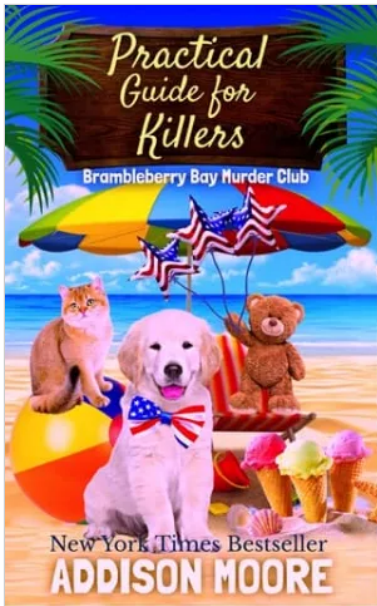




Practical Guide for Killers (Brambleberry Bay Murder Club Book 5)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: It's summer in Brambleberry Bay and the esteemed country club is hosting a beachside sunset cocktail party. But hold onto your beach umbrellas because murder is about to crash the party. And one guest won't be catching anymore waves.

And that little mind-reading secret of Hattie's? It's about to come to light.

The killer might be hoping for a tranquil tide, but I'm about to bring some sunshine-filled justice to the sandy shores of Brambleberry Bay.

A mind reader. Talking pets. An arrogant homicide detective. A murder club. And a corpse.

Welcome to the club. Getting in was easy. Getting out can be murder.

Living in Brambleberry Bay can be a real killer.

It's criminally cozy.

Total Pages (Source): 29

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

“Look at them.” A laugh rips through me as I inspect the polished crowd while sipping a fruity cocktail. It’s evening here on the sands just below the country club and everyone in this snooty organization has come out to usher in a brand-new season.

Each one of these decrepit souls is wealthier than the last.

And each one of them holds a deep, dark secret.

Lucky for me, I happen to know my fair share of those clandestine mysteries. And believe me, if I were the one harboring some of those secrets, I wouldn’t be advertising them either.

I knock back half the fruity cocktail in my hand and shake my head at the plasticine people.

Secrets may abound, but I know my fair share. They trust me enough to keep tabs on the dollar signs rolling around in their bank accounts—even the offshore bank accounts. And that’s exactly how I’ve managed to unearth the juiciest tidbits I’ve recently come across.

One hasn’t paid taxes in years.

One is a brazen thief.

And one is a killer.

I down the rest of my drink and smile.

I've shown my cards—to the debtor, the thief, the killer.

I made it a point to do so last week, and now I plan on collecting the payment for my silence.

However, silencing a debtor and a thief won't land me in prison as an accomplice after the fact. But playing games with a homicidal maniac just might have me singing the prison blues.

Maybe I should rethink my strategy.

Yes. I should definitely put more thought into what to do with the killer.

Someone calls my name and I look up.

"Speak of the devil." I give a bold smile and head their way.

We walk together in silence and I can't seem to get my footing in the sand, the world feels as if it's wobbling, and I can't walk a straight line.

"I'm not feeling well," I moan as the world begins to blur.

A body of water appears up ahead, a puddle the size of a small swimming pool.

They mumble something and take me by the elbow.

I try to avoid the pool of water, but instead, I'm shoved in, face-first.

My entire body enlivens with a jolt.

It looks as if the killer had one more secret they were keeping close to the vest—my demise.

And just like that, the world goes black forever.

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Hattie

“Pass the margarine, please,” Peggy asks with all of the affection her Southern drawl allows.

“The what?” I wrinkle my nose her way just as both she and her bestie Clarabelle drop the towels around their bodies to reveal a couple of skimpy teeny-weeny bikinis—and speaking of wrinkles...“Oh wow,” I say, quickly squeezing my eyes shut, purely out of reflex.

It’s a boiling hot day in June, which also happens to be the first official day of summer. And that alone explains the fact the Brambleberry Bay Country Club is hosting its annual Sunset Soiree this evening, right here on the beach that outlines the periphery of that fancy establishment. The seaside air holds the scent of salty brine mingling with coconut suntan oil. And from somewhere in the distance I can smell burgers grilling to a juicy perfection.

I take a quick look surveying the scene because in less than two weeks we’ll be hosting Brambleberry Bay’s Fourth of July Stars and Stripes Spectacular on this very beach—and every last red, white, and blue detail happens to be riding on my shoulders. I figure the Sunset Soiree this evening will be a good primer.

“Pass the margarine,” Peggy repeats, breaking that last word in no less than sixty-two syllables. “The yellor tub right over there.” She motions to my left, but I can’t seem to take my eyes off the two women before me as they get situated on the electric blue lounge chairs dotting the stretch of sand that the country club has claimed as its own.

Both Peggy and Clarabelle are a couple of fun-loving grannies, knee-deep in their eighties. I met them right after I took on the position of event planner here at the club.

Peggy Ebersol is a feisty redheaded Georgia peach who is always up for a good time. And Clarabelle Harper is basically a gray-headed good time, which pretty much sums up their friendship in a nutshell.

And apparently, neither of them is all too modest when it comes to showing off a pound or two of flesh. Not that they should be. Although I have a feeling looking straight into a bolt of lightning would be gentler on my eyes.

Wrinkles aside, they're both so pale it looks as if they're channeling their inner ghost.

"Why, Hattie Holiday"—Clarabelle grunts my way as she looks up at me from her lounge chair—"you have no clue what margarine is. Do you?"

My mouth opens and closes. "Of course, I know what margarine is." It's the stuff they show all over the internet that the flies won't touch. "Although I'm not sure if the kitchen here at the club has any on hand."

"Oh, hon, they don't." Peggy gives a throaty laugh as she slips on an oversized pair of sunglasses and a hat the size of Boston. "That's why I brought my own." She points just past me once again and I spot a yellow tub the size of a cantaloupe on top of Peggy's beach bag and pass it over.

"Give me that," Clarabelle says, perking up at the sight of the plastic yellow bucket. She does her best to snatch it right out of Peggy's hands and, sure enough, a tug-of-war breaks out.

"How about I get you ladies some toast?" I offer. "It looks like there's plenty of margarine to go around."

“No can do,” Peggy says, flipping off the lid and digging her hand into the buttery-looking goo. “The only one getting toasted around here is me.” She slathers a glob of the gunk onto her thigh and proceeds to rub it in before passing the bin to her bestie who, sure enough, does the same.

“That goes double for me,” Clarabelle says, quickly slathering herself in a bath of yellow cream. “Back in our day, there was no better way to ensure a nice golden tan. By my estimations, we’ve still got a few good hours of peak sunshine to get bronzed up for the big beach bash you’ve got planned for tonight.”

She’s not wrong—about the beach bash, that is.

I glance past the sea of sunbathers where there is a small army of white tents set out, already bejeweled with the requisite amount of twinkle lights.

I’ve already shored up the menu with the kitchen—sushi, shrimp, lobster, and an array of appetizers from crab cakes to Asian fusion. I learned pretty quickly that no matter how upper-crust the members of this club might be, they’re not really interested in eating an entire meal at a function that requires hobnobbing with others in their tax bracket. So I decided to eschew a sit-down dinner for drinks and never-ending appetizers.

The entire point of the evening is to watch the sun dip into the Atlantic as they usher in the sunniest season of all—and perhaps exchange new loopholes that the IRS may or may not approve of.

And I hope to heaven that’s as exciting as this evening gets. In fact, I’m rooting for a calm and peaceful summer.

Not too long ago, it seemed as though I was stumbling upon a body left and right. And well, for the last few months I’ve been on what my boyfriend and I like to call

my “lucky streak”. In fact, I haven’t seen a dead body yet this year.

My boyfriend would be Homicide Detective Killion Major Maddox. He, on the other hand, sees a dead body every other week. And believe me, I’m pleased as punch not to get in his way.

I just hope the liquor loosens up the old grumpy bags of gas that run this place, Peggy scoffs.

“What’s that?” I say, turning back her way.

“I didn’t say anything.” She flashes a short-lived smile my way. I swear, sometimes I think that girl can read my mind.

I cringe at the thought, because let’s face it, I can do exactly that.

My name is Hattie Holiday. I have black hair, blue eyes, and the uncanny ability to pry into other people’s gray matter. In other words, I can read minds.

Trust me, it’s nothing I set out to do. I was simply born this way. I found out from my cousin that I’m something called transmundane, further classified as telesensual. Apparently, there’s an entire array of so-called special abilities under the transmundane umbrella, like seeing into tomorrow or seeing the dead. All things considered, I think I got off pretty easy just prying into people’s thoughts. Not that I can help when the prying takes place.

I turn around and take in the expansive Atlantic as it stretches out before us. The sandy coast looks almost white in places and the color of brown sugar in others. You might say I owe a lot to the gorgeous coast of Maine, considering the fact my father owns a small fleet of lobster boats.

Hattie! My sweet cat Cricket bounds over with our favorite golden retriever on her heels. The golden retriever's name would be Rookie, and he technically belongs to my boyfriend Killion. Although I like to think we share him. Much like Cricket and Rookie share the adorable little teddy bear dangling from Rookie's mouth—a cute little teddy they've named Jolly Beary. Hattie, quick! Get a broom or a mop or something that shoots rubber bullets. They're after us!

"Who's after you?" I say, quickly scooping Cricket off the sand and landing a quick kiss to her furry little forehead. Cricket is a tan tabby I've had since she was a kitten and I love her as much as I love my siblings. Sometimes more.

And lucky for me, I can read the animal mind, too. Believe me when I say, I prefer their thoughts to that of most humans.

Rookie belts out a quick woof without daring to let that teddy bear hit the sand.

She's right, he says, stealing a glance behind him. They want Jolly, but they're not going to get him. Come on, Cricket. We've got a bear to protect with our lives.

They dart off in the other direction, sending hot sand pelting against my bare legs and sundress.

"Good grief," Clarabelle groans. "I look like a powdered donut now," she says, trying her best to wipe the sand from her legs and Peggy gives a chuckle at the sight.

"I don't mind one bit," Peggy muses as she admires her own newfound sandy limbs. "Hattie, you get those sweet fuzzballs back here. I want to look as scrumptious as can be for all the hotties on the sand this afternoon. After all, you never know who might be havin' a hankering for a powdered donut."

I'm about to respond when I spot a thundercloud of a woman approaching, and if I'm

not mistaken, she looks as if she'd like to take a bite out of me.

The thundercloud would be Peyton Blakey, aka my boss. Peyton is about my age, close to thirty or just over the edge. She's tall, fit, toned, and tan year-round. She has wavy chestnut locks and a smile as sharp as a razor. Come to think of it, she's about as friendly as a razor, too.

And by her side is a svelte looking brunette, a bit older but equally as stunning and twice as fit as Peyton, as they barrel their way over.

Here comes trouble.

Let's hope it's not trouble times two.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

“Hattie,” Peyton snips my way, her usual tone when it comes to our greetings. The sun is hot, the waves are warm, and the sand is scalding right here at the beach just beneath the country club. “I want you to meet Missy Livingston of the Livingston Live Well for Life Foundation.” The brunette by her side smiles brightly as if affirming the fact. “She’ll be conducting classes on the premises for the next couple of weeks as a courtesy for our patrons.”

The brunette frowns momentarily. Courtesy? Try at a significant discount in hopes to rope in the masses. And hopefully, once they get a taste for health and healing, they’ll line my pockets with a healthy and healing pad of greenery.

I make a face at the woman without meaning to.

“Nice to meet you, Missy,” I say, nodding her way. “I’m Hattie Holiday, the event planner here at the club. I’d be happy to help you set up your classes whenever you like.”

“Perfect,” the woman says. “I’ll be here this evening for the Sunset Soiree. Actually, there’s not much to plan. Peyton already cleared me to run classes out here from nine to five for the next two weeks. But I wouldn’t mind some help getting the word out to the patrons.” The wealthiest patrons, although in a place like this, the words wealthy and patron are a tautology, she thinks to herself. Nevertheless, I need to juice all the green they’ve got.

Tautology? I bite down on a smile. Big vocabulary for a woman hungry to juice the club members for all their green. But then, she’ll have to have more than a big vocabulary to squeeze a single dime out of this crowd. They might have a pocketful

of government-issued lettuce, but it doesn't mean they like to share their salad.

"And don't forget"—Peyton leans in and narrows her eyes at me in a menacing manner—"the Fourth of July will be here before you know it. Think luxury, think class, think French food." She grabs Missy by the shoulder and stalks off for the clubhouse.

"French food?" I call out. "But it's an American holiday."

I'm about to inform her that burgers and hot dogs will be front and center on the menu when a hurricane made of fur threads its way between my legs and blazes past me, nearly knocking both Missy and Peyton to the ground.

And that hurricane doesn't stop coming.

Cricket and Rookie may be leading the charge, but an entire infantry of their furry friends are in hot pursuit. Just about every pooch, cat, and—I can't stake my life on it, but I'm pretty sure I just saw a sheep bolt by as well—are on the move.

And just when I think they're doing an impression of the fifty-yard dash, a giant Saint Bernard swoops between my legs and takes me along for the ride as I lodge onto his back.

"Whoa," I cry as he races near the shoreline. I try to grasp onto his neck, but it's so thick I can hardly wrap my arms around it. I swipe for an ear—heck, I'll take a snout. Instead, my entire body lists to the right, and just my luck, he goes left.

I hit the ground, face-first, and end up with not only a mouthful of sand, but a couple of eyefuls of it, too.

"My eyes." I gag and sputter as I struggle to right myself. "I can't see," I call out as I

begin to crawl toward the shoreline.

My word. I hear Peggy bleat from somewhere behind. You can't take this girl anywhere. She makes a bull in a china shop look like the belle of the ball.

"Nice one," I say. "Although, if I don't get my vision back, I might spend the rest of my life doing an impersonation of a bull in a china shop."

"What was that?" Peggy asks, sounding a bit stupefied by my response.

"Never mind," I mumble as I do my best to spit the sand from between my teeth, still blindly crawling my way to the water.

Hey? Clarabelle muses. If Hattie goes blind, I might have a fighting chance with that wall of muscles she's dating.

"You keep your hands off that wall of muscles, Clarabelle Harper."

Normally, I'd be teasing, but at the moment I'm as serious as the heart attack I'm about to have. My mouth opens to say something else just as a wall of water smacks me in the face and does its best to drown me.

It takes more than a few minutes of coughing, sputtering, and rubbing my eyes raw for me to get my bearings again.

Peggy and Clarabelle help pull me aside as the three of us land back in the sand. I flop unceremoniously across their laps like a fish out of water as the two of them take turns slapping me silly and shouting for me to stay away from the light.

"I'm fine," I say, trying my best to sit up.

“Fine, my shiny behind,” Peggy says. “What made you say that comment about the bull in the china shop? It’s like you knew what I was thinkin’.”

My mouth opens and closes.

Oh my word!

Okay, don’t panic.

“I was just—” Oh, good grief. How was I supposed to know she wasn’t speaking out loud?

“You know”—Clarabelle gives me the side-eye—“I was just thinking about that wall of muscles of yours when you said those very same words.”

Gah!

I sit up straight and do my best not to burp up a minnow from all that water that just made its way down my throat.

Peggy gasps. “Hattie Holiday, how in the world did you know what we were thinking?”

“Oh, that’s just a little old party trick.” I wave the two of them off as if I had any idea on how to make this entire conversation go away.

“Party trick?” Peggy nearly strangles my arm as she shakes me. “Oh, hon, if you can figure out what people are thinkin’, I gotta have me some of that. I’ll give you every dime in my bank account if you teach me how to do it.” The things I can do with a trick like that up my sleeve. If I think I can see right through men now, imagine what I could glean if I could peek under the hood—the one on top, of course. I already

know what's brewing under the lower hood, and it ain't much.

I scoff at the woman for even going there.

Although, let's face it, life would be a lot easier if Peggy gave me all of her money.

"I want in on this little party trick, too." Clarabelle pulls me her way and soon the two of them are yanking me back and forth like a prognosticating wishbone.

"How about this," I say, doing my best to break free from their demonic hold. "The three of us reconvene back on the beach for the Sunset Soiree and I'll try to drum up a few tips and tricks to help the two of you—try to predict what others might be thinking."

I leap back to my feet and do my best to stagger away from them.

Predict what others are thinking, my foot, Peggy calls out.

"It's true," I say, turning around just in time to see Peggy's eyes round out.

"Knew it," she calls out while jabbing a finger my way.

Clarabelle shakes her head. Hattie Holiday, your so-called little party trick is about as little as your behind.

I suck in a quick breath and shake my head in horror.

Clarabelle claps her hands and laughs. "Oh, I knew it, too!"

And just like that, I've been outwitted and outplayed by a couple of conniving grannies.

“We’ll see you tonight,” Peggy shouts out.

“And bring your party tricks, too,” Clarabelle calls out before the two of them break out into cackles.

Party tricks indeed.

So much for a calm and peaceful summer.

I get all the way to the Cottage House where a staff member lets me know there was a package delivered for me and I head over to find a small pink box with an envelope that has my name printed over the top of it. I quickly open up the envelope and it reads, To the most beautiful woman I know. XO

It’s written in all caps and the E’s are nothing but three straight lines. Odd but fun, and Lord knows I can use a little fun.

A silly grin buoys to my face as I open up the little pink box, and once I see what waits for me inside, I can’t help but gasp.

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Summer has always been my favorite time of year, behind fall, Christmas, my birthday, and maybe Valentine's Day—up until this year I didn't have much happening on that aforementioned heart-shaped day. Although, this year Killion made sure to bring his heart-shaped A game. And let me tell you, I was not disappointed. Flowers, chocolate, candlelight kisses—he checked off all the boxes and then some.

Okay, so summer isn't first, second, or third on my list, but then, it can get unreasonably hot and muggy here in coastal Maine. And who could blame me for putting fall before summer on my list of favorites? I've always been a sucker for pumpkin spice everything.

But right now there's not a pumpkin on the horizon. Instead, I'm back on the sand below the Brambleberry Bay Country Club as a tangerine glow touches down over each and every one of us.

Thesky is a canvas of vibrant colors, with strokes of deep orange, fiery red, and soft pink blending seamlessly into the calm blue of the early evening. The sun is slowly dipping into the horizon, casting a golden light over the gentle waves lapping at the shore. It's a moment of breathtaking beauty, nature's artistry at its finest as it paints the Maine sky in glorious hues that leave me and just about everyone else spellbound.

Miles of twinkle lights work their otherworldly magic as swarms of the who's who of Brambleberry Bay walk barefoot through the sand while wearing designer duds that could put any runway in Milan on notice.

Everything about this evening is magical. And I'm glad about it, because I plan on using the same tents and twinkle lights for the Fourth of July festivities as well but

with far more sparklers and buntings. Finally, an event that's practically planning itself. Not to mention that the mayor's office is pitching for the fireworks display off the nearby pier, so that's one less thing I have to think about.

I'm pretty sure I would have blown off a finger or six if I were in charge of the pyrotechnics, so it's probably best this way.

Cricket and Rookie happily yip and yap as they take turns running this way and that.

Good idea strapping Jolly Beary to the back of this big beast, Cricket chirps. Now all we have to do is make sure the big beast doesn't do anything goofy like try to scratch an itch by way of the punch bowl. I'd hate to see the little cutie meet a tragic end.

I knew you cared about me, Rookie sniffs her way.

Not you, you big oaf, Cricket chimes. I'm talking about Jolly. Getting fruit punch out of his delicate fur will be murder to get out—for Hattie at least.

"Well, I'll have you both know I was kidding when I suggested we strap that cute thing to Rookie's back with a belt." Although they were looking for a surefire way not to lose him.

It's a great idea, Hattie, Rookie says with a soft bark. This way Jolly gets to see the fine members of the country club, and I get to gobble down whatever they drop from their plates. Tonight is going to be pawesome. He sits up straight as he spots something in the distance. Speaking of pawesome, there's Killion! And he's talking to Grandma!

Rookie wastes no time in leaping in that direction, and despite the fact Killion's mother is nearby, I don't hesitate to follow.

Cricket hesitates for her own reasons—I might be a bit averse to Killion’s mother, but Cricket seems a bit averse to both Nora and Killion alike.

Oh, good grief, Cricket mewls as she leaps in front of me in an effort to keep up. Can you at least try to keep the smooching at a minimum?

“Not on your life,” I tell her as we traverse sharply dressed men and women whose expensive colognes and perfumes mix to create an intoxicating backdrop that rivals the cerulean Atlantic. “That man’s lips deserve to be smooched.” Come to think of it, so do mine.

“Hattie.” Killion sheds an easy grin and sets off an entire swarm of butterflies in my stomach. It’s true. After all these months, I still get a stomach full of flutters whenever he’s around. “You look beautiful,” he says as his eyes slit to nothing. And just like that, those butterflies are exchanged for a searing heat that makes me sizzle all over.

He waggles his brows as he comes in for a kiss. How quick can we get out of here?

I giggle at his naughty thought and linger on those lips of his for more than a second. Killion doesn’t know about my sneaky ability to pry into his mind, and neither does anyone else in Brambleberry Bay.

And despite Peggy and Clarabelle’s efforts to procure my so-called party trick, I’d like to keep this a private endeavor.

His mother clears her throat and we quickly pull away.

“Nora,” I say, forcing a smile. “So nice to see you here this evening.”

Not entirely a lie. I haven’t seen her in a good long while. And believe me, I

appreciated the break. She hasn't exactly been welcoming when it comes to having me in her son's life.

Last Christmas, she practically threw her assistant at him. A woman who just so happened to have the hots for Killion.

Not that I can blame the woman. He is a rather hot commodity with that dark hair, commanding verdant green eyes, and a body that looks as if it could stop a freight train, let alone a bullet.

Have I mentioned that he's traded his suit for jeans and a T-shirt this evening? He's still got his sneakers on and it gives him that sporty look I find so yummy.

Nora shares the same dark hair as her son, albeit slicked back into a bun, same green eyes, too, although hers glow with a hint of greed.

Nora is the owner of the Velvet Vanity Spa chain, and according to Killion, she's looking to park her money somewhere else as well in hopes to double her fortune. Not that it's a greedy prospect per se, it's just that, well, her eyes are green, and for some reason, greedy rang a bell when I thought of her.

"Hattie." She frowns while patting down the navy shift dress she's wearing. "You've really gone all out for the event. Did you really have to put the ax on the dinner portion of the evening? And I won't believe for a minute that budget cuts had anything to do with the fact I'm not enjoying a juicy slice of prime rib right about now. This country club is a lot of things, but poor isn't one of them." More like poor taste on behalf of the event planner, she thinks to herself before turning to Killion. So help me, if my sweet son gets stuck with this moppet of a girl because he's not giving himself the opportunity to explore his prospects, I'll jump in an early grave.

Stuck with me? I gape her way for even thinking it.

Rookie gives a quick bark and Killion looks down.

“Hey, buddy.” Killion laughs at the sight of his cute pooch with a teddy bear strapped to his back. “What in the heck is happening over at your mom’s?”

I all but wink at Nora as she tries to digest the fact that her sweet son just called me his dog’s mother. She may not be so hot on Rookie either, but she’s downright green around the gills at the prospect of Killion and me sharing custody of any living being.

Good gravy, Nora snorts to herself. If this keeps up, they might make me a grandmother yet. The situation is far more dire than I ever thought possible.

I shake my head at her.

Is she serious?

What in the world does she find so revolting about me, anyway?

Killion seems to like me just fine.

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me in as if to prove my point.

“Thanks for watching him, but I can take Rookie to work with me tomorrow,” he says. “The meetings with the bigwigs are over and it looks as if I survived the ax.”

“Oh?” Nora quirks a brow his way. “Are they having budget cuts down at the station? Don’t tell me they’re not serving hot meals there either.”

“Very funny,” he says with his brows swooped low. “Just some internal reviews that are mandatory every now and again. I can assure you that my job is safe.”

She glares at something over my shoulder. Speaking of murder. Nora clears her throat along with the thought. I might just provide a little job security for Killion yet.

I'm about to turn around and see what's sparked a homicidal tirade in her when a woman crops up and Nora feigns a smile.

"Jane, darling"—Nora purrs—"so nice to see you here this evening. A pop of real personality among all the plastic people." The personality of a pig with lipstick trying to win a beauty contest, she thinks to herself.

My mouth falls open at the dig.

Jane Jordon is a long-time icon in Brambleberry Bay. She used to work for some big accounting firm in Bangor before opening a boutique firm here in town. In fact, she's done my father's books for some time now, and she does the books for my sister Winnie down at her shop, the Crafty Treehouse.

Jane is a stunner. She's around my mother's age and one of my mother's oldest friends. She wears her graying blonde hair curled around her ears, has on her signature oversized tortoise shell framed glasses, and happens to be wearing an even bigger smile.

Jane is petite, yet all five feet of her is a powerhouse. She's smartly dressed in a white dress shirt and dark pencil skirt this evening, but her best accessories are her commanding presence and a no-nonsense attitude.

She's the epitome of a successful woman. I can see why Nora would take issue with her. The idea she's not Jane Jordan probably drives her nuts.

"You're a real personality among all this so-called glamour." Nora's eyes flicker with an unspoken challenge, like a cat eying a mouse she'd like to toy with.

Nice to see I'm not the only one Nora likes to toy with.

But still, poor Jane.

However, in Jane's defense, she seems unfazed.

Jane smiles right back, her eyes twinkling behind her glasses.

"Nora, always a pleasure," she responds, her voice smooth as silk. She turns to me, her smile widening. "And Hattie, you look absolutely radiant tonight. I must say, your knack for organizing such a stunning event never ceases to amaze me."

Her praise washes over me like a warm summer breeze—a welcome change from the bucket of ice water Nora offered up before her.

"Thank you, Jane," I tell her. "It's always good to see a friendly face." I give Nora the side-eye without meaning to.

Jane's gaze shifts to Killion and her expression softens. "Killion, nice to see you as well. Keeping out of trouble, I hope?" She gives a lighthearted laugh, but there's a hint of maternal concern there that I'm sure he appreciates.

"Always, Jane." Killion chuckles as he tightens his arm around my waist. "Thanks to Hattie here, I'm on my best behavior." And on occasion my naughtiest. He gives a wry smile along with the thought.

Naughty indeed. I can vouch for that.

Jane Jordan turns to Nora with a glint in her eye. "Nora, I heard about your recent business venture." I can't help but note her voice is laced with feigned innocence. "It's always so inspiring to see someone striving, even when the odds are—shall we

say, less than favorable?”

I glance at Killion, but he doesn't flinch.

Sounds as if Nora's latest venture isn't going to scratch her monetary itch, after all.

Nora's smile falters as her eyes narrow. “Now, Jane, you know what they say about underestimating the underdog,” she says with her voice restrained and far too calm. “Sometimes, they have a way of eliminating the competition. Permanently.”

Permanently?

Killion and I exchange a glance.

I always knew Nora had a bark, but it sounds as if she's not afraid to bite either.

Oh heck, I knew that, too.

Nora's menacing words hang in the air, momentarily darkening the festive atmosphere around us.

A sharp laugh erupts to our left and we look over, only to see a curious sight.

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The waves crash over the shoreline as the Sunset Soiree carries on here at the country club. A sharp laugh just interrupted the conversation Killion and I were having with Nora and Jane Jordan, and it turns out I know the cackling party all too well.

It's my sister, Neelie, chatting up a storm with her boyfriend, Dr. Stanton Troublefield, a plastic surgeon old enough to be her father, along with another man I don't recognize. The mystery man is tall, about the same age as Stanton, broad-chested, and has an air of distinction about him.

Neelie is my tall, blonde, and leggy younger sister. And seeing that Neelie seems to be dripping all over the mystery man, it's clear she's flirting heavily. I can't say I disapprove. Frankly, I've never been much of a fan of Stanton's.

"Who's that guy Neelie is talking to?" I ask, curious and a bit hopeful that she might be moving on from Stanton. However, for Neelie to move on, that mystery man would have to have a bigger bank account than our resident plastic surgeon.

I know that doesn't paint my sister in a good light, but let's be honest, Neelie doesn't care what light the world paints her in as long as she garners herself a few designer purses out of it.

"That's Dr. Erol Draper, a dentist from Pelican Bay," Nora answers, her gaze fixed on the group as well.

Jane leans that way. "Dr. Draper? He's quite the character. I've heard he's not just your regular dentist." Some have said his past is as patchy as the teeth he's supposedly fixed.

Interesting.

Jane nods my way with a glint of mischief in her eyes. “And if rumors are to be believed, his dentistry might not be the only thing causing discomfort. He’s got a certain charm, but they say there’s a bite behind that smile.”

Sounds as if Dr. Draper and Nora have something in common.

“Well, if you’ll all excuse me,” Nora gives a slight bow, “I hear there are some lobster rolls floating around here somewhere. It was nice seeing you all,” she says before glancing back at Jane. Don’t worry, Jane. You’ll get yours. Secrets have a way of coming to the surface around here—sometimes to the detriment of others. She nods at the thought before taking off, and a chill travels down my spine.

What in the heck was that about?

Cricket mewls from the ground and I promptly scoop her right up.

What’s happening, Hattie? I know that look on your face. You’re not pleased.

“I’m not sure,” I whisper in her ear. “But it doesn’t sound good.”

Jane shakes her head in Nora’s wake. She doesn’t know what she’s getting into. If she’s not careful, she might just find herself in over her head. And I think she already has.

I shiver slightly, despite the warm summer air. Jane’s words, both spoken and unspoken, linger with me, heavy and ominous.

It’s clear something is going on between Nora and Jane. I just hate not knowing what that might be.

I'm about to turn to Jane and ask about her summer plans, just as a body bumps into me, causing a slight collision.

"Whoa," I say, steadying myself, only to find Missy Livingston looking slightly flustered as she narrowly avoids baptizing me with her cocktail.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Hattie," she stammers, trying to regain her composure. She looks stunning tonight with a white sheath dress over her tan glow. She starts to laugh but cuts it short as her eyes land on Jane. Her entire demeanor seems to shift at the sight of her.

"What do you think you're doing here, Jane?" Missy spits the words out lower than a whisper, but that doesn't stop both Cricket and Rookie from giving a little growl.

Jane laughs, clearly unfazed by the woman's icy tone. "I could ask the same of you, Missy," she says with a hint of amusement in her voice.

Killion lifts a finger. "It is a public event, after all." Why are these women warring with one another? And why don't I have a drink in my hand just yet?

I nod his way because I'm thinking the same thing on both counts.

Missy lifts her shoulders a notch. "Well, I actually have a reason to be here. Unlike some people who just show up uninvited." She stares Jane down as she jabs her with words.

"Uninvited?" Jane chuckles lightly, swirling her drink. "Unlike you, I actually belong to this esteemed club. And I certainly wasn't going to miss this event. It's not every day you get to see the crème de la crème of Brambleberry Bay playing in the same sandbox. And I can only guess why you're here. I'm sure it has something to do with that gift of yours?"

Grift?

Killion and I exchange another glance.

Something tells me I'd better change the subject. "Killion, this is Missy Livingston. She's a?—"

"Lifestyle coach," Missy says, quick to shake his hand. Now isn't this a fine piece of meat? "Nice to make your acquaintance."

Meat? I raise a brow in her direction. By and large, I try not to judge people for their thoughts, but this one deserves a side-eye in the least.

She turns back to Jane and the smile slides right off her face. "If you must know, I'm here to enjoy the evening, just like everyone else. Can't a girl have a little fun without being interrogated? But if you must know, why, yes, I will be teaching classes here at the club. And since you're an esteemed member, I guess I'll be seeing you on the sand." Or not. "Besides"—she leans toward the woman—"I think we both know the only grifter around here is you."

She takes off with a wave directed at Killion and me—mostly Killion.

"And on that note," Jane laughs, "I think I need another stiff drink myself. I think I'll join Nora at the bar."

She takes off into the crowd and Killion pulls me in close. And because of our newfound proximity, it sends Cricket propelling right out of my arms as Rookie proceeds to chase her toward the water line.

"What was that about?" He shakes his head in Jane's direction.

“I don’t know. But it must be something in the air tonight. I thought things were a little tense between your mother and Jane as well.”

“I picked up on that, too.”

“Speaking of picking something up,” I say, touching my earlobe and tipping my head his way so he can get a gander at the sparkling emerald earrings I found in that pretty pink box this afternoon. “Thanks for the gift. Killion, they’re gorgeous. You shouldn’t have.”

“They are gorgeous.” He gives a few quick blinks as he does his best to zero in on them. “But they’re not from me.” He inches back. “What exactly is happening here?”

“I don’t know.” A nervous laugh bubbles from me as I quickly recant the note and the little pink box I found waiting for me at the front desk. “I guess I automatically assumed they were from you.”

His brows narrow. “Maybe you have a secret admirer here at the club?” Or a stalker, but I don’t see a need to frighten her.

Too late.

My entire body stiffens at the thought.

“Well”—I cringe, trying to come up with a plausible explanation—“maybe it was from my dad? Or my brother?” Although that would be weird on both counts. “Or one of my sisters?”

He shakes his head.

“Never mind it.” I lean into him just to feel the comfort of his presence. “How about

breakfast tomorrow? Just the two of us?” I suggest, already envisioning a peaceful morning away from the whirlwind of the club. And I will most certainly leave the earrings at home.

He smiles while caressing my back. “I’d love that, but I’ve already got plans to meet the new coroner over in Eagle tomorrow around ten.”

“Ooh, new coroner?” I shimmy my shoulders. “I could come with you. It might be interesting.”

“Definitely not.” Killion chuckles. “I much prefer having you around the living. Besides, I don’t want to jinx your lucky streak. It’s been months since you’ve stumbled upon a body.”

He’s right, of course. My knack for finding trouble—or trouble finding me—has thankfully taken a hiatus.

He comes in for a kiss and the front pocket of his jeans begins to buzz as he presses against me.

“Is that a phone in your pocket, or are you just buzzing to see me?” I tease.

“I’m always buzzing to see you, sweetheart,” he says with a sly wink as he plucks out his phone and frowns. “It’s my mother.”

“Your mother?” I muse as I glance over my shoulder in the direction she took off in—most likely to find the broom she rode in on.

“She’s at the bar in the Cottage House.” He shakes his head. “She says she can use my help.”

“I’m sure she can,” I mutter. Most likely to help locate that broom.

“I’ll be right back.” He lands a lingering kiss on my lips before bolting toward the clubhouse.

It’s nice to know he’s such a devoted son.

Killion is by far the best guy I’ve ever dated. In fact, he’s the first guy who hasn’t made me wonder if my picker is broken.

A cool breeze tickles my bare arms and I quickly hug myself as I take in the scene. The beach is buzzing with the usual suspects, the twinkle lights, the sharp line of salmon in the sky, the light rock music streaming from the speakers, the sound of gently crashing waves, and let’s not forget the scent of freshly grilled burgers—mini as they might be. It all holds the markers of the perfect summer night—first one of the season.

To my right, I spot the ladies from my book club, which, let’s be honest, is more of a who-done-it club these days. We’re all about diving into cold cases and trying to figure out who the killers are. It’s been a wild ride, but one I enjoy far too much for my own sanity. Murder has a way of making me crazy.

Just past them I spot my sisters and brother in the crowd, deep in conversation with a smattering of club members. They’re clearly having a good time, as evidenced by all the laughter floating above the crowd. It’s nice to see them relaxed and enjoying the moment.

I’m about to turn away when I spot Jane Jordan having what looks to be an intense conversation with Dr. Erol Draper, the dentist that Neelie was flirting with earlier. He and Jane look pretty heated. They’re standing off to the side, away from the crowd, and Jane seems a bit more riled up than usual.

I'm steering clear of that one.

I spend the next twenty minutes saying hello to every club member I recognize, noshing on crab cakes, mini lobster rolls, and even mini chocolate-filled croissants. And you can bet I will definitely be having more of each of those before I leave the premises tonight.

Nora is right. I probably should have had a sit-down dinner. I'm famished.

Nevertheless, the mood is changed, the laughter is louder, the crowd is growing far more boisterous by the moment, and even the waves seem to have ratcheted up their intensity.

It's getting late. I'd better find Killion, or Cricket and Rookie for that matter.

I navigate through clusters of people, exchanging brief smiles and nods, but finding Killion in the throng is proving to be impossible.

I weave my way through the lively crowd, the sounds of the beach bash fading slightly as I move away from the mob farther from the crowd, and farther from the clubhouse as well.

The air is filled with the salty tang of the sea and I close my eyes as I take in a lungful. My feet seem to be moving of their own volition as I drift toward the edge of the beach, where the noise of the party gives way to the rhythmic clapping of waves. The atmosphere here is quieter, far more solitary. A stark contrast to the buzz of the bash, and for a moment, I appreciate the tranquility.

But then I see it. A figure, lying face down near the shoreline, in a large puddle about ten feet round that the receding tide left behind. My heart skips a beat, and a chill runs down my spine. Just like that, the festive mood I was in vanishes, replaced by a

sense of dread.

For a few seconds, I'm frozen, hoping against hope that it's just someone who's had a bit too much to drink and decided to take a nap on the beach.

I take a few steps forward and pull out my phone to use it as a flashlight.

"Oh my goodness," I pant as a breath hitches in my throat.

Not only is the body of a woman floating face down in a puddle the size of a small swimming pool, but there's an orange electrical cable running into the heart of that puddle.

You don't think...?

There's no way...

I take a careful step forward and suddenly I recognize that white blouse, the smart pencil skirt, and the large tortoise shell glasses floating by her head.

I recognize that body.

Jane Jordan is dead.

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“She’s dead,” I pant at the horrific sight.

The waves crash over the shoreline with a heavy slap, muting the sound of music and laughter coming from the Sunset Soiree.

The sky is black, and this end of the beach is hardly illuminated by the barrage of twinkle lights emitting from behind.

The sand begins to thump and hum just as Cricket and Rookie zoom right past me.

“Be careful,” I shout. “Stay away from the water. This puddle in front of me, it might be dangerous.”

The two of them circle back and stop shy of the puddle as they quickly inspect it.

Hattie, there’s a woman lying in it, Cricket yowls.

“I know,” I moan as I say it. “That’s Jane. This doesn’t look good, I’d better call for help.”

I’ll get Killion, Rookie barks before darting off back into the crowd.

Hattie, what happened? Cricket yowls once again as she leaps into my arms.

“I don’t know, I was just—” Before I can finish, the sound of two women shouting comes from behind and I turn to see both Peggy and Clarabelle staggering through the sand wearing sundresses and matching pearls.

“There she is,” Peggy says, cutting the words up into make-believe syllables like only a Georgia peach can. “Hattie Holiday, we have been looking everywhere for you. Have you been hiding from us?”

Clarabelle chuffs. “Honey, you’re going to have to try harder than this. In case you’re forgetting, Peggy and I are second and third top female sleuths around these parts. You would be first.”

Peggy scoffs at her bestie. “And who exactly would be second?”

“It’s obviously not you,” Clarabelle bites the air with her words as she begins to get snippy. “You didn’t even see a body in this direction. I told you it was Hattie and not a dolphin prancing through the waves.”

“And I told you I don’t have my glasses on,” Peggy snips right back.

“Speaking of bodies,” I say as I point to the deceased among us, and both Peggy and Clarabelle belt out a bloodcurdling scream.

“You found another one!” Peggy begins to clap as her horror quickly morphs to something just this side of—joy? “Oh Hattie, I knew you could do it.” She smacks Clarabelle on the arm. “And you said she was losing her touch.”

“I said she was putting the homicides to bed,” Clarabelle corrects. “You said she was losing her touch.”

Peggy backs up an inch. “Oh, I thought you said she was putting the homicide detective to bed. And just to clarify, I said nice touch. You really should crank up the volume on that hearing aid of yours.”

“I don’t wear one,” Clarabelle flatlines.

“Then that’s your problem,” Peggy says.

“Ladies.” I make a face. “We’ve got company,” I say, pointing back at the body. “And she’s no longer with us. I don’t think we should be arguing about putting anyone to bed.” I’ll admit, a naughty visual flitted through my mind when Peggy said that bit about putting Killion to bed.

“Oh right.” Peggy wrinkles her nose at the sight and I turn to look at it as well. Hey? Maybe that poor woman was killed by way of a homicidal maniac? Peggy thinks to herself. I bet that means Hattie and that gun-wielding hunk of hers will finally start to heat things up behind closed doors. A good murder mystery really gets them going. They’re twisted that way.

My mouth falls open as I turn her way. “Peggy Ebersol, I’ll have you know Killion and I are plenty heated behind closed doors. We certainly don’t need a dead body to get us going.”

Peggy’s mouth falls open as well as she points my way and struggles to catch her breath.

“She did it again, didn’t she?” Clarabelle shouts. “Hattie Holiday, you just read Peggy’s mind!”

Cricket gasps. These two really are onto you. You’ve done it now.

And how.

“No, no, I can’t really read anyone’s—” I shake my head because I can’t seem to lie to these two. Instead, my attention is hijacked by shouting and barking coming from my left. I look that way and, sure enough, it’s Killion and Rookie speeding this way and not a moment too late.

Clarabelle steps my way, but I crane my neck past her, waving Killion and Rookie over in hopes to bring them here that much faster.

“Don’t you think we’re going to let this body distract us from having you give us the lowdown on your creepy, ultra-cool ability to read my mind as if it were your favorite book.” Clarabelle does her best to garner my attention. I’m your favorite book, aren’t I?

“You’re both my favorite books,” the words speed out of me as I turn her way. “Now let’s not mention anything about this to Killion. He sort of thinks he’s my favorite book. And, of course, the animals—they’re really my favorite books. They’re sort of open books since my party trick seems to work with them as well.”

“Ah-ha.” Clarabelle claps and hops from foot to foot. “You did it again, Hattie Holiday. That party trick of yours is popping off tonight like fireworks on the Fourth of July!”

Killion appears like a flash of lightning with Rookie barking wildly by his side, and soon I’m wrapped tight in Killion’s arms as his momentum carries us closer to the puddle of doom.

“What’s happening?” he pants. “What party trick?” He looks to Peggy and Clarabelle and I shoot them a look that promises the working end of a homicide investigation if they don’t keep quiet.

The two of them raise their arms as they start to hightail it back to the party.

“Don’t shoot,” Peggy says as she traipses in the direction of the melee. And don’t think you’re getting away with this either, Hattie Read My Mind Holiday.

“What she said,” Clarabelle shouts as the two of them drift off in a hurry. We’ll talk!

A hard groan comes from me and Cricket twitches in my arms.

They did it, she chitters with a laugh. They cracked the telesensual code, didn't they? You're really slipping, Hattie. I think you should come clean. If they could figure that out, there's no telling where their genius will take them next. And believe me, I'd rather follow them than him.

She hisses at Killion before leaping out of my arms. Rookie barks at her and a quick chase ensues, despite the fact Jolly Beary seems to be holding on for dear life while strapped to Rookie's back.

"Hattie? What's going on?" Killion spins me slightly, just enough to see exactly what's going on. His eyes flit from the body to that orange cable sitting immersed in the heart of that puddle and he plucks me away from the scene a good three feet. "Geez," he says as he pulls out his phone and calls the fire department, the sheriff's department, and the coroner seemingly all at once. "What happened?" he asks, wrapping his arms around me once again.

"I just walked this way and found her like that. I was going to check to see if I could help, but I saw the cable and I didn't dare take a step in that direction."

"Thank God." He pulls me in hard and lands a kiss to my forehead.

A swarm of bodies heads this way, emergency responders and club members alike, and it takes about three minutes of shouting at the top of his lungs for Killion to get the crowd to keep at a safe distance.

The fire department quickly cuts the power supply to the rogue cable before roping the area off with caution tape, and suddenly I breathe a little easier.

"Hattie Holiday?" a woman's voice screeches from behind and I cringe because I

know exactly who it is.

This day just keeps getting worse for all of us.

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I turn to see Peyton stomping her way over, but my attention is quickly waylaid from my irate boss as the tall blond man next to her steals my focus.

“Oh my word,” I say as I step in their direction. “Duke Kaplan?” I give a few good blinks. It’s still pretty dim in this direction despite the floodlights the sheriff’s department is shining at the scene.

“Who’s Duke Kaplan?” Killion asks, appearing next to me just as Peyton and Duke Kaplan, of all people, crop up in front of us.

“Hattie Ho-Ho-Ho Holiday?” The blond man laughs. “Is that you?”

“More like Ho-Ho-Ho Homicide,” Peyton quips as she cranes her neck past me. And darn it all to heck if she didn’t kill another one.

“I’ll have you both know I had nothing to do with this.” I hitch my thumb at the travesty taking place.

Peyton inches back and it’s then I realize that I just responded to her thoughts, dark as they were—and they usually are.

I guess I really am slipping.

“Hattie Holiday, you blue-eyed cutie, come here,” Duke says, pulling me into a hearty embrace before spinning me like a top.

Did he just call her a blue-eyed cutie? Peyton scoffs internally at the two of us as I

come in for a landing.

Killion lifts a brow at the man as well, and his own thoughts run wild. Did he just call her a blue-eyed cutie? And was that ho-ho-ho comment an insult? I'd like to punch him and ask questions later. It's that kind of night.

"Killion"—I say, hopping close to him and pressing a hand to his chest lest he start in on a punching spree—"I'd love for you to meet my old friend, Duke Kaplan. Actually, his name is Horace Kaplan, but Horace is so fussy he decided to shorten it."

"Shortened it to Duke?" Killion flatlines as he takes a moment to glare at the man. "Makes perfect sense."

"Duke, this is my boyfriend, Killion—Detective Killion Maddox," I say, patting Killion on the chest once again as if trying to keep him from pouncing.

It's been that kind of night indeed.

"Boyfriend, huh?" Duke laughs, showing off two rows of perfect pearly whites.

Duke is perfect in the traditional sense—tall, muscular in a sinew way from all that bike riding he does, or at least used to do, and that wavy blond hair used to drive the girls mad—me included—and mad would be the operative word on how things ended between us. Actually, he dumped me, and that made me really, really mad.

"I guess we have something in common." He chuckles at Killion. "Hattie and I used to be hot and heavy way back when. We dated for a couple of years."

Both Killion's and Peyton's mouths fall open.

"A couple of years?" Peyton grunts. If I knew I was getting Hattie's sloppy seconds, I

would've run in the other direction. Her eyes give him the once-over after the saucy thought. On second thought, Hattie who?

"Hot and heavy?" Killion growls at him.

He's not even trying to hide his thoughts.

"We ended a long time ago," I say, pulling Killion toward me. "Duke, what are you doing here?" I snip without meaning to.

"Peyton invited me." He offers her a half-smile that looks more like a frown. "What are you doing here?" He nods my way as if his suspicions were aroused.

"I work here," I say quickly. "Peyton is my boss. In fact, my parents and my siblings are members here now."

"That's great." He slaps his belly as he says it. "Hattie has the best family." He nods at Killion. "I'm not sure what I miss more, Hattie or all the free lobster I gobbled down while we were going out." He breaks out in a laugh and the rest of us hardly crack a smile at that one, especially me.

"Wait a minute." Killion squeezes his eyes shut a moment. "Did you say your name was Horace Kaplan?"

"Yes, but please call me Duke." He quickly refutes the use of his formal moniker. I've never held that against him, all things considered.

"You're the new coroner down in Eagle?" Killion looks highly displeased by this development.

"That's right." Duke nods hard. "Wait a minute, you're the homicide detective I'm

meeting up with in the morning?”

“That would be me.” Killion is back to growling.

“Well, hot dog. Looks like we’ve got a head start on the game.” Duke turns my way. “I’m taking over for Miles. He got married and took off for Alaska. He said to say hello.” He turns to Killion. “Hattie dated him, too. She really got around.”

“I did not get around,” I practically gag on the words as they race to get out of my mouth. “And for the record, Miles Jeffries and I never officially dated. We just thought about dating.”

Killion grunts, “I see.”

“And I see a big mess,” Peyton snips. “That woman lying over there was an esteemed member of this club, Hattie. And now look what you’ve done.” She groans as she takes in the blossoming crowd. “I’d better run damage control.” She turns back my way and wags a finger in my face. “Don’t you dare kill another member or I might be moved to have you kicked out of the club in a way that will make you wish you were dead.”

I choke in her wake. “I think she just threatened me.”

“I think she feels threatened,” Duke says before shifting his attention to Killion.

“Don’t look at me. I don’t feel threatened.” Should I feel threatened? Killion glances my way and does a double take when he spots those emeralds glittering on my ears. At least now we know who the mystery man is that’s sending gifts to Hattie, he thinks to himself. On second thought, I am feeling a little threatened. Maybe I should be the one issuing the threats.

“Let’s get a move on, Detective,” Duke says as he nods toward the body. “Looks like we’ve got a job to do.” He takes a step forward, then pauses. “Hey, Hattie? Why don’t you swing by the morgue in the morning, too? I wouldn’t mind catching up. Ten o’clock. I’ll have this guy bring donuts.” He points to Killion with his elbow and winks my way.

Killion looks fit to kill as they duck underneath the caution tape in tandem.

He may not be thrilled with the invite, but I’ve yet to say no to donuts or a visit to the morgue.

A cool breeze picks up and I hold myself as I inspect the scene. On the other side of the caution tape, I see Nora holding herself and glaring at the poor woman lying face down in the water.

Just past Nora, I spot that dentist Neelie was hitting on, only this time there’s a redhead holding onto his arm and it looks as if they’re comforting one another. And that woman isn’t Neelie.

“Goodnight, Hattie,” a soft female voice says and I turn to see Missy Livingston walking by with a wave. “I’ll be by tomorrow to start my classes. We’ll be seeing a lot of one another these next few weeks.”

“I look forward to it,” I say, albeit somberly.

She glances past me at poor Jane floating there helpless.

Sleep tight, my friend, she muses to herself. It’s all over now. It’s all over. Her lips curl at the tips as she walks back into the crowd.

She disappears and a chill runs through me.

What's all over? And why did Missy Livingston have a smile on her face as the thought crossed her mind?

I have a feeling Jane Jordan's death was no accident.

And I have a feeling my party trick is about to come in handy as I do my best to track down the killer.

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The summer heat pounds over my back as I head up the steps to the Eagle County Morgue. It's blistering hot, and the forecast only promises more of the same. And as any crime aficionado can tell you, as things begin to heat up outside, things begin to heat up as far as crime goes as well.

It's just about ten on the button and my meeting with the new coroner is about to start. Even though I met Horace Kaplan last night, or Duke, whatever he's calling himself, I've still got an appointment with the guy. And if I'm anything, I'm punctual when it comes to both my personal and professional obligations.

I step into the morgue and the sterile, chilly air hits me immediately. It's a stark contrast to the balmy weather outside.

The walls are a clinical white, and the harsh lighting doesn't allow for a single shadow, leaving nowhere for secrets or bodies to hide. The slight scent of lemon antiseptic is actually pleasing to my senses. And for that I'm thankful.

If the morgue is anything, it's a place of final truths, and today, it's the backdrop for a meet and greet I'm not exactly looking forward to. Nor am I looking forward to any truths about Hattie's former relationship.

I'm not sure how I feel about Duke, Hattie's ex-boyfriend. Frankly, the guy rubs me the wrong way—not sure why, but I've learned over the years to trust my instincts. And the fact that he's connected to our current case doesn't sit well with me either. As a homicide detective, I've trained myself to keep personal feelings at bay, but with Duke, it's a bit more complicated.

I round a corner when I bump into a stunning brunette—my favorite stunning brunette. And she just so happens to be holding a bright pink box of donuts.

“Hattie.” I shed an easy smile as I help steady her load. “What are you doing here?” I’ll admit, there’s a twinge of disappointment in my voice even though I’m never disappointed to see Hattie.

“I was invited.” She hikes up on her toes and offers me a kiss on the lips. “You didn’t think I’d miss out on discussing Jane Jordan’s murder investigation, did you?”

“Nobody said it was murder,” I tell her as I steal another kiss. “And if it is, I’ll be happy to handle things from here.”

She makes a face and that tiny dimple to the side of her lips goes off. “We’ll see what Duke has to say. But something in my gut says what happened was no accident.”

It’s all I can do to keep from cringing because I happen to trust Hattie’s gut more than I trust my own.

“Why the donuts?” I frown at them without meaning to.

“I heard Duke request them and I knew you wouldn’t bring them.” She winks as she says it. “I left Cricket and Rookie back at my cabin.” She wrinkles her nose. “I didn’t want them anywhere near this place. Who knows what they could get into here.”

“Or what you can get into,” I muse and she laughs. “And you were right about the donuts. But that won’t stop me from eating one or two.”

“That’s the man I know and love.” She bats her lashes up at me and I go in for another quick kiss.

“I love you, too,” I tell her, pecking a few more kisses onto her lips. “Now let’s get this show on the road.”

We head past another set of doors into the clinical area of the morgue. The room is palatial, lined with stainless steel tables and cabinets. The air is tinged with the distinct scent of disinfectant and preservatives, not my favorite combination but not the worst.

“I’ve always found this place unsettling,” I whisper to Hattie.

She nods. “A final stop in the stories of those who pass through here. With the exception of us, of course.”

Someone pops out from behind a wall of steel shelves and we see Duke flashing his million-dollar smile in all of his white coat finery.

I steel myself for the interaction ahead, forcing myself to shift into professional mode. I’m ready to uncover whatever truths are waiting for us here—even though my fist is ready to knock the guy out if need be.

Duke straightens up as he walks over, and don’t think for a minute I missed the way his eyes just lit up when he saw Hattie.

“Hattie Holiday,” he sings. “Radiant as ever. And you brought my favorite food group. How did I ever let you slip out of my fingers?” He laughs as he takes the donuts from her and lands a kiss to her cheek.

Now was that necessary?

I take a moment to glare at him, and Hattie turns my way and giggles.

“He’s harmless, I promise,” she whispers.

We exchange polite hellos as he opens the box on one of the steel tables and we help ourselves to a carbohydrate-laden piece of deep-fried heaven.

“Hattie, Hattie”—he shakes his head while looking as if she just morphed into a donut herself—“I must say, I never expected our paths to cross in a place like this.” His gaze lingers on her a moment too long. And right about now, I’m weighing on when it might be appropriate to sucker punch the guy. He chuckles once again. “But then again, life is full of surprises, isn’t it?”

He casts a side glance my way as if I were the surprise in question.

My jaw tightens slightly. Duke’s undertone is grating, and the last thing I want is this guy making moves on Hattie, especially here, of all places.

“It’s full of surprises, for sure,” Hattie says, offering up a quick smile.

She’s handling the situation with her usual grace, but I can tell she’s not entirely comfortable with the attention. And for that I’m thankful.

I clear my throat a little louder than necessary. “So, Duke, welcome to Eagle. It looks as if we’ll be seeing a lot of one another now that you’re here. As in you and me.” My tone cuts through his flirtation like a scalpel.

It’s time to get back to business and remind Duke this isn’t a social call.

“Right,” Duke says, snapping back into a more professional demeanor. He shifts his focus to one of the metal beds that just so happens to have a body lying over it with a sheet on top. “I won’t have my official report for a bit. But it looks like Jane Jordan’s cause of death was indeed acute electrocution.”

“Oh my word,” Hattie groans. “I’m so sorry to hear it. And I feel completely responsible. I am the event planner after all. That cable was there effectively because of me.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” I say, rubbing her back. “Hattie, how did that puddle form? It was the size of a small pond. Was there something in that space before that caused the land to dip like that?” Or did someone dig it out in the night, I want to ask but don’t want to spook her.

She shakes her head. “Trust me, nobody dug that out in the night.” She winces, and I laugh because it’s as if she just read my mind.

Hattie is the first woman I’ve truly been in love with. Now that I know what this slice of heaven feels like, it’s obvious the rest of the women that I professed to love were nothing more than a severe case of infatuation. And we’re intuitive as to what the other one is thinking. Or at least Hattie is intuitive when it comes to what I’m thinking.

“That sinkhole has been there since I started up with the country club last fall,” she says before looking at Duke. “The library let me go last summer, and I was lucky enough to get the position at the club. Let’s just say it’s been an adventure.”

“Sounds like it would be a barrel of fun,” he says with a dark laugh. “I’m thinking of getting a membership myself.”

I clear my throat. “Hattie, I inspected the rest of the electrical on the beach last night. How do you think that cable got on the far end of the beach like that? There were no others around it.”

She thinks on it for a moment, then shakes her head. “I don’t know, but it definitely had no business being there. The twinkle lights it was attached to were nowhere near

that spot. In fact, a strand was disconnected from that cable. I guess someone must have dragged it there,” she says with more than a hint of concern. “I feel so terrible. I didn’t realize there was such a danger out on the sand last night.”

Duke nods, taking over the explanation. “Electrical cables can be extremely dangerous when exposed to water. The risk of electrocution increases significantly in a setting like a beach. Water, especially when it’s not pure like seawater or tap water, acts as a conductor. This means if a live electric cable comes into contact with water, the electrical current can travel through the water and cause”—he turns toward the body lying under that sheet—“well, we saw what it can cause.”

As Duke goes on about the obvious, I can’t help but ponder the implications.

Hattie’s gut feeling is right.

This wasn’t an accident. Another thing that’s becoming obvious is that this was a deliberate act.

The question now is, who would go to such lengths, and why target Jane Jordan?

Hattie nods my way. “Everyone in town knew Jane. She wasn’t just another friendly face. She was a prominent accountant. I have a feeling this case is going to take us deep into the undercurrents of Brambleberry Bay—the darkest undercurrents.”

The three of us stand there, taking it in, just as Hattie’s phone buzzes and breaks the spell. She pulls it out and checks the message.

“I have to run. Duty calls—aka Peyton the Taskmaster,” she says, slipping her phone back into her pocket. “Plus, I need to pick up Cricket and Rookie before I head to the country club.” She lands a quick kiss to my lips before turning to Duke. “Thanks for including me. If you learn anything at all about the case, please let me know.” She

bites down on a smile. “I mean, let him know.” She winks my way. “We’ll talk soon,” she says as she heads for the door.

“Anytime, Hattie,” Duke sings. “Anything for you. And if you’re ever in need of some company just give me a call.”

I raise a brow his way.

Does this guy not realize that Hattie and I are a couple? I thought Hattie made it pretty clear last night, and that kiss she gave me before she left should have been a dead giveaway. It only means one thing—he doesn’t give a rat’s behind.

I push aside my irritation and decide to play it cool but direct. “It’s nice to meet you, Duke.” I offer a polite nod. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other. The department works closely with the coroner’s office.” Then, almost on impulse, I add, “Maybe you and someone special could double date with Hattie and me sometime? Peyton, is it?”

I’m not entirely sure if that was a petty move on my part, but I’m glad to make the point clear. Part of me hopes he declines the offer.

Duke’s expression darkens as he studies me.

“So, you and Hattie are the real deal?” he asks, and I can’t help but note there’s a hint of skepticism in his tone.

“You better believe it.” I’m quick to affirm the fact. My gaze locks with his as I give it a second for my words to sink in.

A tense moment bounces by as we’re locked in a standoff.

“Can I ask you a question?” I go on without meaning to. “Why did you and Hattie break things off?” A part of me wants to hear all about how she stomped over his heart.

“I broke it off like a fool.” He sighs as his shoulders sag at the thought.

He broke it off? I inch back to inspect him properly.

“To be honest,” he continues, “there was something about the girl that unnerved me. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but it was starting to give me the heebie-jeebies. Pretty silly, huh?” He shakes his head in the direction she took off in. “And I’m certainly regretting my actions.”

I nod his way. “I won’t make the same mistake.”

Without another word, I turn on my heel and take off.

Hopefully, the message is clear, and I hope Duke understands it.

Hattie and I are not a passing phase. We’re solid, and I intend to keep it that way.

I still think it’s clear who sent the mystery gift.

And I hope now he sees the error of his expensive emerald ways.

Nevertheless, I might just have a killer to catch.

I’ve got your back, Jane Jordan.

And I’ll make sure justice is on your side.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

The air conditioning inside the Cottage House feels like heaven. I'm not a fan of the heat, and judging by the way the mercury keeps rising, I'll be needing a fan until next fall.

Cricket and Rookie have settled into their requisite post, along with that adorable teddy bear Santa gave them last December, greeting guests as they come in. If I had a nickel for every club member who took a picture of the three of them, I'd be able to outright buy the real estate underneath the club.

Of course, Cricket and Rookie aren't the only pets here on the grounds. If the rich like anything more than money, it's their furry counterparts.

In fact, right now, Cricket and Rookie are entertaining a cinnamon-colored standard poodle named Mrs. Beasley. She's smart, and stout, and has an awful lot to say about everyone who walks through that door—and twice to say about their four-footed pals.

Some days it seems there are more fur friends here than there are humans.

I take a seat behind the marble counter here in the foyer of the Cottage House and open up my event planner as I peruse the schedule for the next few weeks.

The Fourth of July is less than two weeks away, which means I've got less than two weeks to pull off a star-spangled event that even Uncle Sam would approve of. Not that Peyton will approve. I learned long ago that's pretty much an impossible effort. I'm about to make a list of things to do in order to pull off this red, white, and blue miracle when the doors swing open with a whoosh.

A group of men in dark suits stride in. They're headed toward Seabreeze, the fancier of the two restaurants here in the Cottage House. The thought of their prices always makes me shiver. You'd practically need to mortgage your house just to afford their famous Wagyu filet mignon.

The Cottage Grill, on the other hand, is more my speed. It's the casual, more wallet-friendly establishment where most club members usually find themselves. I've been known to spend hours there, planning upcoming events, and sipping coffee while noshing on chocolate-filled croissants.

Looking around, I can't help but be awed by the grandeur of the place. The stone floors are polished to a shine as they reflect the lights above. And that massive chandelier is like something out of a fairytale. Everyone in Brambleberry Bay could swing from it if they tried—all at once. The entire Cottage House gives off a vibe of both elegance and luxury.

The Country Club itself sits on a vast spread of acres that includes a world-class golf course, Olympic size swimming pools, a ballroom that overlooks the water that is mostly comprised of glass, and tennis courts—in fact, every court you can imagine. We even have a stable, a section earmarked for dressage, and the powdery beaches that stretch along the Atlantic. There are seven buildings here on the grounds and the Cottage House sits in the heart of them all.

The doors whoosh open again, and this time it's a couple of happy-go-lucky grannies making a beeline straight for yours truly.

“Morning, ladies,” I sing with a laugh caught in my throat. Both Peggy and Clarabelle have on long floral cover-ups which afford me a peek-a-boo of their bikinis underneath. They each have a basket-like tote bag slung over their shoulders, a large-brimmed hat on, along with oversized sunglasses. “Ready for more fun in the sun?”

“Only if you promise not to zap us into eternity,” Clarabelle quips. “Why’d you do it, Hattie? Why’d you have to send Jane off to the big accounting firm in the sky?”

Peggy leans in hard. “Did she have some serious financial dirt on the country club?”

“I hope you’re both kidding,” I say, closing the planner in front of me.

“Of course, we are,” Peggy says with her Southern drawl. “We know full well someone else did her in, and it’s up to you to get to the bottom of it.”

Clarabelle nods. “And us, too. Face it, Hattie. We’re a team—the dream team.”

Peggy nods hard. “And we kill the dreams of killers.”

“As much as I’m not sure I want to admit it”—I cringe a little—“it’s true, I suppose.”

Cricket and Rookie bound this way mewling and barking as they chase one another’s tails.

I want in on this case, too, Hattie, Cricket says as she threads herself around Peggy’s and Clarabelle’s ankles. You know you do your best investigating with me by your side—and a can of tuna for the two of us to split wouldn’t hurt either.

Rookie gives a soft bark. Count me in. Killion always says if he can’t keep you girls safe, I’m the next best thing.

Oh please, Cricket mewls with an eye roll. As if we need men.

I shoot her a look that says let’s not get carried away.

“What are they sayin’?” Peggy insists. “You mentioned yesterday that you can read

the minds of animals. I want in on that party trick, too.”

Me and my big mouth.

“All right, Hattie.” Peggy clamps her hands down on the counter in front of me. “You have to show us how you do it. Think of all the advantages! Why, I could finally figure out what’s going on in the minds of the men I date.”

I laugh at the thought. “Now there’s an advantage I don’t think you really need. You do just fine with the gentlemen, and we both know it.”

“But think of the improvements I can make,” she pleads.

Clarabelle leans in. “And I could use it to know what all these suits are talking about when it comes to the stock market. It would be a game changer as far as my portfolio goes.”

“Now there’s an advantage I’ve never thought of.” I cock my head at the thought. “But don’t people go to prison for things like that? I look awful in orange.”

“Oh please, Hattie.” Peggy clasps her hands together. “You don’t want to see an old lady beg, do ya?”

“No,” I say plainly. “But what I have—it’s not really a party trick that I can teach anyone. I mean, it’s not like flipping a switch. You both know what you’re asking is impossible. You may as well ask me to teach you how to fly.”

Clarabelle grabs ahold of Peggy’s elbow. “Think of the things we could do if we were airborne!”

“Oh, hon”—Peggy snorts—“I’ve already impressed a number of men with my

airborne skills. At this point, I'm practically a trained aerialist." She yanks her arm back before returning her attention my way. "Hattie, I don't care how long it takes. I just have to know your secret."

Cricket hops up onto the counter and chitters with a laugh. They're relentless, aren't they? Just tell them you need a special tinfoil hat and then send them on a wild goose chase to find it. Maybe by the end of the endeavor, they'll forget all about your party trick and start a new business selling magical hats. I bet there's a big market for things like that. Hoomans are forever finding themselves obsessed with nonsensical things.

Rookie belts out an enthusiastic bark. Ooh, a tinfoil hat! Can I have one, too? I want to read minds. Wait, I can already understand what animals have to say. And to be honest, I'm not all that interested in what hoomans are thinking. I'm more interested in what they're eating.

Sounds about right.

I look over at Peggy and Clarabelle and sigh. "I wish it was as simple as me giving you both a few pointers, or telling you to buy a tinfoil hat. But it's not. And honestly, if you could read minds, I'm sure you'd find it more of a curse than a blessing. Imagine knowing every little petty thought someone has about you?"

"Oh, pish posh," Peggy says, flicking her fingers through her red mane. "I already know what the men think of me. And the women? They're just jealous they're not me. I think reading minds would be amazing. Think of the dirt I could dig up. I could be the queen of the dating scene—and the rumor mill!"

Clarabelle nods in agreement. "And I could lead the top investment firm in Brambleberry Bay. No more guessing which stocks to buy or sell. And by the way, I look fabulous in orange."

“Duly noted,” I say, more than slightly amused.

Cricket stretches her front paws before curling into a ball. You should tell them it only works when you stand on one leg and sing the national anthem. That would be a sight.

I would, but I’m half-afraid they’d do it and break a hip while they’re at it.

“Let’s give her a minute to think on it,” Peggy says, pulling Clarabelle toward the Cottage Grill. “And me a minute to wet my whistle. We’ll be back,” she calls out as the two of them disappear.

“I fully expect it,” I say under my breath just as the doors open once again, and this time it’s my favorite brother making his way over. My only brother.

“Henry,” I say, walking around the counter to offer him a quick embrace. “So nice to see you. I didn’t even get a chance to say hello last night.”

“That’s because you were too busy with your killing spree,” he teases.

“You’re not funny,” I say.

Henry not only has our father’s first name, but he also shares his dark hair and blue eyes along with me. He’s clad in a suit, has his briefcase in tow, and looks sharp and ready to take down any courtroom in the country. He’s a fancy-pants lawyer, and I couldn’t be prouder of him.

He groans as he slings his briefcase onto the counter next to Cricket.

“Is the day over yet?” he asks, giving both Cricket and Rookie a quick scratch between the ears.

“Whoa,” I say. “You sound like you’re about to lose a case before you’ve even begun to fight.”

He takes a moment to glare my way. “Now you’re the comedian. Truth is, I just needed a change of scenery from the office. Thought I’d work on my cases here.” And hope any desire to continue with law comes back to me.

“Henry,” I say as a breath hitches in my throat. “Are things going badly at the office?”

“No, it’s not that,” he says, picking up his briefcase again. “It’s just the usual work stuff. Nothing to worry about.” It’s not like I want my losses on the bench to worry my sister.

Losses? Oh no. It’s clear he’s discouraged. Anyone would be. No one likes to lose. Especially not if they have Holiday as their surname. Our father practically drilled winning into our minds. There was only one acceptable place to be in—and that was first place.

“I’d better head in,” he says. “It’s going to be a long afternoon.”

“I’ll pop in and say hi,” I tell him.

“I’d like that.” He gives Cricket and Rookie a goodbye pat as he makes his way into the Cottage Grill. A part of me wants to spill the beans and let Hattie in on my deep, dark secret. But there’s no need to spoil both of our afternoons. As soon as word gets to my parents, I’m sure they’ll be devastated. Heck, news like this might just destroy my entire family.

He takes off and my mouth falls open.

Something serious is going on with Henry.

And whatever it is, it has the power to destroy our entire family.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

No sooner does Henry disappear into the dining area than my sisters breeze on into the foyer both wearing pastel sundresses—albeit Neelie’s is far more fitting than Winnie’s. In fact, Neelie’s is skintight and leaves little to the imagination, and Winnie’s is blocked by that giant plastic bin she’s toting.

“You just missed Henry,” I say, heading over and taking the bin from Winnie’s arms. “Oh wow,” I say, peering into the box. “This looks as if it has enough red, white, and blue to cover every continent on the planet. Thank you for this.”

Winnie shares my dark hair, blue eyes, and need to decorate the free world at the mention of an upcoming holiday. Lucky for us both, she’s the owner of the Crafty Treehouse, an arts and crafts shop right here on Main Street.

“You’re welcome,” she says. “The country club is going to look amazing. I’ve got buntings, streamers, flags of every size—you name it. And I have another box in my trunk filled exclusively with buntings. You’ll need more than your fair share to festoon this place properly. I’ll be more than happy to help you with that, of course. And once I’m done here, I’m off to decorate Willoughby Hall.”

Willoughby Hall would be the one hundred-and-eleven-room mansion her boyfriend Fitz inherited last winter.

“Oh?” I say, landing the box on the counter just as Winnie scoops up Cricket. “Is Fitz hosting something special for the Fourth?”

“Nope,” she says, giving Rookie a scratch, too. “We’re thinking about turning the hall into a bona fide BB.”

“We?” I coo as my mouth falls open. “Winnie, this is getting serious between you two.”

Neelie grunts, “Oh, honey, things got serious once he landed that rock around her neck.”

That would be true as well. And the rock in question isn’t a diamond, it’s a pendant the size of a walnut that glows blue and pink and looks as if it has a lightning bolt trapped within it. It’s called the Christmas Star and has an entire magical lore behind it. Not only is it priceless, it’s one of a kind—sort of like Winnie herself.

Winnie shrugs. “We don’t know what else to do with the place. I mean, we’re still using it as an entertainment venue. We might add a restaurant or two.”

The entertainment is mostly a few magicians putting on a show. They’re really big on holograms at Willoughby Hall, too, and it’s first-class entertainment all the way. It’s no wonder they charge a mint for it.

“So?” I elbow Winnie on the arm. “I think you’re avoiding the real question here. It sounds like Fitz really values your opinion. You sound like a team. Will we be hearing wedding bells any time soon? Spill the details.”

Neelie scoffs. Oh, who cares about the details, she thinks to herself. I find it ironic that I’m the only one around here who cares about Birkin bags and it’s Winnie who can afford to line her closet with them. Which reminds me, I should probably be a little nicer to her. I wouldn’t mind a castoff or two.

“Yes, Winnie,” Neelie says with the most saccharine tone she can muster. “Spill the details.”

Cricket yowls with a laugh, Aunt Neelie is so jealous her face is turning green.

I'll agree with that.

"Yes, Fitz and I are serious." Winnie gives a dreamy sigh. Mrs. Fitz Willoughby does have a nice ring to it, she thinks. And speaking of rings, I'm sure it would be spectacular. I bet you'd be able to see it on the moon. Not that I would ever wear anything so large and bordering on gaudy. Gaudy is Neelie's department. Besides, Fitz has exquisite taste in jewelry. I'm sure I'd love whatever he picked out for me. She clears her throat. "But that's the end of the story. If there are wedding bells to be had, neither of us has talked about it. But should he bring up the subject, my answer is yes. Yes, and capital Y-E-S."

"Aww," both Neelie and I coo simultaneously, with my coo being a little more genuine. Okay, so a lot more genuine.

"Well, I'm happy for you," I tell her. "And I'm happily offering up my bridesmaid services."

"I don't want to be a bridesmaid," Neelie scowls at the prospect. "I want to be a bride."

Both Winnie and I gasp in unison and not for any good reason. Neither of us wants to see Neelie end up with that old cheating coot she's paired herself with.

"Please tell me Stanton isn't going to propose," I say, unable to stop the words from streaming from my lips.

"Not Stanton." Nellie waves him off like he were a dirty pair of underwear—and let's face it, he sort of is. "I might be looking to expand my horizons." She glances at her watch. "Speaking of which, I've got a dentist appointment in just a few hours. We need to speed this along."

“Cornelia Holiday,” I gasp. “Please do not tell me you’re thinking about hitting on Dr. Draper.” The man might actually be a downgrade from Stanton.

“Dr. Draper is married.” Winnie is quick to inform us and I gasp twice as hard.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I say.

I think.

“He and his wife are separating.” Neelie nods aggressively as if she’s in the know. I’m just not sure if his wife is apprised.

Neither am I.

“Well, it doesn’t sound as if they’re separated just yet, now does it?” I say, and the words come out a little snippier than I mean them to.

“You mind your own business,” Neelie snips back. “We’re just getting to know each other.” She gives a snide smile. And I’m planning to get to know him a whole lot better.

“Neelie, he’s a married man,” I tell her just as that scene from last night comes back to me. Dr. Draper was having what looked to be a spirited discussion with Jane not too long before I discovered her body. And for a second I picture Neelie face down in that puddle with the electrical cord running out of it. “You should stay away from him. He could be dangerous.”

“What’s he going to do?” Neelie makes a face. “Poke a hole in my head with a dental drill?” She bites down on a naughty smile. I’ve got more interesting places for him to poke and prod. She turns to Winnie. “Let’s catch up with Henry. He’s much more fun.”

She takes off as Winnie lands Cricket on the counter.

“Speaking of Henry,” I whisper to my sister. “Have you noticed anything different about him lately? Does he seem, I don’t know, a little more frazzled than usual?”

“Henry,” she balks at the thought. “Henry is never frazzled. Maybe he’s striking out with the ladies. That’s about the only thing I can think of that would send him over the edge.”

“Me, too.”

I shake my head because it’s not enough to destroy our family. Something serious must be going on with him.

Winnie cranes her neck past me. “I’d better go keep them both out of trouble,” she says as she dashes into the Cottage Grill.

“And I should probably keep myself out of trouble,” I say, stepping back behind the counter and opening my planner.

“Hattie,” a breathy woman calls out and I look up to see Chevy Von Champs trotting this way clad in pink yoga gear, her blonde hair pulled back into a whippet of a ponytail. Her pale blue sneakers look twice the width that a shoe should be and they have a thick, wavy sole that gives the impression she’s floating as she walks.

Chevy is a well-established mystery writer who just so happens to be a part of my book club. She comes from money on both her mother’s and her father’s side. An heir to a vodka fortune via her mama, and an heir to cattle ranching billions from her daddy. Her husband is no slouch in the wealth amassing arena either—something to do with menswear I think. She’s in her forties, has two children, and well, she might just be a little obsessed with murder.

“Good job finding that body!” Case in point. “I’ve already got the murder board going,” she exclaims, barely containing her excitement. “I’ve got it all set up, with Jane Jordan’s picture smack in the middle. We’re still on for tonight at your place, right? This is one murder club I cannot wait to get to.”

I can’t help but frown at her eagerness. “I believe it’s called book club, and yes, we are still on.”

Chevy lets out a throaty laugh. “Come on, Hattie. You know you’re just as thrilled as I am. We’ve got a real live case on our hands. There’s no way I’m letting you solve this one without us. The entire club is chomping at the bit.” Especially this member, she muses to herself. I kill people for a living, for Pete’s sake. In fact, I kill them in my sleep, and sometimes those homicidal fantasies are the only way I can make it through the day.

I can sort of commiserate with her on that last point.

“All right.” I shake my head, both amused and slightly terrified. “I get it. We’ll tackle it together.”

She gives a squeal of enthusiasm along with a little hop that propels her three feet in the air. I really do need to look into those sneakers she’s wearing.

“Oh, hey”—I tap the marble counter in front of me—“any word from Bunny?”

Bunny Prescott is one of my official BFFs here at the country club. And she happens to be yachting the ocean blue in Europe for the summer. We’ve exchanged a few text messages, but it’s been hit and miss. Bunny is a light so bright she can outshine the sun and this old club just isn’t the same without her.

“Nada,” Chevy says. “And boy, will she be sorry she’s missing all the murderous fun.

I'll be down on the beach if something should come up," she says. "These wellness classes are just what I need to cleanse myself of the curse that comes along with summer."

"What's that?"

"My kids are home from boarding school." She gives Cricket another scratch. "I still have a week before summer camp starts. And there's not enough vodka in the world to get me to the finish line." But that won't stop me from trying. Vodka is practically in my blood, after all.

She does have a point.

She takes off for the beach and I dig around my desk until I find the itinerary for Missy Livingston's wellness classes.

Sunrise salutation yoga, seaweed smoothies sampling, saltwater meditation?—

Before I can read another thing off the list, Peggy and Clarabelle saunter back this way, their determination radiating off them like a bad sunburn.

Rookie gives a soft bark. I don't know if I like that look on Peggy's face.

Cricket mewls, It's the fact that Clarabelle's left eyebrow is yanked up into her forehead that worries me.

Me, too. Me, too, indeed.

"Hattie, we would trust you with our lives," Peggy starts, clasping her hands as she picks up right where she left off—pleading.

“And we know all your deep, dark secrets anyway,” Clarabelle chimes in. “Remember the time with the?—”

I shake my head to stop her before she can spill any embarrassing anecdotes I’d rather not bring to mind.

“Okay, okay, I get it,” I say.

“We’re practically family,” Peggy continues. “And family shares everything, right?”

“And think of all the fun we could have,” Clarabelle adds—and don’t think that mischievous grin of hers has gone unnoticed. “We could be like a trio of mind-reading super-sleuths!”

They keep going on and on, and each reason is more heartfelt and humorous than the last, until finally I hold up my hand to stop them.

I take a deep breath—because I have a feeling things are about to get honest really quickly.

I clear my throat. “Ladies, I have two things to say. First, I’ve got a suspect out on the sand, and I need to get out there to see if I can shake her down.” I pause long enough to inspect the anticipation on their faces. “And second”—I cringe in the same way I would if I were about to pull off a bandage—“I trust you both with my life as well. That’s why I’m going to tell you the truth. My little quirk is no party trick.”

Both Cricket and Rookie gasp as they train their whiskers my way.

I nod to both Peggy and Clarabelle. “I can read minds.”

Their jaws drop, and for one blissful moment, they’re speechless.

“That’s right,” I say as a strange mix of relief and anxiety washes over me. “And now, I’m about to tell you everything about my deep, dark secret.”

And I do just that.

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“So you mean you really can’t teach us your party trick?” Peggy looks crestfallen as she, Clarabelle, and I sit at a bistro table set out in front of the Cottage House.

I thought what better way for the club members to enjoy the warm weather than to sip on iced lattes outdoors? The Cottage House has a full-fledged back patio, but the front has been just as occupied. Although right about now, we’re the only takers.

The scent of fresh brewed coffee is coming in strong thanks to the fact there’s a service window that leads into the Cottage Grill right behind us. Other than that, the scent of the briny sea air is making me crave some serious beach time.

“Not unless you’re telesensual,” I say, forlorn.

Cricket pauses in front of the table as she and Rookie prance around the patio. I’m glad I’m not telesensual. I can’t imagine being constantly bombarded by what this big oaf is thinking.

Rookie gives a soft bark. And I’d lose my mind if I had to listen to how much you secretly love me. I’ve seen those googly eyes of yours.

You have not, Cricket yowls.

Have, too. Rookie barks and it sounds like a laugh. And Jolly’s noticed it, too. He’s just as tired seeing you drool over me.

That’s it! She zips his way. You keep Jolly out of this.

And the chase is on.

I'd hate to break it to them, but they're pretty much telesensual when it comes to other animals.

I just spent the last twenty minutes telling Peggy and Clarabelle all about my trials and tribulations with the quirky ability that I never asked for.

"One of my grandmothers had it and now I have it, too," I continue. "But I seem to be the only one in my family with it at the moment, save for one of my cousins."

I'd hate to out Bizzy, even if it is just to Peggy and Clarabelle. It's bad enough I'm outing myself. My cousin Bizzy Baker lives about twenty minutes away where she runs a seaside inn. She's the one who filled me in on the fact that my little goofy talent fell under the category of transmundane.

"Well, I'll be a mind-reading monkey's uncle," Clarabelle grunts before perking up a bit. "All right, so what if I can't read minds. The point is that you can. And even more important is the fact we're practically family. And do you know what family likes to do more than anything else?"

"I'm afraid to ask," I say.

"Go to Vegas!" Clarabelle chirps so loud at least six different birds dart out of a nearby evergreen.

"Oh, forget Vegas." Peggy waves off Clarabelle and those dollar signs spinning in her eyes. "Hattie, you and I are good friends. I'd say we're practically sisters. How 'bout you join me this evenin' at the Show and Tell Bar and Grill? There's a couple of gentlemen that have been admiring me, and I'd love to know what those boys are thinking. I could grill 'em and you could read between the lines—or listen between

them. In fact, I think you and I should make a habit of barhopping together. The drinks are on me, of course.”

“Pfft.” Clarabelle rolls her eyes. “Hattie isn’t a barhopper and we both know it. And you know what else we both know—exactly what those dirty barhopping dogs are thinking.”

I’m about to agree, or laugh, or cry, because I feel a little bit like a mind-reading piece of rope being tugged back and forth, but before I can do any of those things, I spot an unusual sight headed right for us.

It’s my mother and Nora Maddox walking lockstep while chatting up a storm.

“What’s this?” I mutter mostly to myself.

My mother and Nora may belong to the same country club, but they may as well live in two different universes as far as anything else goes. My mother is as sweet as a rose. And Nora is as prickly as the thorns on the stem of that rose.

“Here they come,” I whisper as I look frantically from Peggy to Clarabelle. “You have to promise you won’t say a word about my party trick that isn’t such a party trick at all. The only other person who knows about it doesn’t even live in Bramleberry Bay. My family doesn’t know—Killion doesn’t even know. It’s just you ladies.”

“Hattie.” Mom waves as she quickly exchanges hellos with Peggy and Clarabelle as well.

“Hello, ladies,” I say. “What’s on the agenda today?” I can’t help but make crazy eyes at Nora. As far as my mother goes, it’s like watching a lamb walk into a butcher shop with a big ol’ smile on her face.

“We’re doing lunch,” Nora says, pulling my mother close by way of her arm. “It turns out, Ruthie and I have a lot in common. She was just about to spill the tea on the horticulture club we both belong to. I’ve been absent for quite some time and it’s high time I catch up.” She peers down her nose at me. Nice to see Hattie minding her own business for once. Thank goodness she’s not poking and prodding around Jane Jordan’s untimely demise. That’s the last thing any of us need. Especially me.

She yanks my mother off before I can say another word. And just as they head into the clubhouse, my brother Henry runs out—but not before kissing my mother, of course.

“Shoot. It looks like I missed him,” I say as I watch Henry trot toward the parking lot. “Just as he was heading in, he had more than a few ominous thoughts. He said he had news that could devastate our whole family.”

Both Peggy and Clarabelle suck in a quick breath.

“See what I mean?” Peggy says, elbowing Clarabelle in the process. “You can pick up on all kinds of family dirt just prying into someone’s mind. Oh, Hattie, I need you. I’ll pay good money to have you latched to my side.”

“Speaking of money,” I say, rising from my seat. “I’d better go check out that lifestyle guru and see how her fun-in-the-sun class is going while I’m still gainfully employed.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure Nora is fully ensconced inside the clubhouse. “Missy Livingston is my very first suspect.”

Clarabelle claps her hands and belts out a hoot. “Let’s get this investigation on the road.”

We start to make our way toward the sand as Peggy pulls us both back by the elbows.

“Hattie”—Peggy says with a mournful smile—“Both Clarabelle and I want to assure you that your secret is safe with us. I’ll never tell a living soul that you can look them in the eye and suss out all the cacophony of noise they’ve got rattling around up in their noggin.”

Clarabelle nods. “This is one time I’ll let Peggy speak for me. I won’t tell a single soul. I won’t tell the butcher, the baker, or that hot candlestick maker down on Main Street. Cross my heart and hope to?—”

“Bup bup.” Peggy holds out a hand and stops her from finishing her rather morbid sentence. “Don’t you dare press your luck when it comes to the Grim Reaper. Especially since Hattie here is on a first-name basis with that naughty hottie. Now let’s get down to the shoreline. I’ve taken a look at today’s itinerary and we’re just in time for seaside smoothies and a nice brisk crabwalk.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I say.

Although much like my luck, I have a feeling things are about to go sideways.

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“Welcome to the Seaside Smoothies and Crabwalk Whispering Waves Workshop,” Missy Livingston shouts out to the gathering of about thirty or so women sprawled out here on the sand beneath the Cottage House.

The sun blazes overhead, turning this June afternoon into a scorcher as we watch our fearless leader, with her caramel-colored hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Her pink yoga attire shows off her skin that glows like a perfect café latte, and her lips are frosted as pink as a sugar cookie.

“Head to the tables in the back,” Missy instructs as she points the way to a tent set up nearby with a table full of tall glasses of what looks like ground-up grass clippings.

“These aren’t your average smoothies, ladies,” she exclaims with far too much excitement over the grassy-looking concoctions. “They’re a blend of locally sourced seaweed, a dash of organic spirulina, a sprinkle of kelp powder, and for that extra kick—a hint of fish oil. It’s the taste of the ocean in a cup!”

Peggy grunts, “I’m not so sure that’s a selling point, hon.”

Clarabelle nods. “But if it makes us look like that, I’ll drink a gallon.”

“Who am I kidding?” Peggy snorts. “I’ll drink two gallons a day if I can look half that good.”

It’s true. Missy is a stunner.

A few of the women grimace slightly at the mention of fish oil, but most nod along,

and soon enough every last one of them is sipping cautiously at their green concoctions.

I myself have chosen to abstain until after I question my suspect. Who knows what effect locally sourced seaweed might have on my ability to pry into people's gray matter? If it's anything like liquor, it won't be pretty.

"Bottoms up, ladies!" Missy calls out with all the fervor of a drill sergeant. "It's time to get back on the sand. And it's time to get our bodies moving and our souls grooving!" Missy continues, seamlessly transitioning to the next part of her workshop. "It's time to do the crabwalk! This isn't just a physical exercise, it's a spiritual journey. As we move like the crabs, grounding ourselves to the earth and the water, we'll be connecting deeply with the healing energies of the ocean."

Missy waves her arms our way in an effort to garner our attention before leading the charge and demonstrating how to whisper positive affirmations to the waves while walking sideways like a crustacean on the run.

I'll admit, it's a bit mesmerizing just watching.

She demonstrates the crabwalk in slow motion, moving sideways with a grace that seems—well, natural if you had pinchers for fingers. "And as we move, let's whisper our affirmations to the waves, sending our deepest desires and fears into the vast expanse of the ocean blue, allowing the water to cleanse and rejuvenate our souls. It's a full body and spiritual detox! A priceless endeavor if ever there was one." And hopefully one they'll be shelling out the big bucks for a repeat soon enough.

Thought so.

Cricket and Rookie bound this way with two other four-footed cuties in tow, and, of course, Jolly Beary strapped to Rookie's back.

Hey, if it works, it works.

At least we won't have to spend an hour looking for the tiny teddy like we've done a time or twelve in the past.

Rookie and Cricket's two new acquaintances bark with glee as they play follow the leader. One is a majestic husky and the other is a playful chocolate lab that happens to be hot on their tails, and each one of them looks as if they're having a better body and spiritual detox than any hooman on the beach could ever hope for.

Cricket trots by and pauses to gawk at the sideways commotion. Would you look at this spectacle?

The shaggy husky stops cold long enough to wag her tongue at the melee. Hoomans can be so strange.

Rookie backtracks and barks. But they look so happy!

The chocolate lab gives a few quick sniffs toward the tent in the background. And those smoothies smell like fish guts. Yum!

The husky barks at the crab-walking crowd. I've seen many things, but this takes the biscuit. They can't walk straight and they're talking to the ocean. Why don't they just play fetch?

Believe me, I'd rather play fetch—or dig a hole to China, or fight over a bone—anything but walk sideways while slinging wishes into the sea or questioning a potential killer.

Oh, who are we kidding? I was born to track down killers—no matter how pretty or perky they might be.

Rookie hops toward the waves. Maybe we should try whispering to the waves ourselves? I'd whisper for endless treats and belly rubs!

The husky nods sagely. If whispering gets me more treats, I'm in. But first, let's see if any of those smoothies are left unattended! Who's up for fish guts?

The four of them dart for the smoothie tent. And right about now a sliver of shade does sound refreshing, sans fish oil smoothies.

The entire lot of us moves like a mob—a sideways-walking, ocean-talking mob that has imbibed a little too much seaweed. I cast a quick glance around at the crowd and, I'll admit, the sight is nothing short of bizarre. We all look as if we're spontaneously malfunctioning with our arms and legs moving awkwardly as we shuffle sideways, shouting into the wind.

I try my best to keep a straight face as I navigate through the sea of crab-walking women, making my way toward Missy. She's in full instructor mode with her voice carrying over the sound of the waves as she encourages her class to shout out their innermost desires at the top of their lungs.

"Remember, ladies, it's all about connecting with the ocean's energy," she calls out. "Let the waves hear your dreams! The time has come to unleash your deepest, darkest desires—and your deepest, darkest secrets, too."

I'm all for that.

I'm about to extract a deep, dark secret or two from Missy Livingston—and I'm wondering if they're the murderous kind.

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Within seconds of being prompted to unleash dark secrets and desires, a mighty roar evicts from my fellow sand dwellers right here on the beach below the country club. And soon all sorts of wild things are shouted into the clear blue sea—some of them are far saltier than the water.

It's clear that Missy has a talent for convincing people to step out of their comfort zones. Though I suspect today's heat might have a little to do with that as well. The thermometer is about to crest triple digits, and I'm pretty sure heat-inspired delirium has long since set in.

I glance to my left and spot the ladies from my book club, aka murder club. Chevy is here, of course, whipping her blonde ponytail side to side as she crabwalks with the best of them.

Tipper Luxemburg is here as well, her brassy blonde locks scattered over the top of her head in a messy bun that looks as if it's about to unravel with her very next step.

Hillary and Kick are present, too. Hillary Pepperwood, aka Hilly, is a feisty redhead—and at the moment her face is equally as crimson as her locks, which is a tad concerning. And lastly, there's Kick Lawson, a brunette with a pixie cut who just gave birth to her fourth child a few weeks back, or at least I think it was her fourth. It might have been her fifth or eighth. Pumping out the little people seems to be something she excels at.

I watch as Tipper closes her eyes and continues to move sideways with surprising agility. "I affirm that my hair will always look perfect, even in this beachy breeze," she shouts so loud a couple of seagulls caw back at her as if responding.

Kick nods her way, slightly out of sync with her crabwalking. “I send forth a wish for a never-ending supply of chocolate that doesn’t affect my waistline! Just because I had the baby doesn’t mean my cravings have gone away.”

A light bout of laughter breaks out among us.

A woman from the back raises a hand. “I ask that the universe makes my mother-in-law magically understand boundaries—and respects them.” Preferably from the other side of the planet—or another planet entirely.

“Hear, hear,” Kick says and another bout of laughter ensues.

“I’ve got one,” a younger woman says as she nods to the sea. “I affirm that my cat will become Insta Pictures famous. We can do it, Mr. Whiskers!”

More laughter ensues.

Hey? Should Cricket and Rookie be Insta Pictures famous? I bet the free world would love Jolly Beary, too. Ooh, and maybe we’ll get sponsored by some big pet food brand that sends us lots and lots of free pet food. Both Killion and I would be on board with that. My checking account might even cheer the endeavor.

“May my WI-FI never falter during binge-watching weekends,” a voice from the back calls out, albeit a bit strained from the effort.

And then one after another, sort of like a barrage of rocket fire, women shout out their deepest, darkest desires to the unflinching Atlantic. Each affirmation is unique and personal—and on occasion far too personal. Yet, they all share a common thread of hope and a touch of humor. And underneath that humor, there seems to be a genuine sincerity.

I guess it goes to show that even among a group of women, who seemingly have it all, there are still desires that have gone unmet.

Missy pulls off to the side to admire the waves while encouraging the class to keep bobbing along.

This is it.

I don't waste a moment as I crabwalk my way over to the perky ponytail-wielding woman in pink.

"Hey, Missy," I pant. "How are you holding up?" I cringe a little. "I know that Jane was your friend."

"She was." Ironically. She frowns at the thought. "It's tough to think that I'll never see her again." She sighs, her eyes following the class as they move along the shoreline. "Jane was more than just a friend, she was a part of this community. It's just hard to believe she's gone."

"I agree." I nod sympathetically. "Jane was well-loved around here. It's a big loss for everyone. I feel terrible about what happened, and right here on the club grounds no less."

Her eyes glow amber as they narrow in on mine. "Hattie, don't you dare beat yourself up over it. Clearly, it was an accident. I mean, there were electrical wires near water, for Pete's sake. If anything, whoever arranged for those wires to be out here should be on the hook."

I cringe once again and she gasps.

"Oh goodness, that's not what I meant." The last thing I want is for poor Hattie to be

traumatized by the fact she may have caused this. She sighs my way. “Look, I’m a firm believer that not one of us leaves this planet unless it is their time.” Unless, of course, there was an accident, or they were taken off the planet by a crazed maniac, or someone who felt totally justified removing Jane from the planet. Heaven knows there’s no shortage of those people.

My mouth falls open.

Is she implying she’s one of those people?

“But life goes on, right?” She manages a pained smile. “We have to keep moving, keep living. That’s what this class is all about. Finding healing, even when things get tough.”

“Indeed,” I say, studying her features for a sign of guilt. “I heard the sheriff’s department is investigating this, you know, just in case it wasn’t an accident.”

She blinks my way. “You mean like someone lured her out that way?” Her eyes keep widening, and I’m half-afraid her eyeballs are going to bounce right out of her skull.

“I suppose.” I shrug as I say it. “Come to think of it, Jane did seem a little tense last night. I mean, she didn’t look like she was having the best night.”

Her chin hikes up a notch. That’s funny. She sighs with the thought. That little witch looked like she was having the best time last night. The best time making me miserable.

“Honestly”—she shrugs—“I think you might be right. In fact, I know you are. I overheard her and that dentist having a rather spirited discussion about something. Jane stalked off looking more than a little irritated. I wonder what that was about.” Although if it’s anything like the argument the two of us had, then I know exactly

what it was about—and why it would lead to murder.

Now it's my eyes that are about to bounce right out of my skull.

A horrid groan comes from the crowd. We turn that way just as a sudden rustle of unease begins to ripple through the group.

One woman stops cold, mid-crabwalk, and looks around frantically. “Oh no, not now,” she mutters, her face contorting in all sorts of uncomfortable directions.

Another woman nearby clutches at her stomach. “I think those smoothies were a bit too effective!”

Effective?

Peggy and Clarabelle begin clutching at one another as well.

“Oh, for goodness' sakes.” Peggy swats her bestie on the arm. “Now we're gonna have to crabwalk our way to the nearest little girls' room.”

Clarabelle quickly surveys the crowd. “Honey, by the looks of things, we're going to have one serious footrace on our hands.”

They dart off in a blur as panic quickly spreads like wildfire among the group.

“I need a bathroom, like, right now,” cries another woman, trying to stand up and losing her balance in the process.

“Where's the nearest restroom?” someone else calls out, her voice tinged with desperation.

“Ladies, stay calm,” Missy calls out. “I’m sure there are plenty of restrooms to accommodate you all.”

“Actually.” I wince at the crowd. “There’s always been somewhat of a shortage when it comes to the women’s facilities,” I say lower than a whisper. “But this might be the wrong time to bring that up.”

A sense of urgency takes over as the women do their best to scramble up the sand, and believe me, they’re not walking sideways—they’re sort of tiptoeing while holding their bowels together with their arms.

A chorus of groans and panicked screams fill the air.

“I’m not going to make it,” Tipper cries.

“Why did I have two of those smoothies?” Kick pants as if she’s about to pass out.

“Move, move, move!” Hillary pushes them both to the side as she does her best to barrel past the crowd.

And just like that, there’s a descent into chaos. I watch in horror as the entire group makes a mad dash toward the restrooms. Sand goes flying, and the smoothie tent is all but knocked over in the stampede—as it probably should be.

As every last one of them hustles past us, Missy looks at me with horror and disbelief.

“I did not see this coming.” She gasps and straightens. “I think I’d better head to the little girls’ room myself.” I certainly didn’t see that coming either.

She zips off and I thank my lucky smoothie-drinking stars that I chose to abstain from

the fish gut delight.

I make my way back to the Cottage House and waiting for me on the counter is another pink box with my name on it.

It looks as if my mystery admirer has struck again.

And a chill runs up my spine because of it.

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Hattie Holiday.

Even her name makes me smile.

I pull into the parking lot of the Brambleberry Bay Country Club and slide into the slot right next to Ginger, Hattie's oxidized and freckled once-upon-a-time cherry red Ford F-100.

Ginger is starting to feel like a member of the family.

Heck, Hattie has felt like family right from the beginning. I've never felt so close to someone in all my life.

I'm glad she and Duke didn't work out. The guy is a numbskull for letting her go. And seeing them together this morning certainly didn't set off any alarm bells for me. It didn't seem like Hattie had any romantic feelings left for him. Especially since her affection was geared toward me.

I hop out of my truck and the summer sun sears over the top of my head like getting a scalding skillet cracked over it.

Something Duke said at the morgue this morning comes back to me. Did he really admit that something about Hattie unnerved him? That he couldn't put his finger on it, but that she gave him the heebie-jeebies?

I shake my head at the thought.

Some guys are just born fools and Duke Kaplan is one of them. Lucky for me, he couldn't see the good thing he had in front of him.

Thankfully, I'll never make that mistake.

A friendly bark lights up the air and soon Rookie and Cricket are running a circle around me. Rookie has that teddy bear of his strapped to his back and he's covered with sand and something green and slimy as well.

I won't be asking questions.

Here's hoping the slime works itself out before he comes home.

"Look who it is," I say, giving them both a playful pat. "My two favorite fur people. Where's Hattie?"

Rookie barks and points with his snout toward the clubhouse.

"Atta boy," I say, patting his back. "Lead the way."

Cricket bolts toward the Cottage House first, and I'd swear both of these two can understand every word I'm saying. I hope Hattie isn't too busy. But judging by the fact the Cottage House is festooned with enough red, white, and blue to make the building vibrate with color, I'd say she's already had a busy afternoon.

Yesterday, this place was plain as a pancake. And today, the front is lined with buntings that span five feet across and four feet tall.

The bistro tables set out front are each adorned with centerpieces featuring miniature fireworks made of sparkling red, silver, and blue tinsel. There's a bust of a smiling Uncle Sam next to the double doors that lead into the Cottage House, and inside a

cluster of star-shaped balloons, anchored by ribbons that are held by the most beautiful woman in the world, greets me.

My girl.

“Balloons become you,” I say as I pull her in for a kiss.

“And your height becomes you,” she says with a laugh bubbling from her. “Can you help me hook these to that scone up there?”

She points to a brass wall lamp that sits about six feet from the ground and I quickly make all of her balloon dreams come true.

“I knew you were a hero,” she says, reeling me back in.

“Looks like you’re the hero,” I say, quickly surveying the foyer that’s been transformed into a Fourth of July bonanza. “It looks as if Uncle Sam himself decided this was the perfect spot for a revolution. Is there such a thing as being too patriotic?”

“Not according to my sister. Winnie is the one who helped with the transformation.” She gives a sly glance over her shoulder before leaning in. “And you can bet I made sure the country club paid her double for her patriotic trouble.” She gives a little shrug. “I am in charge of the décor around here. And I’m not above paying top dollar for the best.”

“Lucky Winnie,” I tease. “And lucky you. She has a real gift.”

“Speaking of gifts.” She closes her eyes a moment too long, and I swear each time she does, it seems like the lights dim in the world. “Aww,” she coos my way.

“Aww, what?”

She gives a few quick blinks. “Aww, you’re amazing.” Her shoulders jump as if she were covering.

A dull chuckle comes from me. “For a second, I thought you were reading my mind.”

“What, me? Mind reading?” Her cheeks ignite a vibrant shade of pink. “Someone has been reading too much science fiction and it’s not me.”

“It’s not me either,” I say. “I’m too overworked to read for pleasure. The only thing I’ll be poring over is Jane Jordan’s official coroner’s report. Duke texted and said he’d have it ready for me later this afternoon. I was just stopping by to see if you had time for a bite.”

“I’d love to take a bite out of you.” She bats her lashes at me and revs my engine like only she knows how. “Oh, did you mean food?” She feigns innocence and we share a laugh.

“How about both?” I wrap my arms around her tight just as Cricket yowls at the two of us. “Why do I get the feeling she doesn’t approve?”

“Oh, she does.” Hattie gives her feline friend a wink. “She’s just jealous she’s not the one you’re holding tight.”

Cricket belts out a yowl ten times louder than before and we share a laugh at that one because it’s clear Cricket was desperate to set the record straight.

“So, Detective.” Hattie nods at me as if I should finish her thought. “Don’t make me pull it out of you. Do you have any leads in Jane’s murder investigation?”

A hard sigh expels from me. “I’ve got nothing. And you?” I quirk a brow because I know Hattie too well to think she’d keep her mitts off this one. She’s too stubborn not

to.

“Hey.” She laughs as she taps me on the arm. “I am not stubborn.” She stops cold and winces.

“What did you just say?” I inch back because I’m fairly certain I didn’t say my part out loud. Did I?

“I could see it in your eyes,” she stammers. “You know, we’re a couple now. And everyone knows that couples have a special way of communicating—wordlessly. It’s like couples’ telepathy.” She blows out a breath as if she were relieved she came to that conclusion.

“Yes, I guess.” I shake my head as if refuting my own words. “So? What did you manage to dig up?”

“Is this an official interrogation?” She’s right back to teasing and I can’t say I object.

“Don’t make me pull you into a private room and make you sweat.”

“That is exactly what I’m hoping you’ll do,” she purrs, and Cricket gives a hearty groan as if she understood. I’m starting to think she does. “Missy Livingston was here this afternoon teaching a class on crabwalking and something to do with shouting our wishes into the ocean.”

Now it’s me wincing. “I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Oh, you don’t know half of the things you really don’t want to know. Like, how her seaweed smoothies caused a bout of Montezuma’s Revenge on about thirty different women all at once, and now we have what I can only describe as a plumbing apocalypse. Let’s just say there weren’t enough toilets for all of the eager-to-relieve-

themselves bodies. The begonias out back won't be needing any fertilizer this year."

"Geez." I inch back once more. "Who should I arrest?"

"Probably me." She bites down on her lip. "There's no reason Missy Livingston should have all the fun. Ooh, speaking of Missy"—she glances over her shoulder once again—"she admitted that she had some sort of disagreement with Jane last night. And also said she saw that dentist that Neelie was hitting on have a disagreement with Jane as well." Her lips twitch. "And I may have witnessed that exchange myself."

"You saw it? Did you see him lure Jane away from the party?"

She shakes her head. "So you think someone lured her away?"

I can practically see her eyes spinning as who knows what runs through her mind.

"Killion, I think you're right," she whispers. "There was no reason anyone needed to be at the dark end of the beach. Jane was a social butterfly, hardly a contemplative thinker who needed to clear her brain."

"Unlike you." I frown as I say it. "You found the need to clear your brain."

"Lucky I did." She nods. "Can you imagine if a club member found her?" She groans at the thought. "As much as I hate to say it, I'd much rather I stumble upon the dead around here. After all, that's why they pay me the mediocre bucks."

"Very funny," I say, pressing my lips against hers and lingering as I take in her honey-sweet scent.

"Ooh, speaking of sweet treats"—she pulls back, and a chill runs through me when

she does that couples' intuition thing again—"I got another one of those unexpected gifts." She dashes to the marble counter before bouncing right back with a little pink box in her hand. "Here's the note," she says, holding it my way.

"A bauble for a beauty," I read. "I can't take my eyes off of you." I shake my head at it. "Geez. It seems Duke didn't get the memo."

"That I'm taken?" She lifts a brow in amusement. "I don't think this is from Duke. He never bought me anything more than dinner, and at that, it was nothing fancier than burgers and fries." She pops open the box and a jewel-encrusted wave stares back at me with a pearl embedded in the whitewash.

"It's a brooch," she says. "I had Chevy look at it since she was around when I opened it and she assured me the wave is comprised of what look to be quality sapphires and that the pearl is a pricey one. She's pretty sure it's an antique."

"So this is a costly gift." As were the emerald earrings.

"As were the emerald earrings." She nods and my gaze hooks to hers.

My phone pings and I glance down.

"The coroner's report is in," I say, burying my phone back into my pocket. "Would you mind if I take the brooch?" I ask as I pull out an evidence bag out of my pocket. "I'd like to dust it for prints." And catch the creep who sent it.

"You think my secret admirer is creepy?" She crimps her lips as she holds the box my way as if it were a dead rat.

"You don't?" I quickly ensconce the box in plastic and pull her in for one last embrace.

“If it’s not coming from you, I’m completely creeped out.” She dots my lips with a kiss. “Thanks for looking into this for me. Oh, and before I forget, have you seen Henry lately? He’s been acting a little off.”

“Henry has been acting a little off since the second he walked into my frat house a million years ago. What’s going on?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me. I guess we have three full-fledged mysteries on our hands. A secret admirer, Henry’s troubles, and a killer. Life couldn’t possibly get any more exciting, could it?”

“Let’s hope not.” A small laugh rattles in my throat as we share another kiss. “I’ll catch you for dinner?”

“I have book club tonight. But I’ll take a rain check for tomorrow night.”

“You’re on.”

Hattie offers to hang onto Rookie since I’m headed back to the morgue, and all the way there not one of the three mysteries she listed is on my mind. Instead, it’s yet a fourth mystery.

How does Hattie Holiday always seem to know what I’m thinking?

I’ll be honest, it’s not feeling like something cute akin to couples’ telepathy.

In fact, it’s starting to give me the heebie-jeebies.

My thoughts stop cold.

Heebie-jeebies? Isn’t that what Duke said Hattie was giving him?

Huh.

I wonder if they had couples' telepathy, too.

There's only one way to find out.

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Once six o'clock sharp arrived so did the members of my book club.

My little A-frame cabin sits on the periphery of the Moonlit Meadows enclave on the edge of town, and my little rental just so happens to have an ocean view. The sun is just setting and the orange glow over the expanse of the Atlantic is mesmerizing. Although, not a soul in this cabin seems to be paying attention to that.

Peggy and Clarabelle hold Cricket and Rookie hostage over on the sofa while trying their best to read their little animal minds. I'm not sure how they figure they can achieve that feat, but I gave up on trying to understand those two mischievous grannies ages ago.

Tipper brought over a pitcher of margaritas, Hillary brought a carafe of mocha lattes from the new coffee shop that opened up on Main Street, the Whisk and Whip (word on the cobbled streets of Brambleberry Bay is that they serve desserts that are to die for, too), and Chevy picked up a gourmet Fourth of July-themed dessert platter from the bakery complete with fresh warm cookies brimming with red, white, and blue white chocolate chips. In fact, there are sugar cookies in the shape of stars, and more than enough vanilla-frosted brownie bites decorated with patriotic-colored sprinkles to make me explode with delight. My bathroom scale might do a little exploding, too.

Of course, I decorated for the upcoming holiday as well by way of the wreath on my front door that Winnie gave me. It's laden with miniature flags and has a tall makeshift sparkler shooting out of the middle of it. I just about poke my eye out with it each time I come and go, but it's so cute it's worth the risk of losing my vision.

"Hattie Holiday," Peggy snips as she trots my way while caging Cricket in with her

arms.

Clarabelle is hot on her heels, as is Rookie.

“We just have to know what these sweet babies are thinking,” Peggy says, looking a little distressed in the process. “I heard cats and dogs hold the secret to living a long, healthy life. And if I’m expecting to date my way through my ex-husband’s rolodex, then I’d better do all I can to extend my lifespan. He had quite the list of friends—wealthy, healthy sons of guns who have always had a roving eye for me, if you know what I mean.”

“Ditto,” Clarabelle says with a shrug. “Sort of. Anyway, it’s no fair you get all the dirt on anyone you want—and you get to live to be a ripe old age of one hundred and ninety-nine.”

“I won’t even ask how you came up with that number,” I say as Cricket practically leaps into my arms.

Clarabelle nods. “My grandmother Margie lived to be one hundred and ninety-eight and I’d like to beat her by a year.”

“Oh, she did not.” Peggy waves her off.

“She did, too,” Clarabelle insists. “Just like she was the first female to win the Iditarod using a team full of feral cats.”

“Oh, good grief,” Peggy grunts. “Hattie, tell us the secret to living to a hundred and ninety-nine.” She tips her ear my way. I’ll give you a hundred bucks if you tell Clarabelle it has to do with steering clear of bars. She’s been putting a damper on my dating mojo with those crazy concoctions she pulls from her imagination and half the men end up getting her number instead of mine.

“I can see how that could be a problem,” I tell her. “But the truth is, these furry little cuties aren’t harboring some deep, dark secret when it comes to living to a ripe old age, with the exception that becoming a pet owner offers some benefits that range from reducing anxiety to sleeping better, to living longer. So the answer would be to get yourselves to a shelter and rescue a couple of cuties for yourselves. And I bet in a year, you’ll both be asking who rescued who.”

Peggy groans, “All that hair getting every place, the constant nagging to be fed, and let’s not forget the little treats they leave in the yard that stink up the entire neighborhood. I’m not sure I’m ready to sign up for that.”

Clarabelle nods. “And that’s exactly why I’m not getting married again.”

“You’re preachin’ to the choir, sister.” Peggy holds up a hand and Clarabelle offers up a high-five.

What just happened? Cricket chirps.

I think they likened us to men. Rookie gives a soft woof. I’m pretty sure that’s the highest compliment they could give us. I’d better go find Jolly. He doesn’t want to miss the meeting. He takes off and Cricket shoots me a look.

Much like with men—Cricket starts—sometimes it’s best to let Rookie think he’s right.

Have I mentioned that Cricket is wise beyond her years?

Soon enough, the entire lot of us is sitting in the heart of my living room, which just so happens to double as my bedroom considering it’s a bachelor’s unit.

Chevy has erected an easel and set a giant whiteboard on it with the words murder

board written boldly across the top. There's a circle in the center with Jane Jordan's name—and a small picture of the woman taped in the center of it—and a few spokes made out of yarn poke out from it, pointing to bubbles that have yet to be filled with the names of suspects.

We all stare at it a moment too long.

“Shall we start with our roses and thorns?” Hillary asks, sipping her latte.

“Fine,” Chevy snips. “But only because I know some of us crave order more than justice.” Hilly Pepperwood is OCD to a fault. Next time I want to ruffle her feathers, all I'll have to do is rearrange the lineup at our next croquet game. And for waylaying the attention from my murder board for another ten minutes, I might just do that.

Good to know. I glance over at Hillary and make a face. She's irritated me on more than one occasion as well. I've got a few lineups I can rearrange myself.

“My rose is...” Peggy says, raising her hand. “I just learned that a very good friend of mine has the ability to help me figure out men, once and for all.” She winks my way. “Thorn”—the smile glides from her face as she looks at Clarabelle—“other friends have decided they'd like to glom on for the ride and ruin my chances of taking home Mr. Right for the Night.”

Clarabelle chuffs, “Roses—I've got friends in high places.” She turns to Peggy and scowls. “Thorns—I've got friends in low places, too. And the lowest of them all is trying to lock me out of a good time!”

Oh, for Pete's sake. I can't let Peggy and Clarabelle tear apart their lifelong friendship over the fact they think I'm some sort of ace in the hole when it comes to men and gambling. If anything, I'm a tempest in a teapot when it comes to both.

I count it nothing short of a miracle that I have Killion in my life, and as for gambling, I am sort of an expert at one thing—losing my shirt.

“Roses”—Tipper shrugs—“I’ve officially dumped Tucker O’Malley. But I can assure you that my ring, nor the fact he refused to have an engagement party had anything to do with it.” That less-than-stellar ring and the fact he insisted on not having an engagement party had everything to do with it. “I’ve decided I can do better.” She glances my way and thinks, And by better, I mean Henry Holiday. It’s not my fault Hattie’s brother is a hottie.

“What?” I hiss without meaning to. “I mean, what’s your thorn?” Tipper is quickly becoming mine.

Do I want Tipper to pounce on poor Henry? I honestly don’t know how I feel about this. Tipper is man-hungry, money-hungry, and loves to social climb with the best of them. Henry isn’t any of those things. Not to mention he’s stepped into some trouble that has him certain it’s about to destroy our family.

Hey? Maybe Tipper is the ticking time bomb that’s been vexing him? Maybe he’s in love with her and he’s afraid to tell us?

I shake my head. That can’t be it. But a part of me is afraid I’m not all that far off base.

“My thorn is”—Tipper clears her throat—“I need to find another bauble worthy to grace my ring finger. It feels a bit naked.” She waggles her bare left hand our way. I wonder how long it would take Henry to propose?

I practically gag on my latte. I clearly chose the wrong moment to take a sip. Although, holy smokes, this stuff is delicious.

“I’ll go since Hattie seems speechless,” Hillary volunteers. “My rose is the fact I’ve been taking cooking lessons at the local culinary school. My thorn is that I have no one to cook for.” She gives me a sideways glance. I wonder if Hattie’s brother is single? I’ll have to look into that.

Oh, good grief. Since when did Henry grow into such a hot commodity among my friends?

“I’ll go next,” I say, hoping to erase the thought of my brother from both Tipper and Hillary’s thoughts. “My rose is”—oh for goodness’ sake, what is my rose? “Oh, I know, the fact I received not one but two gifts delivered to the Cottage House this week. Both were decent pieces of jewelry. My thorn is, I have no idea who my secret admirer is. It’s not Killion, and I know it’s not my ex.” Or any of my exes for that matter.

Is it?

The room breaks out into instant chaos and complaints of why they can’t seem to get secret admirers who leave pricey gifts.

“I’ll go next,” Chevy calls out over the cacophony of noise. “My rose is that my children finally left for summer camp. As for my thorn—I’m coming at you with two thorns today. First up, no thanks to that smoothie fiasco out on the sand this afternoon, I had to throw away a pricey pair of Vera Veragamo yoga pants in pastel pink. It’s not only a hard-to-find color, but they’ve recently discontinued it.” She takes a moment to glare my way. “My second thorn is the fact I have a murder board with no suspects added to it just yet.”

“Then by all means,” I say. “Let’s get down to the killer brass tacks.”

“It’s time to pull out our magnifying glasses, ladies,” Chevy says. “The murder club

is open for business.”

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“Murder 101,” Hillary says. “Don’t commit a homicide in Brambleberry Bay unless you want to end up on Chevy Von Champs’ murder board.” She chuckles while reaching for a frosted brownie covered in red, white, and blue sprinkles.

“For that to be accurate, we’d have to already know who the killer is,” Tipper points out while pouring herself another margarita, and then generously topping off Peggy’s and Clarabelle’s margaritas as well. They’re the only three takers. The rest of us are enjoying Hillary’s mocha lattes. Have I mentioned that they’re addicting? It’s clear I’m going to have a problem, seeing that I have zero budget for a coffee run outside of my kitchen.

Cricket chitters with a laugh from her perch on the sofa. I love it when they get down to business.

Rookie gives an approving bark. Especially when it’s the business of murder. That’s Killion’s specialty. And he tells me it’s Hattie’s specialty, too.

I make a face at that one.

Hey? Rookie perks up. If Hattie and Killion get married, it will be the family business.

Cricket wastes no time in chasing Rookie around the room for daring to go there.

Although I’ll admit, my mind is starting to go there more and more as well.

The family business.

Mrs. Killion Major Maddox.

A soft sigh escapes me just as Tipper's hand spikes in the air.

"I saw Jane Jordan locking horns with that denizen of diarrhea, Missy Livingston, last night."

"That's it," Hillary says. "I think we should have Missy arrested posthaste. Hattie, get your boy toy on it."

I take a moment to frown at her. "Killion is not my boy toy."

"Oh, hon," Peggy says with a lascivious look on her face. "Then I'm afraid you're not doing it right."

I'll gladly take him off her hands, Hillary thinks to herself while licking her lips.

"Add Missy's name to the first suspect bubble," I instruct Chevy and she does just that.

Chevy nods at the board. "And I saw Jane Jordan locking horns with Dr. Erol Draper. I just so happened to be walking by and heard Jane say something about how soon the whole world will know the real you." She quickly inputs Erol Draper into the second bubble. "Anyone else?"

The real you?

Interesting. And duly noted.

"Oh, I know," Clarabelle says. "I saw Jane having an outright spat with Nora Maddox."

“Nora Maddox is a pit bull who has a spat with everyone she comes across,” Hillary adds before looking my way. “No offense, Hattie. But I wouldn’t want her as a future mother-in-law.” Maybe this will send Hattie in the other direction and me into Killion’s arms? Although, that bit about Nora the Pit Bull Maddox is true in every sense.

She’s got me there, but I’ve got a newsflash for everyone who thinks I’m going to let Nora stand in the way of my love story—a thousand rabid Nora Maddoxes couldn’t keep me away from my true love. Although, that’s one theory I certainly wouldn’t want to test.

“Nora it is,” Chevy says, filling Nora’s name into the third suspect bubble and my stomach pinches at the sight. It’s safe to say this is one murder board I won’t be sharing with my hot detective boyfriend.

“So what do we know about Missy?” Chevy looks over her glasses at us as she surveys the room.

Peggy raises a hand. “She’s gorgeous, has great skin, hair, and pouty lips, and has the ability to turn an entire country club into a plumbing catastrophe. I say we burn her at the stake for making me do things to the border garden that I never thought I’d do in the little girls’ room, let alone in the free outdoors like a wild animal.”

And she’s afraid of picking up after us? Cricket chuckles. You should have seen the gardener’s face when he took a gander at the not-so-sweet surprises she left behind.

That would explain the sudden exodus of half the gardening staff. They all claimed they had a family emergency—and on a mass level.

“Anyone know anything else about Missy?” Chevy asks again.

This time it's my hand going up. "I know she's a fitness guru who'll be holding a variety of fitness classes at the country club for the next two weeks. It's sort of a sample of her work in an effort to procure new clients." A titter of laughter circles the room.

"I took her business card," Hillary says. "Before the bathroom fiasco, that is." She fishes it out of her purse and clears her throat. "Her tagline is if you're not grounding yourself with the Livingstone technique, then you're not living."

"Or feeling the need to buy a box of adult diapers," Tipper quips.

I'm starting to like her more and more.

"That's funny," Chevy says as she taps into her phone like mad. "Missy doesn't have much of a social media footprint. It's as if she just blinked into existence a year ago. That's odd, considering she seems to be a pro at what she does."

"Or maybe she's an amateur," Clarabelle suggests. "A pro wouldn't have sent us all to the commode at the very same time."

"Maybe she is an amateur," Chevy says. "What do you think, Hattie?"

"I think I want to know why a young, vibrant woman seems to be hiding her past. Why else would she be shy a social media presence from a year ago?"

Clarabelle's eyes bug out. "I bet she made one of those X-rated tapes and she was so ashamed she wiped her history clean of any mention of it."

"Oh, hon"—Peggy scoffs—"that's nothin' to be ashamed about. Why, that's a badge of honor in some circles, especially when your boyfriend secretly makes the tape and downloads it to every naughty site on the internet because he's so proud of your

moves.”

“Peggy.” I cringe her way. “Say it ain’t so.”

“It’s so and so what?” She lifts a shoulder my way. “How do you think I got the numbers of so many men to suddenly sift through?” Maybe if I had a friend who was a mind reader I would have known what shenanigans that man was up to. See, Hattie? I need you by my side during my nightly bar crawls. I’ll tell you what, I’ll let you keep the crumbs and we don’t have to tell that cute little detective you’re dating.

My mouth falls open at the horrible idea.

“Let’s move on to Erol Draper,” Chevy says.

“Gladly,” I mutter. “We know he’s a dentist. And he’s married.”

“The marriage is a sham,” Tipper is quick to contribute. “He’s a dirty cheat. He’s been with half my friends.”

Note to self: Tipper’s friends are dirty cheats. How do I know she’s not the same? I’m pretty sure I won’t be a fan of hers if she starts dating my brother. I should probably warn him before she strikes.

Chevy writes the word cheat next to Dr. Draper’s name.

“His wife isn’t well,” Hillary adds. “I heard her mention something about being diagnosed with something recently as I was passing them by. I can’t remember who she was talking to, but I glanced back and she looked distraught over the fact.”

“Sick wife.” Chevy writes it down. “Any dirt on Nora?”

All eyes turn my way.

“Don’t look at me,” I say. “I do my best to avoid the radar when it comes to that woman.” True as gospel.

The room grows quiet for a moment right up until Hillary clears her throat.

“I’ve got dirt on that woman.” She slices a glance my way. “Nora Maddox owed a significant amount in unpaid back taxes.”

The entire room gives a collective gasp.

Every blue blood worth their salt knows that there are only so many loopholes you can jump through when it comes to the IRS, and nonpayment isn’t one of them.

“Well then”—Chevy says, writing back taxes down next to Nora’s name. “I think we know the link Nora had with the deceased. Jane was an accountant, after all.”

I nod as I consider it. And now I wonder if she was the accountant to Missy and Dr. Draper as well.

Exactly what dirt did Jane have on these people? And more importantly, why did someone make sure she took their secret to her grave?

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If there's such a thing as a perfect summer evening, then this is it.

The sun is just about to dive over the Atlantic looking like a melted orange popsicle as it meets up with the cerulean blue. The sky is turning shades of lavender and orange and the sea breeze holds the scent of both ocean brine and night-blooming jasmine.

And right about now the scent of crabcakes and French fries is kicking in as well.

Killion messaged me earlier and asked if we could have dinner at the Lobster Boil, Brambleberry Bay's premier seafood restaurant with a patio that spreads out onto the beach. And because of that sandy fact, it's also one of Brambleberry Bay's most pet-friendly dining establishments.

I parked Ginger a bit down the street. I'm not fond of valet parking. Not because I'm afraid they'll take Ginger for a spin and do donuts in the parking lot with her—heaven knows the old girl would probably get a kick out of it, even if it did throw her alignment out of whack. I'm more averse to tipping the valet when I can't even afford to tip myself a cup of coffee these days.

And boy, have I been craving more of that mocha latte that Hillary brought to the book club last night. I really do need to up my java game. And if I have any spare change rolling around in my sofas, it's going directly to that new coffee shop on Main Street. I can park my own car, thank you very much.

Cricket and Rookie jump and leap as we head around through the back entrance of the Lobster Boil. They've chattered all the way here about how much fun they're

going to have tonight. Their excitement is palpable.

We make our way through the cobbled walkway that leads to the expansive patio out back and already we can see that the beach is bustling with energy. The entire back of the restaurant is decorated for the upcoming Fourth of July festivities with red, white, and blue twinkle lights crisscrossing over the dining area and onto the sand.

Each table has a tiny flag sitting in a vase full of red carnations and blue hydrangeas, buntings hang from the back of the restaurant, and the waitstaff is wearing crisp navy aprons with white dress shirts underneath and star-spangled bandanas tied around their necks.

The aroma of fresh seafood makes my stomach claw at itself. And despite the fact I've already fed both Cricket and Rookie, I know those two feel the same. It's sort of their MO. And mine, too, at this point.

Seafood paradise found, Cricket chirps. Case in point. This is it, Rookie! The Lobster Boil is the big leagues. Keep your eyes peeled for falling treasures from the sky. It's like an all-you-can-sniff seafood buffet.

Rookie jumps and leaps at the thought.

I finally found a miniature backpack made especially for dogs that Jolly Beary could fit in. He has his furry little head poking out of the top, per Cricket and Rookie's insistence, so he could see the world. The backpack is a baby blue color, and it only makes Jolly Beary's tan fur stand out more, and in turn, it makes Rookie look ten times more adorable.

I can't wait, Rookie barks. Here's hoping they'll drop some lobster. Or maybe some grilled fish! Or maybe even a napkin? I'll eat anything.

It's true. I've seen that napkin thing happen before.

Cricket surveys the lay of the land as if plotting their next move. We need to position ourselves strategically. Under the tables is prime real estate. That's where all the good stuff lands.

Rookie nods. And everyone loves Jolly Bear, so with him on my back, we might even get some extra treats!

He's not wrong. On a normal day, Cricket and Rookie have their fair share of attention, but with Jolly Beary along for the ride, they've practically become an internet sensation.

They start to weave their way through the beachside tables, their noses twitching with the scent of the seafood bonanza at hand, and they're off like two furry pirates on a treasure hunt.

Just remember, Rookie, Cricket mewls. Act cute and innocent. The hoomans can't resist our charm.

I'm on it! Rookie barks with Jolly Beary bobbing along. Cute and hungry. That's my specialty!

"There are no truer words," I mutter.

They disappear under the tables, and just like that, they're off on their mission ready to claim whatever delicious morsels might come their way. I'm betting it will be more than their bellies can handle. I'm not really looking forward to the aftermath.

My stomach rumbles, reminding me I'm here to do the same just as a pair of strong, warm arms wrap themselves around me from behind and a woodsy-scented stranger

lands a kiss to my cheek.

He plants a gentle, lingering kiss on my lips as well, causing a warm blush to spread across my face.

I spin around in his arms and smile up at the Irish god at hand.

“Getting bold in public, are we?” I tease with a playful smile.

Killion grins, his eyes twinkling in the dim light. “I figure the fireworks shouldn’t be the only thing lighting things up this time of year.”

“You’re a real smooth talker.” A laugh bubbles from me. “Keep that up, and you might just outshine the Fourth of July display.”

He chuckles, his hold around me tightening. “I don’t know about outshining, but I’m definitely aiming to make this evening memorable.” Let’s just hope Hattie thinks it’s memorable in a good way.

“Oh, is that so?” I laugh once again. “And here I was thinking the seafood was going to be the highlight of the night.”

Killion touches his nose to mine. “The night is young, and I have a few surprises up my sleeve. The seafood might have some competition.” Lord knows I’ll have to make it up to her for what happens next.

I inch back and frown. “What happens next?”

He cocks his head. “It is strange the way you seem to know what I’m thinking.”

I clear my throat. “Couples’ intuition, remember?”

He's about to say something when his attention is hijacked by way of my earrings.

"You're wearing them? The earrings your secret admirer gave you."

I'm quick to nod as I pinch one of the emerald beauties. "I figure if I bump into whoever sent them, I might actually figure out who they are. You know, they might say something that gives them away. Ooh, did you run the prints on the brooch?"

"In progress." He frowns. "Since I already have your prints on file it should be easy to determine if there are any others." He pauses to inspect me. "Hattie, we don't know this person's intentions. They could be dangerous. I don't like the fact you're trying to bait them."

"I don't either, but they sent a second gift. I really want to know who this is and what their motive is."

"I think we both know their motive." He waggles his brows. "You're amazing." He brushes the hair from my eyes. "And I can't fault them for being blinded by your beauty either. Don't worry. I plan on using everything at my disposal to keep you safe." He gives a sinister look around the place until his eyes snag on a couple just making their way in, and I gasp at the sight of them.

"That's Peyton and Duke," I hiss as I watch them make their way to a table set for four near the sand. "Quick, let's leave before they see us."

"That would defeat the purpose." He winces. "I may have let Duke talk me into a double date." Or was it vice versa? Honestly, I'm not sure I'm willing to admit the former right about now.

"A double what?" I say a little sharply without meaning to. "And when exactly were you going to tell me this? I'm feeling a little bit ambushed."

“I’m sorry. And I promise I’m going to make it up to you. I was going to tell him we weren’t interested, but when you got that second gift, I thought maybe we could get to the bottom of this.”

I make a face in their direction. “And just like that, I’ve lost my appetite.”

We make our way over and Duke stands once he spots me. He looks decent with a dark button-down shirt and jeans. Peyton happens to have on a little black dress which just so happens to look identical to my own little black dress. And instead of feeling sexy, I feel as if I’m wearing the required uniform for Peyton’s coven.

I smile their way, feigning surprise. “Peyton, on a date with Duke? And apparently, a double date with you and me? I never would have guessed.”

Not in a million years.

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“How’s the evening treating you both?” I ask my boss and my ex as they stare back at me with placid smiles. One of them is as phony as can be. I’ll let you guess which one.

Killion pulls out my seat like a perfect gentleman—one I wouldn’t mind strangling at the moment—and we take a seat across from the happy couple right here out on the patio of the Lobster Boil.

Peyton rolls her eyes. “Oh, you know, just the usual tonight. Trying to keep Duke in line. It’s panning out to be a full-time job.”

“I remember well,” I say, hitching a lock of hair behind my ear as I try to dazzle him with my emerald wonders.

Come on, Duke. If you sent them, I want you to admit it. At least admit it to yourself.

Duke chuckles at Peyton. “She’s not wrong. But I’m doing my darnedest to be on my best behavior.”

I smile over at Peyton. “Well, if you need any tips on handling difficult men, you know who to ask. I’m getting plenty of experience thanks to this one,” I say, nodding toward Killion.

I only wish I were kidding.

Killion feigns offense. “Hey, I’m starting to resemble that remark.”

“Indeed you are.” I wink over at him.

The waitress comes by and takes our order. It’s the surf and turf special for all of us. And not a single soul at the table has commented on the glowing green gems attached to my ears.

I had a feeling Duke wasn’t my culprit.

I fiddle with my earlobe and tip my head his way as if offering him one last chance to fess up.

“What’s the matter with your ear?” Peyton snips. “Are your earlobes itching? That happens to me when I wear cheap earrings, too. You really should take those off.”

I lift a brow in Duke’s direction once Peyton lets the C word fly, but he doesn’t even seem interested.

“They’re not cheap,” I say. “In fact, one of the club members took a look at them this afternoon and assured me they were pricey emeralds. Did you know some emeralds are more expensive than diamonds?”

“Emeralds, huh?” Duke shakes his head. The next thing you know Peyton will be clamoring for a pair just like them. All she does is talk about Hattie. Of course, I don’t mind talking about Hattie myself. Little does she know it took a million years for me to get over that heartbreak. And even though Hattie didn’t break Peyton’s heart, she seems just as preoccupied with her—albeit in a negative light.

That makes sense. Although, I didn’t break Duke’s heart either. He broke mine.

“You did the breaking up between us,” I tell him. “Just in case you forgot what happened.”

His eyes narrow in on mine. And there goes that familiar chill up my spine once again.

“This is exactly why I broke things off with you,” he says, pointing at me with the glass of water in his hand. “You always seem to know what I’m thinking.”

“Couples’ intuition,” Killion chimes in. “We have it, too.” He shudders as if a chill just went through him as well.

“You stay out of my boyfriend’s mind, Hattie Holiday,” Peyton snips again. And my mind for that matter. She cocks her head my way as if testing to see if I’ve heard.

“We don’t know who sent me these earrings,” I say, proceeding to ignore the fact she’s trying to mentally trap me. “Whoever it is, they sent me a brooch this afternoon as well.”

“Sent it where?” Peyton looks livid as if she could feel the country club being dragged into the drama.

She would be right.

“The Cottage House,” Killion says. “I’m already speaking with security to procure the tapes. I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of this soon enough. There’s no return address and they don’t seem to be sent by courier.” He takes a moment to glare at Duke. “So if you’re sending them, you should probably fess up.”

“I’m not,” Duke says quickly. “If I were trying to win back Hattie’s affections, I would have opted for something more lowkey that appealed to her ravenous need for seafood. Like a nice dinner.”

Killion’s brows furrow. Hey? Wasn’t this place his idea?

“So you didn’t send the gifts?” I ask Duke point-blank.

“Nope.” And even if I did want Hattie back, I know better than to spoil a woman with fancy jewelry. Once you start with that stuff, women come to expect it. I’d go broke just trying to keep up with myself.

“He didn’t do it,” I say to Killion.

Shoot, Killion growls as he casts a quick look around the patio. That means whoever is trying to get in my girlfriend’s good graces is still lurking out there somewhere. And my gut says things are going to get sinister quickly.

I make a face because my gut is getting the exact same feeling.

“What exactly is happening here?” Duke asks just as the food is delivered, and boy, does it look divine—that is, if my appetite ever did a reprisal. “Someone is dropping off jewelry and running off?”

“Basically.” I nod. “Only they come with a note, no signature, and the gift comes in a little pink box. I’ve gotten two of them.”

“So far,” Killion adds. “And those notes talk quite a bit about your beauty.”

“Oh, good gravy,” Peyton snorts. “It’s clear one of those old codgers at the country club has mistaken your kindness for flirting.” Unless, of course, Hattie is actually flirting. I wouldn’t put it past her to hanker for a sugar daddy. Heaven knows the men who hang out at that place could afford to keep her in jewels for the rest of her life. She gives Killion the once-over. But I’ll admit, not one of those old codgers looks like that. Leave it to Hattie to play both sides of the field.

My mouth falls open. “I can assure you, I haven’t been flirting with anyone.” I glance

at Killion. “With the exception of—” I’m about to say you when I see a peculiar sight. “Is that my brother with Tipper Luxemburg?” I practically choke on the words as I say them.

“Looks like it.” Killion chuckles. Hattie may not be mining the country club for a suitor, but Henry sure is.

I make a face at Killion for even going there.

“Tipper just broke it off with that Tucker guy,” Peyton says. “The one who owns all those bars? I guess she’s back on the prowl and your brother is her very first prey. Good luck to him. Once Tipper clamps down on someone, she doesn’t let go.” Or more to the point, clamps her legs around him.

I gasp and jump at the thought. That was one visual I certainly didn’t need tonight.

We start in on our meals—juicy steaks that are just a hair from mooing. I like mine extra rare and so does Killion. And the lobster is steamed to a bright red perfection.

Killion moans after taking a bite of luscious lobster dipped in butter.

“This is too delicious,” he says, patting his mouth with his napkin. “Let me guess, Holiday lobster?”

“You bet,” I say before nodding at the two across the table. “My dad supplies most of the seafood restaurants around here with his catch. Always fresh, always best with butter.”

“Isn’t everything?” Duke says, chuckling my way. “Hattie and I had a thing for buttered corn on the cob while we were dating.”

“We had a thing for corn on the cob because your uncle had a crop of corn on his farm,” I remind him. “The butter was complimentary, too,” I say to Killion and we share a quick laugh.

Peyton twitches her lips in Duke’s direction. I had an inkling the guy was a cheapskate. In fact, I was shocked when he suggested we dine here tonight. Although, come to think of it, he’s probably counting on Killion to pick up the tab. She slices a glance my way. How did I get stuck with Hattie’s cheap leftovers? She eyes Killion for a moment. But then again, I might just be waiting in line in the event Hattie decides to toss that hottie overboard.

I clear my throat. “Duke has such great qualities. You’re very lucky to have him, Peyton,” I say to the sleazy brunette looking to snag my man.

Killion shifts in his seat. Sounds as if Hattie still wishes she had him.

“Not that I’m interested in Duke in that way,” I say, nodding to Killion.

Was I that obvious? He frowns at the thought.

“You heard the lady.” Duke touches his elbow to Peyton’s. “You’re lucky to have me.”

Peyton doesn’t so much as shed a smile. The more Hattie tries to shine a spotlight on him, the dimmer he gets. What is she up to, anyway?

“So, Detective”—Peyton sheds a sly smile at Killion—“what’s going on with the Jordan case? I don’t think for a minute that was an accident. Mostly because Hattie found the woman. And seeing that Hattie seems to specialize in homicides, I have a feeling that’s the direction this is headed in.”

“I’m keeping all options open,” Killion tells her. “The coroner ruled it death by electrocution and that certainly could have been an accident.” He nods to the coroner at hand.

“That cable shouldn’t have been there,” I say. “Ooh, I just thought of something,” I say, turning to Killion. “Maybe the cable has fingerprints on it? I mean, I’m sure my staff wouldn’t mind coming down to the station so you could rule them out.”

“The heck they wouldn’t,” Peyton snaps. “Killion, if you absolutely need them, they will do just that. But if you can at all avoid it, I’d appreciate it.” It’s bad enough I’ve been hemorrhaging employees ever since Hattie took the helm. If they think routine trips to the sheriff’s department is a part of the job description, I’ll lose more than half of them right out the gate.

She’s not wrong. For reasons that escape me, most people aren’t fans of being fingerprinted and quasi-accused of murder.

“How about we change the subject to something far less caustic?” I suggest. “Like the upcoming Fourth of July Stars and Stripes Spectacular?”

Peyton narrows her eyes my way. “And that’s another thing you had better not screw up by way of involving a corpse.”

I’m about to defend my questionable honor—considering that I happen to have a record of dragging a corpse into my events—when I spot a familiar blonde settling in at the bar. Right next to her is a tall, broad-chested man with thinning hair and a greasy smile. He wraps an arm around the blonde’s shoulders and proceeds to kiss her on the cheek. And then it hits me exactly who that greaseball is.

Gah!

It's Dr. Draper! Never mind the fact he's my very next suspect. I don't like the fact he has his greasy mitts all over my very much taken sister.

Okay, so I don't approve of Stanton Troublefield either, Neelie's questionable plus-one. But still, at least he's not a suspect in an active murder investigation—this time—or happily married!

Okay, fine. I don't know how happy Dr. Draper's marriage is either, but that doesn't change the fact that he has one. And I know for a fact Neelie isn't his wife.

"Excuse me," I say, bouncing out of my seat. "I need to make an emergency trip to the little girls' room."

"Probably a residual effect from those seaweed smoothies," Peyton assures Killion and Duke as I make a dash for the bar.

But before I can get there, a couple of grannies with far too much gumption step in front of me.

"Oh, thank goodness," I say, pulling both Peggy and Clarabelle in close. "My next suspect is here."

"The dentist?" Peggy cranes her neck past me. "Let me at him. Murderously handsome men are my specialty."

"Hot dog!" Clarabelle claps her hands. "Let's go get him."

"You can't," I say. "I need the both of you to head to that table over there and make sure Killion stays put. He won't want me talking to a suspect. Do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn't follow me."

We part ways and I head straight for the bar—and perhaps straight for the killer.

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Not only do I make my way to the bar where Neelie is entertaining the man with a target on his back in the shape of my number one suspect, but I manage to snag the empty stool on the other side of the good doctor—or not so good doctor as it just might be.

“Hattie?” Neelie looks as if she’s about to pass out. And judging by that skintight hot pink number she has cutting off her circulation, I’m shocked she hasn’t passed out already.

She is definitely not thrilled to see me.

I’m not so thrilled to see her either. Although, I don’t mind seeing my suspect—just not here with my sister.

The sight of these two together sends a ripple of unease through me, considering the suspicions swirling around Dr. Draper—not to mention the fact the slime ball is married.

And why am I the only one around here who seems to care about that little matrimonial detail?

Neelie seems oblivious to the potential danger before her, matrimonial or otherwise.

“Hello, Neelie—Dr. Draper.” I offer an amicable smile.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Neelie manages to mask her annoyance with a polite smile. “Erol, this is my big sister, Hattie. She runs the country club. Hattie, this is Dr.

Erol Draper. He's a dentist out in Pelican Bay."

"Oh, really?" I perk up. "My boyfriend lives out that way. I'll have to tell him to stop by someday—get his teeth cleaned. Although, he's a homicide detective. He doesn't do much smiling."

Dr. Erol Draper gives a hearty guffaw and I can't help but think there's something innately likable about him. However, the way his tan dress shirt is unbuttoned to his chest and that pinkie ring he's wearing, encrusted with diamonds, puts me off a bit. I don't know why. My father has been known to wear a pinkie ring now and again. Usually when my mother makes him.

"It's nice to meet you, Hattie," he says. "I was just stopping by to grab a quick drink and ran into this pretty little thing."

That pretty little thing gives a big toothy grin at the backhanded compliment. Not many women appreciate being likened to a thing these days, with the exception of my sister, of course. This sister in particular.

"Nice to meet you, too," I say as the bartender lands a beer stein in front of the two of them and I request a seltzer water.

"So you run the country club?" Dr. Draper looks amused and somewhat concerned by this revelation.

"No, actually, that would be my boss, Peyton Blakey. I'm just the event planner."

"Just the event planner?" Neelie balks. "Erol, she's in charge of everything that happens down at the place, with the exception of the unfortunate mishap that happened a few nights back." She purses her hot pink lips my way. This is Hattie we're talking about. She's seen about as many corpses as the morgue has this past

year. Face it, she's bad luck, and this is the universe's way of letting us know we should steer clear unless we want to end up on the wrong side of the soil ourselves.

I take a moment to scowl at her.

I am not bad luck.

I just so happen to have a little of it when it comes to spotting the dead in the wild.

"It's true," I tell him. "I plan all of the parties, the galas, the soirees, and I'm even throwing a humdinger of a Fourth of July bash in just a few nights. You should come out. We have a prime spot to view the fireworks sans all the crowds."

"I wouldn't miss it." He pats his hand over my sister's as he says it and I can't help but frown.

Looks like big sis didn't care for that, he thinks to himself as he pulls his hand back.

"So Hattie"—Neelie starts—"what is the sheriff's department saying about what happened the other night? Have they caught whoever did this to poor Jane?"

"No." I shake my head. "And I don't think they have any leads either." My seltzer arrives and I curl my hand around the cool glass. "So how did you come to know Jane?" I ask the good doctor. As much as I wish Neelie weren't here, I'm glad she's greased the wheels for this interrogation. "She was quite a figure in town."

He hesitates for a fraction of a second before answering. "Jane was—well, she was my accountant for a time. A very proficient one at that." Too proficient, but that's why I paid her the big bucks, I suppose. "I hired her not too long ago."

I nod, pretending to be satisfied with his answer, but my mind is racing.

Why would he be reluctant to admit a professional relationship with Jane? The fact he deemed her too proficient probably means he owed more in taxes than he cared to know. Nora comes to mind, and suddenly back taxes seem to be a running theme.

Lord knows I've heard my father complain of Jane being too proficient, more than once, and he certainly used Jane as his accountant right up until her death.

"Oh, who cares how he knew her?" Neelie snips. "The poor woman is gone. We should change the subject." She gushes with a sugarcoated smile at Dr. Draper before shooting me the stink eye.

Go on, Hattie, shoo. She practically strains her brain with the thought. I can't believe Hattie is not only crashing my date, she's gobbling up all my precious time with him. This was my chance to get to know him better. She's going to pay for this, she seethes to herself. Hey? Maybe I should spill some of Hattie's deep, dark secrets... or worse.

I wrinkle my nose at the thought of Neelie spilling my deep, dark secrets. For starters, she doesn't know about any of them. And to be honest, there's just the one—and it's the fact I can pry into her mind and learn all about her deep, dark secrets.

So take that, Neelie.

I twirl my seltzer around as I try to figure out how to continue to probe Dr. Draper with questions, but I'm momentarily stumped no thanks to my sister and her newfound need for revenge.

Neelie clears her throat, and here we go.

"Hattie"—she leans my way and winces as if suddenly distracted—"wow, those earrings you're wearing are drop-dead gorgeous," she says, gesturing toward the

emerald beauties dangling delicately from my ears. “They really bring out your eyes. Did Killion buy those for you?”

“Actually,” I pinch my earlobe, “a friend gave them to me.”

“That’s some friend.” Dr. Draper laughs. “I’m no expert, but they look pricey. “Indeed, they are quite stunning. Emeralds, if I’m not mistaken? A classic choice, always in vogue and very elegant.” I’d tell her they remind me of something my grandmother used to wear, but I’d best not offend her. I get the feeling she’s not too crazy about me sitting with her sister to begin with.

He’s not wrong. And come to think of it, these earrings look like something my grandmother used to wear, too. So he’s not wrong on both counts.

“Yes, they are emeralds,” I say. “I’ve always had a bit of a soft spot for them.” I scoot in toward him a notch. “Dr. Draper, the other night, did you notice anything strange about Jane? I wondered what would make her wander off on her own so far from the party.” Never mind that I was there, too.

He leans back and stares off in the nebulous distance. “You know, I did see Jane Jordan in quite a heated argument that night. In fact, it wasn’t all that long before—well, her unfortunate demise was discovered.” He points toward the bar with a look of calculated concern. “I saw Jane having a spat with two different women. The first was Missy Livingston. She’s that woo-woo queen that’s running class over at the club now. And then there was an older gal—dark hair, real battle-ax look about her. I believe I heard Jane say her name—Dora, I think.”

“Nora,” I correct with a complacent nod and he snaps his fingers in my direction.

“That’s the one,” he says.

“Do you have any idea what those arguments were about?” I ask, hopeful that he’ll come up with a nugget or two.

He tips his head and casts a glance at the ceiling. “I did hear something about how soon people will know exactly who you are and who you used to be. Those were the words that Jane said to the younger one, Missy.”

I inch back. Wait a minute... Didn’t Missy say that Jane said something similar to Dr. Draper?

I believe Missy said, that she heard Jane say soon the whole world will know the real you.

No, wait. That was Chevy who heard it.

Interesting, nevertheless. Sounds like a common theme.

“And how about with Nora?” I ask. “Did you pick up on anything there?”

“Oh yeah.” He gives a throaty laugh. “There was some name-calling. The word witch was tossed around, although I don’t know who said it.”

It was most likely Jane, and I hate to say justified.

“But they split ways and that was that,” he says. “There’s nothing more I can think of. But if I do—” He pauses a moment to glance behind me as a ruckus breaks out.

I turn around and gasp as I see both Peggy and Clarabelle standing on top of the table. Each of them has a dinner roll in their hands and there are at least a half a dozen dogs circling the table, vying for a bite.

Peyton looks as if she's about to pass out, while both Duke and Killion are doing their best to help those two feisty grannies back to planet Earth without anyone breaking a hip.

Boy, when I said do whatever it takes, they certainly took that to heart.

"I'm sorry, I'd better get going," I say, jumping off the stool. "Nice meeting you, Dr. Draper. Neelie"—I slice a glance her way—"we'll talk."

I do my best to thread my way through the bustling crowd here on the patio and bump right into a waitress holding a pasta platter brimming with red sauce and clamshells.

The platter wiggles and jiggles until eventually the waitress loses her grip on it.

"Timber," she calls out as that platter lands splat onto my chest.

"Gah!" I call out as she swats me with a cloth napkin a few times. I'm not sure if she's trying to clean me off or punish me for causing the debacle to begin with. Either way, she mutters something rife with expletives before taking off and vowing to come back. "Oh, good grief," I say, picking up a stack of napkins from an empty cart nearby and rubbing the red sauce into my dress like an idiot.

There he is, a woman's voice resonates and I look up to see a petite redhead about my mother's age, lots of frown lines, crow's feet, and a look in her eye that could lay flat a trucker a mile away. Cheating louse, she seethes to herself. I knew he was up to his old tricks again.

I follow her gaze to the bar and, low and behold, it's just Neelie and Dr. Draper sitting there.

Dr. Draper is the cheating louse!

That means this woman is his wife.

Double GAH!

I hope he gets everything he deserves. And my legal team and I will make sure of it. Her expression softens a notch. She's gone from irate to crestfallen. That is, if I live long enough to juice him for all he's worth. I can't believe I kept taking him back time and time again. And now my body has to pay the price for my emotional instability. And he gets to walk away clean.

What? What does she mean live long enough?

Is she dying?

From what?

I bet he gave her some nasty super bug that he contracted who knows what by how many different women.

Oh gosh, and now he's going to poison my sister's body as well.

The petite redhead takes a deep breath before storming out the side exit, and I turn back toward the bar where that dirty diseased rat has his hand on my sister's thigh.

"Oh no, you don't." I stomp my way in that direction just as the waitress comes out with another bowl of pasta with red sauce and clams, and without thinking I take it from her and promptly land it in Dr. Erol Draper's lap.

He screams.

Nellie screams.

Half the population on the patio screams and I think Killion just shouted the word freeze.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell the man. “It looks as if you’ll have to go home and change.” I grab my sister’s hand and pluck her out of her seat. “You’re coming with me.”

We don’t get three feet before she yanks herself free.

“What the heck do you think you’re doing?” Neelie screeches over the general chaos breaking out.

“I can ask you the same thing!”

We watch as Dr. Draper does a disappearing act, and Neelie belts out a hard groan.

“You stay away from me,” she says, poking her finger into my chest before regretting the decision once she sees the red sauce. “You just make everything worse. You’re a walking disaster and I want nothing to do with you!”

She stalks off and Killion quickly takes her place as he returns his weapon to his holster.

“You certainly make everything interesting,” he says. “Why do I get the feeling you had those women on your payroll so you could chat with my next suspect?”

A sly smile creeps up my lips. “Has anyone told you you’re a heck of a detective?”

“I won’t be for long if you keep solving my cases for me.” He glances down at my mess of a dress. “How about we get you cleaned up? And then you can tell me everything you gleaned, Detective Holiday.”

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“What am I thinking now?” Peggy asks, and her accent is the most country-fried I have ever heard it. With all that makeup running down your face, you’re just one fluffy tail short of being the cutest raccoon to run around Brambleberry Bay.

My mouth falls open, but before I can answer, Clarabelle plucks at my arm.

“What am I thinking?” she asks while staring into my eyes as if the fate of the universe depends on her very next thought. You look like a clown who just saw a tearjerker!

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I grunt at the two of them as we sit at a small bistro table right here in the most happening coffee shop Brambleberry Bay has ever seen, the new Whisk and Whip Gourmet Coffee and Pastries Shop. The place is packed to the hilt with bodies, and the poor girls running the counter look frazzled as they try to keep up with the customers.

The décor is pink and gold, the scent of freshly brewed coffee is putting my caffeine addiction on notice, and don’t get me started on what the scent of those freshly baked cinnamon rolls is doing to me.

I’d pretty much kill to make sure I get one as soon as they pop out of the oven. And I might just start my murderous spree with these two ladies here.

“Do I really look that bad?” I ask, trying to catch my reflection in the brass railing next to me, but all I see is a blurry smudged face with mascara trailing down my face like abstract art gone wrong. And come to think of it, that orange lipstick isn’t doing me any favors either. “Never mind, don’t answer that,” I say, quickly dabbing my lips

with a pastel pink napkin from the dispenser next to me.

We haven't placed our orders just yet. The line was almost out the door when we walked in so we grabbed a seat instead.

I'm actually set to meet Killion here this afternoon. Last night, before he could tell me a thing about the coroner's report, he had an emergency down at the office and had to leave shortly after I took a bath in pasta sauce. Which reminds me, I really need to get back to the Lobster Boil and order the pasta with clams. From what I tasted of the red sauce, it's scrumptious.

"So?" Peggy nods. "Did ya read my mind?"

"And mine?" Clarabelle ads in haste.

"Yes, and now I realize I look like both a raccoon and a clown." I make a face at them for going there. "But to be fair, you ladies were in the same classes I was at today."

By some miracle, Peggy, Clarabelle, and I lived through four of Missy Livingston's self-help disasters out on the blistering sand this afternoon.

First up was Glitter Stride, an entire hour of our lives that we will never get back, emphasizing the idea that life can be as glittery as your shoelaces. The entire focus of this class was finding joy and sparkle in our everyday steps—as we glued glitter to shoelaces.

Next was Coloring Your Way to Clarity, an hour spent by the sea using coloring books as a tool for relaxation and mindfulness while dabbling in the therapeutic art of, well, coloring.

I'll admit, that was my favorite class of the day. I foresee an entire cache of coloring books in my future.

She also encouraged us to share our problems with one another while we armed ourselves with pencils in every hue of the rainbow. She said that talking to strangers could be the most therapeutic thing on the planet—next to coloring in a petunia, that is.

After that, we embarked on a class called Romancing the Pink Stone, where we learned all about the fine art of rubbing our faces raw with pink Himalayan sea salt. Of course, Missy kept saying ridiculous things like no pain no gain, and you'll look more radiant than the sun once we sand ten years off your faces.

Let's just say I've had third-degree burns that felt more pleasant.

And finally, we rounded out the afternoon with the Glitz and Glam course. A one-hour tutorial on how to attract men in a back alley and make a little dough while you're at it.

Okay, so that wasn't exactly the premise. I believe the narrative she tried to sell us was dare to be beautiful. Let's just say there was far too much gel eyeliner, not to mention lots of bold eyeshadow and daring lipstick choices to be had. Bad choices. And the three of us are wearing them all.

"I think we learned the hard way that ninety-degree temperatures don't mingle well with gel eyeliner," I say, casting a glance from Peggy to Clarabelle who also happens to be wearing enough dark kohl to make any pack of raccoons or car full of clowns envious. "But on the bright side, the three of us look as if we're ready to audition for Alice Cooper's stunt doubles."

"Who's she?" Peggy wrinkles her nose at the mention of the rock god.

“I hope she’s got good hair,” Clarabelle adds just as the bell chimes at the entry. “Here they come, Hattie”—Clarabelle cringes in that direction—“Mom One and Mom Two. If I were you, I’d hide under the table. A face like that could be used against you in a court of law, or for the next few decades’ worth of Thanksgiving dinners.”

“What?” I spin around and, sure enough, my mother and Nora are making a beeline toward the counter. Speaking of which, another register just opened up and the congestion instantly dies down.

“Quick”—Peggy says, hoisting Clarabelle out of her seat—“it’s time to seize the latte!”

“And don’t forget the eclairs we’ve yet to conquer,” Clarabelle adds as they make a beeline toward the registers themselves.

I’m about to join them just as my eye snags on a trio of women seated by the window.

It’s that petite redhead from last night—Dr. Draper’s wife!

Oh, how I’d love to be a fly on one of those delicious donuts sitting before them. I’d probably try to eat the entire plate of donuts, they look that delectable. And considering my diminutive size as a newly-minted winged creature, it would probably be the end of me. Although, all things considered, when it comes to the life of a fly, death by donut doesn’t sound all that bad.

A pair of strong, warm arms wrap themselves around me from behind and the scent of my favorite spiced cologne greets me.

“Hello, beautiful.” Killion lands a kiss to my cheek and I spin into his arms. “Where

are the kids?" he says with a playful wink.

Since Killion had to work late I offered to take Rookie for the night.

"At my cabin, enjoying air conditioning while binge-watching all the It's a Furry World they can handle. I didn't have the heart to bring them out on the sand today. It's really cooking out there."

"I'll say." He grimaces a moment as he inspects my features. I don't want to be the one to break it to her, but I think her face is melting.

"I'm aware," I say, pointing to my melting features. "But don't worry. I don't plan on reprising the look anytime soon."

It really is as if she can read my mind. He chuckles with the thought.

"I could read the look of horror on your face," I say just as those women who were with Mrs. Draper get up and leave, but the redhead who I'd love to question seems to be staying put. "Killion, would you mind getting me a latte and maybe a few sweet treats we could share? I see a member from the country club I'd like to say hello to."

"No problem," he says, landing a kiss on my cheek. "In fact, I think our mothers are here." He nods toward the front.

"Ooh, why don't you grab a seat with them? I'll meet up with you as soon as I can." I'm about to take off before I backtrack. "You might want to grill your mother on what she and Jane Jordan were arguing about the day Jane died."

"In front of your mother?" He looks slightly amused by this.

"They're besties now." I shrug up at him. "And besties have no secrets." Unless, of

course, Nora somehow roped my mother into participating in a homicide. And knowing Nora like I do, I wouldn't put it past her.

It would explain a lot.

I dot his cheek with a kiss before taking off.

Honestly, the last thing I want to do is grab a seat with my mother and Nora, but I need someone to occupy Killian in the event Mrs. Draper feels like pinning a homicide on her soon-to-be ex.

And a part of me is hoping that's exactly what she'll do.

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“You mind if I sit here?” I ask, falling into the seat across from Mrs. Draper right here in the Whisk and Whip Gourmet Coffee and Pastries Shop.

The petite redhead looks my way and the whites of her eyes are lost in crimson railroad tracks. Her friends just left, and yet she remains glued to her seat, looking dazed and confused.

“Oh my goodness,” I say, leaning in. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were having a private moment.”

Her hair is slightly mussed, and she’s wearing a stark white shift that only brings out the grief in her poor eyes.

“No, it’s quite all right.” She lifts a hand. “It’s crowded. And I’m done. I shouldn’t be hogging a table all to myself. Feel free to stay. My friends and I are through. I’m just a little slow to leave at the moment.”

“Please, take your time,” I say.

I’d give anything to dig deeper into this woman and her shady husband, but I don’t have the nerve to do it.

Something Missy said this afternoon comes back to me.

“You know”— I whisper as I lean in— “I took this class once and the instructor said that the most therapeutic thing you can do is spill your problems to a complete stranger. I certainly don’t know you, and we’ll probably never see one another again.

If it makes you feel better, I'm all ears. No judgment, I promise."

But I sure as heck don't mind judging her two-timing husband.

Her crimson lips twitch as she considers this. "No judgment?"

I shake my head just enough. I'm afraid if I make any jarring movements it might break the spell.

"Oh, what the heck." She tosses her hands in the air. "My husband of five years has been cheating on me. And not only is he quickly becoming a problem, but so is the little gift he's given me." She wrinkles her nose. "Don't worry. You can't catch it. I was just put on antibiotics strong enough to turn Brambleberry Marsh into purified drinking water."

"Oh, that's terrible. I mean, it's a good thing you're on the mend." At least she's not dying. However, if he keeps up with his naughty double-dipping routine, she might eventually succumb to something that no antibiotic in the world could cure her of.

I could kill Erol for doing this to me, she growls to herself. Not only is he breaking my heart, he's taking down the rest of my body along with it.

"I'm afraid it's not the first time he's done this to me," she seethes as she gazes out the window. "And I know what you're thinking. I'm a fool for sticking around." She folds her arms tight across her chest, her gaze still angry and distant. "After my husband of forty years died, I didn't think I'd marry again. Then I met Erol. He didn't have a family, never married. He was so charming back then." She huffs at the thought. "My kids are grown and I thought why not? We were married within six months. Then he started coming home late, regularly. I didn't think too much of it. He has a thriving dental practice, so I could understand that. He left on long conferences, and when the conferences grew closer and closer together, that's when I

grew suspicious. How many conferences does a dentist have to attend, anyway? And he never once invited me.” Her entire body is vibrating with anger at this point. “It turns out, he wasn’t at any conference. He had women on the side—more than one—and he was treating them to expensive hotels, buying them fancy clothes, and jewelry, not to mention the exotic meals. I didn’t have half the perks they did. I should have passed on the wedding and opted to take him up on a tryst instead.”

“I’m so sorry. Have you confronted him about it?”

“Oh, yes.” She gives an incredulous laugh. “Twice I walked out the door, but he lured me back in by promising he would never do that to me again. But these last six months his libido has been on the uptick again and I don’t mean with me. There were plenty of clues. I found a secret charge card in his office, a stray lipstick that wasn’t mine rolling around on the passenger side of his car, and, of course, this little treat that took both me and my general practitioner by surprise.” She tosses her hands up again as she glances down at her body. “I confronted him again, but he denied it. I’m through with all that. I know the truth. I started following him. He’s been with several hussies. One is a pretty young thing who just started teaching these hippie dippy classes down at the country club.”

I blink back.

Oh my word. I think she’s talking about Missy!

“Then there was his accountant.” Her fingers float to her lips. “Actually, I’m not sure if that was a genuine affair. But something fishy was definitely going on.”

I nod because I saw Dr. Draper and Jane arguing with my own two eyes.

Something she mentioned earlier catches up with me.

“So he was never married and had no children?”

She shakes her head. “No to both, or at least he’s never fessed up to them. He said he was from Missouri, but how do I believe anything he’s said when he’s taking up lying to me as if it were a sport? Plus, before my father died, he thought it was strange the way Erol claims to have been born and raised in the Show Me State and yet he got away without having a stitch of an accent.”

“That is odd.” More than odd! “I bet he had pictures from his past? Stories?”

She shakes her head. “It’s like he just materialized one day and fell right in my lap.” She glances out the window once again. “I’ll admit, it made me wonder what or who he was running from. A part of me worried that he walked out on some poor woman—perhaps left her saddled with children. Oh, it’s silly.” She waves the idea away. “Of course, he didn’t do that. Deep down he’s a good man. Or at least I used to believe it.” And now he’s turned me into a killer.

My mouth falls open as I try to make heads or tails out of that last thought.

“I have to go.” She jumps out of her seat. “Thank you for your time.” She presses her lips together, but they tremble, nonetheless. “You don’t know how cathartic this was for me. What was your name?”

“Hattie,” I say.

She gives a complacent nod. “I guess we’re not strangers after all.” She bolts from the shop, and before her seat can grow cold, Killion fills it.

“That was some hello,” he says, landing a cup of coffee in front of me along with a couple of chocolate glazed donuts.

“She looked like she needed a shoulder to cry on.” I hook my gaze to his and lean in. “That was Dr. Draper’s wife.” I quickly relay everything she just said and Killion’s eyes turn into a couple of donuts themselves.

“I don’t know how you do it, but you manage to get more information from people than one of my guys with a spotlight and a baton in their hand.”

“What can I say? People love to tell me things. Speaking of telling me things, what did the official coroner’s report say about Jane Jordon?”

Killion’s brows swoop down low and he casts a dark glance in the direction where our mothers are busy chatting away.

If my mother didn’t just implicate herself, it would make this conversation a whole lot easier.

I gasp at the thought and his eyes dart to mine.

I swear it’s as if she can hear me. He frowns. “How about we find somewhere a little more private to chat and I’ll tell you everything.”

“I know just the place,” I tell him. “Mine.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

Out of nowhere, a summer storm decided to dump a deluge of rain, wind, and lightning over Brambleberry Bay.

Hattie and I picked up a few more donuts, along with a pizza for good measure, and I followed her over to Moonlit Meadows.

While she's in the restroom doing a quick change, I'm snug on the sofa with Rookie bouncing from one side of me to the other.

"I missed you, too, big guy," I say, giving him a scratch between the ears when I can catch him.

Cricket gives a lazy yowl from Hattie's bed and I chuckle her way.

"I missed you, too, you little cutie pie. Where's Jolly?" I no sooner ask than the teddy bear materializes in Rookie's mouth.

Hattie steps back into the room, cozy in a pink fuzzy robe, her hair combed back and wet, and her face scrubbed clean and glowing.

I've never seen a woman as beautiful as Hattie in all my life. Half the time, I still marvel that a woman like Hattie wants anything to do with me.

I certainly won't be making the same mistake Duke made. The fact he kicked her to the curb has me questioning his sanity.

"Ooh, speaking of Duke"—she says while opening and shutting cabinets then

pressing the buttons on her coffee maker—“I’m dying to hear about the coroner’s report.”

I freeze solid for a second.

Did I say anything about Duke out loud?

Hattie shuffles back this way looking a bit frazzled as she lands next to me.

“I’m sorry,” she pants. “I had to jump in the shower and get the grime of the day off of me—more to the point, my face. But I can’t stop thinking about the coroner’s report. That’s what I meant when I said speaking of Duke. I guess I was continuing a thought out loud and expected you to know what I was thinking.”

I lift my chin a notch. “I guess I would have to be a mind reader to know that.”

She gives a nervous laugh and I’d swear Cricket just laughed as well.

“Killion,” she says my name lower than a whisper, and if I’m not mistaken, there are tears glittering in her eyes. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

Cricket yowls as if the house were on fire. Then Rookie gives a few sharp barks.

Hattie clears her throat and nods. “You know what? This probably isn’t the time.”

She scoots over and I pull her onto my lap and hold her like that for a moment.

“Lilacs and vanilla,” I say, inhaling the scent right from her neck.

If heaven doesn’t hold the scent of Hattie Holiday, is it really heaven?

A tiny laugh bubbles from her as if she heard and a faint alarm goes off in me.

“So tell me”—I say, reaching for a slice of pizza and handing it to her before snatching one up for myself—“any more gifts from your secret admirer?”

“No, thankfully. Any prints on the brooch?” She takes a bite out of her pizza while studying me for clues.

“A partial.”

“Ooh! What does that mean?”

“It means I don’t have the technology to solve this riddle just yet, but my friends at the FBI lab most certainly do. I’ve handed it over to a buddy of mine and he said he’d take a look.”

Her eyes flit to the corner of the ceiling. “Do you think there’s any way I could get the brooch back in time for the Fourth of July? I was sort of thinking I’d wear that and the earrings they gave me to the Stars and Stripes Spectacular at the country club that night.”

“Why’s that? Match your outfit?”

She swats me playfully on the arm. “Because whoever it is might be there. I really think I could get them to out themselves if they just saw me wearing them. I bet anything they’d want to compliment the pieces or ask me questions about them.” She nods as if there are more but she doesn’t want to give away her methods.

And whatever her methods are, they work. Hattie knows how to get the lowdown on just about anything with not much more than one of her smiles. They certainly don’t teach that at the police academy.

“Okay.” I sigh at the thought. “I’ll give it back as soon as I can. But I’ll be there on the Fourth and I’m not taking my eyes off of you.”

“I certainly hope not,” she purrs as we finish up our pizza slices. “So tell me everything Duke said in the coroner’s report. There has to be something more to this case. I think it’s clear it’s murder.”

“I thought it was pretty clear before I read the official report, but now it’s a neon sign that reads homicide. It turns out, electrocution is still the cause of death, but they were able to ascertain that she had high levels of Methaqualone in her system. Enough to knock out a horse. She was well on her way to a coma.”

“What is that?” she asks.

“The street name is Quaaludes. Duke thinks someone slipped something into her drink. He checked her for needle marks but didn’t find any.”

“Quaaludes?” Her eyes dart around the room as she tries her best to put it together. “Where do you think the killer got their hands on it?”

“It’s not difficult to get if you have the right connections. It’s cheap, usually comes in the form of a pill but you can grind it up. It’s a central nervous system depressant, so people have known to take it to quell their anxiety, or just to mellow out.”

“Maybe she took it herself?” Hattie winces. “I’m not trying to play devil’s advocate, but maybe she was addicted to the stuff? I mean, she had a high-strung job. And she seemed to have a bone to pick with quite a few people, or at least they did with her. And well, if she did accidentally take too much of the drug, that would explain why she wandered off and fell into that puddle of doom.”

I nod. “I agree, all very possible. But something about it seems off. The homicide

detective in me is still oddly rooting for the homicide.” Now it’s me wincing. “Please don’t tell anyone I said that.” It makes me sound like a monster.

“Then I’m a monster, too.” She ticks her head to the side and my blood runs cold. “I’m always rooting for a homicide.”

I’m not sure why, but the fact Hattie clearly knew what I was thinking felt like a sucker punch. From that moment on, I decide to turn my thoughts into a hurricane of nothingness that rivals the thunderstorm rattling the windows.

She clears her throat. “Speaking of homicides, Mrs. Draper certainly wouldn’t mind committing one right about now.”

“Candace Draper,” I offer, warming to Hattie once again. Of course, she can’t read my thoughts. It’s silly of me to think so. We’re a couple. That’s what couples do. They can finish one another’s sentences—even if they’ve never uttered a word. “I did a little digging while you were speaking with her.”

“How’s that?”

“I asked my mother.” I offer a quick smile. “Actually, your mother knew of her, too. Apparently, they both felt sorry for the poor woman because word on the street is that Dr. Draper had been a cad for the entire five years of their marriage.”

“Well, that’s exactly what I gleaned,” she says before proceeding to reiterate his shady past, the fact he’s presumably given the woman an STD, and that she accused him of sleeping with Missy Livingston and maybe the deceased. “Oh”—Hattie nearly jumps out of my lap as she lifts a finger—“and she also mentioned that he said he was from Missouri but that he didn’t have a stitch of an accent.”

I think about it for a moment. “Odd, but not impossible, I suppose.”

“Then there’s that whole strange thing about Missy Livingston not having a social media past. At murder club, we discovered that she?—”

“Murder club?” I deadpan. “Never mind, keep going.” I learned long ago that there was no stopping Hattie from investigating. Justice is as much in her blood as it is mine, and that’s one of the things I love about her most.

“Chevy did a light digging and found out that Missy doesn’t really have a social media footprint that dates back past a year.”

“Interesting,” I say as I consider it. “So we have two suspects with suspicious pasts.”

“That’s right,” she says. “Missy as of one year ago and Dr. Draper as of five years ago. He’s a dentist, though. I mean, surely we can easily find out where he went to dental school, right? That will answer a lot of questions right there.”

“Brilliant,” I say, landing a kiss to her cheek. “And I will get right on that—as in me alone. Let me take this the rest of the way. You’ve always done way too much. Besides, you have the Stars and Stripes deal coming up in a couple of days. You’ve got enough on your plate already.”

A frown twitches on her lips. “All right, fine. But there was one other person arguing with Jane that night.” She chews her lip for a moment, hesitating to say it.

I’ll say it for her.

“My mother.” A hard sigh expels from me just thinking of the ways she’s enmeshed herself in this case. “I was able to wrangle a little info out of her, but only the fact that she did speak with Jane once again, later at the party that night and hinted about trouble with Jane but that she was able to square it all away and had no ill will toward the woman. She just hired her to take over the accounting.”

Hattie lifts her shoulders to her ears. “I may have heard a rumor that your mother owes Uncle Sam in back taxes.”

“My mother?” A thousand thoughts run through my mind and they all look like dollar signs wearing prison garb. “Why hasn’t she said anything to me? Why didn’t she come to me for help?” Those darn spas of hers. When she started out, she was a small-time operation, still having my dad do her taxes for her, then they split up and... “Oh geez.” I pinch my eyes shut tight. “I’d better talk to her about all this. She’s sitting in the middle of a hornet’s nest and she doesn’t even know it. An orange jumpsuit is the last thing I want to see her in.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure it was just an accident. And I bet Jane was trying to help your mother. And maybe Nora?—”

“Was being Nora,” I finish for her. “I bet Jane took one look at the mess and advised my mother to write a big check to the IRS. My mother has never been fond of three-letter agencies, and I’m sure that conversation underscored the point.” I glance at my watch. “I won’t be able to sleep tonight unless I deal with this on some level. I’m so sorry, Hattie. Do you mind?”

“Not at all. In fact, I’ll keep Rookie so he doesn’t get caught up in the melee.”

Rookie whimpers and nods as if agreeing.

“Thank you.” I kiss her on the lips for that one, and the next thing I know I’m on the front porch.

“Oh, wait,” Hattie says. “Let me give you at least half these donuts. It’s bad enough I’m going to gobble them all down, I may as well share the calories.” She turns and heads into the kitchen to do just that.

It's not the first time my mother has skated on thin ice. But it's certainly the first time she's embroiled herself in one of my investigations because of it.

Hattie laughs from the kitchen. "Don't worry, Killion," she calls out. "I have a feeling both of our mothers are experts at skating on thin ice."

She heads this way, hands me a bag with the donuts in it, and my eyes widen twice their size.

"You're right," I say lower than a whisper.

"Of course, I'm right," she says, landing another kiss to my lips. "That's probably why they're hitting it off so well. Nothing like a little trauma bonding," she teases as she offers up another kiss, and this time we linger.

I pull Hattie in by the small of her back and kiss her as if I were going off to war, as if I were about to disappear and we'd never see one another again. It certainly feels that way.

A jag of lightning ignites overhead and the sky brightens in a flash. The thunder sets in right away and rattles the porch beneath my feet.

"I love you," she says as she sneaks in another quick kiss. "Stay dry."

"I will." My eyes hook to hers and I hold her hostage there a moment. "I love you, too, Hattie."

We part ways and I jump into my truck and hightail it out of Moonlit Meadows.

All of these months, all of the so-called intuition. I shake my head.

Without a doubt, Hattie Holiday just read my mind as if it were a book. And I'd be lying if it didn't give me the heebie-jeebies—just like it did to Duke.

This isn't something new with her.

I have a feeling she's been doing it from the beginning.

How is it possible that Hattie could read my mind?

It's not.

Although she's darn good at getting info out of people and maybe that's why.

This isn't possible.

It can't be happening.

Only it is, on both counts.

What the heck is going on?

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

The Fourth of July is finally here, and the Stars and Stripes Spectacular is going to be nothing short of magical.

The beach outside the country club has an energy that's simply vibrant and electric. This evening is already shaping up to be quite the celebration of freedom and joy.

The entire country club—specifically the beachfront—has been transformed into a glamorous scene straight out of a movie. String lights twinkle from above, casting a golden glow on both the sand and the festivities. Red, white, and blue buntings flutter gently in the breeze as they hang along the railings of the country club's deck.

Throngs of people have shown up for the star-spangled event as they mill around in their finest summer evening wear, the women in flowing dresses and the men in crisp shirts and slacks, each outfit accented with patriotic colors.

Tipper is congregating near the seafood buffet along with my brother, Henry, and the two of them keep pointing to the different dishes and nodding. But I'll bet dollars to donuts, or in this case dollars to Holiday lobster tails dipped in butter, that they're not discussing the dinner menu.

Chevy and Hillary are nearby pecking at the dessert offerings. Kick is right behind them shouting at her children and scooting their little hands away from the eclairs. My sisters and parents are here, too, somewhere, hobnobbing with the who's who of Bramleberry Bay.

Laughter and animated conversations fill the air, creating a buzz that feels downright contagious. The sound of easy listening rock music strums from the speakers and the

scent of freshly grilled burgers and hot dogs lights up our olfactory senses. And my stomach is demanding both.

I crane my neck into the crowd of polished people with their bronzed tans which make their teeth glow like flashlights, their pricey Birkin bags worth more than my truck, and their carefree laughter that screams one percenters. But there's no sign of the person I was hoping to see tonight.

I'm not sure why, but I'd swear that Killion has been avoiding me.

He picked up Rookie the other night right after speaking to his mother about her questionable tax practices and I haven't seen either Rookie or Killion since.

And he hasn't exactly been quick about returning my text messages either.

I shake my head at the grand display before me.

At the heart of the event is an extravagant spread of festive appetizers and the yummiest food you ever did see. I worked tirelessly with the kitchen staff to create the perfect menu for this patriotic event, and seeing that there's a buffet spread even Uncle Sam would be proud of, I'm hoping Peyton will be proud of me, too.

And I was sort of hoping Killion would be here to enjoy it with me.

Tables laden with red, white, and blue themed delicacies line the area. Miniature flags and sparklers decorate each dish, from star-shaped sandwiches to fruit skewers arranged in the pattern of the American flag. And don't get me started again on the hypnotic scent of those grilled burgers, grilled hot dogs, and grilled corn on the cob. That, mingling with the salty sea air, tantalizes my senses.

There's a food and beverage station for everyone—a bar serving Fourth of July-

themed cocktails garnished with berries and mint, a dessert table brimming with pies, cupcakes, a large, beautifully decorated Independence Day cake decorated to look like the flag, and enough miniature red, white, and blueberry trifles for each person here to have six of the custard-filled treats. And sitting in the middle of it all is a champagne fountain that's brimming with the priciest bubbles known to man.

From the stars to the sand, the attention to detail is impeccable this evening, if I do say so myself. But that doesn't mean I expect to get on Peyton's good side tonight. Heaven knows not even the U.S. Army can help win that war.

Cricket threads her way around my ankles and I quickly scoop her up.

I stopped by the pet store this afternoon and picked up a miniature red, white, and blue scarf that I tied around her neck. I picked up a patriotic bowtie for both Rookie and Jolly, but now I'm starting to wonder if I'll see them at all this evening.

I'll admit, it's been pretty quiet without the furry oaf, she mews.

"I miss him, too," I sniff as I bury my face in a patriotic flower arrangement on a nearby table. The pale blue hydrangeas may be luscious to look at, but there's not a single scent to them.

I never said I missed him, she corrects. I simply stated that it's been quiet. There's a lot to be said for some solitude. Although I do miss Jolly. It really drives the point home that Jolly Beary should always spend the night with me. That way when you and your hooman oaf break things off for good, we won't have to fight for custody of Jolly. I saw something just like it on the Divorce Dispute show. It comes on after Animal Paws and I've learned a lot about hooman behavior that way. Word to the wise, if you have a favorite china, it's best to claim it now before the destroyer of hopes and dreams tries to steal it from you.

“The destroyer of hopes and dreams?” I scoff at the furry cutie. “Cricket.” I laugh at the thought.

She nods and her whiskers twitch in the process. It’s the nickname the divorcee gave to her soon-to-be ex-husband. It turns out, he was going to sell her grandmother’s antique china for some cheap cash. The woman was lucky to be rid of him. And you’ll be lucky to be rid of Killion, too. I don’t like seeing you check your phone twenty times an hour. Besides, you’re never alone when you’ve got me around. I won’t just walk out of your life one day and forget you exist.

“Killion hasn’t walked out on me. He’s just been—busy.”

I think.

Hope.

And pray.

“Hattie Pattie!” someone calls out and I turn to see both Peggy and Clarabelle making their way over. “Are you ready to have some F-U-N tonight?”

“I am most certainly ready to have some fun.” I laugh. “I’m just hoping the explosions are relegated to the sky.”

“Here’s to an explosive good time,” Peggy sings while lifting the fruity cocktail in her hands.

Peggy is clad in a red and white striped sundress, accented with a blue scarf, while Clarabelle sports a white top with star-spangled blue pedal pushers. The two of them are the epitome of patriotic chic this evening.

“Look at you, Cricket.” Clarabelle swipes Cricket from my arms and coos at the furry cutie. “All ready to celebrate with the lucky Tom cats prowling the grounds. And looking like the red, white, and blue cutie you are, you’re going to have the pick of the litter,” she coos at her, and yet Cricket gives me a look that clearly says, rescue me.

“Speaking of roving Tom cats prowling the grounds,” Peggy purrs. “We’ve got big plans for your mind-prying capabilities, Hattie. Imagine the fun we’re gonna have with the gentlemen here tonight!” Talk about an evening that ends with a bang. She primps her hair with the thought and I gasp her way. “Oh, pish-posh, mind your own beeswax, would ya?” She winks my way. But you know it’s the truth.

That I do.

“Think of it, Hattie,” Clarabelle chimes in, still holding Cricket hostage. “You can be our secret weapon. You’re going to take the guesswork out of what every Tom, Dick, and scary-hairy cat here is thinking. Is he into me? Does he think my outfit is cute? Or is he just thinking about how many fireworks it would take to launch a hot dog to the moon?”

Peggy rolls her eyes. “Case in point, Hattie. We need you to help divide the Tom cats from the wieners.”

“Point taken,” I say. “But remember, with great power comes great responsibility. We can’t judge a man for craving something hot from the grill this evening.”

“Or craving something else that’s pretty hot.” Peggy waves a hand over her dress. “Oh, Hattie, you’ll be our spyin’ little Cupid for the evening. And who knows, maybe you’ll find out some juicy secrets along the way.”

“I sure hope so,” I say as I spot Missy Livingston mingling with the crowd. Now

there's someone I'd love to spy on. Speaking of Missy, here I thought she was working at a settled discounted rate for the country club, and yet the bill she sent the front office was twice that much. Talk about bait and switch. "All right," I say, glancing at Cricket, who seems to be silently judging the whole conversation, and then back at the giddy grannies before me. "I'll see what I can do, but no promises. And no using my abilities for evil. I'm a lover, not a fighter."

"Oh, honey, so am I," Peggy says, slinking off with Clarabelle in tow and Cricket by proxy. "We'll go round up those Tom cats!"

Help, Cricket yowls. I'm being abducted by a couple of cats on a hot tin roof.

"Oh, hush, you little cutie pie," Peggy tells her. "You sit there and look like the doll you are. You're gonna help bring all the big boys to the proverbial yard. And in exchange for your services, I'm going to hand-feed you some lobster."

Never mind! Cricket yelps my way. They know how to treat a cutie like me.

I'll say.

I'm about to scour the grounds for signs of Killion, or any traces of that jewelry-gifting stalker I seem to have amassed, just as a pair of icy cold hands clamp over my eyes from behind.

"Don't move a muscle or you're a dead woman."

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 9:46 am

I've been threatened a time or two in my life, and not once have I taken kindly to it.

I duck and spin until I'm looking right at my attacker, and one look of that familiar face has me gasping.

"Bunny Prescott," I shrill her name up over the laughter, the music, and the crashing waves here at the Stars and Stripes Spectacular. "You about gave me a heart attack! Now get over here," I say, pulling her in for a strong, rocking hug and we squeal and laugh even though I'm still moved to kick her.

I pull back to examine her once again. Bunny is a tall, blonde puddle of society girl perfection. Her skin glows the color of the perfect latte, her hair is a milkier shade of blonde than I remember, but her hot pink lips and hot pink micro dress she's threatening to pop right out of is exactly how I remember her.

Her father spends his time buying up Manhattan, and Bunny spends her time buying up everything else. She's a self-proclaimed man-eater and she just so happens to be one of my very best friends.

"What are you doing back in town?" I ask. "I thought you were yachting on the Mediterranean until fall!"

"Are you kidding?" She gravels out a laugh. "I decided I just couldn't miss the fireworks here in Brambleberry Bay. Not to mention the fireworks in honor of the Fourth." She leans in and her eyes glow in the ever-dimming light. "I heard the murder club is back in business. How dare you find another body without me. Didn't I tell you to hold your homicidal horses until I got back?"

It's true. She did.

"At least now I know what it takes to bring you back from the four corners of the earth," I say just as Chevy and Hillary come this way.

Chevy has her short blonde mane pulled back by way of a red, white, and blue bandana, and she's wearing a dress to match in patriotic hues.

Hillary's fiery red mane is the personification of a cherry bomb. And with that little red dress she has on, her body is sort of the personification of a firecracker, too.

I'm wearing a red dress as well, but it's long and flowy, and with every light breeze it threatens to pick up and show off my underwear. It sort of has me on alert at all times.

"Club rules," Hillary says, pointing a svelte red fingernail my way. "Club business cannot be discussed without three or more members present."

"That is not a club rule," I say.

"It is now," Chevy says, leaning. "So? Do we have any more dirt on Missy Livingston or Dr. Draper?"

"Don't forget Nora Maddox." Hillary nods. "Her path in life has been pretty well soiled, so this should be easy."

Bunny gasps so loud it sounds as if every champagne bubble on the premises just popped.

"You mean to tell me those are your suspects?" Bunny cranes her neck past me. "Let's start from the top. Who's Missy Livingston?"

Chevy wastes no time in pointing her out. “That stunner with long dark hair.”

Bunny frowns at the woman. “She looks familiar. Do we know her?”

“Not really,” Hillary says. “She’s been running some questionable classes at the club. Be glad your yoga wear came out unscathed.” I not only had to throw out my yoga pants, but I had to trade in my Jaguar for a new one. Let’s just say those butter-yellow seats weren’t so yellow after the car ride home.

“Eww.” I wince at the thought. “I mean, oh,” I say, blinking over at the dessert buffet where Mr. Slime Bucket himself is pawing all over my sister. “And that would be Dr. Draper. He’s a dentist and a cheat. His wife is leaving him.”

“You don’t say? A dentist,” Bunny purrs, and I can’t help but roll my eyes. I wouldn’t mind checking out his equipment. It’s been a long time since I’ve dated someone who specializes in oral hygiene.

“Oh, good grief,” I mutter. “He might be our killer.”

Bunny shrugs to herself. It’s never stopped me before. And just like that, there’s another interesting detail about him.

Hillary jerks in closer. “I did a little digging and found out that Dr. Draper has a hankering for leaving his private number with his most beautiful patients.”

“My sister can attest to that,” I say, scowling over at Neelie. “I never thought I’d say this, but where is Stanton Troublefield when you really need him?” I ask, craning my neck into the crowd and spot Killion looking right at me. I’m about to wave, but he ducks back into the crowd with Rookie in tow.

Wait... What just happened? I could swear he was looking at me, but it’s as if he

wanted to pretend he wasn't.

"Everyone knows Nora Maddox is a battle-ax," Chevy says, filling Bunny in on the obvious. "Let's face it, if Nora is the killer, neither Hattie nor Killion will make that arrest."

"It must be good to have friends in high places." Hillary shoots me a look. "It's nice to know the two of you would let someone get away with murder." They certainly weren't going to let the rest of us slide.

A tiny smile plays on my lips. It's true. Last Thanksgiving, Killion and I pegged these women for covering up a homicide. But that's murderous water long under the bridge.

Still not giving any one of them a pass on a homicide, though.

Well, maybe Bunny. But only if she kills for a good cause. A scuffle over Manolo Blahniks doesn't count.

Killion's mother snags my eye, and I shake my head.

"Nora certainly isn't getting away with murder on my watch," I mutter and garner a laugh from the entire lot of them. "And neither is Jane Jordan's killer," I say. "I hardly think Nora had a hand in that. I think we need to keep digging."

Chevy slumps at the thought. "I do my best digging with a glass of champagne. I'll be back."

"Me, too," Hillary says as the two of them take off for the champagne fountain.

"No champs for you?" I ask Bunny who seems to be narrowing her gaze at someone

behind me.

“There will be time for champs later. I think I just remembered why that woman looks so familiar.” She points past me. “And Missy Livingston isn’t her name.”

I turn that way and my mouth falls open. “Spill the dirt, sister.”

“That’s Lochlin Livingsworth. Her father duped my father out of half a million dollars.”

I gasp at the thought. “Did he live to tell about it?”

From what I hear, Bunny’s father has some dicey connections.

“He lived,” she sneers. “The guy was running a Ponzi scheme and ended up doing time. He lost everything, including a nice-size fortune he had amassed via thievery. Rumor has it, his children went from being well taken care of to changing their names and peddling their own dicey wares.”

“I guess hers is coaching,” I say. “She’s a life coach actually. And she singlehandedly gave half the club the runs.”

“I like her a little better now,” Bunny muses just as Chevy and Hillary reappear with bubbly in tow.

“What did we miss?” Hillary asks, sipping her sparkling pink champagne.

I quickly relay Bunny’s revelation and the two of them go slack-jawed.

“Wait a minute,” Chevy says. “I know her, too. Or at least I heard about her. Lochlin used to be married to one of my brother’s friends. He was a lawyer and they divorced

because of her nasty little habit. Apparently, she's a kleptomaniac. She even stole straight from women's purses at social functions. She was proving to be more problematic than her father's reputation so he dumped her."

"She's a thief by nature?" I cock my head as I consider this. "Oh my word, no wonder there was a discrepancy in her bill versus what she charged the country club."

"That means she has things she'd like to cover up." Chevy lifts a brow my way.

"Therefore, she's the killer," Hillary says.

"And look"—Bunny points as Missy heads off down to the dark end of the beach where poor Jane met her untimely death—"she's about to leave the country."

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“Let’s go talk to her,” Chevy says, taking off in that direction, and both Hillary and Bunny take off after the woman.

“Wait for me,” I call out, and before we know it, we’re just feet from the puddle that Jane lost her life in. Since it’s a natural formation in the sand, there wasn’t a lot we could do about it other than keep it roped off this evening. I removed the bright yellow caution tape and opted for red, white, and blue garland from the Crafty Treehouse. There’s a small mound of withered flowers at the base of it, and Missy Livingston is standing with her head in her hands until she hears us rustling, then she just about pops out of her skin.

“Oh geez, you scared me.” She gives a nervous laugh while pressing a hand to her chest. “Are you ladies out here to pay your respects, too?”

“No,” Chevy says sharply. “We’re here to ask why you felt the need to...”

“Teach such addicting classes,” I finish for her. “The members just can’t stop raving about how fun these past two weeks have been.” I shoot Chevy a look that says slow your homicidal roll.

“Oh, really? Why, thank you,” Missy marvels and her teeth shine like beacons in a dark cave. Finally, I’ve hit the jackpot. I knew these rich witches would slurp up whatever slop I was feeding them. And I’m finally going to be able to keep a roof over my head again—hopefully in the right neighborhood.

That’s it. Nobody calls my club members witches—with the exception of me on the odd occasion.

“We know who you really are,” I seethe, eliciting a gasp from Bunny, Chevy, and Hillary.

She really does have lady balls. Bunny chortles to herself.

Lady what? I glance her way for a brief moment.

“Missy”—I say, reverting my attention to the brunette on hand—“or should I say, Lochlin?”

Lochlin is such a glorious name, Chevy muses to herself. I don’t care how badly my father would have embarrassed me, there’s no way I’d change it to something average like Missy.

I completely believe her. Although I happen to think Missy is downright adorable.

I nod to Missy—or Lochlin or whoever she wants to be. “You’re not all that sorry that Jane is gone, are you?”

“What?” She takes a full step back and nearly ends up in the same body of water that did Jane in. “I think Jane was a wonderful person.” When she wasn’t busy berating me, she thinks to herself.

“Missy”—I’m going to keep calling her that because I don’t have the bandwidth to rewire my brain—“we know that you changed your name because of what your father did. We don’t fault you for that.”

Hillary steps up as a dry laugh escapes her. “What we fault you for is perpetuating your five-finger discount habits here at the country club.”

“Have there been thefts?” I practically gag on the words.

Hillary nods, still staring down our suspect. "I'm betting there have been."

"Well, if there were thefts, I'm not responsible for them," Missy is quick to refute the charges. But believe me, I was tempted. She frowns at the thought. Hey? Maybe they've caught on to the fact I inflated my service fee? For goodness' sake, it's like you can't get away with anything in this world anymore.

She's got that right.

"Missy," I practically whisper this time. "Jane knew about how you ran your books, didn't she? She must have seen the discrepancies between the invoices you charged and the dollar amount you accrued. Were you hoping she wouldn't notice?"

Chevy steps forward. "Or were you dumb enough not to notice yourself?"

"Excuse me?" Missy gasps.

"Excuse nothing," Hillary seethes. "You killed Jane Jordan because she was about to send you up the river right alongside your father."

Missy's jaw dislodges and ends up somewhere around her ankles.

"Okay, so I wanted her dead, but believe me, I'm no killer," Missy pants. "Yes, Jane and I exchanged words the night she died, but that's as far as it went. She grew sleepy and started to slur her words. I suggested she walk off the liquor and told her we'd talk once she cooled off." She glances to the small pond to our left. "And that's why she was here, I guess. So I guess in that way her death is my fault." I'd give anything to take back those words. And now the death of that poor woman is going to haunt me for the rest of my life, and no amount of coloring books is ever going to take that pain away.

I shake my head at my three accomplices, and one by one Bunny, Chevy, and Hillary drift back toward the party.

“I’m sorry, Missy.” I shrug her way. “I guess my friends and I were just a little too eager to solve the case.” I should have factored in the Quaaludes before I attacked this poor girl. Although, don’t think for a minute I won’t be amending the bill she sent to the club.

“You really think someone killed Jane?”

I shrug. “Stranger things have happened. And you, of all people, have witnessed her dark side. Jane had a little bite to her.”

A laugh bubbles from her. “A little? Once Jane clamped down on you, she didn’t let go. If someone did do her in, they must have had one killer secret to hide. And believe me, Jane always found out where the bodies were buried.”

“That’s why she was the best of the best,” I say.

Missy nods. “And that’s probably why she’s dead.”

Ain’t that the truth.

She winces my way as she steps forward. “Oh wow, those emerald earrings. Where did you get them? They look just like the ones my grandmother used to have.”

“These little things?” My fingers float to my left earlobe.

She sucks in a lungful of air before she can answer. I think those are the earrings my grandmother used to have! At least I know where the scum landed my granny’s treasures. I’m shocked she’s not wearing the brooch and the opal necklace to

complete the collection.

The brooch! She knows about the brooch. But what opal necklace? It sounds as if my stalker is starting to slack off.

“Missy, you know all about these earrings, don’t you? Where did they come from?”

She lifts her chin. “Let’s just say an old friend was helping me out by taking them off my hands.” So my landlord didn’t take my apartment off my hands.

“What was the name of your friend?” I say the words so fast they string out in one long word.

“You wouldn’t know him,” she says, making her way around me. “That was part of the deal when I sold him the pieces—I promised I wouldn’t out him.” And here I thought he was giving them to his wife. Jeremy Goodwin is a louse through and through. But then, I already knew that.

She takes off for the party and I shake my head her way.

Who the heck is Jeremy Goodwin?

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“Hattie!” Peyton calls out as I enter back into the realm of the Stars and Stripes Spectacular right here on the beach just below the country club. The sky still has a tangerine glow to it, but as soon as it gets dark, the fireworks are set to go off.

“What is it?” I ask just as Peyton runs up wearing an electric blue dress that clings to her body like a tube sock—a tube sock that has been in a frat house one too many times. The dress really does look that cheesy.

Oh, okay, fine. It looks fabulous and I’m jealous I didn’t get to the tube sock first. I’d love for Killion to see me in that. Come to think of it, I’d love for Killion to see me in just about anything right about now. For some reason, it feels as if I’ve donned the cloak of invisibility when it comes to that man.

“I found this on the front desk.” She holds up a small pink box with a white grosgrain ribbon tied around it and a small white envelope attached. Her hand is covering most of it. But I bet Killion could still land a decent fingerprint from it. “This is from your secret admirer, isn’t it?” She laughs as she plucks the card from the envelope. “Let’s see what he has to say now.”

“Peyton.” I swipe for it, but she pulls it out of my range. “You’re getting your fingerprints all over it.”

“Oh, who cares? Only club members are allowed on the grounds. And they might be eccentric, but they’re hardly homicidal. It’s probably some geezer trying to audition for the part of sugar daddy.” And with the way my finances are going, I could sure use a sugar daddy right about now.

I make a face as she holds the plain white card between us. It's written with a red pen in bold writing, and once again the E's are comprised of three straight lines.

"My darling," Peyton reads out loud. "I have no intention of being your friend. We are something more. We were written in the stars long ago. True love burns bright forever." She inches back and grunts, "On second thought, your sugar daddy sounds a bit creepy." She hands me the note and works the lid off the box before revealing a thin gold chain with an opal rose pendant.

The opal necklace! This must be the necklace Missy was referencing—the one that Jeremy Goodwin bought off of her, along with the earrings and brooch.

"Peyton, do you know of a club member named Jeremy Goodwin?"

"Never heard of him," she says, plucking the necklace out of the box and quickly clasping it around my neck. "But then, I don't know every member." She steps back and takes a look at the opal rose as it hangs from my neck. "It's okay." She shrugs as she inspects it. "Try to do better next time you get a wannabe sugar daddy."

Peyton takes off and I gag in her wake.

Hattie, Cricket mewls before appearing before me and I quickly scoop her up. Quick! Let's hide before they find us.

"Who are they?" I ask just as Killion and Rookie show up on the scene.

"Hattie." Killion looks pained as he says my name and there's a cold distance about him.

"Killion, what's wrong?" I ask, taking a step forward and he flinches.

Oh wow, something is definitely wrong,Cricket says.

Rookie gives a soft woof.

He has Jolly strapped to his back and I'm both thrilled and relieved to see them.

Something is wrong,Hattie, Rookie barks. Killion won't talk about it.He's been on the phone and his laptop a lot. I've heard him mumbling something about this can't be so.

What can't be so?

"Hattie," Killion expels my name lower than a whisper as he takes in my features.

Oh no, he's going to break up with me. My heart thumps into my ears at the thought.

I couldn't take a breakup from Killion. Especially not here in front of everyone in Brambleberry Bay. Not even if we were the only people on the planet.

I need to change the subject and fast.

"I got another gift," I say, touching the pendant before handing the note to him. "Whoever sent this says they don't want to be friends." And now I'm wondering if that's all Killion wants. I clear my throat. "I spoke with Missy Livingston, even though that's not her real name and she basically said that she sold this jewelry to a man named Jeremy Goodwin."

Killion's eyes look up from the pendant as he meets my gaze.

He's donned jeans and a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His cologne permeates me like an old friend, and it takes everything in me not to inhale hard like

an idiot.

He's so shockingly handsome with his hair slicked back, that stone-cold look on his face—my heart breaks just looking at him.

Did Missy say something or did Hattie read my—his mind flits to white noise.

The funny thing about white noise is that it's usually nature's way of cutting me off from prying into naughty thoughts. Although at the moment, I seriously doubt Killion is having naughty thoughts about me—more like he's purposefully trying to scramble his brain.

“Jeremy Goodwin,” he says, inputting the name into his phone. “Got it. I'll take it from here. Just so you know, I reviewed the security footage and there was no way to trace whoever sent these packages. They came in with the mail carrier, so whoever handed them off must have caught the mailman at the gate. I'll head to the post office later this week and see if I can question anyone. You enjoy the party, Hattie. I'll catch up with you before the night ends.” He takes off before I can stop him but Rookie stays behind.

What was that about? Cricket screeches down at her furry friend. And don't tell me that you have no idea why he's gone from a puddle of goo to a cold fish around Hattie.

I'm sort of hoping Rookie knows the answer to this myself.

Rookie gives a quick bark. I don't know what's happened, Hattie, but it started the night we left your cabin! He was worried about something all the way home.

That night? I try to rack my brain to figure it out, but before I can, my mother and Nora stride by.

“Hattie!” My mother nearly strangles me with a herculean hug. “Oh, the party is fantastic! You did such a good job.” Her vanilla locks are pinned back, and she’s wearing a stylish blue shift dress. Nora is in a matching red one, and now I’m wondering if this is a result of a joint shopping trip. These two seem to be inseparable these days.

“I’ll admit it as well.” Nora’s lips expand in what I’m guessing is a smile. “It’s a job well done.”

A compliment from Nora? Hell must be freezing over—and just in time to end this heatwave.

Mom pulls back. “We were just on our way over to say hello to Dr. Draper and his wife.”

“You know him?” I ask, almost amused. Of course, she does. My mother knows everyone.

“Oh yes,” she says. “He’s been my dentist for over a year now. In fact, I’ve got a prescription right here in my purse that I keep forgetting to get filled. I’m due to get a root canal in two days, and he’s giving me something to calm me down before I head in. I’m terrified of getting it done. Last time I had this procedure I ended up with a staph infection that almost took me out.”

“I remember that,” I say. “You really need to get on those antibiotics posthaste after the procedure. An infection can make that root canal look like a trip to the candy shop.”

“Well, I’m afraid a trip to a candy shop is probably what got the root canal party started,” she quips. “Which reminds me, have you talked to Henry lately? He said he wants to speak with your father and me, and he sounded about as serious as a root

canal.”

“Oh wow, I’d love to know what’s going on. But no, I haven’t spoken with him.”

Cricket chirps, I bet this has something to do with the news that’s going to detonate your family!

I nod her way.

I’m not sure detonate was the word Henry used, but it might as well have been.

“Mom, if you don’t mind, I’d like to be present when you speak with him.” I have a feeling my parents will need me for moral support.

She nods. “I’ll make sure your sisters are there, too.” She cranes her neck past me.

I glance over at Nora.

Hey? Maybe the reason Killion is acting so strange is because he knows that Nora is the killer!

“Nora,” I practically hiss her name. “Has Killion mentioned anything to you about who killed Jane Jordan?” Usually I would have finessed the conversation a whole lot better, but let’s face it, Nora is the last person I want to beat around the homicidal bush with.

“Jane?” She inches back. “She wasn’t murdered. She was electrocuted. The woman stumbled into a tragedy.” Hattie is lucky Jane doesn’t have any family around to sue her into oblivion. Everyone knows Hattie is to blame for the accident. Even her own mother testified to the fact. Of course, thanks to nepotism and my son’s blindness to any of the woman’s flaws, she lives to stumble through another day like an elephant

on roller skates.

I can't help but frown at the woman.

Okay, so she's not the killer. But that doesn't mean she doesn't know how to kill a good time. Something tells me she'll be homicidal in that department for a good long while.

Mom cranes her neck past me. "Oh poo, it looks as if Dr. Draper and his wife have disappeared out of sight."

Nora shrugs. "But that shrimp buffet isn't going anywhere. Let's load up before the shrimp does a disappearing act, too."

"And let's not forget the Holiday lobster," Mom says, pulling Nora along as they make their way to the buffet.

Quick, Hattie, Cricket mewls. We'd better join them. Peggy and Clarabelle abandoned the lobster for a couple of kooks. Sure, they said they were Tom cats, but by the way those men were acting, they had more in common with an octopus than any respectable feline.

"Sounds like Peggy and Clarabelle know exactly what those men are thinking," I muse as I pull out my phone. "I wish I knew what Killion was thinking. But since that's not happening, I may as well do a little digging—in the direction of Jeremy Goodwin."

I quickly do a rudimentary internet search and all sorts of articles pop up.

"Jeremy Goodwin is a suspect in a double homicide? A couple of slayings that took place in Vermont about five years ago?" I say below a whisper as I try to inhale as

many of the articles as I can.

I wonder how Missy knew him?

I bet he's hiding out here in Maine!

My fingers float to the pendant around my neck. I'd better take the jewelry off. There's no way I want to attract this lunatic any more than I already have.

I scroll through a few more articles until one hints at his occupation and I freeze solid.

My blood runs cold.

What is it, Hattie? Cricket yowls as she leaps from my arms. You've got that look on your face. You know who the killer is, don't you?

I bet it's that Jeremy guy! Rookie woofs and Jolly Beary nods by proxy.

"I have an inkling of who it might be," I say as I make a beeline to where my mother and Nora are loading up their plates with enough seafood to turn their stomachs into bona fide aquariums. "Mom," I pant, nearly ripping her purse away from her. "I need to see something."

"Hattie," Mom says, quickly detangling herself from her leather satchel. "She probably needs a breath mint," she says to Nora. "This used to happen all the time in church. In fact, I carried an extra roll of mints just for my girls. They get the halitosis from Henry's side of the family."

I quickly come up with the prescription, and to my horror find exactly what I'm looking for. Not only is it a prescription for Methaqualone, but the handwriting—it's

all block capital letters and the E's are formed with three straight lines.

I snap a quick picture of it with my phone and shoot it to Killion.

“Thank you,” I say, shoving the prescription back into her purse and placing her bag on her shoulder, right where I found it. “Stay by the buffet, would you?”

I dart off just as my phone pings like mad, but I bury it in my pocket as I thread my way through the crowd.

Hattie, where are we going? Rookie barks as he struggles to keep up with me.

Don't you know anything, you big fur coat? Cricket yowls. We're going to catch a killer.

Catch a killer indeed.

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“Hattie.” The faint sound of Killion’s voice rises above the noise of the crowd, but my feet keep moving, determined to click the final piece of the puzzle into place.

I’m out of breath, out of time, and maybe out of luck. I can’t find the man I’m looking for anywhere in this crowd.

I cast a quick glance to the left, into the darkness that leads to Jane Jordan’s memorial, and I see a faint figure moving in that direction.

“It’s him,” I say as I force my legs to pound over the sand until I’m just inches away from him. “This is a popular destination this evening,” I pant, my lungs still searing from the sprint over. “Hello, Dr. Draper.”

He turns around, his eyes catching the light from the illumination behind us and glowing infernal.

“I just came to pay my respects.” He sighs as he nods to the body of water cordoned off by the silly garland I had the staff stake around it. “She was a great woman.”

“She was a smart woman,” I say, taking a step forward.

Rookie gives a low growl. Don’t do this, Hattie. Wait for Killion. This man is dangerous. He’s killed before.

And on this very spot, Cricket meows. I hate to say it, but I’m siding with the fuzzball.

“She was smart indeed,” he says, staring at the body of water lying as motionless as a

corpse. Too smart for her own good.

And that's all I have to know to confirm my suspicions.

"She figured things out, didn't she?" I ask. "About you, your past. She was your accountant. You mentioned you had just hired her not too long ago. I bet you didn't think she'd do that much digging. But she was thorough. And from what I can tell, she liked to know her clients, right down to their dark side."

He lifts a brow my way. What is she talking about? She can't possibly know.

"I know more than you think I do, Jeremy."

His mouth falls open and the whites of his eyes shine like spotlights.

A lone whistle goes off somewhere over the ocean and a few seconds later an explosion goes off in the sky.

"It looks as if the fireworks have begun," he says, his eyes still hooked on mine.

"Oh, they have," I say. "And this night is going to blow everything to pieces."

Cricket moans, And here we go. Rookie, go get Killion.

I'm not leaving Hattie,he growls.

Neither am I,she says, holding up a paw and her knife-sharp claws. Besides, we can take him.

"Look, Hattie." Dr. Draper chuckles softly, but the perspiration building on his forehead suggests this isn't so funny. "I don't know what you think you know, but I

think there's been a misunderstanding here."

The sky ignites a violent shade of pink as an umbrella of sparkles sinks to earth.

"Has there?" I ask. "Your name is Jeremy Goodwin. You went to dental school in Ohio before moving to Vermont and staying with an elderly couple—Debra and Lyle Perkins? They were found brutally murdered in their home and their boarder was suspiciously missing. That would have been you. Suddenly, you reappeared here in Maine and started a dental practice under the name Erol Draper."

Either she's done her homework or Jane snitched long before she threatened to.

A loud boom goes off and it sounds atomic.

The sky ignites as bright as noonday.

"Jane found out about your past and that's why you wanted her dead," I pant. "You loaded her drink that night with Quaaludes hoping to lure her to the waiting electrocution. That was the easy part for me to figure out. What I want to know is why you sent me jewelry and pretended to be my secret admirer, of all things? I get that you have a penchant for women, especially women that aren't your wife. But why me?"

His lips twitch with the hint of a smile. "Because your mother raved about you, Hattie. She gave me a glowing report on all of her children, but it was you that interested me most. She said you were the best homicide detective this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. I have a feeling you're her favorite."

The sky lights up in shades of red, white, and blue as the crowd on the other end of the beach gasps with delight.

Cricket gasps as well. Grandma gave you away to a killer!

That she did.

I shake my head. “So it was a diversion?”

“A necessary diversion.” He shrugs, managing to look affable while doing so. “She was right. You’re good, Hattie. Jane found out who I was and what I had done. She wanted me to do the right thing and turn myself in. She wasn’t so smart after all. If she was, she would have known someone like me has no intention of ever doing that. Yes, I drugged her. Yes, I lured her away from the party, but I had no idea that something so horrific waited for her here. I saw this body of water, but I was hoping to get her to the shoreline. Drowning after having a few too many drinks—no one would have blinked. Imagine my surprise. I chased her. She fell in.” He nods to the black water behind him. There might have been a shove involved, but Hattie doesn’t need to know that. “A spark went off. I saw her shaking, then I saw the cord. I took off. You found the body just the way your mother predicted. Your mother is right. It’s like an odd talent with you. But just like Jane had to go, I’m afraid so do you. I’m sorry, Hattie. Unlike your mother, I don’t play favorites.”

A trio of deep baritone booms goes off as the sky erupts in a burst of color.

In one fell swoop, I’m in his arms. Within seconds, my back hits the ice-cold water where Jane met her fate.

“Now you’re going to die, Hattie,” he seethes as he wraps his arms around my neck and plunges me into the icy depths.

My hands, my feet, and my entire body does its best to free myself from his stronghold.

He lets out a yelp, and I open my eyes to see Cricket attached to his head and clawing at his face. The water erupts in waves as Rookie leaps in as well, but Dr. Draper is still holding me under as my lungs beg for one more breath.

“Freeze—Eagle Sheriff’s Department,” a deep voice shouts from somewhere in the distance.

A third body pounces into the water, this time knocking Erol Draper right off of me, and I cork to the surface, sucking in as much fresh air as my lungs will allow.

It sounds as if bombs are going off in the sky as the fireworks display grows more aggressive.

Killion handcuffs Dr. Draper and tosses him into the sand before a barrage of backup shows up on the scene.

“Hattie,” he pants as he helps me to my feet and pulls me close.

Rookie barks up a storm over the sound of the fireworks erupting in the sky. I knew he’d come! He still loves you, Hattie. I don’t know what’s going on, but he loves you.

He didn’t want to see her dead, Cricket yowls. That doesn’t mean he loves her. He was just doing his job.

My eyes hook to Killion’s and I try my best to pry into his gray matter, but he’s not giving away a single clue.

“Are you all right?” he says, pulling me close one more time. “I’ll have an EMT check you out. That looked pretty brutal.”

“I’m fine,” I pant as I look over at the monster among us. “He confessed. He killed

Jane and some couple in?—”

“Vermont.” Killion nods. “I just pieced it together.”

“He drugged Jane. He sent this.” I touch the pendant on my neck. “And the notes. He wanted to distract me from the case before it ever started.”

“He was certainly a mastermind.” Killion frowns over at the man as he’s placed under arrest by a deputy. “I’d better see him off.”

Killion starts to leave and I pull him back.

“Wait,” I say. “Killion, what’s going on? Are you angry with me? If I did something to offend you, don’t you think I have the right to know about it? I can’t stand this cold shoulder you’ve been giving me.”

He opens his mouth as he’s about to say something, but the fireworks start in on their grand finale, and the sky is lighting up like the front line of a civil war battleground—but with more fun colors and far less death involved. It looks like a dream as we stare up at the watercolor sky.

I know about your secret, Hattie.

“What secret?” I ask, looking back at Killion and he nods my way.

Cricket growls from behind, He didn’t say anything, Hattie.

A breath hitches in my throat.

That means...

Killion nods my way. We'll talk, he says, looking right at me. But we won't need to use words, now will we?

He takes off and walks with the deputies on their way to a waiting patrol car.

And I shiver in the breeze as the world explodes around me.

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“Hattie, are you okay?” Chevy calls out as she and Hillary run this way. “We heard they caught the killer!”

The grand finale just buttoned up and the air holds the scent of grilled hot dogs and gunpowder. The crowds are still thick here on the beach, but the migration toward the parking lot has begun.

This Fourth of July was far more explosive than any of us could have fathomed.

“You caught the killer, didn’t you?” Hillary snips with an edge, and I can tell she’s annoyed by the fact.

Cricket jumps from my arms and runs a circle around the three of us and Rookie is quick to join her.

Face it, Cricket chirps. You’re a hero, Hattie!

Rookie gives a soft woof. And Killion is a hero, too!

Cricket groans, Whatever, Dog Breath.

Hey, I am a dog, he barks.

And he’s smart, too. Cricket chortles as they run up and down the beach behind me.

“It’s true,” I say to Chevy and Hillary. “Dr. Draper has been arrested. I confronted him with some evidence I just stumbled upon and he tried to drown me in the same

pool of water that Jane died in.”

“Oh my goodness,” a female voice gasps from behind and we turn to see Mrs. Draper herself looking pale and stunned. “I’m so sorry he did that to you.” Her red hair looks black in this dull light and her face looks unearthly pale. “The sheriff’s department just briefed me on what happened. Thank you for your hand in his arrest. I’m terribly sorry that he attacked you.”

Chevy shakes her head at me. “And in the same water that Jane died in? The man is diabolical.”

Hillary huffs at the thought. “He electrocuted a woman. We already knew he was a monster.”

Mrs. Draper turns her head swiftly as if Hillary had slapped her with those words.

Erol didn’t electrocute anyone—I did. She closes her eyes with the thought.

A breath hitches in my throat as I stare the woman down.

What in the world is going on here?

She rubs her bare arms with her hands as she holds herself tight, her gaze drifting toward the sand. Erol’s plan was to drown the woman according to the sheriff. I can’t believe he drugged her, hoping she’d wander into the ocean. And to think I slept next to that maniac, night after night.

But then, am I any better? After I found out he was cheating again, I was fuming. And then I got the diagnosis, that he had infected me with who-knows-what, the very night poor Jane died.

Little does the sheriff's department know that I was the one who lost my mind and dragged that cable into the vat of water pooling near the shore. I was just about to lure Erol in that direction when I heard there was an accident. And now to come to find out, I didn't kill Jane Jordan after all. Erol botched his own homicide and the poor woman fell into my trap instead. She groans hard. Nevertheless, he wasn't going to let her get out of that night alive. Erol is the killer, not me. I never meant for any of this to happen. And he had banked on it.

Candace Draper steps in close and pins her eyes to mine. "I'm so sorry," she says.

"It's okay," I say, reaching for her hand and giving it a squeeze. "You didn't do anything wrong. He was one hundred percent responsible that night, not you. Life is a gift. Keep living yours to the fullest. You deserve to be happy, to be loved, and to enjoy every moment that you have breath in your lungs. I hope you live your life to the fullest and leave this awful night behind as you start your life anew."

A pained smile comes to her face and her eyes glitter with tears. "Thank you. I think I needed to hear that." She nods to Chevy and Hillary before taking off into the night.

"You listen to me, Hattie"—Chevy holds a finger my way—"next time you want to confront a killer, I'll pay you ten thousand dollars if you remember to find me first."

"I'll buy you coffee for a year," Hillary adds, upping the ante.

"Sold," I say to them both. "Although, let's hope there is no next time."

"Oh, honey." Chevy chuckles. "This is Brambleberry Bay."

"Not to mention the fact you live here, Hattie," Hillary adds as she nods to the buffet. "Let's go clean out that dessert table. Everyone knows there are no calories on holidays. And the next one isn't until Thanksgiving."

“Those cheese Danishes are mine,” Chevy says, looking longingly in that direction as if they’ve cast their cheesy spell over her.

“That custard trifle has been calling my name all night.” Hillary sighs.

The two of them bolt in that direction as if there wouldn’t be any cheese Danishes or custard trifles available until Thanksgiving either.

And speaking of which, a cheese Danish and a custard trifle sound like heaven right about now.

If I can’t have Killion, I may as well have all the calories I want.

Oh, who am I kidding? I’ve never let Killion stand in the way of me and a good cheese Danish.

And what exactly is happening between us, anyway? What did he mean by we won’t need to use words?

He can’t possibly have?—

Our conversation plays back in my mind and I cringe.

“Hattie—” a familiar voice calls from the shoreline and it’s my mother waving me over.

She’s standing with my father and my sisters so I head that way and both Cricket and Rookie beat me to the punch.

I wish them all a happy Fourth and we end up in a Holiday family group hug that feels like heaven.

“Don’t you dare put yourself in danger like that again,” my father scolds.

“Oh, Hattie,” Mom moans. “I had no idea that man was a maniac. I guess I’d better find another dentist.”

Winnie shakes her head at me. “I knew I should have had you working on the BB with Fitz and me.”

“Is it up and running?” I ask, enthused for the both of them.

“No, but we’re hoping to officially open our doors in the fall,” she says.

“Ooh, a new snazzy hotel, right here in Brambleberry Bay,” Neelie says and her mind flits to white noise.

If she’s thinking about Stanton that way, I’d rather not know.

Dad sighs hard. “Well, I’m glad everyone is safe. Now what’s this family meeting about, Ruthie?”

Mom cranes her neck past us. “Here comes Henry now. He’s the one who asked to have it.”

It’s not just Henry headed this way. Tipper Luxemburg is by his side.

Oh no, they must be making it official.

I’m not sure why, but I can’t really picture Tipper with my brother. They’re from two different worlds. Tipper values material things, and my brother values family, friends, and the saner side of life.

But I guess the heart wants what the heart wants.

Let's just hope this doesn't end in disaster—like Killion and me.

“A gathering of greatness,” Henry teases and he looks so much like my father tonight it's scary—sans the quickly graying hair, of course. My brother's white T-shirt glows against his skin and jeans, and Tipper is wearing a little red dress that swishes as she walks. “I'm glad you're all still here, especially you, Hattie.” He gives me a hug. “I heard you almost gave up the ghost. Please steer clear of killers in the future, would you? I don't think that's a part of your job description.”

It's not, Tipper muses to herself. But apparently, it's in her blood. The girl is addicted to crime, and I can't say I'm any different.

I nod her way. There's a reason we're in the same murder club.

“So what's going on here?” Winnie asks, her expression growing quickly wary.

“I've got news,” Henry says. “After much consideration, I'll be stepping out of law for a while.”

The entire lot of us gasps in horror.

“Henry,” my mother balks. “You practically fought your way through law school. Every inch of your success has been a battle. Why in the world would you give up now?”

“For those exact reasons,” he says. “Look, I want to do something else with my life, other than making people miserable.”

“But you're helping people,” Dad cries out as if he were in pain and in need of some

serious help himself.

“And now I want to feed them,” Henry says with a sigh. “In fact, I want to feed them really good Holiday lobster. I’m buying the Lobster Boil.”

“What?” we all shout at once.

“It’s true,” he says. “The wheels are already in motion. Tipper has been generous in helping me with the ins and outs of restaurant life.”

She gives a quick nod. “My ex has a string of bar and grills. And as much as he won’t admit it, the success of those dive bars was all thanks to yours truly. I’m giving Henry all of my best pointers.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” I say and all eyes turn my way. “I mean, that you’re able to share your knowledge.” And not about to run off into the sunset with my brother.

Tipper winks my way. Little does Hattie know I plan on running off into the sunset with her handsome hunk of a brother.

Wonderful.

We congratulate Henry and quickly rally around his new dream.

“I’ll be renaming the place,” he says. “But one thing will remain the same—we’ll never stop serving Holiday lobster.”

We give a collective cheer at the thought before saying goodnight and going our separate ways.

I’m about to help the rest of the staff start the cleanup process when I spot Bunny

speaking with a familiar brunette, one that I'm pretty sure I owe an apology to.

It's time to eat crow.

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Cricket bounces my way. Don't do it, Hattie. Haven't we had enough excitement for one night?

Rookie jumps and wags his tail and makes Jolly bob his furry head in the process. I like excitement, he barks. Especially the excitement happening under those buffet tables. I'd better help clean up this mess myself.

Wait for me, Cricket yelps as they dart toward the buffet tables together. Who knows when I'll be eating this good again?

"Bunny, Missy." I shrug at the brunette as the two of them stall their conversation. It's getting late, most of the crowd has already left the beach, and the air still holds the scent of spent fireworks. "I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Hattie!" Bunny pulls me close. "She's the hero of the night," Bunny tells Missy and the woman shudders.

"Congratulations, Hattie," Missy says. "I'm so glad you're okay. And I'm going to fix any billing discrepancies. I promise I'm trying to live on the up and up. I'm really enjoying the classes I teach. I'm hoping they continue to do well."

"I hope they do, too," I say. "I think these belong to you," I say, taking off the necklace and earrings and handing them back to the woman.

"But how did you—? Oh, Erol must have said something."

"Just the origins of the jewelry," I say. "I don't have the brooch on me right now, but

I'll get it to you."

"Wow, I really appreciate this." She leaps forward and offers me a firm embrace. "Thank you, Hattie. Thank you for everything." She nods to Bunny. "And thank you, too."

"I meant what I said," Bunny tells her. "I'm not perfect either. We're still friends. Now let's go hit that champagne fountain before they dismantle the thing. There's no better way to end the night than with a big bang and some Dom." She shoots me a wry look. "I'm talking about fireworks, Hattie. Get your head out of the gutter." She winks my way. The gutter is my lane.

I head in that direction with them just as both Peggy and Clarabelle raise a glass in my honor.

"To Hattie Holiday," Clarabelle shouts, and a light round of hear, hear erupts.

"And so as we end this night"—Peggy calls out, lifting her drink ever higher—"let's remember, always wear waterproof mascara when solving mysteries. You never know when you're going to laugh, cry, or dive into a body of water while chasing down clues!"

A light round of laughter wafts through the night as they drain their glasses.

"Hattie?" a familiar deep voice calls from behind and I turn to see Killion making his way over.

I'm not sure if he said my name out loud or not, but that doesn't stop me from heading in his direction. We make our way to the shoreline in silence and find Cricket and Rookie down there racing up and down the sand.

"Killion." I take up his hands and thankfully he doesn't resist. Instead, he pulls me

close and we take one another in as if seeing each other for the very first time. “I don’t know what to say.”

True as gospel.

Are you telesensual?he asks point-blank, albeit without moving his lips.

My mouth falls open as I study him.

First of all, how in the world would he know this? And secondly, as soon as I respond to his question, he’ll know the truth.

Oh, what the heck.

“Did Peggy and Clarabelle say something to you?” I ask.

“They know?” His eyes widen twice their size.

“They just found out.” My shoulders sag.

“No, they didn’t say anything. Oddly enough, it was Duke who alerted me to it.”

“Duke?” I spit his name out in a blind rage. “Wait a minute. I never told Duke a thing.”

“And that’s why he broke things off with you. He said you gave him the heebie-jeebies.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Is that what I did to you?” I wince because I’m afraid to hear it.

He holds up his forefinger and thumb as if to demonstrate an inch.

“I’m so sorry.” I shake my head. “Sometimes, I just try to have a little fun with it and get carried away with myself, and evidently I accidentally out myself in the process.”

“So you’ve been listening in on my thoughts this entire time?” He looks pained as he asks the question.

“Not on purpose. Killion, I can’t control what I hear and from whom. But if it makes you feel better, if the thoughts get naughty, all I hear is?—”

“White noise.” He nods.

“What? How did you know that?”

“While my buddy in the FBI was running that print on Erol Draper, I asked him if mind reading was a thing. He’s the one who told me about something called transmundane people. He said the FBI knew about a cluster of society who had special abilities—one of them was mind reading—telesensual. He said there was no rational explanation as to why these people had it.” He tips his head my way. “Care to offer one up?”

I shake my head. “I don’t have one either. But just so you know, no one in my family knows about my quirk, save for one of my cousins. She’s the one who told me all about the transmundane and the fact we were telesensual. So I guess it sort of runs in the family.” I blow out a hard breath. “What happens now?” I shrug his way. “With us.”

Killion pulls me in and wraps his strong arms around my waist. “I’ll admit, I was spooked. I wondered if I could do this. But then, I thought about the alternative. Hattie, there’s not a day of my life I want to spend without you. I’m not going anywhere.”

A smile erupts on my face as tears come to my eyes.

“I’m so glad to hear it,” I say as a laugh bubbles from me. “I promise I’ll never try to pry into your mind, and I won’t ever judge you for anything you’re thinking. It’s sort of my code of ethics when it comes to everyone and anyone.”

“Code of ethics?” He shakes his head with a silent laugh. “That’s why I love you, Hattie Holiday.”

“I love you, too,” I say. “And thank you for being so open-minded—no pun intended.”

He chuckles again before landing a heated kiss on my lips, a kiss that assures me that Killion and I are stronger than ever before—and I didn’t even need to be a mind reader to figure that one out.

His phone buzzes and chirps.

“Hold that thought,” he says as he plucks it from his pocket and frowns. “This is bad.”

“What’s wrong?” I ask as I angle to see his screen.

“It’s a text from the sheriff. There’s a body behind that new coffee shop in town. It looks like a stabbing.”

“Another homicide?”

He nods. “And for once, you didn’t stumble upon it. I’m grateful for that. Let me handle this, Hattie.” He offers a quick kiss on my lips before taking off for the parking lot.

There’s been another homicide in Brambleberry Bay, and I didn’t find the body.

An icy chill runs through me at the thought.

As much as I hate to say it, something doesn't feel right about that.

Deep down, I wonder if the killer isn't done just yet.