



# Sweet Crepes of Wrath

## (MURDER IN THE MIX #51)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** My name is Lottie Lemon, and I see dead people. Okay, so I rarely see dead people, mostly I see furry creatures of the dearly departed variety, who have come back from the other side to warn me of their previous owner's impending doom.

It's baby shower mania here in Honey Hollow as my sisters and I are all expecting bundles of joy. But when a body turns up right in the middle of the celebration, this sweet event turns sour faster than a batch of curdled cream.

And if that wasn't enough, a polar bear named Petey shows up and his growl is as menacing as his desire for justice—but boy is he cute.

Noah and Everett are bent on protecting me at all costs and it almost costs the three of us everything.

And have I mentioned the duffle bag full of naughty secrets in the back of goody-goody Francine Dundee's minivan? Let me tell you Carlotta will never let her live it down even if she has to do so by way of prison.

Between the ghosts, the murder, and enough secrets to fill my bakery's display case, it's going to take more than a batch of cinnamon rolls to keep me out of trouble this time. One thing's for sure, living in Honey Hollow can be murder.

**Total Pages (Source):** 38

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

## THE VICTIM

The Honey Hollow Bed and Breakfast is buzzing with the kind of energy that only a circus-like baby shower can muster.

The glass conservatory, that was once posh and premier, now resembles a plush toy factory explosion littered with gifts—tiny booties, mountains of diapers, and every imaginable baby gadget.

Thank goodness we're past the age-old tradition of watching the gifts being opened one by laborsome one .

And with there being four knocked-up women they're honoring here today, the estrogen levels in this room could serve as a scientific study on fertility.

What is in the water in this town, anyway? I muse, sipping my almosta-mimosa, and don't get me started on the lack of alcohol in this place. I suppose they thought it was cute to tease us with virginal knockoffs, even though virginal is far from the theme of this gift grab.

But thank heavens I'm far past my baby-making prime. At my age, I get all of the fun and none of the threats of a two a.m. feeding.

My gaze drifts across the room, landing on the portrait of Miranda Lemon's late husband—as handsome as sin and forever young in his frame.

I tried to land that man once, while he was still kicking and breathing. Alas, he was

too devoted to his lemon of a bride.

But that new boy toy of Miranda's—her new beau, Wylie Fox—now there's a man with a naughty gleam in his eye that suggests he might be up for a bit of extracurricular activity.

In fact, I know he is.

I remember him from way back when. That's when we were much younger and living in Hollyhock. He was married to Suze the Witch, and he stepped out on her at every turn. And just when I was about to hop onto that handsome merry-go-round, he up and ditched the witch and married some hotel heiress out in Fallbrook.

From what I hear, that ended badly. So badly, he faked his own death to get out of it.

But here he is, playing the part of the bartender and looking as scrumptious as any of those desserts they've piled into this place.

I waste no time in heading his way, and soon the hem of my skirt brushes against the makeshift bar.

"Wylie, honey," I purr. "It's been years. And I must say, it's refreshing to see a man who can handle himself so well amid such maternal chaos."

Wylie chuckles, his green eyes crinkling with all the naughty intent a woman can desire. With his dark salt and pepper hair and those dimples to die for, Wylie Fox is a true-blue silver fox indeed.

"Boy, you haven't changed one bit." He gives a dark chuckle. "It's nice to see you again. I heard you were staying here at the B&B. I've been meaning to say hello."

I run my fingers up his leg and he takes a little sidestep while another laugh bellows from his lungs.

“All right”—he says—“while you do know how to make a man feel appreciated amidst the diapers and the bibs, I have to tell you that one hundred percent of my heart belongs to Miranda Lemon.”

“Oh, I’m sure there’s a little room for others,” I tease as my hand brushes his arm. “A man with your talents could be, and should be, generous with the ladies. Starting with me.”

Wylie gives another laugh, this time low and indulgent. “You’re terrible. But I suppose I’ve been terrible a time or two myself.” He winks my way. “I’m sorry you missed the terrible boat. But this man is on the straight and narrow now. I can’t risk losing Miranda. I’m sorry, but I can’t play any games.”

“Not even a few harmless games? Those happen to be my favorite.” I lick my lips as I tease him.

Little does he know, games are something I play to win.

A crowd presses in at the bar and Wylie excuses himself to help the guests as I take another sip of my near-miss of a mimosa. The citrus bite is a perfect match for my sour mood.

The laughter and chatter swell around me, just as a familiar face catches my eye and they curl a finger my way.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” I grumble.

What in the world do they want now?

And seeing I have nothing better to do, I set down my drink and follow along as we weave through clusters of chatting guests.

They lead me out of the conservatory and down a quiet hallway lined with vintage portraits, away from the incessant chatter of the baby shower.

The air grows cooler, and the muffled sounds of celebration fade into a haunting silence that begins to prick at my nerves—and rumor has it, this place is haunted indeed. I’ve yet to see an apparition, but I’ve certainly seen the chandeliers rattle, the lights flicker, and books fall from shelves all on their own.

I don’t know how Miranda has done it, but she’s somehow rigged this place to fool the public into believing in ghosts.

I certainly don’t believe in ghosts.

In fact, I’m certain that once you close your eyes forever, you simply cease to exist. That’s exactly why I live for the now —wild and free without hesitating to get what I want and who I want.

Wiley won’t be getting off so easy today. I might just lead him on enough to make sure he dumps Miranda in the process, too. Nobody rejects me for another woman and gets away with it.

“Where are we headed?” I snap to the idiot before me, but they don’t respond. They simply quicken their pace instead.

My heels click sharply on the old wooden floor, echoing in the empty space. I turn a corner and find myself in a dimly lit room as the door softly clicks shut behind me.

“Why the secrecy?” A ripple of apprehension courses through me as I take in the

secluded setting.

Within seconds, my mouth is bound as a long knitted scarf is twisted around my neck.

My fingers claw to remove it as panic sets in.

Can't breathe.

Can't think.

Moments later, I hit the floor, and oddly enough, at the very same time, I seem to be rising.

I glance down at my body on the ground, crumpled in a heap, and gasp.

It seems I was wrong about that whole lights-out thing. Even though I've lost my body, I seem to be moving on without it.

I was wrong about life after death.

I was wrong about so many other things, too.

It seems my wicked games have finally caught up with me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

“ I am never getting knocked up again,” my sister, Lainey, grunts as we struggle to waddle up to our mother’s happily haunted B&B.

“ I’m never getting knocked up again,” I counter as we steady one another to keep from slipping in the snow.

It’s a late Saturday afternoon in January, and even though the new year has just gotten underway, I swear it feels as if all time has stopped—and I’m stuck at seven months pregnant forever. With twins.

Lainey is due in February and I’m due in March. Not soon enough for either of us.

“Well, I’m never knocking boots with Forest Donovan again as long as I live,” Lainey says defiantly as she wraps her fingers around the oversized door handle.

Forest would be the love of her life and her handsome hubby. He’s a firefighter, just like our father was.

“Sorry, sister.” I shake my head at her. “But this is where we part ways. Knocking boots with my handsome husband might be what landed me in this predicament, but I’m still of sound mind. I’ll be knocking boots with Judge Essex Everett Baxter until the cows come home—or until I go home to Paradise.” I pause for a moment. “But is Paradise really paradise if I can’t knock boots with Everett? It’s thoughts like these that keep me up at night.”

“Come on, before you spiral any further into the abyss,” she says as she pulls me into the B&B.

A tall mirror greets us to the right and we both grunt at our reflections. Lainey and I share the same caramel-colored, medium-length locks, same hazel eyes, same bone structure, too, which is odd, considering I was adopted into the Lemon family as an infant. And we happen to share the same supersized bodies—even though the size of my baby bump far outdoes hers by a baby-loving mile.

Lainey leans into her reflection. “I’d better get my roots done before this baby gets here or I’ll be aging rapidly before your very eyes.”

“Please, you don’t have any tinsel yet.”

“I sure do.” Her voice spikes a notch. “In fact, I’ve got enough to give Santa a run for his gray-haired money. Ooh , speaking of money, you should come by the library next week.” Lainey is the head librarian down at the Honey Hollow Library. “We’re having a big book sale and we’re practically giving them away for nothing. And blowing out a bunch of old magazines, too. It’s a great time to stock up on those cozy mysteries you like, and pick up a bunch of board books for Lyla Nell, too.”

“I might just do that,” I say as I look around at the foyer as we make our way through it.

The B&B hasn’t always been in our lives, but after our father passed away, Mom bought this old colonial mansion and made it her own. It’s dimly lit inside with dark floors and creamy marble counters at the reception area up ahead. There’s a sweeping wrought iron staircase to the right that leads to the bedroom suites. And as previously mentioned, the best, perhaps more lucrative part of this place is the fact it has a family of ghosts taking up residence in it.



Although, at the moment, there's not a single rattle of the chandeliers. In fact, I don't hear anything.

"That's odd," I say as Lainey leads the way to the conservatory where the dual baby shower is supposedly taking place. "It's so eerily quiet here."

The dual baby shower is for our sister, Meg, and Noah's twin sister, Sam.

Homicide Detective Noah Fox is the father of my little girl, Lyla Nell. We were hot and heavy until things went south, and now I'm married to his old stepbrother, Judge Essex Everett Baxter. The three of us are complicated to say the least.

My mother asked me at the last minute if I would pick up Lainey for this big dual baby shindig and, of course, I said yes.

My mother already picked up my daughters, Evie and Lyla Nell, at about eleven this morning to help set up for the event. Evie might have been a helping hand since she's a college student, but Lyla Nell is a tender twenty-two months old and I'm pretty sure she was more of a hazard than a help.

"Are we sure it's at the B&B?" Lainey asks, looking equally stymied by the lack of noise. "This place is quiet as a cemetery."

My stomach does a revolution when she says those words.

I'll confess, my biggest fear today is stumbling upon a body. It seems to be a talent I've picked up as of late, especially when there's a large gathering.

Personally, I'm shocked I get invited anywhere anymore. With the exception of the morgue. And they've credited me with singlehandedly giving them an uptick in business.

“I’m positive it’s here,” I say. “Or at least it had better be. I sent my employees here this morning to deliver all the goodies, not to mention setting up the crepe station.”

Both Meg and Sam have had a craving for crepes as of late. Most likely because both Meg and Sam share the same baby daddy. Oh, it’s a long and sordid story.

“That doesn’t mean the shower is here. Mom could have rerouted them to the right place,” Lainey says as we come upon the conservatory, only to find the doors sealed shut. “Either something came up and they had to move the venue or our pregnant brains both heard the same misinformation.”

She pulls open the door and the lights flicker on in the conservatory as a cast of thousands jumps out at us and they all shout, SURPRISE!

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

“W hoa, what’s happening?” I gasp, clutching my sister’s arm as we take in the fact just about every female in Honey Hollow has shown up right here in the conservatory of my mother’s B&B.

The conservatory itself is a room made entirely of glass, and right now it looks like a winter wonderland with the snow on its roof and the twinkle lights strung up overhead like a canopy of stars.

And the gifts!

There seems to be a mountain of them, all unwrapped, all in multiples too great to count. There are more cribs, bassinets, baby bouncers, highchairs, and playpens to outfit a small country, let alone Meg and Sam.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Lainey groans as she points to a glittering pink banner strewn across the back that reads, Happy Baby Time, Sam, Meg, Lainey, and Lottie!

“Oh no,” I groan right along with her.

I specifically told my mother I didn’t need or want another baby shower, and Lainey did the same. We both still have babies more or less and all of the thousands of items that go along with them.

Mom trots over along with a very pregnant Meg and Sam.

“Oh yes,” Mom sings as she waves a hand around at the place. “This shower is for all four of my girls.”

Meg is our sister, of course, but I’m assuming she’s counting Sam in on that familial equation because my mother happens to be dating Sam’s father.

Mom looks posh in a hot pink pantsuit and her lemon-colored curls bouncing over her shoulders. She’s north of fifty, way north, but you wouldn’t know it.

Mom is gorgeous and youthful-looking and impeccable in just about every way, which is more than I can say about Meg and Sam. Both look bloated, perennially hungry, and downright exhausted. Sort of the way Lainey and I are feeling ourselves these days. Especially the hungry part. And the tired part. And the bloated part, too.

“Mom, you did not need to do this,” I say, craning my neck past her to make sure the dessert table is set out with the sweet treats from my bakery, and that the crepes station is moving and grooving. And much to my delight, both look to be in shipshape.

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery is just as much my baby as Evie and Lyla Nell—and these twins in my belly as well.

“Yes, Mother,” Lainey snips. “I really wish you didn’t include me. You know how I feel about all this consumerism.”

“Calm down,” Meg grunts our way. “It’s just a little baby shower. And whatever you don’t want, you can ship off to a women’s shelter.”

Meg is tall with harshly dyed ebony locks that she wears spun in a beehive. She’s dressed in a black tent, and I can see her combat boots peeking out from underneath. Meg has always embraced the Goth lifestyle, right down to owning every necrotic

shade of lipstick that has ever existed.

She makes a living down at a strip joint teaching the dancers their money-making moves, and she's recently gotten back together with her longtime boyfriend, Hook Redwood.

Hook is such a great guy, and he's firmly committed to raising Meg's baby as if it were his own. I couldn't be happier for both of them—all three of them.

"I'm not sending anything off," Sam is quick to say while holding her belly tight. "Jed and I need all the help we can get. He's having a hard time finding work."

I make a face at the mention of Jed Silver. He was the original reason for this party to begin with, seeing that he impregnated two of the four of us, and the party was originally intended for Meg and Sam.

The room buzzes with laughter and the clinking of glasses as if this was the party of the year, and judging by the open bar and the thick forest of bodies streaming in that direction, it just might be.

There's also a sign strung up above the bar that reads, Due to the invasion of storks, all drinks are flying virgin!

Soft rock music kicks on and the chatter in the room rises an octave to accommodate for it.

"Look at us," Meg says, standing with her hands on her hips and her baby bump proudly on display. "Four hot mamas!"

"Oh, let me get a picture," Mom says, fumbling with her phone. "Line up, girls."

We do just that, and soon it feels as if every phone in the room is pointed in our direction.

“Smile for the camera, future mommies of Honey Hollow,” Mom calls out, and soon we’re hit with a thousand flashing lights.

Once we’re sufficiently blinded, Carlotta ambles over with a crepe in hand.

There are two main ways to eat a crepe, rolled or folded in quarters, and I told the girls manning the crepe station that they should ask the guests how they prefer them.

Carlotta apparently prefers them three at a time and eating them like a pizza, which would be fine if they didn’t have hazelnut chocolate gushing from every angle.

“Good going, Lot,” she grouches my way. “Now the house is going to look as if you looted every baby boutique on the Eastern Seaboard. And just for the record, none of this junk is going in my room.”

Carlotta is my biological mother, and believe me when I say, I’m thrilled over the fact she abandoned me on the ice-cold floor of the Honey Hollow Fire Station when I was just hours old. But as of late, she seems to have taken up residence in my home.

Sam moans just looking at Carlotta’s crepe concoction. “Ooh, those crepes look so good. I’m going to eat them all.” She turns and waddles off without so much as a goodbye.

“Not if I beat you to ’em,” Meg calls out as she takes off after her. “And I’m cutting in line.”

“Wait,” Lainey calls out. “If anyone should be cutting in line, it’s me. We all know my bladder is only half the size it should be.”

I don't know about that as a medical fact, but it's the reason Lainey gave us when we discovered she's been trekking around in adult diapers, which she effectively calls her pee pants . Honestly, the woman is brilliant. I can never seem to beat my bladder to the punch when it comes to racing to the nearest restroom. I might need to look into pee pants myself.

"I'd better go after them." Mom sighs. "I've seen your sisters when they get hungry and it's not pretty. The last thing we need is a riot taking place." She takes a step away before stopping cold and lifting a finger my way. "Don't you dare cause any trouble."

A whole river of words tries to crawl up my throat at once and I gag.

"Or you either." She's quick to admonish Carlotta as well before taking off.

Before either of us can properly insult my mother for the blatant dig, a long-haired, hippie-looking woman clad in a long denim skirt and frumpy blue sweater stalks our way. Her hair is pulled back into a long rope of a braid, reminiscent of a noose, and she has an entire army of baby blue bobby pins stabbed into her scalp.

"What are you doing here, Francine?" Carlotta takes out her ire on the woman at hand.

Francine Dundee is Carlotta's longtime nemesis. I think they went to high school together and that's where their ongoing feud started. Nevertheless, other than their alma mater, they have nothing else in common.

Francine has been happily married for forever and a day and has seventeen kids and umpteen grandkids to show for it. She's a pearl-clutcher who doesn't believe women should wear pants or ever cut their hair, thus the reason she and her daughters all look as if they belong to some spooky cult. Not that long hair, or even long skirts for that

matter, are spooky in general, but once you see them en masse, paired with an entire tribe of matching faces, it's sort of a disconcerting look.

"I was invited." Francine offers a tight yet sweet smile my way before turning to Carlotta and that smile slides right off her face. "And hello to you, too, Carlotta Lemon, the woman who only needed two tries to get motherhood almost right."

"And here we go," I mutter mostly to myself and one of the babies gives me a kick as if they agreed—or maybe it's trying to tell me to make a run for those crepes myself. I'm so hungry I could gobble up everything on that dessert table and lap up the batter for the crepes as well. Although I doubt anything is left now that Meg, Sam, and Lainey have hit the station.

"Is that all you got, Francine?" Carlotta huffs back at the woman. "Those are big words coming from a baby factory who's doing her best to populate Honey Hollow singlehandedly. What are we up to now—fifty-seven? What are you still doing in this town, anyway? I'd thought you'd have started your own village by now."

"My own village?" Francine looks mildly amused. "Well, if I ever do start one, feel free to visit. You could be the token idiot."

"You're the only idiot I see." Carlotta's voice hikes to hostile levels—

not an anomaly in and of itself.

"At least I know how to raise a child," Francine shoots back. "Not all of us can drop 'em off at the firehouse and call it parenting."

"Touché." Carlotta gives a sharp laugh—mostly because she's not embarrassed by that whole dropping me off at the firehouse bit. "But at least I don't need a playbook to remember all their names. Who's the idiot now?"



By “all names” she means just two, and oddly, Carlotta doesn’t need to remember much when it comes to my biological sister, Charlie, or me, because she named us both Carlotta. My name was pinned to me on a piece of paper, and my mother was kind enough to keep it, albeit never calling me by it once. Instead, she gave me the nickname Lottie and, well, it’s still sticking.

“Go on now, scat .” Carlotta thumps her foot on the ground as if to spook the woman. “You’re a crazy ol’ loon and you know it!”

Francine leans toward Carlotta until they’re nose-to-nose. “If I were you, Carlotta, I’d take that back. I’m in no mood to have anyone besmirching me or my good name. I’m so sick of you, I could just kill you.” She stalks off, and before Carlotta can fire off another prickly comeback, a giant white bear lumbers in our direction.

“Oh, good grief, what now,” I say as the white furry beast stands on its hind legs and towers over us at least ten feet tall before bellowing out a roar. “Geez, that thing is scary,” I say as it turns its head for the dessert table and trots that way. “Whoever my mother got to put on that costume sure is tall,” I muse. “And what the heck does that have to do with a baby shower, anyway? I’m shocked half the guests aren’t screaming by now.” I tick my head to the side. “Or taking selfies with it.”

Deep down, I know both of my daughters are going to love that thing. Leave it to my mother to make this a baby bash to remember.

“Uh—Lot Lot?” Carlotta steps in close. “I think the reason the women in this glass castle aren’t screaming their heads off is because they can’t see the thing. That’s not some person in costume. I think it’s the real deal ghost of a polar bear.”

A breath hitches in my throat as I turn its way and, sure enough, that white grizzly beast up and disappears in a vat of baby blue stars.

“It’s a ghost, all right,” I mutter. “And that can only mean one thing. We’re in for a killer good time.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

A pang of hunger hits me abruptly just as I pull out my phone.

“Ooh, a crepe really sounds good right about now,” I groan as I crane my head in that direction where Suze, one of the employees from my bakery—and Noah’s mother, is serving up fresh crepes, right here in the conservatory of my mother’s B&B.

The baby shower, times four, is in full swing as dozens of women indulge in happy chatter and intermittent bouts of laughter.

“Darn tootin’, it sounds good,” Carlotta chirps. “That’s the best chocolate pie you’ve ever made. It’s delicious.”

“They’re crepes, Carlotta, not chocolate pie.”

“Potato, pooh-tato.” Carlotta juts her chest in that direction. “The line is twenty deep. Why don’t you pretend the twins are on their way and I bet they’ll let us at the front of the line.”

My hand lands protectively over my belly. “I will do no such thing.”

“And that’s why you’ll never succeed at life, Lot. Watch a master of her craft have a whirl at it.” She staggers that way. “Ouch, my appendix!” she calls out while doubling over and holding her side. “I think I’m going to puke!”

Sure enough, the line clears out and Carlotta is already putting in an order for her crepes, and in the disorganized way she's having them arranged, it sort of does look like a chocolate pie.

Mmm, that chocolate hazelnut filling sounds like a dream right now. And oddly, I'd like to garnish my crepes with candied pickles, too. And yes, they do exist. My mother gave my sisters and me each a bag for Christmas. They're dehydrated, rolled in sugar, and perfectly spicy, too. I'll have to ask where she got them. That six-pound bag didn't last a day.

But regardless, I've got more pressing issues at hand. I shoot a quick text to both Noah and Everett, letting them know about the supernatural activity I just witnessed.

The two of them have made it clear as crystal that any time I see the dead crop up unexpectedly I'm to let them know asap. Noah is Lyla Nell's biological father, even though she calls both Noah and Everett Daddy. It's so sweet, it's enough to melt all of the ice lining our little corner of Vermont.

I glance back at my phone, but neither Noah nor Everett has responded yet.

Odd.

But knowing the two of them, they're too busy jumping in their trucks and hightailing it in this direction to fiddle with returning a message.

The three of us are very well aware of the fact when I see a ghost pop up on me like that, a homicide isn't that far behind.

Come to find out, I'm something called transmundane, further classified as supersensual, which means I can see ghosts. Not all ghosts all the time, but when I do, especially a newbie like this one, it means they've been sent from the other side to

help me solve a murder.

And oddly enough, the first time I usually see the ghost is just prior to the murder taking place. Oh, what I wouldn't give to stop the murder before it ever takes place.

Only a few people know about my supernatural quirk, and as it happens, Carlotta, Charlie, and little Lyla Nell all share the very same supernatural talent, too.

Here's hoping such dark investigations aren't in Lyla Nell's future. I'm sort of hoping that both she and Evie will want to take over the bakery one day.

Evie and her adorable blonde bestie, Dash, crop up in front of me and they both offer up a spontaneous hug my way.

"Mom, this is so much fun!" Evie gives my belly a little pat. Evie is her father, Everett's, twin in female skin. She's drop-dead gorgeous, from her long dark hair to her commanding blue eyes. "The twins are, like, totally set for life."

"At least the first few years," I agree.

"This is a killer party," Dash says with a vigorous nod and I secretly hope it's not in the literal sense. "I can't believe all this free stuff. I can't wait to get knocked up."

"Please wait—at least until you're married." A laugh bubbles from me as I say it.

Her smile dissolves in a microsecond. "I thought I'd be married by now."

"Dash ." I startle with a laugh. "You're only eighteen."

Her shoulders bounce at the thought. "My mom was sixteen the first time she got hitched."

“I don’t know.” Evie shakes her head at her bestie. “You’re giving off major second-wife energy. You’ll probably find an older man who’s been around the block with lots of money. And that way, you can both hate his first wife together in style.”

“Oh wow.” Dash looks pleasantly stunned. “I bet that would totally, like, bond us forever.”

They trot off and I’m left trying to figure out what just happened.

I’m pretty sure Evie was the voice of reason in that conversation in a roundabout, twisted way. And what exactly is major second-wife energy? Honestly, it sounds like something that has the power to keep me up at night.

I’m about to make my way to the crepe station and satisfy my itch for all things chocolate when I spot Francine Dundee and Carlotta going at it just shy of the dessert table. Lucky for me, Carlotta has a plate brimming with crepes rolled with chocolate hazelnut goodness so I head that way.

“You keep my husband’s name off of your lips!” Francine steps in so close she nearly tips the plate of crepes right out of Carlotta’s hand, so I do the only sensible thing I can—I swipe that plate from Carlotta before she has a chance to notice.

“Relax, you big bag of gas,” Carlotta hisses back at the woman. “I was just asking how he was doing.”

Francine scoffs at the thought. “Wouldn’t you like to know! You keep tabs on all the men in Honey Hollow, don’t you? It’s like you’re running a marathon and every man is the finish line!”

A chuckle bounces through me because, let’s face it, she’s not wrong.

Carlotta has been mighty friendly with just about every man of a certain age in this town. Well, at least she was up until December when my biological father, Mayor Nash, put his foot down. He basically put the kibosh on their bizarre open relationship and said it was him or the highway. Carlotta wisely chose him.

“You’re a regular saint, aren’t you, Francine ?” Carlotta smears out the woman’s name as if it were an expletive. “Except that your halo is so crooked it could double as a boomerang.”

A couple of women nearby begin to titter.

Wonderful.

The last thing Carlotta needs is an audience. That’s the exact environment she thrives in.

Carlotta cocks her head as she studies the long-haired granny before her. “You know what? I bet you’ve got a deep, dark secret or two rolling around in that walnut you call a noggin. And I bet it’s so dark and dirty, you’d sell your firstborn to keep the world from finding it out.”

Francine cowers and her face turns every shade of crimson—more or less confirming Carlotta’s dirty little secret theory.

“ Ah-ha! ” Carlotta slaps her thigh so hard it sounds like a peal of thunder. “I knew it! You’re hiding something dark and delicious, aren’t you? Well, not for long, Miss Prissy! You’ve insulted me for the very last time! I’m going to do a little digging, and I’m going to unearth whatever it is you’d rather stay buried.”

Ooh, this is getting good.

I shove a creamy, dreamy chocolate-filled crepe into my mouth and both twins give a light kick as if they were thanking me.

Carlotta lifts a finger, and before she can continue with her tirade, a couple of older women insert themselves into the mix. A short-haired brunette and a perky-looking redhead with lipstick that matches her fiery locks. Both women look about my mother's age or a touch older, and both look perfectly delighted by Carlotta's behavior as they break out into cackles.

"Oh, come now." The short-haired woman pats Francine on the back. "Don't you worry about Carlotta. She's just teasing. Everyone knows a good woman like you has no secrets. At least not any worth the trouble." She turns to the menace among us. "Carlotta, honey, trust me when I say, the juice ain't worth the squeeze."

Francine huffs at the woman, "You know all about my juice, don't you?" She takes a moment to glare at the short-haired brunette. "You're half the problem in this town, Ursula. And Carlotta is your bombastic bookend. Why, I should—" She stops cold and gives a quick glance around. "I think I need to cool off."

The redhead nods. "I'd step outside the room if I were you. Because we both know if you don't, someone might just end up dead."



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

“ I ’ll do just that.” Francine stalks right out of the conservatory just as my mother takes her place.

“What in the world was that about?” Mom fiddles with the pendant on her neck as she eyes the door. The baby shower times four is in full swing, or full chaos as it were, and tempers have started to flare. “Carlotta, you know better than to rile her up. That poor woman has had far too many children and far too few baby showers and it shows.” She manufactures a quick smile to the two women before us.

“And perhaps far too little sleep in her life as well,” I add and we all share a mournful chuckle.

Mom pulls me in. “Ursula, Agatha, have you met my daughter, Lottie? She’s one of the mothers we’re honoring today. And she’s the baker who provided all the sweet treats—fabulous crepes included! Lottie, these are my old friends, Ursula Wingate and Agatha Reed. Two best, best friends you ever did see.” She nods to the brunette with short hair and the redhead respectively. “Ursula and her husband have been staying here at the B&B with me while their home undergoes some renovations.”

We exchange a quick hello.

“Oh, Lottie, your desserts are divine!” Ursula is quick to sing my praises and she licks her lips. She doesn’t have a stitch of cosmetics on and she’s so cute it would be a waste if she did. She’s a true natural beauty. “Unfortunately, I’ll have to abstain from the crepes. I’ve never been a fan of the texture, but everything else is up for

grabs. And for the record, we just love Francine,” Ursula is quick to tell me, although her eyes still seem to be laughing at the woman. “We just like to tease.”

“Speaking of Francine”—Mom turns my way— “she was kind enough to knit an entire mountain of baby blankets with matching scarves for the mothers. She said the scarf is wide enough to cover you while you’re nursing. How’s that for creative?”

Ursula laughs. “That woman is creative everywhere but the bedroom. It seems she’s a one-trick pony when it comes to that room of the house.”

“More like a one-trick donkey whose baby-making station should be put out to pasture,” Carlotta is quick with the dig and I make a face before shoveling another crepe into my mouth.

The redhead with the matching crimson lips flicks her wrist. “Oh, that old biddy’s baby-making station closed shop a long time ago. Those little folks you see following her around like a herd of baby ducks are her grandkids. The entire Dundee brood is dead set on overpopulating the planet.”

The three of them share another laugh, but my mother and I abstain. I mostly abstain because I just picked up another crepe. Nothing gets between my desserts and me, not even laughter.

“But I have to admit, those adorable baby blankets and scarves—” Mom shakes her head. “I think she’s really onto something there. She could sell those at all the baby boutiques in Vermont and make a killing. Heaven knows the Dundeys can use the money.”

“Francine works for Ursula,” the redhead, Agatha, is quick to tell us. “And her husband has some sort of whittling business. Ursula, what is it called again?”

The brunette takes a moment to glare at Agatha.

“It’s called Dundee Diddles and Whittles,” Mom is quick to chime in.

Carlotta scoffs. “You mean Dumbo Diddles and Whittles. That man couldn’t whittle himself out of a paper bag. It’s no wonder they’re flat broke half of the time.”

A sharp whistle pierces the air and we look over to see Wiley waving my mother to the bar.

“I bet we’re out of orange juice again.” She turns my way. “Evie has Lyla Nell, but let me tell you, that sweet little angel has been the life of the party, telling everyone she’s having two baby dolls coming to live with her. She’s so excited about the babies, it’s adorable.”

“Yeah, she’s excited,” Carlotta grouses as my mother takes off. “She’ll be excited right up until they start pooping, and crying, and stealing her sanity. Then she’s going to ask for the return to sender label.” She plucks the plate out of my hands. “Little Yippy and I have that in common.” She takes off as well and I shake my head in her wake.

Little Yippy is the not-so-nice nickname Carlotta has had for Lyla Nell since her conception.

Ursula and Agatha have drifted off a few feet and Ursula looks as if she’s saying something very serious to the redhead. Agatha tries to interject, but Ursula raises a hand as if she were about to slap the woman, but thankfully she doesn’t. She simply continues with her tirade.

Agatha shakes her head and walks away. Now that’s the bigger thing to do.

Ursula's entire face turns purple, and before she can explode like a pinata, Suze steps up to the woman and the two of them begin to tussle as well.

Suze Fox is Noah's mother. She's tall, stocky, and has short blonde locks with bangs she can't seem to get out of her eyes. It's safe to say I'm not Suze's favorite person, but that hasn't stopped her from collecting a paycheck from me twice a month.

She's been working at the bakery for a few years now. It just so happens she's a permanent resident of my mother's here at the B&B. And just last month, someone left a nasty note on her car, along with a dead man with a Santa hat to go along with it.

The note read, you're next.

Suffice it to say, Noah's hair has aged ten years since that night, and the fact he can't get any info on the dead guy isn't helping. Neither is the fact Suze is being rather tight-lipped as to what her connection to him could have been.

It's a mess.

Most things with Suze are.

Ursula lifts a hand and Suze raises a hand right back.

But I'm not interested in anything those two have going on. The only thing I'm interested in is getting myself a few more of my sweet treats. And I do just that.

I head to the dessert table and pile a plate high with a few of my colorful glazed donuts, about a half dozen miniature cream puffs, a couple of my scrumptious black and white cookies, an entire rainbow of macarons, and I finish it all off with several squares of my chocolate peanut butter brownies.

There is nothing better than a chocolate peanut butter dessert. I'm sure the headlines rang out with joy the day humans discovered that scrumptious combination.

Before I make my way to the crepe station, I decide to hunt down Evie and Lyla Nell. The room is so crowded, the music is so loud, the chatter is twice as boisterous, and there's no sign of either of my daughters, so I decide to step out of the conservatory to steal a moment of peace and quiet instead.

The cool air is a welcome relief, and the farther I get, the more the music and the chatter die down.

I stride down the long hall and spot a couple of men walking around. One of them is an older man with a swath of gray hair and long features, but handsome, wearing a dress shirt and dark slacks. He's drumming his fingers over the reception counter, and the closer I get, he opens up the guest book, albeit upside down.

"Can I help you?" I ask with a hesitant smile. "My mother is the owner, and she's a little busy at the moment. But I'm sure I can do it in a pinch." That's a bald-faced lie. I don't know what goes where in this place, outside of the ghosts that rule the roost. And I don't see them anywhere either.

The man looks up and takes a deep breath, his eyes widening as if I caught him off guard.

"I was just waiting for my wife." He offers a pleasant smile. "She's at the big party." His eyes drift to my enormous belly. "Your party, I'm assuming."

"Oh yes." I grab my belly. "But the party is still raging on. It might be a while."

"Ah, well, I guess that answers my question. I'm on my own for dinner. I'll see what the dining room is serving up." He winks my way before taking off.

I don't get two steps closer to the library when I'm enveloped by the scent of strong, woody cologne and I can't help but smile.

"Lemon." Everett closes the distance between us, and soon I'm in his big, strong arms. Everett is lethally handsome with his dark hair, matching facial scruff, brilliant blue eyes, and body built to lift a building right off its foundation—not to mention the things it does to me on a nightly basis. "Are you okay? Did you find the body? Am I too late?"

"You're right on ti?—"

A shrill scream cuts me off at the pass and we follow the unholy cry until we're in the heart of the library where we find Suze sounding the vocal alarm.

At her feet is that short-haired brunette, Ursula Wingate, lying on the floor with a pink scarf wrapped so tight around her neck, every last inch of her is blue, and next to her lies an upturned plate with a few half-eaten crepes scattered about.

Everett quickly checks the woman's pulse before shaking his head up at me.

He quickly works off that scarf and does a few chest compressions, but that doesn't change a thing. I'd better call Noah.

Ursula Wingate is dead.

LOTTIE

“ E everybody freeze ,” Noah shouts as he bursts into the library with such ferocity that a nearby stack of mysteries nearly tumbles to the floor. His weapon is out, and yet he doesn’t seem to know where to point it.

Everett groans, “Do us all a favor and arrest yourself.”

“Lottie.” Noah puts his gun back into his holster, and before I know it, he pulls me into his arms and presses his lips to mine for an inordinate amount of time—a death-defying act on his part, considering my husband is within fighting distance.

Odd fact: I’ve been married to Noah before, too, and our divorce is all kinds of shades of gray. I might be a bigamist and not even know it, but in truth, it’s always felt right. I’d chalk that little bizarre tidbit up to my raging hormones, but I felt that way long before the twins popped up in my belly.

“Watch it, Fox.” Everett rips Noah away from me and gives him a hard shove in the chest. “What the heck was that about?”

“I’m just glad she’s safe.” Noah rakes his fingers through his dark hair. Both Noah and Lyla Nell have dark hair that turns red at the tips in the sun, eyes so green they rival a freshly mowed lawn, and dimples so deep you can curl up and take a nap in them.

Everett growls at him, “Her safety prompted you to plant one on her? I’m shocked you gave an excuse at all. Why don’t you focus on solving a few mysteries? Inter

alia, the one your mother is embroiled in, or the one that just cropped up at our feet.”

“Lottie.” Noah gives a slow blink. “Do you really want to be with a man who inserts the words inter alia into a conversation?” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Lot. In fact, I apologize to both of you. I was at the office when I got your message. I finally got a DNA match on that naked Santa.”

Both Suze and I gasp.

“Who was he?” I ask.

“Wait,” Everett grumbles. “As much as I’d love to solve that mystery myself, there’s a body lying on the ground.”

“What?” Noah spins on his heels and stops cold once he sees the woman.

“That pink scarf was wrapped around her neck,” I tell him just as the Ashford Sheriff’s Department storms the tiny library, and soon a crowd pushes in around the entry as well.

I pull out my phone and quickly take a covert picture of the crime scene. There’s no way I’m not analyzing this later. I put my phone away and crane my neck that way again. Next to the poor woman lies a few half-eaten crepes with a swath of red lipstick at the edge of each bite. I take a step in that direction and notice a couple of small blue metal objects on the floor next to the body. From here they look like bobby pins.

Bobby pins? I glance back at Ursula lying there with her short, dark hair. I didn’t notice any bobby pins in her hair earlier, certainly not any that were baby blue.

“What’s happened?” Ivy Fairbanks, Noah’s partner in crime, stalks in. Ivy is a tight-



lipped brunette who wears her hair in a bun so tight, her face is permanently pulled back into a skeletal grimace. Ivy has the hots for Noah, but since Noah has the hots for me, I'm on her list of people to glare at until the end of time. "You did this," she snips my way. "I don't need a road map to know you've caused someone else to bite the big one." She cranes her neck past me. "Of course, there's a plate of dessert scattered over the floor next to the deceased. Trust me, whatever poison you used, I'm going to have forensics track it down, and then I'm going to send in the hounds until we trace it back to you. This little killing spree of yours is over."

Everett steps up and sighs. "The woman was strangled. I took the scarf off her neck myself."

Ivy blinks to the ceiling. "Why didn't you lead with that?" She takes off and both my mother and Carlotta push their way through the crowd.

"Oh, Lottie, not again," Mom moans. "I should have listened to Wylie and had a private gathering for you in your home—a very small, small gathering away from the general public. I'd better go fix this." She squints over at the body. "Oh my word! It's Ursula! Oh goodness, her husband is here. I have to go find him." She zips out of the room like a woman on a mission, and horrifically it's the saddest mission of all.

"Wait just a Dundee, Dumbee , Dumbo minute," Carlotta harps as she inspects the scene. "What's that hokey scarf doing next to the deceased?"

"She was strangled with it," Everett says it low so the crowd that's trying to press their way in won't pick up on it.

"I knew it." Carlotta claps her hands as she cranes her neck into the crowd. "There she is," she screeches as Francine Dundee staggers her way over, and I can't help but note that the woman's face looks far more pale than usual. "Here's your killer, Foxy! I bet she whittled up one of those knit disasters just so she could squeeze the life out

of someone here tonight.” She presses her nose far too close to Francine. “Ten bucks says she was aiming for me, but she’s too cheap to spring for glasses!”

Francine chokes and gags just as Noah heads this way, and those baby blue bobby pins in her hair catch my eye,

“I didn’t do this,” she says as she glances to the body, then to the scarf, and her eyes grow wide, and if I’m not mistaken, the tiny curve of a smile quivers on her lips. “I have to go.” She shoots out of the library like a bullet and Noah nods to Carlotta.

“I’ll make a note of it,” Noah says before turning to me. “Lottie, why don’t you head out and check on Evie and Lyla Nell? Maybe get some water and take a seat? You shouldn’t be in here.”

“Now that I agree with,” Everett says, pressing a hand into my lower back as he does his best to steer me out of the room.

“Wait,” I say, turning to Noah. “That scarf? It was knitted by Francine Dundee, and those blue bobby pins next to her body? Francine has about a hundred spiked into her hair.” I press my lips tight for a moment. “As much as I hate to point the finger, I did witness Francine getting huffy with that poor woman.”

Carlotta claps up a storm and belts out a hoot. “Way to go, Lot. We’ll have Fran Fran in the can can by midnight and she’ll be doing the suspect shuffle until sentencing.” She does her best to land a high-five my way, but I promptly ignore it.

“Would you keep it down?” I cast a quick glance over my shoulder. “That poor dead woman’s husband is here somewhere.”

“What’s happened?” a deep voice bellows and we turn to see an older gentleman with a shock of white hair storming into the room and pushing his way past the sheriff’s

deputies, and by his side is Agatha Reed, the redhead who I met earlier. In fact, I met her along with Ursula. They seemed like good friends.

“Oh no,” Agatha moans deeply and her expression grows panicked. “Please tell me she’ll be all right,” she shrieks. “Somebody do something,” she shouts and her face turns a bright shade of crimson. “Please, somebody help her!” She tries to dive her way through the wall of deputies, but a couple of them secure her and she screams all the way out of the room.

That older gentleman shakes his head at the scene. “Who the hell did this to my wife?” he riots. “I want answers, and I want them now,” he bellows and Noah pulls the man to the side as he walks him to the quieter end of the library, and soon enough it looks as if he’s consoling him.

“Poor guy.” Everett rubs my back as he says it.

“He deserves justice,” I pant out the words as my adrenaline surges.

“Good thinkin’, Lot.” Carlotta hops past me. “I’ll go round up the killer so we can get this show on the road. Mr. Sexy, why don’t you fill up a bathtub with water, and Foxy you get the toaster.” She takes off before we can stop her.

Sexy and Foxy are the nicknames she’s given to Everett and Noah. But then, half the female population calls Everett Mr. Sexy.

“Let’s go, Lemon.” Everett sighs. “Noah and Ivy have this handled. Let’s track down Evie and Lyla Nell.”

Everett ushers me right through the crowd and right out of the library and we’re about halfway to the conservatory when I spot an entire gaggle of ghosts flying this way.

“Ooh, Greer and the gang are here,” I whisper. “I can’t wait to hear what they have to say. They might have a better idea of what happened.”

Everett grunts in the direction I’m looking in before glancing to the exit. “I see Meg and Sam. I’m going to ask if they’ve seen Evie. I’ll be keeping my eyes on you the entire time.”

He zips off just as the ghosts of Greer Giles and Winslow Decker zip right in front of me.

“Lottie, what’s happened?” Winslow looks equal parts alarmed and equal parts amused. “You’re no doubt at the nexus of this chaos.”

I make a face at the two-hundred-year-old looker. It’s true. Winslow has been dead for about that long, but oddly, his ghost doesn’t look a day over thirty—because that’s when he kicked the bucket. Winslow is tall, tan, blond, and has a fashion bias for denim overalls, which makes sense considering he was a pig farmer on the land this haunted mansion is settled on.

“I’m sorry to inform you I had nothing to do with the chaos that’s ensued,” I say rather indignantly and both babies give me a swift kick to the ribs because evidently, neither of them thinks it’s true either.

Greer belts out a bold laugh—mostly because she knows I can’t punch her in the face. Greer is a stunner, and she just so happens to be my contemporary. She was killed a few years back, and she’s still wearing the white ruched gown she bit the big one in. There’s a crimson stain over the front of her chest, and if you squint, it sort of looks like a corsage. Her hair is dark, her features are model-esque, and she was once a mean girl who’s now as nice as can be—with the exception of the fact that she’s laughing at me.

Fun fact: I caught the killer who mowed her down and brought them to justice, too.

“Oh, Lottie,” Greer trills, and a sea of ebony stars sparkles in her luminescent flowing locks. “We all know that trouble follows you wherever you go. Wiley was just telling your mother that last night.”

He would.

Winslow nods. “It’s a wonder you got an invite to the party, let alone were included as one of the stars of the show. So what’s happened here?” He frowns past me. “Once the conservatory drained, we took advantage of the buffet and those crepes of yours really are to die for.”

I make a face at him for even going there. If only he knew that someone did, in fact, die for them. Sort of.

And as for that whole ghosts-getting-to-nosh-on-my-sweet-treats thing, well, as my supersensual powers grew, so did the abilities of the ghosts that were near me. They can now gobble down whatever delicacies they want. Don’t ask me where they put it.

But since I’m at the stage in my life where I think about food and gain ten pounds, let’s just say I’m not afraid to die when my time comes, and when I do, I’m hitting every bakery in all of Vermont.

“There’s a body ,” someone warbles and I turn to see Little Lea stalking this way. Lea is Greer and Winslow’s six-year-old adopted little girl. She’s forever six, has been dead for far too long, and has come back to haunt the very site where her family was slaughtered. There’s a warped sense of revenge in there somewhere. She’s about three feet tall and has long stringy hair that covers her face so you can’t tell if she’s coming or going. She wears a dirty pinafore, along with a pair of scuffed Mary Janes. If all that wasn’t terrifying enough, she’s got a machete that dangles from her hand as

if it were an appendage—ready to issue the aforementioned revenge. And zipping up by her side is their black cat named Thirteen.

“There’s a ghost of a polar bear in there, too,” Thirteen is quick to inform us. “His name is Petey and he’s good and ticked at whoever did this to that poor woman.”

“How in the world did that woman have a polar bear?” I ask. All I know about the dead that come back to help solve the homicides is that they’re the ghost of whoever the deceased loved the most. “A polar bear isn’t exactly a domesticated animal.”

Thirteen twitches his whiskers my way. “How should I know? This is your investigation, Lottie. My job is to make sure guests of this inn are adequately frightened.”

Little Lea nods. “And judging by the horror flick playing out, you, Lottie Lemon, are trying to steal our ghostly thunder!” She turns and flies back to the library and this time the other three follow.

I head back to the library myself and spot that furry white polar bear right next to Ursula Wingate’s body.

The hairy beast points his snout her way before standing on his hind legs and towering over everyone in this room. He tips his head back and belts out a horrific moan that starts out like a whimper and ends with a menacing growl.

That lumbering beast is furious, and judging by that lethal look in his eye, he wants justice for Ursula and he wants it now.

I not only want the very same thing, but I’ll make sure she gets it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

NOAH

The air in the library is quickly growing stale as the deputies do their best to thin the crowd.

The deceased is Ursula Wingate, and according to her husband, Orson, they've been staying at the B&B while their home undergoes some plumbing renovations. He has no idea who would want to hurt his wife. The only thing he can think of is that another tenant of the B&B, a woman by the name of Suze Fox, had let them know she was actively being harassed by unknown sources and that maybe the hit was meant for her.

I'll admit, my blood ran cold as I heard him say it. Mostly because a part of me thinks he might be right.

I should know, Suze Fox is my mother.

I take in the scene as the coroner's office is in the process of photographing the deceased from every angle.

As much as I want to find the person responsible, the person I'd really like to speak to right about now is the woman who gave birth to me.

I glance around and spot a familiar face lumbering in my direction. But it's not my mother. It's Everett.

"Why aren't you gone?" I growl. "Is Lottie still here? What about the girls? Please

tell me that you took them home.”

“Turns out, Evie took Lyla Nell home before there was a whiff of something sinister. Lemon is hungry, so she’s making herself a few crepes.”

“As long as she’s not with my mother, I suppose she’s safe.” I quickly fill him in on what Orson Wingate told me.

“Geez.” He winces. “Okay, what’s with the dead guy? Let’s start there and we’ll work our way out.”

“Don’t you dare go on without me,” a female voice chirps, and before we know it, Lottie is next to us. “What’s happening, Noah?” She shoves what looks to be the remnant of a crepe into her mouth, and I’ll admit, it looks delicious.

“I spoke to the husband of the deceased,” I tell them. “He thinks the intended victim may have been my mother.”

She gasps, despite the fact she has a mouthful of food, before motioning for me to continue.

“Look, whatever my mother is wrapped up in, it’s dangerous.” I sigh at the thought. “Nobody hand-delivers a corpse to the hood of your car on Christmas with a note reading you’re next, unless they mean business. I’m afraid Orson Wingate is right. My mother’s life is in danger, Lottie. I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to insist you let her go from the bakery, at least temporarily. She’s a walking target, and I don’t want you anywhere near her.”

“Oh wow.” Lottie taps her lips. “I guess that’s fine, but you’re going to have to do the dirty work. There’s no way I’m getting on Suze’s bad side any more than I already am.”



“Good for you, Lemon.” Everett takes a moment to glare at me. “Hear that, Noah? She’s not doing your dirty work for you anymore. And that includes solving this new homicide. Lemon has too much on her plate at the moment. And in the event you haven’t noticed, she’s carrying twins. Of which have a habit of coming into the world a little early. You had better solve this case and every case that might mildly pique her interest, because short of chaining her to my body, you and I both know we can’t stop her from investigating.”

“Hey, I’m right here.” Lottie giggles as she winks his way. “Don’t worry, Everett. I happen to agree with you. I have enough on my plate.” She cradles her burgeoning belly. “And plus, these are the last few weeks I’ll have alone with the other baby in the house, Lyla Nell. I need to make sure she understands that these babies aren’t taking her place. Don’t either of you worry. I’m not looking to chain myself to Sue Fox, if that’s what you’re afraid of. But honestly, I don’t want to let her go from the bakery either.”

Everett nods my way. “You should chain yourself to your mother, Noah. In fact, you should chain the two of you to your desk. Two weeks have passed since that dead man showed up on the hood of her car and you’re just now able to identify him. I’m sorry, but I don’t have the faith I need to rely on you to solve this case.”

“Thanks.” I nod his way before looking at Lottie. “The dead guy is Tom Darius, forty-two, a known drifter down in Leeds. He was seen hanging out at the Fletcher Hotel.”

“Hey, that’s that quasi-ritzy place,” Lottie points out. “And that’s saying a lot, considering Leeds is basically a toilet.”

She’s right on both counts.

She leans in. “Any idea why he’d be involved in whatever this is?”

“None.” I shake my head as my frustration builds. “This guy is a true mystery. No ties to the B&B, no ties to Ursula as far as I can tell. I asked Orson if he knew the name, and he said he’s never heard of him. It’s like the guy dropped out of the sky.”

“Not out of the sky,” Lottie says with her gaze set on the deceased. “But he has something to do with your mother.” She looks pensive for a moment before shaking it off. “But right now, we’ve got bigger cakes to ice. Ursula’s dead, and there’s the ghost of a polar bear who seems to think we should care. It turns out, his name is Petey. Thirteen filled me in on that ghostly little tidbit.”

A breath expels from me. “I can’t believe the words that are about to come from my mouth, but I need you to help me speak to that ghost. It’s all hands on deck with this one—including a couple of dead hands.”

“You mean paws,” Everett corrects as he glares around at the room. “I don’t care who you get a clue from, Noah. Whatever is going on with your mother has already racked up a body count. This needs to end, and it needs to end now. If I were you, I’d bump that polar bear down a notch on your interrogation list. It’s your mother you need to shake down. She knows more than what she’s letting on. Let’s go home, Lemon.”

We say goodnight as they head out and another heavy sigh expels from me.

As much as I hate it, Everett is right.

My mother knows something and she’s not talking.

What is she so afraid of?

And what the heck has she gotten herself into now?

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

EVERETT

The morning sun barely filters through the kitchen window, casting a pale winter light over the breakfast table.

“Daddy,” Lyla Nell calls out from her highchair as both cats sit on either side of her. “I eat cancakes!” She does her best to spear a pancake that’s already been cut up for her and smears it in syrup. “Not my kitty cat,” she says my way sternly as she holds the bite of pancakes my way.

Yes, the cats’ names are Pancake and Waffles, and each time we have pancakes or waffles, Lyla Nell sweetly reminds us not to eat the cats.

The cats are a couple of Himalayan brothers, and with all that white fur they have, I highly doubt they’d taste as good with syrup or without.

Lemon’s pancakes and waffles are pretty hard to beat.

“Is that bite for me?” I tease as I bite the air just shy of it and she squeals with joy as she shoves it into her own mouth.

Lemon chuckles as she comes out of the kitchen with a cup of coffee for me.

“Thank you,” I tell her and land a kiss to her lips—one I wish wouldn’t end.

Her belly thumps into my side and I look down.

“Whoa,” I say, placing my hand over it. “Someone is awake.”

“Oh, they’re both awake and you know it. Everett, these kids don’t sleep. I’m really worried about what’s going to happen to us once they get here. I’m going to be a certified zombie.”

“ We’re going to be certified zombies,” I assure her. “I’m officially putting in a request today for paternity leave once the babies are born. You’re not going to do this alone. And if you need a nanny?—”

She lifts a finger my way, and I know better than to continue with the conversation.

“I am perfectly capable of taking care of my babies. This is Honey Hollow, not Fallbrook. We don’t use nannies around here. We’re a hands-on kind of people.”

“That’s right, Lot,” Carlotta barks as she staggers down the stairs with her hair matted down on one side and her PJs twisted every which way. “You got yourself into this pregnant pickle times two, you’ll darn well get yourself out of it. You’re serving eighteen hard years plus time served with Little Yippy. No early release, no parole—just one hundred percent hard time, each and every day.”

Lemon closes her eyes a moment. “Well, if you say it that way, then I might just hire six different nannies, two for each kid. Make it seven. Carlotta, you can use one, too.”

“Just make sure he’s hot,” she grouses.

A rumbling comes from the stairs as Evie heads down as well. She’s already dressed for school and has her backpack hitched on her shoulder and a duffle bag in her arms.

Evie is a student down at Ashford University and she’s living in the dorm on campus as well. And as much as I hate to see her go, each time she leaves, I’m glad she’s

living a healthy life. I'm glad about that and the fact she's close enough to the courthouse to have lunch with her old man now and again.

Evie is a lot like me in every sense, right down to her long dark hair, blue eyes, and no-nonsense outlook on life. I haven't always known she was my daughter. Her mother kept her locked away in some boarding school and conveniently forgot to mention that I had a child. But Evie has been in my life for a few years now, and I couldn't be happier.

And as fate would have it, I found out a few weeks ago that I have other biological children as well—twelve-year-old twin girls, Ava and Olivia Griffin.

Their mother is a pediatrician out in Fallbrook, who I have no recollection of sleeping with. And considering I wasn't exactly discriminating when it came to who fell into my bed, this doesn't surprise me. They're off on a ski trip this week with their school, but I'm hoping we can all get together for dinner soon enough.

Lemon has been an angel throughout the entire ordeal. And thankfully, so has the twin's mother, Haley. There was once a time when I couldn't picture myself as a father, and now I can't picture myself without my children. Time is funny that way.

"I, for one, don't need a nanny," Evie says as she gives Lemon a quick kiss, high-fives Carlotta, and lands a kiss to Lyla Nell's cheek as well. "I've gotta run." She comes over and gives the scruff on my cheek a quick scratch before kissing me, too.

"What do you mean, you've gotta run?" I bemoan the fact far more than I meant to. "How about a quick bite?"

"Fine," she says, stealing a bite off Lyla Nell's plate and sending her little sister into a tirade that leaves her red in the face. Lyla Nell gets her temperament from Noah. I've seen him throw a fit or two that goes in that exact same direction.

“What’s going on that has you in such a hurry?” Lemon asks. “Your first class isn’t until one today.”

It’s true. Lemon and I have all but memorized Evie’s schedule.

Evie launches into a story that involves social justice, broken windows, and peaceable solutions.

“And so, after the protest, we’re all going to stage a sit-in right there in the middle of the quad,” she continues. “We did the same thing last weekend. You should’ve seen the dean’s face when he came out and saw us all in tie-dye and singing protest songs from the sixties. It was epic.”

Lottie and I exchange a glance laced with a particular blend of amusement and concern that only comes from parenthood. This isn’t exactly the kind of educational experience we were hoping for when we sent Evie off to school, but it seems she’s making the most of it, in her own unique way. I’d expect nothing less.

“Sounds like a party,” I mutter into my coffee.

“Oh, don’t be such a wet blanket, Sexy,” Carlotta crows. “You know you did the same thing yourself when you were at that hoity-toity college of yours, and you did it while smoking the devil’s lettuce, too.”

She’s not far off, but I’ll never cop to it.

“You tell him, Cray Cray,” Evie says with an impish grin on her face. Cray Cray is the nickname both Evie and Lyla Nell have adapted for Carlotta in lieu of anything remotely close to Grandma. “And the thought of Dad smoking anything? That is so cringe.”

“I’m glad you feel that way,” I tell her. “Please extend those feelings to yourself.”

“You should be proud of Evie Stevie,” Carlotta goes on before turning to Evie. “You’re shaking things up, stirring the pot, keeping those boys on their sexy toes. Take advantage of ’em all! Lord knows they’re ripe for the picking at your age. And pick a few for me while you’re at it, too.”

Evie laughs. “I’m still seeing Conner. I don’t think he’d appreciate me picking up any other guys. Just like I wouldn’t appreciate it if he were picking up any other girls.”

“He had better not be picking up any other girls,” Lemon growls and yet manages to finish it off with a smile. “If that boy even looks in another girl’s direction, he’ll have Fred and Ethel to contend with and he knows it.”

Fred and Ethel would be the matching Glocks Lemon and I have. And yes, Conner Saint is very much aware of the fact that not only are Lemon and I protective over Evie, but so is Evie’s gun-toting Uncle Noah.

Evie grunts, “Mom, do not threaten that boy with bullets. It’s bad enough he has an anxiety attack each time I bring him to the house. He’s terrified of Dad and Uncle Noah.”

I can’t help but growl myself. “It does beg the question what’s behind all that anxiety.”

Clearly, Conner Saint is no saint. And that’s exactly what I’m afraid of.

Saints don’t typically date my daughter. They usually run for cover when they see her coming. But Conner has been in the picture for a few years now and he seems to be a good egg for the most part. At least the parts he allows us to see.

“I’ll catch you guys later,” Evie says as she sails for the exit. “I’ll try to be back for the weekend!”

“Remember not to leave your drinks unattended,” Lemon shouts after her. “Or your food. They can rooﬁe anything! Maybe we should look into those straws that change colors when your drink has been poisoned!”

“I’m on it.” And with that, Evie is out the door.

“Do those straws exist?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “If they don’t, we’re patenting them.”

I nod her way because that’s something I’d throw my money behind.

“Cray Cray”—Lyla Nell calls out—“no take my babies!” she declares as sternly as she can while her big green eyes stare Carlotta down with the intensity only a toddler can muster. She reaches over and places a protective hand on Lemon’s rounded belly. “Mine. All mine !”

Carlotta belts out a laugh. “And you can have ’em. I wouldn’t touch those Little Yippers with a ten-foot pole.” She looks at Lemon and me. “And don’t either of you get any funny ideas about me babysitting either. Before you think of dumping them on me, I know where the fire department is and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Lemon shakes her head at the ceiling. “Don’t worry, Carlotta. I’d have Pancake and Waffles watch the twins before I asked you.”

“And I’d approve that,” I say as my lips curve just for my beautiful wife. “What’s on the agenda today?” I ask as I glance at my watch. It’s time for me to make tracks, too.



“I’m off to the bakery. Not only do I have to bake up a storm, but I’ve got to put a new order in to all of my vendors by three if I want to get all of my supplies in on time for the rest of the month.” Lemon sighs as she rubs her belly. “I don’t know about you, but I’m already exhausted just thinking about all the things I’ve got to do today. And it’s not even eight in the morning.”

I nod, understanding completely. Between the impending birth of our twins, running a bakery, solving murders (because that’s apparently something she’s hell-bent on doing), and keeping up with our ever-growing family, the word overwhelmed doesn’t begin to cover it.

“And what about the case?” I ask as I pull her in and she turns her belly to the side so we can get that much closer.

Her mouth falls open. “Judge Baxter, are you accusing me of sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong?”

I tip my head before touching my forehead to hers. “I’m accusing you of being a naturally curious being. One who has a habit of holding conversations with people directly linked to a homicide investigation.”

“Like I said, I’ve got a bakery to run.” She bats her lashes at me, and I nod because I can read between the lash lines.

“Okay, stay safe.” I land a kiss to her lips and linger before kissing Lyla Nell on the forehead, waving to Carlotta and dashing out the door myself.

EVERETT

I already knew what Lemon was going to say before she said it.

What Lemon doesn't know is that ever since that maniac left a body on the hood of Suze's car, I hired two armed walls of muscles to follow Lemon wherever she goes. Of course, I let Noah in on the fact, lest the bodyguards I hired end up in the back of a squad car for the wrong reasons. Noah more than approved. And he assured me that he's on this case and won't sleep until his family is out of danger.

But what Noah doesn't realize is that I'm not relying on his sleuthing skills to pull anyone out of anything. If history is a teacher, then we already know he's not capable of it.

I'm sorry, Noah, but this is all above your pay grade.

Much like Evie, I'm not due on the bench until one.

In fact, I've laid out my entire month that way. I haven't been heading to the courthouse first thing when I leave the house in the morning.

Instead, I head to the fitness gym in Ashford and train with one of the best boxers around. Then afterward, I head to the shooting range to let off a little more steam—and sharpen my acumen when it comes to ballistics.

Once I finish up with both, I head to my truck and sit there as all of the events that have unfolded these last few weeks flit through my mind, from the first body on

Christmas to that poor woman who lost her life yesterday.

Noah thinks that the hit was meant for Suze.

Suze is far too close proximity to Lemon at all times. Suze, in fact, is family.

Noah can't handle whatever is coming at us.

And if I'm truthful, all of the boxing lessons in the world and every bullet I can hold aren't probably going to do a whole lot either.

Whoever is out there needs to be stopped, and they need to be stopped today.

Noah needs help.

I need help.

And I know just who to ask.

I head to the courthouse, to my chambers, pull back the painting that sits behind my desk, and open up my wall safe. I pull out every stack of one hundred dollar bills and shove them into my briefcase. It's enough cash to buy a house outright. But is it enough cash to catch a killer?

I send a text to two of the most unlikely comrades in arms in hopes they'll agree to meet with me.

My phone pings back with a message from both of them and I tell them when and where.

I head back out into the snowy morning, hop into my truck, and drive to Leeds, to the

Red Satin Gentlemen's Club. I stride in and head down to the illegal casino they have in the back.

I hightail it all the way to the head honcho's office and walk in to see both Jimmy Canelli and Luke Lazzari already comfortable in their chairs, both smoking a stogie that fogs up the tiny room and makes this all feel like a bad dream. And it is.

Jimmy and Luke are both a couple of sixty-something mob bosses from opposing mob families.

Jimmy has a wreath of gray hair, a paunch belly, and the marksmanship of a sniper.

Luke is bald with icy blue eyes and a knack for breaking bones.

Yes, they war it out with one another to the point of death when it comes to their turf, but deep down they're friends of sorts, and they've been known to come together on occasion when the mood strikes. And I'm hoping the mood is about to strike indeed.

I pop open my briefcase and stack the cash in front of them.

"Someone is threatening my family," I say, slamming my briefcase shut once again. "I want to find the bastard and nail them to a wall. And I want all hands on deck."

Jimmy takes a breath. "The money is a good start."

Luke nods. "How about you sweeten the pot?"

I gird myself for what comes next.

Lemon, the twins, Lyla Nell, Suze, they're all in active danger. My hands are tied.

“Jimmy, I’ve got two of your men awaiting sentencing, and Luke, I’ve got three of yours, and one is your nephew. Expect to see time served and a whole lot of community service attached. They’re not getting off the hook on that one.” I’ll flatten them where I can.

The two old hoodlums exchange a glance and shrug.

Luke takes a slow drag off his cigar. “Who are we looking for and how fast do you want them?”

“A ghost. And I want it done yesterday.”

LOTTIE

“ I want coffee,” I grunt as Lyla Nell and I enter the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery. “ Real coffee,” I mutter to my sweet little daughter as I struggle to secure her to my hip. As of late she’s been using my big round belly as a slide and rather loving it, too. “And I want sushi,” I say, prompting Carlotta to laugh her head off.

“You’re not that big on sushi, Lot.”

“Well, I am now that I can’t have it,” I say. “I’ve been craving everything that’s on the naughty list.”

“The only thing on the naughty list you need to crave is Mr. Sexy. But then, judging by the size of your belly, you’ve had enough for a while.”

She takes off to the register and I crane my neck around at the place as I look for my mother.

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery has been my baby for the last few years and I love every last sweet little inch of it. Not only do the butter-yellow walls feel as if they’re giving me a hug, but there are branches that stretch across the ceiling strewn with twinkle lights that give the place an enchanted appeal.

Those branches just so happen to be connected to an overgrown resin oak tree planted next door in the middle of the Honey Pot Diner. I happen to be a partial owner of the Honey Pot along with my sister, Charlie.

Before our Grandma Nell passed away, she had the idea of floating the tree from the Honey Pot into the bakery, and considering the fact there's an open wall between the two establishments, it seemed like a no-brainer.

I spot my mother sitting with her BFF Becca Turner, a sweet redhead who happens to be the mother of my BFF, Keelie, so I head on over. There are two highchairs set out between them, and one of them is already occupied with baby Bear, Keelie's two-year-old son who just so happens to be noshing on an éclair, trying to peel it apart as if it were a banana.

"Oh, Lottie"—Mom takes Lyla Nell from me and lands her in the highchair—"Becca and I were just discussing how we might rectify last night's fiasco. Ursula just ruined the baby shower."

I take a moment to gape at the two women before me.

"Well, I'm sure if Ursula had her way, she would have stayed for cake." A thought comes to me. "But if you did want to rectify it, maybe we could have a do-over. I mean, the gifts are still sitting in your conservatory. Maybe do another party in a week?"

If the killer was at the first party, who knows? They might just show up for the second. They must know that anyone absent, save for the deceased, would have the light of suspicion cast over them.

"Oh, that's a wonderful idea." Becca clasps her hands with delight as she says it. "We really need to wipe off all that bad juju lingering on those gifts as well, and I think another party is just the way to do it."

The two of them begin to chatter amongst themselves a million miles a minute so I hand one of my mother's croissants to Lyla Nell before making a beeline behind the

counter.

The crowd is brisk this morning, the cinnamon rolls are disappearing faster than money in the U.S. Treasury, and the donuts aren't doing so bad either. But the longest wait seems to be for the made-to-order crepes station which Suze is manning down on the other end.

I say a quick good morning to both Effie and Lily, a couple of my trusty employees.

Effie Canelli has been working for me for a few months and has been a godsend, despite the fact her uncle is a notorious mob boss. Effie has dark hair, coffee-brown eyes, and a sharp wit that's a little dry in the delivery but lethal in the punchline.

Lily Swanson is a brunette stunner who used to be one of my high school tormenters, but she's pretty civil to me now that I hand her some cold, hard cash every two weeks. She's seeing Noah's brother, Alex, and helping him raise his infant son, seeing that the biological mother is quasi out of the picture. And for that fact alone, Lily's horns have turned into a halo in my book.

"How are you feeling, Lottie?" Effie asks as she hands a customer a latte and a scone.

"I'm feeling like I'm ready to have these babies. It's not fair that Meg and Sam get to have their babies this month and I have to wait all the way until March. Of course, there's Lainey who has to wait until February. But then, she's always been lucky. She'll probably have her little one this month, too. It feels as if I've got the gestation period of an elephant. And just FYI, an African bush elephant has a gestation period of twenty-two months. Noah informed me of that last week when I complained."

"Men," Lily huffs as she slides a box of chocolate crullers to a customer.

"Hand me one of those thingamajigs," Carlotta grouses from her seat at the counter



and I pull a cream puff out of the refrigerated shelf and land it on a plate for her. I've yet to figure out exactly what a thingamajig is, but each time she says it, I simply hand her the first thing I see. "Go ahead and have those babies, Lot. Don't let that body of yours tell you what to do and when. In fact, pop 'em out right here. It might drive up sales. You could sell tickets for the live entertainment."

Effie and Lily chuckle, but I'm still contemplating the ludicrous idea.

"I'd rather not traumatize my customers," I say with a sigh. "Although a part of me wouldn't mind traumatizing anyone if I knew I could hold a couple of happy and healthy babies today. I'm really done being a human incubator. Everett keeps telling me that he wishes he could take over, and boy, how I wish that he could, too."

"Oh, please, Lot." Carlotta laughs. "You know the rules. The men get all the fun and the women get stuck with all the work."

"Not in Alex's case," Lily is quick to say. "Cormack ditched out on little Levi long before she was shipped off to a mental institution."

It's true. Cormack Featherby was a trainwreck far before she was court-ordered to an insane asylum for stalking me.

"And don't get me started on childbirth," Carlotta goes on. "The most men have to push out is the footrest to their favorite lounge on a lazy Sunday afternoon."

"You got that right," I mutter as I grab a raspberry jelly-filled glazed donut for the twins. Who am I kidding? This one is for me.

Lily huffs as she plucks a pink frosted donut with sprinkles off the shelf for herself. "Alex had the nerve to say he was exhausted after waking up with Levi last night. I mean, sure, the kid screamed like a banshee, but Alex only got up once. I got up six

times, and I stopped counting after that. How am I supposed to look refreshed in the morning?"

Effie gives a dark chuckle. "This is exactly why I'm sticking to dogs. Sure, there are more yard brownies to pick up but far fewer midnight feedings that don't include me. And to your point, Carlotta, if men had to walk around with a watermelon strapped to their stomach, they'd be crying like babies themselves."

A laugh bubbles from me at the thought. "If men had to go through a fraction of the things we do, the human race would be extinct by now. They'd give up after the first contraction."

"Nah." Carlotta waves it off. "They would have invented some doodad by now that would do all the work for them."

"Yup," Effie agrees. "Like some sort of a manly baby vending machine. You press a button and a baby pops out."

"Hey, I think we're onto something." I glance over at Suze as she carefully flips a crepe for a customer. "Any news with Suze?" I ask Effie and Lily. "Has she confided anything to either of you regarding the bizarreness that's enveloped her as of late?"

Effie snorts. "You mean the fact Santa opted to forgo the lump of coal and left her a dead body instead? Nope."

"Ah, come on," Carlotta belches out the words. "Suzie Q probably asked Santa for a drop-dead gorgeous man for Christmas. The big guy just got his wires mixed up. You can't try to make every kid on the planet happy and not lose your marbles."

She has a point.

Effie shrugs. “Whatever mess Suze has stepped in, she’s keeping the stench to herself.”

Lily nods. “That must mean it’s really bad. And if I had to guess, she’s still in danger.”

“I’d guess the very same thing,” I whisper mostly to myself.

“Speaking of danger, rumor has it, you found another body.” Effie shakes her head as she says it. “You’re not working for my uncle as a secret assassin, are you?”

I shoot her a look for even going there. “If I was, I’d be rolling in millions.”

“One would think,” she mutters.

Lily nods. “I heard Francine offed the woman. Apparently, Francine worked for her and the two of them had been butting heads as of late.”

I gasp at the breadth and depth of gossip Lily just doled out without me having to lift a finger.

“Where does Francine work?” I all but shout.

Lily shrugs. “Beats me. Wherever that dead woman had a place to put her.”

Another swarm of customers walks in and both Effie and Lily take off to tend to them as I make my way closer to Carlotta.

“Where does that woman work?” I practically spit the words out, but before I can shake an answer out of her, a spray of blue stars sparkles outside the front of the bakery and a glorious, big, fat, furry polar bear materializes as he rolls around in the

snow.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

Honey Hollow is a picturesque postcard of a winter wonderland this morning, with a blanket of fresh snow glittering under the pale morning sun.

The street outside the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery is an untouched white canvas, except for the occasional tire tracks and the gentle dusting of powdered sugar-like snow on the rooftops.

Bare trees line Main Street like silent guards keeping watch over us, their branches delicately draped in white, and the quaint storefronts are aglow with twinkle lights that refuse to give up their post-holiday cheer.

Carlotta and I race to the front of the bakery where that large furry polar bear lumbers his way up and down the middle of the street, howling and growling and looking as if he's having a good ol' time.

"Petey," I shout his way, thankful that there's neither a car nor a human out on the street to witness the lunacy—and it would look like lunacy considering the fact only Carlotta and I can see the white ogre. "Petey, come here." I wave my arms. "I need to have a word with you."

"Geez, it's cold out here, Lot," Carlotta says, rubbing her arms as best as she can. "Can't you do something about this?"

"Like what? Opening the door to the bakery and heating the neighborhood? It's called winter, Carlotta. Embrace it or hibernate," I say, squinting at the furry menace

as he trots down to the end of Main Street.

The scent of freshly baked goods wafts out behind us, an intoxicating mix of cinnamon, vanilla, and butter that could probably bring a snowman to life.

But it's not the snowmen we need to worry about.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," I mutter as that enormous, and very ghostly, white figure barrels back in our direction. "Petey!"

The giant cutie comes our way and flops onto his back in front of us and is currently doing his best impression of a snow angel—if a snow angel were ten feet tall and weighed more than a small car.

"Aw, look at him, Lot." Carlotta laughs as we watch Petey flop from side to side, sending sprays of snow into the air like a burst fire hydrant. "He's having the time of his life."

"You mean the time of his after life," I say. "I'd like to have a word with him before he turns into the true heavenly being he is and does a disappearing act." I stride forward with as much determination as a woman carrying twins can muster.

"Petey," I call out, trying to get the bear's attention. "Petey, we need to talk!"

But Petey is either ignoring me or too caught up in his own frosty fun to care. He rolls onto his belly and then crawls up on all fours.

I take a deep breath, ready to shout again, when suddenly, Carlotta decides to take matters into her own hands as she charges on ahead.

"I've got this, Lot," she calls out. "Oh, what the heck!" she cries, and before I can

stop her, she's climbing onto Petey's back like he's some kind of ghostly amusement park ride.

"Carlotta, don't you dare," I shout, but it's too late. Petey lets out a playful growl, because evidently he's clearly excited by the fact he's got a passenger, and soon enough he's trotting up and down the street with Carlotta clinging to his fur like she's competing in some supernatural rodeo.

"Yeehaw ," Carlotta shouts, waving one arm in the air like she's rounding up cattle instead of cruising on the back of the ghost of a polar bear. "This is better than that mechanical bull at that cheap bar in Leeds!"

There's some bull happening, all right.

"Carlotta, get off that beast before you break an arm," I shout, scooping up a handful of snow and packing it into a ball. "Petey, please slow down! Carlotta's not like you. She's not dead yet."

But keep this up and she will be soon enough.

However, Petey is having none of it. If anything, he picks up speed while bounding up and down Main Street with Carlotta whooping like a loon on his back.

"Fine, have it your way," I mutter and lob snowball after snowball at the two of them.

Somehow I manage to hit Petey square in the side of his head, and he skids to a halt, sniffing the air as if trying to figure out where the sudden chill came from. And Carlotta just laughs even harder.

"Keep laughing, Carlotta," I grunt. "Let's see how funny it is when you're digging snow out of places you didn't know you had!"

“Ah, come on, Lottie.” My look-alike sister, Charlie, runs over from her post in the Honey Pot Diner and sidles up next to me. “This is Carlotta we’re talking about. She knows things about the human body and all of its orifices that science hasn’t even discovered yet. At least when it comes to sharing her body with men.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“What’s with the polar bear?” Charlie asks, shivering. She’s not exactly dressed for the elements and, come to think of it, neither am I, since we both bolted outdoors on a whim. “Never mind, he’s connected to the case, isn’t he?” Her teeth chatter as she says it.

I’m about to fill her in just as the bear in question skids our way and sprays us both with enough snow to qualify us as human snow cones, and believe me, I have the curves for it. Charlie? Not so much.

Soon, the entire bakery is drained of its customers and everyone around us seems to be scooping up snow and tossing it in the air.

Mom trots this way holding Lyla Nell. “Oh, Lottie, you know you can’t have a snowball fight without Lyla Nell. This child practically flew out of her highchair. She kept shouting teddy bear and snowball fight, over and over.”

I give a little wink to the cutie pie in my mother’s arms. Lyla Nell just loves the ghosts that visit Honey Hollow, the furrier the better. But, of course, my mother doesn’t know that.

“All right,” Petey growls out my way as he makes his way in my direction. “What did you want to talk about?”

I ask my mother to tend to Lyla Nell as Charlie and I slink to the right along with



Petey and Carlotta, who by the way no one seems one iota concerned about considering the fact she was floating high above Main Street while acting like a lunatic. Most likely because it wouldn't be the first time.

“What do you know about Ursula Wingate?” I pant at the furry big bear. And boy, he is cute. His furry little face is so adorable with those button eyes, a little black nose, and tiny triangular ears.

“Ursula Wingate?” He slowly rises on his hind legs and Carlotta slides off of him rather unceremoniously. His voice is sweet with a slightly goofy bent and he has all the charm of an overgrown golden retriever. “I didn't know an Ursula Wingate, but I knew an Ursula Moffletop.”

“Moffletuf,” Carlotta corrects. “I knew that no good for nothing, garden hoe back when she was still among us.”

“Carlotta, you knew her?” I gag on my words. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Foxy and Sexy asked me not to help you out in the investigation department.”

I'm so spitting mad right now. Noah and Everett's names might as well be mud. I don't usually get mad at anyone, but with all these hormones surging through me, I'm mad, sad, and glad at least ten times an hour at any and everyone.

“What do you know?” Charlie snips at her. “Spit it out before our limbs freeze and break off.”

“Fine.” Carlotta tosses up her hands. “The woman was a floozy who stole six of my boyfriends back in the day. She wasn't from around here. She grew up in Hollyhock. But that didn't stop her from hunting down her prey in a six-town radius. I'll admit, I picked up a few tricks and tips from her. I may not have liked the hussy, but she was

a pro at how to land a man even if he wasn't available."

Figures.

That's a skill Carlotta herself has perfected as well. Personally, I'm shocked they didn't team up and petition the IOC, International Olympic Committee, to include Boyfriend Stealing as a sport. And I have no doubt Team Sawyer would have brought home the gold.

"What do you know about her, Petey?" I ask.

The ghostly cutie lifts his snout. "Ursula used to care for me while I was still at the Hollyhock Zoo. Her father was one of my keepers, and she often showed up along with him when she was a little girl. When she was a teenager, those visits grew sparse until one day she simply stopped showing up." His head lolls to the side and he sighs. "I do miss the fun times we had. The rules stated that unauthorized humans shouldn't enter the polar bear enclosure, but Ursula said that rules were for fools."

Carlotta grunts, "Did she ever. I wouldn't be surprised if she had that tattooed on her forehead."

"She didn't," I say because I can confirm it. "Petey, do you know why someone would want to see her dead?"

Both Charlie and Carlotta chuckle at the thought.

"Come on, Lottie." Charlie makes a face at me, and considering how much we look alike, it's a little disconcerting to see a version of myself frowning my way. "The woman stole men for a hobby. Who didn't want her dead?"

"Probably not Francine Dundee," I say. "Her family seems to follow every rule that

the Good Book has to offer.”

“Except for thou shalt not murder.” Carlotta sniffs. “I still think Francine did the deadly deed. She threatened to kill the woman, and the woman was strangled with the scarf Francine whipped up as the murder weapon.”

“She threatened to kill you , Carlotta,” I correct. “But she was rather irate with Ursula.”

Petey bellows out a deafening roar and both of the babies in my belly give a swift kick.

“Where do we find this Francine Dundee?” Petey asks and bares his fangs as if he’s going to eat her.

“She works down the street,” Carlotta huffs. “I found out the hard way and backed out of the place as soon as I saw her ugly mug.”

“Where at?” I ask, craning my neck past her.

“The Cozy Croon Café,” Carlotta growls as if the very name of the establishment made her angry.

“ Ooh .” Charlie wiggles her shoulders. “I’ve heard they have an amazing menu. And I have been meaning to check out the competition.” She glances at her watch. “It’s just about lunchtime. I’m buying, who’s in?”

Carlotta rubs her belly. “Well, if you’re buying, I’m trying—every dish on the menu.”

“Well, if it’s for research purposes.” I bite down on a smile.

We're headed to question my one and only suspect—and try every dish on the menu.

That not only pleases me, but it pleases the twins as well.

LOTTIE

Charlie, Carlotta, and I boot-scoot down the street until we're standing in front of a square brick building with a wooden sign that has just the name we're looking for scrawled across it.

We head on in, and soon we're enveloped with the scent of seasoned fries and?—

“Are those soft pretzels I'm picking up?” I ask as I sniff the air once more just to be sure.

The Cozy Croon Café is exactly what it sounds like—a warm, inviting little nook where comfort food meets live music, with an atmosphere that seems to wrap itself around you like a well-worn quilt.

The lighting is soft, the floors are dark, the furniture matches, and there are wooden beams overhead and mismatched vintage chairs that somehow work together to make you feel like you're standing in your grandmother's kitchen. Dozens of wood carvings are scattered about, mostly wooden bears clutching jars of honey as an homage to our hometown I guess. And there's also a red and white checkered tablecloth on every free surface that makes it that much more homey.

Charlie gives a good sniff, too. “It smells like a combination of roasted coffee beans, buttery biscuits, and something sweet baking in the back that makes your mouth water before you've even cracked open the menu.”

“You're so right,” I tell her.

The walls are lined with old records, and the tiny stage tucked into one corner of the room is home to a live singer crooning soft jazz that could easily soothe even the most frazzled of nerves.

It's some hairy guy with a voice smoother than whipped butter, strumming a guitar and singing a tune about lost love. His voice is the kind that could make you believe every word, even if you've never had your heart broken.

My eyes scan the room as I take in the patrons enjoying their meals, losing themselves in the music. Most of them look as if they're regulars, judging by the easy rapport they seem to have with the waitstaff, but there's one person in particular who catches my eye, and I know for a fact she's not a customer.

Francine Dundee—the very definition of a mama duck with far too many chicks—is bustling around like a woman on a mission. Her ankle-length long hair is pinned up into a bun that could double as a noose, and she's wearing one of those floor-length prairie skirts that makes her look like she just stepped out of a time machine set to 1852.

She has that no-nonsense look on her face as she whisks plates from the kitchen to the tables, moving with a grace that only comes from years of doing the same thing day in and day out. And oddly, I think she got the brunt of her experience from bussing tables in her very own home.

“Welcome to Cozy Croon Café,” she chirps our way. “Grab a seat and I’ll get your menus.” Her voice is as sweet as the tea she’s probably served a thousand times over, but I can’t help but wonder if there’s a bitterness beneath it, one that’s been simmering for years. She does a double take our way and that smile glides right off her face as she narrows her ire in on Carlotta. “What do you want?” she snips at her.

This is going to be fun.

“We want to eat,” Carlotta snips right back. “And if we wanted an attitude, we would have asked for it with a side of extra sass. Now hop to it and get those menus. We haven’t got all day. Some of us still have boyfriends to steal and secrets to unearth.”

Charlie and I exchange a glance.

We both know that’s not true. Carlotta is one hundred percent dedicated to Mayor Nash after he threatened her with an ultimatum. And as much as she loves to ogle and goose men by the dozens, she knows what side her ogling and goosing bread is buttered on. I think it’s going to take a while for her brain to comprehend what’s happening. Her body will most likely never surrender.

Francine cocks her head to the side and squints our way while the crooner among us sings about a woman he lost track of in a train station. I can commiserate. I lost a dog that way once, too—for a solid half hour.

“What are you really doing here?” Francine looks from Carlotta to me with a threat in her eyes.

“All right, fine,” Carlotta spits it out. “Put your hands in the air and give us all your money. My name is Ma Baker and this is a stick-up!”

“Oh, would you hush.” Charlie all but steps on Carlotta’s foot, but seeing that Carlotta swiped my steel-toe snow boots out of my closet, that little tap dance doesn’t get much of a rise out of her.

“All right, I’ll get to the point,” Carlotta huffs once again. “We’re here on official business.” Carlotta whips out her phone and flips it open—yes, a flip phone. “Francine Dumbie, you’re under arrest for the murder of Ursula Wingate.”

Half the patrons turn this way and gasp.

“False alarm,” I shout and motion for the customers to carry on with their meals, which by the way look scrumptious enough to commit a class A felony for. And if I’m asked to wait any longer, I might just have to. “Francine, I’m starving. Can you help us get settled?”

She ushers us to a nearby table for four and slaps a few menus in front of us.

“Lottie, you and Charlie are welcome to stay,” she snips. “But seeing that I’m the acting manager until a fitting replacement is found, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask Carlotta to leave.” She sheds a maniacal grin. “It’s up to my discretion who we serve here at the Cozy Croon.”

Carlotta gets right in the woman’s face. “I ain’t leavin’ until I’ve had some of that lobster mac and crack I’ve been hearing all about.”

“Ooh , mac and crack?” Charlie muses. “I might have to try this myself. I’m sort of addicted to mac and cheese.”

Carlotta ticks her head at Francine. “And I’m addicted to finding out the truth. If you let me stay, I won’t spread any more rumors about you stealing from the church kitty.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” Francine groans. “I told you a thousand times that wasn’t me.” She blows a stray hair from her eyes. “Fine. You can stay, but only because I want each of you to hear what I’ve got to say.” She pins me with her beady eyes. “And only because I want to scratch myself off your suspect list once and for all.” She glances down at my belly. “Why don’t I start you all off with one of our famous sampler platters, a little of all our greatest hits—including the lobster mac and cheese ,” she snips that last word at Carlotta before taking off for the kitchen.

“Crack sounds better and you know it,” Carlotta shoots back. “I’m a genius when it



comes to naming things. I've been told so many times in bed."

"Good gravy," I mutter as I swat her. "Would you keep it down? People are trying to eat."

"That's right," Charlie snips at her. "The last thing they need is visions of you barking at someone on a mattress."

Before Carlotta can contest it, a spray of miniature blue stars sparkles to our right and Petey shows up in all his monstrously adorable glory.

"What's for lunch?" He pats his furry belly while settling between Charlie and Carlotta. "I'm starved. Ooh , is that karaoke?" He tips his head toward the stage and he's so cute I just want to squish him.

"I hope so," Charlie says. "And if there's a lineup, I'm so signing up. I haven't used my vocal cords to belt out a tune in ages."

Carlotta leans my way. "Sounds like someone is having a dry spell."

"It isn't me," I say without missing a beat.

"And it sure isn't me," Carlotta lifts her hand and I offer up a high-five.

"I'm having a dry spell." Petey harumphs and the three of us look at him with our mouths agape.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I say. "But we can't help you with that."

"That's not true, Lot," Carlotta starts before turning his way. "I know a couple of women down at the bingo hall who've taken on a beast your size before."

I wave her off. “Petey, I’m sure when you get back to Paradise you’ll find a soulmate or two.”

I bite down on my lip because I’m not sure if I just lied to the dead. I have no idea how dating or mating works in the great beyond.

“You’re right, Lottie.” Petey sighs and my hair picks up a notch from the breeze. “I’ve got fifteen women after me and I just can’t decide which one of them I want. You see, in Paradise, once you pick a mate, you’re stuck with them forever.”

“ Whagabuga! ” Carlotta trips over her tongue at the thought. “Lot, do something. It’s bad enough I’ve got to commit myself to Harry until death do us part. I can’t take an eternity chained to his side!”

“Would you stop,” I tell her.

“Yeah, Carlotta.” Francine scoffs as she sets down three overloaded platters with what looks like just about everything delicious. “You don’t have to worry about who you’ll be paired up with up there. I think we all know you’re going downstairs .”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Carlotta picks up a curly fry and sighs with relief. “Here’s hoping they’ve got some hot men down there.”

“Hotter than you think,” Petey muses.

“All right, Lottie,” Francine says, planting herself in a chair. “What do you want to know about Ursula Wingate? I’m about ready to tell you everything.”

And just like that, my investigation is off to a hotter-than-heck start.

LOTTIE

“T ell us everything and start from the beginning,” I tell Francine Dundee right here in the middle of the Cozy Croon Café with Charlie, Carlotta, and the ghost of a long dead polar bear all huddled around the table just waiting with bated breath to hear what she has to say.

The Cozy Croon Café might be known for its comfort food and live music, but today, it’s all about the conversation—or more accurately, the interrogation.

Have I mentioned the delicacies Francine has plied us with that I can’t wait to plunge deep into my belly?

I think she’s hoping we’ll eschew her guilt in the homicide of Ursula Wingate if she comps our meal. But I’m less afraid of anteing up at the register than I am of the fact Carlotta can get us all banned from this place for life.

The lobster mac and cheese really does look as if it should be called lobster mac and crack. With that layer of slightly bronzed cheddar melted on top of it, I’d turn a blind eye while Francine Dundee slaughtered half the town so long as she remained my supplier of this delectable treat.

“I met Ursula when I volunteered at the zoo as a preteen,” Francine begins.

“I can relate.” Carlotta nods. “I, too, hung out with animals when I was a preteen.”

Charlie ticks her head to Carlotta. “And that explains all the teen pregnancies.”

“How well did you know her?” I ask the woman.

Francine’s face tightens, but she recovers quickly. “Not well,” she says curtly. “She wasn’t exactly a friend of mine. In fact, I made it a point to steer clear of her kind when I was a kid.” She wrinkles her nose at Carlotta. “I did my best to steer clear of you, too.”

“That’s too bad for you, Carlotta,” Petey says, sniffing at my plate. “It seems Francine here knows her way around a feeding trough.” He quickly slurps up half my platter and Francine gasps at the sight.

I quickly pick up a fork and do my best to shovel it in right by Petey’s side. The last thing we need is our suspect passing out because the food is seemingly doing a disappearing act all by its lonesome.

“Don’t worry, Lottie.” Francine bucks with a laugh. “I shoveled it in like that when I was carrying my boys.” She slaps the table. “I’ll bet all the lobster in this kitchen that you’re carrying two little men in that belly of yours.”

“Let me guess, a future detective and a judge?” Carlotta lets out a whoop. “I knew the three of you were still getting frisky.”

I take a moment to glare at the woman who bore me.

“Francine,” I clear my throat, “what was your relationship with Ursula like as of late?”

Francine’s thin lips all but disappear as she presses them into a line. “I was looking for a little work around the holidays and Ursula needed some help in the kitchen for a cook. That was over a year ago and I stayed on. As you can see, we’re sorely understaffed. I also double as a waitress, janitor, and accountant. Ursula liked the idea

of opening a restaurant, but she had no idea what hard work went into it. I'm more or less the manager here."

"I know nothing about Ursula. Tell me about her," Charlie says as Petey starts in on her dish now that he's licked my platter clean. Drats. I really wanted to try that lobster mac and crack, too.

Charlie picks up her fork and pretends to shovel in her food as quick as it's disappearing. And not one to leave a sister on her own, I pick up my own fork and help myself to her lobster mac and cheese as well.

Oh my GOOD GRIEF! This really is crack.

"Ursula was a good-for-nothing user and manipulator." Francine doesn't mince words. "She's been married four times, or maybe it was fourteen times, but nevertheless, she's two-timed every husband and boyfriend she's ever bothered to be with." She growls as she gives the stink eye to the entire establishment as if it were Ursula herself. "Anyway, she met up with this Wingate fellow, Orson, and stole him away from his poor wife. The guy is loaded with enough real estate to outfit a small island nation." She nods my way. "That's why she went for him. All Ursula ever wanted in life was furs and fame. But she got this place instead."

"Hey"—Petey sits up a notch—"I think that's true. Why, Ursula used to tell me all the time what a fine fur I'd make one day and that she couldn't wait to have me hugging her body."

Charlie and I exchange a grimace.

"That didn't happen, did it?" I ask under my breath and he shakes his head.

"She was too busy with boys to notice me in my later years."

“Lucky for you,” Charlie mutters before making big eyes at Francine. “Lucky for you, she got this place. How did Ursula come upon this place, anyhow? And more importantly, how did she come upon the recipes?” She tips her ear at the woman so as to not miss a beat. And you can bet your britches, Charlie isn’t going to want to leave until she wrangles a few recipes from the woman.

“The same way she got everything else,” Francine grouses. “By opening her legs.”

“How does that work?” Petey asks, turning my way, and I quickly shake my head at him. I’m not looking forward to explaining the birds and the bees to Lyla Nell one day, let alone the ghost of a polar bear. Carlotta already beat me to Evie.

Carlotta points her fork his way. “In other words, the woman rutted her way to the top.”

“Oh, like that,” Petey muses. “I did the very same thing at the zoo. That’s why they gave me the nickname Casanova of the Arctic. I always did have a way with the ladies.”

Something tells me Ursula and Petey would have gotten along great, well into Ursula’s adult life, too.

Francine nods to Carlotta. “That’s exactly how she got this place. Everyone knows the only reason Ursula married Orson Wingate was to land herself a real estate deal. She told me herself that she always wanted something to call her own, and since Orson wouldn’t buy her a house—he wanted them living in his mansion up on the hill—she talked him into buying this place. Apparently, her mother always told her to have something in her own name in case things went south. Ursula told me that her daddy used to work at the zoo with the cheetahs and he was a cheat-a , if you know what I mean.”

“So she came from a broken family?” Charlie asks as Petey works his way onto Carlotta’s platter, so I lean in and steal some of her lobster mac and crack, too. It’s not my fault Carlotta is slow to play along.

“That’s right,” Francine says. “The woman had daddy issues up the wazoo, and the wazoo is where she dealt with them. She liked men an awful lot—the older, the richer, the less available they were. Why, it made her mouth water just to have them. She was in for the thrill of the chase. That’s why she cheated on all of her husbands.”

“Including Orson?” I ask. That poor man looked horrifically grieved yesterday. I can’t imagine that he knew anything about some extramarital activity.

Francine waves the thought off. “If she hadn’t, she was about to. Nothing could tame her appetite when it came to men.” She growls as she says it, and even though it’s pretty dimly lit in here, I’d swear she was foaming at the mouth. “Anyway, I’m not the reason she’s dead. The woman was my boss. Sure, we had our differences. She certainly didn’t take me seriously in the kitchen. She was always rolling her eyes at my new menu options.” She glances down at the three empty platters before us. “But I can see you think my lobster mac and cheese is a hit.”

“You thought of this recipe?” Charlie marvels. “Tell me what it’s going to take to steal you away from this place.”

“She won’t be at this place for long,” Carlotta harps. “You’ll need to gift her a cake with a nail file in it if you want her to go anywhere with you. The woman is lying through her teeth!”

Francine groans as she rises to her feet. “I’m not lying about a single thing. I don’t know who killed Ursula Wingate. I’m certainly not aware of any enemies she might have had, and I spent a lot of time with the woman.” She shoots a dark look out the window. “The only other person who knew her better was Orson. If you want to

know who could have shoved her into the next world, you should probably ask him.” She nods my way. “Lottie, I’ll box up another serving of my lobster mac and cheese for you, seeing that you’re expecting.”

“What about me?” Charlie asks, but it’s too late. Francine has already taken off like a bat out of the hot place.

“Don’t you worry,” Petey says. “I can sniff my way to the kitchen.” He lumbers off in that direction and Charlie lets out a sigh.

“A lot of good that will do me,” she says.

“A lot of good this waste of time did us,” Carlotta counters. “The wicked witch didn’t confess.”

“She may not have confessed, but she’s led me straight to the next person I need to speak with,” I say. “I’m about to shake Orson Wingate down and see if I can’t shake loose a clue or two.”

The crooner on stage announces the karaoke bar is free to anyone who would like it before he steps away and both Charlie and Carlotta exchange a look.

It takes less than three seconds for them to zip up there and croon out a dicey version of “Islands in the Stream” a cappella.

There really are some things worse than murder. Like the slaughtering of my eardrums.

Francine comes back looking winded. “I’m sorry, Lottie. All I can offer you is a tray of my famous spicy curly fries,” she says, handing me the box. “I was about to scoop out some of my famous lobster mac and cheese and I swear it just up and disappeared



right before my eyes. I think I need to lie down.”

“I think you need to make another batch,” I say it like a threat and she all but salutes me before stalking off to the kitchen.

And I think I need to unplug that microphone before I lose my brain cells and my hearing.

But I’m not losing my way in this investigation. Orson Wingate, here I come.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

NOAH

It's been a long day and it's going to be an even longer night. As much as I'd love to head straight home, feed my dog, and collapse on my sofa, I find myself pulling into the Honey Hollow Bed and Breakfast instead.

I park and jog inside, nearly twisting an ankle on the glazed ice that's overtaken the stairs to the entry.

That's a lawsuit waiting to happen. And since it's my father who's in charge of the maintenance around here, I'm betting there will be more than one lawsuit to come.

How and why Miranda puts up with him, I will never know.

I head inside and the scent of spiced cider enlivens the air. The B&B is dimly lit, the chandeliers in the hall are flickering, and every last bit of this place holds that haunted appeal that makes it so well-loved by people far and near.

The nexus of the haunted appeal would be the ghosts. And even though most people think it's a cute gimmick, this mansion is one hundred percent haunted.

I'll never admit to it, but the place gives me the creeps. I don't know how my mother sleeps here. I don't know how my father sleeps here either, although granted, he's not alone in bed.

Odd that my parents would blow up a marriage that lasted umpteen years only to end up living under the same roof again—and somewhat peacefully this time.

The sound of classical music plays lightly over the speakers, and everything about this place suddenly feels as if it's rocking me to sleep.

I stride past the reception counter, past the dining hall, and nearly pass up the drawing room when I spot my mother seated by the fire, staring pensively at the flames as if she were making them flicker by sheer will.

It wouldn't surprise me if she was. It turns out, my mother, much like Lottie, is transmundane. My mother is something further classified as a beguiler, a person who has the power to get others, or even the elements, to do their bidding.

Albeit, my mother isn't very good at it, thus the divorce, the inability to rub two nickels together, and her inability to foresee any major disasters headed her way like the one she's embroiled in now. Not including one dead guy hand-delivered to her on Christmas night and one heck of a threat to go along with him.

That's exactly what brings me here. I'm about to head into the room when I spot a curious sight.

"Geez ." I wince at the spectacle.

On second thought, there are two curious sights, and suddenly my stomach is churning. Any appetite I may have had has up and disappeared.

Just as I'm contemplating heading inside, or cutting bait and running, a pair of cool hands cover my eyes—and thankfully so.

"Boo ," a sweet voice whispers from behind, and not only do I recognize that sweet voice, but I recognize the sweet scent of her perfume, warm vanilla, and the warmth of her body, all of which envelop me with love.

I spin and pull Lottie Lemon into my arms, save for her stomach, which jets out to the left.

“Hello, beautiful.” I offer up a genuine smile.

“Hey, Noah.” She gives a little giggle as she gives my waist a little squeeze. “I was just picking up Lyla Nell. Perfect timing. We can both surprise her. How was your day?”

“The best part is right here,” I say. Hand to God, it’s the honest truth and she knows it. “Word of warning”—I whisper as I hitch my head to the left—“you don’t want to look in that room.”

She makes a face and looks adorable while doing so. “You know you can’t say those things to me. Now I have to take a look.” She cranes her neck past me, gasps, and then squeezes her eyes shut tight. “What in the heck is going on in there? And how can I scrap the image from my brain?”

I glance back, wishing I could do the same.

Yes, my mother is seated by the fire, but just a few feet away, Miranda is sitting in Mayor Nash’s lap and the two of them are getting more than a little frisky with one another. Not to mention that Miranda is wearing a little black dress, and Mayor Nash seems to be making a game of pulling down her spaghetti straps.

As if that wasn’t egregious enough, not six feet away is Carlotta in the lap of my father, doing the exact same salacious deed. Although oddly enough, Carlotta is dressed in a conservative blouse buttoned to her neck and a long flowing skirt. Her hair is spun into a bun, and she’s donned a pair of thick-framed glasses. It’s almost as if she’s wearing a disguise.

“Oh my goodness.” Lottie gives an indignant huff. “I’ll shoot Carlotta and Wiley, and you can take out my mother and Mayor Nash. I don’t have the heart to put a bullet in my poor mother, but clearly, someone has to do it. All four of them are rabid and need to be put down. Good thing I brought Ethel.” She reaches for her purse and I hold her by the arms for a second.

“Let’s see if we can’t talk any sense into them first,” I suggest. “And if that doesn’t work, I’ll take all four of them out. No sense in both of Lyla Nell’s parents serving time.”

“Everett won’t let us spend a minute behind bars and you know it,” she says as she stares down the lunacy before us.

“In that case, I hope there aren’t any other casualties.”

We step into the room, a space that’s usually reserved for rest and relaxation, filled with loungers, sofas, and two fireplaces—one in the front of the room and one in the back. Both fireplaces are tall, brick structures that rise to a vaulted ceiling. There’s a large braided rug that takes up most of the room, and a small table with refreshments sits to the side filled with teapots, mugs, and a smattering of treats from Lottie’s bakery.

“Everybody on your feet before we shoot,” Lottie shouts, not bothering to bury the lead.

The room clears out of its clientele, save for the infamous four and my mother.

“Miranda Lemon,” Lottie snips at her own mother. “What in the name of Jack Frost are you thinking? Clearly, all this snow has frozen your brain cells!” She turns to Carlotta. “And you ”—she seethes, causing Carlotta to inch back in fear—“don’t you think you’re getting away with any of this. I don’t need a road map to tell me that

you're the brains behind this brainless scheme."

"That she is," Mayor Nash pipes up.

Mayor Nash has a wreath of gray hair, a paunch belly, and light-colored eyes that twinkle with every kind of mischief. And believe me, he's gotten himself into quite the variety—most of it was Carlotta's fault. But he does pretty good on his own as well.

But no one is quite as good at tangling themselves up in a mess like my father.

"It's your fault, isn't it?" I seethe twice as hard as I point his way.

"Put that finger down, son," the older look-alike of myself growls. "This is just four adults having a little fun."

"Yeah," Carlotta harps. "It's called doin' the ol' partner switch-a-roo. A little game I learned from the two of you plus Mr. Sexy."

"Oh, you did not." Lottie practically gags on the words.

"Nobody is switching anything," Miranda says while trying to temper the volume on her voice and motioning for us all to settle down. She glances around before leaning our way. "We're simply acting out a little role-playing," she whispers. "No harm, no fowl. In fact, Carlotta is playing the part of the naughty librarian." She holds a hand out her way and Carlotta bounces the glasses over her nose.

"She's naughty, all right," Lottie growls. "Where's Lyla Nell?" Her voice hikes with a whole new level of panic.

"She's sleeping upstairs." Miranda holds up her phone and quickly pulls up the live

feed of Lyla Nell snoozing on the bed she shares with my father. I'd hate to think what else goes on in there.

"Thank goodness." Lottie breathes a sigh of relief. "You pull this sick stunt again and I'll revoke your babysitting privileges."

Miranda gasps as if she'd just been shot. And little does she know how close she came to live bullets.

"Sick stunt?" Carlotta harps. "You mean sexy stunt!"

Lottie lunges for her and I hold her back. Come to think of it, it's probably not a good idea that Lottie is running around with a weapon while hopped up on a serious rush of hormones—a double dose no less.

Dad laughs. "Everyone calm down. Why don't we head to the bar? Drinks are on me."

Mayor Nash is quick to agree and he shoots out of the door like a missile.

"Not so fast," I say, pulling my father back by the sleeve and walking him a few feet away from the women. "Has Mom confided in you regarding any of the trouble she's mixed up with?"

He inches back and shoots her a curious look. "What's the guy's name? I'll punch his lights out and have him fitted for a casket before midnight."

"Cool it, Romeo. Her honor isn't yours to defend anymore. You gave up that right when you started tarnishing the honor of everything in a skirt. I'm talking about the dead man who landed on her car with that note. Has she talked to you about it?"

He tips his head. “No, but Miranda filled me in. I tried to mention it to Suze the other day at breakfast and she grabbed her coat and said she was late for work. She seems pretty dedicated to Lottie and the bakery.”

“She’s also pretty dedicated to keeping her lips zipped tight,” I say, blowing out a breath. “Do me a favor and keep working on her. I’ll do the same. If you hear anything, and I mean anything, do not hesitate to call me. If Mom is in danger, then that puts Lottie in danger, and the kids, and Miranda by proxy.”

“Miranda?” Dad straightens as if I just prodded him with a lightning rod. “That’s unacceptable.”

“I’m glad you think so.” I pat him on the back. “And it’s nice to see you genuinely care for Miranda, too. You’re doing something right for once.”

Miranda and Dad head up to retrieve Lyla Nell while Carlotta staggers this way.

“Thanks a lot, you bunch of goody two-shoes.” She shakes her head our way. “And we all know you’re anything but. You think you’re the only ones in town allowed to have some freaky-deaky fun. Well, I’ve got news for you.” She pokes a finger into Lottie’s chest and it bounces right back out. Lottie is a bit pillowy at the moment. Man, how I miss her body. Carlotta leans in hard. “I’ve still got a few freaky surprises up my sleeve and neither of you party poopers is going to ruin it!”

She stalks off and Mom rolls her eyes as she heads this way.

“And then there was one,” I say, pulling her in and offering a kiss to her cheek. “How did you stand being in the same room with them?”

She sighs at the idea. “It’s safe to say my thoughts are in other places these days. And truthfully, they were providing quite the entertainment.” She’s back to glancing at the



ceiling. “I’ve never heard such crude words steaming from a woman’s lips.”

“Carlotta can be a handful.” Lottie nods.

“I’m talking about Miranda,” Mom counters.

I’d laugh if Lottie’s eyes didn’t just turn red with rage.

“ Mommy ,” a tiny voice coos from the door and we turn to find Lyla Nell trying to wipe the sleep from her eyes as Miranda holds her. And Lottie wastes no time in speeding that way.

“I’ll be right there, Lot,” I tell her before turning back to my mother. “Mom, have you thought any more about who Tom Darius could be?” I ran the ID on the guy past her last night after the coroner left this place. Another homicide in Honey Hollow, and I hate to admit it, but the bodies are really starting to pile up.

She shakes her head and shrugs. “I’m sorry, Noah, but like I said last night, the name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“Don’t believe her,” Lottie seethes as she rushes back this way sans Lyla Nell. And judging by the look in her eyes, her hormones are running full tilt. “Suze, we all know you have an idea of what went down that night and who that man might be. We all saw you sneaking to the window that whole evening while clutching your pearls, looking as if Santa was about to leave a pile of explosives on our front door. And whoever your big bad Santa is, he sure delivered—a dead guy! No more of this keeping-your-trap-shut business. Spit out what you know or we’ll find a way to shake it out of you—or shoot it out of you. We’re both armed. Take your pick.”

Mom lifts her chin as her features tighten with rage. “I need you both to drop it and drop it now.” She points to Lottie. “Don’t you dare start poking your nose where it

doesn't belong, young lady. The longer I keep my trap shut, the safer everyone in this town is."

"Ursula Wingate wasn't safe," Lottie all but riots.

Mom's eyes widen to the size of tennis balls. "And that is exactly why I'm taking what I know to the grave." She turns my way. "Should your investigation progress in any manner, it won't be because of me." She takes off for the exit and Lottie leans in that direction.

"That's because you'll be in the next casket," she shouts and Mom turns and gasps before scooting out of the room.

"So much for getting anywhere with my mother," I grumble as we head over and scoop up Lyla Nell.

We head out of the B&B and I help buckle Lyla Nell up in Lottie's minivan before closing the door.

"Now what?" Lottie says, holding her belly.

Lottie Lemon glows like a star on this dark and snowy night.

"Now you get some rest. I'll handle things from here."

"Just like you handled your mother?" She lifts a brow defiantly. "Let me solve these cases with you, Noah." She places my hand on her belly and one of the twins gives me a kick. "Let's track down whoever took the lives of those peoples—whoever is threatening Suze and stealing our peace—together." She pulls me in by the tie just rough enough to let me know she means it. "You know we're a great team, Noah. Together we're unstoppable."

I lean back and examine her.

Lottie Lemon knows exactly the words to say to get me to do just about anything.

I shouldn't do it.

I shouldn't agree.

I shouldn't say a single word.

She nods my way and bites down on a smile in the exact way that drives me insane.

So I say the only word I can say. "Okay."

EVERETT

The boxes of Wicked Wok set out on the coffee table are getting cold and Lemon hasn't answered any of my texts. I'm guessing that's because she's driving and we have a strict hands-on-the-wheel-at-all-times rule that we abide by.

The cats are snoozing on the top of the sofa, as they should be considering I've already fed them.

Toby is curled up and napping by the fire and I've already fed him, too.

The only one not fed and napping in this equation is me. And just as I'm about to rectify that, the door rattles and in walks Lemon, and on her heels is Noah holding a half-asleep Lyla Nell.

Toby rouses from his slumber and trots over to greet them.

"Whoa, big guy," Noah says, giving him a pat. "What's Toby doing here?"

"I saw him with his nose pressed against the window when I drove in and I felt sorry for the guy. I let myself in with your hide-a-key, fed him, then let him relieve himself on your frozen lawn. Then I brought him home with me."

"Thanks," Noah says, trekking upstairs to put Lyla Nell to bed.

"Don't forget to put that pink elephant next to her," Lemon calls out. "If she wakes up without it, she'll be fighting mad."

“Will do,” Noah says softly, and no sooner do I wrap my arms around my beautiful wife than Noah Fox is in our face once again.

“Where were you?” I ask, landing a kiss on Lemon’s lips and lingering. Lemon tastes as sweet as any of those treats she sells at her shop.

“Picking up Lyla Nell,” she tells me, and she fills me in on the lunacy that followed concerning Miranda, Wiley, Carlotta, and Mayor Nash.

“Why does none of that surprise me?” I tick my head toward the coffee table. “I picked up Chinese. Let’s arm ourselves with a couple of chopsticks. You, too, Noah. It looks as if you’re going to have to prove your mother wrong. The sooner she starts talking, the safer everyone in this town will be,” I say as we all take a seat and dig right in. “You’ll solve this without involving Lemon,” I say sternly his way.

On occasion, I absolutely need to invoke the tone I use on my bench when I’m speaking to convicts.

Noah glances at the fireplace and his lips pull tight.

I don’t even need to ask. I know for a fact he’s allowed Lemon to burrow her way into his investigation. All she needs to do is bat her lashes at him and he’d steal the Mona Lisa from the Louvre. The guy is an idiot. And when it comes to Lemon, he’s an idiot on steroids.

Lemon runs her fingers through my hair and evicts a moan from me.

Okay, fine. I cry uncle. I’m an idiot on steroids myself around her.

“Thank you for picking up dinner,” she says, holding the box in her hand. “How did you know I was craving Kung Pao chicken?”

“You haven’t rejected it yet, so I figured it was a safe bet.” I’m about to steal another kiss when the door bursts open and Carlotta stomps her way inside. Her hair is tousled, her clothes are disheveled, and she has a pair of dark-rimmed glasses sitting wonky on her face.

“Don’t any of you say a word,” she growls our way before wagging a finger at Lemon and Noah. “These two ruined a perfectly romantic evening between my honey bunch and me. I’ll have you know, role-playing is what stokes the flames of desire between the two of us. And at his age, you need to do a heck of a lot of stokin’!”

The door bursts open again and a man clad in black with a matching ski mask steps in before softly closing the door behind him.

“I’m here to take out the trash,” he shouts. “Everybody run and hide. Except for the pretty girl with glasses,” he grumbles. “She’s coming with me. And I’m going to have my way with her!”

Noah and I jump to our feet and pull out our weapons. Lemon grunts and groans as she struggles to lift herself from her spot on the sofa, but soon enough she’s cradling Ethel in her hands as well.

“Hands up,” Noah shouts.

“Nose to the wall,” I bellow.

“Take that mask off, you coward,” Lemon growls and shockingly the man does just that, and soon we’re looking face-to-face at Mayor Nash.

Noah and Lemon put away their weapons. I’m slower to move mine, mostly because I’m moved to teach him a lesson.

“My apologies.” Mayor Nash gives a light chuckle. “Carlotta promised she’d fill you all in. This is exactly what I was afraid of.”

A growl works its way up my throat. “You should be afraid of landing in the morgue. You’re lucky we didn’t shoot first, ask questions later.”

“I was gonna fill them in,” Carlotta barks his way. “But I went ahead and read them the riot act for ruining our good time earlier.” She turns our way. “And now you’ve gone and done it again.” She stomps over and links an arm to the mayor’s. “Come on, Nash. It’s time to take out the trash, just the way you threatened. And if any of you hear my bedroom door a rockin’, don’t come a knockin’.” She turns my way. “And don’t think I haven’t heard a little role-playing coming from your bedroom, too, Sexy.” She shakes her head at Lemon. “The big, bad judge who delivers a harsh sentence for parking tickets of all things. Parking tickets, Lot? Is that the best you can come up with?”

She shrugs. “His punishments never fit the crime,” she calls out after them as they make their way up.

“And on that note,” Noah says, dropping his box of noodles back onto the table. “I’m out. Let’s go, Toby. I’ve got to take a shower, and maybe bleach my brain out if possible.”

I walk him out the door, and as I’m standing on the snow-covered porch, my phone pings from inside my pocket. I fish it out and look at the screen. It’s from Jimmy.

We got news. We know what’s going on and soon you will, too.

A surge of adrenaline spikes through me. Finally some answers. And not shockingly, they didn’t come from Noah. Although it does beg the question, are those two mob bosses a step ahead of Lemon?

I can only hope. Because heaven knows the only way to keep her safe is to do just that.



LOTTIE

“I should have had both you and Mayor Nash arrested for that little stunt you pulled last night,” I snip at Carlotta as she noshes on a chocolate éclair while seated at the counter right here in the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

It’s the next day after that far too explicit disaster that started off at my mother’s B&B and wormed its way under my roof in record time.

“Oh, please, Lot.” Carlotta waves her chocolate-covered fingers dismissively. “You’re just mad because you didn’t think of it first.”

The late afternoon sun filters through the giant floor-to-ceiling windows of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, casting a warm, golden hue over the glass cases filled with an array of confections that could tempt even the most hardened carb deflector.

Raspberry tarts glisten like rubies next to lemon bars dusted with powdered sugar, and the triple chocolate brownies—sinful little squares of decadence—sit proudly on display, daring anyone to resist them. I certainly can’t.

I’m about to indulge in all of the above, but not before I finish giving her a piece of my mind.

“No, I’m not mad that I didn’t think of it first,” I counter. “For your information, my mind has gone to far more indecent places—a trait I’m positive I received from you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m mad because it kept my adrenaline pumping all night.”

Carlotta’s grin widens and she gets that deranged look in her eyes. “And according to all the thumping and bumping coming from your bedroom, you didn’t waste a single ounce of that adrenaline surge. Once again— you’re welcome. ”

“Good grief.” I roll my eyes so hard I’m surprised they don’t pop out of my head and fall onto Carlotta’s plate. Although if they did, she would have eaten them. Carlotta is so the type that would eat her young. Quite frankly, I’m shocked my story didn’t end at my birth. “You’re incorrigible,” I tell her.

“And you’re well-rested,” Carlotta bites back. “Just another satisfied customer. I should go into business.”

Before I can stomp out any big, yet dicey, business dreams she might be having, a deep chuckle rumbles through the room as Petey materializes on the stool next to her in all of his ten-foot-tall ghostly glory. His translucent fur shimmers faintly in the afternoon light, and he’s so mesmerizing, that even Lyla Nell is calling out for him from across the bakery.

“ Mine ,” she shouts. “Big Pete Pete, mine! ”

It’s safe to say she and Petey have been bonding. She lured him into her crib last night and then didn’t let go of his fur until morning. She can be strong-willed about which stuffed animals she wants to sleep with, and always seems to get her way in that department.

Let’s hope that doesn’t transfer to men when she’s older.

Granted, Petey isn’t a stuffed animal. But let’s face it, that ten-foot tall, and just about that wide, ball of fluff more or less qualifies.

“Did I hear someone mention adrenaline surges?” Petey’s voice is low and gravelly, and if I didn’t know better, I’d swear he was trying to be seductive. He nods my way. “And seeing Carlotta is at the helm of this conversation, I have a feeling I know exactly how those adrenaline surges were achieved.”

He’s been here for all of five hot minutes and he basically knows her inside out.

“Back in my day, those surges led to some wild nights at the zoo.” He strums out a chuckle and Carlotta laughs it up right there with him. “I had a little harem back when I was still ruling the roost. Let’s just say the zookeepers were shocked when they witnessed those adrenaline surges. They said it was a bad public image for the zoo and even threatened to separate us if those shenanigans went on.”

“Petey, please.” I try to stifle a laugh, but it bubbles up anyway. “The last thing I need is mental images of you causing that kind of chaos at the zoo.”

“Chaos?” He winks my way. “Oh, sweetheart, it was more like organized chaos. And I gave those girls the ride of their li?—”

“Bear claws, anyone?” I quickly whip out half a dozen from the pastry shelf and Petey’s mouth falls open as he looks from me to Carlotta.

“Did she just threaten me?” he asks with an incredulous tone to his voice.

“Welcome to my world,” Carlotta says, handing him one of the sweet treats. “She threatens me twice a day. Enjoy the bear claw. It’s basically a cross between a donut and a Danish that Lot Lot has filled with marzipan.”

“Sounds delicious.” He gobbles down four at a time before glancing around at the place. “I think I’ll pay Lyla Nell a visit. I see she’s nibbling on a cheese Danish, and these claws have gotten me in the mood for Danishes.”

Effie and Lily scoot up to the counter, each of them grinning like they've just heard the juiciest bit of gossip.

“All right, Carlotta”—Effie lands another chocolate éclair onto her plate—“I'll keep the bear claws coming if you promise to spill the tea. Whose bedroom was doing its best impression of a zoo? Yours or Lottie's?”

“Please ,” Lily grunts as she pulls a glazed cruller out for herself. “Have you met Essex?”

Essex .

I roll my eyes again.

Everett prefers to go by his middle name, but for some reason the legion of women who slept with my husband before I arrived on the scene demand to use his proper moniker like some sort of a parting gift.

I squint over at Lily. I'd swear she had never been Essexed, but then the twins seem to have eaten just about all of my brain cells and I can hardly remember my own name anymore, let alone keep track of who calls my husband what.

All I know is he's a judge in some courthouse somewhere.

Or maybe he's a judge in a swimsuit competition?

That would explain a lot of things.

“I bet there was a lot more than just chaos in Lottie's bedroom last night,” Effie says while sounding an awful lot like a cat toying with a canary. A very round canary pregnant with twins.

Lily nods to Carlotta. “She had a little Essex session, didn’t she? Of course, she did.” She turns my way. “You’re married to the man. That gives you both legal and Biblical rights to get Essexed as often and long as you want. You’d be a fool not to.” She smacks her lips my way. “You’ve been a fool before, Lottie. Don’t mess this one up.”

“I’m not. Everett is a gift—that keeps on giving.” I fan myself as I say it and I can’t help getting lost in a visual of last night’s sultry shenanigans.

“And what a gift it is,” Lily adds with a sly smile.

She snaps me right out of my dirty daydream, and I’m about to swat her with a kitchen towel when Suze catches my eye, busy at the crepe station with her back ramrod straight, staring out into open space as if she was anywhere but in this bakery.

Wherever her thoughts have zipped her off to, I’m pretty sure it has something to do with the dead man that showed up on Christmas night. What I wouldn’t do to be able to read her devious little mind.

The bell on the door jingles as a couple of customers leave, each clutching a pink box tied with a satin ribbon, and each of their expressions is of pure, sugary satisfaction.

It’s a good day. Or it would be, if it weren’t for the fact that Suze has been giving me the cold shoulder all morning, one that would make an iceberg feel like a campfire. But I suppose that’s par for the course.

I’m about to head her way when the door jingles again, and this time an entire crowd bustles in with half of them headed to the crepe station and the other half to the registers—well, all but one.

This hot mess is headed straight for me, and there’s not a thing I can do about it.

LOTTIE

Sam waddles over and plops down next to Carlotta, right here in the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

Effie and Lily get back to work, so I nod over at Noah's twin.

"What can I get for you, Sam?" She's dressed in an odd denim-looking jumpsuit—a bladder trap if ever there was one. I wouldn't dare wear a jumpsuit on a regular day, let alone if I were nine months pregnant.

Hey? Maybe Sam's baby has eaten all of her brain cells, too?

Nevertheless, her skin is piqued and she looks sweaty.

"I just came from a class called Pop, Lock, and Labor," she says. "It's essentially a hip hop-themed birthing class."

"But Noah and I just went to a bunch of birthing classes with you," I tell her. It's true. Just last month, Sam pleaded with Noah and me to help her out in the baby department since the goof that impregnated both her and Meg has opted out—read wimped out —of the labor and delivery room. I lean her way. "Noah is going to be your coach when the time comes, remember?"

I may have agreed to the birthing class, but I never swore on a stack of Bibles that I'd show up bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, in the muck and mire of the delivery room.

And personally, I can't believe Noah signed up for the effort either. She's his sister. Body parts are going to be on full display. There are just some things in life you can't unsee. But as it stands—tag, he's it.

"I remember all about it." Sam shoots me a look as if she heard every thought that just flitted through my mind.

Sam isn't transmundane, is she? There is an offshoot of the transmundane who can read minds. They're called telesensuals, and I happen to have a friend in Maine named Bizzy Baker Wilder who can do just that—read minds.

Hey? Maybe I should fly Bizzy out to read Sam's mind, to see if she's reading mine? Plus, that way Bizzy and I could make a long girls' weekend out of it and it would be a blast. I could hang out with one of my besties while Noah stains his brain with whatever is lying in wait under his sister's hood.

Sam sniffs. "No offense to you or Lainey, but that class was boring."

I gasp because indeed it was Lainey who taught those so-not-boring birthing classes.

"I want this new adventure to start with a new adventure." Sam pats her belly. "Anyway, I just had my last class. I swear, if my baby doesn't come out doing the worm, I want a refund."

Carlotta belts out a laugh. "What's next? Pole dancing in the delivery room?" She looks my way. "I guess that would be Meg's department."

I grunt, "Nothing would surprise me anymore."

"Go ahead and laugh it up, you two," Sam says, picking up a chocolate éclair off Carlotta's plate. "Not only am I far more limber because of that class, but I bet my

kid comes out with some serious rhythm.”

“Well, the twins are already coordinated when it comes to their moves.” Now it’s my turn to pat my belly. “We’re covered in that department.”

“I’m covered, too.” Not one to be left out, Carlotta practically sings the words. “For the record, let’s just say Harry is mighty impressed with my flexibility.”

I toss another éclair her way, although I know darn well there aren’t enough donuts in the world to stop her.

But before the TMI Express can leave its station from Carlotta’s mouth, I lean in toward Noah’s sister.

“Sam, you have to tell me if Suze has clued you in on what might be going on with her as of late. What in the heck has she gotten herself mixed up in?”

Sam opens her mouth then closes it and shoots a frosty look in her mother’s direction.

A breath hitches in my throat.

“Oh my word.” My voice hikes to new heights. “You know something!”

“No, I don’t,” Sam says, plopping the rest of her éclair onto Carlotta’s plate and struggling to get back on her feet. “In fact, I just remembered that I gotta be somewhere. Anywhere,” she says as starts to waddle off.

She doesn’t take two steps before she doubles over in pain, clutching at her belly.

“Somebody help,” she calls out in a panic. “The baby’s coming!”



Just my luck. Sam's hood is about to pop open and Noah is nowhere in sight.

Tag, I'm it.

### LOTTIE

Hospitals always seem to have a unique smell, something along the lines of antiseptic mixed with catsup, crushed hopes, and with just a hint of yesterday's cafeteria mystery meat. It's enough to make anyone want to sprint for the nearest exit, but I'm not sprinting anywhere. I'm stuck in the maternity ward with Sam, who's convinced herself that she's about to birth the next breakdancing prodigy.

And if she were truly in labor, she just might. But as it stands, that's not what the nurse has relayed to us. Well, relayed to me since Sam was howling so loud she couldn't have heard a jet engine roar through the room.

I watch as Sam paces back and forth, holding her belly like the ticking time bomb it is—albeit a bomb that isn't going off any time soon. She pauses next to the window, tips her head back, and her entire body proceeds to move in a quirky seizure-like manner that seems incapable of stopping.

"Somebody help," I shout. "I think she's malfunctioning!"

"I am not malfunctioning," Sam riots back. "I'm doing the moves they taught back in my breakdancing class."

"Well, would you knock it off? You scared me half to death!"

And as much as I'd like to stay and do the electric boogaloo with Sam, I've got other things I need to tend to.

“I can’t help it, Lottie. I swear on all that is holy, this is it. My water is going to break any second. I can feel it.” Her voice hikes with her every word. The second she stepped onto the maternity ward she’s been working herself into a tizzy and she hasn’t let up since.

I glance at the monitor she’s hooked up to. The lines are about as flat as my enthusiasm for this little emergency drill.

“Sam—” I’m about to let her in on the fact she’s not in labor. That those are just Braxton Hicks contractions that are making her feel uncomfortable, but then I think better of it. “You’re right. Any minute now, you could be meeting your little one for the very first time.”

She stops mid-pace and gasps. “You’re so right. I need to call Jed again! No, wait. I need to lie down.” She spins in a circle before making her way back to the bed.

That bed looks so inviting, I have half a mind to crawl into it myself.

“I can’t believe this,” she pants. “I’m in real labor!”

It takes everything in me not to say, Sweetie, if you were really in labor, you’d be screaming your head off and cursing your own mother for bringing you into this world .

Trust me, I’ve been through it.

Sam’s about to say something else when another wave of Braxton Hicks contractions hits her, making her wince, and I can see the panic in her eyes.

I’ll admit, it’s a wicked thing I’m about to do, but this could be my only opportunity to get some answers.

I lean in and place my hand over hers. “You know, Sam, this might be your last chance to tell me what’s going on with your mother. You wouldn’t want to head into delivery with dark secrets on your conscience, would you? Especially not any dark secrets that could endanger your mother’s life or yours, or perhaps even that of your unborn child.”

Okay, so that was low even for me. But it’s time to face facts. Suze Fox has endangered all of us with her presence, Lyla Nell and the twins included. Another reason Noah should resort to drastic measures.

“Is waterboarding legal in Vermont?” I mutter, mostly to myself.

She narrows her eyes at me with suspicion. “I don’t want to be waterboarded. I want drugs. Lots of them. I want the good stuff and I want it now,” she yowls in pain as she stretches out that last word.

I put on my best you can trust me face.

“Come on, Sam. I know your mom has been up to something—aside from the dead guy she was gifted for Christmas. You don’t get that kind of a gift unless you’ve earned it. You tell me what it is, and I’ll make all of your drug-induced dreams come true. Epidurals, extra Jell-O—Jell-O shots, the whole nine illegal yards. You’ll be the queen of the maternity ward, or at least the most juiced up to the hilt.”

She hesitates for a moment while biting her lip. I can practically see the gears turning in her head. Another faux contraction hits, and she lets out a moan, clutching my hand with a bone-crushing squeeze.

“Okay, okay,” she blurts out in desperation. “I don’t know everything, but my mom’s in some seriously deep doo-doo. She’s been making bank drops for someone. I don’t know who, but it’s bad, Lottie. And it has something to do with Francine.”

“Francine?” My heart skips a beat, but I keep my expression in check. “Are you sure?”

Sam nods, wincing again. “That’s all I know, I swear. Please, Lottie, I don’t want to think about this right now. Just get me something to make this pain stop.”

I squeeze her hand, trying to process what she just told me.

Suze is making bank drops?

And Francine —what on earth does Francine have to do with any of this? I need to figure this out and I need to do it now.

I pat her hand soothingly. “Don’t worry, Sam. We’re going to get you through this. But remember, Braxton Hicks or not, you’re going to be fine.”

Her hands slam to her sides as she sits straight up. “What do you mean, Braxton Hicks?”

The door swings open, and a nurse walks in, her face the picture of calm. “How are we doing in here?”

Before Sam can say a single word, I jump in. “We’re good. We just need a little something to help the new mama relax. Maybe a cold drink or ice chips?”

The nurse offers up a reassuring smile. “Of course, I’ll be right back.”

As soon as she steps out, Sam yanks me close. “What if this really is it, Lottie? What if I’m not having some fake Braxton Hicks contractions? What if my baby is coming right now?”

“Then I’ll hunt down the best drugs this hospital has to give. Just try to relax and think happy thoughts. Like, maybe how much fun you’ll have when this is all over, and you get to tell the baby about how you breakdanced your way through labor.”

“You really think I’ll be okay?”

I nod, squeezing her hand. And for the first time, I really want to be there for her when the time comes. Nobody should have to go through this alone.

“You’ll be fine, Sam.”

She relaxes a little as she leans against her pillow. “Okay. But if you’re wrong, this baby better come out fast, and it better be doing the moonwalk, too. I paid a lot of money for that class.”

We share a quick laugh, and soon Sam has both a cold drink of water and her discharge papers. I help her get dressed and drive her back to the house she’s rented with Jed, which just so happens to be a spit-and-a-kick down the road from Noah, Everett, and me.

Once I get her settled, I head back to the bakery and ask my mother if she’ll watch Lyla Nell for the rest of the afternoon. It seems I’ve got a few questions for dear old Francine.

It’s time to find out exactly what Noah’s mother has gotten herself into.

And I can’t seem to shake this feeling that both Suze and I are in way over our heads.

LOTTIE

The late afternoon sun is nothing but a dream as I step out of the bakery with the scent of sugar and vanilla clinging to me like a second skin. I've hardly taken two steps when I hear the rapid-fire click of heels on the pavement behind me. I don't even need to turn around to know who it is.

"Not without me, Toots," Carlotta calls out, catching up with me in record time. She's wearing some leopard-print monstrosity that makes her look like she just escaped from the zoo and her hair is rising up above her head like a tornado.

"What's happening here?" I eye that outfit with a modicum of suspicion. Usually, Carlotta is wearing my clothes, and to my knowledge I haven't ventured into jungle attire just yet.

"I've got a hot date with Harry down in the Jungle Room later."

"That explains everything," I moan.

The Jungle Room would be the bawdy basement beneath the already bawdy basement down at Red Satin Gentlemen's Club. It's filled with themed enclaves where couples can shell out the big bucks to get kinky in style.

"While you ran off to the hospital, I ran off to a boutique and picked up something snazzy—and easy to tear off my body," Carlotta continues. "So how's Sam's new twerp?"

“She didn’t have it, false alarm.” I’d admonish her for using the word twerp , but I don’t have a single second to kill.

I’m about to take off again when a spray of miniature blue stars twinkle between us and Petey the polar bear materializes in all his furry glory.

“Where’s the fire?” He looks past me. “I saw you rushing off. Is it that pizza place we’re headed to?” He hitches his snout toward Mangias, a cute little Italian gem right across the street from my bakery. “I’ve been having a craving for something saucy.”

“You and me both,” I say. “In fact, I’ll rectify that tonight. Right now, we need to talk to Francine. I just found out from Sam that Suze has been making drops of cash to the bank and it has something to do with the danger she’s in. Sam also let me know that Francine Dundee has something to do with this.” I take another step out and Carlotta tap dances her way next to me. “No, no, no,” I tell her. “You and Francine are like oil and water. You’ve already gone around the block with her. It’s time I go at it on my own. Go on, shoo .” I flick my fingers at her. “Aren’t you supposed to be terrorizing someone else’s day right about now?”

She links her arm through mine and gives a wicked grin. “Oh, please, Lot. Terrorizing your day is my favorite pastime. Besides, you’re up to something, and I’m not letting you go at it alone. Foxy and Sexy wouldn’t want me to either. Consider me your partner in crime.”

Petey links his arm to my other side and I sigh.

“Come on, Lottie,” he pleads. “We need a generous soul like Carlotta who freely shares her bear claws. And if things get dangerous, we’ll know who to toss to the wolves.”

I make a face. “You’d think that would ward her off, but Carlotta looks forward to



getting tossed to the wolves.”

“Tall, strong, stinky, hairy, and sexy.” Carlotta ticks her head wistfully at the thought. “Now that I know there are wolves involved, I may never leave your side. Come on, let’s nail that battle-axe to a wall. Petey, you knock Francine’s teeth out. Lot Lot, you can threaten to take her place as the boob with most babies in this town. That’s enough to make her cry for a decade.”

Before I can answer, I catch sight of Francine across the street, slipping into a beat-up burgundy minivan that looks as if it’s seen better days—possibly in the last century. My heart skips a beat. This could be it, the break I need to figure out what’s going on with her and Suze.

“We need to get in my car,” I hiss at both Carlotta and Petey, yanking her toward my minivan parked at the curb. “We’re following her.”

Carlotta’s eyes light up with glee. “Ooh , a good old-fashioned stakeout. I call shotgun.”

“And I call the hood,” Petey says. “I like the icy wind blowing through my fur.”

We hop into my minivan, and I pull out smoothly, keeping a safe distance as we tail Francine through Honey Hollow and right onto the highway. Francine drives us right into Leeds and both Carlotta and I gasp at that one.

“What in the world is a woman like Francine Dundee doing in a seedy place like this?” I say, shaking my head as we follow her right into the heart of the downtown district.

“So, what’s the plan when we catch up with the hussy?” Carlotta bleats. “Rough her up? Shine a flashlight in her eyes? Maybe I’ll just channel my inner bad cop for the

occasion.”

“Your inner bad cop?” I snort. “Carlotta, your entire personality is bad cop.”

The drive through Leeds is more or less uneventful—pretty much a miracle considering the dark element this town seems to attract.

I follow Francine’s beat-up van, which seems to be chugging along as if it’s powered by sheer stubbornness. Leeds is a hotbed of sinners, so to see a self-proclaimed saint making her way through the town as if she owns it makes me twice as curious as to what’s going on.

She pulls up to a tall glossy structure comprised of glass and steel—otherwise known as the Fletcher Hotel, a surprisingly snazzy-looking place in a “we’re trying too hard” sort of way.

It’s the kind of place that might have been luxurious fifty years ago, but now it’s just clinging to the last shreds of its former glory. I’ve never been inside, but I’ve always marveled at it from afar.

We park across the street and watch as Francine exits her van, glancing around as if she’s about to meet a mob boss before entering the slightly decrepit hotel. Carlotta and I exchange a look, and without a word, we hop out and follow her.

Petey floats down next to us. “This is it, Lottie. We’re going to catch the wicked witch in action.”

I make a face his way. “She’s not really a wicked witch.”

“Carlotta says so.” He shrugs as if the moniker were out of his hands and written in stone. And considering he seems to be relying on Carlotta to fill his belly, he’s not in

a position to argue. “Don’t you think it’s strange she’s here, about to indulge in wicked deeds? The woman seemed so sweet to me. I’ve seen more than my fair share of people back at the zoo, and she strikes me as someone who would toss me an extra bucket of sardines if given the chance.”

“What kind of person do I strike you as?” Carlotta dares to ask.

He snorts at the thought. “You’d be sneaking into the lion’s cage and proclaiming yourself the new queen of the jungle.”

“Only after I had my way with the king,” Carlotta snorts back.

“Good grief,” I groan. “That’s fifty shades of illegal. And would you two behave? We need to be inconspicuous.”

I’m about to edge my way to the entrance when Francine zooms back out, with a dark blue tote bag slung over her shoulder—one that was nowhere near her person when she went inside.

She’s about to cross the street when Carlotta throws herself in front of the woman.

Francine screams bloody murder.

Carlotta screams bloody murder.

And Petey howls and yowls so loud, I’m pretty sure they heard it on the moon.

Francine jumps back and gets a better look at us. “What are the two of you doing here?” she snaps, clearly not thrilled to see us.

Carlotta leans her way with a snarl on her face. “We were just in the neighborhood.

And imagine our surprise when we saw you sneaking around like a lady of the night looking to turn a trick!”

“ Carlotta .” I shake my head her way. “I’m sorry, Francine.”

“Don’t apologize,” Francine snips while holding the bag close to her side as if it might up and disappear. Although, in this neighborhood, a mugging is more likely.

Come to think of it, I hold my bag close as well.

“And never apologize for her, Lottie.” Francine glares at the two of us, clearly unimpressed. “I don’t have to explain myself to either of you. Stay out of my business.”

Carlotta gives the woman a predatory grin. “Well, we made it our business, honey. And let me tell you, whatever you’re up to, it can’t be good. So why don’t you save us all some time and just spill the beans before you dig yourself any deeper? What do you know about a cash drop, and what does it have to do with Suze the Snooze?”

Petey sighs. “So much for being inconspicuous.”

He’s so right.

“Please, tell us what you know,” I plead with the woman. “Tell us everything before either you or Suze gets in any deeper.”

Francine scoffs as her eyes dart to the hotel entrance. “Deeper? I’m not the one in trouble here.”

Carlotta scoffs at the thought. “Listen, big, fake Frannie. You’re headed straight to Hell in a handbasket if you don’t start talking. And trust me, that’s an elevator ride

downstairs that you don't want to take."

Francine raises an eyebrow, clearly unamused. "Me? Going to Hell? That's rich coming from you, Carlotta. If anyone's got a first-class ticket to the underworld, it's the person I'm looking at. So maybe you should worry about your own afterlife instead of mine. When I go home, I'm headed upstairs. You're the one going downstairs, Carlotta! And it's not going to be a party."

"You think I'm scared of a little fire and brimstone?" Carlotta belts out a laugh. "Please. I'll be running the place in no time."

I can totally see that happening.

Good grief. I'd better step in before things escalate and one of them finds out exactly which direction they're headed in for all eternity.

"Look, Francine, we just want to know what's going on," I say as sweetly as I can. "Suze is involved, and that means we're involved. So how about you quit dodging and start explaining."

Francine's jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think she's going to tell us to take a hike. But then she lets out a long, exasperated sigh. "You two really don't know when to quit, do you?"

"It's not in our DNA," Carlotta quips.

Francine grunts as if she realizes she's not going to get rid of us all that easily. "Fine. I'll tell you what you want to know, but you're not going to like it."

Carlotta grins. "I don't like anything. So hit us with your best shot."

Francine gives her a look that could curdle milk, but then she glances at me, and I see a flicker of something—hesitation, maybe even regret. “Just remember, you asked for this.”

She takes a deep breath, and I brace myself for whatever bombshell she’s about to drop. But even though she’s about to start talking, I can’t shake the feeling that we’re only scratching the surface of whatever mess we’ve stumbled into.

Francine cranes her neck past me and her eyes fill with terror just before she belts out another one of her bloodcurdling screams.

“Who, what, where?” I shout as I turn that way and struggle to see anything other than a string of dingy-looking businesses. There’s a dry cleaner, a bank, and a woman’s shelter all sitting rather unassumingly.

We turn back around, only to see Francine speeding off in her red wagon of terror as her tires spray us down with a shower of dirty snow.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I shout as I dust myself off.

“It’s always for my sake,” he muses. “It’s nice to know I’m still a popular guy.”

I frown over at the hotel as it glitters in the quickly dimming light.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s go in and see if we can make heads or tails of what just happened.”

I lead the way and head straight for the front desk where a young blonde sits filing her glossy red nails. I ask if she knows anything about the long-haired woman who just ran in and she shakes her head and tells us that Johnny came down from the penthouse and gave her something and she took off.

“The penthouse?” I muse as I glance up. “I bet it’s snazzy,” I say in hopes she offers up a little more info.”

“Oh, it’s snazzy, all right,” she says just as the phone in front of her begins to ring. “In fact, we rent half of it out for events. You know, proms, proposals, wedding receptions, funerals.” She picks up the phone and barks a hello into it.

“Who rents out a penthouse for a funeral?”

“That’s how I want to go,” Carlotta wastes no time in letting me know how she plans on wasting my money.

“Let’s go this way right now,” I say as I drag Carlotta and Petey into the nearest waiting elevator.

“Where are we headed to, Lot?” Carlotta asks as I hit the very last button on the panel.

“To the penthouse, to see a man named Johnny.”

“Johnny on the spot,” Petey says as we feel ourselves rise. “That’s what they used to call me because I was always the first to greet the new sows they brought in. That’s what they call the female of my kind. Men are boars.”

“You said it,” Carlotta says without missing a beat.

The elevator opens up, and the first thing we see is a tall, muscular man with a head the size of a walnut and arms the size of tree trunks.

“What’s the magic word?” he grunts our way and I swear the walls just shook.

“J-Johnny,” the name stammers from me, and before I can utter another word, he nods and opens up a set of double doors behind him.

A whole world of glitz and glamor sits inside. Mostly men seated around a handful of poker tables, blackjack tables, and some other card table that has me stumped as to what it could be.

Women dressed in gold glitzy dresses are milling around with dollar bills tucked in the V of their low-cut gowns. But none of that has the ability to hold my attention. Instead, I’m focused in on one hot judge surrounded by a bevy of beauties as he holds his hand close to his chest.

“Well, well, well.” Carlotta gives a dark chuckle. “It seems Sexy has a lot of explaining to do.”

He nods our way as his jaw tightens. “And so do you.”



NOAH

I burst through the doors, breathless, just in time to see Lottie, wide-eyed and tense, standing in the middle of what can only be described as a den of iniquity. Lots of card tables are scattered about, even more men, along with a handful of scantily clad women. Everett just so happens to be seated with a bevy of beauties, and by the looks of it, I arrive just in time to see him tanking his marriage in the most spectacular way.

And I will more than gladly help Lot pick up the pieces.

Glitz, glamor, and the unmistakable smell of desperation hang in the air, but all I care about is getting her out of here— now .

“Lottie,” I say, lunging for her and pulling her close. “Lottie, Carlotta, what are you thinking?” I gasp, trying to catch my breath. “We need to get out of here.”

“Noah?” Lottie looks more than confused at the sight of me. “What are you doing here? Are you following me?”

“Yes, I was following you,” I say, sounding just as incredulous. “I like to do a drive-by of the women’s shelter when I’m passing through Leeds just to make sure there isn’t any trouble. And I just so happened to be here as the two of you stepped inside this hotel.”

“Three of us,” Carlotta chuffs. “We’ve got fluff n’ stuff doing a ride-along.”

“Wonderful,” I say, frowning at the spot where Carlotta just slung her arm.

Everett stomps over, either angry he was caught or angry Lot ventured this way in her state. Most likely both.

“All right,” he growls. “I want all of us out the door right now.”

“Aww, come on, Sexy,” Carlotta whines as we spin both her and Lottie around and shuttle them out the door. “We were just starting to have fun.”

“Sorry, ladies, but something tells me this fun zone is not for you,” I say, glancing back and shaking my head at the scene.

While charitable gambling is allowed in Vermont, I have a feeling there’s not a single charitable organization behind this mess.

Everett and I manage to hustle both Lottie and Carlotta out of the room and down the dimly lit hallway. The sounds of the gambling room fade behind us, replaced by the echo of our footsteps.

Lottie pauses long enough to swat Everett on the arm. “What the heck was that all about? And don’t even think about giving me the runaround.”

Everett’s expression is unreadable as usual. “It’s a gambling ring. It has something to do with Tom Darius. The manager’s name is Johnny, but he’s more or less someone’s lackey. I got a tip from Luke and Jimmy about this place, and I thought I’d check it out for myself.”

“ Luke and Jimmy? ” Lottie and I echo at the same time while looking at the big buffoon of a judge.

Everett shoots me a glare that could freeze fire. “Someone needed to kick this investigation into gear, and it clearly wasn’t going to be you.”

I feel the sting of his words, but I try to maintain my cool.

“I’ve been working on it,” I say. “I know what I’m doing.” For the most part.

“Do you?” Everett’s voice is sharp. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’ve been dragging your feet.” He glances back to Lottie and then me. “And I know you’ve invited Lemon to work with you.”

I blink, caught off guard.

“Lottie”—I tick my head her way—“you told him?”

Lottie shakes her head, just as surprised as I am. “I said no such thing.” She bites down on her lip as she looks at him. “Not that I was trying to keep anything from you. Noah just made the offer last night.”

My hands rise a notch. “I wouldn’t necessarily call it an offer.”

Everett growls once more in my direction. “Nobody said anything to me. I’m perceptive. Speaking of which—” He swings a stern look at Lottie. “Who’s your next suspect?”

“Orson Wingate.” Lottie doesn’t miss a beat.

“Funny,” I mutter. “He was my next suspect, too. I guess I’m perceptive as well.”

Everett’s jaw tightens for a second. “I know where to find him. He’s at Red Satin.”

Lottie gags as she looks at the guy. “How do you know that?”

Everett glances at me before turning back to Lottie. “I recognized him from the other

night at the B&B when I was in the casino.”

“The casino in Red Satin?” I muse. “New hobby, Everett?”

“Yes.” Everett shoots me a dry look. “It’s called tracking down whoever is threatening your mother.” He shakes his head. “If only one of her sons was a cop.”

“All right, all right.” Lottie holds up a hand between us as if we might come to blows, and just in the nick of time if you ask me. “Let’s head to Red Satin. At least that way, the two of you can keep an eye on me while I ask the hard questions.”

“That’s right,” Carlotta barks. “And Petey and I will clean up at the craps table while you catch a killer.”

A dull laugh rattles through my chest. “It looks like we’re headed to Red Satin. You ready for this, Lot?”

Lottie places a hand on her belly and nods. “I was born ready.”

“And I was born to cause trouble,” Carlotta crows. “Let’s do this.”

“Let’s hope the twins won’t be born any time soon,” I muse. “If you had them at a gentlemen’s club, we’d be forced to come up with a cover story. They might not be able to live that one down.”

Everett casts a dark look my way. “Just like we’re going to have to come up with a cover for your mother.”

The elevator opens up and we step inside. And all the way down I think about his words.

It feels as if I'm sinking into Hell, and there's not a thing I can do about it.

And to think, it's my mother who's leading the way.

### EVERETT

The moment we step into Red Satin Gentlemen's Club, the greasy thrill of it all hits us. Red carpet, red walls, and red lights—and we are certainly in the red light district.

The swirling lights are seizure-inducing, the music is loud, the bass is heavy and it vibrates through our bones as we move farther inside. A long stage stretches out before us, lined with half-dressed girls who are more confident in their skin than most men are in a three-piece suit.

Before we get three feet deep, a swarm of scantily clad women zero in on Noah and me as if we were the last meal at a buffet.

I'd be the steak.

Noah would be an overdone burger. Which would explain why I seem to have garnered the lion's share of half-dressed women attempting to nestle in my wings. I don't even need to look at him to know he's both amused and uncomfortable. It's written all over his stiff posture.

We offer polite nods as we move our way through and Lemon wraps both of her arms around me while giving each and every one of these women a look that could kill.

And knowing Lemon's track record, let's hope this night doesn't end in tragedy.

We try to make our way toward the back, and yet the women still keep streaming my way.

Noah gives me a side glance. “You’re popular tonight. They must remember you have deep pockets.”

Carlotta strums out a laugh. “They remember taking a turn on the Sexy Express and they’re looking for another ticket to ride. But Lot Lot here has locked him up and swallowed the key—along with the entire Sexy kitchen sink. She’s greedy that way.”

“And smart,” Lemon tells her before looking up at me. “And if you’re smart, you’ll tell us everything Jimmy and Luke had to say about what was happening in that penthouse.”

“I will,” I say. “But not here.”

“I’m holding you to it,” she counters.

“As long as you’re holding me.”

A laugh bubbles from her, but her attention gets snagged on something—or rather, someone—else entirely. Her eyes light up as her sister waddles this way.

“Meg,” Lemon calls out, and I can’t help but notice how both of their bellies look impossibly round. Meg is due any day now, and Lemon still has two months to go, but you wouldn’t know it from the size of her bump.

Meg pulls Lemon into a careful hug. “What are you doing here? Let me guess, the three of you are celebrating your babymoon by making it rain?”

“What about me?” Carlotta jumps their way. “What am I? Chopped liver? I’m always looking for a reason to make it rain. In fact”—she glances at her watch—“I’m due to meet Harry here in fifteen minutes. We’re headed to the Jungle Room for a little kinky-winky.” She nods to the open space to her right. “Petey says let’s speed this

up.” She shrugs our way. “I told him all about the zoo-themed room downstairs on the way over. Let’s just say he’s interested.”

“We’re here trying to solve a case,” Lemon says to Meg and I hang back, watching the exchange.

I’m not thrilled that Lemon is out here chasing after bad guys, doing Noah’s job for him. But I know there’s no stopping her, just like there’s no stopping me from doing what Noah should be doing. Heaven knows someone has to get the job done, and at this point, it’s clear it won’t be him.

Meg and Lemon wrap it up, and soon we’re headed down a narrow staircase that winds into the casino below. The sights and sounds hit harder here—the clink of glasses, the chatter of voices, and the unmistakable sound of money being won and lost in real time. Mostly lost.

At Canelli’s casino, the crooked house has a clear advantage.

The air is thick with smoke, and the blood-red decor doesn’t let up, making everything feel like it’s happening in some underground fever dream or portal to Hell. Take your pick.

And then I spot him—Orson Wingate, seated at a blackjack table. He looks lost in concentration, though there’s a slight smirk tugging at his lips. Earlier, he was at the poker table, and seeing as he’s still here, with a hint of a smile on his face, no less, it’s clear he hasn’t lost his pants just yet, though I’m betting he’s come close.

“There he is,” I say, nodding toward the man with his shock of white hair. “Looks like he’s still courting Lady Luck.”

But with Lemon setting her sights on him, his luck is about to run out.



Not that we suspect him of anything nefarious concerning his wife, but if we've learned anything during the past few years, it's that you can't take any theory off the table.

Lemon wraps her arms around her belly as if she's protecting our unborn children from the sin and vice that oozes from this place.

"Stand back, boys." She pulls up her shoulders. "I've got this."

Noah and I watch as she takes off.

"What do we do now?" Noah asks, and I slice a glance his way that suggests he figures it out and fast.

"Now"—I say, keeping my voice low—"we see if Lemon can get the man to talk. Odds are he knows the killer whether he realizes it or not."

Noah shakes his head. "I don't think I could function if anything happened to my wife. In fact, I don't know if I could sit upright if something happened to Lot."

Carlotta chuckles. "Sexy might arrange for you not to be able to sit upright ever again if you keep talking as if Lot Lot belongs in your bed." She tips her chin. "On second thought, she probably never left it. Hey? The three of you should think about joining Harry and me down in the Jungle Room. They've got kinky rooms to spare and enough handcuffs to chain all of Vermont to any bedpost you like."

"Lemon and I may take you up on it," I tell her and Noah's eyes nearly launch out of his skull. "And if they've got a room for singles, I'm sure Noah will show his face, too. I can't seem to shake him these days." I take a moment to glower at him, and he flashes a grin my way.

“ Ooh , look.” Carlotta nods to the blackjack table where Lemon is seated right next to the poor man who just lost his wife. “Lot Lot’s doing her best, but the guy’s lips are still buttoned. Ten bucks says I can get him to talk. Let me at him.”

“No way,” Noah tells her while holding her back. “Subtlety isn’t exactly your strong suit, Carlotta.”

“Subtlety is overrated,” she says while pulling herself free. “Besides, men like Orson don’t need subtle. They need a good shaking.”

“His wife just died,” I say it low. “Trust me, he’s been shook to the core.”

We head to the table and each of us takes a seat, with Noah landing next to Lemon. His brashness is unstoppable.

I ante up and purchase chips for all of us, and Noah seems especially pleased.

We watch as the dealer shuffles the cards just as a waitress wearing pasties and not much else delivers a round of free drinks, whiskey neat all the way around and ice water for Lemon.

Carlotta jabs Lemon in the ribs. “Lot Lot, you’ve got the pick of the litter. Which of these gentlemen are you going to let hold your purse?”

“I’m more concerned which one will need smelling salts once I sweep this table clean.” She offers an amicable nod to Orson and he gives a mournful laugh.

“Young lady, I’d be careful if I were you. These guys might look harmless, but give them a deck of cards and they’ll rob you blind faster than you can say bingo night .”

“Good to know, hot stuff.” Carlotta winks his way. “But we’ve got a few tricks up

our sleeves, too.”

He gives a light chuckle. “You ladies are a breath of fresh air.”

“That’s what they all say.” Carlotta cackles as the cards are dealt.

Lemon nods to Noah and me before she sharpens her attention on the new widower to her side. She’s about to do her thing.

It’s time to see if Orson is ready to show his hand.

LOTTIE

It's a monetary warzone in here with the bright flashing lights, the popping swirling sounds of the one-armed bandits, the occasional burst of laughter, the even more frequent bloodcurdling screams, far too much crimson décor, far too much bass that threatens to break my bones, and the unmistakable scent of desperation mingling with cheap cologne.

This place is a sensory overload.

But despite all that, I'm focused on one thing—beating every person at this table round after round.

I can't help it; it's my competitive nature.

Okay, so I'm not here to beat anyone. I'm here to get Orson Wingate to talk and hopefully crack two homicide cases wide open.

The moment I slid into the seat next to this man, it was as if I could feel the weight of the room shift. He looks harmless enough with his thick white hair and his handsome face outlined with time. His fingers are slightly gnarled, his frame is on the thinner side, and he looks as if he hasn't slept in weeks. But alas, my track record with investigations leaves me wondering if he's harmless at all.

The man glances my way and his eyes are clouded with something I can't quite put my finger on. My guess is grief. It's so much easier for me to speak with people who are only loosely connected to the deceased. This man lost his wife. And for that

reason alone, I know this isn't going to be easy.

But I know what to do. I'm practically a seasoned detective at this point.

Subtlety is king in a situation like this.

Carlotta, of course, is far less concerned with subtlety. She's more of a freight train through a crystal factory— Waterford Crystal. She pretty much goes big.

She jabs me in the ribs as if to prove her point. "Lot Lot, you need to hurry up and clean house. I've got places to go and people to be kinky with."

"Good grief. Would you hush? I'm trying to concentrate here." I shoot Orson a dirty look without meaning to.

The dealer points to each of us as half the table takes a hit and folds. I take a hit and land on the exact number I need.

"Twenty-one," I say and lay down my cards. And before I know it, I'm collecting another chip, this time from the dealer himself.

Just as the dealer starts to shuffle the cards once again, I feel a cold breeze at my back as Petey leans in.

"What's the game, Lot?" he asks, his deep voice vibrating through me like the bass from the club's speakers. "I haven't seen a setup like this since they tried to teach the chimps back at the zoo how to play poker. Let's just say, it didn't end well. But a few of the cards landed in my enclosure and I enjoyed them quite a bit. They had an earthy taste to them and a crunch I could appreciate."

I hide a smile, pretending to adjust the strap on my bag. "The game is blackjack," I

whisper. “And I wouldn’t eat these if I were you or those little round things either. They might be called chips, but they’re not nearly as tasty.”

Orson gives a little chuckle. “Hungry, are we?” He glances down to my belly. “Hey, I think I recognize you.” His expression sobers up. “Weren’t you one of the girls that they were throwing that party for a few days ago back in Honey Hollow?”

“That’s me,” I say. “I’m Lottie Lemon.” I hold out a hand and he shakes it. “My mother owns the B&B.”

“Ah, Miranda.” He offers a kind smile. “She’s been a real saint to me these past few days. It was my wife that lost her life that day.” A heavy sigh expels from him as he looks across the table and his mouth falls open as he zeros in on Noah. “Detective?” He looks more than a little stymied at the moment.

Drats.

Why Noah insists on following me around when I’m trying to do my job is baffling to me.

Doesn’t he realize people clam up when he’s around? How many times do I have to spell it out for him?

I shoot him a look that expresses just that and he lifts his shoulders my way in lieu of an apology.

Everett sighs as if he shared my frustration. Usually, it’s Everett who wants to lose Noah like a bad wig. Not that Everett will ever have to wear a wig. His thick dark locks are so glossy and lush. I can’t wait to run my toes through them tonight.

I make a face at the thought of holding my hormones in check for a few more hours.

“Good evening, Orson,” Noah says to the man. “I’m glad to see you’re up and about. Again, I’m so sorry about your loss. My wife here just wanted a night out before the twins arrived.”

My mouth falls open as I cast a glance his way.

Everett growls when Noah claims me as his own. Although I can tell it was an honest mistake on Noah’s part. It just feels natural for him to reference me that way. I know for a fact Noah believes that I’m just seeing where things might lead with Everett while the two of us are on a break. Well, that may have started off true, but they’ve led to twins and I’m pretty sure that cements us as a couple. However technically, Noah might be able to build his own case using Lyla Nell.

“Twins?” Orson looks mildly horrified for me, as most people tend to do—mostly women. “Well, congratulations. I’m sorry your party came to such an abrupt end.”

“Please don’t apologize,” I’m quick to tell him as we all fold and the house wins big. “I’m so sorry about your wife. Do they know who did this?”

The question would have sounded so much better had the “they” of the conversation not been sitting to my right. Noah really is just putzing everything up for me tonight.

“Well?” Orson nods to Noah. “What’s the scoop?”

“It’s still an active homicide investigation,” Noah says as the dealer passes out another round.

My cards are low and so are the amounts of clues I’ve garnered thus far.

I ask for a hit, and just like that, my luck changes. And I’m hoping my luck is about to change with Orson as well.

Petey swoops past me, and that icy breeze that seems to follow him cools me off. It might be the dead of winter, but with two infernal baby heaters cooking inside of me, it's been more like one long, hot summer.

"Ask him about my Ursula," Petey whispers as if he had to. "I'm dying to know what she had been up to all these years."

"Orson, your wife seemed so vivacious when I met her in the conservatory," I say to the poor man. "If you don't mind, I'd love to know a little about her."

I nod as the entire lot of us folds once again and the house cleans up.

Jimmy Canelli really is the crookedest crook that ever did crook. He might let you win a chip or two, but he's taking back ten.

The dealer finishes shuffling and starts doing what he does best, dealing out a bunch of lemons. As the cards are laid out, I take a moment to glance at Noah and Everett. They're both watching me but for different reasons.

Noah looks like he's ready to jump in if things go south, while Everett—well, he's offering up those bedroom eyes and mentally outlining every last thing on his agenda tonight.

Me.

I would be the one and only thing on his agenda tonight.

But I know him well enough to see the concern lurking behind those stormy blue eyes as well. He wants to keep me safe just as much as Noah does.

I glance at my cards. Not bad, but I'm not here to win a few bucks. I'm here to win



answers. I turn to Orson, offering him a small, sympathetic smile.

“I’d love to tell you about my wife.” Orson’s face softens just a bit as the hard mask of grief gives way to something warmer, something that almost resembles a genuine smile.

He nods my way as if he was about to give me an earful.

And I’m hoping he gives me exactly that and more.

LOTTIE

“Vivacious,” Orson Wingate says as he describes his late wife, and his voice softens a notch as if he’s savoring the word.

The casino here below Red Satin buzzes and brews all around us, but Noah, Everett, Carlotta, Petey, and I are seated at the blackjack table waiting with bated breath for whatever Orson might say next.

“Yes, that was Ursula,” he continues. “She was... well, larger than life.”

I nod, giving him the space to continue.

“She loved people,” he says, the words coming easier now as if the memories are a balm to his soul. “Couldn’t stand to be alone. She was married four times, you know. Each one different from the last, but none of them could keep up with her. Ursula was always two steps ahead of everyone else. Including me,” he says with a chuckle.

“Four times?” I raise a brow even though my mother had already clued me in on that on night one.

“Five including me.”

“Wow,” I muse. “She must have been quite the determined woman to keep finding new dance partners.”

Especially since she was dancing underneath the sheets with them.

“Oh, she was determined indeed.” Orson chuckles, though there’s a touch of bitterness in it. “She had this passion for life, for food especially. She even opened her own restaurant up in Honey Hollow. The Cozy Croon Café. I had suggested she call it The Velvet Spoon, but Ursula said it was too pretentious. She needed to lean in toward the cozy appeal of the town. And she was right. She was right about a lot of things. She and her best friend, Agatha Reed, got it going. Those two were inseparable, did everything together. At least in the beginning.”

“Agatha Reed,” I repeat, filing that away. Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure my mother introduced me to the woman the night I met Ursula. Yes, the redhead. She was the one who told me that Francine worked for Ursula. I lift a shoulder his way. “Sounds like they were more like sisters than friends.”

“They were,” Orson agrees, nodding slowly. “Agatha was the steady one, the anchor. She kept Ursula grounded, or tried to, anyway. Trying to contain Ursula was like trying to put out a fire engulfing a stick of dynamite. If you didn’t watch it, you could lose body parts. They bonded over their love of food. That’s how it all started—two women, one shared passion, and a dream to create something special.”

“Agatha sounds like a lovely person, too,” I say. “Is she local? I mean, if she’s local, I’m sure she’s helping you with the arrangements and she must be a comforting presence with your grief.” I do my best to keep my tone as light as a soufflé but my interest as sharp as a chef’s knife.

“Oh yeah, she’s local.” Orson hesitates, his eyes narrowing slightly as if he’s weighing his options. “She lives in Honey Hollow, just a few blocks from Ursula’s restaurant. Agatha tapes a cooking show from her home. She’s still whipping up dishes that could make you cry with joy.”

“A cooking show?” I can’t help but smile. “She must be quite the chef.”

“She is,” Orson says, a touch of pride in his voice. “And if anyone can tell you more about Ursula, it’s Agatha. Like I said, they were as close as two people could get. I mean, they didn’t always get along. Agatha has always wanted to open up her own place, too. And a few weeks back, they had a falling-out. I believe the words, ‘You were always handed everything,’ came from Agatha’s lips. But I’m sure they made up before Ursula’s life was stolen. At least I hope they did. They really did care for one another. Men would come and go, but their friendship remained the same.”

“Thank you for sharing that,” I tell him. “It sounds as if your wife was a lovely person as well.”

“She was,” Petey insists. “And we’ll be sure to pay Agatha a visit. It sounds like she could tell us more about Ursula than he could.”

I offer a covert nod to the poltergeist in agreement.

Orson ticks his head as we’re all dealt another round. “I’m sorry I ever brought up anything about Ursula and Aggie not getting along. Now that Ursula is gone, I guess some memories are best left in the past.”

I offer him a reassuring smile, though inside, my curiosity is burning bright. I have a feeling that whatever Ursula’s secrets were, Agatha Reed holds the key. And something tells me this cooking show is about to serve up more than just a few recipes.

Although it does make me wonder if whatever Ursula was cooking up with Agatha was bound to be a recipe for disaster.

Orson takes off after the next round and wishes us all a good rest of the evening.

“We should take off, too,” Noah says as he rises to his feet.

“Not so fast, Detective.” Everett motions for him to sit down and he does. “I’ve been waiting for a chance to wipe the floor with you. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

“I’m in,” Noah says. “After all, I’m playing with your funny money.”

“Ooh, this is going to be good.” Carlotta rubs her hands together. “I’ll take bets, five to one, Foxy leaves with his furry little tail between his legs.”

“There’s nothing little about me.” Noah doesn’t miss a beat as the cards are dealt.

“Although he is furry,” I add, pleased with my cards.

The hand begins, and before I know it, I’m holding my own against the table. Actually, I’m doing better than that. I’m winning.

And I win big time.

Carlotta grizzles out a laugh. “Looks as if Lottie Dottie here has the luck of the devil tonight.”

I roll my eyes her way. “Only you would associate the original red-hot sinner of the universe with luck.”

“He’s not lucky,” Petey points out. “And neither is anyone who follows in his footsteps.”

I take the pot three more rounds and Everett shakes his head my way. “You’re full of surprises, Lemon. A master baker, a wonderful mother, a killer detective, and a card shark like no other.”

“I have to agree with him, Lot,” Noah says. “Have you got any other talents you’re

keeping from us?”

Everett cocks his head. “If she does, odds are she’ll be sharing them with me later tonight.”

Carlotta explodes with hoots and howls. “Sounds like the Essex Express will be leaving the station once again tonight. Be jealous, ladies,” she shouts to the crowd. “We’ve got a winner in the house, and she’ll be scoring more than a mountain of chips in the bedroom with the haughty, naughty judge among us. Lady Luck has officially changed her name to Lady Lot Lot!”

I may have won big, but that doesn’t change the fact I’ve got a heavy feeling about what’s about to transpire next in our quest to save Suze from her own foolish ways.

Because there’s one thing about luck that unnerves me.

Eventually, it always runs out.

And something tells me mine is about to take a nosedive.

But Everett proves me wrong. Not only does Carlotta head down to the Jungle Room, but Everett speeds us in that direction ourselves. It’s the Jeanie in a Bottle room for us, and Everett makes sure my every last wish comes true.

Looks like Lady Luck struck again.

Here’s hoping I can keep up the momentum.

### LOTTIE

The next day—or early evening rather—it doesn't take much digging through Agatha Reed's social media profiles to discover she's showcasing her homemade goodies at the Winter Festival up in Hollyhock.

Winter in Vermont in general is a sight to behold, and this year it seems the Winter Festival is the crown jewel of the season.

Snow blankets the ground like powdered sugar on a donut, and the air is filled with the sounds of laughter, the scent of pine, and the mouthwatering aroma of every comfort food imaginable. It looks as if the entire state has turned out for the festivities, while bundled up in coats and scarves, eager to indulge in the festivities at hand.

But I'm not here to indulge—well, not entirely. I'm here to track down Agatha Reed, and according to her Insta Pics account, she's got a booth serving up samples of her famous comfort food. But whatever she's got cooking, I seriously doubt it can beat the mac and crack we had back at the Cozy Croon Café.

The other night I had a dream I was swimming around in a vat of the stuff, naked and eating all the mac and crack I wanted. I've never felt so satisfied but, of course, I'd never tell Everett.

If there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that food has a way of bringing secrets to the surface, and I'm hoping Agatha's got more to share than just her recipes.

“Thanks for inviting me, Lot,” Keelie Nell Fisher, my blonde bestie since preschool, says as she pushes the double stroller I borrowed from my mother. And that stroller just so happens to be occupied with both little Bear and Lyla Nell.

Keelie married my notorious high school ex-boyfriend, Bear Fisher, whose favorite hobby at the time was cheating on me. But he’s settled down and wisely so since he’s married to my bestie.

I’ve made it clear to Bear that should he cheat on Keelie, he’ll have to pay with a pound of flesh. I’ve got a meat cleaver in my arsenal of knives, and he knows exactly which pound of flesh I’ll be coming after.

“Are you kidding?” I squawk her way. “I’ve been dying for a day out with my bestie and our kiddos. How are things at the Honey Pot?”

Keelie has been the manager there for years.

“It couldn’t be better. Charlie has a weekly special that draws in the same customers week after week. And her culinary talents are off the chart. Some days I think she’s dimming her light by locking herself up in the Honey Pot. Charlie has the culinary chops to compete with the best of them on a world stage. You know, like that big cooking shindig they have every year in Vegas.”

“The Vegas Flavor Frenzy? I’m more than familiar. There’s a savory competition and a baking segment as well—the Sin City Sugar Showdown. They have a show that follows it and I tune in every year.” I tick my head. “Hey, maybe we should sign Charlie up? It doesn’t take place until August and the twins would be five months old by then. Maybe we could all go and watch Charlie do her thing? And show the whole country who they’re messing with.”

“Yes, to all of the above. And now that I know they have a baking competition, I



think we should sign you up, too. That way I can watch my boss and my bestie teach the world who's boss when it comes to competition in the kitchen."

"That sounds like a dream—but a pipe dream. I'll probably be too pooped to party, let alone board a plane and head to Vegas."

We weave through the crowd, dodging children with sticky fingers and adults with steaming mugs of hot chocolate. The festival is in full swing, with booths lining the streets offering everything from hand-knitted scarves to artisanal cheeses. But I've got my sights set on the booth up ahead, where a line of eager festival-goers is waiting for a taste of Agatha's cooking.

I'm about to make my way over when I hear a familiar voice call out, "Well, if it isn't Lady Luck herself, fresh off her winning streak."

I turn to see Noah striding toward me with a playful grin on his face, and behind him, Everett follows, with that unmistakable glint in his eye that says he's not here to just enjoy the festivities. Neither of them is dressed for work. Instead, they're both clad in flannels and jeans. It's almost four in the afternoon, so I'm guessing Everett had a hearing get canceled, which cleared up his schedule.

"What are you two doing here?" I ask, bubbling with a laugh and Lyla Nell does the same.

"Daddy," she cries, nearly lunging out of the stroller as she struggles to reach Noah. "Daddy, Daddy!" She turns to Everett and does the same.

Noah lands a kiss on her forehead. "We're just here enjoying the festival, Lot. Thought we might check out the competition they've got going on."

Everett nods. "And keep an eye on our favorite baker." He bends down and gives

Lyla Nell a quick hug and a kiss.

I turn to Keelie and frown. “I think I’m being followed.”

“It could be worse,” she says. “At least they’re hot and have no intention of chopping you up into little pieces.”

“Your mind is a dark place,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “I get that from the Sawyer side of the family.”

“Which explains a lot about Carlotta.” I nod because it’s true. I look back to the handsome steeds before us. “Now what is this competition of which you speak? Let me guess, it involves wolfing down as many burgers as you can in a five-minute window?” Here’s hoping.

Both the twins give a sharp kick as if begging me to sign up for this competition posthaste.

Everett nods. “The kind of competition where I show Noah here that he’s not as quick on his feet as he thinks he is.”

“We’ll see about that.” Noah twitches his brows my way. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve. Lottie can attest to that.”

My mouth falls open as all sorts of salacious thoughts flit through my mind.

“I’m talking about my physical prowess,” Noah says my way as if to clarify—worse yet, as if he knows exactly where my mind just drifted. “Out in the open, Lot.”

That time we were on his back patio, not wearing a stitch of clothing, exposed to all

of the elements comes to mind and my jaw unhinges yet another notch.

“Lemon?” Everett looks genuinely worried for me.

“Sorry.” I wrinkle my nose. “Darn hormones.”

“I’ll scratch that itch later.” Everett’s lips curve with the hint of a malevolent smile that promises to do just that. “Right after the competition.”

“Let me guess,” Keelie says. “It’s another one of those ridiculous ‘manly man’ contests where you two get to flex your egos?”

Noah tips his head. “Something like that. There’s a lumberjack competition over by the ice sculptures. It turns out, Dundee Diddles and Whittles sells firewood, too. They’re supplying all the wood for the competition.”

Everett nods. “And they’ve found a great way to reduce their labor, seeing that we’ll be doing their job for them. Sort of the way Lemon does your job for you, Noah.”

A raucous laugh bubbles from Keelie. “You two never give up. It must be a blast living under the same roof.”

“Keelie.” I shake my head at her. “Noah still has his place across the street.”

“Sure he does,” she says with a naughty gleam in her sparkling blue eyes. “I get there are certain pretenses you need to keep up.” She winks over at Noah as she says it. “Good job, by the way.”

“I’m not laughing,” I say just as Carlotta and Mayor Nash appear out of nowhere.

“Look who showed up for a battle of the alpha males!” Carlotta bleats. “Sorry to

break it to you, Foxy and Sexy, but I've brought out the top gun. Winner gets free firewood for a year, and Harry here is too cheap to turn on the furnace."

"Don't listen to her." Mayor Nash laughs it off while waving to Keelie and offering me a kiss to the cheek. "How's my girl? And how are my grandkids doing?" He gives Lyla Nell a quick pat then a pat to my belly as well.

"We're healthy and happy and here for the food," I tell him. And that's the gospel truth, all of it.

Both Noah and Everett shoot me a look as if they know better.

They would.

"We're all doing great," I tell him. "And good luck to you," I say just as a horn goes off and all participants are called to the barren snow-covered field to the left.

Carlotta and Mayor Nash take off while Keelie spastically yells into her phone for Bear to get down here.

Apparently, the lure of free firewood for a year is too strong to resist.

I lean toward Everett and Noah. "Please back out now. The thought of the two of you wildly swinging axes doesn't sit well with me."

"No way, no how." Noah is the first to shut me down.

"Sorry. No can do, Lemon," Everett concurs with a kiss.

"Fine." I sigh, knowing there's no stopping this disaster once it's in motion. "But don't expect me to patch you up if one of you loses a limb."

“Don’t worry, Lemon.” A dry laugh thumps from Everett’s chest. “I’ll make sure my ax lands in all the right places as far as Noah is concerned.”

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

We take off in that direction, and by the time we reach the lumberjack arena, a crowd has already gathered, eager to watch the showdown.

Soon, Noah, Everett, Mayor Nash, and even Bear are all signed up, lined up, and ready to go with ax in hand. And boy, do those blades ever look sharp.

Everett tosses his ax an inch and catches it, testing the weight in his hands. “Ready to be humbled, Fox?”

Noah grins, gripping his own ax. “I think you mean ready to watch me win, Judge.”

Carlotta claps up a storm with a devious gleam in her eyes. “I’ve got ten bucks on the man with the sexiest swing!”

“Which one is that?” I ask, knowing full well I’m in for an earful.

“Scary Harry is my pick,” she calls out before leaning toward Keelie and me. “I know what side my bread is buttered on. And boy howdy, can that man butter my bits.”

“Stop .” I hold up a hand to emphasize my point just as the competition begins, and the participants go at it with a vengeance, swinging their axes with precision and power.

The crowd cheers them on, and I can’t help but shake my head at it all.

Here I am, trying to unravel a murder mystery, and my two biggest distractions are

busy playing lumberjack in the middle of a festival.

But what delicious distractions they are.

The final logs are split and the crowd erupts in applause.

And it's Bear Fisher who is declared the winner.

"We won!" Keelie screams at the top of her lungs and both little Bear and Lyla Nell nearly jump out of their stroller because of it. "We won!" She jumps and howls, and basically becomes the human equivalent of a helium balloon that just escaped into the sky.

There's no pulling her back from this one and I wouldn't want to.

I'm a big believer in letting my bestie relish in the moment.

As for Noah and Everett—aka the real competition—it's clear that Everett won by a hair in that arena.

Noah shakes his head as he slaps Everett on the back. "You got lucky, Baxter. I'll get you next time."

"Luck had nothing to do with it, Fox. But you keep telling yourself what you need to hear in order to lessen the sting."

Carlotta rushes over to Mayor Nash and gives him a big, fat smooch right here for all to see and evokes a few catcalls from the effort.

Keelie turns my way. "I say we celebrate with funnel cake. It's on me!"

I glance over to where Noah and Everett help gather the wood that was split, then shoot a look over to the booth Agatha Reed is manning, which just so happens to be a few feet from the funnel cake.

We head that way and I tell Keelie I'll catch up with her and the kids in a minute.

"Got it," she says. "And don't worry, Lot. I'll make sure we don't make too big of a mess with the powdered sugar!"

We split ways as I head straight for the exact redhead I came here looking for.

Something tells me I'm about to dig into something far messier than a plate of powdered sugar.

### LOTTIE

With Everett and Noah busy basking in the glory of their lumberjack showdown, or gathering splinters as they gather the newly cut firewood, I finally make my way to Agatha Reed's booth.

The crowd around her has thinned out, leaving a perfect opening for me to swoop in and start asking questions—after I taste a few of her famous comfort foods, of course. I'd hate to be rude. Or hungry.

My hand settles over my belly as the crowd disperses.

Agatha Reed's booth stands before me, and now that the testosterone-fueled spectacle is over, it's time to get down to brass tacks, or butter buns. Obviously, the twins and I are rooting for the latter.

But as I start toward the woman, I can't shake the feeling that despite my winning streak last night, my luck might be on the verge of running out. And there's no telling what kind of mess I'll be left to clean up.

Noah and Everett are right. Whoever is after Suze—whoever killed Tom Darius and Ursula Wingate—is dangerous. They're not afraid to kill people to make a point, and if that scarf that strangled Ursula was truly meant for Suze, then they're not afraid to make mistakes either.

Agatha spots me as I approach, her face lighting up with the kind of warmth you'd expect from someone who's spent her life feeding people.



“Well, if it isn’t Lottie Lemon!” she exclaims, wiping her hands on a checkered apron. “I remember you from the shower. Your mother can’t say enough kind things about you. Now come on over, hon. You must be starving! I’ve got just the thing to fill you up.”

Before I can politely decline—not that I would—she’s already scooping a generous portion of chicken pot pie onto a plate and shoving it into my hands. “Here, try this. It’s my special recipe, and I promise you, it’ll warm you up from the inside out.”

“Ooh, thanks, Agatha,” I say, smiling as I take a bite. The flavors hit me all at once—rich, savory, and oh-so-comforting. “Oh wow. This is amazing .”

I’m not sure if it’s better than mac and crack, but then, I’m not sure it’s not either.

“I knew you’d like it.” Agatha beams, clearly more than happy with my praise. “But don’t stop there. You have to try my mac and cheese. And the beef stew. And don’t even think about leaving without tasting my apple crumble.”

“You don’t have to twist my arm,” I tease as she piles more and more food onto my plate. “Wow, thank you. I’m starting to feel like I’m in a food-eating competition all on my own. But don’t you worry, the twins will be more than excited to help me go for the gold.”

Just as I’m about to strategize how I’m going to manage all this yummy food and an interrogation, a familiar chill sweeps over me.

Petey materializes beside me, eyeing the food with that I’ve-never-eaten-before half-starved glint in his eye.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” he practically purrs and his fur glows an ethereal shade of blue. “Looks like a feast fit for a polar bear. Or two. I think you’re

going to need my help with that, Lottie.”

I shoot him a look that says keep your paws and claws off my yum yums , but deep down I know it’s a losing battle. I can’t go up against a polar bear and win—not when his appetite rivals my own.

And just as I suspected, he digs right in with his ghostly paws scooping up mashed potatoes and scattering pot pie in his wake faster than I can blink, wink, or pick up a fork.

Agatha, of course, can’t see Petey, but she can see the food disappearing at an alarming rate.

“My goodness, Lottie,” she gasps as she says it. “I didn’t realize you would be licking the platter clean in record time. You must be really hungry. But then, you are eating for three.”

I force a smile as I hold up my still unused fork as Petey demolishes the plate in front of me.

“What can I say?” I shrug. “I don’t fool around in the kitchen.”

“You certainly fool around in the bedroom.” She winks as a lusty laugh rumbles out of her. “I’m sorry, that was crass. You’ll have to excuse me. It’s been a busy day. And once I get tired, the real me comes out.” She finishes with a laugh once again.

“Please, no need to apologize,” I say as she promptly refills my plate. “And thank you. I will gladly pay you for each and every bite.”

“No way.” She waves the thought off. “After what you went through during your baby shower? I felt so bad for you girls. The last thing I want you to worry about is

giving me a dime.”

Petey nods with a mouthful of mac and cheese. “You know, this stuff is really good. But it doesn’t compare to Francine’s lobster mac and crack.”

I take a bite and moan, because, well, the mac and cheese is heavenly. Petey is right; Francine wins this competition hands down.

Agatha holds a finger my way before calling over her shoulder, “Mary! Bring out some more of the pot pie, would you? I’ve got a guest who’s going to need seconds! And maybe thirds. Possibly fourths.”

My eyes widen as a young woman hustles over with another heaping plate.

“Really, Agatha, I don’t want to impose...”

“Nonsense!” Agatha waves me off once again. “You’re not leaving here hungry. Besides, I’m always happy to see someone who appreciates good food.”

Petey’s already working on my second plate, and I’m doing my best to look like I’m the one devouring it. It’s a good thing I’m pregnant, and that’s not something I say often these days.

Finally, as the last of the pot pie vanishes, I take a deep breath and seize the moment.

“Agatha, I’m so sorry about Ursula. I can’t imagine how hard this must be for you, losing your best friend like that. My mother told me how close you were.” Not in so many words, but she did introduce them as best friends that first day.

Agatha’s cheerful demeanor falters for a moment. “Thank you, Lottie. It’s been difficult, to say the least. Ursula was like a sister to me. We did everything together.

She had such a zest for life, always pushing me to try new things, to take bigger risks.” She closes her eyes a moment too long. “I miss her more every day.”

“I’m sure you do,” I say softly. “She sounded like an incredible woman.”

“She was,” Agatha agrees as her eyes mist over. But then she frowns, sending a crease forming between her brows so deep you could lose your car keys in it. “But I’ll tell you something, Lottie. Not everything was perfect in Ursula’s world.”

I give a little nod because I know for a fact the dirt is about to start flying.

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LOTTIE

“O h?” I lean in toward Agatha Reed right here at her booth in the middle of the Winter Festival. “In what ways were things not perfect in Ursula’s world?”

“Well, she had that restaurant.” She shrugs. “I told her a restaurant was no joke. I mean, she was a foodie in that she loved to eat, but mostly because I was doing all the cooking. Ursula never lifted a finger in the kitchen unless it was to pick up a fork. She hated anything to do with putting a meal together. But once she married Five—she, or should I say we, had a habit of calling her husbands by the number in which they were acquired, matrimonially speaking—that’s when she had the means.”

“She had a lot of husbands,” I muse.

“Did she ever. And boy, did those men fall hard and fast for her. Of course, she had a no-prenup rule. She was no fool, which is more than I can say for her victims.” She gives a dark chuckle. “Anyway, she found out the hard way what a chore owning your own restaurant could be.”

“I’m shocked she opened one if she didn’t like to cook. I run my own bakery, so I know how much work it is. My love of baking is the only thing that keeps me going.”

“Ursula always was one to learn a lesson the hard way.”

“I’ll say,” Petey huffs. “She once tried to ride me like a horse after her father told her not to. She learned the hard way that polar bears weren’t nearly as accommodating as the equines among us. She nearly broke a bone. And I was the one who was blamed.”

I offer a forlorn look his way. The only thing Petey is guilty of is looking too cute, and maybe having a too-big-for-his-furry-britches appetite.

“Well, since she didn’t cook, I bet you stepped in and helped her out with the menu. I guess it didn’t hurt to have a BFF who’s a top chef.” I hold what’s left of my plate her way as if to prove my point.

“Oh, she didn’t let me anywhere near that place. I think she thought I was going to snatch it out from under her. For as much as she stole boyfriends and husbands away from other people, she was afraid the same was going to happen to her. She didn’t have a happy home life. Her father was a notorious womanizer, and her mother was left penniless in the aftermath of their divorce. Ursula swore she’d never be like her mother, so she sprouted into the female version of her father instead. It was an ugly sight.” She gives a dark laugh. “In fact, she stole one of my men away from me while we were still married. Although, I will admit, Joe and I were pretty much over at that point. When I confronted her about it, she said it was to show me what a jerk he was. But I already knew that. Anyway, Ursula and I survived that debacle and Joe went on to cheat on another half a dozen wives.” She clamps her lips as she looks my way. “That was something else that I admired about Ursula. She was a pretty good judge of character, which is why I was shocked when she hired Francine to work at her place.”

“Francine Dundee?” I inch back, shocked to hear it.

She nods. “Oh yeah, I know she looks as innocent as can be and she’d want you to think she is, too. She has that whole better-than-thou attitude. But she’s every bit the sinner as the rest of us.” She casts a glance in the direction of where the lumberjack competition took place. “Her husband, Mark, is the guy that makes all those cutesy little wooden bears that you see all over town. He carves eagles and other wooden monstrosities, but his specialty is those Honey Hollow bears as he calls them. And since Ursula’s restaurant is in Honey Hollow, she hired him to make her about a dozen of them to sprinkle around the property. That’s when Francine came sniffing

around and asked if she could have a seasonal position at the Cozy Croon Café—that's the name of Ursula's place. Well, it turns out, Francine is the real deal when it comes to the kitchen. That's when the café really took off. She put things on that menu that even made my mouth water. Anyway, as of late, they had a big falling-out." She shrugs. "It was ugly."

"Over what?" I ask, stumped at what it might be. "I mean, I know Francine isn't exactly easy-going, but I don't see her going out of her way to cause trouble either."

Agatha presses her lips tight as she casts a quick glance around. "I'm not one to start rumors. Look, my best friend is dead, but I can honestly say with a clear conscience that Ursula was no saint. She had a bad habit, and that habit was called men. Despite the fact she had a perfectly good, and might I add wealthy, man at home, she still liked to walk around the proverbial supermarket to see what other fruit there was to be squeezed. And let's just say, Mark Dundee's woodworking wasn't the only thing that caught Ursula's eye."

Both Petey and I inhale so hard, that half the food on my plate disappears from the effort.

Wait a minute. I glance down to see Petey slurping it all up and he hardly seems aware of the sultry snub Agatha just threw at her bestie.

Honestly, even if I knew that about Keelie, I would probably take it to the grave with me. I don't see any reason to sully her good name any more than she already had. Not that Keelie has done any such thing. She's as loyal as the day is long. And even though Bear was once the king of the cads, he's just as fiercely loyal to my bestie as she is to him.

No, it wasn't Petey's gasp that was harmonizing with mine. I turn around and groan. It was Carlotta.

“What in heaven’s name is Mark Dundee thinking?” Carlotta’s eyes fill with fire.

“ Ah , Carlotta,” I coo. “It’s so nice to see you’re defending Francine’s honor despite all of your differences.”

“Not that, Lot.” She waves me off. “I’ve been putting out the bait to that man for years. And the fact he chose Ursula Wingate over me stings a bit.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” I mutter as I turn to Agatha. “Please, ignore her.” A thought comes to me. “Hey, no wonder Francine was livid with Ursula the day of the shower. I bet she found out!”

Agatha shrugs. “It seems so. Ursula never was good at keeping a secret. In fact, it wouldn’t surprise me one bit if Ursula was taunting Francine with the fact she was interested in her man.”

“There’s no way Mark would step out on her,” I say, mostly to appease the fact I don’t want to believe it could be true. “I mean, they have that big family. And they’re very religious.”

“ Pfft .” Agatha rolls her eyes. “You would be surprised which married men are the easiest to net. Sometimes men want something a little more exciting in the bedroom than their wives can handle. I bet that’s what happened with Mark. And heaven knows it didn’t get any more exciting than Ursula.”

A crowd presses in and soon the booth is inundated.

“Thank you for the food, Agatha,” I tell her. “Your cooking is truly comforting.”

She beams, pleased as punch to hear it. “Anytime, Lottie. You’re welcome at my table whenever you like.”



“I’m sticking around,” Petey announces as he rocks back onto his hind legs. “The pot pie and I have some unfinished business to tend to.”

I thank Agatha again, but as I leave the booth, the weight of her words lingers.

“Poor Francine,” I say as Carlotta and I walk back into the crowd.

“Face it, Lot, Francine had every reason to want that homewrecker dead. And don’t you think for a minute that she doesn’t believe she’s above the law. I bet that whole thou-shalt-not-murder thing went right out the window when she found out someone was trying to wreck her family.”

“Well, if that’s true, why not kill her cheating husband?”

“Death is too easy for some people. Mark has to pay in other ways. Trust me, living with Francine is a fate worse than death.”

“And how does this all fit in with Suze?” I say. “I’m getting the feeling Francine isn’t just a side dish in this meal—she’s a key player. And something tells me that whatever she’s hiding is going to change everything.”

Noah and Everett jog this way and they both have the same disturbed look on their faces.

“We need to leave,” Noah says, out of breath. “Something’s happened to my mother.”

### LOTTIE

Panic sets in the moment Noah, Everett, and I burst through the doors of my mother's B&B. And believe me, the cozy haunted charm this place holds is doing nothing to soothe the anxiety gnawing away at me.

"Kitty cat ." Lyla Nell giggles as we trot through the foyer, and Thirteen runs by, leaving a trail of purple stars in his ghostly wake.

"Yes, sweetie," I tell her. "Looks as if Thirteen has somewhere to be." I glance at Noah. "Has your mother said anything else?"

"Nothing," Noah pants. "All I know is she said she received a disturbing note and that we had to get down here immediately."

"The killer could still be on the premises," Everett growls. "Lemon, let me take you home."

"Too late," I say as we zoom through the empty reception hall. "I have to know what that note says and I'm already here."

Lyla Nell sits perched on Noah's hip, clutching a stuffed bear as if he were a life preserver, while Everett strides ahead, looking determined to track down the killer himself.

I'm sandwiched between them, trying to keep my anxiety and my appetite in check, but it's not easy when every instinct is telling me that something is seriously wrong.

Not to mention I missed out on those funnel cakes back at the Winter Festival. And sorry, Suze, but that is the biggest grievance of them all.

The sound of laughter comes from the drawing room, and we speed that way. The doors are wide open, and I'm shocked to see a gaggle of little kids sitting cross-legged on the floor. Each and every one of them is staring at my sister, Lainey, with wide eyes as she sits on an armchair, reading aloud from a book.

Lainey is all smiles as she holds the book out so they can see the colorful pictures of what looks to be a polar bear. I'm sensing a theme in my life. And her voice has a bit of a lilt to it as she spins a tale like a pro—or rather reads like a pro. And considering she runs the Honey Hollow Library, she, in fact, went pro a long time ago.

“What in the world...” I start with a whisper, but my voice trails off as my mother pops up beside me and gives us all a little wave.

“Isn't it wonderful?” she says, clapping her hands together like a proud mother hen. “We've started something new. It's called Story Time with Ghosts. The kids love it. We read the books, and the ghosts rattle the chandeliers and ruffle the curtains. It's all very theatrical.”

“Story Time with Ghosts?” I stare at her for a moment. “Please tell me you're not hosting a séance for toddlers?”

“Of course not. Don't be silly.” She flicks a wrist at the thought. “You know darn well hosting a séance is grounds for getting my membership revoked at church. I'm already on the fringe for having a home brimming with the dead. Besides, this is all in fun. And the ghosts seem to enjoy it.”

The chandeliers give a mean rattle and I look up to see Greer and Winslow each swinging from their own mountain of crystal as if they were a couple of flying

trapeze artists.

They wave down at me and I give a tiny wave back.

“Yeah, well, let’s hope they don’t get too enthusiastic and start throwing the furniture around.” I turn to my mother once more. “Mom, do you have any idea of where we can find Suze?” Never mind the fact little Lea prefers to throw machetes.

Mom cranes her neck past me into the hall as a few couples start to migrate this way. Parents of the children being quasi-terrified, I’m assuming.

“Oh, I’m sure Suze is around here somewhere.” Mom twitches her lips as she sighs. “Last I saw, she was heading toward the conservatory. Probably admiring all of those gifts left over from the baby shower. People have been going in all week taking a peek around. Which reminds me, I’ll need to have the do-over shower that we’ll be hosting catered as well. I just can’t wait to get my hands on those crepes again. They’re so delicious, they’re downright creamy and dreamy.”

“The key really is making sure the batter is as thin as possible.” I’m not sure why I offered up that little tidbit. My mother stopped trying her hand at baked goods the day I opened the Cutie Pie, and she’s been feeding her sugar addiction for free ever since.

Noah glances at his phone. “I just got a text. She is in the conservatory.”

“Great,” I say as the three of us turn to leave, but my mother blocks Noah’s path.

“Why don’t you give me that dimpled darling?” she says, taking Lyla Nell out of his arms. “It’s time to listen to a few spooky tales with Glam Glam!” She wrinkles her nose my way. “I promise, these books are spooktacular.”

“ Boo book! ” Lyla Nell claps as they head inside and the three of us make a dash for

the glass castle sitting in the back.

Within seconds, we spot Suze hunched over something while seated at one of the tables up front. And if I'm not mistaken, her entire body looks as if it's shaking.

We burst into the room, and Suze jumps a foot high in her chair while clutching a piece of paper to her chest as if it were her last lifeline.

"Mom, what's going on?" Noah barks.

Suze looks up. Her eyes are wide and filled with fear.

"I... I found this," she whispers hoarsely, holding out what looks to be a letter on a standard-size sheet of notebook paper. It's blank from the back, but once we circle around to see the front, we gasp at the sight of it.

Noah pulls on a pair of gloves, ready to collect the evidence at hand—whatever it may be—and carefully takes the letter from her.

The note is composed of cutout letters and words from a magazine, or a variety of magazines, with each word carefully glued to the paper in a manner that sends chills down my spine. Without even reading a sentence, the message is clear, menacing, and once I see Suze's name at the top, it's all too personal.

Noah sighs. "I'll read it." He clears his throat, and just as he's about to begin, a wild ruckus erupts from the door as Carlotta rides in on the back of a polar bear, who just so happens to be sprinting this way. A wild spray of blue stars sparkles in his wake, and the ground shakes as they thunder their way over.

"Don't you dare start without us," Carlotta bleats as she pulls back on Petey's fur above his neck and he whinnies like a horse while rocking back on his hind legs.

“Keelie told me that the three of you took off as if your knickers were on fire. I figured you were about to get frisky, but then she mentioned something about Suze wanting all the attention. So I figured Suzie Q was dead.” She looks at Suze then turns my way. “Sorry, Lot.”

“Carlotta.” I swat her foot because it’s the closest to me.

Petey looks my way with those big button eyes of his. “Well, if she’s not dead, what are we doing here? They’ve got funnel cake back at the festival.”

“Eh .” Carlotta slides off of him. “We may as well stay and see what has Suze so hot around the collar.”

Suze sputters and gags as she points to Carlotta. “How was she floating like that? She’s a witch, isn’t she? I knew it! I knew there was something dark and wicked about you. The both of you.” She points my way as well and I roll my eyes.

Even though Suze is transmudane, she doesn’t seem to retain the fact that I am, too. Heck, she can’t get my name right half the time. Honestly, I don’t think she’s trying to be rude. I think her mind is getting ready to take a permanent vacation. If I were Suze, I’d take a real vacation before she loses her marbles and can’t enjoy a good frozen concoction while sitting on a tropical beach.

“Go on, Noah,” I say. “Let’s find out what this psychopath has to say.”

### LOTTIE

“ T o Suze, ” Noah begins to read that ragtag letter Suze received as Everett, Carlotta, Petey, and I gather around Suze right here in the conservatory among the mountain of baby gifts, from cribs to diaper bins, to those modesty scarves that Francine knitted in just about every shade of pastel. The room is still littered with plates and cups left over from the party, along with glitter, confetti, and a trail of baby blue bobby pins scattered across the floor.

“ Do I have to teach you a lesson, too? ” Noah continues. “ Didn’t you learn anything from Ursula? How dare she try to steal my husband! She is a witch, and she deserves to burn in the hottest portal of the hot place downstairs! She kept telling everyone who would listen that her husband was a bore, and that’s why she couldn’t stop herself from looking at other men. Well, I have news—she might have been a homewrecker, but she wasn’t about to wreck mine. I made sure she’d never steal another man again. And I’m getting ready to do the same to you, Suze. If I were you, I’d leave Honey Hollow and go very far away. ”

A stunned silence fills the room as we all take in the gravity of the words. This isn’t just a letter, it’s a threat —one that carries the weight of deadly intentions, and deadly intentions already carried out.

Everett shakes his head as he glowers at the letter. “We need to find out who wrote this. Suze, where did you find it?”

“It was in my purse.” She shrugs. “I could have unwittingly collected it anywhere. As soon as I stepped into the B&B, I reached in to find my keycard and found this folded

in my bag instead.”

“Where were you today?” I ask as my adrenaline begins to surge because I’m very well aware of one place she was.

“The bakery, of course,” she snips my way while her bangs flicker in her eyes and she tries to blink them away. “Then I stopped by the library book sale. I heard there was a festival out in Hollyhock, so I stopped by there, too, and picked up some funnel cake.”

“She’s no fool,” Carlotta grouses before giving me the stink eye. “No thanks to you, Petey and I had to abandon ship halfway through our very first bite. You owe us both some serious funnel cake.”

“Duly noted,” I say. “Suze, you went around the world today. That note could have come from anywhere.”

“It’s very specific, though.” Everett tips his head as he examines it again.

Noah nods. “Whoever put this together was convinced that Ursula was after her husband.”

“Or they want us to believe that,” I point out.

“Thank you for defending Ursula’s honor,” Petey says, sounding a bit exhausted by having to defend it himself.

“From what we’ve heard, Ursula was no saint,” I say while wincing his way. “Wait a minute.” I look back at the note. “She is a witch, and she deserves to burn in the hottest portal of the hot place downstairs,” I read again. “Why, this sounds as if?—”



“Francine wrote it,” Carlotta shouts so loud her words reverberate off the walls. “Francine always refers to the hot place as being downstairs. My guess is because that’s where she comes from.”

“Francine?” Noah stares at the note, baffled.

“She did have a motive,” I say. “Agatha told me that Francine found out that Ursula was after her husband.”

Carlotta growls, most likely because Mark never took her bait as she mentioned earlier.

“That’s what I heard,” I say. “Agatha Reed said that Ursula went to Mark’s place to pick up some wood carvings for her restaurant over a year ago. That’s where she met both Francine and Mark. She took on Francine to do some seasonal work at the restaurant and?—”

“She took on Mark to do some salacious work in the bedroom.” Carlotta slaps her knee as if it were the funniest thing in the world.

“We don’t know what happened,” I say. “Besides, it’s nothing to laugh at. Francine and Mark have a family—a supersized one at that. If Ursula was trying to upset the apple cart, then she really was a witch.”

Petey sighs. “But like Ursula always said, it takes two to tango.”

“And there’s that.” I glance at the stack of baby blankets with their matching modesty scarves, all meticulously knitted by Francine’s own hand. “Wait a minute. Francine knit the very scarf that Ursula was strangled with.”

“Oh, she’s going to strangle me, Noah!” Suze warbles it out with fear. “Do

something, would you?”

I lift a finger. “And there were several baby blue bobby pins found around Ursula’s body. Francine had an entire army of baby blue bobby pins in her hair that day.” I point to a few on the floor.

“Ursula was a hussy.” Suze rolls her eyes. “I can hardly blame Francine for wanting her dead. But me? I’m not interested in Mark in the slightest. In fact, I can’t remember the last time I spoke with the man.”

“Orson did say that trying to contain Ursula was like trying to put out a fire engulfing a stick of dynamite,” I point out. “He knew she was trouble. Even her own best friend couldn’t deny the fact Ursula had an insatiable appetite when it came to men.”

“Okay”—Everett rumbles—“we’ve got enough to put Francine at the top of the suspect list.” He turns to Suze and pins her with a stare. “Tell us everything you know about the Fletcher Hotel. Whatever you’re a part of is endangering my family, and I do not take kindly to people who do that.”

A breath hitches in my throat as I lean his way. “Did you just threaten Suze?”

My entire body enlivens at the thought and a prickle of delight runs from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes. Everett doesn’t say a word. He simply continues to stare the woman down.

“Oh my word, I’ve never been so turned on by my husband,” I say a stitch too loud. “I need to pull him into a dark corner, stat.”

“Lottie.” Noah cringes as he looks my way. “Let’s try to focus on the task at hand.”

“Tell that to my raging hormones,” I shoot back.

He shrugs. “Stop by my place. I’ll see what I can do. But then again, you know exactly what I can do.” His brows bounce as he says it and my mind races with a thousand hot and heavy memories, each and every one of them more searing than the last.

I clear my throat. “Boy, is it getting hot in here.”

“Speak,” Everett barks at Suze and a tremor rides through me.

Things really are heating up in here.

“Watch out, Petey,” Carlotta says while taking a step away from me. “I think she’s going to blow!”

“I am not going to blow,” Suze huffs as she eyes the exit. Suze thinks everything is about her, so no one in the room is surprised that she hijacked the barb Carlotta was slinging my way. “I think it’s my bedtime.” She zips out of the room so fast you’d think Noah was ready to cuff her for both murders.

“Mom.” Noah jogs after her but to no avail. He looks back our way. “I’ll take care of this in the morning. She can use a good night’s rest.”

Everett shakes his head. “Hear that, Lemon? In this town, justice can wait, so long as everyone is getting a good night’s rest.” He wraps an arm around my waist—or what’s left of my waist. “Let’s go home and take care of that craving you’re having.” His lips curve just enough to be dangerous—and to let me know we won’t be getting a whole lot of rest tonight.

“Good idea,” Petey says as he floats toward the door. “I think I’ll head back to the Winter Festival and take care of my own cravings. I’ll be sure to hit the chicken pot pie before I venture to the funnel cake. Ursula always said I needed to finish my

dinner before I had dessert. Of course, back then dessert was a bucket of mackerel heads. Death has made just about everything more delicious.”

“I can’t wait,” Carlotta says, patting her belly. “What am I saying? I don’t want to be dead. I want to eat all the funnel cake I can handle and then finish the night with some Harry pie.”

“ Eww . That sounds disgusting,” I say as the two of them take off and my mother shows up and hands Lyla Nell to Noah.

“I’ll get her home, Lot,” Noah says as they head out of the conservatory.

“And I’ll go pull up your car,” Everett says as he steps out.

Since he drove to Hollyhock with Noah, he drove my car here. His driving was a bit more NASCAR than I care for, but then we raced over in the event Suze was about to have the life snuffed out of her.

Why in the world won’t she tell us what she knows about the Fletcher Hotel and that illegal gambling room?

“Would you look at all this stuff?” Mom waves a hand around at all of the baby whoozits and whatzits. “I think the gifts have multiplied twice since the shower. But just two more days and all of this will find a home where it belongs.”

Who is Suze protecting? And why?

“Lottie?” Mom waves a hand over my face. “Oh, you’re exhausted.”

Whatever is happening at the Fletcher Hotel is at the heart of all of this, and it’s happening in one of those penthouse event rooms.

The event rooms!

Of course! There's an empty event room right next to that sleazy den of sin.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm exhausted," I say as a surge of adrenaline hits me. "In fact, I just had a thought regarding the shower." I nod her way. "We're not going to be hosting it here. There's been a change of plans."

### LOTTIE

Several important things happened within the span of a very short time.

The Fletcher Hotel was designated as the new locale of the quadruple baby bop gift drop.

All gifts were moved from the B they were practically taunting me to do it.

Lastly, there is enough lobster mac and crack here to turn all of Vermont into a strung-out, carb-fueled junkie who will do anything for his next hit—including inviting a would-be killer to the party. And since I’m having the Cozy Croon Café cater the event as well, we’ve set up a karaoke station near the back, and it’s been nonstop busy as women of all ages take turns at crooning with the best of them.

So far I’ve heard thirteen renditions of “Islands in the Stream”—not that I’m complaining. I secretly love that song, so I’m not the slightest bit annoyed that I’ll probably be hearing it in my sleep for the next five decades.

The Fletcher Hotel, with all its faded grandeur, really knows how to gussy up when it wants to impress.

The penthouse event room is decked out in pale blue, pink, and soft yellow, with delicate streamers cascading from the ceiling like some sort of waterfall made of crepe paper. The chandeliers glisten, reflecting off the crystal punch bowl, while baby-themed decorations—including an alarming number of diaper “cakes” and stuffed animals—dot every available surface. There’s enough baby gear in this room

to open up a department store, and I'm pretty sure at least half of it will never see the light of day once the twins arrive.

Who needs this many baby blankets, anyway?

I'll tell you who. A killer like Francine Dundee, that's who, because the woman has gone on a knitting spree that could rival Santa's workshop. Every last baby blanket on the premises is from her, and yes, each one is meticulously knitted and stitched in various shades of baby blue, pink, and yellow.

But right now, neither Meg, Sam, Lainey nor I are focused on the gifts. And well, Carlotta's not either.

No can do. We're huddled around the buffet table, more specifically, around the lobster mac and crack, which is the true star of the party. And by huddled, I mean we've essentially made a protective barrier around it, like a bunch of cavemen guarding their last scrap of mammoth meat.

"Oh my goodness," I moan deeply through my next bite. "It's like I've died and gone to mac and cheese heaven."

Sam spoons another bite into her mouth, moaning in a way that makes me wonder if she's having an out-of-body experience, which I for one am.

"What's happening here?" she mumbles with her eyes rolling back in pure bliss. "I'm starting to think we might need an intervention."

"I've been telling you for years," Carlotta chimes in, her voice muffled by the obscene amount of cheesy, buttery goodness she's just crammed into her mouth. "Francine Dundee is a wicked witch. She's definitely cast a spell on this here dish. There's no other explanation. Lot, what are we going to do if she gets locked up for

killing you-know-who? I'm not ready to live in a world without this."

I nearly choke on my bite of lobster crack. "Oh my word, I didn't even think of that." I gasp. "We can't lose this recipe. It's basically a public service at this point."

"Maybe we can imprison her in our kitchen?" Carlotta suggests with a look in her eyes that suggests she's willing to set the trap herself. "Twenty years to life making lobster mac and crack for me should teach her a lesson."

Meg, who is balancing her third plate of the stuff on her pregnant belly, snorts at the thought. "Right, because the sheriff's department is totally going to sign off on that. Imprisonment in your kitchen? I'm pretty sure that violates some Geneva Cooking Convention thing or whatever."

I glance at Carlotta. "Maybe we don't need to imprison her. Maybe she'll give me the recipe if I can convince Everett to go easy on her when it's time for sentencing."

Lainey, who's been suspiciously quiet for the past few minutes—a rarity, raises a brow. "So your plan is to blackmail Francine Dundee into handing over her prized recipe in exchange for leniency in court?"

"Seems reasonable," I mutter through a mouthful.

Sam lifts a fork poised in midair. "I don't know, Lottie. She might consider her lobster mac and crack recipe more valuable than her freedom."

"Exactly," Lainey agrees. "This is Francine we're talking about. The woman takes pride in three things: her floor-length hair, her unshakable sense of moral superiority, and this unholy creation wisely called mac and crack. Do you think she's just going to hand over the recipe like it's some kind of basic church potluck dish? Think again. This is the kind of stuff that goes to the grave with you."



It's safe to say I've let the killer theory out of the bag—well technically, it was Carlotta, but I didn't exactly stop the train.

And who could blame me?

It was Carlotta who gathered us around to dig into the killer cook's killer creation. And sadly, I'm afraid she's not wrong on either point.

“Let's not spread any more rumors about our supposed killer,” I say to those with bloated bellies gathered around me, and yes, I'm counting Carlotta in that equation. “Noah says he needs to do a little more digging before he makes an arrest. Besides, I find it very hard to believe that Francine killed Tom Darius, too. What reason would she have to do that?”

Lainey shrugs. “Maybe he found out some deep, dark, and totally twisted secret about Francine. I mean, that woman's entire reputation revolves around being pious and perfect. If there's something dark lurking under there, I could see how it would be an embarrassment to her and her family. Maybe it was so embarrassing that she'd rather die or kill than have her secret exposed.”

“I suppose nothing is impossible,” I say. Although I have a hard time believing it. That woman is so clean she squeaks. The fact she committed a double murder is a hard sell for me, despite the mounting evidence against her.

“Lottie!” Mom waves me over from where she's admiring the mountain of baby gifts, each one lovingly wrapped and ready to be sent to the women at the shelter.

“Mmm,” I moan through my last bite. “Don't be greedy, girls. Save some for the rest of us—aka me.” I take off and waddle toward my mother as the guests begin to swarm the event.

Since Evie decided to sit this one out, she offered to watch Lyla Nell, and I took her up on it. I wasn't so crazy about having the girls here since the last shower went sideways—all the way to the morgue to be exact.

Here's hoping we don't lose another life at this little do-over event. Although judging by the size of all these bellies, we might just welcome a life or two into the world.

And to think a killer might be among us.

### LOTTIE

It's four in the quasi-evening and the penthouse event room glows with its pastel decor, the sound of a chaotic karaoke duet squeaks through the speakers, and the tables around us groan under the weight of countless gifts. Honestly, it looks like the entire population of Vermont decided to donate to this do-over baby shower.

"Isn't this just lovely?" Mom clasps her hands as she looks at the towers of baby gear that look as if they could take any child from infancy to college. "Just look at all of this! It's like Christmas morning, but instead of toys, it's practical things like burp cloths and diaper rash cream."

"Well, you know what they say, nothing says holiday spirit like a nice, soothing ointment," I deadpan, admiring a particularly large stack of baby wipes. "The women at the shelter are going to feel as if they've hit the jackpot."

"Oh, they will! This was such a great idea, Lottie. People just love to spoil newly expectant mothers," Mom says while craning her neck past me into the crowd of women already gathered here. "Speaking of expectant women, here come Agatha and Orson. Invited them both back." She frowns a moment. "Although to be honest, I didn't think Orson would show."

I glance over as Agatha Reed and Orson Wingate waltz in, both of them dressed as if this isn't just a baby shower, but some high-society gala. Agatha's wearing a floral gown that probably costs more than the bakery's monthly rent, and Orson looks like he stepped out of a Ralph Lauren ad for senior citizens—polished, but with a rugged edge.

“Lottie, Miranda”—Agatha coos—“this is such a beautiful thing you’re doing for the community. I just can’t get over how kindhearted you both are.”

“Well, we do what we can,” I say, smiling politely. “But it wouldn’t be half as good without everyone’s help. The women at the shelter are going to be set for months—years maybe.” Possibly decades.

Orson nods approvingly and his white hair gleams under the soft lighting. “I had boxes of diapers, in every size, sent straight to the shelter this morning. My assistant took care of everything.” He smiles, the sort of smile you give when you’re happy with yourself for being generous but also subtly fishing for praise. “In Ursula’s name, of course.”

“Oh, Orson! That’s so wonderful,” Mom says, patting his arm. “The shelter will be so grateful. And again, I’m so sorry for your loss. If there’s anything I can do to make things better for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“You’ve been far too kind already.” He nods my way. “Your mother has comped my stay at the B&B.”

“It’s the least I could do,” Mom says, clasping her chest.

“Well, ladies, I’ll leave you be.” He glances toward the door. “You know, I hear there’s a secret casino next door. I might just check it out. Test my luck.”

“Good luck, Orson,” I say as we watch him saunter off with the air of someone who thinks they can charm Lady Luck herself.

Spoiler alert: Lady Luck doesn’t like to be charmed. She likes to be cheated. That’s how casinos make their money. At least the illegal ones.

In fact, Everett is over there now, but only because Noah and the gambling task force down at the sheriff's department gave him the green light. They're planning a bust, but not until Noah gathers a few more clues about who's really behind all of this. Other than Francine, that is.

A thought hits me like a sugar crash after too many cupcakes. Wait just a hot-to-trot minute. Is Francine the one running the illegal gambling ring?

Everett said that Johnny person was just a lackey. That means there's someone else sitting on top of the cash-riddled totem pole.

But Francine?

I shake my head at the absurdity of it.

Francine running an underground casino? That's a stretch.

Agatha lingers a moment longer. "You know"—she says in a hushed tone—"Ursula always had a thing for stirring the pot. It's no wonder trouble followed her everywhere." She pauses and her eyes flicker with a hint of darkness. "But then, we all know Francine isn't exactly innocent either."

Mom and I exchange a glance.

"How so?" I'll bite.

Who knows? Maybe Agatha will say something to solidify everything we think we already know about Francine Dundee.

"Well"—Agatha glances over her shoulder briefly as another crowd pushes in—"let's just say that Francine has a knack for getting involved in... questionable activities.

She's always been good at keeping things quiet, but we all know nothing stays quiet in Honey Hollow for long. Especially not when you've got a temper like hers." She blinks past me. "Oh good, there's not a long line at the crepe station. I've been dying for another ever since that horrible day. I never did get to finish my last one."

She takes off and I make a mental note to come back to that little nugget regarding Francine. It sounds to me as if Agatha knows something else.

Before I can figure out how to shake it out of her, Lily strolls in, balancing a few boxes of sweet treats in her arms.

"This is it for now, Lot. But I need to move the bakery van," she says as she nods my way. "I left it in the loading zone, and unless I want to play chicken with a tow truck, I better scoot."

"I'll move it," I say, grabbing the keys from her and offering a quick smile. "I need some fresh air anyway. Too much lobster mac and crack in one sitting is a dangerous game."

Lily gives a grateful nod and disappears into the crowd. My mother and I split ways as I head down to the loading dock. The frozen air outside is a sharp contrast to the cozy warmth of the penthouse.

Leeds isn't exactly known for its scenic beauty, and the alley by the Fletcher Hotel isn't helping the reputation either. The streetlights are flickering like they're one bad day away from quitting, and the shadows seem darker here—heavier. If cities had back alleys where regrets went to die, this would be it.

I head toward the bakery van with its back doors still wide open. I'll be lucky if I don't find a dozen stray cats taking up residence in it by now. And if I do, they're all coming home with me.

I'm about halfway there when I spot Francine across the street, wrestling another silver tray out of her beat-up burgundy minivan. She's hunched over, grunting and groaning as she finally hoists the tray free, and I can only hope she's bringing more of that lobster mac and crack upstairs.

I don't care if that dish is enchanted. At this point, I'd sell both Pancake and Waffles for another plate.

Okay, so I wouldn't dare sell my sweet cats for a single bite. But you get the point.

She takes off and leaves the trunk ajar, probably thinking there's safety in open trunk numbers. And instead of heading toward my van, curiosity gets the best of me, and my feet take me in the direction of hers instead.

I lean in toward the opened back hatch and the aroma of that mac and crack hits me hard.

"Oh, thank goodness," I moan. I'm about to step away when I spot a denim duffle bag sitting to the right. It looks filled to the brim with the zipper partially opened, just sitting there like an open invite for me to peek inside.

I give a quick glance over my shoulder before leaning in and pulling back the zipper. My head leans deeper into the van as I look inside the bag and I freeze solid.

My heart stops cold.

I know exactly what Francine's deep, dark secret is.

LOTTIE

I 'm hardly able to blink before I hear the sound of footsteps coming from around the corner of the hotel. My pulse quickens, my eyes still locked on the nefarious contents of the duffle bag before me, and my heart sinks like a scone in a tall glass of milk.

Of all the secrets I expected to uncover tonight, this was not one of them.

Of all the secrets I expected to uncover in my lifetime , this was not one of them.

Francine rounds the corner and her eyes narrow the second she spots me bent over in the back of her minivan like a raccoon rifling through a dumpster.

Her face contorts into all sorts of unflattering shapes.

“Get away from there!” she barks, rushing forward as if I’ve just caught her with her hand in the naughty cookie jar—though, I suppose in a way, I have.

I stumble back, throwing up my hands. “Francine, what in the world are you doing with a bag full of—” I gesture to the duffle—“naughty adult toys?”

Francine freezes mid-step, her face flushing a deep crimson, and I can’t tell if she’s embarrassed or red with rage. With my luck, it’s both.

“How do you know what those things are?” she spits out, her voice trembling with embarrassment and anger.



Before I can formulate a halfway decent response—something other than “I read Cosmo ” or “Google exists” or “Haven’t you heard I like to have a good time with two men at a time?”—which, by the way, is so not true. Although I can’t be blamed for where my mind wanders while I’m asleep. Let’s just say my internal musings have found a way to take the edge off all these hormones in the most explicit ways with both Noah and Everett front and center. If I’m anything, I seem to be loyal to those two even in a subconscious state. Nevertheless, Carlotta barrels onto the scene with one of Francine’s death scarves wrapped around her neck—in pink, the exact shade that was chosen to send Ursula into the next life.

“Don’t you dare hurt my Lot Lot!” Carlotta screeches as she skids to a halt beside me. Her gaze darts to the open duffle bag, and her jaw roots to the ground. “Francine! What in the good Lord’s name are you, of all people, doing with a bag of fun in the back of your Dundee dumbie dumbo baby wagon?”

Francine gasps, throwing a hand to her chest like she’s about to faint from the scandal of it all.

Carlotta howls out a laugh. “Don’t tell me you’re taking a walk on the wild side, Franny.” She looks my way. “She’s lost her ever-loving mind! I bet she’d kill to keep a secret like this under wraps—or should I say under the sheets .” She gasps. “This must be why she killed that naked Santa and that floozy at your baby shower, Lot. Quick!” She grabs my arm. “You hit her over the head with one of your poison pies, and I’ll grab this bag of fun and make a run for it. Nobody has to know.”

I make a face. “Carlotta, we are not committing assault by pastry.”

Carlotta huffs, “Suit yourself. But if she comes at you with one of those pleasure pokers”—she gestures to the whip sticking out of the duffle bag—“don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Francine steps forward and raises a hand as if she's about to teach us both a lesson. "For heaven's sake, I didn't kill anyone," she seethes. "Although I will go on record to say, I'm glad someone offed that awful woman! She was trying to steal my man!"

"You mean the doodling diddle that you're married to?" Carlotta shouts back. "I've got news for you. It takes two to tango."

"Not unless you kill one," I point out. "And Francine, why are you letting your husband off the hook so easily? If my husband cheated, he'd be the first to go," I growl as I say it.

It's true. Everett had better take note. Although he knows better.

Carlotta shakes her head at the woman. "And here you've been running around, playing the part of pious homemaker while hiding your spicy little secrets in the back of your minivan."

"That floozy drove me to it," Francine roars back. "She told me that no man was going to stick around for what I had to offer in the bedroom, and I was out to prove her wrong. And just to be clear, Mark didn't cheat on me. He turned down her advances, but she kept coming at him. It was all a game to her. Well, I had news for Ursula Wingate. My family isn't a game. Nobody messes with my sacred union. I did what I had to do to prove her wrong." She points hard at the duffle bag. "And after I took care of business at home, Mark wouldn't even look at her anymore. That infuriated Ursula twice as much. That woman was a walking, talking spoiled brat who didn't care who she hurt so long as she got her way. And for the record, that awful woman was a terrible boss to boot. She never thought I had a good idea in my life. The only thing she ever approved of was my taste in men." She throws a glance at the duffle bag as if it's suddenly beneath her. "My man, to be exact."

"I'm sorry she went after Mark," I say as my voice softens.

Francine's lips press into a thin line, and she turns her gaze away as if she's trying to hide the anger simmering.

"I am, too," she says with a brittle voice. "She went after Mark hard. And the worst part? She flaunted it. Like she could just take him because she wanted to—as if I didn't exist. The woman had a perfectly good husband. And the man was wealthy as can be." She motions back to the hotel. "She could have had the world at her feet if she only kept her eyes where they should have been all along—on her own husband. And Orson didn't take too kindly to it when I blasted him about keeping his wife on a short leash. That's right. I ratted her out. If she was going to stir up trouble in my home, I was going to do the same in hers."

"I bet he wasn't thrilled to hear it," Carlotta says. "I guess Ursula was about to move on to hubby number six or sixteen."

"The word divorce was never used," Francine informs us as if she was proud. "I'm sure they were going to work on their marriage, just like Mark and I are working on ours."

I nod. "But you didn't kill her?"

She sniffs my way. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but Ursula Wingate isn't worth spending all eternity downstairs."

"But what about the crazy note you sent to Suze?" I ask.

"What note?" She wrinkles her nose as if I just let a foul odor fly.

"The one with all the magazine cutouts—with the threats."

She squints my way. "I think those babies are eating your brain, Lottie. Don't worry.

You'll get most of your mental faculties back once they're about thirteen. Then they'll turn your hair gray. Been there, done that."

"That explains a lot," Carlotta mutters. "You've lost so many brain cells, you forgot about the time you strangled your husband's would-be mistress with one of your soft, fluffy scarves."

Francine scoffs. "I may have wanted to wring her neck a few times, but I'm not a killer. Honestly, I was relieved when someone else did the dirty work. Now I can focus on more important things, like making sure my family stays intact and running the Cozy Croon Café the way a real restaurant should be run." She steps our way with an aggressive gait and both Carlotta and I belt out a short-lived scream.

But Francine is unmoved as she slams the trunk shut, locks up her van with a chirp, and heads back into the hotel.

"She didn't kill anyone." I sigh as I look up at the hotel. "Why did Francine motion to the hotel when she said Orson was wealthy as can be? I mean, I know he had some serious spare change. He bought Ursula that restaurant."

Carlotta shrugs. "Maybe he's loaded to the hilt. Hey, I bet that's why he didn't want to divorce his new cheat of a wife. She'd get half of everything." She shakes her head. "On second thought, he probably had an iron-clad prenup."

I blink up at the hotel.

I know who the killer is.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

NOAH

The stale air in my office is punctuated with coffee that's about six hours cold. Lucky for me, there's still a half-eaten box of donuts calling my name, generously gifted by Lottie this morning as I stopped by her bakery to wish her a good time at the shower. But for as much as I'd like to dive into that box and finish it off, my appetite seems to have up and vanished.

The papers strewn over my desk are sitting in a jumbled mess, and the letters printed over them are starting to move around like an army of angry ants.

I rub my eyes as I try once again to make sense of it all.

My phone vibrates over my desk, but I ignore it.

My mind races faster than my pulse. I've been playing this game of cat and mouse for hours now, and I think things are actually starting to click into place.

Pieces of the puzzle begin to shift and lock together in my mind.

Francine's strange behavior, Orson's dodgy demeanor, the suspicious activity surrounding the hotel.

Something in me doesn't believe this is about Francine. It can't be. It's too easy. Francine may have had a motive, but she doesn't fit the profile of a killer no matter how many different molds I try to squeeze her in.

This isn't just about Francine's righteous rage. It's about something bigger. Something darker.

I glance at a picture of the Fletcher Hotel with its chipping facade that masks the corruption that lurks within its walls.

My gut tightens.

The illegal casino. That has to be the key.

I pull out my phone and dig into the real estate records. I've learned enough from some of Lottie's successful investigations to know that secrets like these are buried in the details. Heck, all of Lot's investigations have been successful. In fact, I've learned more from her stubborn curiosity than I did in school.

I do a few quick searches, dig through some old deeds, and then I see it.

"Orson Wingate?" I inch back as I look at the screen once more.

The man who's been playing the part of a grieving widower owns the very building housing the casino.

My heart pounds.

There's no way this is just a coincidence. How is it that every trail I follow leads back to him in one way or another?

Just to be sure, I put his name into the search engine and hit enter. The screen populates with far too many options, so I begin scrolling through several pictures and articles.

One photo catches my eye—an event for the hotel’s grand reopening a few years back. And there, in the background, I see him.

“Tom Darius?”

He’s standing there as if he belongs, with a drink in hand, clinking glasses with none other than Orson.

Tom was more than just a victim. He was part of this. They both were.

I grab my coat and run out the door and straight out of the precinct.

The illegal casino, the corruption, the murders—it’s all connected.

I pant as I race to my truck, my breath visible in the cold night air.

I need to speak with Orson Wingate one more time.

### EVERETT

The makeshift casino here at the Fletcher Hotel is admittedly a step up from the seedy hole in the ground that Jimmy Canelli is running.

No nude women, no slot machines, far less alcohol, but they've got the good stuff.

I lift the whiskey that's gone warm in my hand. I'm not here to drink. I'm not even here to win big. I'm just here to glean whatever I can in hopes that something can shake loose the details about who's really running this place. But so far, I've got nothing.

The influx of polished men and women ready to part with their money, the women in gold dresses all too eager to serve, the constant noise and energy of this place is starting to grate on me, but I keep myself in check.

I'm playing my part. Just another high roller with money to burn and time to waste. And as long as Lemon is next door, I'm not going anywhere.

I hate to say it, but wherever Lemon goes, trouble has been known to follow. And I don't care how many ghosts come down from the other side to help her out, I don't care how many weapons Noah arms himself with, at the end of the day I want to be on the front lines, doing what I can to keep her safe.

I'm between rounds at the poker table and stepped aside to let my wallet cool off. When the task force down at the sheriff's station shuts this place down, I hope they offer me a refund.



Orson Wingate just so happens to be sitting across from me, leaning back in his seat while sipping a neat scotch. He looks a bit too comfortable for a man whose wife was murdered, but I've been at this long enough to know people hide their grief in strange ways. Or maybe he's hiding something else.

The room buzzes with activity around us—loud music, laughter, the clink of chips—but my focus stays on the man before me.

"I'm sorry about your wife," I say with as much sympathy as I can muster, and I mean it on the deepest level. No husband ever wants to know that pain. "From what I've heard, your wife seemed like the kind of woman who left an impression."

Orson's eyes flicker just for a second. "She was larger than life," he says, lifting his drink my way. "That woman always knew how to command attention from a room, especially with the men in that room." His smile falters. If that was a stab at humor, it seems to have backfired because I'd swear there was a glint of anger in his eyes.

"The best women do," I say. "Again, I'm sorry. I can't imagine the hole that this loss has left in your heart."

"You have no idea." He pulls out his phone. "But lucky for me, I've got good friends willing to make me feel better any way they can. Of course, I have my investments to keep me on my toes as well."

"What kind of investments?"

"Real estate. Lots of it. Too much of it. Most of it is running at a loss. Thankfully, I've found a way to adapt." He fiddles with his phone for a moment before lifting it to his ear. "Meet me outside. I think I'm ready for that alone time you promised." He wags the phone my way. "Have a good night, sir." He sets down his drink and drops a wad of cash next to it, and within seconds a woman in a gold gown scoops it up.

I watch as Orson straightens his suit jacket and nods to a couple of high rollers before he struts out of the casino as if he doesn't have a care in the world. But there's a tension in his shoulders, and if I didn't know better, I'd think he has something to hide.

"Excuse me"—I say to the gold glittering waitress before she can dart off—"do you know who that man is?"

"Orson?" She inches her head back and laughs. "Everyone around here knows who Orson is." She takes off and I shake my head.

He must be a high roller. A regular.

I swirl the whiskey one last time before setting the glass down as the gears in my mind start turning.

The man just lost his wife, and yet he seems far too composed. He looked comfortable here in the casino—too comfortable. Almost as if this is his second home.

I scan the room, my gaze settling on the plush carpets, the expensive decor, the polished way the entire establishment is run. This isn't some slapdash illegal operation. It's well-funded, organized, protected. Someone with money, someone who's interested in making a lot more of it.

That's not Francine.

A thought hits me.

It's time to have a little chat with Noah.

We're closer than we think.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:24 pm*

LOTTIE

“ T his is bad,” I whisper to myself as Carlotta and I speed into the lobby of the Fletcher Hotel and we practically collide with a one-ton furry white teddy bear.

“Petey, I’m so glad you’re here,” I say, more than happy to see him.

“Of course.” The ghostly cutie floats a few inches off the ground while his massive white fur glistens like freshly fallen snow. “I wouldn’t miss this mac and crack festival for anything.”

“Good to know.” I make a face at the button-eyed poltergeist. “Carlotta, I’m glad you’re here, too,” I pant as I pull her back toward a dark corridor just past the elevators. “I think I know who the killer is.”

“Not now,” she hisses, waving me off. “The big guy and I were just about to plot a heist. Don’t ask, Lot.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I say, raising a brow. “I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“Ooh, fish .” Petey swings his head my way, his ghostly eyes lighting up like someone just dangled a bucket of salmon in front of him. “Now you’re talking my language.”

“Oh, for Petey’s sake,” Carlotta grouses. “Do you have to steal the attention of every man in the room, Lot? There’s no species too big or too small. You just need all the attention for yourself, don’t you?”

“Funny,” Petey says as he tips his furry head. “That’s exactly what Ursula’s father used to say to her.”

“Sounds like he spoke the truth,” I muse. “And Carlotta, stealing the attention from the men in the room is your specialty, not mine.”

“Hey?” She straightens a moment. “You’re right. In fact, I bet you got that little blessing of a gift from me. You’re welcome.”

“Trust me, the last thing I want is the attention from every man in the room. That’s more of a curse than a blessing.”

I’m about to spill everything I’ve just gleaned as far as Ursula’s homicide is concerned when the elevator dings and the doors glide open. A couple steps out, each with an arm wrapped around the other’s waist, looking like they’ve just waltzed out of a romance movie—only less heartwarming and a little more suspicious.

Of course.

I suck in a quick breath as my brain clicks into overdrive.

“Orson, Agatha,” I call out, my voice laced with as much sugar as I can muster. “Leaving so soon?”

Their heads snap toward me in unison like two deer caught in headlights, and I catch the slightest flicker behind their cool exteriors—something that tells me they know they’ve just been caught red-handed.

Orson recovers quickly enough. “Ah, Lottie.” He manufactures a smile that looks as if it’s just for me. “We were just stepping out for some fresh air.”

“It’s about to snow.” I cock my head to the side, not buying it for a second. “I guess that’s about as fresh as it can be.”

Agatha’s mouth contorts as if she were about to say something and that crimson lipstick of hers sears itself into my mind.

“We were actually leaving,” she manages to say as if she were swallowing a laugh. “I wish you and your sisters much luck with the birth of your children. Your mother is just over the moon. You have such a lovely family.”

“Thank you,” I say as they take another step toward the door. “Oh, Agatha?” I call after her and the two of them turn our way once again. “My sister said she saw you at the library sale. She said you scooped up quite the number of magazines.”

She stiffens just a fraction, but it’s enough to confirm what I already know.

Of course, Lainey didn’t mention any of that to me, but that little white lie of mine gave me all the ammunition I’m going to need.

“Orson”—I continue—“the day your wife was killed, you were, well, understandably angry. But what I can’t wrap my head around is that when you walked into the library that day, you immediately asked who had done that to her. The scarf was already removed from her neck so you couldn’t have known that she had been strangled. You didn’t ask if she’d had a heart attack or a stroke, or if anything else might have happened naturally.” I narrow my gaze. “It’s almost as if you knew it was a homicide.”

Orson’s smile falters, and Agatha’s grip on his arm tightens. “I... well, I”—Orson stammers—“I was just shocked, that’s all. There’s no one way to react in those situations. There are no wrong answers, if that’s what you’re implying.”

I take a step closer, pinning him with a look. “Shocked? Or were you more concerned about losing your financial empire? You said yourself that trying to contain Ursula was like putting out a stick of dynamite on fire—that you could lose a body part. Or maybe you were afraid of losing a lot more than that?”

“Way to go, Lot.” Carlotta touches her elbow to my baby bump and one of the twins gives her a swift kick. “Ouch,” she calls out while rubbing her elbow.

Agatha’s eyes dart between us and her perfectly composed mask begins to slip ever so slightly. “Orson,” she hisses under her breath, taking a full step back as if to distance herself from the sinking ship. “You said that about Ursula?”

Orson’s jaw clenches, but before he can deny it, I turn my attention to her.

“And as for you, Agatha,” I say, sweetening my voice just a notch as if I were about to offer her a plate of freshly baked cookies. “You were there in the library the night Ursula was killed, weren’t you? In fact, you were there as she breathed her last breath. Those weren’t Ursula’s crepes spilled next to her body. She told me herself that she couldn’t stand the texture of them. But those crepes on the floor—they were half-eaten, with red lipstick smeared all over them.” I smile innocently. “You were the one wearing red lipstick that night, not Ursula.”

Agatha’s mouth opens, then snaps shut, her eyes darting left and right as if she’s searching for an escape route.

“I don’t eat them either,” she blurts out and the words spill from her mouth like a river of lies.

“Oh really?” I say, my amusement barely concealed. “Because just earlier, you mentioned how thrilled you were there wasn’t a line for them this evening since you never got the chance to finish them the night of the original shower.”

Orson opens his mouth to protest, but Carlotta jumps in before he can get a word out.

“You got her, Lot,” Carlotta whoops it up and claps. “Saggie Aggie, you should have quit while you were ahead. Nothing gets past my Lot Lot.”

“That’s right. Nothing gets past me,” I say to both Orson and Agatha. “Especially not a killer or two.”



LOTTIE

P etey growls and his eyes grow red with rage as we stand in a darkened corridor with Carlotta, Orson Wingate, and Agatha Reed here at the Fletcher Hotel in downtown Leeds.

Petey waves his snout my way. “Lottie, which one of these animals killed my Ursula?”

I shake my head because I can’t be sure which one did the deed. But I know for a fact they’re both going to fry for it.

Orson’s face hardens as he steps forward and towers over me in the process. “You have no proof of anything,” he says and his voice is low and dangerous.

I look up at him, unfazed. “Oh, I think I have more than enough proof to put both of you away for a very, very long time.”

Agatha and Orson exchange a panicked glance, and I know I’ve hit the nail on the head.

“Okay, you’ve got us.” Orson gives a dark laugh as he looks from Carlotta to me, stepping our way and pushing us deeper into the darkened corridor. “Ursula was a terrible wife and terrible friend. That’s what initially bonded Agatha and me.”

“You told me she stole your men,” I say as I look at Agatha. “You wanted revenge, so you stole hers.”

“ Nah ,” Carlotta bleats. “Orson is a hot silver fox. She wanted in on the action. Ursula didn’t let a little wedding band stand in her way, and neither did you, Raggedy Aggie.”

“You’re a witch ,” she hisses at Carlotta.

“And you’re a killer,” I hiss back. “You lured Ursula out of the conservatory that night. You knew that Francine and Ursula were at odds with one another and you took advantage of that fact. Francine Dundee provided the perfect cover-up. You took the scarf that Francine knitted to do the job. I’m pretty certain you collected a few of her bobby pins that day as well. It was easy enough to do. She had a million in her hair and half fell out in the conservatory. You’ve been throwing Francine under the bus from day one. And when that didn’t get her arrested posthaste, you concocted a hairbrained scheme to create that cut-and-paste letter and stick it in Suze’s purse! Francine would never write anything so incriminating. It was obvious someone was trying to frame her.”

Not that it was obvious from the outset, but they don’t need to know that.

Petey shakes his head. “I didn’t think it was obvious.”

“I was hoping it was Francine,” Carlotta mutters. “She always did look good in orange.”

Agatha lets out a cry of frustration as she turns to Orson. “I told you we laid it on too thick. Now what are we going to do? You should have divorced her. Who cares if you had to pay her alimony and surrender half your kingdom? We won’t be living large anytime soon. We’ll be in a six-by-eight cell!”

He raises his hand to her. “How many times do I have to tell you, I’ve got it under control!”

“You have nothing under control,” I boom. “That’s why you killed Tom Darius and landed him on Suze’s car that night. He worked for you, didn’t he? So did Suze, and so did Francine. You had them running bank drops for the illegal gambling room you have upstairs. Your financial empire was crumbling, so you turned to crime. I don’t know how you roped Suze into doing your dirty work, or Tom, but I’m guessing Ursula had Francine doing her dirty work for her. Only you weren’t taking any of that money to the bank. You were taking it to Ursula’s restaurant. That’s where you’ve been washing the money.” My eyes widen a moment. “Have you been washing the money through my bakery, too?”

How in the world could he have convinced Suze to do that?

He lunges my way just as Petey jumps in front of him and belts out a roar right in the man’s face. Although Orson can’t hear a thing Petey has to say if he isn’t touching Carlotta or me.

Orson’s hands reach out my way, and if I had to guess, he’s aiming for my neck.

“You grab the squirrely one,” he shouts to Agatha.

Carlotta sputters, “Who you trying to sweet talk, buster?”

Orson staggers my way with his arms extended as if he was a zombie and Agatha hops onto Carlotta as if she suddenly morphed into a female wrestler.

Fun fact: my sister, Meg, used to be a female wrestler out in Vegas. She went under the name Madge the Badge, and sometimes Mad Madge. And if she were here, she could totally take these two even in her precarious state. But she’s not here.

I try my best to move out of Orson’s way, but he steps right along with me.

“Get back here,” he growls as his arms try to extend over my belly, but alas, his hands can’t quite reach my neck. “I’m sorry, Lottie. But this is your last night on this planet.”

The twins give me a swift kick on either side of my belly and I gasp.

“You’re not hurting me or my babies.” I go to reach for my gun, only to realize that I left Ethel at home. I usually keep her in a holster strapped to my thigh, but as it stands, I haven’t seen my thighs since Thanksgiving.

Drats.

“Nobody is hurting your babies, Lottie,” Petey roars just as Orson dives in my direction and I simply step out of the way as Orson crashes into the wall behind me and Petey crashes into him from behind with the force of a freight train right before he lifts the man about six feet off the ground.

A horrible cry escapes Orson. “I think I broke my ribs,” he mumbles with his face still pressed firmly against the wall as Petey manages to hold him there. “What’s happening to me?” His legs begin to dangle and kick. “Why can’t my feet reach the floor?”

The thing with the ghosts that come back to help me is, they can’t always do anything physical to the perps lest they risk having their earthly day pass revoked a little early—or in this case, right on time.

Petey’s fur begins to shimmer and grows increasingly translucent.

“Lemon?” Everett’s voice booms from the lobby.

“Lottie?” Noah’s voice trails a second behind.

“In the hallway,” I call out. “ Help ,” I shout as Carlotta and Agatha twirl in a tangle of limbs.

Both Noah and Everett jump this way with their weapons drawn on us.

“Everybody freeze,” Noah bellows.

“They confessed,” I shout. “They killed Ursula! Orson runs the casino,” I pant as Petey holds the man pinned to the wall about six feet off the ground. “He was washing the money through the Cozy Croon Café and maybe the Cutie Pie.”

Noah looks over at me in horror and I nod.

“I think your mother has been washing money through the bakery.”

Orson falls to the ground and Noah quickly lands both him and Agatha in cuffs.

A couple of meaty looking men run in and Everett growls their way.

“You’re late,” he roars at them.

“We were at the bar. It was just a second,” the taller of the two confesses.

“Too bad you’re fired,” Everett thunders and they take off and oddly head back for the bar.

“What was that about?” I ask, hardly able to catch my breath.

“Those were the idiots I hired to keep an eye on you,” he says with a sigh as he pulls me in closer.

Within seconds, the darkened corridor glows with the light of a thousand baby blue stars.

“Goodbye, Lottie Lemon,” Petey calls out. “It’s time for me to return to the big mackerel buffet in the sky.”

“Until we meet again,” I call out and wave as he ascends toward the ceiling.

“I’ll catch you later, hot stuff,” Carlotta calls out after him.

“Sooner than you think,” he says back to her.

“What?” she squawks in a panic. “What do you mean, sooner than you think?” She grips at her throat just as the corridor fills with sheriff’s deputies.

Soon, I’m both in Everett’s and Noah’s arms. It’s a tangle of muscles and one I don’t mind all that much, or at all.

“Did he hurt you?” Everett gruffs as he lands a kiss on my cheek. “Are the twins okay?”

“I’m fine,” I say. “We’re all fine.”

“You’re going to the hospital,” Noah insists. “We’re not taking any chances.”

“I’m not going to the hospital,” I tell him just as a swarm of medics dash past us. “What’s happening?”

Noah darts into the lobby and Everett and I follow.

Before we can ask a soul a question, the elevator opens and out spills a small crowd

of women, including my mother, Suze, Meg, and Sam.

“It’s time, Lottie!” my mother cries with glee. “Both babies are on their way!”

A laugh gets caught in my throat as I look to Everett and Noah. “It looks as if I’m heading to the hospital after all.”

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:25 pm*

LOTTIE

Needless to say, we sped all the way to the hospital. Speed limits may have been broken, but thankfully bones weren't.

Then in a blur, we flew to the labor and delivery room where Meg and Sam ended up sharing a suite.

Hook and Jed, the proud papas to-be, showed up in record time, and the next thing we knew, there were lots of panting, very little breakdancing, and a tremendous amount of bodily fluids.

To our surprise, Jed stayed by Sam's side after all, even though she wouldn't let Noah or me out of her sight either.

And before we knew it, Meg's little darling arrived, a precious bouncing baby girl named Piper Miranda Lemon, and on her heels, Sam's angel followed suit—another precious girl named Willow Grace Silver.

"Oh my word," I coo at the tiny cutie pie in my arms as I hold Meg's sweetheart, Piper. "You are just a little angel sent from Heaven."

It's been a couple of hours since the arrivals, and my mother, Lainey, Suze, Carlotta, and I are all gathered around the new additions to our family. And while we coo and kiss the sweet babes to our heart's content, Noah and Everett are off to the side congratulating Jed and Hook.



There's a calm buzz in the room, and it feels like that moment just before the champagne gets popped and everything erupts into celebratory chaos.

Piper Miranda Lemon is the sweetest little bundle of joy I've ever laid eyes on—dark hair, soft skin, and the tiniest of hands clutching at my fingers as if she already knows Auntie Lottie is going to spoil her rotten.

I rock her gently in my arms, smiling over at Lainey, who's holding Willow Grace Silver, who is equally perfect, with her own head of dark hair and a sleepy little smile that melts everyone's hearts. She is Lyla Nell's twin in every way, it's almost spooky.

"You know"—I say, glancing over at my mother, who's fawning over both babies like they're the little miracles they are—"these kids don't even know how spoiled they're going to be with us around."

"Spoiled?" Mom gives a gentle laugh as her eyes soften with that grandmotherly glow. "Oh, please, they'll be loved and nurtured and—okay, fine—spoiled rotten." She gently strokes Piper's tiny hand. "But that's our job, isn't it? To make sure they know they're the center of the universe."

Carlotta snorts as she shakes her head at the two of them. "The center of the universe? Please. Back in my day, we had to earn our keep. I was out selling Girl Scout cookies at three."

Suze balks, "I bet you were sneaking those same cookies out of the box and blaming the dog."

"Details, Suzie Q. Let's not get bogged down with the deets." Carlotta waves it off and fixes her gaze on Willow. "I'm just saying, these kids are going to grow up in a world of participation trophies, endless compliments, and praise just for breathing. What kind of life is that?"

“A happy one,” Lainey chimes in. “Which, might I point out, none of us are lacking in. These precious girls deserve the same.”

Mom coos as she steals Piper from me. “You know, I think there’s something to be said for letting these little angels grow up knowing they’re special. That’s what I did with you girls.” She gives Lainey and me a sweet, almost too innocent smile. “And look how well you turned out.”

Carlotta groans, “Please. Lot and Lainey turned out all right because they learned from their mistakes. We can’t have perfect lives. It’s not natural. Besides, mistakes are a part of the adventure. Why do you think the Good Lord invented bad boys? Or running illegal money laundering operations out of a bakery?”

We both shoot a covert glance at Suze since we’ve yet to hash that one out.

Lainey bursts into laughter. “Carlotta, only you could think that money laundering is a reasonable career path.”

“Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it,” Carlotta shoots back with a wink. “Right, Suzie Q?”

Oh, good grief.

I glance over at the new mamas in the room.

Meg beams over at her little girl, still glowing from the delivery and looking like she could take on the world. And lying in the bed across from her, Sam wears an ear-to-ear grin, albeit an exhausted one.

Jed clears his throat and Hook follows suit, both of them looking a little nervous all of a sudden. The room quiets down as they step toward their respective baby mamas.

“Ladies and gentlemen”—Hook starts, glancing at Jed for support—“we just want to say how grateful we are for these beautiful women and the miracles they brought into this world today.” He turns to Meg and Sam, his eyes misting slightly. “And we’re glad all of you are here to share this moment with us because there’s something we’d like to ask these incredible mothers.”

Before we can blink, both men drop to one knee and pull out small velvet boxes that glow under the harsh hospital lighting.

Hook holds out the biggest diamond I’ve seen this side of Vermont to Meg. “Megan Lemon, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

And then, Jed looks over at Sam with a greasy smile. “Let’s do this, babe.”

The room collectively gasps, but it’s Meg who breaks the silence with a laugh.

“You had me all those years ago at, ‘You look rough around the edges,’” she says with a crooked grin. “Heck yes!”

The room erupts in cheers, and I swear even little Piper lets out a tiny squeal of excitement.

All eyes shift to Sam, who’s smiling so hard it’s bordering on a grimace. “I’d be crazy not to,” she says, pulling Jed closer with a laugh. “Of course, it’s yes!”

More cheers break out just before Carlotta waves her arms as if she’s trying to land a 747.

“Anyone else think she’s crazy for saying yes?” she deadpans and sets the room off into even more laughter.

The babies are returned to their rightful mothers, and everyone is too busy basking in the glow of the moment to notice Noah waving me over to the corner of the room where he stands with Suze and Everett.

Here we go.

I waddle over and brace myself for whatever this little family meet and greet is about, although I have a feeling I'm well apprised.

"Mom"—Noah says, his voice firm but not angry—"we know everything. Well, just about everything. We need to talk about this money-washing business with Orson Wingate. How did you even get involved in that mess?"

Suze sighs dramatically, rolling her eyes as if we're making a big deal out of nothing.

"Oh, Noah, I was just looking for a little excitement in my life. You know how it is. One minute you're a single divorcee and the next minute, you're laundering money through your daughter-in-law's bakery." She winces my way as she says it.

"Suze," Everett says sternly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She closes her eyes for a moment. "I didn't mean to do it. I only did it once, and honestly, I wasn't very good at it. I was at it for a few weeks and told him I wanted to quit. That's when he sent that poor man over."

"The dead Santa?" Noah tips his head as if the dead Santa were driving home a more serious point.

"Yes, him," Suze grunts. "Anyway, after that, Orson never called me back, which I'm taking as a compliment."

“That’s because he was also using Francine,” I tell her.

Suze gives a slow nod as if she knew all along. “Since I wasn’t able to wash the money through the bakery, he decided to utilize his wife’s place. From what I hear, Ursula didn’t appreciate that. She wanted to keep the place on the up and up.”

I wrinkle my nose at Noah. “Add that as another motive for murder.”

“He killed his wife?” Suze’s mouth squares out in horror.

“That’s right,” Everett says. “And he wouldn’t have hesitated to do the same to you.”

“It wasn’t Francine who sent that letter,” I tell her. “It was Agatha. She was in on it, too. Suze, those people were very dangerous.”

“That’s right, Mom,” Noah says. “So please think twice before you go looking for excitement. Or in the least, run it by me. I just want to make sure you’re safe.” He shakes his head at her. “I can’t believe you tried washing money through Lottie’s bakery. I wouldn’t blame her for firing you.”

Suze waves me off like it’s no big deal. “Oh, please. Lottie, you actually made a profit off of it. You’re lucky I’m terrible at crime. And you’re welcome.”

“ Mom ,” Noah looks dismayed by the dicey accolades she’s given herself.

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “And Suze, you’re still welcome to work at the bakery. But please, leave it to me to figure out how to make a profit.”

The four of us share a quick chuckle.

Everett wraps an arm around me and lands a kiss on my cheek. “You’re an expert at

that, Lemon.”

“So, apology accepted?” Suze asks, scowling at me as if I were the one who owed her an apology. “I promise it’ll never happen again—unless, of course, there’s a really good reason.”

I’m about to laugh or protest, but she cuts me off. “You know, Lottie, you really should learn to let loose a little more. You’re wound tighter than one of your cinnamon rolls.”

Noah takes a breath and his chest expands. “Maybe it’s because my mother keeps accidentally involving her in criminal activity.”

“Or maybe”—Suze says, narrowing her eyes my way—“it’s because you’re not eating enough of your own baked goods. That’s the real crime here.”

“All right, you’re funny,” Noah says with a frown. “Just know this can’t happen again. No more shady business deals.”

Suze holds up her hands in surrender. “Fine, fine. I promise. No more money laundering. For now.” She takes off in Sam’s direction and coos over at her new baby granddaughter.

“I’m sorry,” Noah says with a sigh. “But she’s family.”

“We’re all family,” I tell him as I reach over and give his hand a squeeze.

Everett pulls me closer. “Who knows, this little family of ours might just be the picture of normalcy one day.”

“Please”—I avert my eyes—“we passed normal about five exits ago.”

We share a dull laugh and Noah gives my belly a quick pat. “Normal is overrated,” he says. “We’ve got new babies on the scene and babies on the way.”

Everett nods. “And we need you safe, Lemon.”

“Don’t you worry,” I say. “We’ve got two weddings to plan.” I look over at the new mothers as they snuggle with their brand-new daughters. “So when’s the big day?”

“I’d like to get it over with as soon as possible,” Meg grunts.

Sam nods. “Me, too. Just something short and sweet. Nothing too fancy. Maybe a courthouse wedding?”

Mom’s entire body recoils as if she’s just been shot. “Don’t you girls dare deny us all the wedding bells and whistles. Feel free to leave all the details to me. I can plan both weddings, or maybe you could do one of those double weddings.”

“You mean double debacle,” Carlotta chimes in.

“A double wedding?” Meg looks over at Sam and shrugs. “I’m in.”

“I’m in, too,” Sam speeds it out. “That cuts the costs in half right there.” She shares a quick high-five with Jed.

“Great,” Mom trills. “We can plan for a big June wedding.”

“No way. I want it done yesterday,” Meg grouses.

“Same.” Sam nods at my mother. “Something a lot sooner than June would be nice.”

“Well, what about Valentine’s Day?” Lainey suggests. “It’s just around the corner,

and that still gives us a few weeks to get ready for it. And you're going to need it with the babies and all. You're going to want to get your rest."

I make a face. "If they want to be rested up for their big day, they'd have to put it off for eighteen years."

The room breaks out into a mournful laugh.

"A Valentine's wedding it is," Meg says and Sam nods in agreement.

"A Valentine's Day double wedding," Mom shouts so loud both babies begin to bleat like little lambs.

A double wedding is coming to Honey Hollow.

Let's hope Cupid's aim doesn't prove to be deadly.

A Valentine's Day double wedding is afoot.

And something tells me, it's going to be murder.

Thank you for reading! Head back to Honey Hollow and pick up Vanilla Glazed Valentine Vendetta (Murder in the Mix 52) today!

Is that link not working for you? Try this one— [Vanilla Glazed Valentine Vendetta \(Murder in the Mix 52\)](#)

Valentine's Day is around the corner—and so is murder.

And so is a double wedding!



My name is Lottie Lemon, and I see dead people. Okay, so I rarely see dead people, mostly I see furry creatures of the dearly departed variety, who have come back from the other side to warn me of their previous owner's impending doom.

Honey Hollow is gearing up for not one, but two weddings on what promises to be the most romantic day of the year. My sister Meg and Noah's sister Sam have decided to tie the knot to their respective plus-ones. But when dark secrets begin to surface, we're not up to our eyeballs in wedding cake, we're knee-deep in bodies.

As the blushing brides prepare for their big day, something ominous overshadows the event, and what should be a celebration of love quickly turns into a deadly game of survival.

With a killer lurking in plain sight, I'd better uncover the truth before "I do" becomes "You're next."

This Valentine's Day, the only thing more heart-stopping than a kiss might just be...murder.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:25 pm*

### RECIPE

#### FROM THE CUTIE PIE BAKERY AND CAKERY

##### Easy Crepes

Hello, it's me, Lottie! \*waves\* Here's my famous—or should I say infamous—crepes recipe. This is hands-down my favorite breakfast, but the good thing about crepes is that you can gobble them up at any time of day! You can fill them with anything you like and enjoy them sweet or savory! I like them with Nutella, lemon and sugar, and even with pancake syrup! I hope you have fun exploring all the different options. Enjoy!

##### Ingredients:

1 cup all-purpose flour

2 large eggs

1/2 cup milk

1/2 cup water \*(I actually use 7Up soda instead! It adds a nice lift to the batter and a great taste, too! I also add more 7Up until I feel that the batter is a very soupy consistency. You do not want this as thick as pancake batter. More like the consistency of a thick yet runny soup.)

1/4 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons melted butter

Butter or oil for cooking

Directions:

**Make the Batter:** In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the flour and eggs. Gradually add in the milk and water, stir to combine. Add the salt and melted butter then whisk until smooth.

**Heat the Pan:** Heat a lightly oiled frying pan or crepe pan over medium-high heat.

**Cook the Crepes:** Pour about 1/4 cup of the batter onto the pan. Tilt and rotate the pan with a circular motion so that the batter coats the surface evenly.

**Cook and Flip:** Cook the crepe for about 1 minute, until the bottom is light brown. Loosen with a spatula, flip it over, and cook the other side for about 30 seconds.

**Serve:** Slide the crepe onto a plate and continue making crepes with the remaining batter. Stack the cooked crepes with parchment paper between them to prevent sticking.

**Enjoy:** Serve with your favorite toppings, like fresh fruit, whipped cream, Nutella, or a sprinkle of powdered sugar and a squeeze of lemon (one of my faves)!

Enjoy your crepes and happy eating!

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:25 pm*

### RECIPE

#### FROM THE COZY CROON CAFÉ

##### Francine's Lobster Mac and Crack (Cheese)

Hello, it's me again! Well, Francine was so relieved and grateful that the killer was caught that she spontaneously offered up the recipe to her famed dish that we lost our minds over. In fact, since the Cozy Croon Café will be either closing or changing hands, she's given the recipe to Charlie to use at the Honey Pot Diner as well. And I just couldn't leave without sharing it with you! I hope you and your family enjoy it as much as all of Honey Hollow enjoys it. This makes for a wonderful cozy breakfast, lunch, or dinner (and yes, I've eaten it for all three).

Happy cooking!

#### Ingredients

1 lb cavatappi or elbow macaroni

1 ??? lb lobster meat (boiled, shelled, and cut into bite-size pieces)

4 tbsp unsalted butter

??? cup all-purpose flour

3 cups whole milk

1 cup heavy cream

1 tbsp Dijon mustard

1 tsp smoked paprika

1 tsp garlic powder

??? tsp cayenne pepper (optional)

1 ??? cups sharp white cheddar cheese (grated)

1 ??? cups Gruyère cheese (grated)

1 cup Parmesan cheese (grated)

1 ??? cups panko breadcrumbs

??? cup finely chopped fresh parsley

1 tbsp olive oil

Salt and pepper to taste

Optional Garnish

Fresh chives (finely chopped)

Truffle oil (drizzle for extra decadence)

Instructions:

### Cook the Pasta :

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the macaroni and cook according to the package instructions until al dente. Drain and set aside.

### Prepare the Lobster :

If using live lobsters, boil them in salted water for about 8-10 minutes or until bright red. Remove from water, allow to cool slightly, then remove the meat from the shells and chop it into bite-size pieces.

### Make the Cheese Sauce :

In a large saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the flour and whisk constantly for about 2-3 minutes, until the mixture becomes a light golden roux.

Gradually whisk in the milk and heavy cream. Continue whisking until the mixture thickens, about 5 minutes.

Stir in the Dijon mustard, smoked paprika, garlic powder, and cayenne (if you're using it). Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Reduce the heat to low, and add the grated white cheddar, Gruyère, and Parmesan cheeses. Stir continuously until the cheese is fully melted and the sauce is smooth.

### Combine Pasta and Lobster :

Fold the cooked macaroni into the cheese sauce, stirring to ensure all pasta is coated. Gently fold in the lobster meat.

### Prepare the Topping :

In a small bowl, mix the panko breadcrumbs with the chopped parsley and olive oil until evenly coated. Add a pinch of salt and pepper.

Assemble and Bake :

Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C).

Transfer the lobster mac and cheese to a buttered 9x13-inch baking dish or individual ramekins for a more personalized touch.

Sprinkle the panko mixture evenly over the top.

Bake in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until the top is golden and crispy.

Optional Garnish :

Drizzle a touch of truffle oil over the baked mac and cheese for extra richness.

Garnish with finely chopped chives for a fresh pop of color.

Serve :

Serve immediately, enjoying the rich, cheesy goodness of this decadent lobster mac and crack!