



Turkey Trots and Target Shots (Pain in the Assassin Cozy Mysteries #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: My name is Eufrazia Canelli, but everybody calls me Effie. I come from a big Italian family with big hearts, big appetites, and an even bigger bankroll that's cleverly hidden from the IRS.

I'm not married to the mob, I was born into it. Just last year, I was laid off from my career at a tech company, and in an effort to keep from moving back home, I went crawling to the biggest crime lord I know—my Uncle Jimmy.

He gave me two options: dance at his strip club or hunt down his enemies.

Seeing that I'm no fan of public nudity, I opted for murder.

Let's just say my mortality rate so far is nil.

Okay, so I'm not a straight shot, but my Uncle Jimmy doesn't seem to mind and I'm still raking in enough money to keep a roof over my head.

I also took a part-time job at a local bakery. Not only do I get to satisfy my sweet tooth for free, but I get a decent cover when I'm asked about my employment.

Thanksgiving is just around the corner and Honey Hollow is rolling out the feathered carpet as all of Main Street hosts the Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot where shops are handing out samples and having sales right up until the big day. In fact, the bakery is hosting a pumpkin pie-eating contest to kick off the festivities. And let's not forget the huge book signing taking place on night one, featuring Harmony Honeycutt's new book on how to manifest your dreams.

So when my next hit ends up face down in a pie I served up, I'm not only shocked—I'm also a little curious as to who beat me to the killer punch. And wouldn't you know it? That dead guy just so happens to be Harmony Honeycutt's ex. It makes me wonder if she's just manifested herself a murder.

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CHAPTER 1

Two hours from now...

The Victim

Main Street is buzzing here in Honey Hollow with way too much Thanksgiving cheer for my liking.

The storefronts are decked out in autumn leaves and twinkle lights while laughter fills the air, mingling with the smell of freshly baked pies.

I walk along, feeling pretty smug and a little too pleased with myself, and I'll admit, it's a darn good feeling.

I've gotten away with everything.

Some might say I've gotten away with murder—and it's honestly thrilling.

I can't help but think about how I've tormented, in one way or another, each person I've come into contact with so far tonight.

It brings a goofy grin to my face just thinking of it.

In fact, I can't help but grin as I think about the little head games I've got brewing. The cutthroat threats, the lascivious secrets I've dangled over the heads of my victims—it's all too easy and it's nothing but one big thrill. A big thrill that will yield

the perfect payout for me.

Not only will I be able to bail myself out of the hot water I'm sitting in with the mob, but I should have enough to take off for the Caribbean and create a whole new life for myself.

Hopefully, there will be a hot blonde waiting for me on the beach when I get there. If not, I'll buy one or twelve.

How's that for manifesting my destiny?

I pause to admire my reflection in a display window and feel a surge of satisfaction. The world keeps spinning, all of Honey Hollow is bustling around me, blissfully unaware of the strings I'm pulling, and I'm looking pretty decent while doing so.

A crowd begins to gather at the bakery down the street. Looks as if a pie-eating competition is about to start.

"Come and join us," a hot blonde shouts. "There's still plenty of room, and the winner gets a fifty-dollar gift card to the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery—not to mention all the pumpkin pie you can eat tonight!"

A gift card and all the pumpkin pie I can eat?

A laugh strums through me. That little lady has no idea who she's talking to. I can put away enough pumpkin pie to feed an entire football team. She's going to be out of pie by the time I get through with that little competition, and I'll be one fifty-dollar gift card richer because of it.

See there?

Things just keep going my way. I've already manifested another one of my deepest desires—all the pie I can stuff my face with.

I sign up and soon I'm seated at the table with the other contestants, eyeing the lineup of pumpkin pies with a mountain of whipped cream. I can hardly wait to get my mitts on it.

"All right, folks," the cheery hottie calls out. "I'm Lottie Lemon, the owner of the bakery, and I've got an entire line of pumpkin pies ready and raring to go. You may use a fork if you so please, you may use all the extra whipped cream you want, and you may—start now! "

The crowd cheers with excitement as I hunker down and focus on the feast in front of me.

Time to indulge.

I dig in, savoring each sweet bite as I shovel it in as fast as I can.

The crowd roars as the excitement builds, but something is starting to feel off.

My chest tightens, my throat constricts.

Panic sets in.

The fork slips from my hands as I gasp for breath.

I look up, and to my surprise I see them standing in the crowd as a dark malevolent smile curves on their lips. They nod my way and offer a wink as I struggle to breathe.

This is their doing, they've arranged for my demise.

The world blurs around me, and it hits me—this is it.

So, this is how it ends. I shake my head at the disbelief mixed with bitter irony. All of my smug satisfaction evaporates as darkness closes in.

The last bite taken was my last bite indeed.

Amidst the festive cheer of Honey Hollow, all of my secrets will die with me, leaving behind a mystery that will unravel in ways no one will expect.

I can only hope every last secret I've harbored for my enemies will be unleashed.

And that will be my final act of revenge.

A sadistic smile trembles on my lips as the world goes black.

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CHAPTER 2

Present

Effie

“I ’m going to be rich ,” Lily Swanson announces as she holds a tray of freshly iced cinnamon rolls in her hands.

We hit a little lull with the customers right here in the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, and apparently Lily felt the need to fill the void with her financial fantasies.

“I’m going to be richer ,” Suze counters, as she steals a cream puff from one of the refrigerated shelves and shoves it in her face.

And I’m about to do the same—the shoving a cream puff in my face part, not the getting rich. Although riches wouldn’t be so bad either, but with my luck, the money would come with a pox—and most likely a prison sentence.

Lily Swanson is a cheeky brunette about my age, late twenties, who has been working at the bakery a heck of a lot longer than I have. She’s sassy, sarcastic, and can only tolerate so much of our boss, Lottie Lemon.

Evidently, Lily was Lottie’s high school bully way back when. I’m shocked Lottie hired her at all.

And Suze is Lottie’s mother-in-law, or ex-mother-in-law, or mother-in-law-to-be

again. Honestly, I can't keep track of Lottie's prolific love life. All I know is she's got two hot men after her twenty-four seven. One is a red-hot homicide detective and one is a scorching hot judge. Whatever that woman is cooking up in the bedroom, it must be a really sweet treat. Now that's one recipe I wouldn't mind swiping from her.

Anyway, Suze is pushing sixty or seventy. She's tall, stocky, and has a mean bite. She wears her blonde locks shorn around the ears and has bangs that she's constantly blowing out of her eyes. And if you turn your back on her, she's been known to give you the finger. Or at least that's what she does to Lottie—and I'm assuming me.

I, on the other hand, love Lottie.

Lottie Lemon is the reason I actually have a cover for the fact I'm really a mob assassin. Working at the bakery part-time has not only met my voracious need for carbs, but it gives me something to talk about in polite company when they ask what I do for a living. Sure, Lottie doesn't know my secret. No one does except for my sneaky sister Niki, and my Aunt Cat, and her bestie Carlotta, and well, my Uncle Jimmy, of course.

And as of Halloween night, you can add Cooper to that equation, too.

We're smack in the middle of fall, just one week away from the most delicious day of the year—Stuff-Your-Pie-Hole-Till-You-Drop Day, aka Thanksgiving, and the bakery has been nonstop busy from the minute we open until the minute we shove them out the door with the threat of a taser. Kidding, mostly. We use a broom.

The bakery is decorated to the nines with fall-themed garlands, faux fall leaves, and tiny pumpkins lining the shelves. The centerpiece is a cornucopia overflowing with seasonal fruits and pastries, drawing the eye of every customer who steps inside.

The atmosphere in the bakery is a blend of holiday cheer and the sweet promise of

overindulgence with Lottie's delicious desserts. I should know. I overindulge at least twice a week.

Okay, fine. It's twice a day. But who could blame me? With all these pies, cakes, and cookies, I'm destined to turn into a stick of butter before the new year rolls around—or more likely a big round ball of butter.

My name is Eufrasia Margarita Canelli, but people just call me Effie. I'm five feet five inches of fun, have dark medium-length hair, dark eyes, and a knack for landing myself in the deadliest and some might say dumbest of situations. Like with Cooper, yet once again.

Homicide Detective Cooper Knox, aka Cupertino Lazzari, was almost my plus-one. That is, until he caught me quasi-red-handed working as a hitwoman for my Uncle Jimmy, one of the top dogs when it comes to mob bosses here in Vermont.

Not that Cooper has said anything to me outright about his recent discovery—mostly because once I saw that murder board with my face sitting in the middle of it in Cooper's office, I ran past him and have been evading him like a con on the run for the last two weeks.

And ironically, I'm using the words con on the run in the most literal sense.

Suffice it to say, this little kink has put our relationship on ice, most likely indefinitely with the exception that we just so happen to share custody of the cutest golden shepherd puppy you ever did see.

And have I mentioned that cute pooch has an IQ that rivals Einstein's?

Said cute pooch is with Cooper right now, probably helping the good detective solve a case—the one that involves me.

Just my luck, instead of Doogie Howser, I've got a Doggie Bowser , and he's using his intellect against me. Everyone knows he'd do just about anything for a slice of bacon, including sending his own mother up the river for twenty to life.

Traitor.

Anyway, my boss Lottie, my sister Niki, and just about anyone else I can rope into the effort have been helping me with the puppy exchange whenever Cooper comes around to give back or receive the little cutie.

I'm not ready to face Cooper just yet. Most likely because I'm not ready to face the music just yet either—otherwise known as prison .

And even though I'm a bona fide assassin, I haven't really knocked anyone off the planet just yet. Mostly I just scatter a few bullets here and there, willy-nilly, while my target does a little tap dance, and they quickly come to the conclusion that life would be a whole lot easier—and a whole lot longer—if they just paid my Uncle Jimmy the money they owe him.

“So? What's it gonna be?” Niki bops my way with her dark hair pulled back into a messy bun and her apron from the Honey Pot Diner in one hand.

“She can't hear you,” Lily says, helping herself to a chocolate cupcake frosted to look like a turkey. “Effie's been drifting off and daydreaming all week. She's probably having steamy thoughts about that hot detective she's knocking boots with.”

“ Ooh .” Suze perks up. “Are you knocking boots already?” She hikes a brow my way and looks as if she's holding her breath until I pump out a few dirty details her way.

“Nope,” I sag as I say it. “And believe me, I wouldn't mind. We're sort of...not on speaking terms at the moment.”

Niki chuckles under her breath. She happens to be in the know when it comes to the fact Cooper has me pegged for the one causing all the near misses around here.

When an entire slew of mob-related injuries started to take place, and most of those men refused to speak to the sheriff's department or file a complaint, Cooper's suspicions were aroused.

How he surmised the rest of it, I have no idea. And I don't want to know. Mostly because I know the end of the story, the part where Cooper gifts me a set of silver bracelets just in time for the holidays.

“What?” Lily squawks as she stomps this way. “What do you mean you're not on speaking terms?”

Suze waves it off. “Oh, I bet it's just some silly argument. They'll get over it. My ex and I used to have them all the time over silly things like the fact fifty thousand dollars evaporated from our savings account and found its way onto a blackjack table somewhere, or which new floozy he was sleeping with, or the fact that man never took out the trash.” She harumphs over that last point as if that were the major contention, and oddly, it seems to be just that.

“It's nothing that serious,” I say. “I don't mind taking out the trash. Mostly because Cooper and I don't live together. Anyway, what's with the fact everyone is about to come upon some spare cash around here? How are the two of you striking it rich? Did you find a buried treasure map in a cookie jar?”

Lily grins. “Even better. We're going to see Harmony Honeycutt at the bookshop tonight. Her new book, *Dream It, Believe It, Achieve It*, is all about manifesting your destiny. We're going to manifest ourselves a fortune.” She says it so matter-of-fact, I'm almost worried for her.

“That’s right.” Suze nods. “Apparently, she has some magical way of making all your dreams come true and all you need is your noggin. I’m hoping she can help me manifest my way to a winning lottery ticket.”

“Wow, that sounds interesting,” Lottie says, coming out of the kitchen with a tray laden with her new creation, pumpkin spice muffins with cheesecake centers.

Lottie is adorable, somewhere in her late twenties or early thirties, with caramel waves, hazel eyes, and a smile that never stops—unless she’s stumbling over a body. Let’s just say she seems to attract the dead like bears to honey—especially bears in Honey Hollow.

Lucky for me, Lottie lets her staff load up on all the sweet treats we can stomach while we’re working a shift.

Unlucky for Lottie, I can put away a heck of a lot of sweet treats. And even though Lily is pretty petite, she can put the desserts away right there with me. We’re mostly addicted to the crullers, but there’s nothing we consider off the table.

Lottie shrugs over at Lily and Suze. “A little positive thinking never hurt anyone, right? If I wasn’t so busy with the pumpkin pie-eating contest tonight, I’d head down to the bookshop myself. How about you, Effie? You heading over?”

“And that’s what I was asking you.” Niki swats me on the arm with her apron. “Are you manifesting with us tonight or not? I’ve got a few six-foot-three, dark-haired, muscles-for-days, bank-accounts-loaded-to-the-hilt men that I’d like to see materialize.”

Lily laughs. “Come on, Effie, join the club. Suze and I can’t wait to get our hands on Harmony’s new book. Plus, she’s going to give a little dissertation before the signing. If anyone needs to learn how to manifest their destiny, it’s probably you. And that

destiny should definitely include knocking boots with Cooper Knox.”

Suze smirks. “Or how about knocking boots with Cooper Knox in the Bahamas? You’ve got to dream big .”

I roll my eyes, unable to hide my amusement. “You guys really believe in all that stuff? Sounds like a bunch of hocus-pocus to me.”

Niki starts in on a spontaneous applause. “That means she’s in. Effie always disguises her interest in things with negativity. It’s the Canelli way.”

“Perfect.” Lottie joins in and claps her hands as well. “And while you’re on your way to the bookshop, I want you all to enjoy the Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot on the way. All of Main Street is handing out samples and having sales right up until Thanksgiving. A bunch of us business owners got together and thought it might be a fun way to drum up a little pre-holiday buzz. Be sure to sample all the goodies you want, but make sure you’re back in time for the pumpkin pie-eating contest at seven, right here in front of the bakery. That’s my contribution to the night’s festivities, and it’s going to be epic.”

“ Woo-hoo! ” Niki does an odd little jig. “We’re going to see Harmony Honeycutt, and she’s going to make all our wishes come true! And then there’s pie. What more could a girl ask for? Sounds like a dream.”

Why do I have a feeling this night is quickly going to devolve into a nightmare?

Lottie assures us that the kitchen staff can help her with the registers while we’re away and all but shoos the four of us out the door.

We don’t get three steps onto Main Street when I see a couple of all too familiar faces heading my way.

And so the nightmare begins.

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CHAPTER 3

“ Y oo-hoo ,” Aunt Cat calls out as she and Carlotta head our way.

“It’s time to make a break for it,” I say as I turn to head in the opposite direction and Niki catches me by the sleeve. Darn sweater weather.

By this time, Lily and Suze are already halfway down Main Street and on their way to the bookshop where some smooth-talking charlatan is about to teach us how to get exactly what we want out of life with nothing more than our good looks—or good thoughts as it were.

The evening air is crisp and the sounds of holiday music and laughter fill the streets. Every shop, light post, and stop sign is strewn with leafy fall garlands, there are wreaths comprised of orange leaves on the windows and doors of every little shop as far as the eye can see, and the twinkle lights that crisscross overhead give all of Honey Hollow a magical appeal.

The Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot is in full swing, with stalls and tables set up along Main Street, each offering samples of Thanksgiving dishes that are already making my mouth water with their savory scents. And the crowds are out in full force because of it. Judging by the elbow-to-elbow room only on the cobbled sidewalks, I’d say all of Vermont has shown up for the yummy treats.

“What’s your hurry?” Aunt Cat calls out as the two of them close in on us.

Both Aunt Cat and Carlotta are somewhere north of sixty. Aunt Cat dyes her locks a

harsh shade of jet-black and Carlotta keeps her curls real with enough gray going on, it's safe to say that's the primary color.

They're both wrapped in matching black and white buffalo plaid flannel jackets, and that alone makes them look as if they belong to some weird farmhouse cult.

And another thing they have in common? Their penchant for mischief.

Speaking of mischief, my Uncle Jimmy just so happens to use my Aunt Cat as a carrier pigeon when it comes to giving me my new assignments. And if anyone knows how to take mischief to a whole new level, it's my uncle—and that level would be called a felony.

"I've got another job for you." Aunt Cat lifts a small white envelope my way and a shiver runs through me.

"Good grief, the fun never ends," I say as I pluck it from her. "I've got half a mind to quit, move back in with my parents, and call it a life."

Niki shrugs. "Yeah, but it'd be a short life. You're as good as dead, as is whoever's name is in that envelope if you decide to shirk your shotgun duties."

It's true. Should I back out of the contract I have with my uncle, it will be my name in some other hitman's envelope.

Face it, I'm bound to a life of crime and it's my own darn fault.

Me and my big ideas.

Technically, it was the big pink slip I got from the tech firm I was happily accepting a paycheck from that put me in this predicament. That's why I went to my uncle for

help, and he gave me two choices: dance at his strip club or do a little dirty work for him on the side.

I should have strapped on my acrylic high heels and shook my booty with the best of them. Sure, the hours would be a killer, but the tips would keep me in cheeseburgers until the Grim Reaper shows up for that final hot date he's been threatening.

I always seem to make the wrong decision. It's the one thing I'm actually pretty good at.

"Go on." Carlotta nods to the envelope as she rubs her hands together to keep warm—that or because she can't control her excitement.

I quickly do as I'm told, and soon I'm staring at my uncle's sloppy handwriting.

"Peter Honeybutt?" I say just above a whisper. "Never heard of him."

"You mean Peter Honeycutt ? I wonder if he's related to Harmony?" Niki's eyes enlarge as she quickly whips out her phone and commits a half dozen acts of Google foo.

"Eh ." Carlotta shrugs. "I liked Honeybutt better."

"You would," Aunt Cat gruffs at her.

"Don't sound so judgmental." Carlotta is quick to elbow her bestie. "You do, too, and you know it."

"Do I ever." Aunt Cat elbows her back and the two of them cackle into the night.

Niki gasps at something on her screen—most likely with delight. She's been a huge

supporter of my newfound position as an assassin. Sure my other siblings wouldn't agree with it if they were in the know, but Niki here has always been my biggest cheerleader. But that doesn't guarantee she'll bake me a cake with a knife in it when I'm in the big house.

"Peter Honeycutt is Harmony Honeycutt's ex-husband," Niki practically shouts it out as if it were the correct answer on a game show.

Aunt Cat squints our way. "Who's Harmony?"

"Only the biggest, baddest manifester of dreams this side of the pearly gates," Niki says, threading her arm through mine. "Come on, ladies. Harmony Honeycutt is giving a lecture at the bookshop on how to make all of our dreams come true, and we're not going to miss it."

"I'll tell you how she made all of her dreams come true," Carlotta gravels as we start to head down the street. "She handed her husband his walking papers."

Both she and Aunt Cat cackle up a storm all the way to the bookshop.

If Harmony Honeycutt ever wished her ex was standing in line at the pearly gates, she might actually be cheering me on from the sidelines, too.

But as for Peter Honeycutt, he's a dead man walking.

CHAPTER 4

O kay, confession: I've yet to kill one of my uncle's targets.

Mostly, I maim to please, and as of late, my uncle hasn't complained because at the end of the bullet-riddled day, he gets what's his. And by the looks of that bookshop brimming with female bodies, every woman in Honey Hollow has shown up to get what's theirs—or in the least, think really good thoughts about it.

The bookshop, *Between the Lines*, glows like a cozy beacon in the night, with twinkle lights winking around the windows and a hand-painted sign swinging gently above the door. Inside, it's a book lover's paradise, with shelves bursting with every genre imaginable, while plush armchairs sit tucked into corners and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafts through the air.

The crowd is already buzzing with anticipation. A banner in the front reads *Harmony Honeycutt—Dream It, Believe It, Achieve It*.

The place is packed tonight, with every seat taken by eager women hoping to catch a glimpse of the mystical *Harmony Honeycutt*. Or more to the point—looking to make their mystical dreams come true.

The crowd is a mix of what look to be book club regulars, yoga enthusiasts, and women who look as if they've just stepped out of a Pinterest board on manifesting success.

My other sister, Serafina, just so happens to work here, and I spot her near the front

getting things ready for the guest of honor.

Serafina is a brunette with coffee brown eyes, just like Niki and me—and our brothers as well. It's safe to say our parents were a one-hit wonder in the genetics department. And even though we're nearly interchangeable, it goes without saying that Serafina is our mother's favorite—mostly because she's got a steady boyfriend with the promise of a proposal on the horizon.

In our mother's eyes, our worth is waged through other people—mostly men who might outfit her with a grandchild at some point in the future.

The excitement in the air is palpable, as if everyone is just a few affirmations away from sailing off into the sunset of their wildest dreams.

Harmony stands at the front of the room, and she's a picture of bohemian chic in a flowing gold dress with her matching golden curls cascading around her shoulders.

She's older, but polished and more put-together looking than women half her age—aka me. She looks like she's just floated down from some ethereal plane where everyone is perpetually enlightened—or perpetually motivated to scam a bunch of women out of their money. Come to think of it, the two most likely aren't mutually exclusive.

“Good evening, everyone,” she begins with her soothing and confident voice. “I'm so thrilled to be here in Honey Hollow to share how you can dream it, believe it, and achieve it!”

A raucous applause breaks out as if she single-handedly achieved peace in the Middle East, or just deposited a grand into each of these women's bank accounts.

She starts in on her spiel and the crowd hangs on her every word, nodding and

murmuring in agreement as she talks about the power of positive thinking and the law of attraction.

I glance at Niki, who looks like she's about to sprout wings and fly off on a cloud of good vibes. Maybe there's something to this manifesting stuff after all.

Or maybe my sister doesn't have the brain cells to realize this is a bunch of malarky wrapped up like a pipe dream.

Someone has to be the voice of negativity in this room. It may as well be me.

"Now take note"—Harmony continues, her voice wrapping around the audience like a big warm hug—"the key to manifesting is believing in yourself. Visualize your goals, feel them in your heart, and trust that the universe is working to bring them to you. It's not about wishing—it's about knowing . Knowing that you deserve all the wonderful things life has to offer. And you do!"

The room breaks out in whispers as women nod into the lunacy.

Do we really all deserve wonderful things? And even if we did, it doesn't mean we can whip it up with good vibrations.

My Nona Jo calls this hooey hopeium . And it's clear every woman in this room would give her right arm for just one hit of hope.

"Manifesting is about more than just wishing for things," Harmony continues. "It's about embodying the energy of what you want to attract. When you elevate your vibrations to match the frequency of your dreams, the universe responds in kind, opening doors and creating opportunities you never imagined possible."

She takes a step forward with a wild look in her eyes. "Think of the universe as a

giant mirror, reflecting back to you the energy you put out. If you radiate positivity, gratitude, and love, you'll draw those same things into your life. It's a law as immutable as gravity."

She pauses for effect, her curls catching the light and exposing her brassy roots. "Close your eyes for a moment," she instructs. "Picture your dream. See it clearly. Now, breathe it in. That feeling you have right now? That's the frequency you need to maintain it. That's your future."

My frequency?

I lift an eyelid and scan the room to see if anyone else is raising a brow, but everyone else seems more than content to keep their eyes glued shut and their proverbial eyes on the manifesting prize.

I can only imagine all the pricey vacations, cruises, yachts, and white sandy beaches running through these women's minds. Not to mention the stacks of hundred-dollar bills lining their bank accounts and shiny new plus-ones with buns of steel and pearly white teeth.

I don't need to be a mind reader to know what's happening in their noggins. And I don't have to be a con artist to see the scam this Harmony woman is pulling. My bet is that there will be a money grab once she lulls the good senses right off of these women.

The crowd collectively sighs, clearly enchanted by the permission to dream so big that not even their imaginations can believe it.

I sneak a glance at Niki and she's practically levitating with excitement. Suze and Lily are nodding along, completely captivated by Harmony's smooth talk. And there's a brunette near the front, clad in orange, who looks as if she's been hit by the

positivity bus.

Harmony continues, “Gratitude is another cornerstone of manifesting. Be thankful for what you have, and the universe will give you more to be thankful for. Start each day with a grateful heart, and watch as miracles unfold before you. Remember, you are the creator of your destiny. Dream it, believe it, achieve it. Don’t forget to purchase my book and hop in line for me to sign it. And if you’re really serious about your dreams and want to put them on the fast track, I’m offering fifty percent off my online course just for you people who showed up tonight. You can find it on my website. Use the code thankful at checkout. And thank you all for coming tonight!”

The room erupts in applause, and Harmony starts making her way through the crowd, greeting everyone with that radiant smile of hers as she lands behind a table laden with her new tome.

“Come on, Effie! We have to meet her!” Niki grabs a couple of copies of the woman’s books and stuffs one in my hand, dragging me to the line as it begins to blossom behind us.

Soon enough, we’re up at bat and Harmony greets us warmly.

“Hello, ladies.” She smiles and her blue eyes beam under the twinkle lights. And if I’m not mistaken, there’s something nefarious layered just beneath the surface of that smile.

CHAPTER 5

“ I hope you enjoyed yourselves,” Harmony Honeycutt’s teeth glitter like stars right here in Between the Lines bookshop. She just finished up a soliloquy on manifesting our dreams, and now she’s taking cold, hard cash in exchange for the silver bullet which apparently can only be unlocked between the hardcover of her book, Dream It, Believe It, Achieve It , at the paltry price of twenty-nine ninety-nine.

More like making my bank account paltry.

We hand the books to her and she happily takes them.

Serafina steps up and gives Niki and me the stink eye while dressed like the quintessential librarian. Sometimes I think she took the gig so she could show off her uptight wardrobe. Hiring her at this place was nothing short of typecasting.

“Harmony, these are my sisters,” Serafina growls our way. “If they give you any trouble, just say so. I won’t have any trouble giving them the boot from this place. Shocking that they even knew their way over. I’ve never seen them in here before.”

“That’s because you don’t stock naughty books,” Niki is quick to tell the truth.

“We do, too,” Serafina snits back. “It’s just that by your dirty standards even the naughtiest book sounds tame.”

“ Ooh ,” I lean toward Niki, “what exactly are you reading these days?”

“I’d like to know myself.” Harmony chuckles. “You girls are a hoot. Now what are your names?”

“Nicoletta Raphella Canelli,” Niki pants out her formal moniker as if she were meeting her favorite rock star. “And this is my sister, Eufrasia Margarita Canelli.”

Serafina rolls her eyes. “Why do we let you out in public again?”

I shove my elbow into Niki’s ribs. “She means our first names. I’m Effie. E-f-f-i-e.”

“Effie?” The woman looks delighted as she pens a little ditty to me personally on the first page of the book. “That is a gorgeous name.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Also, it doubles as a mild expletive. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard people say Eff this, Eff that.”

“Eff ,” Serafina mutters mostly to herself as if she meant it.

Now it’s Niki elbowing me. “She doesn’t want to hear about expletives. Harmony here is a learned doctor. It says so right here on the cover.” She flashes it my way and I see a toothy version of the woman before us, sans about twenty years with lots of gold foil fonts surrounding her face. “I’m Niki, just one K,” she tells the woman. “But lots of fun.”

The woman chuckles again. “I can tell you’re the fun sister!” And both she and Niki have a good laugh over that one. Serafina just nods as if it were a given.

I take umbrage with that fact.

I’m fun. Mostly. Especially when I don’t have anyone on my hit list. Like the ex-husband of the woman before me.

Hey? Maybe I should ask where I could find him?

On second thought, nah. I'm a big believer in lying low and avoiding the radar.

"You know what"—Niki leans toward the woman as she collects our books—"Effie here is single and I hear you have an ex. If a woman of your caliber once thought he was a good idea, I bet he'd be more than enough in his moronic state for someone like my sister."

I inch back to get a better look at my moron of a sister.

I don't know whether to be ticked or mortified. Try both.

Harmony waves the thought off. "That man is the king of morons. No one should be susceptible to him and his foolish ways. You're better off getting yourself a cute little dog and staying single, honey. You'll live a better life because of it." Harmony laughs. "But I love your enthusiasm for life, girls. Just remember to visualize your dreams clearly and believe they're already yours. Unless, of course, it's that scallywag of an idiot I was once hitched to. Then visualize yourself running in the opposite direction. The man deserves to be shot on sight for his crimes against humanity." She laughs once again as she says it. "Me, I'm humanity." She winks as we're quickly shuffled out of line by Serafina.

"Well, I've already got a dog," I say. "And I'm officially single, so I guess I'm on my way."

"What's this?" someone sniffs to my right and I turn that way to see Naomi Turner, my arch nemesis if ever there was one.

Okay, so she's not my anything, but she does have the hots for Cooper so that automatically puts her on my can't-stand-for-life list. I'm petty that way.

“Never you mind,” Niki is quick to spit the words out and Naomi all but gives us the finger as she makes her way to the register.

“I know what she’ll be manifesting sooner than later,” I moan. The man who stole my heart. Although I don’t have the guts to say that last part out loud.

I glance back at the line just as Lily and Suze get their books autographed as well, and soon that brunette who looked as if she was buying everything hook, line, and sinker is up at bat. Although she doesn’t look all that enthused at the moment. She has short dark hair, long red nails, and is clad in orange from head to toe. Okay, so it’s a burnt orange dress with matching tights and shoes. But it’s an off-putting look even if it is fall-inspired.

“Wasn’t that amazing?” Niki beams as we finish anteing up at the registers. “We’re going to manifest every last one of our wildest dreams!”

“Yeah, let’s start with manifesting our way back to the bakery in time for the pie-eating contest. I need to get on the clock to earn back what this book just manifested from me.”

Niki and I duck out into the night air and make our way down the street as the Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot thrives around us. We sample everything from roasted turkey sliders to sweet potato casserole bites. We enjoy ourselves to the culinary hilt as the shops decked out in their holiday best with twinkle lights and festive displays lure in shoppers looking for deals and steals.

By the time we make it back to the bakery, a crowd the size of the Eastern Seaboard has gathered at the entry, including every soul we met up with in the bookshop and even Harmony herself.

A table is lined up outside the front of the bakery and several men and women are

already seated and ready to go, including Noah Fox and Judge Everett Baxter, Lottie's plus-ones. They're a couple of dark-haired hunks who can shake me down in the name of the law any day. A few pumpkin pies are already set out, but I know they'll need a heck of a lot more on hand.

Lottie looks a bit frazzled as she chats away with an older brunette and they set out a couple of pies.

Hey, it's the orange wonder from the bookshop. I guess the whole bookshop is here after all.

"I'll help bring out the rest of the pies," I offer.

"Thanks," Lottie says as she sets the one in her hands down in front of a contestant.

Soon enough, the entire table is lined with Lottie's delicious pumpkin pies, and with the way my stomach is clawing at itself, I'm starting to wish I had entered myself.

"All right, everyone," Lottie announces, her voice cutting through the chatter. "Let the pie-eating contest begin!"

The contestants dive into their pies with gusto, and the crowd erupts in cheers and laughter. It's a sweet and wholesome moment if ever there was one—albeit somewhat gluttonous.

I just hope the rest of the night is as sweet as the pumpkin pie these people are devouring.

An older redheaded man on the end gives a little hop in his seat before shoveling his fork into his face faster than before. He gives another hop before dropping his fork and clutching at his throat.

His face turns the same fiery hue as his hair, then a dark shade of purple as he rises to his feet and the crowd begins to gasp.

He lets out a horrible moan before falling onto the table and landing face-first into one of Lottie's pumpkin pies.

Screams go off as Noah picks the man off the table and lays him on the ground. He checks for a pulse before shaking his head at Lottie.

"What's happening?" a woman bellows as she steps forward and it's Harmony Honeycutt demanding answers. "Why is my ex-husband lying flat on his back? What's the matter, Peter? You can't cheat your way out of this, so you decided to forfeit?"

A light chuckle breaks out among the crowd.

Her ex ? As in Peter Honeycutt, my shiny new target?

Noah stands tall and shakes his head solemnly at the woman.

"I'm sorry," he tells her. "But he's no longer with us."

The crowd's gasps quickly turn into screams.

My new mark, Peter Honeycutt, is dead and I didn't have to pull a single trigger.

And yet it does beg the question, maybe my uncle wasn't the only one who wanted the guy toes-up in the morgue.

CHAPTER 6

People are crying.

People are documenting the entire fiasco on their smartphones.

And among it all, the air is thick with panic and the scent of fresh baked pumpkin pies right here in front of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

Since the EMTs were already at the Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot for the festivities, they've descended on the scene in droves, not to mention the flashing lights of response vehicles that just arrived and the urgent shouts of law enforcement adding to the pandemonium.

Peter Honeycutt's lifeless body is surrounded by a flurry of activity as the medics try to revive him, but it's clear to anyone with eyes that he's long gone to that pumpkin pie-eating contest in the sky.

The once festive atmosphere is now filled with horror—not that it's stopped an entire horde of customers from storming the bakery.

I can't blame them; death makes me hungry too.

And through the sea of frantic faces, Aunt Cat and Carlotta spot me and make a beeline in my direction. I can't help but frown.

Those two are sort of bad luck charms in and of themselves.

“You work fast, Effie!” Aunt Cat practically shouts the words with glee and it takes a minute for me to put one and one together.

In this case, that name on my hit list just so happens to match the name of the man unlucky enough to choke on a piece of pumpkin pie. Not that anyone can choke on Lottie’s pumpkin pie. It practically melts in your mouth upon contact, crust and all.

But that doesn’t seem to stop my aunt and Carlotta from pointing an accusing—yet celebratory—finger my way.

Although at the moment, I’m the one choking as an entire backlog of words try to stream from my throat at once.

“Wait—you don’t think... I didn’t kill any?—”

Carlotta lifts a finger and cuts me off. “Gotta hand it to you, kid. Didn’t think you’d take care of business so publicly, but hey, no one ever said you lacked style. So what did you do him in with? Cyanide? Strychnine? Some other cool yet deadly nine I don’t even know about?”

I shoot her a look. “No, seriously, that wasn’t me. I swear.”

Aunt Cat shrugs over at Carlotta. “What can I say? She’s a pro and pros never cop to a crime, especially not with a cast of thousands milling around.” She pats me on the shoulder. “But that doesn’t change the fact I’m proud of you. I can’t believe I got the pleasure of watching you carry out a hit with my own two eyes. I can die happy now.” She narrows her eyes over mine. “Don’t even think about it, kid. I’m in my prime. Carlotta and I still haven’t checked out half of the male strip clubs that Leeds has to offer. But when I’m pushing a hundred and can’t remember my own name, you have my permission to stop in and feed me a slice of your poison pie.”

“That goes double for me,” Carlotta says while craning her neck in the direction of the deceased.

“Oh, good grief,” I mutter at the thought of being pegged for a murder I didn’t commit—not that it would be the first time. Long story.

Although I’ll admit, I am a little relieved I didn’t have to pump the guy full of bullets just to appease my uncle—and spare my own body from being riddled full of bullets in the process.

I guess death chose an opportune time to pay Honey Hollow a visit.

Life is funny that way—and so is death.

Before I can say more, I feel a furry nudge against my leg. I look down to see Watson, my adorable pooch—a blonde ball of fluff—wagging his tail and looking up at me with those big, trusting eyes that say feed me or else I’ll poop in your shoe while you sleep .

I scoop him up and snuggle with him. Personally, I’m glad for the distraction, but I know his presence can only mean one thing—Cooper’s not far behind.

And right on cue, there he is, Cupertino Lazzari striding through the chaos with a look of steely determination that makes my stomach do a flip. Fun fact: Cooper comes from a long line of mobsters, too. His uncle Luke and my Uncle Jimmy have been locked in a turf war for the better half of a century.

Detective Cooper Knox may be one of Ashford County Sheriff’s Department’s finest, but he happens to be my current complication.

As much as he makes my insides bisect with heat, I groan at the sight of him.

“Great,” I mutter. “Just what I need right now.”

Aunt Cat snickers. “Good luck explaining this one to your detective boyfriend.”

Carlotta chuckles as well. “Looks like he’s about to manifest a lot of questions!” She glances over at the body among us. “Come on, Cat. We’d better get over there to snap a few good pics before they cover the body.” She grabs ahold of her bestie and they take off like a hurricane.

I set my jaw, trying to maintain some semblance of calm, but the closer Cooper gets, the more my knees start knocking and my heart tries to kickbox its way out of my chest.

Cooper’s eyes lock onto mine, and I can see the storm brewing behind them.

Cooper is tall, with dark hair, even darker facial scruff, and a lean, mean body laden with muscles. His go-to look is a frown—mostly aimed at me—and he seems to evoke the attention of every single female in a twelve-state radius. He’s lethally handsome that way.

This night just went from bad to worse, and I have a feeling it's only the beginning.

Cooper stops in front of me, his gaze soft yet questioning. “Effie, I just pulled up. What the heck happened here?”

I open my mouth to explain, but the words stick in my throat. How do you tell the man you’re falling for that the dead man was your latest target?

Just as I’m about to tell him what went down, someone calls out, “Detective Knox, we need your help over here!”

Cooper's dimples dig in and out and my stomach explodes with heat again.

Darn hormones.

"We'll talk," he says, looking at me intently. "And I think we do have some things to talk about." He takes off as I try to figure out if his words are a quasi-threat or not.

Awe, heck, of course they were. I'm not lucky enough for them to be anything less.

In fact, I'm not lucky enough to make it to Christmas without being tossed into the back of a patrol car. And at the rate my luck is failing me, it will probably be closer to Thanksgiving—or even tonight.

Coop rushes off to where the EMTs are still working around Peter's lifeless body and I breathe a tiny sigh of relief. But only a tiny one just as a hand reaches through the crowd and grabs me by the elbow.

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CHAPTER 7

Niki steals Watson right out of my arms and he proceeds to lick her face silly right here in front of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, after a dead guy just faceplanted into a pumpkin pie slathered with whipped cream.

And is it wrong that I'm suddenly hungry?

"Wow, Effie." Niki laughs. "When you decide to make a scene, you really go all out. What are you going to do with the next guy who lands on your hitlist? Turn him into a fireworks display?"

"How about I turn you into a fireworks display?" I say, stealing my cute pooch right back and now he's licking my face silly—as it should be. I have to admit, he is the best kisser; he takes after his daddy.

I'm about to detail exactly how I'm about to go about turning my sister into one big, grand finale explosion when I spot that woman dressed from head to toe in orange, talking to none other than Naomi Turner, my perpetual thorn-in-the-side brunette nemesis.

The woman in orange keeps glancing over at Peter's body and her face is a mask of concern mixed with something else—satisfaction perhaps? It's strange, to say the least.

Meanwhile, Naomi can't seem to stop ogling at Cooper as if he's a slice of pie she's about to take a bite out of. Too bad that bite couldn't poison her and send her

wherever boyfriend stealers go after they die. Probably the hot place surrounded by a bunch of even hotter bad boys. Figures. Some girls have all the luck.

I frown hard her way. So help me, if my stint with Uncle Jimmy lands Naomi Turner smack in Cooper's arms, there's going to be someone I need to smack, all right. Myself to be exact. Although Naomi isn't too far behind in that number.

Niki clutches my arm as the crowd around us continues to panic. "Effie, I swear, every time there's a dead body in this town, you're somehow in the middle of it."

Watson gives a chirp of a bark as if he agrees and I shake my head at him.

"It's like you're a murder magnet, just like that boss of yours!" Niki hitches her head toward the bakery, so I'm apprised as to which boss she speaks of. Although, technically, both of my bosses are murder magnets.

And yes, oddly enough, it's true. Lottie Lemon has stumbled upon her fair share of bodies as well. I've only got a lowly three under my belt. I hardly call that a murder magnet. More like a bad luck magnet. Very bad luck. In fact, at this point, I should probably work Bad Luck into my formal moniker.

"Would you stop?" I smack my sister's hand away. "It's not like I wake up in the morning and say I hope someone bites the dust today so I can be the first one to trip over their corpse. Besides, I was nowhere near that man when he dropped dead, and I've got witnesses." I was a whole three feet away.

"Maybe so, but you were the one who brought out some of those pies," she points out and I spot Cooper snapping his head in our direction.

Judging by the fact he's less than three feet away himself, I'm betting he heard that last little incriminating tidbit.

“Wonderful,” I grunt as I pull Niki deeper into the crowd. “I’ll have you know, you just landed me at the top of Cooper’s suspect list!”

“Eh .” She shrugs. “Worse things have happened. Look on the bright side. This whole disaster could land you on top of Cooper himself.” She smacks me back. “Anyway, I need to know if I’m safe from your lethal ways. Am I on your good side? Do I need to start sleeping with one eye open and a kitchen knife under my pillow? You’re not planning on using me for target practice, are you?”

“You can relax,” I growl at her. “As long as you keep making those killer calzones, you’re in the clear.” It’s true. Not even Nona Jo can beat Niki at her calzone game. “Besides, if I wanted you dead, I’d at least make sure it was in a more glamorous setting than a pie-eating contest—like, say, Hairway to Heaven.” That’s the salon my mother works at. Also, that would cast a cloud of suspicion on a family member that’s not me. If I had a nickel every time my mother announced she was going to kill my sister, I’d be able to retire to the North Pole and hit on Santa. (It’s sort of been a fantasy of mine. It’s a long story.)

“Aw, thanks,” Niki moans with delight. “You always were my favorite sister. But don’t tell Serafina. I tell her she’s my favorite in an effort to stop her from reporting all the dirt she has on me to Ma. Because you know what Mom would do with all that info.”

I nod. “Report it to her prayer group.” And we both know the words prayer group are synonymous with gossip group. Aka Italian wireless.

“I’d better go while the getting is still good,” Niki says while running that way, digging out her phone, and pointing the camera right at the poor stiff.

At least he didn’t die by my hand.

I spot that lady in orange once again as she inspects the dead as if she were one of the coroners on hand.

What's with her, anyway?

Behind her, an older man is practically glaring at the deceased as if he stole his lunch money. He's a tall wall of muscles, a man about my father's age but with a carpet full of dark hair. And judging by the fact his hair is listing to one side, it might actually be a carpet.

And next to the two of them is Harmony Honeycutt herself and her expression is oddly serene. Although seeing that the guy was her ex, maybe it's not so odd after all.

Come to think of it, serene might be too mild a word. The woman is practically glowing, and not in a warm, fuzzy way. More like a cat that's just swallowed a pumpkin-eating canary. I bet she's secretly pleased he's out of the picture.

Before I can mull it over any further, a panicked shout rings out from none other than Suze herself. "The pies are poisoned!"

Lottie looks horrified. Noah, Suze's favorite son, looks twice as horrified, albeit at his mother—most likely for shouting out the obvious for all to hear. But then, knowing how Suze feels about Lottie, I'm not all that surprised.

The crowd erupts into screams as people scatter in all directions like chickens with their heads cut off—or rather turkeys considering the season.

Watson squirms and wiggles.

"We'd better get out of here before this turns into a full-blown riot," I say under my breath.

We push our way through the hysterical throng, keeping an eye on both the deceased and Detective Cooper Knox.

The pieces of this puzzle aren't fitting together just yet, but one thing's for sure—this Thanksgiving just got a whole lot more interesting.

CHAPTER 8

The next morning, the bakery is overrun with overeager customers looking to get their mitts on, you guessed it, Lottie's infamous pumpkin pies.

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery is loaded with bodies, all of them living thankfully. And even though we can't seem to keep those pies on the shelf, the cinnamon rolls and pumpkin spice cheesecake muffins aren't exactly standing still either.

Last night, Lottie threw out all of the leftover pies and started from scratch just in case someone tampered with her ingredients. She let me know that Noah and Cooper already sent a sample of the pie Peter Honeycutt was eating to the forensics team where they're conducting an analysis.

Personally, I'm still hoping the guy dropped dead from some rare defect. I'd hate to think there's a killer out there somewhere. And more to the point, I'd love to take myself off of Detective Cooper Knox's suspect list if there is a killer out there somewhere.

I try to busy myself by arranging a tray of freshly baked pumpkin spice muffins with cheesecake in the center when the door jingles. I glance up, and there he is—Detective Cooper Knox, walking in like he owns the place, carrying a white paper bag with the word Mangias emblazoned on the side of it.

I can't help but frown for two reasons. One, Cooper knows I can't resist him. And two, Cooper knows just the sight of a bag from Mangias makes my mouth water almost as much as it does for him.

It's like he was born to torment me.

Mangias just so happens to be the cozy Italian eatery located across the street. And now that it's on my radar, I know where I'll be carb-loading this afternoon. I can practically hear the pizza calling my name.

"Ooh, Cooper's here," Lily announces before leaning my way. "Naomi told me all about how you handed him back to her on a silver platter. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I'd like to know myself," I mutter.

Suze steps up to the counter and plasters one of her fake smiles to her face. It's not her fault she's not hardwired to be nice. Somewhere down the family tree, there's definitely a relative responsible for all that venom—or an ex. Now that I think about it, my money is on her ex.

"How can I help you, Detective?" she asks. "How about a scone or a cookie perhaps? Or maybe you'd rather have a slice of Lottie's pumpkin pie? I'm sure Effie would be glad to prepare it for you." She looks my way. "Don't worry, Effie. I know where my loyalties lie."

I'm glad she's aware, although I'm not sure I know.

"Actually"—Cooper takes a moment to grimace, most likely at the thought of accepting a slice of poison pie from me—"I'm here hoping to speak with Effie. No pie needed." Or wanted apparently. "In fact, I sort of brought a peace offering." He holds up the bag.

I frown over at the handsome steed for cornering me so expertly.

“As much as I’d love to grace you with my company, I’ve got customers to tend to,” I say just as another crowd barrels through the door. And boy, am I ever glad to see their half-starved faces.

“Effie, take your break,” Lottie says, coming up from behind and grinning like a loon. “Looks like you’ve got a peace offering to accept.”

I huff but can’t help the smile tugging at my lips. “Fine, but if what’s in that bag isn’t amazing, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

“It’s from Mangias,” Lottie counters. “We both know it’ll be amazing.”

I walk over to the table near the window where Cooper has already settled and his eyes look as if they’re twitching to make an arrest. Either that or they’re twitching because he can’t control his dirty thoughts about me. I’d much rather it be the latter. But with my luck, the former is on the table—right along with that bag from Mangias.

“My sister has Watson,” I blurt as if that were even on his radar. “It’s Serafina’s day off and she thinks having Watson around might somehow prepare her for motherhood. Not that she’s knocked up,” I’m quick to quantify. “Geez, no. She’s too much of a goody-goody for that. I doubt that boyfriend of hers is getting any action at all. And if my mother gets wind of the fact I’m out here starting rumors, she’s liable to drag me back to Grimstone Heights by the hair and lock me in a closet. Not that my mother ever locked me in a closet—not for long anyway. Have I mentioned that I tend to ramble when I’m nervous?”

“So I’ve noticed.” He flexes a smile that comes and goes and about three different women sigh in appreciation. “For you.” He pulls out a sandwich, unwrapping it to reveal an Italian salami masterpiece. Thick slices of cured salami are layered with creamy provolone, tangy roasted red peppers, and a spread of pesto, all nestled

between two halves of a crusty French loaf slathered with oil and vinegar.

My mouth waters instantly. It smells like heaven, and my stomach growls in response, reminding me that I haven't eaten since breakfast.

"As delicious as it looks, you know I can't accept that," I say, not entirely convinced of this lie myself.

"Why not?" He inches back and that dark scruff on his cheeks looks as if it's daring me to touch it.

Believe me, my fingers are tempted.

"It's still morning."

"It's afternoon," he counters and he can't seem to stop from frowning at me in that far too sexy way.

"Oh, all right, fine," I say, pulling the bag forward and unwrapping it like the early culinary Christmas gift it is. "You know I can't resist a good salami sandwich."

"I figured as much," he says. "And thought you might need a pick-me-up after last night." He leans in, those blue eyes of his looking serious as death. "I come in peace—with food."

I lean in and the scent hits me full force. "If your aim is to win me over with Italian deli meats, you're off to a good start." I take a big bite, and the flavors explode in my mouth. The salty salami, creamy provolone, and that perfect hint of garlic in the pesto make my taste buds do a happy dance. "Good grief, Cooper. This is incredible."

He gives a brief nod my way. "That's because I know full well that food is your love

language.”

I swallow another bite, trying not to look too eager, and offer him a look that says, you’re not off the hook .

I think we both know he’s here to give me the third degree. And maybe those silver bracelets I’ve inadvertently had my eye on—or more to the point, am trying to avoid. I hear the return policy on those isn’t too friendly.

“You know, Effie, for someone who claims to be tough, you’re pretty easy to please with the right food.”

“It’s not my fault you’ve discovered my weakness. Good food and cute dogs are my kryptonite.”

“Kryptonite aside”—he leans in as a menacing scowl takes over his face—“we need to talk about what happened.”

And just like that, my appetite disappears like a mobster in the witness protection program.

CHAPTER 9

The bakery begins to percolate with customers once again, the scent of fresh pastries mingles with the aroma of coffee, creating a warm, inviting atmosphere, and yet all I can smell is a corpse—and suddenly I wish it was mine.

“Fine,” I say to Cooper. “But don’t think this sandwich gets you out of answering my questions either.”

Not that I know what my questions are just yet. It’s not like I’m going to ask him what my picture was doing in the center of that murder board in his office, acting like the sun to a solar system of men I’ve tried my best to gun down.

“Deal,” he says. “So what do you know about Peter Honeycutt?”

“Why would I know anything?” My voice squeaks like a pubescent teenager, and it all but implicates me in the guy’s pumpkin pie demise despite the fact I’m innocent.

He frowns in response. “You were there before me,” he counters. “And you were serving pies.”

I glare in the direction of the Honey Pot Diner where Niki is currently busy gossiping or spilling a drink on someone—most likely both.

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery and the Honey Pot Diner are connected through a pass-through carved into a shared wall. Lottie’s sister runs the Honey Pot; meanwhile, my sister tries to run me into the ground.

“So I was,” I say. “Serving pie is a part of my job description. So what did the guy drop dead from? Heart attack? Stroke? Some other bodily malfunction that nature had in store for him that just so happens to be a perfectly natural way to land yourself in the cemetery?”

His lids slit to nothing. “The coroner says he had an anaphylactic response to a common allergen—one he happened to have a lethal allergy to.”

“Strychnine?” I ask a little too eager. I can’t help it, Carlotta has crawled into my brain and made a home there.

Coop is back to frowning. “How is strychnine a common allergen?”

“I’m a baker, not a scientist.” Technically, neither of those is true. I don’t know my way around a mixer any more than I do around a Glock, but that hasn’t stopped me from being a proud owner of both. “Strychnine kills people, Coop. Do I have to do your job for you?”

He cocks his head and gives me a warning look. “The culprit was peanut butter,” he flatlines.

“Peanut butter?” I inch back. “But there’s no peanut butter in Lottie’s pumpkin pies. I should know, I’m a heavy connoisseur of both Lottie’s pumpkin pies and peanut butter.”

“As am I,” he says with a sigh. “I know it’s not an ingredient used in pumpkin pie. I already spoke to Lottie and she assured me it wasn’t an ingredient she added.”

“So case closed as far as the bakery goes,” I say. “The guy obviously picked up a peanut butter goodie somewhere else last night. All of Main Street was crawling with sweet and savory treats. He could have picked it up anywhere from anyone— except

from me. I have a strict no-peanut-butter-for-almost-dead-guys rule.”

Cooper’s chest rises and falls and he gives me a look that says, what am I going to do with you .

I could give him a list of at least ten naughty things if he wants. Handcuffs are a part of the equation but only for funsies.

“Forensics says the pumpkin pie had peanut butter in it.” He raises his brows my way. “We tested the other pies at the table and they had none.”

“What are the odds?” I say, mostly to myself.

“Zero to homicide.”

I gasp. “Are you saying it was murder?”

“I’m saying someone out there wanted Peter Honeycutt dead and that’s exactly what they got.” He leans back in his seat and pins his eyes to mine as if he were trying to coerce a confession out of me.

Cooper Knox has the most intoxicating blue marbled eyes, coffee-brown wavy hair, and don’t get me started on that rock-hard body I’ve yet to fully appreciate.

“So who do you think wanted to off the guy?” I ask as I narrow my own eyes on his. If Cooper thinks he’s the only one around here who knows how to intimidate, he’s wrong, dead wrong.

Although baiting my soon-to-be ex into a conversation that might lead to a discussion of why my face was on that murder board of his isn’t the most prudent direction to head in.

I never said I was smart. But a smart aleck? Now that's another story.

Cooper leans in and parts his lips—just the way he used to when he was about to kiss me—ironic since he's most likely about to kiss me goodbye, as in arrest me for being a terror to the community.

But before he can pucker up, or fill me in on his theories regarding Peter Honeycutt's murder, the bakery door opens with a whoosh and lets in a wicked wind—and it lets in a wicked witch, too.

Within seconds, Naomi Turner slithers up to our cozy table for two and wraps those vipers she calls arms around Cooper like she's just spotted her prey, and I have no doubt she'd like to take a bite out of my man.

He's still my man, right?

“Exactly the handsome detective I was looking for,” she purrs in his ear.

Fantastic. I groan inwardly. Just what I needed to make this day complete.

“Naomi,” Cooper says, trying to extricate himself from her vise grip. “What's going on?”

“I'm in charge of the Thanksgiving Day parade and that's good news for you,” she beams, looking as if she just manifested her dream prize. “I need you to play Santa Claus during the grand finale. You'd be perfect for it. Tall, strong, and oh-so-good-looking—just the qualities Santa needs. And after the parade, we need Santa at the community center for the Thanksgiving meal for the needy. It's a little thing we do, headed up by the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation.”

Cooper raises a brow, clearly skeptical—as he should be considering the source.

“Me? Santa Claus?”

Naomi nods with far too much enthusiasm. Clearly, I’m not the only one around here who has the hots for the big guy—and I’m talking about Santa, but Cooper works in the equation, too.

“Yes, you.” Naomi digs her finger into his chest, using any excuse she can to cop a feel. “And guess what? I’ll be playing the part of Mrs. Claus. We’ll make the perfect pair. And Effie”—she turns to me with a syrupy sweet smile—“you can be an elf if you want. I’m amassing a small army of those critters to help pass out candy canes to the kids on hand.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. If I did, I’m pretty sure they’d get stuck in the back of my head.

“Gee, thanks, Naomi. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Her eyes glint with pride. “Oh, don’t mention it. After all, every Santa needs his little helpers. Maybe you can help with picking up after the reindeer, too? You know, something suited to your talents.”

“I’ll consider it.” I flex a tight smile. “And maybe you can help pull the sleigh. I’ve seen your thighs. You’ve got the horsepower.”

Cooper presses his lips tight as if he’s holding back a laugh, but before he can respond, his phone buzzes. He checks it and his expression turns sour.

“I have to go. Duty calls.” He stands, giving me a look that says, you’re not getting away with this. “We still have a lot to talk about.”

A knot tightens in my stomach as I give a reluctant nod.

He walks out, and I'm left with the wicked witch, who suddenly points a gnarled green finger my way.

Okay, so Naomi's digits are perfectly svelte, the color of peaches and cream, and happen to look freshly manicured with a glossy red fingernail attached.

"Fair warning: If I were you, I'd hit the gym," she says as she rises out of her seat. "Those unsightly green tights you'll be wearing come Thanksgiving show off every little lump and dimple. I guess I'm not the only one with thighs strong enough to pull Santa's sleigh. Maybe brush up on your candy cane distribution skills as well. It won't kill you to smile." She winks my way before sashaying right out into the elements where it's bitter cold just like her heart.

"I'd rather brush up on my escape skills," I mutter.

Face it, I'm an elf with a top position on a homicide suspect list.

Solving Peter Honeycutt's murder is now a matter of survival. Because if I don't figure out who's behind it soon, I might be the one Cooper tosses in the big house for it—along with a whole slew of misdeeds he's already eyeing me for. And this time, I'm not sure even the best sandwich in the world could save me.

Just as I'm about to plot my first investigative move, the door opens again, and in walk Aunt Cat and Carlotta, henpecking a glance around the place until they land firmly on yours truly.

Aunt Cat waves a small white envelope my way like it's a winning lottery ticket.

More like a one-way ticket to Trouble Town—or Hitman's Hollow to be exact.

"Hey, Effie," she practically sings my name as the two of them swoop in and sit

down. “I’ve got another job for you.”

“Great.” I sigh, feeling the weight of the envelope even before I take it. “Just what I needed—another envelope of doom.”

I snatch it from her and quickly open it up.

“Frankie ‘The Bull’ Santoro,” I say below a whisper, and both Aunt Cat and Carlotta belt out a scream because of it.

CHAPTER 10

“Would you keep it down?” I practically hiss at my Aunt Cat and Carlotta as I sneak a quick glance at the other patrons here in the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery. A few roving eyes linger in our direction, but for the most part, everyone gets back to noshing on their sweet treats.

No sooner did I open the envelope and read the name of my new mark than these two began to crow like a rooster at dawn.

“I can’t believe it.” Aunt Cat clutches her chest. “Frankie ‘The Bull’? That man’s a walking danger sign. You’d better be careful with that one.”

Carlotta fans herself with her hand. “Remember when he used to come around? Those biceps, that jawline... He’s a beefcake I wouldn’t mind taking another bite out of.”

“You’re telling me.” Aunt Cat swoons on cue. “Those eyes of his were so intense it was like he could see right through you. He always had that bad-boy charm about him, too. I’d give anything for one more ride on that Italian Stallion.”

“And just like that, I have too much information,” I say, mostly to myself.

There’s no use in stopping these two once they get going.

“Hands off, Canelli,” Carlotta is quick to growl at her bestie. “If that steed is on his final lap, it should be me who gives him a proper sendoff. He once told me he could

die a happy man if I just did that to him one more time.” She holds a finger up my way. “And I’m not telling either one of you what that was.”

“That’s a relief,” I mutter.

“ Please .” Aunt Cat is quick to wave her off. “That man once got on his knees and begged for my lasagna. I could get him to do just about anything for it.” She glances out the window and gets a far-off look in her eyes. “Boy, how I miss those sheetrock abs of his. You could grate cheese on them back in the day. If anyone's giving him the big send-off, it’s gonna be me.”

Carlotta squares her shoulders as if she’s ready for battle. “Not if I get to him first. I’ve got more charm in my little finger than you’ve got in that entire vat of marinara sauce you call a lasagna.”

Aunt Cat slams a hand down onto the table and both women begin to rise out of their seats as if they were ready to rumble.

“Ladies, focus ,” I cut in, trying to regain control. “This isn’t a contest. It’s an assignment. One that I’d prefer to survive.” Frankie’s survival is another matter.

Lottie shows up and sets down a plate full of her pumpkin spice muffins with cheesecake in the center and both women land flat on their keesters once again.

Who says food can’t solve just about anything?

“What’s going on?” she asks as she gives Carlotta the stink eye.

Carlotta is Lottie’s biological mother. She left Lottie at the fire station when she was just a newborn and Lottie’s life has been better because of it.

“None of your beeswax,” Carlotta says as both she and Aunt Cat dive into the muffins. “ Mmm ,” she moans. “These are great, Lot Lot. I’ll be picking up a dozen of them before I leave. I bet good ol’ Frankie will love them.”

“You stay away from Frankie,” I say a little sharper than I meant to.

“Thank you,” Lottie says with a nod. “I don’t know who this Frankie character is, but I trust your judgment. Speaking of characters,” she grimaces slightly, “I saw Naomi dripping all over Cooper. What’s going on between the two of you? It’s the first time he’s been in here in weeks. Please tell me there’s no trouble in paradise.”

I make a face, and that about tells her everything she needs to know.

“Oh shoot,” she says. “I’m so sorry to hear it. But regardless, I think you and Coop can get back on track. In the meantime, whatever you do, don’t give Naomi Turner an inch or she’ll take a stiletto-strewn mile—and it will be a dirty one.” She leans in. “Her twin might be my best friend in the whole world, but I don’t trust Naomi as far as I can throw her. You better watch your back.”

“I carry a Glock.” I shrug. “Naomi should probably watch hers.”

“Duly noted.” Lottie belts out a laugh. “And I carry the same piece, only I call her Ethel. Hey, you should name yours something fun.”

“A Naomi Stopper?” I tease.

“Something far more friendlier.” She laughs again. “I wouldn’t give her the honor. Or threaten to kill her around these parts. Death never seems to be very far away.” She sighs at the thought. “I can’t believe that poor man died just outside these doors last night.”

“Sure, you can, Lot,” Carlotta tells her. “You practically have a corpse show up at your doorstep once a month.” She leans back. “Hey? You’re not part of the Corpse of the Month Club, are you?”

“Would you keep it down?” Lottie says, giving a quick look around. “And no, I am not a part of any ridiculous corpse club. Only you would think of that.”

“And only you would stumble upon the dead as if it were your job,” Carlotta counters.

“What about Effie?” Aunt Cat grunts as if she took umbrage to Carlotta’s claims. “She’s not exactly a slacker in that department, you know. Sure, she’s got some catching up to do.” She turns my way and toasts me with a pumpkin spice muffin. “But I’ve got faith in you, honey. You’re doing great with the dead yourself. You better watch out, Lottie. You’ve got some stiff competition on hand. Get it, stiff? ”

“We get it,” I say, lackluster. “And as much as I appreciate your cheerleading, I’d be thrilled if I never stumbled upon a dead body again.”

At least I’m not the one responsible for turning him into a corpse to begin with. Not that I aim to evict anyone off the planet anytime soon. My shoot-’em-where-it-doesn’t-hurt schtick is still producing the results my lunatic of an uncle wants.

“Anyway”—Lottie says, eyeing a crowd that just moved in—“Noah says that the case belongs to Cooper, and I’m sure he’s plenty capable of solving this one. Besides, I’ve got my hands full with Thanksgiving coming up in a few days.”

Another crowd moves in and Lottie motions for me to stay back while she heads to the registers.

I snap up a pumpkin spice muffin, but before I can bring it to my lips, another hand

moves in and snatches it from me.

“Hey.” I look up just as Niki drops into the seat next to me and takes a bite out of my muffin. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to set a record,” she grunts through a bite. “I just ate six of these.”

“You mean you could eat six of them,” I correct as I grab another for myself and nearly shove the entire thing into my mouth before fate can intervene once again.

With the way my life has been going lately, it’s safe to say fate isn’t exactly on my side. Although the Grim Reaper might be. Just my luck. Considering the line of work I’m in, his presence might just benefit me.

“No, I mean I just ate six of them,” Niki mumbles through a mouthful. “We’re serving them at the Honey Pot, too. So who’s your next assignment?” Niki’s eyes widen as she swipes the envelope from me and reads the name. “Frankie ‘The Bull’ Santoro? Effie, how do you always get the high-profile targets?”

“She’s lucky,” Carlotta snips as if the thought enraged her.

“You know me”—I tip my head at the thought—“I’m a regular horseshoe.”

“Frankie is a dream.” Aunt Cat sighs. “He’s got those eyes that could melt ice. Sure, they’re dangerous, but oh-so-tempting. How I wouldn’t mind if they were looking at my naked body once again.”

“And there goes my appetite,” I say.

Who am I kidding? Nothing can stop me from gobbling down six of these cheesecake muffins myself.

“And those muscles...” Carlotta sighs twice as hard. “I’d let him sweep me off my feet and tear my clothes off any day. This day would be nice.”

“So what’s new with the dead guy?” Niki asks, promptly ignoring the swoon-fest taking place in honor of my new target. “I saw Coop stop in. And by the way, I wouldn’t let Naomi hang all over him like that. You’re sending him the wrong message.”

“It’s not her face on his murder board,” I grunt. “Clearly, I’ve sent him the wrong message far before this morning. Besides, she was just asking him to play the part of Santa for the Thanksgiving Day parade.”

“I love it when Santa shows up at the end of the parade,” Carlotta says. “It officially kicks off the Christmas season. That’s when I know it’s time to borrow Lot’s credit card and buy myself all the pricey things I want. She spends so much during the holidays, she doesn’t even notice.”

“Lovely,” I say.

“I love it when Santa shows up, too.” Aunt Cat nods her way. “Especially when he’s a hot Santa.” She looks my way. “Say, you should play the part of Mrs. Claus. I bet that could make Cooper forget all about the fact you’re a mob assassin.”

“Too late.” I glower at my muffin. “Naomi snagged the sacred spot. She said I could be an elf.”

Niki scoffs. “Don’t worry, Eff. We’ll make sure you’re the hottest homewrecking elf around. Santa won’t know what hit him. Speaking of hits, did Coop say what happened to Peter Peter the Pumpkin Pie Eater?”

“He was murdered,” I say with a smidge of annoyance.

“Knew it.” Aunt Cart slaps the table once again. “You did a good job, Effie.” She’s quick to pat me on the back. “And an even better job of trying to hide the hit from us.”

“I’m hiding it so well, I’m even hiding it from myself,” I say. “That’s because I didn’t do it. But Coop’s still not convinced.”

“You know what that means.” Carlotta leans in with a mean look in her eyes. “We gotta track down the killer ourselves.”

“I have to track down the killer,” I correct. “As in me, alone.”

“Sorry, Toots, but we’re a team.” Aunt Cat scoops up another muffin and toasts me with that one, too.

“So who’s first up?” Niki asks while snatching up another muffin herself.

“I’m starting at the top with the person who most likely hated Peter Honeycutt the most—his ex.”

Niki nods approvingly. “Harmony Honeycutt, here we come.”

And if Harmony is as smart as she is savvy, she’ll be manifesting an alibi.

Something tells me, she’s going to need it.

CHAPTER 11

Thankfully, Harmony Honeycutt's schedule is laid bare for all to see on her website, and as my fickle friend fate would have it, Harmony is speaking tonight at a local festival.

The Harvest Feast Festival right here in Honey Hollow is sensory overload in the best possible way. The crisp fall air is filled with the scent of smoked turkey legs, sweet funnel cake, and fresh baked pies. Hay bales and cornstalks are artfully arranged around the festival grounds, and every booth is festooned with autumn leaves and tiny orange twinkle lights.

There's a pumpkin patch where kids are happily picking out an orange globe to call their own, and the sound of folk music drifts through the air, adding to the festive atmosphere.

And true to their word, Aunt Cat, Carlotta, and Niki followed me over as soon as I got off work. But not before I collected my ball of fluff from Serafina.

Watson wiggles and jumps and his leash is hardly able to hold him back.

"Someone is happy about the smoked turkey legs," I say.

"Yeah, and that someone is me," Aunt Cat says, rubbing her belly. "This place smells like heaven. And don't think just because I wolfed down a dozen of those pumpkin spice cheesecake wonders that I don't have room for an entire Thanksgiving dinner. In fact, I'm ready to dive into one of those turkey legs right along with Watson."

“Speaking of diving,” Carlotta says, her eyes fixed on a stage nearby where a man delights the crowd by shoving a sword down his pie hole. “Check out the sword swallower. Now that’s a trick I’d love to learn.”

“Now that’s a trick I’ve gotta learn.” Aunt Cat grabs Carlotta by the arm and swoops her off in that dicey direction.

“Guess we’re on our own,” Niki says as she cranes her neck and takes a gander at the sights. “Would you look at that?” she squawks so loud I’m half-afraid I’ll see Naomi with her inflated lips locked onto Cooper’s face, but all I see is the most delicious booth of them all.

“Ooh , smokin’ hot turkey legs,” I say, inhaling the smoky scent deep into my lungs.

“No, not the turkey legs. The smokin’ hot guy doling them out. I swear, it’s as if all you think about is food.”

“Have you met me?”

“Yes,” she grunts. “And now it’s time for me to meet him .” She stalks off in that direction and I shake my head.

“And then there was one,” I say to myself just as Watson begins to bark and tug at his leash, reminding me that there are technically two. He starts to take off and I can hardly hold him back. “Whoa,” I say as I’m dragged a few feet. “Where are you going, buddy?”

I let him lead the way, and within ten seconds I’m staring up at two familiar faces—one who loathes me and one who I’d like to think loathes me a little less.

“Loretta, Cooper ,” I say, surprised to see the brother-sister duo at the harvest festival,

of all places.

“Call me Solemina,” she all but growls. Suffice it to say, Cooper’s baby sister doesn’t care much for me. She leans in and offers me the stink eye as if she heard my internal musing. “Only my closest friends call me Loretta.”

Cooper winks and shakes his head at me, and I can’t for the life of me decipher what that means.

Solemina has her dark locks pushed up into a ponytail that looks as if it could double as a rat’s nest. Looks to me that someone likes to tease their hair as much as they like to tease the boys. She’s clad in a black velvet tracksuit, albeit with enough rhinestones studding it from top to bottom she could double as a lighthouse. Not surprisingly, she has another moniker she’s known by around these parts—the Black Widow Lazzari. Let’s just say good ol’ Loretta here has a body count going herself.

And Cooper looks fresh from work with his dark corduroy jacket and matching pants.

“Hey there, buddy.” He scoops up Watson and soon the fluffy pup is licking his face silly.

Lucky dog.

How is it fair that my pooch gets more action than I do with my own boyfriend? That is, if Cooper and I are an item anymore. I’ve got questions when it comes to our relationship status—almost as many questions as I have regarding the status of my freedom.

“Fancy seeing you here,” I say as Cooper leans in and offers me a kiss on the lips.

My entire body freezes. I can’t tell if that was the gentle kiss of the man who once

thought I was a hot piece—or the kiss of a man who wants to put me away because of the hot piece I keep in my purse. But for the most part, it felt natural.

Hey? Maybe I should nickname my gun Loretta?

“Solemina invited me out,” he says. Cooper almost never calls her Loretta. I’m not sure what that says about the state of their relationship. “She’s got a booth and she wanted me to see it.”

“It’s not my booth,” Solemina corrects before glaring at me. “It belongs to the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation. I’m simply making a few extra sales for them. My friend Fiona runs the foundation. She calls me Loretta.” Her eyes slit to nothing and Watson growls at her because of it.

Note to self: Reward the little guy with a turkey leg of his own before we leave this place.

“Whoa, boy,” Cooper says, pulling Watson out of her range. “All right, I’ll be back.” He nods toward his sister as he leads us a few feet out. “What brings you here?”

That smile on his face morphs into a frown as if he were already onto me. And seeing that he’s pegged me as an assassin, yes, I would say he’s that good.

“I heard Harmony Honeycutt was speaking and I wanted in on the action. Word on the street is she can teach me how to make all of my troubles go away and even dream up a whole new reality. Believe me, if anyone’s in the market for a whole new reality, you’re looking at her.”

Cooper dips his chin as he inspects me with those marbled eyes.

“Is there something about your present reality that I ought to know about?” He lifts a

dark brow. “Is that the reason you’ve been avoiding me like the plague for the last few weeks?”

“So you caught on?” I’m only half-teasing.

“I’m a detective.”

“And I was under the weather.” Emotionally speaking. I’m not doing this with him. At least not now. Not here where there’s a perfectly good suspect and a potentially better sword swallower to garner my attention—and maybe pick up a few tips from.

“Okay.” Cooper gives a slow nod, his eyes never leaving mine. “Why don’t we check out what Harmony Honeycutt has to say. And maybe afterward you can fill me in on what exactly had you under the weather.”

We head off into the crowd, and suddenly I’m in need of answers I’m not sure I can ever give Cooper. Not that I don’t think he already has them.

I’m in one prickly pickle. And little does Coop know so is he. If Cooper Knox so much as steps an inch away from this relationship, my Uncle Jimmy has vowed to end the guy.

Face it, both Cooper and I are doomed.

Here’s hoping Harmony Honeycutt can give us a few tips and tricks on how to manifest a whole new reality—and one that doesn’t involve the mob.

But I’m not that lucky.

And if Harmony killed Peter, then she’s not that lucky either.

I'll make sure of it myself.

CHAPTER 12

The large tent set up for Harmony Honeycutt's workshop is buzzing with energy, the chatter of excited participants mingling with the mouthwatering scents of smoked turkey.

The air is crisp with the coolness of fall, and twinkle lights are strung across the tent's ceiling give the whole place a warm, magical glow.

There's a table set up in the front with an immaculate white linen tablecloth and a centerpiece of pumpkins and fall foliage. In fact, there's an entire Thanksgiving dinner set up for show, from a golden brown turkey to creamy mashed potatoes, right down to the decadent pumpkin pie—and the sight of all that food makes my stomach claw at me.

Rows and rows of chairs are set out and a podium with a spotlight on it stands just shy of that scrumptious display. I'm guessing that's where Harmony will hit us over the head with her imagine the juiciest turkey yet hooey.

Although, let's be honest, all I do leading up to Thanksgiving is imagine the most delectable juicy turkey known to man—right up until my mother has her way with some unfortunate bird. I'm pretty sure she invented turkey jerky.

Cooper and I step deeper into the tent, and I can't help but roll my eyes at the overly enthusiastic crowd.

"Manifest your best Thanksgiving," I mutter as I read the banner strung across the

front. “Sounds like a load of turkey feathers to me. Everyone knows Thanksgiving is about family drama mixed in with passive-aggressive comments about the stuffing.”

Coop grunts, “Don’t forget the inevitable political debates and someone burning the dinner rolls.”

“Is that a dig at Loretta?” I cringe because I just used the forbidden moniker according to his roll-burning sister.

He nods. “But don’t tell her I said so.” He presses his hand into the small of my back and a shiver runs through me. Okay, so it was more like a quiver, and in the right places, too, but I don’t dare let on. “Let’s go find a seat,” he says. “Maybe we can manifest a pumpkin pie that doesn’t kill anyone on the big day.”

Watson wiggles and barks as if he wants a bite out of that pie right now.

“Come here, you.” I pick him up and hug him. “Your daddy is a walking, talking pillar of positivity, you know that? I tend to go dark. Although some might say my negativity keeps me grounded.”

Cooper flexes a smile. “A little positive thinking wouldn’t kill you. Maybe you’d manifest fewer dead bodies.”

I snort at the thought.

Sure. I’ll just think happy thoughts and hope the next guy Uncle Jimmy wants me to take out decides to have a rather timely bodily malfunction.

Let’s hope that next guy isn’t Coop.

Watson practically wiggles his way into Cooper’s arms and licks his face.

“I think he knows you’re a sure bet when it comes to filling his belly at will,” I say.

“He would be right. I’m a sucker,” Coop says as he leads us to a couple of seats in the front row. “Here’s to manifesting a stress-free holiday season—one without any more homicides.”

“Right,” I say, scanning the room. “And maybe I’ll manifest a life where my boyfriend isn’t a homicide detective constantly suspecting me of murder.”

“Speaking of which, we still need to talk about that.”

“Later.” I wave him off, not wanting to dive into that particular conversation just yet. “Right now, I’m more interested in seeing what kind of turkey-based nonsense Harmony Honeycutt is peddling.”

A couple of women set out a few more pies on that Thanksgiving table behind the podium and my stomach turns into a bobcat trying to slash its way out of my body.

“Just my luck,” I say. “All this food and no way to eat it.” At least not yet. “If I could manifest anything right now, it’d be that entire table in my kitchen.”

Cooper laughs. “Now that’s the kind of positive thinking I can get behind. Can I score an invite to the feast?”

I’m about to offer up an invite to another room in my home just as Harmony Honeycutt steps behind the podium and the crowd grows instantly quiet. She’s all smiles as her golden curls bounce while she waves to the crowd. For a woman about my mother’s age, she sure is a stunner. I can only pray I’ll be so well hermetically sealed.

“Good evening, everyone,” she calls out and her voice drips with fake enthusiasm.

“Are you ready to manifest your best Thanksgiving yet?”

The crowd responds with a cheer, and I can’t help but shake my head.

“Let the turkey talk begin,” I whisper to Coop just as Watson settles down in his lap and points his button eyes right at the lady of the hour.

And with the way he’s salivating, ten bucks says her head just morphed into a golden blonde turkey.

Harmony launches into her spiel about positive thinking and the power of manifestation, and I do my best to listen, even as my mind drifts to the succulent smells around me and the dark cloud of suspicion that seems to follow me everywhere these days.

All I know is that two things have to happen before I leave this festival of yum-yums. I need to get my hands on one of those smoked turkey legs and I should probably find a way to lure the good detective back to my place for dessert.

But for now, I’ll focus on the task at hand. Maybe, just maybe, I’ll find a way to manifest some answers—and clear my name—before the night is over.

Harmony Honeycutt exudes the grace of someone who’s been manifesting her every whim since birth. She adjusts the microphone and beams at the crowd, her golden curls bouncing with her every move.

What I wouldn’t do for my hair to have body like that. Heck, my body would like to have body like that. I’m all boobs and hips, but I haven’t heard any complaints yet in that department.

“It’s time to manifest our best Thanksgiving yet,” Harmony practically sings. Her

voice rings with the enthusiasm to swipe twenty-nine ninety-nine out of the pockets of these unsuspecting people—she already has mine.

Although I have a feeling she's about to try to dig a little deeper in my wallet. Little does she know, I'm about to do a little digging myself.

CHAPTER 13

“ I ’m so thrilled to have you all here tonight,” Harmony Honeycutt shouts to the crowd gathered here at the Harvest Feast festival, eager to learn a tip or two on how to stave off World War Three on the most delicious day of the year via her quasi-witchcraft. “This evening, I’m going to teach you how to manifest your best Thanksgiving ever! One that includes peace, harmony, and very little indigestion,” she teases, and the crowd titters at her command.

Cooper leans in and whispers, “We can use all three in my family.”

I stifle a laugh and whisper back, “Ditto. Let’s hope she’s got some serious magic up her sleeve. I’ve got a family feast coming up that could use a little divine intervention.”

Harmony nods to the crowd. “Thanksgiving is a time for gratitude, family, and, of course, delicious food. But it can also be a time of anxiety, stress, and tension. Tonight, we’re going to change that. By the end of this workshop, you’ll be armed with the tools to create a harmonious and joyful Thanksgiving with your family and friends.”

She pauses, letting her words sink in, and then gestures to the yummy table next to her. “First, let’s talk about the power of visualization. Close your eyes and picture your perfect Thanksgiving feast. Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells. Feel the love and joy in the room. See yourself getting along with your family, everyone happy and relaxed.”

I sneak a glance at Cooper, who has dutifully closed his eyes and is probably picturing a Thanksgiving where I'm not a prime suspect in a murder investigation.

I close my eyes, too, trying to imagine a peaceful family dinner without any drama, but it's hard when the scent of roasted turkey is making me want to sneak a bite while no one is looking.

"Visualization is just the beginning." Harmony's voice is soothing as she continues. "To truly manifest your best Thanksgiving, you need to align your thoughts, words, and actions. Speak positively about your family and friends. Focus on their good qualities and let go of any past grievances. When you change your thoughts, you change your reality."

I open an eye again and sneak another peek at Cooper, who seems to be taking this all in with a budding frown on his face. I bet he's thinking about me again. I seem to sponsor that look on his face more often than not.

Harmony encourages everyone to turn to their neighbors and share one positive thought about the upcoming holiday and perhaps your neighbor.

Cooper and I exchange a look, and I roll my eyes.

"Fine," I say, giving in. "I'm grateful that I'm not alone in this, and that I have someone who puts up with my—unique lifestyle." Talk about outing myself in a public venue.

Coop twitches a brow. "I'm grateful that you make life interesting, Effie. And that you're always up for a challenge, even if it's manifesting a peaceful Thanksgiving—which I'm not sure is entirely possible."

We share a quick laugh, and for a moment, it feels like maybe, just maybe, we can

manifest some normalcy into our chaotic lives.

Although I wouldn't put any money on it.

Harmony is back at the mic as she wraps up her speech. "Remember, everyone, the key to a perfect Thanksgiving is gratitude and positivity. You have the power to create the holiday of your dreams." She scans the room as if she were looking for someone to steal the spotlight at a funeral. "I need a volunteer to come up and give a demonstration," she announces, and before I can even blink, her gaze lands on me. "You there, in the lovely autumn sweater! Come on up!"

Lovely autumn sweater? Really? I look around, hoping to find someone else dumb enough to robe themselves in knitwear, and, sure enough, she has an entire tent full of women to pick on.

With a resigned sigh, I make my way to the front as the rest of the tent dwellers buzz away. Most likely thanking their lucky stars their autumn fashion choices kept them off the chopping block.

This is exactly why I never sit in the front row. Everyone knows the front is known as the fun zone, and that it is rarely ever fun.

Next time I'm choosing our seats—way in the back, near the exit, and perhaps a buffet.

Cooper gives me an encouraging nod, and I can almost hear Aunt Cat and Carlotta cheering me on from somewhere under the tent, probably hoping I'll trip and fall just for the entertainment value.

I'm about two feet from the podium when my foot catches on an electric cable and I trip and nearly tackle Harmony Honeycutt to the ground.

“ Geez ,” she wheezes as I catch her before we both faceplant in the dirt and she offers me a somewhat affable smile in return.

“Thank you for volunteering,” she sings out the lie. “What’s your name?”

“Effie,” I say, trying to muster up some enthusiasm while my entire body breaks out into one big ball of sweat. A few more minutes of this and I might be moved to whip off my sweater and entertain the crowd with my autumn bra .

“Wonderful, Effie.” She winks my way and I can’t tell if she remembers me from the other night. “Now, let’s manifest your perfect Thanksgiving. Close your eyes and take a deep breath.”

I close my eyes, feeling more than slightly ridiculous but willing to play along.

“Picture yourself surrounded by loved ones.” Harmony’s voice takes on a mystical tone, dripping with all the hocus-pocus one could ever dream of. “The table is laden with delicious food. The air is filled with laughter and joy. And there, at the head of the table, is the one you adore most, looking at you with all the love in the world.”

I do just that and my Nona Jo waves to me from the head of the table, but before I can pretend to wave back, her face morphs into Cooper’s as he blows me a kiss and announces his undying love for me in front of both of our entire families.

And oddly enough, my brothers don’t pull a weapon on him.

A sigh escapes me. Now that would be something.

I sneak a peek and Cooper is watching me with a bemused smile on his face. I close my eyes again, trying to focus.

“Now”—Harmony continues—“imagine Cooper standing up, raising his glass, and saying those three magical words that will make your heart soar.”

Okay, so she didn’t say that. She said some hooey about toasting to a peaceful, joyful evening.

I can’t help but snicker inwardly at the idea of Cooper declaring his love for me in front of both our families. Now that would be a Thanksgiving for the record books.

But hey, a girl can dream, right?

“Open your eyes”—Harmony instructs—“and let the manifestation come to life!”

I open my eyes, expecting to see a room filled with positive energy and maybe even a magical unicorn.

Instead, I see a horror that makes me want to commit a homicide for all to see.

CHAPTER 14

Harmony Honeycutt clears her throat as she waves a hand at the crowd.

“Go on, Effie, tell everyone how you’ve manifested your best life yet!”

I glower at the front row, to the exact spot where Naomi Turner is fighting Watson for space in Cooper’s lap, batting her eyelashes up at my man as if she’s trying to start a tornado.

My jaw drops, and Harmony looks slightly panicked as if her hocus-pocus just went horribly wrong while Cooper is trying to extract himself from Naomi’s death grip.

“I think your manifesting mojo is a little off today,” I say to the self-proclaimed guru by my side and the room breaks out into laughter.

“Oh hon, you have to wait for Thanksgiving to arrive before you can give your final assessment.” She gives a nervous laugh as the crowd breaks out into a spontaneous applause. “The universe is still working on your requests.”

“The universe has a strange sense of humor.”

“Maybe so. But don’t worry. The power of positive thinking always prevails.” She gives a little wink before turning to the crowd. “All right, everyone, let’s take a short break. Help yourselves to some refreshments and mingle a bit. We’ll continue in fifteen minutes.”

As the room buzzes with chatter, I sidle up to Harmony before she can drift off to the dessert table where about fifteen other people have already landed a grabby hand toward those pies.

“Thanks for all that jibber-jabber,” I say. “I really appreciate it.”

Her mouth falls open as she inspects me.

“You probably don’t remember, but we met last night at the book signing. I’m already almost done reading it.” It’s true. I blame the Sandman for not bothering to show up last night. “It’s pure genius. With every page I turn, I keep telling myself I wish I had known this years ago. If I had, I’d most likely be sitting on my own island with a far steamier book and my toes in the water.”

We share a quick laugh.

“Wouldn’t we all,” she teases. “I’m actually heading to the Caribbean after the holiday to unwind. Great minds think alike.”

“Well, only one of these great minds is actually going to have her toes in the sand. I’m starting to think the universe likes you more.”

She laughs again. “Maybe it does. Or maybe I’ve just figured out how to bribe it with piña colodas.” She sighs hard. “But then, my world isn’t all a garden of roses.”

“I heard about what happened.” I wrinkle my nose. “About your ex? I’m sorry about your loss.”

“Yes, well”—she sighs once again—“I suppose when it’s your time, it’s your time.”

“Actually”—I glance around at the crowd—“I sort of wanted to ask you about Peter.”

Her smile falters slightly, but she quickly recovers. “What about him?”

I take a deep breath. “I was actually there during his untimely demise. It really hit me hard, as death tends to do. I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you. I mean, I know you were divorced, but still. You once had some serious feelings for the guy.”

She rolls her eyes then quickly regains her composure. “I suppose that’s true. But Peter and I had a complicated relationship. We were married for several years, and while we had our good times, things eventually fell apart. We divorced about a year ago, but we still had some business dealings together.”

I nod, encouraging her to continue. “What kind of business dealings?”

She brushes a stray curl from her face. “We were co-owners of a small publishing company, Honeycutt & Co. We published self-help books, including my own works. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement, though it did come with its own set of challenges.”

“Challenges?”

Harmony hesitates for a moment. “Peter was—let’s just say he wasn’t always the easiest person to work with. He had a knack for making things difficult, especially after the divorce. But we managed to maintain a professional relationship, at least on the surface.” She glowers out at the crowd as if to contest her words.

“So how was your relationship after the divorce? Personally, I mean.”

Harmony bites her lip. “We weren’t close if that’s what you’re asking. We stayed out of each other’s lives and were peaceful for the most part. But we had our moments of contention, especially when it came to the business.”

She's not giving me much to go on—not as far as a motive goes anyway. A thought comes to me.

“So you wrote all these great books and bam he gets fifty-fifty in the divorce? Remind me never to get married.”

She snorts out a laugh. “You got the first part right. Well mostly. The lawyers awarded me eighty percent of our past profits and one hundred percent from the day of the divorce on. I hired a real shark who knows how to bite. Peter had been swimming in the wrong tank once he met me.”

“I'm liking you more by the minute.” And I mean it. But that sort of wipes away any obvious motive about money on her part. “I heard whispers that this might be murder. Who do you think would have wanted the guy dead? I mean, you've already had your way with him and sent him to the cleaners. Was there anyone out there holding a grudge against the guy?”

“Please, Peter collected enemies the way some people collect stamps.” Harmony's eyes dart around the room as she leans in closer. “If you're looking for someone with a motive, you might want to talk to Fiona Harper.”

“Fiona Harper?” I ask, unsure of who this woman might be. But her name does sound vaguely familiar.

Harmony nods, lowering her voice. “Fiona was Peter's partner in a nonprofit foundation before we got married called Honey Hollow Hearts. She felt sidelined when I came into the picture and took Peter's attention away. I swear the woman never really forgave him—or me—for that matter. Fiona and Peter had a falling-out about something recently, but they seemed to maintain a cordial front for the sake of appearances as far as the foundation was concerned.”

“What was the falling-out about?”

She shrugs. “I’m not very close to either of them, but I’m sure Fiona would be more than happy to fill you in. The woman is a talker. Once you wind her up, it’ll be near impossible to shut her up. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know her,” I say. “Any idea where I can find her?”

“She owns that cheesy boutique on Main Street, Elegance and Envy.” She rolls her eyes as she says it. “Oh wait, I have a picture.” She pulls out her phone and fiddles with it before sharing the screen with me. “That’s her on the left.”

I look down to see a small crowd gathered around a table filled with odd items. The woman in question has short dark hair, narrowed eyes, and a painful looking smile.

There’s something familiar about her and then it hits me.

“That’s the lady in orange,” I say. “She was there last night at the book signing, too.” And at the deadly pie-eating contest, but I keep that little lethal tidbit to myself.

“Yes, she was wearing orange last night.” Harmony scoffs. “A lot of good being around high fashion has done for her.”

I glance back at the picture and spot another familiar face.

“Hey, it’s the guy with a carpet of dark hair,” I say, mostly to myself.

He was there last night, too. I remember him because he was glaring at the deceased as if he had stolen his lunch money.

Harmony squints at the screen. “This guy?” She points to the handsome older man

and I nod. “That’s Frank Santoro.”

She sighs at the sight of him while I try not to suck up the Thanksgiving feast behind us with a gasp.

That’s Frankie “The Bull” Santoro!

Okay, rug aside, I can totally see why Aunt Cat and Carlotta would start a turf war over the guy. He’s a looker, all right. And apparently at any age.

“He’s done a lot of the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation as well. That’s where we were when this picture was taken. I was auctioning off a basket full of my books that night. And I happened to have garnered the most in donations—just the way I manifested it.” She winks my way. “Have a good rest of the night, dear. I’d better mingle.”

She takes off and I can’t shake the feeling that there’s more to this story.

Nevertheless, I’ve got a shiny new suspect on my radar named Fiona Harper. It’s time to dig deeper and uncover the truth behind Peter Honeycutt’s death. And who knows, maybe along the way, I’ll manifest a few answers of my own.

I’m about to step into the crowd when Cooper and Naomi make their way over.

Let’s see if I can’t manifest a sinkhole right underneath Naomi Turner’s high-heeled shoes.

CHAPTER 15

Watson jumps and dances at my feet and I quickly scoop him up.

“What did you find out?” Cooper cuts right to the chase with his blue eyes locked onto mine.

“Oh, who cares what she found out.” Naomi does her best to pull him into the crowd.

“Now that we’ve got a sitter for that hairball, we should probably take advantage of it. How about we head to my place? I’ve got a cheesecake you won’t be able to resist.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” I snip without meaning to and Cooper lifts a brow. “Naomi, why don’t you go home and dive into that cheesecake. Detective Knox and I have more pressing issues at hand—like manifesting a killer who might just show up and share that cheesecake with you.”

Naomi grunts, “You would wish death upon me. And seeing your track record, I take that as a threat.” She tugs Cooper close by the arm. “I’d like to file formal charges.”

“Naomi, there’s a killer out there that I’d like to catch before Thanksgiving. I need to get some real work done here.”

She growls right at me and inspires Watson to growl right back.

“You know, I’m starting to think everyone who works at that bakery is cursed.” She glowers my way. “Everywhere you or Lottie goes, there seems to be another dead

body. Honey Hollow was once a quiet little town. And the two of you have all but turned it into one of those true crime shows—right along with a circus.” She huffs at Cooper, “Are you coming with me or not?”

“I’ve got to glean a thing or two for the investigation.” He tips his head my way and she gives an exasperated sigh.

“Fine,” she growls once again. “You finish up here. I’ve got a sword swallower to see. And if all goes well, I’ll glean a thing or two from them too.” She leans in and gives his tie a tug. “And if you’re lucky, I’ll demonstrate exactly what I’ve learned.”

She takes off and Cooper pulls me in without so much as pausing to digest her words.

I knew I liked him.

“All right, Eff, what did Harmony say?”

“She mentioned that Peter had a lot of enemies, and she pointed me in the direction of Fiona Harper. She said that this Fiona woman would be able to tell me more. Apparently, Fiona had a recent falling-out with Peter over something, but she wasn’t sure what.”

“It looks like I know who I’ll be speaking to next.” He offers me a firm nod. “As in me. I don’t need your help on this one, Effie. I want you to lay off the case.”

“Am I still a suspect?” both Watson and I wait for a response.

“Everyone present that night is a viable suspect.”

Watson gives a sharp bark.

“That goes double for me,” I say and Cooper gives a mournful laugh.

“Don’t worry,” he says, giving Watson a quick scratch. “I’ll keep digging, and I’ll get to the bottom of this—one way or another. But right now, I need to manifest myself some of that turkey. If I’m going to solve this murder, I need some serious sustenance.”

“Can’t argue with that. Let’s grab some food before it’s all gone.”

We head back out to the festival and make a beeline for the smoked turkey legs and pick up three without hesitation—Watson needs a little sustenance, too.

I’m about to dive in when I notice Aunt Cat and Carlotta near that infamous sword swallower, eagerly watching him perform his act. And, sure enough, both Naomi and Niki are front and center, too.

“Looks as if school is in session,” I say. “And ironically, this might be the only class my sister has paid attention to. I’m guessing she’s looking to impress someone with her new tricks.”

“Maybe so,” Coop says. “But in this town, it’s less about impressing and more about surviving.” He lifts his turkey leg my way as if to toast me. “To survival.”

“To tracking down a killer,” I counter as I touch my leg to his before we dive in.

Whoever killed Peter Honeycutt may be thankful they haven’t been arrested for his murder, but they’re about to get their just desserts.

This Thanksgiving, the only thing I’ll be stuffing is the truth, and I won’t stop until I’ve basted every last detail.

Mark my words, this mystery is about to be gobbled up and served on a silver platter.

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CHAPTER 16

Afterward, Coop and I said goodnight by way of a dreamy kiss that let me know even though he had my proverbial number, he still had a very real desire to ring me up in other ways. It's just about midnight and as I'm about to crawl into bed with my favorite furry beast, Watson—not his daddy, but I'm hopeful for a future reversal of fortune in that arena—my phone buzzes.

I flip it over, anticipating a lusty diatribe from Coop begging me to let him in and have his way with me, but no such luck. It's my Uncle Jimmy.

Need to see you at the office. Get here now.

Great. So much for sawing some logs and drifting off to dreamland where I can have my way with a hot detective.

Instead, I grab my ever-loyal furry sidekick and head down to Leeds, a greasy little town with all the charm of a dirty sock, but it just so happens to be where Uncle Jimmy reigns supreme.

We pull up to the Red Satin Gentlemen's Club, a joint that's all about taking it off with its red walls, red carpet, and a long, glitzy runway lined with half-dressed girls doing their best to keep the clientele drooling.

The place is a jerk's paradise, filled with the stench of cheap cologne and even cheaper desperation.

I weave through the tables, avoiding leering gazes and the occasional grabby hand as I try to make a beeline for the back office where Uncle Jimmy holds court. The heavy bass from the speakers vibrates through my chest, and it mingles with the raucous laughter and catcalls of the patrons. Watson wiggles in my arm, his nose twitching at the myriad of questionable scents, but mostly he's trying to leap into the arms of scantily clad waitresses. Besides the dog park, Red Satin is his favorite place to hang out.

Just as I'm about halfway through this maze of harlots and horrors, something catches my eye on the stage. A familiar face is dancing around, draped in a hot pink feather boa, and it's definitely not one of the regulars. I squint and strain and my jaw drops once I recognize who it is.

It's Loretta Spumoni! Cooper's sister!

What the heck is she doing here? And dressed like that? Or more to the point, undressed like that.

Wow. This night just keeps getting better.

"That can't be right." I laugh to myself while visions of all the sugarplum dirt I've got on Loretta dance through my mind.

I can't help the yuletide-based analogy. Christmas is practically breathing down Thanksgiving's neck, and that's the only thing I could come up with.

"That's right," a woman growls from behind, and I turn around to see Lottie's older, far scarier sister, Meg.

Meg Lemon runs this place as far as I'm concerned. Technically, she tells the dancers how to jiggle their wares and who to do it in front of to make the most bucks. She's

the dance choreographer, but Uncle Jimmy has her more or less managing this sleazy joint for him.

Meg dyes her hair a dark shade of midnight and dresses as if she's on her way to sacrifice a goat. She's perpetually clad in black, her feet perpetually entombed in combat boots, and she wears a perpetual scowl to go along with it. Her signature black lipstick only adds to her charm.

"She's a regular," Meg continues, nodding toward the stage where Coop's sis is twirling her hot pink feather boa. "Loretta and her friends come here all the time."

I blink in amazement, but not for obvious reasons. "You're allowed to call her Loretta? I thought only her closest friends are allowed to do that. You and the Black Widow Lazzari must be pretty tight."

"Nope." Meg shakes her head and at least three moths fly out of that necrotic beehive on her head. "She just got sick of me calling her Salami."

I stifle a laugh. "I've let that deli meat moniker slip a time or two as well."

Meg shrugs. "Takes one to know one."

Was I just insulted?

"Now, what the heck are you doing here at midnight?" she asks.

"Trust me, I'm wondering the same thing," I mutter, watching Loretta shimmy on stage. "I got a summons from Uncle Jimmy. He said he needed to see me asap."

She lifts a sharply drawn-in eyebrow and it gives her a cartoon appeal.

“Well, you better get to it then. And keep that dog close. You never know what kind of trouble you’ll find around here.”

I’m about to boot-scoot to the back when Loretta does a double take in my direction, and just as I’m about to duck out of sight, Watson leaps out of my arms and bolts for the stage.

He’s such a boy.

“Hey, get back here,” I shout. “Those are not volleyballs!” I shout even louder, but my voice is no competition with the music shaking and quaking the walls.

Watson darts all the way onto the stage and right into Loretta’s arms.

Loretta is in mid-twirl with her hot pink feather boa when she looks down in surprise as Watson nuzzles into her boobs, wagging his tail like he’s just found the love of his life.

Meg chuckles beside me. “He’s not the first dog that’s done that. And by dog, I mean man.” She takes off for the bar and I take off for the stage.

“Watson, you little tramp! Get down here!”

Another tramp hops down, Loretta herself, while Watson continues to burrow his way into her chest.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my big brother’s walking, talking tramp stamp.” Loretta smears a hot pink smile my way. “Here to join the show?”

Walking, talking tramp stamp? To take the words out of Meg’s mouth, it takes one to know one .

“Not if I can help it,” I say, taking back my pooch. “Sorry about that. He’s got a mind of his own. And apparently, you do, too.” I motion to the hot pink feathers flying between us. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” For now at least. I think we both know I’ve got enough to blackmail her into oblivion. There’s not a single Italian mother or brother who would tolerate their blood relation shaking their culo on a pole.

“Most men have a mind of their own.” She gives Watson a quick pat. “And as far as secrets go, I don’t have one.” She squints my way. “What are you doing here?”

Wonderful. As if an inquisition from Coop isn’t bad enough, I’ve got his sister offering up the preamble.

“I’ve got family business to tend to.” The words slip out before I can vet them. I can’t help it—it’s way past my bedtime and I had one too many slices of Lottie’s pumpkin pie back at the festival. I’m lucky I’m not dead. But right about now, I’d take a tour of the morgue rather than stare at Loretta’s mile-long hot pink eyelashes. “What are you doing here?”

I bet her brother has no clue she moonlights as a dollar-store dominatrix.

No secret, my shiny hiney. There’s no way Coop would approve of this behavior.

“One of my girls is getting hitched.” She nods to a table full of schnockered women who are twirling panties on their fingers—most likely their own—and knocking back shot glasses with glow-in-the-dark ice cubes. “We were just getting ready to head across the street to the Banana Hammock Club. We thought we’d start here first. The antipasto is better.”

I glance at the table and, sure enough, there’s enough antipasto to make my mouth water. An overflowing platter of thinly sliced prosciutto, salami, and capicola

arranged artfully next to marinated olives, roasted red peppers, and tangy artichoke hearts. There's also a generous selection of what looks to be sharp provolone, creamy mozzarella, and aged Parmesan, all flanked by crusty slices of Italian bread.

It's a spread fit for a queen—or in this case, a bachelorette party with a penchant for good food.

“Help yourself,” she says. “You can even head across the street with us if you like. Those boys really know how to put on a show.” Her lips curve as if she just issued a threat, and I have no doubt she did just that. I bet Salami would love to lord that over me when it comes to Cooper. But I'm not here to give her any ammo.

“I might take you up on the antipasto, but there's something I need to tend to first.”

I take off with all the enthusiasm of attending my own beheading.

And with my Uncle Jimmy in charge, it wouldn't surprise me in the least to find him holding a cleaver.

Something tells me it's only a matter of time.

CHAPTER 17

Watson and I head downstairs right here in Red Satin Gentlemen's Club, past the maze of slot machines—my uncle's illegal casino is thumping and jumping tonight every bit as much as Loretta's knockers were just a few minutes ago—and down the dark hall that leads to my uncle's office.

The guard recognizes me and sends me through, where I find Uncle Jimmy seated in what amounts to a room the size of a janitor's closet. You'd think for all of his worth—all of his ego—he'd have a place a little more befitting of his brooding self-image, but here we are, squeezed into a space that could hardly qualify as a litter box.

"And here's my favorite niece." Uncle Jimmy's grin stretches wide as he spots me. Uncle Jimmy is about my father's age, old, has a wreath of gray hair, dark, unknowable eyes, and a paunch belly that advertises the fact he likes his lasagna for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "And there's my favorite little furball." He flicks his fingers and I land Watson on his desk and watch as he bounds over with his tail wagging like crazy.

Uncle Jimmy scoops him up and ruffles his fur. "Good boy, buddy. Good boy." He sets his attention back to me and his grin turns sly. "Heard you handled that Honeycutt business like a pro. I knew I could count on you."

I swallow hard and force a smile. "You know me. Always getting the job done."

Or taking the credit for others who got the job done far more efficiently and in a much more public venue than I would have chosen.

Uncle Jimmy reaches into his desk drawer and pulls out an envelope that looks both thick and heavy. He slides it across the desk toward me.

“You did good, kid. Real good. Consider this a bonus for a job well done.”

I pick up the envelope and I can feel the weight of the cash inside. It’s more money than I’ve felt or seen in a long time. Blood money, but money, nonetheless.

I should refuse this.

“Thanks, Uncle Jimmy.”

What can I say? I like to keep my lights on.

He leans back in his chair, lighting a cigar and blowing out a puff of smoke. “You’re a real asset to the family, Effie. Keep this up, and you’ll be running the show in no time.”

Just what I’ve always dreamed of, running a crime empire from a closet-sized office that reeks of stale cigars and bad decisions.

“I want Frankie ‘The Bull’ dusted by Thanksgiving,” he says, taking another puff of the stick that’s about to dust his lungs and most likely him in one day.

Watson tugs at my sleeve, eager to leave the smoky confines of this coffin.

“I’ll do my best,” I tell him. “But for now, I’ve got to get Watson home. If he doesn’t get his eight hours, he tends to eat my shoes.”

“Better yours than mine,” he says, kicking his feet up on his desk and taking another puff. “I meant what I said, Eff, I want The Bull gone before we break bread on the

big day. In fact, if you can get it done a little earlier, I'll throw in another bonus for you." He winks my way. "You keep up the good work and you'll have enough dough to fund your holiday spending spree. I expect something nice."

"I'll do my best," I say as I make a beeline out of there. I head back up the dark hallway and the weight of the cash feels heavier with every step.

I didn't kill Peter Honeycutt, but now I'm in deeper than ever. And somehow, I have to find a way to off Frankie "The Bull" before I settle in to have that turkey feast I did my best to manifest. As if the Lazzaris and the Canellis would ever come together to break bread. As if I could hold onto Cooper for that long. Sure, he kissed me, but for all I know, he's using his charm and full lips to coerce a confession out of me.

I head back up to the strip club and note Loretta and her girls have already taken off for banana hammock pastures and left behind a table full of virtually untouched antipasto. I head over and help my pooch to a few bites of the world's best capicola. I'm about to take a bite myself when I spot an all too familiar older gentleman seated by the stage, giving those dancing dolls his full attention.

Well, well, if it isn't Frankie "The Bull" Santoro.

Suddenly, I've lost my appetite.

Okay, so that's just a brief hiccup in my otherwise robust desire to nosh on just about anything. I quickly stuff my face with as much antipasto as I can before I dash out the door.

I may have just scored a huge payday for a hit I didn't commit, but within the next few days, it looks as if I'm going to have to earn my keep, and perhaps give Cooper all the ammo he needs to put me in the slammer.

I doubt the antipasto in prison is anything to brag about.

But on the bright side, I might finally catch up on some sleep.

As for now, I've got to sleep with one eye open.

There's a killer on the loose, and if they find out I'm after them, I might be the next one they're looking to populate Honey Hollow Cemetery with.

If my Uncle Jimmy has anything to say about it, it'll be Frankie Santoro landing there next.

It's either him or me.

And that's no bull.

CHAPTER 18

The next afternoon, Lottie has Suze, Lily, and me delivering platters of desserts over to her mother's B&B, the Honey Hollow Bed and Breakfast.

Normally, I wouldn't mind a delivery mission, especially when it involves delicious pastries, but I'm not exactly thrilled about heading to the old white mansion that everyone in Honey Hollow insists is haunted.

Perfect. Just what I needed to go with the dead guy whose blood money is sitting safely tucked in my sock drawer—ghosts. Albeit at this point, I probably deserve a haunting or two.

The stately mansion looms ahead, all white wood and wraparound porches, looking as if it stepped straight out of a Gothic novel. It's festooned with fall garlands, wreaths brimming with autumn leaves, and pumpkins of every size, but the festive decorations do little to hide its eerie charm. The tall, narrow windows seem to watch our every move, and I swear I see the curtains twitching as we approach.

"What's the matter, Effie?" Suze snickers by my side. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a little haunted house?"

She should know. She lives here.

Hey? Maybe Suze is the ghost everyone is afraid of? That makes a lot of sense.

"Please," I scoff, even though I'm clutching my platter full of pumpkin spice

cheesecake muffins like it's a shield. "Oh, all right. I'm not thrilled. But I can't help it. Rumor has it, this place has seen more dead bodies than a funeral home. And rumor also has it, there's more than one lingering spirit hanging around, too."

Lily laughs, her curls bouncing. "Well, rumor also has it, Lottie's mom, Miranda, makes the best hot apple cider in Vermont. So, if we're going to face any ghosts, at least we'll have something delicious on hand to toast the ghosts with."

"Great, because cider is exactly the beverage I want when I'm face-to-face with restless spirits," I mutter.

We head inside and it's dark, dank, and, well, pretty cozy looking. There are a wrought iron staircase that leads to the second level and a marble reception counter a little deeper inside, and the whole place reeks of a posh haunted hotel.

Suze leads the way to the glass conservatory in the back and we're treated to a fall wonderland in a room made of windows. Even the ceiling is made of glass. The room is huge and thankfully so, considering how many women seem to have crammed themselves in here today.

The conservatory is a sprawling structure of glass and wrought iron, filled with lush faux fall foliage and the warm glow of twinkle lights. And today it just so happens to be bustling with the Elegance and Envy Boutique's trunk sale, a whirlwind of fancy scarves, costume jewelry, and designer handbags. The air is thick with the scents of cinnamon, nutmeg, and—strangely enough—fear. Mine mostly.

There's a dessert table to the right with coffee, tea, and cider set out. And in the middle of the room, there's a plethora of tables with lots of fancy clothes, belts, and purses. And near the front, there's a round table set out with all sorts of fancy china that looks as if it will break if you look at it crooked. Most of the pieces shimmer an iridescent shade of blue and have roses printed all over them. There's a large sign in

front of them that reads look but don't touch!

Honestly, everything on that table looks as if it were better off in a museum, for both its safety and ours.

My eyes scan the crowd, and I spot my next suspect, Fiona Harper. She's laughing it up with a group of well-dressed women, looking every bit the successful boutique owner she is—and perhaps killer.

Face it, I can't let anyone off the hook this early in the game.

"Looks like your suspect is right where you want her," a gravelly voice whispers from behind and I nearly jump right out of my sneakers, only to see Aunt Cat and Carlotta standing behind me and hopping between them is the furriest pooch on the planet.

"Hey there, cutie pie." I blow Watson a kiss. I made the mistake of telling Aunt Cat and Carlotta where I was headed this afternoon when I asked if they'd mind watching Watson.

"Good luck trying to get this cutie pie back," Aunt Cat says. "Turns out, this furball is a man magnet."

"That's right." Carlotta is quick to acknowledge the claim. "He brings all the silver foxes to the yard. We like him, he's ours now."

"You can keep him," I say. "But be warned, his favorite place to relieve himself is in your shoe, and he likes to take his first walk at about six in the morning. That's when he likes to deliver the first yard brownies of the day, too. All of which you'll have to pick up yourself."

“Never mind.” Aunt Cat is quick to change her mind. “I like my sleep, and I don’t pick up yard brownies for anyone, no matter how cute they are.”

“That goes double for me,” Carlotta says with a nod. “We’ll stick to doggie daycare while you sling Lottie’s brownies around Honey Hollow.”

“Speaking of which,” I say, holding up the tray of pumpkin spice cheesecake muffins in my arms. “I’d better set these down.”

I head over to do just that and note that both Suze and Lily have already dropped off their goodies and are perusing the selections along with the crowd.

I set my platter down just as an older blonde turns my way.

“Oh good, someone with a sensible mind is here,” Miranda Lemon says, pulling me close to where she and Lottie are standing. “I want you to settle a debate my daughter and I are having.”

Miranda Lemon is about as cheerful as her name suggests, with a blonde bouncy bob, a cherry-red smile at the ready, and a wily twinkle in her eyes that suggests a little mischief is not above her paygrade.

Miranda is the woman who raised Lottie, and Lottie says she’s better because of it. After meeting Carlotta, I can’t argue with that.

“I’ll bite.” I glance at Lottie, who looks like she’d rather be anywhere else. “What’s the topic? The best way to roast a turkey?”

Miranda shakes her perfectly coiffed bob. “No, no. We’re debating whether the stuffing should be cooked inside the turkey or separately.”

I can't help but laugh. "That's easy. Separately, of course. Nobody wants to reach into a turkey's nether regions to grab their favorite side dish."

Lottie nods, folding her arms. "See, Mom? Effie agrees with me. It's a psychological issue—one that can leave your grandchildren traumatized for life."

Miranda rolls her eyes. "Well, I still think the stuffing is much more flavorful when cooked inside the turkey."

"Maybe so," Lottie says. "But there won't be a soul at the table willing to perform surgery to get to it."

Someone calls for Miranda and she waves their way. "I'd better mingle." She steals a pumpkin spice cheesecake muffin before disappearing into the crowd.

"At least she's got great taste when it comes to sweet treats," I say. "These muffins are my favorite."

"Thanks." Lottie wrinkles her nose. "Any leads on the Honeycutt case yet?"

"You might want to ask the lead investigator," I tease.

"I am."

We share a quick laugh just as the lights flicker and the chandeliers up above rattle.

I grab my chest and my eyes spring wide open as I belt out a scream.

CHAPTER 19

“Don’t worry,” Lottie says, chuckling away as the chandeliers continue to shake and sway, right here in the conservatory of her mother’s B&B. “They’re friendly ghosts, I promise. I should know. I’ve pretty much met them all. I can arrange a meet and greet for you as well if you want.”

“No, thanks. I’ll take your word for it. And as for Peter, I spoke to his ex. Apparently, the guy had a laundry list of enemies. And we both know there wasn’t a speck of peanut butter in your pumpkin pie. Whoever tainted it was well aware of his peanut allergy. Do you think someone got into the kitchen?”

She shakes her head. “Not unless it was one of us, and I don’t think it was. Noah said that he and Cooper looked at the security footage, but since the contest took place under the awning, the cameras didn’t catch anything they could use.”

“Perfect.” I sigh. “Well, I’ve got another lead and she just so happens to be in this room.”

“Ooh, who is it?” She leans in, and judging by the gleam in her eyes she’s far too interested.

I make a face. “Fiona Harper,” I practically mouth her name.

Lottie sucks in a quick breath. “This is her trunk show!”

“I know. And believe me, I’m grateful you’re catering the event. It gives me the

perfect excuse to be here.”

“It looks as if the stars are aligning.” She gives an impish grin. “Let’s hope they’ll align all the way to a confession before the turkey ever lands on the table this year. The last thing I want you to be thinking about on Thanksgiving is a killer.”

Someone breaks out into a wild cackle and we look over to see Naomi and her twin Keelie rummaging through a basket full of push-up bras.

“I think I’ll go say hello.” Lottie laughs in their direction. “And maybe you should say hello to a certain someone, too.” She winks my way before taking off.

I contemplate my strategy as I swipe a cream puff off a platter. But try as I might to direct my thoughts toward the investigation, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m being watched.

I glance around the room, but all I see are scads of women whooping it up as if all the clothes were free. Still, I can’t help but wonder if one of them is hiding a deadly secret—namely the woman who hauled these push-up bras here to begin with. And if I’m not careful, I might just become her next target.

“Attention,” Miranda calls out. “It’s time for the fun to officially begin! It is my pleasure to introduce you all to Fiona Harper, the proud owner of Elegance and Envy, located right here in Honey Hollow, down on Main Street!”

The room breaks out into cheers, and I even hear a stray bark.

Not surprising. Watson is a big fan of push-up bras himself.

The chaos begins to settle and a hush falls over the room as Fiona Harper steps up to the front, her birdlike frame commanding attention despite her petite stature.

She's got dark hair that's immaculately styled in a tight chignon, and she's wearing a colorful red and yellow dress with a touch of vintage flair, complete with pearls and sensible heels. She looks like she just stepped out of an old Hollywood film, poised and elegant.

"Welcome, ladies," she calls out with her voice crisp and clear. "Thank you all for joining us today at our special Thanks for Giving Trunk Sale."

The room falls silent as everyone hangs on her every word.

"I'm thrilled to announce that all the proceeds from today's event will be going to the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation," she continues, and a collective gasp ripples through the crowd. "This foundation does incredible work in our community, and your contributions today will make a significant impact."

Polite applause follows, and Fiona nods graciously before continuing. "I'd also like to highlight a few special pieces we have available today. Over here," she gestures to a table laden with exquisite accessories, "we have a collection of vintage jewelry that includes some truly unique and rare finds. If you're a fan of amethyst or opal, you'll particularly love the selection."

Ooh, I love me some opal. I'll have to check those out.

She moves to the next display, where an assortment of silk scarves and shawls are draped over a velvet-covered table. "And here, you'll find a selection of handcrafted items from local artisans. Each piece is one-of-a-kind and perfect for adding a touch of elegance to your wardrobe—or to give as a Christmas gift."

Finally, Fiona walks over to the center of the room, where that magnificent set of china is displayed. The intricate patterns and delicate porcelain glint under the light, and the crowd leans in to get a better look.

I know better than to get anywhere near that stuff. With my luck, a ghost would knock the entire display over and I'd be left footing the bill.

“This”—Fiona says with a touch of reverence in her voice—“is my *pièce de résistance*. A priceless set of china passed down through generations. It's here on display today, but it's not for sale. It's a reminder of the timeless beauty and craftsmanship that can be found in these treasured items. The sum total of these pieces is well over fifteen thousand dollars.”

The crowd gasps in horror—or most likely delight. I'm the one who's horrified. If I had fifteen grand in fine china, the last place I'd be hauling it is into a room brimming with women and ghosts. But to each his own.

The guests murmur in admiration and their eyes widen at the exquisite pieces. Fiona smiles, clearly pleased with the reaction. “As you browse, remember that every purchase you make today helps support the wonderful work of the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation. Thank you all for your generosity! Remember, the holidays are upon us and every last dollar you spend goes to a very good cause!”

With that, she steps back, allowing the guests to continue with their shopping spree. Baskets full of push-up bras start percolating like popcorn, there seems to be a run on feather boas, and those colorful scarves are being snapped up one by one as if they were stitched in gold.

Laughter and chatter fill the air as women peruse the vintage jewelry, hand-painted shawls, and other exquisite items on display.

The room is buzzing with so much excitement, I'm tempted to dive in there and play tug-of-war over a push-up bra or two myself. But I've got a bigger fish to fry.

I glance around and spot Aunt Cat and Carlotta near the pricey china, and

unfortunately for Fiona's collection, they look as if they're plotting their next move—a heist.

But I'm not their keeper, and I can't babysit that table full of china either. Instead, I watch as Fiona moves from guest to guest, complimenting them as they hold up a garment or two. She's clearly in her element.

And the woman is obviously charitable. I mean, she's not making a dime from today's efforts.

I wonder how that works?

I watch as she schmoozes her way to the dessert table, and I don't waste a single second before boot-scooting in that direction.

Fiona Harper might just have the answers I'm looking for, and I'm about to serve her a slice of interrogation pie.

CHAPTER 20

“Looks good, doesn’t it?” I say as I cozy up to my next suspect at the dessert table.

The Thanks for Giving Trunk Sale is carrying on behind us here at the B&B with all the enthusiasm as a rave concert but with less glow-in-the-dark dicey cocktails and more knit tote bags.

“It looks so good, I don’t know where to begin,” she says, her eyes never leaving the selection of sweet treats.

“Those cuties have been a big hit,” I say, pointing to the pumpkin spice cheesecake muffins. “I should know, I restock the shelves all day long down at the bakery. I’m Effie, I work with Lottie.”

“Nice to meet you, Effie.” She laughs as she snaps up a muffin. “I’m trusting you won’t lead me astray.”

“No siree,” I say. But I’m not so sure she won’t lead me astray. “So your shop is on Main Street, too?”

She nods through a bite and pauses to moan deeply. “Wow, this really is delicious.” She rolls her eyes. “My shop is right across from Lottie’s bakery. Apparently, in dangerous proximity.” She holds up the muffin before taking another bite. “So good!”

“So how’s the foot traffic been with that whole Gobble and Grab Turkey Trot? I mean, no sooner did it kick off than tragedy struck. Did that spook people away?”

I know for a fact it increased foot traffic at the bakery and there's been a run on pumpkin pies, but then 'tis the season—and well, people are morbid like that.

Me. I'm people.

She winces. “Not really. But then I'm not sure how it's impacted other businesses. I've been holding a pre-Black Friday sale since the first of the month. It's been nonstop traffic and I can hardly keep my shelves stocked.”

“That's wonderful. But how does something like this work?” I nod to the melee happening around us. “I mean, you said all profits go to charity.”

“Not just any charity, my charity.” She gives a guttural laugh. “It's all a tax write-off for me so I don't mind the loss. The foundation has so much overhead involved, we could use every last write-off. Besides”—she leans in—“between you and me, these are all the seconds I was stuck with. You know, a little nick here, a thread missing there.”

“ Oh ,” I say, looking out at the crowd just as Naomi holds up a bra with three cups. “That explains a lot.”

“But it's all still a steal.” She toasts me with that muffin again before she makes quick work of it.

“Speaking of steals, that dead guy sure stole the show the other night.” Okay, so I need to work on my segues. But in my defense, I'm an untrained assassin, not a polished detective. “Did you know him?”

Fiona's eyes widen ever so slightly. “Peter? Oh, we go way back. He was a charming man, and always had a way with people. A bit of a smooth talker, if you know what I mean.” She frowns out at the crowd as if he were out there now smooth talking away.

I nod, encouraging her to continue. “So, you two were close?”

“Oh, not romantically,” Fiona clarifies with a laugh. “Peter and I were more business associates. He had a knack for investments, and he was always full of ideas. Some good, some not so much.” She grimaces a little before snapping up a frosted brownie with sprinkles, one of my eternal faves.

“So what kind of business dealings did the two of you have?”

“He helped structure my foundation. Peter was quite the whizz with finances. He knew how to maximize benefits and minimize taxes. He was very good at making money appear and disappear, if you catch my drift.”

“I’m beginning to,” I say. Seeing that the men on my hit list always land there for the same reason, I’m betting he made money appear by borrowing from my uncle. And well, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out how to make money disappear. Even I’ve mastered my hand at that. My Visa bill can attest to the fact.

“We both benefited from his expertise,” she says with a sigh. “Such a tragedy he’s gone. And with that peanut allergy of his? You’d think he’d have been more cautious than jumping into a pie-eating contest without asking about the ingredients.”

“It wouldn’t have done him much good, but I agree with you. It’s almost as if he had a death wish. Do you know if Peter had any enemies or issues with people as of late?”

Her lips press tight as she gives a quick look around. “He and his ex weren’t exactly on speaking terms. She’s that whole self-help guru who walks around telling people they can conjure up mansions and sportscars.” She rolls her eyes. “Please, the only thing she’s good at conjuring up is money in her bank account. And when she and Peter divorced—well, his bank account sort of dried up. But last I spoke to him, he said he had an ace up his sleeve. I guess there was some trouble his ex got into a

while ago that he thought might hurt her if it got out to her audience. He thought if he lorded it over her head she'd cough up what he thought she really owed him in the split."

My eyes nearly spring out of my skull. "You mean he was blackmailing her?"

She nods. "I'm not sure what the details were, but he did mention something about her almost going to prison over it so it must have been big."

"Wow. I bet she's not all that sorry to see him go."

"Oh, she wouldn't be. He was a cad. Always taking up with one hussy or another behind her back until she caught him. Once Harmony kicked Peter out the door, she vowed she'd dance at this funeral." She shrugs. "I can't judge her. I wasn't married to the guy."

"Did he have anyone else who'd want to dance a jig on his grave? The guy sounds like a real piece of work."

"I'm sure there's a conga line forming from here to New York. But I couldn't tell you their names." She takes a bite out of her brownie and lifts a finger. "Actually, there is someone who might have more information. He's always a big help with our community outreach work. Peter and he were pretty tight. It always seemed as if they were conspiring. The guy's name is Frank Santoro. He just has the biggest heart."

Frank Santoro? Unfortunately, that's one heart I'm out to stop beating.

"What was Frank's connection to Peter?"

"They were friends. Peter and Frank were thick as thieves." She glares past me as she says it. "Anyway, he owns Frankie's Bullpen Bar and Grill out in Leeds." She makes

a face as she says the name of the seedy town. I can't blame her. "I hear they make a mean version of trash can fries. You know, perfectly crisp French fries loaded with everything you'd ever want on them? He catered an event for the foundation once. They were amazing, smothered in nacho cheese, smoky bacon bits, and drizzled with barbeque sauce and who knows what else. Just talking about them has my mouth watering."

"Mine, too," I say and it's no joke. I can hardly wait to track down Frankie at his delicious digs and dig into his fries—right before I dig into him with a bullet.

A scream evicts from someone near a rack of dresses.

Fiona sighs. "Here's hoping that's a scream of delight. I'd better see what that's about."

She takes off just as Aunt Cat strides this way with a black feathered boa around her neck and a rhinestone bra attached to the outside of her blouse.

It was only a matter of time.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Aunt Cat calls out, her voice dripping with faux sophistication. "Feast your eyes on the latest in haute couture!"

Carlotta twirls around, nearly knocking over a display of scarves. "We call this look bling meets bonkers !"

The room erupts in laughter, and even I can't help but chuckle. But the fun doesn't last long.

Before Aunt Cat or Carlotta can say another word, the room goes dark despite the glass ceiling above. The chandeliers begin to shake, rattle, and roll, and a chilling

silence falls over the room.

A woman's scream pierces the darkness. "The ghosts have arrived! And they're out to steal our souls!"

Panic sets in and the room erupts with screams—and a few stray barks. My sweet pooch really would try to battle an apparition or two in order to save every last woman in this room. He's going to make a great man someday.

A loud crash goes off, followed by a bang, and a few loose expletives fly as well.

The lights flicker back on, and the room is illuminated once again with natural light as well. To everyone's astonishment, Aunt Cat and Carlotta are sitting in a pile of broken china, wearing far too many clothes as a cloud of feathers dances over their heads.

"Oops," Aunt Cat says, trying to look innocent. "Didn't see that there."

Carlotta gags and gasps. "Guess we got a little carried away."

Leave it to Aunt Cat and Carlotta to manage to be the life of the party—or the afterlife, in this case.

Fiona stalks forward with her mouth hanging open before she lets out a blood-curdling scream.

And just like that, the party's over.

The party is over for Frankie "The Bull" Santoro, too, in more ways than one. But before I make him dance with a bullet or two, I need to make sure he sings like a canary.

CHAPTER 21

It's Sunday, the holiest day of the week, and yet, without hesitation, Niki and I drive down to Leeds in anticipation of doing the devil's work—eating fully loaded carbs. I mean fries.

And maybe if I'm lucky, I'll convince Frankie “The Bull” Santoro to pony up some cold, hard cash to my uncle so I won't have to put an end to his French fry making days. I have a feeling I know what Frankie and Peter had in common—their love of my uncle's money.

I've brought Watson along for the ride, but only because I did a little research and it turns out Frankie's joint boasts of being pet-friendly—at least out on the patio. And as much as I don't like the thought of freezing my tushy off in the elements, I like even less the thought of Watson whimpering and crying as he waits by the window all day for me to get home.

Okay, so he doesn't do that. He sits on the sofa and watches the Animal Channel all day while chewing down his kibble. He lives the life of a flatulent king. But I don't see why he should have all the fun, so I dragged him along to earn his keep. Besides, tonight is Sunday dinner. He needs to make room for my mother's lasagna. She makes sure his belly goes away full just like the rest of us.

Niki and I find ourselves standing outside Frankie's Bar and Grill right here in seedy Leeds. The autumn air is blustery, the dark sky is growing a grim shade of steel, and the scent of fresh burgers and fries permeates the air—and somehow absolves this place of every last sin.

The outside of the restaurant has all the charm of a back-alley dumpster with its flickering neon sign and grimy windows that look like they haven't been washed since the Clinton administration.

"I'm still mad at you," Niki chuffs my way before stealing Watson from my arms. "How could you go to a trunk sale without me? You know I'm a clothes horse."

"Then you would have fit right in," I say, giving Frank's place a sideways glance. "The theme seemed to be a bull in a china shop. And the bull just so happened to be Aunt Cat and Carlotta. But today we visit a true bull. Let's just hope he's not about to feed us a load of bull."

"Who cares?" Niki pats her belly. "As long as he feeds us those trash can fries, he can fib with the best of them."

"Yeah, well, I happen to need the truth."

I'm about to step inside when my phone pings and I glance at the screen.

"It's Cooper."

"Ooh, what does he want?" Niki cranes her neck to see for herself, but I pull it close to my chest. "A repeat performance of what the two of you did last night? Another bite of Effie pie? I bet he left his cuffs at your place and they're still attached to your bedpost."

"I'm going to cuff you," I growl her way. "It was none of the above." I frown back at the screen. "He wants to know if I'm free for lunch." I shake my head at my phone. "He's never asked that once. I don't like this. It feels like a trap." I text back and let him know I'm out and about.

He texts right back.

Great. I can meet you wherever. I'm in Leeds. Where are you?

He tags it with a cute little winking emoji and now I know he's pulling my leg.

I gasp at the sight of the name of this smarmy town.

"I knew it," I hiss. "He's onto me. He's just trying to get me to admit that I'm about to shake down my new mark."

"I bet he doesn't know Frankie's your new mark."

"I don't know what he knows," I growl as I sink my phone into my purse. "But I'm about to learn a thing or two."

I lead the way and the three of us waste no time in stepping into Frankie's Bullpen Bar and Grill. The inside is just as seedy as the outside, with dim lighting that tries to hide the worst of the stains on the worn-out carpet and cracked leather booths. The air smells like a mix of greasy fries, cheap beer, and despair. It's a sharp contrast to what I was smelling outside, and now I'm starting to think I should end this trip by paying a visit to the burger joint across the street.

"Well, this is cozy," I mutter, glancing around at the assorted shady characters hunched over their drinks.

"Cozy if you're in prison," Niki whispers back, adjusting Watson in her arms. "But those trash can fries are still calling my name."

As we weave our way through the tables, ignoring the catcalls and leers from a few unsavory hoodlums, I spot a familiar face and freeze.

Detective Cooper Knox sits at a table near the back with a platter of fully loaded trash can fries in front of him, large enough to feed all of Vermont.

Both Niki and Watson waste no time going berserk at the sight as they quickly take a seat across from him and dig in.

“You knew I was coming,” I say, narrowing my eyes at Cooper as I approach.

He shrugs, not even trying to hide his smirk. “I asked your brother Nico where you were, and he told me you were in the neighborhood.”

“How would he know?” I chuff.

“That’s easy,” Niki says, looking bitter. “Both of our brothers are monitoring our locations at all times via our phones. Ask me how I know.”

“Never mind,” I huff, rolling my eyes.

Cooper points to the platter and grins my way. “You hungry?”

Niki doesn’t need to be asked twice—or at all. She and Watson have already put away half of it.

“So, what brings you here, Detective?” I ask, trying to ignore how good those fries look. But it’s no use. I sneak one off the tray and into my mouth and I swear I hear a choir of angels sing.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he grumbles, his eyes narrowing slightly. “But I have a feeling it’s the same reason I’m here. The Bull.”

“Yeah, I need to speak with him,” I say, glancing around the dingy bar. “Any idea

where he is?”

“You need to speak with him?” Cooper rises from his seat and his stubbled cheeks get so close to mine that I can feel the heat emanating from him. And that spiced cologne puts my hormones right in the danger zone. He has no idea the effect he has on me.

His lips curve with a satisfied smile blooming ever so slowly.

Okay, so maybe he has some idea.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you tag along on my surveillance,” he whispers right over my lips. “You’re lucky I’m nice.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not nearly as nice as you are,” I say. “Why don’t you stay here and keep an eye on Niki and the pooch before one of these ruffians tosses a roofie in their trash can. I need to have a word in private with good ol’ Frank.”

I take off like a bullet and navigate my way to the front where the bartender tells me to head to the back office. Without hesitation, I dart down the dark hall of horrors with enough pictures of pin-up girls and sports cars to qualify as a frat house until I reach a door marked office .

I open it up, the lights are on, and there’s a bloody butcher knife on the floor.

“Hey,” I say, picking it up. “Is this what you call good restaurant hygiene? My sister and my favorite pooch are eating at this joint.” I wag the knife at the man seated at the desk with his back turned to me. Judging by the way that rug of his is sitting cattywampus on his head, I know for a fact I’m talking to the Italian stallion that both Aunt Cat and Carlotta are hot to trot.

“Excuse me,” I say, giving his leather chair a tap and the chair spins around. “I dare you to answer me.”

A scream evicts from my throat.

Yes, it’s Frankie “The Bull” Santoro, but judging by that crimson stain on his chest, he won’t be answering me or anyone else ever again.

Frankie “The Bull” is dead.

“Effie?” Cooper thunders as he races in behind me.

He glances at the knife, then the deceased.

Suffice it to say, I’ve just secured my position on that murder board of his once again.

Go figure.

CHAPTER 22

As if this day couldn't get any worse, we're woefully late for Sunday dinner.

I walk into my parents' house in Grimstone Heights with Cooper by my side, both of us trying to shake off the grim sight of Frankie's lifeless body.

Grimstone Heights is more or less Leeds' little sister in terms of dinginess—smaller, but just as rundown, with an added layer of hopelessness, or two.

The moment we step through the door of my old stomping grounds, we're hit with the overwhelming scent of garlic and tomato sauce, mingling with the unmistakable smell of old wood and dust. My parents' house is a cluttered mess of over-decorated chaos. Every available surface is covered with Capodimonte porcelain figurines, ranging from cherubs to intricate floral arrangements, lots of crystal, and doilies that cover every free surface. It's sort of like stepping into an Italian museum that time forgot.

Various collectibles fight for space on crowded shelves, while framed photos of family members—some of whom I don't even recognize—line the walls in haphazard patterns. A giant, ornate gold mirror hangs in the hallway, reflecting the cramped space and making it look even cozier yet chaotic. The dining table is covered with a lacy tablecloth that's seen better days, topped with a centerpiece that was crafted in the 1970s and never retired.

It's hard to find a spot that isn't occupied by a porcelain angel or a fake fruit bowl.

No sooner do we navigate through the porcelain jungle than we come upon the unmistakable roar of a football game blaring from the living room where we find my dad and my brothers glued to the tube like it's giving out free beer and pizza.

"Look who finally decided to show up," Dad booms from his throne on the couch. They don't call him Big Tom for nothing. His body is as big as his personality, with a wreath of silver hair and dark eyes that can either warm your heart or send you running for cover. Today, like most days, they're in teddy bear mode.

Nico and Luciano give Cooper and me a wave but don't peel their eyes away from the screen for more than a second. Nico, Niki's twin, owns Last Call Lounge out in Leeds, courtesy of our late Uncle Vito. He's been pouring drinks there since he was nine—yeah, nine. Don't ask. And Luciano, the baby of the family, works with Dad in the masonry business. He's got about six girlfriends on rotation. His idea of commitment is making sure they all get a goodnight text.

"Cooper"—Dad calls out without tearing his attention from the game—"grab a seat and join us. We're just about to watch our guys wipe the floor with the other team."

"Thanks, Big Tom," Cooper says, craning his neck at the screen. "I might just take you up on that."

"Not before I feed you," I say. "If you leave hungry, Nona Jo will twist my ear off."

"I'm good at twisting body parts off, too," Nico adds, giving Cooper a dark look that more or less says, we're watching you, Detective. Break her heart, and we'll break your kneecaps.

"Understood," Cooper says as his eyes widen momentarily. It's clear he got the message.

“Nice to know I’m so well-protected,” I say. “All right, let’s head for the kitchen before the fumes from all this testosterone knock me out.”

We make our way into the dining room where Watson runs up jumping and barking, more than happy to see us.

I sent him ahead when Niki left Frankie’s place. I would have left, too, but Cooper had to take pictures of me holding the knife and document the entire fiasco for legal reasons. In other words, he was doing his job. And seeing that Niki took off with my dog and my car, I had to stick around until Cooper wrapped things up at the crime scene. Thankfully, Noah told Cooper that he could take the night off. Noah said he’d take care of the paperwork back at the precinct for him.

Niki, Serafina, and my mother happen to be seated around the dining room table, which has been cleared of any evidence regarding our traditional Sunday dinner—a culinary feat that usually includes ten courses and at least three homemade desserts.

My mouth is watering just thinking about it.

Sure, I just found a dead guy and was quasi-accused of his murder by way of my boyfriend, but that’s never stopped my appetite from rearing its head before, and it’s certainly not starting now.

Serafina sits stringing popcorn for what I’m assuming is the upcoming Christmas tree and Niki is scrolling through her phone like her life depends on it.

“Look who finally made it,” Serafina says, not looking up from her popcorn masterpiece. Instead, she tosses a piece of popcorn into the air and Watson runs right over before dutifully gobbling it up and sitting at my sister’s feet. She always did know how to make a man perform.

“Hey, Coop.” Niki barely glances up herself as her fingers fly across her screen. “Thanks for letting my sister get away with murder.”

I growl at her in response.

“Don’t listen to her.” My mother stands and kisses Cooper on both cheeks. My mother, Renata, looks like me with about thirty years on her and a beehive hairdo that nearly touches the ceiling. “You’re a good detective. And if my daughter so much as harmed a hair on someone else’s body, I’d demand you cuff her and have your way with her. Legally speaking, of course.”

“Of course,” Cooper counters.

It’s nice to know my mother would want the book thrown at me.

“Just so you know”—Mom continues while glancing my way, her arms still firmly wrapped around Cooper’s waist as if they belong there—“I’ve been running around the kitchen like a caffeinated squirrel. Cupertino, I expect to see you at my table at some point during Thanksgiving.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He’s quick to tell her and I heat from top to bottom.

Not only are Cooper and I official, we’re Thanksgiving dinner official.

“I’ve already started my meal prep for the big day,” Mom continues. “I’m not feeding anyone myself until Thursday.” She nods my way. “In the meanwhile, your dad picked up some pizzas from Tony’s. They’re in the kitchen. And Nona Jo is already in a coma upstairs. She had quite the day. Now get in there and eat all the pizza you find. I don’t want any leftovers. I don’t have room for them in the fridge.”

“Will do,” I say as Coop and I head into the kitchen and sit at the breakfast nook with

the pizza between us. The aroma of Tony's famous pepperoni pies fills the room, making my mouth water. I grab a slice and take a big bite, savoring the gooey cheese and perfectly crispy crust.

"You okay?" Cooper asks as he leans back with a slice of pepperoni in his hand.

"I've had better days. But you know who thinks they're having a great day? Whoever killed Peter and Frankie." And ironically, it wasn't me.

"Touché," he says with a wistful tick of his head before zeroing in on me with a hardened look. "I think it's high time we get down to brass tacks, Effie. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. We both know you took out those men yourself. Admit it."

CHAPTER 23

An entire river of words tries to gag their way out of my throat at once after Cooper all but accused me of killing both Peter and Frankie. I mean, sure, they were on my lethal list of to-dos, but I'm not about to fess up to it or anything else for that matter.

"I'm kidding," he says as he takes another bite of his pizza right in my parents' kitchen, his eyes still trained on mine. "But there is a real killer out there, maybe two. Are you up for talking suspects? Who's on your short list?"

"The short list is the only one I've got." I take another quick bite and swallow it down. "Harmony Honeycutt and Fiona Harper are the only two on it. My third suspect was just nailed to his chair with a butcher knife."

Cooper tips his head. "Harmony is interesting with her manifesting mumbo jumbo and Fiona is as well with her tax-deductible charity."

I grunt, "Apparently, manifesting your best life is serious business. Just ask the hundreds of women hanging on Harmony's every word and doling out some cold, hard cash to read all about it, too. And before you ask, I've read every last page of her name-it-and-claim-it tome. And I still don't get why I'm not in the Caribbean by now. And let's not forget Fiona's trunk sale. Nothing like selling off your damaged goods for a good cause—which is what she was doing. She said all proceeds went to her charity." I think about it for a minute. "Neither woman had anything all that good to say about Peter."

Cooper shakes his head. "He wasn't exactly a saint. Which one do you think had the

most to gain by taking him out?”

I hover over my pizza for a moment. “Harmony had a motive. The guy wanted what he thought was his—and what he thought was his was lining Harmony’s bank account. She had every reason to manifest him out of existence for good. Not to mention that Fiona said he had some dirt on Harmony that he was blackmailing her with in order to get to those funds.”

“Interesting.” Cooper nods thoughtfully. “And Fiona?”

“Outside of the fact that he helped her set up her foundation and that she thought he was no angel, I’ve got nothing.”

“Maybe they were running their own scheme?” Coop sighs at the thought. “I’ll have to do some more digging.”

“Funny thing is, Harmony’s whole schtick is positive thinking, but she seems to be pretty negative when it comes to Peter. I guess blackmail will do that to a person.”

“And sans the blackmail, that’s on par with most exes.”

“Most exes don’t resort to murder.”

“You’d be surprised who would be willing to kill for money.” He pins me with those baby blues of his and doesn’t let go despite the fact I can’t seem to breathe at the moment.

It’s clear Coop is hinting at yet another killer disaster, namely me.

“I don’t want you to think about either of those suspects anymore.” He takes another bite of his pizza. “I’ll interview them both again and see if I can trip them up. Maybe

one of them will slip and reveal something useful.”

“But I like thinking about it,” I counter. “In fact, I got both of those women to open up to me. I should be the one tripping them up.”

He takes a deep breath and his chest expands the size of the wall—a strong muscular wall with a delicious six-pack. Suddenly, I have a craving to move on to dessert.

“I’ll admit, you’re really good at this,” he says, albeit reluctantly, judging by the look on his face. “I mean, you have a way of getting people to talk, to reveal things they wouldn’t normally share—not with me at least. But I’m the detective around here. Besides, there’s no way I want you to get hurt. Once the killer knows you’re onto them, it might be your food that they poison next.”

“Lucky for me, I’m not allergic to peanut butter.”

“Something tells me the killer isn’t above using something that might be just as toxic for you. I can’t risk it.” He reaches over and picks up my hand. “I can’t risk anything happening to you. I care about you, Effie.” His eyes are back to penetrating mine. He looks at me with that serious yet oh-so-hot detective face. “Okay, Eff, let’s talk about Frankie ‘The Bull’ Santoro. What did you want to discuss with him before you offed him?”

I swat him playfully on the arm. “I did not off him, and you know it.”

“Just checking.” He ticks his head to the side as if he wasn’t sure. “Seriously, what did you want to talk to him about?”

I take a deep breath and try to play it cool. “Fiona mentioned that Frankie and Peter were friends and that he might have been able to shed light on Peter’s murder. I thought he might know something useful.” There’s no way I’m fessing up to the fact I

needed to convince Frankie to pay my uncle what he owed him before he found a bullet in his back.

The knife in the back was something I didn't see coming—and clearly, neither did Frankie.

Cooper leans back and studies me with a frown. “Effie, is there anything I need to know about you that could potentially have”—he sighs once again and frowns twice as hard (have I mentioned he's hot when he frowns?)—“legal consequences?”

I give an audible gulp without meaning to.

My heart skips a beat or ten or twenty because I know exactly what he's hinting at. My work as a hitwoman isn't exactly something we've had a heart-to-heart about ever since he caught me gawking at my picture brightening up his office.

“You know I work at the bakery. Whether or not Lottie runs a clean operation is her business.” I spear him with my own hard stare. “But apart from the occasional burnt cookie, there's nothing illegal going on there as far as I can tell.”

“I'm not talking about cookies, Effie. I just want to make sure you're not getting involved in anything that could get you into real trouble. For your sake—and mine.”

My lips press white.

He knows.

And he knows that I know that he knows.

And for reasons that I can't quite understand, he hasn't thrown me to the floor, cuffed me, and dug his knee into my back as he reads me my Miranda rights.

His blue eyes seem to burn a hole through my skull and straight into my soul.

“Effie”—he says, low and serious—“are you working for your uncle in a nefarious manner? You can trust me,” he says that last bit just below a whisper as if maybe I can’t.

My heart races as he continues to stare me down. Just as I’m about to blurt out the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Nona Jo waddles into the kitchen.

Nona Jo is short, round, and speaks fluent sarcasm.

“Don’t mind me.” She’s quick to wave us off. “I’m just here for my midnight snack.”

“It’s only eight,” I point out, even though I’m more than relieved to see her. Her stomach has some serious timing.

“Eight is my midnight,” she says, completely oblivious to the tension hanging in the air. She grabs a slice of pizza from the box and wags a finger at Cooper and me. “The two of you better stay together like mozzarella on a hot pizza because if you don’t, you-know-what will happen.”

I force a tight smile despite the fact the implication of her words isn’t lost on me. Coop doesn’t realize that if we don’t stay together, my Uncle Jimmy will ensure that Coop’s life is over. Literally.

“But don’t you worry.” Nona Jo busies herself at the counter for a second. “I’ve got a couple of big surprises up my sleeve for you two lovebirds,” she says in an all too cryptic tone. “You’ll see soon enough! And you’ll thank me for it, too!”

Nona Jo trots out of the kitchen with a satisfied smile, clutching her midnight snack like the prize it is. And the moment she’s out of sight, Cooper pulls me into his lap

and wraps his arms around me. I can feel the warmth and the strength of his embrace, and it makes my heart do a little flip.

“About that question I asked just before she walked in,” he says, initiating that infamous hot frown of his once again. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to know, and I don’t want you to answer it.”

I blink up at him, stunned. “You sure about that, Detective? I thought you lived for solving mysteries.”

He gives me a wry smile. “I do. But I’ve come to realize some things are better left unsolved, especially when it comes to you and me.”

I bite down on a smile. “You mean, like how we’re going to make this relationship work despite our—differences?”

“Exactly,” he says, his eyes pegged to mine. “You’re a magnet for trouble, and I’m a cop. It’s like Romeo and Juliet but with more handcuffs.”

“Just great.” I snort. “Does that mean we’re doomed?”

“Not if I can help it,” he murmurs, nuzzling that facial scruff of his over my cheek. “We’ll figure it out, one way or another. Just promise me that you’ll try to keep out of trouble. No more nefarious thoughts.”

“I’ll do my best. But no promises. I seem to attract trouble like Nona Jo to her eight o’clock midnight snack.”

Coop’s lips curve just this side of a smile as he comes in for the kill, but before he can land one on my lips, Watson storms in barking and dancing as he does his best to beg for a bite of our pizza.

Personally, I'm shocked the popcorn held his attention for so long.

"You've got some timing," I say, giving his furry little head a quick pat.

"And some appetite." Coop hands him a slice and Watson gobbles it up before it can hit the floor. "I've got an appetite, too," he says with a devilish gleam in his eyes.

"Well, well"—I stifle a laugh—"look who's full of nefarious thoughts now? Don't worry, Detective. I know exactly how to handle this."

Coop's lids hood and his lips curve in the right direction. "I dare you to."

"I never back down from a dare."

And I don't.

We make out in my mother's kitchen as if we were the only two people in the house.

Thankfully, Watson keeps watch for my brothers so the next person with a knife in his back isn't Cooper.

That would be an easy homicide to solve.

However, Peter Honeycutt's and Frankie "The Bull" Santoro's homicides are anything but easy to solve.

Both men were on my hit list and both men are dead.

It begs the question, do they have the same killer?

And was the true killer Jimmy Canelli?

CHAPTER 24

The rest of the week goes by in a blur with pies flying out of the bakery at record speeds. Before I know it, the big day arrives.

It's Thanksgiving morning, and I'm standing outside the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery alongside Suze and Lily, giving away free pumpkin cheesecakes to the grabby hands in the crowd. Okay, so we're charging a nominal fee, but with the way they're flying off the proverbial shelves, you'd think they were free.

The crowds are thick, the scent of roasted turkey drifts from just about every oven in Vermont, and there's a palpable excitement in the air as the official Turkey Trot is about to kick off, followed by the big parade.

Lottie stands nearby, chatting with both of her men, Noah and Everett. And her smile is as bright as the festive decorations adorning Main Street, making all of Honey Hollow look like a Thanksgiving postcard.

Face it, I'd have a megawatt smile on my face, too, if I had two hot men totally devoted to me.

"Effie! Come here for a second," Lottie calls out, waving me in her direction with a cheerful grin. I hand the muffin duties over to Suze and Lily and make my way to where Lottie and her two hunky companions are standing.

Both Noah and Everett are wearing sweats and long-sleeved T-shirts, which in and of itself is an anomaly since I've only ever seen these two in suits. But I suppose it

would be hard to trot with the rest of the turkeys while outfitted as if you belonged on Wall Street.

The rest of the turkeys would include me. The things I let Niki talk me into.

But I digress. Both Noah and Everett are wildly delicious looking on your average day, but today with that whole we're-about-to-bench-press-the-bakery look in their eyes, they look hotter than a forest fire and it's not one I'd be willing to put out. They both have dark hair, but that's where the similarities stop.

Noah has green eyes and dimples deep enough to sink a cannoli in. And Everett, aka Judge Baxter, aka Mr. Sexy, has a mean, brooding look on his far too handsome face that makes the women swoon. And don't get me started on those blue eyes of his and what I wouldn't mind letting them see.

I shake my head as I come to.

What am I saying? I have a perfectly good, far too handsome boyfriend of my own that I've yet to let his baby blue peepers take a gander of what I've got.

All in due time.

Have I mentioned that we're almost past due? I say it's time to live a little.

"Happy Gobble Gobble Day. What's up?" I ask.

Lottie's expression sobers up a bit. "Noah was wondering if you've made any progress on the case."

"Either case." Noah blows out a breath. "I'll tell you, I did not see that second homicide coming."

“You don’t see any homicide coming.” Everett is quick with the dig.

Noah shoots him a look before reverting his attention back to me. “Any news? Have you gleaned anything that might lead to the killer?”

I shake my head. “I wish. I’ve been so busy at the bakery, I’m still stuck in last week as far as the investigation goes. Besides, Cooper wanted me to step aside. He’s determined to solve the case himself.”

Noah and Everett exchange a glance before breaking out into a guttural laugh.

“What’s so funny?” I ask just as Lottie swats them both.

“Nothing is funny, Effie,” she says with a mild look of irritation. “It’s just that any time these two adamantly insist I stay out of a case?—”

“She tends to do the opposite,” Everett finishes for her. “In fact, I’m about to start implementing reverse psychology and see if that works any better.”

“It wouldn’t on me,” I’m quick to attest. “But seriously, I don’t have much to go on anyway. Harmony is Peter’s ex, and she sure had a motive to want him out of the picture, not to mention there were rumors he was blackmailing her. And when I spoke to Fiona Harper about Peter, she said Frank Santoro might know more about his enemies. But by the time I got around to grilling Frank, he was already sitting on a cloud and strumming on a harp.”

“How did Fiona know Frank?” Noah asks.

“She mentioned they worked on the same charity together.” I’m about to say something else just as I spot a handsome homicide detective—outside of Noah—striding down the street on his way to the beginning of the Turkey Trot and

he just so happens to have a turkey latching onto him.

The turkey in question would be Naomi Turner, all decked out like a slutty Mrs. Claus.

I scowl just looking at her.

Why couldn't I be the slutty Mrs. Claus? Who's a girl gotta kill around here to be the big guy's number one?

Naomi, obviously.

"A charity, huh?" Everett shakes his head. "You wouldn't believe how many shady charities pop up around the holidays. People are so eager to give, but not everyone's intentions are pure."

"I can assure you Fiona's intentions are pure," Lottie says. "This isn't some fly-by-night foundation. She's been running Honey Hollow Hearts for a few years now."

A whistle goes off, and soon we hear Mayor Nash's voice booming from an unseen speaker, asking all of the participants of the Turkey Trot to head to the starting line.

"You'd better get going," Lottie says to the three of us. "Oh, and before I forget, Effie, there's an elf costume for you in my office that Naomi dropped off for after the race. Now go on and get. I'm rooting for you guys, especially you." She points my way.

Noah pats my shoulder. "We're all rooting for you, Effie. And if anyone can get to the bottom of these homicide cases, I hate to break it to Cooper, but it's most likely you."

“That’s right.” Everett nudges Noah. “Effie’s the new Sherlock Holmes. Maybe you should take some notes.”

“Oh, I’m taking notes, all right.” Noah chuckles. “Rule number one, don’t mess with Effie Canelli.”

We share a quick laugh as we migrate to the starting line, and I’m not sure why, but I can’t seem to spot Cooper or Niki in all the melee.

The starting gun goes off, and soon we’re off to the races, or the finish line as it were, and suddenly that finish line seems way too far away.

CHAPTER 25

The crisp autumn air fills my lungs as I join the throngs of people participating in the big, dumb idea more locally known as the Turkey Trot.

The streets of Honey Hollow are buzzing with excitement, with families bundled up in cozy scarves and hats, while kids laugh and chase each other as the smell of roasted turkey wafts through the air.

It would be the perfect way to kick off Thanksgiving Day—that is, if my body wasn't determined to kill me.

I wheeze.

I pant.

I get a charley horse before I crest ten feet.

“Clear the way,” someone shouts from behind and my feet drag me to the side just as Carlotta glides past me in roller skates, and she just so happens to be pushing a grocery cart with both Watson and my Aunt Cat inside of it.

So much for watching my pooch so I can do the gobble hobble with the best of them.

Both Carlotta and Aunt Cat yell and scream like a couple of wild turkeys trying to avoid the chopping block as they leave the competition in the dust. Watson is doing his fair share of howling, too. Here's hoping it's not a cry for help. I'm in no shape to

chase them down.

And a shopping cart? Now, why didn't Niki and I think of that?

On second thought, it's best we didn't. We all know who would be the dumb dumb on roller skates and who would be living it up while getting the ride of her life.

Speaking of life, I huff and puff as I try my best to get back into the race. I'm about to veer away from the crowd just as a familiar face catches my eye.

Who needs to shake a few calories on the most delicious day of the year when I can shake a few more answers out of my number one suspect?

I jog over to where I see Harmony Honeycutt standing, wrapped in a golden faux fur coat that matches her golden locks, and her face is done up to the holiday nines, complete with blood-red lipstick. The last time I saw something that red, I was staring at Frankie Santoro's chest.

"Effie, you're doing great," she calls out as I trot her way.

"You mean I was doing great," I say, swiping a paper cup full of water off the table in front of me and stepping up beside her. "I'm afraid my body insists I take a break."

"Well, don't be long," she says as her eyes widen with a touch of horror. "You don't want to come in dead last."

"It wouldn't be the first time." I knock back my water and pitch the cup just like I've seen countless others do before me. I'll admit, that alone sort of makes me feel like an athlete.

The crowd around us thins as the majority of the runners have already passed us by,

and soon it's just Harmony and me standing on the curb.

"What brings you out this morning?" I ask. "Anxious to see the parade?"

"That and just soaking in the community spirit and spreading some positive energy. It's all about manifesting the best holiday season, right?"

"Right," I say, eyeing her carefully. "Speaking of manifesting, I hear the Ashford Sheriff's Department is getting close to narrowing down Peter's killer."

"Oh, I sure hope so." She shudders. "I may not have cared for him in the end, but that doesn't mean I wanted to see him in a casket either."

I'll bet.

"Our relationship had its ups and downs"—she flicks a wrist as she goes on—"but I assure you, I had no reason to wish him harm."

"Really?" I tilt my head, giving her a pointed look. "Because from where I'm standing, it seems like you had plenty of reasons. Maybe even enough to manifest his downfall."

Harmony lets out a light laugh. "Oh, Effie, you're adorable. If I had the power to manifest someone's death, don't you think I'd be aiming a bit higher than an ex-husband who's already out of my life?"

"Maybe," I say, narrowing my eyes. "But that doesn't explain some of the things I've heard. Like how Peter was going after you for a significant amount of money. Not to mention that there was mention of some previous shady dealings that he was blackmailing you over."

She gasps hard, confirming my suspicions. “How did you know that?”

“So it’s true! You admit to poisoning Peter’s pumpkin pie. Instead of him sending you to prison, you sent him to the pearly gates!”

She squints over at me before breaking out into a genuine laugh.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. Yes, we had started a speaking tour for a while where we were siphoning some money off the top, but I can assure you it was for legitimate overhead. Peter’s so-called blackmail was trying to pin me as a thief. He liked to find the flaw in people and lord it over them for his own personal gain—especially if they were stealing. But I wasn’t stealing. The money I took was indeed to help with overhead, and every last penny matched as far as my taxes go. So you see, he didn’t have anything on me. And as much as I would like to take credit for Peter’s untimely demise, it wasn’t me who caused it. My guess is, it was probably someone else he was blackmailing. And this time, they knew exactly how to ward him off for good.”

I straighten. “Who else knew about his peanut allergy?”

“Only those closest to him, or those that he worked closely with. He wasn’t exactly advertising it.” She cranes her neck past me. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I think I see those decadent pumpkin spice muffins for sale at the bakery. I just need to get my hands on one or six.” She takes off without so much as a wave and glides off into the crowd, leaving me more puzzled than before.

Maybe Harmony isn’t as guilty as I first thought. But one thing’s for sure—there’s more to this story than meets the eye.

So who else could Peter have been blackmailing?

I shake my head as I struggle to come up with an answer.

Something Everett said before the race comes to mind and my spine stiffens.

“Wait one minute.” I pull out my phone and do a little more digging.

If I’m right, I know exactly who the killer is. And if indeed they’re guilty, I’ve been digging in the wrong direction.

CHAPTER 26

Before I can organize my thoughts properly, an airhorn goes off as the Turkey Trot comes to a conclusion and the breathless crowds begin to drift back onto Main Street.

Cooper waves over at me before jogging my way. I'm shocked his legs are still agreeing to bounce up and down after what he's put them through.

Show off.

"Did you feel the burn?" he asks as he steals a kiss, and I can't help but note it's a molten hot kiss for more than one reason. His entire body is glowing red-hot from the run.

"I'm feeling something," I shoot back. "Could be the burn, could be the regret of agreeing to put on my running shoes."

I choose to omit the fact I ran a much shorter distance than he did. You know what they say, a little mystery keeps the romance alive.

He laughs. "You did great, Effie. I'm proud of you. Just think of all the guilt-free pie we've earned with this run."

"Pie has always been my motivator," I agree. "But guilt is something I've never felt while eating it. Cooper, I have to tell you something."

Someone shouts his name and we look over to see that slutty rendition of Mrs. Claus

doing her best to wave him down. More like wear him down.

He glances at his watch and then at me. “I hate to cut this short, but I’ve got to go change into my Santa suit. Duty calls.”

I pout his way. “Leaving me already? I thought we were bonding over pie?”

“Trust me, we’ll be bonding over pie tonight.”

“I guess I’ll go get my elf getup on.” Peter Honeycutt’s killer comes to mind. “But before I forget, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He leans in, planting a soft kiss on my lips. “We’ll talk soon, I promise. Besides,” he adds with a playful glint in his eye, “I seem to have a new affinity for elves.”

I raise a brow. “You think elves are hot?”

He makes a face. “Only the right elf,” he says, winking before jogging off to change.

I shake my head as I watch him go.

Cooper in a Santa suit? This day just keeps getting better.

As the parade begins, I head over to the bakery to slip into the elf costume Naomi dropped off, and it’s every bit as ridiculous as I thought it’d be with its jingling bells and pointy hat—lime green potato sack coupled with bright yellow tights—but hey, it’s for a good cause. Plus, this way I can always bump off Naomi later to make myself feel better because of it.

The parade kicks off with a marching band playing festive tunes, followed by floats decorated with turkeys, cornucopias, and all things Thanksgiving. As the parade

draws to a conclusion and Santa's sleigh is in sight, I join the other elfish volunteers, handing out candy canes to the kids lining the streets while trying to ignore the fact my tights are giving me a wedgie that any middle school tormenter would be proud of.

Just as the float carrying Santa Claus rounds the corner, I spot Cooper in his red suit, complete with a fake white beard and a twinkle in his eye. He catches sight of me and gives a grand wave, causing a ripple of cheers from the crowd.

I can't help but feel a smidge of pride.

Here I am, dressed as an elf, looking about as appealing as a wet rat, and yet it's me he's winking at while Naomi Turner does her best to climb his beard like a pole.

As I make my way through the throngs of parade-goers, handing out candy canes and trying to pretend there aren't a half dozen overzealous children tugging on my elf costume, I spot Fiona Harper standing in the crowd, wearing a turquoise jacket with heavy embroidery and some sequins mixed in. She's as sparkling and colorful as ever, and then a thought comes to me and solidifies what I'm afraid is true.

I hand my candy cane bucket to the kid to my right and make a beeline for the woman.

"Well, well, if it isn't Effie the Elf," Fiona calls out with a little laugh and I'd laugh along, but I'm too busy pulling her to the side away from the crowd so we can have a little not-so-friendly chat.

"Happy Thanksgiving! Enjoying the parade?" I say, albeit a lot less friendlier than I meant to.

"It's festive, I'll give it that." She laughs. "You're going to be a hit at the community

center. The kids are just going to love you.”

“Oh, that’s right, the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation is feeding the needy.”

“Yup. Right after the parade.” She nods. “I just snuck over to have a look at all the fun floats. Oh, it just brings me right back to my childhood. That’s why I started the foundation, you know. I was once a needy child myself.”

“I think we should talk about the foundation. About Peter Honeycutt’s involvement specifically.”

Her eyebrows arch. “I thought we already covered that topic.”

“Not all of it,” I say, stepping closer. “You see, there are some things that don’t add up. Like how Peter’s death wasn’t just an accident, but a carefully orchestrated murder.”

There. I’ve let the peanut butter-coated cat out of the pumpkin pie-shaped bag. Let’s see her worm her way out of this one.

Fiona’s eyes flicker with something—annoyance, most likely. “And you think I had something to do with it?”

“I know you did,” I say, keeping my voice steady. “You had everything to gain from his death. Peter started that charity with you. He was a pro at shady business dealings and known to take a little off the top. When he left, you continued the tradition, didn’t you?”

She inches back, shaking her head. “You’ve been watching too many crime dramas, Effie. I had no reason to kill Peter. Yes, he was a thief, but that doesn’t reflect on me. I booted him out of my organization.”

“Maybe so, but maybe you were just tired of playing second fiddle to his schemes? Maybe you wanted to be the one pulling the strings for a change.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” I challenge. “When we chatted at the B&B, you mentioned there was a lot of overhead at your foundation, and everyone knows that’s an easy way to bilk a fortune off a nonprofit. I bet if the sheriff’s department opens the books, they’ll be surprised just how much went missing.”

Her eyes widen to the size of a couple of turkey eggs, and that’s when I know I’ve got her—for the theft at least.

“Peter Honeycutt was blackmailing you, wasn’t he?” I continue. “Ever the grifter, he wanted in on the take. I think you were tired of sharing the profits, tired of Peter’s constant meddling. You saw an opportunity to take him out and make it look like an accident. He told everyone he was close to about his allergy, including those he worked with. Peanut butter in the pumpkin pie? Clever, but not clever enough.”

Okay, so it was pretty darn clever, but still. I need her shaking in her boots. A pat on the back isn’t exactly going to garner a confession.

She offers me a cold and calculating stare. “You have no proof.”

“I have enough,” I say, feeling the weight of the evidence. “Enough to make sure you’re held accountable for what you did. You killed Frank Santoro, too, because you were afraid that Peter ratted you out. Peter and Frank were thick as thieves—your words exactly, and now I know why. I bet Frank came sniffing around for a little hush money himself. I know firsthand he was broke and looking for some spare cash from anyone who would give it.”

True as gospel. The man went to the Bank of Canelli, and that alone was about to ensure a trip to the pearly gates—only Fiona here beat me to it.

That sequin jacket of hers glints in the sun and darn near blinds me.

Why exactly does she feel the need to dress like a pinata?

A thought comes to me and I clamp my hand over my mouth.

“Oh my goodness,” I seethe. “The night you poisoned Peter, you were helping Lottie bring out the pies. You wore orange from head to foot. That’s not your MO.” I wave to the rainbow’s worth of colors she’s enrobed herself in. “You did it because you knew you’d be mixing ingredients that night—ingredients you knew Peter was lethally allergic to.” I shake my head. “I bet you were clad in red the day you killed Frankie, too.” It’s just a shot in the dark, but I have a feeling I’m right. “You killed them both.”

She lifts her chin abruptly. “Yes, I did it. I killed both Peter and Frank.” She jabs a finger in my chest. “And I’m not afraid to kill again,” she practically growls the words my way. “But I won’t have to.” She digs around in her purse before coming up triumphant with her key fob. “I’ll be in Canada before you take a bite of pumpkin pie tonight with your family.”

Fiona takes off into the crowd like a bullet and I dart right after her.

Nobody tells me when and where I’ll eat my pie.

CHAPTER 27

I grab Fiona Harper by the elbow and she turns to shake me off, and in doing so stumbles into the street just as Santa's sleigh is headed this way. Next to it are eight ornery yet regal looking reindeer that hardly look street legal being led by their handlers. I'm guessing the sleigh is motorized.

"Let me go." Fiona yanks herself free. "Don't do anything you'll regret." She tries to dart to my right, but I block her path and instead, she bolts in front of Santa's sleigh and causes the crowd to give a little shriek.

"Get back here," I call out as I dart right after her and about three different reindeer lift onto their hind legs and whinny in an effort to not run me over.

"Effie?" Cooper shouts while jumping to his feet and sending Mrs. Claus into the air as he knocks her out of his lap.

"She did it." I point in the direction Fiona is headed. "She confessed!"

No sooner do I shout those words than the cutest dog in the world barrels this way. In seconds both Watson and I catch up to Fiona as the crowd parts like the Red Sea.

Watson clamps over her ankle with his adorable yet sharp as razors little puppy teeth, while I throw myself onto the woman's back, landing us both onto the cobbled sidewalk.

Fiona tries to wiggle herself free just as I pull her wrists behind her back.

“You’re lucky I left my Glock at home,” I riot at her.

Lottie is right. I really should have a more user-friendly moniker for my weapon.

“Everybody freeze,” Cooper shouts while pointing his gun right at us, and thankfully there’s nothing friendly about it.

If I thought Cooper was hot as Santa, I had no idea how much hotter he could be dressed as Santa while wielding his weapon.

Watson barks.

Kids scream.

Adults shout an entire chorus of expletives.

I can’t blame the adults. Erasing the image of Santa with a gun will cost those folks an arm and a leg in therapy bills.

Noah runs up and I quickly fill him in on Fiona’s confession. He has her cuffed and moves her out of the crowd and into the nearest sheriff’s vehicle.

Cooper puts away his weapon before an all-out riot ensues.

“Are you okay?” He pulls me in hard and I can feel his heart thumping violently over my chest.

“I’m better now.”

“You did it, Buttercup.” He lands a kiss on my forehead. “You caught another killer.”

“Hey? Buttercup! I like that.”

“Instead of Effie?”

“Instead of Glock . I think you just named my gun.”

He gives a long blink. “Regardless, you did great. Are you sure you don’t moonlight as a detective?”

“I don’t have to moonlight, I’m inadvertently living it.” I look up at him as we share a little laugh. But soon enough the smile fades from my face. “I think we both know what I moonlight as.”

He shakes his head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. Nor do I want you to extrapolate.” His smile is traded for a sorrowful look. “Besides, I’d much rather do this.” He plants one on me and Watson gives a sharp bark of approval.

Well, there you go. Cooper doesn’t want to get into it as much as I don’t want to bring it up. Then it’s settled. Anytime I feel the need to bring up my dicey line of work, I’ll simply land my lips on his instead.

This is much more fun anyway.

“Hey, Santa! Get back here. Are you trying to traumatize these children by two-timing on your wife with some cheesy elf?” a woman screeches, and we look over to see a red-faced Naomi Turner looking as if she were about to detonate. Now that would traumatize these children for sure.

Cooper lands another kiss on my cheek. “I’ll catch up with you in a bit. Maybe head to the bakery where I know you’ll be safe.” He takes off with Naomi latched to his side and the crowd breaks out into cheers.

I scoop up Watson and shake my head in Santa's direction. "Safe at the bakery? It seems he's forgetting just how this story began."

"Effie," someone shouts and I turn around to see both Carlotta and Aunt Cat heading my way. Carlotta's right arm is bandaged like a mummy and hanging off her neck in a sling, and Aunt Cat's hair looks teased to high heaven, most likely from that shopping cart ride through downtown.

"We've got something for you," Aunt Cat pants while riffling through her purse. Considering it's the size of a small car, this could take a while.

"Carlotta, what happened to your arm?" I ask and Watson gives a little bark as if he wants answers, too.

"Just a bump and bruise from the Turkey Trip and Fall. But it was worth it. We came in fifth place."

I wrinkle my nose just as Aunt Cat pulls a thick white envelope out of her purse.

"Your Uncle Jimmy stopped by," she says, handing the envelope my way and I feel its heft. "He said he wanted to give this to you himself, but he's due in the kitchen. He likes to baste the turkey himself."

"What's this?" I say, opening it up, only to reveal a stack of hundred dollar bills, enough of them to buy everyone in Vermont a turkey dinner at the Honey Pot Diner.

"He said it's your bonus." Carlotta shrugs.

"It's for offing Frankie," Aunt Cat scowls my way. "The least you could have done was allow me to offer the man a proper send-off."

“Ugh,” I say, blowing out a breath. “I don’t deserve this. I didn’t kill Frankie. And I’m glad about it, too. Believe me, I would have much rather have given the man over to the two of you.”

“He was a hunk,” Carlotta says as her shoulders sag.

“He was a thoroughbred in bed,” Aunt Cat counters, looking equally dejected.

“More information than I wanted or needed. But I am sorry?—”

“Is that Santa?” Carlotta shouts as she cranes her neck to the right.

“And he’s hot!” Aunt Cat practically screams as she takes off, yanking her bestie along with her.

“It looks like they’ll recover,” I say to Watson as I fan myself with the envelope full of blood money that I didn’t even earn. “But I don’t know if I will.”

I know what I have to do.

And there’s not a pie in the world that will make me feel better about it.

CHAPTER 28

Once the parade was officially over, Watson and I joined Cooper and the rest of the North Pole brigade down at the community center where we ho, ho, hoed with the best of them.

Okay, so the only ho there was Naomi, who kept taking advantage of the fact she was playing the part of Santa's plus-one by way of sticking her tongue in his ear. And the only reason she was able to jab it into that orifice is because Cooper kept turning his head every time she tried to put it in his mouth.

Anyway, I could only take so much, so I let Watson chew on Naomi's ankle and moseyed into the kitchen to sneak a bite. And to my surprise, I find two familiar faces working away to make the tasty holiday magic happen.

"Stir the stuffing, would you?" Niki shouts my way.

"Is this why you weren't at the Turkey Trot?"

"I was at the Turkey Trot, all right," she says. "Lottie asked me to put away the pies before she left the bakery this morning, so I put away three." She pats her belly. "I used a fork, but in truth, I didn't need it."

I avert my eyes. "Teaches Lottie to ask you anything." I nod over at Uncle Jimmy. "Happy Thanksgiving," I say, heading his way as he offers me a hearty embrace. He's manning the mashed potatoes, and by the looks of it, he's wearing them, too.

“Happy Thanksgiving, bella faccia,” he says right back as he gives both of my cheeks a proper kiss. “Congrats on your kills. You’re doing me proud.”

I make a face. “I didn’t kill anyone. I don’t deserve the money. A friend of theirs did them in. I got her to confess, and she’s already on her way up the river.”

Uncle Jimmy inches back. “And? Even better work. You got someone else to take the fall.”

“No, that’s not what hap?—”

He holds up a hand. “Never mind the details. You got the job done. The money is yours. Consider it a pat on the back for carrying out a little justice.” His shoulders jump. “Even if it wasn’t necessarily for me. At the end of the day, we both got what we wanted.” He turns back to his potatoes. “Now we’d better serve up the last of this food and make it snappy. Your mother threatened to take me out if I was late for dinner.”

“Something tells me she’ll take all three of us out for that,” I say.

Uncle Jimmy, Niki, and I serve up the rest of the food while Loretta Salami belts out orders as if this were her calling in life. And it just might be. With Fiona out of commission, the Honey Hollow Hearts Foundation needed a new ringleader, for this afternoon at least. Something tells me Loretta might even be moved to open up her very own foundation soon—albeit a little more honest and honorable.

Oh, who are we kidding? It will be just as corrupt and dishonest.

CHAPTER 29

Soon enough, Cooper and I do a quick change and we head down to Grimstone Heights with our cute little pooch in tow just like the other night.

Only things look markedly different on the street in front of my parents' house this time.

"Looks as if there's no parking," he says, trying to maneuver his truck around the glut of cars parked every which way.

"I guess all the neighbors are hosting their own Thanksgiving blowouts," I say. "Not that my house will look any different from Sunday dinner, with the exception of a few odd aunts and uncles. And I do mean odd."

I leave out the fact a major mob boss will be making his debut. Although Coop already knows Jimmy is in my lineage. Just like I know Luke Lazzari is in Cooper's lineage. Luke would be the only other mob boss around, and one that fights my uncle for turf and probably other lethal stuff every now and again. Shockingly, rumor has it, the two are actually friends.

We park up the street and do another impromptu Turkey Trot as we race to make it to my mother's doorstep on time.

No sooner do we step inside than my eyes can't understand what they're seeing.

People.

Lots of them.

Everywhere.

Watson takes off like a bullet. After all, there are food scraps to be had.

“What in the heck?” I say, struggling to find anyone who actually happens to be genetically linked to me. “Who are all these people?”

Cooper seizes and stops all movement.

“Mom?” he calls out as his mouth falls open. “Dad?”

I spot Loretta Pastrami giggling away next to my Nona Jo and gasp.

“What in Italy’s name is going on?” I ask.

Soon, everyone breaks out into applause. Then to my horror, my family rises to their feet, and next to my Uncle Jimmy is none other than Luke Lazzari himself.

Well, if it isn’t my last Thanksgiving. If it isn’t everyone’s last Thanksgiving.

Nona Jo rises to her feet with a glass of Chianti in hand. “Settle down, kids. Effie, Cupertino, I want you to know this is my doing.”

She waves a dismissive hand, silencing the murmurs. “This is my thank you to the happy couple for bringing together two warring families.” She takes a sip of her wine, and something tells me it’s not her first. “With Effie’s smarts and Cupertino’s”—she glances at him, giving him a once-over—“good looks and law-abiding ways, we’ve managed to create a truce in this town. And what better way to celebrate than by stuffing our faces with enough food to sink a gondola?”

The room chuckles, and I feel Cooper squeeze my hand, a sign that he's as bewildered as I am but going along with it.

Nona Jo raises her glass ever higher. "To Effie and Cupertino, who've not only managed to keep their heads on straight amidst all this madness, but have also brought a sense of peace and sanity to our crazy families."

"Not in the least," I mutter under my breath, earning another squeeze from Cooper's hand.

Nona Jo grins, clearly in her element. "May your love be as strong as Uncle Jimmy's grip on this town and as enduring as the endless pasta dishes at our family dinners. And may your patience be as thick as my gravy because, trust me, you'll need it." Everyone laughs as Nona Jo's toast continues. "To the happy couple! May your days be filled with laughter, your nights with wild lovemaking, and your holidays with the kind of food that makes you want to unbutton your pants and take a nap right on the dining room table." She raises her glass one last time. "Salute!"

"Salute!" the room echoes, glasses clinking together in a chorus of goodwill.

I could have done without the wild lovemaking quip. I mean, I would love nothing more than some wild you-know-what with you-know-who, but must we bring it up in a room with every blood relation I have? My brothers didn't look too thrilled either.

I manage a smile and feel the warmth of the moment despite the fact most everyone here is armed and more than ready to pop off a shot or two if necessary.

Cooper leans in and his lips brush my ear. "Looks like we've got quite the team behind us."

I nod, taking a deep breath. "Yeah, quite the team."

Two different teams—bitter rivals, in fact, but I don't bother doting on details.

We settle at the table where, miraculously, they saved us both a seat. And after a quick prayer of thanks from my Pops, we dive into both traditional Thanksgiving fare along with my mother's Italian contributions, namely her famous lasagna with layers of pasta, rich meat sauce, and gooey cheese baked to perfection. Then there's a massive bowl of spaghetti carbonara, with its creamy sauce and crispy pancetta—not to mention the homemade gnocchi, soft pillows of potato pasta smothered in a robust tomato sauce. Her eggplant Parmesan, with its layers of fried eggplant smothered in marinara and melted mozzarella is a showstopper as well. And let's not forget the antipasto, which never leaves the table with its array of cured meats formed into rosettes, six different kinds of hard cheeses, wrinkled olives, and pickled veggies.

"This is quite the dinner." Loretta Salami nods to both my mother and hers.

"And we've got quite the desserts," Mom is quick to tell her.

"Lots of Lottie's poison pies," Aunt Cat calls out and Carlotta swats her.

"You're ruining the surprise," she chastises.

Cooper's mother gives a little laugh. "Renata and I whipped up a few Italian desserts as well."

My mother nods her way. "We've got the best cannoli and tiramisu going. And I didn't forget to include my ricotta cheesecake!"

The crowd goes wild just hearing it.

I'm already planning on seconds and thirds of each.

Cooper's eyes widen as he takes in the sheer volume of food. "It looks like we're in

for yet another marathon, of the culinary variety.”

I laugh, grabbing another slice of lasagna. “This time I’m staying in the race. Hey? I think I manifested this.” In fact, I know I did. Maybe Harmony isn’t such a charlatan after all.

“Let’s just hope we can get through the night without having to make another arrest.”

Nona Jo leans my way. “Did you like the surprise?”

“Surprisingly , I love it,” I tell her.

“Good.” The wicked smile drops from her face, only to be replaced with a far more nefarious look. “Because I’ve got another surprise for the two of you at the Velvet Fox Hotel down in Leeds. I’m not telling you what day or what time. Just know I’m cooking up something so big, it might take months to prepare. One thing is for sure, it’s going to go off without a hitch. I’ll give you the heads up twenty-four hours before the big day. Be there or be dead.”

Cooper and I exchange a quick glance.

“We wouldn’t miss it,” Cooper is quick to tell her. “Whatever it is, you can count on us to be there.”

“Mostly because we’d rather not be dead,” I say under my breath.

Whatever Nona Jo has in store for us, it can’t possibly be this magical.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” I call out and everyone returns the sentiment in a riotous echo.

Cooper leans over and lands a kiss on my cheek. “If we can survive this, we can

survive anything.”

“Here’s hoping things stay sane and so do we,” I say.

At least until my next victim’s name lands on my list.

*Thank you so much for reading Turkey Trots