







# Vanilla Glazed Valentine Vendetta (MURDER IN THE MIX #52)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** This Valentine's Day, the only thing more heart-stopping than a kiss might just be murder.

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

Valentine's Day is upon us, and Honey Hollow is gearing up for not one, but two weddings on what promises to be the most romantic day of the year. My sister Meg and Noah's sister Sam have decided to tie the knot to their respective plus-ones. But when dark secrets begin to surface, we're not up to our eyeballs in wedding cake, we're knee-deep in bodies.

A double wedding is planned, but before the vows can be exchanged, a double homicide shakes the town to its core. Cupid's arrow turns lethal, leaving a trail of suspicion and broken hearts in its wake.

As the blushing brides prepare for their big day, something ominous overshadows the event, and what should be a celebration of love quickly turns into a deadly game of survival.

With a killer lurking in plain sight, I'd better uncover the truth before "I do" becomes "You're next."

Noah not only has the double homicide to solve, but his mother turns into a project twice as complicated.

And Everett? Well, he uncovers a couple of dark secrets potent enough to rip the lid off two different relationships, leaving all of us reeling from the fallout.

Here's hoping love conquers all—or at least survives the reception. Because in Honey Hollow, weddings come with more than just rings and romance... they come with a body count.

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

## THE KILLER

The ballroom is all gloss and glitter tonight, decked out with gaudy, heart-shaped decor that looks like something a lovesick teenager dreamed up.

Red and pink balloons everywhere, lace hearts draped over every surface—it's nauseating. But perfect. It hides me, lets me blend in with the rest of these wide-eyed fools who think Honey Hollow is this quaint, sleepy little town. This place is practically a homicide factory, and they don't even realize it.

Innocent? Hardly. And tonight, it's about to add to its tally.

They're here, of course, soaking up the spotlight. Laughing, sipping champagne as if they're royalty, basking in their own inflated sense of importance. The more I watch them, the more my adrenaline kicks up a notch.

They have no idea. None at all. They think they've beaten me, that their precious little world is untouchable. So smug. So disgustingly smug. And oh, how I'll enjoy watching that crumble.

My gaze sweeps the room, taking in Honey Hollow's so-called finest. There's Lottie Lemon, bless her heart, looking chipper and insufferable, passing out trays of those overpriced desserts of hers, her little belly growing more gargantuan by the day.

Not that I pity her—no, she's nothing but a busybody with a bakery and two lapdogs she's convinced herself are in love with her. Well, maybe they are. But still, what a fantasy world those three have wrapped themselves up in.

And those men? Everett, with his nauseating protectiveness, hovering like a guard dog ready to growl and bite. And Noah, that so-called morally superior, straitlaced detective who can't take a hint if it was spelled out in a neon sign.

And let's not forget Carlotta. A self-satisfied cawing crow in heels—and in perpetual heat. The woman pecks at anyone who dares cross her path. I can't stand her. She thinks she's so clever, so funny, with her foul-mouthed antics. I've got news for her—that little act of hers has worn thin. She's like every other person in this town—blissfully, ignorantly happy, convinced that Honey Hollow is just a cozy dream come to life.

But tonight isn't for them. No, tonight is for someone else entirely.

The lights dim, casting a warm glow across the room, softening the harsh lines, making everyone look just a little surreal.

I watch as my target moves closer, smiling, laughing, hand in hand with those little gestures that practically scream they own this town. And, of course, the room eats it up, just like they eat up those cutesy little cookies and pastries they jam down everyone's throat.

Everyone thinks they're perfect. They don't know the truth—the lies, the betrayals, the hypocrisy that rots beneath that gleaming smile. They are so very far from perfect.

But the night is young, and I'm in no rush to exact my revenge.

Timing is everything, and tonight they will finally know that for all their schemes, their charm, their hold on all of Vermont— they're not invincible. They're as vulnerable as anyone else, and I will be the one to remind them of that.

I edge closer, weaving through the couples swaying to the music, through friends

chatting with that obnoxious small-town warmth that turns my stomach. One step at a time, with every footfall bringing me closer to my destiny.

The music grows in volume, drowning out the murmur of voices. And I'm there, standing close enough to see the faint lines at the corners of their eyes, the joy in their face. And all of it is about to shatter.

I'm going to shatter it myself.

A dark smile curves on my lips at the thought.

I'm just about ready to end this little charade.

It's time to take control of my destiny.

And theirs.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

“Would you look at all these delicious men here tonight.” Carlotta dances and drools while inspecting the crowd as if they were her favorite snack. “Why, they’re looking like sweet treats themselves, don’t you think, Lot?”

“Behave,” I chide, while arranging a tray of my double iced conversation heart sugar cookies. They’re each as big as my hand, and each one has a cutesy little saying on it like be mine, you’re cute, and meet me out back . I gasp at that last one.

How the heck did that get in here? And who was the saucy culprit? I snap that last one up for myself and take a quick bite.

Mmm , so good.

February is about to bring a lot to Honey Hollow, and Valentine’s Day is just the tip of the sugary iceberg. Lainey is due to have her baby. And Meg and Sam are going to have a double wedding on the heart-shaped day itself.

“And I mean you had better behave,” I say sternly to the hot-to-trot senior vixen by my side. Carlotta is my biological mother, which explains the fact we look identical, save for the wrinkles on her part. Time hasn’t been kind to Carlotta, but then, Carlotta isn’t kind to anyone else so there’s some symmetry there. But we do share the same hazel eyes, same caramel curls, and same ability to see the dead, but I’d rather not think about that right now.

“Besides”—I go on—“you promised Mayor Nash that he’d be your one and only

from here on out.”

Carlotta grunts at the thought. “Leave it to you, Lot, to throw my own words right back in my face. And don’t pretend you’re not enjoying every second of it.”

“I’m enjoying every second of this cookie, that’s for sure.”

I give her a playful nudge as we finish arranging the last tier of pastries on my dessert table.

The Evergreen Manor asked my bakery, the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, to cater the desserts for the evening—or at least most of them. And I came through with platters full of cookies of every variety, brownies, cupcakes, éclairs, cream puffs, and I’ve even set up a six-tiered donut display full of every glazed and wonderful deep-fried confection.

The ballroom in the Evergreen Manor is all glitz and glitter tonight, decked out in pinks and reds as if it were Cupid’s dream come to life.

There’s a large pink banner strewn across the front that reads, Welcome to the Heartstrings and Sweet Things Spectacular! Where Cupid’s arrow meets a sprinkle of sugar and a dash of spice!

Lace hearts are draped over tables, pink streamers twirl from the ceiling, and red roses fill every vase in sight. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon from the dessert display mingles with expensive perfumes and colognes, giving the air a sugary, heady appeal.

Classic love songs croon from the speakers, and couples canoodle on the dance floor while the rest of the room chats away. It’s not just a couples’ event, but it’s a singles’ mingle, too. And by the looks of things, any and everyone is doing just

that—mingling.

The Heartstrings and Sweet Things event has been the talk of the town as of late. We're more than a week out from Valentine's Day, and the Evergreen Manor wasn't about to miss an opportunity to celebrate.

But tonight is more than just a Valentine's celebration. It's actually a showcase for bakers and confectionery brands across Vermont, bringing bakers and baking companies alike together for a night dedicated to sweet treats and culinary creativity.

This sugar-sweet event features the biggest names in baking, and it's where they can share their best-loved products, introduce new delights, and set up drop-dead gorgeously decorated tables filled with everything from decadent cookies and pies to intricately decorated cakes for all to enjoy.

Last year it was in Burlington, but this year the Evergreen Manor happened to be tapped for the honor, and what an honor it is. I'm just itching to go around the room and nibble on every single sweet treat I can get my hands on.

One of the twins gives me a sharp kick in the ribs as if to say, get a move on . I can't blame them. I've sort of spoiled them by way of sending down a dessert their way at regular twenty-minute intervals.

I'm due next month in March, and I'm as large as the bakery itself. Most likely because I've just about eaten everything in my bakery.

Another kick comes, this time sharper.

“ Oof .” I double over a bit, or as much as I can with my newly acquired extra-large beach ball of a belly.

“Quit your witchin’, Lot,” Carlotta is quick to admonish. “I know you’re just trying to drum up an excuse before you inhale everything that’s edible in this room.”

“I am not trying to drum up an excuse,” I say, incredulous. “But if you must know, the twins are starving. And they can be quite demanding when they’re hungry. And they happen to have a sweet spot for donuts.”

“I’ve been telling you for months that one belongs to Foxy.”

“Oh, would you stop.” I roll my eyes at the thought. Noah Fox is a homicide detective who happens to have a penchant for donuts, and he happens to be my ex and the father of my sweet one-year-old, Lyla Nell. I gasp hard. “Oh my word, Lyla Nell will be two next month! I’m going to have a two-year-old and newborn twins.”

“That’s right, Lot.” Carlotta picks up a chocolate cupcake with cream cheese frosting. “I can’t think of anyone who deserves it more than you.”

Before I can respond, a brunette and rather irate version of my best friend bops this way, wagging a finger right at me. Naomi Turner’s heels click-clack against the marble floor, and her jaw is set like she’s prepared for battle.

Naomi is the manager here at the Evergreen Manor, and yet she’s never let go of her high school mean-girl persona. Naomi is a looker with her glossy brown hair, bright blue eyes, and bowtie lips. And with that hip-hugging red dress, she’s put every eligible bachelor here tonight on notice. Naomi has always had an acumen for fashion and cruelty. She could strut her stuff at a runway show while kicking puppies and still have a smile on her face.

On the contrary, her twin, Keelie Nell Turner, is an angel and happens to be my favorite blonde bestie. She married my ex, Bear, and they have a two-year-old boy named Little Bear whom I love just as much as I do my own children.

“Lottie Lemon,” Naomi growls my name out and bares her fangs in the process as if she were out to prove my point. “You’ve got some nerve waddling around in my ballroom! I want you out of my manor and off the premises before you spread any of that bad luck you’re carting around!”

My mouth opens in protest, but before I can begin my rebuttal, she steps in as close as she can get without bumping into my belly.

“I don’t care what you have to say,” she goes on. “I don’t want you giving birth, whipping out your boob to feed a stray kid, or worst of all, doing the two-step with the Grim Reaper! Honey Hollow has had about enough of you, and so have I.”

A collective gasp circles the vicinity around us, and I make a face at all the people ogling the spectacle.

“In case you’ve forgotten”—I say sharply to the brunette attack dog next to me—“you invited me to bring my desserts. In fact, that invite was quickly followed by a nice fat check. And thank you, by the way, because I do like to get paid on time.”

Some people think that since desserts are so delicious, they should be free. Okay, I’ll admit, it would be a better world, but there would be a lot of homeless bakers out there.

“Of course, I haven’t forgotten,” she snips back. “But maybe you forgot that I asked you to have your staff deliver them.”

“Which they did.” I nod over to the dance floor where three of my staff members are currently kicking it up. “And now they’re having a good time. Which is all I plan on having tonight,” I assure her.

“ Ha! ” she barks right in my face. “The only good time you know how to have happens to include a homicide!”

More gasps. Although I’m not sure why. At this point, it’s more or less the truth. And I really do enjoy solving those cases.

I’m about to shove a cupcake into Naomi’s pie hole when two of the most handsome men on the planet show up, bringing the drinks they promised a few minutes ago.

Everett and Noah each hold a glowing pink cocktail with a festive, heart-shaped straw poking out the top.

“Love potion for my love,” Everett says, handing me the drink.

“Thank you.” I give a quick wink his way.

Everett is tall, with a shock of black hair, eyes so blue the sky is envious, has enough dark scruff covering his cheeks to make my fingers twitch, and he rarely, if ever, smiles.

He’s drop-dead handsome. Scratch that, he’s lethally handsome. At any given time, there are women in a twenty-foot radius craning their necks just to get a better look at him. Women have fallen on their knees before him in adulation, and that’s just in the frozen food aisle of the grocery store. And on top of that, he has an IQ that rivals Einstein’s, and he happens to be a judge down at the Ashford County Courthouse.

“Alcohol-free,” he assures me while nodding to the drink already to my lips, and it tastes like strawberries. “Knock yourself out, Lemon.” He takes a moment to offer Naomi a curt nod. “Ms. Turner,” he says sternly. He’s never referred to Naomi as Ms. Turner before, so I can tell he’s good and ticked. “As you can see, my wife is in a delicate condition. Please refrain from upsetting her. And furthermore, I promise to

keep an eye on her.”

I gasp his way. “What do you mean, keep an eye on me ?”

“And”—Noah holds up a finger before Everett can answer—“I promise to keep an eye on her, too.” He waggles his eyebrows my way. Noah is still very much in love with me, and, of course, I still love him. He has dark, thick hair, bright green eyes, and dimples deep enough to curl up and take a nap in. And luckily for me, he passed all of those traits down to Lyla Nell. “In fact, I’ll go one step further,” he says. “I’ll take full responsibility should something go sideways.”

“Sideways?” I practically gag on the word.

“You had better!” Naomi takes a moment to growl at the two of them before she stalks off.

“Goodness,” I grouse. “I mean, do people really think that wherever I go, murder will follow?” I roll my eyes just as the cutest cinnamon-colored poodle strides up and rubs her head against my hip. “Oh my word, aren’t you the sweetest,” I say, giving her a scratch just above the little pink bow sitting between her ears, and she gives a soft woof my way while looking up at me with those adorable button eyes. “Oh my heart,” I say as I blow her a dozen kisses. “Everett, Noah, I want one just like her when the time is right.”

“Just like what?” Noah asks, looking perplexed.

“This cute little pooch,” I say, delighted by her presence. “I mean, she’s obviously not so little. She’s?—”

“Lemon,” Everett growls.

“Lottie?” Noah’s eyes widen with a deep level of concern.

Carlotta sighs hard. “It looks like things are about to go sideways.”

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LOTTIE

“Y ou do realize this means murder,” Noah growls as if he’s not pleased with the prospect. In truth, none of us are.

I glance down at the cinnamon-colored poodle, and she up and disappears in a spray of miniature pink and red stars.

Just great.

Each time I see one of those pesky poltergeists, it’s always a harbinger of lethal things to come. But on the bright side, they do tend to stick around long enough to help solve the case—and eat their way through half my bakery.

Come to think of it, I’d better up production.

But desserts aside, nobody is happy about what’s about to happen next.

“Murder?” Carlotta leaps and clicks her heels midair. And I stand corrected. “Yippee! This yawn of a night is about to take a turn for the deadly, and that’s always a party.” She claps her hands. “So who’s up next, Lot? I say it’s time we show ol’ Cranky Pants Naomi to the eternal exit.” She rubs her hands with glee, and there’s more than a naughty gleam in her eye.

“Carlotta,” I snip as the Heartstrings and Sweet Things Valentine’s Day Spectacular rages around us right here in the Evergreen Manor ballroom. “Might I remind you, Naomi is your niece!”

“I don’t need reminding,” she snips back. “That little twerp has been getting on my nerves for the last thirty years.”

“She’s just a hair under thirty,” I point out.

“I said what I said,” she barks back. “Now put in that order to your boss at the death factory and let’s get this funeral rolling.”

Good grief. Although... I am filled with far too many hormones, and Naomi Turner has danced along my last raw nerve.

Before any of us can say a word regarding murder in general or Carlotta’s familial homicidal intentions, a trio of small children, I’d say all under six, runs between us laughing and screaming as they practically lunge onto the dessert table, and each one ends up with a cookie in each hand. Mostly chocolate chip cookies and my double fudge brookies—a combination cookie and brownie.

Good choices. I don’t know what I would have done had they snapped up a conversation heart sugar cookie with a dicey saying on it. I’d better mine through those and pick them out for now. I had no idea there were children here.

The three of them are so adorable—two little blonde girls and a little redheaded boy with hair the color of fall leaves. Okay, so it’s orange. It’s flat-out orange like the fruit. I’ve never seen such bright-colored locks. It’s perfectly adorable on him, and it’s taking everything in me not to squeeze him.

“Oh my goodness.” A tall blonde who looks somewhere in her thirties, with bright green eyes and an easy smile, swoops in after them and does her best to pull them close. She’s wearing a pink velour gown that touches the floor, and it looks perfectly scrumptious. I would so wear that dress myself. That is, if I had a waist. “Please excuse my children.” She laughs.

“These are your kids?” Carlotta scoffs as she inspects each one. “All three?” The woman nods and Carlotta wrinkles her nose. “What’s with Captain Cheddar? How did the other two survive the redheaded fire?”

“ Carlotta ,” Everett says with more than a twinge of disappointment in his voice.

“Please excuse her.” I cringe at the woman. “She’s still recovering from her self-induced lobotomy.”

“But I really want to know,” Carlotta goes on. “It’s obvious Big Red is the father of this one, but who are the other two daddies?”

Noah holds a hand up. “Don’t answer that.” He offers an affable smile to the woman. “I think I’ve seen you around the precinct. You’re Deputy Sean Finnigan’s wife.”

“That I am.” She laughs. “Venus Finnigan,” she says, nodding to us all. “I’m the owner of Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions. I have a café out in Hollyhock where I sell every sweet treat under the sun. I also sell glazes, frostings, toppings, sprinkles, flavor-infused syrups, and even romance-inspired baking kits. You name it, and I’ve practically got it.”

“That sounds amazing,” I tell her.

The music switches to a bouncy pop song, and the kids begin to hop and shout all at once.

“Oh, I’d better take them to their father,” Venus grunts. “If they get any more sweets in them tonight, I’ll have to peel them off the ceiling.”

Noah cranes his neck past her. “I see Sean next to the dance floor. I can take them over. Feel free to chat with Lottie. She has a popular bakery here in town.”

“Really?” She glances in the direction Noah is looking, and sure enough, there’s a redheaded man with locks just as bright as the little boy in front of us. “Oh, thank you so much. I’d appreciate that.”

“Not a problem,” Noah says, giving Everett a stern look. “I’ve been meaning to contact the sheriff’s department about an impending incident anyway. Come on, kids.” Noah rounds up the children and herds them away. “Let’s head over to Dad.”

Everett pins his blue eyes to mine. “I’m going to have a talk with the security team here at the manor. Don’t move, Lemon.” He takes off, and I offer the blonde before me a tight smile.

“I’m Lottie, and this lobotomized lunatic is my biological mother, Carlotta. Did you say your name was Venus?”

“So nice to meet you both.” She quickly shakes our hands. “And yes, my mother was and still very much is a happy-go-lucky hippie. She says I was born under the planetary alignment of passion, and I’ve been explaining my name away for the last thirty-five years because of it.”

We share a quick laugh along with her.

“Happy-go-lucky hippies are my favorite kind of people.” Carlotta gives a goofy grin to prove her point. “I named Lot Lot after myself. Then I had another Little Yippy and named her after myself, too. It’s just easier to remember that way.”

Venus’ jaw squares out because clearly, she doesn’t know what to do with this information.

“I go by the nickname Lottie,” I’m quick to tell her. “And my sister goes by Charlie. All’s well that ends well in Carlotta Land.” I cringe for a moment. “Actually, the

Carlotta madness didn't end there. I named my daughter Carlotta, too, but she goes by Lyla Nell."

Venus belts out a laugh. "And how about the new babies? Will they be Carlotta, too? I mean, if you're going to give the baby a nickname, I guess you can name it Carlotta regardless of gender."

"They're twins, and I don't know what we're going to call them. And at the rate I'm going, I may never know. But let's talk about your fabulous baking company! Like Noah said, I've got a bakery, and I'm interested in hearing all about your products. And what a great name Cupid's Sweet Concoctions is."

A boxy brunette and a tall man with silver hair step in close. She's wearing a red sparkling gown, and he's donned a silver suit that matches his hair. Although he doesn't look too much older than fifty. Neither does she.

"Yes, what a clever name you have," the brunette says while offering a snide smile to Venus. "How ever did you think of it?"

"It is unique ." The man with the silver hair narrows his eyes on Venus. "As is your own name. Such a fitting name for a woman who likes to play with fire. Just make sure you don't get burned."

A moment of thick silence slices by, and a shiver runs up my spine.

"I wouldn't play with anything." The brunette nods and huffs a little laugh. "After all, Cupid's arrows can be deadly."

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

A strangled tension bounces by for a moment, right here in the ballroom of the Evergreen Manor, before Venus bubbles out a laugh, but I'll be honest—it looks strained.

“Lottie, Carlotta”—Venus pauses to shoot the couple a look—“this is Ramildo Langford and Juliette Lovett.”

“Please call me Romeo.” The silver-haired gentleman shakes hands with Carlotta first, then me. “So nice to meet you both. Juliette and I own the original Cupid’s Confections.” He presses out a tight smile, and I catch Venus averting her eyes.

Was that a dig at her company? I mean, Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions has Cupid in it, but I’m pretty sure there are thousands of places with that name.

Despite the fact, I’m now fully aware of where the tension lies.

The heart-shaped party rages around us, and the music and the merriment grow in volume.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you both,” I say. “And your names certainly lend themselves perfectly to your business. I can see why it was such an easy decision.”

Venus lifts her shoulders as if she had other thoughts on the matter, but Juliette sheds a megawatt smile.

The stocky brunette leans in. “Oh, Lottie, you have no idea. It’s as if Romeo and I were a match made in heaven. And don’t get me started on our shared love of sweet treats.” She pats her stomach. “Sometimes I think we’re the same person.”

We all share a good-natured laugh along with her.

“So where are your tables?” I ask, looking at all three of them, but it’s Romeo who holds up a hand briefly.

“We have the entire west wall.” He points to the opposite side of the room, which, true to his word, is lined with dessert tables. “Our company has grown so much over the last few years.”

Juliette nods frantically. “And we’re in grocery stores across the nation and have a thriving website that handles thousands of dollars of sales daily.”

“Wow, I’m really impressed,” I muse, a little stunned to hear it. I’d like to consider myself in the know when it comes to news in the baking world, and I’ve heard little to nothing about them. “And what about you, Venus? Where is your table?” I cringe a little because I certainly didn’t mean to put her on the spot like that.

“I have the table next to yours. Just one,” she says, shedding a short-lived smile at the couple next to her. “My business is still relatively new.” She looks my way with a sober expression. “But I’m a big believer in pie-in-the-sky dreams. And it just so happens that mine actually involves pie.”

We all shed another quick laugh.

“Well, don’t worry, Mama,” Carlotta tells her. “Lot and I are equal opportunity snack predators when it comes to chomping our way around a room full of sugary goodies.” She leans toward the three of them. “You should see Lot go. She’s like a human black

hole when it comes to anything baked, fried, or glazed.”

“Well then”—I inch back to inspect this older version of me—“I don’t think I’ve ever been called a black hole before.”

“Oh, are we name-calling here?” A woman in an emerald pantsuit jumps into our circle with a laugh. She’s tall, slim, and has shoulder-length hair that’s been dyed a dark shade of maroon, but in this low lighting, there’s a definite purple cast to it. She’s wearing black square-rimmed glasses and has the clearest light brown eyes I have ever seen. “I’m a pro at this one.”

“So am I, sis.” Carlotta holds a hand up to the woman, and they exchange a high-five. “I can name-call with the best of ’em. I don’t go to bingo on Wednesday nights just for the money, you know. That’s where I sharpen my snarky skills.”

The woman belts out a husky honk of a laugh. “Oh, hon, I hone my chops every day of the week. I don’t have time to waste.” She nods to the trio across from me. “Well, if it isn’t the couple of the hour and my favorite wallflower. Come here.” She pulls Venus in for a quick embrace and gives a friendly wave to the other two.

Juliette lifts a brow at the woman. “It looks like someone has had a tad too much love potion.”

I happen to know that the love potion they’re serving tonight is loaded with vodka, sans the one that Everett gave me. I swear there’s an ethanol haze in this room right now.

“I don’t drink.” The woman with the purple hair laughs once again. “I’m sorry.” She looks to Carlotta and me. “How very rude of me. I’m Shelly Everly. So nice to meet you both.”

“I’m Lottie,” I say, shaking her hand. “And this is Carlotta. She doesn’t have a filter.” I say that last bit in lieu of the fact she’s my mother. And for good reason. Carlotta may be my biological mother, but the mother who raised me is currently kicking it up on the dance floor. Carlotta dumped me at the Honey Hollow Fire Department when I was a newborn and never looked back. My life has been a blessing ever since. “And I have an exceptional fondness for your surname,” I tell the woman. “My oldest daughter’s name is Everly.”

Evie— Everly —is Everett’s daughter whom I adopted and have been a mother to ever since she stepped into our lives a few years back. She’s in college now, but close enough to come home on weekends, and she and her boyfriend Conner Saint are at my house right now babysitting Lyla Nell.

Evie and Lyla Nell get along so well, it’s clear they don’t care about the age gap between them. And I’m so very glad about that.

Carlotta leans back abruptly. “Who’s Everly?” she squawks. “Don’t tell me you’ve got an entire litter of Little Yippies running loose on the planet.”

“It’s Evie,” I say, swatting her on the arm before wincing at the present company. “Suffice it to say, we don’t use her formal name very often.”

Juliette nods. “Trust me, both Romeo and I understand all too well what goes into a name and how important that becomes in branding.”

Venus’ mouth falls open, and another thick silence enters our midst.

Romeo cranes his neck past me. “I think I see Caudwell by the bar,” he mutters it low as if it wasn’t for everyone’s ears.

Juliette nods up at him. “We need to make it quick. Our desserts are running low, and

we need to keep them refreshed.”

He nods back before she smiles our way. “Please excuse us. It was lovely meeting you both.”

Juliette gives the other two women the side-eye. “Venus, good luck to you this evening.” She tips her head to the woman with the purple cast to her locks. “Shelly, it’s always a pleasure to be in your midst. You know you’re welcome at any time to stop into one of our stores and help yourself to whatever you like. Romeo and I are so very proud of the empire we’ve built.”

Shelly winces as the couple takes off.

And I swear I heard a little growl work its way up her throat, too.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

“ Help yourself to whatever you want?” I muse in Shelly’s direction as the Heartstrings and Sweet Things Spectacular rages around us. “Now that sounds like a generous offer.”

“It does sound that way, doesn’t it?” She casts a glance in the direction Romeo and Juliette took off in. “Some people are so very generous, and Juliette Lovett is one of them.”

“Wow,” Venus muses. “Are you sure you don’t drink, Shelly?”

The two of them share a dark laugh.

“I’m a food critic,” Shelly says to Carlotta and me. “I make a living getting invites to people’s eateries and eating all the free food I want.”

“Hold your purple-headed horses, Hot Shot,” Carlotta grouses at the woman. “You mean to tell me just because you criticize yum-yums for a living, people throw food at you for free ?”

I nod at the two women. “ Free happens to be Carlotta’s favorite F word.”

“That’s not true, Lot.” She ticks her elbow into my rib and one of the twins gives her a kick right back. “It’s like you don’t even know me. My favorite F word is?—”

“ Yes ,” Shelly says, wisely cutting Carlotta off at the profanity pass. “I get to eat for

free.”

Carlotta rolls her eyes at the woman. “I was going to say fudge , you sassy grape. But how about I come along with you on these little chomping capers?”

“Fudge, my foot.” I can’t help but roll my eyes. “Please excuse Carlotta,” I say for the second time tonight. “Shelly, I can promise you that she’s not going to tag along or stalk you while you’re out doing your foodie thing.”

“Oh, I don’t mind.” Shelly honks out a laugh my way. “I hate sitting and eating all by my lonesome. There’s plenty of food to go around.” She points at Carlotta. “Don’t you go anywhere, Hot Mess Express. I need to run to the little girls’ room and then we can exchange numbers.” She nods to Venus. “You stay sweet as sugar.” She points to the bar. “Don’t you dare let those two ruin your night.” She lands a kiss to Venus’ cheek before taking off.

“Hot Mess Express?” Carlotta jolts as if she’s just been electrocuted when she says it. “It’s like she knows me.”

“She’s got your number, that’s for sure,” I muse.

Carlotta huffs, “I think those Little Yippies in your belly are eating your brain cells again. She just said she’d give me her number as soon as she got done turning on the sprinkler.”

I make a face at Venus. “Sorry. I think the lobotomy is working a little too well.”

Venus laughs. “She’s fine. Speaking of sprinklers, I’d better find my kids. Undoubtedly at least one of them has to use the restroom themselves.” She takes off and I frown over at Carlotta.

“Could you put a muzzle on when we’re around mixed company? You’re embarrassing yourself and you don’t even know it.”

“I only wear muzzles for Harry, and at that, he needs to sit up and beg.”

My eyes close spontaneously, and for some reason I can’t pry them open.

Harry would be Mayor Nash, my biological father.

“Come on, Lot, less napping and more snacking. Let’s gobble our way around the room like a couple of fattened turkeys. I need to practice for my budding career.”

“You are pretty good at criticizing people,” I say.

And face it, I’m pretty good at gobbling up everything I see. Not to mention I pretty much have that whole fattened turkey thing in the bag, and then some.

Carlotta and I make quick work of the room. We don’t sample a little of everything, we sample a lot of everything. In fact, we were getting the side-eye for inhaling the last few raspberry cream éclairs from Venus’ table, and well, we might have hoarded all of the red velvet cheesecake bites and triple chocolate brownies from Romeo and Juliette’s tables, too.

Okay, so we scooped up the last of the tiramisu, baklava, pavlova, and banana cream pie from Romeo and Juliette’s table as well. Although we left their cookies alone. They were hard as a rock. But nevertheless, Juliette was right. They really are running low on their desserts.

Speaking of which, my conversation heart cookies have all but disappeared at my own table.

“Shoot,” I say as I spot the empty platter. “I can’t believe my staff hasn’t refreshed those cookies.”

“The naughty cookies are gone?” Carlotta looks crestfallen.

I shoot her a look. “Yes, the naughty cookies are gone. And you can bet when I find the culprit behind those naughty sayings I’m going to have a word with them.”

“Teehee .” Carlotta covers her mouth and looks guilty as sin.

“Carlotta, I know for a fact you’re not responsible. I’ve made it clear to every single one of my staff that in no way are you allowed in my kitchen.”

“Well, I didn’t do it personally. But let’s just say, money talks.”

“Oh, good grief.” I avert my eyes a moment. “Let me guess. You paid off Suze?”

She backs up with a jerk. “How’d you get it right on the first try?”

“Not only is Suze the only one you can afford to pay off, but she dislikes me enough to do it.”

Suze Fox is Noah’s mother. And not only does she not care for me, but she’s yet to acknowledge that Lyla Nell is her granddaughter. Lyla Nell is about to turn two. She’s bound to notice her own grandmother’s rejection eventually.

Noah had better fix this and fast or I’ll be forced to. But then, Lyla Nell has my sweet mother to lean on, and my mother is a champion grandmother if ever there was one—or a champion Glam Glam as it were.

I crane my neck for anyone on my staff, but the crowd is too dense to see past the

first few people blocking my view. There's no sign of Everett or Noah either.

"Come on, Hot Mess Express," I say, grabbing Carlotta by the elbow. "You're going to have to help me bring in another tray of those naughty cookies of yours. I'll even let you gobble down all of the cookies with the naughty sayings on them for free. It's officially your first gig."

"Yippee," she calls out. "Just so you know, I had Suze set aside a platter just for Sexy and Foxy."

Sexy and Foxy would be the nicknames she has for Everett and Noah, respectively. She's not wrong on either account.

She nods contentedly to herself. "A few of my favorites are kiss this, bite me, and there's a fire in my pants."

"Lovely," I sigh as we make our way out of the ballroom and down the back corridor that leads to the parking lot reserved for vendors.

It's dark out with no moon, but it highlights the zillions of stars glittering like diamond dust in the sky, and all of Honey Hollow is perfumed with the scent of the pines.

There's still plenty of snow in our world. But mostly it's been pushed into a berm because the parking lot has been swept clean, and for that I'm thankful. My center of gravity is off enough as it is, I certainly don't need to add a slip factor into it.

I lead Carlotta out in the direction where the van from my bakery is located as we enter the lot.

"Geez." Carlotta rubs her hands together. "It's freezing out here. Let's make this

quick. Some of us don't have two little heaters burning a hole in our belly."

"They do keep me nice and toasty," I say, patting my enormous tummy.

"Yeah?" She snorts. "Well, in a few short weeks, they're going to keep you nice and awake, too. Just so you know, the Honey Hollow Fire Department is still a very good birth plan. In fact, I can help you do the deed when the time?"

Carlotta does a cartwheel right here in the parking lot, and for a second I think it's a part of her diatribe. It's not until I squint and note she's fallen over a tangle of limbs.

"What the heck," I squawk as I pull my phone out and flash it at the odd sight.

And then I see it. That's not just any tangle of flesh that sent Carlotta into a spontaneous somersault. That's Romeo and Juliette tangled up in one another's arms. Their eyes are closed and their faces are drained of all color—and each of them just so happens to have an arrow through their chest.

A shrill scream rips through me.

Romeo and Juliette won't have to worry about refreshing their baked goods ever again.

Romeo Langford and Juliette Lovett are dead.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

A nother shrill scream evicts from my lungs as I look down at the bodies of Romeo and Juliette, and oddly enough, Carlotta crawling between them.

And well, there seems to be a smattering of what look to be my sugar cookies clutched in each of their hands. I can't blame them. They really are the softest sugar cookies I have ever made. Not a bad last meal, if I do say so myself.

"Help me up, Lot," Carlotta cries as an icy wind whips through here in the parking lot behind the Evergreen Manor, and the scent of damp earth and something metallic clots up my senses. "Looks like that little red tights-wearing weirdo who runs around with a bow and arrow this time of year missed his mark!" She cups her hands around her mouth. "Everybody run! Cupid's on the loose and he's gone stupid! He's armed and dangerous and has a classic case of bad aim!"

"Would you hush," I'm quick to admonish her. "You're making everything worse."

"I'm sitting on two dead bodies, Lot. It can't get any worse than this!"

"Lemon?" Everett thunders and I turn to see both him and Noah bolting this way.

"What's going on?" Noah's eyes are wide as he practically slides on his knees over to the bodies as if he were sliding into home and immediately begins to check for pulses. "Geez, they're both gone," he howls. "And are these... arrows?" he asks, sounding more than a little bewildered.

Carlotta grunts from her awkward perch between the deceased. “You’re not the brightest bulb in the box if you can’t figure that one out. Now help me up. I’ve still got a beating heart but not for long. I think Lot Lot’s murder mojo is still hot-to-trot tonight.” She sits up straight and gasps. “It’s those Little Yippies eating up her brain! They’re requiring human sacrifices now.”

“Would you stop,” I hiss as Everett holds me back from lunging on top of her and bopping her on the head.

“I don’t know, Lot,” Noah says as he hoists Carlotta out from between the newfound cadavers among us. “You are having twins. She has a point.”

“She has no point,” Everett growls. “I’ll make a point by plucking one of those arrows free and shoving it in your chest instead. What are you thinking, trying to spook Lemon like that?”

My lips twitch with a hint of a smile because I just love the way Everett fiercely protects me. And besides that, I love it when he calls me Lemon. In fact, it’s what he exclusively calls me.

“I’m not trying to spook anyone.” Noah pauses to shout into his phone for backup, and within seconds the wail of deputy vehicles can be heard for miles. “I’m just saying Carlotta isn’t wrong. Lottie is pregnant with twins and we have a double homicide on our hands.” His eyes widen a notch. “And I am most definitely not implying that one has anything to do with the other.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Well, it sure sounds that way.”

“It sounds that way to me, too. You were warned,” Everett says, letting go of me and stomping his way to Noah before pulling back his arm and connecting his fist to Noah’s jaw with a definitive crack.

Noah says something unintelligible before staggering backward, inadvertently knocking Carlotta to the ground once again, and then following right along with her. And they both land square over the bodies already twisted beneath them.

“Ooh, Everett.” I motion to the madness at our feet as Noah and Carlotta begin to squirm. “Would you please help them up? They could put an eye out with those arrows. And try not to hit Noah again. He’s got a double homicide on his hands and he really needs to get his head in the game.”

Everett helps them both up and Noah offers me a mournful smile.

“I’m sorry, Lot,” he says, wrapping his arms around me briefly. “I was doing

everything in my power to keep you safe—to keep everyone here safe tonight and I failed. Forgive every word that came out of my mouth.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I tell him as Carlotta swats at her clothes as if a dozen spiders were crawling all over her.

“He’s right,” Everett says, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and glaring at Noah. “He did his best to protect everyone in this building tonight and I tried my hand at it, too. I checked with security to make sure every one of their cameras was on and functioning. But it didn’t matter. I should have stayed with you and kept you safe and warm.”

Carlotta shrugs. “You know what they say, the best way to keep warm is from the inside out. The van from the bakery is vacant. I say you two go at it.” She nudges Noah with her elbow. “Get your phone ready. I want to get them from two angles. My pay-per-view Insta Pictures account is running dry and I need new content. A nude Baxter almost guarantees a five-digit month.”

“Just five?” Everett lifts a brow.

A growl of irritation works its way up my throat. “It doesn’t matter what it is. It’s not happening.”

Noah ticks his head to the side. “Sounds like someone isn’t getting lucky tonight.” He sheds a smart-aleck grin just as a legion of deputies swarm the grounds along with Ivy Fairbanks, a leggy redhead who works with Noah down at the homicide division.

It’s no secret that Ivy has the hots for Noah and not so much any affection whatsoever for me.

I do my best to hide behind Everett, an impossible feat in and of itself, but an eight-month pregnant woman with a belly full of children can dream.

“ You ,” Ivy shouts with a strangled groan. “You have gone too far this time. Heck, you go too far every time. And I don’t need a road map to know you discovered the bodies.”

“Technically, it was her.” I’m quick to point at Carlotta, and Ivy only groans twice as hard.

“You’re basically the same person,” she gravels it out before turning back to the bodies at hand.

Everett shuttles me away from Ivy’s ire and the crime scene just as a swarm of bodies pours out of every orifice the Evergreen Manor has to offer.

“Wait—” I try to dig in my heels. “I forgot to sweep the vicinity for clues.”

“Not your job,” Everett growls.

“That’s right, Lot.” Carlotta runs up next to us with a platter of my conversation heart cookies in her arms. “This here is your job.” She hikes the cookies up a notch. “And you’re good at it, too. This cookie even says so.” She wags it our way and it has the words I’m the best written across it. “ Ohh , wait.” Carlotta winks my way. “Maybe you think you’re the best at something else.” She waggles her brows as if to prove her naughty point.

Everett nods. “And I can attest she is.”

We don’t get three steps closer to the Evergreen Manor before another crowd rushes past us to see what all of the homicidal hullabaloo is about.

My mother and two of my sisters traipse this way with distressed looks on their faces—with my mother’s face being the most distressed of them all.

Miranda Lemon looks impeccable for her age, with her lemony blonde locks that bounce around her shoulders, her ruby red bowtie lips, and those blue eyes with more than a hint of mischief usually buried in them. But right now, the only thing buried in them is...anger?

“ Lottie Lemon ,” my mother’s shriek splits the chilly air as she charges through the crowd, practically tearing a path my way.

Lainey cranes her neck past me and gasps. Lainey and I could pass as blood sisters since we share the same caramel locks and hazel eyes. Meg could pass as Morticia Addams’ long-lost sister. She dyes her locks a harsh shade of umber and teases them to the sky, and almost exclusively wears black, more black, and pairs the look with combat boots. With the exception of now, where she has a pale piece of muslin cloth wrapped around her torso, giving off some serious mummy vibes.

“Oh, for the love of lemon bars!” Lainey breathes, clutching at her enormous belly.

“Lottie, please tell me this isn’t another one of your corpses. Aren’t you getting a little too old to play dress-up as the Grim Reaper?”

“You’re hilarious,” I flatline.

Meg huffs a dry laugh. “The coroner just pulled out two body bags from the back of his van. It looks to me as if she’s going out with a bang.” Meg shrugs my way. “Unless, of course, you’re going out with a slash. So how’d you do it?”

“She didn’t,” Everett is quick to pipe up, and with marked irritation, might I add. “Lemon isn’t responsible for this, and I don’t want anyone making her feel that way.”

“That’s right, you pack of sour Lemons,” Carlotta says while nibbling on a cookie. “And don’t try to egg her on. Everett just knocked Foxy’s teeth loose for even thinking about it.”

“He did not,” I counter. “Or at least he didn’t knock anything loose. I hope.”

Mom waves me off. “You listen to me, little lady, and you listen good.” She wags a finger in my face. “Lottie, what did I say about murder and community functions?” She tosses a hand out at the melee at large. “This is exactly the kind of deadly drama we cannot afford! Your sister is due in two weeks, and I have a wedding to pull off in one—a double wedding no less!” Her voice lowers to a hiss. “You’ve got to get all this murder nonsense out of your system, and fast. I don’t care how many people you have to kill to do it. And I don’t care if half of Honey Hollow disappears because of it. I forbid you to drag a corpse down the aisle or into the delivery room. Do you hear me, young lady?”

I suck in my lower lip for a second. “I do and I understand. I’ll do my best to keep the corpses relegated to the morgue.”

“Oh, you ,” she growls at the sky before tossing her arms up and running back into the building.

Noah crops up next to us. “Ivy is going to take care of things for me tonight.” He wraps an arm around me firmly. “And I’m going to make sure the mother of my child is taken care of. Let’s get inside, ladies.”

“What do you think I was doing?” Everett asks just as a couple of familiar faces stride in this direction.

It’s Venus and Shelly.

Venus is the first to reach us. “Lottie, Noah, what’s going on?”

Noah takes a breath. “It appears there was some sort of an accident.” He winces. “Two people have perished.”

“What kind of an accident?” Shelly squints his way as if she’s not sure she believes him.

“It was a homicide.” He nods.

“Romeo and Juliette bit the big one,” Carlotta pipes up without warrant, as she’s prone to do.

“What?” Shelly gasps as she hikes up on her tiptoes. “I don’t believe it.”

“They’re dead?” Venus says, stunned, and her face grows pale as meringue. “Oh no, oh no,” she murmurs, her eyes darting from me to the grisly scene. “They were... oh, this is... well, I just knew tonight was cursed.”

“Cursed is right. But who would want to kill those two?” Shelly grabs ahold of her friend and her emerald pantsuit sparkles like miniature green stars. She nods at Noah. “They were well loved by everyone.”

Venus swallows hard and nods. “Excuse me, I’d like to pay my respects.” She takes off and Shelly follows.

We’re about to head toward the manor just as my mother runs this way, waving her arms like mad.

“Noah! Oh, thank heavens,” she cries as she takes him by the hand. “You have to come quick. It’s your mother!”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

NOAH

Miranda leads the charge into the Evergreen Manor, where the lights are dim, the music is loud, and the laughter is still yet louder. Thankfully, most people are still oblivious to the horror outside.

Miranda steers us to the left, where Lily (a sassy brunette) and Effie (an even sassier brunette), two employees from Lottie's bakery, are huddled around my mother.

Mom is a stocky blonde with a blunt demeanor that has caused her more trouble than it's worth. But she'll never admit it. Currently, she has a small white towel pressed to her mouth while Lily and Effie fuss all over her.

"Mom, what's wrong? Are you feeling ill?" I charge at her, and both Lily and Effie take a step back. My adrenaline has already hit its zenith after seeing Lottie with those bodies outside. This isn't helping the matter.

"Thith ith what's wrong ," she says, pulling back the towel and opening her mouth wide enough for us to see the horror, and about half the ballroom shrieks in terror, or at least that's what it sounds like.

" Geez ." I lean back hard just as my brother Alex runs up.

"Glad they found you." He pats me on the back with a laugh. Alex is my younger look-alike, and for the most part, we are alike in every way except for the fact that he seems to find humor in just about every situation, even when it's not appropriate. Like this one.

“ Mom ,” I say, sounding like a wounded animal in the process. “What the heck happened to your teeth?”

Her four front upper teeth have broken off into splinters of varying sizes, and each one is badly misshapen.

“Did you get in a fistfight, Suze Q?” Carlotta doesn’t hesitate to ask. But in truth, I’m curious about that myself.

Mom shakes her head. “I bith into a cookie,” she says, sounding as if her cheeks were filled with cotton. Or cookies, as it were.

“A cookie?” Lottie steps forward. “Well, I know for a fact it wasn’t one of mine.”

Her sister Lainey jumps up next to her, and seeing their round bellies side by side looks sweet and yet slightly comical—but I would never say that out loud.

They’re both beautiful, and Lottie is a vision, especially when she’s carrying a child or in this case, two. I couldn’t love every inch of her more if I tried.

“ It wath thith cookie ,” Mom says, pointing to the table behind her that just so happens to have a sign above it that reads, Cupid’s Confection: Where a love connection is made with your mouth and our sweet treats!

“Love connection, my foot,” Carlotta harps. “You would have had better luck chewing on my toenails. I think you should take a restraining order out on those cookies, Suze. They’re out to get you!”

“Oh, they are not,” Lottie says as she goes over and picks up a sugar cookie, attempting to snap it in half but failing. “Okay, so maybe the sugar gods were stacked against you. These may as well be made of granite. But to be fair, they do have a

reputation for less-than-stellar cookies.”

“Reputation?” Carlotta huffs a laugh. “Try infamy. Suze, that cookie has a grudge against your smile. Honestly, all people do. It’s not our fault you look demented when you do it.”

Lainey rolls her eyes. “Carlotta, the theme of these cookies was love . Not criticism.”

“Forget love”—Carlotta goes on. “That cookie was aiming to put you in dentures by morning. Face it, Suze. You’re a dental horror movie waiting to happen.”

Mom waves her off. “Forget restraining orders. I’m suing.” She points at Everett. “Essex, you’ll be my lawyer.”

Essex would be Everett’s formal moniker, which he abandoned eons ago in favor of his far humbler-sounding middle name. Oddly, the legion of women he’s slept with tout his formal name as if it were some prize. Except his mother, my mother, and his sister. They simply prefer it.

“I don’t think you can sue,” Meg grunts, just as that beige scarf strapped to her body begins to squirm. “The owners of this cookie catastrophe just kicked the bucket.” She pulls apart the beige wrap and reveals her newborn daughter wiggling in pink pajamas. Both Meg and my twin Sam each had a baby girl last month. On the same day, no less.

“Oh my word.” Lottie waddles her way. “Is that my sweet niece, Piper? Meg Lemon, how could you be holding out on me all night? Give that baby to me right this minute.”

“I don’t leave the house without her,” Meg says, splitting the top of her dress open and whipping out a boob.

Geez —Everett, Alex, and I each turn our heads abruptly as if she slapped the three of us with it at once. And by the looks of it, it was plenty big enough to do the job.

I remember when Lot's milk came in—hers had tripled in size. And thanks to the fact the top of her dress is formfitting tonight, it looks as if she's about quadrupled this go-round.

“Oh, come on,” Meg growls at the entire lot of us. “I know you’ve all seen a boob before—you’ve either got ’em or you’ve seen Lot’s. I’m including you in that number, Alex.”

Alex laughs as Lily gasps and heads his way to swat him.

“I think it’s time for us to leave,” Lily says, shooting Lottie the side-eye. “Little Levi likes for us to read him a story before bed.”

Levi is the baby that Alex had with one of my exes, Cormack Featherby. And trust me, nobody dares say that woman’s name out loud. She was, and always will be, trouble. Although she’s incarcerated at the moment in a women’s correctional facility—the psychiatric division, so we’re safe—for now. And now that Lily is dating Alex, she’s stepped into the motherly role and is doing a stellar job at it, too. Both she and Alex are.

“Go on,” I tell my brother. “I’ll take care of Mom.”

They say their goodbyes, and Mom begins to moan uncontrollably.

Miranda steps over to my mother and wraps an arm around her shoulders. “Why don’t Wiley and I take you to the emergency room?” she offers.

Wiley would be my father, not to mention my mother’s notoriously bad ex-husband.

Not only did he spend years being unfaithful to her, but he dumped our family and married Everett's mother, Eliza, for a time.

That ended badly when he took off with Eliza's millions and faked his own death.

My father certainly has a way with women. And now that he's dating Lottie's mother, I'm not taking my eyes off of him. I made it crystal clear that I'm due for an accidental discharge with my gun, and it will coincidentally happen the day he breaks Miranda Lemon's heart.

I'd like to say he's toeing the line because of it, but it wouldn't be the first time my father has had a death wish.

"Are you sure?" I nod to Miranda. "I don't mind taking her in."

"Oh, Noah, you have your hands full here. You find that killer before my double wedding on Valentine's Day, or there will be a body count, all right."

I think I've just been threatened with the morgue.

In fact, I know I have.

"It's not your wedding, Mom," Meg gruffs. "Sam and I can take it from here."

"The heck you can," Miranda says, still maintaining that same life-threatening tone. "This double wedding is taking place at my B&B, and I will make sure nothing goes wrong to the very last detail."

I frown at the thought because it just so happens to be my twin sister who will be getting hitched along with Meg.

Meg is marrying the love of her life, Hook Redwood. But Sam is marrying a former drug lord who Everett and I helped put away a million years ago.

Sure, he says he's changed his ways, but the fact that he's the father of both Meg's and Sam's baby says he's still wearing the same old deceptive spots. And I certainly am not pleased with the fact that he's the one Sam has decided will put a ring on her finger. I don't have a good feeling about this. Just like I didn't have a good feeling about this night. Especially not after Lottie saw that poodle that no one else could.

"Did everyone hear that?" Miranda shouts well above the music. "Nothing will go wrong on Valentine's Day!" Miranda points a finger at Lottie. "Even if that means locking the gates to keep you out. Now let's go." She tries to move my mother, but my mother won't budge.

"Mom ." Lottie's mouth falls open in horror.

"Never mind the fact the killer is among us." Mom, too, points to Lottie. "I need to sue for compensation. If I can't sue the dead, I'll sue the living. I'll sue the Evergreen Manor. You hear that, Essex? Get the paperwork rolling . I'll need the payout to spring for my new teeth. Especially since not one of my sons bothered to become a dentist." She shoots me an incriminating look, and with her newfound fangs, it's a disconcerting sight.

"You can still sue the deceased," Everett tells her calmly. "I'm sure they're incorporated. The stale cookie show will still go on without them until the company is reconfigured. Get yourself all the dental work you'll need without worrying about it. Leave the details to me."

My mother folds her hands his way and wags them as if praying to him, worse yet as if spontaneously worshipping him as women are prone to do.

I don't get it. Don't want to.

No sooner do Miranda and my mother take off than Lainey grips her belly and doubles over with a hard groan.

This night is quickly taking a turn for the medical.

My thoughts flit to the dead couple outside. And it has already taken a turn for the morgue.

A double wedding might be on the horizon, but a double homicide just jumped in line for my attention.

### EVERETT

Lainey's husband Forest shows up faster than an apparition as the party here in the Evergreen Manor continues to rage, undeterred by the fact a double homicide just went down in the parking lot.

"What's wrong?" Forest barks with enough fear in his voice to fuel that fire truck he drives.

"I'm fine," Lainey says a little too loud, and her voice shakes as if protesting her words. "It's nothing more than a little Braxton Hicks contraction. Just the warm-up act before the big show."

I'm more than familiar with Braxton Hicks contractions. Lemon had a few when she was expecting Lyla Nell. Apparently, Lainey is right. They are indeed the warm-up act before the big show. But Lainey is not a doctor.

"You should get seen," I suggest. "Just in case."

"Of course, she's going to get seen." Lemon latches onto her arm, but Lainey retracts it. "And I'm going with her. In fact, I'll call Dr. Barnette right now."

"No way." Lainey laughs at the thought. "I promise, Forest will take good care of me," she insists, patting his chest like he's her own personal armored knight and he's just as good. "Besides, I can't go popping out a kid early and stealing Meg's wedding thunder, can I?" She winks over at her sister and I try not to look at Meg, considering she has both of her breasts hanging out now. Albeit one is currently occupied with the

task of feeding her infant. And little does that infant know, she has a buffet of which to choose from.

Forest throws a reassuring arm around her and nods at the rest of us. “You’ve got my word. She’ll be resting at home with some herbal tea in no time. We’re heading out.”

We say goodnight just as Meg adjusts the mummy wrap slung around her and follows them to the door, mumbling something about hoping Lainey steals her thunder anyway. She’d like nothing more than a live birth at the altar to remember her wedding day.

“There’s that,” Carlotta says. “You heard your sister. Meg wants a live birth at the altar, Lot. Here’s your chance to steal Lainey’s thunder. She can only pop out one kid; you can do two! You know you want to do it. You’re a show-off that way.”

Lemon scoffs. “Well, I’m not showing off my hoo-ha to all the guests at a double wedding, thank you very much.”

“Aw, come on, Lot,” Carlotta chides her. “You know your mother’s haunted B&B is your favorite place to give birth.”

Noah shakes his head at Carlotta. “Nice try.” He kisses Lemon on the cheek. “I’d better head out. Stay safe.”

“Not so fast, Foxy.” Carlotta plucks a couple of cookies from the platter and soon she’s holding two cookies between her fingers like she’s about to deal blackjack.

“Here, boys,” she says, handing one to Noah, who gives it a suspicious glance, then another to me. “Something sweet for Lot’s big strong protectors,” she says with a wink. “Go on and read ’em.”

Noah squints at his. “I wanna kiss you all over,” he reads out loud and gives a quick chuckle as he waggles his brows at Lemon.

“Subtle, Carlotta,” I growl at Noah as I say it.

“Relax, Mr. Sexy.” Carlotta waves it off. “It’s a cookie, not a marriage proposal. What does yours say?”

I look down at the sugar heart in my hand and see the words stamped out in bold, pink lettering, “You’re my late night snack,” I read. My lips curve as I cock a brow at Lemon. “Well then, I do believe this cookie is prophetic.” I glare over at Noah. “Just mine.”

Carlotta belts out a laugh while clapping her hands. “Don’t say you weren’t warned, Lot. Sexy times up ahead! Try not to keep the volume down this time. I still get paid a king’s ransom for audio, you know.”

Both Lemon and I groan at the thought, and Carlotta’s face lights up because of it.

“Yes! Do it just like that,” she snaps her fingers with glee.

“And on that note”—Noah’s chest expands twice its size—“I need to run. Everett, I’m counting on you to keep an eye out.” He tips his head toward Lemon before heading for the door.

Naomi Turner glares this way like a woman about to tear a hole in a wall with rage. “You’re going to pay for this, Lottie Lemon.” Naomi stomps over with her heels clacking against the ballroom floor like gunfire, her ire laser-focused on Lemon.

“Naomi,” I say as sternly and yet sweetly as I can.

“Don’t you Naomi me, Essex,” she growls my way. And for the record, she chooses to brandish my proper name despite the fact I’ve never so much as shared a cup of coffee with her. “You are definitely going to pay for this, Lottie,” she hisses once again, pointing a manicured fingernail that could probably draw blood.

Lemon inches back. “Naomi, contrary to whatever it is you might be thinking, I had nothing to do with the fact there are two bodies sitting in a pile in your parking lot. It’s not my responsibility to beef up security around here, now, is it?”

“Way to go, Lot!” Carlotta claps and cackles, and yet I can’t help but wince. Once Naomi bites, she doesn’t let go, but little does she know, Lemon’s bite is a whole lot worse than it used to be now that her hormones are on fire.

“Oh, don’t you play innocent with me,” Naomi snaps, narrowing her eyes on Lemon. “The Evergreen Manor is essentially cursed now. And it all started with you .”

“Eh.” Carlotta shrugs. “She’s not wrong, Lot. You do bring a certain deadly ambiance to the place.”

Lemon sighs hard. “Naomi, the manor is not cursed. It’s just been a rough night, that’s all.”

Naomi’s eyes narrow as she waves an accusatory hand around the room. “A rough night? I don’t think so. No sooner did you walk in, and suddenly we’re knee-deep in a homicide, broken teeth, and rock-hard cookies. Coincidence? I don’t think so.”

“Double homicide,” Carlotta corrects and Naomi seizes.

“What?” Naomi’s head snaps in the direction of the exit. “I need to get out there and do some damage control times two.” She takes off as if the building were on fire. And come to think of it, a simple structural fire would have done better for the Evergreen

Manor's reputation.

"And those were not my cookies," Lemon shouts after her. "I would never weaponize baked goods. Not even against Noah's mother!"

"Yeah," Carlotta shouts as well. "And you can't blame Lottie for adding a little nocturnal slumber to the festivities. That's just her special touch!"

"Good grief." Lemon closes her eyes as if trying to disappear.

I'm about to suggest we head out the door ourselves when I spot a familiar face in the crowd.

"Everett Baxter?" A tall man with a shock of dark hair and a perennial smile on his face steps over and gives me a partial embrace. He's got about fifteen years on me, which puts him in his fifties, and I can see a dusting of gray at his temples to prove it.

"Caudwell," I say, pulling back and giving my friend a pat on his back. "Long time no see. This is my wife, Lemon, and her mother." I quickly do the intros and he shakes both of their hands in turn.

He's wearing his typical business attire, dark suit, white dress shirt, red tie. But then, we're not in a legal office so my best guess is he's here looking for love with the rest of the singles.

"Your wife, huh?" He gives a good-natured laugh at the thought. "I can see you've been keeping busy." He nods to her growing middle.

"That's right." Lemon laughs. "And we'll be even busier next month. We're having twins, on top of the other two kids we have."

“Wow.” Caudwell tips back and I can see what looks like a dark stain against his ribs, but when he rights himself, his jacket covers it. Typical bachelor. He probably figured the stain wouldn’t matter so long as he kept his jacket on. And he’s right.

“And I was going to ask if you’ve been keeping out of trouble.” He tips his head my way, causing Lemon and Carlotta to chuckle once again.

“Caudwell used to work for the courthouse for years. Although I haven’t seen him in a while. Have you been keeping out of trouble?” I toss the question his way and he laughs.

“I’m just here for the sugar, my friend,” he says. “In fact, that’s why you haven’t seen me around. My uncle passed away and I took over his position at Baker’s Best Brand. It was his sugar baby.”

“No kidding?” Lemon’s eyes widen with wonder.

“No kidding,” he says. “I clawed my way, right up to CEO.”

“That’s fantastic,” she says. “Everett, Baker’s Best Brand is a famous corporate entity that has a hand in many bakeries and cafes.” She turns his way again. “I’m so impressed with your company.”

“Thank you.” He nods her way.

“Sounds like you’re keeping busy yourself,” I tell him. “Did you hear what happened?” I hitch my head toward the rear of the building and he gives another far more solemn nod.

“Indeed, I did. It’s a shame. They were two very prominent people in the baking world. I’m sure their loss will be immensely missed.”

“Not by Suze,” Carlotta interjects.

A swarm of deputies enters the room and Caudwell’s chest expands.

“I’d better get going and give these guys some room to work,” he says. “It was nice meeting you ladies. And great seeing you again, Judge Baxter.”

We watch him leave, and I’m about to turn my attention back to Lemon when I spot something that piques my curiosity. It’s Jed Silver standing in the dark corner, schmoozing it up with a woman who is decidedly not Sam—neither is she Meg. She’s a tall blonde who happens to be hanging off him like last year’s tinsel, and he’s lapping it up like he’s in his own personal candy store.

I shake my head at the sight. It’s probably best it’s me who handles this. Noah would fire a round into his chest.

“Carlotta”—I sigh her way—“keep an eye on Lemon for a sec, would you?”

“What?” Lemon balks. “I can take care of myself. Better still, I’ll be the one taking care of Carlotta. You do realize her head is hardly attached to her body.”

“I know,” I say softly for Lemon’s ears only as I give her kiss. “I’ll be right back.”

“And if you stumble upon a few screws, they probably belong to her,” Lemon calls after me, but I’m already ten steps out.

I’m too busy watching Jed to respond—watching the way his arms are swiveling up and down that woman’s back, then lower still before giving her a squeeze, and I can’t believe my eyes. And yet, I very much believe them.

I cut through the crowd and make my way to the bar, stepping right in between him

and the woman he's currently goosing.

I grab him by the arm and yank him back. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

Girls' Group Chat

Lottie: Okay, ladies, we need to settle this—Meg, Sam, what kind of cake are we having for your double wedding? I need answers, stat!

Meg: Lottie, we haven't slept in weeks. Do we really want cake, Sam?

Sam: Cake? Sure... but maybe chocolate? Or lemon? Or both? I can't decide. Can we have sleep-flavored cake?

Lainey: I'd take sleepless nights over being nine months pregnant any day. Someone get this baby out of me!

Charlie: The Honey Pot Diner is already catering the big day, but if you girls need home delivery, just say the word!

Keelie: LOL, so glad I'm not knocked up. Little Bear sleeps all night, and Big Bear and I are enjoying some naughty alone time. See ya, suckers!

Lottie: Alright, sleep-deprived mamas, just let me know what you decide when you're ready! No rush... but kinda. The wedding is in a week!

“Tell us your name,” I say softly to the sugar-sweet specter seated in front of Carlotta, Lyla Nell, and me, while the four of us are tucked away in the kitchen of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

Thankfully, my staff is out front helping customers, and though Carlotta is typically verboten in the kitchen, I hauled her back here the moment I saw that mini tornado of pink stars appear.

It's the morning after the double homicide, and Honey Hollow is shaken to its core.

It's February, and Valentine's Day is just a week away—not to mention a double wedding. Love, joy, and, most of all, peace should be the order of the day, not fear, terror, and horror beyond comprehension.

“What's your name, sweetheart?” Carlotta barks at the adorable creature as if she were conducting a hostile interrogation.

The rather quiet cutie pie simply tips her head at us and sighs.

I'm just so in love with her that I can hardly stand it. I did some research last night while sleep was elusive, and it turns out, she's a standard poodle, all right. She's all of three feet tall, with curly auburn fur and the biggest chocolate button eyes you ever did see. And that little pink bow smashed onto her forehead? It's like the yummy frosting on the all-too-sweet cake.

Speaking of cakes, I've got a dozen in the oven, along with a few batches of conversation heart cookies. I haven't been able to move the latter all week. And now that the deceased were found clutching them, they're magically flying off the shelves. There's actually a strange, and yet very morbid fascination with my desserts, which just so happen to end up at the homicide scenes that I, too, stumble upon. It's twisted, I know, but hey—those desserts always sell like hotcakes.

And nothing would sell at all if it wasn't for Nell, my grandmother who gifted me this place before she passed away. I not only have her recipe book, but I have dozens upon dozens of loose-leaf index cards that she lovingly wrote down recipes on.

In fact, I not only have those index cards floating around my bakery, but I have them floating around my kitchen at home as well. I'll admit, it's like a nice warm hug when I see her handwriting on them.

“What your name?” Lyla Nell shouts sternly in her far-too-cute-for-her-britches itty-bitty baby voice while bouncing on my hip.

I know I shouldn't be holding her in my condition, at least not this late in the game—eighth inning, as Noah likes to point out—but I love holding my baby girl. And besides, I'm protecting her from what could prove to be a suspicious specter capable of who knows what.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Carlotta grouses at the surly ghost. “We haven't got all day.”

“You can call me Sweetheart,” the poltergeist poodle finally pipes up, sounding as adorable as she looks. She has the voice of a mature woman, the type who's not afraid to say what she thinks. I certainly hope she has a lot to say about the deceased and won't hold back.

Carlotta huffs at the pooch, “Don't you dare get sassy with me, Toffee Tail. I want you to tell us your name and tell it to us now. The smell of these baked goods is driving me insane. I'm about to eat my way through the bakery and dive into these buckets of batter for more.”

There go today's profits.

“Sweetheart,” the poodle says, practically barking right back at Carlotta. “You can call me Sweetheart because that just so happens to be my name. And don't you get sassy with me, either, Blondie Barks-a-Lot.” She gives Carlotta a stern look and I gasp in lieu of a laugh. “My bite is a lot worse than my bark,” she goes on. “And before that euphemism creates a traffic jam in your little blonde brain, I need you to

point me to the nearest dog park. I'm back, I'm single, and I am most certainly ready to mingle."

Carlotta straightens. "I think I like this one, Lot." She leans toward the spirited spirit. "How about we gobble up all the goodies we can handle and then mosey on down to the dog park together? I wouldn't mind checking out the owners of those boys with a bark."

"Carlotta ." I shake my head at her.

"What?" She inches back. "Just because I'm taken doesn't mean I can't stroll through the market and see what produce is ripe for the picking. Eggplant, bananas, those extra-large grapes —I love 'em all. Don't worry, Lottie Dottie. I'm not two-timing your daddy. In fact, I predict I'll be ten times more amorous the next time I see him because of it."

I do my best to cover Lyla Nell's ears. "TMI," I mutter, before turning back to the cute pooch at hand. "Sweetheart, you have to tell me everything you know about Romeo Langford and Juliette Lovett."

The cinnamon-colored cutie grunts, "Are they the pair that bit the big one? Boy, they were a nasty combination."

"You knew them both?" I marvel.

"Oh, yes." She nods. "I belonged to the Lovett family, and little Romildo used to come over to play all the time. Juliette's mother is the one who nicknamed him Romeo. Those two would pull at my fur, tug at my ears, and make me beg for the most delicious morsels, only to eat them themselves!"

"That's terrible." I wince at the thought.

“ That tewible! ” Lyla Nell parrots with far more animation and her little brown pigtails bounce like springs. With that and the Valentine’s Day dress and tights I’ve put her in, she looks as cute and delicious as any one of my sweet treats.

Lyla Nell is basically her daddy, Noah Fox, in miniature. They have the same dark hair that turns red at the tips in the sun, the same deep dimples, and the same pine-green eyes.

Noah’s sister, Sam, is his twin, too, in every way—not just in the traditional sense. So, I feel like I have a sneak peek at what Lyla Nell will look like when she’s grown. Spoiler alert: she’s going to be stunning.

“Hear that, Lot?” Carlotta grunts. “Romeo and Juliette sound like a couple of Grade A jerks!”

“ Yerks ,” Lyla Nell shouts and my mouth falls open. “Cray Cray say bad words?” Her little dark eyebrows knot up at the top and I give a quick nod.

Sweetheart barks. “They sure were jerks. The biggest jerks on the planet.” She lolls her head to the side. “And that torment went on for years. So they’re both dead now, eh? Shall we throw a party? I’m starting to crave some cake myself.” She gives a few sniffs in the direction of the ovens.

“We can’t throw a party,” I say. “I mean, not yet at least. We have a killer or killers to catch.”

“That’s right,” Carlotta says. “Someone shot both those jerks in the chest with a couple of arrows, and the Big Guy Upstairs sent you here to help Lot figure out who. And once you do, you’ll get a big boot in your patoot, sending you right back where you came from.”

It's true. Carlotta and I are what's known as transmundane, further classified as supersensual, meaning we can see the dead—not all the dead at once, just the ones that come back to help me solve a case or two.

My sister, Charlie, and Lyla Nell seem to share the same supernatural abilities, but by and large, it's just me who the universe has tapped to solve these egregious crimes. But thankfully, not many people know about my supernatural quirk. It's really only Noah, Everett, Carlotta, and Charlie—oh, and my grandmother, Claret Berkshire, but it's a tight circle and I'd like to keep it that way, too.

“Go back to Paradise?” The pooch sits up a notch. “Well, I don't want to go back just yet. I want to have some fun. Carlotta, you look like a ball. In fact, I like your idea. How about we devour everything this bakeshop has to offer, then take me to the dog park where we can continue devouring everything they have to offer, too?”

“Now it's a party.” Carlotta's chest expands with pride. “Hear that, Lot? Looks like this little Sweetheart has my number.”

I frown her way. “She's got your number, all right. And I have a feeling she's going to be dialing it to her heart's content. Why do I get the feeling Sweetheart is basically you in a furry disguise?”

“You say it like it's a bad thing.” Carlotta swats my arm. “Come on, Curly Q, let's grab all the good stuff here and then hit the Doggie Meet and Greet Playground of Love. Those poopers and their scoopers won't know what hit 'em.”

They take off for the front, and I'm about to follow when my phone buzzes. I fish it out of my pocket and glance at the screen.

“It's a text from Evie,” I say, and Lyla Nell breaks into spontaneous applause. “Aww , she wants ideas for a romantic Valentine's date with Connor. That's so sweet.”

“ Valentine’s Day, so yum-yum! ” Lyla Nell pats her belly.

“You’re so right. It should definitely be about delicious food.” I shoot Evie a text right back, telling her that Lyla Nell and I vote for a delicious feast and hit send just as Lily bursts into the kitchen.

“Lottie, quick,” she shouts in a panic. “You need to get out front. Something terrible has happened!”

### LOTTIE

I waddle out to the front and find the entire bakery bustling with customers—none of whom happen to be at the counter at the moment. It's so cozy in here they're all huddled at the tables set out, nibbling on their treats while winter is busy freezing the very air we breathe outside. With its butter-yellow walls and twinkle lights strung through the faux tree branches near the ceiling, this place looks more or less like an enchanted fairytale.

But I'm not looking at my customers at the moment or any fairytale that might be waiting to happen. Instead, I see Lily, Effie, and Carlotta all gathered around Suze, while true to her word, Sweetheart is making sure everything in my refrigerated display case disappears.

The bakery is decked out in enough paper hearts and foil cutout Cupids to circle the globe twice. Not to mention, that very same heart-shaped theme is present and accounted for in each and every one of my desserts.

“Suze?” I shout so loud that half the bakery turns to look—at least for a moment. It takes more than that to distract them from my desserts. “I'm so glad you're back! How are your teeth doing?” I cringe as I ask, because, well, it can't be good. Her teeth had exploded for the most part last night.

Talk about teeth made from chalk—and those concrete cookies didn't help either.

Suze looks perfectly comfortable bundled in a blue wool coat and has a creamy vanilla scarf wrapped around her neck like a noose.

“Oh, I’m all better now.” She twirls her scarf, and I swear I see a glimmer of something metallic coming from her mouth as she speaks. “Wanna see my new teeth?”

She bares her fangs, and we all belt out a collective scream—save for Lyla Nell, who is wildly laughing and clapping.

“Holy cannoli—Suze,” I shout twice as loud. “Who did that to you? And, more importantly, why?”

“Come on, Lot.” Carlotta ticks her head to the side. “Can’t you see her dentist had it out for her?”

“Oh, you girls.” Suze waves it off with a laugh. “Aren’t they gorgeous?” She runs her tongue along her teeth, and we collectively cringe.

“What exactly are they?” Lily asks.

“Yeah.” Effie makes a face. “What exactly are we looking at here? Temporary caps?”

“They’re permanent, and they’re gold,” Suze announces a little too proudly—and a touch too loudly. She opens her mouth wide for us to inspect, and we lean in to do just that.

Sure enough, every last tooth on her top—and bottom—row gleams in a questionably gold alloy.

“Oh no,” I groan. “Suze, why in the world would you do something like that?”

Effie grunts, “More like, how in the world. You work at a bakery. No offense, Lottie, but she’s not exactly making enough to qualify as royalty, let alone to gift every one

of those enamel queens in her mouth a gold crown.”

Lily scoffs. “I bet Lottie’s been handing Suze a little under the table. She is practically Lottie’s mother-in-law.”

“I’m no such thing,” Suze is quick to protest the idea.

Honestly, she took it better than I thought she would.

“And I didn’t pay for them,” Suze is quick to clarify. “Well, I put it on my credit card, but Everett said he would sue the pants off the deceased—or sue the body bags off of them, as it were.” She shudders for effect. “Apparently, they had deep pockets, and despite their early dismissal from the planet, the monetary beat goes on at their company. Everett says he’s really going to sock it to those two corpses and get me a huge payout. So all of my dental work is free, free, free .” She practically sings that last word.

No surprise there— free is her favorite word. Suze is a notorious cheapskate.

I try to rack my brain and rewind that conversation we had last night, but I can’t recall Everett saying he’d be socking it to any corpse on the planet. For Suze’s sake, I hope she’s right. She’s going to need a big payout to cover the cost, whatever it may be.

I’d ask what that cost is, but it feels crass.

“So how much are the new choppers setting you back, Suzie Q?” Carlotta asks. Subtlety isn’t really her strong suit.

We all lean in, and I think I see a handful of customers leaning in, too.

Suze rolls her eyes and then tries to blink her bangs out of her line of sight. Her short hair is nearly all gray now, but she still clings to that bangs-in-the-eyeballs style she's had for years.

"Oh, all right," she sighs. "If you must know, for the complete set, it was seventy-five thousand."

"American dollars?" I cry in terror.

"No, rupees," she quips. "Of course, it was dollars, you ding-a-ling." She pushes past me with her chin high and teeth gleaming with all the glitz and glamour of a pharaoh's coffin. "Now, let's get to work. These heart-shaped cookies aren't going to sell themselves."

Effie shrugs as she heads back to the counter. "They're pretty much selling themselves. Especially those naughty grams you came up with last night."

Suze shrugs right back. "I do what I can to keep this place in business. Heaven knows what would happen if I just rolled over and gave up. The entire lot of us would be unemployed."

Now it's my turn to roll my eyes. And I shoot Carlotta a look, too, because I know exactly who's behind those naughty grams.

"Nah ." Carlotta waves away the thought. "Lot wouldn't let this place go under. Not before she pulled her biggest stunt of them all—a triple homicide of her least favorite employees."

Suze, Effie, and Lily all gasp in unison before diving back into their work with a newfound vigor.

“I should have Cray Cray give the pep talks more often,” I whisper to Lyla Nell. Cray Cray would be Carlotta’s fitting moniker in lieu of Grandma.

A few customers stride up to the counter, and Suze offers them a big, golden-toothed grin—an uncharacteristically cheerful greeting from the perennial sourpuss demeanor if ever there was one.

In less than three seconds, every one of those customers recoils in horror. Two of them dart out the door, screaming. And another fans herself with her fingers as if she’s about to pass out.

“Suzy scawy!” Lyla Nell buries her face in my chest before looking back up. “Suzy, go away.”

“Believe me, some days I’d love to send her packing,” I mutter. Heaven forbid that Everett can’t squeeze a dime out of that company, and with Suze’s luck, that’ll definitely be the case. Fortune isn’t typically on her side.

I’m about to head over and suggest Suze take the rest of the day off when the chime on the door goes off and in walks my good fortune.

It just so happens to be someone who might be able to shed a little light on why two so-called jerks took an arrow to the heart.

Cupid might be the obvious suspect, but a part of me wonders if this woman here might have had a hand in it, too.

And I’m about to find out.

### LOTTIE

My mother waltzes into the bakery with Venus Finnegan on her arm, looking as if they've been fast friends for decades, though I know it's been less than twenty-four hours.

"Oh, look at you, my sweet little dumpling!" Mom coos as she swoops Lyla Nell out of my arms like a hawk snagging its prey.

Lyla Nell squeals with delight as her little chubby arms wrap around her grandma's neck. She's head to toe in a white velour dress and tights that have bright pink hearts printed all over it. I've never had more fun with clothes than I do dressing my real live doll.

"Lottie, what on earth are you thinking, carrying her around like that?" Mom practically bites the air between us as she says it. "And in your condition, no less. You shouldn't be pulling a wild stunt like that."

"I'm fine, Mom. We're fine." I pat my belly. "And everyone involved survived the wild stunt," I say, trying to mask my mild annoyance, even if she is right. My rampant hormones have a way of making me believe I'm right, too. "Welcome, Venus." I shed an easy smile at the pretty blonde. She's bundled in a long maroon coat with fur trim along the hat and looks as toasty as can be. "Let's get you both to a table. I'll bring out some dessert and coffee, and make you feel right at home in no time."

"Actually"—Mom scrunches her nose—"I'm here to meet Charlie to discuss the

catering menu for the big day.” Makes sense since Charlie owns the Honey Pot Diner next door—there’s a passageway connected to it from my bakery, actually.

“And speaking of which...” Mom gives Venus a playful nudge and a wink. “My new friend here is going to add a little pizzazz to the dessert lineup. She’ll be catering the sweet treats right along with you, of course, Lottie.”

“Mother?” I blink at my mother, surprised to hear it. I’ve catered events at my mother’s happily haunted B&B for years now, and not once has my mother brought another baker into the mix.

“Oh, it was Sam’s request that we bring in another baker,” she says, waving a hand at me as if I’m making a fuss over nothing. “She thought it would be nice to, you know, mix things up a bit.”

I frown at the thought. Leave it to Sam to want to do just that. Sam has been mixing things up for a very long time now, ever since she slept with my husband way back when. Of course, he wasn’t my husband back then, but still. I’m not thrilled with it.

“The more, the merrier,” I tell Venus.

Mom takes off and I quickly shuttle Venus to a table near the window that’s decorated with an entire solar system of little pink hearts. Wait a minute. Those are miniature pink stars!

Well, speak of the sweet not-so-little doggie devil.

“You rang?” Sweetheart materializes in our midst just as Venus and I take a seat.

Perfect timing. Now to get this case off to the races.

Without so much as a nod from me, Lily brings out an assortment of sweet treats and each one is an ode to Valentine's Day. There are heart-shaped macarons in blush pink, éclairs drizzled with red icing and edible glitter, tiny raspberry tarts with chocolate hearts nestled on top, in addition to a couple of carafes of coffee with both regular and decaf options.

She's already set out plates, cups, and utensils to go along with it. I didn't even need to ask. Lily is basically trained to know when I'm about to put my investigative hat on. And Lily wants to see the killer behind bars as much as I do. After all, she's basically a mother now herself.

"Venus," I start with a mournful smile.

She holds up a hand. "Lottie, in no way do I want to step on your toes. I'll turn down the job. Your desserts should shine at your sister's wedding."

"You'll do no such thing. You're not stepping on my toes at all. Just like I said, the more dessert, the merrier."

"Oh, thank you, Lottie," Venus says, visibly relaxing. "I really didn't want to intrude. Sam was just so insistent, and I figured... well, a little extra variety might be fun for the guests. And I can really use the business. The holidays were a boon, but January and February so far can hardly toe the line."

"You're preaching to the choir," I say and we share a quick laugh.

"Oh, for donut's sake," Sweetheart huffs beside me with her coat glowing like a star dipped in molasses. "Can we please step it up with the homicide Q&A? There's a Doberman tied to the mailbox outside who looks as if he'd love to sink his teeth into my puppy chow."

I make a face at the racy ghost. If I didn't know better, I'd say Sweetheart is channeling her inner Carlotta. And I happen to know that the Doberman's name is Jack, and he'll be gone as soon as his owner grabs a sandwich from Mangias Italian Restaurant across the street. The entire scene plays out once a day, and twice a day on Saturdays.

Speaking of sandwiches, my tummy is starting to growl so I pick up a macaron and make quick work of it. Raspberry. Mmm , one of my favorite flavors. Come to think of it, there's not a single flavor I don't like.

But back to the task at hand. I snap up an éclair and take a bite.

One word. Divine .

Sweetheart growls and I clear my throat. Venus has no idea there's an apparition among us. And seeing how sassy this apparition can be, it's probably a good thing.

"Venus, did you know Romeo and Juliette well?"

The woman blinks as if it were the last question she expected. I watch as her fingers begin to fidget with the edge of her napkin.

"Not as well as some," she says with a short-lived smile. "They came out to my café now and again."

"Oh, so you were friends," I say. "Of course, I mean, you seemed friendly enough last night."

"I wouldn't necessarily say friends." Her eyes hook onto one of the silver foil Cupids and her gaze hardens to stone.

Sweetheart lifts an ear her way. “I think things are about to get interesting.”

And so do I.

### LOTTIE

“We were acquaintances in the business world,” Venus Finnegan tells me about her relationship with the deceased couple as we sit in the café of my bakery.

“Poor Romeo and Juliette.” She cringes as she leans my way. “And is it bad that I always want to giggle when I say their names? I mean, obviously, it’s distasteful.” She blows out a breath. “I’m sorry, Lottie. I’ve been known to get weird in situations like this. I don’t handle death well. My mother died when I was young and my father took off before that. I was raised by my sweet grandmother.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss—both of them,” I say with a hand pressed to my chest. “But it sounds like you had a wonderful grandmother. I can certainly relate to that. My Grandma Nell was one of the best.”

“That’s how I feel,” she says with an expression that looks heartfelt. “Anyway, Sean—that’s my husband—he told me that Noah was on the case, and that Noah has a very good track record of putting a killer where they truly belong.” Her lips invert for a moment as she casts a quick glance out the window.

“That’s not what I heard,” Sweetheart says with a bark. “According to Carlotta, Noah’s track record has more to do with not catching a killer than it does anything else. She says you’re the killer-catching pro around here, Lottie.”

I glance over at Carlotta as she happily plows her way through a batch of heart-shaped donuts with Bavarian cream filling. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Carlotta was proud of me. Either that or the thought of me sending killers behind bars has

scared her straight from committing a homicide herself. Probably the latter.

One of the twins gives me a sharp kick and I take another bite out of my dreamy, creamy éclair posthaste. They really do enjoy their desserts.

“Yes, Noah is definitely on the case,” I tell her but stop shy of guaranteeing he’ll solve it anytime soon. “Venus, what do you know about Romeo and Juliette? Why would anyone want them dead?”

“Maybe no one wanted them dead in particular.” She shrugs. “Maybe there’s just a madman out there running loose with a bow and arrow? I mean, it takes all kinds these days. It could have been teenagers for all we know.”

Sweetheart lets out a soft woof. “Me thinks she protests too much. Lock her up, Lottie. But don’t throw away the key just yet. There are still desserts to be had and boys to be bad.”

Good grief, she’s Carlotta’s twin with paws.

“I guess that could be true,” I say to Venus while trying to keep from frowning. “Do you know of any discourse they may have had with anyone? Personal or business-related?”

She closes her eyes a moment too long and I’m starting to get a very dark feeling.

“We really got along well.” She bites down on her lip for a moment. “But I know they were locking horns with several people regarding their business. I think there was some tension brewing between them and a man by the name of Caudwell Belding. I heard something about him circling them for money.”

“Circling them?” I tip my head as I consider this. Wait a minute. Caudwell was the

man I met last night with Everett. His old friend from the courthouse. Another thought hits me. “That’s the same man that Romeo and Juliette were going to speak with after they left us.”

“That’s right.” She snaps her fingers as her eyes grow wide with what looks like delight. She seems more than a little overeager that I shared that information. “So I guess he might be the last person to have spoken to the couple while they were still alive. I think Noah should definitely speak to him.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“And so will we,” Sweetheart growls and I give a quick nod.

“Do you have any idea where Noah can find him?” I ask, playing fast and loose with Noah’s name as I move on to a heart-shaped tart.

“No, actually. He’s so busy, he’s sort of a moving target. But you know who might be able to help is Shelly Everly. She’s the woman with the maroon hair.” She runs her fingers over her own tresses as if to exemplify the point.

“I remember. And where can I find her? I mean Noah, where can Noah find her.”

“She’s easy.” Venus is back to darting her gaze out the window. “She’ll be at my café out in Hollyhock tomorrow afternoon on the button. I’m hoping she’ll give me a good review. I feel like I just need that one thing to magically push me to the top.”

Sweetheart swings her furry little head my way. “You’ve got murder on your side, Lottie. You know what they say, fortune favors those with connections to the Grim Reaper.”

I frown her way. I’m not sure how it’s happened, but clearly Carlotta’s spirit is

embedded in that dog.

Venus' phone vibrates on the table, and she glances down, an apologetic look crossing her face. "Oh no, it's my daughter. I forgot to pack her lunch again. Some days I'm just hopeless at this whole mothering thing."

"I so get you," I say, placing a hand over my blooming belly. "And some days it feels like all days."

We share a quick laugh as she waves as she heads for the exit.

Carlotta bounces over a second too late and looks at the woman just as she reaches for the door. "Where's the fire?" Carlotta calls out. "Bet it's the fault of the kid who was born with a warning label, isn't it?"

"Carlotta," I gasp, mortified, but Venus is long gone, thank goodness.

Charlie heads this way and sidles up next to me. Charlie and I share the same everything, from faces, to hair, to shoe size. We're basically twins minus one year. Although poor Charlie was actually raised by Carlotta herself. She would have done better with wolves.

Lyla Nell is happily perched at a nearby table with my mother and is having a grand old time nibbling on a pink éclair the size of her arm.

"You can't give these homicides a rest for a single month, can you, Lot?" Charlie says as she gives my belly a rub.

"Of course, she can't, Cha Cha." Carlotta belts out a laugh. "And if I were you, I wouldn't go rubbing Lot Lot's belly either. That's not good luck you're picking up."

“Oh, hush,” Charlie teases before looking back at me. “Lottie, if these corpses keep piling up, you’ll be tracking down suspects in the delivery room.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Carlotta chimes in. “When Little Yippy was born, the killer was caught, and Lot Lot squatted down in front of everyone at the B&B and pushed the little squirt right out.”

Charlie starts to laugh, but the phone in her hand cuts short her glee. She glances at the screen and grimaces.

“Duty calls?” I tease, relatively certain of the answer. Both Charlie and I are all too familiar with how all-consuming it can be to run an eatery.

“I’ll say,” she moans. “I’ve got fifty orders on track to be delivered on Valentine’s Day to every corner of Honey Hollow. And this makes fifty-one. I’ll be back.” She takes off and I cast another glance at the door.

“Venus seems to think that Everett’s old friend was having a disagreement with the unlucky couple as of late. I may not have the details of that disagreement right now, but I will shortly. Just like this case is going to be solved shortly.”

Carlotta nods. “And Noah Fox won’t be anywhere near ground zero when it’s done.”

“History can be a cruel mistress,” I say. “And when it comes to the killer, so can I.”

NOAH

It was a long night, and it's been an even longer day.

Add the fact that I went straight to the precinct after that double homicide and haven't been home yet—to eat, sleep, or throw myself in the shower—it feels more like a very long year.

But instead of heading in the direction of home, I make a beeline for Lottie's bakery. That's where Lyla Nell is, and that's where Lottie is. And more than I need sleep, food, or anything else, I need my girls. That's where my home truly is. Wherever they are, that's where it is.

The bakery is bright against the dark, snowy night, each window festooned with hearts, cherubs, and the promise of something sweet inside. As soon as I step through the door, the warmth and scent of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies wrap around me like a hug.

"Noah," my mother sings out from behind the register.

The place has a smattering of customers, mostly seated and huddled over something delicious. I spot Lottie filling a refrigerated shelf next to my mother with an assortment of treats and head their way.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" I ask as I step up to the counter. "Are you sure you should be working? Your teeth must be in pain."

Not to mention, a splintered smile won't bode well for business.

"Oh, I've never been better," she says, stepping in close. "The dentist gave me my smile back this morning." She flashes a wide, toothy grin, and an electrical jolt just runs through me at the sight.

"Geez," I growl so loud the windows shake. "What the—" A thought hits me. "Okay, those have got to be some sort of temporary dentures, right? Don't tell me that's all they had to give you. I can't believe they'd let you run around looking like a character from a horror movie. It's not Halloween. Just point me to their office, and I'll have a word."

And maybe I'll fire a round into the place so they can't practice for a good long while.

Lottie swoops in, shaking her head at me, and I can't help but note that my mother looks crestfallen.

"It's just typical of you, Noah," Mom growls right back.

"I tried to warn you," Lottie says in a sing-song voice as she lands a plate of fresh from the oven chocolate chip cookies in front of me. Lottie knows I can't resist them. Just the way I can't resist her.

"I should have expected it from you, Noah," Mom growls once again. "I do one nice thing for myself, and you have to poop all over my parade," she continues. "I get it—people like me can't afford the finer things in life; therefore, you think I shouldn't have them. Well, guess what? I do now. These teeth are mine, and they're permanent. You'll just have to get used to the fact that your mother is living like a one-percenter now, and it's all thanks to Essex."

My eyes widen at the mention of his name.

Despite the fact he's married to Lottie, despite the fact we've more or less made amends to our checkered past, there is still a part of me that suspects he has a nefarious vendetta against me.

So I stole a girlfriend from him once in high school.

So what? The girl turned out to be psychotic. He should have penned me a thank you. But instead, I keep getting things like this.

"What does Everett have to do with this?" I direct the question to Lottie, because, clearly, my mother cannot be trusted.

"Everett let her know last night that she might be compensated by Romeo and Juliette's company for her teeth."

"Was this before or after Romeo and Juliette were skewered like marshmallows?" Normally, I wouldn't speak so glibly about the dead, but my blood is boiling, and my mind is spinning in ten thousand directions at once.

"Well, of course, it was after." Mom shakes her head at me as if I should have known as much.

"Of course," I mutter, pinching my eyes shut for a moment. "And how did you pay for this in the interim?" Because I know for a fact the dead aren't about to chip in. But knowing Everett, he can squeeze a dime out of both the living and the dead with his legal acumen. Again, nefarious.

Lottie shakes her head frenetically. "You don't want to know."

But my mother waves her off. “You’d be proud of me. I managed to negotiate a pretty decent price. They wanted one hundred and forty, but I got them to come all the way down to seventy-five. Even though, in the long run, it’s not my money I’m spending. You know me—I had to get the very best deal.”

Just watching her mouth open and close with a burst of yellow in between makes my stomach churn.

“Wait.” I shake my head. “You got those caps put in for seventy-five bucks? This is starting to make a lot more sense. Where is your dentist located—some back alley in Leeds?”

Leeds just so happens to be the smarmy town south of Honey Hollow, and they probably have more fake gold teeth per capita than anywhere in the world.

“No, silly. I got them done right here in town. And it’s not seventy-five dollars. Heavens no. These are solid gold, Noah. I wanted nothing but the best.”

“It was seven thousand five hundred?” My blood pressure spikes again.

Lottie hitches her thumb up, and my eyes widen to the point I think my head is about to explode—and I wish it would.

“Seventy-five thousand , Noah,” my mother snaps. “And I happen to think I was worth every last dime.”

“She put it on her credit card,” Lottie says with a sigh, and my eyes are back to wishing they could pop right out of my skull.

“Mother, that bill will be due in less than a month,” I point out, obviously to someone who has no idea how a credit card—or the monetary system in general—works. And

you might be able to add teeth to that list, too. “I’m going to have to mortgage my cabin for this,” I say, stunned.

Alex just had a newborn, and he’s been saving for a bigger home. There’s no way I’d even think of asking him to pitch in.

A customer heads over, and my mother snarls at Lottie. “Why don’t you take him home and do whatever it is the two of you do to make yourselves feel better? I’ll help Lily and Effie close up shop.” She bares another toothy grin my way. “Don’t you worry, Noah. I’m sure Essex will have a grand payout check to me in no time. And who knows? I might even get enough to keep myself in gold body parts for the rest of my life. I’ve been meaning to get my knees done,” she trills as she drifts off to help a woman and her child.

No sooner does she welcome the customers to the bakery than the kid breaks out in tears. Thankfully, Lily steps in.

“Where’s Lyla Nell?” I ask Lot, suddenly feeling the need to protect my own child from my mother.

“Coming in hot.” Lottie nods to the right, just as Miranda emerges from the Honey Pot Diner carrying the cutest little girl with her hair in pigtails and looking cozy in a white furry jacket.

“Daddy!” Lyla Nell practically jumps into my arms as Miranda and I exchange a quick hello.

“I have her all bundled up and ready to go,” Miranda says with a smile. “And don’t you two forget, we have a wedding coming up in just a few days. I don’t want any funny business from either of you.” She points my way. “Your father has been an invaluable asset in all this.”

“That’s a first,” Mom quips from the register.

I’m still not sure how she manages to live at the B&B while her ex-husband cozies up with his girlfriend under the same roof, but it seems to work.

I sigh over at Lottie. On second thought, I’d move in with her in a heartbeat, despite Everett’s constant presence. However, my mother’s motives, and my own, couldn’t be more different.

Miranda lifts a finger. “We have the arch yet to be festooned with the flowers, chairs, tables, the flowers on order, and an entire flock of white doves ready to be delivered.”

“Mother, this is an indoor wedding,” Lottie points out as Miranda speeds toward the door.

“Stop being such a fuddy-duddy, Lottie. Just focus on bringing the most fabulous desserts known to mankind.” She blows us a kiss. “No trouble allowed. Nothing will go wrong with this double wedding!” she barks it out like a threat before she sails off into the frozen night.

“Nothing will go wrong?” Mom smirks, flashing those gold, public nuisances of hers. “Has she met the two of you?”

I’m about to respond when Lottie’s phone chirps and she looks at the screen.

“It’s Evie.” Her brows furrow. “She says she’s at the house. Sam is there with the baby, and Carlotta is... flashing her boobs.”

“And we gotta go,” I say as Lottie, Lyla Nell, and I make a dash for the house.

My prediction for the rest of this week?

There will be plenty of trouble. And everything that can go wrong will.

### EVERETT

I've spent more than a handful of Valentine's Days with Lemon. But this one coming up feels different.

The twins will be here in a month—or sooner—and I want to make the time we have left before they arrive extra special. And since Valentine's Day is right around the corner, I thought I'd start there.

I finish up at the courthouse, jump into my truck, and start down the highway with Lemon still in the forefront of my mind. But I'm not five minutes in before an accident up ahead creates a detour for the rest of us. The traffic is sluggish so I make a left and cut through Leeds.

I shake my head as I drive through the dirty, dicey town. This is definitely not where I'll be taking Lemon any time soon. Although Lemon and I seem to end up here more than I care to admit. Mostly it has to do with Red Satin Gentlemen's Club, which is also the central hub for Jimmy Canelli and his boys. Jimmy is one of Vermont's own infamous mobsters. Not to mention the fact Lemon's sister works there—as a choreographer, not a stripper.

I nod as the establishment appears up ahead. The neon lights above the run-down brick building add all the glitz and glamour this place promises.

Traffic slows me down and I sigh at the old building. I'm about to shift my gaze across the street when something catches my eye. More like someone. A tall, lanky guy with dark hair and his coat pulled up to his ear struts toward the building. And try

as he might to look inconspicuous, I know exactly who he is.

“Jed.” I can’t believe my eyes. First, I catch him goosing some woman at the Evergreen, and now he’s ducking into Red Satin as if it’s just another night. And I’m afraid this outing just might be that routine to him.

I’m not in the least bit surprised. Some people don’t change, and they certainly don’t change their spots.

He heads inside, and I head home.

By the time I pull up to the house, I spot a few extra cars outside. I know for a fact one of them belongs to Evie. And that fact alone has the power to turn my night around.

Evie and Lyla Nell aren’t the only children I have. A couple of months ago, I found out that I’m the father of twelve-year-old twins, Ava and Olivia.

Lemon, Lyla Nell, Evie, and I have been taking them to dinner at least once a week. Lemon and I decided it would be healthier for everyone involved if we saw each other as much as possible. And since they live out in Fallbrook, my old stomping grounds, that’s been easy enough to do.

I park and make my way to the porch, and the first thing that greets me is how blissfully quiet it is in Honey Hollow tonight, though quiet might be too generous of a word once I step inside.

“Knock, knock,” I say as I open the door. It’s warm, and bright, and the TV is on a touch too loud.

Noah’s golden retriever Toby runs over to greet me and I step in to see a sight that

might just be worthy of Red Satin itself.

“Geez.” I turn my head abruptly.

“Dad’s home,” Evie shouts with a lap full of white fur as she cuddles with both Pancake and Waffles at the very same time.

Pancake and Waffles are a couple of Himalayan cats that are just as much our children as Lyla Nell and Evie.

Lyla Nell lifts a hand, but she can’t be bothered to look up.

Lemon sits in the middle of the sofa, with Sam to her left and Carlotta to her right, and all three of them seem to have lost their shirts.

Actually, I take that back. All three are experiencing some level of undress, but regardless of the fact, all three have both breasts exposed. And then there are the children.

Lyla Nell is happily nursing on Lemon while Sam is holding little Willow Grace, her newborn who is red-faced and wailing away, while Sam is trying to force her to latch on.

I’ve learned all the breastfeeding lingo from Lemon.

“I’m sorry, Everett.” Lemon winces my way. “But Sam is having trouble feeding Willow and I needed to demonstrate.”

Evie nods from across the way with her phone pointed at the trio and I hope she’s not snapping pictures of this.

“Mom is like so much better at teaching Sam than Carlotta was.”

“What?” I growl as I look over at my mother-in-law. “Carlotta?” I’d look away, but frankly, Carlotta makes sure she exposes herself to me at least once a week. And after tonight, I think I’ve met my quota for the next ten years.

“Don’t you Carlotta me,” she snaps. “That baby was hungry and I needed to demonstrate to Sam what goes where.”

“She really did try to help, Essex,” Sam says, sounding as if she can’t keep her eyes open for another minute.

I catch Lemon giving her the side-eye. Lemon isn’t too thrilled with the fact Sam prefers to use my formal name and what that signifies. Heck, I’m not too thrilled with it now either. But I can’t turn back time. I definitely had no idea she was Noah’s twin at the time.

And in light of all that, it drives me to be the best husband I can be.

“Well, I’m glad Lemon is here to offer all the help you need.”

I glance over at Noah who’s seated in a lounge a few feet in front of the peep show and he seems to be keeping his eyes glued to the screen. Not that he’d want an eyeful of his sister or Carlotta, but if it were just Lemon, you can bet he’d be sitting right there next to her. It happens almost every night.

“Here, Sam, give her to me,” Lemon says, taking the angry newborn whose voice pierces through the air like a chainsaw. “I’ll show you how to position her on mine.” She pulls the tiny baby bundle with a shock of dark hair close to the side that’s currently unoccupied and the baby wiggles her face back and forth, screaming away until all of a sudden she’s so quiet it’s as if every last one of us stopped breathing.

“Oh no,” Lemon says, trying to pluck the baby off of her, but instead her nipple stretches like taffy. “I’m so sorry, Sam. It seems the baby has latched on and she won’t let go.”

“It’s happened before,” Carlotta pipes up.

“With Levi,” Noah says with a nod.

“It’s not Lot’s fault she’s got sweet milk,” Carlotta says a touch too loud.

Carlotta comes to Lemon’s defense at the strangest of times.

“It’s fine.” Sam tosses up her hands. Her hair is mussed and she’s got dark circles under each eye. She’s wearing a robe over sweats, and her feet are pressed into pink fuzzy slippers. “I give up. I’d pay you to nurse my baby, Lottie, but my bills are starting to pile up and my rent is due again. It turns out, that whole paying my bills thing is cyclical.”

“What about Jed?” Noah asks without so much as turning his head.

“Jed who?” Sam says with exhaustion written across her face. “I hardly see him anymore. He’s off looking for work before dawn, home after dark, and in between, all the baby does is cry. I haven’t slept in weeks.” She shoots me a look as if I might magically have a solution for her, but it’s Noah, sitting unfazed on the couch with his eyes locked on a basketball game, who clears his throat with a grumble.

“I can’t say I’m too impressed with Jed’s disappearing act.” Noah doesn’t look away from the screen, though his tone suggests he’s not exactly focused on the game either. “But I have to give it to him. He’s out there pounding the pavement. That lets me know he wants to provide the best life for you and his child.”

I purse my lips as that scene from last night runs through my mind—the one with Jed and the blonde, then again the one from tonight as he ducked into Red Satin.

The only thing on Jed's mind is having a good time—and not with the woman he's engaged to.

"I'm glad you're impressed, Noah," Sam says with a sigh. "Although impressing me doesn't seem to be Jed's specialty these days."

"I'll have a talk with him," I offer. Because if Noah catches wind of Jed's extracurricular activities, he'll put a bullet in him.

"Ooh, maybe mention that Valentine's Day is coming up," Lemon says. "And that it just so happens to be his wedding on the very same day." She nods my way. "Maybe suggest he do something special for Sam beforehand. I think men forget that women still want a little romance in their lives after the baby is born."

"I don't want any of that," Sam is quick to say with her eyes closed and her head leaning up against the back of the couch. "No, thank you. That man has done enough."

Carlotta belts out a laugh. "That's my Lot Lot, always hot to trot."

"Speaking of hot to trot," Evie says. "Mom, have you thought of anything I can do for Conner on Valentine's Day?" She looks my way. "We're celebrating the night of the wedding once we leave the B&B so we don't lose out on some romantic time of our own. No offense, Sam. I'm sure your reception will be plenty romantic."

"No offense taken," she says, tossing up a hand and letting it flop back down on her chest. "I'm starting to think a wedding sounds like the least romantic thing in the world right about now. You know what sounds romantic? A hot bubble bath followed

by a nice, long nap—all by my lonesome.”

“You hear that?” I nod to Evie as I put down my briefcase and take off my coat. “You take your bubble baths and your naps alone.”

“Oh, Dad.” She rolls her eyes. “Come on, Mom, give me some romantic ideas.”

“Can’t you see she’s got her boobs full at the moment?” Carlotta leans in. “But you’re in luck. Spicy escapades just so happen to be my specialty.”

“Like what?” Evie nods, eager to hear anything Carlotta has to offer.

“Like nothing.” I shoot Carlotta a warning look.

“Oh, don’t lose your britches, Sexy.” Carlotta rolls her eyes at me. “I’m talking walks at sunset, a hot tub under the stars, or better yet, an indoor picnic on the bed.”

“And she’s heard enough,” Noah calls out.

“Don’t you go turning on me, too, Foxy. You know darn well there would be no Little Yippy if you didn’t implement a few of my ideas.”

“That’s right.” Noah nods. “And that’s exactly why Evie shouldn’t implement any of your ideas.”

“Speaking of ideas... scoot in close,” Lemon tells Sam. “I think I know a way to make this work.”

Sam leans in, albeit groggily, and Lemon butts her chest next to Sam’s as close as she can get from the side. Lemon weans the baby from her breast and quickly lands her on top of Sam and soon the baby latches onto her own mother and continues on her

merry way seamlessly.

“It’s working!” Sam calls out. “Finally. Maybe we can actually figure this thing out. It’s been so hit-or-miss, I was half-afraid she’d starve.”

“Bring her by anytime,” Lemon offers.

“Speaking of time.” Carlotta checks her watch. “My new friend Shelly said to meet her tomorrow at eleven at the Stupid Cupid shop that Venus Fly Trap owns so I can start my new gobbling gig as a food freeloader.”

“New friend?” I raise a brow.

Traditionally, Carlotta’s friends are a bag full of trouble. The food freeloader part is expected on some level.

Lemon lifts her head my way. “Shelly Everly. Carlotta met her at the Evergreen Manor. She’s a food critic . And for reasons unknown to humans on Earth, she said Carlotta could go along for the ride if she wanted.”

“A job for Carlotta? How about some dinner to celebrate?” I suggest and the room breaks out in cheers, with Noah’s being the loudest. “It’s on me and I’ll call the Wicked Wok right now.”

Someone’s phone buzzes and Sam grunts. “ Aww , it’s a text from Jed. He’s running late because he stopped by the hospital to apply for work and stumbled upon a baby care class. He said he’ll show me all the tips and tricks he’s learned once he gets home.” She drops her phone to the couch. “Too bad I’ll be too exhausted to hear it.”

I have a feeling Jed is banking on just that.

Little does Sam know that Jed is down at Red Satin, most likely getting far too handsy with the strippers.

I'd share it with Noah, but he'd send Jed to the morgue by morning.

Though, frankly, a bullet might be the only thing that can fix this.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

Girls' Group Chat

Lottie: Okay, I'm taking matters into my own hands. We need a wedding cake, and we need it fast. But do we need just one? Two? How about a classic vanilla with raspberry and lemon filling? Or maybe a red velvet? Come on, Meg and Sam, I need a sign of life and a direction to bake in!

Meg: Cake? Meh. I'm a zombie at this point. Maybe a cake made out of brains.

Sam: Yes, brains sound about right. Especially considering that little Willow has eaten all of my brain cells.

Lainey: My baby has eaten my brain, and it's not even here yet. Send help.

Charlie: You ladies are scaring the ovaries right out of me.

Keelie: Still having a great time with Bear! Babies are for the birds.

Lottie: You all are impossible! Fine, brain cake it is. Just kidding... but seriously, we need to decide soon.

The next day I get to the bakery early and help with the pre-holiday hustle and bustle—and yes, Valentine's Day is almost as big of a holiday as Thanksgiving and Christmas.

My best sellers are the baskets I put together, some with conversation heart cookies—of which I now read each and every conversation on those cute cookies myself—iced heart-shaped sugar cookie baskets, cupcake baskets filled with adorable pink and red frosted red velvet cupcakes and vanilla cupcakes with cute silver, pink, and red, sprinkles, and baskets filled with my heart-shaped glazed donuts with sprinkles.

Okay, so there's one more basket that outsells them all—a basket filled with naughty conversation heart cookies.

Who knew Carlotta could start such a lucrative yet lascivious trend?

Speaking of the naughty devil, I finished up at the bakery at ten-thirty so that I could have plenty of time to head to Hollyhock to meet up with Shelly Everly—who not only happens to be my suspect, but also happens to be babysitting Carlotta for the afternoon for me.

And since Noah was at the shop when I was ready to leave, he decided to come along with Lyla Nell and me.

The three of us make it to Hollyhock in record time, and as soon as we step into Cupid's Sweet Concoctions, it's like stepping straight into a Parisian café.

“Wow,” I breathe out the word as I take it all in. The scent of fresh baked cinnamon rolls enlivens every last part of me—especially my appetite and that of the twins since they're both kicking away as if having a tantrum until they get their hands on something sweet to eat. And I'll make sure they get exactly that.

“Pretty! Pretty!” Lyla Nell cheers and claps while firmly strapped into her stroller.

“This is way out of my league,” Noah says, ticking his head to the side as he takes in

all of the wonder right alongside me.

Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling like glittering sugar satellites and cast soft sparkles over the entire establishment, including the glossy white marble flooring. The walls are painted in soft cloud-gray and trimmed with gold, while the tables and chairs are cushioned in delicate pastel pinks and baby blues.

The place is packed and the staff is busy flitting between tables while wearing adorable pink and blue smocks, each topped with a chef's hat that only seems to add to the elegance.

“Oh my word,” I say, a little dazed by all the razzle-dazzle. “This isn't the cozy café vibe I'm used to back at my own bakery—this is dessert royalty. If my bakery is a warm hug, Cupid's Sweet Concoctions is a three-tiered diamond tiara.”

Noah leans in. “And ten bucks say the prices will reflect just that.”

“ Mommy, gimme cake, donut, cookies ,” Lyla Nell moans as she tries her best to reach out and snatch everything off the nearest display rack. And Noah wisely moves the stroller back a notch to avoid an avalanche of sweet treats.

Lyla Nell isn't the only one mesmerized by the giant sugary displays of perfection. They have rows of extravagant desserts that look more like edible art. Raspberry mille-feuille—a tower of puff pastry filled with decadent frosted droplets and raspberries interspersed, strawberry and lavender pavlova—a meringue-based dessert that resembles a fluffy cloud of perfection, a towering caramel praline mousse, and, oh heaven, a chocolate ganache cake with a delicate scattering of candied rose petals. And that's just the display in front of me. There's at least a dozen more.

“This is gorgeous,” I whisper. “No wonder this place is packed.”

Before Noah can say a word in response, a familiar tall blonde with her hair swept back, wearing a pink smock and chef's hat over a long red velour dress, greets us.

Venus Finnigan looks like a fairy right out of a storybook and it's fitting, considering this shop looks as if it were ripped right out of an enchanted fairytale itself.

"Venus," I say as we exchange a quick hug, or as much of a hug as my belly will allow. "Noah and I thought we'd drop by, especially since Carlotta would be here with Shelly Everly. And let me tell you, I've never been so impressed with a bakery in all my life."

She chortles at the thought. "Well, thank you. But I'm afraid Shelly showed up early to do her work, and she and Carlotta took off about an hour ago," she says apologetically.

"Just my luck." I wince over at Noah. "Well, at least we don't have to worry about whatever havoc Carlotta was about to wreak. It looks as if the shop survived her terror."

Venus laughs. "True, but it wasn't for a lack of trying on her part. She whipped around the place like a hurricane and I had two staff members follow along and quickly fix all the displays she nearly toppled. But please stay and have something—it's on the house. Anything you like." She gestures toward the display cases and my stomach growls in anticipation of just about anything on the menu board.

"We'll accept, but only if you'll join us," I say, giving her an all-too-innocent smile. "You look like you could use a break."

Venus gives a gracious nod. "How could I resist?"

She leads us to a table near a bay window filled with every treat imaginable and it only makes my tummy rumble all that much more. Not to mention Lyla Nell is nearly jumping right out of her stroller trying to get at the display herself. There's no way Noah or I am about to unleash her from that seatbelt. There aren't enough staff members or parents on hand at the moment to stop that mini tornado.

Venus produces a couple of menus for Noah and me, and we quickly peruse them. I can't help but marvel at the fact that not only is there an extensive menu, but the prices are so shockingly expensive.

Noah raises a brow as he glosses over the menu and I don't need to be a mind reader to know he feels the same way. Although he did call it.

Seventeen dollars for a slice of cake—and that's on the low end. Thirteen dollars for a single cupcake? My jaw almost hits the marble floor.

And yet it does beg the question if I'm underselling every single one of my own baked goods.

I'm about to narrow my decision just as a smattering of miniature pink and red stars appear in the empty seat to my right. And one of the sweetest treats of all materializes before me—Sweetheart the cute ghostly pooch.

“Ooh .” I make big eyes at Noah and motion for him to give me his hand.

Noah understands all too well that it means there's a specter among us, and if he wants to hear what they have to say, then he needs to be touching a piece of my flesh. I'm sort of a conduit in that way.

Venus eyes our hands for a moment. “Oh, is this a date?” She gasps with a smile before quickly sucking in a breath. “Wait a minute. I thought you married the judge?”

She cringes and touches her fingers to her lips with a look of regret. “I’m sorry. Sean tried to explain it to me once, and I’ll admit, I couldn’t keep it straight.”

“That’s okay,” Noah assures her. “A lot of times, I can’t keep it straight. Lottie is married to Everett Baxter. Although Lottie and I are still very much family.” He pulls my hand his way and plants a kiss on the back of it. Clearly, he enjoys mucking up the already mucky waters. And I shoot him a look because of it.

“So, who’s treating us?” Sweetheart growls in that Carlotta-style bark of hers. “This place isn’t half bad. It almost looks like Paradise. Though I think they could stand a touch more velvet on the walls.”

I’m pretty sure Carlotta would agree. She’s tried to line her own walls with velvet more than once.

“So, has anything caught your eye?” Venus asks.

“Try everything,” Noah and I say in unison, and we all share a laugh—with Lyla Nell’s being the loudest, and perhaps the cutest.

We put in our orders, Cupid’s own chocolate love potion cake for me, the caramel praline mousse for Noah, and a delicate sugar-dusted heart-shaped cookie for Lyla Nell.

Within seconds our treats arrive and the smell of rich chocolate and buttery pastry nearly makes me pass out with delight. And I don’t waste a second digging in. That first bite is pure bliss, and I can’t hold back a very unladylike groan.

I do realize we’re here to figure out why Romeo and Juliette have landed in the morgue.

But with a cake like this, the dead will have to wait.

LOTTIE

Noah, Lyla Nell, and I just wandered into a wonderland of sweet treats, here at Cupid's Sweet Concoctions, and Venus just offered to comp all the cake we wanted so that we could overindulge to our hearts' content. Okay, so it wasn't quite what she said.

I take another bite of my Cupid's own chocolate love potion cake and moan twice as hard as I did the first time.

I must pause to inform you that this isn't just any chocolate cake that I've have the pleasure to nosh on. It's a three-layer French chocolate cake with Belgian ganache along with chocolate malt cream filling—and have I mentioned the mountain of hot chocolate ganache smothered on top? Absolute perfection.

Noah shakes his head my way. "That cake looks like it could fix just about anything in life."

"It's about to fix mine and I'm well into the afterlife," Sweetheart says, taking a quick bite from the opposite end that I've started on and I move my fork over quickly so as not to spook Venus.

Although let's face it, with the size and girth of these babies inside of me, it won't shock anyone if I make every cake in this place up and disappear.

"Oh wow. Good choice, Lot Lot," Sweetheart says with a soft woof as she devours half of my confection—and I the other. "You're a woman after my own taste buds."

Venus grimaces slightly before pointing to one of her staff members and then to my dish as if to say, bring another slice to the pregnant woman, stat . “You just keep enjoying it, Lottie. Another one is on its way.”

“Thank you.” I wince a little because I did not see this coming when I walked in. But once I took a gander at the place, I sort of knew it was inevitable. I take the final bite of my cake and moan once again. “Oh my stars! This cake has changed my life,” I murmur with a mouthful.

Venus laughs. “It’s the salt that gives it that lift,” she says as another slice of Cupid’s own chocolate love potion cake is set down before me. I’m certainly not going to turn it down.

“I’m a big believer in salt, despite my sweet tooth,” Venus goes on. “Specialty salts, in particular. I’m not afraid to use them in my savory cooking at home either.”

“We use pink Himalayan salt in our kitchen,” I add, my eyes still rolling back in pure chocolate bliss.

Venus nods approvingly. “You should try Celtic salt sometime. It’s higher in calcium and magnesium and adds a subtle depth to the flavor.”

“Oh, that sounds incredible,” I say, making a mental note. Lyla Nell is too absorbed in her cookie to add much, but she gives me a powdered sugar-smeared smile that says she’s more than satisfied.

Venus turns to Noah with a sweet smile of her own. “Sean speaks so highly of you. I think he’s grateful to know there’s someone with integrity he can rely on at the precinct.”

Noah tips his head her way. “That’s very kind of him to say. He’s a good guy. And a

great parent from what I can see.”

“He certainly is.” She laughs. “And so are you by the looks of it.” She nods to Lyla Nell. “And now the two of you will have your hands full all over again.” She nods to my belly before cringing again. “I’m sorry. Did I get that right?”

“Right enough.” Noah laughs. “Parenting is an adventure, isn’t it? One moment you think you have everything under control, and the next you’re expecting twins.”

I shoot him a look for further confusing an already confusing situation and he winces my way. It’s clear he got the message. I hope.

Noah leans her way. “Venus, I don’t suppose you’ve remembered anything more about Romeo and Juliette that might help us?”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Sweetheart says as she licks up the last crumbs of the second slice of Cupid’s own chocolate love potion cake, and miraculously a third slice appears in its place.

Good grief, I’m going to cost this poor woman a fortune. But judging by the eager crowd bustling toward the registers, she can afford it.

Venus shifts a little in her seat, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think she was uneasy. And well, let’s be honest. Who wants to talk about the dead when there’s so much chocolate ganache for the living?

“I’m pretty sure I can’t help.” She wrinkles her nose. “I mean, whoever did that to them, well, it seems they had a clear vendetta. “But I did have a thought after I spoke with you, Lottie. Shelly—Shelly Everly, the one Carlotta is working with?” She nods my way. “She used to work for Romeo when the company was just starting out. That’s before he brought on Juliette. Anyway, Romeo had his own way of dealing

with people, and if I remember, Shelly acted as sort of a fixer for him. That's before she left and started a whole other career."

"A food critic," Noah says, staring at her in a daze as if he's taking it all in. "That's great information, Venus. Thank you. I guess I really do need to speak with Shelly as soon as I can track her down. Is there anything else you can think of that might help with the case?"

"Let me see..." She drums her fingers over the table. "Oh yes, like I mentioned to Lottie, there's Caudwell Belding. He's the CEO of Baker's Best Brand. Well, I just remembered that I overheard them at a competition up in Burlington talking about finances, something about a new venture, I think. Maybe they were going into business together? I'm sorry, I didn't pick up enough of the conversation to tell you what it was about."

A flood of patrons walks through the door and hijacks her attention.

"Well"—Venus says with a sigh as she straightens that chef's hat of hers—"I'd better get back to helping with the customers." She gives Lyla Nell's hand a squeeze before getting up. "If you're hoping to catch Shelly and Carlotta, they mentioned something about heading over to the Love-is-in-the-Air Valentine's Festival here in Hollyhock. You might still find them there."

"Thank you for everything, Venus." I nod, more than grateful for the tip and the food. "We'll check out that festival."

Once she steps out of sight, I nod to Noah. "Looks as if love is the air, and we're headed to a festival."

"With you by my side, Lottie Lemon"—Noah gives my hand a squeeze—"love is always in the air."

“Oh goody,” Sweetheart says as she eyes the refrigerated shelves brimming with priceless treats. “I’ll meet you at the festival. I have a little unfinished business to tend to.”

She takes off for delicious pastures just as Noah and I stroll Lyla Nell right out into the frozen Hollyhock afternoon.

There’s a killer on the loose, and heaven knows we need someone to point our way to them.

Shelly Everly might just be the key to unmasking whoever delivered Cupid’s fatal blow—and we need to find that woman before the killer plunges an arrow into someone else’s heart as well.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

Girls' Group Chat

Lottie: Alright, ladies, last chance! What are we doing for cake? Or do I just surprise you both?

Meg: Let there be donuts.

Sam: Let there be cake.

Lottie: Now that's something I can work with.

Lainey: I'm suddenly having a craving for donuts and cake.

Charlie: I've got a few surprises of the savory variety for our brides. I promise a delicious night to remember.

Keelie: Lottie is usually the one who makes it a night to remember—by adding a corpse to the mix. Lot, you really know how to party.

Noah and I arrive at the Love-is-in-the-Air Valentine's Festival, and it looks as if Cupid took a nosedive into a vat of glitter and sprinkles, then exploded over Hollyhock.

Everywhere we look there are pink tents, red heart-shaped balloons, and people wearing wings as if they're about to morph into arrow-wielding cherubs themselves.

I sent Everett a text before we left Venus' scrumptious shop, and he let me know he was already on his way up to Hollyhock hoping to catch up to us. It turns out, his only case for the day was canceled. So I let him know he could meet us at the festival, and in typical Everett style, he beat us here by a mile.

The three of us walk along as Noah pushes Lyla Nell and we see there's a stage set up with something called a Win Her Heart challenge. It takes less than two seconds for it to catch Noah's and Everett's attention.

"I'm in," Noah says without the luxury of having all the details.

Everett nods. "And I'm going to have to beat you."

"I swear, the two of you just can't resist a chance to prove that you're basically cavemen under the guise of romance," I tease before reading the banner next to the sign-up table. It says something about a physical obstacle course involving heart-shaped hoops and a giant cupcake toss. "Wow," I muse. "Nothing says I love you like launching baked goods at a target."

Noah shrugs. "That's essentially what we did back at Venus' place, and in that case, the target was our mouths."

I nod. "And we sure as heck didn't miss." I poke my finger into Everett's chest. "You missed a good time. We'll have to go back—and often."

"It's a date." He winks my way and sneaks a kiss to my temple. He nods to the giant cupcake toss and gives Noah a look. "We'd better go sign on the dotted line. I'd hate to pass up a chance to watch you lose."

"After you," Noah says. "I've been waiting to shove a giant cupcake in your face for some time now."

They speed off toward the venue and take Lyla Nell with them.

“I’d say break a leg, but knowing how competitive the two of you can get, I’m afraid you’d do it,” I call out after them.

I spot a booth with a chocolate fountain right next door, and just as my feet are about to lead me to a chocolaty paradise, Carlotta jumps in my path and nearly scares all that love potion cake right out of me—but not my desire for liquid chocolate. Nothing can scare that anywhere.

She’s bundled in one of my priciest red wool coats, her cheeks are covered in powdered sugar, her lips are stained bright pink from what I can only assume was an ungodly amount of frosting, and she’s wearing a headband over her noggin with a couple of red sparkling hearts that bounce around on springs.

“It’s about time you got here, Lot. You will not believe the fun I’ve had with Sugarplum Sassy Pants.”

“You mean Shelly?” Although you never know with Carlotta. She could be talking about a turtle for all I know.

“Yup, the Donut Diva is right over there, flexing her foodie taste-testing muscle.” She points to a booth behind me.

“Sugarplum Sassy Pants, the Donut Diva? How does she feel about being hosed down with all these quasi-delicious nicknames?”

Not everyone gets Carlotta’s sense of humor. I’ve been around her for years, and I’m still not sure if I should laugh or be insulted. Half the nicknames she hurls my way sort of require both.

“Please.” Carlotta waves a dismissive hand. “She loves it. We’re practically soul sisters now. We’ve eaten our way through half this festival already, and let me tell you, it’s been worth every carb and calorie.”

“Tell me more,” I say as I hold my belly, because let’s face it, I’m so ready to dive deeper into the culinary side of this calorie-laden day.

Carlotta gives a wicked grin. “First, we started with delicious deep-fried strawberry cheesecake bites. You should really look into stealing that recipe. They were like biting into a cloud made of sugar, with just enough tang to make you see strawberry-shaped stars. And let’s not forget the giant cotton candy hearts, spun right in front of us by a guy wearing a Cupid bowtie and not much else.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Now that’s what I call customer service.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I try.” She gives a solemn nod. “Oh, and Snickerdoodle Shelly, bless her sugar-sweet heart, had about three dozen of those Cupid’s kisses cupcakes that are going quicker than a one-night stand on prom night. They’re red velvet with a spicy cinnamon kick in the pants. She actually cried a little. Said it reminded her of some long-lost love. I think it was the heartburn, but hey, whatever floats her boat.”

“More info, please.” I mean about my next suspect, but I won’t stop her from spinning another sweet tale if she wants. The twins seem at rapt attention, too.

“Then we moved on to an entire trough filled with red velvet truffle hearts,” she continues. Truffles? Carlotta does not disappoint.

“Those things were like popping pure bliss in your pie hole,” she goes on. “And speaking of pies, I want a red velvet truffle pie out of you by midnight, young lady.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, more than eager to please—mostly myself. Obviously, Carlotta just had a culinary stroke of genius, and who am I to turn down that kind of mouthwatering goodness?

“I could have eaten a hundred of them.” Carlotta pats her belly at the memory. “Sweet and Sassy Shelly tried to outdo me, but you and I both know who the queen of truffles is. And I’m darn proud to say I reign supreme.” She sheds a short-lived smile at the sky. “Then we had the most tastiest treat of them all— chocolate-dipped bacon roses . After a cool dozen, I was transported to sweet and savory heaven. I nearly proposed to the guy running the stand.”

“Well, I guess it’s true what they say. Love is in the air—and so is bacon.” I crane my neck past her. “Unfortunately, so is murder. Lead me to Shelly Everly. I’d like to have a word with her before she falls into a chocolate coma.”

“This way, Lot,” Carlotta says, hooking her arm through mine. “It’s your lucky day because she just so happens to be at the most delicious booth of them all.”

“My lucky day, indeed,” I say, patting my belly.

But for one elusive killer, their luck is about to run out.

LOTTIE

Carlotta leads me past the sea of pink tents, red balloons, and cherub-adorned booths until we arrive at the heart of the action—and it's an over-the-top delight if ever there was one.

A glitzy gold banner strewn across the booth reads, Parisian Kiss Patisserie, and no sooner do we step inside than we're transported straight to a Parisian bakery.

There are enough shimmering pink fairy lights strung overhead to cast a rosy spell over the place.

And the aroma! Oh my. The scent of sweet, rich, and positively decadent desserts intoxicates me within seconds. It's enough to make me start drooling before I even see the lineup of delectable desserts. And then my eyes land on all things delicious, and it's all I can do not to go on the attack.

Every imaginable over-the-top indulgent treat sits piled high on delicate gold-tiered trays. We're talking red velvet lava cakes drizzled with caramel and sprinkled with edible gold flakes, strawberry cheesecake profiteroles topped with pink chocolate ganache, giant heart-shaped macarons stuffed with layers of fresh whipped cream and raspberries, not to mention chocolate fondue fountains with all kinds of goodies ready for dipping—marshmallows, brownie bites, fruit, cookies, and more cookies galore.

And, for the pièce de résistance, they have a colossal Cupid's kiss croquembouche tower—a sculpture made of cream-filled puffs and encased in a spun sugar web, shimmering in pink and gold. It's almost too pretty to eat. Almost.

I'm about to head in that direction and lay down some cold, hard cash so I can start in on the tower of creamy goodness when a spray of tiny pink and red stars blocks my path.

"Sweetheart," I say as the sassy pooch appears before us. "You have impeccable timing. Wait until you get a load of this place."

She floats up a notch and takes in the sights. "How is it that after I leave the planet things got a whole lot more delicious?"

Carlotta hangs her head. "That's exactly how I felt after I committed myself to Harry. No sooner did I say goodbye to my fancy and footloose ways—emphasis on the loose—than an entire slew of hot men finds their way into town." She looks my way. "I really should have headed to the dog park sooner. There are more than a few delicious snacks out there."

"Speaking of delicious snacks..." Sweetheart cranes her neck past me. "Oh boy, have I got my eyes on those puffy little things covered in pink fluff," Sweetheart says with her eyes glinting with gluttony. "I bet I could eat twenty of them. Oh, what the heck, I'll eat them all." She zips off, leaving a trail of tiny pink stars in her wake.

I'm about to suggest that Carlotta chases after her when she taps her elbow to my tummy.

"There's the Sticky Fingers Shelly," she says, nodding dead ahead, and sure enough, I spot Shelly Everly with her dark maroon hair pinned up on one side. She's wrapped in a matching maroon coat and her dark-framed glasses look as if they take up half her face.

Shelly, aka Sticky Fingers—according to Carlotta—is here in all her food-loving glory, with a determined look on her face as she dives into what looks like a plate of

toffee pudding. Sticky indeed, and, oh my heart, I need to have a plate full of that sticky goodness myself. Moist sponge cake, finely chopped dates smothered in toffee sauce, and served with a dollop of vanilla custard—who can resist? Not me.

I practically elbow check my way to the front of the line, and soon I've garnered a plate for both Carlotta and me.

Thankfully, Sweetheart is busy bulldozing her way through to the front herself, so I won't have to share.

I try my best to step out of the path of the crowd and bump right into Shelly Everly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I say, resting my plate on top of my stomach and giving my belly a pat. "You can't take me anywhere these days."

"Lottie Lemon." She laughs. "I see you found Carlotta, and possibly the best dessert they have at the festival." She holds up her own plate of sticky toffee pudding. Her hazel eyes are so clear, I'm mesmerized by them. But not mesmerized enough to eschew my dessert over them.

"I've been sampling my way through this heavenly nightmare—all in the name of research, of course," she says with a playful wink.

"Same here," I say as we share a laugh. "I'm actually baking the sweet treats for a double wedding that's coming up on Valentine's Day. My sister and my sister-in-law are both tying the knot to their long-time beaus."

Not so long on Sam and Jed's part, but that's not the point so I don't bother correcting my inadvertent blunder. I'm just glad that the single brain cell the twins have left allowed me to get their names right.

“Research, huh?” Sweetheart floats this way and lands before us. “If eating enough sugar to put down an elephant counts as research, I’m a scientist.”

“Same here,” I mutter under my breath.

“What’s that?” Shelly leans in looking mildly concerned.

“Oh, I was just saying that I stopped by Venus’ bake shop, and boy was I impressed. I guess I missed Carlotta and you by a hair.”

“That’s my Lot Lot.” Carlotta slaps me over the back and leaves a sting in her wake. “She can’t stand being away from me for too long. That’s why I had to move in with her.” She rolls her eyes as if the act somehow impinged on her life. “And you might say I even influenced her when it comes to men. It turns out, Lot here likes a variety, too. How else do you think she ended up with twins who have two different daddies?”

Shelly gasps—and oddly, so does Sweetheart.

The gobsmacked ghost floats over to me. “I was in the exact same predicament with my second litter. And third, come to think of it. But oh, how I loved those men.”

I make a face at the sappy specter before reverting my attention to the purple-haired woman of the hour—and honestly, I’m sort of digging that ornery shade of eggplant. I wonder if I could rock it?

“Venus let me know that I could find Carlotta here.” My lips invert for a moment. “How are you holding up after the other night?” I wince as I ask, because pricking the topic of death is never easy, especially when the suspect at hand was friends with the deceased. And to be honest, I don’t consider either Venus or Shelly much of a suspect.

“I’m doing my best.” She gives a heavy sigh.

“Would you mind if I asked you a few questions about them?”

Shelly lifts her chin and casts a dark glance at the frozen gray sky.

“Ask me anything you want,” she says with a vacant look in her eyes. “I will tell you everything.”

LOTTIE

Shelly Everly pulls her wool coat, the color of oxblood, tight around her waist here inside the Parisian Kiss Patisserie booth as the Love-is-in-the-Air Valentine's Festival rages around us.

The booth is elegant, bathed in pink with a sea of twinkle lights overhead, and there are enough sweet treats to outfit all of France.

"You know, I was close to Romeo once," Shelly confesses. "I only knew Juliette through him. But they seemed so very happy together." She frowns at the thought.

"I sensed that, too," I say with a nod. "They made it very obvious that night."

Sweetheart grunts, "Never mind those lovesick fools. Get on with it, Lottie."

I lean toward Shelly. "You know, I think Venus mentioned something about you working for him—something about fixing all of his problems?"

She laughs. "Something like that. Romeo and I worked together for the first three years of the company. And I certainly did more than put out a few fires. I had a hand in everything. That's before Juliette stepped onto the scene."

"Three years?" I inch back. "I don't know why I thought Juliette was there from its inception."

"That would have been me." She offers a bleak smile. "And did Venus perhaps detail

any of her own involvement with the infamous duo?”

I take a step back as I rack my brain. “No, actually.”

“She wouldn’t.” Shelly stabs at her toffee pudding as if making a point. “Romeo and Juliette had just gotten the ball rolling in a lawsuit against Venus.”

“A lawsuit?” I give a few rapid blinks, trying to absorb this gigantic fact that Venus seems to have left out of the conversation. “Wait a minute. Did Venus know about this?”

Shelly nods. “She was telling me all about the cease and desist letter she received a couple of weeks ago. Apparently, she was going to fight it.”

“Cease and desist at what?” Carlotta asks. “Don’t tell me they were going to try to stop her from making all of those magical cakes.” She turns my way. “I had a chance to sample them all.”

I gasp at the thought. Note to self: figure out how to moonlight as a food critic—or more to the point, a foodie freeloader.

“What was this lawsuit about?” I practically demand as I shovel a bite of sticky toffee pudding into my mouth and nearly melt into a puddle of toffee ooey-gooey goodness.

Shelly’s lips twist for a moment. “They called her a cheater brand—you know, someone trying to ride on the coattails of a bigger name. And beyond that, they were claiming she was stealing some of their recipes, too. It was getting nasty.”

“A cheater brand?” Carlotta jumps in, barely containing her glee. “Sort of like when that ‘Royal Flush’ plumbing company popped up right after ‘King’s Throne Plumbers’? Or, my personal favorite, when ‘Squirts & Spouts Master’ tried to outdo

‘Flush Masters’?” She laughs, clearly tickled with herself.

“Real subtle, Carlotta,” I mutter to myself.

“That’s exactly it.” Shelly points with her fork. “Romeo and Juliette’s company was called Cupid’s Confections and they had an entire menu devoted to couples. And well, Venus’ establishment is called Cupid’s Sweet Concoctions, and she, too, has an entire menu for couples. It’s called the Lovebirds Specials.”

Drats, I must have missed that. I would so love to see what Venus has lined up for couples.

And why haven’t I thought of this? A cake mix kit that couples can put together themselves? I bet Everett would love to bake a cake with me. Noah, too, come to think of it. And in both scenarios, I can picture those boys getting very, very naughty while doing so. I could make a mountain of money—and perhaps inadvertently create a baby boom in Vermont.

I’m suddenly hungry for cake. And Everett. And maybe a side of Noah.

Darn hormones.

“Interesting,” I say to Shelly. “Do you know anything about Caudwell Belding and his business dealings with Romeo? Venus mentioned they might have had some sort of arrangement.”

“Boy, wasn’t Venus the songbird today?” she muses as her smile turns into a full-blown wicked grin. “So you know about the gambling, too, huh?” She leans in a little closer. “Caudwell has a serious addiction to anything that requires a bet. He was in deep with Romeo—real deep with the money he borrowed. Romeo had him by the throat. Word is, Caudwell is desperate. He might’ve been willing to do just about

anything to get out from under Romeo's thumb."

"Anything?" Sweetheart says with a ghostly growl.

"Including murder?" Carlotta bleats. "Some people would do anything to avoid getting stuck in a financial chokehold like that. But then, everyone has their secrets. I bet you've got a few yourself, Shady Shelly."

Again, so subtle.

"Well, that's certainly enlightening," I say, while choosing to ignore this biohazard of a bio mother by my side. "Thank you, Shelly. Would you mind if I passed those things along to Detective Noah Fox? He's my?—"

"He's one of Lot Lot's baby daddies," Carlotta finishes for me. "We'll know which twin belongs to him when it crawls out clutching a magnifying glass."

"Carlotta ." I wrinkle my nose at the woman. "Nobody is crawling out of me." Then a thought hits me. "Oh, Shelly, you should come to my mother's B&B on Valentine's Day at seven. I'm going to have the best of the best my bakery has to offer, and I would love for you to do a write-up if you're willing. Not only will the B&B play host to that double wedding I was telling you about, but it's the very place where my first child crawled out of me." I gasp at my own faux pas and I shoot Carlotta a dirty look for even putting the idea in my very pregnant brain to begin with.

Both women—and one past-her-prime pooch—cackle at the thought.

"You two are a hoot," Shelly says while slapping her leg. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. In fact, I'll be there with bells on."

We part ways and Carlotta and I make quick work of our sticky pudding.

No sooner do we put our forks down than an egregiously loud horn goes off outside, and we rush out to see what the heck is going on.

LOTTIE

“Attention one and all,” a chipper voice bellows over an unseen speaker. “It’s time for the Win Her Heart challenge! Show your love, prove your strength, and sweep your sweetheart off her feet with a one-hundred-dollar prize! Step right up and see if you’ve got what it takes to be the ultimate romantic champion!”

Every last soul here at the Love-is-in-the-Air Valentine’s Festival lets out a wild cheer as the crowd pours in that direction.

“That’s where Everett and Noah are,” I say, grabbing Carlotta and leading us right over to the open field where the contestants are all lined up.

My mother pops up, pushing Lyla Nell in her stroller, looking as if she just stepped off of a runway with her hair curled to perfection, her makeup heavy and yet on point, and wrapped in a luscious pink fur—faux, of course.

“You’re just in time, Lottie,” she trills. “Oh, isn’t this great? Wiley is out there, too. He said he just had to prove his love for me one more time.” She chortles as if it were the sweetest thing.

And truthfully, it is. I’m glad he’s traded his playboy ways in order to be faithful and loyal to my mother. Had he not, he wouldn’t be breathing and both Noah and Everett would help me hide the body.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

The obstacle course looks like a fever dream filled with roadways covered in pink frosting, a table full of giant cupcakes just beyond that, and some sort of a maze that holds the promise of chaos, destruction, and perhaps a deliciously good time.

The microphone squeals. “ Ready, set ...” The sound of a gun firing sends about two dozen men racing ahead, each holding a large red foam heart as if it were a shield.

There’s an inflatable heart archway that marks the starting line, festooned with oversized glittery cherubs that seem to watch every move while judging the competitors like snarky little Cupids.

The course is a winding mess of red-and-pink frosted heart cutouts scattered across a slippery field, creating a treacherous path that has more obstacles than should ever be allowed.

And then there are the hurdles—a row of giant faux cupcakes that stand tall, topped with oversized swirls of what looks to be real pink frosting, and it’s clear by the splattered remnants that some competitors have had less-than-graceful encounters with them.

Just past the hurdles, there’s a tunnel made of sparkling pink streamers that sways in the breeze almost hypnotically, and beyond that lies the frosting-coated balance beam—a narrow strip of wood caked with pink frosting, which I’m sure is as slick as ice.

Every last inch of this place looks like a recipe for disaster, and sure enough, the number of EMTs standing on the other side confirms my suspicions.

The field is lined with spectators, most of them laughing and cheering, while a few munch on cotton candy that’s shaped into adorable little hearts. And aside from the laughter, there’s the occasional ooh when someone takes a particularly ungraceful

tumble. Sort of the way Wiley is now.

But he's back on his feet again. In fact, Everett, Noah, and Wiley are all in the thick of it, dashing across the frosted cutouts, each one of them cradling that oversized foam heart as if it were their ticket to glory. The whole candy-colored battlefield is pure chaos and to think it's all in the name of romance.

I watch in horror as Everett and Noah almost literally break a leg on the icing slicked balance beam. And breathe a sigh of relief when they land on the other side of it.

"They're going to do it," Mom marvels. "Everett, Noah, and Wiley are in the lead!"

Lyla Nell gives a quick whoop before returning to the cookie in her hand, which my mother seems to be doling her way in regular ten-minute intervals. At least now I know how my mother gets her to behave. Come to think of it, it's the same tactics she used on me and my sisters. It's no wonder I went on to be a baker.

"It's just Everett and Noah now," I marvel as the two of them pull ahead by a mile.

"They're just a hair away from the finish line," Mom shouts, jumping up and down. Better her than me. I'd hate to drop the twins here in the frozen tundra of Hollyhock with frosting flying everywhere. Although the frosting flying everywhere part does sound plausible for my birthing scenario regardless of where or when.

But then Noah sticks his foot out and Everett dives face-first into the icing slick below.

"Oh no," I say and Lyla Nell parrots it with a laugh.

Everett reaches over and yanks Noah to the ground with him, and soon both foam hearts and fists are flying.

“Oh, for Valentine’s sake,” my mother grunts at the sight. But then, Wiley crosses the finish line first, followed by an entire gaggle of men. “He won! My Wiley won! That’s my Valentine!” Mom whoops and howls and Lyla Nell joins her in the noisy endeavor.

And yet, my Valentines are still duking it out on a slick of pink frosting.

Of all the things that sight should invoke in me, the only takeaway I have is that I’ve got a sudden craving for a six-foot-three man covered with creamy pink sugar.

We head home and Everett makes sure he satisfies every last sugar craving I could possibly have. And he is delicious.

All’s well that ends well with Judge Essex Everett Baxter in my bed.

But my craving for justice won’t be met until there’s a killer in handcuffs.

I have one last suspect to question.

Caudwell Belding.

You’re next.

NOAH

O kay, so knocking Everett out of the race wasn't my finest hour.

But the shiner he gave me more than made up for the fact I cost him a win.

Cost him a win? He has Lottie. That giant moron who wears a black dress for a living has already won.

Nevertheless, it makes no difference to me. In my heart, Lottie will always be mine, and in the spirit of my grand delusion I've decided it's high time I head to the mall and purchase something that says as much. I need a gift for Valentine's Day—which just so happens to be tomorrow.

I know, my timing has never been good.

I'm also on the hunt for something special for Lyla Nell and Evie, too. I can't leave my daughter or my niece out of the fray.

The department store at the Honey Hollow Mall is brightly lit and outfitted with enough lace hearts and Cupids to qualify as a honeymoon suite for a pair of googly-eyed lovebirds—it's done up in bright pinks, reds, and maybe way too much glitter.

The music is light and cheery and the scent of every perfume bottle being spritzed at once has already caused me to sneeze up a storm—and numbed my tastebuds at the very same time.

I knew I couldn't. Scratch that, shouldn't go at this on my own, and yet somehow, I've ended up here with the worst possible duo for the job.

"Oh, now this is what you need to get Lottie Dottie." Carlotta holds up something that hardly qualifies as fabric. It's red, strappy, and has more cutouts than a block of Swiss cheese.

I wince at the sight. "I'm pretty sure that's not happening."

"Pfft . You're such a prude, Foxy," she says, shaking the material at me as if it might suddenly become a reasonable suggestion if she waved it in my face long enough. "You're buying for Lot Lot—the love of your life, not your grandmother. Although, if you are buying for Nana, I'm sure they've got this in gray."

"I'm not buying that for anyone," I assure her while trying to make a mental map of this maze of a department store. That obstacle course lined with frosting seemed easier to navigate.

My mother barrels her way through the clearance rack, digging through a pile of heart-covered sweaters, and pulls out a particularly hideous one with oversized neon green sequined hearts sewn on the front.

"This is perfect, Noah," she announces, waving it in my direction. "It screams Valentine's Day. It's festive. And more importantly, it's twenty percent off the clearance price." She narrows her eyes at the tag. "And don't you worry. I can get them to take off another ten percent if we tell them one of the sequins is loose." She scratches at a sequin heart with her fingernail and arranges for just that.

To say my mother is frugal is an understatement. She once tried to return wrapping paper on December twenty-sixth, rumpled and torn, with nametags still sticking to it.

“I think I’ll keep looking,” I say with a sigh.

Honestly, when it came to selecting a female companion to help guide me with a feminine touch, neither Carlotta nor my mother was my first choice. I would have taken my sister, or any of Lottie’s sisters, but they’re either nursing, pregnant, or running the Honey Pot Diner. Miranda is knee-deep in wedding planning, so I didn’t have the heart to take away from that.

No offense to my present company, but my list of female companions for this outing was bottom of the barrel.

“But Noah,” Mom whines while wagging the frayed sweater my way. “We can leave with this beauty costing us less than three dollars! We’re practically robbing the place.”

“I have a feeling if I robbed the place, I’d end up with a few nicer things. And unfortunately, that’s the direction I see the most promise at this point. I need something that lets Lottie know she’s special.”

“Nothing says special like saving a buck,” Mom replies, stuffing the sweater back onto the rack with a huff. “Fine, you don’t want to be practical. Waste your money. It’s not like you have kids to think about... oh, wait.” She raises an eyebrow, and I sigh.

“And at least you’re acknowledging Lyla Nell.” I nod her way. “It’s a start.”

Carlotta hooks her arm through mine, dragging us toward a display of perfume bottles shaped like a naked woman.

“Alright, listen, Foxy,” she says. “You need to think romance . And nothing screams we’re about to get frisky like a bottle of pricey spritzer—preferably something that

smells like vanilla cupcakes. That's Lot's kryptonite. Either way, she'll think of you every time she sprays it right into her mouth."

"Thanks, Carlotta. But I don't think I'm leaning toward perfume."

"Lookie here, Noah," Mom pipes up from where she's now perusing the costume jewelry section. "These earrings have little cupcakes on them and they're only five dollars! Why, this would be perfect for Lottie. Even you have to admit that."

"Maybe so," I say, feeling my patience thinning. "But I think I have something else in mind. If only I knew what that was." There's no way I'm getting her anything subpar in any way. "I need something that shows her that she's everything to me."

Carlotta lifts a brow my way. "Well, well, look who's getting all sentimental on us. Didn't realize you had it in you, Foxy. In that case, tie a bow around yourself and give her the best gift of all, yourself! "

"If I knew it'd work, I just might," I tease. "I really would give her anything."

"You're such a pushover when it comes to that girl," Mom grunts. "How many homicides have you let her get away with? What more could you possibly do to show your affection for her?"

"That I don't know." We continue to scan the store, but nothing feels right. Everything's either too corny or too flashy—and neither of those things are Lottie. She's warmth and light, and a whole lot of heart.

Suddenly, inspiration hits like a heart-shaped anvil right over my head. I know exactly what to get her. It's something that's meaningful, something that'll make her smile—Lottie, Lyla Nell, and even Evie.

It's not here in this lace-covered disaster zone, but I know where to look.

"I've got it," I say, turning on my heel and make a beeline for the exit with them.

"What? That's it?" Carlotta squawks, struggling to keep up. "No lacy lingerie, no sequined sweaters, not even some heart-shaped jewelry?"

"Nope. I'm all set," I say, grinning as I hold the door open for them.

Mom shoots me a skeptical look. "You sure, honey? Because there was a nice set of slightly used fuzzy slippers in the returns section. Not many people know that there's an entire section in the back of things that people had to give back. Nothing says love like footwear."

"I'm sure, Mom. Thanks, though."

I don't tell them what I've decided on, but I can already picture Lottie's smile when she opens her gift. It's going to be perfect. Lyla Nell and Evie will love their gifts, too.

EVERETT

The Ashford Shopping Mall is a place that, quite frankly, I never thought I'd set foot in.

With its over-the-top window displays, perfume clouds, and mobs of people meandering from one shop to the next is all a bit overwhelming to me. But today, I'm a man on a mission—a mission to find something that can actually express what Lemon means to me. And honestly, that's turning out to be a lot harder than I'd expected.

It's my fault for waiting until the very last minute. I hadn't intended to, but that double homicide jolted all of Honey Hollow and it jolted me into protective mode when it comes to Lemon and the kids.

In truth, I can't think straight knowing there's a madman out there with a bow and arrow, unafraid to aim and shoot.

It's barbaric.

And it certainly has me losing sleep at night.

Ironically, trying to come up with a few Valentine's gifts has me losing sleep at night, too.

Ava and Olivia were easy. Lemon helped me put together baskets filled with teddy bears, socks, and books along with chocolates wrapped in shiny foil.

Lemon, Lyla Nell, Evie, and I will present them with their gifts during a little brunch outing before the big double wedding tomorrow.

Evie's bracelet was an easy pick, too. She's been hinting at it ever since Christmas, and I will always appreciate a push in the right direction.

Lyla Nell gets a beautifully illustrated personalized storybook where she is the protagonist who gets to go on a rollicking Valentine's Day adventure. It even features family members as supporting characters. I spared Noah the part of the villain despite his villainous move against me yesterday. However, it could be argued my need to throw punches was equally villainous.

Regardless, I can't wait to read the story to her.

But Lemon? I've got nothing.

Lemon deserves the moon, and here I am, trying to find something halfway decent in a crowded mall full of people scrambling to buy whatever mass-produced trinket catches their eye.

I weave through aisles stacked with heart-shaped boxes, pricey perfume bottles, and enough pink and red lace to outfit a brothel.

The jewelry section catches my eye—shiny, romantic, expensive. Not that there is a ceiling on what I'd spend to find the perfect gift.

But none of it feels right for Lemon.

Lemon isn't a prepackaged gift. She's a rare constellation—beautiful, complex, and radiant. These cookie-cutter trinkets just don't cut it.

After what feels like an eternity, and three salespeople offering to hose me down with the latest, greatest perfume, a light bulb finally clicks on.

A smile tugs at the corners of my lips. I know exactly what to get her, something meaningful, something only I would think to give her. Lemon's gift won't come from some perfume or jewelry counter.

I'll need to make a few calls, but it's perfect. She's going to love it.

I turn on my heel, ready to get back out into the frozen afternoon when something stops me cold.

Dead in front of the jewelry section stands a familiar young man. He's leaning in close, too close, to a girl who isn't familiar to me at all. They're locked in an embrace. She's laughing with her hand resting on his arm, and the expression on his face is one I've seen before—that smarmy, confident grin of a man who happens to be thinking with anything but his brain.

My blood boils instantly.

This isn't a misunderstanding. I know full well what I'm seeing. I've been around long enough to know exactly what's happening here.

Without hesitation, I pull out my phone and snap a picture. I get both of their faces—clear as day.

I take a deep breath and consider my options. I could walk over there right now, but that wouldn't end well for anyone involved—least of all me, who would end up with a homicide charge.

No, this is a problem that'll have to wait until I can present it to the girl who deserves

to know every dirty detail. She deserves the truth, and I'll be darned if I let this punk hurt her any more than he already has.

And Lemon? She doesn't need this on her plate right now. Her mental state is paramount at the moment. Especially with everything else going on.

No, I'll keep this to myself. But that young man had better start counting his days because he just made the biggest mistake of his life.

Conner Saint is a dead man walking.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

I t's here.

The evening before the big day, and as much as I'd love to help my mother with whatever it is she might need assistance with, she's all but banned my sisters and me from the wedding venue until tomorrow afternoon.

I believe the words restraining order were tossed around loosely.

And since both Meg and Sam opted out of a rehearsal, or a rehearsal dinner, there's nothing to do but twiddle our thumbs until the big event.

Except for me, that is.

With a killer still on the loose, I'm not twiddling anything.

While I was at the bakery today, I had Carlotta, Lily, Effie, and Suze put their noses to the investigative grindstone to help me track down Caudwell Belding's whereabouts.

And wouldn't you know it, it was Suze who came through for me. She called his secretary and told the woman that she had a singing telegram for Mr. Belding that needed to be received this evening. And after some hemming and hawing, his secretary sold the farm.

Caudwell had already left for dinner, but he would be heading to a casino in Leeds

right after. Apparently, it's what he does to relax.

And according to Shelly Everly, it's also what he does to dismantle his would-be fortune, too.

Lainey offered to babysit for me, so I dropped Lyla Nell at her place on my way home from work. And I managed to talk both Everett and Noah into coming along with me, but only because Keelie had a parent-teacher meeting at Little Bear's preschool or she so would have come with.

Everett and I drove in together since he was already home, but Noah agreed to meet us there as he came home from work.

And here we are—no, really, here we are as Noah, Everett, and I step into Red Satin Gentlemen's Club with its red walls, red carpet, and red-hot nude girls. Well, mostly nude. The music is so loud that the walls are thumping, body parts are jumping, and dollars are flying around like confetti.

Noah and Everett quickly shuttle me through the red-hot madness and to the back, where under this dicey place sits yet another dicey place—the one and only full-fledged illegal gambling casino in Leeds.

The entire place is run by an infamous mobster, Jimmy Canelli, and lucky for us, the three of us just so happen to be on good terms with Jimmy. But then, we've also been the target of his ire before, too. It's a twisted relationship.

The heavy scent of hard liquor, smoke, and desperation to win big hits me the moment we step inside.

It's always the same in here—dim lights glowing over green felt tables, flashing slot machines that wink and blink at you, and a chorus of groans that lets me know Lady

Luck is rather elusive tonight.

The air is thick with the unmistakable odor of cigarettes, mingled with cologne, and it's so overpowering, it could clear out a room—but apparently, not this one. And, if I'm not mistaken, I'm picking up an olfactory backbeat of popcorn, too. Odd. But you can bet your last casino chip that the twins want in on some of that delicious cornfed action.

We're not two steps inside when we spot a banner tacked up behind the bar that reads, One night only—Unlucky at the tables doesn't mean you need to be unlucky in love! Welcome to the Pucker Up Hookup Party Tonight!

The banner is complete with pink neon hearts flashing all around it in case anyone missed the point.

“Huh,” I say as the three of us stare at it a second too long. “I've been here plenty of times, but that looks new.”

We move our way through the crowd, and it is rather packed here tonight. But it is Friday night, and let's face it, there's not a whole lot going on in Vermont in general.

As we sidestep our way through the thick of the bodies, I can't help but notice a few of the older gentlemen ogling me. And oddly enough, a few of the younger ones, too. And is it my imagination, or have a few of them been giving me the look ?

That can't be right. I'm the size of this gentlemen's club, not to mention flanked by two of the best-looking men in all of North America. There's no way those men are hitting on me.

No sooner do I have the thought than a man somewhere in his thirties waggles his brows at me before striding right by us.

“Oh my word.” My mouth falls open as I watch him walk away and he winks at me as he watches me, too. “Oh wow.” I grip my belly as we move through the crowd.

“What’s the matter, Lot?” Noah scoots in close.

“Lemon?” Everett’s eyes widen. “Is it the babies? Is it time?”

“No, not that. I think maybe my dress is a bit too fitted tonight,” I say as a guy in a tacky pinstripe suit also waggles his brows my way and I gasp again. “There goes another one. I think the men here are actually hitting on me.”

Noah tips his head back and glares at the crowd. “Don’t worry, Lot. I’ve got my weapon.”

Everett nods. “I’ve got mine, too. Between the two of us, we should be able to put a stop to it.”

“ Aww , that might be a violent way to show your affection, but nonetheless, I appreciate the sentiment,” I coo, pulling them both close. “But nevertheless, keep your bullets to yourself.”

As fate would have it, I’ve got a weapon, too—my dear old Glock, Ethel. And since Everett has a matching one, we’ve named his Fred. But as for Noah’s sidearm well, the jury is still out on its nickname.

We push our way through the crowd, and to our right I spot not one but two familiar faces. Carlotta and her newfound bestie, Shelly Everly. And to my surprise, Sweetheart, the cute ghostly pooch, is floating right alongside them, too.

Both Carlotta and Shelly look dressed to kill in little red numbers. I’m not sure if they matched on purpose, but in truth that hue makes them look like a couple of devils

running around the place. It's true in Carlotta's case, anyway.

Carlotta waves us over with her big cat-who-ate-the-canary grin. Or maybe it's her cat-who-lost-a-lot-of-your-money grin. Carlotta doesn't have any of her own to lose.

"Fancy meeting the three of you here tonight." She laughs. "Shelly and I are hitting up the singles scene." She gives me a cheeky wink. "Don't worry, Lot. I'm just playing the part of her wing-woman tonight. It turns out, Jimmy's little casino is a big hit with those looking to mate and date."

"Well, that explains it," I say, looking at Everett and Noah. "And it explains the sign, too." I nod to Carlotta and Shelly. "All kinds of men have been hitting on me from the second I walked in—if you can believe it."

"Hitting on you?" Shelly looks gobsmacked and a little off-put.

"Shocking, I know," I say, rubbing my belly.

"Not shocking at all," Carlotta is quick to come to my defense. "Lot Lot gets her man magnet mojo from yours truly." She hitches a thumb at her chest. "It's the curse we Sawyer women bear." She pulls back her chest as if her boobs were needed to make the point. "Just look at those two studs." She nods to Noah and Everett who are each very kindly steadying me by the arms. "Why, they can't keep their hands off of her. And you should see the sexy shenanigans that take place behind closed doors."

"Not true," I'm quick to tell the poor woman.

"I'll vouch for that," Noah says.

"And I certainly will not." Everett winks my way. "At least not between the two of us."

Noah reaches for his gun and I shake my head at him before reverting to Carlotta and her friend.

Shelly looks sassy in her red-clad dress with matching tights and shoes. Honestly, it's a lot, but then I suppose she needs to stand out this evening. Unfortunately with Carlotta dressed in the exact same way, she's not standing out for the reasons she intended.

"I can't blame those men for hitting on you," Shelly says to me. "You're obviously a gorgeous woman, Lottie. And I am nothing like you. Good thing I have Carlotta here tonight. She's quite the wing-woman." Shelly laughs as she says it. "She's even got an invisible dog who sounds just as sassy as she is! I've never met anyone so hilarious before." She slaps her knee as if she means it, and I can't help but wince a little because there is zero humor involved.

A group of older gentlemen struts past us, and Carlotta gives a wolf whistle in their direction.

"We'd better run," she says, hooking her arm through Shelly's. "I think those guys need a little convincing that their luck's about to change—in more ways than one." She winks before dragging Shelly along with her.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," I call after them.

"Wahoo," Carlotta cries out. "Everything is on the table."

Sweetheart gives a ghostly woof. "From what I hear, that's not much of a restriction, Lot Lot," she teases before trotting off after them.

I shrug because she's probably right.

Noah, Everett, and I get right back to the mission at hand. And wouldn't you know it, we spot our target almost immediately.

Perhaps Lady Luck is on our side after all.

LOTTIE

Caudwell Belding is less than ten feet away and looks every bit like a man trying to lose his life savings at a blackjack table, right here in Jimmy Canelli's illegal gambling casino.

"He's leaving." Everett nods toward the exit as Caudwell pushes away from the table. And if I'm not mistaken, Caudwell's face is flush with annoyance.

We waste no time in tracking him, weaving through tables and dodging waitresses with trays of half-empty whiskey glasses until we're right on his tail.

Everett steps forward. "Caudwell? Fancy running into you here," he teases. "Is this what you call a night off?"

Caudwell stops in his tracks as he quickly inspects the three of us. "Well, if it isn't the Baxter bunch and Detective Fox." He gives a good-natured laugh. "Didn't expect to see the three of you here. Not on singles' mingle night. Unless, of course, you're looking to find a few good men or women to crash the party." He raises his hands. "Hey, I don't judge. That's your job." He mock-shoots Everett with a laugh.

I'm not laughing.

If either Noah or Everett asked to have another woman join the fray, I'd have their head on a platter and I'd do it with my duller butter knife, too.

"Lemon's sister works here—as a dance instructor." Everett is smooth with the lie

robed in the truth. “Noah thought we should head down to the casino before we left so he could show us how fast he can make fifty bucks disappear.”

“You mean double my money,” Noah says, all too eager to play along. “Hey, diapers are expensive. A man has to do what a man has to do.”

“Or you can put it on Everett’s credit card,” I say and we all share a laugh at that one—sans Everett, of course. But in truth, with Carlotta, Evie, and me on his credit card, it’s hard to tell where the big financial blows are coming from.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself tonight,” Everett says as he glances at the table Caudwell just left.

Caudwell sighs, and a weary look settles over his features. “Yeah, with the singles’ mingle event tonight, I didn’t expect this place to be so lively. The energy doesn’t seem to jive with my luck—of which I don’t seem to have any.” He gives a mournful laugh.

Everett purses his lips at the man. “Rumor has it, you’ve got quite the gambling habit. And quite the debt to match.”

Caudwell’s eyes narrow at the thought, and he certainly doesn’t deny it. “I know how it looks,” he says, glancing around, clearly not wanting to draw attention. “Okay, fine. I may have a problem. I’ll admit, I need help. It’s been a struggle for me for a bit.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” Noah says. “Where are you getting the funds? Are you running your empire dry?”

Caudwell closes his eyes a moment too long. “I’m trying not to do that. If you want the truth, I’ve been borrowing heavily from friends.”

“Friends?” I tip my head his way. “Would one of those friends happen to be Romeo Langford?”

The man inches back and his mouth falls open, just as Sweetheart floats on by. “Good work, Lottie! I’d help, but these women would be lost without my supernatural tips and tricks. In fact, I’ve already landed Spicy Shelly in a dark corner with a handsome suitor. The way they’re going at it, why, she should have a full litter by spring.”

Who says Shelly is nothing like me?

Caudwell scratches the back of his head. “All right, if you must know. I owe Romeo twenty grand. And yeah, he ends up dead, and here I am, still very much alive. It’s not a good look, I know. But I promise you, I didn’t do it.”

“Twenty grand is a lot of incentive,” Noah says, as he blows out a breath.

“Incentive for what? To make things worse for myself? I’m not an idiot, Detective.” He points at Noah, his expression turning serious. “You do your job right, and you’ll figure that out on your own. No offense, but I’ve done my own digging, and so far, you’ve yet to get it right.” He turns to Everett, giving him a sober look. “And if that’s the case, I’m looking to you to help me land the best defense attorney out there.”

With that, he turns and walks off, disappearing into the crowd before any of us can get another word in.

Carlotta trots over before I can soothe any hurt feelings Noah might have. It might have been the truth, but those words stung just to hear them. And sure enough, Sweetheart floats up right by her side.

“All right, you smokin’ sweethearts,” Carlotta calls over to us. “It looks as if my work here is done.” She checks her watch. “And my work upstairs is about to begin.

Follow me. The more, the merrier.”

“Where are we headed?” Noah growls her way. Mostly because wherever Carlotta leads us there’s always trouble.

“Buck up, Foxy, we’re headed to a party to end all parties.”

Now this I’ve got to see.

We head upstairs, and as soon as I see it, I nearly pass out.

### LOTTIE

Carlotta leads the way with her arm hooked through mine as we step through a velvet curtain and into the dimly lit upstairs area of Red Satin. It's the naughty boom-boom room with a whole lot of va-va-voom up on that stage and not a lot of anything else.

The bass is thumping (which, in turn, means the twins are bumping), a series of colorful spotlights sway across the ceiling, and the music is way too loud for my eardrums to ever be safe.

Glittery boas are draped across each of the scantily clad women on stage, and the place holds the scent of cheap beer, even cheaper cologne, and the underlying scent of French fries.

The scantily clad waitresses are parading about with trays of glorious cheesy nachos and every last molecule in my body demands to have them. Heck, my body practically demands that I dive into the deep end of a vat full of that orange goo.

Ooh. I wonder if I could have Everett arrange for that to happen?

We push our way past the crowd, and Carlotta points to the front.

"Now that's what I call a party," she says, clapping and whooping it up.

I lean in and blink hard, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing.

Noah and Everett pause right by my side and look equally stumped at the sight before

us.

“What?” I hiss as my eyes grow wide.

It takes a minute to register, but there’s a table full of women seated right up front and I think I recognize every single one of them!

Sam is there and it looks as if she has baby Willow papoosed to her chest. Meg is next to her, and I can see baby Piper’s little head poking out of the carrier strapped to her mama’s chest as well.

Lainey is here! She’s holding her belly and laughing at something Keelie is telling her.

Keelie is here?

And that’s not all. I also see my mother, Suze, Charlie, Effie, Lily, Ivy Fairbanks , and Naomi Turner, too.

“Oh my word!” I say, pulling Carlotta in close. “What on earth is going on here?”

Carlotta sheds a grin twice as cheesy as those nachos. “I found out Meg was coming in to pick up her paycheck, so I thought, why not get the rest of the girls together for an impromptu surprise bachelorette party? I made a few calls, and—bam!—here we are. And I even got Mr. Sexy to pitch in for food. Free nachos for everyone ,” she shouts that last bit from the top of her lungs, and the entire place lights up with a whoop .

“Everett!” I laugh as I give him a playful swat on the arm. “You knew about this, and you didn’t tell me?”

He shrugs. “That’s not how surprises work. But I would’ve said something if we weren’t already headed this way.”

I narrow my eyes on Carlotta once again. “Okay, I’m impressed you were able to pull this off. But no offense, I would have helped you come up with something other than watching a bunch of women lose their clothes.”

She shoots me a look. “I don’t need your noggin’ knocking up against mine, Lot Lot. Trust me, I can figure out how to throw a good party all by my lonesome. I already put in a call to the boys across the street. They’re hopping over and putting on a banana hammock show just for us. Let’s just say the managers at both places have owed me a favor for a very long time, and I decided it’s time to collect.”

“Wow,” I say, genuinely impressed. “You really do know how to have a good time.”

Both Everett and Noah raise a brow my way.

“A good time for other people.” I quickly self-correct. “Obviously.” I wrinkle my nose and shrug.

Sweetheart zips in leaving a trail of tiny pink stars in her wake. “Men in banana hammocks? What’s the point of that? Men in my breed parade around naked all day long. Why do you think I enjoy the dog park so much? And oh, how I enjoy watching them run, and run, and have I mentioned run ? You poor humans are so painfully reserved with your bodies. Imagine how freeing it would be to walk around in the nude.”

I try to picture it for a moment before turning to Noah and Everett, and holy heaven, I just got an eyeful, even if it was in my imagination.

I shake my head a bit. Noah and Everett running around in the nude would be far too

much for the women of this world to handle.

I nod over at Everett because I'll be sure to share my thoughts with him later and perhaps we can test out exactly how freeing it could be.

Noah winks my way as if he heard my internal musing and I gasp.

“Whatever you're dreaming up, I'm in,” he says and I gasp twice as hard.

Good grief. I didn't say any of that out loud, did I?

These hormones have me all mixed up, and throw in catastrophically loud music, and far too many nachos (that have yet to get in my belly) and, well—I might just find a nude Noah and Everett in my bedroom later tonight if I'm not careful.

And if that's the case, Everett will certainly put a bullet in Noah's chest and bury him underneath our rose garden. Those thorny flowers might be frozen still, but come spring, they would have a remarkable bloom because of it—or more to the point, because of Noah.

He always did want to help with the flowers, but I'm pretty sure that's not what he meant.

Every one of those familiar faces waves us over, and we weave our way through the throngs of customers as the heavy thump of dance music rattles our bones.

The lights blink off and the room goes dark and they flick back on, only to reveal every last woman on stage is naked as the day she was born.

Something tells me there aren't enough nachos in the world to get me through this night.

LOTTIE

I make a beeline to Keelie and Lainey right here in Red Satin Gentlemen's Club. Although tonight it might as well be called Red Satin Ladies Lounge for all the females congregating in the audience.

Lainey is wearing a shimmering emerald dress that drapes gracefully over her distended belly. And Keelie is wearing a vanilla-colored sweater and matching jeans, and both just so happen to match her hair. She's so brave. With Lyla Nell around, I haven't worn white in a year.

"You girls," I say, pulling them both into a hug. "Keelie! I thought you had a parent-teacher meeting!"

"It was canceled at the last minute," she says. "And I got the text from Aunt Carlotta as soon as I found out. I was already dressed, and in the car. Bear is watching the baby, so I figured why not?"

Lainey nods. "Besides, Carlotta has the persuasive powers of a used car salesman with a quota to meet. How could we resist?"

Keelie laughs. "Plus, how do you say no to a free nacho platter?"

"Amen to that." I shake my head with a laugh. "And Lainey, you are far too big to be traveling to Leeds on your own! And who has the kids?"

"Forest is watching them," she says, pulling me into the seat between them. "Mom

drove both Sam and me here. By the way, I'm in love with both Willow and Piper. Is there such a thing as baby fever when you're already nine months pregnant?" She pats her belly as if it were a drum.

"Yes," I tell her. "But that might have more to do with the fact women wish they could have their bodies back to themselves at that point."

We share a quick laugh because we can both commiserate.

Keelie points to her flat stomach. "I still fit in my jeans and I'm not sorry."

"Show-off." Lainey pulls forth a tray of nachos and hands it to her and the three of us make quick work of it.

A waitress shows up with a tray of glowing pink cocktails in margarita glasses and hoists them up. "Mocktails for everyone," she calls out and we let out a collective whoop of excitement.

I take a look around and spot Noah having a beer while chatting with Ivy.

Everett is nodding at something my mother is telling him. And both Sam and Meg look like zombies seated side by side—those matching dark circles under their eyes aren't exactly helping their plight.

Suze is standing and snapping her fingers while staring at the stage. Every now and again she opens her mouth and her teeth glint like a sunburst. I can never get used to that.

Suddenly, the lights go out, and when they come back on, the bevy of boob-bearing beauties has done a disappearing act.

The stage begins to pulsate in colors of pink and blue, the half a dozen acrylic poles light up a bright shade of red, and out from behind the curtain stride about a dozen shirtless men dressed in chaps, boots, and with red sequin cowboy hats sitting cockeyed on their heads.

The music amps up with a lot more thumping and bumping than before as they congregate in front of us with their hip-yrating moves.

It takes less than ten seconds for those chaps to come off in one well-choreographed, yet violent maneuver, only to reveal those long-anticipated glittery banana hammocks underneath.

Anticipated by other people.

I quickly stand and make my way next to Noah and Everett, who seem to be frowning in unison.

I'm about to say something when Ivy elbows Noah.

"What do you think, Detective?" she asks. "Is this part of your routine after-hours investigation?"

Noah takes a swig of his beer and frowns twice as hard. "I'd say this is a little outside of my jurisdiction."

"Well, it's not out of mine," Ivy says before belting out a woo-hoo and dancing her way to the edge of the stage.

The men strut forward, and each and every last banana hammock-wearing one of them curls their fingers our way while calling for us to join them.

“We need all of you up here right now,” the tallest of the bunch demands and the crowd goes wild.

“ Here we go, ladies ,” Carlotta calls out with her voice rising over the music. “ Yeehaw! You heard the boys and you’d better listen. Don’t make them call the sheriff, or you just might get yourself arrested.”

“Good grief,” I mutter. “There’s no way I’m getting up there.”

“Pish posh,” she says, coming my way. “You’re going first, Lot.” She practically shoves me up the side stairs until I’m standing on the stage with its neon flashing lights glowing beneath my feet. “People always want what you’ve got. You’re what they call a man-fluencer . And let’s face it. When you filled your belly with a bunch of Little Yippies, half the town got knocked up. Hey, wait a minute... You should consider donating a few bucks to me and make a big spectacle of it, too, would ya? I bet I could rake in fifty grand within half an hour.”

“Nobody looks up to me like that.”

“I didn’t say they looked up to you. I’m saying they’re too afraid you might kill ’em if you find out they’re not on your team.”

I take a moment to glare at her. “I’ve got someone I’d like to kill right about now.”

“Lighten up, Lot,” she says as a couple of cowboys head our way. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves some entertainment tonight!”

Soon enough, the entire lot of us is on stage, sans Everett and Noah. They happen to be sharing a look that borders on amusement and the need to commit a homicide.

Hips are swinging, clothes are falling off, and questionable body parts are waving in

the wind—and that’s just the women.

Two of the cowboys land their glittery hats on my mother and Suze, and within seconds, both of those women are mounted on the backs of those men and bucking as if they’re about to win the Kentucky Derby.

“Sweet mother of—” I choke on a laugh as my mother cackles like I haven’t heard in years. Her hat is askew, and her cheeks are flushed with pure delight.

“ Ride ’em, cowgirls ,” Carlotta shouts, throwing an arm around Meg, who’s now got one hand on Piper’s head, shielding her from the chaos ensuing all around.

Even Sweetheart has attached herself to the back of one of these gyrating cowboys and is howling away with delight.

Suze raises her hat in the midst of the melee. “To impromptu bachelorette parties and questionable life choices!” Her gold teeth glitter as if to emphasize that last point.

“ Cheers ,” everyone shouts, and soon I’m spun in a circle by a man with abs that could probably deflect bullets.

Everyone seems to be having the time of their lives.

With the exception of Romeo and Juliette.

They’re too dead to party.

But there’s a killer out there who is still very much alive, and far too free for my liking.

There’s a party in a prison cell I’d like to make sure they attend. And I’d love nothing

more than to send them there myself.

LOTTIE

To say my brief detour to Leeds turned into an exercise in exhaustion is like saying Honey Lake is a bit damp.

Since Noah drove himself this evening, he took off to pick up something from Mangias for us to nibble on back at the house while Everett and I picked up Lyla Nell.

By the time we meet back at the house, the lights are on, Noah has a fire going, and he lets me know he's fed the cats, along with Toby.

"And you've done something else," I say, following my nose into the kitchen where he has a veritable feast fit for an Italian king.

"Oh my word." I drop my purse to the floor as I magnetize toward the island that just so happens to be filled with every single one of my favorite dishes from that bellissimo eatery. "Three large pizzas?" I marvel as I ogle the buffet sprawled out before me. Pepperoni, sausage, and pineapple and Canadian bacon, too—it's a new thing I'm into, and I think the twins are playing a part in that. "A full sheet of lasagna and a tray of chicken marsala!" I groan hard as I name each of them. "Osso buco, chicken parmesan, fettuccine Alfredo, focaccia bread, and gnocchi. Noah, you really are a man after my heart."

Everett steps into the kitchen after landing Lyla Nell in her bed and his chest expands at the sight before us. "Looks like someone worked up an appetite at the strip joint." He shoots Noah an amused look as he says it.

“Very funny,” Noah grunts as we all load up our plates.

Carlotta and Sweetheart come in on our heels and they do the very same thing. Or more to the point, Carlotta is nice enough to do it for our ghostly guest.

“Can you believe in twenty-four hours we’ll be smack in the middle of a double wedding?” I say as I waddle out of the kitchen with my plate piled high with enough Italian savory delights to feed a small island nation. “Of course, I’ve still got those wedding cakes on my mind. But don’t you worry, I’ve got a little surprise for our brides. It’s more or less done, but it still needs to be put together. My team is finishing up with the rest of the sweet treats and I still need to go in early to put the finishing touches on everything before we head to Fallbrook to take Ava and Olivia out to brunch.”

“It sounds like it’s going to be a full and perfect day,” Noah says.

A sigh escapes me. “It would be if we could catch a killer. I can’t believe whoever shot an arrow through the hearts of those two people is still prancing around on the planet—and they might just be prancing around right here in Honey Hollow.”

“Not for long, Lot,” Noah says, almost under his breath, and it makes me wonder if there’s something he’s not telling me.

I wouldn’t be surprised. In my condition, it might be best if I don’t prod too much either.

We head to the living room and turn on the TV while gorging on our meals, and I blow out a breath as I sink into the sofa.

“It feels like heaven not having to stand on my feet one second longer. If the twins get any bigger, I might end up bedbound or else risk snapping my legs like a candy

cane.”

“It’s you who’s getting bigger, Lot,” Carlotta rudely points out. “And if you keep putting away the lasagna like that, you’ll get bigger still. We all know those little legal eagle squirts you got swimming around in your Olympic-sized belly only weigh about three pounds each.”

“They each weigh close to six,” I tell her. “I saw Dr. Barnette just last week.” I get a poke in the ribs and gasp, and then it repeats itself again and again. “Ooh, speaking of the twins. Quick—lay your hands on my belly. They’re going off like a popcorn factory.”

“It’s probably just gas,” Carlotta says. “I’ve had that go off in my belly like a popcorn factory, too.”

Both Noah and Everett place their hands softly over my stomach, and sure enough, the twins put on a show.

Noah shakes his head. “I will never stop marveling at the miracle taking place in there.”

“I still can’t believe they’ll be here in a few short weeks—or less,” Everett says, leaning over and landing a kiss on my cheek.

“Twins, as in two of them,” I point out and he nods.

“We’ll need names eventually,” he says as he gives my belly a soft pat.

Everett and I have been volleying names back and forth each night as if it were a sport. And yet neither of us seems to be scoring any points in that department because nothing seems to be sticking.

“If they’re girls, how about we name them after our mothers?” I shrug up at him and Carlotta gives a whoop of approval. “Miranda and Eliza,” I say. “We can even come up with cutesy nicknames they can go by if you want.”

Carlotta harumphs. “What’s wrong with Carlotta?”

“Honestly?” I shoot her a look over my pizza. “Aren’t there enough of us by now? We’re up to four already.”

“I think you should think outside the box,” Sweetheart says and I place my hands over Noah’s and Everett’s so they can hear her, too. “Human names have always felt rather stuffy to me. How about something more light and airy like Peanut, Pumpkin, Noodle, Scruffy, or Moose?” She turns to Carlotta. “Scruffy and Moose happen to be my beaus at the dog park. Neither of them is fixed, and dare I say, a banana hammock would not suffice.”

“And on that note,” Everett says. “How about we switch gears? What’s going on with the case?”

“I’ve got nothing,” Noah is quick to respond.

“I figured you didn’t,” Everett shoots back. “That’s why I was asking Lemon.”

A little laugh bubbles in my throat, but I can’t help it. I love it when Everett acknowledges my work in the investigative field.

“Let’s see”—I think on it for a second—“I’ve only spoken to a few people and I’d hardly call any of them suspects. There’s Venus Finnegan.”

“Her husband is a great guy.” Noah ticks his head as he says it. “A real family man. He’d do anything for them.”

Everett purses his lips. “Even kill for his wife?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Carlotta says and Everett gives a definitive nod.

“ Ooh , thank you. And good thought,” I say, patting him on the leg. “Venus was in the process of losing her business had that lawsuit gone through. They could have tied her up in legal fees and cost her more than the name of her brand. But I’ll be honest, I’m grateful Venus gets to keep things the way they are. I’ve never been to a more elegant establishment. And those desserts were out-of-this-world. If she wasn’t charging out-of-this-world prices, I might be shaking in my culinary boots. But as it stands, we’re not competitors in that sense. We basically serve two different markets. She’s an upper-end luxury brand fit for royalty, and I’m more or less servicing your everyday Jane and Joe.”

“Sort of like Foxy and Sexy,” Carlotta says between bites of her lasagna. “You’ve got your everyday Joe in Foxy. And Sexy is a king who lives in the lap of luxury.”

“ Ooh ,” Sweetheart muses. “I do love a good lap to snuggle up in.”

Carlotta nods. “So does Lot Lot.”

She’s not wrong.

“I much prefer the Cutie Pie to that fancy place,” Noah says as he raises a hand. “I for one will never stop enjoying your donuts, Lot.”

Everett growls before nodding my way, “And your fudge brownies will always be my favorite, along with everything else you put your hand to.” He kisses the back of my hand to exemplify his point, then proceeds to kiss his way right up my arm.

“Okay, who’s next?” Noah gruffs and motions for things to move along—and not in

any amorous direction.

“I spoke with Shelly Everly,” I say.

“That’s my girl,” Carlotta says with whoop. “Shelly Raisin’ Helly and I were supposed to do a gig out in Fallbrook, but she had something come up and had to cancel.”

“What came up?” I ask, mostly so I can wolf down the rest of my pepperoni pizza before I go on.

The pizza at Mangias is nothing like I’ve ever had. The crust is thick and soft like a pastry, the sauce is tangy in the very best way, and they don’t skimp on it either, and the mozzarella cheese is piled two inches high at least. And as for their toppings, it more or less rained pepperoni all over this beauty.

Carlotta shrugs. “She’s moving her office from Hollyhock to right here on Main Street.”

“Oh, nice,” I say. “Maybe she’ll finally give me a write-up. I’d love to have some free advertising for my bakery.” I pause a moment. “Although I’m not sure we have an office building on Main Street.”

“That’s because you’re too round as a house to notice anything that doesn’t spit out a pizza, a donut, or a plate of wontons,” she points out.

And well, she’s not wrong.

I shrug it off. “Anyway, it was Shelly who told me about the lawsuit with Venus. And come to think of it, Shelly told me about Caudwell’s gambling problem, too—which he admitted to this evening.”

Noah grunts, “What is Shelly’s connection to the deceased?”

“She worked for Romeo before changing careers,” I tell him.

“And she sure changed for the better.” Carlotta hoists her pizza in the air.

“Hear, hear,” Sweetheart cheers. “Just yesterday we visited a bakery out in Cringle that specializes in Christmas treats all year long. I had the dark chocolate yule log with coffee frosting and toffee bits.” She sighs at the memory of it. “While I was still alive, anything with cocoa was strictly off-limits. But now that I’m immortal, it’s part of my regular diet. I should have bit the big one ages ago.”

“If calories don’t count, sign me up,” Carlotta says with a laugh before sobering up quickly and shooting me a look. “Don’t even think about it.”

I make a face. “Anyway, then there’s Caudwell. He’s got the biggest motive of them all if you ask me.”

Noah nods. “Twenty thousand motives, locked and ready to go.”

“I just remembered something.” Everett frowns. “I did see a grease stain on his dress shirt, just on the left side of his ribcage right after the murders occurred. I don’t know if it was there before, but I’m pretty certain a crossbow can get grimy enough to cause it.”

I gasp at the thought. “Especially if you’re holding it close to your body. Oh, Noah, what do you think?”

“Guilty as charged. I say we cuff him.” He winks my way. “Someone needs to be booked for these homicides. It may as well be him.”

“I can’t imagine him doing anything like that,” Everett says, putting down his plate on the coffee table and Pancake doesn’t hesitate to jump right in his lap. Poor Waffles looks as if he missed his moment. Those sweet cats really miss my lap more than I do.

“Didn’t you hear the guy?” Carlotta asks Everett. “Foxy doesn’t care who did the deed. He just wants to beat Lot Lot to the finish line for once.”

“Very funny,” Noah grunts into his pizza.

“Caudwell is a pretty great guy,” Everett goes on. “But I guess he admitted to having a pretty great flaw as well. He could lose his shirt if he doesn’t shape up soon.”

“Yup.” Noah leans into the sofa. “And if he killed those people, he’ll lose his freedom, too.”

We finish up with First Dinner—that’s what I’ve affectionately started to call my early evening grazing parade. The one that occurs closer to midnight is where I really pack on the pounds.

Noah scrolls through his laptop as he works on the case, Everett is lost in the game, and I’m lost in my phone scrolling through the social media sites of all three of my so-called suspects.

Shelly’s social media is the most delicious by far. Caudwell’s is pretty scrumptious, too, but I can tell he has a media team behind his posts. They’re not personal in nature, and each one feels like an ad for one of his products.

Venus’ is by far the most fun for me to look at because it’s rife with cute pictures of her adorable kids. In fact, I scroll back so far, I’m seeing them all as infants. And wouldn’t you know it, her son came out with a shock of red hair right from the get-

go.

Oh, how I can't wait to see what my sweet babes will look like. Will they have hair?  
Will they?—

I stop cold as I spot the very next picture on Venus Finnegan's feed.

“Oh my goodness,” I say with a heavy sigh. “I know who the killer is.”

NOAH

It's Valentine's Day, that heart-shaped day we've all been waiting for, also known as the day of the double wedding.

The Honey Hollow Bed and Breakfast is decorated to the hilt in all things hearts, all things floral, and basically, all things wedding.

The building itself reminds me of a haunted house I visited as a kid—it's tall, white, stately, with lots of columns, a sweeping wrought-iron staircase that leads to the second level, lots of dark wood flooring inside, creamy marble counters, lots of rooms, lots of dark halls, an entire army of chandeliers, and it even has a room made of glass—the conservatory. Which happens to be the very room where the holy matrimony times two is set to take place.

I spot Lottie off near the library, talking to what looks like thin air.

Have I mentioned this place is inhabited by a family of ghosts? They're a lovable bunch if you're into machete-wielding little girls who are perpetually in a bad mood.

But I'm on the lookout for another girl entirely—my sister.

Miranda speeds this way, looking lovely in a long peach gown and carrying a bouquet of pink roses.

"Miranda," I call out, and she pauses in front of me, nearly out of breath.

“Lainey has Lyla Nell with her in my office,” she says, eager to pass me by. “I thought we might need a room away from the conservatory where the kids can take a break. Of course, any of you are welcome to go up to my suite and watch them there as well. I’m just a little busy at the moment.”

“Well, thank you. I was actually going to ask if you knew where I could find my sister.”

“Oh, that.” She waves me off, and the diamonds on her bracelet sparkle and shine. I know for a fact my father didn’t gift them to her. That is, unless he’s committed a bank heist. And it wouldn’t be the first time. “I’ve converted the formal dining room into a bridal dressing room. Just knock on the shoji screen I placed in front of it!”

She takes off, and I head for the dining room, giving a little friendly knock right over the do not enter sign.

Mom pokes her head out. “Oh, Noah, come in,” she says with those gold teeth of hers gleaming.

I will never in a million years times a million get used to that.

“It’s just Noah,” she squawks and sounds more than a little disappointed as she pats a tiny bump on her chest. It’s then I see she’s holding my shiny new niece, Willow.

“Expecting Elvis?” I tease.

Elvis Presley was my mother’s favorite singer, along with her biggest celebrity crush. I may have caught her smooching with his album covers a time or two.

“I thought you might be Jed,” she says.

The dining room is no more—or more to the point, it's covered in veils, dresses of every shape and size, flowers, more flowers, and what looks to be the entire cosmetics counter at the mall.

Meg is seated at the far end with a white robe split down the middle, and I can see she's nursing Piper, while Keelie stands behind her, pulling and tugging at her tresses. And Charlie stands guard in front while dusting the cheeks of the bride-to-be with a fuzzy-looking brush.

And alas, my sister is on the opposite end of the room, scrolling through her phone at a frenetic pace and frowning. Her hair is in rollers, her face is covered in green goo, and she's wrapped in a robe that looks as if it's seen better days.

Mom continues to sway with baby Willow close to her chest, and the infant seems content, more or less, considering she's just inches from my mother's stunning smile. And I don't mean stunning in a good way.

"Sam," I say, heading her way. "You can't be expecting Jed," I say to both her and my mother while I pull Sam in for a quick embrace. "That would be bad luck to see the groom before the wedding."

"Don't be silly, Noah." Mom openly scoffs at me. "Meg and Hook have been canoodling all afternoon."

"And I woke up with Jed," Sam points out, not taking her eyes off her phone. "I made it crystal clear he had to be here an hour before the wedding began. Why does he have to be chronically late for everything?"

"Not everything." Mom rolls her eyes toward the window. "He certainly showed up just in time when both you and Meg were ovulating."

“So true,” I say, shaking my head before snapping out of my Jed Silver-inspired trance and smile over at my sister. “Are you ready to do this?”

She jerks her phone from her line of sight and growls my way. “Do I look ready to do anything, Noah?” she shouts as the green goo starts to slide off her face.

“Don’t mind her.” Mom waves me away. “It’s just wedding day jitters.” Mom sheds a toothy smile while patting little Willow over the back.

As soon as that kid sees what’s holding her, she’s going to test out those lungs once again.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I ask my sister, and I mean it with everything in me. I’d do anything, even put Jed Silver in the morgue if that was her last request as a single woman.

Heck, I’d do it for her if it were an afterthought.

“There is something you could do for me,” Sam says, getting lost in scrolling through her phone again, this time far more frantically than before. “Go out there and make sure everything looks just right. And then sit down and enjoy yourself. At least one of us should.”

“Okay,” I say with a light chuckle. “But if you need me, I’ll be right in the next room vacuuming up the dessert table. And just so you know, I’m packing heat.” I touch my gun with my elbow as it sits beneath the jacket of my suit, and Sam doesn’t even acknowledge my attempt to add levity to the situation.

I drop a kiss to the top of Willow’s head and make my way out of the bridal zone.

I don’t get two feet into the hall when I hear Willow exercising her lungs once again.

I'm guessing she's seen my mother's shining smile.

I'm about to make my way to the dessert spread when I nearly run right through Everett.

"Watch it, big guy." I frown his way.

"You watch it, twerp," he says, and I'm not amused.

"Hey, have you seen Jed? My sister is in a mood, and I think he's the one who's putting her in it. I know she'd feel better once she knew he was here."

Everett's face hardens to stone. He gives a brief glance over his shoulder before hitching his head toward an alcove just shy of the conservatory.

"We need to talk."

### EVERETT

There are some things in life I just do not look forward to, and telling Noah that his soon-to-be brother-in-law has some major moral flaws is one of them.

I lead us down the dimly lit hall to the right of the conservatory. The wedding is still an hour plus away, but throngs of people are arriving at regular intervals. If this keeps up, I'm not sure the entire bed and breakfast will be large enough to house us.

"What's going on?" Noah says, quickly losing his patience. "Cut to the quick. My anxiety is starting to build. It's my sister's wedding day. I have a lot of emotions running rampant."

"You asked about Jed, and I'm going to tell you."

His eyes widen a notch. "What do you know?"

I glance past him and sigh. "Look, I don't want to be an alarmist."

Noah pulls me in by the lapels and shakes me. "Speak," he barks so loud his voice reverberates off my skin.

"All right, geez." I shove him off me. "Don't make me give you two shiners in one week. By the way, it's healing nicely."

He shakes his head like a warning.

“Okay.” I wince a little because I have a feeling I know how this will go. Not ideal right before a wedding. “The night of the murders, I saw?—”

“The night of the murders?” His voice hikes along with the threat level in his eyes. “That was a week ago. You waited a week to tell me this?”

I offer him a stern look. “The night of the murders, I saw Jed at the Evergreen Manor. He was getting touchy-feely with some blonde. They were in my view for less than a minute. I don’t know what became of it, but I didn’t have a good feeling about it.”

“Neither do I.” Noah looks down at the floor as if he’s trying to decide what to do next. And I’m afraid I’m about to make that decision easier for him.

“And then the other night, I took a detour on my way home from the courthouse. I drove through Leeds to cut through traffic, and I happened to drive by Red Satin.”

He hikes a brow in amusement. “You stopped off at a strip club to unwind?” A lopsided grin starts to emerge, and I can practically see him picking out a wedding ring to gift to Lemon.

“No. Like I said, I was driving.” I lean into that last word. “Anyway, I saw him again. He was heading into the place, and I’m guessing he wasn’t there to gamble. It’s the same night Sam was at our house, and she said she received a text from him telling her that he was at the hospital looking for work and stumbled upon a class on baby care.” I say those last two words in air quotes because Jed should have known to say infant care. It would have been much more believable.

Noah blows out a heavy breath. “And it made him look like a saint in my sister’s eyes.”

“Look, we both know he’s no saint. But let’s not go off half-cocked just yet. Maybe

Jed is one of those guys who thinks because his wedding day is closing in on him, he'd better go and see what's out there one last time."

"With some blonde?" Noah cuts the air with his irritation. "And again at Red Satin?"

"We were there last night. So was your sister, so was Meg. No one got hurt. It was all in good fun. I spoke with Hook when I got here, and he laughed about it."

Noah averts his eyes. "Hook, much like my brother, laughs at everything in life." He sighs hard. "I'm not laughing. I'm going to have one serious talk with Jed when he gets here." He pulls out his phone. "In fact, I'm going to play nice, right up until he arrives." He shoots a text to someone, and my guess is it's the man of the hour.

"What did you say?"

"I let him know I couldn't wait to welcome him to the family. Then I told him to hurry up and get his behind down here." He gives a solemn nod. "That's when the real party begins."

"Noah, I caution you to go slow. The guy proposed to your sister. He's got rough edges. We know that. She knew that going in. Like I said, he could have been sowing his wild oats."

"Did you sow your wild oats before you married Lottie?" He shakes his head. "Never mind. You were a walking, talking wild oat. And by the way, I'm still not impressed with that ambush wedding you pulled off. You walked her into it, and you know it."

"Lemon married me of her own volition. Yes, I needed a spouse or I'd lose my inheritance, but I had someone in the queue, and it wasn't Lemon. Look, Noah, I'm not doing this with you. I see that Jed has your head spinning. I get it, Sam is your sister. You don't want her making a mistake."

“Do you think I should tell Sam?” The whites of his eyes expand.

“I don’t know,” I tell him. “It’s her wedding day. Her head probably isn’t in the greatest frame of mind. But then again, it is her wedding day.” I pat him on his arm. “I’m sure you’ll make the right move.”

I make my way out of the hall and head for the conservatory when something in the opposite direction snags my attention.

It’s Conner Saint, tucked in the shadows to the right of the bay window, and that same girl he was getting handsy with at the mall happens to be with him. They look pretty intense. She leans in and kisses him on the cheek before tapping him on the arm and nodding. And then she does a disappearing act.

I bet she was reassuring him they’d never get caught. Little do they both know...

I’m going to take care of this. This ends tonight. And so do Evie and Conner as a couple.

I make a beeline his way and pull him in by the shirt. “What the heck do you think you’re doing?”

“Dad?” Evie cries from behind as she runs over and plucks me off of him. Her hair is swept back, and she’s wearing a long peach gown with lace sleeves and looks like a princess. Because she is one. “What the heck are you doing?” Her voice escalates into a near panic.

“Ask him,” I growl. “Never mind. I’ll save him from having to come up with an excuse.” I pull out my phone and show Evie the incriminating picture.

“What the heck is this?” She squints at the screen. “Who the heck is this?” She looks

up at Conner as her face begins to crumble. “Are you cheating on me? I hate you!” she riots as she turns and runs off.

“Evie, wait ,” he calls out. “I can explain.” He starts in her direction, and I smash my hand to his chest.

“You’ve done enough. Get lost. You’re not invited here.”

I’m the one going after her.

It’s safe to say the Conner Saint Show is over.

He’s no saint, and I just proved it.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:48 pm*

LOTTIE

“ Y ou know, I’ve never been one to discriminate between breeds,” Sweetheart shimmies her way over to Thirteen. “How about you, Hot Stuff? Are you open to a tall, curly-furred cutie who knows how to have a good time?”

I’m standing just shy of the library right here in my mother’s happily haunted B&B with the very family of ghosts who is responsible for the haunting.

Thirteen purrs and mewls with his little ghostly whiskers twitching because he obviously approves of the offer at hand.

Thirteen would be the little black cat who has already spent all nine of his lives and he happens to live right here at my mother’s B&B along with Greer Giles, a gorgeous brunette about my age—albeit frozen in time—her plus-one, Winslow Decker, a handsome blond pig farmer who bit the big one about two hundred years ago, and their adopted daughter, little Lea, a forever six-year-old menace whose long, dark, stringy hair covers her face as much as it does the back of her head, and if it weren’t for her scuffed Mary Janes, you wouldn’t know if she was coming or going.

Lea wears a dingy pinafore, and her most prized accessory is the machete she wields in her hand. As fate would have it, her family was slaughtered right here on the grounds the B&B was built on, and she’s been bent on revenge ever since.

There are some things you just can’t move on from. I get it.

Greer giggles with delight as Sweetheart flirts away with the charming kitty. And

who could blame the cute pooch? Thirteen is a catch in this life and the next.

“You know, Lottie...” Greer leans in and those ebony stars in her dark hair shimmer like a river. She’s still wearing the white ruched dress she was killed in, and that dark crimson stain next to her heart stands as a reminder of that fateful night.

Honestly, I’ve always thought it sort of looks like a necrotic rose. All things considered, it does seem fitting.

“Sweetheart reminds me a little of myself.” Greer winks over at Winslow. “I loved me some male attention back in the day.”

“You still do,” Winslow says as he wraps his arms around her. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten what day it is.”

Greer gasps. “Valentine’s Day! Of course, it is.”

“How could you forget?” I ask. “My mother has this place practically gift-wrapped in pink and red hearts.”

“Well, I didn’t forget,” she says. “Miranda does love her holidays. But Valentine’s Day is my birthday in the afterlife.”

“Oh, that’s right,” I say, patting my belly. “You’d think I, of all people, would remember because I’m the one who found your body.”

We share a quick laugh, morbid as it is, just as Lainey trots over, holding her own belly as if it risked falling right off her frame from the sprint over.

“Lottie, you need to come quickly,” she says, panting. “Evie just ran into the quasi-daycare center Mom set up in her office. She’s upset and crying, and she won’t tell

me why—and now all the kids are crying, too. I don't know what to do to calm her down."

"Oh my word." I glance in that direction, and sure enough, I can hear a choir of screams. I turn to the ghosts among us. "I'll see you at the wedding."

Lainey shakes her head. "Oh, no, I'm going back in there with you," she says, leading the charge.

Lainey has no idea I can see the dead, speak to the dead, and more or less enjoy a cookie or two with the dead. And I don't know where they put those cookies either, I don't want to know, but I'm just glad they can nibble on a sweet treat now and again if they want to.

In a strange way, it makes me look forward to the afterlife myself. All the cake I can eat and not a calorie to count? Count me in.

My mother's office sits right behind the creamy marble reception counter and is lit up like the sun thanks to the harsh fluorescent lighting above. She really should do something about that. I'm not a fan of anything that highlights wrinkles.

The sound of a thousand kids screaming their lungs out fills the air, and they're all currently crawling all over Evie at the very same time.

Okay, so it's not technically a thousand. It's just Lyla Nell, Josie, and Little Bear. But it's a sad sight, nonetheless. Each of them is red-faced with a slick of tears running down their cheeks, and their noses are leaking like runaway slugs as well.

But Evie? She looks devastated in a way that I've never seen before.

"Evie?" I shout over the riot. "What in the world is happening here?" I grab a box of

tissues off my mother's desk, which happens to have a chaotic abundance of notebooks, paperwork, and knickknacks all over it. She's not the most organized person I know—and I blame her for my own chaotic disorganization. In truth, my office looks like it was hit by a hurricane and left for dead.

Lainey and I each grab a tissue and clean up every face we can reach, twice .

“ Evie ...” I struggle to get close to her because of my belly, so I pull her up, then wrap her in a hug as best I can. The twins kick up a storm because I think they'd like to hug her, too. “What's happening? Who do I have to kill?” I tease and she gives a mournful laugh.

“Conner Saint,” she blubbers. “And whoever that ho is that he's cheating on me with.”

“ What? ” I howl so loud all crying ceases for a moment, only to ratchet up at twice its volume.

“Oh my goodness,” Lainey howls twice as loud herself. “You are not going to have to kill him, Lottie. I'm going to do it for you.”

I shake my head at Evie. “You have no idea how much damage two women hopped up on enough hormones to fuel a rocket to Mars can do. And we are going to do some serious damage.”

The doorway darkens, and both Noah and Everett walk in with my mother on their heels.

“What did you girls do to my babies?” Mom screeches before shooing Lainey and me out the door, along with Noah and Everett. “Come to Glam Glam.” Mom pulls Evie into a hug, and poor Evie weeps over her shoulder. And within ten seconds, my

mother has wrangled that entire room to near silence.

“I’m sorry to hear about Evie and Conner,” Noah says. “But with things like this, it’s best it’s over between them before things get too far. Once you break that trust, it’s near impossible to get where you thought you were.” He nods my way with a mournful smile.

That’s exactly what happened to Noah and me. He forgot to mention the wife he had, albeit he was on the fast track to divorce and long separated. But nonetheless, I’d trust him with my life.

“I’m about to take off,” Noah says. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Oh, good,” I say, grabbing his hand. “Don’t leave any incriminating marks when you kill him. We can bury him under my rose garden. The world will never know.”

I leave out the fact that I was willing to help Everett bury Noah under my rose garden just a few days ago.

These hormones raging through my body really are lethal.

“I’m not killing Conner.” He frowns hard my way, as if he were shocked that I even brought up the prospect.

Was he not listening to anything we just said?

“I’m going to talk to Jed for a second,” he says. “I’ll see if I can’t get him to hurry this way. Sam’s nerves are all over the place.”

He shoots Everett a pointed look, and I know for a fact when they exchange that hardened expression, they’re bent on keeping something from me. Most likely

because of my delicate state, although they've done it while I wasn't hauling around a couple of extra humans as well.

But I couldn't care less about Jed right now. All of my ire is pointed at a young imbecile named Conner Saint.

Such a shame. I really did like him.

"Oooh ." Lainey doubles over. "Looks like my little sweet pea is craving a cookie." She shrugs my way. "What can I say? The kid has good ideas. I'll be at the dessert table if anyone needs me." She takes off, and Noah starts to step away as well.

"Wait," I say, grabbing him by the arm. "What about that stuff we learned last night about Venus?" Now it's me giving the pointed look.

Last night while I was scrolling through her stuff on social media, I found a throwback picture of her posing with a crossbow. And after some more digging, we discovered that she used to do archery in high school and was pretty good at it. Then she graduated to a crossbow and became a decorated arbalist. That looks like it lasted until she married Sean seven years ago and started their family.

Noah winces. "The stuff regarding Venus will have to wait. I already said hello to her in the conservatory. I know she'll be here all night, and I know where to find her tomorrow. I'm not worried about her taking off. I can't make an arrest yet. I don't have enough to back up my claim. But come tomorrow, I'll start calling around to all of the archery places in the area to see if anyone has rented any equipment recently or if she's a member. And yet, she might have a crossbow of her own. In that case, I'll need a warrant to search her home. But I'll be honest, if she did do this, I'd think Sean would be suspicious. He had to have known about the lawsuit, and he certainly knew how Romeo and Juliette met their fate. I'd like to think he'd come to me with that information."

Everett grunts, “If the shoe were on the other foot and you suspected Lemon, would you go running to Ivy?”

Noah cocks his head. “I’d make darn sure you were convicted of this crime.” He points at Everett before turning to me. “Your secret would be safe with me, Lottie.” He rocks back on his heels and casts a quick glance at the conservatory. “Point taken. If Sean suspects something, he’s not talking. Unless he plans on uprooting his family and moving to Canada.” He glances at his watch. “I gotta run.”

He takes off, and I turn toward the conservatory just in time to see Venus stepping inside.

“Lemon,” Everett growls. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Just try to stop me from having a cookie or two,” I say, holding my belly his way. “It’s time to feed the twins.”

And my craving for justice.

LOTTIE

Everett and I step into the conservatory, and it's an absolute wonderland of peach roses and sheer elegance.

A giant arch, dripping with those perfect peach poms, dominates the space—as if Cupid himself decided this was the spot to host the matrimonial event of the year. The chandeliers are sparkling so bright they're about to make the stars green with envy, the glass walls are sparkling, too, dozens upon dozens of acrylic chairs are lined up like soldiers, and the dessert bar stretches across the entire right wall.

The savory dishes are set to come out on the left side a little later, all courtesy of the Honey Pot Diner.

I already delivered the sweet treats from my bakery—including a tower of glazed donuts with sprinkles and a three-tiered pink champagne wedding cake with blue icing and raspberry lemon filling. I spiked two donuts on top to give it a playful bride-and-groom twist. And speaking of brides, I really hope Sam and Meg are happy with it.

There's another dessert table—and geez, is it fancy. It's done up with a silver tablecloth topped with a paisley overlay, and dozens of luxurious desserts sit perched on crystal-tiered platters. A tiny glittery sign in the center reads, From Cupid's Sweet Concoctions . And, wow, Cupid sure outdid himself tonight.

“Boy, I can't wait to eat everything on that table,” I whisper to Everett.

“Why are you whispering?”

“So my own desserts don’t hear that I’m about to cheat on them,” I say, just a touch louder this time.

Everett lifts a finger to respond, but before he can, a familiar-looking man pops up next to us.

“Caudwell.” Everett inches back. “Fancy meeting you here. Are you here for the wedding?”

Caudwell Belding looks dapper enough for the occasion—dark suit, dark hair slicked back, freshly shaven. If I didn’t know about his gambling problem, I’d almost say he’s got his act together.

“Actually, I was meeting up with Wiley for a drink. He’s one of my buddies down at the casino.”

“Ah, yes, Wiley.” Everett frowns.

I can’t help but frown myself.

Why am I not surprised that Noah’s father is still busy giving away my mother’s hard-earned money at the blackjack table?

But then, my mother knows full well what she’s gotten herself into with that Noah look-alike. Let’s be honest, those dimples could make almost any woman empty her pockets—and maybe her bank account, too.

Caudwell nods. “Wiley told me about the wedding, and I was about to head out when I ran into Detective Fox in the parking lot. I had no idea that was his son. Anyway, I

apologized to Noah for my behavior last night. It was unacceptable, and I'm very remorseful. After I apologized, I mentioned I'd like to apologize to you as well, and he let me know you were inside." He bows his head a little. "Everett, Lottie, please accept my sincerest apology for being so abrasive last night. It wasn't my finest hour. I tend to get a little testy after I lose big. And seeing that I lose big often, it's been a trend in my life for quite some time."

"No apology needed," I tell him.

"I agree," Everett says, taking my hand. "The only thing we want is for you to get help with your addiction. And yes, gambling is an addiction. It can fuel your dopamine receptors as much as drugs or alcohol and ruin your life just as effectively."

"You do need help." I nod his way. "Caudwell, I'd hate to see you lose your empire. Baker's Best Brand is literally one of the best in the baking business. You really have something special there."

"You're right." He nods. "And that's why I came by to tell Wiley he wouldn't be seeing me at the casino anymore. I reached out to my old sponsor at Gambler's Anonymous, and I'm going back. I care about my company, and I care about my products. In fact, I just heard that Romeo and Juliette didn't have a contingency plan in place, and their entire company is falling apart because of it."

"No contingency?" Everett tips his head at the man.

"None whatsoever. No one to run payroll, no one to restock, no one to sign the paychecks. The entire staff walked out this morning, and they're not coming back."

"That's terrible," I say. "Those poor people. I hope they can find work quickly."

He glances to his left. “I heard another rumor that Venus is expanding, and she’s already put out feelers to those who lost their jobs, letting them know she’s willing to fill as many positions as she can.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic,” I beam before realizing there might be a nefarious factor at play here.

Everett nods my way as if he just came to the same conclusion.

Caudwell says goodbye and lets us know he hopes we have a good time at the wedding.

“Caudwell”—Everett says as the man turns to leave—“why do you think Romeo and Juliette didn’t have the proper contingencies in place? Their business was thriving, and by the looks of it, it seemed airtight.”

His lips tug down. “I don’t know. I do know they were fighting a lawsuit, and that may have played into it. Romeo mentioned to me once that as soon as that was through, they were going to build a proper corporate structure.”

The lawsuit!

I make big eyes at Everett, and he gives a covert nod.

“And one more thing...” Caudwell gives a sheepish smile. “Not to toot my own horn, but since you already know that I owed Romeo a good chunk of change, I’ve decided to borrow against my own company for the exact same amount and create a fund for those of his employees in need of help fast. It’s the least I can do since I couldn’t make amends.” He puts his hands in his pockets, and his jacket pulls back just enough to reveal a grease stain on his left flank.

The grease stain!

Everett nods to it. “What happened?”

Caudwell looks down and frowns. “More like what keeps happening. My radiator is busted, and I keep having to fill it with water. And I swear each time I lean into the engine, I get a stain in the exact same spot. I guess I never learn. But now that I’m committed to steering clear of Leeds, I should have more than enough to fix it. Or who knows? I might even reward myself with a new car. Have a great time, you two.”

He takes off with a wave, and I shrug up at Everett.

“He said all the right things,” I muse.

Everett nods. “And I tend to believe every one of them.”

“Hello, you two,” Shelly Everly says cheerfully as she comes this way, draped in an eggplant-colored sheath that matches her hair and looks perfectly elegant. “This is going to be the best double wedding I’ve ever been to,” she trills on her way past us. “But then, this is the only double wedding I’ve been to. Oh, and Lottie”—she stops short—“your desserts are bar none better than Venus’, but please don’t tell her.” She winces. “And you’re also the reason I’m about ten thousand calories over my limit today. The desserts from your bakery are absolutely irresistible.”

“Well, thank you for the compliment, and you look far too fit to ever worry about a few sweet treats.”

“Well, thank you right back.” She laughs. “I’ve taken up a few physical hobbies as of late, not to mention hitting the gym.” She holds up an arm and flexes a muscle. “You know what they say, use it or lose it.”

She takes off, and I shrug up at my handsome husband. “You heard the woman. The desserts from my bakery are irresistible.”

“I think the owner of that bakery is irresistible, too.” He leans in and steals a kiss off my lips. “And she is by far my favorite dessert.”

“Ooh, sounds to me like you’re going to get a sweet treat later on tonight.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

I gasp as I see Venus heading this way with a grin.

Time to find out what secrets might be hiding behind that smile.

LOTTIE

“Y ou both look so wonderful.” Venus Finnegan is quick to dole out the compliment right here in the conservatory of my mother’s B&B where a double wedding will go down in less than an hour’s time. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

“Thank you,” I tell her, pinching at the peach gown my mother ordered for me. It has a mesh layer across the chest and fitted arms, and oddly by some miracle, I think it might actually be flattering on me. “You look stunning yourself.” And I mean it. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a waterfall of curls, and she’s donned the most luscious emerald velvet dress. “Happy Valentine’s Day to you, too. I hope you have something special planned later with your husband.”

What am I saying? The woman is a killer, or at the very least a very strong prospect for the killer at hand. Unfortunately, the only thing she’ll have planned later is prison. And after that, more prison.

“I do have something special planned for later,” she says quickly. “Each year when the kids go to bed, my husband and I have a glass of bubbly and some very much needed alone time. Trust me, the more kids you have, the more of a precious commodity alone time becomes.”

“We’re aware,” Everett says. “Carlotta lives with us as well.”

The woman’s mouth falls open. “Well, you must laugh all the time. That woman is a hoot!” She glances over my shoulder. “And Shelly must think so, too. I didn’t think I’d see Shelly Everly here tonight. But I guess she and Carlotta are great friends.”

Everett tosses a glance over his shoulder. “Speaking of Everly.” His cheek twitches as he looks my way. “I’d better go see how she’s doing.” He leans in. “Please stay on the topic of dessert and children.” He closes his eyes a moment as if pleading silently with me. “Pardon me, ladies. I’ll be right back.”

He takes off, and I shake my head at her. “Our daughter Everly—who we call Evie—is going through a devastating breakup. And it all happened under twenty minutes ago. My mother is with her.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear it.” She presses a hand to her chest and looks equally crestfallen for Evie. “I know how painful a breakup at that age can be. Especially when it comes to first love.”

A clatter goes off behind her, and we look that way to see Carlotta and Sweetheart making quick work of my donut tower.

“Don’t worry, Lottie. I’m on it,” Effie calls out. Both she and Lily decided to wear matching powder blue dresses with an apron featuring the bakery’s logo on it, and they look perfectly professional and yet elegant at the same time. “I’ve got a van full of these glazed delights, and not even Carlotta can plow her way through all of them.” She salutes me as she ducks out the back of the building.

“Unfortunately, she has no idea what Carlotta is capable of,” I say and both Venus and I share a mournful laugh.

And well, Sweetheart is basically a bottomless pit. If she keeps up her donut spree, the entire state will be out of the confection in an hour.

I look Venus up and down. Speaking of what people are capable of...

“I’m sorry to bring this up, but I’d like to talk to you about Romeo and Juliette.”

“Sure, anything.”

“That night at the Heartstrings and Sweet Things Spectacular you were tense when they walked up to us.”

She lifts her chin. “Juliette wasn’t a big fan of mine. I’m not too sure she liked other women. I think maybe she was insecure in her relationship with Romeo.”

“Shelly was with us that night, too. And before she took off, she told you not to let those two ruin your night. She was talking about Romeo and Juliette. But they were interested in more than ruining your night, weren’t they?”

She shoots a glance to the right and her features harden to flint. “That may have been true,” she all but whispers to herself.

“And then the afternoon that Noah and I stopped off at your café, you were sure quick to point Noah and me to Shelly and Caudwell.”

My stomach rumbles at the memory of that Cupid’s own chocolate love potion cake, and I hope to high heaven there’s some sitting on that table behind her.

She blinks over at me and squints. “What’s going on here?”

“Venus, I know,” I say softly, and almost regrettably.

“You know what?” She tips her ear my way.

“That you were pretty darn good at archery in high school and that you’re a decorated arbalist as well.”

“Oh, I am.” She smiles with delight, but the more she studies my sober expression,

the quicker she inches back. “Lottie?” She gasps. “Romeo and Juliette! Oh, I knew when they were shot with arrows, of all things, I wasn’t going to out my abilities, but that hobby was ages ago. Lottie, I don’t even have access to a crossbow now.”

My lips invert because my heart breaks for the woman. “Your poor sweet children.” One of the twins gives me a swift kick, and I close my eyes for a moment. “I’m so sorry. If only you had been able to control your temper.” A thought comes to me. “Maybe we can have Everett find you the very best defense lawyer on the planet? You could do a plea bargain, and they’ll give you less time if you confess right now. I just know Everett would do everything to make sure you could get back to your family as soon as possible.” I can’t help my lenient stance with her. Not only is she a baker, but she’s a mother . And I can’t imagine being separated from my children for any length of time, let alone years—or worse yet, a lifetime.

“Lottie, what are you talking about? I didn’t kill Romeo and Juliette if that’s what you’re implying.”

I squint her way and inspect her features.

If she’s lying, she deserves an Oscar.

“Venus, I know all about the lawsuit. They were trying to stop you from using your company name because it was too close to theirs. They were out to ruin you.”

She inches back. “Who told you that?”

“I can’t reveal my sources.” I bite down on my lip in an effort to keep it zipped.

“Well, it’s not true,” she says, pulling out her phone and holding the screen my way. “All I got was a cease and desist letter, and I immediately texted Romeo. It was Juliette who wanted me to change my name, and I kindly explained in this text

message that I didn't think it was necessary. And look, he even replied and said he was fine with it as long as I didn't do anything else that might be mistaken for co-mingling our brands."

I read through the message thread, and sure enough, she's telling the truth.

Huh . I guess Shelly must have misunderstood.

"I'm so sorry," I tell her, suddenly sick that I went off half-cocked. And I can't even blame my hormones on this one. "I just thought since you were into archery, and then that connection with your lawsuit..."

"Archery and crossbows, yes, albeit that was a while ago. But there was no lawsuit." She sighs hard. "Please don't worry about it, Lottie. I would have drawn the same conclusion with that information. I'd better let Sean know what we discussed in the event Noah approaches him. In truth, I should have told Noah that first night that I was a whiz with a bow and arrow, but it felt crass to do so."

"And I can see why." I give a mournful sigh just as a thought comes to me. "Wait, Caudwell mentioned something about a lawsuit that Romeo and Juliette were up against. Something about they couldn't structure their company the way they wanted until it was through."

"What does that mean?" She shakes her head at me.

"I think it means someone was taking them to court. It certainly doesn't sound like they had the upper hand."

"Well, if they didn't have a corporate structure because of it, that means someone at the core of it was holding them back."

“That’s exactly what I’m thinking,” I say, pulling out my phone and looking up the website for Cupid’s Confections, going straight to their ‘About Us’ page. “For all intents and purposes, it looks as if this is a normally structured business.”

Venus shakes her head. “Why is Romeo’s name listed as president, but Juliette’s name isn’t anywhere on the page? It’s just her picture there with him.”

“That is strange,” I say.

Her phone chirps, and she sighs at the screen. “I’m sorry, Lottie. I need to take this. It’s my oldest. She likes to do a mommy check-in every twenty minutes. She only gets a phone to use while they’re with the sitter, so it’s sort of a novelty. I’ll be right back.”

She darts out of the conservatory just as Charlie comes in with her crew, bringing in the appetizers in sparkling silver chafing trays. And by the looks of it, Carlotta and Shelly are helping, too. And on their heels is Sweetheart sniffing at Charlie’s delicious offerings, and I don’t need to be a pooch myself to smell trouble. If we’re not careful, Sweetheart might just out-eat us all—me included, and that’s no small feat.

Wait, Shelly used to work for Romeo when the business was just getting started. She might know exactly what’s going on. Although she did mix up those details regarding Venus’ non-existent lawsuit.

There has to be something on this website that can give me a clue. I scroll through the tabs at the top before hitting one called ‘Cupid’s Community,’ and in it are pictures from every office party and outing, including a few from some charity gigs they did.

And just before I give up and scroll away, I see a rather incriminating picture.

I have a feeling I know why Romeo wasn't allowed to move forward with his partnership with Juliette.

I look up and nod.

And if I'm right, I know exactly who the killer is.

### LOTTIE

The air in the conservatory seems to grow strangled and thick as my eyes follow the women across from me.

Carlotta and Shelly Everly are assisting Charlie and her staff as they set out a mile's worth of appetizers for the guests to nosh on after the wedding.

My sister leads her staff back out into the cold, but Carlotta, Sweetheart, and Shelly remain, nibbling on a tray of bacon-wrapped dates stuffed with warm goat cheese. I'm all too familiar with my sister's appetizers, but that one just so happens to be one of my all-time faves, and right about now, the twins are craving ten or twelve.

I speed over and snap up a handful, popping one into my mouth because, obviously, the babies come first, justice comes second.

"Holy candied piglet bellies," Carlotta grunts as she munches on a handful herself.

"Would you quit hoggin' the hog?" Sweetheart dives in and laps up a few for herself. "Ooh, these are delightful. Sweet and savory is a heavenly combination. Ask me how I know."

Carlotta shakes her head. "I don't know what's happening here, but I've never tasted anything so delicious in all my life." She shrugs my way. "Sorry, Lot."

"It's the rosemary honey glaze over the bacon that gives them that perfect sweet crunch," I say.

“She’s right,” Shelly agrees, popping another one into her mouth and moaning. “I think I’m going to have to drop by the Honey Pot Diner next week and do a write-up on these honey-glazed marvels. Of course, you’ll come with me, Carlotta.” She pats her lips as she swallows. “Those were a divine savory treat. But you know, Carlotta, you can have a savory favorite as well as something sweet. I still stand by what I said about your baked goods, Lottie. They’re just the best of the best.”

“Why, thank you,” I say, filling with warmth at the stroke of my ego. And then I frown just as fast.

Can I really accuse someone of murder who is so enamored with my sweet treats?

She leans my way. “And I really like how you stepped up your game with those conversation heart cookies.” She gives a husky laugh.

“Suze,” I hiss under my breath and then glare at the naughty nexus of the naughty problem herself—Carlotta.

I step back and examine Shelly Everly again. She sure is easy to get along with. And she’s so friendly. She’s certainly a character with her purple hair, purple clothes, and oversized black-framed glasses that take up half her face. But is she a killer?

And if she was, why choose a crossbow?

I gasp as a revelation hits me. Maybe she didn’t mess up the details of Venus’ legal troubles with Romeo. Maybe she made them up to throw the authorities off the trail?

And then just like that, my blood begins to boil.

Nobody takes me for a fool.

Sweetheart zooms over. “What’s happening, Lottie? You’ve gone red as a beet and you’ve got the devil in your eyes to boot.”

Carlotta turns my way. “We’d better find Mr. Sexy. I think she’s having a lust flash. It’s sort of like a hot flash but tailor-made to Lot. She and Sexy need to find a dark corner and fast, or she’s going to blow.”

“Would you stop,” I snap her way. “Shelly, I need to ask you something.”

“Anything,” she says with a laugh. “You ladies are a riot.”

“The night of the Heartstrings and Sweet Things Spectacular, you didn’t say anything when Juliette threw out the invite to head to any of their stores and enjoy all the treats you wanted. That’s because it was the last place you wanted to be, isn’t it?”

She inches back a notch. “Pardon?”

I nod her way. “And you winced when Juliette said that she and Romeo were so proud of the empire they built together.”

Her eyes round out, and any trace of a smile glides off her face.

“Go on, Lottie.” Sweetheart zips around us in a circle and leaves a trail of tiny pink stars in her wake.

Honestly, it looks so very festive and just right for the joyous occasion about to take place in this very room. Unlike the occasion happening now.

I go on. “Carlotta mentioned that the day she went with you to Venus’ shop, you enjoyed some cinnamon spice treats that you said reminded you of a long-lost romance. She said you had tears in your eyes. That romance was with Romeo, wasn’t

it?”

“ Aww , Lot.” Carlotta kicks the ground. “Don’t tell me you’re circling around Shelly, the one who feeds my belly. You know we’re practically sisters by now. She and I not only have the same taste in food, but we’ve got the same taste in men. I’m working on getting her a ball and chain of her own.”

Shelly holds a hand up to Carlotta but doesn’t take her stony gaze off me.

“No, go on, Lottie.” She nods. “I want to see where you’re headed with this.”

“Fine.” I blow out a breath. “You told me that there was a lawsuit against Venus concerning her branding. I did a little digging and there was no such thing. But there is a pending lawsuit that concerns you.”

Okay, so I didn’t do much digging, and there might be more than a little conjecture at play, but that’s not the point.

Sweetheart gasps. “You really are good, Lottie. And I’m glad about it, too. Because, to tell the truth, I don’t really care to help out with the case. I wasn’t so hot on Romeo and Juliette to begin with, so what do I care if their killer runs loose? I mean, getting back to Paradise would be nice, but I’ve got my friends at the dog park here. And I’ve got Thirteen in the wings, too. Not to mention all the food. I’m really not doing too bad for myself when you think about it.”

“You worked with Romeo for three years before Juliette came on board,” I say to Shelly. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you helped build that company, not Juliette.”

“That’s true,” she says with a rigid jawline. “I built that company side by side with Romildo. We were going to get married. We had everything going for us until one day he called it quits—the two of us, not the company. Apparently, his old high

school sweetheart came sniffing around again, and he caved like butter on a hot New York sidewalk. And then he just threw me out—like garbage.” Her eyes turn glassy, and she does her best to blink the tears away.

“You set Venus up to look like the killer,” I say with a note of sadness in my tone because my heart truly breaks for everyone involved. “It was you who shot Romeo and Juliette with the crossbow.” I shake my head. “Earlier this evening, you told Everett and me that you were keeping fit with new hobbies. Archery is one of them, isn’t it?”

She closes her eyes, then opens them with a flash, and gone is any trace of remorse or kindness.

Instead, there’s a cold-hearted fire.

LOTTIE

“Y es, I killed them.” Shelly Everly sheds a short-lived grin, and both Carlotta and Sweetheart cower behind me in the conservatory.

“I killed them because I couldn’t stand them anymore,” she continues. “I hated the way Romildo discarded me. I hated the way he changed his name for her so they could sound like some cutesy tragic couple—who, by the way, were a couple of stupid teenagers who made bad decisions. It’s obvious neither of them read the play,” she riots as the veins pop out on her temple like squiggly little garden snakes. “I was the love of his life. Couldn’t he see that? I built that company—heck, I named that company! Cupid’s Confections was mine in every way. Sure, he came up with the capital, but there would be no Cupid’s Confections without me! And yes, I’ve been tying them up in court ever since. He couldn’t get me off the paperwork, try as he might. And I was never, ever going to leave.”

A thought comes to me. “Yes, technically, you were going to leave. You told Carlotta you were moving your office to Main Street, here in Honey Hollow. And I know for a fact we don’t have any office space on that street. You were going to leave town. That’s why you had to pack up.”

Her nostrils flare as she huffs a silent laugh. “That’s right, Lottie. I am going to leave town. And I’m going to do it now.” She pulls her purse close to her body. “Goodbye, Carlotta, it’s been fun. But it looks like the party is over.” She turns on her heels and bolts for the door.

“Stop, thief!” I shout.

Doh! Darn pregnant brain.

“I mean stop, killer ,” I shout as I waddle to keep up with her.

In no time, Greer, Winslow, Lea, and Thirteen appear and zip toward the woman.

“Don’t let her get away,” I call out.

“Well, it looks as if they’ve got it handled,” Sweetheart says as she traipses her way to those bacon-wrapped dates once again. “I’ll just sit back and relax. Romeo and Juliette certainly didn’t do anything for me.”

“Oh, good gravy,” I say as Shelly makes it to the door, and Winslow tosses a chair at her.

I don’t know why, but the ghosts at the inn seem to have the ability to manipulate the material world more than the ghosts that come back to help me. I was once told that it was directly linked to my own transmudane powers. Although at the moment, my own abilities mean squat because the ghost dragged down here from Heaven to help is far more interested in those delectable appetizers.

For a second, my feet turn in the direction of those delectable appetizers.

No, no, I need to stay on task.

“Shelly, come back here, please,” I say, holding my overgrown midsection as I waddle in that direction.

She turns my way and laughs. “You wish. Just try to catch up with me.” She starts for the exit again, and this time it’s Greer who picks the woman up and zips her clear across the front of the room, crashing her into that glorious rose-covered arch.

A horrible cry comes from Shelly as the arch begins to wobble, and as Shelly tries to right herself against it the entire thing crashes down onto the acrylic chairs, and they all topple, row by row like dominoes.

But Shelly is undeterred as she crawls on all fours toward the exit, and little Lea tips over one of my dessert tables right onto the woman.

“Please spare the wedding cake,” I bark.

Thankfully, the wedding cake is much closer to the altar. I didn't want anyone accidentally nibbling on it since it's hardly what I would call tradition.

Shelly tries to run, and those not-so-friendly-at-the-moment ghosts dismantle a little more of my mother's handiwork as framed photos of the couples fly to the ceiling and candles topple—thankfully, they're battery-operated.

I think my mother smelled the potential for danger. And there goes a flower arrangement, spilling water and petals all over the aisle, and one of the chandeliers sways ominously, its crystal drops clinking together like nervous chatter. Lastly, a garland of twinkle lights snaps loose, raining down like a string of defeated stars.

A cacophony of screams emits from the smattering of wedding guests that have already arrived, and soon my mother runs into the room and delivers a scream that can rival an aria.

Meg runs in looking like a bridal dream, with the exception that her dress is black. I'm not sure why I didn't know this in advance, and I'll admit, it's jarring at first glance—but she looks stunning, nonetheless.

Sam darts in next with green goo on her face, still wearing a pink robe, but her hair is styled to perfection with tiny little rhinestones glimmering in it.

“I’m getting out of here,” Shelly huffs as she stands, and her foot slips on one of my Bavarian cream-filled éclairs, and she lands right back on her keister.

“Lemon?” Everett barks as he runs into the room.

No sooner does he swoop my way than Noah runs in on his heels with his gun drawn. “Everybody freeze ,” he shouts.

“She did it,” I tell him as I point to Shelly, still slipping away in my desserts. “She confessed to killing Romeo and Juliette. She tried to frame Venus for it. And probably Caudwell, too. She’s guilty, and she was about to flee from Vermont.”

Noah runs that way and quickly cuffs the woman.

“Lemon.” Everett pulls me tight. “Are you okay?”

I nod. “I wasn’t able to stop her, but the ghosts stepped in. Greer and the gang.” I wrinkle my nose. “Sweetheart wasn’t too interested.” I look back at the extended appetizer display where Carlotta can’t be bothered with the pursuit of justice because she’s too busy stuffing her face with everything she sees.

Ooh , are those deep-fried mac and crack bites? Those are my absolute favorite.

Sweetheart sparkles and dissipates as she slowly rises to the ceiling.

“What’s happening?” she barks in a panic. “Am I going home?”

Carlotta grunts my way, “There you go ruining another good thing, Lot. It’s like you don’t want me having any friends.”

“Goodbye, Lottie Lemon,” Sweetheart cries as she nears the ceiling. “Goodbye,

Carlotta, until we meet again. Quick, Thirteen, there's still time. Why don't you come with me? All you have down there is a nice little family and a bunch of good foo—" And with that, she up and disappears.

"It's over," I say as I hold onto Everett tight, and we watch as Noah speeds Shelly out of the room.

Everett checks his watch. "No, it's actually almost time to begin."

And on that note, my mother drops to her knees and screams at the top of her lungs once again.

### LOTTIE

“ E verybody get to work,” my mother shouts at top volume while hoisting herself off the floor, here in the conservatory, which was just struck by a supernatural tornado. But for good reason—the killer of that double homicide was cuffed and arrested.

All of Honey Hollow can breathe easier now that there isn’t a homicidal maniac running loose with a crossbow like some nefarious version of Cupid.

Speaking of Cupid... I take a quick glance around at the melee left in the wake of that unnatural disaster. The glorious arch intertwined with roses is on the ground with roses strewn all across the room like heads that just rolled away from a guillotine.

One of my dessert tables has been upturned, and dozens upon dozens of éclairs, profiteroles, cream puffs, lemon bars, chocolate truffles, strawberry shortcakes, and tarts are scattered on the ground—some of which have been smeared all over the floor by the killer as she tried her best to get away.

The chairs, once in neat rows, have all been scattered and knocked over. And even the paper hearts, the wedding bells, and the twinkle lights strung up above are tangled, mangled, and hanging in odd positions—like a toddler’s attempt at modern art. All in all, it looks like the conservatory had just hosted a rather rough and rowdy frat party.

“ I said move it ,” my mother barks again, and this time bodies mill around slowly and sluggishly because, let’s face it, this is an overwhelming task.

Greer, Winslow, Lea, and Thirteen zoom past me.

“Don’t worry, Lottie,” Greer calls out. “We’re here to help!”

“I’ll do the heavy lifting,” Winslow bellows as he helps Noah and Everett lift that flower arch back into position.

“I’ll straighten the chairs,” Greer says with a sigh as she begins to do just that, along with my sisters.

“And I’ll lick the floor clean,” Thirteen says as he begins to gobble up the mountain of desserts that would have otherwise gone to waste.

Little Lea gives a dark chuckle as she swings that blade in her hand. “I’ll take care of the ridiculous décor.” She floats up to the ceiling, and soon the tangled Cupids, hearts, bells, and lights are swishing around—seemingly of their own volition.

Wiley even wheels in a large white cage filled with white doves and shoves it in the corner.

Oh, hells bells.

I’ll need a dozen umbrellas to protect my desserts from those winged creatures when the time comes.

But nevertheless, in less than ten minutes, the room is back to the way it was to begin with, save for a few headless roses. Lainey takes the roses that had broken off and scatters their petals down the aisle runner, and it looks twice as lovely as it did before.

Effie, Lily, and even Suze help right the toppled dessert table, and they fill it with an abundance of my desserts, and there’s not one yummy treat missing.

Everett and Noah come my way.

“I can’t believe it’s really coming together now,” I say as I pull them in at the same time. “Thank you both for pitching in.”

“Anything for you, Lemon.” Everett lands a kiss on my lips.

“Please,” Noah grunts. “You left her alone. You couldn’t keep an eye on her for five minutes. You know I had to try to find Jed.”

Everett scowls. “I had to find Evie. And when I was on my way back to the conservatory, I got a call from one of my contacts who was helping me track down the funds for your mother’s teeth.” He shoots Noah a look.

“Did someone mention my teeth?” Suze ambles over with Noah’s brother Alex in tow. Alex is Noah’s younger look-alike who has a good-natured disposition regarding just about everything.

Alex laughs. “Don’t tell me you’re talking behind my mother’s back.” He slaps Everett on the back. “How’s my favorite brother?” He pulls me into an embrace. “Lottie, you look radiant.”

“Why, thank you.” I give a little curtsy, and my knees almost give out.

Everett shakes his head. “Suze, it turns out, there was no corporate structure at Cupid’s Confections. The fact you broke your teeth on one of their cookies doesn’t amount to anything monetarily.”

“What?” she squawks in horror.

And rightly so. Those gilded horrors cost her more than an arm and a leg. They cost

her seventy-five thousand dollars.

“But I can’t pay for these.” Her fingers tap over her lips. “I’ll go broke—far more broke than I already am.” She looks my way with a stern expression. “I’ll need a raise at the bakery.”

Noah groans, “I’ll go to the dentist’s office and explain everything that’s happened.”

“Good thinking,” Suze shouts in a panic. “We’ll give the teeth back. I don’t need teeth. I could pipe some of Lottie’s frosting into my mouth each day just to survive.”

I wince at the toothless visual.

“I’ll handle the dentist’s office,” Everett says roughly. “They should never have taken advantage of you that way. At the least, I’ll get them to slice the bill down. I’ve got a trick or two up my sleeve that can make just about anyone do just about anything.”

“Boy, does he ever,” I mutter, and Noah shoots me a look.

“I don’t even know if I want these gold teeth anymore,” Suze says, poking at the alloy spiked into her gums. “Every time I look at them, I’ll be reminded of what a fool I was to run out and get the very best the world has to offer when I can’t really afford it. The women at Cheap Thrills will not only make fun of me, but they’ll boot me right out of the club.”

That’s right, I forgot all about Suze’s once-a-week cheapskate club. I went once. There was no thrill to be had, cheap or otherwise.

She takes a deep breath. “I suppose I can always swap these out for something silver.”

“ No! ” the entire lot of us cries at once.

Alex laughs to himself. “Look, Mom, Noah and I will pitch in to give you the best natural smile the dental world has to offer. Isn’t that right, Noah?” He shoots his brother a look, and Noah gives a reluctant nod.

“Yes, I’ll go in halves with Alex, but that’s only after we figure out what your senior insurance will cover. Which is what we should have done to begin with instead of going off half-cocked and making assumptions.” He glances at Everett when he says it.

In Everett’s defense, he never told Suze that it was definitive that Cupid’s Confections would pay for anything. If anyone went off half-cocked, it was Suze.

Mom runs through the room with her arms waving as if they were landing a 747.

“Everyone in your places,” she shouts. “It’s time for the wedding!”

Everett takes off to grab Lyla Nell, and within three minutes, everyone who needs to be seated is seated. And yet not everyone who needs to be standing at the altar is standing at the altar.

The minister is there. Hook Redwood looks dashing in a tux, and he can’t stop grinning like a loon. He loves Meg so much, and I couldn’t be happier for the both of them.

But there doesn’t seem to be any sign of Jed.

The crowd begins to murmur.

Noah sighs hard as my mother turns up the violin music that’s playing through the

speakers.

“I’d better go talk to Sam.” Noah rises from his seat and doesn’t get halfway up the aisle before Sam storms into the room, hardly cresting the entry before she stops.

“Listen up, everyone,” she calls out, her voice breaking, and I’m not having a good feeling about this.

Although, serious side note: Sam looks ravishing in her glorious white gown. It’s off the shoulder and drapes her nicely. You would never know she had just given birth a few short weeks ago. Her hair is sparkling with jewels, and gone is the green goo, replaced with a glowing countenance and natural, yet expertly applied, cosmetics.

She lifts her chin and calls out, “Something has happened.”

LOTTIE

“ W hat’s going on?” Suze shouts from the front of the conservatory just as our double wedding is about to get underway. “Sam, what’s happening here?”

“Jed isn’t coming,” Sam rages as she wags her phone at the stunned room full of people. “He sent me a text and said he can’t do it. He’s already cleared his things from our rental and he’s left me.”

The crowd gives a collective gasp.

“So the double wedding is off?” Suze sounds crestfallen. “I guess it’s just a single wedding now.”

She tosses up her hands in defeat, and I get the feeling a double wedding was on Suze’s bucket list. She’s odd that way.

“No, the double wedding is still very much on,” Sam growls. “Noah, come here.” She waves him over and clasps her hand firmly to his, and the room gasps once again.

I’ll admit, I may have gasped the loudest.

“What the hell?” Everett mutters under his breath while ensconcing Lyla Nell’s ears between his chest and his hand.

I echo the sentiment.

Sam lifts her chin and juts her chest out a notch. “I’m marrying myself,” she announces at the top of her lungs, and the entire room breaks out into cheers. Although, honestly, we’re not entirely sure what that means. “The wedding will go on—and so will I!”

More cheers ensue.

The lights flicker, the “Bridal Chorus” starts up, and soon my mother is walking Meg down the aisle. And in truth, the black dress makes my sister look like the Goth fairy she’s been all along.

She has a snippet of a veil attached to that foot-tall beehive sitting on her head, a red ball of roses in her hand with petals so dark they almost look black, and with each step she takes, her combat boots peek through.

I can’t help but smile.

My sister is genuinely herself right down to the bone.

Hook wipes tears from his face as she makes her way to him, and there’s not a dry eye in the house because of it.

The lights dim, then rise once more, and the music starts anew, prompting the entire room to face the back once again.

Sam steps forward with Noah by her side, their arms linked together, and the crowd erupts in spontaneous applause.

I’m not sure why she didn’t ask Wiley to walk her down the aisle—most likely because they’re not all that close in general, seeing that he allowed Suze to give her away to her sister to raise. And well, Noah is her twin, so there’s that.

Sam makes her way down the aisle looking like the quintessential bride in her glowing white gown, a small pom of peach roses in her hand, and a veil that's slung over her back and falls gracefully over her gown. And I'll admit, Noah looks far too regal and handsome in his dark gray suit. It's enough to make every woman's heart in this room flutter at dangerous levels—including mine.

Sam steps up on the altar to the left of Meg, and as Noah lets go to step down, she yanks him back up and holds his hand securely to let him know he's not going anywhere.

Soon the minister works his magic, and vows are exchanged between Meg and Hook. And as they exchange those precious words, Everett gives my hand a squeeze and looks lovingly into my eyes, as we telepathically exchange vows ourselves.

Next is Sam, who reads her vows out loud and changes all references to Jed to reflect her dedication to herself. Although it is sort of off-putting the way she keeps looking at Noah and nodding as she does so.

Everett shakes his head as he leans my way. "This doesn't look right," he whispers.

"Well, this is the Fox family we're dealing with," I whisper back, and a small radius around us chuckles.

Finally, the minister pronounces them husband and wife and asks them to kiss their brides.

Meg and Hook smooch like there's no tomorrow. And well, Noah leans in to offer Sam a kiss on the cheek, but she moves, and he lands it on her lips instead.

The entire room goes from cooing to groaning in a single bound.

Thank heavens Lyla Nell is asleep on Everett's shoulder. I'd hate for her to have witnessed the malfeasance.

"The birds," my mother growls at Wiley. "You forgot about the birds!"

Wiley jogs over to the giant cage and opens the top of it, and to our delight an entire flock of white winged doves fly to the ceiling before one by one knocking themselves out.

"It's a glass ceiling." Everett shrugs as if it were expected on some level. And honestly, it should have been expected.

The twinkle lights rise a notch as my mother jumps out of her seat. "We did it!" she shouts, and the room breaks out into cheers, clearly unmoved by the flopping birds among us. "Now every last one of you, eat, drink, and be merry! Happy Valentine's Day!"

"Happy Valentine's Day," everyone shouts right back.

Within seconds, everyone is following my mother's merry orders. Lively music takes over, and couples are migrating to the front of the altar and busting a move as well.

The birds regain consciousness and begin to torpedo around the room, making little deposits on a few of the guests.

Screams ensue as people try to shield their heads. Expletives ensue, mostly from my mother. I'm just glad they're staying away from my sweet treats. But that might have more to do with the fact Greer and the gang are doing their best to ward them away from that area.

One of the bigger birds starts to nosedive before gliding right over Noah's mother and

dropping off a rather gooey load.

“Oh, one just pegged Suze on the forehead,” I say with a gasp as Suze belts out a horrid groan.

Sam and Noah help round up the birds, as do Effie and Lily. And from the looks of it, they’re releasing them into the wild outside.

“At least they’re getting their own happily ever after,” I say, leaning into Everett.

I’m about to congratulate the brides and groom when I spot Evie in the back, and she’s talking to Conner.

“Oh, Everett, look,” I say, nudging him in the ribs. “They look like they’re having a heartfelt conversation.” The two of them hug just as I say the words. “I think they’re making up.”

“I won’t let him manipulate her like this. Conner Saint is just another Jed Silver in my book. And I’m going to put a stop to this before she ends up in Sam’s shoes as a single mother—and a single bride.”

Everett barrels over with Lyla Nell bouncing on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, still conked out. And I waddle along on his heels, hardly able to keep up.

“What’s going on here?” Everett riots at the two of them. “Evie, please take a step away from him. I’m going to shove him out the door.”

“Dad, stop,” she says, throwing herself in front of Conner as a shield. “He didn’t do anything wrong. That was his sister in the picture!”

“His sister?” Everett shakes his head. “Why would he be canoodling with his sister at

the mall, right in front of the jewelry counter?”

“Because she was helping him pick this out.” She flings her hand in his face, and on her finger is the cutest pink heart-shaped ring you ever did see.

“Aww ,” I coo, and Everett shoots me a wide-eyed look. “Sorry,” I mouth.

“Don’t be sorry,” Evie scoffs. “Mom, Conner was asking his sister’s opinion on which ring to buy. He wanted a girl there to stop him from buying me something weird like a skull-and-crossbones.”

“I was looking at those,” Conner says as he steps in next to Evie and takes up her hand. “So, as you can see, Mr. Baxter, I wasn’t cheating on Evie. My sister is my go-to person for decisions like this. I’m not good at all the romantic stuff.”

“No, you’re not,” Evie says, shaking her head at him. “You’re not good at it—you’re great at it.” She brazenly rewards him with a kiss on his lips, right in front of her father.

Evie has some cookies on her, and that’s my favorite part about her. After all, we raised her to be a strong, independent woman who makes her own decisions.

Conner nods to Everett. “So, is this how you run your courtroom? You ignore the evidence and turn into a one-man jury?”

Okay, so Conner Saint has a pair of cookies on him, too. I can see why Evie would be attracted to him.

Everett’s chest expands, and then he closes his eyes for a moment.

“No, I don’t run my courtroom that way. I’ll admit, that when it comes to my family,

I tend to pounce without weighing all the evidence. And for that reason, I extend my sincerest apology to the both of you.”

Conner nods. “That’s why I like you. You really care about Evie and what’s going on in her life. You want to protect her. Well, I care about Evie, too, and I want to protect her. That’s why I couldn’t let this day go by without explaining to her what really happened.” He turns to her and takes up her hands. “I don’t want you to suffer an ounce of pain, and definitely not because of something that I may or may not have done. I’m sorry.”

“Please, he’s the delulu one,” she tells him. “You were totally innocent.” She lifts her ring finger, and that pink heart sizzles in the light. “And you and your sister have, like, totally good taste. I love it, and I love you.” She lands a kiss on his lips once again, and Conner hesitates at first, most likely because he likes his head attached, but then he goes for it.

“We should leave,” I whisper to Everett, but he’s hesitant to move until I yank him away. “All’s well that ends well.”

“All is not well while that guy is sticking his tongue down my daughter’s throat. It’s like he didn’t even care that I was standing there.”

“No, he didn’t,” I sigh. “That’s because they’re in love.”

A growl rattles through him, but I manage to calm him down as I pull him and Lyla Nell—by proxy—close and we begin to sway to the music.

The donut tower is a hit and so is the raspberry lemon champagne cake, the bouquets are tossed, and a good time is had by all.

All’s well that ends well. And as Sam has proven, sometimes you have to take

happiness into your own hands.

A loud howl breaks out, and we all turn to see Lainey standing in the middle of the dance floor with Forest at arm's length, and there just so happens to be a puddle at her feet.

She glances up at the crowd. "My water just broke."

### LOTTIE

Lainey and Forest Donovan added another little cutie pie to their growing brood last night with a baby girl weighing in at seven pounds and seven ounces.

Josie is now a proud big sister to Miranda Lottie Donovan. Yes, Lainey squeezed my name in there and reduced me to tears by doing so—both my mother and me.

“They’re going to call her Mimi,” I tell Noah, Everett, and Carlotta as they sit at the counter of my bakery.

It’s the very next day and all of Honey Hollow seems to be lagging this morning.

I can’t blame them. We did have one wild night. Especially those who went with Lainey to the hospital, and that was half the wedding party.

There was screaming, there were terse demands being made, there were lawsuits threatened, and some light fainting—and all of that was from Forest.

Suffice it to say, it was all a bit much for him. Lainey, however, fared much better. She huffed and puffed and had a drug-free delivery just the way she wanted. She’s a loon that way.

I happened to have a drug-free delivery with Lyla Nell quite by accident and I’m still not over the trauma. And I have no idea what labor will be like with the twins. It’s terrifying to think that the only way to get them out of my body is to go through that trauma again.

Last night, Lily and Effie offered to watch Josie and Lyla Nell up in my mother's suite at the B Twice Baked Risky Whiskey Cakes (Murder in the Mix 53)

St. Patrick's Day is here—and so is a killer.

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

It's March in Honey Hollow and all month we'll be celebrating St. Patrick's Day! There's a parade to be had, a convention of redheads called the Redhead Roundup: An Auburn Affair, and have I mentioned Lyla Nell is turning two? Speaking of two, it's time for the twins to make their debut into the world. The twins may not be able to wait to get here, but with a killer on the loose—my thirst for justice can't wait either.

The twins are about to make their grand entrance, and Honey Hollow is buzzing with excitement for the St. Patrick's Day Parade and the Redhead Roundup: An Auburn Affair. It's a convention of fiery hair, and Carlotta is terrified of the entire thing—and that's before a killer makes an appearance.

As if that weren't enough, Lyla Nell's second birthday is on the horizon, and my bakery is buried in orders for every sweet treat imaginable. Between celebrating, baking, and dodging danger, it looks like March is about to test my limits in more ways than one.

With a killer lurking among the redheads, and my own family growing by the day, I'll need more than a sprinkle of luck to keep everyone safe. In Honey Hollow, when it rains, it pours—and sometimes it's raining trouble.

Here's hoping I can keep the cakes from burning and the killer from striking again.

Because in Honey Hollow, life is sweet, but murder never takes a holiday.

Includes RECIPE!

Cosmopolitan Magazine calls Addison's books, "...easy, frothy fun!"

Humor with a side of homicide.

A laugh out loud standalone cozy mystery by New York Times, USA TODAY, & Wall Street Journal bestseller Addison Moore

All books in the series can be read individually, so dive on in!

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:49 pm*

### RECIPE

#### FROM THE CUTIE PIE BAKERY AND CAKERY

##### Pink Champagne Raspberry Lemon Cupcakes

Hey there, it's me, Lottie Lemon! Well, that wedding cake finally came together. And I think both Sam and Meg were happy with both versions of it. I thought I'd share a more manageable version of the recipe for you, where rather than a three-tiered wedding cake, you can bake scrumptious and gorgeous cupcakes using the very same recipe! These cupcakes are easy to make and add a touch of elegance, perfect for celebrating life's special moments—and even enjoying them all on your own.

Here's hoping the birds stay away from your cupcakes like they did my wedding cakes!

Happy baking!

Ingredients:

For the Cupcakes:

1 ??? cups all-purpose flour

1 tsp baking powder

??? tsp salt

??? cup unsalted butter, softened

? cup granulated sugar

2 large eggs, at room temperature

1 tsp vanilla extract

??? cup pink champagne or sparkling rosé (Yes! Real champagne!)

2 drops pink food coloring (optional)

For the Raspberry Lemon Filling:

??? cup raspberry jam

1 tbsp fresh lemon juice

1 tsp lemon zest

For the Champagne Buttercream Frosting:

1 cup unsalted butter, softened

4 cups powdered sugar

3 tbsp pink champagne (more champs!)

1 tsp vanilla extract

2 drops pink food coloring (optional, but I always do it to add a little pink pizzazz)

## Instructions:

### Make the Cupcakes:

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Line a 12-cup muffin tin with cupcake liners.
2. Mix Dry Ingredients: In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, and salt. Set aside.
3. Cream Butter and Sugar: In a large bowl or a stand mixer, beat the softened butter and sugar together until light and fluffy (about 2-3 minutes).
4. Add Eggs and Vanilla: Beat in the eggs, one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Add the vanilla extract and mix until combined.
5. Add Champagne and Dry Ingredients: Gradually add half of the flour mixture to the wet ingredients, mixing on low until just combined. Pour in the pink champagne and mix, then add the remaining flour mixture and mix until smooth. If using, add pink food coloring and mix until just incorporated.
6. Fill and Bake: Divide the batter evenly among the cupcake liners, filling each about 2/3 full. Bake for 18-20 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Allow the cupcakes to cool completely on a wire rack.

### Prepare the Raspberry Lemon Filling:

1. Mix Filling: In a small bowl, mix together the raspberry jam, lemon juice, and lemon zest until well combined. Set aside.

### Fill the Cupcakes:

1. Core the Cupcakes: Once the cupcakes have cooled, use a small knife or cupcake corer to remove a small portion from the center of each cupcake.

2. Add Filling: Fill each cupcake with about a teaspoon of the raspberry lemon mixture. Place the removed cupcake tops back over the filling.

Make the Champagne Buttercream Frosting:

1. Beat Butter: In a large bowl, beat the softened butter until smooth and creamy (about 2-3 minutes).

2. Add Powdered Sugar and Champagne: Gradually add the powdered sugar, one cup at a time, mixing on low speed until combined. Add the pink champagne and vanilla extract, and mix until smooth and fluffy. If desired, add pink food coloring for a light pink hue.

3. Frost the Cupcakes: Pipe or spread the buttercream frosting on top of each cupcake.

Decorate and Enjoy:

Optional Garnishes: Garnish with a fresh raspberry, edible glitter, or a slice of lemon for a beautiful touch.

Serve: Enjoy these light, flavorful cupcakes with a glass of bubbly for a truly special experience!

These Pink Champagne Cupcakes are perfect for any celebration, from birthdays to weddings or even a cozy night in.

I hope you enjoy every last bite.

Cheers!

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:49 pm*

### RECIPE

#### FROM THE HONEY POT DINER

##### Bacon-Wrapped Dates Stuffed with Goat Cheese

Hi, it's me, Charlie, Lottie's sister (the one who runs the Honey Pot Diner)! Lottie asked if I'd share my recipe for my delectable and hard to resist bacon-wrapped dates. When I tell you that I cannot make these fast enough, it is the gospel truth! Since I've added it to the menu it has become the Honey Pot Diner's number one appetizer. In fact, some of my customers come in just so they can have their fix! These treats are perfect for parties or a delightful appetizer just to enjoy all on your own. This combination of sweet, savory, and creamy flavors is sure to be a hit.

Lottie Lemon approved!

Enjoy!

#### Ingredients:

24 Medjool dates, pitted

4 oz goat cheese, softened

12 slices of bacon, cut in half

1/4 cup honey (optional for drizzling, but trust me, you want to do this!)

Fresh rosemary (optional for garnish. I put a little honey in a cup and stick a sprig of rosemary in it to infuse it. It is a chef's kiss of perfection!)

#### Instructions:

1. Preheat Oven: Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C). Line a baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil for easy cleanup.

#### 2. Prep the Dates:

Carefully slice each date lengthwise on one side to create an opening. But make sure not to cut all the way through!

Remove the pit if the dates are not already pitted.

#### 3. Stuff the Dates:

Fill each date with about 1 teaspoon of softened goat cheese. You can use a small spoon or a piping bag to make this easier. (I use a spoon.)

Gently press the date closed around the cheese.

#### 4. Wrap with Bacon:

Wrap each stuffed date with a half slice of bacon. Secure with a toothpick to hold everything together.

#### 5. Bake:

Place the bacon-wrapped dates on the prepared baking sheet with the seam side down.

Bake for 18-20 minutes or until the bacon is crispy, turning them halfway through to ensure even cooking.

Keep an eye on them during the last few minutes to prevent overcooking.

6. Drizzle with Honey (optional, but oh so necessary):

Once the dates are done baking, remove them from the oven and let them cool for a few minutes.

Drizzle with honey for an extra layer of sweetness, if desired.

7. Garnish and Serve:

Garnish with fresh rosemary sprigs if you like, adding a lovely aroma and a touch of color.

Serve warm or at room temperature.

These Bacon-Wrapped Dates Stuffed with Goat Cheese are the perfect blend of sweet, savory, and creamy, with a touch of crispiness from the bacon. They make an irresistible appetizer that your guests will love!

Happy eating!