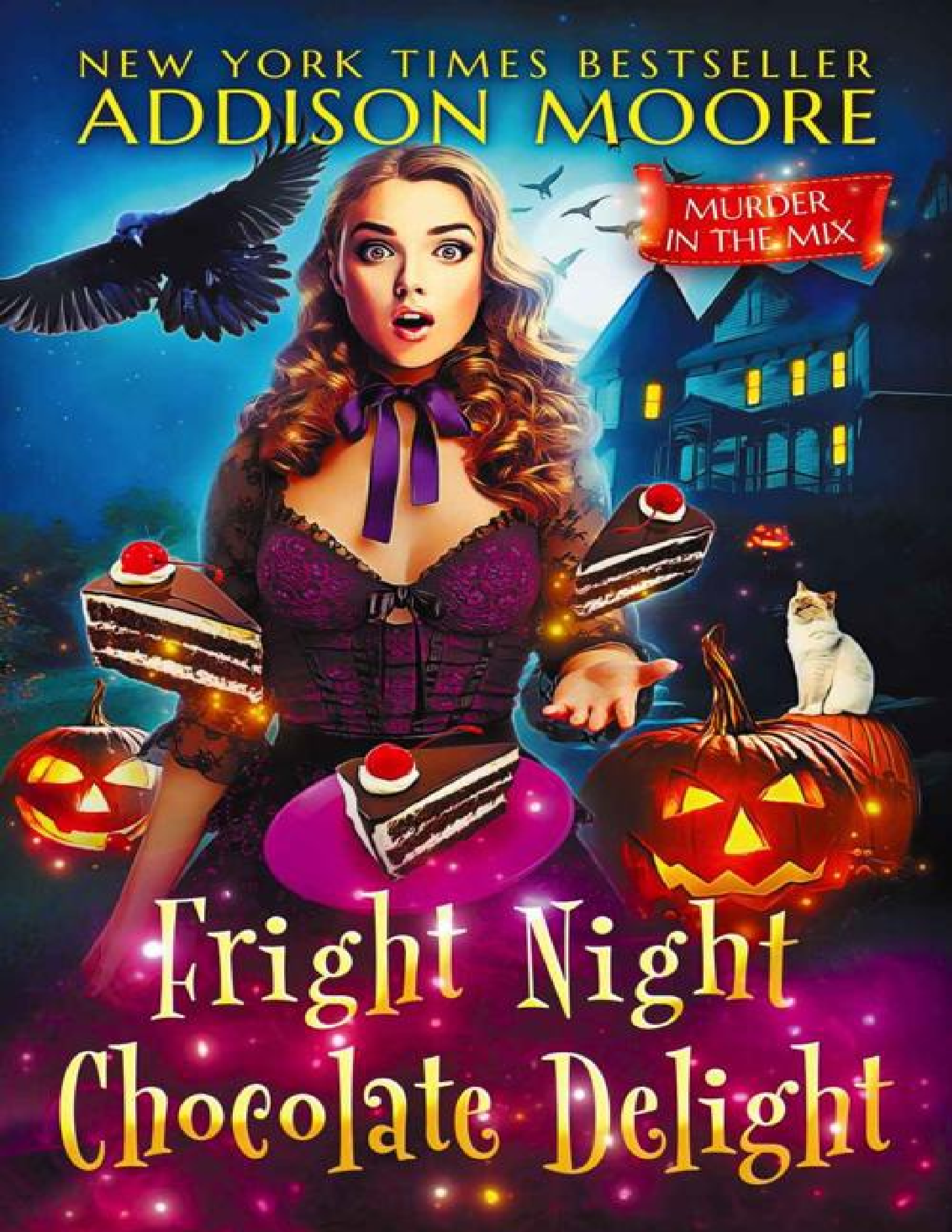


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
ADDISON MOORE

MURDER
IN THE MIX



Fright Night
Chocolate Delight

FRIGHT NIGHT CHOCOLATE
DELIGHT

MURDER IN THE MIX 48



ADDISON MOORE

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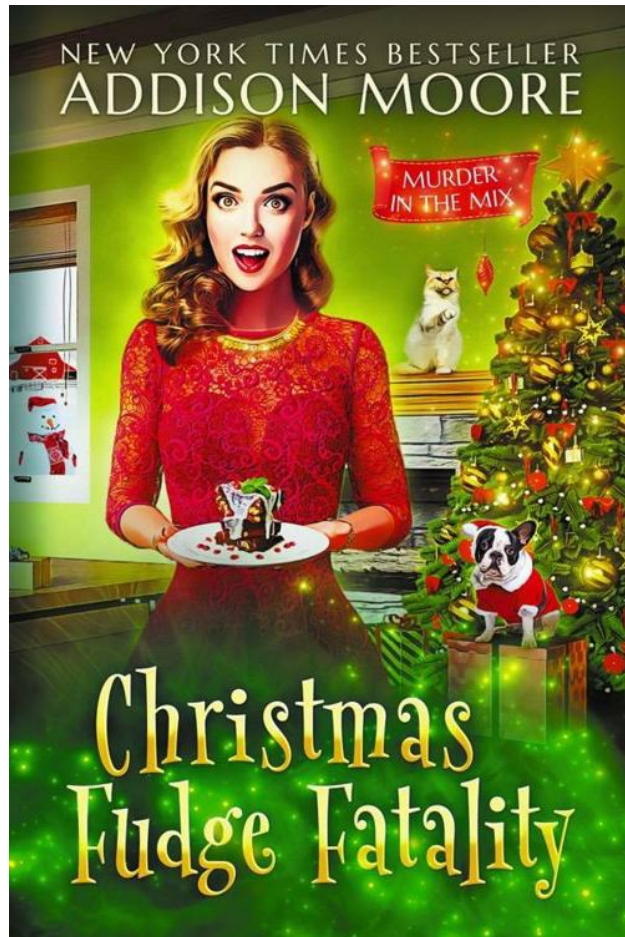
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BOOK DESCRIPTION

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

My mother's B&B is hosting a Fright Night Festival for the entire month of October, and since my bakery is out of commission, I've opened up a booth there to sell my sweet wares.

But not only is that lunatic, the Prankster, still terrorizing me, but a body turns up at the festivities. There are more pumpkins, candy, haunted hayrides, and ghosts than you can shake a magic wand at in Honey Hollow this time of year.

And just when I thought my honey-glazed donuts would be the talk of the festival, it's a grim-faced ghoul stealing the show. But when I find a chilling clue hidden within my very own sweet wares, I realize that this Fright Night may just turn into my worst nightmare.

Can I sift through the madness, unmask the Prankster, and stop a killer before the final trick is on me?

Welcome to Honey Hollow—where the treats are sweet, the scares are sweeter, and murder is just the icing on the cake.

Lottie Lemon has a brand new bakery to tend to, a budding romance with perhaps one too many suitors, and she has the supernatural ability to see the dead—which are always harbingers for ominous things to come. Throw in the occasional ghost of the human variety, a string of murders, and her insatiable thirst for justice, and you'll have more chaos than you know what to do with.

Living in Honey Hollow can be murder.

LOTTIE



*M*y name is Lottie Lemon, and I see dead people. Okay, so rarely do I 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. But the only thing I'm seeing now is a whole gaggle of pink fairies and cute little green monsters.

"More candy! More candy!" a choir of adorably costumed children cries out at once as I try my best to sprinkle a handful of sweet treats into each of their plastic pumpkins.

I'm about to offer a second round of sweets when a terrible *roar* erupts, and that roar would be Carlotta jumping from behind and sending those kids screaming right out of my mother's B&B.

A few salty words are lobbed our way by their mothers as they do a disappearing act as well.

"Carlotta," I snip. "What the heck are you thinking, scaring the daylight out of those kids like that?"

My sister, Charlie, lifts a hand. "Don't bother reprimanding her. Our mama doesn't know right from wrong, up from down, or left from right. She's a..." Charlie nods toward Carlotta. "Well, exactly what she's dressed as—a wicked *witch*."

It's true. Carlotta is dressed to the wicked nines in a black tattered dress, her gray and honey blonde hair is teased every which way, and her face is covered in green foundation.

Carlotta opens her mouth to say something when a lone black feather drifts from the ceiling, leaving her looking transfixed by the sight for a moment.

The three of us are standing in the makeshift bakery that my mother—Miranda Lemon, the sweet angel who raised me—has lent me. This makeshift version of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery just so happens to be in the heart of my mother’s happily haunted B&B. In addition to selling my pies, cakes, and cookies inside of her B&B, I also have a booth right outside these walls where all of Vermont seems to be gathered these days.

Back in September, I seemed to pick up a crazed lunatic’s attention who identified themselves via a series of mean-spirited riddles as the *Prankster*. And well, as their last act of terror, they not only temporarily kidnapped Lyla Nell, my sweet one-year-old, but they vandalized and virtually destroyed my bakery.

But it’s October now, the spookiest month of them all, and my husband, Everett, has hired the best contractor in town—my ex, Bear Fisher—to put the front of my bakery back together again. Thankfully, the kitchen was more or less untouched, so I’ve still got an army of bakers whipping up sweet treats and driving them straight over to the B&B so we can feed Honey Hollow.

The bakery should be ready for a grand reopening in just a few weeks. Or sooner if Bear takes me up on my bribe of free sweet treats for life. As much as I love my mother and all of the ghosts that take up residence in her sweet B&B, I must admit, there’s no place like home. And by home, I mean my bakery on Main Street.

I take a quick look around at the steady crowd streaming in through the front door of my mother’s massive B&B as they clamor to get a better look at the various desserts I have strewn out on the tables right next to the reception counter.

A few of my trusty employees are helping me hock my yummy wares both inside and at the booth set up right outside. The crowds are ravenous in both places as they snap up the cinnamon rolls, brownies, the bevy of cupcakes decorated with edible witches’ hats, and marshmallow ghosts for the holiday at hand.

And you can bet all of my employees are dressed to impress. Costumes are practically mandatory at my bakery for the entire month of October, so this makeshift version is no different. That’s exactly why I’m dressed as Dorothy from the *Wizard of Oz*, complete with a blue and white checkered dress, ruby slippers, and French braids. And Charlie is—well, she’s glued some Smarties candies to her leggings and she’s a self-professed *smarty pants*.

Every last inch of my mother's B&B has been decorated for Halloween, but more importantly, for the festival, my mother is inadvertently hosting up until the spooky finale of this month—it's a little community party she's dubbed as the Fright Night Festival.

Of course, some festivities take place during the day as well for the little ones, but come evening the grounds of the B&B are transformed into the spookiest and perhaps kookiest place on the planet—or at least here in Honey Hollow.

My mother came up with the frightening idea after she lent me the space to open up my temporary bakery. She thought a spooky fall festival seemed like a perfect way to lure people to the B&B, seeing that it usually doesn't have near the foot traffic that Main Street does.

And in true Miranda Lemon fashion, she's turned this place into a carnival that has drawn just about every person in Vermont to her doorstep. She didn't do it alone, however. She hired one of her boarders, Cormack Featherby, a feather-headed socialite to run the Fright Night festivities.

My mother put her money where her mouth was when it came to hosting the biggest haunted party Honey Hollow ever did see. And if Cormack is good at anything, it's spending other people's money—this time the money would be my mother's.

I have to give it to Cormack. She's called in her decorator friends who have turned the inside and outside of the haunted mansion into just that, a bona fide haunted mansion with enough spiders, bats, witches, scarecrows, monsters, and ghouls to scare up a fright all year long if need be.

And the festival? Well, let's just say every food vendor in town has shown up to feed the masses, along with crafters who are happy to show off their wares.

The best part of all is there's a haunted hayride that travels all around the grounds with things that go bump in the night that jump out at you. The ride is all fun and games during the day—and naughty and spooky as a horror movie at night.

Actually, I hear it's more like a theme park ride with various spooky scenes that build to a terrifying crescendo. During the day, it's tame and playful for the little ones, and at night it takes on a more demented feel. Apparently, the scenery and the storyline changes every night so that the teenagers and the grown-ups alike keep coming back for more. It doesn't hurt that my mother is charging them a premium to do it either.

“Watch your language, Cha Cha,” Carlotta snips at my sister. “I am not dressed as a wicked witch. Do you see a pointy hat?” She thumps herself on the head as she says it. “Do you see a broom in my hand?” She tosses her empty hands in the air and another lone black feather drifts from the ceiling, falling right into her palm. “*Gah*,” she shrieks before shaking it loose and letting it fall to the floor.

“Please don’t tell me you’re afraid of a little old feather.” Charlie snatches the feather and fans it toward our birth mother.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” Carlotta bellows a touch too loud as if she were trying to convince herself.

I roll my eyes at the thought, although it’s probably true.

For as long as I’ve known Carlotta, I don’t remember her shirking away from anything.

“And the only reason you don’t have a broom in your hand is because you’re too afraid I’d make you use it,” I tell her.

There is no greater truth. Carlotta is pretty much allergic to manual labor.

“You got me there, Lot.” She grins for a moment. “But who needs to ride a broom when I can ride the arm of a handsome man or two.” She makes a face. “Now that Harry has put up the finish line to my freedom, I need to nab me as many men as I can get my grubby little hands on.”

Both Charlie and I frown at our birth mother in unison.

It’s true. Carlotta’s so-called boyfriend, Mayor Harry Nash, has told her that he wants monogamy come Christmas, and Carlotta has been bemoaning the fact ever since. Most women would be thrilled that they no longer have to share their man with heaven knows who, but not Carlotta. Mostly because the good time runs in the other direction as well.

“Oh, come on.” Carlotta waves us off. “You girls both know life is too short to date just one handsome man.”

“Please.” Charlie shakes her head. “We could barely survive the chaos you brought when you were single. You’re ten times the terror with one, two, or ten men by your side.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” I muse.

Charlie really does know her.

“*Eh*,” Carlotta chuffs. “Survival is overrated. But variety, now *that’s* the spice of life. How am I supposed to stay spicy with just one man by my side? I’ve got less than eight weeks of freedom, and you girls can bet your britches I’m going to get while the getting is good.”

“Just don’t get any venereal diseases,” I say as I scoop up a fist full of candy. “You’re still living with me, remember?”

“Always and forever, Lot.” Carlotta crosses her heart. “You’ve got my pledge of household allegiance. I’ll be there until they drag my cold, dead body from my bedroom.”

Charlie sniffs. “Now there’s something to look forward to.”

Carlotta, Charlie, and I all share the same honey blonde hair, same hazel eyes—okay, so Charlie has a touch of blue—and the same build and features.

We also share the same cursed ability to see the dead.

Charlie gasps at something just past the wrought iron stairwell that leads to the second story.

“Charlie, what is it?” I ask, stepping in line with her in an effort to see anything that might pique my interest. The only thing I see is that oversized painting of my mother that hangs in the foyer.

“Nothing. I just...” her voice trails off and her face turns white as a sheet.

“Charlie, you look as if you’ve seen a ghost, and I’m not talking about any of the ghosts we know.”

Charlie shakes her head and snarls. “Oh, I had better have seen a ghost. Excuse me,” she says, speeding past me as she darts in that direction.

But before I can chase after her, I see a sight that sends a chill right up my spine.

LOTTIE



The Fright Night Festival bubbles around me right here in the entry of my mother's B&B as a crowd of costumed children, and men and women alike, bustle their way to the tables housing my baked goods. But that's not what has me in a panic.

My mother—the aforementioned saint who raised me, Miranda Lemon—staggers forward, clutching at her chest as if her heart were about to stop beating.

“Mother, what's wrong?” I ask as I pull her in close.

Her lemon blonde hair is neatly coiled around her shoulders and she's impeccably dressed in a cranberry-colored silk suit. She bought this place after my father died and she's been a force to be reckoned with in the business world ever since.

“Oh, it's nothing really.” She bites down on a ruby red lip. “Okay. So it's *something*. I just came back from the doctor and he gave me some very bad news.”

Carlotta zips forward. “You're about to bite the big one? As in the big candy bar in the sky?” she asks while swiping a fun-size chocolate bar from the candy dish in front of me.

“No.” Mom bats her away. “At least not yet. But I will sooner than later if I don't change my eating habits. My triglycerides were sky-high and so was my bad cholesterol. The doctor threatened to put me on some serious medication if I can't fix the mess I'm in before the new year.” She looks right at me. “He suggested I give up sugar and all carbohydrates!”

A handful of my employees and I all gasp at once before they get right back to selling my sugary, and might I add, carbohydrate-laden goods.

“Don’t worry, Mom,” I tell her without a clue as to why she shouldn’t.

“How can you tell me not to worry? I practically live off of your chocolate muffins, and your chocolate-filled croissants, and these new chocolate delights you’re selling like hot cakes—well, I just don’t know if life is worth living without them.”

She’s not wrong on that last account. The chocolate delights are a new layered chocolate cake with creamy layers of chocolate mousse between them. It’s sort of a new creation I came up with during one of my many late-night cravings.

I land my hand protectively over the twins in my belly.

I’m just four months along, but I feel as if I’ve loved these babies all my life.

“I’m a baker,” I’m quick to inform her. “I deal with substitutions all the time. We’ll figure this out. I promise.”

I hope.

I’m just about to expound on that notion when I spot the cutest little dinosaur you ever did see, and she just so happens to be in the arms of the cutest detective I ever did see, her daddy.

“Oh my goodness,” Mom squeals as she lunges for them. “Give me that baby.”

“Glam Glam.” Lyla kicks with glee as my mother takes her from Noah.

Noah Fox, or Detective Noah Fox, would be my first *true* love. We share Lyla Nell and still feel affectionate toward one another. But as it stands, I’m currently married to his old stepbrother, my second and final true love, Judge Essex Everett Baxter.

“Lottie Lemon.” Noah pulls me in for a quick embrace. Noah has dark hair that turns red at the tips and eyes so green they’re the envy of every pine tree in Honey Hollow, not to mention those deep wells in his cheeks that people call dimples. He’s also the lead homicide detective down in Ashford County. “I’m happy to report that Lyla Nell loved every minute of the happy hayride.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And you took her just in time.” I nod his way. “The sun is setting, and that means that nice little romp through the woods behind the B&B is about to take a turn for the scary.”

“What’s scary?” a deep voice strums from behind and I turn to see all six feet plus of my handsome hubby. Everett has jet-black hair, piercing blue eyes, and a face and body that make all the girls in a ten-mile radius crane

their necks in his direction. He's intelligent, handsome to a fault, and rarely ever smiles. "Are you afraid of Noah? I can initiate a restraining order if you like."

"Very funny," I say, hiking up on my tiptoes to give him a kiss.

"*Bobby*," Lyla Nell whines while plucking off the hood of her green dinosaur costume. Noah has bought her enough costumes to last the entire month of October—and she'll never have to wear the same thing twice. He figures since Lyla Nell is never leaving my side or his, she'll spend most of her time right here at the Fright Night Festival with me. "*Bobby*," Lyla Nell cries as she opens and closes her hands.

"Don't you worry, honey," Mom says, cradling Lyla Nell in her arms. "I've got an entire stack of Barbie dolls in my suite." She nods my way. "She's tired. Why don't I take her to my room for a quick nap while you finish up. And I'll stay right there with her. In fact, I'll let Wiley know he's in charge while I'm away."

"Please do," I say as I give the baby a kiss and the two of them take off.

Wiley would be Wiley Fox, Noah's look-alike father. I'll admit, it's been a little weird seeing my mother and Wiley together, but only because the resemblance between Noah and his father is more than a little jarring.

And the fact Wiley swindled Everett's mother out of millions once upon a time is more than a little jarring as well. That short-lived love connection is how Noah and Everett once became stepbrothers.

I watch as my mother whisks Lyla Nell up to the second floor and that horrible, albeit brief kidnapping runs through my mind.

One evening last month we lost track of Lyla Nell at the harvest festival downtown, but thankfully we found her, still strapped into her stroller, sitting in a field all on her own in a circle of flowers, along with a creepy note sitting next to her.

The so-called Prankster promised they'd be back and that this Halloween season would be the scariest of them all.

A mean shiver runs through me.

"You're thinking about it again, aren't you?" Everett says sternly as he inspects my features.

"Don't," Noah says just as sternly. "Think about something light and happy. Are you hungry? I'm your man. I'll pick up whatever you need. I mean it. I'll globe trot if I have to."

"*Ooh*"—I rub my belly just thinking about food—"actually, I've been

having a serious craving for donuts.”

“You hear that?” Noah elbows Everett. “She’s craving donuts. I think they’re mine,” he says, nodding down at my stomach.

My waist is just about gone, but my baby bump isn’t all that big just yet. At this time with Lyla Nell, I wasn’t even showing yet. But I suppose the fact I have a double occupancy has something to do with it.

“They’re mine,” Everett says, pulling me in close. “And so is the girl hosting them.” He lands another quick kiss to my lips. “Have you felt them kick yet?”

I shake my head. Everett has been so anxious to feel these babies it almost hurts to witness.

“All right, buddy.” Noah sighs. “You’ve got twins. You’ve evened up the score.”

“Technically”—Carlotta lifts a finger—“he’s one ahead of you.”

Two if you count Evie.

Everly—*Evie*—Baxter is Everett’s eighteen-year-old daughter that I adopted a few years back. Her mother hid her away from Everett for years and well, Evie needed one serious do-over in the mommy department.

Another black feather floats from the ceiling and Carlotta shrieks as it lands right on the tip of her nose.

“It’s happening!” She’s quick to pluck it off as she shrieks again.

“What’s happening?” I ask. “Each time one of these feathers blows your way, you freak out a little.”

“Try a *lot*,” Carlotta corrects. “Do you know what it means when you see three black feathers in a row?”

“There’s a bald bird nearby?” Noah asks.

“No,” she grouses. “It means something *wicked* this way comes.”

No sooner does she say those words than a raven with a four-foot wingspan flies right past us.

“Geez,” I say, clutching at my chest. “Did you see the size of that bird?”

“What bird?” Noah asks, trying to follow my gaze but looks lost in the endeavor.

“That bird,” I say just as the raven in question does another loop before flying right up through the ceiling, and both Carlotta and I gasp.

“You just saw another ghost, didn’t you?” Noah asks.

“I think we did,” I say. “And you know what that means.”

Everett nods. “It means murder.”

Before we can fully digest the homicidal implications, Noah's father, Wiley, runs our way.

"Noah, Everett, *quick*," he pants. "Something terrible has happened. You need to follow me."

LOTTIE



Noah, Everett, and I follow Wiley right out of my mother's haunted B&B and onto the haunted grounds where a cast of thousands have amassed on this crisp October evening to enjoy the game booths, the food vendors, and a—woman dancing on the roof of the B&B?

Creepy organ music seeps through unseen speakers, and each of the evergreens and maple trees on the property are strewn with lavender twinkle lights. Not to mention there are enough glowing pumpkins sprinkled about to light up a black hole, but I'm not paying attention to any of that at the moment.

"Oh my word," I gasp up at the cute blonde with a pert nose, pale eyes, and hair that looks light as cotton candy. She's dressed in rags from head to toe and she happens to be dancing away as if she wasn't on the edge of a sheer two-story drop—and perhaps on the edge of oblivion. "How did she get up there? And who is she?"

Everett shakes his head. "Whoever she is, she's out of her mind."

"You got that right," Charlie says, stomping over and grunting at the sight. "And I happen to know exactly who she is. That, my friends, is Carlotta Sawyer's *favorite* child."

"*What?*" Noah, Everett, and I say in unison.

"I don't care who she is," Wiley snips, looking ever so much like Noah with a few extra gray hairs. "She needs to get the heck off that roof before we have a body on our hands."

Noah, Everett, and I exchange a look.

Lord knows we've had more bodies on our hands than even the local morgue knows what to do with.

Hey? Maybe that ghostly raven was meant for her?

I shake my head at the thought. That doesn't make sense. The ghosts that come back to help me with my investigations are strictly here to help solve a murder—specifically the murder of the person who loved them most.

It's sort of sweet when you take the homicide out of the equation.

"Charlie?" I pull my sister in by the elbow. "Exactly what do you mean, she's 'Carlotta's favorite child'? I thought we were her only children."

"Now, now." Carlotta strides over. "Don't you get your panties in a twist, Lot." She puts her fingers in her mouth and belts out an ear-piercing whistle. "Derby Dingle, you get your shiny hiney down here before I give you a whoopin'."

"Mama!" The blonde waves like mad and effectively loses her balance before she jumps to the slanted roof one story below, lands on her bottom, and slides down the shingles until she lands square into Wiley Fox's strong, yet greedy arms. "Woo-wee," she squeals as she gets a better look at him. "Aren't you the cat's meow?" She gives his dimpled cheek a quick pinch.

"He's taken," Charlie says, practically swiping the girl out of Wiley's arms. "What in the name of Higgins Bottom are you doing here?"

Higgins Bottom, Arizona happens to be where Carlotta trotted off to once she left me on the floor of the local fire department when I was just an infant. She actually came back into town a little while after to see how I was doing, a bit after the firefighter that found me adopted me—Joseph Lemon, God rest his sweet soul. And while Carlotta was in town, she decided to do the mattress mambo with Mayor Harry Nash once again and out came my sister a year later.

Carlotta tried to off Charlie to the Lemons as well, but my mother was already expecting my younger sister at that time so Carlotta got stuck with *Cha Cha*—her words and her cutesy nickname for my sister, not mine.

And believe me, if Charlie were raised by wolves, life might have been easier for her.

Noah steps in. "Carlotta, is this woman your daughter?"

"She sure is, Foxy." Carlotta gives a cheeky wink. Carlotta has a cutesy nickname for just about everyone. "She's my daughter by another mother."

That's not how the saying goes, but I'm not about to correct her.

"*Everyone*"—Carlotta bellows as she wraps an arm around the blonde's shoulders—"meet the girl who changed my world, the man-taking, money-making, prettiest girl in the world—Derbyshire Dingle."

The cute blonde waves her off. “You can call me Derby,” she says before sliding in next to Wiley. “And you can call me anything you like.”

Charlie leans my way. “She prefers them older. Daddy issues,” she mouths that last part.

“Nice to meet you.” Everett nods to the woman, but that stern expression on his face suggests he’s anything but glad. “What’s with the rooftop rumba?”

“It’s how I make a living.” She shrugs. “After my birthing units both went to prison, and then Mama and Cha Cha skipped out on me, I needed to find a way to turn a quick dime. You’d be surprised how quickly people fill up a hat with government-issued lettuce once they get a gander at my quick-step routine.”

“Two truths and a lie.” Charlie gives a wistful shake of her head. “Nice to see things haven’t changed.” She looks my way. “Her parents went up the river because they knocked off liquor stores for a living. Carlotta took her after she ran away from foster care. And yes, Derby is a stunt artist or a con artist, whatever they’re calling it these days. But neither Carlotta nor I skipped out on her.” She turns her ire onto the blonde. “I told you I was headed to Honey Hollow to find my sister—my *real* sister.”

Derby turns an ear to Carlotta. “And you, Mama?”

“I meant to write,” Carlotta stutters the words out—a clear indication she was thinking no such thing. “And before I knew it, Lot Lot here dragged me into a homicide investigation, and it’s been one dead body after the next.” She turns my way. “And don’t think I haven’t appreciated it.” She turns back to Derby. “Come to find out, Lot Lot’s investigations have landed me in more seedy bars than all of the seedy bars the two of us once haunted, *combined*.”

A group of teenagers dressed as vampires strides past us.

“Come on, Derby girl.” Carlotta links arms with hers. “How about I show you around? I practically own this place.” She zips her into the crowd before anyone can correct her.

Charlie wastes no time stepping right up to Noah’s father.

“Wiley Fox”—she pokes her finger into his chest—“you stay away from that whirling Derby of a disaster or you’re bound to lose Miranda Lemon forever.”

She takes off into the crowd just as a loud howl erupts behind us.

Wiley shakes his head at something just over my shoulder.

“Well, well,” he says. “If it isn’t the dirty devil himself.”

LOTTIE



The devil in question would be a man who looks to be in his late fifties, dark hair, square jaw, tall, wide shoulders, and he happens to be dressed as—well, the devil himself. I’m talking red leotard, horns, pointy tail, and a spear of some sort in his left hand.

“Well, if it isn’t Wiley Why-You-Gotta-be-so-Mean Fox,” the man belts out a hearty laugh as he slaps Wiley on the back. “Long time no swindle.” He winks before slapping him on the shoulder, twice as hard.

Wiley scoffs at the man. “Rusty Shadowood, what’s a fool like you doing here?”

“I’ll answer that for you.” A tiny brunette with her hair fanning out around her face in coils steps up. She’s wearing a shimmering silver dress and matching eyeshadow, although I’m not so sure she’s wearing a costume. And she looks to be about my age, late twenties. “He’s here to swindle the masses.”

Everett straightens at the sight of her before leaning my way and whispering, “Lemon, just for the record, I have never *Essexed* that woman.”

I inch back and inspect my handsome hubby for a moment. It’s true. We use his proper moniker as a verb, but only because he’s liberally *Essexed* half of the women in the Eastern Seaboard.

Everett was a player back before he met me, and the women who have danced beneath the sheets with him sort of use his first name as a parting prize.

The woman turns our way and gasps.

“Well, as I live and breathe, if it isn’t *Essex* himself.” She fans herself with her fingers. “Judge Baxter here put me away for the better part of

sixteen months, but I've never been one to hold a grudge."

Ah, now I see why Everett would circumvent her use of his proper moniker. And I give an approving nod his way for clarifying.

She slinks forward and slips her finger down his blue silk tie. "How about I let you make it up to me? Are you free now, or are you free later?"

"Twila, this is my wife, Lemon." Everett nods my way.

Everett rarely if ever calls me by my proper moniker and I don't mind one bit.

"Please, call me Lottie," I say, quick to shake the woman's hand. "I'm sorry to hear about your sentence."

She waves me off. "I've paid my dues, got out three months ago, and got me a job tending bar down at Sinners and Saints out in Leeds."

Leeds is the seedy town that sits just below Honey Hollow. It's more sinner than it ever is saint.

"In fact"—the woman continues—"I'm here to meet with the owner of this here B&B. My boss heard about the Halloween party that's set to go on all month long, and he wanted to see if they could use our bartending services."

I shake my head. "Thank you for offering, but we're not serving hard liquor. My mother owns and runs the B&B. She doesn't have a liquor license, and this is a family-oriented event."

No sooner do I say that than three young women strut by wearing little to nothing with enough whips and chains and high heels to qualify as bona fide strippers. A scream gets locked in my throat as I recognized two of the three.

"Evie," I snip just as Everett freezes solid. "What are you girls doing walking around dressed like that?"

Evie is essentially Everett in female skin, much prettier, with the same dark locks, albeit down to her waist, and the same Baxter-issued cobalt blue eyes. She's just starting her first year at Ashford University.

"Mom, it's like practically Halloween," Evie huffs. "Besides, Glam Glam told me it was a costumed event when she invited me."

The blonde next to her nods like a bobblehead. And the blonde in question would be Dash Johnson, Evie's ride-or-die BFF.

"Mom, Dad, this is Kirby, our roomie." Evie pulls the redhead over a notch.

Kirby is as cute as a button with a tiny nose, freckles, long red hair, and big green eyes.

“Nice to meet you.” Everett shakes his head back at Evie. “Couldn’t you find something less revealing? It’s dipping into the forties tonight.”

“Dad,” Evie balks at the thought of the weather. “We’re college students. We can’t afford to run around buying costumes. We went to Aunt Meg and let her dress us for the night.”

“That explains everything,” I mutter.

Meg is my little sister—younger by one year—and she happens to work at a strip joint, but she doesn’t do the stripping. She merely teaches the strippers their moneymaking moves.

“So nice to meet you all,” the redhead says. “Evie has told me all about you. I can hardly wait to meet Cray Cray.”

Cray Cray would be the nickname Evie has for Carlotta—a fitting nickname at that.

“Come on,” Evie says, pulling both girls along. “Let’s go find our boy-toys. They’re going to die when they see us like this.”

They disappear into the crowd before Everett or Noah can talk some sense into them.

The aforementioned boy-toys would be Evie’s and Dash’s boyfriends, and that alone is enough to give both Everett and Noah heart attacks.

“Lemon,” Everett grouses as he bores a hole into the void of her wake.

“I’ll talk to her,” I say.

I’m not a mind reader, but I can tell Everett is loathed to think about what Evie’s boyfriend might be thinking about once he sees her in those scandalous skivvies.

Twila shakes her head. “I can’t believe you’re a daddy, Essex. Anyway, too bad about the bar.” She turns and gives the devil among us the stink eye. “I hope you rot in hell, you low-down dirty devil.”

She takes off and my jaw falls to the floor at her abrupt and rather rude parting.

But Rusty just laughs it off. “She’s ever the spitfire, that one.” He nods my way. “I’m already in cahoots with your mother. I’m the owner of Beast Brewery non-alcoholic energy drinks. I’ve donated a few dozen cases for the festival in hopes to drum up business with the youth. You know what they say, you gotta get ’em young if you want to keep ’em.”

“Energy drinks?” Noah frowns. “As in caffeine overload?”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Rusty slaps his thigh and pretends to shoot Noah.

Little does he know, Noah is packing some serious heat under that vest of his.

And confession: so am I.

My trusty Glock, whom I've named Ethel, is strapped to my thigh. I don't normally bring Ethel to the bakery—makeshift as it were—or anywhere while Lyla Nell is with me, but with that psychotic Prankster on the loose, I haven't been comfortable unless I have Ethel with me. Just in case.

“Caffeine is the name, money is my game.” Rusty pretends to shoot Noah again and this time makes Everett a target, too.

“Nice to meet you,” I tell him. “Please, do what you have to do. And feel free to help yourself to a slice of my chocolate delight cake. I own the bakery booth over there. It's on me.”

“That I will,” he says, tipping his horns my way. “Thank you.”

“Rusty”—Wiley steps in—“this is my son, Noah, and my favorite son, Everett. Noah is a cop and Everett is a judge.”

He's omitting a few more kids from the equation, but they're not here so it makes for a cleaner intro.

“A cop and a judge?” Rusty looks amused, and a tiny bit terrified. “Well, isn't that convenient? I've always wondered how you managed to keep yourself out of prison.” He slaps Wiley on the back again, and before he can initiate a laugh, his eyes narrow on a redhead striding this way. “Well, if it isn't little Miss Candy Sunshine.”

“Sienna Broomfield.” She nods my way. Her hair is short around her neck and her hazel eyes glint in the night. She's dressed head to toe in a catsuit and has little cat ears poking out of the top of her head and a svelte long black tail to match. I can't help but note a large sparkling ring on her finger. It's the face of a cat and it looks as if it's cut out of glass. “Your mother pointed you out earlier,” she says, holding her hand my way. “I own the Candy Confectionary here in town.”

“Oh my goodness,” I say. “I didn't know Honey Hollow even had a candy shop. I'll have to stop by.” I press a hand over my stomach. “I've been craving candy something awful. I'm expecting twins and I think they're both a couple of chocoholics.”

“Congratulations.” Her eyes enlarge and I can't tell if she's happy for me or horrified, most likely both.

I can't blame her. Having twins is not for the faint of heart.

“And I can totally understand why you haven't heard of my shop,” she

says. “If you’re not on Main Street, you’re practically invisible in this town. That’s why I’ve donated all of the candy here that the B&B is giving out. I’m hoping to get the word out.” She cuts a glance to the devil among us. “Well, aren’t you appropriately dressed, you dirty devil.” She laughs at the thought. “Let me guess, you’re pushing your poison here on these poor unsuspecting souls?”

“Don’t look so surprised,” he says. “You knew I’d be here. Told you so myself at the bank last week. And don’t you dare talk smack about my beverage. It’s a labor of love, and the best tasting energy drink on the planet and we both know it.” He leans in. “How’s that candy shop of yours going, anyway? Looking for an investor?”

“Not on your life.” She laughs. “I rather like calling the shots for once.” She looks my way. “I’m just here to drop off a bag of refills,” she says, holding up a pillow sack that I hadn’t even noticed she was holding. “I’ll be out of your hair in no time. Excuse me.” She nods to Rusty before heading for the B&B.

A scream goes off near the staging area for that tractor that hauls a flatbed full of hay bales.

Wiley shakes his head in that direction. “That driver moves way too fast. I’d better go take over before he breaks a neck or two.” He takes off and Rusty squints out at the woods.

“It was nice meeting you all,” the man says. “I’d better go replenish the coolers with my beverages. Remember, guzzle up and bring out the beast in you.” He winks before disappearing into the ever-growing crowd.

“Don’t worry,” I say to both Noah and Everett. “I’m not guzzling anything with caffeine in it until next spring.” I rub my belly to prove my point. “But I can’t make any promises about chocolate.” I make a face. “Ooh, I just had a serious craving for chocolate croissants.”

“Lucky for you, you’re a baker,” Noah points out.

I make a face. “Unlucky for me, I’m craving them from a French patisserie.”

Another sharp scream goes off and Noah sighs. “I’d better patrol the grounds. I’ll be around.” He takes off and Everett cranes his neck past me.

“Evie and her friends are over by the coolers,” he says.

I glance that way and spot them.

“Looks like they’re fishing out those drinks,” I say.

“Yeah,” Everett growls. “I’d better go over before they bring out the

beast in those boy-toys of theirs. Don't move, Lemon. I'll be right back.”

He takes off, and I'm about to follow when I see something—or more to the point, someone, and a scream gets locked in my throat.

LOTTIE



“Cocoa Ganache?” I squeal with delight as I lock my arms around my old friend. “Is it really you?” I say, pulling back to get a better look at her.

Cocoa is a tall brunette with dark button eyes and cheekbones cut sharp enough to slice hard cheese. She was one of my good friends back in high school and we’ve kept in touch via social media, but it’s so great to see her in person.

“It’s me.” She laughs as she takes me in. “Lottie Lemon, you haven’t changed a bit. I’m sorry I haven’t been to the bakery to visit you just yet. I just moved back into town a few weeks ago. You know what they say, there’s no place like home.” She gives a little wink while motioning to my costume.

“Moved back?” I ask, startled. “What about your shop?”

Cocoa went into the chocolate bonbon business not too long ago out in New York. Back when her mother was pregnant with her, she craved nothing but chocolate, thus her name—a play on her surname as well. And to be honest, just being around Cocoa used to make me crave chocolate back in the day—and come to think of it—she’s doing it now, too.

She shrugs. “I couldn’t take the rent in the big city, so I thought I’d take over the family business. After my uncle died, it was bequeathed to me, and I thought instead of letting a business manager run it, I could do a better job myself.”

“Are you talking about the cemetery?” I blink over at her. It was a well-known fact that once Gerald Ganache kicked the bucket, he left the place to his only remaining relative, Cocoa, but the place seemed to be running just fine without her presence.

She nods. “That’s the one. In fact, I’m here on business. Your mother requested a few of the death masks my uncle has in his collection. Is she around? I’d like to see the space for them before I have them brought in. They’ve been kept in glass cases to preserve the quality.”

“Death masks?” I grimace at the thought. “I guess my mother really is going all out for the festival. She’s actually watching Lyla Nell for me at the moment, but why don’t you head on in, and if you find an appropriate space, by all means, bring on the masks.”

I grimace again because I understand the concept of those ghoulish molds. They’re cast right after a person bites the big one—or at least they were when they were still being made way back when.

“Will do,” she says. “And I can’t wait to meet Lyla Nell. Oh, and congrats on the twins.” She pulls me in for another quick embrace. “I’ll come right back out and we’ll reconnect.” Her demeanor darkens as she glances past me. “Here we go.”

She takes off, but she doesn’t make a beeline for the B&B; instead, she heads over to the devil in charge of the over-caffeinated beverages.

Rusty looks up and his face goes white. The two of them start in on what looks to be a spirited conversation before she picks up a can and sloshes the contents in his face.

“Wow,” I whisper as I watch Cocoa take off for the B&B.

That was odd.

Maybe it was an accident?

Cocoa has always been so demure.

Or maybe... maybe Cocoa has changed a bit since I’ve seen her last.

I glance back toward the beverage table, only to find Rusty chatting away with a tall man in a dark suit and a fedora as if nothing ever happened.

I guess that’s that.

I take a look at the grounds as the Fright Night Festival rages as a vibrant happy chaos unfolds around me. My mother’s property has been transformed into a virtual playground for all things macabre. Streaks of orange and black streamers crisscross the violet-illuminated sky like veins carrying the lifeblood of the Halloween spirit.

On my left, a coven of teenagers masquerading as witches and warlocks shriek with delight, as they chase a black cat. It zigzags between their legs, always just a leap away from their grasp, its hisses and purrs swallowed by their laughter.

To my right, an eerie green lantern hangs from a tree, serving as a guide post for those interested in the haunted hayride that circles the property. A group of teenagers is just disembarking from the ride now with their faces ashen, hair on end, and shrieks of faux terror as a badge of honor as they quickly merge back into the throngs of the festival.

The “Monster Mash” bellows through the speakers, much to the crowd’s approval, sending a jolt through the sea of swaying bodies who have created their own dance floor near the food vendors.

The air is heavy with the aroma of pumpkin-spiced everything and the signature fragrances of autumn—apple cider and cinnamon pretzels—and there’s even a hint of a smoky bonfire from some unknown source. It’s a heady mix.

Everywhere I look there’s an explosion of color and screams—a sensory overload of the most spooktacular kind. The festival isn’t just raging around me, it’s pulsating through me—and right through the twins by proxy.

It’s Fright Night at its finest, but I think I’d best leave this trick-or-treat paradise for the ghosts and ghouls enjoying it.

I look high and low for Everett, Noah, or Evie but can’t find any one of them. Heck, I can hardly find anyone I recognize in all this melee.

A lone dark raven with its gloriously wide wingspan swoops in front of me, leaving a trail of miniature shimmering blue stars in its wake.

“Hey,” I call out as it swoops near the edge of the woods and I drift a little farther from the hubbub of the festivities around me. “Come back here,” I shout as it dives straight into the ebony woods and disappears with a menacingly loud caw. “I could really use your help!”

I’m about to take another step when my foot kicks against something soft and I glance down to find something crimson obstructing my path.

I quickly turn on the flashlight on my phone and point it to the ground, only to see a man in a red leotard and tights lying there with his hands smashed through a slice of my chocolate delight cake.

Rusty Shadowood won’t have to worry about bringing out the beast in himself ever again.

The dirty devil is dead.

LOTTIE



A scream rips from my throat, disrupting the quasi-silence in this area of the woods. My mother's Fright Night Festival rages on in the distance, but I'm too lost in the horror before me to pay it any mind.

Rusty Shadowood's lifeless body lies sprawled amongst the fallen autumn leaves.

I wish I could say it's the first time I've seen a lifeless person sprawled out before me, but for the last few years, I've seen more bodies than the autopsy table at the local morgue.

My heart lurches into my chest, the kind of feeling you get in a free-falling elevator, and a cold prickle runs down my spine.

That devilish glint in Rusty's eyes is gone, replaced with a vacant stare as he gazes off into the void of an endless night.

A knot of horror tightens in my gut as a wave of nausea grips me.

"Lottie?" Noah's voice echoes from behind, and soon he's right next to me, taking a moment to scan the stillness of the scene. "Geez."

"Lemon?" Everett lands next to me, huffing for air, and before any of us can react, a woman dressed as a black cat jumps in front of us.

"I heard a scream," she pants, falling to her knees, and it's then I can see it's Sienna Broomfield, the woman who owns the candy shop here in Honey Hollow. She takes in the scene a moment, looking down at the poor man's body splayed out, and there's an eerie calm surrounding him as if he's laid down for his final rest. "Oh my goodness! Rusty?" She gives the man a violent shake and the moon glints on something over her finger. It's that giant ring in the shape of a cat's head. "You can't be dead," she says as she starts in on a series of jolting chest compressions. "Wake up," she shouts as she

thumps so hard over his chest that ring of hers cuts open the front of his leotard, and a seam of crimson slashes over his chest.

“*Whoa,*” Noah says, pulling her back before he checks the man for a pulse. Noah glances up at Everett and me and shakes his head. “I’d better call this in.”

“You mean he’s dead?” Sienna pants as she stares into the woods in disbelief.

“Let me help you up,” Everett offers as Noah shouts into his phone for backup and the coroner’s office all at once.

“He’s really dead?” Sienna whispers, visibly shaken. “I can’t believe he’s dead,” she cries out with a ragged edge to her voice.

“Hey,” I say, wrapping an arm around the redhead in an effort to keep her from falling over. “Why don’t you go grab a seat and maybe some water? I’ll come check on you in a few minutes once the authorities arrive.”

“Yes.” She nods as she takes a blind step forward. “I’ll get some water.” She staggers off into the crowd and I give a heavy sigh in her wake.

“She’s living proof not everyone is used to seeing a dead body,” I say as Everett wraps his arms around me. “Although, I don’t think I can ever get used to it.”

“Neither can I,” Noah says as he steps in. “Lottie, what did you see?”

“I saw that bird, the raven, headed this way, and I tried to chase it down, thinking maybe we could circumvent this kind of tragedy. Obviously, I was wrong.” I glance back at Rusty’s body, his chest exposed with the cuts on it from Sienna’s ring. There’s a slash of crimson on his chest, but he’s not bleeding. I suppose dead people don’t.

Despite the macabre scene unfolding at the edge of the forest, the Fright Night Festival is still in full swing just a short distance away. The air is thick with laughter, music, and the sweet scent of caramel apples and cotton candy. Strings of orange and purple lights hang between the trees, illuminating the carved pumpkins that line the walkways, their eerie faces flickering in the autumn night.

“Lot Lot?” Carlotta’s voice cuts through the darkness as both she and Derby appear, gawking at the poor man splayed out behind us.

“You got another one!” Carlotta shouts, and dare I say, there’s a smidge of glee in her voice.

“Another what?” Derby gasps as she gets a better look at the man.

“Another body,” Carlotta says, slapping her knee with a touch of pride.

“My Lot Lot could make a fortune if she charged for this skill.”

“Skill?” I huff over at the woman who birthed me. “And what skill would that be?” Although something tells me I shouldn’t have asked.

“You *know*—your habit of finding dead bodies. You’re like a human divining rod for doom. Or a corpse compass, if you will,” Carlotta quips, managing a weak chuckle.

“A corpse compass?” Derby gives a dreamy sigh. “Now why couldn’t I have a divine talent like that?”

“Don’t I know it.” Carlotta shrugs. “Some girls have all that luck *and* the ruby slippers. She gets it from the Sawyer side of the family,” she’s quick to assert.

I roll my eyes at the thought “Next time you’re looking for a body, Carlotta, I’d be more than happy to lend you my corpse compass.” I’d offer up my ruby slippers, too, but I’m afraid she’d never give them back.

Carlotta elbows Derby in the stomach. “Didn’t I tell you she was generous?”

Derby squints. “I thought you said she was a sucker?”

“*Sucker, generous*, what’s the difference? Welcome to Honey Hollow. We’ve got more bodies popping up than a zombie apocalypse.” Carlotta chuckles just as the grounds swarm with deputies from the sheriff’s department, and before long the coroner shows up at the scene as well.

“More like a corpse apocalypse,” Derby counters. “I guess I should start carrying a shovel instead of an umbrella. Never know when I’ll need to do some impromptu grave digging in this town.” She chuckles lightly as she looks at Carlotta. “And I suppose I should prepare for unearthing more than just a few bodies. Secrets have a habit of burrowing deep, don’t they?”

Carlotta stiffens for a moment, her eyes holding a flicker of apprehension. “Come on. Let’s see if we can gather up some clues. I’m Lot’s number one sleuth when it comes to solving these kinds of things.”

“You mean the man was *murdered*?” Derby gasps. “This night only gets better,” she says as Carlotta drags her off into the darkness—most likely to destroy any evidence that the killer left behind.

“He could have died of natural causes,” I call out after them and Everett shakes his head.

“After that ghost that led you right to the body?” He lifts a brow. “I think we both know the odds are slim to none.”

“Lottie?” My sisters, Lainey and Meg, trot this way before I can disagree

—or agree with him.

Both of my sisters are pregnant as well. It's the first time that all three of us Lemon sisters are knocked up at once, and I won't lie, I'm loving every pregnant minute of it. Not to mention the fact my mother is in grandchildren heaven.

While Lainey shares my golden locks and hazel eyes, Meg dyes her hair the color of the darkest night before she teases it up in her signature beehive. It's a stunning look with her icy blue eyes.

"Lottie Lemon," Lainey is quick to hiss. "What have you gone and done now?"

"She hasn't done anything," Everett says in a calming voice, his hand lovingly placed over my belly as if he were trying to warm the twins. "This is Noah's territory. None of us need to involve ourselves with what happened to that poor man."

"None of us would be *you*, Lot," Meg is quick to inform me. She's got enough black eyeliner on to impress a coven of raccoons, and she's wearing her signature black combat boots along with a tent-like dress in the same somber hue. Meg has always been a Goth princess at heart.

"I realize that," I say as I frown up at Everett. "I promise I won't do anything to put the twins' lives in danger or my own. But you know as well as I do, I've got a craving to solve a homicide just about as bad as I have a craving for those French chocolate croissants."

"Let Noah handle the homicide and I'll handle your cravings."

"Homicide?" Lainey cranes her neck past me.

"We're not sure, of course," I'm quick to say.

"We're sure," Meg says, taking a quick look for herself. "He's clutching a slice of Lot's chocolate cake. Which by the way, is your best sweet treat yet," she says, rubbing her own burgeoning belly.

Meg and coincidentally Noah's sister, Sam, are both due around January. And coincidentally yet again, they were both knocked up by the same man—Jed Silver.

Lainey is due in February, and thankfully her husband, Forest, hasn't impregnated anyone else. Although to be fair, Jed is no one's husband. In fact, he's taken an extra interest in Sam, while Meg has taken an extra interest in her ex, Hook Redwood.

"She's not wrong. It is your best-tasting cake," Lainey says. "What's the name of it, and what's making it so delicious?"

“It’s a new creation born out of a craving. It’s essentially a layered chocolate cake with decadent layers of creamy chocolate mousse in between. I’ve been selling out of them just about every day, and ironically, I make sure the one in my fridge at home never runs out. Feel free to take as much as you want on your way home. I’ll be replenishing my supply come morning.”

Thankfully, the kitchen in my bakery is still able to function. My mother’s kitchen here at the B&B could never handle all the sweet treat action I’d throw at it. And I’d have to throw in the towel.

Lainey leans in, cradling her own burgeoning belly. “How are things with you know who? Have you had any more messages?”

You know who would be the nefarious Prankster who’s been making our lives miserable.

“None, thankfully,” I say just as Everett wraps his arm around my waist or what’s left of it.

“And we’re going to keep it that way,” he says. “Noah has this place, the bakery, and our home surrounded by officers at all hours. Lemon has nothing to worry about.” He lands a kiss to my cheek. “It’s all in the past.”

I wish I could believe him. And I think Everett wishes he could believe himself as well.

“I’d better get going,” Lainey says, glancing back at the B&B. “Josie is up there taking a nap with Lyla Nell, and if it goes on any longer, she won’t sleep a wink tonight.” She offers me a quick kiss to the cheek. “Don’t worry about anything. Oh, and Josie’s preschool is having a field trip right here at the B&B. You’ll have to bring Lyla Nell. She’s going to fit right in. I can’t wait until she’s at school with her cousin Josie. Those girls are going to be the best of friends.” She wrinkles her nose with delight.

Both of my sisters say goodnight just as a crowd presses in around the yellow caution tape that’s been erected around the body. And in that crowd, two faces catch my eye, both Twila, the woman Everett sent up the river, and my old friend, Cocoa, stare mesmerized at the sight of Rusty Shadowood’s body lying there slayed for all to see. And next to them are Carlotta and Derby, unabashedly taking pictures and pointing at errant spots on the ground.

“Carlotta is really showing off for that woman,” I say just as Charlie steps in close, holding herself as she shivers.

“You can say that again.” She shakes her head at the sight. “I don’t know what that girl is doing in Honey Hollow, but I can tell you right now she’s up

to no good. Not only is Derby Dingle a boatload of trouble, she's about as funny as a toothache and twice as painful."

"Sounds like you've got her number," Everett quips.

"Oh, I do," Charlie says without taking her eyes off the woman. "And I'm not talking about the one that's written on every men's room stall from here to Chattanooga."

"What do you think she's really doing here in Honey Hollow?" I ask as we watch the girl light up with laughter despite the fact there's a corpse less than three feet from her.

"I don't know," Charlie growls. "But I can guarantee it's nothing that's going to garner her the Citizen of the Year award. She's nothing but a notorious daredevil scammer. Having her in Honey Hollow is like inviting a bull into a china shop. No good will come of this. Mark my words."

Everett sighs in the woman's direction. "Maybe we should give her a chance."

"A chance?" Charlie bucks with a silent laugh. "A chance to turn this town upside down and inside out. But don't worry, Lottie. If she thinks she can come over here and play us for fools, she's got another *thing* coming." She nods my way. "This isn't my first rodeo with that *ding-a-ling*." She takes a step away before backtracking. "And not only is she a no-good con woman, she's a notorious prankster, too. Be on the lookout for all sorts of tomfoolery now that the biggest fool of them all is in Honey Hollow."

She takes off and a chill runs up my spine at her words—specifically the word *prankster*.

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I fish it out in the event my mother needs help with Lyla Nell. But it's not my mother.

It's a text from the exact person I never wanted to hear from again.

NOAH



“*N*oah,” Everett barks just as I finish speaking with the coroner.

“Call me as soon as you finish your report,” I tell the man as a frozen breeze whistles through the night. “I want this treated like a homicide,” I say, pushing past him as I make my way to where Everett and Lottie stand huddled. The Fright Night Festival is still going strong despite the fact the coroner’s office is about to wheel a body away.

Everett has a stern look in his eyes, the kind he gets when we’re on the edge of something dangerous. Lottie’s face is as pale as the moonlight spilling in through the windows.

“Don’t worry,” I tell them. “I’m having the coroner send me anything he discovers posthaste. If this is a homicide, we should have our answer by this time tomorrow.”

“We’re not worried about the homicide right now,” Everett says, thrusting Lottie’s phone my way. “We’re worried about this.”

I take the phone from him and start reading the text message staring back at me.

Dear Lottie, sweet and bright,

Fright Night’s coming, filled with fright.

Underneath falls cold air, a special scare just for you to share.

Your Fright Night is no jest, it’s real!

With an ominous, approaching feel.

Two choices for you, both crystal clear—disappear yourself, or I interfere.

My method might make you shake with fright, so choose your path in the moon’s soft light.

The Prankster's clock is ticking fast. Choose wisely now, or this night might be your last.

Tick-tock goes the clock. Don't sleep. Before your Fright Night takes a leap.

Not jokingly yours,

The Prankster

"Another one," I groan as I read over it once again. "It's clear they want you out of town."

"That means they live here," Everett says.

"Or they want to," Lottie says with her gaze set elsewhere, and try as I might to follow it, a crowd floats by.

"So what are you thinking?" I ask the two of them. "Any hint at who you think this might be?"

"No idea," Everett says. "And it's not for Lemon to think about either. She's got enough on her mind with Lyla Nell and the twins to take care of. Not to mention the bakery. We're taking care of this, remember?" His voice is tight, and there's a slight threat buried in there, too.

I get it. I don't want anything to happen to Lottie either, and I certainly don't want the stress of it to affect her pregnancy.

I nod his way.

"Everett is right," I say to Lot. "And you know I don't say that often. I'll take care of this." I examine the message again. "I'll see if I can do a trace on the number, but this is most likely a burner phone."

"Why do you think they changed modalities?" Lottie asks. "I mean, all of their other messages were on good old-fashioned paper."

"With the exception of the message they left spray painted on the walls of the bakery," Everett points out.

"That's true." Lottie shivers as she warms her arms with her hands. "And I have a feeling they're not working alone. One person couldn't have bashed in all of the windows at the bakery, spray painted the walls, and decimated all of the shelves."

I tip my head to the side. "They might not be working alone in the traditional sense, but that doesn't mean whoever did this didn't pay off a couple of hoodlums to destroy your property. You'd be surprised—people would do just about anything to earn some cash."

Everett nods. "Especially when they're down on their luck. I think you're right, Noah. And I don't say that often." He lifts a brow as he lobs my words

back at me. “This person could be acting alone and paying people to do their grunt work. In fact, it might be their way of trying to throw us off.”

“Lottie,” a female voice calls out before I can agree with him.

We look up to see a frazzled-looking Miranda running this way.

“Oh, Lottie, I heard there’s been yet another tragedy,” she bemoans. “Couldn’t you hold off until after the holidays?”

“*Mother*,” Lottie groans. “And never mind me, where’s Lyla Nell?”

“She’s safe with Lainey. Your sister was just about to leave when she told me the news and I begged her to stay with the girls so I could come out and see what’s going on for myself.”

Lottie sighs my way. “I’ll fill her in.”

They take off and I step closer to Everett.

“Looks as if this monster isn’t backing off,” I say, holding Lottie’s phone between us. “And I’m positive it’s a burner phone they used.”

“So am I.” He nods. “And I’m positive they’re not above harming Lemon.”

A wild howl goes off in the distance and Everett practically snaps his neck as he looks in the direction we saw Lottie last.

“Go find her,” I tell him. “I’ll finish up here and get right to work on this as well.” I take a picture of this latest threat, on her phone no less, the backend info of the number, along with the time stamp, and send it to myself before handing him Lottie’s phone. “Make sure Evie is okay before you get Lot and Lyla Nell back to the house. We need them all safe.”

“They will be,” he says. “I’ll make sure of it.” He takes off, and I’m about to get back to my investigation when a blonde hurricane knocks me right to the ground.

“Big Boss!” Cormack shouts as she shakes me by the shoulders. “I need your help. I’m in way over my head.”

“Geez,” I say, struggling to get out from under her. “What’s happened?” I ask as I carefully untangle our limbs before helping us both to our feet. “Is it the baby? Is Levi okay?”

I give an anxious glance past her in the event there’s something going on with my nephew. Last summer, she gave birth to my brother’s son and tried to pass him off as my own.

It’s safe to say Cormack has had a longstanding, unhealthy obsession with me ever since we were in high school. Ironically enough, her attention started off on Everett. And how I wish to God she would have kept it that

way.

“The baby is fine—I think.” She slits a glance back at the rows of food vendors. “That nasty Lily Swanson is doing her best to make sure I don’t see nearly enough of my sweet babe, or *Alex*.”

I inch back and take her in. She’s dressed as a flapper in what looks to be an expensive red beaded gown. And knowing Cormack, that dress costs more than my house and truck combined.

This is the first time Cormack has even hinted that she has any interest in the baby. I’d say it to her face, but I don’t have the heart.

“Wait.” I squeeze my eyes shut tight for a moment. “Did you say *Alex*?”

As much disinterest as she’s had in Levi, her own flesh and blood, she’s had even less interest in my brother.

She gives a furtive nod. “I’ve got a confession to make.”

The word *confession* makes my ears pique. I’ll admit, I’m in a hurry to hear a confession from just about anyone—particularly if it has something to do with the Prankster or my shiny new homicide investigation—and I’m more than convinced Rusty Shadowood was murdered.

“Go on,” I say, prodding her to continue as an icy breeze blows past us.

Cormack’s green eyes glint in this dim light as she glances behind me and scoots in a notch.

“I’m sorry, Noah, but my affections have moved over to where they probably should have been to begin with. I’m smitten with your brother and I’ll do anything to get him back.”

I give a hard blink.

I don’t know whether to laugh or cry with relief. Although, a part of me says proceed with caution.

“With *Alex*?” I tip an ear her way. “That’s great. I mean, it would have been great, but Lily has already moved in with him. They’re more than serious, Cormack.”

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I’m afraid that ship may have sailed. Although, I’m not too sure how seriously *Alex* ever took Cormack. Come to find out, they were pretty much using one another for a quick hookup for the last few years.

And the worst part? *Alex* let me know she had a penchant for calling out my name while they were in bed. It’s not a far stretch, considering the fact *Alex* and I look nearly identical, despite the year gap in our ages.

“Cormack, he’s with Lily now,” I say softly.

“I know.” She stomps a spiked heel right over my foot. “*Ooh*, sorry.” She winces. “Oh, Noah, you just have to help me get him back. Don’t you see? Alex and I are perfect for one another. We have a family. I don’t care what anyone says. I’m determined to win him back.”

“I don’t know what to say.” I shake my head at the woman I’ve known for ages. “This is quite the turnaround.” And I’m not too sorry about it either. “But I don’t see how I could possibly help.”

“Oh, but you can,” she says, straightening, and those red beads on her dress shimmer in the night. “You can tell him all about my good qualities.” Her lips curve with the hint of a malevolent smile. “In fact, I’ll fill you in on them right now.”

“Cormack.”—I motion to the coroner’s men as they zip the victim of the night into a body bag—“I’ve got an active investigation on my hands.”

“Don’t you worry, Noah Fox. I’ll track you down soon enough. It’s a date.” She gives a little wink as she takes off into the night.

A date.

With Cormack Featherby, of all people.

I shake my head at the crowd. Just my luck.

The coroner’s office wheels the body past me and I watch as they make their way to the van.

Rusty Shadowood’s luck wasn’t too great tonight either.

And come to think of it, neither was Lottie’s.

But the killer and the Prankster’s luck is about to run out, sooner than later—I’ll make damn sure of it.

EVERETT



Last night was a nightmare within a nightmare.

Another body on Honey Hollow's doorstep—one that Lemon discovered no less. And then that message that popped up on her phone like a haunted jack-in-the-box.

My blood boils just thinking about it.

I can't wait to find out who this so-called Prankster is and wrap my hands around their neck for terrifying my family.

Lemon wanted to talk about it once we got home—to talk about the impending homicide as well, but I artfully changed the subject time and time again until she fell asleep in my arms satisfied in every last way.

There's not a chance I'm going to entertain a maniac with her. In fact, I don't want Lemon entertaining a maniac either. It can't be good for her to think dark thoughts, and I'm assuming it's not good for the babies either.

But as much as I'd like to think Noah is on his own with that homicide and that the two of us will somehow unveil the identity of the mischief maker who is set on making us miserable, I don't doubt for a moment that Lemon isn't giving up on either of those cases.

She likes a good puzzle to solve, and if anything, the universe has laid two solid puzzles at her feet. The only thing Noah and I can do is try to solve them before she gets herself into danger.

And that's exactly why I'll be stopping off at a certain gun shop on my way to the courthouse. That is, after my first stop of the morning, the B&B where Lemon has temporarily set up shop.

I'm not one for morning events, but the Fright Festival in the early light has a charm of its own. The word *night* has a piece of black tape struck

through it on the sign that hangs above the outdoor venue. That was Lemon's idea about a week ago since the festival takes place during the day as well.

She has Wiley strike a line through the word in the morning and take it down in the evening. That's about all he's good for these days, that and doing a little maintenance work around the B&B for Miranda. Wiley may have siphoned millions from my mother all those years ago, but I've long since forgiven and moved on.

As long as he doesn't hurt Miranda, I'm fine with having him around.

A brisk wind cuts through the air, rustling the remaining leaves clinging to the trees and ushering in the sweet, sharp smell of fall.

I head for Lemon's booth as a handful of mothers with their wide-eyed kids descend onto the grounds. A riot of autumn colors, laughter, and excited chatter fills the area, and how I wish that was the pinnacle of these last blue sky days.

Last night's terrors come to mind and I quickly sweep them back out.

There's a massive haystack to my left with toddlers climbing all over it, squealing as they roll down in a shower of straw. The makeshift pumpkin patch to the left is a sea of orange orbs with kids darting in and out, picking the biggest ones they can carry.

And the treats... The smell alone is enough to make my mouth water. Freshly baked pumpkin bread, caramel apples shining like sunny globes, and spiced cider—sweet, tangy, and holds the promise to take the edge off the chilly wind.

"The Purple People Eater" blares over the speakers and Lemon is swinging her hips to the rhythm as I step up to her booth.

"Everett!" Her face lights up with glee as she quickly makes her way around the counter and lands a kiss to my lips. She's wearing a powder blue dress and has a small crystal tiara planted on her head. "I'm supposed to be Cinderella." She makes a face as she plucks at her dress. "And why did I think you'd head straight for the courthouse?"

"I thought of a better place to be," I say, stealing another kiss. "I don't have court until noon. And you're always a perfect princess in my eyes."

"Well, look at you." Derby, the blonde that spent last night in Carlotta's room, shuffles forward holding a half-eaten pumpkin muffin in her hand.

As delicious as that muffin looks, I can't help but notice that she's wearing that same ragged dress she had on last night. It's probably a costume. And if not, she's definitely down on her luck.

She gives a little wink my way. “Don’t you look just as scrumptious in the light of day as you did last night?” She turns to Carlotta. “That’s a darn right miracle in most cases.”

“Agree,” Carlotta says with a nod while dressed as a mermaid. “But don’t go getting any funny ideas. Lot Lot doesn’t like to share her toys. And just for the record, she’s got two of them. The detective you met last night isn’t on the table either. Foxy and Sexy are off-limits.”

“A girl who can’t make up her mind, huh?” Derby slaps her thigh, and despite the fact she’s technically not related to Carlotta, that little move begs to differ. “Sounds just like her mama.” Her lips stretch across her face. “Correction, *my* mama. Don’t any of you worry. That man doesn’t have enough gray hairs for my liking.”

Lemon shakes her head my way. “I don’t know what that’s about,” she whispers. “Lyla Nell is getting her face painted with my mother. Lainey and the kids from Josie’s preschool are here, too. And a thought came to me as I was whipping up another batch of my chocolate delight.”

“What’s that?” My stomach growls just thinking about that chocolate delight cake of hers. Marrying a baker was the best move I’ve ever made. Although, Lemon could have been a tax auditor and it still would have been the best move.

“You know, *Twila*.” She nods as if I should be able to piece together what that might mean. “She called Rusty a dirty devil.” She wrinkles her nose. “She was actually one of three people who called him that. That means she knew him and that she could have had a motive. So what did she go to prison for, anyway?”

I wince a moment.

There have only been a handful of cases where I wasn’t entirely convinced of a defendant’s guilt after the jury has piped up, and Twila Ember happens to be one of them.

“She went away for felony theft.”

Lemon’s mouth falls open. “What did she steal?”

“An exotic piece of jewelry worth over a million. It was a rare piece, and even though she denied until the very end that she participated in the caper, there was more than ample evidence against her. She worked at a country club where she says a wealthy patron conned her into the heist under the guise that he wanted to swap out the rare necklace with a fake to see if his wife would notice.”

Lemon blinks twice. “She thought the heist was a gag?”

“So she says. But despite her protest, and lack of criminal history, the jury still found sufficient evidence to prove otherwise. The fact a large sum of money appeared in her checking account soon after the heist was the clincher.”

She studies me for a moment. “You don’t think she did it, do you?”

I press my lips together. “I’ve always been skeptical of her guilt, although I had no choice but to obey the law.”

Lemon’s shoulders hike up, her eyes never leaving mine. “You did the right thing. And thank you for letting me know. Although, unless Rusty was the wealthy man that tricked her, I don’t see a motive for murder.”

“Agree. And as much as I don’t want you digging around, would you at least let me escort you when you decide to speak with a suspect?”

“Ooh, like a sidekick?”

I frown at the thought. “Like an armed bodyguard.”

“But you don’t carry a gun,” she points out. “Don’t worry,” she whispers. “I have Ethel.” She pats her thigh as she says it.

“I’m not talking about Ethel. I’m heading down to Leeds to pick up a little piece for myself.”

“What?” She plants her hands firmly on my chest. “Are you trying to turn me on?” She shakes her head. “Scratch that, you don’t have to try. And that’s so not fair.” She bites down on her lip and takes a quick look around. “You know I’ve got twice the hormones raging through me than I had with Lyla Nell, or at least it feels that way. I’ve got one serious scratch to itch.” She blinks hard. “Pregnant brain! I’ve got one serious *itch to scratch*.”

My lips curve at the thought. “I’m well aware and I will be the last to complain. Hold that thought. I’ll make sure to scratch any and every itch before the clock strikes midnight. In fact, I plan on scratching it many, many times.”

A guttural laugh bubbles from her. “I’m going to hold you to that.”

“You should. And I happen to know you’re craving chocolate croissants as well. Have you scratched that itch yet?”

She makes a face as she shakes her head. “I’m afraid mine don’t hold a candle to the ones at the French bakeries I’ve had back in New York. That’s about as close as I’ve ever gotten to France.”

“Maybe have a couple of slices of the chocolate delight to hold you over?”

“Oh, believe me, I will.”

Little does she know she won't have to hold out for long. I just finished overnighing a dozen chocolate croissants from a patisserie in Paris. I'm out to scratch every itch and cure every craving for my beautiful wife.

A sharp whine comes from our left and we turn to see Miranda trying to feed Lyla Nell a stalk of celery.

“Bad Glam Glam.” Lyla Nell does her best to bat the green sticks away.

Lemon moans at the sight. “I'd better go save her.”

We head over and I say good morning to Miranda while giving Lyla Nell a kiss.

“Oh, Lottie, you'd better help me,” Miranda wails. “I wasn't made to live off celery alone.”

Lemon makes a face. “I'm pretty sure there's more to a carb-free diet than celery.”

“That might be true, but I looked at the nutrition guide the doctor's office gave me and there's not a single cupcake or brownie on the list,” she wails. “You have to save me from this infernal carb-free”—she places her hands over both of Lyla Nell's ears and mouths the word—“*hell*.”

Lemon nods. “I will. I promise. In fact, I won't go to bed tonight before I whip up something delicious, and sweetened in a different way that one hundred percent complies with your new diet. Trust me. There are so many sugar substitutes and great ones, too. And I checked my inventory this morning while I was at the bakery poking around and I have enough almond flour to bake you just about anything.”

“Thank heavens.” She fans herself with Lyla Nell's hand. “I'd better get a cup of coffee before I sail right over the edge.” She steps over a few feet to a carafe sitting on the counter and proceeds to oblige herself.

Lemon leans in. “Please excuse my mother's newfound carb psychosis.”

“There's nothing to forgive,” I say, landing a kiss on my wife's beautiful lips. “I'd be just as psychotic if I had to ditch your treats. Speaking of treats, how was last night?”

A guttural laugh drums in her chest. “Delicious, unforgettable, and left me wanting more.”

“Looks as if I checked off all the boxes.” I touch my nose to hers. “There's more where that came from.” We share another kiss, this time with my hand firmly over her stomach. I'll admit, I'd give anything to feel that first kick. And with two of them in there, I'm pretty sure those kicks will be

tough for Lemon to bear until next spring.

“I’ll hold you to it.” She waggles her brows.

“Good. I’d better get going,” I say. “Call me if you need me.”

“I will. I promise,” she says, hiking up on her tiptoes to offer up another kiss. “And I know what you’re thinking. I promise to stay out of trouble.”

“Oh, she will,” Miranda winks my way. “There’s plenty around here to distract her.”

“Here’s hoping,” I say as I take off.

My phone bleats and I pull it out to see it’s a text from my mother offering to send a box of my old baby clothes to the house.

I text right back, letting her know that sounds perfect.

In fact, I couldn’t think of a better distraction.

That gun I’m about to purchase runs through my mind and I shoot a text off to Noah.

Meet me down in Leeds. I’m picking up some heat. I can use your input.

He texts right back. **Take whatever stripper you like. I’ll take Lot off your hands.**

I shake my head at my phone before it bleats again as he shoots another text.

When and where. I’m there.

Nice to know I can always depend on Noah. I mean that in the truest sense.

I’ll be able to depend on those bullets, too.

LOTTIE



I'm just about to set down another one of my chocolate delight cakes on the counter of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery's booth when a burst of red hair and freckles leaps from behind a scarecrow and lands dead in front of me.

"Boo!" Keelie shouts, dressed as Pippi Longstocking, and that ever-widening grin of hers reveals the fact she's delighted in scaring me senseless.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Keelie!" I scold, clutching my chest. "You nearly scared me right out of my glass slippers!"

Keelie chuckles, twirling one of her adorable pigtails. "That's the whole point, Cinder-Lottie. It's a *fright* festival, remember?"

"True, but there's a difference between fright and a full-blown heart attack," I say, offering her a playful swat.

"I'll make a note of that," she teases. "Less heart attack, more harmless spooks for Her Royal Highness." She curtsies, almost tripping over her oversized shoes.

I can't help but laugh, shaking my head. "Are you here helping out with the Honey Pot Diner's booth?"

Charlie and I own the Honey Pot Diner together. Actually, our grandma Nell bequeathed it to me, but since Charlie was essentially kept a secret for so long, Grandma Nell didn't even know she existed. And seeing that Charlie's passion is cooking—of the savory variety—I more or less gave her the Honey Pot and kept myself on as a silent partner. Very silent.

"That's right." Keelie tosses me a mock salute. "Aye aye, Captain! Off to the Honey Pot, I go. But be warned, there might be a few more surprises for you along the way. Delicious surprises."

“Ooh, something delicious?” I straighten my Cinderella dress. “You know you’ve got my attention.”

“In due time,” she teases.

Everett just took off for the courthouse and my mother snapped Lyla Nell right back into her arms as the Fright Night Festival rages all around us.

“I can’t believe how magical this all is.” I sigh as Keelie and I take a moment to soak in the spooky splendor. Keelie and I have been besties since preschool, and it wasn’t until a few years ago that we discovered we were cousins. Life sure has a way of surprising us—especially me with twins.

“I agree,” she says. “In fact, I vote the B&B hosts this festival every year. It’s as if the entire town has been dipped into a cauldron of festivity, then sprinkled with a dash of magic.”

No sooner does she say that than a burst of laughter echoes all around us. I don’t think we’ve ever seen Honey Hollow so happy.

Colorful booths dot the landscape, each one exhibiting an array of Halloween treats, knick-knacks, and games. Every inch of the grounds has been adorned with strings of twinkling fairy lights and pumpkin lanterns, and the aroma of freshly baked pies—namely mine—and spiced cider wafts through the air, tingling our senses.

The midday sun adds a warm glow to the scenery, casting long, playful shadows that dance along with the fluttering fall leaves. There, against the vibrant orange and red hues of autumn, the townsfolk of Honey Hollow revel in their costumes, laughter echoing around the haunted B&B.

Lily Swanson shuffles our way, looking like the brunette cutie she is—and absolutely groovy in her go-go dancer costume. Lily was once my high school tormenter, but now she’s content to work for me. People often like you a little bit better once you start doling out dollars to them on the regular.

“Keelie,” Lily hisses, sounding almost desperate. “I need more of those lemon bars. I ate the last one and I am officially in lemon withdrawal.”

“Lemon bars?” I cock my head at the woman curiously. I’m not sure if we have lemon bars here, and why would she be directing this to Keelie? “Is this the delicious surprise?”

She nods my way before turning to Lily. “You’re in luck, girl,” Keelie beams. “I brought a whole new batch.”

My jaw practically hits the floor. “Wait, what?” I ask, turning to Lily in disbelief. “You prefer Keelie’s lemon bars to mine? I thought I was the baker here?”

“What can I say, Lottie?” Lily shrugs and her psychedelic earrings jingle with the movement. “Keelie’s lemon bars aren’t necessarily better than yours. I’d say they’re about equal. But for some reason, they’re addicting. I’ve found myself dreaming about them for the entire last week. I was moaning so hard, Alex thought I was dreaming about another man.” She turns to Keelie. “You’ve got a lemony force to be reckoned with on your hands.”

“It’s true,” Keelie says. “I actually brought a batch here today for Sam. She said she needed another hit and I’m basically her supplier.” She offers me an impish grin. “I made up a batch last week and brought them to share with Charlie. But Sam, Meg, and Lainey happened to be chatting at a table nearby, so I offered them some. And well, let’s just say I may have just come up with pregnant lady crack.”

“They’re that good, huh?” I muse. “Then you know I have to try them.”

She pulls a small Tupperware container from her tote bag and offers us each a piece of the lemon yellow squares that I must admit are making my mouth water before I ever take a bite. But when I do, both Lily and I moan with approval.

“Good grief,” I groan right at my bestie. “You’ve been holding out on me! Keelie, what’s your secret weapon? I have to know.”

“It’s two secret weapons, actually,” she says. “It’s an angel food box mix combined with lemon pie filling. And that’s the long and short of it. See? Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy!”

“Really?” I can’t help but laugh, shaking my head at her. “Well, Keelie, it seems like you’re not just full of scares today, but also full of scrumptious surprises.”

Lily takes off for the booth to help out with the mad customer dash just as Suze and Sam waltz this way.

Suze is Noah’s mother and she happens to be dressed as a witch—so no costume there—while Sam—Noah’s sister—is radiating a heavenly glow in her Greek Goddess getup, her pregnant belly adding to her divine presence.

“Lottie, Noah told me all about what happened last night. To think, another homicide and *you* found the body. I guess it’s true what they say—not all superheroes wear capes; some wear aprons,” Suze says, her voice dripping with syrupy sweetness that I know is as artificial as that magical broomstick in her hand. “How about you let Noah solve a case for once?” She flicks her short blonde bangs off her face. Suze has short hair in general, a square jaw, and a square body to match. “I think it’s about time you stop

stealing his thunder. You emasculate that boy at every turn.”

“That *boy*?” Sam rolls her eyes. Sam looks like Noah in female skin—seeing they’re twins—and since Lyla Nell is Noah’s look-alike, it’s safe to say I know what my baby girl will look like in thirty years—stunning. And, of course, Sam’s baby belly—about the size of a medium pumpkin—is adorable as can be. “Mom, you’re emasculating him yourself.”

“Oh, I am not.” Suze flicks her wrist. “Just look at Lottie’s track record. She’s caught every killer from here to Canada—or at least in every case that Noah was assigned. Honestly, it’s like she’s got it out for him. First she steals his heart, then she steals his career. What’s next? His soul?”

“*Mother*,” Sam huffs at the woman. “You’ve got to let it go. Focus on the positive. At least she’s not trying to steal your broomstick.” Sam winks my way before scrambling over to Keelie to loot her tote bag.

Sam lets out a greedy moan as she bites into a bar. “Oh, Lottie, it might just be the pregnancy cravings talking, but Keelie’s lemon bars—they’re just the right mix of light and tasty. I mean, who knew a shortcut recipe could compete with the town baker?”

Suze heads over and shoves one into her mouth, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think she just swallowed it whole.

“*Mmmwowmmm*,” Suze mumbles before looking my way. “Maybe you should consider a box mix for your next batch of treats? It saves on time, and apparently, it’s a hit. I think Keelie could put you out of business if she tried.” She nods to my bestie. “I’ve been meaning to invest in an up-and-coming business. We’ll talk later.”

The three of them trot over to the Honey Pot Diner booth next door and begin to peck at that Tupperware container like a bunch of lemon-bar-hungry vultures.

How do you like that?

I might be booted out of business, and it will be my own bestie who does the booting.

LOTTIE



“*I* don’t know whether to be amused or offended,” I mutter as I see Suze, Sam, and Effie—another one of my trusty employees—attacking Keelie’s scrumptious lemon bars.

Those lemon bars are almost as delicious as Everett in bed, not that I’d ever say those words out loud. Especially not here. I sigh as I look around at the Fright Night Festival taking shape as afternoon creeps upon us.

Who knew the Fright Night Festival would become an unexpected baking battleground—and the grounds for murder, too.

“Try both, Lot. Amused and offended,” Carlotta says, stepping up to the counter dressed as a mermaid and flipping her faux fishtail my way. “And take revenge for both, too.”

“Spoken like a true spitfire, Mama,” Derby belts out a hearty chuckle, dressed head to toe as a pirate. “Ain’t no one better at revenge than our mama. And as her favorite child, she let me ride shotgun while she was in action distributing a little renegade retribution.” She pats Carlotta on the shoulder. “I guess it’s true what they say—revenge is a dish best served cold.” She shoots an icy look from me to Carlotta. “And might I add, served up unexpectedly as well. You never know what direction the tide is going to turn. But I suppose everything runs smoothly here in Happy Honey Hollow.” There’s more than a little sarcastic intent in her voice.

A laugh bubbles from me. “About as smoothly as Cinderella’s pumpkin carriage,” I tell her. “If you haven’t noticed, the streets of this sweet town are cobbled, which generally makes for a bumpy ride. I guess that should have been our first hint of trouble,” I tease. I’m about to tell her all about our special little town when Wiley stomps by muttering something about having

to deal with another repair. “Speaking of trouble,” I say, waving his way as he makes his way past us.

Derby steps forward and her mouth falls open. “Well, my *my* sugar and spice, ain’t that man twice as nice.”

“He’s old enough to be your father,” I’m quick to point out. Although, he does look like Noah, so I can see the draw.

Derby waves me off. “Oh, honey, you can keep your young ones. I’m here for the salt and pepper generation.” She crosses her arms and tips her head. “Older men are like aged cheddar, sharp, rich, and full of depth. Or like a well-baked loaf of bread—warm, comforting, with an enticing crust and a softness that only comes with time.”

Wiley is crusty, all right. But I keep my commentary on my quasi-father-in-law to myself.

“Or even like a vintage wine, mature and complex, that just gets better with age,” she continues. A devilish grin blooms on her face. “Compared to those delicious choices, young men are just plain as raw dough.”

I’m about to fill her in on my love affair of raw dough when Cormack Featherby, dressed like a diva in hot pink from head to toe, pops out from behind the booth and I startle.

“Cormack?” I practically squawk her name out. “Were you lurking there this whole time?” The booth isn’t all that big. How could I miss the pink tornado?

Cormack narrows those celadon eyes on mine. “What you call lurking, the rest of us call working. I’m the supervisor of this festival of fright, in the event your mother hasn’t clued you in on the fact.” Her lips pull down in a hard frown. “If you must know, I was in the mood for something sweet to put a little pep in my step.” She holds up a chocolate cupcake decorated with bright green frosting with a tiny marshmallow ghost planted in the middle of it. “Although, I hear Keelie has something better to offer.”

She sets the cupcake down on the counter next to me before taking off in Keelie’s direction.

Come to think of it, Keelie has quite the crowd amassed around her.

Wiley walks by again, this time in the opposite direction, and Derby settles her gaze on him again. And I can’t help but notice there’s a predatory glint in her eyes.

I clear my throat. “Derby,” I try my best to sound light and airy, “just in case you didn’t know it, Wiley is dating my mom. In other words, he’s very

much off-limits.” I have a feeling she needed a roadmap to know exactly what I was saying.

Derby turns my way, her eyes narrowing just a touch. “It must be nice always having things handed to you on a silver platter. Carlotta tells me your entire life, you’ve been given exactly what you want without any struggle. It must be so natural for you to expect things to fall into place—people, things, businesses—even when it concerns other people’s—*preferences*.”

A part of me is shocked by her response, a very small part. After all, Carlotta did have a hand in raising her.

Derby holds my gaze. “Just remember, *Lot Lot*,” she says the moniker Carlotta gave me with a syrupy sweet voice that chills my spine. “Life has a funny way of teaching us lessons. And I’m a fast learner. Keep all the young guns to yourself. I’ve got my eyes on a prize of a different kind.”

I can’t help but shake my head at her words. I have a feeling Derby is a woman used to getting what she wants as well, and it seems she’s set her sights on Wiley.

This could get ugly. Scratch that, this is already ugly.

A crowd sweeps in, and soon Suze, Lily, and Effie are working the booth.

I’m about to start slicing up my chocolate delight cake when Carlotta yanks me by the arm and pulls me a few steps away.

“Listen up, Lot Lot. I’ve got trouble.” Her voice is low, urgent. “I need your help,” she says, eyes wide and serious. “We need to make that girl disappear!”

“Disappear?” I inch back. “But I thought you liked her? I thought she was your favorite child?”

Carlotta huffs, “I never said she wasn’t a good time. But that girl is nothing but a deep well of trouble. She’s a high school keg party in a sequin dress. And right now”—she lets out a weary sigh—“I can’t handle another smidge of trouble. I’ve got my own drama with Mayor Nash. It’s bad enough he wants a commitment by Christmas. I’ve only got a few weeks left to sow my wild oats. I can’t have her cramping my style.”

“You mean stealing your men,” I’m quick to point out. Derby already let us in on her geriatric secret.

“What can I possibly do? I can’t get rid of the girl. She came all the way from Higgins Bottom just to see you.”

“Just figure it out, Lot,” she says as her voice hikes an octave. “You’re resourceful. Don’t you work for the Grim Reaper on the sly? I’m sure you’ll

come up with something.” She lifts her nose in the air, her eyes still glued on me as if insinuating I take the woman out.

As if I’d ever do that.

But if I was moved to do that to anyone, I might have started with *her*.

Kidding. Sort of.

“Wait a minute.” Carlotta straightens with a start. “How about the investigation? Maybe we can tell Derby she needs to skedaddle because we’ve got a case to solve. Where are we off to next? Surely my services are needed elsewhere.”

I make a face at the woman as I mull it over.

The hustle and bustle of the festival brings last night rushing back like the nightmare it is.

“I guess we could talk to Cocoa,” I tell her, my mind already whirling with questions to ask her. “She’s my old friend from high school, and I saw her having—well, an argument for a lack of a better word, with the deceased. She’s back in town running the cemetery now. I think maybe we should head over there.”

Carlotta sighs with relief. “That sounds perfect, Lot. Now let’s go tell Derby she’s off the guest list for this murder investigation—and she’d better leave Honey Hollow if she wants to keep from getting murdered herself. You might want to slip in the fact you’ve got connections in that area. That might light a fire under her.”

I’m about to tell her I’ll do no such thing when a loud caw deafens us for a moment. We look up and, sure enough, that raven with the four-foot wingspan comes barreling this way with a trail of miniature blue stars in its wake.

“*Duck*,” I shout, but it’s too late. That supernatural spook dives right through us, sending a shiver through our bodies that rivals a glacier.

“That was no *duck*, Lot,” Carlotta says as she knocks her elbow to my arm. “Didn’t they teach you anything in college? That was the ghost of a pigeon.”

I’m about to correct her when my mother crops up with Lyla Nell and I scoop my little girl into my arms.

“How’s the festival going, sweetie?” I ask as I bounce her on my hip. Everett helped me pick out a costume for her today, a jean dress, leggings with pink hearts, and pink cowboy boots with little silver heels. “How’s Mama’s little cowpoke doing?” I say just as she lifts an envelope my way.

My blood grows cold as soon as I see the small svelte white envelope.

If I'm right about what's inside, the Prankster has already reverted to going old school—and they're using my baby girl to do so.

LOTTIE



*D*ear Lottie,

The countdown begins, for the time is nigh. Unravel the mystery, before another should die. Beware of those close, not all are as they seem. The darkest hour is near, and this is not a dream.

Yours, the Prankster

Within seconds of receiving that demented love note, I sent a picture of it to both Noah and Everett.

Noah called and said he was coming up to the festival, but I let him know I wasn't hanging around and that I was taking Lyla Nell with me. He decided to send extra patrols this way and he's going to examine the security cameras to see if there's anything he can find.

Everett has a private patrol watching both Lyla Nell and me, but when he asked, they said they didn't notice anything suspicious.

I told Keelie, Lily, and Effie about the note—and Suze, too, but as soon as I brought it up, Suze claimed to be behind on her coffee consumption and took off.

Anyway, both Lily and Effie were shaken and promised they'd keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary and reassured me they'd take good care of the booth while I was gone.

Keelie said there was no way she was letting me out of her sight, so she, Carlotta, and Derby jumped into my minivan, along with Lyla Nell and me, and that's exactly how we ended up at the Honey Hollow Cemetery on this crisp fall afternoon.

Try as I might, I couldn't get Derby to change her mind about coming along with us. In fact, she said, "Lottie, sweetie, the cemetery is the perfect

place to find a man. After all, they're dying to meet me."

I don't know how much truth there was in that, but Carlotta's eyes seemed to light up at the prospect as well. She does have a self-imposed quota to meet before Christmas after all.

"Where are they?" Carlotta asks like a bull anxious to leap over the gate as we step out onto the rolling green lawns where hundreds of granite markers and tombstones glitter in the sun.

The cemetery greets us with a solemn air, its wrought iron gates creaking to reveal a landscape tinged with the hues of fall. It's as if nature itself has decided to join in the Halloween spirit with hues of gold and crimson. Scarlet and golden leaves flutter down from the ancient oaks, dancing across tombstones and the narrow pathways between them. Pumpkins and gourds, plucked straight from the harvest, are nestled in amongst the headstones, their cheerful orange color brightening the usual somber grays.

Straw scarecrows stand guard at the entrance of every pathway, their button eyes watching over the peaceful final resting place of so many. Bunches of rust-colored chrysanthemums and bright marigolds are scattered generously around, their sweet scent merging with the crispness of the autumn air.

"It's a little eerie, but there's a certain beauty in the juxtaposition of life and death," I say.

"Yup," Keelie agrees as she sniffs hard. "The celebration of the harvest season in the midst of a place dedicated to those who have moved on. It's beautiful in a sad sort of way."

The sky up above is a clear, perfect blue, the kind of blue you only ever see on crisp fall days, a stunning contrast against the fiery colors of the leaves.

The October sun casts long shadows that stretch across the lawn, turning the cemetery into a canvas of light and dark. And strung between trees and over headstones, cobwebs and bat decorations shimmer in the sunlight, adding a playful Halloween touch to the scenery.

Lyla Nell chirps to life as she reaches for the sky.

"Birdie! Birdie!" she cries as she does her best to reach out and touch something. I look up just in time to see the expansive wingspan of that raven that's been haunting me.

Lyla Nell, Carlotta, Charlie, and I are all transmundane, further classified as supersensual, which means we can see the dead. Not all the dead—

thankfully—or being in a place like this might be more like attending a rock concert with standing room only.

Nope, we just see the dead that the universe allows. And as of right now, that list is contained to the friendly ghosts who reside at the B&B, along with this magnificent creature that’s spinning a circle above our heads before it dives in for a landing and plops right onto my shoulder.

“Please tell me the killer is near,” the raven chirps. “As much as I adore this haunted season where my countenance is celebrated, I’d much rather be in paradise flying through a dark and cool forest.”

“You and me both,” I mutter.

“Killer, *killer*,” Lyla Nell squeals as she grabs onto the bird’s talons.

The bird isn’t your run-of-the-mill raven. She’s more or less the size of a small toddler—Lyla Nell’s size to be exact—and lucky for me, she doesn’t seem to weigh a thing as she sits perched next to my neck. And yes, judging by its light feminine voice, I’m guessing she’s a she indeed.

Keelie gasps. “Did Lyla Nell just say killer? Lottie Lemon, you hand over that baby right this minute,” she says, snatching Lyla Nell from my arms. “She’s picking up on your bad news vibes. I knew we shouldn’t have brought her along on the investigation.”

“We’re not really questioning a suspect,” I say. “This is Cocoa we’re talking about.” I bite down on my lip because I’ve learned one too many times that you can’t scratch someone off the suspect list just because you know them.

Carlotta leans toward the bird. “What’s your number, sky dancer?” she whispers.

“Fill us in on the who, what, where, and when and make it snappy.”

The raven belts out an egregiously loud squawk and stretches her wings right through my skull. I’ll admit, it felt sort of like a vibratory massage.

“My name is Raven. And I’m one of Rusty’s oldest acquaintances. He didn’t have a lot, but those he had were cherished.” Her head darts forward in a quick pecking motion as she says it. “I guess you could say we were birds of a feather.”

Derby grunts, “Who cares about the who, what, where, and whatnot when we’re right here in the ripest pickin’ grounds for silver foxes in mourning? Just think of the potential of those tear-streaked faces.”

I gasp at the thought. “Don’t you dare go prowling around for grieving Romeos. Those men need comfort, not flirtation.”

She scoffs my way. “Don’t you worry, Lot Lot. I fully intend to provide them with some very personalized comfort indeed.”

I’m about to tell her that’s what I’m afraid of when an all too familiar woman heads this way. The exact woman we were hoping to see.

Cocoa Ganache is striding over, greeting us with an enthusiastic wave while draped in an autumn-colored shawl. Her eyes light up, sparkling like a forest kissed by morning dew.

“Hello, ladies,” she calls out. “How can I help you?” She gets a better look at Lyla Nell and her fingers drift to her lips. “And, oh my goodness, you brought your baby girl. I finally get to meet your living doll in person.” She heads over and gives Lyla Nell’s little hand a kiss. “You’re twice the beautiful princess your mama says you are.”

“Get over here,” Keelie says, giving our old friend an embrace. “I’m so glad you’re back in town. We heard the cemetery was decorated for fall, and not only did we have to see it for ourselves, we had to see *you*.”

Cocoa gives a belly laugh at the thought. “Well, you’re all just in time. I was headed out for my daily walkabout. The cemetery isn’t just a job—it’s brimming with fascinating treasures all day long. You’ll never believe what you might find.”

“I’m hoping we find some *men*,” Derby says, craning her neck in the direction of a few mourners in the distance.

“Well, there are plenty of men—below ground, of course,” Cocoa winces as she says it, but then her face brightens on a dime. “Oh, I know what you might like to see. We’ve got more than our fair share of old tombstones with recipes inscribed on them. Lottie, you might find those particularly intriguing.”

Keelie scrunches her nose, her red Pippi Longstocking braids bouncing with the motion. “That’s an interesting way to be remembered, I suppose. Nothing says eternal rest like a good casserole recipe, right?”

Carlotta chuckles at the thought. “I bet mine is going to say, ‘She died as she lived—causing trouble.’”

“I can attest to that,” I say.

“As can I,” Raven squawks. “I have an intuitive eye when it comes to assessing a person. Trouble follows you wherever you go, Carlotta. It’s your gift in life.”

A rather twisted gift that Carlotta has been far too generous in sharing.

“Speak for yourself, Mama.” Derby’s eyes glimmer with mischief.

“When I kick the bucket, I want my tombstone to say, ‘She loved aged cheese and even better aged company.’ It’s all about leaving a tasty legacy.”

Try tasteless, I want to say, but bite my tongue instead. Her need to feast on some poor old soul is greedy to say the least. It’s like watching a raccoon invade a picnic. Nothing is sacred and nothing is off-limits either. Except maybe men of a certain age.

“How about you, Lottie?” Cocoa laughs. “What do you think your tombstone will say?”

“At this rate, my tombstone will probably say, ‘She came, she baked, she got caught up in a murder investigation.’ Now that’s a legacy I didn’t see coming.”

Lyla Nell claps like mad and cheers as if she wholeheartedly approves.

“Enough with the tombstone chatter,” Raven caws sharp in my ear. “I’ve got a forest to supervise in paradise. Let’s get this investigative show on the road.”

I’m all for that.

An idea comes to mind. “I know,” I say. “How about we make a game of who can find the most tombstone recipes?”

Derby lifts her chin. “How about we team up? Losers buy the winners a round of drinks?”

I make a face because I can’t have more than a glass of lemonade, not that I’ve ever been a drinker. But seeing as this might help get Derby out of my hair for a while, so I go with it.

“Done,” I say.

Derby belts out a hoot. “Sorry, Mama, but I’m taking Keelie with me. After nibbling on her lemon bars, I’m convinced she can make even the stiffest of stiffies rise from their graves for another bite. And if I’m lucky—another date.”

“And I’ll be needing Lyla Nell on my team, too,” Keelie says, bouncing her on a hip. “She’s my secret weapon. Or should I say, my good luck charm.”

She kisses Lyla Nell on the cheek, and Lyla Nell’s giggle rings out pure and innocent, a refreshing sound in the hushed silence of this morbid place. No matter what, Lyla Nell always knows how to light up a room—or in this case, an entire graveyard.

We watch as Keelie, Lyla Nell, and Derby take off to find both tasty men and recipes alike and I shed a slight smile at my old friend.

If Cocoa Ganache knows anything about Rusty Shadowwood's death, I'm going to make sure she spills it if it's the last thing I do.

I'm determined to unearth the truth.

After all, in a town as sweet as Honey Hollow, some secrets refuse to rest in peace.

LOTTIE



Carlotta, Raven, Cocoa, and I amble along the cemetery pathways and I can't help but notice a veil of autumn-inspired serenity hangs over the grounds.

The leaves, in their resplendent shades of amber, crimson, and gold, paint a picturesque canvas against the stone-gray backdrop of the tombstones. Pumpkin lanterns perched on grave markers cast an ethereal, flickering glow, their carved faces adding a touch of whimsy. Scattered throughout are meticulously arranged mums in hues of orange, burgundy, and yellow, which add a sense of vibrant life amidst reminders of the departed.

Despite the chill in the air, a peculiar warmth envelops the cemetery, a testimony to the many lives celebrated and remembered here. Yet, under the playful Halloween decorations, beneath the foliage-strewn paths, secrets lay buried, waiting to be exhumed.

And that's exactly what I intend to do.

Our heels click against the cobblestone path as Raven flaps her wings, and this time flapping them right into my cheek. I'm not sure why the dead who come back can feel as real as they want, *when* they want. I much prefer the vibratory feel of her wings going through me.

"All right, Lottie," Raven caws. "It's time for the opera. Get this woman to sing like a canary stuffed in a jack-o'-lantern. We've got a harvest hootenanny kicking off in the great beyond, and I'll be a crow's breakfast if I'm late for the spectral square dance. Death waits for no bird, but I'll be darned if it makes me miss the party!" Her obsidian eyes glint in the light as if she could hardly wait for the shedding of secrets to begin.

"Cocoa," Carlotta crows, her voice as subtle as a bullhorn, "your uncle

owns this place, doesn't he? Is he single?"

"Yes, he did own it and he was single," Cocoa tells her. "But he went the way of the great majority a little while ago. I was just telling Lottie last night that I'm the new owner here."

"New owner?" Carlotta gags at the thought. "Well, Lot and you are good friends, and everyone knows a good friend is practically family. And I'm Lot Lot's family, too. I bet you give some good family discounts, don't ya?"

I make a face at the woman.

Raven shivers at the thought as well. "Exactly what are you gunning for, Carlotta?"

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

Cocoa laughs. "We're family, all right, Lottie. But contrary to popular belief, we don't offer any family discounts."

Carlotta huffs, pretending to be affronted, or at least I'm hoping she's pretending. "Who needs a discounted cash exchange when you've got a baker in the family? Lottie here could trade her honey cakes for a good plot."

"*Hmm*," Raven muses. "The fact that she's planning your funeral while you're still very much alive doesn't seem to faze her."

"That's Carlotta," I say, rolling my eyes. "Always planning ahead."

"It's nothing, Lot." She pats my arm. "Anything for my best girl. Don't worry. I'll make sure you get a top-of-the line casket."

Cocoa chuckles at the morbid conversation. "Well, in that case, maybe we should start measuring you, Lottie. You know, to get the right fit."

"You're both hilarious," I say, missing the required enthusiasm.

"You know what they say." Cocoa laughs. "Nothing like a little grave humor."

"The case, Lottie," Raven squawks. "Get to the nitty-gritty before I molt from the sheer tedium. Believe me, there's nothing more embarrassing than a bald raven. Heaven knows I don't have the figure for it."

Funny.

"Cocoa," I start slow in an effort to choose my words carefully. "I couldn't help but notice you and Rusty talking at the festival last night. The poor man passed away. I don't know what happened. Can I ask what that conversation was about?"

Cocoa inches back, her eyes widening just a touch.

"You saw Rusty and me?" she stammers slightly. "Oh, well, we were just making small talk. You know, the usual chit-chat one engages in at town

festivals.” Her lips clamp shut as she shoots a dark look at the vacant land to the left of the cemetery.

“Small talk?” I push gently. “How did you know the man? Can I ask how the two of you met?”

Cocoa’s cheeks flush a vibrant shade of pink, her hands nervously fluttering over her ruffled scarf.

“Actually, we met a while back, about a couple of years ago. I guess you could say our worlds collided in a rather unexpected manner. We first crossed paths at a lavish food industry gala held in Fallbrook.”

“A lavish food gala?” Carlotta harps. “Lot, why can’t we ever head to something delicious like that? I bet there are loads of tasty men there along with loads of tasty treats. The only places you take me to these days are haunted houses and burial grounds. How am I supposed to sow my wild oats like that?”

“Ignore her,” I tell Cocoa. “Go on with the story.”

Cocoa laughs. “As you probably know, Rusty is the successful entrepreneur behind an energy drink company. He was at the gala to rub shoulders with potential partners for his latest health-focused venture. And well, I was just getting into the chocolatier business. We both happened to sit next to one another to hear a guest speaker, sharing her insights on the marriage of traditional confectionery and avant-garde flavor profiles. Anyway, we met up again near the chocolate fountain. He said he was a self-proclaimed chocolate enthusiast and we talked non-stop about the decadent treats they had laid out for us. I was pretty impressed by his genuine interest regarding cocoa origins, the nuances of tempering my treats, and he seemed to enjoy listening to me drone on about crafting exquisite chocolates.” She glances to that vacant field once again and her expression darkens before she shakes it off. “It was a rather brief encounter, but it left an indelible imprint on me.”

“They shared a passion,” Raven muses. “A mutual appreciation for the finer, sweeter things in life. It seems an unlikely bond formed that evening. But was it a bond that would later prove to have fatal consequences?”

I nod because I’d like to know the answer to that myself.

“So how long had it been since you last saw Rusty?” I ask. The fact she splashed a drink in the man’s face comes to mind. Surely something must have sparked enough rage in her to do that.

“Actually”—Cocoa’s eyes widen, looking as if I’ve thrown her off guard

—“not since the conference all those years ago. I just went over and said hello.” She shrugs before looking past me at a sedan pulling up into the lot. “I’m sorry, ladies, but it looks as if my afternoon appointment just arrived. Oh, and if you want a head start on that tombstone competition, there’s an entire slew of recipes over at the old part of the cemetery to the left.” She takes a step away and then backtracks. “The spiced pumpkin chocolate truffles is particularly to die for. An old pastry chef by the name of Julie Nichols, God rest her soul, used to swear by it—so much so, she put the recipe on her tombstone.” Just as she turns to leave, she glances over her shoulder, a small smile playing on her lips. “Be careful not to lose yourselves there. Let’s just say the old part of the cemetery is full of surprises. Even during the day it tends to be darker than one might expect. Good day, ladies.” With that final cryptic note, she strides off to meet her appointment, leaving us in silence.

“She’s lying, isn’t she?” Raven asks. “She lied about not seeing Rusty up until all those years ago.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “But she left out the part about sloshing a drink in his face.”

Carlotta nods. “Sounds as if she was hitting on him and he turned her down flat. I’ve sloshed a few drinks in the faces of men myself.”

“I doubt that was the reason,” I say. “But you can bet I’m going to find out what caused her to sling an energy drink his way.”

As we head out toward the old part of the cemetery, I know one thing for certain—Rusty’s secrets aren’t going to stay buried much longer.

NOAH



At the B&B, I shoot the text to Lottie.

Just left the cemetery, she texts right back. Keelie and I thought we'd say hello to an old friend of ours. I'm at the house now so Lyla Nell can take a quick nap.

Good, I tell her. I spoke with Everett. He's deeply concerned, as am I. I'll scope out the grounds here and run through the security footage from this morning. Can I ask why you decided to meet with your friend at the cemetery? I shake my head as I hit send.

That's dark even for Lottie.

She owns the cemetery! Her uncle passed away recently and she inherited the grounds. We actually had a lot of fun and I got a lot of fun new recipes to try from the deceased! Aunt Hilda's pumpkin bread, Uncle Mortimer's mulled cider, Aunt Agnes' caramel apple pie, Grandma Daisy's squash soup, old man Elijah's maple-pecan granola with fresh blueberries, Cousin Maude's honey-glazed ham, and I got a great recipe for wild berry jam.

Recipes from the deceased? I press send, afraid to see how this might play out. I'd shudder to think of Lottie running into an entire army of ghosts with Lyla Nell in tow, especially since Lyla Nell can see them, too.

Those recipes were written in stone—aka tombstones. It's already got me thinking about which recipe I'll want on mine!

Just the thought gives me chills.

The last thing I want to think about is anything happening to Lottie Lemon.

She's the mother of my child, the love of my life, and she always will be.

The Fright Night Festival is in full swing here at the B&B. It's closing in on a little after two and the crowds are growing by the minute. Creepy organ music blasts through the speakers, endless chatter and laughter fill the rest of the auditory void, and a choir of gasps and screams fills the crisp autumn air.

As a member of the local law enforcement, I volunteered to patrol the festival, but as of right now I'm strictly here to hunt for the ever-elusive Prankster. Their tricks have been nothing short of creative, and for darn sure they've been keeping our department on our toes.

Children hopped up on sugar and excitement scamper around in their various costumes. Witches cackle, superheroes zoom by, and ghouls lurk in the corners. And how I wish that was the extent of the excitement in Honey Hollow.

I'm about to walk a lap around the grounds when a blonde wearing far too much pink jumps in my path.

Cormack.

The woman is more trouble than a snake in a henhouse.

She's got a smile that promises secrets and a waist that begs for a two-step, but behind those green eyes lurks a mind as sharp and as cunning as a fox.

But she can't *outfox* this Fox.

"I've got a surprise," she announces as her hot pink lips spread wide in a devious grin. She quickly produces a pumpkin from behind her back, and once I see the image carved onto the front of it, I do a double take and hold my breath for a second too long.

"Holy heck," I say. "Is that me?"

Her lips twist in a knot. "It's *Alex*—the love of my life," she stretches out each word as if it pained her to do so. And knowing Cormack's obsession with yours truly, I'm sure it did. Or old obsession, I suppose.

I'll admit, it feels like a relief. My sympathies for Alex—but tag, dude, you're it.

There's an upturned grin carved into my brother's likeness, and if I didn't know better, I'd think that image was taunting me.

"Fright Night is all about scary faces." She sheds a scary grin of her own as she says it. "Alex is here," she snips. "He's on that haunted hayride with the baby and Lily."

She says the baby and Lily as if both left a bad taste in her mouth. Come to think of it, include Alex in that equation.

“Oh, Noah,” she whines as she bats those inch-long lashes my way. “You just have to help me win Alex back before he goes off and does something as mindless as marrying Lily.”

“Mindless?” I inch back. “I hate to break it to you, Cormack, but if he marries Lily it’s because he’s very much in love. My brother has his head screwed on straight.”

With the exception of all those months he was fooling around with Cormack just because she made it easy.

She shudders and brings her hand to her heart as if the thought of Alex marrying Lily pained her physically.

“Noah, he’s got my son hostage,” she continues. “I hardly ever get to see little Liam.”

“Levi,” I correct her.

I’m not sure if she’s pulling my leg, but a part of me doubts Cormack is this good of an actress. She seems genuinely interested in Alex and the baby—albeit she didn’t get his name right.

She’s tugging at something protective within me. But I’ve been on this ride before, and I know all the twists and turns.

“Look, Cormack, like I said last night, I don’t see how I can help you.”

Her face crumples momentarily, and this time that damsel-in-distress routine seems to be faltering. But I can see the wheels turning behind her eyes, calculating her next move in the ongoing chess game she seems to enjoy playing with people’s lives, so I steel myself for whatever she’s about to throw my way.

“Okay,” she says with fresh assurance in her voice. “This is how you’re going to help. I want you to list all of my positive traits. Now go on, do it right now. Don’t just stand there. Let the compliments gush forth like Old Unfaithful.”

My lips twist as I consider correcting her on the watery national treasure but decide against it.

“All right, Cormack. I’ll give it a shot.”

I scratch at the scruff on my cheeks, buying time as I scan my mind for the positives.

“You’re determined,” I say, my voice flat. “When you set your mind to something, you don’t back down.” As in her obsession with me, up until last night, that is. “It’s an admirable trait in its own way.” Albeit frightening in another.

She motions for me to continue so I clear my throat. “You’re confident. You own who you are, regardless of what others think. And you’re resourceful. You always seem to land on your feet, no matter the situation.” As evidenced by the continued string of dramas she’s landed herself in, and me in by proxy. Come to think of it, it’s a miracle we’re both standing.

“Go on,” she encourages, flashing a wide grin. “Don’t you remember what a good kisser I was? And what about my talents under the sheets? Surely you can vouch for me in that area, too.”

She gives a little wink and it takes everything in me not to shudder at the memory.

That was a long time ago. I’m personally shocked she remembers, let alone asking me to do so.

“I hardly think that’s appropriate,” I tell her. “Besides, Alex would be far more familiar with both of those attributes.”

“Okay, how about the memories we shared?”

She prods on and I wish upon every star in the galaxy that my phone would go off and I’d be mercifully whisked away to the nearest homicide. It’s more than a bit murderous standing here listening to Cormack, let alone being forced to come up with her good features.

“Yes,” I admit reluctantly. “I suppose we did share a handful of good times.”

“I’ll be more than happy to remind you of those,” she says as she runs her finger down my tie. “All those shared memories, all the laughter, the secrets, times when it seemed like we were the only two people in the world.”

I nod. “That’s because we sort of were. I was helping you cheat on Everett. We both needed to keep tight-lipped or I’d have a split lip. He not only split my lip when he found out, he gave me a matching set of black eyes.”

A laugh bubbles from her. She always did see the humor in it.

“Our relationship hasn’t been perfect, but it’s had its moments.” She sighs. “We’ve had our share of late-night conversations and impromptu dances under the moonlight, too.”

I don’t quite recall those moonlit dances and it makes me wonder if she’s fusing the memories of our short-lived relationship with that of her relationship with someone else.

“I remember one particular night, huddled up under the stars,” she goes on. “Sharing stories and dreams until the sun began to peek over the horizon.

Sure, we had our issues, but in that moment, we were just two people, crazy about each other.”

It’s hard to keep from grimacing. I don’t remember any conversations that led into the early morning. But what I do remember is that Cormack had the ability to talk to me about her day until my ears begged to fall off. Mostly those conversations revolved around Italian couture and her latest jaunt to Fashion Week in Paris.

Someone calls her name in the distance and she frowns their way.

“Hold your darn horses,” she shouts over at them. “Can’t you see I’m busy?” She scowls my way before forcing a smile. “Well, it sure would be nice to share all that with someone again. We’ll get back to it again someday.” She bats her lashes my way and I’m unsure which direction this conversation is about to wander. “With other people, of course.” She winks. “And until then, we’ll always have Paris.”

“Paris?” I whisper, dumbfounded as to what she might mean as she darts into the crowd.

What the heck just happened?

I snap out of the temporary stupor Cormack plunged me into.

A part of me feels obligated to give Alex the heads-up. Apparently, the girl is bananas over him.

Bananas being the operative word.

But I don’t. I spend the next two hours in the shoebox of an office inside the B&B poring over security footage from this morning, which basically yields me nothing. Despite the fact Miranda was holding Lyla Nell the entire time, there were too many costumed bodies bumping up against the two of them.

I spend another spate of time reviewing the security footage from last night and I get a little luckier with that. I spot a brunette walking up to Rusty Shadowood, having what looks to be a terse word with him before splashing a drink into his face. I freeze the frame and take a picture of her face once it comes in clear.

Soon after, I spot a man in a dark suit and a fedora as he comes over to Rusty, and they seem to be having an amicable exchange, as in no liquids were harmed in the process. I rewind the tape earlier in the night and see Sienna Broomfield speaking with him, Lottie is there as well. I had a chance to speak with Sienna once she administered CPR to the guy, but only long enough to gather her name and number. And Twila Ember, the woman

Everett sent up the river is in a frame with the deceased too, so I snap her picture as well in the event I need to hunt her down.

I'm about to rewatch the whole thing when my phone bleats. It's a text from the coroner's office.

The report is in and he just emailed me a copy.

I quickly head for my email, download the file, and within seconds I know exactly how Rusty Shadowood met his demise.

I speed out of the office and nearly knock Miranda over.

"Sorry, I was just about to head to Lottie's," I say, sailing right past her.

"Well, you won't find her there," she calls after me. "She went to the courthouse!"

"The courthouse," I whisper as I dart out the door.

That's exactly where I'm headed.

NOAH



I drive to the courthouse in record time.

The limestone walls and floors have always given off the warmth of a mausoleum. I'm about to head down the hall that leads to Everett's private chambers when I bump into an all too familiar polished brunette, and she happens to be the attorney handling my divorce from Lottie.

"How's the—you know what going?" I frown at the woman because I can't seem to bring myself to say the word *divorce*. It doesn't feel natural even though I've already done the deed with both my ex Britney and Cormack. Now, those marital dissolutions couldn't happen fast enough.

"Oh, Noah, I'm so sorry. I meant to call you. I've just been so busy, I'm afraid I'm the reason things have stalled."

"Stalled?" I cock my head. "I don't mind one bit if things are stalled. In fact, feel free to stall all you want."

A robust laugh bursts from her tiny frame. "In that case, I'll move it to the bottom of the pile. Just FYI, you might be married to Lottie Lemon forever at the rate I'm going." She bolts to the left and disappears out of sight and I'm glad she can't see the grin blooming on my face.

I practically whistle Dixie as I make my way to Everett's door. His secretary, aka the gatekeeper, is away, so I head over, and just as I'm about to twist the knob, I hear a couple of voices coming from inside, Everett and Lottie.

"We should name it," Lottie says and I can practically hear the giggle in her voice.

"No, we shouldn't," Everett protests.

He's never been any fun. What are they naming, anyway?

“Why not?” Lottie contests. “I named mine.”

Wait a minute...

I burst in without hesitation. “Stop,” I call out with my eyes closed. “I think this is an entirely inappropriate conversation to have around Lyla Nell.”

EVERETT



“Exactly what would be inappropriate?” I ask the buffoon who just barreled into my office.

“Did you say something about Lyla Nell?” Lemon’s voice hikes in a panic. “Where is she, Noah? Is she with you? I left her with Lainey and she swore on her life she wouldn’t let her out of her sight.”

“What?” Noah opens his eyes and blinks hard at the scene around him. “You’re both dressed.”

“Why wouldn’t we be dressed?” Lemon asks, suddenly clutching at the neck of her blue gown.

I shake my head at the guy. “I have to give it to you, Noah. Sometimes, you really do have good ideas. Now, what do you want?”

Noah winces. “I thought I heard something about naming it and—”

“Oh geez.” Lemon swats him before I can get to him. “And you didn’t hesitate to barge right in?”

“I thought Lyla Nell was with you.” He winces again. “My apologies.”

“I was showing her my gun.” Everett lifts his suit jacket enough for me to see the piece sitting on his hip in his shiny new holster. “And thank you for helping me pick it out.”

Lemon nods his way. “It looks just like mine but bigger.”

“It’s just as lethal,” Noah assures her. “Listen, I just went over the security footage and I couldn’t find anything that could implicate anyone as far as the Prankster goes. Do you have that note?”

“Oh, I sure do.” Lemon pulls a plastic bag out of her purse. “I didn’t have an evidence bag, but I put it in a sandwich bag as soon as I got home. Not that I expect it to yield any evidence. There hasn’t been a hair or fingerprint

on any of the love notes they've sent yet."

"Their luck is about to run out," Noah says, taking it from her. "I can feel it."

"I don't want another second to go by," I tell him. "That monster handed the note to Lyla Nell. It could have been worse."

Noah nods. "And that note..."

"Beware of those close, not all are as they seem," I say. "They're not warning you against your friends, Lemon. They might just be masquerading as one of them."

"No way." Lemon shakes her head. "Not possible."

"Everything is possible," Noah tells her.

"Fine." She sighs. "Any luck with the case?" Lemon sounds hopeful.

"Actually, I think I did make some strides," he says. "But no rush on that. I think I'll let the two of you be. I'll pick up some Mangias and meet you back at the house. I need to do a little paperwork down at the office anyway. I just found out what the cause of death was for Rusty Shadowood."

Lemon gasps as she leans his way. "Well, don't keep us in suspense."

"Tonight, I'll bring the pizza and my dog. You bring Lyla Nell and we'll make it a party." He shoots us with his fingers. "Carry on." He darts out the door just as quick as he burst in.

"Well, how do you like that?" Lemon shakes her head. "Why in the world would he want to make me wait all the way until tonight? He knows I'm itching to find out what that man died from."

"To keep you wanting more." I meant to think it, but the words slipped anyway.

A gurgle of a laugh strums from her as I reel her in and hold her tight.

"Speaking of itches," I say. "You have any you need to scratch?"

"Come to think of it," she bites down on her lip, "I do have something you can help me with, Judge Baxter."

We go with Noah's line of thinking and take off our clothes and I make sure Lemon doesn't have a single itch left to frustrate her.

She's in good hands.

Mine.

EVERETT



True to his word, I come home that night to find Noah sprawled over the sofa and eating pizza, his golden retriever Toby running a circle with the cats, Pancake and Waffles, a couple of Himalayan brothers.

And, of course, Lyla Nell is in the mix, running around with a sippy cup in her hand demanding that the three of them listen to her, then breaking out into fits of laughter intermittently.

Carlotta and Derby are sitting on the far end of the sectional, each noshing away on their own slices of pizza.

Lemon swoops over and lands a kiss on my lips. “Sorry, I was starving so we dived right into the pizza.” She lands her hand on her growing stomach. “Scratch that, the twins were starving. I’ve never been so ravenous in all my life. Not before Lyla Nell, not after. These kids have me attacking every snack, sweet and savory treat I can find. Ooh”—she covers her lips with her hand a moment—“that reminds me. Lyla Nell scored all sorts of candy at the festival today. I say we raid her pumpkin.” She takes off for the coffee table where a plastic pumpkin sits and shoves her hand into it.

The entire house has been amply decorated for the scariest holiday of the year, and it’s been decorated this way since about right after the Fourth of July. That was while Evie was still living here, and she wanted to soak in a little old-fashioned fall before heading to her dorm.

There’s not a nook or cranny void of spiderwebs, fall leaves, or orange twinkle lights. Every free surface has a pumpkin sitting on it, and there are more goblins, ghosts, and scarecrows festooning every corner than you’d find at a craft store.

“Mommy, *no*,” Lyla Nell shouts as she catches Lemon in action.

“Now you have to learn to share, Lyla Nell,” Lemon says as she tries her best to shove a handful of fun-size chocolates down into the bosom of her dress.

“My candy!” Lyla Nell shrieks, and every animal in the house stops cold and sits up at attention.

“Fine,” Lemon says, emptying the contents of her stash and returning to the pumpkin at hand.

“Mommy greedy,” Lyla Nell says, taking off with the pumpkin that looks as if it weighs just as much as she does, and both Carlotta and Derby break out into raucous laughter at the sight.

“Lyla Nell,” Noah calls out. “Please don’t call your mother greedy. It’s your siblings who are greedy.” He winks my way and I scowl at him.

“Speaking of greedy,” Carlotta says, reaching for another slice of pizza. “A big box came delivered all the way from Fallbrook and I had to sign for it.”

“Yup,” Derby says. “I helped haul it in so Mama wouldn’t strain her back. She’s got her oats to sow and we all know how stressful that can be on the lumbar region.”

“Don’t forget the rumble region,” Carlotta adds. “I’ve got a lot of rumbling and tumbling to do, too. If I’m gonna sow some oats, I may as well dig up some weeds while I’m at it.”

I don’t dare ask what the weeds might be.

“A box from Fallbrook?” I ask as Derby nods through a mouthful and points to the entry. “That’s from my mother,” I say. “She offered to send us some of my old baby clothes.”

“Your old baby clothes?” Lemon brightens as I gather the rather large box and land it on the coffee table. “Oh, I can’t wait to see them! They’re practically vintage.”

“That’s code for you’re old,” Noah tells me.

“You’re only a year younger,” I remind him.

“Don’t worry, boys,” Derby raises a hand. “You’re both still way too young for my liking.”

Now that I’m thankful for.

I open the box for Lemon, and before I can back away, she’s already elbows deep in the loot.

“Oh my word.” She gasps as she pulls out a pretty yellow—*dress*? “Everett, I think maybe your mother made a mistake,” she says, taking a peek

inside the box. “There’s not a boy outfit in sight. I think maybe she sent your sister’s old clothes.”

“What?” I look into the box and, sure enough, I’m afraid she’s right. “There’s a note,” I say, picking up a creamy piece of paper, my mother’s signature stationary. “Essex, here are all of the dresses you wore as a child. I hope your babies will love them as much as you did.”

“You wore dresses?” Noah heads over with an amused look on his face. “Well, you didn’t stray far. You still wear dresses for a living.”

“*Whoa.*” Derby nearly chokes on her pizza. “Just what line of work are you in again?”

“I’m a judge,” I say sternly as I take a moment to glare at Noah. “And that dress I wear each day while I’m on the bench has the power to put someone away for a very long time. I’d get on my nice side, Fox. I have a feeling your day in court will be here sooner than later.”

“Oh, Everett.” Lemon laughs as she plucks out dress after dress. Mind you, not a one of them is even remotely blue. “These are adorable. And don’t feel too bad. I actually think it was common back in the day for boys to wear dresses when they were infants. I’m sure it made everything easier for your mother.”

“You mean his governance,” Noah corrects before looking my way. “How old were you again when you first met your parents? Nine? Ten?”

“Don’t listen to him,” I say.

It was five, I believe.

“Lot’s right, Sexy,” Carlotta says. “It was pretty common back in the day to see little boys wearing dresses. That lets the rest of us know their folks were filthy rich, or royalty, sometimes both. It made good targets for kidnappings, too.”

Lemon sits down on the sofa, buries her face in one of the dresses, and begins to cry.

“Hey, Lot.” Noah wastes no time to land by her side. “Don’t cry. I’m sure I can find a box of my old baby clothes in the attic. My father would never have allowed my mother to put me in a dress.”

Derby squeals, “*Ooh*, I just knew Wiley Fox is a man’s man.” She nods at Carlotta. “A man’s man who’s been around the sun almost a dozen decades, too.”

I’d correct her on her math, but it feels as if he’s been in my life just as long, so I get it.

“It’s not that.” Lemon sighs as I take a seat on the other side of her and wrap my arm around her shoulders. “It’s just—I’ve never had twins before,” the words come out in a half-cry, half-shout. “I’m terrified at the prospect of all the things that can go wrong. What if they’re so identical I can’t tell them apart and I end up mixing them up?”

“You won’t have that problem if it’s a boy and a girl,” Noah points out.

“But what if it’s two little girls?” Lemon suggests. “Or two little boys? And boys? I don’t know the first thing about boys!”

“Oh, come on now, Lot,” Carlotta scoffs. “You’re not giving yourself enough credit. You’ve been playing with the balls and the bats since you were a teen.”

Derby chuckles. “And if you’re anything like Mama, you never strike out.”

“She didn’t with me,” Noah adds.

“And she’s hit a homer every night ever since I’ve married her,” I add.

Lemon nods as if to affirm the fact.

“But”—Noah says while lifting his finger—“once the twins get here, that good time will be over.”

“Don’t I know it,” Carlotta harumphs. “It’ll be welcome to Sleepless City one more time, and this time we may never leave. It’s bad enough I have to bribe Little Yippy with a sucker each night just to keep her quiet.”

“Carlotta Sawyer,” Lemon snaps. “You have not been giving Lyla Nell a lollipop each and every night.”

“Not every night,” Carlotta says. “Just on the nights that end in Y.”

Lemon buries her face in the dress in her hands and starts to cry once again.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, offering Carlotta a lethal look.

“Oh, Mama.” Derby shakes her head. “We can’t stay here if come next spring there are going to be *three* Little Yippies running around. That only gives us ten months or so to get a place of our own.”

Her math is off, but I’m still stuck on the fact she, too, plans on being here that long. At this point, Carlotta is a given.

Derby’s eyes grow wide. “Mama, you should buy a home in one of those fancy retirement villages and then I can come and live with you.”

“I wholeheartedly approve of this idea. We can always talk financing.” I lay it out there in the event Carlotta needs a loan. I won’t be opposed to investing.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Carlotta looks at the woman, affronted by the idea. “Those Little Yippies will be moved out in no time. I’ve already got rid of one. Although, I sure do miss Evie Stevie. She liked sharing her devil’s lettuce with me.”

“What?” I bark without meaning to. Ah, hell, I meant it.

“Kidding.” Carlotta lifts a finger. “Come on, Derby. I think I’m falling asleep and so are you. It’s time to sleepwalk up to my bedroom.” She leans toward the woman. “We can shimmy down the drain pipe and stay out all night. Another little trick Evie Stevie taught me.”

“Good grief.” I close my eyes a moment.

“I’ve got something that will take your minds off things,” Noah says, pulling out his phone and cueing up a picture. “Do either of you know this woman?”

“That’s Cocoa Ganache,” Lemon says. “The woman I met up with this afternoon at the cemetery.” She looks my way. “She went to high school with Keelie and me.”

“Okay,” Noah says. “What did you get from her?”

“Nothing really.” Lemon shrugs. “And that’s the problem. I saw her toss a drink in the man’s face and she made no mention of it when I prodded her. She said they met at a culinary conference of some kind and that she was just saying hello last night.”

Noah shakes his head. “Hate to say it, but she’s a suspect. And then I’ve got this woman.” He flashes a familiar face our way.

“Sienna Broomfield,” Lemon says. “Why did she make the list?”

“I saw her circling back to him and they had an exchange,” he says. “And this one.”

“Twila Ember.” I frown as her face pops up on the screen. “She did call him a dirty devil,” I say.

Lemon nods. “And I believe she invited him to rot in hell.”

“She’s a no-brainer,” Noah says. “And then there’s this guy.” He flashes his screen our way again, and there’s a man in a suit and a fedora on the other end.

“Never seen him,” I say.

“I have.” Lemon leans into the phone. “I saw him there at the festival talking to Rusty. They seemed to be getting along just fine.”

“We’ll see about that.” Noah turns his phone off.

“So what did the man die from?” Lemon asks sternly. “You can bet I’m

not letting you leave this house until you spill all the deadly beans.”

“Caffeine poisoning.” Noah deadpans.

“Caffeine?” I ask. “So was it a homicide, or did his body malfunction from one of his own energy drinks?” It’s happened before, more often than I care to count. I’ve seen more than my fair share of cases touting exactly that.

“Rusty Shadowood had enough caffeine in his system to wake up all of Alaska. A normal can of soda contains thirty to fifty milligrams of the stuff. One oversized can of Beast Brewery energy drink has one hundred and sixty milligrams of caffeine.”

I nod his way. “And how much was in Rusty’s bloodstream?”

“Ten thousand milligrams.”

Lemon clutches at her chest. “Ten thousand? How could he have drunk that much?”

“Now that’s the ten thousand dollar question.” Noah shakes his head. “I’d better say goodnight to Lyla Nell.” He gets up. “Come on, Toby. It’s time to go.”

We walk them out and I hold Lyla Nell as she offers a sleepy wave their way.

A crisp breeze blows by as I place a hand over Lemon’s stomach.

“Any movement?” I ask and she shakes her head up at me.

“No, but I’ve got a doctor’s appointment coming up in a few days, and if we’re good, Dr Barnette just might let us see them.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I say, offering up a kiss and Lyla Nell giggles like mad.

We head inside and put Lyla Nell to bed before getting to bed ourselves.

Once Lemon and I scratch a couple of itches, I hold her long into the night, but I don’t sleep.

Twila Ember runs through my mind on a loop. She’s here in my life all of a sudden. I put her away for sixteen months, and I wasn’t even convinced she deserved it. The sentence could have been, *should* have been ten long years. I cut it short, then sliced it in half one more time.

Maybe she’s after revenge?

Maybe she’s the killer.

Maybe she’s the Prankster.

LOTTIE



The Fright Night Festival has turned Honey Hollow into a carnival of fall colors and cheerful frights, or at least the daytime version has.

At night, the ghost and goblins come out and there are enough terrors to outfit a hundred horror novels—just the way the residents who frequent the nighttime event demand it.

The ghosts who reside here are out in full force as well. That would be Greer Giles, a girl about my age who died a few years back when she was struck down by a bullet while wearing the most stunning white dress. She's still wearing the dress. Actually, she's still wearing the gunshot wound, only now it looks more or less like a red corsage pinned to her chest. I helped bring her killer to justice.

And then there's her two-hundred-year-old plus-one, Winslow Decker. He's a blond cutie, forever somewhere in his thirties, wearing a pair of dusty old overalls. Winslow was a pig farmer on this very land and still remains here till this day. Then there's little Lea, a six-year-old they adopted. She wears her long dark hair combed over her face so you don't know if she's coming or going. She stalks the grounds with a machete in her hand looking to avenge the massacre of her family. And to round out the happy little family, they have a tiny ghostly black cat named thirteen. Funny enough, Thirteen actually came back to help me solve a crime once, only he never left.

I don't make the rules, but I'm sure glad he got to stay. And right now all of those kids running for their lives are probably glad the ghosts are here, too. Probably.

Greer Giles and Winslow Decker have been providing just the right

amount of scares for the kids and families that rove the grounds during the day, with a little rattle of a scarecrow, the occasional disappearing cookie, or floating cupcake.

It's sheer magic and the kids are particularly delighted.

Also at night, little Lea and her trusty cat, Thirteen, tend to shine a bit more with harrowing screams, shaking chandeliers, and jack-o'-lanterns alike. Of course, Greer and Winslow are pretty busy in the evenings, too, rattling the skeletons set out and haunting the hayride to make the trek through the woods extra spooky.

I've yet to go on the nighttime version of the hayride, but I've already taken Lyla Nell on the adorable daytime version twice already this morning. Once when Noah arrived and once when Everett arrived. We sat on bales of hay while Wiley drove the tractor through the woods and we saw plenty of friendly "ghosts"—mannequins covered with sheets—sparkly spiders, and plenty of faux spiderwebs.

Each child was given a tiny paper-mâché lantern as they climbed aboard and you could bet their tiny faces lit up twice as bright in anticipation.

The ride chugged along gently at a snail's pace, following a winding path through the woods surrounding the B&B. The sun-dappled trail took under an archway of old trees, their leaves a riot of gold, scarlet, and orange.

Lyla Nell pointed and giggled at clusters of scarecrows propped against trees, their stitched grins thankfully friendly rather than frightening.

Instead of creepy sounds, the speakers rigged around the woods played whimsical music and gentle Halloween-themed nursery rhymes—a few of which Lyla Nell actually sang along to—or at least attempted to. Occasionally, Wiley, dressed as a jovial farmer in overalls and a straw hat, would pause the tractor just as we hit a table strewn with a group of gourds arranged to resemble a jolly family, or a cluster of spiderweb hammocks, each holding a cute stuffed spider.

And, of course, every now and again a friendly costumed character would appear from behind the trees to wave at the kids and hand out a handful of candies.

The hayride happened to end at the foot of the makeshift pumpkin patch where children could choose a small pumpkin to take home. By the time they disembarked, they're already excited about their next adventure on the haunted hayride. And you could bet Lyla Nell was already insisting on more herself.

The Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery booth has been busy as a Honey Hollow beehive this morning and we've gone through most of our muffins, Danishes, cupcakes, cookies, and chocolate delight cake. It seems the closer to Halloween we get, the bigger the collective sweet tooth of this town gets.

Everywhere I look, locals and out-of-towners alike are engrossed in the festive spirit. Jack-o'-lanterns with faces carved into cats, werewolves, and silly faces are lined along the entry to my mother's B&B. And considering that the cloud cover is giving us an ominous gray day, their flickering lights cast eerie shadows on the cobblestones. The air is filled with the smell of autumn—crisp apples, spiced cider, and pumpkin pie, and I couldn't feel cozier nestled deep in the arms of a perfect fall day.

Suze, Lily, and Effie are working as fast as they can to meet the orders, and as soon as the mob begins to dwindle, I head over to where Noah and Everett sit, each with a stack of donuts and a cup of coffee. Lyla Nell is planted firmly in Noah's arms, dressed as the cutest little Snow White, and she happens to be feeding him a chocolate cruller. Honestly, there's nothing cuter. I happen to be dressed as a circus tent with this striped dress I threw on this morning. Not so cute.

"Ooh, speaking of cute," I say as I pull out my phone. "Everett, I almost forgot to thank your mother for those dresses."

He glowers my way a moment at the mention of them. My fingers quickly tap over my screen.

"And I just sent it," I say, triumphant.

"Lot Lot!" Carlotta runs this way with a look of glee on her face, her body wrapped like a mummy. "Great news, Lot. It looks as if the Grim Reaper is about to make another appearance. You'll never believe what Derby is up to now in hopes to turn a buck. Look to your left. You'll never guess what you're about to see."

"The Grim Reaper?" I ask as I turn that way, and just as I do, Raven swoops in with a trail of miniature lavender stars floating behind her.

"Did someone say Grim Reaper?" she caws as she lands on my shoulder with a thump. "I could use the ride home. It's Heavenly Hummus and Holy Guacamole Night in paradise this evening. I tell you, those deceased chefs do not rest in peace. Now if I could just convince them to start an Earth delivery service."

Just about everyone in the vicinity turns in the direction Carlotta is pointing and we give a collective gasp.

“Is that woman out of her mind?” Everett asks, standing and looking as if he were ready to bolt to save her.

“She’s going to get herself killed,” Noah says, looking equally ready to charge the scene.

“Take a seat, boys,” Carlotta says, pushing them both back onto their stools. “It’s high time nature takes its course. If it’s the girl’s time to go, it’s the girl’s time to go.”

Just around the corner past a booth selling caramel popcorn, we see a sight that stops me in my tracks. It’s Derby Dingle perched atop a massive haystack with a wicked grin plastered on her face. She’s about to partake in what the banner beside her boldly declares as the Pumpkin Slingshot Showdown.

A crowd watches in anticipation as she straps on a ridiculously oversized helmet, decorated with painted-on lightning bolts and a plume of neon feathers with a matching feathered skirt. She hoists a pumpkin, easily the size of a soccer ball, into a gigantic slingshot made from rubber tubing and a leather pouch.

Before I can even begin to comprehend the magnitude of what she’s about to attempt, Derby pulls back the slingshot with all her might with the pumpkin nestled securely in its pouch. The crowd collectively holds its breath with the silence punctuated by the creak of the strained rubber tubing.

“Good grief,” I groan. “One wrong step and she’s going to fall a full story off that tower of hay.”

Then, with a wild cackle that echoes through the entire festival grounds, Derby lets go. The pumpkin launches into the sky, arcing high above a vacant field before it starts its downward trajectory, landing in a patch of open ground marked by what looks to be a giant target spraypainted onto the dirt below.

Derby’s pumpkin lands just outside the bullseye, but it’s close enough to send the crowd into a fit of cheers. Derby stands triumphant atop the haystack with her arms raised in victory as a thunderous applause is offered her way.

“Would you look at that?” Carlotta scowls at the sight. “There goes the daredevil queen, reveling in her adoring subjects. And the worst part? She lives to devil another day.”

“Carlotta,” I step her way, “you do not mean that,” I say, but Carlotta chooses to keep her lips zipped.

I’m about to address it again when Cormack saunters over, dressed as

Cinderella—funny since I wore that exact same costume yesterday. Albeit it looks a lot more luxurious on Cormack, most likely because it is.

“Cormack,” I say as I slide a complementary purple-frosted chocolate cupcake her way. “I have to say, I’m very impressed with how well you’re running the festival. I think you might have found your niche in life.”

A smile pinches on her lips. “Wouldn’t you just love to see me run away with the circus, Loretta.”

For reasons unknown to me, Cormack refuses to get my name right.

“Would you look at this?” she says as she offers Noah and Everett a quick nod. “Well, isn’t this a cozy little powwow,” she muses and I can’t help but note her voice is dripping with sugarcoated mischief. “Did I miss the invite, or was it a closed kaffeeklatsch?”

“It’s nice to see you,” Everett says amicably, but Noah seems suspiciously quiet.

Can’t say I blame him.

Cormack’s obsession with Noah Fox is off the rails.

“Morning, Cormack,” Lily says as she’s about to stride on by but stops short instead. “Hey, you should really come by the house sometime. Little Levi is growing by the minute. And he’s just started to smile. He’s got those Fox signature dimples, and I just fall into one each time he laughs. In fact, Alex should be here with him any minute now. We were about to head out this afternoon to buy little Levi his very first Halloween costume, and you’re more than welcome to join us.” She raises the carafe in her hands before taking off.

Noah straightens. “How about that? It looks as if Alex would be happy to have you around.”

Cormack frowns and her eyebrows twist into a hard V, giving her more of an evil villain look than a princess.

“Sure, of course, things are great between Lily and Alex,” she seethes. “I mean, that woman has practically stolen my happily ever after. Or so she thinks.” She offers a demented smile my way as she says it and a shiver runs down my spine.

Raven caws and flies right off my shoulder before landing on the counter in front of me. “If I didn’t know better, Lottie, I’d say that woman was out to get *you*, not Lily. Reminds me of my old nemesis, Gertrude the Guinea Fowl. Always thought she ruled the roost, till I showed her who the real queen of the coop was.” She fluffs her black feathers dramatically. “Anyway, enough

about fowl memories. Let's hustle. I've got a paella party tomorrow night in paradise, and trust me, you don't want to keep those celestial chefs waiting."

I nod at the sweet bird because I happen to agree with her.

"Cormack," I lean her way, "you should go. You shouldn't miss a minute of little Levi's life just because Alex is with someone else."

She sniffs my way. "Easy for you to say. I bet if someone stole the love of your life they'd find themselves buried six feet under."

Noah nods. "Cormack is in love with Alex."

Carlotta gasps as she looks at the sparkling princess among us. "Are you saying Lily had better carry around a shovel?"

Her eyes linger on Carlotta's before she continues. "Let's just say if anyone comes between me and my man, they'd be lucky if they could still use a shovel." She lifts her chin to the crowd. "Now where is that chubby little cherub of mine and his handsome as-can-be daddy?" She nods to Noah. "I think it's high time I remind Alex of why he fell in love with me in the first place, especially when I'm looking like the belle of the ball." She fans her dress out and gives a little curtsy.

She takes off and Carlotta snorts. "More like the belle of the *brawl*. Lily isn't going down without a fight."

"I'm still shocked to hear she's in love with Alex," I say just as a curious sight heads in this direction.

"Lottie," my mother calls out carrying an oversized box. "A package came for you and it was just left at the front desk."

LOTTIE



My heart skips a beat. For a moment, I'm frozen, my mind rushing back to the recent so-called pranks that have been giving me one sleepless night after the next.

Could this be another one of those tricks?

A package from the Prankster?

Panic seizes me as I glance at the box, half-expecting it to burst open with an explosion of confetti or something far less pleasant.

Both Noah and Everett mobilize.

Noah hands Lyla Nell to Suze and quickly takes the box from my mother as if he were plucking a bomb out of her hands. And knowing the Prankster, he just might be.

"Get back," Noah barks at Everett as he takes the box to a clearing a few feet away and opens it up himself. He pilfers through the contents and shakes his head at whatever they may be, before bringing the box this way and plunking it down on the counter. "It's for you, all right, Lot."

"Thank you," I whisper to Noah as I gather the courage to glance into the box.

Instead of a horrifying surprise, I spot yet a smaller box encased in dry ice. And once I open that one, it reveals a luxurious layer of croissants nestled in silk, their aroma wafting up and hitting me with a scrumptious wave of all things delicious. The small label on the side reads *Imported from Paris—croissants au chocolat*.

"Oh my word." I gasp as I pull the box out. "Chocolate croissants from Paris!"

"Who's it from?" Lily asks, peering at the box just as Suze and Effie lean

in to do the same.

“Someone looking to get into her pants,” Carlotta sings.

The tiny print on top of the box gives away its sender.

“Everett.” I sigh as I head over and offer him a kiss and a hug. “How did you know?”

“Ah, come on, Lot.” Carlotta laughs. “Everyone knew. You’ve been talking about eating one of those butterballs for weeks.”

“They smell amazing,” Effie says, giving the box another sniff.

“I bet they’ll taste amazing, too,” Lily says.

“We won’t know,” Suze grouses. “Lottie doesn’t share her toys, as Carlotta likes to remind us so often.”

“Well, I’m sharing these,” I say, quickly pulling them out, warming them and giving Lily, Suze, Effie, Carlotta, Noah, Everett, and Lyla Nell each their own. There are still close to a dozen in the box.

“Well, isn’t that the cherry on top of my no-carb sundae?” Mom growls. “Here I am salivating like a kid outside of a candy store window and it’s still no candy for me.”

“Not to worry,” I say, pulling out a small platter from under the counter. “I woke up early and made you a batch of chocolate chip cookies. I replaced the flour with almond flour, bought low-carb chocolate chips, and used a sugar substitute. I promise you won’t be able to tell the difference.”

“Lottie Lemon,” Mom practically screams my name. “You are officially my favorite child,” she says, taking the box from me. “Don’t tell your sisters,” she says, finding a free seat before she dives on in.

Speaking of diving in...

“Oh wow,” I groan hard as I enjoy my first bite. “Everett, you are a brilliant, *brilliant* man.”

“It was your idea,” he says. “I just made sure it happened.”

“Gee whiz.” Lily shakes her head. “Croissants all the way from Paris? What other fine cravings are you having?”

“Belgian chocolate, Italian gelato, Swiss fondu, Turkish baklava, and German pretzels,” I say without giving it a single thought. “Oh, and Russian caviar, but I’m not sure that’s something my doctor recommends. I’ll have to ask at my next appointment.”

“Duly noted.” Everett nods my way and I offer up a cheeky wink. “And just so you know,” he says. “I knew you’d be more than happy to share so I had another box shipped to the house.”

“Aw, Everett.” I offer him another kiss, albeit a chocolaty kiss this time. “You really do think of everything.”

“Nothing but the finest for his Lemon,” Carlotta says through a bite. “I guess if you’re craving all those fancy pants things, you really must be having Sexy’s babies. Face it, the only things you ate while you were cooking up Little Yippy were fried pickles and donuts.”

“Still a wonderful combo,” I say to Noah just as my phone bleats and I look down with a hint of reluctance. Now that the Prankster knows my number, my phone has the power to give me a jump scare each time it makes a noise. “Oh, it’s a text from Eliza,” I say cheerily as I look to Everett. “She says *you’re welcome, dear. I managed to dig up a few pictures of Everett in some of his favorite dresses. I hope you’ll enjoy them as much as I do.*” I click on the images and coo at the screen.

“Let’s see,” Noah says as both he, Suze, and Lyla Nell lean in. Everett cranes his neck this way, too.

“Pretty baby,” Lyla Nell calls out and claps at the sight.

Raven takes a gander and twitches. “Well, bless his heart. With ears like that, Everett could have heard a mouse sneeze in the next county.”

I make a face at the humorous wraith.

Although, she’s not wrong.

“Not those pictures,” Everett groans as he takes in the images.

“If it’s not one thing, it’s your mother,” I tease.

“Well, well.” Noah chuckles. “You certainly grew into those Dumbo ears, didn’t you, Judge Baxter?”

“Technically, I didn’t.” Everett sighs. “I had them pinned back when I was eight. Seven years too late if you ask me.”

“Thank goodness for modern medicine,” I jest, reaching over to give his now perfectly proportionate ear a playful tug. “Although, I think I would’ve loved you all the same, cute big ears and all.”

Noah doesn’t hide his amusement. “Pinned back ears or not, I think we can all agree you were quite the little charmer in those frilly dresses. I’m just wondering how you didn’t take off with a strong wind with those satellite dishes.”

“Funny,” Everett deadpans without the hint of a smile.

“All right, Lot,” Carlotta chimes in. “You’d better book a plastic surgeon now. We wouldn’t want those poor Little Yippies to inherit those satellite dishes, now would we?”

“Carlotta.” I swat her way with a dish towel.

“Imagine the baby picture,” Suze joins in as Noah takes Lyla Nell from her. “Two adorable little cherubs with their teeny-tiny bandaged ears. The cutest!”

“She’s sadistic,” I say to Noah and he gives a quick nod of agreement. “And if they do inherit their father’s ears, well, that just means they’ll hear their mother’s wise words even better.”

“And my *ear*-resistible dad jokes,” Everett adds with a short-lived grin, his pun earning a chorus of groans from us all.

“And their father’s bad puns,” Noah adds. “Poor kids won’t stand a chance,” he says, handing Lyla Nell to me. “I gotta run. I’ve got an entire squad patrolling the grounds. Stay safe.”

“I will.”

“I’d better go, too.” Everett offers both Lyla Nell and me a kiss.

“You are a prince among men,” I say before leaning toward his ear. “And you will be properly rewarded.”

“Looking forward to it.” He takes off with a wink.

“And what do I got to look forward to, Lot?” Carlotta sags in her seat. “A lifetime of Derby Dingle buzzing in my ear.”

“You really don’t care for her, do you?” I say as another crowd lines up at the booth and the girls get straight to work.

“You catch on fast, don’t you?” Raven teases, prompting a giggle fit from Lyla Nell as she gloms onto the bird’s wing. “*Ouch*, watch it, Little Yippy.”

“Carlotta?” I say, leaning in. “What’s going on between you and Derby, anyway?”

Carlotta glances over her shoulder briefly before leaning my way. “Remember me saying I wasn’t afraid of anything?”

I nod.

“Well, I *lied*. I’m scared spitless of Derby Dingle. We gotta get out of here, Lot.”

“Where are we going to go?” I ask.

“I’ve got an idea or twelve,” Raven squawks. “Let’s get a move on this case.”

A little girl carrying a pumpkin brimming with candy walks on by and I nod.

“I know exactly where we’re going next. Straight to the heart of the sugar rush.”

Here's hoping a little sugar high can reveal a clue or two about Rusty Shadowood's killer.

LOTTIE



Once again, try as we might, we couldn't shake ourselves of the daredevil extraordinaire. Somehow, despite all our attempts, we hadn't managed to lose her. Derby is like a stubborn piece of bubblegum stuck on the sole of our proverbial shoe, sticky and determined.

"Who's up for a bucket full of candy?" Derby Dingle shouts as Carlotta, Lyla Nell, Raven, and I get ready to step into the Candy Confectionary.

True to Sienna Broomfield's word, it's not on Main Street, thus the reason there's nary a soul inside as far as I can tell.

"With Lot Lot in tow, a bucket of candy won't stand a chance," Carlotta shoots back. "I've seen her take on a dessert buffet single-handedly."

"I own a dessert buffet," I'm quick to inform her. "And contrary to what you might think, I always make sure there's enough to go around."

"Yeah?" Carlotta lifts a brow. "And where did all that chocolate delight disappear to before we left?"

"The twins were hungry," I say, pressing a hand to my belly. "And Lyla Nell wanted a couple of slices, too."

Lyla Nell looks up at me from her stroller and with Raven tucked safely in her arms. The look on my baby girl's face suggests she's about to call out a bald-faced lie.

"Oh, all right," I say, pushing her stroller to the door. "Let's get in there."

Raven gives a sharp caw. "We'd better hop to it," she squawks, trying to free herself from Lyla Nell's clutches but no such luck. "Time to grill the candy lady. Let's see if she's as sweet as her treats or has a sinister center."

"Let's hope it's the former," I mutter as I swing the door open. "Because the last thing we need is another sour surprise."

Carlotta and Derby storm in before I can push the stroller through, but after a short struggle on my end, we all find ourselves standing in a candy-filled wonderland—and in truth, it feels like stepping into an alternate Halloween-themed reality.

Gone is the comforting warm glow of typical shop lighting. Instead, it's dim inside, creating an eerie ambiance amplified by carefully placed purple spotlights that cast elongated shadows on the walls, adding a spooky layer to the festive decor.

Strings of orange and purple fairy lights hang in uneven swoops from the ceiling, their soft glow making the room feel like it's under a starry night spell.

The candy displays are lit from beneath, adding a glow that makes each sugary treasure seem precious and more than a little magical, like edible jewels in a Halloween treasure chest.

Spooky decorations of all types appear out of the semi-darkness. A life-sized paper mâché witch riding her broomstick hangs from one corner, her shadow thrown large and looming on the floor beneath. Black and orange streamers crisscross overhead, mingling with cobwebs that drape from the ceiling and corners of the shelves.

There's the occasional banner that reads *BOO!*, a couple of grinning pumpkin cut-outs, and even an animated skeleton that chatters its teeth as we walk on by.

Every corner brims with something haunted, much to our delight and, thankfully, Lyla Nell's. I snap at least a dozen pictures of the place and what I can see of the kitchen from this vantage point.

As someone with her own bakery, I'm forever curious about what other people stock their kitchen with, and as it stands, there's a row of candy tubes, chocolate powder, and a few other jars that are unfamiliar to me. Something labeled Kaf8.

Maybe if I'm good, I can get the full tour.

"Would you look at this?" Derby muses as she takes a look around. "It's as if we stepped into the belly of some friendly Halloween beast."

"Yup," Carlotta agrees, still wrapped up like a mummy who likes her toilet paper. "And its belly just so happens to be filled with the very best thing—candy."

"And a touch of fright," I add.

As soon as Lyla Nell catches sight of the sea of sweet treats, her eyes

light up like twin stars.

“Candy! Candy!” she squeals with delight, stretching her arms as far as they’ll go and opening and closing her hands. And without warning, she begins to frantically stuff every piece of candy she can reach into her stroller.

“Oh my word,” I howl as I try to stop the candy-grubbing hurricane. But it’s no use, she’s all business, no pleasure—one hundred percent laser-focused on the task at hand.

“Lyla Nell,” I say, trying to pry her little hands open to free a few candy bars before they’re misshapen.

Carlotta chuckles. “Sort of reminds me of the good old days, doesn’t it, Derby?”

“Sure does, Mama.” Derby nods, that feathered skirt shedding every time she takes a step. “Who could ever forget Operation Swaddle and Swindle.”

“Swaddle and Swindle?” I practically spit out the words because let’s face it, once again I’m unimpressed with Carlotta’s so-called parenting skills.

“That’s right.” Derby sways back on her heels with a touch of pride. “Who knew a baby stroller could hold so many treasures?” She uses air quotes when she says that last word and both she and Carlotta cackle like a coven of witches.

“The best heist vehicle ever,” Carlotta agrees while slapping her thigh. “Cops never expect the moms with strollers. It’s an easy getaway every time.” She straightens a moment. “Come to think of it, why don’t you mosey around here by your lonesome, Lot? Derby and I will be happy to take Little Yippy off your hands for an hour while we head over to Main Street.” She turns to Derby. “There’s a little boutique with buckets of costume jewelry I’d just love to add to my collection.”

“Ooh.” Derby rubs her hands together at the thought of committing a misdemeanor.

I can’t help but shake my head at Carlotta. One minute she wants to get rid of Derby, and the next she’s looking to rekindle their past shenanigans.

“Over my dead body,” I say.

Derby locks eyes with mine and her expression darkens in a flash. “Have it your way, honey.”

I blink back, but before I can process the exchange, Sienna Broomfield herself appears from the back, dressed as a sugar plum fairy—purple tutu, wand, sparkling tiara, and all.

“Well, if it isn’t the Sugar Plum Fairy herself,” Derby quips, a smirk

spreading across her face.

Sienna laughs while twirling her wand in the air and she's seemingly out of breath. "What can I say? I happen to have a sweet tooth. Forgive me, ladies. I went out for a quick walk. Needed to clear my head."

"Boy, are you lucky to work here," Carlotta says, taking it all in while shaking her head in wonder. "I'd give an eye tooth to spend all day in this paradise of peppermints, this landscape of lollipops, and dominion of dark chocolate."

Derby laughs. "Mama, you'd be as round as a wagon wheel in no time. You can't go ruining your *ghoulish* figure."

"I am hiring, you know." Sienna laughs. "But fair warning, I pay in candy."

Carlotta shakes her head. "With the amount of sweets you've got in here, I'd die of a sugar rush before I could enjoy my first paycheck." She points her finger my way. "Don't you get any casket-shaped ideas."

"Well, I really could use a hand around here." Sienna shrugs over at Carlotta. "Think of the perks—all the candy you can eat, and a front-row seat to the parade of Sugar Daddies passing through."

"Did you say Sugar Daddies?" Derby pushes Carlotta to the side at the mention of money-laden silver foxes. "I don't suppose any of them come with dental insurance." She nods to a barrel full of miniature chocolate bars when she says it.

"Oh, honey, of course, they do." Sienna doesn't miss a beat as she catches her breath between bouts of laughter. "I've got one guy who's a dentist. How's that for dental insurance? And the irony? He loads up on candy to pass out at his front desk. I guess you could say he's securing his job future."

"I could really use me a Sugar Daddy," Derby says, staring off dreamily as if that row of candy bars just turned into a row of silver-haired men.

Sienna waves her off. "Oh, ladies, you don't even know the half of it. You want to know the best place to find a silver fox? Retirement homes. They're brimming with them."

Derby elbows Carlotta hard in the ribs. "Didn't I tell you last night we should be boot-scooting to a retirement village? We need to get while the getting is good. I say we hightail over to the nearest den of silver foxes this afternoon."

"No way, no how." Carlotta fans her arms as if she was drawing a line in the sand. "I'm a bit young for that crowd."

Sienna waves a hand dismissively. “Age is just a number. And the numbers on the bank accounts of those silver foxes are usually quite large.”

Derby smirks. “And let me guess, they can’t run away very fast either?”

Sienna chuckles. “Not if you snag one with a walker.”

“Oh, come on, Mama,” Derby whines. “Think of all the high stakes bridge games we can grift those old codgers into, and the strip bingo nights! We could be stirring up more mischief than a cat in a yarn factory. We could stock up on enough hundred dollar bills to line our closets with.”

Carlotta glowers at the girl. “I think I’d rather stock up on candy,” she says, speeding for the barrels of sugary fun, and Derby speeds right after her.

Raven flies up and perches on the handlebar of the stroller. “Come on, Miss Clueless. Time to put on your detective hat. You’re not here for a Halloween candy-tasting marathon.”

My mouth waters just looking at all the chocolate surrounding me like a cocoa fortress of temptation.

“But the candy is so good,” I mutter.

“Please, help yourself,” Sienna says, handing me a small plastic pumpkin to fill. “In fact, I’ll give you a tour of the shop.”

“Don’t mind if I do.” A smile crests on my lips.

But fair warning, I intend to grill Sienna Broomfield like a marshmallow at a s’mores bonfire.

Here’s hoping Sienna won’t melt under pressure.

LOTTIE



Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth—especially when there’s chocolate involved—I get straight to filling that pumpkin right here in the Candy Confectionary.

“I insist on paying for this,” I tell Sienna Broomfield as I snap up candy bars of every shape and size.

“I won’t hear of it,” the cute brunette replies.

“Well then, I’ll trade you all the sweet treats you can eat from my bakery,” I tell her.

“Deal.” She laughs as she watches me pile in the candy as if I had three seconds to sweep clean the whole store.

“*Mommy,*” Lyla Nell opens and closes her hands, stretching so far out of her stroller that she’s about to float right out. “*Gimme, gimme!*”

“You bet,” I say, peeling open a fun-size Hershey’s chocolate bar and handing it to her.

If I’m about to inhale my weight in candy, I may as well share the wealth.

“Consider it our first mother-daughter chocolate bonding moment,” I tell her as I snap up a few more fun-size candy bars for myself.

Sienna laughs once again. “I can tell you’re a fun mom, Lottie. When are your babies due again?”

“March,” I say, unwrapping a fun-size KitKat and chomping it down in three quick bites. There’s nothing like that cookie crunch. “Actually, my birthday is in March and so is Lyla Nell’s since I had her on my special day. I guess we’re going to have more birthday cakes than we’ll know what to do with that month every year from here on out.”

Next up is my perennial favorite, Mr. Goodbar. And as expected, it’s

chock-full of peanutty goodness.

I moan through a bite. “One of my faves,” I say through a mouthful before finishing it up in haste.

“Don’t hurry on my account,” Sienna says, waving for me to proceed.

And proceed I do, moving right along to a Snickers bar. I quickly unwrap the chocolate delight and take a bite right through to the chewy nougat, caramel, and crunchy peanuts working together in harmony.

“*Mmm*,” I moan at the woman. “That never fails to hit the sweet spot.”

“More, Mommy, *more*,” Lyla Nell wails with chocolate-coated lips.

“You bet, sweetie,” I say, handing her another candy bar, this time a full-size Hershey’s chocolate bar. I do need to keep her busy while I conduct my interrogation.

Raven sighs. “At this rate, her stroller will need its own zip code due to all the wrappers. Speaking of wrappers, let’s wrap this up, shall we?”

“Will do,” I whisper. But first I need to take a detour through the cosmos with a Milky Way. The silky caramel and fluffy nougat, all enveloped in a layer of smooth milk chocolate, are like a sweet journey through the milky galaxy of sugary goodness. And boy, do I ever approve.

Lastly, I make my way toward a pyramid of Almond Joys and those ever-delicious Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. The combination of creamy coconut, crunchy almonds, and rich milk chocolate is an exotic treat that transports me straight to a beachy paradise with every bite. And last but not least, those peanut butter cups taste like heaven personified.

“Oh, wow,” I moan as I fill my pumpkin with a few more Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. “One could never underestimate the power of a peanut butter and chocolate combo. It’s like the superhero duo of the candy world—solving crimes *and* my sweet cravings.”

We both share a laugh at that one.

“Get on with it, Lottie,” Raven caws. “Or we’ll all be in paradise rollicking around on sugar clouds before you ever ask your next question.”

Point taken.

“Sienna.” I pat my belly. “How are you holding up after, well, you know, Rusty Shadowood passed away? You seemed to know him well.”

Sienna’s eyes cloud over. “It’s such a tragedy.” She holds herself for a moment. “He seemed so jovial that night. It’s hard to believe it was his time to go.”

“His time to go?” Raven belts out a wicked scream. “More like his time

to be murdered. There's quite a difference, you know."

I am well aware. But apparently, Sienna here doesn't think anything shady happened to the poor man.

"How did he die, anyway?" She shakes her head. "Heart attack, you think?"

"I'm afraid so," I say. "But according to the coroner's office, I heard caffeine poisoning was included."

Her mouth falls open. "You don't say. I guess no one should be surprised. After all, that's how he made his millions."

"Millions? I had no idea Rusty's business was that lucrative."

"Oh, yes." She gives a solemn nod. "The guy had greed written all over him. In fact, he's killed people because of it."

"Killed people?" I stop cold before taking another bite of my Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. "What people? How?"

"Oh, you can probably read about it on the internet or something. I'd hate to be peddling rumors and making the poor guy look bad. After all, he is dead and he did die by way of his own bad medicine."

"That's true, I suppose." Note to self: look up who Rusty Shadowood may have killed! "I guess he was a great businessman, though. I mean, to make millions."

She nods. "He was shrewd to the bone. You don't claw your way to the top without stepping on a few heads on the way up. That man begged, borrowed, and stole—and then before we knew it, he was a hit sensation." She glares out the window as if she didn't approve of his tactics.

"That was some night." I sigh. "You didn't happen to notice anything odd going on with Rusty, did you?"

Sienna furrows her brows as a spark lights up her eyes. "Wait, now that you mention it," she starts, her voice just above a whisper, "I do remember something odd."

"Go on," I say, my heart pounding right out of my chest in anticipation—but then it could be all the sugar doing the pounding too.

"There was this brunette," she begins. "Shaggy hair, looked rather miffed. I distinctly remember seeing her getting all snippy with Rusty."

Raven fluffs up her feathers in surprise but keeps her silence for once.

"Did you happen to catch her name?" I probe gently, trying my best not to appear too eager.

Sienna nods. "Rusty called her—Twila, I think..." she trails off. "Yes,

Twila. And you know what? Rusty did mention a Twila to me once before, said she was a bit of a spitfire, always vowing revenge for some perceived slight or the other.”

My mind starts racing as I struggle to piece together this new information.

Twila Ember was there that night, and she was certainly in the majority when she called Rusty Shadowood a dirty devil.

“Thank you, Sienna,” I say, doing my best to hide my excitement. “That’s very helpful. Did you do any business with him? I mean, do you sell Beast Brewery energy drinks here in your shop?”

“No, and I never would. I wouldn’t want to give that man a dime. I asked him for a loan when I was starting out and he turned me down flat.”

“Rusty gave out business loans?”

“Oh, all the time.” She laughs. “I guess the man could have been dressed as a shark that night just as much as he could have been a devil. Rusty Shadowood was both. But I’m glad he didn’t lend me the money because rumors started to swirl that he had a funny way of collecting and making people miserable in the process. I’ve got enough of my own misery.”

“Wow, I didn’t know that about him. And I’m sorry to hear about your misery. Is the shop doing that bad?”

“It’s not the shop.” She wrinkles her nose. “I had another dream once, and let’s just say that dream was swiped from under me.”

“Oh, for St. Peter’s sake,” Raven caws. “Ask her what the dream was.”

“May I ask what your dream was?” I ask, doing as I’m told by my supernatural sidekick.

“I was a food chemist.” Sienna shrugs. “I thought I’d develop something unique to make myself a millionaire one day. But here I am.” She fans her hands around the shop. “But don’t worry. I’m working on perfecting my fudge recipe.”

“Fudge?” I give a little laugh. “Thanks for the heads-up. It looks like I’ve got some competition. But great news for the both of us—between the townies and the tourists, I can’t make my fudge fast enough. We’re both going to sell out this holiday season, guaranteed. In fact, I’ll help advertise your shop when the time comes.”

“Really?” She blinks my way. “You’d do that for me? I’m far more used to cutthroat competition where they’d do anything to steal my customers.”

“Not me. In Honey Hollow, we’re all just a part of one big, happy family.”

“Give that to me,” Carlotta shouts and we look over to see Carlotta and Derby playing tug-of-war over an oversized candy bar that looks as if it could double as a door.

“Not on your life, Mama,” Derby shouts. “This could feed me for two years straight.”

“Ladies?” Sienna calls out. “Sorry, but that’s actually not for sale.”

“Well, good,” Derby shouts back, her tug-of-war still very much in progress. “Because we weren’t planning on paying for it!”

Carlotta pulls hard, but Derby pulls harder, and before we know it, they both let go at the very same time and go flying in opposite directions with Carlotta knocking down six barrels filled to the brim with hard candy and Derby knocking down six barrels of wrapped taffy. And suddenly, the entire store looks like a candy-coated warzone with hard candy shrapnel and taffy tripwires.

“A rather dysfunctional family,” I say under my breath.

Sienna gags. “It looks as if a candy grenade exploded in here. It’s utter and complete chaos.”

“At least it’s sweet chaos?” I wince as I say it.

Carlotta and Derby agree to stay behind and help clean up the chaos—after a few threats and a couple of choice salty words from yours truly.

I couldn’t help it, I’ve got all sorts of hormones raging through me.

And since Lyla Nell seemed determined to eat everything in sight, I told the two of them I’d take Lyla Nell for a walk down the street by Honey Lake.

Lucky for me, Lyla Nell is fast asleep before she ever sees the water because she likes to chase the ducks down at the lake almost as much as she likes candy. And with all the chocolate I crammed into my pie hole, I don’t think I’d have the energy to chase her.

The lake is quiet and devoid of any life as I stroll right up to the shoreline. And to my surprise, something gray and small drifts by, but it’s not a duck—it’s a fedora? A rather familiar-looking fedora at that.

“What in the world?” I take another step forward and squint just as something else floats on by.

A body.

NOAH



Five-thirty and I've been staring down at the list in front of me for the better part of an hour, my mind drifting back and forth.

Cocoa Ganache

Sienna Broomfield

Twila Ember

Each name feels like a wave pushing me in the opposite direction.

I've been at my desk and up to my elbows in case files all afternoon, trying to sift through every detail of the Shadowood case.

My coffee has been cold and stale for the better part of the day. And the dozen donuts I grabbed from Lottie's bakery booth this morning have dwindled to two. It's been bone quiet in my office, the silence only punctuated by the soft flickering of an old desk lamp.

Scratch that.

It hasn't been bone quiet.

Lottie called and said she found a body at the lake. Little did she know a bystander had already called it in and the medics and the sheriff's department showed up while she was on the phone. I told her to get Lyla Nell and herself home and to stay there.

My partner here at the station, Ivy Fairbanks, showed up at the scene and let me know there was no sign of foul play. The guy was alive when the medics arrived and administered CPR. Unfortunately, he died before arriving at the hospital. Ivy is convinced the guy had some bodily malfunction that landed him in the morgue. But I let the coroner know I want a full report on the man asap.

Two things don't smell right. The fact his body was found in Honey

Hollow. And the fact Lottie Lemon stumbled upon him while he was face-down in the lake.

Something is not right.

And then you throw that Prankster in the mix and I've got my head spinning twelve ways till Sunday.

The door bursts open with a start.

"Big Boss!" Cormack jumps in and slams the door behind her, wearing a sparkling blue gown and a tiara that sits crooked on her head. Her crimson lips quickly lose that lunatic grin as she quickly sobers up. "I mean, hello, *Noah*." She clears her throat and it makes me wonder what her game is.

"Cormack." I sit up a notch. "What can I help you with?" I would have told her I was just wrapping up for the evening, but I have no doubt she would have taken that as an invite to take this party elsewhere.

"I was just in the neighborhood running a quick errand and I, well, I couldn't help but stop by." Cormack speeds over with her heels echoing off the linoleum floor as she makes her way to my desk. "Noah." She sighs, practically throwing herself into the seat across from me.

"I was just going over a case," I say, patting the stack of files before me. "What's going on?" I lean back into my chair, not sure whether to be amused or annoyed by her sudden appearance. Ah hell, it's the latter.

"Noah," she snips. "I'm not here to help you with your case. I'm here to get Alex back."

I raise a brow. "Did you hang out with him and Levi today at the festival? I think Lottie gave you some sound advice as far as that goes."

"You would think so," she scowls a moment.

There's no love lost between Cormack and Lottie, but the onus of that belongs to the blonde before me.

"No, but only because there was a very important appointment I couldn't break." She flashes her glossy red nails my way and I'm stunned at what she's implying.

"Cormack, are you telling me you chose to have your nails done over spending time with your son?"

"My appointment was with *Esmerelda*." She nods as if I should understand the implication of what she's trying to say. "You don't skip out on Esmerelda unless you want to be bumped from her schedule. And without Esmerelda, I don't know where I would be. She's not only a salon specialist, she dispenses the very best advice." She drums her glossy nails on the desk.

“As does your mother.”

“My mother?” Now I’m amused. “And what, pray tell, has my mother been telling you?” I’m almost afraid to ask.

“Oh, this and that.” She waves me off. “Let’s just say the old coot is better at dispensing advice when it comes to l-o-v-e.”

“The old coot? She talked about love?” I almost laugh at the thought. My mother is about as jaded on that L word as they come. She has my father to blame for that.

“The old coot, indeed.” She winks my way. “Back to what I came for.” Her green eyes flash with a determination I’m not used to seeing. “I got to thinking about all those kind things you said about me at the festival.”

“The kind things?” I jog my mind for a minute. “Oh, right, the positive traits you wanted me to call out.”

“That’s right. And I got to thinking I am those things, Noah. I am intelligent. I am loyal. And let’s not forget I am stunningly beautiful.” She bats her lashes while looking up at the ceiling. “Noah Fox, I am all those things. I’m not just a winner. I’m a *steal*.”

“I—agree with you.” I honestly don’t think I have a choice at this point.

“And there’s more—” She goes on as if she’s about to sell me a used car. “Most importantly,” she coos as she leans forward and her breasts nearly spill right out of her dress. “I’m not afraid to chase what I want. And what I want is—*Alex*.” A look of disgust crosses her face as she says his name.

A light chuckle bounces from me. “You sure don’t hold back, do you, Cormack?”

“Why should I?” She shrugs, the smirk on her face not wavering an inch. “I know what I’m worth, Noah. That’s more than what some can say. So what should I do? I want to secure the heart of the man I’m passionately in love with. I’ll do anything, and I mean anything to do it. What advice could you give me? I’m desperate, Noah.” Her voice grows bare and tears glitter in her eyes.

I’ve never seen her like this about anyone—anyone but me. I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was thrilled to the bone.

“All right, Cormack.” I lean on my elbows as if I was about to lay out a master gameplan. “If you ask me, there’s only one way to Alex’s heart, and that’s through Levi. That little boy is his entire life.”

She waves a dismissive hand. “Oh, been there, done that. It only leads to a bunch of crying and fussing.”

“Cormack”—I inch back—“he’s a baby. Crying and fussing is kind of their thing.”

“I was talking about me, Noah.”

Of course, she was. I sag in my seat and examine the woman. Cormack Featherby might be one of my oldest friends, but she hasn’t changed in all these years. With the exception of her newfound infatuation with my brother. That is entirely new and, might I add, out of the blue.

“I’ve got an idea.” She tilts her head as she examines me. “How about the two of us head out to dinner and discuss this a little further?” She lifts a shoulder. “No reason to stick around this stuffy old office when we could be out at a five-star Michelin-rated restaurant slurping down oysters by the gallon.”

Oysters?

The food of amorous affections?

I don’t think so.

A part of me is still convinced she’s getting her lovestruck wires crossed.

“I appreciate the offer,” I tell her, “but I’ll have to take a rain check.” I glance down at the list of suspects that’s been vexing me for the better part of the day and hone in on Twila Ember. “I’ve got a hot date.”

“A hot date?” she chuffs, looking affronted at the idea. Now that’s the Cormack Featherby I know. “Is that what you and Lemony Snickers Bar are calling it these days?” She shakes her head in dismay as she jumps to her feet. “How Essex puts up with the two of you, I will never know.”

She speeds to the door before looking back. “Just remember, Noah, hot dates are fleeting, like candy wrappers in the wind. True love? Now that’s a rare vintage, a delicacy you hold onto and never let go of. You move mountains to make things happen. You do whatever it takes to ensure you end up with the one you were destined to be with all along.”

And with that, she darts out of the office and slams the door in her wake.

“What the heck was that about?” I shake my head at the lunacy of it all.

I glance down at that list in front of me one more time.

“Twila Ember.” Next to it reads *Sinners and Saints*.

My phone pings, but it’s not Lottie. It’s Everett.

Where are you? He asks.

I text right back. **On my way out. I’ve got a hot date with Twila Ember.**

No response. It makes me wonder if he’s forgotten who she is for a

moment.

You're not allowed to have a hot date. He replies. **Lemon doesn't care for it and I don't want anything to stress her out. I'll head over to the bar Twila works at and talk to her myself.**

You're going to interrogate my suspect? I laugh as I hit send.

I'm the one who sent her to prison. I couldn't think of anyone better to do it.

I shake my head as I grab my jacket and head out the door.

There's no way I'm letting Everett go at my suspect alone. Besides, I highly doubt he messaged me with the intention of cutting into my hot date.

I may as well see what Everett wanted, too.



SINNERS AND SAINTS is located adjacent to the strip club, and lucky for them since it seems to be picking up their overflow.

I no sooner step in than I'm handed a black mask just large enough to cover the area around my eyes.

"We're getting Halloween started a little early," the waitress manning the door tells me. "Don't be a spoilsport," she hoots as she helps me slip the mask on.

It's loud inside as rock music blares through the speakers. A few pool tables are set out, and the scent of burgers and fries reminds me of the fact I haven't eaten anything but those donuts.

The lights are low and the entire place looks as if it's a sepia-dipped dream or nightmare. Take your pick.

Sure enough, everyone in the entire establishment is wearing one of these silly masks. The place is decorated to the hilt with spiderwebs and ghosts in honor of the spookiest night of the year—tomorrow night to be exact. I give a quick scan of the facility and spot one uptight judge seated at the bar and one all too friendly bartender, a woman, fawning over him.

Everett and Twila.

"Boo," someone whispers in my ear and I turn to see the most beautiful sight of them all.

"Lottie?" She has the requisite black mask over her eyes, but I'd recognize her with a bag over her head. "Where's Lyla Nell?"

“She’s with Lainey. And speaking of people, I couldn’t seem to get ahold of Everett. I just tried texting him. Any idea where he could be?”

“I know exactly where he is. He’s on a hot date.”

EVERETT



“Well, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Twila Ember laughs as she slides a drink my way.

“I could say the same about you, but with that mask on your face it’s questionable who I’m speaking with,” I tease.

She lifts the scant black covering an inch and winks.

It’s dark yet lively here at Sinners and Saints. The hum of conversations competing with the raucous music fills the room like a familiar song—one that has the power to give me a headache.

The entire place is shrouded in both mystery and anticipation. As it should be, considering it’s the night before Halloween. Everyone in this place, myself included, is wearing a black mask covering the area around their eyes.

And despite the fact I’m bellying up to the bar in a sea of anonymous faces, there’s a strange sense of camaraderie with the woman before me, and our common link would be that I’ve sent her to prison once.

As a judge, I’ve had to make difficult decisions, and that was one of them.

Here’s hoping it’s not in the cards to happen again.

She wiggles her shoulders and giggles incessantly, flirting and laughing away as if she holds no animosity against me because I ordered that a chunk of her freedom be revoked.

Unless she’s a great actress, I tend to believe her. If she was angry or upset, my thoughts would be different, darker, but only because of those menacing threats Lemon keeps receiving.

“Enjoying your drink, Judge Baxter?” she asks, and that playful tone

lightens my mood.

Considering I'm here to garner more than a few secrets from the woman, you can bet I appreciate any form of levity.

"You bet I am," I say, raising my glass her way and knowing full well I won't be letting a drop of whiskey pass my lips. "How do you like this place?"

"Better with you in it." She bats her lashes my way. "But I'm not buying whatever you're selling. I mean, what's a good-looking, intelligent man like you doing here? And married no less! Don't tell me you're thinking about stepping out on that pretty little wife of yours. Rumor has it, she's got two buns in the oven on top of the two you've already got."

I take a deep breath, but before I can reply, a pretty young thing plants herself on the stool right next to me.

"We're role-playing if you must know," a familiar voice answers for me.

"Lemon?" I shake my head in disbelief. I glance past her and spot Noah waving from one of the pool tables dotting the place. And by the looks of it, he's about to cue up. I'd blame him for letting her in on my whereabouts, but I know full well Lemon was bound to show up here this evening despite the two of us. And if Lemon is here, I have no doubt that feathered friend of hers is here as well.

She holds her hand out to me as if reading my mind.

I may not be able to see the dead the way that Lemon can, but if I hold her hand I can hear them just the same.

"Role-playing?" Twila laughs her head off at the thought. "Oh, hon, no offense, Judge Baxter, but I thought you would be stiff as a board. But then again, all the pretty ladies don't call you *Essex* for nothing." She wrinkles her nose at Lemon. "Does that bother you much?"

"Not really." Lemon shrugs. "I'm just honored to be the one he paused the tawdry train for."

"That's because the train has officially reached its destination," I say, bringing her hand to my lips as I kiss it.

A sharp caw drills into my right ear.

"Enough with the lovey-dovey routine, you two," Raven shouts over the music. "We're not here for a soap opera audition. This isn't *As the Feather Flutters*. Now let's get back to the investigation."

I happen to agree with her on that last note. I'd love to move the night along to get my wife home safe, in our bed where our feathers can flutter all

they want.

Lemon clears her throat. “Twila, I’m sorry about the loss of your friend.”

The woman jolts. “A friend of mine died? Which one? Who? What? Where?”

My lips cinch a moment. “I believe she’s talking about Rusty Shadowood.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sakes.” A hard groan escapes the woman. “You about gave me a heart attack. For a second, I thought you were talking about someone I actually cared about.” She grimaces. “I suppose it’s not too nice to speak ill of the dead. But then again, I stopped caring what people thought about me when I stepped into the pen.” She tips her head my way. “In fact, thanks to you, Essex, I’ve been living my best life ever since.”

“I’m glad you came away with such a good attitude. And you certainly seem happy.”

Lemon shakes her head. “I’m sorry, Twila. I’m glad you’re happy, but why aren’t you even the slightest bit upset about Rusty’s departure? I mean, did he do something to you personally?”

“You could say that.” She pauses a moment as she glares at the wall behind us. “Actually, he did something to my baby brother. He was just a year younger than me, but Jack was full of life in every way that counted. He was my mama’s favorite child and with good reason. He was smart, funny, cute as a button—he always had ten girls on the line, if you know what I mean.” She nods my way once again.

“He sounds wonderful,” Lemon says. “But what did Rusty do to your brother?”

“He killed him,” Twila says without hesitation and it sparks that ghostly bird to scream at the top of her lungs.

“How could my Rusty kill anyone? He was the kindest soul when I knew him way back when. He even saved a baby bird that fell from its nest and was rejected by its mother. That baby bird would be me,” she crows again.

Lemon coos before straightening. “I’m so sorry about the passing of your brother,” she says the words to the woman across from us. “May I ask what happened? Was it a car accident or something?”

“Oh, nothing like that.” Twila waves it off. “Jack died of caffeine poisoning. Turns out, that *Beastly* energy drink was responsible. Seeing that Rusty was the owner, he showed up to the funeral and tried to apologize up and down, but Mama wouldn’t have it. We sued and won some, but no

amount of money can ever replace Jack.” She sighs. “And that right there is the reason I couldn’t stand the man. And in a way, I’m sorry he dropped dead so soon in life. After seeing him the other night, I was already plotting all sorts of ways I could have made his life miserable.”

“Doesn’t sound like a killer,” Raven muses. “Although, trust no one has always been my motto.”

It’s mine, too, at least to an extent.

I give Lemon’s hand a squeeze.

I trust Lemon with my body, soul, and all of my children.

“Oh, Twila.” Lemon shakes her head. “I’m so sorry to hear that. No wonder Rusty got under your skin with just one look at the man.”

“Well, he’s dead now.” She smirks. “On the plus side, I won’t have to get another look at him ever again.”

“There’s that,” Lemon mutters. “Speaking of Rusty, did you see anything odd that night he died? I mean, it’s awfully strange he just dropped dead like that. Do you think he had any enemies?”

Twila bows her head a moment. “You know, I almost said something to the deputies swarming around his body, but I did see something that night. There was a woman doling out a harsh word with him, and she ended her tirade by way of splashing one of his energy drinks in his face.” She gives a wistful tick of the head. “I would give anything to go back to that night and do the same thing to him myself.”

“She doesn’t mince words, now does she?” Raven muses. “I vote we get on with the night and track down the woman who dared to wash my Rusty’s face uninvited. I believe the cemetery is where we’re headed next.”

I shoot Lemon a look.

I don’t care if the killer is lurking at the cemetery. There’s no way I’m taking my wife to that place, especially not this time of night, and the night before Halloween no less. That’s inviting a mishap in my opinion. I’ll leave the jaunt through the graveyard to Noah.

“Twila,” Lemon grips the counter as if she were in pain, “is there anything else you know about Rusty, any facts at all?”

She laughs. “If he wasn’t dead, I’d think you were trying to dig up dirt on him.” She purses her lips for a moment. “I did hear something about him looking for a new location for his brewery, or maybe he was expanding? Anyway, he wanted that vacant land next to the cemetery really bad. I think I heard he was fighting tooth and nail to acquire it right until the bitter end.”

She shakes her head. “Oh, and the fact he lent money out like candy—but only if he had a hand in whatever that poor soul was trying to do with it. Rusty Shadowood was a no-good scoundrel who always made sure he came out on top. If there was nothing in it for him, then you can bet he had nothing to do with it.”

An onslaught of customers heads for the bar and we thank Twila for her time before heading out the door and Noah follows suit.

“Well?” He nods our way. “Is she our killer?”

Lemon places her hand over her stomach. “How about we discuss this over pizza?”

We head to the parking lot and Noah stops cold once his truck comes into view.

Etched into the driver’s side door are the words, *She will die.*

Lemon gasps. “I guess we don’t need a roadmap to know who *she* is.”

I reach into my suit jacket to pull out my phone and my fingers land on something foreign as I pull out a small envelope instead.

“What the—”

“Is that from the Prankster?” Lemon gasps again.

“This is the first I’m seeing it,” I say as I open it up to find that same black card with the same creepy skeleton’s face grimacing at us that we’ve seen one too many times before.

I flip it open and we read it at the same time.

Dear Judge Baxter, prudent and wise,

The Prankster’s hour has turned sour.

No more sweet talk with your Lemon so bright.

The time has come for her final night.

It’s time to bid your farewell. For in the morrow, there’s a chilling tale to tell.

The clock strikes twelve, and then you’ll see, your Lemon will be just a memory.

Tick-tock, the countdown has begun. The Prankster’s jest is almost done.

Goodbye, dear Lemon. Your zest was fun.

But her end, dear Judge, has surely come.

The Prankster

LOTTIE



All of the investigations, the questioning, the pranks, the complete horror of the day has fired up a hunger in me that I haven't felt in a long time.

It's as if every revelation has only served to stoke the flames of my appetite. Of course, it's a hunger for truth, yes. But I'll admit, it's also a hunger for a good old-fashioned pepperoni pizza and maybe a comforting plate of pasta to go along with it.

It's safe to say tonight has whet my appetite in more ways than one—and that's exactly why Noah, Everett, and I are standing in front of our favorite Italian eatery, Mangias, right here in the heart of Honey Hollow.

Everett opens the door for us and the scent of tangy slow-cooked tomato sauce and roasted garlic hits our senses.

A hard groan works its way up my throat. "Is there anything better than this?"

Noah chuckles as he nods to Everett. "I believe that includes you."

"It includes you, too," Everett is quick to tell him.

"Stop." I swat Noah on the arm as we head in and are instantly accosted by jack-o'-lanterns, witches, ghosts, and ghouls. "Aww, would you look at this place? It's been transformed by the holiday spirit."

"Makes sense," Everett says. "Especially since that holiday takes place tomorrow night."

We head over to our usual table in the back, and the most horrifying sight of them all jumps out at me—Carlotta and Derby Dingle.

"Oh, thank the good Lord," Carlotta shouts with her hand over her heart as they make their way toward us. "I thought I was actually going to have to foot the bill tonight!"

“Come on, Mama.” Derby rolls her eyes. “You’d think we’re in a five-star steakhouse, not some cheap pizza joint.”

I make a face at the woman. “I’ll have you know Mangias is the best pizza joint this side of Sicily.”

“Really?” Derby bucks at the thought. “Well, that only makes me want to try every item on the menu.”

“Me and you both, sister,” I say. “But for obviously different reasons, of course.” My hand lands on my belly as if to accentuate my point.

“Your dinner is on me, ladies,” Everett tells them, and for that alone, they follow us to our tables.

The waitress comes by and we order just about everything on the menu, no thanks to this monster appetite I seem to have garnered.

“I blame the twins,” I say as the waitress leaves.

“I blame them, too, Lot,” Carlotta doesn’t mind telling me. “I’ll be blaming them for everything from here on out. I guess you could say Little Yippy Number One is off the hook.”

Noah ticks his head. “I’m not sure why, but that makes me a touch proud of Lyla Nell.”

Everett growls his way just as the waitress comes back with enough garlic breadsticks to feed half of Italy.

“Ooh,” I say as I take my first bite and notice both Noah and Everett staring at me. “Don’t look at me like that. This breadstick was practically spilling over the edge of the basket and I saved it from hitting the table. Besides, if you want to look at something, look at these golden-brown breadsticks, glossy with butter. How can you resist?”

Derby nods. “And don’t forget the dusting of finely chopped garlic and parsley adding a pop of color.” She gives a chef’s kiss before scarfing it down. “Well, butter my biscuit and call me a dinner roll,” she drawls, reaching for the basket once again. “Please tell me they have unlimited refills.”

“Why do you think we’re here?” I say, reaching for another one myself.

Carlotta nods. “At this rate, we’re about to make these breadsticks an endangered species. Consider this our carb-loading session before our marathon investigation starts up again tomorrow.”

“Forget tomorrow,” Noah says sternly. “We’re starting right now.”

“But first, that note,” I whisper to Noah and Everett as Carlotta and Derby start in on a breadstick frenzy that could put a flock of vultures to shame.

Everett leans toward Noah. “I had my jacket in my office all day. Whoever they are, they just strolled right in. It must have been while I was on the bench.”

“What about your secretary?” I ask. “Maybe she saw something?”

He shakes his head. “She’s been out sick all week with the flu.”

“Any cameras set up in the area?” Noah asks.

“No, but there will be come Monday,” Everett asserts.

“They no longer want me gone,” I say, swallowing hard as I stare down at the table. “They want me dead.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Everett growls at the thought.

Noah nods. “I can promise you that.”

“They followed us to a bar tonight.” I sigh. “That means I’m under twenty-four hour surveillance.”

Both Noah and Everett grow quiet because they know I’m right.

“What about that body I found tonight?” I ask Noah.

“What?” Everett’s eyes enlarge in horror, as they should.

Noah quickly fills him in on the fact the man was seen by several people at the lake and the incident was called in by the time I found him. And the fact the poor man died at the hospital shortly thereafter.

“So who was he?” Everett asks. “And was he in any way connected to Rusty Shadowood?”

Noah lifts his chin. “I haven’t thought of that. But I’ll make a note to look into it. And the guy’s name was Homer Gloman. An attorney from Fallbrook.”

Everett casts a glance at the darkened window. “The name sounds vaguely familiar.” He pulls out his phone and does a quick search for something. “Homer Gloman private practice, corporate law.”

“Corporate law?” I shake my head. “What does that mean?”

“It means he specialized in businesses and corporations.” Everett shakes his head. “This guy could very well have been connected to Rusty—”

“He was!” I blurt out. “I just remembered why that fedora looked so familiar. I saw that man talking to Rusty the night he died—the night *Rusty* died.” We’ve got so many deaths plaguing Honey Hollow they’re practically overlapping. “I bet he was Rusty’s attorney, or in the least they were friends. In fact, that was the one person I saw Rusty having a halfway decent conversation with that night. Poor man, God rest his soul.”

“And God bless this food,” Carlotta calls out just as an entire parade of

pizzas and pasta dishes arrives, and both Carlotta and Derby dive in like a couple of ravenous raccoons at a midnight picnic. But Noah, Everett, and I don't take more than a bite of the food on our plates.

A shimmer of pale blue stars erupts in the center of the table as Raven appears.

"Our fine feathered sleuth is here," I say to Noah and Everett. "Maybe we should stick to talking about the case for a bit?"

"Sounds good," Noah says. "And sad to note that it's the only way to get my mind off the Prankster for a few minutes. Now tell me what Twila said to the two of you."

Everett quickly gives him a recap.

"Her brother, huh?" Noah makes a note of it. "Sounds as if Twila has the strongest motive of all."

Raven squawks as she pounces on the sausage and mushroom pizza. "Lottie, tell him who your top suspect is before he draws this case into retrograde."

"Well, Twila is a good suspect," I say. "Although, she didn't seem to act or talk like a killer. Not that there's a playbook to follow." I swallow hard because I hate what comes next. "The only person who's still a puzzle to me is Cocoa." I make a face as I mention my sweet friend. "I can't imagine she'd do something so heinous."

Everett shakes his head. "As much as I hate to say it, Twila is still a suspect. People take vengeance for the death of their loved ones all the time. It's one of those things that's an eye for an eye."

"It's true," Derby pipes up while shedding a dark smile Carlotta's way. "And you wouldn't believe the lengths they'll go to make themselves look innocent."

Noah shrugs. "Lottie, you did mention that Cocoa never fessed up to sloshing a drink in his face."

"It's true," I say. "I saw it with my own two eyes."

Noah reaches down and places a hand over my belly. "Soon, you'll have two more sets of eyes watching you."

I'm about to agree when a sharp nudge comes from my belly.

"Oh my goodness." I jump in my seat and Noah gasps.

"I just felt the baby kick," he shouts. "Or at least one of them."

"What?" Everett all but shoves Noah into the next county as he places his hand over my belly. "It's me—it's Daddy," he says intently. "Come on. I'd

give anything to feel a kick or a flutter.”

“Ha.” Derby laughs. “Looks as if Foxy beat you to the punch. Mama says it’s something he’s pretty good at.”

Everett sighs as he sits up a notch. “She’s right. You did it again, Noah. You beat me to the punch and felt my own children move in their mother’s stomach before me.”

“Aw, come on now, Sexy,” Carlotta says. “Don’t look so down.”

Noah winces at Everett. “Maybe it wasn’t the babies.” He shrugs my way. “Just a little pepperoni pizza trying to digest.”

“There ya go.” Carlotta claps. “Go on, Lot Lot. Squeeze out a couple of toots to make Sexy feel better.”

“For the love of all things feathered.” Raven gives a shrill caw. “You humans really are something. Enough with the toots and the kicks. We’ve got a case to solve. And I’m not a candy corn connoisseur if we don’t solve it by tomorrow night. The veil between the worlds will be the thinnest in hours. And if you think wickedness reigns supreme now, just wait until the ghouls and the goblins have free reign. Halloween night is when all the monsters come out to play.”

And with that, she disappears in a vat of twinkling stars.

Here’s hoping we can catch the killer and unmask the Prankster before that veil breaks open one more inch and rains wickedness over Honey Hollow like a pinata full of bad candy.

LOTTIE



I called Dr. Barnette in hopes to move my appointment up, and by a sheer Halloween miracle she had an opening this morning.

Everett got to be there front and center as Dr. Barnette gave me an impromptu ultrasound so that the daddy-to-be could see those two little pumpkin muffins of his rolling around in my belly. And darn it if she didn't reduce us both to tears in the process.

They're perfect.

They're better than perfect because they're ours.

I can't wait until Lyla Nell and Evie meet their little siblings. And I hope one day they'll all be just as close as I am with my own siblings.

But the morning is long over, the sun is setting, and it's growing ever so much darker here at my mother's B&B on this Halloween night. The crowds are thick. The ghosts and goblins are out in full force.

Spooky music seeps through unseen speakers. Food vendors are out in full force with each stand paying tribute to the macabre *and* the playful this evening. The lines have never been longer for that haunted hayride, and I've yet to go on the evening version once. Heaven knows I've got enough things to be frightened about in my own world; I sure as heck don't need to go looking for it.

Every now and again a group of shrieking teenagers runs like mad from the ghoul-faced actors Cormack has peppered this place with. And there are enough glowing jack-o'-lanterns set out that I'm sure you can see Honey Hollow from space this evening.

My stomach growls, and suddenly I've got a craving for one of my maple-glazed donuts—and maybe a bowl full of the Honey Pot Diner's

hearty chili, and a steaming mug full of apple cider to round things out.

Of course, I can't go a night without a slice or two or ten of my luscious chocolate delight cake. It's been such a big seller, I had the bakery crank up production to double what we were making last week.

Everywhere you turn, there's a new fright to be had, another reason to scream, and it's all a true-blue testament to the spirit of Honey Hollow—or more to the point, the spirit of Halloween.

But even amidst the joy and the revelry, I can't shake off the morbid feeling that I'm being watched, stalked by a madman—that's because I know for a fact it's true. Not to mention the fact Rusty Shadowood's killer is still roaming free.

The festival may be in full swing, but for me, it's just another chapter in the unraveling mystery.

"Ooh, look at that booth, Mama!" Derby calls out, dressed as a vampire cowgirl—a complement to Carlotta's vampire queen getup. "They've got full-size candy bars!" she calls out, pulling Carlotta's hand toward the Honey Pot Diner's booth draped in fake spiderwebs. And standing at the helm is my sister, Charlie, dressed as Mother Goose.

"Patience, little witch," Carlotta pants as if she couldn't walk another step.

Derby clucks her tongue. "I'm not dressed as a witch, Mama."

"So what's your point?" Carlotta shrugs with the question.

"Mommy." Lyla Nell practically leaps into my arms.

"Oh, honey," I say, kissing her on her rosy little cheek. Both Lyla Nell and Josie are dressed as a couple of matching fairy princesses with enough lime green and bright pink tulle to ensconce the planet with twice.

"More candy," Lyla Nell whines and she looks as if she's about to pass out.

Noah, Everett, Evie, and I all share a quick laugh at that one. We've been trick-or-treating with Lainey and Josie—and Carlotta and Derby—for the better part of two hours.

Lainey's husband, Forest, went around with Lainey and his little princess this morning, but he's hard at work at the fire department this evening. He promised Lainey he'd make an appearance this evening—dressed as a firefighter, of course.

"Come on, Mama," Derby insists. "Before they run out."

Carlotta stomps her foot. "Are you sure we're not too old for this?"

“You’re never too old for free candy,” Noah says, unwrapping a chocolate bar he swiped from Lyla Nell’s pumpkin.

Noah is head to toe in white gauze over his normal clothes, along with a magnifying glass in hand. He says he’s a zombie detective and that it’s exactly how he’s feeling these days.

Can’t say I blame him. I’m feeling like a zombie myself. Although, I’ve dressed otherwise. Both Lainey and I have dressed as fairies ourselves.

And Everett has donned a fluffy white shirt and tattered pants along with a giant menacing-looking sword—and it’s no exaggeration when I say he’s the sexiest pirate that’s ever walked this earth. The only plank he’ll be walking is the one that leads to our bedroom.

“You’re never going to be too old for trick-or-treating,” I say as I give Lyla Nell’s cheek a kiss.

“That’s because it’s fun—and it’s tradition,” Evie says, stealing her baby sister from me. “Mom, you’re having twins. You really should let Dad or Uncle Noah hold this little cutie pie whenever you can. She weighs as much as that jumbo pumpkin we carved this afternoon.”

“She’s right,” Everett says, wrapping his arms around me. “And this has been a lot of walking. You should sit. I never walked this much while trick-or-treating as a kid. This is for the birds.”

“Aw, come on, Captain Jack Sparrow,” Carlotta teases. “Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy trick-or-treating as a kid?”

“That was a different time, Carlotta.”

“More like a century ago,” Noah teases, earning a playful nudge from Evie.

“You know all about centuries past, don’t you, Foxy.” Carlotta chuckles. “Isn’t that when you got your detective’s license?”

Carlotta and Derby cackle. And, well, Evie joins in, and that makes Lyla Nell and Josie giggle like mad, too.

“Laugh it up, ladies.” Noah takes another bite out of his candy bar. “I’ll have you know with time comes wisdom.”

“True,” says Everett. “So what’s your excuse?”

Noah takes a moment to glare at him.

Josie begins to whine and Lainey lands her back in the double stroller my mother lent us for our trek around her property.

The double stroller is something my mother picked up after Lyla Nell was born so she could shuttle her granddaughters around town. And now both

Lainey and I will have to go out and buy our own.

A thought comes to me.

I'll have to get a *triple* stroller.

Do they even make those?

"*And she's timed out,*" Lainey says, rocking her baby girl. "I'm heading back to Mom's suite until Forest arrives. How about I take Lyla Nell and the girls can nap together?"

"I won't say no to that." I motion to the stroller and Evie lands her in the back seat as Lainey rolls the girls off to see some serious zzzs.

Evie offers me a quick hug. "I'm so glad I got to go trick-or-treating with my baby sister. And I can't wait to go trick-or-treating with the twins next year, too."

"Next year?" I scoff at Everett. "This is all happening way too fast. Before we know it, they'll be graduating from college and moving off to who knows where. Why is this all so unfair?" I wail as my emotions get the better of me.

Evie nods at Everett. "She definitely needs a fried pickle corn dog."

"And a slice of her chocolate delight cake," Everett adds.

"You know me so well." I offer him a congratulatory smile because we both know he'll be rewarded.

"I'll be right back," Everett says, landing a kiss to my cheek.

"And so will I," Evie says as the two of them disappear.

Carlotta and Derby trot off for Charlie's booth, and soon there's a tug-of-war between the two of them and Charlie as they fight over the oversized candy dish set out.

"It looks as if history is about to repeat itself—" Before I can finish, the candy goes flying every which way—full-size candy bars no less—and a frenzied free-for-all ensues.

"What's happening?" Sam runs up along with Meg and they both happen to be dressed in all black, save for the fact their shirts are lifted over the top of their blooming bellies and they've transformed their bare stomachs into a matching set of pumpkins—jack-o'-lanterns to be exact—with Sam's sporting a silly face and Meg's looking a tad bit vicious.

Both Noah and I hoot with laughter.

"Whose idea was this?" Noah asks.

"Mine," Sam is quick to confess. "I figured we'd be trick-or-treating together from here on out now that we're practically family, so we might as

well start tonight. Besides, Jed would rather die than wear a couple's costume with me. He's at your booth, Lottie, stuffing his face with all those fresh baked chocolate chip cookies."

"Fresh baked?" Noah cranes his neck in that direction.

"That's right," I say. "If you want in on that fresh baked action, I wouldn't hesitate."

"I'll be right back," Noah says without missing a beat and I shrug up at the pot-bellied girls before me.

"What can I say?" I laugh. "He's always been crazy about my chocolate chip cookies."

"Honey"—Sam leans in—"that man is crazy about you. And despite the fact you're otherwise taken, he is never going to stray."

A bloodcurdling scream goes off right next to us and the three of us scream in unison as well.

LOTTIE



Our screams echo into the night as creepy organ music drones from somewhere up above as a blonde hurricane stumbles into our midst and it's Cruella de Vil herself.

"Cormack," I shout, clutching at my chest. "You about gave us a heart attack. What in the heck were you screaming about?"

True to form, Cormack is decked out from head to foot as the cruel devil herself with a wig—part white, part black—and a fur coat that looks as if it's stitched together with the coats of a dozen Dalmatians.

Come to think of it, I think she's worn this costume before. And for Cormack to recycle anything says how much she feels connected to this piece.

"It's Fright Night in the event you haven't noticed," she barks right at me, those crimson lips of hers turning into a snarl. "What don't you get about that? Now, where did Noah go off to? We've got business to tend to."

My mouth falls open at this aggressive version of Cormack Featherby. I've never known her to be anything but docile and ditzy, but then again she has been commandeering this circus for the last thirty-one days. I suppose that's enough to make anyone lose their mind.

"He's eating Lottie's cookies," Meg tells her with a dead look in her eyes as if daring Cormack to come at me again. Meg has always been a bit protective of her sisters, and right now I'm glad I'm one of them. "He will always eat Lottie's cookies and nobody else's cookies. So if I were you, I'd take my interest elsewhere," she ends with a roar.

"Aargh!" Cormack roars right back before taking off for my booth with a start.

“Meg.” I laugh. “That was—perfect,” I say. “I’ve about had it with Cormack Featherby, and Noah might be buying that whole *I’m in love with Alex* nonsense, but I’m not taking the bait,” I say, rubbing my belly.

Sam shakes her head at Meg. “It’s these darn hormones. The two of us have been biting every head off we can see. How about you, Lottie? Any hormonal victims just yet?”

“No, but I’m definitely far more emotional than I was with Lyla Nell. But my sweet husband always seems to know what to say or do to defuse the situation.”

“Way to rub the fact we’re not hitched in our faces, Lottie,” Sam snips.

“That’s just like you,” Meg snips my way twice as hard. “Come on, Sam. Let’s go hit some of those cookies before your doorknob of a brother eats them all.”

The two of them take off in a huff and I’m left speechless in their wake.

Was I just a victim of their hormonal rage, or is there something darker brewing here?

“Happy Halloween, Lottie,” a friendly voice chimes and I look over to see a woman dressed in a white flowing gown with a halo seemingly floating above her head. With her dark hair and giant grin she looks more than familiar.

“Twila?” I say, squinting in this dim light. “Is that you?”

“It’s me, all right.” She laughs as she flicks her halo and makes it vibrate above her head. “I thought I’d go as something someone would never suspect. An angel.”

I laugh at the thought. “Well, I’m glad to see you here tonight.”

“I figured the first time I missed out on the haunted hayride, I may as well go tonight.” Her features grow somber. “Halloween was my brother’s favorite holiday, so I’m sort of dedicating this ride to him. I’m not big on spooky stuff. Who knows? On a night like tonight, he might even ride along with me.” She casts a glance over her shoulder. “And I never did get to thank the woman who told me about this shindig to begin with.”

“Who was that?”

“The candy lady who refills the dishes down at the bar. She’s the one that suggested to the owners that we offer up our services as a form of free advertising, just the way she was doing.”

A whistle goes off in the distance as Wiley shouts the last call to board.

“I’d better go. Have a great time tonight,” she howls as she disappears

into the crowd.

A shimmering blue glow materializes to my right as Greer, Winslow, and Raven float their way over.

“Here she is,” Raven says with a sigh. “Chasing candy once again when she should be chasing killers.”

“Ooh, that reminds me,” I say, holding Lyla Nell’s pumpkin high. “I’ve got some serious candy to plow through. Want some?” I offer my ghostly friends each a piece and they both snag a candy bar for themselves.

“Mmm, peanut butter and chocolate,” Greer moans as she indulges. “Whoever thought of this combo was a genius.”

Winslow shakes his head. “But this cookie bar can’t be beat.”

“Oh yes, it can,” Greer says through another bite. “You haven’t lived until you’ve gobbled up peanut butter coated in chocolate.”

“And you haven’t lived until you’ve gobbled up a cookie dipped in milk chocolate,” he counters.

Greer shimmies her shoulders. “I just love it when you tell me what’s what.” She winks his way. “How about we ditch this haunted house for a moment and steal a little time for ourselves?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” he says as he hooks his arm to hers and the two of them float off to who knows where.

“Hey,” I call out. “You can’t leave. It’s the biggest night of the year! You’ve got a job to do! And what about the Prankster? I thought you were going to keep an eye on things for me?”

Raven belts out a caw. “Oh, they’re useless. Every time I turn around they’re canoodling. They’re almost as bad as you and Foxy, and you and Sexy. Honestly, I don’t know how you have the energy for anything else.”

“I’ll have you know,” I start in just as a woman dressed as the Mad Hatter, complete with top hat and tails, approaches, and in her hand is a five-gallon bucket of candy. “Sienna,” I say brightly. “I see you’ve traded in your pillowcase for something sturdier.”

“It’s my busiest night of the year.” She laughs. Her face is painted bone white with exaggerated black outlines of her lips. It’s a disconcerting look, that’s for sure. “And your mother’s busiest night, as evidenced by the crowd.”

“You’re telling me. I can’t imagine what the aftermath will look like in the morning.”

“It’ll look a lot like my candy shop once Carlotta and Derby got through

with it,” she says and we cackle into the night about that one.

“Hey”—I lean her way—“off topic, but would you happen to know if Rusty knew a guy named Homer Gloman?”

She inches back. “Actually, yes. Homer was his lawyer. In fact, I just saw him here the other night—the night Rusty was killed.” She winces. “I remember Rusty saying that Homer was his one true friend.”

“Wow.” I shake my head at what this might mean. Something else Twila mentioned comes to mind. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about Rusty looking to find a new location for his brewery, would you?”

“Oh, I do.” She rolls her eyes. “It was the same plot of land I was looking into. The one next to the cemetery here in town. The owner wasn’t selling, but Rusty said he had his ways.” She shrugs. “It looks as if that’s off the table now either way.” A scream goes off near the B&B. “I’d better go. The natives are getting restless and they definitely need their candy.” She reaches into her bucket and hands me a Snickers bar. “Enjoy it. You deserve it.”

She takes off and I can’t seem to catch my breath.

“Did you hear what she said?” Raven caws as she flies a circle around me. “Rusty wanted the land next to the cemetery. “Maybe we should dig in that direction?”

“And I know just who to get the shovel from.”

LOTTIE



I lead Raven through the crowd, through the jostling limbs and costumes alike, as I struggle to swim upstream through the thicket of people who have shown up for the horrors this night promises to bring.

I'm about to head for my booth to tell Noah what I'm thinking when someone bumps right into my shoulder.

"I'm so sorry," a cute brunette dressed as a giant Hershey's kiss, silver foil and all, says as she takes a step back. "Lottie! Oh goodness, are you okay? I didn't hurt the twins, did I?"

"Cocoa." I laugh. "I'm fine. I promise. You're actually the exact person I was looking for. Can I ask you a question?"

A look of surprise takes over her features. "Lottie, you can ask me anything." She makes a face. "Does this have something to do with fitting Wiley for a casket?"

"What?" I squawk. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Oh, I'm just teasing." She laughs. "I heard your mother lamenting the fact some young woman was all but throwing herself at him." She leans in. "It was that blonde that was with you at the cemetery."

"I know the exact ding-a-ling you're talking about."

Raven caws, "You warned the girl, Lottie."

That I did.

Apparently, some people prefer actions to words. Once I'm done here, I fully plan on unleashing my hormones on the ding-a-ling in question.

"But seriously." Cocoa laughs again. "What is it you wanted to ask?"

"You wouldn't happen to know who owns the land next to your cemetery, would you?"

“The three vacant acres? I do. I own them.”

I rock back on my heels. “You own them?” I examine her for a moment. “But that means your uncle owned them before you. I mean, he died a year ago or so, right?”

She nods. “But they’re mine now. Why? Don’t tell me you’re thinking of opening another bakery. As much as I’d love to take your money, I don’t think that part of town caters to many *living* souls.”

Raven chortles as if she were being tickled with a feather. “I like her sense of humor. Now arrest her so I can get on with the rest of my afterlife.”

“You own the land,” I say as all of the previous conversations we’ve had this past week come flooding back. “That means you must have talked to Rusty recently about it. I heard he was adamant about acquiring it right up until the end—his end.”

She blinks my way. “I guess he was.” A nervous laugh strums from her. “I’d better get going.”

“Wait.” I step in front of her, blocking her path. “Cocoa, you’re one of my oldest friends. Why in the world are you dodging my questions with—well, half-truths.”

“Come now, Lottie,” Raven caws. “The girl is lying like a flamingo claiming to be a peacock.”

Cocoa opens her mouth as if she’s about to deny it, but she bows her head instead.

“So it’s true?” I say. “You knew Rusty a lot more than you were letting on.”

Her mouth opens again as she examines me.

“Yes, I knew him. He was a bad man. I—I wanted to live my dream and open my chocolate shop in New York. Just like you wanted to open your bakery. Only I didn’t have a wealthy grandmother to gift me anything.”

“So you took a loan from Rusty?” I ask as the pieces start to fall into place. “Oh no, he was less interested in making your dreams come true and more interested in getting his hands on that land. Why didn’t you sell it to him? You wouldn’t have needed the loan to begin with.”

She shakes her head. “He didn’t have the money. In fact, he didn’t have the money to loan me either, come to find out. He borrowed it from the mob. And then when he tried to shake me down, he let me know the mob would finish the job. He said I had no choice but to give him the land next to the cemetery. He said he’d make me a partner and that I’d be rolling in money

right along with him, but he was so shady, I couldn't risk giving away what had been in my family for decades."

"But?" I shake my head because I can feel it coming.

"But I actually signed over the land as collateral for the money he lent me. He had his lawyer write up something airtight that guaranteed him the land should I default on the loan from the shop. He was in it to win it, no matter how crooked the path to get there. That man stole everything, Lottie. He even confessed to stealing the formula for the silly Beast energy drink of his from his former partner. He was no good. He was rotten to the core."

Raven flaps her wings and a shower of light blue stars falls all around us.

"Is that why you did it?" I ask softly.

"Did what?" Cocoa blinks my way.

"Got him to inhale a vat full of poison." I twist my lips. "How did you get all the caffeine into him, anyway? Did you spike his drink?"

She inches back. "Lottie Lemon, are you accusing me of murder?" She laughs. "I might have considered it but only in my dreams. I won't lie. I sleep a lot better with Rusty Shadowood no longer stealing what belongs to my family. I was a fool to agree to anything with that snake of a man. He was dressed as a devil that night, but it was no costume. Rusty Shadowood was a thief, and a liar, and as demented as they come. I hate to sound so bitter, but it just might be a better world without him." She blows out a breath and a pale plume streams from her lips. "I'm sorry, Lottie. I was just here to check on those death masks. I hear they're best viewed on Halloween night." She takes off and I'm left stunned by her words.

She's right about the masks. I studied them again this afternoon and they looked ten times creepier than they have this entire week. Their alabaster forms look like a row of sleeping men and women. And each time I passed them, I thought each one of them was going to spring open their eyes and say hello. They're that realistic.

"So it wasn't Cocoa?" Raven asks and I shake my head at her.

"I don't think so." I sigh. "I know her well enough to know when she's telling the truth, and that my feathered friend, was the truth."

"I suppose we know who the killer is then," she caws. "An eye for an eye just like Everett said."

"Twila." I shake my head once more. "I don't know. I realize she has a motive like no other—I mean, her brother died because of that energy drink. But something doesn't sit right with me." I think on it a moment. "Wait a

minute. Cocoa said he confessed to stealing the formula for that energy drink of his from his former partner.”

I pull out my phone and start in on a deep dive into Rusty Shadowood and any partner he may have had way back when. I scroll through endless pictures of Rusty at his factory, of Rusty opening a bottle of that energy drink with a smile. I scroll through hundreds of photos until—

“That can’t be right,” I whisper and then cross over to my own files where I pull up some photos I took a few days ago and enlarge a few to see the strange looking bottles on the shelves in the background. “I think I just hit paydirt.”

LOTTIE



“Noah,” I shout as I spot him noshing on a stack of my chocolate chip cookies near the bakery booth. And judging by the crowd amassed around that booth, just about everyone here is ready to nosh on my sweet treats.

“Lottie,” Effie calls out, dressed in all black. “Your chocolate delight is a hit! People are asking if you provide shipping.”

“Shipping?” I drift her way for a moment. “Hey, that’s a great idea. Maybe we should get into internet sales?”

“I’ll gladly handle that for you,” she says. “I miss my work in the tech sector. That will give me a taste of both worlds.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. And come Christmas, I’ll give her a raise because of it. I glance down at the empty holster she’s wearing along with that black cat suit. “Say, what are you supposed to be tonight?”

“I’m an assassin.” She winks. “I’m sort of hiding in plain sight.”

We share a laugh at that one.

Suze is dressed as a Raggedy Ann doll—a rather haunted looking version. And Lily looks perfectly adorable dressed as a French maid.

“I’m actually wearing a costume,” Suze gruffs. “Lily is wearing her nighty and Effie, well, I’m not convinced she’s in costume at all.” She leans my way. “Her uncle works for the *mob*.” She mouths that last word.

I’m more than familiar.

A sharp caw goes off overhead. “Would you stay on track? You get distracted more than a squirrel at a nut festival.”

“More truth has never been told,” I say, snapping up an iced sugar cookie in the shape of a raven in honor of my ghostly feathered friend and bite off its

head. The cookies are covered in purple icing and sprinkled with blue sugar crystals. And not only do they look magical, they taste that way, too.

“Lot,” Noah says, meeting me halfway and placing the remainder of his cookies on the counter next to him. “I just got word from the coroner’s office regarding Homer Gloman.”

“What was the cause of death?” I pant, taking another anxious bite of my cookie.

“Caffeine poisoning. He had a comparable amount in his system just as Rusty did.”

“Oh, Noah, that was no accident and neither was Rusty’s death.” I gobble up my cookie posthaste before telling him everything Cocoa just filled me in on.

“Cocoa owns the land?” He cocks his head. “And Rusty was on track to steal it? Lottie, that’s a powerful motive.”

“Yes, but another suspect just cropped up with a pretty powerful motive themselves. It turns out, Rusty admitted to stealing the formula to his famed Beast energy drink from someone, and that person was listed as a partner a few years back before Rusty cut them from the company.”

His eyes grow wide. “And with Rusty dead, they have no one to contest their recipe. They’re off and running again.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” I say. A thought comes to me. “Noah, did the coroner say how Homer may have landed that much caffeine in this system? Do you think the killer slipped these men a drink?”

He shakes his head. “He said there was an injection site on the upper left side of the chest.”

“A shot to the heart,” I say and he nods.

Both of us gasp at once.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Noah asks with a start as he quickly examines the crowd.

“Rusty’s chest was bleeding from the CPR administered. She wore a ring that cut him up in the exact area. No wonder the coroner couldn’t find an injection site. She was covering her tracks,” I say, taking up Noah’s hand and darting into the thicket of bodies determined to track down my one and only remaining suspect.

Raven belts out a few sharp caws. “Follow me!”

And we do.

LOTTIE



The air crackles with excitement as Noah and I thread our way through a sea of costumed bodies.

All around us colorful monsters, superheroes, and princesses alike swirl in a jovial chaos. Laughter and shrieks punctuate the moody organ music playing through the speakers as the constant hum of conversation warbles around us.

Jack-o'-lanterns line the pathway that leads toward the darkened woods, their flickering flames setting the mood for a perfectly spooky night. The chatter from the festival lessens as we drift closer to the pickup station for that haunted hayride. And there's a sense of unease mingled with anticipation of the bodies in that ever-growing line.

A crooked sign hangs above, illuminated with purple twinkle lights that reads *Haunted Hayride: ride at your own risk!*

It's scrawled in red paint as if written in blood, and it serves as a perfect warning for the spooky journey ahead.

Raven stops midflight right at the front of the line, and that's when I see her just about to board the flatbed strewn with bales of hay.

"Sienna," I call out and wave and she turns my way just as she's about to step up on the platform. "I need to speak with you," I call out again. "It's urgent."

Noah lets go of my hand and drifts a few paces behind me so as not to alarm the woman, I presume.

"Sure." That bone-white face of hers with the dark lines drawn vertically above and below her eyes looks menacing in this low light. Sienna Broomfield glows as pale as a skeleton as she heads my way and I lead her

away from the crowd and deeper into the woods so I can hear myself think. “What’s going on, Lottie? Are we out of candy already? I was just about to take a ride, but I’d be more than happy to head back to my shop and—”

Raven lets out a sharp caw. “Don’t let her get away, Lottie. Grill her until she’s well done. I’ve got a party in paradise to get to. We celebrate All Souls Day there, too, you know. This year I’m going as a Mad Hatter in handcuffs.”

I make a face at the bird for her play at humor at a time like this.

“Sienna, I just have a few quick questions,” I tell her. “When I visited you at the candy shop, you mentioned you were a food chemist.”

She laughs. “Is this about a recipe you want me to help you with? I’ve tried just about all of your treats, and I don’t think I can teach you any new tricks. In fact, you can teach *me* a few things.”

“Lottie?” Noah calls out just as Wiley whistles for everyone to step away from the tractor as they prepare for takeoff. “Lottie, where are you?”

The tractor takes off with a whistle and a start and I can hear Noah’s voice shouting after it.

“He thinks you went on the ride,” Raven points out and a chill rides through me.

“Sienna,” I pant as I lean her way. “You were quite good at developing recipes, weren’t you? You created a lucrative recipe that was eventually worth millions.”

Her eyes close a minute, and it’s then I see she’s painted black hearts over each of her eyelids.

“That I did,” she says, adjusting her top hat. “But, let’s just say someone beat me to the punch with it.” Her eyes narrow over mine. “Wait a minute. How did you know that?”

“I read an old article.”

“I see.” She straightens. “I guess I didn’t factor that in.”

“No, you didn’t.” I sigh. “You knew Twila would be at the Fright Night Festival the evening Rusty died because you invited her. You knew her brother died and that would be a prime motive for murder.”

“Murder?” She inches back and presses a hand to her chest. “You don’t think she murdered him, do you?”

Raven belts out a caw.

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t think so. I think she was a good red herring for the killer, though.” As was Cocoa, but I’m leaving her out of it for now. “Sienna, that day in your candy shop I took a few pictures of your shop.

I couldn't help it, the place is adorable.”

“Thank you,” she frowns as she says it because her antennae seem to be up.

“One of the pictures showed a gallon of something I couldn't quite identify until tonight. I looked it up. Turns out, it was liquid caffeine. I wondered how both Rusty and Homer could have had so much caffeine pumped into them. It would take almost that whole gallon to get it to the levels in their systems.”

“Lottie”—she takes a full step back into the darkness of the woods —“what are you saying?”

“I'm saying only a chemist—or a baker—would know that you can boil something down to condense its contents.”

“Are you suggesting that I boiled the contents and somehow gave it to those men?”

“I'm not suggesting it,” I pant as I take a step her way. “I'm able to prove it.”

“How?” A maniacal laugh pumps from her. “It would taste like poison. There's no way I could get anyone to drink something like that. I use that caffeine when I make my high energy dark chocolate bites. It's a best-seller. You hardly have a case.”

I don't remember seeing those. And I highly doubt they exist. Although if they did, I have no doubt they'd be a best-seller—especially among the college crowd.

“You're right. When it's boiled down to toxic levels, it would probably corrupt the flavor of just about anything. That's why you chose to inject it.”

She lifts her chin as if I struck her.

“You injected it straight into Rusty's heart that night. And to cover your tracks, you pretended to administer CPR—scratching up his chest with that sharp ring you wore that night. But you didn't do the same to Homer.”

Her eyes squeeze tight. “No. I had a notification that someone walked into my shop. I had to hurry back.” She forces a short-lived smile. “And that someone was you.”

Raven caws three times fast. “She did it, Lottie! She all but admitted it! Strap her to a tree and set her on fire so I can get back to paradise before the parade of costumes begins. The grand prize is a trip for two to Paradise Beach Resort and Spa that includes free scuba diving and sunset cruises. You wouldn't want me to miss out on a sunset cruise, now would you?”

“You killed them both.” I shake my head at the *mad* Mad Hatter before me. Why? So you could get the formula back?”

“Yes,” Sienna hisses. “It was my formula that gave Rusty his financial freedom. He cut me out of our partnership without so much as a paperclip to take with me. He lawyered up and made it impossible for me to even replicate something similar to it. He said he would help make me rich, and instead, I ended up on the wrong end of town peddling candy that no one buys. I’m one step from losing everything. It was him or me, Lottie. So he had to go.”

Something Twila says comes back to me. “And so did Homer because he knew all of Rusty’s dirty secrets.”

“That’s right,” she pants wildly. “He knew too much and now so do you.” She swoops down and picks up a short branch, thick enough to be a club, and darts my way, but I turn to run and duck behind the trunk of an evergreen as she passes me up a moment.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” she sings, her voice taunting me with death more than it is with a good time.

“Lottie?” Noah shouts in the distance.

“I’m over here,” I shout back without thinking—darn pregnant brain!

Sienna bolts my way. She raises that makeshift club in her arms right over my head just as she’s tackled from behind by Noah and they both land to my left with a thump.

“She did it,” I shout as Noah struggles to cuff her. “She confessed to killing both Rusty and Homer,” I pant, creating a ghostly halo around my mouth.

“And you did it, *tooooo*,” Raven caws as she swirls straight into the stratosphere. “Lucky for me, there’s still time to sample the sizzling worm skewers and chocolate fountain before the parade starts. I’ll tell Rusty and Homer you said hello. That is, if I see them.”

And with that, Raven dissolves in a spray of sparkling blue stars.

Noah leads Sienna out of the woods and I follow along.

“I’m taking her to the deputies I have stationed here,” he says, nodding toward the life back at the festival. “Go find Everett and stay safe, Lottie. The night’s not over yet.”

We split ways as I head for my booth.

The night’s not over yet, indeed.

LOTTIE



I can't help but feel as if I'm cloaked in victory as I navigate the sea of ghosts and ghouls on my way back to my bakery booth.

And as I fast approach, the sugary scent of freshly baked goods offers up its delicious embrace. I may not have my bakery up and running just yet, but the scent of vanilla and spice and all things nice makes just about anywhere feel like home.

"I can't believe you did that, Miranda," Carlotta howls with laughter as she high-fives my mother, vampire fangs and all.

Mom happens to be dressed in an elegant red gown with a chunky ruby necklace and a stunning headdress to match, but I'm not quite sure what she's supposed to be. Most likely herself.

The crowd around the booth is still pretty thick and lively as I head their way.

"You can't believe she did what? Have the two of you seen Everett?"

"No sign of Sexy," Carlotta says. "But I did see a sight I never thought I'd see—Cleopatra here giving a tongue-lashing to a naughty vampire cowgirl."

"Derby?" I ask and Carlotta nods. I step her way and whisper. "You never did tell me what made you so afraid of the woman."

Carlotta's shoulders jump to her ears. "I'm the real reason her mama left her daddy and he went up the river. Her mama found her own way there, but I guess you could say I motivated her daddy to do bad things. And that's why I agreed to take her in. Derby said I owed it to her since I blew apart her family. And she's used it to blackmail me into doing her bidding."

"What kind of bidding?" I squint her way.

“Things that make those state-issued silver bracelets of Foxy’s jingle. Not only that, but she says she *owns* me until the day I die for the things I did to her. And she refuses to allow anyone else to steal my attention—especially not any of my children. She darn near drowned Cha Cha one day at a lake. And that’s when I told Derby she was and always would be my favorite child.”

I blow out a breath as I take it in. “Carlotta, she sounds—”

“She sounds completely unstable.” Mom nods furtively my way. “That Derby *Ding-a-ling* made a hard pass at Wiley during his break and I did my best to break her neck. Well, verbally at least.”

“She sure did.” Carlotta slaps her knee so hard as she laughs it sounds as if she snapped a bone. “I’ve never heard such salty language come from a person with such expert ease. Your mama can teach an entire league of sailors a thing or two about colorful expressions. She had more dirty metaphors coming from her mouth than a parrot on a sugar rush.”

Mom scowls. “And I’m not even allowed to have sugar.”

“I’ve got you covered,” I tell her. “There’s a batch of low-carb cookies I had the bakery whip up, tucked under the counter there.”

“I’ll help you celebrate, *Mirandy*,” Carlotta says, slapping her on the shoulder. “But I’m diving into about six slices of those chocolate delights. If it’s good enough for the dead, it’s good enough for me.”

I make a face as they drift off. It’s sad to think my chocolate delight was the last thing Rusty ate before he met his untimely demise. Although, on an up note, at least his final meal was delicious.

I’m about to text Everett when I spot a small white envelope lying on the edge of the counter with the words *the end* scrawled over it in red lipstick, and a mean chill rides through me at the sight.

“Another one,” I pant as I snap it up without hesitation.

I open it in haste and read.

Dear Lottie—lemon bright,

From underneath the moonlight, the Prankster is causing fright.

Your child is in the deepest woods, completely out of sight.

Jests cease, a chilling plot.

Your darling babe, part of the lot.

From Higgins Bottom, a twist you never sought.

The end begins, you’ve been caught.

With your babe in the woods, set apart.

It's your final chapter and time to depart.
Forever jesting,
The Prankster
Higgins Bottom? And my *child*?
They have Lyla Nell.

LOTTIE



“Derby?” I hiss as I bolt for the woods. “The deepest woods?” I pant as I burn through the crowd and land to the right of the B&B where the woods trail off seemingly forever. “Lyla Nell?” I scream so loud my voice comes back to me as an echo. It’s dark as pitch, save for the scant moonlight lacing through the branches of the evergreens.

The sights and sounds of the Fright Night Festival have faded to nothing, and all I hear is the sound of my spastic breathing.

“Lyla Nell?” I call out again before plucking my phone out of my pocket and hitting Lainey’s name.

“Come on,” I cry and it rings twice before she picks up. “Who took Lyla Nell?” I shout into the receiver.

“What are you talking about?” Lainey cries. “She’s right next to me. She and Josie are playing *Bobbies*. It’s the cutest little thing you ever did—”

A hard slap to my right arm sends my phone sailing into the darkness, and it’s then I realize I’ve just fallen right into the Prankster’s trap.

I turn to see a figure dressed in black with a dark hood over their head, and I can’t help but think they look like an executioner. But I don’t stick around to ask questions. Instead, I run in the direction of the B&B and end up deeper in the woods that surround it.

“Get back here,” a female voice shrieks. “This is the night of your demise, Lottie Lemon. *You’re not making it to midnight alive!*”

My hair stands on end as I do my best to hold my belly while I traverse tree branches and piles of evergreen needles alike. The trees up ahead are strewn with dark purple twinkle lights, affording me a touch more illumination than before.

“*Help*,” I cry out, but my voice is muffled by the sound of my heavy breathing.

“Lottie?” Little Lea appears in all her six-year-old ghostly glory, that machete in her hand looking like a welcome sight. “Why are you running through the woods, alone? You do realize this is the haunted hayride track, and that means these woods are laced with boobytraps fit to maim, not to mention horrific frights.”

Thirteen appears next to her like a good little kitty familiar. “And might I add that you don’t look frightening at all with that fairy godmother getup,” he says.

“You’re ruining our mood,” Lea adds like only Lea can.

“*Help*,” I pant as I trip over an errant twig and the masked lunatic behind me lands an axe in the tree bark next to me.

A scream rips through me as I bolt deeper into the woods, and as I do, every witch, ghost, and goblin that’s playing a role in this haunted hayride jumps out doing their best to scare me.

They’ll have to try a lot harder than that, considering the fact I’ve got a bona fide axe-wielding maniac hot on my heels.

“Why, Lottie Lemon”—Thirteen speeds up until he’s floating right in front of me, his dark fur glowing with a purple aura—“I do believe there’s someone trying to kill you. Just what have you gotten yourself mixed up in this time?”

“Never mind, Lottie,” Lea roars. “I’ve been waiting to avenge the death of my family for generations. I’ll gladly take this axe-wielding maniac down.”

I glance back in time to see Lea’s machete glide right through the masked terror and nothing comes of it.

I’m not sure why the dead can make themselves feel real when they want, but whatever that mechanism is, Lea seems to be missing it.

“Gird your spirit, Lea,” Thirteen chastens her. “I told you that you should be practicing.”

“I never thought the universe would give me such a gift,” she shouts from behind.

“*Help*,” I scream the word out in one shrill cry as I spot Greer and Winslow glowing like a couple of green fireflies up ahead.

“Not now, Lottie,” Greer shouts back. “I can only haunt one area of the woods at a time. And as it stands, that tractor is about to come through with a

new batch of tourists.”

“Victims,” Winslow corrects as he cranes his neck that way.

“*Help me,*” I shout again just as I run up against a slope that drifts upward at a vertical incline I’ll never be able to climb.

I turn around, only to see that the Prankster stops short less than a few feet away from me.

A pale hand waves not too far behind the shadowed figure and I spot a familiar handsome frame dressed as a pirate, with cobalt blue eyes that pierce through the darkness, that sword of his glinting by his side.

A swell of relief hits me at the sight of Everett.

His footfalls smash through the silence, and it’s enough to alert the Prankster to his presence.

The Prankster turns and looks from Everett to me, that axe in their hands swinging wildly enough to let us know not to get near.

So much for Everett jumping them from behind.

“We finally meet,” I pant as I say to the menace.

“Lottie,” Greer gasps. “Is that Noah in the mask? Are the three of you playing a little game of naughty Halloween catch-me-if-you-can?”

“That can’t be Noah,” Winslow says, floating over to the darkened figure. “I just saw him a second ago looking for Lottie near the entry to the hayride.”

Noah is looking for me.

Everett is here.

And yet my heart insists on jumping into my throat.

The Prankster turns my way and Everett takes the opportunity to leap onto them, but they leap in turn and Everett falters and trips.

The Prankster lets out a cry as they jump my way, and just as that axe is about to come down over me, both Greer and Winslow wrap themselves around me like a shield and gently push me to the side.

Greer nods to Lea. “And that’s why we tell you to practice girding your spirit.”

That axe comes my way again, forcing me to duck, and as I do, I grab onto a stick on the way up. With one upward motion, I knock that axe right out of the Prankster’s hand.

“Take that,” I shout and they look back at their weapon.

Everett dives for it just as Noah runs up on the scene with his gun drawn. Everett doesn’t hesitate to draw his as well—right along with his sword.

I’ll admit, it’s a sexy sight.

“You’re done,” Everett thunders. “Get on the ground.”

The Prankster looks from them to me and bolts my way, so I stick my leg out and send them falling face-first into the dirt.

I don’t hesitate to bend over and grab ahold of their mask.

“All right, Derby,” I pant. “You just dispensed your final fright.” I pluck off the mask in haste and gasp.

It’s not Derby Dingle at all.

“*Cormack?*” Noah shouts as both he and Everett put away their weapons. “What the hell are you thinking?”

“She’s not,” Everett gruffs as he helps her to her feet.

“You can’t have him,” she seethes my way. “You can’t have him!”

Her cries pierce the night just as that tractor trailer pulling a flatbed full of Honey Hollow’s teenagers comes wobbling by.

“Hey, that’s my mom,” someone shouts and I look over to see Evie waving like mad as the tractor turns the corner. “Way to go, Mom! And Dad and Uncle Noah, too! Although, it’s not too spooky,” she calls out as the tractor drifts deeper into the woods. “Maybe work on upping your game.”

Next to Evie and her friends I see Twila, and just slightly above her hovers the ghost of a man about her age. His aura is blue and shimmering, but I can see his gentle smile just the same. He gives a friendly wave this way as they take off out of sight.

“*Cormack,*” I hiss. “It was you all along? You wanted me dead and gone?”

“That’s right, little Miss Priss. You stole the one thing I had that made life worth living and I was determined to return the favor. If only you had left. Not even thoughts of harm coming to your bundle of misery could make you think twice about ditching Noah. You’re a beast, Lottie Lemon. And I hate you! I *hate* you,” she screams as she falls to her knees shaking and sobbing.

“It’s over,” Noah says, landing a pair of cuffs onto her wrists.

“It’s over, indeed,” Everett says, coming my way and holding me tight.

The Prankster has been revealed and disarmed in every capacity—and yet I don’t feel victorious—I feel sorry for Cormack.

LOTTIE



“*K*eeep your eyes closed,” Everett says as Evie holds her hand over half my face.

“Mom, you’re going to love it,” she says.

“Mommy *love* it,” Lyla Nell coos from somewhere behind as Noah holds her.

“I can’t wait to see whatever it is you want to show me,” I say as I take hesitant steps as Evie does her best to guide me along.

“All right, Lemon,” Everett says. “Take a look.”

Evie lets go of me and I open my eyes to see my bake shop glowing with a fresh coat of butter yellow paint, the mix and match pastel furniture restored, as well as a row of brand new refrigerated shelves and a brand new menu board with a digital panel to the right.

“What?” I squawk. “Oh my word. It’s beautiful,” I say as tears come to my eyes.

The twinkle lights on the branches that sit against the ceiling flicker, and I look up to see that beautiful tree Nell installed for me all those years ago in the same pristine condition as the day it was put in.

The rest of the tree is rooted in the heart of the Honey Pot Diner, the restaurant attached through a shared walkway that Charlie now runs. Thankfully, none of the goons Cormack hired hurt a single thing at that place.

I’m about to turn to thank Everett for helping speed along the contractors when the lights flash on and off and an entire mob shouts *SURPRISE!* as our family and friends pop out of the kitchen and from the Honey Pot next door.

“Oh my goodness.” I grip my chest. “You about scared my boots off.” I laugh.

It's November first, the evening after Halloween, and all of Honey Hollow is going about their business as if none of those events last night ever happened.

Sienna Broomfield is in a holding cell down in Ashford County. And according to Everett, she's trying her best to procure a high-powered attorney.

Everett caught up with Twila Ember before she left the festival last night, and he asked the question that's been plaguing him ever since he handed down her sentence. He asked if she was guilty of the crime in which she was convicted.

Twila laughed for two minutes straight before sobering up and nodding his way. She said she was guilty all the way. She just wishes she could have made the jury have the same kernel of doubt that he did. Once she left, Everett said he'd never doubt a jury again.

And as for Cormack, she's under a psychiatric hold at the moment at Honey Hollow General. You can bet her father is pooling all the funds he can to keep her out of the pen, a place he was in himself not too long ago.

I spoke with Dr. Barnette this morning and told her to have a look at Cormack, seeing that Cormack delivered a baby not more than three months ago. And Dr. Barnette agreed that Cormack's bizarre episode might have been caused by something postpartum. Evie and I did a little digging and postpartum psychosis is a very real thing.

I guess we'll see how that plays out. I'd hate to see Cormack miss a minute of little Levi's life.

Speaking of which, Levi is cute as a button and nestled in Alex's arms while Lily dotes over him.

My mother, Wiley, my sisters, Sam, even Carlotta and Derby are here.

"Now this really is a surprise," I say. "How about free cake for everyone?" I say and a cheer breaks out in the crowd.

And right on cue, Effie, Suze, and Lily come out of the kitchen, each holding one of my chocolate delight cakes on a platter.

"Come and get your chocolate fix," Effie shouts as the mob moves in their direction.

Mom breaks out with applause. "Oh, Lottie, you should have a grand reopening! We'll get some savory food trucks to come by, too, just to get people primed to eat dessert, and make a real party out of it. I can't think of a better way to kick off the Thanksgiving season!"

Another cheer erupts as the crowd agrees.

“But for now.” Mom holds up a finger while shaking her hips. “Let them eat cake!”

I’m about to do just that when I spot one of my old friends standing shyly at the entrance to the Honey Pot Diner.

“Cocoa Ganache,” I say, waving her in. “Come here and give me a hug,” I say, going over and offering her a warm embrace. “I’m so sorry I accused you of such a terrible thing last night. I don’t know how I’ll ever make it up to you.”

“You don’t have to.” She laughs. “But if you insist, I have an idea.”

“What’s that?” I ask, pulling away a notch.

“Well, now that there’s a candy shop in town minus one owner, I spoke with the landlord and they’ve agreed to lease me the site. We could cross promote our businesses.”

“Cocoa! You get a second chance at your candy shop, right here in Honey Hollow! And that’s essentially free candy for the rest of your life.”

“What’s this?” Carlotta and Derby trot over. “Did I hear the words *free candy for life*?”

“Where do I sign up?” Derby jolts as she says it.

Cocoa chuckles at the women. “Actually, I’d love to have some help at the shop I just leased. I’m taking over the Candy Confectionery. I might rename it sometime in the future, but for right now, I need to get it off the ground.”

Derby raises a hand. “If you pay in candy, I’ll help you out.” She nudges Carlotta. “Come on, Mama. Volunteer, would ya? I came all this way to make us a family again. I’d love to be elbow to elbow with you all day long.”

“I ain’t working nowhere, no how,” Carlotta is quick to announce to everyone in here she’s perfectly content being a sloth. She turns her face up at Derby. “What do you mean, you came all this way just to make us a family again? Is that the only reason you showed up in town?”

Derby swipes a finger across her chest, twice. “Cross my heart and hope to die in a vat of creamy milk chocolate.”

Carlotta sniffs hard. “Then you really just care about me being your mama?”

Derby nods with tears of her own. “No more games. I think we’re all grown up now.”

“Come here,” Carlotta says, ringing the crook of her arm around the girl’s

neck.

A tiny laugh bubbles from me. “I think that’s Carlotta’s way of hugging you.”

“She should know,” Carlotta says, almost strangling the poor girl. “She’s my favorite child.”

Cocoa lifts a brow. “Well, the position is open to the both of you if you’ll have it.”

“I’ll take it,” Derby says. “I can live at Lottie’s place and commute.”

I make a face. It’s hardly a commute, but that’s not why I’m frowning.

Cocoa opens her mouth as she looks my way and offers me an assuring nod.

“And Derby?” Cocoa starts. “Since I don’t feel right about just paying you in candy, how about I offer you the loft as a place to stay? There’s a loft above the shop. That way you can have a home of your own and a job. And I get all the help I need launching my new business?” She shrugs my way. “I’m ready to hire someone to manage the cemetery for me and focus on what I truly love, candy.”

“I’ll double take it!” Derby shouts as she jumps and clicks her heels in a show of unadulterated joy.

“You mean you’re moving out of my bedroom?” Carlotta asks and Derby gives an enthusiastic nod. “Let’s go have some cake to celebrate!”

They take off and Derby turns around. “And don’t you worry about drawing the crowds to your new shop. I’ve got my magic shoes and I’ll tap-dance the tourists right over to your front door!”

“Stay off her ceiling,” I say as she and Carlotta bolt for the chocolate delight being served up.

“Congratulations,” I say to Cocoa as I steer us in that direction as well.

“Thanks. I was just next door celebrating my new career with a bowl of the Honey Pot’s mac and cheese.”

“Wise choice,” I tell her. “And you can bet I’ll be sending business your way as well. I can’t think of anything that goes better with my sweet treats than candy.”

“I’ll gladly repay the favor,” she says as Keelie comes over and hands her a slice of cake and they take off together to find a table.

I’m about to do the same when a mean shiver runs through me and my head snaps toward the window.

Someone is watching me.

Someone is there. I can feel it.

LOTTIE



Every last inch of me is frozen solid as I try my best to scour the street outside of my bakery window.

I don't know what's gotten into me, but I can't seem to shake this feeling that something evil is lurking in the shadows.

I'm about to head over and enjoy some of my chocolate delight cake along with my friends and family when Noah and Everett flank me on either side.

"This was a great surprise," I say to both of them as I wave a hand around my new refurbished bakery. "I'm so glad that nightmare is over."

I glance to the window and a chill rides up my spine as if contesting the idea that anything is over.

I force myself to look away, and in doing so I spot my mother feeding Lyla Nell a bite of cake and then stealing a bite for herself.

"It looks like my mother is out to find balance in her diet," I say. "Good for her. But I think I'll still add a few no-carb options to the menu lest she loses her mind again."

Noah shakes his head. "I can't imagine not being able to eat all the donuts and cookies I want." He pats his stomach as if proving his point.

"We believe you," Everett says. "We've witnessed the carbohydrate carnage you're capable of more than once." He wraps his arms around me from behind and plants his hands firmly over my blooming belly. "And I can't get enough of your sweet treats either," he says, landing a kiss to my cheek, and as he does, a wild wallop comes from inside my belly. "Was that a kick?" he says sharply as we both freeze solid.

"It was," I say with my own voice hiking to enthusiastic levels.

And then one after the other, it's nothing but *kick, kick, kick*, and soon Noah, Lyla Nell, Evie, my mother, and my sisters all have their hands on me.

"Oh, Lottie, this is so wonderful," Mom cries as she presses a tissue to her eyes. "This is the best day of my life. More cake for everyone," she calls out and the counter is mobbed once again.

"This is the best day of my life, Lemon," Everett says, kissing me square on the lips and this time we linger.

A light applause breaks out around us, and soon one by one our friends and family take off for the night.

Evie, Lyla Nell, and Carlotta go next door to enjoy an early dinner with my mother, Derby, and my sisters.

The sun has already set and the sky outside glows a dark shade of navy.

"Why don't you ladies go home?" I say to Effie, Lily, and Suze. "We'll open up the shop bright and early, in keeping with our old hours."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Effie says. "I've got a hot date. Here's hoping I don't get arrested because of it." She bolts out the door before I can probe.

"Me, too," Lily says, sneaking another slice of chocolate delight. "Alex asked if I would bring him another piece."

"Take a whole cake," I tell her. "The two of you deserve it."

Especially since Cormack used them as an excuse to terrorize me.

Lily does just that, and it's just Suze stepping around the counter.

"Mom," Noah says as he steps her way. "Cormack came into my office this week and said something about you giving her tips on her love life? Do you recall any of that?"

Suze lifts her nose to the ceiling as she ponders it. "Come to think of it, I believe it was *Effie* who I gave the advice to, and that was well over a month ago. But Cormack was there, too, and she thanked me most profusely."

"What did you tell them?" Everett asks the one million dollar question.

"Oh, this and that." Suze waves a hand around. "Something to the effect of true love being a rare and vintage delicacy you hold onto and never let go of. I believe I said, 'You should move mountains to make things happen.' That you do whatever it takes to ensure you end up with the one you were destined to be with all along." She waves it off. "You know, all of that hooley I don't believe in." She leans toward Everett. "I was just trying to prod Effie along because we all know she's dying to get under the sheets with that new hot detective down at the department." She reaches over and straightens

Noah's tie. "We all know what a hot commodity those homicide detectives can be. Now speed along that divorce so we can get you out on the market again—properly this time."

"Will do," Noah says as he winks my way and it makes me wonder if he'll do so at all.

Suze takes off.

Noah steps next door to get Lyla Nell while Everett leaves to bring the car out front so I won't have to walk a block in the chilly night air.

I dim the lights in the bakery, and I'm just about to pull the gate between the Honey Pot Diner and the café when a spray of lavender stars lights up the vicinity and the most wonderful sight of them all materializes.

She looks exactly how I remember, with her gray hair and sparkling blue eyes. She's still wearing her favorite knit sweater and looks properly bundled for the brisk fall weather.

"*Nell!*" I shout as I wrap my arms around her.

Growing up, I never knew that Nell was my grandmother, so I've never called her *Grandma Nell*. And I guess old habits die hard, but we are family through and through, and we were that long before I ever knew the truth.

"Can I get you a slice of cake?" I offer. "I just got the bakery up and running again, and oh so much has happened since the last time we spoke. Lyla Nell is getting so big. And the twins"—I cradle my tummy—"they're doing wonderful, too."

She nods my way. "I'm glad about that. But that's not why I'm here." She cuts a quick glance to the darkened window.

Her eyes lock over mine and her demeanor grows serious as stone.

"Nell, what's wrong?"

"She's coming," she whispers. "Lock the doors, leave right now. Don't let her see you. Whatever you do, don't speak with her. Do you hear me, Lottie? Do *not* speak with that woman. She's dangerous—she's a hellraiser. She's"—she glances over her shoulder—"she's wicked."

"What? Who is she? Who are you talking about?"

Her eyes dart to the window with panic. "She's here," she pants. "God help us all. I'm sorry, Lottie. I'm so very sorry."

Nell disappears as quick as she came and my mouth falls open, trying to absorb what she might have been trying to tell me.

A light knock erupts at the window, and I look over to see a woman in a brown wool coat, red wavy hair to her shoulders, and a small brown cap on

her head.

She looks older than my mother. Her crimson lips expand a notch as she gives a little wave, but there's nothing friendly about it. In fact, it felt darn right dangerous.

She walks right through the door, and something about her very presence sends a chill up my spine.

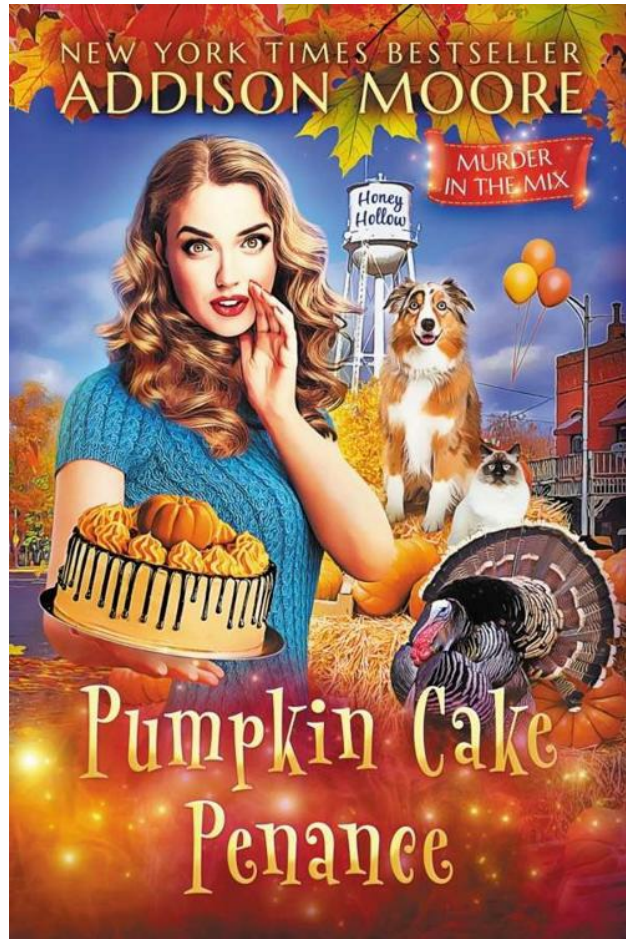
"I'm sorry, we're closed," I tell her.

"No matter." She sheds that nefarious smile once again, and this time there's something strikingly familiar about her. "I just had to see you with my own eyes." She reopens the door, this time to leave, before glancing my way again. "I come bearing truths, Lottie. And secrets. So many buried secrets." Her lips curve with devilish intent. "And the first buried secret is me."

She takes off and a bionic gust of wind blows through the door in her wake, causing everything that's not nailed down to flutter and fly.

Nell is right.

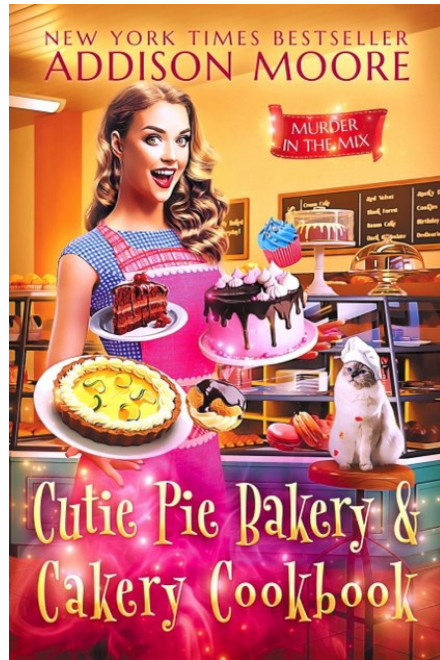
Something wicked just rode into Honey Hollow, and I have a feeling that wicked woman is going to raise more than a little hell.



***Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed Lottie's latest adventure. Need more Honey Hollow? Grab-> [Pumpkin Cake Penance](#) next!**

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RECIPE

From the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery Chocolate Delight Cake

Hello there! Lottie Lemon here! And boy, am I glad to get back to baking. Here is the recipe for my to die for chocolate delight cake. It just so happens that not only does everyone in the family love this, but so do the twins—as in they're having me eat my weight in it. I suppose there are worse things they can have me do. If chocolate appeases them this early on, I think we're going to get along just fine.

Oh, and you might want to make a little extra. This goes quickly. Share if you must!

Have a delightful time baking!

Ingredients

For the cake:

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 cups granulated sugar
- 1 ½ cups unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1 tablespoon baking soda
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- 1 ½ teaspoons salt
- 4 large eggs
- 1 ½ cups whole milk
- 1 cup vegetable oil

2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1 ½ cups boiling water

Ingredients

For the mousse:

10 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
4 large egg yolks
3 tablespoons sugar
¼ cup water
1 cup heavy cream

For the whipped topping:

2 cups heavy cream
¼ cup powdered sugar
1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

And finally:

Chocolate shavings for decoration

Directions:

Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease and flour three 9-inch cake pans.

In a large bowl, mix together flour, sugar, cocoa, baking soda, baking powder, and salt. Add eggs, milk, oil, and vanilla and beat until smooth. Stir in boiling water until well combined—batter will be thin.

Pour the batter evenly into the prepared pans and bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until a toothpick comes out clean. Let the cakes cool in the pans for 10 minutes, then remove to a wire rack to cool completely.

While the cake is cooling, make the mousse. Melt the chocolate and butter together in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of simmering water. Remove from the heat.

In a separate bowl, whisk the egg yolks. In a small saucepan, bring the sugar and water to a boil. Pour the boiling syrup into the yolks, while whisking constantly. Keep whisking until the mixture cools.

Pour the yolk mixture over the melted chocolate and mix until smooth. Whip the heavy cream until soft peaks form, then fold it into the chocolate mixture.

Once the cake layers have cooled, spread a layer of the mousse between each layer.

For the whipped topping, beat the heavy cream until it starts to thicken. Add the powdered sugar and vanilla and continue to beat until it forms stiff peaks.

Frost the top and sides of the cake with the whipped topping and garnish with chocolate shavings.

Enjoy your delicious chocolate delight cake!

RECIPE

From the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery

Keelie's EASY Chocolate Delight Cake

Hey ho! It's me, Keelie Nell Fisher, Lottie's best friend! Lottie is the expert baker, and I've sort of always been the queen of cheater recipes. I loved her chocolate delight so much I made an abbreviated and super easy version of it. My husband, Bear, and my little boy, *baby* Bear, just love to gobble this up. And the best part? I'm done in less than half the time it takes Lottie to make hers!

Enjoy! And have an EASY time baking!

Ingredients

For the cake:

1 box of chocolate cake mix (and the ingredients it requires, typically eggs, water, and oil)

For the mousse:

2 boxes of instant chocolate pudding mix

4 cups of milk

For the whipped topping:

1 tub of store-bought whipped topping (like Cool Whip)

And finally:

Chocolate shavings for decoration (optional)

Directions:

Prepare and bake the chocolate cake according to the instructions on the box. You can use two 9-inch cake pans to create layers.

While the cake is cooling, make the chocolate mousse by beating together the instant chocolate pudding mix and milk until well combined. Let it sit in the refrigerator until it sets.

Once the cake layers have completely cooled, add a layer of the chocolate mousse between each layer of cake.

Frost the top and sides of the cake with the store-bought whipped topping.

Sprinkle the top of the cake with chocolate shavings for an extra touch.

Refrigerate the cake for at least an hour before serving to allow everything to set.

This version is a quick and easy take on the original recipe that still delivers a delicious chocolate delight! Enjoy!

RECIPE

From the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery

Keelie's EASY Lemon Bars

It's me, again, Keelie! You can bet Lottie was not going to let me get away with not sharing my totally addicting lemon bar recipe. Don't get me wrong. Lottie's Lemon bars are bar-none AMAZING, but mine are just as tasty and require almost no effort.

Have fun and read a good book with all the time you've saved!
And above all, have an EASY time baking!

Ingredients:

- 1 box of angel food cake mix (the one-step kind that only requires water)
- 1 can (21 oz) of lemon pie filling

Directions:

Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease a 9x13 inch baking dish.

In a large bowl, stir together the angel food cake mix (with the required water) and lemon pie filling until well combined.

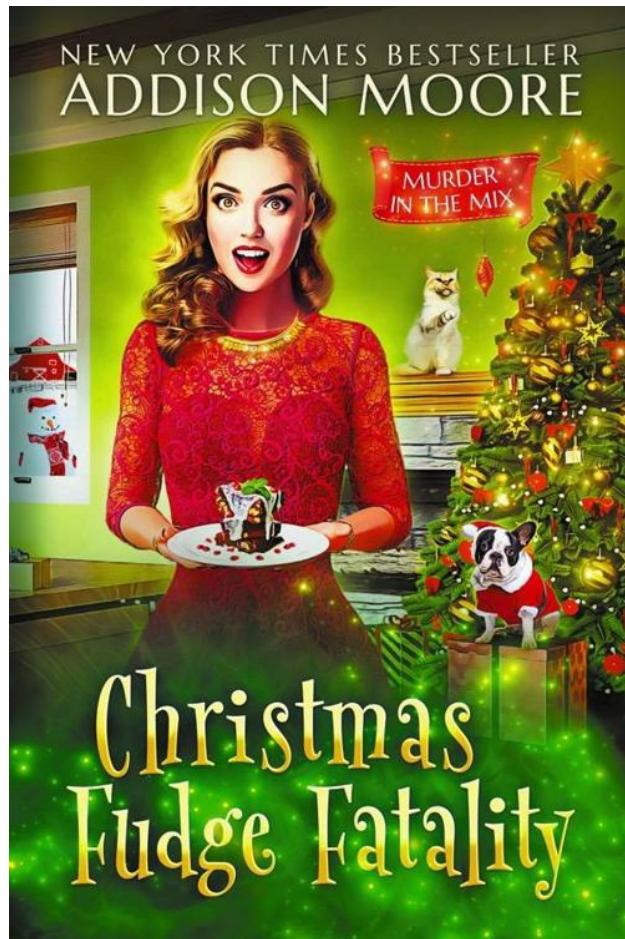
Spread the mixture evenly into the prepared baking dish.

Bake for about 20-30 minutes or until lightly golden on top and the bars spring back when lightly touched.

Let the bars cool in the baking dish, then cut into squares to serve.

These lemon bars are delightfully tangy and sweet, and best of all, incredibly easy to make! Enjoy!

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Crown of Ashes

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All Hail the King

Roar of the Lion

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Big thanks to YOU the reader! I hope you had a wonderful time. I can't thank you enough for spending time in Honey Hollow with me. I hope you enjoyed this bumpy ride with Lottie and all of her Honey Hollow peeps as much as I did. The MURDER IN THE MIX mysteries are super special to me, and I hope they are to you as well. If you'd like to be in the know on upcoming releases, please be sure to follow me at [Bookbub](#) and [Amazon](#), and sign up for my [newsletter](#).

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking this wild roller coaster ride with me. I really do love you!

A very big thank you to Kaila Eileen Turingan-Ramos, and Jodie Tarleton for being awesome.

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And last, but never least, thank you to Him who sits on the throne. Worthy is the Lamb! Glory and honor and power are yours. I owe you everything, Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Addison Moore is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author who writes contemporary and paranormal romance. Her work has been featured in *Cosmopolitan* Magazine. Previously she worked as a therapist on a locked psychiatric unit for nearly a decade. She resides on the West Coast with her husband, four wonderful children, and two dogs where she eats too much chocolate and stays up way too late. When she's not writing, she's reading. Addison's Celestra Series has been optioned for film by 20th Century Fox.

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