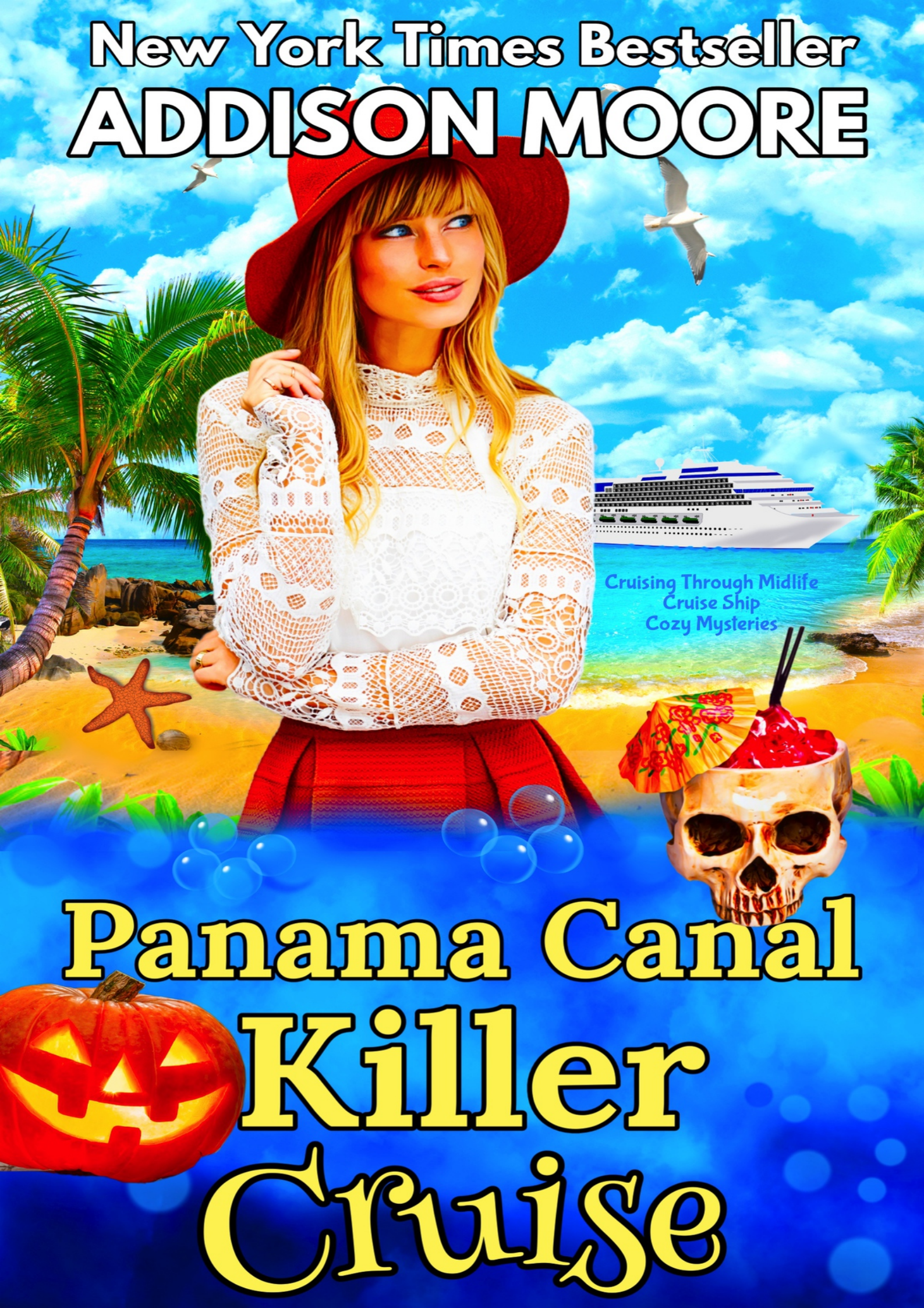


New York Times Bestseller  
**ADDISON MOORE**



Cruising Through Midlife  
Cruise Ship  
Cozy Mysteries

**Panama Canal  
Killer  
Cruise**

PANAMA CANAL KILLER  
CRUISE  
CRUISING THROUGH  
MIDLIFE 7



**ADDISON MOORE**

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# BOOK DESCRIPTION

An impending divorce. An ornery homicide detective. The cruise of a lifetime. And ghosts.

**Midlife on the high seas is proving to be a real killer.**

It's Halloween on board the *Emerald Queen of the Seas*! Throw in a notorious drug lord, a scorned ex-wife, a mystery writers' convention, along with a killer, and suddenly, bingo seems the least of my concerns.

Cosmopolitan Magazine calls Addison's books, "...easy, frothy fun!" **INCLUDES RECIPES!**

An impending divorce. An ornery homicide detective. The cruise of a lifetime. And ghosts.

Midlife on the high seas is proving to be a real killer.

**If I thought the first half of my life was a bumpy ride, I'd better buckle up because I'm about to go over the hill and off the rails.**

A laugh out loud Paranormal Women's Fiction Novel by *New York Times*, *USA TODAY*, & *Wall Street Journal* bestseller Addison Moore. A cruise ship cozy mystery!

**My name is Trixie Troublefield, and I live on a cruise ship. My days are filled with exciting shore excursions, nonstop buffets, and ceaseless games of bingo—can life get any better than this?**

It's Halloween on board the *Emerald Queen* as we sail through the Panama Canal, and the ship is playing host to a mystery writers' convention.

Authors from across the country have swarmed the ship with their noir narratives and peculiar plotlines. Who knew there could be so many ways to kill someone in fiction?

But fiction turns into chilling reality as we transit the Panama Canal. It's spooky season on board the *Emerald Queen*, and the ship is decked out in its macabre best for our annual costume party. But when an ornery ghost and a very real killer crash the festivities, even the authors who specialize in murder are left speechless. Who needs a whodunit novel when we have a live mystery unraveling on board?

We're cruising through the glorious Panama Canal, where every lock and gate seems to whisper a cryptic warning, carrying an undercurrent of danger that chills to the bone. And the echoes of a tumultuous past reverberate through its narrow passageways.

Ransom's sister, who also happens to be the captain's ex-wife, is coming along for the ride. It doesn't help that there's tension between her and her brother, not to mention the extreme discord between her and the captain. With tensions mounting, I'm swimming in a sea of family drama and deadly secrets. Throw a notorious Colombian drug lord into the mix, who also happens to be the latest flame of our scorned guest, and suddenly, bingo seems the least of my concerns.

I'm about to discover that the most terrifying ghost isn't the one moaning on the lido deck. It's the deadly secrets lurking in the hearts of those I hold dear.

One thing's for sure—this cruise will be one for the crypt keeper.

**Midlife on the high seas is proving to be murder.**

# CHAPTER 1



## *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*H*ello, dear readers! I hope this message finds you well and in good spirits. It's your friendly cruise buddy, Trixie, here to share some exciting news. I'm about to embark on a thrilling adventure through the Panama Canal, and I can hardly contain my excitement!

As I prepare to set sail on this amazing journey, I want you to know that I'll be taking you along with me every step of the way. From the stunning landscapes to the fascinating cultures, and, of course, the unexpected twists and turns that often come with cruise adventures, I'll be sharing it all with you.

So feel free to bring me your burning questions, and in the meantime, I'll pepper you with a few tips on cruising and perhaps even provide a dose or two of humor.

Together, we'll navigate the high seas, explore new horizons, and make memories that will last a lifetime. So fasten your seatbelts—or life vests—because the adventure is about to begin!

Stay tuned for more updates and tales from the Panama Canal and beyond.

Here's to smooth sailing!

XOXO Trixie

*EMERALD QUEEN OF THE SEAS*, Royal Lineage Cruise Lines

Itinerary



## **13 Night Cruise**

**Day One = Departure: San Diego, California**

**Day Two = At Sea**

**Day Three = Puerto Vallarta, Mexico**

**Day Four = At Sea**

**Day Five = Santa Cruz Huatulco, Mexico**

**Day Six = Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala**

**Day Seven = Corinto, Nicaragua**

**Day Eight = Puerto Caldera, Costa Rica**

**Day Nine = At Sea**

**Day Ten = Panama Canal Transit**

**Day Eleven = Cartagena, Colombia**

**Day Twelve = At Sea**

**Day Thirteen = At Sea**

**Day Fourteen = Arrive in Fort Lauderdale, Florida**

*Three hours from now...*

### *The Killer*

*THERE THEY ARE*, I muse as I watch my intended victim as they move through the crowded lounge, laughing and oh so oblivious as to what's about to transpire.

I stand hidden in plain sight, watching their every move.

Their spirits may seem bright, but their heart is nothing but soot.

“You won't hurt me or anyone else again,” I whisper it to myself like a promise fueled with the powerful need for revenge.

How I wish they weren't laughing.

How I wish they were afraid—just the way they made me feel. I wish they knew exactly what was coming.

Watching as they move through the crowd, acting charming and delightful, I keep my eyes on them, waiting. Every smile they give, every laugh they share is nothing but another carefree moment ticking away, bringing them closer to their ultimate end.

I move around unnoticed, blending in, ready to act.

I'm about to bring their whole world crashing down, and that alone puts a smile on my face.

## CHAPTER 2



Trixie

### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: As you step aboard the ship on that exciting first day, don't forget to unpack your sense of adventure. Leave your worries behind, unpack your enthusiasm, too, and set sail with the spirit of exploration. The first day is the perfect time to dive into all the ship has to offer and embark on your unforgettable journey with a sense of wonder and anticipation.

Above all, don't forget to hit the buffet on the lido deck!

Let's make day one a splendid start to our cruising adventure.

Cruising straight for the lido deck,

XOXO Trixie

“WELCOME to the haunted high seas party.” Captain Weston Crawford is the first to greet Bess, Nettie, and me as we step aboard the most majestic cruise ship there is—the *Emerald Queen of the Seas*.

Wes is decked out, clad in white, wearing his very best captain's uniform with a matching glossy cap and lots of brass buttons running up and down his chest. His dark hair peeks from under his hat, and with his verdant green eyes and pearly white smile, he's a looker that happens to garner the attention of just about everyone with ovaries.

“Oh, *Wes*.” I toss my arms around him tight. “How we’ve missed you. And we’ve missed the *Queen of the Seas*, too.”

It’s true, while the ship was repositioning from Vancouver to San Diego, Bess, Nettie, and I rented a car and took a road trip all the way down the California coast. And boy, was that an adventure—and that’s putting it mildly.

It’s October, the spookiest month of them all, and even though I’ve lived on the *Emerald Queen* for almost a year now, I’ve yet to experience Halloween on board the vessel.

Orange and green buntings are strewn over every inch that I can see here on the promenade deck, and there’s a large black sign that reads *Welcome to spooky scary party days aboard the Emerald Queen! Fun for some and a nautical nightmare for others. Beware, haunted high seas ahead!*

And next to that rather ominous sign stands a ten-foot-tall headless horseman holding a smiling jack-o’-lantern in one hand and the wheel of the ship in the other.

“Looks as if we have a whole new captain,” I muse as Bess and Nettie take in the sight along with me.

“*Eh*, I guess he’s hot,” Nettie grouses with a note of disinterest in her voice. “But get a load of *him*.” She points dead ahead, and right next to the entry to the Queen’s Mall stands a twenty-foot skeleton dressed as a pirate, complete with a parrot on his shoulder, an eyepatch, and a red bandana tied around his head. Behind him are about six smaller versions, all dressed to thrill as a pack of high-seas bandits.

“Oh wow.” I laugh. “It looks as if the skeleton crew is about to take over the ship.”

Nettie gravels out a laugh. “With that hottie at the helm, I’ll submit to his lusty demands. I have a weakness for a man with a killer smile and a rebel heart.”

Bess groans, “Please, you practically said the same words to the waiter at that restaurant last night and he was anything but a rebel. Face it, Nettie, you have a weakness for testosterone.”

“There you go yucking my yum again,” Nettie says. “You and I both know there’s something irresistible about a man who can rock a fake parrot on his shoulder and still offer up a killer smile.”

Bess shrugs. “I won’t fight you on that one.”

“Just remember,” Nettie says. “If you hear *ahoy, matey* coming from my cabin, don’t come a knockin’.”

Bess rolls her eyes my way before we share a laugh.

Bess and Nettie are both somewhere in their eighties, and they happen to live on board the *Emerald Queen* right along with me.

Bess Chatterley is a redheaded feisty retired teacher from Vermont. And Nettie Butterworth is a gray-haired hippie who happens to hail from the same area.

When I first stepped on the ship to celebrate my twenty-fifth anniversary last January—solo, might I add—they were the first to comfort me regarding my newly dissolved marital status. In fact, they were the ones who convinced me to *move* on board.

I did and I’ve never been happier.

“Captain,” I say, glancing around him as he nods and waves to the eager passengers as they board. “Where’s the rest of the welcoming committee?” Namely my red-hot boyfriend, head of vessel security, Ransom Courtland Baxter.

Ransom and Wes are actually ex-brothers-in-law, and oddly enough, Ransom’s sister, Scarlett, who also happens to be Wes’ ex, let us know she’ll be joining us on this trip.

For that reason alone, I’m pretty sure this will be the most frightening cruise I’ve taken on the *Emerald Queen*. Let’s just say Ransom blames Wes for the fact Scarlett left their marriage, left the United States, and moved to Colombia to live with a drug lord.

I’ll admit, it’s not ideal.

And that’s exactly why Ransom and Wes have been at odds ever since.

Wes glances over his shoulder. “The crew has been decorating for the last three days, and they’re still putting the finishing touches on the ship. We take spooky season seriously around here.”

“That’s an understatement.” Bess nods to the spiderwebs attached to the glossy railings and lampposts nearby. “Trixie, prepare to have your socks scared right off your tootsies.”

Nettie looks up and gasps, sponsoring Bess and me to do the very same thing—and the three of us belt out a bloodcurdling scream at the very same time.

## CHAPTER 3



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: On your first day aboard, make navigating the ship a breeze by snapping a few ship selfies. Take a quick photo of the ship’s deck plans and your stateroom number. It’s the modern-day version of leaving breadcrumbs, ensuring you’ll never be lost at sea.

With this selfie strategy, you’ll be shipshape and ready for adventure in no time.

And once again, don’t forget to visit the buffet on the lido deck posthaste!

Lava Cake Lover,

XOXO Trixie

THE SCREAMS SOUND MORE like a song as Bess, Nettie, and I inadvertently harmonize like the Harlem Gospel Choir.

Flying overhead just so happens to be an entire coven of miniature black bats with red beady eyes, spastic wings, and claws that look hungry to create a nest in my hair.

“Relax, ladies.” Wes laughs as he tries to settle us—and just about every other female passenger—boarding the ship. “They’re holograms. Tinsley hired a special effects team to help scare up a few surprises for us, and that’s just one of them.”

“Wonderful,” I grunt at the mention of my grumpy boss.

Tinsley Thornton is the cruise director, and since I teach a few art classes here on the ship, I fall under her thorny jurisdiction.

“Get used to this nonsense,” Bess tells me while hitching a thumb up at the flying menaces. “The week leading up to Halloween is nothing short of living in a haunted house.”

“That’s right,” Nettie says, swooning over at that overgrown skeleton pirate. “Living in a haunted house with the love of your life.”

A pair of strong arms wraps themselves around me from behind.

“Speaking of the love of my life,” a deep voice whispers right into my ear and the familiar spiced cologne lets me know exactly who it is.

It just so happens to be the love of *my* life.

“Ransom!” I spin around and we indulge in a mouthwatering kiss. “I missed you like crazy,” I say, giving the dark scruff on his cheeks a quick scratch.

“Two weeks felt like two years,” he says, landing another far more heated kiss on my lips.

He pulls back and takes me in, doing that broken elevator thing with his eyes.

“You, Trixie Troublefield, are a feast for the senses. And I do mean all five,” he teases and I can’t help but laugh.

Ransom is tall with a shock of dark hair, matching scruff on his cheeks, piercing blue eyes, a body built like steel, and he rarely, if ever, smiles. He’s somewhere in his fifties, which makes him the foxiest silver fox I know—sans any silver. He puts the brood in *brooding* and the *Lord help me* in just about everything else.

And with that fitted Italian suit he’s wearing, Lord help me indeed.

“I was just speaking with my sister,” he says, taking a moment to give Wes the side-eye. “She’ll be here shortly.” He



frowns at the thought. “Ladies”—he nods to Bess and Nettie—“tell me all about your trip down the West Coast.”

“It was wonderful,” Bess starts. “We rented a convertible for the drive. We ate everything we could get our hands on, and Nettie only got us ran out of three different counties. That’s four less than the last time I took a road trip with her.”

“You’re improving,” he says to Nettie. “And you?” His lips curve as his eyes connect with mine once again. “How was your trip?”

There’s something explosive between Ransom and me, like kindling to a spark, and I predict there’s going to be a wildfire soon enough—maybe before the muster drill.

“Oh, Ransom,” I say. “I loved the entire West Coast. Washington was beautiful. Oregon cast a spell over me—I have to go back. And we stayed a few days in Morro Bay once we drove into California a bit. I just loved that emerald bay, and the rock was massive. It had greenery that went about halfway up, and I’ve never seen so many sea otters playing in the water. It was magical.”

“They had the best clam chowder,” Bess moans, holding her stomach.

“And fish and chips,” Nettie adds.

“That’s right,” I say. “And then we drove into Pismo Beach, then all the way down to this cute little town called Solvang, a replica of a Danish village. And don’t get me started on the bakeries there.”

Bess nods. “We couldn’t get Nettie to part ways with the cheese Danishes.”

“But we eventually did,” I say.

“With good old-fashioned bribery,” Bess adds.

I nod. “Specifically with the promise of all the yummy desserts waiting for her back on the ship.”

A deep moan escapes Ransom as he looks my way. “I may have sent a lava cake straight to your cabin.” His lips flicker. “Welcome back.”

“Lava cake? You do know my love language.” I reward him with a kiss. There’s nothing more delicious than one of those chocolaty ooey-goopy delights set in a little white ramekin—except maybe these kisses. “And that’s why I love you.”

“And I do love you,” he says, heading in again with his lips just as a scream erupts from behind.

We turn around to see an entire gaggle of women abandoning their designer carry-on luggage and hugging it out with one another as if they were having a reunion.

“Ladies,” Tinsley says to Bess and Nettie as she appears next to the captain.

Tinsley Thornton, the aforementioned ship’s cruise director, is a stunner with perpetually tanned and toned skin, chestnut locks that have a body of their own, and a pert little nose that she likes to turn up at me when given the chance.

She’s about forty to my almost fifty and hasn’t cared much for me ever since both the captain *and* Ransom made their affection for me known.

“Attention”—Tinsley calls out once again, this time to the crowd of chattering women. “If you’re here for the Hallow-ink Mystery Writers’ Convention, please be aware that your welcome party, the ghostly gathering, will be held right after the muster drill in the Starlight Lounge.”

Half the crowd gathered gives a *whoop* of excitement.

A tall brunette with long hair and pale skin, dressed in a black gossamer gown, makes her way over to the welcoming committee.

“Captain, on behalf of the mystery writers joining us on this trip, thank you for the kindness you’ve already displayed toward us.” She extends a hand his way and they shake. “I’m Drucilla Grim, the head of the local Salem, Massachusetts chapter. It’s my chapter that will be sailing with you.”

“Salem?” Tinsley perks up. “You’ve come quite the distance to join us for the voyage.”

“Oh, the Panama Canal is a bucket list item for most of us,” she is quick to inform.

“Mine, too,” I whisper to Ransom and he tightens his grip on me a notch.

“Can’t wait to do it with you,” he whispers hot into my ear, and my insides sizzle with the inadvertent double entendre—or not so inadvertent.

“Please, all of you”—Drucilla nods to each of us—“join us at the ghostly gathering. We’d love to get to know you better. And who knows? There might be a real ghost joining us yet.” She winks over at Ransom. “Stranger things have happened.”

She takes off and that horde of women follow along with her. I can’t help but notice a woman with red hair and large chunky blonde highlights calling after Drucilla as she runs to catch up. She’s lanky with a tall forehead and bright red lips. And something about her reminds me of a scarecrow.

Drucilla turns and frowns at the woman. “Well, if it isn’t the sea witch herself, Ursula Ravenscroft.” They share a quick embrace as they take off chatting.

“Anyone see a ghost?” Wes shoots a quick look my way and I twist my lips before shaking my head at him.

Bess, Nettie, and the captain are the only three people on the ship who know about my annoying supernatural quirk that allows me to see straight through to the other side.

My name is Trixie Troublefield. I’m about to hit the big five-O, stand at an unremarkable height of five feet five inches, and wear my blonde locks to my shoulders with blunt bangs that I haven’t let go of since their heyday in the eighties. I’m newly divorced, and I’m also new to seeing the dead. Yes, the *dead*.

It’s sort of a long story.

“I don’t see any ghosts at all.” I wink his way.

At least I don’t see any so far.

Sadly, I’ve yet to fill Ransom in on my spectral-based secret, but I have a feeling if I don’t let him in on it soon, I

might inadvertently detonate this good thing brewing between us.

“Ransom”—I take a deep breath as I look into his cobalt blue eyes—“I think we should carve out some alone time on this trip.”

“Just try to stop me,” he teases before doing a double take at something over my shoulder. “Scarlett?” he calls out and waves at a stunning redhead who quickly traipses over in a pair of sky-high heels.

She’s donned a little black dress and has on a pair of dark sunglasses, but as soon as she strips them off, I can see the family resemblance between Ransom and her—same strong cheekbones, same strong smoldering air about her.

“Big brother,” she sings and he quickly offers her a firm embrace before pulling away and nodding at me.

“Scarlett, this is Trixie,” he says. “The woman I’ve been telling you about.”

“The woman who stole my brother’s heart,” she muses as she takes me in. “Scarlett Crawford. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same here,” I say, shaking her hand.

Crawford isn’t Wes’ given surname, although it’s the one he switched to after deciding *Cockburn* would be a less-than-pleasant way to go through life.

Wes steps in and she lifts her chin his way.

“Weston.” She nods.

“Scarlett.” He nods, hardly a trace of a smile, more like a look of annoyance.

I’ve never seen Wes act that way toward anyone. I hope this isn’t a harbinger of bad moods to come—on both their parts.

The woman takes a deep breath. “Just so you both know, Manny will be meeting up with the ship in Mexico.”

Wes glowers at the floor while Ransom rubs that Glock handgun he has hidden under his suit jacket.

I'm guessing Manny is the drug lord boyfriend.

One thing is clear right out the gate—this is going to be the scariest cruise the *Emerald Queen* has ever seen, and it has nothing to do with the fact Halloween is around the corner.

An older gentleman with a thicket of neatly combed gray hair nods my way before walking right through Ransom and dissolving into thin air before he ever gets to the elevators.

And just like that, the fright festival has officially begun.

## CHAPTER 4



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie! Long-time fan here. I've got a real pickle of a situation that I'm hoping you can help me with. My name is Jenny, and my shiny new hubby, Martin, and I are on our honeymoon cruise!

That's the good news.

The bad news?

It turns out, his ex, Betty, and her new husband, Dan, are on the very same cruise, and get this—it's their honeymoon, too!

I'm not sure if I'm being paranoid or not, but she keeps popping up at the most inopportune time. And each time we meet, she insists on hugging and kissing my husband on both cheeks! (Before you ask, she's *not* European.) There doesn't seem to be a spot on the ship safe from her tentacles or her lips—save for our cabin. Although, I would like to see the rest of the ship on occasion.

What would you do?

~SOS From the Honeymoon Suite

DEAR SOS,

Oh my, talk about a honeymoon horror! That situation sounds like a plot straight out of a Shakespearean comedy. I think maybe you should consider it a fun game of *honeymoon hide-and-seek*.

Plan your activities ahead of time, keeping an eye on the ship's schedule. Sneak away to different parts of the ship when you know Betty and Dan are occupied elsewhere. You'll get to explore and enjoy the cruise while avoiding those unexpected encounters. And if you do bump into them again, just smile and remember, you've got the upper hand in the game of love!

Happy cruising and keep making those honeymoon memories!

Best of luck,

XOXO Trixie

"LOOK at the miniature hotdogs wrapped like mummies," Nettie is quick to coo at the adorable finger food as we head straight for the buffet right here in the Starlight Lounge as a cast of thousands mingle around us.

"And the deviled eggs with a spider sitting in the middle of each one," I muse.

By the looks of it, the spider is a black olive with olive slivers for legs. As much as I love deviled eggs, it's a disconcerting sight.

"Look at the witches' fingers." Bess laughs at what looks like breadsticks with almond slices as fingernails.

Everything is neatly labeled, and there's not a single dish that doesn't have a spooky flair to it.

But nonetheless, it all looks delicious.

There are bat wings—chicken wings dipped in a dark teriyaki sauce—quesadillas cut out to look like ghosts, cheeseballs in the shape of a pumpkin, tombstone taco dip that looks like a diorama of a cemetery—an impressive one at that—and a dish called Frankenstein fritters—green and scrumptious looking, and I quickly snap up a few on a plate even if they do have olives for eyes.

There's everything from gory-looking pizza bites to coffin chips—coffin-shaped tortilla chips with a side of guacamole.

Face it, the buffet is haunted in the very best way.

In fact, the Starlight Lounge isn't far behind. The entire room is like walking into one of those Halloween pop-up stores, but with a luxury cruise twist that only the *Emerald Queen* can provide. Soft rock music strums from the speakers, and the scent of spiced cider wafts in the air.

"I'm impressed," I say, glancing around at all of the spooky touches as far as the eye can see. "I guess Tinsley and the rest of the crew have given the entire ship a swanky Halloween makeover."

The plush velvet chairs have been draped with spiderwebs. The usually shimmering chandeliers have been draped in webs as well. Orange and purple twinkle lights have been strung up above, giving this place the spooky ambiance it deserves during the spookiest season of all.

And if that's not eerie enough for you, there's even a large crystal ball sitting in the middle of the buffet display with the levitating head of an old woman inside of it. She has long purple hair that sprays around the orb, and each strand lights up like lightning every now and again as she casts an eerie glance at each of us in turn.

"Wow." Bess leans toward the glowing sphere. "She looks so real."

Nettie offers the woman a cheery wave. "Hey, Toots! Don't worry. We'll save you some dessert. And if you play your crystal cards right, I might even drum up a man for you. There's still plenty of you left to make any man happy."

"*Nettie.*" Bess shakes her head at her bestie.

"What?" Nettie squawks. "You know what they say, every pot has a lid. And she seems sweet."

"Speaking of something sweet," I say, nodding past a cauldron with smoke pouring out of it, right at an entire plethora of desserts.

We head over and I recite the roll call of yumminess the kitchen has set out for us. "Cobweb cakes, mummy macarons, ghoulish-filled donuts—that looks like raspberry jelly oozing out. *Ooh*, pumpkin pecan phantasm pie bites and dark delight



graveyard mousse,” I groan and the three of us take a moment to appreciate the chocolate decadence set before us. “Chocolate cauldron truffles and haunted forest cocoa cakes.” Each cake is meticulously cut into the shape of a barren tree and then neatly iced in rich chocolate frosting. “I think I’ll start there.”

“I think we should start *there*.” Bess points ahead at the bar where a chalkboard sign reads *Boos & Booze* And sitting in front of the bar is seemingly every variety of spooky-themed cocktails, from glowing orange concoctions, to something hot pink with bubbles, to electric blue potions, to bright purple mini cauldrons labeled *poison*.

Next to the bar, there’s a great big banner that reads *Welcome Aboard to the Hallow-ink Mystery Writers’ Convention!* And just below that in elegant, yet slightly spooky script, is the tagline, *where every plot is to die for*.

“Clever,” I say and we share a laugh.

“I thought so,” someone says from behind and we turn to see the woman with the dark hair in the gossamer dress that we met during boarding. She’s embellished her gown with what looks like three purple rhinestone spiders positioned strategically across her chest, and she’s wearing a headband with a couple of purple glittering rams’ horns. “Drucilla Grim.” She shakes each of our hands. “I’m so glad you could join us.”

“Thank you for having us,” Bess says.

I’m about to say the same when someone calls out the woman’s name.

“Drucilla Grim?” a woman gasps as she steps into our midst and I’m shocked to see it’s none other than Scarlett Crawford herself. Her red hair looks freshly styled with lots of loose curls, and she’s changed into a plum-colored dress that’s as fitting as a tube sock. “Why, I’m one of your biggest fans.” She laughs as she shakes the woman’s hand. “My name is Scarlett. And please forgive me for being so rude. I didn’t mean to interrupt. But I’ve read all of your *Vampires on the Bayou Mysteries* and all of the spin-off series as well. They

helped me get through some of the toughest seasons of my life.”

I bet she’s talking about her divorce.

Ironically, *my* divorce is turning out to be the *best* season of my life.

“I’m so glad they could help.” Drucilla wrinkles her nose at Scarlett. “Like I always say, there’s no better way to escape reality than between the pages of some good old-fashioned fiction.”

“Well, there’s no fiction like your fiction.” Scarlett gushes. “Your books are the best of the best. I hope you’ll have more out soon.”

“Oh, I have many more tales to tell.” Drucilla pats her on the hand as she says it.

“Trixie here is a writer, too,” Nettie says with a touch of pride while slinging an arm around my shoulder. “She writes scathing details about her marital misfortune to any and everyone who will listen.”

“Not true.” Bess averts her eyes at Nettie’s somewhat truthful blunder. Oh heck, it was completely truthful. “Well, I guess it’s sort of true. She writes a travel blog called *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!* where she mostly dispenses advice on cruising. But now and again she likes to toss a zinger to her ex.”

“So she’s vindictive,” Scarlett mutters to herself while examining me with amusement.

What?

“I can’t wait to read your work,” I tell Drucilla in an effort to take the spotlight off my vindictive self. “Oh, and before I forget, the captain wanted me to let you know he’d be here soon as well.”

“So you have an in with the captain?” Drucilla muses with a wink. “That doesn’t surprise me—I saw the way he was looking at you earlier. And I know exactly what that look means. The man is smitten.”

Scarlett gives me the side-eye and I'm quick to shake my head.

"Oh no, that is *not* what it means," I say, cringing as the words come out because I don't even believe them.

"That's exactly what it means," Nettie says with a dark laugh. "As soon as Trixie boarded the ship last January, she's had both the captain and the head of vessel security wrapped around her spiked stiletto."

I don't wear spiked stilettos, but nonetheless, the euphemism works.

"Is that so?" Scarlett raises a crimson brow my way, and I see that smoldering look in her eyes that Ransom gets every now and again—and it is definitely off-putting at the moment.

"I'm dating Ransom," I tell her. "The head of vessel security," I inform Drucilla. "But Wes—the *captain*—and I are great friends."

Nettie nods. "That's because he's got the hots for her."

I just stare at her wide-eyed before offering a nervous laugh to Scarlett.

"Ransom and I are very much in love," I'm quick to assure her.

"Well, I love my big brother, too," she says with a wry smile. "In fact, I was thrilled to find out he'd be sailing my way—and on his birthday no less."

"His birthday?" My ears piqué without meaning to. There's still so much I don't know about Ransom—like when his birthday is. "When would that be?"

"I thought the two of you were very much in love?" Scarlett says and inspires a laugh from Drucilla, Bess, and Nettie.

I shoot my shipmates a look that says *traitors*.

"October thirty-first," Scarlett tells me. "*Halloween*."

"Wow." I laugh. "That must have been a lot of fun while growing up."

“Oh, it was a blast,” she says. “But you know Ransom. He never wants the attention on himself, so it worked out pretty good for him, seeing that every other soul on the planet is vying for attention on that God-forsaken day.”

We all share a laugh this time.

A shrill catcall goes off and our attention is hijacked to the right.

Drucilla smirks to herself. “Speaking of attention whores.”

## CHAPTER 5



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: Be sure to explore the ship’s lounges and bars on the first night. Many offer unique themes, entertainment, and specialty drinks, and almost every ship has a comedy and magic club as well. It’s a great way to find your favorite spot for relaxing evenings throughout your cruise.

So, let’s raise a glass to a memorable first night on the high seas!

May it be a safe one.

XOXO Trixie

“WELL, look what the devil dragged in.” A woman wearing a sparkling red dress comes our way and I recognize her from earlier with her dark hair juxtaposed against her blonde chunky highlights.

“If it isn’t Ursula Minor,” Drucilla groans while smearing the woman’s name, rife with sarcasm.

“Ursula *Ravenscroft*,” the woman with the chunky highlights corrects as she sheds a glossy crimson smile to each of us. She’s so thin, she’s spindly. And with her frenetic movements, she reminds me of a puppet on a string.

“Call yourself whatever you like,” Drucilla mutters. “We all know it’s a ruse.”

Ursula’s face grows stone-cold for a moment before those glossy crimson lips spring back into a wide grin. And with that

mirror shine her lips have going on, I can practically see my reflection in them.

“Nice to meet you, ladies,” she says. “I write psychological thrillers that I guarantee you won’t be able to put down. If you haven’t read one of my books yet, you’re in for a treat. And I happened to bring along an entire suitcase full. I’ll give you each a free copy asap.”

“Free?” Bess practically sings the word. “Now you’re talking my language. That happens to be my favorite F word.”

Ursula belts out a brassy laugh. “Honey, I’ll do you one better and sign it. You’d better hold onto that because it’s bound to be worth some money one day.” She tosses her hands to the ceiling as she says it. “In case you haven’t heard, I’m taking the literary world by storm.” Her attention is momentarily waylaid by a brunette walking by and she quickly pulls the woman over by the wrist. “Where do you think you’re going, little lady?”

The little lady in question is somewhere in her sixties if I had to guess. Her hair is styled in a bob just below her neck, and her pale gray eyes look backlit. She has adorable full cheeks that look as if she’s hoarding acorns in them, and as she smiles our way, soft lines break out around her eyes.

“Taffy Blackwood,” she says with a laugh before pulling her wrist free from Ursula’s hold. “And since you asked, I think I’m headed for one of those colorful cocktails.” Her eyes flit to Drucilla. “My, my, don’t those horns suit you. It’s amazing how well you hide them the rest of the year.” She takes off and Drucilla chortles in her wake.

“Don’t mind her.” Ursula flicks her wrist at the woman. “She’s just sour because her latest book tanked. It’s not easy to be the low man on the totem pole in a room full of winners. Not that I would know what that’s like.” She guffaws so loud half the room turns our way. “*Kidding*. Taffy is as successful as they get. I aspire to be her when I grow up.” She winks and laughs—most likely because they look about the same age.

“Don’t mind her.” Drucilla offers the rest of us a consolatory smile. “Ursula specializes in blowing smoke up

her own skirt.”

Ursula grunts, “Well, if no one else is going to inflate my ego, I figure I have to do it myself.”

Drucilla nods. “And believe me, if her own ego wasn’t enough, she’d steal someone else’s.”

Ursula takes a moment to glare at her. “Enough about me.” She links arms with her friend. “How about we all head to the bar and really get this party started?”

Nettie lets out a whoop as we follow along.

“Laughy Taffy,” Ursula calls out to the brunette already holding court in front of a jewel-toned cocktail, “pass the queen bee something delicious.”

Taffy hands Drucilla one of those orange glowing drinks with a spear full of candy corn sitting in it and the rest of us grab one for ourselves as well.

“Now *this* is a party,” Ursula shouts and the rest of the room gives a raucous whoop in response. “Drink up, ladies! And welcome to the ghostly gathering!” She steals a sip from Drucilla’s glass before belting out another whoop and dances her way into the crowd.

A blonde dressed in a purple jumpsuit heads over and yanks Drucilla to the side. Her hair is short and curly and her eyes are ringed in copious amounts of kohl.

Drucilla yanks her arm back and the two of them look as if they’re about to lock horns. Or at least they could’ve if the blonde had a pair of horns on herself.

“Yikes,” I say to Scarlett while nodding their way. “You put a little liquid courage in someone, and that’s usually the direction things head in.”

“I’m heading for the graveyard—to get some of that chocolate mousse,” Bess says before offering us a mock toast with her glowing cocktail and taking off.

“And I’d better supervise,” Nettie says while eyeing the buffet herself. “Those cauldron truffles cast a spell on me the second I laid eyes on them.” She knocks back her drink,

plunks the glass back on the bar, and takes off for cocoa-dusted pastures, too.

“Chocolate has its way of casting a spell on me, too,” I say to Scarlett as I give a little laugh.

“According to Ransom, lava cake is your weakness,” she says with a smile, but I’d swear there was a layer of sarcasm underneath the sentence somewhere. “And I hear from others that you have a weakness for my ex as well.” That faux smile melts right off her face. And just like that, the gloves come off, too. “I’ve spoken with Tinsley. We’re old friends.”

And there goes *my* smile.

If she’s friends with the one woman on the ship who lives to make me miserable, then we’re starting off on more than the wrong foot—try the wrong planet.

“Wes is a wonderful man,” I say just as her phone rings in her hand.

Her forehead wrinkles as she studies the screen. “I’m sorry, I have to take this. It’s the man who stole *my* heart.” She takes a moment to frown my way. “Unlike you, I just have the one.” She lifts the phone to her ear before dissolving into the crowd.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I choke in her wake.

She can’t be serious.

Darn Tinsley for turning Ransom’s sister against me. Her wicked work knows no bounds.

I’m about to head for the buffet and eat my weight in cauldron truffles. I’ve already plowed through the lava cake Ransom had waiting for me in my cabin earlier, but a single lava cake serving is smaller than the palm of my hand. It was just an appetizer to my appetizers. But before I can take a single step, something stops me cold.

It’s Drucilla and that Taffy woman. They’re standing in a dark corner near the bar, and they’re not just arguing, they look ready to pull one another’s horns out.



Drucilla hauls off and slaps the woman. And as a reflex, Taffy sloshes her drink in the woman's face.

"Oh my word," I say as I head in that direction. By the time I arrive, Taffy has done a disappearing act and Drucilla is clutching at her throat. "I saw the whole thing," I tell her as I reach over to the bar and snap up a linen napkin. "Here," I say, quickly dabbing at the poor woman's face. "I'll help clean up the mess."

Drucilla's hands go from her throat to mine, and soon she's choking the life out of me.

The woman's eyes bulge wide, and her face turns a bright shade of pink as I struggle to break free from her death grip.

I trot backward, knocking into a few women in the process, and suddenly the room ignites with screams and gasps as Drucilla and I engage in a rather morbid and terrifying tango.

"*Trixie*," a deep voice shouts from somewhere near the entry, but I'm too busy trying to pry the woman's icy fingers from off of my windpipe to respond.

Drucilla's grip loosens, and a deep groan comes from her as her eyes meet with mine one last time. And if I'm not mistaken, there's a look of horror in them as she glances over my shoulder.

"*Commodore*," she whispers faintly before falling onto me with her full weight and I stagger backward, causing her to fall face-first onto the floor.

Ransom appears and drops to his knees, checking her pulse. He turns her over and does a few quick chest compressions as every soul in the room quickly gathers around. He checks for a pulse again, and this time shakes his head up at me.

The news confirms my worst suspicion.

It looks as if she doesn't have another tale to tell after all.

Drucilla Grim is dead.

## CHAPTER 6



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip Tip:* If you ever encounter something suspicious or feel uneasy about a situation, don't hesitate to report it to ship security. Your safety and peace of mind are their top priority. It's always better to be cautious and let the professionals handle any concerns.

With vigilance and a little help from ship security, we'll keep our voyage smooth sailing.

XOXO Trixie

THE FESTIVE MOOD in the Starlight Lounge crashes faster than a toddler on a sugar high as we stare down at Drucilla Grim's body slumped onto the shiny dance floor.

The orange and purple twinkle lights now seem eerie, casting unsettling shadows from the ornate Halloween decorations.

"She's dead?" Taffy Blackwood, the dark-haired woman who I saw splash a drink in Drucilla's face, steps forward, her own face as white as a sheet. "She can't be."

"I'm sorry," Ransom says before placing a call to the security department, and in moments the room is flooded with the entire security team, along with Ransom's comrade in detective arms, a no-nonsense brunette who goes by the name Quinn Riddle.

"You're at the helm of this again, aren't you?" Quinn snips as she strides by before making her way to the body, and I try

to ignore the snide remark.

But seriously? Why am I always present when these kinds of things take place? Even *I* would like an explanation at this point.

The crowd continues to swell all around us, gasping and whispering. How fast the faces of these poor people shifted from excitement to shock in the space of a heartbeat—or lack of one on Drucilla’s behalf.

“Can you believe this?” Scarlett steps in close, her hand clutching at her chest. “There’s no way I can believe she’s gone. I was just speaking with her. *You* were just speaking with her.” She looks at me, agog. “And now she’s left us forever. Do you think it was a heart attack?”

“I doubt it,” Tinsley Thornton says, materializing between us as if she were an apparition. She’s wearing her white and navy uniform—a sweater and a pencil skirt respectively—and her chestnut locks gleam under the dim lights like tendrils. “This was no accident. And I seriously doubt this has anything to do with that poor woman’s body malfunctioning on its own. I’m not sure how, but this has everything to do with her.” She shoots me a lethal look before returning her attention to Ransom’s sister. “Didn’t I tell you the woman is a jinx? Or a *killer*.” She grunts my way as if she knew the lethal answer, “Nevertheless, it looks as if vessel security has yet another homicide on their hands.”

She takes off for the bar and snaps up one of those fruity-looking drinks before knocking it back like a sorority girl on Homecoming weekend.

“How morbidly ironic”—Scarlett shakes her head at the melee—“a mystery writers’ conference that suddenly has a real-life mystery on its hands.”

Wes steps forward, looking equally dashing and concerned, his white uniform glowing like a ghost. “Everyone, please remain calm. We need to give some space to the security team so they can do their job.” He shoots me a look as if I personally caused the destruction.

Okay, so Wes is turning on me, too?

Quinn raises a svelte arm toward the crowd and shouts, “Please make your way to the exit and leave your name and cabin number with the security guards at the door. Just a rudimentary precaution.” She slices a glance my way when she says those last words—most likely because she knows better.

Rudimentary precaution, my foot. Even she smells murder.

Although with me on board, murder seems rudimentary at this point, too.

Bess and Nettie trot over, looking pale-faced and horrified just like the rest of the room.

Nettie nudges her bestie. “You know, every time Trixie is around, someone kicks the bucket. Makes you wonder if she’s good for our blood pressure.”

Bess shakes her head, never taking her eyes off the body. “Let’s just say if we ever want to pen our own mysteries, she’ll be an open source of material. Murder seems to be the order of the day whenever she’s around.”

Scarlett scoffs at the thought. “And here I thought cruises were all about shuffleboard and sunsets.”

“Really, Trixie?” Tinsley passes this way and pauses. “Murder at a mystery writers’ conference? That’s cliché, even for you.”

“Tinsley.” Wes steps in, his voice so curt it could freeze the Caribbean. “Now is not the time.”

“I don’t know, Wes,” Scarlett mutters. “It’s almost poetic. A mystery at a mystery conference. Although, from what I’m hearing, wherever Trixie goes, chaos seems to follow. So I suppose it’s no mystery there.”

“Oh, honey.” Nettie leans her way. “It’s never smooth sailing with Trixie Troublefield on board. But hey, that’s half the fun.”

“Fun?” I gag on the word and garner a handful of crooked stares.

“And on that note”—Bess says, taking Nettie by the elbow —“we’ll be in our cabins if anyone needs us. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“But I don’t want to go.” Nettie struggles as Bess presses her toward the exit. “The fun is just beginning.”

“Murder is never fun,” Bess shoots back, and half the room lights up with gasps and screams once again.

And just like that, the word *murder* reverberates around the Starlight Lounge like a wicked echo off a crumbling mountainside.

Wes and Tinsley help herd the crowd to the exit, but there’s more than a handful of stragglers who are staunchly staying put—Scarlett being one of them, and me being another.

“Trixie.” Ransom comes over and wraps his arms around me. “Are you okay? She had her hands around your throat. What the heck was that about?”

“I’m fine, I promise,” I say, shooting a quick glance to his sister. “I don’t know what happened. I saw Drucilla get into a tussle and someone splashed a drink in her face. I tried to help mop it up, and the next thing I knew, she was on me, her hands were around my neck, and then she dropped dead.”

He takes a moment to frown back at the body. “We’ll talk in length later. Right now, I need you both to get back to your cabins.” He nods to his sister. “I’m sorry either of you had to witness this. I’ll take it from here.” His eyes scan my face for a moment with sheer concern. “I mean it, Trixie,” he says, as his tone grows grave. “I don’t want to find you on the wrong side of one of these investigations. This one is all mine. You got that?”

Scarlett gasps my way. “You’re not going to let him talk to you like that, are you?”

I look over at the woman, stunned. For the life of me, I can’t get a read on how she feels about me. She’s hot and cold and nothing in between.

“I understand where he’s coming from,” I say as I sigh up at the handsome man holding me in his arms. “I won’t get in your way.”

He glowers a moment. “But you won’t stay out of it.”

The thing about dating an ex-FBI operative is that he sees all the worst parts of people, but I’ll admit, Ransom’s concern for me makes my heart thump a little faster.

I try to muster a convincing smile. “I’m just going to focus on the fun of the cruise and the mystery writers’ conference—if it’s still on.” I wince. “And the Panama Canal is a bucket list item of mine. I plan on being fully attentive. Besides, a little redheaded birdie whispered that you’ve got a birthday coming up. I can’t wait to celebrate with you.”

His lips curve a notch and I swear an entire group of women just sighed at the sight.

“Good,” he says. “That’s what I want to hear. And as for my birthday”—he shakes his head—“let’s focus on having a little Halloween fun instead.”

Scarlett scoffs. “Didn’t I tell you? He doesn’t like the spotlight.”

“And I don’t like homicides either,” he says sternly. “I mean it, Trixie. The mystery unfolding tonight is mine. You stick to reading about them in books.”

“Understood,” I say, making a face. “Although—real-life mysteries do have a certain allure.” That I just can’t seem to resist.

“They have a certain danger, too,” he says without missing a beat. “I prefer you safe and out of the sights of a killer—if there is one.” He frowns hard at the body because I’m afraid we both know the answer to that. “Say the words I want to hear.”

“I love you.” I wince because I’m almost teasing.

He nods. “The other words.”

“I promise, I’m just a spectator this time.”

“Good.” He lands a kiss on my lips and we part ways. Scarlett disappears into the crowd without so much as a goodbye.

I scan the room as it drains of bodies and catch a glimpse of that blonde woman who seemed to be arguing with Drucilla earlier. She glares down at the body before darting out of sight.

That was odd.

She didn’t look sorry in the least that the woman was dead.

But deep inside, a chilling unease settles into my bones. The dire reality of the situation is finally hitting home.

That ghost I saw earlier comes to mind. I don’t see the dead willy-nilly. I only see them under one circumstance—when the universe sends them my way to help solve a homicide.

There’s a killer on board the *Emerald Queen*, and whether Ransom likes it or not, I’m caught right in the middle.

I turn to leave and spot Taffy Blackwood, the exact woman who tossed her drink in Drucilla’s face, standing by the bar downing a Bloody Mary—an unfortunate choice of drink given the circumstances. Her eyes dart nervously from one corner of the room to the other as if she were looking for an alternate escape route, and I can’t help but note the way her fingers are fidgeting with a napkin.

A part of me wonders if she’s worried about being next, or maybe feeling *guilty*.

I take two steps toward the exit and spot Ursula Ravenscroft staring vacantly down at her old friend. That vivid shade of blood-red lipstick on her gives off a cartoonish appeal in this low lighting, and there’s a matching red cocktail in her hand. She’s standing with a group of women who chatters next to her, but she can’t take her eyes off of Drucilla. Poor thing looks as if she could drop to the floor next.

I’ll have to seek her out during the trip and comfort her, same with Taffy—and perhaps that mystery blonde. I know I promised Ransom I’d step aside, but that doesn’t change the fact I have a heart for those in mourning.

Besides, I'll be safe. I'll have Bess and Nettie with me.

Together, we'll navigate the treacherous waters of suspicion, one bloody cocktail at a time.

A spray of miniature orange stars appears before me as the ghost of that dapper-looking man with the slicked gray hair and fancy suit materializes. He glowers at the people in the room before looking down at Drucilla and letting out an egregiously loud roar before disappearing as quick as he came.

"Geez." I jump in his wake, clutching at my chest.

The ship may be sailing smoothly, but aboard the *Emerald Queen*, a spooky storm is definitely brewing—and leading us straight into choppy waters.

This is already shaping up to be the scariest Halloween of them all.

I just knew it would.



## CHAPTER 7



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip Question: Hi, Trixie! It's me again, Jenny, the newlywed inadvertently honeymooning with her husband's ex.

It turns out, his ex, Bodacious Betty, is harder to shake than my own shadow.

She and Dan had their table assignments switched in the formal dining room and now guess who's coming to dinner? Every single night! It's enough to make me want to starve. And besides that, I lost the gold bracelet my mother gave me as a wedding gift. Can things get worse?

Also, what are my options for dinner, and I'm not talking about the menu.

*~Hangry Jenny*

DEAR HANGRY,

The saga continues! Losing your mother's gold bracelet is unfortunate, but don't worry, we'll tackle that issue first.

Lost bracelet emergency plan—retrace your steps and check all the places you've been on the ship. Ask the ship's staff if anyone has turned it in.

Report the lost bracelet to ship security. Sometimes, passengers or crew members find lost items and turn them in.

Keep an eye on the ship's lost and found. You never know, it might turn up!

Now, on to your dinner dilemma...

The dinner escape plan. Consider dining at one of the ship's specialty restaurants, which often have smaller, more intimate settings. Reservations may be required, so book early.

Look into the option of in-room dining for a cozy and private dinner in your cabin—one of my faves and I'm not even on my honeymoon.

Explore the ship's alternative dining venues, like the buffet or casual eateries, where you can grab a bite without the formality of the main dining room.

As for dealing with Bodacious Betty's nightly appearances, try engaging in pleasant conversation and keep the focus on your new life with *your* husband. She might eventually get the hint.

Remember, it's your honeymoon, and you deserve to enjoy it to the fullest!

Stay strong and cherish those honeymoon memories,

XOXO Trixie

COMMODORE.

That's right. That's exactly what Drucilla Grim whispered, *Commodore*.

What could that mean? Maybe it's the title from one of her books?

I quickly look the word up on my phone. The definition is a senior naval officer.

*Huh?* Maybe that was her way of calling out to the captain for help?

And don't get me started on that ghost I saw.

I haven't always had the ability to peer past the proverbial veil. But last January before I ever boarded the *Emerald Queen*, Nettie inadvertently bonked me on the head with a bottle of vodka, and well, I've never been the same.

Just a few weeks later, I learned that my new little supernatural quirk was something called transmundane, further classified as supersensual—as in I could see the dead. Apparently, there’s an entire slew of quirks that fall under the transmundane umbrella. It just so happens I managed to procure the spookiest gift of them all. That is, if you can call it a gift. It’s more or less been a curse ever since.

The sun paints the sky in hues of rose and amber as I lean back in my chair with a plate of delectable breakfast treats before me.

It’s the morning after Drucilla Grim dropped dead, and the sun has just crested the horizon. It’s the ship’s very first day at sea and I couldn’t sleep, so I did a quick entry into my blog and came up to the lido deck to grab a quick bite. The kitchen staff put a spooky touch to everything, from the ghost-shaped eggs Benedict to the mummy-wrapped sausages—and my personal favorite, the boo-berry muffins.

Goodness, how I’ve missed the Blue Water Café, aka Buffet Central. Sure, the road trip was fun and the food was pretty good, too, but nothing beats an endless selection of any and everything I want—when I want it—and have I mentioned that I don’t have to ante up each time I help myself? It’s definitely a huge plus.

And once I’m through here, I’ll meet with Bess and Nettie down in the formal dining room for what we’ve affectionally come to call *second* breakfast. Not only is the food something I wouldn’t want to miss out on, but I’d hate for the waitstaff to think something has happened to me. We’re all like family here on the *Emerald Queen*.

I haven’t just missed the food, I’ve missed the way my cabin steward turns a simple bath towel into an elephant or a turtle. I’ve missed all nineteen decks of this emerald beauty, the countless swimming pools, the colorful slides that spiral into the sky, the hot tubs and beauty spas, the carousel on the promenade deck, the ziplining station on board the ship, the bumper cars, and even the miniature golf.

I've missed the way I could get myself a soft serve ice cream whenever I wanted, or a jelly-filled donut, or a pizza made to order, or more importantly, a lobster.

Okay, so I mostly did miss the food.

In fact, I'm halfway through savoring a deliciously gruesome jelly-filled eyeball donut when Elodie Abernathy slides into the chair opposite me.

Elodie just so happens to be my on-ship bestie. She originally hails from South Africa but has been working on a cruise ship for the last few decades. She's got to be somewhere near my age, but she looks no older than thirty. She has a short sassy blonde bob and has an equally sassy personality—especially when it comes to men.

Have I mentioned that she's a self-proclaimed man-eater? And believe me, the men who fall into her honey trap are more than happy to be there.

“Trixie.” She sheds a short-lived smile through crimson lips. “How's my favorite murder magnet doing this morning? My, my, it's true what Tinsley says—you really have a knack for turning what should be a tranquil cruise into an Agatha Christie novel.”

I make a face at her for even going there.

“Morning, Elodie. Always a pleasure.” And I mean it. Elodie has helped me through more than a few tangles over the past few months. Plus, she offers me a wicked discount on the items in any of the ship's boutiques. And if that's not a plus, I don't know what is.

I take a moment to admire her pristine dress shirt—white, a size too small, which accentuates what she likes to call her two best features.

“I thought I'd kick the day off a little early before my classes start up,” I say, sliding a plate of donuts between us. “I've got two classes this afternoon, sketching and watercolor—two of my favorite to teach. What's up with you?”

“I heard they were dropping like flies at the Starlight Lounge last night.” She wags a finger my way. “Someone has

been a very busy murderous bee.”

“They were not dropping like flies. It was just the one body,” I say, pushing my plate aside and taking a sip from my pumpkin spiced latte. “You know, I was hoping for a single cruise without a corpse popping up, but alas, my luck doesn’t allow for it. Suffice it to say, Ransom wasn’t pleased.” I wrinkle my nose at the thought. “And neither was the poor woman who dropped dead.”

“Speaking of Handsome Ransom, please do dish.” She waggles her brows as she leans in. “How’s the atmosphere with Wes’ ex, aka Ransom’s baby sis, on board?”

“Rocky, at best,” I confess, casting a wary look over the ship’s railings. “Scarlett is—well, she’s a force to be reckoned with. She was snippy with me at first, then she was on my side, and then she was snippy again. I can’t get a decent read on her. Oh, and she let me know that Ransom’s birthday is coming up on Halloween. Not that it makes things any simpler.”

Elodie’s blonde bob bounces as she laughs. “Honey, if life were simple, you’d be bored to tears.”

“And speaking of boring, I have no idea what to get the guy. I don’t want to botch this up. It needs to be special. This is our first year together.”

“I’ve got an idea.” She leans in with a naughty glint in her eye. “Why don’t you give him the gift that keeps on giving? *Yourself*.”

“Elodie.” I give a weak laugh as I crumple up a napkin and toss it at her.

“What?” She tosses it right back. “Wrap yourself up as his big gift. Or rather—*unwrap* yourself. It’s high time you stopped letting your prudish ways get under your skin. And, you know, get Ransom under the sheets. I bet my best high heels that he’s waiting for you to stake your claim.”

My cheeks heat at the thought. “You might be onto something.”

The warm breeze rustles by and I glance into the café as a crowd descends on the buffet. The entire lido deck has been transformed with cobwebs, pumpkins, and skeletons, giving a whimsical holiday appeal. The faint echo of spooky music drifts from the main hall, and crew members in witches' hats and vampire cloaks flit around.

“So”—I drag my finger along the rim of my mug, my mind still clearly envisioning Ransom beneath those sheets—“have you taken a look at the Halloween agenda for the cruise? There's practically a costume party every day.”

“It's my favorite time of the year for a reason,” she says, plucking a donut off my plate. “I can't wait for all the masked men. It's like running around in a candy store for me.” She takes an aggressive bite of the sweet confection she's snagged and jelly oozes out from the side. “There's an ongoing scavenger hunt. Here's hoping I stumble upon some unsuspecting beefcake in the sauna.”

“You're incorrigible.”

“They also have a séance night at the Starlight Lounge.” She points my way before stealing a sip from my latte. “You should definitely go to that. You might just get some insight into your complicated love life.”

“No thanks. Not only is it against my religion, but my love life isn't complicated.”

Is it?

“Suit yourself,” she says with a shrug. “But speaking of your love life, now that we're away from that icebox up north and moving back into warmer climates—*and* now that things are getting steamy with Ransom—I've arranged a little wardrobe makeover for you. I made a ship-wide call to my best contacts and *voilà!* I've got a range of outfits that'll have Ransom—and every other man on board—drooling. I just had them sent to your cabin. You can thank me later.”

My jaw drops. “*Elodie!* You didn't have to. But also, thank you. Bess, Nettie, and I donated almost our entire wardrobes to a women's shelter in San Diego before we boarded the ship.

We figured wool coats and sweaters would be better off with someone who might actually use them now that we're on our way to the Caribbean. You're a lifesaver."

She waves a hand dismissively. "It's what besties are for. And besides, with us crossing the Panama Canal soon, you need outfits that scream *adventure* with just a hint of come *hither*. It's going to be hot, and I'm not just talking about the weather."

"I knew you weren't." I blink a smile her way. "And neither was I."

"I knew you'd come around."

I shake my head with a laugh. "You are one of a kind, Elodie. And apparently, so is the Panama Canal. I've always wanted to see it. There's something so thrilling about the idea of being between two different worlds. Don't you think?"

"Between two worlds? Honey, I'm more interested in being between two well-toned, sun-kissed men as we make the crossing."

I lift my mug her way. "To adventure, romance, and all the delicious detours—and men in between."

"Hear, hear," she says, jumping to her feet. "I'd better get going before Tinsley chops my head off and plunks it on a table as a part of her macabre decor." She blows me a kiss. "And just so you know"—she leans in close and her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper—"I want in on this little investigation of yours."

I make a face. "I'm not investigating. I promised Ransom."

Elodie scoffs at the thought. "Oh please, Trixie. I know you. You have that glint in your eyes. The whole ship knows something isn't right with what happened last night. Do you really think you can keep your nose out of it?"

I hesitate for a moment, "I'm going to try."

"Try as you might," Elodie snorts. "Just know when you inevitably break that promise, you have a partner in crime

waiting in the wings. And for the record, Birthday Boy can't keep you on a leash forever."

"Duly noted," I say. "And thanks for having my back."

"Always. But don't hesitate too long or that investigation might grow cold. Or worse, someone else beats you to it." She strides off with a flirty wave as her heels click against the deck in a rhythm that screams confidence.

I need to take a lesson from Elodie and find a way to scream confidence myself.

I'm about to dive into my boo-berry waffles when a spray of stars appears and the ghost of the handsome man materializes across from me. He reaches over and steals a donut before disappearing once again.

"Wait," I call out, but it's too late. He's already gone.

Honestly, entertaining a ghost before I finish my coffee?

I really need to get more sleep—and maybe seek out a suspect or two.



## CHAPTER 8



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip Tip Question:* Hi, Trixie, my name is Martin, and I'm on my honeymoon cruise with my new bride, Jenny. It's going great with one exception—my ex and her new husband are taking their honeymoon cruise as well.

Betty, my ex, doesn't seem to mind hanging out with Jenny and me. But I can tell this is ruffling more than a few feathers with Jenny. I'm not crazy about the idea either. Not only does it feel wrong on many levels, but Betty's new husband is a classic jerk.

I'm not sure what Betty sees in him, and the fact she'd rather hang out with Jenny and me speaks volumes. Jenny and I decided to have dinner with them one last time before we let them know we'd probably be doing other things from here on out in the evening. Anyway, at some point during dinner, my watch went missing.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I seem to have misplaced my wallet. Jenny is already at wit's end due to the bracelet she's missing, I don't have the heart to tell her I've lost a few things, too.

I went to the lost and found to report it and found out an entire slew of passengers had reported jewelry missing—ruby pendants, emerald rings, and so on. I think we have a true-blue thief on board.

Should I tell Jenny or keep this from her until we get back to our home port?

There's enough drama with Betty, I just don't want to panic my new bride any more than she already is.

What would you do?

~Losing It in the Atlantic

DEAR LOSING IT,

Oh my! First, regarding missing items—keep calm and report your missing items to ship security. I'd wait for their investigation before alarming Jenny. And keep an eye out for suspicious activity discreetly. No need to put yourself in harm's way.

As for dealing with the Betty situation—I strongly suggest you have a private talk with Betty, kindly setting firm boundaries. Politely decline her invitations if she continues to intrude. And please prioritize quality time with Jenny during your honeymoon.

Communication is key!

Stay calm and enjoy your cruise,

XOXO Trixie

“NETTIE, did you raid a disco ball factory on your way to dinner?” Bess teases while raising a brow at Nettie's rather vibrant, sequined scarf.

“Oh, come on, Bess.” Nettie gives the scarf a little twirl as we thread our way through the main dining room en route to the captain's table. “Sometimes you've got to shine a little brighter to get noticed. You, of all people, should know that. Besides, if there's an emergency, I can double as a flare.”

“You're right.” Bess rolls her eyes. “With that bling, you'll not only get noticed, but you'll be able to guide a ship to safe harbor.”

“That's the plan.” Nettie tosses a grin to her bestie. “And once I have them where I want them, I'll nab myself a sailor.”

Bess and I share a laugh as we make our way through the opulent dining room, with its sparkling black glossy floors,

immaculately set tables, and peach velvet chairs to provide the ultimate luxurious experience.

The scent of something freshly grilled and perfectly spiced lights up our olfactory senses and the sound of jazz music buzzes softly overhead.

The chandeliers above cast a shimmering golden hue throughout the main dining room, and on each table sits a nearly carved jack-o'-lantern twinkling away to add just the right Halloween ambiance.

The elongated grand table in the center of the room boasts an ice sculpture of a haunted mansion, complete with glossy spires and an icy graveyard sitting in front of it with crooked tombstones, as fog—or dry ice—floats eerily around the spectacle.

The entire dining room has been transformed into an elegant witches' banquet, and I must admit, it's bewitching, to say the least.

And, of course, at the center of this eerie elegance sits the captain's table, currently ground zero with enough tension to keep a cauldron boiling. Or at least that's what I'm surmising as we come upon Scarlett seated between Wes and Ransom.

The three of them look as if they're forced to walk a string of wax over a bubbling volcano. And judging by the look on Wes' face, he'd rather opt for the volcano.

It's clear the evening promises a blend of culinary delights and underlying tensions, and well, I'm not sure why, but I'm sort of here for all of it.

Both Wes and Ransom stand once they spot us.

“Wes, you've truly outdone yourself this time. The ship looks spookier and kookier than it did last year,” Nettie exclaims as she gives the peace sign dangling from her neck a quick jerk. “It's like a trip back to the seventies. Only this time, without the—you know, hallucinogens.”

“I'll say,” Bess agrees as we all take our seats. “It's a lot less disorienting than the seventies, that's for sure.”

“Scarlett, it’s so nice to see you again,” I say to the woman before nodding to Wes. “And I agree. The ship is *spooktacular* looking. I’m so excited about doing a full transit through the Panama Canal, and Halloween is just the icing on the cake.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Ransom says as his lips curl with what looks to be naughty intent as he looks my way. He lands a kiss on my mouth just to confirm my suspicions. “You look stunning tonight,” he whispers and I can’t help but shoot a naughty smile his way, too.

“Thank you,” I whisper back.

True to her word, Elodie sent up a load of clothes to my cabin this morning, and let’s just say some were far naughtier than they ever were nice. Nothing too extreme, but lots of jewel tones, low necklines, and above-the-knee hemlines. Of course, there were more than a few A-line dresses in there, too.

Shortly after giving up my ex-husband, I gave up counting calories, too, and I’ve never been happier on both fronts.

Scarlett takes a sip of her wine. “Nice to see you ladies again.” She casts a quick glance to her ex. “It’s nice to know you’re in the company of such stunning women.”

“I’ve been lucky to be surrounded by such good friends.” His eyes linger over mine a moment too long.

Poor Wes. I know he still has feelings for me. But he knows all about my feelings, too, and the fact I think we work better as friends.

“I learn something new about them just about every trip we take.” Wes’ eyes enlarge as he picks up his menu.

I can’t help but make a face at him. I know perfectly well he’s talking about the fact I can see ghosts, and neither one of us is talking about the kind that wear sheets.

“I learned something new, too,” I say, looking at Wes. “Ransom’s birthday is coming up on Halloween.” I’m still shocked I didn’t procure this bit of cake-shaped information earlier. Just a few more days and I would have missed the occasion entirely.

A growl emits from Ransom as he glances at his sister. “And like I said, that wasn’t necessary for Scarlett to mention.”

“Yes, it was,” I say, nodding to the woman. “And thank you for letting me know. And by the way, feel free to spill any and every other secret you know as well,” I tease and the table lights up with a laugh—sans Ransom, of course.

“I sure will,” Scarlett says without missing a beat. “And I happen to have the dirt on both of these men.” There’s a soberness in her tone that has both Ransom and Wes sitting a little straighter, and Bess, Nettie and I share a dark laugh because of it.

Although, if I’m not mistaken, I’d swear she wasn’t kidding and neither are they.

We each pick up our menus and begin poring over them as if we were studying for the SAT exam—more like the SAE’s—the Super Appetite Exam.

My fingers dance over the culinary playlist, and each dish sounds more tempting than the last. I decide on the roasted pumpkin bisque to start—a velvety concoction that seems perfectly suited for this spooky fall voyage. Ransom goes for the blood orange and feta salad. Can’t say I blame him. Not only does it sound amazing, but with all the tension in the air, I’d want to keep it light, too.

We order an extra side of stuffed portobello mushrooms to split as well. For my main dish, I decide to go with the honey-glazed Cornish hen with a side of butternut squash ravioli. Ransom, ever the carnivore, opts for the braised lamb shank—and you can bet I’ll be taking a bite out of that, too.

Ransom is well aware of the fact his food isn’t safe when in my proximity. Thankfully, he doesn’t mind, and I always happily return the nibbling favor.

We plow through our appetizers in what feels like seconds, and our main dishes land in front of us before we can blink. A hushed silence takes over the table as we enjoy our first few bites of culinary bliss and I can’t help but moan.

“Wes, your kitchen really does know what it’s doing,” I say.

“Thanks, Trixie.” He lifts his fork my way. “Just a heads-up, the chefs will be putting on a few demonstrations up on the sundeck during the last few days at sea. A dessert spectacular. You won’t believe the haunted masterpieces they whip up this time of year.”

“And the pounds of chocolate that go into it.” Bess shakes her head as she says it.

“You mean the pounds of chocolate that go into our hips,” Nettie says while pinching her thighs. “And I haven’t regretted an ounce.”

“Well, it sounds delicious—the chocolate,” I say. “You can bet every brass button on your uniform, Captain, that I’ll be there to check it out and gobble up all the sweet treats they’ll allow. In fact, I hear Mexico has some chocolate treats that are not to be missed.” A thought comes to me as I glance over at Scarlett. “Hey, aren’t we picking up your boyfriend tomorrow in Puerto Vallarta?”

“No, no.” Scarlett’s lips twitch as if they didn’t know if they wanted to smile or frown—maybe both. “He’ll be joining us in the following port, Santa Cruz Huatulco. Let’s just say there’s a business deal he just couldn’t pass up.”

The table grows eerily quiet once again.

I think we all know what kind of business deal he’s involved in—an illegal one.

Quite frankly, I’m shocked that Scarlett is attracted to a man with such a dark lifestyle. I mean, her brother is an ex-FBI agent, for Pete’s sake. In fact, he’s *still* enforcing the law. And Wes is about as straight an arrow as you can get.

On second thought, maybe she’s always had a hankering for a bad boy? It would be in direct opposition to what her big brother wanted. And knowing what I do about family dynamics—well, that seems par for the reverse psychology course.

“Can’t wait to meet him,” Wes says, tightening the grip on his glass.

“Me either,” Ransom quips as a flash of annoyance crosses his face.

It seems we’ve finally found a subject Wes and Ransom can agree upon—their shared disdain for a drug lord named Manny.

“You know what they say.” Scarlett lifts her wine in a mock toast. “Business before pleasure.”

“Indeed.” Wes meets her gaze with an icy resolve. “Just make sure his business doesn’t interfere with the safety and pleasure of my passengers.”

The clink of silverware takes over once again as our conversation hits an all-time lull.

Ransom leans my way and whispers, “I meant what I said. You look amazing tonight, Trixie.”

“Why, thank you, kind sir.” I shoot him a playful grin. “And you look bewitchingly handsome. You’re casting a spell on me with those blue eyes of yours.” I blow him a kiss to punctuate the sentiment.

We finish up dinner, and soon we’re halfway through dessert as well—pumpkin spice crème brûlée, some ghostly chocolate fondue that we all partake in, and a slice of midnight berry tart—a berry pie to die for indeed.

Bess clears her throat. “So what’s going to happen to poor Drucilla?” she practically whispers the woman’s name and for good reason. Half the guests seated around us are Drucilla’s cohorts in mystery writing crime.

Ransom’s chest expands as he glances at me. “The body was airlifted back to San Diego just a few hours after she passed. But I’ve got a video call into the coroner’s office tomorrow afternoon. I’ll be curious to hear what he has to say.”

Scarlett clucks her tongue. “Poor thing. Maybe she had a blood clot? She did just endure a five-hour flight to catch the

ship, to begin with. I hear it's not uncommon."

"True," I say, hoping for the best but knowing better.

"Oh, hon." Nettie leans in. "That was no ordinary bodily malfunction that took that grande dame down. And we've got Trixie Troublefield here to prove it."

Scarlett gives a knowing nod my way. "I guess they were right. Everyone is aware of your—well, for lack of a better word, *powers*."

I'm guessing the infamous *they* would be Tinsley.

"Truth is stranger than fiction," Bess says with a shrug and we all share a laugh at that one—including me, even if I am the butt of that joke.

The evening might be haunted by past grudges and unfinished business, but despite itself, it promises to be one to remember.

We finish up dessert and both Bess and Nettie rise from their chairs to save us a seat at the upcoming show in the Emerald Theater.

"You're going to love it, Scarlett," I tell her. "The ship's entertainment crew always puts on a Broadway-worthy performance. And according to the *Seabreeze Newsletter*, tonight's number is called *Ghoul Grooves—A Hauntingly Harmonious Cabaret*. Nettie usually sneaks in popcorn, but afterward we make our way up to the lido deck and hit the buffet. They've got a killer lava cake that I'd swim across a few oceans for. And we could hit the casino afterward too if you like."

"I can't wait." She pins a smile to her face, but it looks somewhat manufactured. Her phone buzzes in her hand and she jumps. "It's Manny. Pardon me a moment." She steps aside and begins tapping away into her phone furtively.

Ransom's phone buzzes as well and he glances down at it.

"Looks like it runs in the family," I tease just as he finishes scanning over the screen and winces.



“Maybe don’t save a seat for me at the show.” Ransom sighs as he pulls me close. “Quinn just called a meeting. It might be a while. I’ll try to catch you in time for the lava cake. Maybe we can enjoy a nightcap at my place?”

“Sounds like heaven,” I say. “So what’s the meeting about? Is it about the case? Do you know something about Drucilla’s murder?”

“Murder?” He lifts a brow. “Why do I get the feeling you know something I don’t?”

I shrug up at him. “That’s because I’m intuitive?”

He growls before giving me a kiss. “I’d better get going. Stay out of trouble. Not that I think it’s possible,” he says, taking off for the exit.

“Hey,” I call after him, albeit weakly. “I resemble that remark,” I mutter mostly to myself. And indeed, I do resemble it.

Wes comes over and pulls me close. “All right, Trixie. Who’s the ghost this time?”

“How did you know?” I practically mouth the words. “Never mind. Don’t answer.” I give a quick glance around. “It’s a man, a very dapper man. I don’t see him at the moment, but he’s been popping in and out like the apparition he is, and let me tell you—he doesn’t look one bit friendly.”

“An unfriendly ghost?” He tips his head to the side. “Maybe steer clear of this one.” He glances at his watch. “Speaking of which, I need to head to the bridge. I’ll catch up with you soon enough.” He takes a moment to frown my way. “Stay out of trouble, would you?” He offers me a quick embrace. “Don’t worry. That fun quirk of yours is still our little secret.” He takes off, only to reveal Scarlett standing less than a foot away.

“Well, well, well,” she says, folding her arms staunchly over her chest. “It seems you and Wes are sharing a little secret.” She shakes her head as the smile drips from her face. “It had better not be the secret Tinsley was alluding to. If you’re stepping out on my brother—with my ex, no less—

there just might be another dead body on this ship.” She lifts her chin as she strides past me. “I’ll see you in the theater.”

I swallow hard as she breezes out of the room.

Why do I get the feeling Scarlett would have no trouble feeding me to the sharks—and keeping her hands clean while getting her cartel boyfriend to do all of her dirty work?

A spray of stars appears near that ice sculpture as the ghost with no name clears the makeshift tombstones right off the table. A few passengers gasp and scream as the haunted house seemingly begins to crumble on its own.

The specter in question nods my way before letting out a roar worthy of a lion and darts right through the ceiling, leaving every last chandelier shaking in his wake.

The lights flicker, the ship takes an unexpected dip, and every last soul on board has just been put on notice.

This ghost ship is headed for uncharted waters where the past lays out deadly consequences for the very near future.

## CHAPTER 9



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie! My name is Betty, and I happen to be on the same cruise as my ex and his new bride. The truth is, I'm here under false pretenses.

I paid some shmuck I met at a bar to take the cruise with me and pretend to be my new husband just to try to make my ex jealous. I just can't stand the fact my ex chose Jittery Jenny over me!

Anyway, Dan, my fake hubby, is actually a pretty fun guy. He loves to hang out at the bars and the casino, and he's been getting pretty friendly with just about everyone we meet. And not only that, but while he was taking a shower, I opened his drawer by mistake instead of mine and found an entire cache of jewelry in it—a gorgeous gold bracelet, a couple of ruby pendants, and a luscious emerald ring among other things.

I think my faux beau is not only going to pop the question, but he's about to shower me with jewels! Do you think I should take a chance on romance and ditch the vendetta against my ex? I think I may actually be on the receiving end of Cupid's arrow this time!

~Betty with the Beau

DEAR BETTY WITH THE BEAU,

Oh dear, Betty! While things that sparkle are wonderful, I would question if there was more to the story with those jewels. If I were you, I'd proceed with caution.

While your connection with Dan seems enjoyable, I'd advise you to head straight for the ship's security and ask to speak with the lost and found. Ask if anyone has reported a ruby pendant, a gold bracelet, or an emerald ring missing—just in case he's found them lying around and hadn't wanted to mention it. I trust that the ship's security team can take it from there.

Best of luck,

XOXO Trixie

THE PROMENADE DECK is alive with the hustle and bustle of passengers doing their best to leave the ship for the first excursion of the trip. It's mid-morning, and the ship has settled in its first port of call, gorgeous, colorful Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

And amidst the cheerful chaos, the magic of the Halloween season surrounds us like a gossamer shawl. Glowing jack-o'-lanterns pepper the path, and orange and black garlands are intertwined with both cobwebs and sparkling twinkle lights that sit draped gracefully over the railings. And those skeleton pirates are still being mobbed by every person who comes their way as they struggle to get a selfie with them.

But today's adventure doesn't involve pirates. It involves Puerto Vallarta in all of its colorful history and glory. And it seems every last soul on board the *Emerald Queen* is brimming with the anticipation of discovering new wonders. The excitement is palpable in the salty sea air.

Bess, Nettie, and I just enjoyed *first* breakfast at the Blue Water Café. I eschewed the waffles for pancakes because I wanted something light.

Then we enjoyed *second* breakfast in the main dining room—a prudent decision considering the fact we had eggs Benedict all around. Something tells me we'll be needing the protein to get our day started off on the right foot.

Speaking of feet, I hope there's not a whole lot of walking involved this afternoon. These sandals Elodie sent to my cabin

are glorious—gold strappy numbers with flat heels—but they’re not made to win any marathons.

Bess and Nettie ran back to their cabins to grab their hats and I head to the gangway to meet up with them again.

I give a quick glance to the crowd for two of my favorite women, but they’re not here yet. Although, I do spot a couple of people I know all too well.

“Captain,” I say with a wave as I speed in his direction. He’s standing next to Tinsley and wishing the passengers a wonderful visit as they head down the gangway.

“Trixie.” He sheds an easy smile. “Off on your own today?”

“I’m meeting up with Bess and Nettie—and actually Scarlett, too. We invited her to enjoy the port with us.”

The lights flicker overhead before Wes can answer, and a series of gasps and screams go off around us, quickly followed by a bout of nervous laughter.

“Now that casts a shadow over the festivities,” Wes says with a chuckle, looking polished in his navy uniform.

“I don’t think it’s funny,” Tinsley snorts. “I think we’ve got a true-blue ghost on the ship with us.”

I make a face at her for hitting it right on the ghostly money.

Tinsley looks polished herself with her skintight navy pencil shirt and equally skintight white dress shirt. Her hair is pulled back into a severe dark ponytail that looks as if it’s offering her an inadvertent facelift.

Note to self: Ponytail facelift. Make it happen—preferably on Ransom’s birthday to remind him he’s in cahoots with a younger woman.

“It’s probably just an electrical short,” I say just low enough for the two of them to hear.

The last thing we need is to incite a panic among the passengers in fear of an electrical fire.

“We’ve checked everything,” Tinsley says through slotted lids. “It’s not a power issue.”

Wes nods. “It’s true. She had me check,” he murmurs that last part.

She growls my way, “And the flickering lights are just the tip of the haunted iceberg. Passengers have reported doors slamming on their own, ghostly whispers in the night, windows rattling—and a handful of passengers have even reported seeing a dapper-looking gentleman who appears and *disappears* at will.”

My eyes spring wide open at that one.

It’s him!

It’s the ghost.

Not that I’d ever confirm Tinsley’s suspicions.

She leans in and glares right at me. “And don’t think for a second that we’re not aware that *you’re* at the bottom of this seaside curse.”

“What curse?” I regret asking the question before it leaves my lips.

“The fact you dragged a phantom on board with your penchant to keep the Grim Reaper busy.”

“*What?*” I raise a brow. “If there is a disembodied passenger here for your to-die-for Halloween party, it’s not my fault. Maybe you wooed him here with your horror-themed décor?”

“Are you saying it’s my fault?” She takes a full step back and examines me with a look that suggests I have some nerve.

“If the haunted shoe fits,” I say. “You’re the one that lined this ship with crystal balls and all things spooky and kooky. I wouldn’t be surprised if an entire gaggle of the undead showed up before we reached Florida. You practically threw out the supernatural welcome mat.”

“I am pretty good at decorating, aren’t I?” she sniffs with a look of clear disdain. “Just my luck to have a haunting on the

cruise.”

Wes shakes his head my way as if beckoning me not to say another word that might egg Tinsley on. Although, I’ll admit, it’s a lot of fun.

“Perhaps we should focus on the matter at hand, ladies.” Wes nods to the mob of passengers crowding the gangway. “We need to ensure the passengers disembark safely.”

“Agree.” Tinsley shoots me a look. “Safely and without any otherworldly interference.”

“Fine.” I shrug. “But I will say this, if there is a ghost on board, it’s got excellent taste in cruises.”

Wes chuckles at the thought just as the lights give another flicker, plunging the vibrant deck into a momentary abyss.

A gasp rises from the surrounding passengers, followed by hushed murmurs of concern—or more to the point, regret.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Tinsley huffs in exasperation. She scans the crowd of visibly agitated travelers. “I’d better handle this.” She takes a moment to glare at me. “Try to keep the body count at a minimum, would you?” She hustles off with her heels clicking sharply against the deck as she moves, and in her wake Bess and Nettie show up, each wearing a sundress ready for the sun, sea, and the *suspect*.

“Did you see that?” Nettie asks as she speeds our way and that gray tumbleweed sitting on her head bounces behind her as if it’s trying to catch up. “It looks like our ship’s ghost is clocking in some overtime.”

“Let’s hope he’s not working the graveyard shift,” Wes muses as he gives the chandeliers the side-eye.

“Regardless, this ghost is scary,” Bess says with a shiver despite the humidity in the air. “I walked back to my cabin last night after the casino had the nerve to claim my spare change, and I swear, it felt like there was someone right there beside me. It wasn’t just the cool breeze either. It was—someone *unseen*.”

“All right, Trixie.” Wes nods my way. “Tell us what you know about the spook doing his best to spook us.”

“Yes,” Bess says. “Dish.”

“He’s an older gentleman,” I offer. “Dapper, with a full head of gray hair, always in a suit. Definitely seems like he was from a more refined era. An angrier era, too.”

“*Ooh.*” Nettie doesn’t waste any time rubbing her hands in delight at the thought of a Dapper Dan running amok sans a body. “Sounds like this ghost is quite the hottie. I miss the days when men really knew how to dress to impress—and they did their best to impress over *and* under the sheets.”

“Ignore her.” Bess swats her bestie on the arm for going under the sheets with the dead—proverbially at least. “And Captain”—she says, turning to Wes with a smile—“we’re absolutely thrilled Trixie shared her little secret with you.”

“As am I,” he says as any trace of a smile melts off his face. “Speaking of secrets, Trixie, do you plan on telling Ransom about our ethereal passenger?”

“If I did, I’d have to fill him in on a few more details,” I say with a sigh. I dart a glance out toward the vibrant scenery of Puerto Vallarta. “Honestly, I have no idea when to tell him about my supersensual status. With Scarlett here and her cartel boyfriend about to board, I feel as if he’s already got a full plate.”

“Agree.” Wes offers a mournful smile. “I think you should trust your instincts. He does have a lot to juggle right now. And yet I’m glad I’m in the know. Thank you again for trusting me with your secret.”

I wince when he says that last word. I loathe the thought of keeping a secret from Ransom.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Bess chimes. “You should save it for his birthday. It could be his big surprise. Let’s face it, your little ghostly gift does have a Halloween theme, after all.”

“Don’t listen to her, Trixie.” Nettie waves the thought off. “I’m pretty sure Ransom would much rather have *you* as his



present. Tell him he's got a choice—trick or treat. Then surprise him with both. And by both, I mean in the buff!”

“Elodie beat you to that suggestion,” I’m quick to tell her.

“Great minds,” she says, tapping her temple and winking so hard her eye sticks like that a moment too long.

I’m about to suggest we text Scarlett when I spot an entire gaggle of women clustered near that pirate skeleton crew. It’s the mystery writers aboard for the convention, and they all seem to be in a tizzy, waving around little pieces of paper.

“Pardon me a moment,” I say, making my way in their direction and waving at the brunette with the chunky blonde highlights. “*Ursula*,” I call out as I approach.

The highlights in Ursula Ravenscroft’s hair glimmer like silver in this dull light. Her eyes are red beneath her cat-eye glasses as she turns my way.

“*Trixie*.” Ursula’s voice holds a gravity I hadn’t expected. “Would you look at this?” She wags a handful of papers at me. “We seem to have a real-life mystery on our hands.”

“What’s going on?” My heart thumps in anticipation. With a killer on board *and* a ghost, I can’t imagine what could possibly be next.

Ursula holds a crumpled piece of paper my way. “All of us—each writer here for the convention—woke up to find one of these slipped under our doors. They’re ominous veiled threats.”

She hands one to me and I quickly read it. “*Your pen might be mightier than a sword, but it won’t save you.*” My stomach drops as I look her way. “Do you think this is a joke?”

“Nope.” She holds up a fist full of those notes. “Every last one is different. Listen to these.” She clears her throat. “*For every story you’ve penned, there’s an end. Yours is coming.*” She cocks a brow my way. “And this one—you’ve written many deaths, but have you prepared for your own?”

“Oh my word.” I shiver just hearing it. “Those are terrifying.”

“There’s more,” she says, holding up the next note with sharply angled all capital letters. “Your tales of horror will pale in comparison to your reality.” She glances past me at the crowd gathering in a panic. “And these are just the ones that I’ve seen. If this is a prank, it’s a cruel one. Especially after what happened to Drucilla.” She grabs me by the arm and gasps. “Trixie, you don’t think there’s a crazed lunatic running around on the ship determined to kill us all, do you?”

“I don’t know,” I wince as I say it. “It’s clear that someone is targeting the writers on board. But don’t worry. The ship has excellent security and a couple of full-time detectives on board. I’m sure they’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“I sure hope so,” she says as the mood behind us seems to lighten and a few errant laughs break through, but Ursula isn’t smiling. “You know, I don’t think I have it in me to enjoy an excursion. I think I’ll stay on the ship this time around.” She shrugs and shivers at the same time. “I’m scared. I don’t like to admit it, but I am.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, rubbing her back just as a quasi-familiar blonde strides by holding yet another one of those infamous notes. A memory dislodges and I clearly remember her having it out with Drucilla on that infamous night. “Hey, that’s the blonde from the welcome party,” I say, nodding at the woman. “Do you know who she is?”

Ursula cuts a cool glance over her shoulder as she takes in the woman. “That’s Sabrina Nightshade. And that would be her pen name.” She wrinkles her nose at the woman. “She writes paranormal mysteries with ghosts and stuff. She’s pretty much harmless. Or at least she usually is.” She takes off abruptly without so much as a goodbye.

“*Usually?*” I call out. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I crane my neck into the crowd after her, but it’s no use. She’s already in the elevator.

I’m about to shoot Scarlett a text in the event she got lost on her way here when I spot my mark for the day—Taffy Blackwood. She’s standing less than three feet away, chatting with a small group of women, and I take a step in their

direction and hear them prattling on about the salsa-making tour they're about to embark on.

I quickly pull out the newsletter the ship slips under our door each morning—nothing scary about this note other than the fact Tinsley penned it—and I peruse it until I find the name of the excursion.

“Spooky salsa and spirits—a dance with tequila and chocolate tour,” I mutter to myself.

I glance up and spot Scarlett speaking with Bess and Nettie.

Perfect.

It's time to tango with our first suspect.

The festive sounds of Puerto Vallarta beckon from just outside the ship. But lurking beneath the revelry, I have a feeling something sinister awaits.

## CHAPTER 10



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: Don't be afraid to haggle with local vendors, but do so with a smile and a sense of humor.

Negotiating is often part of the culture, and it can be a fun way to connect with locals and snag some unique souvenirs. Start with a friendly, *how about we work out a deal* and let the bargaining adventure begin.

With a dash of charm and a pinch of wit, you might just master the delicious art of haggling.

Happy shopping, explorers,

XOXO Trixie

THE FIRST THING that greets us as we disembark in Puerto Vallarta is the sweltering *humid* heat, and I won't lie, after the frigid temps of Alaska, it feels like a tropical hug.

"Put your hats on, ladies," Bess instructs as we make our way onto the sunbaked concrete just beyond the gangway. "We're not used to this heat."

"Well, I'm used to it. Colombia can be twice this hot," Scarlett says. "And I'm still putting on a hat."

She joins us as we each plunk a hat onto our heads. A couple of wide-brimmed numbers for Bess and Nettie, a Panama hat in keeping with the Panama theme for me—that Elodie sent to my cabin—and a blue baseball cap for Scarlett with the letters CCB written across the front.

And it isn't just the heat that greets us—there's a riot of color everywhere we look.

Straight ahead are dozens of vibrant craft booths and food stalls bursting to life in shades of red, blue, yellow, and green. The craft booths are laden with frilly dresses, cloth masks that look as if they belong in a wrestling ring, and skulls of every shape and size painted on vases and various trinkets.

But it's the mouthwatering scent of something delicious wafting in the air that stops us cold.

"Oh *wow*," Bess moans. "I recognize that scent. It's the tantalizing aroma of sizzling meats mingling with the sweet scent of roasted corn." She practically sings the words.

I nod. "With hints of freshly squeezed lime and spicy chili peppers, too."

Now it's starting to sound like a poem—food poetry. That's about the only poetry I'm capable of.

Scarlett moans as well. "I'm picking up notes of sugar and cinnamon. I'm a sucker for churros, and you can bet I'll be snapping a batch or two before we leave."

"I'll be right there with you," Nettie says, holding her stomach. "There's nothing I like more than a deep-fried dessert rolled in sugar to start my day in the right direction."

Bess snorts, "That explains your daily donut obsession."

"And mine," I say, holding up a hand because I'm guilty as charged.

The booths beckoning hungry passersby with the promise of delectable street food have clearly done their jobs because each one of them has a mile-long line attached.

Someone lets out a catcall to our right just as the cheery sounds of a mariachi band ignites. We glance their way to see a group of men dressed in resplendent black suits with intricate white stitching that races down their legs and ropes around the hemline of their coats.

"They're wearing charro suits," Scarlett says as if reading my mind. "It makes them all look so handsome. And I just

love the sound of mariachi.”

We pause a moment and watch as they passionately strum their guitars, blaring their trumpets while serenading us with soulful vocals of a gorgeous Mexican melody.

Beside them, a woman sways gracefully, wearing a traditional dress that billows in bright colors of pink and blue. And with each twirl, she showcases the intricate patterns and sequined details of her attire—mesmerizing all who watch, especially me.

There’s nothing the artist in me likes more than watching color come to life like that—with the exception of music to go along with it. And right now, Puerto Vallarta is delivering on both fronts.

“We have a few minutes before the bus leaves,” Bess says, pointing to the booths filled with local crafts. “Let’s do a little shopping.”

“I’m in,” Scarlett says.

“Me, too,” I say, quick to part with my money. “I’d love to have one of those dresses.”

“You should buy a little something for Ransom’s birthday, too,” Nettie says as we migrate toward one of the booths and start picking up items at random. “Maybe get him one of these.” She picks up a mug in the shape of a skull with flowers for eyes and lots of intricate yellow and blue patterns inscribed around it.

“That’s too morbid.” Bess waves her off.

“Morbid is practically his middle name,” Nettie protests. “Besides, he and Trixie practically bonded over the dead.”

“His middle name is Courtland,” I say to Scarlett, hoping to impress her on some level. “And I would never get him that mug.”

“You should,” she shrugs. “The skull décor is a part of Día de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead, a tradition where families remember and honor the deceased. It’s a time filled with love, respect, and, of course, fun festivities. It’s coming up right

after Ransom's birthday, but this merchandise is popular year-round. Believe me, my brother wouldn't be offended. If anything, he might find some humor in it. After all, as Nettie says, death has practically brought the two of you together."

I growl at the thought. "It still sounds a little too morbid."

"Well, the Day of the Dead isn't just about mourning," Scarlett muses as we take in the intricate designs of the sugary-looking skulls and marigold flowers that adorn them. "It's a jubilant celebration for those who've gone before us."

"A celebration of life and of memories." Bess sighs as she runs her finger along the rim of one of those mugs.

"All right," I say. "I'm in. I'll get Ransom a skull-shaped mug and myself that hot pink gauzy dress with the pastel ribbons. By the looks of it, the nonexistent waistline should allow me to eat all the lava cake I want for the next five decades."

We share a laugh while I ante up, and soon we're on the bus with the tour company.



WE DRIVE fifteen minutes away to a local beach where three red tents are set up on the grass just this side of the sand. And those tents just so happen to be set up against the backdrop of pristine white sand and sparkling blue waves. Not a bad view for the afternoon.

Puerto Vallarta is batting two for two today.

Each tent seems to house a different culinary delight. One showcases a variety of fresh vegetables and chilies, with mortar and pestles at the ready for eager salsa-makers. Next to that, another tent boasts an impressive lineup of tequila bottles, each glinting in the sun with shot glasses set out for sampling.

And a few steps away from that is heaven on earth. The rich, intoxicating scent of Mexican chocolate fills the air, drawing us over like a bunch of chocolate-hungry zombies to the tent where tables are laden with samples of dark, spicy chocolates, awaiting our eager taste buds.

“But first—*salsa*,” an older woman calls out to our group of fifty or so women who have signed up for the excursions. “Come this way and gather around the tables,” she says with a gorgeous lilt in her voice. “I’m happy to report each of you will have your very own mortar and pestle to play with this afternoon.”

We shed a collective laugh as we quickly enter the tent dedicated to all things spicy and delicious.

I quickly scan the crowd and spot Taffy Blackwood with her dark hair pulled up in a cute little half-bun that leaves her curls waterfaling over the top of her head.

“There she is,” I whisper to Bess, Nettie, and Scarlett. “I’m going to do my best to land next to her.”

We barrel our way to the north side of the tent, and as luck would have it, I end up right next to Taffy with Scarlett on the other side of me and both Bess and Nettie across from us.

In addition to the mortar and pestle, each budding chef has been allotted a cutting board, a sharp knife, a frilly apron, and a few dishtowels set out before us.

Both Bess and Nettie offer me a thumbs-up just as a bell goes off at the front of the tent.

Standing tall at the head of the class, the older woman calls out, “Welcome, ladies, to the spooky salsa and spirits class. And, of course, we will dance with tequila and enjoy a chocolate tour as well.” A loud whoop ignites from among us, with Taffy’s being the loudest.

At least I know she’s up for a good time.

“My name is Señora Lourdes,” the instructor calls out. She’s a vivacious woman in her mid-to-late fifties with salt-and-pepper hair tied back into a sleek ponytail. She has high cheekbones and piercing brown eyes and she’s donned a vibrant red apron, embroidered with green chili patterns. She definitely has an air of authority that demands respect, but it seems equally matched by her warm, infectious smile. “All right, mis amigos,” she begins. “Today, we are going to make the world’s best salsa. And to do that, you must first



understand that salsa is not just about the ingredients, but the love and soul you pour into it.”

Our group breaks out in a collective *ooo* at that one.

“This is how we start.” Señora Lourdes holds up a ripe tomato. “Always begin your salsa journey with the freshest tomatoes from the garden. They should be firm but yield to the touch.” She demonstrates by giving it a gentle squeeze. No sooner does she say those words than a waitstaff comes around and delivers a basket filled with tomatoes and a few other veggies to each of us.

“Next”—she continues, holding a bunch of curly herbs to her nose and inhaling deeply—“is my favorite herb of all—*cilantro*. Fresh, aromatic. But be careful, chop it finely and add just enough. Too much, and it’ll overpower the salsa.”

She walks us through the process, and soon every hand under this tent is chopping tomatoes, cilantro, and onions with the best of them. Then, we’re deseeding chilies and squeezing limes as well.

“Balance, mis estudiantes,” she calls out, still proceeding to chop and squeeze. Her every movement is deliberate and precise, unlike mine. I, on the other hand, have skills that might make a serial killer proud, but not a chef. “Balance is the key. Too much of anything will throw off the harmony.” She pauses to sample her creation, adjusting with a pinch of salt and a dash of pepper. “Remember, the world’s best salsa is not about how hot or spicy it is, but the stories it tells and the *feeling* it evokes.”

We generate a laugh as the waitstaff comes around and helps us each measure out the proper ratio of ingredients. And once we finish with that, they come back around with freshly made tortilla chips, still hot from the oil they were pulled from, along with glasses and pitchers of ice water.

I have a feeling we’ll need the water as much as we’ll need the chips.

Once her salsa is complete, she dips a tortilla chip, ensuring a generous scoop, and tastes her masterpiece with her

eyes closed as if savoring every last flavor.

“Ah, *perfecto*,” she murmurs. “And now, everyone, enjoy your creation as well. Remember, salsa is not just a culinary art, but a dance of flavors, traditions, and today we can add memories to that list!”

A cheer breaks out as we all indulge, and soon the room is lit up with moans of approval.

Taffy Blackwood lets out a whoop of enthusiasm after taking her very first bite.

I nod her way because soon enough I’ll be taking my very first bite, too—from my suspect—and that suspect just so happens to be her.

## CHAPTER 11



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: Be sure to step out of your comfort zone and try the local cuisine. Whether it's street food, exotic fruits, or a regional delicacy, sampling the flavors of a new place can be a delightful adventure for your taste buds. Don't forget to ask locals for their recommendations. It's a great way to connect and learn about their customs.

With an open mind and an empty stomach, you're in for a tasty and culturally enriching experience.

Bon appétit, fellow travelers!

XOXO Trixie

"*MMM*, SO GOOD," I moan through a mouthful as I look at the suspect by my side.

Our salsa-making lesson just wrapped up and we've moved on to indulging ourselves in the fruit of our labors portion of the class—my personal favorite. "This really is the world's best salsa."

"That's because it's finely chopped, not minced," Taffy Blackwood teases and we share a quick laugh. Our sweet instructor may have drilled that point home a time or two.

"I'm Trixie Troublefield," I say, holding out a hand and she shakes it. "We're on the same ship. In fact, I was at the welcome party the other night."

"For the convention?" She blinks my way. She's pretty, full face, with soft features, and a thicket of lashes that look

like a couple of butterflies have landed on her lids. “Are you a writer?”

“Oh no, I was there as a guest. But I did see what happened.” I cringe. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

She pushes her knife away and sighs. “Believe me, no one is thrilled about the development. It was a horrible thing to have happened and even more horrible to witness. I guess they took her body back to San Diego.”

“I heard the same,” I say, quiet as a whisper. It might be time to change the subject for a moment to deter suspicion. “So what kind of mysteries do you write? From what I’m learning, there’s an entire array of subgenres.”

“Cozy mysteries, stuff without gore, but I promise they’re just as intriguing.”

“Oh, I love cozies. I’m actually a big fan. Mostly because I can do without gore of any kind.” The last few bodies I’ve stumbled upon come to mind, and I shoot a look at the sky because I sure wish the universe would get the memo. “So I guess you’re from Massachusetts if you’re with the convention, right?”

“Actually, I’m originally from Pelican Bay, Maine. But my job moved me north. In addition to being a novelist, I’m a journalist. That’s what primarily keeps a roof over my head.”

“No kidding? Well, I’m from Maine as well. I’m practically your old neighbor. I originally hail from Brambleberry Bay, and that’s just about a twenty-minute drive to Pelican Bay.”

“You’re from Brambleberry?” She laughs. “Small world, isn’t it? I’ve been there a few times. Gorgeous sunsets. Well then, it’s like old home week. Boy, we sure traveled far for this cruise, didn’t we?”

“Not too far for me. I live on the ship now. Along with those two women there.” I nod across the way where Bess and Nettie are both chugging straight from their respective water jugs. “I teach art classes on board the *Emerald Queen*. If you have time, you should join us. And I write a blog about my

travels as well. I guess that's a little like journalism—journalism *light*,” I tease and she laughs. “Although my so-called journalism isn't nearly as precision-based as yours.”

“Well, when you've spent most of your early career fact-checking the big fish tales of the local fishermen, precision becomes second nature.” She chuckles. “A few years back, I made the move to Salem, seeking more bewitching stories, you might say. And that's when I got involved with the local mystery writers' chapter.”

“Did you know Drucilla well?”

“Actually, I did, but it didn't have anything to do with our group in the beginning. The local paper had me do a piece on her during the release of one of her novels. And seeing that we were in the same writers' club more or less, she let me interview her in-depth.”

“Wow, I bet you learned a lot about her that day.” And I'm hoping she'll share it all.

“Oh, I did, but I already knew all about her books. Her *Vampires on the Bayou Mysteries* had been sitting on the top of the charts for years. My editor wanted a fresh angle—her love life.”

“Oh? Was she married?”

She shakes her head. “She had a longtime boyfriend at the time, Commodore Whitmore. Word on the literary street was that Drucilla and Commodore had quite the whirlwind romance. Their paths first crossed at an elite gala in New York City during the late eighties. A mutual friend introduced them. From what Drucilla said, she was utterly smitten by his charisma. And according to her, he was utterly enchanted by her sharp wit and astounding intelligence.”

We share a light laugh over that one.

Taffy sighs as she shakes her head out at the blue horizon. “Their love story was the stuff of legends. They really had a love that most people could only dream of.”

“I'm sure he's crushed to hear of her passing.”

“I would think he’d be elated,” she says, and my mouth falls open. “That’s because he passed away nearly five years ago.” She winks my way. “I’d like to think he welcomed her home with open arms.”

“Now that does sound romantic. What happened to Commodore?”

Her forehead fills with deep-welled lines. “He was a real estate magnate in New York. Apparently, he was a really big deal. He went through some dark times and, well, the next thing I knew, it was reported that he fell from a cliff.”

“Fell?”

“He jumped.” She winces. “Horrible, right? I mean, the man had it all, money, love, an entire real estate empire—” She shakes her head once again. “It makes you wonder what drove him to do it.”

“Yeah, I’d love to know that myself,” I whisper. “I bet Drucilla took that hard.”

“She dove straight into her work and never looked up. Everyone grieves differently and Drucilla found a way to numb the pain with her books.”

That scene I witnessed the other night flashes through my mind.

“Taffy”—I lean in—“I’m sorry to bring this up, but the night Drucilla died, that night in the Starlight Lounge, I saw you speaking with her.”

Her eyes close for a beat too long. “I’m guessing you saw the bitter argument we were having.”

“If it resulted in her doling out a slap and your drink being sloshed in her face, then yes. Can I ask what that was about?”

She casts a cool glance over her shoulder. “Drucilla and I used to be close. After the initial interview I did with her, she offered to mentor me and I took her up on it. Let’s just say a few of my ideas ended up on the best-seller list.” Her shoulders sag as she says it. “And I wasn’t the one to pen them.”

“She stole your ideas?”

“Not according to Drucilla.” She sheds a dry laugh. “She says she merely used my ideas as *inspiration*. I didn’t feel the same.” She gives a tight smile. “Suffice it to say, I stopped sharing my outlines with her.”

“So that’s what you argued about that night?”

She clears her throat. “Yes.”

“I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine how frustrating that was for you. As an artist myself, I’d be frustrated beyond measure if that happened to me.” And maybe fit to kill.

A spray of miniature orange stars appears near the tequila tasting booth, and that ghostly Dapper Dan materializes and knocks an entire row of shot glasses right off the table. A handful of women gasp and scream as the waitstaff rush over to clean up the mess. And just like that, the ghost does what he’s best at doing—disappearing.

A thought hits me and I suck in a quick breath.

Commodore? That was Drucilla’s last word!

“Oh my goodness,” I say, looking right at Taffy. “I think I’d like to learn more about Drucilla’s boyfriend Commodore!”

She blinks my way. “Well, let’s see. From what I can remember, he was a pretty shady character when it came to his profession. I think there were rumors of his business rival disappearing, but I can’t quite remember the details. Ursula would know more than I would on that front. She and Commodore moved in the same real estate circles back in the day. Commodore wasn’t just some random investor. He was a significant player. Quite influential, from what I’ve gathered.”

“Ursula Ravenscroft?” I ask, inching back to better examine her.

“Yup. She was a prominent realtor up until about five years ago. She sort of burst onto the literary scene and shot straight up the charts. She mentioned once or twice that she knew Commodore back in the day.”

“Oh, well, maybe I’ll track her down and see what she can tell me.”

Señora Lourdes quickly calls us to attention once again before leading us to the next tent over where we each knock back three different shots of tequila—and that’s three more than my limit—and everyone else’s limit as well, apparently.

Let’s just say lots of laughing and stumbling ensues—mostly from Nettie.

And last but not least, we’re led to the yummiest tent of them all—where chocolate awaits us in about a dozen different iterations.

“Ladies, as you can see, there is a world of chocolate wonder here for you,” she calls out as she waves her hands over the array of sweet treats. “Please have as much as you like of everything, but if I can implore you to try three of my favorites, I promise you will not be sorry. First, there’s the chocolate chili truffles—a bold combination of rich dark chocolate and a hint of smoky chili. The heat might sneak up on you, but it’s a delightful surprise that makes you reach for another, just to experience the rush again.”

We all congregate toward the bowls of truffles and indulge in the sweet yet smoky decadence.

About three seconds after we pop the treats into our mouths, a collective howl breaks out followed by a laugh.

Scarlett leans in. “When she said the heat sneaks up on you, she wasn’t kidding.”

I nod. “And sadly, it only makes me want more.”

She laughs. “I guess what Ransom says about you is true. You have a craving for danger that can’t be quenched.”

I twist my lips at the thought.

“Ladies,” Señora Lourdes calls out once again. “Next up is mole chocolate pudding! Inspired by the traditional Mexican mole sauce, this creamy pudding melds together the flavors of cocoa, almonds, and a touch of cinnamon. Here we’ve



crowned it with a dollop of whipped cream and just a smidge of toasted sesame seeds.”

We’re each offered a small cup, and by the first bite, we’ve already determined the cup is far too small.

“This is life,” I say with a guttural groan that only the truth can bring about.

“And death,” Bess moans. “I wouldn’t mind spending my last day in a vat of this stuff.”

Nettie grunts, “I wouldn’t mind spending my last day in a vat of that tequila even though it tasted different drinking it straight from the bottle.”

“The bottle?” Bess’ mouth falls open. “Tell me you didn’t. Never mind. I know you well enough to realize you did.”

“What did it taste like coming from the bottle?” I ask because curious minds have to know.

Nettie shrugs. “It was chewy and it tasted like chicken.”

Bess lets out a hard sigh. “That’s because you ate the worm!”

That does explain a lot.

“And finally”—Señora Lourdes claps her hands—“a national favorite, some might even say a national pastime—cacao-covered churros. Now these are not your everyday churros. These are dusted with a blend of cocoa and powdered sugar. Crisp on the outside and soft on the inside, served with a spicy chocolate dipping sauce that will make your palate plead for more.”

Nettie sniffs one of the churros as they land before us. “I swear, if this tastes as good as that tequila—sans the worm parfait—I might just move to Puerto Vallarta.”

“You wouldn’t survive a week here,” Bess chuffs. “You’d be swimming in tequila and drowning in chocolate.”

“*Eh.*” Nettie shrugs. “I can think of worse ways to go.”

The churros aren’t long and thick like the kind I’ve seen at amusement parks. These are smaller and slightly curled,

served in paper baskets like French fries.

We all take a bite out of the churros and moan at once.

“Everything here is sinfully delicious,” Scarlett muses. “Although, some sins are more delightful than others,” she says, reaching for another helping of that pudding.

Nettie lifts a finger our way. “I dare you ladies to try all three at once. A chocolaty triple threat.”

“Challenge accepted.” Bess snatches up a truffle, another cup of pudding, and a basket of churros, and both Scarlett and I do the same.

Soon, we’re gobbling up as much decadence as we can shove into our pieholes, and to make matters worse, we snort and laugh as we do it.

I lean into Scarlett. “Between the tequila and the chocolate, we might have to roll our way back to the ship.”

She chuckles back. “At this rate, we’ll need a wheelbarrow.”

Taffy Blackwood strides by and sheds a laugh. “You’ll have to pile me into that wheelbarrow as well.” Her lips crimp as she glances my way. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure.” I step aside and she leans in.

“I forgot to ask if you knew what Drucilla died from. I mean, you work for the ship, I thought you might have an in to that kind of information.” Her pale eyes glow as they study each of mine.

“I have no idea. I mean, it could have been anything.”

“You’re right,” she says. “It could have been a heart attack or a stroke, or it could have been the fact she was deathly allergic to peanuts.” She shrugs. “I always wondered if that would catch up with her someday.” Her shoulders bounce. “No matter what, it’s still pretty horrible.”

“Agree,” I say, stunned to learn of this new allergy-based development. A thought comes to me. “Taffy, I heard people

from the conference woke up to find some sort of a nasty note under your doors. Can I ask what yours said?"

Her mouth opens and closes. "Oddly enough, I didn't get one." She shrugs. "I guess I'm not a part of the cool crowd."

She takes off and I stare at the void in her wake.

Drucilla Grim had a peanut allergy. I'll have to see if I can get a list of all the foods that were served at the buffet that night.

If she died of natural causes—allergy included—I guess we wouldn't have a homicide investigation on our hands.

That ghost appears in a flash and whips through the vicinity like a hurricane, nearly taking all three tents right along with him.

The entire lot of us screams our way right back onto that bus.

And all the way back to the ship, I wonder about him—and peanuts.

## CHAPTER 12



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip Question: Trixie! It's me, Jenny. You will never believe what's happened! My husband's ex, Betty, just informed Martin and me that her new hubby was arrested for burglary right here on the ship!

Apparently, they're holding him in the brig, which I learned was a nautical term for jail, on a lower deck until we get back to our port of origin. To make matters worse, Betty has been crying on Martin's shoulder ever since.

The good news is, I got my gold bracelet back. The bad news is, I got Betty right along with it. How do I get a refund on one weepy ex?

Is there any hope for my honeymoon?

~ Jenny Who Wants to Jump Ship

DEAR JUMPING JENNY,

What a whirlwind of events on your honeymoon cruise. I'm so sorry you're having to go through all of this. As for navigating the dilemma, it's understandable that you're facing an unexpected situation with Betty. Consider having an open and honest conversation with Martin about how you both want to handle this.

If you find moments of privacy, express your feelings and concerns to Betty as well, kindly but *firmly* setting boundaries for your honeymoon.

Try to make the best of your remaining cruise days and focus on creating cherished memories with your new groom.

Stay strong, and may the rest of your honeymoon be filled with happiness.

XOXO Trixie

COULD Drucilla Grim's death be attributed to an allergy? Could the killer have known about that allergy?

As soon as we boarded the ship late this afternoon, I went straight to the galley and asked for a menu of what was served at the Starlight Lounge that night. Thankfully, I was given a full food list, and there was nothing on it overtly with peanuts. I even asked about the oil they used, and one of the chefs suggested peanut oil may have been used, but roughly all of their dishes are made with canola oil.

So there's that.

A hard *maybe*.

There are still a couple of hours before dinner, I've worked on my blog, sketched the skyline of Puerto Vallarta, and tried to cuddle up with the teddy bear fashioned out of a bath towel and take a nap. But none of that satisfied me.

I can't get Drucilla Grim or Commodore Whitmore out of my mind. There's only one thing that might have a chance to take things off my mind—food.

As I step into the Blue Water Café, a shiver of delight runs down my spine, and not just from the bracing chill of the air conditioning.

The café has transformed into a veritable All Hallows' Eve haven as orange and black garland is strung from the top to the bottom of this culinary banquet hall. Skull-shaped lanterns and strings of twinkle lights cover the ceiling like purple stars. Glowing pumpkins sit on every free surface, and paper bats with their wings stretched wide cast dark shadows on the pristine tables below.

The centerpiece of each table boasts ornate glass jars filled with swirling mist—dry ice, I'm guessing—with miniature

haunted houses and skeletal trees silhouetted within, and that makes each one look like a Halloween snow globe.

But as much as the décor draws me in, it's the scrumptious spread of the buffet that captures my attention. Rows of fresh baked desserts with enough chocolate offerings to rival that of the excursion today—pizza with every imaginable topping, simmering stews, and aromatic soups, and an entire row of scrumptious tamales, enchiladas, and empanadas beckoning us to sample the local fare.

But I'm hot and tired and want something simple. I'm about to head over to the soft-serve ice cream machine when a shimmer of brilliant orange stars erupts in the corner of the café, and sure enough, they reveal the semi-transparent figure of Commodore Whitmore standing defiantly amidst the Halloween decorations—and his expression is showcasing a storm of emotions.

“Don't you dare move a ghostly muscle,” I mutter to myself as I speed his way.

The heavy tilt of his brow and the bitter curl of his lips give away his ornery disposition. There he is, all six foot, gray-headed, rather dapper, and angry inch of him.

I weave my way through the tables, angling to intercept him before he decides to up and vanish once again—something he's very, *very* good at.

“Don't you dare disappear on me,” I hiss as I inadvertently back him into a shadowy alcove with one of those life-size skeletons wearing an eye patch and a bandana that Tinsley has sprinkled all over the ship. “I know who you are!”

The ghost's eyes bulge for a moment. I've yet to see him up close and personal, and here we're practically nose to nose. His eyes bulge as he takes me in, and in this close proximity, I can't help but notice, that despite his dapper air, there's something boyish about him and, dare I say, affable. Sort of like an overgrown gray-headed version of the boy next door.

“What do you think you know about me?” His voice vibrates through my body, angry and loud, and I marvel for a

moment at how I can *feel* his words echo through my chest.

“I know your name is Commodore Whitmore. I know you were a prominent figure in the real estate game.” The words speed out of me so fast they string together. “And I know that you went to a cliffside one day—and took your own life.”

His mouth widens to the size of a grapefruit as he belts out a roar over me so loud that my hair blows back from the hurricane effect before he soars right through the ceiling.

“*Trixie.*” Someone snatches me by the wrist and spins me around and I give a few rapid blinks, only to see the captain himself looking wild-eyed and more than a little slightly peeved. “It’s that ghost again, isn’t it?”

“It was,” I say, huffing and puffing. “Let’s just say he left in a rather dramatic fashion.”

“Whoa, buddy.” Ransom pops up from behind Wes and quickly plucks him off of me. “Don’t you dare touch her like that,” he seethes the words through his teeth, and if his pulsating chest is indicative of anything, there might just be another homicide on this ship.

“Message received.” Wes lifts both his hands as if it were a stickup. “*Trixie*, we’ll talk.” He takes off and Ransom quickly wraps his arms around me.

“What the heck was that about?” Ransom looks momentarily bewildered as he watches Wes take off. “He’s lucky I didn’t break his arm—still might.”

“Don’t.” My chest bucks with a nervous laugh. “I was—*dizzy*—and well, Wes helped me gain my bearings.” True in a sense.

He turns his head slightly with his eyes squinted and still very much centered over mine. “I heard you say something about someone leaving in a rather dramatic fashion?”

“Oh, well—that’s sort of a long story.” I cringe at the thought of Ransom thinking the worst of Wes, and yet thinking that I might be keeping things from him—which horribly enough, I am. “Ice cream?”



RANSOM GROWLS a little but humors me, and soon we're both enjoying a soft serve cone we poured for ourselves as we step out of the café and find a table near the railing. The sun melts over Puerto Vallarta like a tangerine dream and the azure water tempts us to dive in.

"You didn't answer your texts," he says flatly, and yet even with his stone-cold expression Ransom Baxter is shockingly handsome—so much so that every woman on the deck is craning her neck to get a better look at him. I can't blame them. He is a heart-stopping specimen. "So I came looking for you. I have news about Drucilla."

"That she was poisoned via peanuts?"

He lifts a brow and looks that much more vexingly handsome.

"How did you know?" he growls. "And poisoning is a very strong word, don't you think?"

"Not after speaking to the kitchen staff. Apparently, there were no peanuts used in any of the dishes served at the buffet that night. And although one of the chefs may have used peanut oil, the chef I spoke to didn't think so because canola oil is their go-to."

He openly frowns at me for the info I just spewed.

"You do realize I'm the lead detective in this investigation," he says as his lips curl a notch. "But I must say, Detective Troublefield, you're not doing so bad yourself. However"—his tone is sharp once again—"things have taken a sinister turn as far as that mystery convention goes, and because of that, I'm going to have to insist you put down the magnifying glass."

I scoff at the thought. "Is this because of those nasty notes?"

"You know?" Now both of his brows rise in amusement as a heavy sigh expels from him. "Trixie, you're already in too deep. A handful of women from the convention contacted



security as soon as they found those sinister notes this morning. My team is already studying the security cameras. I can assure you, I will get to the bottom of this mystery as well—I as in *me*. Trixie, I care about you. I don't want you getting mixed up in any of this, especially with a killer running around."

"So you admit you think Drucilla was murdered."

"I'm not swayed either way, but if the prospect is on the table, then yes, I'm going to treat this like an active investigation. That means you should, too."

We pause for a moment to work on our cones before he nods my way.

"I spoke to Scarlett," he says. "She mentioned you included her in your getaway this afternoon. Thank you for that."

"It was my pleasure. She was delightful." Surprisingly, seeing that she's been running hot and cold since the moment I met her.

"She also mentioned that you made salsa, drank tequila, ate copious amounts of chocolate, and shook down a suspect."

I grimace as he says that last part.

"Did she mention that we had a blast?" I bite my lip to keep from giggling.

"Let's just say she's anxious to join you and your girl gang of killer chasers once again—her words, not mine." He gives another growl before giving his cone another lick, and something flickers in me just watching that motion. "Care to share what you gleaned?"

"I spoke with Taffy Blackwood." And then I spill it all—the fact she was a journalist who interviewed Drucilla, the fact they had a falling-out over the fact Taffy believed Drucilla stole her idea, right down to that drink she slobbered in her face the night of the murder. I tell him every last detail sans Commodore's ghost, of course. "Oh, and she mentioned something about Drucilla's boyfriend, a man by the name of Commodore Whitmore"—I glance over his shoulder just in

case that ornery ghost decides to show up for the roll call—“I guess he took his own life about five years ago. And that was it.”

“Stolen ideas, huh?” His lips twist a moment. “There’s definitely a motive in there. I’ll speak with her.” He licks down his cone and studies me. “Who’s next on your hit list?”

“No one,” I say a little too quickly. “I mean, maybe if I happen to see Ursula Ravenscroft, I may be moved to ask if she knew Commodore, but that’s only because she, too, used to be a realtor.”

His brows furrow a moment. “Why the interest in the dead boyfriend?”

I shrug. “You never know where it might lead. Besides, Ursula was the one who told me about those notes. She was very upset, so upset she decided to forgo the group excursion this afternoon.”

“She was one of the people who came forward about the notes.”

“Speaking of notes, Taffy didn’t get one.”

“She didn’t get one?” He cocks his head at the thought. “That’s funny. From what I heard, just about everyone here for the convention did. I’ll relay that to the team.” He clears his throat. “I spoke to Wes earlier, hours before I witnessed him manhandling my girlfriend.”

A giddy tingle runs up my spine just hearing him call me his girlfriend.

He tips his head. “He and I decided we would take Scarlett out to the waterfalls when we hit Huatulco. We thought it might be the only chance we’ll get to speak to her about that mobster she’s leashed herself to before the menace boards the ship.”

“Isn’t that the port he’s meeting us at?”

“Yes, but not until evening, so we’ll be cutting it to the wire. And I wanted to invite you along—Bess, and Nettie, too. It’s one of the ship’s recommended excursions.”

“So you’re hoping to catch her unawares,” I muse. “Of course, I’ll be there.” To mop up the mess if need be, but I leave that part out. “I love waterfalls. But why not talk to her on the ship?”

“Wes thought we should, but I vetoed it. I want the ship to be a safe space for her. She’s already feeling like a caged animal. Besides, she was the one who brought up the fact she wanted to clear the air with us—that she didn’t want any more secrets between us—and that was before the trip ever began. I’m hoping that happens once we speak with her.” He nods my way. “Thank you for coming along. I’m going to need you there.” He reaches over and gently plucks me from my chair and into his lap. “I need you, Trixie Troublefield.” His lips curl once more. “And I love you.”

“Aww, you know exactly what a girl wants to hear. I love you, too, Ransom Baxter.” I reward him with a kiss and we linger like that, curled up under a blood-red sky.

Scarlett may be harboring a secret or two, but so am I.

One thing is for sure—I won’t be spilling the fact I can see the dead to Ransom anytime soon. Not with his sister and her gangster boyfriend already boiling his blood, not to mention the fact he has Drucilla Grim’s homicide investigation to tend with, and he also has to tend with whoever wrote those nasty notes.

Nope. Ransom’s plate is far too full to bog it down with any disembodied entities his girlfriend may or may not be witness to.

But I will tell him eventually—sooner than later.

We make our way down to dinner and enjoy a wonderful meal with Wes, Scarlett, Bess, and Nettie. But all the while, I watch as Wes and Ransom exchange dark looks.

I’ve always figured they’d be a force to be reckoned with if they ever united about anything, and by the looks of it, they’ve united on their stance against a certain drug lord.

Poor Scarlett has no idea what’s coming at her once we hit the next port.

Sinister things are afoot everywhere we turn, and something tells me this Halloween season just might be the scariest one yet.

*Boo* indeed.

## CHAPTER 13



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie, it's me again, Betty. Would you believe that my fake beau turned out to be an ex-con who stole half the jewels and wallets on this ship?

But not to worry, the ship's security apprehended him and returned all of the stolen goods. And as if that wasn't enough as far as happy endings go, Martin has proved to be a real shoulder to cry on.

Of course, I'm not shedding any tears for Dan in the Can. I've secretly been boo-hooing in hopes of getting Martin to soften his heart toward me again. And guess what? I think it's working. We've spent lots of time together talking about old times and how we wish we could get them all back. Okay, so mostly it's me doing the talking, but he's sure doing a lot of nodding.

I think I'm *this close* to landing Martin by my side once again—this time forever. What do you think I should do to secure my victory?

~No Longer Bad News Betty

DEAR BAD NEWS,

Oh wow, it's quite the tangled web you've woven! Given the circumstances and your previous actions, it's essential to approach this situation with honesty and sincerity.

Be completely transparent with Martin about your intentions and feelings. Honesty is the best policy, especially in rebuilding trust.

However, Martin is married. So I implore you to respect Martin's feelings and boundaries. Give him space to process everything. And above all, remember the fact that Martin is on his honeymoon cruise—with Jenny.

Consider involving a relationship counselor or therapist to help navigate the complexities of the feelings you have for your ex. You'll need to heal from the past before you can move on—most likely without Martin.

Wishing you the best in your efforts to rebuild and heal,

XOXO Trixie

THE SHIP IS DOCKED at the harbor here in Santa Cruz Huatulco, Mexico, and as I look out at the lush landscape, it all feels like a dream. The verdant color of the distant trees, the clear blue water, the scent of the street food rising up to greet us—it's pure magic.

How did I get so far away from Brambleberry Bay? Away from my louse of an ex?

And to think I'm lucky enough to call the *Emerald Queen of the Seas* my home. It's more than I could have asked for, and yet this life is mine, not someone else's.

Yesterday, the ship was at sea. Ransom spent almost the entire afternoon speaking with those women from the mystery writers' convention who received those sinister notes, so I invited Scarlett, Bess, and Nettie for a girls' day at the spa.

We got the works—hot stone massages, face masks, hair masks, mani-pedis, and ended the day with a champagne-infused bubble bath. Believe me, the champagne-infused bubble bath is just as indulgent as it sounds. Not only does it rejuvenate the skin, but it invigorates the spirit and leaves you just tipsy enough to enjoy it all.

But now the ship is in port once again, and Wes, Ransom, Scarlett, Bess, Nettie, and I start in on our adventure. And

here's hoping it's not a misadventure, considering the ambush Wes and Ransom have planned.

The journey from the ship to the waterfalls feels like a magical transition. It's only about a forty-minute drive, but Santa Cruz Huatulco unfolds like a tale from a storybook. As we leave the coastal charm of the harbor, the bustling markets and brightly painted buildings give way to thick, verdant rainforests. The air becomes cooler, laden with the scent of damp earth and the far-off hint of saltwater.

Winding roads take us higher into the hills where the dense canopy only occasionally breaks to offer tantalizing glimpses of blue water beyond it. Every bend seems to reveal another layer of this landscape, from clusters of cocoa and coffee plants to a vibrantly-colored bird darting overhead. The chirps and calls of hidden wildlife become our soundtrack and let us know, without a doubt, that while we might be on a well-trodden path, the true heart of Huatulco remains wild and untamed.

Once we arrive, we get out of the van and stretch our legs as we make our way out of the dirt parking lot and indulge in a short hike before Ransom leads us off the beaten path.

"The first set of falls are in this direction," he says as we stray from the rest of the crowd on our excursion. "They're less popular, but not only are these falls easier to access, we should pretty much have the place to ourselves."

We take a few more steps, only to find ourselves standing in front of a large pond with gentle sloping waterfalls pouring into it from the back. A canopy of trees offers us cover from the sweltering heat, and true to Ransom's word, nary another tourist is interested in this locale.

"Oh, it's heaven," I say as we make our way to the water's edge.

Wes nods. "And like Ransom said, this is far more accessible. The other set of falls requires holding onto a rope next to a tall drop-off to get to them. I would never want to put you ladies through that."

“Well, thank you.” Bess chuckles. “Although, if you wanted to go on ahead, I wouldn’t mind sitting on one of these rocks and taking in nature.”

Nettie nods in agreement. “Thanks for the heads-up. We’re just glad you and Ransom could get off the ship. It’s about time you traded the ship’s decks for the jungle.”

“That’s right,” Ransom says. “Everyone needs some solid ground under their feet once in a while.”

“Just don’t get too frisky with us,” Nettie teases while wagging a finger his way.

Ransom chuckles. “I’m just here to make sure the only danger you ladies encounter is an overpriced souvenir stand.”

“Always the knight in Armani armor,” Bess teases.

We all share a laugh at that one, especially since Ransom has traded his suit for board shorts this afternoon.

“Believe it or not”—Scarlett says as we take a seat on a group of rocks just shy of the falls—“there was a time when you couldn’t get Ransom into a monkey suit.”

Wes ticks his head at the thought. “And now they’re like a second skin—right along with that gun he totes.”

“It’s back on the ship,” Ransom says. “In my closet along with my suits.” He glances my way. “The gun is in a safe.”

I don’t need to be an expert to know that look on his face said *don’t get any funny ideas*.

“I’m not big on weaponry,” I tell him.

“But you sure enjoy your fair share of danger,” Bess says and they all enjoy a quick laugh sans Ransom and me.

Ransom shoots a look to his sister. “You seem to be drawn toward danger yourself.”

“And here we go,” Scarlett says, rocking forward to hug her knees. With her hair pulled back and her face almost free of cosmetics, I can’t unsee the startling resemblance between her and Ransom right now. “All right, boys, I know you’ve been dying to pry. Fire away.”



“No prying,” Ransom says, holding up his hands a moment. “We simply want to know you’re safe.”

Wes glares at her a moment. “You left so fast there wasn’t time for words.”

“We said all we had to say about our failed marriage,” she informs him and he doesn’t even flinch.

Ouch.

I, for one, would hate to be having such a biting conversation in front of everyone like this. My guess is Wes feels the same.

Bess nudges Nettie. “How about we walk down to the edge of this pond and get a closer look at the falls?”

“Not now, Bess.” Nettie inches away from her bestie. “Things are just getting good. I think Red here is about to fill us in on the spell that bad boy put on her.”

Scarlett chuckles. “Actually, you’re right on target and both of you ladies are welcome to stay. You, too, Trixie. I don’t have anything to hide.” Her cheeks darken a notch as if they were contesting her words. She takes a deep breath. “I met Manny while I was in New York on business.” She turns my way. “I owned a home decorating business back in Maine, and I was forever trying to find the next new look for fashion-forward homes. Manny was there on business himself, and we bumped into one another a time or two.” She glances down. “Wes, you were always gone; our marriage was basically over. I raised the boys, and they were never home—I was lonely. I’m sorry. It wasn’t right. In fact, I knew it wasn’t, and that’s why I initiated the divorce.” She sniffs my way once again. “So contrary to what you may have heard, I did not run out on my family. It was time. My time.” She swallows hard as she looks over at Wes. “I think I finally owe you an apology for the way I went about things. I’m truly sorry about that.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe.” Wes’ stern demeanor doesn’t soften. “But I’m not certain how long I can be assured of that. I’m just going to say it—the man you chose to be with has a record of illegal dealings.”

“He’s changed,” she spits the words out so fast, it sounds like a battle cry. “He’s not the same person. He did his time.” She turns my way. “Manny used to be a part of a dirty drug cartel. He’s not doing that anymore.”

That last part comes out more of a question, and it makes me wonder if she believes the lie herself. Not that she’s lying to us—at least I don’t think so. More like she’s being lied to and she suspects it might be true.

“I met your sons,” I tell her softly. “Owen and Carter—they’re wonderful boys. They cruised with us when we were in Alaska. In fact, my children came and so did Bess’ granddaughter. They’re all about the same age—all in college and they got along great.” So *great* that my daughter, Abbey, is still seeing Owen. Also, my son, Parker, is still seeing Ransom’s daughter, Emerson.

It’s a bit twisted, I know.

“The boys told me all about it,” Scarlett says with a wistful sigh. “And yes, I know that Owen is seeing Abbey, and that Carter is with your granddaughter.” She nods to Bess. “It’s a small world and it just keeps getting smaller.”

“It’s about to get even smaller tonight,” Nettie says. “I can’t wait to see the fireworks—I mean, meet your man, *Manny*. Hey, you don’t think he has any way I can get my hands on some discounted bone-building meds, do you? My insurance says I’m up a creek without a co-pay paddle, and these twigs I’m standing on are quickly turning into dust and about to crack off.”

“*Nettie*.” Bess elbows the woman and nearly sends her into the water. “Please excuse her. That brain of hers is turning into dust as well. Come on.” She stands and helps Nettie to her feet. “Last one to the falls is a rotten egg.”

“You’re a rotten egg,” Nettie calls out as Bess takes off. “You just heard me tell everyone that my twigs were about to crack off!”

“Well, if you get cracking, you might just beat me,” Bess calls back and Nettie takes off after her.

“They’re great.” Scarlett laughs before sobering up. “And so is Manny.” She takes a moment to look from Wes to Ransom. “Look, you may not approve of who I’m seeing, but that’s okay. You’re going to have to learn to trust my judgment.”

“It’s his judgment I don’t trust,” Ransom spits the words out sharp as a knife. “And I’m severely questioning yours.”

“Same,” Wes says. “Look, I’m your ex. I’m not going to be signing up for this guy’s fan club no matter what he did. I don’t care if he’s the owner of a luxury resort, I want little to nothing to do with him. But the fact he’s not only got a record—he’s on a watchlist as long as my arm—the guy is bad news. And bad news begets bad news.”

Ransom takes a breath. “The last thing we want is to hear any bad news regarding you, Scarlett. If you get in this guy’s way—or the way of his cohorts—you can end up dead.”

She tips her head back abruptly and blinks up to the sky, trying to keep her tears in check.

“Last I heard, the mortality rate is still sitting at one hundred percent.” She manufactures a smile for the two of them, but neither one of them responds in kind. “Okay, I’m sorry. Bad joke. Look, I’ve been doing my level best to stay out of danger. I’m a grown woman. I can’t promise you anything other than the fact I’m watching out for myself. And for the first time in a good long while, I’m happy. Can’t either of you find it in your hearts to be happy for me, too?”

Ransom casts a quick glance my way as if to say *are you hearing this?*

That’s the nice thing about becoming a couple with Ransom—our silent conversation game is strong.

I nod his way.

“Scarlett”—I start softly—“you have to see this from their perspective. You’re putting yourself in grave danger. And they love you so much they don’t want anything bad to happen. I hope for your sake what Manny says is true about his career

change. Because if it's not, you're not just playing with fire, you're dancing in the flames."

"I know." She gives a solemn nod and suddenly looks as if she'd rather be anywhere but here. "How about we have some fun?" Her hands slap her thighs as she springs to her feet and whips off her cover-up to reveal a one-piece underneath. "Last one in is a rotten egg!" She lets out a yelp before jumping into the water with a splash.

"I'm no rotten egg," Wes says, practically falling in after chucking off his shirt and shoes.

Ransom and I quickly disrobe and hop into the water together, coming up with a laugh caught in our throats.

The water is cool and refreshing, taking the sting off the humidity and the heat.

It's exactly what we needed.

"I'll be a rotten egg with you anytime," Ransom says, pulling me close.

"Technically, my foot hit the water first, so that leaves—"

"The rotten egg standing alone?" he muses with his hair slicked back and his eyes as blue as any ocean on Earth could hope to be. "I see how it is. In that case, race you to the falls." He dives in that direction and I let out a yelp of a laugh before diving right after him.

Ransom waits for me just shy of those roaring wonders before pulling me to him and we swim under the falls together.

Bess and Nettie position themselves right under those massive falls to get the massage of a lifetime, and Wes and Scarlett seem to be having a somewhat amicable conversation about their sons. The words *grad school* permeate the air every once in a while as they buzz away.

Ransom holds me tight and sighs as he looks in their direction. "Of all the people on the planet she could be with, she chose a drug lord."

"A drug lord who apparently has another line of work." I shrug up at him. "We can ask what he's up to. That might be a

good icebreaker.”

A growl works its way from his chest. “I feel like that’s just inciting the guy to lie to my face. But knowledge is power. If anything, I might just be providing him the rope with which to hang himself.”

“*Or*—who knows?” I say as I wrap my legs around him. “You might actually like the guy.”

Ransom glares out at some invisible horizon. “I’d much rather watch him swing.”

He pulls us under the falls and I laugh as the water crashes over us.

Ransom lands a kiss on my lips that assures me of his love for me, that assures me he’d much rather focus on anything but a character from the cartel.

And I oblige him.

I’d much rather think of us, too.

But in the back of my mind, Drucilla Grim beckons me to find her killer, and somewhere up above, Commodore Whitmore bellows with a ghostly laugh.

## CHAPTER 14



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: As Dress Your Best Night approaches, here's a tip to make the most of your formal attire. Instead of letting that fabulous outfit gather dust until the next formal night, mix and match!

Pair your elegant dress or snazzy suit with different accessories or a new hairstyle. Voilà, you've got a fresh look without the extra luggage. Plus, it's eco-friendly! And in the event your trip has more than two formal nights, please feel free to don that frock or suit one more time. No one will mind, and it can take the pressure off of packing extra fancy duds.

With a sprinkle of creativity, you'll be the belle or beau of the ball on multiple nights. Cheers to dressing your best and re-besting it, too!

XOXO Trixie

EVENING HAS ARRIVED FASTER than a groom at the altar, and what would normally be considered the ship's first formal evening is being called the Ghoulish Gala.

In lieu of suits and cocktail dresses, passengers have been encouraged to dress to impress in costume—and every last passenger seems to have stepped up to the spooky challenge.

Scarlett was a no-show at dinner since she was anxiously waiting at the gangway for Manny to arrive. The rest of us weren't exactly in cheery moods either, so it's probably for the better.

It's close to seven and I'm sitting at a table in a lounge with Wes and Ransom—both have opted to dress as themselves, and well, so did I, but I blame my ship bestie for that one.

Elodie poured me into a red satin number and told me that I was dressed as a *smoke show*. I asked her to help put a little more effort into the costume I'll be wearing on Halloween night, and she promised it, too, would sizzle. And that's partially what I'm afraid of.

As it is, this dress is hugging my curves, showing off my décolleté, and riding up near my waist—and that's the hemline! I may have to go lone wolf and pick something out for myself next time.

Wes, Ransom, and I made our way to the Wits and Wands Lounge, a comedy and magic act studio that sits adjacent from the ship's casino. It's dimly lit and holds the scent of spiced cocktails and French fries. And this exact locale is where Scarlett will be bringing Manny posthaste once he boards the vessel so we can all meet him.

The lounge itself is opulent and impossible to ignore, even if it is momentarily overshadowed by an array of Halloween finery. The plush velvet seats are filling in quickly, even though the show isn't set to begin for another hour.

Melodic jazz music seeps from the piano, and it has more than a few people tapping their toes to the jumping tune.

The crystal chandeliers up above are ensnared in cobwebs, while miniature pumpkins dot each table, and there's even a giant cauldron sitting on the bar with the words *free candy* stamped on the front.

And you can bet I'll be filling my pockets with Reece's Peanut Butter Cups and KitKat bars before I leave for my cabin. I may be too old to trick-or-treat, but I'm never going to be too old for chocolate.

The soft hum of the casino filters through, and every now and again it's punctuated by the occasional cheer of someone

on a lucky streak. But inside this shadowy lounge—well, there’s a different game afoot.

The Wits and Wands Lounge is bursting with a kaleidoscope of costumes tonight. There’s a couple decked out as Sherlock Holmes and Watson, locked in a heated debate about something over by the bar.

Near the stage, a group of women in neon pointed hats and flowing black robes laugh like hyenas as their drinks cast an eerie glow in their hands.

A tall gentleman dressed as a warlock, complete with a twisted staff, chats with a lady sporting a Cleopatra headdress, and I’m mesmerized by the way her sequins catch the ambient light.

In one corner, a vampire with rather impressive fangs and a crimson-lined cape sips a Bloody Mary, while not too far off, a coven of modern-day witches giggle away, their black cat and broomstick accessories in tow. I’ll admit, the creativity of the passengers is truly *spellbinding*.

Wes looks every inch the dashing captain he is, despite his overt display of nerves. He keeps stealing glances at the entrance. And judging by that caustic look on his face, he’s not necessarily looking forward to seeing the man about to walk through that door.

Next to him, Ransom tries his best to seem relaxed, but his eyes betray him. They dart to the door every few seconds as well. And judging by the way he’s keeping one hand poised over his gun holster—well, he’s not looking forward to seeing the man about to walk through that door either.

Here’s hoping Ransom can keep his bullets to himself.

An entire mob of people step into the lounge, and I recognize a handful of them because they happen to belong to that mystery writers’ convention.

“Hey, look.” I tap my elbow to Ransom’s. “There’s Taffy, Ursula, and that blonde woman—I can’t seem to remember her name. Ursula mentioned it the other day, but it seems to be slipping my tongue right now.”



“Pen name, Sabrina Nightshade,” Ransom offers and that scowl never leaves his face.

“That’s it,” I say. “How did you know?”

“I’m the lead investigator on the case. It’s my business to know everything.”

Wes nods. “That’s why we pay him the big bucks. As in him alone, Trixie. I heard about those ominous notes some of the writers received.”

“All but one,” Ransom continues to brood.

“Really?” I marvel. “You mean everyone got one of those sinister notes but Taffy?”

He nods. “Quinn and I confirmed it about an hour ago.”

“Wow, that paints her in a different light.” I think on it for a moment. “Maybe she’s the killer?”

“If she is, it’s a sophomoric blunder on her part,” Wes whispers.

“Most killers are sophomoric,” Ransom adds. “My guess is whoever killed our victim isn’t looking to go pro.”

“So it *is* a homicide,” I say a little too enthused.

I can’t help it, I’ve known from the beginning. I’m just thrilled Ransom finally caught up with me.

“You were right,” he says with a tick of his head. “I spoke to the kitchen and confirmed no peanuts or peanut oil was used. I was able to track down the chefs that put the buffet together and they assured me they used canola oil.”

“She was right?” Wes muses before looking my way. “Maybe it’s *you* we need to pay the big bucks.”

“Maybe.” I laugh just as Bess and Nettie burst into the lounge.

Nettie has chosen to channel her inner Morticia Addams, wearing a long, sleek black gown that clings to her form, contrasted by her snowy white hair styled straight and parted

down the middle. The finishing touch is her dark red lips, painted perfectly to match the color of fresh blood.

Beside her, Bess sports a vivid purple and black striped costume, complete with a pointed hat that's slightly askew, revealing her curly auburn locks. A chunky, bejeweled spider brooch sits right at her collarbone. She informed us at dinner that she's the spider queen, seeing that witches are not a part of her religious lexicon.

Nettie takes a good look at Wes before thumping him on the shoulder. "Look here, Bess, it's Captain Nervous." She nods to Ransom. "And that there is First Mate Anxious."

Bess gives a mournful chuckle. "Trixie, I'm surprised you haven't filled these men with whiskey just to calm their nerves."

"Whiskey is always a good idea," Ransom says, still eyeing the exit as if he expected a mad gunman to storm the scene and, oddly enough, Manny probably qualifies.

Ransom offers a sideways glance at Wes. "Never thought I'd see the day where you and I would be on the same side of—well, anything."

Wes gives a wistful tick of his head. "Desperate times call for desperate alliances. But don't get too comfortable. Once Manny's out of the picture, it's back to business as usual."

"Looking forward to all of the above," Ransom says. "It's always more enjoyable when we're at odds."

The crowd surges once again as more costumed bodies file in with just minutes left before the show readies to begin. So much for getting to know the guy before the lights go out.

Nettie leans toward Bess. "You know, if I were a few decades younger, I'd make a mad dash for that dashing green ogre by the bar."

"Oh, come on, Nettie." Bess chuckles at the thought. "You, of all people, know that age is just a number, especially during spooky season. Besides, I've always said, the older the werewolf, the louder they howl."

“Bess, you’re an animal!” I gasp and we all share a laugh along with her.

A waitress comes by, and soon both Wes and Ransom have been outfitted with a glass of whiskey on the rocks, while Bess, Nettie, and I each hold the drink of the night, the Ghoul’s Goblet. It’s a glowing concoction, served in a cauldron, complete with dry ice.

We nurse our drinks while watching the parade of costumes floating by. Nettie takes a few potshots at a fashion-challenged zombie, while Bess spots a few men whom she likens to a coven of vampires who have clearly had a budget cut. The plastic fangs that keep falling out of their mouths and trash bags for capes gave it away.

But the comedy show at hand is abruptly paused when Scarlett hits the entrance, and by her side is a tall, dark, and handsome man wearing a dark zoot suit.

There’s a palpable shift in the air, and for reasons unknown, it seems as if every gaze in the room has turned their way. Even the jazz from the piano seems to have softened.

Bess leans in. “Is that him? He doesn’t look all that bad. I swear, my morning face is scarier.”

Nettie huffs, “Scarlett wasn’t kidding about Manny’s charm. That is one slick-looking dude. He looks like he stepped right out of a telenovela.”

True as gospel.

Manny has a striking presence, there’s no denying it. He stands at over six feet tall, has a strong, chiseled jawline, and deep-set expressive dark eyes. His skin is a rich shade of tan, he has dark cropped hair, and he’s showcasing a neatly trimmed beard and facial stubble. He looks lean but with a muscular build. You can tell he can take on a criminal or two if he has to. Or in his case, an arresting officer or two. Not that he’s any match for a bullet—but then, a seasoned cartel man like himself is probably outfitted in Kevlar.

Ransom leans my way and whispers, “I don’t like the way he’s bedroom eyeing every woman in here. I think I should throw him overboard.”

“Behave yourself,” I whisper right back. And honestly, that’s the first time I’ve ever told any man other than my ex those words.

Hey? I think Ransom and I just achieved another level of coupledness.

Nettie fans herself in a dramatic fashion. “Ladies, I’ve been around the block a few times, and rarely have I seen a man turn heads like that. Must be something in the cartel water.”

Looks can be deceiving, but I have to admit, he’s got a certain magnetism.

We stand as they approach.

“Everyone.” Scarlett gives a little curtsy and she seems a bit giddy in his presence. “I’d like to formally introduce you to Manny El Tigre Monticello.”

El Tigre? As in the Tiger? Now I’m intrigued.

She quickly introduces us to him individually and we all take turns shaking the man’s hand—warm, thick, strong fingers followed by a firm embrace, if you must know.

“Pleasure to meet you all,” he says, shedding an easy smile—something I don’t think I’ve seen Ransom do this entire trip. Although, let’s be honest, that sober expression is a good look on him. “In fact, I’m looking forward to getting to know you better,” he says with perfect English and just a note of an accent.

Wes looks that man dead-on. “I’ve heard a lot about you, Tiger.” His expression is deadpan, and I won’t lie, that moniker he just espoused leaned on the sarcastic side.

“And I’ve heard a lot about you, too.” Manny sheds another smile and it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “All good things, of course.”

“Likewise,” Ransom responds while giving the guy the once-over. “Scarlett speaks very highly of you.” His eyes narrow slightly as he leans toward the guy. “Just so we’re clear, Scarlett is my sister, and family means everything to me. I’d do anything to make sure she’s safe and happy.”

Although, it might sound rather innocuous, every word came out like a red-hot threat.

Manny meets Ransom’s gaze unflinchingly, a small smirk playing on his lips.

“You and me both, brother. She’s a gem, isn’t she?” Manny’s grin widens. “Only the best for the best.”

The lights flicker and we quickly take our seats along with everyone else.

I glance to the table next to us where Taffy, Ursula, Sabrina, and a handful of other mystery writers have taken their places, and I can’t help but note that they’re all chattering away at one another, looking markedly worried as the lights begin to dim.

I glance at the others in the room, specifically those here for the convention, and they, too, seem to be buzzing with worry.

Something has the writers in the room anxious and unsettled.

I glance to Wes and Ransom and, come to think of it, they look pretty anxious and unsettled, too.

The comedy portion of the evening leaves us all in stitches. And the magician is as mystical as can be, as we all do our best to enjoy the show.

I think we can all agree we needed a moment of levity.

But I have a feeling the second half of this trip is going to be no laughing matter as the lines between fact and fiction begin to blur.

And I have no doubt that our own story is about to take a very dark twist.

## CHAPTER 15



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie, it's me, Jenny. You will not believe what's transpired! Martin's ex, Betty, had the nerve to ask him to take her back—during our honeymoon!

Where in the world would she even get the idea that asking him would be acceptable?

She claimed she was simply trying to be *transparent*, whatever that means.

I think she's transparent, all right—in her devious practices to sink her claws back into my husband! Martin swears he's not interested in her and he let her know that they can be nothing more than friends. He wants me to come along when he sets some hard boundaries with her.

I'm tempted to give her a piece of my mind and set a few boundaries of my own with the woman. Martin thinks it would only make things worse.

What would you do?

~Gagging on My Words Jenny

DEAR GAGGING,

What a challenging situation you're facing on your honeymoon. Given the circumstances and to maintain harmony, here's what I would do. Do set some serious boundaries with Betty.

It's commendable that Martin is being transparent about his intentions and has no romantic interest in Betty.

Consider joining Martin for the boundary-setting conversation, but try to keep your emotions in check and maintain a calm, respectful tone.

Focus on expressing your feelings and concerns rather than confrontation, with the aim of fostering understanding and respect among all parties.

Remember, open and honest communication is key in such situations, and it's important to prioritize your relationship with Martin while also asserting your boundaries.

Wishing you a peaceful and joyful rest of your honeymoon,

XOXO Trixie

IT'S a brand new day and the *Emerald Queen* has docked in Puerto Quetzal, Guatemala. I spent the first hour after walking out onto my private balcony just soaking in the colorful scenery while the warm humid air continues its cozy embrace. After that, I quickly met up with Bess and Nettie at the Blue Water Café for cheese Danishes and coffee before we boot-scooted it to the formal dining room and enjoyed some lox and bagels.

Once the show wrapped up last night, I overheard Ursula and a few other writers discussing the walking tour of colonial Antigua, so you can bet your last donut that I signed Nettie, Bess, and me up for the tour as well. Both Ransom and Wes have to remain on the ship for work.

I did extend the invite to Scarlett and Manny as well, but they decided to venture off to the Pacaya Volcano hike instead.

Soon enough, Bess, Nettie, and I find ourselves on the tour bus along with a good cluster of mystery writers—most importantly, Ursula Ravenscroft. Since it's a long drive to our destination, I don't mind that she's seated clear across the vehicle. Both Bess and Nettie took advantage of the drive to steal a nap, but with this scenery unfolding before me, the Sandman doesn't stand a chance.

The moment our chartered bus winds its way into the heart of colonial Antigua, I can't help but be captivated. The city unfolds before us like a historical tapestry with its cobbled streets flanked by pastel-colored buildings, their façades worn by time yet still proudly displaying their glory.

Finally, we disembark, stretch our limbs, and take in a lungful of fragrant air infused with the scent of blooming flowers from the lush gardens and courtyards hidden behind wrought-iron gates.

Everywhere we look, there's a juxtaposition of old and new. A handful of local children play soccer near the impressive ruins of a centuries-old church, which our tour guide points out is a testament to the earthquakes that have shaped the city's landscape and history.

Our guide, a sweet older gentleman with a wealth of knowledge, leads us to the city's main square, the Parque Central. Surrounding it are emblematic structures like the Cathedral of San José and the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales.

He regales us with tales of Spanish conquistadors, native resistance, and the intricacies of colonial life. But I'm drawn to the ornate fountains with their grand tiers. And I can't help imagining the townspeople gathering here from days long ago, discussing politics or probably more to the point—the latest town gossip.

We wander through the narrowed lanes and stumble upon an entire line of vibrant markets with each of their stalls overflowing with handwoven textiles in a riot of colors. Local artisans show off their craft, weaving intricate patterns into baskets and blankets, a talent that has been passed down through generations.

The air is warm and punctuated with the sounds of happy chatter among the tourists, bouts of laughter, and the distant strum of a guitar—not to mention fresh grilled meats seasoned to perfection and a layer of something sweet that makes me hunger to hunt it down.



We make a brief stop at a quaint café, where the rich aroma of Guatemalan coffee beckons. While sipping on the velvety brew, our guide points out the Volcán de Agua in the distance as it stands tall and stately against the crisp blue sky.

“That’s where Scarlett and Manny went,” I say to Bess and Nettie. “I can practically see them trying to traverse their way to the top.”

Bess huffs, “Honestly, the thought exhausts me.”

“This walk has exhausted me,” Nettie says, fanning herself with a pamphlet given to us by the tour guide. “But on the upside, we’re surrounded by some of the best coffee in the world and a café every three feet, filled with desserts that can put the ship’s pastry chefs on notice.”

“I agree,” I say, looking into the window of one of those cafés. “Let’s form a pact. We eat all the desserts we want and don’t breathe a word of it on the *Emerald Queen*.”

“Hear, hear,” Bess chimes and we share a laugh.

Next, our journey takes us to the Convento de las Capuchinas, an impressive convent and church that’s over three centuries old. Its robust stone arches and calming courtyards speak of an age of unwavering faith and devotion. I close my eyes for a moment, allowing the whispers of eras gone by to wash over me.

“I think I’m in love with Antigua,” I say as we pause before the pillars. “It feels as if we’re lost in a beautiful, lingering dream.”

“I agree,” Bess says, studying the chalky walls. “I bet every brick and every *shadow* here has a story to tell.”

The tour guide lets us have a little break on our own before we have to head back, so the three of us decide to hit another café to load up on more exquisite coffee along with a trio of local desserts we intend to inhale. First up is a hefty slice of tres leches cake, a sweet sponge cake soaked in three different kinds of milk and topped with whipped cream and cinnamon.

For our second choice, we have a slice of Atolillo, a Guatemalan version of pumpkin pie—seasonally timely. It’s

served in a trifle glass and is topped with a dollop of heavy cream as well.

And third up is sweet plantain dumplings, deep-fried to perfection and rolled in sugar and cinnamon.

We got six.

Of course, we plan on sharing it all, and because of that, there won't be anything left in about five seconds.

We scan the outdoor courtyard that's set on cobblestone and I spot Ursula Ravenscroft at a small round table near one of the fountains sipping a frothy cappuccino, and I can't help but note there's an air of indifference about her.

"Look at her," Bess says, shaking her head. "She's the kind of woman who looks like she's been places."

"Mysterious places with fabulous cocktail menus," Nettie adds.

They're both correct.

Nettie wastes no time heading straight for her with a touch too much bravado, if you ask me.

There's no stopping Nettie, and there's no stopping my investigation either.

## CHAPTER 16



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: Don't feel confined to a single excursion per port. Get creative and mix and match! Start your morning with a thrilling zip-lining adventure, followed by a leisurely afternoon exploring local markets or savoring seaside cuisine.

It's your cruise, and you can choose your way to the perfect day. But I would advise you to book your excursions via the ship because if anything causes a delay, the ship will fit the bill to get you back on board. Otherwise, it's up to you and your wallet to do so.

Cheers to choosing your own path (via the ship's booking service, of course),

XOXO Trixie

THE BLAZING sun settles over our shoulders here in Guatemala as Bess, Nettie, and I head straight for Ursula Ravenscroft as she sips coffee at a bistro table on the cobbled streets of colonial Antigua.

"Well, if it isn't my favorite author!" Nettie exclaims, loud enough to make every writer in the vicinity look this way.

Ursula barely raises a brow. Her hair is pulled into a ponytail and those blonde chunky highlights of hers look painted on sloppily against her darker mane. Her lips are ruby red and her nails match as she holds a brochure in front of her, but it's us she's studying.

She takes a moment to inspect Nettie. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

Nettie gags on her words. “Well, you ought to. I’m practically famous myself in some very small, very *niche* circles.”

“Try *infamous*,” Bess says as we come up behind Nettie.

“Oh, Trixie, hi!” Ursula brightens before motioning for the three of us to take a seat at the table with her. “Please, the more, the merrier, or so they say.”

“Thanks, my tootsies are killing me,” Nettie says, wasting no time before flopping down in the chair beside Ursula, that gray tumbleweed on her head bouncing as if it were about to drift away. “You know, I’ve always said, if I could choose another circle of friends, it would definitely include someone like you. Preferably with a long list of handsome ex-boyfriends and zero intentions of ever calling them back.”

Ursula belts out a laugh. “And why is that?”

Nettie leans in. “Because if you have the Rolodex I think you do, every day would be a new rendezvous. And did I mention I adore rendezvous?”

“Well, in that case, welcome to the club.” Ursula laughs once again. “But I should warn you—my exes are quite diverse. From tango instructors to treasure hunters.”

I can’t help but smile. “Sounds as if you could write a story with every one of them. We’re always up for a good yarn. Especially if it comes with a side of espresso.”

The four of us toast with our mugs and share another laugh.

If Nettie is an expert at anything, it’s breaking the ice—and on occasion, breaking the ice with a cold-hearted killer.

Now to find out if that’s what we have here.

“Bess, Nettie,” I say. “This is Ursula Ravenscroft, the maven of psychological thrillers.”

Ursula laughs at the thought. “I wasn’t always a so-called maven. I only started writing psychological thrillers about five years ago. Before that, I languished in the historical fiction genre.”

“Wow, that’s quite the leap,” I say. “I guess you must have had psychological thrillers in your wheelhouse all along.”

“I guess I did,” she says with a wink.

I clear my throat and my mood shifts to something more somber. “Ursula, how are you holding up? I can’t imagine how hard it must be to lose someone close.”

Ursula’s smile fades as she reclines in her seat. “It’s been difficult. Scratch that—it’s been *horrible*. Life really seems to have a way of testing our resolve, doesn’t it?”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Bess says, spiking her fork into the tres leches cake.

“Speaking of the truth.” Nettie leans in with a spark in her blue eyes, and I don’t like it one bit. “There’s a little rumor floating around that maybe, just maybe, you had a hand in landing someone toes up in the morgue.”

“*What?*” Bess’ eyes widen in horror as she gives Nettie a firm swat, nearly toppling her from the chair. “Nettie Butterworth, have you lost your marbles? On second thought, don’t answer that.” She nods to Ursula. “Please excuse her. She doesn’t do well in this heat.”

“What do you mean?” Nettie straightens while feigning innocence—or at least I think she’s feigning. “I was just making conversation. It’s what writers do. They *probe*. They *investigate*.”

Ursula chuckles, unfazed. “It’s all right. If I had a dollar for every side-eye thrown my way, I’d be sailing on my own yacht by now. People always suspect us mystery writers of doing something nefarious.”

“Drucilla was one of my favorite authors,” Bess offers up, and I’m not one hundred percent sure if she’s telling the truth. But nevertheless, it defuses the accusation—I hope. “I’d love to learn more about her. What was she like as a person?”

For as dangerous as it is to bring Nettie along on an investigation, Bess may as well go pro.

“Drucilla was”—Ursula sighs and looks into the distance —“well, she was a force of nature. I knew her for over two decades, and in that time, she wore many hats. A writer, yes, but also a friend, confidant, and more than once a fierce rival—in the writing sense, of course.” She takes a sip of her coffee and keeps her gaze distant. “We first met at a writers’ retreat in the mountains. We instantly connected, both of us still struggling to find our voices in the world of mystery novels. And then over the years, our paths crossed again and again in countless conferences and book tours.”

“That’s wonderful that you were so close after all those years,” I say, hoping that she’ll keep the ball rolling.

A deep sigh escapes her. “Drucilla had a way of lighting up any room she entered. Not just with her vibrant personality, but with her strong opinions, too. Oh, she loved a good debate, and I dare say, she got a kick out of ruffling a few feathers.” She chuckles to herself.

“What about her love life?” I shrug as if I didn’t have a clue that she dated a man who eventually became an ornery disembodied spirit. Although, if I was disembodied, I might be pretty ornery, too.

“Oh, her love life was always tumultuous, to say the least.” Ursula sips her coffee as she says it. “She had a wealthy boyfriend, a real estate magnate, Commodore Whitmore. Boy, they had a fiery relationship that everyone knew about. Of course, those fiery details were private. There were rumors of secrets and heartbreak.”

“Sounds like the stuff of novels,” I say.

A gentle breeze drifts by as Ursula leans in. “If there’s anything I’ve learned from being in this industry, it’s that truth is stranger than fiction. Commodore unfortunately took his own life. But the life Drucilla led, the secrets she kept? They could fill volumes.” She shakes her head before taking another sip of her coffee.

“Secrets?” Bess muses. “Tell me more.”

Have I mentioned Bess is investigative gold? I’d brag about her to Ransom, but I’m half-afraid he might steal her for himself. She’d make a valuable member of any investigative team.

“The *secrets*.” Ursula sucks in quick breath between her teeth. “Drucilla didn’t have many, but there was something fishy afoot. I have no idea what.” She pauses for a moment. “Drucilla was a big book collector, first runs, old volumes of this and that. She has a library that would knock the Smithsonian’s socks off. She once let me see her most exclusive collection. It made me tremble just to be in a room with manuscripts that old. But Sabrina would know more about what made Drucilla jittery as far as secrets go.”

“Sabrina?” I blink at the woman as the blonde comes to mind.

“That’s right. Sabrina was actually Commodore’s stepdaughter from a previous marriage. That’s how Sabrina got pulled into our little mystery fold.”

“*Sabrina*.” I nod. Note to self: Track down Sabrina Nightshade asap. “I’ll have to look into her books as well.” And *her*, of course. “She must be devastated. I mean, Drucilla was like family.”

Ursula nearly spits out her coffee. “More like a *dysfunctional* family. Those two never got along. I have no idea what that was about, but it didn’t stop Sabrina from coming around so I’m glad about that.”

I meet her eyes and nod. “Death does have a way of wiping the grime off of some relationships.”

“Drucilla was a dear friend.” She puts her coffee down and pushes it away. “And I truly mourn her passing. As for her killer”—she shakes her head—“I wish the police all the luck in the world unraveling that mystery.”

Something tells me we’ll need more than luck.

“Ursula”—I lean in—“do you have any idea why Commodore would have taken his own life?”

“I’ve asked myself that very question many times.” Her lips purse as she frowns at the cobblestones around us. “I guess behind that confident exterior, he was a complex man with more than a few demons.” She leans in slightly. “There were whispers, of course. Some said financial difficulties, others suggested a broken heart—possibly reeling from his tumultuous relationship with Drucilla. But truth be told, no one can truly fathom the depths of another person’s soul.”

“There is no greater truth.” I sigh. A thought comes to me. “Ursula, last night we were at the Wits and Wands Lounge and there was a handful of writers there as well. We couldn’t help but notice they all looked somewhat anxious. Is there some sort of discourse in the group? You didn’t get any more nasty notes, did you?”

“Oh, *that*.” She tips her head back. “You’ll never believe it, but each one of us received a single black rose delivered to our rooms.”

“A single black rose delivered to your rooms?” I blink over at her and she nods.

“I had my cabin steward leave it on my bed. It was as creepy as it was beautiful.” She cringes. “I thought it had something to do with the convention—you know, mystery writers, we do spend a lot of time thinking about death. Anyway, not many people shared my sentiments. Once we couldn’t get to the bottom of who sent them, my cohorts took it as another threat.”

“Another threat,” I say, breathless.

A whistle blows nearby, and it’s our tour guide giving us a fifteen-minute warning before we need to get back to the bus.

Ursula jumps up. “I think I’m going to beat the rush to the restrooms. Anyone care to join me in the race to the ladies’ room?”

Nettie stands and stretches. “I’m always in for a good footrace to the toilets.”

“I’d better go, too,” Bess says, pushing her plate back. “How about you, Trixie?”



“I think I’ll polish off the rest of these desserts,” I say as the three of them take off as if Elvis just materialized in the nearest restroom.

True to my word, I do my best to inhale every last bite of Guatemala’s sweetest offerings, all the while wondering why someone would arrange for Drucilla Grim to be removed from the planet and miss out on long walks through cobbled streets like the ones before me.

Why did Drucilla need to die? And on the *Emerald Queen* no less.

Whoever killed her, expertly made it look like an unfortunate accident.

But thanks to the presence of Commodore Whitmore’s ghost, I know it’s anything but.

## CHAPTER 17



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*T*rip Tip Question: Trixie! You've got to help me. You're my only hope!

My name is Dan and I was bamboozled into taking a cruise with some nutjob under the pretense of being her husband in order to make her ex jealous. I would have been a fool to turn down a free cruise, so I jumped on it. Boy, am I sorry.

A few days ago, I got out of the shower, only to find the entire security team waiting for me. Apparently, they think I stole a whole bunch of jewelry. And to top it off, Betty, the nutjob who brought me along on the trip, said she found the jewels in my drawer!

First of all, I never unpacked, so I never even used the drawer. All of my stuff is still wadded up in my suitcase. Second of all, I wouldn't know what to do with stolen jewelry.

And to top it all off, the other night when we were at dinner with Betty's ex and his new wife, I saw his wife's gold bracelet slip off her wrist and fall to the floor. When Betty stooped over to pick it up, I only assumed she gave it back to the woman.

Guess what was in that loot of things I was accused of stealing?

You guessed it—a gold bracelet.

I think Betty has sticky fingers, and she's looking to stick *me* with the bill so to speak.

I can't afford a record.

I've got law school coming up in the fall. I tried explaining this all to the ship's security, but Betty has me cornered like a pro.

Should I lawyer up? Should I request to speak with Betty's ex? What would you do?

~Buried in the Brig

DEAR BURIED,

What a horrible predicament you've found yourself in. Given the situation and Betty's apparent involvement, here's my advice. Request to speak with ship security again and provide a detailed and honest account of your innocence.

Express your concerns about Betty's possible involvement in framing you for the theft.

Consider involving legal counsel or a ship's officer to help you clear your name and investigate the matter thoroughly.

Protecting your future is essential, especially with law school on the horizon. Ensure that your side of the story is heard and understood.

Wishing you a swift resolution and a smooth journey ahead.

All the best,

Trixie

IT'S day seven of our cruise and we just left Guatemala last night, only to arrive at the port in Corinto, Nicaragua.

*Nicaragua.*

Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought I'd see this land with my own eyes, let alone explore it. But that's exactly what I'm about to do.

Yesterday, when Bess, Nettie, and I got back from touring colonial Antigua, I called Ransom and let him know about the

black roses that were given to the writers here for the mystery convention.

He let me know that several of those writers had reported the incident to security and he was already on it. And since he was busy investigating, he missed dinner and the show. And after the show, I was too pooped to head to the Blue Water Café for my nightly overdose of chocolate.

It's safe to say I'm falling behind on my lava cake consumption on this trip, but with some sea days up ahead and the Panama Canal transit, you can bet I'll make up for it and then some.

Scarlett and Manny weren't at dinner last night either. I imagine they went to one of the private restaurants the ship has to offer. Wes was a no-show because he had something to tend to at the bridge. I suspect it's not the most comfortable arrangement to have your ex-wife and her new boy-toy rubbing elbows with you.

So Bess, Nettie, and I had the captain's table to ourselves—here's hoping that's not a trend for the rest of the trip. While we love one another's company, we missed the rest of the group, too—ex-cartel drug lords included.

But here we are, the very next morning, and after an abundant breakfast that included pumpkin spice pancakes, pumpkin muffins with cheesecake in the center, a rather large bacon and sausage omelet, and a pumpkin spice latte, I waddle over to the ship's exit with Bess and Nettie, ready to take on all that Nicaragua has to offer.

“Welcome to the land of lakes and volcanos,” the captain calls out to the passengers hitting the gangway with Tinsley by his side as they wave off the throngs eager to leave the ship for a day of adventure.

“Trixie,” Tinsley says my name through her teeth as if someone had wired her jaw shut. “It seems your luck has struck again. There are whispers of nasty notes, necrotic roses, and things that go bump in the night.”

“It’s true.” Wes closes his eyes a moment. “It seems that *ghost* has struck again. Last night the lights on six different decks wouldn’t stop flickering. The chandeliers in the casino were swinging, and just about every card on the blackjack table kept getting blown to the ceiling. It’s becoming pretty clear we’re having a supernatural event.”

“And that’s just the way some of us like it,” a woman chirps from behind and we turn to see Taffy Blackwood grinning from ear to ear as she steps forward wearing a sundress and a wide-brimmed hat. “There’s nothing like an air of mystery at a mystery writers’ convention,” she teases. “Thank you for being so accommodating to us.”

Wes chuckles. “Here aboard the *Emerald Queen* we do aim to please.”

Tinsley offers the woman a pleasant smile—nice to know she’s capable. “Is your group off to another grand adventure today?”

“No, we’re running scattershot this afternoon. To each their own,” Taffy says with a laugh. “But we’re reconvening in Costa Rica tomorrow for a little event on the beach. Some local fans put together a book signing for us. You’re all welcome to join in on the fun. We’ll be having a Q and A session, too.”

“Sounds great,” Bess says. “We’ll be there with bells on.”

“We wouldn’t miss it, Toots,” Nettie gravels it out like a threat, and I bite back a laugh.

“I’m looking forward to it as well,” I tell the woman.

“Great,” she says. “We’ll see you there. Enjoy the day,” she says before catching up to a group of women before they leave the ship.

Tinsley growls our way, “Leave it to our resident sleuth and her elderly sidekicks to poke their noses where they don’t belong.”

“I take umbrage with that,” I tell her.

Tinsley might be speaking the truth, but it doesn't mean I have to like it.

“Yeah,” Nettie sneers. “Who are you calling elderly?”

Before she can respond, a gaggle of customers practically charge right at her, and soon our resident cruise director is actually doing her job.

I spot Ransom, Scarlett, and Manny heading this way and give them a wave.

“Hey, handsome,” I say, wrapping my arms around the stately steed I get to call my own. He's wearing dark shorts, a white T-shirt, and has his sunglasses sitting on top of his head—a good indication he's ready for some fun in the sun.

But then I had a feeling it would be so, considering the fact he texted and asked me to wait for him at the mouth of the gangway.

“Where are we off to today?” he asks, landing a heated kiss on my lips and I take a moment to scratch the scruff on his cheeks.

I glance to Scarlett and Manny.

Scarlett has her dark hair pulled back with that same blue baseball cap on with the letters CCB on the front. She's wearing shorts and a T-shirt, much like her brother, and looks as if she's walking on air while holding her boyfriend's hand. And Manny has ditched the zoot suit for jeans and a T-shirt, and he looks cuttngly handsome sporting an all-knowing grin.

“I'd love to do a group activity,” I say to Scarlett and Manny. “Unless, of course, the two of you already made plans.”

“No big plans here,” Scarlett says before looking at Manny and they share a nod. “We'd love to join the fun.”

“So would I,” Wes says, although he's still being a bit stingy with his smile. “The ship's got a handful of excursions in the area. Anything sound good?”

“Volcano sledding—no ice, it's smoldering hot, and you cascade down ash,” Manny says, tightening that grin on his

face. “This is the only place in the world where you can do it. Although, it does require a bit of a hike.”

I glance to Bess and Nettie to gauge their reactions.

*Hike* is a four-letter word among my friends for more than one reason.

Bess grunts, “Well, if it’s the only place in the world you can do it, then count me in. I’ve walked enough in the last eight decades to circle the globe twice. I don’t see why I should bother to slow down now.”

“Same here,” Nettie says. “Besides, I’d better come along just to keep this one in line.” She hitches a thumb in Bess’ direction. “Toss in a competition and she can get pretty cut-throat.”

“Competition for what?” Bess squawks.

“What do you think?” Nettie squawks back. “To see who can sled down the volcano the fastest. By the way, the answer would be me.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Bess says. “A runaway sled—with you on it.”

“Then it’s settled,” Wes says. “Volcano sledding it is. Let me change and I’ll meet you on the dock.”

“Volcano sledding?” I offer an impish grin up at Ransom.

He nods. “It’s a popular excursion.” He shoots a side glance to his sister and her beau as they step onto the gangway. “One thing he forgot to mention is the fact it’s an active volcano.”

“We’re going sledding on an *active* volcano?” I ask as my voice hits a sharp crescendo, and he nods. “Well then, I don’t see a single thing that can go wrong with this.”

I see many.

## CHAPTER 18



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: When you're gearing up for an exciting volcano adventure, remember that closed-toe shoes, hats, and sunglasses are your volcano besties. Closed-toe shoes protect your feet on rugged terrain, while hats and sunglasses shield you from the fiery sun. Plus, you'll look volcano-vogue while ascending or descending a fiery mountain. You'll be sizzling hot, but in the fashion sense.

With your volcano ensemble on point, you'll be ready to conquer those fiery peaks in style.

XOXO Trixie

WE MAKE our way down the gangway and Bess and Nettie scuttle over to a booth nearby selling colorful scarves and purses, while Scarlett and Manny take a stroll down the dock.

As soon as we step off the ship in Corinto, Nicaragua, we're welcomed by the warm, tropical breeze and the soft murmur of the Pacific Ocean caressing the shores. The sound of lively music fills our ears, and the scent of something sweet and deep-fried is begging me to track it down.

"Oh, it's beautiful," I say as the sound of drums thump through my chest.

A couple of dance troupes have gathered next to the ship, all of them decked out in costume. Some of the girls have on black dresses with white trim, and there's another set in floor-length lime green dresses with full skirts and matching hats.



They whirl and twirl to the rhythm of those drums as a row of men stand behind them, each holding a musical instrument.

Local vendors are set up close to the port, their stalls vibrant with colorful crafts, tropical fruits, and the tantalizing aromas of traditional Nicaraguan cuisine wafting through the air—inviting one and all to indulge in the local flavors. And you can bet I'll be indulging. I didn't come all this way not to get a taste of local flavor—in the literal sense.

But it's the tropical heat and the vibrant foliage to the left and right that enthralls. Lush, verdant landscapes, towering palms, and the mountains in the distance create a majestic backdrop.

"It is beautiful," Ransom says. "With its laid-back charm, this place unravels before us like an untold story waiting to be explored." He takes a moment to glare over at Manny as he holds Scarlett tight. "Here's hoping it has some good things to say."

"It will," I say, hugging his waist. "Think positive." I cringe for a moment. "Speaking of things to say, what's the news on those rotten roses?"

He rocks back on his heels and I rock back with him. "The ship's florist said nobody came in and bought a bunch of roses."

"So that means they boarded the ship with the flowers," I say. "Maybe we can watch the security footage and see who boarded holding a bouquet?"

"I like how you think," he says, dotting my nose with a kiss. "But I already beat you to it. I pored over hours of footage last night and not a single passenger boarded holding a bouquet outright. It would have had to have been several bouquets since there are close to forty writers here for the conference."

"So that means they stowed them in their luggage. Ransom, do you think this prankster who's been sending these dark notes and even darker flowers—do you think they can be the killer?"

“Could be. But why draw attention to yourself like that?”

“Maybe to throw off vessel security,” I offer. “Sure, poisoning Drucilla was damaging enough, and it’s almost the perfect crime, considering it’s an allergy. But I have a feeling our killer wants to cover their behind in the event they inadvertently stirred the interest of law enforcement.”

He lifts his chin. “Maybe so, but they would have been better off to leave well enough alone.”

“I think you hit the nail on the head the other night when you and Wes said the killer was an amateur. And I have a feeling that’s going to work to our advantage.”

“My advantage,” he says with a curve to his lips. “All mine.” He offers me a solid kiss, and just like that, I’m all his, too.

We walk down a bit and see the town’s modest buildings painted in cheerful yet faded colors, which tell of sun-soaked days gone by. Just beyond the port, the vast cerulean sky seems to offer a loving embrace of the Pacific. A few local fishermen navigate the docile waves with their boats and they look like tiny specks against the wide open blue.

Soon, the captain joins our ranks and we’re all shuttled to a private bus he’s chartered for the seven of us just as our guide, a sweet man named Esteban, greets us.

Esteban has a melodic accent, a warm smile, and his skin is weathered by the sun. He tells us all about the rich history of the country as we drive through the changing faces of the landscape.

“Nicaragua is a land of lakes and volcanos. There are nineteen volcanos total here, and seven of them are still active,” Esteban tells us. “We’re on our way to Leon, the jewel and heart of Nicaragua. If you look to your right, you’ll see the sugarcane fields along with other agricultural wonders. Our people are farmers, and we take great pride in our connection to the land.”

Once we arrive in Leon, we’re greeted with more vibrant colors, the sound of a band in the distance, and the scent of

local food wafting through the tropical air.

Leon looks like an old rustic city complete with cobbled streets and neoclassical architecture everywhere you look. The cafés are bustling, and the street vendors are humming along with businesses. And between the sizzle of the meat hitting the grills and the sound of the guitars and drums vibrating through us, we can feel the pulse of this city thumping like a heartbeat.

We stop and grab a cup of coffee—the best of the best before Wes whisks us back onto the shuttle for the remainder of the drive to Cerra Negro, the volcano we’re about to attempt to sled down.

The drive is bumpy but beautiful as we traverse hilly terrain with a few hairpin turns. The bus driver plays loud, lively music with a local flare, and it adds to the adventure as we take turns spotting colorful birds and foliage while that volcano we’re gunning for stands like a silent sentinel awaiting our arrival.

And after a good, long drive, we’re finally stretching our limbs again.

Cerra Negro is tall, dark, and *daunting*, and each one of us pauses to take in its majestic grandeur.

“It’s still an active volcano,” one of the guides for the sledding tour bellows in perfect English. “It goes off about every eighteen years but hasn’t gone off in the last twenty.”

“Wonderful,” Bess says dryly. “That means it’s about due.”

I lean toward Ransom. “Here’s hoping it doesn’t choose today to blow its top.”

“Here’s hoping I don’t blow my top today either,” Ransom growls while narrowing his eyes on Manny as the cartel boss in question gets a little frisky with Scarlett.

“Same here,” Wes growls as he steps up next to Ransom. “She may not be my wife anymore, but I don’t care for the show.”

“There’s only one thing either of you can do,” I say as I take a breath. “Beat him at the race to the bottom.”

“It’s on,” Ransom says with a chuckle.

Wes nods. “I’ll beat him good.” He offers a short-lived smile to Ransom. “And I’ll beat you, too, for good measure.” He steps away and Ransom sighs.

“I should probably let him win,” he says. “If this is tough on me, I can’t imagine what Wes is going through.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” I say, running my fingers through his thick hair.

“But I won’t let him win.” He offers up a lopsided grin—albeit quick as lightning. “Do you still think I’m nice?”

“Oh, honey, I think you’re bad to the bone,” I tease. “What do you think first attracted me to you?” I give his ribs a pinch. “But deep down, I’m in on your nice little secret—and I love it even more.”

He gives a little wink. “Let’s keep that between you and me.”

I glance back at Scarlett and Manny, and for the life of me, I can’t help but feel Manny Monticello is harboring a few secrets himself.

And I wonder if a single one of them is nice.

## CHAPTER 19



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip Tip:* If an excursion makes you quake in your deck shoes, don't be afraid to back out. Politely blame it on a sudden craving to sit in a deck chair or take a nautical nap. Your fellow cruisers will applaud your creativity, and you can always regale them with your own tales of shipboard bravery later.

With this escape strategy, you can cruise with courage and keep your peace of mind intact.

XOXO Trixie

OUR NEW GUIDES spur us along, and soon we embark on our gritty adventure as we attempt to climb Cerro Negro.

Each step on the volcanic gravel creates a rhythmic crunch that echoes against the openness of the Nicaraguan skies. Just beyond this necrotic shadow of the mountain is nothing but green rolling fields, hills, and valleys that tell another tale of this land's beauty. And every last bit of it is beautiful.

Bess and Nettie lead the charge, bantering back and forth as the guides help them along.

"I bet this volcano hasn't seen this much action since its last eruption," Nettie calls back to us and we all share a laugh.

"Oh, I don't know," Bess replies. "We might just make this old rock blow its top with all your hot air."

"What hot air?" Nettie shoots back. "I'm here to break a few records as I cruise down this fiery rock."

“I just hope she doesn’t break a few bones,” I say to Ransom.

“Remember, ladies,” Wes laughs, “it’s not about the speed, but the style in which you arrive. Safety first.”

The air gets cooler as we ascend, and with every drop of the temperature, the breeze becomes that much more refreshing. I glance back and spot Scarlett and Manny wrapped in a romantic bubble as they hold one another and trade kisses.

The mountain may not be getting any action, but Scarlett sure is.

I’m starting to feel sorry for Wes myself.

I may not care for my own ex anymore, but that doesn’t mean I want to see someone pawing all over him right in front of my face either.

We reach the top of this overgrown rock and it feels like a victory, so naturally we take a moment to bask in the glory of our achievement.

The view is breathtaking, and we look out as Nicaragua spreads out before us with this bird’s-eye view. The ground is smoldering in places and Manny, Wes, and Ransom keep taking turns poking their hand into the ashy soil and confirming that it’s indeed hot.

The soles of my shoes could have told them that. Or the sweat trickling down my temple, or the sweat trickling between my boobs, or even the sweat that’s taking over my midsection.

Yes, come to find out, taking an excursion out to an active volcano is akin to taking a tour of the sun. It makes me question my better judgment and the judgment of just about everyone here.

Come to think of it, maybe Wes and Ransom would never have even thought about climbing a volcano if Manny hadn’t suggested it. Just my luck to get sucked into some ego battle among the three of them—and perhaps getting pushed into a pit of hot lava because of it.

Soon enough, the guides give us each a thin orange jumpsuit to put over our clothes, a mask to go over our mouths and noses, and a pair of goggles to protect our eyes. We're armed with sleds, and the next thing we know, we're looking out at the ashy slope with a mix of thrill and trepidation.

"All right," Nettie calls out while steadying her sled. "If I don't make it, tell my plants I love them."

"You live on a cruise ship," Bess tells her. "You don't have any plants."

"Just because you don't know about my secret garden, doesn't mean it's a work of fiction."

Wes grunts her way, "Just tell me you're keeping it legal."

Knowing what I do about Nettie's questionable ways as an ex-cannabis farmer, this might be a loaded question.

"Legal is a loose term when moving in and out of certain districts," she kindly informs. "Meet me at the bottom and I might just share my stash."

I can't help but chuckle as we line up at the edge. The face of the volcano is nothing but black sand, so I can see how sledding down it is not only feasible, but potentially fun. Potentially deadly, too, but it's too late to entertain that point.

One by one our guides launch us down the face of this necrotic beast, turning us into speeding dots as we zigzag down the volcano.

We start off slow but pick up some serious traction, and soon enough it feels as if we're going to break the sound barrier. I'm moving so fast that little bits of volcanic rocks bite against my cheeks as my ears fill with wind and the sounds of my own screams.

"*Yahoo*," Bess gives a jubilant shout and the rest of us join her belting out catcalls of our own.

There's been a handful of times when I have seriously questioned my life choices. And sailing down the side of an active volcano is definitely one of them.

As the world rushes by, a hearty laugh escapes me.

Face it, there's no other way out of this than on the back of this sled. I may as well enjoy it.

We scream and howl and laugh as Nettie and Wes hold the lead. Soon, we all hit the bottom and glide out to a flourishing finish, each of us with a laugh in our throat.

Ransom helps me up, and we help extract Bess and Nettie from their respective sleds as well.

"I did it," Nettie calls out. "I won the race!" She takes a moment to dance with her fists pumping toward the sky. "And you came in second, Captain. Since I'm a woman of my word, drop by my cabin later tonight. I'll have a little green caviar rolled and ready to go."

"You got the good stuff?" Manny lifts a brow her way and I can't tell if he's teasing.

"I don't entertain junk. I only deal the best." She winks at him and I pray she's teasing.

"You're my kind of lady," he says as his phone chirps and he nods to Scarlett. "I'd better take this."

He steps away as the rest of us strip off our jumpsuits and turn in our goggles.

Wes and Ransom help the guides repack the equipment, while Bess, Nettie, and Scarlett each chug a water bottle.

But I can't get enough of the landscape. I pull my phone out and snap pictures of every angle I can, stepping toward the right in hopes of catching a better view of the lush jungle greenery in that direction.

This experience has been both wild and wondrous. Not only that, but Wes and Ransom are actually getting along.

Who knew Manny would be good for our collective souls in that respect?

And the fact he's a *reformed* drug lord should make them feel better as well.

We might be covered with dust, but each one of us is glowing with adventure.



A red and blue bird the size of a toddler flies by and I chase after it, trying to catch its glory with my camera until I nearly stumble right over Manny as he huddles into his phone.

“How many kilos you got available?” he says just above a whisper and my heart sinks. “I don’t entertain junk. I only deal the best,” he says, echoing Nettie’s words, and I can’t help but shake my head.

So much for a reformation—more like a U-turn right back into cartel living. And he’s dragging Ransom’s sister right along with him.

## CHAPTER 20



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*T*rip Tip Question: Hello, Trixie, it's me, Jenny.

Well, you won't believe this latest development. While Martin and I were in the middle of setting boundaries with Betty, the ship's security officers asked to speak with her. They wanted to search her room one more time.

Betty was hesitant, but Martin convinced her to go along with it in the event there were other items they may have missed that Dan had stolen.

It turns out, there were plenty of other stolen items that were found—wallets, watches, and even a bundle of cold, hard cash! All of these were items that were previously reported missing to the ship's lost and found. And they think Betty might have had something to do with this.

She's screaming her innocence. And well, Martin is trying his best to help her out of this pickle. Is it too callous of me to suggest we let the law handle this one and simply enjoy the remainder of our honeymoon?

~ Jenny Just Can't Catch a Break

DEAR JENNY JUST CAN'T CATCH A BREAK,

What an unexpected twist in this saga! Given the circumstances and the potential legal implications, here's how I would navigate the legal situation.

It's not callous to prioritize enjoying your honeymoon. This situation appears to be in the hands of ship security *and* the law.

Continue to support Martin as he navigates this complex situation with Betty and maintain your focus on cherishing your time together.

Stay informed about developments, but don't let it overshadow the joy of your honeymoon.

Wishing you a peaceful and memorable rest of your cruise,  
XOXO Trixie

ANOTHER DAY HAS PASSED and this morning the ship docked in sunny Costa Rica. Bess, Nettie, and even Elodie have joined me on my quest to shake down Sabrina Nightshade for whatever information she could possibly offer up. And it doesn't hurt that the locale of this shakedown is right here on a cerulean blue beach at an author signing of all things.

"Let the record show I voted for the sloth sanctuary," Nettie says as we descend as a mob onto a lush and brown-sugar Costa Rican beach.

"For the hundredth time"—Bess wails as the sun bears down on us and the heated sand warms our feet—"that's not where the suspects are."

"And for the hundredth time, those sloths are always up to something," Nettie fires back. "They might look like little innocent teddy bears, but deep down inside they're nothing but a pack of slow-moving serial killers."

"Yeah, right," Bess huffs a laugh. "And I'm a killer, too."

"It's about time you admitted it," Nettie gravels before glancing my way. "She kills my spirit once a day and twice on Sunday. What day is it again?"

"It's not Sunday," I tell her.

Nettie nods. "Then death only comes for me once today."

"We should be so lucky." Elodie leans my way. "How fast can we lose the biddies?"

“*Elodie.*” I laugh as I bump my elbow to hers. “For the hundredth time, they’re my biddies.”

“Then in the least, the Grim Reaper can show up and claim them,” she scoffs. “One of them is practically volunteering to zip off to the other side.”

I make a face at her, but she’s not wrong.

“Paradise found!” Nettie belts out the words while twirling around and flailing her arms. “If this isn’t heaven, then I don’t want to go.”

“You’re going somewhere, all right,” Bess mutters. “And my guess is, it’ll be just a tad hotter.”

Nettie shakes her head as she takes in the crowd already sitting in the white chairs set out in front of a giant tent. “When I grow old, I want to retire in Costa Rica.”

“Newsflash,” Bess says. “You *are* old and you’ve already retired on a cruise ship.”

“Yeah, but the ship is deficient in the most important area,” Nettie says. “And Costa Rica is rich in it.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” Elodie whispers my way.

“I’ll tell you, Toots,” Nettie says. “One word—*Speedos.*”

Bess and I groan in unison.

“She’s not wrong with that one,” Elodie says, and that alone prompts Bess and me to groan again.

The ship landed in the Port of Limon this morning, and it’s been nothing but a feast for the senses ever since the four of us got off the ship.

Ransom has to work, so he couldn’t make the book signing, and Scarlett and Manny opted for ziplining through the rainforest.

This glorious beach was only a twenty-minute bus ride from the port.

It’s basically a sandy cove that expands for a mile at least.

A tent has been set up and beneath it the authors are already getting fitted with microphones for the Q and A.

A table has been set up at the next booth over, and I'm guessing that's where the book signing portion of the event will take place.

The four of us find a spot in the sand near the tent where a bevy of charmingly weathered wooden chairs have been set out. A waitress comes by and we each put in an order for a fruity mocktail as we ready for the event to begin.

Beachgoers in colorful swimsuits dot the shoreline, palm trees are lined up in thickets, and birds with fluorescent wings take flight against the backdrop of nature's canvas.

A sign hanging from the top of the tent reads *Welcome to the ghostly gathering! Eerie authors by the ocean edge!*

Speaking of ghosts.

Commodore Whitmore is a ghost gone wild.

Last night alone he nearly knocked all the crystal off every single chandelier in the formal dining room, he caused a hurricane of tchotchkes in the gift shop, decimated the entire buffet in the Blue Water Café, and for his final act of the evening, he unleashed a tempest of ethereal screams during a rather silent moment in the performance taking place in the Emerald Theater—I should know, I was there.

The passengers are thoroughly entertained.

The crew thinks that Tinsley has taken her horror-themed décor a tad too far.

And the captain, who happens to be apprised of the truth, thinks we may need to look into an exorcist.

As for me?

I'm tickled to high heaven the ghost in question isn't offering his services to help me solve this case. He's not necessarily someone I'd want to hang around with. Not that I'm left to my own devices—Bess, Nettie, and shockingly Elodie are proving to be die-hard.

I lean toward Elodie as she sips her sangria. “I can’t believe you want in on this investigation. I’m really rubbing off on you, aren’t I?”

She averts her eyes at that one. “Please, I should be the one rubbing off on you. And for the record, I only came for the men. Why didn’t you tell me this mystery shindig was primarily a women’s event? I counted three men in their literary pack, and they were practically the walking dead. Believe me, I have no interest in trying to unravel the mysteries of the little blue pill and its unfulfilled promises.”

A sharp laugh belts from me.

“Speaking of unfulfilled promises.” She swills her drink my way. “Are we any closer to closing the deal with Handsome Ransom?”

I make a face. “With his sister and her cartel overlord making him twitchy? Let’s just say romance isn’t at the top of the list right now.”

“Please, while you’re still young,” she moans.

“The fact you think I’m young is kindness that I’m pretty sure I owe you some cold, hard cash for.”

“I won’t think you’re young forever,” she muses. “And neither will he.”

“Point taken.”

A small group of kids swarm us looking for a couple of bodies to bury in the sand.

“Boy, you came to the right place, kids,” Nettie says, squinting their way. “Now which of us looks like a killer?”

“Nettie.” Bess swats her. “They want to bury *you*. They’re the killers.”

“Aww, come on,” Nettie says, plucking her bestie up by the hand. “All right, kids, you’ve got two of us. Time to start digging.”

Both Bess and Nettie flop onto the sand, a few feet away, and soon enough that cluster of kids transforms the two of

them into the sandy sirens they're destined to be.

"*Aww*," I coo. "I think they're turning Bess and Nettie into a couple of mermaids."

The sand keeps flying, and soon Bess and Nettie are nearly covered to their necks.

"Wow, they're really getting buried," I say. "Should I be worried?"

"Please." Elodie waves them off. "They're old. They're just practicing for things to come."

"Getting buried alive?"

"Just getting buried."

I reach over and kick her in the shin with a laugh. "That's barbaric."

"Speaking of barbaric." She takes another quick sip. "Tell me about this cartel drug lord. Can I steal him for myself, or is Ransom's sister very attached?"

"You can't steal him," I tell her. "And how I wish Ransom's sister wasn't attached. Elodie, the guy is dealing again. He's not honest. In fact, I think he's a very bad man."

"You mean—bad *boy*. And have you forgotten that bad boys are my specialty? I can take him off of Scarlett's hands for her."

"Don't you dare get involved. He's dangerous with a capital everything. I want him away from Scarlett, away from you, and off the ship."

"My mother used to try the same verbal tactics to make me stay away from the bad boys."

"How did that work out for her?"

She shrugs. "I followed one of those bad boys onto a cruise ship once and haven't left the high seas yet. My mother wishes she would have encouraged the relationship. And if she did, I would have probably married that professor who had the hots for me. My mother would have most certainly approved of that."

“Note to self: Reverse psychology still works wonders.”

The squeal of a microphone goes off, and soon a moderator with a melodic accent introduces about a dozen writers from the mystery conference, three of whom are Taffy, Ursula, and Sabrina.

It’s time for the show to begin.

Let’s see if someone on that stage is ready to end a real mystery—who killed Drucilla Grim?



## CHAPTER 21



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: Ahoy there, beach bums!

Here's a fun tip to turn your beach day into a literary adventure—bring along a gripping novel or a travel guidebook, find a comfy spot on the local beach, and enjoy some serious R&R—*reading* and relaxation.

Be sure to sip a cool, tropical drink while getting lost in the pages and it's the perfect blend of relaxation and exploration, and it might just be the best page-turner of your cruise!

With a book in one hand and a drink in the other, you'll create beachside memories that are as epic as the ocean itself.

Happy reading and sipping, sun-soaked travelers!

XOXO Trixie

“WELCOME ONE AND ALL,” says the moderator, a cute younger woman wearing a bright purple dress with a visor that says *book boyfriends do it better*. “Welcome to the authors that have sailed many waters to be with us today as well. And as you can all plainly see, Costa Rica is a writer as well. She is a poet like no other. She says the sun is a generous artist, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink—while bestowing a soft glow upon the sands as the rhythmic sea kisses the shore.”

A round of applause breaks out and some light laughter is sprinkled in there as a thick crowd gathers to watch the writers at hand right here on an idyllic beach in beautiful Costa Rica.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” the moderator continues. “We’re thrilled to have such a spectacular gathering of mystery writers here on this stunning Costa Rican beach. We’ll start the session with each writer introducing themselves and sharing a bit about their latest works, and then we’ll dive into the questions. Let’s start with you, Ursula Ravenscroft.”

Ursula flips her hair back and adjusts her oversized sunglasses. “Thank you, honey. Well, where should I start? I suppose it’s enough to say that writing, to me, is like breathing—both effortless and essential.” A light laugh titters through the crowd once again. “My recent novel, *Venomous Vendettas*, has been basking in the limelight, enjoying its well-deserved space on the best-seller lists.” She gives a little smirk while taking the applause offered her way.

A few other authors offer some insight into their work, and soon enough it’s Taffy’s turn.

Taffy looks adorable in a pink sundress with a little black bow tied off at the waist. Her lipstick matches her frock, and she’s wearing white sunglasses that give her that movie star appeal.

“Hi, all,” she calls out. “I’m Taffy Blackwood, and I weave cozy mysteries that capture the imagination and perhaps, just *maybe*, keep you up at night—in a good way, of course. My latest is a cozy jaunt through the hidden corners of a small town just like the one I grew up in.”

The crowd coos in unison.

A few more authors make their introductions then Sabrina is in the limelight.

“Hey there,” the perky blonde waves to the crowd. “Thanks so much for coming out this afternoon.”

“That’s my mark,” I whisper to Elodie while doing my best impersonation of a ventriloquist.

“She looks guilty.” Elodie doesn’t miss a beat.

“How so?”

“It’s the perky blondes you always have to watch out for. They’re usually the ones trying to steal your man once you turn your back. Believe me, I’ve got enough evidence to back my claim.” She leans in closer. “Half the time, I’m the perky blonde in the equation.”

“Good to know,” I say.

Sabrina might be perky, but is she a killer?

“Side note,” Elodie whispers, “I don’t do married men.”

“And for that, every married *woman* is grateful,” I tell her.

The microphone squeals a moment as all eyes fall on the blonde on stage.

“My name is Sabrina Nightshade and my stories are your go-to if you love a mix of hilarity—and maybe a ghost or two with your dose of mystery. I’m currently working on a whodunit set in a quirky, haunted hair salon!”

“Ooh, that sounds fun,” Elodie lifts a brow my way. “I think I like her. If she does turn out to be the killer, maybe we should look the other way. There are so few books I enjoy reading these days.”

I nod at my bestie. “I’ll keep your literary struggles in mind when trying to fight for justice.”

“Fantastic introductions,” the moderator beams. “Thank you! Let’s move on to the questions. Our first question is from the audience. What inspires your unique mystery plots?”

A couple of banal answers go by and then it’s Ursula’s turn.

She sighs hard as if it’s a mundane question to begin with.

“Inspiration is everywhere when you’re as attuned to the mysteries of the universe as I am,” she practically purrs, much to the audience’s delight. “The key is to allow the universe to speak to you. Every corner, every whisper of the wind carries the seeds of a spine-tingling tale. But, of course, not everyone can harvest these seeds as elegantly as I do.” She offers a smile to her fellow writers, and I can’t help but think it’s a bit condescending.

A couple of other writers offer up their answers and then it's Taffy at the helm.

Taffy leans forward, chuckling. "For me, it's more about coffee and a good dose of people-watching. I tend to find mystery in the mundane, turning an ordinary grocery store visit into a setting for a nail-biting chase."

The crowd offers up a laugh at that one.

"She's so down-to-earth," I say. "Should I let her get away with murder, too?" I shoot Elodie the side-eye and she splashes a smidge of her drink onto my thighs. "Hey." I laugh. "That actually felt good," I say, rubbing in the icy sludge.

"It should, it's devilishly hot and humid."

It's Sabrina's turn and she cocks her head as she thinks about it for a minute.

"The thing that inspires my mystery plots most is the real-life ghosts I seem to encounter everywhere I go. And if you're a passenger on board the *Emerald Queen of the Seas*, you'll know that I've brought a particularly ornery ghost along for the ride this time."

"You can say that again," I mutter.

Elodie kicks her foot to mine. "Do something about this pest of a poltergeist, would you? I'm tired of plucking merchandise off the ceiling."

"The ceiling?" I practically gag on the words. "Boy, he really is ornery."

"He?" Elodie looks amused. "Tell me more."

I flick my wrist at her as the moderator goes on.

Elodie doesn't know about my questionable supernatural talent, but she's probably intuitive enough to have figured it out for herself.

"Fascinating insights!" the moderator says a touch too perky. "Next question—how do you deal with writer's block?"

Ursula raises a hand. "Writer's block is a myth, at least in my world. My creativity is boundless. Of course, surrounding

oneself with the aura of success and talent nourishes the mind, allowing the words to flow like a Costa Rican waterfall.” She wrinkles her nose as she smiles. “I write about five thousand words a day before noon and take the rest of the day to replenish my proverbial well. Writing is my business and I take it very seriously.”

There’s a hush on stage as the other writers exchange glances.

I get the feeling no one else is writing up a storm in the morning and breezing through the rest of their day. I can’t blame them. I know from writing my measly blog that writing is hard work and often draining. Even if I was able to write that much in the morning, I’m pretty sure I’d need the rest of the day to recover.

Taffy offers her colleague a wry smile. “Well, Ursula, we can’t all be blessed with an everlasting waterfall of words. Sometimes, a simple walk or a chat with friends unclogs the creative pipes for me.”

Several other authors nod in agreement.

Sabrina clears her throat. “I don’t write every day. In fact, I only write when the muse strikes. As for writer’s block, well, my stomach seems to block my muse quite effectively several times a day.” A bout of laughter rips through the panel as a few other authors commiserate. “But the best thing that helps me overcome writer’s block is a handful of chocolate and a hot cup of coffee.”

The moderator laughs into her mic. “There’s not a lot that chocolate and coffee can’t cure. Thank you all for sharing. Last question—what advice would you give to aspiring mystery writers? Anyone?”

Ursula Ravenscroft lifts a hand straight into the air once again. “Simple. Be brilliant, be extraordinary, and perhaps try to glean something from established writers such as myself. Absorb the aura of success and brilliance, and you might just find a glimmer of it manifesting in your work.”

The crowd gives a polite applause.

Elodie makes a face before leaning my way. “I hope she’s the killer. I just hate braggarts.”

“She’s not bragging,” I say, trying to find another word for it. “She’s just—an excited professional. Besides, the killer is never someone I’d like to see get their comeuppance. That practically wipes her off the suspect list.”

“Ah-*ha*.” Elodie wags a slender finger my way. “So you do hate her.”

“I don’t hate anybody.” I laugh as I swat her with her hat.

“Thank you all for your wonderful answers and advice,” the moderator calls out. “Let’s give our marvelous mystery writers a warm round of applause! And please join us for the book signing portion over at the next tent.”

Within seconds, the tent is swarmed with rabid fans, each holding a small stack of books with them.

“Would you look at that?” I moan in dismay. “So much for getting a moment alone with my suspect. I’m starting to think you’re bad luck.” I elbow my bestie playfully as I say it.

“Me?” Elodie practically spears her chest with a red pointed fingernail. “If anything, it’s those two biddies.” She hitches her thumb behind us.

“Speaking of which, they’ve been awfully quiet,” I say as we turn around and both Elodie and I let out a scream at the very same time.

In lieu of seeing Bess and Nettie, we see two lumps in the sand that mildly resemble sirens of the sea.

Both Elodie and I pitch our drinks and start digging until we excavate two rather sandy and gasping-for-breath biddies whom I couldn’t live without.

After a few more fruity concoctions and a quick dunk in the water, all is well with the world again.

Bess and Nettie may have evaded the Grim Reaper for another day, but Drucilla Grim wasn’t so lucky.

I glance over to that mob at the book signing table and sigh.

Sabrina Nightshade may have evaded my clutches today, but her luck is about to run out—just like Drucilla's did.

A whirlwind of paperbacks floats off the table and twirls high into the sky as the crowd gasps and screams.

The word *ghost* circles around the beach like a haunted whisper.

Commodore Whitmore's luck is about to run out, too—for a second time.

Only it won't be the Grim Reaper he'll be facing, it will be me.

## CHAPTER 22



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*T*rip Tip Question: Hey there, Trixie. It's me, Betty!

Guess what? Dan actually accused ME of stealing the jewels! He even concocted a story that he's a good guy who got mixed up with a nut job, and if he doesn't keep his nose clean, he won't be allowed to attend law school in the fall. *Boo-hoo!*

I don't believe him.

Apparently, there was an entire boatload of stolen goods held up in my cabin, and when the security team found them, they assumed his story was true.

And do you know where I'm writing you from? The brig! Aka the ship's dungeon!

You just have to get me out of this mess, Trixie.

Meanwhile, Martin, my faithful ex, has already promised to help me garner a top-notch legal team. And with any luck, it will be the same legal team he'll use to dissolve his mistake of a marriage.

By the way, who do you believe is the innocent in all of this? Dan the scammer or me?

~All I Wanted Was a Second Chance

DEAR All I Wanted Was a Second Chance,

What a convoluted situation you find yourself in. Given the conflicting stories and the evidence, it's challenging to



determine innocence.

While navigating this terrible tangle, it's essential to let the legal process take its course to determine the truth of the matter. Both Dan and you should have the opportunity to present your side of the story and evidence in a fair and just manner.

While Martin has promised to help, it's crucial to remain patient and allow the legal professionals to assess the situation objectively.

Stay strong and may the truth prevail.

Wishing you clarity and resolution,

XOXO Trixie

**PLEASE TELL me Bess and Nettie survived the adventure.**  
Ransom texts back.

I've just finished telling him all about my afternoon in Costa Rica with the girls at the book signing. As soon as we got back, I showered, then went up to the Blue Water Café for sustenance. I just finished up a cheese Danish and some pumpkin-spiced coffee.

Why they only bring out the lava cake in the evening is beyond me. I'll have to talk to Wes about that. If anyone has some pull with the kitchen staff, you'd think it was the captain.

**Bess and Nettie not only survived, but they went for a swim right after Elodie and I excavated them out of the sand.** I hit send.

I hardly pay attention to the Halloween overload here in the lobby. It's like Dracula's den met up with a pumpkin patch. Cobwebs hang left and right like they own the place, jack-o'-lanterns giving everyone the stink eye, and a gang of skeletons dressed as pirates set out amidst a fog that's thicker than the kitchen's clam chowder.

It's safe to say the space has been transformed into an elegant chamber of chills. I'll have to give it to Tinsley. She sure knows her way around a haunted house or two. That

probably says a lot about her childhood—and that would explain a lot about her in general.

I'm about to fill Ransom in on the fact I never got a chance to speak with Sabrina Nightshade when I'm interrupted by a spray of miniature orange stars that appear near the corridor to the right.

“Well, well,” I mutter to myself. “If it isn't our resident ghost gone wild, Commodore Whitmore himself.”

There he is, popping in like he's part of the décor.

My phone chirps again and I glance down to see I've already missed two messages from Ransom. The first asks about the signing and the second reads **Everything okay? Don't tell me that the so-called ghost has captured you.**

“More like captivated.” I sigh.

**All is fine.** I hit send before frowning at the ghost in all his otherworldly glory.

Life would be so much easier if only Ransom knew about my supernatural predicament.

I glance down at my phone.

That's it. I'm sick of keeping secrets from him.

I love Ransom. We can't go on like this. He needs to know about my ridiculous quirk.

Those stars begin to swirl again, and in sheer panic, I head in the spook's direction before he does another disappearing act.

“Commodore,” I hiss while giving his dapper self the once-over. “Don't you dare go anywhere,” I say as I come upon him as he floats into the Halloween display with all of those skeletons. “Nice to see you're hanging out with the trick-or-treat crew.”

My phone pings and I glance down. It's Ransom again.

**We'll talk soon. Stay away from ghosts and trouble. Not necessarily in that order.**

I make a face.

If he only knew.

I clear my throat as I move my attention back to the ghost at hand.

“Commodore, we need to talk—as in I need you to stay with me long enough to carry out a two-way conversation. I’ve been chasing you all over this ship like a Cabbage Patch Doll on Black Friday circa 1983,” I call out, hastening my pace to catch up with the retreating phantom.

“I can see that.” He turns my way and exhibits a frown. “Your persistence is as enduring as the legends of the sea.”

“Thank you, I think. I guess you could say I’ve got the tenacity of a barnacle on a battleship. Now, would you quit the ghostly gallivanting? We need to discuss a few things.”

A small crowd passes by on their way to the buffet and I hold my phone to my lips to make it look as if I’m actually doing something sane.

“Ah, the curiosity of the living.” He chuckles my way. “It possesses the soul with an undying flame. Now what exactly is it that you need to discuss with me?”

I scoff at him in disbelief. “First off, I’d love for you to ditch the cryptic carnival act and stop treating this ship as if it were some ghostly playground. The ship has gone bananas with your theatricals. And secondly, it’s high time we discuss Drucilla Grim’s homicide investigation. Right now, this case is harder to crack than a coconut shell.”

He tilts his translucent head my way. “Very well, Trixie. Your determination has earned you passage through the tempest of my mind. Meet me in the library where the tales of many souls reside—and we might get a little privacy.”

“Library, got it,” I pant. “It’s a date, Commodore. Just try not to spook the stories right off the shelves before I get there,” I say with a tiny smile because for once I can feel the tide finally turning in my favor.

He up and disappears and I jump onto the nearest elevator en route to the home of a thousand books, where one onery ghost is about to tell me a story about everything he knows.

I hope.

## CHAPTER 23



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip Question: Hey, Trixie. It's me again, Jenny.

It turns out, my new hubby, Martin, has not only gotten the ball rolling as far as garnering Betty a top-notch legal team, but he's been visiting her in the brig every three hours so that she won't lose all of her hair as she puts it.

Well, guess what? I put in a visit with Betty, too—in private. I told her that I knew she was faking her innocence and that poor Dan got swept into her web.

And then I told her she could have my husband as long as she confessed the truth about stealing those jewels to both the ship's security department and to Martin.

Of course, I wasn't going to let go of my husband, but Betty didn't know that. She promptly held a meeting where she confessed to having poor impulse control ever since Martin walked out of her life. She confessed to stealing the goods, setting up Dan, and stalking us on our honeymoon as a means to get my husband back into her life.

How's that for a legal victory? Just thought you'd like to know!

~Jenny Loves Justice

DEAR JENNY LOVES JUSTICE,

Wow, what a turn of events! It seems you've orchestrated quite the legal victory.

And what a twist of justice it is. It appears that your determination and clever strategy have led to a significant breakthrough in the situation.

Now that Betty has confessed to her actions, it's crucial to ensure that the legal process continues fairly and justly.

Continue to prioritize open and honest communication with Martin to strengthen your relationship.

Your commitment to seeking the truth has led to a remarkable outcome.

Wishing you a peaceful and harmonious cruise from here on out,

All the best,

XOXO Trixie

STEPPING into the library feels like walking into a Halloween wonderland. It seems no space on the ship is safe from Tinsley's determination to turn this luxury liner into a haunted house, and the library is no different.

It's cool inside, and there's a decided hush—mostly stemming from the fact I'm the only living soul occupying it at the moment.

Gobs of cobwebs stretch from the mahogany bookshelves to the ornate chandeliers above, inadvertently dimming the lights and casting an ethereal glow on the place in general.

Pumpkins carved with cooky faces nestle in the corners, and the flickering lights set within them give off the exact spooky vibe this season demands. Paper bats are suspended mid-air, hanging from fishing line that gives the illusion they're fluttering beneath the ceiling.

And there, amidst the supernatural décor, is Commodore Whitmore, hovering near a grand, old-world globe. His gray hair is slicked back, he's donned the same dapper suit he's been haunting the ship in, but his face looks softer, more inclined to the idea of spending a little time to speak with me.

"The stage is set, Trixie." He laughs as he waves a hand around the place. "Shall we unravel the mysteries that have

tangled themselves in reality?”

“Only if those mysteries have to do with a certain ex-girlfriend of yours. Taffy Blackwood filled me in on a few tidbits about you, as did Ursula Ravenscroft. In fact, they filled me in on more than a few things.” I stop shy of mentioning the fact I know that he took his own life.

“Ah, Taffy and Ursula—both nice ladies. Please extend my regards.”

I shoot him a look for even suggesting it.

“Fine,” he says. “What can I do for you, Trixie? From what I understand you, my love, are the key to getting me back to paradise where I belong.”

“Tell me everything you know about Drucilla Grim . We can start there.”

“Drucilla,” he says her name with a sigh as he closes his eyes. “She was a top-notch writer and we had a wonderful time together for the most part. She had a thing for old books, dusty manuscripts, that sort of thing. She was a bit obsessed with it. She’d go to crazy lengths to get her hands on them.” He sighs once again.

“Wow, really?” I step forward. “So, she was kind of like a detective, always on the hunt for hidden gems?”

“Exactly,” he says. “She was all about the thrill of the hunt. Finding secret, old documents was like striking gold for her. She also had a love of digging up dirt—on people.”

“On people?” I inch back. “As in gossip?”

“It was her secret weapon.” He nods. “And often used as such. Drucilla loved having the inside scoop. Knowing people’s secrets and deepest, darkest desires gave her a sense of power.” He scowls off in the distance. “She liked having the upper hand. Between the writing, the hunting, and the secret-keeping, Drucilla was always in the middle of some sort of mystery.”

“Secrets, huh?” I think on it for a moment. “I bet one of those secrets is the key to solving *our* mystery. You wouldn’t

happen to know of any juicy tidbits she may have been keeping about some of the people taking this trip, would you?"

He squints toward the ceiling. "I'm afraid not. Although, I have been gone for quite some time. I'm sure whatever caused her demise was something relatively new as far as I'm concerned."

"Okay, well, you remember Taffy. Do you remember anything about Drucilla stealing her ideas?"

"This again?" He gives a little chuckle. "That's unfortunate. Drucilla really took Taffy under her wing. It was Drucilla who brought it up to me, regarding the accusations. I thought they had squared it away."

"Apparently not," I say. "What about Ursula? I heard she was in real estate way back when, and that was your game."

"Ah yes, she introduced me to Percival Bonmith," he growls. "He was a realtor as well, but he wanted to be a writer. And write he did. He was quite prolific, but he never submitted his work. He was one of those perfectionists who believed in polishing until you scrubbed away the enamel. Regardless, it was Percival from whom Drucilla got her hands on a few of those manuscripts she collected. They were her most prized possessions." He glares out the window as if it didn't sit well with him.

"Okay, that's a start," I say. "What about Sabrina Nightshade? I hear she's a relation of yours?"

"Stepdaughter from a previous marriage. How is Sabrina?"

"She's well and thriving. She writes paranormal mysteries. And judging by the crowd that mobbed her this afternoon, she's doing pretty good for herself."

"Lovely." He winces. "I worried about her. Drucilla never did take kindly to the girl."

"Why is that?"

"Drucilla was insanely jealous of my ex-wife, Maura. That was Sabrina's mother. Sabrina's father had passed when she was a child, so I sort of took on that role for her. I think deep



down Drucilla was afraid Maura and I would get back together. But that wasn't the case. Nevertheless, Maura passed a few years into our relationship. She fell from a second level while working in her barn. It was a great tragedy, but at the time, Drucilla stepped up and tried her best to make amends with Sabrina. That never really panned out for her."

"I'm sorry to hear it. All that strife must have been hard for you."

"Oh, it was terrible. But Maura, Fred, and I are all looking forward to Sabrina's homecoming one day. Fred is Sabrina's natural father. We've grown to be quite good friends. And although Sabrina was not my child by nature, I still consider her a part of my golden circle." He waves me off. "But I don't want to bore you with the details of the heavenly realm."

"Oh, I know all about the golden circle. A previous disembodied spirit let me know all about it. The golden circle is when your nuclear family, your children, and your spouse make it home. Grandchildren, cousins, nieces and nephews, and friends are all a part of the *silver* circle. And the bronze circle is everyone you knew or knew *of* in your life. I believe they said that was the heavenly way of keeping track of who still has connections to the planet."

"I'm impressed." He purses his lips as he studies me. "The heavens are so much more complex than the human mind can fathom. They are the epitome of all things good, right, wonderful, and beautiful. Of course, the one who paid it all is the one who rules the roost. And because of him, we have everything to be thankful for. Dare I say, if the inhabitants of this planet knew what waits in the better realm, they would indeed become too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good. But on the flip side, you're no earthly good if you're not heavenly-minded." He sighs. "Something I wish I knew way back when I still wore a coat of flesh."

"Hindsight is truly twenty-twenty." I sigh along with him. "So tell me, what was the big ruckus that pulled you and Drucilla apart? I mean, to hear it told, the two of you had a storybook romance."

His eyes ignite the color of bright red flames. His entire countenance takes on the hue of a fireball.

Commodore belts out an egregious roar, and in doing so unleashes an unholy wind that not only sends my hair back, but causes every book in this room to fly off the shelves.

Then one by one the books congregate in the middle of the room as that wild wind continues to unleash its unholy gale. The books spin round and round as if they just got sucked into a whirlwind before they begin to fall to the floor, stacking themselves into a unique pattern with eight piles on the outside and one globular pile dead in the middle.

It's a pattern that I can't quite make out until the final book lands on top of the stack in the center.

"Oh my word," I say as I edge my way to the door. "It's a—it's a giant—"

"Kraken," he finishes for me as he stands with his hand tucked under his chin admiring his work. "I thought it went well in keeping with the nautical theme." He shoots me a look with those fiery eyes. "My relationship with Drucilla is none of your business," he growls before letting out another roar and flying right through my body and out through the wall.

"Good grief." I run right out of the library and down the corridor before pressing myself up against the wall to catch my breath.

"What's up," a quasi-familiar voice says softly and I peer around the corner, only to see Manny Monticello talking into his phone. He's standing behind a ten-foot ficus near the elevator, and by the looks of it, he's wanting some privacy. "It looks like you hooked me up with the good stuff. I knew you wouldn't disappoint. I'm putting in an order. I want a shipment sent to my warehouse as soon as you can get it to me. We're going to make more money off this than we've ever seen before. We'll have everyone and their brother addicted before Christmas." He chuckles at the thought. "Make it happen." He hangs up and takes off in a light jog.

"What?" I shake my head in disbelief.

He *is* dealing again.

The guy is nothing but a lowlife pusher. And to think of all the lives he's about to ruin with whatever drugs he's looking to get people addicted to.

Addiction is no laughing matter, and just hearing him giddy over it makes my blood boil.

He doesn't deserve someone like Scarlett. But how am I ever going to convince her to break up with him? I know how the heart works, and it has very little to do with logic.

Unless... a thought comes to me.

Unless she catches him in the arms of another woman. That might actually work.

And I know just the woman who is willing to make it happen.

I shoot Elodie a quick text with my unsavory request and she texts right back.

**Oh, honey, that bad boy won't even know what hit him. I'm on the case. And soon, he'll be on *me*.**

Wonderful. I make a face as I send her a thumbs-up.

And I'm on Drucilla Grim's case.

That's exactly why it's pertinent I speak with Sabrina Nightshade asap.

Something tells me she has the answers I'm looking for.

Or at least I hope so.

We'll be going through the Panama Canal tomorrow, and I know for a fact Sabrina is stuck on this ship—and she will most certainly be stuck with me.

## CHAPTER 24



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip Question: Hi, Trixie, this is Martin, Jenny’s husband. I just wanted to let you know that I’m washing my hands of my devious ex, Betty.

I’m leaving her to the justice system and let her know that she’s to leave Jenny and me alone in the future as well.

They released Dan from the brig, and we’ve been having dinner with the poor guy every night. It turns out, he’s a decent man with a bright future ahead of him. He even let us know that once he gets out of law school he’s willing to work for us pro bono any time—even if it has to do with keeping Betty out of our lives.

Any suggestion on how to make this all up to Jenny?

~Martin the Mender

DEAR MARTIN THE MENDER,

It’s wonderful to hear that you’ve taken steps to remove Betty from your lives and that you’re moving forward with Dan’s support.

As for making it up to Jenny, plan a special and romantic date or activity for just the two of you to celebrate your renewed bond. Express your love and appreciation for Jenny through words and gestures, reassuring her of your commitment. And continue to prioritize open communication and quality time together to strengthen your relationship.

Remember, actions speak louder than words, so show Jenny your love and dedication through your thoughtful gestures.

Wishing you both a beautiful journey ahead,

XOXO Trixie

“WE MADE IT,” I say as I slide into a chair next to Ransom, our plates chock-full of everything necessary to make breakfast a delight—and perhaps a gluttonous event as well.

Panama is verdant all around us this early morning, save for the towering buildings that make up the city in the distance. Everyone on board is bubbling with excitement as the *Emerald Queen* enters what looks like a narrow waterway as we prepare for the adventure of a lifetime.

“Panama Canal, here we come,” he says, leaning my way to offer me a kiss.

“I’m so excited,” Bess says. “It’s been ages since we’ve made this passage.”

Nettie nods. “The last time we were around these parts, Bess needed a bottle of rum to get her through.”

Bess rolls her eyes. “They were having a sale on Caribbean rum in the gift shop, and since I happened to be there early in the day, I thought I’d beat the rush and pick one up.” She wrinkles her nose. “That and the fact I thought I might need it to traverse all those gates and locks. I’ve never been a fan of elevators, and face it, the Panama Canal is one big elevator.”

“Good to know,” I say. “I’ll have Elodie send up a bottle of the finest Caribbean rum.”

“How about champagne?” Ransom suggests while toasting us with his coffee. “After all, it was good old-fashioned American engineering that carved out the Panama Canal.”

“Champagne, it is,” I say as Bess and Nettie belt out a whoop.

It’s finally here, the day the *Emerald Queen of the Seas* crosses from the Pacific to the Atlantic as the ship exits one adventure and begins another. And just about every passenger

has migrated to the three levels of open decks in hopes of securing a spot to witness the wonder that's about to unfold.

Bess, Nettie, Ransom, and I attacked the buffet in the Blue Water Café bright and early, and with the kitchen's Halloween touches, it has turned our breakfast into a spooky yet delicious feast.

Bess took on a bowl of *witches' brew oatmeal*, a bubbly concoction sprinkled with candy corn and swirling with bursts of cinnamon.

Nettie and I picked up a Frankenstein's frittata—a green-tinged, spinach-infused masterpiece stitched together with strips of crispy bacon. And both Ransom and I opted for a stack of pumpkin poltergeist pancakes, haunted by whipped cream ghosts and a drizzle of blood-red strawberry syrup.

The deck around us is a whirlpool of colors and noises. People in ghostly garbs, witchy hats, and even some draped in pirate attire crowd the space as they chatter away with excitement. And the salty sea air is already warm at this early hour, which is a harbinger of heated things to come.

Tinsley, the ever-consummate cruise director, is zooming to and fro with a megaphone. Her voice slices through the buzz of excitement as she instructs everyone to find a perch for the Panama spectacle.

“All right, Trixie.” Nettie leans my way. “This ship is about to get locked, loaded, and ready to go. And I say what better time to pin our final suspect to the wall before we reach the Atlantic. She's got nowhere to run and nowhere to hide.”

“Neither does your sanity,” Bess huffs. “You do realize Ransom is sitting right here.”

Ransom growls in lieu of a response.

“Ah, come on.” Nettie slices a glance his way. “You wouldn't dare ruin Trixie's investigative mojo. Her track record speaks for itself.”

She's not wrong. I've served justice more than half a dozen times while on open waters. Not that Quinn or Ransom

wouldn't have eventually tracked down those suspects themselves. Although, the ship only sails for so long...

"I'm not ruining anyone's mojo." Ransom winks my way, no smile. "In fact, I'd like to think I add to it. So who are we shaking down en route to the Atlantic?"

I shoot Nettie a wry smile because Ransom *is* determined to ruin my investigative mojo.

"Sabrina Nightshade," I offer. "But I'm only interested in asking her a few questions. I don't really think she's a suspect. In fact, I'm a bit lean on those. How about you?" I ask him while taking a bite of my pumpkin pancakes—*ooh*, so good. They really should consider serving these year-round.

"I'm a little lean on suspects myself," he says with a frown. "But I'm not letting that slow me down."

I'm not letting that slow me down either, but I keep that little tidbit to myself.

Bess chuckles to herself while staring at her phone. "The ship just uploaded a new picture to their photo library."

Along with the *Seabreeze Newsletter*, the ship has an app that keeps the passengers apprised of all the ghoulish and foolish activities taking place in real-time. You can set up excursions and even peek at the upcoming dinner menu while you're perusing it.

"Check this out," Bess says, holding her phone out at us. "It looks as if someone broke into the ship's library and rearranged all the books to make the sculpture of a giant octopus."

"You mean there's a kraken on board and I've yet to see it?" Nettie snags Bess' phone before passing it around. "Magnificent. Hats off to whoever created that aquatic wonder. You know what they say about having a kraken on board a ship in any form."

"It's good luck and I won't need a bottle of bubbly to help cross the Atlantic?" Bess asks with a hopeful lilt to her voice.

“Nope.” Nettie stabs at her frittata. “It means trouble is up ahead. And dead men tell no tales.”

Ransom shakes his head as he studies the picture on Bess’ phone. “It’s a magnificent feat, all right, but an illegal endeavor, nonetheless.”

“In what way?” I ask, surprised to hear him taking such a tough stance on Commodore’s work of literary art.

“Vandalism.”

Vandalism? If only he knew the great lengths poor Commodore’s soul had to go through to commit that act of so-called vandalism.

“I can think of worse things that can be done with a book,” I say. “In fact, I’ll volunteer with the cleanup effort.”

Bess groans at the thought. “From what I know about the Dewey Decimal System, you’re in for a migraine.”

“Migraines aside,” Nettie says as she leans toward Ransom, “tell us, Detective, do you think the locks and gates will be the only mystery we unravel today?”

Ransom sheds a short-lived smile. “Considering present company”—he says, gesturing toward a handful of costumed fellow passengers— “I’m expecting Dracula to pop out at any second and claim responsibility for every last mystery on board.”

Bess laughs while stirring her oatmeal like a witch over a cauldron. “Can you imagine Dracula popping on board, waiting to make his grand entrance through the Panama Canal?”

I give a quick nod. “That would be the least surprising event in our current carousel of chaos. Between the ghost, those scary notes, the black roses, and the murder of Drucilla Grim, Dracula would be the cherry on top.”

A bell chimes over the speaker system and a hush falls over the crowd.

I’m fully expecting to hear an announcement from the bridge, but instead, the sound of maniacal laughter floats



through the air.

And just like that, things get spooky.

## CHAPTER 25



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip Tip:* Here's a handy tip for taking in the natural wonders around you from the comfort of the ship. Be sure to grab a pair of binoculars and a guidebook for local wildlife or flora, then find a prime spot on the deck. Scan the horizon, watch for dolphins riding a wave, or spy on exotic birds soaring above. You'll be amazed at the hidden dramas playing out in the natural world just beyond the rails.

XOXO Trixie

THE SUN BEGINS to rise in the sky, warming the shoulders of everyone crowded onto the ship's upper deck. Excitement buzzes through the air like an electric current connecting every soul on board—both the living and the dead.

Crowds have flocked to every open area the ship has to offer, and each passenger is alive with anticipation as they find a nook or cranny to nestle into, securing a front-row seat to the spectacle of our transit through the Panama Canal.

I'm seated on the lido deck at a table near the railing with Ransom, Bess, and Nettie as we finish up our breakfast.

The ship's communication system just chimed, but instead of hearing something informative, all we heard was ghostly laughter—and I'm pretty sure I know exactly who that ghost would be.

"That's Commodore, isn't it, Trixie?" Nettie asks, and Bess is quick to elbow her.

“Commodore?” Ransom lifts a brow as if he were amused. “Did you name the ghost?”

“That’s right,” Bess says sharply while giving Nettie the stink eye. “We named the ghost *Commodore*. We’re just being our silly old selves. I mean, it’s not like there’s really a ghost named Commodore running amok, causing all this trouble.”

Ransom ticks his head to the side. “At this point, I’d believe just about anything.”

Nettie nods my way. “And just like that, he’s ripe for the picking. You’re welcome.”

She’s right. And I will tell Ransom all about my supernatural abilities, just not here in front of a cast of thousands—and potentially Commodore himself.

The bell chimes over the speaker system once again.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.” The captain’s voice crackles through the air—a husky sound that reverberates across the deck and doesn’t spook anyone in the least. “Please excuse that eerie laughter you just heard. I honestly have no idea where that came from. But it’s not Halloween just yet. Today, we will be making the transit to the Atlantic.” A round of cheers and whoops breaks out through the crowd. “Please help me welcome a navigator extraordinaire from the Panama Canal Authority, Captain Martinez, who will be joining us to ensure our voyage through the Canal is smooth and memorable.”

Another round of applause breaks out before the crowd stills once again.

“Good morning, everyone. This is Captain Martinez. We’re starting from the Pacific side, moving majestically through the Miraflores Locks, where our mighty ship will be lifted eighty feet in two stages.” A few gasps circle the crowd. “We’ll then proceed through the Pedro Miguel Locks,” Captain Martinez continues. “Our floating marvel will be elevated further, making its graceful way through the Gaillard Cut, where the mountains were split to make way for this

magnificent canal followed by a quick sail through Gatun Lake—a manmade lake created for this spectacle as well.”

Already I’m itching to pull out my sketchbook. I still have a few more classes to instruct in the final days of the trip, but I can’t wait that long to paint the landscape.

“And then”—Captain Martinez continues—“we descend! The Gatun Locks will gently lower our ship, leading us to the Atlantic Ocean, or as we lovingly call it here, the Caribbean Sea.”

Another round of *oohs* and *aaahs* circles the deck as we’re filled with the wonders of modern engineering and the magic of the journey we’re about to embark upon.

As the ship inches closer to the grand mechanical jaws of the Panama Canal, the humid tropical air is filled with the scent of adventure—and well, the scent of diesel, too.

“Feels like we’re about to be swallowed by a gigantic sea monster, doesn’t it?” I muse, watching as the enormous gates loom closer and we’re met with a white wall that looks as if it stretches to the sky. And I would swear on all that is holy this big ship isn’t going to make it through the narrow strait ahead, but I suppose they know what they’re doing.

“Getting swallowed by a giant sea monster?” Nettie squints up ahead. “Or are we entering the world’s most complicated bathtub? Do you think they use rubber duckies for trial runs?”

Bess chuckles. “Only if the duckies have passed their engineering exams.”

The gates creak open and soon we’re welcomed into the first chamber.

“Here we go,” Ransom says as he picks up my hand. “It’s time to ascend the aquatic staircase.”

“Better that than the stairway to heaven,” Bess muses.

“I wouldn’t dance a jig just yet,” Nettie says. “We’ve still got the Grim Reaper’s assistant keeping us company.” She hitches a thumb my way.

“Very funny,” I say, picking up my orange juice—blood orange juice in keeping with the spooky theme.

As water fills the chamber, elevating us like VIPs in a fancy elevator, I spot my suspect of the day, staring out at the action taking place in the water.

“There she is,” I whisper, nodding her way. “I say we move in.”

“I’ll guard your pancakes,” Nettie offers.

Bess bleats out a laugh. “And I’ll guard Nettie so she doesn’t *eat* your pancakes.”

Sabrina Nightshade looms by the railing, her blonde hair billowing in the breeze like a golden cloud.

“Sabrina is the one that writes paranormal mysteries,” I say to Ransom as I study the woman. “And judging by the way she’s gazing at the water, you’d think she’s trying to stir up some canal ghosts. Should we go say hi?”

“Only if you promise there will be no poltergeists involved,” he teases as we rise from our seats.

“Unfortunately,” I say, taking his hand, “that’s one promise I can never make to anyone.”

For so many different reasons.

We head on over, and soon enough, we’re standing shoulder to shoulder with the spooky author herself.

## CHAPTER 26



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: While on a sea day, don't forget to load up at the buffet! Snag a table near the windows with a panoramic view of the ocean—or even the Panama Canal as you savor your delicious meal. And you can also feast your eyes on the ever-changing seascape.

It's the perfect recipe for a memorable meal and a stunning show!

XOXO Trixie

“GOOD MORNING, SABRINA.” I give a little wave as I say it. “I'm with the ship. My name is Trixie, and this is my boyfriend, Ransom. I hope you don't mind me saying hello. I'm sort of a fan.”

And it's sort of true. I started one of her mysteries last night—the first book in her *Ghost Hunters Mysteries* series. So far the ghosts in her book aren't nearly as scary as some of the ones I've met in real life. Not that I'd ever use that as an icebreaker.

The salty air permeates us as the ship enters the first gate of the Panama Canal on the Pacific side. We're in for quite the ship-raising adventure, and so is Sabrina if I have my way.

“You're with the ship? Oh, that's wonderful.” Her face brightens and her cheeks pinch with color. “So nice to meet you both. I'm flattered you've read my work.” She does a double take Ransom's way.

I don't blame her. Ransom is a looker and he's definitely worth a second look, and a third, and a fourth—but I digress.

“So are you summoning any sea spirits, or are they sleeping in today?” I tease and Sabrina belts out a laugh.

“I'm just watching the show like everyone else. I can't wait to feel the ship being lifted. It's such a mechanical miracle.”

“It's like an elevator ride, but with a better view,” Ransom offers. “And a bit more suspense.”

“Suspense is right up my alley,” she tells him.

“It's up my alley, too,” Ransom says, deadpan. “Sabrina, I'm the ship's resident detective.”

I shoot him a look.

Real smooth, Ransom. Real smooth.

Did they teach him nothing when he was an FBI behavioral specialist?

“No kidding? The resident detective?” Sabrina's mouth rounds out with a smile. “Geez, I bet you've got some interesting tales to tell. But I suppose there aren't too many crimes on board a cruise ship. I mean, it's not like you have a brand new homicide to investigate every single week.”

“Some days it feels that way,” he says, giving me the side-eye.

What is he looking at me like that for?

I'm an innocent party to all the homicides we've had to deal with thus far.

At least I think I'm innocent in all of this.

“Sabrina, I'm sorry about the loss of your friend,” I say just above a whisper because I feel bad for souring her mood.

“Oh yes, Drucilla,” She closes her eyes a moment. “That was so tragic. Unfortunately, we weren't very friendly.” She winces. “I mean, I wish we were. Drucilla used to date my stepfather, Commodore Whitmore.”

“Commodore?” Ransom’s left brow hikes well into his forehead as he looks my way before glancing back at Bess and Nettie. It’s clear he’s putting together Nettie’s comment about the moniker we’ve given to our friendly ghost *and* Sabrina’s stepfather’s name. But something tells me he’s still far off from arriving at the fact that I can see the dead.

Most days, I’m far off from arriving at that conclusion myself despite the fact the proof is in the ghostly pudding.

*Ooh*, banana pudding would be amazing right about now.

My stomach growls at the thought, and I force myself to remain focused.

The ship officially enters the first chamber and the water level begins to rise.

“Commodore Whitmore?” Sabrina inches toward Ransom. “If the name sounds familiar, it’s because he was huge in the real estate world. He’s the man who raised me, so I’ve always considered him my father in that regard. Anyway, he knew I wanted to be a writer, so when he started dating Drucilla, he introduced me. Unfortunately, Drucilla was insanely jealous of my mother. I think she thought there was still a chance that my mom and Commodore would get back together, but that proverbial ship had already sailed. Anyway, she never really took to me.” She shrugs. “But she did welcome me into the fold of our local mystery writer chapter, and I’m forever grateful for that. I don’t think my books would be as successful as they are today if I didn’t have all of these other great writers to learn from.”

“I’m sorry to hear the two of you never got along,” I say. “But it sounds like you benefited greatly from the group.”

“And then some.” She laughs. “But I wouldn’t say Drucilla and I *never* got along. For a while after my mother passed, she seemed to warm up to me. In fact, she invested in a café I opened. Unfortunately, my café went belly up. And, well, that soured our relationship once again. I was never able to repay her for the money she lent me.” She casts an icy glance at the water below. “I swore I’d pay her back.”



“Sabrina,” I say softly. “I saw the two of you having what looked to be a disagreement the night Drucilla died. Can I ask what that was about?”

She winces as she looks from Ransom to me. “She made a quip about me being able to afford the cruise, and yet I hadn’t made an effort to pay her a single red cent. Which isn’t true. The first thing I did was write Drucilla a check for fifteen hundred dollars as soon as I shut the doors on my business. Granted it wasn’t a drop in the bucket, but I was making an effort.” She makes a face. “And I guess she’s sort of right about the fact I could have written her another check rather than taking the cruise, but I just couldn’t stand to pass up the trip. For someone like me, it really is the trip of a lifetime.”

Ransom tips his head as he studies her and I can tell his wheels are spinning.

“Sabrina”—I lean in—“the night Drucilla died, I saw a woman throw a drink in her face. It was Taffy Blackwood. Would you happen to know what that’s about?”

“Oh, that.” She averts her eyes. “Way back when, my stepfather had a good friend who also wanted to be a writer. I think his name was Percival Bonmith. He was a prominent realtor in the area at the time. Anyway, Drucilla was into collecting old books and manuscripts and Percival was, too. Commodore introduced the two of them and they got along great. Not long afterward, though, Percival went missing, and let’s just say the journalists in the area painted a rather unpleasant picture of what may have happened.”

“What was that?” Ransom asks, suddenly intrigued.

“Percival and my stepfather were vying against one another for some big contracts. When Percival suddenly disappeared, a few reporters insinuated that perhaps his business rival had something to do with it. The fact they had a public argument in a restaurant just days before Percival went missing didn’t help the matter. But I knew my stepdad well enough to know he was no killer.”

“How sad for both men,” I say. “Did they ever find Percival?”

She shakes her head. “And to connect the dots for you, Taffy was one of the reporters who painted Commodore in a bad light. Drucilla never forgave her for that. Maybe that’s what they were arguing over that night?”

“But it was Taffy who threw the drink in Drucilla’s face,” I say as I try to tease out the logic before I remember the fact that Taffy accused Drucilla of stealing her ideas.

Hey! Maybe Drucilla faked her friendship with the woman to do just that? It certainly sounds like a spiteful thing to do, especially if spite or revenge was the reason Drucilla stole the woman’s ideas to begin with.

“I don’t know what either of those women were thinking,” Sabrina says as the ship begins to rise and a collective *ooh* breaks out around us. “Oh *wow*.” She grabs ahold of her stomach. “I think I’d better take a seat. I’m always the first to get motion sickness.”

She speeds off and I shrug up at Ransom.

“Well, Detective? What are your thoughts?”

He casts a glance out at the narrow waterway below us. “I think we’re about to experience one of man’s greatest innovations. How about we shelf the case for the day and take in the sights?” His cheek glides up on one side as he wraps his arms around me. “I may be withholding a little bit of information that recently came to light.”

My mouth falls open. “Ransom Courtland Baxter,” I say in the very best mom voice I can afford. Not that I want Ransom to even remotely think of me in a maternal way. “Well? Will you share it with me?”

“Later. If you behave.” He gives my ribs a quick squeeze.

“Have you met me? I don’t exactly have a history of behaving.”

“That might just be one of the reasons I’m attracted to you.”

Ransom lands a kiss on my lips and I hold him until things get good and heated.

The ship isn't the only one feeling snug and safe within the Panama Canal. I bet whoever sent Drucilla to her death is feeling pretty snug and safe right now, too. But as sure as the ship rises to meet the water, I'm about to rise to the occasion and meet with the killer if it's the last thing I do.

And it just might be.

## CHAPTER 27



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip* Tip: Don't settle for ordinary selfies when you can make them *ship-tastic*. Pose with a dramatic ocean backdrop, photobomb a friendly pelican, or even snap a selfie with your favorite cruise cocktail. The more creative, the better. Share these unique moments with your friends back on shore and let them marvel at your cruise-inspired masterpieces.

XOXO Trixie

“ALL RIGHT, Panama Canal, show me what you've got,” I murmur while Ransom and I hold one another tight beneath the relentless blaze of the sky.

The ship nudges forward with its engines purring like a contented giant cat. I lean over the railing, feeling the ghost of a breeze as we creep into the massive locks and we hear the sound of metal grating against metal.

“First stop, Miraflores Locks,” I comment, watching as the gargantuan gates close behind us with a finality that tickles my love for drama. Water churns and swirls around the ship, filling the chamber with a noise like the roaring of an immense waterfall. The ship begins to rise, a slow ascension that quickens the heartbeat—the kind of special effect you'd expect in a supernatural thriller—or on a cruise ship.

I glance around. The crowd is both excited and in awe, chattering away in a multitude of languages. Faces are turned

upwards as cameras click away, capturing the magic trick of the century—making a sea-worthy vessel *levitate*.

Tinsley wanders the deck with that megaphone in hand and has every last passenger abuzz as the ship embarks on its transit through the Panama Canal.

Her voice booms over the crowd, announcing a medley of games to keep the passengers entertained amidst the mechanical marvel of the Canal crossing.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she booms. “Get ready for a little delightful spookiness as we traverse these historic locks. Seeing that the transit can take up to ten hours, I think it’s time to play a few games!”

First up is Panama Canal Bingo, a quirky blend of fun facts about the Panama Canal along with a dash of Halloween horror in keeping with the season. Every number called is paired with an intriguing tidbit, ranging from the Canal’s engineering marvels to ghostly tales of its construction.

And once we finish up with this game, Tinsley has promised us a zombie walk to remember.

Bess, Nettie, Ransom, and I dive into bingo with gusto. And out of the four of us, it’s Bess who seems to be on a lucky streak as she rapidly crosses numbers off her sheet.

Nettie, on the other hand, keeps getting waylaid by the spooky stories Tinsley weaves before calling out the next number.

“I-23,” Tinsley calls out. “The exact number of ghosts rumored to haunt the old construction sites.”

“Did you hear that, Trixie?” Bess gives me a nudge. “I knew there was something extra spooky about this canal.”

Ransom chuckles to himself. “You ladies don’t really think there’s a ghostly presence on this ship, do you?”

Nettie glances up from her card. “Only the ghost of a chance that Bess won’t win this game.”

“In your dreams, hippie.” Bess jumps to her feet. “*Bingo*,” she shouts. “Or should I say, *Boo-ingo*?”

A collective groan goes off in the crowd, along with a light applause for Bess.

“Good game,” I say, dotting Ransom’s lips with a kiss. “And if it makes any difference, there was a time when I didn’t believe in ghosts either.”

And boy, has that ever changed.

Next up on Tinsley’s itinerary of terror is the much-anticipated zombie walk.

The staff comes out in droves and helps transform men and women alike into an array of ghoulish costumes as we prepare to stagger and lurch in a conga line of the undead.

Tinsley leads the procession with her face painted a ghoulish shade of green.

Ransom and I take turns dabbing one another’s faces with a pasty white film as we prepare to stagger with the best of them. And, of course, Bess and Nettie aren’t ones to shy away from some macabre fun either.

“Remember, folks,” Tinsley calls out, looking like a terrifying version of herself, and for once the outside matches the inside. “Let’s see your best zombie impressions! Ready, set, and—*lurk!*”

Soon enough, we’re all a part of the undead parade, but it’s Nettie’s zombie impression that is particularly uncanny with her exaggerated limps and groans. Bess teeters and totters, and I’m half-afraid if she gets too close to the edge she might just throw herself overboard.

“Brains,” Nettie calls out with her arms outstretched. “Bess, you’ve got a big one. I think I’ll start with yours.”

Bess laughs at the thought. “After hanging out with you all these years, good luck finding a brain anywhere near my head.”

Ransom and I join the zombie conga, moving like a couple of exaggerated slow pokes.

“Oddly enough”—I say to the handsome, albeit pale, hunk by my side—“this is just my speed.”

“I’m right there with you,” he says before wrapping his arms around my waist. “Have I mentioned that you look drop-dead gorgeous today?”

“Do I?” A laugh strums from me. “Why, thank you. You’re not so lifeless yourself. *Wait*. Did that make sense?”

“On a day like today”—he tweaks his brows—“it makes perfect sense.”

As the ship maneuvers through the Panama Canal, the walking dead proceed to parade freely on deck as we fill the air with laughter. The Halloween spirit has definitely taken over the *Emerald Queen*, and it’s turning the Panama Canal crossing into a perfect zombie apocalypse.

The ship exits the Miraflores Locks, a two-step chamber, before heading into a small lake and then the Pedro Miguel lock where we’re elevated once again.

Then the *Emerald Queen* glides through a cutout in the countryside called the Culebra Cut, a valley that slices through the continental divide before we enter Gatun Lake, a vast manmade body of water that looks like a modern wonder itself.

The flora and fauna surrounding the lake are apparently home to a vast array of wildlife, according to Tinsley, and that includes crocodiles, caiman, monkeys, sloths, and jaguars as well as a plethora of colorful exotic birds.

We slide through the lake with a gentle glide that defies the ship’s colossal weight before hitting the final three chambers for our descent back to sea level.

We head into the upper chamber, then the middle chamber, and finally we reach the bottom of the lower chamber where the *Emerald Queen of the Seas* is brought to Atlantic waters, completing the transition process.

The ship blows its horn and a raucous shout comes from the passengers on board.

Wes comes back over the intercom and thanks Captain Martinez for guiding us with safe passage through the Panama

Canal, causing every last passenger to break out in another celebratory cry.

True to his word, Ransom supplies the champagne. And Scarlett and Manny have joined us for the celebration this smoldering tangerine evening.

“To the marvel of human ingenuity,” Ransom calls out as we hold our champagne glasses high.

“Hear, hear,” we all call out.

“And to our next stop, Cartagena, Colombia,” Manny says as a smile expands over his face, and yet again it never quite reaches his eyes. “Colombia is my home and I would love to welcome you to it. Would you accept a day trip with me tomorrow? I would love to show you around.”

Ransom and I exchange a glance, along with Bess and Nettie, and soon we all agree.

“We can’t wait,” Ransom says, sans a trace of a smile.

“I’m really looking forward to it,” I say, doing my best to smile for the both of us.

“Wonderful,” Manny says. “It will be a dirty endeavor none of you will ever forget.”

Dirty, huh? I scowl at the thought.

Spoken like a true drug-dealing dirty dog.

Scarlett blinks back the tears in her eyes as she looks at her brother. “You don’t know how much it means to me to see you making an effort.” She gives her big brother a hug and I can’t help but frown.

It looks as if Elodie is slacking on the job, but then again, the ship did just pass through a modern-day wonder. But come tomorrow there’s no excuse.

This trip is quickly coming to a close, and if Scarlett doesn’t dump Manny before we hit Fort Lauderdale, she might just be stuck with him for life—or until her own unfortunate early demise at the hands of his dangerous cohorts.



Wes comes out and joins us, much to thunderous applause, as the last vestiges of the sunset streaks across the sky in colors of pink and gold.

Wes comes our way and Ransom pours him a glass of champagne.

“You did good, buddy,” he says as he hands the captain a glass brimming with bubbles.

“*Buddy*, huh?” Scarlett looks skeptical of their newfound friendship and I can’t blame her. Their only bond is their shared disdain toward Scarlett’s new boy toy.

“The *Emerald Queen* has finally reached the Atlantic,” Wes says, holding up his glass and we give another cheer.

I’m not sure why, but I feel a small sense of accomplishment, as if I personally navigated the ship through.

The Panama Canal is behind us as the wind tosses my hair with the welcoming embrace of the Caribbean.

Atlantic waters.

It feels as if I’ve finally come home, and in a sense I have.

And now to navigate Manny’s home,—and every last one of those illegal secrets he’s harboring.

## CHAPTER 28



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*T*rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie, Betty here! Well, guess what?

Not only has my new legal team assured me that I can plead insanity over all those nonsensical things I helped *misplace* in my cabin, but they assured me I'll have a top-notch therapist for life!

I've always wanted to talk about myself for hours on end, so it's a big win for me.

And guess what else? One of the ship's security officers in charge of keeping me comfortable has taken a liking to me. And he is adorable! His name is Rocko and he has a wife. But I'm pretty sure I can steer his attention in the right direction—*mine!*

It looks like you're not the only one who will be living on a cruise ship. I let Rocko know that as soon as my pesky little trial is over I'm moving on board the ship just to be with him. He said he'd like to see me try.

Isn't that cute? I guess Cupid struck after all.

Don't give up on finding your Mr. Right, Trixie. Cupid can strike when you least expect it. I'm living proof!

~ Bound for the High Seas

DEAR BOUND,

Well, it seems like you've found an unexpected twist in your cruise adventure after all. Thank you for the reminder that love can surprise us when we least expect it. Wishing you all the best on your journey.

Fair winds and smooth sailing to both you and your legal team.

XOXO Trixie

COLOMBIA.

Cartagena, Colombia to be exact.

The ship docked early this morning, and I spent the first bit of the day updating my blog while sitting out on my private balcony surrounded by the port and views of the glorious city, which reminds me a lot of the Emerald City in the *Wizard of Oz*.

Only in this case, Oz himself would be Manny *El Tigre* Monticello.

I don't know what Manny has planned for us, but before we parted ways last night, he instructed us to wear our bathing suits. Of course, I passed on the invite to Elodie. If anyone can drive a man straight into another woman's arms, it would be her. And for the record, *she* would be the other woman.

Once I'm through with my blog, I load up on a monster-sized breakfast with the usual suspects, Bess and Nettie, at the Blue Water Café. The coffin-shaped French toast is a chef's kiss in and of itself.

After that, we meet up with the rest of the crew for formal breakfast—Wes, Scarlett, Manny, and Elodie per my request. The mummy's morning *boo-rito* is a siren song to bacon lovers all over the world, especially this one.

Then we hit the gangway, but before we enter the shuttle that Manny has waiting for us, he leads us to a park-like area called the Port Oasis where we're treated to birds of every shape and color.

"Flamingos," Nettie cries as she makes a run toward a flock of the delicate-looking angels with their twig-like legs

and glorious pink plumage. “I think I was a flamingo in another life.”

“Your brain is still the same size,” Bess says, pulling her bestie back by the elbow before she gets too close to any of them. “Don’t you dare spook these innocent darlings. We’re here to observe, not become one with the flock.”

“Speak for yourself,” Nettie growls back and the rest of us chuckle, sans Nettie, of course.

We take pictures with the colorful macaws, the wild parakeets, and the channel-billed toucans.

I’m about to ask Ransom to pose with me next to a flock of bright blue macaws when I spot a—

“Alligator,” I cry out while pointing to a six-foot-long hideous lime green creature with a tail that looks as if it’s made of spikes and hatred for all humankind.

“Iguana,” Manny corrects. “He won’t hurt you.” He winks my way. “Not unless you decide to hurt him first.”

“Not on his life,” I say. “Or better yet, mine.”

Ransom and I snap a few pictures next to the birds and quickly send them off to our respective children.

All of my pictures go into my family group chat, which still includes my cheating louse of an ex-husband. And typically, he’s the first one to text back.

Like now for instance.

“Stanton says hello,” I tell Ransom.

It’s always Ransom that my ex regards first. I’m not sure what that means, but as long as there’s a modicum of peace between us, I wouldn’t care if he addressed a fire ant before me.

Manny leads us to the shuttle he’s procured, and soon we’re driving through the colorful streets of Cartagena with its Spanish architecture and citrus-colored buildings in the old part of town. Then before we know it, we travel through the

countryside, through dirt pathways until we come upon, well, a *volcano*.

“Welcome to El Totumo,” Manny calls out. “An active volcano that’s about to swallow you whole.”

“*Another* active volcano?” I murmur mostly to myself.

Ransom nods. “I’m sensing a theme.”

“Oh, honey, you have no idea how much I look forward to it,” Elodie purrs as she jockeyes for a position next to the cartel leader in our midst.

I’d be remiss not to note the fact Elodie primped and coifed, and maxed out her makeup bag on herself today. Her blonde bob is curled to the nines, her false lashes are on point, and her red lipstick lets the rest of us know she’s out for blood.

I can only guess the type of swimsuit she has on under that black lacy cover-up.

Honest to heaven, when I saw her this morning, I thought she was wearing lingerie, and I have a sneaking suspicion she is.

“I hope you’re all looking forward to it.” Manny nods her way.

Elodie raises a hand. “Darling, where exactly are you from in this glorious land?”

“Darling?” Bess leans my way. “She’s laying it on a bit thick, don’t you think?”

I shake my head her way because I don’t think it’s thick enough. This cruise is wrapping up and so is the window in which we have to break up Scarlett and Manny.

I may have let my diabolical plan slip to Bess and Nettie over breakfast in the café. They not only cheered me on—Nettie is interested in getting a discount off the good stuff from Manny before he leaves the ship.

Nevertheless, Elodie understands the assignment, and that’s what’s important.

Scarlett clearly isn't in her right mind. If she stays with Manny, she might just get swallowed whole by the cartel.

"Bogotá," Manny tells Elodie. "All of you are welcome to the home that Scarlett and I share. If it were not several hours from the ship, I would have taken you there myself."

More like taken us hostage. Not that an active volcano is any better.

Hey? Maybe he's about to feed us to the volcano to appease his gods? The gods of the cartel!

We get out of the shuttle and stretch our legs before Manny leads us up to a giant wooden staircase that looks as if it goes all the way to the top of this volcano.

The volcano itself is a muddy shade of gray, and gray mud cakes every step that leads to the top of this thing. It's not impossibly tall. It's almost the exact shape of a pyramid, and if I didn't know better, I'd think it was a manmade sculpture to lure tourists over for selfies.

"All right," Manny says, waving to garner our attention once again. "El Totumo is only forty-nine feet high. We're going to take the stairs to the top, and I'm going to throw you in one by one."

Dead silence.

Knew it.

"I'm kidding," he says with a chuckle.

I'll admit, there's something affable about him when he smiles, even if it doesn't reach his eyes or his soul.

"What waits for us at the top is a volcano bath," he says. "Also known as a mud bath. Typically, the volcano is open to the public."

"Oh no," Bess whines. "The sign says closed." She points to a hand-painted sign that says exactly that.

"I know it is, sweetheart," Manny says. "I arranged for us to have the place to ourselves this afternoon. Usually, they have a group of men waiting up top to give out massages, but I

didn't want any man touching me, so we're going to have to give each other massages."

Elodie wiggles her way next to him. "Just wait until you see what I can do with my hands." She glides her arm around him and he lets out a cold, dark smile that looks so nefarious it sends a chill down my spine.

On second thought, maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

Feeding my bestie to a beast sounds more like a mental lapse in the making.

"Shall we?" He nods before leading the way up.

When Manny said this would be a dirty endeavor, I had no idea he was being literal.

Elodie is on him like, well, mud on a volcano.

Wes and Ransom each help Bess and Nettie up the stairwell, and I'm holding up the rear with Scarlett.

"*Trixie*," Scarlett hisses as she leans in close.

Scarlett looks adorable today with her cherry red hair toppled in a messy bun and a red and white print dress that hugs her curves. I'll admit, Elodie has her work cut out for her. Scarlett isn't something to sneeze at.

"I know that woman is your friend," she continues. "But I think she's hitting on Manny."

"Elodie?" I blink her way. "She's just very friendly. She's been working on a cruise ship since she was in her teens. Hospitality is pretty much in her blood at this point. I wouldn't worry about it. She's harmless."

Harmless as a *viper*.

Soon enough, we climb to the top of this muddy beast—those stairs were no joke. They weren't exactly built to spec, so every step felt like I was taking two.

And once we reach the top, we take a moment to soak in the view. Just beyond the volcano lies an emerald lake surrounded by miles of verdant fields, and it looks like

paradise—if you like an active volcano in the middle of your paradise, that is.

I look down at the fiery pit of the volcano, only to see there is no fiery pit. Instead, we're met with a small swimming pool's worth of gray, thick, sludgy mud.

Manny turns and looks at every one of us with a stone-cold expression on his face, and I'm half-afraid he's about to spray us with bullets.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he says four little words, "Off with your clothes."



## CHAPTER 29



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: Here's a little nugget for those moments when you encounter something that looks utterly terrifying. Remember to embrace the adrenaline rush. Whether it's trying a zipline, conquering a daring water slide, or attempting a heart-pounding activity, why not give it a whirl!

Some of the most exhilarating experiences are the ones that initially make your heart race. You might just discover a newfound passion for adventure.

With courage as your compass, you'll create unforgettable memories and surprise yourself with what you can conquer.

I hope.

XOXO Trixie

MANNY INSTRUCTS us all to strip down, and we do—all the way down to our bikinis—well, if you can call what Elodie is wearing a bikini.

The rest of us ladies have opted for one-pieces, but compared to Elodie, we may as well have worn our winter coats.

Elodie Abernathy has donned the *ittiest, bittiest*, little tan bikini that not only leaves nothing to the imagination, but it just so happens to blend into her skin tone to the point she looks nude.

I give her a secretive thumbs-up and she sheds that man-eating smile my way. Or in this case, that *Manny*-eating smile.

Before we move any farther, Manny helps us put all of our belongings into a couple of duffle bags to make it easier to transport down the volcano when it's time.

“And now”—he calls out—“the fun begins.”

Manny goes in the sludge first, carefully stepping onto the ladder built into the side of the mud bath and he helps each one of us land safely into the mixture.

“It feels like quicksand,” Bess cries out.

“It feels like *slime* and I like it,” Nettie says.

“I think it feels like pudding,” I say as I try to touch my foot onto something solid near the bottom but no such luck. “Hey, how deep is this thing?”

“Some say it goes on forever,” Manny says, giving one of his infamous grins. “But not to worry. It's easy to float in.”

“Not easy to move in,” Ransom says, and he's right.

It's like trying to move in concrete that's about to set.

Now there's a new fear unlocked.

“Safe to say there will be no sudden movements in here,” Wes says as he lies on his back, and true to Manny's word, seems to float.

“This is amazing,” I say, trying to swim toward Wes and end up slapping an arm over his stomach as I do it.

Wes jerks and tries to sit up and accidentally buries his face in my boobs and the two of us let out a yelp while the rest of them laugh it up, sans Ransom.

“Check that out, Detective.” Nettie chuckles. “It looks as if the captain just got to second base with your girl.”

“Someone had to,” Elodie quips as she glides behind Manny and begins giving his shoulders a rubdown.

“You got it right,” Manny tells her. “Time to give out those massages.”

Ransom floats over, that scowl set on his face looking lethal but handsome to a fault.

“I’ll take it from here,” he growls at Wes, and soon I’m getting a pro job of a rubdown by none other than my handsome boyfriend.

Bess and Nettie take turns rubbing one another down and rubbing down Wes as well.

Elodie has all but laid claim to Manny.

And Scarlett is doing her best to rub down her man, too.

“What’s this?” Bess says, holding up a goopy string that’s dripping with gray sludge.

“Oh, that’s my top,” Elodie says, hoisting her chest out of the mud. Not that it matters, we’re all so caked with a gray slick of mud, there’s not an inch of flesh exposed from the neck down. “It fell off as soon I got in,” she says dismissively. “You can toss it aside. I won’t be needing it anymore.”

Scarlett takes a moment to glare at my bestie, and I hide the smile wanting to burst forth.

Things are definitely moving in the right direction.

“How’s the case going?” I ask Ransom a little above a whisper. “I believe you hinted at the fact you’re withholding information from me.”

“*Ooh*, I want to hear,” Nettie says.

“Yeah,” Scarlett says teasingly. “We’re among friends. I want to hear all about the case, too.”

Manny sheds a grin. “I would love to hear this myself. I’m always interested in what law enforcement thinks they know.”

*Thinks they know?* Very funny.

“All right.” Ransom is back to growling. “It turns out, the security cameras were able to pick up a person delivering both those nefarious notes and the flowers to the rooms of the people on the ship for the writers’ convention.”

“Good work,” Wes tells him with his eyes closed as he continues to float on his back.

“So?” I give Ransom’s ribs a squeeze. “Who is it?”

“Someone very good at not only hiding their identity, but we’re not entirely sure of their gender either. They were covered from head to foot in a thick black coat.”

“Oh.” I sigh. “Too bad we can’t break into each of their rooms and see who brought along a thick black coat.” I look at Wes. “Can security do that?”

“Nope,” Ransom answers for him. “Even if we did have legal rights to do so, we can’t incriminate someone for bringing along a jacket. Whoever did this may have been borrowing it. We need something solid. This is an active homicide investigation and we need to dot our I’s and cross our proverbial T’s.”

“How’d they do the deed?” Manny asks rather calmly, and I’m betting he’s less interested in Drucilla’s demise than he is in procuring a brand new way to do in his enemies.

“She had a level four peanut allergy,” Ransom says. “That’s the most severe. The coroner found traces of peanuts in her bloodstream.”

Wes straightens. “I thought the kitchen said they didn’t serve any dishes with peanuts that night, nor did they use peanut oil.”

Scarlett shakes her head. “My roomie in college was allergic to peanuts. She said the oil wouldn’t bother her.”

“It wouldn’t if it was refined,” Ransom tells her. “And most peanut oil is, but if it was unrefined, it could cause a problem for someone with a severe allergy.” He looks my way. “I sent the glass that Drucilla was drinking from to forensics, and they found traces of peanut oil.”

“What?” I blink up at him.

“Maybe someone slipped her something with peanut butter?” Bess suggests. “And she washed it down with her drink?”

“Could be,” Ransom says.

“And that someone would be the killer,” Nettie says with all the drama that sentence deserved.

“Who’s looking guilty as sin?” Elodie purrs right into Manny’s ear while rubbing down his chest with the gray volcanic goo.

I don’t know who’s looking guilty as sin, but Scarlett is looking fit to kill.

Excellent work, Elodie.

“There’s Taffy Blackwood,” Bess offers. “Didn’t you say something about her having a strong motive?”

I nod. “She thinks Drucilla stole her ideas.”

“I can see how that can get heated,” Manny says. “Someone steals from me, they’re going to pay for it.”

I shoot Elodie a look and she nods before nuzzling up next to him. She’s set to steal something, all right—*him*.

“What about that Ursula woman?” Elodie asks. “The braggart?”

I shrug. “She seems to have connected Drucilla to some big-wig realtor who used to write and buy up old manuscripts on the side. Apparently, Drucilla was a collector of old books and stuff like that. The man disappeared, though, and no one knows what became of him.”

Manny nods my way. “He either knew too much or he had what someone wanted.”

“Maybe so,” I say. “But they blamed Drucilla’s boyfriend for his disappearance—Commodore Whitmore. The boyfriend in question was a real estate rival of the man who disappeared. But Commodore died shortly after that. And to make matters worse, Taffy was one of the journalists who painted Commodore in a murderous light.”

“What about Sabrina Nightshade?” Nettie asks. “Whatever became of that conversation?”

“Turns out, she was Commodore’s stepdaughter,” I tell her.

Ransom nods. “And she expressed that there was some jealousy between Drucilla and her mother. Apparently,

Drucilla was paranoid that perhaps Commodore and Sabrina's mom could rekindle their romance."

"But that didn't happen," I say. "In fact, Sabrina's mother died some time ago. But Sabrina did say that Drucilla gave her some money to open a café and that Drucilla wasn't happy that Sabrina wasn't able to pay her back. That might work into a motive."

"Money is always a motive," Manny says, shooting a dark look into the distance. "You wouldn't believe the things I've seen people do in the name of the almighty dollar."

Something tells me I'd believe all of it.

"Wait a minute—" Elodie stops massaging Manny mid-flight with her hands pinned to his chest. "You're telling me that there's the body from the ship—our victim. Then there's some real estate mogul who up and disappeared, there's a dead boyfriend, *and* he has a dead ex-wife? That's quite the body count for one measly homicide investigation."

Ransom and I exchange a glance.

She's certainly not wrong.

We soak in the mud for hours, taking turns napping and massaging one another in the gritty slime, and it feels like bliss.

Just as the sun starts to dip in the sky, Manny helps us out and leads us down the back side of the volcano and down another set of stairs caked in mud until we wade into the lake just a few yards out.

We wash off the sludge and bask in the water as we soak in the sun and all of the glory that Colombia has to offer.

We hop back on the shuttle and Manny treats us to dinner at a quaint restaurant that serves the best grilled chicken and beef I've ever had.

In addition to that, there's a large platter of arroz con pollo, a season blend of chicken and rice, that makes my mouth water even while I'm eating it. A platter of pargo rojo, fried red snapper with coconut rice and fried plantains, beef tamales

—again some of the best I’ve ever had—and lechona, roasted pork with rice veggies and spices that give it that chef’s kiss it deserves.

We make our way back to the *Emerald Queen* and promptly collapse from exhaustion.

Colombia gave us her all and we loved every minute of it.

My body begs to fall into a coma, but my mind won’t stop buzzing with thoughts of Drucilla Grim’s murder. The trip is about to come to an end, and I’m not any closer to pinning down her killer than I was the night the poor woman died.

Elodie’s words come back to me.

That’s quite the body count for one measly homicide investigation.

She’s right. There are so many bodies.

Are they somehow connected?

And why?

## CHAPTER 30



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*T*rip Tip Question: Hi, Trixie! It's me once again, Jenny. Last time, I promise! No questions here, just some plain old good news for a change.

Martin and I came home from our honeymoon cruise a few weeks ago, and even though it wasn't the most positive experience, something positive did come from it—a positive pregnancy test!

We're having a little one, and yes, it's a bona fide honeymoon baby! But you can bet your bottom sand dollar we won't be naming it Betty or Dan.

Although, I am growing partial to Trixie or perhaps even Ransom if it's a boy.

We shall see.

~Jenny with the Baby in Her Belly

DEAR JENNY,

Oh, happy day! What wonderful news! A honeymoon baby is such a special blessing. Whether you choose Trixie, Ransom, or any other name, may your little one bring boundless joy and love into your lives.

Wishing you a beautiful and memorable journey into parenthood,

XOXO Trixie



THEY SAY there's nothing like taking a cruise to get a person good and relaxed—I would happen to agree with them—unless, of course, you throw a homicide into the mix. Then there's very little relaxation and a whole lot of hand-wringing until the killer is caught.

And that's what I've been doing the last twenty-four hours.

The last two days of the cruise will be spent at sea. Yesterday, while the ship sailed the ocean blue, I taught three art classes to any and every passenger who ventured into the craft's room.

I taught a class on watercolor, one on sketching, and a third on acrylics. Of course, all three were centered around the luscious landscapes we've been treated to during our transit cruise.

Then after the classes were through, I spent the rest of the day reading up on several of the authors here, looking into the scope of their literary achievements and even cherry-picked my way through a few of their books.

After that, I marched right down to the gift shop to see if there was anything I could get Ransom for his birthday, in addition to the skull mug I picked up back in Puerto Vallarta. And believe it or not, I found the perfect something that might just bring a smile to his face, and no matter how brief that might be, it will be well worth it. I had to embellish it a bit, but that was well worth it, too.

And now here we are, our final day at sea, and it's not just any day. It's Halloween—aka Ransom Courtland Baxter's happy, *happy* birthday.

Or at least I'm hoping it'll be happy.

It's hard to say with a killer running loose among us.

The ship has three open-air decks, and each one of them is playing host to the same event this evening, the Moonlit Monster Mash at Sea.

The sun has just set and the ship is bejeweled with hundreds of strands of orange and purple twinkle lights. Rock music thumps through the speakers so loud it's thumping

through my chest as well, and it seems as if every passenger on the ship has decided to put on their ghoulish best and join the haunted party.

We've got ghouls, witches, pirates, ghosts, and every crazy costume you can think of—mostly of the risqué variety. But then, I suppose the days of plastic masks and costumes from my youth that were purchased at the grocery store are long over.

Some of these costumes are better than some Hollywood special effects I've seen. If someone told me that these ghosts and goblins were the real deal, I'd be prone to believe them. The costumes are that spectacular.

Walking out onto the deck is like walking into a spellbinding spectacle of spooks and surprises. The decks are alive with swirling spotlights in orange, purple, and green, and everywhere you look there are cobwebs draping the walls as well as the tables and chairs, making every last plastic spider feel at home.

More of those skeletons dressed as pirates abound. A few of them have even been jury-rigged to the posts. And with the movement of the ship and the balmy breeze, they look as if they're dancing.

Speaking of dancing, spooky Halloween-themed music blares from the speakers, and it seems to have inspired every spook and kook to move and groove on the makeshift dance floor.

"*Trixie*," Bess shouts my name as she and Nettie make their way over. Bess' cowboy hat nearly topples right off her head as she sweeps me into a hug. "Can you feel the magic tonight? Or should I say, the mischief?"

A laugh bounces from me. "Mischief, for sure."

"Speaking of mischief." Nettie backs up to get a better look at me. "*Wowzah, wowzah, wowzah.*"

"More like *hubba, hubba, hubba*," Bess pants. "Or the female equivalent."

“Thank you, I think.” I make a face as I pinch the burgundy satin dress Elodie has poured me into.

She came through with her promise to give me a costume Ransom wouldn’t be able to forget and transformed me into a vampire queen with the help of a few of her cohorts from the gift shop. The makeup artist of the bunch did up my face with smoldering eyes, pale foundation, blood-red lips, and even a sanguine squiggle at the corner of my mouth to look as if I had just finished biting some poor, unsuspecting soul’s neck.

The dress is formfitting up top, low cut with a tight bodice that fans out and melts to the floor in a puddle of bloody-looking satin.

There’s an elegant yet seductive air to the entire rather sexy getup, with a collar that spikes up around the back of my neck, a choker made of rubies, and Elodie has even pressed a tiara onto the top of my head.

I took a selfie and sent it to the family group chat.

My son and daughter were both impressed, while Stanton thought I should put a pillowcase over my head—a sure sign he approves in a disproving sort of way.

I hope he eats his heart out.

Both Bess and Nettie are done up to the Halloween nines with Bess dressed as a country girl, complete with a red and white checkered shirt knotted off below her belly and a glorious denim skirt with suede fringe.

Nettie is dressed as a black cat with a black sequin bodysuit, a cute headband with little furry ears, and a long svelte black tail that she’s holding like a whip. And I have no doubt it might morph into one by the end of the night.

“You both look enchanting this evening,” I tell them. “Scouting for some cowboys and tomcats, are we?”

Nettie gives a swishing of her tail. “We’re all about keeping our options open. A cat has to have her fun, and Halloween is the *purr*-fect time to do it.”

Bess laughs. “Trust me, I’m not looking to step into anyone’s rodeo just yet. This is one cowgirl who is perfectly content on her own.”

I nod her way. “I say yippee-ki-yay to that. Not a single woman on the planet needs a man to complete her.”

Ransom comes to mind and I swoon for a moment. I still can’t believe he’s all mine, and in a way, I do feel like he completes me.

I open my mouth to say something and Bess holds a hand up.

“Don’t say it. I could see the Ransom-shaped stars in your eyes. You’re in love. And believe me, after what that ex of yours put you through, you deserve it.”

“You mean what her *hex* put her through,” Nettie says, holding out her claws our way, and the three of us cackle so loud we’d make any coven proud.

“Speaking of Handsome Ransom.” Nettie nods past me and I turn to see not only Ransom, but Wes, Scarlett, and Manny heading this way.

Both Wes and Ransom are their usual handsome selves, with Wes in his navy captain’s uniform and Ransom wearing a dark fitted suit that makes my stomach bisect with heat.

Scarlett is dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, and Manny, well, you guessed it, he’s the Big Bad Wolf, complete with a hat of a wolf’s head that looks pretty darn real. Over his back is what looks to be a sheep’s skin rug—faux fur, I’m hoping.

And I certainly get it. Manny isn’t just the Big *Bad* Wolf, he’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

“Happy Halloween,” Bess, Nettie, and I chime in unison.

“And happy birthday,” I say, pulling Ransom in close and giving him a kiss.

I’ve already wished him a happy birthday this morning via text, but he’s been busy closing out the paperwork for the Grim case to give to port authorities tomorrow. Even without a

killer, a homicide on board the ship can prove to be a killer headache where the paperwork is concerned.

“One word,” Ransom says, pulling back and examining me. “Holy—*wow*.”

“That’s two words,” I tease.

“I can’t think straight.” His lips curl with dark intent, and I have a feeling he knows exactly what he’s thinking—and so do I.

“Great costumes,” Bess says to Scarlett and Manny, and they both thank her in turn. She then glances at the un-costumed among us and frowns. “And what are you two supposed to be?”

“I’m the captain of a ship who has long since passed away,” Wes says. “You’re actually looking at my ghost.”

“Clever,” Nettie says, tapping her finger to her temple.

“More like nice try.” Bess chortles before turning to Ransom. “And what’s your slant?”

“Slant?” Ransom’s brows pinch in the middle and he looks that much more comely. “I’m a detective who has more questions than answers. In other words, I’m one killer short of closing out my homicide investigation.”

And judging by the growl he closed out that sentence with, he’s not happy about it either.

“Speaking of questions,” he shoots the lone wolf among us a dirty look, “I want answers from you, too.”

“Not now,” Wes growls.

I’m sensing a grumpy theme between the two of them this evening.

“It’s the last night before we dock. If not now, when?” Ransom growls back at Wes, and I have a feeling the two of them have been conspiring.

“And on that note,” Bess holds up a finger, “I think this is a good time for us to try some of that poltergeist punch.” She

nods to a bubbling cauldron at the bar that glows green and has smoke curling out from it.

“I don’t want punch,” Nettie says. “I want *popcorn*. Things are just getting good.”

“Would you stop?” Bess says, pulling her along until they’re out of earshot.

“All right.” Manny nods to Ransom and Wes. “Let’s have it. What kind of questions do you have?”

“They don’t have any questions,” Scarlett seethes, her crimson curls bouncing over her shoulders as if they were just as spitting mad as she is. “They have *accusations*. Listen up, you two, and listen good. I told you he’s not dealing anymore. Why aren’t my words good enough for you?”

“Because I want to hear it from the horse’s mouth,” Ransom shoots back without hesitation.

“You mean *wolf*,” I mutter, but Ransom doesn’t back down from glaring at the guy.

“Well?” Ransom growls. “Are you dealing? Say something if you have any hope of seeing my sister on any kind of level.”

Manny’s signature grin explodes over his face, his eyes just as cold and serious as Ransom’s.

“I’m not dealing,” he says softly.

“He’s not *dealing*...” I whisper mostly to myself. “But is that a technicality?” I ask boldly. Not that anyone asked me to participate in this tense family drama.

“No.” Manny doesn’t take his eyes off Ransom, but that smile on his face is quickly defusing. “It’s not a technicality. I’m not in the drug trade. There’s nothing illegal about what I’m doing now.” He nods to Ransom and Wes, but they don’t say a word.

Prefect.

There’s nothing like a little awkward silence to add to the creepiness of an already creepy night.

Wes' phone chirps and he sighs as he glances down. "I'm needed at the bridge." He looks over at Scarlett. "I trust you know what you've gotten yourself into." He takes off and Scarlett gags in his wake.

"What I've gotten myself *into*?" she parrots with rife indignation in her voice.

Ransom's phone chirps as well and he glances down at it.

"Knew it," he seethes. "I've got to go." He lands a kiss on my cheek. "There's been a break in the case." He takes off with a jog.

"Wait," I call out after him. "What do you mean, *there's been a break in the case*?" I shout over the music. "What kind of break?" I stop shy of asking if he knows who the killer is so as to not shock the passengers nearby. Although on a night like tonight, there's probably nothing shocking about shouting the word *killer*.

Speaking of killers, Elodie slinks over—dressed to kill—in a black beaded dress that cuts off right after her tush. It's sleeveless and hangs relatively loose, and she has a black headband that crosses over her forehead with a few black feathers sticking up over the back. She's donned several strands of pearls that reach her belly, and her black beaded heels lift her a good six inches. And she looks every bit the Roaring Twenties princess she's destined to be.

"I don't believe in prohibition," she purrs as she curls up next to Manny and grabs him by the hand. "And I don't believe in dancing alone either." She promptly leads him into the thick of the gyrating crowd and both Scarlett and I are left with our mouths open—for entirely different reasons, of course.

Scarlett because she's horrified, and me because I'm amazed.

"Well, how do you like that?" I say. "It looks as if Manny has a wandering eye." I feign a sigh. "Better to find out now than lat—"

Manny appears before us once again, this time sans my bestie.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he says, pulling Scarlett close. “I put her in her place. She won’t be bothering us again. You’re the only dance partner I’m interested in.”

He leads her into the crowd, and soon they’re slow dancing despite the fact the “Monster Mash” is blaring overhead.

Speaking of monsters, I spot Elodie in the arms of a seven-foot-tall square-headed, green-faced monster herself.

“She knows when she’s been defeated,” a deep voice whispers from over my shoulder.

I shake my head, still staring at the flapper who just shimmied her way into the arms of someone willing to do the foxtrot with her all night.

“Defeat isn’t in her vocabulary,” I say, turning around and letting out a little yelp at the glowing disembodied spirit before me.

Commodore Whitmore is a mere outline of his usual, mostly human-looking self. He’s taller than usual, too, glowing like a lavender lightbulb, and there’s an entire constellation of stars shimmering through him.

“*Boo*,” he says sharply and I let out another short-lived scream. “Are you ready to start this party?”



## CHAPTER 31



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: Here's a fun tip to ensure you're the life of the costume party on the ship. Whether it's a tropical luau, a masquerade ball, or a pirate-themed soirée, dressing up is half the fun. Raid your shipboard closet (aka suitcase) for the wackiest, most whimsical attire you can find. Don't forget to accessorize and bring your A-game to the costume contest. The more outrageous, the better!

XOXO Trixie

HALLOWEEN NIGHT BUBBLES and brews on board the *Emerald Queen*, and every last guy and ghoul has come out of their coffins to celebrate the occasion, including the ghost floating before me.

"You scared the bejeezus out of me." I swat him on the arm, but my hand goes right through him. "What's with the ghostly getup?" The ghosts who visit almost always look normal and thus can be mistaken for the living.

"It's Halloween." He chuckles. "I thought I'd deck myself out in all my ghostly glory. Now where's the killer? I demand they're arrested so I can make it back to paradise in time for the poltergeist parade. It's a big thing up there, you know."

"I don't see why," I muse. "Considering the fact you're all poltergeists up there anyhow."

"Never you mind," he says. "It's time to get to the bottom of all this madness. I don't have all night, you know."

“You and me both.” I’m about to run through a few theories with him when a woman dressed as a spider waves my way with all eight arms.

“Trixie,” the woman pants, and as she gets closer, I can see it’s Ursula Ravenscroft. She’s donned a black jumpsuit with four spindly extensions attached to her arms so that they move in concert with her body. “I need your help.” She glances over her shoulder, and it’s then I spot a red glittery circle over her back, confirming the fact she’s a black widow. “They’re after me!”

“Who’s after you?” I pull her close.

“Perhaps it’s the ghost of Percival Bonmith?” Commodore teases and I choose to ignore him.

“The *killer*,” she pants. “Look, I have proof.” She reaches into her pocket and shoves a crumpled piece of paper at me.

I quickly unfurl it and read, “*You’re next*,” I say under my breath as I examine it. It’s the same tall, sharp letters that were present in the other notes that the rest of the writers received a few days back. “Where did you get this?”

“It was slipped under my door,” she says with her teeth clattering.

“You’re shivering,” I say, pulling her close. “Why don’t you go inside? I’ll call security.”

“I would have brought my coat, but there’s no way I’m going back to my cabin. And I’m not isolating myself either. I’ll hang out here until they arrive.” She motions toward the bar. “That’s where you’ll find me.”

She takes off and I scoot close to Commodore. “It looks as if the killer is about to strike again. We need to act fast. Commodore, is there anyone at all you think might have done something like this to Drucilla?”

“Drucilla could be vindictive,” he offers with a mournful sigh. “And the only one I can think of who would be angry enough to act out would be—”

“Trixie,” a cheery female voice calls out and I look up to see Sabrina Nightshade with her face painted white, wearing a tattered wedding dress with a crooked veil. “Before you ask, I’m a *ghost bride*. Silly, I know.” She gives her dress a quick frown as she plucks at the skirt. “Have you seen Ursula? She was acting strange about ten minutes ago. Saying something about they’re going to get her and she needs to act fast.”

“She’s by the bar,” I say. “If you could keep her company, I was just about to get her some help.”

“Help?” Her eyes bulge at the thought. “I’ll head right over.” She darts in that direction and I look back at the real ghost among us.

“As you were about to say.” I nod his way. “Who would be angry enough to act out?”

He blows out a breath and a spray of stars swirls from his mouth. “I’m afraid I’d say, my guess would be Taffy Blackwood.”

“*Taffy*.” I close my eyes for a moment. “Of course. Sometimes the answer is as plain as the nose on your face.” I twist my lips at him. “Not that there’s anything plain about you.” I’m about to pluck out my phone to call Ransom regarding a lot of things when I spot a woman in a shiny red leotard, a long red tail that comes to a sharp little point, and a pair of red rhinestone-bejeweled horns attached to the top of her head that mesmerize as they catch the light. “Speak of the devil,” I say as I speed in her direction.

Taffy Blackwood moves through the crowd as she makes her way to the railing on the other end of the ship, and I’m right there on her long, pointed tail just as she steps close to the edge and stares out at the dark Caribbean waters.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” I say, panting from the trek over.

She turns to look at me and her mouth falls open.

“Wow. Trixie, is that you? You’ve really gone all out. You look stunning,” she whispers that last part.

“Thank you.” My cheeks heat. “Taffy, I’m sorry. But I know what’s going on.”

“You do?” She looks momentarily surprised. “Of course, you do. You work with the ship. I was hoping to keep it a secret until later tonight.”

“You mean you were going to confess?”

“Of course, I was going to confess. How else am I supposed to get my friends to play along?”

“Play along?” I blink over at her, more than slightly confused.

Commodore growls, “Call her out on it, Trixie. It’s clear she’s delighting in these head games of hers. It was those very games that cost me everything.”

I cringe his way because even though Taffy had a hand in wrecking his reputation, he sort of took the wrecking ball to his life as well when he decided to end it.

Taffy squints my way. “Why do I get the feeling you’re not talking about the scavenger hunt I’ve put together?”

“Scavenger hunt?” I inch back. “Unless it points to who killed Drucilla Grim, we’re definitely not on the same page.”

“Pardon?” Her brows furrow as she leans in. “What are you saying about Drucilla’s murder?”

“I’m saying you had a clear motive.”

The woman gasps and straightens, her horns catching the light as they cast a red halo over her head.

It seems fitting.

She scoffs. “Trixie, I can assure you I had nothing to do with her death. Do you mean the coroner has ruled this a homicide?”

I nod. “I thought you knew.” Mostly because she’s the killer. Nice try on her part, though.

“I had no idea. In fact, none of us thought that was true. We were just talking about how unfortunate it was that she was caught off guard with her allergy. She usually has an epinephrine kit with her, but we were in a hurry to get to the party after the muster drill that night. She probably didn’t

think to bring it.” A hard groan comes from her. “Hey, I bet the killer banked on that.”

Commodore growls twice as loud, “Don’t let her get away with this, Trixie. She had a clear motive. Paint the picture and get on with it.”

I nod. “Taffy, you said yourself that Drucilla stole your ideas.”

Her face darkens. “And I hated her for it. She was cruel and vindictive.”

“Told you so,” Commodore says, more or less agreeing with her.

“But I didn’t kill her.” Taffy’s chest bucks at the thought. “That night she was taunting me, telling me that she had three other books in production from the outlines I had her look over when I thought we were still friends. I threatened to contact an attorney if she went ahead with it, and that’s when I sloshed my drink in her face. I was spitting mad, but murder never entered my mind. Litigation *yes*, homicide, *no*. I value my freedom too much to fritter my life away behind bars because of *Drucilla*, of all people. But I’m sure she would have loved nothing more.” She casts a cold glance to the sea. “I bet she’s laughing it up wherever she is at the thought of me looking like the prime suspect.”

“Somebody did this,” I tell her. “If not you, who else would have had the motive? Sabrina?” I ask, still not sure if I believe her at all.

She averts her eyes. “Sabrina is a sweetheart through and through.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” Commodore says as he swoops in close. “Press her further. She knows something. She’s holding back. I can tell by the way her cheeks are twitching.”

True to his word, they are.

“What is it that you’re holding back?” I ask the woman and she casts another glance at the sea.

“I’ll be honest, Sabrina has been far too patient with Drucilla. Sabrina doesn’t know this, but one night over drinks I was asking Drucilla how things were going with Commodore and she said better after Maura died. That was Sabrina’s mother. I suggested it was an icy thing to say, considering the woman had just passed away. And Drucilla said, ‘If you think that was icy, you should have heard what I said to the woman before I pushed her.’”

“*What?*” both Commodore and I roar at once.

Taffy nods. “Of course, she backtracked and said she was kidding—that the alcohol was talking. We never brought it up again, but after Commodore fell off the side of a cliff, it did make me wonder. The man never struck me as suicidal.”

I suck in a quick breath and look to the ghost among us and he up and disappears in a thunderous shout.

I clamp my hands over my ears for a moment.

“Then there was Percival Bonmith,” Sabrina goes on. “He disappeared, and shortly afterward, Drucilla was showing off some rare books she had somehow procured. It’s funny because Percival was just telling Ursula, Drucilla, and me all about his collection just a few days before he disappeared.”

“He was?” I say as my wheels begin turning.

Drucilla Grim is starting to look like a killer herself.

She nods. “He said he had dozens of completed manuscripts himself that he was looking to launch into the world—psychological thrillers, real hot marketable stuff. He wanted to know if we’d read them and see what we thought. But that was over five years ago, though. Poor guy disappeared and that was that. I guess those books will never see the light of day.”

“Did you ever read any of them?”

“Nope,” she says with a sigh. “Too bad. The guy was really nice. It would have been special to at least publish some of his hard work posthumously.”

Someone shouts for her in the crowd and she waves.

“I’d better go,” she says. “I need to shore up the details of the scavenger hunt before it’s a bust.”

She takes off.

Five years ago...

Why does that sound suspiciously familiar?

And then it hits me.

I think I know exactly who the killer is—and why Drucilla Grim needed to meet her untimely demise.

Here’s hoping I’m not about to meet mine—because I’ve got a killer to catch.

## CHAPTER 32



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

**T**rip Tip: When the moonlight shimmers on the water, it's the perfect time for a moonlit serenade. Grab a loved one, a fellow cruiser, or go all by your lonesome and head to a quiet spot on deck. Let the moon's gentle glow set the mood for a heartfelt conversation, a dance under the stars, or simply a moment of serene reflection. It's one of my favorite treats.

XOXO Trixie

THE MOONLIT MONSTER Mash bubbles all around me here on the *Emerald Queen of the Seas*, on this the final night of our Panama Canal transit cruise.

It's Halloween—and Ransom's birthday—and I have a feeling I'm about to give him the killer present of a lifetime. A real-life *killer*.

I'm about to make my way to the bar when a glowing ghostly apparition pops up before me.

"Commodore," I hiss as I attempt to go around him, but it's proving to be impossible. "Would you please step aside? I have something very important I need to discuss—with someone else."

"I'm afraid there's something I'd like to discuss with you," he says with an eerie echo to his voice.

"Believe me, hot shot, you're next on my list. But if I don't talk to this woman right now, I'm afraid the killer might get



away.”

I don't wait for Commodore to move. Instead, I walk right through him—and oh, what a *rush*.

I'm so caught off guard by the feel-good vibes, I almost stumble into one of the ship's many hot tubs despite the fact it's glowing like a lantern.

My feet move as if they were possessed, carrying me all the way to the bar with Commodore flying by my side and struggling to keep up.

But I can't find a single familiar face at the watering hole once I arrive.

“Is that who you're looking for?” He points to the right toward a dark enclave just past the hullabaloo of the festivities.

And then I see her.

“Oh, yes,” I pant. “That's exactly who I'm looking for.”

I speed that way as Commodore growls by my side.

“Do you have evidence of this?” he gravels with an indignant tone, as if this woman couldn't possibly be our prime suspect.

“My evidence might be lacking, but let's just say I have a killer instinct.”

Standing all by her lonesome, sipping out of a glowing cauldron, is the very black widow I was hoping to find.

“Ursula,” I say, breathless, as I approach the woman.

She turns my way and her hair fans out like tendrils.

“Trixie, you scared me.” She places a hand to her chest and four of those furry spindles attached to her arm move in turn.

The muted dark lipstick she's wearing catches my eye and the final piece of the puzzle falls into place.

“Did you talk to security?” she asks. “Is there something they can do to protect me?”

“No, but I spoke to Sabrina a bit ago. She let me know that you were acting strange about, oh, twenty minutes ago? That’s about ten minutes before I saw you, and about the same time I was shouting at Ransom, the ship’s lead detective, asking him what kind of break in the case he was responding to. You heard that, didn’t you?”

Her mouth opens and closes. “I may have. I mean, you did just admit to shouting it.”

I nod. “I thought so. And that spooked you, didn’t it? That’s where you got the idea to write that note to yourself.”

“Pardon me?” The whites of her eyes flash wide. “I did no such thing.”

“Trixie, are you sure?” Commodore asks, but I choose to ignore him momentarily.

“Your lipstick.” I point to Ursula’s face. “It’s flat. I mean, it’s not glossy.”

“Oh, I hate gloss. I detest that sticky feel.” She glances past me as if looking for a quick escape. “Never wear it.”

“But I thought I saw you with gloss on.”

“Nope. Wasn’t me. I only ever wear this shade, Flame Thrower.” She touches a polished black fingernail to her lips. “It’s my signature shade. I own about ten different tubes. I keep them everywhere—in my jeans, my purses, the glove compartment of my car. I can’t be seen without it.”

“That night at the welcome party you had on lip gloss. I remember thinking I could see my reflection in its mirror shine.”

Her eyes widen a notch and she freezes solid. “I—I must have eaten some greasy food.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so.” I shake my head. “The day we met in colonial Antigua, you asked about the killer. You wished the police all the luck in the world unraveling that mystery. It was never announced that Drucilla’s death was a homicide. But you had insider information, didn’t you? Because *you’re* the killer.”

Her mouth rounds out, and her eyes bulge in horror.

“Trixie, no.” She shakes her head as she begins to back away in the direction of the bar once again.

“Yes,” I insist. “Earlier you mentioned that you were cold, that you should have brought out your coat. Not many people packed a coat for their jaunt this close to the Equator. But you brought it for another reason, didn’t you? You put on that big thick coat and pulled the hood over your head so you could distribute those terrifying notes and flowers to your fellow writers without the security cameras being able to detect you. And you brought those black roses along in your luggage because you knew exactly what you were about to do. Just like you brought the peanut oil—most likely unrefined, something you knew Drucilla’s deadly allergy would respond to.”

A fire enlivens within her, and she straightens with a sense of resolve.

“You think you’re so smart.” A dark laugh escapes her as she rides her eyes over my body. “And I suppose you are. However, you can’t prove any of it.”

“But Drucilla could prove something about you, couldn’t she?” I press on. “She could prove that you didn’t write any of those psychological thrillers you published in the last *five* years.”

She gasps as if I struck her.

“That’s because you stole those manuscripts from Percival Bonmith, didn’t you?” I insist.

“How do you—” She shakes her head. “There’s no way you could know that.”

“And that’s why Drucilla had to go,” I say.

“She was blackmailing me.” Frown lines take over as she leans my way. “You have to understand, the woman had me backed against a wall.”

“Because she knew you killed Percival, too.”

A sharp cry comes from her as if I had issued a mortal blow.

“I didn’t do it, at least I didn’t do it alone,” the words speed out of her. “We were at his lake house. He was showing us his manuscripts and some old dusty books Drucilla wanted. Drucilla offered to pay him, but he wouldn’t hear of it. They argued, then Drucilla pushed him down the stairs. She tried to convince me it was an accident, but I’m not a fool. Then she suggested I could have the manuscripts he was working on if I helped her dump the body. She said we were already in too deep. I knew she wouldn’t hesitate to tell the police I did it. It would have been her word against mine.”

A sharp growl comes from Commodore and I hold up a hand his way.

“Ursula,” I snip. “You helped hide his body and you published his work as your own. But that was years ago. Was Drucilla coming after you for a cut of the revenue?”

She lifts her chin and the moon washes her features void of any color.

“She wanted all of it,” she seethes. “She didn’t think those books would garner me the notoriety that they did. Believe me, she was jealous she didn’t take those for herself. It turned out, those old collector copies of his were nearly worthless. Drucilla hasn’t had a new book deal in the last three years. Her money was running out, so she was coming after mine.”

“And so you poisoned her.” I shake my head at the thought.

“I did.” A dark smile gleams on her lips. “And you were right. I wasn’t wearing lip gloss, I was wearing unrefined, gritty-as-all-get-out *peanut* oil.”

A memory from that night dislodges and a breath catches in my throat.

“You made a toast,” I say. “And then you stole her glass and took a sip out of it. But you weren’t sipping as much as you were dipping your lips into her drink, knowing full well that the oil would remain.”

“I didn’t think it’d kill her.” She blinks as she looks vacantly past me. “I thought she’d be ill, but I’ll admit, I didn’t

think I'd land her in the morgue. I was planning on playing pranks on just about everyone at the conference, and I thought I'd start with her—and teach her a lesson.”

“And when she dropped dead, you went on with your nefarious pranks, only this time in hopes of making someone else look guilty in the event the police caught on. And they did.”

“I don't know how,” she pants, her chest suddenly heaving. “I'm sorry, Trixie. I have to go. I have to get out of here and find somewhere to hide.” She starts to take off and I bolt after her.

Ursula is just about to step into a crowd when I pounce onto her back.

“Get off,” she cries out as we roll around on the ground kicking and clawing.

Screams ignite all around us.

“*Incoming*,” I hear someone shout—Nettie, I think.

And no sooner do I look up than a cauldron's worth of green glowing slime lands right over Ursula Ravenscroft's face.

“Good aim,” I shout, mostly thrilled that I managed to evade the mess, save for my hands currently swimming in the thick of it.

The thump of footfalls heads this way, and soon the entire security force is coming at us.

“*Freeze*,” Ransom shouts with his weapon drawn, and no sooner does he pluck me off of the woman than his cohort in crime fighting, Quinn Riddle, slaps a pair of cuffs on Ursula.

“She did it,” I pant. “She killed Drucilla Grim, and she's responsible for all the haunted high jinks that have vexed her fellow writers.”

“We know,” Quinn says, looking every bit the sourpuss she is. “You just couldn't stay out of it, could you?” she seethes my way. “We were seconds from making the arrest. I hope you

realize you could have botched everything up.” She pushes Ursula through the crowd and I look up at Ransom.

“You knew?”

He nods. “The cameras were able to pick up where she put on the coat. She thought she found a spot between the laundry facility on her floor and a blind spot near the service corridor, but we were able to catch her with that. *And* I may have gone into her room, along with the cabin steward, and found a small jar of natural peanut butter sitting in a bag inside her bathroom. It had about an inch of oil on top—unrefined. I’m pretty sure it will be a match for the oil that was coating Drucilla’s glass. But I’m still unsure about why she did it. I don’t suppose you’d like to fill me in on that, would you?”

“I will,” I say as I glance past him at a rather morose ghost still hanging out by the railing. “How about you process Ursula and I’ll clean up a bit?” I hold up my hands still covered with slime. “Meet you in the Blue Water Café by the lava cake? It is your birthday, after all, and I’ve yet to celebrate a birthday without cake.”

A smile curls up his lips, making him look all that much more cuttingly handsome, and I’m pretty sure ten different women just gasped.

“Fifteen minutes,” he says. “Don’t make me track you down. You scared the life out of me tonight.”

“It is the spookiest night of the year.” I swallow down a laugh. “I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

## CHAPTER 33



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*Trip Tip:* Don't forget to cap off your cruise with a touch of indulgence! Before your voyage comes to an end, be sure to treat yourself to a little room service extravagance. Order a sumptuous meal, a decadent dessert, or even a glass of bubbly to enjoy in the comfort of your cabin or balcony. It's the perfect way to savor those final moments of your cruise in ultimate relaxation and style.

XOXO Trixie

“SO YOU CAUGHT THE KILLER.” Commodore Whitmore sheds a somber smile my way as I approach him here on the lido deck.

“I couldn't have done it without you,” I say as I lean my elbows onto the railing and look out at the moon dancing on the water in a silver slick. “So you weren't going to tell me, were you?”

“About?” he asks as he settles in beside me.

“About the fact you didn't commit suicide after all. It was Drucilla who pushed you, wasn't it?”

He bows his head so quick, so sharp, that only the truth could have prompted that sort of response.

The music and the howls of laughter go off behind us as the “Monster Mash” seemingly hits its pinnacle.

“Why did she do it?” I ask as I take him in, and he looks every bit in color and human once again.

“You seem to have all the answers this evening. Care to take a stab at it?”

“You confronted her on the disappearance of your colleague. She didn’t like how close you got to the truth. You realized you would be an accessory to murder and pleaded with her to turn herself in. She gave you one quick shove in response.”

“My, my.” His eyes close and he gives a sorrowful chuckle. “It’s as if you were there.”

“I’m sorry *you* were there.” I reach over and take his hand. “I’m sorry things ended so badly for you.”

“Don’t be. I forgave Drucilla as soon as I stepped into paradise. I knew she didn’t plan on doing me in that night. I’d like to think her impulsiveness took over, and it did.” He nods my way. “I think it’s time I head back to paradise and track down the love of my life. It seems we have a lot of catching up to do.”

“You think she made it to paradise?” I ask, genuinely surprised and then genuinely remorseful that I actually verbalized any of that. My hand cups over my mouth for a moment. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s quite all right.” He tips his head my way, looking ever the dashing gentleman he is. “And yes, I have it on good authority Drucilla made it home.”

“But she killed Sabrina’s mother.”

“It was a genuine slip and fall during an argument, albeit Drucilla believed she did it. And that paved the way to what happened with Percival.”

“And you’re sure she’s waiting for you—at home?”

“The one who handles admissions doesn’t look to the sin but to the blood covering the doorpost so to speak. And, of course, all is forgiven as soon as one asks for it.” He expels a sigh and an entire cluster of stars glide from his lips. “It was nice to meet you, Trixie Troublefield. I wish you a very happy life and a very happy Halloween.”



And with that, he floats off toward the water, then to the sky before disappearing in a vat of sparkling stars.

“Happy Halloween,” I shout after him. “*Halloween*,” I pant as I pull out my phone. I’ve got eight minutes to get Ransom’s gift out of my cabin and show up at the Blue Water Café.

It’s going to be a happy Halloween, and an even happier birthday if I can help it.



WITH SECONDS TO SPARE, I show up just as Ransom walks in. I already texted Wes, Scarlett, and Manny to meet us here as well.

Bess and Nettie have about a dozen lava cakes nestled on the table before them, and each one has a glowing candle inside of it. Then with all the fanfare we can muster, we break out in a cheery, off-key rendition of “Happy Birthday.”

Ransom frowns as he takes us all in. “You shouldn’t have. And I mean that.”

“Well, we *did*,” Bess says. “And if you don’t blow out the candles, we’ll have a code red on our hands.”

Wes nods. “And that will put a ding on my permanent record. So blow that mess out, will you?”

Ransom does it all in just one breath, and soon we’re surrounded by a cloud of smoke as we break out into cheers.

“Happy Birthday, big brother,” Scarlett says, giving his cheek a quick pinch.

“Happy Birthday, Handsome Ransom,” Nettie calls out. “Can I give your other cheek a pinch?” She glances down to his lap and Bess pulls her away.

“How about we meet you all on the dance floor?” Bess suggests. “I think we’ve been through a lot as a group these last two weeks. We deserve to let off a little steam as a group, too.”

“But”—Nettie comes at Ransom with her fingers ready to pinch away, just as Bess plucks her right out of the café shouting that they’ll be warming up their monster moves.

“We’ll go warm up our monster moves, too,” Scarlett says as she and Manny head out after them.

Ransom looks at Wes.

“What?” he says. “I came for the cake.”

The three of us indulge in all of the lava cake we want while I fill them in on the how and why of Ursula Ravenscroft’s killer moves.

“Trixie, you’re a great detective,” Wes says as he pushes out his second empty ramekin before him. “How about I fire this guy and let you take over his position?”

Ransom growls and I can’t help but laugh.

“No way,” I tell him. “Let’s just say I’m not Quinn’s favorite person. I think she much prefers to do the detective dance with this guy.”

“Speaking of dancing.” Wes rises from his seat. “I’d better go out there and give Bess and Nettie someone to boogie with.”

Wes takes off and Ransom leans in. “I’ve seen him on the dance floor. He’s more like the boogeyman than he realizes.”

“Very funny,” I say. “Speaking of the boogeymen. I’ve got something for you, and I hope it’s not too scary.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” He looks genuinely perplexed as I land a glossy black gift bag in front of him.

Ransom reaches in and pulls out that mug in the shape of a skull that I bought for him in Puerto Vallarta, the one with the flowers and intricate painting all over it.

“It’s a Day of the Dead mug,” I start. “I thought it might be—”

“Perfect,” he finishes with a smile. “I love it. And I will most certainly enjoy it.”

“There’s one other thing. It’s really small, and more of a gesture. Just a little something to—”

He pulls it out of the bag, and his face grows serious as he inspects it.

“Trixie,” he says my name in a heated whisper. “Did you do this?”

“I did.” I wrinkle my nose and hold my breath as he examines it. “I mean, the frame is from the gift shop, but the picture—I—I painted that.”

And I did. Once I saw a wooden frame ensconced by palm trees, I knew it needed a picture of Ransom and me. We did meet in the Tropics, after all, and so I couldn’t resist.

“I used one of our selfies from Hawaii and traced it out and painted it with my alcohol markers. They’re easier to work with than both watercolor and acrylic.”

“The likeness is striking,” he says, still studying my work as if he were genuinely stunned. “You are amazing.” He pulls me over until I’m seated in his lap. “I love it, and I love you.”

“I love you so much,” I say as we indulge in a kiss that goes on forever, from here to eternity and back again.

He pulls away slightly and studies me. “You mentioned earlier that you had something important that you wanted to speak to me about. What was that?”

Commodore and my ghostly dilemma come back to me.

One would think Halloween would be the perfect night to fill him in on the fact I can see the dead.

One would be wrong.

“Not tonight,” I say, running my finger down his tie. “Let’s enjoy your birthday.”

We head out to find the Moonlit Monster Mash at Sea still very much in progress and we shake it with the best of them.

The killer is caught, Halloween is a haunted hit, and Ransom’s birthday is very, very happy.

I cast a glance at the wolf in sheep's clothing among us  
and my stomach sours.

Not all is well with the world.

And deep down, I wonder if that's too much to ask.

## CHAPTER 34



### *Suddenly Single—What a Trip!*

*A*las, my dear friends, our incredible journey has come to an end. It's been a whirlwind of adventure, laughter, and unforgettable moments. From dealing with family drama to exploring exotic ports, we've sailed through it all together.

As we bid adieu to the high seas and step back onto solid ground, remember to keep the spirit of adventure alive in your hearts. Cherish the memories, relive the laughter, and keep seeking new horizons.

Thank you for sharing this incredible voyage with me. Until next time, may your travels be filled with joy, your adventures be endless, and your hearts be forever open to the wonders of the world.

XOXO Trixie

THE HUSTLE and bustle to get onto the ship is only rivaled by the hustle and bustle to get off the ship.

Since Bess, Nettie, and I are technically passengers, we need to pack up and disembark with the rest of the herd each and every time.

I may work for the ship as far as my art classes go, but since I've chosen to forgo the crew cabin—I've never shared a room with three other girls before and don't plan on starting now—and I purchase my own balcony suite for each trip, I'm counted as a passenger instead.

Not that Wes or Ransom is living in steerage either.

Wes has the captain's suite, and Ransom has a two-story wonder that amounts to a floating condo. Ransom pays for the luxury cabin, but the ship doesn't make him disembark. Come to think of it, he probably pays them for that privilege, too.

However, disembarking isn't all that bad. Bess, Nettie, and I always make a fun day out of it. And lucky for us, this time we get to explore sunny Florida! Sure, we need to be on the ship in a few hours, but that's never stopped us from conquering the world, having a good time, *and* evading arrest—for the most part.

The handle of my carry-on slips from me as Bess and Nettie stroll on ahead of me.

"Shoot," I say, bending over to pick it up once again when I spot none other than Manny Monticello hiding out behind a planter near the Queen's Mall, having what seems to be a secretive conversation on his phone.

You can bet dollars to pumpkin spice donuts that I boot-scoot my way over and hold my breath as I pause on the other end of that planter.

"Five kilos," he says. "It's settled. I want that dust delivered to my warehouse before I set foot in Colombia or heads are going to roll. The holidays are coming up, and that's my busy season." He chuckles into his phone. "That's right, just like Santa Claus."

He hangs up and heads for the gangway. And I watch as he embraces Scarlett and starts right in on a conversation with Wes and Ransom.

"The *nerve*," I say as my blood hits a boiling point.

"Hey." Elodie pokes her head out of the *Queen's* gift shop before locking the door behind her. The ship isn't allowed to sell any merchandise unless we're on the high seas. It's a fancy way of evading the tax man. "You're still trying to take down that guy, aren't you?"

"I am," I say. "But I can't help it, he's the devil in disguise."

“Well, I’m sorry I wasn’t able to land my man, or Scarlett’s man as it were. Just because I shoot for the basket doesn’t mean I score each and every time. And for what it’s worth, he’s pretty loyal to her. She’s got a good one, if she doesn’t mind visiting him behind bars one day.”

I make a face. “He’s not a good one. Not in the least.”

Elodie and I walk over to the gangway, and she falls in line next to Tinsley as they wave goodbye to the passengers.

“Trixie,” a female voice chirps from behind and I turn to see both Taffy and Sabrina as they pull me in for a group hug.

“Thank you,” Taffy says with tears sparkling in her eyes. “I can’t believe Ursula was the killer. I’m still in shock. And I shouldn’t be because I’m also an investigative reporter.”

Sabrina gives a mournful laugh. “Well, I didn’t see it coming, and I was close to Ursula. What a disaster. I’m thankful you put it together, and I’m sure my stepfather is thankful, too—wherever he might be. He really loved Drucilla.”

“I bet he still does,” I say, and knowing what I do, that alone is a miracle.

“If you’re ever in Massachusetts, please look us up!” Taffy says with a wave.

Sabrina nods. “We’ll do lunch,” she calls out as they take off for the gangway.

And in that moment it occurs to me that I have no idea where the ship is off to next.

I head over to where Wes, Ransom, Scarlett, and Manny are chatting away, and any trace of a good mood I might have had disappears on command.

“Trixie”—Scarlett says—“it was such a pleasure to meet you. I couldn’t have picked a better partner for my brother.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “It was a pleasure meeting you as well.” I glance at Manny and fire runs through my veins. I can’t believe I’m about to let him get away with this. “I wish I

could say the same about you, Manny,” I seethe and a stunned silence falls over our little group.

“Excuse me?” Manny leans in, arching a dark brown brow. He’s wearing the zoot suit he was sporting when we first met him, and he looks just as sharp and devious as any cartel boss.

“I know what you’re up to. I *heard* you.” I blow out a breath. “First in Cerro Negro, talking to someone on your phone, asking them how many kilos they had available. Then the other night outside of the ship’s library, saying that it looked like they hooked you up with the good stuff. You put in an order and said you wanted a shipment sent to your warehouse. You said you’d have everyone and their brother addicted before Christmas. And just now, here in front of the gift shop. You were talking to someone as well. In fact, all three times you were talking about kilos, and dust, and sending something that you deemed highly addictive. You said that your busy season was coming up and you were just like Santa Claus. You never quit your day job, did you, Santa? You’ve been lying to us all along and you’ve been lying to Scarlett!”

“*What?*” Scarlett squawks as she looks at me. “Are you nuts?”

“No, she’s right,” Manny says, cutting an icy stare my way. “I’ve been working on something.” He nods to Scarlett. “And this time she’s in on it.”

“That’s right,” Scarlett bites the air as she says it. “I’m up to my eyeballs in this endeavor and not one of you can stop me.”

“*Scarlett,*” Ransom sounds wounded as much as he does livid.

Wes growls, “It’s not happening.” You can practically see the steam coming from his ears. “I will have you both arrested before you set foot off this ship. There is no way I’m going to be okay with this. Not in any universe will the mother of my children push—”

“*Chocolate?*” Scarlett says, lifting a brow his way. “I can’t push top-notch cocoa products in hopes of making a living for



myself? Does that offend you, Wes? How about you, Ransom?”

“Did someone say chocolate?” Nettie asks, popping up into our circle. And by her side is a stunned-looking Bess.

It’s clear they heard the whole thing.

“That’s right.” Manny’s shoulders bounce. “Scarlett and I have started our own chocolate enterprise—CCB, Caribbean Cocoa Bliss.”

“CCB?” I say, stupefied, as an image of that blue hat Scarlett wore to some of our excursions comes back to me. “Oh wow,” I moan.

“Oh wow,” Scarlett parrots as she shoots me a look. “But I’m not nearly as upset with Trixie as I am you two,” she says, looking right at Wes and Ransom. “I was shocked that neither of you bothered to ask Manny what his new business venture was about. He said it was because you didn’t believe there was one, but I tried to think the best of you. I guess I was wrong. People change, they grow up, grow apart,” she says that last part looking right at Wes. “That doesn’t make them bad. I’m sorry I hurt you, Wes. I’m sorry I’ve frightened you, Ransom. But this is my life, and I’m building it anew with Manny by my side whether you like it or not. You can either choose to support me or—forget me. Because I’m not changing my existence around to please anyone but myself.”

Wes and Ransom exchange a glance.

“Manny, would you please accept my apology?” I plead with the man. “I’m so very sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He offers a soft smile my way. “You were worried for Scarlett. You heard some things that were easily misinterpreted. I’m glad you were looking out for her.”

“And I’m sorry, too,” Ransom says. “You’re right, Scarlett. I should have asked about his new line of work.” He winces at Manny. “Chocolate, huh?”

“Nothing but the finest ingredients,” Manny says with an ever-growing grin.

“Oh, please think of us,” Nettie all but begs. “If you ever need a taste tester, I’m your girl. I’ve been around the world and tasted every chocolate treat I can get my hands on. I know my way around cocoa.”

“I can attest to that,” Bess says under her breath.

“I’ll take you up on it,” Manny says, folding his hands. “In fact, I’ll send a box of all of our products straight to the ship for you all to enjoy. But under one circumstance—you’ve got to tell me your honest thoughts. My stuff might be good, but I realize there’s always room for improvement.”

“Deal,” I say and we all share a laugh.

Wes takes a breath as he steps toward his ex-wife.

“I’m glad you’re happy. I’ve always wanted that for you.” He offers her a firm embrace.

“Thank you, Wes,” she tells him as tears stream down her face. “You have no idea how much that means to me. I wish you all the best, too.”

Ransom and his sister hug it out as well, and I join in the fray, too. Soon, we’re waving both Scarlett and Manny off as they head down the gangway.

“And they’re off,” Ransom says.

“Speaking of going places.” I look to Wes. “I forgot to ask where this ship is headed next.”

He gives a slight bow my way. “I’m happy to report that the *Emerald Queen* is about to spend some solid time in the Caribbean.”

The entire lot of us lets out a whoop.

“The Caribbean!” I jump a little as I wrap my arms around Ransom and he spins me until we’re a few feet out from the rest of our friends. “I can’t wait to spend some serious alone time with you,” I say solemnly. “I mean, these last few cruises, we’ve had my ex, your ex, our kids—”

“My sister and her dicey boyfriend who turned out to be not-so-dicey—I hope.” He tweaks his brows as he says that

last part.

“I hope so, too.” I shrug. “But guess what? We’re getting some chocolate out of the deal.”

“Never a bad thing.” He inspects me a moment and there seems to be a twinge of sadness in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Trixie”—he touches his forehead to mine a moment—“I was closing out the investigation last night, and in doing so I reviewed some of the security videos again. I ran across some footage from the library. I’ll admit, I followed you into it out of boredom at three in the morning. I saw you speaking to—perhaps yourself? And then I saw the books—all of them whipped around the room like a hurricane had taken over. They landed, all right, in the shape of that giant kraken. When I saw the picture of it circulating on the ship’s social media posts, I thought the librarian or Tinsley was pulling a fast one on the passengers. ’Tis the season.” Any trace of a smile is gone from his face, his eyes laying into mine, hard as steel. “Did you do that? *How* did you do that? And why? Trixie, I must have rewound the footage ten times. None of it made sense. Your hands never touched a single book. What the heck went on that day?”

My mouth opens and I take a breath instead of spilling the truth.

“Oh, Ransom.” I butt my head against his chest for a moment. “This sort of dovetails into that thing I wanted to talk to you about. I’m serious about you, about us, and if we’re going to be a couple, I don’t think we should have any secrets between us.”

“Agree,” he says, turning his head ever so slightly as if he were ready to take one on the chin.

The happy chatter of passengers fills my ears, and I can’t even hear myself think.

“Not here,” I tell him. “Later tonight, after the ship has sailed and we have some time to ourselves. I promise I’ll tell you everything.”

“Everything?” His eyes widen a notch as if the thought of there being a plethora of information frightens him on some level, and it most certainly should.

I nod. “Everything.” I glance back at Bess and Nettie. “We’re about to head to shore for a bit and enjoy some Florida sunshine on our shoulders. Care to join us?”

“You bet,” he says as his finger softly brushes over my cheek. “And please don’t worry. There’s not a thing you can tell me that will change my mind about us. I’m in love with you, Trixie. I’m in it for the long haul.”

I fight the tears that demand to come. “Same,” I say, because it’s all I can manage.

The *Emerald Queen* is about to embark on a whole new adventure—one filled with mystery and intrigue that only new territory can bring.

Ransom and I are about to enter a whole new stage of our relationship, with far too much mystery and intrigue for my liking.

I hope he understands.

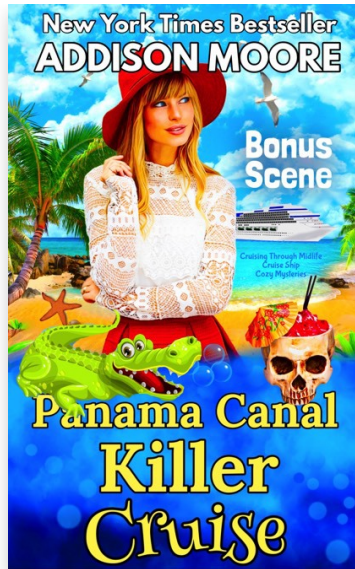
I hope he can see past the supernatural quirk I throw his way.

We’re entering into new territory ourselves and I hope we can survive it.

But something tells me, this trip to the Caribbean will be murder.

**\*Thank you for reading! Be sure to check out the BONUS SCENE below!**

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# RECIPE

## FROM THE EMERALD QUEEN OF THE SEAS

### World's Best Salsa

Hello, it's me, Trixie! And boy, do I ever have a spicy treat for you. The chefs on board had somehow procured the best salsa recipe in the world, and I just had to share it with you. They wanted me to mention that you should adjust both the salt and the peppers to your liking. Some like it salty and some like it hot—and some like it both ways.

Happy chopping!

Ingredients:

4-5 ripe tomatoes, diced

1 red onion, finely chopped

2-3 cloves of garlic, minced

1-2 jalapeño peppers, seeded and finely chopped (adjust for desired spice level!)

1/2 cup fresh cilantro, chopped

Juice of 2 limes

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon salt (adjust to taste. I like mine with a bit more salt!)

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

Optional: 1-2 teaspoons of sugar, to balance the flavors

Directions



Start by dicing the ripe tomatoes. You can remove the seeds and excess liquid if you prefer a thicker salsa (I leave them in!)

Finely chop the red onion, mince the garlic, and chop the jalapeño peppers. Be sure to wear gloves or wash your hands thoroughly after handling the peppers, as the oils can irritate your skin and eyes. I should probably say that twice—please don't touch your eyes! I seem to do it every single time no matter how much I tell myself not to.

In a large bowl, combine the diced tomatoes, chopped red onion, minced garlic, jalapeño peppers, and chopped cilantro.

Squeeze the juice of two limes into the bowl and add the ground cumin, salt, and black pepper. If you prefer a slightly sweeter salsa, you can add a teaspoon or two of sugar at this stage.

Mix all the ingredients thoroughly until well combined.

Taste the salsa and adjust the seasonings to your preference. You can add more salt, lime juice, or sugar as needed. (I love this part because I can make it exactly the way I like it.)

Be sure to cover the salsa and refrigerate it for at least an hour before serving to allow the flavors to meld together.

Serve your homemade salsa with tortilla chips, tacos, grilled meats, or as a topping for various dishes. I can eat this on just about anything.

Enjoy!

# RECIPE

## FROM THE EMERALD QUEEN OF THE SEAS

### World's Best Empanadas

It's me again, Trixie! Bess, Nettie, and I enjoyed yummy empanadas in just about every Latin port of call that we landed in. I just had to give you the recipe for this sweet treat. And the best part is the chef on board the ship assured me this was easy to make.

Happy baking!

#### Ingredients

##### For the Dough

2 cups all-purpose flour

1/4 cup granulated sugar

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, cold and cubed

1 egg

3 tablespoons ice-cold water

##### For the Filling

1 cup guava preserves (or preserves or fresh fruit of your liking)

1/4 cup cream cheese (optional, for added yumminess)

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon (optional, for added flavor!)

Powdered sugar, for dusting (optional but highly recommended)

## **Directions**

### **Prepare the Dough**

In a food processor, combine the flour, granulated sugar, and salt.

Add the cold, cubed butter to the flour mixture and pulse until it resembles coarse crumbs.

In a small bowl, whisk the egg and ice-cold water together.

With the food processor on and running, slowly add the egg-water mixture to the flour mixture until the dough comes together. You may not need to use all of the liquid, but stop adding it once the dough forms a ball!

Remove the dough from the food processor, shape it into a disk, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes.

### **Prepare the Filling**

While the dough is chilling, mix the fruit preserves, cream cheese (if using and I hope you do!), and ground cinnamon (if using) in a bowl. This will create a sweet and creamy fruit filling.

### **Assemble the Empanadas**

Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C) and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

On a lightly floured surface, roll out the chilled dough to about 1/8-inch thickness.

Using a round cookie cutter or a glass, cut out circles of dough, approximately 4-5 inches in diameter.

Place a spoonful of the fruit filling in the center of each dough circle.

### **Fold and Seal**

Fold the dough over the filling to create a half-moon shape. (This reminds me of ravioli! If you haven't seen an

empanada before, you might want to look it up on the internet to get a visual of what you're going for. I'm sorry I don't have a picture! But be warned, just one look has the ability to make you drool.)

Use a fork to crimp and seal the edges of the empanadas, making sure they are tightly sealed.

### **Bake**

Place the sealed empanadas onto the prepared baking sheet.

Bake in the preheated oven for about 20-25 minutes or until they turn golden brown.

### **Cool and Serve**

Allow the empanadas to cool slightly on a wire rack.

If desired, dust the cooled empanadas with powdered sugar before serving.

These sweet empanadas are best enjoyed warm, and they make a perfect treat for dessert or as a snack with a cup of coffee and a good book.

Happy eating!

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Big thanks to YOU the reader! I hope you had a wonderful time. I can't thank you enough for spending time on the high seas with Trixie and me. 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.

A special thank you to my sweet betas Amy Barber, and Margaret Lapointe for looking after the book with their amazing beautiful eyes.

A mighty BIG thank you to Paige Maroney Smith for being so amazing.

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 **20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox**.

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