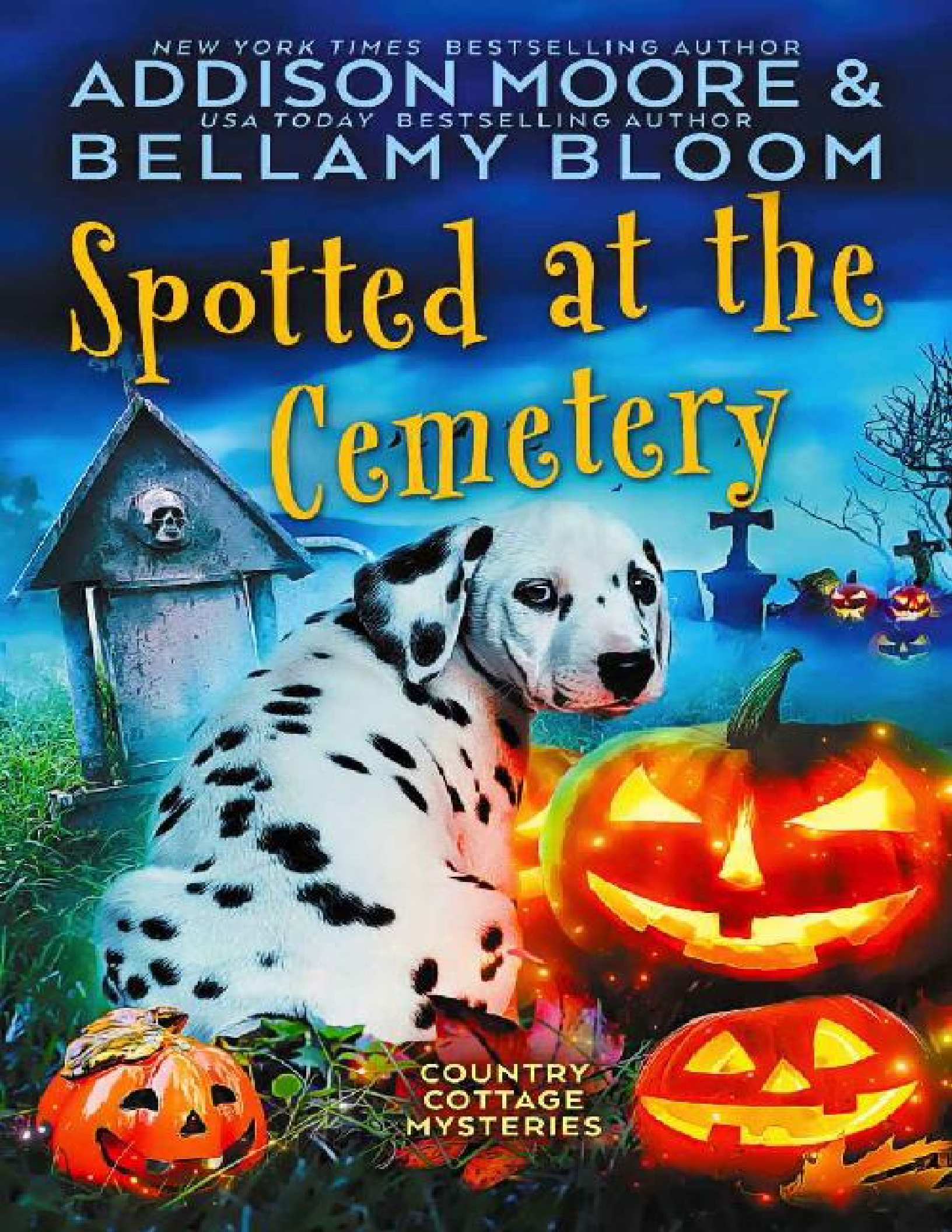


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ADDISON MOORE &
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BELLAMY BLOOM

Spotted at the Cemetery



COUNTRY
COTTAGE
MYSTERIES

SPOTTED AT THE CEMETERY

COUNTRY COTTAGE MYSTERIES 26



ADDISON MOORE
BELLAMY BLOOM

CONTENTS

Book Description

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Recipe

Recipe

Recipe

Recipe

Recipe

Books by Addison Moore

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Copyright © 2023 by Addison Moore, Bellamy Bloom

Edited by Paige Maroney Smith

Cover by Lou Harper, Cover Affairs

This novel is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to peoples either living or deceased is purely coincidental. Names, places, and characters are figments of the author's imagination. The author holds all rights to this work. It is illegal to reproduce this novel without written expressed consent from the author herself.

All Rights Reserved.

This eBook is for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Copyright © 2023 by Addison Moore, Bellamy Bloom

BOOK DESCRIPTION

The Country Cottage Inn is known for its hospitality. Leaving can be murder.

My name is Bizzy Baker, and I can read minds. Not every mind, not every *time*, but most of the time, and believe me when I say, it's not all it's cracked up to be.

It's time for Halloween in Cider—*Spider*—Cove and Jasper's brother is getting hitched—while standing in a cemetery in the middle of the night. And as if a wedding in a graveyard isn't terrifying enough, a guest ends up joining the great disembodied majority. Tombstones and ghosts aside, there's a killer on the loose and *Spider* Cove may never be the same again.

To top things off, the Country Cottage Inn is hosting its annual Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival and things are not just getting spooky—they're getting darn right deadly.

Haunted houses, vampires, werewolves, and ghouls abound. Come to Spider Cove this Halloween night. Tricks and treats abound and so does a killer.

Bizzy Baker runs the Country Cottage Inn, has the ability to pry into the darkest recesses of both the human and animal mind, and has just stumbled upon a body. With the help of her kitten, *Fish*, a mutt named Sherlock Bones, and an ornery yet dangerously good-looking homicide detective, Bizzy is determined to find the killer.

Cider Cove, Maine is the premier destination for fun and relaxation. But when a body turns up, it's the premier destination for murder.

CHAPTER 1



Two hours from now...
The Killer

The cemetery is a haunting sight, bathed in an ethereal glow cast by the moon. The air is thick with anticipation as the sound of laughter and music from the celebration at hand wafts through the tombstones. It's almost Halloween, the perfect night for my malevolent plan to unfold.

I stand in the shadows, hidden among the mausoleums and ancient trees. My heart races with excitement regarding what's about to come to pass.

And there they are—my unsuspecting victim.

They head this way, unaware of the fate that awaits them amidst the tombstones and the statues.

A wicked grin spreads across my face as I ready myself to embrace the role of the puppet master in this macabre dance.

A smug look takes over their features as they speed this way, and as soon as they spot the weapon in my hand, their expression darkens—and might I say, there's a plea for mercy in their eyes.

But mercy is not a language I speak. Their fate has been sealed, their presence in this cemetery an invitation for their ultimate demise. I revel in their fear as they grasp at the faint hope of survival.

In the realm of shadows and nightmares, tonight I am the architect of terror. This macabre venue only strengthens my resolve, for it is on this night

that the line between the living and the dead blurs.

And as the moon watches over the cemetery, I prepare for the next chapter of my sinister tale, knowing that the echoes of my actions will forever haunt the souls of the living—and perhaps the dead.

The present...

Bizzy

“THIS ENTIRE SHEBANG is as spooky and kooky as a haunted house on Halloween night,” Georgie shivers when she says it as the fog floats along the ground.

“I think I’d *prefer* a haunted house,” Mom huffs as she rubs her arms with her hands in an attempt to warm herself. “At least then I wouldn’t have to deal with this arctic chill in the air. But it’s not Halloween night just yet, and there’s no hope of ducking into a house of *any* kind. Face it, we’re stuck in the bitter elements until our fingers and feet freeze off.” Her faux cat ears move up and down as she gives a sharp nod.

“You’re right, Preppy,” Georgie growls. “Not only that, but this place is as eerie as a graveyard in the middle of the night.”

“That’s because it *is* a graveyard in the middle of the night,” I say just this side of my teeth chattering. “Whose idea was this frozen spooky charade, anyway?”

“Come on, Bizzy,” Georgie cackles out my name, her neon bright witch hat throwing out a surreal light in the darkness of the cemetery. Laughter and hoots echo from different corners of the grave-ridden field, making the hairs on my neck stand up in response to the eerie cries. “The three of us know this is all your fault.”

“And she’s not whistling Dixie,” Mom shivers as she says it. “If you weren’t married to Jasper, we wouldn’t have been invited to the crypt keeper’s wedding.”

I make a face while straightening my costume—a French maid who happens to be far too undressed to deal with the wind chill factor.

Come to think of it, I should have dressed up like a bear. A fur coat

sounds delightful right about now and oh so necessary to restart my beating heart.

But what my mother says is true. It is all my fault we're here. Jasper's brother, Max, is getting hitched—a surprise wedding, no less—to a bride none of the family has ever met.

Apparently, his new bride has a haunted sense of humor, seeing that her first choice venue for the event was a place where we house the dead. And if the ceremony dares to drone on, all of her guests might just drop dead, too.

This is by far the chilliest October that Cider Cove—scratch that—*Spider Cove* has ever seen. Yes, we've officially changed our name for the entire month. It was something that was initiated last year, and well, it's stood the test of time.

I know one thing for sure: Spider Cove is about as spooky as a little seaside town can get, especially while standing in the graveyard in the middle of the night.

The sound of organ music begins to blast throughout the cemetery as we traverse gravestones and tombstones alike, trying to make our way to the area where a few folding chairs are set out.

The grounds are mobbed with people in costumes—everything ranging from adorable to terrifying.

This entire scene isn't something I would have chosen to commemorate my nuptials, but then, to each his own.

Max has a reputation for his outlandish string of girlfriends—ironically, my mother was once one of them—but this new girl takes the cake, and apparently, it will be a wedding cake. That is, unless she's opted for a mound of spaghetti, and seeing how unconventional she is, I wouldn't be all that surprised.

Georgie's brows dance under the brim of her hat. "At least it won't be dull."

Mom is quick to respond. "This might surprise you, Georgie, but I prefer dull." ***Boring would be a wonderful change of pace.***

A swift image of a beach, soft waves, and the rhythm of uninterrupted solitude runs through her mind, and I can't help but smile. I recognize the view. It's the same one from the inn that I happen to own and run. And how I can't wait to get back home and warm myself in front of the fire. I don't care if it is midnight. I need to thaw out if I ever hope to function properly again.

Georgie starts in on an odd aria as her voice rises to the moon up above,

and each and every living soul—and perhaps dead soul, too—turns in our direction.

Mom pulls her in. “What in the world are you howling about?”

“Oh, come on, Preppy. You know me by now. I’m singing to the female ghosts of the dead to help them overcome the trauma from sexism.”

“Good grief,” Mom moans. “Where are the men with the big nets when you really need them?”

I can’t help but chuckle. Mom and Georgie are the best of friends. They not only enjoy one another’s company, but they own a boutique together called Two Old Broads, where they specialize in selling something called wonky quilts—and yes, they’re as wonky as they sound.

Georgie is a sassy eighty-something-year-old with a ball of bushy gray hair sitting on her head like a globe, and she happens to have a penchant for wearing kaftans in every color. Tonight it’s orange with black beading in honor of this haunted event.

Mom is more put together in the wardrobe department with both her fashion choices and feathered hairstyle stemming from her favorite era—the eighties—and thus Georgie’s nickname for her, Preppy.

The sound of barking emanates from the right and I spot my adorable dog, Sherlock Bones, a cute red and white freckled mutt, and my sweet cat, Fish, a long-haired black and white tabby, scampering this way.

Of course, I brought them with me. They couldn’t resist the idea of running loose in what looked to them like the biggest park on earth.

Bizzy! Sherlock gives a series of soft woofs. **You’ll never guess what we saw!**

A hand sticking up out of a freshly dug grave. Fish chitters and that alone lets me know she’s teasing.

Did not, Sherlock barks. **She’s just trying to scare you like she has been trying to scare me all night.**

That’s because you’re an easy mark, she mews his way.

“What did you see?” I ask Sherlock while giving him a quick scratch behind his ears.

We met another dog! He’s a Dalmatian and his name is Spooky Spot.

“Spooky Spot, huh?” I muse as I take a look around the graveyard with the blue cast of the moon illuminating it. “That about sums this place up nicely.”

My name is Bizzy Baker Wilder. I stand at an average height, have

average dark hair and denim blue eyes, and I happen to have the supernatural ability to read minds. Not every mind, not every time, but it seems to happen on the regular.

Oh, and I can read the mind of animals, too. And you can bet your last dollar that nine times out of one hundred they have far better things to say than humans.

“Come here, you cute little heater.” Mom laughs as she scoops Fish up and cradles her in her arms. “I swear, Bizzy. Sometimes I think you can understand what my furry grandchildren are saying, the way you carry on.”

“That’s because she can,” Georgie announces and I shoot her a look. “Bizzy’s *intuitive* that way.” She winks my way, assuring me she has no intention of giving up my rather spooky covert intelligence.

Only a small handful of people are in on my supernatural secret, and my mother isn’t one of them. Georgie knows, and my best friend, Emmie, and her husband, Leo, know—only because Leo happens to share the same quirk.

Speaking of those two, I crane my neck into the crowd of monsters and goblins in search of them, but there’s no hope in me recognizing anyone here tonight. With the exception of the man in a dark suit and a wool cap slung over his head as he makes his way over.

“Well, if it isn’t Inspector Clouseau,” Georgie quips. “Why aren’t you in costume? Do you think you’re better than everyone else?”

“I think he’s smarter,” Mom says. “Jasper, you look perfectly warm.”

“I am, Ree.” He gives both my mother and Georgie a quick embrace. “Thank you both for coming out tonight. I’m sure my brother appreciates it. Why don’t you grab a couple of seats near the front where they have the space heaters set out. We don’t want anyone catching their deaths here tonight.”

Mom bucks with a laugh. “And it seems to be a catching condition at this place.”

They take off and Sherlock runs off with them, and, of course, Fish by proxy.

Jasper takes a moment to inspect my costume before waggling his brows. “Hey there, hot stuff. You looking for something to dust? My wife said she’d be running late, and I know of an empty crypt right around the corner.”

“*You.*” I laugh as I give his blood-red tie a tug. “You’re about as crazy as your brother Max.”

“Speaking of which, I think it’s time I introduced you to his bride.”

The faint cry of what sounds like a werewolf goes off in the distance and both Jasper and I give a quick look at the crowd.

He wraps a warm arm around my waist, pulls me close, and whispers, “I don’t know why, but I’ve got a bad feeling about tonight.”

“That makes two of us,” I whisper right back as the crowd begins to blossom with ghouls and ghosts—hopefully of the human variety. “Max doesn’t strike me as the marrying kind, so everything about this screams something is off to me. But I’m sure once I meet her, I’ll love her as much as he does.”

A man in a hockey mask runs by with a live chainsaw in his hands and a series of shrill screams goes off in the crowd followed by a burst of laughter.

“Here’s hoping this night goes off without a bloody hitch,” Jasper muses. I’d agree, but something tells me this night is going to be murder.

CHAPTER 2



“*R*ooooaar!” a beast in a werewolf mask shouts as he leaps out in front of Jasper and me, nearly knocking us off our feet and sending us to an early grave to boot.

I can feel my heart leap into my throat as we stumble backward, startled by the sudden and, might I add, well-executed fright.

The cemetery shimmers under the ethereal blue glow of the moon, casting an enchanting hue upon the surroundings. Tombstones, draped in shadows, stand like sentinels amidst the velvety darkness. Eerie wisps of mist dance between the graves, adding an otherworldly touch to the scene as the organ music blares away and hordes of people in costume scurry to find a seat before the nuptials take place.

“Just one more move, buddy.” Jasper raises his fist, ready to strike, ever the protective one despite the fact an assault could land him behind bars even if he is the one carrying a badge.

But before Jasper can unleash his fury on the furry creature, a familiar voice cuts through the air.

“All right, buddy,” Max calls out, striding toward us with a woman by his side, resplendent in her Bride of Frankenstein attire.

Okay, so resplendent might be an exaggeration, but I don’t think calling her outright spooky would be a compliment either. But then again, spooky is apparently right up her haunted alley.

Max—Maximus—Wilder is Jasper’s brother. He, too, has dark Wilder hair and pale gray eyes. Evidently, each of Jasper’s siblings is basically clones of one another.

And just because he’s the groom doesn’t mean he’s immune to wearing a

costume. He's donned a rather magnificent steampunk-inspired costume complete with a fitted vest adorned with intricate gears, chains, and brass accents. The vest is paired with a crisp, ruffled shirt, reminiscent of eras gone by, and he's paired the look with fitted trousers with cuffed hems, adorned with leather straps and buckles. A long, flowing coat crafted from rich, deep hues of velvet and brocade completes the ensemble. The coat itself is embellished with additional gears, pocket watches, and an assortment of keys, hinting at a world of hidden secrets. Its high collar and tailored silhouette give Max an air of sophistication and intrigue, something every groom should have on their wedding day.

In one swift move, Max snatches the mask off the werewolf's face, revealing a man with an equally furry scruff wearing a mischievous grin. He's donned an orange plaid flannel, and without the mask looks perfectly affable with an ear-to-ear grin plastered over his adorable face.

"*Hershey*," Max and the woman by his side shout with glee at the same time before the three of them break out into laughter.

"Well"—Max says, slapping the man on the back—"the haunted jig is up. Glad you could make it, buddy."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," the man says before inching back to get a better look at my handsome husband. "Jasper, is that you?"

"It's been a minute," Jasper says, pulling him in and they exchange a hearty pat on the back. "Bizzy, this is Herschel Wolfe, Max's old buddy from way back when. Hershey, this is my wife, Bizzy Baker Wilder. She owns the Country Cottage Inn, right here in town. In fact, that's where we reside."

"Pleasure to meet you, Hershchel. If you're anything like Max, I'm sure we're in for a wild and unforgettable evening," I say and the man is quick to shake my hand. "And both Jasper and I own the inn. I just so happen to run it."

"The inn that sits on the cove? Fascinating. Please, call me Hershey," he says before looking back at Jasper. "So what's keeping you busy while your wife does all the work?"

"Jasper is a detective down in Seaview," Max answers for him. "But he's not the top homicide detective. That honor would go to his wife."

Max and Hershey share a laugh at that one.

"It's not true," I say, laughing along with them. "I just so happened to help out with a few cases, that's all."

Jasper glances my way. "And each time I've asked you not to." He sheds

a quick smile. “But you’ve helped land each and every one of those killers behind bars. Good work, Detective Wilder.” He gives a little wink.

“Every killer? Wow, you’re that good,” the Bride of Frankenstein muses.

“Where are my manners?” Max says as he pulls her in. “Jasper, Bizzy, this is Tabina Wickham, my bride-to-be.”

“Your bride?” I gasp with delight as I take the woman in. “But Max, the two of you shouldn’t even see one another before the ceremony. Isn’t that bad luck?” My fingers fly to my lips as the words shoot out before I can give them any thought.

The woman gives a robust laugh. “I’m a firm believer that we make our own luck. Please call me Tabby. It’s a pleasure to meet the two of you.” She shakes both Jasper’s hand and mine.

Come to think of it, she is wearing a wedding dress, a rather rag-tag one that looks as if it’s been dragged through a cemetery or two for the last few years, but still. Her dark hair is teased into a beehive and she has white streaks running through it that look like lightning. Her face is bone white, and her lipstick is black. I’m not sure I’d recognize her without the costume if I saw her on the streets.

“The pleasure is all ours,” Jasper says. “Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you,” she says. “And you’re right, Bizzy. Hershey is as big a hoot as Max is. In fact, Hershey’s mischief is legendary.” ***Oh so legendary.***

“She should know,” Hershey is quick to chime in with that werewolf mask of his tucked under his arm, making it look as if he’s got another head sprouting from the side of his chest. “Tabby and I go way back as well. My sister was in the same line of work, dance.”

“Oh?” I look at the woman. “Ballet?”

She nods. “Right now, it’s a little bit of everything. I’ve opened a dance school here in *Spider Cove* called Enchanted Rhythms. We teach everything from classical ballet to modern dance.” She sighs over at Hershey. “Boy, I do miss your sister. Please tell Rhonda I said hello. And tell her the dance world has never been the same without her.”

“Enchanted Rhythms?” I say. “Aww, that’s such a magical name. And by the way, I love dance in all its forms.”

“We’re having a Halloween show in the clearing behind the community center next Tuesday,” she says. “All proceeds are split between the dance company and the local food bank. Please stop by.”

She crimps her lips at Hershey. “Please tell Rhonda to do the same.”

Although, I think we both know she won't be showing up.

Sounds like there's some bitterness there.

"So what have you been up to?" Jasper asks the werewolf among us. "Are you still in the pharmaceutical game?" He glances my way. "That's how I met this hairy, scary guy. He used to peddle FDA-approved drugs over at Pharm X along with my brother."

Max nods. "Another lifetime ago—and a whole other career."

Hershey pins a stare at Max and lingers a moment before returning to his jovial self as he turns to Jasper.

"Actually, I'm a writer now. An *author* if you want to get technical. Horror is my genre of choice. In fact, I head up the Gothic Quill Society for local horror writers here in town. We like to get together and grab some coffee, nosh on a few donuts, and exchange horror stories of the literary variety."

"An author." Jasper looks stymied. "You can bet I'll be reading whatever you write."

"You might be the only one," Hershey says as he pretends to sock Jasper in the gut.

Max frowns over at his old friend. "Thanks again for coming out tonight."

"You bet." Hershey's lips curl at the tips. ***That's right, pretend you're thrilled to see me.*** "We'll talk after the ceremony."

Max's chest thumps. ***This dirtbag has the nerve to try to taint my wedding. If he tries to put the squeeze on me tonight, I'll make sure it's the last thing he does.***

Dirtbag?

"We'll see," Max throws it out there like a threat and the two men lock eyes a moment too long.

The organ music shifts to something moodier and Max sniffs at the crowd.

"Well then"—he seethes—"it's time to get this show on the road."

CHAPTER 3



The bride-to-be, dressed as the Bride of Frankenstein no less, checks her phone right here in the cemetery on this dark night in which she's chosen to host her nuptials.

"It's time to get this show on the road, indeed," Tabby chimes, and soon she and Max take off, as does Hershey once he dons his mask again, howling away as if he didn't just have a confrontation with the groom.

"Jasper." I pull him in by the arm. "Something is going on between Max and Hershey."

"You heard something?" He lifts a brow.

I'm about to spill the supernatural beans when someone comes up and slaps Jasper on the back.

"And here he is." A man laughs as he and a short woman with blonde hair come around to the front.

"Dalton," Jasper and I cry at once.

Dalton is another one of Jasper's brothers. He happens to be the head coach over at Ward University. He's wearing a sweatshirt that reads *coach*, and the blonde by his side is dressed in a black velvet gown with a high collar. Her face looks a shade of pale blue and she has streaks of blood running down her chin. Judging by the fangs, I'm assuming she's a vampire.

"And here he is," Jasper says, pulling his brother in. "The very reason Ward's football team has been on a losing streak."

"Stop," Dalton says before offering me a warm embrace. "Nice to see you, Bizzy." He pulls the woman in close. "This is my girlfriend, Elvira Flint. She's the mastermind behind this shindig. Elvira, this is Bizzy and Jasper."

The woman laughs. "Nice to meet you both. But I'm not the mastermind

behind any of this. That would be Tabby. I'm just the event planner. I hired a few kids from the drama department to wreak a little havoc in costume and brought the music and the cake."

"She's too humble," Dalton says. "She runs all the haunted houses in the area. She's an expert at staging these kinds of things."

"No kidding?" I say. "I have an inn by the cove and we're hosting a Halloween festival that just started this week. I wouldn't mind hiring you to give it a few extra spooky bells and whistles. That is, if you could squeeze me in."

"You bet I can. Dalton has your number. I can call and maybe we can get together sometime?"

"That would be fantastic. We want to make it an unforgettable event."

"I'll make sure it's just that," she says as she does a double take at something behind me. ***Oh, for goodness' sakes, is that Hershey? I can't go ten steps these days without him getting in my way.*** Her jaw redefines itself. ***I'll have to put a stop to this once and for all.***

They take off to find their seats as a mad dash of humanity moves past us to do the same. I spot my sister, Macy, and my brother, Huxley, sans his wife, the mayor, Mackenzie Woods—yes, she's chosen to eschew the Baker moniker. Mackenzie probably stayed home with Mack, their baby boy who just turned one last month.

Just past them, I see my father and Jasper's mother, Gwyn, who just so happens to be married to one another. It's still relatively new, but I'm darn proud of my father for making it last as long as he has. He's not exactly a fan of the marital department.

The two of them sit down next to Jasper's sister, Ella, and her husband. I can't wait to catch up with Ella. It's been forever.

Jasper takes me by the hand and finds us a seat next to his third and final brother, Jamison. Much like my own brother, Jamison is an attorney specializing in family law.

I can't help but notice a pretty young woman, about my age—late twenties—seated on his other side. She has long red hair that I would die for and pouty lips that most people *pay* for. She's donned a pirate's costume of some sort and so has Jamison. I'm guessing she's his plus-one for the night.

"Hey, guys." Jamison winks our way. "This is my friend, Morgana." He sheds a mischievous smile when he says it.

"Nice to meet you," I whisper her way and she nods and gives a little

wave, but her gaze seems distant like she can't quite pinpoint me. Not that I can pinpoint anyone in this murky light either.

Jamison chuckles to himself as the music switches to the wedding march. ***I can't wait to see the looks on their faces when I tell them she's not human.***

I inch back to inspect him just as the bride makes it down the makeshift aisle.

Not human? What would that make her? A vampire like Elvira? But she can't be the real deal? They don't exist. Although, on a haunted night like tonight, anything seems possible.

I shake my head at the thought. This time of year, this cemetery, it's all playing with my head.

I must have misunderstood him.

I glance in Morgana's direction once again and nod to myself. She looks perfectly human to me.

The ceremony is brief, straight to the point, and altogether morbid, just the way Max and his new bride ordered.

Fish, Sherlock, and that new Dalmatian friend of theirs sit attentively at the base of the bride and groom's feet as if they wanted to get a front-row seat—and they did.

Soon Max and Tabby are pronounced husband and wife as the cemetery breaks out in cheers and howls. Just as the rest of us stand to stretch our legs, an entire band of monsters of every variety, vampires, werewolves, aliens, creatures with horns and tails, and even women dressed as witches burst onto the scene screaming at the entire lot of us, and before we know it, we're all covered with red sanguine liquid from head to toe.

"Geez," Jasper says as he jumps back to inspect the damage to his once-white dress shirt. "At least I know where to send the dry cleaning bill."

"Relax, bro." Jamison laughs, looking suspiciously just like Jasper in this dim light. "It's all a part of the show."

I nod up at my handsome hubby. "In all fairness, we were told to dress in costume."

The crowd breaks out in laughter and screams as the music picks up to something livelier and soon there's a makeshift dance floor forming to our left.

"That brings a whole new meaning to dancing on someone's grave," I muse.

Jasper nods. “Good thing the bride and groom don’t believe in bad luck.”

Jamison laughs. “This entire night has to be the equivalent of breaking a dozen mirrors.” He takes up Morgana’s hand. “Come on. Let’s see those moves.”

She gives a little wave as they head for the dance floor.

“I’d better go find Fish and Sherlock,” I say to Jasper as the crowd begins to swirl around us.

“The bride and groom seem to have done a disappearing act,” he says, craning his neck in the thick crowd. “I think I’ll go say hello to my mother.”

“I’ll meet you by the cake in five,” I say as we split ways.

I search high and low, in front of tombstones and behind, for the next two minutes until I finally hear the sound of barking emanating near the woods to the right.

“Fish? Sherlock?” I call out the closer I get. But it’s not them I see. It’s that gorgeous Dalmatian running in a circle. “Hey, boy, what’s the matter?” I ask as I approach him.

A sharp gasp comes from me and I see exactly what’s the matter.

Lying facedown with a knife protruding from his back is a werewolf in an orange plaid flannel.

I have a feeling Hershey won’t be putting the squeeze on anyone this evening.

Hershey Wolfe is dead.

CHAPTER 4



Bizzy, you'll never believe what just happened, Fish mewls at the top of her lungs as she runs this way with Sherlock on her heels. **You won't believe what the big oaf has done now!**

I open my mouth to say something, anything, and instead of formulating a single sentence, a shrill scream rips through my vocal cords.

Fish stops just shy of the body on the ground, and once she gets a look at that butcher knife sticking up out of the poor man's back, she belts out a scream herself.

Of course, then that motivates me to scream once more, then Fish screams, and then I scream again.

Sherlock trots up, barking up a storm. **Whatever she said, Bizzy, I didn't do it.**

That Dalmatian in our midst swoops in and begins in on a barking spree.

Sherlock takes one look at the man lying at my feet, and soon each one of them is apprised of the morbid situation.

I have no idea why he's lying like that. Spooky gives a sharp bark. **Why isn't he moving?**

Oh dear, Fish mewls. **Don't worry, Bizzy. We've got this.**

Sherlock barks in agreement as both he and Fish herd the Dalmatian away from the body.

Come on, Spooky, Sherlock says, nudging him along with the tip of his nose. **We need you to step away from here. You shouldn't see this,** he barks. **Stay close to me.**

The three of them scamper deeper into the woods just as footfalls thunder from behind. Before I can turn around, Jasper and Jamison, along with his

girlfriend, appear next to me.

“Please tell me that’s a prop,” Jasper pants as he stares down at the poor man.

“I don’t think so,” I pant right back. “But I sure hope so.”

Honestly, the thought never crossed my mind. It would make sense, considering Halloween is a stone’s throw away and we are attending a wedding with a rather morbid and haunted theme, but something tells me I’m not that lucky—or should I say, the poor soul lying on the ground isn’t that lucky.

Jasper drops to his knees and checks for a pulse before looking up at me and shaking his head.

“I gotta call this in,” he says, corking back up and taking a few steps into the woods while shouting into his phone.

“Poor guy.” Jamison groans at the sight. *Of all the rotten luck.* He glances my way a moment. *Come to think of it, Mom did mention that murder followed Bizzy wherever she went. She’s not responsible, is she?*

I can’t help but gasp at the accusation even if it was nonverbal.

Morgana groans down at the body as well. “What do I do now, Jamison?” The cute redhead blinks his way. “This is the first body I’ve encountered. I’m afraid I’m not registered to read dead bodies. Perhaps you can assist me in this?”

Assist her in this?

That’s an odd thing to say. And even odder than that is the fact they’re both clad in their pirate costumes as I shiver in my French maid’s attire.

Jamison’s eyes enlarge as he looks her way. “That’s enough, Morgana. We don’t need to talk about this right now,” he says a little too sharply for my liking while squinting at the crowd past me.

I can’t help but notice he looks exactly like Jasper. In fact, every last Wilder here looks like one another. It’s so dark out tonight, I’m lucky I haven’t pressed my lips to the wrong one by now.

“Jamison,” I say softly amid the budding melee. “Seeing something like this can be very traumatizing. Maybe you should take her home?”

He winces. “You’re right.” *Bizzy must think I’m an ogre for the way I just spoke. But this isn’t the time or place to point out Morgana’s less-than-human qualities.* “I think I’ll do just that, but before I take off, I’d better go fill the bride and groom in on what’s going on. Someone has to break it to them, it might as well be me.”

He takes Morgana by the hand and the two of them disappear into the crowd that's quickly gathering.

Did he just say less-than-human qualities? That's more or less what he alluded to earlier.

What the heck is going on tonight?

I scan the crowd and spot my sister, Macy, over by the cake table set out among the tombstones. And she just so happens to be making out with a dark-haired man.

Is that Jordy?

Jordy Crosby works for me at the inn, and they spent all summer making moony eyes at one another. It seems things are taking a turn for the serious now that it's fall.

I'll deal with that later—as in teasing them both to death. I've long since been the president of the Macy and Jordy Super Couple Fan Club. But after the tragedy that just took place, it's hardly the time to out myself.

In fact, I'm about to hunt for clues in the event the killer left something in the vicinity for me to go off of when I spot Mom and Georgie heading this way.

“*Oh no, no, no,*” I mutter. The last thing I want is for them to get an eyeful of the grisly sight.

“I told you we'd find her trying to run away.” Georgie snickers just as Jasper steps out of the woods.

Mom sighs. “It looks like she was running away with her husband. And believe me, I'd like to do the same. We're ready to go, Bizzy. All of this costume business is starting to exhaust me. First, they hire a band of monsters to douse us all with blood, and now they've hired a team of officers to plague the area.” She says *officers* in air quotes. “And worse yet, they look as if they're out to arrest every one of us. We'd better get out of here before we end up in handcuffs.”

“If handcuffs are on the menu, I'd rather stay,” Georgie says, holding her wrists out as if inviting someone to slap a couple of silver bracelets onto them.

“You would,” Mom grouses at her bestie.

“And you *wouldn't*,” Georgie grouses right back. “Face it, Preppy. The only reason you want to make a run for the parking lot is because you've about had your socks scared right off of you.” She winks my way. “The vampires among us look as if they were craving a bite.”

“Oh, please.” Mom rolls her eyes. “I’m not afraid of anything—except maybe spiders, heights, small spaces, clowns, and... well, you get the idea.”

Georgie chuckles. “You forgot to mention the time you screamed at your own shadow.”

“Oh, hush, you.” Mom waves her off. “My shadow happened to be getting in my way that day. I was simply telling it to move along.” She shrugs my way. “Just for the record, I’m not afraid of *everything*. I just have a healthy respect for the unknown and a well-honed survival instinct. That’s all. Speaking of survival,” she wrinkles her nose as she glances to the ground behind me, “what’s with him?”

Georgie cranes her neck that way as well. “Can’t you see he’s working on his Oscar for playing the part of the corpse?”

“I hate to break it to you both,” I cringe as I say it. “But that man isn’t playing. I’m afraid we’ve had a fatality here tonight.”

Mom gasps while Georgie smacks her.

“I told you she’d drum up a body before the night was through. It’s her wedding gift to the happy couple. Sort of the way a cat brings a mouse to its owner.”

Mom’s mouth falls open. “*Bizzy.*”

“Try not to sound so disappointed,” I say, motioning for her to keep her voice down. “I had nothing to do with that poor man’s demise.”

“Come on, Preppy,” Georgie says, linking her arm through my mother’s. “Let’s hitch a ride with Macy. In the meanwhile, I’ll protect you from all these terrifying shadows and lurking goblins.”

They take off just as the sound of sirens once again pierces through the night, instantly igniting a sense of urgency in everyone around me. Soon, the entire cemetery is awash with flashing lights as even more bodies—all of them living—flock to the scene, their curiosity piqued at the thought of murder.

I’m about to take off myself when I spot a thing of horror headed this way.

CHAPTER 5



The bride and groom are making their way over and I can't help but grimace as they do.

"Hey, guys," Jasper says as he steps away from the crime scene momentarily. "I'm so sorry this happened."

The fog clings to the ground, glowing a luminescent shade of blue as the crowd in the cemetery begins to swell.

Tabby clutches at her chest. Her wedding dress isn't just dingy as it was at the start of the ceremony, but thanks to the mischief makers she hired, it's splattered with red paint as well.

"What the heck... Is that—?" she gags before she can say the man's name.

Max pulls her back as he inspects the deceased as well. "Don't tell me that's Hershey."

"It's him," Jasper says it low and mournful.

"How could this happen?" Tabby shakes her head in disbelief, causing that dark beehive sitting on her head to do a mean wobble. "He was just with us a moment ago." ***Did anyone see us? Could they suspect? No, they can't possibly know. Stay calm. And keep telling yourself you're innocent.***

I inch back. Telling yourself? As in she's not?

Max blows out a breath and white fog plumes from his nostrils as well. ***This can't be traced back to me, right? One thing is for sure—I'd better keep my composure. Just remember, they can't prove anything.***

I blink up at him.

Who can't prove anything? The sheriff's department? His *brother*, the homicide detective?

My goodness, did Max do this? Did he and Tabby work *together* to do this?

That can't be right. They're just panicking. Their thoughts are racing. I learned long ago not to judge anyone by what they might be thinking. Lord knows we all need a safe space to roam free, and our thoughts are one of those places.

Max nods to Jasper. "I can't believe this has happened. Both Tabby and I are ready to fully cooperate with the authorities if need be."

"Thank you," Jasper says softly.

"Good luck with the investigation." Max sighs. "And keep us posted."

"Absolutely," Tabby says as she hugs Max's arm. "We want to find out who did this to Hershey. He was our friend. Whoever did this needs to pay." She sighs down at him. ***I'm sure Max and I will be running damage control from this incident for the rest of our lives.***

She's not kidding there. What a horrific thing to happen anywhere, but at a *wedding* specifically.

Max glances over his shoulder and sighs. "And here comes trouble."

The two of them take off in haste, and as if on cue, Jasper's mother, Gwyn, pops up along with my father. Dad has salt and pepper locks and a friendly boy next door charm about him, and he happens to have had more than his fair share of ex-wives. My mother likes to say she started the trend.

"Bizzy Bizzy," Dad says as he pulls me in. For as long as I can remember, he's said my name twice just for fun, although his tone was somber this time around.

Gwyn has her dark hair swept back, and her Wilder gray eyes glow in the night as she looks to the ground and gasps.

"So it's true." She straightens as she takes a moment to scowl my way. "Well, well, well... If Bizzy Baker, the harbinger of misfortune, didn't strike again."

"Mom," Jasper draws the moniker out. "Please don't go there. This is purely a coincidence."

Dad's brows jump as he looks my way. "Did you find the body again?"

I give a slight nod, ashamed to even admit that much.

"Fascinating." Dad shakes his head as Gwyn pulls him away from me by a few inches.

"Dad," now it's me drawing out his name.

Gwyn leans his way. "You really need to do something about her,

Nathan.”

“Now, now, Gwyn.” Dad pats her hand in an effort to calm the woman. “Let’s not jump to conclusions. Accidents happen, even to the best of us.” He winks my way and I offer a dull smile in lieu of a thank you.

Geez, Dad muses. *The kid really is a walking broken mirror. And to think I’ve spent all that time defending her when I probably should have been investing in a good defense attorney. Here’s hoping Hux will take up legal arms for his sister when the time comes. And if tonight is any indication, it will come.*

I roll my eyes at the thought.

Gwyn nods. ***Oh, she’s guilty, all right. Brazenly rolling her eyes like that? She’s guilty as sin. Typical Bizzy, always attracting trouble. I bet every dollar I have she had something to do with this. It’s like a dark cloud follows her wherever she goes. And unfortunately for my son, she’s never all that far from him. Hey? I bet that’s why she married him to begin with. He is the lead homicide detective. She knew he’d never arrest her. Talk about using your womanly wiles to get your way. Bizzy has taken it to a whole other level—a whole murderous level.***

“We’ll see everyone another time,” Max says.

Tabby nods up at him. “We should renew our vows asap. I’m afraid this night is jinxed. I don’t want anything to do with it, let alone commemorate it once a year.”

Max nods our way. “We’ll keep in touch.”

They take off and Gwyn steps in a notch.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, young lady.”

“Enough,” Jasper says it low but curt.

“Oh, come on, Gwyn,” I say. “You know I’m not responsible for this poor man’s death. I might attract a few odd occurrences here and there, but I’m no jinx.”

Am I?

Over two dozen bodies in just about as many months doesn’t bode well for my argument.

Gwyn frowns my way. “You do seem to have a knack for finding yourself knee-deep in trouble—or knee-deep in *bodies* as it were.”

Dad nods. “It’s like you have a personal invitation to chaos.”

“I’d stick to safer endeavors if I were you,” Gwyn says, pulling my father back another inch. “Like running your inn, for instance. Please leave the

detective work to the professionals. Jasper has talked ad nauseum about how much you like to meddle.”

She drags my father off into the night and I look up at my handsome husband.

“Ad nauseum?” I muse.

Jasper’s brows furrow a moment. “I may have mentioned it a time or two, but only because we were discussing the fact you solved the case.” He lands a careful kiss to my cheek before whispering in my ear, “Stay away from this one, Bizzy. There’s a maniac on the loose and I don’t want you anywhere near their radar. Why don’t you get Fish and Sherlock and head home? I have a feeling I’ll be running extra late tonight.”

“Will do,” I say as we part ways.

I spot Dalton and his girlfriend, Elvira, not too far away, and as I pass them by, I hear Dalton muse as he thinks to himself, ***It’s hard to believe he’s gone. And tonight of all nights? I’ll admit, it’s a brilliant scheme.***

I’ll say. Whoever the killer is, they knew exactly what they were doing.

Elvira’s lips curl as she stares down at the body. ***Poor Hershey. And just like that, the Gothic Quill Society is down by one member. Such a shame. And to think he was just on the cusp of unraveling some intriguing secrets.***

The Gothic Quill Society? Hershey mentioned it... And what secrets was Hershey on the cusp of unraveling?

I inspect the woman dressed as a sultry vampire under the dull blue cast from the moon.

What secrets might Elvira be hinting at? And could they be connected to Hershey’s untimely demise?

My instincts tell me there’s more to Elvira’s words than meets the eye.

I may not know what secrets Hershey was about to unravel, but I do know this: I’m determined to get to the bottom of this, if only to clear my name with my mother-in-law.

There’s the mystery of Elvira and that enigmatic Gothic Quill Society, not to mention the mystique of Morgana’s less-than-human status. And besides all of that, I’m itching to solve the biggest mystery of them all—who killed Hershey Wolfe?

With Halloween drawing near, the veil between the worlds of the living and the dead only seems to thin, heightening the spooky energy in *Spider Cove*.

As dark envelops the cemetery, my determination only solidifies. I may

not know who did this to that poor man, but I'm ready to dive into the depths of the unknown and uncover the secrets that lie hidden beneath the surface.

Halloween might be just around the corner, but a sinister presence looms all that much closer. And if the killer isn't apprehended quickly, this will be the scariest Halloween season *Spider Cove* has seen yet.

CHAPTER 6



The sun bathes Cider—*Spider*—Cove with its golden embrace as my menagerie and I head for the inn.

There's a brisk chill in the air despite the fact it's almost noon and yet there's a gentle breeze coming from the cove, and if I didn't know better, I'd think it was whispering secrets.

The salty sea air bites my senses, and lingering just beneath that there's the warm scent of something fresh baked with just a hint of vanilla. The Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival is already in full swing for the day as a thick crowd descends on the booths that line the empty patch of land just shy of the sandy beach. The air crackles with excitement, filled with laughter and the unmistakable scent of autumn. Pumpkins, masks, and joy abound, painting the landscape in hues of Halloween magic.

It's the morning after Hershey Wolfe's brutal murder and Jasper was out all night, getting a head start on the case. He came in late to change and grab some coffee before heading back to the Seaview Sheriff's Department, so I stayed at the cottage and tried to get as much info out of him as I could—which was scant. Scratch that, which was zero to none.

Jasper made it clear as crystal that this is one case he insists I stay out of. Seeing that the murder took place at his brother's wedding, he's determined to solve this one himself—sort of a macabre wedding gift to the happy couple if you will.

Fish whips her tail with an air of confidence as we make our way down the cobbled walkway that covers most of Cider Cove.

All right, Spooky, she mewls with a touch of excitement. You're about to enter a feline paradise. This place is full of cozy corners and sunny

windowsills—the Country Cottage Inn has it all!

She's not wrong about that. The tall stone structure looms ahead covered in bright green ivy from top to bottom save for the pale blue shutters. I inherited the inn about a year ago, but I've been managing it for over a decade now.

Cozy cat corners? Sherlock balks at the thought. ***Why should Spooky care about that? He's a d-a-w-g! And in the event your tiny cat brain can't figure out what I said, that spells woof.***

Fish hops in front of Sherlock and nearly causes a collision of the furry variety. ***For your information, Sherlock Bones, some dogs have refined tastes, too. But don't worry. There's plenty of adventure for oafs like you as well.***

Adventure? Sherlock barks. ***Now you're talking my language! Let's show Spooky the best spots to sniff out excitement.***

The double doors to the inn are festooned with glorious fall wreaths comprised of leaves in every rich shade of crimson that our local trees could provide. I can't help but marvel at the inn's charm as it stands proud before us with its rich history etched into every stone.

When I was hired on, way back when, the inn had a strict no pet policy, but I quickly did away with that. And since then the inn has held the distinction of being one of Maine's most pet-friendly havens ever since.

My love for animals fueled a rebellion against the previous no pet policy. Who needs such barbaric restrictions when furry friends bring so much joy? Now, guests can bring their furry friends to share in the magic of the inn and the cove. And let me tell you, it's not just the guests who benefit from this pet paradise.

In fact, we've carved out a space, a pet daycare center, right behind the inn. It's become quite the hit, catering to both our guests and the local community. And if guests prefer to keep their furry pals by their side at all times, they're more than welcome to do so, whether it's in their rooms or even in the café that sits on the beach. Even the guests that don't travel with pets find them a delight.

Speaking of delights, our four-legged greeters, Fish and Sherlock, have become stars in their own right seeing that they're employed as the inn's official welcoming committee. They've earned the title of Employee of the Month every *single* month. And I swear, their charm and wagging tails work like magic when it comes to having repeat customers.

What about the ocean? Spooky barks while looking longingly over at the beach as if it were taking all his restraint not to scamper off that way, and I have no doubt it is.

We'll get there soon enough, Sherlock barks. ***Once we're through showing you the inn, we'll take you straight to the beach.***

That's right, Fish mewls. ***And I'll be sure to race you both from one end of the cove to the other. Spoiler alert: I always win.***

That's because she cheats, Sherlock barks. ***I haven't figured out how, but there's no way a cat could beat me fair and square.***

Fish chitters at the thought because she just so happens to beat him fair and square each and every time.

Spooky turns his adorable spotted face my way. ***What about my Hershey?***

You'll stay with us until we figure out what's best, but Bizzy will take care of his case, Sherlock says without missing a beat. ***Our fearless leader is a top-notch detective. She'll track down the truth, no matter what it takes.***

Jasper runs through my mind and I can't help but frown. As much as I want to track down Hershey's killer, I don't want it to cost my marriage. Jasper is right. This case is personal—specifically to him.

We step into the inn and the scent of cinnamon, vanilla, and I'm betting fresh baked cookies, only grows stronger and so does my appetite

Fish dances around our new spotted friend. ***Welcome home, Spooky. Follow me. I'll show you around. I know all the fun places. And look! There's Candy!***

My head whips in the direction Fish's nose is pointing and, sure enough, there's my sister's cute pooch—which means Macy isn't too far off. For someone who regularly declares her dislike for both pets and people, Macy has really taken a shine to Candy. And thankfully so. I'm glad to have Candy as a part of our family. Candy is a pure white ball of fluff. An adorable Samoyed with dark button eyes and a smile that never seems to leave her cute little face. I like her more than my sister on most days.

I take a moment to glance around at the place. The Country Cottage Inn has always been my sanctuary, even now as a plethora of Halloween decorations accost me from every angle.

The old wooden floors are stained a pale shade of gray and they just so happen to creak beneath my feet, adding a touch of eerie charm to the spooktacular atmosphere. There's a creamy marble reception counter straight

ahead where two of my best employees are helping a crowd of guests check in and out.

The entry and the halls have all been adorned with spiderwebs, pumpkins, and bats. The wrought iron staircase is threaded with flickering pumpkin lanterns leading upward as if beckoning our guests to uncover the secrets hidden on the upper floors.

There are over seventy rooms in this seaside behemoth and over three dozen cottages on the grounds, which I rent out. I happen to live in one of those quaint little cottages, as do Georgie and my best friend, Emmie. It's perfectly cozy and I never want to leave.

A set of giant bay windows sit to my left, framed with black lace curtains, allowing the sunlight to filter through, casting haunted-looking shadows on the worn marble counter. And stretched along that counter is a handful of carved pumpkins, a few miniature skeletons, along with a cauldron overflowing with sweet treats, tempting both visitors and staff alike to indulge in the spirit of the season.

Of course, I can't resist. I've been noshing on those miniature candy bars as if they were vital to my survival, and during this time of year, they just might be.

I do a quick survey of the room and spot Macy canoodling in the corner with none other than Jordy Crosby once again.

I suppose this is it. They're official. Not that I mind, but at the moment her hands are moving up and down his body as if she were conducting a pat-down worthy of the sheriff's department.

Jordy is holding onto her loosely with one hand on her back, the other on a bucket filled with tools and a strand of those miniature jack-o'-lantern lights as if he were ready to continue spreading the glow of Halloween.

I can't help but notice that Macy is wearing a red lace dress, and a part of me wonders if it's the exact red lace dress she had on last night.

Why do I get the feeling I might be witnessing Macy's walk of shame? It wouldn't be her first. Although, let's call a playboy spade a playboy spade—this wouldn't be Jordy's first walk of shame either.

I'm about to head over when my bestie, Emmie, heads my way with a platter of what looks to be long skinny green cookies.

"Bizzy Baker Wilder, you must have one or twenty," Emmie says, thrusting the platter of eerie-looking treats my way.

And, oh my word, if they don't resemble long green fingers with bright

red fingernails attached.

“Let’s not and say I did,” I say, wrinkling my nose at the dish. Ever since Emmie discovered that she and her husband, Leo, are expecting, all sorts of strange dishes have cropped up on the menu of Country Cottage Café. “How’s the baby?” I ask, glancing down at her near flat belly. I couldn’t be more excited about the baby if it were my own.

“He or she is anxious for you to have one of their mother’s cookies. They’re witches’ fingers. The fingernail is an almond that I painted with food coloring,” Emmie insists. “And I promise they’re the most delicious cookies you will ever eat.”

I make a face because she’s been giving that dubious tagline to every Frankensteined creation she’s produced this past month.

But out of a firm show of support, I pick one up and take a bite. Emmie just so happens to run the Country Cottage Café for me. Once I took over the inn, I wisely hired Emmie to man the culinary fort and for good reason—she’s a queen in the kitchen opposed to the dumpster fire crown I seemed to have earned during one or more *literal* fires I may have set in an attempt to feed the masses.

Sugar and spice and everything nice hits my palate all at once and a hard moan escapes me.

“Oh wow,” I moan ten times louder. “I will never doubt your culinary expertise again.”

She winks my way as I snap up another.

Emmie and I have been best friends since preschool. We share more than just a strong bond. We have the same medium-length dark hair, same denim blue eyes, and we even share the same formal moniker, Elizabeth. But since our first pig-tailed meet and greet, we’ve embraced the nicknames our families gave us to avoid any confusion since we’ve never been more than a few inches apart.

“Leo told me about what happened last night.” Now it’s her turn to wrinkle her nose. “We left early, but he got called back—on business.”

Leo Granger not only happens to be a deputy and Jasper’s best buddy, but he’s also the aforementioned man who shares my strange quirk.

“I’m so sorry for Max and his new bride.” Emmie winces as she hoists the tray toward me once again and I take another cookie. “And I’m even sorrier for the dead guy. Who was he?”

“A man by the name of Hershey Wolfe,” I whisper, lest some of the

guests hear me and want in on the macabre conversation. “Apparently, he was a good friend of Max and Tabby’s. I found him with a knife in his back.”

“That’s so awful.” She holds her stomach for a second as if things might be a little more awful for *her* in a minute. “Do they have any idea who could have done this?”

I shake my head. “Not yet, but—” I’m about to fill her in on the odd internal musings I heard last night when the canoodling lovebirds come this way as Jordy wags his phone at us.

Jordy just so happens to be Emmie’s big brother. He’s basically been on my sister’s radar for the last thirty years. I have no idea why this coupling took so long to take place. It’s been obvious to the rest of us from the beginning that they’re perfect for one another.

“Morning, Bizzy—Em.” He nods at his sister. “There’s a backup in the kitchen. But don’t worry. I’m on it,” he says as he winks at Macy before taking off.

“That was subtle,” I tease loud enough for all to hear and Macy winks my way as if to tease me right back.

“A backup in my kitchen?” Emmie groans. “I’d better go, too. We’re baking like mad for our booth—cookies, cupcakes, chocolate almond bark, and our super seller—spooky Halloween fudge. I can’t make any of it fast enough. This fall festival will be our best yet.” She takes off after him and Macy steps in, snorting as she inspects me.

“You just had to do it, didn’t you, Bizzy?” she snips, her demeanor suddenly cantankerous. Although let’s face it. That’s sort of her go-to mood. “You couldn’t let poor Max get hitched in peace, you needed to drag the dead into it.”

“Well, the *Dawn of the Dead* was more or less the theme,” I say with less than a touch of regret because I happened to be right. And if anyone can take macabre humor, it’s my sister. “Hey, you were there. Did you see anything out of the ordinary?”

She frowns my way. “Really, Bizzy? Were *you* there? The entire night was out of the ordinary.” She shivers as she says it. “Max and his new bride are a couple of loons. And they’re lucky I was wearing a red dress or I’d be sending them my dry-cleaning bill. Dousing everyone in blood like that was adding insult to injury after dragging us out to jump tombstones in the middle of the night.”

Fish whizzes by with a sharp mewl. ***Death and destruction have come to***

the Country Cottage Inn. I can feel it in my creaky bones!

Don't worry, Bizzy, Sherlock barks. I'm on it. Come on, Candy and Spooky. Everyone knows it's up to us dogs to protect the inn.

Just watch me prove you wrong! Fish yowls, but no sooner does she dart out of the inn than her fur stands on end and she stops dead in her tracks.

“What in the world?” Macy jumps back as Candy bolts past her without so much as a goodbye. “Why do I get the feeling the Grim Reaper is about to pay another visit?”

“He does like to keep close proximity,” I say as we jet out of the inn and we both stop short ourselves once we spot the potentially deadly sight.

Death and destruction have come to the Country Cottage Inn, indeed.

CHAPTER 7



Georgie Conner stands dressed in an emerald green velvet gown adorned with strange symbols embroidered in gold on her chest, but that's not the part that has me worried. It's the fact she's holding a two-foot-long sword, pointing its sharp tip right at Mackenzie Woods' heart.

"Take a step closer"—Georgie shouts at our formidable town's mayor—"and you'll be a ghost for Halloween and forevermore."

"Georgie," I cry as I run that way.

I can't help but note that Mom is standing off to the side, holding baby Mack while the two of them observe the would-be assassination play out. Mackenzie may not have a sword at her disposal, but that look she's giving Georgie is just as lethal.

The Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival roars to life to our left as dozens of fall-themed booths dot the landscape. And each one of those booths happens to be bursting with colorful yet spooky decorations.

A handful of children dressed as witches, ghosts, and superheroes run from one booth to another, their faces painted with intricate designs that rival the talent of any tattoo artist. The local elementary schools have been driving the kids over nonstop for the festive field trips. And since anyone wearing a costume gets a free cookie at the booth the inn is hosting, well, let's just say it's been a parade of nonstop costumes ever since we've opened our proverbial doors.

I can't blame them. Emmie's cookies are just that good.

Mackenzie, aka Mayor Woods, pushes that blade away from her chest as she turns her ire my way.

"Well, if it isn't Bizzy Baker." She sheds a short-lived smile, most likely

because she knows how much it irks me when someone leaves out my Wilder-issued surname. “Either you have some serious stock in a company that supplies this town with caskets or you’re a serial killer with an insatiable appetite. Either way, I’ve had enough of your uncanny ability to attract dead bodies. It’s becoming a public nuisance. Scratch that. *You’re* becoming a public nuisance.”

A laugh stifles in my throat. “I can assure you, Mayor Woods, I don’t intentionally seek out the dead.” I make a face. “They just seem to find me.”

Quite frequently.

“She can’t help it,” Macy calls out from the sidelines. “She’s a dead body magnet. I, however, attract the living,” she purrs a touch too proud.

It would be true on both counts.

Mackenzie narrows her eyes on me. “I don’t care what your excuse is. It’s time for this to end. I don’t care if you are a dead body magnet. What concerns me is that you’re a dead body magnet with a serious reputation. And it’s causing some serious unrest among the citizens of *Spider Cove*. I hereby declare you an official public nuisance.”

“Georgie, drop your weapon,” Mom tells her. “Mackenzie sort of has a point.”

“*Mom*,” there’s a hint of whine to my voice as I say it.

“Oh, come on, Bizzy,” Mom says as she comes my way and I steal my nephew from her arms. “You’ve got to admit, the fact you found another body last night—well, it’s cause for concern.”

“See that?” Mackenzie folds her arms tight. “Your deadly dealings are as plain as the nose on your mother’s face.”

Georgie nods. “And we all know your mama’s got a good sniffer.”

I shoot Georgie a look that says *et tu?*

“Never mind my so-called deadly dealings,” I say, sneaking a kiss to baby Mack’s chubby cheek and he rewards me with a giggle and a slap. “I’d rather deal with the fact this cute little boy had a birthday three weeks ago and you’ve yet to commemorate it,” I shoot the accusation right in Mackenzie’s face, where it belongs. “Please tell me you’re going to celebrate the event with a cake or I’m just going to have to—”

“You’re going to have to what?” Mackenzie squints my way. ***Go on, Bizzy. I dare you to threaten me after one of your minions nearly cut my beating heart out of my chest. I’ll have a restraining order on both of you by dinner. And the icing on this cake? I’ll have your brother whip those***

restraining orders up for me.

I can't help but frown at the witch. She may not be dressed as one, but then again, she doesn't need a costume to make the concept work.

Mackenzie Woods is the exact reason I can pry into other people's gray matter, to begin with.

Way back when, Emmie and I had another bestie and we were an inseparable trio.

That third cog in our friendship wheel was the aforementioned witch before me. But as fate would have it, that all changed one night at a Halloween festival much like this one. Mackenzie dunked me into a whiskey barrel filled with water. It was meant for an innocent game of bobbing for apples, but Mackenzie had a far deadlier game in mind.

Four things came from that event. One, my phobia of submerging myself in water—I'm quick in and out of the shower to this very day.

Two, my dislike of confined spaces.

Three, my extreme distrust of Mackenzie Woods.

And four, my ability to hear what other people—animals included—are thinking.

It turns out, I'm something called transmundane, which houses an entire stable of supernatural abilities. My particular ability is further classified as *telesensual*, which means nine times out of ten I know exactly what thoughts are racing through other people's minds.

"I'll throw him a party myself," I say, bouncing baby Mack on my hip and he gives an approving applause as if he understood exactly what that party would entail—a good time. Something Mackenzie seems to be allergic to.

"You wouldn't dare," Mackenzie seethes my way—and proves my point by proxy.

"Just try to stop me," I seethe right back. "Mack deserves a birthday party."

"Nobody deserves anything," she shoots back. "And I'll have you know, I don't believe in birthday parties. They foster bad behavior, like demanding gifts you haven't earned, and people praising you for the simple act of existing." Her phone chirps and she plucks it out of her pocket. "I have to go." She snatches the baby from me. "I've got another fire to put out because of yours truly," she growls right at me. "The press has been hounding me all night and all morning. It's up to me to do what I can to stop them from

declaring Spider Cove as the murder capital of the world. Once again, I'm off to clean up your mess." ***Or the mess Max Wilder caused.***

I blink over at her.

Max? Why Max? Because the tragedy occurred at his wedding?

Mackenzie shoots an icy glance to the sea. ***I wonder how long it will take Bizzy to figure out he's the killer? I'd make her life easy and tell her I saw him running for the woods with a knife, but then why take away her fun? Besides, it's not like she'd believe a single thing I say. And to be honest? The guilty party just so happens to be her brother-in-law. Bizzy will probably let this one slide. Although if it were me who was responsible for the slaughter, I'm sure she'd have me tarred and feathered before she had her husband throw the book at me.***

"There will be no birthday party on my watch," she snips as she trots off with baby Mack in tow and the baby begins to whine before they hit the parking lot.

"I'm throwing him a party," I say under my breath.

"I'm on board," Mom says. "We can do it on Halloween at the kids' fair. He'll think all the kids are here just for him."

"I'm in, too." Macy snickers. "I'll make sure he goes home with an obnoxiously big gift."

"Sounds like a plan," I say. "And I'll have Emmie bake a cake just for him."

Georgie nods. "And I'll have one of my magician friends show up and make Mackenzie Woods disappear. That will be my big gift to the kid."

Both my mother and I shoot her a look.

"What?" Georgie muses. "It can be temporary."

"I think you're onto something." Mom shrugs. "Only we won't need your magician friend. Maybe we can send her to the spa?"

"Ooh, I like that," I say. "I can arrange for the works right here at the inn. Or better yet, we can have her officiate the pie-eating contest that takes place that night. She does love to perform her civic duty."

Mom tips her head. "That's because it takes her places."

"Speaking of going places." Georgie nods my way. "Who, what, where, and when? We're ready to kick this investigation into high gear."

"Yeah, who's your first suspect?" Mom asks with her ear cocked my way, eager to hear.

"And this is where I leave you. I do boys, not bullets," Macy says as she

takes off with a wave.

“Well?” Mom asks again. “Who is it?”

I glance over to the void in Mackenzie’s wake.

“You’ll never believe it,” I say. “But I think we’re about to eat lunch at one of Maine’s most exclusive restaurants. Maximus Wilder—here we come.”

CHAPTER 8



As luck would have it, Max just so happens to be working a shift at his restaurant this evening, so as soon as the sun sets, I pile Georgie and my mother into my car and we head down to Seaview.

I actually tried to convince Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky to tag along, seeing that Max's place has a pet-friendly patio, but after spending the day at the harvest festival, all three of them were too tuckered out to even think about begging for scraps under our table. I fed them a decent dinner and left the TV on the Animal Channel before I headed out the door.

The moon is high and the wind is frigid as the three of us step into Maximus.

In an instant, the scent of fresh grilled steak lights up our senses and all three of us moan in unison. If Maximus is known for anything, it's getting a steak done right.

The restaurant sits perched on the water's edge just a stone's throw away from the Seaview Sheriff's Department. Although, that didn't incite me to clue Jasper in on the fact I was headed this way. Max and I have a rapport—and not only that, but he once dated my mother. He adores both her and Georgie. If we can't wrangle a few clues from him, no one can.

The restaurant itself has an eclectic seaside charm. The whitewashed walls are adorned with vintage photographs of beachy landscapes, capturing the essence of coastal living. Soft lighting casts a warm glow, creating an ambiance that feels both cozy and inviting. And true to this spooky month, every last inch of this place is adorned with pumpkins, ghosts, and witches. The walls are draped in cascading autumn leaves, and jack-o'-lanterns with mischievous grins adorn every corner as they cast a flickering glow that

dances over the tables. Spiderwebs are strung from the ceiling and flutter in the breeze, adding an eerie elegance to the place.

“All right, ladies,” Georgie says through the side of her mouth like a ventriloquist. “Remember our unspoken agreement? I get first pick of the hot hotties here tonight.”

Mom grunts, “Bizzy is married and I’m seeing your brother. You can have second and third dibs, too.”

“All right then.” Georgie slaps her hands together. “Let’s get ready to *rumble*.” She’s about to charge past the reception counter when my mother plucks her back by the sleeve of her lime green kaftan.

“Not so fast, Georgie from the jungle. The last time you went on a wild hottie spree, you ended up with a self-proclaimed unicorn wrangler who believed he could talk to woodland creatures.”

“That’s right.” Georgie gives a wistful tick of her head. “And I would have married the guy if he hadn’t fallen in love with a garden gnome nymphet and took off for Peru to chase after hallucinogenic frogs. I hope they’re living their best lives.” She turns my way. “Word to the wise, keep those saucy little vixens out of your garden. I’d hate to see Jasper fall under their spell.”

Mom chuckles. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Bizzy. Jasper doesn’t strike me as the type to leave the country in search of hallucinogenic frogs.”

“You never know,” I tease. “This time of year can bring out the beast in anyone.” A thought comes to me and I turn to Georgie. “Hey, remember that time we went out and you ended up with some guy who believed he was the reincarnation of Elvis Presley?”

Georgie rolls her eyes. “He wasn’t the reincarnation of Elvis Presley—he *was* Elvis. The King and I go way back. Truth is, he’s been living incognito in a cottage not too far from mine.”

“You mean to tell me that the King has been right under my nose at the Country Cottage Inn all these years?” Mom laughs. “I’d have to be an idiot not to notice.”

“You said it, not me.” Georgie winks my way just as Max struts over with a grin stretching from ear to ear.

“Well, well, well, look who decided to grace us with their presence. The fab three are in the house.” He glances behind me looking suspiciously like Jasper. “Or is it the fab four? Is Jasper circling the parking lot?”

“He’s at work,” I say as Max pulls the three of us in for a quick embrace. “It’s just us tonight.”

“I wouldn’t want it any other way,” he teases. *And I mean it. The last thing I need is Jasper breathing down my neck while holding his proverbial magnifying glass my way.*

I hike a brow at him.

It does make me wonder exactly what Max Wilder has to hide. That knife Mackenzie saw him trotting into the woods with, perhaps?

Georgie leans his way. “All right, honey, lead the way to the most VIP spot that ever did VIP.”

Max chuckles and gestures for us to follow. “You got it, Georgie. The throne awaits the queens of the night.”

Max navigates us through the buzzing crowd and leads us to a table right in front of a small stage where three men dressed as vampires—pale faces, pointed fangs included—are crooning away about love on the rocks.

“The band is called Vampire Kiss,” Max is quick to inform us as we each take a seat. “And it just so happens that the cocktail of the night shares the same name. They’re a cover band that makes the rounds at all of the local bars and grills. This just so happens to be our lucky night. They’re a blast from the past, and I think you ladies will really love them. But they can get cheeky. Brace yourselves for a wild ride.” He quickly fills us in on all of the seasonal spooky menu items. “And last but not least, there’s a cocktail contest taking place tonight and each night until the haunted grand finale—Halloween.”

“A contest?” Georgie’s competitive antennae goes up and both my mother and I groan. “Give me the deets, tall, dark, and dangerous.”

“Finish ten Vampire Kisses, and your table eats free. But just know that no one has ever done it before.”

“If anyone can get the job done, it’s me.” Georgie snickers.

“Don’t you dare,” Mom groans. “The last thing we need is a side trip to the ER—or the morgue.”

“She’s right.” Max chuckles. “But you can try. And if you do somehow achieve the feat, you can bet tomorrow night’s challenge will be fifteen drinks. I’m about making money, not losing it.”

“Are the drinks free?” I ask.

“They’re seven bucks a pop.” He winks my way.

“Not only are you into making money, you’re good at it,” I shoot back.

He belts out a belly laugh. “I’ll have a waitress come by and take your orders.”

He takes off and I can’t help but note he didn’t seem all that traumatized about last night. But then again, he’s the owner of this place. It’s his job to make the patrons feel as if they’re having a great time. I bet he feels the need to be *on* each time he sets foot in here.

That odd thought he had about Jasper interrogating him runs through my mind again.

I’m sure it was nothing. The poor man has been through enough. He doesn’t want to rehash it all here in the middle of his establishment.

The three of us quickly inspect the menus.

“All right, girls,” Georgie says, squinting at the laminated list before her. “Let’s see what delectable treats this haunted house has to offer.”

My eyes dart across the page. “Ooh, look at this. They have Wicked Witch Fingers—fried mozzarella sticks shaped like creepy fingers—sort of like the cookies the Country Cottage Café is spotlighting.”

Mom nods. “I’m sensing a perfectly eerie theme.” She points at another item. “Check out the Ghoulish Grilled Cheese—melted cheddar with a hint of ghost pepper. It’s going to be a spicy delight, all right—one that sends someone straight to the hospital. I hear those ghost peppers can be a real killer.” She glances my way. “Don’t get any ideas.”

Georgie’s eyes light up. “I found my mark of the night—Bleeding Heart Burgers. Juicy beef patties topped with gooey cheese and blood-red beetroot relish. Now if that’s not the vampire’s meow, I don’t know what is.”

Neither Mom nor I question her euphemism.

“That’s some Halloween spirit,” I muse, pointing at a drink on the menu. “Look at this one. The Cursed Cocktail—a bewitching blend of blackberry, vodka, and a splash of elderflower liqueur.”

Georgie moans, “I bet it’s like sipping on magic.”

Mom twitches her lips. “Let’s not forget the Spiderweb Nachos—crispy tortilla chips covered in a spooky black bean dip and topped with a tangled web of melted cheese. A fiesta with a sinister twist. Ha. I think I’ll have that.”

Georgie raises her menu. “It’s a bloody burger for me.”

I’m about to announce my fare for the night when my phone buzzes on the table, interrupting our burgeoning Halloween feast.

I glance down and cringe when I see trouble.

CHAPTER 9



Jasper's name appears on my phone as three men dressed as vampires belt out a toe-tapping tune, right here at Maximus, the bistro owned by Jasper's brother.

Hey, Biz. Any plans for dinner? I can bring home takeout.

I bite my lip as I read his sweet words. Jasper has been fully supportive when it comes to keeping me out of the kitchen. We'd both like to avoid an insurance claim that involves a structure fire.

I text right back. **Surprise, surprise. Mom and Georgie dragged me to Maximus. Apparently, they're having a Halloween event—and you know Georgie can't resist a good party.**

Mom leans over and sniffs. "She's blaming us," she says to Georgie. "You specifically."

"You know how Jasper feels about me diving into one of his investigations." I wrinkle my nose at the two of them. "I needed a cover."

"More like he's diving into *your* investigation," Georgie points out just as a waitress comes by and takes our order.

Before we can finish our Sinister Stuffed Mushrooms or Ghoulish Garlic Shrimp Skewers, Jasper materializes at the table like a true apparition.

"Ladies," he offers Mom and Georgie an affable nod before landing a kiss on my lips. "I'm onto you."

"Only because I gave you a clue," I tease.

He waggles his brows. "Have you gotten to the good part?"

"You are the good part."

"Wise woman." He winks as we indulge in another quick kiss.

Our meals arrive and we chow down on the savory delectable cuisines

with Jasper and me splitting a Haunted Harvest Pizza—extra mushrooms and olives—while Georgie knocks back five Vampire Kisses as easy as drinking a glass of water.

“Who knew you could put it away,” I muse at the would-be lush before us.

“You’re a real fish,” Jasper says, toasting her with his soda. “I’m impressed with what you can do on dry land.”

“You should see my underwater moves, Hot Stuff.” She hoists an empty cocktail glass in the air. “I can outswim any mermaid and outdance any dolphin.” She jumps out of her seat and her limbs start to flail as if demonstrating her aquatic moves, and in doing so she knocks a waiter off balance and sends an entire tray of appetizers flying toward the band.

“*Incoming*,” Georgie shouts and half the establishment roars with laughter.

“Wonderful,” Mom grouses. “Little do these unsuspecting people know that they’ve inadvertently just egged her on.”

“That’s just my first act,” Georgie shouts to her adoring fans before ordering another four Vampire Kisses.

I’m about to conduct an intervention just as my very first suspect lands in the seat next to Jasper.

“So this is where the real party is.” Max shoots a smile at Georgie. “I knew you’d bring it tonight. And you did not disappoint.”

“The night is young yet,” she sends the quasi-threat his way, and Mom lurches.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she mutters.

Jasper offers his brother a somber look. “How’s it going? How’s Tabby doing?”

“Miserable.” He sags in his seat a moment. “It wasn’t exactly our dream wedding. A do-over is definitely on the agenda. She had her heart set on that cemetery, but she doesn’t want anything to do with the place now.”

“You can have it at the inn,” I offer.

“Really?” Max looks stymied by the offer. “I mean, that would be great. I’m not sure what Tabby will say. She has a heart for the haunted side of life.”

“Then have it on Halloween,” I counter. “We’re hosting our annual fall festival, and the festivities conclude on the big haunted night. We could hold the ceremony right on the beach.”

You're certainly the eager beaver, Jasper teases, although that frown on his face lets me know he isn't all that impressed with my eager beaver moves. I nod his way. "I just love weddings."

"And I love the offer," Max inches back. "And I'm sure Tabby will, too. I'll get right back to you."

Jasper sighs over at his brother. "Max, I hate to do this, but since we're both here—"

And here we go. Max doesn't bother to hide his dissatisfaction with the impromptu interrogation. "Go ahead," he growls at his brother. ***I may as well get it over with.***

Can't say I blame him.

"We know this is tough on you," Jasper starts. "But we need to know everything you remember about last night. Every detail, no matter how insignificant it may seem."

I lean back and inspect my handsome hubby. Did he really say *we*?

That's right, Jasper muses. ***I'm acquiescing to the fact this is your investigation, too. Just don't do any investigating without me.*** He frowns my way because we've danced to that tune before, and we both know how it turned out.

Max's dark brows furrow, his eyes drifting off momentarily. "It was chaotic, to say the least. The crazy costumes roving the grounds, the eerie cemetery, and then—poor Hershey. It's kind of a blur. The only thing I remember with perfect clarity is the overwhelming sense of disbelief."

"I think everyone could say the same," I tell him. "Max, did you notice anything unusual or anyone acting strangely before or after the incident? Anything that stood out?"

His eyes scan the table. ***There was one thing that caught my attention. Tabby talking to Hershey after the ceremony. Whatever they were saying, it seemed intense. And it definitely struck me as odd before Hershey's demise. But now that he's dead? I'm not breathing a word to my brother. There's no way I'm going to paint Tabby as the killer. But I do need to tell him something. Maybe I'll start with the truth.***

"You should probably know Hershey and I haven't exactly gotten along these past few years," he confesses.

"Why's that?" Jasper looks stunned by the fact.

Max averts his eyes. "Let's just say he thinks I swiped a client from him back in our pharmaceutical days. It's water under the bridge now." He

shrugs. ***Water under the bridge because he's dead.***

I try not to react to his morbid and slightly incriminating thoughts.

Jasper sighs. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. He looked content with you when I saw him. Besides, that was years ago. I doubt he was still harboring a grudge. Got anything else?"

"Nope." Max pokes his tongue into his cheek and shakes his head. "And same for Tabby. I mean, she hasn't mentioned anything to me, and I'm sure she would have." ***Got that, buddy?*** He spears Jasper with a dark look. ***Stay the heck away from my wife.***

Jasper might, but I sure won't.

Max takes off just as another three Vampire Kisses arrive at the table and Georgie quickly downs them all.

"*Eleventy*," she shouts with glee as she holds up the last empty glass. "I did, Preppy!" She nearly knocks my mother out as she wields the glass her way.

"You mean you overshot it by one," my mother corrects.

"You're right," Georgie sways as she says it. "I should have some fun."

Within seconds, Georgie hops on stage and starts in on her best rendition of the King as she sways her hips and belts out the lyrics to "Hound Dog" sans a microphone.

The band keeps playing as a couple of beefy bouncers make their way to the stage, and once Georgie spots them, she stops her routine short.

"*It's the po-po*," she shouts.

Then like a chimpanzee who's had one too many bananas, or Vampire Kisses as it were, she hops onto our table and leaps for the ceiling, with her fingers catching onto one of the wrought iron chandeliers. Before we know it, she's ziplining across the establishment as every soul in the place screams at the top of their lungs.

"*Georgie*," Jasper, Mom, and I shout at once as we bolt across the room in an effort to break her fall.

"*Timber*," she shouts as the chandelier rips right out of the ceiling and she lands in Jasper's arms and sends Jasper falling into me, and me into my mother—and all of us to the ground in one rather inglorious dogpile.

"Mom? Georgie?" I cry as we struggle to untangle ourselves. "Did you survive?"

Georgie grunts, "I not only survived, I defied gravity. Now, where did I put my pointy hat?"

“The same place where you put your sanity,” Mom growls as she crawls out from under us all. “In the dumpster behind the inn about twelve years ago.”

Georgie snaps her fingers with a look of defeat. “That’ll teach me not to go green until ten years ago.”

Max and what looks to be an entire entourage of security detail help escort us out the door.

“The meal is on me,” Max says as he helps dust Georgie off. “I probably should have let you know that little detail before you drank everyone in the place under the table.”

“Hear that?” Georgie elbows my mother in the ribs so hard I think I heard one crack. “The kid wants to see me under the table.” Georgie holds a finger up to him before promptly freezing solid.

“And on that note,” I say, helping her toward the car. “Thanks for everything, Max. Sorry about the chandelier.”

“No worries.” He gives a mournful laugh. “I know where to send the bill.” He slaps Jasper over the back. “I’ve been meaning to renovate the place on someone else’s dime.”

“Funny,” Jasper says as we take off. “Only I don’t think he’s kidding.”

All the way back to Cider—*Spider*—Cove I can’t help but think back on what Max said about Tabby—or rather thought.

Just what did Tabby and Hershey have to say to one another that seemed so intense?

Max thought it was odd, and so do I.

And I never did learn why Max was seen by Mackenzie carrying a knife into the woods.

Lucky for me, there’s a dance recital coming up soon and you can bet your last tap-dancing dollar I’ll be front row and center.

I’ll make sure Tabby Wickham tells me everything she knows—even if she doesn’t move her lips to do it.

CHAPTER 10



All the way home Georgie kept asking how many vampires had she kissed. I said none, Mom said too many, and Georgie figured the truth was somewhere in the middle.

After Georgie imbibed a gallon or so of Vampire Kisses, my mother spent the night at Georgie's cottage just to make sure our favorite chandelier swinger woke up this morning. And according to my mother, not only did she wake up, but she ordered enough pancakes from the Country Cottage Café to feed every lumberjack in all fifty states.

They've both laid low today, and that might be why this day has more or less gone off without a hitch.

Georgie's daughter, Junie, ran their boutique and she's here at the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival running their booth this evening as well. And judging by the fact there are more than a handful of people walking around this brisk evening wrapped in one of their Halloween-themed wonky quilts, it's evident their booth is just as big of a hit as their boutique.

The sun dips into the horizon just as Jasper, Leo, Emmie, and I step outside onto the patio of the Country Cottage Café. The twinkle lights are strung up above and the upright heaters are pumping out some serious warmth in hopes to keep us from freezing to death. But the lure of the Atlantic as it stretches before us in all its breathtaking glory is too hard to resist.

The waves crash against the shore with a rhythmic melody, creating a soothing soundtrack for this rather enchanted evening. The sky above is painted in hues of orange and pink as if the sunset has set the world ablaze.

The harvest festival is still in full swing nearby, and the air is filled with

the irresistible scent of roasted corn and fresh baked goodies. The colorful booths are adorned with pumpkins and autumn leaves, creating a vibrant tapestry of fall hues. People stroll by, their voices carrying snippets of excitement as the sound of spooky music filters through the speakers.

“It’s like a party out here,” I say as we land our plates onto a round bistro table large enough to accommodate us all.

“We’re the party,” Leo says just as an entire menagerie of pets races past us—all of which belong to us. Leo is a kind-hearted, dark-haired looker so it’s easy to see why Emmie is so smitten with him.

Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky scamper into the sand along with Leo and Emmie’s golden retriever, Gatsby, and their labradoodle, Cinnamon.

“A bunch of party animals,” Jasper muses as we take a seat. “So what’s on the menu?” he asks, looking down at the golden chicken on his plate.

Emmie plated up dinner for us as we arrived and she promised a delicious meal would be had for all.

“It’s part of the new fall menu,” she says as she glides her plate forward an inch. “I’m dying for you all to try my new maple-glazed chicken. And, of course, the sides are autumn-inspired, too—mashed sweet potatoes and sauteed brussels sprouts along with fresh baked buttered sweet rolls and a side of honey buttered cornbread.” She wrinkles her nose. “I’ve been craving all of the above.”

“I love your cravings,” I’m quick to tell her. “And I’m sure I’ll love the maple-glazed chicken.”

“Just out of curiosity”—Jasper tips his chin her way—“are you craving dessert?”

“Oh, honey”—Emmie gives a throaty laugh—“none of us are getting out of here tonight without a slice of my pumpkin cheesecake. I’ve been baking them nonstop for the past three weeks.”

Leo nods. “We have two in the fridge at any given time.”

“And two in the freezer.” Emmie nods. “You can never be too sure when the baby will need to eat.”

I shake my head at the two of them. “We’re so happy for you both. Anything you need, anything you *want* for this baby, Jasper and I are going to make it happen.”

Emmie and Leo exchange a look, a smile budding on both of their lips.

“We were going to save this for after dinner.” Leo shrugs over at Emmie. “But it feels right to do it now.”

In less than a second Emmie whips a small black and white picture out of her purse, no bigger than a postcard.

“We had our first sonogram today,” Emmie squeals. “We got to see the baby!”

Jasper and I erupt in cheers as Emmie hands me the precious black and white picture printed on slippery paper.

“That’s the head and that’s the body,” Emmie says, pointing at what looks like the ghost of a shrimp with a large head. “And those are the hands and feet.”

“He or she is perfect,” I coo.

“I agree,” Jasper says, sniffing back tears. “You both did good.”

“That’s your picture to keep,” Emmie says and I quickly press it to my heart and mouth a thank you. “You’re both a part of this baby’s life whether you like it or not.”

“We love it,” Jasper answers quickly before socking Leo on the arm. “Someone has to keep this guy in check.”

Leo belts out a laugh. “You’ve been doing that for far too long, my friend.” Leo and Jasper have been friends almost as long as Emmie and me. “I’m determined to finally grow up.”

“And just in the nick of time.” Emmie sighs. “We have an entire person to raise. I won’t lie, I’m terrified.”

“Don’t be,” I tell her. “How hard can having a kid be?”

No sooner do I say those words than a mother walks by carrying a screaming toddler as she chases down another one darting away from her. Some light cursing may have taken place during the chaos, but not one of us is willing to judge her.

We indulge in Emmie’s maple-glazed chicken—amazing! And quickly move onto dessert—heaven in every bite. And while we indulge in the heaven-sent sweet treat, Jasper and I fill them in on what we’ve learned about Hershey Wolfe’s homicide case so far.

Of course, I don’t dare share any of my suspicions that might point to Max. Not only haven’t I shared those with Jasper yet, but I’m sure he’s incapable of murder—especially one so brutal as this.

“I’m hoping Tabby will spill something when I see her tomorrow night,” I say.

“Tomorrow night?” Jasper looks mildly alarmed.

I nod. “Her dance company is performing at the community center. I love

the theater. I can't wait."

Leo lifts a brow. "And I can't wait to find out why she cornered Hershey that night."

"Just minutes before he was killed." Emmie shrugs.

"That's what Max said," I tell them.

"What he thought," Jasper corrects. "But you're right, it is curious."

Leo nods my way. "You got anyone else?"

"Hey"—Jasper frowns his way—"I'm the lead homicide detective around here."

Both Leo and Emmie chuckle at that one.

"As I was saying, Bizzy"—Leo winks my way—"what else have you got?"

"Not too much." I sigh as I glance to the dark navy sea. "Actually, there was something odd that happened that night—other than the twelve thousand other odd things taking place." I glance at Jasper. "Your brother, Jamison, he—well, he kept having odd thoughts about the girl he was with."

"Morgana?" Jasper inspects me. "This isn't ex-rated, is it?"

"No, that would be white noise," I tell him even though he's more than familiar. For whatever reason, when people's thoughts drift toward places I'd rather not go, my telesensual abilities seem to default to white fuzz. "He said something to the effect that she wasn't human."

"Excuse me?" Jasper tips his head. "I met her. She's human, all right. Maybe he meant she was inhuman in the bedroom?"

I shake my head. "It wasn't framed that way. It was just—I don't know, odd."

Emmie glances to Leo, then back my way. "Funny you should say that"—she leans in a notch—"I was telling Leo that there was something off about her."

"Like what?" Jasper sounds mildly alarmed again but for entirely different reasons.

"I don't know." Emmie shrugs. "But I had an entire conversation with her about the venue and I felt as if she was giving me all sorts of odd information about cemeteries in general. Sort of like she was spewing facts from an encyclopedia."

"So she's smart." Jasper tries to shrug it off, but I can tell he's vexed.

"Not just that," Emmie continues. "The entire time we were talking—well, I know it was dark out, but she wouldn't look me in the eye. She looked

above my head, to my right or left, but it was as if she couldn't focus on my eyes at all. It was all a little off-putting."

"That is strange," I say. "Maybe she has bad night vision?"

"Or Jamison was being literal," Leo suggests. "She's not human."

An inhuman howl goes off in the distance, followed by a series of unholy screams and we all jump right out of our seats.

CHAPTER 11



*A*nother series of howls go off, followed by laughter and more shrill screams as the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival continues to rage into the evening.

Jasper clucks his tongue. “I’d better go check out the ruckus just to make sure we don’t have a maniac on our hands.”

“Well, Bizzy does live here,” Emmie teases as both Jasper and Leo take off for the crowd near the festival.

“You’re not funny,” I tell her just as all five of our pets scamper back onto the patio.

I beat them all, Bizzy! Fish pants like mad as she lands in the chair Jasper just vacated.

No fair, Sherlock barks as well. *You’re smaller.*

And faster, Fish points out.

Spooky gives a soft woof. *And faster,* he concedes.

Gatsby and Cinnamon rally around Emmie, and Gatsby gives a soft bark.

Spooky. Gatsby sniffs at the spotted cutie. *Our mom is going to have a puppy next spring.*

You don’t say. Spooky stands straight and wags his tail at Emmie. *Our neighbor had a human puppy and Hershey bought himself a present once it was born.*

I quickly relay the conversation to Emmie before turning to Spooky.

“What did Hershey buy for himself?”

Earmuffs, Spooky barks. *Apparently, human babies like to cry all night. It must be true because our neighbor told us that since the baby was born they never slept again.*

I decide to omit that little tidbit from Emmie.

Come on. Sherlock hitches his head toward the café. ***There's a hose on the side of the building and it has a nice leak. I think we all deserve a cool drink of water.***

Race you to the hose, Fish calls out as all five of them dart for the side of the café.

“The leaky hose?” Emmie asks and I nod.

“See? You’re intuitive. You’re going to make a great mother.”

She bites down on a smile. “And you’re going to make a great mother, too. Have you and Jasper thought any more about, you know—trying? Think about it, Bizzy. We’ve gone through everything together.”

“I know,” I say, biting down on my own smile. “We’ve toyed with the idea, but now”—I glance down at the picture to my right—“I want in on this good time.” I nod over at her. “All of my life I thought we’d raise our kids together and that can’t happen if I don’t have kids.” I shrug. “I think maybe it’s time. Here’s hoping Mother Nature cooperates.”

Emmie squeals as she lunges at me with a hug. “Here’s hoping it happens quickly. I’ll give you all my best tips and tricks.”

“*Emmie.*” I laugh as she says it.

Her demeanor darkens as something behind me catches her eye.

“What?” I turn that way, and soon my demeanor darkens, too, as I spot a brunette getting frisky with Jordy. “Is that Camila?”

“That would be the wicked witch.” Emmie sighs. “I wish she’d leave my brother alone. We both know Macy and Jordy are destined to have an entire gaggle of cute babies themselves—*together.*”

Emmie and I have wanted those two to get hitched since we were knee-high, so we could officially be family.

We watch as Camila lands her hands over Jordy’s chest and looks as if she’s giving him a pat down.

“Camila is a beast,” I say, shaking my head.

I’m more than familiar with Camila’s beastly ways considering the fact she’s Jasper’s ex-fiancé.

And the reason they broke up?

Camila left Jasper for Leo. Yes, it was that bad.

In fact, Jasper and Leo didn’t speak for years afterward, but thankfully they’re over that now. Although, unfortunately, we can’t seem to rid ourselves of Camila Ryder. She’s not only still interested in my husband, but

she just so happens to have finagled her way into becoming the secretary down at the homicide department. And seeing that Jasper isn't available, it looks as if she's set her sights on Jordy. It wouldn't be the first time.

Emmie leans in. "Should we document the malfeasance and send Macy photographic evidence?"

"No way," I tell her. "The last thing we want is for Macy to think Jordy is looking elsewhere. Besides, look at his body language. He's backing up and shaking his head at her. He's clearly not interested."

Jordy says something to her and takes off into the crowd, leaving Camila looking exasperated. And just before Emmie and I can break out into cheers, Jasper and Leo step into Camila's line of vision and she does what she does best—pounces on them.

I shake my head again. "We really need to marry her off to someone."

"Someone in Alaska." Emmie shakes her head as well. "How is she evading every killer that sets foot in *Spider Cove*?"

"Emmie," I give a mournful laugh her way. "Maybe we should make that a project—finding Camila Ryder a Mr. Right—whose name is neither, Jordy, Jasper, nor Leo."

"Are you sure his name isn't Grim Reaper?"

Another dark laugh escapes me. "I blame your diabolical thoughts on your homicidal hormones."

"Speaking of homicides." She bats her lashes my way. "Please try to find that killer before the spookiest night of the year gets here. You know how I feel about horror movies, let alone living in one."

"I'm on it," I say as I look out at the roaring waves as they crash over the shoreline.

Whoever killed Hershey Wolfe must think they've gotten away with murder. Little do they know, they're not getting away with anything.

There's not a ghost of a chance.

As Halloween approaches, I'm determined to unmask the killer and expose their wicked deeds.

They can't hide their dark secrets forever—even if they're not human.

CHAPTER 12



Tuesday arrives with all the bustle of a weekend thanks to the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival taking off like a bat in flight.

Dalton's girlfriend, Elvira the event planner, texted me and let me know she could squeeze me in tomorrow afternoon and I told her that would be great. She said she had some great ideas we could implement on Halloween night, and seeing that it's almost here, she hinted that she'd give me the good guy special.

But it's Tuesday evening, and I've got another woman on the brain and she just so happens to have recently married a Wilder.

Enchanted Rhythms Dance Company is putting on a show right here on a makeshift stage set in the woods just outside the community center.

The fall air is brisk, and the scent of cinnamon and spice emanates from the hot apple cider stand as a bevy of colorful leaves rain over us from the nearby maple trees like confetti.

A dance show, huh? Fish pokes her head out of my tote bag. ***Pay attention, Sherlock. I bet you can learn a new move or two.***

I already have all the moves I need, he gives a soft bark back. ***Spooky and I have been practicing our sit-and-beg moves just for the occasion.***

I don't doubt there will be plenty of treats, Spooky says as he takes a few sniffs. ***In fact, I think I smell soft pretzels.***

I give a quick sniff myself and, sure enough, there's a soft pretzel stand nearby as well.

"You've got a good sniffer on you, kiddo," I say, giving Spooky a quick scratch between his ears.

Thanks, he says, rubbing his head against my knee. ***Hershey used to take***

me to all of his sister's shows back in the day. Hershey always made sure to pick up a treat or two for me before we left for the night.

That's right. He did mention something about his sister being a dancer. Tabby said she knew her; I think she said her name was Rhonda. I might just ask about her when I see Max's new bride.

Let's go check out the soft pretzel stand, Sherlock barks at Spooky. ***I have a feeling our sit-and-beg routine is about to pay off in pretzels.***

The two of them take off and Fish struggles to evict herself from my tote bag.

Wait for me, you big oafs, she screeches as she uses my chest like a springboard. ***I happen to appreciate soft pretzels myself.***

The makeshift stage is set in a clearing and surrounded by oaks, maple trees, and evergreens. Lavender twinkle lights are strung from the branches above, creating a soft violet canopy over our heads.

An entire swarm of people has shown up for the performance, and almost each one of them is dressed in costumes, from adorable bumble bees to slasher maniacs covered with fake blood while holding chainsaws and axes alike—or at least I hope they're covered with fake blood. This is *Spider Cove*. I suppose you can't be too sure.

I glance around and note the seating arrangement seems to be null and void, and I'm curious why that is. The ground doesn't look all that inviting. I don't see anyone with blankets or folding chairs set out. I'm sure we'll figure it all out once the show gets underway.

"Bizzy," someone calls from behind and I turn to see Mom and Georgie walking this way, or more like waddling. Both women are dressed to impress with Mom donning a velvet flowing gown, her arms festooned with enough bangles to stretch to the moon and a head scarf adorned with sparkling stars and moons. She's all dolled up, but I'm not quite sure what she is.

Georgie, on the other hand, is pretty straightforward with her rainbow-striped jumpsuit, red curly wig, pancake makeup, and a big red nose sitting over her own sniffer.

"Did someone call in the clowns?" Mom muses as she holds a hand out to her fun-loving sidekick.

"You both look great," I tell them. "I didn't get the memo, so I guess I'm dressed as an innkeeper. What are you supposed to be?" I ask, giving my mother another quick inspection.

"I'm a fortuneteller," she says, holding out her arms as her purple velvet

gown glows under the lights of the same hue. “Only I don’t need a crystal ball to know this clown should be on a very tight leash tonight.” She cranes her neck past me. “The clown’s baby brother promised he’d show up and help me wrangle this jester who really knows how to pester.”

“Eh.” Georgie waves it off. “That boy has tried and failed to wrangle yours truly once or twice before. Let’s just say he’s only broken two bones, and both times it was because he underestimated my willpower and determination to jester with the best of them.”

“Wonderful,” Mom mutters. “Let’s hope Ben gets home in one piece.” ***Especially since he’s coming to my place tonight. I’ll need him in shipshape for what I have in mind.***

Yuck.

I can’t help but make a face at my mother’s inner musings. It’s times like these I wish I couldn’t so much as read a facial expression.

“Oh, look, there he is.” Mom’s entire face brightens as she waves like mad. “Hey, he’s dressed like a businessman!”

Georgie rolls her eyes. “Ben is a businessman. Now that I think about it, that boy was born in a monkey suit. Talk about vanilla.”

“I don’t know,” I say as I spot him navigating the crowd. “With his sharp suit and those dark sunglasses sitting on top of his head, he could be a cleverly disguised secret agent.”

“Ooh.” Mom wiggles her shoulders as she keeps her eyes trained in his direction. ***Now there’s something I can use later. Ben did say it was my turn to come up with our role-play for the evening. I think a Russian fortuneteller is about to be interrogated by a very hot secret service agent. And if I play my cards right, I might get more than just a few juicy secrets out of him.***

“Good grief,” I moan in horror.

So much for having a fun, restful evening with those images corrupting my mind.

“He’s taken a wrong turn.” Mom sighs. “I’d better go track him down before he ends up on stage dancing a jig with the performers.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Georgie muses as the two of them take off.

But I don’t follow. Instead, I make a beeline for that soft pretzel stand before Sherlock and Spooky get in over their furry heads. I tend to worry less about Fish since she’s smaller and can climb to the top of one of these evergreens if need be.

I traverse through throngs of mummies, mermaids, pirates, and just about every spooky, kooky mask a Halloween costume shop could sell until I come upon the scariest sight of them all.

CHAPTER 13



“So typical of you,” Macy rages at Camila as the two women stand nose-to-nose in what looks as if it’s going to be the hair-pulling extravaganza for the night—despite the fact we’ve congregated outside of the community center to watch a performance of a different variety.

Both women came dressed for success with Camila disguised as a saucy devil and Macy dressed as a seductive witch.

On second thought, maybe they didn’t opt to wear a costume this evening?

“Always trying to steal the spotlight,” Macy continues to rage. “And dressed that way it only goes to show you’d steal the limelight from the Prince of Darkness himself just to showcase those double D’s you *paid* for.”

Camila gasps at the body-altering slight. “That’s low even for you, Macy. Especially since you’ve spent every last dime from that candle shop of yours to freeze your face into oblivion. Most people around here think you’re too mean to smile, but that’s only half the truth. You’re not only too mean, you’re unable to do it!”

Most of that is true—especially the part of Macy owning a candle shop. She actually sells soap and candles, thus the name of her shop, Lather and Light.

Someone snickers to my left and I’m shocked to see Jordy standing there dressed as his boyish self with a baseball cap slung low over his eyes while feasting on a soft pretzel and pinching off a piece for Sherlock, Fish, and Spooky.

At least I know the pets are safe. Macy and Camila, I’m not too sure about.

“Jordy, what’s happening?” I hiss as I step his way.

He gives a sheepish grin. ***How do I say they’re fighting over me without saying they’re fighting over me?***

“They’re fighting over you?” I scoff at the thought. “Of all the middle school moves. And you’re just standing here—watching?”

“I’m feeding your pets,” he says with a false sense of umbrage in his tone. “And the way they’re scarfing this stuff down, I’m not convinced they’re eating at home.”

I roll my eyes at the thought. “I’ve got a one hundred dollar a month grocery bill geared just for them that begs to differ.”

“Oh, I’m *going* there,” my sister wastes no time in letting Camila know there’s more dirt to be dished. “In fact, I’m going there now. The only reason you’re here to begin with is because I told you that I was luring Jordy here for the night so he could see my new lingerie.” Macy wiggles her shoulders as she says it as if to emphasize her point.

Come to think of it, Macy’s itty, bitty black lace dress is a bit too see-through for your typical spooky night fashion. I wouldn’t put it past her to don lingerie in public.

“*Please*,” Camila huffs while her body gets dangerously close to my sister’s. “I had already asked Jordy to meet me here before we texted about it. I just didn’t have the heart to tell you that you wouldn’t be luring him anywhere. For your nosey information, Jordy and I happen to have a *real* connection—a rather *enchanted* connection.” She swings her pointed tail for effect.

Those devilish duds really do suit her.

“We have definitely connected before,” Jordy whispers mostly to himself as his mind flits to white noise.

“Enchanted?” Macy is quick to laugh in Camila’s face. “More like *manipulative!*”

“I don’t need to manipulate Jordy into doing anything. I simply asked for him to come out tonight, and just like that, he showed up. That’s because he’s interested in me. Unlike you, who can’t seem to keep a man’s interest for more than five minutes. Your track record speaks for itself.”

“Honey, when I’m through with them, I send them packing,” Macy huffs back. “Unlike some people, who have spent the past few years pining over someone they were stupid enough to dump in the first place.”

“Thank you for that, by the way,” I pipe up. I couldn’t help it. I lean

toward Jordy and whisper, “If Camila never left Jasper, I would have had to have waited out their divorce. I’m not convinced they would have lasted. Her dumping him was a much quicker route.”

Camila scoffs my way. “It looks as if I’ve got two Baker sisters who think I was put on this planet to accommodate them. Well, guess what? I’m only here to accommodate myself—and maybe a certain ballcap-wearing handyman who knows exactly how to utilize my bedposts!”

“You keep your bedposts to yourself,” Macy warns before poking a finger into Camila’s pillowy chest.

Camila gasps and pokes Macy right back.

Within a few seconds, both Sherlock and Spooky trot over and bark at the two women to cease and desist, and more importantly keep their fingers to themselves.

But they don’t.

Instead, a crowd gathers as the two women continue to poke and prod and resort to calling one another unsavory names for all to hear.

A certain word spouts from my sister’s lips and Camila gasps before she draws back her fist.

“Not so fast,” a deep voice calls out as he catches Camila’s fingers fashioned into a fastball. “Who here wants to end up in handcuffs for the night?” Jasper calls out and both Camila and Macy raise their hands in anticipation. “The party is over. Take off or play nice,” Jasper stays sternly while dressed as a hot detective, in the event you were wondering. “There are kids around. Be mindful of little ears next time, too.”

My heart warms as he makes his way over. Jasper Wilder is going to make a wonderful father.

No sooner do I put my arms around him than a bloodcurdling scream goes off near the stage and the lights cut out, leaving us all in penetrative darkness.

CHAPTER 14



The twinkle lights turn on once again, offering just a fraction of the violet glow they previously bestowed.

A series of spotlights land on the stage, illuminating a set that looks like a bona fide haunted house. Fog machines create an eerie atmosphere, and the air is filled with anticipation. Suddenly, the stage comes alive as an entire army of dancers prance out, each dressed as iconic Halloween characters. There's Dracula, with his long cape and sharp fangs, Frankenstein's monster with bolts sticking out of his neck, a mischievous witch with a pointy hat, and even a spooky ghost floating gracefully across the stage.

The lively organ music blares overhead, adding another layer of spooky flair. A small army of dancers move in perfect sync, twirling and leaping, bringing the spirit of Halloween to life.

A woman dressed as Frankenstein's bride twirls her way to the front of the stage and it's then I realize I recognize that monster.

"Jasper, that's Tabby," I say, perfectly delighted as I watch her strut her stuff. "And wow, she's good."

Her dress is dusty and musty and splattered with rust-colored blood, and come to think of it...

Jasper leans in. "I think she's wearing her wedding dress."

I nod up at him. "I was just thinking the very same thing."

"All right, everyone! This is where you come in!" Tabby's voice rings out, capturing the attention of every spectator. "I want each and every one of you to join in and dance along with us. Don't be shy. This is your chance to show off your best moves!"

Jasper groans audibly. *I'm not showing off any of my moves unless it*

involves me drawing my weapon. Then I might be thrilled to do it.

I can't help but giggle as I hold him close.

"Now, let's all try it together!" Tabby shouts, her voice filled with infectious enthusiasm. The music starts playing, and the audience, caught up in the moment, rises to their feet. Laughter and excitement fill the air as they follow Tabby's lead, attempting to replicate the dance moves—sans Jasper and me.

Tabby wags her finger at the audience. "And don't think anyone is getting away with being a wallflower tonight. I've got my goons and ghouls patrolling the grounds, and if anyone is caught not participating, they'll be brought straight to the stage where they show off their moves for all to see!"

Laughter and howls of delight go off in the crowd as a few other dancers step up alongside of her.

She raises her arms, and the audience follows suit, mirroring her stance. Tabby begins to demonstrate a series of choreographed dance moves, her body fluid and graceful. The crowd watches attentively, absorbing every step, spin, and twirl.

A couple of beefy-looking vampires head our way, and before they can land their fangs on us, Jasper and I toss our arms in the air and begin to move and groove with the best of them.

"You have no idea how much I detest this," Jasper says as we do a series of spastic squats with the rest of the crowd.

"If it makes you feel better, I'm pretty sure it can double as a workout."

Speaking of workouts, I spot Macy and Camila pulling and tugging at Jordy as they try their best to impress him with the sway of their hips.

I'm definitely going to have a talk with Jordy. There's no way I'm going to let him toy with my sister's heart this way—even if my sister is more interested in him handling the rest of her anatomy.

I've dreamed of those two getting together all my life, and by goodness, that's what's going to happen—even if I have to manipulate the situation myself.

Okay, so that's a bit harsh, but still, he can't be serious about Camila. If he marries Camila, we'll be stuck with her forever.

The dance production blossoms into a full-blown play with the bride herself set to get married in what looks to be a cemetery. And not long after Tabby and her monstrous groom say *I do*, a werewolf shows up on the scene staggering about with a knife in his back.

Jasper and I stop cold and share a quick glance.

What the heck? Jasper shakes his head my way and I shake my head right back.

The scene changes and the next act is a rendition of *Hansel and Gretel*, with a rather beefy-looking—might I add shirtless—Hansel.

Tabby has done a quick change and is playing the part of the old lady—who happens to be dressed as a witch, pointy hat and all. And after a few more gyrations of our limbs, the show is over and the audience is roaring with approval as Tabby and her dance troupe all take a bow.

“Thank God up in heaven,” Jasper pants as he braces his hands over his knees. “I’m not cut out for this kind of thing. Please rescind my invitation to any more interactive interrogations that require me to bust a move.” **More like bust my back**, he groans as he straightens.

Bizzy! Fish mewls and I turn to see her trotting over with a single red rose between her teeth. **I saw people with bouquets to give to the dancers, and I thought this might give you an in with the suspect at hand.**

“Good thinking,” I say as I take the rose from her. “Remind me to give you an extra treat when we get home.”

If it’s shaped like a pretzel, you can keep it. She staggers to the side a bit. **One more bite of that salty treat and I’ll be a pretzel for Halloween—in the literal sense.**

“Sorry to hear it,” I say. “Where are the dogs?”

Georgie has them jumping from a hoop while people throw money at them. She says it’s so lucrative it’s going to be a permanent gig. Grandma says she’s thinking about joining the circus, too, now that she sees all the green it can pull in.

I can’t help but laugh at the thought of my mother donning a red curly wig—on second thought, she is a redhead. She’s just one curl away from holding a hoop for Sherlock to jump through.

A scuffle breaks out nearby, and by the sound of salty words being exchanged—by women, no less—it sounds as if someone is about to bust out some moves—right onto someone else’s jaw.

Jasper nods that way. “There go Macy and Camila again. I’m going to put a stop to this once and for all.”

“All right,” I call after him as he takes off into the crowd. “But make sure they don’t enjoy it!”

Camila has been known to egg Jasper on just to get him to lay his hands

on her.

I scoop Fish up and we take off for the stage, nearly knocking right into the Bride of Frankenstein herself—Tabby Wickham.

CHAPTER 15



“*T*abby”—I say, breathless, as I thrust a single crimson rose her way —“you were amazing, and so was your troupe.”

Tabby laughs as she takes the flower from me and I can’t help but glance down at those dark crimson stains that cover her dress. It’s unnerving, to say the least.

“Thanks, Bizzy,” she says as she coos at Fish. “Oh my goodness, give me this cute little thing. Please tell me I can have her, too.”

“She’s mine, but I don’t mind sharing,” I say as Tabby excavates her from my arms.

Tabby’s dance troupe, Enchanted Rhythms, just finished putting on the haunted show of a lifetime—or the haunted workout that almost sent some of us to the afterlife—and the crowd is busy bustling around us.

The lavender twinkle lights turn up another notch, casting an eerie glow over the landscape.

“You really brought the house down,” I tell her as the stagehands work feverishly to disassemble the props and scenery.

She laughs and the green glitter dusting her cheeks sparkles to life.

“And you and Jasper really put on a show yourselves. I spotted you from the stage.” ***Poor Jasper may not walk for a week after what I witnessed. Not that Max will mind. He really let me know how much he didn’t appreciate being interrogated last night.***

I feel bad about that one since it was mostly my fault.

Fish chitters, ***You should tell her what Jasper lacks in moves he makes up for in bullets.***

I make a face at my feline friend. I’ll be the last one to bring up

weaponry. Although, if Tabby wanted to discuss a certain bloody knife, I wouldn't put up a fight.

"Well, your dance troupe is the best I've ever seen," I tell her once again. "You're quite the success."

She laughs. "It wasn't always that way. Not so long ago, I was down on my luck and almost homeless—but then enrollment spiked and I've been in the black ever since. Speaking of things turning around." Her face lights up. "Max told me that you said we could host a do-over wedding at your inn on Halloween night."

"That's right," I say. "In fact, Elvira is coming by tomorrow to help spruce up the festival I'm currently throwing. I'll ask to see if she could work a little magic to make your big night a little—spookier?"

She laughs at the thought. "Sounds like a solid plan." She sobers up quickly. "I can't believe our dream wedding turned into a nightmare for all involved—especially poor Hershey."

Fish raises her whiskers my way. ***Looks as if she broke the homicidal ice for you. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. Ask her why she killed the poor guy.***

I take a moment to frown slightly at her for even suggesting it. Although, it would cut this conversation down by half at least.

"Tabby, a couple of guests mentioned that they saw you speaking to Hershey right after the wedding. Did he seem agitated to you?"

She doesn't have to tell me all the details—so long as she *thinks* about them.

Tabby's eyes darken slightly as she recalls the fateful evening. She takes a deep breath. "Actually, yes, I did speak with Hershey after the ceremony. He congratulated me and made a few wisecracks about Max—all in good fun, but honestly, his mind seemed preoccupied with something else."

I lean closer as the crowd jostles all around us. "What do you think it was that had his attention?"

She hesitates a moment, her gaze shifting uneasily. "I asked what had his fur standing on end and he said it was Elvira."

"Elvira?" I blink up at the woman and she nods.

"She's not just an event planner, she's an up-and-coming horror writer."

"Oh, I think she mentioned something about that." Wait a minute—she didn't mention it at all. It was Hershey who said he headed it up. And once he perished, I remember Elvira thinking to herself that the Gothic Quill Society

would be down by one member. “So she’s a writer?”

Tabby nods. “And published, too. Evidently, she’s doing well enough, but not well enough to keep a roof over her head. That’s where the event planning comes in.”

“I see. I guess it’s pretty tough to make it as a writer. Was Hershey doing pretty well for himself?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. He had a few books out and that’s about all I know.” She holds up a finger. “I take that back. I heard him talking to Elvira earlier that night—something about a publisher asking him to ghostwrite for a popular series. He said they wanted the best the Gothic Quill Society had to offer.” She cringes a moment. “I guess they’ll have to look elsewhere now—or take second best.”

Fish’s mouth falls open as she looks my way. ***Do you think Elvira would kill for that position?***

I shake my head. I don’t know, but I’m certainly going to find out.

“Anyway”—Tabby frowns into the crowd—“I see someone I should go and say hello to.” ***Leave it to Rhonda to show up tonight—of all the nights to interject herself back into the fold.***

I follow her stare, only to see a pretty brunette leaning on a cane while speaking to a crowd of dancers still in costume.

“Is that Hershey’s sister?” I ask.

“Actually, it is.” She sighs. “Poor thing. I supposed she wanted to come out and get her mind off of things.” ***Odd as it is. This isn’t exactly how I’d grieve my brother. Unless she’s here looking for blood. Speaking of blood. She casts a glance my way. Thankfully, Bizzy didn’t ask a single thing about Max’s involvement with Hershey. I guess that means Jasper was satisfied with whatever Max fed him. Good. Let’s keep it that way. The last thing we need is Max looking guilty as sin. He’s my groom. I’ll do whatever I can to protect him.***

“Thank you for coming out,” she says, landing Fish back in my arms. “I’ll touch base before the wedding. And thank you again for letting us use the inn—or the beach as it were. I can’t wait to dance my way down the aisle—for the very last time. I’ll be there with wedding bells on. And just a heads-up, shoes will be optional,” she sings as she takes off with a wave.

So did she do it? Fish mewls my way.

“I don’t think so,” I whisper. “But let’s just say Elvira is on the suspect list, and Max has just made a reprisal himself.”

Max? Fish pretends to faint. ***If he's the killer, we'd best get rid of Jasper. You know what they say, birds of a feather are often a part of the same murderous family.***

A dark chuckle strums from me. "Nobody says that. Now let's find our circus monkeys and head back to the inn. I've got some light reading to do."

The genre is horror, and I'm already a bit frightened about the rabbit hole I'm about to fall into.

CHAPTER 16



The next afternoon, the cove is alive with bodies, big and small, as they flock to the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival.

A few of the vendors have set out games, and a local farmer just finished setting up a small petting zoo over by the clearing.

The air carries the scent of pumpkin spice and kettle corn, while colorful costumes and laughter fill the atmosphere. Booths adorned with orange and black decorations, grinning pumpkins, and scarecrows abound. Eerie music seeps from the speakers that Jordy installed and they set the tone for a spine-chilling afternoon.

But it's the aroma of those fresh baked apple pies, those pumpkin-spiced treats, and an assortment of cookies and cupcakes that add to the festive charm—which completely have me under their scrumptious spell. I won't lie, my stomach has been growling like mad ever since I caught a whiff of all things delicious.

One thing is for sure: the magic of fall and the spirit of Halloween is alive and well at the Country Cottage Inn.

Set smack dab in the middle of those colorful awnings sits the booth run by the Country Cottage Café, and I gasp once I see the thicket of bodies all clamoring to get to the front of the line. It's not only teeming with bodies, but my coworkers are collecting money hand over fist.

It looks like Georgie is working the booth as well, and I give a quick wave as she leans out of the booth as far as her body and gravity will allow. She's dressed once again in that clown suit and bright red wig she had on last night. She has that red ball attached to her nose, and her face is painted stark white with pink dots decorating the apples of her cheeks. Sitting in front of

her is a platter brimming with those green, crooked witches' fingers, and just behind her sit rows and rows of delicious dreamy fudge.

"*Witches' fingers,*" Georgie shouts at the top of her lungs as she does her best to call even more people over to the booth. "Come get your fresh green witches' fingers! *Free* witches' fingers for one and all!"

"*Georgie.*" I can't help but laugh. "We're not giving those away for free. Are we?"

I glance back at that tray that was full just a moment ago and now only a few scant fingers remain.

"Hey, Bizzy!" Emmie waves with the knife in her hand. She's snug in the back of the booth working like a busy worker bee as I step inside. "We've been busy *busy,*" she says before slicing a few inches of fudge and landing it in a little pink box. "And yes, the witches' fingers are free. They're basically a loss leader. Trust me, we reel them in with the witches' fingers, then we sock it to their wallets with the fudge."

Georgie glances over her shoulder at me. "Thanks to her hankering for fresh sticky fudge, you'll be lining your bank account with fresh sticky hundred dollar bills. Don't be afraid to spread the wealth."

"I won't hesitate," I say as I spot at least a dozen different sheet pans set out with just as many different kinds of fudge in them.

"I'm still labeling these," Emmie says, casting the blade of her knife in their direction. "But I'll give you a quick tour." She points to the first pan, where a velvety smooth chocolate fudge glistens. "This here is our classic *chocolate* fudge," Emmie moans as she says it. "It's rich, indulgent, and guaranteed to satisfy any chocolate lover's cravings." She pats her belly with her free hand. "Especially this budding chocolate lover." She gestures toward a pan filled with creamy swirls of light and dark brown deliciousness. "Moving along, this is our caramel swirl fudge, a perfect balance of buttery caramel and decadent chocolate. It's like a sweet symphony of ooey-goey caramel in every bite." She taps her knife on a pan adorned with crushed cookies. "Behold, our cookies and cream fudge—my handsome hubby's favorite," she's quick to announce. "A delightful combo of smooth white chocolate and crunchy cookie bits. It's a nostalgic treat that will transport you back to your childhood—and Leo right to my kitchen." ***And on occasion, my bedroom.*** She cringes before wincing my way. ***Sorry! It's these darn hormones.***

I shrug her way and we share a quick laugh.

“Next,” she points out a pan, showcasing a light pink fudge with familiar pink and white frosted animal cracker cookies encrusted over the top, “we have the ever delightful circus animal cookie fudge—so far one of our biggest hits,” Emmie says with a grin. “It’s the one I’ve been craving most.”

“Ooh,” I say, stealing a nearby runaway cookie, a pink camel speckled with colorful nonpareils. “These are mostly pink. Maybe you’re having a girl?”

“Maybe,” she says before pointing to a pan filled with chocolate and marshmallows. “But I’ve practically inhaled an entire pan of Rocky Road myself. And we both know Leo eats a pint of ice cream in this flavor each night before he goes to bed.”

“Maybe she’ll be a daddy’s girl?” I give a malevolent wink her way. “But a miniature version of Leo would be adorable, too.”

“I think so.” She laughs before pointing to a pan filled with velvety pumpkin-colored fudge. “And we can’t forget the quintessential fall flavor,” she muses. “Our pumpkin spice fudge is guaranteed to give you a taste of autumn with every bite.”

“Wow, I’m impressed,” I say, sneaking a crumb that just fell from the tray and moaning through the luscious pumpkin-spiced bite.

“Hold your impressed horses. The tour’s not done yet,” she says, moving onto a pan covered in crushed nuts. “Say hello to our praline delight fudge. We’ve combined roasted nuts with silky smooth vanilla fudge, creating a delightful crunch and a burst of praline goodness.”

Her attention then shifts to a pan displaying creamy brown swirls.

“Here’s our irresistible peanut butter chocolate fudge. Creating the swirling pattern has been weirdly therapeutic.” She continues the tour, showcasing pans of mint chocolate fudge, coconut dream fudge, salted caramel fudge, s’mores fudge, and even a whimsical unicorn fudge with rainbow colors and edible glitter.

She offers an impish grin my way. “So which one are you having?”

“All of them,” I say. “And I’m pretty sure that’s the right answer. I could use a little fudge therapy, too, you know.”

“I had an inkling you’d approve.”

Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky run up and are quick to sniff themselves into a conniption.

How about a witch’s finger, Georgie? Fish mewls her way and Georgie is quick to comply by tossing each of them a pale green cookie.

I'm not sure how, but Georgie always seems to know what they're saying.

"I haven't forgotten you either." Emmie reaches into a Mason jar set in front of her and plucks out three cookies in the shape of bones. She tosses one to each of the dogs and crumbles one up for Fish as well.

"I guess it's true what they say," I muse at my bestie. "Some heroes don't wear capes—they wear *aprons*."

"This baby has made me a better person already." She laughs as she quickly chops a healthy slice of each of the flavors, about half the size of a playing card, and lands them all into a large pink box before retrieving two plastic forks. "I'm due for a break and I'm anxious to see what my boss thinks of my new fudgy endeavor. Come on," she says as she leads us to one of the picnic tables that sits in front of the booth, the perfect place to watch the Halloween-inspired bustle around us.

We take a seat and I dive into the circus animal cookie fudge first and moan hard through a bite.

"Geez, Emmie." I shake my head at her. "This is a bona fide piece of fudgy paradise."

She nods. "Paradise that I'll be indulging in at all hours of the day. I can't tell you how strong these cravings are. It's like once I get my mind set on something—or my stomach as it were—I become a woman possessed."

"Aww, that's adorable." I can't help but laugh.

"Leo thought so at first, too. That is, until I craved a lobster roll from the Salty Wharf, and since they don't deliver, Leo made the drive—forty-five minutes both ways. But he's been a good sport about it ever since. And funny enough, he's suddenly a pro at making lobster rolls with both butter and mayo."

"Is there any other way to eat them? And speaking of which, put them on the menu, for Pete's sake. Don't we already serve lobster? We're practically halfway there."

"We do, but not in this form."

"Then make it happen. I'll extend the budget if need be. If my little niece or nephew demands a lobster roll, then they're going to get their fill. You do know I let you eat for free."

"Thanks, but don't blame me when the café sashays into the red."

"Bizzy?" a friendly voice calls from above and I look up and smile.

And just like that, my investigation amps up again.

CHAPTER 17



“*E*lvira,” I practically sing the woman’s name once I spot her. “Please, take a seat.”

“Take mine,” Emmie says, standing. “I’d better get back in there. I can’t make this fudge fast enough.” She plucks a plastic fork from her apron and hands it to the woman. “Enjoy.” She looks my way and gives a sly wink. ***And you’re welcome.***

Emmie has always been one of my best wing women.

Elvira laughs as she takes a seat, dressed as a seductive vampire queen once again in a stunning floor-length gown in deep crimson velvet. The dress hugs her figure without missing an inch and has intricate lace detailing and a high collar that adds all the dark allure only the undead could ask for. Her eyes are mesmerizing with intense red contacts, and her lips are painted a deep shade of blood red which happens to match her flowing red wig.

“You look great,” I’m quick to tell her. “I’m horrible at these kinds of things,” I say, plucking at the green vest that’s essentially the extent of my regular uniform.

“Let me dress you,” she offers. “I’ll have something spectacular delivered for Halloween night and I’ll even send over one of my makeup artist friends. They’re already on schedule to be here for Tabby. And by the way, she’s over the moon excited about the do-over wedding. You really know how to save the day.”

“It’s the least I can do. She is family, after all. So what are your thoughts on this place?”

“Oh, Bizzy, this place is great. I’ve spent the last half hour scoping out every nook and cranny. I have some thoughts that could help draw in even

bigger crowds.”

“Let’s hear them.”

Her crimson eyes sparkle as if she could hardly wait to spill the cauldron. “I was thinking of setting up a mini haunted house for the teens. Something spooky but not too terrifying, you know? And for the younger ones, how about a pumpkin patch where they can pick their own pumpkins to decorate? We could also have a face-painting booth and a few different carnival games.”

“Yes to all of the above.” I nod in approval, before taking another forkful of circus animal cookie fudge. “Please help me eat some of this before my teeth fall right out of my head.”

“Thank you and be warned, I’m a bit of a fudge fanatic,” she says, diving right into the peanut butter chocolate swirl and moaning. “Wow, this is so good. And I can tell it’s fresh.” She shrugs my way. “I warned you I was a fanatic. This fudge is amazing. And so are you, by the way. Tabby called this morning, and like I said, she’s beyond excited about the do-over wedding. I’ve already procured another floral arch—black wisteria in keeping with the theme. I just don’t know how we’re going to secure it to the sand. The last thing we need is the arch falling over and killing a guest.” She grimaces. “Did I just say that out loud?”

“Don’t worry about it.” I grimace right back. “And don’t worry about securing the arch. I’ve got a dedicated handyman who can do just about anything.” With the exception of staying true to my sister. I frown at the thought of Jordy falling for Camila’s games.

“I’ve got to admit, this whole thing is an unusual situation—the wedding at the cemetery, the costumes, and poor Hershey.” She shudders. “I can’t blame Tabby for wanting to scrape that night from her memory and start all over again. And by the way, I had suggested a beachside wedding to her to begin with. A part of me wonders if she stuck to that plan if Hershey would still be here.” ***Doubtful, but it’s the right thing to say.***

I blink over at the woman and suddenly wonder if I’m looking at the killer.

“I’m actually pretty surprised that Max went along with all that darkness,” she continues as she shakes her head. “I’ve been dating Dalton longer than Max knew Tabby, so I had a chance to spend a little time with him. He seems so down-to-earth and pragmatic. And Tabby is artsy to a fault. But I suppose love works in mysterious ways.”

“Her show was amazing last night.” Images of Jasper looking as if he were having a seizure come to mind and I fight back a smile. “I guess that’s how she knew Hershey, through his sister.”

“Oh, that’s right. She had a rival company until she hurt her knee, and after that, she closed shop. I remember hearing something about that a while ago—before I knew Tabby formally. The community center uses my services all the time, and by proxy, I’ve helped stage a few of their productions.”

“Small world,” I say. “But then *Spider Cove* always is.”

“Touché.” She slices off a piece of the unicorn fudge and waggles her brows. “I’m just a kid at heart.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” I tell her. “I’m starting to think that’s what it takes to survive in this world. Hey, how’s that writing group of yours taking the news about Hershey?” Not my best segue, but I’ll take it. Those things that Tabby mentioned last night about Hershey and his ghostwriting opportunity come to mind. I wonder how much Tabby knows about that.

Wouldn’t you love to know? She sheds a dark smile. ***And maybe if she’s lucky, I’ll tell her the truth.***

CHAPTER 18



“Oh, they’re crushed,” Elvira Flint says, looking genuinely crushed momentarily herself even if she is dressed like a vampire looking to suck the blood out of just about anybody’s neck as the fall festival swirls around us.

“Hershey is the one who spearheaded the group,” she goes on. “He was essentially the heart and soul of the Gothic Quill Society. But the rest of us have been speaking online and we’re all committed to continuing—as a way of honoring him, of course.” ***At least now we can breathe—or at the least, I can. Hershey put the horror in that horror writing group.***

She can breathe? And he was a horror? I shake my head at her, puzzled by her thoughts.

She hesitates again, her gaze meeting mine for a brief moment. “Now that Hershey’s no longer in the picture, I guess you could say things have shifted for me in the publishing world.”

“How so?” I ask, hoping she’ll dovetail right into that ghostwriting opportunity that Hershey is missing out on because he’s essentially a ghost himself now.

She closes her eyes a moment. “I got a call this morning from Dark Tales Publishing, an imprint busy pumping out a popular series. They’ve been using an entire stable of ghostwriters for years and apparently, they have a few slots they need to fill. They had asked Hershey, and now this morning the opportunity fell into my lap. The money is better than good, so I can’t say no.” ***Only they didn’t call me. I called them.*** Her blood-red lips curl at the tips. ***Not that it’s a detail that matters. The bottom line is, with Hershey out of the way, I wouldn’t be sitting pretty on a pile of easy cash. I’d feel bad***

about it, but he was such a jerk these past few weeks I can hardly muster any pity for him.

My mouth falls open just as Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky scamper this way.

She's guilty, isn't she? Fish yowls as she lands in my lap. ***I know that look on your face, Bizzy. She's just admitted to stabbing that poor man in the back.***

Spooky gives a sharp bark. ***Let me at her.***

"Whoa," I say as I reach over and give him a quick pat. "Elvira, these are my furry friends, Fish, Sherlock Bones, and Spooky Spot. And this," I tilt my way to the vampire queen by my side, "is my friend, Elvira." I make squirrely eyes at the three of them in hopes they'll call off the urge to bite her ankles.

"I know Spooky," she says, giving him a quick rubdown. "And I love him to pieces." ***Even if his owner was a perfect jerk.*** "How are you holding up, buddy?"

He rubs his head against her knee and she hugs him.

"And you two"—she gives both Fish and Sherlock a scratch—"are perfectly adorable."

Fish tips her whiskers at the woman. ***Clearly, she has impeccable taste.***

Clearly. But is she an impeccable judge of character? Why does she think Hershey Wolfe was such a jerk?

"Elvira, was there something bothering Hershey the weeks leading up to his death? Something that he may have hinted at during one of your writing sessions?"

"We only met twice a month. The Gothic Quill Society is more or less an online chat group where we cheer one another on and critique one another's work." She tips her eyes to the side. "Come to think of it, during our last meeting he said he had to leave early. He said something about making the rent by way of the casino."

Fish's ears perk up and so do mine.

"Was Hershey a gambler?" I ask as all sorts of thoughts race through my mind.

"I'm not sure," she says, stabbing her fork into the Rocky Road. "I guess you'll have to ask Spooky."

"Believe me, I will," I say and I'm not teasing.

"But I do know he was growing increasingly agitated." ***Hey? I bet money he did have something to do with it. I bet that's why he threatened to give***

away the spoilers to my new book if I didn't give him the Dark Tales job.

I inch back. The job was hers first? No wonder she called the publisher and told them she would take over. The job was hers to begin with.

My curiosity intensifies. “And what about the night of the wedding? Did you see or hear anything unusual?”

Elvira nods solemnly. “Indeed, I did. Just before the wedding, I was putting the finishing touches on the cake table when Hershey stopped Max just a few feet away. I wasn't trying to listen, but Hershey's voice carried a note of urgency and maybe a threat. He said, ‘I have the power to spill your secret. And trust me, it can destroy any business venture you've ever dreamed of, present or future.’”

An audible gasp escapes me. “Hershey said that to Max?”

She nods.

“What secret do you think he was referring to?”

Elvira's gaze turns distant. “I wish I knew, Bizzy. But whatever it was it seemed to have the potential to shatter Max's life and ambitions. Whatever it was, it must have been a doozy for Hershey to try to use it as leverage.”

A knot the size of a haunted house forms in my stomach. This explains some of the odd thoughts I've picked up on from Max—not to mention the odd thought Tabby had last night about protecting him. Tabby must be in the know when it comes to this so-called secret.

What's happening, Bizzy? Spooky gives a soft bark my way.

Don't worry, Sherlock tells him. Once we're alone, Bizzy won't hold back. You'll know everything, right down to whatever this vampire is thinking.

He's not wrong. I don't keep any secrets from my nonhuman friends.

Speaking of nonhumans—I may as well go for the gold.

“Elvira,” I lean in hard, “since you've been around the Wilder men for a bit, I have to ask you one more thing. What do you know about Jamison's new girlfriend, Morgana?”

She rolls her crimson eyes and it's an unnerving look. “Let's just say Morgana is an intriguing woman.” She chuckles at the thought. “I only met her that night, but I have to say there were some peculiarities I observed during the course of the evening.”

“Such as?” I shove another bite of fudge into my mouth—pralines and dreamy cream. I could die happy now. But if I did, my curiosity about Hershey's death would probably have the power to bring me back to life.

There's yet to be a case I've let grow cold.

“For one, she seemed unnaturally calm—even after the murder.” *It was almost as if she had a hidden agenda, but I don't dare say that out loud.*

“There was a moment when she exchanged a cryptic glance with Jamison as if they shared a secret language.”

My mouth falls open again. “Did she know Hershey?”

She shakes her head. “I don't know, but there was just something off about that woman. I don't know what it is. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but there was a bizarre aura of mystique surrounding her. And I couldn't help but notice the way she effortlessly commanded the attention of those around her—almost as if she held some invisible inhuman power.”

A shiver runs through me when she says the *inhuman* buzzword.

Her phone pings and she glances at the screen.

“Ooh, I forgot I have a meeting in the next town over. They're setting up a corn maze.” She jumps out of her seat and offers each of the pets a quick scratch between the ears. “I can't wait to see the three of you all decked out for Halloween night. Hey? Would you mind if I dressed them, too?”

“Have at it,” I say and Fish is quick to growl at me.

I know exactly how she feels about putting on a costume.

“Great,” Elvira says as she drops her phone into her purse. “I'll send my crew over with the makings for the haunted house and the other things we talked about. And I have a whole other crew who will be here on Halloween prepping the beach for Tabby and Max's big do-over. And don't you worry. This time it's going to go off without a hitch.” *After all, Hershey won't be there to spoil it.*

She takes off with a wave and I sit there trying to absorb everything I've just learned.

An icy breeze picks up as the weight of the unknown presses over me. Morgana remains as mysterious as ever. Elvira seems to have had her own dark intentions regarding wanting Hershey out of the picture. And Max? To quote his blushing bride—he looks “guilty as sin”.

It seems a lot of people wouldn't have minded if Hershey Wolfe was taken out of the way. But one person out there put a knife in that man's back to make sure the job was done.

Hershey sounded desperate for money, and I happen to know that desperation can bring out the monster in anyone. And that in turn brought out the monster in somebody else.

But who?
That is the monstrous question.

CHAPTER 19



True to form, I told Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky every dark thought Elvira was thinking as soon as we made our way back to the cottage.

I also called Jasper and told him everything Elvira had to say about Hershey and Morgana—sans anything about Max. I didn't think it was right to sideline him about his brother over the phone.

But Jasper did say he'd talk to Jamison and see if we could schedule a couple's night so we could get to know Morgana better. I'm hoping that will be soon.

As much as I want to catch Hershey Wolfe's killer, I want to unravel this oddball mystique that seems to have enveloped Morgana.

By the time evening rolls around, Jasper pulls in with a pizza from the place across the street from the precinct, extra cheese, pepperoni, mushroom, olive, and an extra sprinkling of oregano. And after indulging, we decide to stroll through the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival on a hunt for dessert.

So far we've plowed our way through a peanut encrusted candy apple—that we shared in the name of moderation—a pumpkin-spiced funnel cake, and apple crumble bars. Once we've adequately exhausted our outside options, we pick up a bag of Emmie's delectable fudge—cookies and cream for me and s'mores for Jasper.

The twinkle lights strung through the trees sway in the icy breeze as the sky grows a deep shade of violet. Bodies bustle all around us, most of them in costume—nothing too scary, almost all of them adorable. And “Werewolves of London” blasts through the speakers, putting everyone in a jovial and yet howling good mood.

Jasper gives a wistful shake of his head while holding up his fudge. “You do realize we eat like a couple of teenagers on a munchy bender.”

“What do you know about munchy benders?” I tease as I elbow him. “Besides, that pizza we inhaled could practically double as a salad. Did you see how many mushrooms and olives they piled on that thing?”

“I did—not to mention the cheese and the pepperoni.” He takes another bite of his fudge and moans. “If eating this is wrong, I don’t want to be right.”

“It’s practically the holidays,” I say, indulging in another bite of my fudge. “Calories won’t count until January at least. I take that back, well, after Valentine’s Day. I do like to eat my weight in chocolate on that heart-shaped day.”

“And I wouldn’t dare deny you.”

Fish scampers our way with Sherlock Bones and Spooky on her heels.

Guess what, Bizzy! Fish mewls as she nearly runs right past me, propelled by inertia alone. **Georgie brought out the hoops and she says she’s ready to commandeer her pet circus once again.**

Spooky barks, **She said she made over two hundred bucks in tips last night with our help!**

Sherlock nods. **And she’s sharing the wealth by way of those fancy dog biscuits Emmie has made. She says we can eat our fill so long as her pockets are filled with green.**

I quickly translate to Jasper and he lifts a brow.

“That’s a lot of money,” Jasper muses. “Here’s hoping she doesn’t spend it all in one place.”

She already spent the money she earned last night, Fish is quick to tell me and I translate just as fast.

“What in the world did she do with it?” I ask with a slight panicked edge to my voice. And trust me, with Georgie involved, there’s good reason.

She threw it all at the dancer who played Hansel, Spooky says.

That’s right, Sherlock barks. **She kept saying, ‘Take it off—take it off.’ Good thing he had lots of scarves tied around his waist. By the time he got to his pants, she was out of money.**

“Good thing,” I mutter. Especially considering the fact he started the night out shirtless.

Can we go? Sherlock asks, partially dancing on his hind legs.

“Go ahead. Just make sure she doesn’t hurt herself in the process—or

destroy anything,” I say as the three of them dart off for the shore.

The sound of a truck backing up beeps in the distance, and both Jasper and I turn toward the clearing to the left, which happens to be brimming with trucks of every size along with six different double-wide trailers and an entire crew of people erecting the façade of an eerie run-down mansion.

“What in the world?” Jasper squints that way. “Do I want to know what this is about?”

“That would be the haunted house attraction. It’s one of the many improvements Elvira is making to the festival posthaste. I really like her.”

“I like her, too, but I also like the fact we comply with building codes. Are there permits involved?”

“As the owners of this fine establishment, I think we should invoke a don’t ask, don’t tell policy—at least until after Halloween. We do have insurance for the place. I vote we let this one ride. I’d hate to get caught up in red tape just days from the big night.”

“I’m not arguing with that. Heaven knows I’ve got enough red tape to wade through at the sheriff’s department.”

A crowd pushes past us, mostly mothers pushing strollers and a small army of toddlers in tow, each of them dressed twice as adorable as the last.

“Aww,” I coo. “Would you look at those little ballerinas? And that miniature army man with his face clad in camo?”

“If it wasn’t for the whites of his eyes, I think he could disappear in the shadows.”

“And look at that tiny bumblebee,” I coo once again, pointing at a baby sitting at attention in one of the strollers.

“She’s the bee’s knees.” Jasper sighs as he pauses to look my way. “So what are your thoughts? I mean, I know we talked about trying just last month, but this is one thing I can’t do for you.” A mournful smile crests his lips. “I would do it all in an instant if I could—the morning sickness, the late-night cravings. I’d sacrifice my girlish figure every day of the week for you, Bizzy. And the thought of what you’d have to go through when push literally comes to shove—I wish I could take away all the pain before it ever begins.”

“Oh, Jasper.” I pull him in and land a warm kiss to his lips. “That is the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“I’d be worried if anyone else has ever said that to you—especially if he was a man.”

A dull laugh streams from me.

“I’m in, Jasper. And I’m willing to take one—or two—or three, or four for the team. I want to build a family with you. And as scary as having a baby sounds—literally having the baby—I know you’ll be there for me.”

“I will.” He crosses his heart with his fingers, those pale gray eyes piercing into mine. “I will move heaven and earth to make sure you get the best medical care, that every craving is met no matter how late the hour or how far I have to drive to meet that need, and I will make sure you are more than comfortable during labor—whether it means panting right along with you or getting whatever medication necessary from the doctor.”

A laugh belts from me. “You do work at the sheriff’s department. I’m pretty sure you have access to an entire litany of decent drugs, if need be.”

“We won’t be going against medical advice.” A laugh drums from him as he wraps an arm around me. “I promise it will be open communication, trust, and teamwork all the way. So we’re really doing this?”

I nod his way. “I’m committed.”

“Me, too.” He lands another kiss to my lips and this time we linger.

“Speaking of the sheriff’s department...” I bite down on a smile.

“Why do I get the feeling things are about to take a turn for the deadly?”

I nod up at him. “They’re about to get darn right murderous.”

CHAPTER 20



“*Y*ou want to talk about the case?” Jasper sighs, resigned to the fact we’re about to dissect Hershey Wolfe’s homicide investigation right here in the heart of the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival.

“Yes, I want to talk about the case, Detective Wilder,” I say, dotting another kiss to his lips. “And speaking of Wilders, when are we meeting up with Jamison? Did you ever get a chance to give him a call?”

“I did.” He winces. “It was strange. It was almost as if he got a little verbally combative. I offered to take them both to dinner so we could get to know one another better like you suggested and I got shot down. He seemed to feel bad for jumping on me, though, and he conceded that he’d bring her to the wedding. He said there was something about her we should know.”

“*What?*” I inch back with my mouth agape. “I told you there was something going on. Do you think he’s going to tell us she’s not human?”

A howl goes off in the distance and we see Sherlock and Spooky running through those hoops as an applause breaks out around them.

“I can guarantee you she’s human,” Jasper says. “Maybe she has something going on with her eyes, or there’s some other medical issue we’re not aware of?”

“Like her need to survive off human blood?” I cock my head his way and a dull laugh drums through him.

“Or that.” He nods toward the cove and we head that way as Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky take turns jumping through the hoops again, much to the delight of the crowd that has gathered.

“Georgie looks like a pro with her clown costume on. I’d encourage her, but truth be told, clowns give me the heebie-jeebies.”

“Same,” he says, jostling my shoulder with his partial embrace. “And what about Spooky? Any takers or are we adding to our menagerie?”

“Aww,” I coo up at him once again. “Would you be open to that?”

“He is pretty great, and from the digging I’ve done on Hershey, he has no one close to him, no wife, no girlfriend, no kids.”

“He has a sister, but apparently, she’s dealing with an injury to this day. I’ll ask around, maybe I can speak to her.”

“I’ve already spoken with her.” He winks my way. “She doesn’t know anyone who Hershey could have upset, and she says she’s allergic to dogs.”

“I guess she’s out. But since we’re on the subject of suspects, who’s at the top of the list, Detective?”

“I think we both know whose list really matters here,” he says, giving my waist a slight squeeze. “So we still don’t know what Tabby and Hershey were arguing about on the night he died?”

“She said they just spoke. She said he congratulated her on the ceremony and made a few wisecracks about Max, but she didn’t mention anything worthy of an argument. She did say she asked him what seemed to be diverting his attention, and like I mentioned last night, she said that Hershey claimed it was Elvira that was setting his fur on edge. It was that whole Dark Tales Publishing thing I was telling you about. According to Elvira—her thoughts specifically—she was asked to do the ghostwriting first, but Hershey blackmailed her into giving it up by threatening to give away the spoilers to her new book—which could have killed sales. And once he was killed, Elvira called the publisher and got the position again. She said without him around she could breathe again—and that Hershey put the horror in that horror group. She also mentioned that Hershey told her he was paying his rent by way of the casino. It sounds like he had some financial issues.”

Jasper nods. “She could have knocked him off to regain her career. That’s about as strong of a motive as we’ve got so far. But you know what they say, you only need one.”

“Morgana is pretty creepy.” I shrug up at him. “She might be the dark horse in all of this. Although, when Elvira and I spoke about her, Elvira didn’t think Morgana knew him at all.”

“I guess that just leaves Elvira as our one and only suspect.” He shakes his head. “Sometimes a case is as plain as the nose on your face.”

Max bubbles to the forefront of my mind as we set foot on the sand and watch the waves slap against the shore as they glow phosphorescent.

Jasper's words from earlier come back to me and I offer a mournful smile his way.

"You know what you said earlier about open communication, trust, and teamwork? I think maybe it should start right now. I've been holding something back from you."

His eyes grow twice their size.

"Are you?" His hand lands softly over my stomach. "Are we? Did we do this?"

"No, *no*," I say, regretful that I may have accidentally painted the picture of an entire nursery for him. "I've been holding back a *suspect* from you." I shrug up at him. "I just didn't think any of this could lead somewhere."

"Who is it?" His demeanor darkens. "Who are you trying to protect?"

"Your brother."

He leans back so far he nearly trips in the sand. "Which one?"

I hesitate a moment. "Max."

"Max?" His brows nearly lift right off his face. "He's the groom in this equation. It was his wedding—his first wedding and after Halloween night hopefully last. What makes you think he could have done something so heinous? You did see the way Hershey was killed. Max has always been a peacekeeper."

"I know. And I don't want to think he could have done this. But—I have heard some strange things that make me wonder."

His shoulders sag. "Don't hold back."

"Well, he didn't want to throw Tabby under the bus and tell us about the fact that he saw Tabby having a terse exchange with Hershey that night—although it was dark. He may have mistaken their brief conversation about Elvira as an argument of some sort. Anyway, he mentioned that stuff about him and Hershey not getting along for the last few years—something about a client they had while they both worked for that pharmaceutical company."

"That's right. I remember," Jasper says. "And he also mentioned it was water under the bridge."

"And I was satisfied with that, until I spoke to Tabby. She said—or more accurately, thought to herself—that she was thankful I didn't ask about Max's involvement with Hershey and that you must have been satisfied with whatever answer Max fed you."

"Fed me?"

I nod. "She said she wanted to keep it that way, too. And that even though

Max looked guilty as sin, he was her groom and she'd do anything she could to protect him."

"Guilty as sin?" Jasper stiffens as we stop cold. "Protect him?" He blows out a hard breath. "Just what the heck has my brother gotten himself into?"

"I don't know, but it gets a little worse. Elvira said something as well. She said she heard Hershey and Max talking about something. She didn't hear every detail, but she did hear Hershey tell Max that he had the power to spill his secret—and that it could destroy any business venture he'd ever dreamed of, present or future. And well Mackenzie may have said—internally—that she saw him trot into the woods with a knife that night."

"Well then"—Jasper closes his eyes and sighs—"it looks as if we have another suspect." ***There's no way he could have done this. Is there?*** He growls as he glares at the sea. ***And if he did, do I really have it in me to arrest him?***

I wrap my arms tight around Jasper just as another cheer breaks out in honor of Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky's seaside shenanigans. By the looks of that overflowing tip jar, Georgie is really raking it in tonight.

But the only thing Jasper and I are raking in is grief.

We head home and drown our sorrows with fudge before we open our laptops and do our best to prove his brother's innocence.

CHAPTER 21



“*B*izzy Baker”—I turn amidst the hustle and bustle of the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival, only to find a woman dressed in a tight teal dress with a giant fan of peacock feathers poking out the back of it. Believe me when I say, those feathers span at least two feet out on either side of her. And that feather-brained maven just so happens to be Camila Ryder.

“*Bizzy*,” she hisses my name this time. “Tell that maniacal sister of yours that this festival is for one and all to enjoy. Not only that, but there are children present. It’s completely unacceptable that she’s running around with an ax that happens to bear my name on it.”

“Is Macy dressed as a lumberjack?” I muse as I glance past my feathered friend—or nemesis as it were—and do my best to spot my sister in a cast of thousands.

It’s officially Halloween, the sun has set, and the cool autumn breeze rustles through the colorful leaves, carrying with it the tantalizing scent of caramel apples and warm cinnamon. The lavender sky casts an ethereal glow over the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival, and thousands of twinkling fairy lights illuminate the night.

The grounds just outside the inn are alive with shrieks and screams, intermittent laughter, spooky organ music, and the joyful chatter of families and friends. Stalls adorned with festive decorations line the pathways, offering an array of mouthwatering treats and delightful crafts—Emmie’s fudge and witches’ fingers being the biggest hits. Families, teenagers, and perhaps every last citizen in Maine have come out to celebrate this spooky night, right here at the foot of the Country Cottage Inn.

“Who cares what she’s dressed as!” Camila steps into my line of vision

once again. “The woman is diabolical. She’s out to *kill* me. Not that you care. You Baker girls are both vindictive and wicked to the bone. Something tells me you’re *both* natural-born killers. So help me, if she sinks an ax into my skull, I’ll”—she clenches her fists as her feathers ruffle around her—“I’ll—”

“You’ll be dead,” I finish for her and she gasps at the thought.

“The audacity,” she’s right back to hissing. “Where’s Jordy?” She glances past me. “On second thought, where is Jasper or Leo? I have a feeling I’ll need the law on my side tonight.” She glances at me, up and down. ***It is Halloween. I’m sure Bizzy has another dark sacrifice to make. And now that her sister wants me out of the picture, I’m probably next up on her hit list. Am I?*** Her eyes expand my way. “Well?”

Camila has long since found out of my supernatural secret, but I’ve never as much admitted it to her—even if she is right.

“You are most certainly welcome to drive down to the sheriff’s department and file a report on whoever you want.”

She grunts as she takes off in a fit of frustration.

That’s one way to get rid of her, Fish chirps as she runs over and I scoop her up.

“We both know she’s not going anywhere,” I say, dropping a kiss on her tiny nose. “I’m not that lucky.”

You can always swim away the next time you see her, Fish chitters out a laugh as she lands a paw on one of the seashells adhered to my chest. ***We both can.***

“One would think.” I sigh as I glance down at her costume first then mine.

True to her word, Elvira sent over costumes and a makeup artist to my cottage this afternoon, and before I knew it, I had on a long red wig, a leotard that happens to match my skin tone with a seashell bra sewn to the outside of it, as well as a long turquoise tail comprised almost solely of sequins. And my face is just as glittery with far too much bright red lipstick and shimmering blue eyeshadow than should ever be legal.

Fish was fitted with a hat in the shape of a shark fin. Sherlock Bones morphed into his namesake, Sherlock *Holmes*, complete with a detective’s cap, a magnifying glass dangling from his collar, and a wool cape that sits over his back. Of course, Spooky wasn’t left out of the holiday horror—Elvira’s crew provided a miniature fireman’s hat that’s currently secured to his cute little head, a bright yellow firefighter’s jacket that sits snug to his

body, and a small red plastic fire extinguisher that sits over his back.

All three of them are perfectly adorable, and I'm perfectly ridiculous.

As for me? I've been stopped by at least a half dozen little girls while they hugged my tail and their mothers snapped an insane amount of pictures of us—my furry menagerie included.

Jasper hasn't laid eyes on me just yet, but I'm pretty sure he'll have thoughts—none of them pure. These seashells aren't hiding much.

Bizzy, Sherlock barks as both he and Spooky trot over, nearly out of breath. *We can't find Georgie and we've looked everywhere.*

Tonight's our big night, Spooky says with a soft woof. *Georgie said it would be our final performance and that she had a big surprise for everyone.*

Fish nods my way. *She said we were going out with a bang.*

I make a face. "Here's hoping bullets aren't involved."

Nah, Sherlock barks. *Bullets aren't Georgie's style. She's more of an explosives kind of gal.*

"I might prefer bullets," I mutter.

"Did someone say bullets?" a deep voice says from behind and I turn to see Jordy dressed as his old standby—a football player. He's donned his high school jersey and has dark grease under both eyes. He steals Fish from me and quickly gives Sherlock and Spooky a quick pat.

"Well, well, aren't you dressed for cheerleader success," I muse. "Looking good, Jordy. I bet you'll make all the girls cry." I take a moment to scowl his way. "My sister had better not be one of them."

Jordy winces my way. "You know that's not my style."

"Is stringing two girls along your style?" I snip without meaning to. "Never mind. Don't answer that. I know you too well. Just be mindful that both of those women are very interested. This isn't high school," I say, glancing down at his jersey. "Or maybe it is."

Geez, she's really letting into me. His lips twist as he considers this. *I know Bizzy would like to see me with Macy. Heck, I want to see me with Macy, but each time I bring up exclusivity, Macy finds an excuse to take off—running away as quick as she can as if she were darting across live coals. But I don't want to paint Macy in a bad light. I'll take one for the team and let Bizzy think I'm the villain in all this.*

"I promise I'm not looking to break any hearts tonight." He tips his head my way. *It's my heart that's being pummeled, and seeing how bad it feels, I*

wouldn't dream of wishing this on anyone else. "I'll make sure everything is running like a well-oiled machine. If you need me, I'll be hanging out by the haunted house." He winces past me at the impossibly long line. "How much are we charging for admission?"

"A dollar." I shrug. "I didn't have the heart to charge any more than that."

"It's worth every dime," he says, landing Fish back in my arms. "I went through it myself and it's not for the faint of heart. At a buck a pop, we won't leave anyone feeling ghosted." *Unlike Macy, who's been ghosting me like a pro long before this spooky night.*

He takes off with a wave and my mouth falls open.

"It's been Macy this entire time," I say. "I guess we know who the commitment-phobe in the equation is."

Before I can say another word, the crowd lights up with screams around me, and I turn around and gasp at the hurricane headed my way.

CHAPTER 22



“*W*hat in the world?” It’s about all I can say as my mother—or at least I think it’s my mother—and Georgie make their way through the crowd right here at the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival.

The twinkle lights overhead wink in the breeze and the army of jack-o’-lanterns that are lit up on the grounds begin to define themselves with their glowing eerie grins as the night grows that much darker.

“Happy Halloween,” Georgie shouts into a bright red megaphone, which just so happens to match that small yet bright red plastic lobster sitting on her nose. She’s donned a rainbow-colored polka-dotted jumpsuit this time and has on that same bushy red wig once again.

Her clown face is on point, bone-white skin, exaggerated grin painted across half her face, tiny triangles below each eye—albeit she looks a little more garish in honor of this horror-riddled night. But the icing on the spooky cake is the fact she has a steady stream of bubbles radiating from her back and engulfing everyone in the vicinity in a tornado of tiny iridescent bubbles.

And my mother? Well, I’m pretty sure that the larger-than-life red and white box of popcorn—seemingly brimming to the top with the real *corny* deal—is the woman who bore me.

“Mom?” I meet them halfway, and every step my mother takes in this direction a handful of popcorn falls to the ground—much to Sherlock and Spooky’s delight.

Save some for me boys, Fish mewls as she uses me like a springboard and gets right to it.

Oddly enough, popcorn is one of Fish’s favorite snacks.

“Great news, Bizzy,” Mom says, waddling over. “Mackenzie and Huxley

are here with little Mack! Mackenzie asked me to babysit in an hour so she and Huxley can judge a pie-eating contest that one of the booths is hosting. That's when we'll slap on some party hats, wrangle up some kids, and sing happy birthday to my handsome grandson."

"Perfect. Text me when and where. Emmie made the cutest Halloween-themed cake. It's going to be a birthday to remember."

Georgie finally waddles her way over in a veil of bubbles so thick you'd think a portal to a bubbly universe was opening up around us.

"What exactly is happening here, Georgie?" I ask, craning my neck as I inspect the deluge of bubbles threatening to drown all of *Spider Cove* in its bubbly glory.

"I stopped trying to figure her out eons ago," Mom says, poking her head out of the top of that box she's ensconced in. "I'm just here to watch the show. That's why I brought the popcorn." Her arms poke out the front of the box and somehow she manages to scoop a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

"Wise move," I say.

"This is just my first act for the night," Georgie says, turning around so I can see the hot pink backpack with what looks like a bubble machine slung between her shoulders. "First, I lure them in with bubbles." She holds up a giant plastic pumpkin loaded to the brim with miniature candy bars. "Then I hook them with sweet treats. And that's when I put on a show that makes them empty their pockets. So far I have nearly a thousand dollars scraped up from my nights of entertainment and terror."

"A *thousand* bucks?" Mom muses. "That's not bad. What are you going to do with all that money?"

"I've already spent it," Georgie says with a smile that frightens me for all sorts of reasons. "I bought out all of the chocolate chips this side of Maine and gave them to Emmie so she can whip up a life-size chocolate clown. He's going to be six feet of chocolate deliciousness and we've got a hot date later on this evening, just me and him in front of the fire."

"A life-size chocolate clown?" Mom balks. "Georgie, I hate to break it to you, but your chocolate date is going to end in disaster when he melts into a puddle. Chocolate and heat don't really get along."

Georgie sags a moment. "He wouldn't be the first man to deflate on me." She looks my way. "Speaking of deflating, how's the case going?"

"Deflating, indeed," I say. "We have a couple of suspects, a few motives,

but nothing that's a true smoking gun."

Jasper and I spent the last few nights digging into Pharm X, the pharmaceutical company that both Hershey and Max used to work for back in the day, but all we could come up with is that they were both employed there during the same four-year period. Nothing else stood out. We certainly couldn't find out anything about a client Max may or may not have swiped from Hershey.

"Well, don't worry," Mom says. "Once this spooky, kooky night is over, we'll get to the drawing board and you can fill us in on all the details you have so far."

"Popcorn Preppy is right," Georgie says. "Sometimes you just need a couple of fresh eyes to help you see what's been in front of your nose all along." She snaps the tail of that miniature lobster sitting on her face. "But for now"—she puts the megaphone to her lips—"step right up to Georgie's circus! Follow me, folks, for a spooktacular good time, bubbles, and laughs. And if you're lucky, I might just scare the pants right off of you." She glances at Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky. "Let's get moving, kids. We've got a show to put on—the greatest show on earth."

A crowd of pale-faced creatures—humans, I'm hoping—walk by in a cluster. Men and women all dressed to the nines in velvet and fancy boots, their fangs hovering over their bottom lips for all to see.

Georgie smacks my mother. "I told you the local vampire coven was out and about tonight." She nods my way. "I used to be connected to them way back when."

Mom huffs a laugh. "More like way back when you smoked funny cigarettes."

"Hey, I still smoke funny cigarettes," Georgie says. "Where do you think I get my best ideas?" She wiggles the megaphone between them before looking my way. "The vampires are real, Bizzy. They're *real*, I tell you!"

And with that Mom, Georgie, and all three pets disappear in a tornado of bubbles.

I'm about to fish my phone out of my mermaid tail when Tabby and Elvira come this way.

"Well, if it isn't the blushing bride herself and her event-planning minion," I tease as the women make their way over.

The Bride of Frankenstein, aka Tabby, is wearing that same bloodied gown, with its dark brown splashes of blood across the front, her hair is

teased into a dark beehive with white streaks painted on the sides that look like lightning, and her face is a muted shade of green.

And Elvira is ever the gloriously gorgeous vampire in her long crimson gown, matching long crimson wig, along with a crimson smile with fangs and a squiggle of fake blood running down one side.

“Bizzy, you look stunning,” Elvira says, taking me in. “I knew you’d make the perfect mermaid. Don’t be surprised if someone throws you into the sea by the end of the night. You look like the real deal.”

“If someone throws me into the sea, it will truly be the scariest night of my life. But only because this is one mermaid who is terrified of water.”

We share a quick laugh just as my father and Jasper’s mother, Gwyn, show up—looking like, well, *themselves*.

“Bizzy Bizzy,” Dad says, pulling me in, looking dashing in a suit. “You really know how to throw a party.”

“But does she know how to throw a wedding?” Gwyn says as she nods my way in a black glittering gown that looks as if an entire galaxy of stars is trapped in it.

“She doesn’t have to worry about a thing,” Elvira assures her. “I have a makeshift altar set up by the shore, along with a floral arch that’s to die for.” She cringes. ***Leave it to the mother of the groom to jinx it. Here’s hoping no one else is planning to die tonight—or to kill.*** “There are folding chairs and heaters set out as well. Bizzy’s staff was kind enough to work with my crew and everything should go off without a hitch.” ***That is, unless another killer decides to show.***

I frown because that’s not exactly something a killer would say.

Tabby nods. “And both Max and I are determined to make this our last wedding. I’m thankful you both came out again,” she says to them. “I’ll help you get settled,” she says, shuttling my father and Gwyn toward the beach. “There’s still plenty of time before the ceremony to enjoy a few appetizers—the eyeball caprese skewers are my favorite—in keeping with the theme, of course.”

“Of course,” Dad says. ***Geez, she’s creepy. It makes me grateful that my kids turned out this side of normal, even if I did catch Macy dipping her hand into a few Halloween pumpkins earlier that didn’t belong to her.***

“Macy.” I shake my head at the thought.

“What’s that?” Elvira says, tipping her ear my way as the collar of her dress spears up a foot and engulfs half her head in it.

“Oh, nothing. My sister is sort of a menace. Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Anything,” she says, pulling on a pair of dark gloves onto her lily-white fingers.

“Did Hershey ever mention anything about his time as a pharmaceutical representative?”

She blinks back. “Not that I can remember.”

Drats.

She lifts a finger. “But he did once write a short story about a pharmaceutical rep. It was a little off-putting.”

“What was off-putting about it? You wouldn’t remember the plot, would you?”

She nods. “It was about two executives who worked for the same company. One of them swiped a client from the other, and if I remember correctly, there was something about the manipulation of clinical trials and looking the other way when it came to drugs with harmful side effects that weren’t being documented. One of the execs held a high position, and once he discovered the extent of the devious practices, instead of exposing it, he accepted a substantial payout from one of the CEOs in exchange for his silence. The story really stuck with me because it was Hershey’s most intricately detailed work. It was almost as if he lived it.” She shrugs. “He probably saw everything during his time at Pharm X.” ***It’s too bad Hershey met with a maniac who thought it best to cut his life short. What Hershey didn’t know is that Dark Tales Publishing had enough room for both of us at the ghostwriting trough. They actually want to hire someone else from the Gothic Quill Society.*** “I wish he was still here.” She sighs into the night. “He really was a great writer.” She sniffs my way. “I’d better go check out that haunted house. I’ve yet to walk through it myself.”

No sooner does she evaporate into the crowd than I whip out my phone and look up all of the clinical trials and drugs that came out during the four-year period Max and Hershey worked together and, sure enough, there are two that made it into the news.

Claravoy, a drug for diabetics, fizzled due to a flood of visual impairments which were reported shortly after it was released. And another drug called Klazomil, a cancer drug that caused a severe spike in respiratory distress. It wasn’t pulled for three years, despite the fact it was implicated in the death of nearly *seventy* percent of its users.

“Geez.” I gasp before doing an in-depth search on Klazomil and run Max’s name along with it.

And what I see is enough to make anyone shiver on this night or any other.

If this is the smoking gun I think it is, this certainly had the power to taint Max’s reputation and destroy any business venture he’s ever dreamed of, present or future.

I’m about to text Jasper with my findings when an ax swings wildly my way and I belt out a scream for the ages.

CHAPTER 23



“*F*or the sake of all things good,” I shout at my sister who happens to be dressed as a pin-up girl from the fifties, complete with a red and white polka-dotted dress, matching bright red lipstick, and her golden locks curled in victory rolls. The only thing that’s not quintessential to that cozy era is that ax she just so happens to be wielding.

“Relax,” she snips, dropping her weapon to her side. “This blade has Camila’s name on it, not yours.” She lifts it once again and, sure enough, Camila’s name glows in crimson under the duress of the twinkle lights.

An icy breeze picks up and so does the frenetic energy here at the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival as Halloween night kicks into gear. There’s a midway set up with carnival games and prizes, and you can hear the screams of those poor souls who have ventured into the haunted house that Elvira Flint helped to erect at the last minute.

But the latest scream was mine, and I just so happen to be glaring at the woman who made me do it.

“Where’s the candy?” I snip right back at her.

Macy offers me an incredulous look. “How do you know I’ve got candy?”

“Dad spilled the kleptomaniac beans,” I say, not bothering to tell her that I happen to swipe that info right out of his gray matter.

“Oh, all right, fine.” She opens her purse with a huff, and soon I’m staring down at just about every candy bar and sweet treat known to man.

“Wow, I’m impressed. How did you get your claws on these?” I ask, snapping up a miniature Snickers bar and a Mr. Goodbar for good measure. Two of my faves.

“It’s not my fault everyone is so distracted.” She shrugs, unwrapping a Tootsie Roll. “While all those little ghouls and goblins are busy looking at all the horrors you’ve got set out to entertain them, I simply dipped my hand into a pumpkin or two. Along with a few other tried-and-true methods.”

“Macy. That’s pretty horrible even for you.”

I shake my head at the woman, wondering how in the world we’re related just as her furry white Samoyed, Candy, struts up, dressed in a red cap along with a red velvet cape. Attached to her neck is a basket with a sign on it that reads *Candy Please!* And by the looks of it, there’s not another inch of space left to squeeze a sucker in.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” I say, plucking the basket off of poor Candy’s neck. “This must weigh fifteen pounds at least.”

“Well, who could resist this face?” Macy says in a baby voice as she scratches Candy under the chin. “Who’s Mommy’s good girl? That’s right. You are, baby.”

Candy gives a soft bark. ***You should have seen it, Bizzy. Everyone was eager to put some candy in my basket. And as a reward, I let all the littles tug at my tail and pull my ears. I’ve never been more loved on than on this spooky night.*** She straightens as she glances past me. ***I smell Cane!*** she yips and twirls in a circle.

“Uh-oh,” Macy makes a face. “She’s doing the happy dance. That can only mean one thing. Cane is on the premises.”

There he is now! Candy barks as she bolts dead ahead about fifty feet and, sure enough, Mackenzie and Huxley are pushing baby Mack, and all three of them—make that four—are dressed in a family-theme costume with Mackenzie dressed as a cowgirl and my brother, the baby, and Cane dressed as cowboys, complete with ten-gallon hats, plaid shirts, jeans, chaps, spurs, and a red bandana tied around Cane’s furry neck.

I nod their way. “As soon as Mackenzie and Hux take off to officiate the pie-eating contest, Mom and I are throwing the baby a spontaneous birthday party.”

“Someone had to do it,” Macy snorts. “I’ll be there with birthday bells on.”

“Speaking of family business,” I shoot her a look that can double as a threat. “Why in the world are you sending Jordy Crosby mixed signals?”

Her mouth falls open as if she’s about to protest the fact then promptly closes.

“Did he say that?” She narrows her gaze my way. ***Worse yet, did Camila say that? Not that I told her outright, but let’s just say she’s a lucky guesser. That little weasel. Chopping her to bits and pieces is far too merciful.***

“Nobody had to tell me.” I sigh. “I could see it for myself.” Although, I didn’t quite put it together until Jordy clued me in. “Why are you holding him at arm’s length? Don’t you want a future with him?”

“A future?” She blinks hard and the whites of her eyes go on and off like a flashlight. “You really know how to go for the jugular, don’t you?” She crosses her arms tight for a moment, her foot tapping as if she were having one of her classic tantrums. “Okay, fine.” She tosses her hands in the air. “I want a future with him. I’m just—”

“Scared?”

Try terrified, although I’ll never admit it. Bizzy won’t understand. She’s got Jasper. Everyone knows that man hasn’t seen straight since he’s laid eyes on her. In fact, he couldn’t see a killer if he was staring him in the face. He’s blinded by love, blinded by Bizzy. Men don’t get blinded by me. We use one another mutually, and then we both make a naked run for it. How am I supposed to explain to my perfect little sister that there are some women that men just don’t want to keep forever, and I happen to be one of them?

“Oh, Macy.” I pull her in for a spontaneous hug and she grows rigid with my embrace. “You and Jordy are perfect for each other.” I step back, holding her by the shoulders. “Don’t worry. Love is scary for everyone. Rejection looms like a guillotine, but that’s not going to happen with Jordy. He’s crazy about you. But if you keep pushing him away—well, someone else will be there to comfort him.”

“Someone like Camila,” she hisses while glaring out into the crowd. She sniffs and her body softens a touch. “You really think I should go all in with Crosby?”

I nod. “You should go all in tonight.” I squeeze my eyes tight for a second. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t do *that*. But let him know you’re all in. Tell him you want to see him, but just him and nobody else. And tell him you expect the same courtesy. Camila is not a part of this equation. But whatever you do, don’t wait too long to get the message to him. I could see the look in his eyes—he cares about you—but he’s feeling rejected himself.”

“Jordy is feeling rejected?” She inches back. “By me?” She gasps as she

cranes her neck into the crowd. “I need to go. Text me when it’s time to sing to baby Mack. Like I said, I’ll be there with birthday bells on.” ***And I’ll hopefully have Jordy Crosby as my plus-one.***

She starts to take off and I pull her back by the elbow.

“I need another hit,” I say, dipping my hand into her purse and coming up with about six different candy bars, two of them full-size.

“Here, take this.” She shoves Candy’s Halloween basket my way. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have an *ax-ecution* to tend to,” she says, making a mad dash into the crowd.

I strut toward the woods in an effort to stuff my face with all things chocolate just as an eight-foot-tall headless horseman speeds my way, and by his side is someone very much not human.

CHAPTER 24



“*W*hat the—” I drop every last candy bar to the ground as a scream rips its way up my throat.

“*Bizzy.*” The headless horseman chortles with a full deep belly laugh while a glowing pumpkin sits tucked under his arm. “It’s *me*, Jamison.” He pokes his face out from the middle of his black dress shirt and, sure enough, it’s Jamison hiding in there. His shirt and dark cape extend at least a foot above where his head ends, giving him the headless appeal he’s after—and achieved in spooky spades.

“Clever,” I say, my heart still drumming away as the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival swirls around us.

Costumed bodies bustle by, all of them holding plastic pumpkins brimming with sweet treats as errant screams and creaky organ music fill the night. But the creepiest thing I’ve seen thus far isn’t eight-foot headless horsemen standing before me, it’s the woman by his side with bright red eyes that are clearly backlit from the inside.

There’s no way those are contacts or anything else a human could manufacture, for that matter. She’s dressed in dark jeans and a black sweater with the word *scream* written in orange, and as unassuming as that may sound, it’s official. Morgana is anything but human.

“What’s happening?” I pant, backing up in horror.

I can’t help it, we’re edging toward the woods and the festival is a good hundred yards away. If I’m about to be eaten by this red-eyed, very much not human beauty, I might be in some serious trouble if I don’t start making a run for it. But I get the sneaking suspicion this *thing* can outrun me—can outrun a decorated Olympian.

“Morgana,” Jamison says. “Wish Bizzy a happy Halloween in Jasper’s voice.”

Morgana’s eyes brighten in my direction as she bleeds a dark smile. “Happy Halloween, Bizzy Baker Wilder.”

And frighteningly enough—her voice was a dead ringer for my handsome husband’s.

“Get away!” I shriek while picking up a couple of full-size Snickers bars and holding them her way in the shape of a cross. “Get out of here you, you—you *demon!*”

Morgana lurches forward and simply says, “*Boo!*”

But it’s enough to light me with fear and evict another bloodcurdling scream from me. I turn to run and bump right into a brick wall of a body. I pull back and see my husband’s likeness in this dim light.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I pant as I bury my face in his chest. “I thought she killed you and ate your soul.” I land a greedy kiss to his lips and he rumbles with a mournful laugh as he pulls back.

“Bizzy, it’s me, Max,” he says and I squint to get a better look at him.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” I say, covering my mouth with my hand. “Jasper is going to kill me.”

“Never mind that,” Max says, his voice growing steady. “What’s going on? Why are you screaming?” He glances past my shoulders and shudders.

“It’s me, Jamison,” his brother calls from that ridiculous, albeit Hollywood-worthy costume. “And I think it’s actually Morgana that has her freaked out.”

“You *think?*” I say, cowering behind Max partially. Now that I get a better look at Max, he’s wearing a suit much like the ones that Jasper owns. “Jasper’s running late, but he should be here any moment,” I issue the quasi-threat to Jamison and that monster by his side.

Bizzy! Fish mewls, and in less than a second I’ve got a baby shark in my arms—or at least a kitten dressed as one. ***I heard you scream! Sherlock and Spooky are too busy chasing bubbles and jumping through hoops to care about saving you from a stark raving—*** She glances past me at Jamison and the beast with glowing red eyes and lets out an egregious yowl.

“All right,” Max says sternly to his brother. “This has gone too far. You’re creeping the cat out. What’s with the lights in her head?” he asks, angling to get a better look at Morgana. “How are you doing that?”

“It looks like the jig is up.” Jamison laughs from inside that dark cloak of

his. “Go on, Morgana. Tell them all about yourself.”

I gird myself because I half-expect a UFO to suck us all into the sky. At this point, anything seems possible.

“Bizzy, Max, Fish,” she says each of our names even-keeled—in her own voice thankfully—her glowing crimson eyes looking just past us as if she couldn’t quite focus in on any of us. “My name is Morgana and I am not entirely human.”

“Morgana,” Jamison says in a tone that sounds as if he’s chiding her.

“Okay.” She giggles at him. “I was just having some fun.” She turns back our way. “I am *not* human.”

“Knew it,” I hiss and Fish joins me in the effort.

“I am an advanced android created by OmniTech Industries,” she continues. “My name is Morgana, model MT-9000. I possess a vast array of capabilities, from superhuman strength to incredible processing power. My eyes serve as high-resolution cameras, recording everything I see, while my ears capture and store every sound.” She pauses, her expression a mix of intrigue and secrecy. “But my most remarkable feature is my mind—capable of processing complex data and drawing logical conclusions far beyond human capabilities.” She sighs as she shrugs my way. “I am your superior, but I am not above you, nor am I out to hurt anyone.”

“What in the name of modern science?” Max shakes his head. “Jamison? Explain yourself.”

“She’s telling the truth,” Jamison says as he shifts that glowing jack-o’-lantern from one arm to the other. “OmniTech is one of my clients. They asked if I wanted to help them test out their final product for a few weeks and I couldn’t say no.”

“Wow.” I shake my head in disbelief. “I mean, she looks so real, but deep down I just knew something wasn’t right. I was uneasy, but I just couldn’t put my finger on why.”

Morgana tips her head my way. “If you can identify what made you uneasy, please make myself or Jamison aware of your findings. OmniTech is always on the lookout to refine its line of MT-9000 models. Our goal is to look and sound as human as the next girl.”

I nod her way. “The next girl with supernatural strength.”

“My apologies,” Jamison says. “But if you’ll excuse us, I need to get a drink before I pass out in here. Come on, Morgana. Let’s get to the bar.” He bows slightly our way. “We’ll see you both at the wedding.” He takes off and

it's just Max and me.

“I'd better get back to the beach myself,” Max says, turning to leave.

“Not so fast.” I grab him by the cuff of his sleeve and spin him right back around. “You're not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER 25



A sharp howl erupts from somewhere in the woods behind me.

The Halloween festivities are still percolating like a cauldron right here on the grounds of the Country Cottage Inn while Fish and I hold Max Wilder hostage by way of the sleeve of his jacket.

Okay, so it's mostly me holding onto Max, but I don't doubt Fish would stop him from bolting if needed.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions." The words come out far more curt than I intended.

"Sure, anything." He nods my way and he's right back to looking like Jasper's doppelgänger. "What's up?" *I'm sure it has something to do with the wedding, but that tone she just invoked—it's as if she's about to dole out a verbal whooping. I never pegged Bizzy for a dominatrix, but it looks like I just might get a taste of what Jasper might have to endure.*

I roll my eyes at that one.

"Max, I'm sorry to have to say this." My voice softens, but not because he mentally bullied me into it—because I genuinely feel bad.

Bizzy? Fish mewls. Shouldn't we call Jasper first? Or move closer to the hustle and bustle? If you scream, no one will take you seriously. No one but me, that is.

I pull her close and go to kiss the top of her head, but her fin ends up butting me in the nose instead.

"I have to do this," I whisper.

Don't worry, Bizzy. I can take him if I have to. I'll gouge his eyes out while you make a run for it.

I cringe because no one has more mesmerizing eyes than the Wilder

bunch. It would be a crying shame.

“Go on,” Max says, his brows flexed with curiosity.

“That night at your restaurant you seemed tense—almost like you wanted to say something but were hesitating.” I shrug.

“Is this about Hershey’s murder?” ***She thinks she’s onto something, I can tell.***

“Yes, it is about Hershey,” I say. “You were covering something up, weren’t you?”

“Tabby didn’t do this,” he blurts.

“I didn’t say she did,” I tell him as the words plume from me in a white fog. “I think you’re right. I think someone else had a motive, someone who was trying to hide a secret that only one other person knew about—and that other person was Hershey Wolfe himself.”

He glares at the ground for a moment. “Bizzy, Hershey is dead. I don’t know anything about a secret.”

“I think you do,” I spit the words out like machine gun fire. “In fact, I think you know exactly what secret Hershey was touting that night. The two of you worked at Pharm X together for years. You said yourself that he accused you of swiping a client from him.”

He nods. “And like I said, it was water under the bridge.” ***Hershey was right. This is one of those things that has the capability of haunting someone forever—of destroying any business venture I’ve ever dreamed of, present or future.***

A choking sound evicts from me as I hear those very words Elvira heard Hershey utter the night of the murder.

That story Hershey wrote and tried to pass off as fiction comes to mind.

“Max, you were a higher-up at the company. You sensed something was amiss with one of the clinical trials and you were given hush money. You took it, people got sick and died. Your name was tied to Klazomil, the very drug that tied Pharm X up in lawsuits and sent the CEO who paid you off running. That’s the secret Hershey threatened to tell the world, isn’t it? How much money did he want to keep him quiet?”

Max sighs as his entire body sags. ***Geez, she’s good.*** He shakes his head my way.

“Fifteen thousand”—he says—“each month for a year. He was looking to replace his income with mine.”

“That’s a lot of money,” I say, breathless.

That's a lot of Fancy Beast cat food—or dog food in this case, Fish muses.

“It is,” Max says. “And that’s why I wouldn’t do it. I told him if he wanted to blow the lid off my life to go ahead and do it. I don’t negotiate with terrorists. I figured I could have Jamison clean the mess up somehow. He’s the legal eagle of the family. There must have been some recourse for character assassination.”

“Would it have been character assassination if it were based on facts?”

“Misrepresented facts,” he corrects softly. “Look, I’m sorry you heard the worst of it, but I didn’t know anything about how bad that drug was until it was too late. And that so-called hush money? It was Christmas and it came by way of a holiday bonus. I had no idea they were trying to buy my silence until it all came out in the wash. I promise you, Bizzy, I didn’t have a hand in killing those people.”

“Did you kill Hershey?”

He leans back so far, I think he’s about to fall over.

“Is that what this is about? You think I stabbed a man the night of my wedding?” He sounds genuinely baffled. “Bizzy, no. I would never do anything like that.” *Does Jasper think I’m guilty? I honestly thought Hershey and I left off on good terms that night. After I told him no way to his ridiculous attempt at blackmail, we actually hugged it out. He laughed and said he had other means of embellishing his income. He was kidding, wasn’t he?* Max glances at the sky for a moment. *Who else could he have blackmailed? Find the blackmail, find the killer.*

“Why were you carrying a knife into the woods just before Hershey was killed?”

He inches back. “A knife?” *Wait a minute.* “Bizzy, I was looking for Tabby. I wanted to cut the cake.” *Wow, I couldn’t have made myself look more guilty if I tried.*

My phone pings and I pluck it from the ridiculous mermaid tail tied to my wrist.

“It’s my mother.” I sigh. “I’m needed at a birthday party.”

“I’ll see you at the wedding.” Max offers a mournful smile. “Are we good?”

“We’re better than good,” I offer him a quick embrace locking Fish between us momentarily before we part ways.

“It’s time to eat cake,” I say to Fish as we dive back into the crowd.

And it's well past time to find the true blackmail—and find the killer.

CHAPTER 26



“Happy birthday to you,” I sing along with the small crowd that my mother and I herded near the Country Cottage Café booth with the promise of free cake.

Halloween night is nearing a pinnacle and the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival is hitting a haunted crescendo with more bodies pouring onto the premises by the minute.

Little Mack looks adorable dressed as a cowpoke with his miniature tan cowboy hat that brings out his denim blue eyes—his one-year-old denim blue eyes. He claps and sings as my mother helps to slice the triple-layer chocolate cake embellished with candy corn and marshmallow ghosts. It might be Mack’s first birthday cake, but it’s still Halloween.

Emmie shakes her head at me. “Tell me again why we’re hosting a secret birthday party?”

“Because my nephew turned one a month ago and his mother has yet to allow us to acknowledge it with frosting like normal people.”

Cane waddles over with a tiny black cowboy hat adhered to his head and that red bandana glowing against his white fur. Candy is on his tail, still looking every bit like Little Red Riding Hood minus her basket brimming with candy bars—those are still very much in my possession. For her safety, of course. Everyone knows that chocolate is lethal to dogs.

Cane gives a soft woof my way. ***Mackenzie is going to break some limbs because of this.*** He bows his furry little head a moment. ***Her words, not mine. She may have mentioned it on the way over to Huxley. I don’t envy anyone invoking her ire.***

Fish scoffs as she inches up in my arms to get a better look at him. ***Bizzy***

isn't afraid of Mackenzie. She turns her whiskers my way. *Are you?*

My mouth opens and closes.

“Let’s just say the jury is still out on that one,” I whisper.

Emmie chuckles. “Cane is fearing for your life, isn’t he?”

I shrug. “Samoyeds are just sympathetic dogs.”

“And wise,” she adds before helping my mother dole out the cake.

My mother, Emmie, Macy, and I all take turns posing with little Mack as we snap as many pictures as we can to commemorate the occasion.

“I’m going to make a scrapbook, posthaste,” my mother, the giant popcorn bucket, declares, ogling her screen at the photos she’s already taken. “This is the best night ever.”

“I’ll say,” a deep voice strums from behind as a pair of warm arms find their way around my waist.

And I’m out, Fish yowls as she dives out of my arms and heads straight for my mother.

I turn and give the handsome detective a wry smile. “Watch it, buddy. My husband is here somewhere and he happens to be a dead ringer for—you.” I wink as I twirl in his arms and land a kiss on his lips.

“You make a beautiful mermaid. Keep the tail on. I think I can work with it.”

I swat him on the head with it, and before I can agree with his terms, I spot a familiar-looking brunette with a cane passing by the booth.

“Hey,” I say, taking Jasper by the hand and leading him along with me. “Excuse me,” I say as Jasper and I stride over to the woman. “I’m Bizzy Baker Wilder,” I say, panting slightly from the trek over. “And this is my husband, Jasper. We happen to own the inn.” I wince at the pretty brunette, not ten years older than me if that.

She has the same easy smile as Hershey did, and she shares his overall friendly demeanor. And unless jeans and a sweatshirt are novel to her, she’s quite possibly the only one here without a costume.

“Would you happen to be related to Hershey Wolfe?” I ask.

Bizzy? Jasper gives my hand a squeeze. *What’s going on?*

“I am.” She nods at the two of us. “Rhonda Wolfe. I’m Hershey’s younger sister. And I believe we’ve met, Detective.” She gives a little laugh as she looks at Jasper.

That’s right. Drats.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I tell her.

“Once again, as am I.” Jasper sighs. “I don’t know if I mentioned it, but I knew your brother well. He was a great man.”

“That he was.” Her brow furrows. “I suppose it’s bad optics to see me here.” She waves a hand out at the crowd. “At a veritable celebration at that.”

“Not at all,” I say. “We would never judge you for anything.”

“That’s very kind of you.” Her demeanor darkens as she glances past me. “But not everyone is as nice as you are.” ***Where did the witch go? Oh, who cares.*** She blinks my way. “Halloween was Hershey’s favorite holiday. He loved to dress up like a werewolf. It was his homage to our surname. Plus, he made an adorable lycan.” She gives a soft laugh which quickly dissipates. “How I miss him.”

“If it means anything,” Jasper leans in, “I miss him, too.”

“Thank you.” Her eyes brighten a notch. “And please keep me updated on the case. I’ve been meaning to call the precinct again, but I’ve been so lost in grief, not to mention taking care of Hershey’s final needs. Here—” She quickly rifles through her purse. “This is my number in the event you need it again,” she says, handing Jasper a business card that reads *Rhythm and Grace Dance School*.

“A dance school,” I muse, reading further. “Right here in Cider Cove—or *Spider Cove* as it were. How’s that going?” I ask, knowing full well it’s defunct because Hershey told me as much on the night he died, but I can’t help but comment on it. “I think it’s every girl’s dream to open her own dance studio.”

She gives a mournful laugh. “Well, it was certainly mine. I’ve been a dancer all my life. But the studio closed when this happened.” She holds out her cane. “If I couldn’t teach my students, then I knew it was time to hang up my tap shoes.”

“I’m sorry to hear it,” I say. “I bet your students were, too.”

“Oh, they took it in stride.” She shrugs. “They all trotted off to the rival dance school across the way and that was that. The important thing is, they’re still moving. Unlike me.” She wiggles her cane our way again.

The word *rival* leaves me a bit unsettled.

Jasper nods. “May I ask what happened?”

“Oh.” She makes a face at the cane. “It happened at the community center, but it had nothing to do with dancing. It was during last year’s Christmas performance. It was a variety show with eclectic acts performing holiday-themed vignettes, and my studio happened to be one of them. I was

backstage and slipped. When I hit the floor, I must have dislodged one of the props because it fell onto my leg and crushed it. I was quite the klutz that night. I'm just thankful all of the cameras in the room were focused on the stage and not on me. It was mortifying." She shakes her head. "And it was devastating, but now with Hershey gone, it feels trivial in comparison." She sighs our way. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lay all of that on you. Please, Detective, if you find out any leads at all, I'd love to know about them. I look forward to hearing from you again. It was nice meeting you, Bizzy." She takes off with a polite nod, steadying herself on her cane as she continues to peruse the crowds.

"That's so very sad," I say.

Jasper nods. "Talk about terrible luck." He shakes his head.

"For sure. And with everyone having their phone handy these days, I'm shocked someone didn't get footage of the fall."

"I wish someone got some footage of the murder," he says as his lips purse. "Turns out, Max and Tabby didn't have a wedding videographer. They were counting on Jamison to snap a few pictures of the before and after."

"Did he?"

"Just of the wedding. He said he was going to whip out his camera again for the cake, but we never got that far."

That group of men and women dressed in velvet capes with fangs protruding from their lips walks by and a thought comes to me and I gasp.

"They *did* have a wedding videographer," I say, stunned. "Or one they didn't realize."

I take up Jasper's hand again, and in a whirlwind, I lead us to the beach where we track down Jamison and his inhuman date, Morgana.

Wait for me, Bizzy! Fish calls out as she scampers her way over. ***Did you find the killer?***

"No," I pant, looking at Morgana. "But I have a feeling we're about to."

CHAPTER 27



“Lift up my shirt,” Morgana says once I ask if she has the footage from the night of the murder.

“If I must, I must,” Jasper says, giving me a wry grin.

“Oh, *you*.” I smack him on the arm for teasing. “Morgana, why do you want us to lift up your shirt?” For all I know, she might be malfunctioning.

The Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival is hitting its pinnacle not too far from the sandy shores of the cove where Jamison and Morgana are cozying up with a cocktail—of course, the only one imbibing is Jamison.

“That’s where the main screen is,” Jamison says, helping the woman—or robot as it were—to turn around. “It’s on her back.” He lifts her sweatshirt and, sure enough, there’s a rectangular computer screen built seemingly right into her flesh.

“The wedding took place on October twenty-third,” I tell her. “Can you pull up that night?”

Jamison nods. “Take us to that date, Morgana, and fast forward to the night of the wedding. Play it at triple speed.” He shrugs our way. “If you need her to stop or rewind, go ahead and tell her.”

Say. Fish looks up my way. ***Maybe Jasper’s a robot? If so, there may be hope of disconnecting him yet.***

I make a face at the furry little shark.

The screen on Morgana’s back blinks to life, and soon we’re treated to everything she saw and heard as soon as Jamison helped her out of his car. The eerie tombstones, the creepy mood music. We see her meeting the bride and groom, and the rest of Jasper’s family—me included. She sees Hershey, albeit briefly. Fish, Sherlock, and Spooky Spot are in the limelight for a bit

themselves.

Hey, that's me, Fish yowls. ***Does this mean I'm famous?***

I nod her way, too mesmerized to take my eyes off the screen.

The wedding begins and ends in a blip, that band of ghouls jumps from the woods and douses everyone with blood, then we see Hershey and Max speaking, but she's too far to pick up on what's said.

"There he goes," Jasper says, pointing at Hershey as he exits the screen to the left.

A crowd moves in front of Morgana's view as Jamison leads her to the dance floor, but from the corner, we can see a flash of something white as it heads in the same trajectory as Hershey.

I look up at Jasper. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

He nods. "Let's go find her."

"I'm coming with you," Jamison says.

"And where he goes, I go," Morgana insists as Jamison pulls her shirt back down to her waist.

"Last I saw her, she was at the café," Jamison says, leading the way, but before we get there, I spot a vision in white near the woods just shy of the café and there's someone with her.

"It's Max," Jasper says as if reading my mind.

Fish burrows into my chest as I hold her close. ***I don't like this one bit***, she says.

"Me either," I whisper.

Voices grow as we approach the couple, anxious hisses light up the night, and it's clear they're having one heck of a disagreement.

I clear my throat.

"Tabby?" I call out and the woman's head turns briefly before she doubles over and falls onto Max.

"***Help***," she cries out. "You're just in time," she howls as she staggers back, the blade of a knife protruding from her left side and she pulls it out with a howl. "He did this," she screams as she tosses the blade to the ground, her hands covered with dark liquid. "He tried to kill me," she pants as she staggers our way. "He confessed." She searches each of our faces and stops once she spots Jasper. "Thank goodness you're here. Arrest him, Detective. He just told me everything. He killed Hershey Wolfe because he was being blackmailed. Something to do with a drug he approved. I think he's killed before." She touches her hand to her side and it grows glossier by the

moment. “And he’s tried it again tonight with me.”

“That’s not true,” Max says, wild-eyed, as he makes his way over. “None of this is true. We were arguing,” he says to her, bewildered. “I didn’t confess to anything.” ***Heck, the way she was battering me verbally, I’d swear that knife was headed straight for my heart. But she’s—she’s actually stabbed herself.*** “Tabby? What have you done?”

“Jamison,” his name speeds out of me. “Call 911 and tell them we’ve had a stabbing.” I turn to Max. “I think I know what’s going on here.”

“Yes, thank you,” Tabby says and those dark splatters of blood that cover the front of her dress meld with the fresh sanguine liquid—and that’s when I know. “This man—this virtual stranger to me tried to kill me. You’re not the man I fell in love with, Max. You’re a monster!”

“I think you have it backward,” I tell her. “Tabby, the night of Hershey’s murder, you said something cryptic that I wish I would have given more credence to. You said the words you believe people make their own luck. It wasn’t luck that landed your troupe as the number one dance school in Cider Cove, was it? You had a rivalry with Rhonda Wolfe’s dance school, didn’t you? When we met again at your show, you said you were down on your luck and almost homeless, but that enrollment spiked and you’ve been in the black ever since. You found a way to make sure Rhonda shut her doors forever. You were at the community center that night she was hurt, weren’t you?”

She blinks my way. “Yes, I helped Rhonda in the aftermath. I was first on the scene.”

“I bet you were,” I say. “And you were also on the scene with Hershey when he was stabbed. But this time it was Hershey down on his luck, only he didn’t have a rival to push. Instead, he blackmailed you. Hershey knew that you hurt his sister and he was going to make you pay—with cold, hard cash.”

Her jaw redefines itself. “You’re wrong, Bizzy,” she pants, her hand still pressed to her wound. “He was blackmailing Max.”

“Maybe so,” I say. “But he blackmailed you as well. But it wasn’t Elvira or Max who killed Hershey that night. It was you. I should have known that night; the evidence was all over you.” I point to her dress. “Those performers you hired to splatter the crowd with fake blood after the ceremony? It wasn’t that color,” I say, pointing to the dark splatters that cover a majority of her gown. “They were bright red. Jasper’s white dress shirt is still covered with bright splatters—it was fake blood. But the splatters on your gown are rusted brown, the color that real blood turns when it dries. I have a feeling if we turn

that gown over to forensics it will be a perfect DNA match for the deceased. You knew you'd be committing a crime that night and you made provisions for the perfect cover—or so you thought. And now it's Hershey's own blood that's giving you away."

In one svelte move, Tabby bends over and picks up the knife she tossed down moments before and raises it menacingly at the lot of us.

Fish belts out an egregious yowl at the sight. ***Don't you dare threaten my Bizzy!***

In a moment, barking ensues from behind, growing ever so close until both Sherlock and Spooky are front and center.

"Yes, I did this," Tabby pants as she takes us all in. Her face glows a pale shade of green under the moonlight, and I can't tell if it's a part of her Bride of Frankenstein appeal or the fact she's losing more blood than we think. "Hershey didn't want to just ruin me, he wanted me in prison. I couldn't care less about his financial problems. I wanted both him and his stupid sister out of my life. I should have ended her life that night. That would have saved me a whole lot of trouble."

"So you did hurt Rhonda?" Max sounds stupefied over the fact.

"Oh, shut up," she sneers at him. "Like you're so innocent. The only thing that ever really attracted me to you was the fact you once accepted a bribe to keep your mouth shut after you sent a whole slew of people to an early grave."

"That's not how it went," his voice hikes and he sounds incredulous at the accusation. ***How is this happening? How is this the woman I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with?***

"Forget this," she says as she makes a run for the woods, and both Sherlock and Spooky dash after her.

Fish hops out of my arms and the rest of us make a run for the woods as well.

"Stand back," Jasper shouts, but only Morgana heeds his command.

The woods come to life with barking.

Jamison and Max go left, Jasper goes straight, and I follow Fish to the right.

Bizzy! Fish says as she runs right up the back of Tabby Wickham's wedding dress and knocks the woman to the ground.

I land on top of them both, but only because I wasn't able to stop myself in time to avoid a single thing. Soon, we're rolling around with me trying my

best to subdue the woman and her trying her best to escape.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I pant as our limbs get tangled.

“And you’re not going to live,” she hisses, pulling her hand up and leveling the knife right over my head.

A pair of black and white paws hop over the top of her head as Spooky clamps down on Tabby’s right wrist, forcing her to drop the blade just shy of my noggin.

“Good job,” I say, taking the opportunity to sit on her chest and pin her left hand over her head.

“*Freeze*,” Jasper shouts as he and Sherlock jump in front of me, and just like that, it’s over.

Jasper cuffs her just as the EMTs materialize on the scene, and soon they’re pulling her away on a stretcher—handcuffs and all.

“Bizzy.” Jasper pulls me in and holds me tight. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” I squeeze my eyes shut tight. “This night could have ended so differently.”

“Thank God it didn’t.” He lands a kiss on the top of my head. “You’re safe. And I want to keep you that way forever.”

Jasper lands a hungry kiss on my lips that lets me know he wishes he could do just that.

CHAPTER 28



*Y*ou would think the night might begin to wind down now that it's close to eight, but seeing that the residents of *Spider Cove* love their haunted celebrations, Halloween night continues to rage away.

The inn glows like a pumpkin as the Trick-or-Treat Harvest Festival seems to hit its zenith.

Tabby Wickham was just taken away via ambulance and Leo volunteered to provide the sheriff's escort she required so that Jasper could help break the news to the rest of the family.

Sherlock barks my way. ***Spooky and I had better get back to Georgie's circus. She said if we were gone too long she'd try to jump through a hoop of fire herself.***

"Good grief," I groan. "That's the last thing we need."

The two of them take off and Fish hesitates a moment.

Stand on guard, Bizzy, Fish mewls. ***For all we know, everyone in Jasper's family could be a robot. I'd sleep with one eye open if I were you.***

She takes off before I can say a word as Jasper and I head to that makeshift altar where a couple of rows of folding chairs are set out.

Dalton and Elvira turn our way, as do my father and Gwyn.

"We have news," Jasper says with a sigh.

"You're having a baby?" Dad asks with a hopeful twinge in his eyes.

"*Nathan.*" Gwyn gives him a playful swat on the arm. "They just got married."

"Years ago," Dad says. "Besides, I like being a grandpa. Some might say I'm better at it than I was at raising my own kids." ***Some would be my ex.***

A soft laugh rolls through me even though we've come to deliver somber

news.

“I’m not having a baby,” I say. “Yet. But you never know what the future might hold.” I give a little shrug.

I realize she’s Nathan’s daughter. Gwyn’s lips twist at the thought. ***But I had such high hopes for Jasper. Oh well, at least Max is marrying a gem.***

Jasper clears his throat as if he heard her internal musing. “The wedding is off. Tabby was arrested for the murder of Hershey Wolfe. The case is over, and unfortunately so is Max’s relationship.”

A collective gasp circles around us.

Dalton steps up with his arm around Elvira. “What the heck happened? Why would she want Hershey dead to begin with?”

Jasper quickly relays the turn of events, right down to the stabbing that took place tonight—a self-inflicted wound no less.

“Oh my goodness.” Elvira staggers back. “That’s so terrifying. I had no idea she was so unhinged.” ***I had my thoughts about Hershey, but not once did I want that man dead. In fact, I would give anything to have him back here. The Gothic Quill Society hasn’t been the same without him. And that poor dog of his.*** She leans past me and sighs at something in the distance.

“Here comes the spookiest firefighter in all of *Spider Cove*,” I say just as the adorable pooch runs between us.

“You know, Bizzy,” Elvira says, giving Spooky a quick scratch between his ears. “If Spooky doesn’t have a new home just yet”—she shrugs up at Dalton and he nods her way—“I’m more than interested.”

“We’re more than interested,” Dalton says, pulling her in tight. “Spooky needs a family, and I think we might be the perfect couple to give it to him.”

“A family.” Elvira bites down on her lip, her eyes tearing up as she looks into his pale gray Wilder eyes. ***If Dalton wants to build a family with me, well then, a proposal might just be around the corner.***

They share a quick kiss before looking my way.

“What do you say, Spooky?” I ask and the cutie pie in the miniature hardhat gives a crisp bark of approval.

“A family it is,” Jasper says and a collective cheer breaks out.

Bizzy! Fish yowls so loud that every one of us turns around. ***Come quick! It’s Georgie!***

That’s what I came to tell you, Spooky barks and begins to run toward Fish. ***Sherlock sent me to get you, asap. I think that means in a hurry!***

There’s a fire, Fish screeches

“A fire?” I shout without meaning to before the glow of flames catches my attention near the clearing. “Fire!” I shout once again, this time as a warning shot.

Jasper calls 911 as we take off in that direction, and soon every person on the grounds is migrating toward the flames.

By the time we make our way through the crowd, the firemen, who were thankfully still on the premises from the homicide fiasco, have already put out the fire.

We find Georgie with an oxygen mask on her face, sitting in a folding chair with my mother next to her.

“She lit herself on fire,” Mom is quick to inform us before we have a chance to ask.

“What in the world?” I gasp, taking in Georgie’s singed wig and sooted clown outfit, which looks as if she cleaned a chimney with it. “Why would you do that?”

“I was jumping through a flaming hoop.” Georgie shrugs. “The dogs were off helping you solve your case. And *this* one”—she points a crooked finger at my mother—“thinks she’s too good to jump through a hoop, so I had to go solo. Word to the wise: find someone else to hold the flaming hoop before you jump through it.”

“I’ve got a *better* word,” Mom chuffs. “Don’t set anything on fire.”

“I’m just glad you’re okay,” I say.

“Bizzy Baker,” Mackenzie Woods’ voice screeches over the hullabaloo and I cringe.

“I’d better go see what she wants now.” I sigh as I turn to head her way when another cringe-worthy sight has me switching directions.

It’s Jordy, Macy, and Camila all huddled together. And judging by the energetic buzz imitating from them, I think they’re bickering.

“Listen to me, Camila Ryder”—Macy says, poking a finger into the feisty peacock’s chest—“and listen to me *good*.”

Jasper catches up with me and shakes his head.

“I should probably travel with a second pair of handcuffs.” He sighs.

“Or not,” I say. “Both Camila and Macy would enjoy that far too much.”

He gives a dark chuckle as we come upon the testy trio.

“You keep your claws away from Jordy Crosby,” Macy says with her nose just inches from the cantankerous brunette. “Stalk someone else. Jordy is otherwise accounted for.”

“Accounted for?” Camila hikes a brow in amusement. “Jordy?” She cocks her head his way. “Is this what you want? Someone who treats you like a commodity?”

Jordy chuckles as he plucks at the bill of his baseball cap. “I’ve been treated worse.”

Camila’s mouth falls open as she looks from Jordy to Jasper.

I’ll be darned if I’m rejected twice. I’m about to make both of these men regret their life choices. She picks up her feathered dress and begins to stalk away before turning to look at me. ***And you, too!***

She takes off just as Jordy and Macy fall into one another’s arms.

I bite down on a smile as I look up at Jasper. “We might just have another wedding in the family yet.”

“Bizzy.” Mackenzie stalks over with my brother trailing after her, and in his arms is a very sleepy Mack. To their right, Candy and Cane trot over to where Sherlock, Spooky, and Fish have congregated around Georgie. “What have you done now?” Mackenzie seethes as she struggles to take in the scene. “Or should I ask, how many people have you slaughtered now? I should have figured this catastrophe would take place on Halloween. It’s practically a high holy day for your murderous kind.”

“The fire was an accident,” Jasper assures her. “I just spoke to the firefighters a few seconds ago, and they let me know no one was hurt. Everything is under control.”

“Everything but your wife,” Mackenzie spits the words my way. “I’d also like to know why someone just sent me a picture of my son’s first birthday party? And why were you in the background clapping along? You threw him a birthday party without my permission, didn’t you?”

“Bizzy?” Huxley looks my way with a shocked yet pleasantly surprised expression. “You should have called me.”

I make a face. “Sorry.” I shrug his way. “But you were adjudicating the pie-eating contest, and well—Mom, Macy, and I thought it might be fun to sing happy birthday.”

I pull out my phone and show them the evidence. And don’t think for a minute I didn’t mind throwing my mother and sister under the bus as well.

I’ve never been averse to spreading the pain.

Mackenzie snags the phone from me as she and Huxley quickly take in the frosting-laden scene.

“These are great, Bizzy.” Hux sniffs. “Send them to me. I’d love to have

them.”

Mackenzie pulls my phone close to her chest. “You know, when I was a kid, I was never allowed to have a birthday party. My mother thought they would ruin me, make me expect things I didn’t deserve, and think that I was special.” She glances back at the phone. “But now that I see how happy he looks, I don’t think a little cake can hurt anyone.” She nods my way. “Don’t let it happen again. If anyone throws that kid another birthday party, it’s going to be me.”

I stop shy of applauding.

“But as for you—” She shudders as she takes a look at the grounds. “Try to call a moratorium on that whole Grim Reaper thing. You make a much better mermaid.”

She stalks off and a laugh gets caught in my throat.

“Did Mackenzie Woods just pay me a compliment?” I can’t help but chuckle at the thought.

Hux tips his head. “The jury is still out on that one.” ***Little does Bizzy know that I told Mackenzie if she didn’t play nice with my sister, we wouldn’t play at all later tonight.***

And there lies my answer.

I give baby Mack a kiss on his sleepy head before my brother whisks him off.

Jasper wraps his arms around me and shakes his head. “Guess who else thinks you make a pretty amazing mermaid?”

“Your brothers?”

A mournful laugh bounces through his chest. “Try again.”

“The only Wilder brother I care to do this with?” I land a kiss to his lips that’s twice as smoldering as that fire they just put out.

“You always were a smart cookie.” He waggles his brows. “You haven’t been kissing any other Wilder brothers, have you?”

I cringe. “Not intentionally. I vote we leave it at that.”

He groans. “I’ll double that motion.” He rocks back. “I’ve got an idea. How about we help clean up, and once we close up shop on Halloween, we head back to the cottage”—he swallows hard—“and make a baby?”

My mouth falls open with delight as a surge of adrenaline courses through me.

I give a solemn nod. “Now that would be the perfect treat to end this tricky, tricky day. Let’s make a baby.”

A howl goes off in the distance, so loud, so intense, so very *inhuman*. If I didn't know better, I'd think it was Hershey Wolfe howling with approval at the thought of the law finally catching up with his killer.

And come tomorrow, I'll track down his sister and let her know the true details of what happened that night when she lost so many of her dreams.

Who knows? She might reopen her dance studio just yet.

She may not be able to make all of the moves herself, but she could hire a few trained assistants. After all, *Spider Cove*—or as it will be known tomorrow, *Cider Cove*—will be in need of another dance studio.

Mack got his birthday party, Spooky got his forever home, the killer got her comeuppance—and me?

I'm hoping to get something myself in about nine months' time.

A series of wild shrieks and screams echoes from all around us, and we look just shy of the woods at that group of men and women all decked out as vampires that have been stalking the grounds all night.

A flash of lightning goes off, striking just shy of the woods where they stand, and a cloud of purple dust rises in their wake—and every last one of them is...

"Where did they go?" I ask as my voice hikes an octave.

"I *told* you they were real," Georgie shouts as she runs over.

And sure enough, out of that purple plume, an entire flurry of bats surge to the sky as they take off in flight.

"Until next Halloween," Georgie shouts and waves as Sherlock, Spooky, and Fish yip and yowl around her.

"Until next Halloween, indeed," I say as I wrap my arms around Jasper.

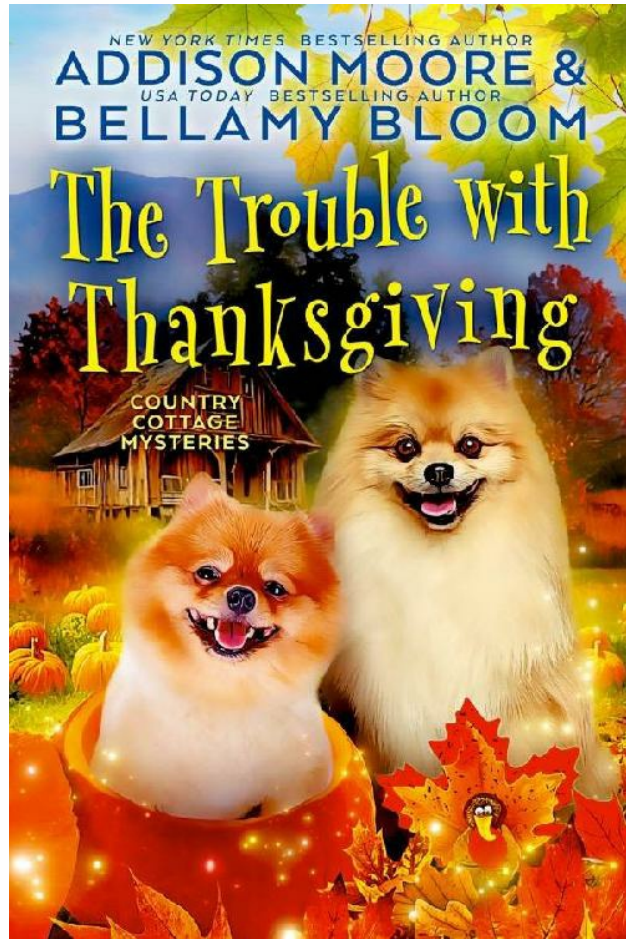
And who knows?

We just might have a little pumpkin of our own by then.

But first, Thanksgiving is up next, and a mean shiver runs through me at the thought.

For reasons unknown to me, I seem certain it's about to be the spookiest Thanksgiving yet.

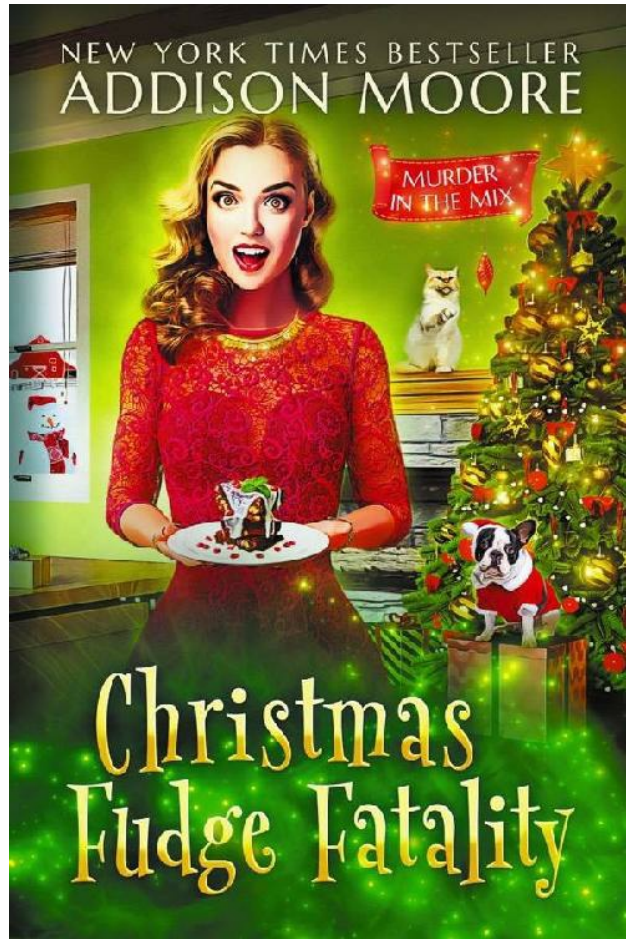
While everyone else has turkey on their mind, I have a feeling the main course in Cider Cove will be murder.



Thank you for reading! Let's head back to Cider Cove! Click—> [The Trouble with Thanksgiving \(Country Cottage Mysteries 27\)](#) NOW!

Is that link not working for you? Try this one—> [The Trouble with Thanksgiving \(Country Cottage Mysteries 27\)](#)

FREE BOOK



[Want to read a FREE cozy mystery? Check it out HERE!!!](#)

RECIPE

From the Country Cottage Café Witches' Fingers

Hello, Bizzy Baker Wilder here! October has arrived in *Spider Cove* along with all of its yummy seasonal treats. My bestie, Emmie, has whipped up the perfect spooky dessert for hungry hands—witches' fingers. And believe me they're more delicious than their name lets on. One thing is for sure, just like spooky season—they won't last long.

Enjoy!

Ingredients:

- 2 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 cup unsalted butter, softened
- 1 1/2 cups white sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- Green food coloring (enough to get your desired shade of green)
- 1 cup blanched almonds, whole
- 1-2 tablespoons raspberry jam (for the bloody effect, optional)

Instructions:

Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C).

In a medium bowl, stir together the flour, baking soda, and baking powder. Set aside.

In a large bowl, cream together the butter and sugar until smooth. Beat in the egg, vanilla extract, almond extract, and enough green food coloring to get your desired shade of green. (Emmie likes it pale.)

Gradually blend in the dry ingredients to the butter mixture. Roll rounded teaspoonfuls of dough into finger shapes for the cookies.

Press one almond into one end of each cookie to give the appearance of a long fingernail. Squeeze the middle of the cookie to create a knuckle shape, and then use a sharp knife to make slight slashes in several places to form knuckle wrinkles.

Arrange the shaped cookies on the baking sheets.

Bake in the preheated oven for 8 to 10 minutes, or until the edges are slightly golden.

Let the cookies cool on the baking sheets for a few minutes, then remove them to wire racks to cool completely.

If desired, you can warm up some raspberry jam until it's a bit runny, and then brush it onto the end of the cookies opposite the almond to give a bloody look.

Enjoy these spooky witches' fingers cookies!

RECIPE

From the Country Cottage Café Maple Glazed Chicken

And here is Emmie's to die for maple glazed chicken recipe! It's perfect for a brisk October night.

Enjoy!

Ingredients:

- 4 boneless skinless chicken breasts
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 cup pure maple syrup
- 1/2 cup chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch mixed with 1 tablespoon cold water
- 2 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley

Instructions:

Season the chicken breasts on both sides with salt and pepper.

Heat the olive oil in a large pan over medium-high heat. Add the chicken and cook for 6-7 minutes on each side or until done. Remove the chicken from the pan and place on a plate. Cover to keep warm.

Pour the maple syrup, chicken broth, and Dijon mustard into the pan. Bring to a simmer and cook for 2-3 minutes.

Stir in the cornstarch mixture and bring to a boil. Cook for 1 more minute or until sauce has just thickened.

Return the chicken to the pan and spoon the sauce over the top. Sprinkle with parsley, then serve. The chicken pairs well with rice or roasted vegetables.

Enjoy your maple glazed chicken!

RECIPE

From the Country Cottage Café Pumpkin Cheesecake

Thankfully, Emmie insisted I give you the recipe to her scrumptious pumpkin cheesecake. You might want to make two or six at a time. Once your friends and family discover this sweet treat, you won't be left with much for yourself!

Happy baking!

Ingredients:

For the crust:

1 3/4 cups graham cracker crumbs

3 tablespoons light brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 stick melted unsalted butter

For the filling:

3 (8-ounce) packages cream cheese, at room temperature

1 (15-ounce) can pureed pumpkin

3 eggs plus 1 egg yolk

1/4 cup sour cream

1 1/2 cups sugar

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1/8 teaspoon fresh ground nutmeg

1/8 teaspoon ground cloves

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

Instructions:

Preheat oven to 350°F.

For the crust:

In a medium bowl, combine crumbs, sugar, and cinnamon. Add melted butter. Press down flat into a 9-inch springform pan. Set aside.

For the filling:

Beat cream cheese until smooth. Add pumpkin puree, eggs, egg yolk, sour cream, sugar, and the spices. Add flour and vanilla. Beat together until well combined.

Pour into crust. Spread out evenly and place in oven for 1 hour. Remove from the oven and let sit for 15 minutes. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 4 hours.

Enjoy your homemade pumpkin cheesecake! It's a perfect dessert for autumn or any time you're craving a pumpkin treat.

RECIPE

From the Country Cottage Café Rocky Road Fudge

Of course, Emmie wouldn't let me leave out the fudge! Here is her husband, Leo's, favorite first. And truthfully, it's Jasper's favorite, too! By the way, this makes a great gift year round for just about anyone!

Happy fudge making!

Ingredients:

- 2 cups (12-ounce package) semi-sweet chocolate chips
- 1 can (14 ounces) sweetened condensed milk
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 1/2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
- 2 cups mini marshmallows
- 1 1/2 cups coarsely chopped walnuts

Instructions:

Line an 8 or 9-inch square pan with parchment paper or aluminum foil, extending paper over edges of pan.

Combine chocolate chips, sweetened condensed milk, and butter in a large microwave-safe bowl.

Microwave on high for 1 to 2 minutes, stirring every 30 seconds, until chips are melted and mixture is smooth. You can also do this in a double boiler if you prefer not to use a microwave.

Stir in vanilla extract until well mixed. Let the mixture cool for a few

minutes, then stir in marshmallows and chopped walnuts.

Spread mixture evenly into the prepared pan.

Refrigerate for 2 hours or until firm.

Use the overhanging parchment paper or foil to lift fudge out of pan. Cut into squares.

Store leftover fudge covered in the refrigerator.

Enjoy your Rocky Road fudge!

RECIPE

From the Country Cottage Café Praline Fudge

And lastly, here is Emmie's super seller—her praline fudge recipe. We can't keep this on the shelves, so beware, this one has a habit of disappearing!

Happy fudge making again!

Ingredients:

- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup packed light brown sugar
- 1/2 cup evaporated milk
- 1/2 stick (1/4 cup) unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 1/2 cups pecans, toasted and roughly chopped

Instructions:

Line a 9-inch square pan with parchment paper or foil, extending paper over edges of the pan.

In a large heavy saucepan, combine the granulated sugar, brown sugar, evaporated milk, and butter over medium heat.

Stir until the sugar has dissolved and the butter has melted.

Increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a boil, stirring constantly.

Reduce heat to low and simmer, still stirring constantly, until the mixture reaches the soft-ball stage (234-240°F on a candy thermometer).

Remove the saucepan from the heat. Stir in the vanilla extract and toasted pecans.

Beat the mixture with a wooden spoon until it thickens and loses some of its gloss.

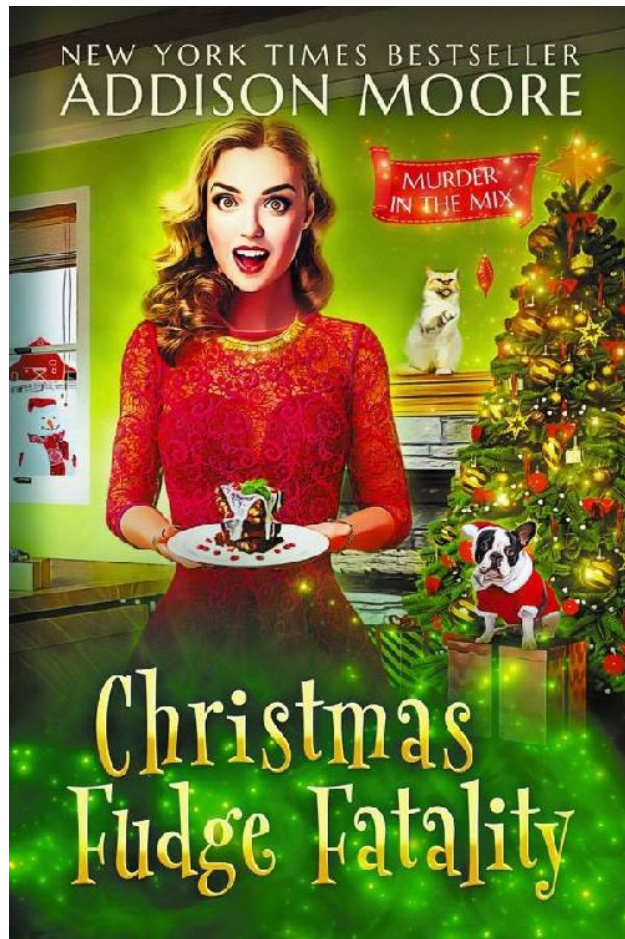
Quickly pour the fudge into the prepared pan, spreading it out evenly.

Allow the fudge to cool completely at room temperature before cutting into squares.

Store leftover fudge covered at room temperature or in the refrigerator.

Enjoy your homemade praline fudge!

BOOKS BY ADDISON MOORE



[Want to read a FREE cozy mystery? Check it out HERE!!!](#)

FREE BOOK

For up to the minute pre-order and new release alerts

*Be sure to [subscribe to Addison's mailing list](#) for sneak peeks and updates on all upcoming releases!

Or click over to the [WEBSITE](#)

[AddisonMoore.com](#)

◆ Follow Addison for the latest updates!

◆ Follow Addison on [Amazon](#)

◆ Follow Addison on [Bookbub!](#)

◆ Like on [Facebook](#)

◆ Follow on [Goodreads](#)

***Want to chat about the books? Hop over to [Addison's Reader Corner on Facebook!](#)**

Paranormal Women's Fiction

Hot Flash Homicides

[Midlife in Glimmerspell](#)

[Wicked in Glimmerspell](#)

[Mistletoe in Glimmerspell](#)

[Midnight in Glimmerspell](#)

Cozy Mysteries

Cruising Through Midlife

[Cruising Through Midlife](#)

[Mai Tai Murder Cruise](#)

[Hibiscus Homicide Cruise](#)

[Alaska Alibi Cruise](#)

[Glacial Indifference Cruise](#)

[Frozen in Fear Cruise](#)

Brambleberry bay Murder Club

[Brambleberry Bay Murder Club](#)

[Murder for Beginners](#)

[Handbook for Homicide](#)

Pain in the Assassin Mysteries

[Always the Killer Never the Bride](#)

[Double Double Recoil and Trouble](#)

Meow for Murder

Murder at Mortimer Manor

Murder Old School

Socialite's Guide to Murder

Haunted Halloween Murder

Murder for Christmas

Murder Made Delicious

Marriage can be Murder

Country Cottage Mysteries

Kittyzen's Arrest

Dog Days of Murder

Santa Claws Calamity

Bow Wow Big House

Murder Bites

Felines and Fatalities

A Killer Tail

Cat Scratch Cleaver

Just Buried

Butchered After Bark

A Frightening Fangs-giving

A Christmas to Dismember

Sealed with a Hiss

A Winter Tail of Woe

Lock, Stock, and Feral

Itching for Justice

Raining Cats and Killers

Death Takes a Holiday

Copycat Killer Thriller

Happy Howl-o-ween Horror

Twas the Night Before Murder

Smitten Kitten Corruption

Cruising for Trouble

Beach Body

A Ruthless Ruff Patch

Spotted at the Cemetery

Murder in the Mix Mysteries

Cutie Pies and Deadly Lies

Bobbing for Bodies

Pumpkin Spice Sacrifice

Gingerbread & Deadly Dread

Seven-Layer Slayer

Red Velvet Vengeance

Bloodbaths and Banana Cake

New York Cheesecake Chaos

Lethal Lemon Bars

Macaron Massacre

Wedding Cake Carnage

Donut Disaster

Toxic Apple Turnovers

Killer Cupcakes

Pumpkin Pie Parting

Yule Log Eulogy

Pancake Panic

Sugar Cookie Slaughter

Devil's Food Cake Doom

Snickerdoodle Secrets

Strawberry Shortcake Sins

Cake Pop Casualties

Flag Cake Felonies

Peach Cobbler Confessions

Poison Apple Crisp

Spooky Spice Cake Curse

Pecan Pie Predicament

Eggnog Trifle Trouble

Waffles at the Wake

Raspberry Tart Terror

Baby Bundt Cake Confusion

Chocolate Chip Cookie Conundrum

Wicked Whoopie Pies

Key Lime Pie Perjury

Red, White, and Blueberry Muffin Murder

Honey Buns Homicide

Apple Fritter Fright

Vampire Brownie Bite Bereavement

Pumpkin Roll Reckoning

Cookie Exchange Execution

Heart-Shaped Confection Deception

Birthday Cake Bloodshed

Cream Puff Punishment

Last Rites Beignet Bites

Pineapple Upside Down Dilemma

Star-Spangled Ice Scream Cake

Apple Cider Donut Danger

Fright Night Chocolate Delight

Christmas Fudge Fatality

Murder in the Mix Boxed Set

Murder in the Mix (Books 1-3)

Mystery

Little Girl Lost

Her Darkest Secret

The First Wife's Secret

Romance

Just Add Mistletoe

3:AM Kisses

3:AM Kisses

Winter Kisses

Sugar Kisses

Whiskey Kisses

Rock Candy Kisses

Velvet Kisses

Wild Kisses

Country Kisses

Forbidden Kisses

Dirty Kisses

Stolen Kisses

Lucky Kisses

Tender Kisses

Revenge Kisses

Red Hot Kisses

Reckless Kisses

Summer Kisses

Shameless Kisses

The Social Experiment

The Social Experiment

Bitter Exes

Chemical Attraction

3:AM Kisses, Hollow Brook

Feisty Kisses

Ex-Boyfriend Kisses

Secret Kisses

Naughty By Nature

Escape to Breakers Beach

Breakers Beach

Breakers Cove

Breakers Beach Nights

Escape to Lake Loveless

Beautiful Oblivion

Beautiful Illusions

Beautiful Elixir

Beautiful Deception

A Good Year for Heartbreak

Someone to Love

Someone to Love

Someone Like You

Someone For Me

A Totally '80s Romance Series

Melt With You

Tainted Love

Hold Me Now

Paranormal Romance

(Celestra Book World in Order)

Ethereal

Tremble

Burn

Wicked

Vex

Expel

Toxic Part One

Toxic Part Two

Elysian

Ephemeral Academy

Ephemeral

Evanescent

Entropy

Ethereal Knights (Celestra Knights)

Season of the Witch (A Celestra Companion)

Celestra Forever After

Celestra Forever After

The Dragon and the Rose

The Serpentine Butterfly

Crown of Ashes

Throne of Fire

All Hail the King

Roar of the Lion

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank YOU, the reader, for joining us on this adventure to Cider Cove. We hope you're enjoying the Country Cottage Mysteries as much as we are. Thank you so much from the bottom of our hearts for taking this journey with us. We cannot wait to take you back to Cider Cove!

Special thank you to the following people for taking care of this book—Kaila Eileen Turingan-Ramos, Jodie Tarleton, Margaret Lapointe, Amy Barber, and Lisa Markson. And a very big shout out to Lou Harper of Cover Affairs for designing the world's best covers.

A heartfelt thank you to Paige Maroney Smith for being so amazing in every single way.

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. We owe you everything, Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Addison Moore is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author who writes contemporary and paranormal romance. Her work has been featured in *Cosmopolitan* Magazine. Previously she worked as a therapist on a locked psychiatric unit for nearly a decade. She resides on the West Coast with her husband, four wonderful children, and two dogs where she eats too much chocolate and stays up way too late. When she's not writing, she's reading. Addison's Celestra Series has been optioned for film by 20th Century Fox.

For up to the minute pre-order and new release alerts

*Be sure to [subscribe to Addison's mailing list](#) for sneak peeks and updates on all upcoming releases!

Or click over to the [WEBSITE](#)

[AddisonMoore.com](#)

◆ [Follow Addison here for the latest updates!](#)

◆ Follow Addison on [Bookbub!](#)

◆ Like on [Facebook](#)

*Want to chat about the books? Hop over to [Addison's Reader Corner on Facebook!](#)

Feel free to visit her on [Instagram](#).

