

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
ADDISON MOORE

MURDER
IN THE MIX



Star-Spangled
Ice Scream Cake

STAR-SPANGLED ICE SCREAM CAKE

MURDER IN THE MIX 46



ADDISON MOORE

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In loving memory of Lisa Markson. You left your mark on the world indeed. Thank you for being a friend. Until we meet again.

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Edited by Paige Maroney Smith

Cover by Lou Harper, Cover Affairs

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

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

The Fourth of July is upon us, and all of Honey Hollow is in a red, white, and blue mood. Cormack Featherby is about to have her baby, and while I'm at the hospital helping her do just that, I stumble upon a seminar on near-death experiences. And just my luck, I stumble upon a body, too.

It looks as if the Grim Reaper is working overtime and he's landed me in the wrong place at the wrong time yet again to look like the prime suspect.

Everett is missing. Cressida Bentley is back in town and looks mighty suspicious as she takes up the number one suspect slot in my book. And then there's the ghost of my grandmother Nell who's come to visit, and she's brought along a Silkie chicken named Fluffernutter to help solve the case.

The Fourth of July is going to be explosive this year.

The summer heat has descended on Honey Hollow and so has a killer.

Lottie Lemon has a brand new bakery to tend to, a budding romance with perhaps one too many suitors, and she has the supernatural ability to see the dead—which are always harbingers for ominous things to come. Throw in the occasional ghost of the human variety, a string of murders, and

her insatiable thirst for justice, and you'll have more chaos than you know what to do with.

Living in Honey Hollow can be murder.

LOTTIE



*M*y name is Lottie Lemon, and I see dead people. Okay, so rarely do I see dead people. Mostly I see furry creatures of the dearly departed variety who have come back from the other side to warn me of their previous owner's impending doom. But the only thing I'm seeing now is the face of my handsome husband as I stare at his picture on my phone.

I switch over to my messages and my fingers dance across my screen for a moment.

I don't know if I can do this.

I shoot the text to Noah while glancing up at the alabaster building before me, glowing like a tombstone against the velvet night sky.

My phone lights up as Noah texts back. **You got this, Lottie. Try to think of something else. Maybe focus on that new cookbook you're working on? Or the fact that the Fourth is just around the corner, and because of that, I'm sure the Cutie Pie will be flooded with tourists soon enough. Don't worry about Everett. I'm looking for him. Evie and her friends are looking for him. We'll find him. Just take care of whatever you need to take care of tonight. Be safe.**

Take care of whatever I need to take care of?

I sigh at the screen.

The Cutie Pie would be my sweet shop—the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery.

But I can't think of my bake shop, or the fact the Fourth of July is upon us or that the cookbook I'm working on is breathing down my neck.

All I can think about is Everett.

I shove my phone back into my purse and pick up the pink bakery box filled with the ice cream cake I dragged all the way over to Honey Hollow General for Cormack, just to satisfy one of her ridiculous cravings.

Not that craving a slice of this beauty is ridiculous. The cake is festooned with red, white, and blue vanilla frosting, and there's a layer of chocolate fudge frosting along the outside of it. Inside, there are three layers of ice cream—strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate—sitting over an Oreo cookie crust. It's truly a masterpiece and best appreciated during sweltering hot days like the kind we're having.

I head into the building and inadvertently straight into a large sign that reads *Near-Death Experiences Conference and book signing featuring acclaimed author and expert in the NDE field, Dr. Dirk Livingston. 7 – 9 p.m.*

Near-death experiences?

A chill rides up my spine at the thought.

In fact, I think that's exactly what Cormack is having upstairs on the maternity ward—a near-death experience.

Come to think of it, I'm probably not that far off from experiencing my own.

I just pray that Everett isn't having a near-death experience. Now that would be devastating beyond measure. It would be a tragedy magnified to horrific proportions—one that I don't like to think about.

My handsome husband has been missing for an entire forty-eight hours—it might as well be forty-eight years.

It's not like him whatsoever. I just *know* something bad has happened.

The Ashford Sheriff's Department discovered his car in an impound lot not far from Leeds. Apparently, it was parked in

front of a tattoo parlor near the gentlemen's club where my sister Meg works.

My sister isn't a stripper. She's the one who teaches those girls their money-making moves.

And oh my word—my sister!

I just found out two days ago that not only is my sister Meg expecting, but so is Noah's sister Sam.

And the kicker? They're both expecting Jed Silver's baby.

Jed Silver is Noah and Everett's old high school classmate who they helped put away for pushing drugs way back when.

Jed did mention he was gunning for revenge. Could this be what he meant? Getting my sister *and* Noah's sister knocked up?

I don't see how that would affect Everett, though. And to be fair, Everett is due fifty percent of the revenge.

I suck in a quick breath.

I bet Jed is the very reason Everett is missing!

I'd go right down to Leeds and hunt Jed down, but I know for a fact he's behind bars awaiting arraignment on drug charges once again.

We just had a big bust last week. And even though I saw them haul Jed out of my mother's B&B and shove him into a patrol car, I'm still not convinced he was behind the illegal malfeasance to begin with.

But all of my suspicions about Jed—in fact, all of my newfound anger—will have to wait. I'm not at the hospital to deal with him. I'm here to deal with another far more pregnant problem—Cormack Featherby.

Cormack is a socialite that I'm not exactly on the best terms with, but she's here to have her baby, and for some strange reason, I'm the one person on the planet she insists experience the trauma with her. And seeing that I'm the only one she's asked or has to ask, I will most certainly be here for

her. Of course, she's asked Noah, but he's too busy looking for Everett.

I stagnate in front of the open maw of the convention room next to the lobby.

That ice cream cake I just picked up from my bakery is starting to feel like an icy boulder in my hands.

Everett is missing and my mind can't seem to steer one inch from that horrible reality. But then, Noah does have every available black and white from the sheriff's department on the lookout for him. Noah is the lead homicide detective on the force, and he's proven that he has more than enough pull to make all of my search team dreams come true.

Noah is technically my husband, too, but it's a minor technicality that we stumbled upon by accident. Noah and I dated before Everett and I did and, well, Noah has never been able to let go of me. Not that he has to. Noah and I share a sixteen-month-old daughter together, the light of my life and his, Lyla Nell.

And Everett and I share a seventeen-year-old daughter together, Everly, who prefers to go by Evie. She isn't my biological daughter, but I've adopted her. She's mine as much as Lyla Nell is, and she also happens to be the other light of my life.

The sign that reads *Near-Death Experiences* snags my attention once again and my feet carry me to the threshold of the conference center. I can't help but peer in. I'm more than familiar with death. It doesn't help that we've had more than our fair share of homicides as of late in Honey Hollow. And the fact I happen to have a supernatural quirk that lets me see through to the other side doesn't help either.

There's a table near the door with a mountain of books on it. Each one has a baby blue cover and they're stacked ten high with just as many rows. The title reads *Death is a Lie* by Dr. Dirk Livingston. There's a picture of a bright blue butterfly floating into a cloud just above the title and it all looks so very serene.

The conference room is sparsely populated, not a surprise, considering there's still a half hour before the near-death shindig gets underway. The stage up front has a few chairs situated on it and a coffee table between them with more of the same books strewn over it.

A blonde with her hair pulled back stands near the edge of the stage, wearing a tan dress that has me doing a double take. There's not a stitch of color on her person, and I'll admit, at first glance the woman looked nude. But I suppose nude is the color du jour these days.

Just past her there's a couple chatting away, a tall lanky man in a navy suit with a bright red pocket square—definitely not Everett—and yet another blonde in a tight blue dress that has some sort of a tail attached—and feathers—matching blue heels, and a matching designer purse slung over her shoulder.

The two of them seem to be locked in a heated discussion of some sort.

She gives his chest a robust slap and I inch back.

Or judging by the way she just smacked him, it just might be a heated argument.

The blonde turns my way and the spotlight pointed at them affords me a flash of her pale features.

And, oh my word, if that isn't Cressida Bentley!

“Say it ain't so,” I mutter to myself.

Without thinking, I snap a quick picture of her and inadvertently capture the other two as well.

Everett is not going to believe this. I'll need photographic evidence, for sure.

Cressida Bentley is Evie's biological mother, the one who threw her in a boarding school for fourteen years and forgot all about her until Everett and I learned of her existence and rescued the poor kid posthaste.

But that can't be Cressida—

That would mean she's back from yachting on the Med or whatever grand adventure she was out having all these blissful years.

It can't be Cressida because that would be a nightmare.

I'm only allowed to have one nightmare at a time. And as it stands, I'm already having two of them.

The clip-clop of heels comes up from behind and I glance back and sigh.

Scratch that. I'm having *three*.

"Wait for me, Lot Lot!" Carlotta harps, adjusting the little black dress she's squeezed herself into—*my* little black dress to be exact.

Carlotta is no stranger to my closet. She's no stranger to my home either, considering the fact she lives with me.

"The way you walk so fast, it makes me wonder if you're trying to get rid of me," she harps once again.

"*Trying* is the operative word," I mutter.

Carlotta Sawyer would be my biological mother, which explains the fact we share the same caramel-colored hair and same hazel eyes. She's ahead of me with wrinkles and gray hair, but with the way my week is going, I'll catch up soon enough.

Carlotta pauses to ogle at the sign.

"Would you look at this?" she muses. "This is where they have all the near-death experiences." She sucks in a quick breath as she takes a step into the conference room. "I bet this is where they keep the dead bodies, too."

"That would be the morgue," I'm quick to correct her. Although, I don't know why. Carlotta doesn't take to correction well. Come to think of it, neither do I. Another genetic foible of hers I seem to have acquired. "This is a conference center. And the people heading here tonight aren't done with the planet just yet."

A crowd moves past us as the center begins to fill and a buzz of excitement replaces the stone-cold silence in the room.

“Would you look at that?” Carlotta exclaims with unmitigated glee as she takes in the masses. “This place is just crawling with dead people.”

“Again, Carlotta, there’s not a dead person in sight. I can guarantee it. Besides, you and I, of all people, would know if the dead were among us.”

She leans in farther and gasps again. “Okay, so maybe it’s not crawling with dead people yet, but it’s sure crawling with Mr. Sexy’s hussies. Why, I think that’s Evie Stevie’s mama up there.” She motions to the stage. “Let’s go on over and say hello.”

She takes the cake from me and strides deeper into the room until I cut her off at the pass.

“We are not going up there. And we are certainly not saying hello to Cressida Bentley,” I tell her as I take the cake box from her and set it on the elongated table next to me. “That woman is certifiable. And heaven knows I’m up to my eyeballs in certifiable people at the moment.”

Carlotta being one of them.

A steady stream of humanity bustles into the room, and soon the room is brimming with bodies, and thankfully so. The last thing I need tonight is Cressida spotting me. It’s best I hide in plain sight.

“Look, I need to get upstairs,” I say to Carlotta, who still looks mesmerized by Cressida’s well-polished and rather overall expensive presence. “The good Lord knows I can only handle one of Mr. Sexy’s hussies for the night.”

Mr. Sexy would be Everett—and the nickname is more than fitting. If anything, it’s an understatement.

“Technically”—Carlotta lifts a finger— “Mack Mack wouldn’t be Mr. Sexy’s hussy, considering the fact she’s about to push Foxy’s baby out of her rear end.”

Foxy would be Noah Fox, and even though Noah is a fox in every respect, Carlotta would still be wrong.

“Technically”—I lift my own finger to correct her—“it’s his brother, Alex’s, baby that Cormack is getting ready to push out of her rear end. Cormack, much like Cressida, is simply out of her mind.”

Much like me whenever I remember that my poor husband is somewhere out in this world and I have no idea of his whereabouts.

“Come on, Carlotta. We need to get going. For all we know, Cormack could be having her baby right now. The entire maternity ward could be exploding with blood, guts, and gore, and there could be amniotic fluid all over the walls. We might just be missing the big show.”

I give her hand a yank toward the door and she yanks it right back.

“I’m not going up there, Lot. This is the show I want to see. They’re gonna have dead people telling us what it’s like on the other side and I don’t want to miss it. Don’t you wanna know if there’s life after death?”

“Carlotta,” I hiss, staring at her a good long while. “They are not having dead people tell you anything. You and I both know there’s life after death. We *see* dead people, *remember?*”

“Exactly, Lot. They’re dead as a doornail. There’s got to be something more than that, don’t you think?”

I roll my eyes and swallow down another groan.

“Have it your way,” I tell her. “Just try not to get into any trouble. Don’t do anything that will make me regret leaving you here.”

“Have I ever done anything that you’ve regretted?”

An entire litany of memories swims through my mind—every single one of them a nightmare in and of itself.

“Don’t make me answer that.”

“Go on, Lot. Get out of here.” She shoves me toward the door. “I’ll be on my best behavior, I promise.”

“Famous last words.”

I take the elevator up to the seventh floor, the maternity ward to be exact, and head straight into Cormack Featherby’s room—or en suite as it were—where she’s thrashing about on her bed just as she was an hour ago when I left her, screaming at the top of her lungs as she writhes in pain.

“Oh, Cormack,” I cry out as I rush to her side and take up her ice-cold hand. Her blonde mane is matted on one side, her mascara has melted halfway down her face, and that garish red lipstick she insisted on wearing has worked its way all over her cheeks, giving her all the ammo she’ll need to back an insanity plea should she need it.

And seeing that she’s been threatening a homicide every hour on the hour for the last two days, the lipstick mishap will very much work in her favor.

“I’m so sorry,” I say as I look at the small crowd of nurses, all of whom seem to be draining out the door upon my arrival.

Cormack squeezes my hand with the efficiency of a vise until my bones threaten to turn to dust at her bionic punishment.

“*You* did this to me.” Her voice comes out several octaves lower than it would seem possible, giving her a demon-like quality I’ve always suspected was in her wheelhouse. “You are going to *die*,” she says once again, doing her best impression of the queen of Hades.

She gyrates and moves and her head swivels back and forth. And I swear on all that is good, her head just did a three-sixty over her neck.

“I thought they were going to give you an epidural?” I squawk as I free my fingers from her death grip before the projectile vomiting begins.

“We did.” A dark-haired man—also not Everett—steps up and removes his gloves before pitching them into the trash. “An *hour* ago,” he flatlines as he cuts her a less-than-pleased

look. “Have a good night, Ms. Featherby,” he says before darting out of the room with the rest of them until it’s just Cormack and me.

“Have a good night?” she shrieks after him. “Have a good *night?*” Her voice shakes the walls with her ire.

“Clearly, he’s never had a human trying to make its way out of his south exit,” I say, disgusted by his false amicable parting—more like parting *shot*. “But I have,” I tell her. “And don’t you worry. I’ll do everything in my power to help you.”

Cormack wails and flails. I don’t know all that much about epidurals, seeing that I didn’t have one with Lyla Nell. She barreled into this world a touch too fast—boy, would I have loved anything to take the edge off.

But if Cormack had an epidural an hour ago, I can’t imagine she should still be feeling this level of pain.

I glance up at the monitor they have her hooked up to.

Why, she’s not even having a contraction.

When I left to get the cake, she wasn’t effaced, dilated, or even in actual labor yet. But with all of the histrionics, not to mention her daddy’s money, Cormack practically owns the maternity ward, as well as the doctors and the nurses alike.

Cormack and I aren’t friends by any stretch of the imagination, but for reasons beyond me, she’s chosen yours truly to help her through this trauma. It’s not just the fact that Cormack is a socialite that sets us apart, it’s the fact that she’s obsessed with Noah that divides us as well. And to be fair, Cormack isn’t just a socialite. She actually has a career with her own cable TV show called *Getting Candid with Cormack*.

“*Cormack*,” I shout in an effort to get her to settle down, but she’s howling at the top of her lungs, rolling from left to right, and that giant bulge of a belly of hers looks as if it’s threatening to roll right off her body. “You need to calm down,” I shout once again. “You’re going to hurt the baby.”

“Who cares about the baby?” she howls my way. “What about me? The baby is hurting *me!*”

She continues to thrash and I can't help but feel as if she's hamming it up. A thought comes to mind as I spot a plastic fork on the small table next to her, and without thinking, I go to prick her thigh with it in an effort to prove a point—but with all that thrashing and gyrating—well—I may have inadvertently stuck a fork in her.

GAH!

“Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry!” I howl, matching her deafening decibel level.

I may have stuck the landing with that fork and it's not moving an inch.

“What are you sorry for, Luella?” she continues with her rant.

For reasons unknown to me, Cormack never cares to get my name right.

“Are *you* missing the new summer couture styles at the *Haute House Flower*?” There's an unmistakable threat in her voice as she says it.

“What's the *Haute House Flower*?” I ask, as that fork pegged to her lily-white skin manages to stick straight in the air as it does its best to keep up with her.

“The it shop out in Fallbrook,” she growls as she tosses up her hands in a fit of frustration. “They're having a big to-do in two days and everyone who's everyone will be there. And look at me?” She slaps her belly so hard the monitor goes wild as she sets off the mother of all contractions. “It's just another thing I have to miss because this little twit that's locked inside of me can't seem to find the exit!”

I suck in a quick breath. “Cormack Featherby, you aren't in a stitch of pain. You're just pitching a fit because you can't go shopping.”

She gives a weak shrug. “It's not just that. The *Haute House Flower* is doing a trunk show of my new children's wear line—my *couture* children's wear line, Noah's Daughter.” She pats her belly with a touch more affection this time. “I just can't wait to show up with Noah Fox's first and

only baby girl in my arms, dressed in the season's hottest fashion as I show all of my friends what a success I've become. Of course, I'll be dressed in haute couture myself, along with a pair of this season's most sought-after Vera Veragamo shoes. She's doing a new thing with jewel-encrusted heels. They cost more than a Rolex and anything Cartier has to offer combined. They're the true measure of wealth, and I won't be caught dead in anything else for the next six months."

A tiny laugh lives and dies in my chest.

"First, it will be near impossible for you to walk anywhere in two days, let alone doing so in jewel-encrusted heels. And second, nobody in their right mind is going to let you leave here with a newborn so you can whisk it off to some fashion show. This is a brand new human being you're bringing into this world. You can't go exposing it to all the germs floating around out there. You have to put the baby first."

"The baby *this*, the baby *that*." Another groan of frustration flies from her and she smacks her belly. "There she goes again, ruining my good time." Cormack is convinced she's having a girl—thus the name Noah's Daughter for her overpriced onesies.

She digs the back of her head into her pillow and closes her eyes.

"I may as well take a nap." She stretches the words out with a yawn. "Wake me when this nightmare is over."

Cormack begins to snore on cue, and I marvel at her ability to drift off to Never-Never Land so quickly.

I watch her saw some serious z's straight through three diabolical contractions, or at least that's what the monitor would have me believe.

Seeing that Cormack is all but dead to the world, I guess she doesn't need me at the moment.

I pluck the fork from her thigh and bring the sheet up to her neck.

That conference on near-death experiences is set to begin. I may as well head downstairs and see what the brouhaha regarding the afterlife is about.

I already know there is one—I'm just not in a hurry to get there.

A horrible foreboding feeling permeates my bones.

A part of me wonders if Everett hasn't beat me to the supernatural punch.

Another part of me fears that's exactly what's happened.

Death is afoot, I can all but feel it.

And if Everett has died, the Grim Reaper had better watch out.

Because there will be hell to pay.

LOTTIE



“*A*nd then what happened?” A woman with a honey-colored shag hair-do leans toward the lanky man in the suit as they sit in opposite chairs on stage with a coffee table stacked with books between them. She has a button nose, thin lips, looks about Everett and Noah’s age—somewhere in her thirties—and is dressed in a sharp crimson pantsuit.

The conference room is dark, save for the spotlights shining down on the two of them. But from what I can tell, the rest of the room is packed with bodies, every single one of them sitting on the edge of their seats—and for good reason. I’ll admit, the subject matter is riveting.

“And then I turned into a unicorn and flew through a rainbow,” he answers and the room lights up with laughter.

“Oh, come on, now.” The woman laughs before continuing to prod him along.

I scan the crowd for a familiar face, and to my surprise, I spot three of them. Not only is Carlotta seated near the front, but my mother and Suze are seated right there with her.

Lucky for me, there’s an empty seat right next to Suze. Not that being anywhere near Suze Fox’s airspace has ever been a good thing for me. The woman can’t stand me for the most part—regardless of the fact I employ her at the bakery or that I gave birth to her first grandchild.

I glance to the seats in front of them and spot Cressida there in all of her bizarre couture feathered-glory, and next to her is that other blonde in the tan dress.

It takes less than ten seconds for me to dart down to the front and steal the seat next to Suze.

“Oh, Lottie.” Mom reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze with her ice-cold fingers, and I can’t help but give an approving sigh at her cool touch.

It might be sub-arctic temperatures here in the hospital, but the rest of Honey Hollow is stuck in the middle of a sweltering summer outside these walls.

“You’re just in time,” my mother whispers. “That’s Carlene Dearborn.” She nods to the woman with the shag haircut on stage. “The editor of *Honey Hollow Gazette*. She’s about to ramp up the interview. Things are about to get interesting.”

My mother, the saint that adopted me, looks stylish as ever in a lemon-yellow sundress, her matching locks curled neatly just above her shoulders. She’s a stunner, and a sweetheart, and she’s also an astute businesswoman, seeing that she’s run her own B&B ever since my father passed away. However, the one area she can’t seem to shine in is men. As it stands, she’s leashed herself to Noah’s father, Wiley Fox, and believe me, that man is as wily as his name suggests.

Noah got his good looks from his father, which would explain my mother’s obsession with the senior version of him.

“I can’t wait to hear this,” I whisper back.

“Would you two keep it down?” Suze practically shouts, causing a murmur to break out in the crowd. Suze is a stocky woman with short blonde hair that swoops over her eyes. She has a boxy face, beady eyes, and a penchant for vexing me at every turn. “I can’t hear a word they’re saying, with the two of you prattling on at top volume.”

I shoot her a look.

No one is prattling on at top volume but *Suze*, and as much as I’d like to point that out, those words ironically would fall on deaf ears.

“You know our Lot Lot.” Carlotta rolls her eyes. “If there’s not man candy for her to ogle, it’s hard to keep her attention

on the subject at hand.”

“Oh, he is a cutie.” Lily Swanson crops up and lands in the seat behind me.

Lily is a dark-haired beauty, one year older than me, late twenties, who also happens to work for me down at the bakery.

Lily nods to Suze. “I brought a few more of those delicious ice cream cakes as you suggested.” She makes a face at me. “They’re in a cooler near the back. And I brought all the utensils and paper plates we’ll need, too. Suze called and let me know you dumped one measly cake on the table, and it’s halfway melted by now. Don’t worry, Lottie. I completely understand. If Essex were my husband, and he ditched me for greener, better looking, younger pastures, I’d be frazzled, too.”

I take a moment to glower at her before turning around.

First of all, *Essex* would be Everett’s proper name.

Judge Essex Everett Baxter had quite the reputation with the ladies before we became a permanent item.

Suffice it to say, Mr. Sexy wasn’t shy with his previous paramours, and now those who once knocked boots with him sort of use his proper moniker as a door prize. Everett, however, prefers to go by his middle name, and even though I knock boots with him on the regular, I call him by the name he prefers to go by.

The woman on stage puts the microphone next to her glossy red lips and grins at the crowd. “For those of you who don’t know, Dr. Dirk Livingston is my fiancé.”

A gasp of delight circles the room, along with polite applause.

“Dirk and I met not long ago after I had my own NDE, near-death experience, and I’ll be sure to share my event a little later. But first, Dirk, please tell us what got you interested in the field.”

Dirk leans forward and flashes a loose smile at the crowd. His short dark hair is slightly spiked, he has a lantern jaw, big

brown eyes, and elongated dimples that cut vertically down either cheek whether or not he's smiling.

"Thank you, Carlene," he says. "I was a general practitioner for over a decade with a specialty in geriatrics. After listening to many of my elderly, end-of-life patients recall more than their fair share of afterlife-based phenomenon, I became intrigued and began to study the field. But it wasn't until I had my own NDE, after a horrible car wreck a little under seven years ago, that I became fully immersed in the topic." He pulls his right pant leg up past his sock and flashes what looks to be a prosthetic leg our way. "Twenty-six bone fractures and a six-week coma afforded me the NDE of a lifetime—or an after-lifetime I should say."

A light laugh circles the room, but we're quickly stone-cold quiet once again, riveted as to what he might say next.

Carlene nods. "Tell us a little about NDEs in general."

"I'd like to say every NDE I've researched has been different, but the truth is, as different as some of the details might be, for the most part, a majority of the stories I hear are the same." He shifts in his seat to better face the audience. "There are some earmarks or commonalities of NDEs that I've found are relatively standard. An inciting incident occurs, and relatively shortly afterward, the person has a sensation of floating outside of their corporeal frame. They feel calm, serene, peaceful, and they seem to understand that they're no longer attached to their body."

"You mean they understand they're dead?" she asks.

"Exactly that," he says. "In fact, right about the point they notice that they're no longer living, along with the peace and serenity, most people have what we refer to as a tunnel experience. Things grow dark, save for a pinhole of light on the other end, and they start moving at a rapid pace toward that light."

"Is that what happened to you?"

He nods. "That's exactly how my experience went. I was driving down the highway on a dark winter night. Skidded out

on some black ice, found myself careening toward the center divider, and not long after I braced for impact, I found myself floating above my body, feeling a bit disoriented but calm and peaceful. It was dark out, but soon an entire litany of cars showed up to help on the scene. I watched as an ambulance wailed its way over to the car wreck, and that's when I realized it was *my* car, and that my mangled body was in it. I remember feeling sorry for my body. It was as if I understood that although it was a part of me at one time, it no longer was. Sort of like an old friend I came to pity. As soon I had those feelings, a review of my life took place before me—all of the good, the bad I'd done, and the way my choices made people feel. I felt those emotions on a deep, intrinsic level. The disappointments stood out the most, as I wasn't comfortable knowing that I had hurt people so deeply. But overall, I would say it was a cathartic experience. Then I began moving into the sky, slowly at first, then at an accelerated rate. The night sky turned darker, then brighter as I passed the stars. There were shadowed figures that I passed intermittently, but I had no fear of them. Soon, the sky above began to brighten, far brighter than anything I'd ever seen—and well”—he winks over at the audience—“you'll have to read the book to find out what happened next.”

Laughter breaks out in the crowd as Carlene lifts the mic to her lips.

“Now all NDEs aren't as pleasant, are they?” she asks. “Can you give us a little more detail as to the darker side of these events?”

He tucks his chin to his chest a moment. “You are absolutely correct. Unfortunately, some people have experienced other, far more unpleasant, things such as nefarious beings that weren't so friendly trying to lure them into a place riddled with screams and flames. It does sound a bit archaic, but those traits ring true in a handful of people who report having negative NDEs.” He lifts a finger. “Take for instance—a woman I interviewed. She was having open heart surgery and had just flatlined on the table when she left her body. She said there were two gray beings who looked bedraggled waiting for her—insisting she come with them.

They told her they were sent to take her home, that she was found guilty and would suffer forever as they ripped apart her limbs. She then began to scream in protest, her fear level was very high, and just when the room exploded in flames, she woke up.”

“Wow”—Carlene presses a hand to her chest—“it certainly sounds like a terrible experience that I’m betting not a soul in this room would like to have.”

“That’s for sure,” he says. “But most experiences sway to a more pleasant atmosphere. Other common traits, aside from self-realization, life review, and floating through the tunnel, are that of an ethereal field opening up, green and verdant—hills are spoken of quite a bit. Most people are met with friends and relatives that have passed on, and key religious figures as well. There is fair documentation of picnics taking place, of being invited to partake in them as well. Almost all of those who chose to do so reported that even though they were aware of the fact they were missing their corporeal frame, they felt solid, as did the people around them. They could see better, hear better, taste, and feel. Also, it’s worthy to note, they all have one other thing in common: all speech is done through telepathic communication. Of course, with the exception of the person who just arrived on the scene. Oftentimes, they’re told by others that they, too, can communicate that way.”

“Fascinating.” Carlene sighs hard as she glances down at a note card in her hand. “I can’t wait to find out more about the afterlife.”

“Believe me,” he says. “We will all find out firsthand.” More laughter ensues. “And when I hit the finish line, who knows? I might even come back to tell you all about it.” He turns and looks out at the audience, specifically at someone in the first few rows, and the audience breaks out in a nervous chuckle.

“Yes, well.” Carlene laughs, too. “Before you leave us permanently, and before we get into the latter half of your NDE, why don’t we take our first fifteen-minute break?”

The lights lift in the room, and soon the crowd rises to their feet as a chatty buzz fills the air.

Both Dirk and Carlene stand and exchange a few words before a dark-haired woman traipses over to Dirk and quickly sweeps a makeup brush over his face and touches up his hair with a comb. They share a quick laugh as she straightens his tie and Carlene shoots them both a disparaging look.

Dirk whispers something into the dark-haired woman's ear, causing her to nod and sniff hard into her hand.

"That's odd," I whisper to myself as I stand with the rest of the room.

It's almost as if whatever he said just upset her.

"I think it's odd, too," a woman's voice says from behind and I turn to see one of my favorite ghosts in all the universe, my grandma Nell.

"Nell!" I can't help but howl her name. Lucky for me, my voice never made it over the din of the crowd. I quickly offer up my long-dead grandmother a quick embrace.

Just a few days ago, Nell appeared to me and let me know she was coming back to help me go through a very dark season, and with Everett missing, I had no idea how dark that season would be.

Nell is as tall as I am, has comfortable padding around her middle, along with gray hair, mischievous blue eyes, and is currently cozy in a lavender cardigan and matching flowing wool skirt.

Since I didn't know that Nell was my grandmother until after she passed, I've always called her by her proper moniker. But Nell and I were close, as close as any grandmother and granddaughter could be.

I pull back to see something white and fluffy in her arms, and oh my word, I think it has eyes.

"What in the world?" I gasp at the fluffy cutie as it begins to jut its head forward. "What is that?"

Carlotta crops up. “It’s a freak of nature like you, Lot,” she says, bopping me on the head with her purse. “What do you think it is? It’s a *chicken*,” she says, clucking her tongue as if to prove her point. “See there, Nell? Walnut for Brains here can’t tell a chicken from a doorknob these days. Give me that little henpecker.” She snatches the fluffy cutie from Nell and begins to coo into its fur, and I can’t help but note its fur has a supernatural glow to it.

“Nell, please tell me that chicken belongs to you,” I say it low this time, because honestly, not even my own ears want to participate in this conversation.

Nell sighs hard and the wrinkles in her face expand and retract. Nell has come back to me before in a far more youthful state, but seeing that this is the way I knew her before she passed away, she accommodates me by displaying her more familiar countenance.

“I’m afraid I found it wandering the grounds, Lottie.”

“Oh dear.” Instinctively I chew on my thumb.

“More like *oh dead*,” Carlotta says. “Looks like we’ve got a murder on our hands.”

And how I hate that Carlotta is right.

“I need to contact Noah,” I say in a panic.

It’s times like these I wish I had my Glock handgun with me. Her name is Ethel, and she’s helped me out of a homicidal pinch or two. Not that I was expecting a homicide to take place this evening. Not up until now at least.

“And I need to contact the Grim Reaper.” Carlotta makes a face at someone in the crowd. “Well, would you look at that? I can’t believe who dared to show her face here tonight. It’s my old nemesis, Francine Dundee.”

“I don’t remember you ever mentioning a Francine Dundee.” I crane my neck in that direction but can’t seem to latch onto whoever she’s giving the stink eye to.

“That’s because I don’t like to think about her. Back in school, we used to call her Francine *Dumb-be*.”

“Oh, is Francine here?” Nell looks suddenly interested as she cranes her head in that direction as well. “I should say hello as well. Oh so many friends and acquaintances I can’t wait to reunite with.”

“You leave her to me, Mama,” Carlotta tells her. “Francine and I are both in the running to ride in the All Souls Bingo Hall float on the Fourth of July. Whoever sells the most tickets gets to ride up on the golden throne and gets to wear a tiara and a sash, too. So far, Francine and I are neck and neck. I’d better go over and say hello so she knows I’m onto her.” She takes off in haste.

I give a quick look around the room that has morphed into a beehive of activity. Lily and Suze are helping pass out slices of my ice cream cake, which judging by all of the moans of delight coming from that direction, is a surefire hit. It’s something new I created for the upcoming festivities leading up to July Fourth at the lake.

Just past the dessert table, I spot Cressida and that woman in the tan-colored dress. Now that we’re closer, I can see the woman better. She’s tall, blonde with exotic features, sharp almond eyes, and painfully large pink lips. Her expression looks frozen in a look of indifference, and it most likely is. All of Cressida’s friends are Botoxed, nipped, tucked, and packed with enough formaldehyde to ensure their corpses will never rot.

It’s that same woman I saw on stage with Cressida and Dirk when I first peered in this evening before I ran up to check on Cormack.

Come to think of it, I should probably do that again, sooner than later. I’d hate for her to have her baby without a soul on the planet there to share the experience with.

Both the woman in the tan dress and Cressida are speaking with Dirk, the man of the hour, at the moment. Cressida shoves the man in the chest hard and the strike jolts both him and me.

She takes off for the exit without hesitation and I can’t take my eyes off her.

“That wasn’t very nice of her,” I whisper and Nell nods as she looks that way as well.

“Cressida isn’t very nice in general, if I remember correctly.”

“Indeed you do,” I say just as the blonde and Dirk seem to share a few words. It takes a few moments, but soon he takes off in the direction Cressida bolted in—right out the door.

“Figures,” I say. “Cressida always did know how to get attention from a man.”

Nell glances past me. “Excuse, me, Lottie. I see an old friend I’d just love to say hello to.” She frowns. “Of course, there’s no point in scaring the life out of her. But I’ll give her a quick embrace regardless,” she says as she floats past me.

“Wait,” I shout. “I need you to try to help me find Everett!”

“All in due time,” she calls out my way.

“All in due time?” I shake my head as I struggle to exit the conference center.

The ghostly fowl comes to mind again.

I need to talk to Noah right now. If there is a killer in this crowd, any one of us could be treated to their very own NDE at any second. And one that they may not have the privilege of coming back from.

The air outside of the conference room is cooler, and the sound level is a heck of a lot quieter.

Speaking of quiet, I should probably run up and check on Cormack. She is the primary reason I’m in this place.

I pull out my phone to give Noah a quick call and he picks up on the first ring.

“Lottie, how’s it going?” He sounds somber yet happy to hear from me.

“I’m just heading back up to Cormack’s room,” I say as I come upon a small crowd waiting for the elevators.

I can't very well talk about the fact a dead chicken has raised a red homicidal flag in front of these fine folks, so I meander toward the sign marked *stairs*. That area is free of any crowds, but I do see Cressida fleeing the scene as if a sample sale were taking place behind those doors. Cressida doesn't do sales, or friendships, or children.

I head to the other end of the lobby in hopes to find another set of stairs but no such luck.

"Hang on, I'm about to head back over to the stairs where we can talk," I tell him. "You will never believe what I'm about to tell you," I say as I push open a steel door and step into the quiet hush of the stairwell. One staircase leads up while another leads down and I take a moment to glance over the railing at how many stories this building seemingly runs below ground.

"What is it, Lottie?"

My mouth opens in anticipation of filling him in on all of the bizarre happenings this evening—most of those being supernatural—when I spot a dark rumple of clothes about two stories down. I squint hard before seeing limbs splayed out, then an all too familiar face.

"Oh my word." I gasp.

"Lottie? What's happening?"

It looks as if Dirk Livingston won't be finishing up the conference, and he certainly won't be telling us the rest of the details regarding his near-death experience.

Dr. Livingston isn't living anymore, and any near-death experience he might have had has morphed into the real deal.

Dirk Livingston is dead.

LOTTIE



The door clicks open behind me and Carlotta whooshes into the cloistered stairwell.

“Is that you, Lot?” she pants.

“Who does it look like?” It comes out snippy without meaning to. “What are you doing in here?”

“I’m trying to avoid Francine Dundee. I just saw her milling around the lobby. What are you doing in here? Trying to avoid the Grim Reaper? You and I both know he’s not letting you off the hook so easily. He’s been trying to frame you for murder for years. Face it, Lot. He knows an easy target when he sees one. And one of these days he’s gonna get it right.”

“I don’t know what you’re babbling about,” I say as Noah shouts something into the phone before the line cuts out. “Wonderful,” I grunt. “Look, Carlotta, I’ve got a situation on my hands.”

I glance down at poor Dirk lying below us, with his limbs splayed unnaturally.

“What’s this?” Carlotta peers over the edge and her mouth falls open. “Congratulations, Lot. You got another.”

“Would you stop?” I all but swat her. “Do not congratulate me on anything. I didn’t have a thing to do with that poor man’s death.”

She peers over the side once again. “Yeah, you did. There’s a slice of that ice cream cake of yours melting all over

his shirt.”

“What?” I squint over the edge and, sure enough, she’s right. “Oh my word.”

“Oh my suspect,” she corrects. “But then, we both know Foxy is willing to overlook a clue or two that may point in your direction. The things that man won’t do to get you to drop your knickers.”

“*Carlotta*,” I practically shriek in her face. “Noah is a consummate professional. And besides, he knows it doesn’t mean a thing that one of my desserts is present at the scene of a homicide. And even though one of my desserts has been present at just about every single homicide we’ve had in Honey Hollow—Fallbrook, Leeds, and Ashford County—I’ve had nothing whatsoever to do with those homicides. Other than the fact I’ve been present myself to witness the aftermath.” Sort of the way I am now.

Carlotta pulls out her phone and snaps a few quick pictures.

“Would you stop?” I snip, trying my best to take the phone from her, but she pulls it out of reach. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Collecting evidence,” she snips right back. “How many times do you need to go around the dead block to figure out how one of these amateur sleuth shindigs work? We’ll need to review scenes from the crime at a later date so we can put the puzzle pieces together. I’ll send these to you so you can turn them into wallpaper if you like. We got an investigation to kick into high gear.”

“There is no we, Carlotta. In fact, we’re both staying out of this. Noah can handle this all by his lonesome. I’ve got Evie, Lyla Nell, my sweet cats, and my bakery to keep me busy. Not to mention the fact I’m putting together a cookbook. I don’t have time to solve a homicide.”

“Have it your way, Lot. I’ll take on this case myself. I’m practically an old pro at this by now. I know what to do next. This is the part where we both start screaming.”

“This is the part where we both stay calm until Noah arrives,” I say back.

“But if we don’t scream, people will think we’re heartless—or worse, *guilty*. Plus, how will the news crews know who to interview? We need to call some attention to ourselves.”

The door opens behind us and in strides a woman about Carlotta’s age. She’s got long gray tresses that reach her hips in scraggly uneven wisps, and she’s donned a white button-down blouse with a brown full-length skirt. Her face is plain but friendly looking, with not a stitch of cosmetics, pale eyes, scant eyebrows, a pinched nose, and high-cut cheekbones.

“What are you doing here, Francine?” Carlotta growls at the woman. “Are you following me around town looking for tips and tricks on how to sell an extra ticket or two?”

“*Ha.*” The woman doesn’t hesitate to laugh in Carlotta’s face. “I stopped taking tips from you in high school. If you must know, I’m taking the stairs to stay fit. I don’t want to be a burden to my family one day. Not all of us have a wealthy daughter we can leech off of. Unlike you, I don’t have anyone to iron my shoelaces, or deliver a cup of coffee straight to my bed in the morning.”

The cup of coffee delivered to bed I can see, but are ironed shoelaces really a part of this woman’s wealthy lifestyle fantasy?

Carlotta lifts her chin. “I’ll have you know, neither of my daughters is swimming in government-issued lettuce. One of Lot Lot’s hot husbands, Mr. Sexy to be exact, is the one who holds the loot bag in the family.”

My lips twitch at the mention of my multiple husbands. It’s not true, not in the traditional sense at least. But with a body present, I’m not in the mood to defend my honor.

However, that whole loot bag thing is true, of course. Everett does come from money. His mother is a wealthy hotel heiress, and Everett himself rakes in the big bucks while playing the part of hottest judge in all of Ashford County.

Who are we kidding? He’s the hottest judge in all the land.

“And”—Carlotta lifts a finger at the woman—“seeing that Mr. Sexy has most likely kicked the bucket, I’m hoping he left me a shiny dime or two.”

“*Carlotta*,” I hiss, momentarily distracted from the task at hand—or body at hand as it were. “Take that back. My husband is not dead.”

“Hush up, Lot. You got a spare.”

Francine offers a tight smile my way. “You must be Carlotta’s offspring.”

For some reason, the word *offspring* registered in my brain as the word *spawn*.

With Carlotta involved, it’s pretty much the same difference.

“How lovely to meet you.” The woman’s nostrils flare as she extends a hand my way. “I’ve heard many things about this *Mr. Sexy* that you’re married to. I’m sorry to hear of his philandering ways.”

“Oh, Everett isn’t a philanderer,” I say, giving her limp, icy fingers a quick shake. “He’s true-blue and committed to our relationship one hundred percent.” I glance over my shoulder for a moment. “Please excuse us, Francine, but Carlotta and I are sort of dealing with a situation. There’s been an unfortunate accident.” I nod toward the bottom of the stairwell and Francine peers over the side, only to have her face go white as unadulterated frosting.

Without warning, Francine bellows out an aria of ear-piercing screams.

“See that, Lot?” Carlotta stomps on my foot as she says it. “I told you we should have wailed our heads off. Now she’s going to get all the attention for herself.”

Before I can inform Carlotta that the only one about to get all the attention around here is the corpse, she joins in on that aria.

The stairwell turns into an echo chamber of blood-curdling screams, with both Francine and Carlotta pausing long enough

to stare one another down before picking up an octave in their screaming shenanigans. Even though I truly believe Francine's initial reaction was organic, it seems they're locked in some sort of vocal competition at the moment.

The door behind them bursts open and in runs Noah with just about every hospital security guard in tow, along with a couple of emergency medical workers.

"Lottie, what's happening?" he says, grabbing me by the arms and pulling me in.

Noah Corbin Fox is handsome to a fault with his dark hair that turns red at the tips in the sun, verdant green eyes, and dimples for days—and our daughter Lyla Nell happens to be his exact replica.

"I think he's dead," I say, looking down at the body, and it takes moments for Noah and the rest of the crowd that came in with him to race down the two flights to get to the poor man.

A gentleman in a white coat checks Dirk for a pulse before solemnly shaking his head at the crowd around him.

Noah says a few words, most likely letting them know he's the lead homicide detective down at the Ashford County Sheriff's Department, just as what looks to be the rest of the sheriff's department pours in through the door behind me.

"Oh dear," Francine says, patting her lips with her fingers. "I'd better get home to the kids. Honey Hollow just isn't the safe haven it once used to be." Her eyes ride up and down Carlotta's body. "Come to think of it, all of this misery began right about the time you strolled into town again." She darts out the door before Carlotta can toss a barb back at her.

"Technically, she's not wrong," I say, and Carlotta frowns my way.

"And technically, they began months before I arrived."

Technically, Carlotta's not wrong either.

Noah wastes no time in bolting back up the stairs, and in seconds I'm back in his arms.

“I’ve got the deputies cordoning off the area around the body. What did you see, Lot?”

“Nothing. I was just on my way back to Cormack’s room. The elevators were busy, so I decided to take the stairs and then I saw him lying there.” I pull back a moment. “How did you get here so quickly?”

“I was in the woods behind the B&B.”

“Here in Honey Hollow?” I scoff. “You weren’t even looking for Everett!”

“Of course, I was.” He looks mildly affronted at my accusation. “What else would I be doing in the woods at this time of night?”

Carlotta leans in. “I’ve seen a few spicy movies that start off that way.”

“But Noah”—I go on, choosing to ignore Carlotta’s plea for attention—“his truck was found miles away from Honey Hollow in *Leeds!*”

Carlotta nods. “You’d have a better chance to get lucky in Leeds, Foxy.”

“I wasn’t looking to get lucky,” he says with his eyes still locked to mine. “And don’t worry. Not only have I covered every inch of that dicey town, but I have plans to get back there later tonight.” He sighs at the commotion down below. “We’ll talk,” he says as he jogs down the stairs once again.

Another surge of bodies wanders in through the door, and this time it’s a crowd of people all craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the body below.

That dark-haired woman, the one that ran a brush over Dirk’s face and touched up his hair back on stage, barrels past me to get to the railing and a tiny smile rides on her lips once she spots the body. Her chest begins to pulsate as she quickly surveys the crowd around her.

I’m about to make my way over to her when a couple of blondes jump between us. Cressida Bentley and that woman in the tan dress. She’s got a red scarf around her neck and it

reminds me of a blood-soaked noose. I can't help it. My mind goes dark when there's a corpse in the vicinity.

The woman gasps hard. "What in the world?" Her hand taps over her chest. "Don't tell me he's met his end."

Met his end?

I make a face at her word choice. It's odd, if not inappropriate, but then again, those seem to be two requirements if you want to be one of Cressida's friends.

"Dirk is dead?" Cressida expels a breath, and if I didn't know better, I'd think it was a sigh of relief.

"Well, well." Carlotta hooks her arm through mine and closes the distance between us. "If it isn't the woman who dumped her kid, ran out of Honey Hollow, and never looked back."

Cressida sniffs. "For your information, I didn't dump Everly anywhere near Homicide Hollow." She nods to the blonde by her side. "Ellington Boarding School is hardly slumming."

"You sent her to Ellington?" Her friend raises a brow.

Apparently, Ellington is the lesser of the two fancy boarding schools that the rich send their children to. Piedmont Academy is where the who's who of Vermont attend. The only reason Cressida hid Evie at Ellington was because she was certain no one would suspect she'd send her own child there. It was twisted—much like Cressida herself.

The blonde woman's attention quickly drifts back to that body.

"Anyway"—Cressida looks at Carlotta—"if I did dump her, I guess you could have said I took a cue from you." Her glossy lips form a smug grin.

"Oh, before I forget, Cormack is here having her baby," I tell her.

Cormack and Cressida are good friends, or at least they've appeared that way for years. With those two you never know.

They could have been enemies keeping a very close tab on one another.

Cressida rolls her eyes. “It’s about time she can travel again. I was tired of hearing her excuses. Oh my achy back, oh my achy feet, oh my achy checking account. It never ends with that imbecile.”

Both Carlotta and I inch back at the catty remark.

“Well, if that ain’t the pot calling the kettle an imbecile.” Carlotta chuckles just as a trio of deputies usher us all out of the crowded stairwell.

No sooner do we hit the bright lights and fresh air of the lobby than Cressida steps before me.

“Lottie, are you still pretending to be married to Essex?”

I make a face at the woman.

“Essex Baxter?” The blonde by her side looks thrown for a loop at that one. And she looks far more shocked by this news than she did at the body we left behind. Although, a part of me can understand why she’s so amazed. Everett wasn’t exactly the marrying kind before he met me.

Wait a minute... did she just refer to him as Essex?

“Yes, I am still very much married to Everett,” I say to Cressida. “Why?”

She takes a deep breath while casting a glance at the woman by her side.

She didn’t even ask about Evie.

“Gigi Whipple here has a shop over in Fallbrook,” she says. “Why don’t you get ahold of Essex’s credit card, and bring all your friends down in a couple days? They’re having a fifty percent discount sale and I wouldn’t want you to miss it.”

“Fifty percent?” Carlotta crows. “I love me a discount. Especially when it’s on Sexy’s credit card.”

I give her the side-eye for even thinking it. Not that she’s a stranger to Everett’s credit card or mine.

“We’ll be there with bells on,” Carlotta sings the words and half the people here turn to give her the side-eye as well.

“Wonderful,” Cressida pants through a smile. “We’ll be sure to welcome you both. I’ll text Everly the details.” She pulls her blonde bestie close.

Carlene Dearborn, the woman who was playing host for the night and Dirk Livingston’s fiancée, zips past us as she exits the stairwell.

“Excuse me,” she says a little too loud as the crowd parts for her. “I’ve got to get to the conference room and let everyone know we’re done for the evening.” Her eyes close a moment. “And we’re done forever.” She whispers that last bit to herself as she makes her way past us.

“She must be in shock,” I say.

“Shock?” Gigi averts her eyes. “Try elation. He was about to be her ex.”

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I saw them arguing a few minutes ago.”

“That’s funny. I saw him arguing with Cressida a few minutes ago,” I say without thinking, and Cressida’s eyes widen the size of twin macarons.

“My word, Cressida,” I hiss her way. “You didn’t push that poor man, did you?”

She sucks in a quick breath, her eyes the size of sugar cookies now.

“No, of course not,” she hisses right back. “I’m just as shocked to hear of his passing as you are.” She shrugs at her friend. “Let’s go see if he left any signed copies back there. I bet we could sell them at the shop for a mint.”

“Ooh, good thinking,” Gigi says as her fingers fiddle with the red neckerchief tied around her neck. I wouldn’t have paired it with that tan sheath she’s wearing, but then again, what do I know about high fashion?

I take that back. I do know that the more I don't like something, the more it costs. Those seem to be two intersecting factors when it comes to couture and me.

“Come on, Gigi.” Cressida nudges her along. “We can't be seen at a place like this. We have a reputation to uphold.”

They take a few steps away before Gigi stops cold and takes one last look at the body.

Cressida follows suit and her lips flicker with a smile. “Sleep well, my dear friend. Sleep well.”

They take off just as my phone pings.

“It's a text from one of the nurses on the maternity ward,” I say as I read it in haste. “It looks as if Honey Hollow is about to gain another resident.”

LOTTIE



“Oh, thank goodness,” Cormack pants as I step into the room. “Quick, Luella, give me my phone. One of these devils in white had the nerve to take it away from me.”

The room is bustling with half a dozen of those devils in white as Cormack so indelicately put it as they transform the once docile-looking birthing suite into a full-blown operating room. Cormack’s mascara and lipstick have finally merged to create a gray sludge over her face, and her hair has transformed itself into a blonde tumbleweed.

“It looks like it’s time to meet your baby,” I say as a thread of excitement runs through me—the first one since I’ve learned of Cormack’s pregnancy.

I step in close to her bedside as the bustle around us grows more furious. The monitor above her bed is going haywire as Cormack’s contractions create peak after peak according to the digital reading.

“I’d better call Alex. And Suze,” I say, but before I can hit the call button, Cormack swipes the phone out of my hand.

“I don’t want either of those people seeing me like this. The only person I want in the room with me tonight is the Big Boss himself. I want the Big Boss here, and I want him here now,” she says the words with a head-splitting cry and all movement in the room pauses for a moment.

Big Boss would be the nickname Cormack has gifted Noah. Apparently, when they were officially together, many, many moons ago, there was some sort of a bossy role-play at

hand. Personally, I don't care to delve in that direction. And apparently, neither does Noah.

And even though Noah isn't the baby's father, these histrionics are all very much his fault.

Noah and Everett were stepbrothers for a still small moment back in high school, and during that time Noah decided to swipe Everett's girlfriend from under him—the abominable Cormack Featherby.

That little stunt severed Noah and Everett's relationship right up until a few years ago.

Everett no longer holds a grudge, and yet Cormack very much still holds her obsession for the Big Boss. Ironically enough, Cormack and Noah didn't last five seconds back in high school, but that hasn't stopped Cormack from pursuing him with a relentless fervor.

“Where's his name?” she calls out. “How do I call him? Why do you have such a cheap phone?” she shrieks in a panic as my so-called cheap phone goes airborne over her head and I snatch it up before she gives herself a concussion with it.

“I'll let him know it's time,” I say, feverishly texting Noah and letting him know just that.

No way. He responds almost immediately. **Not only am I tied up with a murder investigation, but I'm not getting enmeshed with any more of Cormack's baby drama. As soon as she has the kid, I'm filing for divorce. No more Mr. Nice Guy. I'll visit my niece or nephew tomorrow when my schedule permits.**

Geez.

I knew Noah was steamed over the fact Cormack was trying to trick him into believing that this was his child, but Noah has taken it to a new level.

I text Alex about the news, regardless of Cormack's resistance.

Clarification: Noah never slept with Cormack to begin with to produce this child. He was passed out drunk, and she

happened to be with him that night—in another room getting it on with his brother. Anyway, even though Alex and Noah could pass as identical twins, it's still Noah's heart she desires. But evidently, Alex's body will do in a pinch, thus the baby dilemma we're in.

“Well?” she barks. “What did he say?”

“He'll be here soon.” If you consider tomorrow soon.

My phone chirps again, and this time it's the papa-to-be himself, Alex.

Sorry, Lottie. I just finished up at the office and I'm beat. I'll stop in tomorrow. Wish her luck for me!

“Wish her luck?” I say, incensed at his language.

“Did Big Boss wish me luck?” Cormack's entire countenance brightens for a moment as the nurses push her knees back, exposing her pale pink belly to the harsh glare of the spotlight above it.

“Mr. Fox certainly did.”

It's not a lie.

“This is just fabulous,” Cormack says, propping herself up on her elbows as a nurse fluffs her pillow. “I had Noah's Daughter ship over sixteen formal gowns this afternoon.” She nods to the nurse. “Noah's Daughter is the couture clothesline my husband and I created for our pretty little peanut. You can't have a princess without all the fancy bells and frills.” She looks my way, and that tumbleweed sitting on her head wobbles as if it might actually fall right off. “Find out at what age the Piedmont Academy can take her in. You'll have to fill out all the paperwork for me since I'm incapacitated at the moment. And then track down a wet nurse and a nanny to fill the interim.”

“Cormack.” A tiny laugh bubbles me. “I don't think they have wet nurses anymore.”

“What?” she squawks. “But breastfeeding is all the rage. Where am I going to find a pair of breasts to give my child the nourishment she needs to survive? Noah and I have fought

long and hard for this baby girl and I won't let anything happen to her now."

I'd shed a tear or two at the sentiment if it were true.

Her mouth falls open and she gasps as she inspects me. "Are you still producing? Certainly, Linda Bell has had more than enough. I didn't want to be the one who pointed it out, but she's getting a little too portly for her own good. It's time to switch to water and cut back on the desserts."

Now it's my turn to gasp. "First of all, Lyla Nell is healthy in every capacity. I happen to find her chubby little dinner rolls adorable. Secondly, yes, I'm still nursing." Although sparingly these days, not that it's any of Cormack's business. "And thirdly, I would never force my daughter to cut out desserts, not on your life. I own a bakery, for Pete's sake. I practically have sugar coursing through my veins."

Half the nurses in the room pause to look my way.

"Metaphorically speaking, of course," I tell them and they get right back to buzzing around Cormack's body as if she were the queen bee.

A woman wearing blue scrubs, long matching gloves, matching paper hat, and a mask covering most of her face steps into the room and takes a seat at the helm of Cormack's exposed and spread eagle nether regions. Lucky for me, that bulge of flesh is covering the nitty-gritty details.

"All right, Ms. Featherby," the woman says while making her hand disappear into Cormack's body, elbow deep. "You are at ten centimeters and one hundred percent effaced. I'm going to have you push with your next contraction. It's showtime!"

"Push what?" Cormack asks, looking genuinely confused by the concept.

"Your body," I whisper to her. "You know, you're going to have to bear down to get the baby out."

"Bear what?" She offers me a repugnant look as if I just let a foul odor fly. "I'll do no such thing."

“Of course, you will,” I tell her. “You have to push like you’ve never pushed before. That’s why they call it labor.”

“Yes, well”—she shimmies herself up on her pillow a notch—“that all sounds very blue collar to me, and that’s exactly why I’m not participating. Wake me when she arrives.” And with that, she promptly closes her eyes—and then, just like that, they spring open wide. “What’s that tugging I feel?” She sits up as best she can and tries to take a peek past her bulging belly. “There’s a strange sense of pressure happening. Something is going wrong. It’s as if it’s trying to suck my brain right out of my—*aaagghhhh!*”

Cormack howls and screams as a spray of water that can only be equated to a fire hydrant knocking off its base shoots the doctor right in the face, and before you know it, every wall in the room is covered with Cormack’s baby ectoplasm, amniotic fluid, blood, guts, and gore—and well, more than her fair share of fecal matter, too.

“Well, Ms. Featherby,” the doctor muses as she leans into the not-so-fun zone. “For not wanting to push, you sure are making some serious progress. The baby seems to be falling right out of you.”

Falling out of her?

I’m not sure what that says about Cormack, or the fact her baby is trying to escape her clutches right out the gate.

Soon, a tiny, neon pink, perfectly formed human is foisted in the air by the doctor.

“And”—she spins the tiny angel around—“it’s a *boy*,” she shouts, and the entire room erupts in cheers.

“A what?” Cormack flatlines as the tiny being is placed over her chest, while a nurse rubs his back with a towel.

The baby starts in on a shrill scream and Cormack screams right along with him.

“I’ll bring him right back,” a nurse says as she scoops him up and whisks him away to a nearby scale.

“A *boy*, Cormack,” I say, wiping the tears from my eyes. “I can’t believe it. Now that was a real surprise. Congratulations. Your son is perfect.”

“My son?” She sits up another notch while the doctor tidies up at the other end. “Lyla,” she snips my way. “I can’t have a son. I’m having a *daughter*—as in Noah’s Daughter, the soon-to-be multimillion-dollar company I just invested my father’s money in. I’m having a girl and that’s that. Besides, I don’t know anything about little boys. See whoever it is you need to see to set this straight. I’m not leaving here until I have a pink bundle of joy to show for it.”

My jaw unhinges at her blatant hubris.

“Cormack, you’re just in shock, that’s all. You just have to let the fact you had a boy sink in for a bit. They say there’s nothing like the love of a son.” Except maybe the love of a daughter. Much like Cormack, I’m not all that familiar with little boys. “He’s yours and you’re going to have to take him home.” I double down on the fact, stopping just shy of issuing a threat.

“I will do no such thing.” Her bottom lip quivers as if maybe the severity of the situation is sinking in. “Lottie, you have to help me.”

“*Aha*,” I say a touch too loud. “You *do* know my name.”

She rolls her eyes. “Who cares about you? This is a very trying time for me. Pay attention, would you? I need you to figure out a way to fix this and fix it now. I can assure that you’ll be compensated handsomely.”

“Fix it how?”

“I don’t know. But we can’t just settle for that baby because it fell out of my body. We’ll have to switch it.” Her mouth rounds out with a smile. “It’s a brilliant idea. Switch it with a girl—preferably one that looks like Noah. Think dimples.”

I suck in a quick breath. “Not in your wildest dreams.”

I’m pretty sure it’s not only a felony, but it’s morally reprehensible, much like Cormack at the moment. And pretty

much every moment.

The nurse comes back with the baby swaddled in a white flannel, giving him that delicious baby burrito look.

“Here you go, Ms. Featherby.” She’s about to hand the baby to Cormack, but the new mommy promptly pulls the covers up over her head.

“Wonderful,” I blow out a breath as I say it. “I’ll take the little guy.”

The nurse complies, and soon I’m holding a brand new Featherby who is, well, light as a feather. But, oh my word, one look at that round peach of a face, that dark hair, those glowing eyes, and dimples blinking on and off like Christmas lights, well, he’s just a doppelgänger of my own sweet peach, Lyla Nell.

“Cormack, he’s the spitting image of Noah,” I say without thinking.

Not that it has the power to pull Cormack out of her girl-deficient stupor.

“But then again, he’s the spitting image of Alex, too,” I say yet again without thinking.

Noah said he was the one who was going to confront Cormack over her baby daddy shenanigans, and I will gladly give him that privilege.

Soon, every extraneous soul in the room does a disappearing act, and it’s just Cormack, the baby, and me.

Soft snores come from underneath the blanket as Cormack conks out, and coincidentally soft snores come from the new life she just birthed into the world as well.

“Happy birthday,” I whisper into his downy soft hair. “I already love you so much. And Evie and Lyla Nell are going to love you, too. You and Lyla Nell are practically twins.” I do my best to blink the tears from my eyes but can’t seem to do it. “Your uncle Everett is missing.” I sniff hard. “And I just found a body downstairs. There was a ghost of a chicken, so I’m fairly certain this was no accident.”

The tiny angel squirms as if he found the thought of corpses repulsive.

“Sorry.” I cringe. “I probably shouldn’t have unloaded on you, seeing that it’s your very first day and all. I’m your Auntie Lottie. And well, I don’t even know your name yet. But I suppose I will in time.”

A nurse comes in and takes him away to feed him. It seems Cormack has a strict no-waking-her-under-any-circumstances policy that’s under enforcement.

I had Lyla Nell a little under sixteen months ago and I still haven’t had a good night’s sleep.

It would figure that Cormack and I would have very different mothering experiences.

As soon as the nurse leaves the room, I realize I should, too, but I’m exhausted both physically and emotionally and all I want to do is crawl under the covers and close my eyes.

So I do.

I crawl in next to Cormack, rest my head on her pillow, and close my eyes.

The sound of footsteps enliven in this direction. I look up as a couple of men in black ski masks loom above me. I try to scream, but my vocal cords are paralyzed. One of them throws a hood over my head before tossing me onto his shoulder and whisking me away to who knows where.

I sit up in bed with a start.

The silence in Cormack’s room is startling as my heart begs to drum right out of my chest.

“It was a dream,” I pant.

A nightmare.

I fall back onto the pillow and close my eyes once again, but sleep doesn’t come to me.

Everett is missing, and Dirk Livingston is dead.

Is Everett dead, too?

That's something Nell would have mentioned, isn't it?

All sorts of dark questions and even darker theories swirl through my mind.

The loss of one life and the birth of another.

That's the thing about this world—it goes on.

NOAH



The baby is here.

Lottie texted last night and let me know my brother and Cormack welcomed a bouncing baby boy into the world. And not shockingly, neither Cormack nor my brother wanted anything to do with him last night.

I called Alex and read him the riot act, telling him to get to the hospital and hold his son. He said he would but asked rather sheepishly if I'd go with him.

Lottie sent me a picture of the baby. Dark hair, sparkling eyes, dimples.

If I didn't know better, I'd think she sent me a picture of Lyla Nell on the day she was born.

I'll admit, it melted my heart. And my heart has certainly been a glacier when it comes to Cormack. I promised myself that as soon as she had the baby, I'd end this nightmare she's hijacked me into. And that's exactly what I'm going to do—today.

Is it heartless?

Probably.

But above all, it's necessary lest she finds a new way to rope me into her world once again. And I wouldn't doubt for a minute that Cormack has a backup plan when it comes to wrapping her tentacles around me. She might play the part of an airheaded socialite, but I know better.

Cormack is smart, determined, and obsessed. A dangerous trifecta when it comes to just about anyone.

My phone pings and it's a text from Ivy.

Coming in late?

I quickly reply, letting her know I'm sitting in the hospital parking lot, ready to visit my nephew, and that should there be any break in the Livingston homicide or in the case of Everett's disappearance, that she notify me immediately.

Detective Ivy Fairbanks and I have been working side by side at the homicide division for years. Even though I'm her superior, I've treated her as an equal since day one.

I spot Alex's truck as he pulls in behind me and I hop out and congratulate him before we head up to the maternity ward.

My hand presses to the door that leads to Cormack's private suite.

"Are you ready to do this?" I offer my doppelgänger a dark look. "This is your moment. You are that baby's father. It's time to step out of the shadows and man up."

His dimples recess. "I'm ready." He pats me on the back. "I feel like I've waited my whole life for this moment." He blows out a long breath, that perma-grin he usually wears nowhere in sight. "I'm scared, Noah. We had a screw-up for a father. You broke the mold. But I'm not sure I can do it."

"You can and you will," I say. "And I'll be there to make sure you do."

We head in, greeted with bright lights, Lottie looking as if she can hardly keep her eyes open, Cormack applying lipstick while immersed with her reflection in a compact mirror, and my mother standing next to her, holding what looks to be a baby blue blanket with a cute little face sank in it.

"Congratulations," I say to the new mom lying in bed, looking as if she just stepped off a runway.

"Oh, Big Boss, it was awful," she says, rubbing her finger over her lips as she removes some renegade lipstick.

“And the daddy has arrived,” Lottie says as she comes over and offers Alex a warm hug first. “Congratulations,” I hear her whisper in his ear. “And you”—she pulls me close in a tight embrace—“Noah, I can hardly breathe. Please tell me you have news about Everett.” She blinks back tears as she looks up at me, and at this close inspection, I can see the dark circles under her eyes. My fingers press over her back and I can feel every rib as if they were protruding.

“I will find him,” I don’t hesitate to ensure her. “But you need to sleep, and *eat*, because Lyla Nell, Evie, Pancake, Waffles, and I—we all need you.”

She swallows down a laugh and nods. Bringing up her cats always manages to add levity to any situation, and I’m glad this one is no different.

“So let’s see this baby,” I say, wrapping an arm around Lottie’s waist. I’ve never been one to let go of her voluntarily.

Mom waddles over, maneuvering out of the way when Alex attempts to take that brand new bundle of joy from her.

“Noah, he’s beautiful,” my mother coos. “And Sam wanted me to extend her congratulations to you. She’s been under the weather after finding out she’s expecting herself.”

My gut grinds at the thought of Jed Silver knocking up my sister. I bet he was laughing the entire time. I knew he had it out for Everett and me, but I never thought he’d go this route.

I’m not sure how Meg Lemon got wrapped up as collateral, but I have no doubt he knocked her up as well as a part of his master revenge plan. And, of course, there’s the fact Everett is missing.

Leave it to Jed. He’s outwitted us at every angle.

Alex tries once again to take the baby from our mother, but she dances away.

“I’m sorry, Alex,” she tells him while doing her best to lift her shoulder at him with the slight. “But you’ll have to wait.”

“Mom.” It comes out a bit sterner than I meant for it to. “Let him hold his child.”

Her eyes harden as she looks my way. “I’m not letting another soul in this room hold this sweet angel until I’ve soaked him in properly.” She shoots Lottie a dirty look. “I can’t believe you didn’t call me as soon as he was born. It’s common knowledge the grandmother should be the first to hold the baby.” She gets right back to cooing in the baby’s adorable little face.

I inch back as I look at Lottie. “Is this true?”

“The part of the grabby grandma?” she asks. “No. And neither is the part about me not wanting to call her. The nurses confiscated Cormack’s phone and she wouldn’t let me call anyone when I offered.”

“Not true,” Cormack sings. “I wanted to call you, Big Boss, but Lily wasn’t having it.”

I frown at the thought. Another reason I need to end this desperate charade of hers.

“Cormack.” I step in close to her bed and so does Lottie by proxy. “I’m sorry, but you have a beautiful son and I think it’s high time you admit that Alex is the father.”

“What?” Mom shuffles this way. “How dare you question her moral standing when she’s in the recovery phase from childbirth.”

“It’s true,” Cormack snips while craning her head at my mother. “Alex, you’re the father of that child.” She picks up my hand and gives it a squeeze with her icy fingers. “There, I’ve admitted it for all to hear. It wasn’t you, Noah. It was Alex.”

“Wow.” Lottie’s entire body seizes. “I never thought you’d admit it, Cormack. I thought you’d do your best to drag this out for years and years. I’m shocked to say this, but I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too,” I tell her as a wave of relief hits me just about as big as the wave of relief when I found out Lyla Nell was my child. “I guess seeing your son for the first time made you realize it’s best to be forthright. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that.”

“You’re exactly right,” she says, stretching a cherry-red smile across her face. “Seeing that he was a boy made me realize he needed someone who would be there for him at all hours of the day, each and every day for the rest of his life.” She glances at Alex. “I can have one of the porters at the B&B deliver all of the baby gear to your home. Of course, all couture baby items already in my possession will remain so. You’ll need one of those car seat doohickies to take him home with, and apparently, the diapers they use here have given him a rash. You might want to look into something organic.” She bats her lashes my way. “That’s what I would have used for our sweet little princess.”

“Cormack”—my voice is stern once again—“you’re making it sound as if you want nothing to do with the kid.”

“Oh, Big Boss.” She waves me off. “Of course, I want something to do with him. I’m just not sure what. Maybe when he’s older he can handle my social media, or fix any technical glitches that come up with my laptop, but until then, well, I’m going to need to nap for at least fifteen years just to get over what he’s already put me through.”

Lottie sucks in a breath. “But what about his birthdays, his milestones, his day-to-day life?”

Cormack shakes her head. “I’m two steps ahead of you, Leanne. I’ve already decided that I’m going to commemorate this day year after year with a big celebration for myself. And lots of gifts. Expensive gifts.”

Mom chuckles. “Nothing but the best for our boy.”

I’m loath to point out the party or the gifts aren’t for the baby.

“So?” Mom sings as she bounces the baby in her arms. “What’s this little guy’s name?”

“Noah,” Cormack answers quickly.

“No,” Lottie, Alex, and I say at once.

“No way,” Lottie says sharply.

“I won’t have it,” I tell Cormack, who is still obviously running with her delusions.

“I’ll come up with a name,” Alex says as he carefully excavates the baby from my mother’s clutches. And a smile broadens on his face the likes of which I’ve never seen before.

Lottie sniffs hard, and tears come to my eyes at the sight as well.

“Congratulations, Alex,” I tell him again. “You’re already a wonderful father.”

“And don’t you worry about taking care of my sweet little grandchild,” Mom tells him. “I’ll move into your place tonight. Together, we can handle anything.”

Alex lifts a brow in her direction before landing his eyes back where they belong, on his sweet son. I can practically see their inextricable bond forming right before our eyes.

He might have my mother to contend with, but I have a feeling Alex can handle anything at this point.

My phone pings and I fish it out of my pocket.

“It’s Ivy,” I say, taking in a deep breath. “We just found Everett.”

EVERETT



“Come on, honey. The world needs more men like you,” a sweet female voice chimes from above before my face vibrates softly.

“Wake up, Everett,” a far more huskier voice shouts before a crisp slap ignites over my cheek.

“Don’t call him Everett,” another woman says. “We should call him by the name he *really* responds to—Essex.”

The sound of light laughter breaks out around me.

My eyelids feel as if they’ve been cemented shut and I can’t seem to pry them open.

A hard groan comes from my chest as I struggle to move.

“He’s *alive*,” someone shouts. “I knew it. I just knew it. The world wouldn’t be the same without him.”

“You mean your bedroom wouldn’t be the same without him,” another woman coos.

“He’s a married man,” the woman with the husky voice grouses. “And he happens to be married to my sister.”

“Lemon,” her name garbles from my lips.

“Don’t worry, Everett.” The husky-voiced woman leans in. “It’s me, Meg. Some of my girls found you here in the dumpster behind Red Satin. I’ve called 911.”

No sooner does she finish the sentence than the scream of a siren pierces the air.

Another hard groan evicts from me as I force my eyes to open a crack.

Light bursts in, and I'm quick to close them again. I squeeze my eyes shut tight, and this time I command them to open. My lids waver before slowly scraping over my dry eyes and revealing the world around me.

A dozen or so faces, all of them female, stare at me from above. The sky behind them is so blue it hurts my eyes to look at it.

I glance down at my body, naked, save for my boxers. And from the looks of it, I'm floating on a bed of trash bags, the smell of soured milk wafting up from somewhere beneath me.

In what feels like seconds, a couple of beefy EMT workers help hoist me out of the dumpster and onto a gurney where an oxygen mask is shoved onto my face and an IV started in my left arm. And as they help me sit up, I can see the sign on the side of the building before me that reads *Red Satin Gentlemen's Club*.

That's right.

I came to Leeds.

A series of flashbacks echo through my brain, and just as I'm about to dissect each one, I hear the screech of brakes followed by the sweetest sound in the world.

"*Everett*," Lemon screams from the top of her lungs and my lips curve as I drink in her voice. "Oh my word, *Everett*," she pants, and before I know it, she's clamped her body over mine as she offers up a death grip of an embrace. "Are you okay?" she asks before peppering my face with kisses, then landing a far warmer, far more welcoming kiss to my lips. "Oh, *Everett*," she says over my mouth. "I thought you were—I thought the worst. But a part of me couldn't believe it. I knew you would fight tooth and nail for our family, for me. And you did. You're here. You're safe."

"*Everett*," Noah barks as he comes up on the other side of the gurney. "What the hell happened? Where were you? And where are your clothes?"

I open my mouth, only to have my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth and instantly Lemon makes a bottle of water appear.

“Thank you,” I say, taking a careful sip.

“What happened?” Noah asks, a little more determined than before.

“I’ll tell you everything I can remember.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “We were at the B&B, it was Cormack’s baby shower. I was running late. I had just come from the house, and I brought Evie’s acceptance to Ashford University back to the B&B with me.” Evie was thrilled when she learned she was accepted, and I was thrilled I was there to see her face light up. After Evie’s big news, you left.” I nod to Noah when I say it.

“That’s right.” He sighs. “I headed to Ashford where I was briefed on a break in that narcotics case. It was Jed. We were able to pin it on him. As soon as I found out, I made a U-turn back to the B&B and had him arrested.”

Lemon nods. “But not before it was revealed through a few nefarious party games that both Sam and Meg got knocked up by the same guy.”

“By whom?” I growl because I’m afraid I won’t like the answer.

“Jed,” Lemon and Noah say at the very same time.

Another groan works its way up my chest.

“Go on.” Noah pulls out his phone and holds it to me. “I’m recording this.”

“Don’t,” I tell him and he reluctantly turns off his phone. “What happened next is something I think we should keep to ourselves for a while.” I glance around and no one else seems to be listening in. “I had just gotten the text from Judge Merrick.”

Lemon blows out a breath. “The text that let you know that Charlie was off the hook? She’s still off the hook, right?”

“She’s still off the hook.” I give her hand a squeeze as I say it.

Charlie is off the hook for something that Lemon is responsible for—running an illegal gambling casino in the back of Rizzo’s Trattoria. Not to mention running illegal substances through it.

“On the heels of that, I got another text.” I shake my head as I stare out into the void. “This time from Regina Pacheco.”

Lemon sucks in a quick breath. “The woman that was stalking you?”

“Yes,” I say. “She asked if I could meet her at a bar down in Leeds called the Bull’s Eye. I was furious with her for pretending to be someone she wasn’t. She said she was working down at the courthouse as a clerk, so I had someone in HR look her up. As I suspected, there was no Regina Pacheco employed at the courthouse.”

“You went to meet her at a bar?” Lemon says each word slowly. “Why didn’t you tell Noah? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shake my head at her. “I thought I could handle this alone. I got to the bar and it was sparsely populated. I sat with Regina and we ordered drinks. I asked her who she was and what she wanted. She skirted around the issue, and before she could answer, I started to feel heavy, bleary-eyed, unable to control my body or my thoughts. The next thing I knew, I was taken to a dark room by two men. One was bald, don’t remember much about the other. My shirt was torn open, my belt loosened. Regina crawled on top of me while one of the men took pictures.”

“I’m going to kill her,” Lemon growls.

“You won’t have to,” I say. And then I think better of finishing my thought. The truth is, once the photo op was finished, one of the men put a bullet in her forehead. But I don’t want Lemon to jump in and start trying to track down the woman’s killers. It might be Lemon’s natural instinct, but it’s my natural instinct to protect her—even if it’s from herself.

“She said you owe me money for what you had me do to this poor man,” I tell them. And then they shot her, but I’ll fill Noah in on that privately.

I lean back once again and stare over at Noah.

“That’s why she did it. Blackmail of some sort,” he says.

“I know why they did it.” Lemon offers a wavering smile my way. “To end your run for the seat on the Vermont Supreme Court.”

“Probably both,” I counter. “But I promise you this. I’m going to track them down, and I’m going to make them pay for what they did to me and to that woman. She did it for the money, which tells me she was desperate. And now I’m desperate to make them pay. They had no idea the hell they were about to unleash.”

Lemon closes her eyes for a brief moment. “I’ll help you.”

“No,” I tell her. “Noah can help. I would never put you in danger.”

“These men are dangerous, Lottie,” Noah tells her. “It sounds like you were roofied, Everett. I wouldn’t doubt they’d do the same to you, Lottie. Steer clear of this one. And the Livingston case.” He sighs my way. “There’s been another homicide.”

“But on a lighter note”—Lemon says, running her fingers through the stubble on my cheek before I can react—“Cormack had her baby—a boy. And she acknowledged that Alex is the baby’s father.”

“Really?” I can’t seem to wrap my head around it. “Now that’s a miracle.”

Lemon shrugs. “She wanted a girl. And I think we all know what happens when Cormack doesn’t get what she wants.”

I nod.

All hell breaks loose.

And that’s exactly what’s about to happen in my own life.

Those men may think they've gotten away with messing with me—with murdering that woman, but they have no idea what a wound they've inflicted on themselves by doing so.

Noah is right. This case is far too dangerous. That's why I shouldn't involve him any more than I already have.

“Get some rest,” Lemon says, landing another kiss to my lips. “I'm just so thankful you're okay.”

The EMTs shove me into the back of an ambulance and Lemon rides with me to Honey Hollow General Hospital, telling me all about Cressida and the researcher of near-death experiences who was shoved down a two-story stairwell.

Her investigative wheels are already spinning on how to solve that case, I can tell.

But I know her well enough to realize there's no stopping her.

Just like there's no stopping me.

Heaven help us both.

LOTTIE



“*H*ave another walnut fudge brownie,” I say, sliding a plate full of the tasty treats toward my handsome husband. “They’re fresh out of the oven. And they’re going to be featured in my upcoming cookbook.”

“Thank you,” he says while toasting me with the cup of coffee in his hand. “I mentioned it to my mother and she said she’d love to add a recipe if you’d let her.”

“Oh, Everett, of course, I would. That would be wonderful.”

“My mom says she wants in as well,” Noah says and I try my best to curve my lips into a smile.

“I’ll thank her myself,” I say. Maybe.

Suze’s contribution might just be an act of vengeance.

I glance back at my handsome husband and smile.

Everett is right back to his handsome self with his jet-black hair slicked back, those piercing blue eyes, and that hotter-than-a-forest-fire face with a body to match. He’s donned a suit in hopes to make it down to the courthouse today. Although, I’m hoping he won’t. I’m terrified that whoever drugged him and left him for dead might come back to finish the job.

It’s the next day after that dumpster fire—a quasi-literal statement if ever there was one—and my handsome hubby is seated right here at the counter of the Cutie Pie Bakery and Cakery, along with Noah, Lyla Nell, and Carlotta.

The entire bakery is decorated to the hilt for the upcoming Fourth of July celebration with enough red, white, and blue to qualify as a flag itself. I've got buntings set out, faux sparklers sprinkled here and there—Lyla Nell's favorite decoration thus far—and even teddy bears dressed up like Uncle Sam. For some reason, she's not as into the bears as much as I would have thought. But then again, she does like her animals to respond to her—whether they're dead or alive.

The morning rush has just finished up. I've been neglecting the bakery, so both Everett and Noah said they'd come down with me. Lord knows I wasn't going to leave Everett alone at the house even if they did discharge him from the hospital yesterday with a clean bill of health.

The sun is pouring through the large bay window up front, giving the mix-and-match pastel furniture an ethereal glow. The butter-colored walls feel as if they're giving me a nice warm hug, and those faux tree branches strewn with twinkle lights that line the ceiling make it feel as if we're sitting in the middle of an enchanted forest.

The rest of that faux tree happens to be in the restaurant that's conjoined to my bakeshop. There's a walkway that leads right into the Honey Pot Diner, which was my grandma Nell's baby way back when. But I've essentially gifted it to my sister, Charlie. She's the chef, I'm the baker, it only made sense. I've stayed on as a silent partner—emphasis on the *silent*—and good thing, because she's practically turned the Honey Pot into a five-star culinary establishment.

Speaking of the Honey Pot, that's the direction my grandma Nell just went off to.

Much like Carlotta and me, Charlie can see the dead. The three of us are something called transmudane, further classified as supersensual—which means we can see right past that heavenly veil. Of course, we can't control who comes to visit us or why, and we only see the ghosts that choose to expose themselves to us. It's typically a ghost who has come back to help solve the murder of someone who loved them the most. That's always the supernatural kicker.

And who did the person who was unceremoniously kicked off the planet a couple of nights ago *love* the most? A chicken.

Yes, the plucky poultry is fluffy and cute and looks every bit like a stuffed animal. Nell just so happened to take that sweet Silkie, aptly named Fluffernutter, into the Honey Pot with her. And thankfully so, seeing that Lyla Nell can't seem to keep her hands off of the fluffy beast.

Both Noah and Everett have bellied up to the counter and are enjoying coffee with my sweet treats. Lyla Nell is firmly planted in Noah's lap while munching on a plain donut, and Carlotta is seated at the counter as well, feverishly jotting things down in a spiral notebook.

"Sorry, Lot," Carlotta harrumphs as she crosses something out in that notebook of hers. "But I don't have the time to contribute to that cookbook of yours. I'm too busy cooking up trouble and trying to make it double."

"No truer words were ever spoken," I say. "No worries."

"I'll contribute," Noah is quick to offer. "In fact, I'll give you the recipe to my world famous nachos."

Everett shoots him a look. "I'll contribute as well, Lemon. And don't worry. I won't be telling people to microwave potato chips."

Noah huffs, "I'll have you know people are looking for shortcuts in the kitchen these days."

"Maybe not that short." I give him a little wink. "Why don't Lyla Nell and I come by your place sometime and we'll see if we can bake them in the oven? And add lots of toppings. Your nachos are my favorite."

Noah perks up. "Hear that, Everett? My nachos are her favorite."

Everett nods my way. "I'll see if I can get the Wicked Wok to give up a recipe or two."

"Oh my word," I pant at the thought. "I'd kiss your feet if you could pull that off."

A naughty smile curves on his lips.

“I know that look on his face, Lot,” Carlotta says. “There’s another body part he’s gunning for you to kiss.”

“*Carlotta.*” I swat her way with a kitchen towel.

“So what do they think happened, Essex?” Lily asks as she finishes helping a customer with an order.

“They found traces of Rohypnol in his system,” Noah answers for him. “There wasn’t an assault, but they stripped him clean and landed him in a dumpster.”

Everett shoots a look at Noah, no smile—not that Everett ever smiles. It’s one of his charms that women find so alluring.

“I see you don’t let any legal confidentiality clauses rule your life,” Everett tells him.

Carlotta doesn’t even look up to acknowledge the slight Everett handed to Noah. She’s too busy with that chicken scratch she’s filling her notebook with.

Lyla Nell growls something out at Noah before giving his cheek a pinch.

“You tell him,” Everett says.

Lyla Nell is the spitting image of her daddy with those dark curls, big green eyes, and dimples. And she’s already showing off one of the dresses I bought for the Fourth with the miniature flags and sprays of silver fireworks printed on it. I’ll admit, I take any excuse I can to buy her as many dresses as possible. And I’m always freshly miffed that they don’t make those adorable dresses in my size, too.

“Well, I can’t blame them for taking off all your clothes,” Lily says. “I bet it was a group of women who kidnapped you just so they could see you in the nude. I knew there would be repercussions when you insisted on playing house.” She shoots me the side-eye before heading back to the register to help a cluster of customers who just walked through the door.

Carlotta chuckles. “She’s probably right. And I bet they took a ton of pictures while they had you tied down to a four-poster bed, too. I’ll keep an eye out for the calendar. Don’t worry, Sexy. I’m pretty sure you’ll be Mr. *Every Month.*”

“Calendar.” I roll my eyes at that one, but dear Lord, I pray there is no calendar. That would be a nightmare none of us need.

Speaking of nightmares, I had that horrific dream again last night. Same one I had in Cormack’s hospital room. No sooner did I fall asleep than I heard the sound of footsteps as if they were coming toward me. I looked up and a couple of men in black ski masks were there. I tried my best to scream, but I couldn’t get a whisper out. One of those thugs tossed a hood over my head, before tossing me onto his shoulder, and whisking me away to who knows where. And then I woke up with a start.

Everett pulled me back into his arms and asked if I was okay. After what he had been through, I didn’t have the heart to tell him about a silly dream, of all things, so I kept mum about it.

Carlotta gets right back to her busy work, with that determined look on her face—sticking her tongue to the side of her mouth and widening her eyes as far as they’ll go before an eyeball bounces onto the counter.

I wrinkle my nose at her. “Carlotta, what is that you’re writing over there, anyway?”

Carlotta with a determined look is always a sign of something worrisome, and most likely illegal.

“I’m scheming new ways to increase my ticket sales. Francine has taken to her old pastime of standing on a corner. But I’d like to move my marketing plan into the twentieth century.”

“You mean the twenty-*first* century,” I say.

“Don’t tell me what century I want to live in,” she crows back. “I’m talking about the here and now. What good is it going to do to sell tickets for a Fourth of July raffle that won’t take place for another hundred years? We’ll all be dead—including Francine.” Her eyelids roll up like shutters. “Lot Lot, I just had a great idea. Why don’t you and I mosey on down to whatever corner Francine is selling her body—”

“You mean tickets,” I interrupt.

“Same difference,” she says. “And bring some of that Fourth of July ice *scream* cake you’ve whipped up. After a few bites of your poison pie, she won’t be my problem anymore—she’ll be Foxy’s.”

“Carlotta,” Everett says her name sternly. “You shouldn’t be entertaining a homicide given the circumstances surrounding Lemon or the cake in question.”

“I’m not entertaining anything,” she says. “This is Lot Lot we’re talking about. All she has to do is be present. That girl’s desserts know how to bring the Grim Reaper to the proverbial yard.”

“Yeah,” Lily snorts as she strides by. “More like the *graveyard*. Rumor has it, the cemetery is expanding just to accommodate her kill list.”

“Very funny,” I say dryly as she trots off with a box of Danishes.

“Noah,” I do my best to whisper. “Do you think all of this happened to Everett because he’s up for a position in the Vermont Supreme Court?”

“Anything is possible.” He lolls his head toward Everett. “You’re not keeping any deep dark secrets from us, are you?”

Lily pauses as she walks by. “You don’t have any more secret children out there, do you?”

Everett gives a wistful tick of his head. “I suppose the jury is out on that one. But no, I don’t have anything to add to this.”

Secret children.

I make a face at Lily for even bringing up such a notion.

“What?” She blinks back. “Don’t look at me like that, Lottie Lemon. Half the town is knocked up.”

“I can’t contest that,” I say as I hand Lyla Nell another plain donut—red velvet this time—and she squawks with approval. “It must be something in the water.”

Carlotta huffs as she snatches a brownie off Everett's plate, "More like something in *Jed Silver*."

"Stop," Noah moans as he holds a hand up for her to do just that.

"I'll second that," I say.

Speaking of all the women Jed Silver has knocked up, I'd better start selling my fried pickles again. They were a hit when I was pregnant—mostly a hit with me, but nonetheless. I wouldn't mind munching on a few myself.

"Stop with what?" Carlotta dares to push her luck. "The *truth*?"

Everett looks pained for a moment. "I can't believe Jed went after Sam and Meg like that."

"And he got more than he bargained for," Lily points out.

"Or at least he will in nine months," I say, pinching off a piece of Everett's fudge brownie and popping it into my mouth. "Mmm," I moan as it melts over my tongue. "You don't think Jed had anything to do with Everett's kidnapping, do you?" I ask Noah, but both he and Everett raise a brow my way.

"Lemon," Everett says. "You're aware of his history."

"Yeah, yeah," Carlotta says. "But are you aware of his superpowers? He's got Lot Lot under his spell, I tell you."

"That's not true." I shake my head at the absurdity. "But I just don't think the Ashford Narcotics Division got the right man."

Noah's eyes enlarge. "Lottie, I made the arrest myself."

I shrug his way. "And you were operating on information the rest of the division gave you—along with your personal feelings in the matter."

He inches back, never taking his eyes off me.

The bell on the door chimes and in strides Suze with dark circles under her eyes, and yet she has a strange glow about her.

“Good morning, glorious people,” she trills. “What did I miss?”

“Lot Lot just handed Foxy his cookies,” Carlotta is quick to fill her in on the hot piping—completely untrue—tea.

Suze waves it off. “I just came from the nursery. They’ll be discharging the little angel later this evening if all goes well. Lottie, I’ve already let your mother know I’ll be moving out of the B&B temporarily as I help Alex with the baby. Would any of you like to see pictures of my new grandson?” She quickly shoves her phone in our faces and Everett scrutinizes the screen.

“You’re right, Lemon. He looks just like Lyla Nell when she was born,” he says. “So what’s his name?” He nods to Suze as she takes a moment to hug her phone.

“I’m thinking we should do something Biblical like Nebuchadnezzar, or Belshazzar,” she suggests.

“What?” Noah doesn’t look amused. “Mom, I’m pretty sure when people give their children Biblical names they shoot for something a little more common like Mathew, Mark, Luke, or John.”

“*Pfft.*” Suze brushes off the voice of reason. “I gave you boys common names and look where it got us?”

Noah and I exchange a look.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Noah asks, clearly taking umbrage with the slight from his mother.

Carlotta chuckles as she steals another brownie. “Now, now, Foxy. I think everyone in this room knows what she meant by that. She’s sick and tired of being sick and tired. She’s done with vanilla. She wants something a little more exciting for the little tyke.” She looks up at Suze. “And that’s why I think you should go with Carlotta.”

I roll my eyes just as my phone pings in my pocket, and so do Suze, Carlotta, and Lily’s phones, too.

“Wow,” Lily says, yanking off her apron. “Sorry, Lottie, but I was just given a secret invite to a private seventy-five

percent off sale at a new posh shop called the Haute House Flower.”

Seventy-five percent? That’s an additional twenty-five percent off what Cressida told me.

“I got the golden ticket, too,” Carlotta howls. “I bet I can get the hoity-toity women in there to buy a trillion tickets to the All Souls Bingo raffle. I’ll not only beat Francine Dundee, I’ll send her ego straight into the stratosphere, and we can all watch her explode like the firecracker she is.”

“I got an invite, too.” Suze sighs. “And I’m afraid I’ll have to head that way myself. Rule number three of the Frugal Mavens Club is never to pass up an unbelievable deal. Who knows? They might even have something for my little Olympus.” She nods to Noah. “Still a Biblical name.”

He nods back. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

I make a face at my phone. “I just got the same invite.”

Everett reaches over and gives my hand a squeeze. “You should go. Treat yourself. I need to run down to the courthouse anyhow.”

I glance at Noah. “I’ll find Lyla Nell a sitter. I’m pretty sure Cressida has a no-baby policy.”

“*Geez*,” Lyla Nell screeches so loud the walls around us shake.

“I know,” I tell her. “But if I find something cute for you, I’ll be sure to pick it up.”

“I’ve got it!” Carlotta jumps out of her seat. “Little Yippy just sent a brainstorm my way.” She winks over at her. “I’ll shove a candy bar in your crib later as a thank you.”

Little Yippy is Carlotta’s terrible nickname for Lyla Nell.

“You will not sneak her a candy bar,” I say. “What’s the brainstorm?”

I may as well brace for the storm.

“I head down to Geezer Gardens and sell the residents my tickets. I’ll be sold out by noon.”

“How do you figure?” I’m almost afraid to ask.

“Just about every last one of them has memory issues. All I have to do is make the rounds again and again until I run out of tickets. They won’t remember they bought the first, second, or third time. And they won’t feel bad about all the money they spent because they won’t remember that either.”

“No,” I tell her without hesitation.

“Fine. Have it your way. I’ll head down to that fancy shop and see if I can’t unload any there.”

Noah clears his throat. “Lottie, be careful while you’re out.”

Everett glances his way then at me. “You’ve got a suspect?”

I give a little shrug. “Maybe, maybe not. But one thing is for sure, Cressida has some explaining to do.”

Everett closes his eyes a moment. “Do me a favor and don’t say a word to Evie about Cressida’s involvement.”

“I wouldn’t dare.”

But would Cressida dare shove someone down a stairwell to their death?

That is exactly what I’m about to find out.

LOTTIE



The Haute House Flower sits in the ritziest shopping district that Fallbrook has to offer. And seeing that Fallbrook is the ritziest town in all of Vermont, that's saying a lot.

"I just love Fallbrook," Fluffernutter coos while Carlotta nestles the gorgeous bird in her arms.

There's a light breeze, and for reasons unknown to me, the downy soft feathers on that disembodied bird are blowing back in response to it.

I'm not sure why, but the dead have the ability to feel as solid as they like. And not only do Nell and Fluffernutter feel solid, but they look every bit as real as Carlotta and me. Well, save for the eerie blue supernatural glow and the spray of miniature stars that shake out around them periodically.

"You know, we lived in Fallbrook." Fluffernutter juts her pretty little neck my way. "Dirk's family had a farm out in the countryside."

Fallbrook is loaded with fabulous estates, mansions of every shape and size, and yet it does maintain a country appeal, so I'm not too surprised to hear it.

"His mother raised prized chickens," she goes on as we stride up to the Haute House Flower. The front of the building is made entirely of glass, brass, and well, class. And judging by the thick crowd inside those elongated glass doors, there's lots of cash involved in this place, too. "I wasn't one of them,

but Dirk begged her to keep me. You could say we had a special bond—especially after the fire.”

“What fire?” I ask before we dare step inside the glitzy establishment.

“You didn’t know?” The fluffy little specter looks morbidly surprised, or at least as surprised as a chicken can look. “There was a terrible fire that swept through the main house on a stone-cold night. It took the lives of both his parents and one of his brothers. Dirk was orphaned and left with a brother. His aunt took them in. I met my demise shortly thereafter as well by way of a fox in the hen house. You know what they say—a fox a day kills every hen in the hen house.”

Carlotta chortles as she hugs the bird tighter. “That sounds like something I would say.”

“Oddly enough,” I say, pushing the door open. “It does.”

If the Haute House Flower didn’t look like an expensive boutique on the outside, it looks more than a little fancy on the inside. The air is cold as a glacier, the sound of classical music filters lightly through the air, and the scent of flowery perfume is thick enough to smother you.

For reasons unknown to me, the scent turns my stomach.

I’m not surprised. My stomach has been off ever since I realized Everett was gone. I can hardly look at food, let alone eat it.

“Wow,” I say, marveling at all of the expensive labels strewn about the place.

Tables are laden with Chanel, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Dolce & Gabbana, Vera Veragamo, Bulgari, Givenchy, and more.

“*Pfft.*” Carlotta is quick to poopoo it. “Is this all they’ve got? What about the brands people really care about, like Tractor Girl and Muddy Footprints? Those have been my go-tos all my life.”

I make a face at her. “I haven’t seen you wear either of those brands.”

“That’s because you don’t line your closet with them,” she says a touch too loud and a few customers turn our way. “You think you’re too good for them, don’t ya, Lot?”

I choose to ignore the slight.

Nell leans in. “I see your sisters, Lottie. Oh, and I see Miranda, Suze, and Lily. Look, there’s Keelie, too.” She gives a little wave at my blonde bestie who is elbows-deep in a basket full of purses with a sign that reads seventy-five percent off.

“How about Cressida?” I ask. “Do you see her?”

She floats up above the crowd a notch. “No such luck.”

“Say, Nell? Do you think you’re here to help me solve this case, too?” I whisper as she floats back down to eye level. “I mean, you said you were coming back to help me through a dark time, and well, Everett’s back and you totally helped me through that, but you’re still here.”

She lifts her shoulders a notch. “I don’t make the rules. I just follow them.” The wrinkles around her eyes grow more pronounced as if she were considering something. “Although, I think I understood the assignment pretty well. I’m to remain until I’ve helped you through a dark time.”

“I know what that means.” Carlotta nods. “Sorry to be the one to break it to you, Lot, but your luck is about to go from bad to worse.”

That strange dream I had last night comes to the forefront of my mind.

Nell leans in. “Lottie, what is it?”

“Nothing,” I say, blinking a few times fast just as my sisters, Meg and Lainey, come up, each with their arms laden with crisp white bags with the Haute House Flower printed over them, and each of those bags overflowing with merchandise.

“I’ll let you visit,” Nell says. “I’ve always been curious about these types of shops. I never set foot in one while I was living. Even though I could afford the finer things in life, I

wasn't someone who chased after labels. But the jewelry behind those glass counters by the registers has gotten my attention, for sure." She zips toward the glass cases glittering with gems and jewels of every shape and size.

I feel the same way Nell does regarding the labels. And yet much like Nell, I do love me a shiny new bauble or two.

"I'm so glad Cressida included me in that mass text message," Lainey pants as if she just ran a marathon. Lainey and I share the same caramel blonde curls and same hazel eyes even though we aren't a stitch related in the traditional sense. She's the head librarian of the Honey Hollow Library and she happens to be the mama of my favorite niece, Josie, a little tyke just a few months older than Lyla Nell. "I scored three Birdie bags, not to mention a gorgeous Gucci tracksuit and a bunch of other stuff I could never have afforded without this huge friends and family price break."

"Birdie bags?" I inch back at the thought. I happen to know those small little hard cases that look more like boxes than they do purses can set a person back the same amount as a brand new car.

Meg nods. "And I got a bunch of stuff the girls can use down at the club. Believe it or not, Canelli has quite the budget for props and costumes. At these prices, I can afford to wrap the girls in style—even if they will be taking it off."

Jimmy Canelli is one of the two mobsters who practically owns Leeds. I've had plenty of dealings with him before. He can be a nice guy, but I wouldn't say he's harmless.

Meg is gorgeous, with a shock of black hair that has been harshly overdyed, baby blue eyes ringed with copious amounts of kohl, and a grunge meets Goth style when it comes to her accouterments, thus the fishnets, chains, and solid black outfit of choice.

Neither Meg nor Lainey knows of my supernatural quirk.

"I'm glad you both scored great deals," I tell them. "Meg, how are you feeling? Have you seen Dr. Barnette? Did she tell you when the baby is due? Are you sick?"

I've been so busy with Everett's disappearance and Cormack's delivery that I'm completely out of the loop with my own sister's pregnancy. It's her first and I need to be there for her, no matter what.

Meg laughs while readjusting her bags, all of which look weighty.

"I'm fine," she says. "Sam, however, has been puking her guts up. Mom says that's probably because she's having a girl and I'm having a boy." She shrugs. "I don't care what it is as long as it's healthy. Jed's been calling every day to check in on me. I know you think he's nothing but a felon, Lottie, but he really seems to care about the baby."

I clamp my lips closed because I don't think, I know he's nothing but a felon. Although, I'm not sure this latest felony they want to pin on him has a whole lot to do with him at all. Someone was running drugs through Rizzo's Trattoria, but I don't think it was Jed.

Rizzo's burned to the ground a few days ago, and I'm not all that sorry. The Rizzo sisters gifted it to Carlotta as more or less a curse. And well, it was a curse through and through.

Once I saw that illegal casino and all the drug running that was taking place through the back, I took it upon myself to try to nab the dealer who was floating drugs through the place.

Illegal substances have infiltrated Honey Hollow as of late, and if I can stop one person from getting addicted—from trying to sell to my daughters—then by goodness, I will.

"Hey, I just thought of something," Carlotta pipes up. "Back at Cormack's baby shower, we played that baby reveal game where you had half the women at the party pee on a stick. You said there were three women who were knocked up and yet you only announced two."

"Sam and me," Meg says. "But Charlie is the one who was in charge of that fiasco." She glances at her watch. "I'd better go. I've got a hankering for gefilte fish and soft serve ice cream." She dashes out the door and Lainey looks green at the mention of the gefilte fish.

“I’d better run, too,” she says. “My lunch break is almost over and I’m hoping to get home early. *Ohh*, before I forget, I’ve been stocking up on your black and white cookies, Lottie. I’ve had dreams about them, they’re so delicious. I’ve just been obsessing over them like you wouldn’t believe. I’m stopping by the bakery on my way home to get more.” She gives Carlotta and me a quick wave before ducking out the door as well.

“We’d better go find Cha Cha,” Carlotta says, standing on her tippy toes. “She’s got the 411 on who’s got a bat in the cave. Let’s pray hard it’s not you, Lot. My sanity has hit its limit with Little Yippy.”

“I like Little Yippy,” Fluffernutter pecks my way. “She pulled me apart by the legs twice last night and I didn’t mind a bit. Of course, that’s because I’m already dead. And she let me chew on her pigtailed all I wanted. I’ve always had a hankering for hair. Just ask Dirk.” She juts her head back. “But then I suppose you can’t ask Dirk. He’s dead, too.”

“Never mind the dead,” Carlotta says. “I need to find Cha Cha and figure out who got their stocking stuffed by the bad Santa.”

I avert my eyes at that one. “Well, it’s not me. As soon as I got pregnant with Lyla Nell, I was sick city. And I feel just fine.” Sans the lack of sleep, the night terrors, and my inability to look at food. But now that Everett’s home safe, I expect that all to clear up.

“Good to hear it,” Carlotta says. “The only thing that would have me panicked is if you started to crave fried pickles again.”

“*Ha*,” I say as she dives into the crowd with a dead chicken in tow.

As if.

And then, as if on cue, my mouth begins to water at the thought of the savory, slightly spicy treats. Boy, I’d do just about anything right now to get my hands on a couple of fried pickle chips or a pickle spear.

I suck in a quick breath.

Wait just a baby pickin' minute—

Could I be?

LOTTIE



*B*efore I can delve into the deep recesses of more sleepless nights and endless diaper changes—a loop that I’m still very much active in—Cressida struts over in relentlessly tall red heels and a white flowy dress that’s hardly long enough to cover her bottom. And oddly enough, it looks to be made of gossamer.

In fact, I bet it is.

A designer gown made of spiderwebs and dust wouldn’t surprise me at all.

“Cressida.” I give a little wave, and her straight blonde hair whips around her face as she turns my way. Her face has been nipped and tucked and frozen so many times, yet regardless of the fact, I always find myself scouring it looking for Evie’s features. But time and time again, I end up reinforcing what I already know—Evie is Everett’s twin through and through.

“Lottie,” she coos as she makes a beeline for me, grinning like a deviant and I have no idea why. “So glad you could make it.”

There’s a gleam in her eyes, and something in me innately demands that I don’t trust it.

The tall blonde woman she was with the other day clip-clops over, clad in a gold glittery dress that makes her look like one of those statues they hand out at the Academy Awards.

“Gigi Whipple.” The woman shakes my hand and a honey-scented perfume wafts over from her. “I’m the owner. What can we help you find?”

Cressida smacks the woman on the arm. “This is Lottie Lemon. You met her the other night at the hospital.”

The woman cringes. “Are you looking for something to wear to the funeral?”

“No, actually,” I say. “I didn’t really know Dirk Livingston.”

“*Ba-gawk*,” a hard squawk comes from some nebulous place to my right as Fluffernutter floats into our midst with a trail of miniature purple stars following in her wake. “Did I hear someone mention my Dirk?”

I give a covert nod at the disembodied bird.

“Would you look at these cuties?” she muses. “Dirk always did have a soft spot for blondes. His favorite motto was *blondes have more fun—especially if they’re with me.*”

I make a face at the silly tagline of the deceased.

“This is a great place you’ve got here,” I tell the woman.

“It’s a great place that *we’ve* got here.” Gigi wraps an arm around Cressida’s shoulders, and for reasons unknown, Cressida suddenly looks more than a little uncomfortable. “Cressie is my silent partner, but you’d be surprised how much marketing advice she’s given me.”

Cressida shoots the woman a look. “You mean how many of my friends I’ve led to your shop.”

“Cressida—” My mouth falls open. “Why, thank you. I didn’t think you thought of me as your friend.”

Not to mention my own friends and family who seem to be occupying the shop at the moment.

“Don’t be silly, Lottie. You know we’re not friends.” She averts her eyes as she looks back at Gigi. “You sleep with someone’s husband and suddenly they think you’re their bestie.”

The two of them giggle it up like only a couple of socialites can.

“Lottie”—Fluffernutter chuffs—“this woman slept with your husband and you choose to be friends with her?”

“Not quite,” I whisper.

Although, technically, I slept with my best friend’s husband, and yet Keelie and I are still as close as ever.

Fun fact? Keelie married my high school boyfriend who made it a sport to cheat on me regularly. Cheating on me was pretty perfunctory for him, like going to the bathroom or getting up to have a midnight snack. There wasn’t a lot of thought or emotion behind it. But nonetheless, I ditched him ages ago.

Bear has since reformed his cheating ways and is happy as can be with Keelie and their baby boy, aptly named after his animal of a papa.

“My husband is Judge Everett Baxter,” I say as if that explains everything.

Gigi calms herself down long enough to blink my way. “Just so you know, I came this close to sleeping with your husband, too.”

“Goodness.” Fluffernutter flutters her wings and a spray of stars goes shooting every which way.

Believe me, I’m getting my feathers ruffled, too.

The blonde shakes her head. “I still can’t believe you’re the one who stopped Essex’s train from heading down my tracks.” A crooked smile leaps to her face. “I admire you for daring to tame that steed. I never made the Essex Club, but I’d feel too left out if I didn’t use his proper name like the rest of my friends.”

“*Ba-gawk*,” Fluffernutter harps at the thought.

That comment about the rest of her friends wasn’t exactly a barb as much as it was a statement based on fornicating facts.

“Not a problem,” I tell her. I don’t care what name she calls him so long as she tells me the truth about another man. “So how did you both know Dr. Livingston?”

Both Cressida and Gigi stiffen.

Gigi leans in. “If you don’t mind, I think it’s bad juju to bring up the dead—lest we kill business, too.”

The cords in Cressida’s neck leap like garden snakes. “We sold his books here. That’s how we knew him. I mean, that’s how I met him. He came to drop off a shipment about eight months ago and we’ve been friendly ever since.”

“Friendly?” Gigi lifts a brow.

Fluffernutter cocks her head my way. “I hardly think she’s the type of girl Dirk would want to be mere friends with.”

“Cressida,” I say it low. “Did you sleep with him?”

The whites of her eyes turn into twin meringues.

“Knew it.” Fluffernutter flaps her wings with a touch of pride. “That’s my boy. Always getting what he wants.”

And who he wants it from.

“Cressie,” Gigi pulls her name out slowly with an air of disappointment in it, but if I didn’t know better, I’d think it sounded like sarcasm. “You were sleeping with him? Why, he’s practically married.” She nods my way. “You know his fiancée, she was up on stage with him.”

“I remember,” I say, quickly shifting my gaze back to Cressida. “How could you?”

“How could I not?” she gruffs back. “That man practically cast a spell on me.” She shrugs at her friend as if offering an apology.

Fluffernutter belts out an ear-piercing squawk. “If I were his fiancée, I’d kill him.”

Good point.

“Well, did his fiancée know?” I ask the perpetrator in question.

“Oh, I’m sure she knew.” Gigi waves it off. “Dirk was prone to having his way with the ladies. He was almost as fascinated by women as he was by death.”

“Facts,” Fluffernutter chirps and sounds decidedly like Evie as she does it.

That happens to be one of Evie’s favorite one-word phrases.

“Gigi”—I take a half-step in—“you would have the final say in what products could and couldn’t stay in your shop. Why would you choose a book on near-death experiences to be a part of your inventory?”

“Oh, *we* sell lots of books.” She’s back to slinging her arm over Cressida’s shoulder once again. “Mostly books written by influencers and the like. But a couple of years ago, I lost my original partner who I started the shop with. She died in a car wreck out on the highway. Black ice. Anyway, we were close and I grieved her like nothing else. And as a part of that grief process, I became interested in what lies beyond this life. That’s when I stumbled upon his book. Lucky for me, he was local and making appearances at bookstores. That’s where we met, so I invited him to sell in my shop.”

“And like I said, that’s how I met him.” Cressida clears her throat, looking a little green around the gills. Here’s hoping she’s not knocked up by the guy. Not only isn’t he around to witness the spectacle, but Cressida has a habit of forgetting about her children.

“What about Carlene Dearborn?” I say to Gigi. “Did you know her, too?”

“Only vaguely.” She lifts her chin and does a sweep of the shop with her lucent blue eyes. “Although I did hear her say something the other night once she got off stage. Something about *I hope she chokes on her chicken.*”

Fluffernutter breaks out into a fit of clucking and cackling.

“I’ll tell you what,” the feisty bird says before giving an entire string of ba-gawks. “No one would choke on their chicken if you humans didn’t insist on eating us!”

She's got a point there.

"Who do you think she was talking about?" I ask Gigi as my fingers fidget with the pendant on my necklace.

Cressida seizes once again. "Excuse me, but I think I see someone trying to balance a half dozen Birdie bags on their head."

She takes off and I follow her with my gaze.

Not shockingly, Carlotta is the crazy culprit.

"Well?" The ghost among us does a quick revolution around the room before speeding back. "Who was it that his fiancée wanted to kill with chicken?"

"Do you think Carlene was talking about Cressida?" I ask the woman a bit too sharply—and perhaps eagerly.

As shallow as it is of me to say, Cressida Bentley behind bars does have a nice ring to it.

"I'm not sure." Gigi wrinkles her nose. "But if you'd like, you can ask her yourself. She works for that fish wrapper they sell in Honey Hollow. Before the conference, I heard her mention some big to-do taking place at the lake in a few days. She mentioned she would be covering it along with her staff. She said even though she's the editor, she feels the need to have her hands in everything."

"Big to-do at the lake, got it," I say just as a group of women call for her and she does a disappearing act.

"Well, what do you think?" I ask as I pull Fluffernutter close and take in her downy fur against my bare arms.

"I think we have to be at that big to-do at the lake in a few days. Oh, and why don't we bring some of that delicious ice cream cake? What flavors do you use on the inside?"

"Vanilla, strawberry, and chocolate. It's more or less a Neapolitan delight, but I frost the outside with red, white, and blue to give it a festive look. Plus, I add a layer of fudge to the bottom to give it that delicious zing. It's turning out to be a real fan favorite."

Carlotta swoops in with Nell and Charlie by her side.

“And you’re turning out to be a loon, standing here, talking to yourself about fudgy zingers.” She bops me on the head with a lime green bag, no bigger than a lunch box and shaped like one, too. “Give me that bird.” She plucks Fluffernutter out of my hands. “There, there, did that big bad baker scare you?”

Charlie shrugs my way. “She’s right. You know the rest of the world will think you’re a nutcase.”

If Lainey and I look alike, well, Charlie is my doppelgänger in every way.

“Speaking of nutcases. So who was it?” I ask my sister. “Who was the third person that failed their pregnancy test that day?”

Nell chuckles as she swoops in. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

My mouth falls open. “It wasn’t me, was it?”

Charlie lifts her shoulder my way. “Wouldn’t you like to know, indeed. Your mom invited all of the women who were at the shower to come back to the B&B on Tuesday to show off Suze’s new kid. I’ll do the big reveal then. But do me a favor and don’t take another test beforehand. You agreed to this big reveal of a surprise, remember?”

“I remember.” I frown her way. “And I don’t mind because I’m positive I’m not *positive*.”

She laughs in response. “Well, I’m not telling you anything before then. Word to the wise, I have a feeling Honey Hollow is about to go through its fair share of fried pickles. Oh, and before I forget, the Honey Pot Diner would love to contribute a few recipes to your cookbook!”

“Please do.”

She takes off with a wave just as Cormack waddles in, her baby bump still in play—and rightly so since she’s just had the baby.

“Cormack, what are you doing here?” I ask, shocked to see her up and about so soon.

Her blonde mane is swept back neatly, her winged eyeliner and crimson lipstick are both on point. She’s donned a hot pink sheath dress reminiscent of the cobwebs Cressida has wrapped herself in, and I’m guessing gossamer is all the rage.

“What do you think I’m doing here?” She blinks past me. “I’m hoping there’s still some couture left for me to appreciate.”

“You’re here for the fire sale?” Carlotta asks.

“Are you kidding?” Cormack looks mildly confused. “Nobody puts couture on sale. You should wash your mouth out with a bar of fresh-milled French lavender soap.” Her lips contort as she takes in all of the sales signs strewn about. “What is this heresy? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Don’t worry, Mackie,” Carlotta tells her. “All of the Foxy’s Daughter duds are in the back and they’re all still full price.” She looks my way. “That’s probably why no one is touching them.”

Cormack flicks her wrist. “I couldn’t care less. I called my attorney this afternoon and released myself from the company. If I don’t have Noah’s daughter, then I don’t need the clothing line either.”

Cressida swoops in and hugs her bestie as they exchange awkward arm-length hugs and air kisses.

“Oh, Cormack, it’s just been awful,” Cressida whines. “I’m terrified, I tell you. I haven’t slept since the night it happened.”

“You had a baby, too?” Cormack looks genuinely perplexed.

“No, my lover was killed in a freak accident. And I’m just positive his ghost is going to come back to haunt me. Certainly, you must have had that happen a time or two. How did you fend off the unholy wraith?”

Cormack hitches a thumb my way. “Rumor has it, Luanna deals with the dead. You’ll have to see her about it. I’m sure she has some hex or vex she can lend you.” She casts a cool glance my way. “How else do you think she got Essex on the hook like that?”

She takes off for a rack of dresses before I can defend myself against the character assassination she just slung my way.

“I’m not a witch,” I promptly tell Cressida.

“But do you deal with ghosts?” she asks.

My mouth opens and closes because for some reason I can’t bring myself to lie to the woman who birthed Evie.

“Perfect,” she pants. “I’ll be at your place tonight.”

“To do what?” I ask.

“To sleep, of course,” she says as she begins to walk away. “Do get the best sheets in the house ready for me. Have them laundered, pressed, and land a Keto-approved mint on the pillow.”

She takes off and I shudder in her wake.

“How do you like that, Lot?” Carlotta says. “Looks like you and Sexy will have an airhead between you in bed this evening.”

“There would be another homicide before that happens,” I say. “Well, Nell, I think I see why you’re still here after all. Another dark period is about to take place.”

Cressida Bentley thinks she’s moving in.

And it will be my job to make sure that doesn’t happen.

But I sure wouldn’t mind talking to that ghost she’s so afraid of.

Now *he* could put this case to rest once and for all—just the way the killer made sure Dirk was laid to rest himself.

LOTTIE



Just as Everett and I are about turn in for the night, a loud knock erupts at the door.

Both Pancake and Waffles, my white fluffy Himalayan cats, sit up at attention from their post on the sofa next to Everett and me.

Carlotta snickers from her own couch as she cradles a sleepy Fluffernutter. “You didn’t think you were getting out of it, did you?”

“That’s right,” Evie says, plucking an earbud out of her head and pulling a sleepy Lyla Nell close to her chest. “When Cressi-*duh* Bent-on-Making-You-Miserable says she’s going to do something, she does it—even though it’s usually at the last minute. “I’ll get it.”

“I’ll get it.” Everett bolts to the door before Evie can get up from her seat.

If he’s anything, he’s fiercely protective over his family. And at this point, Cressida is nothing but a potential intruder.

The door swings open and in strides the salty socialite wearing that gossamer dress she had on earlier, only bits and pieces of it seem to have chafed off in the interim. She has a white tote bag slung over her shoulder and a pair of sunglasses sitting on top of her head despite the fact the sun set an hour ago.

“Darling Essex.” She takes a moment to scratch the scruff on his cheeks and both cats trot over and hiss right at her. “Did you hear? I’ve got a ghost after me.” She looks my way. “You

were there when he looked right at the audience and said if anything happened to him, he'd be back to haunt us. And he was looking straight at me as he said it."

I think on it a moment. "Come to think of it, he did say something like that."

"Everly." She attempts to frown at Evie, but her lips merely droop a notch. "You've let your hair grow wild. I warned you about eating carbs."

I'm not quite sure where she was headed with that, but I shake my head at Evie in hopes she won't take any of the hairy carb talk to heart. Evie is a stunner with her long dark tresses and her Baxter blue eyes.

"And is that a baby?" Cressida blinks hard at Lyla Nell and my poor baby girl cowers while curling into Evie's arms. "Please don't tell me if I'm a grandmother. I don't think my heart could take much more." She wipes her brow down with her forearm. "Well, Essex, let's turn in." Cressida frowns as she takes a look around at the house. "I suppose if you can slum here so can I."

Everett and I built this house from the ground up a year ago. It's a bona fide mini mansion sitting in the middle of an unassuming street peppered with run-of-the-mill tract houses. It's about as far from slumming as one can get, and yet Cressida seemed genuine in her assumption. It just goes to show what sort of delusions she lives in.

Everett does a double take at the driveway just as he's about to close the door.

"What is it?" I ask as Evie, Carlotta, and I join him to ogle a bright orange two-seater sportscar taking up residence alongside my minivan.

"Why, it's an overgrown ladybug," Carlotta announces. "I'll get the bug spray."

"It's a fancy car, Cray Cray," Evie tells her.

"Yeah, *Cray Cray*," Lyla Nell growls out the funny nickname that Evie gave Carlotta and I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

“It’s a car, all right,” Everett says, his jaw tensing for a moment. “It’s a McLaren. They start off at well over three hundred K.”

“Wow,” I say. “Cressida, maybe you should park it in the garage for the night?”

“Don’t be silly,” she says, cinching her bag to her chest as if someone might come by and mug her. “I’ll need it handy to make a quick getaway in the morning. Now, Essex, please let’s get straight to bed. I’ve had a tension headache all day and I could really use your hands to work their magic.”

My mouth opens, but not a sound comes out.

Evie shakes her head. “There’s no way you’re getting near my dad tonight. He belongs to someone else.”

Cressida rolls her eyes. “Well, then I’ll just take another suite upstairs. It’s not my fault if I bump into him in the buff while heading to the restroom.” She winks at Everett. “It’s happened before.”

I’m about to tell her it won’t happen again, but Carlotta holds up a hand my way.

“Cressie, I’ve got a dead chicken *and* a dead woman upstairs,” she’s quick to inform the slutty socialite.

I don’t care if she is Evie’s biological mother, I’ll call her what I like since she has no interest in respecting my marriage.

Cressida looks to Evie for confirmation and she nods at the woman who bore her.

“Fine,” Cressida snips. “I’ll sleep on the sofa.”

“Good choice,” I tell her. “It opens up into a queen size bed. Here let me—” I say as Everett and I get straight to work moving the coffee table out of the way and plucking off the sofa cushions.

“*Mommy, Dada,*” Lyla Nell cheers and claps as we dig around for the handle and pull the bed out partway. The mattress unfolds, causing the other legs to come down, revealing a slightly rumpled sofa sleeper.

“It already has fresh sheets on it,” I tell Cressida.

“Wonderful,” she says as she bounces onto the center of it in one acrobatic leap and suddenly the bed folds up on itself with a loud clap and swallows her whole.

“Oh my goodness!” I shout in horror.

Both Pancake and Waffles hiss and yowl as they begin to run in spastic circles around the room.

Cressida gives a muffled cry for help while both Evie and Lyla Nell clap and cheer and laugh their heads off.

“Oh my word,” I say as both Everett and I try our best to pry the bed back into its rightful position, but it proves impossible. “We’re going to kill her!”

“I’ll help you hide the body,” Evie offers.

“*Body*,” Lyla Nell shouts.

“You’re training her young, Lot,” Carlotta sniffs while whipping out her phone as she begins to document the debacle.

“Would you stop,” I hiss her way. “The last thing we need is legal evidence.”

“No can do,” she shouts over the melee. “I’ve got an Insta Pictures account to uphold, and as of late you and your male harem haven’t been giving me enough material. I won’t have a pay-per-view subscription if there’s nothing to pay-per-view. Now go on and do something titillating that will make ’em beg for more.”

With one herculean growl, Everett manages to pull the middle of the bed down and Cressida rolls to the edge, landing with her legs spread eagle on either side of his head.

Everett roars in pain at the sight—I think...

“Everett?” I lean in close and he lets out another mean groan.

“My finger’s caught in a spring,” he grunts in agony. “It feels as if it’s being severed.”

“Oh my goodness,” I say, grabbing him from behind and holding on tight as I try to help pluck him free.

“And this is where we leave you,” Evie says. “I’ll be taking Lyla Nell up to my room. We’ll come out of hiding when she’s eighteen.”

They speed up the stairs and Carlotta jumps from side to side, snapping enough pictures to wallpaper the room.

We pull and pluck, but Everett can’t seem to get free, and all the while Cressida is doing her best to hitch a ride onto Everett by way of latching her legs to his shoulders.

“Cressida, get your legs off my husband,” I shout.

“I can’t move,” she shouts back. “My hair is stuck in the middle of this haunted hungry mattress of yours.”

I yank at Everett hard to end this madness and he howls at the top of his lungs, which causes Cressida to howl at the top of *her* lungs, and, of course, I’d hate to be left out of the fun, so I howl it up, too, just praying for Everett not to lose a finger in the chaos.

The door bursts open and in jumps Noah, gun drawn.

“*Everybody, freeze,*” he shouts so loud the walls reverberate.

“Would you put that thing down?” Everett shouts. “We’ve got kids here.” He straightens his back and his finger shoots out of the spring as if it were shot out of a cannon.

I sail backward from the recoil and land on a pile of sofa cushions with my legs up over my head until I find myself staring down at my underwear.

“Lemon?” Everett steps away from the sofa and the bed slams itself in half once again, pinning Cressida between the mattress and leaving her legs dangling out the sides.

“What the hell is going on?” Noah asks, putting away his weapon.

“It’s kink night at the Baxter bordello,” Carlotta says, motioning for Noah to get closer to the sofa. “Move in a notch

so I can get you in the shot. Sexy, you won't have to worry about double teaming them anymore. Foxy is here to help."

"Just great," I say, unfurling my body until it's somewhat usable.

This is going to be a long night.

Let's hope we survive.

NOAH



I spent the night at Lottie's place.

For some reason, that sentence just doesn't have the punch it used to way back when.

Lot was upstairs with Everett while I held vigil on the couch next to Cressida just in case the pullout decided to swallow her whole in the night. Or more interestingly, in the event the ghost of Dirk Livingston decided to pay a visit.

The only ghosts in that place last night were Nell and a dead chicken that once belonged to my latest homicide victim—both of which I want to speak to, although not with Cressida present. Both Nell and Fluffernutter are with Charlie at the moment.

But back to last night, Cressida made me promise to have my gun handy in the event I needed to shoot the sofa or a poltergeist. I did keep it handy despite her slightly skewed logic.

I'm no longer at the house. Instead, I'm holding Lyla Nell while flanked by Lottie and Carlotta as we step up to the porch of my brother's place.

I give a few quick brisk knocks and Lyla Nell claps her hands.

"Why are you cheering, Little Yippy?" Carlotta grouses. "You've got competition on the horizon. No more big *spendy* Christmas gifts from Uncle Foxy. You're second best now."

"She is not," Lottie is quick to swat her on the arm.

It's humid out. It'll be a hot one, that's for sure.

Alex bought a blue clapboard a few blocks away from me last spring. Little did he know he'd be raising his son in it. The lawn is green and neatly manicured and he's got a flag pegged to the front post in honor of the upcoming Fourth. My brother is forever a patriot.

"Noah, you're going to wake the baby," Lottie says, leaning past me as she gives a few softer knocks in my wake.

"Mommy, *me*," Lyla Nell says as she does her best to knock on the door as well, and before she can give up on the effort, Alex opens up, looking more than a little bedraggled.

His bed-head game is strong. He's unshaven, and his eyes look like canned tomatoes.

"No sleep?" I shed an easy grin as Lottie and Carlotta file in before me.

"Give me my niece," he growls, taking Lyla Nell from me. "You need to have a serious talk with your cousin," he tells her. "Someone is allergic to sleeping—or napping."

"Or eating," Mom says as she rocks the baby who's presently doing his best impression of a little lamb bleating.

"*Aww*," Lottie says. "Give him to me."

"Not on your life," Mom says, swinging the baby out of Lot's grasp.

The inside of Alex's home looks like a baby bomb went off. His typical décor consists of a couple of grey sofas, a TV on the wall, and not much else. But at the moment, there's a disassembled crib, a bassinet next to the sofa, and an entire litany of baby bottles and pacifiers on the coffee table, along with a few errant beers.

"Where's Everett?" Mom asks, craning her neck past me in hopes he'll be the next one to walk through the door.

"He's not here," I tell her. "He went to the courthouse but said he'd see the baby soon."

“Who’s going to put the crib together?” Mom’s voice is shrill with panic.

“I put Lyla Nell’s crib together,” I say. “I’m perfectly capable of putting this one together. Where are the tools?”

“You’re the tool,” Alex says with a sleepy smile as Lyla Nell grabs ahold of his hair.

“You show him,” I tell her as I spot a toolbox next to the crib in the corner.

“Come on, Noah,” Mom huffs at the thought. “We all know Everett put the crib together while you stood around and watched. We’re in total disorganization here. We need Everett to save us.”

“Well, you’ve got me instead,” I say. “I’ll put the crib together and then we’ll roll it into the nursery. How’s that?”

“What’s a nursery?” Alex asks, looking genuinely perplexed.

“The room that will alert the ladies to stay away from you,” Carlotta tells him before helping herself to one of the unopened beers sitting on the coffee table. She nods to my mother with the brown bottle in her hand. “Sorry to see you’re getting stuck with the kid, Suzie Q.”

“I am not getting stuck with the kid,” Mom is quick to correct her. “Unlike you, I appreciate having my first grandchild.”

Lottie bites down on her lip while shooting me a look. “Suze?” she calls out sweetly. “You do realize Lyla Nell is your grandchild, too.”

“Who?” Mom looks baffled as the baby in her arms begins to pitch a fit that’s loud enough to raise the roof.

“Oh, give him to me, Suze.” Lottie does her best to pry him out of my mother’s arms, and almost immediately the baby thrashes around in Lottie’s arms, doing his best to bury his head in the cleavage that her sundress affords.

“Make him be quiet, Lot,” Carlotta calls out over the racket. “You know I start to lose my balance if I listen to a

child scream for too long. And I've still got a boatload of tickets to sell for the Fourth of July raffle if I want to win the primo seat on the float."

"Which float?" Suze asks as she fishes a diaper out of a box.

"The one for All Souls Bingo Hall. I'd invite you to play, but I know how you feel about spending money. I feel the same, that's why I've been bankrolling my time at the hall on Foxy's credit card."

"Carlotta." I pause from my monkey business with the wrenches and screwdrivers. "I thought those were illegal charges. I reported them months ago."

"And I've unreported them," she says. "Would you stop trying to make my life so difficult? You think you'd be grateful to me for all I've done for you. If it wasn't for Harry and me getting frisky, then you and Lot wouldn't have gotten frisky. And you wouldn't have a good excuse to come stomping over to the house night after night."

Harry would be Mayor Harry Nash, aka Lottie's biological father. She just found out a few years back and it still messes with her head a little, especially since she's only ever known him as the mayor.

Lyla Nell shouts something at me, too, as if agreeing with her.

"You tell, him, Good Excuse," Carlotta says.

Alex plops back onto the sofa and sags right into it. "What's the new case about, Noah?"

"Someone pushed a guy down a stairwell. He's a doctor with an interest in near-death experiences."

"Really?" Alex gives a slow blink and his eyes are slow to peel back open. "I think I'm having one now."

"Oh you," Mom sings. "You'll get used to this chaos. And you'll learn to love it. Now regarding near-death experiences, I had one while I was delivering the twins." She nods my way as she gives mention to my sister and me. Up until a year ago,

I didn't even know I had a sister. "I was transported to a beautiful fairyland filled with flowers and handsome men who strutted around in the buff. I knew instantly they were angels. They were handsome, I'll give them that. But one look at paradise and I knew I couldn't stay."

Carlotta sighs as she says it. "Your kind does like to suffer."

"Someone has to do it," Mom agrees. "Lord knows Wiley wasn't capable of taking care of the kids. No offense, Alex, but everyone knows a woman does it best. That's exactly why I'll be moving in."

Alex glances at me with a silent plea for help, but I pat him on the shoulder instead.

The baby goes wild, screaming as if someone is trying to pick off his toes, so I drop the tools and head over to Lot.

"Let me try a bottle," she says and I hand her one, but the baby won't have it. His face is turning red as a beet and his dimples have dug in twice as deep as Lyla Nell's.

"*Baby mad*," Lyla Nell shouts over his cries.

"Baby pissed," Alex mutters under his breath.

"Don't worry," Lottie says. "It's just a matter of figuring out what he needs," she tells him as the baby continues to bury his face in her chest.

"Say cheese," I say, snapping a quick picture just as the baby pulls the V of her neckline apart and I catch a little too much flesh.

And boy, do I miss that flesh.

"Lot Lot, work your magic here," Carlotta shouts with her hands pressed to her ears. "Do what you always do when a handsome man gets mouthy. Pop your boob in his piehole."

"*Carlotta*," Lottie says it like a reprimand, but the baby somehow works his way into her dress, pulls out a boob, and drinks from it as if it were a fountain.

"Oh my goodness." Lottie gasps. "Alex, I'm so sorry!"

“Don’t be,” Alex says, stepping Lottie’s way with Lyla Nell. “He looks happy. And he’s actually *quiet*.”

“And he’s hungry,” Lottie points out.

“More like starved,” I say.

“Look at him go.” Carlotta chuckles. “He gets his hankering for Lot Lot’s boobs from you, Foxy.”

I frown her way. Not that she’s wrong.

“*Mine*,” Lyla Nell cries out. “Baby, *no*.” She tries her best to swipe at him.

“I’m with her,” Mom says, plucking the baby off of Lottie, and stretching out her nipple like taffy in the process. But soon my mother has the baby in her own arms and she’s sunk a fresh bottle into his mouth. He seems satiated just the same.

“Close call, Little Yippy.” Carlotta gives one of Lyla Nell’s pigtails a tug. “You almost lost your private reserve to the littlest yippy of them all.”

“You’ll never lose me.” Lottie blows Lyla Nell a kiss while stuffing herself back into her dress.

“Sorry for the attack,” Alex cringes as he says it.

“Don’t worry, Foxy Number Two.” Carlotta slaps him on the back while she laughs. “Something tells me you’ll spend the rest of your life apologizing for that little womanizer you’re rearing.”

“It’s not a problem,” Lottie says, angling to get a better look at the baby’s sweet face. “So what’s his name? Have you narrowed down the pool?”

Alex shrugs. “I’m thinking Essex.”

“No,” I say sharply as I pick up a hammer. “Don’t even kid like that.”

“Who says I’m kidding?” He laughs right at me because he just loves to get my goat. “It’s served Everett well.”

“It would serve the baby too well,” Lot says. “Anything else?”

“Miles, Levi, Eli, Wiley.” Alex lifts a brow to see how I might react to the thought of naming him after our father.

“Has Dad paid a visit yet?” I ask.

“Nope.”

“Then he’s out of the running.” As it should be. My father isn’t anyone a kid should look up to, or heaven forbid emulate.

“I don’t know,” Mom says, taking a seat with the baby in the rocking Barka lounger. “I like the idea of giving him a family name. What do you think about a boy named Sue?”

Everyone in the room groans, the baby included.

My phone chirps and it’s a text from Everett.

Where are you?

I sigh before flipping over to that picture I just took of Lottie with her girls hanging out. It takes less than a second to crop my new nephew out of the shot and for me to send it to Everett.

He texts right back. **Explain. Now.**

At my brother’s. I text back. **My nephew has taken a likening to her. What do you want?**

My phone pings again. **Two things. One: I’m all over the front page of every paper in Vermont. Two: I just found out the true identity of that woman whose death I witnessed and her name wasn’t Regina Pacheco. I’m at the office. Head down when you get a chance.**

My adrenaline kicks in.

Everett pulled me aside the day we found him and he told me that he witnessed that woman getting a bullet to the head.

“Something just came up,” I say to the room and even my nephew looks this way. “Everett says he’s made the news.” I leave out the details of that woman. The last thing I need is to pique Lottie’s interest in yet another dangerous direction.

Lottie quickly scrolls through her phone and gasps. “Oh no,” she groans.

Carlotta peers over and clucks her tongue. “So much for that seat on the Vermont Supreme Court.”

I peer over at the phone as well.

Holy smokes, we’ve got trouble.

EVERETT



Here I am, my body laid out, shirt raked open, belt undone as the woman parading around as Regina Pacheco lounges over me, licking my face, my chest, tugging at my tie as if she owned me.

Of course, her face is lost in shadows. She could be anyone, anyone but my wife, and that was the point. And that's just one of the many salacious poses they put us in.

I didn't see the pictures before Judge Merrick phoned this morning and told me the news. He said the Supremes didn't need the drama and then he wished me well in my legal endeavors.

He wasn't being rude. He was being honest.

And if I'm being honest, I'm a little relieved. Driving close to two hours each way to preside in another courthouse wasn't an ideal situation. That's four hours without my family, four hours I'd quickly come to resent. And I wouldn't dare move them upstate when Lemon has a thriving business, not to mention friends and family in Honey Hollow.

No, I'm not angry about losing the nomination. I'm angry about the fact someone thought it was a good idea to take me down in grand style, drug me, and leave me for dead. But what gets me even angrier is the fact they ended someone's life in an effort to take mine down. And now I want justice, for her, and for me.

Lemon flits through my mind. She could be the next target.

Whoever they are, they need to be stopped.

The nomination is no longer on the table, but who the heck knows what else they're after?

I'm not going to sit around waiting to find out.

The door to my office bursts open and Noah strides in.

"You ever heard of knocking?"

He frowns before gawking at my desk. "What's this?"

"A compilation of yours truly and the supposed woman I'm having an affair with. Never mind the fact she's dead."

Noah grunts as he pulls the sheets I've taken the liberty to print out.

"This one was taken in front of your house," he growls as he inspects the one that has Regina bumping into me during that jog she took in the neighborhood.

"Indeed it was. And this is at Evie's graduation," I say, sliding a picture his way that has Regina landing her lips to mine. "She tripped into my face," I say, lacking any enthusiasm. "And this one, and this one, and this," I say, shooting the rest to his side of the table. "All of them were very much staged with a photographer out in the wild ready to get the shot."

"I can see that." He shakes his head, unable to take his eyes off the mess. "So who is she?"

"You mean who *was* she," I say, pulling up a fact sheet on the woman and sliding it his way. "My cousin, Ransom, used to work for the FBI, so I asked if he could help identify her. He put the pictures I sent him into a database and came up with the name Kylie Morgan. She was a realtor from Freidman, and apparently she was struggling to make ends meet. Suddenly, about a month ago, she moved to Honey Hollow with a new identity—claimed to work as a clerk here at the courthouse, but all she had was a day pass to watch proceedings.

He nods. "What she was really watching was you. So what do you remember about the men who took you for a ride?"

I shake my head. “I think I’ve seen them before. There was a guy with a hooked nose, wearing a fedora—Lemon and I saw him watching us a few times, out in Honey Hollow when that woman was killed a few weeks back, and in front of Red Satin the night Cormack had a shindig there. I think he was one of the men. The bald guy with the mustache. I think he grew it and has since gotten rid of it.”

Noah inches back. “Didn’t Jed say he knew the guy?”

“He sure did. He said the guy’s name is Bianco Loretta. He said they were friends.”

“Ah yes, I remember you telling me. The mid-list gangster teaming up with a couple of other mid-list families to make a name for themselves. Do you know who they are?”

I shake my head. “That, my friend, is where Jed Silver comes in.”

Noah groans at the sound of Jed’s name. “So what happens next? Don’t tell me you’re unleashing him back into society.”

“I just had my buddy offer him bail. Jed will be back in Leeds in just a few hours wreaking havoc on who knows whose sister.”

“You better pray it’s not yours.”

I lift a brow. I wouldn’t put it past Meghan or Jed for that matter.

“Once he gets settled, I’m paying him a visit,” I say to Noah. “You’re coming with me. We’re going to find out where this Loretta bastard is, and then you’re going to throw him behind bars.”

“Bianco Loretta is just a surface weed. We’re going to need to dig all the way down to the root. You know my badge will only get us so far.”

“That’s right,” I tell him. “I do know that.”

“What’s your plan?”

“I don’t have one. I’m not the one who needs it,” I say. “It’s Jimmy Canelli and Luke Lazzari that do. Once they’re

made aware someone is looking to eat their lunch, I'm sure they'll take care of business." I shed a short-lived smile. "I'll be sure to look the other way."

Noah nods. "And so will I."

LOTTIE



*H*oney Lake gleams like a sapphire on this sunny afternoon, its shorelines teeming with people of all ages and stages of life stripped down to their bathing suits and slathering sunscreen all over their skin.

“It’s got to be a thousand degrees,” Carlotta complains while tugging at her neck as if she were determined to remove her skin.

Not a bad idea in this heat and humidity.

Speaking of unholy deeds, I had that dream again last night, the one where a couple of men throw a hood over my head and make off with me. I’m too terrified to tell Noah or Everett about it. And I keep forgetting to tell Nell. But at the same time, I’m afraid if I speak it out loud, I might accidentally call it to life.

“Oh, it’s not a thousand,” my mother is quick to brush her off as she bounces Lyla Nell on her hip. “According to the thermometer in my car, it’s a mere ninety-eight. And speaking of extreme heat, I’ve got Wiley setting up a cabana for us on the beach. Don’t you, worry, Lottie. I won’t let an inch of this baby’s skin see the sun. And I’ve got plenty of things to occupy her with.” She gives a hushed laugh. “I raided the kitchen drawers at the B&B and I’ve got enough spatulas and measuring cups to keep her busy for hours.”

“That sounds good,” I tell her. Be sure to put a blanket underneath her. I don’t want any sand getting in her diaper.”

“Will do,” she says as she and Lyla Nell offer a wave as they dash toward the beach.

A huge sign is staked at the entry to the lake that reads *Welcome to the Star-Spangled Field Day! Enjoy field games, relay races, delicious food, and companionship with the Honey Hollow community.*

And just as the sign promises, there are a myriad of challenges taking place at different times throughout the day as well as all-day events such as volleyball games, foot races, water gun competitions, hula hoop marathons, and crafts sessions that are happening under a bevy of tents set up on the grass that sits in front of the sand.

Throngs of people have shown up, including a few barbeque restaurants and smokehouses that have sent up their wares and are providing enough hot dogs, hamburgers, and smoked brisket to keep every belly here content and yet begging for more.

A foreboding feeling sinks deep into my bones. I’m not sure why, but in this crowd of thousands, I can’t help but shed the feeling that I’m being watched.

That’s just silly. Who would be watching me and why? Everett’s bid for the supreme court is over. I’m pretty sure I’m safe.

Pretty sure.

That’s not sure enough, and that alone makes a shiver run up my spine.

“My mouth is watering for some of that brisket,” Carlotta says. “Look, there’s Harry standing over by the *We’ve Got the Best Smelling Butts* smoke pit stand. He’s chatting it up with Cha Cha. Let’s join him and grab ourselves some smelly butts to eat.”

Normally, I’m more than up for a good smoked brisket sandwich, but the thought of it makes my stomach churn.

It’s probably just the heat. The only thing I’m craving is a slice of my ice cream cake. And lucky for me, there’s more than enough of that here.

Mayor Nash called this morning and let me know I could sell at the impromptu food fair they're hosting here today. And that's exactly why Lily and Suze are working a booth. And seeing that I've spotted more than a handful of people with a slice of my frozen wonder, I'd say the festive summer-inspired cake is a hit.

"I'll go say hello," I tell her as we make our way over to where Charlie and Mayor Nash are sharing a laugh over brisket.

Mayor Nash isn't just my biological papa, he's Charlie's biological father, too, which makes her my only full-blooded sibling and explains the look-alike faces we seem to share, on top of sharing the same name, *Carlotta*, along with the same supernatural quirk.

We're about to say hello when a woman jumps between us and shakes Mayor Nash's hand.

I recognize the woman from the other night at Honey Hollow General. It's Carlotta's so-called nemesis, Francine Dundee. Her long, mostly gray, hair flows to her waist, and she's wearing an ankle-length navy sundress with sunflowers printed all over it.

"Mayor Nash," she coos at Carlotta's quasi-sweetheart. Although, I'm not sure there's anything all that sweet about the relationship Mayor Nash and Carlotta have. "I just had to come and thank you for such a clean, wholesome festival. I'm looking forward to the parade as well."

"You would," Carlotta grouses.

Francine sheds less than a glance her way. "The Fourth of July is my family's favorite holiday."

"Ha," Carlotta carps. "Looks like someone just gave the good Lord's birthday the big heave-ho."

Francine lifts her chin at my salty bio mother. "I'll have you know, Christmas is not just a simple holiday in my household, it's a lifestyle." She nods to Charlie. "This must be your other daughter." She extends a hand her way and they

exchange niceties. “I had the pleasure to meet Lottie the other night. Sadly, it was in the face of a tragedy.”

“Ah, yes.” Charlie grimaces. “I heard all about it.”

Mayor Nash tips his head my way. He has a gray wreath of hair, scant as if might be, light eyes, and a devilish disposition in general. In other words, he’s perfect for Carlotta. “Why, yes, Lottie does seem to have her fair share of run-ins with tragic situations—all of them homicides.”

“Oh?” Francine’s entire face pulls back as she inspects me in this new light. “Thankfully, none of my children have had any experiences like that.” She expands a smile at Carlotta. “Do tell, will we be competing against one another in the Field Day triathlon?”

“A triathlon?” I ask. “In this weather?”

Mayor Nash laughs. “Our triathlon consists of a jigsaw challenge, a balloon hop, and ends in a three-legged race.”

Carlotta shrugs over at Mayor Nash. “I like puzzles, I don’t see why not.” She turns to her nemesis. “You can bet your goody two-shoes bottom you’ll be competing against me—and you’ll be losing to me, too.”

Francine smirks as if she knows better. “And which one of your lovely daughters will be participating with you? It’s a team-building exercise for two. You’ll need to have a partner.”

“That’s easy,” Carlotta says. “I’m taking Lot Lot.”

“Lottie?” Francine chortles my way. “You must be the favorite daughter.”

“Lot’s not my favorite,” Carlotta is quick to straighten the woman out. “Cha Cha and I have an understanding. She’s going to take care of me in my old age. We both know Lot isn’t going to last that long.”

“You do?” I blink her way, trying to digest this.

Are Carlotta and Charlie aware of something that I’m not privy to yet?

Come to think of it, they did have a private chitchat with Nell and Fluffernutter this morning, but Charlie said they were discussing whether or not she should start a hobby farm.

“Come on, Lot.” Carlotta elbows me. “You and I both know you can’t tango with the Grim Reaper for too long without finding yourself on the wrong side of the soil. I’ve got to have fun with you before you come back to haunt me.”

“As if,” I whisper.

Carlotta juts her head toward the woman. “And which of your fifty-two children are you participating with? Or should I ask who the favorite is?”

Mayor Nash chuckles. “Francine, I’ll admit, I’ve lost count. How many kids do you have now?”

“Seventeen.” The woman brims with pride, and both Charlie and I root our jaws to the ground.

“Seventeen?” I lay my hand over my poor belly just thinking of all the stretchmarks, labor pains, and ceaseless sleepless nights.

“It was just fourteen natural births.” She flicks her wrist as if that fact made everything oh-so-normal. “We had three sets of twins.” She bats her lashes at Carlotta. “My daughter, Mable, will be participating in the race with me. And just to be clear, a true mother has no favorites.” She gives Mayor Nash a little wink before waving and taking off.

“Did you see that?” Carlotta sputters in the woman’s wake.

“I know, Carlotta,” Charlie says. “It must not be easy to have someone question your mothering skills.”

Even though Charlie was raised by Carlotta, she rarely calls her any rendition of mama, unless, of course, she’s upset with her.

“What?” Carlotta crows. “Who cares about my mothering skills? That woman was flirting with Harry.” She wags a finger in his face. “Don’t you dare go kicking in her stall.”

He laughs at the thought. “Believe me, this mule isn’t going anywhere near her stall.”

“I can’t believe she has seventeen kids,” I marvel, still stuck on that little procreative tidbit.

Charlie makes a face. “I bet they’re all goody two-shoes freaks like her.”

“She wishes,” Carlotta says while stripping off her baby blue sundress—read the baby blue sundress she stole from my closet this morning—as she exposes us to a shock of pale flesh in a pink and white polka dot two-piece—also mine. I’ll admit, it doesn’t look half bad on her either sans the fact her boobs are swinging near her belly button. “I’ve met a few dozen of the spoiled brats. Her daughter Myra hosted a Christmas party for our bowling league at that mausoleum she lives in. The house is covered with marble from head to toe. I half-expected to find a body in one of her bathroom drawers.”

“*Ma,*” Charlie invokes Carlotta’s matronly moniker, proving my earlier point. “I told you it was rude to rummage through other people’s bathroom cabinets while using the loo.”

“Well, how else am I gonna stock my medicine cabinet? Anyhoo, Francine’s kids are just as messed up as anyone else’s brood. She’s got one daughter who hosts naughty knicker parties for a living.”

“*Ooh.*” Charlie wiggles her shoulders. “Now that’s a party I’d like an invite to.”

“You’re not giving a Dundee a single dirty dime,” Carlotta scolds. “Francine’s got a kid in prison, too. Her oldest boy, Milo. They put him away for running a pyramid scheme. Her second oldest daughter, Marley, is in the pokey as well. She was peddling fake luxury bags. Then there’s Monique. She spent a little time in the big house herself for racking up credit cards that weren’t hers. And let’s not forget Missy. She falls in line as a more recent addition. Rumor has it, she’s penning a tell-all about her whacko parents. Every one of their kids has a name that begins with M to take after Francine’s husband Mark. Personally, I’m shocked she didn’t change her own name to match.”

Mayor Nash chuckles. “Francine always did like to have the spotlight.”

“Yeah, and we all know where she likes to spotlight her husband’s attention,” Carlotta admonishes by way of wagging her finger in his face. “Come on, Harry.” She snatches him by the hand. “Let’s take a dip before I’m due back to give Francine a beating.”

“But I’m wearing a suit,” he calls out as she races him to the shoreline.

My sister rides her eyes up and down my body. “What are you really doing here in this heat? You’re not wearing your swimsuit, and I’m pretty sure you’re not looking forward to becoming a three-legged monster with Carlotta strapped to your thigh.”

“I’m on the lookout for a suspect,” I say, scooting in close.

“Good luck with that. I’m headed back to the Honey Pot where there’s air conditioning and indoor plumbing.”

“Ooh, before you go, why don’t you spill the beans and tell me who that third person is that’s got a bun in the oven? Come on, Charlie. It’s just you and me. I can’t stand the suspense.”

She laughs as she lifts her smoked brisket sandwich my way. “I’m sorry, Lottie. But I’ve already gone over this with you. You’ll find out with everyone else, tomorrow at the B&B. I’m hosting it at noon and providing a buffet so that those of us who work can have a little fun on our lunch hour. Now get out of the sun and go get yourself some brisket. This stuff is gourmet. And you never know, you could be eating for two.” She winks as she takes off.

“Eating for two,” I mutter under my breath. “As if I didn’t know my own body.”

Suddenly, my cycle comes to mind, but before I can start doing the baby math, I spot a well-polished woman with a caramel-colored shag haircut wearing a sky-blue blazer and a matching skirt.

All baby-making thoughts will have to wait for later.

My shiny new suspect just arrived on the scene.

LOTTIE



A spray of stars sparkles over Honey Lake as I make my way to where Carlene Dearborn stands with an electronic tablet in hand. Her caramel locks are tucked behind her ears and her tongue is pinned to her upper lip as she pensively stares down the lake as if it personally offended her.

Nell appears next to me in all of her ethereal glory, holding that fluffy little specter in her arms, and they both radiate a pink glow that looks perfectly magical juxtaposed against the crystal blue sky and matching waters.

“Just in time,” I say. “I’m off to speak with Carlene Dearborn.”

“Perfect,” Fluffernutter ba-gawks. “Maybe now we’ll learn who she invoked that poultry-based pox on.”

“That’s right,” I mutter to the two of them. “Gigi said she heard her wishing someone would choke on their chicken the night of the murder. So where have you two girls been?” I ask, always glad to see them.

“We’ve been with Greer at your mother’s B&B,” Nell says. Greer is one of the ghosts who happens to take up residence at my mother’s B&B. “She’s just so broken up over the fact Cormack has rejected the child she just had. Such a beautiful baby boy. He deserves a mother.”

“He deserves a good mother,” I tell her. “I can’t make Cormack do anything she doesn’t want to do. The only way she’d ever be interested in that poor child is if he belonged to

Noah. She's emotionally detached, and I'm afraid she might stay that way."

Fluffernutter squawks and shakes out her down feathers. "I don't see the problem. My kind aren't very attached to our chicklets either. Certainly, the woman's offspring will be shaking his feathers and strutting his stuff as he strikes out on his own in just a few weeks."

"A few weeks?" I muse as we make our way to where Carlene is holding herself by the lake. "I'm afraid for humans it takes a bit longer. Eighteen years, and then some."

Nell gives a solemn nod my way. "And in the meantime, he'll need a loving support system and a mother figure." Her glowing eyes stay hooked to mine.

"Nell, why are you looking at me like that? Are you suggesting I mother that sweet peanut? I mean, sure, he looks just like Lyla Nell and—" A pang of grief so deep and wide hits me, it's as if my heart has been ripped out of my chest. "Oh my goodness, he doesn't have a mama, does he? All he has is *Suze*. That's practically running in the negatives as far as mothers go. And Alex, well, he should have support—he'll need all the help he can get."

"I think I see where this is going," the ghostly fowl among us chirps. "Carlotta did mention that you were due to add to your reverse harem soon enough. I suppose you'll extend the invite to Alex then. How nice of you to have two brothers on hand."

"What?"

"Technically three," Nell points out. "Noah, Alex, and Everett were stepbrothers once."

"For goodness' sake, Nell," I huff. "You, of all people, know I won't be adding another man to the mix any time soon. Fluffernutter, please take anything that Carlotta says with a grain of salt. She's practically deranged when it comes to men. And this apple is still doing her best to roll as far away from the tree as possible."

An echoing laugh escapes from Nell. “You’re headed in the right direction, Lottie. As for Alex, perhaps the universe is asking you to play Cupid?”

I’m about to question the universe’s intentions when we come upon my target for this sweltering afternoon.

“Carlene?” I say her name softly as I step in close.

She startles for a moment, her hands rubbing over her arms aggressively as if she’s trying to rouse herself before she turns my way.

“May I help you?” The pretty blonde blinks a weak smile at me.

At this proximity, with her button nose and wide blue eyes, she reminds me a little of Keelie and instantly I like her.

“My name is Lottie Lemon. I was at the conference the other night at the hospital. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

She takes a quick breath and closes her eyes.

“Thank you. It’s been such a nightmare.”

“I can’t imagine. I’m actually the one who found the poor man in the stairwell. Such a tragedy.”

Her lips crimp. “Yes, well, I suppose those things do happen.”

Fluffernutter gurgles. “What does she mean those things happen? People wake up and eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. *Those* things happen. People don’t get pushed down a stairwell every day. Do they?”

“No, they don’t,” Nell says. “Speaking of pushing, push the woman verbally, Lottie. We might just have our killer.”

I swallow hard because it might just be true.

“How are you holding up?” I ask her. “I mean, I thought I heard you were engaged to him.”

Her eyes close once again as she gives a quick nod. “He proposed last Christmas Eve. We had only met a few months prior to that. It was more or less a whirlwind.”

“Wow, I mean, that happens,” I tell her. “It sort of happened to me as well.”

Twice.

But I leave that little tidbit out.

“Can I ask how the two of you met?” I give a little shrug as I say it.

“At one of his conferences. I work for the *Honey Hollow Gazette* and I was covering the event. I was interested in the topic at hand—albeit it was a morbid interest. But then, I suppose anyone who is eager to learn more about near-death experiences has a morbid interest in the topic.”

“So you had one yourself?” I ask. “I think I remember you bringing that up during the conference the other night. You were going to speak about it after the break, but unfortunately, we never got that far.”

Her gaze returns to the lake. “That’s funny you should mention it. I was just thinking about it—reliving it. The incident happened right here at Honey Lake.”

“Oh, wow,” I pant as I step up next to her and stare out at the lake as well. “Can I ask what happened?”

“It’s no secret.” She sighs. “I was a teenager. It was Spring Break and a bunch of us came down to the lake for the day. It was a hot one, much like this afternoon. I remember feeling as if my skin was about to melt off my body if I didn’t get into that water. And that’s what we did. A friend of ours took his father’s boat out and we drove it straight to the middle of this overgrown puddle and then we dove right in.

“It was refreshing, of course, and we didn’t want to leave. Two of my girlfriends started to race from our boat to another, and soon the boys joined in on the impromptu competition. I was already tired at that point, and I found myself alone. The ladder to the boat wasn’t that far away, but I felt out of breath, exhausted, and out of the blue I got a bad cramp in my leg. I began to kick and flail. I remember the pain felt insurmountable. Then panic set in and I found myself unable to tread water, let alone scream.”

“Oh my goodness,” Fluffernutter clucks. “I can hardly stand the suspense. Did she survive? Or did she make a big splash as she entered the big lake in the sky?”

“Both I bet,” Nell says, pulling the plucky poultry close.

“And then what happened?” I ask with bated breath.

“The unimaginable.” Carlene sighs hard, her gaze still pinned to the middle of the lake as if she were seeing it all play out in real-time. “I sank under the water and eventually my limbs stopped flailing. I took in a few unsteady breaths. The first hurt. It felt like a sharp shock to my lungs, but the next few, well, they felt normal as if I were able to breathe water all my life.”

Not ironically, Nell, Fluffernutter, and I all suck in a quick breath at the thought. And *ironically* only one of us needed that breath to survive.

Carlene gives a tight smile my way. “And that’s when it happened.”

She pauses to stare vacantly at the lake once again.

Here’s hoping she’s about to dive into exactly what happened during her near-death experience—and with the actual death experience Dirk had, too.

Here goes nothing, and I sure as heck hope it leads to everything.

LOTTIE



“*T*he next thing I knew, I was floating above Honey Lake,” Carlene Dearborn continues as she recants her near-death experience that happened right here at the lake all those years ago.

“I remember glancing down and feeling sorry for my body as if I knew it was its own entity, a shell, and that I wouldn’t be needing it anymore.” She takes a deep breath. “Then I floated through the sky. West at first before slowly veering north. I remember looking down at my body—my spiritual body, I suppose—and thinking that I looked good, healthy, my muscles were a bit more defined, and I felt strong. I also noted that I looked longer, perhaps taller than I was in my earthly body. Then the sky faded from pale blue to a deep navy and I was surrounded by stars. I saw that pinhole of light that seems to be so common in NDEs and I surged toward it.

“All the while my mother and my siblings ran through my mind. My older sister just had a baby and I thought about all that I would miss with my new niece. I thought about how sad my mother would be. I wondered if my father would take the news of my passing any better.

“And then in a flash, as that bright light grew bigger, I thought about my life, those that I had hurt—and I felt the pain I had caused them on a deep level that I could never fully convey. I saw the good and the bad and it was as if I was an observer, someone who just watched a movie rather than someone who lived it. Then I felt this strange peace come over me. I remember trying to feel angry with the peace as if it

were robbing me of all the angst that being separated from your loved ones should bring. But on some strange level that I can't understand, I did feel hurt and sadness regarding those things. Anyway, my experience mirrors that of Dirk's, strikingly so. Apparently, we're a dime a dozen in that respect."

"What happened next?" I ask. "I mean, did the next part mirror what Dirk experienced, too? He never did get to finish his story." I feel heartless for even bringing it up. But I'm so curious I can't stand it.

For as often as the dead come to visit, we rarely get into the nitty gritty details of paradise. And even though I've prodded Nell on occasion, she's been scant with the details herself.

"What happened next was magical." Carlene glances to the sky with a knowing smile tucked in her cheek. "I saw a man in white, glowing and gorgeous, and I knew he was our Lord. I flew right through him as if he were a door and landed in a verdant field, lots of hills, fresh cut grass, and walls of evergreens in the background. It was sunny and yet the light was golden and emanating from everywhere all at once. As soon as I stepped onto the grass, a small crowd appeared before me.

"The first person I saw was my husband, who had passed away seven years ago. The only comfort in his death now is that I know the beauty and the peace he experienced when he went home, so to speak. We were high school sweethearts and married young. We tried feverishly to have a family, but I'm pretty much infertile. But back to what happened while I was in paradise. I saw both sets of my grandparents who had passed, a couple of them recently at that point. I saw a sister and brother who my mother had lost in utero before I was ever born. My sister jumped in front of me and introduced herself first and then she introduced me to my brother. He was a bit less talkative yet equally happy to see me. She said they were inseparable and went everywhere together. Then she closed her mouth and yet continued talking. I was momentarily confused, but my maternal grandmother let me know we

didn't need to move our mouths to speak there. It was all done telepathically.”

“Telepathy? How interesting,” I blow out a slow breath. “But what about errant thoughts that you wouldn't want the whole world privy to?”

Fluffernutter ba-gawks a few times as she looks up at Nell. “I bet Lottie has thoughts about those men in her life all the time. Carlotta says she can't stop thinking about them or the things she'd like to do to them. I can see how that could get awkward.”

Tell me about it.

Not that she's right.

Or wrong.

Carlene shakes her head. “I'm not sure how, but I innately knew that my thoughts would still be my own. It was sort of like a faucet that ran separately. And I felt so good while I was there. I can't describe how I felt the deepest level of joy and love all at once. And I knew, deep down in my spirit, that I was finally where I belonged all along—I was home.”

“Oh, Carlene,” I whisper in wonder as I take the woman in. “What you experienced sounds like perfection. I'm sorry about what you had to go through to get there though. What happened next?”

“I hugged each one of those souls that came to greet me. And then my paternal grandfather took me by the hand and told me that it wasn't my time, that I had to go back.” She makes a face. “He always was a party pooper.”

We share a quick laugh at that one.

“And that's when I woke up in the hospital,” she says. “Apparently, I was in a coma for a few days, but I came out of it with all of my faculties intact.”

“That's quite a story,” the words stream from me, still out of breath. “I can see why you'd be fascinated with NDEs.”

“Are you a believer?”

“In the afterlife?” I blink her way. “Oh, yes. You’re preaching to the celestial choir. I’m positive beyond a doubt that a whole other life waits for us beyond the borders of this one.” I give Nell and Fluffernutter a covert nod.

“Ask her about the chicken,” Fluffernutter ba-gawks. “Who did she wish death upon at that meeting?”

I’d like to know myself, but I have no neutral pathway to get the question out.

“Carlene?” I wince her way. “I understand they’re investigating Dirk’s death as a homicide. Do you know of anyone whom he may have been in a disagreement with?”

“*Ha.*” She laughs sharply at that one. “Dirk didn’t do anything halfway. He ticked people off good. He was a real pro at it.” Her gaze narrows on something across the lake with fury as if it were Dirk himself. But it’s not. I for one would know. “Let’s see... that blonde ditz was there.”

“Cressida Bentley?” I blurt out without meaning to.

“Yes.” Her eyes expand. “You know her? She’s a devil in designer heels if ever there was one.” The cords in her neck distend as if she’s having thoughts about what she’d like to do to that devil.

Nell nods. “It appears she’s mildly aware of the affair.”

I’d have to agree.

“Which makes her look mildly guilty,” Fluffernutter points out.

I’d have to agree with that as well.

“Oh, and that friend of hers, Gigi Whipple. She runs some froufrou shop out in Fallbrook. She and Dirk weren’t nearly as involved as he was with that dim-witted socialite.” Her fists clench at the mention of Cressida once again. “In fact, Gigi and Dirk were a bit cold to one another for the past few months.”

“Why is that?” I ask.

She shrugs. “She stocked his book in her shop. That was the extent of their relationship.” She lifts a finger. “Then there’s the woman who styled Dirk.” She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t think he needed a stylist, but she was a part of his team before I met him so she stayed on.”

“A stylist?” A visual of the brunette who ran a comb through his hair and touched up his face with a brush comes to mind. I remember they shared a laugh that night. Then he said something to her and she looked crestfallen. “Is that the woman who hopped up on stage and combed his hair during the conference?”

She nods. “That’s the one.” An icy cold look crosses her face. “She’s something else.”

“I sense trouble,” Nell says. “We should speak to this woman, Lottie. She sounds like a vital piece to this puzzle.”

“Where do you think I could find her?” I ask without thinking it through. “A friend of mine, she just had a baby, but she’ll be getting back to work soon. She has her own cable TV show. You may have heard of it, *Getting Candid with Cormack*? She’s actually looking for a stylist who can work on set.”

I have no idea what Cormack’s set needs are for that gossip hour she runs, but I’m glad I could utilize her to finesse my line of questioning.

“Actually, we were supposed to have another conference tomorrow with Dirk, but seeing that he passed he won’t be there.”

“Is it still taking place?” I ask.

Carlene sighs. “It is and it isn’t. His NDE club still wants to meet so we can process his death together. Plus, there are a few new members who have their stories to share. We were supposed to meet at the hospital again, but I can’t pay the fee to rent the room out. I was even thinking about the picnic tables here at the lake, but I’m half-afraid a few of the club members might actually die from the heat.”

“Have it at my mother’s B&B,” I’m quick to throw out the invite.

What time did Charlie say that maternity reveal was again? Noon? During everyone’s lunch hour?

“How about one?” I nod eagerly in an effort to get her to agree.

“Really?”

I’m about to confirm when an ear-piercing whistle erupts from behind and we turn to see Carlotta waving me over.

“Come on, Lot Lot. This triathlon isn’t going to win itself,” she howls. And behind her, I can see a thick crowd congregating.

“Ooh.” Carlene jerks at the sight of the masses. “I’d better get going. I’m supposed to be covering this event.”

“And I’m supposed to be winning it.” I sigh.

“Lottie, if you’re serious about lending the club some space to meet, then we’ll take you up on it. I don’t have a lot of money to spend on—”

“It’s on me,” I tell her. “And what was the woman’s name whom I’ll be meeting with tomorrow?”

Her eyes grow black.

“Elenora Finnigan,” she practically spits the woman’s name out.

“Great. I look forward to seeing you there.”

“Likewise, and good luck with the race.” She frowns in the direction of the makeshift field. “Be careful. I’ve seen these things go sideways more than once.”

And something tells me it’s about to do just that.

LOTTIE



Carlene Dearborn and I split ways, and before I know it, I'm standing next to Carlotta as the two of us work feverishly to solve an oversize jigsaw puzzle laid out on one of the picnic tables. A dozen other teams stand all around us doing the exact same thing.

"We're almost done," Francine Dundee shouts from the table next to us, while her look-alike daughter, Mable, same long hair and prairie-printed sundress, nods frantically.

"We'll win for the glory of all that is good," Mable shouts, if I remember her name correctly.

Sure enough, Mable snaps the final piece in place and Francine belts out a whoop our way.

"Don't worry, Lottie," she calls out. "We all understand the handicap you're under. Nobody expects much from the two of you."

I take in a breath—and take umbrage at the thought, but before I can think of a comeback, they've taken off to the next task.

"Come on, Lot Lot. You're making us look like a couple of losers."

"*Carlotta*," I snip. "Francine and Mable are the only ones who finished the puzzle."

"Don't you see?" She stomps on my foot and I belt out a yowl. "Francine and Mable are the only ones that matter."

“I do now,” I say as I snap in the last piece of the puzzle at the very same time that six other teams do and we move on to the next phase of torment in this heat—the balloon hop.

“Okay, ladies.” Mayor Nash holds out a bright yellow balloon. “Smash this between your heads, no hands allowed, and run ten yards to the orange flags at the end of the lawn where you’ll begin the final leg of the race.”

“Good grief,” I say as Carlotta and I smash the balloon between our temples and start walking sideways like a couple of crabs along with the rest of our competitors.

“Ha!” Carlotta laughs and nearly jolts the balloon free. “See that, Lot? Francine and Mable keep dropping the balloon. I guess there’s more air in their heads than there is in those balloons. Come on, this is our chance to get ahead and smash the competition.”

We do just that, beating out Francine, Mable, and the rest of the airheaded crowd, so to speak.

Soon, my left leg and Carlotta’s right leg are strapped together so securely I’m half-afraid we’ll be waddling around like a three-legged monster for life.

“And we’re *off*,” Carlotta shouts as the two of us hobble three inches before nearly toppling over.

“Would you let me control this?” I howl over at her before spotting the cutest little June bug of all waving and clapping for me while safe in my mother’s arms. “*Aww*, there’s Lyla Nell! And Nell herself, and Fluffernutter cheering us on, too.”

I go to wave and trip to the ground, taking Carlotta with me.

No sooner do we hit the ground than an entire gaggle of people hobble right past us, two of them being Francine and Mable.

“Now look what you did, Lot,” Carlotta growls. “I didn’t want to do it, but I’m forced to unleash the beast.” She points right at me. “It’s do or die and we ain’t picking up a harp just yet.”

Carlotta hoists me up and practically carries me as we hop, waddle, and something classified a tier just below actual running.

The humidity seems to pick up; the heat is unbearable. I'd give anything to go back in time and plop a baseball cap on my head this morning.

"Get a move on, Lottie," a woman screams from the crowd and I'm shocked to see it's Cressida. "I'd like to get home and take a nap."

Home.

I make a face at the thought.

She's been threatening to spend the night indefinitely at my place. I'm terrified she's going to become Carlotta 2.0.

"Don't worry, Lot," Carlotta says as we approach the thicket of bodies beginning to congest the field. "I know how to handle this."

Carlotta body-checks the men to our right and the women to our left, sending them spilling to the ground in a fit of moans and groans. Shockingly, she repeats the process until it's just Francine and Mable up ahead.

"How much farther is there to go?" I call out as a trickle of sweat blinds me.

"Who cares?" Carlotta shouts back. "It's do or die, remember?"

Within seconds, we're neck and neck with her so-called nemesis, prompting both Francine and her daughter to look our way and growl.

But it's not the ire they're trying to induce in me that has my attention, it's the orange flags less than fifteen feet away that I can't stop looking at.

"We have this in the bag," I shout to Carlotta. "We're going to make it."

"We're going to win," Carlotta corrects as we bypass the mother-daughter power duo to our right.

I take a few more steps before I begin to stagger.

Carlotta spouts off an entire litany of expletives, but they all sound far away and far too deep an octave to be coming from her vocal cords.

The sun... so hot.

Can't breathe...

The world spins like a top and I fall to the ground.

The fresh-cut lawn fills my mouth just before the world fades to black.

NOAH



“Everett,” I call out with a wave. I’ll admit, there’s a skip in my step as I walk shoulder to shoulder with Fiona Dagmeyer, my shiny new divorce lawyer ensconced right here in the marble halls of justice.

Everett frowns once he sees us. “What’s happening?” He looks from Fiona to me.

Fiona Dagmeyer is a thirty-something defense attorney, a no-nonsense brunette who can take on any fellow shark—and promptly eat them for breakfast.

“Essex.” She pulls a tight smile.

She’s also bedded my old stepbrother. But then, who hasn’t? It’s practically a rite of passage amongst the women here in the great state of Vermont.

“I officially filed for divorce,” I tell him. “Fiona is representing me.”

She nods. “Cormack Featherby will be served shortly.” She shakes her head my way. “Noah, I can’t believe you were married to two different women while working at the station. It’s illegal on every level. You do realize you’re essentially a bigot.” She looks to Everett. “Now it’s your wife, Essex, who holds that title. Please do something about this. I prefer you keep your nose clean in every direction. It doesn’t help that she keeps finding dead bodies. Must she clutter her matrimonial affairs with bodies as well?” She begins to walk away. “Expect a bill from me.”

The smile drops off my face and seems to make its way onto Everett's.

"Make it double for your trouble," he calls after her.

"Would you stop?" I come shy of socking him. "You know I'm barely making ends meet on a detective's salary. Diapers are expensive in the event you haven't noticed. I have Lyla Nell to provide for."

"Lyla Nell will be comfortable her entire life. I'll see to it myself."

I glance past him and wait as a small crowd of men and women, all of whom look far too serious, scuttle on by.

"I got word that Jed is being released this afternoon. I see the wheels of justice can move swiftly if a scorned judge so pleases."

He gives a mock bow. "I do my best."

My phone pings and I glance down, hoping to see a message from Lottie. I've grown accustomed to our text exchanges throughout the day, mostly updates on Lyla Nell, and I hope that never ends. But it's not Lottie, it's my father.

Miranda and I are taking Lottie and Lyla Nell back to the house. Hot day at the lake.

That's odd. My dad doesn't usually announce things like that. I shake my head at the phone.

Ten bucks says he's buttering me up because he needs a cash infusion, and I have the word *sucker* stamped on my forehead.

Sounds good, I text right back before looking up at Everett.

"You got plans for lunch?" I ask the big lug all decked out in a sweaty wool suit.

I never thought of Everett as someone who would suffer for fashion, but with today's heat index, he just might die for it, too.

“Why?” He looks fit to kill as if my invite might include a toxin designed to shut down his kidneys.

“Because I think we should head down to Leeds and talk to a couple of mob bosses about Bianco Loretto. If he arranged to take you down once, and killed a woman to do it, then Lottie’s not safe. And I don’t like my wife not being safe.” I threw that my wife bit in just to enrage him a little, but it’s true, nonetheless.

He nods. “I’m free.”

We hop into my truck and race for Leeds.

We’ve got a criminal to stop—by way of two other criminals.

I wonder where that leaves Everett and me in the equation?

When it comes to Lottie and the girls, neither of us cares.

EVERETT



“*A*nd that’s what we need,” I say as Noah and I stare at the faces of Jimmy Canelli and Luke Lazzari.

I texted them both as soon as Noah and I left the courthouse, and just our luck they were lunching together in the casino that sits behind Red Satin Gentlemen’s Club. The casino sits here illegally, but that hasn’t stopped the Ashford Sheriff’s Department from shutting it down. In fact, most of the deputies frequent this place.

Jimmy arches a brow at Luke.

Jimmy is the owner of this place, head full of silver hair and large dark eyes that threaten to steal your soul.

“What says you?” He nods at his so-called adversary.

For a couple of rivals, these two hang out like besties.

Luke takes in a deep breath, expanding his chest in his Italian cut suit. Luke is bald, pointed chin, light eyes. And for the life of me, I can’t recall which one Carlotta had a fling with way back when.

Knowing Carlotta, most likely both.

Luke nods my way. “As you know, our kids are looking to make a name for themselves up in Starry Falls.”

“Enzo and Dom,” I nod as I say their respective children’s names.

Enzo and Dom aren’t a couple of preteens running around, though. They’re in their late twenties, and they’re armed with

enough sophisticated weaponry to make a Navy SEAL drool with envy.

Jimmy leans forward, his hands folding over the spot where in a few hours some unlucky schmuck will be folding in a bad game of Blackjack.

“We’ll let our boys handle it,” Jimmy says. “If things get out of hand, that’s when we step in. But the Loretis are small-time crooks looking to impress and hoping to move Luke and me out of position.” A dark chuckle emits from him. “It ain’t happening. Expect to hear news from me soon. We’ll have this buttoned up after the Fourth. The only thing I want to hear booming that night is fireworks.”

Luke nods. “Same here.” He slaps his hand over the table so hard, Noah flinches and reaches for his weapon. “Relax, Officer.” Luke winks his way. “I’m simply making a point. Our boys have got this handled. Don’t worry about Bianco Lorette.”

“Okay,” I tell them. “But there’s one more thing. Bianco and his accomplice killed this woman while I was in the room.” I land a picture before them of Kylie Morgan, aka Regina Pacheco. “I want Bianco to pay for that. And I want a body.”

“A body?” Jimmy cocks his head at Luke. “The judge wants a body.”

Luke offers me a mournful look. “Sorry, Baxter, but if Lorette is worth his salt, ain’t no one going to find a trace of that girl anymore.”

That’s what I was afraid of.

“But as for Bianco”—Luke shrugs as only a mobster can—“he’s as good as ours.”

“It’s just a matter of time,” Jimmy says.

We exchange polite goodbyes as Noah and I make our way out of the casino, past an endless parade of girls in pasties, until we meet the searing sun once again on the other side of Red Satin’s doors.

“What do you think?” I ask as we hop back into his truck.

“That was easy,” he says as the engine roars to life.

“That’s what I think, too.”

And exactly what has me worried.

“Let’s get you back to the courthouse,” Noah says as he takes off into traffic.

My phone chirps and I look down at the screen.

“It’s Charlie,” I say, amused before reading the rest of the text. “In the event my sister decides not to disclose this, she passed out at the lake today.”

“What?” Noah says, nearly sideswiping a city transit vehicle.

Noah drops me off at my truck and we both speed back to Honey Hollow.

Nothing can happen to Lemon.

That’s exactly why Noah and I just paid a visit to a couple of notorious gangsters.

God forbid something is wrong with Lemon.

I won’t allow myself to think of it.

But there’s a niggling in the back of my mind that I just can’t shake.

LOTTIE



“*I*’m fine! I promise,” I say to both Everett and Noah for the one-hundredth time.

They were like this last night, then again this morning, and now they’re proving to be consistent as the clock strikes noon on the button.

The three of us are standing in the middle of my mother’s conservatory, right here at the Honey Hollow Bed and Breakfast, which she happily owns and runs. It’s the afternoon of the big-bellied reveal, and a little over half the women who were at Cormack’s baby shower a week ago are here to get front-row seats to the new gossip at hand.

As it stood, there were three women who failed their pregnancy tests during one of the silliest baby shower games I have ever played. Since only two were announced to be with child, we’re all at the edge of our seats to see who the third mama-to-be is.

And, well, yesterday I passed out cold, so that got the rumor going in the direction of my uterus.

I wasn’t going to say a word to Noah and Everett.

I mean, who wouldn’t pass out in that heat? And strapped to victory-hungry Carlotta?

The woman was practically dragging me along mercilessly. I could hardly breathe. I’m half-shocked I didn’t have my own near-death experience on the spot.

But despite the fact I was going to keep my fainting spell a secret, Charlie and Carlotta had zero intention of doing that. When it comes to gossip, Charlie and Carlotta are essentially like a bad game of telephone—only with a clear signal.

Just my luck.

“Why would anyone want another baby?” Carlotta calls out to the masses with Suze and Lily by her side.

I make a face at her as Noah and Everett flank me like shadow guardians who have no intention of leaving my side this afternoon—perhaps ever.

“Now that Little Yippy can walk, she’s been a tiny terror, misplacing things, making things outright disappear,” Carlotta growls. “She almost ate one of my ruby earrings last week because she thought it was candy.”

“That was *my* earring,” I’m quick to tell Noah and Everett. “And I plucked it out of her mouth before she had a chance to swallow it.” Or choke on it.

“Oh yeah?” Carlotta bleats my way. “Well, this morning I found the remote in the fridge.”

I cringe a little at the thought. “As much as I hate to admit it, I’m afraid that was me. I was exhausted last night. I thought I was putting away the milk. And shockingly, I found the milk on the coffee table this morning. Honestly, I haven’t been this ditzy since I was pregnant with Lyla Nell. A pregnant brain is a very real thing.”

I suck in a quick breath and refuse to let it go. And I can feel both Noah and Everett stiffen by my side.

It can’t be.

Can it?

I glance down at my flat belly and lay my hand over it as if it were made of glass.

“Lemon?” There’s a twinge of excitement in Everett’s voice that I can’t deny.

“It’s nothing,” I try to assure him. “I’ve had the Livingston case on my mind. And with Cressida taking up residence on the couch, it’s been throwing me off as well. And I’ve been burning the candle on both ends trying out new recipes for my cookbook. Not to mention this pressing heatwave. They say we’re breaking triple digits this afternoon.” Noah and Everett still look white as virginal snow. “It certainly doesn’t help that we’re standing in a glass conservatory, which explains why we all feel like ants under a magnifying glass at the moment. I bet half the room faints before the hour is through.”

Hand to heaven, this is a very real possibility.

“So you fainted, huh?” Lily snickers as she pops a mini cream puff into her mouth. “You do realize that’s what pregnant women do,” she says, albeit garbled with whipped cream.

“Not this pregnant woman,” I say before tapping my fingers to my lips. “Not that I’m pregnant.”

Geez. My body may not be expecting, but my brain has yet to get the memo.

Suze lifts her nose to me. “We’ll soon see about that. My money is on you.”

Carlotta nods. “And my money is on Foxy as the baby daddy.”

“*Carlotta,*” I hiss.

“What?” She inches back. “Everyone knows you bet on the one with the track record.”

“It’s not true,” I say to Everett in the event Carlotta’s words give him cause to worry. “I’m not pregnant.”

“You could be,” he says it low, just for my ears, and for the first time, I can see the anticipation in his eyes.

And surprisingly, he could be right.

Heaven knows we’ve been practicing enough to populate a small planet. But we’ve been careful, haven’t we?

Haven’t we?

“Attention”—my mother calls out as she takes to the center of the room, Lyla Nell in hand—“welcome one and all. Please enjoy the feast generously provided, and we’ll get straight to the reveal in just a few minutes!”

My mother’s B&B is festooned with enough red, white, and blue buntings, not to mention flags of every size, to outfit all of Washington, D.C. It also happens to be festooned with ghosts, which explains why Nell and Fluffernutter are in the hall speaking to the family of disembodied spirits who take up residence here. Once this is through, I’ll go say hello to the ghostly brood myself. But as it is, I can’t stand to miss a minute of the big baby reveal.

Not to mention the scent of that lasagna has cast a spell on me something fierce. The Honey Pot Diner has provided a delicious spread of mouthwatering hot dishes, along with a bevy of cold-cut sandwiches. I had the Cutie Pie deliver a fair sampling of my sweet treats as well. But from what I can see, it’s the ice cream cake that’s the biggest hit of all. And thankfully, it’s almost gone. If it hadn’t gotten eaten, it would be a puddle of goo before long.

“There they are. Two of the pregos of the hour,” Carlotta grouses while pointing with her nose to the entry to the room.

Sure enough, both Sam and Meg stride in looking more or less like themselves, with the exception that they look a little green around the gills.

“Sam’s been pretty sick,” Noah points out.

“So has Meg,” I say. She texted last night, begging for something to cure her puking.

Lily snickers at the thought. “I guess Jed’s Silver bullet is enough to make anyone sick to their stomach. Good thing he’s locked up and so is his baby maker.”

Everett and Noah exchange a look.

“What?” I ask the two of them, but before they can answer, the attention in the room shifts to the entry again.

This time it’s Cormack and Cressida waltzing in like the out-of-place socialites they are. They’re both polished to the

hilt with their hair blown out, their cosmetics impeccably applied, and their accouterments just odd enough to let you know that you could never afford them.

“Look at them thinking they’re better than anyone else,” Carlotta growls. “I bet they’re both knocked up. Snobs like that are always on the inside track of new trends.”

“Carlotta, Cormack just had a baby,” I say, glancing to Suze for a moment. She has dark circles under both of her eyes and she looks a little zombified all over. A clear sign she’s pulling the night shift with Alex’s still unnamed little babe.

“Carlotta is right,” Lily says. “I’ve got ten friends who have suddenly turned up in the family way overnight.”

“I’ve heard the same from a handful of women at the precinct,” Noah says.

Everett nods. “Same down at the courthouse. It does seem to be an epidemic.”

“It’s just like the *Village of the Damned*,” Carlotta says a touch too loud, and with a touch too much panic in her voice. “In that haunting flick, a monster runs around knocking up all the women in town. And it’s happening here, I tell ya.”

I’m not sure the movie went quite in that direction, but she’s close enough.

“You’ll see,” Carlotta scolds as she wags a finger at the heads turning her way. “Once these yippers make their appearance, they’ll be creepy to the bone. None of you will be able to deny it. They’ll all look alike and have funny bowl haircuts. And when they don’t get what they want, their eyes will glow.”

Sam begins to cry on cue at the thought.

“Way to go, Carlotta,” Noah says as he goes over to comfort his sister.

“Well, it’s true,” Carlotta doesn’t bother slowing down her rant. “They’ll be experts at pitching a fit, too. Sort of the way Little Yippy is. She’s their leader, I tell ya.”

“Oh, Carlotta.” Mom chortles while bouncing Lyla Nell on her hip. “Lyla Nell is an angel, much like this new batch of yummy babies about to bless our little world. Speaking of yummy things.” She leans my way. “I’ve got an entire litany of recipes I’d love to have included in your cookbook, Lottie. Funeral potatoes—I’ve got two great recipes for those—my no-bake mint ’n chip thumbprints, and I might throw in my mother’s classic gelatin salad. It’s a dinner and a dessert.” She winks.

“Wow,” I say, not sure how to veto those last two recipes. “Thank you.”

The no-bake thumbprints were pure joy when I was a kid, but the thought of eating straight powdered sugar mixed with cream cheese makes my stomach churn—but not as bad as it’s churning at the thought of Grandma’s gelatin salad. Not only is it opaque and consists of ham bits and coconut, but my sisters and I were convinced it had toenail clippings in it as well. I’m pretty sure that was the toasted coconut floating around in the mixture, but still—not even over my dead body would that recipe make the cut for my cookbook.

“Add all the funeral potato recipes you want,” I tell her.

Carlotta pats me on the back. “Lot Lot does love her funerals. It falls right in line with her *The Last Thing They Ate Cookbook*.”

“That is not the title,” I assure everyone within earshot.

Lainey steps into the room and zooms our way. Her hair is frazzled and her sundress is askew as if she ran all the way over from the library.

“Have I missed anything?” she pants, eyeing the buffet table all the while.

“They’re about to get started,” Everett tells her. “You still have time for a bite.”

“Great,” she says. “I’ve been craving that iced ice cream cake of yours, Lottie. You have no idea how much I’ve been dreaming about it as of late.”

“Craving?” I muse. “Hey, maybe you’re the new mama-to-be?” I laugh as I say it. I wouldn’t be surprised. She’s been telling me for months that she can’t wait to give Josie a sibling.

“Sorry, but it won’t be my pregnancy they’re announcing today.” She gives a little wink as she heads for the food.

“Come on, Everett. I’m half-starved and that lasagna from the Honey Pot is calling my name.”

“It’s calling my name, too.” He lands a simple kiss to my temple. “Are you ready for the big news?”

“I am,” I tell him. “But I honestly don’t think it’s me.” Someone walks by with a plate brimming with savory delights. “Ooh, Charlie brought her famous firecracker shrimp. You know what would go good with that? Anchovies!”

“Anchovies.” His brows lift a notch. “Maybe you should brace yourself for some big news in a few minutes.”

I’d laugh if it were funny.

We load up our plates, and no sooner do we start digging in than Charlie and Naomi—Keelie’s twin sister—calls the room to attention.

And as if on cue, my bestie traipses her way over to me.

“I can’t believe I almost missed this,” she says as she plucks a grape tomato off my plate. “Why are you eating this junk, Lot? I spy an entire smorgasbord of your baked goods here. I’ll go get us both a plate.” She flies to the dessert table to do just that and I do my best to wolf down my food before she gets back.

“As you know—” Naomi starts. Her hair is dyed a dark shade of chestnut and she’s wearing a tight denim dress as if to prove the point she’s not in the running for today’s pregnant prize. “We were rudely interrupted by Jed Silver’s arrest to finish up our little game, so here we are, ready and willing to try again.”

A shrill scream goes off, and soon all eyes are on the entry again, only this time it’s not a woman there for us to see—it’s

Jed Silver himself.

And judging by the way Sam just wrapped herself around him like a vine, I'd say the scream belonged to her.

"Ooh, he's back," Keelie says, taking my savory plate from me and replacing it with a plate of my cookies.

I quickly start noshing on a chocolate chip cookie while Everett takes a brownie. Of course, it's loaded with raspberry pinwheels, chocolate lace cookies, a few black and white, and my salted caramel thumbprints.

"Jed Silver?" I shake my head. "How in the world did he get out so fast? I knew he wasn't guilty."

"The jury is still out on that one," Everett says. "He's out on bail."

"Interesting," I say.

I'll have to touch base with him before we're through.

"All right," Charlie calls out. "Attention, attention!"

Meg is the next to make her way to Jed, and soon he has an arm over both her shoulder and Sam's.

Figures.

He's no stranger to putting his body parts where they don't belong—especially when it comes to the two of them.

"And the third person who is expecting a baby," Charlie shouts while Carlotta starts a drum roll, beating her hands against the dessert table, making my ice cream cake wiggle and jiggle.

It should really get eaten soon or else we'll have to suck it up with a straw. I might just have to see to that myself.

"The new mama is"—Naomi holds up one of the white sticks we were told to pee on that fateful day—"Lainey Donovan!"

My mother and I gasp and scream with delight as we tackle my sister with a hearty embrace. Meg joins in and so do a few of Lainey's friends.

“Lainey, you had me going,” I say, playfully swatting her arm. “You seemed sure it wasn’t you.”

Her face smooths out, her eyes are twice their size, and her mouth is opened, but she can’t seem to say a word.

“Oh, Lottie,” she says as she brings her fingers to her lips.

“Don’t you, *oh, Lottie*, me,” I tease. “Congratulations. This is all about you. I can’t wait to find out all of the details. How are you feeling? When are you due?”

“I’m feeling fine for the most part.” She shrugs at my mother. “I guess you’re having an explosion of grandchildren.” She shoots me the side-eye. “And it just might be bigger than you think.”

I spot Noah patting Everett on the back, so I head on over.

“Hey,” I say, inserting myself between them. “I guess we’re in the clear,” I say to Everett and he winces. Obviously, he’s crestfallen. “Everett, I’m so sorry.”

“Not a worry,” he says, brushing his thumb over my cheek. “We have plenty of blessings in our life.”

“That we do,” I say as my gaze gets hijacked by Jed and the fact he’s getting frisky with Sam. “If I’m not mistaken, I think Sam and Jed are a couple.”

“Sam seems to think so,” Noah says.

Everett shakes his head. “How do you think Meg feels about it?”

“If she’s smart, she won’t care,” I say. “I never thought Jed was the one for her.”

A woman dressed in a yellow blazer and skinny jeans strides in carrying a white tote bag and makes her way to Cressida and Cormack who happen to be standing a few feet away.

“Excuse me,” she says to the women while we watch the exchange. “Which one of you is Cormack Featherby?”

“That would be me,” Cormack curtsies as she says.

“This is for you,” the woman says, handing Cormack a manila folder. “You’ve just been served.”

“Served what?” Cormack asks as she looks at the oversized envelope.

“Divorce papers.” The woman gives a tight smile before ditching out the door just as fast as she sped in.

“Noah.” I swat him on the arm next. “You just had her served in front of half the town. I can’t believe you humiliated her like that.”

Noah looks taken aback. “I didn’t humiliate her.”

Cormack huffs as she stomps her way over, “Noah Fox, you’ve humiliated me—and I’ll make sure you pay.”

Everett chuckles as he checks his phone. “I’d love to stay for the rest of the fireworks, but I’ve got to be on the bench in an hour.” He lands a kiss to my cheek. “I’ll bring home dinner for the family.” He brings his mouth to my ear. “And dessert to the bedroom just for you. It’s going to be a long night.”

“Thank you.” I bite down on a smile as he takes off and most of the room drains with him. I glance at my phone and see that it’s one on the button—the exact hour another group of people is meeting in the library right here at the B&B. “I’d love to stay for the fireworks, as well, Noah, but I’ve got a meeting myself.”

No sooner do I step out of the fun zone than Cormack starts in on an expletive-riddled tirade.

Poor Noah.

Poor Lyla Nell having to witness the event.

I step out of the conservatory and into the cool hall where I spot a gaggle of ghosts swarming the entry to the library. And walking right through them is the exact brunette I was hoping to see here today.

Elenora Finnigan, I’m coming for you.

LOTTIE



*K*eelie storms out of the conservatory after me with her fists clenched and her face beet red.

“I can’t believe I wasn’t the one who was knocked up.”

“Keelie.” I press my hand to my chest. “I had no idea you were so excited to have another baby.”

An entire stream of women trails out after her and we step to the side.

“I’m not really,” she confesses. “It’s just that I’ve had all the symptoms. I’ve been eating your fudge cake nonstop and I gained fifteen pounds. Although, I haven’t been having any night terrors or craving fried pickles. Those two things should have tipped me off to the fact I’m in the clear.” She pulls me in for a quick embrace. “I’ll see you back at the bakery. I’ve got to pick up a fudge cake to make myself feel better. Oh, and before I forget, I’m sending you all of my cheater dessert recipes for your cookbook! Busy moms are going to love them.”

I give her a thumbs-up. Keelie’s dessert recipes all start with a boxed cake mix. They’re not only fast, they’re fabulous.

She zips off and I consider her words for a minute.

Hey—I’ve been having night terrors on the regular for well over a week. In fact, I had that reoccurring dream last night where a hood lands on my head and I’m kidnapped by a couple of thugs and taken who knows where.

And don't get me started on my cravings for fried pickles...

My mouth waters just thinking about them.

Another small crowd buzzes by filled with chatter, as my sister's name springs from their mouths at every other turn.

I can't believe Lainey is having another baby. I'm thrilled for her and Forest, and for my sweet niece.

Lainey really looked surprised by the news. I swear I could have tipped her over with a feather.

A spray of stars flickers over by the entry to the library as a trickle of people head on in. It's that NDE group that belonged to Dirk Livingston. I'm just thrilled Carlene took me up on my offer to host it here at the B&B today. Not only do I have easy access to the event, but it worked out to be right after the last event I had lined up.

If I had found out it was me who was expecting, I probably would have had my own near-death experience just now.

Thankfully, it's not me who will start all over with sleepless nights in nine short months. Lyla Nell isn't that great of a sleeper just yet, but it's not nearly as brutal as it was in the beginning.

The feeling of foreboding comes back to me ten times harder than before. I just can't seem to shake this feeling that someone is watching—and from every angle to boot.

I'm not sure why I'm so paranoid, but it doesn't matter. Noah is here and he's packing heat. I should feel as safe as a swaddled baby, although I just can't seem to get there just yet.

I'm about to head in that direction when a body lands in front of me.

He's tall, brooding, and recently out of prison. Jed has dark hair and aqua-colored eyes, and I'm secretly hoping Meg's baby has the very same peepers. Meg's baby blues are pretty, too, but Jed's look downright supernatural.

"Jed," I say before spontaneously giving him a quick embrace. Sure, he's Noah and Everett's archenemy, but only

because they helped put him in the slammer way back when. He seemed genuine when he tried to help me catch whoever was running drugs through Rizzo's. "How did you get out on bail? I thought they threw the book at you."

"They did"—he sighs hard—"but according to my attorney, a certain judge made a few calls and I'm free and clear until my trial."

"A certain judge?" I inch back. "Are you saying Everett pulled a few strings?"

"Stranger things have happened." He nods past me as Sam and Meg head this way. "I gotta run. I'm taking my old ladies out for an early dinner."

"Early dinner?" I laugh. "They just ate lunch."

"We're eating for two, Lot," Meg says as Jed links arms with the both of them.

Sam waves my way. "I'm having a mean craving for Mangias," she says as they disappear through the front door.

Oooh, Mangias does sound delicious. That's Honey Hollow's premier Italian restaurant situated right across the street from the bakery. Noah loves it almost as much as I do, and Everett is a fan as well.

Hey? Maybe I can get Everett to bring home a pizza for dinner?

Oh, what I wouldn't do for a slice of their pepperoni with extra cheese and tangy marinara sauce. Add a few fried pickles and you'd have perfection.

Nell's ghost blips in front of me in all of her lavender glowing glory.

"What in heaven's name are you doing out here lollygagging?" she says, ushering me toward the library. "They've already begun their meet and greet. Homegoing stories are my absolute favorite. I don't want to miss this and neither should you."

The library is cool and dimly lit, and the curtains in the back are drawn to keep the pressing heat out, which adds an

eerie murkiness to the atmosphere. The scent of cologne and perfume mingles as all eyes are cast to an elderly gentleman, clad in gray, sitting in a lone chair facing an audience of about three dozen people. The folding chairs are set in a semi-circle, and I can see Carlene near the front, as well as Elenora. They're seated at opposite ends of the spectrum, and I spot Carlene tossing dirty looks toward the woman intermittently.

It's safe to say there's some bad blood there.

Just beyond them, I see Greer Giles, the ghost of a girl about my age whose homicide I helped solve ages ago. Her ghostly hubby, a two-hundred-year-old pig farmer named Winslow Decker, stands next to her as they listen to what the elderly man in gray has to offer.

Their little girl, Lea, is on stage, right next to the man, while holding her ghostly black cat, Thirteen.

Little Lea is eternally about six, and has long dark hair combed over her face that touches her chest. If it wasn't for her scuffed Mary Janes, it would be hard to know if she was coming or going.

And, of course, we can't forget Lea's favorite accouterment, a gleaming silver machete that dangles from her wrist. She's been trying to exact revenge for the slaughter of her family for decades now. Here's hoping she doesn't choose the man in gray to exact it on.

Carlotta waves to me from the middle of the room while holding Fluffernutter close. She pats an empty seat next to her so I head over and take it.

"He's just getting to the good part, Lot," she whispers. "He had a heart attack and ended up at Honey Hollow General about six months ago."

The older man in a gray sweater goes on. "As they tried their best to revive me, I somehow appeared next to the door and was watching the entire event unfold as if it were happening to someone else. As they were pumping and jumping on my chest, I happened to see that my wedding ring fell off.

“I watched as it rolled toward me, and just as I was about to do my best to retrieve it, a nurse beat me to it. She slipped it on a cart filled with doodads while they continued to pummel me. Eventually, I woke up in my own body, coughing and sputtering. When the doctor asked me how I felt, I told him I felt better when I was standing by the door watching the chaos. Of course, he made up excuse after excuse trying to convince me it was just a dream, that medically it was impossible for me to have witnessed the event. I was out cold. So that’s when I asked the nurse for my ring back. I told her I saw her put it on the cart near the bed and her face went white. She let him know that it took place while I was in full cardiac arrest. And I’m glad to say my doctor and nurse are here today to listen to all you fine folks—and that they’re believers.”

A raucous round of applause goes off. And Carlene gives a soft laugh.

“Well done, Milton,” she says. “Would anyone else like to say something?”

“Me!” Carlotta spikes a hand in the air. “I’ve got tickets good for the grand prize at the Fourth of July parade coming up this Friday, and for every block of tickets purchased, I’m throwing in one of those *bougie* Birdie bags.”

“Carlotta.” I pull her hand down. “Please excuse her,” I tell Carlene. “Go on with your meeting.”

And Carlene graciously does.

“What did you do that for, Lot?” Carlotta yanks her arm back. “This is my best sales tactic yet. I already sold nearly two hundred tickets in the conservatory during that pregnancy pandemic you ovulating girls are propagating. And I’ve still got a few Birdie bags left.”

I make a face. Those bags cost a fortune. No wonder people are scooping up blocks of tickets to get a free purse.

Carlotta is practically paying people so she can buy the head seat on that float.

At this point it might be cheaper for Everett to buy her that seat—seeing that he paid for the purses.

A woman in a crimson blouse raises her hand and Carlene gives her the go-ahead.

“After I was declared clinically dead, I was whisked right through a dark tunnel and ended up in what looked like a heavenly bus stop. There was nothing but blue skies and clouds all around me. And waiting for my arrival were two older women who were very happy to see me. We chatted for what felt like hours. They were just so happy and lovely. This happened when I was a child and my mother was happy to have me back. But once I told her the names of the women I was speaking to, Loraine and a woman named Tidbit, she just about passed out.”

Carlotta elbows me and whispers, “I bet she was preppers.”

The woman leans forward in her seat. “It turns out, Loraine and Tibit were the names of my grandmothers who had passed long before I was born. That’s when I knew I had a genuine afterlife experience.”

A series of *oohs* and *ahhs* circle the room.

An older woman in a pink sundress raises her hand. “About six years ago I was in an awful trampoline accident, falling off and suffering multiple injuries to my head and chest. I thought I’d hog around with my grandchildren and it didn’t end well—at least not at the moment.

“When I initially hit the ground, I saw snatches of my life burst by, a few pictures of my past flitting by, a few of my birthday parties, my time in school, followed by the birth of my children. Then I was whisked through a dark tunnel until I came upon two men whom I understood were angels.

“That’s when I had a second life review run through my mind. This one was much more thorough. It began when I was in diapers and ran straight through to the moment before my accident. It was mostly a pleasant experience. I mean, I did get to see my wedding day again and revisit great memories of when my children were young. But I did feel the hurt I had imparted to people and felt deep remorse for that. Afterward, a man with a glowing white robe came my way and told me that

I had a choice to make. I could stay there in paradise or head back to earth to be with my family for a little longer. I think you can all see the path I chose to take.”

A small bout of laughter circles the room and Carlene waves a hand in the air.

“I want to thank all of you for coming today. I know that Dirk would have loved to know that the work of his passion ministry continues to thrive. As soon as we find a dedicated venue, I’d like to continue with these meetings at least once a month to hear the stories of new members and meet with like-minded people who share our affinity for the hereafter. Would anyone else like to share a story before we start in on the memorial?”

A lone hand goes up near the front and Carlene slits her eyes in that direction.

“It’s Elenora Finnigan,” I whisper to both Carlotta and Nell.

Nell nods. “And by the looks of it, Carlene Dearborn isn’t enthused to hear what she has to say.”

LOTTIE



“Elenora,” Carlene seethes with anger, regardless of what that smile she’s just pinned to her face is trying to tell us. “I don’t believe I knew you had an NDE to share. Here I thought you were just another pretty face.”

Elenora tips her head back. Her features are sharp, she has a girl-next-door appeal, and her dark hair is cut close to her neck and is glossy as a mirror.

“That is how I met Dirk,” Elenora says. “If you don’t mind, I’d love to share my story.”

“By all means.” Carlene tosses her hands in the air and I can feel the tension in the room rise a couple of notches.

Elenora clears her throat. “It was four years ago to the month. I was out shopping at the mall out in Hollyhock and stepped out into the parking lot while looking at my phone. Unfortunately, it didn’t give the car that hit me any time to slam on its brakes. I was knocked to the concrete and hit my head. That’s when I stood up as if nothing had happened, only my body didn’t rise with me. I panicked and ran back into the mall, bypassing the doors and walking straight through the walls. Once I was inside, I didn’t know where to go or what to do. That’s when a crowd of people appeared.” Her lips clamp shut a moment. “It was my parents, my grandparents, friends I’d grown up with who had passed far too soon.” Tears stream down her cheeks. “That’s when I understood what was happening. And I was happy about it. I was filled with the most pressing calm I had ever felt in my life. I was bathed in it. My mother came to me and took me by the hand. She said I

couldn't come home just yet. That I had a very important task at hand." Her voice grows small as she says it. "That I was going to have a baby."

A small applause breaks out and yet Carlene looks as if she's about to breathe fire.

"We'll reconvene in about fifteen minutes," she says. "If any of you are looking for a quick snack, the owner of the B&B has invited us to partake of a buffet in the conservatory. And there's coffee here in the back."

The room swarms with bodies and Elenora flies right past me and jumps into the hall. Nell, Fluffernutter, and I follow along while Carlotta belts out a shrill whistle and begins to push her pricey purses at a bargain basement price.

The dark-haired woman tucks herself behind the opened door as if to hide and sinks her face into the palm of her hand.

"Excuse me," I say and she blinks up at me as color rushes to her cheeks. "That was quite a story. Thank you for sharing it."

She gives a shy smile. "Thank you. Although you might be the only person who was glad to hear it."

"Why's that?" I ask as Fluffernutter lands on my left shoulder, and I try not to let on that I'm shocked by her heft.

Technically, a ghost shouldn't weigh anything, but she definitely weighs something and that something is threatening to take out my back.

Elenora sighs as she glances at the bodies streaming from the library on their way to yummiest pastures, aka the conservatory.

"You'll have to excuse me," she says. "I'm actually with child at the moment." Her hand cradles her belly and I coo on command.

"Would you look at that?" Fluffernutter clucks herself silly. "It seems Carlotta was right. There's a monster roaming around filling up the bellies of all the fertile girls. Soon, the

entire town will be overrun with children who have glowing eyes.”

I roll my eyes at the thought.

Although, honestly, there does seem to be an epidemic at hand.

“Well, congratulations,” I say as her lip quivers and her face begins to crumble. “Is everything going well with the pregnancy? You look great.”

“I don’t feel great, but thank you.” Her lips invert as she looks down at her stomach. With her flowing blouse and loose skirt, I can’t tell if there’s a baby bump or how far along she might be. “The father is no longer in our lives.” Tears stream from her eyes as she says it. “And well, it’s probably for the best. He had asked me to get rid of it.” She shakes her head. “I would never do that. I’d never call my baby an *it*, let alone make it disappear.”

“I’m glad you’re happy about the baby. I’m sure everything will work out. And if you get a good lawyer, the father will be forced to contribute financially to ease your situation.” Fiona Dagmeyer comes to mind. I’m half-moved to give out her number.

“He can’t do that.” A tiny laugh escapes her, no smile. “He’s dead.” She practically mouths the words. “And even if he wasn’t, he was just about flat broke.”

“Oh, Lottie.” Nell’s countenance lights up a deep shade of purple. “Could she be talking about our victim?”

A breath gets caught in my throat at the thought.

“Elenora,” I whisper her name. “You’re not telling me Dirk is the father, are you?”

The woman sighs hard as her hand finds a home over her belly. “I didn’t tell you in so many words. But you sure picked up on it fast.” She cringes. “I hope you don’t think less of me. I mean, I didn’t start out to have an affair with a practically married man.”

“Carlene and Dirk were engaged,” I point out. “What happened? Why would you—”

“Dirk was a charmer.” A weak smile flits on her lips as she looks down at her belly once again. “He could make you feel as if you were the most important person in the room. Of course, he swore to me that he and Carlene were over. It was just a technicality at that point. But eventually, I caught on—I was just a fling, and a dirty fling at that.”

“Do you think Carlene knows?” I whisper in fear that Carlene is standing on the other side of this door.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. But I do know that she knew about the affair Dirk was having with some dingy blonde that kept hanging around.” She cuts a cool glance to the registration desk and nods in the direction of Cressida and Cormack.

“Oh, right. I did hear rumors of that myself.” From Cressida herself.

“Wait a minute,” Fluffernutter squawks. “Did she say he was having financial troubles? But I thought Dirk and his surviving brother got the farm once his parents passed? I heard it was going to be a hit during the holidays selling pumpkins and evergreens.”

“Did Dirk have financial troubles?” I ask Elenora. “I heard something about him coming from a wealthy family, something to do with a holiday farm?”

She nods. “That farm happened long ago. He and his brother sold it, and Dirk took his money and turned it over to a vanity press to publish his book on NDEs. He had a lucrative job as a physician, but as soon as the hospital board got wind of the kind of interviews he was conducting, they canned him. Without recommendations, no other hospital would touch him. Dirk had to sell his house and live off the proceeds. He was renting a small condo in Leeds trying to make something work. Most of his income came from independent bookstores and boutiques willing to stock his book. I went with him a few times to collect his earnings and it wasn’t much.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize that,” I say. “Can I ask why Dirk never officially broke things off with Carlene if he was so into other women? I mean, you don’t need to break down the anatomy of a cheater to me. My first boyfriend cheated on me more than eight times before I finally called it quits.”

“Bear Fisher!” Nell spits his name out as if it were an expletive. And it may as well be for all he put me through.

“I’m not sure why I stayed,” I say. “But well, I suppose some people—namely me—like to do things the hard way.”

Elenora’s chest trembles with a laugh. “I’m one of those people, too. I should have known he wasn’t going to leave Carlene for me. I’ve never been first on anyone’s list. I don’t know what made me think my luck would start changing now.”

“Poor thing,” Nell’s voice wobbles as she says it. “She suffers from horrible self-esteem.”

I nod because I’ve been there myself.

“Elenora, you are enough. No man out there has to complete you. And once you see your little one for the very first time, your heart will grow ten sizes. As for Dirk, well, do you know why anyone would want to push him down a stairwell?”

Fluffernutter gives a few sharp clucks. “If I were her, I’d want to push him myself.” She bucks and clucks in a fury as if the Grim Reaper was chasing her once again, sending her feathers to explode all over the place. “That means she’s the killer, Lottie. Quick, get Noah. I think we have an arrest to make.” She looks up at Nell. “If we’re lucky, we’ll be back in paradise sipping blue heavens on its white sandy shores.”

“That would be nice.” Nell sighs. “But I do rather enjoy spending time with my downstairs family.”

Downstairs family?

Now there’s a term for you.

Elenora sighs as she stares at the crowd milling around in the lobby.

“I did see him having a disagreement with quite a few women just moments before he was killed. There were the blondes—Cressida Bentley and Gigi Whipple. I think Cressida ripped him a new one or something to that effect. And once she stormed off, Gigi did the same. Although, she was probably coming to the defense of her friend. And then there’s Carlene. They were ice-cold before the conference, but once it got going, you’d think their romance was as strong as ever.”

“Maybe Dirk told Carlene about your baby?” I say. “I can see how that could make any fiancée a bit frosty.”

“No way.” She shakes her head vehemently. “Although, Carlene has been exceptionally cruel to me for a couple of weeks, and that’s about the time I told Dirk of the news. But well, he swore to me we had to keep it a secret, that Carlene wasn’t to find out. Or at least not just yet.”

Nell shrugs. “She may have sensed it. Women are highly intuitive creatures, you know.”

“It’s true across species,” Fluffernutter says, puffing out her feathers. “However, my kind is used to sharing a cock-a-doodle-do. Who would want all that racket around all the time, anyway? It’s so much easier to pay a visit or two and then continue on. I had my own life to live, you know.”

I can see her point. But then, the men in my life are exceptional.

A rush of bodies speeds back into the library and Elenora wipes the tears from her face.

“I’d better get back in there. This is the memorial for the father of my child,” she says, holding her belly tight. “And not a soul on this planet is going to make me miss this. It was nice meeting you. What was your name again?”

“Lottie,” I tell her. “Lottie Lemon.”

“I’ll see you around. Say, will you be at Honey Lake tomorrow? His brother is hosting another memorial for him at dusk just before the fireworks show. The Fourth of July was one of Dirk’s favorite holidays.”

“I sure will be there. I’ll see you at the lake,” I say as she takes off with a wave.

Someone walks by with a plate of something glibbery and ensconced in green gelatin. That surely can’t be from the Honey Pot Diner. And if it is, I’m going to have to take the place back from Charlie.

My stomach does a revolution just looking at it as the room begins to spin.

A hard moan comes from me. “Excuse me, ladies,” I say to the spirits among me. “I think I’d better go lie down.”

“You take a nap, Lottie,” Nell says. “I’ll attend the memorial. I do love a good celebration of life—even if that life was a cad.”

We split ways and I lie down in my mother’s suite, just enough to fall asleep and have another night terror. Only this time it felt far too real.

What in the world is happening?

I’m not about to get kidnapped, am I?

One thing is for sure—I’ve got a mean craving for Mangias, and I’m going to make sure to scratch that pepperoni itch.

I invite both Noah and Everett to meet me there for dinner. That will save Everett the trip—or more to the point, me the time to wait for him to deliver.

But pizza isn’t the only thing that will be on the menu—I’ll be serving up a side of suspects.

LOTTIE



*M*angias is Honey Hollow's little piece of Italy, and it holds the magical scents of garlic and slow-cooked marinara sauce.

The place is dimly lit, Sinatra blares through the speakers, the tables and floors are stained the same rich shade of chocolate, and there's a decent crowd here this evening, which includes Noah, Everett, Lyla Nell, Carlotta, and me.

Our pizzas were served over twenty minutes ago and we devoured nearly three. Come to think of it, I inhaled one all by my lonesome. I think I'm having pregnancy pangs for Lainey—and Meg, and well, I suppose I'm having them for Sam, too.

Speaking of which, both Meg and Sam are seated to our right at an intimate table with Jed Silver. And even though Meg is engaging in the conversation at hand, she's been steadily noshing on pizza while Sam drips over Jed like honey.

The odd thing is, they've been here since lunch and it's well past six in the evening. I guess there's some company you just can't get enough of—and good Italian food to go along with it.

“*Bat bat,*” Lyla Nell says as she strikes the table with a breadstick before shoving it into her mouth.

Carlotta may have told her the basket of garlic bread was filled with miniature baseball bats.

“Carlotta, if confusing my child is your aim, then you're off to a great start,” I tell her. “I'll have to monitor the situation before Lyla Nell grows up with all sorts of

misinformation. Starting with the fact Charlie is her true mother and that I'm just a clone who was made to babysit her."

Carlotta gives a snide look to Lyla Nell. "Well, it's true."

Everett clears his throat. "Perpetuate that misnomer again and you'll have to find another roof to keep over your head."

Carlotta buttons her lips posthaste.

I think that's the last we'll be hearing of it—at least for now.

A bout of laughter explodes from a nearby table and I look over to see Sam sitting in Jed's lap while Meg polishes off the rest of the pizza. I believe it's the fourth that's been delivered to their table since we arrived. Not that I'm judging. I'm about to have another delivered myself.

"How about we change the subject?" I say, reaching for another cheesy slice of pepperoni with sausage and extra mozzarella.

"You're right, Lot," Carlotta says. "It's high time we discuss how I can off another couple hundred tickets before tomorrow afternoon."

"I bet there will be plenty of people lining the parade route in the morning," Everett says. "You'll have a captive audience."

"Good idea, Sexy. It'll be like shooting fish in a barrel."

Noah moans, "Let's not incite fate. Honey Hollow hasn't exactly had great luck at large public gatherings these past few years." He points my way. "Alert me if you see a ghost that doesn't belong there."

"Will do," I tell him. "But for now, Fluffernutter is the only ghost I know who was sent here to help out with the case."

"*Fluffy Nutty*," Lyla Nell moans as she looks around for her new favorite spirit, but the ghostly ghoul is nowhere to be found.

“I think Nell and our favorite silky chicken are spending time at the B&B this evening,” I say. “My mother is currently booking two tours daily. She likes the bump in income.”

The tour in reference would be the Haunted Honey Hollow B&B tour that she runs through her inn. Usually, afterward, she loads the tourists back on the bus and sends them to my bakery for what she’s dubbed the Last Thing They Ate Tour and we feature the dessert that the most recent homicide victim in our cozy town was noshing on before they bit the big one.

I know it’s terribly morbid, but it does give my bottom line a nice boost at the end of the month. However, I won’t be benefiting from her evening tours since the bakery closes at six.

“How about we talk murder?” I suggest.

Carlotta frowns my way. “I don’t see why not. It’s practically your love language, Lot. And you think *I’m* the bad influence around Little Yippy. Just wait until she gets to preschool and starts making chalk outlines of bodies on the ground, and pointing her finger at all her classmates, calling them a suspect.”

Noah closes his eyes a moment too long. “I hate to say it, but she’s right. However, I don’t see the harm in discussing one more case. Who have you spoken with, Lottie?”

“Why, that’s mighty presumptuous of you to think I’ve spoken to anyone, Detective.”

Both Noah and Everett lower their chins and give me a knowing stare.

“Oh, all right, I may have talked to a few people,” I say. “Like Cressida. I’m not even kidding, she’s a true contender. The woman was having an affair with the deceased despite the fact he was engaged.”

Everett shakes his head. “That’s not above her paygrade, but I’m sad to hear he was okay with it, too.”

Noah nods. “That’s pretty horrible. But I did know that. I interviewed Cressida and she told me the same thing. It was

almost as if she was confessing to a crime. She even held out her hands at one point as if she expected me to arrest her.”

“Interesting,” I say. “Although, knowing Cressida, she was looking to have a good time with you, and handcuffs were expected to be used as a prop.”

“That’s always fun,” Carlotta says, pulling out a stack of tickets onto the table. “You know what else can be fun?” She looks at Noah and Everett. “If the two of you buy up the rest of my tickets. The one who buys the most will get to have Lot Lot for the rest of the night.”

Noah reaches back for his wallet and Everett growls his way.

“Don’t even think about it,” he says with a threat in his voice.

“I was teasing,” Noah says, plunking down a stack of bills in Carlotta’s direction. “But just in case.” He gives a little wink and Everett is right back to growling.

“And then there’s Gigi Whipple,” I continue. “She stocked Dirk’s books at her boutique. Rumor has it, they were sort of icy to one another, but that’s about all I know regarding her relationship with the man. And, of course, there’s Carlene, his fiancée. If anyone has a motive, it’s her. I mean, the guy cheated on her—and not just with Cressida. He was sleeping with the woman who worked as his stylist.”

“He had a stylist?” Noah looks perplexed by this.

“And to think you’re the detective,” Everett says, handing Lyla Nell another breadstick.

“Go on, Lot,” Noah glowers at Everett as he says it.

“Well, it turns out, Elenora Finnigan, the stylist, is pregnant. Apparently, he suggested that she get rid of it.” A thought comes to me. “Wait a minute. The night of his death, he said something to her and she looked destroyed by it. I wonder if that’s when he told her that he didn’t want to have the baby?”

“That would make her a suspect as well,” Noah points out.

“Yeah, I guess we have two contenders,” I say. “Where are you at on the case?”

“I know that Dirk had financial troubles going back a few years,” he tells us.

“Oh, that’s right.” I point a finger his way. “Elenora told me the same thing. She said he was surviving off the proceeds from his books. She said she even went to a few vendors as he collected his earnings. But she said it wasn’t much.”

“Money could have been a motivator,” Everett says. “Maybe someone owed him money, and instead of paying up, they gave him the push of a lifetime?”

“An after-lifetime,” I say. “I guess that could be the case. Maybe he was blackmailing Cressida?” I grimace a moment. “Although, I’d hate for Evie’s biological mother to be put away for murder.”

Everett blows out a breath. “I can only look the other way so many times.”

I lift a brow. “What are you looking the other way for?”

Noah’s phone chirps and he grows serious as he reads the screen.

“Noah, what’s wrong?” I ask and Lyla Nell parrots me in the most adorable way.

“It’s Fiona Dagmeyer,” he says. “It seems Cormack had put me as the primary in that business she started up, Noah’s Daughter. And she’s stopped paying her designers and the factory producing the garments, so they’re coming after me.”

I lean his way. “What do you mean, they’re coming after you?”

“According to this, my cabin, truck, and bank accounts are on the hook.”

Carlotta breaks out into a maniacal chortle. “You gotta give it to the Featherhead. She vowed revenge, and she’s not wasting any time dishing it out. I like her more already.”

“So do I.” Everett curves his lips in a short-lived smile. “Cheer up, Noah. Tomorrow’s the Fourth of July. There’s a parade to be had, barbeque, Lemon’s ice cream cake, and a firework spectacular to round out the night. It could be worse.”

Noah stares past me out at the darkened window. “Something tells me it’s about to get worse.”

A shiver rides up my spine, and that feeling that I’m being watched comes back twice as strong.

I have a feeling it’s about to get worse, too.

My phone buzzes and I glance down at the screen to see a message from Cressida.

He’s here! Dirk Livingston is in your house and he’s trying to kill me!

LOTTIE



Two things happened last night, and none of them involved the true ghost of Dirk Livingston.

I rushed home from Mangias, only to find Cressida armed with a baseball bat while Evie laughed her socks off on the sofa. Not only was Evie taking extreme pleasure in making her bio mama believe that the house was haunted by the ghost of the deceased, but she documented the entire haunted debacle for her Tickety Tock account. Apparently, she's gone viral overnight.

It took Everett, Noah, and a sprig of burning sage to convince Cressida that it was safe to get some shut-eye last night. I'm not sure how she did it, but she managed to trap Pancake and Waffles onto the sofa bed with her in order to protect her from the spirits of the dead while she slept.

Noah is just thankful he didn't need to keep vigil all night with his weapon at the ready.

And then when I finally got some shut-eye myself, I had that nightmare again.

This time it felt all too real. I would have put my hand on a Bible and testified to heaven and earth that a couple of thugs broke in, threw a hood over my head, and whisked me off to who knows where.

But alas, it was a dream—a dream that somehow feels shockingly imminent.

It's the Fourth of July and all of Honey Hollow is abuzz. We're just minutes away from the big parade that will be

running right through Main Street, and I've set up a couple of tables out in front of my bakery to sell a variety of red, white, and blue-themed sweet treats. We have cupcakes with faux sparklers embedded into their frosted tops, flag-shaped cookies, blueberry raspberry muffins, and, of course, I have my patriotic ice cream cake. And in this sweltering heat, the ice cream cake has been the biggest seller of them all.

Suze and Lily are working the dessert table for me while I hold Lyla Nell as she takes in all of the festivities. Every inch of Main Street has been festooned with buntings, Flags, and banners of every shape and size that tout our allegiance to this great nation of ours. Red, white, and blue balloons have been tied together to create enormous arches that dot their way down the street in three sections. And you better believe that Lyla Nell has been begging to touch them all.

“Cray Cray”—Lyla Nell shouts and claps as Carlotta, Francine Dundee, and a small crowd of other women gather on the corner, so I take Lyla Nell and head over to see what the excitement is about.

“You're just in time, Lot,” Carlotta says. “Quick, put Little Yippy's foot on my head.”

“What?” I recoil with the baby in hand, but Carlotta is quick to land Lyla Nell's sandal to her temple.

“Just do what I tell ya for once,” she growls. “Everyone knows it's good luck to have a baby's foot on your noggin. And since they're just about to announce who sold the most tickets for the All Souls Bingo Hall float, I'll need all the magic the little witch can afford to give me. You know I've been working my tail off to sit on the throne. I was born to be the bingo queen.”

A woman dressed in a sequined red and white striped shirt looks up from the clipboard in her hand.

“And the gal who sold the most tickets, and therefore will be crowned the queen of the All Souls Bingo Hall float is—”

Francine elbows a small crowd of onlookers out of the way as she makes her way closer to the front. Her long gray hair

swings like a pendulum and her sundress is printed with miniature flags.

“It’s me,” she howls. “It has to be me. If it’s not me, I demand a recount.”

Carlotta makes a face. “If it’s not me, *I’ll* demand a recount,” she howls twice as loud.

The woman at the helm sheds a husky laugh. “Nothing like a little competition among friends to keep the financial cogs down at the hall churning and burning.” She holds up her clipboard. “Would you look at this? I can’t believe what I’m seeing, but we’ve got two winners! Francine Dundee and Carlotta Sawyer! Congratulations to our two new queens. You’ll have to share the throne this afternoon. Job well done, girls.”

Both Carlotta and Francine look as if they’ve stopped breathing. Their jaws have rooted to the ground, and they’re both simultaneously turning purple.

“I demand a recount,” they shout in unison, but the woman with the clipboard gives them a dismissive wave.

“No time for that, ladies. Get to your post. The parade starts in less than ten minutes.”

“Congratulations,” I say to Carlotta. “You earned this. Don’t let anyone make you feel less than. Lyla Nell and I will be cheering you on.”

“*Congra—lations.*” Lyla Nell gives Carlotta a swift kick to the head and poor Carlotta looks as if she’s seeing stars.

“It’s not over,” she calls out as she staggers off toward the line of floats waiting to barrel down Main Street. “There’s always the hot dog competition down at Honey Lake. Ain’t nobody sharing that title.”

Francine stalks after her. “Lucky for me, I’m hungry,” she thunders. “If anyone knows how to put away a hot dog, it’s *me.*”

Carlotta turns to look at the woman. “And that’s the reason you’ve got so many kids.”

They take off in a huff and I return to the front of the bakery as Lyla Nell and I watch the endless parade of floats sail by. The high school band is providing the heart-thumping beats today and the holiday is kicking off with a grand start.

Evie and her friends are here across the street, and every now and again Lyla Nell spots her big sister and gives her a cheer as if she, too, were a part of the parade.

Noah is here somewhere as well. He said he would be working the grounds, along with the rest of the deputies. He has very real concerns for our public safety.

Everett said he had a few loose ends he needed to tie up but would be here at some point. I hope it's sooner than later or he'll miss the entire event. And it's looking as if he just might do that.

Both Cressida and Cormack have congregated in front of my baked goods. Cormack is noshing on one of my cupcakes while Cressida holds herself, looking around at the crowd with dark circles under her eyes. To say she's paranoid about being haunted by Dirk Livingston's ghost is putting it mildly. She's been jumping out of her skin every time someone sets off a firecracker. I've never seen anyone so afraid of their own shadow.

I do a quick visual sweep of the sidewalk, but it's not Everett I see walking this way. It's Alex with a baby stroller.

"Alex Fox," I say as he comes up with his sweet babe bundled in a flannel blanket that looks like a flag. The baby's dark hair and dimples catch my eye as the little one sleeps soundly despite the raucous. "Isn't he just a little cookie crumb that fell from heaven?"

"*Baby.*" Lyla Nell does her best to bend her entire body over my arm in an effort to grab him. "Gimme *baaaby.*"

"Baby is sleeping," Alex says with a touch of regret in his voice. "It's sort of a miracle, so I'd hate to wake him."

Suze and Lily are quick to bury their faces as close to the little angel as possible.

"He's as handsome as a fox," Suze says with pride.

“How’s he eating?” I ask and the question prompts Suze to shoot a dirty look my way.

“He’s taken nicely to his bottle, so we won’t be needing your services anymore,” she’s quick to inform me.

“Aww,” Lily coos at the little face enchanting us all. “Alex, if you ever need a babysitter, I’m volunteering my services.”

“I didn’t know you babysat,” I tell her.

She cuts a side glance to Lyla Nell. “I don’t. But for you, Alex, I wouldn’t mind a bit. I have plenty of experience with newborns, seeing that my sister has three under three. And I wouldn’t mind coming over sometime. I can bring a pizza, a bottle of wine, and we can watch a movie.”

My mouth falls open and I quickly scuttle over to where Cormack is snatching another cupcake for herself without bothering to pay for it.

“Cormack, you’d better go over there and claim your baby and your man,” I tell her. “Lily Swanson is making a move on your family.”

Cormack’s eyelids flutter as if she were considering it. “No, thank you. He’s still not Noah, and that baby is still a boy. I can’t see this working out.”

My heart breaks for the tiny babe.

“Cormack, just because that baby isn’t a girl doesn’t mean you can’t have fun with him. You can still do all the things I do with Lyla Nell. We take nature walks, we watch TV together, we read books. And I take a million pictures of her and send them to all my friends and family.”

“I think she’s onto something.” Cressida points to Cormack with the black and white cookie in her hand.

Both Cressida and Cormack are wearing bright red dresses that border on neon. And if I stare at them too long, I’m afraid I’ll get dizzy.

However, the black and white cookie in Cressida’s hand is really a red, white, and blue cookie in honor of the holiday. And they’re just as delicious as they always are.

Cormack gives a few quick blinks at her bestie. “And why would she be onto something?”

“You could take pictures of the little river rat,” Cressida tells her. “Heaven knows my entire feed is cluttered with pictures of miniature versions of our friends. You wouldn’t believe the views those things rack up. It’s almost as if they have an unfair advantage with the algorithms.”

Cormack raises a penciled-in brow as she eyes the stroller.

“*Cray Cray*,” Lyla Nell shouts as she bucks and kicks, her little hands opening and closing as she tries to reach for the float in front of us covered with bingo cards and red, white, and blue roses. A gaggle of women is clustered on the float, and sitting on a riser of some sort is a golden throne with both Carlotta and Francine shoving and pushing one another to land their bottom on the seat.

“Oh no,” I moan. “This looks as if it’s about to take a violent turn.” No sooner do I get the words out than Carlotta falls backward, off the side of the armrest, and lands headfirst into a railing of some sort, and if I didn’t know better, she looks wedged in good.

Her dress slides past her knees, past her thighs, and settles around her waist, exposing her enormous white underwear for all to see.

The entire crowd breaks out in laughter and so does Francine Dundee.

“For Pete’s sake,” I say, doing my best to shield Lyla Nell’s eyes from the sight, but that doesn’t stop her from laughing her head off and clapping like mad.

“So much for being queen for the day,” I mutter.

Poor Carlotta is being humiliated in front of the entire world. And her nemesis is relishing every moment.

The float sails on, and the laughter continues down the street right along with it. Everyone and their mother has their phone poised at the sight, and I’m afraid this is one of those moments Carlotta will never live down.

Cressida moseys over. “Will you be heading down to the lake for the rest of the day?” She bats her baby blues my way, awaiting an answer.

“Yes. In fact, in case you didn’t know, Dirk’s brother is having his own memorial service at sundown. He said the Fourth was one of Dirk’s favorite holidays.”

Her eyes double in size. “I’ll be sticking close to you as soon as I get there. Everly let me know that you really do have the ability to repel the dead. But for now, I’ve got to get my nails done.” She glances down at her slightly sooted-looking French manicure. “Who knew burning sage could wreak such havoc on your hands? A witch’s work is never done.” She winks my way as she takes off and Lyla Nell promptly shouts after her something that sounds less like *witch* and more like *witch* with a *B* at the start of the word.

We are not witches.

Or that other word.

“Oh my goodness, Lyla Nell,” I reprimand. “Please don’t ever say that word again.”

But she does. Again and again and again—and she laughs her head off every single time.

“Great.” I sigh as I hand my baby girl a cookie in the shape of a flag.

A couple of women walk by, each sporting one of those fruity-colored Birdie bags Carlotta gave away with the purchase of those tickets, and Cormack chuckles to herself as she eyes them and shakes her head.

“Isn’t that crazy?” I say, shaking my head right along with her. “The entire town has been outfitted with luxury bags, no thanks to Cressida’s new business venture.”

“The Haute House Flower?” Cormack tips her head as she says it. “I wouldn’t waste your money on anything from that place.”

“Why not?”

Cormack twists her fingers over her lips as if she were buttoning them up. “Friends don’t spill the dirty little secrets of their so-called friends. I’ll see you at the lake.” She glances past me where Lily is holding the baby and both she and Alex are smiling down at the tiny bundle of joy. “I’ll be thinking about what you said. Heaven knows all of my socials could use a boost.”

She takes off and both Lyla Nell and I help ourselves to a slice of my ice cream cake.

Everyone in town will be at the lake in just a few hours.

Odds are the killer will be there, too.

LOTTIE



*H*oney Lake is teeming with bodies, each one of them in an exuberant mood as the town celebrates the Fourth of July together.

The food tents are up and running, the scent of smoked brisket is wafting through the air like mouthwatering poetry, and my own little contribution to today's culinary fest is seeing its fair share of customers as well.

The hot dog competition took place less than an hour ago and, true to her word, Carlotta took home the big prize—a twenty-five dollar gift card to the local deli that provided the meat sticks she forced into her body. She's been laid out over a picnic table, moaning in pain ever since.

Mayor Nash has been kind enough to fan her and offer her ice chips until she feels better. Or call her an ambulance, whichever comes first.

Mom and Wiley have taken Lyla Nell and Josie for a stroll around the lake, while Noah, Everett, and I nosh on a buffet of everything the makeshift food court has to offer.

“We should get a smoker,” Noah says to Everett.

They're both dressed to impress in jeans and T-shirts. I'll admit, my heart goes pitter-patter just as much when they dress down as it does when they suit up for work.

“We?” Everett looks amused by Noah's word choice. “You mean me.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got the big yard. And I’m over all the time anyway. I can help you man it once in a while.”

Everett takes a swig of his drink. “So what you’re saying is, you’d like for me to buy the smoker, buy the food, and cook you dinner. Do I look like your personal chef?”

“Dream big, buddy,” Noah dares to say. “You could be. Once Lot gives you the boot, it’ll give you reason to come around the house.”

“Lemon, Lyla Nell, and Evie are my reasons,” he tells him. “Speaking of reasons—” He hitches his head my way. “I’m coming clean for reasons of my own.”

“Coming clean of what?” I ask as a chill rides up and down my spine. It’s not the first one I’ve had today, and I’m afraid it won’t be my last.

Everett gives a long blink my way. “I know who kidnapped and drugged me, and it’s the same person who killed that woman, Regina Pacheco.”

“Regina Pacheco was killed?” I bounce in my seat when I say it, and every last bit of the barbeque sitting in my stomach does a revolution. “Everett, what happened to her?”

“After they took racy pictures of us together”—he grimaces—“she was shot in front of me.”

I suck in a hard breath, my hand clamping over my mouth in response.

Noah nods. “It turns out, her real name was Kylie Morgan. Everett got Ransom on the horn, and since he worked for the FBI, he had the resources to help oust her true identity.”

Everett takes up my hand. “I didn’t want to worry you. But thanks to Jed’s cooperation, and both Jimmy Canelli and Luke Lazzari, we won’t have to worry about Bianco Loretto or his thugs anymore.” He looks to Noah. “Luke sent me a text, letting me know that they’re closing in on the guy tomorrow. They’ve let their men take the day off to be with their families. But they know where he’s at and how to nail him.”

“I hope Bianco enjoys the day,” Noah says. “It’s his final taste of freedom. He and his goons won’t see the light of day for long.”

“What?” I shake my head at the two of them. “You don’t mean that they’re going to kill him, do you? I mean, don’t you want justice?” I rake my eyes over Everett, incensed that both he and Noah are content to let this play out. “Not to mention the fact that men like Bianco have their ears and eyes everywhere. If he gets wind of the fact it’s his last day on the planet, he might be moved to do something desperate.”

Noah shakes his head. “With less than twenty-four hours to go, I’m not worried, and you shouldn’t be either.” He checks his phone. “Enjoy the afternoon, Lot. I’ve got to meet with Ivy and a few of the deputies. We’re beefing up patrol here at the lake just in case.”

He takes off and Everett pulls me close. “Lemon,” he says, pressing his cobalt gaze to mine. “I wanted to make sure Bianco pays for what he did to that woman, to me as well, but as far as the law goes, he’s a greased pig on the run. He’s already in a war with mobsters down in Leeds. All I did was highlight the fact he was looking to steal their lunch. This is completely Jimmy and Luke’s initiative. Whatever shakes out tomorrow, my hands, and Noah’s hands, are clean.”

I take a deep breath as I try to absorb it all.

“Okay,” I whisper. “This man and his friends are dangerous—kidnapping, murder. But who do you think made them take those pictures of you and why?”

“Best guess?” His shoulders rise a notch. “Another candidate? Someone who doesn’t want my views conflating the verdicts? Word has it, a judge from Burlington is up for the same position and he’s notoriously easy on crime.”

“How about that?” I shake my head. “Then I’m not too surprised that a criminal would want you out of the running.”

His phone buzzes between us and he sighs down at the screen.

“What is it?” I ask, hiking up on my tiptoes to sneak a glance, but he buries it in his pocket before I can see so much as a reflection.

“Something came up. I just need a minute to deal with it. Why don’t you go get some of that frozen lemonade and stay hydrated? I’d hate for the heat to get to you again.” He lands a lingering kiss to my lips. “I need you in top shape for tonight.”

“For the fireworks show?” I say it low and sultry.

He nods slowly. “There will certainly be fireworks, I can promise you that.”

But according to that crooked grin forming on his lips, I have a feeling they won’t be taking place in the night sky.

Everett takes off and I look back at the lake and hold myself as the masses scream and laugh. Rock music blares from unseen speakers, and this moment right here feels like a slice of Americana from days gone by.

Another chill rides up my spine from out of nowhere, and that feeling that I’m being watched comes back stronger than ever.

I just can’t help but feel as if I’m being stalked. Cressida isn’t the only one whose paranoia is running high.

“Lottie,” a shrill female voice cries. “It’s happening. You’ve got to help me!”

Speaking of Cressida.

I blow out a breath. “What’s wrong now?” I glance past her. “What’s happening?”

“It’s Dirk,” she says, pressing her hand to her chest and revealing the fact each of her fingernails is covered in rhinestones. She’s ditched the red sheath she was wearing earlier for a pale pink number with a pastel flag printed across the front. I give her an A plus for playing the part of a patriot today. “I swear to you I’ve seen him. He was just by the smoke pit and he looked hungry—hungry for revenge!”

“Cressida, I can assure you it was probably just some man who looked similar to him. With all the heat, the smoke in the

air, not to mention the noise pollution, your mind is probably just playing tricks on you.”

I give another glance around the vicinity and spot Nell and Fluffernutter doing their best to bring Carlotta back to life from all of the drama and trauma her body has been through today. But other than those two, there’s not a ghost in the vicinity.

Instead, I spot the editor of the *Honey Hollow Gazette* as she stands near a cluster of juniper bushes, noshing on a slice of my ice cream cake while giving the lake shifty glances intermittently.

“Cressida, what do you know about Carlene Dearborn?”

Cressida looks in that direction and sniffs.

“I know she’s an old hag with a bad attitude.”

“Cressida.” I shake my head at the blonde. “Carlene isn’t an old hag. She’s about our age. But if she happens to look bedraggled a bit, it’s because she’s deep in mourning.”

“Please.” Cressida averts her eyes. “That woman is deep in revenge. She knew as well as I did that Dirk was having a baby with someone else.”

“What?” I inch back. “What makes you think Carlene knew?”

She lifts her chin a notch. “Because he let me know that he told her himself.”

“Dirk said this?” I ask, dumbfounded. Elenora didn’t think he told anyone. “Cressida, when did he tell you this?”

“The night he was killed.” She casts a cold look out toward the lake. “I wasn’t exactly thrilled with him that evening.”

“I can see why,” I say as my gaze drifts toward Carlene. “Excuse me, I have to speak to a certain someone about a baby.”

My feet carry me in that direction and Cressida traipses along right by my side.

“Oh no, you don’t, Lottie Lemon,” she hisses. “I’m not leaving your side. Not when there’s a ghost out there set on hunting me down and doing who knows what with me.”

Before I can contest her on any of it, we come upon Carlene as she glowers at the lake. Her hair is freshly styled in layers that frame her face, and her lips are inverted to the point it looks as if she doesn’t have any. She’s donned a red blazer, a white T-shirt, and jeans. It’s a far more chic and casual look than the red sundress I’ve donned.

“Carlene?” I say softly as I pull her out of her lakeside stupor.

She does a double take my way. “Lottie.” She chuckles. “You’ve caught me red-handed reliving my worst nightmare.” The smile drops from her face as she spots Cressida holding up the rear. “And yet, here’s another one of my nightmares,” she mutters. “What can I help you ladies with?” She pins another smile to her lips, albeit forced this time.

“Carlene,” her name swims from me smothered in sympathy. “I think there might have been a few details you left out of our conversation the other day.”

She tilts her head to the side. “Pardon? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“What I mean is—well, the night you were up on stage with Dirk and you cut to a break, I saw the dark look you gave Elenora as she touched up Dirk’s hair and makeup.”

She leans back a notch. “And? It’s no secret I didn’t care for the woman.”

“And you mentioned that you struggled with infertility. I am sorry about that, but I happened to learn that Dirk was having a baby with Elenora. That was no secret to you, was it?”

Her eyes close instantly and she gives a subtle shake of her head.

“That must have been very hard to hear,” I say just above a whisper. “Is that why you did it? Is that why you pushed Dirk

to his death that night? Because he had finally pushed *you* to the limit?"

Her mouth opens then closes. "Lottie? Are you actually accusing me of killing Dirk?" A dull laugh bounces through her. "I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but I was nowhere near that stairwell until after I heard of the news. I was with the director of the hospital board who was in charge of renting out the facility to Dirk. Should you or anyone else need verification of my alibi, I'm sure the director would be happy to comply." She gives Cressida a scathing look. "Excuse me, I have an event to cover."

She stalks off and I let out a breath that felt as if it were building in my lungs for years.

"Now what?" I say, tossing up my hands. "She sounded sincere, but I'll still have to corroborate her alibi, of course. Although, if Carlene didn't do it, then who did?"

"I know who did it, Lottie." Cressida lifts her nose in the air, her eyes still pinned to mine. "And I think it's high time I confessed. *I* did it. I pushed Dirk Livingston to his death."

LOTTIE



“Come again?” I say, tilting my ear to the woman who just confessed to murder one.

Cressida Bentley shakes out her blonde hair as the summer sun does its best to smother us both. That fiery orb is still right overhead, broiling us alive as the festivities of this patriotic day percolate around us.

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” she shrieks, grabbing me by the shoulders and pulling me in. “*I killed Dirk Livingston*. I’m the reason that man landed at the bottom of that stairwell. It was me who did it. I ended Dirk’s life that night, and now he’s going to haunt me until the day I join him in the hereafter.”

I make a face at the blonde. “You pushed him down the stairwell?”

She lifts a finger in the air, her mouth contorting in all sorts of unflattering shapes.

“Well, no.” She glances to the sky. “I didn’t push him *per se*, but we were arguing in the stairwell. He told me about his affair with Eleanora and the baby. And I told him he would rue the day he chose to two-time on me with another woman.”

“But”—I shake my head at her—“Cressida, you, too, were the other woman in that equation.”

“I know that,” she snips. “I know very well he was two-timing Carlene. But it doesn’t mean he’s allowed to two-time on *me*. How dare he even think of it, let alone put a baby in the belly of his mistress. I told him he was worthless scum and that he should do everyone a favor and just drop dead. I

slapped him over the cheek so hard my hand stung for a week. But nevertheless, after I slapped him, I left the stairwell. Don't you see? I must have slapped him right over the railing. I did this, Lottie." She foists her wrists my way. "I'm a killer. Take me straight to the electric chair. I deserve it. But maybe give me a Bellini first to ease my suffering."

"Cressida, is that why you've been acting so strange? You think you caused that man to plummet to his death?"

"I don't *think*, I *know*. And if I don't confess, I'll be haunted by the dead for the rest of my life. Can you imagine having to live with the fact you'll be haunted by a ghost until the day you become a ghost yourself?"

I make a face at the lake. "Oddly enough, I have some idea of what that might feel like." I sigh her way. "Look, Cressida, I'm not entirely convinced that your slap had anything to do with this. But don't worry. I'm not ruling you out just yet either."

"Well, aren't you going to arrest me?"

"Perhaps, but I think I—" Before I can tell her that I need to talk to Noah, the sounds of two women screaming at one another hijacks my attention. I turn to my left and spot Carlotta and Francine Dundee going at it, howling at one another at the top of their lungs while a crowd quickly gathers. Most of the women gathered around Francine all happen to bear a striking resemblance to the woman, each one wearing the same long dress and long tresses to match. They're all cheering their mother on to pop Carlotta a good one, and I can't help but shake my head at them.

They really do think they're better than us. And yet all of their deep, dark secrets are laid out bare like the fact her son is in prison, that one of her daughters did time for selling fake luxury bags. And another was—

Something Cormack said earlier comes back to me. She had warned me not to spend any money at the Haute House Flower. And when I pressed her on it, she said, *friends don't spill the dirty little secrets of their so-called friends*.

What dirty little secret could the Haute House Flower be holding?

And then it hits me like a ton of faux bricks.

“Oh, Cressida,” I shake my head her way. “I think I know why you had that fire sale down at your new shop.”

Her eyes bug out like ping-pong balls.

“You knew?” I scoff at the woman. “Please don’t tell me that you and your friend are pushing a bunch of fakes down at that shop.”

“I—” She glances around as if suddenly coming to from a bad dream. “I can’t have anything to do with this, Lottie. I didn’t know until it was too late. And then I needed to recoup some of my losses. I spoke with one of my father’s lawyers anonymously and he said because the business is online as well there’s mail fraud involved. I didn’t know Gigi was flat broke and desperate. I didn’t know she was a con artist from who knows where. Don’t you see? She sniffed out my innocence and roped me into her dicey business so she’d have a scapegoat when she took off for her next grift.”

I scan the lake as if looking for a lost child.

“Where is she?” I pant.

“She can’t know I told you anything. That woman is bent on taking me down with her.”

The fact Dirk sold books at her shop comes to mind—the fact Dirk was flat broke himself takes prominence in my thoughts.

“Wait a minute,” I say under my breath. “I think I took a picture of her that evening.” In fact, I know I did. Only I wasn’t taking a picture of her as much as I was taking a picture of Cressida as a show of evidence to Everett that she was in town.

I look down at the picture as it pops on my phone and Cressida comes in close and smirks at it.

“She did have a good aesthetic going that night,” she points out.

“What do you mean?” I ask, scouring the woman’s face for signs of anything that could be interrupted as murderous intentions.

“Her tan dress, it goes with her hair, her skin, her lipstick. She really knows how to make a color palette work for her.”

“What about her—” I’m about to point out the red scarf I saw her in that night. I remember it well because it stood out like a blood clot to me, but she’s not wearing it at all in this picture. The only show of red is the pocket square tucked in Dirk’s suit.

Wait a minute...

I pull up the pictures that Carlotta took of poor Dirk as he lay at the bottom of the stairwell.

“There he is.” I shake my head as I zoom in on his chest.

And there’s my ice cream cake melting all over his shirt with no trace of that pocket square in sight.

“There she is.” Cressida points to a lone tent that butts up to the woods behind the lake. It’s the exact tent that houses buckets of equipment for the field play events such as volleyball, the rope used for the three-legged race, among other paraphernalia that makes for an exciting afternoon.

“I have to go,” I say. “But do me a favor. Don’t stray too far away from the lake. I’m sure Noah will want to have a word with you.”

My hand instinctively pats my thigh for signs of my trusty Glock, but she’s not there. I’m not surprised. I try not to bring Ethel along for the ride if I’m going to be spending the day with Lyla Nell—not to mention Noah who is perpetually packing heat. But Noah isn’t here at the moment and neither is Ethel.

However, those little details aren’t strong enough to keep me from heading toward that tent.

A spray of golden stars appears by my side as Nell appears holding that ball of white celestial fluff.

“Where to in such a hurry, young lady?” Nell asks as she seamlessly glides alongside me.

“Oh, Nell, your timing couldn’t be more perfect. I think I might just have my killer.”

“Who’s that?”

“This woman, right here,” I say as I step into the empty tent where my last, and I have a feeling final, suspect stands scrolling through her phone as she escapes the heat for a moment.

She has on a tank top with the word *Veragamo* printed over it and her denim shorts look expensive despite the fact they’re shredded in all the right places.

“Gigi Whipple,” I say, out of breath from the trek over.

The blonde jerks as she looks my way. “Lottie, you scared me.” She laughs.

“Ba-gawk.” Fluffernutter flaps her wings. “Did she do this? Did she push my Dirk down to his death? He always did say a pretty girl would be the end of him.”

I nod because I’m positive he had no idea how literal he was being.

Gigi blinks my way, her phone still poised to get her attention. “Can I help you with something?”

LOTTIE



“*Y*es, actually,” I say, clearing my throat. “You can help me with something,” I say to Gigi Whipple as we stand under a tent that butts up to the woods just shy of Honey Lake as the Fourth of July festivities go on all around us. “Gigi, the night Dirk was killed, I witnessed the two of you having a terse exchange both before the conference and after. The latter of which was after Cressida took off. You didn’t look too pleased with him. If you don’t mind, can I ask what that was about?”

The woman blinks fast, slipping her phone into her purse blindly as the color bleeds from her face.

“I’m sorry, Lottie. But I’d rather not say.”

Nell huffs, “I bet she’d like to keep her lips zipped.”

Fluffernutter spreads her wings. “She looks mighty guilty to me, Lottie. But why do it? Why send Dirk into the next life? What possible reason could this woman have had?”

That’s exactly what I’m about to bring to light.

“You know”—I continue—“your wardrobe that night is what initially caught my attention when I first saw you.”

She sniffs with pride. “I do dress to impress.”

“Yes, well, I thought that tan dress and the red neckerchief was an odd color combination. Not one I would have chosen.”

And not one that was in the picture of her that I snapped earlier in the evening.

Her eyes widen a notch, most likely a show of fear. Although, with all that Botox I will never know.

“I didn’t see you wearing a red scarf while you were still in the conference room before the meeting began and you were speaking to Dirk. I did notice you had it on after he had died, though. The funny thing is, it was the same color fabric that Dirk had earlier tucked in his suit as his pocket square. It belonged to him, didn’t it?”

Gigi takes a few steps back as her breathing picks up.

“Okay, Lottie,” Nell says. “I think perhaps we should call Noah before things get out of hand.”

Fluffernutter belts out a few sharp squawks. “Forget Noah, let me at her. I have a serious craving for eyeballs, and I’m looking at two juicy balls of optic deliciousness that I’m about to put in my belly.”

I tip my head at the salty specter. But I don’t have the time or bandwidth to discuss a dead bird’s dinner menu at the moment.

“I didn’t do this, Lottie.” Gigi shakes her head my way.

“You did,” I counter. “But tell me—did you pluck the pocket square from him before you pushed him? Or did your fingers hook over it as you gave him a shove?”

Her eyes slit to nothing.

I shake my head at her. “And yet you tried to expertly pin this on Cressida. When I visited your shop out in Fallbrook, the moment you mentioned that she was a silent partner, Cressida looked more than uncomfortable. You relished that, didn’t you? She knew about the fakes you were selling. I bet she was next on your kill list.”

“You *know*?” She takes another large step back, her eyes never leaving mine. “That witch told you everything, didn’t she?”

“No, she didn’t have to. I put it together on my own.” Never mind the fact another witch altogether gave me the biggest clue of all. But I choose to leave Cormack out of it for

now. “I thought it was pretty incredible that you were giving my friends and family such a steep discount on those insanely priced luxury goods. But luxury goods like that don’t sell for a steep discount. You just needed the money, didn’t you? I’m going to take a wild stab at this, but I bet if I dig deep enough, I’ll find out you’re not made of gold bars like Cressida. But you sure found a way to scam people like her and like me out of our money.”

“My father was a mechanic. He was hardworking just like me. I tried to run a decent business, but they kept jacking up the rent so I thought I’d put my sublimation machine to good use and print up a few labels here and there, mark up the prices on a few knock-off items, and see what happened.”

“And what did happen?” I ask.

“Business exploded overnight. I couldn’t keep anything in stock. Not in the store or online. I was making money hand over fist, but I didn’t realize what I was doing was such a bad thing. I mean, who was it really hurting? Those designers who have enough money to build a staircase of dollar bills to the moon? And the irony of it all? I still struggled to pay the rent on that place. All I wanted to do was catch up for once. Can’t you see? I wasn’t going to keep this up forever.”

My heart hurts for her because I know what it feels like to not have enough cash on hand and wishing you had more. That’s the exact predicament I was in before I opened the bakery.

“Get back to my Dirk,” the fowl among us squawks at top volume.

And I do.

“Gigi, I heard rumors that you and Dirk were icy with one another. You stocked his books in your store. Dirk was cash-strapped as well. What happened when he came to collect what was due to him?”

She swallows hard.

“You didn’t pay him, did you?” I ask.

“I was going to, I swear, Lottie.” The panic on her face grows more palpable. “I was behind a few months. I begged him to hold on a little longer, but he grew impatient with me. He threatened to tell.”

Nell, Fluffernutter, and I gasp at once.

“Oh my word, he *knew*,” I say.

Her chin lifts to the sky. “I offered him free merchandise and he became suspicious. He did a little research and discovered the brands I was representing didn’t have merchandise like mine in any of their lines. He wanted half my take. Don’t you see? I couldn’t do that. He was smart like you. And he was dangerous.” Her eyes narrow in on mine. “He was dangerous just like you.”

Her hand swipes down into the bin next to her and she comes up with one of those ropes used at the three-legged race. Before I know it, she has my back to her chest and the rope cinched around my neck.

A hard groan comes from me as I struggle to pluck the rope from my skin, but Gigi has efficiently cut off my breathing.

“Lottie,” Nell shouts as she tries to dig her fingers into the rope, but her hands keep slipping right through me. “Oh, for goodness’ sake,” she cries out to the sky. “Why am I here if I can’t help Lottie through a dark time?”

I’m not sure why the dead seem to have their powers to move within the material world revoked now and again, but I do know that when the dead intercede to help me at times like these, they’re pretty much whisked back to paradise.

Perhaps this isn’t why Nell was sent here?

Although, I can’t imagine her helping me through any darker moment than this.

Fluffernutter screeches out an ear-splitting ba-gawk and Gigi flinches as if she heard it, too—and I have no doubt she did. I seem to act as a conduit to the dead if anyone happens to be touching me, and Gigi Whipple is indeed touching me in the very worst way.

“Can’t breathe,” I sputter.

“That’s the point, you nosey little witch,” she seethes. “I had to keep him from exposing me. I faced prison time over what I was doing. A girl like me doesn’t belong in prison, Lottie. And for your information, I pushed him hard. And yet, that pocket square hooked onto my ring. I didn’t notice until I was back in the lobby, so I did the only thing I could think of. I tied it around my neck. Are you happy now? You know everything you shouldn’t, and now you’re going to have to pay for it. Get ready to have the near-death experience of a lifetime, Lottie. In fact, I think I’ll take you all the way.” She tightens the rope around my neck and it feels as if my spine is about to snap. “Just do us both a favor and drop dead already.”

Fluffernutter flies right at her and sinks her talons in the woman’s eyes.

Gigi backs off, immediately loosening her grasp on the makeshift noose, and I stagger forward, gasping for breath while pulling the rope off of me.

Gigi makes a run for the back of the tent, but not before Nell rolls a bin full of equipment in front of her, causing the woman to stumble.

As soon as she loses her balance, I jump on her back, clamp her hands together, and let out a blood-curdling scream.

The sound of footfalls quicken this way.

“*Everybody, freeze,*” Noah thunders as he jumps into the tent with his weapon drawn.

On his heels about six officers, including Ivy Fairbanks, jump this way, doing the exact same thing.

“She confessed,” I pant as a swarm of deputies takes over and soon land the woman in handcuffs.

Noah takes me in his arms hard. “Lottie, are you okay? You’re all alone out here with her. She could have killed you.”

“Believe me, she tried,” I say, brushing my fingers over my neck. “But I’m just fine, I promise.”

“Okay.” He sighs as Ivy reads the woman her rights, and every last one of them migrates toward the parking lot. “I need to go and button a few things up with this. Do me a favor and find your mother, find Lyla Nell, and just enjoy the rest of the holiday with our daughter.” He presses a firm kiss to my forehead. “Thank God you’re all right. Nothing can happen to you, Lottie Lemon. It’s my job to keep you safe.”

“Yes, sir,” I mock salute him. “I promise I’ll be safe. Go take care of what you need to. I’ll go find my mother.”

“Good.” He winks as he starts to take off then turns back my way. “Oh, and Lottie? Great job.”

I nod as he takes off.

Fluffernutter begins to float right out of the tent, and both Nell and I follow along.

“It seems I’m all through with this planet, for a second time around,” the glowing white poltergeist says as she clucks her way into the sky.

“Goodbye, my friend,” Nell calls out. “I’ll track you down as soon as I get home,” she calls out after her. “We’ll do lunch! No chicken.” She laughs with a wave.

“Goodbye, Fluffernutter,” I call out as she disappears into the crisp blue sky. Nell and I wander into the woods a bit as we wave the friendly bird off. “It was nice knowing you! Thank you for all your help! If it wasn’t for you, I’d be a goner.”

The tiny creature gives a few final caws before blipping out in a spray of silver stars.

“I guess it’s finally over,” I say, but before I can turn to look at Nell, two men in ski masks barrel over. One of them lands a hood over my head, tosses me over his shoulder, and trots me off to who knows where.

Who says dreams don’t come true?

Or in my case—nightmares.

NOAH



“**S**he did it again.” Ivy stares me down as if this were somehow my fault. “Lottie Lemon is always one step ahead of us.”

And sadly, it does feel exactly that way.

“That she is.” I give a wistful tick of the head as the sheriff’s vehicle housing Gigi Whipple takes off toward Main Street. “I should have known better than to patrol the lake. I should have been right there next to her. I should have been her shadow.”

Her chest trembles with a laugh. “You sound like a stalker, Noah.” She cranes her neck past me. “And I bet she likes it that way.” She frowns. “Why don’t you go tend to her? She looked a little shaken. Her neck was red. I think there was a struggle. I’ll head down to the station and take care of our suspect, or killer as it stands.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. I owe you one.”

“You owe me more than one.” She laughs as she heads for her car. “I’ll collect in the form of dinner.” She winks as she disappears into the lot. “I’ll see you later, Noah.”

Dinner.

I shake my head.

Ivy doesn’t give up. But then again, I’m not giving up on Lottie either, so I know how she feels.

I trot back over to the tent where I last left the love of my life, but it’s empty. I’m glad about it, too. I want Lottie to

enjoy what's left of the day before the big show starts up in the sky.

The lake is thick with bodies, but I manage to track down my father and Miranda, both holding a grandchild in their arms. I casually ask if they've seen Lottie, not wanting to worry Miranda, but neither of them has seen her since they arrived.

The food court is where I head next, but my mother and Lily haven't seen her either.

I pull out my phone and shoot her a text but no response.

My heart thumps wild, and my adrenaline kicks in as I scan the crowd for any sign of my beautiful wife, but there isn't one.

My phone rings and my heart thumps hard in response, but once I see who it is, relief doesn't come.

"Everett," I snap into the speaker.

"What are you doing?"

"I just put Dirk Livingston's killer in a patrol car. Lottie worked her magic and another case is in the bag."

"Good. That means Lemon is with you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask. "Why do you sound relieved?"

"It means I just got off the phone with Luke Lazzari. He wanted to let me know that his men lost Bianco today. They were tracking him, and it turns out he was onto them. He used a decoy. By the time they found out, Bianco was long gone. I just wanted to make sure Lemon was safe, that's all. I have a bad feeling, and I can't seem to shake it."

My adrenaline hits its zenith as I scour the lake one more time in hopes of spotting her somewhere in the crowd but no such luck.

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, Everett, but I can't find Lottie anywhere. I think we've got trouble."

EVERETT



It takes less than ten minutes for me to get to Honey Lake from Leeds, a twenty-minute commute on an average day.

But with Lemon missing, this isn't an average day.

It's a nightmare, one that I may have inadvertently pulled her into.

Let's not kid ourselves. It was her proximity to me that brought this on.

It takes another two minutes to track down Noah, who looks as if he's just had his cookies handed to him. His hair is rumpled, his face slap-cheek red, and he's huffing and puffing out of breath.

"I ran around the lake," he pants. "I went into the woods and called out her name, but nothing."

I glance toward the shoreline and spot Carlotta having it out with some woman with long gray hair. Usually, I'd step in before things got physical, but right now I can't help Carlotta or anyone else. But I'll be darned if I can't help Lemon.

Lottie's mother and sisters are clustered under an umbrella, and seated under the umbrella next to them are Sam, Meg, and Jed Silver.

"Let's go," I say, making tracks to the man who owes me for his momentary freedom. "Jed," I bark and he looks up nonchalantly while Sam greases his bare back with sunscreen. "We need to talk."

“Just a moment, ladies.” He picks up Sam’s hand and kisses it. “Save my seat,” he says, plucking her out of his lap and snapping up his shirt. “We’ll pick up where we left off.”

He nods our way and offers a smarmy smile as we lead him out of earshot from Lemon’s family.

Noah sighs his way. “Lottie is missing. She disappeared here at the lake and we think Bianco might have something to do with it.”

“We know Bianco has everything to do with it,” I say, doubling down on Bianco’s guilt. “Canelli and Lazzari’s men lost track of him.”

“They were going to take care of him, tomorrow,” Noah tells him.

“But now we’re going to take care of him, today,” I say.

Jed lifts a brow my way before putting on his shirt. “Are you packing heat?”

I lift my shirt just enough for the butt of Lemon’s gun to peer out of the holster.

Noah shakes his head. “We’ve got to get you your own gun,” he says. “Ethel belongs with Lottie.”

I nod. “And I wish she had her. Jed, right now you’re our only hope. Do you know where Bianco Loretta could have gone?”

He drops his head for a moment. “There is one place he could have taken her.” He looks up at me. “And if he did, it may not end well.”

LOTTIE



*H*orror.

My every worst nightmare is playing out in real-time. Darkness has enveloped my world in every single sense.

For as much as I could tell, I was thrown into the back of an SUV. Lots of air, lots of legroom, but just enough confinement to let me know I wasn't going anywhere. As much as I tried to put up a struggle, my wrists were bound behind my back. And the way my wrists feel as if they're being sliced up, my guess is they used zip ties.

The hood they threw over my head is still firmly in place. But I can feel the car moving and every lump and bump in the road. Worst of all, I can feel it traveling.

The distance between Honey Lake grows wide as a chasm with each passing moment. And all along the way, Nell Sawyer belts out a string of expletives I've never heard her utter while she was alive, let alone dead.

I'm pretty sure there is some sort of celestial rules about those things, and she's on the cusp of breaking them all.

The vehicle comes to an abrupt stop.

"They're coming back here," she says, breathless from her salty tirade. "Don't worry, Lottie. I'll move heaven and earth to make sure no harm comes to you. I just feel so helpless that I wasn't able to stop this."

“It’s not your fault, Nell. Whoever it is, I’ll make sure they pay. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad you didn’t get blipped back to paradise with Fluffernutter. I’m so glad you’re here.” My voice wavers. “I couldn’t have done this without you.”

I can feel her take up my hand. “And I have a feeling we now know this is the dark hour I was sent to see you through.”

“I’m afraid it is.”

The trunk opens and a blast of fresh air washes over me. The scent of evergreens bites my nostrils despite the cloth over my head.

“Get her,” a deep voice gravels. “Hold her legs. We don’t need any trouble.”

Soon, I’m hoisted over someone’s back once again like a sack of potatoes.

“There are two of them,” Nell says, the panic in her voice becoming increasingly discernible. “One is tall with a scar across his forehead. Dark hair, gaunt. The second is shorter, a bit stocky, bald, and he looks angry.”

I’m hustled down a short path before we start up a few stairs.

“It looks like an old shack,” Nell says. “Let me get a bird’s-eye view.” Her voice grows faint as she says it. “Ah, yes. We’re on the outskirts of town in the woods that lie just above Leeds.”

I hear the sound of wood rattling, most likely a door, then we’re traveling again. The air is warmer in here, and after a few more seconds of traversing twists and turns, I’m laid onto what feels like a sofa.

“All right,” the one with the deep voice pipes up again. “Bind her feet.” He clears his throat. “I’m sorry, little lady. But your husband has done this to you.”

“Everett would never do this to me,” I shout with everything in me.

“He’s done it, all right.” He gives a husky laugh. “My life might end tomorrow, but your life ends today.”

“Oh, Lottie,” Nell’s voice trembles as my feet are quickly bound. “I should go get help. I should go find Carlotta, but I can’t seem to leave your side, dear child.” The sound of soft sobbing emanates from her. “I keep trying to stop them, to hurt them, but for some reason, I’m powerless.”

She would be taken right back to paradise if she could intervene.

Might there be a reason she needs to stay on?

But isn’t she here to help me?

Unless, of course, she’s here to help me transition to the next life.

Lyla Nell and Evie run through my mind—so do Noah and Everett.

Nell gasps. “They’re leaving, Lottie.”

“Great,” I mutter, twisting and twirling my head until I’ve managed to work the hood up to my mouth. “Nell, see if you can help with this.”

She plucks the dark cloth right off my head and I blink several times as I look around at a dusty old room, a living room maybe, and it’s filled with blue milk crates brimming with brown paper bags.

“Nell, can you work off my restraints?” I roll over a bit to make it easier on her as she gives it her best shot.

“I’m afraid I’m not able to do it. I’m sorry, Lottie. I’ve never felt so helpless in all my life. I don’t know why I could take off your hood, but I can’t free your arms. I don’t know why I’m being sidelined at every turn.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I pant as I manage to sit up.

A window as wide as the wall sits in front of me, and if I sit on the edge of the seat, I can see over the ledge. It looks like a dried-up lawn, but most of the yard is obscured. Those milk crates get my attention again. There must be at least six, and each one is filled with small paper bags.

“Nell, what’s in those bags? Can you take a peek?”

Nell floats over and peels one open with ease. “Looks like pills,” she says. “Would you like me to bring them to you?”

“No, actually.” My heart races furiously. “If there’s any fentanyl in there, it could be lethal if I so much as touch them.” My chest palpitates in anticipation of what might happen. “I just have to know what those men think they’re going to do with me,” I say as I jump to my feet and hop toward the window.

I peer straight down and see two men, one tall and scraggly, the other short and bald, just the way Nell described. The portly one moves out of the way, and I can see clearly what they’re up to.

“Oh no,” I moan.

“What is it?” Nell floats over and moans twice as hard.

A couple of folding chairs are set out. A set of errant shovels lie on the ground. And a mound of dirt sits to the right of where the two men stand, and a ditch just below that. To the left, there’s darkened soil long enough to fit a body beneath if you wanted.

Oh my word, I think I know where Regina Pacheco ended up.

I’m looking at a budding cemetery in their backyard.

“They’re digging my grave,” I whisper.

No sooner do I get the words out than the tall one appears, tosses me over his shoulder, and speeds me into the yard.

“Lottie,” Nell screams. “I won’t let them do this to you,” she cries at the top of her lungs. “Heaven help me,” she howls to the sky, and the man holding me jerks just hearing it.

“Geez, you’ve got some serious lungs on you, girl.” He looks to his friend. “Where do you want her?”

“Throw her in.” The bald man offers a nefarious smile my way. “When I tell Baxter she suffered, I don’t want it to be a lie.”

The next thing I know, I'm set down in the ditch, nothing but walls of earth surrounding me.

"You," I call out to the bald man. "You killed Regina Pacheco or whatever her name was."

He exchanges a glance with his partner in crime—or double homicide as it were.

"Technically, it was my buddy here." He shrugs. "But if you want to give me the credit, I'll take it."

"Why did you do it? Why kill her? All to ruin Everett's bid for the Vermont Supreme Court? What stake do you have in it? To get the court to lean in your favor?"

"The court *will* lean in my favor." He sheds a dark smile before looking at his accomplice. "She's really good, you know that? We should have shoved a few pills in her mouth to keep her quiet."

Those pills come back to me and I freeze solid.

"It was you who was running drugs through Rizzo's."

He cocks his chin in the air and stares at me for a moment.

"It was, pretty lady. Too bad about that raid. But it looks as if the narcotics division was happy with who they netted. Poor Silver kid can't catch a break, now can he?"

I shake my head with fury.

Jed went away the first time because of something he did do. I can't let him go away a second time for something he didn't.

The worst part is, I had enlisted him to help me nab the monster before me.

The slender man picks up a shovel and offers me a mournful look.

"Nell," I say her name sharply. "I want you to leave and get Carlotta to call for help."

Honestly, I don't want Nell to go anywhere, but for sure I don't want her to see her granddaughter get buried alive. Heck,

I don't want to see it myself or experience it. But it looks as if I have no choice.

"I'm sorry, Lottie," Nell says, fury growing in her voice. "But I'm not going down without a fight, and neither should you." She shoves one of the folding chairs at them, and surprisingly it bucks through the air.

Finally a breakthrough.

She picks the other chair up and flings it at the two of them, knocking the bald man over the head.

I take advantage of the melee to hop up on my feet.

"Shoot her," he thunders.

But before the lanky one can reach for his gun, the ground begins to tremble as three men traverse the torn-down fencing and run this way.

"Everyone, *freeze*," a deep voice thunders, and as they leap from the shadows, I can see it's Noah, Everett, and Jed Silver.

The tall one reaches back for his weapon just as a deafening bang goes off, but it's not Noah who fired the shot. It's Everett. And to my surprise, it's Ethel he's having do his dirty work.

Another shot goes off, and both men fall to the ground, with blood pulsing from their thighs.

"Good shot," Noah muses.

"*Lemon*." Everett parks Ethel into his holster, and within seconds he's plucked me out of the ditch and landed me safe in his arms. "You're safe." He brushes his lips to mine hard. "Tell me they didn't hurt you."

"I'm fine," I say, resting my head over his shoulder as Noah cuts my wrists and ankles loose. "Thank goodness you showed up. I thought for sure it was the end. I didn't think I was going to make it."

"But you did," Nell says. "Now if you'll excuse me, I think I'm going to faint." She fades into a spray of stars, but I know it won't be the last I see of her.

Noah offers me a quick embrace. “Jed led us right to you.” He looks up at his old adversary.

“They did it.” I point with my nose to the men rolling around on the ground as blood pools around them. “They killed that woman who was with you, Everett. And they were the ones pushing drugs out of Rizzo’s.” I look over at Jed. “You were innocent all along,” I say to him. “And I knew it.”

Jed sheds a slight grin. “It’s nice to know someone had a little faith in me.”

Noah calls it into the station, and soon the area is flooded with deputies and emergency medical workers.

Everett lands a kiss to my lips. “How about we get you checked out at the hospital?”

“Not on your life. All I did was roll around in the back of their trunk. There’s nothing wrong with me. Besides, it’s almost dark. I think we have just enough time to get down to Honey Lake and watch the fireworks show with the girls.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Everett says. “And when we get home, I’ll draw a nice, hot bath for you.”

“Only if you promise to join me.” I run my finger over his lips. “There wouldn’t be fireworks without you.”

A naughty grin crests on his lips. “I’ll make it memorable.”

“You always do.”

My phone bleats in my pocket and I fish it out.

“My phone.” I laugh. If I could have freed my hands, I could have used it. “And if things went south, you could have found me with it regardless—even if I was buried alive,” I say, glancing at the screen. “It’s Lainey. She says we need to talk.”

LOTTIE



“Oh, Lyla Nell—Evie,” I say as I collapse my arms around both of my girls at once.

“Mom, what happened?” Evie pulls back to get a better look at me. “You look as if you fell in a ditch.”

“You will never know how close to the truth you are,” I say as the energy here at Honey Lake is twice as rumbunctious as it was before I left.

The sky glows a dark shade of tangerine mingling with deep purples as the stars struggle to make their appearance.

Rock music plays from somewhere to our left, the air is smoky from the brisket, not to mention the grilled hot dogs and hamburgers giving the air its savory scent.

“I’ll be hanging out with my friends for the fireworks show,” Evie says, handing Lyla Nell to me. “We’re going to hang out afterward, but I won’t be home too late.” She gives me another warm embrace. “I heard you helped put away another killer tonight. I’m really proud of you, Mom.”

“I’m just glad we’re all safe.”

She takes off and Everett comes over along with Noah.

“Well, Lottie,” Noah says as he takes Lyla Nell from me and I can’t protest. Every muscle in my body is exhausted. “It’s been a long day and an even longer night.”

Everett wraps his arms around me. “We’ve still got the fireworks to look forward to.”

“I’ll go get us a spot near the water,” Noah says.

“I’ll help move some blankets over,” Everett offers as they take off to do just that.

A kerfuffle breaks out over by the pier and I look over to see Carlotta and Francine shouting obscenities at one another.

“Oh no,” I moan as Nell appears next to me.

“What do you think should be done about the two of them?” she asks, her body glowing like a lavender star in this dim light.

“I think they could both use a swim in the lake to cool off,” I say.

“I’ll see what can be done about that.” She zips off and I watch as Carlotta and Francine dance their way to the edge of a wooden pier.

All it takes is a single blow from Nell’s defunct lungs and both Carlotta and Francine flail for a moment before falling right into the water.

A loose round of applause and cheers breaks out and I can’t help but laugh.

Both women resurface, sputtering and coughing, holding onto one another as if they each morphed into a life raft.

“Well, that’s one way to make them get along—or in the least work together.”

A shrill cry belts out and I turn to see Cormack jumping up and down while looking at her phone with Cressida peering over at it as well.

“*Lena*,” Cormack calls out as she traipses this way, and Cressida zips over as if she were her shadow.

Speaking of shadows, she’s still afraid of her own.

“Look at this,” Cormack says, holding her phone my way. And shockingly, it’s a picture of the baby from earlier in the day at the parade.

“Oh, Cormack,” I say, cooing at the cutie on the screen. “I’m so glad to see you’re warming up to motherhood.”

Cressida snickers at the thought.

“What?” Cormack pulls her phone back a moment. “I’m talking about my views. I’ve racked up a quarter of a million of them. I’m finally at the top of my game again. Now, where is that little brat? I’ll need at least two dozen more photos pronto. Of course, I’ll have to stage and style him. I can dress him up as a miniature baseball player, and then there’s football and hockey. I can’t forget cosplay. That’s just huge year-round. I wonder if they make couture outfits for little boys?” She taps her finger to her lips as she ponders this fact.

And as if on cue, Alex comes over with a fuzzy baby sling strapped to his chest as the baby hides out under a flannel blanket.

“Let’s see him,” I say, pulling the blanket off his head a bit. And I’ll be darned if he doesn’t look more like Lyla Nell by the minute. Those Fox genes are potent, that’s for sure. “*Aww*, please tell me he has a name. I’m just itching to use it.”

“I’m thinking about naming him after my big brother,” he says.

Cressida nods. “Family names can land you a lucrative position in the will.”

“You’re thinking about naming him Noah?” I ask. As sweet as the gesture might be, it wouldn’t be a healthy thing, considering Cormack’s obsession.

“Not on your life,” Cormack seethes.

I stand corrected—*previous* obsession.

Alex laughs and his dimples dig in deep like only Fox family dimples are capable of doing. “Actually, I was thinking of my other big brother, Everett.”

“Oh you.” I swat him on the arm. “Not this again.”

“All right.” He laughs. “I was actually thinking something along the line of Levi.”

“Levi?” I coo once again. “What do you think, Cormack?”

“Think about what?” she asks, scrolling through her phone at breakneck speed.

“Never mind.” I shrug over at Alex. “I love it.”

“I love it, too,” Alex says, brushing his cheek over the top of the baby’s head. “And I thought it went well with Lyla Nell. They are cousins. And I figure since we’ll be calling their names out together, time and time again, they needed to go together. And now they do.”

“They do indeed,” I say, running a finger over the baby’s downy soft hair. “Nice to formally meet you, Levi Fox.”

“Levi *Wiley* Fox,” Alex says with a shrug. “My old man may not be perfect, but I still have a soft spot for him.”

“You must,” I say. “Well done.”

“I’d better go say goodnight to my mother,” he says, covering the baby back up. “I need to get this little guy out of here before the sky explodes—and then he explodes, and I fall apart from no sleep.” He glances toward the food tents. “And just my luck, Lily is still here.”

He takes off and my mouth falls open. “Cormack, he’s going to talk to Lily. You should go after him.”

Her lips twitch right then left. “I might be in the mood for another one of your cupcakes.” She trots off in his direction.

“Here’s hoping she’s in the mood for a family,” I say to Cressida, who’s busy scrolling through her phone.

“Oh, come on, Lottie. Cormack doesn’t do family unless it involves the Fox that dumped her.” She buries her phone in her purse. “Thank you for catching the culprit who killed Dirk.” She bites down on her lower lip as she holds my gaze a moment, and for the first time Cressida Bentley looks vulnerable.

I’m not sure how I feel about this. Cressida has always been a pillar of ditzy steel.

“Did you know?” I ask her, my voice just above a whisper. “About the things Gigi was selling?” If Cressida knew her shop was running fakes through it, then she’s just as culpable with that aspect of the case. “On second thought, don’t answer that.”

She’s Evie’s biological mother, and I don’t want any more trouble from her or for her. I certainly don’t want to march her to the sheriff’s station. The authorities need to sort this out. I’m not doing their dirty work for them. Not this time.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She leans in close. “But I do know that ghost that has been following me around is here at Honey Lake.” She glances over her shoulder and shudders. “But now that my business has gone bust, and Gigi is headed to the big house, I thought I might take the time to go yachting on the Med—lest I join her as well.” She glances over her shoulder one more time. “Let’s hope the ghost doesn’t follow me over the pond.” She wrinkles her nose my way. “I think I’ll have another slice of that ice cream cake of yours. You are pretty good at whipping up a sweet treat or two. You should consider opening a bakery.”

“Very funny,” I say as she takes off.

I glance to the woods, to the exact area where a couple of thugs shoved a hood over my head and took off with me in hopes to bury me alive.

To my surprise, a sprinkling of dark stars appears and an image begins to form.

“What in the world?” I whisper as I take a blind step forward.

A man appears, disembodied as he may be, and I think I recognize him with that dark spiked hair, that lantern jaw, and overall lanky build.

It’s him!

It’s Dirk Livingston.

He sheds a brief smile and waves my way before dissipating into the night once again.

How do you like that?

Cressida was right after all.

I spot Meg and Sam seated at the picnic tables, chatting—most likely about the tiny feet they’re each knitting in their wombs—while noshing on smoked brisket sandwiches.

I bet they wish they had a plate full of fried pickles to go with that.

Come to think of it, *I* wish I had an entire platter full of fried pickles. After all I’ve been through tonight, I’m famished.

Nell appears before me. “Well, Lottie? I think the girls are adequately cooled off for now.”

“I bet they are,” I say with a laugh. “Thank you for that, Nell. And thank you for getting me through the darkest hour of my life.” I offer her a brazen embrace right here in the open. “I could never have survived that trauma without you.” I pull back a notch. “But wait a minute. You’re still here,” I marvel.

“I am, aren’t I?” She winks. “I suppose the universe has something else I’m to bear witness to.”

“Here’s hoping there’s not an open grave involved.” I make a face. “And by the way, if you’d like to contribute to my cookbook, please do. It’s just about done, but there’s always room for you, Nell.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to give you my most prized mouth-watering dishes.”

“Lottie?” Lainey makes her way over, wearing a baby blue sundress that glows in the ever-darkening night. “Oh, Lottie. I’m sorry. But we just have to talk.”

Her eyes fill with tears as she takes up my hands.

“Sure, what is it? It’s not the baby, is it? Do you need water? Do you need a doctor?”

She shakes her head. “I need to apologize—to you.”

“Whatever for?”

“Lottie.” Her eyes close a moment. “A few weeks back, the night of Cormack’s baby shower, I sort of did a selfish thing.”

“What could you possibly have done? Lainey, you’re the least selfish person on the planet.”

She makes a face. “Well, I wasn’t trying to be selfish. I thought I was being clever. You know how we had to hand in our pregnancy tests after we agreed to take them?”

“That’s right.” I nod. “And agreed to share the results with the masses.” I cringe because she’s probably regretting that. Half the town knew before her poor husband.

“Yeah, well, after you wrote your name on yours and dropped it in the basket, I fished it out and rubbed off your name and wrote mine over it.”

I give several blinks, trying to follow along. “What did you do that for?”

“Because I already knew I was pregnant and I wanted to tell Forest before I told the whole world. I don’t even know why I agreed to the dumb game. Although, it was fun watching my stick turn pink once again.” A momentary grin rides on her face. “I snuck my test into my purse and took it home with me. I thought if I gave them your test they wouldn’t know I was pregnant. I didn’t think they’d care that one test was missing. And then the night ended in chaos and everything got delayed. So when we went to the B&B last week, I was fully expecting to hear that Keelie or anyone else was pregnant but me.”

Nell leans in so as not to miss a word of what Lainey might say next.

“But, Lainey, your test wasn’t there,” I say as the pieces begin to fall into place.

She gives a hesitant nod just as the first firework of the night whistles into the sky.

“That’s right, Lottie,” she says. “That wasn’t my positive pregnancy test they revealed. It was yours.”

 Apple Cider Donut Danger

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RECIPE

Ice Cream Cake

From the Cutie Pie Bakery & Cakery

Hello all! Lottie here. Summer is here in my neck of the woods, and it's been sizzling. The Fourth of July is upon us, and I thought what better way to combat this heat than to whip up a cool treat that can be decorated to fit the patriotic day. And the best part? This cake is a hit year-round. You can use any ice cream flavors you like, it's no-bake, and has an Oreo cookie crust. What could be better than that?

Happy no-baking!

Ingredients

½ stick butter (softened)

1 quart vanilla ice cream (softened)

1 quart strawberry ice cream (softened)

1 quart chocolate ice cream (softened)

About 35 Oreo cookies (regular)

*Feel free to frost with any type of frosting you desire. You can even top with Cool Whip! Be sure to add sprinkles to give this sweet treat an extra festive flair.

Directions

***Note:** You can make this into the shape of a round cake by using a spring form pan. Or you can use a 9 x 13 Pyrex pan.

In a food processor, pulse the Oreo cookies until crumbled to a fine consistency. In a medium mixing bowl, add cookie crumbles and butter, mixing until well blended. Press to the bottom of the pan and freeze for 10-15 minutes.

In a medium bowl, stir chocolate ice cream until smooth and creamy. (Or whichever flavor you would like for the bottom layer of your cake.) Spread evenly over the Oreo crust and freeze for 20 minutes.

Repeat the process with the next two flavors, freezing 20-25 minutes between each layer.

Frost with your desired topping and enjoy!

Everett likes fudge with his, so (in keeping with the no-bake theme) I pick up a jar right in the frozen section, next to the ice at the grocery store.

This cake will go fast!

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Big thanks to YOU the reader! I hope you had a wonderful time. I can't thank you enough for spending time in Honey Hollow with me. I hope you enjoyed this bumpy ride with Lottie and all of her Honey Hollow peeps as much as I did. The MURDER IN THE MIX mysteries are super special to me, and I hope they are to you as well. If you'd like to be in the know on upcoming releases, please be sure to follow me at [Bookbub](#) and [Amazon](#), and sign up for my [newsletter](#).

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking this wild roller coaster ride with me. I really do love you!

A very big thank you to Kaila Eileen Turingan-Ramos, Jodie Tarleton and Lisa Markson for being awesome.

A special thank you to my sweet betas Amy Barber and Margaret Lapointe for looking after the book with their amazing beautiful eyes. And a shout out to Lou Harper for designing the world's most beautiful cover.

A mighty BIG thank you to Paige Maroney Smith for being so amazing.

And last, but never least, thank you to Him who sits on the throne. Worthy is the Lamb! Glory and honor and power are yours. I owe you everything, Jesus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR





Addison Moore is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author who writes contemporary and paranormal romance. Her work has been featured in *Cosmopolitan* Magazine. Previously she worked as a therapist on a locked psychiatric unit for nearly a decade. She resides on the West Coast with her husband, four wonderful children, and two dogs where she eats too much chocolate and stays up way too late. When she's not writing, she's reading. Addison's Celestra Series has been optioned for film by 20th Century Fox.

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