DARYL WOOD GERBER

NATIONALLY BESTSELLING AND AGATHA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

A CLASSIC CASE OF MURDER

A LITERARY DINING MYSTERY



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A Classic Case of Murder

Daryl Wood Gerber



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To my family and the fond memories
of Christmas celebrations,
as complicated as they might have been.

To my son, Jackson, who shares my love of
classic Christmas movies and stories.

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"A Christmas Carol *is Scrooge's dark night of the soul,*
but his character represents all of us.
May we remember the ghosts' lessons and
be kind to each other this holiday season …
and all throughout the year."

—John A. Rice, artist

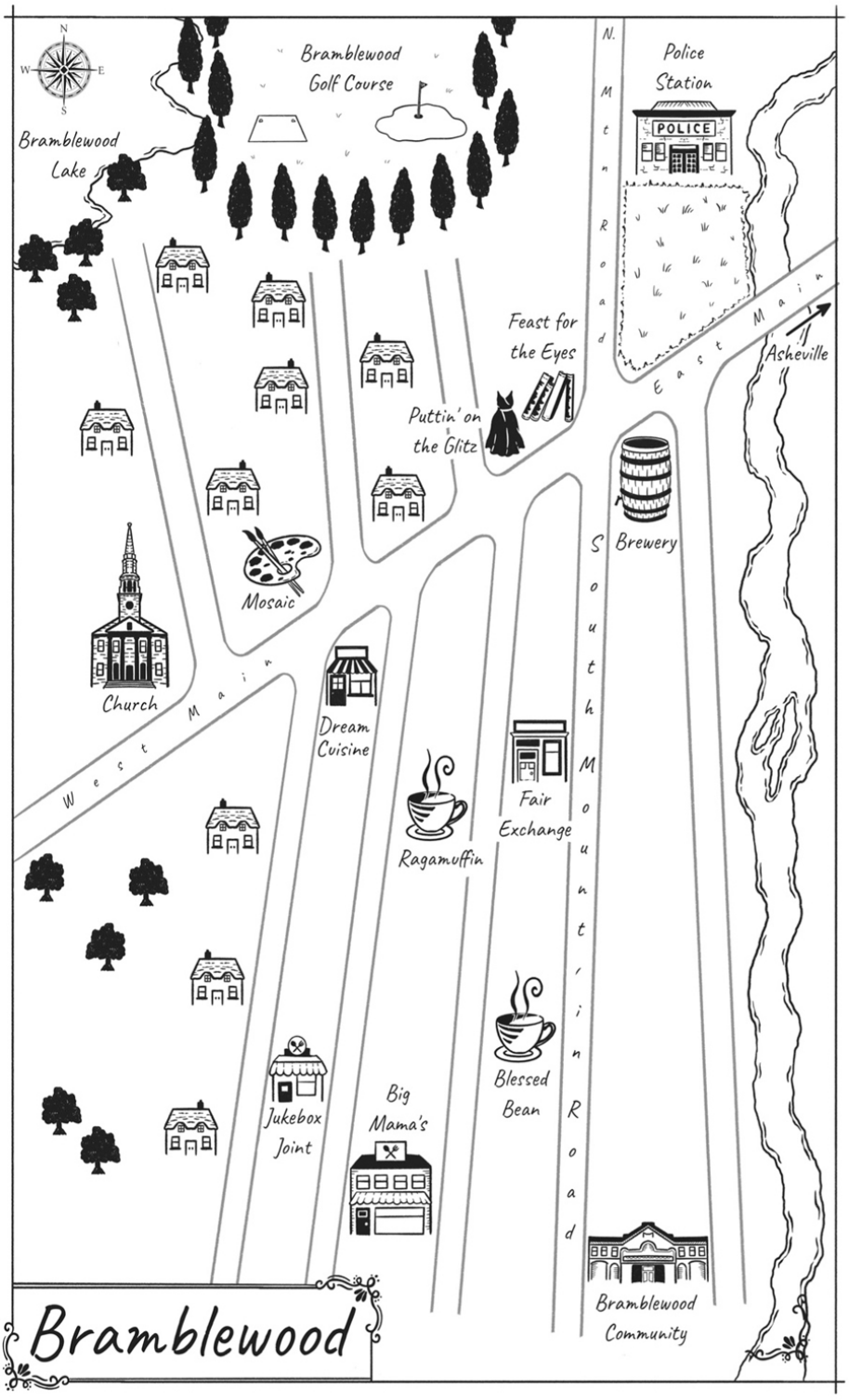
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List of Characters

Allie Catt, caterer
Brendan Bates, police detective
Candace Canfield, singer
Cherry, liquor store owner
Chloe Kang, bookshop clerk
Dalton Frasier, Dickens aficionado
Erwin Scroggie, businessman
Evelyn Evers, head of the community theater
Felicity Bobb, Freddy's wife
Fern Catt, Allie's mother
Freddy Bobb, Scroggie's nephew
Gilbert Quackenbush, antiquarian
Helga, housekeeper at B&B
Imogen Grimshaw, avid reader
Jenny Armstrong, owner of Jukebox Joint
Kiki Cranston, girlfriend of Yale
Lillian Bellingham, retailer Puttin' on the Glitz
Magda Bellingham, Lillian's grandmother
Noeline Merriweather, owner of two B&Bs
Oswald "Ozzie" Crockett, Freddy's cousin
Pippa, Helga's niece
Quinlan O'Leary, actor
Rae Goodell, sister of Felicity
Smith, security guard
Stella Burberry, accountant
Tegan Potts, bookstore owner
Tinsley Bobb, Freddy's daughter

Udita Singh, bookstore clerk
Vanna Harding, caterer and Tegan’s half sister
Wallis, waitress at the Brewery
Xenia Blair, book dealer
Yale Kildare, process server and bail agent
Zach Armstrong, police detective

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STAVE 1

The Overture: Merriment Abounds

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Chapter 1

There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humor.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

"You are murdering it, Allie," I muttered to myself as I tried to inscribe the word *Merriment* on the ginormous sheet cake. "C'mon. It's not difficult. You've written words like these dozens of times. Start over."

Standing at the marble island in the ghost kitchen where I prepared most of the items I created for customers, I knifed off the offensive icing mess and began again with the piping bag appropriately tilted. This time my pressure was perfect. The sentiment—*Merriment is being married to you. Happy Anniversary!*—was legible. Yay!

The tribute from Freddy Bobb to his beloved wife was almost ready to be delivered to Legal Eagles, where Freddy worked. With regularity, the law firm, one of my steadiest clients, celebrated its employees' successes and special days, but this one was personal. Freddy had handled a number of property matters for my parents. I adored him. All I had left to do was box up the cake, insert it into the van, and finish up the rest of the orders.

I set the piping bag aside, leaned against the island, and reflected on my life as I hummed along with the instrumental holiday music playing through

a speaker. What brought me joy and made me merry? Baking and reading, without a doubt. Music, for sure. Bringing smiles to my customers' faces, check. The idea of marriage? Nope. Not yet.

"All in good time," I could hear my nana say. How I missed her.

To be honest, I'd intended to get married a few years ago. I'd been engaged, but my fiancé proved to be a louse. Thankfully, his rejection drove me to abandon my dream of becoming an English professor, and I moved home to Bramblewood to launch my catering business. I delighted in providing delicious treats for my customers. I reveled in their happy smiles. And then, as an added bonus for a book lover like me, whenever I'd completed my deliveries, I tootled to Feast for the Eyes, the town's premier bookshop, to help out.

Yep, I was happy and content and didn't want for anything. Merry? You bet I was.

I eyed the other items I'd been constructing since five a.m. Gingerbread cupcakes for Blessed Bean. Mini cheesecakes for Big Mama's Diner. Oversized peppermint cookies for Perfect Brew.

Just another busy Friday, I mused.

A raucous bulletin tone echoed through the kitchen. *Weather alert, snowstorm coming* flashed on my cell phone.

Yeah, right. Bramblewood, North Carolina, didn't have snowstorms. Like nearby Asheville, we received around two inches of snow a year, but two measly inches in one fell swoop could slow traffic everywhere.

I cleared the alert.

At the same time the rear door swung open, and Vanna Harding stumbled in, losing her footing and dropping the crateful of strawberries she was carrying. "Yiii-ahhh," she cried. "Darned heels."

The strawberries went flying and tumbled toward the walk-in refrigerator.

My tuxedo cat, Darcy, safely nestled in his cat carrier in the corner of the kitchen, yowled at the intrusion on his nap.

"*Oof*," Vanna muttered. "Sorry, Darcy. I'll buy you more produce, Allie."

"No time." The strawberries were meant to be décor on a large batch of heavenly vanilla cupcakes meant for Ragamuffin. "I'll change the recipe and use crushed peppermint as a topping. 'Tis the flavor of the season."

“The owners won’t mind?”

“They understand snafus.” Ragamuffin was a lovely place located in a courtyard connecting Holly Street and Elm Street. The café’s baristas were some of the best around, excelling in preparing and serving specialty coffees, teas, and more.

“Well, I apologize again for the mess.” She bent to scoop up the strawberries. “Say, we could rinse these and make them into jam. Boiling them will remove any taint.”

“Good idea.” Though I wouldn’t serve the jam to my clients. It would be for personal use only. “Where are you off to?”

“Huh?”

“Why the heels?” Having cooked alongside me for a little over five months, Vanna knew I advised wearing flats.

She did a quick spin and assessed herself from her toes to frilled collar. “I plan to secure a new deal.”

“New deal?” Both she and I were caterers in our own right. She had individual clients, as did I. A few weeks ago, she’d wanted to stop working with me—we’d hooked up so we could both expand our businesses—but after the mayor reneged on his proposition to promote her solo business, somehow she kept offering to help me, and for some reason I kept saying yes. Primarily, we worked together to host the literary dining parties with Feast for the Eyes.

“Yes. New, as in big.” She patted her chignon to make sure she hadn’t disturbed its perfection with the assessment twirl and smiled slyly.

At times she could be as stoic as a poker player holding a hand of aces. Knowing this about her, I didn’t give her the satisfaction of asking for more information.

After five long seconds, she said, “Okay, a bit ago I told you I intended to become a one-woman show again. And I know I haven’t followed through on the plan. But if I can secure this gig, it’s done. You’ll be free of me. I’m on pins and needles.”

“I don’t need to be free—”

“Hey.” She cut a look at Darcy in his carrier. “Why is he with you today?”

“I’ve opted to stay at your mother’s new inn tonight with Tegan so we can help with the display and details for Saturday’s soiree.” Noeline

Merriweather was the mother of my best friend, Tegan, as well as Vanna, who were half sisters. “I didn’t think I’d have a chance to return home,” I added, “and you know me. I never feel good leaving my sweet feline alone for hours upon hours.”

“Mother’s new inn,” Vanna said. “We tried to talk her out of buying it, but she wouldn’t listen.”

“Well, I’m glad she did since that’s where we’ll have the party.” For the holidays, Tegan, Vanna, and I had landed on the brilliant idea—okay, Tegan had come up with it; Vanna and I had concurred—to throw a literary dining party with a Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol* theme. “The inn is absolutely beautiful and so centrally located.”

Vanna made a dismissive sound. “What kind of name is the Amber Lantern anyway?”

“A companion name for the Blue Lantern, natch,” I said. Vanna was a smart cookie, but at times she could be obtuse. “The structure was built by the same designer who built the Blue Lantern and has the same floor plan.”

Years ago, Noeline had purchased the Blue Lantern in nearby Montford, which was now a premier bed-and-breakfast. Two months ago, she’d considered investing in a second inn in Montford. When that sale didn’t come to fruition and while she was still eager to own two properties, she’d bought this inn, located in Bramblewood, not far from the lake. Both Tegan and Vanna had been against the purchase, but their mother had a mind of her own. Because she always decorated the Blue Lantern to the nines during the yuletide season, this year, to boost the Amber Lantern’s name recognition, Noeline had opted to dress it up as well. I couldn’t wait to see the décor. She prided herself on creating a modest Biltmore-type experience for her guests. For those who aren’t tuned in, the inn on Biltmore Estate in Asheville was known for its lavish Christmas displays.

“Your mother is very excited about hosting the party,” I added. “She’s an avid fan of Dickens.”

Noeline read across genres, but a few months ago I’d noticed an array of Dickens’s works on the shelves in the Blue Lantern’s office and had asked her about them. She said she’d fallen in love with his books the moment she’d read *A Tale of Two Cities.*

“Dickens. Yeah. Whatever.” Vanna wasn’t a bibliophile, though she was reading more now than she had six months ago. She deposited the

recovered strawberries in a colander before focusing on Darcy. “Hello, handsome.” She traipsed to the cat carrier and bent down. She didn’t reach in, but she scratched the mesh. “Hi, hi, hi.” She adored him, and though he wasn’t a true people cat—he was a *dedicated observer*, like me; I participated when necessary, but most often I liked to absorb life around me—he had taken to Vanna. She wasn’t the warmest human being, but she was a fan of animals.

“Ooh, look at that cake!” Vanna exclaimed, taking in the kitchen while washing her hands. “Who ordered it?”

“Freddy Bobb at Legal Eagles for his and his wife’s fifth anniversary.”

“Aw. I wish I had someone special in my life.”

“Any prospects?” I asked.

She offered a wry smile. “Mine to know.”

Surprisingly, I couldn’t pry anything more out of her while we completed the orders.

Before heading out, I changed from my baking duds into my standard black jeans and crisp white blouse attire. I tamed my unruly red curls into a messy knot at the nape of my neck and dabbed on a swath of lip gloss. I wasn’t a makeup kind of person unless absolutely required, and I constantly worked to present myself against stereotype. After all, I might be curvy and had what some dubbed saucy green eyes, but I was one hundred percent girl next door, right down to a genuine smile.

After making the rounds to all my other customers, I tootled to Legal Eagles. I parked my Ford Transit on the street, unloaded the trolley holding the anniversary cake, and pushed it inside.

I was immediately greeted by a festive atmosphere. An elegant Christmas tree stood in the corner, festooned with shimmering gold and silver ornaments, twinkling white lights, and a star perched on top. Around the base of the tree sat gifts wrapped in gold and silver metallic paper. The reception desk held an arrangement of red poinsettias in a gold vase and flickering LED candles. Subtle holiday scents of cinnamon and pine lingered in the air. Instrumental holiday music was playing softly in the background, creating a serene atmosphere.

The firm, which was one of many concerns owned by Erwin Scroggie—who wasn’t a lawyer but was a crusty businessman who preferred to be

addressed by his surname—handled a variety of legal matters, including corporate law, criminal law, real estate law, and more. The Scroggie family had dwelled in the area for nearly two hundred years. Before the construction of the famous Biltmore Estate in 1895, the town of Asheville, and thereby Bramblewood, got a boost when a road from Tennessee opened in 1828. The influx of people was incredible and included Scroggie's ancestors. Scroggie, as far as I knew, was named for his great-great-grandfather, Erwin. Freddy, one of Scroggie's nephews, wasn't named after anyone in particular.

I strode to the front desk.

"Happy Friday," the receptionist said, offering a toothy grin. "Felicity will be awestruck." Felicity was Freddy's beloved. "I've set up plates and such in the boardroom and pulled the drapes. Let me alert everyone." She motioned for me to proceed.

Garlands of pine boughs decorated with bundles of silver bells swooped from one end of the boardroom to the other. At the far end of the room hung a banner thanking Felicity for five years of bliss. Below the banner stood a rectangular table draped with a lush red cloth upon which lay a cake knife, plates, forks, furled napkins, and a stand of champagne glasses plus a chilled bottle of champagne.

Freddy Bobb slipped into the room, quietly closed the door, and took in the cake. "Wow, Allie, perfection." In his late thirties, he was lean with a constant five-o'clock shadow, as if he couldn't shave often enough to keep the fuzz at bay. His tie was askew and his suit slightly rumpled. "Your parents sure raised a talent. How are they?"

"Fine. Traveling." As always.

The first time I met Freddy, I was impressed by his ability to listen attentively. He'd expertly advised my parents about some real estate issues. When I'd come to the firm to make the pitch for Legal Eagles' business, he'd sat in on the meeting. His uncle Scroggie had taken the consultation with me because, thanks to Freddy, he'd heard great things about Dream Cuisine. After my pitch, Scroggie had addressed Freddy, "What do you think?" Freddy had looked flabbergasted to be asked his opinion. He'd sputtered, "She's great. Her business is great." His uncle had frowned and banged his lion's head cane against the floor. "That's it? That's all you've got? Think, man, think. What are the plusses and minuses? You are the

lawyer, not I. Give me an oral argument." Freddy had taken his time formulating an answer. Once he had, he'd laid out all the positives—the daily deliveries, variety of selections, and ease with which I'd presented myself had given him complete confidence. In the end, he'd said he had no negatives, to which his uncle had roared with laughter. "Freddy, you'll make a superb judge one day." He was wrong. Freddy would never become a judge. He enjoyed practicing real estate law.

A knot of lawyers and assistants tiptoed into the room. Many quietly admired the cake.

A minute later, the receptionist escorted Felicity in, and everyone yelled, "Surprise!"

"Oh, Freddy." Felicity covered her mouth with her left hand. Her right arm was in a cast. "I'm … I'm …" She hurried to him and embraced him with her good arm. Even with her feet tucked into platform heels, she was petite beside him. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you will love me until the day I die."

Her pale blue eyes sparkled with humor. "I will, you big oaf, but you'd better not die before me, or I'll kill you."

Everyone laughed.

Then Freddy knelt on one knee and pulled a small jewelry box from the pocket of his suit jacket. He held it up to her. "If I could, I would buy you a new piece of jewelry every day."

Her eyes widened. "Freddy, you shouldn't have. We can't afford—"

He leaped to his feet. "We can, and I did. Open it."

She lifted the rim. "It's beautiful."

"For a beautiful woman." He embraced her gently. "FYI, it's fake. Merely a placeholder until I can give you what you deserve after putting up with me for five years."

Tears bloomed in her eyes.

I cut the cake, and Freddy poured the champagne.

When everyone was served, Felicity waved to me. As she lowered her arm, the frayed edges of her cast snagged on the bodice of her red dress. She struggled to free it.

I hurried to help.

"Isn't Freddy the best?" she gushed. One-handedly, she flicked her shoulder-length blond hair off her youthful heart-shaped face.

“He’s a keeper. What happened to your arm?”

“Ack. I had a fall a few weeks ago. I was climbing with Freddy near Looking Glass Falls and slipped on some wet rocks. Rookie mistake. I’ve been a klutz my whole life. Why, when I was a girl, I broke my other arm shinnying up a tree. Well, not shinnying up. Falling off.” She shook her head. “The upside is I make Tinsley feel like a superstar.”

Tinsley, a button of a girl with severe asthma, was Freddy’s ten-year-old daughter from his first marriage. Sadly, when his wife died, he had to take over all of Tinsley’s care. Trips to doctors, to emergency rooms, and more.

“Is Tinsley clumsy?” I asked.

“No, but sometimes when she suffers a fit of sneezing, she stumbles like she’s inebriated.” She jutted out her cast, which boasted a riot of colorful swirls and red flowers. “Do you like her gel pen artwork?”

“Cute.” I’d seen Felicity with Tinsley. They were quite close.

“By the way, I’m so excited to take part in the festivities at the Amber Lantern this week. We won the firm’s package for a mini staycation. Freddy’s former mother-in-law will watch Tinsley.”

“That’s nice.”

“I heard you’ll be catering. I’m so pleased. I love your food. And I’ve already read the novella.”

For our literary dining parties, we encouraged guests to read the book beforehand so we could discuss it at the gala. Most participants joined in the fun. Many were regular bookshop customers.

“Friends and colleagues,” Freddy said in a booming voice, “please raise a glass to my beautiful bride, and to me, the luckiest man in the world.”

When he clinked his champagne glass with a fork, the glass shattered.

The ensuing silence was deafening.

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Chapter 2

He was conscious of a thousand odours floating in the air, each one connected with a thousand thoughts, and hopes, and joys, and cares, long, long, forgotten.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

When I arrived at the Amber Lantern in the late afternoon, the snow was beginning to fall. Calling it a storm was a bit of an exaggeration—so far, we had received a mere half inch of white powder—but it did make the inn, with its white exterior and sunflower-colored vergeboard trim, look magical. The steeply pitched roofs were dusted with white, as were the lanterns hanging from shepherd's hooks. The front porch spanned the entire width of the house. A pair of live fir trees stood in sepia-toned containers, their twinkling fairy lights charming.

The gardens in the spring, summer, and fall were always in bloom—Noeline had made certain the landscaper planted seasonal plants—but now they lacked flowers. In their stead, Noeline had draped blankets of lights on the evergreens and the porch railing. A quartet of life-sized singing mannequins in Victorian garb stood to the right of the steps leading to the front door. For the party, I'd rented a costume that was nearly identical to

the mannequin’s on the left, complete with muff, red jacket, red-and-green plaid skirt, caplet, and bonnet with plaid bow.

I parked in the guests’ parking lot, climbed out of my van, lifted Darcy in his cat carrier, and gathered the gift I’d wrapped for Noeline. After all, she had willingly offered the inn for the literary dining party. She deserved something special.

Entering the foyer, I was struck by the heady scent of pine and in awe of the Christmas tree decked out with gold balls and mini lights. An arrangement of honeycomb angels graced the reception desk. A candle in a tiny brass holder bedecked with holly stood on the table between two brocade chairs.

In the living room to the left, a majestic tree decorated with miniature gnomes in red hats, green vests, brown pants, and leather boots brought a smile to my face. Four-foot-tall gnomes clustered in the corner were grinning as if they approved of the décor.

The tinkling notes of “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” emanated from the player piano in the parlor to the right. That room was where I found my best friend, Tegan, standing on tiptoe atop an antique stepping stool, doing her best to hang mistletoe in the archway. She teetered. Her white blond pigtails flopped.

Quickly, I plunked Darcy and the gift on the hardwood floor and steadied Tegan before she toppled. “Your half sister has already taken a spill today, and Felicity at Legal Eagles recently broke her arm. No near disasters on my watch, okay, pal?”

Tegan and I had known each other over twenty-one years. We met as kindergartners. We didn’t finish each other’s sentences, but we were bonded in lots of ways. We loved to read and eat. We laughed easily. And we were darned good at pranking one another, though she was definitely better in that regard.

She stepped to the floor, righted her pigtails, and tugged down the hem of her yellow Pikachu hoodie, which had risen up. When not working or reading futuristic novels, she was a video game nerd. “What do you think of the decorations?” She positioned the stepping stool to the right of the piano and pivoted to admire her handiwork.

I surveyed the room alongside her. “Good job.”

The Amber Lantern, like its sister counterpart, offered nightly food- or wine-tasting events in the parlor. Therefore, it required a variety of seating arrangements, which included two vintage gold damask settees and pairs of plaid chairs, each positioned on area rugs around distinctive coffee tables. Holiday pillows featuring reindeer adorned the settees. Freestanding bookshelves provided books for guests of the inn to read. The luxurious oak dining table nestled against the wall by the window often held goodies that the guests could consume. For now, the table was merely draped with a pine-themed quilted runner. A Christmas tree strung with twinkling lights and covered in Victorian house ornaments stood to the right of the table. To the left was a comfortable-looking chair plus end table, and beyond that, a square-topped Doric pedestal upon which sat a large glass box.

"Welcome, Allie." At sixty-one, Noeline Merriweather had a presence that commanded attention the moment she walked into a room. Her bobbed hair perfectly framed her jawline, and her smile radiated warmth and authenticity. I'd known her since I was a girl and felt blessed to be able to call her my second mother.

"I have something for you." I lifted the gift and handed it to her. "Open it now."

"What is it?" she asked. "It's heavy."

"You'll see." I stole a glance at Tegan, who gazed at me with curiosity. I hadn't told her about the purchase.

"Rip it open, Mom," Tegan demanded.

Noeline was not the kind of person who would tear off wrapping paper. Ever. She oozed decorum, in a good way. She lifted each strip of tape carefully and peeled back the paper, keeping it intact.

"C'mon. Rip it." At Feast for the Eyes, Tegan was the modicum of self-restraint, but right now she reminded me of the impatient imp I'd first met when she was wrestling a dark-haired girl for the chalkboard eraser.

Noeline set the box on the dining table and opened the lid. She withdrew a bust of Charles Dickens and hooted. Literally, hooted. At the top of her lungs. "Allie, I can't believe it. Wherever did you find this? I love it. It's amazing."

"It's only fiberglass." I'd asked our local pawn shop guy to see if he could locate something for me. It was sixteen inches high and finished with antique stone. Though inexpensive, it expertly captured the shoulders and

head of Charles Dickens, including his distinctive beard. “I know how much you admire Dickens.”

“It’s a keeper.” She deposited the bust on top of the player piano and took a step back. “Perfection. Thank you so much. And, Tegan, my darling, thank you for giving me Marigold’s player piano.” Marigold was Tegan’s late aunt and Noeline’s sister. Earlier this year when she died tragically, she left her estate to Tegan, Vanna, and Noeline. Tegan wound up moving into Marigold’s house and was in the process of updating it. “She treasured it, and now I can, too.”

“I’m glad you could find a Christmas music spindle for it.” Tegan sipped from a bottle of water she’d retrieved from a coffee table. “By the way, Scroggie and the antiquarian he hired are on their way over. Separately.”

“Before they arrive, I’ll take Darcy up to our room,” I said.

“Third floor,” Tegan said. “Last one on the right. The door is unlocked.”

“When I return, Noeline, we can discuss the details for Saturday’s soiree.”

“Nothing to discuss, Allie. You’ve covered it all in emails. We’re good.” Noeline gestured with both hands, shooing me upstairs. “Simply enjoy the evening.”

The rooms at the Blue Lantern were designated by numbers. For the Amber Lantern, Noeline decided it would be cozier to give the rooms the names of flowers. I entered Peony and released my sweet cat from his carrier. “Enjoy, handsome.”

Like all the rooms, the interior was white with mellow yellow trim. Paintings of Victorian homes and gardens beautified the walls. The drapes featured luminous lanterns. The linens on the two queen-sized beds were a soft flaxen color. A quaint table with two scroll-back chairs decorated with a delicate floral pattern abutted one wall. A coffee table and small settee, its fabric featuring lemon-colored peonies, were arranged to the left. A pair of complimentary umbrellas for guests to use in the event of rain while staying at the inn rested in a coat stand to the right.

Tegan had selected the bed closest to the window and had helped me by setting out a cat litter tray, water, and kibble for Darcy. I would bring my overnight case up later.

“Explore.” I tapped my sweet cat’s nose. “I’ll be back soon.”

Content to go straight to sleep, he leaped onto the settee and curled into a ball.

I was descending the stairs to the foyer as Gilbert Quackenbush entered the inn. He was a renowned sixty-something antiquarian whom Marigold had trusted implicitly to authenticate the rare books at Feast for the Eyes.

He deposited an old-style suitcase by his feet. “Lovely. Exquisite.”

“Hello, Mr. Quackenbush,” I said.

“Gilbert. Please, Allie. I’m not a stuffy man.”

I guided him into the parlor, and he gushed praise again. “Exquisite.”

“Thank you,” Tegan murmured.

Thick-rimmed glasses made it hard to determine the exact color of Gilbert’s eyes. It didn’t matter. I pegged him as the kind of man who had probably read books all his life and shunned television. He spoke softly, but when immersed in his passion of rare books, he was a whiz, and any hesitancy vanished.

“Hello!” a man shouted from the foyer. “Where is everyone?”

“In here, Scroggie,” Gilbert replied. “The parlor on the right. Come in, old chap.”

At seventy, with dark eyes, slick white hair, and a keen mind, Scroggie was a force—the type of man who could keep you on your toes. Despite his age and the lion’s head cane he invariably carried, he moved with a lively energy. “Good day, everyone.” He removed his fedora and tapped it against the leg of his trousers. A dusting of snow fell on the carpet by a settee.

“Have you got it, man?” Gilbert asked.

“It’s locked in my Mercedes,” Scroggie replied. “First, I wanted to see what kind of setup to expect inside.”

It was a first edition of *A Christmas Carol*, which Scroggie was putting on display at the inn until the day after the party. I couldn’t believe his largesse, but Tegan said he and Noeline were friends. Gilbert had agreed to authenticate the novella and for his services was granted a free week’s stay at the inn.

Noeline crossed to Scroggie and extended her hand. “Long time no see, Erwin.”

He leveled her with a stern glance.

“Fine.” She smirked. “Scroggie.” She said over her shoulder to us, “I’ve known Scroggie a very long time. Since before he was betrothed to his

intended."

"Intended, indeed," he muttered.

Tegan said sotto voce to me, "Apparently, her parents wouldn't let her marry him. She left town, never to return, completely heartbroken."

So was Scroggie, evidently. Perhaps that was why he had such an irritable disposition.

Scroggie said, "Is this the room where it'll be on display?"

Noeline nodded. "We've hired an armed guard to be on-site twenty-four/seven."

Tegan had arranged that.

"*Hmph.*" Scroggie murmured. "At home, it sits within a weight-sensitive, fully alarmed case, and I have CCTV."

"Yes, I know." Noeline clasped his elbow. "But you can rest assured it'll be safe here."

The inn had no security cameras. In fact, it had no security anything. After setting up Ring at my house, I'd mentioned to Tegan that her mother ought to invest in some type of system, but Noeline wouldn't address the subject. Bramblewood, in her estimation, was the safest place in the world.

Scroggie attempted a smile, but the tension in his jaw didn't permit it to reach his eyes. "I'm displaying the novella this single time because you are a Dickens scholar, Noeline."

"A scholar." She snorted. "As if." She squeezed his elbow and released it. "Tomorrow we're having a brunch. Why don't you come?"

"We'll see." He eyed Gilbert. "You, follow me."

The men left the room, and I released the breath I was holding. "He's sharper than a serpent's tooth."

Noeline chuckled. "Don't let him fool you. He's like a soft-boiled egg. Hard on the outside and mushy on the inside."

"Could've fooled me," Tegan joked.

Helga, the cook and housekeeper for the Blue Lantern, stepped into the room. Her yellow uniform with white lapels coordinated with the color palette for the Amber Lantern. In order to get the new inn up and running, Helga had opted to help out. Her sister, who was a decade younger than Helga and a trained cook and housekeeper, had come to town to temporarily take care of the Blue Lantern while her employers were on a two-month tour of Europe. Helga was a good-natured woman with an astute eye for

detail. Despite her gray hair, she looked a good ten years younger than her sixty-something years. Had she recently enjoyed a facial?

A shy, freckle-faced woman who was younger than me slipped in behind Helga, her honey blond hair tucked into a snood. Like Helga, she was wearing a pale yellow uniform with broad white lapels and white cuffs. In her hands, she carried a silver tray arranged with teacups and a plate of cookies.

“Noeline, you’ve met my niece Pippa, my sister’s firstborn,” Helga said. “She has three girls in total.”

“Yes, welcome.” Noeline smiled. “Pippa, this is my daughter Tegan and her best friend, Allie. Ladies, Pippa will become the regular cook and housekeeper here once she’s settled in.”

“Don’t let looks deceive you,” Helga added as explanation to me and Tegan. “My niece may be youthful, but she has been well trained.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” Pippa said, curtsying ever so slightly so as not to upset the tray. “Where would you like this, ma’am?” she asked Noeline.

“On the dining table by the wall. And you call me Noeline. We’re not formal here.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Make way. Make way.” Gilbert paraded into the room with a two-foot-square Plexiglas display case within which was a copy of the novella, balancing on a Plexiglas stand. He drew to a halt so we could view the contents. “Voila.”

I admired the gilt edges of the book and its ruby red cover. It was opened to the title page, which read: *A Christmas Carol. In prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas*. On the left-hand page was a drawing by John Leech of a portly man and woman dancing merrily. The joy in the man’s eyes brought a tear to mine.

Scroggie forged in and said, “Remove the lid, Quackenbush. Verify to your heart’s delight, though I’ve had it authenticated, as you know.”

“Ah, yes,” Gilbert said. “But sometimes originals are swapped out at the last moment.”

Scroggie mock-frowned. “Are you calling me a fraudster?”

“Heavens no, my friend. You are prudent.”

Scroggie winked with humor, the depth of their friendship clear.

Gilbert positioned the box on a coffee table in front of a settee and rubbed his hands in gleeful anticipation. He withdrew a pair of latex gloves from the pocket of his jacket, slipped them on, and carefully removed the lid of the box. Delicately, he reached in.

At the same time, Pippa bumped into the dining table, which sent the tea tray, teacups, and platter of cookies sprawling.

The clatter of breakage was nerve-wracking, and a feeling of doom slithered up my neck.

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Chapter 3

No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

"Everything is fine," Noeline assured Pippa. "Everything is replaceable. Nothing is an heirloom."

Despite Noeline's words, Pippa was clearly vibrating with nervous energy. Poor thing.

Helga hurried out of the room and returned with a broom and dustpan. While the two of them cleaned the mess, Helga calmed her niece sotto voce. When the task was completed, Helga promised Noeline that she would set up tea and coffee for the evening, as planned, and then she and Pippa hastened to the kitchen.

"It's an omen," Scroggie muttered.

Noeline crossed to him. "There are no such things as omens, Erwin, and you know it."

Honestly, given the way Noeline was taunting him by not using his surname to address him, I wondered if they'd been more than friends at one time. Perhaps they'd had a fling after his intended fled town, but before Noeline married Vanna's father?

“O Holy Night” started in on the player piano.

“When are the inn’s guests arriving, Mom?” Tegan asked.

“Any time,” she replied.

“Lillian is coming at six with costumes,” I said.

Lillian Bellingham owned a fabulous dress shop named Puttin’ on the Glitz. In addition, she helped out with costumes at Bramblewood Community Theater. She had a great eye for color and style.

“She’ll wheel in period costumes on racks,” I continued. “Guests can choose from the array, should they be inclined. She’s not charging a penny for any of them. The theater staged a musical production of Dickens’s *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* last year. Tegan and I saw it.” I motioned to my friend. “The costumes were fabulous.”

“The mystery was, well, a mystery,” Tegan chimed. “Interesting tidbit about the play. Dickens died from a stroke before he could finish the story, leaving the mystery unsolved. Did you know the piece was the first Broadway musical with multiple endings?”

“I had no idea,” Noeline said.

“FYI, Mom, I brought copies of *A Christmas Carol* for each of the guests.”

“Excellent. I’ll hand them out during dinner.”

Tegan pointed to the mistletoe and ogled me. “Care for a smooch?”

I whacked her on the arm. “Get out of here. My heart belongs to one man.”

“Zach, Zach, Zach.” She fake swooned and, in childish fashion, spun away from me and wrapped her arms around her torso, moving her hands up and down to imitate two people kissing and hugging.

“Cut it out.”

Zach Armstrong was a detective for the Bramblewood Police Department. We hadn’t known each other long, and we were taking our relationship slowly, but in recent months, we’d shared more than I thought possible. For example, I knew he had been married briefly, but his wife died of complications from COPD. And I knew he had an ex-brother-in-law, but I hadn’t known how he fit into the picture, thinking perhaps he was the brother of his deceased wife, until Zach revealed he had a sister who was a fashion designer in New York. Big surprise. For my part, I’d divulged the prickly details of my upbringing by aloof, albeit kind, parents, resulting in

my retreat into the world of books. I didn't know if the relationship I had with Zach would blossom into more than a treasured friendship. We'd kissed, but we hadn't gone further yet. No matter what, I admired him. He was a good detective and a decent man. After the fiasco of my brief engagement, holding him in high regard mattered to me.

"Scroggie, congratulations," Gilbert declared, drawing our attention back to him. "This is an original."

"Of course it is, man," Scroggie groused. "I wouldn't steer you wrong. My great-great-grandfather met Mr. Dickens when he visited America and was so impressed that he bought this the day it was released. It has been handed down for generations."

"Have you read it?" Gilbert arched an eyebrow.

"In another form. I dare not touch this one. The pages are fragile." Scroggie leaned in but didn't lower his voice. "Some say it was my ancestor who inspired Dickens to come up with the name Scrooge."

Gilbert guffawed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Actually," Tegan said like the librarian she had intended to become until the bookstore path opened to her, "I heard Mr. Dickens named him Scrooge because the word, which is derived from the verb *to scrouge*, sounds like the act of squeezing and aligns perfectly with the character's miserly nature."

"Very well." Scroggie chuckled. "Believe what you will. Now, let's settle the book in its case and establish the security."

"Sir … Mr. Scroggie," Tegan said.

"Just Scroggie," he said brusquely.

"Yes, of course." Tegan's cheeks reddened. "I purchased a glass showbox. It's airtight. I think it's better than the Plexiglas box you have. It will sit atop this pedestal." She motioned to it. "As you can see, the pedestal is tucked well into the room, and the guard will be seated beside it at all times."

Except when taking a bathroom break, I mused. Did Noeline have a backup plan in that instance?

"Fine." Scroggie examined the platform. "Looks solid. Sturdy. I approve."

"Here comes our guard now," Tegan said. "Right on time." She peered out the front window. "He'll take the first shift from six to six."

A burly man with a lush head of hair tramped into the foyer. Muscular yet trim, he was dressed snugly in a Safety First uniform.

“I’ll guide him in.” Tegan rushed to greet him. “This way, Mr. Smith,” she said and made the introductions. “Erwin Scroggie, Gilbert Quackenbush, this is Mr. Smith.”

Smith. Yeah, right. I bet all the guards were named Smith or Doe for anonymity’s sake.

“Mr. Smith,” Tegan continued, “this is the book you’ll be protecting.”

Smith, professional yet warm, surveyed the setup. “It’s so skinny, isn’t it?”

“It’s a novella,” Scroggie said proudly. “By Charles Dickens.”

“I’ve heard of him.”

Scroggie exchanged a look with Gilbert, who bit back a smile, and returned his gaze to Smith. “Guard this with your life.”

“How valuable is it?” Smith asked.

“It’s not the number that matters to me, man.” Scroggie placed a hand over his heart. “It’s the sentimental value.”

I said, “It’s been in his family for generations.”

Noeline tapped my arm. “Helga told me she’d like to go over the menu for Saturday’s event with you and Vanna, who just arrived. Tegan, darling, let the men get acquainted. I could use you at the front desk. Guests will soon be arriving.”

“Coming.”

“And, Scroggie,” Noeline said before leaving the room, “please consider coming to brunch in the morning. Don’t fret over the book. It will be safe within these walls.”

He grumbled something indistinct.

Noeline giggled. “Because I am all-knowing,” she quipped in response.

I ambled down the hall past the living room, dining room, and Noeline’s office, and entered the kitchen. When Noeline purchased the inn, she’d poured a lot of money into it. She hadn’t done the rehab herself. She’d hired some very talented contractors to do the work. The kitchen was a prime example. As she had done at the Blue Lantern, she’d installed state-of-the-art appliances so the staff could prepare delicious meals. The space effortlessly blended modern luxury with rustic charm. The cabinets were a soft yellow. The finish was matte and smooth with subtle wood grain

texture peeking through. Accents of antique brass hardware caught the light. A marble island with padded stools stood in the center of the kitchen. To the right were open shelves displaying artisanal pottery and glass jars filled with ingredients a cook would use regularly.

The aroma of chicken soup tickled my tastebuds. “Smells divine,” I crooned.

Helga was tending a pot at the eight-burner stove, a half apron tied around her waist. Pippa was washing dishes at the oversized sink.

Vanna entered with a handful of baby tomatoes. Each of Noeline’s inns boasted a greenhouse as well as a garden room where the cook could stow fresh vegetables. I peeked out a window and saw that there were no flowers in bloom in the backyard, and snow dusted the evergreens. The lanterns, which were all on timers with LED lights, had not yet lit up, but the white gazebo glittered with twinkling lights. In spite of the weather, it looked like a lovely spot to read a book.

“I have written up a menu for Saturday,” Vanna said imperiously.

“Does it include all the fixings mentioned in *A Christmas Carol*?” I asked.

“I haven’t read the book.”

“Vanna, honestly? You have to get with the program.” I ticked items off on my fingertips. “We’ll need turkey, geese, game, poultry, brawn, great joints of meat, sucking pigs.”

“Sucking pigs? No way.”

I didn’t let her deter me. I’d memorized the book passage, having salivated through the entire reading. “Long wreaths of sausages, mince pies, plum puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked apples, juicy oranges, luscious pears, twelfth-cakes, and—”

“Stop. Go back. What is brawn?”

“Boar’s head.”

“Ugh, absolutely not.” She fisted her hands on her hips.

Helga guffawed. Pippa tittered.

I made a face at Vanna. “Aw, you’re no fun.”

“I am so. Why, yesterday my boy—” She halted abruptly.

“Your boy?” I teased. “Do go on. Is *boy* short for boyfriend?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Oho. Vanna has a boyfriend.” I made eye contact with Helga and Pippa. “Should I tell Tegan?”

“Do not dare,” Vanna ordered. “What I meant to say was this man I know—”

“Who is not a boy,” I quipped.

“This man I know,” she repeated stubbornly, “said I’m the most fun person he’s ever known.”

“Are you sure he didn’t say funny, as in odd?”

She stuck her tongue out at me.

Once upon a time, the gesture would have quailed me, but Vanna had lost her thorniness. Sticking out her tongue was nothing more than a gesture of fondness.

“Very mature,” I responded. “Anyway, the menu should include lots of meats, gravy, mashed potatoes, roast goose for sure, and herb stuffing.”

“I’m a pro with roast goose,” Vanna stated.

“I have a fabulous stuffing recipe,” I replied.

Helga said, “I’ll make pudding with brandy sauce. I’ll even flambé it.”

“Ooh, love it.” I applauded.

Helga sparkled with pride. “I’ll be teaching Pippa to cook for crowds.”

“Not for this party,” Vanna warned.

Helga eyed her. “Along the way. One dish at a time.” She petted Vanna’s cheek. “You are a worrywart.”

After settling on the menu—I would have a lot of taste testing to do in the coming days, but I knew with Helga at the helm, we would sail smoothly—I returned to the reception area to help Tegan and her mother greet guests. “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen” was once again resounding from the player piano.

“What can I do?” I asked Tegan.

A few single guests stood in line, waiting for Noeline. Two couples queued behind them.

“Why don’t you check in the couples?” Tegan suggested. “Mom will tend to the singles. I’ll fetch the keys.”

“Got it.” I knew the routine. I had assisted with check-in on a few occasions.

“Yes,” Noeline said to a redheaded, sixty-something woman whose hair was nearly the same color as mine but not as curly. The woman was

wearing a classic button-down blouse, black pencil skirt, and black pumps. A cashmere scarf warmed her long neck. “Be assured the Amber Lantern is where sustainability meets comfort. We always keep the planet in mind. We use solar energy, have rainwater collection systems, and offer organic, locally sourced food options. Reducing our carbon footprint is vital. You’ll be in Camelia room.”

“Lovely,” the woman said, dragging out the word with what sounded like a rehearsed southern drawl. She transferred a winter coat from her right arm to her left. “I adore camelias.”

“Scroggie went home for the night.” Tegan handed me a pair of keys. “Gilbert retired to his room.”

“Thanks for the update. Freddy, Felicity, step this way.” I beckoned them and said to the couple behind them, “I’ll be right with you.”

“Has my uncle come by yet?” Freddy asked. Both he and his wife were dressed in winter coats and boots. Snow dusted their hair.

“Yes, his copy of *A Christmas Carol* will be on display later in the parlor. We’ve draped the exhibit box with a cloth in the meantime.” I motioned to the room. “We’ll have an official unveiling after supper.”

“Swell. This place is fabulous, right, hon?” Freddy gave Felicity a squeeze, mindful of her broken arm. “I can’t believe we won a staycation. Perfect timing.”

The square-jawed man in the other couple said, “How’d you manage that, Bobb? Did you game the system? Did you stack the odds against the other employees? Did your uncle play favorites?”

I blanched. How dare this guy accost Freddy, who wouldn’t hurt a fly. I’d seen the man once or twice at Legal Eagles picking up documents. He was a process server.

“My uncle doesn’t have favorites,” Freddy said over his shoulder. “And even if he did, I’m not one of them.” He turned back to me. “Please continue, Allie. Sorry for the interruption.”

“You’ll be in Azalea,” I went on. “It’s a king room. That’s on the second floor. You can use the stairs or the elevator behind the staircase.” Before finalizing the sale, the previous owner had installed a small elevator, believing it would improve the inn’s functionality.

“I heard Noeline telling the other guest that the inn is eco-friendly,” Freddy said.

“Yes. In addition, the inn provides guests with reusable water bottles and biodegradable toiletries.” I handed them two keys in a pretty floral envelope. “Once you’re settled in, come downstairs, and the woman providing costumes for the literary dining party will have arrived. There will be wine and appetizers and—”

“Gossip?” Felicity asked.

Freddy nudged her with a shoulder. She tittered.

“Tomorrow,” I said, “after you get the lay of the land, take a walk outside. There are nature trails, perfect for birdwatching. Cardinals, juncos, and chickadees abound. There’s a map on the desk in your room.”

“I love birds,” Felicity squealed. “Someday we’ll have to bring Tinsley here. She’d love it.”

“You can always invite her to walk the trails,” I assured them. “They’re not private property.”

“Excellent,” Freddy said. “By the way, the anniversary cake was inspired. I’ve never tasted better frosting. Lots of people in the office are planning to reach out to you.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

He handed the envelope of keys to his wife and lifted their two overnight-sized cases.

“Oh, sweetie, look, mistletoe,” Felicity squealed. “Come kiss me.” She hurried to the arch, brushed her blond hair off her shoulders, and paused, chin tilted upward, lips pursed.

Freddy eagerly obliged, and then the two of them climbed the stairs.

Noeline had moved on to the next guest—Dalton, I heard her say—a dapper British man in his fifties with salt-and-pepper hair, a waxed mustache, and an air of authority. I could imagine him in a thriller novel, fooling everyone into believing him to be a professor when in truth he was in charge of an international hunt for a thief.

“Savile Row,” Dalton said in response to a question Noeline asked. She must have inquired about his suit. It looked to have been crafted by a highly gifted tailor.

“Stunning.” Noeline wasn’t a clothes horse, but she was savvy when it came to understanding the nature of her guests and probably figured Dalton expected a compliment. “Following the soiree, feel free to find dinner in

town. However, we will be serving a casual dinner buffet, if you're too tired from travel."

"Ideal. A buffet is exactly the ticket." He collected his leather valise and took the stairs to his room two at a time.

"He's not only handsome, he's athletic to boot," Tegan whispered as she provided another set of keys.

"Isn't he too old for you?" I teased. Having recently finalized her divorce, she wasn't in the market for a new boyfriend, as far as I knew.

"Not me. For Mom."

I shook my head. "Not her type." I motioned to the other couple. "Next."

"Yale Kildare," the man said, stepping forward.

"Allie. Nice to meet you."

Officiously, he brushed a hank of dark hair off his face and assessed me with placid eyes as if daring me to question whether he had been guilty of anything in his life. He motioned to the woman accompanying him. "This is my girlfriend, Kiki Cranston."

"Pleasure." Kiki had thin red hair, which was similar in coloring to mine and the southern lady's, but she was entirely too lean to be healthy. Three sapphire stud earrings adorned one ear. A single one graced the other. The odd combo gave her an off-balance kind of look. "Did I hear the prized novella is here?" She peeked in the direction of the parlor.

"It is," I said. "We'll invite you all to look at it later on."

"I'm excited to see it," Kiki gushed. "I acted in our high school production of *A Christmas Carol*. I was the Ghost of Christmas Present. It was exhilarating. I've wanted to view a copy of a first edition ever since. My mother gifted us this vacay so we could."

I smiled and said, "What a nice mom."

"She's super wealthy," Yale inserted. Kiki elbowed him.

I handed them their keys and gave them the same spiel I'd given Freddy and Felicity. They thanked me and departed.

"Phew," Tegan said when they disappeared up the stairs. "Half the inn is officially booked for the next few days. More will arrive the day before the party."

She turned to her mother. "Ahem. Here's a thought for future bookings. You need to give guests varied check-in times."

“Geez, the weather is nasty.” A man dashed into the foyer and stomped his shoes to get rid of snow. “It’s not fit for polar bears.”

Not only was he dark in mood, he had hooded small slits for eyes, and his slicked-back hair made his receding hairline that much more prominent. “Oswald Crockett. People call me Ozzie.” He flashed the *OK* sign and offered a slick wink as he approached.

Ugh. He reeked as if he’d been smoking in a closed room for days.

“Is Freddy Bobb here yet?” he asked me. “He’s my cousin.”

“Yes,” I replied. “He and Felicity have arrived.”

“Between you and me, he’s a total suck-up. He’s only showing interest in the novella because he’s vying for Uncle Scroggie’s affection.”

“Um, no,” I said. “He’s here because he and his wife won the Legal Eagles’ staycation prize.”

“Yeah, believe what you want to, but I figure he rigged it, more likely. He’ll do anything for a promotion.”

I didn’t get that impression. Freddy seemed quite satisfied with his position at the firm, though I did detect that Freddy and Felicity, due to Tinsley’s health issues, could use more money, should a promotion warrant a raise.

Ozzie pulled a card from his pocket and laid it on the counter. He nudged it toward me with his index finger. “I’m in insurance if you need an agent. Has this place got a good policy?”

Noeline cut around me, her jaw tense with dislike. “We have excellent coverage, thank you, Mr. Crockett. Your room is on the second floor.”

He eyed the stairs behind the reception desk. “I’ve got bad knees.”

She informed him about the elevator. “There is no smoking inside the inn.”

“Gotcha.”

“And if you intend to dress in an ensemble befitting the Victorian era for Saturday’s event, feel free to come down once you’re settled in. A costumer will be here to offer suggestions.”

“Costumes are for bozos,” he said. “Where’s the book?”

I said, “The novella is in the parlor, but we’re not allowing anyone to view it until after dinner. A guard is keeping watch.”

“Good idea about the guard. The thing is worth a pretty penny.”

He was referring to the prized novella as a *thing*? How crass.

I smiled. “I believe you’re mistaken. Your uncle said it didn’t have much worth. It’s purely sentimental.”

“Yeah, how like Unc. He shortchanges lots of stuff. It’s got value all right. I checked.” He grabbed the key Noeline offered. “Like I said, I hope you have enough insurance, in case, you know, anything untoward happens. You might want a special rider.”

“Dinner will be served after the cocktail hour,” Noeline stated.

“Only wine, right?” Ozzie asked.

“Yes.”

“For the record, wine isn’t a cocktail. See ya.” He lugged his weathered suitcase down the hall.

“What a boor,” Tegan said under her breath. “If this was the beginning of a murder mystery, he would wind up the victim.”

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Chapter 4

I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

At six p.m. on the dot, while I was chatting in the parlor with Freddy and Felicity—they were over the moon with their accommodations—Lillian Bellingham sashayed into the inn. She paused, brushed her curls over her shoulders, and waved to me. She looked amazing in a green velvet jumper cinched at the waist, and I made a note to find one for myself. I wouldn't rock it like she was doing, but I'd enjoy wearing it.

I hustled to her. "Welcome."

"Allie, thank heavens you're here." Lillian was a former actress who would have given Marilyn Monroe a run for her money in the breathless-way-of-speaking department. "We need a little help."

"We?"

"My grandmother Magda is with me. Evelyn came through with a wealth of costume choices. Wait until you see them." She applauded silently. Evelyn Evers was the director of the community theater. "She

wanted to assist tonight, but she was holding final rehearsals for something she said was a secret."

In an effort to boost excitement for this month's literary dining party, the theater had decided to stage mini readings of *A Christmas Carol* all around town as well as at the community theater. Evelyn was a big believer in educating Bramblewoodians.

"Darling." Magda Bellingham, youthful for her seventy-something years, stepped inside bundled in a heavy coat and midcalf snow boots. She'd chicly looped a burgundy scarf around her neck. "I can't wait for the event," she said. "I've read the novella twice before." Typically, Magda was a romance reader—heat meter one—but thanks to the blind-date-with-a-book experience we'd held at Feast for the Eyes recently, she was becoming enthralled with mysteries, fiction, and even historical novels.

"We have two racks in the truck," Lillian said. "Are there any strong men who could help us push them through the snow and up the front steps?"

"I'll grab two," I assured her, and retreated to the living room.

Freddy was there as well as the British gentleman named Dalton, which, lo and behold, was his first name. Frasier was his surname. Both said they'd lend a hand.

Three minutes later, Lillian and the men wheeled in the racks. Immediately, the other guests flooded the foyer to have a look. Lillian had brought top hats, bonnets, velvet gowns, hand muffs, tailcoats, and more. In less than an hour, the guests who had elected to wear costumes to Saturday's party were fitted. Lillian informed them she would hold all the costumes at her shop until Saturday morning, at which time she would deliver them to the inn.

When the ruckus died down and Lillian and her grandmother departed, Noeline announced that the dinner buffet was ready. All of the guests had elected to eat in.

The dining room was a nice size with high ceilings, ornate moldings, and Tuscany gold velvet curtains. The walls were decorated with light wood paneling. To the left of the window stood a long oak table draped with a lace tablecloth. Candles in brass holders created a warm ambiance. At the near end of the table stood a stack of Lenox holly-and-berry porcelain plates. At the far end, crystal goblets gleamed. A bar trolley held a choice of

wines and sparkling water. On the right side of the room stood four tables, each prettified with lace tablecloths and candles.

The aromas were amazing. Helga, with Pippa and Vanna's help, had outdone herself. Sliced roast turkey filled a silver platter. A clove-studded ham sat on another. Elegant serving bowls were piled high with mashed potatoes, roasted Brussels sprouts, and cranberry sauce.

"Wow." Felicity beamed with delight. She and I had stopped to chat beneath the archway. "I'm putting on five pounds inhaling."

I leaned in and whispered, "Wait until you see the desserts. We'll enjoy those in the parlor later."

Yale and his girlfriend, Kiki, were at the head of the line, ready to plate their meals. They were followed by Dalton Frasier, Ozzie Crockett, Gilbert Quackenbush, and the elegant southern woman whose name, Felicity informed me, was Xenia Blair. She was the owner of Book Haven, a rare-book shop in Asheville.

I heard Gilbert say to Xenia, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

She smiled and said, "The pleasure is all mine."

"Xenia is an interesting name," he said. "Is it Greek?"

"My mother was from Mykonos. I got my red hair from the Scottish side of my family."

Felicity continued sotto voce to me, "I visited Miss Blair's shop. It's in one of those quieter, charming parts of Asheville, and it's like walking into a treasure trove. It's not the largest bookstore, by any means, but large enough to pay a full-time clerk. She's quite lovely, if I do say."

"The clerk?"

"Uh-huh. Very exotic. She must be an ace with a feather duster. The shop is spotless. And every corner is packed with first editions, out-of-print novels, antique maps, and even a few rare manuscripts that probably belong in a museum rather than on a shelf." Felicity giggled. "I'm a nut for old books. I should have become a bookseller instead of a paralegal."

Freddy bumped his wife fondly. "My bride, the bibliophile."

"I think we all are," I said. "At least all the attendees for the literary dining party ought to be."

Other than Ozzie Crockett, I mused. He seemed like a troglodyte.

A soft instrumental version of "Greensleeves" began playing through the speaker discreetly built into the dining room's wall.

Noeline entered the room and announced her daughter, Tegan, would assist her in serving the wine. “Who has read *A Christmas Carol*?” she asked.

“I have,” Xenia said. “Charming. Much better than any of the movies, but then a book always is. Dickens’s language is so colorful.”

“Do any of you have a favorite ghost?” Noeline asked.

“The Ghost of Christmas Present,” Gilbert said. “He’s so lively.”

Xenia said, “And the feast surrounding him is remarkable.”

“I was quite animated when I played that part,” Kiki said. “For fun, the costumer made me look like a gift, with bows in my hair.” She flicked her fingers next to her head.

Everyone paused to imagine that sight.

“I like the Ghost of Christmas Past,” Yale said. “I enjoyed the way he highlighted Scrooge’s life experiences and showed how those shaped his character. Wouldn’t you agree, Freddy?”

Was I wrong? Was there a bite in his tone?

“I believe we learn from our mistakes,” Freddy said judiciously.

Yale sniffed. “Yeah. We learn.”

Kiki nudged him to continue filling his plate so they wouldn’t hold up the line.

“Is the book my uncle brought the real deal, Quackenbush?” Ozzie asked with a feral zeal in his eyes.

Gilbert said, “Indeed. The novella is a remarkable specimen. The cover and the pages’ gilt edges are pristine. All in all, it’s worth a pretty penny.”

“How much?” Ozzie demanded.

“Well, Miss Blair and I must confer before placing a value on it.” Gilbert smiled shyly at Xenia.

“Is Scroggie looking to sell it?” Yale asked.

Ozzie snorted. “Bro, my uncle would never. He hordes his treasures.”

“Will you inherit them?” Kiki dished a slice of turkey and a few Brussels sprouts onto her plate. Nothing more. No potatoes. No cranberry sauce.

“Inherit?” Ozzie guffawed. “Ha. Uncle Scroggie will go to his grave with every last penny. I wouldn’t be surprised if, in the end, he doesn’t cash it all in for gold coins and surround himself with them in his grave.”

Ew. The image gave me the willies. Why on earth was Ozzie here if he despised his uncle so much?

Kiki regarded Freddy. “Could you win him over?”

“Freddy? Get real,” Yale scoffed. “Not a flipping chance. His uncle loathes him.”

“He does not,” Felicity said. “He trusts him and admires him beyond measure.”

“I heard he wouldn’t front you a loan, Freddy,” Yale taunted. “And someone heard you call him a skinflint.”

“I did no such thing.” Freddy’s face blazed red.

Tegan shared a worried glance with me as if wondering the same thing I was. What in the heck was Yale’s history with Freddy?

Felicity slipped her hand around her husband’s elbow and guided him to a table, far away from Yale.

As I roamed the room helping refresh beverages while the guests tucked into their meals, I overheard murmurs of “delicious,” “moistest turkey ever,” and “five-star worthy.” Vanna, Pippa, and Helga would be thrilled.

I caught a snippet of a conversation between Xenia and Kiki. They were seated at the same table. Xenia ribbed Kiki about having the same hair color and asked what brand of dye she used. Kiki swore her hair color was natural.

Xenia threw off her buttoned-down prim demeanor and cackled like a hyena. “If that’s true, I have some swampland in Arizona to sell you.”

“But it is,” Kiki maintained. “My mother’s hair is the same color.”

Xenia leaned closer to inspect. Kiki shied away, uncomfortable under the woman’s scrutiny.

Yale rose to his feet, wineglass in hand, and met me by the bar trolley. “Allie, when we checked in, you seemed sort of judgy.”

“Me?”

“When I said Kiki was my girlfriend, you rolled your eyes.”

“You’re mistaken.” I was certain I hadn’t.

“Whatever.” He brandished his glass. “I don’t give a hoot what you or anybody else thinks.”

“I don’t—”

“I mean, I know it’s not cool to live together before we get married,” he went on, sounding like a pro at making excuses, “but we’ve been best

friends for years. High school sweethearts. If it makes you feel any better about us bunking together, I'll be proposing to her next week."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, her mother gifted us the week's stay because Kiki is such a fan of *A Christmas Carol*, and because I told her I'm going to pull the trigger." He winked at me. "Mama Cranston loves me." He offered a cocksure grin, arms outstretched. "What's not to like?"

Doing my best to remain neutral, I said, "How do you and Freddy know each other?"

"We were buddies in college."

"Buddies? Why don't you like him now? Did you have a falling-out?"

"Nah. Don't you ever get tired of people you've known for a long time?"

I couldn't say that I did.

"I can tolerate him more than his cousin can," Yale said. "Ozzie is not a fan. That guy—what a piece of work. I've seen him hustling people all over town. He has more business cards than a Fortune 500 CEO at a networking event." He poured himself more wine.

"And you and Freddy?" I asked, leading him back to my initial question since I got the feeling he'd dodged it on purpose.

"Freddy and me …" He paused. "Long story short, he got a full scholarship to law school."

Thankfully, he had or he might not have been able to go.

"I wanted to become a lawyer," Yale said, "but it wasn't in the stars. The moment I graduated, I had to work a real job to make a buck."

"Freddy had to work, too."

"Not for every nickel and dime."

"Do you resent him for that?"

"I'm jealous for sure and a bit ticked off. I mean, he could've helped me with my applications for scholarships. He was a pro at begging for money. He had all the right words. The right tone. I sounded needy." He took a swig of wine and squared his shoulders. "But, hey, I'm doing what I am now because he suggested it."

"So you respected his opinion?"

"Something like that. On the other hand, being a lowly process server has its limits. It's not a cush job by any means. I'm a rung above a delivery

boy. In retrospect, I should've gone into Internet cybersecurity or something like that. I'm good with coding, and the pay is miles better." Then he added morosely, "If wishes were horses," and retreated to his table to resume his meal.

I plated a dinner for myself and sat with Tegan and her mother. The Brussels sprouts glazed with maple syrup were divine, and I made a mental note to add the dish to future party menus.

"Everyone"—Tegan rose to her feet and clinked her glass with a spoon—"when you're done with your dinner, please convene in the parlor. Allie will remove the drape hiding the novella so you can take a peek. Plus, as a welcome gift, I have a special leather-bound copy of *A Christmas Carol* for each of you, complete with gorgeous graphics by John A. Rice."

Rice was an award-winning artist, writer, and actor who specialized in oil pastels. I'd picked up my copy yesterday and had spent an hour last night pouring over his hauntingly beautiful drawings.

Tegan bussed her plate and mine to a table, and I headed to the parlor.

Helga and Pippa were setting up coffee and desserts when I arrived. The heavenly scent of sugar-dusted shortbreads and gingerbread cookies tickled my tastebuds. Could I eat more after such a delicious meal? Yes. But I had to take care of business first.

I crossed to the pedestal, greeted the guard, and removed the velvet cover from the showbox. I gasped when I saw the beautiful display. The interior base of the box was illuminated and added elegant ambient lighting, making the keepsake book literally glow. "Well done, Tegan," I murmured.

A few minutes later, all of the guests as well as Tegan and Noeline entered the parlor. Yale and Kiki were the first guests wishing to take a peek. I noticed tears in Kiki's eyes and stepped away to give her room to appreciate the novella.

"Hello, everyone." Vanna, who had spruced herself up after cooking dinner, swept into the room carrying a platter of petit fours. "I have desserts."

I noticed the guard perk up and take notice of her. And why not? She was a superb specimen of genteel femininity. Her lipstick was freshly applied and tendrils of her hair, freed from her chignon, graced her cheeks. My guess? She had a date later with her secret boyfriend.

“Don’t miss these wondrous gems of deliciousness,” Vanna said. “If you didn’t know, the word *four* in *petit four* does not mean the number four. In French, *four* means oven. *Petit four* means small oven.”

Felicity slipped up beside me. “Where’d she learn that?”

“She likes foodie history,” I said. “So do I.”

“Here are your books, people.” Tegan edged past Felicity and me, her arms full of green leather-bound tomes. She placed them on the right side of the dessert table. “They’re all the same. No need to rush.”

Before leaving the room with Pippa, Helga said, “We will set up coffee and tea again later this evening, if any of you should wish a cup during the night.”

“Thank you,” Noeline said. Many guests proved to be night owls, and she aimed to accommodate them. To the guard, she said, “I’ll make sure you get a cuppa later, Mr. Smith.”

“Much obliged.” He acknowledged her with a bob of his head.

While Gilbert, Felicity, and Freddy filled dessert plates with goodies and discussed their favorite holiday traditions, Xenia moseyed to the guard and started chatting him up. He spoke to her amiably, but his responses were brief. I noticed Dalton Frasier moving away from the novella to the player piano. He ran his fingers along the edges of the keys, and again my imagination about him being an international spy cranked into gear. Did he hope to find a secret message wedged between the ivories? Perhaps an unbreakable code?

I sidled up to him. “Do you play?”

“No. I don’t have the knack.” He chuckled warmly. “And I’ve got a tin ear. I can’t carry a tune.”

“What do you do, Mr. Frasier?”

“I’m a scholar, if you will, a historian, and a particular fan of Dickens’s work. His novels provide invaluable insights into the socioeconomic conditions of the Victorian era, such as poverty and poor sanitation.”

One of my college classes on Dickens had focused on those aspects. “Everyday life and class structure were his specialties, of course.”

“Yes, the man lived what he wrote. *Bleak House* is a prime example of revealing how the legal system functioned.”

I scrunched my nose. *Bleak House* was my least favorite of his novels. “Do you work for yourself or a company?”

“I’m an independent contractor in London. In addition, I serve as a trustee of the British Museum and have been appointed a Knight Bachelor for my series on history.”

“Impressive.” I didn’t have a clue what a Knight Bachelor was. “And yet you’re gracing our modest town of Bramblewood. Why? Purely for the reveal of Mr. Scroggie’s novella?”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t have missed it. It’s a first edition. That’s so rare, it—” Suddenly Dalton’s eyes clouded, making me question whether he was lying about his purpose for being here.

Felicity approached the showbox. “Freddy, Allie.” She motioned for us to join her. “Come see. Isn’t it glorious?”

I excused myself from Dalton Frasier.

Freddy arrived ahead of me. “I’ve seen it before,” he said flatly. “At my uncle’s house.”

Felicity swatted his arm. “Don’t act so blasé. It’s new to me.” She pressed a hand to her chest. “I can’t imagine being a writer like Dickens. The passion he instilled in his work. The perceptions he gave us of human frailty. I want to go to the Dickens Museum in Kings Cross.”

Freddy winked at me. “And Bangkok, New Zealand, and Antarctica.”

“Sue me,” Felicity teased. “I have the heart of an adventurer.”

“I’ve been to the museum,” Noeline said, joining our group. “Did you know it was formerly a house Dickens lived in for two years, a building threatened for demolition in the early nineteen hundreds, but the Dickens Fellowship saved it?”

“You seem to know a lot about it,” Freddy said.

“Like Allie, I studied Dickens when I was younger.”

I smiled. “But Noeline is much more educated on all things Dickens than I am. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she would love to travel through time to that era.”

“He was a genius.” Noeline sounded wistful. “Not only did he edit a weekly journal, but he also wrote fifteen novels, five novellas, and numerous short stories. Plus he lectured and performed readings of his work and campaigned vigorously for children’s rights and education.”

“Some say he was boorish,” Freddy stated. “He wasn’t good to his wife, in particular.”

“Wasn’t he in love with someone before her?” Felicity asked.

“Yes,” Noeline said. “Maria Beadnell, who supposedly was the model for Dora in *David Copperfield*. Her parents didn’t approve of the match.”

I thought of Erwin Scroggie and how he hadn’t been able to marry the love of his life. Had that soured him forever?

“Is the box locked?” Xenia crowded in with us and bent to study the display case like a rare-book dealer would.

“No,” I said.

“If it was, it wouldn’t matter,” she continued. “A thief would take the entire box should they want to steal it.”

“Steal it?” Felicity exclaimed. “Who would dare?”

“Specialty books are in demand.” Xenia spread her hands. “It’s not welded to the pedestal from what I can see. The edges of the box aren’t even with the pedestal’s square top.”

I raised a hand. “Everyone, relax. The guard will make sure it remains safe.”

“Will he?” Xenia walked off with Noeline while recounting the type of security she had at Book Haven. “A bibliophile like you must visit my shop, Noeline.”

Freddy and Felicity strolled to the furniture grouping where they’d set their dessert plates, and they nestled on the settee to enjoy their treats.

Dalton stepped up to the novella and tilted his head left, then right. He lowered one shoulder to get a more sideways view.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” I asked.

He jerked to a stand. “Nope. Just curious. It’s so thin.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Yale and Kiki mosey to the player piano. Yale scanned it as Dalton had, though I didn’t get the feeling he was looking for a secret message. He tapped a key, and the note resounded. He shrank back as if astonished to find out the instrument was also an acoustic piano.

Giggling and calling him a doofus, Kiki left him to chat up Mr. Smith. She toyed with a tendril of hair as she spoke. A guard at Buckingham Palace couldn’t have acted more stoic to her charms.

Exhausted after putting in a full day and then some, I sidled behind the grouping where Freddy and Felicity were sitting, intent on exiting beneath the archway, fetching my overnight case from my van, and making my way

to my room. I slowed, however, when I heard Felicity say sotto voce, “Your uncle will not bail us out. We need to find a lender.”

I wasn’t the only person picking up on their conversation. Ozzie, who had positioned himself near the paneled wall, was craning an ear. He pretended to be studying his cell phone, but his malicious gaze was clearly fixed on the anxious couple.

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Chapter 5

But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round–apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin if anything belonging to it can be apart from that–as a good time; a kind, forgiving charitable, pleasant time …

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Knowing I shouldn't pry into their business or worry about Ozzie doing so, I fetched my overnight case from the van. The snow was continuing to fall, and a fairly stiff wind made my trek a challenge. Once inside, I headed upstairs. Tegan was already in the room and nuzzling Darcy.

"There's your mama," she cooed, and plunked him on the floor.

He hurried to me and brushed his head against my leg.

"What's up, sir? Did you think I'd forgotten you? Never." I lifted him and rubbed his nose with mine. We'd stayed in the Blue Lantern inn before but not the Amber Lantern. After a moment, his pulse returned to normal. "This was an interesting evening, don't you think?" I said as I placed the cat on the settee and began to unpack and prepare for bed. "Did you see Ozzie Crockett staring daggers at his cousin?"

"More than once. Clearly, they are not pals." Tegan slipped out of her clothes and donned bunny-themed flannel pajamas and a pair of bunny-

eared slippers. “I thought that Dalton guy was awfully standoffish.”

“Yeah, he acted like he was too deep for small talk, but I’ve seen kiddie pools with more depth.”

Tegan snorted. “You and your one-liners.”

“Knee-jerk reaction,” I said. “That was mean of me. In reality, he’s quite polished and polite.” I told her what he’d shared with me about his career. “When I asked if he was visiting our burb purely to catch a viewing of the novella, he said he was, because a first edition was so rare. But then he shut down like a robot on reboot.”

“Like you said, small talk isn’t his thing.”

“No, it was different. As if he was hiding something.”

“You’re seeing mysteries where there are none.” She slipped into the bathroom and exited with an electric toothbrush. “The next thing you know, we’ll be telling ghost stories and hearing chains clanking in the night.”

On cue, the stiff wind outside rattled our window.

Tegan *eeked*. I giggled.

“Do you remember—” She plopped onto her bed, pressed the button to start the toothbrush, and inserted the brush into her mouth. Immediately, she paused the action, pulled out the brush, and held it like a wand. “Do you remember all of our girlhood slumber parties?”

“Not all, but quite a few.”

“How about when Sally what’s-her-name played pranks on all of us, filling our sleeping bags with globs of slime?”

I wrinkled my nose. “Sally. What a pill. But super smart. The last I saw on the high school reunion site, she ended up working in cybersecurity.”

“Makes sense. Someone that clever could figure out how to hack into systems.”

I thought of Yale, who said he should have gone into the technical field. Why hadn’t he? Wasn’t that a career he could’ve pursued while continuing to be a process server?

“Did you see any pictures of her?” Tegan asked. “Does she still look like Eijiro Kirishima with super spiky red hair?”

Leave it to my pal to reference one of the main anime characters from *My Hero Academia*. Kirishima was male, muscular, and known by his alias, Red Riot.

“Yes, she continues to sport the look,” I said.

“Remember how she used to make fun of your red hair?”

I winced. “One time she’d dubbed me ‘Manic Witch’ because my hair was so unruly.”

“Cruel,” Tegan said on her way to the bathroom to finish up her ablutions. When she reemerged, she snapped her fingers. “Oh, oh, do you remember …”

For a long while we gossiped about others from our past.

When we’d exhausted that topic, Tegan said, “What did you think about Yale and Kiki? Talk about flaming red hair. But it’s so thin.”

“Like she is,” I quipped. “Yale said he’s going to propose to her this coming week.”

“That’s sweet. You know where she works, don’t you?”

I shook my head.

“Zach’s mom’s diner, the Joint.”

Jukebox Joint was its official name and one of my customers. “I haven’t seen her there,” I said.

“She started a couple of weeks ago.”

“I wonder if working in a restaurant is why she doesn’t eat much.”

“It would make me eat more,” Tegan joked.

“Maybe seeing huge portions of food is off-putting for someone with her …” I paused. “I won’t say she’s anorexic, but she eats like a bird.”

“Maybe she was heavy at one time, so she always watches what she eats now.”

“I suppose.” I changed into my nightgown and yawned. “No more chitchat. We need to sleep. I’m up early tomorrow. I have to head to Dream Cuisine to bake, then I’ll make deliveries, and I’ll come back here to see if your mom needs help with anything before I venture to Feast for the Eyes.”

“She said she didn’t.”

“Just in case.”

Tegan smiled. “No rest for the weary. G’night.”

I switched off the hurricane lamp on the nightstand and lay back on my comfy pillow.

Seconds later, something inside the house creaked.

My pulse snagged. “Did you hear that?”

“Probably a guest going downstairs to fetch a cup of tea. The stairs could use a little work.”

“We can hear them squeak from the third floor?”

“I’ve mentioned it to Mom. She said it’s the inn’s ghost. As if.” Tegan chortled. “Relax. Go to sleep.”

“Which was your favorite ghost in *A Christmas Carol*?” I asked, too edgy to sleep.

“We’re back to that, huh? Okay. Like Yale, I prefer Christmas Past.”

“Why?”

“For the same reason. Through Scrooge’s past life we were able to gain a deeper understanding of him. How he had been a good person at one time. How he’d loved someone. It made me hopeful he could be warm again. Now go to sleep.”

I closed my eyes and drifted into slumberland.

What felt like seconds later, my alarm sounded. I silenced it immediately, and without turning on the light, I slipped into the bathroom to dress for work. I yawned. Six hours of sleep was not enough, but I would manage. I had to. Saturdays were super busy for me.

I was whispering good-bye to Darcy when I heard a woman shriek. At the top of her lungs.

Tegan stirred. “What was that?”

“I’m checking it out.”

I grabbed one of the complimentary umbrellas from the coat stand and dashed into the hall. Seeing no one, I raced to the stairs and took them two at a time, pausing at the second floor. Kiki poked her head out of the room two away from the stairs. I shivered at the sight of her. She was dressed in nothing more than a skimpy negligee, her thin hair knotted with a silky tie.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, eyes wide. “I heard a scream.”

“I did too.”

“Not on this floor.” She pointed. “From down below.”

I continued on. At the foot of the stairs, I gazed left and spotted Helga in uniform at the entry to the parlor. I rushed to check on her and realized she was staring at a body that was lying facedown on the floor, head toward us, feet toward the window. “Oh, no. What happened?”

“I … I …” She couldn’t catch her breath.

I steadied her with two hands.

“Before preparing for breakfast,” she said, “I came in to collect the tea and coffee items and found Mr. Quackenbush like this. He’s … he’s dead.”

My throat went dry as I stared at Gilbert, who was clad in a corduroy robe, pajamas, and socks. His head was twisted to one side. Blood oozed from the back of his skull. The bust of Dickens I’d given Noeline lay nearby. My insides lurched. Had someone struck him with it?

I knelt to feel his wrist for a pulse. None. His skin was cold, suggesting he’d been dead quite a while.

“Mr. Smith is sound asleep.” Helga motioned to the guard, who was slumped in his chair. “He’s alive. I can see his chest moving.”

I gawked. Her scream hadn’t awakened him? How was that possible? A leather-bound copy of Dickens’s *Great Expectations* sat on the table beside him. Despite the compelling nature of the story of an orphan who comes into a large fortune, I supposed if the guard wasn’t a reader, perusing the tome might have knocked him out. But Helga’s scream—

“What’s going on?” Noeline bustled into the room.

Pippa followed her in and shrieked. She covered her mouth with both hands.

I heard the sound of footsteps descending the stairs.

Noeline eyed Gilbert on the floor. “Is he—”

“Yes,” I rasped. “Murdered.”

Pippa keened.

“Noeline, call nine-one-one,” I said.

“I’ll do it.” Tegan rushed to the archway, still dressed in her bunny pajamas, her feet stuffed into her bunny-eared slippers. She raised the cell phone in her hand.

“Thanks.” I gestured to the guard. “Noeline, could you see to him? He’s asleep. He didn’t waken when Helga screamed.”

Was he faking it? Had he killed Gilbert?

“Heavens.” Gingerly, Noeline crossed to him, avoiding making contact with Gilbert’s corpse.

Helga instructed Pippa to go to the kitchen and wait for her. Pippa didn’t hesitate. She fled the room.

One by one, guests materialized in the foyer.

“Don’t come into the parlor,” I advised. “There’s been a murder.”

Xenia clutched the lapels of her satin robe as if to brace herself.

Dalton Frasier stood near her, fully clothed. It dawned on me that if he was on English time he might have risen early to conduct business across the pond.

Felicity, in a flannel nightgown, was clutching Freddy's arm like a lifeline. Freddy, barefoot and clad in pajama bottoms, his scrawny torso on display, seemed to be in shock.

Kiki had thrown a pink floral kimono over her negligee, and I noted that she had removed the silk tie from her hair, because her thin tresses cascaded over her shoulders.

I studied the scene again and turned back.

Ozzie Crockett and Yale Kildare had joined the throng. Ozzie's slits for eyes were puffy. A beige nasal strip clung to his nose above the flare, suggesting he suffered from apnea. Had he slept in his clothes? The tail of his rumpled oxford shirt hung outside his jeans. Yale, in his camouflage T-shirt and black sweats, gave off the vibe of a bad-boy rapper.

"Oh, Allie, this is so horrible," Helga said, her voice sad with grief. "I can't believe it." She sucked in air and shook her head. "Who did this?"

"Maybe an intruder," Freddy said.

"When?" Helga asked. "I didn't hear Mr. Quackenbush cry out."

Neither had I. Whoever had killed him must have caught him completely unaware.

Tegan said, "The police and EMTs are on their way."

"Good," I replied. "Everyone, if you'll—"

"The novella," Kiki cried and pointed. "It's gone."

The showbox was indeed empty. I rushed to the pedestal. Tegan followed me.

"This is horrible," Tegan said. "Poor Mom."

"Poor Gilbert, you mean," I murmured.

A scenario played out in my mind. Gilbert appeared to have been on his way out of the room when someone bashed him in the skull. The guard? Someone else? Why had he been here? Perhaps he'd come in for a cup of something, but before he reached the beverage setup, he caught the thief in the act and pivoted to wage an alert. The thief grabbed the first thing he could—the bust—and struck Gilbert dead.

I observed Noeline tending to the guard, patting his cheeks as if trying to rouse him.

I joined her.

“He’s out like a light,” she said.

I bent to sniff the empty mug sitting on the end table beside his chair. It smelled like wintergreen tea. I turned and called to Helga, who had remained in the archway. “Helga, is the tea for the guests wintergreen?”

“No, Allie. It is Earl Grey, as always.”

“The guard drank wintergreen tea.”

Noeline said, “Yes. I made him a cup of tea last night before retiring. He asked for something herbal. He also asked for something to—” She motioned to him. “Look. He’s waking up. Mr. Smith, hello? Hi.” Soothingly, she informed him he’d fallen asleep.

“Huh?” He blinked rapidly and rubbed his eyes. “Asleep? Me? No.”

“Yes. Sound asleep,” she said.

“No. This has never happened before.” He rubbed his jaw. “No. Not ever. I’m as solid as a rock. Reliable. Why, I can stay awake for forty-eight hours if I need to.”

“Perhaps reading put you to sleep,” I said.

“Not a chance. I’m an avid reader.” His tempo of speaking was slow, as if he was searching for words. “I don’t collect first editions, mind you. Not on my salary.” He yawned and rubbed his cheeks with his knuckles. “But I treasure them. Some say I’m a bibliophile. That’s why …” He stretched his neck. “That’s why I wanted this gig.” He shook his head morosely. “Falling asleep on the job is bad. Very bad. My reputation—” His unsteady gaze landed on Gilbert. “Whoa. Wait. Is that man … is he dead?”

Noeline nodded glumly. “Plus the novella is missing.”

“Argh.” Smith tried to get to his feet but teetered.

Noeline gently pushed him into the chair. “Stay seated. Help is on the way.”

I refocused on the guests. They were talking among themselves in the foyer. I picked up bits and pieces. “The novella.” “Gone.” “Murder.” “I knew the book was trouble.”

The latter was uttered by Ozzie in his distinctively weaselly voice. He caught me staring and shrugged one shoulder. “What’s your problem?”

I approached the archway and drew short of leaving the parlor. “Why did you come to the inn, Mr. Crockett? Why did you want to see your uncle’s novella?”

“Because.”

What a glib answer.

“Did you steal it? Did you do this?” I shot a hand in the direction of Gilbert Quackenbush, who never saw the end of his life coming.

“How dare you.” Ozzie squinched his nose like a rat sniffing bad cheese. “I am not a thief or a murderer.”

“I’ll bet Freddy stole the novella,” Yale cut in. “To get even with his uncle for being a skinflint.”

“I never called him that!” Freddy shouted. “Take it back.”

I studied Yale. What if he stole the novella so he could give it to his intended as a wedding gift? Or what if Kiki swiped it? Ever since she’d performed in the play, she’d been hoping to see a first edition of the novella. Would owning it send her over the moon?

“Stop it!” Noeline bellowed. “All of you.” In twenty-plus years, I couldn’t remember ever hearing her shout. “All of you need to … need to …” Her voice broke.

I pressed a hand to her back and took over. “Everyone, please go to the dining room and have a seat until the police arrive. They’ll want to question each of you.”

“Us?” Felicity gawked. “Why us? I was asleep in my room.”

“So was I,” Kiki cried.

“Everyone,” I repeated. “Go.”

“Do what Allie said,” Noeline ordered, having once again found her calm. “I am cancelling the formal brunch, of course, but Helga will bring in breakfast and beverages. We’ll need sustenance. Tegan, would you lead the way please?”

Implied to her daughter was the order to make sure they all stayed in the dining room. The killer could be among them.

Grumbling was heard from the group, but they obeyed and followed my pal.

I dialed Vanna to fill her in quickly about the murder and theft. She squawked and declared she was on her way to the inn, but I suggested she refrain, saying we had enough people milling about. We didn’t need more bodies to add to the confusion. When she calmed down, I begged her to help with the day’s orders and deliveries. She agreed.

“Hey.” Noeline looped an arm around my shoulders as I ended the call. “How are you?”

“Me?”

“This is the third time you’ve found a body in less than a year.”

“I didn’t. Helga did.”

“Yes, but you took charge. Do you need to sit?”

“No.” I was surprisingly steady on my feet. What did that say about me? Was I becoming inured to crime?

“What do you think happened?”

The question gave me pause. “I think the novella was the prime target.”

“The novella.”

“Yes. I believe the thief must have spiked Mr. Smith’s tea in order to disable him during the night. When the guard was asleep and the coast was clear, the thief sneaked into the parlor and was stealing the book when Gilbert appeared. Probably to fetch a cup of tea. Gilbert saw the thief and pivoted to alert someone in the inn. Acting fast, the thief grabbed the statue and bashed Gilbert in the skull from behind.”

“A sleeping potion takes a long time to work,” Noeline said.

“True.”

“Meaning an intruder is unlikely. Whoever did this lingered in the vicinity until Mr. Smith drifted to sleep.”

“You’re probably right. The thief is most likely a guest at the inn.”

The color drained from Noeline’s face.

I whispered, “Will your insurance company cover the loss of the book?”

“I hope so, but I’m sure Erwin …” She groaned. “I’m worried sick about having to inform him.”

A different issue troubled me, and I faltered. Would Gilbert’s family instigate a wrongful death lawsuit? What would happen to the inn if that were to happen? It wasn’t Noeline’s fault Gilbert had been murdered here, but she had invited Scroggie to display his novella.

A siren blasted. It was followed by the sound of an emergency vehicle coming to a halt and doors slamming. I bustled to the foyer.

Seconds later two EMTs tramped inside. “Victim?” the burlier of the two asked.

I pointed. “He’s dead.”

He was judicious enough not to say, “I’ll determine that.” With a firm jaw, he and his partner tended to Gilbert.

While they were conferring, Detective Zach Armstrong strode into the inn followed by his partner, Detective Brendan Bates. Neither was in uniform. Detectives for Bramblewood Police Department were allowed to dress in plain clothes. The two men were striking in their own way. Bates was at least six inches taller than Zach and gave off a jazz-club vibe with his tight Afro, neatly trimmed goatee, and standard black-on-black outfit. He didn’t play an instrument. He chose the neutral combination because, as Zach had informed me, he was color-blind and worried he might mismatch his clothes. Zach, on the other hand, was a musician and occasionally moonlighted as a drummer at a jazz club in Asheville. At six feet four, with thick black hair, strong shoulders, and mesmerizing dark eyes, he made women swoon, including me.

“Hi,” Zach said softly to me. “Another one, huh?”

I nodded glumly.

“Buck up,” he said, and immediately stepped away so he could give the appearance of objectivity.

“Detective Armstrong,” the burlier EMT said, “he’s definitely dead. Appears to be blunt force trauma. Been dead awhile. His body is cold to the touch. I’m no coroner, but my guess is he was killed somewhere between midnight and one a.m.”

Without moving from his spot, Zach studied the crime scene. His gaze landed on the guard, who was slumped in his chair. “Who’s he, Allie?”

“A guard from Safety First.” I explained his role of protecting Erwin Scroggie’s novella. “I think someone might have slipped something into his tea.”

“Who?”

“The thief, I suspect.”

“Thief?”

“The novella is missing.”

“That’s the book for this week’s literary dining party?”

“Yes.”

Zach and Bates planned to attend. They were both readers. I’d met Zach at Feast for the Eyes when we were browsing the same aisle.

“Unfortunately, the thief must have been caught by Gilbert … Mr. Quackenbush entering and bashed him.” My throat felt thick with sadness. “As you know, sleeping pills can take a long time to work. Therefore, I think whoever administered a sedative was a guest at the inn.”

Zach pursed his lips, considering. “The thief, if not a guest, could have slipped in, dosed him, and waited outside the inn until he fell asleep.”

“But the temperature is cold, and with the wind and snow—”

“Unlikely.”

But not impossible, I thought. *A warm coat, hat, and boots would protect a killer from frostbite.*

“The guard might need medical attention,” I said.

Zach directed the EMTs to check him out and returned his focus to me.

“The guard doesn’t know anything. He didn’t witness the crime.” I pointed to the bust lying on its side on the floor. “I think that was the murder weapon. I gifted it to Noeline last night. She’s a huge fan of Dickens.”

“Bates, bag the statue,” Zach ordered. “And take photos.”

“On it.” Bates slipped on a pair of latex gloves.

I said, “Zach, I imagine the thief … the killer … wore gloves. There won’t be fingerprints.”

“That’s not the only evidence we will collect.” He smiled gently. “Now, start at the beginning. You found the body.”

“No, Helga the cook did.”

“Why are you here then?”

“I stayed the night because I wanted to help Tegan and Noeline with the setup for the book display and finalize details for Saturday’s soiree. I’d just dressed for work when I heard Helga scream.”

“When was that?”

“A few minutes after four a.m.” It dawned on me I needed to check on Vanna and ask how everything was going. I … we … couldn’t afford to lose business. “I raced out of the room with the umbrella.” I pointed to where I’d placed it. “No guests are booked on the third floor except Tegan and me. I took the stairs. When I reached the second floor, Kiki Cranston—she’s a guest—poked her head out of her room. She heard the scream and thought it emanated from down here. When I reached the bottom step, I caught sight of Helga standing at the entrance to the parlor.”

“Why was she awake?”

“She gets an early start so breakfast will be ready when the guests rouse. It’s served between seven and nine. She’d come to fetch the coffee and tea. She sets it out each evening in case any of the guests are night owls.” I gestured to the urns on the table by the wall.

He motioned for me to continue.

“The victim, Gilbert Quackenbush, is a dealer of antiquated books. Yesterday evening he validated the authenticity of Mr. Scroggie’s novella, though it had been certified previously.” Meaning Scroggie probably had insurance, which made me breathe easier. Perhaps Noeline wouldn’t be liable for the theft.

“Go on.”

“Gilbert stayed the night, and I think he must have come downstairs to get a cup of tea, but he entered when the thief was stealing the novella. He turned to run. Maybe to alert someone. The thief spotted him and slammed him with the first thing he could find—the bust. If one of the guests took the novella, it might be in their room.”

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Chapter 6

It swung so softly in the outset that it scarcely made a sound; but soon it rang out loudly, and so did every bell in the house.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

"Hearing the ruckus," I continued, "the guests flocked to the first floor. Oh, wait." I held up a hand. "First came Noeline and Pippa." I explained who Pippa was. "The young woman was shaken and trembling, so Helga sent her to the kitchen. When I established Gilbert was dead, Tegan arrived. She dialed nine-one-one. Right afterward, guests started descending the stairs and huddling in the foyer. I asked them not to enter the parlor. Noeline tended to the guard, and …" I batted the air. "I'm muddling it up. Sorry."

"Go on."

"I instructed the guests to settle in the dining room and await your arrival. I said you'd want to question them."

"Give me a rundown of them."

As my mind recalled the scene in the foyer, a clear picture of each guest came into view. "Xenia Blair is a rare-book dealer in Asheville. Dalton Frasier is a historian and Dickens aficionado." I described both of them—Xenia in a robe; Dalton fully clothed, probably due to awaking on English

time—and relayed their reasons for coming to the inn. “Felicity and Freddy Bobb came down next. Do you know Freddy? He’s Mr. Scroggie’s nephew and a lawyer at Legal Eagles.”

“Good firm.”

“Yes, very reputable. As a matter of transparency, he handled a number of real estate affairs for my parents, and he’s the person who snagged me the catering account at his law firm.”

“Okay.”

“If it matters, Freddy and his wife were both wearing pajamas. They still are. Kiki Cranston—she’s Yale Kildare’s girlfriend—trailed them, a robe thrown over her negligee, her hair loose.” I paused. “She’d taken time to brush her hair.”

“I’m not following.”

“As I was running downstairs, she poked her head out of the room. Her hair had been tied in a knot.”

“So you’re saying she wasn’t in a hurry after she saw you?”

“I think it was a matter of pride. She’s a server at your mom’s diner.” I proceeded. “Yale appeared next.” I paused. “Or was it Ozzie?” I’d pivoted to view the parlor, and when I’d turned back, they had joined the others.

“Ozzie?”

“Freddy’s cousin Oswald Crockett. An insurance salesman. He is not a pleasant person. The people who tolerate him on a daily basis are heroes.”

Zach smirked. “Ouch.”

“He’s pretty vile. I can see him killing someone. He’s got a mean streak that runs deep. Immediately, he tried to pin this on his cousin.”

“No love lost?”

“None.”

“Are you leaving anyone out?” he asked.

“Ozzie then Yale or Yale then Ozzie?” I murmured.

“It doesn’t matter. Why don’t you go to the dining room and wait with the others? Listen in.”

I managed a smile. “Are you deputizing me?”

He chuckled softly. The two of us were trying our best to find something lighthearted in an otherwise dark moment. “Hardly, but you do seem to have a knack for picking up what others miss. Notice body language. Shared secrets.”

I saluted.

He frowned but whispered, “I’m glad you’re safe.”

“I’m thankful you’re here.”

I hung around for a second while he crossed the room to the guard and began questioning the EMTs.

The burlier one said, “He was given a sleeping potion for sure. A benzo is my bet.”

I’d learned about the benzodiazepine family of drugs from reading mysteries. Diazepam, temazepam, and lorazepam belonged to it. Would Zach find the substance in one of the guest’s rooms along with the stolen book?

Zach gave me a sly wink over his shoulder and flicked a finger, meaning *Leave.*

I did as bidden and joined Tegan in the dining room. Ozzie was eating the breakfast Helga had prepared. The others sat morosely quiet, as if shell-shocked. Felicity was weeping. Xenia and Yale were checking their cell phones, meaning they, like Tegan, had brought them when they’d ventured from their rooms.

My attention was drawn to Kiki, who, for some reason, was eyeing Freddy with sheer animosity. Was she worried that, because Yale had implicated him for the crime, he might try to finger Yale?

For the next hour, if anyone spoke, it was in a reverently muted tone.

Noeline entered, informed us the coroner had arrived, and joined Tegan and me to the right of the door. Many in the room shifted positions. Some stood. Others sat.

A few minutes later, Zach and Bates stepped in.

All attention fell on them. Zach regarded each of the guests individually. Before joining Bramblewood PD, he had served a stint in the army, which helped pay for his criminal justice college degree. His military bearing spoke volumes.

Ozzie, who hadn’t left the table where he’d downed his meal, squirmed and glanced at the others.

Dalton leaned against the far wall, feigning nonchalance.

Freddy and Felicity, standing by the bar trolley, reminded me of meerkats I’d seen at the zoo, constantly on alert. He clasped her hand. She lowered her chin.

Kiki and Yale had taken seats at a table with Xenia. Kiki, who was consulting her cell phone, exchanged a worried look with the rare-book dealer, who nodded ever so slightly—sisters in arms. Yale pushed his cell phone aside, his expression placid and untroubled, a skill, I imagined, he'd learned as a process server. When interacting with angry customers, a process server would have to maintain his cool at all times.

Zach introduced himself and Bates to the group and said they would be asking each of those present for their alibis between midnight and two a.m., stretching the EMTs estimation by an hour.

All at once, everyone began talking.

"I was sleeping," Felicity asserted.

"I was on a Zoom call," Xenia said over her. "To a client who lives overseas in Germany."

"We were sleeping, too," Kiki said, moving a finger between herself and Yale. "No, wait. Before I drifted off I heard a noise at midnight and got out of bed. That's when I saw him"—she pointed at Freddy—"creeping about the yard."

Everyone regarded him.

"I … I …" Freddy stammered, and deflated. "I wasn't creeping. I was restless. I didn't want to disturb my wife. I thought walking outside and taking in the fresh air might do me a world of good."

"Why were you restless?" Ozzie asked in an insidious way. "Got a guilty conscience?"

"No."

Ozzie sniffed, clearly not believing his cousin.

"I came inside about fifteen minutes later and went to bed," Freddy said.

"Did anyone see you enter?" Zach asked.

No one spoke up.

"My wife was snoring when I slipped into the room," Freddy added, looking like he wanted to fade into the woodwork.

"How about you?" Zach addressed Dalton. "Start with your name."

"Dalton Frasier." He pushed away from the wall and stood erect. "I couldn't sleep, as I'm wont to do when traveling to the States, and was reading a very fine novel about the onset of the Industrial Revolution."

That would have knocked me out in a matter of seconds.

“And you?” Zach focused his attention on Ozzie. “Name first.”

I was always taken aback that Zach didn’t know every person in town. Bramblewood wasn’t huge. On the other hand, Ozzie might socialize in places Zach didn’t. I’d never seen him at the Brewery or any of the restaurants or cafes Zach and I frequented.

“Ozzie Crockett,” he replied. “I’m in insurance, if you ever need any.”

“I don’t, thank you.” Zach remained stoic. “Where were you between midnight and two a.m.?”

Ozzie shifted in his chair and raised his chin. His nostrils flared defiantly. He was hiding something.

“Come clean. We will find out.” Zach wasn’t lying. He was one of the savviest detectives I’d ever met, and I’d encountered a few when working for a caterer in Charlotte.

“I went to a liquor store in town.”

Which one? I wondered. We had two.

“All they serve is wine here,” Ozzie went on, “and, well, I wanted a belt and a smoke.”

“The name of the store?” Zach pressed.

Ozzie gave it.

“Would anyone recall you being there?”

“I imagine. I don’t know.”

Zach proceeded to the others. After collecting everyone’s names and contact information, he asked for their room keys and told them to stay put.

“Why?” Ozzie demanded. “I didn’t kill that guy.”

“Me either,” Kiki cried.

“Because we will be searching the rooms for the missing novella,” Zach said.

Felicity released Freddy’s hand and stepped forward. “But what if the thief … I mean the killer … what if it wasn’t one of us?” She cradled her broken arm in the other, making me certain she wasn’t the murderer. I doubt she could’ve singlehandedly wielded the bust. “What if an intruder broke in and—”

“Rest assured, you will be cleared if you’re innocent,” Zach said.

He and Bates left the room.

While they were gone, a few rose from their seats and others sat down and chatter resumed.

“Who would do such a thing?” Kiki asked.

“You.” Ozzie pointed at her. “You told us you loved being in the play. You were gaga over the book.”

“I … I …” Tears flooded Kiki’s eyes.

“Who would profit?” Xenia asked. “The book can’t be worth much. Gilbert and I were discussing its value. On eBay it draws around eighteen to twenty thousand.”

“It’s gotta go for more,” Ozzie said. “It was in pristine shape.”

“Twenty thousand is enough to get someone out of debt,” Yale said glibly.

Tegan, who was standing near me by the door leading to the foyer, said, “I wonder how much Scroggie insured it for?”

“It’s not insured,” Ozzie said.

“Yes it is,” Freddy stated. “For half a million.”

“You’re lying,” Ozzie snarled. “Uncle would have insured it through me if he’d wanted to do so.”

Freddy smirked. “Think again. Is it possible he doesn’t trust you?”

“Why you …” Ozzie rose to his feet and raised a fist.

Although he was halfway across the room, Freddy held up both hands in defense and repeated, “Half a million.”

Dalton whistled. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?” Xenia asked.

“Nothing. I meant …” Dalton waved a hand. “All I’m saying is it must be more valuable than we guessed.”

Ozzie blew a raspberry. “Freddy’s got to be wrong. He couldn’t know how much it was insured for. Our uncle doesn’t confide in him.”

I regarded Ozzie. What if he’d known Scroggie had used another insurer? Had he resented his uncle for doing so? Would that have been his motive for stealing the novella, to retaliate out of revenge? And Gilbert—poor Gilbert—showed up in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Freddy said, “I’ve seen the paperwork. At the firm. One of our lawyers specializes in overseeing the insuring of valuable art objects, reviewing policies, et cetera. Face it, Cuz, Uncle used someone else. Obviously, the book holds many precious memories for him, hence the large sum to cover it.”

“Ridiculous.” Ozzie sneered. “Uncle has no precious memories. He’s led a sour existence his whole life.”

“Not true,” Noeline said, raising her voice. “He was in love once. He was a much kinder man then. The loss of his love took its toll.”

“Did she die?” Felicity asked.

Noeline shook her head. “No. Her parents wouldn’t let her marry him. He wasn’t genteel enough, they said. The family relocated.”

“That’s so sad.” Felicity pressed her good hand to her chest. “Freddy, did you know?”

He shrugged. “I’d heard a rumor, but he hasn’t confided in me.”

“See?” Ozzie jutted a hand at him. “You don’t know him as well as you think you do.”

“No, I don’t,” Freddy snapped.

“What does it matter?” Felicity huffed. “None of us do.”

“Ahem.” Tegan cleared her throat. “Has anyone considered the possibility that Scroggie sneaked into the inn and stole the novella himself so he could reap a big payout?”

“Tegan, heavens. He wouldn’t,” Noeline protested.

“Hear me out, Mom. If what Ozzie is saying is true and the physical book is only worth eighteen thousand on the open market, the thief would determine the reward wasn’t worth the risk. However, Scroggie might have stolen it to either make headlines or—”

“That’s it!” Noeline said brusquely. “I’ve heard enough. He is one of the most honorable men I know. End of story.” She strode angrily from the room.

Xenia rose from the table and drew closer to us. “I like your theory, Tegan. If Gilbert caught old Scroggie in the act, he would’ve turned him in for sure. Your mother can say Scroggie was honorable, but Gilbert Quackenbush has a reputation that is unmatched by others in the field.”

“My uncle doesn’t need money or notoriety,” Freddy cut in. “And he’s not a violent man. But if he was, he’d sooner whip someone with his cane than bludgeon the poor soul with a bust of Dickens.”

Dalton mumbled something I couldn’t catch and moseyed to the beverage station, where he poured himself a cup of coffee.

Ozzie grunted. “Hey, what if Freddy was in on the theft with our uncle? Maybe he was the lookout guy. When Gilbert unexpectedly showed up,

Freddy leaped into action."

A team effort? No. I couldn't envision it.

"Stop it, Ozzie. Stop," Felicity cried. "After Freddy took his stroll, he came to the room and went straight to sleep."

"Oho." Ozzie pointed at her. "That tidbit means you were awake, missy, and knew he'd slipped out. Perhaps you waited for him to drift off, and then you tiptoed downstairs and abetted our uncle."

"Cut it out," she hissed. "I was writing in my diary when he came in."

"He said you were sleeping."

She didn't have a response.

"Can we see this so-called diary?" Ozzie sniped.

"Not on your life." Felicity shot him a foul look. If she'd had claws or even the use of both arms, she would've struck out.

"C'mon, everyone, chill out," I said. "Tempers are flaring. Get something to drink. Stop talking about the murder. No more suppositions." I wriggled with unease, realizing I sounded like Zach warning me not to theorize when I'd been suspected of murder.

Tegan said, "How about I ask Helga to whip up more food? Perhaps some sweets?"

"I'm not hungry," each of the guests said in turn.

All except Ozzie, who bussed the plate he'd been working on and filled up a new one. Would a guilty man have an appetite?

An hour later Zach and Bates reentered the dining room.

"Did you find the novella?" Dalton asked.

Zach shook his head. "If the book is in one of your guest rooms, it's hidden very well."

Each of the guests sighed with relief. None gave the impression of being guilty.

Was it possible the thief hadn't been a guest at the inn? Did the intruder drive off with it? Was he or she on the way to fence it?

"We did discover this," Zach announced, and lifted a plastic evidence baggie containing a small vial.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Pills. Specifically, the sedative diazepam," Bates said. "No label on the vial. We believe the thief ground up the medicine and slipped it into the

guard's mug and waited somewhere until he fell asleep before committing the robbery."

And murder, I reflected.

"Wouldn't he have tasted the drug?" I asked.

Bates shook his head. "When dissolved, there's hardly any taste. Maybe a hint of mint."

Interesting. Tegan had hired Safety First. I doubted she'd asked for the guard's tea preferences. How could the thief have known the guard would request wintergreen tea and planned for it? Maybe it was a lucky coincidence.

"Where did you find the vial?" Tegan asked. She'd settled into a chair at one of the tables.

I was too edgy to sit and busied myself by replenishing water glasses while studying the faces of the guests.

"In Mr. and Mrs. Bobb's room," Zach said. "In the trash can by the desk, hidden beneath a wad of wrapping paper."

"No." Freddy leaped to his feet.

"I knew it!" Ozzie exclaimed.

"No," Freddy repeated. "I didn't drug the guard. I didn't do it. I'm being framed."

"I didn't, either," Felicity cried. "I put the wrapping paper in the trash after I opened a present Freddy gave me."

"What present?" Zach asked.

"A fountain pen. That was all I tossed in there. Last night. Before we went to bed. We're innocent."

"Fingerprints have been wiped off the vial," Zach continued, "so we can't be sure who stashed it there. However, Mr. Bobb, we have since discovered that you are deeply in debt, which gives you motive to steal the novella to sell for profit."

Wow. He found that out already? He must have ordered the precinct's Internet tech to do a rush job.

"If I stole it, where did I stash it?" Freddy demanded. Defiance wasn't a good look for him. His eyes darkened and his brow furrowed.

"Your daughter is in ill health," Zach said, not giving Freddy the courtesy of a direct answer.

“Yes, she has severe asthma.” Freddy sagged. “I’ve been paying off past-due bills and new ones crop up, but I wouldn’t kill to get the money. I tell you, I’m being framed.”

Who would want to do that? Ozzie out of jealousy? Yale because Freddy hadn’t helped him get into law school?

Zach said, “Freddy Bobb, I’m afraid we’ll be taking you—”

“What the devil is going on?” Erwin Scroggie marched into the room, cane stabbing the floor. “Noeline informed me that my novella is missing!”

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Chapter 7

Even the blind men's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts, and then would wag their tails as though they said, "No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master!"

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Scroggie couldn't have sounded louder if he'd used a bullhorn. "Is it true, Armstrong?"

Zach said, "Scroggie, hello, yes. I'm afraid so."

They were on a casual last-name basis? No "Mister"? No "Detective"? Interesting. Scroggie did own a lot of businesses in town. I supposed it would be in the police department's interest to keep open communications with him. For all I knew, Scroggie might play in the department's weekly poker game.

Tegan huddled beside me.

Noeline slipped into the room and exchanged a covert glance with Tegan and me, implying what? Had she learned something more from the coroner? A wider time frame for the time of death? An additional clue?

"It's been stolen," Zach continued, "and a man was murdered."

"Murdered?" Scroggie's eyebrows rose in alarm. "Who the blazes—"

“G-gilbert Quackenbush, Uncle,” Freddy sputtered. “In the parlor.”

“With the candlestick,” Ozzie said snarkily, as if uttering an accusation in the board game Clue.

I shot him a stern look. The louse shrugged off my disdain with one shoulder.

“That’s not true,” said a trembling Kiki. “He was struck in the head with the bust of Charles Dickens.”

“He was bludgeoned? Good heavens.” Scroggie staggered toward a table and sagged into a chair. “The man was a saint. A brilliant antiquarian. A confidant. Who would want to harm him?”

Ozzie jutted an arm. “The police think Freddy did it.”

“No they don’t,” Freddy countered.

“You stole the book,” Ozzie stated, “and when Gilbert caught you in the act, you struck him dead.” With one hand, he motioned violently downward.

“I did not.”

“Detective, you were about to take my cousin in for questioning, correct?” Ozzie directed the question to Zach. “That’s what you intended to say before our uncle barged in.”

Zach didn’t answer. His gaze swung from one guest to another. Was he now suspecting Ozzie? Or someone else?

Noeline brought Scroggie a glass of water and placed it on the table in front of him. I heard her murmur that, of course, the brunch was canceled.

He grumbled, “Bah,” and lifted the glass, hand shaking. “Who did it, Armstrong?”

“Freddy, Uncle.” Ozzie’s reedy voice pierced the air. “He has debts. He stole it so he could sell it.”

“Is this true, Freddy? You’re in debt? From what?” Scroggie zeroed in on Freddy, who looked like he wanted to crawl into a hole. “Are you a spendthrift like your father?”

“No, sir.” Freddy’s cheeks flamed red. “I’m nothing like my father. He was …” He pressed his lips together. For fear of saying something horrible?

Marigold had known Robert Bobb, aka Robby Bobb, and had told Tegan and me about him. He’d died a few years ago of complications with liver disease. An entrepreneur with a penchant for reading, Bobb was memorable for starting failed businesses. For the very first concern, a vegan

hot dog stand, his brother-in-law Scroggie advanced him the money. It went belly up in a matter of months. Bobb then invested in a left-handed tool store. Being left-handed, he thought it was an ingenious idea. The market wasn't large enough, and it flopped. He was never able to repay Scroggie for the first or second loan, and ever since, Scroggie, who regularly lent money at a high premium to risk investors, had held his brother-in-law in contempt. When Bobb died, Freddy's mother—Scroggie's sister—had to go back to work full-time. She died two years ago after a horrible bout of cancer. Hence, the reason Freddy had to turn to his former mother-in-law for help with Tinsley.

"My father was …" Freddy tried again but was unable to defend the man.

"A freeloader," Ozzie inserted.

The irises of Freddy's eyes grew steely. Using one hand, he pinned his right arm to the side of his body as if to prevent himself from striking his cousin. "You know what, Oz? I wouldn't be shocked if you stole the novella so you could pretend to find it and bring it back to Uncle so he'd think you were a hero."

"What garbage. I am as honest as the day is long," Ozzie retorted. "Insurance agents have integrity."

"Lawyers have integrity, as well," Freddy countered. "So watch your mouth."

"Gentlemen, please." Scroggie slammed his cane into the floor.

Under her breath, Tegan said, "Gentlemen, indeed. More like muckrakers."

"Uncle," Freddy said, "yes, I have debts because of college loans."

Scroggie's forehead furrowed. "I thought you secured a full scholarship."

Freddy's shoulders rose and fell. "The scholarship covered tuition. Nothing more. And with Tinsley's illness—"

"Ha," Ozzie cut in. "Admit it. You're a rotter. Uncle, I'm the one who has your back. I'll find out what happened to the novella. Count on it."

"Enough," Scroggie growled. "Both of you, silence. I can't believe I'm related to you wastrels." He rose to his feet. "Armstrong, I want to see the crime scene."

“It’s cordoned off,” Zach said. “But you may stand in the foyer and observe.”

“Very well.” Scroggie said to Noeline, “Accompany me, please.”

She bent her arm at the elbow to give him steady support.

When they exited the dining room, there was a huge sigh of relief from everyone. I rotated my head on my neck to loosen the muscles in my jaw and shoulders.

Kiki, who was sitting at the table with Yale and Xenia, said, “I swear, I’ve never seen such a drama play out before.”

“Agreed.” Xenia ran both hands through her tousled hair. “It was like watching a soap opera.”

“Or one of Hamlet’s tragedies,” Yale quipped.

“You mean Shakespeare’s,” Xenia corrected.

“You’re a jerk,” Ozzie muttered to Freddy.

“Yeah? Well, you’re a sycophant,” Freddy hissed. “A toady. A groveler.”

I leaned into Tegan. “I wish I could give Freddy a few witty rejoinders. You know, like, ‘Careful. If you suck up to Uncle any harder, you’ll cause a vacuum.’”

She sniggered.

“Should we stay here or help your mother?” I gestured to the door.

“Stay here. Observe.” Tegan crossed to a table and sat down.

I joined her and perched on the end of a chair, too edgy to lean back. “Freddy couldn’t have killed Gilbert,” I said sotto voce. “He’s such a kind man. I’ve seen the way he dotes on Felicity and on his daughter. There’s goodness in his soul.”

“I think Ozzie did it,” Tegan said. “He’s adamant about pinning the crime on his cousin.”

“Hey, everyone.” Yale crossed to the buffet and nabbed a muffin. “I think we can solve this. As a process server”—he puffed up his chest—“I’ve seen a lot of detectives in action. Tell me, what did you notice?”

“Good idea,” Dalton said, joining him. “Let’s write down a list of clues. Anybody got paper?”

Kiki lifted her cell phone. “I can take notes on my mobile.”

“Nah, then we won’t be able to see it,” Dalton groused.

“I can send a group text if you give me your contact information,” she assured him.

Some rattled off their numbers.

Xenia rose to her feet and spoke in bullet points. “Gilbert lying there. The bust. The blood. No music was playing. The house was quiet.”

“Except for the scream,” I murmured.

“The missing novella,” Dalton said.

Kiki typed away. “Which I noticed right after *she* ended the call with the police.” She pointed at Tegan.

Yale said, “Let the record reflect the *she* in question is Tegan.”

“*She*”—Ozzie aimed a finger at me—“was talking to the maid at the time.”

“She,” Yale cut in again, “is Allie … what’s your last name?”

“Catt.”

He faltered. “Your name is actually Allie Catt?” To his credit, he didn’t laugh.

“That’s right,” I said matter-of-factly. The earliest reference to the surname Catt was Catford, of Medieval English origins, which initially meant a ford frequented by wildcats. I can’t tell you how many cat jokes I’ve endured because of the combination of Allie and Catt, which my super bright parents—no kidding; they were off the charts brilliant—thought was humorous. By the way, did you know a group of alley cats is known as a clowder? I didn’t until I started receiving taunts like, *Hey, clowder head, take a powder. Do you want me to yell it louder?* Yeah, kids could be cruel. “And the housekeeper’s name is Helga,” I added.

“Helga,” he acknowledged. “She was rattled.”

Felicity said softly, “The guard was out like a light.”

“Meaning he didn’t see squat,” Yale theorized.

“Maybe he was in on the scheme and was feigning that he was asleep,” Kiki offered.

Everyone regarded her.

Yale said, “Good thought, babe. How do we know he was really out? He could’ve faked it.”

I shook my head. “The EMTs determined he had been drugged.”

“If he was snoozing, it was because Freddy supplied the pills,” Ozzie said.

“I did not,” Freddy snapped. “I’m not guilty. The evidence the police found was planted in my room.”

“The evidence,” Yale said, “was a bottle of … what were they?”

“Diazepam,” Dalton said.

Had the killer known a guard had been hired? Had he or she come prepared to knock out the guard with sleeping pills? How had that person had time to plant the vial in Freddy’s room? While Freddy was sleeping or after everyone hustled downstairs? They were all lodging on the same floor. Only Tegan and I were in a room on the third. Did one of them come downstairs to witness the ruckus, and then steal back up while the rest of us were transfixed by the crime scene?

I cleared my throat. “First on the scene was Helga. Then me. Then Noeline and Pippa. Tegan arrived next, then Xenia, Dalton, Felicity, and Freddy. Kiki followed them. Then came Ozzie and Yale.”

“Uh-uh,” Kiki said. “Yale then Ozzie.”

“Wrong,” Ozzie snapped. “I was down before him.”

“What does the order matter?” Felicity asked.

“Correct. Focus.” Xenia clapped her hands. “Back to the crime scene, everyone. That’s where the clues lie. Gilbert was exiting the parlor when he was struck.”

“How do you know that?” Felicity asked.

“The wound was here, at the back of his skull.” Xenia motioned to the base of her head. “If the thief attacked him while he was entering, his face would’ve been smashed in.”

“So the thief heard Gilbert,” Yale said, “pivoted with book in hand, grabbed the bust off the piano, and swung.”

“Or without book in hand,” Kiki stated. “The thief might not have taken it yet.”

“All in a matter of seconds,” Xenia said.

“Suggesting whoever did it was fleet of foot,” Dalton said.

“And strong.” Felicity cradled her broken arm in front of her torso, indicating she clearly was not capable.

“I wish we knew the time of death,” Dalton muttered.

Yale said, “The detective said between midnight and two.”

“I heard someone tiptoeing downstairs right after I drifted off, I think,” Kiki said.

“That could’ve been me climbing up to the second floor,” Freddy offered, stressing the word *up*. “After I went outside to get some fresh air.”

Ozzie sniffed. “Which continues to sound lame.”

“It’s true!” Freddy shrieked. “The moon was full and tucked right behind the large tree in the yard.”

“You could’ve found its location online,” Ozzie said. “They have dedicated apps for that.”

“I saw him outside,” Kiki confirmed. “Remember?”

The group gazed collectively at Freddy and then Ozzie.

I mentally reviewed the clues they’d amassed so far, which deduced nothing more than I’d determined. When had the killer drugged the guard? When had the killer deposited the vial of pills in Freddy’s trash? I really didn’t think he was guilty. He couldn’t be.

Tegan said, “I wonder if the police searched for footprints outside.”

Yale stabbed the air. “Good question. Footprints would show whether you went out or not, Freddy.”

“Your girlfriend saw me. And, yes, it was snowing,” Freddy said. “Lightly, true, but enough to cover tracks.”

Meaning the snow would have obscured prints from an intruder, too.

The door to the dining room whooshed open, and Zach strode in. “My partner and I would like to interview you individually in the living room. Once we’ve concluded, you’re free to return to your rooms and your daily routines, but do not leave town.”

“What about Freddy being guilty?” Ozzie cried.

Zach eyed him. “Let’s start with you.”

An hour passed before Zach, having questioned each guest, reentered the room. What had he learned? Anything other than what we’d heard in the group?

“One by one, come up.” He handed each a room key.

When the exchanges finalized, I glanced at him, but his gaze betrayed nothing. I breathed easier when he didn’t haul Freddy off to jail.

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STAVE 2

The Development: Reality Sets In

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Chapter 8

O cold, cold, rigid, dreadful Death, set up thine altar here, and dress it with such terrors as thou hast at their command: for this is thy dominion!

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

I packed up Darcy, then swung by Dream Cuisine to see if Vanna had forgotten anything. She wasn't there, so I texted her. She responded instantly. She'd completed and delivered all of the orders, including last-minute mincemeat pies for Cook & Cook, an accounting firm that had recently begun ordering from us. Relieved, I sent a thank-you emoji, then retrieved some star-shaped sugar cookies from the walk-in refrigerator and hurried to Feast for the Eyes.

Outside the shop, a tall, lean gentleman in forest-green Dickensian garb —the actor who won most of the leading roles at the community theater— was reciting a passage from *A Christmas Carol*. I recognized it as the beginning of stave 2. I remembered asking a college professor why Dickens had titled his chapters staves rather than chapters, to which he explained that in music a stave was a group of five horizontal lines on which notes were written. Dickens, believing his tale to be joyful and uplifting, used staves to connect the story to the musical tradition of carols.

“Good afternoon,” the actor said before I entered the shop.

I grinned. *Good afternoon* was considered a slur in *A Christmas Carol* because Scrooge used the term to dismiss people, revealing his cold, unfeeling heart. “Good afternoon,” I said pleasantly.

“Handsome cat.” He nodded at Darcy’s carrier.

“Thank you.” I paused in front of the door, taking a moment to admire the cheerful book wreath made with book pages. Fake of course. We would never decimate a book.

Then I stepped inside and smiled. The year-round book tree was decorated with miniature book ornaments spruced up for the holiday season. The ornaments were for purchase. Chloe Kang, one of the shop’s clerks, would personalize them if customers wanted. She was an ace with a metallic Sharpie and possessed beautiful handwriting. Hanging on the walls were posters featuring quotes from *A Christmas Carol*, also Chloe’s handiwork.

I scanned the shop for Chloe but didn’t see her as I sailed past the four aisles on my left, each packed with curious customers, each endcap brimming with Christmas-themed books and draped with festive paper chains.

Turning right at the cozy reading nook, which shimmered with colorful lights, I made my way to the display island in front of the sales counter, where I set down the tray of cookies. Beyond stood a stack of books cleverly arranged to resemble a snowman.

“Hello, Chloe, Tegan?” I called. Neither responded. “Oho, what’s this?” I said to myself as I peered at what used to be a bare section of the store. Tegan could never decide what she wanted to do with it. A coffee nook was out. She didn’t want the headache of having to pull permits to serve food and drink.

I’d suggested a book-themed gift display. It seemed that my suggestion had finally struck a nerve. Bakers’ racks now lined the area and each shelf was filled with items, like colorful bookmarks, wood or crystal bookends, reading lights, book-themed stationery, book nook DIY kits, and hardwood valets upon which one could prop a book. In addition, there were signs for purchase that read JUST ONE MORE BOOK AND SO MANY BOOKS, SO LITTLE TIME.

“Inspired,” I murmured. “Marigold would have loved all of it.”

I placed Darcy's carrier on one of the ladder-back chairs. He mewed. I assured him I'd take him to the office in a minute and strode to the archway leading to the stockroom to look for Tegan.

As the majority share owner, a position she inherited after her aunt's passing along with a generous cash bequeathment and half of a house, she oversaw everything related to the store. Her mother and I were the minority partners—Noeline, due to her being Marigold's sister, and me, because of my passion for reading, something Marigold and I had bonded over. Vanna, who hadn't been particularly fond of reading, had received gold coins from her aunt instead of a share in the shop, along with a cash gift and the other half of the house. Within a matter of days, Tegan had bought her out.

"Yoo-hoo." I whistled softly. "I'm here. I brought treats."

"Bless you. Be right out," Tegan replied.

"Love the gift corner."

"I knew you would."

"Hi, Allie," Chloe crooned, scooting past me on her way to the counter. Her arms were laden with a stack of *A Christmas Carol* novellas that she could barely see over. "We've had more takers for the story. Lots of them." Chloe was a darling Asian American woman about Tegan's and my age with the kind of energy that could power a city. Whether chatting with customers or tackling her to-do list, she had a vibrant, unstoppable spirit. Her bouncy blunt-cut hair and bright red dress with fluttery flounce accentuated her youthful charm.

"Love the book gift space," I said.

"Doesn't it slay?" She guffawed. "Oh, right, you came up with the idea." She laughed again, then tilted her head. "Hey, you look peaked. Is everything all right?"

Hmm. Hadn't Tegan told her about the murder and theft? I was ready to dive in when a woman exclaimed, "Allie Catt of the Catford clan, is that you?"

Evelyn Evers emerged from the mystery aisle and smirked. "It is. Darling, you're exactly who I needed to talk to." A retired OB-GYN, she had been one of Marigold's best friends and was a dedicated reader. In addition to reading spiritual conversion narratives and histories of the theater, she was a true historical romance reader, *Outlander* being her favorite.

“You look nice in forest green,” I said. “The A-line dress style suits you.” The way she could rock a cornrow updo never ceased to amaze me.

“The acting troupe is doing a few readings of *A Christmas Carol* around town, as you might have noticed.”

“I did as I entered. Bits and pieces or entire staves?”

“It varies. I’d like you to take part.”

“Me? Uh, no, thank you.” I wasn’t cowed by acting. I merely had too much on my plate.

“Please. Chloe and a few others are participating.”

Chloe had auditioned for the musical last year and had been asked to assume a role, but she’d bowed out, realizing rehearsals and shows would take away too much time from reading.

“No, but thank you for considering me,” I said.

“Our loss. By the way”—Evelyn cocked her head—“Fern texted me.”

My mother didn’t like me to call her Mother or Mom or anything close. Solely her given name, Fern. She and Evelyn had been good friends in their younger years. Their friendship had ended over a boy. For years Evelyn and my mother hadn’t spoken. A few months ago, Evelyn pleaded with me to ask Fern to reach out to her. I did and, apparently, Fern had. Good on her.

“We’ll be doing a FaceTime later this week,” Evelyn added.

“Glad to hear it.”

Evelyn hooked a thumb at the mystery section. “I’m looking for a historical Christmas-themed mystery. Any recommendations?”

Wow. That was a surprise, not to mention a mishmash of genres. “Let me think.”

Chloe waltzed to us carrying one of the books that had resided on an endcap. “How about this one? *The Twelve Clues of Christmas*, by Rhys Bowen. It’s a Royal Spyness Mystery and so much fun. ‘Lady Georgianna Rannoch, who is thirty-fifth in line for the throne, finds bodies left and right.’”

Evelyn flushed with excitement. “I’ll take it.”

Off the two of them went to finalize the sale. I eyed other customers who were milling about. None appeared to need immediate assistance, so I toted Darcy in his carrier to the office and released him. He immediately leaped onto the desk to peer at customers through the window that provided a view of the bookshop.

“Enjoy,” I cooed to him.

Tegan entered, star-shaped cookie in hand. “Delicious. What’s the secret ingredient?”

“Cream of tartar.”

She hummed. “How are you holding up?”

“I can’t get the crime scene out of my head. Poor Gilbert, dead. And I keep wondering where the book vanished to.”

“Maybe one of the guest rooms has a loose floorboard, and the killer hid it beneath that.”

“Or a wall safe,” I theorized. “Are there any?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“We should ask your mother.”

“Or Helga. She’s the one polishing the floors and dusting picture frames within an inch of their lives. But Mom first.”

While Tegan tapped numbers on her mobile phone, she said, “Before I forget—” She cut herself off and pointed at the phone, indicating her mother had answered. “Hey, Mom …”

I circled the office. It wasn’t large, barely big enough for two filing cabinets, a glass-enclosed, hermetically sealed bookshelf, a peg board for receipts, a white board for orders, a dehumidifier to keep the room free of moisture, and a desk fitted with a computer.

The glass case, which was lined with acid-free paper, was where we stored all the first editions. If a customer wanted to view one of the books, we would take it to the conference room, an adjunct off the storage area.

I moseyed to the glass case and scanned the titles within. Marigold’s all-time favorite was *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* by Agatha Christie, followed by *The Circular Staircase* by Mary Roberts Rinehart, and *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* by P. D. James. Marigold enjoyed other genres, but like me, she was a mystery buff first and foremost. I noticed a rare copy of *The Three Coffins* by John Dickson Carr, one of the finest examples of the locked-room subgenre ever written. Known for its ingenious plot, the novel was a must-have for collectors of true mystery classics. Marigold swore she’d never part with it.

After last night’s theft, I pondered whether the shop might need to add a special security device for the bookcase. We had entrance and exit security

alarms and cameras, but what if someone figured out how to steal a book while we were tending to customers?

Seeing *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* by Agatha Christie to the right of the Carr novel gave me pause. The story was about a gathering of a dysfunctional family. A murder took place in a locked room, meaning everyone was a suspect. But the murder of Gilbert Quackenbush wouldn't be considered a closed-room murder. There had been too many moving pieces.

I flashed on the guard. Kiki had speculated he might not have been sleeping and was in on the heist. Yale had backed her up. But I had said the EMTs had confirmed he'd been drugged. Had I jumped the gun? Had they done a toxicology test?

I recalled seeing a copy of *Great Expectations* on the table beside the guard. Where had he obtained it? Perhaps he'd brought it with him to occupy himself during the wee hours of the morning. Had he filched the novella and stowed it in a pocket inside his jacket, leaving no room for his own book? If he was the thief, did he have a partner? I remembered how amiably he and Xenia had chatted. What if she'd hired him to lift the novella? I hadn't visited her shop. Maybe her inventory of Dickens's work was low, and she was on the hunt for something new. Would she kill to own the novella? When the guests had first arrived and I'd said the guard would keep the novella safe, she'd responded, "Will he?"

Tegan ended her call. "Mom said there aren't any hidden safes in the inn's walls and no loose floorboards. When she bought the place, she inspected every slat of wood and nail stud." She twirled a finger in my direction. "What's going on in that crafty mind of yours?"

I told her how I'd been studying the rare books in her aunt's case when a novel's story triggered my thoughts about a closed-room murder, which led me to wonder again if the guard should be a suspect. I explained the theory.

"What was it you wanted to say before your mother picked up?" I asked.

"I believe someone planted the vial in Freddy's room."

"Me too."

Tegan tapped her chin. "While Freddy and Felicity were sleeping?"

“Risky, for sure. I think it had to have occurred either while everyone was on the way down the stairs or while they were huddled in the foyer, transfixed by the crime scene.”

“The timing would have needed to be perfect. If it happened while everyone was madly racing to the foyer, he could have dashed in and out.”

“Right. They’re all roomed on the second floor, so that would help with logistics.”

“But the doors would’ve automatically locked as they exited,” she said.

“Unless Freddy’s door didn’t close all the way. Ours hangs open unless we tug it shut.”

“True. I’ve mentioned that to Mom. The handyman is splitting his time between the Blue Lantern and the Amber Lantern. I suggested she find a second go-to guy.” Tegan frowned, thinking. “When we were all in the dining room, you laid out the order for when each guest came down the stairs. You were first.”

“I heard Helga scream.”

“Everyone did.”

“I raced downstairs.”

“You always have been quick to react. Every time we had a fire drill in elementary school, you were out the door in a nanosecond. And on the basketball court? You were the first to retrieve the tip ball.” She pumped an arm and started chanting, “‘Allie, Allie, Allie!’ The crowds went wild.”

“Ha!” Yes, I’d enjoyed playing point guard. A guy friend in junior high who could cut in and out of players like a quarter horse had taught me all the moves. I wondered what he was doing lately and made a mental note to look him up on social media.

“Make a timeline,” she suggested.

“Good idea.” I grabbed a sheet of paper.

After midnight	*Gilbert Quackenbush killed; novella stolen; Helga collecting tea and coffee items from*
4:02	*parlor; finds body; screams*
4:02–4:05	*Allie races out; sees Kiki poke head out; confirms scream;*
	Allie descends stairs, finds Helga and body;

	Helga says guard asleep; *See copy of* Great Expectations; *Noeline and Pippa appear;* *Tegan next; calls 911;* *Xenia, Dalton;* *Felicity, Freddy;* *Kiki, Ozzie, Yale*
4:06	*Kiki notices novella gone; Realize guard drank wintergreen tea*
4:07	*Allie accuses Ozzie of stealing novella; he denies;* *Yale suggests Freddy did;* *Kiki and Felicity state their alibis;* *Allie suggests everyone go to dining room and wait for police*
4:08	*Allie and Noeline discuss sleeping potion*
4:09	*EMTs arrive; then police (Zach and Bates) EMT declares TOD between midnight and one; Zach stretches time to two a.m.*
1 hour later	*Sit in dining room, waiting for detectives;* *Noeline informs all that coroner arrived;* *Zach and Bates question guests; all have alibis;* *Learn insurance value placed on novella*
1 hour later	*Zach and Bates return; found sleeping potion;* *Scroggie arrives; demands to see crime scene;* *Allie and guests, at Yale's directive, write down clues*

"Not much to go on," I said. "It's all pretty basic. Your mother and Pippa arrived, then you, Xenia, and Dalton appeared." I pictured each of the faces staring into the parlor. "Felicity stood behind Dalton clutching Freddy's arm like a lifeline."

Tegan narrowed her eyes. "Do you think she was anticipating seeing a body?"

"No. I imagine she was being vigilant not to jostle her injured arm."

“Why would she need to be cautious?” Tegan asked. “It’s in a cast. It’s not likely to break again.”

“Good point. Then came Kiki, Ozzie, and Yale.” I paused as I viewed their names on the timeline and questioned the order again as I had when relating it to Zach. “Kiki said Ozzie followed Yale.” I stared up and to the right, yet again trying to picture the sequence. “Drat it all. I can’t remember.”

As I added a question mark to that note, a woman cried, “Allie, help me!”

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Chapter 9

… for on the raising of the hand, he became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Felicity rushed into the office, chest heaving, injured arm pressed against her torso. “Save me. I won’t do it.”

Wouldn’t do what? Admit guilt? Implicate her husband?

I drew her into the room and closed the door. “Sit.”

She didn’t. She glanced at the closed door.

“Do you need some water?” I asked.

“No. I …” She curled into herself. “Allie, it’s horrible. So horrible. Freddy and I went back to work, like you did, and an hour later my sister, Rae, showed up. She heard about the murder.”

Sheesh. Word traveled fast in Bramblewood.

“She … she demanded I move in with her.” Felicity sobbed. “I didn’t know what to do so I ran.”

“Freddy didn’t intervene?”

“He was in a meeting. I texted him, but he hasn’t responded.” She sniffled. “Rae doesn’t think I should stay married to Freddy. She hates him.

She always has. She—”

The office door burst open.

Rae, I presumed—her heart-shaped face and shoulder-length hair were similar to Felicity’s—stepped over the threshold and jammed her fists against her hips. She wasn’t Felicity’s twin. She was a good five years older. But the stern expression paired with the white-collared black dress she was wearing made her look like an angry nun. Supply the woman with a ruler and I could see her smacking her sister’s knuckles to drive home a point.

“There you are.” Rae’s voice was strident. Occasionally, Vanna’s voice could cut ice, but this woman had her dead to rights. “You thought you could hide from me?”

Tegan and I exchanged a worried glance. What were we supposed to do?

“Rae …” Felicity gestured meekly with one hand. “C’mon, I’m a grown woman.”

Could’ve fooled me. She sounded like a meek child. Had Rae always bullied her?

“I demand you move in with me,” Rae said.

“No.” Felicity backed up a step. “I’m staying at the Amber Lantern. With my husband.”

“A murder occurred at the inn. He could be the killer.”

“He’s not, I tell you,” Felicity protested. “He’s innocent.”

“Tongues are wagging at the beauty shop,” Rae said.

“Beauty shop?” Tegan asked.

“Rae owns Lush Locks,” Felicity explained. “It’s the salon near Ragamuffin.”

I knew the place. The décor was black and white, which might explain Rae’s garb.

“She’s real good with hair, but she’s not good at being an older sister,” Felicity said, exhibiting some spunk.

Ray huffed. “I’m a stellar sister. I’ve saved you from many a bad situation. How about the group of boys in junior high who invited you over to watch a movie? How did that end up, huh?” She splayed her hands. “Felicity, I care about you.”

“To distraction,” Felicity whined.

“You need to divorce Freddy. I’ll pay the legal fees.”

“No.” Felicity’s voice cracked with distress. “I love him. Please leave me alone.”

“How can I? Freddy is a rotter like—”

“No he’s not,” Felicity cut her off. “Not. Not. Not.”

“Like who?” I asked.

“Bryan,” Felicity said. “Freddy’s brother. Rae and Bryan—”

“Hush,” Rae ordered. “It’s not your story to tell.” She paused, stewing, shifting feet. Her gaze swept over me and Tegan. We were definitely the enemy. “Okay,” she said at long last. “If you don’t want my help, don’t come crawling to me when you discover Freddy is a scoundrel and a snake in the grass like every other Bobb. Don’t whine to me when all your fortunes go down the drain. It’ll be a legal nightmare. I promise you. A legal nightmare.” She stomped out of the office.

Seconds later, I heard the shop door slam.

Felicity sank into a chair and wept. I patted her shoulder and told her everything would be all right, but I wasn’t sure.

After Felicity calmed down and returned to work, Tegan and I filled preorders and neatened bookshelves and didn’t discuss the incident further. Chloe roamed the store, answering customer questions. At closing time, Chloe sped off to convene with girlfriends for their personal book club, and Tegan and I finalized sales and cleared the register.

Task completed, Tegan said, “You’re coming to the inn for dinner and staying the night, aren’t you, Allie? Helga is planning a feast.”

“Are you sure it’s a go, considering the circumstances?”

“I imagine my mother will insist on normalcy. Please say yes.”

“I’ll join you for dinner, but I won’t sleep there.” I’d packed my bag when I left the inn earlier and had stowed it in my van. “Darcy needs to go home.” Poor guy was strung out from the unusual activity. His eyes were at half-mast. His tail was barely flicking. “He’s craving normalcy.” So was I, to be honest. “Why don’t I swing by Dream Cuisine on the way to the inn, and I’ll throw together some goose appetizers?”

“Goose?”

“Inspired by Dickens of course. I coat goose breasts with my special dry rub, then I sauté them in white wine.” I’d made some the other day to taste test, after which I froze the batch.

“Yes, please.”

When I arrived at the inn, a string quartet was playing “It Came upon a Midnight Clear” in the living room. Yale and Kiki were seated on a couch, talking between themselves. Both had dressed for dinner. Kiki had curled the ends of her hair and had draped it dramatically in front of her shoulders. Yale, sporting a classic striped shirt with white cuffs and collar, his trousers creased just so, reminded me of a figure in *Sail Magazine*. Dalton, in jeans and a hoodie, was reading in an easy chair, one leg slung casually over one of its arms.

Kiki caught sight of me and waved. Loath to disturb the musicians, I greeted her with a nod and carried the appetizers to the kitchen. I announced what I’d brought. Helga was appreciative. Pippa was moving about, head lowered, movements jerky. I imagined the idea of remaining in a house where a murder had occurred was weighing on her. I wasn’t feeling all that swell about returning myself.

Helga noticed me assessing her niece and winked at me. “She’s fine. She’ll rally. Now leave and have some fun tonight.”

Enjoying the evening would be difficult, since my mind was working overtime trying to figure out who had killed Gilbert and where the novella had gone. Had Zach made any headway? Had he spoken to any fences in the area who might purchase such an item? How about rare-book dealers? There were others besides Xenia Blair. And had he reached out to Gilbert’s next of kin? If I reached out to Zach, would he fill me in?

No, he won’t, Allie. It’s his case. Let it be. For now. Except how could I, knowing Freddy was a suspect and Noeline’s inn could suffer from bad publicity?

I wandered into the living room. By then, Tegan had made an appearance.

“You look nice,” she said to me.

I’d thrown on a pair of black slacks and sage green silk sweater. Sage green was my signature color. It went with my eyes. I’d weaved my curly hair into a French braid. “So do you.”

Normally, like me, my pal preferred casual clothing, but tonight she’d donned a sparkly gold sweater, skinny black jeans, and kitten-heel boots. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was trying to impress someone, but I

couldn’t imagine who. Not Dalton. He was at least twice her age. Yale was taken. Ozzie was a definite no. I wondered if, now that her divorce was final, she might have a date planned after dinner. All our lives she’d been able to keep a secret better than anyone, but if there was someone new in her life, I’d wheedle it out of her.

“Good evening.” Noeline waltzed in carrying a tray filled with tasting glasses of white wine. “Lovely,” she said to the quartet as they ended their song. “Who would like a sip of a Biltmore chardonnay?” The Biltmore Estate owned a fifty-acre vineyard that put out varietals like chardonnay, cabernet franc, cabernet sauvignon, and merlot. The grandson of George Vanderbilt planted the first vines in the 1970s. “After dinner, we’ll enjoy smoking bishop, a mulled punch featured in *A Christmas Carol.*”

“Sounds delish,” Kiki said. “I love all the spices in mulled beverages.”

I opted for a glass of chardonnay. Tegan did, too. Dalton shook his head and resumed reading.

“Tegan, darling, help me fetch the appetizers,” Noeline said.

The musicians launched into a dulcet version of “The Holly and the Ivy.”

I moseyed to Dalton and asked which book was captivating him.

“*The Haunted House.*” He showed me the cover. “It’s an anthology that includes short stories by Dickens, George Augustus Sala, Adelaide Anne Procter, Wilkie Collins, and Elizabeth Gaskell. Dickens wrote the first and last in the collection.”

“Fascinating.” Feast for the Eyes didn’t sell anthologies. Its primary readers preferred long-form fiction.

He resumed reading, dismissing me, so I carried my wine into the foyer. I peered into the parlor, which remained cordoned off. Mr. Smith was not at his post, of course—he was no longer needed, seeing as the novella was missing—but I couldn’t help wondering whether he had lost his job because of his negligence. Plus I continued to wonder whether he might have stolen the novella and hidden it inside his coat. Had Zach searched his person or beneath his chair?

I spotted the copy of *Great Expectations* he’d been reading lying on the table. Something about the book vexed me until I realized Smith had dog-eared a page. How could he have? He’d said he was a bibliophile. Book lovers would never mar a book in that manner. It was sacrilege. Then a new

thought came to me. Not that Smith was the thief and killer. Quite the opposite. What if the thief, who'd laced the guard's tea earlier in the evening, had tiptoed to him to confirm he was asleep? Noticing *Great Expectations* teetering on the man's lap, the thief, to ensure it wouldn't fall to the floor and make a noise while he … or she … was absconding with the novella, had removed the book from its precarious spot, dog-eared the page, and rested it on the table?

I pulled my phone from my pocket and started texting Zach but stopped short of sending it.

"What are you staring at?" Tegan asked from behind.

I clued her in about the book.

She aimed a finger at me. "You could be right. You should tell Zach."

"I was texting him when you snuck up on me."

"I didn't sneak."

"But I thought better of it. After all, it's a guess. A theory. You know how much he doesn't like when I speculate. Besides, it wouldn't provide a clue as to the thief's identity."

"Unless there are fingerprints on the book cover," she said.

"Like I told Zach, I imagine the thief wore gloves to commit the crime."

"Dinner!" Pippa announced at the top of her lungs from down the hall. She jingled a bell, in case her voice wasn't enough to alert the guests.

Felicity and Freddy traipsed downstairs. Felicity, in a velvet ruffle A-line dress, appeared more relaxed than she had earlier. Telling off her sister had done her a world of good in the confidence department. Freddy, however, looked exhausted, as if each breath was laced with the suffocating weight of suspicion.

"Did I hear dinner is being served?" Xenia trailed them, dressed in a cheery green sweater and midcalf black skirt and boots. She'd swept her red hair into a classic chignon with tendrils—a look I often sported to tame my curly hair.

"Yes," Tegan said, averting her gaze from the parlor.

"Excellent. I'm starved."

My appetite was nil, but I'd do my best to appreciate Helga's wonderful cooking.

The doors to the elevator whooshed open. Ozzie emerged from the car looking disheveled at best—his hair tousled, his shirt rumpled. It dawned on

me that he hadn’t used the elevator in the morning. He’d taken the stairs, like everyone else. Was that significant? Had he followed the herd to ensure he knew where each was, giving him the opportunity to return upstairs to plant the drugs in Freddy’s room?

He frowned at Freddy. “The nerve of you to show your face, Cousin. Have you no shame for what you did?”

“Can it,” Freddy hissed. “I didn’t do anything, and I’m a guest. Guests eat. C’mon, Fee,” he said to his wife.

I thought about Freddy’s brother, the one Felicity’s sister, Rae, loathed, but pushed him and her from my mind. Felicity and Freddy would need to be a united front to ward off accusations of guilt.

“Borrowed time, pal.” Ozzie’s mouth curved up in a smirk. “Borrowed time.” He caught me staring at him and blew me a smarmy kiss.

I flinched, irked that he could get under my skin. “Tegan, do you know if Scroggie will be joining us?”

“I didn’t ask Mom. I doubt he’d be in a very festive mood.”

I reviewed what I knew about Erwin Scroggie. Businessman. Lender. Crafty. Freddy claimed his uncle had insured the book for half a million, and yet others thought the value was less than twenty thousand. Why had Scroggie done so? To bilk the insurance company? Was it possible he had hired the guard to steal the novella and stash it somewhere the police wouldn’t find it, and then had ordered the guard to dose himself with the drug?

That’s a stretch, Allie. Give it a rest.

I stepped into the dining room and paused to take it all in. Helga had rearranged the morning’s tables into one long table and draped the expanse with a supersized linen tablecloth. There were place settings for eleven, each fitted with elegant napkins, beautiful sterling silver, and crystal wineglasses. Presentation mattered to Noeline.

“Please sit,” Noeline advised from the far end of the table.

Tegan took one end chair and her mother the other. Kiki sat beside Yale. Then came Felicity and Freddy. I selected the seat nearest Tegan. Dalton settled beside me. Then Xenia and Ozzie.

“Who else is joining us?” Tegan asked, noting the empty chair beside her mother.

“Your sister. She’s running late. She had a meeting with—”

“I’m here.” Vanna sailed into the room and came to a full stop. “I apologize for my tardiness. I did everything I could to arrive on time, but Parker delayed me with all the special requests for the banquet I’ll be catering.”

Parker? As in Councilman Stevenson? Oho. Was he the new boyfriend? I gave her a questioning look and tried to use ESP to get an answer to the question. Her cheeks reddened.

“It’s fine, sweetheart,” Noeline said. “Sit.”

Vanna tugged at the cuffs of her lacy blouse so they jutted an inch from the edges of her Armani jacket sleeves, and she patted the underside of her messy bun, which was perfect with exactly the right proportion of mess to neatness.

“Everyone, if you haven’t met her,” Noeline said, “this is my other daughter, Vanna. She works with Allie.”

“Mother, please. That’s not all I do.” Vanna blew a raspberry. “I have my own catering business. Extraordinary Catering. If anyone would like a business card, I—”

“After dinner,” Noeline said, resting a hand on Vanna’s wrist.

Vanna perched on her chair. “Tell me all about the murder,” she blurted, startling everyone. “I can’t imagine.”

Of course she could. I’d filled her in earlier. She was hoping for salacious gossip.

“Allie, how did you feel seeing a third body?” Vanna leaned forward to make eye contact.

“A third?” Xenia’s eyes widened.

“She’s found two before.”

Noeline saved me by saying, “Let’s not talk of the tragedy right now.”

“What happened to the guard?” Vanna asked. “Was he canned?”

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Chapter 10

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Noeline said, “No, he has been reassigned. With the novella gone, he wasn’t needed.” She gripped the stem of her wineglass.

Tegan glowered at me as if urging me to tell them about the dog-eared page in the guard’s copy of *Great Expectations*, but I wanted to keep that information to myself for now. Until I spoke with Zach.

“Everyone,” Noeline said, braving a smile, “tell us what else you did today, once the police cleared you.”

“I’m not sure all of us are cleared,” Ozzie muttered.

“You don’t think so?” Xenia asked nervously.

Chatter began in earnest, but it was muted, as if no one wanted to increase the volume for fear of stirring up a hornet’s nest.

Yale and Kiki said they’d taken a long walk. Freddy and Felicity had gone to work. Xenia had made business calls from her room. Dalton had read.

One look at Ozzie and his disheveled appearance made me wonder if he'd slept the day away.

"Here we are," Helga said, pushing in a tea cart set with bowls. "Asparagus soup."

Pippa helped her serve the portions.

Xenia tucked into hers and said, "This soup is delicious. I've never had it before."

"Me either," Felicity chimed.

"It's not completely as Dickens would prefer," Noeline said. "I enjoy it with lemon and parmesan, so Helga made adjustments."

"It's my recipe," Vanna added. "If any of you are interested, I prepare entire meals and individual dinners suited to your dietary needs."

Hmm. She hadn't provided individual dinners prior to working with me. She had been purely a party caterer.

"I've served dignitaries," she added.

I nearly choked on my soup. Since when? Tegan, who was fisting and unfisting her hands, looked ready to clock her half sister. She blinked rapidly to signal *Cool it*. But Vanna was oblivious. She had her charming side and her obnoxious side. Didn't we all know people like that? Some of my acquaintances probably thought I was insufferable at times. After all, I could be snarky. I had developed the art of offering snappy comebacks as a girl because, being the daughter of my unusual parents, I was teased a lot, and I'd hated it.

Why are your parents so cold? a girl had asked in junior high. It had started out as a normal conversation, a fair exchange of opinions. *They aren't cold*, I'd replied. *They want me to be self-sufficient. They believe the fewer hugs they give me, the more I won't rely on them*. Fern and Jamie—my father also preferred I use his given name and not Dad—were academics who hadn't planned on being parents. I'd been a surprise. Physical contact hadn't been the norm. *Cold, cold, cold*, the girl had taunted. That was when I'd said, *Maybe if you spent less time picking on my family and more time working on yourself, you wouldn't be so miserable.*

To cut this evening's tension, I said to Helga, "Will we be having roast goose on Saturday?" The bigger question was whether we would even host the soiree. Would there be a pall over the evening if the novella wasn't recovered and the murder solved?

“Absolutely,” Helga said. “As well as joints of meat and stuffing.”

“What are joints of meat?” Kiki arched an eyebrow.

Helga smiled. “A large piece of meat that is usually cooked in the oven and contains a bone, like tonight’s lamb roast.”

“Helga’s using my recipe for that,” Vanna said.

Noeline tapped her daughter on the wrist and gave a curt shake of her head. Vanna’s cheeks bloomed pink, indicating that she got the message. No more bragging about her cooking skills.

Ozzie said, “I’m hoping we’ll have figgy pudding with whipped cream.”

Helga chortled and rested her hands on her stomach. “Of course.”

The next half hour passed amiably, with no talk of murder, menus, or ill will.

“Kudos to the chef,” Freddy said as Pippa made the rounds with a platter of the remaining slices of lamb and roasted potatoes. “The meal is incredible.”

“As if you know the difference between a boiled shoe and properly cooked lamb,” Ozzie chided.

Dang it, I groused mentally. *Leave it to Oswald Crockett to wield a barb and wreck the calm mood*.

“I know food,” Freddy said. “I cook.”

“Especially now that I’m injured,” Felicity said.

“Freddy? Cook?” Ozzie scoffed, then addressed the others, “He burns water.”

Vanna glanced in Tegan’s and my direction. I mimed I would text an explanation of this nasty interaction later.

“Mom,” Tegan said loudly enough to cut off the sparring cousins, “will Mr. Scroggie be joining us this evening?”

“No, dear, he’s not feeling well.”

Freddy tilted his head. “Because of the theft?”

Noeline said, “Because of the murder. He feels responsible.” She added quickly, “Not for the murder itself, but for inviting Mr. Quackenbush to the inn and putting him in danger.”

I studied the faces of the guests, hoping for an admission of guilt. Kiki was mindlessly running a finger along the stem of her wineglass. Felicity was fidgeting with her utensils, making each parallel to the other. Ozzie was

working his tongue inside his cheek. Freddy was staring at his plate as if contemplating finishing the last bite of lamb. Xenia and Dalton were checking their cell phones. Yale was studying his cuticles.

Stilted conversation filled the next few minutes while Pippa removed dinner plates.

When Helga reappeared to offer dessert, she said, “My niece will enter in a moment with the smoking bishop. Would anyone like a taste?”

Hands shot up, including mine.

Pippa pushed through the swinging door cradling a decanter of the punch. She hip-checked the door to keep it from slamming into her. “Here we are.” She poured a glass for each guest and Tegan and me. Noeline and Vanna declined.

I took a sip and swooned. The beverage had exactly the right amount of spice. “How many cloves did you use, Helga?”

“Plenty.” She grinned, then said to Pippa, “Go and fetch the item you discovered. It’s time.”

“What item?” Noeline asked.

Tegan said expectantly, “Did you find the novella?”

The young woman left the room and returned in less than two minutes. She’d donned latex gloves and was holding a paper bag.

“Open it,” Helga insisted.

Pippa removed a slip of paper and curtsied as she handed it to her aunt.

“No curtsying required, dear child,” Helga said. “That’s old fashioned. We are a modern establishment. Now, what have we here?” She perused the paper and said, “Ah, yes. Miss Xenia”—she directed her gaze at her—“I believe my niece found a missive in your room, sent to you from Gilbert Quackenbush saying he was looking forward to seeing you again.”

“Again?” Ozzie wheezed. “Were you two pretending that you just met?”

Helga went on, “He couldn’t wait to confer with you this evening.”

“How dare you search my room,” Xenia huffed.

“We didn’t *search* it purposely, miss,” Helga said politely. “We cleaned it as we do all the rooms. Every guest when signing the inn’s policy agrees to a daily room cleaning.”

“It was in a state of disarray,” Pippa said.

Helga hushed her.

I stared at Xenia while revisiting a new theory. Had she and Gilbert plotted together to steal the novella? Had they made a plan to take the novella after midnight? At some point, had she decided to go rogue? Perhaps she'd slipped into the parlor to steal it, but Gilbert caught on and tried to thwart her, only to meet his own demise. Felicity had said Xenia employed a clerk. What if Xenia had directed the clerk to motor to the inn after midnight and wait for her in the driveway? After Xenia killed Gilbert, she gathered up the novella, raced outside, handed the novella to the clerk, who then sped away, and Xenia went to bed. That could explain why the police hadn't found the book yet.

Unless they had. I desperately wanted to speak to Zach.

"I don't have to stand for this," Xenia said, slapping the table.

And yet she did. Stand.

"I did not kill Gilbert Quackenbush, and I did not steal the novella!" she shouted. "But I have a good idea who might have. Dalton Frasier." She pointed at him. "I was stretching my legs last night around eleven and heard him through an opened window talking on his cell phone to someone about the Dickens item."

Dalton shifted in his chair.

"That's how he described it," she continued. "The Dickens item. To be obscure, obviously. Item." She stressed the word again. "He said—mind you, I merely caught snippets of the conversation—but he said, 'Let her,' and after a brief moment, 'burn.' 'Let her burn.' Don't you see? He's trying to pin the murder on me."

"Or me," Felicity said.

"Or any of us females," Kiki added.

"Ladies, please, quiet down," Noeline ordered as she rose to her feet.

"Let her burn," Tegan whispered to me. "Interesting."

"Well, sir?" Noeline eyed Dalton Frasier. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Yes, sir." Vanna rose imperiously and pushed her mother's shoulder, forcing her to resume her seat. "Care to explain?" she asked, taking the lead.

"Yes," he said curtly, "it was me she heard, but that's not what I said."

"Do tell."

Vanna stepped toward Dalton like he was her prey, and I tamped down a laugh. She reminded me of Inspector Clouseau in the Pink Panther movies, officiously overacting. Thankfully, she wasn't feigning a French accent.

"I don't have to tell you anything," he said.

"Who was on the call with you?" she demanded.

"None of your business." Dalton lifted his chin.

"Maybe the police would like to know."

"Yes, the police," Kiki said.

Felicity echoed her.

"Well?" Vanna folded her arms. When he didn't respond, she said, "What was your alibi between midnight and two?"

"He told us earlier that he was reading," Ozzie offered.

"Reading?" Vanna coughed out a fake laugh. "Not much of an alibi, is it?"

Tegan elbowed me and winked. "She's almost cute when she's playing an amateur detective."

"Speaking of cute," I said under my breath, "where are you off to later? Got a hot date?"

"Me? A date?" She pulled a face.

"The sparkly sweater, the snazzy boots?" I wagged a finger. "Who is he?"

"No one."

"Liar."

Her cheeks bloomed with color.

"Is it someone at the table?"

She coughed out a laugh.

"I'll get it out of you," I assured her.

"I have no doubt. You, my friend, are like a dog with a bone when it comes to sussing out the truth." She thwacked my arm. "That's a compliment, by the way."

Vanna whacked the table and shouted, "Talk, mister!"

He didn't.

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Chapter 11

“There are some upon this earth of yours,” returned the Spirit, “who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Vanna didn’t get any more out of Dalton Frasier. Was he the killer? The thief? I had no idea. I offered to help with dishes in the kitchen, but Helga shooed me out. So I left.

I loved the house I rented from my parents. Fern and Jamie traveled the world and had no desire to move back to Bramblewood. My home—I liked to call it a cabin—was located at the end of a cul-de-sac about a mile from the center of town. It boasted skylights that allowed in natural light, a cozy stone fireplace, and a small but very functional state-of-the-art kitchen. I hadn’t needed to decorate when I’d moved in. My parents had bought the house from the previous owner completely outfitted with shabby chic furniture as well as eclectic art on the walls. I’d added a rocking chair and, as a lark, had hung bookish sayings on the walls like, *You can’t buy happiness, but you can buy books*. I liked to be inspired.

Darcy's favorite piece of furniture was the barrel-shaped llama, a cat-scratching station positioned near the rustic dining table and window nook. Like an eagle searching for prey, he was perched atop it ready to play when I walked inside.

I deposited my keys and purse on the table in the foyer. "It's late, sir," I said. "One game. That's it."

I grabbed a mouselike catnip toy and hurled it across the living room. It skidded beneath the Christmas tree I'd draped with white lights but had yet to decorate. Time had been scarce.

Darcy dove to the floor, on the hunt.

Moving into the living room, I pulled my cell phone from my pocket. Zach hadn't called. He hadn't texted. Even though I knew he didn't want my two cents about his investigation, I mustered some courage and texted him my observation regarding the *Great Expectations* dog-eared page. I asked if he'd questioned the guard further. In addition, I mentioned the theory that one of the guests might have had an accomplice waiting outside in a getaway car to receive the novella.

Three dancing dots materialized on the screen. I stared at them for a long minute. When no text followed, I decided it was time for bed. Zach was mulling over his response. Hopefully, he would reach out tomorrow.

Sleep came easily. I was exhausted.

Bright and early Sunday morning, while I was slipping a batch of gingerbread men into the oven, my doorbell chimed. I answered the door, stunned to see Vanna bundled in a down parka, leggings, and Uggs.

"Come in," I said. "What are you doing here?"

She stamped her feet to shake off fresh-fallen snow. "I thought you could use some help with whatever you're baking and with deliveries." Sheepishly, she worked her lower lip between her teeth. "I apologize for my comment at dinner last night. I really enjoy partnering with you, and it was rude of me to suggest otherwise. And when I took over the questioning from mother to steer the conversation? Gack. What was I thinking? I mean, sure, I was being protective of her. She is exhausted from the ordeal. But after reviewing my actions, I realized I was beyond selfish."

Huh. Perhaps therapy was working for her. She'd been going for a month.

I smiled. “Want a cup of coffee?” I’d liked my Cuisinart Coffee Center so much at the ghost kitchen, I’d purchased one for the house.

“Do you have the vanilla creamer I like?”

“Of course.”

She traipsed after me, calling to Darcy. “Here, kitty. Auntie Vanna wants a kiss.”

He emerged from the barrel of the llama and leaped to the floor. Tail in the air, he pranced to Vanna for affection.

“How’d you know I’d be here?” I asked, pushing past the Plexiglas door into the kitchen. To obtain a Cottage Food Operator health rating so I could, on occasion, bake at home, I’d installed the see-through door to keep the kitchen separate from the rest of the house. Darcy wasn’t a shedder because I groomed him often. Even so, he wasn’t ever allowed to enter the closed-off area.

“I didn’t.” She shrugged out of her parka, revealing an elegant pearl-beaded red sweater, perfect for the Christmas season. “I guessed you wouldn’t have left for Dream Cuisine yet.” She dumped her parka on a stool and inhaled. “Yum. Gingerbread?”

“Yes.” I prepared a cup of coffee for each of us—I had an assortment of mugs featuring either Bramblewood or the Blue Ridge Mountains; she preferred the mountain scenes—and retrieved the container of creamer. “So tell me about Councilman Stevenson.”

“Wh-what?” she stammered as she loaded up her coffee and stirred with a spoon.

“Is he the boy who’s a man?” I teased.

“The boy—”

“Boyfriend. You referred to him as Parker, meaning you’re on a first-name basis. Spill.”

She peered at me over the rim of her coffee mug. “There’s nothing to spill.”

“You’re interested. I can tell.” I’d met him at a council meeting. “He’s very handsome.”

“Do you really think so?” Vanna asked.

“I do.” I viewed today’s orders to refresh my memory—I kept a list on my computer and mirrored it on my cell phone—then pulled an additional mixer from the pantry and more mixing bowls. A couple of months ago,

Sundays weren't busy days baking-wise, but now, with the word spreading about Dream Cuisine's delicious treats, I typically had at least six orders to fill. "His wavy hair and easy smile are winners," I added.

"You know, when he's not handling town activities, he's a day trader. He does quite well."

Councilmen in some cities held full-time positions, but the modest-sized business of Bramblewood didn't require such dedicated attention.

"What are we making?" Vanna asked.

"Two dozen chocolate muffins for Blessed Bean. The gingerbread men are for Big Mama's Diner. They're having a kiddie party. Two large cherry-rosemary cheesecakes for Perfect Brew. Four dozen double-thick chocolate pecan cookies for Jukebox Joint."

"Got it." She slipped on an apron, donned a mesh-style chef's cap—I was already wearing mine—and washed her hands. "So who do you think did it?"

"Did what?"

"The murder. What else?"

Okay, it was mighty early to be theorizing.

"Was it somebody sitting at the table last night?" she went on. "Has Zach told you anything?"

"No." He hadn't texted. He hadn't emailed me, either. I was miffed about his lack of communication. Wasn't he concerned about my well-being and my having seen another dead body?

Oh, boo-hoo, Allie. Pity party over. He and I would talk in time. He was probably up to his ears in the investigation.

"So who do you think did it?" Vanna repeated.

The timer for the gingerbread men chimed. I removed the trays from the oven and placed them on the stovetop. I needed to let the cookies cool completely before icing them.

"Let's do that thing you, Tegan, and I do," Vanna went on. "Hashtag AlliesClueCrew." She double-crossed four fingers to mime the hashtag symbol. "And Chloe, too. She wants to be on the team."

A few months ago in a moment of silliness when I was bouncing around ideas about who had killed Jason Gardner, a wealthy builder who'd recently moved to town, Tegan had suggested the phrase. She'd heard the term *clue crew* on a kids television show and thought we needed a group name.

Seeing as I was usually the first to come up with suppositions, I was dubbed the ringleader.

“Create a list of suspects.” Vanna pointed to the laptop standing on the counter. I didn’t have a home office. The kitchen counter and occasionally my bed served as my desk. “You know”—she snapped her fingers—“with those columns you make.”

As a caterer and former English major, I liked being organized. Laying out ideas in an orderly fashion helped free up the rest of my mind.

“Do you think Zach spoke with the dead man’s family?” Vanna asked.

“His name was Gilbert Quackenbush.”

“Yes, write that down.”

The way she was ordering me ticked me off. “Vanna—”

“Got it.” She waved a hand. “I’m being bossy. But I can’t help myself. My brain waves are tingling. Isn’t that what Hercule Poirot says?”

Recently, I’d persuaded her to read an Agatha Christie mystery. She’d been resistant at first. Even so, she had perused a few more.

“The little gray cells,” I corrected.

“*Mais oui*.” She pointed at me with a mixing spoon and then aimed the spoon at her temple. “Poirot was the greatest detective in the world.”

“According to his own press reports,” I joked. “Why don’t you make the pecan cookies and put them in to bake, and I’ll throw together the cheesecakes? Then we can bat around theories.”

She whistled as she worked. I appreciated how meticulous she was in the kitchen. She barely made a mess, and bowls and utensils were instantly cleaned once a recipe was complete.

A short while later, she said, “Okay. I’m ready. Are you?” She slotted her tray into the oven, rinsed her hands in the sink, and dried them with a paper towel. “Let’s go. Who else might have wanted Gilbert Quackenbush dead? Can you Google to see if he has family living nearby?”

I set aside the cheesecake mixture. I would whip egg whites and fold them into the batter after I created the document. I wakened the computer and typed a command in the search engine. Up popped a Wikipedia page with Gilbert’s name and background:

Gilbert Quackenbush got his start in rare books in the Cecil H. Green Library, where he worked as a curatorial assistant while at

Stanford University. He subsequently moved to New York and learned the trade in a famous gallery. In 2010, Gilbert launched his own firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. He has been an ABAA member since that time.

"What's ABAA?" Vanna asked.

"The Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America."

"Does it say anything about his family?"

I scrolled down the page, then gave her the rundown. "Gilbert was married, but his wife passed away five years ago. They didn't have any children. His primary family—two brothers and a sister—lived in Greensboro, North Carolina, where Gilbert had been born. The fact that he stayed in North Carolina to pursue his career leads me to believe they were a close-knit family, meaning no one wished him ill."

"Who do you suspect?" Vanna asked. "Make the grid."

"Yes, your majesty." I saluted.

She smirked.

I launched a new Word document and created columns. At the top of each, I typed in the names of the guests at the inn. *Yale Kildare & Kiki Cranston, Oswald Crockett, Freddy & Felicity Bobb, Xenia Blair, Dalton Frasier*. I ruled out Noeline, Helga, and her niece as suspects. I knew Noeline and Helga well and was certain Helga would vouch for Pippa. I added the guard's name, *Mr. Smith from Safety First.*

"He couldn't be guilty." Vanna peeked over my shoulder at the screen. "He was so sweet. He loved my petits fours. Besides, what would his motive be?"

"Financial gain," I said matter-of-factly, like Zach had implied as pertained to Freddy. I typed in the alibis that each of the suspects had provided, giving no weight to whether the claims were true or not. "Freddy is the main suspect because the police found a vial of diazepam in his room—the pills were used to drug the guard—and Freddy is in debt." I explained his monetary issues. "But I believe him when he says he's innocent."

She eyed the document on the computer screen. "Yale Kildare was the square-jawed one next to the redhead at last night's dinner?"

"Yes. He works as a process server. He probably makes decent money, but we don't know if he's overextended. He seems to have a beef with

Freddy. See, he and Freddy were friends way back when, but Freddy didn't help him get a scholarship to law school, so he couldn't go."

"Resentment is a good motive," she murmured.

"*Mm-hmm*. His girlfriend, Kiki, is a waitress at Jukebox Joint." I added each employment position to the columns.

"I doubt Kiki makes a ton of money," Vanna said. "When we go to the Joint to deliver the cookies, we could ask what her financial situation is."

"Like she'd tell us."

"Maybe Jenny knows something," she said. Jenny Armstrong was Zach's mother and owner of Jukebox Joint.

I continued. "Then there's Oswald, who goes by Ozzie—"

"He was a boor to Freddy."

"Yes, he was."

"What's his story?"

"I'd say jealousy. Maybe something to do with their parents? Not sure. I think he'd like to be his uncle's favorite nephew. I wouldn't put it past him to have hidden the pills in Freddy's room to frame him." Which, come to think of it, Freddy had suggested.

"Do you think he stole the novella so he could turn up with it later on and be a hero? You know"—she wiggled her head left and right—"to get in his uncle's good graces?"

"Good thought." I added the motive to Ozzie's column.

"See if Kiki has an Internet footprint," Vanna suggested.

"Listen to you." I snickered. "You sound like a seasoned detective."

She pulled a face. "Don't make fun of me."

"Heavens no. I was complimenting you."

She narrowed her eyes as if assessing whether I was being truthful. "I have a source—"

"Councilman Stevenson?"

"A source," she began again, "who says the Internet has a wealth of information that we have yet to tap. He's against all this AI stuff. He says it's intrusive. On the other hand, he has used it for oppo research."

"Oppo research?" I tilted my head. "Are you implying the councilman has higher hopes in the government? Is he planning on running for mayor? Or an even bigger office? Say … congressman or state senator?"

Vanna frowned and pointed at the computer. “Back to the suspect list. Could the reason for the theft be more than financial, like someone who hates Mr. Scroggie and wants to punish him?” She gathered the ingredients for the chocolate muffins and began by measuring out the sugar.

I left the computer and created the icing for the gingerbread men. Once the confectioner’s sugar and milk were blended, I poured some into three ramekins. I added green food coloring to one and red to another for the cookies’ pants and jackets. The white would work for the collars and cuffs.

Vanna said over the whirr of the blender, “According to my source—”

“The councilman.”

She didn’t correct me. “Mr. Scroggie is a tough-as-nails lender. Mainly high-risk loans. What if he reneged on someone’s loan due to a bad credit score or because he found discrepancies in the borrower’s application and the borrower lashed out by stealing the novella, you know, to embarrass the old coot, but he was caught in the act by Mr. Quackenbush?”

“Scroggie is not an old coot,” I said, thinking how fond her mother was of him. He must have been a much nicer man when he was younger.

“What if the killer needed the book?” Vanna riffed. “Not out of financial necessity but because they really, really needed the book, as in, had to have it?”

“As in they’d die otherwise?”

“Well, no, not that extreme.” She brandished a spatula.

The notion brought to mind a new suspect. “Xenia Blair is a rare-book dealer. What if she lacked a Dickens novel or novella in her collection? I imagine there is a great demand for first editions.”

“Couldn’t she have offered to purchase it?” She wielded the spatula again. “Hey, what about the Dalton Frasier guy? He’s handsome but poker-faced. You wrote that he’s a historian. What does that mean? I mean, what does a historian do?”

“They gather historical data by delving into various sources, like archives and such. They trace how events and ideas have come into being and share them in their findings.”

“Boring.” She mimed a yawn. “But he’s obviously smart. I can see there’s something going on in his brain, although he doesn’t let anyone get chummy. If you ask me, he’s shifty.” She aimed the spatula like a sword. “What if he knew Gilbert? Or he and Xenia are in cahoots? Or … I don’t

know, something. I mean, what did that whole thing about ‘Let her burn’ mean?”

When had she become so observant? Was this a result of therapy? Perhaps I should visit my therapist soon. I did so every few months, just to touch base. I didn’t need to work on my sense of self. I felt good about being a baker and caterer, and I enjoyed working at the bookshop and interacting with customers. But I needed a confidence boost when it came to my relationship with my parents. They didn’t railroad me, but at times they could make me feel “less than.” And perhaps I needed perspective regarding how I was acting around Zach. When he wasn’t immersed in an investigation, he was warm. When he was involved, and I was similarly occupied … crickets.

“Don’t forget about Felicity Bobb,” Vanna chimed. “She’s all sugar and spice and everything nice on the outside, but I promise you a tigress lies within.”

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Chapter 12

This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Jukebox Joint, known familiarly to locals as the Joint, was brightly decorated with turquoise booths, red chairs, and an expansive counter fitted with yellow stools. The accents were also red, yellow, and turquoise, right down to the neon sign at the entrance and the jukebox at the far end of the room. A Christmas tree fitted with colored lights stood beside the jukebox, twinkling with merry abandon. Gifts Jenny Armstrong had collected for less fortunate children were nestled beneath the lowest branches, waiting to be distributed when she held the annual cookie-decorating party.

"Last Christmas," the cast of *Glee* version, was playing when Vanna and I entered. I hadn't been much of a TV aficionado when I was growing up—I was a reader—but Tegan had insisted I watch *Glee*. With its catchy tunes, fabulous cast, and progressive messages, it had captured my heart.

Jenny was tending to a couple at the counter. Like her son, Zach, Jenny had an easiness about her. Her warm smile was infectious. Her laughter was delightful. Dressed in her turquoise uniform and bright red apron, her soft

brown hair secured in a yellow snood, she looked younger than her fifty-eight years. She spotted us and raised a hand, two fingers up, to signal she'd be with us shortly.

I was more than willing to wait and surveyed the diner. Three servers, each clad similarly to Jenny, were on the floor. Two of the servers were round and curvy. Kiki's outfit hung on her and made her appear three sizes skinnier than Jenny—and Jenny was slim. She was tending to a table near the jukebox, tapping furiously on an iPad as her customers perused menus and rattled off their requests. Though transmitting orders to the kitchen directly did streamline the process, Jenny preferred the old-school touch of real menus with daily specials attached.

After Jenny submitted the order for her customers, she rounded the counter to greet us. "Hello, ladies. Got my cookies?"

Each of us presented her with a signature white box fixed with a sage green label. Jenny deposited the boxes on the counter and fetched a wet towel from beneath. She began wiping down the area.

I tilted my head in Kiki's direction. "I see you've hired Kiki Cranston."

"Yes," Jenny said. "She's quite good at pitching menu items, but she struggles with the iPad. She's not a tech-savvy person, if you catch my drift."

"I didn't realize how thin she was," Vanna whispered.

"Yes, poor thing," Jenny said. "She's always on a crash diet of some sort. I've told her the darned things deplete her vitamins, and I've tried to entice her to take a multivitamin or at least B12 to help with her thinning hair issue, but she refuses. Nothing artificial goes into her body." She'd added air quotes around the word *artificial*. "She's a whirlwind of activity, like a honeybee moving from table to table. Unfortunately, the honeybee can sting at times. She yells at the chef and kitchen staff."

"No," Vanna said.

"Yes," Jenny replied. "I understand her passion. She wants the best for her customers. Zach heard her once and suggested I have a word with her."

"Did you?" I asked.

Jenny chuckled. "I told him to chill. I was exactly the same at that age. Tart but sweet. Not exactly as vicious as a bee, but feisty when pressed. She'll grow out of her short temper, although …" She didn't finish her thought.

“Although …” I motioned for her to continue.

“Nothing.”

“How’s she doing for cash?” I hoped the question didn’t sound too pointed.

“Fine.”

“I wanted to know because …” The words wouldn’t come.

Vanna said, “Does she ever talk about her finances?”

Jenny frowned but didn’t answer.

“Has she asked for a raise?” Vanna pressed.

Jenny laughed. “She’s only been here a month. That would be brazen.” She hooked her chin in Kiki’s direction. “If you want to grill her, she gets a break in about five minutes.”

“Grill her?” Vanna sputtered.

“Not you, Vanna. Allie,” Jenny said. “She’s always curious. I like that about her. So does my son. He said it’s how she figures out what her clients want and what they need.”

He really said that? Cool.

“Zach should be in a bit later, if you want to stop by,” Jenny added. “Around lunch. He enjoys a Sunday brunch burger with all the fixings.”

A Sunday brunch burger included a fried egg and caramelized onions.

“Too busy,” I said. “Lots on our plate today.” I was dying to ask her if she’d spoken to Zach about the investigation—he still hadn’t reached out after my texts to him—but I bit my tongue. She and I weren’t at the point in our relationship where we could talk freely about him. I didn’t want to put her in an uncomfortable position.

Jenny tossed the soiled towel into a bin behind the counter and wiped her hands on her apron.

“About Kiki …” Vanna said, trying to steer her back to our initial conversation.

“She adores her boyfriend, Yale,” Jenny said. “They’re inseparable. They have been since kids. Have you met him?”

“I have.” I didn’t add where or under what circumstances.

“Kiki said he and she were on a mini staycation when—” Jenny’s face went pale. “Oh, my golly, how insensitive of me, Allie. You were at the inn, too, when it happened. Kiki mentioned you by name. She said it was horrible. What is our town coming to?”

I couldn’t answer. The murder rate—three vicious deaths inside of a year—was rapidly affecting our WELCOME TO BRAMBLEWOOD FOR A RELAXING TIME slogan. Every once in a while, I wondered whether I was a bad vibes magnet since I’d known all the victims personally.

“How is Noeline handling it?” Jenny had been a freshman in high school when Noeline was a senior.

“She’s managing.”

“Erwin Scroggie must be beside himself with grief,” Jenny said. “He and Gilbert were in last week for lunch. They sat at the counter, as they always did, once a month like clockwork. Oh, how they could wax on about books.” She fanned the air. “The way their mouths were always moving, it was a wonder they ate a thing.”

Vanna said, “Mr. Scroggie is sort of crusty, don’t you think?” She leaned in. “I was thinking he might have pinched the novella in a fit of pique.”

Why was she intent on making him the bad guy? She’d met him for a split second. Or … hmm. Had there been other occasions? Maybe he’d visited Noeline when Vanna was in the vicinity, and Vanna had developed a dislike for him.

“Don’t judge a book …” Jenny said, not completing the metaphor. “The man has a generous soul. He lent me seed money years ago.” Her eyes moistened. “He knew I’d lost Zach’s father, and I needed help.”

“Blow me over with a feather,” Vanna said.

“Not blow,” I murmured. “The phrase is knock me over with a feather.”

“That’s what I said.”

I tamped down a smile.

So did Jenny. “Did you know Erwin was madly in love years ago?” she asked.

“Noeline mentioned something to that effect,” I said. Would Scroggie chide her for using his first name the way Noeline had? “I heard the woman’s parents were against the marriage.”

“Yes, it was so sad. Before that, he was a jovial sort. Cracking jokes. Extremely witty. When the family moved away, it broke him, I dare say.” She placed a hand over her heart. “It’s horrible to lose the love of your life.”

Jenny was speaking from experience. Her husband, Zach's father, had died when Zach was in high school. Noeline had lost two husbands, but she'd worked hard to piece herself together after her second husband, Tegan's father, the true love of her life, passed away from a rare blood disease.

"I'm not much of an Internet enthusiast, so I've never done a deep dive to find out where she went," Jenny confided. "You know, Vanna, your mother would tan my hide for saying this, but I think Erwin is sweet on her."

"No way." Vanna went pale.

"Way."

"How would you know that?"

Jenny crooked her head toward the counter. "Around here I'm like a bartender. For some reason, when drinking a cup of coffee or chowing down a tasty meal, customers confess things."

If only the killer would confess to murder, return the novella, and end this nightmare, I mused.

"How are you and my son doing, Allie?" Jenny caught me off guard with the change in topic.

"We … oh … we're fine. Moving along." My heart nervously pounded my rib cage.

"Has he asked your opinion about what happened at the inn?"

"Not really."

"Kiki said you were first on the scene."

"Second. Helga found the …" I hesitated, unable to say the word *body*, feeling it would dehumanize Gilbert. "She found Mr. Quackenbush."

"Did Zach press you for details?"

"Sort of. I mean, I told him my initial observations. He … you know … he likes to make his own determinations. He can be quite independent."

"Yes, he can." Jenny tamped down a smirk. "When he lost Becky," she went on as if we were having a normal conversation, "it cut his heart in two. He shut down and wouldn't let anyone in."

"Becky?" Vanna asked.

I explained how Zach and his high school sweetheart, Becky, had married immediately after graduation. Knowing she suffered from COPD,

they hadn’t wanted to waste a moment of their lives apart. She’d died a year later.

Vanna’s eyes moistened with tears.

“I worried he wouldn’t recover,” Jenny said. “But he was youthful. Strong. The army did him a world of good. Gave him perspective. And then you came along, and he returned to the land of the living.”

“He was doing fine before meeting me,” I said wryly.

“That’s subjective.” She winked at me.

Vanna pressed a hand to her heart. “Can one ever get over the loss of a true love entirely?”

The question was so insightful, it startled me.

Jenny hitched her chin toward Kiki. “She’s taking her break now. See if you two can get her to drink a protein shake. Order one for yourselves, on me.”

Vanna and I didn’t have a lot of time, but we could fit in a short chat with Kiki. We moseyed to her as she moved toward the kitchen.

“Hi,” I said.

Kiki swung around. Perspiration speckled her upper lip. “Hi.” She whipped the moisture off with her forearm. “What’re you doing here?”

“Jukebox Joint is one of our customers,” I replied.

“You have a lot of them.”

“The business is growing.” I hooked a finger at the server behind the counter. “Buy you a protein drink?”

“Nah,” Kiki said. “I don’t eat when I work.”

Or ever, I thought. Was it due to an affliction or lack of finances?

“I wish I could start my own business.” Kiki removed her hair net snood, scooped up loose hairs that had escaped, refastened her hair, and slipped the snood back on.

“What would you do?” Vanna asked.

“Sculptures and such.” Kiki’s face lit up with excitement. “You know, personal items upon a client’s request. Maybe cat prints or dog prints. Ornaments for Christmas trees. Garden pots. Vases. That sort of thing. But Yale chides me, calling it a pipe dream. There’s no money in it.”

Vanna chortled. “Tell that to Archipenko.”

“Who’s he?” Kiki asked.

“A Ukrainian American avant-garde artist and sculptor. He died years ago, but I’ve always loved his stuff. Art history was my major in college.”

I knew she’d gone to UNC, but I had no idea what she’d studied.

“I tried college,” Kiki said. “It didn’t work out for me.”

“It takes a lot of money to go,” Vanna said, leading the witness.

“Well, my mom said if I didn’t intend to earn a degree, she wouldn’t throw good money after bad.”

“I’m sorry,” Vanna said. “That must’ve been hard.”

Kiki’s eyes clouded with tears, but then she sobered and shrugged one shoulder. “Dreams are for children. I serve tables now.”

“Do you make enough money?” Vanna asked, stunning me further with her direct approach.

“One day at a time.” Kiki regarded her watch. “I’ve got to use the loo before I return to my shift. Nice to see you.” She rushed away.

“Gee, Vanna, that was, um …” What could I say? “That was some—”

“Good sleuthing?” She beamed. “I know, right? Hercule Poirot would be proud, don’t you think?”

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Chapter 13

“Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

After making deliveries, Vanna headed to a lunch date—she was cagey about with whom; I suspected the councilman—and I went home. I collected Darcy and some of the extra chocolate pecan cookies we’d made and drove to Feast for the Eyes.

When I entered, it felt like I’d walked into a Christmas wonderland. Chloe had added more decorations, sprinkled the book tree with tinsel, and spruced up the quotes from *A Christmas Carol* with sprigs of holly.

“All I Want for Christmas Is You” by Mariah Carey was playing through the speakers. A couple of mystery readers were sashaying to the beat as they browsed titles.

Chloe emerged from an aisle and did a quick twirl, the skirt of her red dress fluting out. “I love selling books,” she declared.

Stella Burberry, a regular customer, trailed her. She wasn’t wearing her hair piled on top of her head, as was her norm. In fact, she’d chopped it off so it wasn’t more than an inch long. What a dramatic change.

I motioned that I loved the new hairdo, which made her smile, and then I approached the sales counter, where I couldn't reserve my awe. On the table in front of the counter was a gorgeous array of fruit and cheese and a spray of red flowers. "Wow," I said to Tegan, who was finalizing a sale with a mother of two toddlers. "What's with the feast? Yum!"

"Mom said the guests at the inn weren't eating much and thought we should share the perishables." She handed her customer a bag with her purchase. "Here you go. Happy reading, kids!"

The customer shepherded her children toward the door.

I said, "Here's my donation. Dessert." I presented Tegan with the cookies, took Darcy to the office, freed him from his carrier, and returned. "Let the party begin." I nibbled gouda paired with a slice of apple. So good. "So who'd you go on a date with last night?"

"Huh?" she asked, playing dumb.

"Date? You were dressed up. It wasn't for dinner. Coffee, maybe?"

"You don't know him."

"Should I? I'm your wingman. I should check him out."

"It's nothing. It's casual. Let it go." She pinched my arm.

I winced and agreed.

"You're really going to enjoy this one," Chloe said to Stella as she grabbed two books from an endcap. "*A Christmas Duet* by Debbie Macomber. Oh, and this, too. *Kiss Me at Christmas* by Jenny Bayliss is one of my favorites. It's about a woman who directs a play, and the theater owner is …" She swooned, dramatically, the back of her hand to her forehead. "I won't say more. Think of it like a Nora Ephron movie meets *White Christmas*."

"I love Nora Ephron movies," Stella said.

Whoa. She did? News to me. I didn't think she had a romantic bone in her body. An accountant with a fondness for single-color dressing, Stella was an avid book club attendee who typically enjoyed historical mysteries.

Stella accepted both books from Chloe. "You had me at hello."

"Different movie," Chloe quipped.

"I know." Stella snickered.

Lillian swept into the store carrying zippered dress bags. Whenever she had costumes to share, she rarely waited until she was close up to speak. "Ta-da!" she announced so the entire shop could hear. "You will all look

smashing.” She crooned the word. Passing Stella, she said, “If you’re coming to the *Christmas Carol* event on Saturday, you’ll want to dress like a real Dickensian. See me, and I’ll outfit you.”

Stella said, “Do you have a Miss Havisham getup?”

Lillian guffawed. “You are not an old prune, and I won’t let you wear it.”

Stella nudged her in jest. She and Lillian were good friends and often donated time to good causes.

“All Alone on Christmas” started piping through the speakers.

I grinned at Tegan. “Are you playing the *Love Actually* soundtrack?”

“Yep.”

It happened to be one of her favorite movies. Mine too. The heartbreaking scene between Sarah and her emotionally dependent brother ripped me to pieces. And the guy with the cue cards silently showing Juliet he loved her? Wow.

“What’s your all-time favorite romance song at Christmas?” Stella asked Chloe.

“I don’t have one.”

“I do,” Lillian chimed. “‘Kissin’ by the Mistletoe,’ by Aretha Franklin.” She belted out the chorus.

Her gleeful delivery made me think of my mother. I’ll never forget the first time I heard Fern singing along with Dean Martin to “I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm.” While not truly a Christmas song, she’d explained, she loved Dean’s languid delivery and the lyrics melted the cockles of her heart. I was six at the time. I didn’t have a clue what a languid *anything* was. And when I’d asked what cockles were, she couldn’t come up with an answer but swore me to secrecy, cautioning I could not reveal to my father what I’d heard. When I’d questioned why, she’d said Jamie would make fun of her for days. Yet again I was perplexed. I didn’t think my father had been blessed with the *fun* gene. I loved him, but he was a no-nonsense kind of guy.

Candace Canfield sauntered into the shop warbling about being down in the valley. She stopped singing when she caught us staring. “Sorry, I got swept away.”

It seemed everyone was entranced today. Were they simply embracing the holiday spirit, or was something more at play?

I eyed Candace. She was shy by nature and mousy in appearance. However, when onstage, she blossomed into a woman brimming with confidence. “What’s that tune?” I asked.

“‘Sing Hallelujah,’” Candace replied.

“Love it,” Lillian chimed. “By the way, Can-Can, when are you coming to Puttin’ on the Glitz for that makeover?”

Makeover? I mean, if anyone could do it, Lillian could, but would Candace go through with it? And Can-Can? What kind of nickname was that?

“Soon,” Candace said. “Promise. I’m trying to decide what to wear.”

“Blue,” Lillian said. “That’s your color.”

Candace said, “K,” then shifted her tote bag from her right shoulder to the left and brushed her long curls over both shoulders with her free hand. “Hey, Tegan, I’m looking for some book gifts.”

“What genre?” Tegan asked. “Mystery? Historical?”

“Do you have any romantasies?”

The word was a new mash-up of romance and fantasy in which world building was super important. Tegan was an expert.

“Let’s go.” She nabbed Candace’s elbow.

I moseyed to Lillian. “Show me your wares. But first, tell me what’s with the Can-Can nickname?”

“I had a small soiree the other night, and let’s just say a few of us drank a wee bit too much, and Candace wound up doing a dance on the coffee table.” She bent one arm, propped it behind her head, and did a low kick. Giggling, she added, “Wish I’d had my camera. She made me promise not to tell her husband.”

Again, I imagined my mother and her lusty singing. Oh, what secrets we keep.

Stella wiggled her fingers. “I can attest. I was there.”

“Why wasn’t I invited?” I asked with a fake pout.

“We played canasta,” Lillian said. “You told me you didn’t want to learn.”

She was right. I liked poker. Occasionally, Zach and I played for pennies.

“Here’s your costume. I’m waiting on a few items for Tegan.” Lillian unzipped one of the carryalls. “By the way, I’m having another soiree, and I

hope you'll cater it."

"When?"

"Tonight. Seven-thirty. Figure on seven to eight people."

I gaped.

"I know, I know. It's last minute, but I invited a few women whom I intend to beg to volunteer at the theater. Feeding them will sweeten the lure. Can you manage it? Doesn't have to be fancy. Heavy hors d'oeuvres would work. Pretty please?" Daintily, she curled a tendril of hair around a finger and batted her eyelashes.

Laughing, I said, "Sure." I didn't have an event planned, plus I had plenty of pre-made bite-sized pastry shells ready for filling.

"I want lots of fresh veggies."

"Consider it done."

She pulled two dresses from the bag and followed with muffs and capes. "Chloe is on the fence about what she wants to wear. I brought some ideas in the other carryall. Do you still like this one?"

I held the dress I'd chosen in front of me and grinned. "I love it."

Lillian pressed a hand to her chest. "It's so sad about poor Gilbert Quackenbush. Do you have any idea who did it? Does Zach?"

I shook my head, clueless to his thoughts.

My cell phone buzzed. To my surprise it was Zach texting. Had he picked up on my mental anguish?

Got time?

Yes.

Precinct. Now.

"Is it a love note?" Lillian asked.

My cheeks blazed with heat. "Hardly." By the terse tone, I might be in hot water.

On my way to the police department, I gave myself a pep talk. Zach requesting to see me at his workplace did not mean I was in trouble. He might be too busy to go for coffee and was requesting everyone come to him so he could accomplish all his investigative proceedings at one location.

Yeah, and unicorns are real.

I drew in a deep breath and let the air out in four long counts. When I inhaled again, a favorite quote by A. A. Milne came to me. It was often attributed to Winnie-the-Pooh, but it was really Milne who came up with it: “Organizing is what you do before you do something, so that when you do it, it is not all mixed up.” I’d liked it so much, I’d hung a plaque inscribed with the words in my kitchen as a reminder for me to be prepared for any emergency.

I pulled into the public parking lot located at the junction of North Mountain Road and East Main Street, near the rec center and Bramblewood Park. Before exiting the van, I swathed on lip gloss.

Feet on the ground, I drew in a restorative breath and strode to the precinct entrance. Like most of the buildings in town, the exterior of the building was red clapboard. The reception area was homey with a welcome desk and windows through which visitors could view the main room of the precinct. Many of the desks held holiday decorations like mini Christmas trees or snow globes. An animated, foot-tall Santa caught my eye, and I grinned. The sounds, however, were of phones ringing or staff chatting or tapping keyboards. No cheery music was playing.

From his office, Zach caught sight of me and beckoned with one hand.

After being buzzed in, I entered the main room and veered right. Zach’s office sported windows sans slatted blinds, but there were no holiday decorations. He embraced me and kissed my forehead gently. Amazingly, the teensy gesture made me breathe a whole ton easier, and I believed all would be right with the world. Soon.

He released me, and I caught sight of a dry-erase board behind his spartan desk. On it was a timeline visually different from the one I’d created. Mine was vertical. His ran horizontally. The hours when Gilbert and guests arrived at the inn, the approximate time of the murder, and the discovery of the body were noted.

Below the time references, Zach had affixed photographs or sketches signifying each of the guests, the guard, Erwin Scroggie, Helga, her niece, Noeline, Tegan, and, yes, me. He’d dubbed the collection “Suspects.”

Yipes. I’d believed this time he could rule me out. Maybe not.

Below the suspects’ images, he’d jotted the words *Clues* and *Evidence*. Beneath those he’d written:

Murder weapon: bust of Dickens
Missing item: novella
Suspect item: guard's cup of tea
Evidence: red hair, blond hair, dark hair, gray hair. Insignificant unidentifiable fibers. No fingerprints on murder weapon or case holding absent novella. A copy of Great Expectations *given to guard by Noeline Merriweather.*

Aha. One mystery solved. Noeline had given the book to the guard. He hadn't brought it with him.

I continued reading:

Note: Noeline Merriweather provided a list of items typically included in the space. All accounted for and numbered. Nothing else stolen.
Suspects: Everyone at inn? Possible intruder? Outside conspirator?
Motive: Financial gain from sale of novella; other?
Person of interest: Freddy Bobb; motive: debt

A detailed sketch of the parlor with an outline of the victim's body was included. Had Zach done the artwork? If so, he possessed more talent than I gave him credit for.

"Don't you consider any of Gilbert's associates suspects?" I motioned to the board.

He frowned. "You shouldn't have seen that."

"You wanted me to review it or you would have flipped it over before I arrived. You trust me. You respect my opinion." I tamped down a smile. If only Tegan were here. She would know what I was trying to do—employ Obi-Wan Kenobi's Jedi mind trick to make the enemy, aka Zach, believe he wanted the same thing Obi-Wan did. Answers.

Zach's mouth quirked up on the right. "Guilty."

I didn't let on how relieved I was. I proceeded like an equal. "I read on Wikipedia that Gilbert's family members live in Greensboro."

"Wikipedia?" He arched an eyebrow.

“I was doing some research.” I shrugged a shoulder, not feeling guilty in the least. “Any known business enemies or former clients who reviled him?”

“None. Those who knew him said he was the nicest guy in the world.” He’d mimed quotation marks around *nicest guy*. “He worked alone. No employees.”

“You haven’t found the novella yet, have you?”

He shook his head.

“Did you talk to known fences about whether the thief was trying to sell the novella?” I asked.

“Bates is focusing on that angle.”

“And you didn’t—”

“Hold it.” He raised a hand. “This is my office. My interrogation.”

I waited for him to ask me a question. When he didn’t, I proceeded. “You didn’t find fingerprints on anything?”

“Sure we did, all over the room, but none on the novella case. None on the bust of Dickens. Or the tea urn. Or the guard’s mug.”

“Meaning the killer wiped down Smith’s cup after he drank the potion?”

“Apparently so.” Zach clicked his tongue.

“You’ve checked out Smith’s reputation?”

“Stellar. Comes highly recommended. Never had an incident with the law.”

“Did you happen to look for prints on the trash can in Freddy’s room?”

Zach frowned. “Are you insinuating we aren’t thorough?”

I felt my cheeks warm. “No. I didn’t mean—”

“I’m goading you.” He winked and grew serious. “There were no prints on the trash can, and the doorknob was wiped clean inside and out.”

I tilted my head. “Interesting. That clears Freddy, right?”

“Not necessarily. He could’ve polished the knob to make it appear someone else had entered his room after he and his wife exited.”

I chewed on my lower lip and viewed the board again. “The red hair could be mine, Xenia’s, or Kiki’s. The blond could be Tegan’s, Pippa’s, or Felicity’s. What tone was it?”

He squinted. “Um, blond.”

I sniggered. “There are a variety of shades. Light blond, dark blond, honey blond.” I regarded the board again. “I suppose the dark hair could

belong to Freddy, Yale, or Ozzie. The gray hair could belong to Dalton, Smith, or Scroggie, or possibly Gilbert Quackenbush or Helga. By the way, we were all in the parlor earlier that evening to view the novella and enjoy dessert."

He nodded.

"Silly question, but were any of the hairs you found root hairs?" I asked. Quickly I explained that I'd learned from reading mysteries how a strand of hair without a follicle could not be tested for DNA.

"Forensics is handling that end," he said, dismissing my expertise.

"You know, I was working through the scenario with—"

"That is exactly why I asked you here."

"Not to spend time with someone as charming as me and discuss motives?" I motioned at the board. "I see we agree on one front. Financial gain is the most likely motive."

"Did you miss the word *other* followed by the question mark?" He tapped the board and rounded the desk. He stood inches away from me, the heat between us palpable. If not for the fishbowl view of the precinct, I'd have thrown myself into his arms.

After a long moment, he retreated and leaned against the desk, arms folded. All business. "Tell me your and Tegan's suspicions."

"In fact, I was theorizing with Vanna. Surprise." I wiggled jazz hands.

He grinned. "Go on."

"We don't know much about Dalton Frasier. He said he came all the way from England to view the novella. Truth or lie? I mean, yes, he's a historian and a Dickens aficionado, but it seems quite costly to make a trip to Bramblewood simply for a peek. On the night of the murder, he was overheard saying 'Let her burn' to someone on the phone. Xenia Blair figured he meant her."

"Why?"

"Not sure. To take the fall? Kiki Cranston and Felicity wondered if he'd meant one of them."

"Go on."

"Do you know if Xenia's business is doing well? Her interest in the novella makes sense. She's a rare-book dealer. Viewing and possibly holding something like Scroggie's treasure had to be the allure. But what if

her business is struggling, and she lacks a Dickens item, and a buyer approached who would pay anything to get his hands on one?"

"Therefore, her motive falls under the category of financial gain," he stated.

"Yep." I regarded the board again. "To be honest, no one seems to have a good alibi." Not seeing any of their excuses scribbled down, I listed them, ticking them off on my fingertips. "Freddy was walking outside a few minutes after midnight and found Felicity asleep when he reentered their room, meaning she can't account for when he returned, though she says she can because she was awake and writing in her diary."

Zach grunted. "Which she most likely claimed to cover for his absence."

"Kiki said she and Yale were in their room sleeping, though she awoke to see Freddy outside. What if she never really went to sleep? What if, after Freddy went to bed, she slipped downstairs? Yale wouldn't have been able to account for her whereabouts."

"Why would you consider Kiki Cranston a suspect?" Zach asked.

"She could be struggling financially."

"My mom pays a fair wage," he said.

"I didn't mean to imply …" I wagged a hand. "Did you confirm Xenia's alibi? She claimed to be on an overseas Zoom call."

"We have."

"And?"

"The client says Xenia was speaking, but he couldn't see her face. She had her video switched off."

Why? Because she hadn't thought she looked professional enough, due to the late hour? Because she'd had a glass or two of wine? A theory came to mind. "Is it possible she transmitted her sound from a different part of the inn, say the parlor? As long as she had a microphone and audio settings configured correctly, that might have allowed for input from a second device."

Zach raked his fingers through his hair. "That's a stretch."

"But not impossible. Back to Dalton Frasier. He claimed he was reading a book about the Industrial Revolution. Honestly, the topic alone would've knocked me out."

Zach laughed. “I rather enjoyed the period. There were remarkable inventions, including the steam engine, telephone, and dynamite.”

Give me fiction any day of the week. “As for Ozzie, who really loathes his cousin and doesn’t like his uncle, either, from what I can tell … he said he went to the liquor store next to Fair Exchange. Have you verified that?”

Zach chuckled. “Okay, Sherlock, got it. You have been busy. And you have been heard. Now”—he gently brushed my cheek with his knuckles—“I wish you would let me and Bates handle this going forward.”

“Uh-uh, you don’t get off that easy. You can’t dismiss me with a sweet gesture. You asked me to come here. You wanted to pick my brain. Consider it picked. What time did Ozzie return? Did he see the killer? Did he notice the body? Was he drunk and oblivious? If so, it’s not a good defense.” I motioned to the murder board. “And what about Scroggie? Where was he at the time?”

“Erwin Scroggie?”

“Maybe you aren’t aware, but he’ll recoup a big paycheck for his loss,” I said. “Big.”

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Chapter 14

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

When I left the precinct, I felt so much better about my relationship with Zach. After all, he hadn't bitten off my head, and I even believed he'd be open to me offering thoughts in the future, should any pop up.

They would, of course, because I intended to continue theorizing. I loved Noeline. I didn't want to see her business suffer. And I cared about Freddy. I didn't want him to be the killer. Not to mention poor Gilbert Quackenbush deserved justice. I knew Zach would do all he could to discover the truth, but a fresh pair of eyes wouldn't hurt.

I swung by the bookshop to fetch Darcy, went to the grocery store to pick up some vegetables, and headed to the ghost kitchen.

Darcy remained in his carrier while I prepared a variety of appetizers for Lillian's soiree: mini quiches, a standard from Dream Cuisine; baked artichoke dip made with sour cream and cheddar cheese, served in a bowl of sourdough bread; blue cheese and bacon appetizers, which were a crowd favorite; and ground pork, ginger, and green onion pot stickers. In keeping

with a Christmasy theme, I made a cranberry-studded cheese ball and a Christmas tree–shaped charcuterie board complete with meats, olives, a variety of nuts, sliced cheeses, red grapes for ornaments, and leafy kale for the base. I whipped up a few desserts, too. The women Lillian had invited loved their sweets.

When the task was done, Darcy made it very clear he craved a home-cooked meal, so I took him to the cabin and fed him. Contented, he leaped to the top of his cat-scratching station and went to sleep.

As I was not a guest at the party, I donned my catering standards: black slacks and crisp white blouse. For a festive touch, I tucked my curly hair into a sparkly snood.

Lillian lived in a lovely house given to her by her family upon her return from Hollywood. They came from old Bramblewood money and continued to make good investments. I slipped inside pushing the food warmer packed with hot appetizers—the front door was open—and paused to admire the gigantic Christmas tree decorated with white lights and golden orbs. It nearly touched the living room's high ceiling. Wrapped boxes nestled on the floor beneath the lowest boughs. Strands of twinkling lights circled the large windows. Through the windows guests could view the cultivated gardens, which were aglow with landscape lighting focusing on the winter blooms. The aroma of cinnamon candles filled the air. "Greensleeves" was playing softly through a Bluetooth speaker.

"Lillian," I trilled. "I'm here."

"In the back," she replied. "Out in a sec."

The silk couches facing one another held myriad holiday-themed pillows. It looked like a game of chess was in progress on the antique table in the nook to the left. The set was new. I'd never seen it before.

"I'm going to the kitchen," I announced.

I trundled the food warmer through the swinging door and nearly gasped when I saw the kitchen décor. Lillian would rival a Hallmark movie set designer. Boughs of holly prettified the cabinets. A trio of snowmen stood on the island. The kitchen table was set for four, complete with red-and-green quilted tablemats, Santa mugs, and Santa candlesticks.

"Hey, you," Tegan said, entering from the dining room, wearing a kitschy Christmas sweater over leggings. Some might call the sweater ugly.

I knew better than to comment. "Hi. What're you doing here so early?"

“I came to help”—she raised a glass of wine—“myself to a beverage.” She sniggered. “What else did you bring?”

“A couple of salads. Platters of veggies with a variety of dipping sauces. Freshly baked bread. I’ll need to make a second trip to the van.”

“Mom, Vanna,” Tegan called. “Come help.”

Vanna and Noeline, each in sparkling dresses, entered the way Tegan had, each carrying a glass of wine.

“Tell them what you need, Allie,” Tegan said.

I asked them to remove the appetizers from the cart and place them on the gigantic island. “If you’d preheat the ovens, I can keep the food warm until guests arrive.”

Tegan and I headed outside to the van. “You’re under-dressed,” she said.

“I’m the caterer tonight.”

“Yeah, why is that?”

“Because someone needs to manage it all. Lillian can’t cook a lick.” I pointed toward the van’s opened rear doors. “Wheel the trolley cart on the left down the ramp. I’ll take the one on the right. Don’t worry. Nothing will spill out.” After a major snafu months ago, I’d learned to securely lock all containers and cart doors until each reached its destination.

“How did it go with Zach?” Tegan asked, guiding the cart effortlessly into the house.

“Not now. I want to stay focused on the evening’s plans.”

She made a raspberry sound. “Spoilsport.”

“Professional.”

I veered to the kitchen and arranged the remaining food on the counters. In a matter of minutes, I’d plated it all, using kale and parsley to decorate the platters I’d toted along.

An hour later, Lillian, her grandmother Magda, Evelyn, Stella, and Candace were seated in the spacious living room lapping up appetizers along with Noeline, Vanna, and Tegan. I was roaming the room, collecting discarded paper plates decorated with Christmas trees and red snowflakes. Other than insisting her guests dress in merry outfits, Lillian had demanded the event be informal. No dishes to wash other than her wineglasses or the platters I provided.

“Everyone, have I told you about the other festivities I’ve arranged in town?” Evelyn announced in a stage-worthy voice. “Our very own Candace

will be singing and playing keyboard outside a venue tomorrow."

"A few standards," Candace murmured. "You know, like 'The Little Drummer Boy' and 'Winter Wonderland.' Nothing fancy."

Evelyn clapped her hands.

Candace picked up a quiche and bit into it. "*Mmm*, I love these, Allie."

Evelyn said, "Me too. And the blue cheese and bacon appetizers on toasted baguettes? Heaven." With a wry smirk she added, "You didn't learn to cook from your mother. She couldn't even make a proper piece of toast."

"Like me," Lillian quipped.

"Your ineptness in the kitchen was not my fault, darling Lillian," Magda said. "I tried to teach you, but you were more interested in sewing." She eyed each of the guests. "Ask the girl to make a dress for her dolly? Done in a flash. But help with dinner?" She clucked her tongue. "She was running for the hills."

Everyone tittered.

Lillian fondly pinched her grandmother's arm. "Blame yourself for my proclivity, Nana." To everyone she said, "She bought me my first sewing machine. Within a month, she taught me how to make buttonholes and wraparound skirts."

"She's always had a sense of style, my little one," Magda said.

"Oh, yes, a wraparound skirt is so fashionable," Lillian joked. "Not."

After a round of laughter—Lillian crying tears of joy from the memory—the crowd settled into a reverent silence. An instrumental version of "Silent Night" filled the room.

"So," Stella said slyly, breaking the calm, "spill, Allie."

I stopped what I was doing, hands full. "I'm sorry. Did I spill something?"

Stella guffawed. "Don't be coy. What happened to Gilbert Quackenbush? I mean, I know what happened. He died. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he was murdered. But tell us more."

Candace froze. Vanna cleared her throat. Tegan cocked her head, curious how I'd respond.

"C'mon. You always have theories," Stella went on. "You're observant. Tell us what you noticed."

"I shouldn't talk about any of it," I replied judiciously. "Zach will expect everyone who was there to keep quiet until he determines who the

killer is."

"Pshaw. No theorizing?" Stella leveled Vanna with a look of curiosity. "Vanna says you have a crew of detectives helping you."

"Vanna," I moaned.

She fussed with the sleeves of her dress.

Stella persisted. "I heard Xenia Blair was at the inn at the time. Is she a suspect? I've been to her shop. Have any of you?"

Candace shook her head. So did Noeline.

"I have," Magda said. "I'm a collector. Find me a first edition Jane Austen, and I cry 'Sold' every time."

"I love Jane Austen," Stella exclaimed. "But I've invested in Georgette Heyer novels."

Although I didn't read a lot of romance, I knew of Heyer. Her Georgian era novels had revitalized interest in the genre.

"I own a first edition of *The Grand Sophy*," Stella said. "It's so witty. Especially for having been written in the 1950s. Sophy, who was raised by her military father, goes to London to live with her cousins, and are they ever shocked to find out what a force she is."

Yet again I was surprised by Stella's interest. She and I would have to meet for a cup of coffee soon so I could ask the titles of her most favorite books. The short list could be quite telling about a person. I favored *And Then There Were None* by Agatha Christie, *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett, and *The Long Goodbye* by Raymond Chandler.

"Her shop is lovely," Stella went on.

"She's quite an unusual woman," Magda said. "Not only does she deal in rare books, but she loves to talk about them and share historical anecdotes. Did you know when she landed on a first edition of *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe, she nearly fainted?"

"Thomas Wolfe." Stella cooled her face by flapping her hand.

Magda tittered. "Of course, she won't ever part with it. She is such a fan."

Thomas Wolfe, one of the giants of twentieth-century American literature, was an Asheville native. His childhood home, featured in *Look Homeward, Angel*, became the Thomas Wolfe Memorial State Historic Site.

"Is it possible she felt the same about Dickens's novella?" Evelyn asked. "To have and to hold from this day forward for her own personal

enjoyment?”

While the group massaged the theory that Xenia stole the novella, I passed around a platter of pot stickers. Each guest took one and hummed her approval.

“Allie, did I see cookies on the dining table? Are they for dessert?” Candace eyed me expectantly. “I’m a cookie fiend.”

“Yes, and I brought a white chocolate and raspberry tart,” I said.

Noeline swooned. “My favorite.”

“I know.” I winked at her. Considering the stress of the murder and theft, I’d guessed she could use some comfort food.

“Noeline,” Lillian said around a mouthful of baked artichoke dip on a cracker, “how upset is Erwin Scroggie? After all, it was his treasure.”

“Very,” Noeline replied.

“He’s not my favorite person,” Candace inserted, “but he does donate to the library.” She had a few passion projects, the library being one of them. In particular, she wanted the children’s section to be rife with new books. Her son, now in junior college, had been a reluctant reader until she’d introduced him to the children’s hour at the library.

“Anyone who donates to literacy gets a star in my book,” Stella said.

“And anyone who donates to the theater,” Evelyn added.

“Hear, hear,” Lillian agreed, happy to put in a plug for her labor of love. “And if you can’t donate money, hours of your time would be a tremendous help. Hint, hint.”

“Books or donations aside, can we talk about Scroggie?” Vanna asked. “He is so crabby.”

Her mother eyed her. “Don’t say that. You don’t even know him.”

“He can be harsh and brash and …” Vanna waved a hand. “I’ve seen him in action. Why, at the bank the other day, he was super critical and ultrahot under the collar. He barked at a clerk. In front of everyone.”

Aha. That might explain her aversion to him.

“He can be short-tempered,” Noeline conceded. “Losing his fiancée …” She took a sip of wine and didn’t finish.

“Noeline,” Magda crooned, “little birdies say he has a crush on you.”

“I’ve heard the same.” Evelyn bobbed her head.

Noeline nearly spit out her wine.

Tegan stared at her mother. “Mom? Care to share?”

All heads turned toward Noeline.

Her cheeks tinged pink, and she buckled under the pressure. “We’re friends. Nothing more.”

Lillian said, “Perhaps you should ask him on a date.” She eyed the other partygoers. “What do you think, girls?”

“Ugh.” Vanna moaned. “Mother would rather die than go out with the old prune.”

“Vanna, enough!” Noeline snapped. “Under his rough exterior, he’s sweet.”

“His fiancée left him. How sweet can he be?” Vanna retorted.

“She left because her parents …” Noeline huffed and went quiet.

“He never married,” Vanna persisted. “He became a hermit.”

“You don’t know anything,” Noeline said.

“What if he needs money and was at the bank for a loan?” Vanna addressed the others to gain support. “When the clerk denied him, he raised his voice.” She held up a finger to make her point. “What if he stole the novella to get the insurance? Meaning he might be the killer.”

“He’s a lender, for heaven’s sake,” Noeline chided. “He doesn’t need money.”

“Do you know that for sure?” Magda asked.

“Do you, Noeline?” Stella raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, do you?” Evelyn’s hawkish stare would’ve made me confess to anything.

Noeline wheezed as if the air was seeping out of her. “Stop. Please. All of you. No more talk of him.”

“*Ooh*, Mother,” Vanna said sharply, “at times you can be exasperatingly private. Why you …” She sputtered. “You—”

“Zip it, Vanna,” Tegan cautioned.

“But she drives me crazy.” Vanna thrust her arm, palm up, in the direction of her mother.

“And you, Daughter, drive me to drink.” Noeline lifted her glass, took a sip, and remained tight-lipped.

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Chapter 15

No space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunity misused.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

When I left Lillian's, my mind was roiling with disparate thoughts: how Magda had teased her granddaughter, how Noeline had maddened her eldest, and how my mother's prickly friendship with Evelyn Evers might be on the mend.

Oddly enough, for some reason the disjointed musings led me to reconsider Scroggie as a suspect. What did I really know about him? Yes, he was a businessman and lender, and, yes, he was known to be fixated with money. Was Vanna right? Was it possible he'd messed up his personal accounts and had been trying to obtain a loan? Would a huge payout from his insurance policy on the novella help bridge the gap?

I fastened the carts inside the van, swung around to the driver's side of the vehicle, and climbed in. As I secured my seat belt and switched on the ignition, I refocused on the guests at the inn. Kiki, for instance. Simply because she worked at the diner didn't mean she needed a financial boost. For all I knew, given her mother's wealth, she might have a trust fund.

What about Ozzie? He was such a hard-edged guy. Always cracking wise. Exceedingly dismissive. Without a doubt, he hated Freddy. Why? Did he resent his cousin's happiness with Felicity? Was it possible he'd aimed his sights on Felicity, only to be thrown over by her for Freddy?

Get real, Allie. Do not create a soap opera where there is none.

I drove home, allowing my mind to free-associate, but I didn't come up with any new theories.

As I was unlocking the front door, my cell phone jingled. I pushed inside, bent to pet my attentive tuxedo cat, and viewed the screen. *Fern.*

I answered and kicked the door shut. "Hey, Fern. What time is it?"

"Eleven a.m., Cookie."

Cookie was the one endearing phrase my parents had ever given me. Not Sweetie or Honey. Odd because they hadn't allowed me to eat cookies when growing up. I had to bake them at Tegan's house and sneak a stash into my dresser drawer.

"We're thirteen hours ahead of you," she said. "Guess where we are?"

"Antarctica."

"That was last month. C'mon. Guess." She jokingly sang the tune to *Jeopardy!* "Ding," she declared when I didn't answer. "Nepal. Did you know that Nepal is the sole country in the world with a nonrectangular flag? Its flag is two overlapping triangles symbolizing …" She trailed off, waiting for me to complete the sentence.

"Nepal hopes it will last as long as the sun and the moon."

"Excellent. And, c'mon, give me one more tidbit."

"It's the birthplace of Buddha."

Throughout my childhood, my mother and father demanded I fill my head with nonessential facts. They believed the more I challenged myself to remember, the more I would recall.

"And …" she coaxed.

"Fern, it's late. I just finished serving a party. I'm tired. Why are you calling?"

"Evelyn and I spoke." She said it matter-of-factly. No bitterness. No accusation. "We're working things out between us. I admitted that the end of our friendship was my doing."

Whoa. Fern rarely acknowledged being at fault.

“Over a boy, no less.” Fern clucked her tongue. “My early twenties were such a ridiculous time. I was a flibbertigibbet.”

“Never. Not possible.” All my life, I’d considered my mother a stern taskmaster. A humorless soul married to facts and figures and mathematical enigmas.

“I forgot what a hoot she is,” Fern went on. “Even now, she makes me laugh.” Evelyn had told me my mother had been funny way back when. She’d cracked wise with jokes. “I hate that my actions broke her heart.”

“Does Jamie know?” I asked.

“No, and he doesn’t need to. Evelyn assured me what’s past is past. She’s forgiven me for running off with the love of her life.”

Fern and the boy in question—they were barely out of college—had traveled the United States together. When they broke up, she must have dumped every last vestige of their relationship. I’d searched albums in the attic for pictures of her and him but hadn’t found any.

“Evelyn thanked me,” Fern continued, “saying she and he would’ve been completely wrong for one another. She’s made quite a life for herself. She encouraged me to do the same.” She sighed. “Isn’t it silly how we can hold on to our past with such fierceness as if anger should be the driving force to carry us through life?”

Her sentiment gave me pause. I believed I’d forgiven my ex-fiancé for dumping me, but even now I felt a pang. Was I emotionally tiptoeing around Zach, not letting him fully know me, because I worried he might leave me in the lurch like my ex did?

“I can’t believe there’s been another murder,” Fern said, changing course. “Have you considered therapy?”

Honestly, I couldn’t have been more stunned had she hurled a bucket of ice water at me.

“Say what?” I forced a laugh. “You don’t believe in therapy.”

“It might help to have someone to talk to. You were first on the scene.”

“Second,” I corrected.

“What does Zach think? Is he being sensitive to your needs?”

Holy mackerel. When had my mother become—*be still my heart*—caring? “Yes,” I said. “He is.”

“Good. Evelyn speaks highly of him. You deserve someone who respects you but also looks after you.”

“He doesn’t … I don’t need—”

“Your father and I are a mutual admiration society,” she quipped. “That’s the secret sauce in our marriage.”

I screwed up my mouth, stymied by how to respond.

“As for solving the murder, no matter what, don’t forget to listen to what everyone says,” Fern added. “Gossip. Lies. Every detail. I remember reading …” She said something else I couldn’t make out.

“What? Could you repeat that?”

She chuckled. “It’s like a game of telephone. I utter one thing. You hear another.”

“But I didn’t hear—”

“All I was saying was don’t forget in *Hercule Poirot’s Christmas*, when the detective says, ‘If a human being converses much, it is impossible for him to avoid the truth.’ The best way to approach an investigation is to be observant. Get people to talk.”

Now I was totally blown away. “You don’t read fiction.”

“Once in a blue moon I do.” She preferred math journals and scientific articles. “If you intend to help Zach with his case, you must be alert. Oh!” The word popped out of her. “Your father is beckoning me. Must go. We have a lunch reservation. Love you. Ta.”

The call ended abruptly, as always.

“Love you, too, Fern,” I murmured, puzzled by how warm she’d been.

Instantly, my cell phone chimed. Not Fern ringing back. It was Zach.

Man, I was tired, and I knew I needed to bake items for the morning’s deliveries, but I didn’t want to pass up the call. I answered. “Hey.”

“Listen,” he launched in with no preamble, “I was wondering if we could have a date soon.”

A thrill of excitement swizzled through me, and my fatigue vanished. “Yes. I’d love it.” I missed spending time with him.

“How about a week from today?” he suggested.

So far off? Drat.

“By then I will have solved the crime,” he added, “and all will be right with the world.”

Would he nab the killer? Would he find the novella? Would the literary dining party proceed as planned? Or would someone else meet a tragic fate and change our course?

“Allie?” he whispered. “You there?”

“I am.” I couldn’t plan my life around dire possibilities. I had to commit. “Yes. A hike sounds perfect.”

“I was thinking a barbecue at my place.”

“Better yet. I can’t wait.”

I ended the call and traipsed into the kitchen, pulling the Plexiglas door closed. I washed up and withdrew baking items from the pantry. I had six dozen sugar cookies to complete. While I prepped cookie sheets and assembled flour, sugar, and the like, I switched on some jazzy Christmas instrumental music, and soon I found myself humming along with Kenny G.

A half hour later, when I was removing the first batch of chilled dough from the refrigerator, the doorbell chimed. I glanced at my watch. Nearly eleven. Who was calling on me at this time of night? Not Zach. He would’ve sent a text announcing his intention.

I rushed to the foyer. Darcy roused and followed. I peeked through the peephole and threw open the door.

Tegan stamped her feet. “Sheesh, it’s cold out here.”

“It’s late.”

“I’ve been dying to know what you learned at the precinct.” She skirted past me, made smooching sounds at the cat, and shrugged off her polar-worthy parka. She hadn’t changed out of her ugly Christmas sweater. “Knowing you didn’t intend to spend the night at the inn, I got antsy. I saw the lights on and decided to intrude.”

I headed to the kitchen. She trailed me. I closed the Plexiglas door and advised her to tie up her hair and wash her hands.

Darcy, resigned, sat on his haunches outside the door, eyes open like a sentry at attention.

“Answers,” Tegan demanded after she’d obeyed my orders. “What do you have? Did Zach share any ideas regarding motive?”

“He concurs that the murder happened because the thief was caught in the act and that the theft occurred most likely for financial reasons, although he did write the word *other* with a question mark on his murder board. Like us, he couldn’t come up with who specifically needs the money.”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Tegan said. “Are you two cool? I mean, he didn’t mind you seeking answers, did he?”

“He teasingly referred to me as Sherlock.”

She applauded without sound. “That’s a good sign.” She crossed to the computer, which was open on the counter, and tapped a key to waken it. The document I’d created after Vanna made me write down our initial suspicions appeared. “Oho, what’s this?” She perused the document. “A full bio on Gilbert Quackenbush and a list of suspects. You’ve been busy.” She read off their names. “Yale Kildare and Kiki Cranston, Oswald Crockett, Freddy and Felicity Bobb, Xenia Blair, Dalton Frasier, Mr. Smith. You didn’t add Scroggie.”

“I should. I mentioned to Zach how Scroggie could recoup a lot of money if insurance paid out, but …” I sighed. “I can’t see him killing Gilbert. Jenny Armstrong said they were good friends.”

Tegan perused the document again and glanced over her shoulder at me. “Ozzie is a toady where his uncle is concerned. I don’t trust him at all, and he despises his cousin, which makes me think he’d do something like steal the book and point the finger at Freddy. But commit murder?”

“He’s impulsive.”

She tapped the screen. “I don’t think the guard is a viable suspect.”

“I agree. He seems more like a victim. At the wrong place at the wrong time.” I started rolling out the chilled dough.

“What are you making?”

“Sugar cookies. They’re so popular at this time of year and super easy to make. Why don’t you help me with the icing?” I asked. “It’s the hard-shell kind made with corn syrup.”

“I’ll mess up.”

“No, you won’t. I’ll ensure the measurements are right. You’ll simply stir.”

She ogled the computer again. “Nah. You do the cooking, and I’ll conduct a deep dive on the Internet. Starting with Ozzie. He’s slimy and untrustworthy. My bet is on him.” A few clicks later, she whistled. “Whoa, he’s boastful. He claims to be a one-stop supercenter for insurance. If a customer wishes, he’ll give them a quote, file a claim, and make a payment.”

“I imagine most insurance agents can do that.” I cut out the cookies and placed them on the cookie sheets a couple of inches apart so they wouldn’t touch when they spread.

“His ‘About Me’ page is interesting. I’ve got to say, based on this photograph, he’s not the guy I’d trust to insure me. I mean, look at his hooded slits for eyes and his slicked-back hair and receding hairline. Ugh. He reminds me of a naked mole-rat. Slimy is as slimy does.”

“Maybe his clientele don’t care about appearances.”

“Are you saying I’m shallow?”

“Nah. More like depth optional.” I snorted. “Has he posted any client testimonials?”

Tegan scrolled through the site. “Nope. Not one.”

“Interesting. References mean everything to me.”

“Me too. Maybe none of his are good—ergo, he’s a weasel, meaning he might be a killer.”

“Look up Xenia Blair,” I said. “Knowing both Magda and Stella are her customers, I got to wondering how many other clients in Bramblewood frequent her shop. You heard about the missive Helga and Pippa found, saying Gilbert was looking forward to seeing her again. Is it possible Xenia knew Mr. Smith, as well, prior to this week and corralled him into her scheme?”

“Seconds ago you thought he was a victim.”

“True. On the other hand, if she knew him beforehand, she might have prodded him to reach out to request to be granted the gig as security guard.”

Tegan, a whiz on the computer, typed in a command on the keyboard. “Golly,” she exclaimed. “Look at her shop. It’s beautiful.”

I took a peek at the website.

“It reminds me of an old church. High ceilings, arched woodwork.” She reviewed the web page and whistled. “How about that? It *was* an old church. There are books everywhere. And ladders like we have at Feast for the Eyes. I wonder where the staircase goes?”

I peeked at the image. “To an attic?”

“An attic where she could hide a certain novella?” Tegan waggled her eyebrows. “I’m calling the shop. I want to ask for a collectible.”

“It’s too late. It’ll be closed.”

“I’ll leave a message.”

“Stop.” I gently tapped her arm. “Let’s not leave a voice trail.” My hands were messy from the cookies, so I pointed with my elbow to an image of the neatly organized main desk in the bookshop. Beside it stood a

roller cart filled with tomes. “Capture a screenshot of the cart and zoom in. Make sure the novella isn’t tucked into the mix, hiding in plain sight.”

She did and reviewed the image. “Nope. Not there. Good try.”

“Let’s focus on Yale Kildare. Given his profession, he must have a website.”

She typed a command and landed on a site. “Serve Process Now dot-com,” she recited. “Seems like a pretty basic setup. There are buttons to place an order. A list of courthouses in and around our area including places to the east, like Asheville, Biltmore, Montrose, and Black Mountain.” She clicked her tongue. “It’s a pretty goofy site, honestly. There are all sorts of cartoons of guys on the run that remind me of those community service cards in *Monopoly*.”

“If it gets the job done, so be it,” I said. “Are there testimonials? References?”

“There’s a link to Yelp reviews.” She pressed it and perused what came up. “He seems legit. He’s well liked.”

“And yet he doesn’t like many people, including Freddy.”

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STAVE 3

Call and Response: New Beginnings

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Chapter 16

He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

At midnight, after Tegan went home, I crawled into bed.

Monday morning I awoke at five-thirty and washed my face, which helped clear the cobwebs from my brain. I decided not to take a run. It was too chilly out and snow was falling. Instead, I fed the cat, ate a bowl of oatmeal with brown sugar, sliced bananas, and milk fortified with extra protein. Then I dressed in leggings, a sage-green sweater, boots, and a jacket. I even donned a beanie to keep my ears warm. Darcy was snuggled inside his cat station when I was ready to say good-bye.

Outside Ragamuffin, which was my last delivery—I'd made five others—I spotted Candace, who was bundled as I was, playing a keyboard and singing. Wow. So early. Barely eight a.m. As she crooned the opening verse to "Santa Baby," pillows of foggy breath billowed from her mouth. Looking at her made my teeth chatter, though she didn't seem fazed by the cold.

Evelyn emerged from the café carrying a steamy beverage. She gave it to Candace, who accepted it eagerly and sipped. Evelyn caught sight of me,

and her eyes crinkled with good humor. “Who knew the temperature would drop this much?”

“Why don’t you ask the owners if Candace can move inside?” I suggested.

“The place is packed.”

“She’s only one person,” I countered. “What are you hoping to accomplish by having her freeze to death?”

“Don’t worry about her. She has Inuit ancestors.” Evelyn sipped her drink. “By the by, did you notice the advertisement for the theater readings?” She motioned to a sign to the right of the keyboard.

Bright bold letters announced: EVENT: SELECTIONS OF DICKENS’S WORK. WHEN: FRIDAY AT NOON. COST: FREE TO THE PUBLIC. WHERE: BRAMBLEWOOD COMMUNITY THEATER, SOUTH MOUNTAIN ROAD.

“I thought they were going to take place Friday night.”

“They were, but now I have a surprise planned to run for four evenings, starting Wednesday. I’ll be sending you and the bookshop staff comp tickets for it. You’ll be available, won’t you?”

I’d blocked off Friday evening to go to the readings, but I could adjust. Attending an opening night performance was always fun. “Yes, sure.”

“Oh,” Evelyn went on, “you do know we’ll be doing *Twelfth Night* the following week, right?”

“Yep.” In Elizabethan England, Twelfth Night, or Epiphany Eve, was a celebration marking the end of the Christmas season. Revelry and the swapping of social roles, such as servants dressing as masters, occurred. In Shakespeare’s play of the same name, the plot centered around upending social hierarchies.

“Every performance is a fundraiser,” Evelyn added. “A theater can’t function without financial support.”

The word *financial* caught me up, and yet again I wondered who might have stolen the novella to sell it, unless all of us who were theorizing about motive were really off base and monetary gain was not the aim.

“Are you bringing goodies for the café?” Evelyn asked.

“I am.” I raised the pastry box.

“Here, allow me.” She opened the door and followed me inside.

The temperature was a toasty seventy degrees. If I'd had a free hand, I would've pulled off the beanie.

"By the way, your mother and I spoke, and we are meeting up next week," Evelyn said.

"Next week?"

"Yes, she and your father are coming to town."

That was the first I'd heard of it. Why hadn't Fern told me?

"It was a spur-of-the-moment decision," Evelyn added. "They're heading to Canada to see the northern lights and decided to make a short stopover here. I invited them to stay with me."

Wow, wow, wow. I was amazed that a mere phone call could sweep away so many years of ill will. Forgive and forget? Let bygones be bygones? Was it that easy? Would I, as I grew older, be able to release my hurt feelings?

"That's all right with you, isn't it?" Evelyn asked.

"As long as they give me an hour of their precious time." I instantly regretted my snappy response and said, "Of course it's all right. Fern isn't a kitty cat fan. She'll be happy not to have to stay in a room where Darcy might have wandered."

"I don't have cats."

"Good." I forced a smile. "You'll score points."

"You know, Allie, last night at the party, we didn't talk much about Charles Dickens, the man," Evelyn said, changing the subject adroitly. "The desire to own a special work of his, be it novel or novella, had to be the lure for the thief, don't you think?"

If such was the case, then the culprit would mostly likely be Xenia, Dalton, or Kiki.

"Dickens was such an icon." Evelyn painted the air with one hand. "Larger than life in his day. Did you know he left his wife for an actress?"

"I did. When I studied his works in college, we read biographies about him."

"The one by Claire Tomalin is the best." Evelyn pressed a hand to her chest. "How did she say it?" She glanced up and to the right as if searching for the words, and then refocused on me. "Never mind. I'll paraphrase. The man who emerges from the insightfulness of words is extraordinarily complex, a muddle of contradictions, whose depravities as well as virtues

are as interwoven as his art and life." She sighed and focused on me. "Dickens's daughter said his love affair was obsessive and tore apart the very fabric of his family."

"I would imagine it did."

"Did you know he wrote many letters to the mistress? In fact, he was a voluminous letter writer in all aspects, to friends and family and contributors to his literary periodicals, but …" She snuffled. "Do you want an insider tidbit? He had a reputation for burning most of the correspondence because he was concerned that his private missives might be viewed by the public. No airing of dirty laundry for him. Uh-uh." She slid her head side to side. "And what's more, his mistress destroyed all their letters. I imagine she, like him, believed secrets were better kept hidden." Evelyn spotted a friend across the café. "Oh. That's my coffee date. Good-bye, love."

I delivered the cookies to one of the clerks in the café. She offered me a free latte, which I readily accepted—anything to warm my insides. I sipped it unhurriedly while reviewing email on my phone, then I headed to Feast for the Eyes.

To my surprise, Tegan had opened early.

The bookshop was hopping with good vibes when I entered. Customers were flocking the aisles. A half dozen were viewing the new gift items in the corner, which pleased me. The suggestion to expand was a hit. I searched for Tegan and spied her in the office.

She waved through the window.

"Hellooo," a woman crooned.

When I saw Tegan's face squinch in frustration, I spun around and caught sight of a largish, sixty-something woman parading toward the counter. Literally parading. Given her floppy white bonnet, white ruffled blouse, navy blue skirt, and navy shawl, I wouldn't have been surprised to see her also carrying a placard promoting suffragette rights. Tight curls framed her face. She'd painted her lips ruby red, which wasn't a good look with her fair skin.

"Young lady," she said.

She meant me, I was pretty sure. Chloe was nowhere in sight, and Tegan had pulled the blinds in the office. What was up with that?

"Yes, ma'am," I replied. "How may I help you?"

“I’m Imogen Grimshaw. Up from Charlotte.”

“Welcome.”

“Y’all have heard of me, of course.”

“No, ma’am, I can’t say I have.” Why on earth would she think I had?

“I have been one of Marigold’s steady readers for, lo, twenty-odd years. It’s a shame what happened to her.” She clucked her tongue. “A great lady. A brilliant mind. A heart of gold.”

“Yes, ma’am. She was all that.”

“I come to the shop every year at this time.” Her voice reminded me of Dan Aykroyd’s take on Julia Child, full of trills and ripples. “Typically, I stay at the inn on Biltmore Estate.”

“I hear it’s lovely,” I said. “I haven’t seen this year’s decorations yet.”

“Nor have I, and I won’t because I’m not staying there this year. The cost has become unaffordable. Not that I can’t manage it.” She twirled a hand in a grand parade-style gesture. “I’m rather wealthy. But it’s a matter of principle, wouldn’t you agree?”

I didn’t know the cost of a room at the inn, but everything imaginable—even the price of eggs—was rising lately.

“It’s neither here nor there,” she continued. “I’ve got a lovely place to stay. I’ll be off to check in after I’ve picked up my yearly batch of mysteries.”

How many did that entail? Had Marigold known what Mrs. Grimshaw would have chosen? Should Tegan and I?

“I am an avid reader,” the stately woman went on. “I read at least two hundred books a year.”

I whistled.

“Many I’ve read three or four times. There’s nothing like reuniting with an old friend.”

“I would agree,” I murmured.

“My bookshelves are crammed to the brim, but there’s always room for more, and what I don’t keep, I donate to the library. You received my email, I presume.” She tilted her head.

I hadn’t. Perhaps Tegan had, but she hadn’t filled the order yet; ergo, the reason she was hiding in the back.

“What better time to solve a mystery than at the holidays?” Mrs. Grimshaw opined. “*Murder on a Midnight Clear* by Sara Rosett. *The*

Twelve Clues of Christmas by Rhys Bowen, *The Secret Christmas Library* by Jenny Colgan." She rattled off the titles. "And one mustn't forget the *Candy Cane Murder* by Joanne Fluke and the two other stories in that collection, *The Danger of Candy Canes* by Laura Levine and *Candy Canes of Christmas Past* by Leslie Meier. Delicious. I love a tasty cozy mystery." She pulled a folded piece of paper from her navy clutch and thrust it at me. "Could you please fetch my order?"

I reviewed the copy of her email, and my mouth fell open. There were over fifty titles on the list. I certainly hadn't amassed any of them. I doubted Chloe or Tegan had, either. Perhaps Tegan had joined Chloe in the stockroom and both were scrambling furiously to gather the titles.

"I can't wait to get to my room at the inn and dig into the first on the list. Ngaio Marsh's *Tied Up in Tinsel*. Excellent mystery."

"Perhaps we could deliver the books to you," I suggested. "This is such a large order, it will be too heavy for you to carry. Where will you be staying?"

"The Amber Lantern."

If I'd been drinking, I would've done a spit-take.

"Noeline will be so excited to see me," Mrs. Grimshaw said.

"You know Noeline Merriweather?"

"Of course." Mrs. Grimshaw offered a warbling guffaw that derived from the pit of her belly. "I knew her before I met Marigold. Of course, Noeline doesn't read like her sister. She doesn't treasure books in that fashion. And she certainly doesn't like mysteries, but she's a dear."

"She's a fan of Dickens's work," I stated.

"Isn't everyone?" Mrs. Grimshaw shifted her clutch from one arm to the other.

"I suppose I should tell you …" My throat went dry. "If you haven't spoken to Noeline or anyone at the inn …" I couldn't go on.

"What's wrong? Speak up," Mrs. Grimshaw ordered.

"A murder occurred at the inn."

"Really?" The woman's gray eyes lit up with an eagerness I'd seen in horror movies. "A real live murder? Not live any longer, I suppose." She tittered nervously and flapped a hand in front of her mouth. "Forgive me, y'all. Gallows humor. How terribly rude of me. Especially in light of losing Marigold to the same fate. Who was killed?"

I told her. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Quackenbush was from Charlotte. Did you know him?”

She shook her head. “I can’t say I did.”

“He was an antiquarian.”

“Poor Noeline. I must comfort her. Where did it happen? In which room? Can you tell me?”

“The parlor.”

“With the—” She cut herself off. “Stop, Imogen. Stop. Don’t be tasteless.” She motioned to the paper in my hand. “Please collect the books and bring them around. My credit information is in the email. I must go. A murder. Heavens.”

She bustled toward the door, nearly bumping into Erwin Scroggie, who was entering, his cane tucked under one arm. As an afterthought, she crooned, “Merry Christmas.”

Scroggie’s expression soured. “Bah! Merry Christmas, indeed.” He removed his fedora from his head, batted it against his leg to remove a dusting of snow, and jammed it back in place.

Tegan peeked from the archway and beckoned me. I drew near. “We don’t have her books,” she confided. “I’ve been waiting for a delivery.”

“She won’t care. She’s staying at the inn, meaning her mind is now totally preoccupied with the murder.”

“Oh, no.” She pulled a face. “Mom can’t stand her.”

“Why not?”

“She’s overbearing. For years she ran roughshod over Aunt Marigold, but of course Auntie would never say so. My mother …” Tegan sighed. “If she wasn’t a lady, I know she’d have clocked her on a couple of occasions.”

I laughed. “Your mother will rally.” I greeted Scroggie as he approached the sales counter using his cane for support. “Welcome, sir.”

“You.” His tone was curt. “What are you doing here?”

“I work at the shop occasionally.”

Tegan hurried to us. “She’s one of the owners of the store.”

“But you’re a caterer,” Scroggie said almost accusatorily.

“I wear many hats,” I quipped.

He harrumphed. “Tegan, young lady, I’ll have you know I was an old friend of your aunt’s.”

“Yes, sir, I knew that.”

Surprisingly, with the mention of Marigold, Scroggie's demeanor softened. "She was an utter delight and so knowledgeable about collectible works. We could talk for hours about literature."

"She was very special," Tegan said. "We miss her dearly." Her eyes misted with tears. "What brings you in today?"

"I'd like to buy a special book for your mother. As an apology. I can't bear the thought that putting my novella on display at the inn has brought such tragedy. She must be bereft."

"She's managing the best she can," Tegan said. "She's made of tough stock."

That was an understatement. Not only had Noeline pressed on after the death of her first husband, who perished in a climbing accident a couple of years after Vanna was born, and after the heartbreaking death of her second husband, Tegan's father, but she had also survived a rocky relationship with an ex-husband. How I wished I had her spine.

Scroggie pivoted, taking in the posted quotations from *A Christmas Carol* and the décor. He mumbled, "Frivolous." Then he asked Tegan, "Is there a work of Dickens she doesn't own?"

"*The Pickwick Papers*," she replied. "Or as it's more formally known, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*."

"Clever girl," Scroggie said.

"Mom loaned her copy to a friend in college, but the friend never returned it."

"Dastardly. Do you have the novel on hand?" he asked. "Perhaps a first edition?"

"We have the book, but it's not rare," Tegan said. "We could hunt for one."

"Yes, yes, do that. In the meantime …" He rotated a hand. "I'll purchase what you have. It will do for now."

"It's the thought that counts." Tegan smiled. "I'm sure Mom will appreciate the gesture."

While she went to the stockroom in search of the book, Scroggie remained fixed in place, so I observed him. A sly smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He seemed to be taking great delight in purchasing the gift. Was he interested in Noeline, as I'd surmised earlier and Magda had intimated at Lillian's soiree?

“I studied Dickens in college,” I said to pass the time.

“I’m a Dickens scholar,” he declared. “He moved a lot, you know. As a boy, to help pay his family’s debts, he was forced to quit school and work ten-hour days at a bootblacking warehouse, pasting labels on pots of bootblack. When his father was released from prison, Charles’s mother didn’t support their son’s removal from the warehouse. What a rotter she was.”

What could I say? He was right.

Scroggie said, “In addition, he was a creature of capitalism.”

“I’ve heard that. He was adamant that books be affordable and demanded his works be available in inexpensive bindings, believing his populist readership included everyone from the poor who read *Oliver Twist* to Queen Victoria.”

“She found his work”—Scroggie chuckled and winked—“interesting.”

Before I could ask what he was implying, Tegan emerged from the stockroom, book in hand. “Here we are,” she crooned.

“Wrap it up in your finest gift paper, please,” Scroggie requested, and eyed me again. “You know, during his American visit, Dickens spent a month in New York City.”

“Really?”

“He lectured, particularly about those pirating his works. He questioned copyright laws and caused quite a fuss. The press was in an uproar. Downright hostile, in fact. They said he should be grateful for his popularity, piracy be hanged.”

I knew the details, but Scroggie was taking such delight in sharing his knowledge, I didn’t interrupt.

“The police questioned me,” he said, abruptly switching gears.

Tegan and I exchanged a look.

“They asked if I had insurance on the novella, which I told them I did,” he said. “They also inquired about my alibi at the time of the murder, which is their duty, of course. I gave it willingly.” He drummed his fingers on the sales counter. “After dinner, I fell ill and went to urgent care. I was being pinched and poked by nurses from midnight until four a.m. My housekeeper drove me and stayed the entire time.”

His alibi was so faultless that I had to wonder if he’d fashioned it on purpose, hoping it would stop the police from questioning whether he had

hired someone to steal the novella.

Stop, Allie. Don't be such a cynic.

Scroggie sighed. "In truth, I will miss having the book for sentimental reasons." He sounded so wistful, the statement rang true. "Tell me, Allie, who do you believe stole it and killed my friend Gilbert?"

I blinked. "You're asking me?"

"Yes, you. Didn't you help the police solve Marigold's murder a few months ago?"

I silently conferred with Tegan, who motioned for me to answer.

"I didn't exactly help them," I said. "I did a bit of digging because I wanted to make sure Tegan wasn't held responsible for her aunt's death."

"Yes, of course. Very understandable. Noeline tells me the two of you are like sisters."

My mouth dropped open. They had discussed us?

Chloe stepped from the stockroom, her arms full of books. "Here are half of Mrs. Grimshaw's order." She stacked them on the counter.

"Do you think Xenia Blair might have done the deed?" Scroggie asked, not caring that a third person could listen in on the conversation. "I don't trust the woman. She's haughty. On the other hand, her reputation as a book dealer is unvarnished. I suppose it could have been that man Frasier. What's his first name?"

"Dalton," I replied.

"Yes. He seemed too eager to see the novella. Why, I ask you?"

"He is a historian and a Dickens scholar," I said, "like yourself."

"Don't believe a word of it," Scroggie groused. "I checked him out. He's a nobody. A twerp. A wannabe. His reputation does not precede him. His writings have no depth. He doesn't do his homework."

Interesting that Scroggie was conducting an investigation of his own. Maybe he really did hope to see justice served.

"Here you go, sir." Tegan slipped the book she'd wrapped in pretty paper and tied with ribbon into a tote bag and handed it to him.

He produced a credit card, paid for the item, tipped his hat, and left.

Tegan leaned one elbow on the counter. "Well, that was interesting. Do you think he really came in for the book or merely to share his alibi?"

"You've got me."

“Who do you think did it?” Chloe asked, rearranging the books into an alphabetical stack by title.

“Ozzie,” Tegan said. “To discredit Freddy. His alibi is iffy. He was out and about to find some liquor? Get real.”

I offered another suggestion. “Yale Kildare clearly has bad blood with Freddy.”

Chloe said, “Didn’t you say his girlfriend verified his alibi?”

Lovers often lie for each other, I mused, and hoped that wasn’t the case between Felicity and Freddy.

Tegan’s cell phone buzzed on the counter. She flipped it around to read an incoming message and groaned. “Mom texted that she’s fine and not to bother her, but Vanna and I are worried.”

“About?”

“What will this do to her reputation? The inns are our mother’s lifeblood.” Tegan grabbed my hand. “Allie, I can’t leave here. We have a children’s book club coming in. I’m moderating. Please go to the inn. Check on her, and report back after Scroggie shows up with the gift.”

“I can’t simply show up.”

“Sure you can. Take some cookies. Tell her they’re for Helga. She loves your treats.”

“She does not.”

“Oh,” she said breathlessly. “I know. Take the books to Mrs. Grimshaw.” She wouldn’t broker an argument.

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Chapter 17

Scrooge was at first inclined to be surprised that the Spirit should attach importance to conversations apparently so trivial; but feeling assured that they must have some hidden purpose, he set himself to consider what it was likely to be.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

How could I refuse my friend's plea? I went to Dream Cuisine, pulled two dozen round sugar cookies from the freezer, and decorated them with hard icing and dragées—small, shiny silver balls. When the icing cooled, I packed the cookies in a couple of signature Dream Cuisine pastry boxes, went home, slipped Darcy into his cat carrier, and drove to the inn.

When I arrived, a trio of females in Dickensian costumes were in the living room to the left, harmonizing a cappella to "O Little Town of Bethlehem." I recognized one in the group. She'd starred as Kate in last year's community theater production of *Kiss Me, Kate* and had given a fiery performance.

Hands full with the carton of books and pastry boxes on top, I nodded hello to her and continued on to the reception desk, where Noeline was scribbling in the guest ledger. Her bobbed hair was in desperate need of a comb. Without lipstick, she looked wan. I saw the copy of *The Pickwick*

Papers sitting in its opened wrapping paper on the desk. Scroggie was nowhere to be seen.

"You received your gift." I smiled to calm her. "I think Erwin Scroggie might be sweet on you."

"I can't think about that right now," she said wearily. "People are canceling future stays. The word has gotten out."

"What about the guests who are here, and, you know—"

"Suspects? They're staying. For now."

"Are they all on-site?"

"Yale and Kiki went to work. Freddy is somewhere with his daughter. Not sure about Felicity. Ozzie's lurking. Mr. Frasier is reading, no doubt. He always has his nose in a book. I have no clue where Xenia Blair might be, but her car is in the lot." Noeline waved a hand. "What's in the carton?"

"Books for Mrs. Grimshaw." I nodded to the pastry boxes perched atop. "I brought cookies for Helga."

Noeline frowned. "She won't be pleased."

"Yummy sugar will win her over. Has Mrs. Grimshaw checked in?"

Noeline huffed. "Yes."

"You two aren't close?" I teased.

She eagle-eyed me. "I'm sure my daughter told you she was a burr in my sister's side. Marigold loved filling the large order, but Mrs. Grimshaw liked to talk nonstop about each book she was reading. And she revealed the endings."

"No."

"Evidently, she thinks it's quite a lark to be staying where a murder occurred. I'll ring her and have her come down."

"Where's Helga?" I asked.

"She's in the dining room setting up tea. Good luck. Give me the cat." She held out her hands.

I gave him to her and adjusted my hold on the carton and pastry boxes. At the same time, Pippa appeared.

Noeline said, "Pippa, be a darling and take Darcy to the kitchen." The landline phone jingled. She answered, invited the person to wait on the phone for a brief pause, rang Imogen Grimshaw's room, and informed her of my arrival. Then she refocused on the caller who was on hold. "Yes,

ma’am, I understand you’re upset. No, we’ve not had any ghostly appearances since the incident.”

“Ghosts?” I whispered.

Noeline rolled her eyes.

I strolled into the dining room. “Hello, Helga.” I deposited the carton of books on the floor and removed the pastry boxes.

“Welcome.” She was dusting a tabletop with a feather duster. At the far end of the room, a platter of treats and an array of beverages were arranged on a buffet table draped with a floor-length tablecloth.

“Don’t be mad at me, but I brought treats.” I offered her the boxes.

“Good. That is all our guests are eating now. Sugar, sugar, sugar.”

Score one for me.

She set aside her feather duster, opened the box, added the two dozen cookies to her half-empty platter, and disposed of the container under the table, out of sight. “I suppose for an anxious soul, sugar is the best comfort. That and tea.” She grasped her feather duster and shuffled out of the dining room.

I lifted the carton of books and followed. As she began dusting the furniture in the foyer, I peered at the parlor. The police tape had been removed. Had any of the guests felt comfortable lounging in it yet? The notion sent a shiver down my spine.

“There you are, Allie,” Mrs. Grimshaw trilled as she descended the stairs. She hadn’t changed a thing about her outfit other than she had removed her hat.

I offered her the carton of books. “So far we have half of your order. Sadly, a delivery was late. We promise to supply the others as speedily as possible.”

“Thank you, dear girl.” She set the box on the check-in counter. “Think nothing of it. Nothing at … *Ooh*, look. Mistletoe,” she exclaimed while peering at the parlor. “I must’ve missed seeing it when I arrived.” She raced to the arch and stood beneath it, lips puckered. “I love the allure of mistletoe, don’t you? How I wish I had one true love to kiss.”

“One true love,” Helga muttered. “There is no such thing.”

“Oh, Helga, you’re a curmudgeon,” Mrs. Grimshaw said. “Of course there is.”

“No.” Helga glowered. “According to the great French moralist François de La Rochefoucauld, ‘True love is like ghosts, which everyone talks about and few have seen.’”

Noeline ended a phone call and crossed to us. “Imogen, don’t provoke Helga or she’ll launch into her views of Molière and Pascale.”

“I like literature from the French classical period. Sue me.” Helga whisked her duster in the air and resumed her chores.

Mrs. Grimshaw stifled a smile. “She is a hoot. A treasure. Now, Noeline, dear, we must get caught up.” She clasped Noeline’s elbow and ushered her toward the dining room. “A snack is in order.”

Given the way Noeline was grimacing, Imogen Grimshaw’s grip was firm and unyielding.

“Oy.” Helga made a dismissive sound with her tongue. Was she peeved at Mrs. Grimshaw or something else?

“Is everything okay?” I asked softly.

“I cannot bear to keep the secret any longer.” Helga stood akimbo, duster jutting out like a broken wing. “A woman—Miss Blair’s client—rang this morning asking for her. She said she tried to reach Miss Blair on her cell phone, but she didn’t answer. I informed her that Miss Blair was on a walk and asked if I could take a message. The woman inquired about Miss Blair’s health, saying Miss Blair hadn’t been feeling well the night they had their Zoom call.” She paused. “The night of the murder.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure where she was going with the account.

“The client said she sounded horrible. Raspy. Not at all like herself.”

Again I said, “Okay.”

“Sounded,” Helga repeated. “Meaning Miss Blair was not visible on the call.”

“*Ahh.*” I understood her concern. “Yes, I know. Zach told me.”

“The client said Miss Blair used an avatar. I believe that is the term. And I began to wonder whether Miss Blair wasn’t on the call after all and whether someone else acted in her stead.” Helga blanched, clearly traumatized by her theory. “I have done the Zoom once. I did not allow the video. I do not look good on camera. But Miss Blair is elegant. Professional. Why would she not show her face to a client?” She brandished the feather duster. “One must be present to seal the deal, don’t you agree?”

I did.

“Meanwhile, Miss Blair could have tiptoed down to the parlor and killed …” She moaned. “But if she is not the murderer, and I am speaking out of turn—”

I placed a hand on her arm. “It’s all right, Helga. You haven’t gotten anyone in trouble. You have simply questioned an alibi. Good job.”

“Come back, kitty,” Pippa squeaked as she raced after Darcy. “I’m sorry. I love kitties. I wanted to play. I didn’t know he’d scoot away from me.”

Darcy darted into the parlor. He bolted onto the piano bench and then leaped on top of the piano.

“Cat,” I snapped. “Stop. Now. Before you knock the metronome to the floor.”

“Eek,” a woman shrieked.

Xenia shot upright on the far side of the piano looking mortified, her cheeks as crimson as the cranberry-colored sweater she was wearing. Had she heard Helga and me talking about her? Was she embarrassed to be caught hiding?

“I … I …” Xenia jutted a hand toward the stepping stool wedged between the piano and pedestal that had once held the novella. “I was checking out this old stool. I love it. It would be perfect to have in my bookstore. Exactly the right height to help customers reach a few of the upper bookshelves. The ladders we have can be precarious. I was hoping there would be a designer’s mark showing who made it so I could purchase one, but alas I found none. Do you think Noeline might sell this one to me?”

She was prattling, which—call me suspicious—made her sound super guilty. But of what? Had she been searching for some telltale clue that, if found, would prove she’d killed Gilbert Quackenbush? What if she lost a piece of jewelry that night? When Zach found one of my earrings at a crime scene a couple of months ago, that had nearly sealed my fate and sent me to prison.

“Here, kitty.” Xenia reached for Darcy. “C’mon. Give me a cuddle.”

She was clearly trying to distract us from questioning her reason for being present. Darcy wanted none of her cajoling. He reared back.

“I love kitties. I have two calicos at the shop,” Xenia assured him. “Puss and Boots.”

“Puss and Boots?” Pippa giggled. “How cute.”

Helga sniffed. “Pippa, gather the cat and come with me.”

I crossed to Darcy, lifted him off the piano, and handed him to Pippa. “Sir, be nice and follow the rules. We’ll go home soon.”

He warbled agreement and nudged Pippa’s chest with his head as if asking for forgiveness.

Xenia remained in place. Was she hoping I’d retreat and she could continue her pursuit?

Yeah, dream on. I wasn’t going anywhere. I was too curious for words.

I said, “I think Noeline’s grandmother bequeathed her the stool.”

“Oh, drat. Then she’ll be attached to it. It truly is perfect.”

I hooked a thumb over my shoulder. “Helga told me a client of yours phoned today.” No need to be subtle. I wanted to pin down the facts. “You were out walking at the time.”

“I was. It’s so pretty here, especially with the fresh snowfall.”

An additional half inch had fallen around daybreak.

“Your client told Helga she was concerned about your health,” I went on. “She said you’d sounded very ill on the Zoom call the other night.” I tilted my head, waiting for a response. When she didn’t comply, I said, “Meaning she couldn’t see your face.”

“Oh, gosh, yes. I’d almost forgotten.” Xenia wheezed a sigh. “I felt like I was coming down with a cold, so I soaked my face with warm compresses. When I realized I’d wiped off all my makeup, well … you know how it is.” She forced a laugh. “I couldn’t possibly let her see me like that, right? I’m too old to go without makeup. Not to mention my hair was tied in a knot.” She motioned to the nape of her neck. “I prefer the days when we didn’t have FaceTime and all these calls where we have to look presentable, don’t you?”

“Actually, no. I like to see someone’s face. That way I can view their expressions.” As I was doing now.

Xenia blinked rapidly. “Heavens. I’m late. Must go. Thank you for being concerned.” She grabbed an elegant leather backpack from the nearest couch, slung it over one shoulder, and hurried from the room.

Hmm. She had definitely been up to something. But what?

I tiptoed to the stepping stool, crouched down, and inspected it. No designer’s mark. I felt around the base. As I did, I noticed a few scratches

on the floor. Tegan might have accidentally marred the surface when she'd returned the stool to this position after hanging the mistletoe. But if she hadn't …

Deftly, I nudged the stool to one side. Nothing lay beneath. I peered behind the back edge of the piano but didn't see anything unusual there, either. Not even a dust bunny. In addition to being a fantastic cook, Helga was a meticulous housekeeper.

"What're you doing?" a man asked.

I shot upright, as Xenia had.

Ozzie stared back at me. Waiting.

Like Xenia, I said, "I was checking to see if I could find out who made this stool."

"Why? That old thing is useless. Like my cousin. Not worth the wood it's made of. Two steps? Give me a three-step ladder any day." He marched out of the room.

Well, that was weird, and again, I had to wonder about his fixation with his cousin. Why did he hate Freddy so much? Had their parents fought? Had the elders pitted the boys against each other while they were growing up? Had Scroggie?

I was heading out of the inn when I noticed Freddy in the living room with his daughter, Tinsley. Her plaid dress hung to her knees. Knee socks and canvas tennis shoes completed the ensemble. Her braids were tied with red ribbon. She had Freddy's coloring. His chin. She was sipping from a glass cup. On a table to the right of the gnome-decorated tree stood a punch bowl, glass cups, and a platter of cookies. Helga had made sure every room was well stocked.

Accompanying Freddy and his daughter was Freddy's mother-in-law from his first marriage, a lovely woman with kind eyes and sleek gray hair. I'd met her on two previous occasions. The first time at the bookstore—she liked historical fiction. The second time at the theater—she'd adored the play.

The trio was listening to the carolers, who were wrapping up a jazzy version of "Jingle Bells." When the carolers concluded, they thanked their audience and announced they were moving on to their next location, an inn around the corner from the Amber Lantern.

Following their departure, I poked my head in. "Freddy, hi."

He beamed. “Allie. Come in.” He started to introduce his mother-in-law.

I cut in. “We’ve met. Nice to see you.”

She nodded hello.

“Tinsley,” Freddy said, “this is Allie Catt.”

“We’ve met, Daddy. One time.”

“That’s right. Good memory.” He tapped her forehead fondly.

“Hi, Miss Catt.” The girl curtsied to me, pulling the seams of her dress to the sides. “Pleased to see you again.”

“Call me Allie.”

She grinned broadly.

Freddy’s mother-in-law said, “Tinsley, release your dress or you might blow away.”

“Don’t be silly, Nana. There’s no wind in here.”

Freddy said, “Allie is the caterer who delivers all the delicious food that makes me fat.”

Tinsley knuckled her father’s arm. “You’re not fat, Daddy.” She had an unmistakable wheeze in her tone, a clear sign she suffered from asthma.

Felicity had told me that they had her illness under control, but I couldn’t imagine what that entailed. I recalled a girl in my high school gym class who had suffered a terrible bout and had to be whisked to the hospital because she’d gone blue from lack of oxygen.

“Where’s Felicity?” I asked Freddy.

“Resting upstairs. I heard you witnessed her confrontation with her sister.”

I pulled a face.

“Rae is a tornado,” he went on, “but Felicity is resilient. That’s why I love her. She can hold her own.”

She hadn’t been doing so until she had support from me, but I wouldn’t tattle. Let him believe she was sturdy.

“Freddy, dear,” his mother-in-law said, “I’ve been meaning to ask. I’ve heard some gossip about Felicity. Is it true?”

“Oh, geez,” Freddy muttered. “George Harrison was right. ‘Gossip is the devil’s radio.’ What did you hear?”

“Felicity might have killed the antiquarian.”

“Absolutely not.” Freddy’s face reddened. “How could you even think it possible?”

“Two women in my bridge group said she has no alibi,” the woman went on. “One said you were out and about, and she was left alone in the room. At midnight.”

“I was taking a walk for a few minutes. A few. That’s all. Felicity did not kill Gilbert Quackenbush.” His tone was tense and passionate. “Besides, she couldn’t have. She’s got a broken arm.”

“Her other is perfectly fine,” his mother-in-law said.

Tinsley glanced between the two of them, her face pinched with concern.

“No, her other arm is not okay,” Freddy snarled. “She broke it as a girl. It lacks strength. If she tried to clobber someone with a bust or a bat or anything else, her bone would snap in two.” He turned to me. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to ask you about Ozzie.”

“What about him?” His tone was sharp.

“Daddy,” Tinsley cried. “Don’t be mean.” She started to cough.

Freddy patted her shoulder. “I’m sorry, sweetie. Daddy’s on edge.”

His mother-in-law pulled an inhaler from her purse and passed it to Tinsley. The girl, well trained, shoved it into her mouth and drew in a deep breath. When her coughing subsided, she sighed.

The stress of seeing his daughter in pain was obvious in Freddy’s eyes. “What do you want to know, Allie, other than my cousin hates me?”

“Why does he?”

“He’s jealous.”

“Of your job?”

Freddy’s shoulders rose and fell. “He was in love with …” He sighed.

“My daughter,” his mother-in-law said.

“My first wife,” Freddy explained. “They were dating”—he mimed air quotes around *dating*—“when she and I met. We were all of thirteen, but Ozzie has held it against me ever since. Of course, his mother fanned the fire.” He shifted feet. “See, she hated my dad for being a spendthrift and leaving my mother, her sister, in the lurch. And now that Ozzie’s parents and my parents have passed on …” His voice trailed off. He sighed. “Ozzie would like nothing more than to see me fail in a big way so he could be Uncle Scroggie’s sole heir.”

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Chapter 18

“Man,” said the Ghost, “if man you be in heart, not adamant, forbear that wicked cant until you have discovered What the surplus is, and Where it is. Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die?”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

It was snowing again by the time I arrived home, enough to dust my shoulders with white stuff between getting out of my van and crossing the threshold. I shrugged out of my coat, brushed off the moisture, hung the coat on the rack, and freed Darcy from his cat carrier.

Darcy darted around the room and scampered back to me. He grazed my ankles and purred loudly enough for the neighbor’s cat to hear.

“Okay, okay, I get it.” I picked him up and scrubbed gently beneath his chin. “Sorry. You were tucked too long in the carrier.” Pippa had returned him to it, afraid he might escape again. I kissed his nose and placed him on the floor. “Let’s eat.”

I’d intended to go to Dream Cuisine first thing in the morning, but on the drive home I decided I was too tired and might want to sleep in. Not to mention, after the chat with Freddy and his former mother-in-law, I was

eager to review the list of suspects Vanna and I, with Tegan's additions, had created.

"Eat first," I whispered to keep myself on track. "Then bake and reflect."

Hashtag AlliesClueCrew cycled through my mind, followed by a tinge of guilt. Should I brief Zach about the lists I was making? No, I reasoned. He had his own. We would confer again soon.

I fed Darcy tuna and fixed myself a quickie dinner of English muffin with sharp cheddar cheese melted on top of sliced tomato. We ate in the dining room, after which I washed up, slipped on a mesh chef's cap, and reviewed tomorrow's orders: a couple of seasonally requested cranberry gingersnap pies and one German chocolate sheet cake with coconut-pecan frosting for Blessed Bean; two dozen raspberry swirl cupcakes for the Joint —Jenny noted that one of her regulars was celebrating a birthday, and those were the customer's favorite; and two dozen regular scones for Ragamuffin. They'd been selling out by ten a.m. daily and determined an extra dozen or so would help satisfy latecomers.

"Whewie." I whistled. My ovens would be working overtime. German chocolate cake wasn't hard to make. Neither was the frosting. But both were time consuming. "Maybe I should go to Dream Cuisine after all," I said to Darcy through the Plexiglas door.

He meowed and, done with me, tucked himself into a ball for a snooze.

I peered outside. Snow was falling more heavily, which sealed the deal. I was staying home.

After arranging mixing bowls and ingredients and all the bakeware, I prepared the German chocolate cake batter, poured it into a nine-by-fifteen baking dish, placed it in the oven, and set a timer. Then I tackled the vanilla batter for the cupcakes. I swirled a rich stream of raspberry jam through it and scooped the batter into prepared tins. I slid the tins into the lower oven, set a second timer, and crossed to my computer.

I wakened it and tapped on the suspect list document. I reviewed what I'd written about each of the suspects thus far, which wasn't much. Their careers. Their alibis. A few tidbits from their websites after Tegan did her semi–deep dive. I pondered what Vanna had said when we'd created the list. Felicity was all sugar and spice. Was she? Was Freddy's mother-in-law's concern valid?

Nothing appeared when I typed *Felicity Bobb* into the browser search bar and hit Return. Absolutely zip. I tried her maiden name. Diddly squat. Huh. Perhaps people were becoming savvier and, like me, as a matter of protection, were not revealing as much about themselves online. All I ever did was post an occasional photo of Darcy and pictures of items I'd baked or events I'd hosted. A few featured my image, but nothing was personal-personal.

I wrote in Felicity's column:

Motive: To avenge Freddy because his uncle wasn't supportive enough? To help financially with his debts? Is she truly incapable of using her healthy arm due to previous injury?

I keyed in *Dalton Frasier*, whom Scroggie had labeled a twerp and a wannabe. My search produced a number of links. Dalton was currently fifty-five years old. After graduating from Eton, he wrote articles for various magazines. He was featured on a website about academic influencers. There were a few NPR interviews of him. He had won awards for his biography on Churchill as well as his accounts of the two world wars from England's point of view. He wasn't married, though he had been. He had one grown child.

Not exactly a wannabe, I noted, as Scroggie had intimated. What was his beef with Dalton Frasier?

I added the information to Dalton's column but paused when I recalled words he'd said after Freddy had stated how much his uncle had insured the novella for. *I knew it*, he'd whispered and whistled. When asked about the comment, he'd tried to brush it off as nothing, but what if it was something?

A previous notion resurfaced. Scroggie had insured the novella for half a million. He'd mentioned at the inn the novella held sentimental value. He'd said the same at the bookshop. Was it possible there was something else in the novella? A lock of Dickens's hair? A trinket from his beloved? Would something like that have enticed Dalton to travel across the Atlantic to our tiny town? Was Dalton's keen interest what had peeved Scroggie?

I added in Dalton's column:

Motive: Did he kill to get his hands on something that was hidden in the novella?

But how could Dalton possibly know of a keepsake unless Scroggie had confided in him? Perhaps Scroggie had revealed the secret to someone else, who then relayed it to a colleague of Dalton's.

While making the crust for the pies by smashing gingersnaps in a food processor and mixing the crumbs with melted butter and brown sugar, I reflected on Kiki Cranston. According to Zach's mother, Kiki was tart but sweet, like the cranberry pies I was assembling. Yes, she adored Yale. In fact, they'd been best friends since high school. He doted on her and she on him. Had she lied about his alibi to protect him?

I pressed the crumbs into two pie plates and situated the plates on a shelf in the refrigerator to cool.

Then I searched the Internet for Kiki. Unlike Felicity, she had quite a presence. She clearly loved clothes. Most of her Instagram photos were of herself in some new outfit. She wasn't receiving the fashions from designers, and she wasn't an influencer, which meant she was spending her own money. Often. Was Kiki, as Vanna had suggested, in need of funds?

I scrolled further and noticed Kiki had posted photographs of sculptures. Most were gaudy ogre-like heads made of clay. Not charming animal paw prints. The images made me wriggle with unease. Was this the stuff her dreams were truly made of? She'd tagged herself as #amateursculptor and mentioned how she didn't intend to sell her works, which contradicted what she'd told Vanna and me at the Joint. Maybe she was savvy enough to know this stuff was unmarketable. I supposed if she made her art at home, it was an affordable hobby and not a drain on her income. However, it meant that Kiki, despite her thinness, had strong arms. Strong enough to kill someone with a bust of Dickens.

Taking another break, I prepared the cranberry curd for the pies. After bringing a small amount of water to a boil in a saucepan, I added the cranberries and sugar and stirred constantly. When the berries had completely popped, I removed the pan from the stove. In ten or fifteen minutes, when the mixture had cooled, I would puree the berries, then add the eggs, lemon juice, and remaining sugar.

One timer dinged. I removed the cupcake tins from the oven and placed them on racks to cool.

Within minutes, the other timer chimed. I withdrew the German chocolate cake and placed it on the stove top.

I couldn't frost either for quite a while, so I resumed my research. "Ozzie," I murmured, consumed with him as Tegan had been because I didn't like or trust him. "I can't believe he is jealous over a crush lost in junior high. How juvenile." I typed his name into the search bar and, yawning, said, "You, pal, are my last deep dive tonight."

Tegan had viewed Ozzie's website and said he was a legitimate insurance agent who didn't have any bad reviews because there were no testimonials at all. Was he meticulous about deleting them? I found he had a presence on a site named Health Markets Worldwide. He was also on Facebook. It was a very professional page. Almost pristine. A mere ten followers. No personal photos. *Slick* was the word that came to mind. That didn't necessarily mean he was untrustworthy.

In his column, I typed:

Motive: Possibly, to get into his uncle's good graces, he stole the novella and will miraculously find it so he can overshadow his cousin. He is devilish, for sure, but would he have stooped so low as to have framed Freddy for the murder? Does he need money? Is it possible he knows what valuable thing might be hidden inside the book? Is he the one who told Dalton Frasier about it?

As I blended the eggs and sugar that I intended to add to the cooked cranberries, I pictured Xenia Blair sneaking around the parlor. Why had she been searching the room? The stepping stool story had been a bunch of malarkey. Had she been scouring the floor for a missing piece of jewelry that had fallen off when she'd struck Gilbert? Or was it possible she'd hidden the novella someplace the police hadn't looked and hoped to retrieve it?

"The stool!" I rasped. What if the stool had a secret compartment?

I posed the question to Noeline in a text. Within seconds she replied.

Noeline: **Yes.**

Me: **Look inside. Is the novella there?**

A minute passed. Two. My heart batted my rib cage in anticipation. Finally, she responded.

Noeline: **No.**

Rats. It was worth a shot.

I finished baking and crawled into bed, mentally and physically exhausted.

Tuesday morning, I did sleep in … until all of six-thirty. I would need jolts of caffeine throughout the day. After feeding Darcy and prepping the van for a dozen deliveries, a few customers as far away as Montford and Asheville, I threw on my work outfit, shrugged into a heavy parka and boots, and drove to Jukebox Joint. The snow had stopped falling. Thanks to the county maintenance services, the roads were clear.

I was wheeling a delivery cart from the van—three boxes of cupcakes needed special care; I couldn't stack them on top of one another and carry them—when Zach and his mother stepped outside.

Jenny waved to me. "I'll see you inside."

Zach crossed to me and greeted me with a gentle kiss. "Anything new in your case?" he asked with a grin.

I smirked. "No." I didn't tell him about my Internet research. When I dug up something concrete, I'd share it.

Fondly, he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and kissed my forehead, a gesture that sent sweet chills down my spine. "Keep me apprised."

"You do the same."

I stood there for a moment wondering why I hadn't told him about Xenia and her foray in the parlor at the inn. Because he was busy, or because I wanted to get a fix on her first? After all, she hadn't been visible on the Zoom call on the night of the murder. Had someone covered for her? She'd been so cagey when I'd pressed. How could I learn the truth?

Around ten, when all my deliveries were completed, I decided to drive to Asheville to have a peek around Book Haven.

When I stepped across the threshold, I was met with a complex mixture of scents, including paper, leather, lemon oil, and wood. One corner of the shop boasted a gorgeous antique sales desk, its wood worn smooth. On one

side of the desk stood the book cart I'd asked Tegan to capture in a screenshot. On the other was a hermetically sealed bookcase.

Two calico cats—Puss and Boots, I imagined—were lying atop the case, sound asleep.

"May I help you?" A woman about my age emerged from behind a velvet curtain and sauntered toward me. Her hair was swooped into a clip, the scarlet and blue ombre ends of her hair poking out like a macaw's plume, emphasizing her long, graceful neck. Her skin was olive-toned. "I am Udita Singh." She had a southern drawl that sounded as rehearsed as Xenia's. Her chocolate brown eyes regarded me warmly.

"What a beautiful name," I said. "Is it Indian?"

"Yes. My grandparents are from Mumbai. My family relocated here before I was born. And you are?"

"Allie," I blurted, without thinking. I hadn't planned on being asked. Quickly, I added the lie I'd formulated. "I'm looking for a first edition of *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens."

"Alas, I am sorry, but we do not have any collectibles by Dickens. They are coveted."

Hmm. Two theories came to mind. Either Xenia had stolen the novella because she'd wanted it for herself, or, as I'd theorized to Zach, a collector had requested it of her and would pay top dollar to own it.

"You look familiar to me," Udita said.

"I've never been in the shop."

"No." She wagged a finger, which made her gold polish glisten in the soft overhead lighting. "Ah, yes. I have seen you advertise on Instagram. You are a caterer."

"I am."

She beamed. "I was looking for someone to handle my wedding."

"Wonderful." I pulled a business card from my purse and offered it to her. "Please call me. I'd love to discuss it. When are you planning on getting married?"

Udita blushed. "We previously tied the knot, but my grandparents could not attend the service. They are finally coming to visit next month, so I want to have a celebration of our marriage."

"Sure. I can do that." I'd catered a wedding reception a month ago, and it had gone off without a hitch. "Will you want it to be as lavish as—"

“An Indian wedding?” she cut in. “Heavens no. Something simple. A few family and friends. Intimate. My mother is pushing back, but I told her this is my decision. We had a feast. We enjoyed the dancing. This is to honor my grandparents.” She smoothed the soft collar of her taupe suit. “As for your purpose of being here, to find a collectible by Dickens, as I said, I am so sorry. We have nothing.”

“Your boss—”

“She isn’t here.”

“Yes, I know. She’s staying at the inn where a murder occurred.”

Udita’s warm expression grew wary. “How do you know this?”

“I was staying there that night, too. We met.”

“You poor thing.” Udita pressed a hand to her chest. “Are you as shaken as Xenia? I told her to come back to Asheville, but she said she’d paid for the week. She isn’t wasteful.” The assistant said the latter with a pleasant twinkle in her eye. “Believe me, I know. I haven’t received a bonus in two years. Between you and me”—she fussed with the clip holding her hair—“staying somewhere a murder occurred would give me the creeps.” She shuddered. “But she is adamant and very excited about attending the Saturday evening soiree.”

If only we could find the novella, I thought.

“Why is she so interested in celebrating a Dickens classic if she doesn’t have any novels by him on hand?” I asked.

“She had been hoping Erwin Scroggie might have other collectibles she could buy from him. In particular, the one you requested, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Her plan—the reason for her stay at the inn—was to schmooze with him and convince him that she should be his go-to person for all future collectible purchases and sales.”

Interesting. When exactly had she planned to do that? At dinner? Scroggie hadn’t attended. And the next day, after the brunch was canceled, an additional opportunity hadn’t arisen.

“Apparently, she was on a Zoom call at the time of the murder,” I said blithely, hoping Udita wouldn’t realize I was probing for answers.

“Yes.” She didn’t add anything further.

Phooey. That didn’t work.

I lowered my voice, as if imparting a secret. “I don’t think the police believe her.”

Udita's eyes widened. "Why not?"

"Because she used an avatar, and according to the customer with whom she was supposedly conversing—she'd called to ask about Xenia's health—Xenia had sounded horrible." I added, "Not at all like herself."

"But it was," Udita asserted. "It had to be."

"Don't you have access to her account?"

Sheesh, Allie, cool your jets. Where's your finesse? You're bulldozing through this. But how else could I get answers? I couldn't pussyfoot around the questions.

Luckily, Udita didn't seem bothered by my bluntness. "Access?" she repeated.

"C'mon," I threw out casually. "Can't you Zoom with someone as Xenia's proxy?"

"I would never." She pressed a hand to her cheek. "No. That would not be proper."

"You sound like her," I said. "Your genteel accent is much like hers. Warm. Honeylike. Lyrical, in fact."

"Why, thank you, but I have never acted as my employer on a Zoom, and it would've been impossible for me to do so that night."

"Why is that?"

"Because …" A look of embarrassment suffused her face. "Because …" She studied her wedding ring, a gorgeous single diamond in a white gold setting. "Because my husband and I were trying for a baby. This past week has been my fertile window, particularly from dusk until dawn."

An hour later I rushed into Feast for the Eyes, eager to bring Tegan up to speed. I spied her through the office window and bypassed Chloe, who was tending to two customers, each carrying a stack of children's Christmas-themed books.

"You won't believe it," I said to Tegan, interrupting her from unwrapping a stuffed pita sandwich she'd purchased at Ragamuffin.

"Hungry?" she asked, offering up half.

I shook my head and launched into my account about how Xenia's clerk had corroborated her boss's alibi.

"All she substantiated," Tegan said, "was that she wasn't the person on the Zoom call. She can't be sure her boss didn't cajole someone else into

posing as her.”

“Good point.” I mulled that over and followed a new thread. “Udita—that was her name—said Xenia is mindful of money. Not wasteful. That’s why she’s continuing to stay at the inn. She paid for the privilege in full.”

“Money, money. Follow the money.” Tegan took a bite of sandwich and set the remainder on the Ragamuffin takeout bag. “Have you pinned down which of the suspects might be in financial straits?”

“No, and it’s so frustrating. You saw Ozzie’s and Yale’s websites. They were legit. Despite the lack of testimonials, Ozzie probably has plenty of clients. Same for Yale, and his reputation is spotless.”

“I wonder …” She didn’t finish. She closed her eyes and lowered her head, an indication that she was thinking. Hard.

“Wonder what?”

She popped her eyes open. “Got an hour?”

“Why?”

She wrapped up her sandwich, slipped it into the mini fridge, and brushed crumbs off her holiday-themed *Star Wars* sweater. “I think you and I should do some sleuthing.”

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Chapter 19

What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you?

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Standing on the sidewalk outside the shop to the right was the tall and lean actor in Dickensian gear that I'd seen the other day. Puttin' on the Glitz customers would reap the benefits of his talent today.

"Tegan," he hailed, raising an arm. "Got a minute?" he said with a slight Irish accent. "I could use some help."

With his outfit? With tamping down that amazing smile?

We approached, and Tegan jutted her hand as a hello. The man took it between both of his, which made Tegan's cheeks bloom pink.

"Allie," she said, pulling her hand from his grasp, "do you know Quinlan O'Leary?"

"I've seen you onstage," I replied. "You're good."

Genteelly, he tipped the brim of his top hat. "Thank you, ma'am."

"What are you doing here?" Tegan asked.

“I’m to recite the opening of stave 3 of *A Christmas Carol* all afternoon.”

“Is anyone paying attention to these readings?” she asked.

“I’ve lured a sizeable crowd. After all, I’m a star.” He said it tongue in cheek, slipped his thumbs beneath the lapel of his waistcoat, and grinned.

Tegan said, “When he’s not bragging—”

“Or acting,” Quinlan cut in.

“He works for Parks and Recreation leading hikes and river-walks and such.”

“I’m a real mountain man, like my father before me, rest his soul.” He removed his top hat and placed it over his heart.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said.

“Don’t be. He’s alive,” Quinlan quipped. “But he was a drinker and a womanizer, so me mum kicked him out. His soul is no longer welcome in Bramblewood.” He knuckled Tegan on the arm. “Could you two listen to my spiel and tell me if my British accent is good enough?”

She laughed. “Good enough? I happen to know most Irish actors master many accents so they won’t be known as *that Irish guy*. I’ll bet it’s excellent.”

“Just a few lines,” he crooned. “Please.”

We listened for three minutes. When his confidence was intact, we bid him good-bye, and headed to the inn.

In my van, I said, “Is he, you know, the guy you’re interested in?”

“Mine to know.” She smiled like the Cheshire Cat. I would get no more out of her.

“So what are we sleuthing?” I asked wryly.

“Hiding spots.”

The inn wasn’t bustling when Tegan and I entered. In fact, no one was around except Noeline, who was on the phone at the reception desk, and Mrs. Grimshaw, who held a copy of Ngaio Marsh’s *Tied Up in Tinsel* in her hand. The strains of “Silver Bells” were playing softly through speakers. The Christmas trees were glowing in the living room and parlor.

Mrs. Grimshaw said to us as we drew near, “Noeline is distraught, y’all. Guests continue to cancel.”

Noeline ended the phone call and groaned. “They’re not merely canceling. They’re requesting all of their nonrefundable deposits back.”

“Aw, Mom, I’m sorry,” Tegan said.

Money, money, follow the money droned morosely in my head.

“Dear, sweet Noeline.” Mrs. Grimshaw sidled behind the counter, giving Tegan’s mother no escape route. “I haven’t picked up any bad vibes since I arrived.” She fluttered the fingers of one hand by her temple. “And I always pick up bad vibes when they’re hovering. I’m not a psychic, but I am tuned in. And I am quite plugged in on the Internet. I’ll make sure my social media posts speak glowingly about the Amber Lantern. Everyone will know this is the best inn in Bramblewood. The best in the world.”

Okay, that might be a stretch.

“All your rooms will be booked well into the future. Don’t worry.” Without warning, she hugged Noeline.

I caught sight of Noeline’s shocked expression and tamped down a laugh. Tegan did, too.

“Yes, well, thank you. Very kind of you.” Noeline broke free of the woman and smoothed the ties of her silk blouse. “At least for now all the other guests are remaining.”

One of them, I reflected, *could be the guilty party watching the scenario play out.*

“Are any of them on the premises?” I asked nonchalantly.

“Yale and Kiki are at work,” Noeline replied. “Freddy and Felicity, too. I think Xenia is on a hike. Dalton might have gone with her. Why?”

“No reason.”

“You know, Allie,” Noeline said, “you had the right idea about the stepping stool.”

Tegan glowered at me. “Did you forget to tell me something?”

I explained how Helga and I had caught Xenia snooping around the stool and how she’d given us an iffy reason for her presence. “I’d wondered if there might be a hidden compartment in the stool where the thief—the killer—might have stashed the novella to recover at a later time.”

“There is a compartment,” Noeline stated, “but, alas, it was empty.”

“I had no idea a hidey-hole existed,” Tegan said.

“Where else do you think the book could be?” Mrs. Grimshaw asked, her eyes glittering with intrigue. “For example, did the police check all the

guests' luggage? Were they thorough? So many times in the mysteries I read, the police are lackadaisical or sloppy. It's not a good look. They should be sharp. On top of things."

"Zach Armstrong is excellent at his job," I said. "Diligent. Observant. I know for a fact that he and his partner searched all the rooms. I'm sure they went through personal belongings. They found the vial in a trash bin."

"What vial?" Mrs. Grimshaw looked between us.

"A vial of sedatives," Ozzie said as he walked through the front door. His shirt was more rumpled than usual, and his lip was bleeding.

"What happened to you, son?" Mrs. Grimshaw asked nervously.

"I ran into a fence."

She winced. "Are you okay? Do you need medical attention?"

"Nah. I took a fall and bonked my face. Dumb move." He weaved slightly. Was he drunk? "Nothing a Steri-Strip or two and sleep won't take care of." He proceeded to the elevator, waving one hand overhead as a good-bye.

As he disappeared into the lift, I thought about his snappy comeback. Was it possible he'd had a run-in with a real fence—a guy who dealt in stolen merchandise—one he'd hoped would buy the novella?

"What a character," Mrs. Grimshaw said. "Who is he?"

"Oswald Crockett. He's one of Erwin Scroggie's nephews."

"Ooh." She silently applauded. "This real-life mystery keeps getting better."

No, it doesn't, I mused. *Not in my book.*

"I'm hungry," Tegan said. "I wish I'd brought my pita sandwich with me. Allie, let's beg Helga for one of her famous tuna melts."

"She's in the kitchen," Noeline said as she answered yet another phone call.

We headed there, and when our appetites were sated, I said to Tegan, "Where should we start our sleuthing?"

She sneaked back to the foyer. I trailed her. No one was around. She peeked into the parlor and living room and out a few windows.

"The coast is clear," she said. "Mom must be in the office. I see Mrs. Grimshaw in the gazebo." She moved behind the reception desk, tapped in a code to open a cabinet, snagged a universal key to the rooms, and whispered, "Follow me."

We climbed the stairs to the second floor.

“We can’t sneak into Ozzie’s room,” Tegan said. “He’s here.”

Even if we did, if my guess was correct, he might have disposed of the novella and taken a beating for the privilege. Had he haggled over the price? Demanded more money? And if he had stolen the novella, did that establish he was the killer?

“Let’s check out Xenia’s room,” she said sotto voce. “Maybe we can find out who her contacts and other associates are.” She rapped on the door for Camelia. “Housekeeping.”

No one answered.

“Mother said she went on a hike. We have a little time.” Using the pass key, Tegan slipped inside.

So did I.

She stood, hands akimbo, studying the room. “Helga must have cleaned the room. It’s as neat as a pin. See anything?” She crossed to the dresser and opened a drawer. “An address book? A notepad?”

“No.” I peeked into the closet. Dresses and shoes. No other paraphernalia. I recalled how Xenia had nabbed a leather backpack when I’d caught her snooping in the parlor. “It’s possible following Helga’s foray when she found the missive about Xenia knowing Gilbert, Xenia is now toting all her important documents and tech-related things with her, and this is a bust.”

“True. Moving on …”

She led the way to Yale and Kiki’s room. A DO NOT DISTURB sign hung on the door handle. “Mother said they went to work. I think the coast is clear.” She opened the door as she had Xenia’s and slipped inside. “What a mess.”

That was an understatement. If I didn’t know better, I would say a tornado had hit it. Their bed was piled with clothes. Items lay on the floor and were strewn on the settee. The door to the bathroom was ajar, and I could see Kiki’s makeup scattered everywhere.

“If you were a novella,” Tegan said, “where would you be hiding?”

“Not here. I might get cooties.”

She sniggered and sneaked to the dresser. I took the closet again.

We came up empty, as I'd expected. I'd meant it when I said Zach and Bates had been thorough.

"This is a bust," I whispered, "and the longer we stay, the more likely we are to be caught. Let's go."

Reluctantly, she complied.

I drove Tegan back to the bookstore and continued on to Dream Cuisine, my curiosity piqued about Ozzie and his bruised appearance and unsteady demeanor. I wanted to talk to Freddy about Ozzie, so I decided to make a batch of goodies to deliver to Legal Eagles.

In less than an hour, I baked two dozen chocolate chip cookies and removed lemon bars from the freezer. When the cookies were cool, I packed up two boxes of treats, sealed them with my signature label, and sped to the law office.

In the nick of time, as it turned out.

As I strode through the door, I spotted Felicity fending off her sister. Dressed in a pink wispy outfit, Felicity reminded me of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Rae, however, thanks to her helmet-shaped hair and the stone-gray pant suit she had on, reminded me of a warrior statue come to life.

"No, I won't," Felicity exclaimed, batting her sister with one arm. The good one.

Luckily, there were no clients in the area. The receptionist was on her feet, flummoxed as to how to intervene.

"Rae," I said sharply.

She ignored me. "I won't take no for an answer, Fee." She grabbed Felicity's wrist.

Felicity pulled free. "Read my lips. N. O. No."

"We have to talk about your marriage," Rae said.

"Rae," I repeated in a softer tone. "Hello. Are you hungry?" I held out the boxes. "I thought the office staff could use an afternoon pick-me-up. You, too, since you're here. I've brought sweets. Chocolate chip cookies and lemon bars."

"Allie, leave us alone. My sister and I have to talk finances," Rae hissed. "Felicity, how are you going to take care of the child?"

The child. Tinsley.

“She’s sick. The bills are piling up.” Rae chopped one hand against the other. “Freddy is behind in paying off his student loans and doctors’ fees, and you’re flat broke. I’ve reviewed your accounts.”

“How dare you!” Felicity yelled.

Whoa. How had Rae gained access? Had Felicity given her the passwords, or did Rae simply know her sister so well that she’d guessed them? Was she an Internet wiz like Tegan? Or psychic?

“You have no right,” Felicity added. “None. Talk about inserting yourself into my life.”

“I did it because I love you.”

“You do not. You want to control me. Like always. Big sister. Bigger bully.”

Rae growled, “Take it back.”

“I won’t. You’re a tyrant.” Felicity eyed the receptionist and me for corroboration. “I’ll have you know, Rae, we’ve been meeting with a financial planner to get things under control. Plus Freddy’s working overtime and so am I.”

“Allie”—Rae thrust a hand at me—“speak up. Felicity respects you. Talk her into leaving Freddy.”

Now she wanted my support? *Uh, no.*

I shook my head. “Sorry. I can’t. I won’t.”

She wheezed out her disgust.

“Why don’t you like Freddy?” I asked. “If they’re dealing with their issues in a grown-up fashion—”

“He’s a Scroggie!” she screeched. “A Bobb.” Spittle flew from her mouth. “The whole family is a bunch of rotters. His brother is a ne’er-do-well. He travels the world picking up jobs.” She threw her arms wide. “*The world*.”

The receptionist said to me, “He’s a roughneck.”

I flinched. “That’s sort of harsh.”

“No,” she added hastily. “I mean, he’s a rig mechanic, which is known as a roughneck. He fixes oil riggers. It’s not an odd job, but he’s rarely in the States.”

I nodded, understanding now.

“He broke my heart,” Rae said, stifling a sob. “Felicity, you know he did. I believed—” She broke off and deflated, looking like a scorned

woman. “He said he would … he promised … but he didn’t.”

“Sis,” Felicity said softly, “I’m sorry he didn’t come back. I’m sorry he’s not following through with his promises. But Freddy is nothing like his brother. Freddy won’t break my heart. He’s a good guy. Our financial issue is temporary.”

I gulped, hoping she wasn’t implying that selling the novella would get them out of debt. “Felicity, I need to speak with Freddy.”

The office door opened, and Zach walked in. When he spotted me at the receptionist’s desk, his eyes narrowed. He strode to me. “Allie, why are you here?”

“I’m delivering treats,” I said. It wasn’t a lie.

He sighed. “Look,” he whispered under his breath so others wouldn’t hear him, “I’m the one who’s supposed to be talking to suspects, not you.”

“I’m not—”

“You need to leave.”

“Can I first tell you my suspicions about Ozzie Crockett?”

“Not now.” He broke eye contact, stepped away from me, and zeroed in on Felicity. “I’d like to chat with your husband.”

The color drained from Felicity’s face.

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Chapter 20

“There are some upon this earth of yours,” returned the Spirit, “who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Zach did not reconnect with me because the receptionist buzzed him and Felicity through to the rear offices. Rae tried to follow.

Felicity impeded her sister’s access with her palm. “No. You’re not allowed.”

Rae huffed and stomped out of Legal Eagles.

I, on the other hand, stood frozen in my spot, worried about my relationship with Zach. The heated way he’d stared at me could have charred steaks. Was he really upset? Even after we’d theorized together in his office?

No, that couldn’t be it. He had been on a mission. To grill Freddy. Had he found the novella? Could he pin the theft on Freddy and, therefore, arrest him for murder? Had Ozzie drummed up a plot that had sent Zach after his cousin?

Chill, Allie. Maybe Zach merely learned more about Freddy's finances and wanted clarification. Just because Freddy owed money didn't make him a thief or a killer.

I mulled over Scroggie and his lending practices. I imagined he placed whopping interest rates on the loans he provided. Did other lenders in town do the same? Was Freddy under someone's thumb?

My cell phone buzzed. Tegan was calling. I waved good-bye to the receptionist, asked her to have Freddy call me—if Zach didn't haul him off to jail—and exited the office, my mobile to my ear. "What's up?"

"I'm worried about Mom," Tegan said. "I think Vanna is aiming for a showdown."

"A showdown?"

"I think she wants her to sell the inn. Quit the business. Vanna texted me, but I couldn't make out what she was planning. You know her and texting. She's incapable of using spellcheck. I'm forwarding it to you now."

My cell pinged. Vanna's text appeared:

Hey got to thinking maybe time mom sells in like not in but inn. Idk makes sense?

I laughed. "Yeah, it's jumbled, misspelled, and lacking punctuation." An English teacher in high school had drummed into me to take care when writing. Go sentence by sentence. Plot out my thesis. The fewer mistakes I made meant I'd truly considered the issues. "How can I help?"

"Join me for dinner at the inn. Be my wingman."

Vanna wasn't nearly as influential as Tegan believed, but I agreed. "I'll stop by for one drink, but I have a lot of orders for tomorrow, and Darcy—"

"Thank you." She ended the call.

When I arrived at the inn, the living room was filled with a bunch of children and attentive adults, including Vanna. She was hard to miss in her bright green dress and twinkling minibulb Christmas necklace.

The adults were standing, and the children were sitting on the floor facing the Christmas tree. All were watching a female mime attired in a nutcracker costume. The mime, who was playing all the parts in *A Nutcracker Suite*, acted out the story of Clara on Christmas Eve and her showdown with the Mouse King. She hurled an imaginary shoe at the

Mouse King, and then nimbly swung around to receive the imaginary shoe in her face. The children laughed. The adults applauded.

Vanna spotted me and ushered me into the foyer. “I’m so glad you’re here. You’re sane. You’ll help.”

“With what? What’s going on?” I asked.

Sotto voce, she said, “Mother thought having a multigenerational event at the inn might help squelch the bad vibes the murder has created.”

I thought of Mrs. Grimshaw, who’d vowed no bad vibes existed in the inn. *Yeah, right, and I owned beachfront property on Mars.*

“Mother is hoping a show of goodwill and some coupons for free one-night stays might encourage people to book future holidays,” Vanna continued, “so she invited a kindergarten class and their parents for cookies, punch, and a show.”

“She needs to lure guests who aren’t locals,” I suggested.

“Yes, she knows that. She’ll be advertising, of course,” Vanna said. “But, honestly, Allie, it’s a bit much, don’t you agree? I’ve told her to toss in the towel. The expenses are too high, and if people keep canceling …” She splayed her hands.

“She’s not selling.”

“My friend—”

“The councilman.”

She glowered at me. “My friend happens to also be a Realtor.”

Councilman Stevenson was a day trader and a Realtor? He was one busy guy.

“He said Mother could sell this place for a sweet price. She’d make double what she paid for it.”

Real estate prices had been on the rise, but I didn’t think money was what drove Noeline. She loved owning two inns. She adored entertaining guests.

“Let me guess—he’d like the listing,” I said.

“Yes, of course, but—”

Tegan raced into the inn and drew up short, nearly careening into her half sister. “Do. Not. Make. Mom. Sell.” She uttered each word like its own sentence.

I rested a hand on my pal’s shoulder. “Chill.” I regarded her *Star Wars* sweater and said in a mashup of Yoda uttering a famous British wartime

motto, "'Calm you shall keep, and carry on you must.'"

She nodded. "Good one."

"Don't worry," I said. "Vanna won't convince your mother to do anything she doesn't want to do."

Vanna eyed me. "And why not?"

"Because your mother—"

"Doesn't respect your opinion," Tegan cut in. "That's why."

"Yes she does," Vanna snapped.

"Not when it comes to real estate. Not when it comes to business. You are a caterer." Tegan gazed at me. "Not that catering isn't a noble career. It is." She shot a hand at her sister. "But catering and running an inn are two entirely different animals."

"Two inns," Vanna snarked.

"She's good at what she does. This setback—"

"This murder?" Vanna said too loudly.

A few adults in the living room pivoted to listen in on our conversation.

Judiciously, I guided Tegan and Vanna across the foyer to the archway by the parlor. "Let's put a pin in this for a future time."

"Fine," Vanna huffed. "In that case, I have some gossip."

Swell. Not what we needed right now.

"It's about Yale and Kiki," she went on.

Okay, I was wrong. My interest was roused. Had she discovered one of them was in dire financial straits? Something that might take Zach's focus off of Freddy? I motioned with one hand. "Go on."

"I was at Blessed Bean," Vanna said, "checking out whether the owners wanted to increase their daily orders of sweets, when I spotted Yale and Kiki sitting at a table for two. Their heads were bent close together, but they weren't kissing. They were whispering. So …" She lowered her voice and said with a grin, "I moseyed over."

"You don't mosey anywhere," Tegan chided.

"I can when I want to. Don't interrupt." Vanna flicked Tegan's arm with a finger. "I heard them talking about the key—"

"To what?" I asked. "To a safe? To a building?" Had they stolen the novella and stashed it somewhere off-site?

"No, silly," Vanna said. "Let me finish. What they said was the music of their love and devotion was the key to a long life together. Sweet, right?"

She pressed a hand to her heart.

“Aw, big deal. You heard two lovebirds cooing.” Tegan blew a raspberry.

“It was romantic. I want that kind of love.” She scowled at her sister. “Don’t you?”

“I thought I had it,” Tegan groused. “Allie did, too. We’re more discerning now, aren’t we?”

“We sure are.” I high-fived her.

“Speaking of which,” Tegan said, “how’s—”

A woman shrieked. Outside on the porch.

I raced through the front door and drew to a halt. Vanna and Tegan bumped into me.

Yale, hair handsomely tousled, was one step down on bended knee, his right hand outstretched to Kiki, who stood inches in front of me. Yale was pinching a diamond ring between two fingers.

Kiki’s hands were covering her mouth, but she could still be heard mewling with joy. “Oh, oh, oh.” She released her hands and yelled, “Yes, I’ll marry you!”

A few of the adults from the living room pushed through the front door. They skirted Tegan, Vanna, and me.

“You will? Really?” Yale popped to his feet, slipped the ring onto the fourth finger of Kiki’s outstretched left hand, and embraced her. “You have made me the happiest man in the world.”

Everyone on the porch clapped.

Ozzie, who was strolling up the path, hollered, “Get a room!”

Yale threw him a sour look. “Cut it out.”

“You cut it out.” Three Steri-Strips graced Ozzie’s bruised face. “No one needs to see your PDA.”

“Public display of affection,” Vanna translated for the onlooking adults’ edification.

Ozzie reeled to his right but steadied himself. Was he drunk again, or still, as I’d presumed earlier? A pair of binoculars hung around his neck. A canvas backpack dangled over one shoulder. Was there a flask of liquor in it? He said he’d gone into town to purchase some real alcohol on the night of the murder, seeing as all they served at the inn was wine. Had the police checked out his alibi? I wished I’d been able to tell Zach about how

unsteady Ozzie had appeared earlier and the fact that he might have been in a brawl. Was his conduct the behavior of a guilty man?

Noeline stepped across the threshold. “Oh, my. What’s going on?”

“They’re engaged,” Vanna said, pointing.

“Congratulations.” Noeline picked her way through the knot of people and held out a hand. “Let me see the ring.”

Kiki obliged.

The ring wasn’t flashy but it had a quiet charm. The band was either white gold or platinum. The diamond wasn’t huge, maybe a quarter carat, but it sparkled when the light hit it.

“It’s lovely,” Noeline said.

Ozzie wedged past the throng to enter the inn, accidentally ramming into Noeline and pushing her in Kiki’s direction. In the nick of time, Yale shot out his hands to prevent a collision, then started after Ozzie. “You. Buddy. Hold up.”

Kiki said, “Let him go, babe. He’s a boor. Don’t give him the time of day. Yale, please come back.”

“Heavens,” Noeline said. “I do not need this. Gentlemen, I want a word with you both!” she yelled, then addressed two of the male bystanders on the porch. “Please assist me.” She reentered the inn.

The two bystanders followed her inside.

I said, “Vanna, why don’t you check on the guests in the living room and make sure they each get their gift certificate.”

“Certificate for what?” Tegan asked.

I gave her a nudge. “You, come with me.”

“We’re doing what?” Tegan squawked as I drove the two of us back to Bramblewood.

“You saw how Ozzie acted with Yale just now. If he has a drinking problem, we should find out about it. Maybe he was drunk the night of the theft, too, and after stealing the novella, he killed Gilbert in a blurry daze.” I needed something like a clue or a solid lead to give Zach if he was going to respect my input. “C’mon, I came to the inn to be your wingman, and I’ve already straightened out Vanna, so now I need you to be mine.”

Over the years, Tegan and I had buddied up on a number of exploits. I’d followed her into sketchy territory on more than one occasion. She’d joined

me, too. As girls, we'd adored playing Harriet the Spy. When we found out a frenemy was TPing a student's house, we told her parents.

"Okay," she said, resigned, "but I don't have a good feeling about this."

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Chapter 21

I am sorry for him; I couldn't be angry with him if I tried. Who suffers by his ill whims? Himself, always.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

The Liquor Loft felt more like a hidden gem than a place to grab a bottle. It was nestled on Holly Street between a candle shop that always smelled like vanilla and cinnamon and Fair Exchange, the pawn shop where I'd purchased my Celtic knot necklace and the bust of Dickens. Liquor Loft's sign and windows were hand painted with grapevines.

Inside there was a wall of wine selections ranging from low end to high end. A sign advertising a bourbon-tasting event in two weeks stood prominently in front of the hard-liquor wall. A refrigerator held prosecco and locally crafted beer.

The owner, Cherry, a garrulous woman in her sixties with a smile that could light up Times Square, wagged a hand in greeting as we approached. "Hello, ladies. I'm coming to the January mystery book club."

In honor of Marigold, we were reading *The Mysterious Affair at Styles.*

"I loved the drawing-room murder and all the red herrings," Cherry added. "And Hercule Poirot? Oh, if that man were alive, with his brain and

wit? He'd have women chasing him day and night." She fanned her broad face dramatically.

"No kidding," Tegan agreed.

With no preamble, I said, "Could we see some surveillance footage?"

Cherry tilted her head. "Are you working for the police now, ladies?"

"No." I felt my cheeks warm. "We're—"

"Relax." She chortled. "I'm just ribbing you. I don't care who sees what. Once you're caught on camera that makes it public property. Does it have to do with a suspect's alibi?"

"It does."

"Detective Bates said the same."

Meaning the police had followed this lead. I weighed whether Tegan and I should quit but decided to stay put. Fresh eyes and all that.

"Hold on." Cherry held up a finger. "Let me ring these fellas up." She wiped her hands on her bib-style apron before sidling to the register to finalize the sale of a six-pack of beer to two young men. When the purchase was complete, she asked her clerk to tend to the front of the store and led us to an office behind the register.

It smelled of something intensely fruity.

Cherry noticed me looking for the source. "Oopsies. I dropped a bottle of apricot schnapps this morning. Its sugar content makes it the hardest darned stuff to clean up." She sat at a desk and wakened the security system, which could be viewed on five screens. "We've got interior and exterior motion-activated cameras, front and back. A total of four. The system has enough memory that it doesn't override for about two weeks. This screen"—she gestured to the one on the far right, which was divided into frames—"is where we can view all the past action without interrupting the current recording. Here's Friday night, starting around ten p.m. and running until about three a.m." She raced the video forward. "Okay, at midnight, you can see Oswald approach." She paused the video.

"You know him as Oswald?" I asked. "Not Ozzie?"

"Either works, I suppose. I like using formal names. It's a quirk of mine. Except for my own." She winked. "My parents strapped me with Cyd Charisse Cherbino. Ugh. I love watching old films featuring the famous dancer, but the mouthful of a name for me was too much. I chose Cherry at the tender age of six." She chortled. "Back to Oswald. He's our insurance

guy and quite full of himself, but, hey, you need some bravado if you sell insurance, right? It's so expensive."

"How often does he come in?" I asked.

"At least twice a month. Buys the same thing. A bottle of Dewar's White Label. It's a moderately priced whiskey. Tasty enough."

I didn't drink hard liquor. "Is that a lot to purchase on a monthly basis?"

"Honey, we have people who buy a bottle or two a week." She offered a full-throated laugh that made her ample bosom shake. "I don't judge. I can't or I'd be out of business." She pressed Start, and the video resumed. "This is the front exterior camera. See him stop shy of the door? He paces and smokes for three minutes. Take note. He appears to be talking up a storm, but there's no one with him, and I don't see any Bluetooth device. I don't have sound, so I don't know what he's saying, but it looks heated." She paused the video again.

"Maybe he's trying to convince himself of something," Tegan said.

"Maybe."

I wondered if he was giving himself a pep talk so he'd have the courage to steal the novella.

Cherry restarted the video. Ozzie extinguished his cigarette in a receptacle in front of the store and stepped inside. A few minutes later, he exited carrying a paper bag that held a small bottle of scotch, and he lit up another cigarette. He debated which way to go before turning left toward Fair Exchange. The view was wide enough to see him pause outside the pawn shop's window. The shop's main lights were off, but the display window was illuminated. He peered in. To see what? Did it matter? He checked his watch. Was he killing time, waiting for someone?

Suddenly, a man in a broad-brimmed fedora festooned with a red feather materialized. He was the same size as Ozzie. Same build. With his back turned, I couldn't make out his face. He said something. Ozzie's eyes narrowed. He angrily aimed a finger at the man and barked a response. The man batted Ozzie's hand away, gave him a shove, and marched past him.

"What the heck?" I eyed Tegan. "Did you see that?"

"I did," she said.

"Cherry, do you know that man?" I asked. Had he been the one who had recently bloodied Ozzie's face?

"I don't have a clue who he is."

“Does he remind you of any of your customers?” I pressed. “Maybe the way he walks? The fedora with feather is pretty unique.”

Tegan said, “Like something out of an old movie.”

“Sorry,” Cherry said. “My memory isn’t entirely reliable when it comes to faces of people I don’t see on a regular basis. Can I remember weekly sales? Sure. Do I know who owes what on a running tab? You betcha. I’m a dollars and cents gal.”

“Can you take a screenshot of him and text it to me?” I recited my cell phone number.

Cherry sent the image.

When Tegan and I exited Liquor Loft, I veered left and paused in front of the pawn shop. I didn’t see the owner, J.J., a wizened man with a great sense of humor, inside.

“What’s caught your eye?” Tegan whispered.

“The display has sort of a mix-and-match energy, don’t you think?” There was a guitar on a stand in the background and an arc of small handguns in front of it. Closer to the window were flashier items like bracelets, gold chains, and rings like the one Yale bought Kiki. “I want those.” I pointed to a pair of emerald stud earrings. I enjoyed wearing Celtic knots and jewelry that reminded me of my roots, but I adored emeralds. “Emeralds are my birthstone.”

“I’ll get them for you for your birthday next year.” She sniggered. “Personally, I’m salivating over that turquoise Ruger.”

“Since when do you like guns?”

“I don’t. I love the color.”

I elbowed her. “C’mon, let me buy you a beer at the Brewery and let’s revisit everything we’ve learned.”

Like many restaurants in Bramblewood, the Brewery served craft beer as well as cider. It was also known for its delicious burgers and fries. When we entered, the noise level was intense. Two bartenders were feverishly manning the dozen beer taps affixed to the wall behind them and shouting out orders ready for pickup.

“Can you hear yourself think?” Tegan asked.

“Barely,” I said.

It didn’t help that the TVs around the room were airing a Charlotte Hornets basketball game, and the fans were cheering. I steered Tegan to a

communal rectangular table with two empty backless stools. Patrons occupied the others, undisturbed by our arrival.

I surveyed the crowd. “It looks like everyone except us received a memo to dress for the holidays.”

Some were sporting blinking necklaces like Vanna’s. A table of women our age had donned glittery reindeer antlers.

Our server, Wallis, a petite blond woman with an engaging smile, appeared tableside. “Hi, you two. What’ll it be? Spruce Goose for you, Tegan?”

She nodded. That was her usual choice.

“And, Allie?” Wallis didn’t write anything on a pad or even type it on an iPad. She had a stellar memory.

“Suggestions?”

“My personal favorite right now is Quentin Beerantino. It’s a pale ale. Expect a satisfying finish with some plot twists.” Wallis winked. “I’ve never seen Tarantino’s movies, but I hear they’re really complex.”

“Clever,” I said. “I’ll take that.” Craft beers had the best names and descriptions.

Wallis moved on.

“She’s so sweet,” Tegan said. “It’s a shame about her father. I don’t know if I could act with such grace, allowing for the kind of pressure she’s under.”

Wallis’s father had walked out on the family a year ago, and she’d been working two jobs to help her mother and younger sister survive.

“So …” Tegan leaned forward, arms folded on the table. “Ozzie’s alibi seems to hold up.”

“If the murder happened at midnight,” I said. “But if it occurred closer to two a.m., he could’ve made it back to the inn by then. We both know determining the time of death isn’t an exact science.”

“True.”

I pulled up the photo Cherry had given us on my cell phone and placed the phone on the table. “Who could this guy be? Ozzie had acted angry. If he was waiting to meet someone, it wasn’t him.”

“I don’t think he was planning on meeting anyone,” Tegan said, spinning the phone to reexamine the photo. “He seemed captivated by

something in the shop's window. I think the guy in the feathered hat startled him. Maybe he was drunk or verbally abusive."

Wallis returned with our drinks, laid out two cocktail napkins, and set the beer glasses on top of them. "Any appetizers?"

We both shook our head. On the drive, Tegan said she'd eat a bowl of soup when she got home. My appetite hadn't been up to snuff since seeing Gilbert dead.

"Hey, that's the pawn shop," Wallis said, peering at the image on my phone. "Why are you—" She gasped. "I know those guys."

I swiveled to face her. "Both of them?"

"Ozzie comes in every once in a while. Not much of a beer drinker, but he entertains clients who are. The other guy, the one in the stupid hat, was my father's receiver."

"Receiver?" I tilted my head.

"Fence," she replied.

Whoa. Her father was a thief? How did I not know that?

"Yeah, the creep decided to turn state's evidence on my pop. That's why dear old Dad left town. He had two strikes against him. Mom always kept his illegal activities on the down-low." She gazed at me. "Why do you have a photo of him?"

"Ozzie is a suspect in the murder at the inn, and we were—"

"The one where the book was stolen?" She mouthed a silent *Oh*. "I get it. You think Ozzie was negotiating with the guy?"

"We didn't until now. We didn't know he was a fence," I said. "Do you know his name?" I tapped the picture.

"No, but the police should have records of any known moving men in the area." She paused. "Moving man, receiver, fence. One and the same." Wallis tucked her serving tray under one arm and jutted a hip. "I'd bet J.J. would know who he is. I'm not saying he'd accept anything that had been stolen. He's a legit guy, but he might have the inside scoop." She acknowledged a patron who was hailing her by raising her finger, meaning *Just a sec*. "Gotta go."

"Poor thing," Tegan said. "Her dad … ugh. What a burden to carry around."

I caught sight of Zach and Bates strolling into the pub and ached to know what Zach had talked to Freddy about. Had he arrested him? Did

Freddy need an attorney? There had to be one at Legal Eagles who could help him, unless that would be considered a conflict of interest.

Zach spotted me and lifted his chin in greeting, but he didn't smile. Was he upset with me for being at the law office?

Into the lion's den, I decided, and rose to my feet.

"Be right back," I said to Tegan.

"Where are you—" She saw Zach and, like Wallis, mouthed a silent *Oh*. "Ask Bates about the fence."

I approached Zach and his partner at their small table by the window. "Hi, Detectives."

"Allie," they said in unison.

I said, "Did you arrest Freddy, Zach?"

"We chatted."

"Why were you at Legal Eagles?" I asked.

"We got a tip," Bates said. "An email."

"From?"

"An anonymous source," Bates replied.

That sounded highly suspicious. Who had sent it? Had they tried to track it and failed?

Zach silenced his partner with a glower.

"Was the tip about Freddy's finances?" I asked.

Zach picked up the menu, his tongue working overtime inside his cheek.

"You already knew he was in debt," I said, "due to his daughter's medical bills and his student loans. What else did you discover? He's a hard worker. He's even holding down a side job."

Zach remained mute.

"Simply because he needs money doesn't make him a killer," I said. When he didn't respond, I addressed Bates with a smile. "Could I ask you a question, Detective?"

"Fire away." Bates was always affable. I'd never seen him be cool to anyone. Perhaps he abided by the motto "You catch more flies with honey," a lesson Zach ought to learn.

"Did you happen to track down the receiver—the fence—who accosted Ozzie Crockett on the night of the murder?" I asked.

Zach slapped the menu down on the table. "Allie, c'mon. You're pushing the envelope."

“Pushing the—” I glowered at him. “How about you’re crossing the line, Allie? Or you’re overstepping the mark? Or exceeding the boundaries?” In high school and college, I’d prided myself on being a human thesaurus. “Look, I care about Freddy. I believe he’s innocent. And I care about Noeline, too. The pall of a murder occurring on her property is hurting business. Like you, I want this to be resolved. Sooner rather than later.”

Bates and Zach silently conferred with facial expressions.

Finally, Zach jutted a hand. “Brendan, see if you can find our server.”

Bates nodded. “On it.”

I slipped into his vacated chair and sighed. “Zach, I’m sorry for my outburst. Having feelings for a police detective can be very frustrating.”

“So can having feelings for a curious caterer.”

At least he hadn’t referred to me as nosy. “May I tell you something I intended to say earlier at the law office before …” I motioned between us. “Before this friction started?”

He screwed up his mouth, but he didn’t say no.

“I believe Ozzie might have a drinking problem. He was acting erratically at the inn.”

“Okay.”

“When you shut me down”—I lightly tapped the table—“Tegan and I decided to do some digging and pin down his alibi for the night of the murder.”

“Bates already did that.”

“Yes, the owner of Liquor Loft told us. But before, at Legal Eagles, I was …” I splayed my hands. “I was merely trying to help.”

“Okay.”

“I should tell you about Xenia Blair, too.”

He stared daggers at me. “What about her?”

I wasn’t cowed. I’d faced fiercer competitors on the basketball court. Plus the twitch in his cheek hinted that he was trying his best to be mad at me but failing. I dared to proceed. “She was prowling around the inn and paying acute attention to the stepping stool in the parlor. Her interest seemed bogus, and knowing she might not have a solid alibi for the night of the murder, given that she wasn’t visible on the midnight Zoom call, I went to her shop in Asheville.”

“Allie—”

“Let me finish.” I explained my encounter with Xenia’s assistant, Udita, and questioning whether she had impersonated her boss on the Zoom call. I added that after learning her whereabouts at that time—trying to conceive a child—I believed Xenia had conducted the call, confirming her alibi. “Except Tegan disagrees. She thinks Xenia could’ve cajoled someone else into posing as her.”

“She’s right,” he said.

“Okay. I won’t quibble. Moving on. When I left the bookshop, I flashed on the stepping stool again and wondered whether it had a hidden compartment. You know, someplace the thief might have stowed the novella. So I reached out to Noeline. She confirmed there is a compartment. Did you know about it?”

He scrunched up his nose. “No.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s empty. However, I continue to wonder if the thief … the killer … might have stashed the book someplace else so it wouldn’t be in his or her room when and if the police searched. When the hubbub about the theft and murder cooled down, they’d retrieve it. Did you inspect beneath all the furniture in the parlor?”

“Yes.”

“And behind books on the freestanding bookcases?”

“Yes.” He sighed dramatically. “And inside the player piano and the piano bench. We even checked for wall safes but came up empty.”

Bates returned with two beers. I got to my feet and motioned for him to sit.

At the same time my phone buzzed in my pocket. Vanna was texting to ask if I needed her in the morning. I replied that I didn’t. When I swiped the message aside, the image of Ozzie in front of the pawn shop appeared. “Detective Bates,” I said, which earned me a round of Zach’s peeved stares. “Cherry at the Liquor Loft said you viewed the surveillance footage. Is that correct?”

“I did.”

I rotated the phone to face him. “Did you see this image? It was right after Ozzie left the shop and lit up a cigarette. He paused outside Fair Exchange and peered inside.”

Bates cursed under his breath. “No. I didn’t go that far. Ozzie bought the liquor, which confirmed his alibi.”

“According to Wallis, this guy in the fedora interacting with Ozzie is a known moneyman, meaning—”

“Meaning Ozzie might have handed off the novella to him. Geez.” Bates eyed his partner. “Zach, I’m sorry. I’m a slacker.”

Zach said, “Forget it.”

I smiled broadly to disarm Zach. “Golly, perhaps it’s a good thing you have a concerned citizen who wants to help.”

His mouth quirked up on one side. “Perhaps.” He motioned with his fingers. “Send me the image.”

“Yes, sir.”

While driving Tegan to her house, I quietly replayed Zach’s and my chat. Thankfully he hadn’t bitten my head off and hadn’t demanded I butt out. An oversight? Perhaps. To be fair, he knew I had different skills than he did. For a caterer, life was more nuanced. I paid attention to people’s needs and desires. That might have been the reason why I’d questioned Xenia’s and Ozzie’s actions. Zach couldn’t pay attention to the same issues because he was busy tracking down clues, whereas I was mixing with potential suspects in social settings.

After dropping my pal off, I headed home. Darcy was as pleased as punch to see me. Sometimes I was convinced he thought every time I left the house I might abandon him. Odd for a cat. They were supposed to be so independent. But I did shower him with attention, and truthfully, if Zach showered me with the same kind of attention, I’d pine for him.

Let it go, Allie. We would have a barbecue Sunday and sort things out. Or not. I wouldn’t change who I was or how passionately I loved my friends and family. All my favorite fictional heroines, like Jane Eyre, Elizabeth Bennet, Jo March, and Nancy Drew, would approve of my commitment.

I fed Darcy, ate some cheese with apple slices, and slogged to bed.

Wednesday morning, the snow had stopped, and the streets were cleared, so I took a run. After I got home, I fed Darcy and downed a strong cup of coffee. Then I dressed for work and slung a crossbody purse over my puff parka.

By six, I was at Dream Cuisine facing a long list of baking chores. To my amazement, Helga had requested a specialty birthday cake for her niece, adding that if she baked it, Pippa would smell the aroma and catch on.

In short order, I baked four dozen scones for Blessed Bean, two dozen gingerbread cupcakes with cinnamon cream cheese frosting for Ragamuffin, three loaves of banana bread for Big Mama's Diner, and a delicious lemon chiffon cake embellished with sugared raspberries and green royal icing leaves for Pippa's celebration. It was a light cake yet perfect for the holidays. Lemon, Helga had informed me in her message, was Pippa's favorite flavor.

When all the chores were complete, I stowed everything in my van and drove to the Amber Lantern. As I was carrying the cake into the inn, a woman let out a bloodcurdling shriek.

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STAVE 4

Crescendo: Dire Consequences

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Chapter 22

The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made (for Scrooge observed it closely) of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

I rushed into the Amber Lantern and saw Mrs. Grimshaw standing beneath the arch leading to the parlor, wagging her right pointer finger excitedly. On the index finger of her left hand dangled a small handgun by its trigger.

"Dead!" she screamed. "He's dead!"

I dashed to her. She didn't strike me as dangerous. I could see she was frightened out of her mind. I glanced where she was pointing.

Halfway across the room, Ozzie was lying faceup on the floor, a bullet hole in his chest, his opened eyes frozen in shock. There wasn't much blood splatter. The killer must have shot him at close range. Who would he trust to get so near?

"I didn't do it," Mrs. Grimshaw wailed. "I didn't."

"Of course you didn't," I said calmly as if speaking to a child. Balancing the cake on one hand, I held out my other, palm up, hoping she'd place the handgun in it. She didn't.

“What’s going on?” Noeline sprinted from her office.

“Allie, tell us,” Vanna demanded, tripping after her mother.

“Ozzie Crockett,” I said. “He’s dead.”

Pippa emerged from the kitchen and screamed.

Helga descended the staircase. Behind her appeared Xenia, Felicity, and Dalton. Xenia in a silk robe, jeans peeking from beneath the hem. Felicity in a jogging outfit, pants tucked into Ugg boots. Dalton in a smoking jacket over plaid pants, reminding me of a model out of the British magazine *Tatler*.

“He was shot,” I managed to get out.

Felicity choked back a sob.

Yale charged through the front door, a book in one hand. A cold gust of wind trailed him. “What’s the ruckus?” He caught sight of Ozzie and froze. “Oh, man. Is he—”

“Dead,” Mrs. Grimshaw said. “I was on my way to fetch tea when I saw him. This was beside him.” She raised the gun. “I saw something like it in a shop in Charlotte a day after a friend of mine was mugged, and I wondered if I should buy one, but—” Suddenly, as if awakening from a bad dream, she realized what she was holding and dropped it like a hot potato. Luckily, the thing didn’t fire. “Oh, my. I touched it. I didn’t mean to. My fingerprints …” She swooned.

Yale released his book and reached for the woman, catching her seconds before she landed on the hardwood floor.

I handed the cake box to Helga and said, “Yale, let’s get her into one of the chairs in the foyer. Everyone, do not go into the parlor. It’s a crime scene.”

Again, I reflected miserably. I hadn’t liked Ozzie, but he didn’t deserve to die, did he? Who had shot him? Why?

“I’m calling nine-one-one,” Vanna said.

“Pippa, fetch Mrs. Grimshaw a glass of water,” I ordered.

“Yes, ma’am.” She ran out of the room. Seconds later, she reappeared. She handed a glass filled with ice water to me.

I held it to Mrs. Grimshaw’s lips. “Drink a sip.”

“Tea.” She wheezed. “I’d like tea.”

I motioned to Pippa with my chin, who exited at a clip. Helga followed her with the cake.

“I was outside in the gazebo reading,” Yale said, “when I heard her scream.”

“Did you see anyone coming or going?” I asked, setting the glass on the small table between the chairs. “Did you hear the shot before that?”

“I heard something,” he said slowly, as if trying to rehear whatever it was, “but I thought it was a car backfiring.”

Noeline drew near. “When was that?”

He looked toward the ceiling, thinking. “Maybe ten minutes ago.”

Ten minutes was a very limited time frame.

“When Vanna and I were in the office,” Noeline said, “we didn’t hear a thing.”

“I’m leaving this place,” Xenia said loudly enough for all to hear, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I’d hoped I could make it through the festivities, but this is too much. It’s not safe.”

Were the tears real or manufactured? Had she killed Ozzie? Was she planning on making a speedy getaway?

Dalton slung an arm around her. “Calm down. There’s got to be a perfectly good explanation. An insurance salesman is sure to have made enemies in his line of work.”

“Why?” I asked. “Because a policy didn’t pay out?”

Pippa returned with a cup of tea and administered it to Mrs. Grimshaw.

“The police are on their way,” Vanna announced. “Mother, I think you should cancel the party this Saturday. A second murder will really put a pall on the festivities.”

Like the first one hadn’t? I mused.

“No,” Noeline said firmly.

“But the inn’s reputation,” Vanna protested.

“This is not the inn’s fault.”

“But it’s two murders. In a week. *Two*.”

“Murder will not deter future guests as long as the crimes are solved.” Noeline regarded me, as if begging me to agree.

“Mother,” Vanna lowered her voice, “I can read a room. You might lose all of these guests by noon.”

“No I won’t,” Noeline said doggedly. “Everyone, tonight’s stay is free.”

“What are you doing here?” I asked Vanna.

“Mother and I arranged to meet super early in her office to go over the Christmas list, discussing which gifts to buy for vendors and staff and such. We just finished. If I weren’t a caterer, I could be a personal shopper. I have exquisite taste.” Sotto voce to me, she added that she’d tried yet again to convince her mother to cancel the party.

Without the novella and a murderer or possibly two on the loose, the cancelation might be a fait accompli, but I didn’t insert myself into the conversation. Instead, I left them to hash it out and moseyed to the archway leading to the parlor. Whoever had shot Ozzie had done so facing him. I tried to imagine the scenario. Ozzie, like Imogen Grimshaw, came to the parlor to grab a cup of tea or a morning snack. Miniature muffins were arranged on a platter beside the tea and coffee urns. But before he could make it halfway across the room, the killer summoned him. Ozzie turned and—

The front door flew open and crashed into the wall.

Vanna squealed.

“Sorry if I frightened you,” Freddy said as he crossed the threshold, his face flushed and hair windblown.

“You.” Yale thrust his hand toward him. “You did this.”

“Did what?” Freddy asked, perplexed.

“Murdered your cousin.”

“I did no such thing. What the heck are you talking about, man?” Freddy stared daggers at Yale.

“Oh, Freddy.” Felicity scurried past Xenia and Dalton and rushed to her husband, inserting her hand into his.

“He’s dead.” Yale motioned to the parlor. “He’s been shot.”

Freddy glanced in that direction. And blanched. “Holy heck. He’s really dead? I …” He licked his lips. “I don’t own a gun.”

“There’s one on the floor,” Yale said.

“It’s not mine.” Freddy, with Felicity in tow, joined me at the archway. He stared blankly at the body. “When did it happen, Allie?”

“Maybe ten minutes ago. Yale heard something that he thought might have been a shot.”

“Or a car backfiring,” Yale corrected.

“Well, I didn’t do this,” Freddy stated. “I wasn’t anywhere near here. I was walking on the trail by the lake. In fact, I saw that quirky neighbor with

the dog that looks like a lamb."

Noeline said, "The Bedlington terrier?"

"That's it," Freddy said.

"Mrs. Doolittle and Doogie," Noeline said. "She's very sweet. Sort of dotty, but she has good eyesight."

"Then she can corroborate seeing me," Freddy said.

"Bullpucky," Yale said. "You could have paid her."

"Oh, no," Noeline responded. "Mrs. Doolittle is above reproach. She's a very religious lady. She'd never accept a bribe."

"Why would anyone kill Ozzie?" Felicity asked, her voice tiny and strained.

"Because he wasn't a nice guy," Freddy replied.

"Nice? Understatement of the year." Yale snorted. "You did this to get rid of your cousin because you wanted your uncle to love you and only you."

"Uncle Scroggie will never love anyone," Freddy stated.

"That's not true," Noeline cried. "He did love someone, and she loved him in return."

The room went quiet.

I studied the faces of the others who were hanging around. Dalton and Xenia on the stairs, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Vanna tapping her cell phone screen.

Helga brought in a tray of pre-poured cups of coffee. I passed on it but thanked her. So did Noeline. Helga made the rounds, set the tray on the check-in desk, and departed.

"Is it possible Ozzie learned who murdered Gilbert Quackenbush?" Noeline whispered.

I hadn't considered that. "And confronted the killer?"

"Maybe Ozzie planned to eat a snack before heading off to meet whoever it was," she added, "but his assailant showed up at the inn. Surprise."

"Or the person was staying here," I said.

Noeline shuddered.

"Where's Kiki?" I asked.

"She went to work an hour ago," Noeline said.

So Kiki couldn’t have done it, if Yale’s time frame was correct. Felicity was here. If Ozzie had threatened to hurt or malign her husband, I could see her shooting him.

Xenia, being a business owner, might own a gun. What if Ozzie had learned she wasn’t on the Zoom call and pressed her on that point?

I eyed Dalton and remembered something Xenia had said she’d overheard on the night Gilbert had died. Dalton had been talking to someone and was heard saying, *Let her burn*. Xenia had shared the story because she’d felt he was trying to cast suspicion on her.

But there could be a different explanation, one Evelyn Evers had suggested inadvertently when I’d run into her outside the café. She’d said Charles Dickens had a reputation for destroying most of his correspondence because he was concerned that his private missives might be viewed by the public. Had he really burned them all? Had his mistress? Was there one outstanding piece of correspondence tucked into the novella?

“Letter,” I uttered.

“Let her what?” Noeline asked.

“No, a letter, as in a piece of correspondence.” I mimed scrawling words in the air and faced Dalton. “Mr. Frasier.”

“Yes?” He released Xenia.

“If I recall correctly, when questioned, Xenia said she overheard you talking to someone the night the novella went missing. With whom were you conversing?”

He cleared his throat. “A member of the Dickens Society, if you must know. What’s it to you?”

“Xenia thought you said, ‘Let her burn,’ but you denied it, and yet you wouldn’t explain further.”

He raised his chin.

“I propose you were speaking with a colleague or possibly a potential buyer about a letter you believed Erwin Scroggie might own. When you learned the novella had been insured for way more than its due, you whispered, ‘I knew it.’ I further suggest that you believed the novella held the document in question. Perhaps a letter from Dickens to his beloved. One that scholars believed Dickens had burned.”

Dalton deliberated. Finally, he said, “Bravo, Allie. Good deduction. Yes, I do believe a letter exists. Mind you, I’m not sure which one. You see, most

that were salvaged from that era are in the Dickens Museum. However, in 1842, Dickens traveled to the United States. I imagine he wrote a thank-you note of some kind to one of his benefactors or friends. If it was never burned, it holds immense significance."

"Did Ozzie Crockett figure this out?" I asked. "Was he blackmailing you, believing you killed Gilbert Quackenbush to get your hands on the novella and, thereby, the letter?"

"No. He and I … we never talked about it. We didn't interact. Ever. I had no reason to kill him." He held up both hands as a sign of innocence. "Don't get me wrong. Yes, I wanted the novella, and if it exists, the correspondence within, but I didn't and wouldn't kill for it. As a scholar, I simply wanted to see it."

Noeline said, "I'm calling Erwin and asking him."

Before I could stop her, she tapped a number into her cell phone.

"Scroggie?" she said, using the name he preferred. "It's me. Noeline. Yes, thank you. It was very thoughtful of you. No, I haven't had time to read it yet. I will. Listen, may I ask you a question? There's been a discussion about the novella and whether there was some kind of correspondence from Charles Dickens within it." She listened to his response. "No? You're sure? Your nephew believes you insured the book for a lot of money." She waited again. His voice could be heard dimly. "I see. Yes. All right. Thank you." Her cheeks reddened. "That would be lovely. I look forward to it."

"To what?" Vanna asked.

"He asked me to dinner." She addressed the onlookers. "And he said there was no such letter."

"Of course he did," Dalton muttered. "It's his secret. But if it exists, the killer has ownership."

Zach stepped into the foyer. Bates followed him, the bust of Charles Dickens in his hands.

"Well, well, Allie Catt, to what do we owe the pleasure?" Zach asked, shaking his head as if he couldn't fathom how I could be at the scene of yet another crime.

"I was delivering a cake," I said.

"Uh-huh. Like I believe that. Helga is an amazing baker."

“Yes, but …” Hastily, I explained how Helga asked me to make a specialty cake for her niece. “When I arrived at the inn, Mrs. Grimshaw, a guest, was screaming.” I motioned to where she was sitting. “I raced inside. Mrs. Grimshaw was standing in the archway. I joined her and saw the body.” I pointed to the parlor and headed in that direction.

Zach followed.

“Ozzie was lying as you see him,” I said. “Mrs. Grimshaw was holding the murder weapon by a fingertip.”

“I didn’t do it,” the beleaguered woman mewled.

“I asked for her to give the gun to me,” I went on, “but she seemed dazed. In her defense, she must have automatically picked it up, curiosity taking hold at the sight of the body. There is no blood splatter on her bodice.” Imogen Grimshaw was in her typically pristine white blouse and navy skirt. I motioned to the others. “Noeline and Vanna came out of the office. Pippa from the kitchen. Helga, Felicity, Dalton, and Xenia trotted downstairs. Yale rushed in from outside. He’d heard Mrs. Grimshaw scream. When she realized she was holding the gun, she swooned. Yale caught her, and we guided her there. Freddy charged through the door a few minutes later.”

“Freddy did this,” Yale said. “He must have.”

“Except Freddy has an eyewitness as to where he was. By the lake. Taking a walk,” I said.

Yale snorted. “Yeah, as if.”

I said, “Yale believed he heard a car backfire about ten minutes before Mrs. Grimshaw screamed. That might have been when Ozzie was shot. The killer could have vanished in that amount of time.”

Zach studied the crime scene.

I said, “I think Ozzie found out who killed Gilbert Quackenbush—”

“And was bribing that person?” Zach cut in.

I nodded. “He met the killer here. The killer shot him point blank.”

“And left the gun with fingerprints on it?”

“I’d bet the only prints you’ll find will be Mrs. Grimshaw’s.”

Zach scrutinized the onlookers.

Under his watchful gaze, Xenia said, “I was in my room.”

“Me too,” Felicity said. “My husband was on a walk.”

“Yes,” Zach said. “Miss Catt has informed me of your husband’s whereabouts. How about you, Mr. Frasier?”

“In my room. Reading.”

“I was reading, as well,” Yale said. “In the gazebo.”

“Did anybody see you?” Freddy asked snidely.

“The birds,” Yale snapped.

“Gentlemen,” Zach cautioned.

“My fiancée is at work,” Yale said in an effort to release her from suspicion.

Bates crossed to Noeline and offered her the bust of Dickens. “Evidence is done with this item, Mrs. Merriweather. You may have it back.”

Loath to touch it, Noeline recoiled. Vanna interceded and took it from Bates. She peered at the parlor and then at Zach. “Um, permission to place this on the piano, sir?”

Zach nodded. “But keep to the perimeter.”

I wondered how long the bust might remain in the parlor. I hoped Noeline would trash it as soon as she could, even though I’d gifted it to her. After all, it had been used as a murder weapon.

“Everyone,” Zach said, “as before, please have a seat in the dining room. I’ll be with you soon. Consider whether you heard any strange noises or saw anyone lurking around the property in the last twenty-four hours.”

Glumly, the guests wandered in that direction, and Vanna returned to the office with Noeline.

“Allie, hold up.” Zach nabbed my elbow.

My stomach soured. “I’m sorry I’m here.” I was. Truly.

“No, that’s not …” His mouth quirked up on the right. “I’m the one who should apologize for how I treated you at the Brewery as well as at the law firm. I care about you.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“I’m tough.”

“As a barn cat in a snowstorm,” he joked. “But, see, that’s the thing. People who think they’re tough sometimes do rash things.”

“I’m not rash.”

“I didn’t say—” He heaved a sigh.

“Did you and Bates track down the moneyman? Is it possible he did this?”

“Why would he have?”

“He and Ozzie exchanged words in front of Fair Exchange.”

“Allie—”

“Am I overstepping again? Because if I were you, I’d follow up.”

“But you’re not me.”

The sharp retort caught me squarely at my solar plexus. A nerve-wracking quiet fell between us.

Finally, he rested a hand on my arm. It was warm. Comforting. *Phew*.

He spoke first. “My mother told me you and she were talking about my past with Becky.”

“I wasn’t prying.”

“I know. Relax. She said she instigated the conversation.”

I said, “She was enlightening Vanna.”

Gently, he cupped my chin. “I’ll tell you anything you want to know about her and about my life with her when you come over for barbecue. Deal?”

“Deal.”

“I love you,” he said so softly I wondered if I’d heard him correctly. “I don’t want to lose you. Please be cautious.”

My insides relaxed. He wasn’t mad at me.

“This …” He motioned to the parlor. “Two murders in a week. At the same location. It boggles the mind. What is Bramblewood coming to?” He regrouped and squared his shoulders. “Bates, contact the coroner and handle the evidence. Allie, we’ll talk.”

He headed *toward* the dining room.

Bates entered the crime scene and inspected the gun from close range. “Uh, Zach,” he said before Zach disappeared, “the serial number’s been filed off.”

“Swell.” Zach waved a hand without turning around. “Document everything.”

As I watched Bates insert the handgun into a paper bag to ensure that any potential fingerprints would be preserved, something niggled at the edges of my brain.

Think, Allie. What is it?

But I couldn’t because Vanna emerged from the office and ordered me to wait up.

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Chapter 23

No warmth could warm, no winter weather chill him.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

"Let me go with you on your deliveries," Vanna said, following me to the van. "Mother doesn't need me for anything else, and I'd like to help."

"Sure. We're headed to Big Mama's Diner first."

"Cool," she said as she climbed in the passenger seat. "So, Scroggie …" She didn't continue.

"Yes?"

"Poor Mother."

Okay, that seemed like a non sequitur. "Why poor?"

"Well, I mean, I think she's going to date him."

"If your mother chooses to do so, it's her business." I secured my seat belt and switched on the engine.

"Yes, but …" Vanna squirmed in her seat. "It's … he's so …" She was rarely at a loss for words. "Oh, forget it."

Three minutes into the drive, I expected Vanna to bend my ear again about her mother's dating life, but she didn't, and I wondered if perhaps she realized she wouldn't want her mother giving *her* dating advice.

When she finally spoke, she said, “Could we chat about *A Christmas Carol*? I’ve read it and have questions.”

“Fire away,” I said, instantly regretting the term after what had happened to Ozzie.

Thankfully, Vanna didn’t pick up on my faux pas. “What role does Tiny Tim play in the story?”

I veered onto Holly Street.

“I mean, I get that he’s innocent and vulnerable,” she continued. “Does he represent all mankind or something deep like that?”

“I think that’s a fine interpretation,” I said. “Yes, he symbolizes the destitute and unfortunate. His generous spirit, despite his challenges, contrasts Scrooge’s miserliness.”

“Meaning if Scrooge can warm up to the boy, he can warm up to everyone else?”

“Yes. In fact, when he realizes that, his transformation is imminent.”

“Yay.” She applauded herself. “I get it. I truly get it. I was talking about it with …” She stopped short.

I drove one-handed and motioned with my other. “Your friend?”

“Yes, my friend. He’s read the book. In fact, he’s read a lot of Dickens’s work. I think I might peruse one of Dickens’s other books.”

Hold the phone! If the councilman—her new *friend*—could encourage her to read more, kudos to him.

“I’ll take this order in,” Vanna said when I parked on the street.

Her behavior wasn’t suspicious. She’d met all of my clients over the course of the last few months. I doubted she hoped to score a new customer.

In lickety-split time, we delivered the other orders, and I offered to drive Vanna back to the inn to fetch her vehicle.

“I’d like to go to the bookshop with you, if that’s okay,” she said.

“You’re not afraid to be at the inn, are you?”

“Yes,” she squealed. “Shouldn’t we all be? A second murder occurred there.”

I heaved a sigh. “True, but the police are investigating.”

“Do you think this murder is related to the first one?” she asked. “Because Ozzie knew something?”

That was exactly what I was thinking. Ozzie believed he could coerce the murderer to pay big bucks to keep the secret.

“What if the killer thinks one of us knows something?” she asked, voice trembling.

I cut a glance at her. “Do you?”

“Well, no.”

“Then relax. I doubt you’re on the killer’s hit list.” I found a spot on West Main Street in front of Puttin’ on the Glitz and parked. I climbed out of the van, grabbed a platter of cookies that I’d arranged for the customers at Feast for the Eyes, and led the way into the shop. “Your mother said when she and you were in the office, you didn’t hear a shot,” I said over my shoulder.

Vanna replied, “We certainly didn’t hear a car backfiring, like that Yale guy did.”

“Was the office window open?”

“No. It’s cold out. But don’t you think we would’ve heard a gunshot inside the inn?” Vanna asked. “FYI, here’s a timeline detail.” She formed a T with her hands, which was sort of cute since the T sign typically meant time out. “I went to reception a half hour earlier to fetch Mother’s cell phone. She’s always leaving it someplace.” She blew a raspberry. “And I swear Ozzie was not dead in the parlor yet.”

“That seems to support Yale’s claim.”

I wondered if the coroner had arrived at the inn and determined whether the handgun had been fitted with a suppressor, which could explain why Vanna and Noeline hadn’t heard anything, and might also render Yale’s account moot. Also, there wasn’t much blood splatter.

But if a suppressor had been used, why hadn’t the killer left it attached to the discarded gun?

I handed Vanna the platter of cookies, fished my cell phone out of my crossbody purse, and sent Zach a text to that effect. Three bubbles materialized, but ultimately he didn’t respond. Fine. I was okay with his silence. I was being helpful. That had to earn me Brownie points.

“Hi, everyone,” I said, taking back the array of treats as Vanna and I entered the bookshop.

Tegan was standing atop a three-step ladder in the mystery genre section organizing shelves. Chloe was rearranging an endcap of *A Christmas Promise*, which featured two delicious novels by Norah Roberts in one book.

“Look who came with me,” I announced.

“I just got off the phone with our mother,” Tegan said to her half sister. “I’m not happy.”

“Yes,” Vanna said, “there was a second murder at the inn. It’s so sad.”

“Wait, what?” Tegan clambered down the ladder, eyes wide. “Allie?”

I set the cookies on the sales counter and pivoted.

“Mom didn’t tell me that.” Tegan made a beeline for me. “Who? How? When?”

I filled her in on the details.

Tegan slumped onto a ladder-back chair. “Poor Mom.”

Poor Ozzie, I thought even though I hadn’t liked him much.

Chloe scurried up. “Did I hear you say someone else died at the inn? Yikes. Bad karma.”

Two customers who were browsing the romance aisle peeped out and ducked back. One was Magda Bellingham.

“Chloe,” Tegan said, “Allie will fill you in soon. First, see if those customers need help.”

“On it.” She saluted and flounced away.

“Why are you not happy after talking to our mother?” Vanna asked.

“Scroggie asked her on a date,” Tegan groused. “I’m not in favor.”

“Relax. He’s harmless.” Vanna swatted the air.

I gawked at her. Moments ago she’d been worried sick. Now she was supportive? She cracked me up sometimes.

Vanna continued. “I heard him say to her, ‘You make me want to be a better man.’”

Tegan scoffed. “Him? A better man? You heard him utter those words? In person? In this universe?”

“No, over the phone, but his voice travels.”

Tegan growled. “I don’t like him. He’s a mean-spirited, money-hungry curmudgeon, and he’s not good to his family. Not to mention he could be a suspect in Gilbert Quackenbush’s murder.” She glowered at me. “Has Zach solved it yet?”

“Not that I know of. And now with one more …” I shrugged.

“Maybe Scroggie killed Ozzie,” Tegan said, “because Ozzie discovered his uncle never lost the novella in the first place.”

A new thought occurred to me. Was it possible Ozzie had found out about the existence of a letter by Dickens and was blackmailing his uncle to keep the secret?

“Mother was laughing by the end of their conversation,” Vanna said, stuck on the exchange she’d overheard.

“Laughing?” My eyes widened in shock. “After learning someone else had been killed?”

“Heavens no, Allie, ugh. Later.” Vanna fanned the air. “Scroggie reached out a second time to tell her where he planned to take her to dinner, and then he told her a Christmas joke. Something about an elf. Her laughter was … well, I hadn’t heard her laugh in a long time. It warmed my heart.”

Gee whiz. Who was Vanna lately? Her mother’s laughter had warmed her heart? The councilman was having a huge impact on her.

“Mom is not a good judge of character,” Tegan said. “After what happened with he-who-shall-not-be-named—”

“Stop being Miss Negativity,” Vanna ordered. “She married right the first and second time. That guy was an anomaly.”

“Big word,” Tegan joked.

Vanna stuck her tongue out.

“Oh, ladies”—Tegan held up a stack of flyers on the sales counter—“I nearly forgot to tell you. I found out Evelyn Evers’s big secret. Tonight the theater is putting on a production of *A Dickens of a Christmas Eve*, a play written and directed by Evelyn herself.”

I took the flyer and scanned it. The artwork featured a teensy girl peeking from behind the base of a teetering Christmas tree as an elf in a green outfit and pointy hat shook the bells on his shoes in the face of a beleaguered and rather skinny Santa Claus.

“I didn’t know she wrote plays,” I said.

“It’s her first. A one-act,” Tegan said. “Short and sweet, she told me. She sent someone to deliver comp tickets to the guests at the Amber Lantern so they could attend.”

“That’s nice.” They could use a bit of levity. All except the killer.

“And she provided comp tickets for us,” Tegan said.

“Is Quinlan acting in it? I don’t see a cast list on the flyer.”

“He said he is. I don’t know which role he’s playing. The proceeds will benefit the theater foundation. Marigold would approve, don’t you think?”

I agreed. Her aunt had made the foundation one of her pet projects.

“Seven-thirty sharp,” she said.

“Done,” I said. I’d already added the opening-night performance on my calendar. “Now, back to Scroggie. I was talking with Jenny at the Joint. She said he is a regular at the diner, but she knew him personally when they were younger. She claimed he used to be a kind, generous man, but losing the girl he loved made him bitter.”

“Isn’t that sad?” Vanna murmured. “I would hate to lose the man I loved.”

I said as an aside to Tegan, “Your sister is in love.”

“No I’m not,” Vanna countered.

“She and a councilman are friends.” I added air quotations around the word *friends*. “But back to Scroggie. Jenny believes there’s hope for him.”

“If he’s not a murderer,” Tegan groused.

Chloe guided Magda and another customer to the sales counter. “Here we are, ladies.”

Magda was fiddling with the drape of her snowflake-themed scarf. Her companion—I didn’t know her—was viewing her cell phone.

Chloe set two copies of *A Christmas Promise* on the counter along with eight other books. “Anything else?”

“I want to own everything on those bakers’ racks,” Magda said. “But for now I’ll settle for a hardwood book valet for me, and I’ll buy my friend a mug with the words *I Love to Read*.” She elbowed her companion. “This is my BFF from kindergarten. She’s making an East Coast tour. She moved away when we were girls. We have so much catching up to do.”

“And reading,” the friend said, pointing at the books.

Magda leaned in conspiratorially. “So, Allie, who do you think killed Ozzie Crockett?”

The question stunned me. She couldn’t have heard us talking about it. We hadn’t mentioned the victim’s name to Chloe.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Magda went on. “Helga has been keeping us apprised.”

Heavens. Helga had to be counseled not to talk. Had Pippa been chatting about the goings-on at the inn, too?

“I think the police would prefer if we didn’t speculate,” I said judiciously.

“Of course they would.” Magda chortled. “But we will. You, in particular.” She tapped the side of her nose. “Do you have a suspect in mind? Ozzie Crockett wasn’t a beloved member of the community. He didn’t arrange the best policies for his clients. He was always trying to cut corners and save a buck.”

Had he cut a corner today and paid the price for it? I wondered.

In the afternoon, I dropped Vanna back at the inn to retrieve her vehicle, and then I went to Dream Cuisine and baked up batches of peppermint cupcakes for a last-minute staff holiday party at Blessed Bean. After I delivered them, I dashed home to change for the theater. Tegan hadn’t mentioned dining together, so I threw together a quick cheese and fruit platter and ate while I washed up and changed into a kelly-green sweater over black slacks.

Darcy traipsed after me, head held high, repeatedly asking me where I was going this time. In the end, I was pretty sure his yowling was cat speak for, “Don’t stay out too late, young lady.”

Bramblewood Community Theater was located on South Mountain Boulevard. It was a charming building that boasted weathered wood and a low, pitched roof. The evergreens out front framed the facade and gave the theater a tucked-away feeling, as if we as audience members were entering a secret place and would be delighted with whatever we encountered.

Vanna, Tegan, and I met in front and entered together. Nearly every seat was filled in the ninety-nine-seat theater, many with young children. We had to apologize multiple times as we eased past patrons in our row. I spotted Magda with Lillian a couple of rows in front of us. I caught sight of Dalton a few rows back sitting beside Xenia. I’d thought she was eager to get away from the inn. Maybe attending a play was her last hurrah.

“I hope this is good,” I whispered as I perused the program. “I don’t want to have to lie to Evelyn.”

The synopsis of the play was brief, with the opening line informing the reader that the word *Dickens* was doubling as a reference to Charles Dickens and an old-timey way of saying “a heck of a time.” Oddly, there was no cast list. Did all the actors wish to remain anonymous?

I spotted Evelyn standing off to the right observing the excited crowd, one hand steadying the elbow of her other arm, the knuckles of the braced arm supporting her chin. She resembled a female version of *The Thinker*. Was she nervous? Excited? At one time she had aspired to be an actress. When my mother had traveled the country with Evelyn's beloved, the angst Evelyn had felt afterward had ruined her stage performances. She had said she was always crying. Once she decided to pursue something less emotionally taxing in the administrative field, she'd found her joy. I wondered if her lack of a creative outlet had stimulated her to write this play.

The lights dimmed. An instrumental version of the comical song "Fancy Like Christmas" started playing through speakers. The burgundy curtain opened.

Immediately, my attention was drawn to the multilevel set that could've been a scene straight out of a snow globe. The lowest level was a cozy village brimming with twinkling fairy lights. There were carolers and townsfolk miming that they were singing or whispering to one another, though no words were coming out.

Rising above the village square were two tiers of stairs, leading left and right. To the left was a warm cozy home with a Christmas tree and presents. To the right was a rooftop decked out with colorful lights. Upon the roof two actors dressed as reindeer stood beside Santa's empty sleigh. A man in a red suit—Santa, I presumed—was bent over the chimney, his face obscured.

A mischievous elf in a green and gold outfit galloped onto the rooftop carrying an absurdly oversized candy cane.

"Help!" cried the man from the chimney.

"Well, well," snickered the elf. "If it isn't the jolly jellybean himself. Having some … *technical difficulties*, big guy?"

"Get me out of here," Santa begged.

"Ho, ho, ho. Will do." The elf tugged and tugged.

When he finally pulled Santa free, Santa tumbled down the stairs to the cozy living room.

The audience roared. Off to one side, Evelyn stood motionless, but her mouth had curved up in a smile, and relief was obvious on her face. The pratfall had worked.

The elf tiptoed down the stairs and offered a hand to Santa to pull him to his feet. As Santa dusted off his trousers, I realized it was Quinlan O'Leary. Wow. Could he ever handle stunts.

"Uh-oh, Santa," the elf said, pointing a finger behind one hand in the direction of a little girl who was crawling from beneath the Christmas tree. "We've got a peeper. Twelve o'clock."

The girl peered up at them, wonder in her eyes. I was pretty sure she was one of the reindeer's children.

"Operation Distract and Dazzle," the elf announced in full voice. "Go, go, go."

Santa ran up the stairs toward the roof. The elf dashed down the stairs to the village. A second elf raced from the wings and ascended the stairs. A third elf surfaced on the roof and scurried down the stairs.

A riot of humorous bumping and squabbling ensued. A few of the performers couldn't control their own laughter.

The audience applauded and cheered.

Santa met up with the two reindeer on the roof. "Help. Now she knows I'm real. I've got to fix this. Which one of you has the magical memory-erasing snowflakes?"

One reindeer silently shrugged its shoulders, hooves turned outward in a gesture of *not me*.

The other reindeer pulled an envelope from its pocket. "I've got a 'Dear Santa' letter. That's magical, isn't it?"

"Not good enough," Santa griped.

"Hey, Santa." The primary elf scurried up one staircase, down a different one, and up the stairs to the roof. Out of breath, he snatched the envelope from the reindeer and tossed it into the chimney.

The reindeer cried, "It's gonna burn!"

"Ashes to ashes," the elf said cavalierly. "Santa, I have the ticket. Magical dancing sugar plums."

Antics ensued for forty-five minutes. Ultimately, Rudolph saved the day with a good-night kiss to the girl's cheek. By the end of the frenzy, the actors were ecstatic with their performances but exhausted.

The lights rose so that the actors could take their bows.

A few minutes later, we gathered in the theater lobby for the opening night's celebration of treats and beverages—a time when Evelyn could

receive kudos and actors could mingle with the patrons. Vanna had left us and was chatting up Councilman Stevenson, who had also attended the play. I was with Tegan at the beverage table, sipping punch and telling her how good Quinlan was as Santa when something niggled at the edges of my mind.

"Oh!" popped out of me. "The stairs!"

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Chapter 24

“Ghost of the Future!” he exclaimed, “I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But, as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

I stepped outside and zipped up my parka. The air was brisk. Frost accumulated on my eyelashes.

Tegan pulled alongside me. “Now tell me, what about the stairs? What’s going on?”

“The stairs,” I repeated.

“Yes, the staging was very clever, wasn’t it? And the chaos? The play reminded me of *Noises Off*, don’t you think?” *Noises Off* was a play within a play, cleverly written by Michael Frayn. “So many entrances and exits.” She whistled to make a point. “And the corny letter in the chimney, melting snowflakes, and dancing sugar plums? Hysterical.”

What is it about the stairs that’s bugging me? I wondered.

“Are you walking home?” Tegan asked. “I’ll join you. I didn’t drive.” She lived a couple blocks west of me.

“I did drive to the theater,” I said, “but I need to walk to clear my head.” I headed north at a brisk pace. After passing one shop, my thoughts gelled. “The stairs,” I muttered again.

“What about them?” She wrapped her arms around her torso and shivered audibly.

“On the morning when we learned Gilbert was dead, everyone raced down the stairs. Me first. Then the others. What was the order of people who followed?”

“Allie, we’ve been through this. You wrote a timeline.”

“I know,” I snapped, and quickly apologized. “But I want to figure out who might have planted the substance in Freddy’s room. I think the last person had the best opportunity to make a U-turn, do the deed, and return to the group. If I can pin down who that was, I might discover a clue as to who killed Gilbert.” I moaned and smacked my thigh with one hand. “How is it possible that I can picture an entire list of baked goods orders but I can’t seem to remember every detail of that morning?”

“You’ve got a memory like a sieve.”

“Ha. You’re a laugh riot.”

I closed my eyes and yet again tried to picture the morning Gilbert died. First down the stairs came Xenia in a robe. Dalton followed, fully clothed. I’d figured he was on London time and awoke early. Felicity and Freddy appeared next, both in pajamas. Next came Kiki, who had taken the time to brush her hair and had thrown a robe over her negligee.

Tegan snapped her fingers. “Allie, yoo-hoo. Are you here?”

I opened my eyes. “Yes.”

“Where’d you go? You zoned out.”

“I—” I paused, realizing I’d stopped in front of Fair Exchange. “The fence.”

“There wasn’t a fence in the play. There were stairs. And a village.”

Desperately, I tried to connect the dots of the chaotic image forming in my mind. “Pushing the envelope,” I whispered.

“You’ve officially lost me, pal. Did you drink too much punch at the theater?”

“At the Brewery, Zach said I was pushing the envelope when I asked him about the moneyman—the fence—who might or might not have purchased the stolen novella. Pushing the envelope …” I tapped my chin,

trying to discern why that phrase had come to me. “Envelope …” I jerked my head upright. “Letter!” I cried.

“Allie, you’re scaring me.” Tegan screwed up her face. “What the heck are you going on about? The ‘Dear Santa’ letter the elf tossed down the chimney?”

“No. The word *letter*. Remember how Dalton said, ‘Let her burn,’ and when pressed, he admitted he believed one of Dickens’s personal letters existed and hadn’t been burned and that letter—that document—had been secreted in the novella?”

“Okay.” She said the word like she was appeasing me. “Got anything else?”

“No, dang it.”

The lights were on in the pawn shop. Impulsively, I went inside.

J.J. was a bald man with a scruffy beard. His spectacles, the Ben Franklin kind, swung from a chain around his neck while he squinted through a loupe positioned on top of a sheet of paper on the glass-enclosed case. He looked as intent as if he were trying to decipher a fortune cookie’s six-point font.

“What’re you doing now?” Tegan said under her breath as she trailed me.

“I want to talk to J.J. about the night of the murder when Ozzie was standing outside the shop’s display window.”

“But the shop was closed.”

“I know, but J.J. might have a clue what Ozzie and the fence argued about.” I recalled Wallis saying J.J. was honorable and didn’t deal with moneymen, but that might not matter. “Hi, J.J.,” I said as I approached the counter.

His eyes twinkled with a warm welcome. “Well, well, if it isn’t the alley cat with Celtic origins.” He greeted me in the same way every time we met. His family had roots in the same part of the British Isles as my family.

“Why are you here so late?” I asked.

“I’m a night owl.”

“You weren’t open last Friday night. Did you have a hot date?”

“Hotter than hot.” His face crinkled when he grinned. “You here to buy?”

I assessed the items in the case. There were a variety of rings, chains, pendants, and earrings. Some were cheap. Others looked like they might fetch a good price. “Actually, I came to ask a question,” I replied. “A guy named Ozzie Crockett paused outside your shop last Friday night around midnight, and he seemed fixated on what was in the window.”

“So Detective Bates tells me.”

Meaning Bates, after a push from me, had reviewed the tape Cherry had shown us, believed Ozzie’s movement after leaving the liquor store had merit, and had followed up.

“Do you have surveillance footage from that night?” I asked, hoping to get a view of Ozzie’s face and what he might have zeroed in on.

“Alas, no such luck.” He shook his head. “Camera broke. It’s on the to-do list, but you know what happens to to-do lists. They become to-don’t lists. I make one, stare at it, and somehow feel I accomplished something without doing a thing.” He chuckled.

“Did Bates ask you about the run-in Ozzie had with this guy on Friday night around midnight?” I opened the photo app on my phone and showed him the picture of the receiver, as Wallis had dubbed him.

J.J. rubbed his chin. “He did.”

I said, “He’s an individual who, shall we say, knowingly buys stolen goods.”

“For the record, I don’t work with fences.” J.J. tattooed the counter with his thumbs. “This is a legit establishment. My father wouldn’t have had it any other way, rest his soul. He was a devotee of the truth and a fair exchange, hence the name of the shop.”

“Gotcha,” I said.

“Hey, is it true?” His eyes brightened with concern. “Ozzie’s dead?”

Tegan said, “Yes. Murdered.”

J.J. clicked his tongue. “Shame. He wasn’t a bad guy. Quirky, but who isn’t?”

“You knew him?” I asked.

“In passing. He hadn’t bought anything from me until the other day.”

“When was that?”

“Monday. He came in for a necklace for his mother.”

“That’s sweet,” Tegan said.

I flashed on the murder weapon used to kill Ozzie. Though the gun was silver, it had reminded me of one Tegan and I had seen in the shop's window. "Did he purchase a gun and a suppressor from you?" It was highly possible Ozzie came equipped with a weapon to his meeting at the inn, but the killer got the upper hand.

"Nope."

"You have quite an array in the display window." I hooked my thumb over my shoulder. "Did anyone purchase a small handgun about the size of the turquoise Ruger recently?"

"I've sold a few weapons that size in the past year."

"With the serial number scratched off?"

"Uh-uh. No, ma'am." He waved a hand. "None with the SN scratched off. That's not kosher. If someone bought a gun from me and eliminated the serial number afterward, I couldn't tell you."

Tegan said, "What time did Ozzie come in Monday?"

Why was she asking?

"Late." J.J. squinted his eyes, as if trying to pull up the memory. "Around dusk. He said his friend Yale something or other, who bought a ring from me for his girlfriend, recommended that he stop in here to see what I had in stock."

So Ozzie had come into the shop before Yale had proposed to Kiki.

"You've got to love word of mouth," J.J. said. "Best way to grow a business."

I'd agree. It had helped Dream Cuisine expand. "That's when Ozzie bought the necklace?"

"Yeah, a gold mariner chain, fourteen carat. A steal, if you ask me."

I was sure J.J. told every customer they were getting a great deal. "Did you and he chat?"

"Yep. As a matter of fact, we got to talking about his buddy, Yale …" He snapped his fingers, searching for the surname.

"Kildare," I said.

"That's it. Good-looking dude. Quite a joker."

"How so?" Tegan asked.

"The guy pulled out a coin purse when he was getting the ring, and he paid me in dimes and quarters." J.J. chuckled slyly. "He was messing with me and claimed he was low on finances and had to break into his piggy

bank. You know the angle. To make me cut my price. I didn't." He winked. "When I handed him his purchase, he got this gleam in his eyes and said he was coming into money soon, and when he had it in his hot little hands, he'd be back for a bigger and better ring. I asked him what kind of dollar signs he was talking about. Maybe an inheritance of some kind? He guffawed and said it was going to be super-duper. A secret treasure. When he exhumed it and sold it, he said everyone would read 'em and weep."

Read 'em? Was he referring to a book? To the novella? Exhume meant to unearth. Had he buried it in the ground somewhere near the inn? It had been snowing that night.

Calmly, I said, "Did you tell Ozzie about the exchange?"

"Sure did," J.J. said. "He played along as I relayed the story. 'A secret treasure?' he asked. I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'He needed to exhume it?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Do you think he was telling the truth?'" J.J. thwacked the counter. "That made me laugh. 'Nah,' I said. 'Lots of people think they've discovered a fortune, but when I appraise it, most times it's worth bupkes.'" He slapped the counter a second time. "Bupkes. What a word. It says it all, doesn't it?"

My mind started humming with possibilities. Ozzie must have realized what had gone down and raced back to the inn to search for the novella. I pictured him rummaging through Yale's room. He then inspected the property, looking for flower beds that had been disturbed. When he came up empty, that was when he devised a blackmail plan. Bluffing, he phoned Yale and warned him that he had proof Yale had stolen the novella and killed Gilbert and said if Yale didn't split the proceeds from the sale, he would turn him in to the police. Yale agreed to meet him, but he came to the meeting armed. After killing Ozzie, he realized he needed a foolproof alibi and rushed to the gazebo with a book.

I paused. *The gazebo*. Could the novella be hidden in a box affixed to one of the chairs where it would have been protected from the snow? By releasing it from its confines would Yale, in essence, be exhuming it?

"J.J., did Yale buy a gun from you?" I asked.

"Nah."

Okay. Perhaps, as a process server, Yale owned one and, before meeting Ozzie, shaved off the serial number. Had he, as I'd surmised, fitted the gun

with a silencer? If so, where was the suppressor now? In his belongings? On his person? Did he hide it in the gazebo?

I tried to picture the showdown. Knowing his fiancée was at work and she wouldn't interfere, he told Ozzie to meet him in the parlor. Then he lay in wait.

"Hey, you gals want to buy something?" J.J. asked. "Another Celtic knot perhaps, Allie? A bust of Will Shakespeare?"

"Not today. We've got to go. See you soon." I grabbed Tegan's elbow and steered her outside.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To the Amber Lantern."

"Could you be more cryptic?" she groused.

"We need to revisit the crime scene."

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Chapter 25

In short, I should have liked, I do confess, to have had the lightest license of a child, and yet to have been man enough to know its value.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

On the drive to the inn I explained my theory to Tegan, and she got on board. It was around nine thirty p.m. when we arrived at the inn. The exterior Christmas lights were twinkling. The interior lights of the inn were on. I parked and raced around to the backyard. Tegan followed.

I ducked into the gazebo, crouched, and peered beneath the chair on the left. “Nothing.”

Tegan did the same on the right. “Nada.”

I peeked under the table between the chairs. No novella. “Rats. I’d been so hopeful.” I stood up, hands on hips. “It has to be inside, then. Is there a basement?”

“No.”

“Yale told J.J. he would exhume the novella.”

“Exhume the treasure,” she corrected.

“Right.”

“Which might not be the novella.”

“It has to be.”

The word *exhume* clanged inside my head. What else could that word mean? *Dig up. Unbury. Disentomb*. A tomb was a burial place. A monument. An enclosure.

I hurried into the inn, hoping a visual aid might trigger an answer.

The foyer was empty, but I heard movement in the parlor. I waved to Tegan to keep quiet, and I tiptoed to the archway. If Yale was in the room retrieving the missing suppressor, I didn’t want to grab his attention.

I peeked in. Mrs. Grimshaw was the sole occupant. She was bent over the antique stepping stool. Tea and coffee urns, cups, and accoutrements were arranged on the dining table in front of the far wall.

“Hello,” I said.

Mrs. Grimshaw jerked to a stand, looking mighty guilty, and I jolted. Was I wrong? Had she killed Ozzie and hidden the suppressor? No way. To what end?

“What are you doing?” I asked casually.

“Yeah,” Tegan said accusatorially, drawing beside me.

“Oh, I … I …” Mrs. Grimshaw looked stunned by our arrival. She pressed a hand to her throat. “I was merely wondering if I could purchase this stool.”

That stool sure is popular, I noted. First Xenia was interested in it. Now Imogen Grimshaw.

“Mom won’t be selling it,” Tegan said.

“I understand. Your mother must be devoted to her treasures. But perhaps I could persuade her. It’s the perfect size for my library.” Mrs. Grimshaw’s voice grew calmer. “Did I tell you I have my own library? Floor to ceiling books. The moveable ladder I own busted a month ago. I haven’t had it repaired. This”—she motioned to it—“would fit the bill and be much less apt to break. Wherever did she find it?”

“My great-grandmother gave it to her,” Tegan said.

“Your mother has such good taste,” the woman continued, adeptly changing subjects. “I love the fabric on the sofas, and the metronome on the piano is a gem.”

As she prattled, my gaze swung from the pedestal to the stool. That fateful night, what if the thief, hearing Gilbert Quackenbush’s imminent arrival, had known about the stepping stool’s hidden compartment and

stashed the novella there? The police rifled through evident places like the piano, piano bench, couches, and coffee tables, but they had been unaware of the compartment, as Zach acknowledged, meaning they'd discounted it in their search. Waiting for the right time, the thief returned to the scene of the crime and, as a failsafe, in case the police decided to yet again rifle through the guests' possessions, transferred the novella to a different location rather than hide it in their luggage, planning to clandestinely fetch it after he checked out?

Yes, *he*. I really did think the thief was Yale.

And what if when I'd asked Noeline if there was a hidden compartment in the stool and she'd searched it and said it was empty Yale had overheard her talking to me and deposited the book back into the stepping stool's compartment?

"Mrs. Grimshaw," I said solicitously, striding toward her, "please move aside." She did. I lifted what I now saw to be the secret lid of the stool and peeked inside. Nothing. Empty.

"What're you doing?" Tegan asked.

"I was hoping—" I snapped to attention, recalling something Mrs. Grimshaw said. "Devotion," I uttered.

"Huh?" Tegan tilted her head. "Should I nickname you The Riddler?"

"No, no, dear girl. *Devoted*." Mrs. Grimshaw clapped her hands. "A moment ago I said, 'You mother must be devoted to her treasures.'"

I rotated in a circle, thinking about the word *devoted*, or rather the word *devotion*. "Remember what Vanna said about the key?"

"You and your obsession with keys," Tegan groused.

"Vanna told us about a conversation she overheard between Yale and Kiki and how the music of their love and devotion was the key"—I mimed air quotes around the words *the key*— "to a long life together."

"Ooh," Tegan cooed. "And you thought the word *devotion* might have been code because it rhymes with sleeping potion? Meaning she or Yale planted the vial of pills in Freddy's room?"

"No." I stared at her. "That's not what I thought."

But perhaps she'd landed on something. What if Yale stole the novella and by saying the word *key*, he was cheekily sharing his hiding place, as in the player piano with its eighty-eight keys.

I hustled to the archway and glanced right and left. Seeing the coast was clear, I pivoted and rushed to the piano. I removed the metronome and bust of Dickens from the top and rested them on the piano bench. Then I flipped open the piano's lid and peered inside. "Bingo!"

The novella was lying on the corner of the roll box, title faceup.

Tegan and Mrs. Grimshaw crowded me. Both gaped at the contents.

"My word," Mrs. Grimshaw said.

"Mom hasn't utilized the player piano since the murder," Tegan said. "Therefore, the novella didn't reverberate on the roll box. Otherwise, we would have found it right away. But, wait, why didn't the police stumble upon it?"

I explained that the police didn't realize the antique stool had a hidden compartment, which was where Yale hid it at first. "After the police did their initial search of the parlor, Yale moved it from the stool to here." I reached for the book.

"Don't touch it," Tegan cautioned. "Call Zach."

She was right. I started to text him but paused when I caught sight of something else, and a new theory zipped through my mind. Red hair was sticking out of the novella's pages. Jenny told Vanna and me that Kiki suffered hair loss as a result of her lean diet. Was I wrong about Yale? Was Kiki the thief and, thereby, the killer?

A memory surfaced. When Jenny, Vanna, and I were talking about Kiki, Jenny had seemed ready to share a juicy tidbit, but then she'd trailed off. What could she have wanted to say? Was it pertinent to the crime?

Hastily I texted her, hoping I wasn't disturbing her end-of-night cleanup routine.

Sorry to bother you. Quick question re: Kiki. Got a sec?

If you want to speak with her, she left a bit ago.

No. I need your input. When Vanna and I were in the other day, you acted concerned about Kiki. Why? Could you share?

I shouldn't.

Please. It's important to Zach's investigation.

Okay, sure, it might not be important, but a tingly feeling like the kind I experienced when concocting a new recipe was zinging through me.

Three bubbles materialized on the screen then stopped.

Be bold, Allie. Go out on a limb. I added one more question to entice Jenny to cooperate.

Did she ever steal from the till?

Why would you ask that?

I'm trying to determine whether she pinched the Dickens novella. Was she hard up for money?

[facepalm emoji]

What?

Yes. Kiki's mother is struggling. Kiki sends every dime she makes to her.

Whoa! According to Yale, Kiki's mother was wealthy. She had footed the bill for their staycation, and Kiki had intimated her mother held the purse strings. If the woman was in dire straits, that put a whole different spin on the situation. Were they all struggling to make ends meet? Had Yale and Kiki wanted to get their hands on the novella so badly, believing it was their way out of debt for everyone, that they'd charged their vacation on a credit card?

I thanked her, ended the exchange, and began to replay the events of that night. Hearing Helga scream. Running downstairs. Seeing the body. I envisioned the interrogation in the dining room. Ozzie and Yale both accusing Freddy of stealing the book and killing Gilbert. Kiki saying Yale arrived downstairs before Ozzie.

That detail gave me pause. What if Ozzie hadn't come down last? What if Yale, trailing the pack, had retreated back upstairs and tossed the telltale vial of pills into Freddy's trash can? What if Kiki had lied about their order of arrival to deflect suspicion from Yale? What if she and he had been working as a team? They were lovers for life. High school sweethearts. And now betrothed.

"Tegan," I said, "at the pawn shop J.J. mentioned he sold a number of Ruger-style guns in the past year. What if Kiki Cranston purchased the murder weapon?"

"Are you suggesting Kiki killed Ozzie?" Mrs. Grimshaw asked.

"No," I replied. "I think Yale did. He would've had access to it. Tegan, do you think if I brought J.J. a picture of Kiki, he could identify her?"

"I'd bet he has records," she said. "And she must have signed a release of some kind."

“Good point.” I texted Zach about our discovery, and then started snapping pictures of the novella.

“Is tea service set up in the parlor, Helga?” a woman trilled from the foyer.

I recognized the voice. *Kiki.*

“Yes, ma’am,” Helga said. “As always. I’ll be bringing in cookies in a few minutes.”

Kiki thanked her and swept into the room. With Yale. They made a beeline to the beverage service and began preparing two cups of tea.

I cleared my throat.

A startled “Oh!” popped out of Kiki. She spun around and, in a quick sweep of the area, assessed the situation.

The lid of the hidden compartment on the stepping stool ajar.

The top of the player piano open.

Me, poised to capture pictures of the treasure hidden inside.

“What are you doing?” Kiki demanded.

“We found the novella,” I said. “The one you stashed in here.”

“What the blazes are you talking about?” Her eyebrows lifted so high I worried they might shoot off her forehead.

“Strands of your hair are in the novella. You and Yale worked in tandem.”

“You’re crazy.”

Yale yelled, “Kiki, move right!” He rushed forward and threw the contents of his teacup at me. Thankfully, the hot liquid landed wide.

In a flash, I grabbed the bust of Dickens off the piano bench and slammed it into Yale’s shoulder. He yowled and stumbled backward.

“You witch!” Kiki screamed at the top of her lungs. “You hurt him.” She charged me.

“Stop right there, Kiki.” Tegan picked up the metronome and threatened to strike her with it.

Mrs. Grimshaw shrieked.

Noeline hurried in wielding a utility knife. Strips of ribbon hung around her neck. I gathered she had been in the office wrapping holiday gifts.

“What’s going on?” Noeline demanded.

“Mother!” Vanna yelled from the foyer. “Where are you? You’ll never believe—” She drew to a halt, stunned by the sight of us.

Helga entered within seconds, carrying a porcelain tray filled with cookies. Pippa was on her heels, toting a hefty platter of brownies.

“These two are in cahoots,” Tegan said to her mother. “Allie texted Zach. The police will be here any second.”

I didn’t know if that was true. Zach hadn’t responded.

“Why you—” Kiki dodged Tegan and hurtled toward me.

Yale too.

Helga flung the tray like a Frisbee at Kiki, connecting with her chest.

Vanna grabbed the platter of brownies from Pippa, dumped the brownies onto the floor and, swinging the platter like a baseball bat, smacked Yale in the gut.

Yale pitched toward the pedestal, slamming into Kiki. Both landed on their rumps.

“Yale and Kiki were in on the theft together,” I said to all concerned. “I don’t know which one stole the novella and who killed Gilbert, but they’ve been covering for each other.” To Yale, I said, “You bragged to J.J. at Fair Exchange about exhuming a treasure. You revealed to him that you are short on funds.”

“Liar!” Kiki hollered. “We’re flush.”

“Wrong. I happen to know you give your paychecks to your mother.”

Kiki snarled.

“Babe, cool your jets.” Yale scrambled to his feet and, resigned, dusted himself off and said, “They know.”

“They don’t know diddly,” she cried.

“I know you stole the novella,” I said.

“Wrong,” Yale countered. “She didn’t do anything. She’s not to blame.”

Kiki whispered, “But—”

He held up a hand, cutting her off.

I studied the two of them as the scenario played out sequentially in my mind. “Yale dosed the guard that night with the pills. When he believed the guard was asleep, he tiptoed downstairs, intent on taking the novella. You, Kiki, not sure what your beloved was up to and anxious after seeing Freddy outside, followed him.”

Neither contradicted me.

“When Gilbert entered to fetch a cup of tea,” I continued, “Kiki arrived. She saw what you were up to, Yale, and she acted fast. She grabbed the bust

of Dickens and clobbered him with it."

She mewled.

"You took the novella, Yale, and hid it in the antique stool."

He didn't dispute me.

I continued. "Kiki tried to convince me that Ozzie came downstairs last that morning, implicating him as the person who had the opportunity to stash the vial of pills in Freddy's garbage can, but in reality, it was you, Yale." I regarded him. "You have had it in for Freddy for years, ever since he refused to help you write essays for law school scholarships." Another detail came to mind. "You told me you should have become an Internet tech instead of a process server, saying the pay would've been better." He didn't refute me. "Did you clandestinely send an email to the police to make them once again focus on Freddy's complicated financial situation?"

He didn't respond.

"Ozzie wasn't the kindest of men," I said, "but he wasn't stupid, Yale. When he went to Fair Exchange looking for something to buy his mother, he learned what you told J.J. about your financial situation. You were low on cash. You couldn't afford a ring from a reputable jeweler. You shared with J.J., albeit jovially, that you were coming into some money soon. When Ozzie wheedled that tidbit out of him, he surmised you had stolen the novella, but he searched everywhere and didn't find it. Even so, he arranged a meeting with you saying he had proof of your crime."

Yale moaned.

I eyed Kiki again. "Do you own a gun?"

She wagged her head, but her rapid blinking gave her away.

I said, "One of you scratched off the serial number and used that gun to kill Ozzie. Which one of you was it?"

Kiki slumped onto a sofa. Yale, depleted of fight, nestled beside her and slung an arm around her.

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STAVE 5

Finale: Let the Revelry Commence

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Chapter 26

“Good morning, sir! A merry Christmas to you!” And Scrooge said often afterwards, that of all the blithe sounds he had ever heard, those were the blithest in his ears.

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Zach and Bates arrived and, after I explained step by step what had gone down, they arrested Kiki and Yale. Neither copped to killing Ozzie, but they would soon enough. While Bates escorted them to his vehicle, Zach slipped on latex gloves, retrieved the novella from the player piano, and opened it to inspect its condition.

From its outward appearance, it seemed in good shape. There were no torn pages. No bent corners.

“Oho,” Zach said as he reached the end of the book. “What’s this?” He removed an envelope tucked between the cover and final page. He set the book aside and withdrew a sheet of paper. After he read it, he rotated the paper in my direction.

I perused it, and my mouth fell open. It was a letter from Charles Dickens to Erwin Scroggie written in 1843.

Devonshire Terrace, York Gate,

Regent's Park, London
February, 1843

Mr. Erwin Scroggie
46 Hillcrest Knoll
Asheville, NC

My Dear Mr. Scroggie,

I hope this letter finds you in most excellent health and spirits. Permit me, if you will, to express once again my sincere pleasure at having made your acquaintance during my recent travels in America. In the course of many encounters, few remain more vivid to me than our conversation in New York City when I visited to provide lectures as to copyright laws, in which your wit, warmth, and turn of phrase left a most agreeable impression.

It is in that spirit—and with a mixture of admiration and an author's need for invention—that I take the liberty of writing to you now.

Since my return to England, I have been engaged upon a work which I dearly hope may bring about the stirring of human kindness in a season often marred by apathy. The tale concerns a man once hardened of heart who comes to know the blessing of empathy and compassion. In seeking a name for this memorable character, I found myself returning, quite unbidden, to your own, which is sharp, memorable, and decisive.

I have, with some modification, borrowed from your surname to create a new one: Scrooge. The first name, Ebenezer of Hebrew derivation, has been added by my own device, that the combination might carry the gravity I desire, for its derivation means stone of help. Please understand, dear sir, that the character as he first appears bears little likeness to your own worthy self, but in his transformation to a man of goodness, I hope you may find some kinship.

It is my earnest hope that you shall not take offense at this playful derivation of your name, and that you will see it as the

author's homage to a name both striking and, to me, indelibly bound to our initial encounter.

Should you object in the slightest, I shall, of course, rework the matter. But if you will grant me your goodwill, I shall count it among the many kindnesses I have received across the sea.

With every expression of my esteem,
I remain, dear sir,
Your faithful and obedient servant,
Charles Dickens

"Zach, no wonder Scroggie insured the novella for so much money," I said. "We have to inform him we found it."

"You mean *you* found it."

I wasn't sure if he was chiding me.

"How did you …" He shook his head. "Never mind. I don't need to know the play by play." He slung an arm around my waist and pulled me close. "I'm so glad you're safe."

Tegan, Noeline, and Vanna drew near.

"Detective," Tegan said, "may I assume it's all right for the literary dining party to proceed this Saturday? And we can display the novella?"

"It'll be up to Scroggie," he said. "These are his items."

"Did I hear my name invoked?" Scroggie said from the doorway. Though he was leaning ever so slightly on his lion's head cane, he struck me as a powerful man. The type of man who was ready to turn a corner on life.

"Why is he here?" Vanna asked under her breath.

"We're going for coffee," her mother whispered.

"It's late."

"Late coffee." Noeline patted Vanna's arm. "What did you wish to tell me when you raced in?"

Vanna's cheeks reddened. "Councilman Stevenson—"

"Her boyfriend," I said.

"He isn't … he wasn't …" She licked her lips. "He officially asked me out."

I grinned, genuinely happy for her.

"Congrats," Tegan said.

Scroggie caught sight of the novella, and a smile grew on his face. “Well, well, you’ve found it, Zach. About time. I saw your man Bates hauling away two of the inn’s guests. Shall I surmise they are the culprits who stole it and killed my dear friend Gilbert?”

“Yes, sir,” Zach said. “But I didn’t find it. Allie and her friends did.”

Hashtag AlliesClueCrew, I mused.

Scroggie noticed the letter Zach was holding and his cheerful demeanor darkened. “Hold on. That’s none of your business, son. Hand it to me.”

Zach stepped backward. “Yes, sir, it is my business. It is part and parcel of the retrieved goods. However, I believe if you’d like to share it as well as the novella at the literary dining party this Saturday, the police department will be willing to guard it with armed officers and return it directly following the event.”

Scroggie regarded Noeline, who nodded ever so slightly, and then he turned back to Zach. “Upon my soul, as Ebenezer Scrooge himself would say, ‘I am as light as a feather, I am as happy as an angel, I am as merry as a schoolboy. I am as giddy as a drunken man.’” He offered a full-throated laugh. “Yes, indeed, let the merriment begin. The letter shall be on display, for it shares a wonderful history of my family. A moment to be treasured. Yes, have at it.”

“And ‘A merry Christmas to everybody,’” I said, quoting *A Christmas Carol*.

Three days later, on Saturday evening, I fluffed the fur collar of my costume as I strolled among the many party attendees crowding the foyer. The first floor of the Amber Lantern was filled to capacity with book club members, bookstore customers, and others from town who wanted to share in the festivities. All but a handful had donned Dickensian garb. A couple of guests were clothed in *A Christmas Carol* ghost costumes. I hadn’t hired them. I wondered if Noeline had. Many in attendance who were eager to take a peek at the novella and an original letter written by Charles Dickens were waiting patiently in a line that led into the parlor. As promised, two armed policemen were protecting the documents, and Mr. Smith, the security guard who’d been temporarily under suspicion of being an accomplice in the original heist, was in charge of keeping the viewers orderly.

Teenagers positioned by the inn's front door were singing a charming a cappella rendition of "Up on the House Top."

Noeline, dressed in a green velvet dress with white lace, her hair held in place by an ornate gold clip, approached the choir and asked them to stop singing. When the area quieted, she spoke through the sound system she had arranged for the evening. "Hello, everyone. I'm Noeline Merriweather, the owner of the Amber Lantern. Welcome to *A Christmas Carol* literary dining party, sponsored and organized by Bramblewood's very own Feast for the Eyes bookshop as well as Dream Cuisine. We hope you've all had a chance to read the novella. Throughout the night, after you've had the opportunity to dine on the feast provided, we'll discuss the various themes. But first, before we open the doors to the dining room, let me introduce Erwin Scroggie, the benefactor who has so gallantly offered up his treasures for our inspection." She handed the microphone to him.

Dressed in a black frock coat, black cherry jacquard vest, and black puff tie and striped trousers, he would have fit perfectly in the 1800s. All that was missing was a top hat. In a gruff but good-natured voice, he advised everyone that the letter, now on display alongside the novella, would soon be sent to the Dickens Society for posterity. The announcement earned him great applause.

After he ceded the microphone to Noeline, the singing resumed, and the crowd spread out. Many were praising the décor and the Christmas decorations.

Others were making a beeline into the dining room to taste the magnificent feast Helga and Pippa had prepared, which included Vanna's prize-worthy roast goose, Brussels sprouts, cranberry sauce, and more. I'd set the desserts I had provided—dozens of cookies, one hundred individual figgy puddings, and one hundred cranberry gingersnap tarts—in the living room. It had taken an entire day at my ghost kitchen to throw it all together. Darcy had been my stalwart companion.

"There you are." Tegan joined me by the table at the far end of the dining room.

"Want a cup?" I motioned to the punch bowl.

"Absolutely. Helga's recipe?"

"You bet." I ladled a portion of the mulled beverage into a crystal cup and handed it to her.

She sipped and said, “*Mmm*. Delicious. Mom is over the moon with the turnout. People have been saying repeatedly that they will call tomorrow to reserve a room for themselves or family in the coming months.”

“Great news.” I fixed a glass of punch for myself.

“Some are planning on booking time for next year’s holiday celebrations.”

Apparently, two murders in the inn weren’t as much of a drawback as we’d worried they might be.

“Isn’t it scrumptious?” Mrs. Grimshaw passed by with a plate filled to the brim with a serving of everything. “Enough reason to stay an additional week. How often do you do these events?”

“We try to host at least one a month,” Tegan replied. “They aren’t all as elaborate as this, of course.”

“Well, count me in,” she said. “I might even ask Noeline if I can rent one of the rooms on a regular basis. My home away from home. New costumes to purchase. New books to read. Or possibly reread. This will be so much fun. Marigold would be so proud of y’all.”

She moved on, and we moseyed into the foyer with our drinks.

Xenia, who had not fled the inn once she’d learned the killers had been caught, was strolling through the inn accompanied by Dalton Frasier.

“Are they a couple?” I whispered to Tegan.

“Got me. She looks happy enough. But she has to know he’ll be heading back to England.”

“Will he? Historians can live anywhere.”

“Mom seems to be enjoying herself.” Tegan hitched her chin in her mother’s direction. Noeline was standing beneath the arch leading to the parlor, her hand gently wrapped around Scroggie’s elbow. “She looks content.”

“She does.”

“And he … what a change in personality.”

“To us, perhaps. Not for those who knew him when he was younger.”

Freddy and Felicity were exiting the parlor when Scroggie detained his nephew loudly enough for all to hear.

“Freddy, my boy,” Scroggie said. “Hold up there.”

Freddy’s cheeks reddened. “Sir.”

Felicity clasped Freddy's hand protectively. In her lacy frock, her mouth tightened in fear, she looked as vulnerable as a doe facing the barrel of a hunter's rifle.

"You deserve a raise," Scroggie said.

"Wha-what?" Freddy stammered.

"Indeed. It's time. You have been under my thumb for far too long. And if I'm not mistaken, there are some medical bills that need to be paid for that delightful daughter of yours."

"D-delightful?" Freddy sputtered.

"Tinsley?" Felicity asked, clearly shocked he even knew about the girl.

"Yes, Tinsley. Splendid name," Scroggie said. "Consider it done. And bring her round soon. I'd like to spend some time with her and show her my book collection."

"Your—" Freddy jammed his lips together.

"She reads, doesn't she?" Scroggie asked.

"Indeed, Uncle. She loves to read."

"Excellent. I'll see to all of this on Monday morning. Now, go on." He shooed them away with the back of his hand. "Celebrate. Enjoy the season. 'Tis a beautiful time of year."

Freddy and Felicity didn't hesitate. They hurried excitedly into the living room. I could see them chatting with one another, tears streaming merrily down Felicity's cheeks.

"Well, I'll be," Tegan said. "He's a changed man."

"Miracles do happen," I concurred, and placed my empty punch cup on a side table. "Perhaps your mother had something to do with it."

"Possibly."

"What miracles have happened?" Lillian asked as she approached.

Magda, Candace, and Stella accompanied her. Each was clad in a rococo gown of a different hue, the gowns festooned with lace bodices, ruffles, and bows. Each was carrying a fan. I'd wager Lillian had made the dresses herself with all the trimmings.

"I believe," Magda said in response, "our dear friend Allie is referring to the fact that Erwin Scroggie has become a full-fledged human being."

All four women fluttered their fans and tittered in a way uncommon to them. How sweet. They were pretending to act as they believed Victorian era women would act. Elizabeth Bennet might disagree.

One of the ghosts swept up to us in an ethereal manner, as if gliding on skates. The Ghost of Christmas Present, I decided. He wore a green velvet robe trimmed with white fur cinched with a belt of fake pinecones and ivy. A holly wreath with tiny berries adorned his head. He was carrying an LED torch and was smiling with jovial Santa energy.

Upon closer inspection, I realized it was Quinlan O'Leary, the actor who had played Santa in *A Dickens of a Christmas Eve*.

"What is it you desire this season?" the ghost asked me in an otherworldly voice.

"World peace," I said. "And a Roomba that doesn't eat my socks."

Tegan chuckled.

"And you, pretty lady?" the ghost asked her.

"Pretty?" She nearly spit out the punch she'd sipped. She set her cup on the table beside mine and quipped, "To finally understand how to fold a fitted sheet."

Lillian and Magda roared at that.

The ghost guffawed. "How about a date soon?" he crooned.

When Tegan nodded demurely, he proceeded to the next group of guests.

I spotted Zach entering the inn with his mother. Neither had dressed in costume for the occasion, although both had donned evening wear. I excused myself from my friends and headed to them.

Jenny clutched my shoulders, leaned in to air-kiss me on each cheek, and stepped back. "Allie, I'm so sorry."

"What for?"

"Well, you know why. I should have guessed about Kiki. She had been acting strangely at the diner. Snapping more often at the chef, clearly agitated."

Zach shook his head. "I told her she couldn't have known."

"He's right," I assured her. "It was only when I surmised she'd worked in tandem with her beloved Yale that the scenario made sense." I squeezed her arm. "Go get yourself a cup of punch in the dining room. It's delicious."

"Before I do, is it true? The rumor? Is Noeline going on a date with Erwin Scroggie?"

"She's already been."

Jenny clapped her hands softly. “Excellent. Simply excellent.” She left us and weaved through the crowd.

Zach clasped my elbow gently and guided me to the arch leading to the living room. He paused and glanced up. “Well, well, do I see mistletoe?” He tilted my chin upward.

“You do.”

Tegan had prettified every arch in the inn with a sprig.

“Then allow me.” He kissed me softly on the mouth. “Please, no more investigations that put you in harm’s way.”

“I’ll do my best,” I whispered, “but I can’t promise anything.”

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RECIPES

Blue Cheese and Bacon Appetizers
Figgy Pudding + Gluten-Free Version
Gingerbread Cupcakes + Gluten-Free Version
Peppermint Cookies + Gluten-Free Version
Perfect Herb Dressing
Dry Rub Seasoning for Sautéed Goose Breasts
Sautéed Goose Breasts
Smoking Bishop Wine
White Chocolate Raspberry Tart

“A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you, for many a year!
I’ll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl smoking bishop, Bob.”

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Blue Cheese and Bacon Appetizers

(Yield: 12)

4–6 slices thick bacon
Olive oil
Kosher salt and pepper
1 baguette (may be gluten-free)
4 ounces cream cheese
2–4 ounces blue cheese
Honey

Preheat oven to 400°F. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Bake 4–6 slices of thick bacon on one of the baking sheets for 15–20 minutes, until crispy. Remove from oven and let cool. When cool, snip into small bits.

Rub the second baking sheet with oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Slice a baguette into 1/4-inch slices and lay them on the prepared baking sheet. Bake for 6–8 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool.

In a mixing bowl, blend the cream cheese with the blue cheese.

Once the baguettes are cool, spread the cheese mixture evenly on them. Sprinkle with bacon bits, and then drizzle with honey.

Figgy Pudding

(Yield: 12 servings)

½ cup unsalted butter, room temperature
2 large eggs
1 cup molasses
2 cups finely chopped dried figs
½ teaspoon grated lemon peel
1 cup buttermilk
½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans, if desired
2½ cups all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon baking soda
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
Whipped cream, if desired

Preheat oven to 325°F. Grease and flour an 8 × 4 soufflé dish.

In a large bowl, cream the butter until it is fluffy. Add the eggs and molasses and beat again.

Add the finely chopped figs, lemon peel, buttermilk, and if desired the nuts. Mix for 1 minute.

Add the flour, baking soda, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Blend until everything is incorporated.

Pour the batter into the prepared soufflé dish.

Bake for 1 hour. It is done when a toothpick in the center comes out clean.

Let cool for 10 minutes. Spoon the warm pudding onto plates and if desired garnish with whipped cream.

Note: If desired, you can make these in smaller ramekins. Also a half recipe makes four 8-ounce or eight 4-ounce servings. Bake these for approximately 25–30 minutes. Test with a toothpick.

Tip: If you don’t serve these warm, they will “firm up” and become a bread. To soften, simply put the ramekin in the microwave and reheat on medium high for 10 seconds.

Figgy Pudding: Gluten-Free Version

(Yield: 12 servings)

½ cup unsalted butter, room temperature
2 large eggs
1 cup molasses
2 cups finely chopped dried figs
½ teaspoon grated lemon peel
1 cup buttermilk
½ cup chopped walnuts or pecans, if desired
1½ cups sweet rice flour
1 cup tapioca starch
½ teaspoon xanthan gum
½ teaspoon baking soda
2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
Whipped cream, if desired

Preheat oven to 325°F. Grease and flour an 8 × 4 soufflé dish.

In a large bowl, cream the butter until it is fluffy. Add the eggs and molasses and beat again.

Add the finely chopped figs, lemon peel, buttermilk, and if desired the nuts. Mix for 1 minute.

Add the sweet rice flour, tapioca starch, xanthan gum, baking soda, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Blend until everything is incorporated.

Pour the batter into the prepared soufflé dish.

Bake for 1 hour. It is done when a toothpick in the center comes out clean.

Let cool for 10 minutes. Spoon the warm pudding onto plates and if desired garnish with whipped cream.

Note: If desired, you can make these in smaller ramekins. Also a half recipe makes four 8-ounce or eight 4-ounce servings. Bake these for approximately 25–30 minutes. Test with a toothpick.

Tip: If you don’t serve these warm, they will “firm up” and become a bread. To soften, simply put the ramekin in the microwave and reheat on medium-high for 10 seconds.

Gingerbread Cupcakes

(Yield: 12 cupcakes)

Cupcakes:

1⅓ cup flour
½ cup dark brown sugar, firmly packed
¼ teaspoon baking soda
¾ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
1½ teaspoons ground ginger
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
¼ teaspoon ground allspice
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
⅓ cup melted unsalted butter
⅓ cup canola oil
⅓ cup molasses
1 egg + 1 large egg yolk, room temperature
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
¼ cup boiling water
⅓ cup sour cream

Frosting:

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
½ cup unsalted butter, softened
2 tablespoons light brown sugar, firmly packed
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
Pinch of salt
3½ cups powdered sugar

To make the cupcakes:

Preheat oven to 350°F and line a 12-count cupcake pan with liners.

In a large mixing bowl, whisk the flour, brown sugar, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and spices (ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, and cloves).

Add the melted butter and oil and stir. The batter might be dry. That’s okay, but make sure all of the flour is mixed in.

Add the molasses and stir. Stir in the egg, egg yolk, and vanilla extract. Combine well.

Add the boiling water and stir again until all is incorporated. Add the sour cream and mix again, scraping down the sides of the bowl.

Divide the batter evenly in the cupcake liners, approximately three quarters full. Set on the center rack of the oven and bake for 18 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool the cupcakes for 10–15 minutes. Remove and place on a cooling rack to cool completely.

To make the frosting:

In a large mixing bowl, combine the softened cream cheese, softened butter, brown sugar, vanilla extract, cinnamon, and salt. Using an electric mixer, combine until smooth and creamy.

With the mixer on low, add the powdered sugar, a bit at a time, until incorporated and the frosting is smooth.

Spread or pipe the frosting over the cooled cupcakes.

Note: These cupcakes may be made ahead of time and stored in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

Gingerbread Cupcakes: Gluten-Free Version

(Yield: 12 cupcakes)

Cupcakes:

1 cup sweet rice flour
⅓ cup tapioca starch
¼ teaspoon xanthan gum
½ cup dark brown sugar, firmly packed
¼ teaspoon baking soda
¾ teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
1½ teaspoons ground ginger
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
¼ teaspoon ground allspice
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
⅓ cup melted unsalted butter
⅓ cup canola oil
⅓ cup molasses
1 egg + 1 large egg yolk, room temperature
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
¼ cup boiling water
⅓ cup sour cream

Frosting:

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
½ cup unsalted butter, softened
2 tablespoons light brown sugar, firmly packed
1½ teaspoons vanilla extract
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
Pinch of salt
3½ cups powdered sugar

To make the cupcakes:

Preheat oven to 350°F and line a 12-count cupcake pan with liners.

In a large mixing bowl, whisk the sweet rice flour, tapioca starch, xanthan gum, brown sugar, baking soda, baking powder, salt, and spices (ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, and cloves).

Add the melted butter and oil and stir. The batter might be dry. That's okay, but make sure all of the flour is mixed in.

Add the molasses and stir. Stir in the egg, egg yolk, and vanilla extract. Combine well.

Add the boiling water and stir again until all is incorporated. Add the sour cream and mix again, scraping down the sides of the bowl.

Divide the batter evenly in the cupcake liners, approximately three quarters full. Set on the center rack of the oven and bake for 18 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Cool the cupcakes for 10–15 minutes. Remove and place on a cooling rack to cool completely.

To make the frosting:

In a large mixing bowl, combine the softened cream cheese, softened butter, brown sugar, vanilla extract, cinnamon, and salt. Using an electric mixer, combine until smooth and creamy.

With the mixer on low, add the powdered sugar, a bit at a time, until incorporated and the frosting is smooth.

Spread or pipe the frosting over the cooled cupcakes.

Note: These cupcakes may be made ahead of time and stored in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

Peppermint Cookies

(Yield: 8–12 cookies)

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened

6 tablespoons sugar + extra for sprinkling

1 egg, beaten

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

½ teaspoon peppermint extract

⅔ cup + 1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

¼ teaspoon baking soda

Pinch of salt

½ cup white chocolate, chopped

¼ cup peppermint chips or crushed candy canes, more if desired for topping

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, whip the butter until smooth. Add the sugar, egg, vanilla extract, and peppermint extract.

Add the flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix until combined.

Add the chopped white chocolate and the peppermint chips or crushed candy canes. Stir well.

Drop by spoonfuls on the prepared baking sheet.

Bake for 10–12 minutes or until golden brown around the edges. Cool on the baking sheet for a couple of minutes and then let cool completely on a baking rack. Sprinkle with extra sugar if desired.

Peppermint Cookies: Gluten-Free Version

(Yield: 8–12 cookies)

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened

6 tablespoons sugar + extra for sprinkling

1 egg, beaten

½ teaspoon vanilla extract

⅔ cup + 1 tablespoon sweet rice flour

½ teaspoon peppermint extract

¼ teaspoon baking soda

Pinch of salt

½ cup white chocolate, chopped

¼ cup peppermint chips or crushed candy canes, more if desired for topping

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a medium bowl, whip the butter until smooth. Add the sugar, egg, vanilla extract, and peppermint extract.

Add the sweet rice flour, baking soda, and salt. Mix until combined.

Add the chopped white chocolate and the peppermint chips or crushed candy canes. Stir well.

Drop by spoonfuls on the prepared baking sheet.

Bake for 10–12 minutes or until golden brown around the edges. Cool on the baking sheet for a couple of minutes and then let cool completely on a baking rack. Sprinkle with extra sugar if desired.

Perfect Herb Dressing

(Yield: 4–6 portions)

12–14 cups bread cubes, toasted or stale
1 cup unsalted butter
3 cups diced onion
2 cups diced celery
4 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and pepper to taste
3 tablespoons chopped fresh sage or 1 teaspoon dried sage
3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
3 tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary
2½ cups chicken or vegetable stock
2 large eggs

To make the bread cubes:

Cut approximately 1½ pounds of bread into very small cubes, place on a cookie sheet, and toast in the oven at 350°F for about 15 minutes. You want them to be really cooked so they are crisp, like croutons. OR you can buy toasted bread cubes at the store. I like sourdough the best.

To make the dressing:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Brush a 9 × 13 baking dish with melted butter.

Place the bread cubes in a large mixing bowl.

In a large skillet, heat the butter over low heat. Stir in the onion, celery, garlic, and at least ½ to 1 teaspoon each of salt and pepper. Cook the vegetables for about 8 minutes to soften. Stir in the sage, parsley, and rosemary. Cook 1 more minute.

Add in 1 cup of stock. Pour this mixture over the bread cubes. Toss well.

In a small bowl, whisk together the remaining 1½ cups of stock and the eggs. Pour that mixture onto the bread cubes and fold until combined.

Bake the dressing for 45–50 minutes until the internal temperature registers 160°F. If it starts to get too brown, tent with foil.

Dry Rub Seasoning for Sautéed Goose Breasts

(Yield: 2½ teaspoons)

¼ teaspoon dried oregano
¼ teaspoon dried basil
¼ teaspoon dried parsley
¼ teaspoon dried chives
¼ teaspoon dried thyme
¼ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon paprika
¼ teaspoon white pepper
¼ teaspoon coriander
¼ teaspoon nutmeg

In a bowl, mix all the seasonings. Store in a sealed container.

Sautéed Goose Breasts

(Yield: 8–16 appetizer portions, depending on slice sizes)

2 tablespoons butter

2 goose breasts thinly sliced

2 teaspoons dry rub seasoning

¼ cup vermouth or dry white wine

In a sauté pan, melt the butter on medium high. Cook the goose breasts until they are nice and brown, about 2 to 3 minutes for medium rare. Flip and sprinkle with the seasoning. Cook 1 more minute. Pour the vermouth over the slices. Let the breasts simmer in the liquid for 1 minute.

Remove from heat and serve immediately, with or without the juice.

Note: May be made with duck breasts.

Smoking Bishop Wine

Note from Allie:

The following recipe was first found in *Apician Morsels; or, Tales of the Table, Kitchen, and Larder*, a culinary collection published in New York in 1829. The collection explored cooking history, and lore, all with a humorous tone. I've made just a few little tweaks regarding the time it takes to prepare it all because, let's face it, none of us have as much time as people used to have. Enjoy!

(Yield: 12–16 portions)

4 oranges
2 lemons
25 whole cloves
¼ teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon mace or nutmeg
1 piece fresh ginger root, peeled and cut into chunks
1 cup water
1 bottle (750 milliliters) red wine
½ cup sugar
1 bottle (750 milliliters) ruby port

Remove any stickers from the oranges and lemons. Wash gently and pat dry.

Preheat oven to 300°F. To start, you will need 4 oranges and 1 of the lemons. Reserve the second lemon for later.

Make 5 small incisions with a sharp knife into each orange and the lemon. Stick whole cloves into each incision. Place the oranges and lemon on a baking sheet.

Place the fruit in the oven. Let it roast for about 75 minutes, until the peels begin to lose their bright color and turn paler. Remove the fruit from the oven. Replace any cloves that have fallen from their incisions, and then place the fruit into the bottom of a large bowl. Set aside.

In a small saucepan, combine 1 cup of water with the cinnamon, allspice, mace (or nutmeg), and ginger chunks. Whisk and bring to a boil. Simmer the mixture, stirring frequently, until the liquid is reduced by half, about 5 to 6 minutes. Remove from heat.

In a larger saucepan, pour in the bottle of red wine and heat over medium high until it boils, approximately 3 minutes. Reduce heat to simmer, and then pour in the sugar and stir until it dissolves. Let the wine simmer for 10 minutes. Stir in the spiced liquid mixture. Remove from heat.

Pour the heated wine mixture over the roasted oranges and lemon. Stir the fruit and wine gently to combine.

Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or a towel. Place the bowl in a warm area for 6 to 12 hours. After that time, remove the fruit from the bowl and slice the oranges and lemon in half. Juice them into the spiced wine. You may use a juicer for this step.

Pour the wine mixture through a strainer into a new saucepan. Make sure to remove large spices and solids. Press down gently on the solids with a spoon to remove as much liquid as possible.

Add the bottle of port to the saucepan. Stir and heat over medium until hot, but do not boil, for about 5 minutes. Vapors will begin to rise from the warming wine—this is the *smoking* part of the “smoking bishop.”

Taste the mixture. Add more sugar if desired.

Cut the extra lemon into rounds and float the rounds in the warmed wine. Pour the wine into heat-safe mugs or glasses or serve in a punch bowl. It can be served hot or warm and you can refrigerate it to reheat and serve later.

White Chocolate Raspberry Tart

(Yield: 6–8 slices)

Tart crust:

2 cups gluten-free oats

½ cup sweet white rice flour

¼ teaspoon xanthan gum

½ teaspoon salt

⅓ cup unsalted butter, cut into cubes

2 tablespoons maple syrup

2 tablespoons water, more if necessary

Raspberry layer:

2 cups raspberries, fresh or frozen

⅔ cups water

1 teaspoon agar powder or gelatin

3 tablespoons sugar

White chocolate layer:

7 ounces white chocolate, chopped

¾ cup cream

Garnish:

Sugared raspberries

Sugared cranberries

To make the tart crust:

Preheat oven to 350°F. Lightly grease a 9-inch tart pan. Set aside.

In a food processor, blend the oats, sweet rice flour, and xanthan gum. Add the salt, butter, syrup, and water and stir. If it's too dry, add a tad more water.

Press the mixture into the prepared tart pan with your fingers.

Bake for 15 minutes. Remove from oven and place on a wire rack to cool. It will crisp up.

To make the raspberry layer:

In a saucepan, mix raspberries and ¼ cup of the water and bring to a boil, about 3 minutes.

Pour the remaining water into a small bowl and sprinkle with the agar powder or gelatin. Let dissolve and set aside.

Once the raspberries are cooked, remove from heat and mash them with a spoon. Add sugar and the agar powder or gelatin water mixture. Return the saucepan to the heat and bring to a boil again while stirring. Simmer for 1 to 2 minutes. Set aside to cool before pouring into the tart crust.

Place the tart in the refrigerator for about 15 minutes, until the raspberry layer is firm.

To make the white chocolate layer:

Place the white chocolate pieces in a microwave-proof bowl. Microwave on medium for 30 seconds. Stir. If necessary, microwave again on medium in 10-second intervals until soft. The white chocolate does not need to melt completely.

In a saucepan, warm the cream. Add the melted white chocolate and stir until smooth.

Pour the cream mixture on top of the raspberries in the tart crust. Chill for at least 3 hours or overnight.

Making Sugared Berries for Decoration

1 cup water

½ cup + 2 tablespoons granulated sugar

8–12 raspberries

Stir and bring 1 cup of water and ½ cup of granulated sugar to a simmer (not a full boil) in a medium saucepan. Simmer for about 3–5 minutes. Make sure the sugar is completely dissolved. Remove from heat and allow the simple syrup to cool for about 15 minutes.

Add the berries to the simple syrup and let them steep for 3 minutes.

Remove the berries from the syrup with a slotted spoon and allow them to dry on a paper towel. Separate the berries so they’re not touching each other and let them dry for 1 hour.

Toss the berries in the additional 2 tablespoons of granulated sugar. Use the berries to decorate the tart or any other dessert.

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