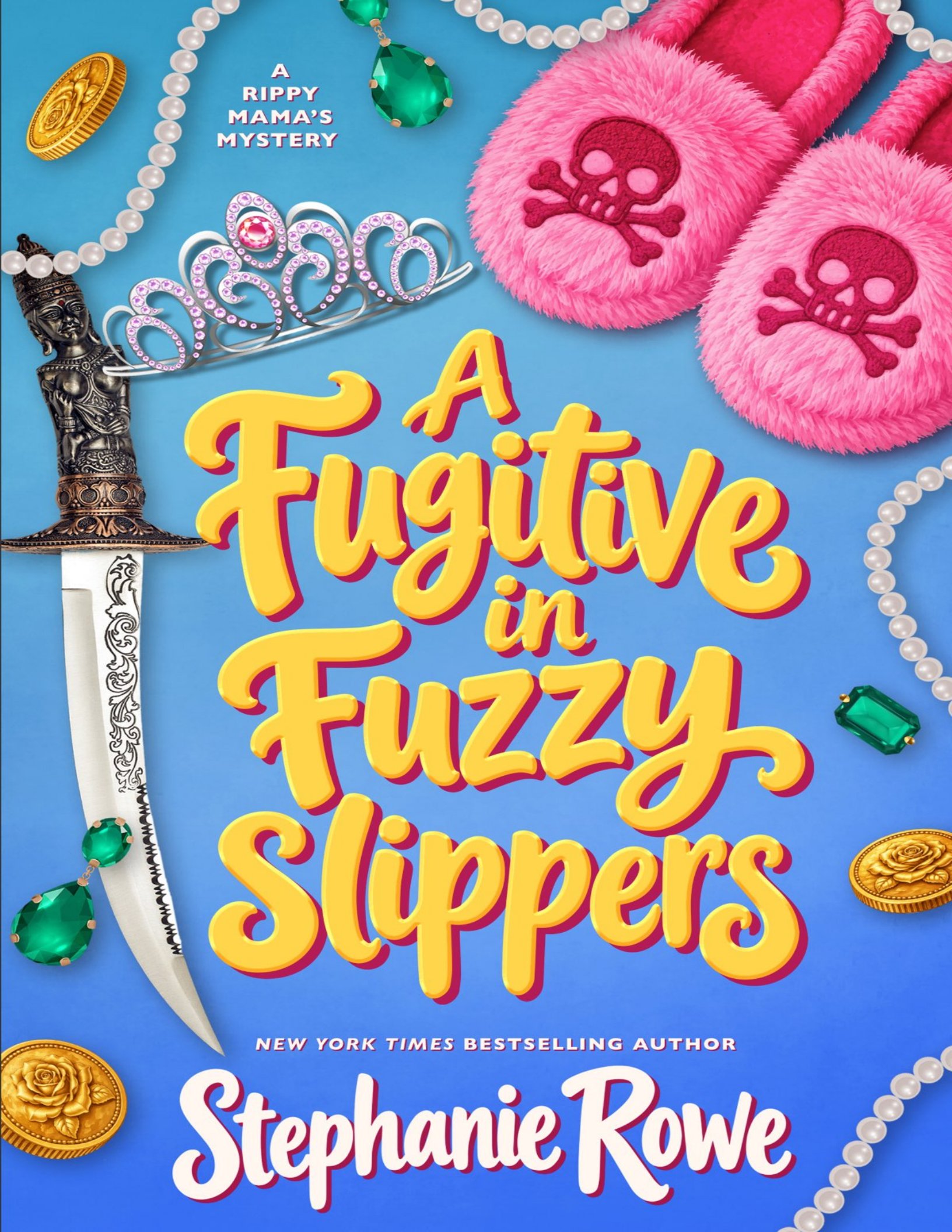
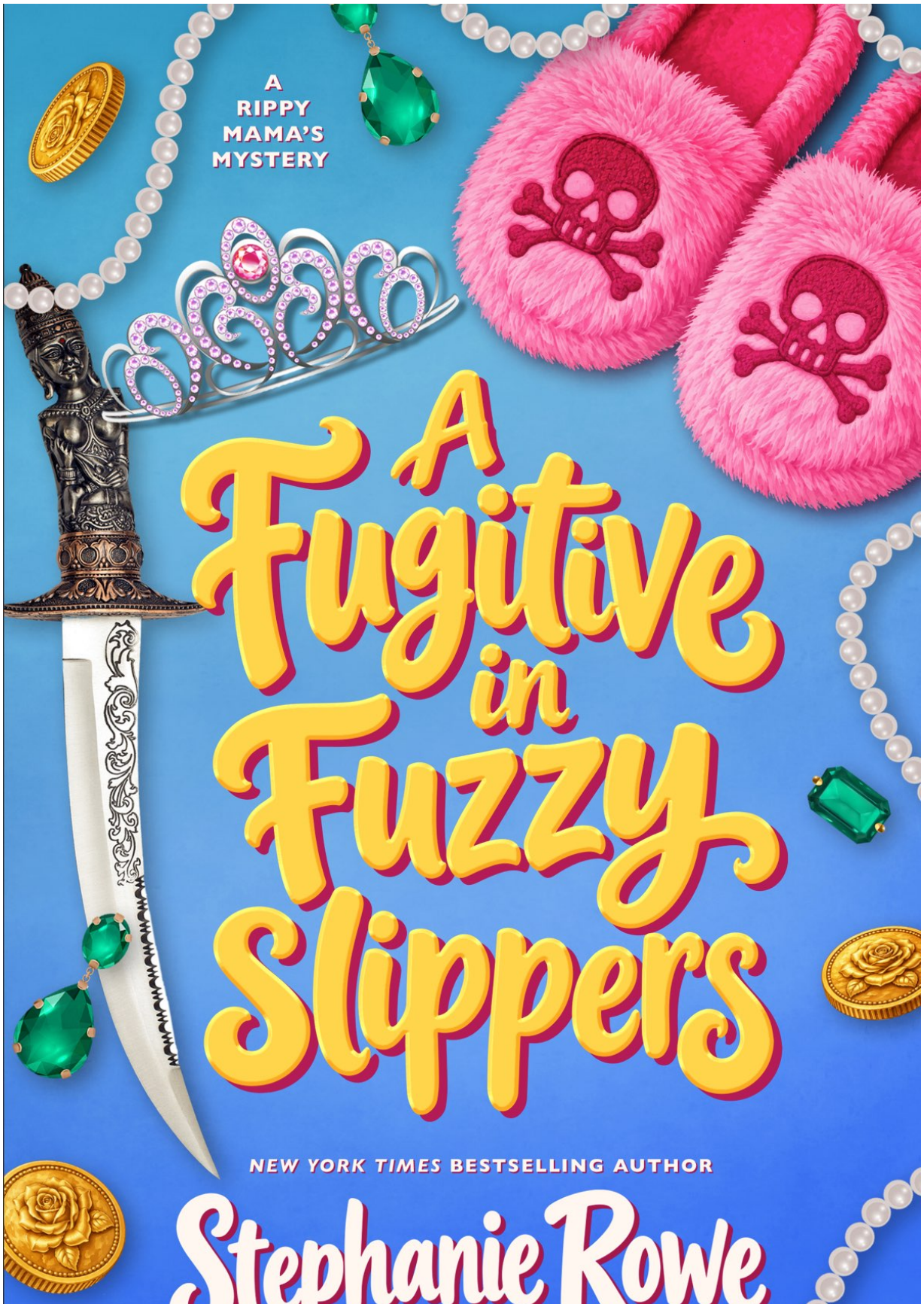

A RIPPY MAMA'S MYSTERY
A Fugitive in Fuzzy Slippers
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A FUGITIVE IN FUZZY SLIPPERS

A RIPPY MAMA'S MYSTERY

STEPHANIE ROWE

AUTHENTICITY PLAYGROUND, LLC

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WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT STEPHANIE'S COZIES

"A hilarious and twisty ride! …I definitely need more Mia Murphy in my life." Five-Star Goodreads Review (Tammy M.)

"I was catapulted into the story and remained captivated until the end… Down right laugh out loud!" Five-Star Goodreads Review (Elizabeth)

"Stephanie Rowe has such a way with words! Her offbeat humour and madcap adventures are absolutely mesmerizing!" Five-Star Goodreads Review (Laura C.)

"A hoot! " Five-star Goodreads Review (Margie)

"I am so in love with Mia and her friends…this series just has me literally laughing out loud…Non-stop high jinks, great characters, and above all, wonderful and engaging writing." Five-star Goodreads Review (Penny)

"[Mia] had me laughing out loud constantly. Also, I think King Tut might be my favorite water-loving bodyguard/ kitty cat companion that I've ever read! I absolutely cannot wait until we get the third book!" Five-star Goodreads Review (Danielle B.)

"I love this book, this series and this author!" Five-star Goodreads Review (Riding Reviewer)

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CHAPTER 1

THIS WAS IT.

My last night until I became the woman my mom would have been so proud of.

I was proud, too.

Exhausted. Drained. Burned out. Slightly insane.

But also victorious, so all the pain and suffering was totally worth it—

"Evie!" A loud, demanding knock rattled the door of my condo. "It's me! Champagne time!"

I grinned. "I'm asleep," I called out, as I shuffled to the door in my fuzzy slippers and flung the door open.

"Hah! You lie like a rug!" My across-the-hall neighbor, Leah Gallagher, was wearing hot pink jeans, yellow sneakers, and a tie-dyed sweatshirt. Her tortoise shell glasses were pink and black, and her nails had matching leopard print going on.

I leaned on the door and yawned. "I was on my way to bed." I raised my leg to the side and waved it around. "PJs and slippers."

"You always put those on the minute you get home. That's proof of nothing, you lying scallywag." She wiggled her brows at me. "I knew you'd decide you were too tired to celebrate your awesomeness tonight. You've

got weariness written all over that make-up-free face right now. You gotta try those false eyelashes I gave you last week. You'd look so huggable."

"That's definitely my dream," I agreed, without even a hint of sarcasm. "To look huggable."

Leah was high energy, obeyed no rules, and she was fascinated by the fact that I wore a suit every day and bled my days away in a high-rise office doing grinding, high-stress work.

When she'd moved in across the hall eighteen months ago, she'd made it her personal mission to become the gal pal I'd thought I didn't want or need. In truth, she was like a shot of sunshine, and I appreciated every interfering moment she banged on my door and pep-talked me into following my dreams.

She did kitten yoga, owned an art gallery, and drank green smoothies. I got up, worked, slept, and then got up and repeated the cycle the next day.

Leah was the joy-filled elf fairy who gave me the energy to keep fighting for my dream.

"I know it's your life goal to be more huggable," Leah said cheerfully. "No one except me ever hugs you. You need to put that message out to the world that you're ready for love."

"Hah." I snorted. "Hugging is overrated—"

"Never!" She flung herself at me, slammed me into my side table, and nearly took us both down with the force of her tackle-embrace. "Champagne's on ice in my place," Leah declared cheerfully as we untangled from the furniture. "Let's go there."

I was laughing now. Two seconds ago, summoning the energy to shuffle five feet across the hall to her place had felt like a lot. Now? She made me want to be someone who I'd never been. Someone fluffy, sparkly, and silly who danced through life. Not that I could be that woman, but she at least made me think of her. "I'd love to, but I can't. I have an early morning—"

“Silence!” Leah held out her hand to cut me off. “After selling your soul for eight years, you’re finally going to be announced as partner at your fancy law firm tomorrow. You most certainly can and will take five minutes to celebrate that!” She pointed to her open door. “Besides, I have Hattie’s Café’s peppermint ice cream and hot fudge—”

“Hattie’s?” Oh, boy. My fave. “Really?”

“I do!” Leah looked extremely proud of herself, as well she should. Hattie’s ice cream was almost impossible to find. It was a small store in Maine, and distribution was almost zero. I’d only had it a few times.

“How did you find it?” I hadn’t had it in months. It was so good.

“I’m magical. It’s the last night of your life as a peon. I wanted to make sure you were so tempted by my offerings that you couldn’t say no.” She grinned with a sass that I envied, that I never seemed to find the energy to have. She yanked my phone out of my hand and tossed it on my front hall table. “Five minutes without work, Evie. As your bestie, I demand compliance with my edict.”

“You’re insane.” I laughed in surrender as I let her take my arm and drag me across the hall, PJs and all. “You know I appreciate you, right? If it weren’t for you, I’d have given up on making partner long ago. You keep me sane.”

And I meant it. She was the only friend I had. I had no idea why she’d decided we had to be friends, but I was incredibly grateful for it.

“I know. I’m fantastic. Life is better with me in it.” She slung her arm over my shoulder as she dragged me over the threshold into her condo and kicked the door shut with her foot. “But you’re pretty fab yourself. I don’t know how someone as marvelous as you has only one friend, but I’m glad you picked me.”

“Me, too.” I grinned as I saw the champagne sitting on her kitchen counter, next to the jar of Hattie’s hot fudge. “That’s such a beautiful sight.”

My tension from the day started to ease. “How do you always know exactly what I need?”

“I pay attention, my friend.” She parked me at the kitchen island and went to her freezer. “Before we get started though, I want you to meet someone.”

I yawned. “Are you trying to set me up? You know I don’t have time to date.”

“You don’t *make* time to date. There’s a difference, and I’m calling you on it.” I saw a flicker in her eye of something I hadn’t seen before. Not warmth. Something else. Regret? Guilt? “Amping up your social life is definitely on my list, but lucky for you, this manly man already has his eye on someone else.”

“Then why do you want me to meet him?” I picked up the hot fudge. “Oh…it’s warm. You’re the best!” I grabbed a spoon, dipped it in, and then sighed with joy as I licked the spoon. “Is it a potential client?” I would need to level up delivering new clients when I became partner, which I wasn’t looking forward to. I liked to do good work, not schmooze for business.

“Ummm… Not exactly.” Leah looked over my shoulder. “She’s all yours.”

“All whose?” I turned around and was startled to see a man leaning against the wall in the back corner of her living room. “Oh!”

How had I not noticed him when I walked in? Then I remembered that Leah had slid her arm around my shoulders and dragged me straight to the kitchen before I could see him.

Hmm…

He was wearing a jacket and tie, nice pants, and dark leather shoes. He had short hair, a hard jawline, and serious eyes. Attractive in a fancy pants kind of way.

Definitely smelled like a potential client, but Leah would never have brokered a client meeting when I was in my pajamas, eating hot fudge. I

leaned back in my seat and took another spoonful of hot fudge, eyeing him.

It was too late to come off as a badass attorney, so I embraced the hot fudge and fuzzy slippers.

I was mildly curious as to what she was planning. But only mildly, because as soon as I finished off the bottle of hot fudge, I was going to bed. But I was a little bit curious, because Leah was exuberantly eccentric, and she very well might have ordered me a stripper or something equally outrageous for my last night as a peon.

“Evie Montgomery,” he said, his voice deep and all-business. “No immediate family. No friends. Mom died suddenly when you were eighteen. Making partner tomorrow at Graves & Stone.”

Alarm shot through me at his odd, formal announcement, and I froze for a split second.

He was watching me intently, so I forced myself to relax. I even took another lazy mouthful of hot fudge, trying to appear calm when my mind had just exploded into overdrive. What was going on? What did he know about my mom? And my life? And why was he reciting it like he was pouring out my darkest secrets?

He waited expectantly for my reaction, so I took my sweet time before finally responding. I glanced over at Leah, who was leaning against the counter, the ice cream in her hand, clearly not surprised by his aggressive little greeting.

Huh.

Making him wait, I took another slow bite of hot fudge, which suddenly didn’t taste as good as it had a moment ago.

“Well,” I said eventually. “Thanks for the recap on my life. And you are?”

His gaze flicked toward Leah, then he levered himself off the wall. “Agent Hawk Straus. FBI.”

“FBI?” I was so surprised that I forgot to pretend I was unfazed.

He sat down across from me and set his badge on the island between us. “Once you’re officially confirmed as partner tomorrow, Graves & Stone will have you sign an assortment of documents. Confidentiality documents. After that, they’ll take you into an interior office and explain to you exactly what Graves & Stone does.”

I picked up his badge and looked at it, but I had no idea how to tell if it was real.

Letting the badge clatter to the countertop, I turned my head to the only solid thing I had in this surreal situation. “Leah? Who is this guy? What’s going on?”

“He’s legit. You can trust him.” She cleared her throat. “I work with him.”

“You work with him? At the art gallery? Because he doesn’t look like a kitten yoga kind of guy.”

“No.” Leah reached into her back pocket and pulled out her wallet. She flipped it open and then slid it across the counter to me. “Sorry to tell you this way, but I wasn’t allowed to tell you before now.”

I peered at it. “Leah Walters…FBI?” My heart started racing and I stood up, suddenly feeling wobbly. I wished I had on my suit, not fuzzy slippers and pajama pants with flamingos on them. I felt exposed and vulnerable. “You’re not Leah Gallager?”

“Not in real life, no,” She watched me, her voice soft. “I’m Agent Leah Walters. I work for the FBI. I was assigned to get to know you and assess you.”

“Assess me?” My blood was rushing so loudly in my ears it sounded like the ocean in a hurricane. “I thought we were friends.”

I saw something human, something of my friend, flicker across her face, but then it was gone, replaced by a determined visage that made ice clamp on my spine. “We had to know you. It was my job to find out.”

“*We* had to know *me*?” Sliding a glance toward Agent Straus, I tried to quickly piece together what was happening. “What job? Why?”

“We’ve had agents on every potential partner at Graves & Stone for several years now,” Agent Straus said. “We’ve been waiting for the right lead, and you’re it. You have no family that they can pressure you with. No friends they can trap you with. You have no life outside the firm. Nothing to lose. Nothing they can use as leverage.”

Um, wow, that sounded like I had a super depressing life. Did I? “Leverage for what?” Then I held up my hands and started walking toward the door, trying unsuccessfully to stalk in fleece slippers. “You know what, I don’t want to know. I’m going home and—”

“Your firm works for organized crime,” Leah said.

I grabbed the doorknob. “No, it doesn’t.” But I didn’t open the door. I just stood there, somehow knowing, in my gut, that they weren’t lying to me.

“It does,” Leah said. “And once you sign on as partner, you can’t ever get out. You’ll know too much.”

What was happening right now? My ears were ringing, and I was hot. Sweaty.

“Evie?” Leah’s voice was soft. Caring. Like I was supposed to believe she cared? “You okay? I know this is a lot all at once. Sorry about that.”

I pressed my lips together. Eight years. I’d spent eight years fighting to be one of their few women partners. The same firm my mom had been the first woman partner—

I spun around suddenly, my mouth dry. “My mom’s car accident when I was eighteen… Was it not an accident?” I could barely get the words out of my mouth.

Leah looked at Agent Straus.

So I looked at Agent Straus.

But his face was impassive, and he didn't answer my question. "We're offering you a chance to get out. Be our eyes and ears inside the firm. Agent Walters will be your contact. If it gets too hot, we'll make you disappear. It's your only way out."

I stared at them, back and forth, trying to process it. Conversations and documents whirled through my mind as I put pieces together, saw patterns in things I'd experienced over the years.

I realized that I already knew too much.

I'd chosen not to see it because I'd been so busy trying to make my mom proud, trying to be the success that she'd wanted for me. Unwilling to deviate from the path she'd chosen.

But I saw it now. Crystal clear.

Agent Straus nodded with satisfaction. "You'll just continue to hang out with Leah, like always. The firm bugged your condo, so no conversations can happen there. We swept Leah's just before you got here, and it's clean, so you guys can talk here for now."

Bugged? My condo was *bugged?* How long had that been happening?

"Hot fudge will be the code word when you have info," Leah said. "You love your hot fudge so much that it'll be normal for us to talk ice cream and hot fudge. Half our conversations revolve around that anyway."

"Wait a sec." I held up my hand to shut them down. "You want me to be a spy? For the FBI? At my firm? To expose an organized crime ring?"

Leah nodded enthusiastically. "You'll be great. You're smart and capable. That's why I recommended you. They usually choose men, so this is really exciting that you get to do it." She held up her fist. "Girl power, right?"

Girl power was not my first thought. "A spy." This was insane. "I can't be a spy. I have no idea how to do that."

"Not a problem," Agent Straus said. "I've trained others like you before. I'm excellent at it."

I stared at him. “You’re excellent at training civilians to go undercover.”

“Yep.”

“Well, great. I feel totally safe now.” Not.

“Safe?” He laughed softly. “You haven’t been safe since you started working there.”

Oh…boy. I suddenly found it hard to breathe. Had my colleagues killed my mom? Was I next? Panic started clamping around my throat.

Agent Straus narrowed his eyes, studying me. “All we need now is a confirmation that you’re in.”

I looked back and forth between them. “I can’t—”

“You can.” Leah gave me a sympathetic smile that was edged with a hardness I’d never seen from my pink, artsy bestie. “It’s too late, Evie. You’re a good person. I know your heart. Working for organized crime isn’t what you want, and this is your way out.”

I’d read the book *The Firm*. I knew there was no way out.

My head hurt. My palms were sweating.

Agent Straus glanced at Leah. “You said Evie was ice under pressure. I can read all her signs right now. She’s in full panic mode. They’ll know immediately.”

I shot a look at him. “They’ll know? Then they’ll kill me, won’t they?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s very tough. She’s just processing.” Leah turned to face me, giving me her full attention. “You’re a badass, Evie. You can do this. You won’t be alone.” She smiled, a smile I no longer believed. “You’ll always have me. The sister and bestie you never had? I’m still here.”

Sister and bestie? Her betrayal bit so deep I could barely breathe. “I…I gotta go.” I reached for the door again.

Leah put her hand on the door, holding it shut. “Let’s meet for breakfast,” she said. “You can let us know your decision then.”

“But remember,” Agent Straus said, “You’re either with us or with them. And we’re taking them down.”

The threat hung in the air, and I felt my world close in around me. If I didn't work with the FBI, I'd be going to federal prison when the hammer came down. I was trapped, and they knew it. I felt like I was going to be sick. "I'm leaving."

"I'll be over at six with breakfast." Leah released her hand from the door, but immediately locked her arm around my shoulders.

I froze, looking down at those pink and black fingernails patting my arm. "Do you even like pink?" I asked softly.

"Of course. A woman can be a kickass FBI agent and still like pink." She gave me a hug, which didn't feel so warm and snuggly as it had a few moments ago. "I know it's a lot, Evie, but I don't want you on the wrong side when it all goes down, because if you won't help, someone else will."

I shrugged her off, yanked open her door, and walked across the hall to my condo. "All those times I almost quit? You talked me out of it, knowing that if I stayed, I'd be trapped. A friend wouldn't have done that. Instead, you're the reason why I'm stuck right now." I felt sick.

She sighed. "I know it feels that way, and I'm sorry. I just…it's important."

"More important than me? Your best friend?" Was I her best friend? Apparently not. But she'd been mine. She was literally the only person I'd been close to since my mom had died.

And it had been a lie.

Fun. Nice times. Good on me.

Leah ignored my best friend comment. "I joined the FBI because I believe that the greater good matters. It's what I do. It's what I believe in."

"Wow. Okay. Lucky you to have clear life goals." My heart felt like it was freezing over, but I met her gaze. "Just so you know, I'd have told you to run while you still could. Because you mattered to me," I said softly. I'd let her in, and it had all been…a plan.

For a split second, regret filled her face. Sadness. Vulnerability.

I froze. “You don’t have to be like that, Leah. You can make a different choice.”

“I don’t want to make a different choice.” She lifted her chin and reclaimed her ruthless mask. “I’ll see you at six for breakfast.”

I met her gaze, searching for the friend I’d come to trust, but I only saw the hard visage of a woman doing her job.

Me. I was that job.

I had no words for her. Just…nothing.

So I stepped inside my condo, closed the door, and locked it. Then I stared at the lock. Safety was an illusion. All I’d wanted my whole life was to feel safe, to feel connected, to recover from the isolation that my mom’s death had thrust me into.

And now…I looked around my condo. Were there cameras watching me now? FBI? Graves & Stone?

I didn’t move.

I just stood there, leaning against the door, my mind reeling.

And it kept coming back to my mom’s car accident. What had really happened that day? Had I been the leverage that had forced her to keep working for them, even after she found out the truth? What if my mom had been working for the FBI, and the firm had found out?

And was it a fluke that I’d wound up working for the same firm? Or had Graves & Stone planned it all along? So many pieces rushing through my mind.

I closed my eyes and tried to think.

I couldn’t go into work tomorrow, obviously. I couldn’t accept that partnership. Work for the company that might have killed my mom? Spy on them until they figured it out, and I had a car accident?

All this time, I’d been trying to be the woman my mom would be proud of, but I knew as I stood there, that all she’d be saying to me right now would be, “Run.”

How? It was too late. I knew too much. I'd started seeing things two years ago, about the time I'd been told I was shortlisted to make partner. They'd made it impossible for me to quit.

I couldn't hide. They'd follow me.

My only chance was if they decided not to follow me.

Why wouldn't they follow me?

If they decided I wasn't a threat.

If they decided I wasn't worth their time.

How could I convince them of that?

I looked around my perfect condo, carefully curated to represent all that I'd strived to be. I couldn't stay here, obviously. But I didn't really care about that. I didn't feel a sense of loss.

Weirdly, I was more concerned with survival than being upset about losing the position and life I'd been working toward for eight years.

Maybe because work had been sucking me dry. Maybe it was because I was in shock, my mind was disintegrating, and at any moment, my grasp on reality would snap, and none of them would want me anyway because I'd be a complete unhinged lunatic—

Oh.

Oh.

If their prized pawn suddenly had a nervous breakdown from the stress and fled town to go raise goats in Vermont, would that be enough?

Maybe.

But they'd have to believe I had fully gone over the edge.

I looked around my neutral, manicured condo more carefully, an idea forming in my head.

I was going to have to snap. Fully snap.

And all their cameras, if they had some in my condo, would have to believe it.

And I’d have to complete my meltdown and be long gone before six o’clock when Leah showed up to claim my freedom. But go where?

I looked at my computer, sitting on my kitchen counter, and I knew that they probably knew every key stroke I’d ever made. The thought made chills run down my spine, and I thought of all the hot fudge recipes I’d looked up over the years.

Hot fudge.

They’d believe hot fudge.

I ran to my computer, opened it up, and then started an online search, knowing that they might be watching. Listening. Waiting.

I had to make this good, or I’d be dead by the week’s end.

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CHAPTER 2

EIGHTEEN HOURS LATER, I was three hundred miles away from my condo, and I was still alive, free, and unemployed.

Celebrate good times, right? Let's goooo.

My life? Burned at the stake.

I'd boiled both my work phone and my personal phone in a pot of spaghetti sauce (plain water didn't feel unhinged enough), then tested their durability in the garbage disposal (it had been a tie, because they both broke after three seconds).

I'd baked my personal and work computers in the oven (thank goodness for my fire extinguisher), then I'd tested a hammer on them, and finally drowned them in the bathtub.

There was a note on my counter for my bestie, Leah, telling her how I'd had a spiritual awakening about what to do with my life, and I was going to find my inner child and heal her. I'd even put a few hearts on there with happy faces.

I left the same note for the firm, since I knew they'd send someone looking for me when I didn't show up for my coronation.

I made sure to sound as manic, frantic, joyful, and unhinged as possible in both notes. I'd also thrown in some gobbledygook about no longer

needing material things, and that true wealth lay in the sunshine that my soul was trying to pour into my heart.

But, let's be honest, my new definition of true wealth was not getting murdered, conscripted by the FBI, or hunted by the mob.

My work wardrobe had been engulfed in flames in my fireplace when I'd walked out with nothing more than my car keys, my wallet, and a garbage bag of all the photos and belongings that I'd kept of my mom.

I'd sashayed down the condo corridor wearing my fuzzy slippers and the pink flamingo PJs, heading straight to the trash room, in case Leah had been watching through her little peephole.

Once in there, I'd grabbed a sweatshirt from the donation bin, then scurried down the back stairs to my car.

Moving fast. Sweating. Panting. Basically, having the exact nervous breakdown that I'd pretended I was having.

Once I was a hundred miles from the city, I'd traded my white Mercedes for a used, bright red pick-up truck, because I was paranoid (and correct?) that my car had been compromised in assorted ways by all the people who wanted a piece of sweet, little me.

I'd emptied my accounts of all available cash and bought a little safe to put on the floor of my truck.

And, most importantly, before I'd left home, I'd purchased an ice cream store on a random island off the Maine coast, sight unseen.

Did I want to run an ice cream store?

I did not.

Did I want to live on a harbor island that was more than a hundred miles from the nearest decent-sized city?

Again, I did not.

Did I want to stay alive for more than a week?

Why, yes. Yes, I did.

Which was why I was sitting in my new used truck, staring at the covered bridge I was supposed to drive across to get to my new home on Blueberry Island.

The ancient bridge looked like it was going to fall into the harbor.

Yes, it had some charm, but it had been a long time since I'd noticed anything charming, and so my charm radar was a little rusty.

But in other circumstances that didn't involve running for my life from people who might be chasing me down right now, maybe the bridge would melt my workaholic, traumatized, terrified little heart.

But right now, it just looked dangerous, because that was all my mind could see.

Danger.

Danger.

Danger.

I was fully exhausted from all the possible danger moments in the last sixteen hours, none of which had actually been dangerous, but vigilance was not standing down.

Of additional concern was the fact that I'd expected this to be a wee little seasonal island.

It was not.

It was a full, town-sized island. The coastline stretched off to the right. Far to the left. And along with all the trees, beach, and cliffs, I could see a cute town center, houses, and a big, central dock large enough for a ferry boat.

There was a small cabin beside the bridge, on the mainland side. On the front porch, two gray-haired, grizzled men were sitting in Adirondack chairs. Were they doing needlepoint? It looked like they were. A massive, shaggy tan dog was snoozing on the grass in the shade of the shed, a bowl of water beside him.

One of the men noticed my truck, set aside his canvas, then stood up and strode toward me with more pep than I'd expected. He was wearing jeans, old sneakers, and a faded ball cap. His brown skin sparkled with wrinkles, and his face was framed by a neatly trimmed gray beard and salt-and-pepper brows.

He waved at me, and, by sheer force of will, I convinced my finger to hit the button to roll down the window.

"Afternoon," he said, giving me a big grin that made his brown eyes crinkle up. "My name's Bernie Ward. Welcome to Blueberry Island. Been the bridge keeper for forty-three years." He spoke with the leisurely drawl of a man who had all the time in the world.

I was pretty sure I hadn't been leisurely since I was born. My nervous system was having a panic attack at how slowly he seemed to exist.

But I needed to play the part of an ex-lawyer who had had a cathartic awakening and become an entirely new person, so I managed a bright smile that definitely didn't go to my tired, blood-shot eyes. "Hello," I said ebulliently. "My name is Evie Montgomery. I just bought an ice cream store in town."

His bushy brows climbed his well-seasoned forehead, disappearing under his cap. "Rippy Mama's?"

I stared at him. "What?"

"There's only one ice cream shop in town. Rippy Mama's." He winked at me.

Rippy Mama's was the name of my ice cream store? That sounded unhinged. Sassy. Interfering. Badass.

Who was the original Rippy Mama? Those were queen-bee vibes. A woman no one wanted to cross, for sure. And since I owned the store…did that make me Rippy Mama now?

I kinda thought it did.

Well, huh.

Did I love that?

I might. I really might.

“Yep,” I said. “Rippy Mama’s. I’m so excited.”

Lie. I wanted to eat ice cream, not sell it. But since I had purchased Rippy Mama’s, I was going to eat a lot of it. “Is Rippy Mama’s ice cream good?”

“Hell, yeah, it is.” Bernie let out a long whistle of appreciation. “Best in the entire state, but don’t tell Hattie I said that. She’ll show up here and straighten me out, and no one wants that.”

I blinked. “Hattie? As in Hattie’s Café Ice Cream? That’s the best ice cream ever.”

“Hattie Lawless, yeah. She’s about an hour and a half from here. Rippy Mama’s beats out Hattie’s, but next time Hattie’s in town, you can tell her that she’s better. She’ll appreciate that.”

I blinked. “Hattie comes to town?” What was even happening? Was this magic land? Hattie visited the island sometimes? And Bernie knew her? And her last name was Lawless? I felt like I’d just walked into the inner circle of ice cream royalty.

“Harvey!” Bernie bellowed. “This is Evie Montgomery. She bought Fiona’s store. Evie, this is Harvey Haskell. His wife and mine were best friends, and we’re keeping up the tradition.”

Oh, my. That was incredibly sweet. They were needlepointing together because their wives used to do that? I was in love.

Harvey toasted me with his needlepoint canvas. “Welcome to the island, Evie! Glad to have ya. I’m the town locksmith, so if you need any locks changed, let me know.”

“Thanks! Nice to meet you.” I felt the genuine warmth of both men, and the fear inside me began to settle a little more. I had space to focus on the image I needed to project. “I’ve wanted to own an ice cream store forever, and I finally did it.” I held out my hand for a fist bump.

Bernie didn’t seem to care if I was lying or not. He just widened his smile and fist-bumped me right back. “Well, that’s fantastic news. Fiona ran that store for almost forty years until her last breath, and she’d be downright tickled to know that a gal with purple hair had taken over.”

Oh. I totally forgot I’d dyed my hair purple at a truck stop a couple hours ago. “Fiona is an awesome name. She sounds like a badass.”

He grinned. “Oh, you have no idea. She terrorized this town for decades.”

Terrorized? My smile faltered. “Great. I love terror-inducing women.” Terror was exactly the vibe I’d been hoping to find when I’d bought the place. Yay for plans working out so well. “Is she the original Rippy Mama?”

Bernie snorted. “Fiona was the original everything,” he said. “Shirley will fill you in. She’s running the shop for you,” he continued. “Fiona made her promise, and no one breaks a promise to Fiona.”

I squinted at him, my tired brain trying to process what he was saying. “Who is Shirley? And what do you mean, she’s been running the shop? You mean Rippy Mama’s?”

“Oh, you’re in for a treat with Shirley. Last name is Kincaid.” Bernie chuckled, a deep, belly laugh that sounded so authentic that it made me almost wish I still knew how to laugh. “Shirley’s been running Rippy Mama’s since Fiona passed. We knew the shop would find its new owner at some point. We can’t hand you a dead business, can we?”

I blinked. “Um…” I’d actually been kind of counting on a business that was at least taking a long nap.

“She opened at eleven,” Bernie continued. “She’ll get you up to speed.”

“What?” I had to run the store today? I’d been planning on taking weeks, maybe months to rehab my life before opening the store. Or maybe never. “But—”

“I’ll let her know you’re on the way. She’ll be thrilled.” Bernie dismissed my protests with effortless efficiency, turning away and shooing me on.

I wasn’t quite ready to go. “Um, Bernie? How big is Blueberry Island?”

He rubbed his jaw for a moment while he considered the answer. “About forty square miles.”

Forty miles. Where was my cute little seasonal island where I could disappear? “Wow. It’s big. How fun.”

He beamed at me with evident pride. “Sure is. The island was losing population a few decades ago, but Fiona got us back on track. We’ve got a sizable year-round population, and a big tourist business. Plenty of folks buying ice cream.”

I flexed my hands on my steering wheel, feeling panic start to build at the idea of so many people. “Fiona did it? How?”

“Back when she was Town Manager—” His gaze shifted to his right, and his smile faded. “You have a good day now, Evie.” Then he headed toward the back of my truck, fully dismissing me.

I glanced in my rearview mirror to see where he was going, and then I froze. A big, black pickup truck was right behind me, and a bearded man in sunglasses and a black ball cap was leaning out the window toward Bernie.

Had he followed me? It was too soon. I didn’t have enough functioning coping mechanisms to handle the FBI, anyone from Graves & Stone or, heaven forbid, some freaking organized crime baddie.

My fingers curled over the steering wheel, gripping the worn vinyl with rising panic.

The man said something, and Bernie’s smile vanished. His dog bolted to his feet, staring at the pickup truck with a stiff tail, the body language of a dog on alert.

Oh, man. Oh, man. Oh, man.

I stared into the rearview mirror, fixated on the interaction, as I watched Bernie draw back his shoulders and clench his fists.

Just when I was ready to go into full-on panic, Bernie stepped back and waved him on.

The truck immediately pulled out and sped past me, bouncing over the boards on the bridge. I caught a glimpse of ragged red hair and a navy-blue sweatshirt as he passed me, and the name on the side of the truck said something about construction, and then he was gone.

I jumped out of my truck. “Who was that? Is everything okay?”

Bernie nodded, a slight drip of perspiration sliding down his temple. “Yep. Just one of the Wilson boys.”

Wilson boys? “So, he was local?”

“Yep. The family’s got a bad rap, but don’t you listen to that nonsense.”

“Liar,” Harvey shouted. “Bernie has a soft spot for the Wilsons, but they’re trouble. You watch yourself around them, Evie!”

Oh, yay. Local residents who were trouble. Exactly what I was hoping for.

Bernie sighed. “See? Bad reputation. Make your own choices, Evie. Never follow the crowd just because they tell you to.”

“Never listen to an old man just because he likes to talk your ear off,” Harvey hollered.

I almost started laughing at the exchange. How cute were they? “You’re the people expert, then?” I asked Bernie.

“That I am.” Bernie tipped his hat back. “Not many folks come over this bridge that I don’t know,” he said. “Even the tourists come back year after year.” He cocked his head, his eyes becoming shrewd as he took in my wide stance. “You all right, Evie?”

I realized I was clenching my fists. Whoops. I managed a smile. “Yes, great. Just wanted to make sure you were okay.” I relaxed my hands and shook out my arms, trying to release the tension.

“Well, thanks for that. I appreciate it, but I got it covered.” He studied me, and I felt like he was using his several centuries of life to unravel all my secrets. “You worried about someone coming after you?”

I blinked. “What? No. Hah.” Dammit. My voice cracked on the “Hah.” I cleared my throat and tried again. “Hah, hah.”

He raised his brows. “No one gets on the island without me knowing about it, so if you need me to watch for someone, just say the word.”

Wow. I could tell he meant it. How sweet was that? But I wasn’t going to tangle him up in my life. “I was thinking of getting a cat,” I blurted out, trying to change the subject. “Are there any cat shelters on the island?”

His eyes were still assessing me. “Nope, but Fiona’s cat hasn’t moved out. She’ll be happy to have you.”

“She has a cat? *I* have a cat?” I didn’t want a cat. I’d just panicked. Where was my cool-as-a-cucumber lawyer persona? Vanished in an instant after a lifetime of curating.

“Yep.” He chuckled. “Good luck with that one.” Bernie waved me on. “Get on with you, Evie. You’ve got a store to run. Welcome to the island.”

He wandered back to his shed, patted his dog, then eased down into the blue chair. He picked up a needlepoint canvas and sat beside Harvey. The dog gave him a tail wag and a snuggle, then all three of them settled back down like they were claiming that little spot of shade for their own oasis.

The guardian of the island was an old man doing needlepoint by the bridge?

Unexpected. And adorable.

But Bernie also had an edge to him. He’d try to protect me if someone came looking for me…which worried me.

What chance would Bernie have against the FBI or worse?

Had Bernie already become the leverage that Agent Straus had been so quick to point out I didn’t have? No friends, no family, no weak spots.

I looked at Bernie and realized that I had to be extremely careful in my new life.

No friends. No points of leverage.

Just me, hot fudge, a cat, and a store called Rippy Mama’s.

And, apparently, a woman named Shirley who was running my new shop.

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CHAPTER 3

As I pulled up to Rippy Mama's, I realized I'd vastly underestimated the ability of small-town shenanigans to cause mayhem, chaos, and disruption.

The ice cream store that I'd thought had been collecting dust for the last few months was indeed open.

Not just open.

It was summer vacation pandemonium.

Lavender picnic benches overpacked with giggling teenagers.

Little kids tearing around, ice cream flying.

Parents in full pursuit.

Two moms placating their screaming toddler with a banana split.

Several dogs enjoying splattered ice cream and fresh bowls of water.

One older woman even had a leashed cat on the bench beside her, and they were sharing a cone.

A pink Rippy Mama's flag was whipping in the ocean breeze, sporting a caricature of a blue-eyed, purple cow licking a triple-scoop ice cream cone with sprinkles and a cherry. The cow looked like it had enough sass to bring down the entire street with one sneeze.

The building was a little dated, and the paint was faded and chipped, but I liked the gray shingles and pale blue shutters. It looked like a Blueberry

Island legacy that had been selling ice cream for forty years, and it had the memories to prove it.

It wasn't my home, but the little second floor deck for the apartment I planned to live in looked like it might have a view of the sunset. I could almost see myself sitting out there, rebuilding my soul with some hot fudge and a magical evening sky.

Not a modern condo in the city, but maybe not so bad to live in for a little bit.

Except for all the people downstairs. How easy was it going to be to be antisocial and off-grid with all those customers? I'd bought a store that was closed. And it was clearly not.

Based on what Bernie had said, the past owner, Fiona, had fully orchestrated that from the beyond.

With a sigh of both dread and deep, lasting admiration for Fiona, I drove down the alley next to the building and parked in the two-car driveway, beside a hefty man in jeans and a black jacket unloading glass milk bottles from a Stone Berry Dairy truck. He looked to be around mid-thirties, maybe a little more or a little less.

I pulled up next to him and hopped out. "Um, hello?"

He jumped and spun around to face me, his hands up like he was protecting himself, his eyes wide with such unmitigated horror that I leapt back.

"What? What is it?" I asked quickly, looking around, but all I saw were bottles of milk, a garbage can, and a few bushes and grass. There was a low fence between my driveway and the lot next door, but that back yard was empty as well. A bit overgrown, but not enough to hide anything nefarious.

The milkman stared at me in shock for a split second, then seemed to register that I was the one who'd said hello, and he dropped his hands. "Nothing," he said gruffly, shooting a wary look over my shoulder. "My mistake."

I followed his glance, but saw nothing untoward lurking behind me. Besides, this was Blueberry Island, where the biggest drama was probably whether the library lemonade stand should be under the oak tree or the maple tree.

Or that's what I was hoping.

I didn't want to be here, but I did want a no-drama life right now.

"Are those for Rippy Mama's?" I eyed the growing number of crates on the dolly with rising suspicion.

"Yup." He loaded another one on there.

I put my hands on my hips. I was used to managing conflict in my past life. I could handle a small-town milkman. "Who ordered them? Shirley?" I tossed out her name like I knew her, because I could fake it with the best.

"Standing order." He got back in the truck and got a crate of heavy cream.

"By who?"

He set the crate of cream on the dolly and hopped down. "Fiona Prescott."

Fiona was managing my new life from the grave, and I didn't even know her. I was too impressed to be annoyed. I admired strong women who knew what they wanted, so go Fiona. "Well, I bought Rippy Mama's this morning. It's my store now." I'd printed all the paperwork before I'd left my condo, and it was in the safe in my truck.

He paused. "You own it?"

"I do. My name is Evie Montgomery."

He smiled then, a genuine smile of warmth. "Great. Welcome to Blueberry Island, Evie. Fiona was a legend." He held out his hand. "I'm Junior. I own the dairy. My family has been delivering milk on Blueberry Island for over a hundred years."

I shook his hand. "Wow." That was amazing. "That's quite a legacy."

“Happy cows make great milk, and we produce the best milk around,” he said with unabashed pride. “It’ll cost you, but my cows smile themselves to sleep every night, so no one minds.”

My heart went a little mushy with how he talked about the cows. If I were a farm animal, I think Junior would be the one I’d want to live with. “Works for me. I’m all about happy animals.”

“Great.” He pulled out a piece of paper. “Here’s the bill. Remember, I warned you.”

“The bill?” There was enough milk and cream on his dolly to feed the entire island for weeks. “I don’t need all this milk and cream. I’m not opening Rippy Mama’s yet.”

He shot me an amused look. “You’re not opening it?” He laughed softly. “Yeah, good luck with that. Fiona’s spirit will never let that happen.” He grabbed the handle of the dolly and began wheeling it into the store.

“But—”

“No buts, Evie. You belong to Blueberry Island now. In fact, I have an extra Stone Berry Dairy hat in my truck. You can have it. Everyone cool has one.” Then he winked at me and disappeared inside.

I belonged to Blueberry Island? The thought made me laugh. I was only here to save my life, not to become entangled in the fabric of small-town society. But it did feel sort of nice in theory. Belonging anywhere wasn’t my forte.

I was smiling when I looked down at the bill, then whistled at the amount. Apparently, no one had been paying the milk bill since Fiona’s demise, or maybe for the entire decade before that.

After years of selling my soul into organized crime legal work (yeah, oops), I had plenty of money to pay even an exorbitant milk bill, but investing in a store I didn’t want to own or open was not how I’d envisioned my peaceful foray into a fake new life.

With a sigh, I shoved the bill in my pocket and followed Junior into the back entrance to Rippy Mama's.

The minute I stepped inside, I knew I had a problem.

I could see to the front of the store, and a woman I assumed was Shirley was running the front counter like it was her personal playground. She was a gray-haired fire-starter in polka-dotted leggings, a neon yellow blouse with ruffles down the back, and a pink ball cap with the Rippy Mama cow on the front of it.

I suspected my plan to keep that store closed was in big trouble. Shirley looked like a woman who had spent many decades deciding that the only person who got to tell her what to do was Shirley.

To my right was the kitchen. I glanced over and saw vats of ice cream churning in a massive glassed-in freezer. Along the back wall were towers of finished ice cream bins lined up.

Holy cow. Ice cream was being made right there, right then. In front of me.

I'd concocted plenty of quarts of ice cream in my kitchen, but this was the real deal.

So. Much. Ice. Cream.

Waiting for people.

Waiting for me.

Thick bars of fudge were on the wooden counter, half chopped up, ready to go into the ice cream base.

The scent of freshly baked waffle cone wrapped around me like a hug.

This kitchen was a fairyland for an ice cream lover.

There was enough ice cream in that freezer to feed me for at least a year. I was definitely going to close the store, and then set myself up in that ice cream oasis. That would solidify my new reputation as off my rocker, but in my heart, nothing would be more right than moving in with ice cream.

Junior uttered an oath, jerking my attention off my new happy place, as he almost dropped a crate of milk bottles. He saw me looking, and he shot me a friendly, sheepish grin. “Just a little off today,” he said, with endearing honesty. “But I haven’t dropped a bottle in years. No need to worry.”

I smiled back, relaxing slightly at his friendliness. “Good. That crate would have made a mess.”

He hefted it up and put it on the top shelf in the walk-in fridge. “No need for a mess.”

“At least not one that interferes with making ice cream,” I agreed.

He raised his brows. “You like ice cream?”

Thanks to my ice-cream high, all I could do was beam radiantly at him. “It’s my favorite thing in the whole world to eat.”

“That’s good to hear.” He leaned on the shelf. “I heard Fiona turning over in her grave when you said you weren’t going to open Rippy Mama’s. Didn’t realize you were joking.”

Oh…my radiance poofed away. “Well—” I stopped. I had no words.

His smile faded as he realized that I hadn’t been joking after all. “I hope you change your mind, Evie. Some institutions are meant to last forever, and Rippy Mama’s is one of them.” He turned away and went back to unloading the milk and cream.

I stood there for a moment, guilt creeping its dastardly way into my heart.

No. It was fine. I was on the run for my life. I didn’t owe ice cream to a cow-lover who delivered milk, or to anyone else on Blueberry Island.

Including Shirley.

Who I apparently was going to have to pry out of my store if I wanted any chance at keeping it closed.

As Junior pushed his empty dolly past me to the driveway, I folded my arms across my chest, leaned against the doorframe, and waited for Shirley to finish up with the last customer. She was bold, loud, funny, and

unstoppable. She knew everyone's name, every flavor of ice cream, and owned that register like she'd been doing it for years.

I wondered if she knew I'd bought the store. The real estate agent was supposed to meet me here shortly with the deed and the keys, but it wouldn't surprise me if Shirley had them already, locked in her bra.

"Good luck in the softball game," Shirley shouted, waving at the little group as they headed out to the picnic tables. The moment they were out the door, she spun around to face me, hands on her hips, chin up, a woman about to attack.

"Whoa." I held up my hands in the universal sign for peace. "You must be Shirley." She'd apparently known the instant I'd slid my big toe past the threshold of the back door, but she hadn't given a single hint.

She was good. I was impressed.

She didn't acknowledge my friendly greeting. "Why are you in my kitchen?"

"Because it's my kitchen."

"Yours?"

"Mine," I confirmed.

"Huh." She cocked her head, studying me.

I cocked my head, studying her right back.

"I heard about you," she said finally.

"And I heard about you," I replied.

"What did you hear?" she asked.

"That you're running my store because you promised Fiona." I paused. "What did you hear about me?"

"That you bought Rippy Mama's for cash in the middle of the night without asking any questions about it or even seeing it." She narrowed her eyes. "I don't like that. Fiona made it very clear that her shop had to go to someone who cared about it. I'm not pleased that you were able to buy it without meeting me first."

Well, my plan to avoid making friends was going to go just fine with Shirley, apparently. “It’s my lifelong dream to run an ice cream shop,” I said.

She stared at me.

I smiled.

Then she burst out laughing. “You are such a terrible liar. How are you so bad at lying?” She tossed a blue towel over her shoulder and leaned against the counter. “I like the hair, though.”

Oh. I’d forgotten my purple hair again. I wanted to dye it back. I was so not a purple hair person. “Thank you, and I’m a great liar.”

“You’re not.”

“I am. Usually. I’m just having a nervous breakdown, and I’ve lost my edge.”

Her eyes brightened. “A nervous breakdown? That’s fun. All sorts of good life changes happen when you have a breakdown.”

“Like buying an ice cream store in the middle of the night without ever seeing it?”

“Exactly like that! I admire the reason, and I shall refrain from driving you out of town until I get to know you better.”

“I get a chance to stay in town and prove my worthiness?” I’d spent the last eight years proving myself. How fun that I got to do it again, simply to be able to live in the building I’d purchased. Yay for small towns.

“A very small chance, but yes.” She stuck her hand out, apparently deciding that I was deserving of at least a wee bit of friendliness. “Shirley Kincaid. Welcome to Blueberry Island, Evie.”

I shook her hand, surprised by how strong her grip was. “Thanks, Shirley.” I glanced at the front door of the shop. “So—”

Her eyes narrowed. “Bernie said you weren’t planning to be open today. I’m going to have to overrule you. It’s a hot day. People expect ice cream.”

I bit my lip to keep from grinning. She was so bold it almost made me laugh. “You’re going to overrule me?”

“Yes.” She didn’t bother to justify herself, and I admired that immensely.

I opened my mouth, and then closed it again, honestly not sure how to handle this. If I was going to live here, I didn’t want to make enemies. But at the same time, it was literally my store.

I paused for a moment. “Look, Shirley, I’m in the middle of a personal crisis. I really need a few days to get organized before running the store.” I paused, then glanced at the door as a trio of teenagers wandered in, chatting and laughing. “I can’t handle this right now.”

As I said it, I realized that it sounded like the real me, how I would react if the FBI had cornered me last night and I was making a run for my life.

Not like someone who actually wanted to run an ice cream store.

Dang it. I was blowing it already. I had to do better, because I knew they would come check on me.

Shirley’s face softened, and I knew she’d heard the edge beneath my words, the truth that I didn’t want to admit. “I got it covered, Evie. You go move your stuff upstairs. I’ll handle the store this afternoon.”

My stuff? The three bags I’d bought from Walmart on my drive, in and out in less than fifteen minutes?

I took a deep breath.

No, I was good. Excited to be here and start my dream life. “You know what?” I said brightly. “That sounds great. I’m honestly super pumped to get the store going. Just tired from the drive. That would be amazing if you’d run it today, and then maybe show me the ropes tomorrow?”

She stared at me. “Why are you such a bad liar?”

“I’m not lying.” I pushed urgency in my voice.

After a long moment, Shirley’s eyes filled with understanding. “Right then,” she said, watching me with too much wisdom. “I’ll take over and

then meet you upstairs after I close. I'll take you over to the house later, if you want."

I blinked. "What house?"

Shirley paused. "The store comes with a house."

"You mean the apartment upstairs?"

"No. Fiona had a house. It comes with the store. You didn't know that?"

A house? I'd never owned a house. I'd been a city girl my whole life. I was a lawyer, and yet I had barely read the contract. Too busy jumping at every little sound, waiting for a cement block to appear around my ankles for harbor-tossing. "No. Does it have a yard I have to take care of?" I was getting way over my head with this new life. What happened to "hide on a random island for a few months?"

Shirley laughed softly. "Don't you mean, 'Yay! A house! I can't wait!'"

I cleared my throat. "Yep. That's exactly what I meant."

"Great. You'll need a positive attitude when you see it. Now go unpack, Evie. I have customers to take care of." She patted my arm and then gave me a little shove. "We'll talk later."

She turned away, leaving me standing in the doorway, feeling completely railroaded. For the last eight years, I'd been the woman who owned the room. I'd fought for respect and competence, and yet, I was floundering in this small town.

Shirley looked over at me. "Go!"

I threw up my hands. "I'm going!" I headed back to my truck, my mind whirling. I could do this. I could pull myself together. I could handle this—

I stepped outside and saw the Stone Berry Dairy truck was still there with the back open, but I didn't see Junior anywhere.

I sighed and trotted down the stairs. As I rounded the dairy truck, I saw the passenger door of my truck was open and Junior's legs were sticking out the door…where my safe was.

The cow guardian was a thief?

“Hey!” I raced over to my truck and launched myself at him, grabbed his back to pull him out, but my hand slammed around something hard. “Ow!” I jerked my hand back and then stared in stunned horror.

Junior was sprawled across the seat…with a knife lodged in his back.

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CHAPTER 4

"SHIRLEY!" I tripped on the top step and sprawled my way across the back hall of the ice cream shop. "Where's the phone? We need to call 911!"

She peered around the doorframe at me, an ice cream scoop in her hand. "Why are you so dramatic?"

I scrambled to my feet. "Because Junior is in my truck with a knife in his back!"

Her eyes widened, then she swore under her breath. "I swear to the stars above, this has to be Fiona's fault. That woman never makes life easy." She looked over her shoulder. "I'm going on break," she shouted into the store.

I spun around, looking for the landline, but I didn't see one.

Shirley marched briskly toward the back door. "Let's see what's really going on."

"You think I don't know what it looks like when a man has a knife in his back?"

"I think you already explained you had a nervous breakdown, so I'm just confirming that it's not actually a butterfly basking in the sun." She was out the door and into the driveway before I could stop her.

"I know what a knife looks like!" I yelled after her as I looked around one more time for a phone. Was there no phone? Dammit. Served me right for being too scared to buy a new one on my frantic flight from my old life.

I sprinted out the back door as Shirley reached the passenger door of my truck. “Do you have a cell phone?”

Ignoring my question, she put her hands on her hips as she faced the interior of my truck. “Well, by all that’s chocolate and fudgy, this is not what I was expecting to see today.”

I ran up beside her, and sadly, Junior was still there, the black handle of the knife still in his back. “See?”

“Yep. That’s no butterfly.” With a sigh, Shirley pulled out her phone and called, reporting him. She looked over at me. “Is he still alive?”

I widened my eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Check for a pulse.”

“You check for a pulse.” I was very good at being a tough lawyer, but apparently, my bravado did not extend to possible dead bodies.

“It’s your truck. Plus, checking for a pulse gives a reason for your fingerprints to be on him.”

I stared at her. “I didn’t kill him!”

“So he is dead, then? How do you know?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” I inched past Junior, trying not to look at him as I pressed my fingers to his neck. His skin was warm, and his eyes were closed. He was just napping. No dead body here. “No pulse.”

“How sure are you?”

I rolled my eyes, but moved my fingers around, in case I hadn’t hit the right spot. “Still nothing.” I was so glad he had a black shirt on and the interior of my truck was black. If he was bleeding, I couldn’t see it, so I was fully not going to process this little situation.

What had happened? He’d been jumpy. He’d talked about cows. And now he’d been stabbed?

“We can’t find a pulse,” she said into the phone, “so maybe dead. Thanks!” She hung up. “Help is on the way, but the only ambulance is on the mainland, so it will be a few minutes.”

She parked her phone in her pocket and leaned over to peer at him. “At least he looks happy. Probably a good way to go, right? A little poke in the back that you don’t see coming. Junior was a good man. Glad he died happy.”

I gaped at her. “A poke in the back? He was stabbed.”

“In your truck, which is an interesting little fact.” She looked over at me. “Maybe the person who stabbed him thought it was you.”

Her words slammed into me so fast that I lost my breath. My legs gave out, and I went down onto the dirt driveway, bracing myself on my hands. “Oh, God.”

“Whoa.” Shirley crouched beside me. “I was making a joke. Levity is important in times like this.”

I turned my head enough to look at her. “It was super funny.”

Her eyes widened at whatever she saw on my face. “Girl, are you in trouble?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

She studied me shrewdly. “Enough that it was possible my joke was actually a clairvoyant truth?”

“Yeah. I guess. It’s possible. Or I’m paranoid. Or both.” I flexed my fingers in the dirt, trying to ground myself.

“Wow.” She grinned and clapped me on the shoulder, nearly knocking me over. “Well, this is great! Life has been getting boring since Fiona found better things to do.”

I sat down as she stood up. “It’s not great. It’s traumatic and dangerous and—”

“Fun!” She put her arms up to the sky. “Fiona, thank you for sending me your replacement. I’ll take good care of her!”

I stared at her, dread sinking in my belly. “Are you insane?”

“Aren’t we all, on some level?” She walked over and eyed Junior again. “So, it was possible that an assassin thought this two-hundred-fifty-pound

behemoth of a man was you.”

I let out a breath. That was unlikely, right? “I guess it’s possible,” I conceded, feeling a little calmer. “But I would think most decent assassins would be more discerning than that.”

“Agreed.” She drummed her fingers on the door frame, still studying Junior. “What if the assassin knew it was your truck, and decided it was a great opportunity to send you a message? That might be more reasonable.”

And the panic was back. “That’s a lovely thought. Thanks for that. I appreciate it.”

Shirley leaned over Junior. “Is that a safe his hand is on?”

My safe! “Yes. Is it open? Did he get anything?” I leaned past her, trying to see the floorboards but Junior was substantial, and Shirley was immovable.

“No, the safe isn’t open,” she reassured me, “but its presence does make one wonder about yet another option.”

Not open.

Relief flooded me. It was so stressful to have all that cash in my truck. “Junior was pretty jumpy when I arrived. Maybe someone was stalking him even before he went inside.” Not great for him, but it definitely made my panic ease to remember that his death most likely had absolutely nothing to do with me.

Shirley glanced at me. “Any witnesses?”

I paused. “I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking about that at the time.”

“So, no proof, which means the final possibility is that he was robbing you, and you caught him mid-theft.” She shook her head at me. “That’s not a good defense, Evie. You can’t stab someone for trying to steal your safe.”

I threw up my hands. “I didn’t stab him!”

She raised her brows skeptically. “Did you remember to clean your prints off the knife?”

I stared at her, suddenly remembering that my hand had slammed into the knife handle. “Oh, no.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and she ran over to me, grabbed my arm, and dragged me away. “Are your prints on the knife?” she whispered. “I was kidding.”

I looked back at my truck, my heart pounding. “I saw him in the truck, and I panicked over my safe, so I lunged for him and grabbed for the back of his shirt. My hand closed around the handle.”

She whipped me around so I was facing her, searching my face. “You grabbed the knife? You want me to believe you didn’t notice a knife sticking out of his back and just happened to grab the handle instead of his shirt?”

I held out my hand defensively. “His shirt is black. The handle’s black. I didn’t even see it. I wasn’t thinking, ‘Wait, I better make sure there isn’t a knife in his back.’ I just lunged for his shirt. That’s reasonable!”

“Is it?” She put her hands on her hips and stared deeply into my eyes like she was about to expose every secret I’d ever had. “Evie Montgomery, did you stab Junior?”

“No!” My hands were shaking now. “I swear I didn’t. I don’t even know him.”

She looked down at my trembling hands, searched my face, and then nodded. “Okay. I believe you.”

My knees suddenly felt weak again. “Thank you,” I whispered. After Leah’s bestie betrayal, having someone in my corner was enough to make me get a little emotional.

She patted my cheek. “I’m an outstanding judge of character, and I have full faith that Fiona didn’t die just so a bad seed could take over her life.”

What? “I’m not taking over her life—”

She interrupted me. “Did you leave prints on the knife?”

I felt myself pale. “I don’t know! I freaked out and ran inside!” Sudden alarm gripped me. If my prints were on there and I got accused of murder, then the FBI and Graves & Stone could both use that as leverage to get me to do what they wanted.

Shirley, however, seemed unconcerned as she pulled a dish towel from the back of her leggings. “Well, then, we just need to clean that knife off just in case—”

But just as she spoke, a police SUV drove around the corner of the building and careened to a stop in front of us, lights flashing.

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CHAPTER 5

"THERE IS LITERALLY nothing convenient about that man," Shirley muttered as she shoved the towel into my hand. "Honestly."

"That man? Junior?" I mean, yes, I fully agreed that it wasn't convenient having him stabbed in my truck, but I did feel bad for him. I mean, I highly doubted that he'd planned it.

"Well, yes, Junior," Shirley acknowledged, "but I was talking about the police officer who just interrupted our crime scene management discussion. Deputy Ethan Shepard. He was Junior's fishing buddy. He'll be fired up about this incident. I'll distract him. You wipe off the knife."

I gripped the towel as I blinked against the flashing lights trying to blind me. "If he sees me wiping my prints off the knife, that won't be a good look for me."

"Neither are your prints on the murder weapon, my darling." She waved as the driver's door opened.

"I'll get disbarred if I tamper with a crime scene," I muttered under my breath. "And what if the killer's prints are on there?"

"Disbarred?" Shirley looked over at me. "You're a lawyer?"

She sounded both disgusted and disappointed, but I lifted my chin. "Yes."

She glared up at the sky. "Funny joke, Fiona. You know I hate lawyers."

I kind of did at the moment as well. “If it’s any consolation, I quit this morning.”

She shot me a look that had a little twinkle in her eyes. “I’ll have to think about it. Now smile for the friendly cop. Maybe he’ll think you’re adorable and not notice any of the obvious scenarios that would implicate you.”

Deputy Shepard got out of the SUV, and my heart sank. He was around mid-thirties, attractive, fit, and his dark brown eyes looked like he was entirely capable of coming to the same conclusions that Shirley had come to.

I’d been hoping for a very old, confused, local cop who had been on the job for at least a century. Not some capable person with a fully functioning mind.

He even looked like he had the enthusiasm to go the extra mile, especially when he found out it was his fishing pal with the knife in his back.

Yay.

“Hi, Shirley.” He shot her a smile that was both cocky and charming. “You called this in? A stabbing?”

“Good afternoon, Ethan,” she said cheerfully. “I did, indeed.” She hooked her thumb toward my truck. “He’s in there.”

Ethan glanced at me as he strode over to my truck. “You’re the new owner of Rippy Mama’s?”

Was there no way to fly under the radar in this town? “Yes. I found him.”

“Stick around.” Ethan leaned into my truck, then swore. His head popped back out. “It’s Junior.” Surprise and pain were etched on his face.

Ugh. I felt bad for him.

Shirley grimaced. “Yes. Sorry, Ethan. I know you guys were friends.”

He swore again and leaned into the truck, maybe taking Junior's pulse. Maybe robbing me. Maybe planting my DNA on the knife. Maybe crying at the loss of his friend.

So many possibilities.

Did I distrust law enforcement after Leah's surprise party for me? Why, yes. Yes, I did.

But Ethan was just a local cop who had to deal with his pal getting stabbed. This wasn't about me, and I needed to chill out. Maybe even have some sympathy for the local who had just lost one of his own.

Before I could run over and offer to hug it out with Ethan, an ambulance roared into the driveway, followed by an SUV with Sheriff on the side.

Wow. This was a lot more activity than I'd been planning for when I'd decided to move here.

I tried not to panic, but all the law enforcement was giving me the heebie-jeebies after my FBI party last night.

But when the sheriff climbed out, she had exactly the gray-haired, slouchy, slightly overmatched, easy-to-out-run vibe I'd been hoping for when Ethan had shown up instead. Okay, so that was better, right?

Except as she began to saunter across the dirt driveway, there was a slow, understated authority to the set of her shoulders. I had a sudden feeling that I was watching the arrival of a level of competence, intelligence, and power that I'd only dreamed of reaching someday. Her slouch and languid pace weren't incompetence. It was the vibe of a seasoned warrior who had seen it all and knew that death would wait for her until she was good and ready.

"Oh, Charlene's here," Shirley whispered. "Since she hired Ethan, she often sends him in her place. That's super helpful that she came. She always looks out for her girls." She raised her voice. "Good afternoon, Sheriff."

Charlene's gaze swiveled toward Shirley, and she shook her head once, like a mom chastising her wayward daughter. "Of course you're here.

Honestly, Shirley. I thought you'd stay out of trouble without Fiona to lead you astray."

"And betray Fiona's legacy?" Shirley said with a grin. "Never."

Charlene's gaze flickered to me. "This is Evie Montgomery? She's Fiona's legacy?"

Shirley tucked her hand around my elbow. "Yes and yes."

Charlene studied me with understated intensity as she kept walking toward the crime scene. "If you know what's good for you, Evie, you'll stay far away from Shirley." But there was an undercurrent of genuine warmth in her voice that made me think she actually meant the complete opposite.

As Charlene and Ethan descended upon my truck, Shirley drew me back, away from the kerfuffle. "Charlene's been the sheriff for almost fifty years," she whispered. "First female sheriff in a hundred miles. She's such a badass, but she wants to retire. She hired Ethan earlier this year to take her place when she's ready, but he's just way too enthusiastic about following the rules. It's annoying."

I watched Ethan and Charlene talking in low voices. She was so cool that I felt like a forest fire would part ways if she walked into it, and I could see the respect in Ethan's face as he listened to her. "The sheriff doesn't follow the rules? Isn't that bad?"

"Bad? It depends on the rules, my dear." Shirley patted my arm. "We're going to need to break you of that rule-abiding obsession, Evie. It's a good thing you quit your law job. That could get sticky."

Oh, man. "I really like rules."

"No, you don't. You've just been trained to obey them. There's a big difference." As she spoke, another ambulance showed up, plus a firetruck. It soon became very crowded and very overstimulating to my strung-out brain.

Over Ethan's protests, Charlene gave us permission to go into the store and close it down, but Ethan banned us from leaving the premises.

It was such a relief to get away from the chaos in the driveway, but it took us a bit of time to get all the onlookers out of the store. One guy was trying to film the action. Some lady wouldn't leave until she got her daughter's ice cream cake. A couple kids were having a temper tantrum about not getting ice cream, and there was general buzzing and whispering, because apparently, small towns were magical when it came to the rapid dissemination of high-octane news.

I tried to pay attention to who looked too interested, who looked not interested enough, who might have bloody hands (no one did, thankfully), and who tried to sneak away when they saw me looking, but there was simply too much chaos.

Thankfully, Shirley was a queen of efficiency, plowing through people like a hurricane.

But just when we got the last person out the front door, a woman in a neon green tank top, running shorts, and wrap-around sunglasses ducked past me and stepped inside. She looked about my age, and she carried a high energy that made me think she didn't need sleep or caffeine. Ever. "Shirley! What's going on? I hear someone got stabbed?"

Shirley put her hands on her hips. "Nora," she said firmly. "You can't be here."

"I was just running by, and I needed a snack." Nora had bright red hair, freckles, and a smile that I was pretty sure she used as a weapon. "Who's in back? Is that Deputy Shepard? The sheriff? An ambulance?"

Shirley pointed at the door. "Nora! You need to leave."

She ignored Shirley and spun to face me. "I'm Nora Fuery. You are?"

"Nora owns the *Blueberry Island Gazette*," Shirley interrupted. "She's fully untrustworthy with any secret."

Oh…boy. I needed to be careful with her, then.

Nora waved her hand dismissively. "Shirley exaggerates. I'm a vault when I make a promise." She held out her hand. "Are you the new owner of

Rippy Mama's? Lovely to meet you."

My first test. My first chance to be the new me. I beamed at her and shook her hand. "Evie Montgomery. Yes, I bought the store. I'm so excited! I love the island and the store. I'm so thrilled to be here."

Shirley rolled her eyes at me. "Bad liar," she mouthed.

Nora, however, lit up. "Wonderful. I'd love to write an article about you. Introduce you to the community. Do you have time for a quick interview right now?"

"She doesn't," Shirley said. "You know that there's drama in the parking lot—"

"Is there?" Nora shot back rapidly. "This is so fantastic," she said, beaming with enthusiasm. "We never get anything newsworthy on Blueberry Island."

"That's not true," Shirley said. "The bell tower burned down last year. That was drama."

Nora put her hands on her hips. "This is my island, Shirley. Don't I deserve to be the one to break the story? This is big! Do you really want someone from the mainland to write about it?"

Shirley gave a derisive snort. "It's not your island—"

Nora made a noise of frustration. "I meant, I *live* here, not like those cutthroat reporters on the mainland. Honestly, Shirley, you know what I meant."

I folded my arms across my chest as I listened to Nora negotiate with Shirley. Nora had a point about giving her the first chance at the story. Plus, always good to support local women-owned businesses.

But Shirley wouldn't bend.

"Ugh! You're impossible, Shirley." Nora held up her hands. "I'm going outside and around the back. Ethan won't stop me—" She stopped, stared at Shirley, and then they both burst out laughing.

“Okay, fine,” Nora said. “Ethan would rather handcuff me and throw me in the jail than let me stick my nose into police business. He’s like a giant, immovable, stump.” She angled her head. “Please let me sit in the kitchen and listen? Pretty please? I’ll make sure it’s good publicity for the store.”

Shirley shrugged, but her eyes were crackling with sass. “Not my store. It’s Evie’s.”

“Evie!” Nora spun toward me. “Can I sit in your kitchen? I can interview you while we eavesdrop.”

Okay, how would the new Evie handle this? “Nora, I’m new to town. I can’t have the police thinking I’m a problem. What if I decide to break the rules and sell margaritas without a liquor license?” Like I would ever do that. I spent my life making sure I did nothing illegal that could get me in trouble with my law license. The irony of my lifelong commitment to moral fortitude as a lawyer was not lost on me.

“Margaritas?” Shirley looked startled. “Did you just say margaritas?”

“I did. Why?” I looked suspiciously between them. “Why do you guys look so surprised?”

“Margaritas was Fiona’s favorite drink,” Shirley said. “Mine, too.”

Nora was staring at me. “You’re like Fiona reincarnated. That’s so creepy.”

I frowned. “I’m not Fiona—"

“No, but she sent you, and I’m beginning to see why.” Shirley was beaming with approval. “Fiona loved to skate around all the rules. And to do it with margaritas? It’s perfection.”

“Fiona didn’t just skate around the rules. She rewrote them,” Nora said, not even trying to hide her admiration. “She said a firecracker would take over her store, but I didn’t know she’d actually make it happen. You and I definitely need to do an interview.”

I liked rules. I really did.

But this was my chance to be different. They were literally handing me an opportunity to be the new Evie. An interview was a great opportunity to show how much I was committed to my new life. I needed time to nail that interview and seed my identity crisis life-relaunch so anyone would believe it. “Tomorrow? I could meet you for breakfast?”

Nora beamed. “Perfect. I’ll meet you at Coco’s Coffee at nine?”

“Perfect.” I had no idea what Coco’s Coffee was, but it sounded like a good place to be at nine in the morning. “Now, you should probably head out. Ethan told us to clear the store, and I’m guessing he’s smart enough to notice you standing there.”

“I wish he’d see me,” Nora said with a dreamy sigh. “He’s like this delicious dessert that refuses to be served no matter what the guest list is.”

I had to turn my head to hide my smile. “You should tell him that,” I said.

“And feed his ego? Never. But that man is certainly a charmer. When he first came to town, all the ladies tried to win him over.”

I raised my brows. “Did anyone get him?”

Nora snorted. “A few delicious nights here and there, but he remains fully uncaught, not for lack of trying by half the town, though. Not me. I never follow a man. He’d have to win me over. If he decided to pursue me, I’d be fully on board with it, though. After I made him earn it, of course.” Nora pulled down her sunglasses. “I’m going to run down the driveway and see what I can discover before he throws me over his muscular shoulder and tosses me in the harbor.”

Shirley grinned. “You hope he’d toss you over his shoulder.”

“I do!” Nora agreed. “I really do.” She gave me a thumbs up. “See you tomorrow morning, Evie. Can’t wait to learn all your secrets!”

I gave her a fluttery wave. “Not all of them,” I shot back. “Only the good ones.”

“I love good secrets! Bye!” Nora slipped out the door, and I quickly locked it behind her before someone else could pop in.

“She seems interesting.” She was so different than all the women who worked at my old firm. Irreverent. Fun. Lighthearted. I liked her.

“She’s a pain in the butt,” Shirley said, but I heard the warmth in her voice. “No one reads the *Blueberry Island Gazette*, but she writes that thing every week and hands it out for free. She’s quite a funny writer.”

I raised my brows. “So no one reads it…except you, apparently?”

“I don’t read it. I absorb it through osmosis when it sits in the window of the store and takes up oxygen.” Shirley slapped her hand on the counter, startling me. “Okay, girl. Ethan will be in here any moment asking questions, so I gotta get mine in first. What the hell is your story? Tell me the high points. I need to know what we’re dealing with.”

Panic started to surge, but I clamped it down. I changed the subject instead. “Was anyone we just kicked out someone who Junior knew?”

Shirley eyed me, clearly noticing my evasion, but she rolled with it. “Evie, we live on an island, and Junior’s family has owned that dairy for decades. He knew pretty much everyone.”

“Okay.” I slid down the door and sat on the floor, bracing my hands on my knees. “Was anyone who just left an enemy?” I had to think. I had to problem-solve. I had to do something that made me feel like I had some semblance of control in my life that was cascading down around me. “Was Nora an enemy? What about the guy who was videoing? Or the lady with the red hat who didn’t want to leave?”

Shirley raised her brows. “You’re very excitable. It’s just a murder.”

I gaped at her. “Just a murder? He’s dead.”

“I know he’s dead. He was a good man. But life is too short to let things derail us. We’re still alive, right? It’s an insult to dead people everywhere if we decide to abandon all the adventures in life just because of a few bumps in the road.”

“A few bumps? That’s what this is?”

“Yep. Have some ice cream. It’ll remind you why life is worth living.” Shirley pulled a plastic-wrapped, chocolate chip cookie ice cream sandwich out of the freezer and frisbeed it across the store.

It hit me in the knee and bounced against a chair leg before coming to a stop by my foot.

I didn’t move to pick it up. I just closed my eyes and tried to pull myself together. Until the last twenty-four hours, I’d been the queen of crisis management. Now? One dead guy and one local reporter, and I was freaking out.

Just a murder. No big deal. It was fine. Just another day.

“Do you even like ice cream?” Shirley asked, her voice dripping with suspicion.

“I love it,” I whispered, my voice sounding raw and grating. “Peppermint with hot fudge is my favorite.”

“I can do that.” She got to work behind the counter, and I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, trying to slow my breathing.

I listened to the murmur of voices from the driveway, the ones from the sidewalk who were hoping we’d let them in, and the homey sounds of Shirley getting my ice cream together.

She was being nice to me. Too nice. I didn’t want her to pay for getting too close to me. “Shirley?”

“Yes.”

“I need to tell you something.” Even as I said it, a voice inside my head was screaming at me not to say it. But I had to warn her. I wasn’t a monster. Even if I had been hours from a lifelong contract with an arm of the mob, I wasn’t a bad person. And I guess I had to prove it to myself, because I didn’t like looking backwards at all the signs that I’d ignored.

Shirley was a good person. I owed it to her to keep her safe. What if Junior had been stabbed because of me? The possibility was mind-numbing.

“Can’t wait,” she said cheerfully. “Lay it on me.”

I pressed my lips together, then took a steadying breath. “It’s possible that spending time with me will put you in danger.” I opened my eyes to look at her as I spoke. Despite my best efforts to stay completely unattached in this town, I already liked her. “I don’t want you to get hurt or killed because you know me. I think you should walk out of the store and not come back.”

“Hurt or killed?” Her eyes widened and she froze mid-scoop. “Just because I know you?”

What had I become? “Yes, I’m so sorry, but—”

“This is fantastic!” A huge grin spread across her face, and she paused to shake the ice cream scoop at me. “Girl, I’ve been waiting for news like this. I’m so thrilled. Thank you for making me a part of your life.”

I sat up. “No, I’m serious—”

“Are you ever not serious?” She went back to scooping ice cream. “You seem like you have no sense of humor whatsoever, so the last thing I’d expect was you’d make a joke, especially since you suck at lying.”

“I have a sense of humor!”

“Do you?” She scooped a thick glob of hot fudge onto the peppermint ice cream. “Tell me one thing that’s funny. Just one.”

I stared at her, waiting for the sassy, delightful side of me that used to send my mom into spirals of hysterics…but my brain was empty.

Shirley’s brows went up expectantly.

God, the person I used to be was completely gone.

“I—” I stopped. I literally couldn’t think of a single funny thing. Not even a dumb joke. “The firm I just made partner for works for organized crime, so I quit in the middle of the night and faked a nervous breakdown so they wouldn’t follow me and kill me or make me come back and work for them, even though I know stuff that could get them into trouble.” I

blurted it out, the words spilling out desperately like a darkness that needed sunshine or it would die.

Oh…boy…that was so bad I'd just said that out loud.

Shirley froze, the hot fudge continuing to drop in delicious-looking glops onto the ice cream.

Had I really just unleashed a truth bomb that needed to stay hidden deep inside my traumatized little heart? I needed to switch directions fast. I laughed, a pathetic, shaky giggle that wouldn't fool anyone. "See? I'm funny. Hah hah. Joke."

She shook her head and went back to scooping hot fudge. "As I said, you're not funny at all."

Something boiled up inside me, something that wanted to be seen. To be heard. To be acknowledged. And I couldn't stop it. "What if I told you that the FBI cornered me last night and asked me to spy on the firm. They said if it got too hot, they'd hide me, but all of us knew that the odds were higher that the firm would catch on first and kill me. That's funny, right?"

Funny, because I certainly wasn't having some sort of self-sabotaging moment that would fast-track me to the bottom of the harbor.

"Nope. Not funny." She jammed a spoon in the ice cream and walked it across the store to me. "But you do need this."

"Thanks." I gratefully accepted the treat and dug my spoon into the gooey temptation.

She stood above me, her hands on her hips. "What's the rest of your little joke, Evie?"

I shrugged. "I faked a nervous breakdown and bought this place so that all of them would think I wasn't a danger and I wasn't worth their effort to harass." I took a bite and then closed my eyes. "Wow. This is incredible."

"It's Fiona's secret recipe, which you don't get unless I approve it." She pulled up a chair and eased herself down into it. "You suck at lying, so I

know you just unloaded the truth on me. That's what is in the safe? Cash, so you can lay low?"

Deep down, I was desperately glad Shirley believed me. I felt overwhelmed and alone, yanked out of my life into one that didn't fit me at all. "Yep. I left home with a trash bag, my wallet, and my keys. I traded in my car on the way here. I know they'll find me soon, so the only chance I have is if both groups think I'm too far gone to be useful or dangerous, and therefore not worth the bother."

Shirley was watching me intently. Not with worry. Not with compassion. But definitely with riveted interest. "Bad for you. You suck at lying."

"Apparently." I held up a dripping spoonful. "This is worth dying over though, so I feel like I made a good choice."

Shirley didn't smile. She looked thoughtful. "This incident with Junior will be in the papers, and not just the *Blueberry Island Gazette*, especially if you're a suspect. They could use that against you."

"Yep." I took another bite of ice cream and closed my eyes. "This is like my death row last meal. This is what I would have chosen, so at least I'm going out in style."

"Evie."

"Do you want the store? I can redo my will and leave it to you. Right now, I'm leaving everything to the dog shelter near my condo, but this ice cream needs to live on—"

"Evie!"

I didn't open my eyes. "The mint in this is sublime," I said dreamily, rolling the ice cream around on my tongue. "And the texture is so creamy, but not overwhelming. And the hot fudge becomes exactly the right amount of gooey as it cools—"

She yanked the ice cream out of my hand.

“Hey!” I lunged for it, but the sassy senior was too fast for me. “That’s just cruel.”

She was unruffled. “I like you. I’m bored with life since Fiona moved on. I’m not going to let you get carted off by your old firm or the feds.”

Her words made me feel a little emotional. It had been a very long time since anyone had tried to take care of me. Except Leah, who was trying to set me up as a spy, so she was the opposite of a warm spot in my heart.

“That’s so sweet of you,” I said, fully meaning it. “I’m very dangerous, though. You shouldn’t get involved with me. I would also appreciate it if you would forget everything I just told you, so that they’ll believe their secrets are locked in my unbreakable mind vault.”

“I’m a vault. It stays locked forever, a lot better than you locked it.” Shirley grinned and leaned in. “And I’m the one who’s dangerous.”

I stared at her, and then I smiled. “I can believe that.”

“Exactly.” She handed the ice cream back to me. “They’re going to find you. Soon, probably.”

“Yep.” I settled back against the door and took another spoonful. “I need to be believably unhinged, or I’m dead.”

“Well, honestly, I think you’re kind of dead then.”

I looked at her over the rim of my ice cream. “What does that mean?”

“You’re not nearly unhinged enough, my darling. When Ethan comes inside to interview you, you’re going to have to convince him that you’re really having a complete meltdown because his little FBI pals will ask him.”

Of course he had FBI pals. “He seems very competent.”

“And attractive. And charming.” She wiggled her brows at me. “I know. It goes against girl code to make a hot guy think she’s bat-shit crazy, but you gotta do it.”

“He’s attractive?” I said blandly. “I didn’t notice.”

Shirley waggled her finger at me. “Have I mentioned how sucky you are at lying?”

“Yep, but to be honest, I am having a bit of a breakdown. I’m usually very steady.” I pointed two fingers at my eyes, then at hers. “I can stare you right down and never crack.”

She grinned, her eyes sparkly. “Now you sound like you could be fun.”

“I used to be fun.” I took another bite, watching the action in the driveway through the open back door. Nora hadn’t come into view, so I was assuming she got cut off before she made it that far.

“You’ll definitely be on the short list of suspects,” Shirley said, following my gaze.

Ugh. “And that’s enough for my dark demon pursuers.”

“Yep.” She grinned. “You know what that means, don’t you?”

I thought about it, then looked over at her. “That we have to find the murderer superfast before my life becomes lethally interesting?” That sounded like everything I wanted no part of.

“Yep.” She raised her coffee, a wicked gleam in her eyes. “Let’s go hunt a murderer, Evie.”

Double ugh. “I’d rather sit on the floor and eat hot fudge.” I took another bite to prove my point.

“And wait for your dark past to come get you?”

I grimaced. “No.”

“So?”

I sighed. “Apparently, I have to fully commit to a meltdown, and then find a murderer with my new friend Shirley before my past life baddies hunt me down.”

Shirley beamed at me. “And before the killer realizes we’re looking for him and decides to kill you first.”

I stared at her. “Yay.”

She smiled wider. “Double yay.”

At least one of us meant it.

Then a shadow filled the back doorway, and Ethan headed toward me.

The game was on.

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CHAPTER 6

As I watched the charming, attractive Deputy Shepard work his predatory way toward me, his dark eyes fixed on me like he was going to dismantle my very soul in the next five minutes, I realized I had to make this really believable.

I had to be a former lawyer who walked away from a partnership because of an existential crisis, not because the firm was besties with the mob and the FBI wanted to get on my speed dial.

What would that Evie act like? What would she care about?

I didn't even know.

My only identity was workaholic lawyer, then traumatized woman-on-the-run.

Ice cream. She'd care about ice cream. Making friends. Quality of life. Peace in my heart. Meaning. Life purpose. Connecting to this small town and making it my forever home.

Ugh. Literally none of that was something I cared about. I liked being a lawyer, negotiating deals, and being feared and respected. Well, I did love ice cream, but just for eating. Not selling.

Deputy Shepard stepped into the front part of the store. "Shirley," he nodded at her. "Good to see you again."

She wiggled her fingers at him in a wave. "Is Junior dead?"

He sighed. “Yes. He’s gone.”

Oh…I heard the tiniest weight in his voice. That was super sucky for him. I felt bad.

He pulled out the chair beside Shirley and sat down next to her, facing me.

I was still on the floor eating ice cream. That was as good a place to start as any.

“Hi,” he said to me. “My name is Deputy Shepard. Can you tell me your name?”

“Evie Montgomery.” I took another bite, focusing on the delicious fudge instead of the panicked roaring in my ears. “New owner of Rippy Mama’s Ice Cream. Just arrived today. I met Bernie at the bridge. He was so nice. He has a dog. Does anyone know the dog’s name?” I rattled off the info, trying to sound just the slightest bit not-quite-okay. “I just met Nora, too. So now I know three people. Four actually, because Harvey was there.” I continued rattled off names, trying to sound at least somewhat incoherent. “Then that makes five, including you.” Six if you included Junior, but I didn’t want to think about that poor man.

“You found the victim?” His voice was gentle. Soft. Like I was some traumatized little fawn he had to tiptoe around.

Exactly like I’d intended.

Except…dammit. A fragile little fawn was exactly who I’d spent my life refusing to become.

I couldn’t step into this new life and have people think I was a little mouse afraid of a dust bunny. I mean, yes, right now I was terrified of everything, but I couldn’t take on that identity. The only identity I knew was being tough, fearless, and independent.

I’d fought hard to become her.

I didn’t want to give her up just to stay alive.

I literally didn’t know how to be. So, I didn’t commit. “I found the milk delivery guy,” I clarified, wanting to make it clear that I did not have a preexisting relationship with the man in my truck. “He said his name was Junior. If that’s who you are talking about, then, yes. I found him.”

Deputy Shepard cocked a brow at me. Wow. He really was attractive, in a stiff, lawyerly way. Which was my world, so he felt reassuringly familiar.

Familiar was bad.

I should not be comforted by that.

“Can you tell me about finding him?” he pressed.

I shrugged and leaned back against the door, eyeing him as suspiciously as I could. Did I look paranoid? That would be good, right? “I went outside, saw him in my truck, lunged at him to get him away from my safe, but my hand grabbed something hard instead of the shirt I expected. I pulled back, saw it was a knife, saw it was in his back, freaked out, and then ran inside to tell Shirley.” I had to make sure there was a reason for my prints to be on the knife.

I took another bite, knowing full well that he would want much more information than that.

“You grabbed the knife? With your bare hand?” He sounded startled.

Not surprising. It had been a stupid thing to do. “I didn’t notice it before I reached for him. Yes, that means my prints will be on the knife, but only because I thought he was stealing from me.”

“You stabbed him because you thought he was stealing from you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You know that’s not what I said.” Dammit. It figured he was good at interrogation. That was my job. I was the one who was good at it. “I didn’t stab him,” I said very clearly.

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “Did you see who did?”

I sighed. “No.”

“Did you see anyone else in the area? Anyone at all?”

I let out my breath. “No. But I wasn’t looking.”

“Huh.” He made a note on his phone. “What else?”

I needed to get this interview spiced up a bit. Crazy Evie needed to show up. “I think I fell running into the kitchen.”

“You did fall,” Shirley said. “I said you were being dramatic. Turns out, you weren’t.”

I pointed my spoon at her. “That was a little rude.”

Shirley shrugged. “No one would be surprised by me being rude.”

“Well, I was. It was a little upsetting—”

“Hey.” Ethan’s voice was calm, but firm, trying to redirect with efficiency. “Do you know Junior? Had you talked to him before?”

I paused before answering, taking my time to consider every word. “I just met him before I came inside.”

“What did you talk about?”

I shrugged. “Introductions. He was a little jumpy at first, but then relaxed. He gave me a bill. Told me he’d give me a Stone Berry Dairy hat because I belonged to the island now.”

Ethan considered that for a moment before he spoke. “Is that why there’s a Stone Berry hat in your front seat?”

I blinked. “There is?”

He nodded. “It’s brand new.”

“That’s why he was in my truck? He was leaving me a hat?” Weirdly, my throat got a little clogged. The last thing Junior had done before he died was to give me a free hat? That was so sweet. No wonder his cows went to bed happy.

Ethan didn’t seem touched by the gesture as I was, because he moved on. “What was he jumpy about? Did he say?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“What do you think he was worried about?”

“I don’t know.” I shifted restlessly under Ethan’s question assault.

I couldn’t shake my tension.

A man, a good guy from what I could tell, had been murdered in my truck. He'd been giving me a present, apparently right at the moment of his death. And now I was being hammered with questions.

It was normally my job to ask the questions, but I was too tense to pull myself together and shift the power dynamic. I couldn't stop thinking about Junior being dead. About whether I was next. About the hat. His cows. My mom. The fact that the cop interviewing me was friends with the man who'd been stabbed, even though he was keeping it professional, at least on the outside.

It was like everything was coalescing in my brain, and I couldn't even think anymore.

"Evie?" Ethan leaned toward me, his dark law-enforcement gaze drilling into me, just like Agent Straus had done. "Are you listening?"

"Are you sad he's dead?" I asked. "Shirley said you were friends with him."

His brows shot up, and something flickered in his eyes before he pulled himself together. But I saw his reaction. He was human. How could he not have an emotional response, right?

"Evie." His voice was cool and collected. "I need information. Let's focus."

I felt like my brain was going to explode.

Real Evie would stand up, go on the offensive, and reclaim control.

New Evie would have to do the exact opposite.

So I set my ice cream on the floor, balled my hands into fists, and then screamed.

Long. Loud. From deep inside my body.

Wow. That felt so good.

Shirley's eyes widened, and Ethan jerked upright. "Whoa. Are you all right?"

I sat up. “That is so cathartic. I’m doing that again.” I jumped to my feet, fisted my hands again, bent over, and screamed.

I heard feet running into the store, but I didn’t stop. I couldn’t stop. It was like a thousand years of emotions were ripping out of me and dragging my soul with it.

Tears began to trickle down my cheeks, and I screamed again. And again. I heard voices murmuring, but I didn’t care. The screams kept coming.

And coming.

Until finally…they didn’t.

I braced my hands on my knees, breathing heavily. My throat hurt. I was sweating. Tears were caked on my cheeks.

And I felt the best I’d felt in a very long time.

Like weight that had been locked around my throat since I could remember was suddenly gone. “Wow.” My voice was scratchy.

“You need some water?” Shirley asked.

I thought about it. “Tequila?” I didn’t drink hard liquor, but why not? It felt like it fit the moment.

“All we have in the store is vanilla extract. Do you want to chug that?”

“That sounds great.” I looked over at her, and I saw the sparkle in her eye.

It made me giggle. She chuckled. And then we both started laughing.

Ethan was standing beside Shirley, his brow wrinkled. “Ladies—”

Ladies. Ladies.

Even I knew not to call Shirley a lady.

Shirley met my gaze, and then she started laughing harder.

And suddenly, the giggles got us.

I started laughing so hard, I had to sit back down on the floor, and the tears started coming again.

“Hell,” Ethan plopped himself back into his chair. “We gotta wait this out.”

How did he know that? How did he know that inappropriate giggles erupting were literally wild creatures that could not be contained? Did he laugh?

If so, I was jealous.

I never laughed.

Oh, wait. I was laughing now. The idea of me having the giggles was so absurd that it made me laugh harder.

Shirley slid off her stool, gasping for breath as she crawled across the floor toward me. “I’m getting a side cramp,” she gasped. “That’s deadly in a woman my age. Stop.”

I swallowed my laughter and looked at her. For a moment, we were both silent, gasping for air, and then we started laughing again.

Ethan swore under his breath and folded his arms over his chest.

Waiting.

I knew that look. I’d given many people that same look when I’d been interrogating.

He was like a mini me.

Oh, God. I was losing my mind. “I can’t,” I gasped.

“Put your feet up on the wall,” Shirley said. “Fiona swore by it.”

I quickly rolled onto my back and put my feet up on the front door, my sneakers above my head, still laughing. And then I noticed that my white sneakers had red on them.

Ice cream?

No. A little voice in my head chimed in. Not ice cream. Blood.

I’d stepped in Junior’s blood? My laughter vanished, and I pointed at my sneaker. “Get it off. Shirley. Get it off.”

She was still laughing. “Get what off?”

“There’s blood on it. Get it off!” I tried kicking my foot, sudden panic hitting me. “Get it off!”

Ethan was suddenly beside me. He looked down at me, then grabbed my ankle, and plucked the sneaker off my foot. “Got it.”

I looked at my other sneaker, and saw a little rim of red around the sole. I shook my foot, and he pulled that one off too.

The minute my socks were free, I rolled onto my side and curled up, hugging my knees to my chest. I closed my eyes, suddenly exhausted. “I hate dead people,” I whispered.

“Fiona would be deeply offended by that,” Shirley said, sitting up. She leaned over me. “You okay, Evie?”

I considered that question. “No, I don’t think I am, actually.” Apparently, I hadn’t had to fake the new “existential-crisis” Evie. She was alive and well, and melting down inside me publicly.

“Ms. Montgomery?” Ethan sounded very wary.

A smart man. “Evie.” Everyone in my old life called me Ms. Montgomery. Or any assorted titles associated with lawyering. “Just Evie.”

He sat down in front of me on the floor. I could feel his presence. He felt too close. In my personal space.

I opened my eyes, and realized he was all right. He’d given me enough room.

He studied me, those stupidly beautiful dark eyes of his assessing every swollen, puffy, and tear-stained cell on my face.

I studied him back, still hugging my knees to my chest, my head on the floor. “I moved here because I had a cathartic awakening that I was on the wrong path with my life and I had to escape it or it would trap me forever. So I bought an ice cream store in the middle of the night, and decided to follow my dream.”

He nodded. “Makes sense.”

“I wasn’t expecting a dead man in my truck.”

He nodded again. “Not many people do.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you coddling me?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t like being coddled.”

His brows went up. “Then stop lying on the floor.”

Well, heck. I respected that. He could have been fawning over me, calling for an ambulance, but he wasn’t. He was just waiting for me to pull myself together, fully assuming I had that capability.

I sat up.

He stood up.

Seriously? Sitting up had been a triumph, and now he was pushing me to the next level?

He gave me a look of “challenge issued.”

Which of course made me summon the fortitude to hop to my feet, wipe my cheeks, and raise my chin.

It was then that I noticed we weren’t alone. Sheriff Charlene was leaning against a back wall, arms folded, saying nothing, but literally seeing inside the soul of everyone in the room. An EMT. Some other people who were probably crime scene people. “Oh,” I said. “Hey, there.”

Shirley pointed to the window behind me.

Slowly, I turned around, and I saw a dozen faces pressed against the glass. The customers we’d kicked out.

Nora was there, too, and she waved cheerfully at me.

The minute I faced the window, all the onlookers started clapping and cheering. There was one red-haired woman I recognized, and a man in a green hat with a frog on it, both of whom had been outside for a while.

“They’re proud of you for getting up off the floor,” Shirley said cheerfully. “You were quite alarming with all that screaming.”

Heat flooded my cheeks, but I smiled and bowed, trying to reclaim some little bit of the personal power that I’d had twenty-four hours ago.

They cheered again, which made me wonder exactly how extensive my screaming had been.

I turned back to the room and saw all their gazes on me. Sheriff Charlene with an utterly impassive expression that was the result of fifty years of discipline. Shirley looking impressed and somewhat alarmed. Ethan looking thoughtful. The others all ranging from scared to worried to suspicious.

I cleared my throat. “I’m fine,” I said. “Just had to let off some steam. All good.” I shook out my arms.

Sheriff Charlene raised one hand ever so slightly, without even uncrossing her arms, and everyone on her team except for Ethan obeyed her silent signal and left the store.

Wow. She was impressive.

Ethan was the one who spoke. “You want to talk about Junior now?”

“Not really.”

Charlene was still leaning against the wall, silently observing. Me? Ethan? The melting of my ice cream? The meaning of life? I had a feeling she knew exactly what that last one was, but she’d take it to her grave.

Ethan didn’t crack a smile at my attempt at levity, but understanding flickered in his eyes. “Are you capable of answering some questions now?” He changed his question.

Clever man. I sighed. “Yes, I think so.”

“Great.” He gestured to a chair. “Have a seat.”

I glanced at Shirley, and then sat down.

As Ethan sat across from me, the look on his face told me that he wasn’t entirely sure the meltdown had been real. Shock rippled through me as I leaned back in the chair.

He thought I might have faked it? Why would I do that?

But as soon as I thought that, I knew the answer.

He was thinking that it could have been an attempt to distract him from asking me questions about the body in my truck. About my fingerprints on the knife?

And from the fact Sheriff Charlene was now lingering on the back step, listening?

They considered me a suspect in Junior’s murder.

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CHAPTER 7

AN ETERNITY LATER, I was liberated from the crime scene, released from store duty, and didn't have handcuffs around my wrists.

My list of unexpected things I considered wins was growing exponentially by the hour.

Twenty minutes into the interview, Charlene had gone back outside, leaving Ethan to finish the interrogation alone. Was that a sign she trusted him or me? Or both of us? Or no one?

So many possibilities.

But, for the moment, I was free, so I was going to lean into the small joys in life.

"I'll be by at seven to take you to dinner, and then to your house," Shirley shouted from the driveway as I dragged my garbage bag of memories up the external stairs to my new apartment.

I nodded and waved, too tired to try to talk her out of a dinner date.

My truck had been towed off by the cops, but Ethan had been gracious enough to allow me to retrieve my garbage bag of my mom's memories, because it had been tucked behind the driver's seat. My Walmart bags and my safe, on the other hand?

Still in my truck.

Charlene was already gone, so I'd pulled him aside and told him what was in the safe, including the cash amount. His expression would have been comical if I hadn't been on the verge of freaking out because he was taking my truck and my cash.

He said he'd move the safe into the police station, but did he let me take my cash out? No, no, he did not. There was no DNA evidence on the cash. It had been inside the safe.

Did that matter?

Apparently not.

That left me cashless, which didn't make me happy, because I wanted to stay off radar as long as possible, and I suspected that all my frenemies back home probably had watches on my credit cards.

Which meant that all I had were the clothes I was wearing, and no shoes. No car keys. Just me, the little bit of money in my wallet, and my memories. The sleeping bag I'd planned to use until I bought a bed was in my truck, too.

I was too soft to sleep on a bare floor. I didn't even like camping.

But I was alive, right? Not trapped as a spy with a fake best friend and a hot FBI agent who wanted to endanger my sweet little self?

So, I'd sleep in the garbage bag and like it, if I had to.

I reached the top step, grabbed the doorknob, and turned it—

But it was locked.

"No!" I rattled the doorknob, but locked was locked.

I leaned my forehead against the wood, suddenly remembering that the real estate agent I'd been supposed to meet had never showed up to give me keys.

Maybe she'd tried to get in, but we'd had the store closed.

Maybe she'd run away when she saw me screaming.

Or maybe she'd been stabbed, too.

I dropped the bag and sat down on the landing, suddenly too tired to cope.

I laid down on the peeling wooden platform, put my sock feet up on the railing (Ethan had taken my bloody sneakers, which was fine with me), and clasped my hands behind my head, staring up at the blue sky dotted with puffy clouds.

"This is my life," I said aloud. "I'm so excited with how things have turned out."

A seagull circled above me, calling out all sorts of fun trivia to her pals.

What was I doing on Blueberry Island?

Last night, I'd been hours from officially becoming partner at Graves & Stone.

And tonight…I was here. A suspect in a murder.

Ethan had told me not to leave town, so even if I wanted to go back to my old life, I couldn't.

Plus, I didn't have a truck.

I was fully trapped in this new life, and I didn't even want it.

I let out my breath. "On the plus side, I'm not dead."

The bonus of being alive didn't feel quite as delicious as it had earlier. Because I wanted more than to simply not be dead. I wanted to *feel* alive. I wanted more moments of laughing until I couldn't stop, like Shirley and I had done earlier, although I wanted it not to be on the heels of a total breakdown.

I wanted to work. To matter. To… I didn't know.

But it wasn't this.

I wasn't the type of person to lie on a landing on a nice afternoon and admire clouds and seagulls. Just yesterday I—

The floorboard by my head creaked.

I froze, my heart suddenly hammering. "Hello?" I whispered, my voice squeaky.

The floorboard creaked again, and I felt like I was going to pass out.

Then something tapped my forehead.

I screamed and bolted to my feet, whirling around with my hands in a karate-chop position, ready to defend.

A gray, long-haired cat was frozen, her paw suspended in mid-air, right above where my forehead had been.

I stared at her. “You scared the daylights out of me.” A cat. It was just a cat.

She sat down, her blue eyes fixed on me.

I could literally feel how offended she was that I’d screamed. “No way. I’m not taking responsibility for my reaction. You knew exactly what you were doing.”

She blinked at me, swished her tail, then brushed by me and disappeared through a cat door into the apartment.

Oh. That was the cat Bernie had been talking about.

That was now my cat. I had a cat.

I’d never had a pet. Ever.

And now I had a cat with sass. Which I appreciated. I would never have been able to handle a fragile, wimpy cat. I had no idea how to nurture something like that.

She stuck her head out through the door, looked at me impatiently, meowed, then disappeared inside again.

I put my hands on my hips, the panic inside me receding. Somehow, she made me feel less alone. Less hopeless. Less abandoned by life. “You want food? I don’t have any.”

I heard her chastise me from inside the apartment, and I felt a little guilty. I assumed Shirley had been feeding her, but now she was my responsibility.

I went down on my knees so I could peek through the cat door, and my kneecap landed on something hard. “Ow!” I pulled back, flipped up the

doormat, and then let out a sigh of relief when I saw a key.

“Thank you, Fiona, for trusting this world more than I do,” I whispered.

I didn’t even get off my knees. I just slid the key into the lock, held my breath while I turned it, and then nearly cried with joy when the door swung open.

It was not an empty apartment welcoming me with wooden floors that I’d have to sleep on.

It was Fiona’s fully furnished home. The living room was decorated with lace doilies, overstuffed plaid couches, and braided rugs. The cat was sitting on a cluttered coffee table, her tail swishing as she studied me.

“Thank you, Fiona!” I tossed my garbage bag across the threshold, then lunged to my feet. I stepped inside, closed the door, and then leaned back against it, just like I’d done in my beautiful condo after Leah and Agent Straus had issued their invitation to party with them until I was killed.

Fiona’s built-in bookcases were overflowing with books, little statues of animals, notebooks, real plants, and fake flowers in vases. Ivory lace curtains brushed the floor, just a little too long for the space they’d been given. It was dated, crowded, and well-lived in, the opposite of everything about my condo…and I loved it.

It felt like home. It felt like *my* home, even though nothing in it was mine.

The kitchen was visible from the entrance, and there was a white basket on the counter wrapped in pink cellophane. I stepped over my trash bag and walked over to the kitchen. The basket was filled with fruit, wine, and gourmet snacks from Coco’s Coffee, which was where I was meeting Nora for breakfast in the morning.

A little white card was attached. A sympathy basket for Fiona’s death?

Then I saw my name on it.

My heart started to race as I stared at it. Had the firm already found me? Was the FBI mocking me?

The cat hopped up on the counter, startling me.

I looked at her. “I guess I need to open the card, right? I need to know what I’m dealing with?”

She flicked her tail at me and meowed.

“I know, you’re hungry. But I need to know if I have only five minutes to live.” I took a deep breath, then peeled the envelope off the cellophane with fingers that were, yes, actually trembling.

I opened the envelope and pulled out a card that had an ice cream sundae on the front. The faint fragrance of flowers drifted free, and pink rose petals fell out onto the counter.

I closed my eyes for a second, trying to calm down, before I flipped it open.

Dear Evie,

Welcome to Blueberry Island. I hope you’re as reckless, extraordinary, and dangerous as Fiona promised you would be.

~Coco de la Fuente

(I own the coffee shop next door, and Fiona was one of my best friends)

P.S. The cat’s name is Duchess Fang. I’m sure Shirley won’t remember to tell you. Her food is in the fridge with her name on it.

P.P.S. I put my phone number on the fridge for you if you have an emergency.

P.P.P.S. Shirley is bat-shit crazy. Don't believe anything she says. Just kidding. Maybe.

I stared at the note, rereading it again until it finally sank in that it wasn't a threat.

Someone had simply been nice?

My throat suddenly felt tight, and tears stung my eyes.

Maybe she was like Leah, and I couldn't trust her.

But Coco had literally put dried rose petals in her card to me. That wasn't simply "hey, welcome, new neighbor." That was…extra.

And I appreciated it. I picked up a rose petal and sniffed. It smelled like spring.

Who did that for a stranger? No one I knew.

But this was a random island town. Maybe people were just nice here. So nice that they put together a basket within hours of me buying the store?

That didn't even make sense.

I decided to ignore the part about hoping that I was reckless, extraordinary, and dangerous, because that was a bit alarming. Less surprising than I would like to admit, given what I knew about Shirley and Fiona, but alarming nonetheless.

Didn't these women have better things to do than look for trouble?

I mean, yes, when I was an attorney, I looked for trouble, but not in the way these hotshots were. I didn't want that kind of trouble. No. I did not. Definitely.

I eyed Duchess Fang. “I’m not here to make friends. That’s a liability. I can’t afford it.” But Coco’s basket and note warmed the frozen cockles of my little heart.

Not that I was going to encourage it, of course, for many reasons. But with no one here to see me? I bent over and pressed my face into the scattered petals and smelled them.

Deeply.

With all my heart.

For just a minute, because no one was watching.

Then Duchess Fang meowed and hit me on the forehead with her paw.

I eyed her. “The world revolves around you, does it?”

She stared at me, and I could almost feel her psychic push to get me to open the fridge and feed her.

“I will not be manipulated,” I told her, returning the stare.

She growled, a low, slow burn designed to breed fear into the hearts of brave women everywhere.

I blinked. “Okay, you win.”

I hastened to open the fridge, then stared, slack-jawed, at what was inside.

Three casserole dishes with my name on it, with baking instructions, signed by Shirley.

Fresh milk. Fruit. Yogurt. Three sandwiches from Coco’s Coffee. Eggs. A bunch of fresh vegetables.

A jar of Rippy Mama’s hot fudge.

And several containers with Duchess Fang’s name on them, of course.

I touched one of the casseroles. “Beef stew,” I read. “Lasagna. And chicken parmesan.”

I stood there, staring at the fridge. Stunned.

On the lasagna, Shirley had written. “I didn’t know if you’d have time to buy groceries, since you’re apparently in a major rush to move in. Fiona

made me promise I'd do this, so thank Fiona. I would have met you before deciding you were deserving of a homecooked meal, but Fiona's house, so Fiona's rules." Then she'd drawn a little happy face.

That was just… I didn't have words.

I just kept staring at the fridge. Confused. Happy. Alarmed. Hungry.

Then I saw a bottle of champagne in the back.

Leah had lured me to her place last night with hot fudge and champagne.

And now Shirley had also given me hot fudge and champagne.

"Is she an evil temptress?" I asked Duchess Fang as I grabbed one of her cat food containers, not quite sure what to do about the cornucopia of food and apparent goodwill. "I'm pretty sure Shirley would claim that title."

Duchess Fang ignored me, her blue gaze fixated on the food in my hand.

"Maybe evil has tracked me to Blueberry Island," I told her as I pulled open a drawer. "Taking on different forms, but always hunting me."

Staring at me were assorted cutlery. Spoons. Forks. Knives. Fiona's. And she'd left them for me.

There was nothing evil about an old lady's silverware.

Deep gratitude washed over me, and I grabbed a spoon. "I promise to take good care of Duchess Fang," I told Fiona.

I couldn't promise the store. Because I just didn't want it.

But the cat? I scooped up some food on a plate and watched her eat it. Listened to her purring.

I'd managed to feed another living creature a meal.

It felt like a major accomplishment.

Did it make me feel like the badass I'd channeled for the last eight years?

No, not even close.

But I’d contributed to the life span of a living creature, and that was something—

Duchess Fang suddenly spun around, staring at the door, her tail stiff.

I froze, my gaze shooting toward the door. “What is it?”

She continued to stare at the door, and my heart began to race. “Squirrel? Maybe a bird? I’m setting a rule that you don’t get to bring rodents into the house, okay?”

As I spoke, I grabbed the spoon and eased across the room toward the door. Not that a spoon would protect me, but I was scrappy. I could make it work.

I eased the curtain on the door back just as I heard running footsteps outside. “Hey!” I yanked open the door and leapt out onto the landing, but no one was there.

I scanned the driveway, and caught a glimpse of someone’s shadow as they disappeared around the side of my building toward the main street.

Duchess Fang came out to stand beside me. Together, we waited for the person to reappear, but they didn’t.

The spoon still clenched in my fist, I glanced at my door to see if someone had left me a nice welcome note, but there was nothing. I checked the ground, and I saw a small pair of scissors that had definitely not been there when I’d been lying there moments ago. I picked them up and turned them over.

They were small, a little bigger than manicure scissors, but not much. The handles were intricately carved pink metal, and the blades were silver. The tip was pointy, and the blades had a slight curve. They looked well-used, but cared-for. Antique craft scissors, maybe? Or quilting? I wasn’t crafty. I had no idea what special scissors were for, but the pink handles made me think crafty.

Whoever had left them there, either on purpose or by accident, had snuck up my stairs quietly, without me or a sassy cat hearing them, and then

run hard and fast, not caring if they were heard on the way out.

Craft scissors felt pretty innocuous. But then again, give ‘em a good shove, and they could do some damage. And the fact that someone had snuck up and then run off? That was weird.

“Friend or foe?” I asked Duchess Fang.

She went back inside, leaving me on solo guard duty.

It could have been completely innocuous.

Teenagers wanting to make out on my deck, but they’d fled when they realized I was inside.

It also could have been Junior’s killer coming back to check on things. The knife was for a milkman. Pink scissors for the ice cream girl.

I mean, probably not, but it was a little weird.

I scanned the area again, searching the bushes that had made Junior so jumpy, but there was nothing there. It was just a little driveway that used to be occupied by lots of emergency vehicles, my truck, and a body.

And probably Fiona’s car. Of course she used to park there. She’d probably left lots of good karma and protective juju around the apartment. I was fine.

It had to be fine.

I’d never survive my new life if I got terrified at every sound. It was much too stressful, and I hated feeling scared.

I was the queen of chill, and I handled pressure like a champ.

Or I used to.

I had to find that woman again.

Whistling a nonsensical tune, I walked back inside my new apartment.

This time, I made sure I locked the door.

And I checked it.

Twice.

Making sure to whistle the whole time, trying to drown out the sound of silence in my new home.

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CHAPTER 8

By the time Shirley arrived to pick me up for dinner, I'd discovered Fiona wore the same size shoes that I did, and that her supply of both sweatshirts and business suits was zero. She'd been taller than me, and loved cardigan sweaters with bright colors, flowy fabric, and oversized buttons.

She also owned many pairs of jeans. I'd counted at least forty before I'd abandoned the denim palooza and moved on.

I hadn't worn jeans since I was in high school. My mom had told me that I needed to be taken more seriously than jeans would allow, and after she'd died, my choice had been to carve out the badass side of me and never stop, which didn't include jeans.

It did include flamingo pajama pants, but those were in my Walmart bags, along with my fuzzy slippers, which made me very sad.

I'd opted for a pair of sturdy hiking boots and a denim jacket with large, embroidered flowers. Not quite my style, but better than a garbage bag and no shoes, so I thanked Fiona and tried not to feel weird about wearing a dead woman's clothes.

Duchess Fang had kept me company, following me around, using my legs to sharpen her claws, and doing her best to trip me.

She didn't let me pat her or pick her up, but I was getting the sense that we could be friends, and I was pretty sure she wasn't going to turn me over

to the FBI, so that was nice for me. The kind of friend you could actually trust.

It wasn't quite seven when I heard footsteps thudding on the stairs. "Evie!" Shirley crashed into the door with an alarming thud. She grabbed the door handle and rattled it. "What the hell? Why is this locked?"

I hurried over and unlocked it, then opened it. "Sorry. I was feeling stalked."

"No time for that!" She leaned in, her eyes wild. "We gotta hurry! Change of plans! Let's go!"

She was in black leggings, knee-high black boots, and a purple velvet vest fastened with large, silver buttons. Her hair was teased up into spikes, and she had radical blue eye shadow on which made me notice that her eyes were the same blue as Duchess Fang's. "Hi! Thanks for all the food—"

"We don't have time for that!" She grabbed my arm and yanked me out the door, nearly hurling me down the steps. "We gotta go!"

I pulled the door shut, tried to lock it, but Shirley dragged me away before I could get the key in. "Wait, I need to lock it—"

"No, you don't! No one locks doors on Blueberry Island!" She thundered down the stairs, moving much faster than I'd expected. "Come on!"

She didn't seem worried, just in a hurry, so I activated my chill mode as I paused to lock the door anyway, then ran down the stairs after her to a red convertible that was idling in the driveway. "Cool car!"

"Get in!" She nearly hurled herself over the door, and I did the same, barely getting myself into the passenger seat before she was flying backwards down the driveway. "I assume you can run?" she asked. "We'll have to run."

I fastened my seatbelt as she peeled out of the driveway, turned right, and then took off down Main Street. "What's the rush?"

“The *Buttered Rum* is here! Coco got us reservations, but if we’re late, they’ll leave without us.” She flew around a corner. “Junior used to work there. People will talk. We can’t miss it.”

I gripped the door handle, grimacing as we hurled toward a sharp turn. “What’s the *Buttered Rum*?”

“Oh, right. I forgot you just moved here.” She put on her blinker and spun around the corner. “The *Buttered Rum* is a dining boat. Kind of like a mini ferry with food.”

“Like a food truck, only it’s a boat?”

“Yep, kinda.” She whirled around another corner. “We never know when they’re coming. They pull up to the main docks, and you have to get on board within an hour. Word goes out fast. People drop everything to get there. Coco was dropping off food for Bernie at the bridge when she saw them coming, so she got us reservations. They’ll hold our spot until the last moment, but once the boat is ready to depart, they’ll give our seats away to a standby passenger.”

A dining boat that just showed up whenever? That was so bizarre that I actually loved the idea. “Is the food good?”

She shrugged. “How do you mess up hot dogs, wings, burgers, fried clams, and onion rings?”

I considered that. “Everyone brawls to get their hot dogs, but they’re not that good?”

“Everyone brawls to get on the boat. You’ll see.” She was speeding down a road that went along the harbor now, and I noticed there were other cars cruising along at the same exuberant speed we were, all of us racing toward the water.

Adrenaline pulsed through me, and I leaned forward. “How many people does it hold?”

“Seventy-two. Not a single more. Coco is already there.”

I saw three women running down the side of the road in dresses and sneakers, holding their purses, shouting and laughing. “They’re going?”

“Oh, man, it’s Madge and her mahjong buddies. She owns a mahjong studio in town. She’s like a crack dealer, always dragging innocents into her web of addiction to those evil little tiles. Makes my head want to explode. I hope they miss the boat.” Shirley honked and waved. “Suckers. They’ll never make it on foot. Too bad we don’t have room in the car—”

At that moment, two other women came into view, standing by the side of the road, the hood up on their SUV, waving pickleball paddles at every car that passed them.

“It’s the twins!” She careened off the road, skidding to a stop inches from them. “Get in!” she shouted. “We’ve got three minutes!”

“We left right in the middle of a match when I got your text,” one of them shouted as they ran over to the convertible. “We told Cindy and Sarah that I had the flu.”

“You willingly lost to them?” Shirley sounded shocked. “They’re literally your arch-nemeses.”

“Hah. When they find out they won because we went on the *Buttered Rum*, they’ll be crying into their water bottles for a week,” the other said as they vaulted into the car, not even bothering to open the door. “They can take the match, but they can’t edge us out of the boat.”

“Absolutely not,” Shirley agreed. “Pickleball can’t hold a candle to the *Buttered Rum!”*

One of them snorted. “You believe pickleball can’t hold a candle to cow manure.”

“Well, it can’t,” Shirley said with a grin. “You’re just lucky I already decided I liked you before you started waving that paddle around like it was your best friend.”

“Someday you’re going to try it and fall madly in love, like the rest of us.”

“Never. I’m morally committed to never falling victim to that ridiculous trend,” Shirley retorted.

“I look forward to the day when you admit defeat!” One of them blew Shirley a sassy kiss as she straddled the gear shift, and the other plopped herself on my lap as Shirley gunned the engine, and the car took off, wheels spinning out.

“Ladies, this is Evie Montgomery,” Shirley yelled over the roaring engine and blasting wind. “She bought Fiona’s store. Evie, meet Roxy and Cinnamon.”

They both shouted some sort of hello, but the wind was too loud for me to hear. But Roxy’s butt was keeping my lap warm, so yay for me.

Roxy had gorgeous curly hair and brown skin. She was wearing leopard-print leggings and a matching maxi dress. Cinnamon was Japanese, and she was wearing jeans, flipflops, and a Blueberry Island sweatshirt.

Either they had changed on the fly, or they showcased the most interesting pickleball outfits I’d ever seen. They both looked younger than Shirley, but older than me, and I had a sense that they were the type of pickleball players that might kneecap an opponent before the match.

Which was probably why Shirley was friends with them.

Shirley took a hard left, and Cinnamon flew off the gear shift and slammed into Roxy, who hit the door. I thought for a second that they were going to shoot out of the little convertible and become airborne, but they both grabbed on and seemed to have plenty of experience with Shirley’s convertible.

We sped down a short road. Up ahead, I saw what looked like an old-fashioned steamboat from the Prohibition era. “That’s what we’re going on? That’s so cool!”

There was a small cluster of people milling restlessly by the boat ramp.

“Yep. That’s the standby crowd. We gotta get there before they steal our seats!” Shirley drove down to the pier, sped up into a gravel parking spot,

and the car spun around as she hit the brakes. “Run!”

Everyone launched themselves out of the car and rushed toward the steamboat. It took me a second to get my seatbelt off, but I was thankfully faster than the rest of my quartet, and I caught up to them as the steamboat whistle blew.

“We’re here!” Cinnamon made it up the ramp just as a man in a bellhop-type uniform picked up a red velvet rope to lock us out.

“Made it!” Roxy was next, Shirley on her heels. I stepped onto the boat right behind them.

The bellhop raised his arms to block us. “We’re fully sold out. If you don’t have reservations, you’ll have to leave.”

“Shush your threats, Sampson.” Roxy waved her phone. “We have reservations. Table for two.”

Sampson scanned her phone, then looked at us. “Shirley?”

“We’re with Coco.” She held out her phone. “She texted me a screen shot of the reservations.”

Sampson scanned her code, and I felt myself relax slightly as he nodded. I’d never been on the *Buttered Rum*, but I was already caught up in the urgency of not missing out.

“That makes sixty-eight.” He tapped an earphone that I hadn’t noticed. “We’re at four-under. Welcome, ladies,” he said. “Enjoy your evening.”

There was a shout from the dock, and we all looked over to see Mahjong Madge and her pals making a valiant effort to race across the parking lot, even though running was clearly not their forte. Or even a basic life skill.

I was kind of worried for them.

Sampson looked at his watch. “Thirty seconds,” he shouted. “And you have to have reservations!”

“We have reservations!” Madge bellowed.

The little group of standbys groaned at the sad news. “They won’t make it in time,” one of them protested. “Let us on!”

“They still have twenty-five seconds,” Sampson shot back. “You know we never break protocol.”

“Maybe they shouldn’t be running,” I said. “I mean, isn’t one dead body enough per day?” I wasn’t really joking either. I admired their commitment, but it was a little alarming watching them run.

“Oh, they’re fine, unfortunately. They’re just dramatic, and not in the good way.” Shirley unfastened the top button of her velvet vest to reveal a turquoise pendant the size of Canada, set in what looked like engraved pewter. It was simple, but it looked like Shirley probably kept her magic spells in it. “Sadly, it looks like they might make it. We’ll just have to stay positive, ladies, and not let them ruin our night.”

“Who are they?” Did Shirley have mortal enemies? Small town drama?

No, wait. I didn’t need drama. I was here as an outsider until things blew over in my actual life.

“Oh, they’re trouble,” Shirley muttered. “And they know it.”

“Thanks for the ride, Shirley,” Roxy said. “See you guys in there. I’m starving.” She started to head down the passageway, but her twin didn’t move.

“You look familiar,” Cinnamon said, staring at me.

I looked over at her. “Really?”

“Yes.” She glanced at Shirley, who was still watching the mahjong trio’s admirably laborious efforts to catch the boat. “Have you been to the island before?” she asked me.

“No.” I cleared my throat, shifting under her thoughtful gaze. “This is my first time.”

Roxy grumbled with irritation. “Let’s go, Cin. I’m starving.”

Cinnamon kept looking at me. “Do you recognize her, Rox? She looks so familiar.”

Roxy came back and eyed me. “She does.” She studied me. “Are you famous?”

I cleared my throat. “No.” Unless they followed the niche news about up-and-coming attorneys in the region, of course.

“I know!” Cinnamon snapped her fingers. “You look like that missing person who was on the news. The one with the ten-thousand-dollar reward.”

My stomach congealed. “What?”

“She totally does!” Roxy clapped her hands. “That’s it.”

Shirley spun toward us, abandoning her Madge vigil. “What are you talking about?”

“Hang on.” Roxy pulled out her phone, while I shot a frantic look at Shirley. After a second, Roxy showed us her phone. “It’s a missing person. Some lawyer from Boston who vanished overnight. They think she was kidnapped by an unsatisfied client.”

It was my headshot from the firm’s website, along with the ten-thousand-dollar reward. I didn’t recognize the phone number on the flyer, but it could have been someone from the firm, or someone they hired. “Oh, boy,” I whispered, my head starting to spin.

Shirley stared at the phone, then burst out laughing. “That woman looks like the most uptight, cranky, stick-in-the-mud I’ve ever seen. I’d never be friends with her.”

Roxy took the phone back and looked at it. “Well, she has kind of the same nose.”

“Really?” Shirley snatched the phone, then held up the picture beside me.

I managed a sassy grin and wrinkled my nose, tossing my purple hair and flipping up the collar on my flowered denim jacket, trying to look the exact opposite of my head shot with my tight bun, black suit, and white blouse. In the photo, my skin looked lighter than it was in real life, and you could barely tell I was mixed-race, unlike in person. “Help!” I squawked.

“I’ve been kidnapped by Shirley and forced onto the *Buttered Rum* against my will!”

Shirley snorted, and Roxy and Cinnamon laughed. “I guess you’re right,” Roxy said. “Too bad! I could use ten thousand dollars.” She shoved her phone in her pocket. “I’m Roxy,” she said. “I couldn’t hear your name over the roar of the convertible.”

The photo said my name was Evelyn Montgomery, so I couldn’t tell them Evie. I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind. “You can call me Rainbow.”

“Rainbow?” Roxy grinned. “I love that. My best friend in middle school was named Rainbow.”

“Wow,” I said brightly. “Small world. I’ve been thinking of doing my hair in rainbow colors.”

“Yes!” Roxy said. “That would be awesome. I own a hair salon in town. I’d be happy to do it.” She eyed my hair. “Your hair would benefit from a quality coloring job.”

Instead of the one I’d done in the gas station bathroom? I was up for that. “Awesome. I’ll stop by.”

“Great!” She dug into her purse and pulled out a business card. “I take walk-ins, too.”

Cinnamon blew me a kiss. “Awesome to meet you, Rainbow. See you guys inside!”

The two women waved good-bye and headed down a passageway.

“Hell,” Shirley said, standing beside me. “A ten-thousand-dollar reward? That’s going to get some action pretty quickly.”

I glanced at her. “You think Roxy and Cinnamon will figure it out?”

“They might, but they’re trustworthy. They’ll realize you didn’t own up to it, and you’re obviously not kidnapped. Once they figure it out, they’ll come ask you or me about it. I claimed you, and they’ll respect that you’re part of us now.”

I hoped. I glanced after them, but they were already out of sight. “I’m wondering if it’s not such a good idea to be on the boat tonight.” I knew that my past life would find me eventually, but I wanted to buy all the time I could.

“I’m beginning to agree with you—”

But when we turned around, we were already too far from the dock. “We’d never make it,” I said, not quite able to keep the dismay out of my voice.

“We’re stuck,” Shirley said softly. “The boat doesn’t dock for three hours.”

I looked at her. “What do we do? Is there somewhere to lay low?”

“Not on the boat. It’s too small. It’ll be more suspicious if someone sees us hiding.” She swore under her breath as her gaze flipped to the mahjong trio who had made it on board and were showing Sampson their reservations. “They’d report you.”

I quickly turned my back on them, my heart pounding as I listened to them chat with Sampson. Shirley pulled off her fuchsia rhinestone glasses and handed them to me.

I put them on, surprised when I could see fine through them. “Are these plain glass?”

“Of course. My vision is perfect. They’re statement pieces.” She unfastened her pendant. “Put this on. Anything you can do to distract attention from your face.”

“Thanks.” I let her fasten the turquoise stone around my neck. “If someone reports me, they’d be able to be at the dock before we got back. They have a firm helicopter.”

Shirley pursed her lips with determination. “Then we better make sure you are one hundred percent Rainbow tonight and zero percent Evelyn Montgomery.”

The trio hurried past, chatting excitedly about dinner. Sampson was right behind them, talking into his headset. I noticed that he'd let one more single man onto the boat, one who looked familiar. Where had I seen him before?

The man nodded at me. "Glad to see you made it onto the boat, Evie."

As soon as he spoke, I recognized him from the bridge. "Hi, Bernie!" I smiled, feeling less tense. Bernie would be on my side. He'd never report me. "Coco and Shirley invited me."

He winked at me. "You're in for a treat, right, Shirley?"

She grinned. "Oh, she has no idea."

They exchanged a private smile as he sauntered by.

I eyed Shirley suspiciously. "What are you not telling me?"

"Well, if I told you, then that would spoil the fun." She turned and began walking in the direction the others had gone. "It'll be a hoot. Let's go!"

I didn't move. "What about the reward?"

"Just adds to the excitement," she said cheerfully. "Bask in life, Rainbow. It's so fun."

"You're incorrigible." But her irreverence eased some of my tension. How could anyone stay stressed when being assaulted by her exuberance?

I followed her, shoving my hands restlessly into my pockets. My fingers brushed against something hard as soon as I got my hands in the pockets of my jacket.

Frowning, I pulled it out and saw it was a credit card.

"Put that away, Rainbow." Shirley waggled her index finger at me. "My treat tonight. No reason to use your credit card and make it easy for them."

"It's not mine. It was in the pocket. It's Fiona's jacket."

She frowned. "That's odd. I thought I cut up all her credit cards." She held out her hand and snapped her fingers.

As I handed it to her, I noticed the name on the card. “Ronald Stone, Jr.? Is that Junior’s real name?”

Shirley snatched the card, read it, then folded her hand over it. “Yes.”

How odd. “Why did Fiona have his credit card in her jacket?”

She frowned. “I don’t know.”

“Shirley,” I said softly. “Did Fiona have something to do with Junior’s murder?”

“Perish that blasphemous thought!” She shot a sharp look at me. “She clearly didn’t kill him, did she? Because she’s already dead.”

“But she clearly had something going on with him.” I paused, my mind turning over the pieces, like I used to do at work in the old days. Like yesterday. “How did Fiona die?”

“She was taking a nap on the beach, and she never woke up. It was exactly how she wanted to go.” Shirley started walking across the deck toward the passageway. “She wasn’t stabbed, if that’s what you’re implying.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Heart attack?”

“Her heart was fine,” Shirley snapped. “That woman was like a freight train. Nothing could stop her.”

“Then how did she die?”

“She was bored here.”

I let out my breath. “She doesn’t sound like the type of woman who was ever bored.”

“She wasn’t. Ever.”

I put my hand on her arm. “Shirley,” I said softly. “Was an autopsy done on Fiona to discover cause of death?”

Shirley stopped and her gaze shot to mine. “I don’t know. She said she had a plan for Rippy Mama’s. She talked about her successor. She knew she was going to go. What did it matter?”

I didn’t like how that sounded. “Fiona was fully healthy, not bored, but knew she was going to die soon?”

“She was psychically gifted. She knew things.”

“Like her own death? When she was fully healthy?”

Shirley stared at me. “What are you saying, Rainbow?”

“I’m just asking questions.” But I wasn’t. I was homing in on a possibility that was suddenly looking like it needed some attention.

I saw the moment Shirley realized what I was thinking. “Son of a biscuit,” she said softly. “You think she was murdered? Like Junior?”

I nodded at Junior’s credit card in Shirley’s hand “Do you?”

Shirley looked down at the credit card, then she swore and punched the air. “That makes so much more sense than that she was bored. I knew it!” She raised her fist to the air. “We will find justice for you, Fiona! I swear it.”

I was relieved that Shirley was taking it so well. Murder might be off-putting to some. “What do you know about her and Junior?”

“A lot. And not enough, apparently.” She waved the credit card at me. “I don’t know of any logical reason for this to be in Fiona’s jacket, which is very telling, because we had no secrets from each other.”

“Except for whatever secret about Junior she was holding back from you.”

“Apparently.” Shirley stared at the card. “Why would she hide something from me? Something so dangerous that it could get her killed?”

“To protect you.” I knew the answer even without having met Fiona.

Shirley put her hand over her heart. “Yes, she would,” she said softly. “She absolutely would.” She looked at me. “This murder quest just went from protecting you from going to jail, to bringing Fiona’s possible murderer to justice. We gotta bring Coco in on this.”

I bit my lip, not fully on the trust-everyone bandwagon these days. “Can you trust her?”

“Never. She’s a veritable menace.” Shirley put the credit card in her bra. “Let’s go talk to her.”

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CHAPTER 9

SHIRLEY STRODE down the passageway like a woman on a mission.

Following closely, I peeked behind me to make sure no one was stalking us. The deck was empty, but when I turned forward again, Shirley was gone.

The passageway was empty.

I stopped, startled. “Shirley?”

There was no answer.

Fear rippled through me, and I spun around, searching for her. But the hall was empty in both directions. No doors. Just an interior passageway with no exits.

She’d been within touching distance, but now she was gone.

My heart started pounding, and I forced myself to stand still.

To breathe.

To listen.

And when I listened, I heard a giggle.

From in front of me.

But no one was there.

As I looked, however, the air in front of me seemed to drift, like hot air coming off a summer sidewalk. Frowning, I reached out with my hand, expecting to feel steam.

But I didn’t.

My fingers brushed against something solid, and I jerked my hand back in surprise.

Another giggle gave me courage, and this time, when my hand touched something that I couldn’t see, I moved forward and pushed at it.

To my surprise, a curtain drifted aside.

The hallway had been a 3D image on a flat curtain. The curtain split in front of me, revealing an identical curtain right behind it…so that when the first curtain opened, you couldn’t tell.

It was a sleight of hand, a trick to the eyes, so that a person could vanish from sight like magic.

I stepped through, then pushed the next curtain aside.

And there was Shirley, standing in front of a large, ornate wooden door, merriment sparkling in her blue eyes. “Hello, there, Rainbow. Well done.”

“That was crazy.” I was impressed. “It was so cool.”

“Right? This boat is magical. Now you’re starting to understand why everyone wants to come, right?”

“Starting?” I pushed at the curtain from behind. The same hallway was on the back side, and even up close, I couldn’t tell it was a curtain, it was so expertly designed. “There’s more?”

“Of course there is!” Shirley beamed at me. “Watch this!” She tried the door. “Locked, right?”

I nodded, fascinated.

She wiggled her brows at me, then banged the door’s ornate brass knocker several times.

Nothing happened.

“Now, if I do it this way….” She banged the knocker again, but this time, it was a series of short and long taps.

As soon as she finished, the door swung open, and a woman in a bellhop uniform opened the door. “Good evening, Shirley. May I help

you?”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Shirley said with a wink.

That apparently was a secret code, because as soon as Shirley said it, the woman’s face shifted into a big, welcoming smile. “Come on in, ladies. You’re just in time!” She pulled the door open and stepped back, gesturing broadly with her arm. “Welcome to the *Buttered Rum!”*

We walked right into a 1920s speakeasy.

Cozy. Decadent. Ornate. Dark. Delicious.

There were small dining tables, some square and some round, with lace tablecloths, every table full of excited diners. The chairs and built-in benches had lush maroon velvet cushions. The walls were intricately carved polished mahogany. Crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow over the room, and there was an exquisite bar with antique bottles. At the front of the room was a small, raised stage with a microphone, just waiting for a jazz quartet.

It was luxurious, intimate, and humming with excited conversation, clinking glasses, and raucous laughter.

Some folks were dressed for a high-society gala, and others were wearing jeans and flipflops, but everyone was having so much fun. Laughter was bouncing off the chandeliers, and delight was radiating through the air. It was contagious, and I felt myself grinning.

A roulette wheel off to the side was idle, but it was just as beautiful as the rest of the room. It felt like time had been frozen since the 1920s, and we’d gotten a secret invite to a private party that was way above our pay grade.

It was seriously the coolest thing I’d ever seen, and the firm had taken me to some cool places…oh…right…that had probably been owned by the mob.

In the Prohibition era, this boat would have been owned by the mob.

They probably tossed people overboard who blinked the wrong way.

But this wasn’t the 1920s, and I was pretty confident that my past life hadn’t found me yet. So, I was going to enjoy this unexpected treat for as long as I could.

Shirley tucked her hand in the crook of my arm and leaned close to my ear. “Junior worked the roulette table for years. He even had a key for it,” she whispered. “When the boat came last week, he wasn’t on the table, or the boat. No one knows what happened.” She nodded dramatically. “And now we have some suspicion that all was not well with our favorite milkman, eh?”

Oh…Junior. I had completely forgotten about the murder in my truck. Was that a sign I was actually losing my mind? Or an indication of the allure of the *Buttered Rum?* I could imagine that back in the day, people could go missing for days in this gorgeous den of iniquity. “You think his murder has something to do with the boat?”

“I’d bet a banana split on it.” She tugged on my arm and began to guide me through the room. “Come on!”

I looked around as she led the way across the room. There might have been only seventy-two people in the speakeasy, but the dining room was small, and it was tightly packed. Tables were close together. Chairs bumped against each other. People were humming with energy and vitality, as if being in this secret hideaway had made them all feel like rule-breaking little kids who were finally getting away with something.

The quarters were so close that I had to keep my arms above my head so my elbows didn’t bump any of the revelers.

If I had to run for my life, there would be no way to do it quickly. I’d be locked in, right there among the diners. There were six doors off the dining room, and I couldn’t tell which one I’d come in, and there were no windows.

My chest tightened, and I suddenly felt trapped.

But we couldn’t leave for three hours. There was nowhere to hide. And if Junior’s murderer was on the boat, guess who couldn’t get away? That would be us.

And them.

I had to focus on the latter. Maybe in three hours, this whole situation would be behind us.

“There’s Coco!” Shirley waved, and I followed her gaze.

A woman with tumbling waves of dark hair, massive diamond stud earrings, and a flowing lace scarf over her black evening gown rose to her feet and waved at us.

Oh…that must be Coco de la Fuente? She appeared as dramatic as her name had promised. She was dressed for the red carpet, and she carried herself with the expectation that every camera would be trained on her.

She had presence. I kind of wanted to get a selfie in case she actually was someone famously important. Like, maybe the queen of some country that her family had ruled for centuries? Or a movie star with twenty-five Oscars? Or a wealthy heiress with no time for peons like me?

Then I saw she was wearing pink, bedazzled high-top sneakers underneath the gown, and I knew she was more than she seemed.

I liked her immediately. I was also a little scared of her, but fear was always a good thing to keep relationships healthy.

We reached the table, and Coco put her hands on her hips, studying me with so much authority that I stopped where I was, just out of her reach. “So, Fiona picked you, did she?”

I stood a little taller under Coco’s assessing gaze. Coco felt like the upper levels of society that my mom and I had always revered, but never been worthy of. “I never met Fiona, but thank you for the gift basket. I loved the flowers in the card.”

Coco kept studying me. “You’re very welcome. They’re from Fiona’s garden. She gave them to me to give to you when you arrived.”

I blinked. Like me, specifically? “Really?”

Shirley tucked her arm through mine. “Coco means that Fiona told her to give them to whoever bought the store. She didn’t know your name specifically.”

Coco eyed me. “She probably did. Just didn’t tell us.”

Shirley waved her off, signaling her to stop talking. “Let’s sit down. We need to fill you in on—”

“Don’t wave me off, Shirley,” Coco retorted. “You know that never works with me. I’ll say it so the new girl understands.” She faced me. “Shirley and I were ride-or-die besties with Fiona. If you get salty with her legacy, I’m going to have to kill you.”

I stared at her, trying to decide which to respond to first. The fact that she believed Fiona chose me, and even knew my name, or the fact she was threatening my life? So many options. “There might be a line,” I finally said.

Coco fluffed her hair, drawing my attention to an emerald and diamond ring so large that it would have given me tennis elbow. “A line for what?”

“To kill me.”

Her hand stilled in her hair, and interest flared in her dark eyes. “Why?”

Shirley drew a slicing motion across her throat, and I realized I’d almost given away the whole FBI/mob thing that I was trying to prove I would never talk about. Yikes. Put me in the presence of a celebrity, and I lost all sense of self-preservation. “Because…” Why? Why would there be a line to kill me?

“Because I already gave Evie the same warning,” Shirley interrupted. “She’s not getting any ice cream recipes until I approve her.”

“That’s right.” Coco leaned in close to me, so I could see her cat-eye makeup. “That gift basket was because Fiona made me promise, but I’ll protect her legacy. People have been wanting to get their hands on that store

for years, but if you try to close it, sell her recipes, or turn it into that boutique hotel that Armando has been squawking about, I will stop you."

The threat hung in the air with impressive weight. She was fantastic. "I believe you'll try."

I couldn't say I believed she would stop me, because that would imply I thought she could win.

I didn't let anyone win. It was against my nature. Which was why I'd abandoned my old life in a heartbeat instead of letting others railroad me into a life I didn't want. Freedom of choice for the win.

Coco narrowed her eyes. "I'll do more than try. I'll do it if I decide it needs to happen. For Fiona."

"You won't have to. I don't even like the name Armando." As for closing Rippy Mama's? I didn't need to do that as long as Shirley was running it. "But I can't let you kill me. What if I let everyone kill me who wanted to? It sets a bad precedent. A girl has to have boundaries."

Her brows went up. "Sassy, are you?"

"More like a badass, but if you like sassy, we can go with that." Dammit. I should be playing the meltdown girl, but it just wasn't in my nature. "I mean, eek, I'm scared, don't ruin this foray into the dream I've had my whole life."

Shirley rolled her eyes and threw up her hands, but the corner of Coco's mouth twitched in an ill-concealed smile.

She pointed at me. "There might be hope for you, Evie." She was definitely trying not to laugh.

I leaned in. "Just so you know, I don't have to win you over. You have to win me over. I'm the one who owns Rippy Mama's."

Her eyebrows shot up, but before she could respond, I decided to add the New Evie verbiage. "Because this is my dream, and I almost lost out on it because I was stupid and caught up in the corporate rat race. Now that I finally got here, there's nothing that can stand in my way. I'm here for life.

Ice cream is my greatest love, and it always has been. Get used to me, and all the new flavors I'm going to create." I paused. "And I go by Rainbow now because I spread sunshine through all the raindrops of life."

Shirley silently applauded me from behind, giving me a "wow, that was good" nod.

Coco couldn't hold back her grin, but she waggled her finger at me. "Just because I'm starting to like you, doesn't mean I won't kill you. So don't get overly confident."

I smiled back. "I kind of like you, too, but I still won't let you win, no matter how much Armando and I become besties."

"Watch yourself, missy." But I could hear the smile in her voice as she held out her arms, showcasing wrists adorned with rows of bangle bracelets that sparkled with diamonds and rubies. "I ordered margaritas for us, to celebrate Evie's arrival."

"It's Rainbow now." A little warm feeling settled in my chest. "Thanks—"

Coco dropped her arms. "It's not for you, Evie. It's for me and Shirley. You have to earn your way into my drinking circle."

"Call me Rainbow," I reminded her yet again. For some reason, I thought her drinking circle exclusion was sort of adorable. "Sounds reasonable," I agreed. "Drinking buddies are next level."

Shirley patted my arm. "Coco's a prickly little thing, Rainbow, but she has a heart of gold. If you need anything, she'll be there for you."

"I will not," Coco said. "Unless it has to do with Fiona's legacy, then yes, I'll do whatever it takes." She patted the chair next to her. "Sit, my dear, so I can haunt you into revealing your true self."

I sat in the other chair.

She grinned. "You're so rude. I love that. Well done."

Shirley looked pleased, and she took the chair that Coco had tried to get me to sit on. She glanced at me, then leaned forward. "Coco," she said

softly. “We need to talk.”

Coco picked up her margarita and settled back in her chair. “About Junior’s murder? So tragic. He was a good chap. Are we investigating?” She sounded delighted by the idea.

“Yes, but...” Shirley paused dramatically. “We think maybe Fiona was involved with Junior in some way.”

Coco froze with the margarita halfway to her mouth, shock flickering across her face.

It wasn’t surprise shock.

It was shock that Shirley had found out.

I leaned forward. “We think that Fiona was murdered, and it had something to do with Junior.”

Shirley elbowed me. “I was going to be more subtle than that. Sort of ease into it.”

I didn’t take my gaze off Coco. “She already knew.”

“She didn’t.” Shirley looked startled

“She knew something.”

Shirley whirled around to face Coco. “What do you know? That Fiona was murdered? Tell me you didn’t know that, and you hid that from me.”

Coco set her drink down and looked back and forth between us.

We waited, but my leg was bouncing restlessly under the table. What did Coco know?

Then she pulled out a rhinestone purse shaped like a bejeweled strawberry. She fished out a small piece of paper, and slid it across the table to Shirley. “I received this the day after Fiona died,” she whispered. “It’s Fiona’s handwriting.”

I leaned over Shirley’s shoulder as she unfolded it and read it with her. It was simple, short, and to the point.

Coco, darling.

I know what you're thinking, but don't ask questions. For your own safety. Just don't ask. It's too dangerous. Let it go. If Shirley ever asks, tell her the same. Fiona's house, Fiona's rules. Love you! Smooches until we meet again!

Love forever and always, Fifi

Shirley looked at Coco. "What did Fiona suspect you were thinking?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Coco rolled her eyes. "That she was murdered, and I was going to find out what happened."

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CHAPTER 10

"WELL, HOT PANCAKE HEAVEN!" Shirley slammed her hands down on the table. "That is fantastic!"

"Right?" Coco laughed with visible delight. "I thought you were never going to ask me." She wiped her brow dramatically. "Whew! What a relief."

I frowned, trying to catch up. "Why are you guys so happy?"

"Because," Coco said, picking her drink up again. "Fiona knew she trapped me. I'm not going to break the dying wish of my best friend, especially if she sacrificed herself to keep me safe."

"Totally," Shirley agreed, taking a long drink. "Why would you?"

"But Shirley is different," Coco said. "She's trouble."

"I'm so much trouble," Shirley agreed. "Fiona knew that if I saw that note, I'd violate all her wishes and go find the sugar daddy who offed her."

"Yes!" Coco gave a fist pump.

"That note is a fire starter," I said. "She basically told you that something was up."

"Exactly," Shirley said. "That note wasn't simply an invitation, it was a command from beyond the grave to take action."

Coco nodded. "I'm sure Fiona figured it would take a few weeks for Shirley to put it together and bring it up—"

“And by then, the murderer would think he was safe—”

“And let his guard down,” Coco finished. She beamed at me. “Shirley is an unstoppable force. Action is going to happen now. I’m so relieved I don’t need to hold this in anymore.”

“Eats away at you, for sure,” Shirley agreed. “Secrets are poison to the soul.”

“I can’t stop Shirley, so I might as well join her,” Coco said happily.

“Join away,” Shirley said. “Let’s do this! Cheers to finding a killer!”

“Double cheers!” Coco tapped her glass against Shirley’s, and then they both turned to me, waiting.

I picked up a water glass and toasted. “Cheers to murder quests.” Okay, yes, so maybe there was a wee bit of sarcasm beneath my toast, because what sane person would be toasting the chance to hunt down a few killers?

“Murder quests! I love it!” Coco took a reverent drink of her margarita. “This is fantastic. Almost as good as mine.”

“But nowhere close to as good as mine,” Shirley retorted.

“You’re masterful,” Coco agreed.

“Learned it from the Seam Rippers. The best of the best,” Shirley said.

I leaned in, beginning to get caught up in their exuberance. Why not get excited about making bad guys pay for their misdeeds? It felt like a rather noble cause, honestly. And Fiona seemed like a champ. She deserved to have her death be handled with justice and honor. “Who are the Seam Rippers?”

Shirley grinned. “You’d love them. They’re a pack of notoriously rebellious quilters in Bass Derby, where I grew up. It’s only about an hour or so away, so I go back there often to see them, and sometimes they come here.”

“They’re fantastic,” Coco agreed. “Best margaritas in the country.” She brightened. “They’re so handy when it comes to bodies and murders. They’d love this.”

“They sure would,” Shirley agreed. “If we need help, we’ll call them.”

Why didn’t it surprise me that Shirley had pals who were handy when it came to bodies and murders? “Um…”

Shirley and Coco exchanged glances and then burst into laughter. Shirley patted my arm. “Not in a bad way. Just that they’re good to have on hand if we get in over our heads.”

“Resilient old ladies,” Coco agreed. “I love them.”

“Me, too.” Shirley put her drink down. “But honestly, we’ve got a situation. Rainbow’s a possible suspect for Junior’s death, and now that we know Fiona had something going on, we have to acknowledge that maybe Rainbow’s going to be in trouble because she’s inheriting Fiona’s life.”

“Oh, yes.” Coco looked over at me. “You could be in danger if you get in the way. Did you find anything suspicious at Fiona’s? I didn’t search because of the note, of course.”

Oh, boy. Added danger for me? Urgency began to press at me to untangle this situation before it took me down. I told her about Junior’s credit card, and then I showed them the scissors, which I had brought along. Why? I wasn’t sure. Maybe so someone couldn’t lie in wait at my apartment and then stab me with them.

Because that was a cheerful, thoroughly un-paranoid thought.

Coco picked them up and turned them over in her hand. “They look like craft scissors. Quite beautiful, actually. Shirley?”

Shirley checked them out as well, and shook her head, mystified. “I have no idea why someone would drop them on your porch.” She gave them back to me. “But keep them. I’m sure they’ll make sense at some point.”

“Okay, let’s get busy.” Coco turned to me. “First, if you’re a suspect, why? You just got here.”

I told her how I found Junior’s body, and she narrowed her eyes, studying me, before she turned to Shirley. “What do you think?”

“I believe Rainbow didn’t kill him,” Shirley said. “But her prints might be on the knife. He looked like he was stealing from her, and her past life is hunting her, so we gotta act fast and find out what really happened.”

To my surprise, instead of asking why my past life was hunting me, Coco lit up and clapped her hands. “Oh, yes! How fun! Added drama. Now I know why Fiona picked Rainbow. Her parting gift to us! A sassy pants with a past, secrets, and prints on a murder weapon. I love it!”

I almost started laughing. These two women were crazy, and I deeply appreciated them. “What do you guys know about Junior and Fiona? Were they romantically involved?”

Both women burst out laughing. “Heaven’s no,” Shirley said. “Fiona had much different tastes.”

“I didn’t even realize they were friends,” Coco said, stirring her drink thoughtfully. “Friendly, but not friends. Or even business partners, other than Junior delivering milk.”

“I didn’t think they were friends either, but there had to be a reason why she had his credit card in her pocket,” Shirley said. “I’m stumped.”

“Maybe she stole it from him?” I suggested.

They both looked thoughtful. “Maybe, but if she did, she had a reason,” Shirley said.

Coco rubbed her chin, her fuchsia nails bright. “Well, I think we should talk to his wife.”

“Wife?” Shirley and I spoke at the same moment.

“He got married again?” Shirley asked.

Coco shook her head. “He never got unmarried, Shirley. And Jasmine bought some coffee yesterday morning.”

Shirley’s jaw dropped. “She’s back?”

“Yep.” Coco nodded. “She had some silly disguise on, but I recognized her by her voice.”

I leaned in. “Jasmine is his wife? Tell me more.”

Coco let out a low whistle. “Junior and Jasmine started dating in middle school. They got married right after high school graduation. She was a little demon, but he worshipped her and treated her like a queen. They fought like the dickens, and then would make up hard. And then one day, Jasmine disappeared.”

Shirley leaned in. “People said Junior killed her, but no one had any proof.”

I felt my eyes widen. “Really? He seemed so nice.”

“Yes, he did, but you know what they say about nice guys, right?”

“That they murder people?”

“Exactly.” Shirley nodded. “Then Junior disappeared for a couple weeks, and everyone thought Jasmine’s brother Duane had killed him in retribution.”

Maybe staying at the firm would have been less dangerous than Blueberry Island…

“And then Junior reappeared, delivering milk at his family’s dairy again, like nothing had happened.” Coco said. “But no Jasmine.”

“No Jasmine,” Shirley agreed. “And Duane started working at the dairy. He’s a no-good, lazy bastard, but suddenly Junior hired him? Suspicious, if you ask me.”

“Plus, Junior and Duane seemed to be best friends,” Coco added. “But Duane had always hated him for marrying his sister.”

“But still no Jasmine. If anyone asked, they changed the subject,” Shirley said.

“Some folks said that Jasmine left him, and Junior was crushed,” Coco said. “That was why he didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Others thought he was just a cold, heartless killer,” Shirley chimed in.

“Wow.” I sat back. “Are either Duane or Jasmine on the *Buttered Rum* tonight?”

Coco shook her head, which relieved me a little bit. “I haven’t seen them, but not all the dining room seats are taken yet. Some folks are probably still on the top deck enjoying the weather.”

“Jasmine loves the *Buttered Rum*,” Shirley said. “If she’s in town, she’s definitely on board. She’d never miss it.”

Coco scanned the room. “Duane could be working the kitchen.”

“So, he’d be out of sight,” Shirley said. “Sliding in and out of rooms. Very convenient.”

My heart started to race. “What does Duane look like?”

“Very tall,” Coco said. “Muscular. He looks kind of like a massive tree armed with violence, danger, and attitude. He lost the Texas accent when the family moved up here, unlike Jasmine, who still has a twang if you listen closely.”

“Um…wow.” That sounded like a fun guy.

“And he has a wrist tattoo,” Shirley said. “It’s a bunny with a halo.”

“His childhood pet,” Coco said. “Fluffy. Never got over losing her.”

I looked back and forth. “You guys are serious?”

“That’s the rumor. I’ve never been close enough to see it,” Shirley said.

“No one wants to be near that man,” Coco agreed. “If he starts delivering the milk to Fiona’s store, we’ll have to change suppliers.”

They both looked over at me, and I raised my hands. “I have no loyalty to Junior’s dairy. That’s fine with me.” I paused. “But what about his cows? Who will run it?”

“He was an only child and his parents are gone,” Shirley said. “I don’t know who will take over.”

“Someone will step up,” Coco said. “Those cows will be fine. But in the meantime, let’s split up and look for the Wilsons. That’s our first step. They were close with Junior. They might have information.”

“Wilson? That’s Jasmine and Duane’s last name?” I frowned, remembering how Harvey had shouted that the Wilsons were trouble, after

Bernie had defended them. “Does Duane drive a construction truck?” I still had a vivid memory of the Wilson brother scaring me and Bernie at the bridge.

Shirley shook her head. “That’s Gator Wilson. He’s the oldest sibling. He has a construction business, but no one will hire him to build houses, so he just does basic handyman stuff.”

Coco leaned in. “He’s called Gator because when he was a kid in Texas, he wrestled an alligator who was trying to eat Jasmine. Killed that thing with his bare hands.”

I blinked. “Really?”

Shirley rolled her eyes. “You’re so dramatic, Coco. But yes, that’s the rumor. Who knows if it’s true. But either way, the Wilsons are no good.”

Exactly what Harvey had said. And what Bernie had warned me against believing. “You think they’re capable of killing?”

Coco snorted. “Rainbow, everyone is capable of killing, given the right situation.”

“Even Fiona?” I challenged.

“Hell, Evie,” Shirley said. “She’s the first in line who’d be capable of that—”

She stopped, and we all looked around at each other. “Really?” I asked.

“Well, technically yes,” Shirley said, “but I don’t actually think she killed anyone.”

“Only because no one gave her a good enough reason,” Coco said. “She’d sacrifice herself for those she loved.”

Shirley drummed her fingers on the glass. “Her note suggests she already did.”

They looked at each other, and I felt the sadness waft between them. As sassy as they were, these women had heart, loyalty, and love for each other. “She’s lucky to have you guys,” I said quietly. “You guys are all lucky to have someone you can trust so much.”

Shirley looked over at me, and her face softened. “Don’t sound so sad, Rainbow. We’ll bring you into our little circle, too.”

“Not me,” Coco protested, but her protest was a lot weaker than it had been when I’d first met her. “Rainbow hasn’t earned her way into the cockles of my heart yet.”

“Well, you’re in mine.” Shirley snugged her arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head.

Just like how my mom used to do.

I’d forgotten what it was like.

Shirley didn’t seem to notice the sudden emotion clogging my throat as she turned back to Coco. “Rainbow and I will circle the dining room for Jasmine and Duane. You check the roof deck—”

At that moment, a Black woman with fabulous braids, wearing blue jeans, a red velvet jacket and matching cape stepped out onto the stage, holding a shiny brass bell. She rang it enthusiastically, and the room fell silent. “We have a newbie tonight,” she announced.

“Oh, oyster shuckers,” Shirley muttered. “I forgot about that.”

Coco glanced over at me. “You said your past was hunting you. Would it be bad for you to get called onto the stage and be forced to dance or sing?”

I stared at her, alarm mounting. “Yes.” Hello, ten-thousand-dollar reward, anyone?

“Then something bad is about to happen to you,” Coco said, looking genuinely concerned.

“Our newbie is a guest of our favorite coffee maestro, Coco de la Fuente!” The woman on stage announced.

Shirley swore under her breath and grabbed my arm. “This is your chance to prove you’re insane,” she said fiercely. “You gotta own this. She’ll say your name in about two seconds, so you better stop her.”

“Are you kidding?” Panic was closing in on me. “You didn’t think of this before you booked us on the boat?”

“I thought it would be funny! I didn’t think there’d be a price on your head,” Shirley whispered. “But this is your chance.”

“Son of a—”

“Everyone put your hands together for our new, very own—”

I bolted to my feet. “My name is Rainbow,” I announced, throwing my arms up in the air, like I was announcing my greatness to the world. My heart was racing like a freaking train as I bowed. “It is my great pleasure to be here.” I grabbed Coco’s scarf, flung it over my head like a shawl, and spun around. “I am the new ice cream maven of Blueberry Island,” I declared. “Ice cream has always been my life, and now I’m here to shake things up!”

The room applauded madly as I shot a look at Coco and Shirley, who gestured me toward the stage.

Son of a biscuit.

Own the new crazy, Evie. Own it!

I leapt up onto the stage and held my hand out for the microphone. “May I?”

The emcee was beaming at me as she pointed to the microphone in the stand. “All yours, Rainbow.”

I blew her a kiss, then spun around to the microphone, grabbed it, and leaned in like it was my best friend. “Fiona was brilliant with flavors,” I said. “I’ve already tried every one of them—”

“Which is your favorite?” someone shouted.

“Peppermint. It’s decadent.” Yay that I had actually tried one. Thanks to Shirley. “With hot fudge, of course.” I held up my hand for silence as more questions started being yelled. “I’ve been experimenting with ice cream flavors since I was eight years old.” Absolute truth there. “I will be trying

out new ones, and you gorgeous people will be my guinea pigs. Every time I have a new flavor, it will be free to anyone who will give me feedback."

The place erupted into cheers, and I saw Shirley give me a fist pump.

I held up my hands again and silenced the crowd, like a conductor leading a hard stop. "Apparently, I now have a cat. Duchess Fang. I've never had a cat, and I'm very pleased."

Again cheers, and Shirley beamed at me.

The emcee spoke then, quieting the crowd. "Rainbow, the tradition is that every *Buttered Rum* newbie must provide on-board entertainment. A song. A dance. A joke. Are you game?"

Yikes. What was I going to do? I couldn't sing or dance or tell jokes. I hadn't done any of that since I was a kid with my mom when we used to do the…oh… *Oh*.

Evelyn Montgomery would never be caught dead doing what I had just thought of. It was perfect. "I have a dance, but I need my partners, Coco and Shirley, to assist. Badass bitches, you in?" I'd been about to call them ladies, but I was afraid they would murder me in my sleep if I did so.

"Oh, yes!" Shirley leapt up and practically threw herself on the stage.

Coco was more refined, striding up the stage like she was going up there to receive an Oscar. She swept herself up beside me and grabbed the microphone. "The only reason I agreed to do this is because Rainbow called me a badass bitch."

See? I knew what I was doing. I shielded my eyes from the glare of the spotlight. "Roxy? Cinnamon? Would you guys like to join us?"

A spotlight splashed across the crowd until it found the twins, who had both bolted to their feet, as I had suspected they would. "We're in! Yes, pick us!"

Cinnamon started dancing between the tables. "Badass bitches for the win!"

“Hallelujah!” Roxy hurried after her, and the two of them started chanting “badass bitches” as they danced toward me.

A few faces in the crowd looked a little alarmed at the profanities being shouted with so much exuberance, but it was too late to close the floodgates now. I was pretty sure it was going to add to my insanity defense, so I decided to clap my hands and stomp my feet to the rhythm of their chant. Coco and Shirley immediately followed suit, and by the time the twins reached the stage, at least half the diners were stomping, clapping, and shouting “badass bitches” as well.

What kind of place was this? Insane. It was a perfect fit for the new me.

Roxy and Cinnamon laughed themselves onto the stage, high-fived all of us, and then lined up behind me with their arms around my other two compatriots, all of them grinning like I’d just announced they’d won the lottery.

Such enthusiasm. I loved it. Exactly the women for this ridiculous dance that I was going to honor old mother-daughter times with. I faced the emcee. She was in her early thirties, maybe a shade older than I was. Nothing close to the age of the women doing chorus line kicks behind me. “And what’s your name?”

“Mine? It’s Mirabelle Skye.”

“Would you like to join us?”

Mirabelle’s gaze shot to the dancers, and I saw her grin. “I don’t know the dance.”

“Neither do they. I’m a genius at teaching it. All I need are three minutes and some great music.”

Mirabelle spun toward the room. “What do you guys think? Should I cast my lot with these ruffians?”

The room erupted into boos and cheers. Everyone was so invested that I was beginning to understand why there were fights to the death for a seat on

the *Buttered Rum* when she came to town. The residents of Blueberry Island had come on board for a rousing time, and they were fully committed.

“That’s a yes!” Mirabelle held out her hands. “Rainbow said three minutes, so three minutes is what she gets. Maestro, start the countdown and play something fantastic in three minutes. Give us the five second countdown!”

As the room cheered and buzzed with anticipation, Mirabelle stashed her microphone and hurried over. She was laughing as she reached us. “Coco, you get a free dessert for bringing Rainbow on board. She’s a hoot!”

“Right? I’m amazing,” Coco agreed.

Shirley turned toward me. “We have less than three minutes. What’s the plan, Rainbow?”

“Can we go backstage so we can practice?”

“This way!” Mirabelle herded us off stage right, through a door, and into what looked like a private salon with cabinets, couches around the sides, and a fully loaded bar.

I saw Shirley and Coco look around with interest, and Shirley eased off to the side and peered behind the bar. Recon? Nice.

I held up my hands. “Okay, ladies, this is a dance from my childhood called *The Eggbeater Ballet*.”

“Ballet?” Roxy frowned. “That’s so boring. I’m not doing ballet.”

“It’s not ballet.” I quickly explained it to them, and by the time I finished, they were all dying of laughter.

“That is literally the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” Coco said, gasping for air. “I’d be absolutely horrified to associate my name with that.”

“Me, too.” Cinnamon said. “I’m definitely in.”

“I can’t even,” Roxy said. “I’m far too classy for that.” But even as she said, she began practicing her moves.

“I love this. It’s so asinine that it’s literally the cleverest dance I’ve ever heard,” Mirabelle said, also practicing her twirl.

Shirley was peering behind a curtain, making quick work of checking out the room while I kept everyone else occupied with practice.

“Fifteen seconds to stage time,” Mirabelle suddenly shouted. “Everyone out.” She led the charge across the room, and we all followed. I saw Shirley put something in her pocket, and then she ran after us.

She was close behind as we hurried out to the stage. “Did you find something?” I whispered.

“Just a fiver that someone lost. Nothing dramatic, unfortunately.” She shoved me to the middle of the stage. While everyone else took up spots just offstage in assorted corners, Shirley and I took our position in the middle.

The spotlight settled on us as we stood back-to-back, arms up, fingers touching, like we were fancy ballerinas.

Or eggs.

Unbeaten eggs, was what we actually were.

Mirabelle ran over to the microphone. “I now present *The Eggbeater Ballet*, performed by Rainbow and Shirley as the eggs, and the Eggbeaters, performed by the Badass Bitches Quartet.” She then ran back into the shadows, and we waited.

The room was silent, the spotlight was on, and for a split second, I felt like I was back with my mom, in our living room, giggling uncontrollably, wearing the fanciest Goodwill ball gowns we’d been able to find, the sparkliest costume jewelry, and shoes that were too big for my feet.

I sensed my mom there with me, laughing, cheering me on, and I felt the first sense of peace I’d experienced in a long time. I looked over at Shirley. She winked at me, and then the music began.

We grabbed hands and began to dance around the stage, doing our most dramatic, most absurd improv dancing we could think of. Under the leg. Through the arms. A split that almost broke my hip.

And then the magic happened. Out of the dark corners came the eggbeaters, arms clasped above their heads, spinning and spinning and spinning.

They started banging into me and Shirley, still spinning, all of them laughing so hard that I could almost hear my mom's laughter. Shirley and I dramatically interpreted the eggs being beaten, until we finally collapsed on the stage in a puddle of goo, while the eggbeaters danced themselves off stage.

The music stopped.

Silence fell in the dining room, while Shirley and I lay on the stage.

Shirley grinned at me. "The audience is processing," she whispered. "Give them a sec."

I grinned back. "It doesn't matter." I felt so free. That was literally the dumbest dance ever, and I'd done it. I'd made an absolute fool of myself, and it was so liberating.

The room suddenly erupted into cheers, and all the eggbeaters raced on stage, bowing and cheering as they yanked us to our feet. We bowed our way off stage and back to our tables, while Mirabelle went back to the microphone. "I think we can all officially declare that Rainbow is the perfect fit for Blueberry Island. Welcome, Rainbow!"

I held up my arms and bowed again as I reached my table, still laughing, and slightly breathless.

As I collapsed in my seat, Mirabelle announced that it was time for dinner. As servers began circulating with trays of burgers and hot dogs, I realized I felt the most alive I'd felt in years.

Maybe since before my mom had died.

Was it the magic of Blueberry Island? Or being on a murder quest? Or Shirley and her friends?

I had no idea, but I realized that I didn't want this feeling to end.

I didn't want to get dragged back to my old life.

Did I want to stay here?

Did I want to become Rainbow, ice cream maven of Blueberry Island with a sassy cat?

The idea was ludicrous. I didn’t belong here. But there was something about tonight that felt so good.

I looked around, and then my gaze landed on a rugged, clean-cut man leaning up against the far wall.

Arms folded.

Gaze on me.

Deputy Ethan Shepard. On a quest for a murder suspect.

We locked gazes, but he didn’t burst into a charming smile of love and adoration.

He did, however, push himself off the wall and stride across the room toward me.

I’d forgotten how attractive he was. Or maybe I’d been so stressed about Junior that I hadn’t fully grasped that fact. No wonder half the town had tried to land him.

I smiled at him as he reached the table. “Hi.”

“Good evening, Evie.” He dropped a piece of paper on the table.

It was the ad for the ten-thousand-dollar reward for me, kidnapped attorney from Boston.

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CHAPTER 11

Coco and Shirley didn't notice Ethan's arrival.

I was on my own with him.

Which was fine. I loved challenges.

My two compatriots were chatting with other diners, talking about the performance and asking questions about Jasmine and Duane. They were so fully immersed in searching for the Wilsons and receiving accolades for our award-worthy performance that neither of them paid any attention to my handsome cop suitor.

He sat down in Coco's empty seat and nodded at the photo of me. "That's you?"

It wasn't a question. But his voice was curious, not accusatory, so I relaxed a wee smidge.

"I saw that," I said conversationally. "It's definitely a picture of me." Servers were delivering food to tables, and a tray of onion rings went past that looked amazing.

My stomach rumbled.

"It says you're missing," Ethan said.

"Clearly, I'm not missing." I patted my velvet cushion. "I'm right here. Making the world brighter simply by being in it."

The corner of his mouth twitched a tiny bit. Had I almost made him smile? Of course I had. I was so charming.

“I researched you. You work for Graves & Stone, eh?” He draped his arm over the back of his seat, lounging like a man who had nowhere else to go.

Was he playing me with his casual stance? Trying to disarm me before he whipped out the handcuffs and his arrest warrant? Or was he really just so pleased to be able to sit in the sparkle emanating from my soul? It was so difficult to tell.

“I’d expect you to look that up,” I said. “Well done.”

He looked like he had to fight not to crack a smile. “Thank you. I’m an excellent cop.”

“Of course you are.” His professional confidence was as high as mine. I liked that. “Charlene would never hire a loser.”

This time, he didn’t hide his chuckle. “I’m sure she’d appreciate that evaluation of her character.”

“Right? I agree.” I paused. “In case you didn’t turn this up in your search, I quit my job at Graves & Stone this morning.” Wow. Had that whole desperate flight really been today? Crazy. “I left them a friendly note, because I’m thoughtful that way.” I rolled my eyes. “But honestly, I’m so great, it’s no wonder they’re offering a reward for my return. Being fabulous can be a drag sometimes, you know?”

He drummed his fingers casually along the back of the next chair. “I’ve heard rumors about Graves & Stone, so I made a few calls for more info.”

Ugh. “FBI?”

He nodded. “Yep.”

“Figures.” Of course he had a pal in the FBI. Of course he’d called them when he’d realized what firm I had worked for. Was I the only one who hadn’t realized what my firm did? “Did you tell them I’m here?”

The question made a surprising ache settle in my stomach. I wasn't ready to be yanked out of this life.

Or killed. That was probably the bigger factor.

Ethan leaned in. "What the hell is going on with you?"

Yep, no sweet little charm there. So, he'd been casual and friendly to get me off guard, not because he thought I was sunshine and sprinkles that was worth protecting in the name of universal goodness.

"You remind me of my best friend, Leah," I said. "So friendly one minute, and so aggressively invasive the next."

He didn't smile at my wit this time. "Talk to me, Evie."

Hey. He thought he could order me around just because he was attractive and had a badge? I was going to have to turn that power play right around. "I'm following my dreams, Ethan. What about you? Why are you in this small town? If you have pals in the FBI, then you aren't some small-town cop for life. How did you end up here?"

When in doubt, hammer back with questions. The more personal and invasive, the better.

"My dad is a sheriff in Maine," Ethan said easily. "I always knew I'd wind up here."

"You're from Maine?" That was so innocuous. I was so disappointed. I had been so sure there was something juicy to explain why Ethan had taken a job working for Charlene. "Why aren't you working for him?"

A muscle ticked once in his cheek, and I knew I'd hit a nerve.

Oh, goody. What was the sexy, charming cop hiding?

"He doesn't believe in hiring family," Ethan said. Bitterness edged under his words.

Oh…that had stuck in his craw. I could feel it. "Well, I don't even know who my dad is, so pooh on dads."

"Pooh on dads?" He looked surprised at my insightful response.

As he should be. I was impressive. "Yep."

Ethan’s gaze sank into mine, and we had a brief, silent connection about dads. “I’ve known Charlene since I was a kid,” he said after a moment. “She wanted someone she could trust to take over when she retired. It got me out of the NYPD and back in Maine, so it works for both of us.”

If Charlene had known him since he was a puppy, and she’d hired him, it meant that he was a good guy. She’d never hire for charity. He had to be a top-notch cop if he was working for her.

Dammit. If he decided I killed Junior, he’d make sure the case would hold up in court.

Especially if his dad refused to hire him, and he wanted to prove his dad wrong.

But on the plus side, if he was a competent cop, then he probably would figure out pretty quickly that I hadn’t killed Junior. So…yay for that.

This was going to be fine.

“That means I’m very protective of this town,” he said, all charm gone. “What’s your story, Evie? A woman with a reward is a woman who brings trouble with her.”

Oh, well. I hadn’t expected him to get all possessive about the town. That was an unexpected twist. It was time to steer this conversation in a better direction.

I leaned in, so my face invaded his personal space. “Ethan, I appreciate your protectiveness of the island. But I’m a good person.”

He raised his brows. “Anyone can claim that. Why are you here, Evie? Because right now, I’m sitting at a table with the mob’s attorney, who is being hunted by them. That’s not the vibe I want in this town.”

Son of a biscuit. He was being so difficult. “Look, Ethan. I bought Rippy Mama’s and moved to Blueberry Island because it’s my dream. It’s all I care about. My mom died when I was eighteen, and I realized last night that I don’t want to end up like her.” Amen to that, right? “Life is short. I

want to live my dreams now, not run out of time. And that includes ice cream, a cat, and *The Eggbeater Ballet* on a food boat."

It was a good thing he wasn't attractive, or I might be horrified that I'd done the ballet for him.

Oh, wait, he was attractive.

Never mind, then.

He didn't back up, leaving our faces uncomfortably close together. "I don't want trouble on this island."

"I don't either. I moved here to have an idyllic dream life with chocolate and heavy cream." I smiled sweetly.

The servers swarmed the room like little rodents, stopping at tables in a meticulously choreographed dance. The food smelled so good. It convinced me I was starving.

Ethan narrowed his eyes.

I narrowed mine right back. If he was waiting for me to collapse into some desperate, frightened woman pouring out my secrets and begging for his help, he would have to wait a long time.

I wondered how long he would wait. Did he have a hero complex? If he did, that would make sense why he'd decided to be a cop. Save the town. Be the hero. Solve the murders. Report the girl to his pals.

He might wait a while if he was trying to be a hero.

Ethan ground his jaw for a moment, then swore. "Are you in danger?"

Yep, hero complex. But wow, also very sweet that he thought to ask about my safety. Unless that was a trap, too. Men were such complicated little buggers. "No. I'm not in danger right at this second."

But that was a really good sign that he at least considered the idea that the reward was not a reflection of me being a bad person.

The muscle twitched in his cheek again. "Overall," he clarified.

"Hard to say." I would have loved to ask for his help, but he admitted to having FBI pals, had me on the short list for Junior's murder, and had

drawn nefarious conclusions about my old job.

Ethan paused. I could see his brain working, and I knew he was debating about what to say. Was he going to repeat the FBI's offer to join their party? Ban me from bringing my taint into his precious town?

"Did you find out who murdered Junior?" I asked preemptively. Obviously, he hadn't, but I wanted to gauge how personally invested he was in solving the case. If he really had been close with Junior, he might be extra motivated to find a killer as fast as he could, without worrying as much if the person he targeted hadn't done it.

Like me, for example.

His jaw flexed. "No."

He'd given away nothing. Steady as a rock. "Did he have a key on him when he was killed?" Because why not try to get more info while I had the chance?

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "A key?"

I gave him an innocent look. "I'm missing the key to my store and my apartment. I thought maybe Junior picked it up while he was there. Did you find one?"

Total lie about the store key. Just wanted to know if he had any key.

I didn't know for sure he had even stolen one. Although he did have the key to the roulette table…supposedly. I just felt there was more to this key situation than we'd fully sorted out.

Ethan studied me. "Your store key?"

"Yes," I said emphatically. "The real estate agent was supposed to drop it off, but I can't find it. I figured it was worth asking."

"I have no idea where your store key is." He paused again, then spoke. "Did you know Junior from when you lived in Boston?"

"He's from Boston?" What? My city? "I thought he was from the island." No, he definitely was. His family had owned the dairy for generations. I was so confused.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“No, I didn’t know him. I’d never seen him before today.” I made sure to be definitive in my response. But what the heck? What was the connection between Junior and my city? Or, rather, my former city? Sadness. It was no longer my home.

From the look on Ethan’s face, I could see he didn’t fully believe my claim of innocence. As Shirley had said, the man was decidedly inconvenient. And what had Junior been doing in Boston?

“All right,” Ethan said. “If you think of a different answer, let me know. Enjoy your evening.” He pushed the chair back to stand up, and I caught his wrist.

I didn’t mean to.

It just happened.

Maybe because he’d shown moments of humanity. Maybe because he was strong, rugged, and manly. Maybe because my gut sensed that he could help.

Regardless, my fingers just snapped around his stupidly strong and capable wrist.

He leaned down, resting his hand on the table, looming over me. “What?”

“I’m not going back to my old life. You can tell your FBI pals that.” I met his gaze. “Tell them to leave me alone.”

Something flickered in his eyes, but I couldn’t tell what it was. But at least it meant there was a human being underneath his toughness. “What about Graves & Stone?” he asked. “They’re looking for you. You’re worth ten thousand dollars to them.”

“I’m not going back. That life is over. I’m an ice cream store owner now,” I repeated. “If you can help convince anyone of that, please do.” I knew I shouldn’t trust him, but at the same time, what could he do to me?

He knew who I was. If he'd chatted with the FBI, he probably knew everything there was to know.

If there was any chance he'd help, I had to ask. I had to have at least a little faith in Charlene's choice to hire him.

He studied me for a moment, and I wished I was as psychic as Shirley had claimed Fiona was. What was Ethan planning?

"I don't work for the FBI," he said finally, his voice low. "That means I don't have to tell them where you are." Then he stood up and walked away without another word.

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CHAPTER 12

I LET OUT my breath and leaned back in my seat as Ethan walked away. Was he on my side? Unclear, but possible. Had he kept my location a secret? Or was that too much to hope for?

Maybe he was going to blackmail me for his silence?

I watched as he made his methodical, athletic way across the room, pausing to chat with patrons as he went.

He didn't have the vibe of a man who was on board to enjoy a few hot dogs.

He was working the case. I had to assume that he also wanted info on Junior, and thought the boat was a good lead. Maybe he'd find Junior's murderer, who would admit to killing Fiona as well, and we could retire from our murder quest before it even got underway.

I would love that for us.

A tall, athletic Black man in a flowing silk dress, a lavender wig, glitter eyeshadow, and pink cowboy boots trotted up to our table and presented a tray with dramatic flourish. "Would anyone care for a hot dog? And Rainbow, I'm Tanya Tuscani, she/her. Utterly fab performance. We're always looking to add guest stars to the show. The door is always open."

I grinned, grateful for the pronoun clarification. "Thanks, but that's the extent of my skills."

“Nonsense. I sense star power when I see it.” Tanya wiggled her tray at me. “Try a hot dog. They’re to die for.”

“I will. I love hot dogs.” I grabbed one, then a second one when Tanya gave me a mischievous nod.

“Tanya! You look marvelous tonight. I love the dress.” Shirley plopped down beside me, breathless and beaming. “Siren red looks fabulous on you. I don’t know how you bring all those colors together, but you’re literally magical.”

“Thank you, queen,” Tanya said, blowing her a kiss. “The Firefly Boutique just got the dress in! I bought it in six colors.”

“I’m getting one, too,” Shirley said. “I love how low cut it is. Very sexy.”

Tanya winked at Shirley. “Sex it up, girl. Flaunt it while you got it!”

“I’ll always have it,” Shirley shot back, helping herself to two hot dogs. “Have you seen Junior around?”

“Oh, honey, Junior is too young for you,” Tanya said with a wink.

“Hah. No one is too young for me,” Shirley sassed right back, picking up a bottle of ketchup. “But have you seen him? Or heard anything about him? I heard he’s in a bit of trouble.”

Tanya looked over her shoulder, then leaned in. “Well,” she whispered dramatically, “Nigel was over by Junior’s house the other night, and he said he heard a lot of yelling. Naturally, Nigel waited around to see who it was.”

“Naturally,” Shirley agreed. “Who was it?”

Tanya looked around, then lowered her voice dramatically. “Nora Fuery.” She said it like she’d just delivered a veritable bombshell.

“Wow. I didn’t see that coming.” Shirley looked thoughtful.

“That’s what I said, girl,” Tanya said.

I sat up. “Nora?”

“Yep.” Tanya nodded dramatically. “Nora stormed out of there, got in her Jeep, and drove away so fast that she almost hit a fire hydrant. She was

steamed, ladies. Steamy, steamy, steamy."

"Were they dating?" I asked.

"Heck no," Tanya said firmly. "But I think she was onto a story, and he wasn't giving her information."

"Huh." I leaned back and met Shirley's gaze. My breakfast with Nora was suddenly looking a lot more interesting. "What was the story?"

"I don't know," Tanya said. "Spoiled milk? Embezzling from the dairy? Duane's dirty little secret?"

I raised my brows. "Duane has a dirty little secret?"

Tanya gave me a look and rolled her eyes. "Rainbow, everyone has a dirty little secret. Don't you?"

I started laughing. "Yeah, okay, but mine aren't enough to get Nora worked up."

"No?" Tanya raised her brows. "Rainbow, honey pot. Tanya Tuscani is the queen of makeup, disguises, and camouflage. She knows what she sees, and she knows you're worth ten thousand dollars, so don't tell me that you don't have dirty little secrets."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "I'm not—"

Tanya patted my arm. "Rainbow, any and all secrets of my girls are safe with me, and that includes anyone who is friends with Shirley. But Duane's dirty little secret is none of Nora's business, or anyone else's."

I considered that. "Is Duane's dirty little secret enough to get someone killed?"

Tanya's eyes widened. "Like who? Who got killed?"

I looked at Shirley, giving her the silent question of whether we should tell Tanya. But how do you tell someone about a murder? I didn't want to be the one to share the news, since Tanya obviously hadn't heard about Junior yet.

Shirley shrugged and spread her hands.

“What?” Tanya looked back and forth between us. “What in glitter’s name are you two talking about with all those secret glances and hand gestures? Did someone get killed?”

Shirley didn’t answer. Instead, she repeated my question. “Do you think Duane’s dirty little secret is enough to get someone killed?”

“Uh, uh, uh.” Tanya shook her head. “Oh, no, girl. You don’t get answers from me if you’re holding out. That’s not how it works. You know better than that, Shirley. Who died?”

There was a long pause at the table. I had no idea if Tanya was someone we could trust, but she seemed amazing. But I deferred to Shirley.

Finally, Shirley let out a breath. “We think maybe Fiona was murdered.”

Oh. She brought up Fiona, not Junior? Why had she done that?

Tanya’s eyes widened. She stared at Shirley in silence for a long moment before she finally spoke. “Well, hot tulips and golden bananas. If someone killed my girl Fiona, they are going to answer to me. That woman was an icon of all that is right in this world.” Tanya sounded so mad that I started to grin.

Yeah, Tanya was amazing.

“I don’t know how in the devil’s playground Duane’s dirty little secret could have anything to do with Fiona, but I am going to do some digging, and I will let you know. Tanya is on the case, girls. She’s on it. And she’s not getting off it.”

I touched Tanya’s arm. “Hey, if Fiona did get killed, and you ask questions—”

“Oh, don’t you worry about me, Rainbow. I may not look like it, but discretion is one of my superpowers.” She drew a capital T across her chest. “I’m a superhero, and I don’t mess around.”

“Oh, hey, ladies! Hi, Tanya! These hot dogs are the best.” Coco appeared over Tanya’s left shoulder, grabbed two, and set them on her plate

before claiming her seat from Ethan's shadowy presence. "Looking fab as always, Tanya."

"Back at you, my fabulous Latina queen!" Tanya pivoted right into showgirl mode, as if we hadn't just been talking murder and mayhem. "You set the standard for gorgeous, fierce female energy on this island."

"Don't I know it?" Coco looked delighted by the recognition. "I love being me."

"And we love trying to keep up. Honey, you inspire me every day to find my roar." Tanya curled her hand into a playful wildcat claw, then blew us a kiss. "Gotta keep moving. See you all later!" She drew the T on her chest again, pointed at us, then swept herself over to the next table.

Coco picked up a hot dog, watching Tanya. "Dare I ask why Tanya is in superhero mode? What did you guys say to her?"

Shirley sighed. "I'm not confident she really knows what discretion is," she said. "She thinks people underestimate her, but literally no one is fooled by all the glitter. She's the badass bitch in this town. If she asks questions, whoever she is asking will know she's onto something."

Coco set her hot dog down. "Oh, tell me you didn't tell her about the murders."

"I told her about Fiona," Shirley said. "It seemed safer than Junior, and I thought she would think I was insane."

"She didn't?" Coco looked surprised.

"Nope." Shirley sighed and filled Coco in on Duane's dirty little secret, Nora's late-night fight with Junior, and Tanya's outrage over someone possibly murdering Fiona.

"Well, huh." Coco took a bite as she thought. "I wonder what Nora knew. I never thought of her as a great reporter, but maybe she was onto something. I have no idea what Duane's dirty little secret is, but I'm guessing Junior did. He was always close with that family."

"I would agree," Shirley said.

I leaned back in my seat, scanning the dining room for…who? Someone watching me? Gator, the Wilson brother who drove the pickup onto the island when I arrived?

My gaze landed on a familiar man across the dining room. “Who is Bernie sitting with?” I didn’t recognize the woman or the two men with him.

“He’s at a singles table,” Shirley said. “If you book a single ticket, you get seated with other solo attendees. He booked his ticket at the same time I did, when we saw the boat arriving.”

“Isn’t that sort of sad he’s sitting alone?” I watched Bernie munch on his hot dogs, listening to the others at his table chat.

“Nah,” Shirley said. “Bernie loves to sit with strangers. He’s obsessed with people. He knows everyone who goes on and off the island. Especially since his wife passed away. He and Harvey sit at the bridge and see everything.”

Bernie looked over, and I waved him to come sit with us.

He smiled at me, and shook his head, waggling his finger at me.

Shirley touched my arm. “He’s good, Rainbow. Trust me. That man chooses his own path every day.”

He was watching me with an amused grin, and I almost felt him telling me to leave him be. I leaned back in my seat, watching as he stood up and sauntered through the door that led to the kitchen. “He’s up to something,” I said.

“Bernie? He’s definitely not up to anything. He’s a sideline sitter. Fiona often tried to get info from him when she was fixing something, but he never budged,” Coco said cheerfully. “But we all love him!”

“He has a good heart, doesn’t he?” I watched the kitchen staff welcome him before the door closed behind him.

“He sure does,” Shirley agreed. “That dog of his was a trouble-making stray. Bernie spent days trying to catch it, and once he did, he loved on that

cranky beast until it was a pile of mush. He likes to do that. Take care of the broken."

He'd been nice to me. Did he think I was broken?

At that moment, a burger-meister danced up and presented his tray. We all chose a burger, and then came wings, onion rings, and fries. Within moments, our plates were loaded, and it looked amazing.

We spent dinner chatting about all we knew so far, including Ethan's visit, which then led to filling Coco in on my past. She'd been thrilled and swore her life on my secret. Since she'd kept Fiona's secret, I had faith, and it felt good to get more support. Plus, since Tanya and Ethan had figured some of it out, I knew it wouldn't stay hidden for long, so the more allies I could prearrange, the better chance I had at coming out unscathed.

Before too long, dinner was in our bellies, and coffee was being served. Shirley stopped one of the coffee servers as he went by with his pot of decaf. "Hey, Felix. Looking good."

He was about Shirley's age, and he gave her a big smile. "You're lighting up the night, Shirley. As always."

She giggled, and then patted his arm, leaning in. "Is there going to be roulette tonight? I was looking forward to showing Rainbow here how to play."

He shook his head. "Junior hasn't come to work the last two times. No one else can run the table. He has the key."

Huh. It sounded like Felix didn't know Junior was never coming back to work. Tanya also hadn't known. I would have thought news that big would travel to all ends of this island within moments.

Shirley frowned. "Did he get fired?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so, but I heard him arguing with the head chef last time he was on board. They were yelling about the blue cabinet."

"Is that on the boat?" Shirley sounded so innocent I was impressed.

“I don’t know.” His eyes brightened. “Are you gaming tonight, Shirley?”

“Maybe, we’ll see.” She patted his arm. “I’m so worried about Junior. Do you think he’s all right?”

I kicked Shirley under the table. She kicked me back, and instead of backing off, she added. “He’s been jumpy lately. I was wondering if something’s wrong.”

Felix paused. “You know, he has been a little strange lately. He didn’t even deliver our milk today. He never misses.”

Shirley nodded. “Well, thanks. Let me know if you hear from him.”

Felix gave her a big smile. “Will do!” He smiled at me. “Great dance, Rainbow!”

He headed to the next table, and Coco picked up her hot dog. “It’s Saxon. He definitely killed Junior. I should have thought of that.”

I picked up my coffee, surprised by how good it smelled. “Who is Saxon?”

“The head chef on the *Buttered Rum*. He’s a spicy fellow. Very temperamental.”

“Saxon, you think?” Shirley cocked her head. “Why would he kill Junior?”

“I don’t know, but that man is trouble.” Coco leaned in. “He used to have some fancy restaurant in New York, but then he went bankrupt. He descended upon Blueberry Island to make a name for himself so he could crawl back to the big city, but he hasn’t made it yet. He thinks he’s more upscale than the rest of us, and he’s always trying to get his restaurant in town nominated for local awards. I bet he wanted Junior to give him some special deal on milk, and Junior refused.”

Shirley shot her a skeptical look. “He killed Junior over milk?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.” Coco sat back. “The mob owns the restaurant business in New York, doesn’t it? Saxon probably traded a few

kneecappings for customers in his day."

Alarm shot through me. "Saxon has mob connections?"

Shirley hit Coco in the arm. "Stop spreading rumors! Just because Saxon is a little feisty over his restaurant in general doesn't mean he's a killer."

"Doesn't mean he isn't," Coco grumped. "I know these things." She leaned in. "Just the other day, Philippe told me to keep an eye on him."

I blinked. "Who's Philippe?"

"Coco's dead husband," Shirley said. "They chat all the time."

"True love never dies. It just changes planes of reality." Coco nodded. "If Philippe says to watch out for Saxon, then we need to watch out for him. I just didn't realize it was because Saxon was about to murder Junior. I'll have to ask him to be more specific next time."

Wow. "Um, how would Saxon have killed Junior if he was on the *Buttered Rum*?" I asked. "It was only a few hours ago."

"Because Saxon wouldn't have gotten on until the boat got here," Coco said.

I looked back and forth between them. "How do you know?"

"The *Buttered Rum* picks up her staff at whatever port she docks for the evening. So everyone working tonight is from Blueberry Island. They all get messages an hour before that the boat's coming in, and they get invited to work." Shirley leaned forward. "No one knows where the *Buttered Rum* actually docks or where she comes from. Or even who owns her. The hour she spends in port before taking on passengers is to have the staff get to the boat."

Shirley wiggled her brows. "It's so mysterious, right? There are all sorts of rumors about where the *Buttered Rum* comes from. They don't get their food from their landing port, but no one knows who supplies it."

"Some people think she's a ghost ship from the past," Coco said. "She becomes corporeal when the veil between the worlds grows thin, drifting

into our present to connect us to times gone by."

I stared at her. "Are you one of the ones who believes that?" Because it sounded like she did.

"Coco is bat-shit crazy," Shirley said cheerfully, using the same terms that Coco had used in her letter to describe Shirley. "Others think she's owned by the eccentric mystery author named Beau Hammersley, from Bass Derby. He sends the boat out so he can people-watch and get ideas for his stories," Shirley said. "He's wildly anti-social, and if he was on the boat, no one would ever know. I've asked him repeatedly, and he denies it, but that means nothing when it comes to him."

"You *asked* him? Do you know Beau Hammersley?" I was a little starstruck. He was the only author I made time to read. Or rather, listen to, on my way to work. "His newest book, *The Bloody Knife*, was fantastic."

Shirley nodded. "I do know him quite well. He's an odd man, but my friends Hattie and Mia somehow get him involved in their Bass Derby shenanigans."

Wow. I sat back. Hattie *and* Beau Hammersley together? "That is so cool. I want to go to Bass Derby."

"Yeah, you do." Shirley grinned. "I'll give Hattie a call and see what she has going on."

"And Beau? He'll be there?" Yep. I was fangirling, and I was going to own it.

"You never know with him. He's an unpredictable, billionaire recluse with a heart of gold, even though he pretends he cares about no one and nothing."

"The best kind of recluse." Coco picked up an onion ring. "You like mysteries, Rainbow?" She sounded delighted.

"I love his," I said. "He's so strange."

"Well, he could be watching us right now," Shirley said. "Cameras in every chandelier."

I looked around the room, and my newly paranoid gaze quickly found what could be a camera in the corner I was facing, up on the ceiling. I followed the line of the ceiling, and I saw them in every corner, plus some in the middle of the ceiling.

A little chill ran down my spine. “We’re definitely being watched.”

“I know. Isn’t it fun?” Shirley leaned in. “What madness do we walk into when we get on the *Buttered Rum*? No one really knows.”

“Even the folks who work on the boat don’t know who owns her,” Coco said.

“What about the captain?”

Shirley shrugged. “No one ever sees the folks who drive the boat.”

I looked around the room again, this time noticing that the servers were chatting with everyone, and that there was such a feeling of joviality in the room. “Everyone seems to love it.”

“What’s not to love?” Shirley said cheerfully. “The mystery is part of what makes it so fun!”

I drummed my fingers on the white tablecloth. “Do you think the sudden appearance of the *Buttered Rum* had anything to do with Junior getting killed earlier today? Depending on how far away it docks, the decision to cruise tonight may have been made after Junior died.”

Shirley’s eyes widened. “Or after you arrived in town. Maybe its appearance was triggered by your arrival.”

I blinked. “You think it has to do with *my* past?”

“Or maybe your arrival woke up Fiona’s past.”

“Well done, ladies.” Coco picked up a wing. “You might be onto something. Maybe we’re actually on a murder boat.” She nodded at my butter knife. “Better put that in your pocket in case you need to defend yourself.”

I gripped the knife, looked at the cameras, then casually dropped the knife to the floor. Oopsie. Instead of picking it up, I slid it into the cuff of

my boot. Because why not?

The second I let go of the knife, I saw the lights flicker. I bolted upright and looked around, but no one seemed to have noticed. “Um, guys? Did the lights just flicker?”

Shirley grinned. “They sure did.”

The lights flickered again, and this time, I heard other people notice. Anticipation rippled through the room. Not fear. Excitement. I frowned. “Is this part of the experience?”

The room suddenly went black.

Absolute pitch black.

Shirley shifted. “This isn’t,” she said quietly. “Hang on, ladies. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Me, too.” Coco’s voice was equally low.

The lights stayed off. No emergency lighting came on.

Then suddenly, the sound of the boat’s engines stopped.

The rhythmic chugging dissolved into deafening silence.

Conversation stopped. I could feel the energy in the room hovering between anticipation and worry.

Silence and darkness continued. Expanding. Taking over the space.

Anticipation surrendered to worry…to fear. I heard low murmurs escalating in intensity.

I reached out, found Shirley’s wrist, and wrapped my hand around it. “Grab Coco,” I said softly. “Make sure we stay together.”

“Got her.”

Keeping my hand on Shirley, I got up and moved between them, putting my hand on Coco’s shoulder, needing to make sure they were both safe. Accounted for.

My heart wasn’t racing.

No panic.

Just the focused, readiness that I’d spent my professional career navigating.

Waiting.

Then suddenly, behind us, there was a loud crash.

Keeping my hands on Shirley and Coco, I spun around, but it was still pitch black.

I heard a muttered curse from the area of the stage, a man’s voice, followed by a piercing scream.

And then the lights came on.

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CHAPTER 13

Coffee Guy Felix was sprawled across the stage in a pool of blood.

"Oh my God!" Gasps echoed across the room, and someone screamed.

But before anyone could move, the emcee Mirabelle walked out onto the stage, still wearing her velvet cape. She held up her hands for silence, and a hush seized the room.

"Welcome to Pirate's Widow!" she shouted. "The countdown has begun!"

The room erupted into raucous cheers, and then chaos ensued. People started flipping the chairs upside down, tossing tablecloths, crawling on the floor.

I froze. "What's happening?" I was absolutely terrified for my life. What kind of crazed enclave had I walked into?

A man shouted, held up a gold envelope, and then sprinted out of the room with the rest of his table.

Shirley grinned at me. "Every night on the *Buttered Rum* involves a game of some kind. We never know what game or even what the rules are, because the rules change every time."

I tried to process that as quickly as my "I'm going to be eaten by zombies" brain could switch tracks. "It's a game, but no one knows the rules?"

“Exactly.” Shirley’s face was glowing. “Pirate’s Widow is a murder mystery. Every table has a gold envelope to start their quest. Each table’s quest is different. The first one to solve their quest gets a prize.”

“What kind of prize?” The room was bedlam. It had to be a good prize.

Coco had crawled under our table, apparently looking for our gold envelope.

“You never know.” Shirley shrugged. “Last time, it was a month’s supply of milk from Stone Dairy. Another time it was a bouquet of roses from Gemma’s Flowers. It’s always sponsored by a local business.”

“Milk? As in the milk that Junior delivered?” There was no way that was a random coincidence.

Shirley’s brows went up. “Son of a biscuit,” she said softly. “Yes, it was. It was two weeks ago. He wasn’t on board that night. It was the first time he hadn’t run the roulette table in years.”

“Got it!” Coco popped up with a gold envelope as the room began to empty. Even the servers were running around with gold envelopes, and the tables of half-eaten food remained uncleared.

I could hear shrieks of laughter echoing through the ship, getting fainter as people ran off with their golden envelope. I took a breath, letting the joyous energy break down the oh-no-Felix-is-lying-in-a-pool-of-blood panic that was still trying to grip me. “I need to check on him.”

Leaving Shirley and Coco to tear open our envelope, I hopped up on the stage, being careful not to step in his blood, because doing that twice in one day was overkill. I knelt next to him. “Felix,” I whispered. “This is Rainbow. Are you sure you’re not dead?”

He didn’t even twitch.

I tried again. “You look very dead, and I’m freaking out. Blink twice if you’re alive.”

No blinking. Just a blank, empty stare.

Assuming he was not actually dead, all I was dealing with was the equivalent of a reluctant witness. I could handle that. That was my zone of genius.

“Felix,” I whispered. “If you don’t blink twice, I’m going to tell Shirley that you have a crush on her.”

His gaze shot to me for a split second, and then he blinked twice rapidly.

I patted him on the shoulder. “I’ll take your secret to the grave.” I stood up, feeling much better now that I knew Felix was alive and well, and that my instincts that he had a crush on Shirley had been on point.

I stretched out my shoulders and looked around the room with more curiosity now that I knew it was just a bunch of islanders having a grand time out on the water.

We were the only ones still in the dining room, and the room was in full disarray. “Who cleans this up?” I asked as I returned to the table.

“We all do,” Shirley said. “It’s not always this messy, but everyone on board does the cleanup.”

Fascinating. This *Buttered Rum* business was like a study in human nature. It felt like something that an eccentric, reclusive billionaire mystery writer might indeed set up.

I sat down across from them. “So, where’s the blue cabinet?”

Shirley looked at me in confusion. “The blue cabinet?”

“The one Junior and Saxon were arguing about? And where is our mysterious chef? Is he on the boat tonight? Will he be playing the game too?” Since the servers had all run out with golden envelopes, I was assuming that the kitchen staff might also be involved.

Shirley and Coco looked at each other, then Shirley smiled sweetly at me. “You know,” she said, “we could just do that later. I mean, it *is* Pirate’s Widow.”

I raised my brows. “You want to play Pirate’s Widow instead of finding a real murderer?”

She smiled. “Yes, exactly. I’m so glad you understand.”

“But—”

“This is only the second time I’ve ever played Pirate’s Widow,” Shirley said. “We can look for the blue cabinet while everyone’s cleaning up.”

“Exactly,” Coco said. “I’m happy to skip cleanup. I want to find Felix’s killer first!” She waved a gold-edged card. “It says, ‘let the chips fall where they may.’”

“Chips? Like food?” Shirley drummed her fingers on the table. “You think the kitchen?”

“They don’t serve chips,” Coco said.

“Chips. Wood chips?” Shirley beamed. “Maybe they’re going to put Felix in a woodchipper?”

“Are you guys complete idiots?” I blurted out. “We’re on a Prohibition speakeasy boat. There has to be a secret game room around here, and I’m guessing that there are poker chips in it.”

They both stared at me, then Coco let out a whoop. “Good job! I knew Fiona would bring in a crackerjack!”

“The game room’s in back,” Shirley said. “It’s usually locked, but if the clue leads us there, it’ll be open. Let’s go!”

I sat there as they both stood up, holding out my hands in disbelief. “What about Junior? And Fiona?”

Shirley put her hands on her hips. “We have no idea where the blue cabinet is, and this card gets us into the game room. It’s as good a place to start as any. Junior definitely had access to the game room to get the supplies to run the roulette table.”

“Plus, I’m sure Saxon ran off with his golden card as well,” Coco said. “We’ll bump into him somewhere.”

“And we’ll be less suspicious if we’re actually following our quest,” Shirley added. “There are cameras everywhere, and whoever is watching knows what our quest is. This is actually the perfect game for our purposes. It gets us access to the whole boat.”

Okay, so they had a point. “You’ll show me Saxon if we run across him? And Duane? And Jasmine?”

“You bet. Let’s go.” Shirley grabbed the card, and the two of them took off across the room, heading for a door in the back corner.

I checked for the butter knife in my boot, then caught up to them as they reached the door.

Shirley looked over at us, her eyes gleaming. “You think it’s open?”

“If we’re right about poker chips, then yes.” Coco looked equally thrilled.

But I was thinking about the fact that Coco had made reservations, so we might have been intentionally paired with our quest. No one else had gone through this door on their quest.

I almost wanted that door not to open.

But when Shirley turned the knob, the door surrendered to her. She gave a muffled shriek of delight, and then hurried inside. I took one last look behind me at the empty room, at Felix lying on the stage in a pool of blood, and then I stepped inside the game room.

The game room was uninhabited. It had another bar, a massive hexagonal table in the middle that would probably seat twenty people, and glass wall cabinets full of every gaming device you would need. Pool cues. Ping pong paddles. Decks of cards.

But no blue cabinet. Just mahogany frames and glass doors. Of course that would be too easy.

“Poker chips,” Shirley said. She was in front of a cabinet that had stacks of poker chips. She tugged on the door, but it was locked. “Do either of you

know how to pick locks? We need Mia from Bass Derby. She's great at picking locks."

What a random, helpful skill.

"I can break the glass," Coco said. "Should we do that?"

"No, that's definitely against the rules," Shirley shot back. "We'll get banned if we break something."

The two ladies bonded over the horror of being banned from the *Buttered Rum* while I thought about the clue. "Let the chips fall where they may."

Fall.

I studied the table, then dropped to my knees and peered under it. The carpet was a deep rich red, with small green squares. No poker chips or gold envelope. I started to get up, then decided to crawl right under the table. I rolled onto my back and studied the underside of the table.

No gold envelope, but there was a key secured to the bottom of the table with duct tape. It was a little key, like the size that would go in a padlock. Not a door key. Maybe the size that would fit a blue cabinet? Um… "You guys? What are we looking for? A gold envelope?"

"That would be my first guess," Shirley said. Then she paused. "Where are you? Did you find a secret passageway?"

"I'm under the table." But it didn't surprise me that there might be secret passageways in this boat. I sat up to take a closer look at the key. "Didn't Felix say something about Saxon and Junior arguing about a missing key?"

Shirley paused and I heard her and Coco discussing. Then she said, "Yes, he did. Why?"

"Found a key."

"I found a gold envelope!" Coco shouted at the same time.

So, the key wasn't the clue. I wasn't supposed to be under the table.

I heard a chair move, and then Shirley crawled under the table with me. “Where is it?”

I pointed.

She peered at the bottom of the table. “Fantastic,” she said. “That’s a new key.”

“Yep. Not from the era of this boat.”

She laid down next to me, and we studied it. “That’s certainly a random place to stash a key,” she observed.

“Sure is.” I paused. “Do you think we should take it?”

She cleared her throat. “If we damage the boat, we get banned.”

“I can take it off carefully.” I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted that key. I didn’t want to get tangled up in a murder investigation, but my life and freedom could be at stake, so I couldn’t afford to crawl out from under the table and pretend I hadn’t seen it.

“It might be part of the game,” Shirley said. “Something to tempt us. It could be cursed. Like, if we get it, then an alarm might go off, and we’ll have to walk the plank and swim back to shore. We found the envelope. That key is definitely not what we’re supposed to take.”

I looked over at her. “They have a plank on this boat?”

“Sure do.”

I considered that. “I can swim.”

She grinned. “So can I.”

“The key might have to do with Junior’s murder.”

“It might.”

Coco banged on the table. “You guys, the clue is ‘let the sun shine in.’ Any thoughts?”

Shirley and I ignored her. “I don’t mind getting banned,” I said.

“You say that now, but in six months, when we’re all running down to the docks because the *Buttered Rum* just arrived, you’ll be devastated to miss out.”

“Maybe I’ll be back in my old life.”

Shirley sighed. “Evie, you can never go back to your old life. You know that.”

“I’m not giving up on it.” I sat up, peering more closely at the key. “I don’t see any alarm wires. Why don’t you get out from under here, and I’ll take it. No need for both of us to get in trouble.”

“I love trouble. Why do you get to be in trouble?” She reached up for the key. “I’m taking it.”

No way was I going to let Shirley have to walk the plank. “No! I am!” I grabbed for the key, and she shoved me to the side.

I shoved her back, fell across her, and yanked the key off the table, pulling off pieces of wood with it.

She sucked in her breath. “You damaged the table!”

I pulled the tape off the key and stuck it back on the table. “Yep, but no alarm went off, so we’re fine.”

“You’ve never heard of a silent alarm?”

“Good point.” I scrambled out from under the table. “Time to go.”

Shirley was right behind me. “Come on, Coco. Let’s jet to where the sun shines in.”

Coco now had two gold envelopes in her hand. “But where is that?”

“A window? A roof deck? A cabana? Let’s check anything.” I had a bad feeling, and I wanted out of the room. If that was the key that had gotten Junior killed, I didn’t want to be caught in the room where it had gone missing.

“Roof deck!” Coco shouted. “Let’s go!” She led the way out the door, but I paused to look around the room, to see if there were any modern locks that might match the key, but all the cabinets had an antique keyhole.

I followed them out of the room as another foursome ran past us and into the game room we’d just left. Coco seemed to know the way, leading

us down a hall, and then up a flight of circular twisted stairs, the key burning in my front pocket.

We reached the top and emerged into a hallway that opened up on the top deck of the boat. It was evening, so there was no sun shining down, but in the light of day, it would be the perfect place for a sun bath. It had a brass railing on all four sides, several lounge chairs, a few high-top tables, and a bar that was unattended.

White Christmas lights were wrapped around the railing, and tiki torches were burning at the four corners. It was so charming that I wanted to park myself there for the rest of the night and let the party go on without me.

There were two other groups up there, and Shirley and Coco greeted them both, doled out fake information about what our clue was and where we'd been, then hurried back to me. "If there was a gold envelope up here, they would have found it," Shirley whispered.

"It's too obvious," Coco agreed.

The steamboat whistle suddenly blew, scaring the bejeebers out of me. Then Mirabelle's voice came over the speaker system. "Olly-olly-in-come-free!" Then she rang what sounded like a dinner bell.

We stared at each other. "What does that mean?" I asked.

The two other groups screamed and ran for the stairs.

"That sounds like what we used to shout at the end of hide and seek," Shirley said.

"When it was time for everyone to come in," Coco said.

"Last one back to the dining room will have to walk the plank," Shirley shouted. "Run!"

"Oh, sun of a beach!" Coco and Shirley both took off for the stairs.

I followed them. "How do you know that's what we're supposed to do?" I asked as they hustled down the stairs.

“Context,” Shirley huffed. “Remember, no one knows the rules. You have to figure them out. Run!”

They hit the first floor and took off running. I was right behind them, and then suddenly they both crashed into a wall, and I dove to the right to keep from plowing into them.

“Where in the chocolate heavens did that come from?” Shirley said, rubbing her head. “That wall wasn’t there earlier.”

“We gotta find another way to the dining room,” Coco said. “Hurry!”

The two of them started to run, but I caught Shirley’s arm. “Everyone ran the other way because of this wall, but if it wasn’t there before, that means it’s movable.” Given what I knew of this boat so far, a moving wall was entirely plausible.

“We don’t have time to be wrong,” Coco said, clutching the notecard. “I hate swimming in the ocean.”

I ran my fingers along the wall blocking our path. “You don’t actually know that we’re supposed to go back to the dining room.”

“There was a dinner bell, too,” Coco said. “That summons people to dinner.”

“Could have been a fire bell. Maybe the engine room is engulfed in flames, and we need to start a fire brigade,” I pointed out.

Shirley and Coco shrieked.

I whipped around, but they were gone.

I was alone in the hallway.

Fear slammed into my belly. Shirley would not have left me. What happened to them?

Before I could move, a man sauntered around the corner wearing a tuxedo. He was maybe mid-forties, fit, and tall. His hair was short and slicked back, and his shoes were brightly polished.

He reminded me of some of the firm’s clients, and a chill ran down my spine.

He propped his shoulder against the door and studied me.

Didn’t say a word.

He just dissected every aspect of my appearance.

I thought of the key in my pocket. There were cameras everywhere on the boat. What if Pirate’s Widow had been a way to get people looking for that key? What if the man in front of me knew I had it?

What if the key in my pocket was what Junior had been killed for? And we both knew I had it?

Or was this part of the game?

I leaned back against the false wall and pressed my hands to it, still searching for a latch or a trigger that would open it. “Where’s the bride?” I asked.

One dark eyebrow arched. “The bride?”

“With your tux, I assumed you were here for the wedding. Isn’t that tonight’s game? A wedding?” My fingers slid across a piece of metal, and I paused, feeling for something to push or pull.

“Who are you?” he asked. “You’re not from the island, and everyone on the boat is from the island.”

Had he missed my performance? Or was he pretending? “My name is Princess Buttercup.” Reference to my favorite movie ever. “You?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You seem to be over your screaming incident.”

My screaming incident when Ethan had started to interview me in the ice cream shop? Dayum. So he knew exactly who I was. “Were you there?”

“Heard about it.”

Or he’d been there. My fingers found a little button, and elation shot through me. It must be the release button for the wall.

At that moment, I noticed white powder on his neck. Cocaine? Flour? Was he the murderous chef? I looked at his feet more closely, remembering my own sneakers-and-blood situation. Along the edges of his polished shoes was more white powder, as if he’d walked through a dirty floor after

doing something like, changing in the walk-in freezer before striding across the kitchen.

“You’re Saxon, right?” He wasn’t dressed like a chef, but I was beginning to figure out that nothing was as it should be on this boat.

If I hadn’t been watching so closely, I would have missed the ever-so-slight widening of his eyes. But I hadn’t missed it, because I was an expert at asking people questions they didn’t want to answer. My finger hovered over the button, ready to push it. “Did you ever find the blue cabinet? Or the key? Or did you kill Junior too soon?”

His eyes narrowed. “You have the key. Give it to me.”

He knew. It wasn’t a guess. What was this boat? “Why did you kill Junior?”

“I didn’t kill him.” He held out his hand. “Key.”

But he definitely knew Junior was dead. I hadn’t surprised him. “Where’s the blue cabinet?”

He took a step. “Give me the key, Evie.”

Uh, oh. He even knew my actual name. “I threw it overboard.”

“You didn’t.” He took a step closer, clearly trying to intimidate me.

Well, too bad for him because I had faced down clients of organized crime (unknowingly, of course, but that didn’t change how tough I was). I rubbed my finger over the button. “Who killed Junior, then? And why?”

He paused. “Key first.”

Holy cannoli. He sounded like he knew who’d killed him. A chill ran down my spine, and my heart started to race. “Nope.” I somehow managed to keep my voice steady. “Who killed Junior? And why?”

“Junior was in trouble.”

Duh. Like I couldn’t have figured that out. “What kind?”

“He didn’t say. But he made some bad choices.” Saxon was inching toward me, so slowly it was almost imperceptible, but I knew all about that kind of physical intimidation, so I was tracking it very carefully. But I had

to admit, Saxon was no slouch at what he was trying to do, which of course, made him interesting.

Wasn't it a little odd that a resident of Blueberry Island was trained in the art of subtle intimidation? Or maybe he'd been naturally blessed with that skill.

Then again, I was also trained in that elusory art, and I was here, so there we go.

"The cops are looking for you," I lied. "You left your scissors there," I said, referencing the ones that had been left outside my door.

He didn't fake the flutter of surprise. "Scissors?"

"Never mind." He was almost close enough to grab me. I was going to have to push the button before I had answers. I hated having to play my ace too early, but if he had killed Junior, who wanted to stick around and get touchy feely with him?

Not me, thanks.

"If you didn't do it, Saxon," I said, injecting urgency into my voice, "tell me what you know or the cops are going to come looking for you."

He paused his encroachment. "Junior stole something," he said. "I was asked to get it back. I wouldn't have killed him before I got it."

Oh, yay, I got info. "Who did he steal from?"

"I need that key, Evie. Just give it to me, and you can go back to your ice cream store." He twitched, and I hit the button just as he lunged.

But the wall didn't swing open.

The floor opened.

With a yelp of surprise, he dropped like a cement block through the hole in the floor. I released the button, and the trap door snapped shut, sealing him off.

What. The. Actual. Heck.

Was that what had happened to Shirley and Coco? Had I just dropped him right on top of them?

Panic surged through me, and I hit the button again. This time, the fake wall slammed open, throwing me down the hall. I landed on my knees, and then spun around just as the fake wall settled itself into the wall of the hallway, sinking in until it was almost invisible.

Had I not opened the trap door then? I'd released the wall instead? I looked down at the floor, and I saw the outline of where the wood was split for the trap door. I ran my fingers all over it, but I didn't find any way to open it. The button on the fake wall was now hidden, and I couldn't press that either.

So had someone else opened the trap door? I laid down on the floor and pressed my ear to the wood. "Shirley? Coco? Can you hear me?"

No response. I hit my palm on the floor. "Shirley! Coco!"

Nothing. Not even a protest from Saxon.

I sat up and looked around. The hallway was empty. I heard a sudden clank, and then the engines kicked on again, and the boat began to move with a lurch.

I scrambled to my feet. If everyone was returning to the dining room, then that's where I wanted to be. In a crowd. I had no idea which way to go, but Shirley and Coco had been heading down this hallway, so I broke into a run, racing toward the heavy wooden door at the end.

It was unlocked, and when I wrenched open the door and ran inside, I was back in the dining room.

It was packed, people were crowded around an…ice cream sundae bar.

Making sundaes.

So the dinner bell had actually been calling people back for dessert? No walking the plank. Just dessert?

"What?" I leaned against the door, so confused, but also so impressed.

I was beginning to understand why the people of Blueberry Island were obsessed with the *Buttered Rum*. It was literally insane, unpredictable, alarming, and clever.

I kind of loved it. Or I would have, if I hadn't almost been attacked by the man who might have killed Junior. Other than that? This was just crazy enough to appeal to my weirdo brain that I'd tried to suppress for all these years as a workaholic.

Feeling much better at the sight of all the ice cream (because what bad things could happen when ice cream was involved?), I scanned the room for my nearest and dearest.

Down in front, Shirley and Coco were huddled up, talking quietly, not yet loaded up on ice cream. Shirley was scanning the room, and then her gaze landed on me. Her face lit up so brightly that I felt a little warm and fuzzy inside.

Shirley was happy I was there. Didn't that feel good? It did.

I trotted down the steps and slid into my seat. "Did you guys go through the floor?"

"We did!" Shirley looked thrilled. "We landed on a slide, and it spun us around and dumped us out into a ball pit."

"Wow." That was so random, but also made perfect sense, in a *Buttered Rum* kind of way.

"I've never heard of trap doors on the boat. Are they new? Have they been here the whole time? I have so many questions," Coco said. "Let's get some ice cream while we contemplate the magic that is the boat. It's from your store, after all." But she didn't move. She was grinning at me with visible anticipation.

"What? Did Saxon fall on you?" I asked. "He went through right after you."

"No, but we found something better." Shirley leaned forward, her eyes glowing. "We found the blue cabinet."

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CHAPTER 14

"YOU DID?" I'd actually forgotten about the blue cabinet in all the drama of trapdoors, moving walls, and the Saxon encounter. "Where is it?"

Shirley leaned forward and jerked her head toward a door. "It's in the men's bathroom. We passed by it on our way from the ball pit back to the dining room."

Of course Shirley and Coco had searched the men's room. "Does the cabinet have a lock?"

Shirley grinned. "A sparkly new one that looks like it will fit that key."

Whew. I couldn't believe we were so close to answers. "Rock on. That's fantastic. Well done, you guys." My heart started to race, and I flexed my hands.

"We're superstars." Coco was leaning back, scanning the room. "Saxon just came in. He's looking around."

I grimaced. "I ran into him just after you guys went through the floor. He knew I had the key, and that Junior had been in trouble. He said Junior stole something, and Saxon was supposed to get it back." I watched Coco watching Saxon. "He knew Junior was dead."

Shirley rubbed her jaw. "I'm betting that whatever Junior stole is in that cabinet."

“Saxon also said he wouldn’t have killed Junior before getting it back,” I said.

“Well, that’s just a load of bunk. Maybe Junior told him where the key was, so he killed him, and now he realizes maybe it was a little premature. Criminals are stupid all the time,” Coco said, her gaze not leaving Saxon. “He hasn’t noticed us yet. May I suggest we retire to the men’s room to find out what Junior hid away?”

“I’m in.” I kept my back toward the room where Coco was watching. “Let’s get out of here.”

“This way.” Shirley dropped to her knees and began to army crawl between the tables.

Coco slithered out of her chair and began to follow Shirley across the gorgeous carpet.

“Wow.” Tanya came to stand beside me. “What are they doing?”

“Trying to avoid being seen by Saxon. We think he knows something about Fiona’s death.” I almost started laughing. “They’re very dramatic.”

“I love drama,” Tanya said. “I very much admire them for their commitment to such a worthy cause. Are you going to crawl, too?”

“I guess I have to. I’m the one Saxon is after.”

“Are you?” Tanya glanced over her shoulder. “My, my, isn’t Saxon looking handsome tonight. I’ll bet that he’d love a little visit from his favorite Tanya. I’m sure I could distract that dangerous bull long enough for you to stroll right out on your own two feet.”

I grinned. “You’re the best.”

“I know, sugar.” She pulled her wig off her clean-shaven head and handed it to me. “I’ll trade for the sunglasses. I know they’re Shirley’s. It’s my chance to get them. The witch refuses to ever let me wear them.”

“Done!” I handed over the shades, and then pulled the wig over my purple hair. “Won’t you feel naked without your wig?”

Tanya put the sunglasses on. “Honey, if you think I go anywhere without coiffure backup, then you don’t know Tanya T as well as you should.” She fluttered her gel-tipped polka-dotted fingers at me. “Now, go follow your crawling grannies to safety while I engage in a little shock and awe for our spicy little chef man.”

She blew me a kiss, then spun away, while I flipped my lavender locks and followed the trail of breadcrumbs left behind by Coco and Shirley. As I weaved by dessert devourers, I didn’t receive any accolades for my ballet, so I decided the lavender wig was a fairly decent disguise.

Shirley and Coco had just reached one of the many doors leading out of the dining room when I strolled up behind them. “Do you guys need knee pads for all that crawling?”

Shirley looked up at me, then shook her head in disgusted admiration. “That little menace took my sunglasses, didn’t she?”

I opened the door for them to crawl through. “She saved me from the bad man. That’s worth some sunglasses.”

“You’re going to have to get those back,” Shirley muttered as she crawled by. “I love them with all my heart.”

“And return the wig while you’re at it,” Coco said. “Lavender isn’t your color.”

“Being alive is, so I’m all in.” I shut the door behind them, and the two sassy seniors hopped to their feet with surprising agility. “Where to?”

Shirley studied me for a moment. “I think Coco’s wrong. You look great in lavender.”

Coco harrumphed. “You always have to try to prove me wrong, don’t you, Shirley? I eagerly await the day you admit that I’m your queen in every way.”

“Never. It’s against the laws of nature for me to ever declare anyone superior to my greatness.” The two of them grinned, pretended to slap each

other in the face, and then each of them grabbed one of my arms and dragged me down the hall, still brawling with good-natured quips.

It felt like the family feud that had never been a part of my childhood. It was sort of endearing and adorable, and I enjoyed every moment…when I wasn't wondering whether Saxon would have actually killed me for the key.

A few twists and turns later, we were standing in front of a beautiful wooden door with a carved bronze sign on it that said "Gentlemen."

Shirley tapped the sign. "There are no gentlemen on Blueberry Island."

"Well, Saxon believes he is." Coco rapped on the door. "Housekeeping," she yodeled. "Any male-identifying humans inside?"

No one answered, so she poked her head inside. "All clear," she announced.

"You stand guard. Rainbow and I will go inside," Shirley said. "You're the best at smoke and mirrors, not me."

"That I am. Your safety is assured. Begone, young adventurers." Coco wandered a few feet to the right and began inspecting an old portrait of a piano player.

"Let's go." Shirley shoved the door open, and we scurried inside.

My first thought was that it was a bathroom meant for royalty. It was as fancy as the rest of the boat, including a cozy lounge area with a velvet love seat, matching chairs, and a tall mahogany display cabinet against the wall. It had glass doors, and on the middle shelf, was a small metal box. A blue box. "You think that's the cabinet?" I couldn't keep the doubt out of my voice.

"No." Shirley pointed behind me. "That is."

I turned around to see a dresser-sized cabinet beside the sink. It had bronze feet, and on the top of it were folded hand towels, a bowl of gold-foiled chocolates, and a pyramid of toilet paper. It looked like solid wood, was wider than the doorway, and appeared to be bolted to the floor.

And the cabinet was blue.

A faded, weathered blue with a shiny modern lock.

Adrenaline rushed through me, but I didn't move as sudden wariness crept over me. "You think we should have Ethan here for this? What if it's something bad? Or something of critical legal importance that we taint because we touch it?"

Shirley met my gaze in the mirror above the sink. "Dear heavens on graham crackers. Are you serious? I thought you quit that absurdly dull and uptight life as a lawyer?"

"I did, but—"

She turned to face me. "Evie, would Evelyn Montgomery open that cabinet without the police present?"

"No, of course not—"

"Would Rainbow? The Rainbow who you need to be?" She put her hands on her hips and waited.

I clenched my fists. "I'm not Rainbow. I made that up so I didn't die."

"All the more reason for you to open that cabinet. You need to be Rainbow, and I need to find out why my best friend died on a beach on a sunny afternoon when she didn't need to."

I bit my lip. "That made too much sense."

"Open it." She tossed me a towel. "And don't get your fingerprints on another murder weapon."

I let the towel drop to the floor. "You open it." I pulled the key out of my pocket and held it out.

She didn't take it. She just waited.

I waved it at her, feeling more desperate. "Shirley, if this is a crime scene, I could get disbarred for knowingly messing with it."

"If you get yourself disbarred by doing something asinine and small-townish, wouldn't that prove that you're no threat to the big baddies in your past life?"

My head was starting to hurt. “I want the option to still be a lawyer, Shirley. I don’t want to actually be trapped here.”

“You can’t have both, Evie.” Her voice softened. “You can’t keep the door to your old life open, and still make the mob believe that they can leave you alive. My best friend was killed. You want to be killed, too? Because I don’t think you do, and you’re being a complete idiot if you think that a little purple hair and some hot fudge is enough to save you.”

I pressed my palms to my forehead, suddenly feeling the same panic I’d felt when Agent Straus and Leah had cornered me. Impossible choices. “I love my life.”

“You mean you love life in general, right?” She raised her brows. “Because if the mob or your firm decides you’re a danger to them, you will be dead. Open the blue cabinet, Evie, and hope like all that’s salty and sweet that whatever’s in there puts you on the path of no return, not ever, no matter what.”

I didn’t want to be on that path. I wanted choices. I wanted freedom. I wanted…to be alive long enough to choose.

What would my mom say?

She’d tell me to stay alive first, like she hadn’t been able to do.

Mom.

Long settled in her grave, and still telling me what to do.

Had she died to keep me alive? Maybe. So then, it was supremely rude and ungrateful to refuse to make a choice that might keep me alive, when she couldn’t do that for herself.

I refused to add “ungrateful child” to my resumé.

Dammit.

“On the plus side,” I said, as I knelt in front of the blue cabinet, trying not to hyperventilate. “No one can sabotage my car and make it kill me, because I don’t have a vehicle right now. So, hah on them.”

Shirley put her hand on my shoulder, but said nothing.

With a sigh, I slid the key into the lock, almost hoping that it wouldn't fit.

But of course, it did.

And when I turned the key, it obeyed.

A little click sounded in the bathroom as the cabinet unlocked.

I glanced at Shirley, and then I grabbed the brass knob to open it just as I heard something thud against the door. I froze. "Coco?"

The door swung open, and I tensed, expecting to see Saxon.

Or Coco.

But all I saw were Coco's feet, sprawled in the doorway, pink glitter sneakers on limp, motionless ankles.

Then Saxon appeared in the doorway. "Good evening, ladies—"

Shirley shrieked like a banshee, launched herself at him, and full-on assault-tackled him. The two of them slammed into the far wall of the hallway. "Lock the door," she shouted. "Lock the door, Rainbow!"

I lunged for the door, slammed it shut, and then threw the deadbolt on it.

There was another thud from outside, and then silence.

Then, a light knock at the door. "Open the door, Evie," Saxon said, his voice relaxed and friendly. "Coco and Shirley need some medical attention."

My heart seemed to freeze for a split second, then rage flooded through me. The same rage that had consumed me for so long after my mom had died. How dare he hurt them?

And how dare I be afraid of being disbarred when Shirley and Coco had literally just risked their lives for Fiona?

Screw it.

Rainbow was on the job now.

The door shuddered as Saxon threw himself against it, and I heard a crack as the wood began to split.

I had seconds, if that, to work a miracle to save myself, two island treasures, and their best friend.

I ran over to the cabinet, dropped down to my knees, and yanked the door open.

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CHAPTER 15

THERE WAS a velvet curtain hiding whatever was inside from view.

Dear God. Was it a body? It was a small space so if there was a body in there, it was definitely in pieces.

I did not want to see that.

“It’s mine!” Saxon broke the door down before I got the nerve to open the curtain.

I ducked as he lunged for me, but he grabbed my shoulder and yanked me to the side. We crashed into the wall, and I slammed my foot onto his ankle as I heard footsteps racing down the hall.

He grunted in pain as I scrambled away and lunged for the cabinet. He grabbed my ankle, and I kicked him in the face. He yelped and let go, and I hurled myself across the bathroom. I grabbed the curtain and yanked as hard as I could.

It ripped away with a loud tear as Saxon’s arm closed around my waist, and he dragged me backward. “Mine!” he shouted.

I slammed a back elbow into his face, and he gagged and let go as I crawled across the floor. There was a wooden box on the middle shelf. I grabbed it and pulled the lid off.

Something exploded out of the box with a screech. I screamed and fell backward as dozens of brightly colored fabric snakes hit me in the face.

Saxon yelled something, and I shoved my hand into the box, past all the shooting snakes and grabbed a plain white envelope that was inside. I heard shouting in the halls, so I scrambled into one of the stalls, locked the door, and backed against the wall as I frantically tried to get the envelope open.

My fingers felt like they wouldn't work, and I flinched as Saxon clambered to his feet, shouting at me to let him in. He hit the door, and I jumped.

I finally got the envelope open. A white card was inside, so I pulled it out as the bathroom went silent.

His fingers wrapped over the top of the stall door. I could hear heavy breathing, but no voices. Just oppressive panting.

I flipped the card over.

It took me a second to decipher the thin, gold lines in the dimly lit stall, but after a moment, I could read it.

Beware the chef with a charming smile.
Illusions mask a serpent's guile
His blade has tasted mortal breath.
It hungers now for one more death.
His quarry now, the huntresses three
Thrice blow the whistle, or be doomed at sea.

P.S. See more than you see. And do it now.

The P.S. was scrawled in black ink across the bottom.

What. The. Hell.

I flipped it over, but there were no other words.

The huntresses three? Shirley, Coco, and me? Had whoever left that note known we'd be the ones to find it? Warning us that we were next? And…hello? A chef with a charming smile had just thrown me across the bathroom, and was currently hanging on my stall door.

He'd killed someone already? Junior?

Oh, boy.

Sweat beading on my brow, I shook out the envelope, and a small silver whistle fell out into my hand.

It looked like a dog whistle.

I listened to the heavy breathing outside the bathroom.

I read the note again.

Thrice blow the whistle?

Well, hell…why not? I blew the whistle.

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CHAPTER 16

THE PIERCING SHRILLNESS echoed through the bathroom, so loud that it felt like it stabbed right through my eardrums.

I flinched, then blew it again.

Nothing happened.

I looked at the note, then… "This is for you, Shirley."

I blew it a third time.

The note faded into silence.

I waited. For what? Magic?

And then, suddenly, cheers erupted outside the stall. "We have a winner!" It was Mirabelle's voice. "Congratulations to Coco, Shirley, and Rainbow for winning Pirate's Widow!"

The boat's loudspeaker started playing high octane music, and then someone banged on my door. "Open up, Rainbow! You guys did it!"

I was so confused. What was happening? Was this a conspiracy to get me out of the stall so Saxon could kill me?

My heart racing, I went down on my knees and peered under the stall door.

There were a lot of feet in that bathroom.

Including Saxon's flour-covered feet.

Coco’s pink sneakers were no longer in the doorway. I sat down on the toilet, trying to regroup. Until I saw my friends, I wasn’t leaving that stall.

“Rainbow!” Mirabelle banged on the stall door. “Come out and celebrate! We have champagne!”

I didn’t move.

There was movement at the base of the stall door, and I tensed as a shadow crossed the threshold—

Shirley popped her head under the stall door. “Hey, girl.”

Relief shot through me, and I dropped to my knees beside her. “You’re okay?”

“Yep.” She rolled onto her back so she was staring up at me. “So, in unexpected news, we just won Pirate’s Widow.” She sounded as confused as I felt.

“Did Saxon hurt you?” What was going on? Right now, I didn’t care about the game.

“No, not at all.” She wiggled her hand under the door and held out a silken strand of rope. “He just tangled me up in some red velvet rope. It was very soft. Luxurious, really, if you pause to think about it.”

I touched the rope, startled by its softness. “It really is lovely.”

“Right? I feel like royalty.”

“Royalty that was tied up.”

“As part of the game,” she said. “Like who knew? Brilliant.”

Coco suddenly shoved her head under the door next to Shirley. “What in the actual hell, ladies? Like what is happening?”

“Coco!” I was so happy to see her that I literally kissed her forehead. “I thought you were dead!”

“Stop it, wench.” She batted me away, but she didn’t sound mad. “Saxon said I had to lie there, or he’d kill me. It felt like the prudent choice.”

I let out my breath. “But it was a lie?” Yay for my new friends not actually facing death tonight.

“Apparently. I honestly thought he meant it.” Coco sounded as deflated as Shirley and I did. “I thought he was Junior’s killer, and we were the heroines blowing the case wide open. Instead, it was a game. I feel so unaccomplished right now.”

Shirley draped the velvet rope over Coco’s face. “I could tie you up and throw you overboard if you want to almost die for real.”

Coco snatched the rope and threw it at me. “There are a lot of people milling around this bathroom. Open the stall door, Rainbow. We’re not about to get killed, at least. Too many witnesses.”

Oh. I’d forgotten about everyone. Now that she mentioned it, I could hear people talking. “Right.” I draped the velvet rope over my shoulders and stood up as they wiggled out of sight.

I opened the stall door, and then blinked as golden streamers and glittery confetti showered down on us. Mirabelle was cheering. Saxon was beaming at us. Felix was there, blood-covered and all. Ethan was leaning against the opposite wall in the hall, and I could see the crowd gathered, spilling out into the hallway. Roxy, Cinnamon, Bernie, and so many people from the dining room.

Mirabelle held up her arms to present us. “Evie! Who killed Felix?”

I blinked. “What? Felix?”

“What did the note say?” she urged me.

“The note? You mean the one about the chef?” That had been about Felix being stabbed, not Junior? Yeah, that made sense, but…what?

“She did it! Saxon is the murderer! May I present the winning trio!”

The hallway erupted in cheers, and cameras flashed. I adjusted my lavender wig, then threw one hand up in the air, put one hand on my hip and extended one leg and assumed the most dramatic pose I could think of.

Coco took one look at me, and did the same.

It took Shirley a moment longer to decide to join the fun, but then she stepped in front of me, put one foot up on the wall above her head and threw her shoulders back. “To my besties,” she shouted. “Badass bitches for the win!”

Everyone cheered, and then Mirabelle addressed the crowd. “Back to the dining room, for the awards presentation,” she shouted. “Tonight’s prize is one you won’t want to miss! And we have champagne and strawberries for everyone who makes it back to the dining room in the next sixty seconds!”

There were shrieks of delight, and then within moments, we were alone in the bathroom with Mirabelle, Saxon, and Bernie.

Ethan was still lurking in the hallway, looking leisurely dangerous.

Bernie nodded in approval. “Impressive. Winning Pirate’s Widow isn’t easy. Most times, no one wins.”

“Right?” Shirley grinned. “Rainbow shows up, and the impossible happens.”

Coco draped her arm around my shoulders. “She’s special.”

Bernie cocked his head. “I knew Fiona would have liked you,” he said to me. “I knew it the moment you drove over that bridge.”

Coco squeezed my shoulder. “She sure would have.”

I smiled, my heart getting all warm and fuzzy. “Highest praise ever.”

“Amen, sister,” Shirley said. “You got that right.”

Bernie’s gaze flicked around the bathroom, like he was looking for something. He paused for a moment, studying something behind me, but then he looked back at us. “Well done.” He patted my arm, then ambled out of the bathroom and down the hall.

I looked over my shoulder to scan the area, but I didn’t see anything untoward. What had Bernie been looking at?

“Excellent work,” Saxon said. “So well done.”

I put my hands on my hips. “That was all made up?”

“It was our best stuff.” He grinned, looking so pleased with us. “You were all over that key clue and the blue cabinet reference. No one else picked up on the clues they received earlier in the night. Well done!” He shook all of our hands, then patted his jaw. “You got me good, Rainbow. Next time maybe take it easy! It’s just a game.”

He thought I’d known he was only fake-attacking me? I’d hit him as hard as I’d been able. “Is your ankle okay?”

“My ankle?” He grinned and pretended to limp out of the bathroom. “I’ll never walk right again.” Then he winked at us and strode down the hall.

I was so confused. Saxon had felt fully menacing in the hallway earlier, and I’d been genuinely scared when he’d attacked me in the bathroom. Was he that good of an actor?

I realized he hadn’t hurt me at all in the scuffle. Not even a little.

Wow. It had been a fake fight, and I hadn’t even realized it.

Mirabelle beamed at us. “I’m so glad you three won. After that Eggbeater Ballet, I was rooting for you guys.” She seemed so genuinely pleased that I felt deeply loved and adored.

No, not really.

I was still reeling. The whole night? All the clues dropped by the servers had been part of the game?

“Let’s go celebrate,” Mirabelle said. “I have your tiaras!”

“Tiaras?” Coco looked thrilled. “We get tiaras?”

“Yep. They’re gorgeous too.” Mirabelle gestured toward the door. “Let’s go, champs!”

Coco tucked her arm through Mirabelle’s. “I absolutely deserve a tiara. Let’s go, ladies!”

They headed out the door and disappeared from sight.

Ethan remained, lounging against the opposite wall of the hall. He watched us for a moment. “You guys okay?” he asked finally, pausing to

look at me after checking on Shirley.

He sounded genuinely concerned. That was very sweet. I appreciated it. I must have won him over with my scintillating charm when we'd chatted earlier. Maybe I was even off the suspect list. Yay me. "I'm fantastic," I said. "I've always wanted a tiara."

"Peachy," Shirley agreed, but she didn't sound any more enthusiastic than I did.

He studied me. "You didn't think it was a game, did you? You thought Saxon was attacking you?"

"Yeah, kinda thought I was about to die."

"Me too," Shirley said.

Ethan grinned. "You're on the *Buttered Rum.* Why would you think any of it is real?"

"An excellent question." I laughed, the best fake laugh I could do, not fully wanting to open the door about how many murders we thought had occurred on Blueberry Island. "Honestly? I don't have any idea what is happening on this boat. I was just following Shirley and Coco. Did you know there are trap doors on this boat?"

He raised his brows. "Trap doors?"

"Yes." Coco walked up behind him, no longer with Mirabelle. "Shirley and I fell through one." She held up a bottle of champagne and three glasses. "Bernie stole a bottle for us. He said we have time to celebrate before heading in. It's not a margarita, but it's something. We freaking won Pirate's Widow, ladies! Let's celebrate! Mirabelle said it would take a few minutes to set up because we won faster than they expected, so we have a moment."

"That's a great call, Coco. Love that." Shirley took one of the glasses. "You're right. We need to embrace this moment. This is legendary, winning Pirate's Widow. We need to toast to Fiona. It's the one game she never won on the *Buttered Rum.*"

“I know, right?” Coco looked over at Ethan. “Can you give us a moment to toast our dear bestie?”

“Yep.” He paused, like he was going to say something else, but then, all he said was, “Congrats, ladies. Well done.”

“Thank you!” Coco fluttered him out of the bathroom, then headed over to the love seat and sat down. She tossed the bottle on the couch, then flopped on her back, and put her feet up on the wall. “I’m utterly devastated. I thought we knew who had killed Fiona. How did we get played so completely?”

Wow. I’d fully bought into her excitement about the tiaras and winning. Was this entire boat full of excellent actors?

“The *Buttered Rum* is legendary for so many reasons.” Shirley sat down on one of the armchairs and picked up the champagne. “I know we all thought we were onto Fiona’s killer or Junior’s, but we need to not let that overshadow the fact that we won Pirate’s Widow. This is a once-in-a-lifetime victory, ladies.”

“I know. I know.” Coco sat up and picked up a glass. “Fiona is probably rolling her eyes at us right now for being so dramatic. We need to celebrate, ladies. This is amazing!”

“Amen, sister!” Shirley echoed. “Let’s drink Bernie’s champagne and toast the night.” She peeled the foil off the champagne, then popped the cork into the ceiling with impressive dexterity.

“And thank Fiona for sending Rainbow to us,” Coco said. She pointed at me. “You were pivotal in figuring it out. You found that key!”

“So well done,” Shirley agreed as she began filling the glasses. “You’re coming onto the *Buttered Rum* every time, Rainbow.”

Ignoring my glass of champagne, I sat down in the other armchair as Coco and Shirley committed to celebrating their victory with a joyful toast. “So, the blue cabinet and the key were just for the game? How did they know you’d ask Felix about Junior?” I was still trying to recalibrate. I’d

honestly thought Saxon was about to kill me, and I was having a little trouble trying to calm down.

Shirley raised her glass to admire the golden bubbles. “Every server was probably briefed on the clues that each quest needed,” she said. “I’m sure that they all knew that our quest required that we be told about the blue cabinet and the key. It’s up to them to figure out how to get it into the conversation. So when we asked about Junior, Felix made up an argument with Saxon.”

“So well done,” Coco said. “I’m so impressed. This boat gets better every time.”

I pulled off the wig and tossed it on the table, trying to remember what Tanya had told us as opposed to Felix. And had Tanya been part of the game when she’d told us about Nora and Nigel? “What if I hadn’t crawled under the table and found the key?”

“Then we don’t get tiaras,” Coco said cheerfully. “I would have been so sad at the awards ceremony to see other people getting tiaras. What if Bernie had won? He would never do justice to a tiara.”

As Coco and Shirley continued to get themselves more excited about their victory, I looked around the bathroom. Trying to think. “Does this feel off to you guys?”

Coco waved her hand dismissively. “This is how it always works on the boat. It’s very dramatic and unpredictable.”

But Shirley was watching me. “What are you thinking, Rainbow?”

“I don’t know. But Junior was killed today, right? That was real. And Saxon knew he’d been killed.”

“Or maybe he thought it was part of the game,” Coco said.

“Maybe.” It hadn’t felt like it. But maybe they were right. Maybe this was how the *Buttered Rum* worked, just a mirage of illusions.

I looked down at the note I still held in my hand and read it again. “Weird that it mentions the three of us.”

“All the quests are personalized,” Shirley said. “Once we made our reservation, they probably quick-printed the cards for each team.”

“They’re so clever on this boat. I love it so much,” Coco said.

My gaze fell on the last line, the hand-written post script. *See more than you see. And do it now.* Someone had added that by hand. Quickly written after the card was printed?

See more than you see.

And do it now.

I looked up and studied the blue cabinet again. Had I missed something earlier? Hmmm… I walked over and checked it carefully, but I found nothing untoward.

Shirley was watching me. “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know—” My gaze fell on the blue metal box that was on the shelf of the glass-doored cabinet across from me. I studied it. “You know, I thought that was the blue cabinet.”

“I know you did, but it’s not even a cabinet. It’s a lock box.” Shirley’s voice faded into thoughtful silence as she looked at it.

I eyed it. “Do you think it’s a coincidence that a blue lockbox was in the same room as the blue cabinet?”

Coco turned to look at it. “Nothing on this boat is a coincidence.” She swore. “Maybe we didn’t really win. Maybe that’s part of the game. A fake victory. Maybe it’s still going on.”

“Son of a biscuit,” Shirley said. “That would be so clever to make us think the game is over, when it’s really not.”

“Maybe everyone else is still continuing their quests, and we’re sitting here getting flirty with stolen champagne while the victory slips out of our fingers,” Coco said. “That would really piss me off, I’m not gonna lie.”

“You know, you could buy your own tiara, and even afford to put real diamonds in it,” Shirley said.

“I know, but what fun is that? I want a fake tiara for winning the Pirate’s Widow. I won’t take it off for a week.”

They both paused, watching me study the blue lock box. “You think the game is still on, Rainbow?” Shirley said.

“Maybe the game. Maybe something else. Someone added that P.S. after the note was printed. What if there are two things happening here? The game, and something else. Something real.” I walked over to the winning blue cabinet, and pulled the key out of the lock. “A locksmith can make different locks use the same key.”

“You don’t think—” Coco scooted to the edge of her seat. “Try it.”

Shirley jumped up and headed for the door. She looked down the hall both ways. “Empty.”

“Cameras?” I asked.

We all looked around at the ceiling, but I didn’t see anything.

“Cameras in a bathroom are probably illegal,” Coco said. “I think we’re safe.”

I didn’t feel like I’d ever feel safe on this boat, but I knew we only had a couple minutes until Mirabelle came looking for us. I strode over to the glass cabinet and opened the door. I tested the key in the lock on the box, and it slid right in.

Coco and Shirley sucked in their breath, and Coco stood up. “Just in case anyone walks in, let’s block the view from the hallway.”

They came over and flanked me, so that no one could see what we were doing.

I turned the key, and I heard a click.

We all looked at each other, then I shielded my face with my forearm while I lifted the lid.

No fabric snakes sprung out at me.

I peered inside. “There’s another box in there.”

“Let me see.” Coco wedged past me and peered inside. Then she sucked in her breath. “Shirley. Look at it.”

Shirley leaned past me as I looked into the box as well.

It was a small, ornate jewelry box with an F on it in pearls. “Is that Fiona’s?” I asked.

Shirley let out her breath. “Yes. I couldn’t find it in her apartment. I wondered where it was. She keeps her charm bracelet in it, and I wanted to wear it.” She looked at us. “Why is Fiona’s jewelry box here?”

We both shook our heads, and I picked it up, because neither of them seemed to want to do it. It was also locked, but this time, I had full confidence as I slid the key into it, and it opened.

My two pals leaned in as I opened the lid. Resting on a black velvet bag was a charm bracelet, and a small white envelope with gilded edges.

“Fiona’s bracelet!” Shirley snatched it out of the box and held it to her heart. “This bracelet was her greatest treasure. All the charms represent moments in her life.”

“Let me see,” Coco grabbed it from her and kissed it. “I feel like Fiona’s with us again. I miss her so much!”

They hadn’t seemed to notice anything else was in the box. I picked up the jewelry bag and dumped it out. As it slid out onto my palm, I saw it was a yellow gold diamond necklace, and a ring was threaded onto the necklace. I picked the ring up to study it. It looked like an antique engagement ring with a tiny diamond, and some engravings on the edges. “Was this Fiona’s, too?”

Shirley glanced at it, then shook her head. “Nope. I know all her jewelry.”

“Let me see those,” Coco said.

I handed them to her, and she looked at them closely. “I have no idea who these belong to, but it looks like an heirloom of some sort. The

necklace looks very old, and so does the ring. Is there anything else in there?"

I shook the bag, and one more thing slid out. "It's a coin." I picked it up and peered at it. "It's really worn, but it looks like it has a rose on it."

"A rose?" Shirley snatched it from me. "It says Blueberry Island on the back of it. And the date, I think? I can't read it."

Coco frowned. "What are an old coin, a ring, and a diamond necklace doing in a box with Fiona's bracelet?"

"Maybe it's a serial killer trophy box," Shirley said dramatically. "That coin is his calling card that he leaves at every scene."

We both looked at her sharply and I felt an influx of raw, unfiltered terror. "What?"

Coco smacked her in the arm. "That's not funny! Honestly, Shirley, have you no boundaries? A serial killer on Blueberry Island?"

"You think it's a serial killer?" I felt like if she said yes, I was going to hitchhike straight back to my old life. Between the FBI, my firm, and the mob, I'd be watched every minute, and no serial killer would be able to get to me.

Shirley started cackling with glee. "You both are so gullible. It was getting a little dramatic in here, so I had to lighten the moment. It's a joke."

Coco glowered at her. "It's a terrible joke. I'm throwing you overboard."

"It was perfect." Shirley beamed at us. "You should have seen your faces. My timing was impeccable."

"Maybe it is a serial killer," Coco said. "What if his favorite prey are sassy women who have been young for a very long time? Who like ice cream, margaritas, and murder mysteries? Guess who's next? You? Me?"

"Definitely you," Shirley said. "I'm in better shape, and all I have to do is run faster than you. He'd get you, and then I'd call the cops, and you'll have solved the murder. Well done."

“Hey.” Coco poked Shirley in the sternum. “I have more money. I’d pay him to kill you instead. Money can buy anything.”

I was laughing as I held up the envelope. “Hello? Is anyone interested in the envelope that’s with the trophies?”

They both turned toward me. “There’s an envelope? Maybe it’s the serial killer’s confession.”

Shirley snatched it out of my hand. “Withholding key evidence is a crime.” She glanced at the note. “It’s addressed to Mouse. Anyone know someone named Mouse?”

“Mouse? It doesn’t say mouse, you blind old bat.” Coco grabbed it from Shirley. “You’re too old to read. I’ll do it.” She flipped the envelope over. “It does say Mouse.”

“Hah.”

“In Fiona’s handwriting.”

Shirley’s smile faded. “Shut up.” She leaned over and swore. “You’re right. I didn’t even notice. You were distracting me with your threats to pay someone to kill me, which was incredibly rude.”

“And smart.”

“Yep, very impressive.” Shirley yanked the envelope out of her hand. “What does our bestie from the beyond have for us this time? Another warning to watch out for our lives?”

She pulled a card out of the envelope and unfolded it. We all leaned in to read it over her shoulder.

Mouse—I found these exactly where we thought I’d find them. We need to talk. Meet me at the usual spot during the fireworks tonight. ~F

“There were fireworks the night she died,” Coco said. “She must have sent that note the day she died.”

A chill ran down my spine. “Who’d she send it to? Who is Mouse?”

“I don’t know, but Fiona died six hours before the fireworks.” Shirley looked at us. “She never made that meeting.”

“By all the stars at midnight,” Shirley said. “I swear on all that’s chocolate and gooey, I am going to kill Fiona. Why does she need to be so cryptic?”

“Better question,” I said. “How did Fiona’s note wind up on the boat for us to find?”

They both looked at me. “You think the game was a set up for us to find Fiona’s jewelry box?” Shirley looked impressed. “How did she do that? Did she plan it before she died? She would, you know. She definitely would have done that.”

“No, this boat is from the spirit world. She’s talking to us.” Coco looked up at the ceiling. “We hear you, Fiona,” she called out. “We got your message! We’ll figure it out.”

“Write a clearer message next time,” Shirley shouted at the ceiling. “Honestly, we’re not mind readers, and there’s a murderer running around. Do you really want Evie to get arrested, or worse yet, killed?”

“Killed?” I looked at her with a wee bit of horror. “Why will I be killed?”

“I don’t know,” Shirley said, “but I felt like I needed to put a little pressure on Fiona to do a better job at communicating.”

“Right? She probably thinks it’s hilarious to give us random half-clues,” Coco said. She shook the coin at the ceiling. “What in the name of all that’s sparkly is this coin, and why do we care?”

There was no answer from the ceiling.

“Or this?” I held up the necklace with the ring, because why not?

Still no answer.

“Who is Mouse? Someone to trust, or the demon-monster who betrayed you, and then hunted you and Junior down?” Shirley demanded of the ornately carved bathroom ceiling.

Again, no help from the beyond.

Which wasn’t really the biggest surprise of the night.

“Yoohoo, badass bitches,” Mirabelle called out from down the hall. “Time for the awards ceremony!”

“Hide them! Hide them!” Coco shoved the coin in her bra. Shirley tossed the jewelry at me, and then shoved the jewelry box in her vest and folded her arms across her chest.

I threw the necklace over my head and tucked the ring pendant beneath my shirt, then quickly shoved Fiona’s note and charm bracelet into my jacket pocket, the same pocket where Junior’s credit card had been only a few hours ago.

I shoved the blue metal box back on the shelf, and we were all smiling innocently when Mirabelle walked in. She paused, looking at us. “What have you three been up to? You look positively evil.” She beamed at us as she said it. “Another ballet?”

“Just delighted to have finally won the Pirate’s Widow.” Shirley linked her arm through mine, trying to hide the lump from the jewelry box that was shoved under her vest.

“It’s tiara time!” Coco jumped in beside Mirabelle, and we began to head down the hall.

Shirley suddenly hit my upper arm. “I just had an idea!” she whispered. Then she raised her voice. “Mirabelle, do you still work at the historical society?”

Mirabelle looked back over her shoulder at Shirley. “Of course I do. Every day except Mondays. Why?”

“Is there anyone there who’s an expert on old, Blueberry Island artifacts?”

She laughed. “You’re looking at her, Shirley. It’s my passion.” She paused, her face lighting up. “Why? Do you have a piece of island history to donate?”

“Not to donate, but maybe to get information on.”

“You bet,” Mirabelle said, her delight visible. “You can stop by tomorrow afternoon.” She beamed at us. “I love when people bring in artifacts they find in their basements or grandma’s jewelry boxes. Every time someone brings something in, I discover new secrets about the island. What is it? Can you describe it?”

“It’s a few pieces,” Shirley said vaguely. “They were Fiona’s.”

“Fiona’s?” Mirabelle’s eyes widened. “That’s so cool. I bet she has amazing things. Do tell. What do you have?”

Shirley shrugged. “I still have to go through it and see what there is.”

“All right, tease a girl, why don’t you?” Mirabelle grinned at her. “Honestly, it’s better not to tell me. I’ll be distracted, and I’m on *Buttered Rum* duty tonight. No one messes with the *Buttered Rum*.”

“Great. Maybe we’ll stop by tomorrow,” Shirley said noncommittally as Coco looked back at us, her eyebrows raised.

“I hope you do! But in the meantime—” She pulled open the door to the dining room. “It’s time to party!”

A jazz band was playing, and Tanya, Roxy, and Cinnamon were on stage, adorned in gorgeous dresses, sparkling jewelry, and high boots made for kicking. “The champions have arrived!” Tanya shouted.

The band immediately broke into rousing music, the trio burst out into a high-kicks chorus line, and Sampson ran out on stage, wearing a top hat, and holding a velvet tray with three tiaras.

“Oh, yay for us!” Coco left us behind, almost sprinting for the stage, and Mirabelle hurried behind her, leading the crowd in cheers.

“We’re only about fifteen minutes from shore.” Shirley gripped my arm, holding me back. “I don’t know exactly what happened on this boat

tonight," she whispered, "but you guard that note and jewelry with your life. Don't let anyone see them. Don't get killed. Don't get robbed. Tomorrow, we'll figure it out."

And with that, she dropped my arm and started dancing toward the stage, keeping one arm across her chest to hide the jewelry box.

I stood there for a second, but then people started reaching out to pat my shoulders and congratulate me.

I shoved my hand into my pocket to make sure the note and the bracelet were still there, and then I plastered a smile on my face and headed into the dining room to join the celebration.

I cheered like Rainbow.

I talked ice cream like Rainbow.

I danced like Rainbow.

And I kept looking over my shoulder like a woman who was carrying a murdered woman's last words hidden in her pocket.

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CHAPTER 17

SOMEONE WAS WATCHING ME.

I knew it before I opened my eyes.

My heart started thundering, and I had to fight to keep my breath even.

It took me a split second to remember why the sheets were softer than mine, and once I remembered I was in Fiona's bed, the events of the last thirty-six hours came flooding back to me in a rush that was almost deafening.

Tingles slithered along my spine, the warning of being watched.

Maybe it was Duchess Fang. She was a bit of a stalker with those whiskers.

"I can see your eyeballs moving," a low voice whispered in my ear. "Open your eyes, Evie."

I shrieked and flung myself off the bed, snatching the lamp off the nightstand as I went. I landed on my feet in a crouch, holding the lamp in front of me like I knew how to use it.

Staring at me from across the rumpled bed was the sheriff, leaning forward in a kitchen chair she'd pulled up next to the bed.

Not a killer.

The freaking sheriff.

She was dressed in black sweatpants, a plain red T-shirt, and a pair of running sneakers. Her gray hair was smoothed in a tight bun, and she had navy-framed sunglasses propped on top of her head. Her eyes were a silvery-gray, and there were lines around her eyes that spoke of years of either laughter or concentration.

I was betting the latter.

She smiled at me, a smile that didn't quite go to her eyes. "You're a very heavy sleeper," she said. "That's not smart for a woman on the run."

On the run? Why had she said that? She was fishing for information before I was even awake.

I fully respected that. Well done by Sheriff Charlene.

I set the lamp back on the nightstand and stood up. I was wearing Fiona's nightgown, which was much too flannelly and plaid to make me feel like myself. "I was tired."

She continued to lean forward. "Still not smart to do."

I cleared my throat. "I don't think it's legal for you to simply walk into my apartment."

Her smile faded. "I'm not here as a cop. I'm here as a friend."

"We're not friends." Obviously, I was aware that being friends with the sheriff would be good for me in many ways, but she was a tough cookie, and I had no illusions that she was watching me sleep because she actually wanted to be pals.

She laughed softly and leaned back in her chair. "There's only one way to start." She cocked her head. "Hi. Welcome to Blueberry Island, Evie. My name's Charlene, but my friends call me Charli. I used to be good friends with Fiona, and I worked for free at her ice cream shop when she first opened and didn't have the money to pay anyone."

Why was she here? Why had she snuck in? Why did I get the feeling that as smart as I was, she was a zillion times smarter? "That's nice," I said evenly, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Tell me something about yourself, Evie. Where do you work?”

I cleared my throat. “At the same ice cream store you worked at. What a small world, don’t you think?”

Duchess Fang walked in through the cat door. The moment she saw the sheriff, she let out a yowl of delight, bounded across the floor, and leapt into her lap. She curled up in a ball, tucked her nose into her tail, and purred loudly enough that I could almost discern the individual notes.

Was I feeling slighted by my cat? Perhaps.

Charlene patted the kitty’s head absently, still watching me. “You know what’s interesting? Deputy Shepard told me that our dead friend, Junior, used to do errands for a firm in Boston.”

No way. There was no way he’d worked for my firm. And how had Ethan found out? If it was true. “Did he?”

“Yep. He was a courier.”

Great. This sounded like it was going in a wonderful direction for me. This stupid flannel nightgown was distracting me from who I knew I was. I grabbed my leggings off the armchair and pulled them on, thinking, strategizing.

I needed to turn the power dynamic here, because the sheriff was definitely not my friend. Which was a bummer, because she’d been so badass striding up to the crime scene that I definitely had a little hero worship going on with her.

Charlene whispered sweet nothings to Duchess Fang, who was very much enamored of her, giving me space to get dressed, which I did in a hurry.

Was I feeling jealous that indifferent Duchess Fang was besties with another woman?

Maybe a little.

Was that ridiculous? Probably.

But I was a human, and my world had been yanked out from under me, so a little feline friendship would have been nice.

Once I was dressed, which meant wearing Fiona's boots and the same jacket as last night, I put my hands on my hips and faced Charlene. "What do you want, Charlene?"

She gave me a neutral smile. "How do you like Fiona's apartment? Nice?"

"I love it," I said truthfully. "It feels like home."

"It does, doesn't it?" She eased Duchess Fang onto the bed. "I made some coffee. It should be ready now. Want some?" She didn't wait for me to answer. She strode off toward the kitchen with that predator walk she had.

She had to be at least seventy, and I felt like she would kick the ass of every lawyer at my firm with both hands tied behind her back. All she'd have to do was look at them, and they'd each explode, one by one by one.

I pulled my shoulders back and followed her into the kitchen as she was pouring coffee for us. "How did you manage to make coffee without waking me up?"

Charlene smiled at me as she slid a cup of coffee across the counter toward me. "Before I became sheriff, I spent some time crawling around in scary places with lots of guns and enemies. I learned how to be very quiet doing literally anything."

I sat down across from her. "Military?"

"Secrets, Evie. It's all tangled in dark secrets that shall never cross these lips." She poured some cream into her cup, and then leaned on the counter directly across from me.

Wow. "Black ops? Special forces?" Had they allowed women in those kinds of roles when she was in the military?

She raised her brows. "What part of 'secrets that shall never cross these lips' did you not understand?"

I leaned in. "Could you kill a man with only your hands?"

She started laughing. “You’re very dramatic. I love it.”

“Can you? And if so, will you teach me?”

Her gaze sharpened ever so slightly. “Why would you want to know how to kill a man?”

Um… I felt her silent reference to Junior and the knife that held my fingerprints. “Last night on the boat, Saxon attacked me as part of the game. I hit him as hard as I could, and I thought I was saving myself, but it turned out that he just let me get away. It made me realize that if anyone actually went after me, I’d be toast.” That was the truth. I knew I had to find ways to tell Charlene the truth, because she would know a lie instantly.

I didn’t know what game we were playing, but we were definitely in the middle of one.

Kind of like the *Buttered Rum*: a game with secret rules that probably changed all the time.

This game, however, I liked. It was like intellectual sparring with a world champion.

“Why would anyone go after you?” she asked.

“Because I’m so charming. The world isn’t ready for me.”

She chuckled again. “I heard about *The Eggbeater Ballet*, Rainbow.” She paused. “From many people. You made an impression.”

The right one, I hoped. “Charli? Can I call you that?”

“Of course.” She took a sip of the coffee, her gaze never leaving my face as she drank.

“Why are you here? And don’t give me some fluffy story about being friends. Truth.”

She continued to savor her coffee, making no rush to answer.

So I took a sip of mine. It was dark, plain, and rich with an assault of flavors. Almost too much for me, but not quite.

After a long moment, she put her coffee down. “Have you found anything of interest in Fiona’s apartment?”

That was an unexpected twist. I narrowed my eyes. “What kind of interest?”

“I’m not sure. I checked around after she died, but I didn’t find anything. But maybe I missed something.”

Her answer was so vague that it caught my attention. Did she also think Fiona had been murdered? Maybe she was Mouse, and Fiona had been helping her investigate something. Or maybe she was the one who had killed Fiona, and that necklace and ring were actually hers, hidden in a safe place by Fiona so that it wouldn’t be found until the time was right.

I’d put the jewelry and the note in the drawer of the nightstand, and I had a sudden urge to race over there and see if Charlene had found it while I’d been sleeping.

“She had a lot of jeans,” I said. “And no sweatshirts. Ethan took all my clothes when he took my truck, even though they were in the back seat. I’d really like a sweatshirt.”

I saw the flicker in her eyes, but I couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“She did have a lot of jeans. Most folks on Blueberry Island do,” she said evenly. “I was thinking more like, something that didn’t seem to fit in with Fiona’s lifestyle.”

“Like what?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Just curious.”

“About what?” This conversation was pure subtext, which was actually very fun, but also completely confusing because I had no idea what the subtext actually was. Or what the point was. Or whatever.

She swirled the coffee around in her mug. “If you run across anything in her apartment that seems odd, let me know.”

“Odd in what way?”

“You’d know.” She slid a business card across the table. “Call anytime.”

I ignored the card. “I don’t have a phone.”

That surprised her. I could see it in her eyes. “Everyone has a phone.”

“I trashed all my electronics. The material world is a trap designed to slowly drown your soul in a world of meaninglessness until it’s too late. Then you die, alone, unsatisfied, with your passion and your authentic self buried beneath things that never actually mattered.”

She paused mid-sip, eyeing me over the rim of her coffee cup.

I smiled at her. “Ice cream matters. You don’t need a phone to make ice cream and to bring smiles to people’s faces.”

“I almost believe you,” she said. “But not quite.”

Shirley was right that I was a bad liar? How could that even be? I was so smooth. I shrugged. “I don’t need you to believe me,” I said with more ease than I felt.

Tension was starting to wrap around my throat. Charlene was kind of terrifying, and I felt like she was tangling me up in a net that I couldn’t see. I was usually the one in control of conversations, but she was better than I was.

She tapped the card. “The address of the police station is on here, too. If you need anything, or find anything, you can stroll on over. It’s just a couple blocks away.”

“Is my truck there?”

“I don’t know if it’s been impounded yet. It might still be there.”

“Impounded?” With my clothes? And what if my safe was still in there?

She nodded, still watching me. “It’s evidence.”

I felt so exposed with her. “Charlene. I didn’t kill Junior. I never met him until yesterday.”

“Weirdly, no one was seen leaving the area. It was a very small window of time and not a lot of places to hide,” she said. “Small town and everything.”

I stiffened. “You said this was a visit with friends.”

“Yes, we are, but I do love a good gossip session, don’t you?” She winked. “Small towns are the best for that kind of thing. Nothing makes

people talk like a murder of one of their own!”

I leaned back in my chair and said nothing.

She drank her coffee and said nothing.

It was very effective. I really wanted to start blabbing my innocence, why I’d run from my life, how I was a good person, and everything else I could possibly think of.

Charlene was the kind of cool cucumber that made me want to find a way to make her think I was one of the cool kids too.

Except I wasn’t a cool kid. I never had been. I’d been the smart, motivated, disciplined kid instead, but that had never quite made up for being uncool.

Charlene made all those old feelings well right back up again.

We sat there in silence until she finished her cup. It was probably only a few minutes, but it felt like the longest ten hours of my life. Charlene was freaking amazing at intimidation, and I wanted to be like her when I grew up.

If I got that chance.

“Well, this has been fun.” She washed her coffee cup out and set it on the drying rack, moving with the familiarity of a woman who had clearly been in this kitchen many times. “I look forward to seeing you around town. Shall I call you Rainbow or Evie?”

I had barely touched my coffee. “I go by Rainbow now. It fits me.”

She cocked her head. “Does it?”

“I’m thinking of changing my last name to Sprinkles.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “So your name will be Rainbow Sprinkles?”

I smiled back at her, my first real smile of the morning. “It’s pretty perfect, isn’t it? For an ice cream maven?”

“It really is,” she said, still looking like she was about to start laughing. At me or with me? I had no idea. “There’s a fabulous lawyer in town. She

could handle the name change for you."

"Lawyers?" I made a face. "I hate lawyers."

Knowledge flickered in her eyes, a whispered confirmation that she'd seen the same reward that Ethan had shown me. She knew exactly who I was, and the firm that I'd worked for. She'd been testing me the whole time, with every word either of us had spoken. Had I killed Junior? What danger did I bring to town? How closely did she need to watch me? Would I be killed by my old firm before the day's end?

So many questions were floating through that razor-sharp mind of hers.

I didn't know what conclusions she'd come to, whether she'd decided I was someone to protect or attack.

"Who doesn't hate lawyers?" She opened the door to let herself out. "Have a great day, Ms. Sprinkles. Welcome to the island. I'm sure we'll be chatting again soon."

She put a little extra emphasis on the 'soon,' and she was out the door before I could ascertain whether it was a threat or an invitation.

I was guessing she hadn't fully decided yet either.

Which meant I still had time to find the real killer…but how much?

Not enough.

Not nearly enough.

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CHAPTER 18

THE MINUTE CHARLENE WALKED OUT, I knew what I needed to do.

I needed to reclaim my power.

Translation? I had to haul my butt to the police station and retrieve my money, my clothes, and my fuzzy slippers before my meeting with Nora.

Trying to deal with the sheriff while wearing Fiona's nightgown had made it abundantly clear that I wasn't going to be able to handle what was coming if I was broke and wearing a dead woman's clothes.

It took me about ten minutes to feed Duchess Fang, eat, get dressed, zip the necklace and card in my jacket pocket, and get out my door, which barely gave me time to get to the police station before I was due at Coco's.

I locked the door, whipped around, charged down my stairs, and then froze.

Gator Wilson was at the bottom of my stairs, on his way up. The man who'd once killed an alligator with his bare hands was on my steps, blocking my exit.

I wouldn't have known it was him, except that I recognized his truck, which was parked haphazardly across my driveway.

Jasmine's brother. Third member of the Wilson clan, who the town had made very clear was trouble in all the wrong ways.

He stopped when he saw me, giving me a clear view of a face that looked like it didn't have any mercy, empathy, or sympathy, or anything else you'd want to see in a large, beefy man blocking your only exit from a building that was hidden from the street.

Just me and Junior's brother-in-law, who was part of the family who was, to quote Shirley, "no good."

We both stayed still for a moment, staring at each other.

There was no way I could let him come up the stairs and trap me.

I glanced over the railing. Too far to jump.

I let out a breath. He wasn't aware that I knew anything about him. I decided to play it dumb. So I lifted my chin, and gave him a polite nod. "Good morning," I said, keeping my voice deep and even, like I always did when I was at work. I took a step down, using the sheer force of my presence to create an invisible wall to push him back. "May I help you?"

He narrowed his eyes, and he didn't take even one step backward, apparently immune to my energetic assault. "You Evie Montgomery?"

"My name's Rainbow." I paused. "Rainbow Sprinkles."

He didn't crack the smile that Charlene had, which, honestly, wasn't entirely surprising. "I need to talk to you." He was wearing a heavy sweatshirt that said Wilson Construction on the chest, and jeans splattered with red paint. His work boots looked like they had a decade of wear on them, and his beard was overdue for a trim.

He looked rough, uncivilized, and like he had to shop at a Big 'n Tall store.

"I'm happy to chat," I said cheerfully. "I'm meeting the sheriff at the police station in a couple minutes. You can walk with me. I don't want to keep her waiting." I'd debated whether to use Ethan's name or the sheriff's, but I was more scared of Charlene, so I assumed everyone else would be as well.

He still didn't move. "No cops."

Yep, that's what I'd been hoping to hear from this particular person. Should I walk down the stairs or not? "Right?" I laughed as I made myself trot down the steps, right toward him. "I'm so with you on that. Those bastards impounded my pickup truck. I hate cops, but the sheriff just left, and she's waiting for me, so, I gotta go."

I was getting closer to him, and he was still blocking the steps.

Was he going to grab me when I got close enough?

I was calling his bluff by heading right toward him. Sometimes that worked, but only if he was bluffing with his aggressive stance. But if he wasn't bluffing, then he'd grab me anyway. No harm in making it easier for him, right?

I reached him and fluttered my hand to ask him to get out of the way.

He didn't move, forcing me to stop.

My heart was pounding now, and I could feel sweat beading down my temple. "What?" I put my hands on my hips as I stopped on the third-to-last stair.

"What did Junior say to you?"

I blinked. "When?"

"Before he died. You were the last person to talk to him. What did he say? Did he give you anything?"

I couldn't figure out his tone. Why was he asking? "He gave me the bill for the deliveries, said he was on edge. Mentioned he hadn't dropped milk in years and–"

"Give me the bill."

I stopped, surprised. "The bill?" The bill that I'd put in my pocket…of the same pants I was wearing right now? That bill? The one that was easily within reach?

"Yeah. I want it."

I fought to remember what the bill had said. I'd glanced at the price, but hadn't read the rest carefully. I could pull it out of my pocket and check

right now, but the fact he wanted it made me want it, too.

Possession was rumored to be nine-tenths of the law, so I won.

He leaned in. “Give it to me.”

“Hey!” I put my hand on his chest and literally pushed him back. To my surprise, he let me. Ah! Bluffing! Energy rushed through me, now that I knew that he wasn’t there to squish me into a tiny little ball of pulp. “I’m trying to remember what I did with it. Everything was a little chaotic afterwards.”

I shoved forward and then squeezed past him. My arm brushed his chest, but he let me by. I nearly leapt past him into the driveway, grabbing space and distance as fast as I could.

When I spun to face him, he was still on the steps, and I got the feeling he was fully confident that he could grab me before I could get away.

Which was fine. Because I was fully confident that I could run at least five feet before he reached me. So we were evenly matched.

I put my hands on my hips again, assuming my power stance. “Look, I don’t know who you are—” Total lie because I did know who he was, but he didn’t know that, did he? “—but I don’t appreciate being bullied in my own driveway. On a public road? Absolutely fine. But in my own driveway, I have rules.”

He narrowed his eyes, clearly caught off guard by my statement, as I’d hoped. “What?”

“It’s the same thing as people who want to kill me. I have rules. You don’t get to jump to the front of the line.” I pointed at him. “There’s a line to kill me, buddy. Get in it.”

“Whoa.” He held up his hands. “I don’t want to kill you. I’m not killing anyone.” He looked around, as if he thought someone was watching. “I’m not killing anyone,” he repeated more loudly.

Oh, well, that was fascinating. Not only was he bluffing about violently attacking me, but he was also panicked about being labeled a killer? That

was handy info. I felt much sassier and emboldened now. The big ol' Wilson bully was just a closet wimp.

I surveyed him like a woman who knew how to kill a man with her bare hands, because perception was everything. "Well, if you don't want to kill me, why are you here? And FYI, you should be careful because if you're here when someone does arrive to kill me, then it's like the Junior thing, right? Someone else offs me, and you've got your prints on the murder weapon."

Genuine alarm brightened his lifeless eyes, and he looked around sharply. He swore under his breath and held up his hands. "I'm not here to kill you. I just wanted to get info."

"Why? Why do you care?" I pressed him, taking advantage of his reluctance to take on the role of my future murderer.

"Because Junior was my brother-in-law, and someone killed him! The cops think you did it, but we both know you didn't, so what the hell happened?" His voice was on edge, wiping out his façade of cold indifference.

I loved this moment. It was so satisfying when a reluctant witness got emotional. So much good stuff came out when emotions were unleashed.

And, um, Gator Wilson, private detective? I didn't think so. "What's on the invoice?" I challenged him.

He answered with a question. "Who was it from?"

"Stone Berry Dairy. Who else would it be from?" I shot back.

"What was the amount?"

I told him the exorbitant price.

He swore. "No, that's not it, then. Was there anything on there? Like a note to me?"

A note to him? Well, call me bumfuzzled. I wasn't expecting that. "I didn't notice, but I wasn't looking for it. I'll look for the invoice, though, and let you know."

Swearing under his breath, he clasped his hands on top of his head and stepped down, pacing. “What about the milk? Anything special about that?”

I watched him stride back and forth, tracking his body language, trying to figure out if he was thinking, planning, or simply agitated. “The milk?” I repeated.

“Yeah. That Junior delivered.” He looked over at me, but kept up his restless movement. “Did you use it? Did you open it?”

I shook my head. “No, it’s in the fridge.”

“We need to check it.” He turned and headed right toward my back door. He grabbed for the knob and tried to open it. “It’s locked.” He turned back to me and pointed impatiently at the door. “Open it.”

“Can’t.” I spread my hands. “I don’t have the key.”

Irritation flickered across his face. “How can you not have the key? You own it.”

“I know, but the real estate agent never showed up. The store was already open when I got here,” I realized it as I said it. Huh. That was weird. Where was the real estate agent?

He swore, and then looked at the window, assessing it.

I walked over and chucked him in the back. “No! You’re not breaking the window!”

He looked over at me, and for the first time, I saw desperation in his eyes. Emotions unleashed. Victory for Evie. “Someone killed him,” he said softly. “I need to know why.”

“The cops are working on it,” I reminded him helpfully.

“Cops suck.”

Sometimes, yes. For people like the Wilsons, who were universally regarded as trouble, I doubted the police had ever been anything but an inconvenience. “What was Junior up to? What was in the milk? What do you know?”

“Not enough.” He shaded his eyes and peered through the window. “Looks fine in there. No one broke in and trashed it.”

“God, I hope not!” Protectiveness shot through me at the idea of my store being violated. Yes, I didn’t plan to stay here forever, but for now, that store was my baby, and no one was allowed to mess with it.

He turned toward me. “How are you going to open the store today?”

What was in that milk? Inquiring minds very much wanted to know. His mind. My mind. Anyone else’s? So many minds at play. “I’m going to have to find a key.”

He sat down on the back step. “I’ll wait.”

Wow. That was commitment. I was impressed. And also concerned. “It might not be for hours.”

He leaned back against the door. “Got nowhere to go.”

“Really?”

“Yep.” He folded his arms over his chest, looking very dangerous and aggressive. “No one will break in if I’m sitting here.”

Huh. “Well, my store will appreciate having its own personal bodyguard.” I appreciated it, as well. I didn’t want my store injured.

He grunted, but appeared to have moved on from acknowledging my existence for the moment. Until I showed up with the key or more info, I was no longer relevant, and he was making sure I knew it.

Unfortunately for him, even if the bad guys would leave my store alone because Big Gator was guarding it, I didn’t believe his danger vibe anymore, so I folded my arms over my chest and decided to take advantage of his presence. “What did you say to Bernie at the bridge that got him upset?”

He scanned the driveway, looking for burglars to apparently spring up unbidden out of the dirt. “What?”

“At the bridge to the island. You were behind me, and you said something to Bernie that upset him. What was that about?”

His gaze drifted to me, and his brow furrowed into a frown. “I always upset Bernie.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a lifelong disappointment to him.”

I processed his bitterness for a moment. “Is he your dad?” Because if that was the case, then many people had left out a lot of relevant info in their chats with me.

He snorted. “Hell, no, but I robbed him when we first moved here as kids. Instead of reporting me to the cops, he made me build a new porch on his house. He thought he could save me.” He shrugged. “I never lived up to his dreams.”

Well…huh. Bernie had seemed more alarmed than disappointed when Gator had driven up behind me. But that was wholly rich information that told me a lot about both Bernie and Gator. “Well,” I said cheerfully, “you haven’t murdered me, so that’s a win. He’d be proud of that.”

Gator’s gaze drifted to me again, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “Are you tempting in that regard?”

“Very. You have strong willpower to resist the call.”

To my surprise, a smile teased at the corner of his mouth for a split second before disappearing. “Who knows. Maybe there’s hope for me, then, eh?”

“There’s always hope,” I said, then I paused. “You’re not as dangerous as you make yourself out to be, are you?”

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the door, like he was settling in for a nap. “Don’t be like Bernie,” he said softly. “Don’t see things in me that aren’t there. I’d hurt you if I needed to, I can promise you that.”

Would he? Maybe. But maybe not. “Like to save Junior?”

His eyes opened, and he looked at me. Hard. “If I were to find out that you really did kill him,” he said, “then, yeah, I’d make you pay.”

A chill ran down my spine, and I shivered. He wasn’t lying. Gator Wilson might not be planning to kill me or hurt me now, but with the right motivation?

He’d do whatever it took to get what mattered to him.

Would he have killed Fiona if he’d believed he needed to in order to protect someone or something?

Yes. One hundred percent, yes.

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CHAPTER 19

I SKIPPED the police station and headed straight to Coco's Coffee for a reset after the encounter with Gator. I needed tiaras, girl bonding, and caffeine, and time to fill them in on my shop's newest bodyguard before my meeting with Nora.

The dark stains on Gator's soul were haunting me as I hustled down the street, clutching that bill from Junior in my hand.

The paper looked inauspicious to me, but my expertise with dairy bills was sketchy at best. I was hoping Shirley had the experience to see something I couldn't, and to find it before Gator realized how close he'd been to what he wanted and decided to come after it.

As I approached Coco's coffee shop, I was delighted to see it was an adorable café with a big picture window. There were tables and chairs out front with vases of flowers on them. It looked classy, expensive, and charming, everything I'd expect from Coco.

Bernie was sitting at one of the patio tables, reading a book and drinking coffee. His rescue dog was by his feet, snoozing in the morning rays, a bowl of water by his paws. Bernie was wearing a different baseball cap, a barn jacket, and battered sandals. "Hi, Bernie."

He glanced up, then a warm smile eased lazily across his face when he saw me. "Morning, Evie. Congrats again on winning Pirate's Widow last

night.”

I smiled, my tension abating at his chill vibe. He was like a beach chair on a lazy, breezy balmy afternoon. “Thanks. The *Buttered Rum* is crazy.” Frenetic. Mysterious. Dangerous. Fun. Unexpected. “I loved it.”

“It’s a testament of someone’s good character if they fall in love with it,” he said, lounging back in his seat, his dark brown eyes surveying me. “Met a few folks who didn’t like it, and they all turned out to be no good. No good at all.”

The *Buttered Rum* was a character test? Honestly, nothing would surprise me about it. “Have you been on it many times?”

“Often enough,” he said vaguely.

“Do you know who owns it? Or who designs the games?” I was curious about all the cloak-and-dagger secrecy around the boat, especially since Fiona’s stash had been on it.

He yawned and reached down to scratch his dog. “If you ask too many questions, you get banned. If you love it, don’t ask. Just enjoy it.”

His answer surprised me, but it also was fully predictable. Did Bernie have those answers and preferred not to share them? Or he knew better than to ask? “Whoever runs that boat loves mystery, don’t they?”

“The boat always knows when folks ask too many questions about it,” Bernie said, sitting back up. “Don’t get curious, Evie.”

Huh. That, of course, made me much more curious. Was that the point? I had a feeling the *Buttered Rum* games were always going on, even when it wasn’t in port. Was it secretly nefarious? Or a vessel of local love and lore giving back joy to the community who adored it?

I decided to change the subject to one that was lodged deeply in his fatherly heart. “Gator Wilson is sitting on the back step of my store.”

His brows went up, and he let out a long-suffering sigh. “What’s he doing there?”

“Waiting for me to come back with a key so I can let him search the milk that Junior delivered yesterday. What would he be looking for in milk?”

“Hell if I know.” He closed his book. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“No, it’s fine. He seems happy there.” I didn’t want to be responsible for triggering Gator. “Do you know the real estate agent who was supposed to give me the keys? She never showed up, so I don’t have a key to let him in.”

“Alana never showed?” He shrugged. “Probably gave your set to Shirley. Did you ask her?”

“I didn’t think of it.” I paused. Bernie seemed like he’d been on the island for a hundred years, and knew every story, every rumor, every person who had ever crossed that bridge. “Bernie, who do you think killed Junior?”

He snorted. “Hah! You think you’re Fiona, do you? Buy her shop and start sticking your nose in everyone’s business?”

I cocked my head at his amused tone. He wasn’t mad. “Nope. Just curious because he was killed in my truck.”

“That’s the only reason you’re interested?” He looked at me more closely. “Not sure I believe you, Evie.”

I cleared my throat at his sudden intensity. Bernie definitely had stripped the masks off every soul on the island. Gently. But without regret. “What do you know about Fiona? Was she ruffling feathers before she died?”

His gaze settled on mine. “What do you think?”

“Of course she was.”

He smiled. “Never a day went by when she wasn’t.”

I studied him. “Did she ever ask you for help?”

He laughed softly. “She used to ask every single day, but I don’t get involved in shenanigans. I’m a peace-loving fella, Evie. Fiona figured that out, and then we got along fine.” He stood up, and his dog rose to his feet as

well. “Don’t you go getting tangled up in murder. Let the sheriff and Ethan handle it.”

“I will. I was just curious—”

“Don’t be curious.” He repeated the same warning as he had with the boat. “Leave it to the professionals. They’ll figure it out.”

“Do you have an idea of what Fiona or Junior were involved in?” Bernie sat at that bridge day after day. He saw more than anyone suspected.

He picked his book up and tucked it in his pocket. “This old man keeps to himself, and I suggest you do the same.”

“But—”

Someone shouted my name. “Rainbow! Yo’ Rainbow! Girl! Wait up!”

I turned to see a man biking toward me in cycling shorts, a bright yellow jersey, and neon pink cycling shoes. He was glistening with sweat, and his arms and thigh muscles were corded like an Olympic athlete. His face was obscured by a black helmet and wraparound sunglasses, but I knew that voice.

My heart lifted. “Hi, Tanya.” I turned toward her as she rode up onto the sidewalk.

She coasted to a stop and high-fived me as she threw a long, ripped leg over the bike in an elegant dismount. “It’s daytime, love. I’m Tony, and he/him is my game. No boobs, no wig, no makeup, and you know Tony’s in the house.”

I grinned. “I’m still Rainbow, but I think I might change my last name to Sprinkles.”

Tony unsnapped his chinstrap and tossed the helmet on his handlebars. “Girl, if you change your name to Rainbow Sprinkles, then you have to be on stage. No one with that name can live a dull, ordinary life. It’s against the laws of the universe.”

Tony’s vibrance eased my remaining tension from the Gator encounter. “My life is quite full right now. New ice cream shop, Pirate’s Widow

celebrity, murder suspect, cat owner. It's a lot."

"Hah!" He snorted. "If you're not on a stage, it's not full enough. That's my motto." He air-kissed each of my cheeks and presented his cheek, so I rolled with it and handed out the first double air-cheek-kiss of my life.

He propped his sunglasses on top of his head. "Well, we're going to have to work on that," he said. "No one will ever believe you're a drag queen."

I grinned. "How random would that be, for someone to think I'm not a drag queen?"

"Nothing's random, honey." Tony tucked his hand through my elbow to guide me into the café. "Our lives are meticulously organized by powers that conspire to help our sparkle shine brightly all over this beautiful earth. If we don't sparkle, it's because we refuse to listen to the magic guiding us along the perfect path for our souls."

I looked over at him as he pulled open the door. "You believe that, don't you?"

He patted my shoulder. "It's not whether I believe it or not. It simply is." He waved his hand at me. "After you. I have gossip."

"Gossip?" Coco shouted from inside the café. "Bring it in, Tony! Bring it in!"

Tony winked at me, and I was grinning as I headed into Coco's café. As we walked inside, I saw that Bernie and his dog were gone, his coffee cup abandoned on the table. I hoped he hadn't gone to talk to Gator.

Coco was behind the counter wearing her tiara. She was also sporting a matching necklace that would probably be close to a million dollars if it were real. It was very sparkly. But…real?

No. Right?

"Good morning!" Shirley was sitting at a counter stool, also wearing her tiara. She had a steaming mug of coffee in front of her, along with a half-

eaten muffin. “Lock the door behind you and flip the sign! And where’s your tiara, Rainbow?”

“Duchess Fang is wearing it. She wanted a turn.”

“Rainbow needs to be wearing that beauty all over town,” Shirley said. “Go home and get it.”

I glanced over my shoulder as Tony paused to turn the lock. He changed the sign from open to closed, as if he’d done it a hundred times.

I threw up my hands in mock surrender. “Darn it. Tony locked us in. I’ll have to get the tiara later.”

Coco rolled her eyes. “Wench.”

“Very short-sighted, Rainbow,” Shirley said. “You have to do better if you want to live through the day.”

I blinked. “You’re very dramatic.”

“Just making valid points that you’ll regret not listening to as you’re sinking to the bottom of the harbor,” Shirley retorted.

Yikes. “I’ll get it in a minute.” I strolled into the cute little shop, trying to calm myself by focusing on the cozy environment. One-of-a-kind armchairs surrounding small, antique tables. Nothing matched, but everything had character and flaws. It was imperfectly perfect, and I loved it immediately.

I was surprised that we were the only ones there at this hour. “Why are you locking the door?” I asked. “Isn’t it prime breakfast time?”

“Of course it is,” Coco said, “But I don’t need money, so I run this shop for my own convenience.”

“Which means, since we need to talk murder before Nora gets here, the rest of the world gets locked out.” Shirley grinned at us. “I saw you guys coming, so I unlocked it.”

Tony strode up to the counter and glided onto the stool next to Shirley. “I love being in the inner circle,” he said. “The fact that you unlocked the door for me makes me feel like the queen I deserve to be. I don’t always

make that grade, Rainbow. Your presence has elevated me, and I am going to live this moment like it's my last."

Shirley patted his shoulder. "Even when we lock you out, we still love you."

"Oh, I know that, sugar, but it's still better to be on the inside of that locked door." He held up his hand. "I'll take your best coffee, your best breakfast, and anything else you want me to have, Coco. Surprise me, Queen."

Coco grinned. "You got it. Rainbow?"

I glanced at the menu. "Quiche of the day. And a black coffee."

"On it." Coco grabbed a pot of coffee and two mugs. "What gossip do you have, Tony?" she demanded. "Tell us!"

"Oh my starry eyes," Tony said. "You won't believe this. I just heard that Saxon paid Alana Stevens five hundred dollars to borrow the key to Rainbow's shop yesterday morning!"

"What?" I gaped at him, recognizing the name from when Bernie had said it a few minutes ago. "That's why the real estate agent didn't show up with the key? Because she gave it to Saxon?"

"Amen, sister," Tony said. "He didn't return it, so she couldn't deliver it to you. She's so mad she's spitting fire right now, trying to track him down. She's got a reputation, and he blew that in a big way. But her fault, totally. Taking money to loan out a key, right? No good comes of that. Glad she got busted, the little—"

"Hot diggity," Coco said, leaning on the counter. "This is fire. Why on earth would Saxon want the key to the shop?"

"I was there all day yesterday," Shirley said. "He didn't come by."

"Maybe last night," Tony said. "After everyone was asleep, he snuck in there and did something naughty. Maybe there's a new body in there!"

"Oh, wow! Another body! That's so fabulous," Coco said. "I wonder who it is."

“Jasmine,” Shirley said. “Definitely Jasmine.”

“Or Duane,” Coco said eagerly. “Could be Duane. That fellow is just one lucky moment after another that someone hasn’t whacked him right good for being such a—”

“He’s not the only one who wants to get into my store,” I interrupted. “Gator Wilson is currently sitting on my back step guarding the shop until I return with a key to let him search the milk.”

“The milk?” Shirley frowned. “What’s he checking it for?”

“I don’t know. But he specifically wanted to check the milk that Junior delivered yesterday,” I said.

“Well, how about that?” Shirley said, tossing down her napkin. “I think we need to trot our cute selves over to the store to make sure no one gets to that milk first.”

I didn’t move. “Gator is waiting for me, and he’ll keep anyone from breaking in,” I said. “And if Saxon was going to use the key, it would have been during the night. We can’t just run over there, because Gator will claim whatever’s in that milk the minute we open the door.”

“He can’t have it. It’s your milk,” Shirley huffed.

I raised my brows. “Do you want to fight Gator?”

All three of them shook their heads.

“Gator is a danger to everyone who gets in his aura,” Tony said. “I’m not going over there and fighting him for milk.”

“Me either,” Coco said. “I have a store to run and a life to live.”

Shirley put her hands on her hips. “So we just roll over and let some ingrate take over our territory? Because if anyone is wondering, the answer to that is definitely not.”

“No,” I said. “But we take a moment to figure out how we’re going to handle it. What Gator asked for first was this.” I pulled Junior’s bill out of my pocket and waved it. “I looked at it on the way over, and I didn’t see anything weird. It just looks like a regular bill.”

“Let me see. I’ve gone over hundreds of Stone Berry Dairy bills over the years.” Shirley snatched it away, and she, Coco, and Tony all leaned in to study it.

They were silent for a long moment, giving me the chance to look around.

A woman who looked vaguely familiar was standing at the front door, and she waved at me and pointed to the closed sign. “Um, Coco? Someone wants to come in.”

Coco glanced up, and then snorted. “That’s Madge. She wants me to supply coffee and pastries to her eleven o’clock game, which has thirty-two people. As if I would ever provide anything in bulk. I’m far too artisan for that.” She waved at Madge, and then went back to looking at the bill.

Ah…yes…Madge, who Shirley had left on the side of the road.

Madge, who owned the mahjong studio.

Madge, who Shirley said would turn me in for the ten-thousand-dollar reward—

Oh…I’d forgotten about that.

I quickly turned my back on her, suddenly remembering that I had to be careful traipsing around town today. Without Shirley’s glasses or Tanya’s wig, it was very possible someone would recognize me.

I let out my breath and tried to shake out the sudden tension in my shoulders, but it wouldn’t leave.

Shirley shook her head and sat back. “It looks like any other bill I’ve gotten from them. I don’t see any secret message from Junior stating that he was about to be murdered, and who was going to do it.”

“Me either.” Coco sighed. “He’s as obtuse as Fiona. No wonder the two of them were pals.”

“Pals?” Tony frowned at Coco. “Fiona and Junior?”

We looked at each other, and I realized that we hadn’t let Tony in on all the details about finding Junior’s credit card in Fiona’s pocket. How much

did they trust Tony?

I waited.

I got my answer when Shirley laughed. “Oh, heavens, Coco. Fiona and Junior pals? Can you imagine? You’re so funny.”

Wow. And she said I was the bad liar?

Awareness flickered in Tony’s eyes, because he wasn’t an idiot. He knew she’d just locked him on the outside of our door, proverbially speaking. He flashed a smile at Shirley, but some of his sparkle was gone.

I’d spent my life crushing my sparkle, so I knew it when I saw it happen to him.

I knew what it was like to sit on the outside of friend groups and never be invited into the inside. It sucked.

But I also didn’t know Tony that well, and I did know that someone in this town had likely murdered Fiona and Junior, so from my perspective, everyone was a suspect until Shirley and Coco vouched for them.

The thought surprised me. I trusted two women who I’d just met? Why didn’t I think one of them could have done it?

They were good people. Loyal friends. Yes, I’d trusted Leah, but these two were different. I felt their goodness in my core, the way I’d always felt my mom’s.

I believed in them, and I was going to stick to it, because if you stopped believing in the goodness of people, then you had nothing. I’d been without belief in humanity for far too long…and only was realizing that fact now.

Tony lifted his chin. “Fiona was my champion. You think Tanya T would have a show every Tuesday night at the Opal Theatre if Fiona hadn’t made it happen? No way. My legacy is alive and thriving because of that goddess, and if Junior had something to do with Fiona’s death, then I want to know.” He slammed his palms down on the counter. “Tell me now.”

I grinned at Tony, silently applauding him. I felt his speech in my gut. “How did Fiona help you?” I asked him as Coco and Shirley exchanged

glances.

Tony shook out his shoulders. “Fiona ran this town, even when she was no longer Town Manager. She made things happen, and she took care of problems, even up until the day she died. She cared about the right things, and I was one of those she championed. I will love that woman through every lifetime that I get to live, and a thousand more.”

Shirley nodded. “She sure did run things,” she agreed. “Fiona made a lot of enemies, and she never let that stop her.”

“Not that many enemies,” Coco said. “She was magnetic, and she could get almost anyone on her side.”

“Not everyone,” Shirley said. “Definitely not everyone.”

“Truth,” Coco said, meeting Shirley’s gaze. “But she never cared who she pissed off.”

I was a little sad that I’d never get to meet this woman who had impacted so many. “She sounds so amazing.”

“Which is why you’re going to keep her legacy alive,” Coco said, her voice rough. “You don’t have a choice, Rainbow. Fiona picked you, and that’s the way it is.”

I knew they were talking about the store, but I couldn’t commit to that. As amazing as Fiona had been, this was her life, not mine. “It sounds like Fiona had enemies,” I said, bringing the conversation back to a more neutral topic. “Did any of those enemies have anything to do with Junior or the dairy?”

Shirley and Coco looked at each other again, and Tony and I exchanged glances. We both knew they were trying to decide whether to bring Tony in.

He stood up. “Look,” he said. “I get it. I’m not going to put pressure on you. It’s fine. I’ll just head out—”

I raised my brows at Shirley. Were they really going to let him just leave? I didn’t know him well, but he seemed to be a bright light everywhere he went.

Shirley sighed and caught his arm as he started to leave. “Tony,” she said. “We think Fiona was helping Junior with something. It got her killed, and it got him killed. And whoever murdered them is still running around in this town. If you get involved, you could get killed, too. I don’t want that.”

His eyes widened. “Oh.”

Coco nodded. “We don’t want you killed. You’re a treasure, and the world needs you.”

He considered that. “But it’s okay for you to get killed?”

“Fiona asked us to look into it,” Shirley said. “The dying wish of our best friend was for me and Coco to solve her murder. We can’t say no.”

“Oh, girl.” Tony sat back down. “Did she really?”

“Yep,” Shirley said.

“And I’m involved because I’m the top suspect,” I chimed in. “I don’t want to go to prison for murder this week, so I’m jumping in.”

Tony raised his brows. “This week?”

“Right.” I shrugged. “Because maybe next week I’ll feel differently.”

Shirley snorted at my witty quip, but Tony stayed focused. “You’re protecting only me, then?”

“Tony, honey.” Coco patted his arm. “Does the idea of chasing after a murderer delight and thrill you?”

He looked back and forth between the three of us. “No.” He took a breath. “But I owe Fiona. I’ll help.”

“See?” Shirley sighed. “This is why we didn’t tell you. Because it’s not your zone of genius. You don’t want to help, but you’ll do it anyway.”

“They *want* to do it,” I pointed out. “They think a murder quest is brilliant fun.”

Coco’s eyes lit up. “I do. I really do.”

“Me, too,” Shirley said. “I feel like hunting down a murderer was Fiona’s parting gift to us.”

Tony looked around at us. “You all are serious.”

“Heck, yeah, we are,” Coco said. “Life has been so boring since Fiona died. And now we get to track murderers together, and try to keep Rainbow from being reclaimed by her past life? Now, this stuff is fun.”

Tony looked at me. “You think it’s fun, too?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Honestly? Yeah. It’s kinda fun.”

Tony surveyed the three of us. “You ladies are all bat-shit crazy.” But he said it with affection and warmth.

“You know it,” Coco said. “I claim that title with full pride.”

“Me, too,” Shirley said.

“I’m working on it,” I added.

Shirley leaned in. “Here’s the deal, Tony. We don’t want to get you involved. We don’t want someone stabbing you.”

He put his hand over his chest in full alarm. “Hella no,” he agreed. “I don’t want to get stabbed.”

“But you can help secretly. Don’t get involved. Don’t know too much. But…” Shirley wiggled her eyebrows.

Tony nodded. “Yep, yep. I get it. I’ll spill any info I have, but I won’t get involved. Love that for all of us.”

“Yes!” Shirley looked relieved, and I realized she’d been worried about Tony’s safety.

“Exactly,” Coco said. “Well done.”

“Let’s do this, girls. Let’s freaking do this show, right now!” Tony smacked his palm on the counter. “I’m not getting involved at all, but I will tell you that if Fiona was working with Junior, then Duane’s dirty little secret might have been in play after all.”

Oh, boy. This was good. “What was his dirty little secret?”

We all asked it at the same time, with varying degrees of shouting, “Tell me now!”

Tony widened his eyes and leaned in. “Duane isn’t actually a Wilson,” he whispered. “Duane was Gator’s friend, and he moved up here with the

Wilsons to hide from his daddy, who was a right bastard of a fellow, if you know what I mean." He lowered his voice. "The Wilsons basically stole Duane from his family, and his daddy came looking for him one day, and no one ever saw him again."

"What?" Shirley's mouth gaped open. "The Wilsons killed Duane's father?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "So much drama, honey. No, he talked to the Wilsons and then left. Never came back. Let that boy grow up a Wilson."

"What does this have to do with Junior?" I asked.

Tony fluttered his brows. "True love, my pretty Rainbow. Jasmine and Duane aren't really brother and sister. Duane was her brother's jerky friend…until she didn't think he was such a jerk."

"Whoa!" Coco leaned in. "Jasmine and Duane were a couple?"

Tony nodded. "Mmm…like peanut butter and arsenic, ladies. Until one day, they weren't, and Jasmine and Junior were hooking up. And then it was Duane and Jasmine. Then back to Junior. All through high school, that girl was playing those boys off each other like a she-beast in heat. Heartless and ruthless, she was, and she kept poking that wound even after she and Junior got married."

Son of a biscuit. This was fantastic.

"And then," Tony said, "when Jasmine left town, she went to Boston, right?"

"She did?" Shirley shrugged. "No one knows where she went. Or why she left."

"I don't know why she left. Bored of playing with her toys, maybe? But it was definitely Boston. And one day after she'd been gone for a while, Junior went to find her. Duane followed Junior. There was a situation, and then next thing you know, Junior's in jail in Boston, Duane's back home, and Jasmine is still in the wind."

“Well, hot fudge and butterscotch,” Shirley said. “No wonder Duane and Junior hated each other.”

“But why were they so close when Junior came back to town?” I asked, because yes, I’d paid attention yesterday.

Tony shook his head. “I haven’t been able to find out. Maybe because they decided not to let a woman ruin their friendship? Who knows. The only reason I’m telling you is because of my darling Fiona. If this can solve her death, then I’m in. If not…” He zipped his lips. “You pretend you never heard this. Got it?”

We all nodded. “And we definitely never heard it from you,” Shirley added.

“Never,” Tony agreed. “But if I were you, and I wasn’t worried about getting stabbed, I’d go talk to Duane. But I’m not you, and I’m deeply averse to being stabbed, so I’m not going anywhere near him. He’s so dicey.”

I drummed my fingers on the counter. “Ethan said that Junior was a courier when he was in Boston. Do you know anything about that?”

Tony shook his head. “I didn’t think he had a job when he was there. He was just after Jasmine from what I know. He wasn’t in jail for long.”

I leaned on the counter, years of cynical lawyering beginning to rise up. Not cynical, necessarily, but suspicious. Looking for holes. “How do you know this? Who told you?”

Tony put a finger over his lips. “Secrets, Rainbow.”

I shook my head. “We need to know. We have to trace the information to figure it out.”

Tony sighed. “This isn’t something I advertise, but at one time, Jasmine and I were dear friends.”

This news startled all of us. “Really?”

He nodded. “She didn’t have a lot of friends, and we were both in drama club. Girls chat when they’re doing their hair. Secrets come out over

hairspray and lip gloss." He paused, a wicked gleam in his eyes. "Especially when one of the girls brings whisky to rehearsals."

Coco grinned. "Jasmine?"

"Hah." Tony batted her arm. "Me, of course."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door. We all turned to see Nora peering through the glass. She saw us looking and waved cheerfully.

"Oh…Nora." Tony let out a breath. "That woman knows something. Find out what it is. Why was she at Junior's house that night? But don't tell her Nigel saw them. Keep Nigel out of it."

"Who is Nigel?" I asked.

"One of my best friends. I've known him since high school." Tony was already on his feet. "He was in drama club with me and Jasmine."

Shirley let out her breath. "Stall her for a few minutes, Tony. We need to plot before we let her in."

"Stall a reporter?" Tony laughed. "You ask the impossible, and I'm excellent at the impossible. I can get you a few minutes." He blew us all kisses as he strolled toward the exit. "Stay alive, my pretties. I'll pass on breakfast, Coco. Next time!"

When he stepped out of the café, he shrieked with delight to see Nora. They air-kissed, then he grabbed her arm and dragged her away from the door. I heard him mention *The Eggbeater Ballet* and tiaras, and I knew he had her trapped.

The minute the door closed behind them, we all leaned in.

"I bet Duane killed Junior," Coco whispered. "Crime of passion."

"But how does that involve Fiona?" Shirley countered.

"Fiona was always involved," Coco shot back.

"But she always had a good reason," Shirley retorted. "There had to be a purpose to her involvement, and I don't see one. She only took on projects that mattered to her heart, and I don't think the Wilson clan was up to her standards."

“Wouldn’t Gator know if Duane killed Junior?” I kept my voice low. “He had to know the drama between Duane and Junior. If there was any chance Duane killed Junior, Gator would suspect it. But he’s trying to find out what happened.”

“Maybe he’s looking for evidence to implicate Duane,” Coco replied.

I shook my head. “No way. He wanted answers so he could dole out justice himself. If he knew it was Duane, Duane would be handled.”

“Maybe Duane is handled. When was the last time anyone saw him?” Shirley whispered. “I never saw him on the boat.”

“Me either,” Coco said quickly. “But we didn’t see everyone.”

“Maybe Jasmine’s been handled, too,” Shirley said. “Maybe both of them are at the bottom of the harbor. Or in your ice cream freezer.”

I blinked. “I hope not. That ice cream freezer is sacred.”

“Gator lured her back to town,” Coco surmised, her eyes glittering with delight. “She got her favorite coffee from me, and then bam! I was the last one to feed her before she met her demise. I’m going to put that on a plaque and hang it over the espresso machine.”

“You’re so morbid,” Shirley whispered. “The poor girl is dead, and you want to profit off her?”

“She’s not dead!” I tapped my fingers on the counter to get their attention. “If they were both dead, and it was over, Gator would not be sitting on my step waiting to check the milk.”

“Maybe they were shipping moonshine through the dairy, and he found out,” Coco shot back. “After killing them, he’s now going to save the dairy by exposing their nefarious plans.”

I raised my brows. “This isn’t Prohibition. No one in Maine makes moonshine.”

“I’m sure they do, but it doesn’t matter. Moonshine is just fun to say,” Coco whispered. “I’m still in the spirit of last night. I’m never taking this tiara off.”

“Me either,” Shirley said. “It’s like wearing a neon sign around town stating that we’re the best. I love that so much.”

“Me, too!” Coco beamed at her.

They both looked at me, judgment ringing in their faces.

I grinned. “I promise I’ll get mine! Crazy Rainbow will show up.”

They grumbled and rolled their eyes, muttering about me being difficult and stubborn, making me laugh.

“We only have a couple minutes before Nora comes in,” I reminded them.

“Excuses, excuses,” Shirley muttered, but she sounded more amused than mad.

Tony was gesturing dramatically to Nora, still distracting her, so I turned back to my team. “I agree it’s logical that Duane might have killed Junior out of jealousy, but if their love triangle was going to lead to murder, it would have happened when they were younger, and all the back and forth was happening,” I pointed out. “Emotions were high back then, but Jasmine has been gone for years.”

“Ah…you may be right,” Coco said. “The passion has long cooled.”

“But resentment festers like a poison eating away at your sanity,” Shirley said.

“Amen, sister.” Coco high-fived Shirley, then turned to me. “Didn’t you say Junior acted like he was being hunted? Who was hunting him? Maybe Duane? Or Jasmine? We know she was in town that morning.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think he’d be so on edge about family. I feel like they’d go right at each other, not sneak up from behind.”

Coco growled. “There’s no way this Wilson family drama didn’t contribute to this murderous chaos. We’re just not seeing the connection.”

“It’s old drama,” I pointed out.

“But drama leads to drama,” Coco said. “Where there’s a spark, there’s fire.”

“Sometimes a spark is just a series of minor electrical shocks,” I said, “while the actual arsonist is down the street spreading gasoline while everyone is chasing sparklers. Like Saxon. Maybe he’s the arsonist in polished shoes, and we’re so busy with the Wilsons that we don’t even see him pouring out the fuel.”

Coco and Shirley both looked at me in surprise.

“Well done, girl,” Coco said. “I like that analogy.”

“Me, too.” Shirley beamed at me. “Fiona would love you. She’d be so honored to have you solve her murder.”

“*Help* solve it,” Coco clarified. “We’re all in this together. Rainbow doesn’t get all the fun.”

The door jangled, and I heard Nora’s voice. “Hello, ladies. Sorry for the delay. Tony was feeling chatty today.”

Shirley met my gaze. “Never forget Nora’s a reporter,” she whispered. “Your past is something she’ll be delighted to expose, and murder will sell her papers, no matter who she decides to pin it on.”

Coco hit my arm. “Nora’s not your friend, no matter how charming she appears to be.”

Shirley hit my other arm. “Your job is to find out what she knows about Junior. Give away nothing of your own secrets.”

“Nothing,” Coco repeated. “Nothing of your secrets, or what we already know.” She pointed two fingers at her eyes, and then at mine. “She’s the enemy, and you’re at war.”

“War,” Shirley repeated with a nod. “War for the soul of this town.”

“For the soul of Fiona,” Coco said.

“For your own soul,” Shirley said. “For Evie’s soul. For Rainbow’s soul.”

“For freedom,” Coco whispered. “For—

Nora cleared her throat and leaned over my shoulder. “What are all the whispers for? More gossip?”

Shirley and Coco both looked at me, then they peeled away, leaving me alone on my stool.

It was time for my date with the enemy.

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CHAPTER 20

NORA and I sat down at a table by the window.

Coco brought us coffee, giving me a long look before turning away to go back to the counter.

The rainbows from the sun hitting Coco's tiara hadn't even disappeared from our table before Nora slapped a printout of the reward for me onto the table. "Did you know about this?"

I shook off my panic and managed a blank expression. *I could handle this.*

I leaned in and studied it. "What am I supposed to be looking at? The type of paper it's on? It's nice paper."

Nora grabbed the paper, crumpled it up, and stuffed it in her purse. "Is this reward by your ex? Some old boyfriend hunting you? Do you need a gun? I can get an ex-military bodyguard at your door in less than two hours. What do you need to be safe?"

My mouth dropped open in stunned shock. "What?"

She shook her head. "You don't need to admit anything. Just tell me what you need."

I stared at her. "You think—"

She held up her hand to silence me. "I knew there was something behind you buying that shop minutes after finding it online, and then

showing up here hours later, with a safe full of cash in your truck. When a woman tries to disappear like that, it's never because she had a spiritual awakening. Someone is after you, and the odds are ninety-nine percent it's a husband or boyfriend."

I was so stunned. "How did you know about the cash in the safe?"

"I saw the safe at the murder scene and made an assumption."

Well, color me impressed. I had definitely underestimated her.

"Evie. Listen to me." She leaned in, her eyes blazing. "I'm a reporter. Yes, I'll do whatever it takes for a story. I'm sure Coco and Shirley warned you not to trust me, but I'll never betray a woman in danger. I'll repeat my questions. Do you need a gun? Do you need a bodyguard? How can I help?"

I sat back in my seat, completely thrown off guard by her. I'd walked into the interview ready for a battle of the wits, cagily dancing around and trying to outwit each other. I didn't have a plan for the raw fury igniting Nora's words.

"Women supporting women," Nora said. "What do you need to be safe?"

I opened my mouth to deny I was in danger, but the words faded. I was in danger. I was being hunted.

I wanted to grab her arm and accept any help she could give me.

But my entire future safety depended on the firm thinking that I had no idea what was really going on with them. And Shirley and Coco had made it very clear not to trust anything about Nora…even this?

Movement outside the window caught my eye, and I looked sharply, but it was just Tony getting on his bike. Cars were driving by. People strolling by in shorts and sunglasses. An idyllic summer day on a cute Maine island.

I took a breath, grounding myself in this moment, in the fact that right now, I was safe. I turned back to Nora and forced a laugh. "That's so sweet

of you to offer," I said. "Sorry to get you worried, but I'm not in danger. It's not even me."

"It is you. It literally says Evelyn Montgomery on it, and it looks like you." She pulled it out of her purse, uncrumpled it, and laid it on the table. "It's you."

I leaned in to look at it, and I could feel Coco and Shirley's attention, primed to pull a fire alarm or tackle Nora while I ran for cover. Did I admit it was me? She was a reporter. How long could I pretend it wasn't me? Or that I hadn't seen it? I peered at it, frantically trying to decide the right approach.

"Well, that's weird," I said, glancing again outside, suddenly on edge. Had someone already reported me? Were people from Graves & Stone crossing the bridge into town at that moment?

"What's weird?"

"It's my picture and my name." My knee bounced restlessly as I kept looking outside, and then back at Nora.

"But it's not you?" She was watching me so closely.

"Well, I guess technically, but it must be a joke or something." I pushed it aside and tried to focus on her. "No one's looking for me."

Nora leaned back and studied me. "You're a terrible liar."

Shirley snorted, and I tried to stop bouncing my leg. "I had a spiritual awakening about my life purpose," I said firmly. "I want to bring joy to people through ice cream, which has been my passion since I was a child." I pointed outside. "Look at that beautiful setting. I'm so happy I'm here."

Nora drummed her fingers on the table. "Someone is paying ten thousand dollars to find you."

"Are they? I find that highly doubtful." I rolled my eyes. "Shirley, did you hear that? Would you pay ten grand to find me?"

"I'd find you for free, Rainbow."

“Back at you, Shirley.” I beamed at her, and then forced myself into a relaxed sprawl in my chair, assuming the stance of a happy ice cream maven excited to talk about her dream. “I’ve loved ice cream since I was a kid. My mom and I used to invent recipes. I literally have hundreds of recipes that I’ve tried. I had a coding system that I’d use to grade them. One to ten sprinkles, and I always wrote notes on what went well and what didn’t.” All true.

Nora stared at me.

My gaze slid to the street outside again, just to be sure no one was coming for me. “I could never bring myself to throw the recipes out, and now I know why.” I held up my arms in victory. “Finally, I’m in the ice cream business. It was meant to be all along. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

Nora tapped the paper. “Should we call the number so we can find out if someone’s really looking for you?”

I couldn’t stop the sudden tension from shooting through my body, and I saw from her expression that she saw my involuntary response.

She leaned in, her voice so quiet that only I could hear her. “I understand that you feel like you can’t trust anyone right now, Evie, but you’re not alone. You have me.”

My heart tightened, and sudden desperation rushed through me. “What I need is a story that convinces anyone who reads it that I really did have a complete breakdown, left my old life, and I’m never going back because I found my true passion.” The words came out before I could stop them.

She waited for a moment, then said, “That’s it?”

I shrugged, not daring to say anything else. I had no idea what Nora would do with the information, but I suspected she would be calling that number as soon as we were apart, regardless of what I told her. “If you call that number, they can probably track you.”

“They, who?” Her response was so fast that my heart sank.

If she really wanted me to be safe, she would have immediately said she wouldn't call.

But she hadn't.

Shirley and Coco were right.

Wow. I'd been so close to believing her. Maybe she'd already called the number. That's what a reporter probably would do. Fresh tension rippled through me, and I slid my chair to the right so I was facing the window, able to watch everyone who approached the store.

"Who is after you, Evie?" Nora asked again. "I can help you."

Could she? Or was she helping herself? I admired a woman who could help herself, so it was time for me to be that woman. I glanced over at her. "What were you and Junior arguing about the other night when you were at his house?"

Her face drained of color so fast that I was afraid she'd pass out. "What?"

Wow. That was a dramatic reaction. Had they been planning a murder? "Junior was killed only a few days after you were arguing with him at his house, and you were the first one on the scene after he was found. Weird, right?" Okay, so I was being a little aggressive. Maybe I was a little salty that she'd almost gotten me to believe she was my new guardian angel sent to save me from all the bad decisions I'd made in my life.

So close, yet so far.

"How do you know that?" she asked me, instead of answering my question.

"Duchess Fang."

"Duchess Fang? Who's that?"

"My new cat. She's always out and about at night. When she found out that Junior was dead, she was all like, 'hey, ask Nora why she was yelling at him.'" This was actually going well. I was fishing for information and being slightly unhinged at the same time. "And I was all like, 'hey, she seems

nice, why would I bother her?' And she was all like, 'just ask her.' So I am because you know cats. Especially long-haired, silver ones who think they're descended from royalty." I curved my hands into claws and growled.

Her eyes widened, and I had to keep from laughing.

"Duchess Fang thinks you guys were dating," I continued. "She said she's seen you there before. Not always mad, if you get my drift." Why not make up more stuff? And who knew what Duchess Fang knew?

"We weren't dating," she snapped very defensively. "He was helping me with a story."

"Oh, dish it," I said. "What story? The one about Jasmine and Duane? Because that's fiery, right?"

She blinked. "What about Jasmine and Duane?"

"No? Then which one? Oh! Did Junior get killed because of the story? Is that why you freaked out? Or did you kill him because of it?" I was coming in hard with lots of questions, feeling like my old self. Feeling much less like a scared little mob target and more like a badass bitch who could do *The Eggbeater Ballet* in front of tens of people.

"What? No. It was nothing like that." She looked alarmed, though. "Did you tell the police about me and Junior?"

"Maybe. I don't remember. I was having a meltdown at the time." Was I being random enough? Hopefully. "Is it guilt, then? You feel like you got him killed? I feel you. I feel like I got him killed, too. What if my truck hadn't been there? Maybe the killer hid behind my truck, and then jumped him when he wasn't looking." I held up my hands. "I wonder every minute what would have happened if I'd parked in front."

"I didn't get him killed. It wasn't—" She stopped.

"It wasn't what?"

She looked at me, looking somewhat impressed. "You just flipped the tables so fast I didn't even realize it. Who are you?"

“Ice cream goddess and cat owner. They both take a lot of quick thinking.”

“You’re a lawyer.”

Of course she knew that. “I *was* a lawyer. Sucked my soul dry… Dude, wait a second. Let me see that paper.” I grabbed it off the table. “I bet that’s my friend Leah’s number.”

“You bet? What?” She was still off-kilter, trying to keep up with me.

Fast. Agile. Unpredictable. That was me on a good day. “She lived across the hall. I left her a note that I’d found my calling and I was leaving, but I guess maybe drowning my computer in the bathtub and burning my work clothes in the fireplace alarmed her.” I leaned back. “Maybe she thinks I wrote the note under duress.” I started grinning. “That’s actually very sweet. I’ll have to invite her up here. She’d love it up here.”

“You didn’t recognize her number?” Nora sounded steeped in disbelief, which was valid.

I snorted. “I don’t know anyone’s number. They’re all in my phone, which I destroyed in the garbage disposal. So yeah, she can’t reach me, which might trigger her to freak out about my safety. I love good friends, don’t you?” I beamed at her happily.

“That’s it? Your friend is looking for you? That’s worth ten thousand dollars?”

“She’s rich, loyal, and loves kitten yoga. What else would she do?”

“I—” Nora was looking very perplexed again.

“But enough about me.” I tossed the paper aside as if I didn’t care about it one bit, though I did sneak a peek at the street again. “Let’s talk about you. What were you and Junior going off about, huh? If you didn’t kill him, then you need to come clean, because anyone who argues with a murder victim shortly before their death is always a suspect.”

“Amen to that,” Shirley yelled out.

“Girl, you’re in so much trouble,” Coco said. “Even I know that, and I’m just a sweet old lady who makes coffee and pastries.”

Nora studied me, suspicion etched on her face. “You’re like two different people. One minute, I’m convinced you’re in real danger, and the next, I think you’re a rude, flighty liar who doesn’t even care that her friend thinks she’s been kidnapped.”

Well, I was going to take it as a win that I at least half convinced her that I had a friend who loved me. “What were you and Junior fighting about, Nora? If you didn’t kill him, then there’s no harm in telling me.”

“I’m a reporter. I take my secrets to the grave.” She stood up. “Interview’s over. I have a call to make.”

My heart sank. She was calling my bluff. I wanted to tell her not to call, but I had to look at the long game.

I had to let her do it. I had to pretend I didn’t know what the firm was up to.

I swallowed hard. “Tell Leah I didn’t mean to freak her out. Send her my love.” As I said it, determination flooded me. If Nora, or anyone else, made that call, my time was up. I needed to get to that police station, and retrieve my truck and my money. I needed the power that they both gave me.

Nora looked at me hard. “If making that call would put you in danger, you need to tell me.”

She was so convincing. I almost believed her. I forced myself to shrug. “You should call. Leah will be happy to know I’m not dead—” Movement caught my eye outside, and I glanced at the street.

An old, red pickup truck was going by. Slowly.

It took me a split second to recognize it, then I bolted to my feet. “That’s my truck!”

Was my safe in there? Was someone stealing my safe?

I ran for the door, but I was on foot.

I’d never make it.

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CHAPTER 21

WHEN I REACHED THE SIDEWALK, my truck was paused at the corner, engine idling.

"Hey!" I sprinted after it. "Wait!" I caught up and hit the back with my hand. "Stop—"

It started moving again.

"No!" I lunged for it, but my hands caught only air as my truck cruised leisurely forward, staying just out of my reach as I sprinted after it.

Taunting me.

I lasted less than a block at full sprint before I lost the ability to breathe. I staggered to an unathletic stop, gasping in aghast dismay at losing my truck, and maybe my safe.

To my surprise, my truck eased to a halt, pausing a few yards ahead of me.

Frowning, I started walking after it, and it immediately started rolling forward again, staying just ahead of me.

I stopped.

It did the same.

Huh.

I strolled forward, and my truck waited patiently.

Then, just when I was almost within touching distance, I launched myself at it, but the driver hit the gas, lurching away just as my fingers brushed the tailgate.

Rude.

Bracing my hands on my knees as I fought for breath, I watched it pause again, definitely waiting for me.

Toying with me.

Mocking my raw physical athleticism.

What was happening? Was this a spillover of the *Buttered Rum?* Another game with new rules every thirty seconds?

“Yoohoo! Rainbow!” I looked up as Shirley pulled up next to me in her convertible. Coco was riding shotgun. “Let’s go get your sweet baby!”

Relief rushed through me. “You’re the best!” I ran around to the passenger side. Coco helped me climb over her, so we were both squeezed on the seat. The minute I was in, my truck started to move again.

"We got it!" Shirley pulled up close behind my truck and tooted her horn.

It kept going at the same leisurely pace.

Twice it got delayed at an intersection, but the minute I started to get out to see who was driving, it started moving again, nudging aside pedestrians gently but relentlessly.

Each time Shirley tried to pull up alongside it, the driver sped up. Each time we got behind, it slowed down.

We followed it out of town, and it turned onto a road that went alongside the harbor. My truck picked up speed, but didn’t rush. Just cruising along at a reasonable pace that was easy for us to keep up.

“What in the devil’s macaroon is going on?” Shirley asked.

“It’s not going toward the bridge,” Coco said. “It’s heading to the north end of the island.”

The driver had a hat and sunglasses on, and as I watched, the driver looked up at the rearview mirror. Checking on us. Making sure we were keeping up. Realization dawned on me. “Son of a biscuit,” I whispered. “The driver is leading us somewhere.”

“Leading us?”

“Like Lassie.” I studied my truck more intently. “What is the one thing that I would hunt down? My truck. Stealing my truck guarantees that I’ll follow.”

“By all that’s chocolate and bitter,” Coco said, “You might be right.”

Shirley hit the brakes, and our convertible stopped.

Up ahead, my truck stopped, too.

Coco hit Shirley in the arm. “What are you doing?”

“Some random person is trying to lure us to an off-grid location. Following it is like being the dumb person in a horror movie.” She gripped the steering wheel. “Someone stabbed Junior yesterday. We’ve been asking questions. And now someone stole your truck with the intention of leading us into the woods.”

The three of us fell silent, watching my red tail lights.

As we sat there, my truck inched forward a few feet, then stopped again.

“Whoever is driving that really wants us to follow,” I said.

“Yep,” Shirley replied.

“What if it’s someone who’s trying to help us solve the case?” I said. “Someone who wants to stay anonymous?”

“What if it’s someone who wants to stab us?” Shirley said. “Anonymously, of course.”

“If it’s a stabber, it’s three against one,” I said. “We win.” Or maybe not. “Or at least one of us will be able to get away, and tell the cops what happened.”

“Unless there’s a whole army of zombies with giant knives hiding in the back seat. Or in the bed of the truck,” Coco said. “Then it’s three against an

army of flesh-eating death bringers."

I looked over at her. "The zombies could take us right now if they wanted."

Coco's eyes widened. "Back this thing up, Shirley! I refuse to be taken down by a zombie army. I have way too much unspent money to die now!"

Shirley glanced at me then shifted into reverse.

As she began to back up, my truck's white backup lights came on, and it started backing up as well.

"Stop," I said to Shirley.

She stopped.

My truck stopped.

"Nora knows I sprinted out after my truck," I said. "She probably ran to get her car, and she's zooming after us. If we keep sitting here, she'll catch up."

"And if we keep driving, she'll find us," Shirley finished.

I looked over at her. "Yep."

"Nora?" Coco nearly shouted her name. "You think Nora is going to save us? She'll take pictures of us being killed and try to win a Pulitzer with it."

"Your car is so much faster than my old truck," I said to Shirley. "You could outrun and outmaneuver that beater so easily."

She flexed her hands around the steering wheel. "So, if we made sure to keep a line of retreat open, we'd win the race to safety."

"Assuming you're a speedy driver."

"I love speed." She looked over at me. "Fiona would tell us to follow the truck."

"Of course she would," Coco groaned. "Fiona was fearless, and it got her killed!"

"And she asked us to find out who did it," Shirley said. "You want to wait for Nora to mess it all up?"

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Coco opened the door. “We don’t have cell service here, but I’ll get out, walk back to town, and find the police. I’ll get them to come save you.”

Shirley and I exchanged glances. Was it asinine to follow my truck? Maybe. But maybe not. Better to summon the cops? Maybe. Maybe not. “Someone made sure we found Fiona’s jewelry box on the boat last night,” I said. “Maybe this is the same person.”

Coco paused with one foot out of the car. “Fiona left that there for us.”

“And someone made sure that our quest led us to that metal box.” I’d been thinking about it, and it was the only thing that made sense. “Maybe the driver of my truck is Mouse, who Fiona was working with.”

“But maybe Mouse killed her, and is trying to do the same to us,” Coco said.

Shirley shifted into drive. “Evie’s right. Someone’s helping us, and I’m going to find out who. You in or out, Coco?”

Coco held up her hand and closed her eyes. “Let me ask Fiona.”

We waited for a moment while she communed with the dead.

When she opened her eyes, her jaw was clenched. “Of course she told us to go. She thinks it’s hilariously fun.” She slammed the door shut and sat back down, folding her arms over her chest. “If I die, I will find her in the afterlife and torment her for all eternity.”

I grinned. “Let’s do this, then. Make sure to keep a clear avenue for escape, Shirley.”

“You bet. We can’t solve a murder if we’re dead.” She took her foot off the brake, and her convertible eased forward.

My truck began to move again.

We were silent, wrapped in tension as both vehicles began to pick up speed.

I bounced my knee restlessly, squished between Coco and the gear shift. “What’s out this way?”

Shirley glanced in her rearview mirror, and flexed her hands around the steering wheel. “We’ll pass through farmland. The dairy is out this way. Ridgeway Farm, too. They have a nice store with local produce from the area. Hiking trails. Campsites. Some old camps. On the far side, along the water, are some neighborhoods with prime beach real estate. Those are mostly second homes belonging to out-of-towners. Too expensive for locals.”

“I live there,” Coco said. “I’m a local.”

“Maybe we’re being led to your house for a surprise party,” Shirley said. “Champagne and strawberries for all.”

But her voice was tense.

The three of us fell silent again. The rhythmic hum of the tires on the road and the wind whipping past us were the only sounds.

A few cars passed us going the other way, but we were going fast enough that no one caught up to us.

The road was eerily empty.

As the woods grew thicker, my tension rose. “You know, ladies,” I said, “I’m beginning to think my truck isn’t worth this.”

“It’s not about your truck,” Coco said. “Fiona told us to go.”

“It’s about justice,” Shirley said.

At that moment, my truck slowed, and then turned left onto a dirt road.

Shirley stopped at the end of the road, and we all watched as my truck’s tail lights disappeared from sight. “Raise your hand if you want to drive down a dirt road after Evie’s truck.”

I sat on my hands.

Coco shoved hers into her pockets.

Shirley folded her arms.

“It’s unanimous,” Shirley said. “I’m not going in there.”

“We could be disappeared in those woods,” Coco agreed. “It would be easy to make us vanish.”

I didn’t want to be a wimp. But I also wasn’t an idiot. Following my truck down a dirt road felt different than humming along a main road where others were zooming past.

Because, although I suspected someone was helping us, I didn’t know it for sure. I couldn’t take the chance that we were being led to our death.

But at the same time…I paused, trying to ignore fear and to focus instead. “The truck didn’t wait to see if we followed this time,” I said slowly, trying to piece things together.

“The driver knows he has us committed to following him,” Coco said. “Arrogant toad.”

“But anyone with a brain would assume three intelligent women wouldn’t follow the truck down an isolated dirt road,” I said. “He wouldn’t have expected us to drive down there after him.”

“People underestimate women all the time,” Coco said. “A curse and a blessing, to be honest.”

“Or…” I looked around. “This is where he wanted to lead us to. He did speed away once we got here.”

“Oh cupcakes, I hope so,” Coco said. “That would be fantastic.”

I grabbed the windshield and hauled myself to my feet. “If this is the spot, then we need to find out why.”

“What? Don’t get out!” Coco grabbed for my arm, but I slipped past her and vaulted out of the convertible, right at the junction between the asphalt and the dirt.

I turned in a slow circle, carefully assessing my surroundings.

Shirley unhooked her seatbelt and stood up in the car, looking around. “I don’t see anything.”

“There has to be something.” I walked beside the car, keeping close while I scanned the woods. I saw trees. Bushes. An empty, wooden stand that said “Local corn, $1 each. $5 for a half dozen.”

I pointed to the corn stand. “Is that always there?”

Shirley braced her palms on the top of the windshield. “Yep. It’s for Thistle Farms, one of the small farms on the island. They fill it with corn during the season and have a lockbox for money. Honor system.”

I walked over to it and peered at it. It was basically like an open bookshelf with two deep shelves, at least three feet wide and two feet deep. The top shelf held a few withered corn husks. Same with the bottom.

I wandered around to the back, and then frowned. “There’s an old chest back here. Is that new?”

“I’ve never walked around back before,” Shirley responded.

Coco was also standing up in the car, but neither one of them made a move to join me.

Which was fine. I didn’t need to endanger them as well.

I crouched by the chest, a move that put me out of visual contact with Shirley and Coco. I tried to open the old, weathered chest, but a new, shiny padlock was keeping it closed. I wiggled it with my hand thoughtfully, thinking. “It’s got a new lock,” I called out.

Shirley leaned over my shoulder, startling me. “What are the odds? Another locked box? It’s becoming a habit.”

I flicked it. “Makes me wish I’d grabbed that key from the boat.”

“You mean this one?” She dangled a shiny key in front of my face.

“What?” I was so impressed. “You grabbed it?”

She shrugged. “It was still in the lock when I took Fiona’s jewelry box. I decided to keep it handy.”

My heart jumped, and I grinned at her. “I could kiss you.”

“Right? That’s what everyone says.” She held the key out. “Open it.”

My hands stayed where they were. “I opened the last one. Your turn.”

“Nope. On the boat, it was all fun and good. Out here, I’d rather you be the first one to discover a murder weapon, or a rotting corpse, or any of that fun stuff.” She raised her voice. “Coco? All clear out there?”

“No sign of the truck or anything else,” Coco yelled back. “I’ll keep watch.”

Shirley grinned at me. “Coco is all smoke and no fire. She always chooses to stand guard. Fiona and I had to do the dirty work.”

I took a breath and took the key. “Exactly how you like it.”

“What’s the fun if you don’t get dirty?” But as she said it, she took a step back.

“Where’s your fire?” I challenged, really not wanting to be the one to open the chest.

“It’s burning bright, but I don’t want to get in the way of yours. Go for it, Evie.”

“Fine.” I slid the key into the lock, and it went right in. I turned it, and the padlock opened.

Shirley clucked softly. “That locksmith sure gets around. We need to talk to him.”

“Harvey?” I recalled my arrival to the island. “Bernie’s bridge friend? The one he needlepoints with?”

“Yup. That’s the one.”

“Yep, we need to talk to him.” I slid the lock off and let it drop in the dirt.

I glanced at Shirley, then lifted the latch. I stood up, ready to dive for safety if necessary, then flipped the lid open.

We both jumped back, but nothing leapt out of the depths to attack us.

“No zombies,” Shirley said.

“Always a good day when there are no zombies.” I inched forward and peered into the chest. Relief made my shoulders sag. “It’s empty milk bottles.”

“What?” Shirley hurried up beside me and leaned over. “Son of a biscuit. That’s very anticlimactic.” She picked one up and peered at it. “Stone Berry Dairy bottles.”

“Connected with Junior, then.” I crouched next to the chest and ran my hand around the inside. “It’s insulated. It would keep milk cold.”

“Oh, Lordy. We’ve stumbled onto a milk crime ring,” Shirley said. “It’s supposed to be organic, but it’s not? Full fat, but it’s really skim milk? Llama milk when it’s supposed to be cow’s milk? Chocolate milk made with a cheap substitute instead of high-end chocolate? The possibilities are endless.”

I picked up another bottle and inspected it. It was clean, empty, and boring.

“It could be Thistle Farm’s drop off point for their deliveries,” Shirley said. “We return all the dairy’s bottles after we use them. We have a box for them. They could drop off their corn and pick up their milk.”

“It’s not corn season, though.” I put the bottle back and picked up another one. Something rattled in it, and I held it up to the light to inspect it more closely.

Then my gut dropped. “Um, Shirley?”

“What?”

“There’s something in this one.”

She sighed. “What is it? Curdled yogurt? Another bill? A ten-thousand-dollar reward for you?”

“No.” I looked at her. “It’s a human toe.”

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CHAPTER 22

"A TOE?" Shirley's eyes widened. "It is not."

I held it up. "The bottle's still cold. I don't think it's been in there long."

"Is it rotting? Frozen? Bleeding?" Shirley didn't make any attempt to answer those insightful questions herself by actually looking at the toe. In fact, she backed up a step. "Is it laced with pain, agony, and suffering?"

"I don't know. Probably. I can't think of a situation where losing a toe feels like joy, bliss, and happiness."

"You guys!" Coco shouted. "Someone's coming up the dirt road!"

Alarm shot through me, and Shirley sucked in her breath.

"We're not leaving it," I said. "It'll be gone if we do!"

"Hand it over!" she commanded.

I tossed her the bottle. She caught it and raced around the stand, heading back toward her car.

I slammed the lid shut, put the padlock back on, then bolted, the key gripped in my hand.

Shirley was already in the driver's seat, engine roaring as I rounded the stand. I could see headlights coming up the dirt road. As Shirley whipped the car around, I sprinted toward her. She barely slowed as I grabbed the door and threw myself over, landing on Coco.

"Hang on!" Shirley shouted.

Coco locked her arms around me as Shirley hit the gas. The tires sprayed gravel as they spun out, and then the convertible leapt forward, hurtling down the paved road we'd just been on.

"I don't have a seatbelt on," I shouted as I shoved the key in my pocket. "Don't stop fast!"

"Can't make promises," Shirley yelled back. "Secure the milk bottle!"

"Where is it?"

"I have it," Coco shouted over the roaring wind. "It's at my feet. What's in it?"

"A severed toe!"

"Are you kidding?" Coco's arm loosened in alarm. "There's a severed toe at my feet? What if it tries to attach to my foot? What if it thinks that my feet are its home?" She kicked frantically. "Stay off me, you monster!"

"Oh, stop it," Shirley said, punching Coco in the arm. "It's in a sealed bottle. It can't get out."

"You're sure it's sealed?"

I wasn't even sure it was sealed, so I knew Shirley couldn't promise it.

"I'm positive," Shirley said. "Now calm down—"

A blue Jeep sped toward us, coming from the opposite direction.

"That's Nora!" Shirley said. "Heads down!"

Coco and I ducked, and I peered around Coco's knees to check the floor. The milk bottle was on its side at her feet, and there was a lid on it, so I hoped the toe was still inside. I didn't want to deal with a toe wandering around the floor.

"Nora's doing a U-turn," Shirley reported. "She must have seen us as she passed by."

Coco sat up. "Of course she saw us. You're the only red convertible on this island."

"But why would she think that Evie was with me? Why isn't she looking for the truck?"

“Because she’s a piranha in human form,” Coco said.

I turned around and saw that the Jeep was indeed turning around. “She’ll definitely sense we have a toe in the car,” I said. “She’ll smell it out.”

“Does it smell?” Coco asked. “Is it rotting? That’s so gross.”

“It’s cold,” I said, “so hopefully not smelling. I was talking rhetorically.”

The Jeep made its full turn and started down the road after us.

Shirley drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “This is our toe, not hers. We can’t let her get to it.”

“Hide the toe,” Coco said. “Put it in your bra, Shirley.”

Shirley shot her a look of disdain. “You put it in your bra.”

“Let’s have Rainbow do it.”

“I have rules against severed body parts in my undergarments,” I said. “So yeah, no can do.”

Coco twisted around. “Then we need to lose that menace. Hit the gas, Shirley.”

Shirley took her foot off the accelerator, and the car slowed. “I’m not going to outrun her. It makes us look guilty.”

“Of what? Avoiding her? We are.”

I looked behind us. Nora was closing fast. “How could we even lose her? This is an island.”

“It has a lot of twisty side roads,” Coco said. “Shirley knows them. She could make it happen.”

I looked over at Shirley. “Could you?”

“Yeah—Oh, boy.”

“What?” I looked behind us again, and I saw a black pickup had paused at the corn stand. “Did that truck come out of the dirt road?”

“Yep.” Shirley was watching the mirror. “And someone just got out.”

“Looking for the toe!” Coco groaned. “They’re going to realize we have it and come after us.”

I wanted to go back so badly and see who it was. But that would be insane. “Do you guys recognize the truck? Or the person who got out?”

They both shook their heads. “We’re too far away,” Coco said. “There are a lot of dark pickups on the island. The list is long.”

I knew that Gator had a dark pickup truck. But that was parked at my store, so it wasn’t him. Unless he’d gone on the move when I’d left him. So…was that Gator?

Shirley was drumming her hands on the steering wheel. “Is the truck coming after us?”

Coco and I twisted around, watching. We were getting too far away to see, and as we rounded a corner, the truck disappeared from sight. “Can’t see it anymore,” I said.

“Same with Nora,” Coco said.

“That means they can’t see us either.” Shirley hit the brakes and took a hairpin left that slammed Coco and me against the door. I started to lift off, and Shirley grabbed my arm and held on as the tires spun out, caught purchase, and then launched forward.

We shot down a side road, going at a speed that made all the trees become shadowy blurs as we hurtled past.

“Seatbelt,” Coco shouted. “Come on, Rainbow.” She dragged me back onto her lap, and I braced myself as she pulled the shoulder belt down. “Lean back!”

I pulled it over my shoulder, and then Coco shoved the buckle in, locking me on her lap. The moment we were secure, the convertible shot over a low hill, and the milk bottle flew up.

“Get it!” Coco shouted.

I snatched it out of the air, shoved it down the front of my shirt, and then folded my arms over it. “Got it!”

“Hah! Rainbow put the toe in her bra,” Coco cackled. “I love that so much!”

“It’s not in my bra. It’s in my shirt.” Raw, unbridled terror gripped me as Shirley careened around another sharp turn that was flanked with thousands of trees poised to splatter us.

The tires slid on the dirt, and I shouted as a large pine tree came at us. “Watch out!”

Shirley straightened the car, and we leapt forward again, passing by the tree so closely that I flinched and braced for death.

Then we were on a straight section again, flying past pine trees at a speed that had to be so illegal that I’d get disbarred for being a part of it.

“There’s no way that Nora can make these turns,” Shirley yelled. “A few more minutes, and we’ll be home free!”

“You mean dead?” I shouted. “You’re going to kill us!”

Shirley cackled and wiggled her fingers at me.

“Dear God! Put your hands back on the wheel!”

“She’s been doing this since she was twelve years old,” Coco yelled. “Just enjoy the ride. She doesn’t even need to have her eyes open.”

“Don’t you dare close your eyes, Shirley,” I shouted, “or I’m going to sell the shop to Armando and let him turn it into a boutique hotel filled with severed toes!”

Shirley’s smile widened. “You’re so much fun, Evie! I adore you!” Then she hauled the steering wheel to the right and sped down another road—

She hit the brakes suddenly, stopping so fast that the seatbelt almost cut my sternum in half and the milk bottle crushed my ribs. Coco slammed into my back, and for a moment, I thought for sure I was going through the windshield.

Then the car settled, and we both slammed back against the seat. “What was that?” I gasped, fighting for air as the pain from the milk bottle impaling my chest made me want to crawl away crying.

“Deer.”

“Deer?” I looked up and saw nothing but an empty road. “What?”

“She’s gone. Zipped into the woods.” Shirley began to drive again, this time at a less lethal pace. “I never hit animals. It’s against my moral code.”

Coco patted my arm. “It’s okay, Rainbow. You’ll get used to riding with Shirley.”

“Never.” I pulled the milk bottle out of my shirt. “I think I broke my ribs.”

“Can you take a deep breath?” Shirley asked.

“No. I’m dying.” My heart was thundering, and I wiped my cheek. Tears from fear, or from the wind? I didn’t even know.

Coco clucked with sympathy. “Take a deep breath,” she commanded.

I did as she said. It was shaky, but it didn’t hurt. “It’s okay.”

“No broken ribs. Perfect.” Coco patted my arm again, as if she sensed that I was far from okay right now.

“To be fair,” Shirley said, as she picked up speed again, but not at the pace we were at before. “You specifically asked me if I could drive fast, and I said yes, so you basically green-lighted this entire side quest before it even started.”

“And we lost Nora and the bogyman looking for the severed toe, so hats off to Shirley for her excellent driving,” Coco said. “Well done, Shirley.”

Shirley did a little bow. “You’re so welcome. It’s always a good day when I get to drive like that.”

I set the bottle between my feet. “I think I need to throw up.”

“No!” Shirley glared at me. “That’s not allowed in my car. Toughen up, Rainbow.”

“I need to get out of the car.”

“We can’t stop,” Shirley said. “Nora is wandering these woods. She’ll eventually find her way out, and we need to keep moving.”

I leaned my head back, resting it on Coco's shoulder. "I thought I was going to die."

"How did it feel?" Shirley glanced over at me.

"What?"

"How did it feel when you thought you were going to die?"

"Terrifying."

She nodded. "Excellent. Now you know that you have something to live for."

"It's Rippy Mama's," Coco said. "It's definitely not your old job."

"It's—" I paused. "It's just life. I want to stay alive because of life."

Shirley winked at me. "Isn't that beautiful, Rainbow? You've just learned that you have a passion for life. That's amazing. Most people spend their lives chasing money, the dream house, approval of others, and you just figured out that life itself is what is worth all the fuss. Even life with a severed toe in your shirt and the mafia hunting you, it's still so gloriously wonderful that it's worth sticking around for."

I turned my head to look at her. "You're insane."

"Absolutely, but in all the right ways."

I sighed and rubbed my sternum. "Maybe," I acknowledged. I'd spent years chasing a partnership, and I'd had no trouble leaving that dream behind yesterday. Was it only yesterday?

Shirley flipped a smile at me. "Welcome to Blueberry Island, Evie, where everything you thought you knew vanishes in a sea of ice cream, passion for life, and unpredictability."

"And fabulous women," Coco added cheerfully. "How can you ask for anything more?"

Laughter finally bubbled up inside me. "I'm never going to ask you to drive fast again," I said.

Shirley cackled. "Never make promises you can't keep, Rainbow." The car nudged out onto a paved road that was lined with trees, houses with cute

yards and flowerpots.

I relaxed. “We’re back near town.”

“Yep.” She didn’t pull forward. “Where to, ladies?”

I held up the milk bottle. “The police station?”

Shirley and Coco looked at each other, and then they both shook their heads. “Nah.”

“Not yet.”

“But we have a toe—”

“And if we give it to the police, we’ll never hear another thing about it,” Shirley said. “We need to get the info from it first.”

“Do you want me to interview it?” I asked. “Maybe use my excellent interrogation skills to force it to talk?”

“I could try talking to it,” Coco said. “Sometimes I can communicate with ghosts.”

I glanced at Shirley, and she nodded.

“Wow. Okay. Here.” I handed her the bottle.

Coco peered at the toe through the glass, then put her hands around the bottle and closed her eyes.

“We should visit Harvey.” Shirley drummed her fingers on the steering wheel.

“The locksmith? But we have a toe—”

“Ssh!” Coco didn’t open her eyes.

“Exactly,” Shirley whispered. “There’s a toe on the lam right now, and the bad guys are looking for it. Nora knows something is up. Gator is stalking your store. How long do you think we can keep zipping around without anyone realizing what we’re up to? We need to move while the shadows still conceal us.”

I stared at her. “There are literally no shadows concealing us.”

“Well, there are a lot more than there will be with each passing hour,” Shirley said.

Coco opened her eyes. “Fiona said to go see Harvey. She sounded very urgent. We need to go now.”

“Fiona?” I raised my brows. “I thought you were talking to the toe.”

“Well, Fiona sensed I’d opened the portal, so she popped in. Like I said, urgency is the message. We gotta go.”

“To Harvey’s we go,” Shirley said cheerfully as she pulled out onto the main road.

Coco closed her eyes again and began to hum to the toe.

“Fiona,” I whispered. “Please tell Coco who killed you.”

Coco opened her eyes. “Seriously? That’s not how this works.”

So many rules about communing with ghosts. How did I not know this? “How does it work?”

“The dead can’t solve their own murders,” Coco said impatiently.

“Of course not,” I agreed. “That wouldn’t make sense.”

“And Fiona wouldn’t do it anyway,” Shirley said. “Where would be the fun in that for us?”

“Right? She’s guiding us, though. Giving us just enough of a direction.” Coco closed her eyes again. “Now silence. I need to talk to the toe.”

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CHAPTER 23

"THIS TOE DOESN'T WANT to talk," Coco said several minutes later, as we were cruising toward Harvey's, keeping a tense watch for Nora. We checked out three dark pickups that passed by, but none of them paused to murder us, so yay for the day turning out great.

"Not surprising that the toe isn't chatty," Shirley said. "Toes are notoriously uncommunicative."

"Amen, sister." Coco sighed and handed me the toe. "You try."

I accepted the bottle and held it up, inspecting the toe, trying not to think of it as a toe, but rather as information, like I was doing discovery for a corporate espionage case. Just some incriminating documents that happened to be shaped like a toe. "It's not the big toe," I observed. "Probably the second or third toe."

"Definitely not a pinkie, either," Coco agreed. "I noticed that, too."

There were flecks of dirt around the nail and in the knuckle. "It's dirty, but that could have happened after it was removed."

Coco chuckled. "I can just imagine the drama. 'Hey, I dropped the toe in the mud! Does anyone see it?'"

Shirley looked over at me. "You're like a coroner, dissecting that toe."

"It's just information," I said, trying to keep my brain quiet. I turned the bottle, inspecting the red on the end. "I don't think that's blood on the nail. I

think it’s polish.”

“What?” Coco grabbed the bottle. “Hot diggity. I think you’re right.” She looked at us. “Tony would know what shade this is.”

“Lordy loo, Coco, we’re not going to show Tony a dismembered toe. He’d never recover.” Shirley turned a corner. “And what does it matter what color it is? Anyone could buy any color.”

“What if it’s Jasmine’s color? Tony might know that,” I said. “After all their drama club time together.”

Coco nodded, and Shirley’s brows went up. “You think it’s Jasmine’s toe?”

“I have no idea, but it’s kind of petite. It’s not giving a big, hairy knuckle, man vibe. What other women do we know that are linked to this?”

Shirley gripped the wheel. “It’s not Fiona’s. She only wore purple, pink, or blue.”

Coco rolled her eyes. “Well, obviously. Fiona would have told me if it was her toe when we were just chatting.”

“Would she? You may be overestimating her helpfulness,” I said. “I don’t know that we can fully trust anything that Fiona tells you.”

Coco inclined her head. “You may be right. She does like a good lark.”

“That she does,” Shirley said, giving me a look. “I agree with Evie. Probably best to keep a bit of skepticism with Fiona reporting in from the great beyond.”

“Shoot. You’re right.” Coco held up the bottle. “Fiona! Is this your toe?”

While she waited for a response, I nudged Shirley. “Can I have your phone? I want to take pictures in case we lose it.”

“Lose it? How will we lose a freaking milk bottle?”

“Or someone murders me and takes it.”

“Oh.” Shirley held out her phone. “Good idea.”

I took the best photos I could through the glass, because I wasn't going to open the bottle, then I texted them to Coco, so we had them on two devices. Did the mafia still remove appendages to teach lessons? Oh… man…I didn't like that intrusive thought. "I hope the toe was an accident."

"An accident?" Shirley snorted. "A toe in a bottle?"

I gave the bottle back to Coco. "Well, obviously someone put it in the bottle, but maybe it got cut off in an accident."

Shirley gave me a skeptical grimace, but she nodded. "Sure, it was an accident. If that makes you feel better, let's roll with that."

"It does." I let out my breath and tried to focus. "I think—"

At that moment, I heard a siren behind us. My stomach dropped, and we all turned around. Blue lights were flashing on the roof of an SUV that was right behind us.

"Son of a biscuit. Hide the toe!" Shirley pulled off to the side, and to our dismay, the SUV pulled up behind us. "It's Ethan," she said, looking in the rearview mirror. "Everyone cry. He's a man. He won't know what to do."

Coco immediately started sobbing as she tried to shove the bottle under the seat. "He's so inconvenient."

The bottle didn't even come close to fitting underneath. "Can't we just give him the toe?" I said. "We have all the info we need, and I don't really want to be dragging it around with us."

"What if the man in the black truck finds us?" Coco snapped. "And he wants the toe, but we don't have it. There's no reason for him to keep us alive, is there?"

"If we give the bad guy the toe, there's no reason for him to keep us alive at that point either." I retrieved the bottle from the floor.

"But if he thinks we're hiding the toe, then he could torture us to get us to crack," Coco said. "I'd rather have him just shoot us and be done with it."

“Me, too,” Shirley said. “I hate torture.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. No one is going to torture us—”

“You don’t know that toe wasn’t torture, do you? It could be an accident, or it could have been so much more,” Shirley retorted. “Team vote. All in favor of hiding it from Ethan, say ‘Aye.’”

Both of them raised a hand. “Aye!”

“Aye!”

“It’s evidence of a crime,” I pointed out. “We can’t keep it—”

“Give that to me, you law-abiding softie.” Coco snatched the bottle out of my hands. “Majority wins. That’s how we roll.”

“Majority doesn’t win in this case—”

“You consented to our rules when you bought Rippy Mama’s,” Shirley said. “It was in the small print in the contract you signed.”

“It definitely wasn’t—”

“Did you read the fine print? You didn’t even know you also bought a house.”

Fair point. “I’m pretty certain there was nothing in there that said that when confronted with perpetrating a crime, I have to participate if I’m outvoted.”

“That’s exactly what it said,” Shirley said. “Would you expect anything less from Fiona?”

Honestly, no. “It would be legally unenforceable.”

“But what about your big, smooshy heart?” Coco said. “How will you feel watching someone stick a nail in my eye because we can’t hand over the toe? You’ll be crushed watching me with an eyepatch for the rest of my life, blinded because you betrayed the team.”

Wow. That was well done. I could already taste the guilt.

“Betrayed the team,” Shirley repeated ominously. “It’ll eat away at your soul.”

“Forever and ever,” Coco agreed.

“We don’t even know that hanging onto it is criminal. It’s a toe in a bottle. Why would we think there is anything untoward about it?” Shirley said.

“It’s a toe in a bottle,” I said. “Of course there’s something untoward about it.”

Ethan’s car door slammed, and I could see him sauntering toward us in the rearview mirror.

Shirley grabbed my arm, her fingers digging in. “My best friend was killed months ago, and no one is looking for her murderer. Your prints are on a murder weapon, making you the easiest suspect for another death. Do you really think that handing over our one piece of good evidence to the cops who aren’t on our side is the right call?”

“Charlene’s on our side.” But I felt the weight of her words. If Fiona had been killed, it had gone under the radar. And I had a whole lot of shadows lurking around my reputation.

“Charlene didn’t suspect Fiona was murdered,” Shirley hissed. “We’re on our own, Evie. Be the badass you’ve been training to be for your whole life—”

“Hello, ladies.” Ethan’s shadow fell over us.

The bottle was in my hand.

In plain sight.

Shirley gave him an innocent look. “Was I speeding again?”

“You’re always speeding, Shirley.” His gaze surveyed me and Coco, then settled on me. He gave me a thoughtful look, and I felt my cheeks heat up as my fingers tightened around the bottle.

If he looked down at the bottle, could he see the toe?

I slid the bottle between my thighs, so the bottom of it was blocked by my legs. As I did it, I felt my ethics and morals screaming in protest. What was I doing?

But I couldn’t stop thinking of Fiona and how no one had looked into her death.

How I liked Coco with both eyes.

How I didn’t want to go to prison. Would stealing a toe make me more or less likely to go to prison? Less. More.

“A word in private, Evie?” he asked.

“No. Whatever you say to her can be said in front of all of us,” Shirley said firmly.

Amusement flickered in Ethan’s eyes. “It can’t, actually. Evie?”

“No. Don’t go. He’s trying to trap you,” Coco whispered.

“I can hear you,” Ethan said, trying to hold back an amused grin.

“It’s fine.” I unfastened my seatbelt and stood up, letting the bottle slide under me onto the seat. I took off my jacket and tossed it on the seat, covering the bottle. What was I doing? I couldn’t believe I was hiding the bottle, but I couldn’t stop myself from doing it. “I’ll be right back.”

Coco pinched the back of my thigh as I climbed over her, and Shirley gave me a look, both of them warning dire repercussions of guilt and partial blindness if I betrayed the team.

I ignored them and climbed out over Coco.

“Fiona sends her love,” Coco called out as I walked around behind the convertible.

“So much love,” Shirley echoed.

They both twisted around in their seats, watching me as I met up with Ethan behind the rear bumper. He glanced at them, then gestured me toward his vehicle.

“Don’t get in his truck,” Coco shouted. “Make him kill you with witnesses, not in private!”

“I’m recording this,” yelled Shirley. “Stay in sight!”

Ethan was struggling not to laugh as he escorted me out of their earshot. “They’re talking to Fiona?” he asked.

I nodded and stopped by the grill of his truck. “Coco apparently communes with her. I’m not sure whether Shirley believes her or not.”

His gaze slid back toward them. “Knowing Fiona, it wouldn’t surprise me if she found a way to do it.”

“I didn’t even know her, and I agree.” I folded my arms over my chest. “What’s up?”

He cleared his throat, and I realized that he looked stressed.

I stiffened. “What’s going on?” Was he going to arrest me right now?

He grimaced. “So, yeah, um…” He paused then cleared his throat a second time. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but your truck got stolen out of the police lot.”

Oh. My truck. Yay for not getting arrested. Relief rushed through me, but I made sure to widen my eyes in feigned surprise. “What? My truck’s missing?” I paused, then asked the question I assumed I knew the answer to. “Did you take my safe out of my truck? And my clothes?”

He grimaced. “No.”

“No?” A sudden chill gripped me. “*No?* You said you were taking the safe out. Are you kidding?”

“I’m sorry as hell.” He swore and ran his hand over his forehead. “I know. I screwed up. I couldn’t touch anything until it had been fully processed. The folks are due here later this morning. It’s Blueberry Island. I figured it was secure.”

I stared at him. “You were wrong. Like utterly, completely wrong”

He nodded. “Yes, I was. I screwed up.”

Dammit. Why was he admitting his failure and taking responsibility? It was so much more difficult for me to stay angry at him. “Are there cameras at the police station?”

He grimaced. “Technically, but they haven’t worked since I’ve been there. I’ve been on the sheriff to get them fixed, but she’s not a fan of technology.”

I clasped my hands on top of my head and paced away from him. “You lost my safe.”

“I’ll get it back, I swear. Someone saw it going through the town center out toward the north end of the island. I was heading out that way when I saw Shirley’s car. They aren’t going off island.

Well, I knew *that*.

“Do you have GPS on it?” he asked. “That would be helpful.”

“It’s an old truck, so I’m guessing no.” Was he right that he couldn’t take my money out of the safe? I guess that made sense. “Wasn’t the truck processed at the scene?”

“Not fully.” He swore under his breath. “I need to find the truck. It’s evidence in a murder investigation.”

“Yes, but more importantly, it has my life savings in it.” Ugh. Just saying the words hurt. Not that it was actually all the money I had, but it was the money that might save my life. Hence, life savings. I was so clever. Yay me for staying witty under immense stress. I was so proud of myself.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Shirley yelled from the car. “We followed Rainbow’s truck out of town. It turned left at the corn stand ten minutes ago, and then we lost it.”

Ethan whipped around to look at Shirley. “What? Why didn’t you call it in?”

“Because there was no cell service,” Shirley said.

“And you guys let it get stolen,” Coco added. “Why would we trust you?”

Ethan was already running toward his vehicle. “Who was driving it?”

“We couldn’t see the driver,” I said. “But he’s probably rich now, seeing as how he has my safe.”

“I’ll find it!” Ethan launched himself into the front seat, already on his phone as he threw his truck into reverse, whipped into a frenzied U-turn, and then took off down the road, siren screaming.

I put my hands on my hips, anger building inside me. “He left the safe in the truck. In the parking lot. What kind of idiot does that?”

Shirley was perched on the back of the convertible. “To be fair, the odds of someone stealing a truck from a police impound lot are small.”

“They don’t have an impound lot,” Coco said. “It’s just a parking lot, but still a valid point.”

“Shoulda told Charlene,” Shirley said. “She would have protected your money with her life.”

“Not with her life. But with guns,” Coco said.

“Security,” Shirley agreed. “Her overall badassness.”

I clasped my hands on my head, trying not to panic. “Maybe it’s fine. Whoever was driving my truck was helping us, right?”

“Anonymously,” Shirley said. “That leaves a lot of room for someone to say that the safe wasn’t in the truck when he got it.”

Oh, boy. My safe was *gone*. I turned back to the convertible, trying not to panic. Not having a lot of success.

Shirley watched me walk toward them. “Is that all your money? Are you broke?”

“It’s all I can get right now,” I said. “It was the only way I had to avoid leaving a paper trail.”

Coco waved the bottle. “We could sell this on the black market after we’re done with it. Split it three ways.”

“I’m fine.” I flexed my fingers, trying to shake out the tension. How was I going to run a store without money? Eat? “They’ll probably find me in a day or two anyway.” Oh, God. The idea—

“You know I’m rich, right?” Coco tapped the bottle on my arm as I reached the car.

“I’m not borrowing any money.” I braced my hands on the door as all the tension of the last thirty-six hours seemed to rise up and grip me. The

mob. Leah. Agent Straus. Junior. The boat. The freaking toe that I'd hidden from the cops.

My life. Gone in a breath. And now, I was standing in some weeds, wearing a dead woman's clothes, with aching ribs bruised by a dismembered toe.

Coco leaned close. "Are you going to have another meltdown? I missed the first one, but it sounded fantastic."

To my surprise, a laugh bubbled up inside me.

"That's how the last one started." Shirley reached across the car and patted my hand. "Evie." Her voice was gentle. "Look at me."

I glanced at her. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine, and that's okay. You don't have to be fine. You just have to take one step after another and figure it out as you go."

I nodded. "I know. It's fine—"

She squeezed my wrist. "What scares you most right now? Right in this second?"

I took a breath. "Getting killed by the mob. Or forced to go back to my firm. I know so much," I said softly, desperately. "They won't let me go. I know it. How much time do I have? An hour? Two? A day. The money being stolen—it doesn't even matter. Nothing can save me."

The words hung in the air. Heavy. Scary. Making me want to drop to my knees and give up.

I wasn't being dramatic.

It was the truth, and I knew it.

Neither woman said anything. No placating me with platitudes.

Just silence, letting the words settle under my skin.

After a moment, I looked at them both. "What?"

They both shrugged. "Just waiting," Shirley said.

"For what?"

"For that fear to lose its grip on you."

Coco nodded. “Once you put it out there and look at it, it loses power.”

“It doesn’t change the facts,” I pointed out.

“No, but you’re a badass capable of handling anything. Once you stop freaking out, you can problem-solve.” Shirley grinned. “I’d place my bets on you.”

Coco nodded. “Me, too.”

I raised my brows. “Against organized crime?”

“Every single time,” Shirley said. “Mostly because you have us on your team, of course, but you’re not so bad either.”

I laughed then, a weak, shaky laugh, but my grip on the car door felt more secure. Stronger. “I hate feeling powerless.”

“Everyone does,” Shirley said. “Let’s go solve this murder and at least get that done. Right now, you’re still here, you’re still free, and you’ve got us.”

“Right on,” Coco said. “Ethan is off chasing your truck. It’s up to us to get the real answers.” She waved the bottle. “The toe came to us for help. We have to honor that request.”

I smiled then. “It summoned us to that corn stand?”

“Exactly.”

Shirley turned the car on and revved the engine. “Come on, Rainbow. Ethan is a good cop. His dad’s the most respected sheriff in Maine, and Ethan was following him around at work when he was still in a diaper. He’ll find the truck and your safe. In the meantime—” She waved the key at me. “We need answers.”

I sighed. “It will at least keep me busy while doom closes in on me.” And the image of baby Ethan in a diaper. That was sort of entertaining.

“That’s the plucky spirit that keeps us dancing through life,” Shirley said cheerfully.

“You’re such a barrel of sunshine and sparkles,” Coco said. “We’re so lucky to have you.” But she winked as she spoke.

Gratitude suddenly settled deep in my heart. I might be the hunted right now, but I was also so supremely lucky to have found these women. To have this time with them. To be around their friendship, their warmth, and their strength. To be accepted exactly as I was.

I let out my breath as I climbed into the front seat and squished in beside Coco. “You two are treasures.”

“That we are,” Coco said cheerfully.

Shirley pulled out onto the road. “So are you, my friend.”

I smiled as I settled back into the seat. There was something about these two women that was crazy. And so right.

I had no idea how this was going to turn out, but I was suddenly very glad I was along for the ride.

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CHAPTER 24

By the time we got to Harvey's locksmith shop, which he ran from his house, the toe had still not broken its silence.

Coco had tried. I had tried. Shirley had tried. But the vibe? Just not there, apparently.

Stunning, unforeseen failure.

We were all hoping Harvey would be much more helpful.

As we drove up, he was in his front yard, sitting in an Adirondack chair in the shade. He was wearing a ball cap, sunglasses, jeans, and sneakers. A thermos sat on the arm of his chair. A needlepoint canvas was on his lap. Sprawled and relaxed, taking in a beautiful day.

I couldn't imagine being that relaxed about anything.

Shirley tooted her horn as she parked. "Morning, Harvey!"

He didn't leap up with joy and delight.

In fact, he didn't react at all. Not even a wiggle or a giggle.

Hmm…

Foreboding woke up deep inside my bones. "You think he's...dead?"

"Dead? I hope not. The man's a great napper." Shirley unfastened her seatbelt. "Harvey! Wake up! It's your favorite island resident!"

He didn't so much as cock his head toward us.

“Oh, hellfire. Not another one!” Shirley leapt out of the car. “Stay in the car, Rainbow. We don’t need your prints on another body.”

“He can’t be dead!” Coco climbed out of the convertible as Shirley raced across the grass.

“Harvey!” She touched his arm, but he didn’t move. “Harvey!” She shook his shoulder, and he toppled off the chair and thudded to the grass.

Oh, no! “Call 911!”

“By all that’s holy and hellish! This is morbidly wrong! He’s an island treasure!” Coco yanked her phone out while I jumped out, my heart thudding.

Shirley was on her knees, feeling for his pulse. “No pulse. Dammit.” She shook him again, and he just rolled over, his face in the dirt. “Oh, Lordy Loo!” She looked up at me. “It’s like Fiona. Dead during a nap in his favorite spot.”

I crouched beside them, studying, but not touching. “Any chance this could be natural? Just his time.” His face was ashen, and I could feel that his spirit was gone.

Oh, God. Was I turning into Coco? Sensing spirits?

“There’s always a chance,” Shirley muttered, “but a coincidence feels highly unbelievable right now.”

I grimaced. “I agree.”

“You talk to them.” Coco shoved her phone at Shirley, and I could hear the operator asking what the emergency was. “Let me try to talk to his spirit.”

“It’s gone,” I said, blurting it out before I realized I was saying it.

They both looked at me in surprise.

I cleared my throat. “I meant, he feels dead.”

“Hah! Liar. You were doing some medium work, city girl.” Shooting me an amused grin, Shirley grabbed the phone and stepped to the side.

Coco knelt next to him. “He’s definitely not here,” she said. “You were right, Rainbow.”

“Maybe he’ll come back and talk to you,” I suggested.

“I’ll try.” She waved her hand over his forehead. “Harvey,” she whispered. “What happened?”

“No, you need to get him to want to come back.” I leaned in. “Harvey, who is Bernie going to needlepoint with if you leave? You’re his needlepoint buddy. He’ll be all alone at the bridge with his dog. Do you really want to do that to him? He wouldn’t do that to you—” I realized Coco was staring at me. “What?”

“You’re a natural,” she said. “Appealing to his heart like that? Well done.”

I felt myself preen just a wee bit. “They were just so sweet together at the bridge. I’d hate for Bernie to be alone.”

“Well, you can’t make a spirit come back if they want to leave, but if it’s not his time, he might listen.” She patted my arm. “It’s a good idea, Rainbow. I’ll use that, too.” She placed her palm on his forehead and closed her eyes, sinking into her woowoo state.

As Coco went to work with her communing gifts, I stood up. Shirley was on the phone doling out information. If Harvey had met the same “accidental” fate as Fiona, then we had only a few minutes to figure out why.

I put my hands on my hips and looked around. His truck was in the driveway. The garage was open. The front door of his shop was open. “You know,” I said, “if he was killed, I’m guessing it’s because someone was afraid he’d tell us exactly what we came here to ask.”

Still talking on the phone, Shirley looked over at me, and then gestured me toward the front door. “Go!” she whispered. “Fast! They’re on the way!”

I didn’t hesitate. I sprinted across the yard and bolted up the steps and inside.

The store was neat and pristine. Clean, organized shelves with assorted deadbolts on display. A rack of key blanks. An old register sat on a small counter. It was small, and in pristine condition.

The entire store spoke of a man who had been doing business for a very long time, and he knew exactly what he needed and didn’t keep anything else around to distract him.

It was the store of a man who kept precise details about everything he did.

He definitely would have a record of every call he’d ever been on.

There was no computer in sight, which meant he most likely did his receipts by hand.

I ran over to the register. Sure enough, a little notepad of blank receipts was sitting right next to the register, and a black pen that said “Harvey’s Locks” lined up next to it. It was a carbon copy pad, which meant that every time he wrote a receipt, it made a copy for the customer.

Where did he keep the receipts?

I hurried behind the counter.

There was a little drawer beneath the register, but when I pulled it open, it held only neatly arranged keys, pens, notepads and business cards. There was one small wooden box that was the perfect size for a receipt, but it was empty. “I’d hire him to do my locks,” I muttered as I closed the drawer.

There was nowhere else in the store that could hold a lifetime’s worth of receipts, so I eased over to the interior door that I assumed led to his house. As I reached for the knob, I noticed that the door jamb had a chunk of wood out of it, as if someone had kicked the door open.

My heart started to race, and I tapped my toe against the door.

It swung open, revealing a sparse but neat kitchen.

I stepped inside, and I caught the lingering scent of the coffee. Just made this morning? Not very long ago. The coffee pot was on its stand, but it had been cleaned out already.

Unlike everything else, it wasn't lined up perfectly. It was half off the lip, as if Harvey had shoved it there on his way out the door.

I moved quickly through the kitchen, and into the living room.

Again, neat, but this room felt the presence of his past wife. The faded couch with wooden arms was covered with a hand-knit throw blanket. Three needlepoint pillows of assorted island critters were on the couch. A moose. A fox. A raccoon.

On the walls were numerous framed needlepoint projects. Different sizes. Some were flowers. A few that were hearts. A couple of fish. I could almost guess which were his and which were hers simply by looking at them. It was so sweet.

The braided rug was old, but it was beautifully woven with cheerful colors. Logs stacked in the fireplace, needing no more than a match to set them ablaze. On the mantle were a dozen framed photos of Harvey with his wife, kids, and grandkids. The coffee table had books on needlepoint and Maine coastal living, all of them carefully lined up. A bookmark was in a paperback, and reading glasses were set on top.

A neat freak, but in a way that felt organized, peaceful, and detail oriented.

A cabinet was tucked in the corner. On top was a carved wooden raccoon with a key in its paw.

It seemed to be staring at me.

Coco would probably have a conversation with it, but I was more interested in the drawers of the cabinet. I hurried over and pulled open the top drawer. "Bingo." It was full of file folders, hanging in alphabetical order. The tabs were aligned in progression, each one a quarter inch to the right from the one in front of it.

I scanned down the row, opening each folder. The receipts were all lined up and alphabetical.

“Hurry up, Rainbow,” Shirley yelled. “They’ll be here soon!”

My heart started to race, and I shoved the drawer shut. I pulled out the bottom drawer. I scanned the row quickly, and then adrenaline jumped when I saw the corner of a receipt sticking out of one of the back folders. I grabbed the thick folder and opened it. The receipts were all jumbled and bent.

Someone had been rifling through this file, and left it a mess.

This was where the receipt had been that someone had come to retrieve. I checked the file. It was the letter “W.”

Wilson?

But which one?

I opened the folder and quickly glanced through. Some of the files dated back thirty years. It was an entire career worth of receipts, all of them meticulously filed. Some of them stated “cash” as the client, but he’d written the client name below in a different pen color.

It looked like the record keeping of someone who honored his clients’ wishes of no paper trail, and then once they were gone, he’d written their real name for his files. Because he was that kind of guy—

The name Wilson caught my eye, and I paused, quickly going back.

There was a receipt for Duane Wilson from ten years ago. Another for Jasmine dated two years ago. Those had been left for me to find—

“Wait a sec.” I pulled the Jasmine one out. “Two years ago, you weren’t in town, Jasmine,” I whispered. “But maybe you were.” I scanned it quickly. It was for rekeying, for the same key to fit different locks, exactly what we had going on now. Fifteen padlocks, all keyed to the same key.

Four copies of the key.

Fifteen locks.

Four Wilsons…so each to have their own key? Plus maybe Junior?

But why was this receipt still here? Why hadn’t it been taken?

I heard the distant wail of a siren, so I shoved the receipt back, returned the folder to its same position and slammed the drawer shut. Then, just as I was turning to leave, I noticed that an interior door was slightly ajar.

Harvey would never leave the door ajar, would he? He’d leave it open or closed, but never ajar. Was it a closet? Bathroom?

“Rainbow,” Shirley yelled. “Get out here!”

I should listen. I didn’t need to be caught snooping. I really didn’t.

But Harvey hadn’t left the door that way. I was sure of it.

“One more second,” I yelled back. “I just need to check one more thing.” The sirens were getting louder, but they were still far away.

I had time.

I hurried across the living room and reached for the door. The hairs on my arm suddenly went up, and a chill went down my back. I froze, then took a breath. “It’s fine,” I said aloud. “My imagination is on overdrive.”

Just because there was a possible dead man in the front yard didn’t mean that the killer would be dumb enough to hide in the closet when we drove in.

I shook out my hands, then I grabbed the doorknob.

The door burst open so fast that it slammed me back against the wall. My head hit hard, and the doorknob gut-punched me. I gasped for air and fell as someone threw something over my head. Someone kicked me in the ribs, and I doubled over as excruciating pain shot through me.

I heard a drawer slam, and then footsteps and another door slammed as I fought for breath. I tried to shout for help, but I couldn’t breathe. Pain was ricocheting through my head, my gut, my body. The sirens were almost there, and I threw off the blanket, struggling to my knees.

The room was exactly as it had been, but I knew it wasn’t.

Fighting against the pain, I crawled across the floor, dragged myself up, and yanked the bottom drawer open.

The “W” folder was gone.

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CHAPTER 25

I MADE it outside as the ambulance came into view down the road.

"What happened to you?" Shirley looked startled as I reached her.

"I got attacked, someone ran out the back door with the Wilson file, and Jasmine had locks rekeyed two years ago. Fifteen padlocks with four keys." I pressed my hand to the back of my head, but I didn't feel any blood. There was a good-sized lump, though.

Coco's eyes widened. "Son of a biscuit, girl. Well done."

"We need to tell the cops," I said. "Someone attacked me."

"And tell them what? That you were inside snooping through Harvey's files and someone who is no longer around attacked you and took the missing file?" Shirley shook her head. "We need to handle this."

"Innocent people tell the truth." I sat on her bumper, trying to catch my breath. That was the second attack on my ribs in less than an hour, and it hurt.

Shirley put her hands on her hips. "And innocent people never go to jail? Ever?"

I looked at her. "Seriously—"

"You worked for the mob. You basically faked your death, ran away, and have your fingerprints on a murder weapon of a victim who lived in

Boston and was apparently a courier for your firm. What part of innocent do you think will help you through this?”

I closed my eyes and swore under my breath.

Shirley put her arm around my shoulders and squeezed, quickly releasing me when I grunted in pain. “Stay cool, Rainbow. You’re doing great.”

She trotted over to the ambulance as it stopped. The EMTs raced over to Harvey, where Coco was still leaning over him.

I folded my arms and closed my eyes. What was I doing in this mess? Why was I lying to the cops about what was happening? It didn’t even make sense.

Except that ever since the FBI had had their little chat with me, I’d realized the cops weren’t on my side. Not right now. I mean, maybe, but maybe not.

As I sat there, the sheriff pulled in with her lights blazing.

She ignored me as she strode over to Harvey. She shooed Coco and Shirley away, and bent over, talking to the EMTs.

Shirley and Coco wandered over to me. “Say nothing,” Shirley said.

“Nothing,” Coco repeated.

I watched Charlene’s cool competence with the EMTs. “You know,” I said quietly. “Weren’t Fiona and Charlene friends?”

“They went way back,” Shirley said. “Fiona was the one who hired Charlene as sheriff back when she was town manager.”

I flexed my wrist, watching Charlene work the scene. “I think,” I said slowly, “Fiona would tell Charlene what’s going on.”

Shirley shook her head. “Fiona never told Charlene. They had an agreement.”

I looked over at her. “What kind of agreement?”

Coco and Shirley exchanged glances, then Shirley sighed. “Fiona was… a fixer.”

“A fixer?” I repeated.

They both nodded. “It started when she was Town Manager. People would come to her with issues, and she’d fix them. After she retired from that, people still came.”

“They came with the problems that they didn’t want to tell anyone else about,” Coco said. “Fiona took care of things.”

“She solved problems,” Shirley said. “And not always in ways that were completely legal.”

Why wasn’t this surprising?

“Charlene and Fiona had an agreement that Fiona wouldn’t ask Charlene for help that she couldn’t give, and Charlene would let things slide as long as she didn’t know about it.”

“She trusted Fiona,” Shirley said. “And she knew Fiona could do things she couldn’t do.”

I let out my breath. “But whatever Fiona was working on got her killed.”

“If Fiona didn’t tell Charlene, she had a reason,” Shirley said. “We have to respect that.”

“Do we?” I asked.

They both nodded. “Fiona always had a reason, and she was always right.”

“She wasn’t right. She got killed.” I felt it was a valid point.

“But the reason she didn’t tell Charlene is still there,” Shirley said. “The reason didn’t get killed.”

“Maybe it did,” I said.

“Until we know, we can’t tell Charlene. Either it would compromise what Fiona was working on, or it will put Charlene in an impossible situation,” Shirley said. “Either way, it won’t get the result we want.”

What I wanted was to avoid prison.

To not allow a murderer to go free.

I felt those were pretty basic things.

And I also felt that bringing the cops in on our evidence would help support those desires. Or did I? “You don’t know that telling Charlene would be a mistake,” I said.

“No,” Shirley agreed, “not for sure. But until we do, we don’t say anything.”

“I trust Fiona,” Coco said. “She left us that note to find weeks later. She left that jewelry box. She had a plan, and I’m on board. She didn’t leave those for Charlene. She left them for us.”

I laced my fingers on top of my head. “My fingerprints are all over inside Harvey’s house.”

Shirley rolled her eyes. “Really? You didn’t learn that lesson with Junior?”

“I’m not used to thinking like a criminal.”

The EMTs loaded Harvey onto a stretcher and wheeled him across the grass. His head was not under a sheet.

Charlene stood and walked over to us. She looked tired. I felt that weariness in my own bones most days. Not today. Today I felt pain, fear, adrenaline, and all sorts of other fun stuff that had been missing from my life until now.

“Is he still alive?” I asked.

“Yes, thankfully,” she said. “His pulse is faint, but he’s still with us. He’s lucky you all showed up when you did. Hopefully we got to him in time.”

We all let out our breaths, and I felt weirdly emotional. I’d barely spoken to Harvey, but I was so glad he wasn’t dead.

“I love this so much,” Coco said. “He must have come back. His spirit wasn’t there a moment ago.” She nodded at me. “Rainbow told him to return. She gave him a reason.”

Charlene nodded, not even hesitating at Coco's statement. "Spirits often change their minds," she said. "They decide they aren't ready to leave, and return to the body. Harvey was lucky, then."

"You think heart attack?" Shirley asked.

Charlene rubbed her palm across her forehead and sighed. "I don't know. I'm not a doctor. But he has a pulse and he's breathing, so he has a chance." She paused, watching them load Harvey in. "He's a good man," she said softly. "I hope he's all right." She sighed. "But if not, that's how he'd like to go. With his coffee under his favorite tree."

His coffee. I suddenly remembered how the coffee pot had been askew, the only thing in his entire house that hadn't been perfectly aligned…except the W receipts. "The coffee," I blurted out. "Check his thermos."

All three of them looked at me. "For what?" Charlene said.

"Poison."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Gut instinct." I couldn't keep the urgency out of my voice. "Test it. Maybe it could save his life."

"Son of a bitch." Charlene shouted at the ambulance to wait, whirled around, and ran back to the chair. She put the thermos in a plastic bag, then hurried to the ambulance. She spoke to the driver, handed over the coffee, and then stepped back as the ambulance peeled out and tore down the road.

She pointed at us to stay put, made a couple quick phone calls, then stalked back over to us. "You," she said to me, "Start talking."

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CHAPTER 26

Shirley and Coco gave me looks of warning, and I grimaced, my mind in hyperdrive as I tried to figure out what I could say to Charlene, and what I couldn't. "I went inside to get some water for Harvey. We thought maybe he passed out from the heat."

Charlene folded her arms over her chest and said nothing.

Of course she'd say nothing. She was waiting for me to tangle myself up.

Except I was too good for that, and she had to have realized that.

"While I was in there, I noticed that he's extremely neat. Everything is in perfect order. Except the coffee pot," I continued. "It was clean, but it was put back crooked. When you mentioned coffee, it made me think of the pot. He didn't put it back. Someone else did."

She raised her brows, waiting.

I shrugged, making her ask.

She did. "Why on earth would your mind jump to poison?"

"Because someone jumped out of the closet, threw a blanket on my head, kicked me in the ribs, and then ran out the back door."

Her face gave away nothing, and she was too good to be distracted by my attempt to get her to race into the woods in search of my assailant. "Why were you next to the closet? It's not in the kitchen."

“Because I’m nosy.”

The corner of her mouth twitched. “Now, that I believe. But why would someone leaping out of a closet make you think poison?”

Shirley and Coco were watching me warily. “Yes, why?” Shirley asked. “That’s so weird to think sweet Harvey was poisoned.”

“Yes, I was thinking the same thing.” Coco eyed me. “Your mind goes to such dark places. Is it a bad place to be? I would think it would be, all tangled up with poison and murder.”

Funny. They were hilarious.

“Whoever hit me did it only a few minutes ago,” I said. “You could probably catch them.” Just in case she hadn’t thought of that great idea.

“This is more fun.” Charlene didn’t even look at Coco and Shirley. “You’re a smart, savvy woman,” she said. “If your first thought was poison, then there’s a reason. Spill it.”

Ah…I flexed my hands. “I’m naturally suspicious. It comes with my old job.”

“No. Don’t believe it. Poison is very specific.” She kept pressing, which I admired.

Charlene was smart as hell, and we both knew it.

And if Fiona and Charlene were friends, then Fiona had known it, too.

Maybe…maybe Fiona had told Charlene something? And Charlene couldn’t talk about it?

She cocked her head. “I can see you thinking.”

I cocked my head right back. “I heard that Fiona used to do things and not tell you about them.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly. “Did you?”

“What if this was one of those things?”

Silence fell across our little foursome for a long moment, then Charlene unleashed a litany of vibrant epithets.

She spun to Coco and Shirley. “What do you know?”

They both blinked innocently. “Nothing,” Shirley said.

“Me either,” said Coco.

Charlene swore again. “Fiona’s dead.”

“She left a note,” I said.

“A note,” Charlene repeated.

“It was in her jewelry box.” Well, one of the notes had been in her jewelry box. I was living in her home. It would be a logical assumption that I would have found it, not that she sent it to Coco from beyond the grave.

“What did the note say?”

“Basically, it said, don’t tell Charlene, but I need something fixed,” I said. “Not in those exact words, but that was the gist of it.”

Charlene clasped her hands on top of her head and strode away from us, muttering to herself. I heard her say Fiona’s name a few times, plus more curses, and other colorful vocabulary which honestly didn’t fully surprise me.

Shirley and Coco looked at me, and I shrugged. “I had to say something,” I whispered.

“Why?” Charlene spun back. “Why did you have to say something?”

Impressive. She was so good. “Because you were grilling me about why I thought to check for poison.”

She marched up to me, poked me in the chest, and leaned so close that her nose brushed mine. “Did Fiona really leave a note?” She raked through me with her gaze, filtering out every secret my bones carried.

I lifted my chin and met her gaze steadily. “Yes. Fiona left a note.”

“And she asked you to do something for her? You? A stranger? She asked you to do something that made you eventually think, ‘hey, maybe Harvey was poisoned?’”

I cleared my throat. “Apparently, Fiona has been planning for my arrival for quite some time. Coco thinks she even knew my name.”

Charlene narrowed her eyes. “Of course she did.” She swore again. “That woman is probably laughing her ass off right now, watching this conversation.”

“Hah, hah,” Shirley said. “Fiona is such trouble.”

Charlene ignored Shirley and focused her razor-sharp, intuitive gaze on me. “So, a stranger left you a note to do something that required you not telling the police, and which then led you to think about poison, and you thought ‘hey, that sounds like a good idea. I’m going to do what the note says.’”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Why on earth did you think ‘hey, that sounds like a good idea. I’m going to do that?’”

“Because a man was stabbed in my truck, and my fingerprints are on the murder weapon.”

Charlene stared at me, and I could see her brain whipping through a thousand connections, trying to figure out why Junior’s stabbing had made me say yes to Fiona’s request. “Huh.”

I nodded. “Exactly.”

She strode away, walked over to Harvey’s chair, and stared at it.

Shirley gave me a thumbs up, and I rolled my eyes.

We waited.

After a few minutes, Charlene came back. She pointed at Shirley. “You told Evie to get involved, didn’t you?”

“Evie is a grown woman. I couldn’t make her do anything she didn’t want to do.”

Classic evasion. The sheriff would see right through that.

Charlene narrowed her eyes. “Answer the question, Shirley.”

“It’s one of those things,” Shirley said. “The ones where Fiona didn’t tell you.”

Coco nodded. “It is one of those things.”

Charlene put her hands on her hips, surveying the three of us. She looked furious, but also resigned. She said nothing. Just stood there. She reminded me of my mom, trying to pull herself together before she reacted.

I admired that. I'm sure we were being frustrating as hell.

Finally, Charlene spoke. "I want to see the note."

We all shrugged. "I don't have it," I said.

"Me, either," Shirley said.

Coco just held out her empty hands, because I was pretty sure she had the note in question on her, and if she lied, Charlene would know immediately. I had the note from the boat in my pocket, which Charlene probably would have appreciated.

But she hadn't asked about that note, had she? I was pretty sure she meant the other one.

None of us said anything. We held onto our silence with impressive commitment.

Charlene swore again. "Twenty-four hours." She pointed at all of us, a very aggressive index finger that could probably kill each of us with a single poke. "I'll give you twenty-four hours, and then you're telling me everything. That was the deal Fiona and I had. Once I got wind of something, she had twenty-four hours to pull it together before I got involved. That's it. I expect the three of you at Fiona's apartment in exactly twenty-four hours, or I'm arresting all of you and never letting you out. Got it?"

We all nodded. I thought it was interesting that she wanted to meet at Fiona's apartment, not at the police station. She must be wise enough to know that she might not want to hear about our shenanigans when she was on official duty at work.

Charlene didn't turn away. "One thing Fiona always understood is that I can't and won't protect you if you cross the wrong line. And if I have to

bring down the wrath of the law on you, I'll do it. I'll feel bad about it, but I'll still do it. Do you understand?"

A ripple of fear sliced down my spine. Charlene was the real deal. She might not be my enemy, but she'd play the role if I made her.

Coco and Shirley looked at each other, and I saw their doubt for a split second.

Charlene saw the exchange. "You want to end this now? Show me the note? Tell me what you're up to?"

It was Coco who shook her head. "It was Fiona's last wish. We have to do it for her."

"Do you? She's dead. You owe her nothing."

Shirley put her hands on her hips. "We owe her everything, and so do you. We'd never betray her."

Charlene swore and looked at me. "And you? You don't owe her anything."

"Dead man in my truck," I reminded her. "Big stakes."

Her eyes became thoughtful, and I could see her once again trying to connect a note from Fiona with Junior and the poisoning of Harvey. "All right then, take off. I'm going to search the woods for this mystery assailant."

I blinked, not entirely sure about a seventy-something woman traipsing around in the woods by herself after a possible murderer. "You want us to go with you?"

She stared at me, and then burst out laughing. "Evie, I should get so lucky as to have an asshole attack me. That would make my day." She waved us off, put on her sunglasses, and then headed toward the house.

I put my hands on my hips, watching her walk like she was hoping for a fight. "She'll figure it out," I said. "She'll know that we think Fiona was murdered. She might have already realized it."

“Then we better hurry up, because there’s something at play that Fiona wanted to be kept a secret,” Shirley said. “We need to figure it out before Charlene does.”

“Fiona died for that secret,” Coco said. “Let’s make sure it wasn’t in vain.” She fist-pumped the air. “We’re on this, Fiona! Let’s go!”

The two women got in the convertible, and Shirley revved the engine. “Come on, Rainbow! We’re on the clock.”

I looked back at the house. Charlene was standing in the doorway watching me.

Not the others.

Just me.

She knew I’d worked for a firm that served the mob.

I saw the message on her face. One wrong step, and she was going to protect the town from me. I didn’t get the leeway that Fiona, Shirley, and Coco got.

Reasonable, but it still felt like a little jab in my heart.

I sighed and walked around to the passenger side. “Charlene’s looking at me like I’m a murderer.”

Both women checked on Charlene as I got in.

Shirley whistled. “That glare isn’t about Fiona.”

“It’s about my past. My old firm.” I wedged myself in next to Coco. “She doesn’t trust me.”

“You don’t have a twenty-four-hour reprieve. She’s hunting you right now.” Shirley started the engine. “Seriously, girl, you don’t need to worry about your old firm or the FBI catching up to you. It’s Charlene who’s sniffing at your heels.”

I watched Charlene as Shirley backed out of the driveway. “She’s so aggressive the way she’s staring me down.”

“On the plus side, if she decides you’re innocent, the mob and the FBI will have no chance against her.” Coco put the bottle with the toe in my lap.

“And if she doesn’t?” I knew the answer, and so did they.

No one needed to say it.

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CHAPTER 27

SHIRLEY HEADED STRAIGHT INTO TOWN, which made my adrenaline spike. “Are we going to my store to meet Gator?” I didn’t know which way to go next, but whatever we did, I was ready to do it.

I’d had enough of being scared. Murder, poison, stabbing, rib-kicking, stolen files, and now a hostile badass sheriff? There was no time to go slow and gentle anymore. The mission was now.

“No. We’re going to mahjong.” Shirley took a hard left at a moose statue, and then a right by Roxy’s Hair Salon, which reminded me that I needed to get an update on my hair.

“Mahjong?” Coco sighed. “Now is not the time to learn, Shirley. Besides, it’s too sedentary for you. You’ll get too bored—”

“Mirabelle plays mahjong, and you said that Madge was hosting a game this morning. Maybe Mirabelle isn’t at work this morning because she’s at mahjong.”

“Oh…” Coco shook her head. “You don’t interrupt mahjong. Those women are hard core. That’s why I don’t feed them. They’re so obsessed with the game that they’d never have the awareness to notice how amazing my food is.”

“Oh, we’re interrupting.” Shirley pulled up in front of a beautiful stone building that looked like it had once been an old New England church. It

had a white steeple, gorgeous stained-glass windows, and a stone walkway flanked with vibrant flowers. “Charlene’s onto us, and we have a toe in the car. You want to sit around and wait for Mirabelle to have time this afternoon while the real owner of that toe finds us?”

Coco blinked. “Not really.”

“I’m in.” I unsnapped the seatbelt before the car had come to a full stop. There was a small parking lot full of pickup trucks, SUVs, and a few sedans, but Shirley had parked right in front.

I was out of the car before the engine was off, and Shirley was quick to follow me. I was not afraid of mahjong ladies, and if I ever became afraid of them, I was going to be sorely disappointed in myself.

Coco stood up in the car. “These women are monsters,” she shouted. “You don’t want to go in there!”

“Guard the toe,” Shirley yelled. “We’ll be right back.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Coco muttered. “I don’t want to be in charge of the toe!”

Shirley and I ignored her as I grabbed the arched wooden door and hauled the monstrously heavy thing open. The foyer was empty, except for a side table and a coat rack with a few light jackets.

Off to the side was a big easel with a poster board that said, “Mahjong event in progress. Please wait until you’re invited in.”

Shirley and I looked at each other. “I invite you in,” I said.

She beamed at me. “I invite you in,” she said.

I grinned. “Aren’t we lucky ducks? That’s so convenient.”

“Right?” Shirley grabbed the door handle, but I stopped her.

“I think Rainbow needs to handle this,” I said.

“Oh, hell, yes.” Shirley grinned. “You’ve been acting way too normal today. I’d love for Rainbow to step up.”

“You can wait out here. I know you have a reputation to upkeep in this community.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, hell, no. I’m too old to give a banana pancake about my reputation. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“All right.” I didn’t have crazy sunglasses or a cape. I could use the toe, but I felt like it was a little premature for that. It just had to be me. “I’m going in.”

Shirley beamed at me. “Oh, yes. Please do.”

I shook out my shoulders. *This is for you, Mom*. And for all the wrongfully murdered lovely humans in the world who needed an advocate. I grabbed the handle, closed my eyes for a split second, then opened the door and stepped inside, Shirley right behind me.

What had once been a chapel was filled with square tables, bright lights, luxurious plants, and a food-filled catering table along the side wall. There were no longer any pews, but there were a lot of women sitting around the card tables in silence, staring at rows of tiles in front of them.

No one seemed to notice us.

Until the door closed behind me with a clank, and then a few of them looked up, checked us out, and then went back to their game.

“Wow,” I said, making sure not to keep my voice quiet. “This looks intense.”

We got a few more looks, and some players shushed me very aggressively.

Madge popped up from a desk at the front of the chapel where the altar would normally be. When she saw us, she shook her head and gestured at us to leave.

I ignored her and walked into the room. “Is this the American version?” I asked loudly. “I’ve thought about learning, but I never had time.” I leaned over a woman’s shoulder. “Wow. They have jokers in mahjong? Is that good you have two of them? I would think that’s good, right?”

The woman shoved her chair back and glared at me. “Seriously?”

The other three women at her table had expressions that ranged from horrified to amused.

“Beth Ann has two jokers?” One of them muttered under her breath. “Shoot.”

“Madge!” Beth Ann stood up, outraged in her navy-blue pants and sensible shoes. “Who is this woman?”

“Oh, sorry. Hi, everyone!” I waved my hands at the room and raised my voice to a cheerful shout that made every game come to a stop. “I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Rainbow! I bought Rippy Mama’s, and I’m the new ice cream maven of the island.”

Someone on my right whispered something about the *Buttered Rum*, and I beamed at them. “Yes, I did win Pirate’s Widow last night with Shirley and Coco!”

Shirley raised her arms in a victory pose. “That’s my winning tiara on my head. Feel free to be insanely jealous.”

There was a murmur rippling among the players, and Madge was practically sprinting across the chapel. “Out,” she shouted. “We have an event in progress!”

I ignored her and strode into the middle of the room. “Is Mirabelle here? Mirabelle? Anyone see her? Mirabelle, hon? You with us?” I whistled cheerfully, like I was calling my favorite puppy.

Madge skirted around tables trying to get to me, but I kept moving, and she was trying not to make a scene by actually running at me.

A woman in a Blueberry Island T-shirt pointed. “Mirabelle’s over here.”

I spun around, and saw the emcee from the *Buttered Rum*, staring at me in horror from her corner table.

I beamed at her and waved.

She tried to sink down in her seat.

Was I going to let her escape? Definitely not.

Did I blame her for trying? Nope. Not at all.

In my past life, I would've bolted too, if I saw Rainbow coming for me.

And what joy I would have missed, right?

"Mirabelle!" I threw my arms over my head and did *The Eggbeater Ballet* twirl toward her. "Let's go, girl! A recap from last night!"

"I'm in!" Shirley bellowed, and launched herself into the middle of the room, also doing *The Eggbeater Ballet* twirl. "Mirabelle! You can be the egg today!"

Mirabelle's jaw was aghast as Shirley and I twirled toward her, dodging tables.

"Oh, another joker," I pointed at a woman's tiles. "Well done, right?"

She glared at me, and I beamed at her.

Some of the other women were laughing, which I was happy to see. Not all mahjong players lacked a sense of humor. Good to know!

Shirley and I descended upon Mirabelle, who didn't get up. "I'm in the middle of a game," she said.

"I know, girlfriend," I said, "but we need to chat like there's no tomorrow."

Shirley twirled into me. "You be the egg, Rainbow!"

I immediately started flopping around, like an egg that was being scrambled by a beater, bumping into chairs. "Mirabelle," I said, as I continued to get knocked around by Shirley. "We need you to look at some items."

Mirabelle still looked stunned, but the ladies at her table were starting to crack up. "I said I'd meet you this afternoon," she said.

"We can't wait. Drama has ensued," I said. "Stolen truck, poisoned key master, it's been a morning."

"Poisoned key master? What?" Players were chatting more excitedly now, because who doesn't love gossip. I heard Harvey's name, because who else would be the key master in question?

“Honestly, we don’t know Harvey was poisoned,” I shouted out. “It’s just a theory. He’s on his way to the hospital, though.”

Shirley gave me a final, hard hip check, and I launched myself at Mirabelle, landing sprawled across her lap, my shoulder hitting the table just hard enough to send all the tiles flying.

Oopsie.

Everyone at her table let out squawks of dismay, but I beamed at Mirabelle as I laid across her lap. “Got a minute?”

She frowned at me. “Harvey was poisoned?”

“Maybe,” I said cheerfully. “We don’t know at this point. It’s really just fun conjecture. But I need to ask a favor—”

“Accidentally or on purpose?” She sounded alarmed, which made sense.

A plethora of murder can be a lot.

Maybe getting her into a state of terror wasn’t my best plan. I patted her arm soothingly. “I’m sure it’s fine. We’ll know more eventually. But we need your help—”

“Is he dead?”

Wow. Mirabelle was really getting worked up about Harvey. Oopsie. “He was, and then he wasn’t. It’s a bit complicated.” I paused. “Why? Did you know him?”

Her brow furrowed, like I was insane. “Everyone knows him. It’s Blueberry Island.”

“Right. Of course. Do you know anyone who would try to kill him?”

Her eyes widened. “Wait. So he was poisoned on purpose?”

Yikes. I needed her focused and ready to assist, not panicking. I lowered my voice. “Honestly,” I whispered, “I’m just making stuff up to cause disruption. Sheriff Charlene got him carted off in an ambulance, and I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Madge finally reached us, and she looked impressively furious. “These are your friends, Mirabelle?”

Yay for her timely interruption to get Mirabelle's thoughts off murder and mayhem.

Mirabelle shook her head quickly, clearly trying to distance herself from the crazies who had crashed the game. "No, they're not my friends—"

"All of you, out. Now." Madge grabbed my arm with impressive force and tried to haul me off Mirabelle's lap.

Mahjong Madge was no match for dead-weight Rainbow, even when Mirabelle tried to help her dislodge me. "I have a message from beyond the grave from Fiona," I shouted. "She needs Mirabelle's help. You guys, Mirabelle won't help Fiona, and Madge is being resistant!"

Did I sound unhinged? Yes, yes, I was quite sure I did.

"Fiona?" Madge stopped yanking on my wrist. "Fiona sent a message?"

"Yes." I snuggled more securely on Mirabelle's lap and wrapped my arms around her waist. "And Mirabelle won't help because she's too busy playing mahjong." I pointed at Madge. "And you're being a rude little wench by kicking us out when Fiona's legacy is at stake." I raised my voice to a full shout. "Who here owes Fiona a favor? Anyone?"

A few hands went up, because of course they did. Fiona had been that person.

"I bet Mirabelle does too, and she's refusing to help Fiona's last wish come true," I shouted.

"I'm not refusing to help—" Poor Mirabelle looked utterly perplexed by what was happening to her.

I felt for her, but Rainbow needed to make a scene, and Evie needed answers. "So you'll help us?"

"Fiona got me the license for this studio," Madge said. "Mirabelle, help them."

I smiled up at Mirabelle. "Pretty please? It won't take long."

She looked down at me. "Are you insane?" she whispered.

“I might be,” I whispered back. “But Fiona does need your help. It’ll just take a few minutes.”

“I said later—”

“I need now. I can’t get off your lap until you help. It’s a moral obligation.”

The corner of Mirabelle’s mouth started to twitch, and I realized she was trying not to laugh. Ah…the Mirabelle from the boat was coming back to life. Yay for me! “I’ll let you try on my tiara later,” I whispered.

“I have three. We had extras.”

Well done. “What about hot fudge?”

She sighed. “You have some that Fiona made?”

“First of all, I also make amazing hot fudge, but secondly, yes, I still have some that Fiona made.” Did I? I had no idea.

“You have to be bribed to help Fiona?” Madge swept Mirabelle’s tile holder thing off the table. “Fiona’s spirit is literally embedded in every tile in this building. Mirabelle, you’re so lucky that Fiona chose you for help. I won’t even ban you for disturbing the game.”

Mirabelle grinned. “And that’s how it’s done, Rainbow,” she whispered. Then she raised her voice. “Of course I’ll help you. Let’s go, badass bitches!” She giggled as a ripple ran through the room at her badass bitches comment.

I bounced to my feet. “So great to meet everyone! Make sure to come by for ice cream! I’m giving out free samples every time I create a new flavor as long as you give me feedback.” Why not repeat my offer of goodwill? If I didn’t get murdered, imprisoned, or kidnapped today, I might want customers in the future.

“Yay! Eggbeater Ballet to the exit,” Shirley shouted.

We both began to spin toward the foyer. Mirabelle refrained from participating in our wonderful dance, but she did follow us, apologizing profusely for the interruption.

By the time we got outside, she was laughing hard. “You two are insane.”

Shirley tucked her arm through mine. “Every minute, I consider myself so lucky that this random woman who bought Fiona’s store turned out to be even crazier than me.”

Mirabelle grinned. “Well, I have to say, I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to interrupt one of Madge’s events and not get banned for life, but you figured out how to do it. Well done.”

“Thank you,” I said with a bow.

“I love being recognized for greatness,” Shirley said cheerfully.

“Me, too. By the way, Mirabelle has three tiaras,” I told Shirley as we headed down the walkway. “They had extras.”

“Not the same thing as winning them,” Shirley said. “Imposter tiara-wearer.”

Mirabelle rolled her eyes. “I’m not wearing it. I just said that because Rainbow was trying to bribe me with a tiara.”

Coco saw us coming, and I saw her look around, trying to find a place to stash the bottle. She waved us aside, and I caught Mirabelle’s arm, stopping her before she could get close enough to the car to see inside. “Fiona left us a few things,” I said. “We wanted you to look at them.”

Mirabelle’s smile faded, and I could see her shift into business mode. “The island antiques you mentioned last night?”

“Yep.”

Shirley pulled out the Blueberry Island coin. “We found this in Fiona’s jewelry box.”

Mirabelle held out her hand, and Shirley dropped it in her palm.

When Mirabelle saw what it was, I saw her suck in her breath. She definitely knew what it was.

“What is it?” I asked.

She closed her palm over it and looked up. “Have you all heard of the Blueberry Island Vigilante?”

Shirley frowned as Coco stood up in the car, but didn’t get out. “You mean from the 1800s?”

Mirabelle nodded. “Yep.”

“What’s the Blueberry Island Vigilante?” I was glad it was from the 1800s, because that didn’t sound like something that I wanted to add to the mix right now.

“Riches,” Coco called out. “Lots and lots of riches! Pirate booty, ladies! Shake it if you’ve got it!”

Mirabelle laughed. “Well, sort of. Basically, there is a legend that at one time, there was a vigilante who lived in the area. The rumor was that he was sort of the Robin Hood of Blueberry Island. He would dole out his brand of justice—”

“Which included stealing from the rich,” Coco said. “He had a stash of treasures that no one ever found.”

“This isn’t a treasure,” Shirley said, pointing to the coin. “It’s a token.”

Mirabelle held it up. “The legend says that he would leave a coin just like this one whenever he’d been around. It was his way of letting people know that they were seen. Either because he was helping them, or that he was stealing from them.”

“Huh.” Why didn’t it surprise me that Blueberry Island had a vigilante legend? I sort of loved the idea. “Kind of like Fiona, huh?”

“Fiona never stole from anyone,” Coco said.

“Well…” Shirley looked at me and shrugged.

Fiona, I was pretty sure, would have been happy to steal if it were for a good cause.

Mirabelle continued. “The legend is that one day, the coins stopped appearing. People assume he died or retired. But either way, legend says his stash of stolen items is somewhere in the area, but no one has ever found it.

Sometimes people find the coins, though. We have a few on display at the historical society."

I frowned. Had Fiona found the cache? Was that why she had the coin? Or maybe her secret partner Mouse had? I held up the necklace. "Treasures like this?"

Mirabelle's eyes widened, and she took the necklace, turning it over in her hands. "I'm not a jeweler, but this looks very old, and the stones look real." She paused. "Did Fiona find the stash?"

"No," I said quickly, before Shirley or Coco could answer. But maybe she had. Or she knew someone who had.

But Mirabelle was intrigued now. "Those two things together would suggest she did." She whistled. "I wonder where she found it? I would love to see it." She got a dreamy look in her eyes. "Can you imagine the historical significance of all those items? Did she tell you where she found them?"

"The note simply said that they were gifts to me to help fund the store," I said. "She said I should get them appraised and sell them."

"But only if Rainbow was willing to invest the proceeds into Rippy Mama's," Shirley said. "Fiona made it very clear that her legacy is the store, and she wanted to make sure whoever bought it would have the funds to keep it going."

"I recognized the coin," Coco said, "so I thought we should check with you. Do you think the coin is worth anything? From a historical perspective?"

I was so impressed with how quickly Coco and Shirley had pivoted to my story. I had no idea who Mirabelle would talk to, and we didn't need the whole town thinking that Fiona had found the stash. People like the Wilsons would become treasure hunters in a hurry, and not the kind I'd want following me around in Fiona's life.

Mirabelle looked at the coin again. “It’s in excellent condition,” she said, “but we have a few of them. You could donate it to the historical society, but we wouldn’t pay for it. I don’t think it has a lot of monetary value. It’s a collector’s item though.” Her fist closed around it. “I’d love to have it.”

Uh uh. I held out my hand for the items. “It’s my legacy from Fiona,” I said cheerfully. “I want it.”

Mirabelle dropped the items in my hand with visible reluctance. “Well, if you change your mind,” she paused. “I’ve had a few of the historical society items appraised by a jeweler on the mainland. I would be happy to show them to him next time I go see him. He’s excellent with old items, and very trustworthy.”

“We can reach out directly,” Shirley said. “Text his contact info to me?”

“Will do.” Mirabelle looked around at us. “Anything else to look at?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “That’s it.”

“All right.” Mirabelle didn’t leave, though. “I know Junior was stabbed at the store,” she said. “If Fiona did find that stash, and it’s as extensive as legend says, some folks would find that worth killing over. Be careful. We need more badass bitches in this world, not fewer.”

I considered that. “You think Junior was killed over the vigilante’s stash?”

Mirabelle nodded at the items in my hand. “He was killed over something, and it was in your driveway, so maybe. Just be safe, ladies.” She started to turn to leave, and I had a thought.

“Has anyone else brought anything in for you to look at lately?” I asked.

She turned back to me, her brows furrowed in a frown. “Now that you mention it, Gator Wilson brought in an antique ring a couple months ago. He wanted me to check the engravings on it and see if I could tell who it originally belonged to, but it was just first names. I couldn’t match them to any town records.”

Ah…Gator. “What kind of ring?” I asked. “With jewels?”

She shrugged. “As I said, I’m not a jeweler, but it looked like maybe diamonds and sapphires. I didn’t think much about it at the time, but now…” She rubbed her chin. “Those Wilsons are trouble.”

I thought of Gator, sitting on my back step, wanting to search the milk that Junior had delivered. If a toe could be in a milk bottle, so could a ring or a necklace, right?

Shirley and Coco looked like they’d come to the same conclusion that I had.

“Well, thanks,” I said. “We’ll do our best not to get stabbed, and let you know if we find anything.”

Shirley cleared her throat. “Mirabelle, if there is something going on with this, I’m sorry we got you involved.”

“Me?” Mirabelle waved her hand dismissively. “No one’s coming after me. I just work there. I’ll be fine, but you guys be careful, okay?”

“Will do,” I said. “Thanks for your help.”

“You bet. When I’m at the office today, I’ll look at the records from the last few months and see if anything else of interest has come in.”

“Thanks!”

“Appreciate it!”

“No problem. Good luck.” She turned to head inside. “Don’t forget that I’d love to have that coin if you don’t want it, Rainbow. It’s beautiful.”

I held up my closed fist. “You’re first in line.”

“Awesome!” She waved good-bye and then trotted back up the stairs and into the mahjong studio, leaving us on the sidewalk.

We all looked at each other. “You think Fiona found the stash?” I asked. “And was selling items?”

“No.” Shirley rubbed her jaw. “She wouldn’t care about selling them.”

“That’s too materialistic for her,” Coco agreed.

“She wouldn’t want to make sure the items were returned to their original owners?” I asked.

“From two hundred years ago? No. Not her thing.” Shirley took the coin from me and tucked it away.

“So, what then? Assuming that the stash was found, then why leave clues that tell us that? Why does it matter?”

Shirley looked at me.

Coco sighed.

My gut sank. “You think we need to go to my store and talk to Gator?”

“Don’t you?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

But I knew that’s what we were going to do anyway.

He couldn’t kill us all in the middle of my store, right?

Wrong.

He definitely could.

But maybe he didn’t realize that.

We’d have to take that chance.

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CHAPTER 28

WHEN SHIRLEY PULLED into my driveway behind Rippy Mama's, Gator was still sitting there on the step.

He'd been resting his head against the door, but the minute we pulled in, he sat up, leaned forward, and gave us an aggressive stare.

Great. Fun.

I wasn't scared of the mahjong ladies, but Gator was a different situation.

"Oh, Lordy," Coco whispered. "He looks like a man who would chop off a toe no problem."

"He sure does," Shirley said. "He probably has."

"Do we have security cameras in the store?" I asked.

"Nope. It's Blueberry Island. No one has security cameras," Shirley said.

"Except the *Buttered Rum*," I pointed out.

"It's not from the island."

Gator stood up. "You got a key?"

I summoned courage, then stood up, bracing my hands on the top of the windshield. "Do you know anything about the legend of the Blueberry Island Vigilante?" Gator had brought Mirabelle a vintage piece of jewelry,

and he was not a jewelry-wearing kind of guy. Plus, he'd known Junior. Was it a stretch to think he knew something? Maybe. Maybe not.

He narrowed his eyes. "You got a key or not?"

Yes, I did notice that he hadn't answered my question.

I didn't really want to get out of the car, and neither of my gal pals got out either. "The stash would be worth a lot if someone found it."

He walked up to the car, and Shirley shifted into reverse. "Key. Now. I'm tired of waiting." He put his hand on the doorframe and looked right at Shirley. "I know you have a key. You've been running the store for months."

"Was Junior smuggling jewelry items in the milk?" I asked, watching Gator's face closely. "Is that what you're looking for?"

His gaze shifted to me, and I saw something in his eyes that made me certain he knew what I was talking about. Holy moly. He knew about the jewelry? And the stash? But what did he know?

"You looking to say it's Junior's fault he got stabbed?" he snarled. "Because that's an absolute lie."

Huh. He sounded legit mad about Junior being stabbed. "No, I meant—"

A shrill whistle interrupted me, and we all spun around as Tony cruised into the driveway on his bike.

"Hey, Rainbow? Where have you been? Nora's looking for you." He waved. "Hey, ladies. Good to see you."

Gator turned toward him, his movement catching Tony's attention.

Tony's smile faded, and he stopped his bike. "Is this a rumble for the ice cream turf? Because I'm not in, if it is. I don't choose sides."

Oh, no. I didn't want Tony caught up in this situation. "I'll see you later, Tony. We're in the middle of something."

Tony sat resolutely on his bike and didn't move. "Is Rippy Mama's open? I was hoping for some ice cream. I'll just go in and help myself. You

don’t need to serve me.”

I realized Tony was trying to provide a neutral witness or deterrent to keep us from being murdered by Gator. That was very bold and sweet, and Tony’s size and muscle would make him a factor, except this was Tony, and I didn’t want him injured or traumatized. “We’re all set. Maybe come back later.”

“Girl, I’m so hungry that I could eat an Escalade made of hot fudge and peppermint stick ice cream. I rode over a hundred miles this morning, and Fiona always finished off my rides with dessert.” He waved. “Hey, Gator. Looking fine today, as always. You here for ice cream, too?”

My heart tightened. How sweet was Tony? “Seriously, Tony, we’re good—”

“I’m not. I want ice cream.” He folded his massive biceps across his chest. “I’ll wait ‘til you all are finished with your little chitty chat.” He pulled the water bottle from its holder and popped the lid. “I’ll just be here hydrating ‘til you all are ready for me.”

Gator ignored him and turned back to us. “Open the shop.”

At that moment, Nora’s Jeep careened around the corner. Tony shrieked and leapt off his bike, and Nora ran over a bush to keep from plowing him down. “Tony!” she shouted as she jumped out. “Are you okay?”

He was on his butt in the driveway. “You are one dangerous bitch, Nora.”

She grinned. “So, not hurt.” She then took in our little foursome, and her eyes widened. “What did I interrupt?”

I looked at Shirley. “We have a lot of witnesses,” I whispered. “It might be a good time to go into the store and look around.”

“Especially if we find another body,” Coco whispered.

“Or someone else gets stabbed when you’re around,” Shirley added.

We looked at each other. “Let’s do it.”

Coco shoved the bottle at me. “Hide it.”

I shoved it in my jacket, then we all climbed out of the car.

“Gator wanted to look at the milk that Junior delivered yesterday,” I said. “So we were all going to go inside and do that. Do you want to come, Nora?”

“Oh, yes. I certainly do.” She pulled out her phone. “Can I take photos?”

“No.” I didn’t waste words. I used my work voice, low and tough, and Nora’s eyes narrowed.

But she put her phone away.

“Let’s go,” Shirley said. “Follow me.”

She headed up the back steps, with her entourage in tow. She let them in, leading the way, and I knew she’d watch every bottle that Gator checked. So would Nora.

Tony stretched his long legs out and leaned back on his hands. “You’re not a joiner?”

I sat down next to him. “How squeamish are you?”

Tony pulled his sunglasses off so he could look at me. “On a scale of one to ten, probably zero. I wasn’t always this adorable and charming. I have a very colorful past.” His voice was lower. Serious. “Why?”

“How do you feel about toes?” The stakes were high. Time was running out. I was going to use all the resources I had available. I didn’t want to traumatize him, but if he was a zero on the squeamish scale, he might be okay with it.

Curiosity flickered across his face. “Toes? Like, do I have a toe fetish?”

“No, do they gross you out?”

Tony pushed his helmet back on his head. “No, but I am so very curious as to where this is leading. Please continue.”

“What if it wasn’t attached to a foot?”

Tony’s mouth dropped open. “Please, girl, don’t even tell me that the bulge in your jacket is a dismembered toe.”

I grinned, because I was increasingly confident that the toe wouldn't bother Tony for even a second. "Do you want to know that? Really?"

He cocked his head, studying me with fascination. "You tell me, girlfriend. You tell me what I want to know."

I folded my arms over the milk bottle, trying not to press it against my bruised sternum. "Do you know what color nail polish Jasmine wears?"

"As in toenail polish?"

"Yep."

"Shut up." He hit my arm. "Don't even tell me that you have a toe in there that you want me to identify."

"What if I did?"

"Then I'd want to see it, of course. It's been a while since I've seen a dismembered toe. It's something I like to refresh at least once a year." He held out his hand and wiggled his fingers. "Give it to Tony, Rainbow."

"You sure? Once you've seen it, you can never go back."

"Who wants to go backward? The past is boring. I love toes. Gimme gimme."

I laughed and pulled the milk bottle out of my jacket. "We stole it."

"Of course you did. I knew I loved you the first time I met you." He took the bottle and held it up. "Hot damn, girl. You have a freaking real toe in there. What in the actual glitter bomb, right?"

"We found it in a locked trunk behind the Thistle Farms corn stand."

He looked at me with blatant curiosity. "Such an odd place to be randomly wandering with lockpicks."

"Right? So odd." I nodded at the milk bottle. "Well? Do you think it could be Jasmine's?"

He gave me a look, then turned his attention to the toe. "This is so morbid," he said. "I'm horrified and obsessed at the same time. I don't know which emotion should win." He paused and peered more closely at the toe. "That looks like Huckleberry Pink," he said.

I grinned. “I figured you knew nail polish.”

“I sure do, honey.” He set the bottle on his lap. “And to answer your unspoken question, yes, Jasmine’s top choice was always Huckleberry Pink.”

I let out my breath. “You think it’s Jasmine’s toe?”

“Yes. I’m sure. My poor sweet Jasmine.” Tony’s voice softened. “There’s a tan line at the base of the toe. It’s in the shape of a tarantula. That’s her toe ring. It must have fallen off when the toe—” He made a slicing motion across his throat.

“Really?” I picked up the bottle and peered more closely at the toe, turning it until I could see the tan line that Tony had mentioned. Once I saw it, I could definitely see the legs and body of half a spider. “Wow.”

Tony patted the bottle. “Jasmine can be a tough little viper, but she has a good heart, at least at one time. She was kind to a girl who most people weren’t very nice to.”

I smiled. “If Jasmine was a friend to you, then that’s a gold star in my book.”

Tony smiled, but his eyes were sad. “Sometimes, good hearts get contaminated by the oil spills around them.”

“Like Gator?”

“And Duane. And Junior. It’s a spicy family dynamic. She didn’t have much of a chance of making it out nice.” He sighed. “It wouldn’t surprise me at all if she walked herself right into a life that resulted in toe dismembering.”

I took the bottle and tucked it into my jacket, so that Tony didn’t have to look at it. “Maybe the toe was an accident.”

He shot me a skeptical look. “An accident that wound up in a milk bottle in a locked chest by a corn stand?” He shook his head. “No, if it had been an accident, she would have packed up that toe and high-tailed it to the nearest hospital to try to get it stitched back on. She wouldn’t have left it for

someone to find and stick in a milk bottle." He looked at me. "However that toe came off, Jasmine didn't have the chance to keep it, and trust me, she would have fought hard for an opportunity to get that toe reattached."

I let that sink in. Gone was my fantasy that the toe wasn't bad news for all involved. "Jasmine came into Coco's store yesterday morning and ordered coffee."

Tony's head whipped around so fast that I knew he hadn't known she was in town. "Shut up. She's back?"

"She also paid Harvey to make a bunch of keys two years ago."

Tony hit my arm. "Shut up. She wasn't in town two years ago. She hasn't been in town for years."

"Except she was. As recently as yesterday. Several hours before Junior was killed."

"Oh, sweet brownie heaven," Tony said. "What's she doing? She shouldn't be back. It's too dangerous—" He stopped when he realized what he'd said.

My heart seemed to stutter. "What?"

"Nothing." He put his sunglasses back on.

"You said you were friends with her when you were in high school," I said slowly, trying to piece everything together. "But it's more recent than that, isn't it?" I leaned in. "Tony, what do you know? Why is it dangerous for her to be back?"

He muttered something unintelligible.

"Tony. If she's in town, would you know where to find her?"

Tony looked up at the sky.

"Tony. What danger is she in?"

He looked at me. "Jasmine didn't leave all those years ago because she wanted to. She left because Junior discovered she was embezzling from the dairy."

"Oh…wow."

“Junior was crushed. He covered for her, but he told her that she had to leave the island. If she ever came back, he’d throw her ass in prison. He gave her a chance because he loved her, and she took the opportunity and ran.”

Wow. I had not seen that coming. “So why did he go after her?”

Tony sighed. “I’d stopped being close with her at that point, but I heard she stole something of real value, and Junior went after her to get it back. And she got him put in jail for it.”

I rubbed my jaw. “So, Junior was a threat. If she wants to be back in town, Junior was in her way.”

“Yes.” Tony sighed.

“Could she kill someone? Junior, to be specific?”

He looked at me. “Honey, anyone can become a killer with the right motivation.”

That was the same thing Shirley had said. “You think Gator is on her side, or on Junior’s? And what’s he searching for in the milk?”

“I don’t know. Gator is a scary dude. He’d definitely kill someone. Probably already has and we just don’t know about it.” Tony sighed. “I’ve always kept Jasmine’s secrets. I never forget how she stood by me. I just…” He stopped and fell silent.

“It sucks when someone you trusted betrays that trust.”

He looked at me. “You know, too?”

“I do.”

He nodded. “If Jasmine is in town, she’ll be staying with Duane. They were always the closest. He lives on the west side of the island…” He paused. “Not too far from that corn stand, actually.”

Oh, boy. “Do you have an address?”

“Just turn left at the corn stand, follow the dirt road for a couple miles, and then turn right at the white rock, down a road that’s almost completely overgrown. When you see the orange blaze on the birch tree, turn left. An

old cabin is back there, hidden by underbrush. It looks like no one has lived there for a long time, but it's where they always went when they needed to hide. That's where she'd be."

I did not want to drive down that road and turn left at the orange blaze. "Thanks."

Tony nodded. "Don't get stabbed, Rainbow. As I said, I'd never go and talk to Duane, but you do you."

At that moment, Coco came out of the back of the shop. "I think you better come inside, Rainbow."

I tensed. "Did you find something?"

"You could say that."

"That's my cue to abandon this candy-coated moment." Tony stood up. "I'll leave you to your ice cream."

I hopped to my feet. "Don't go after her, Tony. She's not who you once knew. It might not be safe."

He picked up his bike. "It's definitely not safe. There's nothing about Jasmine that's ever been safe."

"But you're going to go try to find her, aren't you?"

He threw his leg over the seat. "Do you really want to know?"

"I don't know. Do I?"

He blew me a kiss as he began to pedal. "Keep the glitter sparkling, Rainbow. You never know when you'll need it." And with that, he was gone, picking up speed as he hit the road. He turned left, which was the same direction my truck had gone when it had led us to the corn stand.

As he disappeared from sight, I had a sudden, terrible feeling I might not see him again.

I wanted to go after him, but he was a grown man. He knew more about this situation than I did. How would I even stop him? He outweighed me by about seven hundred pounds of muscle.

"Evie," Coco said, her voice urgent. "You need to see this. Right now."

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CHAPTER 29

I LET TONY LEAVE, and I hurried over to Coco. “What’s up?”

She gave me a look. “Words cannot possibly do this moment justice.” She held the door open. “To the kitchen, my dear.”

I heard a wail from inside my shop, and I bolted toward it.

Shirley and Nora were standing in the doorway to the walk-in fridge, looking into it. The wail was emanating from the fridge. “What’s going on?”

They were so entranced with whatever was happening inside the fridge that they didn’t even notice my arrival.

I ran over and shoved past them to see into the walk-in.

Gator was sitting on the floor in a lake of milk and broken glass. He was covered in milk, and his hands were bleeding from the glass.

And he was sobbing. *Sobbing.*

“Oh.” I stopped. “Wow. I did not expect this.”

He didn’t seem to notice me. He just kept crying and wailing, the blood from his hands making pink swirls in the milk puddle he was sitting in.

I cleared my throat. “What’s going on?”

Both Shirley and Nora shrugged as Coco came up behind them and peered over Shirley’s shoulder.

“As soon as he got into the fridge, he started throwing the bottles on the ground and smashing them. He went through every single one, even the ones we already had,” Shirley said.

“When he broke the last one,” Nora said, “he went to his knees and started running his hands through the milk, muttering that he must have missed it.”

“That’s how he cut his hands,” Coco said.

“And then he started sobbing,” Shirley said, her voice soft.

I looked at him, and I didn’t see a terrifying man who could stab us.

I saw grief.

Raw, debilitating grief.

Eighteen-year-old me knew all about grief, the kind that could make someone hurl milk bottles to the ground and then sit in the milk sobbing. Not that I’d done that specifically, but similar enough.

My heart tight, I crouched in the doorway so I was level with Gator. “What were you looking for?”

He slammed his fist into a crate, shattering the plastic, making us all jump.

“Hey!” I knew it was stupid, but I lightly hit his shoulder. “Gator!”

He startled, spinning toward me. He grabbed my wrist and yanked me into his space. “Don’t touch me.”

I held my ground. “What were you looking for?”

“My sister lost something, and I have about two hours left to find it.”

Oh…Lordy.

“He said it was in a milk bottle. It’s not in the milk bottle!”

I glanced at Shirley and Coco, who both looked horrified.

How many hours did one have to get a toe reattached? The toe in my jacket probably was past its expiration date. “Who said it was in a milk bottle?”

Gator was past answering questions. He was just crying and sobbing and muttering about how he'd let her down.

I couldn't handle his pain, so I cleared my throat, pulled the bottle out, and put it in his hands.

It took him a full second to look at the bottle, and when he finally did, it took him another several seconds to process what he was seeing. Then he unleashed a roar of profanity, leapt to his feet, and charged right through all of us and out the door.

I had to peel myself out of the strawberries, and the other three were all on the ground. I was the first one on my feet. I scrambled through the milk and glass swamp, made it out into the kitchen, and then bolted out the back door.

I reached the back step in time to see him vault over the low fence at the edge of my driveway and disappear. He moved so fast that he was out of sight in an instant.

What the heck? Where had he gone?

My athleticism was seriously lacking, but I made it over the fence without killing myself. When I landed, I was in the bushes on the neighboring property, but there was no sign of Gator.

I frowned and looked around, but there was nowhere to hide.

Nowhere he could have gone to vanish so quickly.

Just like the police had concluded—there was no logical way for someone to have murdered Junior and then vanish so quickly, without anyone seeing them, which added to my status as a suspect.

And yet, that was exactly what Gator had done.

My friends rushed out the back door in a furor. "Where is he?" Shirley asked.

"What was in the bottle?" Nora shouted. "What did you give him?"

I held out my arms in confusion. "He went over the fence and then vanished. There's nowhere he could have gone, but he's not here."

“Maybe he had angelic help,” Coco said as they all raced across the driveway to me, Nora still frantically trying to get one of us to tell her what I’d given him.

We, of course, ignored her.

Shirley was first to reach the fence. She braced her hands on it and leaned over. “Replay what he did.”

I pointed to a spot in the fence a few yards from her. “He jumped it right there, and then vanished.”

“Vanished?” Coco leaned over that section of the fence and looked down. “There’s no trap door. It’s just dirt.”

“He didn’t vanish,” Shirley said. “He went somewhere. Be more specific, Rainbow. Focus.”

I took a breath, still rattled from the last few minutes. “He jumped it, then it was like he simply vanished. I didn’t see him duck or land. He was just gone.”

“Like the *Buttered Rum*.” Shirley waggled her way over the fence. “An illusion or a trap door, or something.”

Nora slammed her hands down on the fence. “What was in the bottle?” she shouted.

I spun toward her. “However Gator got out of here is probably how Junior’s murderer did, so stop yelling about the bottle and help us think!”

Her eyes widened. “You’re so aggressive.”

“Thank you.” I walked down the fence line to where Gator had gone over. I stood there, on the ground, and looked around. It was weedy dirt, with a few small bushes, next to a driveway that was a little smaller than mine.

I pointed to the building on the property. “What’s that?” From the back, it looked like a small, one-story house. The front appeared to be on the street.

Shirley gave me a surprised look. “It’s literally next door to your store. You didn’t notice it?”

“I’ve been busy.”

She grinned. “I know. I’m teasing.” She nodded at the building. “It used to be a real estate company. It’s been closed for a long time, though. Armando bought it, and he’s holding onto it until he can buy up the other properties.”

It took me a second to remember who Armando was, but then I recalled Shirely had said something about him wanting to buy Rippy’s Mama’s so he could turn the whole block into a boutique hotel. Bad Armando. “Anyone who wants to build a hotel instead of an ice cream store is definitely morally devoid and probably deeply evil.”

I saw Shirley and Coco exchange delighted smiles. “Agreed,” Shirley said.

“Absolutely.”

“And if he wants to buy Fiona’s shop, but she wouldn’t sell it, maybe he had plans to force it.”

Even Nora went silent, watching me brainstorm.

Spinning possibilities is what I was great at. It was why I was a fantastic lawyer.

I drummed my fingers against my thighs, thinking. “Why would someone have to sell a property? Environmental reasons? Cash flow problems?” I walked along the fence line, studying the ground, the bushes, the fence itself. “Did Fiona have cash flow problems?”

Coco shook her head. “No.”

“She never kept books,” Shirley said. “She ran it all on instinct. It was a small business, and it worked fine.”

“Hmm…” I crouched down in the dirt and put my hands down. “An easy way in and out. A way that Gator and maybe some other people found out about?”

“You think a tunnel?” Shirley said.

“Has to be. He didn’t go into the house. I would have seen it.” I began to crawl along the fence line where Gator had gone over, feeling with my hands and knees, scanning for anything that looked amiss.

Nora was hanging over the fence, watching. “A tunnel? In the middle of town? Someone would have seen him digging it.”

“Not new,” I said. “Something old. Something that’s been here.”

“A root cellar.” Shirley crouched down, inspecting the earth. “A lot of the old farms have them. And this was farmland before it was a town.”

“A root cellar!” Coco wiggled over the fence and landed beside Shirley. “This is fantastic.” She didn’t kneel down, but she began tapping her foot on the dirt.

I looked over at Nora. “Give me your phone.”

“Oh, yay! Yes!” She fished it out and handed it to me. “Thanks for letting me document—”

I began hitting the edge of her phone on the dirt.

“Hey! What are you doing with my phone?”

“Listening.” I bent over, my ear close to the dirt as I continued tapping the edge of the phone against the dirt. “If it hits metal or wood, it will sound different than hitting dirt.”

“Great idea!” Shirley pulled out her phone and began hitting the ground.

“I’m not sacrificing my phone,” Coco said. “Nora! Go get some ice cream scoops for us to use!” She started stomping on the dirt.

“No way. I’m not leaving. You’ll find it while I’m gone.” She hopped the fence and yanked her phone out of my hand. “I’ll check with my phone. You’re getting the ports filled with dirt!”

She flipped her phone around and then began tapping the dirt as I sat back on my heels, watching the three of them hone their surveying skills.

It couldn’t be this hard to find.

Gator had been gone in an instant. There was no way he'd had time to find a hidden door, leverage it open, slide down, and then close it behind him.

I thought of what Shirley had just said about the *Buttered Rum* trap doors.

I recalled the lever that I'd pulled to make the wall flip on the boat.

Maybe whoever had created the *Buttered Rum* had built other similar things during that era.

My gaze went to the section of the fence Gator had gone over.

Could it be that simple?

I hopped to my feet and walked over to the fence.

He'd put one hand on it as he'd jumped, so I paused to remember where he'd put his hand. It had been…around here?

I ran my hand along the top of the fence, but there were no levers.

Same with the sides.

The fence probably hadn't been there when the cellar was built, right?

So maybe it wasn't the fence.

I hopped the fence and stood on my side of it.

Shirley saw what I was doing and paused. "Rainbow?"

"Thinking."

Coco walked over. "What are you thinking?"

"Foot lever." I began tapping my toe against the ground. "If the lever is on my side of the fence, then if someone accidentally opens it, they won't see the trapdoor open. It could have been opening and closing for years, and no one knew."

"No one except Armando."

"And Gator, and…" I paused, noticing a piece of white quartz embedded in the dirt. It was tucked up against the base of a bigger rock. It was about the right distance from the fence—

I walked over and tapped it with my toe.

Coco grabbed the fence. “Don’t you dare drop me like the boat did.”

Shirley stood up. “Do it, Rainbow. It’ll be fun.”

Nora was on her hands and knees, but she sat up. “Do what?”

I grinned at Coco, then I slammed my foot down on the piece of white quartz.

She shrieked, and grabbed the fence…but didn’t disappear.

“Anything?”

The trio looked all around, and shook their heads.

I let out my breath. “Okay, let’s assume that whoever did it doesn’t want it opening by accident. That means that it has to be more difficult. Like a series of moves.”

Shirley leaned on the fence, looking fascinated. “Replay exactly what Gator did.”

I put my hand on the post. “He put his hand here—”

“No.” Nora stood up. “Start from the steps.”

“I didn’t see him from there.”

“But maybe it’ll click.”

“All right.” I jogged back across the driveway and up the steps, taking a moment to survey the driveway. “My truck was over there,” I said. “And the milk truck was there.” I pointed. “So there’s no trigger there because the murderer couldn’t have gotten to it.”

“And my Jeep is blocking anything to the right,” Nora said.

“All right.” I ran down the steps, and went to the right, pretending that the two trucks were still in the way, then curved back around toward the section Gator had gone over.

As I ran, I saw something glint in the sun. I stopped and crouched. “It’s a metal disk, like the lid to a septic tank or something,” I said. I stepped on it, and my heart leapt when I felt a click under my foot. “Anything?”

They were all standing at the fence now, and they shook their heads.

“Then that was step one.” I took another stride toward the fence, and I saw an old cement property marker. I stepped on that, and I felt another click. Incredibly slight, and I would never have noticed it if I weren’t looking for it.

Three faces were still staring at me expectantly.

“Nothing?”

“This is ridiculous.” Nora leaned forward and put her hand on the fence post. “There’s no secret trapdoor.”

Then I saw it. A small black hook right below her hand, one that would be easy to trip with a foot while mid leap.

I grinned, walked over to her, and leaned into her space. “You’re so judgy.”

Then I hit it with my knee.

She squawked and dropped out of sight as fast as Gator had.

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CHAPTER 30

SHIRLEY, Coco, and I stared at each other in stunned delight.

Even though I'd pulled the lever, I hadn't really expected Nora to vanish.

"Brilliant!" Shirley exclaimed.

"That was amazing," Coco shouted. "Well done!"

"I feel so victorious. I love it." I leaned over the fence, but there was no hole. It was solid dirt again. "Wow. That closes fast."

"I sure hope Gator isn't still down there," Coco said. "Nora might not be up to the challenge."

"Oh, no!" I ran back to the metal disk and stomped on it. Then to the cement marker, and then I ran over to the fence. "Stand where you were before," I said. "Make sure you're out of the way."

They both nodded. "Ready."

"All right." I leaned over the fence to watch the ground where Nora had been standing. "One, two, three!"

I hit the hook with my knee, and the ground opened up. Staring up at me was Nora. "Get me out," she shouted. She jumped up, trying to grab the edge of the trap door.

"There's got to be a way to open it on that side," I said, as she missed and fell back down. "Find it—"

The door closed before I could say anything more. Two doors covered by dirt and grass had swung downward, and then lifted back up, sealing it off.

“Holy cantaloupes,” Shirley said. “I watched that happen, and I still can’t see where those trap doors are.”

“Too much grass and weeds,” I said. “I can’t either.”

Coco leaned against the fence a few yards down. “You think Nora is going to figure out how to get out of there?”

“Well, if it’s a regular handle, she should be able to find it.” I braced my hands on the fence, watching the ground.

Coco shifted restlessly. “Nothing’s happening.”

“Give her a second.” As I said it, I heard distant pounding from under the dirt.

Shirley grinned. “She’s probably screaming, ‘get me out’ right now, but we can’t hear her. It’s sort of fun.”

I sighed and jogged back and hit the two triggers again, then went back to the fence. I leaned over and hit the third one with my knee. The doors dropped open again, and Nora was staring up at me. “I can’t find it,” she shouted. “Get down here and help me!”

“You’re disappointing yourself,” Shirley yelled back. “You can be more, Nora! I know you can!”

“Get me out!” She jumped up, trying to get Shirley’s wrist.

“Oh, hell, no.” Shirley jerked her hand out of reach. “You’re not dragging me down into your chamber of doom.”

“Shirley!” Nora fell back down.

The doors closed again.

I leaned on the fence, and we waited.

Nothing but distant pounding.

Coco sighed. “You two are going to have to go down there and save the day.”

“She’ll get it,” I said.

We waited a few more minutes, but the doors didn’t open.

“She’s probably freaking out,” Coco said. “Go save her. I’ll wait here and call for rescue if you two don’t reappear.”

“I’ll help you call for aid, Coco,” Shirley said. “That looked pretty shady down there. Rainbow, go for it.”

I frowned. “I don’t want to go down there. We should call the police.”

Shirley and Coco both shook their heads. “And tell them what? That you gave Gator a toe you’ve been carrying around, and then he ran off and fell through the earth?”

“We could tell them we know how the murderer got away,” I said. “That would be helpful.”

Shirley raised her brows. “Don’t you think we should find out what’s down there before we invite the cops? Just in case it’s…I don’t know… Fiona’s secret, maybe?”

I sighed. “Dammit.”

Shirley grinned. “We’ll stand guard and make sure you aren’t down there forever.”

“All right.” I went back and hit the first two triggers, showing them where they were, and then I explained about the one on the fence. “Once I’m down there, give me a couple minutes and then open it again. I’ll report in.”

“Got it.” Shirley climbed over the fence to my side, and I went over to Armando’s side.

I stood on top of the trap doors and braced myself.

Coco started laughing. “You look like you’re ready to launch yourself at an assailant. Be tough, Warrior Rainbow. Slay thine enemies with courage and bravery.”

“Oh, shut up— Ack!” I screamed as the ground vanished from under my feet. I had a split second of total panic, and then I crashed down on

something soft. The earth closed over my head, and I was in darkness.

Well, not really darkness. I was actually being blinded by light. “Nora! Turn your phone in the other direction.”

The light stopped frying my retinas, and I could see Nora standing next to the couch I’d landed on. Her face was stricken, and she looked like she was crying. “Are you okay?”

“No. Not at all. I’m freaking out. I don’t like being trapped. We need to get out! My phone doesn’t work underground. We’re too deep! What if it collapses? Have you ever been buried alive? I haven’t, but it sounds like a horrific way to die!”

“Whoa.” I scrambled to my feet. “It’s okay. I love being trapped, and I’m great at puzzles. I’ve got this.”

“Do you? Do you really? Because we’re stuck in a massive grave with a man who just destroyed glass with his bare hands!”

I whirled around. “Is he here?”

“Probably!”

I jumped off the couch and grabbed Nora’s shoulders. She was shaking. Her eyes were wide, and tears were pouring down her cheeks.

“Rainbow!” She grabbed my wrists with the strangling grip of a woman fighting for her life.

Gone was the arrogant reporter.

She’d been hijacked by the panic that could turn a perfectly capable woman into a pile of raw, unfiltered terror.

Been there, done that. I felt her.

“Nora.” I kept my voice calm. “If Gator can figure out how to open this from the inside, don’t you think I can?”

“No!” she screamed. “We’re going to die down here!”

“Okay, fine.” I grabbed her phone. “Just keep panicking then while I sort this.” Honestly, I was also kind of panicking, and I didn’t have the capacity to manage Nora and problem-solve at the same time.

I shined the light around, quickly assessing. “Definitely a root cellar.” The walls were carved out of stone, the ground was dirt. There were old shelves all along the walls, with a few old wooden crates. I could see the trap door. Rungs were built into the wall leading up to it.

An old black crank was across the underside of it. Seriously? It was that easy? Nora needed to upgrade her ability to think under pressure.

“Shine this on me.” I handed the phone to Nora, then climbed up the rungs. I tugged on the crank, and the trap door opened easily.

I grinned up at Coco and Shirley, who were leaning over the fence. “Hi.”

Shirley’s brows went up. “Well, that didn’t take long.”

“Let me out of here!” Nora grabbed my ankle and yanked me off balance. I fell off the ladder and landed on the couch. The doors snapped shut again.

“No!” Nora lunged for the trap door and tugged on the latch. It opened, and Shirley and Coco were still there, now looking somewhat concerned.

“Get out of my way!” Nora scrambled up the ladder and clawed her way out of the cellar. She landed on the grass and disappeared from my sight.

Coco looked over at her, but Shirley leaned in. “Is it safe down there?”

“So far. It’s definitely a cellar.”

“I’m coming, then.” She rolled onto her belly, dangled her feet over the edge, and then dropped.

The moment she landed on the couch, the doors snapped shut again.

Shirley turned on her phone flashlight, and we both stared up at the ceiling. “Well, that’s interesting,” I said. “The couch closes the trap door from the inside.”

“Perfect if you’re on the run.” She waved. “Go get Coco.”

I climbed up the ladder and opened the trap door again.

After a moment, Coco appeared. “Nora’s having a panic attack,” she said. “I’m going to stay here and help her calm down.”

Shirley snorted. “You just don’t want to run around in a root cellar after a missing toe and a terrifying man.”

“Is that what you’re doing?” Coco blinked. “I had no idea. I’d love to join you, but my feminine caretaker urge is surfacing. I’ll take photos of the milk carnage and guard it until you guys come back to clean it up.”

“You could clean it up,” Shirley said. “We’re risking our lives down here.”

“I’m too rich and too fiercely female to clean up a mess made by a man. I will support our girl Nora and hold down the fort.” Then she waved, stood up, and disappeared from sight.

A moment later, the trap doors began to swing shut.

“Yikes!” I jerked back, and the doors brushed the top of my head, nearly decapitating me. “Hey!”

“I guess she figured out how to close it from up there,” Shirley said. “She’s apparently much more clever than Nora.”

I jumped down to the couch. “Nora was freaking out. She couldn’t think clearly.”

“Or she’s a failure as a reporter because she’s just not that good at things like this.” Shirley was shining her light along the walls. “As a reporter, she needs to be the first one to jump into root cellars after madmen.”

“It’s my favorite thing to do,” I said. “I can’t imagine why she didn’t want to do this.”

“Right?” Shirley’s beam landed on a tunnel. “A real tunnel,” she whispered. “How stinking cool is this? I had no idea this kind of thing existed on the island.”

“You didn’t even know about the trap doors on the boat before last night,” I said as we headed toward it.

“Life is expanding in glorious and magical ways with every passing minute since you arrived.” Shirley slowed as we reached the entrance. “You

first.”

“You have the light.”

She put her phone in my hand. “Now you do.”

I gripped it tightly. “Are there bears on the island?”

“Black bears, but they don’t attack people much.”

“Much?”

“Almost never.” She paused. “But murderers do, and I think it’s pretty clear that we’re currently following the exact path that Junior’s murderer took.”

I looked over at her. “This is stupid. We shouldn’t do this.”

She snorted. “Junior was killed yesterday. There’s no way his murderer is still in the tunnel. We’re good.”

She had a point. “What about Gator?”

“Clearly in a hurry. He’s long gone.”

“Right. Okay, then it’s fine. Totally safe.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed.

But neither of us took even a single step.

“It’s very dark,” I said.

“It’s a root cellar. The darkness is like a luxury spa for potatoes.”

“So, we’re in a luxury spa, then?”

“Exactly. Don’t you feel safe now?”

“I can feel all the tension in my body dissolving. It’s like someone poured peace and serenity into me,” I said.

“Same here. We’re so lucky and special. Pampered, even.”

Suddenly, I started laughing. “Seriously, Shirley. We’re in a dark tunnel about to follow a murderer and a crazy man into darkness. What in the actual hell are we thinking? Let’s go back and call the sheriff—”

“No!” She snatched the phone out of my hand. “Fiona died for whatever that darkness leads to. She was my best friend.”

And then she took off running down the tunnel.

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CHAPTER 31

"SHIRLEY!"

But she was already out of sight, and the light from her phone was fading fast.

"Hey!" I took off after her, hoping that I wasn't going to run into anything. But Gator had been moving fast, so I was hoping it was a clear runway.

She got too far ahead, and the tunnel became pitch black where I was.

Absolute utter darkness, as one might expect from a root cellar.

I stopped. "Shirley!"

There was no answer.

I yelled again, but still no response.

Panic began to grip me, and I shook out my hands. "This is fine," I said. "It's fine."

Keeping my palms extended, I started to walk again in the direction I thought the tunnel went. I made it three steps, and then I hit a wall. A crate fell off the shelf and cracked me on my head.

Why was this so freaking dark?

"Shirley!"

My voice echoed off the walls and the spirits of the potatoes that had once been stored down there.

I looked behind me, but it was an abyss of night. I paused for a moment. Which way was back? Which way was forward? I kept my hand on the wall, trying to mentally retrace my steps to figure out if this was the wall that had been on my left or right.

My right, I think.

If I kept my right hand on the wall, I was hopefully following Shirley.

Left hand? Heading back.

I couldn't leave Shirley in the tunnel alone. I put my right hand on the wall and started walking again, dragging my feet to protect against tripping on anything.

A splinter bit into my palm, and I jerked my hand back. Ow! It was old wood. Of course there were splinters.

I pulled my sleeve over my hand and kept walking as fast as I felt I could manage. I heard the jacket snagging on more splinters. My right foot hit something, and I almost fell. "Shirley!"

Again, no reply. How could she be out of earshot?

What if something had happened to her?

Urgency pulsed through me, and I tried to move faster, shuffling as quickly as I could. Why was it so dark? My eyes hadn't even adjusted to the darkness. It was just an empty void of nothingness.

My heart started to race, and I kept moving. The air smelled musty and damp. Like old sawdust. The faint scent of mold.

Minutes ticked by, and I still saw no sign of Shirley. No flash of light from her phone.

How long was this tunnel?

It felt like I'd been in there forever, but maybe it was just a few minutes. Had the tunnel curved to the right? What if there'd been a fork, and I'd gone the wrong way? What if I was winding deeper underground?

It was fine. Coco knew we were under here. She'd send someone.

The air was getting more stagnant. Heavier.

Was the tunnel going deeper? I didn’t want that.

My shoulder bumped something, and I reached out with my left hand.

The wall was right there.

The tunnel was getting narrower.

I held out my arms, both hands on stone. There were no more shelves. Just a stone passageway only a little wider than my body. I reached up. The ceiling was only a few inches above my head.

My feet seemed to glue themselves to the ground. I didn’t want to go any farther. I wanted to go back. But I didn’t even know if I could find my way back. I pressed my hands to my forehead, trying to stay focused.

All I’d wanted was to be a partner at my mom’s firm.

Then I’d just wanted to escape with my life.

And now, somehow, I was in a shrinking tunnel on an island in Maine with murderers running amok.

I didn’t want this.

I didn’t want the ice cream store or a new life. I wanted to wake up in my own bed, with a good income…

No. My mom never let me look backward. This was the only moment I had, and I had to live it. That meant going forward and dealing with whatever I found, which was hopefully Shirley having a cup of tea with Fiona, laughing at how the whole thing had been a joke.

I took a deep breath, pulled my sleeves over my hands, and started walking again, keeping my hands moving along the walls.

It still kept getting narrower, and then, my face hit something hard. I backed up and felt in front of me. It was a wall. The tunnel was a dead end.

What the heck?

Where had I gone wrong? I pressed my hands on the stone and leaned on it, pushing lightly to see if it was a false wall, but it seemed solid. I started to turn, then froze.

Someone was breathing behind me.

Softly.

My heart started to race. I heard the scrape of feet. Close behind me.

Who was behind me? It wasn't Shirley. She'd have her phone on.

Gator? The murderer?

Whoever was behind me, went still.

Listening for me?

I didn't move. Breathed in silence, pretending I was hiding from my mom under the bed when we'd been playing hide and seek. Waited.

The silence grew thicker, twisting around me like a straitjacket, paralyzing my muscles.

I had nowhere to run.

Whoever it was had to know I was there. Right?

Or not?

Slowly, I eased myself down to a crouch, getting low so that if they reached for me, they'd find only air.

I pressed myself to the side, but there really wasn't room to get out of the way.

More silence. Were they still there? Had I imagined them? Was my mind playing tricks on me? I squished to the side and pressed myself against the wall. My elbow hit something that clicked and then moved.

Oh…

There was a squawk of metal and then someone slammed into me with a grunt, flattening me against the wall.

I shrieked, slammed my knee upwards, then bolted down the tunnel.

I crashed into a wall instantly, ricocheted backward, and landed on the person who'd just landed on me. Ack! I must have triggered another wall like I'd done on the boat!

We both scrambled to our feet, fighting and slapping as we tried to get apart, but the space we were now trapped in was tight. Too tight. Just stone

walls on all sides and another person in my space, pushing and grunting at me, like they were trying to get away, not kill me.

“Stop!” I shouted. “We’re trapped!”

The other person froze. I couldn’t tell if it was a man or woman, but I caught the distinct scent of sweat and panic.

“I’m Rainbow,” I said, trying to keep my voice from squeaking in terror. “Who are you?”

Silence.

“Your body is pressed against mine,” I said. “I know you’re there. Who are you?”

“No one.”

It was a man’s voice, one I didn’t recognize. “Duane?”

“Duane? Is he here?” The panic was real, which made me relax slightly.

If he’d sounded thrilled to have Duane around, not as good. “No. It’s only the two of us, trapped in a stone silo. Who are you?”

“Who are you?”

I ground my jaw. “My name is Rainbow,” I repeated. “I bought Fiona’s store. I’m friends with Shirley and Coco.” I threw out all the feel-good names I could, hoping one of them would land.

“You’re new to town?”

“Yes. I arrived yesterday.”

His hands shot out, hit me in the throat, then fumbled across my collarbone to grab my shoulders. His fingers dug in painfully, and I readied my knee again.

“I need you to remember this,” he whispered. “Are you ready?”

I nodded, then realized he couldn’t see me. “Yes, of course. I have nothing else on my agenda right now. Go for it.” His fingers were digging in painfully, and I had an uncomfortable realization that if it came down to a one-on-one combat in our little space, I was probably not going to win. Survive. Be alive at the end of it. Any of the above.

I swallowed down the fear. He hadn’t tried to kill me yet, right? So maybe it wasn’t his plan.

“My name is Nigel Watkins,” he whispered.

“Nigel?” I snapped my attention to where his face might be. “Tony’s friend? That Nigel?”

His fingers tightened. “You know Tony?”

“I love Tony. He’s a treasure. He said you heard Nora and Junior arguing, but he also said to tell no one that I knew that. So I haven’t.” Nigel was here? Son of a biscuit! Why was he in the root cellar? Why was I in the root cellar? Why were any of us in the root cellar? It felt like an existential question, really.

His fingers finally started to loosen on my shoulders. “He trusted you with that information?”

“He did.”

His hands dropped from my shoulders. “Fiona was murdered,” he said, “and now they’re hunting me.”

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CHAPTER 32

FEAR GRIPPED ME, and I fought to stay focused. So many questions. “Who’s trying to kill you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who killed Fiona?”

“I don’t know.”

I shook out my hands, trying not to get frustrated. “What do you know?”

“That someone was following me through the tunnel, and Fiona was murdered. Why? What do you know?”

“That someone killed Fiona and Junior, and maybe tried to kill Harvey.”

“Junior’s dead?” he gasped. “He’s dead?”

“Stabbed. Yes.”

“Oh, no!” He slid down my body and collapsed on the ground, which basically meant he was sitting on my feet, and there was no room for me to crouch down with him.

This was a one-crouch space. “Nigel,” I said, trying not to panic. “Why do you think Fiona was murdered?”

“Because Junior told me.”

Holy moly. “When?”

“A few days ago. He said he was pretty sure Fiona had been killed, and he knew who had done it. He asked if he could crash at my place for a few days, because he was worried about his safety.”

What? No wonder Junior had been jumpy when I’d met him. What had he figured out? And…no wonder he’d been killed. Fiona’s murderer must have realized that Junior was onto him. “What did you say when Junior asked?”

“I said no. I don’t want murderers at my house. And now he’s dead?” His voice squeaked with horror.

“He died doing his milk delivery,” I said quickly, trying to interrupt the guilt before it could suffocate him. “It wouldn’t have made a difference if he’d slept at your house. It’s not your fault.”

“Thank you for saying that.” He took a shaky breath, then swore. “Junior was the only nice one in that bunch. They probably killed him. It was probably Duane. Or Gator. Not Jasmine. But one of the boys, I’m sure.”

My heart was thudding now. Junior had known he was being hunted? “Did Junior say who he thought murdered Fiona?”

“No, he said he needed to find proof.”

Wow. The stakes had suddenly escalated. And it explained why Fiona had Junior’s credit card. They were likely working together on whatever was going on. But…what was going on? What had gotten Fiona and Junior involved in the first place? “Why were you in the tunnel just now?”

“Jasmine wanted to meet with me. She couldn’t find Tony, and she asked me to meet her to give him a message. But then on my way back, I heard someone in the tunnel hunting me. Hunting me! Just because I met with Jasmine? I don’t deserve to be hunted!” His voice was escalating in panic. “They’ll find us. And there’s no out. We’re trapped in here.”

Alarm pulsed at me. Junior had definitely been murdered. And it all pointed to Fiona as well. “We’re not trapped.” I hoped. Boy, did I hope.

“It’s a trick door. I must have triggered it.” I started feeling along the wall where I’d been standing. I found the lever quickly, but paused before I pulled it.

Did I want to open that door so that whoever was hunting Nigel could find us?

No. I did not.

I dropped my hand from the lever.

“There has to be a way out.” I reached up, and my hands touched the low ceiling. I felt around, and quickly found a latch that felt the same as the one on Armando’s property. I pulled the lever exactly as I had done with the one near my store, but it didn’t move.

I felt again, looking for a second latch, or a lock, and my fingers found a padlock. “Oh…man.” Freaking locks everywhere. I had a feeling that Shirley’s key might save us, but I didn’t have it. “You don’t have a key, do you?”

“A key?”

“Yes, like maybe that you stole from Jasmine?”

“No, but I have one she gave me.”

What? I had so many questions. “Can I have it? I think I can get us out.”

“You can get us out?” He jumped to his feet, and his head bounced off my chin. We both yelped, and he went down again while I braced my jaw with my hand, trying to keep it attached.

“Key?” I asked again. “Slowly, this time.”

“Right.” He moved around, bumped into my knee several times, but after a moment, he said, “Here. I’m holding it up.”

I felt around, and my hand touched his. I quickly found the cool metal and gripped it tightly. “Got it.”

“Don’t drop it.”

“I won’t.”

He released it, and I gripped it tightly as I felt for the padlock. It took me several tries, and then the key slid inside. I held my breath and twisted it, and the key turned easily. I gave the padlock a tug, and the lock opened. “Got it,” I said.

“Shh,” Nigel said. “I think I hear someone.”

I didn’t wait for him to be right. I shoved the lock in my pocket, then grabbed the latch again and yanked.

This time, it opened, and the trap door dropped down. I yelped at the sudden light. I ducked and held my arm over my eyes, but the light still hurt.

Nigel yelped, too.

“We gotta go,” I said, blindly grabbing the edge. I didn’t even know where we were coming out, but if it was hostile territory, I wanted out of that hole before anyone had time to shove me back in it.

Still covering my eyes, I got myself out with one hand, and Nigel climbed after me. He landed next to me, and then we both scrambled to our feet. I tried to open my eyes, and got them open for a split second before they closed again. It was enough to see we were indoors.

Nigel grabbed my arm. “Close the trap door,” he said. “Close it and lock it.”

I got my eyes open again, and this time I was able to look down into the hole. My vision had a purple hue to it, but my eyes stayed open. The hole was only about eighteen inches wide. It gave me the chills looking down into it. We would have died down there.

The trap door matched the wood panels of the floor we were standing on, but there was no handle to close it. I looked around, looking for triggers, but I didn’t see any.

We were in a closet, and the overhead bulb was the light blinding us. “Do you see any levers to close it?”

Nigel had his back to me, so I couldn’t see him, but he had a build, and he wasn’t super tall. Maybe a few inches taller than I was. He was wearing a black T-shirt, jeans, and faded sneakers. “No.” He grabbed the door handle. “I’m outta here.”

And then he bolted.

“Hey!” I sprinted after him, and then gasped when I burst out of the closet.

We were in Harvey’s living room, and I’d just come out of the same closet that I’d been attacked from.

Nigel was already out the front door, and I ran after him. “Nigel,” I shouted. “Wait! Tell me about Jasmine’s toe!”

He reached the road and spun to face me. He looked younger than Tony, almost nerdy. “Her toe?”

“We found it.” I slowed as I neared him, trying not to panic him. He looked young and scared. “What happened? Did you talk to her?”

He looked left and right down the road, but no cars were coming. “She said it was my job to take over if she couldn’t do it. Now I give it to you.”

“Give what to me?”

“The key. I don’t want it.”

“Take over what?”

A car cruised toward him, and he flagged it down. “You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

He swore as the car pulled over next to him. “I can’t tell you if you don’t know. Give the key to Tony. He’ll know what to do with it. I’m out. This isn’t my story.” Then he spoke to the driver, who nodded.

He quickly got in, and the car headed down the road, leaving me standing in Harvey’s yard with the key. What in the heck was going on?

I put my hands on my hips as I watched him go.

What had Nigel been doing in the root cellar? He’d been terrified. And yet, he’d been down there anyway? Why had Jasmine given him the key?

What was he supposed to take over? Besides running from a murderer—

Oh, no. Shirley was still down there somewhere.

I couldn't leave her down there.

I ran back inside and headed to the closet. I peered down into the hole, and a cold chill crept down my spine.

It looked like a stone coffin.

I didn't want to go back in there.

But Shirley was down there.

Swearing, I ran into Harvey's shop. As I expected, he had a headlamp neatly stacked with his tools. I put it on, then grabbed a couple screwdrivers and a hammer. I zipped the key in my pocket with Fiona's card and the jewelry to make sure I didn't lose it.

Then I saw car keys.

I hesitated. Was it better to go back in that hole alone, or get help? I didn't even know if Shirley was near that exit. Maybe she'd gone in another direction?

The best way to help her wasn't to get murdered by whoever had been hunting Nigel.

Praying I was making the right call, I grabbed Harvey's keys. I bolted outside and saw his locksmith truck still parked where it had been this morning.

I ran over to the truck, jumped in, and it started right up.

Shirley was in danger, and I had to find her before it was too late.

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CHAPTER 33

I CAREENED into my driveway a few minutes later, honking my horn frantically.

Coco was still standing in the driveway by the fence. She whirled around when I pulled in, then her face brightened when I opened the door. “Rainbow—”

“Get a flashlight,” I said as I got out, rattling off what had happened as fast as I could. “We’re going after Shirley. I lost her. Found Nigel. He was being hunted by a killer. He said Junior told him Fiona was murdered. Junior didn’t tell him who, because he said he needed to get proof. I got us out of the tunnel, and Nigel ran. The tunnel I was in ended in Harvey’s closet. Nigel gave me a key he got from Jasmine.”

I held it up. “It looks like the one that we found on the boat.”

I put it back in my pocket. “But most importantly, Shirley’s still down there. We need to go get her.”

Coco stared at me for a split second, then held up two industrial-sized flashlights. “Ready.”

I grinned at her response. No questions. Just ready for action. “Seriously?”

She hit the lever on the fence with her knee. “I’ve been friends with Fiona and Shirley for a very long time. I know how these things can go.”

I pulled out a screwdriver. “I’ll trade for a flashlight.”

“A screwdriver?” She knocked it out of my hand. “It’ll just get used against you. Don’t you watch any crime shows?” She tossed a small aerosol can at me. “I have pepper spray, but don’t use it unless you have to. Shirley and I have both sprayed ourselves by mistake, and it’s awful.”

“But better than being murdered.” I tucked it in my back pocket.

“Infinitely.” She nodded at my headlamp. “Good choice.”

“Stole it from Harvey.” I leaned over the fence and saw the trap door was open and ready for us.

“I love stolen things,” she said as she climbed over the fence. “I’d ask to borrow the headlamp, but it would conflict with my tiara.”

“Can’t let that happen.” I hopped over the fence. “Where’s Nora?”

“Photo-documenting the milk carnage.”

“Good. That’s important.” I sat down on the edge of the opening and hung my legs over.

“That’s what I told her. Encouraging career women is always a good thing, and I do my best to partake whenever I can.”

“As we all should.” I paused. “The trap door will close when I land on the couch, so watch out.”

“Then let me climb down first.” Coco handed me her flashlight, then hustled down the ladder. She hopped off at the bottom, careful not to touch the couch. “Ready.”

“Coco?” Nora shouted for her, probably summoned by my aggressive honking.

I leapt before she could see me, landing on the couch. The trap doors shut above me, plunging us into a familiar pitch-black abyss.

This time, I clicked the handy button on the industrial-sized flashlight, and the root cellar lit up like a beautiful summer morning, much brighter than my headlamp, which I then turned off. I breathed out. “This is so much better than absolute darkness.”

Coco picked up her flashlight, but didn't turn it on, because there was no need with the portable solar flare I was holding. "You were in the dark when you were down here before?"

"Shirley ran off with the phone, and I lost her." We headed down the tunnel, moving fast.

"Why'd she run off without you?" Coco asked, keeping up surprisingly well.

"Because I suggested we go to the cops. She said Fiona was her best friend and took off without me."

Coco nodded. "Makes sense. How many times do we need to tell you not to involve the cops?"

"Well, I came here instead of the police station," I pointed out.

"Good girl." Coco grinned at me. "You finally learned. I knew there was hope for you."

"Maybe." I scanned the tunnel as we went, looking for signs of Shirley.

"Speaking of cops, Ethan stopped by," Coco said.

"And?"

"He didn't want to leave a message, but I wrangled it out of him."

I glanced over at her in alarm. "What message? Did my old firm find me?"

"Well, I don't know about that, but he found your truck."

The way she said it made me tense. "The safe wasn't in it anymore."

"The safe wasn't in it anymore," she agreed. "But your clothes were, so they're all back at the police station. Walmart, huh? That's your on-the-lam shopping destination?"

"My money's gone." I crouched down and pressed my forehead to my hands. "This isn't good."

Coco squatted next to me. "Listen, girl, don't let this shake you. It's some cash. Who cares? You have a lot more of it. So what if you can't get to it for a few days? I have tons of cash. I'm happy to share with you.

You’re not going to let stupid pride make you use a credit card, are you? When you have a good pal dripping with extra cash?”

“No. I’m not,” I said resolutely. I was not going to give up just because some asshole stole my money.

“Then that’s it. Move on. Pull yourself together, stop worrying about things that aren’t worth your effort, and get focused.” She put her hand on my arm. “We have a sassy old lady to find in a hurry.”

I stood up. “You know, it’s actually good to find out my money is gone. Now I don’t have to worry about it anymore.” Positive attitude for the win. Plus, I couldn’t think straight if I was freaking out, so I had to stay focused. “Gotta save Shirley.”

“Exactly.” Coco tucked her arm through mine. “We got this, Rainbow. We really do.”

I looked over at her. “We have to.”

“Yep. No option but success.”

I squeezed her hand. “Let’s do it, girl.”

“Amen, sistah.”

We fell silent and started moving again. “When I was in here before, I kept my right hand on the wall and ended up in a dead end. So there must be a place where the tunnel splits.”

“Got it.”

We fell silent as we walked. The tunnel was mostly empty, with a few old remnants of a life long gone occasionally passing us. An old wooden crate. A shovel. A tea pot. An old kettle. “You know,” I said. “Some of this stuff is pretty cool. I bet Mirabelle would love to look around down here for her historical society—”

I stopped. “Wait a sec.”

Coco stopped, too. “What?”

I picked up a brass plate with engravings on it. “This looks old, right?”

“Yes, so?”

“Isn’t this the perfect place for a vigilante to hide his stash?”

Her brows went up. “You think the vigilante stash is in these tunnels?”

“It explains why no one found it, and how he got around back then.”

“It certainly doesn’t explain why no one found it. The murderer, Gator, and Nigel are all using the tunnels. Who knows who else is? Just because we didn’t know about them doesn’t mean no one else did. If the stash was in these tunnels, it would have been found.”

I turned the plate over. “Unless it’s hidden behind trap doors or fake walls or something like that.”

“Again, if we figured out trap doors and fake walls, someone else would have as well.” She started walking again. “If it was in here, it’s been found.”

I set the plate on a shelf and followed Coco. “Maybe it’s been found. Maybe that’s why Fiona had the coin and the necklace. Maybe that’s what she was telling us.”

Coco kept walking, but I could see from her face that she was thinking about it. “If it has been found, then what?”

“Is it enough to kill over?”

She looked over at me. “With the right motivation, anything is enough to kill over.”

“Yep, I’ve heard that theory.” I started inspecting the tunnel more carefully, looking for any signs of fake walls, hidden cabinets, or newly cleaned areas. “The key Nigel gave me opened a padlock that was on the latch of a trapdoor. He said Jasmine gave it to him and told him that if she couldn’t do it, he had to take over.”

Coco glanced over at me. “Take over what?”

“He said if I didn’t know, he couldn’t tell me.” I was replaying the words in my head as I spoke. “He said Tony would know what to do with the key.”

“Tony?” Coco swore under her breath. “That man is holding out more and more. I hope he’s not involved with the Wilsons, but it sounds like he might be.”

“He definitely is.” I saw a trap door above us with a padlock on it. “Hold this.” I handed her the light, and then climbed the rungs embedded in the walls. I slid the key into the lock and it clicked open. I looked down at Coco. “Harvey made fifteen locks all keyed to the same key, with four copies of the key,” I said. “I’m thinking this key is the exact same as Shirley’s.”

Coco was shining the light on the underside of the trap door. “Maybe Jasmine got all the locks and keys so she could secure these tunnels.”

“Sounds like it.” I put the lock back on and climbed down. “She doesn’t want anyone except her family getting into the tunnels, assuming she gave the other keys to them.”

“Except the one in Armando’s backyard. That’s not locked from the inside.”

“It would explain how she’s been in town but no one saw her,” I said, shining the light all around as we continued to walk. “If there were four keys for the three Wilsons, who still has one? We have Jasmine’s key.”

“Gator obviously still has his,” Coco said.

“So the one Shirley has might be Duane’s. Or maybe Junior had the fourth key.” I said. “It’s a lot of trouble to lock so many entrances.”

“Something one might do to protect a copious collection of treasures,” Coco said. “You think the Wilsons found the stash and are taking it off the island, piece by piece? And killing to keep their secret safe?”

I shrugged. “It’s plausible. And Mirabelle said she knew a jeweler who could appraise them.”

“No.” Coco shook her head. “Mirabelle’s not involved. I don’t believe it.”

“I didn’t say she was, but she did say Gator came in recently. Maybe she gave him the name of that jeweler.”

Coco sighed. “We need to talk to that jeweler.”

“Maybe.” I paused, suddenly realizing we’d been walking for quite a while. I frowned. How far would Shirley have gone? “How far do you think these tunnels go?”

“They’d have to stay in the center of the island, since that’s higher. The edges are lower, closer to sea level,” she said. “But the middle part of the island is above sea level all the way to the north end.”

“So, along the road we drove this morning? Like out to the Wilson shack?”

“And the dairy,” Coco said. “Both are high ground.”

We continued walking. “Handy for a vigilante,” I said.

“Handy for a murderer,” she replied. “You have your pepper spray ready?”

“You bet.” I paused as my light illuminated a fork in the tunnel. “I must have gone right here.”

“So Shirley went left. Let’s go.” Coco led the way, moving faster now. “Did you yell for her?”

“Yep. No reply.”

“That little wench. What’s she thinking by running off alone? She definitely could have convinced you to go with her.”

“Maybe Fiona told her to run,” I said.

“Probably. She knew she had to get me into the tunnel.”

“Why did you have to get in the tunnel?”

“I don’t know yet.” Coco turned on her light and moved ahead of me. “But it’s probably dangerous. Fiona always liked danger.”

“Great.” I was walking faster now, urgency wrapping around me tighter and tighter. “Nigel was in the right-hand tunnel with me,” I said. “He said someone was chasing him. We could run into them at any moment.”

“Bring it on,” Coco said. “I’m ready.”

I wasn’t feeling so ready to come face-to-face with a murderer, but I wasn’t ready for Shirley to get killed either, so I sped up, periodically shining the light behind me to make sure we weren’t being followed, but the tunnel appeared to be empty.

Just us.

We kept walking, going deeper and deeper into the abyss.

As we made progress, the trap doors became less and less frequent, until they stopped entirely.

“I’m getting thirsty,” Coco said. “Did you bring water?”

“No.” The minute she said it, I realized I was thirsty as well.

“Well, that means Shirley’s thirsty too. We need to keep going.”

I felt like we’d been walking for too long. “Would Shirley have come this far? Or would she have gone out a trap door?”

“Or been stabbed, thrown into a miner’s cart, and rolled down this tunnel, unconscious and hanging onto the last shreds of life?”

I stopped. “Don’t say that.”

Coco kept walking. “I have to say it. I can’t stop thinking it, and it’s eating me alive. I can’t lose both my best friends, Rainbow. I can’t.” Her voice trembled slightly. “You said that Nigel claimed a killer was chasing him, and he came from the direction Shirley went. Is there any chance at all she didn’t run into him? I don’t think there is. I think she ran into him and something bad happened.”

A chill ran down my spine. “Then we need to find her. Right now.”

Coco spun toward me. “I know that! What do you think we’re doing?”

“I think we’re wandering without a plan.” I crouched down, giving my legs a break. “If this goes to the end of the island, we could walk for days in here.”

“Shirley’s worth it.”

“I know, but it doesn’t make sense to walk that far. I think she went out a trap door, either on her own or with someone else.”

“How do we know which one?”

I thought about it. “If people went out, there would be no one in the tunnel to put the padlock back on this side.”

“So we look for one without a padlock?” Coco asked.

“It’s our best shot.” I nodded. “Let’s go backwards.”

“I feel like we’re spinning our wheels,” Coco said as we began to retrace our steps. “Shirley could be dead by now.”

“She’s not.” We were moving fast, keeping our lights up on the ceiling.

The fourth trap door we passed had an open padlock hanging on one of the ladder rungs. “Bingo.”

We both stared up at it. “Now what?” Coco said.

“We go up there and interrupt whatever is happening.”

“You first.”

I took a breath. “Okay.” I didn’t give myself time to get scared. I just climbed those rungs, grabbed the latch, and paused. “Get out of sight around the corner,” I said. “If something happens to me, go back to Rippy Mama’s and get help.”

She nodded. “Got it.” She hurried down the tunnel and around a corner, taking her light with her.

I turned off my light and pulled out my pepper spray, aiming it at the trap door. “On three,” I whispered to myself. “One, two, three!” I turned the latch, then ducked back as the trap doors opened.

I waited, pepper spray aimed, but no one came over to see who had opened it.

Coco poked her head around. “Good?”

I signaled her to stay back, then I pulled myself up just high enough to see through the trap door. It was in a small cabin. We hadn’t gone far enough to be the Wilson hideaway, so I wasn’t sure where we were. It had

two twin beds, a mini kitchen, a wood stove, and not much else. No evil murderers, which was a lovely gift from the universe.

I swung myself up and into the cabin, pepper spray still ready. “Shirley?” I whispered.

No response.

I climbed the rest of the way out, and I heard Coco moving in the tunnel. I went to the window, moved the curtain slightly, then swore. Shirley was outside tied to an Adirondack chair, and there were a man and a woman I didn’t know standing near her, talking in low voices.

Coco leaned over my shoulder. “Holy hot fudge. That’s Jasmine and Duane.”

“That’s them?” Jasmine was fairly tall, wearing jeans and hiking boots. She didn’t look like a woman who was missing a toe. She looked like a woman who was in a fight with her brother, who towered over her.

Duane had to be close to six-five, maybe even taller. He was beefy, rough, and looked like he could snap Shirley in half with his elbow. He looked angry, and he was aggressively leaning in toward Jasmine, who had the same body language.

Everyone who had told me that the Wilsons were trouble felt very validated. They did look like trouble. Terrifying even. And they had Shirley.

Shirley saw us, and her eyes widened. She shook her head at us.

I pulled back and closed the curtain. “She wants us to leave her there?”

“No. She doesn’t. She’s not that heroic.” Coco tipped the curtain a tiny bit so she could see. “Can you hear what they’re saying?”

“They’re talking too quietly.”

“I think Duane wants to kill Shirley, and Jasmine is trying to talk him out of it.”

Oh, boy. “We can’t get close enough to use the pepper spray before he could get us,” I said, pacing restlessly. “He might have a weapon.”

“What do we do?”

I laced my fingers on top of my head, trying to calm myself enough to think. “This isn’t just about Shirley. It’s about finding out what’s going on. Like did they kill Junior? And Fiona?”

Coco was still watching them. “How do we do that? Run out there and ask?”

“Give me a sec.” I scanned the cabin, looking for any clue on how to handle this situation.

Why were they using the tunnels? Why? I walked back over to the trap door and turned the light on, shining it down. The rungs were free of dust, and the ground beneath was clear. They’d been up and down a lot.

Retrieving items from the vigilante stash? That had to be it.

“What did Fiona find out?” I whispered. “Why did she need to die?”

“Money?” Coco asked.

I went down on my stomach so I could see down the tunnel. I shined my light along the way we’d come, searching the walls for something. Anything that would tell me what I needed to know. “There have to be more passageways down there,” I said. “Secret rooms. It fits. Like the one that Nigel and I were sealed in.”

“They’re still arguing,” Coco said. “They haven’t looked over here.”

“Fiona,” I whispered. “Tell me something—”

A hand went around the rung right below me, and before I had time to move, Gator hauled himself up the ladder, grabbed me around the neck, and dragged me headfirst down into the tunnel.

He threw me on the ground, shut the trap door, and then locked it.

Leaving me in the tunnel with a possible murderer.

Leaving Shirley and Coco alone with two others.

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CHAPTER 34

MY FLASHLIGHT WAS on the floor beside me, shining up at the ceiling as Gator vaulted down.

I tried to scramble to my feet, but he lunged for me and pinned me face down in the dirt. “Shut up,” he whispered. “If you yell, I’ll kill you right now.”

Oh, God. I bit my lip against the flood of panic. “Why would I yell?” I shot back. “I doubt your siblings are going to save me, and they’re the only ones who would hear me.”

“Who the hell are you?” His knee was digging in between my shoulder blades, and he had my hands locked behind my back.

“You know who I am! I bought Rippy Mama’s—”

“You worked for the mob. You sent Junior to jail in Boston. And now you’re here to finish it.”

I blinked. “What? I didn’t even know Junior in Boston.”

“You did. You followed him here, killed him, and now you’re after the treasure. It’s always been you.”

Ah! So it *was* about the vigilante treasure. Excitement rushed through me, but I tried to focus on the immediate threat. “I didn’t know my firm worked for the mob until two days ago. As soon as I did, I quit and moved

here to sell ice cream. I didn't know Junior, and I don't care about the mob. I just want to sell ice cream."

He tossed a piece of paper in front of my face. "Liar."

"I can't see that. It's on my face." Men. So incompetent sometimes.

He swore and released one hand to hold the paper up. It was a picture from a firm event. In the photo, I had my arm around Junior, who was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. I was wearing a red dress that I recognized from the holiday party this year.

Junior had not been at that party. I blinked. "I'd never seen him before yesterday."

"That's not what the photo says."

"No," I agreed, "it's not." What in the actual heck was happening? "Where did you get that photo?"

"Found it."

"Where?"

"The front seat of my truck." He leaned over me, so his mouth was next to my ear. "You have two choices. Confess to Junior's murder so the world sees your truth as you get carted off to prison, or I will kill you right now and you can rot away in silence, with no one ever knowing what happened to you." His fingers tightened on my wrists. "Choose the second one. I loved Junior like my brother. You don't deserve to live."

Wow. Just…wow. This was fully getting out of control. On the plus side, if he believed I killed Junior, then he hadn't done it. Which might mean he wasn't a murderer, so yay for that hope. "Are you Mouse?"

He went still. "What?"

I could feel the sudden tension in his body. He knew who Mouse was! "Are you Mouse?" I asked again, speaking slowly and clearly.

"How the hell do you know that name?"

"Fiona was working with someone named Mouse right before she died. They were supposed to meet, but she died a few hours before. We think she

was killed because of whatever she was working on with Mouse." I blurted it out as fast as I could, hoping to connect with him before he snapped my neck.

Gator didn't move for a long moment. "Prove it."

"I have the note in my jacket pocket. Can I get it?"

"No. Which pocket?"

"Left jacket."

He shoved my face into the dirt and jabbed my side as he unzipped the pocket. The necklace and ring were in there, too, and I heard the clank as the jewelry hit the ground.

He swore. "Where'd you get this stuff?"

I spit out dirt and turned my face, trying to get enough air to talk. "It was with the note."

I heard the rustle as he unfolded the note, and then silence.

My face was hurting from being pressed against the stone floor. It felt like a pebble was grinding a hole in my cheekbone.

He swore, then suddenly, his weight was off me. He sat down against the wall, staring at the note.

I sat up immediately, flexing my jaw. "Who is Mouse?"

The note was in his hand, and he was staring at it. "Who wrote the note?"

"Fiona. It's her handwriting. Gator, who is Mouse?"

He finally looked up at me. "Junior. Junior was Mouse. I was the only one who called him that. I'm the only one who would know."

Oh…got it. Well, that made so much sense. "So they were working together, then. He told her to use Mouse as his code name." I paused. "I wonder if he did that so you would know it was him." That would be just like Fiona to leave a paper trail that Gator could follow as well.

Son of a biscuit. Had she intended for Gator to help us? That woman was so complex, even in death. I was so impressed by her.

He picked up the necklace and held it in front of the spotlight, then swore. “I remember this one. It’s one of ours.”

“Yours?”

He studied the jewelry. “How did you find these?”

My gut told me to tell him the truth, so I did. After all, I was now quite sure that Fiona intended for Gator to help us. I told him every detail, including the posthumous note Fiona sent to Coco and what we’d discovered on the *Buttered Rum* and at Harvey’s.

When I finished, silence fell.

Gator was clasping his hands on top of his head, staring at the ceiling.

He knew what I was talking about. I could read his face so easily.

“That was Jasmine’s toe, wasn’t it?”

He looked at me sharply, but said nothing.

Dammit. I was so close to having answers. I thought of how he’d been wailing. Whatever was going on, he cared. Deeply. “Gator,” I said softly. “Junior was never at my office party. I’ve never met him before yesterday. I don’t know what that photo is, but it’s a lie.”

He finally looked at me. “Junior said that he was working on something. I didn’t believe him.”

Yes. Finally. We were making progress. Teamwork for the win. “What did he say he was working on?”

Gator shook his head. “He wouldn’t tell me.”

“What do you suspect?”

He didn’t answer, and I saw his face shut down.

I knew that expression. He didn’t trust me. How could I make him trust me? I had to meet him where he was. I had to make him believe I understood. “I think,” I said softly, “that the firm I was working for murdered my mom when I was eighteen.”

He looked up sharply, watching me. He didn’t say anything, but he was listening.

“Two days ago, the FBI cornered me. They told me that my firm worked for the mob, and they wanted me to be their spy. If I refused, they’d put me in prison with the rest of the firm. If I did, then it was just a matter of time until the firm figured it out and killed me.”

Gator’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

“So I faked a breakdown and ran. Bought Fiona’s store. I’m pretending to be bat-shit crazy so that no one thinks I’m worth their time. If they do decide I’m a threat, then they’ll kill me. Either right away, or after they drag me back to my life. They’re hunting me. Right now.”

He let out a low whistle. “Straight up?”

“Yep.”

“Sucks for you.”

Dammit. He still wasn’t connecting with me. I had to turn this around, because Shirley and Coco were up there with Duane and Jasmine. “I ran because I can’t be on the side of people who killed my mom. No one who kills innocent people,” I said. “Not the firm, and not some asshole who murdered a good man in my own driveway.”

His gaze went to me then. “You’re some angel to fly in and solve other people’s problems?”

“No. I’m the only kid of a single mom who doesn’t want her line to die just yet. I’m the suspect for Junior’s murder, and if I get arrested, my life is over, and I don’t want it to be over.”

He heard that.

I saw it in his eyes that he understood about not wanting to go to prison.

Oh, boy. What was in his past? Maybe he was both the troublemaker that the world thought, and a man who cried over his sister’s toe and his bestie’s murder.

“Gator,” I said. “I don’t care what you’ve done before this. If we can figure out who killed Junior and Fiona, then that’s all I care about.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why do you care about Fiona?”

I paused. “Because I inherited her life, and I want to honor that. Honor her. She was a freaking amazing woman, and we both know it.” And I loved the two women stranded above me.

We sat there in silence for a moment that seemed to stretch forever. What was happening with Shirley and Coco right now? Were they okay? I cleared my throat. “Are Jasmine and Duane going to hurt Shirley and Coco? They have Shirley tied up.”

He grimaced. “They might have to.”

“Have to? Why would they have to?”

A long silence fell, and I could see him struggling with whether to tell me.

I waited, forcing myself to sit there, like people I loved weren’t in danger right at that second. “Look,” I said, “Fiona chose to leave us that note, the one for Mouse. You’re the only person in the world who would know Junior was Mouse. That tells me that she intended all along for us to work together.”

He said nothing, but he shifted restlessly.

His struggle was so visceral I could feel it crawling along my skin. “Do you trust Fiona?” I finally asked. She was the linchpin in this town.

He swore under his breath. “Yeah.”

Relief. Thank heavens. “Then?”

Finally, he looked at me, his jaw jutted out, his face in a snarl. “Will you help me?” he growled the request, like he was ready to launch himself at me and strangle me for daring to exist.

Whoa. I had not been expecting him to ask me to help him. “Help you with what?”

“Answer it first.”

I was an attorney. I knew perfectly well not to agree to something without knowing what it was. But there was too much at stake, and Gator

seemed to be the only chance we had at answers. So, I nodded. “Yes, I’ll help.”

“And swear to never tell anyone. Not anyone. Not ever. Or I will kill you.”

I swallowed. Yay for that fun threat. “I promise.”

He searched my face. “You swear on your mother’s soul?”

Oh, boy. “I can’t even tell Coco and Shirley? I might need their help.”

“No one. Not a single person.”

Wow. That was a lofty demand from a man who was desperate.

I was also desperate, but I was a woman who had learned that boundaries mattered. So I met his gaze. “If I deem it necessary to include Coco and Shirley, I will tell them,” I said evenly. “I trusted them with my secret, and I’d trust them with yours. I won’t do anything that’s going to put me in prison or hurt anyone I care about. But I’m very, very good at solving problems, and I can probably solve yours. I’ll help you as long as you help me with Junior and Fiona’s deaths.” I stuck out my hand. “Deal?”

“It’s about Junior and Fiona’s deaths,” he said.

“Then yay for us being on the same page. Win-win for everyone.” I wiggled my fingers for our handshake. “Deal?”

“You swear on your mother’s soul?” he asked again.

I nodded. “Yes. Do you swear on Junior’s soul to help me and not kill me or anyone I care about?” Why not raise the stakes right back? I felt that was fair.

Gator, the man I’d been warned about repeatedly since I’d walked into this town, narrowed his eyes at me. Was I really going to make a deal with him?

“Yes, I swear on Junior’s soul.” He reached out and shook my hand. “Deal.”

Yes, yes, I was.

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CHAPTER 35

THE MOMENT I made a deal with the Blueberry Island devil, I got to business. “First, we need to go up there and stop your siblings from hurting Coco and Shirley.”

He shook his head. “No.” He met my gaze. “Like I said, it’s just you and me.”

Oh, boy. How much time did they have? “I’ll give you three minutes until I go save them.” Urgency pulsed at me. “Tell me what I need to know.”

“You heard of the Blueberry Island Vigilante?”

I nodded, proud that I was now an insider on local lore. “Yes.”

“It was my great-grandmother. With a lot of ‘greats.’ I think six.”

I blinked, fully not expecting that. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He narrowed his eyes. “You tell no one, right? Or I kill you. Or send you back to your firm.”

“Yes, agreed.” But hell, who wouldn’t be so proud to be descended from a badass woman like that? “Continue.”

“Her name was Daniella. She was the original. Several of her daughters picked up her mission. It went on for a few generations.”

I loved this story so much. “Did your family make the coin?”

He nodded. “We still have the coin press.”

What. The. Actual. Hell. I felt like I was in the presence of the heir of royalty. *Women* were the Blueberry Island Vigilante? “What happened?”

“One of them got caught. Some rich bastard tried to coerce her into working for him. He threatened her daughter, and everyone else she cared about. It got ugly. People died. Once it was over and everyone who knew about our family’s legacy was dead, my family ended it. No more sacrificing for the greater good. It’s over.”

Wow. Just wow. “I hear you.”

“But my family had all the items that the vigilantes had taken over the years. The family mission became to safeguard our secret. Protect the treasure. Hide the deaths. Secrets hidden forever. Let the blood money die.”

I leaned forward, riveted by his story. “And your family has been protecting it ever since?”

He nodded. “No one dies over the treasure again. That’s the mission.”

“But—”

He looked at me. “A while ago, we found one of the stashes had been compromised. Someone was taking stuff out of it. We tried to shut it down. Move that location. Install locks in the tunnels. Activate illusions. Make it impossible. It worked for a while.”

“And then?”

“Someone kept looking. We could see signs that they were hunting, and they were close. We set up a trap to find out who it was…” He paused. “Somehow, we screwed up. About four months ago, he figured out who we were. He started sending us untraceable instructions to ship pieces out.”

“You said no, right?” I didn’t have to ask.

“Yeah, but...” He paused. “He knew something about our past. Something we did a long time ago.”

I felt his anguish. “He blackmailed you guys.”

He nodded. “It was me, really, who did it. Duane and Jasmine were there, but they didn’t do it. But they wouldn’t let me hang for it. So they

said yes. Agreed to do it."

"Oh, boy."

Grief was heavy in his eyes. "We soon realized it wouldn't end until the treasure was wiped out, so I convinced Jasmine and Duane to help me stop him. We decided to give him fakes until we figured out who it was." He paused. "But he realized they were fakes a few weeks ago, and now it's too late to get out."

"Jasmine's toe?"

"Yeah. It was too late when I got it back. I knew that, but I had to try."

"Didn't Jasmine see who cut off her toe?"

"She stepped in a bear trap in her bathroom. She was lucky it was only a toe."

Oh my. "But how'd she lose it? Why was it in a bottle?"

He shook his head. "Someone was there. Waiting to see what happened, I guess. The minute she stepped into the trap, someone burst in, threw a blanket over her head, and took off with the toe. He's been sending me all over the place for the last five days trying to get it back. It's me he wants. It's me who controls them, and he knows it. And I'm failing. I'm absolutely failing, and he killed Junior to make me pay for it."

Someone had thrown something over my head at Harvey's. A chill ran down my spine at how close I'd been to a person who set bear traps in women's bathrooms.

I also wasn't sure Junior had been killed to make Gator suffer. I suspected that Junior may have been killed because he got too close to the truth.

"When it first started three months ago, I told a friend I trusted. Not for help. But so that he would know. Someone needed to know." Gator paused. "He must have told Fiona. Maybe Junior helped them. I think they're both dead because of me."

Wow. This was a lot. And it was the same thing that Jasmine had said to Nigel. Someone needed to know. “And now?”

“He said we have until the weekend to clear out the rest of it.” He looked at me. “It’s our family’s legacy. It’s our mission to protect it. And if we don’t betray our legacy, he’ll kill Jasmine and Duane, and I’ll go to prison.” He held up the ring and necklace. “This is one of our fakes.”

Wow. “That’s fake?” Mirabelle had thought it was real. Whoever was involved was better at identifying jewelry than Mirabelle at least.

“Yeah. It’s a good one. But somehow, he figured it out. Or she. Or whoever.”

I swore under my breath. “Do you have any idea who it is?”

“No. We’ve tried to trap him. Everything we set up fails. He’s always one step ahead.” He looked at me. “When I got that paper with your photo on it, I thought it was you. I thought someone was helping me realize it was you. But it was him, wasn’t it?”

I let out a long breath. “I think that maybe I’m a convenient scapegoat,” I said. “With that picture, I suspect he’s setting me up for Junior’s death. And it’s working.” I paused, wondering what other things were being put in place to make sure I got convicted for Junior’s death. “Why do Jasmine and Duane have to hurt Coco and Shirley?” Yes, I felt for the Wilson siblings, but my friends were in the more immediate danger.

“Better them than our legacy. Whatever buys us time.”

Wow. “You guys are like ancient protectors of religious relics.”

He looked at me. “We have until tomorrow night to deliver all the treasure. All of it.”

“It’s a lot?”

“Yeah.”

“Like how much?”

He shrugged. “We’ve never had it appraised, but somewhere in the low millions.”

Holy moly. These “troublesome” Wilsons had been sitting on millions of dollars for generations and never done anything with it but protect it? Town judgment was rough. No wonder Tony was still loyal to them.

“Are you going to deliver it?” I asked.

“No.” He sighed. “But if we don’t, and he kills us, then there’s no one to stop him from going back in the tunnels and searching. He’ll find it eventually.”

I paused. “Nigel gave me Jasmine’s key. He said to give it to Tony, and he’d have to take over. Are you going to put him in charge of the tunnels?”

Surprise flickered across his face. “She’s giving her key to Tony?” He stood up. “Screw that. No one else I care about dies. We’re not bringing Tony into this. Why the hell did she tell Nigel and Tony? It just endangers them!”

His outrage was palpable. This man who was so upset about endangering good people was the evil monster that everyone hated?

“The legacy has to be protected. It’s my *purpose*.” He flexed his hand. “We’re going to find this bastard, and I’ll kill him. I’ll end this threat and take the heat.”

I scrambled to my feet. “No, you don’t need to kill anyone. We’ll figure out another solution.”

“I don’t care. I’ll wind up in prison sometime anyway. I’ll find him, and I’ll kill him, before tomorrow night. And you’re going to help me.” He reached into his pocket, and for a second, I thought he was going to pull out a gun.

It was an inhaler. A freaking asthma inhaler.

He took two puffs, then saw me staring at him. “What?”

I cleared my throat. “You’re just very normal and terrifying at the same time. I’m having an existential crisis trying to decide how to react to almost every word you say.”

To my surprise, the corner of his mouth twitched in a smile. “Be terrified.”

“I can’t. I agreed to help you. I can’t problem-solve from a place of terror.”

He put the inhaler away. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Fine.” He smiled at me, a massive smile that, although it didn’t reach his eyes, softened his face and made him look like a giant teddy bear. “I’m adorable and sweet, and I save baby cows on my off days.” He blinked innocently, and I almost started laughing.

His smile softened and became almost real. “Everyone is terrified of me. You’re strange.”

I shrugged. “Good. Keep telling everyone that I’m strange. That will help me live an extra day. Maybe two.”

This time, his smile was real. “We’re a couple of freaking weirdos then?”

“Works for me.”

We had a little moment that felt surreal, creepy, and liberating, all at once, then his smile faded. “So, what now?” he asked. “How the hell do we find this guy and shut him down?”

“I have an idea.” I didn’t actually. I was lying. “But we need Shirley, Coco, and your siblings to pull it off.”

He scowled. “I told you. It’s just me.”

“No. It’s you *and* me. And we need their help.”

He glared at me. “My sister lost her toe because I didn’t handle it.”

“Your sister seems very capable. And so does Duane.”

He grimaced. “It’s my job—”

“To protect your family’s legacy. They’re part of your family.” I waited to see if he’d tell me that Duane wasn’t really family.

But he didn’t. He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Do you think either of them killed Junior or Fiona?”

His gaze snapped to me. “No.”

There was no hesitation.

“Is either of them working with this guy?”

He paused a split second before answering. “No.”

Uh, oh. “But you’re not sure.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “I just…I don’t know how he found the stash without help. I don’t know how he would have figured out who we were, without help. I don’t see a way.”

Ah…so that was the real reason he didn’t want to include them. “Who else knew besides you guys? Nigel? Tony? Junior?”

He rubbed his jaw. “No. None of them. Just my friend that I told, but I told him after it was already happening. We’re the only ones.”

“What about the fourth key? Who got that?”

“Four? There are three.” He narrowed his eyes. “And how did you know about the keys?”

“Harvey. Did Harvey know?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. We got the keys. We didn’t spill our family secrets to him. We’re not fools, you know.”

I cleared my throat. “Jasmine got four keys.”

“She got three.”

“She got four. I saw the paperwork. She gave one to someone else.”

Gator stared at me, then swore. “Junior,” he said softly. “She must have given Junior a key.”

“Which means he knew about the vigilante?”

“No. She wasn’t allowed to tell.”

“He’s her husband. Maybe she would have told him?”

“Well, maybe.” He ran his hand over his head.

“Do you trust Junior?”

“Hell, yeah.” He didn’t hesitate. “He’d hold every secret for us.”

I nodded. Junior had been a man who spent his nights sleeping beside his cows if they needed him. He did indeed sound like a man who would hold the secrets of the woman he loved. “Did you know there’s an entrance in Harvey’s house?”

He nodded. “We checked them all. We wanted to know where they all came up. Some are in people’s houses. Others are in yards. We locked them all, except the one in my cabin here, and the one in Armando’s yard.”

“Because you had control over the one in your cabin, and the one in Armando’s yard is almost impossible to open from the outside.”

He nodded. “We figured no one would randomly go through the series of triggers by accident. And they haven’t.”

“Or they have, if someone’s been in your tunnels. I figured it out, for example.”

He narrowed his eyes, thinking about that.

I leaned back against the wall, cogitating. “Nigel clearly knows something. And he said Tony knows. Would Jasmine have told them? Would Duane have told anyone?”

“No—”

“Did you ask them?”

He looked at me. “Yes. Of course.”

“Did you ask them when you were angry, pissed off, and terrifying?”

He inclined his chin slightly. “Maybe.”

“So they might have lied to you to keep you from unleashing the Gator wrath upon them?”

He stared at me, clearly processing my question. “I’d never hurt them. Ever.”

“Are they afraid of you?”

He sighed. “Maybe. I guess. I don’t know.”

Right. Too late to undo that lifetime trauma. “Then we use that to our advantage.”

His brows went up. “How?”

How indeed. I still didn’t have an idea. “Open the trap door. Let’s go have a little chat.”

He didn’t move. “I don’t want to endanger them.”

God, the man was such a protector with a massive heart. Who knew? I almost liked the big guy by now. “How about saving them and their legacy? Would that work for you?”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Yeah,” he said. “It would.”

Hero complex at work again. For him. And maybe for me. “Then let’s surface this submarine full of love and get the gang together.”

He studied me. “Are you the real deal? Or are you going to sink this ship for all of us?”

I smiled. “Gator, out of all the attorneys that have been at my firm for the last seven years, the FBI picked me. Only me.” I leaned in. “Because I can be the monster when I want to be.”

The words stuck in my throat when I said them, because I knew they were true. Making partner at a firm like mine didn’t happen for women who were nice. Who were kind. I’d had to become my own version of a strategically placed nuclear weapon to get where I’d wanted to go, and I suddenly remembered a lot of those moments.

I used to look in the mirror every night and be proud of them.

Right now, those memories made me want to throw up.

Maybe that’s why I’d come to Blueberry Island.

To be the one who saved good people instead of partying with the devil and his minions. Or, since I was teaming up with the Wilsons to save Coco and Shirley, maybe it was a little bit of both.

Like my mom. She’d been a little bit of both. Unconditional, beautiful love for her daughter. And a monster working with demons until they’d killed her?

Gator nodded. “All right then.” He reached up, slid his key into the padlock, and opened it. “Let’s do this.”

I took a breath, trying to pull myself back to the present. “After you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How do I know you won’t bolt?”

“Because people I love are up there.”

Understanding flickered across his face. “Me, too.”

Then he pulled the latch.

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CHAPTER 36

GATOR MADE it about six inches up the ladder, and then there was a loud crack. He plummeted down the ladder and landed on the floor of the tunnel, not moving.

Coco leaned over, grinning at me from above. “You’re welcome.”

“Well, that was super impressive, but he’s on our side, now.” I crouched down and patted his cheek. “Gator?”

There was commotion from above, and then Coco yelped and disappeared from sight. I jumped back and plastered myself against the wall of the tunnel as Duane leaned down. “Gator!”

Yikes.

“You little wench!” he bellowed at Coco. “You hurt my brother!”

He started to climb down, but then Coco shrieked like a banshee, and I heard something heavy thud in the shack.

“Duane!” Jasmine shouted. “Get up here! She’s getting away!”

Coco had managed to evade Jasmine and Duane? I was so impressed.

“She’s an old lady!” Duane yelled as he kept coming down the ladder. He was right in front of me. All he had to do was turn around, and he’d see me. He was even bigger at close range. “Go get her!”

“She got your gun, you dumbass!”

Duane’s hand went to his hip, then he swore. He grabbed the top rung and hauled himself back up the ladder. I heard feet thudding in the shack, and I jumped down. “Gator!” I smacked him in the cheek. “Wake up or your siblings are going to prison for murder!”

He suddenly sucked in breath, his eyes snapped open, and he grabbed my wrist. “You little—“

“Gator! It’s me! Get focused!”

His eyes settled on my face, and recognition softened his gaze. He swore, and he leaned back onto the floor. “What happened? My head hurts like hell.”

I decided to skip the assault. “You fell off the ladder, and your siblings thought Coco did it. She stole their gun, and they’re trying to stop her.”

“Jasmine! Duane!” He hauled himself to his feet, staggered slightly, and then dragged himself up the rungs.

I was right on his tail, barely avoiding getting kicked in the face as he went up.

He burst through the opening and took off running.

He was already out of the cabin by the time I got up, but the door was still open.

Coco was standing behind Shirley, aiming her gun at Jasmine and Duane, who were circling her, shouting at her to put the gun down.

Gator was charging across the grass, ordering his siblings not to hurt her, and Coco was yelling back that she was going to shoot them all.

Meanwhile, Shirley was sitting in the chair, laughing, and yelling that they were all idiots.

Good heavens. It was like a chaos emporium. I ran out of the shed, but no one noticed me. Gator tried to charge Coco, but she whipped around and shot the ground in front of him.

Whoa.

He stopped. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he bellowed.

Um, hello? It was more like, what the hell was right with her? The woman could shoot! I was even more impressed by her.

His siblings erupted in outrage, flanking Coco as they started to close in on her.

Shirley saw me, and her brows went up. Still laughing, she nodded at Coco and the others, clearly challenging me to shut it all down before it ended in one-hundred-percent bloodshed.

No one in this yard was sane, rational, and predictable.

Literally no one.

How did I stop this? “I killed Junior!” I screamed. “I did it! I killed him!”

Everyone stopped shouting and spun to face me, stunned into split-second silence.

“Just kidding.” I spoke as fast as I could before anyone could remember how to talk. “Gator and I are working together to trap the bastard hunting the treasure and you guys. All of us are a team. Hug, and let’s get busy.”

Gator was clearly quicker on the uptake than I expected, because he jumped on my train instantly. “Yeah,” he said, “We’re working together. All of us. Stand down, and let’s get the bastard now.”

“Yes!” I ran over to Gator and stood shoulder to shoulder. Solidarity for the win. “Teamwork makes the dream work.”

Everyone stared at us for a long second, clearly trying to process this unlikely duo of rainbows and demons.

It was, not surprisingly, Shirley who responded first. “That’s great news. I’m in.” She tossed aside the rope that had ostensibly been holding her in the chair and hopped to her feet. I wondered how long she’d actually been free. Had the ropes held her for even a minute? Had she ever been in danger? I was beginning to doubt it. “What’s the plan, Rainbow?”

Of course she had to start with that question. I didn’t have a plan yet. I gave her a look, and she shrugged and blew me a kiss.

Coco was still holding Jasmine and Duane at gunpoint. “I think I’ll stay status quo for a few minutes,” she said. “Just ‘til the rabid wolverines chill out.”

Jasmine put her hands on her hips. “We’re not working with these old ladies,” she snapped. “They’re the ones stealing from us.”

“Yeah,” Duane said.

What was up with this intel that was getting fed to them? That Coco and Shirley were the blackmailing thieves? “First of all,” I said, “I don’t recommend calling Shirley and Coco old ladies. I suggest you apologize before Coco gets mad.”

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. “Who’re you?”

“The badass bitch you’ve been needing on your side.” Did I sound tough? Attorney-tough was one thing. Local, she-demon tough was different.

Jasmine took in my leggings, Fiona’s denim jacket, and my purple hair. “What’d you say to Gator to make him believe you’re not stealing from us?”

Coco nodded at the Wilsons. “See why I’m not putting the gun away yet?”

Honestly, I hadn’t thought ahead to how difficult it would be to get Jasmine and Duane on board. I’d thought Gator was the clear alpha dog in this trio.

Shirley grinned at me, far more amused than worried. Confidence in me? Or herself? Or maybe she didn’t think Jasmine and Duane were as much trouble as they wanted to be.

It was Gator who spoke up. “Junior and Fiona were helping me,” he said, fully lying to them. He didn’t know that was true. We only suspected it. “They both got killed for it. Fiona left these women information on what she was working on.”

Wow. Um. Again with raising the stakes on something I couldn't deliver?

Jasmine and Duane looked at me. "What information?"

Ummm… I shook out my shoulders and strode into the middle of the circle, as if I was in full control. "The first thing we need to do is find out who it is," I said.

"Well, obviously," Duane said, not overly impressed.

"We set a trap." I was stalling, frantically trying to think of what that trap was.

Jasmine folded her arms. "We've set traps. He's too smart."

"No. He's not too smart. He's just been smarter so far." I paced across the field, falling into thought. Coco had to avert the gun as I walked between her and Duane, but I didn't care. I could feel my brain coming online. "This person. Let's call him Pirate Sam, a nice gender-neutral name, since we don't know if it's a man or a woman."

"Pirate Sam?" Jasmine looked confused, but Shirley was nodding.

"Love it. Pirate Sam."

As she spoke, I realized that Coco and Shirley didn't know the details of what we were dealing with. They hadn't been privy to my conversation with Gator. The realization made me appreciate their complete willingness to go along with me, fully trusting me.

My throat tightened. I wasn't going to let these women down.

I turned to the group. "What does Pirate Sam want?"

"The stash," Gator said. "I told you that."

"Right. The stash. So they want money."

Duane was watching me, but he wasn't saying anything. He felt like a viper, just waiting for the moment to strike me down.

I turned toward them. "What does he want more than money?"

Everyone shrugged and waited.

"To win. To be more clever than all of you."

Shirley and Coco nodded, but the Wilsons looked confused.

I'd been around so many narcissists and criminals in my shining years as an attorney. I knew how to spot them. I knew how they thought. And I knew how to play their game. "If Pirate Sam just wanted the money, he would have marched into your house, held you at gunpoint, made you show him where the stashes are, then killed you all. Simple. Clean. Easy."

Jasmine blinked, and Duane frowned.

"But he's not. He's putting you through this clever little game where he stays anonymous, and you guys get all twisted up. Right? It's much more complicated, but at the end of the day, he walks away with the money, his identity a secret, a few bodies strewn anonymously behind, and the victory."

Again silence, but Coco and Shirley both nodded.

I looked at Jasmine. "Pirate Sam wants to win," I translated loosely, "And you to lose."

"Asshole."

I grinned. "Yes." I was warming up now. "It's a game to him," I said. "He thinks he's too smart for you guys."

Jasmine's eyes narrowed, and Duane's frown deepened. Gator was watching me with curiosity. I grinned. "So we invite him to a better party than the one he's currently playing in. His ego won't let him decline the invitation."

Shirley grinned. "You have a plan. I can see it in your eyes."

I smiled back. "I do." Yes, I did. Or at least, the beginnings of one.

Coco lowered her gun. "There's nothing I like more than outsmarting a narcissistic murderer. This sounds fun."

"Do we get to kill him?" Duane asked.

I met his gaze. "Do you want to go to prison?"

"Not everyone who kills people goes to prison. If no one knows, no one goes."

The minute he said it, Jasmine’s gaze shot to Gator, and he looked away, not meeting her gaze.

I froze for a split second. Had Gator killed someone? Was that why he’d responded to me saying I didn’t want to go to prison? Was he a murderer?

Was that what Pirate Sam was using to blackmail Gator and the others?

Holy moly. Was I teaming up with a trio who had covered up a murder?

“Rainbow?” Shirley frowned at me. “You with us?”

My heart was racing now, but I had to keep going forward. Right now, this was about redemption for Fiona and whatever she’d been working on. And clearing my name. Whatever secret the Wilsons were hiding was not my problem. I had to let it go.

I lifted my chin and shook out my hands. “Yep. I’m here. This is the plan.”

And I told them.

Or, at least I told them what I trusted them with.

Because secrets between frenemies always worked out well, right?

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CHAPTER 37

ALL THREE WILSONS escorted us back to my shop.

None of them trusted us to go alone, and Jasmine and Duane got in plenty of threats on the ride back. Plus, we needed a ride, so yay for carpooling with the Wilsons.

Gator was broody silence as he drove.

He pulled into the end of my driveway, but didn't shut off his truck.

Shirley and Coco climbed out of the truck bed where they'd been riding with Duane and Jasmine. I was in the passenger seat beside Gator. "You know what to do?"

He nodded. "Yep."

The weight on his shoulders was almost palpable. Jasmine and Duane were cagey and dangerous, but Gator…there was a deeper level to Gator. I connected with him, even though the idea of connecting with a man with his secrets was alarming.

"We'll stay in touch," I said.

"Yep." He flexed his hands over the steering wheel. "Just so you know," he said, "I might have to kill Pirate Sam for killing Junior."

A chill ran down my spine. "Would Junior want you to spend the rest of your life in prison?"

“If no one knows, no one goes.” He didn’t look over at me, but I felt the threat in his words.

Oh, Lordy. I did not want to go through the rest of my life hiding a murder. My heart wouldn’t be able to take it. “It’s always in your soul,” I pointed out. “Do you want to live like that?”

He shrugged. “I can handle it.”

The way he said it made me certain he’d done it before. And by “it,” I meant killed.

Oh. Wow.

I put my hand on his fingers that were wrapped so tightly around that steering wheel. “Maybe you can handle it,” I said softly, “but you deserve better. You’re a good person, Gator, and you don’t need to punish yourself for whatever else you’ve done. Don’t add to the weight.”

He looked over at me. “You sound like Bernie. He’s wrong.”

“Well, I’m never wrong, so listen to me.” I squeezed his hand, then got out of the truck before he could respond.

I’d seen plenty of bad people in my life. Sociopaths. Narcissists.

Gator wasn’t one of them. I mean, yeah, he wasn’t a cute little kitty cat, but a demon?

No.

At least I didn’t think so.

But I’d lied to him that I was never wrong. I was often wrong.

I just hoped that this wasn’t one of those times.

“Let’s go, Rainbow,” Shirley said. “Clock’s ticking.”

I watched Gator drive away. His siblings were in the back, watching us moodily until we got out of sight. “They’re such a cheerful bunch. We should have them over for Christmas dinner. I think that would be fun.”

Shirley snorted. “Yeah, that would be a trip.”

We headed up the driveway. Nora’s Jeep was parked where my truck had been when Junior had been murdered.

As we reached the back door, she came out on the steps. “I got everything you requested.”

I grinned. “Awesome.”

Nora didn’t move from the doorway. “You’re sure about this?”

“Nope.” I answered for all of us.

“Rainbow’s a liar,” Shirley said. “She knows what she’s doing.”

“Yes, she does,” Coco agreed. “She’s on fire. I’m honored to know her.”

I started laughing as we jogged up the steps. “We don’t know if this plan will work.”

Shirley looked over at me. “It’ll work.”



Ten minutes later, I was dressed in the most extreme rainbow and ice cream garb that the heavens had ever seen. I’d topped off the outfit with a pair of ice cream sunglasses that Shirley owned, a hat shaped like an upside-down waffle cone, and a scarf decorated with rainbow sprinkles, which I’d used to obscure my jawline.

“Am I unrecognizable?” I flared my arms dramatically.

The three of them were standing with folded arms, studying me.

“I mean, I know who you are,” Shirley said, “but facial recognition might not.”

“Facial recognition?” Nora was grouchy because we hadn’t fully apprised her of what we were doing. We’d only told her that we wanted to get together so she could do a photoshoot of me. “What are you talking about?”

I’d been thinking since we arrived. Thinking about Nora. And I made a decision.

Maybe a stupid one. Maybe brilliant.

Didn’t matter. Decision was made. So, I leaned on the ice cream vat in front of me. “Nora. I ran away from the mob and the FBI to come here. That reward was from my old firm, which probably means the mob is hunting me. I could be killed any minute. Or dragged back to the firm. Or other possibilities that are even grislier.”

Nora’s jaw dropped open. “Hell, yeah!” She fist-pumped the air. “I knew there was something radical going on with you.” She paused. “But I mean, obviously, a bummer for you in all the ways, but I’m not going to lie, I’m very impressed with my instincts.”

I grinned. “I get it. It’s awesome to be validated.”

“Right?” She fist-bumped me. “I’m relieved, actually. I was doubting myself. You know. Offering the ex-military bodyguard. Was I totally off base? Reading things wrong? You know how the brain can go.”

“Never doubt yourself,” I said. “Always be delusionally confident. It pays off most times. And honestly, an ex-military bodyguard is freaking fantastic to have on speed dial. How do you manage that?”

“Oh, well, I haven’t always been the owner of a bitty newspaper on Blueberry Island,” she said.

I leaned in, fascinated. “Tell me everything. You’re a badass, aren’t you?”

She beamed at me. “Trying! Really trying!”

“You’re doing great. Just the fact you can offer that resource is so impressive. I’m a little in awe, honestly.”

“Except for the panic attack in the tunnel,” Coco chimed in. “It took superb coaching by me to get Nora off the ledge. So, not so badass.”

Nora grimaced. “Coco’s not wrong.”

“I know,” I said. “I was there, remember? But we all have moments—”

“Hey! Hello? Why would you tell Nora about the mob and the FBI?” Shirley put her hands on her hips. “She’s a reporter! She’ll betray you and be the cause of your death!”

“Hey!” Nora glared at Shirley. “For your information, I didn’t call that number for the reward.”

I was so surprised I almost fell off the ice cream. “You didn’t?”

“Of course not.” She rolled her eyes. “You were clearly lying to me about a lot of things, but there was nothing good about that reward. I wasn’t about to put you in danger, even if you were lying.”

I couldn’t keep from grinning. “I knew I made the right call to bring you in on this.”

“She’s a reporter,” Shirley repeated. “Completely untrustworthy.”

Nora ignored her and faced me. “What’s going on, Rainbow?”

I propped my elbows on the ice cream vat. “I need you to write your ‘meet Rainbow’ story that we talked about earlier. How fast can you distribute a paper copy? Like in an hour?”

She snorted. “An hour? You want me to publish a paper in an hour?”

I nodded.

“Huh.” Interest flared in her eyes. “Give me two, and I could get out a hundred copies.”

“If we help?”

“Three hundred. Still two hours.”

I looked at my pals. “Good?”

They both nodded.

Nora’s face was full of anticipation. “What’s the story?”

“The point of the story is to make me look so irrelevant that the FBI and the mob will think I’m not worth their time. I need to look unhinged, fully committed to ice cream, and slightly insane.” I held up the sprinkles scarf. “Introduce me as Rainbow Sprinkles. Not my real name. Hopefully it will take time for them to find me, especially if you don’t publish online.”

She shot me a thoughtful look. “Why are we doing this now? What’s the purpose?”

I grinned. See? Nora was clever. She knew there was more to it. “Because we’re trying to trap Junior’s killer.”

“And Fiona’s,” Shirley said. “We think she was murdered, too.”

“Oh!” Nora stared at us, her eyes wide with shock. “He was right?”

“Who was right?” Shirley frowned.

“Junior. He said he thought Fiona had been murdered.”

“What?” Shirley smacked Nora in the shoulder, almost knocking her over. “When?”

Nora looked around at us. “That’s what I was doing at Junior’s house that night. He had sent me an anonymous note that Fiona’s death hadn’t been an accident, and I should look into it. I figured out that he was the one who sent it, so I went to talk to him.”

“Hot diggity, girl.” Coco sat down on a stool. “Now you’re talking! Tell us everything.”

Nora rubbed her hands together, clearly warming up. “He denied sending me the note, but I could tell he was lying. I asked him why he was lying.” She grinned. “Honestly, I hammered him hard. I loved Fiona. We all did. If she was murdered, then I wanted to know everything he knew.”

“Of course.” Shirley sat down next to Coco. “What did he say?”

“He was no help. I think he was scared about what he knew, and scared that someone dangerous might see me at his house,” Nora said. “But his note had a Blueberry Island Vigilante coin tucked in it.”

Coco frowned. “He was pretending to be the vigilante?”

“I’m not sure,” Nora said, “but I have cameras at my office. I saw him drop it off. I know it was him.”

“Maybe he’s the vigilante,” Coco said.

I spoke up then. “Junior’s not the vigilante.” I’d promised Gator I wouldn’t tell them about his family legacy, and I hadn’t. Of course, I fully intended to, but I just hadn’t had the chance yet. I wouldn’t tell them with

Nora there, although she was fast getting on my “cool chick” list. “Where did he get the coin?”

“Well, probably the same place where he got the one that Fiona left us,” Coco said.

“Fiona left you a coin?” Nora asked. “When?”

Shirley and Coco looked at me. I nodded. “If Junior trusted her enough to leave her that note, then we can tell her what’s going on.” Of course, Junior leaving her that note might have gotten him killed by Nora. I knew that. But I didn’t think so.

I thought Nora was on our side, and I was beginning to suspect she was incredibly capable. Good news for us.

I listened as they told Nora, trying to put the pieces together. I thought about the coins. Junior asking Nora for help. What had he known? Why had he pretended to be the vigilante? Why was he circulating coins?

What was I missing?

I was sure that Bernie was the friend that Gator had told. He was the only person Gator trusted. Had Bernie enlisted Fiona? Might make sense, right? He’d had only great things to say about Fiona when I’d driven onto the island.

And Fiona might have told him she was working with Junior. From everything I knew about Fiona, she was the one both Bernie and Junior would have gone to for help.

Those were guesses, but they made sense in terms of threads connecting the players.

Bernie had been on the boat. He’d been at the bathroom when we’d found the blue cabinet, and he’d sent Coco back with champagne so we would stay in the bathroom and celebrate, giving us time to notice the blue lockbox.

So maybe Bernie had been the one to plant the jewelry box and make sure we got it.

Bernie had also been sitting at Coco's café, seen me go inside, and a few minutes later my truck had driven by. I was guessing Bernie was my truck thief, using it to lead us to the toe.

So I was putting my money on Bernie being the secret helper. Not wanting to officially get involved, but unable to stay out of it because he cared about Gator.

But then what? I didn't believe he'd stolen my safe. He'd driven down the road that Tony had described as leading to Duane's shack. Had Duane taken my safe? Had Bernie been working with the Wilsons? Had they given him coins?

Was Bernie the new vigilante?

Gator hadn't known what Junior was up to and said Junior didn't know about the vigilante history, so he hadn't given Junior the coins. But Junior had married his sister. Maybe Jasmine had told Junior about the history, or even the threats.

Which maybe was why Junior had gotten involved…

But I didn't have any proof of any of it. And it didn't lead to the identity of Pirate Sam.

I felt like I was so close.

Just…so…close, but the answer was floating out of reach, not quite solidifying enough for me to touch it.

I suddenly realized that the others were looking at me expectantly. "What?"

"You said that you had a line you wanted Nora to put in the story," Shirley said. "To flush out the killer."

"What's the line?" Nora asked.

I didn't give it to her yet. "You need to put it in as a quote. That you're directly quoting me."

She nodded. "No problem. What is it?"

I'd thought about what it needed to say. What I'd come up with wasn't perfect, but it would have to do. I told them the line.

They all stared at me.

I hadn't told them this part of the plan.

"You're kidding," Shirley whispered. "You can't mean that."

"I do." I'd thrown out a challenge, and I knew it would be answered. I might not know the identity of Pirate Sam, but I knew who he was as a person. I knew this would work. I flipped the scarf over my shoulder. "Let's take the photos."

None of them moved. "You're making yourself the target," Shirley said.

"Yep."

"For a killer."

I sighed. "You guys, it's the only way. They have to be the winner. They won't be able to let me win. They simply won't. They'll come after me."

"Nope." Coco shook her head. "I don't like this."

"Me either," Nora said.

But Shirley was starting to smile. "You know who it is, don't you?"

I nodded. "I think so, yeah." I didn't. Not quite.

"Who?"

I told them a name I didn't actually think was the killer.

Yes, I lied to them.

Because I had to.

Silence fell over the ice cream freezer.

"Holy mother trucking hilly billy," Coco breathed. "Are you kidding? That is jalapeño hot right there."

I told them why. Not my real why. The why I was choosing to tell.

Nora sat down on a crate of frozen fudge. "I don't even have words." She sounded stunned.

Shirley was nodding. "You know, I think your plan is freaking brilliant. It's the only way."

I met her gaze and grinned. “I knew you’d get it.”

“Oh, I do.” She clapped her hands. “Let’s do it, ladies. Let’s put a target on the back of our favorite Rainbow, and let’s do it quickly.”

Coco and Nora looked at each other.

“Nora,” I said. “You could break the story of Junior’s killer. Could be big for you.”

“Not at the expense of your life.”

She wasn’t wrong that I was endangering myself. She was just wrong about who was going to come after me.

Shirley hit her in the arm. “Nora, you’re never going to be a great reporter. You freaked out at the tunnel, and you’re unwilling to run a story that could get Rainbow killed. You need to toughen up, girlfriend.”

“But—”

“Life is about taking risks,” Shirley said. “If you never take risks, your soul dies piece by piece until you wind up alone in a life that lost its purpose and falls into an abyss of nothingness.”

I felt her words in my heart. It felt like she was describing my life at the firm, even though I hadn’t realized it at the time. I would never have known, if I hadn’t had the chance to compare it to the last couple days on Blueberry Island.

“Well, hellfire and hot peppers,” Coco said. “I’m not about to die in a metaphorical abyss. Count me in. I’ll write the blasted story if Nora won’t.”

Nora finally pulled her shoulders back. “I’ll do it.”

I smiled. “I knew you would.”

She picked up her camera. “I don’t know whether to take that as a compliment or an insult.”

“Maybe it’s neither,” Shirley said. “Maybe it’s simply that Rainbow saw a path, and she’s never wrong.”

“I’m often wrong,” I said, as I flipped the scarf dramatically, trying to summon sass that I simply didn’t feel right now.

“Admit nothing. Claim everything,” Shirley said. “It’s the only way.”

I met Shirley’s gaze. “For Fiona.”

Understanding filled her eyes. “She’d appreciate how this is playing out.”

“I know she would.” I steadied myself. “Let’s do this.”

But as I got into the most random pose I could think of, I looked at Shirley. She winked at me and gave me a thumbs up, and guilt settled in my belly.

I didn’t want to put them in danger.

I didn’t want to lie to them.

It was the only way, but I hoped that in doing so, I hadn’t lost the first real friends I’d had since my mom had died.

But if I wound up alone, it was okay.

If I could save Fiona’s legacy, I felt like it might make up for some of who I’d been…who I hadn’t even realized I’d been until I’d had to leave her behind.

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CHAPTER 38

AN HOUR LATER, Shirley pulled up in front of the historical society and parked the car. Coco was helping Nora distribute the new edition of the *Blueberry Island Gazette*, while Shirley and I executed a separate part of the plan.

She looked over at me. “Ready?”

I nodded. “Let’s do it.”

The open flag was billowing in the ocean breeze, and we hurried inside. The historical society occupied several rooms, like a small museum. There were paintings with little info tags, some statues, and a lot of smaller items in display cases, including a plate and a tea kettle like the ones I’d seen in the tunnels. Several closed doors went off the main rooms.

A young couple with two elementary school girls were wandering through, pointing out everything pirate to the kids.

Mirabelle was at the front counter when we’d walked in, reading through what looked like an antique captain’s log. She had reading glasses on and was resting her chin on her hands as she read.

She was so absorbed that she didn’t even hear us come in.

“Hi, Mirabelle,” I said.

She jumped and then looked up, breaking into a smile when she saw us. “My favorite mahjong disrupters,” she said. “Welcome!”

“Thanks!” I nodded at the book. “What are you reading?”

She held it up. “It’s an old diary from the 1800s. It’s fascinating. I could get lost in island history for days and forget to eat. It’s incredible.”

Shirley grinned. “You love this island, don’t you?”

Mirabelle nodded as she carefully put the book back in the glass display case at the front counter and locked it. “It’s so intriguing. I’ve read so many diaries, logs, and journals. It’s awesome.” She grinned. “I’ve been looking for info about how the *Buttered Rum* began, but I haven’t found any. Lots of pirate references, though. This place used to be hopping!”

I leaned on the counter. “How did you get so interested in the island?”

“Well!” She beamed at me. “I really just stumbled upon this job. I was bored being a librarian, and I wanted to get out of the city, and I saw this job posting.”

I raised my brows. “You were a librarian?”

“I was! And I worked for the Peace Corps. I also did a brief stint as a cave guide out west.”

I blinked. “Really? What else?”

“Oh…let’s see.” She rested her chin on her hands. “I worked on a dude ranch cleaning stalls. I was a sky dive instructor for a while, but I haven’t jumped in forever. Honestly, after I nearly died in an avalanche out in Oregon, I kind of was like, whoa, you know? Like settle, right? I was in that hole for several hours before they found me, and I thought I was done. And for what? Like was I ready to die? Or did I need to do more? So I decided to be a librarian, but whoa, right? That got dull in a hurry, even though I do like books.” She spread her hands. “This is like being a librarian of secrets. It’s fun! And I have freedom to run around and play mahjong or go fishing or whatever, so it’s great. Plus, the people. I love this town. I’ve never stayed one place long enough to put down roots, but I’ve fallen madly in love with the island.”

I stared at her in surprise. “I had no idea you were so adventurous.”

“Hah! My mom always said it was an early death wish, but I like adventurous better. Life is meant to be lived, right? The more lives you can fit into the one you have, the better.”

“Amen to that, sister,” Shirley said.

“Right?” Mirabelle grinned at her. “I think I’m keeping this town as my forever home base. It’s just so cozy, like a warm snuggle every time I get too far off shore, I have something to come back to.”

I blinked. “That actually makes sense.” Was that why the town felt good? Because it was like a home base that I didn’t have either?

“I’m getting my pilot’s license soon,” she said. “You’ll have to come fly with me once I’m legal.” She winked as she said it.

“I love to fly,” Shirley said. “We’re in, right, Rainbow?”

“I’d love to get a ride with a brand-new pilot,” I said. “Maybe we can wait for a storm or something to make it more interesting?”

“Hah. Perfect. We’re going to be friends, I can tell.” Mirabelle drummed her hands on the table. “Now, tell me ladies, what can I do for you?” Her face brightened. “More artifacts?”

I shook my head. “What do you know about tunnels on the island?”

“Oh, the tunnels. That’s one of the reasons I took the job. I’ve been dying to get into them since I got here.” She whistled. “I have a map. I haven’t found a way to get inside, assuming they’re still there.”

Bingo. That was exactly what I’d been hoping for. “Can we see the map?”

“Sure, hang on.” She disappeared through a door behind her, and popped out a moment later with an old parchment sealed in plastic. “It’s in our specialty section. It’s very fragile so we don’t leave it out.”

She set it out on the counter. “Please refrain from touching it, ladies, or I’ll have to cut off your hands.” She grinned as she said it, but I had a feeling she half meant it.

“Of course.” Shirley and I leaned over and inspected it, but I couldn’t figure out where the tunnels were with reference to the town. “Where would my store be on this?”

Mirabelle leaned over and peered at the map for a moment. “Right there.” She pointed to a spot on the lower left. “There’s an old entrance right nearby. It’s probably under the store or something. I think it’s where the main tunnel starts.”

There was indeed a tunnel opening right next to where she was pointing, and I traced the path I’d taken. I saw the split where I’d gone to the right and wound up at Harvey’s, and then the left tunnel.

More tunnels split off as the tunnel progressed. Forks that we hadn’t seen. Had they been blocked off? Hidden behind fake walls? Yay!

I grinned at Shirley. This was even better than I’d anticipated, but exactly what I’d wanted.

Mirabelle leaned in, her eyes bright with excitement. “I’ve gone out looking for the entrances,” she whispered, “but I haven’t found any. I don’t know if they’ve been sealed over, or if the map is distorted for security purposes. But how cool would that be to find a tunnel? Can you imagine what’s in there? Things long forgotten. Maybe books. Journals. So much cool stuff.”

“I bet it would be incredible,” I agreed. There was a lot of detail on that map. “Can we take a photo?”

“Oh, no, absolutely not,” she said quickly. “It’s very fragile. The flash would compromise it.”

“How about no flash?” Shirley took out her phone without waiting for a yes. “I mean, of course it’s all right, right? We’re island residents, so we fund this place, right?”

Mirabelle looked positively pained at the idea of the precious piece of history being exposed to invisible rays of the camera, but Shirley snapped the photo before Mirabelle could come up with an excuse.

“How far does the tunnel go?” I asked, trying to distract her from Shirley’s egregious liberties.

Mirabelle shook her head. “It’s hard to tell exactly, but I think the furthest entrance is out by the dairy.”

Shirley and I looked at each other. “The dairy?” I repeated. Well how about that? Things just got a lot more interesting.

Mirabelle nodded. “But honestly, I suspect there are other tunnels and entrances.” She pointed at the map. “If you look, the lines are varying thickness and shades, indicating that they were drawn with different implements. I believe this map was a work-in-progress that someone made as they explored the tunnel system. It might not be complete, or there could be a whole other set at the far end of the island.” She grinned. “I’m great at maps. This is a perfect little puzzle, begging to be solved. I dream about those tunnels.”

“Wow,” Shirley said. “The map is so cool.”

“I know.” Mirabelle sighed. “I’ll find a way in some day. If you guys want, I’ll let you know when I do.” She winked at us. “It’s my job as the island historian, after all, and as a woman with a death wish, because who knows what I’d find in them, right?”

“It’s definitely your duty.” Shirley was studying the map more closely, and I knew that she could see things I couldn’t, because of her familiarity with the island.

I decided to give Shirley alone time with the map, not sure how clear her photo would turn out. “Did you check the records any further, Mirabelle? Has anything else come in?”

Mirabelle shook her head. “Nope, nothing else.” She paused, her gaze going to Shirley and her intense focus on the map. “Why are you asking about the tunnels?” Then her face morphed into shock. “Wait a stinking second! You found the cache, didn’t you? You’ve been in the tunnels? That’s where you got the necklace and ring?”

I grimaced. “No—”

“This is freaking amazing! Oh my God! Oh my God!” Mirabelle leaned over the counter and grabbed my shoulders. “Where is it? How did you get in? You have to show me!”

Shirley eased away, using her finger to drag the map with her.

Bad Shirley. Touching that map.

I moved in the other direction, so Mirabelle was facing me and had her back toward Shirley. “Do you think the vigilante used the tunnels?” I asked, trying to distract her. “Is that how he got around without being seen?”

She nodded excitedly. “Yes. It’s the only thing that makes sense.” She rubbed her jaw. “He must have hidden things down there. It’s why his cache hasn’t been found.” She stared at me. “And you found it. I’m in awe of you.”

“No, I didn’t find it,” I said quickly. “Fiona left those for me.”

“Then she found it?”

“Not that I know of—”

Mirabelle frowned, clearly trying to put all the pieces together. “Then why are you asking about the tunnels? Why would you want a map if you weren’t going down there?”

“Looking for entrances, same as you.” I sighed. “But it sounds like the map won’t help with that.”

“Why are you looking for entrances?” Suspicion tightened her face as she studied me. “Oh, wait a literal minute and a half! Are you planning to steal that treasure? Because if so, I’ll tell you right now that it’s island history. It belongs in a museum, not in some private collection. Preserve and protect history, in whatever form it’s in. I won’t allow it. Deputy Shepard feels the same way. I’ll tell him and—”

“Whoa. Stand down, girl.” I held up my hands to diffuse her sudden hostility. “I don’t want the stash.” I paused, thinking of how to redirect her.

“I did wonder how Junior’s killer disappeared so fast. If there’s a tunnel there, then that could be it.”

“Whoa!” Her face blanched. “What? You’re hunting Junior’s killer? Why would you do that?” She took a step back, as if I put her in danger simply by being near her.

“Because otherwise I’m going to prison for it.”

She stared at me. “Did you kill him?”

Oh, for heaven’s sake. “No, of course not. Why would I kill him?”

“I don’t know. Why does anyone kill anyone?”

“Money. Power. Survival. Love.” Shirley stepped back from the counter, apparently satisfied with her map perusal. “Those are the standard reasons for murder.”

Mirabelle looked back and forth between us, alarm etched on her face. “Wow. I don’t know how to respond to that statement. How do you know that?”

“I killed a few people in my past life,” Shirley said, total deadpan.

Mirabelle looked like she was going to pass out, so I hit Shirley in the shoulder. “Stop it. She’s joking, Mirabelle. It’s a joke.”

“Not a good one.” Still looking alarmed, Mirabelle grabbed the map and slid it out of sight under the counter. “Look, ladies, I’m all for adventures. But tracking down a murderer is completely different. If you’re really going after Junior’s killer, then you need to stop. He’s already killed someone. Don’t put yourself next on his list. Just tell the police and let them handle it. Deputy Shepard is so on top of things. He helped me when the society was burglarized by some mainland teenagers when he first got to town. He’ll figure this out.”

How many times had I suggested the police to Shirley and Coco? “I agree with you, Mirabelle, but Shirley and Coco have rules.”

“Rules? Like about intentionally throwing yourself in front of a murderer as he’s about to stab victim number two?” She put her hands on

her hips. “Look ladies, when I was in the Peace Corps…and in the caves… and on the ranch, I met more than a few shady men, and I’ll tell you right now, that intentionally stirring that pot is not a good idea.”

Poor Mirabelle. She deserved better than to be associated with me and Shirley. She looked so stressed. I sighed. “Don’t worry. We’re just checking some things out. We’ll call the police when it’s right.”

“Always do,” Shirley said cheerfully. “But do let us know if anyone else comes in with items that could be the vigilante treasure.”

“Whoa.” Mirabelle narrowed her eyes. “Hang on. You think the vigilante treasure has something to do with Junior’s stabbing? With the entrance out by the dairy?” She clasped her hands on her head. “Mother trucker, what is even happening right now? I left this behind!”

“Left *what* behind?” Shirley asked. “Murder?”

Mirabelle stared at us for a second, then dropped her hands. She lifted her chin. “I’m good. Just had a moment. You know, lots of drama in my past. Things pop up. All good.”

I paused, and leaned on the counter. “Mirabelle,” I said, firmly, “if Junior’s death has anything to do with the vigilante, I’d lay off looking for those tunnels for a few days.”

“You’re warning me off them?” She looked back and forth between us. “Wait. You *are* going in them, aren’t you?”

Dammit. She was a clever little historian, wasn’t she? “Never,” I said firmly. “It’s too dangerous. I’m not volunteering myself to add to the body count on this island.”

“Me either,” Shirley chimed in. “Tickling murderers is much too dangerous.”

Mirabelle nodded. “Yes, it is too dangerous,” she agreed. “Definitely too dangerous.” But her eyes were narrowed suspiciously.

Shoot. She didn’t believe me. Not enough.

“Seriously, Mirabelle—”

At that moment, there was a crash and a shriek from the gallery. Mirabelle whipped around. “Don’t touch anything,” she shouted. “I’ll clean it up!”

She bolted toward the family, leaving us free to make a quick exit, which we did.

Shirley scowled at me as we got into the car. “Mirabelle’s going to get involved. I can feel it. She’s obsessed with the treasure, and she knows we’re onto something.”

I sighed as I glanced back toward the building. “I knew it was a risk, but we needed that tunnel map if we could find it.”

“I know. It’s fantastic. Totally worth it,” Shirley said excitedly. “But how do we keep her out of the tunnels?”

I leaned back as she pulled out. “Well, she hasn’t found them yet, so we’re probably okay.”

“But she could follow us into them.”

I sighed. “Call Tony. We’ll get him to distract her until this is over.”

“Tony is already involved trying to find Jasmine, isn’t he? I mean, we haven’t seen him, but he’s lurking around behind the scenes somewhere.”

She wasn’t wrong about Tony. I was a little concerned that we hadn’t seen him with the Wilsons. I hoped he was okay. “Mahjong Madge, then? She loved Fiona.”

Shirley grinned. “Madge is perfect. She’ll do anything to help Fiona, and I would feel terrible if something happened to Mirabelle if she decided to go into the tunnels.”

I grinned, glad to have that settled. It was a decent plan. “How was the map? Did it have what we need?”

She looked over at me, delight dancing in her eyes. “Oh, it did. It definitely did.”

I let out my breath. “Fantastic.” But my spirit wasn’t as light as my words. What we were planning was…a little insane. Mirabelle’s alarm over

the fact we were hunting a murderer had been a gritty reminder that we were playing with real stakes.

But the paper was hitting the town right now.

I had two more stops to make.

No backing out now.

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CHAPTER 39

WE WAITED UNTIL DARK.

Sitting there in my apartment, the three of us and Duchess Fang.

Taking turns watching the tunnel entrance to see if anyone went in.

No one did.

Just us.

Watching.

Waiting.

Until the sun set, and the night descended like a shadowy veil.

I was on sentry duty as darkness took hold, and the driveway faded to black. “It’s time,” I announced, a part of me almost wishing evening had never come.

Almost, but not quite. Was I a little bit terrified of poking a murderer? Yep. Was I ready to not be scared anymore and to end this thing? Amen to that one, sister.

We were handling this, and we were doing it right now.

I turned away from the window, and then burst out laughing when I saw Coco and Shirley standing behind me.

They had both dressed in all-black, except for their tiaras. They even had ski masks over their faces. “Are you guys serious?”

“If someone dies, then no one gets to point their finger at us for being there,” Coco said.

Shirley nodded. “Incognito for the win.”

“And the tiaras? Because those aren’t exactly subtle.”

“It’s our power move.” Shirley pulled a knit hat on, covering the tiara. I could still see the outline of it, but only because I was looking for it.

“Exactly.” Coco put a hat over hers as well. “We won Pirate’s Widow, and we’re basically hunting pirate treasure. Our *Buttered Rum* victory was OG Vigilante Daniella’s way of telling us that she’s got our back, and we’ve got hers.”

“OG means the original gangster,” Shirley said. “Because Daniella was the original vigilante.”

I raised my brows. “I know what OG means.” And yes, I’d filled them in on what Gator had told me about the vigilante…after I’d run an errand that neither of them knew about.

“We’re the new vigilantes.” Shirley put her hands on her hips. “Daniella has assigned her legacy to us. We heard her call, and we answered it.”

I stared at them. “We are definitely not the new Blueberry Island vigilantes.”

“We definitely are.” Shirley’s blue eyes were bright in her ski mask. “It’s a women’s legacy, and we’re women. Badass women of the island, more specifically. We’re the natural choice.”

“Daniella’s lineage declined to continue their mission. So it pivoted to a new line,” Coco said. “Us.”

“Exactly. It’s been dormant for generations, until the next feminine power became ready to rise,” Shirley said. “It’s so fantastic. I’m delighted by our coronation as the new queens of the island.”

Coco nodded. “Through others, Daniella showed us the tunnels, gave us a coin, and handed us our first assignment. It’s so very obvious, and I accept the position.”

“Me, too,” Shirley said.

Oh, boy. “I don’t.” I put my hands on my hips, mimicking Shirley’s pose. “We don’t live in the 1800s. We can’t run around town in tunnels, steal from the rich, and give to the poor.”

“No, we just fix things like Fiona did,” Shirley said, “but now we have a job title.”

“And a uniform.” Coco held up another tiara. “It’s time you put this on, Rainbow. You need the spirits of Fiona and Daniella to be with you tonight.”

“I’m not wearing the tiara—”

“Rainbow would wear the tiara,” Shirley said. “You still have to be Rainbow. That part of your life isn’t in the past yet.”

Coco pulled up her ski mask to give me an enthusiastic grin. “If you go traipsing around in tunnels, calling yourself the reborn Blueberry Island Vigilante while wearing a tiara that channels the spirits of two dead goddesses sending you power from the beyond, I’ll know you’re finally sane, but your old life will think your brain is detonating.”

“Detonating would be a good thing.” I sighed. She had such a good point.

“Yep.” She pulled the ski mask back down. “They’re the dumbasses with the fried brains, but we don’t need to tell them that. Put on the tiara, Rainbow. Unleash the real you.”

The real me. Coco was right. Right now, the real me could be nothing less than Rainbow Sprinkles. “Fine. Give me the tiara.”

“Not yet. You’re dressed in leggings and a T-shirt. Too fancy for tunnels.” Shirley grinned and held up a black neoprene suit. “I think wearing Fiona’s old waterskiing wetsuit would be pretty perfect.”

I started laughing. “You’re kidding.”

“It’s black. It blends in with the night so wonderfully well. And it’s a freaking wetsuit that you’re going to wear in a root cellar tunnel with a tiara

while hunting a murderer.” She waggled it at me. “Waterskiing suits have extra room in the shoulders for doing things like holding onto the tow rope—”

“Or climbing ladders in tunnels,” Coco said.

“It’s ridiculous to wear that,” I pointed out.

They both nodded their agreement. “Ludicrous,” Shirley agreed cheerfully.

“If I had any sense at all, I’d refuse to be seen with you while you’re wearing it,” Coco added. “But I don’t have sense, so I’m good with it.”

I grinned and took the suit. “You know, I think you’re right. I’ve been wanting a neoprene body glove for years.”

“Atta girl.” Coco popped the tiara on my head. “Hurry up. The dinner bell has rung. We need to go dine on a killer’s lies.”



Five minutes later, I was in the wetsuit.

I was also sweating, panting, and claustrophobic, and Coco and Shirley had gotten up close and personal with parts of me that I hadn’t shared with the world in a very long time.

But I had a tiara on my head, a ski mask in my fanny pack, and a backpack filled with the rest of the gear for the evening.

Coco and Shirley were traipsing down my stairs, and I was walking out the door when I looked over my shoulder and saw Duchess Fang.

She was sitting on the counter, watching silently, her tail flicking.

I paused, my hand on the doorknob. “What?”

She said nothing, but I felt her concern.

Oh heavens. Coco was getting to me. I could feel a cat’s emotions?

“Rainbow,” Shirley shouted from outside. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah.” I paused. “Duchess Fang seems worried.”

“Of course she is,” Coco yelled. “Her mama died, and now her new mama who she barely knows is running off after a murderer. She’s concerned that she’ll be stuck with Shirley again.”

My heart suddenly got tight. “Is that what you’re afraid of?”

Duchess Fang stared at me.

I sighed and walked over to her. I leaned my elbows on the counter, resting my chin in my hands so we were eye-to-eye. “Look, Duchess Fang,” I said. “I know you don’t fully trust me yet, or maybe even like me, and that’s okay. But you need to know that tonight is not my night to die.”

She continued to gaze silently at me.

“I’ll be back. And you’re going to learn to like me. Got it?”

She said nothing.

“Duchess Fang. My mom died, too, and she was the only family I had.” I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat. “My only friends squeezed me into a wetsuit that is slowly suffocating me, and I have so little left in my life that I’m grateful for it. You and me. We’re alone and we’re lost, but we both live here, so that’s a start.” I held out my hand to her. “I got you, sweetie. Promise.”

To my surprise, after a long moment, she lifted her paw and tapped my nose.

Tears sprang into my eyes, and I closed them, trying to contain the swell of emotion. Sadness. Grief. Fear. “I don’t want to lose how this place makes me feel,” I whispered. “How those crazy women outside make me feel like I matter.”

“Rainbow!” Shirley hollered. “Let’s freaking move it! We’re already behind schedule.”

I opened my eyes. Duchess Fang was no longer on the counter. I looked around and saw she was curled up on the couch, her eyes at half-mast, her nose tucked under the tip of her tail.

She didn’t look concerned. She looked like she’d believed me, and she would be waiting.

I took a deep breath. “I’ll be back. And we’re going to start to be friends.”

She took a deep, contented sigh and closed her eyes.

“Right. Good.”

I tapped my fingers on the counter a few times to ground myself, then I stood up straight, grabbed my headlamp, and headed for the door.

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CHAPTER 40

WE WERE LOUD.

Obvious.

And repetitive.

But cleverly subtle.

Just in case someone was watching. Which I hoped they were.

"You're sure that's how to open this?" Shirley asked as we stood side by side, gazing at the septic tank lid at the edge of my driveway.

"Yep. You step on this little septic system cap like this—" I stepped on it. "You can hear it click."

"Then what?" Coco asked. She was over on Armando's side, and just far enough away that we had to raise our voices to communicate. "I just want to know how to get into the tunnel in case we get separated."

"You walk over here and step on this cement property marker," I told them, making sure my voice was loud enough to drift through the night, but not so loud that it was obvious that I wanted to be easily overheard.

"Then the fence post?" Coco asked. "This little black lever?"

"Yep, but you have to wait until I step on the marker." Which I then did.

"I'll do the lever." Shirley walked over and hit it with her knee, just like I had done. She leaned over the fence to peer at the hole in the ground. "That makes me feel like a wizard to open up the earth like that."

“See ya!” Coco sat down on the edge, and then descended the ladder.

“Let’s do this,” Shirley said. She climbed the fence and hustled down the rungs.

I looked around the dark night, but I didn’t see anyone watching us, tracking what we were doing. But I felt a prickle on my skin.

Mosquitoes?

Or was I sensing that someone was watching and waiting?

Or maybe it was raw terror bubbling up. I’d know soon. “No one saw us,” I said as I hopped the fence. “We’re good.”

I looked around one last time, still saw no one, then jumped.

I landed on the couch, and the trap door closed.

Shirley and Coco had their headlamps on, lighting up the tunnel.

They’d pulled their ski masks up so I could see their faces, but the fabric was bunched on their foreheads, ready to pull down as soon as they needed anonymity.

I turned on my headlamp. “You guys ready?”

“Do we wait until we’re followed?” Coco asked.

“No. We’re meeting up with the Wilsons.” I activated a glow stick and dropped it so anyone following us would know which way we’d gone. “Let’s go.”

Shirley had the map opened on her phone as I led the way, and we moved fast, shining our lights as we went, scanning behind us and to the sides, while I periodically dropped a glow stick to light our path.

This was my third time in the tunnel, and I felt like an expert guide now.

I led with confidence, quickly passing by the tunnel to Harvey’s as we headed farther up island. “It’s so much hotter in here than it was before,” I said, wiping some sweat off my forehead.

“It’s the neoprene suit,” Shirley said. “You’ll roast in it.”

I looked over at her. “Seriously?”

“What did you expect? It’s basically like stuffing yourself into rubber sausage casing.”

“I’ve never worn a neoprene suit,” I said. “I trusted your judgment.”

“As you should. It was to make you look crazy, and we did it. High five, girl.” Shirley and Coco slapped palms.

“No one in their right mind would wear a neoprene suit in a tunnel,” Coco agreed. “You’re welcome.”

The suit was sticking to my legs, making it more difficult to walk. And I was hot. Really hot. “I have to be able to move.”

“It’s stretchy. You can move.” Shirley wasn’t remotely concerned, which was great for her.

I was starting to panic. “What if the murderer comes after me, and I can’t run?”

“Coco’s slow,” Shirley said. “You’ll definitely be faster than she is.”

“Hey!” Coco hit her arm. “We’ll all stay together and crush any intruders. The vigilantes are a team.”

I wiped my forearm over my brow to clear the sweat, then tugged at the neck, wishing it had a front zipper. “I feel like I’m choking.”

“You’re being dramatic,” Shirley said. “Fiona spent hours in that thing some days.”

“Well, I’m not Fiona, and I feel like I’m being crushed in a sauna.”

“People pay a lot of money for sauna experiences,” Shirley said. “You’re living the luxe life, baby. Good for you.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What if I’m actually dying right now?”

She looked over at me. “Are you?”

“No.”

“Then don’t be so dramatic. Step into the challenge. That’s what badass bitches do.”

I shook out my shoulders, trying to ease the panic trying to grip me. I wasn’t dying. I was hot and uncomfortable, but I was fine. This was fine. It

was great. I loved it. I was so lucky to be in this suit right now. Yay for me.

We rounded a corner, and I heard voices up ahead. I paused, and held up my hand so we could listen.

After a moment, I recognized the Wilsons. “We’re good. Let’s go.”

But Coco caught my arm. “How sure are we that the Wilsons are on our side?”

I shrugged. “Pretty sure.”

She gaped at me. “Pretty sure? Not fully sure?”

“I mean, I trust Gator, but the others? I don’t think even he really trusts them.” I started walking again, and Shirley did, too.

Coco didn’t move.

We both looked back at her. “What?” Shirley asked.

“What if I wait here? Then I can run for help if things go south.”

I bit my lip. “What if we’re followed? Then you’ll be alone with them.”

Coco looked over her shoulder, her brow furrowed with conflict. “I’ll wait here for a few minutes to see what’s going on with the Wilsons. If it’s good, I’ll come in. If I hear someone behind me, I’ll come running. How is that?”

I frowned. “I don’t love it.”

“Me either,” Shirley said. “I think we need to stay together.”

“They won’t even see me. Look.” Coco pulled her ski mask down, then crawled onto the bottom rack of a nearby shelf. She pushed a couple old crates in front of her, and pressed herself against the back. “I’m invisible.”

I shined my light on her. “It’s not bad,” I admitted. Who knew that there was actually a good reason for the all-black outfit and ski mask?

“I can see you, but only because I know you’re there,” Shirley agreed. “That’s pretty good.”

“They won’t be looking for me on a shelf.” Coco’s voice seemed to drift out of the darkness.

“But if they do see you, you’re fully trapped,” I pointed out. “I think you should stay with us.”

“I have my pepper spray,” Coco said. “They’ll have to come close to drag me out of here.”

“Unless they shoot you,” I said.

“They won’t. Pirate Sam is a stabbing-poisoning kind of killer. He’d need to get close to do that. I’m good.”

I looked at Shirley and held out my hands, feeling helpless. “I don’t like leaving her here—”

“Hey!” Duane strode around the corner with a headlamp on, looking huge and aggressive. He hadn’t bothered to wear black. He was in jeans, a T-shirt, and steel-toed boots, which were pretty perfect for rib-kicking someone after throwing a blanket over their head.

I froze. What if he was the one who had set the bear trap in Jasmine’s bathroom? I had not thought of that possibility. I suddenly wished I was in Coco’s spot, hidden from view.

We both turned away from Coco to face him.

His gaze shot to my outfit. “Why are you wearing that? No one told me that we’re going in the ocean. You lying to Gator? Planning to steal the treasure and take it into the harbor?”

My, my. He was so volatile. “I’m not going swimming.” I kept my voice neutral and cheerful to try to diffuse his agitation. “I wanted to blend in.”

“Blend in with what? It’s a wetsuit.”

“Oh…” I nodded with deep understanding. “Is that what this is? A wetsuit? That actually makes so much sense. I just liked it because it was black, and I thought it would be good camouflage.” I held out my arms. “Plus, it’s super sexy. I found it in Fiona’s closet. I’ve never seen a jumpsuit made of padded rubber before. Don’t I look awesome?” I beamed at him.

He stared at me. “You’re whacked.”

I adjusted my tiara. “Thank you. Kind of you to say.” I put my hands on my hips. “Let’s get this party started, shall we?”

He didn’t move. He looked back and forth between us. “Where’s the other one? Did she go to the cops?”

Coco remained silent in her little hiding spot, and I decided this was a good test of her camouflage. “She’s in my apartment watching the entrance,” I said. “She’ll text Shirley if someone comes in, to give us a heads up.”

“There are a lot of entrances,” he pointed out. “Pirate Sam could come in anywhere.”

“And all of those have locks,” I pointed out.

“No, we took ‘em all off. Gator said to.”

Frustration and alarm rippled through me. “Then we have no control over the situation.”

“He said we needed to make sure Pirate Sam could get in.” He scowled at me. “You better have control. Or this is a bad choice that we trusted you.”

“Excuses already?” Jasmine walked around the corner behind him. “Gator said you said to take all the padlocks off. Are you saying he’s a liar?”

“Or stupid?” Duane challenged.

Oh…wow… I definitely wanted to be where Coco was right now.

But I wasn’t. So, I lifted my chin and faced them like I was the one with all the power in this sweaty, hot, asphyxiating tunnel. “It’ll be fine,” I said firmly. “Where’s Gator?”

“He’ll be back shortly,” Jasmine said.

Oh…we were alone in the tunnels with the two crazy siblings? “Where did he go?” I was hoping for the news that Gator was thirty inches to the left or something equally nearby.

“He’ll be back soon,” Duane said vaguely. “Let’s go.”

I looked at Shirley, and she shrugged. What choice did we have? We'd launched too many balls into the air to try to stop anything now. We had to keep moving forward and pivot as needed.

It was good to know that Gator felt liberated to adjust plans as needed. I now knew I couldn't trust that anything I'd told him to do would be done.

Always a fun challenge in a lethal situation. Yay for good times.

Shirley inclined her chin in silent agreement that we needed to go with the Wilsons.

"Okay," I said, suddenly incredibly glad that Coco was hiding. "Let's go."

Jasmine gestured to me. "Come on." She started walking, but Duane waited for us to follow before pulling up the rear.

As we headed deeper into the tunnels, sandwiched between Jasmine and Duane, the suit began to feel tighter and tighter, making it difficult to walk. To breathe. To think of anything but how trapped I felt.

Shirley put her hand on my shoulder, and I took a breath, trying to calm down. I forced myself to take out a glow stick, activate it, and toss it down.

Duane snatched it off the ground. "What's this?"

He was edgy, and that didn't bode well for us, even if he was on our side. Edgy, erratic, dangerous people were like time bombs. "It's part of the plan," I said. "We want to make sure that whoever follows us knows which way to go."

"I thought we wanted to hide, then jump out and kill the bastard."

Oh, lordy. "Is that what you tried before?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"Did it work?"

He swore and kicked the wall.

"Right." Where the heck was Gator? Suddenly, I wondered if Duane and Jasmine had killed him. If they'd decided to end everything tonight… but to do it their way.

No. No. I needed to stay focused. I couldn't let my mind run off in crazy, terrified directions. Just a few hours ago, things had clicked in my head. I was pretty sure I knew who was coming after us, and I had to trust that judgment, not the one my panicked brain was trying to inflict upon me just because it was dark, constricted, and hot.

We were silent as we headed swiftly through the tunnel.

As we walked, I began to calm down a bit. I started thinking again. There was one piece I didn't have. It didn't change who I thought Pirate Sam was, but I wanted to connect that dot. "Guys. Hang on."

Jasmine stopped and turned around. "What?"

Shirley bumped into me, and Duane growled for us to keep going.

"How did the killer find out that you guys were the ones guarding the treasure?"

Shirley pinched me in the back, but I ignored her. I needed to know this.

Jasmine narrowed her eyes. "We don't know."

"Yeah, screw you," Duane said. "We would never tell anyone. It's our legacy."

There was no mistaking the pride in his voice. He was unpredictable, but the pride was real. I already knew I trusted Gator.

It had to be Jasmine. I faced her. "Jasmine," I said quietly. "I know you didn't tell anyone on purpose, but what did you do?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Nothing—"

"I already know you embezzled from the dairy, and then stole something so Junior had to go after you." I also knew she'd told Nigel, but that could have been last minute, not the original leak.

Shirley kicked me in the calf, and I squeaked as pain shot through my leg.

Duane grabbed my shoulder and flung me against the wall. He leaned into my space, blinding me with his headlamp. "Don't you dare say lies about her."

I squinted my eyes against the light, but tried to keep them open enough to make eye contact. My heart was racing, but I knew bullies, and it wasn't the time to back down. "This treasure has been hidden for more than a hundred years, and then suddenly someone found it, and figured out it was you guys guarding it? Something changed, Duane. And it had to be one of the three of you, because no one else knew. Literally no one else knew."

"It wasn't me," he snarled.

"It wasn't Gator," I shot back.

Silence. No denial from Jasmine.

I turned to look at Jasmine. Her face was stark white, or it looked that way. I mean, I was in a dark tunnel lit by headlamps. Light spots were dancing in my vision from Duane's headlamp, but I could see the expression on her face.

Guilty as sin.

But guilty of what? "Jasmine," I said. "We all know you didn't do it on purpose, but we need to know. This is all going down tonight, and if we're going to win, we need all the info we can get."

She looked away.

"Hey!" Shirley erupted from behind Duane. "Are you kidding me? We're down in a freaking tunnel using ourselves as bait for a murderer, and you lied to us?" She stalked over to Jasmine, grabbed her by her shoulders, and shook her. "Grow up, Jasmine! You've been irresponsible your whole life! This is your legacy! Be the woman that Daniella would have been proud of! Own your drama so we can fix it! You'll never get another chance for us to help you! Spill it, woman!"

Oh. My. God.

All three of us were so stunned by Shirley's outburst that we all just stood there for a moment.

It was Jasmine who spoke. "I took a few pieces," she said quietly. "I was out of money. I sold them."

Yeah! I knew it!

Duane's grip on my shoulders loosened. "What?"

She looked at us. "I…have a daughter," she said. "I needed money, so I came back and took a piece now and then and sold them."

Ah…so those were the first pieces that had gone missing. It hadn't been whoever was after them now.

"You…you have a daughter?" Duane's hands dropped from my shoulders.

She lifted her chin. "Yes. That's why I never came back. I don't want this life for her. I want better. Every time I come back here, I fall back into who I was, what I was. I don't want to be that woman, and I don't want her to grow up that way."

Oh…boy. I looked at Shirley, who had a very smug expression on her face, clearly delighted that she had wrangled the truth from Jasmine.

And hello? Single mom? My heart was big and mushy for single moms.

But this was Jasmine. She wasn't an angelic innocent.

"I didn't tell anyone where I got them," she said, her voice edgy with defensiveness. "I got them appraised and then sold them. It's my legacy, too. Daniella would have wanted to take care of us. I know she would have."

Shirley nodded. "You're not wrong. She definitely would have taken care of you."

Jasmine shot a look at Shirley. "Don't mock me."

"I'm not! I agree with you. Women support women."

"You stole our legacy?" Duane didn't sound nearly as supportive as Shirley. "You didn't tell us? You just took it? All along, we thought someone was stealing from us, and it was you?"

"It was just a few," she shouted back. "I didn't take all the recent stuff. And I had to take it! You wouldn't understand!"

“How do you know?” he bellowed back. “My mom died, and my dad was a bastard! Why the hell wouldn’t I think it was good to make sure a mom could take care of her kid? Hell, Jasmine. That’s all that ever matters, that a kid is protected!”

His voice was trembling with rage, and I remembered what Tony had said, that Duane had moved up from Texas with the Wilsons because his dad was such a bad guy.

Duane hadn’t had a home, except the one the Wilsons had given him.

Had he spent his life worrying that it could be taken away at any moment?

Jasmine stared at him. “You would have let me take the items?”

“I don’t know what I would have done, but you wouldn’t have been on your own.” He walked over to her. “Why the hell didn’t you tell us you had a kid?”

“Because…” She held out her hands, palms up. “I didn’t want to break Junior’s heart.”

Shirley shuffled over next to me. “She was definitely scooting around on Junior,” she whispered. “And then had to hide that kid from her family. That’s a big burden.”

Duane was silent for a moment. “Did you kill Junior so you could come home?”

Shirley and I became very, very still. Very quiet. Very invisible.

Jasmine’s eyes widened. “No! I would never! I still loved him!” She paused then. “I’m sorry, Duane, but I always loved him.”

He nodded. “I know. I’ve always known.”

She paused. “Did you kill him?”

I held my breath. What in heaven’s name were we witnessing? It was a Wilson family train wreck right now.

“No.” He didn’t say more. Just the one word.

But Jasmine’s eyes filled with relief. “I thought you might have,” she whispered. “I was afraid to ask you.”

He laughed softly. “I was afraid to ask you, too.”

They stared at each other, then started laughing. “Thank heavens,” Jasmine said. “I really thought you did.”

“I might have,” Duane said, “but I didn’t.” He touched Jasmine’s shoulder. “I’m glad you didn’t. I thought you were setting up this whole tunnel thing to set those women up for it.”

“I thought you were doing that!” Jasmine laughed. “Do you think that’s what Gator is doing?”

Her words hung in the air for a moment, then they both stopped laughing and turned to look at us.

Oh…boy. I waved. “Gator isn’t setting us up for it. We had a good chat.”

I saw the skepticism in their eyes. “Yeah,” Jasmine said slowly, “I’m sure you’re right. Gator wouldn’t kill anyone.”

If no one knows, no one goes. The Wilson mantra.

Shirley wrapped her fingers around my wrist, and I saw a shadow emerge from behind Jasmine.

I recognized the silhouette immediately.

It was Gator.

How long had he been there?

Maybe the whole time.

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CHAPTER 41

BEFORE ANY OF us could move, Saxon appeared right behind Gator.

"Holy cannoli," Shirley whispered. "You were right. It's Saxon."

"No one move," our favorite psychotic chef growled.

It was then I realized that Gator's hands were in the air by his shoulders.

"He has a gun in my back," Gator said conversationally.

The Wilsons moved so quickly it was a blur. Duane launched himself at Gator, and fear leapt through me. "Wait, no—"

Saxon's eyes widened. He screamed and took off down the tunnel.

"Get him," Duane shouted. He took off, then tripped over Gator's foot, and crashed into the wall. Jasmine fell on top of him, and for a moment, it was a tangle of arms and legs as Gator tried to help them up, and only made things worse.

I jumped in to help, and between me and Gator, it took several minutes before everyone got untangled. Weird how Gator and I kept accidentally pushing Duane and Jasmine back down without them realizing it.

Duane finally got free and took off after Saxon, shouting about how he was going to end him. Jasmine followed close on his heels, shouting at Duane not to kill him.

I was panting and sweating. "You have to stop them," I said to Gator. "They're going to hurt him." Or worse. Like death. Bad death. Scary death.

“Stop them!”

“We gave Saxon a good head start,” Gator said. “He’ll get to the room in time. We left it open.”

“Go after them!” I shouted. “If they get him, it’s our fault! Go!”

Swearing, Gator took off in a run after his siblings, while I scrambled to my feet.

“Why are you trying to save Saxon?” Shirley asked as she helped me up.

“Because he didn’t kill anyone. He was just pretending.” I started running as fast as I could in the neoprene. “He wasn’t supposed to come out so early. And what the hell with Duane attacking an armed man?” I was so scared I could barely think. What had just happened?

“What are you talking about?” Shirley was running beside me, having a much easier time in her leggings than I was in my rubber suit. “You said Saxon was the killer, that he’d wanted the key from Junior for the tunnels! Wasn’t that who the clue in the paper was for?”

“No, I lied to you.” I was panting and sweating now. How had this gone wrong? It had been so simple. Why had Gator disappeared, and why had Saxon popped out at that time?

“What?” Shirley grabbed my arm and hauled me to a stop. “You lied to me? When?”

“We have to keep going—”

She yanked me back as I started to run again. “There is no way we’re catching up to them. Whatever you unleashed is going to happen without you, regardless of whether you stand here or run your sweaty self to death. What is going on?”

I jerked my arm out of hers. “I will never forgive myself if Saxon gets killed.” I started running again.

Shirley caught up to me. “How could you lie to me?”

“I’m sorry,” I panted. “I didn’t have a choice. I knew that I might lose you forever, but it was the only way I could think of to do it.”

“Lose me? For lying to me? Hah!” Shirley laughed. “It makes me respect you even more.”

I looked over at her. “Seriously?”

“Of course. Sometimes lying to your bestie is the only right course of action.”

I stopped. “You’re my bestie?”

“Do you have anyone else?”

“No.”

“Then it’s not very difficult to be your bestie, is it? I’m number one of one, so that’s an easy win.” She put her hands on my shoulders. “I don’t know what the hell you’re up to, Rainbow, but I know that you’re smart as hell, and I respect it fully. Tell me what I need to know, and let’s bring this home.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I threw my arms around her in a giant hug.

She laughed. “You’re disgustingly sweaty right now. Get off me.” But she hugged me back.

For a moment, in that dark, hot, dangerous tunnel, I felt the safest I’d felt in years. Not physically safe, because killers and all, but emotionally? Hell yes.

Shirley pulled back. “What’s the point of Saxon?”

I started squelching my way after the fleeing foursome as I told her my plan. My real plan. Quickly. Quietly.

She gripped my arm when I finished. “What. The. Hell.”

“I know.”

“You must be wrong.”

“I’m not. I feel it in my gut.”

“I see why you lied to all of us before.”

I nodded. “I couldn’t take the chance of anyone giving even a hint of it.”

“Does Gator know?”

I shook my head. “No way. He knows Saxon is a decoy, but he thinks we have no idea who Pirate Sam might really be.” I paused. “Saxon is really just to cause chaos and be a red herring. I didn’t mean for him to get hunted by the Wilsons.”

“Good call not to tell them the truth,” Shirley said. “Saxon will be fine.”

“I hope.” We started running again, and it wasn’t long until we heard shouting. We looked at each other, and I touched Shirley’s arm. “Wait here. In case it’s not good.”

She pulled her ski mask over her face and eased back into the shadows.

I touched my tiara and then squished my way around the corner. Light beams from the headlamps were hitting the walls in all directions, and the three Wilsons were in total chaos.

Duane was yelling and pounding on the wall of the tunnel, and Jasmine was shouting at him to calm down. Relief rushed through me. Saxon had made it into the hidden room in time.

We’d found it on the map, and Gator and I had figured out how to open it during the several hours when Shirley and Coco had gone home to prep for the evening.

It looked like Saxon was safely inside with all the jewels that we’d put in there.

“I saw him go in here,” Duane was yelling. “Where’s the door?”

Gator grabbed Duane’s arm and yanked him back from the wall, tossing him on his butt. “Shut up and listen,” Gator shouted. “Calm down!”

Duane launched himself to his feet, but Jasmine jumped between them.

I leaned against the wall and waited as they sorted themselves out.

It was Jasmine who finally noticed me. “What do you want?”

“Why are you guys so unhinged?” I asked.

They all turned toward me, and I saw Gator sigh.

“An armed man had your brother at gunpoint, and you attacked him?” I shook my head. “That’s insanity.”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” Duane shot at me. “He didn’t shoot any of us, and he’s locked up now, like a trapped rat.”

“How do you know that? How do you know there isn’t an exit from there?” I asked. “Maybe he’s a mile down the next tunnel by now.”

They all stared at me, then Jasmine swore. “There has to be a way to open it,” she said. “Everyone look.”

She and Duane started running their hands all over the wall, arguing about the best way to open it.

Gator looked at me.

I shook my head, silently ordering him not to tell his siblings our plan, or what he knew of it.

He ignored me and turned to his siblings. “Rainbow got a map to the tunnels earlier today,” he said.

Ugh. I didn’t want to let Duane and Jasmine into our inner circle of knowledge. Even if they were innocent of killing Fiona and Junior, I didn’t fully trust their spy capabilities. His need to trust them was another reason why I hadn’t told Gator the truth. “Hey!” I walked over. “Gator—”

“Rainbow and I opened that room,” he said, ignoring me. “The rest of the cache is in there.”

Both Duane and Jasmine whirled around to face him. “You found the rest?” Jasmine said. “You mean, all the stuff mentioned in the log? *All of it?”*

Oh…there was a log? I swore. “Gator, we decided not to tell them—”

He held up his hand to basically tell me he was going off-road. “Not all of it, but a lot of it. Enough to satisfy Pirate Sam. On the map, that room is just a single room. But we found an exit from the room that leads to another set of tunnels and cellars. It’s packed with vigilante items.”

I sighed loudly, but they ignored me.

Duane crouched down and bowed his head. “Now is not the time to find it,” he said. “If we know where it is, Pirate Sam will take it.”

Jasmine looked stunned. “We’ll lose everything.” She looked at Gator. “How could you look for it? How could you find it? Why would you do that?”

“We needed a plan for tonight,” Gator said. “We need to know these tunnels better than he did. I didn’t expect we’d find it, but you needed to know what’s at stake.”

“And now he’s in there? With it?” Jasmine looked crushed. “Is there really an exit?”

Gator shrugged. “We didn’t find one, but we didn’t look extensively. Most likely it connects somewhere.”

“How did he find it?” Duane said. “How did Saxon open the door to get in there?”

Gator looked over at me, then clearly decided to continue the Saxon charade. “I was in there, and he walked in. He must have seen the article in the paper and come down to the tunnels.”

Jasmine glared at me. “So this is your fault?”

“My fault? We figured out who was blackmailing you. You guys never did.”

“But what does it matter?” Jasmine sank down and rested her hands on her knees. “We still have to give it to him. He still knows what he knows. We can’t stop him from taking it.”

“Screw that. I’ll kill him.” Duane was up now and feeling the walls for triggers to open it. “Then he can’t tell anyone. Rainbow’s right. We got him now.”

Um, Rainbow had not said to kill anyone.

Jasmine looked defeated. “Does that have to be the only way? I’m so tired of killing.”

“He has to be the one who killed Junior,” Duane snapped. “Are you going to let him live after that?”

Tears filled Jasmine’s eyes. “I know. I know. You’re right.”

“Wait!” I walked into their family circle. “It’s not the only way. We’ll tell the police and—”

“No!” All three of them yelled it at the same time.

Because if no one knows, no one goes. Their family secret was bad enough that Duane would kill to protect it instead of going to the police?

Use of deadly force was only appropriate to defend against deadly force. So, yeah…a life for a life. But who had killed who?

“No police,” Jasmine said firmly. “We’ll handle it.” She paused. “Maybe it’s time for you to leave, Rainbow.”

“Yep. Leave and never remember any of this.” Duane gave me a hard look before resuming his search for the lever to open the wall. “Forget it all.”

Oh, boy. The Wilsons were fully serious right now. I did appreciate them wanting me to get out before I got in too deep. So, see? They were such sweetie pies.

Duane dropped his hands from the wall. “Why am I looking for the door? You guys know how to open it.” He stepped back. “Let me in. Now.”

Shirley suddenly walked around the corner. Her ski mask was up, and her tiara was glistening in the headlamp emporium of light. “Hi. Sorry I’m late. I was scared you guys were going to kill each other, and I didn’t want to get caught in the kerfuffle.”

I frowned. Why had Shirley chosen that moment to show herself? It was kind of a tense moment.

Duane ignored her. “Open the door, Gator.”

Gator and I looked at each other, and then I saw Shirley give us a warning nod out of the corner of my eye. She jerked her head backward, and I stiffened.

Someone was coming. But who was it?

That was why she'd appeared. Awareness flickered in Gator's eyes as he came to the same conclusion.

This was it. Time to play our hand. I shook out my hands, suddenly nervous.

Gator turned to his brother. "I'll open it on one condition," he said. "Don't kill him right away. Maybe we can think of a better solution."

Duane frowned. "But—"

"If we can't, you can kill him," Gator said. "Just give us time."

Jasmine nodded. "I agree. If there's a better way…I would love that."

Duane exhaled, and his shoulders seemed to sag. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, okay."

Gator silently walked over to the opposite wall where a hole had been scraped out of the rock. An iron rod was on the floor, so he picked it up and slid it into the hole. He looked at me. "Rainbow?"

If I was right about who was coming, then now was the time to open the room. To unleash the beast. So, I walked over to the other side, reached behind a stack of shelves, and pulled on an old nail that was sticking out of the wall.

Then, Gator went to the right, several yards away, and kicked aside an old barrel. Underneath the barrel was a rusted tea kettle. He crouched down and pushed the spout down.

The moment he released the spout, a grinding sound echoed through the tunnel.

Duane and Jasmine stepped back as a portion of rock about two feet wide and high slid backwards and out of sight, leaving an opening big enough to crawl through at the bottom of the wall.

"No way," Jasmine whispered. "That is so cool."

"Me first." Duane got down on his knees and peered through the hole. "It's a tunnel. A death trap. He could shoot me before I can get through."

Umm…I looked at Shirley. The door was open. Saxon was defenseless.

She rolled her eyes at me, and stepped back…

“What in the actual happy days?” Mirabelle walked around the corner, holding one of the glow sticks I’d so nicely left behind. She had headphones around her neck, as if she’d been listening to music before dropping in to the party. “That’s amazing. I knew you knew where it was.”

Oh, wait, what? Mirabelle was there? I hadn’t expected that. How had she evaded Madge? She was going to get caught in the crossfire. Shirley must have figured she couldn’t stop her, and so she’d tried to warn me.

I had totally misread Shirley’s silent communication. Uh, oh.

“I heard her coming a minute ago,” Shirley whispered. “She must have followed us into the tunnels.”

Mirabelle glanced at her and winked. “How could I not come down here? You guys are terrible liars. That entrance was so well hidden. I never would have found it on my own. Smooches, ladies!” She frowned. “Why are you wearing a wetsuit?”

“I’m a fashion trendsetter,” I said quickly. “Why are you here?”

She rolled her eyes. “To defend the innocent, of course. Someone has to do it.”

“Innocent what?”

“Artifacts!”

Duane scrambled to his feet, and Gator threw an elbow into the wall. The rock immediately slid back into place, making the tunnel invisible.

“Who are you?” Duane asked.

“Hi, all!” Mirabelle waved at everyone. “My name’s Mirabelle Skye from the Blueberry Island Historical Society. I’m here to preserve and protect island history.”

I cleared my throat. “Mirabelle, this isn’t a good time—”

“Of course it is. You found the stash. I heard you.” Her eyes were glistening with delight. “Do you realize what a big day this is for the island?

This is history! Think of all the secrets that have been hiding for so long down here."

She was so happy that she appeared to be completely oblivious to the fact that she was standing in a tunnel with the Wilsons. I mean, yes, Shirley and I were no danger, but the Wilsons? Didn't she also hear them talking about killing poor Saxon?

Duane narrowed his eyes. "What stash?"

"Mirabelle," I said firmly. "There's no stash of anything. We're just having fun down here." I did not need the Wilsons thinking that I'd betrayed them.

She folded her arms over her chest. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Rainbow. Do you think I'm a complete idiot? I mean, clearly you do if you think I didn't figure out you were running around down here with all your artifacts and tunnel questions."

The Wilsons looked at each other, and I saw Duane nod, clearly asking for permission to shut her up.

Good heavens. He was so violent.

Mirabelle didn't appear to care. "Let's open it and see what's down here—"

"Mirabelle," I interrupted. "The man who killed Junior is locked inside that room. Don't go in there." It wasn't the man who had killed Junior. It was Saxon, but she didn't need to know that. I just needed her to leave.

She paused. "Really?"

"Yes."

"You left him alone with the artifacts? Seriously!?" She hurried over and pulled the first lever, clearly having been watching us. "He won't kill me."

"Delusional confidence," Shirley muttered.

"Hey." Duane grabbed her arm and yanked her away from the wall. "Don't—"

He suddenly stiffened, his body trembled, and then he dropped.

Um…what?

Mirabelle held up a taser. “Anyone else want to stop me?”

I blinked. What had just happened? I looked at Shirley, and she looked as startled as I felt.

Mirabelle shrugged. “I told you I’d met a lot of creepy guys. You really think I’d come down here without protection?”

Gator’s brows shot up, and he snatched the taser out of Mirabelle’s hand before she could react. “What is wrong with you? Get out.”

“No.” She walked over and pulled the rusty nail. “I know what’s going on with you all. You’re selling these treasures, and it’s wrong. These are treasures that belong to the island.”

“We’re not—”

“Oh, come on, Jasmine,” Mirabelle interrupted. “I’ve been brokering those deals for you for several years. I know where they’re coming from. It just took me time to figure it all out.”

I turned to Jasmine. “Mirabelle’s the one who has been selling them for you?”

“She knows a jeweler,” Jasmine said. “I didn’t tell her where I was getting them. I just showed the first one to her to see if it had any value and if the society wanted to buy it. And then she said she could get more money for it.”

She knows a jeweler. Yep, Mirabelle had mentioned that before.

Duane swore. “You went to someone on the island? Jasmine, what the hell? That was so stupid.”

“I’m sorry it was stupid,” she shouted, “but I was desperate. And I trusted Mirabelle. I knew she would tell me what they were really worth.”

“Wait a sec,” I held up my hands. “Mirabelle, if you believe that these items should belong to the island and not be sold, why were you selling them for Jasmine?”

“Because if I didn’t, someone else would. I took a generous commission for each sale, and then used the proceeds to start buying them back,” she shot back.

“Wait a second,” Jasmine interrupted. “You cheated me?”

“I saved the legacy,” Mirabelle corrected her. “Honestly, keep up, girl! And you’re welcome for saving it! You would definitely have regretted it later in life if the pieces disappeared.”

“Where are all the items?” Jasmine asked.

“My jeweler is holding the rest for me until I can raise enough money. I have most of them back already. They’re in my home.” She gave a long look at Jasmine. “Where they belong.”

Shirley cleared her throat. “You mean, they belong in the historical society?”

Mirabelle threw up her hands. “Yes, obviously, but I can’t put them there until all this gets sorted out.” She waved her hands at the Wilsons. “I don’t know how you found the stash, but you don’t get to sell it for money. I’m taking over now.”

Duane had recovered enough to sit up, then started to laugh. “You’re taking over?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

Wow. I fully admired her audacity on so many levels, not least of all taking on the Wilsons. Or maybe that was stupidity. Or both.

Duane lunged to his feet, walked over to her, and grabbed her shoulders. “Get the hell out of this tunnel,” he growled, “and don’t come back. Jasmine isn’t giving you another piece, and we’ll be by tomorrow to get what you have. It better be there.”

“Hey! Let go!” Mirabelle shouted and tried to get away, but Duane pushed her back against the wall.

Gator and Jasmine leapt at Duane and tried to pull his hands away, shouting at him to back off.

He didn’t even seem to notice his siblings trying to get him to stop. He just leaned into Mirabelle. “This isn’t your party,” he snarled. “This isn’t your time. Walk away while you still can.” Then he flung her down.

She dropped to her knees, gasping.

Gator swore. “Get out of here, Mirabelle. Run like hell, and don’t look back.”

“Yes, leave,” I said urgently.

“Get out while you can,” Shirley agreed.

But Mirabelle looked up, and there was a fire in her eyes. “You Wilsons have been tainting this town since you moved here, and now you’re desecrating its history. This is our island. Not yours.”

Oh…she was pissed. I admired that greatly. Angry women could do great things.

“Our family has been on this island for generations,” Jasmine snapped. “My mom’s lineage goes all the way back to the 1800s! She just moved to Texas for college and then stayed there for a few years. We belong here. This is our history.”

Mirabelle stood up. “No. It’s not. It’s the island’s.”

Things were getting heated. Yikes. “I’m going with the Wilsons on this one, Mirabelle,” I said. “I think it’s best if you leave.”

“Of course you do!” She spun toward me. “You’ve been lying to me all along! Telling me you don’t even know where the stash is. Or the tunnels. You know how much this means to me, and you’ve cut me out.”

“Because people are getting stabbed and poisoned for knowing this,” I shouted at her. “I don’t want you stabbed or poisoned.”

She froze. “Poison? You mean Harvey?”

“Yes,” I said.

“What?” She took a step back. “You think Harvey was related to the artifacts?”

“Well, we don’t know for sure, but we think so. And Fiona.”

“Fiona?” Mirabelle looked horrified. “How was she poisoned? I thought she just died.”

“She had a margarita in her thermos when they found her,” Shirley said. “Probably that.”

Mirabelle stared at her. “I brought her that margarita.”

The tunnel went silent.

“Holy cannoli,” Shirley whispered.

“You?” I asked. This had not been on my Bingo card for tonight.

“Yes,” Mirabelle said. “She wanted to talk about artifacts, so we agreed to meet on the beach. She said it was the best place—” She looked around. “I didn’t poison her, I swear—"

“And Junior? Did you kill him too? Or are you working with Saxon?” Duane’s voice was low. Angry. Terrifying. “That’s why you’re here. You’re meeting Saxon. To take everything.”

“No, I swear I didn’t—”

“Did you poison Harvey? It was in his coffee.” I blurted out the question, fully not expecting Mirabelle to have had a role in this carnage.

“Coffee? It was in his coffee?” She blanched. “It wasn’t my fault. I just stopped by to drop off something—”

Oh, hellfire and hopscotch. “You poisoned Fiona and Harvey?”

“If I did, it was an accident!” But she was panicking now. Her voice escalating.

Duane moved toward her, and to my shock, she pulled out an antique pistol and aimed it at him. “Stay right there,” she warned. “Back off, Duane!”

“Oh, fire and sparkles,” Shirley whispered. “She’s armed.”

“That’s one of ours,” Duane shouted. “That’s a vigilante pistol. I can see the coin on the side!”

“You have a vigilante pistol?” I asked.

“I want one,” Shirley said. “We’re the new vigilantes. We should have those.”

All the Wilsons circled her. “Why do you have one of our guns?” Gator asked, sounding just as menacing as his aggressive brother.

“It was in the inventory when I took over the historical society.” Mirabelle was assessing the encroaching Wilson men with the calm demeanor of a woman who had indeed dealt with shady men before. “I didn’t take it. I’m preserving the whole collection for the island.”

“You killed Fiona and Junior,” Duane said. “You did it.”

“I did not!” She looked over at me and Shirley and tapped her left hand to her ear.

“Uh, oh,” Shirley whispered. “She’s going to fire that thing. Cover your ears.”

Oh, crap. “We’ll all go deaf.”

“Better than murdered by the Wilsons.”

We both covered our ears. “Don’t, Mirabelle—"

Mirabelle grabbed her headphones and pulled them over her ears. “Back off,” she shouted. “All of you stand down. I didn’t kill anyone. I’m just here for the artifacts!”

“Those are ours!” Duane lunged for her, and she pulled the trigger.

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CHAPTER 42

BLINDING white light exploded through the tunnel like lightning.

The crack of the gun was so loud it felt like it punched the air out of my lungs.

It echoed violently through the tunnel, driving me to the ground.

I clenched my hands over my ears, trying to protect them from the reverberation.

Boom!

Boom!

Boom!

Again and again, so loud, bouncing over each echo so fast that I couldn't even separate them. Had there been more than one shot? Had she shot everyone?

My ears were ringing. Screaming in pain.

My nose burned with acrid gunpowder.

And still more echoes. Boom! Boom! Boom!

Someone grabbed my arm, and I looked up to see Shirley, barely visible through dark clouds of dust and powder. She shouted something at me, but I couldn't hear it.

Had she been shot?

Metal burning.

Sulfur searing my lungs.

I didn’t even know which way to go to get away.

Had Mirabelle shot Duane? What had she shot?

I’d promised Duchess Fang I wouldn’t die.

I looked up. Everyone was down on the ground, covering their ears.

Duane was down. Bleeding from his head.

Mirabelle was at the tea kettle.

She was going after the treasure. And Saxon!

No! I scrambled across the floor as she pulled the spout. The door slid open, and she dropped to her knees to crawl through. The minute she went down, I launched myself at her and landed on top of her.

My ears were ringing so badly I couldn’t hear anything. I didn’t know if she was yelling. But she was fighting.

I shoved my elbow in her back and my knee in her hamstring, fighting with everything I had to stay alive. Did she still have the gun? I didn’t know.

The suit was so hot. I was melting. Couldn’t really move.

But she couldn’t shoot me if I was on her back. Could she?

Maybe. I didn’t know.

Had she shot Duane? Had she poisoned Fiona? And Harvey?

I just had to hang on long enough for someone else to recover.

And where the hell was Ethan? He was supposed to be there by now—

Someone yanked me off her, and I crashed into Jasmine. I rolled just in time to see Tony grab Mirabelle’s wrists and slap them into pink fur-covered handcuffs.

I gaped at him. “Tony?” I couldn’t hear my own voice. What was he doing there?

He looked over at me and said something, but I couldn’t hear it.

Gator was on his knees now, bent over Duane.

Jasmine shoved me off her and crawled over to him. She pulled his head onto her lap.

Shirley? Where was Shirley?

I looked around and saw her on her knees. She yelled something, but I shook my head. I gave her a thumbs up, and she nodded.

Okay, she was all right. “Go call 911,” I shouted at her, finally beginning to hear the muffled sound of my voice. “Find an exit!”

She nodded, scrambled to her feet, and disappeared around the corner.

Tony dragged Mirabelle away from the entrance and tossed her against the side of the tunnel. He grabbed her gun from the ground and aimed at her.

She was shouting at him. Something about how she was protecting the town from the Wilsons.

My head was still spinning, and my ears were ringing. Gator and Jasmine were bent over Duane. Shirley had gone for help. Tony had Mirabelle at gunpoint.

Saxon? Was he okay?

I crawled inside, scooting through the tunnel, shouting his name.

The echoes had stopped, but my ears were still ringing, and my nose was burning.

I got through the tunnel and scrambled to my feet. “Saxon!” This time, I could hear my voice more clearly. It was muffled and distorted, but I could hear the words.

Hooray for progress.

I looked around the root cellar. It was small, claustrophobic, and I was so glad Mirabelle hadn’t made it in there with a gun. “Saxon?” He wasn’t in sight.

He poked his head around a corner. I hadn’t been lying when I said there was a second tunnel off the back of the room. “Is it safe? Those Wilsons are terrifying. What happened?”

Between my returning hearing and my awesome lip-reading skills, I was able to follow the conversation. “Mirabelle shot a gun.”

“She did?” He shot an alarmed look at the tunnel and didn’t come out from behind the wall. “Did she shoot anyone?”

I coughed and waved my hand through the powder smoke that was starting to drift in. “I don’t know. It’s chaos out there. I wanted to make sure you were okay. We got her though. I tackled her, and Tony handcuffed her.” I had tackled an armed woman? What kind of lunatic had I become? “She was ranting about how she had to preserve the antiquities of the island.”

“Wow.” Saxon’s brows shot up. “You and Tony took her down? What about Ethan? He was supposed to handle all of this. Wasn’t that the plan?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.” I still couldn’t believe he hadn’t come. “I told him what we were doing. He promised he’d show up. That had been the plan.”

“Shoulda told Charlene,” Saxon said. “She’s the real backbone of this town.” He walked out from behind the wall. “Ethan will never be good enough to replace her.”

“Is that so?” Ethan stepped out from behind Saxon.

We both jumped, startled by his sudden appearance. “Where the hell did you come from?” Saxon said.

“Been there all along.”

My heart started racing with urgency. “Duane attacked Mirabelle, and she shot a gun,” I said. “You need to go arrest him. Her. Both of them, maybe.”

“On it.” He strode toward me, and I tensed, but he walked right past me.

I frowned and turned as he went to the tunnel. He was really going to arrest Duane and Mirabelle? Just walk right by me?

But then he smacked his palm on the wall by the tunnel, and the rock slid shut.

Oh…hell… I mean, oh, goody.

Saxon stiffened. “Duane and Mirabelle are out there.”

Ethan turned toward us. “Charlene’s on her way. I heard Shirley say she was going to go get her.”

I stiffened. I had not planned to be locked alone with Ethan.

No, it was fine. We could roll with it.

Saxon waved his hands. “Well, go out there—”

Ethan turned to Saxon, still standing between us and the exit. “You think I’ll never be as good as Charlene? Isn’t that what you said?” His voice was low. Hard. Not super friendly.

Saxon frowned. “Why are you so hostile? No one is as good as Charlene. Like no one ever. It’s not an insult.”

“I was NYPD for twelve years. I solved more cases than anyone.” Ethan was wearing his gun. But not his uniform. Was that a bad sign? I was thinking it was. “I’m so much better than her. And my dad. And all of you small-town losers who think you’re so much. You’re not. The idiots who fired me are stupid. My dad is an idiot, and he’ll know it soon enough.”

Sweat was pouring down my face. From terror? From neoprene? So many choices. Was he planning to kill his dad?

Saxon narrowed his eyes. “Hey, little man, don’t insult our island. It’s full of outstanding people. You don’t get to come in here and mock us. You’re an outsider, and you always have been. If you think we’re so beneath you, why don’t you leave, then?”

Saxon was good. I was so impressed. “Um, Saxon—”

“You’re sitting on all this treasure. Millions of dollars. For more than a hundred years, and no one does anything about it. Mirabelle is trying to snag some items. Jasmine sold a few. Bunch of low-level stupidity.” Ethan gestured at the cavern behind Saxon. “That kind of wealth gives freedom. No strings attached. Just freedom.”

Not just freedom. Proof of worth to mean daddies who didn’t believe in their kids. Raise your hand if you have daddy issues. Anyone?

“You want the vigilante treasure?” Saxon’s jaw dropped open. “Why would you take that? It belongs to the island. Not the people. The island.”

“Because I deserve it. I’ve proved myself again and again, and my dad keeps screwing things over.” Ethan made a noise of aggravation, and he pulled out a knife. “Time for him to realize he was dead wrong. To admit it to my face.”

A knife? Thank goodness. After Mirabelle’s stunt, I’d been worried he’d whip out a gun and call it a day.

Saxon frowned. “What are you doing, carving cheese?”

I had to stifle a laugh. Cheese? Saxon was at the other end of the cavern, too far for Ethan to reach, and I saw that he’d edged back behind the wall ever so slightly. Smart man.

“No.” Ethan looked at me.

Me. He was going to carve me.

Because I, on the other hand, was within reach. Not literally, but he was faster, longer, and I was in a freaking wetsuit. I let out a breath. “Why’d you kill Junior, Ethan?” Time to get to business.

“I didn’t kill him. You did.”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Nope, I didn’t. He also never couriered for my firm. And he was never at a Christmas party with me. You set all that up to make me take the fall for it. But I don’t want to. I already made choices to keep myself out of prison.”

I saw Saxon slip out of sight. Well done.

Ethan tapped the knife on the rock, making a pinging echo in the small chamber. “I searched Junior’s house, and I found printouts of correspondence between the two of you. You wanted the treasure. He was helping you. Turns out, an entrance to the tunnel system is on the dairy property and another one is by your shop.”

“Yep. I know about the entrances, too.” I leaned against the rock and crossed my ankles, trying to act like I knew I had the upper hand. He

wouldn’t like that. He’d want me scared. He’d want me to acknowledge his awesomeness. “But there was no correspondence between us. You made that up.”

I had to piss him off enough to make a mistake. Make him not think.

He cocked his head and studied me. “You think you’re going to chitchat me into some random confession of something I didn’t do?”

“That’s my plan.”

“Your plan.” He laughed softly and ran the knife along the wall like he was sharpening it. “Your plan is a little flawed, Evie.”

“You’re just going to stab Saxon, put my fingerprints on the knife, then accidentally shoot me while you’re trying to apprehend me, but not until Saxon is dead and can’t tell anyone what really happened.”

He rubbed his jaw, as if he were contemplating my wonderful suggestion. “That’s such an interesting idea. Not bad for some mob attorney.” He grinned. “You know, too bad you ditched the mob. If you hadn’t, they might be mad if something happened to you, but right now, they’re just going to hunt you down and kill you anyway. They won’t care if you get shot in a tunnel. No repercussions for whoever does it.”

“I know, right? Life’s so ironic. I find my ice cream purpose in life, and then boom, I die.”

“Yep.”

I looked at him. “See, that’s the funny thing, Ethan. They’re going to kill me in the next day or two, so really, what do I have to lose?”

Something flickered in his eyes. Frustration, maybe? Anger? Irritation? Wounded pride. He was probably very sad that I wasn’t sobbing for mercy or admiring his wisdom. Hopefully, at least. “Well,” he said, “it could be a painful, torturous death.”

“It could,” I agreed, “but it will still end eventually. Like when my mom died, the pain was so great I thought I’d never survive it. I thought it would kill me. I wanted it to kill me. But it didn’t. It went on and on and on. But if,

for example, you shoot me or stab me and let me bleed out?" I shrugged. "It's just a few minutes, and then I'm with my mom again, so it's all good, right?"

He narrowed his eyes. "It's not good."

"It is." I shrugged. "Since my mom died, I'm all alone. I buried myself in work, but that blew up, so what am I going to do? Sell ice cream on a small island for the rest of my life?"

His hand tightened around the knife handle. "You think you're too good for this island?"

I shrugged again. "Who cares who is better than who?"

"I do! I'm better than all these losers, and I'm better than some hotshot attorney who thinks she can outrun the mob." He grinned. "I called that number, Evie. They're coming for you."

Oh…cold clamped around my gut, despite the neoprene sausage casing. But I lifted my chin. "Then no time like the present."

"To do what?"

I shrugged. "Die."

He blinked. "Die?"

"Yeah." I stared at him. "You stabbed Junior and poisoned Fiona and Harvey." I'd seen the shock on Mirabelle's face. If she delivered the poison to Fiona, it hadn't been on purpose. Somehow, Ethan had made it happen. She'd made a few comments about how he'd helped with the society, so that had to be the connection. "Plus, you took poor Jasmine's toe, and you want to wipe out this town's legacy. You're an asshole, you deserved to be fired from the NYPD, rejected by your dad, and you're dumber than any of the people in this town."

His eyes narrowed, and his upper lip snarled.

"If you were so good," I continued, "the NYPD wouldn't have figured out what you were doing and fired you, would they? And Fiona wouldn't have left a nice list of what you were doing, would she? She told me what

she was going to tell Charlene, Ethan. And Charlene was going to tell your dad, wasn't she? Your dad was going to find out you were blackmailing the Wilsons for the treasure, and he'd know he was right."

Ethan's nostrils flared, and his jaw flexed.

She hadn't left that list, but close enough, so basically I was being forthright and honest. "Some old lady ice cream maven figured you out, but she gave you a chance, didn't she? She told you to walk away, and she wouldn't tell on you. She gave you a chance, so you killed her."

"I didn't kill her. Mirabelle did."

See? He'd known that Mirabelle had brought the drinks! How had he gotten her to do it without her knowing? Had he poisoned the margarita that she brought? Or Fiona's thermos? He was too controlled. I'd thrown everything at him, but he wasn't admitting anything. I could feel his tension, but he had too many years of practice.

I raised my voice, pushing harder. "You can't even kill an old lady yourself. What kind of loser is that? You." I pointed at him. "You're the loser, Ethan. And no matter how much vigilante treasure you take or how many people you stab in the process, you're still the loser. You'll never outrun it. You'll always know that your dad knows it."

"I'm not dumber than you. You told me what you were doing to set up Mirabelle and Saxon, and you asked me to come arrest them. You thought —" He stopped suddenly as awareness dawned.

"Right. I thought you would come and play your hand," I said. "You've used anonymity to threaten everyone, and now you have to show your face. So yay, me. I win."

"Win?" He scoffed. "What's the plan, Evie? You got me down here, and now you're locked in a cavern with me. There's no way out."

"I don't want to get out. I just want you to admit you killed Junior and are a terrible human being. And then I'm happy to die."

"No one wants to die."

“See?” I grinned at him. “That’s your problem. You didn’t take into account dealing with someone who has nothing left to live for.” I paused. “Except justice.”

“Justice? I haven’t admitted to anything.”

“No. But what if I start to walk out of here? Are you going to let me? Or stab me?”

His smile faded. “No one will know if I stab you.”

“I’ll know.”

“You’ll be dead.”

“Saxon will know.”

“Also dead.” He paused. “Just so you know, Junior screamed when he died. He suffered. And this time, I have time to make it worse.”

And bingo. There it was. His ultimate weakness. Pride. Wanting credit for his greatness. “Was it fun to stab him?”

“Always fun. The minute he figured out it was me pressuring his buddies, he came and challenged me. That was dumb. Really dumb. Just like how you’re being dumb. Dumbasses get stabbed.”

“By people like you.” *Always* fun? How many more had he stabbed?

He grinned. “Yes. By me.”

And there we go! Yay for me! Of course, I knew that he’d admitted it because he wanted me to know that I was going to die. That was his way of promising to kill me. Such a sweetie. “Why did you stab him?”

He shrugged. “He threatened me.”

“How?”

“He told me that he’d figured out I’d poisoned Fiona, and he was going to tell Charlene. He felt a little betrayed since we’d gone fishing together, so it was personal to him.”

“I can imagine. Fishing buddies, and all.” I knew that betrayal. Leah Walters, FBI, anyone?

“Fishing buddies is a little overstated.” He tapped his knife on his thigh. “We fished. I asked him about the Wilsons. He fed me info, but never realized it.”

Poor Junior. Just a nice guy who’d been caught in the tractor beam of a narcissistic murderer. “You could have just blackmailed him. You didn’t have to stab him.”

“He was panicking, so I had to calm him down.”

“By stabbing him.”

“It calmed him down, so that worked out.”

“Poison would have calmed him down more subtly.” I chose my words carefully, trying to edge him around to where I wanted him.

He nodded. “Yep, it would. Would have preferred that, but sometimes you just gotta act fast. No time to dwell. Victory goes to those not afraid to take action.”

“Hmm…” I folded my arms. “Why aren’t you going to poison me? You could pretend that I passed out from heat exhaustion. That would be subtle.”

He laughed softly. “Mirabelle’s not around to deliver the drinks. Can’t get my hands dirty on that one.”

I sighed. “You really made her do it?”

“I didn’t make her. She’s just too trusting.“ He shrugged. “She loves to talk about the vigilante treasure with anyone who will listen. Easy enough to find the laudanum, and toss it in the thermos for her beach outing with Fiona. Worked out perfectly.”

He was so proud. Ego was such a liability. Poor guy. Instead of congratulating him on his brilliance, I just sighed. “So, you’re telling me all this just to prove you’re going to kill me, right?”

“Maybe.” He nodded at the wall. “I jammed the door. We have plenty of time.”

I cocked my head. “I wish you were better at all of this. I really thought you’d be a more worthy opponent.”

Frustration flashed across his face. “What is *wrong* with you? You’re about to die. Why don’t you care?”

“Here’s the thing, Ethan. I do care. Which is why I have an exit out of here.”

“No exit. I checked.”

“Did you? Did you also think to put my safe in a good place? Or is Charlene going to find it when she checks on you?”

Genuine surprise lit up his face. “The safe?”

“Yeah. Too late to hide it. She’s getting it right now.” That was the one thing I wasn’t sure about. Or I hadn’t been until this moment, when the expression on his face told me that my safe was indeed on his kitchen counter or somewhere obvious like that, somewhere that Charlene would find. “So, even if you kill me, she’s got the safe thing on you. You’re exposed. Ethan.”

I saw the moment he realized that he was busted, that Charlene would finally see who he really was.

Rage contorted his face, and he lunged at me.

I yelped, and I sprinted for the back tunnel.

He was fast, though, and I was neoprene-slow. I wasn’t going to make it. I dove and rolled to the side as sharp pain hit my side.

Then there was a bellow of outrage and a thud.

I scrambled to my feet as Saxon leaned around the corner. “Did we get him?”

I ran over to the hole in the floor that Saxon had opened with the trapdoor lever we’d found earlier.

I peered over the edge.

Ethan was trying to climb out, but the walls were smooth and just barely high enough.

Saxon came to stand beside me. “You are one brave woman, Rainbow.”

I let out my breath and put my hand on my side where it hurt. “Not brave. Just…” Just what? Wanted to be on the good side for once? To prove to the two nicest humans alive that their belief in me was worth it? To be a hero?

Yeah. Maybe it was that. Or all of them. Or maybe mom issues.

Saxon looked at me. “Do I get a recipe now?”

I grinned. “Next time you want a Fiona recipe, don’t break into my store. Just ask. We can work together. It’s a small island. Ice cream for all.” He’d been my last stop earlier today. I wanted my key, and I wanted to know why he’d wanted into my store. Once he’d admitted he’d wanted the recipe for the Caramel Pecan Delight for his restaurant, had I blackmailed him into helping me, since I knew from the boat that he was a great actor?

Maybe. Maybe not.

He grinned. “Yeah, will do.”

At that moment, the tunnel door slid open, and Charlene crawled through. She was in full uniform, and she looked pissed. “Why are you bleeding, Evie?”

Was I bleeding? I pulled my hand away from my side and saw blood on it. Huh. I hadn’t even realized. “Ethan stabbed me.”

She blinked. “What?”

I pointed at the hole, where Ethan had gone suddenly silent. “Ethan stabbed Junior. He admitted it. He also poisoned Fiona.” I was really hoping that Mirabelle hadn’t shot anyone.

“I did not,” Ethan said, his voice calm. “They ambushed me—”

Saxon held up his phone. “I recorded his confession—”

“You stupid liars,” Ethan shouted, his voice no longer quite so calm. Or smug.

Yay for us!

Charlene stood up and dusted off her knees. “Mirabelle’s ranting about how she didn’t poison Fiona and Harvey, and that it’s not her fault, even

though she brought them both drinks that day.”

“Oh, no. Poor Mirabelle. Ethan set her up.”

She nodded. “As it turns out, Harvey had laudanum in his system. When I found the safe at Ethan’s, I also found a bottle in his kitchen. Looks like he swiped it from the historical society.”

Victory rushed through me. “So, that’s it then.”

“Yep.”

I heard the sadness in her voice. For Fiona. “I’m sorry, Charlene.”

She lifted her chin. “I can hear Fiona cheering, can’t you? We got it sorted, and that’s what matters.”

There was a ruckus at the tunnel, and I looked over to see Shirley scrambling through. She popped out, and Coco appeared right behind her.

My throat tightened when I saw them, and my hands finally started to shake as the adrenaline wore off. “It worked,” I said, surprised that my voice was shaky.

“She got stabbed,” Saxon said proudly. “She’s a beast!”

“It’s not bad. Just a scrape—"

“Rainbow!” Shirley flung herself at me, and wrapped me up in a hug, and Coco did the same.

And for a moment, all I could do was let go, of the fear, of the loneliness, of being lost. I fell into the embrace of the two women who had dragged me into being the woman I’d never even thought about becoming.

Until now.

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CHAPTER 43

"YOU POKED that hornet's nest like a crazy woman," Coco said after watching the video of me and Ethan for the zillionth time.

"I know. Watching it made me realize that I was legit insane." I was also so impressed that Saxon had gotten a video recording. I'd told him to go for audio, but he'd been brave enough to get a video.

Well worth a recipe or two, for sure.

I smiled at Duchess Fang sitting on the railing, her tail flicking. She hadn't given me much of a welcome when I'd walked in, but I knew, in her little kitty-cat heart, that she was so happy to see me.

I'd convinced her to sit on my lap for several minutes, so that was progress.

The three of us and Duchess Fang were on my front deck, watching the sunrise over the island. And yes, we were still wearing our tiaras, but the wetsuit was forever banished from my body.

It had taken hours to sort out the chaos underground. Mirabelle had shot the ceiling, but a piece had fallen on Duane, so there was a little bit to untangle, but I had the sense that Mirabelle wasn't going to jail, and Duane wasn't going to die.

We'd finally been released by Charlene just before dawn. The EMTs had treated my stab wound, which had been superficial, thanks to the thick

neoprene.

We'd decided to celebrate our success with coffee, sunrise, and girl time.

Shirley looked over at me. "You rode that horse like a woman who really didn't care if she died. Was that for real?"

I wrapped my hands around the mug and studied the orange and gold sky. "I do care if I die, but in that moment…I don't know. I guess I was too caught up in what I was doing to think about how dangerous it was to engage him like that." Maybe my sparring with Ethan had been driven by the same ego that had made him decide to take on the Wilsons. The need to be smarter and to prove it.

I wasn't impressed with myself…but at the same time…I was also super proud of myself. My mom would have been thrilled. She always believed in women being badasses.

"Spoken like a true warrior," Shirley said with a grin. "You were in the game and taking each moment like a champ. I'm super proud of you."

I looked over at her. "That was completely insane, guys." I was still replaying the events in my head. "How on earth did you two drag me into that whole thing, and make me think it was a good idea?"

They both smiled. "We're magical," Coco said.

"It's the Fiona effect," Shirley said. "You've become a part of her legacy now. No going back."

I watched a truck drive down the road. It wasn't one I recognized, but it kept going past my store, so I relaxed. "At any moment, the past is going to find me," I said. "I don't want it to."

Shirley sighed and shifted in her chair. "Well, when Nora writes up what happened down in those tunnels, you'll be the town hero. Everyone will fight for you."

"She can't write about the tunnels, and we all know it. They have to stay a secret. The treasure has to remain protected." I sighed. "I like it here," I

said softly. “I didn’t come here to stay, but…” I shrugged. “Island life is growing on me.”

Coco and Shirley exchanged grins. “Glad to hear it,” Shirley said. “You’re growing on us, too.”

My heart got a little warm. “I’m not making any promises,” I said.

There was a light knock at my door. I leaned over the railing to look along the side of the building, and I saw someone I’d been expecting standing at the top of the stairs. “I’ll be right back, ladies. Stay here.”

They both turned to watch me go back inside to answer the door, but neither of them got up.

I walked to the door and opened it. I smiled. “Came back for your scissors, did you?”

Bernie was leaning against the railing, his arms folded over his chest while he watched the sunrise. “Don’t know what you’re talking about, Evie.”

I grabbed the pink craft scissors off my kitchen counter and held them out to him. “Thanks for the help on the *Buttered Rum*. With Fiona’s jewelry box. And the note you got to Coco. And driving my truck to the corn stand.”

He took the scissors, but still didn’t look at me. “Still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It took me a while to realize the scissors were your calling card,” I said. “Next time, just knock and come on in.”

He stuffed them in his back pocket. “Why would you think they’re my scissors? They’re pink.”

“Fiona told me.”

He grinned. “Fiona’s telling tall tales again.”

“As always, I expect.” I paused. “Honestly, it was the fact you and Harvey needlepoint together. I thought maybe it was your wife’s scissors. Once I knew you were involved, I figured it had been you.”

“Not bad, Evie.” He nodded. “That’s how I used to tell Fiona that I had something she needed to know. I don’t get involved with anything, but when something needed Fiona’s attention, I let her know. She’d see the scissors and come find me.”

I smiled. “That’s getting involved, Bernie.”

“Nope. Not at all. I’m just chatting, and it’s not my responsibility what people do with the words they hear me say.” He shrugged. “When I met you, I knew she’d like you. I left the scissors…well…I felt like she wanted me to. If you figured out I’d left them, then you could come find me and ask. If you didn’t…well…I’d just repossess them at some point.”

He was such a sweet man. “Fiona will live forever, won’t she?”

He grinned. “Hell, yeah, she will.” He cocked his head. “At what point did you figure out I was involved? Just out of curiosity.”

I leaned on the opposite railing so I was facing him. “When Gator said he’d told a friend, the only person he could trust, I knew it was you. Once I knew he’d told you, then a lot of things fell into place. You’re the only one who ever believed in him.”

Bernie’s gaze searched my face. “Not the only one,” he said softly. “Seems that some mob lawyer from the big city believes in him, too.”

I nodded. “He has a good heart.”

“Yep, he does.”

We were silent for a few minutes.

“You asked Fiona for help when Gator told you he was being blackmailed for the treasure, didn’t you?” I’d been putting the pieces together, bit by bit.

Bernie sighed. “Couldn’t let him be blackmailed,” he said. “But if I had known Fiona would pay with her life, I never would have asked.” He sighed. “I’m very glad Harvey’s going to be okay.”

“And Duane?”

“Gonna be fine, too. I think he’s going to leave town for a bit. Getting almost shot by Mirabelle was a shocker for him. It’ll be good for him to get away. Too many memories for those kids to move on.”

I didn’t say anything. I wanted to ask what those memories were, but it wasn’t Bernie’s secret to tell, or mine to know.

Bernie cleared his throat. “He sends his apologies for kicking you in the ribs at Harvey’s, but he didn’t know you were on his side. He wanted to protect the family’s secrets.

That made me smile. “He apologizes? Really?”

The corner of Bernie’s mouth quirked. “Well, sort of. I interpreted broadly.”

I laughed softly. “I suspect you’ve been interpreting broadly for the Wilsons for a long time.” But I was also happy to know it was Duane who had kicked me, not Ethan. He’d been out chasing my truck at the time, so it couldn’t really have been him, but it still felt better knowing it was Duane instead of a killer.

Small wins, right?

“Jonah asked me to tell you what happened back then,” Bernie said.

I frowned. “Jonah? Who is Jonah?”

“Gator’s real name. I’m the only one who seems to remember it.”

Jonah. That was such a soft name. “I love that his name is Jonah.”

Bernie smiled. “He’d shoot me for telling you, but I’ll never see him as a Gator. He’s Jonah to me.”

“He needs to have someone remember who he really is.”

“Exactly.” Bernie paused. “Apparently, at one point, he saw the expression on your face when you realized part of his past, and he didn’t like it.” He laughed softly. “He respects you, Evie, and that boy don’t respect many folks.”

My fingers tightened around the railing. “You don’t have to tell me.”

“He wants you to know.” Bernie looked over at me. “You heard about Duane’s daddy? A no-good bastard who came up here to find Duane and bring him back to Texas?”

I nodded. “He agreed to let Duane stay and then left.”

Bernie looked over at me. “You think a man like that would let Duane stay with a new family? Or do you think a man like that would try to punish a teenage boy for leaving him? Maybe even try to kill him?”

I swallowed. “The latter?” It didn’t surprise me, actually. I think I had known all along.

Bernie nodded. “And you think that his soul brother would let that kid be killed or stolen by his daddy? Or do you think that soul brother would try to save his friend? And then, well, things spiral sideways, and suddenly a few scared teenagers have a body to bury and a secret that will eat away at them forever.”

His words sat in my heart. “And an older friend who will help them.”

“Didn’t help bury no body, but I wasn’t going to let any kid’s soul die because an old bastard got what was coming to him.” Bernie’s voice was hard. But at the same time, there was pain in it, pain he’d been holding for Gator for all those years.

“How old was Gator…I mean Jonah…at the time?”

“Always too young for things like that to happen,” Bernie said. He looked at me. “Jonah never believes me when I tell him he has a good soul because no one else has ever told him that. But you looked him in the eye, saw his heart, and proclaimed it good. He heard that. So, thanks.”

My throat tightened. “I’ve been through hell, so I know what it’s like.”

Bernie nodded. “That’s why he heard you.” He paused. “Rumor is that Junior left the dairy to Jonah. Don’t know if he’ll run it, but maybe. Hope so.”

“I do, too. You can tell him that I vote yes for him to run it.”

Bernie smiled. “Will do. He said to tell you he won’t tell anyone anything except that you’re a deluded crazy bird.” He tapped his chest. “That’s the story I’ll tell, too.”

Warmth filled my heart, and emotions clogged my throat. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Bernie stood up and looked right at me. “Glad you’re here, Evie. Hope you stick around.” Then he gave a salute and headed down the stairs.

Waiting at the base of the stairs was Charlene, holding a police duffel bag. She gave him a nod as he passed, then headed up the stairs fast and efficiently.

She saw me waiting and flicked her hand at me to get me to go inside. “Get the others,” she said.

I felt like a little kid caught with my hand in a cookie jar. I ducked inside, and found that Coco and Shirley were right inside the door, clearly eavesdropping.

“That was insane,” Shirley whispered. “His name is Jonah? You tamed the beast!”

“Ladies.” Charlene stepped inside the door and shut it. She handed me the bag. “Your clothes are in here. Bring someone strong by the station tomorrow and pick up your safe.” She raised her brows. “Nice pink slippers, by the way.”

My slippers. I was so happy to have them back. “Thanks. For everything.”

Shirley and Coco gave her innocent, saccharine-sweet smiles. “Hi, Sheriff.”

Charlene gave us all a hard glare. “That was extremely foolish to try to trigger a murderer to attack you.”

They both pointed at me.

“It was Rainbow’s plan,” Coco said. “I hid in the tunnel.”

Charlene raised her brows at me.

I shrugged. “I agree. It was asinine and foolish. We’re lucky to be alive.”

“And…you’ll never do it again.”

Nah. That wasn’t what I wanted to talk about. “And how come you didn’t realize Ethan was an evil blight upon this island?”

Charlene didn’t even blink at my question. “A question I will ask myself every night until I get an answer that satisfies me. I guess I still saw the earnest ten-year-old boy that tried so hard to get his father’s approval, instead of seeing the man he’d become. I gotta live with that.” She met my gaze. “How did you figure out it was him?”

“I suspected when Gator showed me the photoshopped picture with me and Junior. Ethan was the only one who had heard of Junior being a courier for my firm. Even Jasmine and Tony didn’t know, which made me think that it wasn’t true. I made a few cognitive leaps, and took a chance.”

Charlene tipped her head. “That single photo made you think that Ethan was setting you up to take the fall for killing Junior?”

“Well, it got me thinking about him. It was the piece that didn’t fit. And I’m trained to see things that don’t fit.” I paused. “Plus, the fact that he let my truck get stolen so he could steal my money.” Not that I had been sure about that, but I’d put things together and made the judgment call. “But I wasn’t sure. I had to set that trap. I couldn’t tell you because…well…if I was wrong…”

“Same reason Fiona didn’t tell me, I suspect.” Charlene rubbed her jaw. “Well done, I suppose.” She surveyed all of us. “Here are my rules. Don’t ever risk yourselves like that again. Next time, bring me in earlier.”

Shirley and Coco nodded. “Got it.”

“Next time?” I asked. “There’s no next time. This was a one-time thing because of special circumstances.”

Shirley laughed softly and patted my cheek. “Good luck with that, Rainbow.”

“But—”

“Tell her the truth, Evie,” Shirley said.

We all looked over at her. “About what?” I asked.

“The hunt for Evie.”

Charlene looked directly at me. “Someone’s hunting you?”

Holy moly. The look in her eyes was pure wolf. “Maybe.”

She folded her arms. “Spill it.”

Shirley nodded, so I did.

When I finished, there was a long silence while Charlene digested my story.

Finally, she rubbed her collarbone. “Good to know.”

Then she turned and let herself out.

The door closed behind her, and I looked at Shirley and Coco. “What does that mean?”

Shirley grinned at me. “It means she’s not going to kick you out of town for causing trouble.”

I felt relief shudder through me. “Well, that’s good.”

“Amen. You don’t want her as your enemy.” Shirley draped her arm over my shoulder. “Let’s go finish our coffee, ladies. We have an ice cream store to run in a few hours.”

Oh, wow. The idea of having a day just be about ice cream sounded like a really good idea. “For now,” I said, knowing that I couldn’t count on anything at the moment. “For as long as it lasts.”

They exchanged looks. “For now,” they both agreed.

Shirley’s arm tightened around me. “We’ll make it last,” she said. “We’re the new vigilantes.”

I grinned as I looked at their matching tiaras, and I touched the one on my own head.

In truth, I couldn’t count on anything at the moment, with the exception of two crazy women who were brave, unhinged, and had the biggest hearts

of anyone I'd ever met.

I'd take it.

"Yoohoo! Girls! You got room for one more up there?"

I leaned over the railing and saw Tony on the sidewalk. "Hi!" I waved him up. "Always room for you."

"Thank goodness! I'll be right up!"

I grinned at Coco and Shirley. "We never did find out how he ended up down there."

"I think we're about to," Coco said with a smile.

We made space for Tony, and I grabbed my slippers from the police duffel.

He trotted out onto the deck a few moments later. He'd changed into black spandex leggings, pink sneakers, and a polka-dotted hoodie. He sprawled on the lounge chair. "Girls, that was a night, wasn't it? Ethan was the bad boy behind it all. Who knew?"

I put my feet up on the railing, next to the post where my new Stone Berry Dairy hat was hanging to honor Junior. I smiled happily at the fuzzy pink beacons of joy on my feet. I was finally home. "How did you wind up down there, Tony?"

He cocked his head. "Don't you mean, thanks for saving my cute little hiney from Mirabelle's gun-toting enthusiasm? Even though it turns out that she's just an armed sweetheart with an overzealous commitment to history."

Laughter bubbled up. "Of course I mean that. Thank you."

He blew me a kiss. "My pleasure, sweetie pie. Thank goodness I never travel without my handcuffs, right?"

"I was going to ask about that," I said.

"Never ask about a queen's handcuffs," he teased as Duchess Fang hopped up on his lap. "We're watching the sunrise, are we? I love that so much. Deep breaths, everyone. Time for a reset. Anyone want to do a sunrise meditation with me?"

“Tony,” Shirley said, “how did you wind up down there to save Rainbow’s cute little hiney? We really want to know.”

He looked over at her as he scratched Duchess Fang’s head. “Some friendships last forever. Jasmine needed help, and she knew she could trust me.”

I smiled. “She was right.”

“Yep.” Tony leaned back in the lounge chair and clasped his hands behind his head. “It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten to use my skills in a dangerous situation. It was fun. If you ever need anyone to do it again…” He paused dramatically. “Don’t ask me!”

We all laughed. “I feel the same way, Tony,” I said.

“I don’t,” Shirley announced.

“Me either!” Coco held up her tiara. “We’re just getting started, ladies.”

“The new Blueberry Island vigilantes for the win,” Shirley agreed.

Tony looked over at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “Do I want to know what they’re talking about?”

I grinned. “Definitely not.”

He winked. “All the more reason to ask, then.” He rolled to his side on the lounge chair and hung over the arm so he could look at them directly. “My precious queens, my first question is, can I get a tiara, too? Second, what’s next on the agenda?”

Coco smiled. “We’ll have to ask Fiona. She’s the one calling the shots.”

“Ahh…” Tony settled in. “She always is. I love that woman. The queen is always with us.”

Shirley nodded toward me. “And so is her legacy.”

I held up my hands in denial. “I’m not her legacy. I’m just a nice city girl who likes ice cream, and is living in Fiona’s old apartment trying not to get arrested or killed.”

The three of them exchanged glances and Shirley patted my shoulder. “Keep telling yourself that, Rainbow. Yep, there’s no future here for you.

None at all.”

Then she winked at me.

Coco snorted.

Tony wiggled his eyebrows dramatically, making me laugh.

And then Duchess Fang jumped on my lap, looked me in the eye, and started purring.



Want more of these awesome women? Check out the *Mia Murphy* series, which is Shirley's original series! Get started with the first book, *Double Twist*, while you wait for the next *Rippy Mama's* book! You can also skip ahead for a sneak peek!

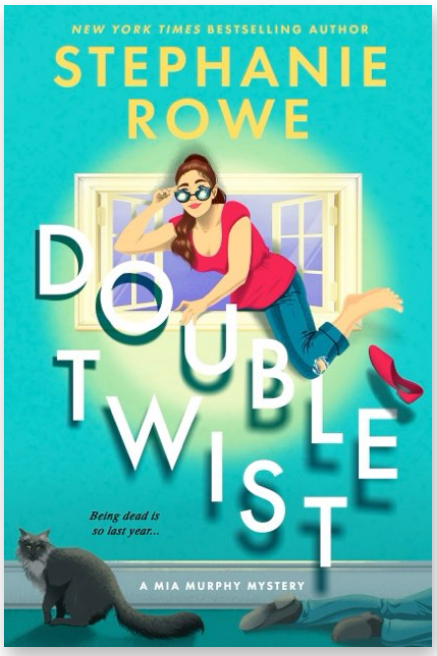


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SNEAK PEEK: DOUBLE TWIST

MIA MURPHY MYSTERIES (BOOK ONE)



"What a fun-loving, non-stop, action-packed whodunit that I could not put down." ~ Dru's Book Musings

A shadow moved across my fifth-floor window.

Assassin.

I yelped and launched myself out of bed. My foot caught in the sheet, and I crashed to the floor. I rolled onto my back, frantically kicking to get free. I scrambled up and lunged for the doorknob—

Then I heard a meow.

I whirled around and saw King Tut, my neighbor's rude and massive black cat, staring at me through the glass, with his unblinking yellow eyes, thick gray mane, and unruly tufts of fur in his ears.

A cat. Not a hit man. *I wasn't going to die tonight.*

My legs gave out. I landed hard, and then pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes, trying to slow my frantic heart rate.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. *I'm not going to die tonight.*

It was hard to believe I used to be fairly chill. Relaxed. Resilient.

Being raised and trained by a con artist mother had made me pretty unflappable, even after I'd ditched that life when I was seventeen.

Now? A grumpy *cat* had sent me running for my life. Two years being undercover against my drug lord ex-husband, Stanley Herrera, had totally screwed with my tolerance level for stress.

I'd made one little anonymous tip to the FBI hotline after finding bags of white powder in our china cabinet. One tiny, socially conscious gesture. That was all it had taken to get me dragged into a two-year sting run by an FBI control freak I'd nicknamed Griselda.

Agent Straus didn't appreciate my pet name for him, which made me call him Griselda as often as I could. I'd needed to find some way to amuse myself, because spying on the man I was sharing a bed with had been surprisingly stressful, especially once I learned how much he liked to have traitors chopped up into little pieces and used as an example to others.

Con artists were non-violent. Non-confrontational. Clever law-benders who delighted in the artistry of deception. My childhood hadn't prepared me for thriving in a world of hit men, murder, and violence.

The night Stanley had figured it out and pointed a gun at my forehead? If Griselda hadn't been literally breaking in the front door at that second—

But he had. So it had worked out fine.

Except for the apparent wee bit of lingering jumpiness on my part.

King Tut meowed again, tapping his left paw impatiently on the glass.

I took a deep, calming breath, and rolled to my feet. "All right. Cool your jets."

I walked over to him and fought with the window until I was able to get the crooked casing to move. As soon as it was open, King Tut hopped off the sill and strolled into my cardboard-box-sized bedroom, the one I'd been

stashed in during Stanley's trial so a hit man couldn't keep me from testifying.

I'd always thought it would be fun to have my ex sending killers after me. Childhood dreams right there, right?

Tonight, no FBI agents were lurking in my hallways, and no one cared what I did. Why? Because ten hours ago, Stanley had been convicted, and he was now heading off to his new home behind bars.

Since I had nowhere else to go, Griselda had let me stay in the safe house for one more night, which gave me a chance to say good-bye to the cat who had been my only decent company for months. My only friend, actually, but who wants to sound like a loser?

The FBI had offered me witness relocation, but I'd turned it down. The last thing I wanted was to turn my life over to yet another person. I'd been forced into crime by my mother. I'd been tangled up with Stanley for years. And then I'd been used by Griselda as his little spy.

I was done letting someone else control me.

No more. Never. Ever. Again.

Tomorrow, I was packing up and moving on. To where? I had no idea. But I had about twelve hours to figure it out, so plenty of time.

The air drifting through King Tut's window was cold and crisp, an early May chill that made me shiver. The spring air felt alive and clean, like the fresh start I was claiming for myself. I braced my hands on the window and leaned out, inhaling the night air.

My next-door neighbor's window was open, and I marveled once again at how King Tut managed to jump the gap between our windows without being fazed by the five-story drop to the unforgiving pavement. Granted, I'd met my very sketchy neighbor a couple times, and if I lived with him, I'd probably risk plummeting to my death to get away from him, too.

The sound of a police siren drifted up from below, and I leaned out to check the street. It looked more like Griselda's ride than a Boston police car.

It stopped in front of my building as the theme from *The Greatest American Hero* burst from my phone.

Habit borne from two years of taking every call in case Griselda had news that would save my life made me hurry over to the nightstand and check the screen. *Griselda.*

This was supposed to be over. He wasn't supposed to call me in the middle of the night anymore. Ever again. Alarm prickling at the back of my neck, I hit the send button. "What's up?"

"Mia! Assassin. Get out!" he shouted. "Now!"

Terror shot through me, and I grabbed King Tut. But just as I started to run for the front door, I heard the whoosh of a silenced gun, and the lock on my front door exploded.

I skidded to a stop, scrambling backwards as I gripped the phone. "He's at the door!" I whispered. "He's here!"

Griselda swore. "Hide in the bathroom. Lock the door and get in the tub. I'm on my way up."

The front door splintered, and King Tut yowled in fury and tried to leap out of my arms.

Struggling to keep my grip on him, I raced into the bathroom, locked the door, and then dove into the tub, clutching the wriggling feline in my arms. I yanked the mildewed shower curtain closed, and then curled onto my side in the fetal position so all my body parts were below the rim.

The floorboards creaked outside the door, and I tried to hold my panicked breath, but it echoed off the yellowed tiles. Loud. So freaking loud. I really had to learn how to stop breathing in times of crisis.

I couldn't believe this. After all I'd survived for the last two years, *now* I was going to get whacked in a tub?

There was so much indignity in being murdered in a bathtub.

King Tut purred and began kneading my chest, through my tank top. I bit my lip and slid my hand beneath his claws to protect my skin.

His purring got louder, and the footsteps paused just outside the bathroom door.

Seriously? I was going to get busted by a cat?

I raised my head enough to peer around the edge of the curtain at the door. The wood was so flimsy there were already cracks in it. Literally one bullet is all it would take to get in. It probably would take no more than a gentle nudge with a pinkie finger, actually.

I was pretty sure my late-night visitor could muster up at least that much force, which meant I had maybe a millisecond at most until the only thing between me and a hired killer was a moldy shower curtain.

Griselda was, at that very moment, sweating his way up four flights of stairs. He was almost as fit as he liked to tell everyone he was, but he wasn't *that* fast.

In retrospect, maybe it would have been better to lock the bathroom as a red herring, and then hide somewhere else, like hang out the window by my fingertips. I would admire myself so much more if I died that way, instead of cowering in a tub.

My mom would be so disappointed in me for cowering in my last moments of life.

Truth? I would also be disappointed in myself for cowering in my last moments of life. I needed to die as more than a bathtub victim.

My phone rang again, but it was outside the bathroom. I must have dropped it during my sprint for safety. The floor creaked, and I heard my personal Grim Reaper move away from the door in pursuit of my phone.

Frantically, I scanned the bathroom for a weapon. Toothbrush? Towel? Mascara? Hairdryer?

Hairdryer.

I tucked King Tut under my arm, scrambled out of the tub as quietly as I could, and climbed up onto the sink. I tucked myself up against the corner closest to the door, set King Tut on my lap, and picked up the hairdryer.

I tested the weight of the hairdryer, swung it from the cord, and then heard the creak in the hall again, outside the bathroom.

I went still.

My assassin waited.

King Tut purred.

My quads started to cramp. My arm ached from holding up the hairdryer. Sweat dripped down my eyebrow and stung my right eye.

The doorknob rattled.

Fear shot through me, obliterating all thought of leg cramps.

The gun fired, and then the door handle exploded. I leapt back and my foot slipped on the porcelain. King Tut dug his claws into my thighs for balance, as I grabbed the towel rack to keep from tumbling off my perch right to my assassin's feet.

Two more shots and the door drifted ajar while I perched precariously, clinging to life by one old towel rack and a stained sink. I'd never wanted to see Griselda as badly as I did in that moment.

But he didn't show up.

Instead, the gleaming barrel of a gun poked through the gap in the door and then bullets flashed out of the end of it, right at the tub. Where I'd just been. Because that had clearly been a great place to hide. *Thanks, Griselda.*

A man moved into my line of vision. He was angled away from me, his gun and his attention focused on the tub. His all-black attire and ski mask escalated my terror level to near-debilitating heights.

He fired several more shots into the shower curtain, then reached out with his gun to push the shower curtain aside and inspect the bullet-ridden body he wasn't going to find.

This was it. My chance.

I braced myself, then tightened my grip on the cord. "Hey!" As I shouted, I swung as hard as I could.

He spun around just as the hairdryer smashed him across the face, shattering his nose with a loud crunch. He dropped like an old lady shocked by her first sight of porn.

I leapt over him, landed on the hall floor, and then raced for the front door. I ran out into the hall corridor, and then something hit me between the shoulder blades and flung me forward. I hit the carpet and dropped King Tut, who yowled with protest as he landed gracefully on his feet.

I scrambled up, but before I could get off my knees, something cold and hard pressed into the back of my head. A gun?

I froze.

"Mia Murphy. You two-faced, lying, little snake."

I blinked at the sound of my ex-mother-in-law's voice. "Joyce?"

The gun pressed harder into the back of my head. "We took you in as family. We loved you. I called you my daughter. And then you turned on my son and ripped him from me. And now you want to steal his business."

"Steal his business?" If I hadn't been so stressed about the gun pressed up against the back of my head, I would have started laughing at the ridiculousness of that idea. "There's literally nothing I want less than becoming a drug lord—"

"For that, you die." Joyce kicked me in the hamstring, and my leg immediately cramped, making me lurch to the right.

Except dying. *That* was something I wanted less than running a major drug operation.

"Turn around," Joyce snarled. "I want to watch your agony and pain as the life drains from your pathetic, unworthy body."

Wow. That was alarmingly sociopathic.

I slowly turned, frantically trying to figure out how to get out of this one. Then I saw her face. It was bright red. Twisted with rage. Mottled with anger. Her eyes were almost glazed. Crazy eyes. And she was aiming a machine gun at my face.

She met my gaze with unflinching hatred. "Without your testimony, Stanley won't get convicted on his appeal."

Witness protection? Who needs witness protection? Clearly it had been a great choice to turn that down. "Listen, Joyce, there's been a misunderstanding." I tried to summon the quick-thinking that had saved me so many times as a kid, but the assault weapon aimed at my face was making it difficult to concentrate. "I'm not going to testify against Stanley again or take over his business."

"Exactly. You'll be dead." Her flushed face twisted into a triumphant grin. "Say good-bye, you snot-nosed, thieving rat."

"Wait!" I held up my hands, which were shaking so badly I could practically feel the breeze on my face. "If you shoot me, you'll go to prison. Put the gun down. We'll both walk away and pretend we never met—"

She called me a name that would have had nuns fainting (or cheering, depending on the nun), and then her finger moved on the trigger.

I had no time to duck before the deafening sound of gunshot exploded in the hallway.

I yelped, but I didn't collapse in a bullet-ridden death.

Her mouth opened in surprise, a red stain blossomed on the front of her shirt, and then she toppled over. She hit the floor with a thump, and behind her stood Griselda. He was dripping with sweat, panting, and aiming his gun right where she'd been.

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SNEAK PEEK: GONE ROGUE

A MIA MURPHY MYSTERY



"So much darn fun!" Five-star Goodreads Review (Penny)

CHAPTER ONE

My phone rang just as I hopped out of Turbojet, my well-used, antique pickup truck I'd acquired along with my new business, the Eagle's Nest Marina. I saw the call was one of my new besties, Hattie Lawless, so I answered. "What's up?"

"Mia. It's been ten days since we've had to deal with a corpse. Are you getting as bored as I am?"

Alarm shot through me, and I hung up on her.

Hattie was a seventy-something race car driver who owned and operated a café in my marina. She was sassy, irreverent, and an unstoppable force, which I greatly admired. Except when it got me almost killed. Which seemed to happen a little bit too often.

She called again, and I almost didn't answer. But what if Hattie was in trouble? I couldn't take the chance. "What?"

"No one has tried to kill you in ten days either. You have to ditch your new bodyguard. I think he's repelling fun."

I hung up on her again. Hattie was like a siren. The entire world seemed to want to bend to her will, not because she tried to control it, but because it *wanted* to be her friend. If Hattie invited murderers into our lives, they would probably come.

Not that I was superstitious, but Hattie was…Hattie.

My phone rang before I managed to get it back in my pocket. I answered it as I wandered away from Turbojet and headed toward the Bass Derby town green, which was teeming with people, music, tents, and small-town festivities. "Hattie. I love you. I don't love murderers."

"Yes you do. If you didn't, you wouldn't have gone undercover for the FBI against your drug lord ex for two years."

That had not been an entirely voluntary situation for me. "They made me."

"Hey! Don't give away your power by lying to yourself like that! No one makes you do anything. You wanted to because you crave excitement, my thieving friend."

I smiled at the affection in her voice. I'd been so scared that she and Lucy Grande, my two favorite people in the world, would reject me when

they found out about my criminal childhood, but my pickpocketing past had been a great hit with both of them. "I just arrived. Where's your tent?"

"Pink and white striped tent at the near end of the first aisle. Best spot of the festival. You can't miss it."

"Of course you got the best spot."

"Always," she agreed cheerfully. "The world is my playground."

Up ahead, I saw the awning in question. "I see you. Coming over."

"Awesome. Ditch Ivan in the crowds, though. Seriously."

I glanced behind me at the six-foot-four jacked-up, federal agent-type suit-wearer who had been shadowing me for the last ten days, shooting looks of "I will take you down if you mess with Mia" to anyone who came close to me. I smiled at him, but he ignored me. Ivan didn't mess around, which was a great trait in a bodyguard. "I'm not ditching Ivan. You'd be so sad if I was assassinated."

"Would I, though? That's such a complex, loaded issue."

I laughed. "Bye. I'll see you in a sec." I hung up as I merged with the crowds streaming onto the grass. Tonight was the opening night of the three-day Bass Derby Strawberry Festival, an annual event that drew people from all over the state to celebrate, culminating in the crowning of the Strawberry Shortcake Bake-Off Champion on Sunday afternoon.

How adorably small-town was that?

I was so excited. The crowds were boisterous. The tents were so cute, local vendors selling crafts, artwork, pottery, candles, pizza, sandwiches and everything else that one could create. There was a big contest tent for the competitors. Tonight was round one, the strawberry contest, where contestants would present home-grown strawberries for judging. Saturday was the biscuit contest. And Sunday was the Strawberry Shortcake Bake-Off, which was the biggie. Plus, there was a palooza of other events planned for the weekend as well.

A band was playing on the gazebo, and the local baton-twirling team was performing routines. Pickup trucks lined the parking lot, and people were tailgating with barbeques and beer. The mid-June night was warm, the evening sun casting glorious light across the water, and the adjacent town beach was full of kids and families playing in the water.

It filled my soul with all the warmth and belonging that I'd wanted my whole life.

This was why I'd turned down witness protection and moved to Bass Derby.

This was why I'd bought the run-down Eagle's Nest Marina, so that I could be here, becoming a part of a community for the first time in my life, rehabbing the marina to make it my dream.

I'd even managed to grab a last-minute volunteer spot. I was part of the team patrolling the contest tent to make sure that all the competitors had what they needed. My shift started in ten minutes, and I was so pumped. I was proudly wearing my volunteer badge, and I was pretty much giddy with excitement.

I jogged over to Hattie's tent, breathing in the scent of the fresh bread Hattie was so magical at creating. She was behind a well-stocked table, and there was a line twenty-people long already. "Hey, girl. How's it going?"

"Swamped," Hattie said cheerfully. "Niko and Cris are away at some football camp this weekend, so I'm on my own."

Nico and Cris Stefanopoulos were Greek brothers who worked in her café. They were both headed to college on scholarships, and their grandma, Angelina Stefanopoulos was raising them. As a staff member at the police station, she'd been helpful to us on more than one occasion.

Today, Hattie was sporting fuchsia hair, to match her Hattie's Café T-shirt. I didn't know many seventy-somethings who could carry off fuchsia hair, but Hattie definitely could. "Jump in and help. I'll give you free food."

Hattie never gave away anything for free, so the offer was tempting. But… "My shift starts in ten minutes."

"How long is your shift?"

"Two hours."

She shook her head. "No, that won't work. I need help now. Ditch your shift."

I blinked. "I can't. I promised I'd do it—"

Hattie leaned on the table. "I need you. I thought we were friends."

"We are friends." I would never turn down a request from Hattie, but I'd been excited at the chance to volunteer, as if I actually belonged to the community. "Hattie, I—"

"Hey!" A low voice barked out the single word.

We both turned to see three twenty-something gang member-ish dudes striding across the grass toward us, wearing heavy motorcycle boots, leather jackets, gold chains, with possible gun bulges in their jackets, and enough swagger to trigger a tidal wave in Diamond Lake.

A path had cleared, and people's jaws were open in stunned shock, clutching their babies and dogs as if the trio was there to mass murder everyone. The approaching trio was so out of place that I could practically feel the earth shifting to expel them.

The woman at the front of the line hugged her loaf of Hattie's rosemary focaccia bread to her chest. "Are they coming here? They look like they're heading here. They're not getting my bread."

As she spoke, the trio strode right up to the table and stopped, arms folded, jaws jutted out, shoulders back. Every line of their bodies said that they expected to be thrown out.

I'd spent most of my first seventeen years with that stance.

They did not tackle anyone for their bread, babies, or dogs. Instead, they focused entirely on Hattie. The tallest one spoke first. "You owe us. We're here to collect."

A woman behind me made a noise like she was slowly dying, and I heard someone whisper to find Chief Stone. I heard someone else say something about me being a drug dealer, which hurt my innocent little heart just a bit.

Hattie set her hands on her hips. "Mia? Do I owe these guys?"

I'd been with her when we'd met them a couple weeks ago. I knew what she was doing, but at the same time, I felt for these guys, because that had been me. They wouldn't interpret her response the way she meant it. I knew that, because I'd been them. "Um, guys? Vinnie?"

The tallest one looked over at me, then his brows went up. "I remember you."

More people started whispering, which bothered me a little bit. Honestly, life was so much more complicated when you cared what people thought, when you were trying to put down roots. "Hattie, for heaven's sake, stop being difficult. Vinnie, you, too. You're like two alpha dogs who want to pee on each other."

Both Hattie and the guys looked at me. "You're calling me a dog?" Hattie said.

"I am. An alpha dog, though. Top of the heap."

"A Cane Corso? I'd like to be a Cane Corso."

Of course she would choose to be a one-hundred-and-fifty-pound guard dog. "Sure."

"You're calling *me* a dog?" Vinnie didn't look as thrilled with the news as Hattie had been.

"Yes. I am." I put my hands on my hips. "Vinnie, Hattie promised you a free sandwich at her café in exchange for the favor you did. Instead, you chose to show up at the strawberry festival and try to scare everyone. But Hattie's the alpha dog, and she has to prove it by not feeding you here, since she's not at her café. So, she's going to say no to the sandwich, and then you're going to get all mad and think that no one is trustworthy. But that's a

bunch of crap, because Hattie's completely loyal and amazing. We all know you're not a jerk, because you saved our lives and hers. So give it up. You two are both cute little puppies who need to go romp on the beach together instead of peeing on each other."

Everyone stared at me.

I smiled. "But Hattie needs help at the booth right now and she offered me free food to help her, so maybe you guys can make a trade."

Vinnie's eyes widened. "Work here?" He looked around, and we all did. I could see that he didn't believe Hattie would let him get behind her table, handle her food, work with customers, and take their money.

But he didn't know Hattie like I did.

Sure enough, Hattie's face lit up. She liked to nurture people with potential, and these guys were no exception. She knew goodness when she saw it, and she didn't give a hoot what anyone else thought. So what if Vinnie probably liked to steal cars in his spare time? He had a good heart buried under that gang activity, so that was all that mattered to Hattie. "Yes!" she exclaimed. "Great idea! Vinnie, get your team back here. Let's do this! One free sandwich for every hour you work the booth."

Vinnie stared at her. "You're serious?"

"I never joke about food."

Vinnie went silent, then looked at his friends. They both shook their heads and headed back down the aisle toward the parking lot. But Vinnie shrugged off his leather jacket, revealing massive, tattooed biceps that set the whispers going again. "I'm in."

Two minutes later, Vinnie and his muscles were wearing a fuchsia Hattie's Café T-shirt that was a little too tight, a matching visor, and he was holding a credit card reader and taking money.

Hattie grabbed a muffin and handed it to me without a word.

Her way of thanks. Lucy and I owed Vinnie our lives, and Hattie was as happy as I was to offer more than a sandwich to him.

I winked at her and swiped a cookie, feeling all sorts of warm fuzzies in my heart. I was so happy to be in a position to offer belonging to someone who was an outsider, after a lifetime of being the one on the outside.

If I had tried to hire Vinnie, my marina would have paid the price in lost business. But Hattie had the power to do whatever she wanted in Bass Derby, and she'd just given Vinnie her stamp of approval.

It felt good to be a part of that.

"Mia! Hattie!"

We both turned as the third part of our trio of awesomeness, Lucy Grande, ran toward us, ducking around people. It took me only a split second to register her tension and to realize she was running hard. Alarm shot through me as she reached us. "What's up?"

"It's Rogue!"

I glanced at Hattie. "Rogue? What's wrong with Rogue?" Rogue, whose real name was Esther Neeley, was about Hattie's age. She was obscenely rich and not afraid of owning it. She was sassy, irreverent, and a member of the Seam Rippers, a local quilting group who loved margaritas, loyalty, and adventure. I adored Rogue, and she'd helped save my life ten days ago. Different situation than when Vinnie had stepped in, but equally as helpful.

"The strawberry judging starts in a half hour, and Rogue's not there. Her table's not set up. I've looked everywhere for her, and no one has seen her." Lucy looked worried. "I tried to call her, and her phone went right into voicemail."

"She should have been set up hours ago." Hattie swore. "We need to check her house. Something's clearly wrong."

Their worry was contagious. "What are you guys talking about? What table?"

"I'll drive," Hattie said. "Vinnie. You're in charge. The reputation of Hattie's Café is on your shoulders. If you blow it, I will hunt you down, and you won't like it one bit."

The gun-wielding gang leader's eyes widened, and he looked slightly alarmed. "Run your tent?"

"Yes, I'll be back soon." Hattie grabbed her keys from a corner of the tent. "Let's go!" She broke into a run, and Lucy ran after her.

They took off so fast that I had to sprint not to lose them in the crowd. They were both fitter than I was, but ten days of working out with Rogue had helped me enough that I still had them in sight when Hattie leapt into her massive, jacked-up pickup truck.

Lucy jumped into the back seat, and I grabbed hold of the passenger door and hauled myself in as Hattie hit the gas. "What is going on?" I panted as I dragged the door shut just in time to avoid taking out a telephone pole.

"Rogue has won the Strawberry Shortcake Bake-Off four times," Hattie said as she peeled out onto the main road. "The festival charter states that the championship trophy will be named after the first person to win it five-times."

"She's been entering for years, and she finally won her fourth time last year. There are four others who have also won four times," Lucy said. "Rogue wants that trophy named after her, and she's been planning for this year's festival for the last twelve-months."

"One of the four-time champions is probably going to win this year," Hattie said, the tires squealing as she peeled around the corner. "Rogue needs it to be her."

"Why?"

Hattie glanced at me. "She used to enter with her daughter long ago. It has personal meaning for her. There's no way she'd miss out on the Strawberry Contest."

"Doing well in the first two rounds can help break a tie in the finals," Lucy explained. "Today matters."

"Rogue was planning to get there at six this morning to set up her table," Hattie added. "Presentation makes a difference."

"But her table is empty. Nothing on it at all," Lucy said. "Judging starts at seven."

I glanced at Hattie's dashboard and saw it was six thirty-three. Much like Hattie, Rogue was an unapologetic, unstoppable force, but she had the added benefit of endless financial resources. If she wanted to win that contest, nothing would have kept her from being at that table. "You don't think she changed her mind?"

"No." Hattie swung the truck into the long, white-stone driveway that snaked almost a half mile through Rogue's lake-front property. "No chance."

I pulled out my cell and texted Bootsy Jones, the only other Seam Ripper I had in my phone. *Rogue's missing. Have you heard from her?*

What? No. I'll ask around. I'm at the Festival. I'll look around here.

Great. We're at her house. I set my phone down as Hattie screeched to a stop by the front door.

Rogue's cherry red Lamborghini SUV was parked out front, with the tailgate wide open.

I was the first one out of the truck. "Rogue!"

There was no answer, but the back of Rogue's SUV was loaded with gorgeous strawberries, along with other crates containing what appeared to be table decor. I could see champagne, a velvet table covering, but no Rogue.

Hattie came up behind me. "She told me she was packing her car at five-thirty this morning."

Fear trickled down my spine. "That was thirteen hours ago."

The strawberry crates were neatly arranged, ready for transport that had never happened. The berries were a gorgeous vibrant red, plump, flawless

perfection. "The strawberries look really good. Does she grow them herself?"

"Actually yes. She doesn’t even let her gardener touch them. They're the best around."

Lucy was at the front door. "No one's answering." She peered through the window beside the door, then swore. "You guys! The furniture inside is knocked over. It looks like someone tore the place apart."

We all looked at each other, and then suddenly, I realized that Ivan, my bodyguard wasn't with us. "We lost Ivan."

"Well, I think that tells you a lot about how useful he'd be in an emergency, right? Because right now, I feel like there's something going on that he might be needed for."

"I agree," Lucy said. "This scene is giving me the creeps. It's like Rogue was plucked right out of her life mid-stride."

A shiver went down my spine, so I immediately cleared my throat and stood taller. Fear was never allowed to win. "It's fine. Whatever it is, we can handle it."

"Damn straight we can." Hattie pushed me toward the house. "Go unlock the door, Mia. See what's going on."

"Unlock it? I mean, yeah, I love a chance to pick locks, but shouldn’t we call the police?"

Hattie put her hands on her hips. "How well did that work for us recently? Involving the police in a dicey situation?"

"That was murder!" I stared at them, horror congealing in my stomach. "You don't think—"

"Well, open the door and find out."

With the exception of Griselda, my FBI handler, I didn't trust cops to believe in my innocence. Well, if Devlin Hunt was in town, I might have texted him. But he'd been called away right after he asked me out on a date, and I hadn't heard from him since. The only one we could call was Chief

Stone. The fact he was Lucy's cousin didn't mean we could trust him to do what was right and handle the situation correctly.

Quite the opposite.

Which meant if we cared about Rogue, it had to be us.

I grimaced, but pulled out my lock picks, which I now carried with me more often, because life in Bass Derby was turning out to be like that. "Make sure no one shoots us."

"They'd shoot only you. *We* don't have assassins after us," Hattie said, but she took up position next to me, facing out.

Lucy did the same as I went down on my knee and got to work.

I was sure that Rogue had an alarm, but there was no sound as the lock clicked a minute later. I pushed the door open. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Silence.

I stood up and took a step inside. "Rogue?" My voice faded as I took in the carnage. Her house usually was in pristine condition, gorgeous, designed to emulate cozy, Maine warmth with expensive perfection. But right now, chairs were upturned. Pictures and books strewn on the floor. The rugs askew.

"Go in and check it out," Hattie said. "I'll stand guard out here."

I looked back at her. "Why me?"

She smiled and waved me inside. "You're the FBI special agent. Do your thing."

"I'm not an FBI special agent—"

"Closer than I am. Go, go."

I looked at Lucy, and she picked up a small pot of geraniums and hefted it. "I'll come with you. I'm good at throwing things."

"All right, then. Let's do this." Wishing I had my hairdryer, which I'd recently discovered was very useful as a weapon, I led the way into the front hall. I looked around and saw that the family room was open to the kitchen. "That way." I pointed, my instincts drawing me toward the kitchen.

"Okay." Lucy stayed close to me, her pot ready.

As I walked past an upturned table, I grabbed the lamp off the floor and wrapped the cord around my hand, swinging the lamp gently. It wasn't as maneuverable as a hairdryer, but all corded projectiles were pretty much in my wheelhouse these days.

We stepped into the kitchen and looked around.

"Nothing in here looks like it was touched," Lucy said. "Let's go—"

"No." I knew from my own childhood training sessions with my mom that sometimes the best distraction was in plain sight. "The front hall is a mess, so maybe someone doesn't want us to notice something in here."

"Oh…right…I forgot about that. I gotta work on my criminal mind."

We both looked around, and this time, I saw a note on the center island, with messy handwriting scrawled across the paper. I walked over and peered at it. The message was short and to the point. "I didn't do it," I read aloud.

Lucy looked over. "Who didn't do what?"

"Rogue, I'm guessing. But what didn't she do? Trash her house?" I looked around, and I saw that the pantry door was open at the back of the kitchen. Instinct made my heart start to pound. "In there."

Gripping my lamp more tightly, I forced myself to walk across the kitchen. "If Rogue jumps out of there to scare us, I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a heart attack."

"You and me, both." Lucy edged up close behind me, which I greatly appreciated—

My gaze dropped to the threshold, and fear crept down my belly when I saw something peeking out from the pantry. Limp. Lifeless. Adorned with very high heels. "Are those *feet*?"

"What? Where?" Lucy looked down. "Oh, God. *Yes."*

We lunged for the door and yanked it open. Sprawled on the ground facedown was a fifty-something woman with raven black hair, gorgeous

shoes, and a bunch of strawberries scattered around her.

"Oh, God." I dropped to my knees beside her, but the moment I touched her, I knew.

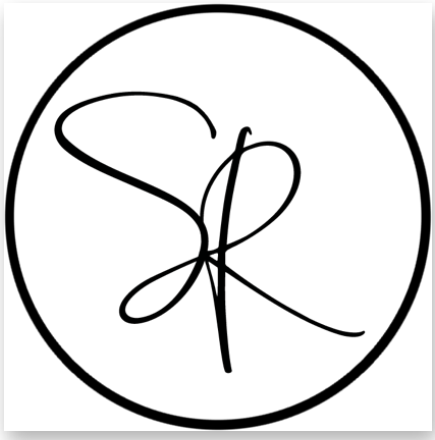
She was dead.



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For The Winsor School Class of '87, who originated the Eggbeater Ballet in real life. Yep, it's really a thing!

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