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KILLER EYESHADOW AND A COLD ESPRESSO

A DANGER COVE HAIR SALON MYSTERY

by

TRACI ANDRIGHETTI & ELIZABETH ASHBY

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To Christina A. Burke and all the others who didn't get to finish their stories

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CHAPTER ONE

"Never has the name Painted Lady been more appropriate for a building," Harriet McCudgeon boomed into a microphone at the top of the double-decker bus. On her short, squat frame, the black bowler hat, red scarf, and black puffy coat made her look more like a sinister snowman than a tour business owner. "Because during the Klondike Gold Rush, the Victorian mansion that houses The Clip and Sip beauty salon was home to a bunch of *whores*."

My stomach threatened to leap from my throat and crawl under the bus as I watched the tourists' reactions through the glass door of my salon. Several dropped their jaws, while others snapped pictures.

A smug smile cut into Harriet's pudgy cheeks as she prepared to deliver the most salacious line of her spiel. "Indeed, the women of The Clip and Sip—I mean, the old LaSalle House brothel—mined many a miner and felled a lot of lumberjacks' timber."

The Clip and Sip slip, which I wasn't sure was accidental, made me want to run down the porch steps and shove the mic into her mouth. But I thought of the contract I'd signed and stayed put, as did my horrified stomach.

"Then, on New Year's Day in 1955, the wives of Danger Cove followed through with a resolution." She battened down her bowler, reenacting their determination, and gathered her breath for a preacher-style pronouncement. "They stormed the brothel with torches and burned the den of sin."

A few elderly women on the upper deck broke into applause.

"I can't believe they clap for that trash." My stepcousin, Gia Di Mitri, shouted behind me. "Can we close the salon early, Cassidi? Or move to a new town?"

"It's not even noon." I kept my eyes on the tourists. "A client could come in."

"Who? These Gold Rush History Tours have scared away pretty much everyone. Not even our free drinks can dull the pain of the McCurmudgeon and her gawking 'prospectors.'"

"Sh." I waved to silence her. "She's at the part about Uncle Vinnie restoring the building."

"Why would you listen to that again, much less for the third time today?"

I turned and withheld a wince. It was fifty degrees outside, and Gia sported a rose-adorned Bardot top with red satin short shorts and matching strappy sandals. If the tourists got a load of her getup, they'd think the salon was still a whorehouse. "Aren't you cold?"

"I'm hot-blooded, remember?"

It's hard to forget with that outfit. "So, there have been three tours today?"

"Oh, that's right." She tucked her long, black hair behind her ears to display the Dolce & Gabbana rose earrings she'd gotten secondhand. "You missed the first one when you went to breakfast with Zac."

If only I were back at Cinnamon Sugar Bakery with my boyfriend. I collapsed onto a corner of the reception desk. "When I agreed to this tour thing, I didn't think Danger Cove had that many tourists. But she's tripled her customers since she opened in January."

"Thanks to you giving her troops the right to ogle the bordello artifacts upstairs where we live. Did I tell you that I found a lady going through my lingerie drawer?"

She hadn't. And I hadn't told her that I'd found a group taking shots of her flavored vodkas at the *Bottoms Up* bar in our living room, because she would've torched Harriet's ticket booth. "We've been over this. Harriet had information we needed to save the salon, so I had to agree to her terms."

"Ironically, those terms are now sinking the salon. And at the rate her business is growing, we could have a tour tromping through every hour. Then it's RIP for The Clip and Sip." She sunk onto the blue velvet Rococo couch beside our product display. "We have to get out of that contract."

"You're from New Jersey, so you know as well as I do that Harriet's extortion skills rival the mob's. We have to ride it out."

She tapped a red stiletto nail against her cheek. "Or run her out." "How?"

"We'll talk about it later. George Fontaine is here to see me."

George strode up the walkway wearing a double-breasted herringbone coat and tailored suit and holding a large floral arrangement from his shop, Some Enchanted Florist. At thirty-two, he was only five years older than Gia and me, but his elegant style and European upbringing made him seem older. And vaguely mysterious.

"Flowers from Donatello?" I asked.

"Nope. From me to me."

There was a story in there that I could wait to hear. I stood and opened the door, triggering the salon bell.

"Sorry I'm late, Gia. I got held up in Craggy Hill Estates, taking an order for a vow renewal." George placed the arrangement on a coffee table in front of her. "Exotic flowers for an exotic beauty."

Her cheeks turned as red as her roses. "You're a flatterer—and I love it."

"Don't tell that to your officer boyfriend." He rubbed his hands.

"And I won't tell Alex," I said, referring playfully to his girlfriend. "Can I offer you something to warm you up?"

"You know I never miss a chance to sample your homemade liqueurs, but Charlotte Vickers is expecting me at the church. The Reverend's niece is getting married this weekend, and Charlotte has ordered enough flowers to fill the gardens of Versailles."

Gia and I stayed silent. We'd been through hell and high water with the Reverend and his wife, and we wanted to stay on dry earth.

"Besides"—his eyes darted to the bus—"it sounds like the gold rush army is about to stage a siege."

My cousin shot me a side-eye. "We were just talking about that."

"Well, for your sakes, I hope Harriet doesn't supply any prospecting tools, like picks." He flashed a dashing smile and slipped out the door.

I frowned at the bus. The tourists would be coming inside any minute for the second part of the tour. I wasn't ready for the stress, so I turned my attention to the flowers. "That burst of color is just what the salon needs on the first day of spring."

"Actually, I'm using it as inspiration for my Mad Makeup line."

"For your Fierce Flowers-themed smoky eye palettes?"

"Close." She leaned forward on the couch, her brown eyes sparkling. "For my Fierce Flowers—themed smoky lip kits."

"There's a smoky lip?"

"Your girl-next-doorness is showing, and that peach sweater doesn't help."

I smirk-smiled at the jab. My blonde hair, blue eyes, and modest clothing clashed with Gia's dark features, and she was forever trying to get me to cross over to the smoldering side.

"A smoky lip is a matte lipstick topped with sheer black gloss."

That certainly sounded fierce. And slightly morbid.

She pointed to a frond with a radish-shaped berry. "Imagine this red with a black overlay."

"That could be nice." *If you're a vampire*. "What kind of berry is this?"

"What am I? A Girl Scout?"

I looked at her false eyelashes, plumped lips, and acrylic nails and decided to dodge the question. "How are you going to name the kits if you don't know the flowers?"

"I'll make something up. None of the flowers in my line are real." *Naturally*.

The bell sounded, and Harriet held open the door. She'd inserted a white flag into the hatband of her bowler, presumably to lead the tourists. "Go on in, prospectors," she said as tourists filed inside. "Let's pan for gold."

Gia rolled her eyes. "Speaking of pans, can someone lend me theirs? I need to bash myself in the head."

Harriet's white flag said *surrender*, but her green eyes said *fight*. "First up, the sinks in the prostitutes' bedrooms. Then, the late gigolo's lair."

My hand gripped the desk to keep the floor under my feet. My Uncle Vinnie had been no saint, but I couldn't believe she'd disrespected his memory in my presence—or that she was showing his room and discussing his murder. "Harriet, we need to talk."

She looked annoyed and directed her clients' attention to the back of the salon. "The stairs are through the break room to the right. I'll meet you at the old picture of Hope, Faith, and Charity. You can't miss their, uh, professional pose."

The elderly women who'd applauded the salon-torching walked past and sized up my cousin and me. Gia turned and twerked, and they gasped and ran.

"Do not twerk at my tourists," Harriet huffed as the door closed behind her. "Or I'll see you in court."

I stepped in front of my cousin. "I know we have a contract, but this isn't working out."

"What do you mean? This chicken ranch turned salon-home is a gold mine."

I regretted her analogy—and not having the funds to remove the brothel relics. "Our clients aren't as excited about this arrangement as yours are. So I need you to limit the tour times to before or after our business hours."

Harriet glanced around. "I don't see any clients."

"Precisely. You've driven them away."

"Your crabby cousin did that. She could drive out a rat infestation."

Gia stuck out her chest, revealing the thorns on her Bardot-top roses. "Then how come you're still here, wagging your whiskers?"

Harriet's hand went to her upper lip, and her eyes narrowed.

I seized on their standoff to stop a rat fight. "From now on, my uncle's room is off limits. He bought and restored this building in 1995, so he obviously had no part in the gold rush."

"Which makes your tours fool's gold," Gia jeered.

Harriet's double chin tripled. "My tours are the best on the West Coast. And according to our agreement, I'm here for nine more months with no restrictions."

She was right about the contract, but I refused to allow anyone to profit from my uncle's death. "Fine. Come when you want. But tomorrow you'll find my uncle's door padlocked."

"Murder is money, Goldilocks. Especially unsolved murders that involve sex. So if you try to keep me from that room, I'll sue for breach."

The grab for cash had turned Harriet hateful, complete with themed nursery rhyme name-calling. "What's the point? You said yourself that you only have nine months left on our contract, and then you won't be allowed inside."

Harriet harrumphed. "Judging from your empty salon, you're going to go bankrupt. And judging from my packed bus, I'll be able to buy this dump when you do."

She spun on her sensible heels and stalked through the break room to join the group. And with every stomp she took, my anger level climbed.

"She's like a gold digger," Gia breathed. "But of businesses."

I crossed my arms. "No. She's a dirty rat who's infested our Painted Lady. And we're going to get rid of her, even if we have to call an exterminator."

Gia tapped a bottle of metallic gold nail polish on the round table in our salon break room and kitchen. "I hereby convene the first meeting of Operation Goldfinger."

Amy Spannagel's quasi-unibrow furrowed. "What does a James Bond film have to do with getting out of the contract?"

Gia sighed and touched her index fingers together. "One, the 'gold' part of the name is code for the tours. Two, Goldfinger was a notorious villain who planned to obliterate the world's economy, i.e., Harriet on a larger scale. And three, Goldfinger covered one of his victims in gold body paint, which is a totally fab look."

I glanced at the clock above the sink. Two minutes after six p.m., one minute later than the last time I'd checked.

Amy brushed mousy brown hair from her face. "But why would Harriet have gold body paint? I've never even seen her wear makeup."

Gia gave her a hard stare. "Either you need to quit your library job or your PhD program. All those books are dulling your brain."

"Yes, because literacy and education are cognitive killers," I quipped.

My cousin unfurled her arms. "I give you Exhibit Amy."

"Play nice, okay?" I reached for my pink lemonade. "She's here to help us."

"I'm here to help myself too." Amy's hazel eyes grew large behind her lenses. "Since Harriet started the tours, library visitors are down sixty percent. And if that trend continues, I'll be out of work."

I hadn't thought about the effect of the tours on other businesses. "I didn't know the library existed during the gold rush."

"It was a one-room shack back then. But based on the information Harriet provides during the tour, the focus isn't the library. It's Ben."

"As in Ben Bardsley, your boss?" I couldn't have been more shocked. "He's a little abrupt—"

"And seriously uptight," Gia interrupted.

"—but he's a highly respected citizen of this community."

Amy adjusted her beige cardigan. "If Harriet's research is correct, then his ancestor Boone Bardsley wasn't. He was a major bootlegger. And at one point during the gold rush, Danger Cove was sending so much timber up north that Boone couldn't get enough wood for his stills. So he helped himself to the books in the library and used them as kindling."

I almost coughed up a lemonade sip. "Ben's ancestor was a bootlegger book burner?"

"I'll drink to that." Gia raised her vodka, which was rose-flavored to go with her outfit, and took a swallow. "Now, about that rat exterminator you mentioned. I know a guy."

"Oh!" Amy touched my cousin's arm. "Is it Tommy Two Fingers?"

I blinked, astonished. "You're not actually talking about a mob hit?"

Gia gestured to her body. "Does this say a mobster to you?"

I looked again at her false eyelashes, plumped lips, and acrylic nails and decided to address the question. "A mobster's moll, maybe."

She tipped her head. "I'll take that as a compliment. Those women know how to take care of themselves."

If you count Botox, fillers, and silicone as self-care.

Amy pushed up her glasses. "Tommy Two Fingers is a self-described critter ridder. Before George Fontaine bought Marlton House from Alex Jordan, he rid the attic of an entire colony of bats. He caught some of them in a cage and strapped it to the top of his station wagon. When he drove away, the rest of the colony followed."

I glanced back at the clock. Two more minutes had passed, but it seemed like an hour. "You both know that Harriet's not actual vermin, right?"

Gia flicked her hand. "That's debatable, which brings me back to the guy. I meant someone on the right side of the law, like Donatello."

"That could get him fired," Amy exclaimed. "As a police officer, your boyfriend can't get involved in your contract dispute."

"Au contraire, mon Amy." Gia's accent wasn't French, but pure children's taunt. "Right after we moved in, Detective Ohlsen told Cassidi that the police wanted Vinnie's room to stay intact until his murder was solved."

I stared at my cousin, incredulous that a constructive idea had come from her Operation Goldfinger meeting. "That's true. And if Donatello tells Harriet that the room is still a crime scene, she'll have to stay away."

"Away from his room." Amy's eyes took on a lascivious gleam. "But not the sexy brothel stuff."

"Precisely." Gia moved to sit on her hot-panted haunches. "And seeing George this morning gave me an idea. I called Finials and Facades

Renovation and Restoration Services and asked Alex Jordan to give us an estimate for renovations."

"What?" I was so upset I rose from the table. "I can't afford that. You have to cancel."

"Then how do you plan to get rid of Harriet?"

"I was thinking we could take down the picture, the old wooden *Bottoms Up* placard above the bar, and the gilt mirror on the ceiling and just leave the holes in the sheetrock for a while."

"What about the bedroom sinks?" Amy asked. "You can't take those out without sealing the pipes."

"I'll padlock all the rooms, not just Uncle Vinnie's."

Gia finished off her vodka. "That whack job will bring metal cutters. I guarantee it."

"It's our only option. The salon is losing money, and I just used my tax return to pay the tuition balance for my final semester of college. There's no way I can afford renovations."

"You can't afford not to afford them. Either Harriet goes, or The Clip and Sip does." She deposited her shot glass on the table. "I've got five thousand dollars put aside that we can use as a down payment."

I leaned against the kitchen counter, stunned by the offer. For one thing, Gia wasn't a blood relative, so Uncle Vinnie had left me his entire inheritance. And for another, she hadn't exactly struck me as a saver. "Why would you invest in the salon?"

She shrugged. "So I can get something out of it."

With Gia, that went without saying. "I take it you don't just mean income?"

"I want the tower room for Mad Makeup." She held up a hand to stop me from speaking. "Dream with me for a moment. I put a makeup chair in the center of the room and have circular floor cabinets installed to display my products and store my inventory. And you use my current station for manicures."

I bit my thumbnail. The third-floor tower was wasted space, and a manicurist, not to mention free staff manicures, would be amazing. But Gia's dream was a pipedream given our financial situation. "The tower would need a heating upgrade on top of your renovations. We're looking at twenty grand minimum, and I don't have the other fifteen."

Amy snapped her fingers. "You could take out a small business loan and use Vinnie's old Ferrari as collateral."

"Or"—I returned to the table—"I could sell the Ferrari and use the money for the renovation and a practical car."

Gia doubled over and made a spitting-hacking sound.

"Are you okay?" Amy patted her back.

"Relax," I said. "She's just choking on the word practical."

Gia straightened and hiked up her top. "Let's not do anything puhrack —I mean, drastic—just yet. There's always Vinnie's eight hundred grand."

I gave her a look. "If I had a dollar for every time you mentioned his missing money, we would already have eight hundred grand."

"We know he stashed it in the house the week before he died, so it's here somewhere. And if we do the renovations, it could turn up." She reached for my hand. "Good things are going to happen—I can sense it. And you know I'm kind of psychic."

Psychotic was more like it.

The salon bell rang.

"Darn it, I forgot to lock up." I stood and walked toward the waiting room. And when I saw the town gossip, Donna Bocca, with a copy of the newspaper, I had even more reason to doubt my cousin's pseudo-psychic prophecy.

Gia strutted into the room. "What do you want, Woman Mouth?"

Donna's wide nostrils flared at the translation of her Italian name. "I thought you two would want to see the evening edition of the *Cove Chronicles*."

Amy entered and pushed up her glasses. "There isn't an evening edition."

"Sometimes a special edition comes out." Donna's mustache curled. "Like when a big news story breaks."

I sunk into the chair at my station. I'd already gathered that the story would somehow involve the salon.

"Give me that rag." Gia snatched the paper.

Donna sniffed and shoved her hands into her brown woolly coat. "I'll spare you the trouble of having to read. The charges against Jesse Rothman have been dropped on a technicality. He's getting out of jail."

That was a big story, one that made my stomach quease.

Because Jesse Rothman had killed a man. And thanks to reporter Duncan Pickles, it was common knowledge in the Cove that Jesse and my Uncle Vinnie had done at least one illegal business deal.

CHAPTER TWO

"Your uncle sold Jesse Rothman counterfeit Viagra." Zac's voice and the sound of his Jeep engine projected from the phone resting on the pedestal sink in my bathroom. "What's the big concern?"

I placed my morning triple espresso beside my makeup bag. "I know Jesse has no reason to come after me or the salon, but I feel this sense of dread that I can't shake."

"It's those tours. They're getting to you."

"I know, and that's why I'm going ahead with the renovations Gia suggested. Alex Jordan is on her way over."

"How are you going to pay for that?"

I brushed blush onto my paler-than-usual cheeks. "By selling the Ferrari."

"That's a drag."

"Tell me about it. When life blows up in your face, a drive along the coast in a fabulous Italian sports car helps take away the pain."

"Look at it this way—the last time you sold something of Vinnie's was when we met."

The mirror reflected the semi-smile that the memory brought to my lips—semi because it was tempered by Sexy Sadie, my uncle's tacky statue that Tucker Sloan hired Zac to help him move to his antique store, One Man's Trash. "Maybe you and Gia are right. Something positive could be on the road ahead—like a new boyfriend."

"Over my dead body." The engine went silent, signaling his arrival at work. "I'm sorry. That wasn't the best choice of phrase."

Death was a dicey subject at The Clip and Sip.

He cleared his throat. "I was thinking more along the lines of your money problems disappearing."

The brothel relics would go away, but I wasn't so sure about Harriet, which meant that we would continue to lose clients, renovations or no. Still, I wanted to be optimistic for Zac. "Here's to both of our money problems disappearing. That reminds me, what's new on the treasure hunt front?"

"It's been suspended."

I sat on the side of the claw-foot tub. "How come?"

"Clark's ready to retire, and he wants to see how much he can get from the sale of Pirate's Hook Marine before he decides whether to spend any more money looking for pirate booty."

My heart sank like an anchor. Finding the treasure Bart Coffyn had stolen from Sir Francis Drake's ship the *Golden Hind* was Zac's best shot at buying back his late father's marine supply store from Clark Graham, his boss. "You guys found a couple of silver pesos. Surely those are valuable."

His Jeep door opened and slammed shut. "Not enough to make Clark want to keep searching." He fell silent, and I heard shouting in the background. "Hang on a sec."

Muffled conversation ensued.

I wished there was some way I could help Zac, but ever since I'd opened the salon, I'd been struggling to help myself.

"Cass, I've got to run. We've got a crisis."

"It's nothing serious, is it?"

"Only a two-hundred-thousand-dollar sailboat at the bottom of the bay."

I gasped. "How did that happen?"

"The water was choppy last night, and a log crashed through the side. The worst part is that we had a buyer lined up, but the sale capsized with the boat."

That was a shame, because the loss would probably make Clark more eager to sell the business. "What are you going to do?"

"We'll raise it and salvage what we can."

I heard knocking downstairs. "Someone's at the door. Be careful, okay? And call me later."

"Wait, babe."

"Yes?"

"Make sure I'm there when you sell the Ferrari."

"Are you implying that I can't negotiate a good price, Zac Taylor?" I said in mock outrage.

"I'm implying that I need to keep an eye on the buyers. I don't want you to trade me in for a new model."

"Then you'd better hope all the buyers are women," I joked. "Now go raise that boat." I ended the call and hurried down the stairs.

Alex Jordan was at the back door in a flannel shirt, Carhartt work jacket, and jeans. She had a backpack over one shoulder, and her brown hair was in a ponytail beneath a baseball cap. And if I were a TV director, I would've signed her to a home renovation show on the spot because she

would have been stunning in a hazmat suit. Even Gia thought Alex was a knockout, which was notable because she barely wore makeup. But the two shared a passion for bronzer—Alex a faint sprinkling, Gia a full storm.

I opened the door and ushered her in. "Thanks for moving up the appointment time."

"It's always fun to come to the salon."

"If only our clients still shared your enthusiasm."

"They will after we do these renovations." She glanced around the room. "Where's Gia?"

"These days she doesn't leave her *I Dream of Jeannie* bottle bed before nine, which is why I moved the appointment to eight. I need to do this as cheaply as possible, and she's all about upgrades."

Alex snort-laughed. "Doesn't the salon open at nine?"

"It does, but we haven't had enough business to warrant both of us working, which is where you come in. Follow me, and we'll start with the offending items."

We climbed the stairs, and when we reached the landing I pressed a finger to my lips. Gia's bedroom was across from mine in the front of the house, and I didn't want to wake her. We proceeded past the other four bedrooms to the back of the house and entered the living room.

Alex went straight to the seating area on the left. "Love the velvet Victorian furniture, especially that violet high-back chair and crimson couch." She pointed to a player piano beside the bar on the back wall. "Does that work?"

"It does, but Gia disabled it. She says uncool music gives her migraines."

"That girl's a card."

"Yeah, the Joker."

She pulled a clipboard from her backpack. "For this room, I have instructions to remove the gilt mirror on the ceiling and the *Bottoms Up* placard above the bar and repair the hole." Her brow furrowed. "And to take down a picture bolted to the wall?"

I pointed to a poster-sized photograph above the fireplace of three prostitutes who'd worked at the brothel. They were on their backs and propped up on their elbows with legs splayed in a V formation. Originally, they wore only shoes and socks, but Gia had begun stapling lingerie to their lady parts. "The infamous Hope, Faith, and Charity."

"No...Gold...Diggers?" Alex said, reading the appliquéd word on each of the women's underwear.

"Gia changes the phrase to suit the situation. This one is a message for Harriet and her tourists."

"That's hilarious. Are you sure you want to take it down? Hope, Faith, and Charity are decent now, and it's a shame to remove history from the house."

"This history is better left in the past."

She ran her fingers along the edge of the frame. "I should be able to fill the bolt holes with caulk and touch up the paint. You know, Tucker Sloan would probably buy this off you."

"I was planning to store it in the attic for posterity." And prudence so that the likes of Duncan Pickles couldn't get his hands on it to write another scandalous article about The Clip and Sip. "Speaking of the attic, let's do the tower room next."

We returned to the hallway and climbed the stairs to the third floor. The room was twelve feet in diameter and unfinished. When my uncle bought the house in 1995, it had been abandoned since the 1955 fire, and no one had ever repaired the damage. He spent a fortune restoring the building, refinishing the living quarters, and adding the salon, The Yankee Clipper. My guess was that he'd never gotten around to fixing up the tower.

Alex glanced at her clipboard. "For this room, I have cabinets, a raised platform for a makeup chair, and a Victorian-inspired throne."

I gave an eye roll. "There will be no throne. If Gia wants to feel royal, she can use the high-back chair in the living room."

She pulled a pen from her pocket, and it caught on her jacket and catapulted across the floor. She knelt to retrieve it and paused. "There's something stuck between the wall and the floor. It looks like gold."

"Don't tell Harriet that. She's likely to mine the place."

Alex pulled a hammer from her backpack and pried up a loose floorboard. "Whoa. It's a cameo, surrounded by pearls." She rose and handed me the oval-shaped brooch. "Is it yours?"

"It looks expensive, so it's not from my jewelry box." I studied the scene on the front. A woman stood in a field among some trees, with a dog at her feet. Her dress, or maybe a toga, blew behind her in a breeze, and she held a bow in one hand, while the other arm was raised. "Who's she supposed to be?"

"I dunno, but I've never seen anything like it, and it's definitely an antique. I wonder if it belonged to one of the ladies who used to work here."

"Well, it certainly wasn't my uncle's." I turned the brooch over in my hand looking for identifying marks, but there weren't any. "If it did belong to one of the women, I'd love to find their relatives and return it."

"My grandmother has a book about cameos. Why don't I take a picture and show it to her? Maybe she could help you date it or figure out the brand."

"It's worth a try."

She pulled her phone from her pocket and snapped a photo. "I'll take some of the room while I'm at it."

While she photographed the tower, I counted the pearls mounted on the gold around the cameo. There were thirty-seven, and they didn't appear to be fake. Someone had lost a gorgeous piece of jewelry. If I couldn't find the rightful heirs, I would gladly keep it. Maybe the find was one of the good things that Gia had predicted.

Alex pulled a tape measure from her back pocket. "It feels weird to be in here again."

"Did Gia already show you around?"

"Actually, it was your uncle." Her mouth twisted into an unspoken apology. "He was almost my first client when I moved to Danger Cove."

I didn't reply. Even though I hadn't known my uncle, his death still was an open wound for my father and the rest of the Conti family. And I regretted that I couldn't thank him for the inheritance, because it had allowed me to start a new life in Washington after I'd made a mess of things back home in Texas. The only way I knew to repay him was by keeping the salon in business and bringing his killer to justice. But after ten months in Danger Cove, I feared that I would fail at both objectives.

"I'm sorry." Alex's tone was gentle. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, it's okay. The truth is that I only met him once."

"He was super nice. And such a character."

I hoped by "character" that she didn't mean "player." From what I'd heard about my uncle, Alex's work outfit, or even a hazmat suit, wouldn't have hidden her generous curves from his lecherous gaze. "Just out of curiosity, what did he want to do to this room?"

"Mainly, he wanted me to finish it out—paneling, baseboards, wood floor. But he also asked me to make a raised platform for his bed."

"He was going to move his bedroom up here?"

Her head tilted. "This was his bedroom."

It was my turn to be confused. "No, it was and still is next to mine."

"That was his office. He had me take measurements in there for some custom shelving."

He must've switched rooms. "Do you remember when this was?"

The corners of her mouth tightened. "The morning of December thirty-first."

Her tense look suddenly made sense. Fifteen months before, my uncle was found dead in his bed late New Year's Eve. "Did you tell any of this to the police?"

"Bud Ohlsen interviewed me since I was one of the last people to see Vinnie, but I don't remember discussing the layout of the house. Is it important?"

I looked at the cameo, unsure how to respond. Because if what Alex was saying was correct, then my uncle might not have been strangled in the place we all had thought.

* * *

Gia slid low in her seat at the Danger Cove police station and toyed with the ties at the collar of her leopard top. "Humor me here—what are the odds that Alex Jordan was the one who wrapped the fishnet stocking around Vinnie's neck?"

"You did not even"—I spun in my chair and did a quick scan of the open-style office. Luckily, it was lunchtime, so most of the officers were away from their desks—"just ask that here."

"You can unwad your panties. The cops know she was with him."

"Exactly," I whisper-huffed. "So if the stocking were hers, they would've traced it to her."

"Valid point." She crossed her legs in jeans so distressed that more of her skin showed than fabric. "But I still say we should get a discount on those renovations."

Detective Bud Ohlsen entered, to my relief. Without our clients as buffers, my cousin and I were spending too much time together. And if he

hadn't come when he did, I might've killed her right there in the police station.

"Cassidi and Gia," he said in a well-what-do-you-know tone as he settled his big frame behind the desk, "I haven't seen you two since Christmas."

Gia pursed her lips. "It was a good run."

"Indeed." He glanced at a framed picture of his boat, no doubt wishing he were on it, and moved a stack of papers to make room for his arms. "So, what's new in your uncle's case?"

My cheeks warmed at the irony behind his question. It was well known around town that Gia and I were looking into my uncle's murder—others too on an as-needed basis—and that our sleuthing had caused Detective Ohlsen a fair amount of stress. In fact, I was pretty sure we were to blame for the extra salt in his salt-and-pepper hair.

"Well, we hired Alex Jordan to do some work on the house, and when I took her to the tower, she said that it was my uncle's bedroom and that the room he was found in was his office."

He shifted in his seat. "It *has* been over a year. Maybe she was confused."

"She's a carpenter, not a calamad."

Detective Ohlsen looked to me for a translation of Gia's New Jersey Italian, which he often did even when she spoke straight English.

"It means squid, as in a stupid person."

"I see." He rubbed his mouth. "I suppose Vinnie could've moved his furniture when Alex left."

"Right after having her do an estimate for a platform for his bed and some office shelves?" I asked.

Gia sat up and cast an annoyed look over her shoulder. "Vinnie was a gigolo, not a *gidrul*."

"Cucumber," I translated, "as in idiot."

The detective's gaze drifted from me back to the boat photo. "I agree that Vinnie was a smart man, but to be frank, I can't say the same about his business choices. Now I appreciate the information, and I'll note it in the case file."

"That's it?" Gia exclaimed. "No comment, no theory?"

"I've told you both at least twenty times that I can't discuss a pending investigation."

The quiet in his voice said the matter was closed, but I decided to try a less accusatory approach. "In all fairness, Detective, you don't seem surprised by the news. Does this mean you already knew about the furniture?"

"What it means is that I need you to trust me to handle the case in a way that leads to an arrest and a conviction."

"I'll translate this one, Cass." Gia stared down the detective, standoff style. "That's cop-ese for yes."

Although I shared her frustration, I stood and pulled her from the chair before she smarted off with another Italian food word for moron—or worse. "We'd better get back to the salon."

"Yeah," Gia said, "because if we hurry, we can make Harriet's tour."

Detective Ohlsen rose to his feet. "You ladies have a pleasant day. And stay out of trouble."

I raised the corners of my mouth high enough to be polite but didn't make any promises on either count. After all, it was time for the next Gold Rush History tour, and I did live with Gia.

We entered a hallway that led to the entrance, and Gia sidled up to me. "Something's not right about that furniture."

"I think I know what it is."

"Are you gonna clue me in?"

"Vinnie's body was moved along with that furniture."

Gia stopped short, and I did too. But for a different reason.

A slender woman around six feet in height stared at us from behind a potted plant in the lobby. She wore a black wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses, but there was no mistaking her, thanks to her regular appearances on the society page of the *Cove Chronicles* and, more recently, the front page.

Elise Ingall Rothman, hardware-store heiress and wife of the murderous Jesse.

She removed her sunglasses, revealing bright blue eyes sans crow's feet, despite her reported fifty years. "You're those stylists from The Clip and Sip."

I nodded, reluctant to engage her in conversation.

She pulled a black duster cardigan around her and peered from side to side before stepping from behind the plant.

"I'm sure you've heard that my Jesse is being released today, so I'm sorry to run into you under these unfortunate circumstances." She held up her hands. "No, no, Elise," she said, talking to her herself. "It's all a matter of perspective." She closed her eyes and took a meditative breath. "It's fortunate that you ran into these girls at the police station."

Gia shot me a sideways look and tapped her right temple, the Italian gesture for touched in the head.

Elise's eyes popped open, and we jumped.

"Jesse and I are renewing our vows in a ceremony at our home tomorrow. We were so young when we married, and we want to reaffirm our commitment."

"Hey, uh," Gia fumbled, "your life choices are none of our business."

I would've said congratulations, but okay.

"Interesting comment." Elise rested the tip of her sunglasses on her lip. "But this life choice *is* your business. The Seattle salon I hired for hair and makeup has canceled, so I want to contract The Clip and Sip."

We needed money, but the nature of Jesse's crime and his association with my uncle made the deal a no way. "I'm flattered that you would think of us, but it's not enough notice."

She put her hands on her hips and looked down at her beige Jimmy Choos. "They're right to be reluctant, Elise. After all, Jesse was accused of a horrible crime."

Gia's sideways look moved from me to the exit.

Elise's head popped up, and we jumped again.

"I'd like to invite you girls to look at this as an opportunity. It will be an easy job, and a lot of important people will be there, not to mention the press. How about I pay you double what you would've earned in a day and throw in the travel expenses I offered to the Seattle salon?"

"That's generous, really," I said. "But I'm afraid we can't."

Gia took my hand. "So we'll just be going."

"Let's say ten thousand dollars?"

Gia dropped my hand and grasped Elise's. "Need us to bring anything on our way over? Run some errands? Oh, and I have barista experience."

It was good to know that my cousin couldn't be bought.

An office door opened, and Jesse Rothman emerged. I would've said that the six months in jail hadn't been kind to him, but with his greasy dyed hair, wide nose, and fleshy, low-hanging lips, he'd hardly been handsome before his incarceration.

"Good news, darling." Elise slid her arm in his. "Cassidi and Gia are going to make us pretty for our ceremony tomorrow."

His dark eyes bored into mine, and his grin resembled a grimace.

Not exactly courteous, but his reaction reflected how I felt.

"We'll need you at nine a.m." Elise squeezed Gia's and my hands. "I'll email you our address within the hour. This will be so fun!"

"A blast," Gia said.

From a shotgun.

They headed for the door, and after they'd exited, I turned to Gia. "Would you stop signing us up for things we can't do?"

"I know. It's going to be hard to make that man anything close to pretty—"

"I meant the job. Jesse's dangerous. I don't want his money."

"But ten grand is half the renovation fee, so we could keep the Ferrari." She fist-pumped to get me pumped. "And he just got a Get Out of Jail Free card, so he's not going to do anything to anyone."

"Excuse me for not trusting Lucky Luciano's look-alike."

"His name is Rothman, and he's from Washington. The mob would never let him in."

"Maybe not. But his first name is Jesse, like James, and he just got away with murder."

The door slammed, and heels clicked on the tile.

My cousin's frozen face told me it was Jesse.

I turned, convinced he hadn't heard me. And yet his gaze exuded hate. Not only that, his gait was that of a gunslinger who'd challenged us to a duel.

"I told my wife I forgot my ID," he said in a raspy drawl, "but I came to clear up any confusion."

Gia and I exchanged a look. We hadn't been confused, but at that point we were.

"While you're at the house tomorrow, you'd best stick to hair and makeup. Because if I find either of you poking around for that casino money..." He closed his eyes and sneered, and then his eyes popped like his wife's. "...your lady luck'll run out."

CHAPTER THREE

The ringing of slot machines woke me. I rolled onto my back and pulled a pillow over my head.

Wait a second. I wasn't in Atlantic City, or even Las Vegas. And even if I were, there wouldn't be any slots in my bedroom. I didn't stay at that kind of hotel.

I tossed the pillow and opened my eyes. My alarm clock projected 6:01 a.m. onto the ceiling above my bed. I slid my hand from beneath the warm pink quilt and grabbed the noisemaker, my ringing phone, from the nightstand.

The caller was Carla Di Mitri, my father's sister, Gia's stepmother, and a near clone of Peg Bundy from *Married... with Children*. I'd last seen her at my uncle's funeral in a leopard spandex dress trimmed with black lace, holding a hot pink rosary and sobbing into her husband Frank's red satin handkerchief.

I tapped Answer. "Hey, Aunt Carla."

"Sorry I missed your cawl last night," she said in her New Jersey accent. "I made a lasagna, and everybody came ovuh. Carmine and Rosalie, Gino and Carmela, Joey and Giovanna..."

I watched the time on the ceiling while she ran through the list. Italian-American women name-dropped friends and relatives like social climbers did connections. "That's okay. I was calling—"

"Hold it right theuh, doll. As the matriarch of this family, I have a right to know how my niece is doing."

I braced myself against the pillows for the usual questions, in order of importance, and questionable advice.

"Are you eating?"

"Of c—"

"Because I pray to God every night that you girls can find decent food, what with all that fish and lobstah."

Like my Aunt Magnolia in Texas, who only ate red meat, my Aunt Carla had a healthy disdain for protein with gills. She said oceans and lakes were nothing but "giant johns."

"Make sure you eat plenty of Italian sausage because pork fat keeps your skin plump and supple."

And the rest of me too.

"Now, what's the status with that boyfriend?"

"We're doing great."

"So you're still single." She sounded like she'd bitten into a bad garlic clove. "You've gotta go in through the stomach, Cassidi Lee. That's how I got all my husbands. They tasted my ragù, and the next thing you know I had a ring on my finguh. I'll send you my recipe."

I thanked her even though I had no plans to make the proposal-inducing sauce. I wasn't the type to try to lure Zac or any man into marrying me. And if I were, I'd make a dish that not only landed a husband, but also kept one.

"So, what were you cawling about yesterday?"

"Uncle Vinnie."

"God rest his soul." She sighed the sorrow of a hundred Virgin Marys. "But if my brothuh was here today, I'd give him such a smack. What that man put me through you'll never know."

Actually, I did. She told me every time she called. "I wanted to ask if you recognized the name of one of his business associates, Jesse Rothman."

"Who's his mothuh? Is she Italian?"

"I don't know. Gia and I ran into him, and he mentioned casino money, like he owed Uncle Vinnie a cut."

"Why would he tell that to yous two? What's going on?"

"Don't get all worked up about this," I said, knowing it was as futile as suggesting she switch to whole-wheat pasta, "but he might've brought it up because he just got out of jail."

"'Don't get all worked up,' she says. Well, I am, and I've got the *agita* to prove it. Did that criminal threaten you girls?"

I heard clicking, and I imagined her pacing in too-high heels on the marble tile of her Versace-inspired kitchen. "His wife hired us for their vow renewal this afternoon, and he told us not to look for the money."

"*Marrone*," she said, invoking the Madonna, "my heart feels like a piece of veal under a meat tenderizer." A cabinet door slammed. "Frank, where's the damn Campari?"

"We'll be fine, Aunt Carla. A lot of prominent people will be there, so try to stay calm, okay?"

"How do you expect me to stay calm when my niece and my stepdaughter could be mob targets?"

I froze, hoping she was referring to a flash mob. "Could you explain that last comment?"

"It's that Atlantic City business. I always said it was how Vinnie got the money to buy the property in Danger Cove."

I sat up in bed. "He owned a casino?"

"Two years ago, about nine months before he passed, he told me he had a business there, but he was secretive about it. And what else could he have had his hands in?"

Where my Uncle Vinnie was concerned, I'd learned not to ask that question—in a couple of respects.

"Gambling has been the bread and buttuh of the Atlantic City mob since it was legalized in the seventies. And before that it was bathtub booze during the Prohibition."

I lay back and pulled the quilt to my chin. "So you think he was involved with the Mafia?"

"Why else would he leave Jersey? It's paradise heuh."

New Jersey was no Hawaii, but she might've had a point about Uncle Vinnie's move. Washington was on the opposite coast, so if Vinnie had wanted to escape the Cosa Nostra, Danger Cove was a good place to come. Unfortunately, he hadn't changed his name, which meant that a hit man could have located him and done him in.

"I just had an idea. Vinnie used to be close to Carmine's cousin Sal, and Sal's sistuh Gloria plays canasta with Angelina, the one with the droopy eye at Dino's Bakery. She sees things, that one."

My gaze drifted back to the ceiling, and I wondered whether there was any science to support droopy eyes and heightened powers of sight.

"I'll ask her to get Gloria to talk to Sal and find out if Vinnie ever mentioned a casino. In the meantime, stay away from that Jesse charactuh, and definitely keep Gia from him. She's got a mouth, that one."

Carla didn't have to tell me that. Gia's mouth spoke for itself. "We can't back out on his wife at the last minute. Who knows what he would do?"

"Then you'd better watch out for the guests."

"Why?"

She took a long slurp, probably of an Italian Sunrise, her favorite drink. "Times are harder than evuh for Atlantic City casinos. If money's been missing and this man just got out of the joint, then someone could come to collect. And if the money ain't theuh, you know what happens next."

Yes, and anyone who'd ever seen a Mafia movie did too.

"Someone's gonna get whacked. And if Vinnie was his associate, that someone could be yous two."

I slipped underneath the quilt. That was a scene I hadn't predicted.

* * *

"I'm Katrina Schwarz, the mansion manager." The six-foot female's bodybuilder biceps flexed as she led Gia and me into a spacious but stark dressing room. "Mrs. Rothman is on her way with hair and makeup instructions. Until she's here, don't go anywhere or touch anything." Her green eyes turned granite as they scanned our faces, and she strode from the room.

Gia closed the door behind her. "That one's as icy as her peroxide pixie."

I took a seat on a metal chair. "She fits with the décor. Just look at all the concrete and metal."

"I am." Gia surveyed a spiky silver chandelier. "I knew they had rich people houses in Craggy Hill Estates, but this place is big enough to rival Buckingham Palace."

"If only it had the Queen's Guard."

She tossed her makeup bag onto the Hollywood-style vanity. "I know you're stressed about that call with Aunt Carla, but we're safe with Schwarzenegger in the house."

"It's Schwarz."

"Is it? Because those rock-hard muscles are all Arnold. And I'm pretty sure they could stop bullets from a Tommy Gun."

I stood and paced in front of floor-to-ceiling windows. "I'll be all right if we can get to work soon and then get out."

"But not before we collect that fat paycheck." Gia slipped off her blue faux fur coat, and the cameo brooch was on the bodice of her black strappy dress.

"You took that from my dresser?"

"I'm sorry. Did you want to wear it?"

"I want to find the rightful owners."

She shrugged. "It's ours until it's someone else's."

It was hard to argue with that.

The door opened, and Elise wafted in wearing a red dragon-adorned dressing gown and high-heeled slippers. "A reporter from the *Cove Chronicles* is coming at eleven, and none of my bridesmaids are here." Her head dropped low. "Don't panic, Elise. It will work out."

I wished I shared that sentiment.

Her head rocketed up, and I half expected her to breathe fire. "Cassidi, when the matron of honor arrives, could you give her a simple updo?"

"How about a French twist?"

"Perfect, because I'd like a Grace Kelly tuck." She put her hand on Gia's shoulder. "Let's be frank, shall we?"

I shot my cousin a don't-you-dare stare.

Elise's shoulders did a woe-is-me slump. "Jail was unkind to Jesse's skin."

That and a lifetime of scowling.

"Well, I can touch him up with my Mad Makeup base."

"I'm so relieved. He's showing my brother, Rhys, around his man cabin out back." She gestured out a window to a large structure that resembled a hunting lodge. "When he gets out, pay special attention to his eyes. I can't have him in the newspaper with those dark circles."

"I've got the perfect products for that."

"Splendid." She clasped her hands. "You girls feel free to set up your things. I'm off to check on the flowers, and then I'll be getting a preceremony massage in the spa. It's the building with the fitness center next to the man cabin, if you need me." Elise sailed from the room.

Gia shook her head. "Her own spa and fitness center. I don't even think Buckingham Palace has that."

"Apparently, there's good money in hardware stores."

"And in a criminal husband's casino."

"Sh." I waved my arms. "Do not say the *C* words in this house, especially around Jesse. And when you're doing his touch-up, please don't do anything crazy like a male smoky eye. On the off chance he is what we think he is, I don't want your makeup job on his reasons-to-hit list."

"Chill, okay?" She removed an eyeshadow palette from her makeup bag. "I'm going to use a neutral shadow from one of my smoky eye kits and some concealer."

"What about the bridesmaids? Elise didn't say anything about them." Gia lit up like the vanity. "Stained-glass makeup."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Eyeshadow that looks like a stained-glass window. It's perfect for a home vow renewal. It'll give it that touch of church."

And I thought the smoky lip was creepy. "Before you start soldering people's eyelids, we need to run that idea by Elise."

She rolled her blue-shadowed eyes. "Fine."

We went the way we came, down a hallway lined with portraits and the odd nude statue, passing countless bedrooms, and into a formal living area with a fireplace.

George Fontaine stood near the entryway in a wide-lapel suit coat and pleated trousers with a centerpiece of calla lilies, hydrangea, and tea roses. "Katrina has already put the bouquet, corsages, and boutonnieres in the refrigerator, and I'll get the flowers on the tables and the altar."

Elise took the arrangement and carried it to a coffee table between two white couches that faced one another. "They're exquisite, George. You've outdone yourself."

He winked at Gia and me and glanced at a painting above a love seat at the far end of the room. "That landscape isn't bad either. Where'd you get it?"

"Jesse bought it from some unknown artist. I don't remember where." She grimaced as though art by unknowns was distasteful.

The front door opened, and Lilly Waters from the Smugglers' Tavern entered balancing a huge tray of crab puffs on one hand and a platter of salmon on the other. "These are the last of the hors d'oeuvres."

"Let me help you with that." I took the tray.

Her blue eyes flashed gratitude. "I'm on my way to the kitchen. The Rothmans' chef couldn't be here today, so I'm going to stay and serve these myself."

I followed her through the dining room, and a cherry tomato fell from the tray to the floor. I watched as it rolled across the wood toward a closed door, and I willed it to stop before slipping out of sight. Fortunately, it did. I placed the tray on a formal dining table and hurried to the door. Then I knelt to retrieve the tomato.

"I told them to back off, but they're looking for it."

Jesse's raspy voice raised the hair on the nape of my neck, and his statement raised questions.

Who were "they"? And what was "it"?

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching and crouched lower, although my legs trembled from fear.

"It doesn't matter if they do." Jesse's rasp had turned into a growl. "They're getting too close, so the two of them have got to be dealt with. A permanent solution, if you get my drift."

Oh, I got it. And his drift wasn't good at all.

* * *

Gia spun in slow circles in the dressing room vanity chair. She did the same thing in our salon when she pondered a problem. "Jesse had to be on the phone, right?"

I stuffed my hair products into a carrying case. "I didn't hear anyone else in the room. But Elise said he was showing her brother, Rhys, around his cabin, so maybe he was talking to him."

"Or that manly mansion manager, Katrina. She could've been in there."

"Whoever it was, he ordered a hit." I pointed a hairbrush at her. "We're leaving, and we're going straight to the police."

"I'm from Jersey, and my boyfriend's a cop." She held up my curling iron like a baton. "He's not going to mess with us."

I grabbed the curling iron and shoved it into my bag. "The police didn't matter to him when he killed his real estate partner. And our lives are worth more than a ten-thousand-dollar paycheck. Now let's go."

She stopped the spin. "You can, but I'm doing this job."

"Are you crazy?"

"For the Ferrari. And I'm going to fight for my ride."

I gripped the carrying case. "I can't leave you in this house."

"Exactly. So let's find out where those bridesmaids are." She catapulted from the chair and exited the dressing room.

I tossed the case onto the vanity and rushed after her. I always knew my cousin would be the death of me, but I didn't think she'd be willing to get me killed for a car. Gia pushed open the swinging door that led to the industrial-style kitchen. Katrina was putting coffee in the espresso machine, and Amy Spannagel stood at an island.

I eyed her plate of crab puffs. "Why aren't you at the library? Are you attending the ceremony?"

"No, Elise misplaced a book of poetry she needs for the reading, so she asked me to bring the library copy. Katrina told me to help myself to some food before I went back to work."

Gia sniffed. "She didn't even offer us water."

Katrina cast a cold stare over her shoulder, and the cold turned icy at the sight of Gia's strappy dress.

"Well, Ben's docking my lunch for this. He considers anything that takes me from the library to be personal time."

In some ways, Ben was as crooked as his bootlegger book-burner ancestor.

Katrina headed for the door with the espresso and a plate of hors d'oeuvres.

When she was gone, I sidled up to Amy. "Any chance you can sneak in some research this afternoon?"

"I could use what's left of my lunch." She popped a crab puff. "What do you need?"

"Information on Atlantic City Mafia and casinos."

She coughed out the puff. "Harriet's connected?"

"This is about my uncle, not the Gold Rush History Tours. I think he and Jesse owned a casino, maybe with other partners."

"That industry disgusts me." Amy repopped the puff.

I was disgusted too, but not by the casino. "Gambling isn't always corrupt, but in this case I'm sure it is."

"I was talking about the cards and poker chips." She helped herself to some salmon. "Studies have shown that they're teeming with bacteria."

"I know something else that's disgusting." Gia pointed to Amy's plate. "What are you eating?"

"Gravlax."

"Ugh." Gia stuck out her tongue. "Did you just throw up in your mouth?"

"It's the name of a Nordic dish." Amy pushed up her glasses. "Raw salmon cured in salt, dill, and sugar."

Gia gagged. "Thanks for the graphic description. I just threw up in mine."

Jesse burst into the kitchen, white with rage and rigid, and the three of us cowered behind the island.

"This swill is undrinkable." He held up the espresso cup. "You in the black dress. Since we're paying you so damned much, make me a decent espresso."

Gia stomped to the espresso machine.

"Bring it to the dressing room." His gaze flicked to me. "We need to get the hell on with this day. I've got business to take care of." He pushed the door so hard it swung long after he left.

"Forget the coffee, cuz. We need to leave."

Gia filled the portafilter with coffee, avoiding my eyes.

Amy looked at her Swiss Army watch. "I'd better head out too. Ben's going to be as angry as Jesse if I'm not behind the circulation desk in twenty minutes. I'll be in touch with that research, Cass."

She grabbed a satchel and hurried from the room, and I did the only thing I could. I stood near a knife block and monitored the door.

It opened, and I gripped the handle of a cleaver.

Alex Jordan appeared, looking lovely in a white pantsuit, and I dropped my hand, relieved.

"Have you ladies seen George? He called and said his intern, Ruby, has to study for an exam, so he needs help with the flowers."

Gia pushed the *Brew* button. "We saw him in the living room, but that was almost an hour ago."

Alex's face lit up at the sight of her dress. "Oh, I showed Gram the picture of the cameo, and she said it's Diana, the goddess of the hunt. She's positive she's seen it before, but she can't remember where or when." She clutched her necklace. "She's a little forgetful these days."

"I'm sure it'll come to her." A sound outside the kitchen window caught my attention, and the culprit caught me off guard. "There's George. In that yellow-flowered shrub?"

"That man." Alex shook her head. "He really gets around." She slipped out the door.

Gia poured the espresso. "It's go time, as in let's head to the dressing room."

I followed her into the long hallway, my dread increasing with every step.

Jesse watched us enter via the vanity mirror, unblinking, reptile style. He took the espresso and swallowed it in one gulp. "It's cold."

Like your blood.

Gia picked up the eyeshadow palette. "Yeah, well, if you lived in a smaller house, it would still be warm."

His face was impassive, but his gaze was steady and intense, like a lizard preparing to shoot out its tongue and pull her into its mouth.

She brushed a neutral shade on his eyelids, and the tension was so thick I could have cut it with the cleaver, if I'd had the sense to bring it with me.

I approached the vanity and opened my carrying case on the pretense of setting up my hair station. The first item I pulled out was a can of hair spray. In the absence of sheers, it was a stylist's best weapon, professionally and personally.

Gia placed the palette on the counter and picked up a bottle of concealer.

Jesse's eyes opened wide—à la horror movie actor.

My cousin and I exchanged a what's-his-problem look.

But Jesse didn't notice. He seemed transfixed by his reflection.

I debated whether to say something, but I feared a trap was in the works. I picked up the hair spray.

His back arched like he'd been shot.

Gia leapt backwards, and I pressed the spray button.

Jesse keeled over like felled timber and face-planted in the smoky eye palette.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Ah, the ladies of The Clip and Sip." Detective Marshall's tone was as slick as the oil stain on the lapel of his cheap suit as he towered over Gia and me in the Rothman entryway. "It wouldn't be a crime scene without you here."

Gia glowered so intensely that her false eyelashes resembled tiny porcupine quills preparing to launch. "It's a coincidence."

"You might want to consult a dictionary, Ms. Di Mitri, because you've been involved in more than two murder investigations."

My stomach churned at the insinuation. "And as in those other cases, we had nothing to do with this."

"Why don't you relax while I investigate that?" The detective pointed to the love seat beneath the landscape painting, and we entered the living room as though it were the gallows.

"Dick Marshall's at it again." Gia flipped her hair and flopped onto the seat.

I sat on the end closest to a window. "Don't let him hear you."

"Well, it's true. There's a living room full of suspects, but as usual he zeroes in on us."

She was right about the detective, and the roomful. George, Alex, and Lilly were on the couch with their backs to us, and they faced Elise and her stuffy fiftysomething brother, Rhys. Elise sobbed, but everyone else was silent from shock and probably fear. The crackling of a fire only added to the tension.

Katrina entered with a glass and handed it to Elise. "It's tap water." She glared at Gia and sat across from Lilly Waters. "So we can be sure it's safe to drink."

"What's the muscled manager implying? That I poisoned Jesse's espresso?"

A terrifying thought prevented me from replying. *Had Katrina or someone else in the house framed Gia?*

"It's so unfair, so unfair." Elise's voice had the pitch of a wail as she twisted the sash of her dragon robe. "Just when my Jesse was returned to me, I lost him again. Forever." She broke into a fresh round of sobs and crashed into Rhys's side.

"There, there, love." He protected his ascot with one hand and patted her bicep with the other, but his arm never made contact with her shoulders. Nor did his styled white hair budge. "Stiff upper lip."

Gia sniff-snorted. "He talks like Madonna when she lived in England."

His accent *did* sound affected, and his concern insincere. I glanced at Detective Marshall to get a read on the situation. He contemplated Rhys with a gaze as impenetrable as steel.

Catherine Cooper exited the hallway with the black medical examiner bag I'd seen too often. Her pencil skirt whipped around her calves, making her stride seem more brisk.

The detective motioned for her to follow him to a corner near Gia and me. "What have you got for me, Doctor?"

"I can't rule out a severe allergic reaction, but based on my preliminary examination, I'd say it's poisoning."

I squirmed at the word. Poison was a cruel manner of death, and Gia and I had been falsely implicated in a poisoning during the holidays a few months before. Detective Marshall was inclined to make assumptions, and the murder method would fuel his hasty thought process.

He pulled a notepad from his suit pocket. "Any thoughts on the source?"

"My team has collected samples of the food and coffee, and we're taking the eyeshadow to the lab."

My gut seized at the makeup mention, and Gia grabbed my arm.

"But we'll analyze his stomach contents, and I'll be in touch when I have the full autopsy results." Catherine cast a sorrowful glance at Elise and headed for the door.

Gia leaned in. "I know it looks bad, but my money's on the crab. If it's Dungeness, it can be toxic."

My hand moved to my mouth. "No."

"What? You think it was that revolting fish?"

The detective spun around. "Are we interrupting your chitchat?"

I rose. "Detective, I just remembered that Amy Spannagel ate the crab puffs and the gravlax."

Lilly's body contracted like I'd hooked her with a fishing pole. "What are you suggesting, Cassidi?"

"Not that you did anything wrong. But Dr. Cooper said they're testing the food—"

"Eavesdropping, eh?" The detective's lips spread into a gotcha smile. "Is there something you were worried you'd hear?"

Everyone stared, and I sunk onto the love seat. "I'm worried about my friend."

Officer Richie Faria burst through the front door with his biceps flexed. "We've searched the grounds and the two buildings out back. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"Did you contact Miss Spannagel?" The detective shot me a smug stare.

"She ate both of the appetizers and drank a bottle of Evian. No sign of illness, but I told her to get checked out."

Gia and I exchanged a look. I was relieved about Amy but more worried than ever about that espresso and makeup.

"I'll contact her when we're done here." He scribbled a note. "What about the video from the outdoor security system?"

"I pulled it from the hard drive."

"Start reviewing it. I want the name of every individual who set foot on this property today."

"Yessir." Officer Faria saluted and left.

Detective Marshall sauntered over to George. "What kind of flowers did you deliver to the ceremony?"

"Calla lilies, hydrangea, and tea roses."

"To your knowledge, did Jesse Rothman come into contact with them?"

"Not the arrangements outside, but I don't know about this one." He gestured to the centerpiece on the coffee table.

Elise raised her head from her brother's shoulder. "My Jesse isn't allergic to flowers." She looked down and made a mucousy gargling sound. "You mean he *wasn't*, Elise."

The detective did an over-the-shoulder double take at her private conversation. He turned and tightened his necktie, but the crease between his eyebrows gave away his consternation. "Are any of those flowers toxic to humans, Mr. Fontaine?"

George's head retracted. "The calla lilies and hydrangea. But surely you're not suggesting he *ate* them?"

"Not by choice."

George rubbed the back of his neck.

"Any other flowers you were in contact with on the grounds?"

"None."

The yellow flowers on that bush. Why hadn't George mentioned them? The detective put a hand on his hip and looked down. "Where'd you say you were from?"

"I've been in Danger Cove for four years."

"Before that."

George hesitated. "London."

"What do you know? Same as Mr. Ingall." The detective pointed to Rhys, whose head shot up.

"I don't know this gentleman." Rhys frowned at George, and his eyes widened slightly and shifted—to the painting above my head.

But why? Did Rhys and George know one another? If so, what reason would they have to hide that? And what did it have to do with a landscape?

A fiftysomething officer appeared in the hallway. "We need you in the dressing room, Lester."

"Everyone stay put and off your devices." The detective aimed his index finger and scanned the room. "When I get back, we're going to split you up for questioning." He threw back his shoulders and strutted down the hall.

My attention moved to Rhys. His leg bounced, and he looked everywhere but at George. He rose and grabbed the poker, and all eyes were on him. He was as tall as his sister, about six feet, and relaxed as he stoked the fire. The flame intensified, as did the tension simmering in the room.

Minutes passed.

Gia picked at the black polish on her coffin nails, and the creeps crept down my spine. When we returned to the salon, I intended to ask her to go with a different nail shape, like round or square.

With a sigh, I turned to the window.

And I stiffened.

A black barrel was pressed against the lower glass pane—not of a gun, but of a camera lens.

Duncan Pickles was crouched outside taking pictures for the paper.

Anger rose in my throat and threatened to blow out my ears. He'd been humiliating my family with his salacious articles since I'd moved to

Danger Cove, and I refused to allow him to victimize us again. "If the detective comes back, tell him I'm in the ladies' room."

Gia nodded but didn't look up.

I rose, aware of Katrina's eyes on my back, and hoped she hadn't seen through the fib. I went through the dining room to the kitchen. Behind it was a laundry room with an exit. I slipped out the door and went around the side of the house.

Duncan stood near the window, camera at hip, waiting for me.

"You need to leave."

He flashed a sexy smile. With his blond hair and strong features, he was a handsome man, and he exploited his looks when necessary. "Not until I get the scoop. Katrina called the paper to cancel the vow renewal story, and the medical examiner is here." He scrutinized my face. "So someone's about to leave the mansion in a pine box. Or probably mahogany."

I lowered my eyes. Duncan could read facial expressions faster than a newspaper headline.

"Don't worry. I already know it was Rothman. You don't kill a guy like Sonny Torlone without payback."

Jesse's victim had been in the news almost weekly since his murder, but it was the first time his name had made me uneasy. My Aunt Carla had predicted a mob hit, and a moniker like Sonny Torlone smacked of *The Godfather*.

Duncan raised his camera and snapped.

"Don't you dare put my picture in one of your articles."

"The town has a right to know that Cassidi Conti was at another crime scene." He peered in the window. "Now all I need is a shot of Fontaine."

"George hasn't done anything."

"Are you sure? Because the florist gig is a sham."

Duncan wasn't the first person to wonder why George had bought Some Enchanted Florist, but I'd never questioned his motives. Changing careers was common, and he was too nice to be mixed up in anything nefarious. "You should focus on Torlone's people. Didn't he and Jesse invest in real estate?"

"Yeah, about two years ago—a failing casino in Atlantic City."

My uneasiness escalated to anxiety. Aunt Carla might've been right about a mobster coming to collect missing casino money.

"But the plan was to run it, not rent it. Then Jesse took off with Torlone's investment capital."

The anxiety turned to relief. The money he'd told Gia and me not to look for wasn't my uncle's, so we didn't have to worry about ending up at the bottom of the ocean.

Duncan snapped a photo. "So this is either payback, or the silent business partner took him out."

"Jesse and Sonny had another partner?"

"They had two. It came out during Torlone's murder investigation."

"Who were they?"

"Their names weren't revealed because of some concurrent investigation. But every reporter at the *Chronicles* knows who one of them was." He aimed the camera at me. "Your uncle, Vinnie."

* * *

Gia's body hung in a backbend position from a red band of silk supported by two chains suspended from the ceiling. "They could've at least let us wait in the spa instead of the gym. I mean, we could certainly use a massage, and this aerial yoga thingy isn't cutting it."

I rose from the hammock next to her that I'd been sitting in like a swing. "I don't think Elise is going to give us the spa treatment if she thinks we killed her husband."

"Apparently not." Gia rolled onto her stomach and dangled, limp, lifeless.

"Would you get off of that?"

"I'm relieving stress."

It was a good thing one of us was. Detective Marshall had confiscated our phones, so we didn't know the time. But Gia and I had been in the gym for so long that it was dark outside. And through one of the windows, we'd watched Lilly, Alex, and George be released one by one, which had sent my sky-high anxiety to Mount Kilimanjaro level. I'd done several laps on the indoor track, and I'd even resorted to panic attack breathing. So far nothing had lessened the dizzying fear in my chest.

I pondered the exercise equipment against the back wall and climbed onto a rowing machine. Maybe some upper body would give me relief. "I don't like that they're still holding us."

"We'll get to go soon."

I pulled the oars and pushed back with my feet. "You also predicted that we'd be safe with Katrina."

"And we were. Look, we're alive." She kicked off from the rubber flooring and spread her arms to simulate flight.

"We're in danger of being arrested for killing Jesse, but I guess a lifetime in prison is still technically considered living."

She skidded to a stop. "Who do you suppose did it?"

"After Duncan told me his theory about Sonny Torlone, I'm thinking Aunt Carla might've been right about the mob hit."

"Think of the people in that living room." Her tone was as skeptical as it had been the first time I'd told her that bronzer and glitter together were over the top. "Who's the mobster?"

None of them seemed like *mafiosi* to me. In fact, the only obvious criminal in the house was Jesse, and he was dead. "Maybe he wasn't there. He could've come earlier and poisoned some food or a product Jesse would use."

"I guess Richie Faria will find that out when he watches the security video. But what if no one else is on it?"

Her question shot my anxiety up to Mount Everest. I needed full body, so I climbed onto a NordicTrack and started skiing. "Then it had to be one of the people in the living room."

"We know it wasn't Lilly, Alex, or George."

Despite George's odd behavior and his possible connection to Rhys, I agreed with her. We'd known the three of them since we'd come to town, and they were upstanding people. "That leaves Elise, Rhys, and Katrina."

"It's probably the brother."

"Why would you suspect him?"

"He was out in the man cabin with Jesse. Maybe they argued about something." Gia jumped from the hammock. "Oh! Maybe he's the mobster. He *was* wearing an ascot."

I stopped skiing—not because of the absurd comment but because I wasn't used to exercise. "How does wearing an ascot make him a Mafia member?"

"You know they dress flashy. He could be with the British mob."

"Yeah, because everyone's heard of them. Like the Norwegian and Finnish Mafias."

She shot me the side-eye and side-saddled an exercise bike. "All right, who do you think it is? Elise or Katrina?"

"Elise seemed genuinely upset. But Katrina seems kind of shifty. Plus, I caught her looking at the cameo."

"So what? Everyone loves Princess Diana."

I rolled my eyes. "The Princess of Wales wasn't alive when that cameo was made. It's Goddess Diana, as in from ancient Greece."

"Even if it's Diva Diana from Motown, I don't see how the cameo is related to Jesse's death."

"Maybe it's not. But I'm starting to think it had something to do with Uncle Vinnie's."

"How come?"

"I don't know yet. A sixth sense. Or maybe it's because I'm also thinking that Vinnie's and Jesse's deaths are connected."

She straddled the bike and put her platforms on the pedals. "Maybe that's a good thing."

"What could possibly be good about it?"

"Well, all these problems we keep having with the salon and our lives always point back to his murder. And until we solve it, we'll never get past where we are now."

I dropped onto an exercise ball. That was the wisest thing she'd ever said, and something I'd known instinctively all along. But I never would have admitted it to myself or anyone else because I felt so powerless where my uncle's death was concerned.

The door opened with a creak and closed with a click that echoed throughout the gym.

Detective Marshall stood at the door like a vigilante come for justice. He put one foot in front of the other, slow and casual, which made his stride extra menacing. "Got a couple of updates for you."

I rose for the showdown. My legs, already weak from exercise, were wobbly, so I gripped the handrail of a treadmill.

"Officer Faria and two of my men have been combing through the security video. Over the past twenty-four hours, the only people who came to the house arrived this morning—Mr. Ingall, Ms. Jordan, Mr. Fontaine, Ms. Waters, and the two of you." He reached us and took another step, which was a step too close.

My grip on the handrail tightened. "What about Katrina Schwarz?"

"She lives on-site."

Gia hopped off the bike. "I'd look at that Ingall guy if I were you. Anyone who fakes an accent is running from something."

His lips pursed. "Thanks for sharing your considerable investigative experience."

She saw his lip purse and raised him a lip curl. "It's always a pleasure working a case with you."

I had to intervene before the mouth movements turned biting. "Uh, what was the other update, Detective?"

"Oh, yes. We found a clue."

The feigned brightness of his tone made me anything but optimistic about the discovery.

He held up a plastic bag with an oval-shaped greenish brown object. It resembled a dried unripe olive, but it had a small piece of fleshy pulp on one end. "This little thing was underneath the vanity, in the crack between the floor and the wall."

Gia squinted at the detective. "I give. What is it?"

He moved the bag inches from her face. "A seed from some sort of berry. And according to Dr. Cooper, it could be toxic."

"Why are you showing that to me? I don't even eat berries."

Unless it's a flavor in vodka.

"Because berries aren't only used for making smoothies and pies, Ms. Di Mitri. They've been used throughout the centuries to produce cosmetics." His lips pulled back in a stab at a grin. "And this neutral shade would make for a mean smoky eye."

It took all of my willpower not to climb onto the treadmill and start running.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Seattle Dutch Babies for you and Gia." Zac placed to-go boxes that oozed the odor of maple syrup in front of me on the break room table. "These should get your day off to a sweet start."

After the events at the Rothman estate, a breakfast of dog food would've seemed sweet. "Where's the paper?"

His jaw set. "Why don't you eat first?"

"If you're worried Duncan's article will ruin my appetite, don't. I lost that when Jesse died." I stirred sugar into my triple espresso.

"At least Detective Marshall released you both."

For the time being.

Zac removed his leather jacket, and I plucked the *Cove Chronicles* from the inside pocket and opened it to the front page.

"JESSE ROTHMAN DEAD. Whacked by a Mafia clan? Or by a haircutter duo?"

Two pictures were beneath the headline—one of Sonny Torlone in a black and red tracksuit with a group of shady-looking men in pinstripes, and the other of my cousin and me on the love seat cowering beneath the detective's glare.

It was what I'd come to expect from Duncan Pickles, speculation bordering on slander.

Gia made an entrance in a black belted sweater with a red bow at the neck, plaid tights, four-inch Mary Janes, and tortoiseshell glasses. "I had the worst nightmare of my life. We were in prison, Cass, and OMG it was awful." She put her hand on her forehead, overcome. "Instead of orange, they made us wear mustard yellow."

The horror. "While we're talking outfits, since when do you wear glasses?"

Her head popped up. "This is my library look."

Zac and I dropped our jaws—both because my cousin was going to a place of reading and because she had an outfit for the occasion.

"I don't know why it's so surprising." She filled the portafilter with espresso. "Someone needs to help Amy with her mob research, and as a former Atlantic City resident and full-blooded Italian-American, I'm the ideal person. Let's face it—that woman doesn't know a goomba from a gangster."

I wasn't sure I did either. "I'll come with you." I glanced at Zac. "Unless you need me for something?"

"I'm here to help *you*. But if you're going to the library, I'll run over to the marine and help raise the sailboat."

"It's still in the water?"

"One of the inflatable bags we use to lift boats had a leak, and Clark had to go to Seattle to get another one. It won't take long, and I can do anything you need after that."

I squeezed his hand. He was always at my side, no matter how bad the predicament. And with Gia on my other side, I desperately needed him there.

"Holy freakin' cannoli." Gia set her espresso cup on the table and snatched the paper with freshly squared nails. "That wretched reporter called us *haircutters*?"

Zac swallowed a smirk.

I didn't share his amusement. "That's what bothers you? His terminology?"

"Uh, I'm a makeup artist? And that word is so 1970s."

"And here I was dwelling on the 'whacked' pun."

A tapping sound interrupted our conversation.

Alex peered in the back-door window, and I waved her inside.

Zac bent over and kissed my hair. "I'd better get going." He ran his thumb over my cheek. "Don't let this get you. We'll figure it out."

I gazed into his blue eyes, willing him to be right.

He greeted Alex and left.

Gia pointed to Alex's steel-toed boots. "Can I borrow those for an hour? I need to kick the crap out of a certain reporter."

"Gram showed me the article." She placed a to-go coffee on the table and took a seat. "I came to tell you that I totally understand if you need to cancel the renovations."

My cousin's eyes met mine. They were wide, naked—but only because her library look didn't include false lashes.

"I appreciate your offer, but we're going ahead with the work. This morning I'll place an ad to sell the Ferrari." I reached for my laptop and opened the lid.

Gia slammed it shut. "I've got the down payment." She pulled off a Mary Jane and dumped a check onto the table. "We'll have the rest by the

time the job is done. Now excuse me while I go do my researcher updo." She slipped on her shoe, grabbed her espresso and a to-go box, and trod upstairs.

Alex let the check lie.

I wouldn't have touched it either. "So what's the plan for the work?"

She pulled out a poster tube that had been protruding from her backpack. "I put together a floor plan for the renovations. My carpenter, Big Ron, will handle the tower, and I'll remove the picture, placard, and sinks."

I should have been excited, but Jesse's murder weighed on me. And to my surprise, so did Alex's comment about preserving the history of the house. Its brothel origins had caused so many problems, and my uncle's activities hadn't helped. But with the opportunity to renovate finally within reach, it somehow felt wrong to strip the painted lady of her character.

The screech of brakes prompted me to glance inside the salon. The Gold Rush History Tours bus had arrived for the morning tour.

"Don't be fooled by the white exterior of this painted lady." Harriet's voice boomed through the bullhorn. "Because let me tell you, prospectors, she's anything but virginal."

Alex averted her eyes.

I snapped out of my uncertainty. I switched on some music to drown out Harriet. "How soon can you start those renovations?"

"Tomorrow, if you like. Today I need to run an errand, and then I'm going to take it easy. I'm still shaken up after yesterday."

"I get it—believe me." I drained my espresso and toyed with the idea of switching to something calming, like a shot of one of my homemade liqueurs. But it was nine o'clock in the morning, and Danger Cove was hardly New Orleans. "Alex, I hope you don't think Gia and I—"

"Don't even say it." She covered my hand with hers. "I know you guys had nothing to do with Jesse's death. Who do you think did it?"

"This might sound crazy, but we're wondering if Jesse had connections to Atlantic City Mafia."

She wrinkled her lips. "It's not crazy at all. Do you remember my Gram's friend Alice Sweeney?"

I started at the name. "I'd forgotten about her. She was from the most powerful mob family in New Jersey." I leaned across the table. "Do you know if they had any casinos?"

"I never knew what business they were in, except crime, but her father and uncle were busted for tax evasion in the seventies. And Alice is pushing ninety, so I'm sure the father has passed away, and maybe the brother."

"They wouldn't have been involved with Jesse, then. He tried to buy a casino a few years ago with Sonny Torlone, the man he killed." I didn't mention my uncle and the mystery silent business partner, for fear it would jeopardize my uncle's murder investigation—and implicate me in Jesse's.

We studied the floor plan, even though our minds were on the crime.

I wanted to ask about George, but I didn't want her to think I suspected him of killing Jesse, because I didn't. But his stint in the bush outside the man cabin made him look guilty of something.

Alex rested her chin on her palm. "I can't fathom who at the mansion would've committed a murder, especially while we were all there."

I saw my opening. "Who does George think did it?"

"Well, he knows it wasn't you and Gia. Or Lilly, for that matter."

"What about Rhys?"

"He didn't mention him."

"That's weird, because there was a moment during the questioning when I would have sworn Rhys recognized George."

"Really?" She blinked. "Well, you heard Detective Marshall point out that they both lived in London. Maybe they met at an event."

Rhys was the snooty society type, as his attitude and ascot indicated. "You mean, like a social club or charity function?"

"Or a gallery showing. Like me, George has a background in fine arts. He was an art appraiser in Europe, and from what I understand, he specialized in paintings."

That explained his interest in the landscape, but it didn't explain Rhys's. "Why would he give up an art appraisal business in Europe to run a Danger Cove flower shop?"

Alex looked down. "I wish I had the answer."

"I didn't mean to pry. I just thought that since he's your boyfriend—" Her head shot up. "He's not. We're friends."

The announcement blindsided me. I'd seen George and Alex kiss more than once, and they often referred to themselves as Nick and Nora Charles—from the *Thin Man* movies, not the books. I thought they were the perfect, happy couple. Everyone in town did as well.

She rolled up the floor plan with slow, precise movements. "I don't mind confiding in you because I know you'll keep it quiet. There are some things about George's past that he hasn't...been able to share with me. Until he does, he knows I can't let myself get too close."

I had no idea how to respond except to make sure she was safe. "It's nothing serious, is it?"

"The only thing he told me is that his parents were involved in something illegal. And whatever they did ticked off some, quote, 'really undesirable characters,' unquote, who wouldn't think twice about coming after him for restitution."

She couldn't have stunned me more if she'd hit me with her hammer. "Are you talking about organized crime?"

Her eyes crinkled. "Maybe? I honestly have no clue."

"Where did this happen?"

"The family is originally from Boston, but in London. They've lived there for years."

The British Mafia crack I'd made to Gia no longer seemed funny. From what Alex was telling me, George could be in danger, and so could she. Even more unsettling, George might hold the key to Jesse's murder—and to my uncle's.

* * *

Amy stood at the library circulation desk, scanning books from the overnight drop. "I feel terrific, Cass. But I suppose someone could've poisoned Jesse's hors d'oeuvres."

"That someone could've been Katrina since she took a plate to him."

"In all fairness, we don't know if anyone had access to the plate after she brought it to him."

"True." Regardless, I needed to drop by the Smugglers' Tavern to ask Lilly's forgiveness for suggesting she might have used toxic food. "Have you had a chance to do any Mafia research?"

"Between Lester Marshall and Ben, I haven't had a minute."

"That's all right. Gia's on it." I glanced at my cousin, who was working at a microfiche machine. For a non-reader, she was putting her fake tortoiseshells to use. "What did Detective Marshall say?"

Amy ran the scanner over another book. "He wanted to know if I had poisoning symptoms and if I'd noticed anything unusual at the Rothman's. The answer was no to both."

"What's up with Ben?"

"He's making me do some genealogy on top of my other duties."

"Huh? Why?"

"Well, you know I've been researching my two main family lines for years." Her face beamed, and her voice boomed. "And I've traced the Spannagels and the Finagles to the fourteenth century."

"Sh. You're being too loud."

"Right. Our patrons." She covered her mouth. "They've been so scarce since Harriet started her tours that I sometimes forget about them."

Actually, I was thinking of my cousin. If she heard those two names together, the jokes would abound. "Does Ben have you looking into his ancestor, Boone?"

"No, Harriet's."

"I'm still confused."

She loaded the books onto a cart. "He wants to find out if she has any seedy chapters in her family history that we can use to stop her."

The heaviness I'd been carrying in my chest lifted a little. "Ben's a genius. Have you found anything?"

"Not yet, but I only started this morning."

"Keep digging. Until you strike gold."

She cast a glance over her shoulder at the closed office door. "I don't want Ben to hear this, but while I was on ancestry.com, I did a quick search on Jesse Rothman's family."

"What did you find?"

"His mother was Irish, so he could've been a gangster. The Irish Mafia is the oldest organized crime group in the United States."

I tilted my head. "An Irish mother doesn't make him a mobster, Amy."

"Not even if she was born and raised in Atlantic City?"

I straightened. "It could be a coincidence, but if not, Gia will find something. She's got her research on." I removed my bag from my shoulder. "You've never heard of a British mob, have you? Or an English one?"

"The football hooligans."

Somehow I didn't believe soccer was behind Jesse's death. "How do I access the library research database?"

"On any of those computers next to the microfiche machines." She pushed the cart toward the stacks. "Whisper if you need my help."

I went to the computer table and pulled a notepad from my bag. Amy's genealogy research had given me an idea. I wanted to find out George's parents' names so I could research whether the crimes they'd committed had made the news in England.

The first thing I googled was George Fontaine and London. I found a salesman on LinkedIn, but not our George. I searched for him in Danger Cove, and two articles came up about Some Enchanted Florist. But none of them mentioned his mother or father, nor did the flower shop's website. Somehow I would have to get their names from George.

At a standstill, I glanced at my cousin. "Anything incriminating?"

She didn't look up. Her library look was doing the trick, and so were a pair of earbuds.

While I waited for her to finish, I did a search for British Mafia. The first page that appeared said homegrown organized criminal groups in the United Kingdom were called "British firms." I researched their business activities, hoping to find gambling, and I gasped. The so-called British firms did operate casinos, but their main crime was stealing fine art, as much as three hundred million pounds worth per year. And their number one heist was paintings.

Was that why George was interested in the landscape? Because he thought it was stolen? If so, why did Rhys look at the painting after he recognized George?

A door slammed, and Ben stormed toward the library entrance. His pale, slender frame was taut, and his bowtie had been loosened. It looked like he was angling for a skirmish, or at least a spat.

"Next up, prospectors, the Danger Cove Library." Harriet McCudgeon's bullhorned voice projected through the brick walls.

Gia didn't seem to hear her, and I kept her in the dark. I wanted the Mafia research, and I didn't want a confrontation.

"One of the great ironies of the gold rush," Harriet crowed, "has to do with Head Librarian Ben Bardsley's great-great-grandfather Boone. He was a book burner, but not for religious reasons. For him, books were kindling for his stills. And he took his bootlegged liquor to his nightly visits to The Clip and Sip. Oops! I mean, the LaSalle brothel."

So much for avoiding confrontation—it was on. My frame, which wasn't as slender as Ben's but was every bit as taut, rose from the computer table and marched into the street.

Harriet let out a holler, but it had nothing to do with me.

Ben had turned the water hose on her.

She dropped the bullhorn, and her arms flailed.

Fearing she would go overboard, I wrested the hose from Ben. The stream jerked upward and blew the bowler from her head, and I bent the hose in half to stop the water.

Amy ran outside and grabbed her boss by the suspenders. "Ben, think of the library. You've got to get ahold of yourself."

"There's only one person I want to get ahold of." His Mister Rogers' voice trembled, and he extended his arms. "Harriet McCudgeon."

"I'm feeling ya, dude." Gia stood in the doorway, studying the scene.

Amy spun Ben around and looked in his eyes. "Then think of the budget and the waste. Water costs money, and it's a precious resource."

Harriet picked up the bullhorn. "It's too late for the budget. I've got a tour bus full of witnesses, and I'm going to sue. But first I'm pressing charges against you, Ben. And you too, Cassidi."

I sunk onto a bench. With all the problems my cousin and I had, we couldn't afford a lawsuit.

Gia shook her fist. "My cousin tried to help you, McCurmudgeon."

"No one knocks my hat off and gets away with it." She stomped her foot on the bus roof. "Driver, to the police station."

The hairy guy behind the wheel gave an oh-brother head roll and stepped on the gas.

Ben's shoulders slouched. "I'm a criminal, like my ancestor."

"Maybe Harriet will cool off." Amy led him to the door. "You did give her a good dousing."

Gia turned off the faucet and tossed the hose into the hedges. "Come on, *cug*." She used the abbreviation of *cugina*, Italian for cousin, to show affection. "Let's get our stuff and get back to the salon. It's time to call another Operation Goldfinger meeting."

I appreciated her concern and her support, but we had research to do. "Forget Harriet. What did you find out about the mob?"

"They were big into Atlantic City when gambling was legalized there in the seventies. But since then the New Jersey Casino Control Commission

has clamped down on them. One article said the situation is like 'disorganized crime' because there were only twenty mobsters left in the city, and nine were in prison."

"Was Sonny Torlone one of the eleven?"

"I couldn't find any names, but I know who can."

"I do too. Aunt Carla." If there were an international competition in keeping tabs on sons, Italian mothers would take the title. Those women not only knew what their own sons were doing, they kept an eye on everyone else's. They operated within a vast organization that held meetings at Catholic churches, beauty salons, deli counters, and various other locations to make sure their boys were eating enough, dating respectable Italian girls, and not turning into criminals.

"She'll tap into 'the network' and have those names in no time."

Gia had read my mind. "We should call her, anyway, and let her know what happened."

"Ugh." She dropped onto the bench. "I'm not in the mood for more drama."

I didn't bother to tell her that we'd be immersed in it for a while. "You've got some time to prepare. I need to stop by the Smugglers' Tavern on the way home." I rose from the bench, and sudden movement caught my attention.

Katrina had been watching us from around the side of the building. She saw me and pulled back.

"Hey, that was Schwarzenegger." Gia ran down the sidewalk, and I ran after her. We made it to the parking lot as Katrina pulled out in a yellow Dodge Charger.

"Figures she'd have a muscle car." Gia put her hands on her plaidtighted hips. "What was she doing at the library?"

"She was holding a book. Maybe she came to turn in the poetry book Amy brought to Elise."

"The day after her boss was offed?"

"Yeah, too soon." I headed back to the library so we could get our things.

"I'll bet she saw us come outside when Harriet showed up and she hid to eavesdrop."

I had to agree. What I didn't know was what she'd hoped to hear. A confession from Gia or me? Or was Katrina afraid we suspected her?

CHAPTER SIX

From my seat beside Gia at the centuries-old bar of the Smugglers' Tavern, I took a remorseful breath. The scent of polished wood and fried catfish filled my nose. "I wanted to apologize again for what I said about your hors d'oeuvres at the Rothmans'."

Lilly stood on a stepladder, in a peasant blouse and Capri pants, dusting a shelf of relics smuggled into Danger Cove after Napoleon's British embargo. "No worries, Cassidi. I get it. Food is always the first thing people suspect in a case of poisoning." She grinned. "I'd have jumped to the same conclusion myself."

I exhaled my relief. Lilly was a friend and regular client for a cut and highlights, and I wanted to keep her as both.

She returned an old tea tin to the shelf and picked up a medicine bottle. "My curiosity makes me wonder why Chef Paul wasn't available to do the food for the ceremony. Maybe this wouldn't have happened if he had."

"Whoever killed Jesse would've done so regardless. And we don't know that he was poisoned by the food."

Gia's elbow in my rib cage said he was.

I took a slug of the Caribbean lemonade that Lilly had insisted we sample. The lemon-lime rum drink dulled the pain of our predicament and in my side. "By the way, who's Chef Paul?"

"He's the Rothmans' cook."

She'd mentioned a chef when I helped her carry the crab puff platter to the kitchen. "Do you know why he wasn't there that day?"

"He'd just come back from a vacation, and I think he had to work his other job at the Lobster Pot."

The restaurant was a favorite of Zac's and mine, but I'd never heard of Paul. "Is he new?"

"He's been there for a while, but I heard he only cooks on weekend days."

That explained it. Zac and I went on Saturday nights, but given the high prices, only for the most special of occasions.

A waitress with fiery red hair approached in a cute off-the-shoulder sweater. "Did you ladies want to order?"

Gia handed her the menu. "Two of the linguine with marinara."

It was almost lunchtime, but the only thing I wanted was more of my drink. "Make that one."

"Do you really want to call Carla on an empty stomach? Or even worse, on one that hasn't been nourished with something Italian?"

Gia was right. A plate of pasta would go a long way toward lessening the drama—and the effects of my drink. "Okay, two. My aunt is convinced that we don't eat."

Lilly descended the stepladder. "That's on the house, Mandi."

"We'll throw in garlic bread to make your aunt extra happy." Mandi tore the order from her pad. "I'll go turn this in to Tara and Clara."

"You didn't have to buy us lunch, Lilly. We'd be happy to pay for it." The truth was that a restaurant meal wasn't in the budget. And with our business under siege from Harriet and the *Cove Chronicles*, neither was a meal at home.

"I wanted to treat you guys. Consider it me balancing the universal scales for the way I reacted at the Rothmans'." She cleared a couple of empty hurricane glasses. "I just wish I knew what happened."

That made all of us. "Did you glean anything from Detective Marshall?"

"Not really." She wiped the bar counter. "But he did ask a lot of questions about Katrina."

Gia's lids lowered like those of her detective nemesis. "I told you that muscle manager's no *Kindergarten Cop* Schwarzenegger. She's totally Schwarzenegger from *The Terminator*."

Lilly's eyes widened, emphasizing their gold flecks.

I gave a never-mind-her headshake. "What did he ask, specifically?"

"If she helped me make the food, if I watched her make Jesse's plate or take it in to him. That kind of thing."

It occurred to me that Lilly hadn't been in the kitchen when Katrina made Jesse's plate. "And what did you tell him?"

"That I'd watched my top-notch chefs make the hors d'oeuvres with fresh, quality ingredients at the tavern. And I was here getting cherry tomatoes when Katrina served Jesse and Amy, so I couldn't have seen anything."

Mandi returned to the bar, her lips retracted in a sheepish look. "I forgot to put the tomatoes on two of the platters, so it was my fault Lilly had to come back. But I don't believe Katrina would've poisoned Jesse."

I was so used to Gia suspecting Katrina that I was surprised to hear Mandi defending her. "Why? Do you know her?"

"Just from our chats when she comes here. But I gathered that she and Elise are super close. She said she used to train her at Hard Bodies until Elise lured her away from the gym to train her and Jesse at home."

And manage the estate, an unlikely job for a personal trainer.

"Yo." Gia gave me a thwack in the ribs. "That's the place where I hired the buff guys for our Queen of the Nile and Reverse Christmas events, remember?"

Not even a gallon of Caribbean lemonade could erase the memory of orange bodybuilders wearing Egyptian eyeliner and wraparound skirts, not to mention lifting weights in Speedos. "Do you know anything else about Katrina?"

Mandi shrugged. "Not much. She comes in fairly often, sometimes with Elise but mostly with different dates."

Lilly leaned onto the counter. "I've seen her here with men too. I think she meets them online, because there have been a few times where I could tell they didn't recognize each other."

Gia gave an annoyed hair flip. "As surly as she is, I can't imagine who would date her."

I shot her a let-me-talk look. "Did you recognize any of these men?"

"Only the one late last night." Mandi looked at Lilly, who nodded. "George Fontaine."

I gripped the sides of my barstool to keep from keeling over.

"That no good *mascalzone*." Gia pounded her fist on the bar. "He's dating Alex Jordan."

I hadn't told her what Alex said about her and George being friends. Nevertheless I agreed with the cheat label.

"Oh, I didn't see them being intimate or anything. But they did sit in the back booth, and they were having a private conversation."

Gia whipped off her glasses. "We're going to need more information."

"You know, they were leaning in close, talking low, looking around. And every time I brought something to their table, they went radio silent." Mandi pulled up the neckline of her sweater. "I figured they were talking about Jesse being killed."

A logical assumption. But why would George and Katrina need to talk about the murder in private?

The Ferrari's engine ran as smooth as *burrata*, a buttery Italian cheese, but my nerves were so shot that I might as well have been on a road with potholes. "Let's not mention the George and Katrina meet-up to Alex."

Gia spun in the passenger seat. "How are we going to face her if we keep it quiet?"

"It'll be easy because I don't think George and Katrina were on a date. She's the mansion manager, so he probably met with her to get information about Jesse. Until the police know the source of the poison, he's a murder suspect like the rest of us."

"And a cheating suspect too."

I sighed and pulled up to a stoplight. "I'm sure he was trying to figure out who, if anyone, force-fed Jesse a calla lily or hydrangea. And for all we know, Alex was aware of their meeting."

"He might want to be careful about who he meets, because if anyone force-fed Jesse a flower, it was Katrina."

She was on my list, but so was Rhys. "That could be why he met her in public."

My phone rang on the console.

Gia looked at the display. "It's Carla. I'll break the Jesse news." She answered and pressed *Speaker*. "Hey, it's Gi—"

"Why didn't you girls cawl me when Jesse Rothman was whacked?" "We were—"

"I saw it in the papuh. I've been in such a state I left the house without my scarf. And I promised to make a brajole for Teo's grandson's baptism, so Frank will kill me if I get a *colpo d'aria*."

The light turned green, and I smirked and pressed the gas. A "hit of air" referred to exposure to a fluctuation in temperature, a dreaded experience that somehow inflicted ailments only on Italians. If a paesan went from warm to cold without the appropriate clothing, they could contract any number of maladies, ranging from a stiff neck to pneumonia.

"Are you inside now?" Gia, who believed in the ominous air hits, sounded worried.

"I'm in the car with Angelina at Dino's Bakery. We came outside so we wouldn't attract unwanted attention."

I held my breath to keep from snorting. Like my Aunt Magnolia, Aunt Carla had a Cadillac that was anything but inconspicuous. Instead of Mary Kay pink with longhorns on the hood, Carla's was metallic gold with an Italian flag.

Gia cleared her throat for questioning. "Angelina, can you hear me?"

"Yeh." Her voice was wily with a wise-guy edge.

"Did you talk to Gloria, Sal's sister?"

"Yeh."

"Did she have the goods on Vinnie and the casino?"

"Yeh."

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. If "yeh" was the extent of Angelina's involvement, we could have done without her.

Carla coughed, no doubt because a hit of air was ravaging her immune system. "Vinnie told Sal that he was going in on a casino deal with Jesse Rothman and that dead mobster Sonny Torlone, but he never got the chance."

I leaned closer to the phone. "What happened?"

"They cut him out of the deal."

"Yeh. It had to do with a dame."

Angelina's first full sentence, and she uses the word dame?

"You know my brothuh." Carla sounded stricken with Catholic shame. "Always sticking his salami in other people's cellars."

I was glad I didn't have any salami at the house. Or a cellar.

"But I gotta tell you girls, I was sure this deal was how Vinnie got the money to buy the painted lady."

My uncle didn't need gambling to fundraise. The eight hundred grand he'd stashed somewhere in our house was proof that sex provided a better payout. "Do you know who the woman is, Aunt Carla?"

"We don't even know if she was with Jesse or Sonny."

Gia scratched her cheek. "You got a contact to look into that?"

"Yeh. Rosie at the butcher."

Gia nodded, satisfied, like a godfather informed of a hit. "No one beats Rosie when it comes to identifying a dame."

"She's a tough *biscotto*." Carla's tone conferred respect. "Those six toes give her a mental advantage ovuh the rest of us."

There could be science to support that association. "Angelina, did Sal's sister mention a silent partner in the casino deal?"

"Nah."

I waited for her to elaborate, but I shouldn't have.

Carla's cough had degenerated into a hack. "I don't like this silent partner business, C. Without a name, it's hard to know who to keep an eye out for."

I'd had the same hair-raising thought. "It could be someone in Sonny Torlone's circle. We were wondering if his clan ordered Jesse's death."

"I'll check with Flavia at the funeral parlor. G, she's the one with the extra-wide nostril who came to your sweet sixteen."

"I remember."

I'd remember that too.

Gia picked at her pinky nail. "Could you also find out if Sonny's associated with Little Nicky Scarfo's clan?"

A cute moniker, but clearly Mafia. "Who's he?"

"The late boss of the Philly-South Jersey mob who poured all the cement for the Atlantic City casinos."

The word *cement* was stifling. We still didn't know who Jesse was talking to when he said "the two of them have got to be dealt with," so there was a possibility that Gia and I had a hit on our heads.

"I'll look into the relationship, G. And since you mentioned cement, I've got a piece of advice for yous two."

I pulled into the parking lot of Hard Bodies gym, my neck knotting from the tension. "We're listening, Aunt Carla."

"Watch your feet."

* * *

Gia leaned against the Hard Bodies juice bar and surveyed the giant room. "I visited a lot of gyms during my summers at the Jersey Shore, but this one has the best equipment bar none, which is why I joined."

I followed her gaze—she wasn't looking at the weights, and she definitely hadn't joined the gym to work out.

"Your super-awesome Mounds of Muscle smoothie." A blonde barista in a tiny top and shorts handed Gia a cup.

How my cousin could drink-eat in a place that smelled like air-freshened sweat, I didn't know. And if the odor wasn't bad enough, the beat

of the music threatened to drive the knots from my neck to my brain. "Can we look for one of your bodybuilder buds now?"

"I'm game." She Groucho-Marxed her brow and lip-locked her straw.

We set off through the maze of equipment—in the proper sense of the term. One-half of the gym was pure power lifter with free weights and benches on a concrete floor, while the other was more powder puff with cushioned machines, balance balls, and pink mats. I scanned the power side for a familiar face, but bodybuilders in their natural environment all looked alike to me.

"There's Quadzilla." Gia pointed to a spray-tanned guy holding a bar stacked with plates at his chest.

Based on his size, the nickname wasn't off base. He was only five-foot-seven, but his quadriceps made his thighs as big as Gia and me. As we approached, he kicked back a leg and lifted the bar over his head.

"Hey, Quad." Gia addressed his pecs.

His smile was relaxed despite the two-hundred-plus pounds he pressed, and he eyed her plaid tights. "Swedish workout gear. Cool."

I could almost see confusing Swedish with Scottish, but there was no mistaking Gia's four-inch Mary Janes for tennis shoes.

"Oh, I'm not here to work out. My cousin Cassidi and I were wondering if you knew one of the ex-managers, Katrina Schwarz."

"Whoa. You're the third and fourth people to ask about her today."

One had to be Detective Marshall. "Can you describe the others?"

"They were dudes."

It wasn't a nice thing to think, but Quad struck me as a dumbbell. "Can you give us more to go on? Names? Clothes?"

"One dressed like a cop. The other dressed old-fashioned."

Gia sucked her straw. "Was one of them a cop?"

"Yeah, the one who dressed like one."

I needed to take over the questioning. "Was one of them named George or Rhys?"

He gave a rapid-fire laugh. "That last one sounds like a peanut butter cup."

I gave him a bodybuilder-competition scowl.

Quad's orange face turned vermillion—from embarrassment, not from the weight hovering over his head. "One was Detective Maxwell, or something. The other dude didn't introduce himself." "What color was his hair?"

"Would you say he was in his early thirties or fifties?"

He shrugged under the plates. "Old dudes all look the same."

I wasn't in a position to judge since I couldn't distinguish him from the other oversized Oompa Loompas in the gym. "Did anyone else see the guy?"

"The Beast. I'm his squat spotter, and I was giving him pointers when the dude came in." He turned, barbell and all, to scan the gym. "That's him at the front desk."

A well-muscled male with a crew cut the color of his fake tan stared at a computer screen.

"Gia, you stay and talk to Quad." I shot her a look that said press him for information the same way he pressed the barbell, and I walked up to The Beast. He was entering data into an employee tracking software that I used at the salon.

I waited, but he didn't acknowledge me. "Hey, The Beast. Quadzilla said you could give me some info about a man who came in earlier?"

"As a manager in training, I'm not allowed to discuss our patrons."

That meant employees were out too, unless...I could get a peek at the database. There was a notes area where managers could leave comments about employees' job performance and how they interacted with others. But my only chance at that was to wait him out.

Since Gia had signed me in as her guest, I went to a leg machine and did curls—after removing the pin from the weights.

The blonde barista jogged to the reception desk, but nothing jiggled. "We're out of protein powder." Her perky tone held a note of panic. "What's going to happen?"

The Beast's eyelids—the only part of his body not spray-tanned—went pale. "Be chill, and let's hustle to the supply closet."

The duo rushed to the back with muscles tensed to maximize toning, and I ditched the machine and slipped behind the computer.

Luckily, The Beast hadn't logged out of the program. I typed *Katrina Schwarz* and pulled up her file. Date of hire, address, phone number. I

[&]quot;Slicked back."

[&]quot;Brown or gray?"

[&]quot;I only noticed the smooth style."

scrolled to her employment history and inhaled so hard that I pumped up my chest.

Terminated for stealing?

That wasn't the story Katrina had told Mandi at the Smugglers' Tavern about Elise hiring her away from Hard Bodies. *But did Elise know she was a thief? And if so, why had she hired her?*

"What are you doing?"

I jumped so high that I could've hurdled an ab bench. The question was innocent enough, but the delivery was decidedly drill sergeant.

Back on the ground, I turned and came eye level with the word *bodies* on a company muscle shirt. I looked up and told myself that the veins probably always bulged from the guy's neck—and his bald head. "Um, I'm a guest. Aren't I supposed to log in?"

"On the sign-in sheet." He tapped a clipboard on the counter.

I picked up a pen and scribbled my name.

He scanned my outfit. "You're not dressed for working out."

"First I want to check out the equipment." My cheeks turned warm. Thanks to Gia, the phrase sounded like an innuendo.

"I'm aesthetic."

The warmth turned slow burn. Apparently, he was pretty pleased with his equipment.

"Aesthetic God? That's my name?"

"Right," I gushed. "How did I not guess that?"

His lips went leer, and he stroked the tuft of hair beneath his lip. "You're cute, you know that? We should call you Aesthetic Godette."

I forced a giggle, which was hard considering he didn't know that the correct term was goddess. "And you're so buff."

He puffed up like the Michelin Man and looked at the clipboard. "Cassidi Conti. You related to Vinnie?"

So many people had known my uncle that I wasn't surprised he'd made the association. "Yeah. Did he cut your...soul patch?"

He winked. "I trim my own patch."

Okay, that was an innuendo. "Then how did you know him?"

"He used to come in to see an ex-manager, Katrina."

I hid my astonishment. "Did she train him?"

"You could say that." He leaned in so close that I could see the blood pulse in his veins. "They were hot and heavy for years, like you and me

could be."

Aesthetic might as well have conked me with a forty-five-pound plate, because my ears rang, and *dame* echoed in my head.

Was Katrina the woman who cost my uncle the casino deal?

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Katrina and Vinnie?" Zac gazed at the bay from our picnic table at Carolyn's Coffee and Creamery on the pier. In the foggy, overcast morning, the waves were the color of night. "I wouldn't have put those two together."

I didn't know why not. My uncle used to put himself together with anyone who had a pulse and the right parts—well, any parts. "I wish I knew whether she was the reason he was cut out of the casino deal with Jesse and Sonny."

"Why? What would it matter?"

I tore off a hunk of my croissant. "It could mean that Jesse was seeing her and got jealous of Vinnie. And if Jesse and Katrina had a history, she might've had a motive to kill him."

"Such as?"

"Maybe they were still an item, and he dumped her and she got mad. Or, Katrina and Elise are close, so Jesse could've threatened to tell Elise about their relationship, and Katrina killed him to keep her job and her friend."

"Or Elise murdered him for cheating on her."

I chewed the pastry. Elise was a suspect, but she seemed too kooky to be a killer, and it wasn't only the way she talked to herself, but also that dragon robe and the aerial yoga. "I doubt it. She was excited about the vow renewal ceremony, but Jesse seemed so indifferent, which makes me suspect the affair even more."

Zac swallowed a sip of coffee. "Don't forget that there were two others in the casino deal that Katrina could've been seeing, Sonny and the silent partner."

A gust of wind blew the rest of my croissant to the pier, and a seagull swooped and scooped it up.

"You scavenger." I scowled at the sky. Beneath a canopy of black clouds, seagulls circled like vultures.

"Want me to get you another one?"

I shook my head. "I need to go soon to open the salon. Gia and I actually have a couple of customers on the books, and Alex and Big Ron are coming to start the renovations."

"Before you go." He paused and took my hands. "I don't want to tell you what to do, but I hope you're not going to look into Sonny or his

associates. The Mafia isn't a group you mess with." His blue eyes turned as dark as the water. "They kill people."

A wave slammed into the side of the pier, startling us both. Water washed across the wood. I lifted my feet to keep them dry, and spotted concrete weights on the picnic table legs.

Cement shoes.

I gulped in the salty sea air to suppress a shudder, and I shifted to sit on my legs. "So I've been told."

"And?"

"You have nothing to worry about." And he didn't, since Amy and Rosie at the butcher were the ones looking into Sonny Torlone. "Now what are you up to at work today? You never told me what happened with the sailboat."

He pushed out his lips. "We raised it. The navigation system and the engine can't be repaired, but we can salvage the shell."

His blasé attitude had me concerned. Zac was always so enthusiastic about his work. "Is something wrong?"

"Me and one of the guys were in scuba gear to shackle the lift bags to the boat. When we inflated them, we found an empty chest where the boat had been."

"An ice chest?"

"No, it was a foot wide and about as deep, covered with barnacles and other debris. I scraped off the top, and it started disintegrating. But I found the initials B.C."

A thrill went through me, like I'd discovered a stash of gold and jewels. "Bart Coffyn?"

He folded his arms on the table and looked down. "We'd have to have it carbon dated to make sure it's at least from 1579 when he buried the treasure, but Clark agrees that it's probably his."

I leapt from my seat. "Then the treasure must be in the silt somewhere around the dock."

He looked up, his eyes still stormy. "We combed that whole area with the metal detector at Christmas."

"So?" Excitement surged through my body. "The waves could've washed the chest there after that, maybe from the old smugglers' caves where you found the other pesos."

"We searched again yesterday." He finished his coffee and crumpled the cup. "Whatever was inside the chest is gone."

I returned to the bench. Without the money from the treasure, Zac wouldn't be able to buy back his father's business. I was devastated for him, and I feared what it would do to us. Owning the business wasn't only an attempt to lessen the tragedy of his past, it also represented his present—the thing that would've made him feel like a man who could take care of his family, as his dad had done. And if he lost the present, I didn't know what our future would hold.

"You never needed the treasure, Zac. You're an engineer from MIT with a high-tech design for a yacht. You just have to find an investor. People do that every day."

"Before Clark has to sell?" He took a shot at a grin and rose from the table. "It's almost eight. I'd better get to work." He kissed me on the cheek and walked across the pier toward Pirate's Hook Marine Services.

I shifted my gaze south to the rock formation that Zac's father had named the marine supply store after. Pirate's Hook was also where I'd found a silver peso with a crude map to the treasure that had set Zac on the hunt. And I hated to think that I'd had a role in setting him on a quest that ended in failure.

The screech of a seagull drew my attention to the water near the pier.

A small boat emerged from the fog and reached the beach. A person climbed out in a trench coat and...put on a pair of sunglasses?

I pulled my phone from the pocket of my pea coat and aimed the camera at the figure. I swiped the screen to enlarge the frame, and a shock of gray hair and an ascot came into focus.

Rhys Ingall.

I snapped several pictures as he traipsed up the beach and disappeared onto a street.

As I finished my triple espresso, I tried to make sense of the scene. The chances that he was getting some rowing exercise in were slim in those shades, but I couldn't fathom what else he would be doing except...

Feeding something to the fishes.

* * *

Thunder rumbled, adding to the air of foreboding.

I climbed into the Ferrari and locked the doors. *Had Rhys been disposing of evidence like the poison, or was it something else? Or someone else?*

Lightning cracked and backlit the clouds with an eerie yellow.

My fingers trembled as I fastened the seat belt. I wanted to get home before the downpour—and before someone tried to dispose of me in the bay.

I moved to put the key in the ignition and spotted Harriet McCudgeon strutting up the pier, presumably to the Gold Rush History Tours ticket booth. I was thankful I'd avoided a confrontation about the water hose. I was already on edge—I couldn't take any more tension.

My phone rang, giving me a jolt. It was Amy. "Hey," I answered. "I was about to call you."

"If it's about the Mafia research, I've got it."

"Good, because I have another assignment—Rhys Ingall. I need anything you can dig up on his life in London."

"Sure, but I won't be able to get to it right away. As of this morning, I'm doing my job and Ben's."

Panic hit me like a wave. "He wasn't arrested, was he?"

"No. Detective Ohlsen came in yesterday after we closed, and he said he'd convinced Harriet not to press charges or sue either of you."

I knew I loved that man. "How'd he do it? She's as stubborn as, well, an old gold prospector."

"He told her she should be grateful that all Ben did was spray her, because if it had been any of the other business owners she's been harassing, she would have ended up, at a minimum, over at the fairgrounds in a dunking booth."

I'd be in that line with ball in hand, and Gia would cut to the front. "Then what's wrong with Ben? He should be relieved."

"As far as he's concerned, the incident proved that delinquency is encoded in his DNA, so he pleaded with Detective Ohlsen to lock him up before he sprays again. When he refused, Ben took the trolley to the police station and tried to turn himself in to another officer. Now our board of directors wants him to take some time to find himself."

"Gia and I will be taking time to find ourselves if we don't stop Harriet soon. Have you uncovered anything on her ancestors?"

"Sonny Torlone seemed more pressing."

She had a point. The McCurmudgeon could ruin my life, but the Mafia could take it. "Did you find out whether he's associated with a mob clan?"

"He's not a gangster. He's a goomba."

Wait until I tell Gia. "Could you define that?"

A paper rustled, and Amy cleared her throat. "An Italian-American male from the East Coast who's not in the Mafia but who has some *mafiosi* acquaintances. Also, his godfather is a godfather, he has an everyday tracksuit and a going-out tracksuit, and he thinks getting a slice is a romantic dinner."

"Tell me that's not from a sociology book."

"It's from *A Goomba's Guide to Life*, by Steven Schirripa, the actor who played Bobby Bacala on *The Sopranos*."

Solid research, in other words. "If Sonny's not a gangster, how did he make his money?"

"Hanging around Italian-American social clubs and gambling. He was a cardsharp who specialized in blackjack."

"Any ties to organized crime in London?"

"A goomba is faithful to the East Coast, Cass." Amy sounded almost offended. "Also, Sonny was an orphan, so he didn't have any relatives. My guess is that he was a friend or acquaintance of your uncle's who wanted to own a casino."

If Sonny wasn't a mobster, then the Mafia wasn't after Gia and me.

"I've got to run. An eighth-grade class came in, and one of them draws dirty doodles." She closed the call to take on the dirty doodler, and I stared out the windshield at the dastardly detective.

Lester Marshall was headed toward Gold Rush History Tours.

I couldn't imagine why he'd meet with Harriet unless she wanted to convince him to let her press charges against Ben and me. The drive to find out propelled me from the car.

The detective turned right and disappeared, and I hurried up the pier and hooked a left toward Carolyn's Coffee and Creamery. The end of the pier was circular, so I walked behind the buildings along the water until I got close to the ticket booth. I crouched behind some shrubbery at a nearby park bench. The leaves were thick, but I could see Detective Marshall at the counter, and Harriet was inside.

The detective lowered his head to speak into the window. "Now that Jesse has passed, we've dropped the charges you filed against him."

I held my breath. What had Jesse done to Harriet?

"I appreciate your efforts, Lester." Even when she was being gracious, her voice sounded like a sneer.

"We take threats very seriously at the Danger Cove PD."

"You do, but I can't say the same for Bud Ohlsen." She grunted and adjusted her bowler. "No matter, though, because I can handle Ben and Cassidi."

"Don't do anything you'll regret."

She raised her hands, the picture of innocence. "Why would I regret devoting more tour time to them? My clients lap up their histories, so it's a smart business move."

"Can't argue with that."

You can, Detective, and you should to keep the peace.

Harriet tapped her pudgy chin. "But now that Jesse's gone, there's nothing to stop me from including Ingall Hardware on my tour."

I'd wondered how the store had escaped Harriet's gold wrath, especially since it was across the street from the library. Apparently, the credit went to Jesse.

"And the more I look into that guy, Lester, the more I realize what a criminal he is."

The detective tipped his head. "He did kill a man."

"Oh, I'm not talking about Jesse. I meant Rhys Ingall."

I jerked and crunched some leaves.

"What's that?" Harriet peered from side to side, and the white flag on her bowler moved with her.

Detective Marshall approached the shrub, his arms tensed in gungrabbing position, and I made like the stone bench.

Little feet padded across mine, and I bit my coat belt to stop a scream.

"It was a squirrel." He tightened his necktie and sauntered back to the counter. "What can you tell me about Rhys?"

Harriet put on her gossip face—greedy eyes and a pinched smirk. "He's already blown through his inheritance, and he's too sophisticated to work. So I'll bet he came to ask Elise to give him a handout, not to attend that vow renewal ceremony."

"Their father left the company to her, isn't that right?"

"Because Rhys is such a loafer. But Elise won't give him a penny, and I'm sure he knows that. I can't prove it, but I'd say he's been running schemes back in London."

The detective pulled out a notepad. "Can you be more specific?"

"He associates with rough types who deal fenced merchandise to black market collectors. And being the snob that he is, he's perfect to do the dealing—and maybe even the stealing."

"What kind of merch are we talking?"

She smiled like the Mona Lisa. "Fine art, especially paintings."

I didn't need Harriet to explain who the rough types were, because my instinct told me they were members of the British firms. But for once I knew something she didn't—Rhys wasn't going to ask Elise for money. He would steal it in the form of a living room landscape. What I didn't know as I stole away from the shrub was whether Rhys had poisoned Jesse over the painting and whether he would seek restitution from George for whatever his parents, the Fontaines, had done.

* * *

Rainwater engulfed the sidewalk in front of The Clip and Sip and threatened to overtake the yard. The storm had liquidated any chance at walk-in clients, i.e., tourists and the news-averse who didn't know about the Gold Rush History Tours or our link to Jesse Rothman's death. On the plus side, Harriet wouldn't be able to fill the top of her double-decker bus.

I flipped the window sign to *Open* and turned to prepare my station.

The floral arrangement George had delivered was still on the reception desk. Instead of serving as inspiration for Gia's Fierce Flowers smoky lip line, the flowers were a fierce reminder that we were in dire trouble and that I had to talk to Alex about George—without mentioning his tête-à-tête with Katrina at the Smugglers' Tavern.

I climbed the two flights of stairs to the tower room, where Alex and her right-hand man, Big Ron, took measurements for the cabinets.

Alex lowered her clipboard when I entered. "Ron was just telling me that Vinnie gave him a tour of the house not long before he died, and he says this room was definitely his bedroom."

I leaned against the doorframe and looked at Big Ron. "How did you know my uncle?"

"Vinnie used to cut my hair." All six-foot-eight of him rose from a crouched position, and he gave an off-kilter grin. "He was kind of a legend."

I wasn't surprised he felt that way. According to Alex, Big Ron had been a football star when they were in high school together, but his prowess on the field didn't extend to women. And my uncle was nothing if not a Latin lover. "I can't imagine why the killer would take the time to switch the furniture, especially with a room on another floor. You'd think they would be in hurry to leave the scene."

Ron wiped his nose with the back of his wrist. "It wouldn't have been hard to do."

"Not for you." I gestured to his physique. "You're a big guy."

"No. I mean, he didn't have much furniture, and sliding a mattress across a floor and down some stairs is easy."

"But what purpose did it serve to make the police think he'd died in his fake bedroom downstairs instead of in his real one?"

Alex tapped her pencil on the clipboard. "What if it was because of the cameo brooch?"

"You mean, because it was a clue to his identity?"

"Or hers. A woman's stocking was involved, right?"

"Wrapped around his neck." I'd uttered the words slowly, thinking of Katrina. Was that why she'd stared at the cameo? Because she was the one who'd lost it?

"The brooch was between the floor and the wall. So maybe she dropped it and couldn't find it."

"But you saw it. Why wouldn't she?"

"I only saw it because the gold was glinting in the sunlight, remember? If the killer strangled him at night, she could've missed it, especially if she was frantic or in an altered emotional state."

I moved to a stepladder and took a seat. My body was weak, but Katrina's wasn't. She was muscular enough to move my uncle's furniture by herself. "Did your gram ever remember where she'd seen the cameo?"

"Not yet."

"I wonder if it would jog her memory to know that Katrina Schwarz kept staring at it at the Rothmans'."

Alex's mouth opened and stayed that way for a second. "You think it's hers?"

"In all fairness, if the killer is female, then any woman who dated my uncle is a suspect."

"Vinnie and Katrina dated?"

I nodded, but I was thinking of George with Katrina.

"Go, Vincent." Ron clenched his fist and did a "score" motion. "Mind if I take a look at the cameo?"

"Gia had it last. Let me call her." I pulled my phone from the pocket of my corduroys and tapped her number.

"Yo," she answered. "I'm driving, so make this quick."

"Where'd you put the cameo brooch? Big Ron wants to see it."

"It's in my jewelry box. I'm pulling up the drive now with Cinnamon Sugar Bakery doughnuts for all, so I'll run up and get it."

"We'll be in the tower." I hung up. "She'll bring it in a few."

Alex and Big Ron resumed their measuring, the perfect time to ask some questions. "Alex, how are you and George handling the aftermath of Saturday?"

"I haven't seen him since then."

Big Ron let his measuring tape release with a snap. "I told her she ought to look into him, like she did that dead guy in the bathtub at his house."

He was referring to a murder at Marlton House that had occurred while he and Alex were renovating the place a few years before.

Alex gave him a whack with her clipboard. "You always think something fishy is going on. It's that family of watermen you come from."

"All I know is that pretty boy came out of the investigation smelling like one of them roses he's selling. But if you ask me, he stunk back then, and he still stinks now."

She didn't say a word, probably because she couldn't since she knew George's parents were criminals.

"And the way the dude dresses is suspect too. It's like Edward G. Robinson in those old-timey mob flicks."

The Mafia kept rearing its ugly horse head.

"It's like William Powell as Nick Charles." Alex snatched the tape measure. "And fancy pants don't make him a crook."

Gia rushed in, huffing from the stairs.

I eyed her oversized white Gucci sweatshirt and tennis shoes. "Speaking of fancy pants, are you looking for yours?"

Her eyes were as big as the interlocking Gs on her chest. "Someone was in our house, Cass."

I swallowed my smirk, and it hit my gut with a thud.

"My jewelry box is in my room, but the cameo is gone."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Detective Marshall perched his hands on his hips, revealing the gun holstered inside his suit jacket. "You're accusing Katrina Schwarz of stealing your cameo...because she looked at it?"

I sunk deeper into The Clip and Sip's reception couch. When he put it that way, I sounded hysterical, and not in the humorous sense. "I didn't accuse her, specifically."

"But you told me, a man of the law, that she could be a suspect."

Gia flipped her hair in protest and took a seat beside me. "She also mentioned Rhys Ingall, Marshall."

The detective shifted his hard stare to me. "Because he was out rowing."

My hopes of getting him to see our side sunk like the sailboat Zac had raised. "Well, it was suspicious that he wore sunglasses in the fog."

"Know what I think is suspicious?"

I did, but I had to let him tell me.

"You two concocting this cockamamie cameo story to point the finger at the other suspects in Jesse's death."

I struggled to stay civil. "Please hear me out, Detective."

"I don't have time for nonsense, Miss Conti."

Gia slapped her pant-less thighs. "And we do?"

I silenced her with a look, as did the detective. "Alex Jordan found the cameo in the room where my uncle was murdered. And right after Gia wore it to the Rothman mansion, it was stolen. So the cameo could belong to the killer—my uncle's and Jesse's."

"From what I know about your uncle, that cameo could belong to half the women in Washington State. But speaking of your buddy Alex, where'd she run off to? I'm going to need her to corroborate this tale."

"She and Ron went to the hardware store to get new locks for our house."

He sneered. "When you girls put on a show, you go all out."

Anger shot through my chest like a bullet from his gun. "This isn't a show, Detective. Those rough types Rhys deals with in London could belong to the British firms. And they deal in stolen art, which could also include jewelry."

His brow arched like a black cat poised to pounce.

Because I'd outed myself for eavesdropping on him and Harriet.

"You scared that squirrel from the shrub." His voice was half Clint Eastwood, half Lurch.

I hugged a couch cushion and stared out the window. The storm had ceased, but it was about to thunder in the salon.

"I'm assuming you realize the gravity of this situation, Miss Conti? Spying on the investigating detective in the Rothman case makes you and your cousin look guilty of the poisoning."

"I know you've been dying to arrest us since we moved here, Marshall, but this isn't your opportunity."

"Pardon me, Miss Di Mitri, but I might beg to differ."

If Lester hadn't been standing there, I would've whacked Gia with the cushion. Her mouth wasn't making this conversation any easier.

The salon door opened, and Bree Milford from Ocean View Bed & Breakfast breezed in wearing jeans and a white blouse that emphasized her green eyes and red hair.

"Sorry I'm late, but I've had a mother of a morning." She frowned at Detective Marshall. "Whatever you're here for, I hope you're done. I need this hair appointment more than you can know."

"He needs one too." Gia mouthed graying and balding at Bree.

The skin went taut over the detective's skull. "I'll be back, and when I show up you'd both better hope I'm not holding a warrant."

He moved to leave and knocked the floral arrangement from the reception desk. He caught it and stared at the flowers before returning them to their place and shouldering his way out the door.

"I take it that was about the Jesse Rothman murder?" Bree asked as I led her to my hair station.

"He thinks we had something to do with it."

Gia checked her lip gloss in her makeup station mirror. "If a murder is salon related, we're his favorite go-to suspects."

"That man would suspect a newborn of murder." Bree climbed into my chair. "Thankfully, Bud Ohlsen keeps an eye on him. Otherwise, half the business owners in town would be in prison."

Gia and I certainly would have been. "What can I get you? Espresso? Tea?"

"Ten thirty in the morning is too late for caffeine. I'll have Prosecco with a side of limoncello."

"I'll get the drinks, Cass, because I plan to join her." Gia went to the break room.

I put a cape around Bree and leaned the chair back to wash her hair.

She closed her eyes. "If it makes you feel any better, Detective Marshall's been hounding Rhys Ingall too."

"How do you know?"

"He's come to the B&B every day since the murder."

I turned on the water and almost sprayed her. "Rhys is staying with you?"

Her eyes popped open. "Is it that hard to believe? If it wasn't for that guy who died, we'd have a perfect rating on TripAdvisor."

That could certainly lead to a bad review. "I'm not questioning his choice of the B&B. It's just strange that he's not staying with his sister at the mansion, especially since she lost her husband."

Bree reclosed her eyes. "Those two don't like each other. They had a huge fight on the phone last night. At one point Rhys yelled so loud I could hear him in the lobby. Do you know what he said?"

I wet her hair and waited for her to tell me.

"He told her to stop the grieving widow act. Can you imagine?"

That was a surprise. His support of his sister hadn't been sincere, but her grief had seemed genuine. "It's only been three days."

"Right? Rhys Ingall gives new meaning to the words *insufferable* and *snob*. When he learned that we don't serve caviar and clotted cream for breakfast, he threw such a tantrum that I had to skip yoga to go and get some." She gritted her teeth. "And don't get me started on his flowers."

"He has flowers?"

"I put red roses in his room, and he demanded that I remove them and order red tulips instead. And they had to come from Some Enchanted Florist, probably because George used to live in Europe."

I reached for the shampoo, and my hand was shaking. "When was this?"

"On Sunday."

The day after the murder. "Did George deliver them? Or was it his intern, Ruby?"

"It was George, and I'm sure he regretted it because Rhys cornered him in his room for half an hour." She waved her hand. "I'll bet he was examining the flowers and finding all kinds of problems with them." I worked shampoo into her hair. They hadn't discussed the tulips—it was the painting. Because it had something to do with the murder.

"I'm telling you, clients like Rhys make me want to ditch the B&B and move back to LA."

Sometimes I wanted to leave Danger Cove too—not because of any clients, but because residents and visitors dropped dead at a rate that rivaled Cabot Cove's.

"Yesterday I needed a break from the guy, so I said I had a doctor's appointment. But I went with Cristal to Lily's Lingerie so she could pick up something lacy and racy for a date. They're having their first-ever sale on back inventory, FYI."

Gia entered clutching the drinks. "Ooh, did you get anything?"

"Lingerie's not really my thing, but Cristal talked me into buying a pair of black fishnet stockings with a red sequin heart appliqué."

Glass shattered on the floor, mimicking the explosion in my head.

Bree had bought a copy of the stocking used to strangle my uncle—the one the police had never been able to trace.

* * *

"The stockings Bree bought?" Donna Bocca wrinkled her mustached lip as she placed a bullet bra on a Lily's Lingerie hanger. "They're so tacky, Cassidi. Did you want them for your cousin?"

Gia wrapped a garter around her hands like a garrote.

I shoved her toward the sale area. "Why don't you look around, cuz?"

"Okay, but only because this is a first-ever event."

Gia darted to the thong table, and I glanced at the customers to make sure none were listening. "I'm not here to shop, Donna. Those stockings are identical to the one from my uncle's case."

Her wide-set eyes widened, as did her nostrils. When it came to succulent slabs of gossip, her appetite was ravenous. "Do you think his murderer ordered them from us?"

"That's what I need to find out. Did you sell any more of those stockings?"

"We never carried them in the store. I found them in the back of a drawer in the stockroom with a note that said *return special order*, *wrong size*."

My heart rate downshifted. "Then the killer must have gotten them somewhere else because both stockings are in the package Bree bought, and the police have the one the killer used in evidence."

"Based on our return policy, there would have been a second pair."

My heart kicked back into high gear. "How do you mean?"

"If a customer needs another size, we don't send the original item back until we've verified the new size is correct."

"So the purchaser probably got the new pair?"

"And Marjorie, the woman who worked here at the time of the order, never returned the pair Bree bought. That was long before Leroy hired me, so it was too late to send them back."

Leroy was Lily—because Leroy's Lingerie didn't have the same cachet. "When were you hired?"

"January of last year."

My heart raced the Formula One. *The stockings were ordered before my uncle was murdered*. "Donna, can you get in touch with Marjorie?"

"Oh, she died on the job."

I covered my mouth, and goose bumps dotted my arms. "Do you think it had something to do with the stockings, like maybe the killer silenced her?"

She smacked and gave a headshake. "She was suffocated by a corset during a demonstration. It's a hazard of the profession."

That explained why Marjorie never returned the stockings, but it raised a lot of questions about the lingerie line of work. "Did the police ever question you or Leroy about my uncle's case?"

"They talked to Leroy, but he didn't know anything. Handling merchandise is my responsibility."

"Is there a way to trace a special order?"

"Sure."

The fact that she didn't elaborate spoke volumes. I leaned a hand on the counter and pursed my lips. "What's it going to cost me? And bear in mind that I'm broke."

"I'm going to have to lift and search dusty boxes of old records, and after hours to boot." She rubbed her stubbly chin. "Free cut-and-dye appointments for life should do it."

I grimaced, and Gia approached the counter with a wad of thongs. "Yo, I'll gladly throw in free mustache and beard waxes too."

I pushed her toward the push-up bra rack and glared at Donna. "Deal, but finding that order had better be your priority."

"Don't worry, Cassidi. I'm as eager as you for answers."

Because it would make a killer story.

A bell sounded, and my client Santiago Beltrán entered in a white suit. His chocolate eyes bulged at a boobless baby doll on display at the entrance. As a Cesar Romero look-alike, he flashed us a smile reminiscent of the Joker. "¡Hola, chichis!"

I took it he meant *chicas*. After all, he was pushing eighty.

Donna stepped from behind the counter. "Can I help you, Santiago?"

"No, gracias. I have orders from a lady friend."

"And the Coveside Retirement Resort continues to swing." Gia spoke above her breath.

We'd been to the resort before, and the place got pretty wild.

Donna scanned Gia's purchases. "I read in the paper that you two are mixed up in Jesse Rothman's murder."

We said nothing, because she was fishing.

"If he were my husband, he wouldn't have lasted as long as he did."

I took the bait. "Why? What was he doing?"

"Every woman he met. That counterfeit Viagra he was buying from your uncle definitely wasn't for Elise."

I regretted the day Duncan Pickles had published my uncle's client list in the *Cove Chronicles* for many reasons, but Donna's revelation wasn't one of them because it could have been relevant to Jesse's murder.

Santiago held up his hands—along with some crotchless panties. "Women are like a fine *ron*," he said, using his native Cuban for *rum*. "There are so many varieties, an *hombre* must sample them all."

Donna aimed her scan gun at him. "After he's married, Santiago, an hombre had best stick to one variety—his wife. Is it true you were at Jesse's vow renewal bachelor party the night before he died?"

That sounded like an oxymoron.

"It was a fabulous *fiesta*. There was—"

"Let me guess," Gia interrupted. "Ron, women, and song?"

His smile was as wide as the missing crotch on that underwear. "Like a night in *Habana*."

"From what I've heard, it was more like a night in Las Vegas." Donna shot us a scowl. "It's appalling that Jesse got out of jail and went right back

to chasing women. If I were Elise, I would've killed him myself."

She made a valid point. Jealousy and humiliation could drive an unbalanced person to drastic action. But, if Katrina was seeing Jesse, and waiting for his release, she could've killed him for cheating as well. "Did Elise have a vow renewal bachelorette party?"

"She and Katrina went to eat at Ching's Chinese. Those two aren't thick as thieves—they're thicker." She glanced at the total on the register. "That'll be 29.95."

Gia handed Donna her credit card. "Why anyone would want that muscled monster as their BFF is baffling."

Santiago approached the counter with a red vinyl teddy. "My BEH-EFE-EFE es Rhys Ingall."

The snobby Brit wasn't his type. "Why's that?"

"He gave the *fiesta* for Jesse. ¡Qué chico!"

What a guy, indeed. Not every man would encourage his brother-inlaw to cheat on his sister—even a sister he didn't like. Rhys wanted something from Jesse, and it was probably the location of the casino money he'd stolen from Sonny Torlone.

The sound of a slot machine jackpot pinged in my ears.

Jesse invested the casino money in that landscape painting.

* * *

From the passenger seat of the Ferrari, Gia cast a horror-flick-chick look at the two-story strip mall on Main Street. "What are we doing at Sunny Patches? You know I have quiltophobia."

I gave her a blank stare. There was no such thing as a phobia of quilts. Her issue with the blankets was that they were "old and unsexy." "I'm going upstairs to the *Cove Chronicles* office. I need to talk to Duncan Pickles."

"If I go in there, I'll rip that rat's eyes out."

"That's why you're staying here."

The stricken-by-a-slasher look returned. "In the car?"

I exited and leaned in the drivers' side. "Your attachment to the Ferrari is what got us into this situation, so now you two can spend some quality time together."

"You could've at least parked up the street. Those quilts in the window look like they came out of someone's psychotic great-grandma's

haunted attic."

"Fix your gaze on your new thongs. I won't be long." I slammed the door.

The air still smelled of rain. Even though the storm was over, I had a bad feeling that a tsunami was coming—one that would engulf and wash away the salon and all of us in it.

I shuddered and climbed the stairs to the second-floor office. The reception desk was unmanned, so I walked through the rows of cubicles until I arrived at the one with the leg lamp from *A Christmas Story*. Duncan was a schmuck, but not a scrooge. At his desk, it was the holiday season year around.

He looked up from his late-afternoon lunch of a hamburger and fries and leaned back in his chair. "I don't suppose you're here to give me the scoop on what went down in the Rothman mansion?"

"You suppose wrong."

"If this is about your uncle, I don't have any new information. At this point, he's just another cold case file."

My lead on the stocking murder weapon said otherwise, but I kept that detail to myself. A solution was within my grasp, and there was no way I was going to let Duncan break the news to the killer with one of his sensational stories. "This is about Jesse's death. You were wrong to suspect Sonny Torlone's people for murdering him as payback."

"You sound pretty sure."

"I've been doing my homework. There's no evidence Sonny was connected to a Mafia family."

Duncan wiped his fingers on a napkin but never took his gaze from my face. "If I were in your position—that is, a primary suspect—I'd be arguing the opposite."

"You've been covering my cousin and me since we moved here. You know we're not murderers, so stop with the suspect crap and tell me what you know about Rhys Ingall."

His wide-eyed look relaxed into a grudging smile. "He has connections to organized crime in London, but I wouldn't call him a member."

I pulled up a chair. "Why not?"

"He's done some odd jobs for them, but he mostly operates on his own doing small-time cons."

"Did he ever have a profession?"

"Before he blew his share of the family money, he owned an art gallery."

A light switched on in my head—like a spotlight. The gallery had to be his connection to George Fontaine. Alex said George was an art appraiser in Europe, so he could have done work for Rhys or at least met him through the London art scene.

"But if it's not Sonny's people, then I'd have to suspect Fontaine."

I gave an impatient exhale. Apart from Amy, Duncan was the only person in town who could get me information, and I needed him on the trail of the right suspects. "On what basis?"

"I've been digging into his background since he moved to town, and I can't find a thing on the guy. Not here or in Europe. It's like he doesn't exist, which is a sure indicator of a false identity."

Was that why I hadn't been able to find George and his family on the Internet? If so, it wasn't surprising since Alex had said some undesirable characters were after him. I just hoped that was the only reason he would use an assumed name.

A shrill ring from Duncan's desk phone shook me from my thoughts.

"One sec." He grabbed the receiver. "Duncan."

I leaned closer, but I couldn't hear the voice on the receiver.

"Complete anonymity, yes." He reached for a pen and touched the tip to a sticky note, prepared to write.

Whatever the caller was saying must have been riveting because Duncan literally sat at attention. I knew he wouldn't share the tip with me, and in a desperate move, I pressed the speaker button.

"The poison was definitely taxine," the male caller whispered.

I sat back, adrenaline surging in my chest.

"I won't forget this." Duncan replaced the receiver, his face purple with rage. "Pray that you didn't just cost me my best informant."

"I'm sorry, but everything I have is on the line, including my life."

He lowered his head. "Just keep your mouth shut until tomorrow, because if you blow my lead, you and your cousin will be the focus of the next paper."

"Don't worry. Tell me what you know about taxine. It sounds like a tobacco nicotine thing."

"My informant says it comes from the yew tree." He swiveled his chair to face me. "Which bodes badly for you."

"Why? I've never heard of that tree."

"But you have seen one of its seeds." He pressed his fingertips together and locked me in a hard stare. "According to my sources, it was under the vanity. So it points right at you, your cousin, and her makeup."

Once again, he was off base. If anyone, the seed pointed to George and his flowers.

CHAPTER NINE

George Fontaine poked his well-coiffed head out from the backroom of Some Enchanted Florist. "A delivery truck just arrived out back." He gave a mock salute. "I'll be with you shortly."

"Oh, that's fine."

And it was. I'd come at seven a.m. when he opened because I knew that was when he received his flower deliveries. I needed him to be occupied while I searched the shop for the yew tree. I didn't really expect to find it, but I had to check before Duncan's article on the poison came out.

He disappeared, and I pulled up an image of the tree on my phone so I could identify its green fronds. I hadn't had time to drink my usual triple espresso, but the floral scent in the small space was just as eye-opening. And that was good because I'd lost sleep over a nightmare about the British firms and the Terminator. They'd come to the salon to steal Hope, Faith, and Charity, which I was ecstatic about. But then they left an ominous warning on the porch—a concrete-shoed picnic table. Of course, it had seemed a lot scarier in the middle of the night.

But who was Jesse talking to when he'd said "the two of them have to be dealt with—a permanent solution"? Was it Rhys or Katrina? Or was it someone I didn't know about?

I shuddered and inspected the plants. I counted eleven different types of greenery scattered among the flowers, and none of them looked like the yew.

After I completed my round of the shop, I slipped behind the old-fashioned glass case with a Formica countertop to peek inside a floral refrigerator. Orchids and roses, but no greenery. An elegant black address book on a computer desk caught my attention. I didn't know any man who kept one, apart from Uncle Vinnie. And he'd used his little black book to keep track of clients for his illicit dealings.

I paused.

Did George do the same?

I glanced at the door marked *Private*. The muffled voices of George and the deliveryman were audible. I chewed my lip and decided to go for it. I opened the book and went to the *F* section. No Fontaines were listed, but I assumed he would know his parents' contact information. I checked the *I*

section for Ingall. The page was blank. I started over at the beginning and stopped when I reached L.

Leach Gallery.

Was that where George worked in London? Or was it the gallery that Rhys used to own?

"What are you doing, Cassidi?"

I spun around and dropped the book, which slid beneath the desk.

George's tone had been flat, and his eyes were hard. The sheen on his hair almost villainous.

Avoiding his question, and his gaze, I knelt to pick up the book. I looked under the desk, and the squeezing sensation in my abdomen moved to my lungs.

Taped to the underside was a holstered gun.

I flashed to Duncan Pickles and the others who'd questioned George's past. *Who was he really?*

I stood and tossed the book onto the desk. And I inched backwards toward the shop.

George held up his hands. His eyes had gone soft. "The gun is for protection, I swear."

There could be no doubt that I'd been snooping, so I decided to confront the situation. "I would ask why you need protection, but I think I know. Did Rhys Ingall own the Leach Gallery?"

His hands dropped to his sides. "It belonged to my parents."

"Is that how you know Rhys? Did he do an art deal with them?"

He scrutinized my face but stayed silent.

"Look, George. I think of you as a friend. But if you can't tell me what's going on..." I swallowed hard. "...then I'll have to go to Detective Marshall."

He bowed his head. "The gallery was in bankruptcy proceedings. Rhys put them in touch with the black market so they could try to salvage the family home."

"When you say 'black market,' do you mean the British firms?"

He nodded.

"Why are they after you?"

"Money. Because of my work as an art appraiser, I was able to figure out that my parents were selling their stolen paintings to private collectors.

The first thing I did was confiscate the ones they hadn't sold and leave them at the galleries they'd been stolen from—anonymously, of course."

He paused and stubbed the toe of his wing tips against a flowerpot, and I waited for him to continue.

"But there was one painting I couldn't identify, and it wasn't listed on any of the stolen art databases. By that point it was obvious I had to leave London..." He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "...so I sold it to finance my new life." He looked down at his shoes. "I couldn't tell anyone, and especially not Alexandra. I was afraid she would avoid me if she knew."

If I were her, I would have steered clear of George, but not because of the painting. The fact that organized crime was after him was more than a little off-putting. "Is that why you hid in the bushes when Rhys and Jesse were walking to the man cave?"

"Yes, on the off chance Rhys would recognize me. This all happened ten years ago, and I've matured since then and changed my look." He gave a wan smile. "I wasn't nearly as stylish in my early twenties."

I couldn't muster a wan smile of my own. I still had questions I needed answered. "But then he recognized you in the Rothmans' living room when he saw the landscape painting. Why? Does that have something to do with your parents?"

"It was one of the paintings they were supposed to sell for Rhys. I found a picture of it in their office, but they told me they'd already sold it. Evidently, they lied so I wouldn't confiscate it."

"Then why did Rhys seem as surprised as you when he saw it on the wall? He must've arranged the sale between your parents and his sister, or at least with Jesse."

"I met with Rhys the other night, and he thought I'd brokered the sale. My parents aren't returning my calls, so we're both trying to figure out how Jesse got the painting."

His meeting with Rhys reminded me of another meeting. "Is that why you met with Katrina at the Smugglers' Tavern?"

He gave a grin tinged with a grimace. "I'd call you Nora Charles, but that role is taken. At least, I hope it still is." He kicked the pot again. "Katrina didn't know anything about the painting, or so she said."

I rubbed my forehead. I was overwhelmed by the revelations, but I reminded myself that his black market art dealings didn't make him a

murderer. "You need to tell Alex, George. She has a right to know."

"I agree." His voice was quiet. "I'll talk to her today."

I headed for the door, wondering whether he would tell Alex the whole story. Because my instincts told me that George hadn't shared everything with me. And I exited Some Enchanted Florist wondering what I didn't know.

* * *

"Nap time's over."

My eyes opened to the Union Jack. I shot up in bed, clutching my quilt. Had the British firms come to get me?

"Chill out, cug." Gia flounced onto the mattress, avoiding my quilt.

The realization that she was the one sporting the British flag was no less terrifying thanks to her choice of accessories—black thigh-high boots, safety pin earrings, and an actual tiara. She looked like a renegade royal.

"Why are you sleeping in the middle of the day, C?" Aunt Carla's voice came from the phone Gia waved at me.

My alarm clock read eleven fifteen, which was hardly afternoon. I massaged the budding headache at my temples.

"Did you get a colpo d'aria in that godforsaken cove?"

"I was just trying to catch up on some sleep, Aunt Carla. No need to worry."

"'No need to worry,' she says. We got a dead body and a looming mob hit, but everything's hunky dory." She sighed. "You got any wine around heuh, Flavia? My nerves are about to blow."

Grunting and smacking came from the phone.

It sounded like they were at the zoo. "Where are you, Aunt Carla?"

Gia leaned back on her elbows. "At the Coma Funeral Home, where Flavia works."

Coma was an unfortunate name for the business, but it didn't hold a funeral candle to the Amigone mortuary chain in New York. "Did you ask her about Sonny Torlone's Mafia connections?"

"Not yet. She's eating her lunch."

That explained the grunting and smacking. "She's not near any bodies, is she?"

"What? It's no different from people eating at funerals. And I brought her my sausage and peppahs and amaretto-chocolate chip cannoli."

The cannoli sounded so delicious that I might've eaten them in the funeral home, but only in the lobby.

Gia covered the phone. "That nostril's not Flavia's only extra-wide body part."

"I heard that, young lady. You could use a trip to confession this Sunday."

She crossed her thigh-highs. "I'm planning on it."

Planning being the operative word. "Aunt Carla, you never told me how Flavia comes by her information."

"Well, the Coma Funeral Home is *the* place in Atlantic City if you want to go out in style. You want a live leopard at your service? No problem. A wax figure of Dean Martin? They've got it. And Flavia is their makeup artist."

Gia tugged at a safety pin. "We have a lot in common."

"You think?" I asked.

"She's a local celebrity heuh in Jersey for her work on murder victims—the real gory ones, like Mafia hits and car accidents. You lose an eye? She can replace it. Lips gone? She'll rebuild them and top off the job with the perfect shade of gloss. She did Sonny Torlone's makeup, and when she redid his missing nose, she even put black hair in his nostrils. She pays special attention to the nose on account of her own enlarged nostril."

Gia let out a whistle. "Impressive."

That was one way to describe it. "I'm sorry, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"It gives her the ability to smell a mob rat alive or dead."

I was willing to believe that an enlarged nostril could enhance sense of smell, but there was no way a person could sniff out a criminal. "You can't smell a mobster, Aunt Carla."

"I sweauh on the Virgin Mary, Flavia can. And all these years of working around embalming fluid haven't dulled her sense of smell."

"Or her taste," Gia whispered.

I shot her a smirk. "Okay, so what does a mafioso smell like?"

"John Gotti's favorite cologne."

Things were finally entering the realm of logic. "Which one? Boss?" "No, Grey Flannel."

Gia raised her lower lip and turned down the corners of her mouth—an expression of respect in the Italian culture. "Classy choice."

Said the punk-rock royal. "Did you get a chance to ask Rosie at the butcher about the woman who cost Uncle Vinnie the casino deal?"

"I just came from theuh. She said, and this is a quote, 'The dame ain't local, and she ain't no Italian.'"

Which meant the dame was out of network, so to speak.

Gia rolled onto her side. "It has to be Katrina, Cass."

"But the casino deal happened before he left New Jersey, so how would he have known her?"

"Through Jesse."

Maybe we'd been looking at this the wrong way. It wasn't weird that Vinnie had met Jesse before he moved to Danger Cove, but it was weird that he'd moved to Danger Cove after Jesse had cut him out of the casino deal. "Aunt Carla, did Vinnie ever tell you why he moved here?"

"To play hide the cannoli with some broad. Why else?"

The cannoli she'd made for Flavia got a lot less appetizing.

Gia gave a flip of her wrist. "Katrina. We know they were dating, and she's connected to Jesse."

There was also the matter of the cameo she stole from Gia's room.

An enormous burp broke the silence.

"That's my sausage and peppahs." Carla spoke with culinary pride.

"Sorry to make yous wait, girls." Flavia's voice was, not surprisingly, nasal. "We've got a funeral tomorrow, so I had to eat lunch and finish up the dead guy's makeup for the viewing today."

I caught sight of my reflection on my dresser mirror. I looked waxy—like a made-up corpse.

"It's Lorenzo Marino's service." Aunt Carla had a trill in her voice, like she was excited about meeting the deceased. "He made a killing in the market."

"Stocks?" I asked.

"No, marinara. They outsold Ragù."

I wondered if they'd have a giant sauce jar next to the wax figure of Dean. "Thanks for working us in, Flavia. We're trying to find out if Sonny Torlone was in a crime family, like the Scarfos."

"Sonny wasn't none of that. He was a regular goomba. But there was a rumor at his funeral that Jesse Rothman was connected and ordered his hit."

Gia and I exchanged a wide-eyed look.

If that was true, then we were right to think that Jesse had put a hit on us. "Do you know if Jesse was a member of a New Jersey or Philadelphia crime family?"

"Nah, everyone figured it was some West Coast clan."

I'd never heard of organized crime in Danger Cove, but Seattle had Ukrainian and Russian organized crime groups, among others. "Did anyone bring up Jesse stealing Sonny's casino investment money?"

"Are you kiddin'? No one could shut up about it at the reception." "Why?"

"Because the double-cross was ordered by their silent partner, who is the one everyone said was Jesse's mob connection."

"Did you get his name?"

"The silent partner wasn't a man. It was a woman."

Gia's jaw almost landed on her flag.

"But no one at the service knew who she was because she's not local."

"A woman," Carla repeated, her tone tinged with embarrassment. "So emasculatin'."

And even more so if the woman had more muscles than most men.

* * *

"Katrina's a crime boss?" Amy shouted from the circulation desk.

"Can you not yell that to the entire library?" Luckily Ben was off finding himself, because hearing his employee shout in the library would've sent him to the psych ward. "I don't have any proof. And honestly, it seems unlikely that the head of a Mafia family would be working as a mansion manager."

"Maybe it's a cover, like Tony Soprano's sanitation business."

"Or there's some other woman involved that we don't know about yet. Like maybe Rhys has a wife. Have you had any time to research him?"

She leaned onto the counter, and the dark circles behind her lenses came into sharp focus. "I'm sorry, Cass. With Ben out, I haven't been able to get to that or Harriet's genealogy. I've been coming in early and staying late just to keep the library running."

I squeezed her hands. "That's all right. You take care of the library, and leave the research to Gia and me. Besides, thanks to Duncan Pickles and my Aunt Carla's contacts, we've already found out most of what we needed to know."

"Are you sure? Because I could try to get to it tonight."

A metal grate slammed outside.

I turned toward the entrance. "What was that?"

"The newspaper delivery boy refilling the vending machine. I don't know what's going on today, but he can't stock the *Cove Chronicles* fast enough."

Duncan's article on the poison—I'd forgotten about it. "Hang on a sec. I'll grab us a copy."

I went and purchased the paper. On my way back to the circulation desk, I scanned the headline and a rush went through body—like toxins flooding my veins.

JESSE ROTHMAN POISONED WITH TAXINE! Was it the florist, the cook, or the beauticians?

Leave it to Duncan Pickles to omit the likes of Rhys and Katrina and lay the blame on local businesspeople—and to use another outdated word for *hairstylist*.

Amy looked up from the computer. "You look like you've seen Harriet."

"Close." I tossed the paper on the counter.

"Taxine?" She pulled off her glasses. "I wonder if it's a coincidence."

Amy knew something. I leaned over the counter. "Start spilling."

"It might be nothing, but a few of months ago, we read *A Pocket Full of Rye* by Agatha Christie. And the killer used taxine."

A jolt went through me, like another shot of poison. "Who's we?" "Oh. Esprit de Corpse."

The mystery book club at Dangerous Reads. "Who participated in the discussions?"

She tapped her glasses on her cheek. "Let's see. It was a small group led by Meri Sinclair, Alicia Holmes, and Burt Lewis from the bookstore, of course. Besides me there was Viola Aster from the Garden Club, and Dee Madison and Emma Quinn from the quilting guild. Elizabeth Ashby came too, which was fun. Oh, and Santiago Beltrán."

Santiago was everywhere women were gathered, but neither he nor the others were likely suspects in Jesse's murder. "Do you know if there were any no-shows?"

"No, but there's always someone who buys the book but can't attend the discussion because of work or some other issue."

"Who can I ask about that?"

"Meri sells the book club selections at a discount, so everyone in Esprit de Corpse orders from her. She also posts a notice by the cash register and on the website to drum up new members."

I'd have to stop by Dangerous Reads and convince Meri to give me the names of everyone who ordered a copy. "Do you mind if I borrow your book tonight?"

"Not at all. But I used the library copy."

"Perfect. I'll check it out right now."

She put on her glasses. "Let me make sure it's still here. Agatha Christie is pretty popular in Danger Cove."

I hoped that was because people liked her mysteries and not because they wanted to copycat her murders.

Amy typed the title into the library catalogue on her computer. "Yup. *A Pocket Full of Rye* is available in the mystery section."

I followed her through the stacks. "I'm hoping there's a detail in the book that triggers something."

"Maybe, but the plot is pretty different from what happened at the Rothman mansion." She stopped in front of a bookshelf and scanned the titles. Her quasi-unibrow assumed the form of a bat. "That's funny. I don't see it."

"Maybe it was misshelved."

Amy's unibrow flapped its wings.

"I wasn't implying that you misshelved it. Maybe a patron put it in the wrong place."

"It's possible. But our patrons usually leave the books on the tables where they were sitting."

I glanced at the circulation desk. "What about the return cart? Maybe someone checked it out after you, and it's waiting to be shelved."

"I emptied the cart thirty minutes ago during lunch, after I checked the overnight book drop." She scanned the books again, checking the Dewey decimal system numbers. "A more likely explanation is that someone stole it. But why would anyone do that when they could check it out?"

I knew the reason. The authorities could trace computer searches for taxine, but if you stole a murder mystery that featured the poison, no one would ever find out.

CHAPTER TEN

Amy and I returned to the circulation desk so that she could fill out a report about the missing Agatha Christie book.

And I tried to figure out a way to identify the thief. "Are there security cameras in the library?"

"I wish. Then we could catch that dirty doodler."

Not to mention the murderer. "Can you give me a summary of A Pocket Full of Rye?"

She looked up from her report. "If you're going to read it, I don't want to spoil the plot."

I pulled up a chair from a nearby table. Sometimes Amy made me tired. "It's not like I'm reading the book for pleasure, remember? And in case Dangerous Reads doesn't have a copy, I need to know the key details of the murder."

She leaned onto her elbows. "There were actually three murders, and they follow the Mother Goose nursery rhyme 'Sing a Song of Sixpence.' But essentially, a greedy son kills his rich businessman father; Rex Fortescue, his stepmother; and the maid he seduced and tricked into serving the poison."

I looked behind me to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "The Rothmans don't have children, but Rhys could be Elise's heir." A horrifying realization practically nailed me in the head, and I scooted to the edge of my seat. "Elise could get the next dose of taxine."

"Mm." Amy tilted her head. "That's not the way Agatha Christie wrote it. The stepmother's tea was poisoned with cyanide."

"Whether it's taxine or cyanide is irrelevant, don't you think? Now what about the maid?"

"She was strangled and found with a clothespin on her nose."

My hand went to my face, and I thought of Flavia's enlarged nostril and Sonny Torlone's missing schnoz. "Amy, this is scary. We have to tell the police about the plot. More people could die."

"But the killer isn't following the book."

"How do you know?"

"Because of the nursery rhyme. When Rex Fortescue was poisoned, the killer stuffed his pocket with rye. You would know if that had happened to Jesse because Detective Marshall would have grilled you about it."

I chewed my thumbnail. "He did show us the taxine seed he'd found beneath the vanity."

"See? So why not the grain?" She began entering the missing book data into the computer.

"Then maybe it's just a coincidence that the killer used taxine."

"Or the killer had access to a toxic yew tree, and the book gave him or her the idea. For instance, I had never heard of taxine until I read *A Pocket Full of Rye*."

I got a whiff of mothballs and catapulted from my seat.

Viola Aster, the seventy-something vice president of the Garden Club, handed Amy her library card and a copy of *The Savage Garden: Cultivating Carnivorous Plants*. "I'm delighted to hear you girls discussing *A Pocket Full of Rye*. Whilst I thoroughly enjoyed our Esprit de Corpse discussions, I was disappointed that Jane Marple had such a small role."

She would be. In her tweed suit, sensible shoes, and practical hat, Viola could've been Miss Marple's twin. And she was British to boot.

Amy scanned the card and the book and slid them toward Viola. "Yeah, Inspector Neele was dull and uninspired."

Her tiny blue eyes twinkled. "However, the use of taxine was quite ingenious. It's my favorite of Agatha Christie's poisons."

Amy lowered her glasses and shot me a look.

Apparently, Viola hadn't read the latest *Cove Chronicles*. "What, um, do you like about it?"

"Taxine is a cardiotoxin like snake venom." She flashed her eyes wide. "It causes heart damage and, eventually..." She shivered, but a smile formed on her shriveled lips. "...failure."

That explained Jesse's manner of death—but not why Viola was so excited about it. "Is taxine found in anything besides the yew tree?"

"No, dear, which is what makes it such an intriguing choice."

Amy tucked a loose lock behind her ear. "I just did a quick search on the yew. There are several types, but the only one native to Washington State is the Pacific yew, which isn't poisonous."

I leaned over the counter and looked at the computer screen. "Some of the other kinds are probably here too in people's yards or in the woods."

"If they are, they're invasive alien species."

Viola clasped her hands. "Thrilling, isn't it?"

I stared at her for a moment, and then I turned to Amy. "What do you mean, invasive alien species?"

"Plants transported accidentally or illegally into a foreign territory. In either case, if you see a nonnative species like the yew tree, you're supposed to report it to the US Fish and Wildlife Service."

"I know gardeners," Viola said, "and they can be ruthless when it comes to creating their ideal garden." She stuffed her book and library card into her quilted handbag, which clanked.

It was probably gardening tools, but I couldn't rule out guns and knives.

Viola patted Amy's hand. "If you girls want to find out about yew trees in the area, contact Herb at the Tree Society. We've had him speak to the Garden Club. He's a rather odd chap, but he's an expert on tree species." She pinched my cheek. "Now I must be off. I'm taking a tour of the morgue, and I shouldn't want to be late."

Stunned, I watched her leave. I didn't know what to be more disturbed about—the morgue tour or my throbbing face.

"Viola's adorable, isn't she?" Amy's tone was affectionate.

"She's cute." *But something dark lurks beneath the surface*. "Oh, darn it. Do you know Herb's last name or contact information? I forgot to ask Viola."

Amy folded her hands in front of her mouth. "Were you a Girl Scout, Cassidi?"

I returned to my chair. The question was random, which guaranteed a problem. "For a couple of years. Why?"

"Before I tell you how to find Herb, I'm going to need Scout's honor that you won't do anything irrational." She raised three fingers.

I sighed and threw up mine. "Scout's honor."

"His last name is McCudgeon."

My Scout's honor plummeted. "As in, Harriet?"

"As in, her husband." Amy plunged her fists into her cardigan pockets. "And her tour bus driver."

I exhaled all the air from my body, deflating.

"But before you talk to him, there's a plot twist in *A Pocket Full of Rye* you should know about."

The news about Herb had me twisted like a tree knot—I wasn't sure I could handle another. "Please make it as painless as possible?"

Amy took a deep breath in preparation. "Inspector Neele thought the taxine had been put in Rex Fortescue's tea at the office because he died after drinking it. But Miss Marple deduced that he'd ingested the poison several hours before in the marmalade he was served for breakfast at his mansion."

That was painless, and promising. Because it could prove that Gia and I hadn't poisoned Jesse. "Is that a typical amount of time for taxine to take effect?"

"I'm sure the time varies based on the dosage and the health of the individual."

"But you're saying that Jesse could've been poisoned hours before Gia served him the espresso?"

"That and one other thing." Amy tucked her lips over her teeth and looked around the library.

"Are you going to tell me what the other thing is?"

"I'm afraid I can't make it painless."

I pulled my bag to my chest. "Go ahead and say it."

"You and Gia have definitely been framed."

* * *

Amy's words weighed on me as I walked to my car. I'd been fearing that Gia and I had been framed, but it was jarring to hear her—and, in a sense, Agatha Christie—confirm it.

I climbed into the Ferrari, and my phone began to ring. Zac. I'd been neglecting him because of Jesse's death, and it was time to rectify that situation. "Hey, you. Let's do something this weekend."

"I was calling to suggest dinner at the Lobster Pot this Friday."

Our special occasion place. My chest swelled with hope. *Had Zac sold his yacht design?* "Are we celebrating something?"

"We are." He paused for effect. "Us."

Normally, I would have melted at the romantic sentiment. But since there was no longer a chance of finding Bart Coffyn's treasure, I would've preferred to hear that he'd found a way to buy Pirate's Hook Marine Services. Of course, I couldn't let him know that. "Then I happily accept. An evening with just the two of us sounds like heaven right now."

"Is everything okay?" His tone held a hint of concern. "Or is Lester Marshall still harassing you about Rothman?"

A flash of black caught my attention in the rearview mirror, and it wasn't one of the detective's cheap suits. A figure in a hooded trench coat, slacks, and tennis shoes seemed to be watching me from the side of Ingall Hardware across the street. Whoever it was had accessorized with sunglasses, gloves, and a scarf that covered the lower half of their face.

It was normal to bundle up during a Washington winter, but the temperature outside was around fifty degrees. And the head-to-toe black was *mafioso*, except that it was more sophisticated.

Was it a member of the British firms?

Rhys?

Or was it Katrina? Like Rhys, she was around six feet, which was more or less the height of the figure, and muscular. And with her pixie obscured by the hood, it would be easy to mistake her for a man.

"You still there, Cass?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Everything's fine." At least, I thought it was—except for the fact that I'd forgotten I was on the phone with him. "What's the latest on Clark's plan to sell Pirate's Hook?"

"He's working with Abigail Harris at the Savings & Loan to calculate the value of the business. He'll probably put it on the market within a week or two."

The news was as unsettling as the presence of the dark figure. "Can Clark secure your job with the buyer?"

"He can try. But nothing is guaranteed."

"Well, whoever buys it will need a manager, and you're the obvious choice." I glanced in the rearview mirror.

The figure flattened against the side of the building.

Damn. I'd tipped my hand.

"Cassidi?" Zac's pitch had risen from concerned to alarmed. "What's going on?"

I didn't want to tell him that I might have a stalker, because I knew he'd leave work, and I felt perfectly safe in the Ferrari. "I'm sorry, Zac. I just left the library. I've been running errands, and I've got one more to take care of."

"Ah. Well, call me later when you're free, all right?"

"I will. Love you." I closed the call without waiting for him to return the sentiment. I had to get to that errand—at Ingall Hardware.

I started the engine and pulled from the parking lot. I hit the gas, and my tires squealed as I crossed the street and entered the hardware store lot. If the dark figure was still around, I wanted to send a message. This Texas girl wasn't going to tolerate being framed or followed anymore.

I drove around the building twice, but there was no sign of the trench coat.

As I headed back to the salon, my gut was heavy like I'd swallowed a concrete shoe. I couldn't shake the fear that the dark figure had come to carry out the hit Jesse Rothman had ordered on Gia and me. If that was the case, he or she would resurface. And when that happened, there was almost nothing we could do to stop them from carrying out their murder mission.

* * *

"All right, prospectors," Harriet crowed from atop the Gold Rush History Tours bus. "It's time to get a gander inside this bawdy chicken ranch. Oops! I mean, The Clip and Sip."

A twig pricked my temple, and I snapped it from the shallon shrub that I was crouching in next to the porch. Ironically, I wasn't hiding from the trench-coated figure, but rather Harriet McCudgeon. And I was seriously on edge. It was five p.m., and in the hours since Duncan Pickles had published his taxine article, Harriet had revised her spiel to portray Gia and me as deranged assassins who attacked innocent people with poison and garden hoses.

"Off the bus, everyone!" Harriet nudged an older couple from their seats. "The den of whores, murderers, and water sprayers awaits."

I snapped off another twig and twisted it around my fingers as Harriet exited the bus and led the prospectors up the steps to the salon. It was all I could do not to grab the hose and go all Ben Bardsley on her.

"Hello, McCurmudgeon." Gia's tone dripped disdain. "I've been waiting for you all afternoon."

My cousin's statement was alarming, much like the threat of shrub squirrels, but I couldn't do anything about it without blowing my cover.

The salon door slammed shut, and I parted the branches.

The area was clear of tourists.

On the off chance Harriet watched from a window, I crawled from the shrub and sprinted in a serpentine fashion to the bus.

Herb, her husband slash driver, sat behind the wheel reading *The Hidden Life of Trees*. He was remarkably hairy for such a small, thin man, a kind of hybrid between a hippy and a troll. His tousled gray-brown hair flowed past his shoulders, as did his mustache and beard. And his eyebrows threatened to spill over as well.

I knocked on the glass door, and he jumped and touched his hair, as though I were armed with a hose—and hair-cutting shears.

"Go away. We have nothing to discuss."

I was sure Harriet had forbidden him from speaking to Gia or me, which was why I'd hidden from her. But I had a spiel of my own prepared, one a tree lover like Herb wouldn't be able to knock down. "Viola Aster from the Garden Club sent me. I have a tree question that only you can answer."

His tongue emerged from his lips, and his hand shot to the door release, where it hovered.

"In your official capacity as the founder and president of the Danger Cove Tree Society." I almost curtsied, but I went with a respectful nod instead.

Fingers with nails that rivaled Gia's in length grasped the handle, and the glass opened. "Get in before my wife sees us."

I climbed aboard.

"Get down!" He swiped his bear claws at me and emitted a dank, musty odor.

I hunkered between the seat and the protective metal panel by the steps, trying not to get another sniff. "Whether you believe me or not, my cousin and I are being framed for poisoning Jesse Rothman."

Herb crossed his arms against his suede fringe jacket. "Sounds like you're up a gum tree."

I didn't know what the expression meant, but I latched on to the tree part. "That's where you come in." I widened my eyes and decided to soften my tone—something he undoubtedly never heard at home. "I need information about the yew tree to prove that Gia and I are innocent, and you're the only person with the expertise to help."

His beard bobbled, and the hair on his brows seemed to bristle. Resolute, he reached into a frayed messenger bag at his feet.

I closed my eyes so that I wouldn't have to see his toenails curling around his Birkenstocks. When I heard pages turning, I peered between my

lashes.

Herb browsed *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Trees*. "You've got your Pacific yew, your Chinese yew, your Japanese yew, your Canadian yew, and your English yew. All of 'em except the Pacific are poisonous."

He might've looked like a hippy troll, but his speech was as slow and methodical as that of a Southern farmer. "Are any of the poisonous ones in Danger Cove or the surrounding area?"

He stroked his brows. "Until three or so years ago, Georgette Potter over on Pine Bluff Road had a Japanese yew in her front yard. But she had it removed after the incidents."

"Incidents?"

"The tree killed a moose." He stomped a sandal, outraged at the memory. "And her gardener."

Odd that the gardener didn't warrant an earlier mention. "Are all of the poisonous yews so toxic?"

"For corn's sake, yes. Especially the English yew." He ran his fingernails through his beard and worked a tangle. "And at least one has been located in Washington."

Surprised, I stood. "Is it near here?"

"Are you out of your tree, woman?"

I gave him a blank stare. I got the word *tree*, and that was it.

He waved his arms and kicked his curly toenailed feet. "Get down. My wife could see you."

I glanced over my shoulder and returned to my crouched position.

Herb adjusted his facial hair. "The exact location of the English yew wasn't disclosed, and it could've been removed by now. But it was listed on an official report for the state, which is close enough. A few leaf fragments are enough to kill a person."

The seed beneath the vanity came to mind. "What about the seeds? Are they poisonous?"

"You bet they are. They're the most toxic part of the tree, and more so during winter. The only part that isn't is the aril, the fleshy red covering of the seed."

When I'd pulled up pictures of the yew tree on my phone, I hadn't seen any red covering. "Does your book have pictures of the aril?"

An exasperated sigh escaped his mustache. "Why do you think they call it an illustrated encyclopedia?"

Herb was huffy, like Harriet. "You're right. Would you please show me one?"

"It's a vibrant red orange, but with a brown seed in one end." He turned a few pages and tapped an image with a long, yellowed nail. "Here you go."

A clawing sensation raked my gut.

The aril and seed looked exactly like the berries in the exotic flower arrangement George Fontaine had delivered to Gia.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Herb closed the bus door behind me, catching a lock of my hair between the rubber seals. Nevertheless, I broke into a run. My fear about the yew berry discovery propelled me forward, and anyway, I had a salon full of extensions. I sprinted up the sidewalk to the porch, hurdled the steps, and threw open the salon door.

To shouting.

There was a fight on the second floor.

I headed for the stairs to break it up, but skidded to a stop.

The exotic floral arrangement wasn't on the reception desk. Or on Gia's makeup station.

A door slammed above, and the shouts became screams. *And a wail?* I raced to the stairs.

Another wail.

My legs went leaden.

That last one wasn't human. It was a police siren.

Detective Marshall was coming to arrest us for Jesse's murder, but I couldn't fathom how he'd found out about the yew berries.

The flowers. He'd looked at them so strangely when he'd knocked them off the reception desk. He could've suspected that the berries were the source of the poison and then gone to get confirmation.

A self-preservation instinct surged through my limbs. I couldn't let him lock up Gia and me, not yet. I had to find an attorney or recruit Zac to help us.

The siren blared on our street.

I rushed to the salon door to lock it.

A squad car with flashing lights pulled up where the Gold Rush History Tours bus had been parked. The door opened, and I broke into a sweat. An officer climbed out with a buff bod, black hair, and a low brow.

Donatello Stallone.

Detective Marshall wouldn't send Gia's boyfriend to arrest us. So why was he here?

Gia.

What was it she'd said to Harriet while I was hiding in the shrub? I've been waiting for you all afternoon?

My self-preservation instinct was flushed out by anger-fueled adrenaline. My cousin had followed through with her Operation Goldfinger plan to have Donatello confront Harriet, and she hadn't looped me in. If I weren't a suspect in Jesse's poisoning, I would have been tempted to turn her in for yew berry possession.

Leaving the door unlocked, I marched upstairs to take on my cousin, the McCurmudgeon, and her prospectors.

The shouting and screaming had stopped, and when I got to the second floor, I found out the reason.

A standoff was in progress.

Big Ron barred my Uncle Vinnie's door with his hulking body. Gia stood next to him, still sporting the tiara and Union Jack while wielding a curling iron that was plugged in to a wall socket. Alex Jordan stood with her back to them in a defensive lineman position.

The threesome were warding off Harriet, who scraped her feet on the floor like a bull about to charge.

"Everyone get a grip," I shouted. "Except you, Gia. Drop the curling iron."

"Not a chance, *cug*." She made a fencing jab with the hot styling tool. "I caught the Gold Digger trying to get into Vinnie's room."

"Danger Cove PD."

We turned to the stairwell.

Donatello was in his relaxed police officer pose—chest puffed out, legs slightly spread, hands on belt—calling attention to his six-pack abs, gun, and package. "Someone reported crime scene tampering?"

Harriet removed her bowler. "I have a signed contract that gives my clients and me unrestricted access to this property."

"Speaking of your clients"—I glanced around—"where are they?"

Alex looked apologetic. "I sent them down the hall. They're at the *Bottoms Up* bar."

Enjoying drinks on the house, no doubt.

Donatello sauntered toward Harriet, emitting wafts of Dolce & Gabbana cologne. "Vincent Conti's bedroom is an active crime scene, ma'am. If you try to enter said scene"—he paused and tapped his handcuffs—"I'll have no choice but to bring out these guys."

I rolled my eyes. "Thank you, Officer Stallone. I'll take it from here." His chest went concave, and his hands slid from his belt.

"Uh-uh. No." Gia waved her weapon. "I'm the one who called him, and I say he should take the McCurmudgeon to the clink."

"Give me that." I snatched the curling iron. "Please see Officer Stallone to the door so Harriet and I can chat."

She glowered but took Donatello's hand and strutted him and her thigh-highs to the stairs.

Alex cleared her throat. "Time to get back to work." She pushed Big Ron to the stairs. "We'll be in the tower room if you need us."

I unplugged the curling iron. "You heard the officer, Harriet. My uncle's room is off limits, so gather your prospectors and leave."

"You think you're so smart, but you'll be hearing from my attorney. In the meantime, I'll see you tomorrow for the eight a.m. tour."

"I wouldn't be so confident."

"And why's that, pray tell?"

"When Officer Stallone pulled up, your driver split with the bus."

Her chubby cheeks blew up, and she tossed the bowler onto her head and stomped toward the bar. "I'm going to fire him," she muttered, "and sue him for dereliction of duty."

I felt somewhat sorry for Herb. Being Harriet's husband would be hard on so many levels.

After the Gold Digger had ushered her prospectors down the stairs and out of the salon, I locked the door behind her and gestured to Gia, who was perched on Donatello's lap in her makeup station chair. "Come on, cuz. We need to talk."

She sighed and slid to the floor, and Donatello rose to his feet.

I pointed to the chair. "Sit."

He sat.

I stormed into the break room and remained standing.

Gia sashayed in. "All I was doing was executing the Operation Goldfinger—"

"Where are the flowers George delivered?" I whispered.

She stepped back, as though she'd run into Sybil. "Uh, I pitched them."

I pulled the lid from the garbage can.

"No, outside. They had little bugs."

I peered into the salon. Donatello was at the makeup station checking out his bicep. "You need to go and get them."

"I'm not diving into the Dead Sea." She used our nickname for the dumpster we shared with Filly Filipuzzi, our fishmonger neighbor. "It smells like freshly shampooed fish guts."

"Gia, there are yew berries in that arrangement, and they contain the poison that killed Jesse Rothman."

Her boots buckled, and she fell into a chair. "So what are you saying? That George set me up?"

I sat beside her and grasped her hands. "I'm saying that you need to get the arrangement out of the trash, for both of our sakes."

She shivered, but I wasn't sure whether it was because of the incriminating yew berries or the thought of climbing into a dumpster full of hair and rotten fish.

"Can't we just leave them, Cass? I mean, people do throw away dead flowers."

"Sure!" I released her hands so I could throw mine into the air. "And then the police will find out we disposed of evidence."

Her dark eyes drifted to the doorway. "They just did."

Slowly, I turned.

Donatello stared at us, slack-jawed. And if that weren't bad enough, Zac was with him, jaw clenched.

Zac's gaze sought mine, more hurt than surprised. "Clark saw you speed through the parking lot at the hardware store and said I should make sure everything was all right."

An awkward pause ensued because everything was clearly all wrong.

Donatello closed his mouth, and I didn't like the twist his lips had taken. "Yo, it's time you two start talking."

* * *

Flip-flopping between enthralled and embarrassed, I watched from the doorway of the break room as Donatello faced off with the dumpster. He shook out his arms, jogged in place, pulled his head from shoulder to shoulder, and all while staring down the trash bin as though he was trying to intimidate it.

Zac stepped forward. "It's probably safer to climb in. Otherwise, you could slip and bang up your head on that metal."

Donatello struck a pose reminiscent of Aesthetic God at Hard Bodies Gym. "Yo, I appreciate the input, bro. But search and recovery missions are best left to trained police officers."

I sneered at his bravado. He was dumpster diving, not scuba diving, although there were a lot of fish in that receptacle.

With a flourish, Donatello crouched in the set position of a sprinter and charged. He leapt, let out a war cry, and catapulted via the rim inside. He landed on his feet but wobbled. His arms rotated once, twice, and he fell backwards with a wet smack.

In a psychosomatic show of support, I held my breath and waited for him to reappear with the floral arrangement.

Zac approached the bin. "You all right, man?"

Donatello emerged buoyant from the abyss. "Totally, dude." He spotted the fish juice and cut hair on his arms. "It's all goo—"

A cone of vomit spewed from his lips.

And another.

One more still.

Apparently, police search and recovery training hadn't prepared him for diving into rotting fish and salon waste. Repressing a gag, I went inside and closed the door, hoping those cones had missed the flowers.

Gia was at the table in her tiara, meditating—that is, polishing her nails and sipping tea-flavored vodka. "How's Donny doing out there?"

"He's, uh, riding the waves of the Dead Sea."

She applied a coat of sparkly blue to her thumbnail. "So, how mad do you think Zac is?"

"Well, until a few minutes ago, I *had* neglected to tell him that a person in a trench coat, who is possibly a member of the British Mafia, was following me." I flopped into a chair. "I guess in that sense I'm no different from George."

Her eyes darted to the stairway at my back, and my stomach seized as though I were Dead Sea diving with Donatello.

Alex Jordan was behind me, which meant I'd outed the entire Fontaine family.

"It's all right, Cassidi." She took a seat at the table. "George asked me to meet him at Marlton House for lunch today, and he told me everything, including the details of his meeting with you this morning."

Gia slid a bottle of polish toward her. "This'll take the edge off the stress."

Alex reached for the vodka. "Thanks, but manicures and renovation work don't mix."

While she poured a shot, I debated how much to tell her. George might have come clean about his family's art dealings with Rhys Ingall and the British firms, but I doubted he'd confessed to putting yew berries in Gia's exotic floral arrangement—if he was the one responsible.

The back door opened, and Zac entered holding the flowers at arm's length. "You might want to hold your noses until I rinse these off. They smell like rotten shrimp."

Alex's eyes crinkled. "Pardon the pun, but did you fish those flowers out of the dumpster out back?"

"So where's Donny, Zac?" Gia fiddled with a safety pin earring, trying to seem innocent.

"He, uh, needed a shower." Zac cast a wary look from me to my cousin. "After that he was going to the station to talk to Bud Ohlsen about a security detail for you two."

But was he going to turn us in for the yew berries? I desperately wanted to ask, but Alex was scrutinizing our faces, and the flowers, looking for an answer to her question.

Zac turned on the faucet and sprayed the arrangement. "But regardless of the police, Donatello agrees that I should stay here until we know who's following you."

I didn't bother to protest about him missing work. He might be angry with me, but he would stay until Gia and I were out of danger. And while I loved him for it, I regretted the extra pressure. Since buying back his father's company was no longer an option, I didn't want to cost him his job.

Gia pointed her polish brush. "I'll bet it was that peroxide power lifter, Katrina."

"It could've been Rhys." I leaned back in my chair. "I still want to know what he was doing on that rowboat the other morning."

Zac turned off the water. "When was that?"

"The day before yesterday."

He leaned against the counter. "That's the same day one of our rowboats was found on the beach not far from the pier."

Alex frowned. "Rhys doesn't strike me as a rower."

"Or any kind of athlete," Gia said.

I looked at Zac. "Now that I know he stole the boat, I'm convinced he was disposing of evidence. Maybe even the cameo."

Alex massaged her palm. "If only Gram could remember where she saw that brooch."

"I'd better call work and give Clark an update." Zac pulled his phone from his back pocket and walked into the salon.

The clock above the sink read six o'clock, and I needed to get to Dangerous Reads before they closed to talk to Meri about the orders for *A Pocket Full of Rye*. But first I had to do the right thing and give Alex an update about George.

I reached for the vodka and helped myself to a shot. "Alex, I'm sorry we didn't answer your question about the flowers earlier. The truth is, we didn't know how to tell you that the arrangement contains the berries that poisoned Jesse Rothman."

Gia tipped her tiara. "And they came from Some Enchanted Florist."

Alex stared straight ahead, turning her shot glass on the table. "It couldn't have been George."

I placed my hand on her back. "I know, but the berries were in the arrangement, and he delivered it to the salon."

"Someone else put them in there. I'm sure of it. And he delivers so many arrangements that he wouldn't have noticed them."

Gia jabbed her polish brush at Alex. "I'll bet it was Ruby, his intern. That tan and those teeth are clearly fake."

I glanced at my cousin's acrylic nails and Chicken Fillets—enhanced chest. "Ruby is a nice girl who has no reason to frame us. Someone else must've had access to the flowers."

Alex swallowed a second shot. "They assemble the arrangements in the back of the shop, so I doubt it was a customer."

"Leaping lasagna." Gia jumped from her chair as if to underscore the expression. "George mentioned Charlotte Vickers. Remember, Cass? He said he was late because of a flower order for her niece's wedding."

I bolted to my feet. "No, he was going to the church *after* he delivered your flowers. He got held up taking the order somewhere else."

Gia and I clasped hands. "Craggy Hill Estates." We shouted from excitement. "For a vow renewal ceremony."

Burt Lewis frowned as he two-finger typed *A Pocket Full of Rye* into the computer next to the register at Dangerous Reads. A retired military man, he had no use for modern technology.

Anxiety gripped my gut as I waited to find out whether Katrina, Rhys, or even Elise had ordered a copy, and I wasn't the only one who was antsy. Alex stood beside me chewing her nails, and Big Ron paced the floor behind us. He'd insisted on canceling a rare date to act as our bodyguard while Zac stayed with Gia to wait for word from Donatello.

Burt scowled at the screen and tapped some keys. He stepped back, rubbed his chin, and tapped a few more. "I show that eleven copies were ordered for the book club."

Amy said that nine members of Esprit de Corpse, including herself, had participated in the Agatha Christie discussion. "Can you tell us who ordered them? It's really important."

"I'm not sure I'm allowed to share client information."

Big Ron loomed over the counter. "You heard the lady. This is serious business. Can you ask your boss or something?"

Burt's narrowed eyes traveled the foot of Big Ron that towered over him. "Stay here." His tone was as gruff as his facial expressions. "Meri's in the office. I'll see what I can do."

I was too stressed to stand there in the interim. "Alex, do you mind waiting for him? I want to see if there are any copies of *A Pocket Full of Rye* on the shelf. There should be two books left over unless they sold them or had copies in stock before the book club started."

"Okay, but what should I do if Meri comes out?"

"Tell her the truth, but be gentle." A patron approached the cookbook section nearby, so I lowered my voice. "I have no idea how she'll react to learning that a book club selection could've inspired a murder."

"Yeah." Alex pulled back her lips. "I'll do my best, but it'll be hard to soften a blow like that."

"Don't worry. Normally I would be here with Gia. So, even if you hit Meri over the head with the news, that would be gentler than anything my cousin could pull off."

We shared a grin, and I headed for the mystery section. I passed the reading-group room to the right of the main entrance. The French doors

were closed, but I could see Elizabeth Ashby and Nicole Leiren presenting their latest true crime mystery set at the Smugglers' Tavern.

The anxiety spread to my chest, and I tiptoed away before Elizabeth spotted me. She and Traci Andrighetti had already written two mysteries about The Clip and Sip, and I couldn't risk giving them the idea for a third. The salon didn't need any more negative publicity.

I passed a couple of aisles and stopped at the mystery section. Scanning the Cs, I located the Agatha Christie books. There was one copy of A Pocket Full of Rye on the shelf. If my estimation was correct, the killer could have the other one.

I rushed to the front counter to tell Alex and Big Ron, but they were deep in conversation with Meri Sinclair. Judging from the drawn look on Meri's face, she'd been informed of the book's probable connection to Jesse's murder.

Alex turned to me. "Meri has graciously agreed to give us the names."

Meri tucked a lock of her black chin-length bob behind her ear. "I was just telling Alex that only one of the eleven copies I ordered wasn't picked up. It was for Lizzie Jones. She had to cancel when she got a lucrative petsitting gig in Seattle."

"Is that the copy on the shelf?"

"Yes. I didn't have *A Pocket Full of Rye* in stock when Esprit de Corpse selected it for the book club. The other patron picked up their copy but never came to the discussions."

Alex leaned forward. "And who was that?"

"It's funny you should ask, because it was George Fontaine."

Alex's hand went to her chest, and mine was tempted to do the same. But for her sake, I hid my shock and came up with something soothing. "There has to be a logical explanation for this."

Big Ron's laugh was guttural. "I'd like to know what that is. I say we go straight to Marlton House and hear it from the fancy man, himself."

"We need to take Cassidi home." Alex's tone was as calm as her demeanor. "I'll speak with George alone."

He made a *hrmp!* sound. "That's not going to happen."

"Ron." Alex's pitch had a sharp edge. "George is a good person. He's obviously being framed."

He slumped onto one leg, unconvinced.

Alex turned to Meri. "We'll be in touch when we know something more."

We made our way to the exit, and Big Ron held open the door for us, activating a chime.

A figure leapt from behind a parked car and fled down Main Street.

"Go back inside." Ron gestured to Dangerous Reads and broke into a run.

Alex obeyed, but I stood petrified on the sidewalk. Beneath the familiar trench coat, I'd seen a flash of steel.

The barrel of a rifle.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Zac stood in The Clip and Sip reception area, twisting from side to side to work out the kinks from a night on the Rococo couch.

Guilt smacked me like that fish goo Donatello had fallen into. "I feel so bad that you had to sleep in the salon."

"It's not your fault, Cass. I blame the maniac who's stalking you." He rubbed his lower back. "And Donatello for tackling me when I got up to go to the bathroom."

Donatello was almost as dangerous as the dark figure, and he too was armed. "Well, Officer Faria is stationed out front, and Big Ron's keeping watch from the tower with his shotgun. And it's almost eight o'clock, so please go to work."

"Are you sure?" He ran his thumb over my cheek. "I would die if anything happened to you or Gia."

I appreciated the sentiment—but not the choice of verbs. "We have plenty of protection." I planted my hands on his face and gave him a long kiss. I pulled back and patted his chest. "Time to go, Taylor."

He slid his arms around my waist, pulling me close. And for a split second, his blue eyes took me to a warm and safe island surrounded by sea.

"Maybe I should stay." He nibbled my neck, bringing me back to the biting reality of the salon—and the stalker.

"Nope. You're not getting in trouble with Clark because of me."

He sighed. "Such a taskmaster." He released me and opened the door. "Keep your phone on you, because I'll be checking in every hour. And stay inside, away from the windows."

"Which one of us is the taskmaster?"

"I'm serious, Cass."

"I know. And I won't take any risks. I promise."

He gave me a be-careful look, and I closed the door. I watched him drive away, relieved he was out of danger, and shifted my gaze to the squad car.

Richie Faria sat rigid in the driver seat, scouring the area with the intensity of a vulture searching for a meal. I headed for the break room, grateful that Bud Ohlsen had sent his most competent officer to watch the house, as opposed to Donatello.

Footsteps pounded the stairs.

My stomach fluttered. Had Big Ron spotted the dark figure?

Gia bounded into the salon wearing the source of the stair-pounding—commando boots—with a spandex camouflage dress. Given that we were being hunted like animals, the outfit made a certain amount of sense, except for the sequins and neon purple color.

"Wait till you hear this. It'll pick you up better than Carla's tiramisu." She hair-flipped and fist-pumped for emphasis. "We've got a group of ten clients booked for Tuesday."

Hope crept into my chest, but hesitation kicked it to the squad car. "We can't honor that appointment. The events of last night convinced me that we have to close the salon. Permanently."

Her mouth opened as wide as a foxhole. "With twenty Gs in renovations going on? Have you lost it?"

"We can list the building and recoup the costs in the sale price."

She marched toward me like Rambo, albeit purple and bedazzled. "The McCurmudgeon is the only one who'll buy this painted lady, and I'd rather burn it like those wives did in the fifties than let that happen."

"We won't sell to Harriet. I'll contact Gil Torres at the Danger Cove Historical Museum to see if she knows of a preservation society that would be interested."

"Unlikely. Aside from Vinnie and us, no one in Danger Cove has ever wanted this place. It was an embarrassment as a brothel, and then the whole Vinnie thing went down."

And the painted lady became a haunted house of sorts.

Gia crossed her arms. "So we have to stay open and make this work. We've been through too much to let that trench-coated stalker cost us our business."

Her passion was moving, but it wouldn't solve the problem. "That trench-coated stalker had a shotgun, Gia, maybe even a Tommy Gun. So we can't guarantee client safety."

"With Supercop outside and Sasquatch upstairs? Besides, with all the mass shooters out there, we couldn't guarantee client safety before, either."

She made a decent argument, but the odds of the dark figure shooting at the salon were far greater than a random stranger. Frustrated, I sunk into my salon chair. "Who are these clients, anyway? Don't they have TVs or read the news?"

She fiddled with an eyeliner display on her station. "They're locals."

Something was missing from the scenario—because Gia was deliberately omitting it. "What services do they want?"

"Hair and makeup."

"Is that it?"

"And a séance."

I sprang from my seat. "Have you been hitting the vodka? Because all we need is for a group of people to come in and summon the spirit of Jesse, or Uncle Vinnie, or some salon ghost from the past."

"All we need is cash. And the séance gave me an idea."

"We're not doing an event, Gia. The Clip and Sip is closed."

She held up her hands. "This isn't an event, so just listen. Instead of running from the salon's murderous past, what if we play it up and host a spa version of the murder mystery dinner party?"

I reached for my curling iron.

"No? Too much?"

I plugged it into the wall.

Her lips flattened. "All right, I'll cancel, but only if the closure is temporary. Otherwise, I'll advertise the Mystery Spa Day."

Gia was an endless source of frustration. But she, and her commando clothes, reminded me to do what was right. Stand my ground and fight—especially against her latest scheme. "Okay. Let's just hope the police catch whoever is after us soon."

Footsteps pummeled the stairs.

My gut flutter returned.

Big Ron entered with an axe over his shoulder.

I held up the curling iron for real. "Is the trench coat outside?"

"Uh, no." He shifted his weight. "We've got a renovation issue."

I could have grabbed the axe and chopped him with it.

"Since Alex is running late, I pulled out one of the bedroom sinks and found a big rat's nest in the wall."

Gia put a fist on her hip. "How did you recognize it? Was Harriet's bowler hat in the nest?"

"Basta." I used the Italian word "enough" on the off chance it would have more effect. "Please tell me it was an old nest, Ron."

"Nah, I went into the attic and found fresh droppings. It kinda looks like someone scattered a bag of wild rice in there."

With the dark figure lurking, I was already uneasy in the house. The thought of a rat infestation and a pound of poop was enough to make me retreat to Texas. "I'll call an exterminator."

Gia pointed a pink fingernail. "What we should do is call another Operation Goldfinger meeting to clear out both of the rat infestations."

I picked up the curling iron and switched on the heat.

"I'll go cancel that appointment." She scurried toward the stairs.

Big Ron lowered his axe. "I know a guy who catches critters and relocates 'em."

He had to be the self-proclaimed critter ridder Amy had mentioned. "Tommy Two Fingers?"

"You know him?"

"Only by name."

"It's memorable, ain't it?" He gave a shake of his head. "He lost his fingers trying to save a cat stuck in a basement. Reached through an old window, and *whap*!"

I jumped. Big Ron could use some pointers on appropriate topics of conversation in a crisis.

"The glass fell out in shards and sliced off his other three fingers. That's what he named the cat."

"Glass?"

"Three Fingers."

"How do I get in touch with him?" As soon as I'd said it, I thought about his missing digits. "I mean, call him?"

"I can have him come out and give you an estimate. Can I use your phone?"

"Of course. It's on the reception desk."

Ron headed to the front of the salon, and I went to the break room for a chamomile tea. Between the stalker, the rats, and the poop, I needed to be soothed.

I put a kettle on the stove, and my phone vibrated on the table. *Aunt Carla*. "So much for being soothed."

I answered on speaker and heard an Asian language.

"Cassidi, are you theuh?"

"I'm here, Aunt Carla. Where are you?"

"Near the Boardwalk at Long Nail."

Vietnamese. They had the market on nail salons cornered, and a marked tendency to overlook the plural.

"Mani-pedi only twenty-nine dollah." The manicurist spoke into the phone.

"That's Trang, but she goes by Jenny. You should have her do your nails, C. It's the best price in Atlantic City, and she has an extra pinky, so her hand is really steady."

The extra pinky prompted me to add a second teabag to the kettle. This was going to be a long conversation. "Thanks, Jenny. But I don't live there, and I do my own nails."

"Ahhh." Jenny's tone was wary. "Your niece cheap."

And I thought Italian women were direct.

"She hab husban?"

My aunt gave a forlorn sigh. "She tells me one is coming, but I haven't seen the evidence."

"She do her own nail. Dat why."

I glanced at the kettle. That chamomile couldn't brew fast enough.

"Honey, you come to Long Nail. I do gel. Pretty color. You find husban fast."

"You're wasting your time, Jenny." My aunt warned her in a singsong. "I offered her my ragù recipe, and she didn't take it. These girls today? They don't want to cook or clean. They're into their careers and personal development."

"Honey, dat bad. You get old. Die alone."

The "die" did it. "Did you want to talk to me about something, Aunt Carla?"

"Oh, Lorenzo Marino's funeral. They buried him in a casket special made to look like a jar of his ragù. Can you imagine?"

I could, but I didn't want to.

"And you'll never guess who made an appearance."

My first thought was Dean Martin. "Who?"

"Carmine's cousin Sal, Gloria's brothuh? I told him what Flavia said about the silent partnuh being a woman in the mob. And he said no self-respecting Italian family would let a dame run the clan."

"Everyone knows the Italian Mafia isn't a feminist organization."

"Yeah, but then he told me Vinnie knew a British mobstuh."

The kettle hummed, but I ignored it. If the silent partner was a woman in the British firms, she could be the person trying to shoot me. "Did Sal give you a name?"

"Vinnie nevuh told him."

"Vietnamese Mafia awful," Jenny said. "One time dey take man's finger. He hab only nine."

"That's three fewuh finguhs than you have," Carla observed.

And two more than Tommy Two Fingers, but why was that relevant?

"Anyway, I feel a tiny bit bettuh knowing the British Mafia has the hit on you girls."

Funny, but I wasn't comforted. "Why would you say that?"

"You know how polite those British people are, especially compared to the New York Italians. Ooof, don't get me started."

I got up and poured some chamomile—and considered adding a shot of Gia's tea-flavored vodka. "Did Sal say anything else about the British Mafia?"

"No, but do you have a fishmonguh in the neighborhood?"

"Filly Filipuzzi next door. Why?"

"That's the one. Sal said he and Vinnie were tight. He thinks you should ask him about the casino business."

That was a great idea, and one I should've thought of myself. I'd talked to Filly once before about my uncle, and he knew a surprising amount about his financial dealings.

My aunt emitted a string of nasal tones, as though she'd bumped her funny bone.

"What's wrong?"

"That was Vietnamese, and you don't want me to translate. Jenny got red polish on my sleeve, and it's silk cheetah in baby blue. I'll cawl you latuh."

She hung up, and I stared at the phone. I knew my aunt spent a lot of time in nail salons, but learning Vietnamese was a sign that it was time to reduce the mani-pedi budget.

A knock rattled the back door, and I leapt a foot.

Alex peered through the glass. She was pale, and dark circles lined her eyes.

I motioned for her to come in.

"Sorry I startled you, and for being late." She placed her backpack on the floor. "I went by Some Enchanted Forest to talk to George. He wasn't home when I stopped by last night to ask about the book. I assumed he was out somewhere, but..."

"What?"

"He's not at the shop, and Ruby said he hasn't come in or called." I pulled out a chair. "Why don't you sit while I get you some tea?" She sat and rubbed her eyes.

I filled a teacup with the steaming liquid. "Did you ask Ruby if the shop was locked when she got there this morning?"

"It was her day to open, so George wouldn't have been there at seven. Still, I'm worried." Tears welled on her lashes. "What if the gunman left Dangerous Reads and went after him?"

"Don't even think that." I placed the chamomile before her. "Whoever it was probably left the state at the sight of Big Ron chasing them."

She tried to smile, but she didn't believe me any more than I did. Gia and I weren't the only mob targets. By George's own admission, the British firms wanted restitution for the paintings he'd returned to the galleries. And they could've sent someone to get the painting at the Rothmans' and, while they were at it, done away with George if he hadn't paid up.

But there were a couple of other possibilities I had to entertain, as much as I hated to. One, George had heard I was being followed, and he'd fled town to save himself. Two, the most distressing of the options, he was the gun-toting figure in the trench coat—and he was out there somewhere waiting for another shot at Gia and me.

* * *

Filly Filipuzzi's white pickup pulled into the parking lot of Filly's Fresh Fish at six p.m. sharp. He didn't work in the shop, but he showed up at closing time to collect the earnings.

I slipped on my pea coat and peered through the salon door, glad to see Officer Faria back behind the wheel of the squad car. Donatello had relieved him for a dinner break, and if he'd been on duty, I would've stayed inside.

With my lungs in my throat, I stepped onto the porch.

Officer Faria bolted from the front seat. "Going somewhere, Miss Conti?"

"Next door. We don't have any food in the house."

He offered me his bicep. "Per procedure, I'll have to accompany you." I opted for his forearm.

Richie led me down the steps. And as we took a shortcut across the lawn, he leaned in. "It's all right to ask me about it."

His tone bordered on conspiratorial, so I assumed he was referring to the Rothman investigation. As a suspect in the case, I was leery of a trap. "Anything big going on at the station today?"

"Oh, I can't discuss police business. I was talking about my bicep." He flexed his escort arm. "Pretty huge, isn't it?"

My sigh was mental, but it was no less heavy.

"I work out six days a week at the police gym, but that's not how I built up this level of mass."

I picked up the pace. Richie was as dense as his muscles and just as inflated.

"I used to do mixed martial arts at Hard Bodies. It's a full-contact combat sport that allows striking and grappling, so it's the hardest workout around. Better than training for Mr. Universe or American Ninja Warriors."

I couldn't resist throwing a punch of my own. "Why'd you quit? Too tough for you?"

"Uh, hardly. It was the teacher—" He stopped. "She...got another job."

I knew who she was. "Katrina Schwarz?"

We reached the entrance to Filly's.

Richie opened the door. "I'll wait for you outside."

I gave him a sideways look and entered the shop.

"Cassidi." Filly stood behind the register counting cash in a blue tracksuit. His balding head glistened beneath the overhead light, as did the saliva pooling around his unlit Cuban. "How's my girl?"

I tried not to frown. It wasn't the "my girl" that got me, but the smell. Despite the name of the shop, Filly's fish weren't so fresh. "Um, did you happen to see the squad car when you pulled up?"

"Sure. That boyfriend of Gia's, Rocky Stallone?"

"Donatello. And it's actually a security detail." I cleared my throat to make way for the bomb I was about to drop. "Someone associated with

Jesse Rothman is stalking Gia and me, and they're armed."

His head jerked up. "Ca'maan."

"No, really."

He shuffled to the door and turned the bolt. "We gotta get out of the line of fire." He pulled me by the wrist into an office lined with Styrofoam coolers, newspaper stacks, and some questionable magazine choices. "We'll be safe in here. Have a seat."

I sat in a folding chair.

He settled into a La-Z-Boy behind a card table. "If you and your cousin need to get out of town, I've got a cabin in the woods outside of Seattle. No one'll ever find ya again."

That didn't sound promising. "Thanks, but what I need is information about my uncle's casino deal with Jesse Rothman and Sonny Torlone."

"I can't help ya there, kid. I didn't know about that until I read it in the paper."

Disappointment drained me. "In that case, I'm sorry I involved you in our current predicament."

"No worries. I'm always happy to help out a niece of Vinnie's. But next time a shooter's in the equation, call the cops." He flashed tobaccostained teeth. "By the way, I see you're renovating his old bedroom."

I stared at him. The only room Filly could see from outside of the house was the tower. And with the trench-coat drama, I'd forgotten that the killer had switched my uncle's bedroom and his office.

"He thought he was on top of the world in that tower." Filly pulled the handle of his La-Z-Boy and reclined. "Sometimes I'd come to the shop before sunrise for a delivery, and he'd be at the window, king of his castle, surveying his kingdom." He winked. "Him and whatever woman had spent the night."

Women. Filly would've seen at least some of my uncle's girlfriends. "Did you ever see Katrina Schwarz up there?"

He rubbed his chin. "Sure. They were together on and off the whole time he lived here."

"Do you know if he moved here to be with her?"

"He didn't tell me that, but she was with him till the end."

Something told me "the end" was literal. "Do you mean—"

"December thirty-first."

My hand flew to my chest. "You saw her at his house the day he died? Did you tell the police?"

He contemplated me while chewing his cigar. "I guess there's no harm in telling you now that Walt's dead."

"Who's that?"

"He was on the Danger Cove PD, died a couple months ago. He was Lester Marshall's first partner. Taught him everything he knows about being a cop."

That couldn't have taken more than a week or two. "What does this man have to do with my uncle?"

"Not your uncle, kid. Katrina. Walt was her dad."

I shot from my seat. "Are you saying Detective Marshall ordered a cover-up?"

"Aaay! Oooh!" He held up his hands, shielding himself from my dangerous extrapolation. "I'm sayin' that out of respect for Walt, certain things were kept quiet."

I returned to my chair, hoping the Styrofoam and newspaper had muffled the sound from Richie Faria. "But she could've killed my uncle. Didn't the police care about that?"

He pulled the cigar from his mouth. "Trust me—if she'd done it, they would've arrested her."

With her cop connection, maybe not. But if she *had* strangled my uncle with the fishnet stocking, I would prove it and see her to prison myself. "What was Katrina doing at the house that day?"

"Yelling at Vinnie, per usual. I took a load of trash to the dumpster when we closed at six, and I heard them fighting all the way from the tower. Katrina was giving him holy hell for cheating on her with 'her'—she kept stressing it like that. Then I went back into the shop."

"Do you know who this 'her' was?"

"Could be half of the women in town." He pointed his cigar at me. "But she's got a temper, that Katrina. And strong? I saw her lift a desk like it was one of these empty coolers."

The mixed martial arts training, no doubt. "You mean, at Hard Bodies?"

He patted his Santa-sized belly. "I appreciate the vote of confidence, sweetheart, but do I look like I work out?" He stuck his cigar into his

mouth. "This was at Vinnie's, and she was wearing a little black and red number. I figured she'd carried it up there to throw it at him."

My stomach felt like shrimp were swimming in it. "Was that the same day? December thirty-first?"

"Yeah, since we were going to be closed for the holiday, I stayed late putting fish in the freezer. I saw her with the desk when I was going home, around eight."

I crossed my arms against my abdomen and leaned over, thinking that whatever was in my belly might come out.

Because Filly had seen Katrina moving my uncle's office furniture to his bedroom—in lingerie that matched colors of the stocking used to strangle him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Amped up on anger and espresso, Gia stood on her *I Dream of Jeannie* bed in full combat mode—after swapping her genie jammies for purple camouflage pj's. "We'll storm the mansion and drag Killer Katrina out by her hair."

I eyed her from a nest of Moroccan cushions on the floor. It was seven a.m., and I was drained from the enormity of Filly's revelation—and hours of listening to my cousin's plans for a vendetta. "Clearly, we can't do that."

"You've got a point. Her hair is too short because of that horrible pixie and too brittle from the peroxide damage."

"That's not what I meant."

"Well, if you're worried about her Goliath size, I can ask Aesthetic God and Quadzilla to do the dragging."

I was too tired to sigh. "Then we'll all get arrested for assault and kidnapping. For the last time, we have to work within the law."

"But Katrina's got the law on her side, if that's what you can call Lester Marshall."

"And the British Mafia, which is why we need the law on our side too."

She flopped into a cross-legged position. "Do you think the British firms...took care of George?"

Fear and pressure had led me to suspect him of being in the mob himself, and mere hours later I was praying they hadn't killed him. "I choose to believe he's in hiding."

Gia reclined and stared at the fabric-draped ceiling. "But if you've chosen wrong, are we next?"

Her voice was small, vulnerable. Despite her militaristic pajamas and plans, she was terrified. It was my turn to lead us into combat—for her, for me, and for Uncle Vinnie. I leapt from the pillows and into action. "With everyone we've got in our camp? Not a chance."

She rose onto her elbows. "We do have a squad car outside. And Donatello, Zac, Alex, and Big Ron."

"Don't forget Aunt Carla and the network."

"That's right." She sprung to her feet on the bed. "We're Italian. Our Mafia is way more notorious than Britain's because we're cunning and

crafty."

I smiled in spite of the stereotypes. My cousin was back in battle mode. "Which is why we've beaten Detective Marshall at his blame game before, and we'll do it again."

"We're legit better investigators than he is, and we're stylish, which is so important."

I couldn't argue with that. Style was our business.

Gia pulled down her pajama top to reveal more cleavage. "But how is Katrina in the British firms, anyway? She's obviously German. And related to Arnold Schwarzenegger."

"Maybe her mom is British."

"I'd guess Russian. Katrina is so KGB, like Putin. If you ask me, she's the one stalking us, not a hit man."

I'd come to the same conclusion. Katrina suspected we were onto her, and she'd been keeping tabs on us ever since she'd spotted Gia wearing the cameo at the Rothman mansion. "We have to link her to Vinnie's murder."

"Let's draw up a battle plan." She bounced down and grabbed a pen and notebook from her nightstand.

I sat beside her. "The strongest evidence would be the other stocking."

"Katrina would've tossed that by now. Or torched it."

"Not if she was afraid it would be found, or kept it as a memento."

"She'd have to be pretty stupid or sick to do that. Then again, her brain probably turned to muscle, and she definitely could've used steroids."

Once again, I couldn't argue. Katrina's body was unusually developed, and it was well known that steroids altered the brain. "I'll go to Lily's Lingerie this morning and update Donna on Katrina. That could help her trace the return order for the stockings."

"Woman Mouth is like Flavia, except that she's got two enlarged nostrils. So if anyone can sniff out a connection between those stockings and Katrina, it's her."

Aunt Carla might've been Gia's stepmother, but the two had a lot in common. "If she can't connect them, that leaves the cameo."

She scribbled a note. "Let's hope Rhys didn't pitch it into the bay when he swiped the rowboat."

"I think he was doing something else, like disposing of yew berries. What I don't get is why he would cover for Katrina."

Gia chewed the pen. "Because his crazy sister likes her for some unfathomable reason?"

"But he doesn't like Elise. Even Bree said so."

"Then maybe, and get ready to be grossed out, Rhys and Katrina have a thing."

"They don't strike me as each other's types."

My message tone beeped. I climbed from the bed and retrieved my phone from the pillows.

"Who is it?"

"Amy. She's on her way over, and she says not to leave because she has something to show us."

"Where are we going to go with the muscled murderer stalking us?"

"She doesn't know about that." I tossed my phone onto the bed. "I haven't talked to her since she told me about *A Pocket Full of Rye*."

"That reminds me, remember that day Katrina was spying on us from the library parking lot, and she left without returning the poetry book Amy brought to Elise? She was stalking us back then—she just wasn't wearing the trench coat."

"I don't know, G. I almost got the feeling she was surprised to run into us. But I remember thinking it was weird that she would return a library book right after her boss was murdered."

A jolt sent me into the pillows.

The book.

"Oh my God." Gia jumped to my side. "Are you having a heart attack?"

I squeezed her hand. "Katrina was trying to return the missing copy of *A Pocket Full of Rye*, not the poetry book for the vow renewal. She's the one who took it from the library."

Gia jumped onto the mattress. "That'll prove she knew about taxine and tried to hide it."

A knock interrupted our excitement.

I looked at my cousin. "Do you think that's Amy already?"

The knocking became pounding.

She hopped to the floor. "Katrina could be after her."

We fled downstairs to the break room.

Amy was at the back door pressing her hands to the window to see inside. Her breath was so labored it fogged up the glass and her glasses.

I turned the lock, and she burst inside. Her cross-body satchel was crooked, and the seam of her denim skirt was twisted.

"I pedaled as fast as I could."

Gia secured the bolt. "Was a trench coat following you?"

Amy defogged her lenses on her shirt. "I think you're missing a person in that question." She gulped down some air. "It was the newspaper boy."

Gia's head fell forward. "He's in on this?"

"No, George Fontaine."

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "What about George? Did you see him?"

"On the subject of seeing, can I put on my glasses?"

I released her.

She slipped them on and pulled a newspaper from her satchel. "I went to work early, and Ralph Bailey, the kid who fills the *Cove Chronicles* kiosk, followed me inside to show me the lead story."

I took the paper and unfolded it to the front page.

We found out where George was.

His arms were behind his back, and his eyes were closed. Above his picture, the headline read *OOPS-A-DAISY! Florist Arrested in Rothman Murder*.

* * *

"What's Woman Mouth doing back there?" Gia stared at the stockroom door from the counter of Lily's Lingerie. "Inventorying the store?"

I glanced at my phone. It was twenty past noon, which meant we'd only been waiting ten minutes. "She said she had to take a call, and you know she likes to chat."

"Uh, the whole town is painfully aware of that."

The dressing room curtains parted, and Mallory Winchester exited in mom jeans and a wide-necked turtleneck. She carried an armload of lingerie to a rack of nightgowns.

Gia sidled up to me. "The two biggest gossips in Danger Cove under the same roof? That's no accident, but those granny gowns she's holding are." Mallory had probably come to confer with Donna about George's arrest, and she'd stayed to look around. Normally I would have avoided her, but the newspaper article had been scant on details. "Hello, Mallory."

She hung the last gown on the rack and turned. Her face lit up like she'd scored seventy-five percent off her next purchase. "Oh, Cassidi. Isn't it awful about George Fontaine? I always said he was no florist, but I never thought he was an *assassin*."

Gia gave a frustrated hair flip. "Don't you have a PTA meeting to dominate?"

Mallory's mouth didn't move from its fixed flat line, but her eyes frowned at the embellished bra beneath Gia's leather jacket.

I gave my cousin the elbow, her cue to rein it in until I got my gossip. "Nothing has been proven yet, so we should wait to hear the evidence against him."

"Well, I heard they arrested him at the Seattle airport getting off a plane to London. Fleeing town is all the evidence I need to convict him."

It must've had something to do with the stolen painting. "They pulled him off the flight before it took off?"

"No, he was on a return flight."

Gia guffawed. "A guy fleeing a murder rap doesn't come back, Mallory."

Her chin retracted into the turtleneck. "Unless he came back to turn himself in."

Detective Marshall had told us all not to leave town, so the trip must've been urgent. "Maybe he had a family emergency. His parents live there."

"He's in jail, so he must've killed Jesse Rothman." Mallory's eyes assumed a sly slant. "I noticed the Finials and Facades truck outside your salon. What does Alex Jordan have to say about this?"

I didn't want her to have the satisfaction of knowing Alex was upset, so I concocted a fib. "I have no idea. I told her to take the day off, but that wasn't because of George."

"Oh?" Her brow lifted. "Does it have anything to do with that squad car you've had parked out front?"

Gia held up a finger—to show off a red-lace nail that matched her bra. "One, that's none of your business. And two, have you been casing our house? Because you seem to know a lot about it, and yet I haven't seen you

in the salon." She eyed Mallory's mom hair. "You should make an appointment, by the way. I might be able to help you look somewhat attractive."

Mallory's mouth twitched. "For your information, I went to Filly's a couple of times to buy seafood for a dinner party."

"Why don't you go again so you can stop fishing for info from us?"

A cord protruded from Mallory's neck, and she spun on her loafers and stormed from the boutique.

Gia adjusted her leather collar. "I feel like a mushroom cloud has been lifted. What do you make of George's trip?"

"He said his parents had been avoiding his calls, so he might've gone to confront them about selling the painting to Jesse."

"Is that important enough for him to risk getting arrested? I mean, he already knew they sold it to him."

I leaned on the counter. If Katrina was the killer, why would George need to go to London? It wasn't like he needed to hunt down a member of the British firms, unless... "This is a long shot, but what if George went to London to track down the source of the English yew berries in your floral arrangement?"

"It sounds kind of out there, Cass, but it's possible."

The stockroom door hit the doorjamb with the sound of a shot, and Gia and I took cover behind the counter.

"You two are jumpy. Is it your guilty consciences?"

Gia gritted her teeth while we were still out of Donna's sight, so I mouthed *be nice*, and we rose to face her.

I looked into Donna's wide-set eyes. "We had nothing to do with Jesse's death, which is why we're here."

"I thought this was just about your uncle's murder." Her nostrils flared. She was on the scent—and not of Gia's Prada Candy perfume. "Are you saying the two murders are related?"

I had to be more careful. "I meant that we're honest people. We're trying to solve a crime. We don't commit them."

"That's so wholesome and sweet I'm gagging on it." She stuck out her tongue. "Anyway, I've got news so huge I'm tempted to sell it to Duncan Pickles."

Her tone had a hum, and my brain began singing. "If it's about the stockings, remember our deal. Cut-and-dye appointments for life are worth

more than any amount you'd get from Duncan."

"Don't forget the free mustache and beard waxes," Gia chimed.

Donna's jowls dropped, and I skipped the elbow and stomped on my cousin's foot.

"Owww," Gia howled.

Donna's nostrils flared, this time with satisfaction. "Unfortunately, I have to tell the police what I've learned, which is such a waste of a scintillating tidbit." She tapped her stubbled chin while giving me the eye. "But, I suppose I could tell you before I call Detective Marshall."

My chest constricted with fear and anticipation. I was finally going to get the proof I'd been searching for since I moved to Danger Cove. "My entire family would be so grateful."

"I went through the old records, but the box with the return special order records for the period in question was missing."

Gia and I shared a side-eye. Katrina had stolen the records like she'd stolen the cameo.

"Not one to back down in the hunt for information—"

Gia snorted but turned it into a fake sneeze to avoid further injury.

"—I left a message with the company that manufactured the stockings." Donna gestured to the stockroom. "That's who I was on the phone with a minute ago. And guess what?"

"What?" Gia sounded irritated.

"All of their records are on computer."

"So they were able to pull it up?" My voice was a whisper. The fear and anticipation had pushed the breath from my lungs.

"On the spot."

Gia moved away from me. "If you don't hurry up and tell us what you found out, you won't live to gossip another day."

"And you wonder why you're a suspect in so many murders?" Donna exclaimed. "I'll tell you, Cassidi, because you have manners. The credit card used to make the purchase belonged to Jesse Rothman."

I made like a tree. "The stockings were for Elise?"

Donna tittered. "I doubt that. Jesse and your uncle had a lot in common. He collected women and used Vinnie's Viagra to seduce them. And like Vinnie, he carried on with Katrina for years."

"How do you know all of that?"

"The Rothmans' chef. He spilled some serious secrets when I gave him a lingerie discount. This was right before he went to see his girlfriend a few weeks ago in London."

London? "Chef Paul went to England?"

Donna scratched her cheek. "Now that I think about it, a lot of roads are leading to London, aren't they? I'll have to ask around about a connection. But yes, he got back a couple of days before the vow renewal ceremony."

Gia's head tilted backwards, and she caught my gaze.

I knew what her stare said. Either the chef had something to do with the stolen painting, which seemed unlikely, or I hadn't been barking up the wrong tree with my English yew berry theory.

* * *

"Okay, but you've got to make this quick." Zac glanced out the window from our table at the Lobster Pot. "It's getting dark, and I want to get you home."

After a lot of convincing, he'd agreed to keep our date. But he was uneasy about it. I appreciated his concern, but I was positive that Gia and I were safe in light of the arrest. "Remember, it's in Katrina's interest to let the police think George was the trench coat stalker."

He nodded but turned his gaze toward the street.

I weaved through packed tables and peered into the wait station. A young waitress in the restaurant's signature lobster hat loaded a tray with food and left to serve her customers.

I slipped through a swing door.

Despite the aroma of seafood and garlic bread, the men in the kitchen didn't promise anything appetizing. With long hair, missing teeth, and sallow skin, they looked more like pirates than cooks. One even had an eye patch, and yet he chopped corn on the cob with a cleaver.

I wanted to tell him about Tommy Two Fingers, but it was hard to hear over the whacking and the heavy metal blasting from a jam box.

"Bathroom's that way, darlin'." Holding a potato peeler, a squat male with bowlegs pointed to the swing door.

"I'm looking for Chef Paul."

The chopping ceased, and leers spread across the men's mouths.

A tall, lanky thirtysomething with Robert Plant hair stepped from behind the stove. In place of a chef's hat, he wore a black polyester skullcap that tied in the back. He slung a greasy towel over his shoulder and strutted toward me in a food-stained apron. He stopped, crossed his arms, and gave me a cool once-over. "What can I do you for, beautiful?"

"I'd like to talk to you about the Rothmans."

His leer fell, and so did those of his mates. "Can't help ya." He returned to the stove. "Got fish to fry."

As if I didn't. "Please, can we talk in private? I really need your help."

The leers rebounded, as did the chef's strut. He led me to a dry-goods room with a walk-in freezer that had a picture of Christopher Walken above the handle. The chef shot me a grin.

I did the same, except mine was upside down. "I'll make this fast. George Fontaine didn't kill Jesse, and I'm hoping you can help me clear his name."

"What am I gettin' out of this?"

He'd directed his question to my chest. "Don't you have a girlfriend in London?"

"I've got a woman in every port, baby." He whipped off his apron and made a grab for my waist.

I slapped down his hands. "I've got a boyfriend who'll come looking for me if I'm not back at the table in five minutes."

He took a step back.

Some swashbuckler. Won't even fight for a wench. "Speaking of boyfriends, is it true Katrina and Jesse were having an affair?"

"That ended a couple of years ago. They had some kind of falling out, and she hated him after that."

"Then why'd she continue working for him?"

"He had something on her." Chef Paul shook out his rock-star locks. "The dude was evil like that. He kept records and things on people out in his man cabin in case he needed to blackmail them."

Things like the other fishnet stocking? Or the cameo? "Why didn't you cook for the Rothmans' vow renewal? I heard you were in town."

"Cause Elise came up with the shindig plan while I was in London, and I was already scheduled to work here that Saturday." He grimaced. "Katrina fired me for that."

"Why? Don't you make the kitchen schedule?"

"Yeah, so I could've had someone cover my shift, but I was tired of her drama." He smoothed his skullcap. "The Lobster Pot gives me the freedom I crave, and my band of merry men."

Horny men was more appropriate.

"But hey, I got a free trip to London out of it."

"How? Did your girlfriend pay for your ticket?"

"Nah, the Rothmans needed a package picked up. They couldn't use the mail like regular folks. You know how rich people are."

I also knew how corrupt people were, especially Jesse Rothman. And a package from London set off police sirens in my head. "Was it the size of a painting, by chance?"

"Nah, a medium-sized envelope."

"Any idea what was in it?"

"Plant one right here"—he tapped his lips—"and I'll dish."

My abdomen clenched, and my hands went to his pecs.

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about."

I stared into his black eyes. "Was it a frond with narrow green leaves and red berries?"

He pushed me back. "How'd you know that?"

"It's a branch from an English yew tree." My voice was calm even though I felt like I'd been poisoned. "Someone put it in my cousin's flower arrangement to frame George Fontaine."

He went as white as his apron should have been. "It wasn't me, lady. I thought that stuff was some exotic European spice I was supposed to cook with. I delivered it to Katrina, and she canned me right after that."

Like George, he'd been a pawn in Katrina's scheme.

"Cassidi?"

Zac rushed in, fists clenched, and Chef Paul yanked open the "Walken" freezer and cowered behind the metal door.

I was tempted to follow the chef's lead when I saw the anger on Zac's face. "What's the matter?"

"We've got to go." He pulled me through the kitchen and out the restaurant entrance.

I wasn't sure what had gotten into him, but I knew he would've taken me out the back exit if he'd seen Katrina. "Are you jealous of Chef Paul?"

He gave me a you-know-better-than-that look and opened the door of the Jeep. "Your phone rang while you were in the kitchen. It was Gia, so I answered it."

I climbed in and fastened my seat belt. "Is this about one of Harriet's tours?"

"Gia wasn't calling from the salon." He slammed my door and walked around to the driver's seat.

Fear filtered from my brain to my chest, squeezing it like a sponge. *Had I been wrong about Katrina stopping the stalking?* "Zac Taylor, where is my cousin?"

"She's in jail, Cass." His statement rang out like a shot. "Gia's been arrested as George's accomplice in Jesse's murder."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A female guard with a blonde brush cut escorted Gia into the inmate visitation room. My cousin often looked rough before her morning shower, but after a night in lockup she was almost unrecognizable. Her hair was tangled, her smoky eyes were smudged, and her false eyelashes were unsticking. Even more jarring, her red-lace fingernails clashed with her orange jail jumpsuit.

"Donatello told them about the flowers, Cass." Her voice was low and gravelly as though she'd already taken up smoking. "It was the evidence they needed to throw me in the joint."

"He had no choice."

"I know, I know, but you have to spring me from here. Or bake me a cake with a nail file, because that brute guard made me chip my pinky."

Gia and I watched a lot of jailbreak movies, but apparently she hadn't been paying attention. "Zac is working on getting you an attorney, and we're waiting to see if the judge will grant bail."

"How are we going to pay for any of that? And don't say the Ferrari, because it's the only thing getting me through the long days and nights here in the pen."

She'd only been inside for twelve hours, but I didn't point that out. "I'm sure your dad and Aunt Carla will pitch in."

"No way, rosé. We have to do this on our own. I'm already going to have to deal with the ladies in the network twisting their mustaches and saying 'I told you so.'"

"Why would they say that?"

"Because they always said my best chance at success was marriage." She lowered her chin and looked at me beneath wobbly lashes. "That, and my senior year I was voted Most Likely to Commit a Crime in the Name of Fashion."

My high school in Texas didn't have that category, but her Italian-only school in New Jersey had a whole other set of standards. "I'll try to figure something out."

"That makes me feel a little better." Gia gave a sob suspiciously similar to the practiced cries of the Italian women in our family. "It's bad enough that criminals are seeing me in this state." She gestured to her face. "If even one picture goes public, it could kill my career as a makeup artist."

The biggest kill to her makeup career would be a murder conviction, but I didn't say that either.

She straightened and flipped a tangle. "At least I look hot in orange."

"It totally complements your hair." My attempt at support was shallow, but I had to raise her spirits.

"You should see my cellmate." Her eyes went wide. "We're so lucky we grew up privileged."

I envisioned a Katrina-sized criminal with a face tattoo and a neck scar.

"She's an accountant, and I don't think she's ever had a proper blow out or pedicure. Her toe cuticles are so overgrown they're halfway up the nail beds."

"We really ought to thank our parents," I said dryly.

"Five more minutes, Miss Conti."

The guard's warning was a reminder that the time to let Gia vent was over. "What have they told you about your arrest?"

"Dick Marshall—"

"Detective." I jerked a shoulder toward the brush cut.

"Whatever." She gave an eye roll that knocked a false lash to the table. "He said there were traces of taxine in the cup I used to serve Jesse espresso, but Killer Katrina's cup was clean, naturally. Then he accused me of putting yew berry seeds in the coffee and taking them out after they'd steeped."

And the seed the officer had found beneath the vanity was his proof.

"All because the espresso Katrina made him was cold." Gia reattached the eyelash. "That muscled monster set me up, Cass. She would've known that Jesse was picky about his coffee temperature."

"If what Amy said about taxine is true, then Jesse was poisoned earlier, like the victim in *A Pocket Full of Rye*."

"Right? Because I never left that espresso cup from the time I pulled it from the cabinet until I brought it to Jesse."

"Katrina must've put the yew seeds in the cup after he died, when we left the dressing room to get help."

"You've got to find a way to prove that, because Dick Marshall's coming for you too. He was talking to some prosecutor guy right in front of me, and he said this was his chance to put us away."

I recoiled. "What else did he say?"

"That we've been associated with too many crimes to be innocent of all of them. He also said he wouldn't be surprised if we killed Vinnie ourselves to get the salon and the house."

I jumped up, almost knocking over my chair. "That's the lowest thing we've ever been accused of."

The guard approached the table. "Have a seat, Miss Conti. Or I'll escort you out."

"Actually, I'm going." I patted the table because I wasn't allowed to pat my cousin. "Don't worry, G. The detective's words are the motivation I needed to prove our innocence."

She leapt up with a double fist pump. "Sic 'im, cug."

The guard grabbed her arms.

"Hey, watch the nails, Brigitte Nielsen."

"Back to the cell, Di Mitri."

"This is brute brutality." Gia went limp. "I need your badge number."

The guard dragged her out.

I fumed and marched toward the exit. I'd had it with the shame and suspicion that had hung over Gia and me since we'd moved to Danger Cove. And I'd had it with my Uncle Vinnie's murder. I didn't know the specifics, but somehow I would end the police station visits and silence the town McCudgeons and Marshalls.

"How's Gia?" Alex Jordan's voice pulled me from my head. She rose from her seat in the lobby.

"Nearing a beauty breakdown."

"Fancy Pants isn't faring so well in a jumpsuit either."

I appreciated the humor. We both needed it even though neither of us could laugh. "We've got to get them out."

"I'm working on it. I called Martin VanSant, an attorney friend of George's, and he flew in last night from California. He's meeting with Detective Marshall now, and he convinced Gerald Dunham, a colleague from Seattle, to represent Gia. And the best part is, he and Martin are among the top criminal defense attorneys in the country."

My hopes roller-coastered. "Then I can't afford the guy."

She tucked a lock behind her ear. "George did Martin a huge favor years ago, so this is all pro bono."

"Are you serious?" I sat beside her. "How can I repay you? Or VanSant and Dunham?"

Her lips flatlined. "By helping us thwart Frank Wolfe, the prosecutor Big Ron and I went to high school with."

The name was familiar. "I'm in. But is he the one who tried to prosecute George over that dead guy in the bathtub?"

"Yes, and this is his second shot at a conviction. He was prom king and a star football player back in the day, and the guy will do anything to win."

Frank must've been the prosecutor Gia overheard Detective Marshall talking to. Given the detective's animosity for Gia and me, and Frank's for George, things didn't look promising for either of them.

"If we don't stop this case from going to trial, George and Gia will get life."

My gut slammed shut like a prison cell door—for them and for me. Because I'd probably get life too.

* * *

Inhale for five. Hold for two. Exhale for five. I followed the panicattack breathing instructions as I drove home from the police department. Fletcher Way was up ahead, and I wanted to go inside and hide beneath my covers.

"See?" I spoke to myself in the rearview mirror to boost my shaky confidence. "You made it home just fine. So you can make it through this crisis."

I hooked a right and hit the brakes.

The Gold Rush History Tours bus blocked my street.

Anxiety sped through my body at one hundred miles per hour. I couldn't deal with any more stress, which meant I definitely couldn't deal with Harriet McCudgeon.

I rolled down my window, and her pudgy mug appeared from nowhere. I let out a scream.

"Quit with the theatrics, or I'll pull some of my own." She spoke in part snarl and part wheeze.

The woman was deranged, and I was over it. "Move your bus. I need to pull into my driveway."

"Keep up the antics, and I'll add to your Rothman woes." Spitballs formed at the corners of her lips. "I've been planning to put that mansion on

my itinerary, and if it weren't for that beast Elise, I would've been rolling in dough."

She wasn't only deranged—she was hysterical. "You need help, Harriet. You're rambling and foaming."

The flag on her bowler bobbed from contained rage. "You're just like her. You cost me a driver."

And maybe a husband.

"To top that off, every client on the eight a.m. tour asked for a refund." She flailed her arms. "So either you move that shock wagon, or I fabricate evidence to tell Lester Marshall."

I squeezed the steering wheel to keep from going for her throat. "One deceitful word to the police, and I'll resort to your slander-suit tactics. Oh, and FYI, I have no idea what a 'shock wagon' is."

"Step out of the car and behold."

I hesitated because I smelled a setup—and her BO. But she seemed genuinely riled, and I wanted to know the reason. "First, you go to the porch."

She clenched all that was clenchable and clomped her clogs toward the salon.

I turned off the engine and, keeping an eye on Harriet, walked around the empty bus. The Finials and Facades truck was parked in front, and before it was a dilapidated station wagon with "Critter Ridder" spraypainted in bright orange. Tommy Two Fingers must have come to give me an estimate for the rat extermination, but Harriet thought the wagon was a ploy to scare away her clients.

Harriet stepped off the porch. "Your little prank could cost me a mint, so you'd best drive that jalopy away before the noon tour."

"It's no prank. The station wagon is legit. We've got a lot of critters to rid—inside and out." I gave her a pointed look as I crossed the lawn. "But I'd be delighted to show your prospectors the giant rat's nest in the wall."

A low, feline growl came from deep in her chest, and I darted into the salon. Then I locked the door, pointed to the *Closed* sign, and lowered the blind for good measure.

Hammering came from upstairs.

I climbed to the third floor and entered the tower room.

A scrawny, wiry fellow with a ponytail and handlebar mustache inspected the platform Big Ron had built for Gia's makeup chair. He turned

and stuck out a hand sans the last three digits. "You must be Cassidi."

"Tommy, right?" I shook his palm.

"How'd ya know?"

"I just fingered, I mean, *figured*." My face grew hot, but he didn't seem to notice the gaffe.

Big Ron slid his hammer into his tool belt. "I showed Tommy the rats' nest."

Tommy's head bounced, as did his handlebars. "It's a big 'un, but it's a straightforward critter catch. Won't cost much. I just need to set a few traps."

If only he could trap the rat in the hat out front. "What do you do with the rats after you catch them?"

"Give 'em to you, if you want. They make good eats."

"Uh, you can keep them."

"You might wanna ponder that. Vietnamese women eat 'em to stay young lookin'. They fry 'em up with the heads and tails on, kind of like meat on a stick but with faces."

I thought of Trang, aka Jenny, and hoped she hadn't passed that recipe on to my aunt, along with her language. "I'll stick to pho and bánh mì, thank you."

"Cassidi, are you up there?" Alex's voice came from the stairwell.

"In the tower," I called.

She entered the room, and I could tell something was up. Her face was a white as her blouse.

"I talked to Martin VanSant. The case against George and Gia is strong, so the judge denied bail."

I sat on the platform, regretting that I'd nixed Gia's throne. If, or rather, when she was released from jail, I'd let her turn the tower room into a tiny leopard-inspired version of Versailles if she wanted.

"I'm sorry, ladies." Big Ron hung his head. "I always said there was something fishy about George, but he ain't no killer. And now that they've arrested Gia, I know they got the wrong people."

Alex touched his arm and sat beside me. "I told Martin about *A Pocket Full of Rye* when I called him, and he asked George about it this morning."

I rested my chin on my knees. "How did he explain that?"

"He said he'd intended to participate in the book club, but Esprit de Corpse held the first couple of meetings in December, which is the busy season for florists."

"For critter ridders too," Tommy said. "Lots of rodents pick up and move indoors for the winter."

Alex silenced him with a glare. "But, he ordered the book in person, and guess who was in line behind him?"

My chin popped up. "Katrina?"

"The one and, thankfully, only."

So Katrina had framed George. "Were there witnesses?"

"The cashier, Alicia Holmes. I'm about to go to Dangerous Reads to find out if she remembers seeing them."

It wasn't enough to prove Katrina's guilt, but it was a start.

A beep sounded, and Tommy glanced at his phone. "Imma have to git. Someone let a python loose down at the duck pond."

A shiver slithered up my backside. I related to those ducks—sitting, waiting to be swallowed.

He slipped his phone into a shirt pocket. "Sure you don't want those rats, Cassidi?"

"Not unless you can put them in Harriet McCudgeon's tour bus." It sounded like a joke, but I was serious—and hoping Tommy would say yes.

Alex snapped her fingers. "The bats."

"Rats," I corrected.

She shook her head. "No, bats. Tommy, can you come back and set those traps today?"

"Sure. Won't take no time."

"And could you catch some rats by midnight tonight?"

Big Ron broke into a grin. "I see where you're going, Alex."

I didn't, but I assumed it had something to do with the story Amy had told me about Tommy ridding George's would-be attic of bats.

Tommy twisted a handlebar with his two fingers. "If I put out some marshmallows, I should have a passel of 'em by then."

I looked from Alex to Tommy. "Rats eat marshmallows?"

"It's like catching flies with honey." Alex rose and pulled her car keys from her pants pocket. "Everyone meet at my house at eight p.m. sharp. And Cassidi, bring Zac. I'll have Dolly, Gram's cook, make us all dinner."

My hand went to my throat. "To eat the rats?"

Her smile was radiant, yet deviant. "I would never eat a rat, not literally, anyway. We're removing them from The Clip and Sip...and using them to disinfest the Rothman mansion."

* * *

Janiece Jordan rose from the formal dining table at Rockgrove, the classic Queen Anne Victorian home where she and Alex lived. She was in her nineties, but with her powder-white hair, elegant blue pantsuit, and pearls, she was still a handsome woman. "Let's retire to the parlor, shall we?"

"Great idea, Gram." Alex stood and tossed her cloth napkin beside her plate. "We've got to get to work."

I pushed back my chair, grateful to escape Dolly's potpie. The bite I'd sampled was delicious, but I couldn't eat. I kept thinking of Gia and George. And rat meat.

Zac slipped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. I was also grateful for him and his support. When I'd told him we were devising a plan to help Gia and George, he was all in.

We followed the trail of Gram's Shalimar perfume into a gorgeous parlor. Rockgrove was built on a cliff overlooking the Pacific Ocean, so the room afforded breathtaking views of the bay and the old lighthouse.

Big Ron and Tommy Two Fingers reclined in oversized armchairs near a wide stone fireplace with an already lit fire, and Gram and Alex sat in a sea of throw pillows on a weathered leather couch. Zac and I took the couch across from them and snuggled beneath an afghan blanket.

"Stupid wench, stupid wench!"

Everyone started.

The name-calling had come from some sort of bird, but there wasn't one in the room.

Tommy's eyes were as round as the turquoise clasp on his bolo tie. "You got critter ghosts in this painted lady?"

Alex rose and went to a corner. With a flourish, she removed a cover from a giant brass and iron birdcage. "Meet Smitty, Gram's sixty-four-year-old parrot."

Tommy smoothed his mustache. "Don't seem right to let a critter talk to you that way, no matter how old he is."

Gram waved a hand, revealing an impeccable manicure. "He's complaining about Dolly. He gets his feathers ruffled, quite literally, when she forgets to uncover his cage after she vacuums."

Alex gave Smitty a handful of seeds and returned to the couch. "All right, coconspirators. It's time to discuss the details of Operation Disinfestation."

The code name reminded me of Operation Goldfinger, Gia's plan to get rid of Harriet, and I got fired up. I'd only spent a few hours in our house since her arrest, but I already knew there was "no way, rosé" that I could live there without her. "What's the plan? Tommy catches the rats and releases them in the Rothman mansion?"

Big Ron tapped his chest. "With my and Zac's help."

Tommy's nose twitched. "A few months back, Katrina called me out to remove a family o' coons from their attic. I know the place like the back of my hand." He raised the one with two fingers and gave them a wiggle. "We'll let the rats loose, and I guarantee them ladies'll go a runnin' from the mansion."

"Varmint!" Smitty squawked and flapped his wings.

We all jumped again.

I eagle-eyed the parrot. Either he understood our conversation, or his timing was uncanny. "What time will you release them, Tommy?"

"Depends on when Elise 'n' Katrina go to sleep, but I'm guessin' around one a.m. tonight, give or take."

Alex looked at me. "I've asked Bree Milford to text both of us the very minute Ocean View gets any unexpected guests."

"You think they'll spend the night at the B&B?" Zac asked.

Gram nodded. "Elise once told me that hotels are too common for her liking. She much prefers a nice bed and breakfast. And besides, Rhys is already staying at Ocean View."

If the aftermath of Jesse's murder was any indication, Elise did rely on her brother for comfort, regardless of their dislike for one another. "Has anyone seen Elise since Jesse's death?"

Gram patted a throw pillow. "We were talking about that at my quilting group yesterday. Dee Madison said she's in deep mourning and hasn't left the house."

That jived with the grief Elise had displayed in her living room. I nestled into Zac's side. I couldn't fathom losing him, and especially not on

the occasion of something as special and romantic as a vow renewal.

Zac gave me a squeeze. "So, once Elise and Katrina are settled in at Ocean View, what then?"

Alex surveyed our faces. "We break in to the man cabin."

"Murder, murder!" Smitty paced on his perch.

I pulled the afghan to my nose. That bird was definitely conversational. I just hoped he wasn't clairvoyant.

Alex approached his cage and held up the cover. "Stop it right now, Smitty, or this goes back on."

"Pretty bird." He fluffed his feathers and preened.

Someone needed to let that parrot out of his cage—in a tropical forest.

Alex flopped onto the couch. "Okay, as soon as we're inside Jesse's cabin, we'll split into groups to search for the fishnet stocking and the library copy of *A Pocket Full of Rye*."

I lowered the afghan an inch. "Don't forget the cameo brooch."

Gram grasped her pearls. "Why, that's it. I remember."

I threw off the afghan. "Who did it belong to, Mrs. Jordan?"

"It was at our cotillion." She stared at the fire as though she could see the past in the flames. "Lydia Simmons wore it on the bodice of her ball gown."

Alex touched her arm. "Who's Lydia, Gram?"

"Elise Rothman's mother."

"Bloody hell!"

No one jumped, and no one spoke. Smitty's screech had said it all.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tommy Two Fingers strode into my living room a few minutes past midnight. He had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and a foot-long covered cage in his hand.

I slid low on the couch and took refuge behind a silk pillow. I would have liked to think that Smitty was in the cage, despite his penchant for squawking up drama, but the hard reality was that it contained rats from my walls.

Alex set her teacup on the coffee table in front of us. "How'd you do with the traps?"

Tommy pulled the cigarette from his lips and lifted the cage. "Got a decent haul. This thing's perty near full, and we got two more o' these downstairs."

I gulped. "We had that many rats?"

"Oh, it ain't a big number. It's the size o' these rascals. Got some half-pounders in this 'un, and Big Ron pulled out a couple as fat as cats."

I should have been horrified, but I was distracted by a vision of a hatted Harriet twisting her whiskers, like Tommy was doing with his mustache.

Alex's eyes gleamed. "Not even Katrina will take on rodents that huge. Are you guys leaving for the mansion?"

"Shortly. Big Ron and Zac are loading the cages into the critter wagon. I'm gonna go load this sucker 'n' do one last check of the traps."

I pulled the pillow closer. "Please do."

"I'll text you ladies as soon as we've set 'em loose." Tommy flashed the peace sign, and I wondered if it was intentional.

After he'd gone, Alex rested her head on the back of the couch and stared up at the gilt ceiling mirror. "No matter how many times I go over it in my mind, I can't decide who killed Jesse—Katrina or Elise."

"And I keep wondering if Gia and I were hired by our uncle's murderer. But I can't imagine what he would've seen in Elise."

She rolled her head in my direction and gave me a long look.

"Okay, so Uncle Vinnie wasn't choosy about his women, but Elise would've been a weird choice even for him. She talks to herself every other sentence."

Alex lifted her head. "You still think Katrina did it?"

I pulled my knees into the pillow. "She could've borrowed the cameo from Elise, maybe without her knowledge, which would've been an added incentive to steal it from us."

"Yeah, but Elise could've killed your uncle and Jesse for reasons we don't know, maybe something related to that casino deal."

I shook my head. "Filly Filipuzzi saw Katrina in this house moving my uncle's furniture. And before that, he heard them arguing." I dropped my feet and death-gripped the pillow. "She killed him, and I'm going to prove it."

A door slammed, underscoring the finality of my proclamation.

"Cassidi Lee Conti!"

A tremor shot up my already scared spine.

Alex swallowed a gulp of tea. "Is that your mother?"

"My aunt, Gia's stepmother. She must've found out Gia was in jail through the network."

"The what?"

"It's complicated. I'll get back to you on that."

A clomping came up the hallway.

Her too-high heels.

Aunt Carla appeared loaded for bear in head-to-toe tiger with hair as big as a lion's mane. "What are all those men doing at your house this time of night? The neighbors will think you're a whoruh."

In Italian-American neighborhoods, "whore" was a two-syllable word, and the act of being a whore constituted the eighth deadly sin. "We have rats—"

"Starting with the dirty cop that arrested my daughtuh."

"Did Gia call you?"

Her false eyelashes lowered. "I had to find out from Jenny."

"The manicurist from Long Nail?"

My aunt crossed her arms, jingling the Virgin Mary and saint medallions on her necklace. "She's got a cousin at Pretty Nail in Seattle, who mentioned that a fellow manicurist and makeup artist named Gia Deemeetlee got arrested for poisoning a client." She threw up her arms, clanking her bracelets. "The Vietnamese knew before my own people."

Alex shot me a stare that begged for an explanation.

I mouthed *Tell you later*, but I should've said *It's not as bad as it looks*. My aunt was worried about Gia, but in the midst of the crisis it was

easier to focus on the Vietnamese nail network out-gossiping the Italian-American housewives than on her accused-murderer stepdaughter.

I rose and gave her a hug. "Don't worry, Aunt Carla. We'll clear Gia's name—and the network's."

"I can't even go theuh right now." She pressed fingernails adorned with gold Italy charms to her forehead. "I got two suitcases of food I need to unpack, and then I need a beauty mask and a few hours sleep before I can face this mess." Carla tramped to the hallway.

I returned to my seat. "Sorry I didn't introduce you."

"She was upset. I get it." Alex cradled her teacup. "That was nice of her to bring Gia food from home."

"Oh, it's for her too. She only eats Italian food from the tri-state area. If it comes from anywhere else, she says it's not authentic."

Alex's brow raised, and she took a slug of tea.

Footsteps came up the hall.

Zac entered in a leather jacket and jeans. "I met your aunt. It's insane how much Gia looks like her."

I hated to stereotype, but a lot of New Jersey Italians resembled my aunt. And Gia.

His phone rang. "Who's calling me this late?" He pulled it from his back pocket and frowned. "I don't know this number."

"Answer it," I urged. "In case it's from the jail."

He put the phone to his ear. "Zac Taylor."

I studied his face and saw his jaw tighten.

"Did anyone call the fire department?"

Alex and I shared a worried look.

He ruffled his hair. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to find someone else to deal with it. I've got an emergency of my own." He closed the call and shoved the phone into his pocket. "That was Beverly, Clark's assistant. There was an explosion at the Pirate's Hook Marine dock, and at least two of our boats are on fire. Clark's out of town, and she can't reach him."

I went to his side and touched his arm. "Call her back and tell her you're on your way."

"I can't let you go to the Rothmans' without me."

"Why not?" Alex stood. "I'll be with her, and so will Big Ron and Tommy."

"Uh-uh. No." He looked at me. "The fire department's en route to the dock, and ultimately this is Clark and Beverly's problem."

I placed my hand on his chest. "In your heart, it's still your father's business, and one day it'll be yours. If the fire spreads to the store, you'll regret not going to help."

He looked up and exhaled his stress. "I'll run over there. When the fire is contained, I'll head to the Rothmans'."

"Sounds good." I embraced him and then let him go. But my chest was heavy as he walked to the hallway.

Somehow I knew there would be another hitch in Operation Disinfestation. And I feared whatever it was.

* * *

At the *Bottoms Up* bar in my living room, I stared at my phone.

Alex sat on the stool next to mine, facedown on the bar. She wasn't sleeping, or drinking. She was trying to stay sedate while we waited for a text or a call.

At first the minutes had been difficult, and then the seconds turned agonizing. All the while, horrible images flitted like phantom demons through my brain—Zac in the hospital, Gia and George in jail.

"What time is it?" Alex's voice was muffled.

"Two a.m." I sat up and pulled the hair from my eyes. "I don't like this. Tommy and Big Ron released those rats half an hour ago, and I still haven't heard from Zac."

She straightened. "I'll text Tommy. The rats should've done the trick by now."

"Especially since they put them in their bedrooms."

She typed a message and dropped her phone on the counter. Then she rubbed her thighs and forced a smile. "I would've loved to have been a fly in those rooms, wouldn't you?"

"Not me. Rats eat flies."

Her phone beeped, and she lunged for it. "It's Tommy. He says they're hiding in the bushes like critters, waiting for movement in the mansion."

The man was a speedy texter. If Aunt Carla hadn't been asleep down the hall, she would've said that the loss of those three digits made him lighter on his two fingertips. "Hang on. He's typing another message." Alex's eyes grew as wide as a shot glass, and she grabbed my arm. "A Mercedes just sped away from the Rothmans'."

"Were Katrina and Elise both in it?"

She fired off a text and got a reply beep. "They couldn't see inside. But I think it's safe to head over there."

I wasn't convinced that Katrina, an MMA fighter turned killer, would turn tail and run from rodents. "We need to wait for Bree to confirm that they've checked in to the B&B. We can't risk getting caught—or ambushed."

"You're right. We shouldn't stray from the plan." Alex returned to her facedown position.

And I resumed staring.

A low rumble sounded.

She raised her head. "Was that thunder?"

"No, my aunt's snoring." Like everything else about Aunt Carla, her sleeping was loud.

My message tone chimed.

"It's Zac." I scanned the text, and my stress combusted. "The fire has spread toward Pirate's Hook Marine. He's been in touch with Tommy and Big Ron, and he wants us to text him when we've heard from Bree." I tossed my phone on the bar and rubbed my temples.

Alex rubbed my back. "He'll be fine. The fire department's on it."

Still, I wanted to be there with him. I knew Zac, and if the flames spread to the storefront, he might fight the fire himself.

Another rumble sounded.

Alex spun her stool toward the hallway. "Your aunt can really snore."

"That was actual thunder."

"Ah." She went to a window and drew the curtains. "Rain could be a problem."

"I want it to rain. It could help put out the fire at Pirate's Hook Marine."

She turned, her eyes soft. "You really love him, don't you?"

I nodded. "He makes me so happy that I moved to Danger Cove, despite all the problems I've had here. And he's the main reason I stay when things get bad. I thought we'd eventually get married, but—"

"You're not going to get arrested, Cassidi." She paced in front of the hearth. "Jesse was a blackmailer, so he had something on Katrina. And we're going to find it, even if Big Ron and I have to take that man cabin apart board by board."

I appreciated her attempt to comfort me, but I could see how concerned she was. I needed to return the reassurance. "George is going to be fine too. I know how much you care for him."

"Oh, I don't care. I'm just used to him, that's all."

I'd watched *The Thin Man* movie, and that comment was classic Nora Charles.

Alex's phone beeped, and she rushed to the bar. "Bree just got two late-night check-ins." Her gaze met mine. "Elise and Katrina."

Lightning lit the sky, and I would have sworn the bolt hit my body. The next few hours would determine the course of the rest of our lives—Alex's, George's, Gia's, Zac's, mine, even Tommy's and Big Ron's.

And I hoped we would all survive the storm that was to come.

* * *

Big Ron, Tommy, Alex, and I congregated in the open living area of Jesse's man cabin. Between our three businesses, we'd produced enough plastic and rubber clothing to work in a morgue. Or maybe a cafeteria. We couldn't risk leaving any fingerprints or strands of hair that could later incriminate us.

Alex shined her phone light on the vaulted ceiling beams. "Looks like a classic hunting lodge."

It smelled like one too. The place reeked of polished wood, expensive leather, and stale cigar smoke.

Her light moved to a massive stone fireplace, and my eyes locked on a mounted boar head hanging on the hearth above. Whoever stuffed the animal had left its mouth halfway open to reveal its long, curved teeth.

I gave a shiver, and my protective clothing crinkled. "Have either of you heard from Zac?"

Big Ron lowered his industrial mask. "Uh, I did. It took some work, but I convinced him to stay at the marine supply store a little longer. I figured the four of us could handle the search."

"Right. Great." I added a note of spunk to my tone to conceal my disappointment. I couldn't shake the sensation that I would need Zac with me. Desperately.

Tommy twisted a handlebar that protruded from his facemask. "We'd best get back to searchin'. We did Jesse's office while you ladies were on your way. I'm working on the sauna, and Big Ron's got the walk-in humidor."

"I'll take the bedrooms and bathrooms," Alex said.

I eyed the boar. "I'll search in here."

Alex entered a bedroom off the hearth, and the men went to the back of the cabin.

I tackled the kitchenette-bar that overlooked the living space. One by one I opened the cabinets, inspecting the contents and feeling the wood for trap doors and hidden compartments.

Nothing.

I started on the drawers.

Alex emerged from the front bedroom. "That was a bust. Have you found anything?"

"Not unless you count a lot of sharp knives and these." I held up a glass in the shape of a nude woman.

"Charming." She gave an eye roll. "No wonder he built this place. I'm sure Elise wouldn't let those in her house." She gestured to a hallway. "I'm going to start on the back bedrooms."

"When I'm done, I'll come help you out."

She left, but I wasn't alone.

The boar head seemed to watch me as I finished going through the drawers.

I knew it was my imagination—the effect of too many old horror movies—but nevertheless I turned away and looked through the refrigerator.

Nothing there, either.

The wind picked up, howling around the cabin.

Strangely, I almost welcomed the sound. Even with the four of us inside, the place was too quiet.

I entered the living room and shined my phone light on a westernstyle leather couch. A search of the cushions produced a peanut and thirtyeight cents. I rose and thought I saw the boar's eyes flash. I muffled a scream.

Chill out. It was your phone reflecting off its glass eyes. Either that or the boar was making sure I didn't steal the money I'd found.

I de-cushioned a suede armchair and knelt to search its folds.

Several taps came from the window.

With a single bound, I flew behind the couch.

The tapping continued, but at that point my heart was louder.

I crawled to one end of the couch and peered around the side.

A tree branch bumped against the glass, courtesy of the strong wind.

I sat on my heels and exhaled. I had to calm down. After all, it wasn't like I was alone in Jesse's man cabin.

I rose and went to the TV cabinet. Besides the wide-screen television, there was a DVD case. I opened it. *Disney Princesses?*

Jesse Rothman was a freak.

A pinging caught my attention, and I fled back to the couch.

I listened, ears and arm hair on alert.

It was rain pelting the tin roof.

Seriously, Cassidi?

The pinging turned to pounding. I went to the window. Marble-sized hail gathered on the ground.

At least I couldn't hear the tapping tree branch anymore. And hopefully the rain and hail would extinguish the fire at Pirate's Hook Marine. Then Zac would come to the mansion, and everything would go smoothly.

I moved from the window and scanned the living area, looking for the next place to search.

The fireplace.

Beginning at the base, I felt for loose stones. I worked my way up the hearth until I couldn't reach any higher. I turned on my phone light to look for cracks in the seals around the stones I couldn't get to. I aimed the beam directly below the boar.

And I saw the flash again.

It wasn't the boar's glass eyes. It was something in his mouth. I shined the light between its teeth and saw gold.

I leaned back.

Obviously, it wasn't a tooth. What I didn't know was whether taxidermists used metal plating when they stuffed an animal. But if they

did, it wouldn't be gold.

I dragged the suede chair to the fireplace and balanced on the arms. Even with my gloves, I dreaded touching the dead boar. Gritting my teeth to keep from screaming, I stuck two fingers between its curled fangs and felt the item. It was cool and smooth to the touch. And it had a thin bar across it.

Like the pin of a brooch.

The speed of the rain increased, and my heart rate nearly matched the pace.

I fished the item from the boar's mouth, and a long piece of black stuffing came with it. Disgusted, I dropped it to the hardwood floor and shook out my arms.

An oval of white pearls glowed in the darkness.

The cameo.

I hopped from the chair and picked it up. The clasp was caught on the stuffing. I gripped the material to work it loose, and my palm wrapped around something scaly and cold.

I opened my hand.

A red sequin heart appliqué.

On black fishnet.

The match to the stocking that killed Uncle Vinnie.

I was so stunned that I screamed—a cry of victory and a wail of grief. It was too late to help my uncle, but I would free Gia and George.

"Cassidi?"

I raised the cameo and stocking in triumph, and I turned to show Alex.

My arm dropped to my side.

Elise?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Cassidi, thank God." Elise spoke through gasps, and rainwater dripped from her white sweatshirt and tights.

I stepped backwards. Why isn't she at the B&B? And why isn't she surprised to find me in her husband's cabin?

"You've got to come with me. We don't have much time." She came toward me and held out a wet hand.

I shrunk from her and hit the fireplace. "What's going on? Why aren't you asking me what I'm doing here?"

"Everyone in town knows you've been looking into Vincent's and Jesse's deaths. And if we don't hurry, you and I will be next."

"You?"

"Katrina is trying to kill me." Her gaze shot to the window. "And she plans to kill you too."

Lightning illuminated the room.

I saw fear in her eyes, but I didn't trust her. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

Her head lowered. "I'm trying to tell her she's in danger, Elise, but she won't listen."

That little conversation made me want to go with her even less.

She grabbed my forearm and pulled, and she was surprisingly strong. "I'm not kidding, girl. We've got to leave. I need your help to fight that animal."

I wrested free. "I'm not alone. I'll tell my friends. The five of us can take on Katrina together."

"She's already gotten them."

Terror pelted my brain. "They're—"

"Bound and gagged in the humidor. I tried to let them out, but she padlocked the door."

And I didn't hear anything because of the rain on the tin roof.

"Do you understand now?" Her pitch rose with each syllable. "We have to run and get help. Otherwise, she'll kill us all."

"Did you call the police?"

"She cut the lines." Her voice was a wail.

"I've got my phone." I tapped the button. No service bars.

The storm.

Elise took my wrist. "Enough of this nonsense. We're going to the gym."

I pulled back. "Why move to another building? What's wrong with the cabin?"

"She knows I'm looking for the evidence you're holding, and she knows Jesse hid it here."

Shock turned to anger. "You knew she killed my uncle, and you did nothing?"

"This isn't the time to have that conversation." She shouted the words, on the edge of hysteria. "We're being hunted, child."

Lightning lit up the grounds.

Katrina's silhouette was unmistakable. She exited the mansion, indifferent to the rain—and the hail.

Unlike my brain, my legs didn't hesitate. They ran. Gripping the cameo and stocking, I followed Elise to the hallway, and I prayed Zac was on his way.

She led me to a back door with a window, and I was terrified that Katrina's face would appear like the Jack Torrance character in *The Shining*.

Elise grabbed the handle. "Run left, and you'll reach the spa exit. It's unlocked. Are you ready?"

"I'm going first?"

"So I can cover you."

"Or feed me to the lioness."

She dropped her head. "Leave her, Elise. She's dragging you down."

Her self-talk was startling—not to mention rude—and a reminder that if she were the killer, she would've already offed me. "Okay, but if you see Katrina, you'd better help me fight her off."

"We need each other. That's why I came to get you." She opened the door a few inches and peered out.

I ripped off my plastic clothing so I could run faster.

"It's clear." She jerked open the door.

And I bolted. Fearing that I was either a sacrifice to Katrina or Elise's next victim, I squeezed the cameo and hoped Diana, the goddess of the hunt, would protect me.

Rain obscured my vision, and hail stung my head. And my feet slipped in the mud. I wanted to look behind me to see if Katrina was coming, but I resisted the urge. Because the spa exit was in sight.

Just a few more yards.

And maybe my phone would get service.

I was flying—not with speed, but through the air.

Had Katrina caught me? Or Elise?

I landed hard in mud and leaves. Petrified, I looked back.

I'd tripped over a broken branch. Were the trees out to get me? Did they seek revenge for Herb the bus driver?

I got to my feet, but my ankle didn't work. *Was it sprained? Broken?* It didn't matter. I had to hop.

Three yards.

Two.

One.

Made it.

I pushed open the door, slammed it behind me, and turned the lock. It was an automatic reaction, but it made sense. I wasn't convinced that Elise was one of the good guys despite her white outfit.

I looked out the window. No one.

I checked my phone. No service.

My ankle throbbed, but I had to move. Find a hiding place.

I glanced outside and gasped.

Elise was running toward the exit with Katrina on her heels, and her rage face said she intended to kill.

She wasn't acting. Her best friend and mansion manager wanted her dead.

A charge went through my body. I had to let Elise in and lock Katrina out. *But could I stop a muscled maniac? And if I did, what then?* We'd be trapped in the spa, hapless victims, with no way to call the police.

Elise was close, and Katrina gained on her.

I turned the lock and the handle.

She was a few feet away, and I threw open the door. She barreled inside, and we used our bodies to close it while I fumbled with the lock. But my fingers were too muddy to get a grip.

Katrina bashed into the door, her cheek pressing against the window with a Jack Nicholson grin, and a stab of pain from my ankle caused me to lose my footing.

Elise held firm, and I charged at the door, using my good leg as a brace to help her push it closed.

She turned the lock and yanked my bicep. "This way."

"I can't run. I'm hurt."

Her head dropped. "Dear God, Elise." Her breath was ragged. "I told you to dump her."

My head recoiled. Nice way to thank me for saving her life.

Katrina hit the door with a crack.

I ran through the pain.

Elise led me to a hallway and through a door. "We can hide in these tanning beds."

"You mean, electric coffins? Katrina could sit on the lid and tan one of us to death."

Another crash into the door.

She threw up her arms. "The gym."

I ran-hopped behind her, trying not to think the effort was futile. To find us, all Katrina had to do was follow the trail of muddy water. But if we could elude her until the storm broke, I could get phone service and call the police. And there was always the hope that Zac would show up.

Elise flung open the metal door and ran to a stack of rolled gym mats. She unrolled one. "Lay down, and roll yourself up."

I complied while she unrolled one for herself. The mats weren't the best hiding place, but they weren't electric, and they offered potential padding from Katrina's MMA kicks.

Inside my mat, I listened as Elise rolled herself up. Her mat was behind mine against the wall, so Katrina would find me first. I was a piece of rolled lunchmeat on a platter. Even worse, I couldn't see the door without sticking my head out one end—an invitation to stomp on it or punt it like a ball.

So I lay there, blind and confined, and waited.

Silence.

I couldn't hear the storm, and the door battering had stopped. *Had Katrina given up? Or was she inside, on the hunt?*

"Cassidi." Elise's voice was a whisper. "Do you still have my cameo and the stocking?"

Somehow my hand still gripped them, vice-like. "Yes."

"Whatever happens, don't lose them. They're our proof Katrina killed Vincent. She wore them to his house the night she strangled him."

I squirmed in the mat, wishing I could break free to confront her. As risky as it was to continue the conversation under the circumstances, I had to ask her about my uncle's murder. "If you knew she killed my Uncle Vinnie, why didn't you go to the police?"

"Because I only found out when Jesse was released from jail. He said we had to get rid of Katrina because she was blackmailing him."

"For what?"

"He stole some investment money."

The infamous casino deal with Sonny Torlone and my uncle.

"She figured out he'd invested it in a painting and was threatening to turn him in if he didn't pay. So he went looking for dirt on her and found the stocking in her bedroom." She choked on a sob. "That's why she killed my Jesse. He confronted her the day of the vow renewal ceremony."

Something seemed off about the story. "What about the cameo? Jesse was dead when Katrina stole it, so how did it end up in the boar's mouth?"

"I put it there."

"You stole it from my house?"

"Watch who you're accusing, young lady. Katrina did it. At my insistence."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

She sniffed, exasperated. "When I saw Gia wearing my cameo in my home, I was shocked. Katrina manages the house affairs, so I demanded to know what your cousin was doing with my brooch. And she confessed to wearing it the night she killed Vincent."

That was an oddly materialistic way to phrase it. *How about, and she confessed to killing Vincent while wearing it?*

Elise gave another sob. "The only thing I could do was order her to get it back. I knew someone would eventually connect it to me, and I didn't want the police thinking I murdered your uncle."

My lips curled, and so did my fingers. "So you hid it with the stocking as more evidence against her."

"As evidence I didn't want her to use to falsely implicate *me*." Her tone was defensive with outrage. "Jesse had bought her those tacky fishnet stockings, so she could've lied to the police and said they were mine. And since the cameo belonged to my mother, they'd be inclined to believe her, especially since her father, Walt, was Lester Marshall's partner."

I had questions about Jesse and the stockings, but I was consumed with anger at her self-centeredness. If she'd gone to the police as she should have, my uncle's killer would have been caught, and we would have all been safe. But it would've been a waste of my breath to tell her that. And we needed to stop talking and listen for Katrina. My uncle was dead, but our lives were savable—at least, that was what I hoped.

We fell silent.

I couldn't hear the storm.

The gym was quiet.

Deathly so.

I shuddered. I had to stop thinking in those terms.

But something bothered me. Why had Elise left the B&B to come back to a house infested with rats? "What prompted you to look for the evidence tonight?"

"Katrina and I got into an argument. It horrifies me to say this, but we developed a sudden rat problem. I accused her of neglecting her duties and fired her. And she accused me of hiring someone to put the rats in the mansion to set her up." She paused. "Like anyone would do such a thing."

I stayed as quiet as a church rat.

"I pointed out that there were rodents in my room too, but that didn't satisfy her. She said she'd get even with me. I knew I had to get the stocking and cameo before she found them, so after she went to her room, I threw my purse out the window and climbed down the side of the B&B."

"Why didn't you just call the police?"

"Because I had to come to the mansion to get that painting. Thanks to my slouch of a brother, our hardware company has been losing money for years. Rhys has been exploiting it, and Jesse certainly wasn't earning money in jail. That painting is my livelihood."

I paused to listen for Katrina. I was satisfied that we were alone, but not with Elise's story. "Okay, then why didn't you call the police when you got to your car?"

"My phone was gone. Either Katrina took it, or it fell out of my purse when I threw it out the window."

"You didn't look for it?"

"With that animal after me? I thought I'd come here, get the painting, and drive straight to the police station. But..." She gave a muffled cry. "...it was gone."

"The painting?"

"Katrina must've taken it, because that's when I realized she'd followed me here."

Or Rhys took it. Was that why he stole the rowboat?

A creak echoed throughout the gym.

Katrina.

A click resounded in my ears like the toll of a bell.

Seconds passed, maybe minutes.

Pin-drop silence.

Had she looked inside and left?

My internal clock ticked.

It was so dark and quiet that I grew disoriented.

Dizzy.

No, I was moving.

Rolling.

Fear washed over me in sheets.

My mat went flat with a thwat, and a rush of air blew over me.

A flashlight came on and shined in my eyes.

Katrina stood over me, soaking wet, her pixie plastered to her head. I'd never noticed how many muscles she had in her face. And all of them were moving.

Her lips parted. "I've been training for this matchup for months."

"I d-don't w-want to fight."

"Who said anything about fighting?" She crouched to my side. "You're going to drop to your death."

Water dripped from her chin to my eyes.

And everything went black.

* * *

My eyes opened. The gym lights had been turned on, and the floor was below me. Feet below me—as in twelve or so.

Was I looking down from heaven?

Katrina stepped into my line of vision in black workout attire.

No. Still in hell.

She looked up, her face blank. "How are you enjoying aerial yoga?"

I glared at her from my parallel position, and worked my bound wrists behind me. Oddly, my head didn't hurt.

"Fine." She spread manly arms. "Don't talk to me. It'll make this easier."

"What do you mean by 'this,' exactly?"

She pointed at me. "You're feisty for a fainter."

I was relieved to learn that I'd passed out. A blow to the head would've concussed me, and I needed every last wit in my head to take on the unjolly giant.

"Too bad you never trained with me at Hard Bodies to build up your mental toughness. But, I would've just killed you back then and made it look like an accident, which is what I'm about to do now."

She acted as though that was news. It wasn't.

Katrina walked in a circle. "You and your cousin should've let the police handle these investigations."

The evidence.

I scanned the floor.

"Looking for these?" She pulled the cameo and stocking from the pocket of her sweatpants. And my phone.

My wits were failing me. Zac had to come. Where was he?

"These things are useless to you now." She stuffed the items into her pocket. "It's not like you're going to survive the fall from your aerial yoga hammock."

I swallowed and worked my wrists harder.

"But you asked me what I meant by 'this,' so I'll tell you. I'm going to drop you flat on your face. The impact will shove your nose into your brain, and your ribs will puncture your lungs and, with any luck, your heart."

The shock of waking up in midair was wearing off, and terror was taking its place.

"I'll make it look like Elise killed you—right before she killed herself."

Elise. I scanned the room.

Katrina walked over to the wall with the gym mats. "She thinks I don't know it, but she's still here in her ridiculous hiding place."

She kicked Elise's mat.

It unrolled, and Elise sprang out with a karate-type cry. She whipped off her sweatshirt, revealing a sports bra, and raised her fists.

The two women faced off like boxers, circling and sizing each other up.

Katrina threw a punch.

Elise avoided the blow and replied with a punch.

Missed.

Katrina punched again.

Elise ducked and rose with a kick.

Katrina grabbed her leg and flipped her to the floor.

Elise groaned.

As did I.

Katrina straddled her and punched her face. One, two, three...

I lost count.

Elise struggled, but Katrina kept punching. Then she rose to her knees, straddling her victim.

I winced.

Elise's face was a mask of blood. And she wasn't moving.

"See that, Cassidi?" Katrina looked up. "That's called the 'ground and pound.' I'm the best in the state at that move in my weight division."

"Good thing I had a great teacher." Elise rose via a sit-up, grabbed Katrina's head between both hands, and smashed her nose with her forehead.

Even twelve feet up I heard the bone and cartilage break.

Katrina fell forward onto Elise's chest. The blood spatter surrounding them was so vast that it could have come from a gunshot wound.

Elise shoved Katrina to one side and wriggled out from under her. She threw her head back and made a long huffing sound, as though she were trying to breathe fire.

The woman had a dragon fixation.

"You don't know how happy I am to see you up and around, Elise. I was terrified you were dead."

"It was an act." She picked up her sweatshirt and used it to wipe blood from her face. "I need to tie her up, and then I'll let you down." She went to the switches by the door and flipped one.

The silk hammock next to mine lowered.

She went to Katrina, who was facedown in a growing pool of blood, and dragged her by the armpits to the hammock.

"Don't forget the scarf and cameo," I said. "They're in her pocket."

"Ooh, thanks for the reminder." She retrieved the items and placed them on the floor. Then she took the silk loop and wound it around Katrina's neck, hands, and feet as deftly as a cowboy hogtying a calf.

She returned to the switch.

I watched, apprehensive, as Katrina's body rose to my height. Even unconscious, I was afraid of her.

"Nice work, Elise," she said to herself. She pulled down the switch that controlled my hammock and lowered me to her waist.

I closed my eyes, thankful to be alive.

"Hm." She tugged at the silk binding my ankles, and the throbbing returned. "Katrina knotted the loop somehow."

"Can you try my hands?"

"They're knotted too. Let me go get the scissors from the spa. We use them to cut my seaweed wraps."

I didn't care what they were used for as long as they cut me free.

Elise left the gym, and as I waited, anxiety crept into my chest. I didn't actually know how Alex, Big Ron, and Tommy were. I wanted to get to the sauna to make sure they were alive.

The door creaked open and closed with that click.

Elise's feet came into view. "Hold still so I don't cut you."

I listened as she made a few snips.

"She's got you wrapped up tight. I'm going to have to lower you to the floor to cut this silk." She walked over to the switch and flipped it.

I went up.

"Wait." I continued to rise, and she came into view. "Wrong way."

"No, it's right." Her mouth twitched, amused. "You didn't really think I'd let you *live*, did you?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The hammock reached the ceiling of the gym with a jolt, but it was nothing compared to the one Elise had just given me. "I don't understand... Katrina was trying to kill you."

Elise scowled at her alleged best friend's body. "She was. To stop me from framing her for Vincent's and Jesse's deaths."

Although I was suspended, I felt like I'd hit the floor. And it wasn't because she'd killed Jesse. "You murdered my uncle?"

"I had to tell you a few fibs earlier to get you to help me."

She was so blasé that my body jerked.

And I heard a rip in the silk.

I had to keep calm despite the emotions coursing through me, or I would plummet to my death. "But why? What did he do to you?"

"He lied and cheated." She scooped the fishnet stocking from the floor. "If he were alive today, I would strangle him again."

Bile gathered in my throat. I swallowed. "Does this have something to do with the casino deal?"

"No, the Blue Diamond."

"The illegal Viagra?" I was floored—as in stunned, not flattened on the ground. "Did you sell that with him?"

"Do I look like a criminal?"

At the moment, yes.

She paced and twisted the stocking. "Vincent was a lothario, and my Jesse wasn't."

True. He was a lizard. And a snake.

"He seduced me, and I was prepared to leave Jesse for him. But we started having problems in the boudoir. So on New Year's Eve I went to surprise him in sexy lingerie, and I found him asleep in bed with Katrina, next to a bottle of that fake Viagra. Incensed, I picked up one of her stockings from the floor." She paused and wrenched the fishnet. "And Vincent Conti rung in the New Year with his neck wrung."

Anger lit up my limbs, but I had to control it, channel it into freeing my hands. "Is that when you found out that Jesse had bought the stockings for Katrina?"

"Yes. When she woke up and saw what I'd done, she told me the police could trace the stocking to Jesse, and we'd all be implicated."

I glared at Katrina's unconscious body. Her first thought had been to protect herself rather than seek justice for my uncle. Look what her selfishness had accomplished.

"Can you imagine?" Elise wailed the question. "My own husband cheating on me with the same woman as my lover?" Her chin dropped. "The *gall*, Elise."

Indeed. "Why didn't you frame Katrina then? Why wait until now?"

"Because she'd lost my mother's cameo somewhere in that room, and we couldn't find it."

"So you and Katrina moved the furniture to make sure the police wouldn't find it in his real bedroom and link you to the murder."

"And we made a pact to cover one another."

"Why would she agree to be your accomplice?"

"Guilt for betraying me, and to keep her cushy job. Plus the knowledge that I would frame her if she turned me in."

Elise had powerful connections, so people might have believed her over Katrina. And Mr. Filipuzzi's testimony would have damaged Katrina too. "What prompted you to break the pact?"

"Duncan Pickles' article with the names of the men who'd purchased the street Viagra from your uncle. My Jesse was on it." She yanked the stocking, and it tore.

I flinched and worked my wrists harder. I needed that fishnet intact.

"Vincent told me he loved me, but all the while he was giving Jesse Viagra to keep me out of his bed so he could be with *her*. Oooh. The nerve of that man." She picked up a ten-pound dumbbell and threw it across the gym.

I started at her strength, and the silk tore a little more.

"Jesse was lucky he was in jail awaiting trial for killing Sonny Torlone, or I would've strangled him with this stocking. But I took comfort in thinking he'd get life, and I didn't want to bring any suspicion on myself by killing Katrina. So I let it go."

"Then he got off on that technicality."

"And he found this stocking in Katrina's room." She held up the fishnet and shook it at me. "Of course, Jesse acted like he'd never seen it before, which enraged me all over again. So I decided to get revenge on them both in a way no one would suspect."

With yew berries and a vow renewal ceremony.

"Of course, you and your cousin had to be involved because you'd become a problem."

"Did you really expect us not to investigate our uncle's murder?"

"Most people don't. But that's enough chitchat." She tossed the stocking. "Now that I've given you closure in the death of your uncle, you can go to your grave in peace." Her head lowered. "You've always been so thoughtful to others, Elise."

Yes. Quite.

She reached for the switch and flipped it several times, causing the hammock to jerk up and down.

A loud rip echoed through the gym, and I plunged.

Then I stopped with a bounce.

I hung by my feet.

"One more flick of the switch," she singsonged, "and you're going down."

The fear was so intense I could taste it, along with the sweat that had erupted from my pores. I had to buy time. Zac would be on his way, surely. "You *are* so thoughtful." I worked my wrists harder. "So would you grant me a final request?"

She leaned against the wall. "Such as?"

"Could you tell me why you framed George Fontaine too?"

She smoothed her hair. "That's a long story, and I have to be at the B&B before breakfast. I'm sorry, but I need to make it look like Katrina killed you and then took her own life. And I know you don't like going first, but you'll have to so that damn medical examiner doesn't get suspicious."

Nice of her to take my feelings into consideration.

"Ooof. That Catharine Cooper just *riles* me. Did you see the sad look she gave me before she left my home? There I was distraught after killing my Jesse, and she couldn't be bothered to say a kind word."

My mouth hung, like my body.

She lowered her head. "Some people are just awful, Elise. You have to ignore them."

The woman was psychotic. And I was out of time. I had to make a move, regardless of the outcome. I pulled my right arm with all the strength I had left. My hand slipped from the binding.

And the silk ripped.

Sweat ran in rivers into my eyes.

The gym door blew open.

Zac.

I tried to blink away the sweat, but all I could see was a flash of...

Leopard?

"You mess with my niece, brutta strega, and I'm gonna go Jersey on you."

Elise gasped. "Did you just call me an ugly witch, you vile Italian creature?"

"You think that stings me, WASPy?"

"Be careful, Aunt Carla. She's as strong as a man."

"Oh, I came prepared after Zac called and told me you were here."

"Where is he?"

Elise kept her gaze on my aunt. "Didn't I tell you, Cassidi? He showed up while I was getting the scissors."

Panic and rage exploded through me, and I did a midair sit-up to reach my bound ankles. The silk band was more than half torn. Gripping the area above the tear, I worked the knot with my free hand. I had to get to Zac. And I had to help my aunt. Her cat-fighting skills were no match for Elise's MMA training, and her acrylic fingernails were too thick and dull to do any damage. "Aunt Carla, she knows mixed martial arts."

"Oh yeah? Well, I've got mob moves." She thwacked her nails against the doorjamb and held them up, broken and jagged like miniature bottles. "Come at me, and I'll cut you."

"You ethnic types are pathetic." Elise charged and pushed her against the wall.

"Flip the switch right next to you, Aunt Carla."

My aunt swiped across Elise's cheek, and she jumped backwards and touched her face.

Aunt Carla flipped the switch.

I started my descent.

"If those cuts leave scars, I'll haunt you in death." Elise kicked my aunt in the gut and pulled the switch down.

The silk band jerked and ripped.

And I went up.

I wiped sweat from my eyes, and looked over my shoulder.

Elise had her hands around my aunt's neck.

She was choking.

"You're killing her," I shouted, helpless.

My aunt's face was red, and her mouth was open, gasping for breath.

I had to do something to make her fight harder. "Aunt Carla, Elise killed Uncle Vinnie."

She went still.

"No," I screamed and yanked at my ankles.

The silk band gave out.

And I went down.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"When I heard Elise killed my brothuh, I jammed my knee into her *cuca*—that's Italian for vajayjay—and knocked her across the gym." Aunt Carla deposited a platter of cannoli, her favorite breakfast dessert, on the coffee table in my living room. "Meanwhile, Cassidi fell by her *culo*—that's Italian for booty—and landed flat on top of her." She raised her chin. "And she literally busted that murderess's gut."

Alex, Big Ron, Tommy, and Zac stared at my aunt with dazed expressions—and it wasn't because of her gym showdown or the head injuries they'd sustained from Elise's dumbbells.

I leaned into Zac on the couch and struggled to keep my eyes open. It was eleven a.m., and none of us had been to sleep thanks to hospital checkups and police questioning.

My aunt added a jar of Nutella to the breakfast options. "After I told that Detective Marshall what happened, I had one more piece of information for him. I said, 'You go after my daughtuh and my niece again, coppuh, and I'll sic the network on you faster than you can say focaccia."

Alex's head retracted. Then she rubbed her lump. "You threatened an officer with the Mafia?"

I pressed my back into a heating pad. "The network isn't the Mafia—at least, not in the traditional sense. It's pretty much all the Italian-American housewives in the tri-state area. When I clarified that for the detective, he actually looked more terrified."

"Because we don't take no crap." My aunt flashed jagged nails. "And I'd proved that by taking down Elise Rothman."

Everyone stuffed cannoli into their mouths rather than risk getting her more riled up.

"Morning, everyone."

Our heads jerked toward the hallway.

Detective Bud Ohlsen rubbed his hands. "Under the circumstances, I wanted to personally deliver your loved ones."

The detective stepped aside, and a disheveled Gia entered, followed by a dapper George.

Aunt Carla threw her arms around her daughter, and Alex embraced her man. After some tearful moments, a round of hugs and handshakes commenced, and Bud Ohlsen attempted to slip out. "Detective, wait." I sat up gingerly. "Could I ask you a few questions?"

He stopped beside my aunt next to the fireplace, and his smile bordered on paternal. "Now that you know what happened to your uncle, I was hoping you'd be done with your investigative work."

"I'm retiring after this, I promise." I shot a sheepish smile at him and Zac. "Elise didn't tell me everything, like how she met my uncle and poisoned Jesse."

"She gave a confession in the hospital, so I suppose I can share some things." The detective looked at George, who was in an armchair next to the couch, preparing to bite into a cannolo. "But I'm not the only one who has inside knowledge of the case."

George dropped the dessert. "Looks like I'm on."

"Yes, because you're retiring too." Alex took a seat on the arm of his chair. "From being an international flower man of mystery."

His grin was as shiny as his hair pomade. "You look ravishing today, Mrs. Charles."

"Don't change the subject, coward."

"Yeah." Big Ron grunted the word from his barstool, still not ready to trust George with his friend and boss.

Gia hopped from the couch. "And don't start until I get back." She raced down the hall and returned with a makeup bag. "K. Ready."

George crossed his ankle over his knee. "Elise was the head of a British firms clan, and Rhys worked for her."

I gasped. "She was the silent partner in the casino deal, not Katrina."

Aunt Carla tapped her nostril. "Flavia said it was a woman. She can always sniff out a rat."

Tommy started on the barstool next to Big Ron. "If this Flavia needs a job, let me know."

"Not until she's given this place a solid sniffing over," I joked. "Carry on, George."

He folded his arms against his argyle sweater. "Rhys used his social connections to steal art, and he and Elise kept the family hardware store as a front. They fenced the art to private collectors through gallery owners, including my parents." He gazed at his wing tips. "So I moved to Danger Cove to keep an eye on them."

Alex stared at him, shocked.

Gia and I did too.

Detective Ohlsen cleared his throat. "Elise recognized George when he moved to town, so she shut down the art ring. But they needed money, so Jesse stole Sonny Torlone's investment capital and killed him. When he was charged with the murder, he purchased a stolen painting from George's parents to hide the money."

Alex looked at George. "So that's why Elise framed you."

"To get me out of the picture, so to speak. But she also wanted to pay me back for returning some paintings Rhys had stolen that she'd planned to sell on the black market." He leaned forward on his knees. "When I went to the mansion to take the flower order for the vow renewal, I mentioned that I was late to make a delivery to The Clip and Sip." His lips wrinkled. "That's when Elise had Katrina slip the yew frond into Gia's arrangement."

Gia brushed on hot pink blush. "Then she asked us to do the hair and makeup for the ceremony."

"And when we showed up to do the job," I said, "she saw you wearing her mother's cameo and confronted Katrina."

The detective took a plate from Aunt Carla. "Jesse recognized the cameo too, so he ordered a hit on Elise—and Katrina while he was at it."

I gripped the couch arm. "The hit wasn't on Gia and me?"

"No, and we know because the hit man turned him in, not realizing Jesse was already dead."

My aunt harrumphed. "Some hit man, breaking the code of silence."

I gave her the side-eye, wondering just how she'd learned that Mafia nail move. "So, I know Katrina was blackmailing Jesse for the casino money, but why did he want Elise killed?"

The detective swallowed a bite of cannolo. "Jealousy. She told him she'd lost the cameo on a trip they took to Europe. When he saw it on Gia, he put two and two together and figured out that she'd lost it here while she was with your uncle. And, according to Elise, he'd already suspected her of cheating on him with Vinnie back when they all met in Atlantic City to negotiate the casino purchase."

Aunt Carla clenched her jagged nails into a fist. "So she's also the woman who cost my brothuh that deal."

"She cost him a lot of things." His gaze went to the floor.

I broke the sad silence. "Detective, how and when did Elise poison Jesse?"

"She ground a yew seed into the coffee beans of Jesse's first coffee that morning. After he died, she put a seed in the cup Gia served Jesse so there would be some taxine residue."

"So the taxine was administered earlier that morning, just like *A Pocket Full of Rye.*"

The detective nodded. "We recovered the library copy in Katrina's room at the B&B, by the way. She and Elise were meticulous in their planning."

Aunt Carla looked at him. "If these broads were so meticulous, why didn't they take the stocking from my poor brothuh's neck?"

"Elise wanted to humiliate him by leaving the public a clue that he was strangled by a woman. And the competitor in Katrina agreed."

"That muscled monster," Gia grumbled.

Detective Ohlsen shoved his hands into his pockets. "We could've caught them sooner if we'd known about the return special order of those stockings. But Marjorie died before she could tell us about it."

Gia looked up with one blue-shadowed eye. "I think Katrina offed Marjorie in the back room at Lily's."

"No, there were witnesses. She was suffocated by a corset." He shook his head. "Hazard of the profession."

I squirmed. The heating pad was hot, and that lingerie death made me uncomfortable. "One last question, Detective. Was Elise the reason my uncle moved to Danger Cove?"

"She was. And I think, in her own way, she loved him. She cost him the casino deal, but she set him up here with a wealthy clientele for his salon. And she loaned him the money to buy this painted lady, which made his betrayal with Katrina that much more enraging."

That explained how he'd bought the place.

Aunt Carla sniffed. "That bum really loved this house."

Tears welled in my eyes, so I changed the subject. "What about Rhys? What's his role in all of this?"

"Mr. Ingall knew Jesse had stolen Sonny's investment capital and figured that since he was out of prison, he would lead him to it."

I reached for a cannolo. "But he spotted the painting during questioning and realized Jesse had hidden the money in plain sight." I looked at George. "That's also when he recognized you."

George inhaled. "Yes, because my parents were supposed to sell that painting to Rhys years ago, but I'd stopped the sale when I figured out what they were doing."

Big Ron narrowed his eyes. "Is that why you flew to London during the investigation? To ask your parents if they'd sold it to Jesse?"

"They weren't answering my calls, so I went to confront them in person. They'd sworn to me that they would stay out of the business." He bit his lower lip and sighed. "Now they're in legal trouble, I'm afraid."

I thought of Rhys in sunglasses on the rowboat. "Where is the painting?"

"In police custody," Detective Ohlsen said. "When Elise went to the mansion last night, it was gone. She was certain Rhys had stolen it."

Zac looked at him. "With our rowboat."

"Yes, and your company name gave him the idea to hide the painting on Pirate's Hook."

Where I'd discovered the peso with the treasure map so long ago. If only Zac had found loot in Bart Coffyn's chest, then everything would have been perfect.

Gia opened her Badass Blue Rose eyeshadow palette to start a smoky eye. "I hope Rhys rots in my jail cell."

Detective Ohlsen adjusted his belt. "He's awaiting extradition to England for stealing from a gallery, among other things."

"The gallery." I looked at George. "You said your parents own the Leach Gallery. Is that your real last name?"

"Leach? Ugh." Gia stuck out her tongue. "If it is your name, that's one international mystery you should leave unsolved."

"Hm." Alex eyed George. "I might agree with her."

"Well, people." The detective consulted his watch. "I need to get back to the station. But before I go, I have a request for all of you. Should you stumble into trouble again, and I sincerely hope you don't, please call the police."

Cheeks went hot pinker than Gia's blush, and promises were mumbled.

He took his leave, and Tommy slid from the barstool. "I'd best check them traps. Got critters to catch."

Alex rose and approached Big Ron. "And we have renovations to finish."

I stood. "Absolutely not. All of you need to take a few days off."

Alex winked at George. "I could use some sleep."

"I thought you'd never ask." He took her in his arms, leaned her backwards, and kissed her lips.

Big Ron rolled his eyes, but grinned. Then he rose to his six-feet-eight inches. "Before I go, I might as well take down this *Bottoms Up* sign."

My stomach gave a tug. My uncle had loved his painted lady, and she was part of his history too.

Big Ron pulled a crowbar from his tool sack and jammed it under one end.

"Stop." I held up my hand. "I want to preserve the painted lady as is —except for Hope, Faith, and Charity. They can advertise their wares in the attic."

Alex's eyes twinkled. "I think you've made the right choice."

"I'm not so sure about that." Big Ron eyed the opening he'd made with the crowbar. "There's something green poking out, and it's got a hundred on it."

Gia leapt off the couch, her half-smokyed eyes wide. "Don't listen to Cassidi. Hanging upside down scrambled her brain." She clamped her hand over my mouth. "*Bottoms Up* be gone, Big Ron."

He looked at me for permission, and I gave him a thumbs-up—because my cousin's hand prevented me from speaking or moving my head.

Big Ron pried the sign from the wall. Then he inserted his crowbar into the opening and moved it around.

Stacks of one-hundred-dollar bills hit the floor like the hail I'd seen pelting the ground.

Uncle Vinnie's stash.

A boom resounded in the living room.

It wasn't a clap thunder.

Gia had gone down for the count.

* * *

My eyes popped open, and I shot straight up.

In bed in my room.

"Someone has a little PTSD," I muttered and glanced at the clock. It was four thirty. I'd overslept from a nap.

I followed the aroma of garlic and sausage downstairs to the break room.

Aunt Carla stood at the stove in a tight yellow zebra dress, breaking up the meat with a spatula. "How's your back, Cassidi Lee?"

"Fairly decent."

Gia strutted in from the salon. "Major news. People are so shocked and outraged by Elise killing Vinnie that they've been calling to offer condolences—and book appointments."

"How did word get out so fast? It only happened about twelve hours ago."

My aunt looked over her shoulder. "While you were napping, I paid a visit to that Duncan Pickles."

Gia's brown eyes sparkled as much as her blue glitter lip gloss. "Carla made the *Cove Chronicles* put out the first ever early afternoon edition. It was only one page, but the whole thing was about Vinnie and The Clip and Sip." She squeezed my hands. "And they retracted every negative thing they ever published."

I stared at my aunt. "How did you accomplish that?"

She flashed her nails, and the ones on the left hand were broken. "I gave Mr. Pickles the same demonstration I did for Elise last night."

That was better than releasing rats in his room.

Gia took a seat at the table. "I've been running some numbers, and we could go ahead and hire four more stylists to fill the other stations if we offered an additional service."

I marched to the stove and held up my aunt's free hand to flash her Mafia nails. "We're *not* doing Mystery Spa Day. Besides, we just found eight hundred thousand dollars, so we can hire those stylists."

Gia's lower lip protruded. "You're so puhrack...puhrack..."

"Practical." I pulled out a chair. "And yes, I am. We'll pay for the renovations, put a chunk of money into the salon account, and split the rest. I'm going to use some of my half to cover the rest of the tuition for my business degree, and then I'm going to invest."

"That's smart." My aunt pointed the spatula. "G, you should do that."

The back door opened, and Amy Spannagel rushed in. "I'm so relieved everyone's okay and no one's in jail." She stopped to catch a breath. "But I hereby call an emergency meeting of Operation Goldfinger."

Something big had happened with Harriet McCudgeon. "Okay, but aren't you supposed to be at the library?"

"Ben's back as of this morning, and he thinks I'm at the police station." She collapsed into a chair. "His first order of business was to demand that I go and get the library copy of *A Pocket Full of Rye*."

"I guess he 'found himself," I joked.

Gia smirked. "And he can hardly afford to lose a book given his book-burning ancestor."

"No." Amy pushed up her glasses. "Tongues would wag."

As if they didn't already. "So, what's the emergency?"

"You remember that I've been researching Harriet's family tree?"

My aunt stuck her spatula in Amy's line of vision. "Is this that broad with the red tour bus?"

"Have you seen her?" I asked.

Gia twisted her mouth to one side. "She did quite a tour while you were napping."

I must've been sleeping hard if I'd slept through the McCurmudgeon's bull and bullhorn.

My aunt wrinkled her upper lip as though she smelled bad salami. "She's got no business sense, that one. I mean, why not paint her bus gold like my Caddy?"

Gia nodded. "It is a missed opportunity."

I bit my upper lip. "So, what about Harriet's genealogy?"

A smile spread across Amy's face that reached from glasses rim to rim. "Her great-grandmother, Lola Turnblatt, was a prostitute at the brothel."

"No!" I slammed my palms on the table.

"A whoruh? Get outta heuh."

Gia's mouth was open, but she wasn't breathing.

Amy gave her a slap.

She gasped for air like she'd been choking. "What time is it?"

My eyes went to the clock. "One minute till five."

Gia looked at me. "Harriet's evening tour time."

"Aunt Carla, give me your grease funnel."

She rinsed it and handed it to me.

"What are you going to do, Cass?" Amy asked.

"Follow me outside."

We filed through the salon and down the porch steps just as the Gold Rush History Tours bus pulled in front of the house.

Harriet spotted us from her seat behind the wheel. She rubbed her hands together, as though she had something planned to get even with us.

I gripped the funnel.

She threw open the doors and descended with her bullhorn and gestured in our direction. "Prospectors, this is a rare sighting of the owners of the old LaSalle House brothel—"

The funnel went to my lips. "—the place your tour guide's great-grandmother, Lola Turnblatt, proudly served the miners. Oops! I mean, serviced."

The gasps and cries from Harriet's clients were drowned out by the whimper amplified through the bullhorn.

As fast as she'd exited the bus, Harriet was back on it.

Tires squealed, prospectors screamed, and smoke rose up.

And the Gold Rush History Tours bus was gone.

* * *

Zac leaned back from the break room table and put his hands on his stomach. "That's the most amazing meal I've ever eaten."

Aunt Carla glowed as bright as the yellow of her zebra dress. "It's my special ragù, but Cassidi made it."

I hadn't. I opened my mouth to confess, but my aunt flicked her nails at me.

She rose from the table. "I've got to be back in Atlantic City tomorrow for my confirmation sponsor's nephew's birthday party, so I'm off to bed. Why don't you two get some tiramisu, which Cassidi also made, and go onto the porch?"

My cheeks burned, probably as red as the ragù I hadn't made. I turned and spooned two servings of the tiramisu, which I also hadn't made, and Zac carried them out to the porch.

I turned to wish my aunt good night, and Gia came downstairs in a tight red satin dress and matching heels.

"You look nice, G. Are you goin' out with Donatello?"

"I broke up with him." She ran her fingers through her satin-black locks.

I gasped. "Because of the flower arrangement?"

"Nah. It's just too dangerous to date a cop. I mean, look at me—I ended up in the joint."

Aunt Carla's lips thinned—into a smile. "That's my girl."

I wondered again about my aunt and her Mafia side.

"Do you need the Ferrari, Cass?"

"Zac and I are staying in. Where are you going?"

"I've got a date with Quadzilla." Gia gave her Chicken Fillets a bump. "Don't wait up." She sashayed out the back door.

Shaking my head, I went out to the porch and settled into the swing beside Zac. With our thighs touching, we dug into our desserts.

"Whoa." He jerked back from the dish.

I coughed.

My aunt had loaded it with brandy, trying to get us drunk and hyped up on caffeine.

"It really picks you up, as the name suggests," I said to cover my embarrassment. Then I ditched mine on an end table.

He exhaled into a laugh. "I was just thinking about Harriet. I still wish I could've seen her peel out of here today."

"The best part was when she came back and tore up the contract as though I was the one losing out."

"She's something else."

"Entirely. But the irony is that her tours are what prompted us to do the renovations that led to Uncle Vinnie's money."

"Funny how life works out, isn't it?"

I gave him the eye. Something about the question struck me as odd.

We sat for a moment, holding hands and gazing at the stars.

Zac put his dish on the porch and slipped his arm around me. "I'm sorry about your uncle."

"I know."

"I'm also sorry I got knocked out like an idiot and couldn't help you last night."

I rested my head on his shoulder. "You've been there every time I've needed you, starting with the day you helped Tucker Sloan move my uncle's nudie statues from the house."

He chuckled. "That was a spectacle, wasn't it? But an enjoyable one." I pulled away and punched his arm.

"Hey." He rubbed his bicep. "I was talking about you—you were the spectacle, an awesome one."

"I'm glad you added that last part." I cuddled into his side. "But there's something I'm sorry about."

He kissed the top of my head. "What?"

"That you never found the treasure."

"Oh, I had it the whole time."

I lurched up. "Huh?"

"You. I'm talking about you again. You're the treasure."

"Oh." I settled into his side. Maybe my brain *had* gotten scrambled from hanging upside down.

Zac leaned over and gave me a kiss that made me sorry about one other thing—that my aunt Carla was in the house.

I pulled away and looked up at him, trying not to smile. "Well, it's good that you think I'm a treasure, because there's something I need your help with."

His head tilted backwards. "Didn't you tell Detective Ohlsen that you were retiring from sleuthing?"

"This isn't about crime, Zac. I need help investing my half of my uncle's money."

"I know a little about stocks and mutual funds, but you'd be better off talking to a financial advisor."

I elbowed his side. "I'm talking about you, Zac. And Pirate's Hook Marine Services."

He blinked.

"I've got serious capital to invest, and I don't want to end up like Sonny Torlone. I trust you, and I believe in the business."

"Cassidi, I don't know."

"I do. It's what I want, and I have the money for the down payment. Besides, I would be buying it from Clark, so you can't tell me no. And, after the log downed the boat and the fire took out three more, he'll probably lower the price, which means I need to act before someone buys it out from under us both."

He looked away and flicked his thumb across his lashes.

And my heart melted.

Zac inhaled, and his chest expanded. "Actually, I could use a partner," he said softly, "but not just in business."

Was he...

I looked into his gorgeous blue eyes. His pupils were dilated.

He was.

I straightened and adjusted my sweater. "Well, you can't expect me to produce a down payment without putting one down yourself."

"Sounds fair. I can do that." He leaned back and reached into his front pants pocket.

And pulled out a Tiffany & Co. box.

I gasped and looked at the house.

Aunt Carla was right. That ragù really worked.

* * * * *

RECIPES

Italian Sunrise

This drink just screams "Aunt Carla" to me because she's so colorful and so over the top. I had my first Italian Sunrise (yes, I've had more than one!) at Riondo's Ristorante in Galveston. It's pretty much the ideal drink for me because it has Limoncello *and* Campari, two of my favorite Italian liqueurs (and Franki Amato book titles).

Ingredients

1 oz Limoncello

1 oz vodka

1/4 oz Campari

2 oz orange juice

Directions

Fill a highball or Collins glass with ice. Add the Limoncello and vodka. Add about two ounces of orange juice, leaving just enough room for the Campari. Gently pour in the Campari so that it will sink to the bottom of the glass. Do not stir, and drink immediately!

Ragù

If you're wondering about Aunt Carla's proposal-inducing pasta sauce—or desperate to get your hands on it—she uses the late Marcella Hazan's classic Bolognese recipe (Sh! That's a secret!). If you've never heard of Marcella, she has the distinction of being the cook that introduced the United States to authentic Italian cuisine. *Buon appetito!*

Ingredients

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

3 tablespoons butter, plus 1 for the pasta

½ cup chopped onion

²/₃ cup chopped celery

²/₃ cup chopped carrot

3/4 pound ground beef chuck

salt

black pepper, freshly ground

1 cup whole milk

whole nutmeg

1 cup dry white wine

1½ cups canned imported Italian plum tomatoes with their juice

11/4 to 11/2 pounds tagliatelle or fettuccine

parmigiano-reggiano, freshly grated

Directions

Put the oil, butter, and chopped onion into a saucepot. Cook at a medium heat, stirring the onion until translucent. Add the chopped celery and carrot, and cook for two minutes.

Add ground beef, a large pinch of salt, and a few grindings of pepper. Break up the meat with a fork, stir well, and cook until the beef has lost its raw, red color.

Add milk and simmer gently, stirring frequently, until it has evaporated. Grate and add 1/8 of a teaspoon of nutmeg, and stir.

Add the wine and let it simmer until evaporated. Then add the tomatoes, and stir. When the tomatoes begin to bubble, reduce the heat to a low

simmer (bubbles will intermittently break to the surface). Cook uncovered for three hours, stirring occasionally. If the meat begins to dry out while cooking, add ½ cup water as needed to keep it moist. At the end of the cooking time, water must be completely evaporated and the fat must separate from the sauce. Taste and correct for salt.

Toss with cooked, drained pasta, adding the tablespoon of butter. Serve with freshly grated parmigiano-reggiano.

* * * * *

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Deadly Dirty Martinis

A Poison Manicure & Peach Liqueur

Not-So-Bright Hopes (short story in the <u>Pushing Up Daisies</u> collection)

Tequila Trouble

Deadly Thanksgiving Sampler

Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso

* * * * *

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Grazie for reading Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso!

Dear Reader,

It was a blast being back in Danger Cove, but I'll bet Cassidi, Gia, Amy, and Zac think otherwise. I mean, I haven't exactly been nice to them over the years, have I?

Speaking of torturing my characters, I had so much fun solving the serieslong mystery of who killed Cassidi's Uncle Vinnie in *Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso*. It was especially entertaining for me to bring his sister and Cassidi's aunt, Carla Di Mitri, to Danger Cove. I mentioned her in the first two books, so her trip was long overdue.

While I was cracking Vinnie's cold case, I decided to investigate some unsolved mysteries from *Secret of the Painted Lady*. I've always wanted to know why George Fontaine moved to Danger Cove and bought a flower shop when he clearly wasn't a florist, and what his parents did in London that had him on the run. I don't know about you, but I like to think that Christina, the author of *Secret of the Painted Lady*, would be pleased with my sleuthing.

If you have any comments about the Danger Cove Hair Salon mysteries, please email me at <u>traci@traciandrighetti.com</u>. Your emails not only help me to improve my plots, they're fun to read, and they motivate me to keep going.

Last but not least, if you enjoyed *Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso*, please write a review. We authors are dependent on readers like you to stay in business, so thank you in advance for your support.

Buona lettura (Happy reading)! Traci Andrighetti

* * * * *

Book Club Questions

Who is your favorite character in *Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso*? Explain. (Mine is Aunt Carla because of the color she brings to the book—I'm so glad she came to visit.)

Speaking of Aunt Carla, she operates within an extended network of relatives, friends, and neighborhood contacts, which provides her with good information. Does your family or community operate like this?

Vincent Conti is a controversial character, given his side hustles—i.e., selling illegal Viagra and working as a gigolo. What do you think of old Uncle Vinnie?

Everyone agrees that George Fontaine doesn't seem suited to be a florist. If you could have a career do-over, what would you choose?

Cassidi has mixed feelings about the brothel background of her painted lady and the remaining racy relics. If you had inherited the Victorian mansion, what changes would you have made, if any?

Alex Jordan finds a cameo brooch in the tower room. (I picked a cameo because I often see them for sale in Italy, and because they remind me of a forgotten era.) Do you wear vintage jewelry? Or do you collect a certain type?

Eyeshadow—Gia's all about it. Do you wear makeup? If so, what's your can't-live-without product? (I don't wear foundation or powder, but I would be hard-pressed to decide between lip liner and dark-circle concealer. My eyes and lips need the help!)

Thanks to Harriet McCudgeon's Gold Rush History Tours, Cassidi and Gia finally find Uncle Vinnie's hidden stash of cash. If you found eight hundred thousand dollars in your living room, what would you do with it (besides pay bills, of course)?

Cassidi and Zac seem destined for their happily ever after. What do you think happens to Gia and Donatello? And Amy Spannagel?

Aunt Carla's ragù seems to have a special effect on men. Do you have a secret-weapon recipe? If so, can you send it to me?;)

* * * * *

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

In her previous life, Traci Andrighetti was a lecturer of Italian at the University of Texas at Austin, where she earned a PhD in applied linguistics. But then she got wise and ditched that academic stuff for a life of crime—writing, that is. These days Traci is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Danger Cove Hair Salon mysteries and other works.

To learn more about Traci, visit her online at www.traciandrighetti.com.

USA Today bestselling author Elizabeth Ashby was born and raised in Danger Cove and now uses her literary talent to tell stories about the town she knows and loves. Ms. Ashby has penned several Danger Cove Mysteries, which are published by Gemma Halliday Publishing. While she does admit to taking some poetic license in her storytelling, she loves to incorporate the real people and places of her hometown into her stories. She says anyone who visits Danger Cove is fair game for her poisoned pen, so tourists beware! When she's not writing, Ms. Ashby enjoys gardening, taking long walks along the Pacific coastline, and curling up with a hot cup of tea, her cat, Sherlock, and a thrilling novel.

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BOOKS BY TRACI ANDRIGHETTI

Danger Cove Hair Salon Mysteries:

<u>Deadly Dye and a Soy Chai</u>
<u>A Poison Manicure & Peach Liqueur</u>
<u>Killer Eyeshadow and a Cold Espresso</u>

* * * * *

SNEAK PEEK

of the another Danger Cove Mystery

HEROES AND HURRICANES

A DANGER COVE COCKTAIL MYSTERY

by

NICOLE LEIREN &
ELIZABETH ASHBY

CHAPTER ONE

If anyone had ever told me a tavern would represent my last hope, I would've laughed. Seriously. Out loud with tears in my eyes. That kind of laughter. But here I stood in front of the Smugglers' Tavern in the quiet little town of Danger Cove, Washington. Looking for a little—

The front door of the building opened, and a woman stepped outside. "Hi, I'm Hope. Owner of the Smugglers' Tavern. Can I help you?"

Really? Her name was Hope. The universe must be having a good laugh about now. I knew my smile reached my eyes despite the desperate nature of my situation. This was too good to be true. I extended my hand. "Hi, I'm Lilly Waters. Charlie sent me over to see if you might have an opening. He said he used to work for you before he opened his own restaurant. He also suggested you were a good boss and a really decent person." I left out that Charlie's ex-wife wasn't such a good and decent person. She'd basically blackmailed him into hiring her niece, which had eliminated a need for my services. In all fairness, by giving in to her demands, the ex promised him more time with the kids. I didn't blame him. Kids needed a father. At least that's what I'd heard—not that I'd ever had a father in my life. But I'd had Gram, and she'd been all I needed.

Hope smiled and gestured for me to follow her inside. I took in my surroundings while she turned on lights and brought the tavern to life for the start of its day.

"Come on in. We're not officially open yet, but I'll be happy to get you a cup of coffee while we talk."

"Any chance I could have some tea?" Did I really say that out loud? What was wrong with me? I smoothed my hand through my long hair. The blonde highlights were fading, and the brown was becoming the dominant color again. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

Hope smiled. "Actually, I prefer tea myself. My friend, Ruby, and I are about the only ones who prefer tea to coffee around here it seems. I'll heat the water. Any particular kind?"

"Whatever you have will be fine. Thank you." There. I'd found my edit function again. *Keep it together, Lilly. You've got this.*

While Hope fixed our tea, two women who looked to be about the same age as each other walked in the door. "Hi, Hope. We're here. I've got

some great ideas for today's specials." The one talking noticed me about then. "Oh, sorry. Didn't know you had company."

"Lilly, this is Tara, my chef, and her twin sister and right hand, Clara."

"Nice to—" Tara started.

"Meet you," Clara finished.

A small chuckle escaped. I couldn't help it.

Hope saved me from too much embarrassment. "They do that all the time. You get used to it."

"Nice to meet both of you."

"Would anyone like a BLT or sandwich before—" Tara began.

"We get started on prep work?"

Oh, I liked these two. Made me wish I had a sister...or a brother...or a close family. Enough of those thoughts. I needed to present a well puttogether candidate for my perspective employer.

"Would you like a sandwich?" Hope asked.

I shook my head no, but my stomach betrayed me at that precise moment. Darn stomach. No job meant stretching the few groceries I had as far as I could. I was little, only five feet and barely five inches. Shouldn't require much food to sustain me, right?

Hope ignored my shaking head. "Two BLTs please. You know how I like mine."

They nodded and headed off to the kitchen. Hope turned and set the steaming tea down on the table. "So, Lilly Waters, tell me about yourself."

The full story would've taken longer than this nice lady had, so I gave her the abridged version. "I left home just shy of my twenty-first birthday. My grandmother, Rebecca Waters, who raised me, passed away."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry."

I shrugged. No tears in an interview. That had to be a rule somewhere. "Thank you. I decided to see the world. Well, the great old United States anyway. I took the money Gram left me, headed out of New York, and ventured from city to city. I trained to be a bartender shortly after I turned twenty-one. I happened to be in New Orleans at the time."

"Oh wow!" Hope's eyes widened, and I could almost see a sense of adventure and excitement in her expression. Maybe she'd been a traveler as well.

"Yeah, it was a pretty intense couple of years. I worked at Pat O'Brien's..."

"They're famous for their hurricanes, aren't they?"

I laughed. Many people had fallen, literally and figuratively, from drinking a few of our secret-recipe hurricanes. "That they are. It was a lot of fun. After a while, though, I needed a break from the partying and started the move west."

"What brought you to Danger Cove?"

I blinked a few times to regain control. *Relax. It's a normal question, not an interrogation.* "My great-grandmother Mary Beth was originally from here. Most of my family has lived here at one time or another. Thought it would be a good place for a homecoming."

About that time an older couple came in the door arguing with every breath. Hope leaned in and whispered, "They're like that. It's how they communicate and show they care about each other."

I smiled, unsure of how to respond.

"Ruby! Vernon! Come here and say hello to Lilly." Hope's face lit up as she called them over.

"Hi, Lilly," they offered in unison. Apparently they were capable of doing some things together.

Ruby shooed Vernon off to the kitchen. "Don't eat anything that isn't good for you!"

"Yeah, yeah," he mumbled and waved off her warning with his hand.

"Another tea drinker. I say we hire her." Ruby smiled and nodded in my direction. "Besides, I like her eyes. They've seen a lot of hurt and pain, but she still has a sense of compassion and humor."

I broke away from Ruby's intense gaze and refocused on Hope. "Is she a psychic or something? She could see all of that from looking into my eyes?"

"Soulful brown eyes with gold flecks," Ruby corrected.

Hope grinned at the other woman. "She's highly perceptive. We've both seen a lot in our travels as well. Ruby is very in tune with the universe. She's pretty spot-on with these things."

"Spot-on?" Ruby started laughing. "You're sounding more and more like Harvey every day."

At the mention of Harvey's name, Hope's eyes glazed over, and a goofy smile spread across her face. Ruby leaned over and whispered into my ear. "That is the look of a woman in love. Don't need to be in tune with the universe to figure that one out."

"Okay, enough about me," Hope interrupted. "What do you think about some extra help, Ruby?"

"Extra help? I can't argue with that. We're going to need someone, especially while you and Harvey are gallivanting all over the mother country having high tea with the queen and all."

They both laughed again. This was apparently an inside joke or information that was on a need-to-know basis. I was pretty sure I didn't need to know. Truthfully, I'd stopped listening at "going to need someone," hoping that translated into a job.

"Can you start training today?" Hope's dreamy expression faded, replaced by what I considered to be her conscientious-business-owner face.

"Yes, ma'am. I can start today. Right now if you need." Okay, that might have been a little eager...or desperate. Hey, if the situation fits...

"The tourist season is well underway, so we'll be pretty busy. I think after you finish your tea is a good time to start. Later, I'd love to see you whip up a special hurricane recipe to put on the menu."

Now she was talking my language. "You bet I can! One Smugglers' special hurricane coming right up." I slid my hand inside my purse. My secret ingredient rested comfortably at the bottom. There had been any number of extra ingredients added to hurricanes over the years, including some unscheduled alcohol from time to time. Mine created less mayhem when overconsumed, just added a nice extra touch. Since I had faith I'd secure a bartender position when I left this morning, or work my way up to one, I'd put it in my purse. Luck may never have been on my side, but faith still ran deep through my veins. Learned that lesson from a family who never gave up hope.

About that time the door swung open, and the finest male specimen I'd seen in a long time... Correction. Finest specimen I'd *ever* seen walked into the room. His tanned body proved a strong contrast to the white T-shirt straining to contain his well-defined muscles. The mellow lighting in the bar didn't dim his brilliant smile or his sandy blond hair. As my pulse raced, I couldn't help but think that he could be a hurricane blowing into my life any time he wanted.

HEROES AND HURRICANES

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