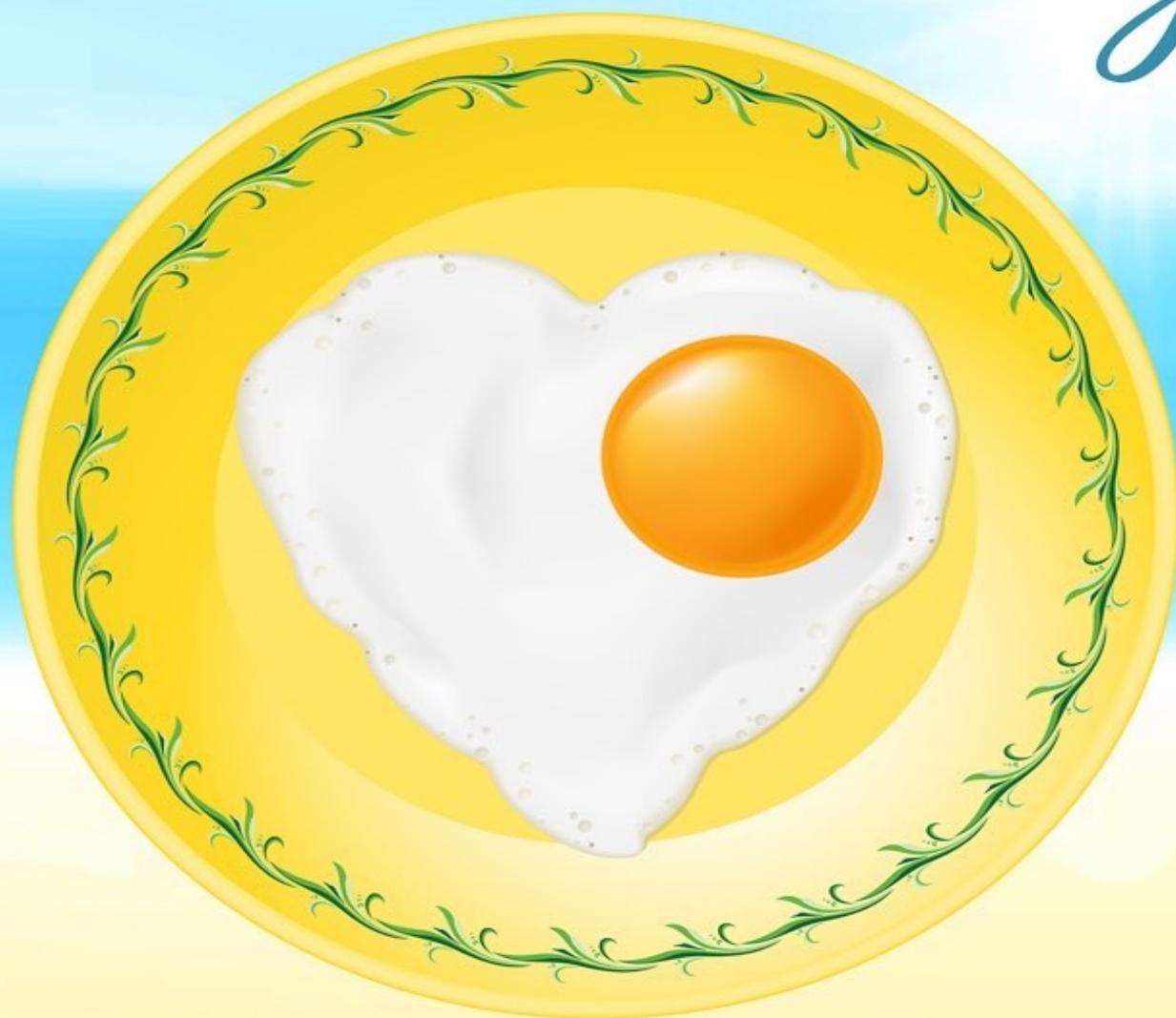


A SUNNY SIDE UP COZY MYSTERY - 1

MURDER

Over Easy



ROSIE A. POINT

MURDER OVER EASY

A Sunny Side Up Cozy Mystery Book 1

ROSIE A. POINT

CONTENTS

[You're invited!](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Craving More Cozy Mystery?](#)

[More for you...](#)

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YOU'RE INVITED!

Hi there, reader!

I'd like to formally invite you to join my awesome community of readers. We love to chat about cozy mysteries, cooking, and pets.

It's super fun because I get to share chapters from yet-to-be-released books, fun recipes, pictures, and do giveaways with the people who enjoy my stories the most.

So whether you're a new reader or you've been enjoying my stories for a while, you can catch up with other like-minded readers, and get lots of cool content by either...

[Signing up for my mailing list.](#)

[Joining our awesome reader group.](#)

I look forward to getting to know you better.

Let's get into the story!

Yours,

Rosie

The cat was out to get me.

It sat on the top step of my auntie’s cottage, its black paws placed neatly beside each other, its yellow eyes focused on me. Every time I tried taking a step up the front path, it would hiss, fur standing on end.

Now, I hadn’t exactly been expecting a welcome wagon when I’d arrived in Parfait, Florida, at the crack of dawn, but this was ridiculous. An angry cat, humidity that had no right to exist at 5:00 a.m., and the depressing realization that all my belongings fit into one wheeled suitcase—boy, was I living the life.

I cleared my throat, and the cat flicked its tail.

Why had Aunt Rita never told me she owned a cat? Though, in this case, it seemed more like the cat was the one who did the owning.

“Auntie,” I warbled. “I’m here!”

She’d expected me two days ago, but paying my ex-husband’s debts had taken longer than I’d hoped. There had been complications. People who I hadn’t even known had had dealings with Damon had come out of the woodwork, looking for handouts. A lot of them were Russian. And intimidating. And had told me if I called the cops, I would regret it.

Try not to get depressed this early in the morning.

“Auntie Rita?” I called.

The cat hissed at me again.

“Oh relax,” I said to it, hoping that my shouting hadn’t woken the neighbors.

Parfait was a small, coastal town, and the last thing I wanted was to make enemies on arrival. According to Aunt Rita, the locals adored her café and were pretty laid back, unless you got on their bad side.

I took a breath and fiddled with the extended handle of my suitcase. This was absurd. I couldn't let a cat get in my way. Aunt Rita had invited me to stay at her house while I got back on my feet after the messiest, scariest divorce in history.

And, yeah, I had been through the wringer, but I wasn't about to let a feline with an attitude problem prevent me from having a good start to my "revival."

Granted, my revival had so far comprised three sweaty bus rides and being hit on by a toothless man who smelled of bourbon and peanut butter. Interesting combination, I'd give him that.

"Aunt Rita." I tried one last time.

The cat meowed, showing off disastrously sharp fangs.

"Look," I said, directing myself to the cat, "I like cats. Pretty much every animal is great in my books, barring chickens. Long story." I waved a hand. "The bottom line is, I'm expected, OK? Aunt Rita knows I'm coming, so you can chill out."

Another disdainful flick of the tail.

Grow a pair of ovaries, Sunny, for heaven's sake. What's the worst that could happen? It launches at your ankles?

I *did* have tender ankles.

"OK," I said, "I'm coming up."

The cat had understood that, it seemed, because it rose on all fours and yowled like a bat out of the nether. It hissed and spat, clawing as I walked up the cute path that led to Aunt Rita's single-story cottage.

"Shoo!" I waved a hand. "Shoo!"

The cat streaked toward me, and I braced for clawed impact. It disappeared underneath a bush rather than inflicting flesh wounds.

"Huh, would you look at that," I murmured. "All hiss and no claws." I trudged up the front steps, grinning at my silly idiom, and stopped on the cutesy, floral-print welcome mat.

I rapped my knuckles on the front door. "Aunt Rita?" It was early, but my

aunt usually rose with the birds. She had when I'd lived with her, and I doubted that habit had changed over the last twenty years. Shoot, every Christmas I visited she'd wake me up with coffee at 4:30 a.m..

Twenty years. Gosh, was I really *that* old?

Thirty-eight and back at Auntie's house, looking for a place to stay, broke as the day I left.

I knocked. "It's me, Sunny." Still no answer.

The house was quiet as the grave.

Uh oh. OK, no need to panic.

My aunt always kept a spare key in plain sight in case she wasn't home when I came to visit. She'd changed her hiding spot from under the mat to the potted plant hanging from the eaves about a year ago. That was after I'd pointed out that everyone kept their spare key under the welcome mat.

I dug around in the soil in the potted plant and extracted the key. I dusted it off, my nerves building.

Why wasn't she answering the door? And why was her cat acting so weird? And when on earth had she gotten a cat?

I let myself into the cottage's entrance hall. It smelled faintly of lavender and chocolate chip cookies, as it always did. The evil cat streaked past me into the house, hissing for good measure, and I shut the door.

"Auntie?" I called out and flicked on the lights.

The place was immaculate—polished wood floors, styled in teal and cream, with framed pictures of me and Aunt Rita along the walls, showing my progression from geeky teenager to woman.

"Where is she?" I scooted my bag into place next to an end table. My gaze landed on an envelope propped against a vase of flowers. My name was scrawled across the front in my aunt's looping handwriting.

I lifted it, frowning. Why would she leave me a letter and not call me if she had a reason for not being here? Then again, I was a few days late.

I slit the envelope open with my aunt's silver letter opener and slipped out a single sheet of folded parchment paper.

My heart tha-thumped in my chest.

Dear Darling Sunny,

If you're reading this letter, I'm long gone. I regret to inform you that I've decided to go on a cruise with a few lady friends. To the Bahamas! Can you imagine it? Me in the Bahamas, sipping Bahamian drinks and dipping my toes in the water.

Now, you might think I'm crazy for leaving Florida, which is basically a prime vacation destination, but I need a break.

It's for this reason that I'm leaving you in charge of the Sunny Side Up Café until I get back.

I nearly dropped the letter in shock. "What?" I had no experience running a business whatsoever. I had gone to college to get a business degree, but my studies had been cut short when I'd married Damon. Besides, I couldn't cook a meal to save my life! Except for maybe spaghetti, and even that was touch and go.

I straightened the page and kept reading.

Don't worry, dear, you'll have plenty of help. Just try not to burn the place down while I'm gone.

I'll be unreachable for a few days until we've settled in, at which point you'll be able to contact me via the number on the back of this letter.

Have fun! Live a little!

Sincerely,

Aunt Rita

P.S. I've already had my neighbors feeding Bodger, but if you could take over from them once you arrive, that would be perfect. Also, Bodger hates everyone except for me, so make sure to lock your bedroom door at night. He has a tendency to leap at people's faces when they close their eyes.

Each word in the letter was worse than the last.

I was alone in my aunt's house with a homicidal cat and a café to run. Talk about out of my depth. And what had she meant about having plenty of help?

A knock rattled the front door, and I jumped and nearly dropped the letter.

“Hello?” I called out, uncertainly. “Who’s there?” I was still in a mental swirl over Aunt Rita taking a vacation and leaving me in charge of her business. In a letter. Say what you wanted about my aunt, but she had style.

“Miss Charles?” A warm, deep voice came through the door. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” I said, and folded my aunt’s letter. I tucked it into the pocket of my blue jeans, then opened the door.

One of the most handsome men I’d ever seen stood on the threshold. Dark brown, wavy hair, sparkling blue eyes, five o’clock shadow on his strong jaw, he welcomed me with an amiable smile.

Instantly, my red flag “don’t trust him no matter what” mind alarm sounded.

“Ready to go?” he asked, smile widening.

“Who are you?”

“Oh, right, of course. Rude of me. My name’s Nick Talbott. I live next door.” He gestured to the cottage to the right of my Aunt Rita’s. It had a well-kept front yard and a cute picket fence. “I’m here to help you get settled in the café.”

“I—OK?” I needed a minute to catch up.

“Your aunt told you you’d be taking over at the Sunny Side Up, right?”

“She wrote me a letter about it.”

“A letter.” Nick quirked an eyebrow. “Oh, Rita.” He gave an affectionate shake of his head. “That’s just like her. She’s always causing mischief and

mayhem wherever she goes.”

I nodded, swallowing. “What did you mean about me being ready to go?”

“I’m the chef at the café,” he said, gesturing to his chef’s whites. I’d been so taken with his ingratiating smile that I hadn’t noticed he was in uniform. He checked his watch. “We usually open around 8:00 a.m., and I like to get the prep done early. Might be a good idea to get down there now so I can show you around.”

“It’s 5:30 a.m.,” I squeaked. “I haven’t even had a coffee yet.”

“We’ve got plenty at the café. Croissants too.” He paused, casting his gaze over my outfit. “You might want to change into something lighter than that. The air-conditioning’s been on the fritz for a week, and the technician can’t make it out until tomorrow afternoon. I’ll give you five.”

“Oh. OK.”

He took the door from me, since I’d frozen, and closed it in my face.

I blinked.

This was surreal. I’d gone from losing everything, being sure I would make nothing of myself and feeling incapable because of it, to being thrown into the deep end.

I didn’t know the first thing about food or hospitality, other than the “customer was always right” mantra. And though I considered myself a friendly person, I wasn’t the obsequious type. I called people out when they were rude.

“Be back in five minutes,” Nick said through the door.

His words jolted me back to the present. I rolled my bag down the hall and found my aunt’s guestroom. Quickly, I changed into a pair of khaki shorts and a light cotton blouse before hurrying through to the kitchen and locating a tin of wet food for the resident demon cat.

I put food in his bowl, hoping that he would eat it, then refreshed his water supply.

The knock came at the five-minute mark exactly. At least this Nick guy was punctual—a good trait in a chef, right?

I opened the door, and he thrust a mug into my hands. “Jasmine made this for you,” he said. “Thought it might help you since you’ve had a long night.”

“Thanks,” I said, and took a sip of the strong black coffee. “Who’s Jasmine?”

“My wife,” he replied. “I’ll introduce you to her later, but for now, we should probably get down to the café.”

I locked the cottage, tucking the key into my pocket, then followed him to his car. He opened the passenger door for me.

“You don’t have a car?” he asked.

I shook my head. I wasn’t about to go into the grubby details about how I’d had to sell it to cover my ex-husband’s debts.

“That’s fine. I can give you a ride to work each day. But I leave early.”

Nothing sounded less appetizing. I got into the passenger seat and clipped on my seatbelt.

Ten minutes later, we’d come to a halt outside the Sunny Side Up Café. It was a friendly place, with blue walls and a giant fried egg painted on the sign above the door. It was situated on one of Parfait’s wide streets, with a view of the sandy beach and whispering waves. A boardwalk overlooked the ocean, and I pictured myself taking lunch breaks there, the sun on my face and the sea salt in my hair.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad. It was a pleasant change from the city.

“—little cow!” The yell came from the boardwalk.

Nick, who’d been fishing the restaurant keys out of his pocket, froze. “Ah. Here we go again.”

“Huh?”

He nodded to two women standing at the entrance to the boardwalk. One old and hunched over, her purple-gray hair bobbling as she shouted and gesticulated, the other young and short, with poker-straight black hair glistening in the rising sun.

“This is a common thing around here?” I asked. “People fighting at the crack of dawn?”

“It’s the crazy time in Parfait,” he replied. “Too hot to sleep, so people decide they’ll head out for a beach walk and end up airing their grievances to each other or about each other to each other.”

“That’s a lot of each other. And grievances.”

“Pretty much,” he said, shrugging. “The elderly woman’s name is Frances. She’s... not someone you want to mess with. She’s got a red-hot chili pepper temper.”

“What, like the band?”

He laughed. “No, like the actual chili pepper. Like a California Reaper.”

“Eugh.”

“She comes into the café every morning, so consider this your first lesson of the day. Stay out of her way. Just smile and nod and give her whatever she orders. Then again, you don’t have to worry about that. You’re the acting manager not a server.” He unlocked the café, then entered and jabbed in the alarm code.

I followed him inside, and a wall of heat hit me. “Oh wow,” I said. “It’s even hotter in here.”

“Glad you changed?”

I nodded.

Nick handed me a set of keys. “Rita left these for you,” he said. “You and I are the only two people who have a set now, so if anything goes wrong... well, it won’t. Don’t worry. Let me walk you through the place.” Nick’s tour was exhaustive, from the steel-countered kitchen to the dining area with its circular tables and checked yellow and white tablecloths to the brass register behind a broad counter that held baked goods.

“These items are ordered from suppliers.” He gestured to a standing fridge with glass windows—cakes turned in circles on stands, some of them already with a few slices removed. “We replace them every few days or when they’re finished, depending on which comes first. The cheesecakes are always the most popular. Key Lime in particular.”

I’d already lost track of most of what he’d told me, but I nodded like I was onboard, forcing myself to smile. Sweat gathered on my top lip, as the sharp sunlight streamed through the front windows and across the pale wooden floorboards. The walls were a pleasant peony blue, carrying happy pictures of customers with food, many of them featuring my Aunt Rita.

What I wouldn’t have given for her to be here right now.

I was so out of my depth, it was scary.

“All right,” Nick said, clapping his hands together. “Now, I’m going to teach you how to make an over easy egg.”

“What? Why? You’re the chef, I—”

“It’s Rita’s signature dish,” he said, “and everyone who works here is expected to know how to make one. We get so many orders of them, it’s sometimes helpful to have the servers making them to order should I be otherwise engaged.”

“Why not just hire more chefs?”

“They’re not exactly a dime-a-dozen in Parfait. Besides,” he said, offering me another shatteringly handsome smile, “it’s tradition. You wouldn’t want to go against tradition, would you?”

“**T**hey’re at the doors, scrambling to get in. Excuse the pun.” Didi, a server on duty this morning, rolled her eyes at her own joke. She was young, with long dark hair streaked pink, and wore a t-shirt with a Korean pop music group on the front, all in different cute poses. Didi had informed me she was a BTS-stan the minute she’d entered the door. I had no idea what it meant and was too flustered to ask.

“So, think you’re ready?” Nick asked me. He’d already done his prep for the morning and left me to greet the three servers as they’d arrived.

We’d made our introductions, but I’d never felt less prepared for anything in my life, and I’d just spent the last few months dealing with divorce lawyers, for heaven’s sake.

“I—uh—”

“I’ll take that as a resounding yes,” the chef said. “Get out there and break a leg.”

“Unleash the drones!” Didi cried—she was college-aged and enthusiastic.

I wanted to be swept up by that excitement, but I was way too nervous. I exited into the dining area and found the servers lined up in front of the counter and coffee bar, chatting. They were so calm, and I was streaked with sweat, my blonde hair standing on end and trying to escape its ponytail.

“Should we open the doors, Miss Charles?” Karl asked.

“Call me Sunny,” I said. “And, uh, yes, I think you should.”

I took a sip of the water I'd secreted behind the counter, shaking a little.

You're fine. You've got a plan of action.

I would use the register and coffee bar as my base of operations, only heading out to meet the customers when there was a problem, or it was time for a meet-and-greet. That type of thing. I'd simply ring up orders and everything would be perfectly fine.

The doors opened, and a group of customers entered, all taking the window tables first, then the others that spread through the cafe. The doors remained wide open, bringing in an ocean breeze that was, thankfully, coolish.

And just like that, I was inundated with action. Servers ringing up orders, me doing the same, greeting people, smiling so much my cheeks hurt, trying to fathom out how the coffee machine worked, then messing up about five orders and having to refund them.

I stayed on the brink of panic for the first hour, then the second. Finally, during the third, I tore myself away from the counter and strolled through the room, stopping to talk with the townsfolk.

They all wanted to know where Rita had gone, and, as one lady had put it, "Who do you think you are taking her place?"

My rounds through the restaurant brought me to the table closest to the door. I stopped next to it and plastered up a smile. "Hello," I said, "How are you get —?" I broke off.

It was the elderly woman Nick had told me about. The mean granny, Frances. She wore a flowery dress and sat hunched over her cup of coffee, staring into its murky contents.

Was I about to get screamed at? Embarrassed in front of strangers? Give my Aunt's café a bad name?

"Good morning, dear," Frances said. "It's lovely to meet you. You must be Rita's niece, is that correct?"

"Yes, I am."

"I've heard so much about you," she continued, waving a hand. It trembled as she placed it back on her cup. "Rita spoke so fondly of you."

"She did?"

“Of course. How pretty you are, how sweet you are, how much potential you have and how you deserve better than your low-life husband. That kind of thing.”

I choked on my own saliva. “My—”

“Potential,” Frances replied with another smile.

“Are you, uh, are you having a good morning?” I asked, then blinked at the silly question. “I mean, is everything up to its usual standard?”

“Coffee is terribly weak, but it’s your first day. I’m sure everyone will cut you slack, dear. Don’t worry too much about it. I know you must be a little overwhelmed, but by the end of the week, it will be like you’ve lived here your entire life. Parfait is like that. Warm and welcoming. You’ll see.”

Not the impression I’d gotten from her this morning. “Thank you,” I said, and slunk off, privately grateful that her temper hadn’t made its appearance. Then again, she might have had a good reason for arguing with that other woman this morning.

Who was I to judge?

I wound back toward the coffee bar, but a shout stopped me in my tracks.

A group of young people had entered the cafe, a short, dark-haired girl at their center, holding up a phone and snapping pictures of herself and then of the restaurant. It was the same young woman who’d been arguing with Frances a few hours ago. Now, she didn’t so much as glance the elderly woman’s way—and Frances paid her the same attention. Or lack thereof.

“Who’s that?” I whispered to myself.

Didi stopped next to me, carrying a large tray with empty dishes from a table on it. “That?” She rolled her eyes, the glitter on her eyelids amplifying the effect. “I went to high school with her. She was a few years older than me. Trisha Williams.” Another eye-roll. “She thinks she’s so cool, but she’s so... ugh. Trisha’s a food vlogger, though, so you probably want to stay on her good side. She’s got over a million followers across her social media accounts.”

“Wow.” That was a lot—I wasn’t that familiar with social media numbers, but a million was still a million.

“Yeah.” Didi hurried off toward the kitchen. And the other servers were all

busy with their tables. I searched the café for help, but there was none.

Meaning I would have to seat the group and serve them. I cleared my throat, squared my shoulders, and told myself to buck up. I'd been a homemaker for most of my adult life, but that didn't mean I couldn't conquer new territories.

“Good morning,” I said, surreptitiously checking the time on the egg clock behind the coffee bar. It was just past 11:00 a.m.. “May I help you?”

“Hi, yeah,” Trisha said, flicking her hair, and snapping another photo of herself. “Party of five. We're here to eat and take pictures. We're influencers. Do you have a discount for that kind of thing?”

“I—I have no idea,” I replied. Honesty was always the best policy, right?

Trisha narrowed her eyes.

“But I'm sure we can work something out. Right this way, please,” I said, and led them to a booth along the wall.

They sat down, and I hovered next to the table like a lost fly.

“Are you going to offer us drinks?” Trisha asked, raising a micro bladed eyebrow.

“Yes, of course. What can I get for you?”

They rattled off their orders one by one and I noted them down on my phone, trying not to ask them to repeat themselves too many times. “Right,” I said. “I'll be right back with those.”

Trisha had already started talking into her phone, posing while she took a video of herself, so I skedaddled.

I signaled to Didi and showed her the list of drinks. “I have no idea how to make any of these,” I whispered. “Iced coffee with a maple syrup sprinkling and a—what is this?”

“Lime-o-chino?” Didi asked, setting down her tray and glancing over at her tables. “It's a lime and coffee milkshake.”

“That sounds revolting,” I hissed.

“It does,” Didi agreed, “but it tastes surprisingly good. Look, I'll help you make this round of drinks. And I'll come back after the evening shift tonight to help you figure out how to make the rest of the drink items on the menu.”

“Thank you. You're too kind.” I could have cried in gratitude.

Didi was a whiz at the coffee bar. She whipped up the drinks, showing me how to make them as she went, teaching me about the frothing wand on the front of the coffee machine, and the difference between a latte and a cappuccino. At least fifty percent of the information sank in.

Finally, I had my tray of drinks. Didi hurried off to serve her table—the customers had been shooting her angry looks since she'd taken so long helping me—and I took the tray to the food vlogger, wobbling all the way.

Of course, I gave everyone the wrong drink, and they had to switch at the table, but it was done at least. Now, I could find another of the servers to take control of the table.

I drifted a few steps from Trisha's table, hoping the drinks would tide them over until things calmed down a bit.

"Excuse me," Trisha called, and clicked her fingers at me, her bright green eyes zeroed in on mine. "Aren't you going to ask us what we want to eat? The service in this place has seriously gone downhill. The last time I was in Parfait, this was the café to eat at."

"Sorry," I said. "I'm new. OK, so what can I get for you?"

The people at the table remained silent, shaking their heads that they weren't hungry, their gazes trained on Trisha.

"Hmm, let me see. What am I going to try?" Trisha paged through the menu—it was laid out like an A4 newspaper and doubled as a place setting. "Hmm. Ah. I'll take Rita's Eggs Over Easy, please. Make sure you bring the hot sauce with you."

Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

This wasn't a dish I could rightfully hand off to Nick in the kitchen. He was already swamped and as he'd mentioned earlier, it was tradition in the Sunny Side Up Café to make eggs over easy for your customer.

"Are you sure you don't want to try something a little more involved?" I asked. "What about a Sunny Side Up Burger and Fries?"

"Eggs over easy, please."

"OK," I managed, and almost took the menu from her before realizing she needed it for a place setting.

I retreated, my heart sitting in my throat. What if I messed it up? I searched around for Didi, but she was busy, and I'd already stolen enough of her time. I brushed my hands off on the Sunny Side Up apron I'd tied on this morning as part of the staff uniform and headed for the kitchen.

Nick was inside, enveloped in delicious cooking scents and clouds of steam. He spotted me and gestured with an egg flipper. "Mind watching this bacon while I run to the bathroom?"

"Uh, sure."

I fumbled a pan out of the cupboards and placed it on the stovetop. It took me two minutes to figure out how to switch the gas on. I got the oil from the pantry, then returned to the kitchen and slopped it into the pan.

"So far, so good," I whispered. "Now, where are the eggs?" I found them in the fridge.

I cracked two into the pan and practiced doing exactly as Nick had shown me, all while keeping a panicked eye on the bacon.

Nick returned and took over. "Doing a superb job on those eggs," he said, smiling. "Take a breath, Sunny, you're doing great."

"Thanks," I said, managing a wavering smile. The moment of truth had come. Egg flipping.

I closed one eye, stuck my tongue between my teeth, and turned the eggs over using the technique he'd shown me. And...

It worked! The yolks didn't break or anything.

I served the eggs onto a waiting plate, pride welling in my chest at what I'd created. They looked pretty darn good, if I said so myself. I grabbed a bottle of hot sauce on the way out of the kitchen.

"There you are!" Didi waved. "Oh wow, you did it! Your first ever plate of eggs over easy."

"I can scarcely believe it," I said. "I've never cooked eggs before."

"First time for everything. Here, let me take a picture of this momentous occasion." Didi took my phone out of the front pocket of my yellow apron, a picture of an egg on the front. She snapped a picture of me smiling, sweat-streaked, but successful, then popped my phone back into my pocket again.

“You know,” I said, “I should’ve learned to cook long ago, but we had a chef for that and...” I trailed off, blushing. It was silly to talk about my past now. And crass. “Never mind. I’d better get this over to the vlogger’s table.”

I did exactly that and set the eggs down in front of her with pride.

She frowned. “Uh, no toast?” she asked.

“Oh! Right. I can get some.”

“No, I don’t have time,” Trisha sighed. “This will have to be fine.” She splashed hot sauce over the eggs, then took several pictures of them.

It was silly to be prideful, but I couldn’t help worrying that the eggs would be cold by the time she took the first bite.

I tucked my hands behind my back and twisted my fingers, nervously. What if they didn’t taste good? *Ridiculous. Eggs are eggs are eggs. They can only taste one way.*

Trisha cut through the middle of an egg and golden yolk oozed onto the plate. She took yet another picture, before finally spearing a piece on the end of her fork and eating it. She chewed, cleared her throat, then chewed some more.

Her face paled. She sucked in several deep breaths and shook her head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Is it not done well enough?”

Trisha didn’t answer. She keeled over and plonked face first into her plate.

The inside of the café erupted into screams.

I sat on a barstool in front of the cash register, my hands on my thighs, my eyes wide and staring directly ahead. I'd seen a few shocking things in my time—pictures of my ex-husband on vacation with his mistress in Puerto Rico, some of which had been on the racy side. And I'd also watched plenty of true crime shows with my Aunt Rita—it had been a passion of ours during my teen years—but nothing could have prepared me for this.

Trisha Williams was dead as... well, as a dead thing. I couldn't summon up a metaphor in this state.

The café had turned to chaos after she'd collapsed, but Nick had come striding out of the kitchen and called everyone to order. The police had been summoned, and now the detectives were questioning everyone.

The booth where it had happened had already been cordoned off, and the body removed.

Apparently, they wanted to ensure *nobody* left the Sunny Side Up Café until the police had taken their details and statements.

And that included me.

"You all right?" Nick asked, from next to the counter. "You're pale. Have some water."

I shook my head. "Just didn't expect it. She just... she just died. Right in front of me. What happened?"

"No idea," Nick replied. "But I'm sure the cops will figure it out. We've got

some good ones in Parfait. That guy over there? He's new. Transferred from Miami, so he knows his stuff."

"That's good." The sooner this got sorted out, the better. I didn't want my aunt's café to suffer because of what had happened. "You know, it's just my luck that something like this would happen on my first day here. I swear, I'm a bad omen."

"Don't be silly." Nick patted me on the back. "It's just bad luck."

"Yeah, and I'm the source."

The detective he'd pointed out—a handsome Latina man wearing a buttoned, short-sleeve shirt, a pair of pants, and a lanyard bearing his identification—walked over before Nick could reply.

"Are you Miss Sunny Charles?" he asked.

"Yes, that's me." I swallowed halfway through the word 'that's' and made a horrible glugging noise in my throat.

"I'm Detective Garcia," he said. "Mind coming over here with me, ma'am?"

"Sure, no problem." I followed him to a booth that was two away from the other cops, nervous diners, and would-be witnesses. I sat on the comfy covered vinyl, sweat gathering on my brow.

The day had worn on, and the cool breeze had vanished. It was humid, and the beautiful view of the beach and the boardwalk did nothing to soothe me.

"How are you?" the detective asked, removing a notepad from his pocket. He set it on the table between us and placed a ballpoint pen atop it.

"Um, I've been better," I said.

"I understand you witnessed Miss Williams' death firsthand?"

"Yes. I was standing right next to her table when it happened," I managed. "She... I think she was choking. She started sort of clearing her throat and went pale, but she didn't grab anyone or gesture that she needed help. Trisha just... she just fell over into her plate and died. Oh, it's horrible." It came out of me in a stream. The pressure had built to a point where I had to release it. "You know, she was going to recommend the café and the eggs I made her, I'm sure of it, and now she's—I can't believe this has happened."

Detective Garcia flipped open his notepad, keeping the cover up so I couldn't

make out what was on the page. “Tell me more about what she was doing before she passed.”

“She was talking to her friends. And eating, of course. I served her some eggs over easy with hot sauce. First time I’ve ever made them, too, and they went so well.” I could hear myself babbling but was powerless to stop it. “You don’t think it was the eggs, do you? Can rotten eggs kill a person? That’s a stupid question, don’t answer it. I know that they can’t immediately kill a person like that, but it was so shocking and—”

“I’m afraid I have bad news, Miss Charles,” Detective Garcia said, his expression serious. “You’re going to have to close the café for a few days while we conduct a search and document any evidence the killer might have left behind.”

“Killer?” I blinked rapidly. “But she was choking.”

“Our preliminary findings suggest this was no accident,” Garcia said. “You’re going to have to close this place down.”

“For how long? Look, I just started here today. This is my aunt’s place. I can’t let her down. She trusted me to—for how long, detective?” The panic had reached a fever pitch.

I couldn’t allow anything to happen to my aunt’s café. She’d dreamed of owning one for the years we’d lived in the city together. She’d spoken so fondly of retiring and starting her own place out by the beach. I simply couldn’t be the reason she lost her life’s dream.

“For as long as we take to find the evidence we need.” He removed a card from his pocket and gave it to me. “I’ll be in touch. Don’t leave town.”



NICK HAD BEEN KIND ENOUGH TO GIVE ME A RIDE HOME FROM THE CAFÉ, BUT we’d passed the time in silence. I was lost in worry about the murder and the consequences related to it. What if my aunt’s café couldn’t reopen? What if... oh heavens, what if I had brought the bad luck that took down the successful establishment?

That's ridiculous. It's not like you murdered Trisha.

"We're here," Nick said, clearing his throat.

I jerked upright, blinking at the sight of my aunt's cottage through the passenger window of his car.

"Sorry." Nick smiled. "I didn't mean to startle you. You were kind of staring into space there."

"Oh." I blushed. "Yeah, it's been a strange morning. And afternoon."

"Do you need help with anything?" Nick asked. "I visit Rita pretty often, so I know the lay of the land."

"No, thank you. You've been too kind." That was a silly turn of phrase. "I can take it from here." I thanked the incredibly handsome, and incredibly *married* chef one last time, then got out of the car and made my way up the cute stepping stone path that led to the cottage steps.

The evil cat was nowhere to be seen. I should've called out for him, but I was afraid this was merely an employment of guerrilla warfare, and he'd leap out of the bushes, claws angled for my throat.

I hurried up the front steps and fished my aunt's front door key out of my pocket.

It was still hot as hades, and I fanned myself as I entered the cottage. Thankfully, my aunt had air-conditioning that worked. I found the remote and switched it on, then relished the cool.

But the relief was short-lived. I had to tell Aunt Rita about what had happened. While I was at it, I could ask her about the letter and the cat.

I fetched myself a bottle of water from the fridge, drank from it, then fished out my phone and dialed the number on the letter Aunt Rita had left me.

"Hello?" Aunt Rita yelled down the line. "Hello, can you hear me, sweetheart?"

"Hi auntie," I said back, raising my voice even though there was no interference on my side.

"Hold on a minute. I'm at a deck party. One second." The noise grew louder than fainter. "Ah, there, that's better. Sunny! How are you, darling? Are you settling in all right? How's the café? Did you feed Bodger? What about Nick?"

“I fed Bodger,” I said, checking the cat’s food tray. It was empty, but his water bowl was still full. “But I didn’t feed Nick.”

“Hilarious,” Aunt Rita said. “And the café?”

I sucked in a breath, crossing my fingers. “I, uh, well, uh...”

“What did you do?” Aunt Rita sighed. “Start a fire? Health inspector? Come on, I don’t have all day. They’re serving cocktails in five minutes, and Marjorie wants us to compete in a wet shoe contest.”

“What’s a wet shoe contest?” I asked.

“Don’t change the subject, Sunny.”

“There’s been an accident,” I said, and then filled her in on the gritty details of what’d happened. “I’m sorry, auntie, but I don’t know what to do. I did my best, but Detective Garcia says we can’t open again until he gives us the go ahead.”

“That’s not ideal,” Aunt Rita said. “But I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“What?” I squawked. “How might I be fine? I’ve just—I need help! Look, auntie, I think you should come back. I know you want a break, but I’m just not fit to deal with these types of problems. I didn’t even finish my business degree. I—”

“You’ve got Nick to help you,” Rita said, firmly. “And I think you underestimate yourself, Sunny. You’ll be fine. Just don’t lose the café.”

“But—”

“Have fun!” And then she hung up.

I stared at the phone, eyes wide. Was she serious? My aunt had always been a free spirit, but this was unheard of. She was entrusting me with the fate of her beloved café so she could take part in wet shoe contests and drink Cosmopolitans on a cruise out in the Bahamas?

I lowered myself into a rickety chair at her kitchen table.

Bodger’s yellow eyes appeared in the doorway that led into the living area.

It was going to be a long day. Shoot, make that a long week.

I had never been inside an interrogation room before, but if I believed most of the TV shows I'd watched, they were always gray, with a steel table and two uncomfortable chairs. Of course, there'd have to be a two-way mirror, and a door that slammed ominously as the questioning officers exited or entered.

The interrogation room down at the Parfait Police Station, or the 'precinct' as Detective Garcia had referred to it, defied expectation. It was a well-lit room, walls colored duck's egg blue, with two comfortable chairs, a circular table, and no windows. A camera sat in the corner of the room, and I glanced at it once in a while, rubbing my arms at the cold temperature. Still, it beat the humidity that I'd woken up to this morning.

Detective Garcia entered. "Good morning, Miss Charles," he said. "How are you?"

"A little out of sorts," I said, "but OK, and you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Are you comfortable? Can I get you anything?" He set down two bottles of water on the table, then took a seat, his caramel brown eyes focused on my face.

"Water is great, thanks." I took the bottle, opened it, and drank some.

"Glad to see you found this place OK," he said. "Thanks for coming down."

"No problem." I'd discovered my grandmother's old VW Beetle in the garage—painted a sunny yellow, with an egg decal on the side—and pattered down here, my heart thundering against the inside of my ribcage.

Detective Garcia placed a folder on the table between us, his back to the door. “You understand why I’ve asked you to come down here today, right?”

“To talk about... to talk about what happened to Trisha,” I said.

This was silly. I had nothing to be nervous about. I hadn’t hurt Trisha. I’d merely given her a plate of eggs. For all I knew, she might’ve choked on them. If that was the case, I doubted Detective Garcia would’ve asked me to come to the station to talk to him.

“That’s correct,” Detective Garcia said, in a mild tone. “Now, I want you to understand that you’re here of your own free will. You can leave at any time. You’re not under arrest. Do you understand that, Miss Charles?”

“Yes, thank you. I understand.”

“Great. We need as much information as we can get about what happened to Trisha yesterday. I appreciate your cooperation.”

I shifted in the chair. “I’m happy to help in any way I can.” I wasn’t just concerned about my aunt’s café. A woman had died yesterday. Right in front of me. It had been so traumatic I’d struggled to fall asleep last night and had raided my aunt’s medicine cabinet for a sleeping pill.

“Great,” Detective Garcia said, the skin around his eyes crinkling as he smiled. “Great. So, let’s begin by talking about what happened yesterday. I took your statement, but there are a few things I’d like to discuss with you regarding the kitchen and your staff.”

“Uh, OK?”

“When you prepared the dish for Trisha yesterday, were you alone in the kitchen at any point?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, I was. Nick, the chef, went to the bathroom.”

“And you were watching over the food while he was gone?”

“Yes.”

“Did you leave the kitchen at any point during that time?” Detective Garcia asked.

“No,” I said. “Oh wait, yes, yes I did. I went into the pantry to get ingredients for the eggs.”

“How long would you say you were in there?”

“A couple minutes at most.”

“All right. Is there more than one entrance to the kitchen?” he asked.

“Not that I know of,” I said. “But I’ve only just started working at the café.”

“Why is that?”

“What? The entrances?”

“No, why have you only just started working at the café, yet you’re the one managing the place?”

Hadn’t I told him this yesterday? I took a sip of my water to still my nerves, then cleared my throat. “Well, my aunt owns the café, and she left me in charge while she takes a vacation. It was kind of a shock. I expected to come down and stay with her for a while, but she’d already left for her cruise.”

“Where did you come from?” Garcia asked.

“Chicago,” I replied.

“And what made you come down here? Just a vacation?” He leaned in.

I angled myself away from him. “Uh, well, I’ve come to stay for a while until I get back on my feet.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think that applies to the case, detective,” I said.

I wasn’t about to go into my sordid history with my disappearing ex-husband.

“I think it’s very relevant,” Detective Garcia said, tapping the case file on the table. “In fact, I think it’s crucial to this investigation, and I’d appreciate it if you answered my questions, ma’am.”

I didn’t like his tone.

Keep it together. Just answer the questions for Aunt Rita. For the café.

“OK,” I said. “Fine. I came out here, if you really must know, because I’ve just been through an incredibly messy divorce, I’m broke, and I need a place to stay.”

“A divorce,” Garcia said. “With Mr. Damon Stokes.”

“How did you—?”

Detective Garcia opened the file on his desk and removed several pictures from it. He turned them around and slid them over to me. He tapped a figure on

one of them. “Is that your ex-husband, Miss Charles?”

“Yes, that’s Damon.” My stomach twisted at the sight of my handsome, low-life of an ex. He was with a burly man with a hooked nose, seated at a table at a restaurant I didn’t recognize. A suitcase was on the floor at Damon’s feet.

“Do you recognize the man with him?”

“No,” I said, trying to take even breaths so I wouldn’t start hyperventilating. Damon had caused me nothing but trouble over the past six months.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, I’m sure. But I assume he’s a criminal.”

“Why do you assume that?” Detective Garcia asked, tilting his head to one side.

“Because,” I sighed, “as I recently discovered, Damon had been dealing with criminals. As far as I know, most of them were Russian. I understand you’re probably suspicious of me, but I already went over this with the FBI.” They’d been kind enough not to drag me into an interrogation room, but had spoken to me in my home. “Damon was living a double-life. I didn’t question where our money came from.” A point of which I was ashamed. “All I knew was that we were doing great, and that we could afford to have lavish Christmases and parties.”

“Tell me more,” Detective Garcia said.

“There’s not much to tell, except Damon lied to me, and by the time I figured it out, he was already long gone, and I had a bunch of unsavory debtors knocking on my door. The men he had been dealing with. I had to sell everything to pay the banks and them, and it still wasn’t enough.”

“What happened?”

“The FBI stepped in and scared off or arrested most of the criminals squeezing me for money and information,” I said. “And they gave me a new last name to use.”

“You’re giving me this information freely.”

“What choice do I have? You can just contact them and find out all of this yourself.” I’d come to my aunt’s place because Rita had moved away from my original ‘childhood’ home to start the café, and I hadn’t been to Parfait since

then. No one knew where she stayed. I'd assumed I'd be safe here. Had my assumption been wrong?

All I wanted was a new start to my life, and the FBI agents who had handled the many cases connected to my disappearing husband had assured me I would be fine. That Damon's illegal contacts had been dealt with.

"Why do you want to know all of this?" I asked, after a long silence from him. "Do you think I had something to do with the murder because of my past?"

"I'm merely looking for the information I need to solve this case, Miss Charles," Detective Garcia said. "This is relevant information."

"I can't speak for my ex-husband," I said, "but I haven't done anything illegal. I'm a law-abiding citizen." Strangely, talking about Damon made me angry enough to banish the nerves I'd had when I'd first sat down at the table. "I'm happy to cooperate and answer any of your questions."

"I think that will be all for today, Miss Charles," Garcia said, no smiles now. "But like I said, don't leave town." He got up.

I followed him out of the interrogation room and down a long hall toward a reception area. He bid me a good day before walking off, and I was left to exit the building by myself. Probably a good thing. I needed the time to think, and Detective Garcia had given me *a lot* to ponder.

My feet carried me out into the sunshine, down a set of steps and to my aunt's VW Beetle. I leaned against it for a moment, soaking in the sun, my eyes closed and my head tilted back to catch the faint whisper of a salty breeze off the ocean that was only a few blocks over.

"You OK?" A man spoke next to me.

I squeaked and opened my eyes. "Nick," I breathed. "What are you doing here?"

"Detective Garcia asked me to come down. His partner interviewed me," the chef said, out of his uniform today and wearing a pair of shorts and a collared t-shirt. His dark hair was messy, his eyes shimmering blue.

"How did it go?"

"On a scale of one to Disneyland, I'd say it was a minus ten," he replied, grimacing. "What about you?"

“About the same,” I said, because I wasn’t about to go into detail with anybody about Damon or my past. No one in Parfait needed to know my business. It would only make them look at me strangely, and this was meant to be a clean slate.

“Sorry this happened to you on your first day in Parfait,” Nick said, then laughed, deprecatory. “Sorry it happened on any day.”

“Yeah, me too. I’m frustrated,” I said. “I wanted to help Aunt Rita out, but I can’t be of much use if the café is closed.”

“Look,” Nick said, “don’t worry about that. It will all work out. I promise.”

He was sweet. “Thanks, Nick,” I replied, smiling.

A car door slammed nearby, and a brunette woman, about the same age as me, pranced over. She wore yoga pants, a loose shirt, and a scowl. “Nick! We’re going to be late for class!”

“Oh hey, honey,” Nick said, and welcomed her with an arm around the waist and a kiss on the cheek. “I was catching up with Sunny. She’s the manager of the café while Rita’s taking her vacation.”

“Oh.” The woman eyed me, green eyes narrowed. “Hello.”

“Hi,” I said, wiping my hand surreptitiously on my shorts then putting it out. “Nice to meet you.”

“Sunny, this is my wife, Jasmine,” Nick said.

We shook hands. Jasmine’s grip was firm—maybe a little too firm—and she gave an extra squeeze before letting go of my hand. “It’s a pleasure,” she said, her face telling a different tale. “Nick didn’t mention you.”

“I did.” Nick scratched his brow, frowning. “Yesterday, remember? I even asked you to make coffee for her?”

“Oh. Oh! OK. I was picturing someone different when you said Rita’s niece was in town.” Jasmine gave me a suspicious once-over. “Anyway, we’re going to be late. We’d better hit the road.”

“Right. I’ll see you around, Sunny. Don’t stress about the café too much. I’m sure everything will work out.” And off they went together, Jasmine stiff-backed, even as Nick loped alongside her, his arm around her waist.

That was interesting. But inconsequential. Jasmine didn’t have to guard

Nick. I had no interest in romantic relationships, and I certainly wasn't the type of woman who meddled with a married man. Besides, I had more important things to worry about.

Like Aunt Rita's café and whether we'd ever open again.

I opted for a drive along the beachfront in my aunt's old car, the windows rolled down to let in the breeze off the ocean. The view was beautiful, the boardwalk packed with people walking, talking, and enjoying food from the various stalls set up along it. The ocean sparkled underneath the morning light, and I smiled.

It would've been perfect if the café wasn't in trouble.

I drove past the Sunny Side Up, my heart sinking at the sight of the yellow police tape strung across the door. There were no officers poking around in there, but I wouldn't be getting permission to go back in soon.

Was it a bad thing that I was relieved about that?

While I desperately wanted to do my aunt's café justice and look after it properly, the first day working there had been intimidating even without the murder.

I'd been out of my depth, afraid, and sure I'd mess it all up.

It was a challenge. You're supposed to rise to challenges. Still, I couldn't help feeling under-equipped and embarrassed. Maybe if I'd finished my degree...

But it was too late to go back now. I was pushing forty, and I couldn't picture myself sitting in a lecture hall with young classmates. Moot point. I couldn't afford to go back to school, even if I'd wanted to.

The sunshine and wind seemed a little less fresh, and I turned down a street

then back up another, circling back to the road that held the café.

I drove down it again, frowning at the police line, my thoughts on a negativity rampage.

“Hey!” The shout came a second before the bump on the car’s hood.

I hit the brakes, my gaze snapping to the road ahead just as a man fell across the front of the sun-yellow hood of the Beetle.

I gasped, pulled up my handbrake, then bolted out of the car.

“Oh my word! Oh my word, are you OK? I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!” The words came out in a flustered rush.

The man, chubby, wearing a bowtie with a short-sleeved buttoned shirt and a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, looked up at me. He pressed his palms to the hood and lifted himself upright. “Y-you hit me,” he stammered. “You—you hit me.”

“I’m so sorry!” I helped him along, waving at the cars gathering behind mine. They started streaming past, a few of the drivers craning their necks to get a good look at us.

I escorted the man onto a wood-slatted bench on the sidewalk. He blinked, clearly shell-shocked.

“Are you OK? Do you have pain anywhere? I can call 911!” My aunt probably had insurance, but I doubted it covered her reckless niece careening into innocent pedestrians. I’d have to pay for his hospital bills out of pocket. The trouble was, there was nothing in my pockets.

“I’m fine,” he said, shaking his head. “Just a little shocked. You barely hit me.”

I had been driving at a crawl, glaring like a weirdo at the café. “You fell over.”

“I’m fine, lady,” he said.

“Look, let me make it up to you somehow,” I said, while cars honked their horns behind the Beetle. “I can get you something to eat or drink. My name’s Sunny, by the way.”

“Tom. Tom Miller.” We shook hands. “I wanted to get a milkshake at that café.” He nodded to the Sunny Side Up. “But it’s closed.”

“Yeah, there was, uh, an incident. But we’ll open again soon.”

“We?” Tom asked, squinting up at me. “You work at the café? I haven’t seen you there before.”

“Oh yeah, I’m new. I’m Rita’s niece,” I said, trying to be proud about that rather than shameful. “Look, let me get you a milkshake from the stand over there. Or a soda. Something sweet for the shock.”

“You’d better move your car first. People are getting frustrated.”

I did, pulling into a free parking spot along the boardwalk before hurrying over to a stall and buying a Coke from a grumpy man in a sweat-stained tank top. I returned to Tom and handed over the can.

“Thanks,” he said, and popped the tab. “Ah, that’s better. Nice and sweet. So, you were talking about Rita?”

“Yeah. I’m her niece. I’m working at the café until she gets back from her cruise.”

“A cruise, eh? Lucky. I wish I could afford to take one of those. Anyway, thanks for this. You really don’t have to worry about me,” Tom said, with a wan smile. “I’m clumsy on my clear-headed days. I wasn’t looking where I was going when I crossed the street.”

He was so kind that it made me feel even more guilty. I opened my mouth to thank him and insist that I would have to compensate him when a cry rang out from across the street.

The shout had come from a hunched over woman in a flower-speckled sundress. She stood in the doorway of the building next to the café. The board above the door read: **Parfait Animal Shelter** in bold letters that had faded under the constant barrage of sunlight.

She waved at me. Or at Tom. I wasn't sure which.

"Who's that?" I asked. "Do you know her?"

Tom sighed. "Everyone knows her," he said. "That's Mildred. Owns the shelter. Always looking for a handout. Look, I've got to go. Thanks for the Coke, and I believe it's my duty to tell you to watch where you're going in the future. I'll do the same." He rose and strode off down the boardwalk—no hobble in sight, which made me feel a little better.

That had been a lucky escape. If I'd been driving faster... heavens, I needed to pay more attention.

Another call came from the woman in front of the animal shelter, and I decided the time was ripe for introducing myself. The shelter was right next door to the café, and I'd been meaning to say hello to the neighboring business people yesterday. Obviously, more pressing matters had intervened.

I went over, checking both ways before I crossed the street.

"Hello there," Mildred said, in a raspy voice. She patted her limp gray curls. "You must be Sunny."

"I am," I said, and put out a hand.

She waved it away and offered me a hug instead. She smelled faintly of old books and dog feed, but it wasn't an entirely unpleasant scent. "Rita has told me so much about you, dear," she said. "You must come in. Please." She beckoned for me to follow her into the shelter. "I'm Mildred, by the way," she said. "Mildred Shaw. One of your auntie's best friends."

"It's lovely to meet you."

The reception area in the animal shelter was themed in pale pinks and white, the floor tiles cracked here and there, the paint dull and having seen better days. Several of the chairs near the reception desk looked chewed on, which I guessed made sense.

Mildred shuffled over to a worn looking coffee pot behind the desk. "Can I interest you in a refreshment?"

"Sure," I said, not wanting to be rude. "That would be great."

Mildred set about making the coffee, humming under her breath as she worked. "It's nice to have a new face in town. Don't get me wrong, I love the old ones, but it's so refreshing when someone comes to visit."

I wandered around the reception area and peeked down the long hall that led to where the animals were kept. The place was quiet. "It's nice to be here."

"That's good. I know Parfait isn't a hot and happening place for young people, but it's cozy. And that counts for something, you know?"

"Cozy enough that someone died in the café," I murmured, before I could stop myself.

Mildred nearly dropped a mug. "Oh dear, you mustn't speak like that. It's just terrible what happened to poor Trisha and to the café, but you must try to look on the bright side of things. There's that new detective in town. He's from Miami Dade county. If anyone can solve this case, it's him."

I nodded noncommittally.

"He has to, doesn't he?" Mildred continued, getting down a cookie jar from a cupboard behind the desk. She came over with it and opened the lid, offering me one.

"Thank you," I said, and extracted a chocolate chip cookie that looked about as old as I was. I took a bite regardless, and it puffed to dust between my teeth.

“You’re welcome, dear. I hardly get visitors.”

“Why do you say Detective Garcia *has* to solve the case?” My curiosity was piqued, now that I wasn’t overwhelmed by what had happened. My aunt and I had stayed in many nights watching cold case crime shows when I was a teen. We’d tried solving the mysteries before the end of the show and had gotten pretty good at it.

“Why, because the Sunny Side Up simply has to stay open for the good of the town,” Mildred replied, shutting the cookie jar without taking a cookie for herself. She peered up at me with deep, brown eyes, enhanced by her thick glasses. “It’s like the heartbeat of Parfait, and if it closes... I’m afraid that what little business I get will disappear.”

I cleared my throat, trying to free it of chocolate chip cookie dust. “What do you mean?”

“This is a non-profit shelter, dear. I rely on the generosity of others to keep the doors open and the animals fed, and your aunt, she’s such a dear, has been wonderful about helping drive interest with fundraising events. I don’t know what I’ll do if the café closes down.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, my stomach twisting. Once again, it felt like this was my fault. If only I’d never made those eggs. But no, if I hadn’t, someone else might’ve and the same would’ve happened. Then again, who was to say it was the eggs that had killed Trisha? “Is there any way I can help?”

“Oh no, no. Nothing you can do, dear.” She reached up and patted my cheek before shuffling off to fill the coffee mugs. “I hoped that my nephew could take over from me soon, but at this rate, I might not stay open another week.”

“Because the café is closed? I’m sure the police will permit us to open again soon,” I said, hoping to offer some hope, however slight.

“It’s not just that,” Mildred said. “I’ve had some other issues lately. Money missing from the bank account. It’s... don’t worry about it, dear. It’s none of your business, and it’s not your problem. You focus on enjoying a good time in Parfait.”

But I couldn’t shake the weight that had settled on my shoulders. It was more than my aunt relying on the Sunny Side Up Café staying open. There was a

whole financial ecosystem that revolved around the business. There was Mildred next door, and then Nick the chef and his wife, and the servers who worked in the café too. What would happen if they lost their jobs? I didn't want to envision it.

“—dear?”

“Sorry?”

“Would you like cream in your coffee, dear?” Mildred held up a jug that she'd brought out of the fridge.

“Just black for me, thank you,” I said, and finished the grave dust cookie, my mind whirring away, and my nerves returning in force.

Later that evening...

I'd spent the rest of the afternoon considering my navel, feeling guilty, and dusting Aunt Rita's house so I would at least have something to do. I was ashamed to admit, even to myself, that a portion of my day had been taken up by spying on my neighbors behind the net curtains in the kitchen and the attached living room.

People-watching was my vice and always had been, and it helped me feel in control of the situation. Like if I knew where everyone was, no one could sneak up on me—not murderers or Russians. Not that there were Russians after me or anything.

I finished toweling off my hair in the guest bedroom of the cottage, gave myself a weary look, then headed into the kitchen in search of dinner. I'd have to cook for myself, which was about as appealing as a thrombosis, but what could I do?

"Let's see what we've got," I muttered, and opened the cupboard. I fished out a box of macaroni and considered it. It was better than nothing, and I had to woman up and learn how to cook already. I wanted to squash any part of me that connected to my ex-husband and that silly, fake luxury life we'd been living.

That included learning to fend for myself in the kitchen, rather than relying on other people to do things for me.

A grating meow came from under the kitchen table, and I hopped on the spot, dropping the box of pasta.

I bent and peered at Bodger.

He was black as ink, lending stark contrast to his evil yellow-eyed gaze.

“Hello,” I said, cautiously.

He flicked his tail at me.

“Would you like some food?”

His second meow was a clear demand. “Feed me or I will punish you.”

“All right,” I said. “Just a second.” I found the cat food, brought it out and opened a tin. “You know, you’re spoiled. My friends back home had a cat, and they didn’t feed it copious amounts of wet food from noon till’ night.”

Silence. I feared for my life.

“I take it back,” I said, as I spooned the food into the bowl. “Just don’t claw my eyes out, all right?”

No return meow, but when I sneaked a glance in Bodger’s direction, he was still there, quiet and watching. It was a vast improvement on the hissing and leaping. Had he finally started trusting me?

The thought had barely formed when Bodger let out a threatening yowl and dove out from under the table, clawing and batting me away from his bowl.

“Eek!” I abandoned the empty tin in the sink and ran for the safety of the living room. Was it utterly ludicrous that I’d been chased out of the kitchen by a cat, and would now have to wait however long it took him to eat his meal before I could make my dinner? Yes.

Was I going back in there regardless? No.

My road to independence would come in baby steps. Cooking first, cat taming later.

A knock rat-tatted at the front door, and I wound past my aunt’s comfy sofa and armchairs and into the short hallway at the front of the cottage. “Who’s there?” I called.

“It’s Didi!” The cry came back. “From the café?”

Oh right, the server who loved K-Pop. She'd been super friendly on a day when everything had gone wrong.

I unlocked the front door. "Hi," I said, smiling. "How are you?"

"I'm great!" Didi invited herself in and pranced past me. She stopped after a few steps, looking around the front hall, one eye narrowed. "Where's the cat?"

"Bodger? He's eating. Don't tell me he growls at you too?"

"See this scar?" she gestured to a mark on her knee, below the hem of her black skirt. "First time we met. That cat was summoned from down under. And I'm not talking about Australia."

"Yeah, he's not the most welcoming cat, is he?"

"No." Didi twirled a strand of pink-streaked hair around her finger, then examined it. "I don't mean to harsh your vibe or whatever, but I figured you'd need some company. What with you being new in town and all. Do you want to go out for dinner?"

I hesitated.

Hadn't I just decided I'd grow up and learn to cook? Then again, going out would be a pleasant distraction from worrying about the café and Trisha's murder. And if it got me further away from Bodger's evil kitty stares, all the better.

"Sure," I said. "That sounds great. Thanks for asking."



I'D EXPECTED DIDI TO TAKE ME TO SOME HIP PLACE WHERE PEOPLE HER AGE hung out. Possibly a bar that played K-Pop or trance music, but it appeared places like that were in short supply in Parfait. Thank goodness. I wasn't a square, but I wasn't ready for a millennial awakening on my second day in town, right after witnessing a murder.

Instead, we took a leisurely stroll from my aunt's cottage down to the boardwalk along the beach, and found a table at the Hungry Alligator, a surf and turf restaurant with an amazing view of the ocean.

"This is gorgeous," I said, interlacing my hands and looking out over the

waves. We were on the balcony, and the sun had just reached the horizon, casting an orange hue over the distant water.

“Isn’t it? This is my favorite place to come when I get a little lonely,” Didi said. “It always makes me feel at home. Welcome.”

“Don’t you feel welcome in Parfait?”

Didi shrugged. “It’s a small town, and most of the girls my age are at college or have boyfriends. Or they don’t listen to K-Pop and think I’m a weirdo.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, who cares what most people think?”

“That’s what I always say.” Didi beamed and plucked at her t-shirt, which bore an image of one of her favorite bands. Or, wait, weren’t they called groups? They didn’t have instruments, right?

A server appeared and stopped me from over analyzing pop culture. I ordered a seafood platter for one—I was starved and it was on special—and Didi got herself a burger and fries.

We sipped sodas and chatted idly about life in Parfait.

“It’s a tourist town,” Didi said, “so during the summer months, things get a little crazy. I remember last year, Rita was run off her feet by the new people stopping by the café. Not that she was complaining because it was extra work. Rita loves work. But you know that.”

My aunt was a hard-working eccentric. A rarity. Speaking about her brought a pang of nostalgia and sadness—I missed her already. I’d been looking forward to spending time with her.

“Did you speak to her about Trisha?” Didi lowered her voice as she broached the hot topic.

“I did,” I replied. “She told me she trusts me to handle it.”

“Sheesh. Well, if she trusts you, then I do too. Rita is a great judge of character.”

I wanted that to be a compliment, but I didn’t trust myself to do my aunt’s café justice.

“I can’t believe that happened on your first day. There are so many rumors. A lot of people are saying she choked, others are saying she was poisoned,” Didi whispered.

I shuddered. “The only way she could’ve been poisoned was by our food, so I refuse to think it was that. Even I can’t mess up eggs that bad, right?”

“Right.” Didi laughed, lifting her hand in front of her mouth and bowing her head to hide her smile. “Oh wow, speak of the devil.”

“Who?”

“That’s Trisha’s assistant, Bebe,” my new friend said, nodding toward the doors that led onto the balcony overlooking the ocean.

A young Latina woman with caramel-brown hair, wearing a tight black dress had arrived. She was alone, but I recognized her from the other day. She’d been a part of Trisha’s entourage at the café.

Bebe had her smartphone out and swept her green-eyed gaze over the mostly full tables on the balcony, then walked over to one where a solitary figure sat.

I frowned. “Hey, wait a minute,” I whispered. “That’s Tom.”

“Oh right,” Didi said. “Tom Miller, the food critic.”

“He’s a food critic?”

“Yeah, he has a column in the *Parfait Platter*—it’s the local newspaper. He’s really nice. I don’t think I’ve ever read an overcritical review of the local restaurants.”

“I wonder why he’s having dinner with Bebe,” I said. “It doesn’t look like a friendly conversation, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t. But I went to school with Bebe and she’s, uh, she was popular. So she wasn’t that nice to me, and I don’t think she’s that nice to other people in general. I haven’t spoken to her in ages, though, so maybe I’m wrong and she’s changed.” Didi’s frown was doubtful.

Our food arrived, and I lost myself in the flavors of crispy fried clams, mussels in a garlic butter sauce, grilled fish on the bone, delicious French fries, and calamari with fresh lemon squeezed over it and a side of tartar sauce. It was difficult to worry about anything with this much delicious food to eat.

So, I wasn’t the greatest cook. I was an appreciator of the finer cuisines. My gaze wandered over to Bebe and Tom’s table. They sat in stiff silence, Tom eating his meal, and Bebe ignoring a plate of fries.

What was going on with them?

None of your business, Sunny. It's not your problem to solve.

“**A**re you sure this is safe?” I asked, as Didi and I strolled down the sidewalk after our meal. The sun had set long ago, and we were full to the brim after having a slice of chocolate cake each after dinner. I should’ve been rolling down the road rather than walking.

“What do you mean?” Didi asked, readjusting her purse strap on her shoulder. “Am I sure what’s safe?”

“Just walking home like this. At night. Just two women on the street.”

“Of course,” Didi laughed. “Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

“Just not something I’d do in the city, is all.”

“Well, you’re safe in Parfait. We have minor crimes here, theft occasionally, but nothing serious. Nothing like what happened to Trisha.” Didi shivered, even though it was a balmy evening. “But we don’t even know if Trisha was murdered. They haven’t told us outright. Even the *Parfait Platter* hasn’t released any information yet.”

I didn’t have the heart to break it to her that Detective Garcia had all but told me that this was a murder case.

“If you say so,” I said.

“You’ll get used to the slower pace of things around here. We go to bed whenever we want, we spend time eating and laughing and kidding around with our friends and family,” Didi said. “There’s a real sense of community.”

“Is that why you stayed in town?”

“Kind of. I love it here, but I want to go to college and study to be a chef. I just can’t afford it, and my mom can’t either. So, I’m trying to work extra shifts and save up enough money to go.”

Another wave of guilt assaulted me. Yet more evidence that the Sunny Side Up Café was important to the local people. Didi relied on it for her income and for her future life goals.

“What’s wrong?” Didi asked.

I hadn’t realized I’d stopped walking. “Nothing,” I said. “I just hope that everything works itself out soon because I—” I cut off.

A strange creeping sensation prickled down my spine, and I turned to peer back down the street. We’d left the ocean and boardwalk behind and were on a side-road that wound back toward my aunt’s seaside cottage.

“What is it?” Didi asked, following my gaze.

“I could swear I—no, it’s nothing. I’m just being paranoid.” But I’d heard something. The faint whisper of footsteps following us in the dark. It had to be my imagination. Was I so stressed that I was now hearing things? “Let’s go.”

We set off again, and Didi hummed under her breath, completely unfazed by my tense stride. I listened hard.

Sure enough, the soft scuffle of steps started up, and I spun around, glaring back down the street. A shadowy figure disappeared down an alleyway, stepping out of sight a second too late.

“Someone’s following us,” I said. “They just went down there.”

“Between the baker and the candlestick maker?”

“Uh…”

“I’m serious,” Didi said. “That’s Rob’s Bakery, and Kara’s Candles is right next door.”

I tried not to get distracted by the extraneous information. “Someone is following us.”

“Are you sure?” Didi was skeptical. She popped a hip and placed a hand on it.

“I’m sure,” I said.

“Well, then, let’s go see who it is.” Didi took a few steps forward, but I

grabbed her arm and stopped her. “What? Come on, it’s probably a local walking home like us. Or a busybody who wants to find out more about you.”

“No, Didi. Let’s go. I don’t like this.”

“It’s OK,” the young woman said.

“Please.”

“Hey, whoever’s down there, come out right now!” Didi yelled. “Let us see your face!”

Silence answered her call, and the rush of blood in my ears was the only sound.

“See?” Didi shrugged. “No one.”

Reluctantly, I started walking again, and we wound back around toward the coast, finding the dirt road that led to my aunt’s cottage. Thankfully, Didi lived nearby with her mother, so she wouldn’t have to walk much further after we’d reached my place. The follower, whoever they were, didn’t chase after us, and the whispering of footsteps stopped after Didi’s shouting.

“Are you sure I can’t walk you home?” I asked.

“I live just down the road,” Didi laughed. “Seriously. It’s totally chilled around here. You don’t have to worry about anything other than Rita’s cat. Good luck.”

I stood on the porch and watched until she reached the house on the far corner. She disappeared inside, and only then did I enter my aunt’s house. I double-checked the door was locked, just in case.

Dawn came too early for my liking, but the bright sunlight and morning humidity wiped away my fears from last night. I took a cup of coffee out onto my aunt's small front porch and sat on the swinging seat. In the daylight, my fears seemed silly. Of course, Parfait was safe. Of course, I was fine.

It was just Detective Garcia's talk about Damon and my past that had gotten me worried. No one would find me here, and the FBI had done their job in taking care of the last stragglers who had had dealings with my husband.

I was perfectly safe. And perfectly ridiculous for turning what was the start to my new life into something sinister and scary.

The ocean view from my aunt's cottage was only partially blocked by coastal scrub, and I smiled to myself, listening to the distant waves, tilting my head back to accept the mingled scents of coffee and salty air.

A door slammed nearby, and a young man with long dark hair tied back in a ponytail appeared in the yard next door.

"Hello," I called. "You're up early."

"So are you," he said with a smile. "You must be Rita's niece. She mentioned you'd be coming to stay for a while."

I got up, brushing off my shorts and straightening them, then walked down to the quaint picket fence that separated my aunt's yard from his.

He stuck out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you," he said. "Jonas Hodges."

“Sunday Charles, but you can call me Sunny.”

“Great,” he said. “I was about to do some gardening. Want me to water your flowers? Rita’s not the best at looking after her garden, and she relies on me to make sure everything stays alive and well. I get a few free drinks at the café for it.”

“Oh, sure, if you’d like to,” I replied. “But I don’t think you’ll be getting any free drinks this week.”

“Heard about that,” Jonas said, with a regretful shake of his head. “But look, I’m sure everything will work itself out. That new detective has a keen look about him. Heard a rumor that he worked at one of those big homicide departments in Miami.”

The door opened a second time, and a young woman in a pink dress came out, also with dark hair tied back in a ponytail. “Oh hello!” She grinned. “You must be Rita’s niece.”

“This is Sunny,” Jonas said. “Sunny, this is my wife, Emilia.”

“Nice to meet you.” I waved. “Are you—?” My phone rang, and I winced. “Excuse me.” I trudged back to my aunt’s porch for some relative privacy and answered the incoming call.

“This is Sunny,” I said, nerves swelling in the pit of my stomach. I had no idea why. They were just *there*, and I couldn’t rid myself of them. How annoying.

“Good morning, Miss Charles. It’s Detective Garcia.”

OK, so apparently my nerves had been well-placed.

“How are you, detective?”

“As well as I can be,” he said. “I’ve got some news about your café.”

“Oh?” *Please be good news. Please be good news. Please be good news.*

“We’ve found traces of poison in your kitchen and on the plate that served Trisha Williams,” he said.

I nearly lost my balance and sat down heavily on my aunt’s swing seat. “You... you what?”

“Yes. But we believe the poison was placed there before your employment. By someone who worked in the café.”

“That’s... why?”

“I’m only telling you this to let you know I don’t need you to come down, and that you’re not under suspicion at the moment,” he said.

I didn’t like the ‘at the moment’ part of that sentence.

“And that you’re permitted to go in, clean up, and open your café again. I’ll be in touch soon.”

“Why?” I blurted it out.

“This case is far from closed, Miss Charles. Stay safe and stay in town.”

“Wait!” I yelped before he could hang up.

“Miss Charles?”

“I—can you at least tell me who you think might’ve done this? I need to know if I’m going to be working in the café. I don’t want to worry about what might happen tomorrow or the next day or—”

An awkward quiet followed.

“Please?”

“We’re investigating a few leads,” Detective Garcia said. “And I’m not at liberty to disclose that information just yet.”

“It’s not Nick,” I said, because that was my hunch. It had been Nick and me in that kitchen, and he’d spent the most time there. There was just no way. He was a nice guy, right? And he’d been so helpful.

You don’t know him, though.

But Aunt Rita did, and she would never have trusted him to help me if she’d thought for a second that he might be a murderer. Or a bad guy.

“—a good day, Miss Charles.” And then the detective was gone, and I was left with a churning stomach.

Jonas and Emilia were still out in the yard—Jonas watering the flowers, and Emilia chasing their toddler around in the front yard. The chubby little boy let out wild whoops of joy, giggling madly while his mother chanted, “Here comes the kissy monster!”

It was such a sweet image that it made my predicament starker.

Quickly, I dialed Nick and pressed my cellphone to my ear.

The phone rang and rang, eventually clicking over to his pre-recorded

message.

“This is Nick. Leave a message after the beep. Beep!” He’d said the beep and everything, his voice tinged with a smile.

“Hi Nick, it’s Sunny. From the café? I mean, from Aunt Rita’s café. I just got news from the detective that we can open up again. We need to clean up. I’m thinking we’ll be ready by the weekend. Uh, just call me when you have the chance.”

I nudged myself back and forth on the swinging seat, trying to rock myself to calm. It didn’t work.

There was nothing left to do that afternoon but clean up the café and prepare it for the reopening. The police tape was gone when I arrived, but the interior of the café was messy. Everything had been left as it was, and there were coatings of powder that I assumed was for fingerprinting on the table where Trisha had died.

Eugh.

Someone had died in the café. Would that put people off? It put me off.

I'd joined the group chat that comprised the Sunny Side Up's employees and broadcast a message that we were free to clean up for reopening, and that I could use a little help. I'd noted that it wasn't mandatory or anything.

There had been a barrage of questions about shift times and changes, and I'd promised that I'd look into it once I got to the café. I had no idea how they organized their shifts, and my guts twisted into knots at the thought of figuring it out on my own.

Nick still hadn't answered my message.

"You can do this," I whispered, wiping sweat from my brow as I walked through the interior of the café, noting the mess, the cleaning we'd have to do to make this place ship-shape.

I entered the kitchen, and my jaw dropped.

They'd taken just about everything. They'd cleared out the pots and pans, the food... It had obviously been contaminated. That, or they'd taken the stuff into

evidence. Which meant I'd have to contact Rita's suppliers and request more, and buy a whole new set of cutlery, crockery, and cookware.

That was probably for the best.

"Nick, where are you?" I whispered, bringing my phone out of my pocket.

"Hello?" Didi's voice echoed from the café's interior, and I walked out to meet her.

"Didi," I said, and hugged her. "I'm so glad you came."

"Of course," she said, practically bouncing with excitement in a cute pink dress that stressed the streaks in her hair. She'd tied her locks up in pigtails. "The sooner we get the café up and running again, the happier I'll be. But we've got to leave the door open while we clean. It's too hot in here." She fanned herself, pulling a face.

I wedged the door open with the doorstep—a little man with an egg for a body. "I have no idea where to begin. They took everything in the kitchen. The place is a mess. I just—it's so overwhelming."

"Don't worry," Didi said. "I know where Rita keeps the contact info for her suppliers. And she orders her plates special from a guy the town over." She strutted into the café, clearly at home. "Wait a sec. Where's Nick?"

"I don't know," I said. "I can't get hold of him."

"That's weird." But Didi brushed it off, ever the optimist as I had learned. "I think we should clean out here first. We can work our way backward. That way, we don't have to worry about contaminating the dining area. Right?"

"Right."

"We'll fill the buckets from the bathroom faucets. And there's a cleaning supply closet next to the office so..."

We set to work, Didi showing me where everything was, the sun baking us as we worked. We cleaned tables, the floor, and even the walls, taking down the pictures to wipe them down, both growing clammy.

At around 2:00 p.m., a silver Honda pulled into a parking space in front of the café, and a woman with plum-colored hair emerged. It was Frances, the supposedly crotchety customer who'd been sweet to me on my first day in the café.

She held a cardboard cup holder with four paper cups propped inside it and knocked on the café's glass front door before entering.

"Good morning," she said. "How are you ladies today?"

"Hello, Frances," I replied. "We're doing the best we can. How are you?"

Didi had colored pink and merely bowed her head deferentially to the older woman.

"Oh, I'm fine. I thought you hard worker bees might want some refreshments. I heard through the grapevine that you've got some cleaning to do before you can open the café."

"We do," I said, "and thank you for this. What are they?"

"Oh, just lemonade," she replied, and set down the cups on one of the clean tables near the front of the café's dining area. "Is it just you two here today?"

"Yes. But we're due a break."

"I think I'm going to clean the kitchen," Didi squeaked, and motored off without taking one of the paper cups.

"Strange child," Frances said, shaking her head, her plum-colored do wiggling. She sat down at the table where she'd placed the cups and helped herself to one. "Care to join me, Sunny?"

"Yes, please." I sat down and took a cup. The lemonade was sweet, tangy, and cool and exactly the type of refreshment that provided solace on a hot day like this. "Thank you for this, Frances. This is heavenly."

"Oh, it was nothing," Frances said. "I figured you had so much on your plate after that idiot Trisha went and got herself killed that you might need a little help. Besides, Rita's been so kind to me over the years, I owed her one."

Goodness. *That idiot Trisha?* That was quite a thing to say about a murder victim, especially when Trisha and Frances had argued on the morning of the murder.

"We'll get all of this cleaned up in no time," I said, feigning confidence. "And then we'll be back in business."

"I hope so." Frances pursed her lips. "There are plenty of other restaurants in town, but the Sunny Side Up is the beating heart of Parfait."

A strange sentence if I ever I'd heard one.

“And it would be such a shame if that stupid girl ruined it for you.”

“Who, Trisha?”

“Yes, Trisha.”

“It’s not her fault,” I replied. “She was the victim in the scenario here.”

Frances rolled her eyes, her eyelashes fluttering. “Oh please, don’t be so polite. That woman was a scourge. A vlogger. Pah! She did nothing but flit around town taking inappropriate photos at inopportune times, annoying people. It’s no wonder she got herself killed.”

I was speechless.

“I’d say good riddance to trash like her, but... well, that wouldn’t be diplomatic, would it?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I said, at last.

“But since I’m with a friend,” Frances continued, “I feel comfortable enough to say it. Parfait is better off without Trisha Williams. In fact, whoever killed her did us all a favor.”

“Why? What did she do?”

“Her foibles go way back,” Frances said, sipping her lemonade sagely. “It all started when she was in high school. She nearly burned down her friend’s house, but she escaped arrest because her father was rich enough to grease a few palms. From there, things got worse. She was a gossip and a thief, and when she finally left Parfait for college, everyone was relieved.” Frances wriggled her nose. “And upset when she came back a few weeks ago. Apparently, she wanted to expand her career as a food vlogger. Whatever that is. Sounds like a waste of a profession if you ask me.”

“Oh dear,” I said, because while I didn’t agree with Frances, she was telling me a lot of stuff I hadn’t known.

And so what? What are you going to do with that information?

“Have you told Detective Garcia all of this?” I asked.

Frances sipped her drink and gazed out of the front doors at the shimmering ocean and the activity on the boardwalk. “You know, a town like this deserves better than people like that. Anyway, dear, I’d better leave. I wanted to check that you were doing all right out here.”

“Thank you. Take care.”

“You too, dear,” Frances said, pausing in the doorway and raising a gray eyebrow. “You too.” And then she was off in her silver car.

The kitchen doors swung open. “Is she gone?” Didi asked.

“Yes. Why? What was so urgent about the kitchen that you had to clean it right away?”

“Nothing,” Didi said. “I didn’t want to be around her. She’s horrible on her good days, and also... oh my word, Sunny, did you drink that lemonade she brought with her?”

I looked at the paper cup in my hand. “Yeah, why?”

“What if it’s poisoned?”

A cold rush passed over me, but my senses returned quickly. “Don’t be silly, Didi,” I said. “She wouldn’t poison me in broad daylight with you here. It would be too easy for it to be traced back to her. Loads of people saw her car pull up in front of the café.”

“Oh. Right. OK.”

“Are you suggesting that Frances is capable of murder?” I asked.

“You never know with her,” Didi replied, and crossed herself. “I like to stay on her good side. The last person who crossed her was run out of town.”

A week later, we were finally prepared to open. The kitchen was fully stocked, cutlery, crockery and cookware included, and I'd spent many a late night pouring over the shift management sheet, and the accounts to ensure everything was in order.

The old business savvy that I'd had in my first years of college had come back—including my love for working with numbers. Food and people were difficult, numbers were simple. They told you exactly what they meant and never lied.

It was fifteen minutes to eight, and I stood in the dining area of the café, the servers ready for their shift, seated at the bar or leaning against the counter while they waited for the place to open. Everything was clean and ready for our customers.

There was just one problem. Nick hadn't arrived for work.

He was usually the first one through the door—according to Didi and the other servers—and the fact that he hadn't even replied to the message I'd left him had my stomach in knots.

What if we didn't have a chef today?

Just as my anxiety reached its peak, Nick strode down the sidewalk and knocked on the glass front door.

I opened it and let him in.

He was pale, his cheeks almost gaunt, and his shoulders hunched with worry.

Still handsome with his wavy brown hair and blue eyes, he was transformed compared to the man who'd driven me to the café on my first day in Parfait.

"Nick," I said. "How are you?"

"I've been better."

"I tried calling you to check in..."

"I'm sorry I didn't respond. Things have been complicated at home." He walked past me, barely nodding a greeting to the servers, and entered the kitchen.

Frustration and sympathy warred inside me. I asked Didi to open the doors and get ready for service before following Nick into the kitchen. He was already prepping vegetables at a frantic pace. The *chop, chop, chop* of his knife set me on edge.

"Nick," I said. "What's going on?"

"Don't want to get you down."

"I know I'm not the real boss around here," I said, "but I would've liked it if you could have been here to help us clean this place up. Or if you'd just let me know what was going on. I was worried that you wouldn't be around today."

"Yeah," he said, without looking up. "Sorry."

"You don't sound sorry."

"What do you want from me?" Nick gestured with his knife flinging a bit of mushroom onto the counter.

"I just told you," I said. "I want you to communicate with me so I'm not in the dark."

His anger faded, and he hung his head. "I'm sorry," he sighed. "Really, I am. I should've contacted you, but..."

"What's going on?"

"Detective Garcia has had me in multiple interviews over the past week, squeezing me for information. He thinks I'm the one who poisoned Trisha," he said. "And Jasmine is in a panic about it. We've been fighting more than usual. Shoot, I shouldn't tell you any of this. It's not your problem, and it's inappropriate."

"No way, Nick," I said. "It's OK. You can tell me. I'm here to help." After

all, hadn't he helped me when I'd been at my most confused? Reassured me that everything would be fine after the worst had happened last week?

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't think you can help."

"Look, if Garcia was going to arrest you, he would've done it already. He doesn't have enough evidence to go through with it, which means you're fine. And if you didn't kill her—" I lifted a hand to forestall his protest "—then you have nothing to worry about because he'll never have the evidence to arrest you."

"Thanks." Nick's smile was tiny, but at least it was there. "But the folks in Parfait will not let this go. It'll probably be for the best if you find another chef. They won't want to eat here while I'm still—"

"Don't be silly," I cut him off. "If my aunt believes in you, then so do I." I left him to continue his prep work and entered the café.

A few customers had trickled in, but it was nowhere near as busy as it had been on my first day. It seemed Nick was onto something—people were less inclined to eat at a café where someone had died of poisoning. Though, I was pretty sure that was more to do with the murder rather than them thinking he'd done it.

By mid-morning, more of the tables had filled up and the Sunny Side Up bubbled with chatter, laughter, and the noises of cutlery on plates. The servers worked at a leisurely pace, with Didi occasionally stopping to fill me in on a tidbit of gossip.

I was still shaky about being out on the floor, but it was much easier than it had been before. I spent my time stopping at tables to ask if people were happy with their meals or whipping up coffees and milkshakes to the best of my abilities. I messed up a lot, but people were forgiving because I was new.

"—heard that he did it. I mean, we're taking our lives into our hands by eating here." The gossiping tone had come from the corner booth where two women sat on the cushy vinyl benches, sipping from striped straws.

"I always said that Nick was a bad one. Can't trust a man that handsome. It's not natural."

Anger bubbled up to the surface, and I clapped my hands loudly.

Everyone in the café turned to look at me.

My cheeks grew hot from the extra attention, but I lifted my chin. “Sorry to interrupt your meals, everyone, but I want to make an announcement. I will not allow gossiping about our chef in this establishment. Anyone who wants to talk about him behind his back can kindly leave, right away.”

A stunned silence followed.

The women in the corner booth burst out laughing, and many of the customers seconded the mirth at the other tables.

“Oh honey, no,” one of the women said, shaking her head. “You don’t get to tell people what to do in Rita’s café. She loves a good gossip about anything and everything.”

“You’re just the manager,” another person called out.

Cowed, I returned to the bar, hot all over.

Didi grimaced at me from the coffee machine. “Maybe not a good idea?”

“You don’t say.” If anyone ordered eggs over easy, they could cook them on my face. I was left alone at the register to fume, and I scanned the customers, gossiping and laughing but ignoring me completely now.

It had taken courage to say that—I wasn’t about drawing extra attention to myself—but of course, it had fallen flat. What had I been thinking?

The doors opened, and Jasmine entered the café, waving to a few of the people at the tables. She carried a sealed box and made for the coffee bar, her long strides sinuous. Jasmine stopped in front of me, barely acknowledging my presence, and placed the box on the countertop.

“Morning,” I said.

“Mhmm.” She popped the box open to reveal a range of cosmetic products inside, then placed a stack of cards next to it.

“What’s that?” I asked, frowning. “Makeup?”

“Yes, it’s makeup,” Jasmine replied, waspishly.

“Why are you putting it there?”

“So that people can sample it and take a card to contact me if they want more.” Jasmine looked as if she was holding back an eye roll at my stupidity.

“You can’t do that here,” I said. “This is a private business.” I doubted my

Aunt Rita would want someone else hawking their goods in her café. Was it really hawking when Jasmine was giving things away for free? “Sorry.”

“You don’t own this café.”

“No, but my aunt does, and unless you have her express permission to do this...”

Jasmine glared. “She would be *fine* with it. Rita’s a nice lady.” The implication of who wasn’t a nice lady was clear in her tone.

“Sorry,” I repeated. “But you must get permission from her before you put your stuff here.” Or permission from me. And it was a solid ‘no’ on my account. Makeup and food didn’t connect well, and this clearly wasn’t a joint venture between the Sunny Side Up and Jasmine’s makeup business.

Jasmine huffed and puffed, then snatched up her cards and thrust them into her handbag. She grabbed the box, a few of the makeup tubes and compacts falling out and cracking on the floor, spraying glitter powder everywhere.

“You’re a horrible person,” she hissed.

The customers in the café sat straighter, listening in.

“Look, I’m sorry, but I can’t—”

“Haven’t you harmed this town enough? Do you have to step on small business owners too? Is that what makes you happy? Hurting other people?”

“Jasmine,” I said, in disbelief over her reaction. “Please, I can’t—”

“Whatever,” the other woman said. “Whatever. Do what you want, but I’ll tell you one thing.” She came forward, leaning in. “You’d better stay away from Nick, or you’ll regret it.” Jasmine turned on her heel and marched from the café, leaving me jaw-dropped and humiliated for the second time in the last half hour.

Later that evening...

It was good to be ‘home’ even though that home contained a cat that despised me and nothing but emptiness with the prospect of boxed macaroni for dinner. Anything beat being out in town—I’d noticed an increase in the number of stares when I’d gone for an evening walk. I wasn’t safe from the gossip in the café or in the suburbs. Reopening the Sunny Side Up and intensified the rumors.

I’d caught snippets of them.

“I bet she did it.”

“It was Nick, the chef at the café.”

“I can’t believe she opened up after what happened. Who wants to eat in a place where someone died?”

With every whisper, my inside curdled, but I’d kept my back straight for the day, and only retreated into my shell upon arriving home.

I stood in the kitchen, sipping from a glass of wine, watching Bodger feast on his cat food, his tail occasionally flicking when I made too much noise or looked in his direction. We had reached an uneasy peace. A truce that meant I could be in the same room as him, but I couldn’t leave my doors or windows

open when I went to sleep. Thank heavens for the HVAC.

My phone was on the counter, and I eyed it, but I hadn't heard anything from my auntie since our last conversation. Chances were, she was having the time of her life, and she deserved it. I didn't want to distract her when she was this happy.

I grabbed my phone and wandered through to the living room, stepping up to the bookcase that contained her weathered collection of mystery books, and, on the bottom shelf, a stacked set of leather journals.

"I remember these," I whispered, a smile parting my lips.

I picked one of them up and retreated to the sofa, then opened the journal. Inside, there was a mish-mash of newspaper clippings and notes, both in my auntie's handwriting and in mine. They were our mystery books.

We'd started out watching true crime shows and trying to figure out who'd done it before the end of the show. Then, we'd moved onto unsolved cases and muddled our way through those, trying to figure them out and failing, before finally ordering mystery magazines, and solving the cases they detailed inside.

It had been our favorite pastime back in the day, and I paged through the journal, memories flooding back and bringing a wedge of emotion to my throat.

Things had been simpler then.

No cheating ex-husbands, no criminal activity, no murders, or hopeless futures. Just us trying to figure out the truth.

My phone rang on the sofa, and I answered. "Hello?"

"Hi!" Didi's breathless voice came down the line. "It's Didi. Are you OK?"

"Yeah, why?" She was a conscientious young woman. I liked that about her.

"Oh, I wanted to check because, you know... Nick."

"Wait, what about Nick?"

"You don't know?" Didi asked. "I thought everyone knew. News travels like crazy in Parfait, I—oh no."

"What? Didi, what's wrong with Nick? Is he sick? Is he—?"

"They've just taken him in for questioning. He's being held from what Jasmine said, but not arrested."

I sank back into the sofa cushions, gripping my belly. "No. That's terrible."

“Yeah,” Didi said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen, but I think you might need to get a chef to stand-in for tomorrow.”

On such short notice? Impossible. But that didn’t matter. Poor Nick was in trouble. And for a crime he surely hadn’t committed.

Do you really know that for certain? Think rationally, Sunny. The cops wouldn’t take him in without cause.

“Thanks for letting me know, Didi.”

“Look, maybe you should close the café tomorrow? We can’t open without a chef.”

“Leave it to me,” I said. “I’ll figure something out.” I thanked her and said goodbye, trying for confidence that I didn’t feel. I studied the leatherback journal on my lap, the neatly written notes in my handwriting, the messy ones in Aunt Rita’s, my resolve strengthening.

If I could prove Nick’s innocence...

“Don’t be silly,” I whispered, and shut the journal, then returned it to the bookcase. “You’re not a detective, or even a private investigator.”

But the idea was lodged in my mind, a strange sense of excitement building in my chest.

The following morning dawned as bright and humid as every day in the past week had been, but the ride to the café was occupied with anxiety. Would Nick show up for work? Just how long could Detective Garcia keep him down there without issuing an arrest warrant? Did Nick have a lawyer? Could he afford one? Why hadn't he called, once again, to let me know what was going on?

I was technically his boss, though I loathed that label. Perhaps he had gotten hold of Aunt Rita? But no, she would surely have called or messaged me to let me know what was up.

I parked in front of the Sunny Side Up Café at 6:30 a.m. and found Mildred out on the sidewalk in front of her shelter, chatting to Tom, the food critic. They were all smiles and laughter, and a pang of envy at how easily their conversation went rose in me.

Silly.

I got out of my aunt's VW Beetle and waved at them.

"Oh, hello, dear," Mildred said, abandoning Tom and coming over. She wore a flowery blouse and a matching pair of flowing slacks today. "It's going to be a scorcher. Good thing we're right by the ocean, eh?"

"How are you today?" I asked.

"Fine, fine, what about you?" Mildred asked, lifting her hand to shield her mouth. "I heard that Nick is down at the police station. Oh dear, people seem to

think he was the one who... you know. But I don't believe it. He's always been such a lovely man."

"I'll see you later, Milly," Tom called from the shelter.

The pair gave each other a merry wave, and he headed off, nodding to me as he passed.

"Are you two good friends?" I asked, and then I remembered what Mildred had said the other day. "Oh, is he your nephew who's going to take over once you retire?"

"No," Mildred laughed. "That's Tom. He helps out at the shelter occasionally, mostly because he has free time in between writing his pieces for the *Parfait Platter*. The local newspaper."

I nodded. "Oh right."

"Anyway, back to Nick," Mildred said, taking hold of my arm and steering me toward the front of the café. "What are you going to do if he doesn't show up for work this morning?"

"I don't know. I'll have to cook." I grimaced. "I'm not very good."

"That's not ideal," Mildred said. "You could buy cakes from the local bakery and serve that with some coffee?"

"Maybe I should close for the day."

"That might be a good idea." Mildred patted my arm. "On the bright side, if you close for the day, you can come spend time with me in the shelter. That ought to be fun. I'm always looking for the company, you know."

"Thanks," I said. "That's kind of you." I was afraid she'd give me another ancient chocolate chip cookie, but Mildred was sweet, and it was nice that I'd made at least one friend in town. Wait, two. Didi was lovely as well.

I said goodbye to Mildred, then let myself into the heat of the café. Still no update on the repairmen for the air-conditioning unit. It was going to be a long and frustrating day, and while I probably should've closed the café, I didn't have the heart to. The servers coming in for their shifts relied on their pay, and it felt wrong to take that away from them.



THE FACT THAT NICK WASN'T HERE HADN'T REALLY AFFECTED BUSINESS. HARDLY anyone had come to eat at the café, which meant most of the servers on duty had spent their time hanging out at the coffee bar or playing on their phones. I'd sent them home, all except for Didi, who'd insisted she'd hang around in case we got busy.

We did *not* get busy.

"It's going to be OK," Didi said, but even she sounded uncertain about it, as she tugged on her t-shirt, sporting another picture of her favorite K-Pop group. "This will work out."

"Sure," I replied, just as concerned.

The doors were open, and Didi had suggested we narrow the menu down to just the eggs that everyone knew how to make—and that had, in a horrible twist of fate, contained poison on that fateful day a week ago—and the cakes in the display case. Drinks were easy since Didi could make every coffee and milkshake on the menu.

At around noon, I'd resigned myself to the fact that we were done for the day. But this wasn't over. I wasn't about to let my aunt's café go down. I had to figure out how I'd save it. If only I could *prove* that Nick was innocent. That *I* was innocent. People wouldn't avoid the café then. They'd be reassured that we weren't crazy murderers waiting to pounce.

"Ah! Someone's just pulled up," Didi said, leaping off the edge of her barstool.

Two women in their forties entered the café and looked around, frowning. "You're still open," the brunette in the pair said. "I heard you'd be closing today on account of your chef being a murderer."

I heated, but Didi cast a quick glance in my direction. "Uh, alleged murder," she said. "And yeah, we're open. Can we get you something to drink?"

"Sure," the blonde woman said, and recognition sparked. These were the same women who'd been gossiping about Nick yesterday. The ones who had laughed at me because I'd told them they weren't allowed to speak ill of him.

They walked over to a corner booth and sat down, fanning themselves with their hands.

“Sorry,” I said. “We’re waiting on the repairmen for the air-conditioning.”

“Yeah, Rita’s been trying to get them out here for weeks,” the blonde woman said. “Isn’t that right Cherry?”

The brunette nodded. “Weeks, Sienna, weeks.”

“What flavor milkshakes would you like?” Didi called from behind the coffee bar.

“Vanilla for me,” Sienna called, fluffing her blonde locks and readjusting the heart locket that rested on her chest.

“Chocolate,” Cherry put in.

Both women watched me like a hawk while they waited for their orders, and I did my best not to shift under their scrutiny.

“You know,” Cherry said, turning to her friend. “It’s a shame that Trisha died, but you’ve got to admit, she had it coming.”

“Too big for her boots,” Sienna agreed. “Thought she was the most popular woman to walk the face of the earth, let alone grace Parfait with her presence. No wonder someone killed her. I bet she stepped on Nick’s toes.”

“It wasn’t Nick,” I said. “I’m sure of it.”

“Why?” Cherry turned to me, like she’d been expecting I’d join in on the conversation. “How do you know it wasn’t him? Were you watching him every minute of the morning?”

“No,” I said. “I just don’t think he would do it. He had no motive.”

“Huh.” Sienna tapped her chin. “I never thought of it like that before. Nick really didn’t have a motive. He didn’t fight with Trisha or even talk to her. Unless you heard something to the contrary, Cherry?”

“Not me, no. Never heard a thing about Nick and Trisha. Trisha and Frances, however...”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that.” Sienna clicked her fingers and pointed at her friends. “Michael.”

“Who’s Michael?” I asked.

Didi delivered the women’s milkshakes, and they stripped their straws of the paper covering in near-identical motions.

“Michael,” Cherry said. “Is Frances’ son. Until about, oh, say, a month ago,

he was working as Trisha's assistant. Rumor has it she fired him because he was a slacker. Ever since then, no one has seen him. He just disappeared. Poof." She gestured with both hands. "Like magic."

"You think he'd kill her over a job?" Sienna asked, narrowing an eye.

"People do crazy things for money and revenge. And it might not be him who killed her, but his mother. You know how protective Frances was over him when he was in high school. No girl was ever good enough for him. Heavens, she packed his lunches even when he was a Senior."

"Social suicide," Cherry agreed. "You might be right." She slurped noisily on her milkshake, bright blue eyes traveling sideways until she caught me in her stare. "Or it was someone else."

Was I crazy? Or was I inspired?
No, just desperate.

After the conversation, I'd made several notes on my phone about Frances, Michael, Trisha, and even Nick, and I reviewed them now in the café's quiet—Cherry and Sienna long gone—my fingers itching to fill in the gaps. There were missing clues, things I could uncover, but it would mean taking the next step. Talking to people. Snooping around.

Could I do that?

“What are you writing?” Didi asked, stopping beside me at the bar.

We'd already closed the Sunny Side Up's doors for the day, and she'd spent the last of her shift cleaning up the already spotless interior. I figured that was more out of nerves than anything else. Or maybe Didi felt like she had to work to earn her keep.

“Oh, it's just me being silly,” I said, leaning back so she could get a better view of the page.

Didi picked up the notepad and read it. “Hey, this is great,” she said. “You've got a suspect list and notes about suspicious behavior and everything. Have you done this before?”

“Not like this,” I said. “My aunt and I used to do this type of thing in our spare time with stuff we saw on TV.”

“That's so cool.” Didi chewed on the corner of her lip. “Say, why don't we

head out to visit Frances and talk to her? Maybe you can uncover more about Michael and where he went. No one's seen him in ages, you know."

"Cherry and Sienna mentioned as much." I hesitated, though. "Should we really? Isn't it silly?"

"No way," Didi exclaimed, clapping her hands. "It'll be fun. Besides, I don't know about you, but I've got nothing better to do."

"And, I suppose, if we found out something, we could tell Detective Garcia. It might help him arrest the murderer quicker, and then things would get back to normal in the café." And I'd stop feeling like I'd let down Aunt Rita and everybody else.

"Exactly." Didi grinned at me, buoyed up by the prospect of not sitting in the dead café for the rest of the afternoon.

"Do you know where she stays?"

"She's got a cottage on the beach on the other side of Parfait. I'll direct us," Didi said, then faltered. "But, uh, you do the talking, OK? Because she scares me."

"Why?"

"I don't know. There's just something about her I don't like. It's not even that she's mean to everyone, it's... I don't trust her. And my gut feelings are usually right." Didi twirled a strand of pink-streaked hair around her finger, then let it bounce free.

"I'll take care of it," I said.

Twenty minutes later, we parked in front of Frances' cottage. It was like my aunt's place in appearance, but nowhere as near to the beach. Rather, it was hidden between the brush and trees further back from the road. Was it just me, or did this place have an ominous vibe?

How could a place be both summery and scary wrapped into one?

"Oh boy," Didi said. "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

"Sure you are," I replied. "Everything will be fine."

Didi didn't comment.

We exited into the afternoon heat and trudged up the steps of the cottage to knock on the door.

“Just a moment,” Frances called from inside. “Just a—” The latch clacked, and she appeared. Her plum-colored hair was in disarray, but her slacks and loose blouse were both neatly pressed. “Oh hello!” Her smile brightened. “How lovely of you to stop by. I haven’t had any visitors in ages. Come in, come in.”

“Hi Frances,” I said, and entered, Didi stepping on my heels.

“How are things going?” Frances asked, shutting the door and us inside her home. “Did you close the café early today?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Unfortunately, business isn’t booming.”

“Well, that’s understandable,” Frances sighed. “Regrettable, but understandable. Don’t you worry, Sunny, this will pass. Once the police have caught the murderer, people will move on from this and business will get back to normal. Come through to the living room. I’ll make us some lemonade.”

Didi paled at the mention of lemonade, but we followed Frances into a sunlit living room, her glass sliding doors open to allow the breeze in from her back yard. A sleepy dog lay on her back porch, his massive brown head on his paws. He opened one eye and peeked at us, snuffled, then let out a grunt of a sigh.

“It’s all right, Baxxy,” Frances said. “These are friendly people. Don’t mind him, he’s just sulking. I’ll get the lemonade.”

Didi and I sat down on Frances’ floral sofa, both of us on edge and scanning the room. A picture of Frances and a young man, who had to be Michael, hung on the wall in a position of pride. The coffee table was cluttered with knitting and gardening magazines.

Frances returned with a silver tray of glasses and a lemonade pitcher and set it down carefully next to the magazine array, nudging them aside with her knuckles. “There,” she said. “Help yourselves.” She poured herself a glass of lemonade, then retreated to an armchair that faced the TV and the picture of her son on the wall next to it.

I poured a glass of lemonade for Didi and then for myself. “Thanks, Frances. This is great.” I took a sip of the sweet goodness.

“On a day like this, one needs refreshment. Even if it is on the sugary side.” Frances took a chaste sip of her drink.

Her dog groaned and huffed again.

“Oh, Baxxy, you silly boy,” Frances said. “You must excuse him. He’s been in a terrible mood for over a month now.”

“Why?” I asked.

“He misses my son. Michael and Baxxy are the best of friends and have been for years now, ever since I got him.”

“Oh, when did Michael leave?” What great serendipity that her son had come up in conversation like this. “Recently?”

“About a month ago. He got a job out of town, so he thought it would be best to move rather than commuting. We miss him terribly, but he set up this Skype thing on my computer so Baxxy can chat to him every day.” Frances gave a pleasant smile.

“Is that him?” I gestured to the picture.

“That’s my Mikey,” Frances replied. “He’s been my rock ever since his father passed. I don’t know what I would’ve done without him.”

“He worked for Trisha, didn’t he?” Didi squeaked it out, hiding her mouth behind her glass.

“Don’t even get me started on that trollop,” Frances said, her lips tugging down at the corners. “I don’t even want to think about how she treated Mikey. Anyway, it doesn’t matter now. He’s doing bigger and better things.”

The conversation drifted away from her son, and we idly discussed the murder, which Frances didn’t seem fazed about or interested in, and then the weather. Finally, we finished our lemonades, thanked Frances for the visit, and headed out into the hall.

At the front door, my gaze landed on a pair of heavy-soled men’s boots, coated in sand and grit, and I tried not to let the surprise show on my face.

“Keep safe,” Frances said. “You must visit again.”

“That would be great. Thanks again for the lemonade and the company.”

“Oh, it’s me who should thank you. You definitely cheered up Baxxy.”

We headed off down the steps, then got into the sweltering interior of the Beetle and rolled down the windows with old-fashioned elbow grease. “Did you see the boots?” I asked Didi as I started the car.

“Boots?”

“By the door. There were a pair of men’s boots right there.” I drove down the short inlet road that led to Frances’ cottage. “If she hasn’t seen Michael in a month, then why are his dirty boots next to the front door?”

After dropping Didi off at her mom’s cottage, I headed back to Aunt Rita’s and let myself into the blessedly cool interior. Bodger swiped my ankles the minute I got through the door, as he did every day when I arrived home, and I preemptively dodged the strike.

“What is up with you?” I asked, sternly. “You know, I’ve done nothing but be nice to you since I’ve arrived. Do you have a thorn stuck in your paw or something?”

Bodger meowed at me balefully and pranced off without further contest. That was something at least. When I lectured him, he listened, but if I was too nice, he’d take a flying leap for my gullet.

Treat ‘em mean to keep ‘em keen, I guess.

I kicked off my shoes, undid the top button of my blouse and fetched a can of diet soda from the fridge, the prospect of many hours of boredom ahead. I could go down to the beach and dip my toes in the water, but it seemed wrong to relax.

What with Nick under investigation, the café under threat...

The doorbell rang, and I jumped, spilling a little soda on my blouse. “Ugh,” I murmured, and hurried through to the front hall. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Nick.”

My heart leaped—a combination of nerves and joy that he was OK—and I opened up.

Nick was even paler now. His hair stuck up at the back, cow-licked and

untidy, and his eyes were bloodshot.

“Are you OK? You look like... uh, you’re not.”

“May I come in?”

If you’re not the murderer, sure. That was a terrible thought. Of course, he wasn’t the murderer. “Sure. Do you want a soda? I’ve got diet.”

“That would be great, thanks.”

Nick followed me into the kitchen, so tired he didn’t even look out for a Bodger attack, and sat down at my aunt’s kitchen table. He rested his forearm on it, then plopped his head down and let out a breath.

“Here,” I said, popping the tab on the soda for him. “Would you like a glass?”

He gave a noncommittal grunt, so I took a chair too.

“What’s going on, Nick?” I didn’t want to be mad at him. He was in enough trouble as it was, and even though he’d dodged contact with me over the past while, I didn’t want to stress him out even more.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call again,” he said. “I thought it would be better to come over here rather than calling. Talk to you in person.”

I waited for more.

“They let me go because they don’t have evidence to hold me, but I’m still their prime suspect,” Nick said, slowly. “And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Pity rose in me. He wasn’t capable of murder, was he? *You don’t know him. Remember that. Be impartial.*

“I’m so sorry, Nick,” I said. “I wish I could help you.”

“Me too,” he replied.

“I find it weird that they haven’t called me in yet,” I said. “I was the one who prepared the eggs that... killed her.”

“I think the plate had poison on it,” Nick said. “And since I was the one in the kitchen for most of the morning, they figure I ought to have seen something or done it. But I’ve got nothing for them. I really don’t know who did this.” He took a sip of his soda.

“Is there any way I can help? Do you need me to cook you a meal or—”

Nick smiled. “You, cook for me?”

“Ha, you’re probably right. That wouldn’t be helpful.” And he had a wife to cook for him. It was the only way I could think to help him, short of trying to figure out who the killer was. Which I was technically already doing, albeit more for fascination’s sake.

Nick continued drinking his soda, occasionally dragging his hand over his eyes or yawning.

“I, uh, I wanted to talk to you about something, actually,” I said. “I don’t want to stress you out, but I—well, I had a run-in with your wife the other day.”

“Jasmine was at the café?”

“Yes. She came in to put makeup on the counter and I told her she couldn’t do that because I didn’t have permission from Rita, and neither did she.”

“Oh, right.” Nick shook his head. “I warned her not to do that without asking, but she’s stubborn. She thought Rita wouldn’t mind.”

“I could ask Rita if it’s OK, but I don’t know, I felt bad about telling Jasmine not to do it and she reacted badly,” I said, sheepishly.

“Uh oh. What did she do?”

“Nothing serious. Just a few verbal barbs.” No way would I tell him she’d said to stay away from him. That was an embarrassing line to cross, and definitely not my place to say. I wanted to keep Nick as an employee and a friend, not make him uncomfortable. “I wanted your advice on how to handle it. Should I apologize? We’re neighbors, and I’ll probably be seeing a lot more of both of you so...”

“Just let it blow over,” Nick said, waving a hand. “Trust me. Jasmine is all bark and no bite. She’ll get over it. She’s been super stressed lately because things haven’t been going that well for us financially. That’s made her irritable and probably a little desperate.” Shame settled around him and he shook his head. “My fault.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again, because I had no idea what else to say. “If there’s anything I can do...”

“Just don’t fire me?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I laughed.

We settled into a comfortable silence, Nick drinking his soda, and me

scanning the kitchen for want of anything else to do. My thoughts were occupied, mind racing over what he'd said about the cops. The plate had been poisoned.

That made it seem like he'd have had the most access. But what if someone else had gotten into the kitchen beforehand? How would they have known which plate was going out to Trisha's table? They would have had to have been in there while I was cooking the eggs over easy to know for sure.

Oh heavens. A killer in the kitchen, watching me cook, waiting for the opportune moment.

"Say, Nick."

He started. "Yeah?"

"I was wondering, did you see anyone or anything weird on the morning it happened? In the kitchen or just in the café?"

"Hmm." He wriggled his nose from side-to-side. "I don't know if I'd say it was strange or not, but I saw a guy hanging around outside the café in the morning. Every time I came out to grab a cup of coffee or go to the bathroom, he was outside, sitting on a bench on the boardwalk."

"Oh? Did you recognize him?"

"No," Nick said. "But he had dark hair and eyes, he was young and tan. I've never seen him before in my life. That's why he stood out to me, I think. I know a lot of people in Parfait, even if it's just by sight, so running into someone new usually stands out."

"Right," I nodded.

That didn't give me much, but it was something. A stranger hanging around outside the restaurant on the morning of the murder. If only I could track him down and ask him a few questions. Or find out who he was.

"Thanks for the soda," Nick said, rising. "And for your understanding. I can come back to work tomorrow if you'll still have me."

"Absolutely!" I got up too. "I understand you're going through a rough time. Just let me know if anything changes before tomorrow, OK?"

"I will. I'll make more of an effort to keep in contact with you." There was an awkward moment where he looked as if he wanted to step in for a hug but

thought better of it. “Take care, Sunny. See you in the morning.”

The following day...

If I'd thought the café was dead in the water thanks to it being a crime scene, boy had I been wrong. News had spread of Nick's return to the kitchen, and just about everyone in Parfait had turned up hoping to catch a glimpse of the suspect. The air was rife with gossip and suspicion. Gone was the friendly, cozy atmosphere, and the servers were on edge as they put in orders or prepared drinks and delivered them to tables.

I sat behind the cash register, opting to hang back today. I couldn't handle overhearing more gossip about Nick, so it was easier to deal with the drinks and ring up orders for people when they came to pay.

"Have you seen this?" Didi asked, placing a tray on the blue countertop. "Check it out." She handed me a folded copy of the *Parfait Platter*, the local newspaper, and tapped a column on the front page. "That might cheer you up." She pranced off again before I could ask her why.

I lifted the paper.

A Stirling Day's Breakfast at the Sunny Side Up Café

By Tom Miller, Food Critic

Though the Sunny Side Up Café has had a dip in its operating hours of late, I

headed out to the acclaimed dining spot this week. I wanted to get a feel for how things run under new management, while the town-beloved Rita Jackson is on a much-needed vacation.

When I arrive, the place is half-full, but the smells are divine, the staff are friendly, and the drinks are excellent as always. A plate of eggs over easy goes down a treat, perfectly prepared by the chef at the establishment. The only downside of my experience is the lack of air-conditioning in the café.

Overall, a pleasant way to spend the morning. Eight out of ten stars from me! Keep it up, Sunny Side Up Café.

My cheeks flushed, and a smile parted my lips. This was great! It was just the publicity we needed, assuming anyone in town read Tom's reviews. Gosh, I hoped they did. And if he had a social media presence, even better.

I set the newspaper aside and brought out my phone.

A quick search for 'Tom Miller food critic Parfait, Florida,' brought up a list of search results. He had a few social media pages and had posted his most recent review, but... it didn't have any pictures, and there was only one 'like' on the post.

So, OK, the review wouldn't be shared far and wide, but this was still a good thing. I could be assured that things were running as smoothly as they could be under my 'leadership' while my aunt was gone. And given the circumstances, that was all I could ask for.

Curious, I searched the phrase 'Sunny Side Up Café, Parfait, Florida, reviews.'

The first search result was an image from none other than Trisha Williams' social media page. And it was tagged with a title: ***If you're looking for the worst meal you'll have, come to the Sunny Side Up Café. 1 out of 10 stars.***

"Oh no," I whispered, my finger hovering over the result. I tapped, hesitantly, and it opened on my screen. My insides squirmed.

Unlike Tom, Trisha had a fantastic online following. She had over a million followers, and the review, which was from several months ago, had over five thousand likes and one hundred and sixty-seven comments. Trisha had posted a picture of the signature eggs over easy dish.

If you're looking to induce vomiting, come eat at this place. It's supposed to be the best café in Parfait, but it's totally gross. I asked for eggs over easy, and my server made them herself and they were hard! Just look at that. Don't come here!!! Ever!!

A long list of hashtags followed the caption.

This was bad. Not only because it reflected poorly on the café, but because the victim had written this well before her death. And if people knew that Nick was in financial dire straits... Well, it would seem like a motive.

If Nick lost his job or felt his job was under threat, he would have a reason to get rid of Trisha. He wouldn't have wanted her to write another negative review of the café because it might've put him at risk of losing money.

My mind whirled, and I set my phone down, the pleasure that had come with Tom's review slowly ebbing away to nothing.

The café was still under threat, and there was nothing I could do to help. Not really.

Chin up, Sunny. You can do this. Aunt Rita will be back soon.

But I had no idea if that was true. What if my aunt decided to continue her vacation? Could I really blame her for wanting to when she'd spent so much of her time working? I'd have to keep on keeping on, but the longer this investigation dragged on, the worse I felt. The more uncertain.

What if Nick really had done it?



AFTER A LONG LUNCH SERVICE, I RETREATED INTO THE OFFICE FOR A FEW moments of privacy before the final evening push. I had put in my umpteenth call to the repair company, only to be told they had no record of Aunt Rita ever having asked them to come out.

Covered in sweat, angry about the review from Trisha and my confusion over the murder, I'd raised my voice on the line and wound up getting hung up on. Not my proudest moment.

A knock came at the door and Didi opened it. "Can I talk to you for a

second?”

“Of course,” I said.

The K-Pop fan entered and plopped down in the chair in front of my aunt’s desk. “Thanks.”

“What happened? Is something wrong?”

“No,” Didi laughed. “But I can tell you’re stressed out about the café. I came to ask if you’d like to join us for our weekend getaway. I didn’t want to invite you earlier because I wasn’t sure it was still on. Nick usually organizes these sort of team-building events for us.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, we’re all going bird-watching in the Everglades this weekend. I guess Nick must’ve been too stressed to tell you about it.”

I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip. “Are you sure you want me there? I don’t want to intrude if I’m not welcome.”

“Of course, you’re welcome,” Didi said. “You’re the manager now. The boss. Rita always comes on the getaways. Come on, it will be fun. We’ll pick you up on Saturday morning, bright and early.”

“Sure. OK. Yeah, that sounds like fun.” It would be great to get away for the weekend, and I could ask Emilia from next-door to take care of Bodger while I was gone. She’d mentioned doing it for Rita in the past, and she didn’t seem that afraid of the cat. Maybe that was because she had a toddler. Everything paled in comparison to changing dirty diapers, was my guess.

“Great!” Didi left the office, and I abandoned my sweaty pursuit of the air-conditioning company as well.

I wound through the interior of the café, stopping at tables and sharing a few words with people to make them feel welcome. It was a trial, not because I was nervous about being in charge anymore, but because of the ‘Nick and murder’ gossip.

I moved to the corner table and had to stop myself from gasping. Bebe, Trisha’s newest assistant, sat at the table, messing around on her phone. She was completely alone, this time, no Tom in sight.

“Hello,” I said. “Enjoying everything so far?”

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Bebe said, and cast a quick smile my way. “Great, I mean. Sorry, I’m kind of in the middle of something here.”

“Oh. What is it?”

Bebe glanced up at me. “I’m posting a picture of my meal,” she said.

“Are you a vlogger?”

“An influencer,” she said.

“You look super familiar. Have I seen you somewhere before?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. I was here with Trisha a while ago.” And that was it. She didn’t seem to want to give me more information.

I hovered by her table for another couple minutes to no avail. She was done talking to me.

Interesting that she’s an influencer now. The minute Trisha’s gone, she steps in to take her place? Can you smell the suspicion?

All I could smell was coffee, but I kept my eye on Bebe while she ate her food, took pictures, and recorded herself in the corner booth. Finally, she finished up, and Didi came to the counter with her money.

“Didi,” I said, “would you mind monitoring things for a few minutes? There’s something I need to do.”

“Sure,” she replied. “No prob.”

Bebe headed for the door, and I hesitated for only a moment before stripping off my apron and following her out into the sunset.

Bebe strode down the boardwalk into the purple dusk, the lampposts on the street flickering on as the evening darkened. I followed her, keeping as much distance as I could without losing her, my pulse racing, even though she hadn't noticed me. And there was nothing 'illegal' about taking an evening stroll.

You're crazy. This is crazy.

I wasn't an investigator, shoot, I wasn't anything, so why did I think it was OK to tail a woman who'd known the murder victim?

Bebe paused along the boardwalk and snapped a photo of the sun over the water—an orange glimmer on the horizon—then continued her walk.

I scooched past people on the boardwalk, some of whom were vaguely familiar thanks to their visits to the café, and others I didn't recognize but who stared at me in passing. That was probably because they'd heard about Trisha's death.

You can do this.

Bebe strolled across the road and down a side-street. This was it. If I went after her, I was committing to tailing her to her destination. I could turn back now, go to the café, close for the evening, go home, feed Bodger, and relax.

My feet carried me across the road, my gaze fixed on the back of Bebe's head.

As Trisha's assistant, she would've had direct access to the woman's plate.

Could she have slipped poison onto it just before Trisha had been about to take a bite? Or was that implausible?

Bebe turned the corner, and I followed. She walked for ten minutes, crossing streets, taking lefts and rights, while I trailed behind her, pretending I was on an evening stroll. My pulse-pounding anxiety over her looking back and finding me there was for nothing, though.

The new vlogger's attention was consumed by her phone, the light from the screen illuminating her face and casting a blue hue in the fading night.

Her phone blipped, and she paused. I stopped too, pretending to tie my shoelace, even though I was in sandals.

"Ugh," she murmured, then set off again, crossing the street quickly.

We were in a suburban area, further back from the beach. The houses here were larger than my aunt's cottage, some of them with two or three stories, made of wood and brick, with neat fences bordering their properties.

Finally, Bebe dipped into a breezeway between two homes and stopped. A figure emerged from the house to the left of her, and I crouched down on the sidewalk, hiding from view behind a bush that pressed up against the perimeter fence. The person who'd come out to meet her was shrouded by darkness, their side profile hidden from view in the dusk. All I could make out was Bebe's face, thanks to the blue light from her phone.

"—stupid reason to meet."

"Just thought—busy with—Trisha anymore," a deep male voice replied.

I didn't recognize it, but sweat beaded on the back of my neck. They were talking about Trisha! And holding a clandestine meeting at night. Sure, that meeting was smack dab in the middle of suburbia in a quaint seaside town, but still! That had to count for something.

"—don't understand why you think you—I told you no."

"Bebe—if you would just listen to—I was the one who did this for you."

What?

"—happy now?" the man continued. "You're free!"

"—free then I wouldn't have to worry about—"

Was I hearing this right? Or was I jumping to conclusions?

“Come inside,” the guy said, his voice softening. “Let’s talk about—?”

A hesitation, then Bebe’s shoulders relaxed. She followed the guy inside, and a door closed, the light that had spilled from it cutting off.

Oh my word. What was that?

I didn’t want to read too much into it, but it had sounded a lot like Bebe and the mystery guy had been talking about Trisha’s death. He’d said something about Trisha and that Bebe was free now. But free from what? From Trisha? Had Bebe grown so disgruntled with being Trisha’s assistant that she’d got rid of her and enlisted the help of this mystery man to do it?

My mind whirred.

Who was the guy? I hadn’t recognized his voice, but then, I wasn’t familiar with everyone who lived in Parfait. I’d seen Bebe with Tom the other day. Could it have been him? I cast back for a recollection of how his voice sounded, but no, he’d been more nasal, hadn’t he?

What if it was Michael?

A rush of excitement prickled through my veins. What if I’d overheard Michael and Bebe conspiring? They’d both hated Trisha and worked closely with her, so they knew her habits and schedule, and it would explain why Frances had had a pair of dirty boots at her front door that belonged to him. Could Frances be in on it too?

No, surely not. That many people conspiring... one of them would eventually break and—

Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the light touch. I leaped up from my crouch, turning, and found Detective Garcia behind me, his lips drawn into a thin, unimpressed line.

“Is there a reason you’re hiding behind a bush, Miss Charles?” he asked.

“Huh?” Great. I couldn’t muster up a coherent answer fast enough, and if that reply didn’t make me sound guilty as sin, I didn’t know what would.

“Are you lost, Miss Charles?” Detective Garcia asked.

“No,” I said. “I was just taking an evening walk. I like to go on evening walks.”

“Ones that just happened to follow a suspect’s path.”

“Bebe’s a suspect?”

“Everyone’s a suspect,” the detective replied.

“Then why does it matter where I’m crouching?” I asked, shrewdly. “I mean, if everyone’s a suspect then you could be annoyed at me for being outside anyone’s house, even my own.”

“It was a figure of speech.”

“But Bebe’s a suspect.”

Detective Garcia’s nostrils flared. “Miss Charles, try not to make my job more difficult than it is already.”

“I wasn’t doing anything, detective. Like I said, just going for an evening walk.” The sweat that had gathered on my neck during my little eavesdropping

stint had migrated to my forehead.

“Do you usually crouch when you walk?”

“It’s good for the glutes,” I replied. “Squatting while you walk.”

“You really expect me to believe that you just happened to be walking like a duck behind Bebe Rae?”

“You should try it sometime. It’s a good workout.”

“I’m not playing games, Miss Charles,” Detective Garcia said. “If I catch you doing anything that will hinder my investigation, I’ll consider it obstruction.”

“I swear, detective, I wasn’t doing anything.” I put up my hands. What could he do? Arrest me for snooping? For listening in? I wasn’t on anyone’s property, but on the sidewalk, so he couldn’t even get me for trespassing.

Where is this defiance coming from?

Perhaps it was the seriousness of losing my aunt’s café that had gotten to me. Or maybe it was that I’d become annoyed with the entire investigation and law enforcement. Either way, I wouldn’t let the detective bully me.

Even if you were doing exactly what he thinks you were doing.

“I want to make something clear, Miss Charles. You’re not to interfere in an ongoing investigation. And you’re to stay away from persons of interest in this case, because, you are, in fact, a person of interest in this case. That hasn’t changed. I would expect you would try to stay out of trouble rather than drop yourself into more of it.”

“I—walking.” Great. Back to being incoherent.

“Then don’t let me stop you from doing exactly that.” He folded his arms, tilting his head to one side.

I dragged my teeth over my bottom lip. “Good evening, detective,” I said, then crossed the road and started my long walk back to the café. I glanced over my shoulder once I reached the corner and found Detective Garcia watching me from next to his police cruiser.

Shoot, I hadn’t even heard it pull up, I’d been so lost in thought. How ridiculous I must’ve looked, hunched over next to the fence in the gathering darkness.

I shook my head at myself, brought my cell phone out of the pocket of my shorts, and opened the maps app. I plotted a course back to the café, since I wasn't familiar with Parfait's winding streets and intersections.

The walk was brisk, my steps reflecting the pace of my thoughts.

My suspicions about Bebe's involvement in Trisha's murder had grown immeasurably after overhearing that conversation, but I had nothing that proved she'd done it. Or that she'd asked someone else to do it.

And wasn't it too far-fetched to believe that she might've enlisted the help of not one, but two other people? Could three people despise Trisha enough to want to kill her and keep it a secret? Surely, not all of them were lacking in moral fiber to that degree.

Several times, I paused mid-stride, a sneaking feeling crawling over my shoulders and neck. But the streets were quiet apart from the occasional dog barking or a passing car.

I arrived at the closed café a few minutes past 7:00 p.m. and found Didi waiting with my handbag and the keys to the Sunny Side Up.

"There you are," she said, and let out a relieved sigh. "I was worried something had happened."

"Why?"

Didi pulled a face. "Trisha was murdered the other day. It could happen again, you know."

"I thought this place was super safe." I took my stuff from her. "Do you need a ride home?"

"Sure, that would be great, thanks!" Maybe, Didi was coming to her senses about the dangers in Parfait.

We piled into Aunt Rita's Beetle and took the quick trip to the beachfront cottages in silence. "See you tomorrow," she said, and waved as she hurried up the stepping stone path that led to her mother's cottage.

I waited until she was safely inside before heading back to my aunt's place. It was silent, but I'd left the porch light on in anticipation of coming home at this hour. Bodger was—wait, what was that?

I blinked, clutching the steering wheel, my hands clammy against the plastic.

Was that a note taped to the door?

“Relax,” I muttered. “It’s probably nothing.”

I cut the engine, grabbed my belongings, then hurried up onto the porch. A single piece of folded paper had been fixed to the front door. It hadn’t been addressed to anyone. I put my things down and removed the note, opening it along its fold.

Untidy handwriting scrawled across the page.

Everything is taken care of.

I flipped the note over, but there was nothing on the back.

“What on earth?”

I reread it, but the words held absolutely no meaning for me. What had been taken care of? What was this in relation to? I doubted that the guys who were meant to fix the air-conditioning at the café would’ve left me a mysterious, unsigned note.

But that was the only thing I could think of that might—

Unless... Oh wait, unless this note wasn’t for me. What if someone had placed it here thinking that Aunt Rita was in town? It might be for her. But from whom? And why?

An impatient meow yowled from inside the cottage, and I quickly tucked the note under one arm and fished out the cottage key.

“Coming,” I called.

It wasn’t good to make Bodger wait for his dinner.

But as I let myself into the cottage, the note pressed against my side, I couldn’t help wondering who had written it and why.

That weekend...

I yawned, rubbing my eyes and checking the time on my pearl-faced watch, trying not to let the morning grumps get to me. I'd run out of coffee in the cottage and I'd been run off my feet at work the day before, so I hadn't had the chance to get more.

Not a good thing, since it was the morning of the Everglades trip, and I was expected to be social, bright, and happy.

Bodger sat in the living room doorway, eyeing me like a tuna fish out of water.

"I'll be back on Sunday evening," I said.

Bodger flicked his tail but said nothing.

"Emilia will be here to fill your water and food bowls. Try not to attack her when she arrives, all right? I don't think she's the type who'll buy into your mood swings. She has a toddler. They're even more high maintenance than you are."

A slight hiss that turned into a yawn. Somehow, through great effort on my part not to invade Bodger's personal space and always feed him on time, we'd managed an uneasy truce—as long as I kept my door locked at night.

On Thursday evening, I'd completely forgotten and simply left it closed. Bodger had opened the door, and I'd woken to him sitting on my chest, his claws inches from my throat, and his growling loud and obnoxious.

I'd nearly had a heart attack.

A car horn honked outside, and I waved to the maniac cat, grabbed my bag and headed out the door. I'd be gone for one sleep and the better part of tomorrow, but I'd packed for every occasion minus high heels, since, rationally, I probably wouldn't need heels on a hike.

Nick, Didi, Yuli and Karl—two of the other servers at the restaurant—sat in Nick's Jeep, chatting happily while they waited for me.

Nick leaped out of the car and helped me get my bag into the back, then opened the passenger side door for me.

"I get shotgun?" I asked.

"Sure," Yuli called from the back. "You're the oldest, Miss Charles. You get to sit in the front."

"I'd prefer to be younger and sitting in the back," I replied. "Is that something that can be arranged?"

The servers laughed.

The Everglades Luxury Bungalows were about an hour from Parfait, and our drive was filled with laughter, the occasional bout of singing, and snacking. Thankfully, Didi's mother had had the forethought to pack a whole range of snacks, including a flask of coffee that went down a treat.

By the time we pulled up to the cluster of thatched-roofed wooden bungalows, my mood had improved threefold. It was hot and muggy, but the sounds of nature overwhelmed my discomfort, and we piled out of the Jeep.

A lanky man appeared on the porch of the reception building next to the parking area. He was handsome, with sun-bleached hair, bright green eyes, and an even tan that spoke of hours in the sun.

"There you are, Nick!" He strode up to us, and I caught sight of his nametag.

Michael.

My eyes widened. Surely, that wasn't *the* Michael? As in Frances' son Michael?

“How was the drive down?” he asked.

“All good. Right, gang?” Nick grinned around at us.

Everyone nodded and smiled.

“You’re in bungalows three through seven,” he said. “No charge thanks to Nick over here.”

“Thanks to you, buddy,” Nick said, clapping a hand onto Michael’s shoulder. “You’re the one who gave them to us for free.”

“Yeah, well, I owed you one, didn’t I?” Michael’s grin took on a strange quality, and I stared at him. “I’ll leave you some time to get settled in,” Michael continued. “But the nature walk starts in a half hour, so meet back here for that if you want to take part.”

“We sure do,” Nick said.

Michael handed over our keys, and Nick shared them out among the group. We each had our own tiny bungalow, and we split off to go drop off our things and check the place out, the air zapping with excitement for the day ahead.

I was in bungalow number five, right between Nick’s and Didi’s, and I let myself into the small space. It contained a bed, a bathroom with a rustic shower and wide showerhead, and two thatched armchairs in front of a low coffee table.

The bed, with beige sheets and two thick pillows, was comfortable, and I flopped onto it, tucking my hands behind my head. The smell of the thatch roof was relaxing—completely different to anything I’d experienced before, and I kind of liked that. Any time I’d gone on vacations with Damon, we’d wine and dined at luxury resorts or hotels. We’d never ‘roughed it’ or gone hiking.

Michael is here. The thought rose out of the blue.

Frances had said that her son had left and was far away. That she hardly ever saw him. But he was just one hour away, and there’d been those boots right next to her front door. And why was Michael being so nice to Nick? What had he meant by ‘he owed Nick big time?’ What had Nick done to deserve a favor like this?

“You’re too suspicious,” I whispered. “Just relax.”

Once the allotted relaxation time of a half hour had passed, I pulled myself out of the cool bungalow and marched over to join the others at the Jeep. Nick,

Yuli, Karl and Didi were already waiting, and Michael appeared as I arrived, striding across the grass, a broad smile on his handsome face.

He spread his arms. “Everyone ready to go?” he asked. “Excited for some fun?”

“Will we get to see an alligator?” Karl’s arms were folded. As the youngest of the group at around nineteen-years-old, he still had the willowy form of a teenaged boy who hadn’t gotten a lot of exercise. “I told my brother I’d get to see an alligator.”

“We’ll probably see a few when we go on the airboat ride tomorrow,” Michael replied. “Today, you might get to see Wood Storks and other native birds. I’ll talk you through it as we go. All right? Follow me, everyone.”

We did as we were told, filing in pairs behind him as he led us to a small trail that wound through the underbrush. It was humid between the trees, but the sounds of birds chirping brought a peace to the oppressive heat.

Michael fell into step beside Nick, who was just ahead of Didi and me.

“Did you get my note?” he asked Nick.

“Note? Nah, can’t say that I did, Mike.”

“Oh, that’s weird. I left a note on your front door yesterday,” Michael said, then gave a sheepish laugh. “I was worried you’d try calling me. I don’t have a phone.”

“What happened to it?”

“Lost it weeks ago,” Michael shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. You guys are here now, and we can, uh, we can talk about stuff later.”

“Cool.”

Michael turned and walked backward through the green grass to talk to us about what we could expect from the rest of the hike, but I didn’t hear a word of it.

The note had been from Michael? And it was for Nick?

Everything is taken care of. That was what the note had said. He’d obviously stuck it to my aunt’s door rather than Nick’s by accident.

It was proof that Michael *had* been in Parfait recently, and that he could get in and out with ease.

So why had Frances made it seem otherwise? And what had Michael taken care of for Nick?

That evening, after a successful hike and a lot of fun, we gathered around a firepit to roast marshmallows after a dinner of barbecued meat, grilled corn, and mashed potatoes. I was full and satisfied, but that didn't stop me from watching Nick and Michael like a hawk.

They'd been acting natural around each other, but I'd noticed them sitting together at dinner, their heads bent toward each other, conversing quietly.

What if I'd been wrong about Nick? What if he was capable of murdering Trisha?

Stop. Just relax.

I turned my stick over the crackling fire, swatting an occasional fly or mosquito away from my face, the stars bright in the inky sky above. We'd doused ourselves in bug spray and had been rewarded with relative peace from bug bites.

Didi gobbled down her marshmallow, grinning at the sticky, oozy sweetness. "This is great," she said. "Didn't I tell you these getaways are super fun?"

I shifted my booty on the wooden log that was our makeshift bench. "It's awesome," I agreed. "It's nice to get out in nature once in a while." I wasn't used to roughing it, but I had to admit that being out here was charming, bugs and all. We'd seen plenty on our hike, with Michael gesturing and telling us the names of the animals in question.

There had been Wood Storks and Snail kites, and other birds whose names

I'd forgotten because I'd been staring suspiciously at the back of Michael's head.

"We should make s'mores," Didi said, and grabbed the bag of crackers she'd brought with her. "We just sandwich the marshmallows in these. What do you say?"

"Sounds great."

Nick had already gone to bed, but Karl and Yuli were amid an animated conversation, and a couple of older married folks sat on a log to our left, roasting their marshmallows and murmuring.

A door slammed nearby, and Michael appeared, striding toward us. He took a seat on my right, smiling. "Hello," he said. "Mind if I steal some of your crackers? I was thinking of making s'mores."

"You read my mind," Didi beamed. "Help yourself."

He speared a marshmallow and held it over the open flame in the pit. He turned it evenly, the firelight reflected in his eyes.

Michael had worked as Trisha's assistant. And Frances, his mother, had despised Trisha, especially because she'd treated Michael badly when he'd worked for her. Was that enough motivation for them to work together to get rid of her?

It seemed like Michael had a good gig here. Why would he ruin that by killing Trisha? And how was Nick involved?

"You're about to lose your marshmallow," Michael said.

And he was right, my marshmallow had burned black on one side and drooped off the end of my stick. "Whoops. Thanks." I drew it out of the flames and took the proffered cracker from Didi. I deposited my marshmallow onto it, placed another cracker on top and squished it into a s'more without the chocolate.

"See?" Didi grinned, already eating hers. "They're great."

"Michael," I said, "are you Frances' son?"

Didi went pale around the gills and looked down at her cookie, checking out of the conversation.

"I sure am. You know my mom?" he asked, ruffling his blonde hair. "I hope she hasn't given you any trouble. My mom is kind of set in her ways."

“She’s great,” I said. “We had tea with her the other day. She mentioned that you were working out of town and that she misses you a lot.”

“Yeah,” Michael shrugged. “I’ve been meaning to visit her, but I never get the chance. This place keeps me busy. Best job I’ve ever had.”

“Better than when you worked for, uh, for Trisha?” I asked, trying to broach the topic of conversation casually.

Michael stiffened, an incremental shift in his posture that relaxed a second later. “What do you know about Trisha?” he asked. “Aren’t you new to Parfait?”

“I know she was a pain in the neck,” I said. “She came into the Sunny Side Up the other day and she was difficult to deal with. Just before she, uh, you know. Died.”

Michael blinked. “Trisha’s dead?” he asked.

“Yeah. She was murdered.”

He dropped his stick and lost the marshmallow in the fire pit. “What?”

“Yeah, I thought you knew. Everyone in Parfait knows. I suppose, though, you’re not really in Parfait anymore, are you, so how would you know?” I gave a chuckle that was too high and too squeaky. “Yes, it’s really unfortunate. Someone poisoned her.”

“When?”

“A week and a bit ago,” I said.

“Wow.” Michael shook his head, blinking repeatedly. “Wow. Well, that’s news to me.”

“Your mom didn’t tell you?”

“I haven’t called her in a while. So, no, I had no idea.”

And the police hadn’t come out here to talk to him? Surely, Detective Garcia would’ve considered a disgruntled ex-employee a person of interest? And what about the dirty boots next to Michael’s mother’s door? They couldn’t have been sitting there for longer than a week, shoot, or even a few days.

Was Michael lying?

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to break the bad news to you. I was curious what it must’ve been like working with her.” I gave another awkward laugh. “I guess everyone’s been talking about what happened so much that I’m kind of

used to it as the chief topic of conversation.” Did that sound like a good excuse for bringing up Trisha? Boy, I hoped so.

“Right.” Michael got another marshmallow and a stick from the piles nearby. “Working for Trisha was challenging. I’ve got to say, I’m not surprised someone...” He drew a finger across his throat. “She was a piece of work. Always in a mood, always threatening people.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah.” Michael rolled his eyes. “She fired me, but I’ve got to admit I was glad I didn’t have to work for her anymore.”

“Why did she fire you?”

“I didn’t post her picture with the right hashtags,” he said, shrugging. “But I wasn’t cut out for that kind of job. I felt sorry for the chick who took over for me after I left. Bebe, I think her name is. I heard a rumor that she and Trisha fought like cats and dogs too.”

“They did,” Didi squeaked. “They fought all the time.”

“You know, you look super familiar,” Michael said, turning his attention to Didi. “Did we go to school together?”

Didi colored peachy pink. “Yes, we did. You were... um, a few years ahead of me.”

“Right. Didi. I remember you. You always wore that cute little beret.” He winked at her.

I excused myself from the potential third wheel situation, taking my s’more with me, and headed for my bungalow. Michael had given me a lot to think about.

He was happy, so clearly not disgruntled about being fired, but somehow hadn’t known Trisha was dead even though it was the talk of the town, and his mother had hated her and argued with her on the morning of the murder.

The fact that he didn’t know, or hadn’t known, would’ve made sense except he’d said he’d heard a rumor that Trisha and Bebe had fought a lot. So which was it? Did he have enough contact with his mother, or other people in Parfait, that he heard the rumors or not?

I ate my cool s’more, relishing the gooey sweetness and the crumble of the

cracker.

Hopefully, everything would be clearer by the light of day. And hopefully, that light of day wouldn't reveal that Nick had been involved in Trisha's demise.

The Sunday afternoon drive back from the Everglades was spent with less laughter. We'd had fun but were tired from a morning airboat ride and the excitement of having seen alligators. And Nick's behavior had changed too. He'd gone from happy-go-lucky to somber, and the closer we drew to Parfait, the worse it got.

I wanted to comfort him about his concerns, but that would've been disingenuous. After all, I'd started suspecting that he'd been involved. Guilt over that kept me silent.

Nick dropped me off in front of my aunt's cottage, and I grabbed my bag from the back, refusing help from the others and thanking them for a great time.

I needed a shower, a change, and a call with my aunt to clear my head. Whenever I was unsure about anything, Aunt Rita was there to give it to me straight.

I traipsed down the front path, frowning at the lack of greeting—or attack—from Bodger, and traversed the three front steps. I fished my key out of my pocket and inserted it into the keyhole.

The front door creaked open before I'd turned the key.

My blood ran cold.

“What on earth?”

I'd definitely locked up after myself when I'd left yesterday morning. There wasn't a chance I'd forgotten. But I *had* given a spare key to Emilia so she could

feed Bodger. That had to be what had happened—she'd left it open.

I didn't blame her. If I had a toddler to look after, I would've been scatter-brained too.

Dismissing my fear, I entered the house and dropped my bag next to the entrance hall table. My hands leaped to my mouth, but the gasp escaped anyway.

The front table had been turned on its side. Papers were scattered through the hall, and a cushion from the sofa had been split open, spilling fluffy stuffing everywhere.

I navigated around the mess, picking across it, my hands still on my mouth and fear clawing at my throat.

Someone had been in here while I was gone and torn the place apart. I peered into the living room. The TV was still there, but the bookcase had been tipped over, and the books spilled across the floor.

They might still be here.

I backed up real quick, practically falling over myself.

What about Bodger? "Oh no! Oh no, oh no." I ran out of my aunt's cottage and sprinted across the yard, practically vaulting her gate. "Emilia!" I cried and collided with my neighbor's front door. "Emilia? Are you home? Please be home!"

"Just a minute," Emilia called, followed by the harrowing cry of an angry toddler.

The door opened and my smiling neighbor appeared. "Oh, you're home. Wonderful. Listen, I fed—Sunny? You're pale as a ghost. What's wrong? What happened?"

"The cottage. Bodger. I—someone—"

"Bodger's in the living room," Emilia said, opening the door wider. "He's playing with Justin."

"He... what?" Bodger was playing? It was a sign of how shocking that statement was that I forgot about the break-in at my aunt's cottage for a second. "Why's he here?"

"I have no idea. He came over last night after dinner and didn't want to leave. So, I set up a little kitty bed for him in the living room and he's been

having play time with Justy, ever since.”

Another shriek came from the toddler. The little boy sat on the mat in the center of the living room, the TV playing a children’s show in the background. He held a cat toy and bonked it lightly on Bodger’s head.

Bodger didn’t so much as flick his tail, but purred. Actually purred. And swatted the toy instead of the child.

“What’s going on, Sunny?”

“Can you call the police for me, please?” I whispered. “I—someone broke into my aunt’s house.”

Emilia paled. “Oh, no. Yes, I can do that.” She rushed off and grabbed her phone, while I stood in the living room doorway, witnessing Bodger and the toddler playing together.

Had Bodger left last night and come here because he’d been afraid of whoever had broken into my aunt’s cottage? I touched my pocket and found my phone there. I’d been so distraught over losing Bodger and the break-in that I’d totally blanked on the fact that I could call the cops myself.

“They’re on their way,” Emilia said, appearing in the doorway. “Don’t worry, Sunny, it will be OK. Come on through to the kitchen. I’ll get you a soda. You need sugar.”

I followed her, the hall blurring. Was it my past that had come back to haunt me? Could it be that my ex-husband had another mystery enemy who’d found me?



“YOU NEED TO RELAX, DARLING,” AUNT RITA SAID, DOWN THE LINE, TOTALLY calm, the sound of chatter occasionally flaring in the background. She was clearly in ‘cruise mode’ because she hadn’t batted an eyelid or flapped a lip over the fact that her cottage had been broken into, her books tipped over and her clothes ripped out of her closet.

“How can you say that?” I asked, standing out on the porch while two police officers walked through the cottage, doing one last sweep of the place. They’d

already checked for any remaining intruders and had found none.

“Nothing was stolen, was it?” Rita asked.

“No.”

“Then there’s no need to stress. You can’t control this anymore than you can control the ocean waves or the summer breeze.”

“Auntie, you’ve been on that cruise for too long. You’re starting to sound like you’ve been sniffing essential oils.”

Aunt Rita let out tinkling peals of laughter. “Be that as it may, you have to manage what you can control instead of worrying about what you can’t.”

“How?”

“Insurance,” Aunt Rita said. “Call the insurance company and have them come out and assess the damage. And then... hmm, try calling the local alarm company and asking them to come install one. By the way, have the air-conditioning guys come out to the café yet?”

Now, she sounded more like my aunt. In organization mode, Rita was a woman to be reckoned with.

“No. I tried calling them, but they said that they had no record of the booking. And when I shouted...”

“Oh dear,” Aunt Rita said. “Look, let me give them a call and work my magic.”

“No, no, I can do it, it’s fine. You’re on vacation. You’re not supposed to do any work.”

“Are you sure?” Rita asked. “I can call them. It would be no trouble.”

“No, auntie, I’ll do it.”

“All right, darling. Now, look after yourself and stop stressing. Strange things like this happen all the time, and I trust that you’ll take care of things there. Just make sure Bodger is safe and well-fed.”

“I will. I just... are you sure you don’t want to come back? Things are weird here, auntie. There are—well, there’s the murder and now this.”

“I’m sure this is a random break-in. Malorie down the street had a problem like this a few years back. Turned out it was just a group of rambunctious teenagers on a dare. You’ll see. It will be something relatively innocent. Now,

I've got to go, sweetie. They're serving mimosas at the pool."

"Have fun."

I stared at the phone's screen, still shaken but a little calmer thanks to my aunt's soothing tone. I was caught between believing she was right and the certainty that something fishy was going on here.

Sure, the break-in could've been some teenagers on a dare or even a random person looking for a quick buck—or it could've been if anything of value had been taken—but my gut said this was different.

Could it be related to Trisha's murder and the fact that I'd been asking questions? Or was this because of my ex-husband's illegal shenanigans?

Either way, there was nothing I could do but beef up security at my aunt's cottage and stay the course. Whatever happened, I couldn't afford to mess things up. Not at the café and not at home. This was my last chance at a normal life.

Returning to the café the next day, even with the gossip and the strange looks directed at me and Nick, was a slice of the normality pie I'd needed. I spent the morning behind the coffee bar—my new favorite hidey hole where I could avoid people and pretend to be busy making drinks.

Didi and Karl were on duty and in great spirits after our weekend getaway, and I hadn't bothered telling them about the break-in. I didn't want the news to spread and the perpetrator to know the cops might be onto them.

At lunch time, I dipped out of the café on a quick fifteen-minute break and entered Mildred's animal shelter next door.

Mildred sat behind the counter, sipping from a chipped mug and idly paging through a copy of the *Parfait Platter*. She looked up, and her expression brightened. "Sunny!" she exclaimed, shuffling off her stool. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, just thought I'd pay you a visit and check how things are going," I said. "Also, I've been thinking of getting a companion cat for Bodger."

"Well, how wonderful to have you," Mildred said. "I'll fix you a cup of coffee."

"Thank you," I replied, privately hoping that didn't include more chalky chocolate chip cookies.

Mildred hummed under her breath as she prepared the coffee, the scent of mothballs drifting from her dress—a knee-length yellow-striped number with

sleeves. Despite the mothballs, it had a few neatly chewed holes here and there.

“How are things, Mildred?”

“Oh, they’re... I wish I could say they’re good, but I always hope they’ll get better.” Mildred sighed, her back still to me. “It turns out my nephew won’t be coming down, so I won’t be retiring from the shelter.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. Are you tired of working here?”

“No, of course not,” Mildred said, facing me, her hand shaking as she reached for the jar of coffee grounds. “I’ve spent my life dedicated to the shelter, but I just can’t do it anymore, dear. I’m tired. Tired of working so hard and getting nothing in return. Tired of seeing the animals never get adopted, or when they do, missing them once they’re gone. I thought I would do something good for the community and for the animals, but people are more interested in buying pets than adopting from the shelter. They want puppies and kittens, not my battle worn, loveable menagerie.”

I took a seat on the scarred and holey sofa next to a water cooler that was as dry as the Sahara Desert. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“There’s nothing I can do anymore, and I hoped that handing the shelter over to someone with a fresh take would help. I’ve failed these animals, this place, and I felt like leaving would be best for everyone involved.” Mildred fetched her cookie jar and came over. She popped off the lid and offered me a cookie.

I took one, trying not to come across as reluctant, and held it over my palm. “Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mildred said. “I think the worst part is... and this might be my fault, but I’m fairly certain that someone is stealing the last of the money in the shelter’s business account.”

“How is that your fault?”

“Well, because I’m the one who lost the card. I only realized I’d lost it a little while ago, and I’ve been too shy to call the bank and have them cancel it. I’ve lost it several times, and now it costs money when I need to order a new one. I’ve just been going into the bank directly and asking them for money.” Mildred nibbled on her bottom lip. “Eat your cookie, dear.”

I took a bite and experienced the graveyard dust puff of ancient cookie for

the second time. I'd hoped it would only be once in my lifetime.

"Thanks," I said, trying not to choke. "But you should cancel that card and get another one."

"Do you think so?"

"I'll help you," I said. "I'll give you money to pay for a new card. If someone's been stealing from you, that's a start to putting a stop to it at least. And you should report this to the police too."

"Oh no, no, I wouldn't want to trouble anyone." She eyed my half-eaten cookie.

I took another bite, keeping my face impassive as I chewed mechanically. "Of course, you should trouble them. It's their job to take care of citizens and look out for crime. Imagine how many criminals will walk free if we never trouble the police."

"Oh, I s'pose you're right, I just don't want to be a nuisance," Mildred said, brushing her hands over her moth-eaten dress. "Yes, I guess I will speak to them."

"Good. And if they don't find out who it is, well, I'll try to help you myself." It would help take my mind off the café, Trisha, and my growing fear that Nick had been involved. I'd been avoiding him all morning.

"You will?" Mildred asked, perking up.

"I will."

"You're an angel, Sunny. A real godsend."

I blushed, shaking my head. "Just being helpful." I cleared my throat and nearly choked on cookie dust again. How on earth had a layer of it affixed itself to the lining of my esophagus? "I'm thinking of getting a cat friend for Bodger," I said, steering the conversation back to something that would set Mildred more at ease.

"Oh, well, I'm not sure that's a good idea," Mildred replied.

"Why?"

"Because it's Bodger. He's an incredibly territorial cat. I don't think he would appreciate another animal in his space."

"Hmm. I guess."

“What gave you the idea to get another cat?” Mildred asked.

“He seems lonely most of the time. He went over to Emilia’s yesterday to play with her son.”

“Good heavens. That’s out of character.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to tell her about the break-in. That was need-to-know information.

“Maybe you’re right.” Mildred glanced back at the hall that led to the area where the animals were kept. “Or maybe, you need a dog. Take some time and think about it before you decide, dear. Animals are a big commitment. You don’t want to rush into anything, especially if you’re not going to be around to look after them.”

I blinked. “What do you mean?”

Mildred stood up and hurried over to the coffee pot. “Oh, just that you might leave town in the future. You never know.”

I perched on my aunt’s swing seat on the front porch, a can of soda in one hand and my phone in the other while I waited for the men installing the alarm to finish their work. At least they were responsive. All the sweet-talking in the world hadn’t moved along the air-conditioning company. I was starting to think I’d have to go down there and talk to them in person, although it would involve a ride out-of-town in Aunt Rita’s Beetle.

Bodger had retreated to the top of the car while the men worked, and I worried that it was because the person who’d broken in—boy, I’d pay to know who’d done it—had scared him.

“It’s OK, Bodger,” I called out, softly. “Everything will be fine.”

He let out a fantastic growl which gave me comfort that he was still his same crotchety self.

Between worrying about Bodger, the break-in, and the café, I’d had barely enough time to consider Trisha’s murder, but now that things had slowed down... I couldn’t stop thinking about the note Michael had left on the cottage door, and that Nick had been acting strangely with him.

They’d spent a lot of time on the trip talking quietly together, and that Nick had had access to the food in the kitchen made things worse.

Could I overlook this? Trust Nick to be in the kitchen even as my suspicions grew? The trouble was, I didn’t have any real clues or evidence that pointed directly to him.

Bodger leaped off the top of the Beetle and streaked underneath the car.

“Bodger? What’s wrong?”

The front gate clicked, and my attention shifted.

“Hi, neighbor,” Nick said, strolling easily up the path, his hands in his pockets. “I noticed a commotion over here, so I thought I’d check everything was all right.”

Why had Bodger just run away? He was usually defensive of Aunt Rita’s property, and he knew Nick after years of living next door to him.

“Everything’s fine,” I said, slowly. “I’m having an alarm installed.”

“Did you get your aunt’s approval for that?” He tilted his head to one side, his expressive blue eyes fixed on mine.

Forget that he’s handsome. Focus on the facts. It was too easy to be charmed by a handsome face. Damon had been my lesson for that. “Of course,” I said. “She’s more than happy to have some security out here, especially with how things have been going lately. You know, the murder.”

“Right,” Nick said, and came up the steps. He leaned against the balustrade, a tan forearm resting against the wood. “I was worried. You didn’t talk to me at work today. I thought maybe something had happened.”

I pressed my lips together.

Here was my problem: I was incurably honest. Shy, but honest. I usually said what I meant, even if it took me a while to get over being flustered about having to say it. And I was comfortable around Nick now, barring my suspicions. Couple that with the guilt over suspecting him in the first place...

“I need to talk to you about something,” I said.

“Sure.” He straightened. “Mind if I take a seat?”

“Go for it.”

Nick sat down on the swing seat next to me, an appropriate gap separating us. “What’s up?”

“You and Michael were talking about a note on the trip this weekend, right?”

“Yeah.” He frowned.

“He taped that note to my door instead of yours,” I said. “And it said something like everything had been taken care of.”

“OK?”

“I just think that’s a little weird,” I said, awkwardly. “Especially after what happened to Trisha. Why would he leave a note for you like that?”

Nick fell silent, but a slow blush spread up his throat and onto his cheeks. He scrubbed his neatly clipped nails over the stubble on his square jaw. “What are you insinuating, Sunny?”

“I’m asking a straight question,” I said. “Why would he leave you a note saying that?”

“Yeah, but why are you asking?”

“Why aren’t you answering?” I countered, stubbornly. “Do you have something to hide?”

“Wow.” Nick pushed up from the seat and strode to the steps. “Wow. Are you accusing me of something? I don’t know you that well, but this is the last thing I would’ve expected from Rita’s niece.”

“That’s neither here nor there, Nick.” I hesitated, letting out a frustrated breath. “Look, I’m not trying to upset you, I just... come on. That’s kind of suspicious, right? You see what I’m saying. One second the police are pulling you in for questioning, the next you’re receiving notes from Michael, who hated Trisha, and who lied about not being around his mother’s house.”

Nick’s eyes grew wider and wider as I spoke until they looked liable to pop out of his head.

“What?” I asked. “What? I’m just pointing out what I see. You can’t be mad at me for that.”

“I very much can be mad at you for that,” Nick snapped. “You’re crossing a line here, Sunny. It’s not your place to make assumptions or ask questions like that. You’re not a detective. You’re not even my friend.”

I recoiled, hurt although I’d only known him for a couple weeks.

“I’ve been dragged over the coals over the last while and your solution is to make that worse?”

“I—Nick—I—”

“If you must know, the note was about our weekend away in the Everglades. I asked Michael to let me know when everything was organized so we could

come out, but he didn't so I drove us out there anyway, trusting that he would have set everything up. And he had," Nick said, the words bubbling out of him like lava out of the mouth of a volcano.

"Nick, I didn't mean to make you angry."

"Then maybe you shouldn't have just accused me of being involved in Trisha's murder," he replied. "Look, I—uh—yeah, I don't want to work for you anymore."

I gasped. "Nick! No, don't—I was just curious. I'm—"

"Nah." He lifted a hand. "I don't need this. I've been under enough pressure as it is already. I'll find a job at another restaurant. I quit." And then he walked off down the steps and slammed the front gate behind him.

Just like that, in the blink of an eye, I had lost my aunt's long-term chef. What now?

Guilt had been my best friend over the last twelve hours. I'd spent the night tossing and turning, occasionally trying to call Nick, then texting him, until I'd received an irate phone call from his wife, Jasmine, instead. I didn't even want to think about what she'd said. It was too embarrassing.

Worse, I'd sent out a group text to the servers at the restaurant and told them we'd be closed indefinitely. The response had been as expected—sad, confused, questioning. And I'd had to tell them we needed to find a new chef because Nick had left.

It had been difficult to keep my tone professional. And even worse, I couldn't get hold of Aunt Rita either. Her phone was off, or she had no signal.

I pulled myself out of bed at quarter past six in the morning, fixed myself a cup of coffee and put out Bodger's food for the day. For once, he didn't hiss at me about it or try to bat my legs as I passed by. Maybe he sensed that I was in a foul mood too and grudgingly respected that? Who knew?

"What am I going to do, Bodger?" I asked, taking a seat at my aunt's quaint square table in the center of her sun-yellow kitchen. "I haven't got a chef, and nobody would want to work in a café that's basically a glorified crime scene, would they? It's hopeless."

Bodger flicked his tail, chewing noisily at his food bowl.

"I've got nowhere to be, nothing to do, and I can't afford to leave town.

There's got to be an answer to all of this." I'd tried apologizing, but it seemed like Nick needed his space, and if I didn't give it to him, Jasmine might beat me up. I wouldn't put it past her. She did yoga and was spry and athletic.

I was tall, thin, and hadn't gone jogging in about five years. No muscle mass to speak of.

"Well, I can't sit around all day and mope." I finished my coffee, deciding to forego breakfast—I didn't have an appetite because guilt had filled me up. "See you later."

A flick of the tail was the reply.

I set the alarm before letting myself out of my aunt's cottage. Maybe today was the day I could drive out and convince the air-con guys to come fix the unit in the café. Or I could do a general spring cleaning and rearrange a few things, maybe print out a flyer that there was a vacancy for a new chef at the café.

Rita had always treated her employees well, both emotionally and financially, so the café had an excellent reputation. A pity I'd gone and ruined that with Nick yesterday.

I got into the Beetle and spent the drive down to the café mulling over my options. To be honest, there weren't many.

"Cleaning," I said. "I'll start with the cleaning."

I unlocked the café, the sun casting morning light into the interior, a cool breeze shifting the air, and let myself inside. I kept the doors open but put a 'closed' sign up in the window so people would know.

One cup of coffee later—way better than the one at the cottage—and I set to work. Mopping first, then wiping down the counters, only taking a break to wipe sweat off my brow or snack on a piece of cake and place the money in the register.

I wiped down the chairs in the booths, plastic squeaking underneath my cloth, and ran my hand between the cushions. The backs of my fingers bumped into something hard.

"Huh?" I stopped wiping and dug my fingers a little deeper, feeling the item wedged between the cushions. It was flat and hard, maybe made of plastic? I pulled it out.

“A phone,” I muttered.

Someone’s phone had fallen out of their pocket and gotten wedged in the cushions. It had to belong to a customer. That was an easy enough fix.

I abandoned my cleaning supplies and brought the cellphone to the counter, then pressed the power button on its side. The screen lit up, but it was on low battery. I’d have to figure out who’s phone it was quickly, then call them from the office.

“Let’s see. Hmm.” I unlocked the screen with a swipe of my finger and sucked in a gasp.

The background picture was of Trisha! And the man standing next to her, his arm around her shoulders, lips pressed to her cheek, was clearly Michael, Frances’ son, the man who had left Nick the note, and who had said he didn’t have a good relationship with the vlogger victim.

“Wait a second...” But Michael hadn’t mentioned they’d been dating. No one had.

Did no one except them know? Surely that was information that Detective Garcia would find interesting. And how on earth had this phone wound up in the cushions of the booth in the corner? Was this Michael’s phone or Trisha’s? Maybe she had a spare phone? Because she hadn’t let go of her phone when she’d been vlogging everything on the morning of her murder.

I tapped on the message icon on the screen and opened the texts. There were several conversations open, but the most recent, dated a month back, was between Michael and Trisha. So, this was Michael’s phone, after all—the one he’d mentioned losing long ago on the Everglades trip. Of course!

Trisha: I feel like you don’t hear me when I talk to you, Michael. When I ask you for something, I expect you to just get it for me, not get annoyed because I’m asking. I get that it’s difficult to figure out the line between being my employee and my boyfriend, but something’s got to give. I don’t want things to end badly between us.

Michael: End??

Trisha: You know that it can’t go on like this.

Michael: I just don’t get why you’re saying this now. We were fine this

morning.

Trisha: Maybe you're fine, but I'm not. This situation is getting out of hand.

Trisha: Answer me, Michael. You can't ignore me for long. You know that.

Trisha: Michael!

Michael: I'm here.

Trisha: And?

Michael: I just think there's more to this than meets the eye. You're saying this stuff, but I don't think that's the real problem.

Trisha: Oh yeah, then what's the real problem?

Michael: Your ex. You're still into him. I see him around you all the time, Trisha, don't think I'm blind or stupid.

Trisha: Yeah, he's around all the time because he's stalking me! I told you that!!!

Michael: Sure.

Trisha: Believe what you want to believe. I swear, the longer this goes on...

And that was it. The last message from Trisha. There was no correspondence on the phone between them other than that one, but, boy, was it illuminating.

Michael had been in a relationship with Trisha. Could it be that no one had known about it? A secret relationship between friends? Or could it be... hmm...

It was pastime I had a serious conversation with Bebe Rae, and this time, I wouldn't let roving detectives or strange dark figures stop me from drilling down to the truth.

A quick call to Didi had afforded me the information I needed: Bebe's address. Though I'd followed her to the mystery house the other day, I couldn't guarantee that it was her home. Turned out, it wasn't, which made the fact that she'd gone there and met that stranger even more interesting.

Who was he? Why had she spoken to him? Was it Michael? Had they agreed to get rid of Trisha together after things had gone sour? And who was the stalker ex that Trisha had mentioned in her earlier texts?

The pondering had me on edge, excited, like I was closer than ever to sorting this out and proving my innocence, and maybe even Nick's. That would be the perfect way to apologize for my brash accusations.

I pattered down Seashell Road in quaint suburbia and parked outside number 1765. My resolve hardened, but my nerves hopped and skipped long, regardless. Just because I wanted to question Bebe, didn't mean I wasn't scared it would go poorly.

Everything else had so far.

The house was a single-story brick building without a fence, and with a paved driveway. A Honda Civic sat parked out front, blue and sparkling clean, reflecting the afternoon sun. I got out of the car, brushed off my blouse, and took the path up to the front door.

You'll be fine. Just be polite. Don't accuse her of having murdered her friend, and everything will go to plan.

I knocked. “Hello? Is anyone home?” I called.

The door clicked open, and Bebe appeared, a phone in hand. Her caramel-colored hair swept in front of one eye, the other eye peered up at me, glittery with makeup. She was a gorgeous young woman. Could Michael have had an affair with her?

“Yeah?” she asked, tapping on the screen idly.

“Hi, Bebe, I’m—”

“I know who you are,” she said. “The café owner, right? Or the new manager. Whatever.”

“Sunny,” I nodded, extending a hand.

Bebe pursed her lips, tucking her phone to her chest and giving me her full attention now. “Right. Sunny.”

I dropped my hand. “Uh, I’m sorry to bother you, but I just, uh, needed to talk to you?” It came out like a question, and what was worse, my voice squeaked as I asked it.

“OK...?”

“Yeah, I, uh, may I come in?”

“Depends what you want to talk about,” Bebe said.

“I’m looking for a chef,” I replied, using the excuse I’d rehearsed in the car on the way over. “And I figured you’d know where I can find one since you’re always frequenting the restaurants in town.”

Bebe’s expression shifted incrementally. “Ah, OK. Cool. Yeah, you can come in.” She opened the door wider, and I followed her into a well-lit, but exceptionally messy hallway. Old bills and newspapers, half-opened moving boxes, and even a few piles of clothes—it looked as if a mini-hurricane had swept through her house.

“Excuse the mess,” Bebe said, “I just moved in and things have been pretty complicated lately. You know, Trisha’s murder.”

“Oh, yeah, I can imagine.”

She led me into her kitchen, and we sat down at a circular table that held two chairs. The whole thing rocked back and forth the minute I touched it, threatening to topple an empty glass sitting atop it.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No stress. So, what’s up? What happened to Nick? Isn’t he the guy that works there?”

“He quit,” I said. “For, uh, personal reasons.” That was true, and while I was honest, I wasn’t about to give a potential murderer inside information about me. “So, I’m looking for someone who might be interested in working there. I thought maybe Michael?”

“Michael.” Bebe frowned. “Trisha’s ex-assistant, Michael?”

“Yeah. I heard he cooked in his spare time?” Maybe I wasn’t as honest as I claimed to be. That was an outright lie. But anything in the pursuit of truth, right?

“No, that’s not true. Not as far as I know,” Bebe said. “Michael was acting as Trisha’s assistant while she looked for someone better. Then she found me.”

“Oh OK. I must’ve gotten my wires crossed somehow. I don’t know why I thought he was a chef. He seems like a nice enough guy, though, pity.”

“Ha.” Bebe’s brief laugh dripped with cynicism.

“What?”

“Yeah, just... it’s not relevant.”

“No, go ahead. Tell me. Any information is good information, right?”

She raised an eyebrow at that, and for a second, I was sure I’d messed up. “Just that Michael’s not as good of a person as everyone thinks he is. If you ask me, the cops should be knocking on his door asking him questions, rather than on mine.”

So, Detective Garcia had been to visit her. That would explain why he’d found me tailing her. Maybe he’d been doing the same.

“Oh yeah? Everyone’s been gossiping about Trisha’s murder lately. It’s the talk of the town. I figured it might be someone close to her who did it, but her ex-assistant? Eh.” I shrugged.

“Not just an ex-assistant.” Bebe said, her brown eyes lighting up. “They were dating. And no one knew except for me and, like, two other people.”

“Wow, really?”

“Oh yeah,” Bebe said. “And I find it mighty interesting that Michael didn’t

tell anyone about their messy break-up either.”

“Do you think he might’ve done it? Or could it be another of her exes?”

Objection, your Honor, leading the witness.

“You know what, I wouldn’t have put it past one of her exes to do something like this. She didn’t date the most stable guys.”

“Uh oh.”

Bebe pursed her lips and nodded. “The last guy she dated was a total nutcase.”

“Does he live in Parfait?”

“Nah, he was dating her in college before she came back here to start her career as an influencer.” She rolled her eyes. “Not that it makes sense that she even wanted to be a food vlogger. Just between you and me, she didn’t even like food that much.”

“Who doesn’t like food?” I put up a scandalized expression.

“Psychopaths,” Bebe said.

“You don’t think that the nutcase guy could’ve done something to her, do you?”

“Who, Eddie? I don’t know. Maybe.”

“His name is Eddie?”

“Yeah. Eddie Martinez. And in case you’re thinking about telling the cops about him,” Bebe said, “don’t bother. I’ve already done that. You know, I gave them all the information I had, just in case. Trisha was difficult to get along with for most people, but I did like working for her. So... yeah, she didn’t deserve to die, especially not in the way she did. I swear, I’m totally scarred from it. Keep having nightmares and stuff.” She waved a hand in front of her eyes as if to ward off tears, but there were none in sight.

Was she faking? Maybe, but she’d still given me a lot of useful information about Trisha and her stalker ex. And by some miracle, I hadn’t let on that I was super interested in it.

“Well, that’s just crazy. The whole thing,” I said, “but, uh, could we talk about my chef problem?”

“Oh, sure. Sheesh, I didn’t mean to blab like that.” Bebe laughed. “I guess

I've just been holding it inside for so long that it had to come out.”

Bebe walked me through a few options for a new chef for the Sunny Side Up, and I wrote them down, all the while thinking about what she'd told me. It would be an interesting week.

My chat with Bebe had made two things clear. First, I didn't want to hire another chef. I wanted Nick back in the café because he was great at what he did, and Aunt Rita clearly trusted and liked him enough to leave him in charge of helping me.

Second, I still had no idea who had killed Trisha, but at least I had more information about the potential 'players' so to speak. Whether that would wind up helping me was still to be decided.

I returned to my aunt's cottage in the lazy afternoon after my chat with Bebe and opted for a walk before going inside. I needed to clear my mind, and the weather was temperate today, the breeze uplifting and the humidity lower than it had been all week.

The street was quiet, and I made my way to the end, smiling at the quaint cottages and the gardens I passed by before heading home.

Nothing. I had nothing.

Except a healthy dose of shame for accusing my chef of being involved.

Even so, if I looked at the facts, plainly and without bias, Nick had a motivation for wanting Trisha out of the picture. He'd stood to lose his job. But he'd quit anyway, so didn't that mean he'd never been worried about losing his job in the first place?

Goodness, my mind had gone mulchy from all the worry.

I stopped in front of the cute gate that led into my aunt's front yard, studying

the cottage with its white-washed walls, its blue front door. Bodger was out on the front step, studying me through narrowed yellow eyes.

“What?” I asked. “You know me. You don’t need to look at me like I’m a piece of tuna.”

He meowed at me, and it was less hostile than usual.

“Is everything OK, Bodger?” I entered the garden and proceeded up the pathway toward him “Do you want a cuddle?” It was possibly the most ridiculous thing I’d ever suggested.

Bodger agreed. He let out a hiss the moment I came within two steps of him.

“Well, so much for that idea. I’m beginning to think I have cooties.” My gaze wandered from Aunt Rita’s cottage to my next-door neighbor’s, guilt building in my chest.

I ought to apologize to Nick in person. It might not mend the bridge, but it would be a start. Hopefully, I could convince him he should still work at the Sunny Side Up for Rita if not for me. I wouldn’t be running things forever. My aunt would come back and take over again.

You’ve got this. Don’t be shy.

I pushed my shoulders back, lifted my chin, and walked over to Nick’s place. His cottage was nearly identical to my aunt’s in appearance, except he had a sea green door and a stylized knocker attached to it.

A knock later, and the door opened.

But it wasn’t Nick’s blue eyes and calm smile that greeted me.

Jasmine stood on the threshold, her knuckles white as she gripped the door. “What do *you* want?”

Good heavens, the woman hated me, didn’t she? I hadn’t done anything specific to irritate her, except for the makeup incident, but surely she could understand why I’d said no to that?

“Hello, Jasmine,” I said, as pleasantly as I could muster. “How are you today?”

“Cut it out,” she replied. “I know you’re not here to make small talk, so what is it?”

“We are neighbors, you know. I might be here for small talk.”

Jasmine's lips drew into a thin line. "I *will* slam the door in your face."

"There's no need to be rude," I said.

"Me, rude? That's hilarious coming from you."

"Is this about the other day?" I asked. "I didn't mean to upset you, I just had to do what was right for the café. Can you understand that?"

"I can understand you're a wretched, controlling witch."

"I need to speak to Nick," I said curtly, because this wasn't going anywhere except some place bad, and I didn't want to have an all-out argument with the woman. I wasn't a person who particularly enjoyed confrontation, but I'd stand up for myself if I had to.

"You can't speak to him."

"Jasmine, you can't dictate who Nick speaks to."

"I can, and I will, but that's not why you can't speak to him," she said. "He's not here. And he won't be for a while. Despite your best efforts to sink our family, you haven't succeeded. Nick is starting his own business as a chef and social media influencer. He's got things to do that you would never understand."

"Can you just tell him I came by, please?"

"Ha!"

She tried closing the door, and I caught it with my palm. "Jasmine, please. Let's be rational about this. I'm here because I want to apologize and offer Nick his job back."

"It's not yours to offer. You didn't fire him, he quit. That's a pretty clear signal that he wants nothing to do with you or that stupid café."

"Hey, the café is not stupid. Nick enjoyed working there."

"Did he? You act like you know him so well, but you've barely spent more than a few hours with him. He's not your friend. He's not your employee. So why don't you just mind your own business and stay out of ours?"

"Because I—"

She shut the door on me, and I stood there, staring at the knocker, half-inclined to bang it against the door and demand an apology.

But I wouldn't get one, and it would only make things worse. Jasmine was rude, but she was right. I didn't know Nick that well, and I had no idea whether

he'd loved working at the café or not before I'd been there. But if he hadn't, why would my aunt have trusted him?

And what was this about being an influencer? Did he want to be a celebrity chef?

Nick is starting a career as an influencer, so soon after Trisha's death?

He didn't seem the type. Sure, he had the face for it, but he'd avoided the limelight in the café. Or was that because of the murder and him hiding from those who suspected him? I couldn't be sure.

I hovered on the step for another couple minutes before traipsing down the garden path and back over to my aunt's cottage.

Nick was responsible for his own actions, even if Jasmine was a terrible influence, and I couldn't help but believe that financial issues would make a man do things he'd later regret. But was it enough for Nick to want to get rid of the competition?

Something still didn't add up. If only I could place my finger on what it was.

“**A**nd you’ve had some experience working in a kitchen?” I asked, pen in hand as I studied the applicant for the chef’s position at the Sunny Side Up.

He was young, with a shock of bright red hair and freckles across his nose. And by young, I meant he looked as if he’d only just graduated high school.

“Well,” he squeaked, “I guess you could say that. I’ve cooked a few meals at the Barrel, but mostly I just, uh, bussed tables.”

“You were a busboy?” I glanced down at his resume. He’d sent it through padded with loads of accomplishments, but very little work history. Still, chefs were thin on the ground, as I’d discovered, and I was desperate enough to hope that he’d reveal an extensive work history to me in person.

My naïveté had reached new heights. Or my desperation. Combination of the two?

“Yes, ma’am,” Roger said. “I know that might not be what you’re looking for, but I promise you, if you let me try my hand at cooking, you won’t be disappointed. My mom says that I make the best spaghetti she’s ever tasted, and that’s high praise.”

“Of course.” I nodded, pretending to consider it. “Thanks for coming down for the interview, Roger, I think I have the information I need for now.”

“I’ll be waiting for your call!” He beamed and hopped out of the chair, somehow convinced that he’d nailed the interview. He exited the office and shut

the door behind him.

I closed my eyes and let out a long sigh. What had I expected? Parfait was a small town, and it was possible that I would wind up with no chef. It wasn't as if they were lining up around the block to work at a place that was now the murder hotspot of the town.

And why on earth had Bebe suggested Roger as a likely candidate? Was she just recommending her friends, or was she actively trying to get me in trouble?

“Ugh, you’re being paranoid.”

I slid my aunt’s desk drawer open and peeked inside. Michael’s lost phone sat atop a yellow legal pad inside. I hadn’t decided what I wanted to do with it.

Give it to Detective Garcia? It was technically evidence, but if Bebe had done what she’d said, he already knew about Michael and Trisha’s relationship, and he knew that there was a stalker ex in the picture.

You should give it to the police.

I could easily say that I’d found it between the cushions and that it had been flat. No, but then they’d want to know how I’d figure it was Michael’s. Either way, I could say I’d turned it on this morning and...

Maybe I was making too big of a deal out of this, but it felt like this phone could offer more than the information it already had.

What if I took it over to Frances’ house?

My eyes widened, my heart rate picking up a little.

That was a great idea. Returning the phone to Frances would provide me more information on how it had gotten into the café in the first place, and I would avoid Detective Garcia’s scrutiny too.

But was it dishonest to do that?

You’re past that point now. You’ve got to do what you can to figure this out yourself.

While everyone had said that Garcia was a big wig detective from Miami, he still hadn’t made an arrest, and his attention had made things worse at the café. It was a rationalization so I could do what I really wanted to do and poke my nose where it didn’t belong, but it was enough for me.

“Are you really going to do this?” I whispered to myself, but I already had

the answer prepared.

I grabbed the cellphone, tucked it into my pocket, and headed out.

The long drive from the quiet café gave me plenty of time to go back on my course of action, but I didn't. I parked outside Frances' house and hurried up the steps.

"Hello, dear," Frances said, lighting up at the sight of a visitor. "Oh my, what a lovely surprise." She fluffed her curly plum-colored hair. "Please, come in. Come in. You didn't bring your young friend today?"

"Didi's busy," I replied because that was true. Didi had let me know that she'd started working part-time at the Barrel, to make ends meet until the café opened again. She currently had a shift but had offered to come over and hang out later on today.

Was it bad that I was excited about spending time with a new friend who was so much younger than me? Age was just a number, right? And Didi was a refreshing personality.

"Come in, come in," Frances said. "Don't just stand there. Baxxy will be happy for the company too."

I followed Frances into her sunny living room and sat down on the same sofa as the last time. It was strange, but it seemed as if no time had passed. Her dog was in the same position he'd been on the last visit.

He groaned, opening one eye, and gave a quick wag of his tail.

"See?" Frances gestured to him. "He's overjoyed you're here."

"Is he friendly? May I pet him?"

"Of course. I'll fix us some lemonade."

I crouched next to Baxter and stroked his furry head. He smelled of old dog, but he gave more appreciative wags of his tail, opening his eyes and looking up at me. He licked his lips once and released another satisfied groan.

"Hello, boy," I whispered. "How are you?"

"He's fine," Frances said, placing a tray with a pitcher of lemonade on her coffee table. "Lazy as the day he was born, but still fine."

I returned to the sofa and helped myself to a glass of lemonade. "Thank you," I said. "How have you been, Frances?"

“Oh, you know, still alive, not dead yet.”

What a depressing sentiment. Or alarming, depending on how you looked at it. “I’ve been meaning to ask where you got Baxter? Was it from the shelter in town? I want to get a dog for my aunt’s cottage, but I’m not sure whether it’s a good idea. What’s it like having Baxter around?”

“He’s no trouble, if that’s what you’re asking,” Frances said, taking a sip of her lemonade. “Didn’t get him from the shelter, though. Wouldn’t touch that place with a ten-foot dog treat.”

“Why?”

“You haven’t heard?” Frances asked.

“About?”

“A few months ago there was a rabies outbreak in Parfait, and it stemmed from the shelter. A lot of the animals had to be put to sleep, and Mildred had to spend extra money ensuring it never happened again. But I wouldn’t trust her to have worked everything out.” Frances slurped more lemonade. “Not to be mean or anything, but she’s not exactly the most responsible woman around.”

“Oh,” I said. “That’s terrible.” I’d had no idea. No one had mentioned it to me, not even Didi, when I’d talked about potentially adopting a companion for Bodger. Was it true? Why would Frances lie about something like this?

“Yes, terrible for the animals. You’ve seen how Mildred dresses and behaves. She has no idea how to run that place. Like I said, I don’t want to speak ill of her but... the facts speak for themselves.”

I shifted. “I like Mildred,” I said. “She’s always been nice to me.”

“Hmm, well, she’s desperate, dear. She probably thinks you can give her money. She keeps talking about some nephew who’s going to come take over her business, but I’ve started thinking he doesn’t exist. And I’m not the only one.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t want to speak ill of Mildred. “Shoot, I nearly forgot,” I said, and fished Michael’s phone out of my pocket. “I found this in the café when I was cleaning this morning, and I meant to give it to you. It’s Michael’s phone.”

“Michael’s phone?” Frances accepted it from me and turned it over in her hand. “Goodness, he’s been looking for this for over a month. Thank you for

returning it. I must've taken his phone with me to the café accidentally and lost it there. How strange.”

“You're welcome,” I said, smiling then taking a sip of lemonade. It was refreshing, but Didi's warning came to mind, and I set the glass down on the coffee table. Could I trust Frances? For a woman who was mean to people she'd sure been nice to me, and that made me question her motives.

We enjoyed a leisurely conversation, but I excused myself after a few minutes, citing a trip out to see the air-conditioning company in the town over. On my way out the door, I paid special attention to the entry hall. The dirty boots that had been there the last time were conspicuously missing.

“**A**re you sure you don’t mind coming with me?” I asked. “I could pay you for your time.”

“Don’t be silly, Sunny,” Didi replied, as she put on her seatbelt in the passenger seat of my aunt’s VW Beetle. “I haven’t got a shift, and it will be nice to get out of town. I was hoping that we could stop for lunch in the town over too. I’m paying.”

“I can’t let you do that.” I had little money to my name, but Didi had even less, and she was striving for more in her life than I was. A college education. A future. She had everything going for her.

“But I want to,” Didi said. “You’ve been so nice to me.”

“You don’t have to buy me lunch because I was nice to you,” I said, starting the ever-noisy engine of the car. It popped and sputtered.

“I don’t have many friends,” Didi said. “I—People think I’m kinda weird because of the K-Pop thing, and all the people my age have already left Parfait or they’re popular and don’t have time for a girl like me.”

“A girl like you?”

“You know, a nerd.”

“Don’t talk negatively about yourself,” I said. “If my aunt taught me one thing, it’s that what you believe about yourself matters more than what others think of you. You’re the one in control of that.” If only it was as easily said as it was done. I was plenty guilty of negative self-talk.

We fell into a peaceful quiet as we started our trip out of town. Didi rolled down her window, the breeze whipping her hair away from her face, the pink streaks in the black masses colorful streamers that made her appear younger and freer. She hit the button for the radio, and it blared to life, playing a jivey pop song I didn't recognize.

"Say, Didi?"

"Yeah?"

"I was thinking about people your age, and I wondered if you knew a guy called Eddie Martinez," I said.

"Uh... rings a bell, why do you ask?"

"I've been talking to a couple people around town about Trisha, you know, seeing if I can find anything out about what happened to her, and his name came up."

"Oh wait, yeah, that's Trisha's ex-boyfriend. He's not from Parfait, but he lives somewhere close by, I think. I remember seeing her change her relationship status on social media. Everyone sent her messages and congratulated her like she'd announced an engagement rather than a boyfriend."

"Interesting," I said. "What does he look like?"

"Dark hair and eyes, kind of a hooked nose, stocky and muscular. He wasn't a bad-looking guy, but I didn't know him so I couldn't tell you what type of person he was." Didi hesitated, tilting her head to one side. "Wait a second, do you think he might've had something to do with what happened to her?"

"I don't know," I replied, honestly. "I'm intrigued, that's all. Got a lot of time to think now that the Sunny Side Up isn't open."

"Right," Didi said, sadness in her tone.

We arrived at the air-conditioning company—Florida Air-conditioning and HVAC Contractors—in Trenton and parked in the paved lot out front. The side of the building was occupied by fork-lifts, with an opening to admit them, but a gated entrance to the right looked as if it led to a reception area.

"This is the place," I said. "Boy, I hope they don't fight with me today."

"Fight with you?"

"Yeah," I replied. "First, they told me I'd missed my appointment and

someone had been out to see us at the café, then they told me they had no record of us asking them to come out, and then, well, I screamed at them. I'm not proud of it, but I was frustrated."

"I hate that kind of stuff. Makes me feel so awkward."

"Same. And just so you know, I rarely yell at people. I normally let them do whatever they need to do, but I'm trying to grow a darn back bone."

"Let's find out what they—" Didi broke off, her brow wrinkling. "Whoa. That's so weird."

"What is?"

"We were just talking about Eddie, right? Trisha's ex?"

"Sure."

"Well, I don't want to weird you out or anything, but that's him. That's Eddie Martinez right there." She gestured to a guy standing next to a forklift. He wore a set of blue overalls with the company's name emblazoned on the breast pocket. He was as she'd described him, stocky and handsome, with dark hair and eyes.

Wait a minute, didn't Nick say he noticed a guy hanging around the café who matched Eddie's description?

I clunked the car door open and got out, then strode toward the guy. "Eddie Martinez?" I called out. "Can I speak to you for a second?"

Eddie turned and laid eyes on me. Eyes that had pupils narrowed to pinpricks and went round as eggs over easy.

"Hi," I said. "I wanted to ask you about—"

Eddie took off running. He vaulted over the forks of a forklift and sprinted for the street. His colleague, who'd been mid-conversation with him, cried out in surprise, but Eddie didn't stop. He ran for it, swerving out of the paths of cars, ignoring the honking of horns and the yells. He launched himself over a hedge and disappeared.

"What was that about?" Didi asked, stopping next to me.

"I have no idea," I said. "But I've got to report it. There's no way he runs like that if he's innocent."

"Ma'am, do you need help with something?" Eddie's colleague asked me.

"Like you wouldn't believe," I replied.



“DETECTIVE GARCIA, HE RAN LIKE THE HOUNDS OF HOT FURY WERE SNAPPING AT his booty. You can’t tell me that that’s innocent behavior,” I said, shifting back and forth, but unable to get comfortable in the front seat of the Beetle.

We were outside the air-conditioning company’s HQ.

“There’s nothing connecting Mr. Martinez to the crime,” Detective Garcia said, and his voice was thick with annoyance at having to repeat himself. “Ma’am, I’ve already told you you’re not to interfere.”

“I’m not interfering. I’m a concerned citizen,” I said, while Didi nodded her agreement from the passenger seat. “I arrived at this place to speak to someone about my air-con, for heaven’s sake, and he happened to be here. The minute I said his name, he took off like he’d seen a ghost.” Trisha’s ghost, to be exact.

“I appreciate you letting me know, but there must be another reason for it. Eddie is fine, not that I need to tell you that,” Garcia replied. “Leave the investigation to the professionals, Miss Charles, before you wind up getting in trouble you don’t need.” He hung up on me.

I gritted my teeth out of sheer frustration. “This is stupid. Eddie’s gone running off into the distance and the detective thinks he’s fine.”

“Maybe he has some other evidence that proves he’s clean.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, trying to take a more measured view. But my emotions kept interfering. Eddie seemed like such an obvious suspect. Did he have an alibi? If only Garcia would tell me anything other than to stay out of it.

You’re not entitled to information.

“Let’s go back to Parfait,” I sighed. “I’d like to grab lunch at that seafood place again. It was great.”

“Perfect!” Didi said, putting up a smile.

The Hungry Alligator was as aesthetically pleasing as I remembered it. We grabbed a table out on the terrace with a view of the ocean and beach. Kids ran around on the sand or splashed in the waves, while a wary lifeguard kept watch. Noise enveloped us, the tables at the joint filling up fast as the tempting scents of seafood, burgers, and steaks drifted down the beachfront street.

My stomach growled and my mind did along with it, though they were for different reasons.

No matter how suspicious Eddie was, I couldn't prove he'd done anything wrong. And I had no idea where he stayed. The only information I had was that he worked at the company we used at the café. Short of asking for him to be the one who repaired the air-con, there wasn't much I could do to get hold of him.

Ooh, I could case out the company. Stay there all day.

Nothing sounded less appealing.

"Everything looks so good," Didi said, studying the menu. "I want shrimp. Oh no, wait, the All You Can Eat Crab Legs look amazing. They have a loaded potato with crispy bacon bits too."

I turned my attention to the menu too. "Oof, that potato is right up my street. And curly fries. And a steak."

The server arrived, and we gave our orders, my mouth watering at the thought of all the good food to come. Maybe that was my problem—I was

hungry and angry all wrapped into one. I'd skipped breakfast this morning because I'd wanted to get down to the café to interview the potential chef.

I drank my milkshake—strawberry was my favorite flavor—and enjoyed the soft breeze, the sunshine, and the view. I could see why my aunt loved living here. It was like being on vacation all-year-round.

“Hey, there’s Nick,” Didi said.

I caught sight of the ex-chef heading for a table near ours. He sat down on the bench seat and another guy, this one short, with horn-rimmed glasses and a bit of a belly, sat opposite him. It was Tom.

My heart dipped. “Oh, he must be having a lunch meeting. Jasmine mentioned that Nick was super busy organizing everything for his new endeavor.”

“Which endeavor?”

“He’s going to become an influencer,” I replied. “Like a celebrity chef, I guess. Maybe Tom is going to help him out or give him some advice.”

“I don’t think Tom will have great advice about being a social media influencer,” Didi replied, dipping her straw in and out of her soda. “He’s not exactly great with that kind of thing.”

“I should apologize,” I said. “In person. I should—probably not interrupt them, right?”

“I think you can go over,” Didi said. “I could be wrong, but it doesn’t look like they’re speaking seriously. See? They’re laughing.”

And the server had just arrived at their table. If there’d ever be a time to interrupt, it was now. “I’ll be back in a minute,” I whispered, and got up. My nerves built with every step, but I finally stopped next to Nick’s table, plucking up my courage.

The ex-chef met my gaze. “Oh, hello, Sunny.”

“Sunny!” Tom stuck out a hand, and we shook on it. “Been a while since you’ve run me over.”

“Run you over?” Nick asked, quizzically.

“Our little inside joke,” Tom replied, waving a hand. “Sunny’s made quite a splash since she arrived in town. A pity the café has closed down.”

“We haven’t closed down,” I said, quickly. “We’re just, uh, looking for a new chef. That’s all.” It was awkward saying that in front of Nick.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been open?” Tom asked. “A week?”

“Just about.”

Tom wriggled his lips from one side to the other but didn’t make further comment. The implication was clear, though. We were technically closed, but I wouldn’t allow that to become a permanent thing.

“Nick,” I said. “I just, uh, can I talk to you for a minute?”

“You’re talking to me right now,” he said, smiling, but his eyes colder than they usually were. I didn’t blame him. I wouldn’t have been too happy if he’d accused me of being a murderer.

“Right. Well, look, I wanted to say I’m sorry for the way things turned out, and what I said.”

Tom listened with interest.

“I was wrong, and it was wrong of me to behave that way,” I said, then flapped my hands. “That’s it. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“I appreciate that,” Nick replied. “And I accept the apology.” He looked down at his lap, then up at me again. “But I’m on a different course now. Jasmine’s been very encouraging about me becoming an influencer, and I want to do what’s right for our family.”

Disappointment descended over me, but what had I expected? Nick to just drop his plans and come back to the Sunny Side Up?

“I understand,” I said. “Have a good meal.” I returned to my seat and Didi raised an eyebrow, hope blossoming on her face. I shook my head, and she sank back again.

“Oh well,” she said. “It was worth a shot, right?”

One week later...

“**Y**ou can’t be serious,” I said, holding the phone’s receiver to my ear in the café’s back office. Blood rushed to my cheeks and my breath hitched in my chest. “Look, I can open up again within the next few weeks, I have to find another chef.”

“You’ve had several weeks,” my aunt’s accountant said. “Here’s the thing, Sunny, the numbers don’t lie. You can’t afford to keep the place open without a chef, and even if you opened tomorrow and somehow drew in more customers, it wouldn’t work. Your aunt pays a lot of rent for that spot, and if you can’t afford to pay that rent...”

“This isn’t happening,” I said. “I’ve done everything I can. Surely, there’s money in the café’s business account that can pay for at least a few more months?”

“A few more months of being closed?”

“No, I’ll work something out. I’ll—”

“You need to get our aunt on the phone and discuss your options with her. She’s already put forward rent for the next couple months, but without a chef, you’ll be running at a loss, and no profit will eventually bleed the account dry. I

can't consciously recommend you continue what you're doing when I know it will end badly."

"Mr. Schwartz," I said. "I'm doing my best."

"Your best isn't good enough. Sorry to put it like that, but I come from the school of tough love. You need to tell your aunt what's going on. Today."

My bottom lip trembled, and I held back tears. "Fine," I said. "I will."

"Sorry, Miss Charles. Take care."

I set the receiver in its cradle, my throat closing.

You will not cry! You will not.

My aunt had trusted me to keep things afloat while she was gone, and I had failed miserably. But how was I meant to predict the murder? And losing the chef? OK, the latter *had* been my fault.

I hung my head, allowing a few of the self-pitying tears to dribble out and drop onto the desk. I swiped them away, then brought a tissue out of my purse and cleaned my face.

The accountant was right. I had to own up to my mistakes and call Aunt Rita about the café.

It hurt, especially after everything Damon had said about me. That I would never have made it in business, anyway. That I didn't have the people skills to be an entrepreneur. That women like me, and women in general, had their place, and it wasn't rubbing shoulders with people who made money.

The comments had been made in passing and had sounded less harsh. Just little barbs or remarks I'd figured were said in jest. They had eaten away at me over time, chipping at my confidence.

But his comments had no bearing on my failure now.

I picked up the phone and dialed my aunt's number.

It rang twice, and she answered. "Hello, Sunny, darling. How are things?"

I swallowed twice, rapidly. "They're not so good, auntie."

"Oh no, why not?" The sounds of fun and music cut off as my aunt closed a door, sequestering herself in some secret place aboard the cruise ship.

"Because I... I had to close the café."

"You what?"

“I had to close the café.” And I broke into the full explanation of what had happened with Nick and how I hadn’t been able to find a chef. “And I spoke to your accountant, and he told me we need to close, unless you can come back and get things under control.”

Aunt Rita was quiet on the other end of the line.

“Auntie?”

“I’m here,” she said, her voice tired.

I was transported back to being a little girl again, and how she’d sounded when I’d gotten in trouble for fighting in school. The first time she’d been disappointed with me, and had gotten down on one knee, looked me in the eye, and told me I had a responsibility to try harder, be better, treat other human beings nicer.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Will you come back and help me, please?” The failure sat on my chest like a boulder.

“Yes, I’ll have to, won’t I?” Aunt Rita’s tone was brisk. “I was hoping to spend a little more time on the cruise liner. The girls and I had spoken about purchasing tickets once we put into port this Friday, going back out again. But so be it. I’ll come back and speak to Nick. Work things out.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m sorry about this. I really tried.”

“Yes, Sunny, I know. I’ll see you on Friday. You’ll need to pick me up from the port. Can you make it down there in the Beetle?”

“Of course,” I replied.

“See you then, darling.”

I dropped my phone back into my purse, tears welling again. “Oh, stop it,” I said, and blinked. “Stop. You were the one who did this. It’s your fault. You don’t get to feel sorry for yourself over it.”

But the emotion wouldn’t leave me, no matter how hard I tried to dismiss it. I had messed everything up. This was a fresh start. My new life. Instead, I’d fallen into old destructive patterns.

I’d railed against trusting Nick. I’d been unsure about running the café and hadn’t bothered to do my research or to reach out to customers and be the best I could be, all because of fear.

And where had it landed me? Realizing my worst nightmare.

I buried my head in my hands and allowed myself a good old-fashioned cry. After, I straightened my spine, cleaned my face, and got up. The only thing I could do now was try to work all of this out before Friday.

I wasn't the one who'd wanted to give up—Mr. Schwarz had simply advised it from a financial perspective—which meant there was still hope that I could convince Nick to come back, and that I could clear both my name and his and renew interest in the café.

I had five days. Five days to solve a murder that a much more experienced detective hadn't solved after nearly a month.

What did I have to lose?

Later that evening...

“**H**ere Bodger,” I called, and put down the bowl of kitty food next to the fridge. He meowed and streaked into the kitchen, not hissing at me this time.

It was a minor victory and I’d take it. Bodger had grown used to my presence. I didn’t sleep with my door unlocked, but it was one good thing that had come out of my time in Parfait. That and my friendship with Didi.

“Is that good?” I asked.

The kitty chomped down on his food and flicked his black tail at me.

“Right. Now, it’s my turn.” I had little to do except wait for Aunt Rita’s return and go over everything I knew about the case so far. That meant a night in with a pizza, some soda, and a notepad listing all my suspects and current information.

It would have to work because if I didn’t figure out something soon... Never mind, I already knew the stakes.

I popped the lid on the pizza box and released the scents of cheesy deliciousness from within. I’d gone for a seafood pizza, and the top was festooned with mussels out of the shell, shrimp, calamari, and bits of lobster. A

garlic sauce accompanied the pizza, and I popped the lid on it and sluiced it over the top of the pie.

“There,” I said. “That’s completely fattening and over the top, but it’s perfect.”

Another meow from Bodger.

I tugged a cheesy slice from the box and placed it on a plate next to my notepad, then popped the tab on my soda can.

“Here we go.” I studied my notepad and the information I had so far, while helping myself to the slice, my tastebuds going wild from the explosive flavors.

Case Number 1

The Case of the Dead Food Vlogger.

Victim Name: Trisha Williams

Occupation: Food Vlogger

Age: College-aged. Approximately 21-years-old.

Time of death: 10:15 a.m. (ish)

Cause of death: Suspected poisoning (no other information about what the poison was, though)

Suspect list...

Nick Talbott—*Chef at the Sunny Side Up Café. Major suspect in Detective Garcia’s eyes. He had access to the kitchen at the time of the murder and just before it. But went to the bathroom, and I was alone in the kitchen while he was gone.*

Might have had motive because he’s now becoming an influencer. That or he was afraid of losing his job because Trisha left a critical review of the Sunny Side Up. But, why quit if he was afraid of losing his job?

Me—*Alone in the kitchen for a short while. Obviously not the killer. Saw nothing unusual when I was in the kitchen.*

Frances Grace—*Was seen fighting with the victim on the morning of the murder. Openly despised her and still has nothing good to say about her. Her son was fired as Trisha’s assistant and was secretly having a relationship with Trisha. Did Frances find out about the relationship and get angry about it? Motive could be revenge? Or being protective of her son?*

Claimed that her son hadn't contacted her in ages, but his boots were by the door. Why lie if she's not doing something suspicious? Or trying to hide something?

Everyone says Frances is mean, but she's only ever been nice to me. Strange.

Michael Grace—*Son of Frances. He worked as Trisha's assistant and was also her secret boyfriend. Seems as if they left things on bad terms. Michael believed Trisha wasn't giving him enough attention. Appeared they often fought. Left Nick a note that was supposedly about the weekend, but could it have been about something else?*

Motive to kill Trisha would have been jealousy or even revenge because of the messy end of their relationship and him being fired as her assistant.

Bebe Rae—*Trisha's newest assistant. The minute Trisha passed, she started her own vlogging endeavor. Also, she mentioned that she didn't have any problems working for Trisha, but Michael said otherwise: that she had argued frequently with her new boss, or so he had heard. Bebe was seen talking to Tom Miller, a food critic. But there doesn't seem to be too much of a connection there? They're all in the same industry.*

Bebe was in the café, seated next to Trisha at the time of her death, so she had easy access to the victim, and, possibly, the kitchen when no one was looking.

Eddie Martinez—*Trisha's stalker ex, according to Bebe and to the texts on Michael's phone. He ran the minute I mentioned her name and lived the town over. Might've been around the café at the time of the murder—Nick described someone who looked like Eddie being in the area then. But was it him?*

Detective Garcia was set on not arresting Eddie but wouldn't tell me why. Must have an alibi, but he's so suspicious!

Tom Miller—*Local food critic who I almost ran over with my car. Eek. He was seen speaking to Bebe and, more recently, to Nick. He might've had something to do with it if they were trying to get rid of competition? Maybe Bebe wanted Trisha out of the way so she could be an influence and Tom is involved in that? Tenuous connection.*

Was outside the café after the murder, hoping to go in and eat. Have little by

way of motive? Might have been business-related if he did it.

Mildred Shaw—Lady who works next door to the café in the animal shelter. Rumors from Frances that she had somehow spread rabies? Irrelevant, in my opinion. But she's low on funds and is struggling to make ends meet. Someone stealing from her. She had access to the café by being right next door to it, but no motive?

Clues List...

Text conversation on Michael's phone. Trisha and Michael were dating, there was a stalker ex, and the end of the relationship with Michael was messy.

The poisoning happened in the café. So, it had to be someone there at the time. It couldn't have happened before because no one else was poisoned, so it's not like the killer poisoned a specific ingredient alone and that was fed to multiple people.

Michael's boots at his mother's house.

Notes:

Could multiple people have conspired together to murder Trisha? Was she that big of a problem? Or was this a solo killer?

A solo killer seems more plausible...

I took a massive bite of my pizza slice after all that writing. From what I could gather, the most likely suspects were those who had been in the café at the time of the murder. So there had to be a cross-section of people who had motive to get rid of Trisha, and who were in proximity to the crime scene.

But how close was close enough?

Could they have been next door like Mildred or at the table with Trisha like Bebe?

I tapped my pen on the notepad, considering it. The only people who had been in the café and were on the list, that I had seen, were Bebe, Nick, and myself. I was ruled out, obviously, which left Bebe and Nick.

But what if I'd missed something?

What if someone else had been there, and I hadn't realized it? Or seen them? What if they'd left some piece of evidence in the café I'd missed?

"No, the cops would have found it," I muttered, and finished my slice.

But with all my clues written down, and my options thinning for evidence, I had nothing else to do except go back to the café and check it out.

There had to be *something* there, right? I'd scour the place from top to bottom if I had to.

I parked outside the Sunny Side Up at around 8:30 p.m., anticipation brewing in my belly. Or maybe that was the second slice of pizza I'd devoured before I'd taken the drive out here. I so desperately wanted to find some tangible evidence of the crime, or even the barest hint of who might've done it. But the closer I'd drawn to the café, the more convinced I'd become that I wouldn't find a thing.

Not only had the police gone over the crime scene with a fine-tooth comb, but I'd also spring cleaned the place afterward to get rid of any potential remnants of poison. And it had been weeks since the murder had taken place.

But I couldn't just sit at home and do nothing. And writing down my evidence, clues, and my suspect list had gotten me riled up. I wanted to believe there was something here that would help the investigation.

"Don't get your hopes up," I muttered, and exited the car.

The night air was saturated with the scents of delicious food from the restaurants along the boardwalk. It was a heady scent that reminded me of good times and vacations, hours spent on the beach as a younger woman with friends or with my aunt.

I let myself into the café, clicked on the lights and looked around. The interior was spotless, the scent of coffee still hovering, even though I hadn't served anyone in days. Hopefully, that would change soon.

Either way, if I didn't solve the murder, Aunt Rita would be back to take

over.

I kind of wanted her here, but I didn't want to fail, and she deserved her time to relax after years of putting up with my shenanigans.

I shut the café's door then scanned the interior, considering my next steps. I'd found the phone in the cushions of a booth, so I started there, swiping my fingers between the cushions of each booth, and finding nothing but a collection of coins and lint.

Hey, at least I was a couple pennies richer.

I checked under tables, then went through the office, and finally, I entered the kitchen and switched on the lights.

The gleaming empty steel counters stared back at me. I could picture Nick's friendly smile from behind the stove on the day the murder had taken place.

"OK," I whispered. "Think back. What happened that day?"

I chewed on my bottom lip. I had come into the kitchen and told Nick I had to make eggs over easy for Trisha. He'd directed me to look after the bacon while he ran to the bathroom. I hadn't seen him do anything suspicious with the food, and he hadn't been around when I'd started making the eggs.

"I got out the pan, and then I went to the pantry to fetch the oil. I think?"

I entered the pantry and clicked the light on. Everything was stored beautifully in labeled Tupperware containers on the shelves, and the fridges that held the fresh produce for each day were empty. I frowned, studying the interior of the pantry.

Everything was in its place. There was plenty of room to move around, and at the back of the pantry was an old window that was... rusted shut? No, that didn't seem like something my Aunt Rita would allow.

I walked over to the window, skirting around a couple boxes that stacked in front of it. I hadn't noticed this window on the day I'd come in here for ingredients, but that might've been because I was distracted. Making eggs over easy for a food vlogger had been a high-pressure scenario. Funny how easy that seemed now.

"What do we have here?" My eyes widened.

The back window was closed, not rusted shut, but the hint of rusty red I'd

noticed had been from something caught between the sill and the window's edge.

"What is that?" I muttered and leaned in.

I touched my fingers to the piece of red, then gasped. It was a swatch of cloth caught in the frame, and it didn't look like any dishcloth I'd seen in the café. All of them were checked yellow and white.

My fingers crept toward the latch that opened the window. I hesitated, then opened it outward. Cool night air rushed in, and the piece of fabric fluttered to the pantry floor. I picked it up.

It was clearly torn free of something.

Someone's shirt?

That had to be it!

I gasped a second time. It had to be a piece of the killer's shirt. And Nick hadn't been wearing anything red on the morning of the murder. Neither had any of the servers.

Relief shuddered through me.

Though I'd apologized to Nick, I had withheld a little of my trust from him. After all my experiences, I'd learned to expect the worst from people, men in particular. This little piece of evidence, that had to be what it was, had cleared him in my mind. It was tangible proof that someone else had been in the pantry on that day.

I peeked out the window and got a darkened view of the alleyway that flanked the café. There was nothing in it except for the dumpster, but the alley itself led out to the street. This was the perfect method of accessing the café!

"It's got to be..." I shut the window and latched it, then slipped the material into my pocket. It was evidence, and I could give Detective Garcia what I had later. Though, would he believe me? If I gave it to him, he'd probably think I'd made it up or ripped the cloth from a piece of my clothing.

I should've called him right away.

But it was too late now.

I whipped out my phone and scrolled through my contacts until I found Nick's number. If I couldn't talk to Garcia about this without getting in trouble,

then I'd contact Nick. He'd know if anyone had been wearing a rusty red shirt. And after him, I could speak to Didi.

Besides, it would be good to get hold of Nick and tell him what I'd found. Maybe it would help fix things?

I dialed his number and waited. Five rings later, and the phone clicked to his message. Nothing. He wasn't answering his phone.

Come on, Nick. This is important.

I tried two more times, but nothing. That was fine, I could go over there. Jasmine would be mad, but I'd explain everything to her too. I wanted them to be my friends, to fix the fractured relationship. Heck, I'd even talk to Aunt Rita about the whole "makeup in the café" thing. That ought to help, right?

Just do it.

And if Nick wasn't home, I'd cave and call Detective Garcia, give him the information I had. Simple as that.

At least, I hoped so.

The closer I drew to Aunt Rita's cottage, the more excited I grew.

I didn't understand why, but it seemed important to tell Nick that I'd found this evidence. Surely, it would cheer him up. Could it potentially mend bridges between us and encourage him to reconsider the offer to work at the Sunny Side Up? Boy, I hoped so. Or it would backfire horribly, and he'd tell me I should've trusted him from the start.

Honestly, I would deserve that, but I had to try.

I pulled up outside my aunt's cottage and parked in front of it rather than pulling the Beetle into the driveway.

I leaped out, my hand flying to my pocket to check that the swatch of cloth was still there, then ran down the sidewalk and to the cute front gate that led to Nick's yard. I opened it and started up the pathway but stopped after just two steps.

A figure lay on the porch. The lights in the house were off, porch lights, included.

I stood there, stunned, blinking, then finally came forward.

"Nick?" I climbed the first two steps. "Nick, is that—?" I bent and touched the person lying on their side, I turned them over, and dark hair fell across a tan, pretty face.

Jasmine Talbott was unconscious on her front porch, a knot on her forehead where she'd either fallen.

“Jasmine!” I cried. “Jasmine, wake up.” I pressed two fingers to her throat, but her pulse was steady. Her chest rose and fell, but she didn’t open her eyes. “Oh, no. Nick? Nick! Are you home?” But there was no car in the driveway and no answer from the darkened cottage. “Nick!”

My panic reached its peak, and my breaths came in short, quick gasps.

Get it together! Call 911.

I tugged my phone out of my pocket and unlocked the screen. “Hold on, Jasmine, I’ll get you help.” I didn’t dare move her more than I already had in case she was seriously injured. I tapped out the three numbers and moved to hit dial.

A police siren whooped behind me, and a cruiser pulled up outside the house. Two police officers in uniform emerged from the vehicle.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I cried. “I was about to call 911. There’s been a terrible accident. Can you call an ambulance, please? My friend’s wife has—”

“Put your hands in the air!” An officer yelled, taking a defensive stance, his weapon out and trained on me.

“What?!”

“Hands in the air. Now! Hands in the air!” the officer repeated, the other one joining in the cacophony of shouted commands.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. I dropped my phone, my hands went up, they approached me and pinned me to the ground, tucked my hands behind my back, then escorted me to the cruiser, saying things I couldn’t make out in the dull thread of panic.

An ambulance pulled up and men ran toward Jasmine, rolling a stretcher. At least, they were here. She would be fine.

“I didn’t—” I managed before they thrust me into the back of the car. The door shut, and I was alone, the handcuffs biting into my wrists.



“I SWEAR, I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING,” I SAID, MASSAGING MY WRISTS. THE CUFFS hadn’t hurt me, but it felt as if they were still there, seated against my skin, even

though Detective Garcia had already removed them.

I was back in the interrogation room, with its circular table and chairs, the detective across from me, his back to the door, and the camera in the corner trained on us.

This time, Detective Garcia hadn't asked me if I was comfortable. He'd simply entered the room, placed a closed manila folder on the table, then removed my cuffs and taken a seat opposite me, expression serious.

"You want to walk me through what happened tonight?" he asked.

I struggled to find the right words and worked moisture back into my mouth. They had taken the swatch of rusty red cloth from my pocket when they had processed me and my personal effects at the police station.

"Detective," I said, meeting his gaze, "there's something very important I have to tell you. The piece of cloth in my pocket, that's evidence."

"Huh?"

"For Trisha's murder." I broke into a quick explanation of what I'd done this evening, from my frustration at having to ask my Aunt Rita to return to Parfait, to my decision to find evidence that proved both my innocence and Nick's or at least narrowed down the suspect pool. "So that piece of cloth is evidence. I wanted to make sure it wasn't thrown away because that would be a terrible mistake."

Detective Garcia considered me, his dark eyebrows raised. "One moment." He got up and walked to the interrogation room's door, then stuck his head into the hall beyond and had a hushed conversation with someone. He returned to the table.

"All right," he said. "Now, walk me through what happened when you returned home this evening."

"There's not much to say. I arrived at my aunt's cottage and wanted to go next door to speak to Nick about what I found at the restaurant."

"What exactly was that?"

"The piece of cloth in the pantry window," I said. "I thought Nick would be encouraged that I had found a clue that showed it wasn't just us and the servers in the kitchen."

Detective Garcia released a slow breath. “You realize that the cloth might’ve gotten caught in the window before or after the murder?”

I hesitated. “Yes. But it seems like too much of a coincidence. Anyway, when I got to Nick’s cottage, I saw Jasmine lying on the porch. You’ve got to believe me here, I didn’t hurt her. I turned her over to check she was all right, then started dialing 911. That’s when the police arrived.”

Detective Garcia nodded. “Right. And did you see anyone else at the house?”

“No, it was totally dark. I called out for Nick, but he wasn’t there either. I just... don’t know who could’ve done this or why.” The officer who had brought me in had indicated someone had hit Jasmine. They thought that person was me.

Detective Garcia remained silent.

“Detective, is Jasmine OK?”

“She’s woken up,” he said. “And she told us what happened to her.”

“Good. What happened?”

“A masked man attacked her.”

“A masked man? That’s terrible.” A man, most likely the murderer, had attacked Jasmine. That cleared me of the attack. But... Why would he have attacked her? And who was it? It couldn’t be a random guy—there was crime in Parfait, but nothing like this. It felt sinister, much like Trisha’s murder.

“Detective,” I said. “It’s got to be the guy who killed Trisha.”

“How do you figure that?” Detective Garcia sat back in his chair, tilted his head to one side and studied me.

“Nick and Jasmine were working on building up an influencer profile for Nick, from what I heard. And Trisha was an influencer. What if the person who’s doing this is involved in that type of work?”

Detective Garcia said nothing again.

I picked over the details, nervously chewing on my index fingernail. A bad habit.

It could be anyone, but there were suspects. Nick wouldn’t randomly attack his own wife. But Tom had been talking to Nick a lot. Could it be him? What if it was someone else? Someone from my past who had come to town? I had felt as if someone was following me the other day, but... no, that made little sense.

“We’ve spoken to Miss Talbott, and based on what she told us, you’re free to go,” Detective Garcia said. “But, Miss Charles, I’m expecting you to report anything you hear, see or find that is related to my investigation right away. And not go running off to your friends to share it with them instead.”

“I will, I promise.”

“That said,” Garcia continued, raising a palm, “I want you to stay out of the case.”

But it was too late. I was in too deep, and I felt I was on the cusp of something big. A discovery that would lead to the arrest. “OK,” I said, but crossed my fingers under the table.

I got home at 10:15 p.m., exhausted and ready for the night to be over. My brain was utter mush. I hovered halfway between defeat and determination, but I wouldn't give up. Not when I was so sure things were about to go my way.

I couldn't explain the feeling. A little voice in my mind whispered for me to keep going, not give up. Then again, that same voice had been the one that'd told me not to give up on my marriage, and that had been a total loss. Was I just stubborn?

The Beetle's engine ticked and cooled after I put it in park, and I looked up at the cottage, its porch lights on, and the solitary black shape of Bodger on the porch, waiting for my return, the only greeting.

I got out of the car and went up to him, my hand in my pocket for the front door key—now free of the only clue I'd had. The rusty red piece of shirt. Or pants. Who knew at this point?

"Hey, Bodger," I said.

He didn't hiss at me this time, but looked up at me with those all-knowing yellow eyes.

"Did you see anything weird tonight?"

A flick of the tail.

He wasn't unsettled like he'd been after the break-in at the cottage. Did that mean he hadn't seen anything? Or was the person who had attacked Jasmine

familiar to him?

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get you some food.” I unlocked the front door and let us inside, then input the alarm code.

In the kitchen, Bodger prowled back and forth, waiting for his kitty nibbles. I put them in his cheerful yellow bowl with its paw print pattern, then poured myself a glass of white wine. I needed it after a day like today.

“Cheers to us figuring this out, eh, Bodger?” I raised the glass.

He ignored me and gobbled down his food.

The doorbell rang, and I set my wine down on the kitchen table and went through to the entryway of the cottage. “Who’s there?” I called, catching my frazzled reflection in the mirror over the table. My blonde hair was tied back in a hastily made ponytail, and the wrinkles around my eyes were more pronounced than they had been a few months ago. That was what going through a divorce did to a person.

“Sunny?” A female voice. “It’s Emilia from next-door. May I come in?”

“Of course.” I opened the door and let my neighbor in.

Emilia’s hair fell past her shoulders, loose and free, and the exact opposite to mine right now, but her face wore concern. “Sorry, I just wanted to check on you. I put Justin down earlier and I heard a commotion. I had to wait for the hubby to get back from work before I could come over and check you were OK. What happened? There was a police car outside.”

“Yeah,” I said, and broke down the night’s events for her, briefly. “It was pretty scary.”

She nodded along.

“Do you want a glass of wine? I’ve got extra.”

“That would be heavenly,” she replied.

I shut the door and checked it was locked before leading her through to the kitchen. Bodger acknowledged the new arrival with a flick of his tail and muted hiss around a mouthful of kitty food.

“And hello to you too, Bodgy,” Emilia said, accepting a glass of wine.

We sat at my aunt’s quaint table in the center of the kitchen, and Emilia let out a breath. “Well,” she said, “what a crazy month we’ve been having.

Everything's gone wild."

"It feels like it's my fault. I arrived and suddenly..."

"Don't be silly, Sunny," Emilia said, offering me a warm smile. "Sometimes these things happen."

"I feel like I have bad karma."

Emilia took a sip of her wine. "I wish I had known Jasmine was in trouble. I didn't hear a thing."

"No screaming or... anything?"

"Nothing," Emilia replied, with a shake of her head. "But I did... hmm, see something."

"What?"

"I thought nothing of it at the time, but a car pulled up outside the cottages earlier in the night. I peeked out our front curtains in the living room because I thought maybe Jonas had gotten home early. But it wasn't his car. It was a silver one, and it was parked between your cottage and Nick's."

"Oh." My eyebrows rose. A silver car. "You don't think..."

"Maybe," Emilia replied. "I thought it was just one of Jasmine's friends—you know, she teaches yoga so she has a lot of students who are also her friends—but now that I know what happened, I'm starting to think differently. I've never seen that silver car around the cottages before."

"It must've been the attacker," I said, wracking my brain for whose car it could be.

Did I know anyone with a silver car?

I took a sip of my wine, thinking hard, and then it struck me. Frances!

On the day she visited us in the café, the very next day after Trisha's murder, Frances had pulled up in a silver Honda. Or was it a silver Volvo? I couldn't remember the details, but the car had been that color. Frances had brought us drinks while we were cleaning up the place.

"Sunny? You just went still as a board."

"Oh," I said. "Sorry. I just... remembered something." And it was a something that would, potentially, help me solve the murder. Frances and Michael *had* to be involved. The fact that his boots had been at his mom's place,

that he'd had a relationship with Trisha that had ended badly, and now the silver car had arrived at Nick and Jasmine's, and Jasmine had been attacked—it all added up.

Emilia finished her glass of wine. “Sorry to drink and run,” she said. “But I’ve got to get back. Justy’s a light sleeper and Jonas will worry about me if I don’t come back soon. You know, with the murder and now the attack. Parfait’s feeling a little unsafe.”

“Yeah.” But I would change that. I had to.

I wasn’t about to fail again, and let Aunt Rita down, and watch this town and all the lovely people I’d met in it suffer because of me.

“**A**re you sure about this, darling?” Aunt Rita asked. “Because the cruise ship puts into port on Friday and I need to know what you want to do. I’m more than happy to come back and help you run things if you can’t handle them.”

“No, auntie, I want you to stay out there. I want you to have fun with your friends and let me handle this. I’m onto something here. I’ll have everything back to normal soon. Promise.” I’d never been this determined.

“I knew you weren’t a quitter, Sunny,” Aunt Rita said, pride shining through in her tone. “And I’ll be glad to spend some extra time out here. You know, I’ve been having the time of my life. Exactly what I needed.”

“Good,” I said, standing in the cottage’s tiny living room, my gaze on the books which I’d stacked neatly back in their bookcase. Insurance had covered damages to all the furniture, and new stuff had already been delivered. “Because I’ve got everything under control now. I’m sorry I ever bothered you.”

I’d panicked because of what Mr. Schwartz had said. He’d been right about the finances, right about everything, but I had been wrong to give in so easily. The past few days had taught me I couldn’t give up when the going got tough.

“Oh, Sunny, you didn’t bother me. It will take a lot more than a few mishaps to do that. I trust you, darling.”

“Thanks, auntie.” I didn’t know where she got her confidence in me from. I’d hardly proved myself over the past few years. Marrying a man who she

didn't approve or like, then winding up without a degree or job or career and moving in with her when I was at my lowest.

"All right, well, I'm off to have a cocktail," Aunt Rita said. "Love you."

"Love you. Bye." I put my phone on silent and slipped it into my pocket. I had big plans for this morning, and I had needed to get that conversation out of the way so I could undertake them without it weighing on my mind.

Aunt Rita would enjoy herself, and I'd be stuck running the Sunny Side Up and being terrible at it, but it didn't matter. If I could figure things out here, I was confident I could do anything.

I checked Bodger was well-fed and watered, then set the alarm and slipped out of the house. Aunt Rita's VW Beetle gleamed sunny yellow in the Floridian morning light. I got inside, started it, and took to the road.

Twenty minutes later, I pulled up next to the entrance that led to Frances' house, my pulse fluttering along.

Her car, the silver Honda, was parked out front, and her cottage door was closed, the curtains drawn. She was home, but if I was quiet as a mouse sneaking under a sleeping cat's nose, I might do what I'd come to do.

Scratch that, I *had* to do it.

I checked the long winding road that led past her cottage's secluded driveway. Her neighbor was hidden from view behind shrubbery, and the entrance to their driveway was a few paces away. If they came out while I was snooping around, all they'd see was my aunt's car. Troublesome, since everyone in town knew who Rita Jackson was, and she was out of town.

They'd probably assume I was visiting Frances, though.

You're overthinking this.

I squared my shoulders then hurried up Frances' driveway, suddenly aware of my limbs and how I was holding them at my sides. Did I usually walk like this? Did I look natural?

I reached the back of the car and checked the house. No movement yet. It felt as if my heart was about to pound out of my chest.

The inside of the Honda was empty, no extraneous trash or work out clothes, no incriminating men's clothing or shoes lying around. It looked like a normal

car with a pine air freshener hanging from the mirror.

I tried the door handle, but it didn't open, then moved to the trunk and tested if it was unlocked. It clicked open, and I swayed on the spot, forcing myself to remember to breathe. I checked inside, but it was empty too. Nothing. Nothing at all.

Disappointment sidled into place in my chest.

What did it mean? Possibly that Michael had used the car and then cleaned up after himself. There should have been a weapon in here? Or a mask or something. Right?

My pocket buzzed and a merry tune burst out of it. My cell phone!

I nearly fell over myself trying to silence it. I wormed it out of my pocket, spotted Nick's name flashing on the screen, and hit a button to quiet the ringtone, hurriedly glancing up at the house. Still no movement. Strange but good, given the circumstances. I turned on my heel and rushed back down the driveway, hitting the green phone icon as I went.

"Hello? Nick? Is that you?"

"Yes," he said, his deep voice traveling down the line. "Hi, Sunny, how are you? Am I catching you at a bad time?"

"No. Great time. Why do you ask?"

"You sound, uh, out of breath."

"Oh, I was just doing a workout." Technically true.

"I can call you back later when you're free."

"No, no, now's a great time," I insisted, and got into my aunt's car. I shut the door as quietly as I could manage, but it still made a tinny slam.

"All right, well," Nick said, and took a breath. "I wanted to let you know that Jasmine is doing great. She's awake, and she wanted me to extend her gratitude to you for finding her when you did. If you hadn't come over, she might've been in serious trouble. The police seem to think that you chased off her attacker."

That was news to me. "Wait, what?"

"That's what they said. Apparently, you arrived at just the right time."

Her attacker had been close by when I'd found her. "OK," I said. "Well, I'm glad she's all right. That she's awake. She's going to make a full recovery?"

“Yes,” he replied. “She will. She’s pretty keen to get out of the hospital.”

I chewed on the corner of my lip. “That’s good, Nick. Listen, I was coming over there because I found something at the café that—”

“Sunny, before you say anything, I wanted to give you an apology of my own. I shouldn’t have been so rash about quitting. I was stressed and angry, and Jasmine was putting pressure on me to make more money. I thought that leaving would open up more opportunities for me, but... look, I hoped that if the offer still stands, you might want me to work at the café again?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes,” Nick said. “I shouldn’t have quit. It wasn’t your fault. I took offense to what you said, but I’m usually cool headed. And I love your aunt too. She’s been a great employer, and I didn’t give her the time of day because of what happened. Look, the pressure’s off for me now. The cops think that I’m clear because I had an alibi for last night.”

So that meant they thought that the killer and the attacker were the same person. A man. That narrowed things down a bit.

“That’s great news, Nick,” I said. “Great news. And I would be so happy to have you back at the café. Do you want to meet up later and talk about it? I need to go to the café, anyway. Start getting things set up for when we open again.” I’d planned on cooking everything myself if I had to. We would open next week, come high water or hades below.

“Sure. I can meet you there in an hour?”

“Great!” I frowned, a thought occurring to me. “Wait a second, Nick, what about your influencer stuff? And Tom?”

“Oh, right, yeah. Well, I wanted his advice on it and he basically told me it’s a dead-end job in this town. Not much money to be made. I was going to do it because Jasmine wanted me to, but the more I thought about what happened between you and me, the worse I felt. I’m not coming back because I think I can’t make it anywhere else,” Nick said, quickly. “That’s not what this is about.”

I laughed. “Even if it was about that, I wouldn’t care. Nick, the café needs you. And I really am sorry for questioning your moral fiber.”

“No way. I get it. You don’t know me. I don’t know you.”

“See you in an hour.” I hung up.

I hadn't found anything in Frances' car, but at least something good had happened today. I had the Sunny Side Up chef back on the staff, and my promise to Rita was finally coming to fruition.

Opening the doors to the Sunny Side Up Café felt like a victory, even though we weren't technically open for business yet. It was only so I could meet up with Nick. I entered the warmth of the café, fanning myself and making yet another mental note to sort out the air-conditioning. When I'd gone up to see the folks from the company the last time, I'd been distracted by Eddie Martinez.

If only I knew who the killer was.

That didn't matter now. At least one piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. Nick would return to the café.

I hummed under my breath and fixed myself a cup of coffee to prepare for the meeting, checking my watch as I went. He was due in about a half hour. That gave me some time to think about what I'd say and what type of organization was needed.

Maybe we could do a grand reopening? If Nick was right, the cops no longer suspected he was the murderer. Gosh, I hoped he was right. But who did that leave? Another unknown man who might've—

“Hello, dear!” Mildred stood on the threshold of the café, wearing another moth-eaten sundress. She fluffed her limp gray hair. “I thought I heard your aunt's car pull up.”

“Hello, Mildred.”

“Oh, you must call me Milly. Everyone else does.” She took two hesitant

steps into the café. “Are you opening again?”

“Soon,” I said. “Not today, though.”

“That’s great,” Milly said, slowly, looking around the restaurant. “I have some good news too. My nephew has arrived! I’d love it if you came next door to the shelter to meet him.”

“Oh sure.” From what Frances had said, Milly’s nephew wasn’t real. This ought to be interesting in the very least, and I had some time to kill before my meeting with Nick. “Shall I bring some coffee?”

“No, no, we’ve got plenty.” Mildred shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Come on, dear. Let’s go.”

I frowned at her urgency but followed her out of the café and into the shelter next door. A massive man sat in an armchair in the shelter’s reception area. He looked almost too big to fit in the small space—with dark brown hair, dark eyebrows, and sharp eyes. He studied me like he was the predator and I was the prey.

This was Mildred’s nephew?

“Alexei, this is my friend, Sunny. Sunny, this is my nephew Alexei.” Mildred bore a sweet smile, unaware of how what she’d just said had affected me.

My blood ran cold.

Alexei was a Russian name, and while I wasn’t one for profiling, the coincidence was too great.

“It’s good to meet you,” Alexei said, his accent tinged with hints of both American and Russian. He squeezed himself out of the armchair, his leather jacket squeaking, and towered over me. He extended a hand that dwarfed mine. “My aunt has told me much about you.”

“Oh wow, that’s nice.” I shook his hand, too freaked out to be ashamed about how clammy my palm was.

“Very good. Very good,” Milly said. “I’ll make us some coffee.” She set to work behind the reception desk, humming pleasantly under her breath, while Alexei’s gaze bore into the side of my face.

“You are new in town?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Milly mentioned that you wouldn’t be coming out. What

changed your mind?”

“My aunt has told me that people are stealing from her business. I can’t allow that.”

“Oh.”

“Alexei’s been helping me with my little problem,” Mildred said.

I colored. “Gosh, Milly, I totally forgot about that. I’m so sorry. I should’ve been here to—”

Mildred waved a hand, facing me again and bringing the cookie jar with her. “Oh, don’t worry about that. You’ve done enough. You know, Alexei’s already canceled the card on your suggestion, and he’s helped me gather a list of all the volunteers who have worked at the shelter in the last few months.”

“Oh,” I said, relaxing a little. “Could I see it? Maybe I can help.”

“Sure.” Alexei brought out his phone and walked it over to the desk. He put it down, then unlocked the screen. “Here is the list.”

I joined him, keeping a distance but unable to avoid the aromatic scent of his cologne. It wasn’t unpleasant. “Let’s see.” I scanned the list. Most of the names were unknown to me, but a couple stood out. Didi was one, but she’d worked here infrequently, and then there was another, Tom Miller, the food critic. “Tom,” I murmured, something scratching at the back of my brain. “Tom.”

“What is it, Sunny, dear?” Mildred asked.

“I don’t know. How long has Tom been volunteering at the shelter?” I asked.

“Oh, a few months,” Milly said, uncapping the cookie jar and holding it out to me. “He’s been a great help in his spare time. Apparently, he’s got a lot more of it now.” Milly’s voice lowered. “He’s been struggling to get work, you know. The *Parfait Platter* has discontinued his column because people are more interested in what these new-fangled vlogger’s have to say. Everything’s on the internet nowadays, so the paper had to cut costs. What’s wrong, dear? You’ve gone pale. Alexei, isn’t she just as white as a ghost?”

I took a halting step backward, my eyes widening. “Tom lost the column?”

“Yes, a few weeks ago. I think his last review was of the Sunny Side Up, actually.”

My heart thudded away against the inside of my ribcage. Tom had been

outside the café on the morning of the murder—I'd nearly run him over with my car. He'd convinced Nick not to become a vlogger, as well. And hadn't I seen him talking to Bebe at one point too? Tom had been fired. Tom was low on cash. Tom may have been desperate enough to get rid of a vlogger so that he could take her place or—

“Tom—?” I cut off, mid-question.

“Did someone call?” Tom, horn-rimmed glasses and all, appeared in the door that led to the back.

“Oh, there you are, Tom,” Milly said. “I was just telling Sunny here about your unfortunate lack of work at the moment.”

Tom's beady gaze flickered from Mildred to Alexei to me.

I forced a bright smile. “You know what, Milly? I wish I could stay and chat a while longer, but I have a meeting in about five minutes.”

“Oh, of course. Well, why don't you come by after? I'm sure you and Alexei will have a lot to talk about.” Milly wiggled her eyebrows at me.

“Right. Have a good morning everyone.” I slipped out of the shelter, and practically jogged back into the Sunny Side Up. I needed a moment. Shoot, I needed an hour to process what I'd learned.

I made a beeline for my aunt's office and shut the door behind me, my phone already in my hand. I had to make sense of this.

At her desk, things started falling into place.

Tom didn't have a job. He'd spoken to both Nick and Bebe about being influencers. I'd checked his social media presence and found he'd had none on the morning we'd discovered the review of the Sunny Side Up in the *Parfait Platter*. He was broke. He'd likely been stealing from Mildred too, which would explain the missing card.

If only I could place him at the restaurant on the morning of the murder. Could someone have seen him there? One of the servers? I opened my contacts and considered calling them, spotting Didi's name first.

My eyes widened.

The image I'd attached to her contact card wasn't one of her, but the one she'd taken of me on the morning of the murder. I'd probably done it

unthinkingly. Shoot, I'd forgotten that she'd even taken that picture in the first place.

I tapped on the picture and it opened.

My breathing stalled, trapped behind clenched teeth.

There I was, holding up the plate of eggs over easy, bearing a nervous smile, and behind me, emerging from the swinging kitchen doors, was none other than Tom Miller. He wore a rusty red shirt.

"It was him! It was him!" I squeaked, unable to keep my excitement at bay.

"Congratulations, Sunny." A nasal voice spoke from my aunt's office door. "You solved the case." Tom Miller stood inside the office. He kicked the office door shut. "Pity. I was just starting to like you."

“**Y**ou should have stayed out of it,” Tom said, coming forward and placing his palms on my aunt’s desk.

The color drained from my face, and I pushed the chair back, rolling it until it hit the back wall of my aunt’s office. There was no way Tom would come in here and talk to me like this unless he planned on doing to me what he’d done to Trisha.

“Listen,” I said, raising my palms. “There’s no need to get hasty. I—uh—I—”

“I—uh—I—uh—” Tom mocked me and then chuckled. “You solved it, Sunny. Good for you. You know, I’ve been keeping an eye on you for a while. I heard you were sticking your nose where it didn’t belong.”

“You can’t do this,” I said.

“Do what?”

“Whatever it is you’re planning,” I replied. “The police will know it’s you.”

“How?” Tom’s question was cynical, but there was a hint of concern in his tone.

“Because they have evidence that points to you,” I said, and lifted my phone. I tapped on the screen and flashed him the picture. “I’ve just sent this picture to them, and they have a piece of the shirt you wore that day. I found it in the pantry window. That’s how you got in, isn’t it? You should have just left the way you came.”

Tom's cheeks reddened. "I couldn't," he said. "You were in the way. And Nick—You're lying. You didn't send that. And even if you did and I'm caught, that's even more reason for me to get rid of you. Consider it payback." He circled the desk, removing a pocket knife from his jeans.

I leaped out of my chair and kept my distance from him, circling at the same rate. The minute I got to the door, I'd make a break for it.

"There's no use," Tom said. "You might as well give in. The more of a fight you put up, the worse it will be for you."

"Tom, you don't have to do this. Look, we can come to some kind of arrangement."

"Liar. You'll say whatever you can now to avoid dying, but we both know the truth. You'd give me up the minute you have the chance."

I swallowed, circling toward the door.

"Oh no you don't!" Tom dove toward me, slashing the knife through the air. It missed me by inches, and I stumbled back into the wall, bashing my arm painfully.

"Stop," I said. "Please. You can't do this. I—"

Tom bore down on me, his teeth gritted, a horrible smile twisting his features. "You're just as bad as Trisha. She thought she was better than everyone else, that she could swoop in and steal my spot in this town, and she got what she deserved. You know, they had the nerve to offer her a job as an online associate to the paper? You—"

The office door crashed open, and Nick streaked into the room. Tom turned, eyes widening. He brought the knife down, but it was too late. Nick tackled him into the wall opposite. The men fell to the floor and rolled from side-to-side, Nick's hand pinned over Tom's wrist, keeping the knife at bay. Punches were thrown, followed by groans.

"Nick," I cried. "Nick! Help!" I ran out of the office and into the café.

Alexei and Milly had appeared in the doorway. "What's going on, dear?" Milly asked. "We heard a—"

"Nick! Tom! Tom's the killer. Someone call 911." I should've called, but the panic had taken control.

“I’ve already done this,” Alexei replied, pointing toward his ear, where he held his phone.

I sprinted back into the office, fearing the worst. *Please, let Nick be all right. Please. Please. Please.*

Nick had pinned Tom on his belly and had his hands behind his back. The knife lay abandoned on the floor. I jogged forward and kicked it into the corner.

“Did you call 911?” Nick asked.

“Let go of me!” Tom yelled.

“Quiet,” Nick said, lifting him and slamming him back down again.

“Alexei called,” I whispered.

And that was it. The killer had been caught, and the police were on their way. Somehow, I’d helped solve the case. Though, I’d nearly lost my life and everything of value in it along the way.

One week later...

At the beginning of my time in Parfait, the prospect of being in charge of a bustling café had been nothing short of terrifying. Now, I knew what genuine terror felt like—a murderer bearing down on me with a knife—my fear of the café and its patrons was absurd by comparison.

I wound between the tables in the Sunny Side Up, stopping to chat with customers and smile at those who entered through the open doors. I received confident smiles and greetings in return, and it helped allay my nerves.

So, I wasn't afraid of managing the café, but boy, I was still nervous of messing up and of interacting with new people. And eggs over easy? I hadn't prepared them since Trisha's murder. I was put off for life, but the diners in the café had no such qualms. It was by far the most popular dish.

I headed over to Frances' table—her favorite booth in front of the windows that looked out on the boardwalk—and smiled at her. "Everything OK over here?"

"Oh hello, Sunny. Yes, everything's fine. I'm glad things have gotten back to normal in town now that that horrible piece of trash has been arrested."

Tom was being arraigned for Trisha's murder and attempted murder on me.

Thank heavens for Nick showing up in the ‘nick of time’ to save the day. I still had nightmares from the ordeal, but I was healthy and alive, and the café was back on track financially. All the troubles hadn’t disappeared, but I was glad to be here now.

“Well, if you need anything—”

“I could do without the incessant noise,” Frances said. “What is that banging?”

“Oh, the repairmen have finally arrived to fix the air-conditioning,” I replied. “Sorry for the interruption, but trust me, it’s going to be worth it.”

Didi arrived with Frances’ chosen drink and set it down on the table. “Here you go, Miss Grace.”

Frances grunted by way of reply. “You couldn’t wait until the weekend to repair the air-conditioning? It’s noisy!”

Didi squeaked and hurried off.

“Sorry,” I repeated, determined not to absorb Frances’ grim mood. “This was the only day they had free.” And I wasn’t about to reschedule after waiting so darn long for them to come out.

I walked off before Frances got into her complaining zone and checked a few of the other tables. I headed into the kitchen and found Nick in front of the stove, preparing fried green tomatoes, and singing under his breath.

“Hey!” I said. “Enjoying being back in the kitchen?”

“I sure am,” he replied, and offered me a serene smile. He plated up the tomatoes and Karl swept into the kitchen and removed them. We were alone again, and Nick switched to slicing mushrooms.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” Nick said, slowly. “It’s kind of important, but I haven’t gotten the chance to go over it with you. I wasn’t even sure if it was appropriate.”

“Oh?”

“You’re my employer while Rita’s on vacation.”

My aunt had extended her trip by another few weeks now that everything was under control. “Yeah?”

“And I usually tell Rita when something big happens in my life. Just so she

knows. I behaved poorly after Trisha's death. I kind of ghosted you because of the stress, so I want to give you a heads up when things are changing from now on."

"That would be great, Nick," I said.

"Well," Nick said, and took a breath. "You ought to know that Jasmine and I are getting a divorce. She's leaving me."

"Oh, Nick, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah." He nodded. "She was real angry with me for coming back to work at the Sunny Side Up, but... I felt I belonged here. Turns out she wanted me to become an influencer because she wanted us to move out of Parfait. But this town is my home, and I don't want to leave."

What could I say? "Nick, if there's anything I can do..."

"No, no, just thought you should know. I'm trying to turn over a new leaf here."

"Well, look, if you ever want to hang out, I'm sure we can organize something with Didi and the gang," I said.

"That would be great," Nick replied. "Thanks, Sunny."

I gave him a double thumbs up and exited the kitchen, leaving him to his thoughts. Poor guy. I'd just been through a messy divorce of my own, and I knew the potential it had to turn your entire life upside down.

I only hoped he would eventually find his silver lining.

Was that what had happened for me? I stood behind the coffee bar, listening to the hum of happy diners, watching as the repairmen waved goodbye, and as Didi served meals and laughed at something a customer had said. Mildred passed by in the street outside, her arm hooked through Alexei's, a small, satisfied smile on her lips.

Yes. It was fair to say that I had finally found my silver lining. Or better yet, my sunny side up.

Sunny's mystery adventures continue in Book 2 of the Sunny Side Up Cozy Mystery Series, Muffin But Murder. [Get it here!](#)

CRAVING MORE COZY MYSTERY?

If you had fun with Milly, Waffle, and Gran, you'll, love getting to know Charlie Mission and her butt-kicking grandmother, Georgina. You can read the first chapter of Charlie's story, *The Case of the Waffling Warrants*, below!

"Come in, Big G, come in." I spoke under my breath so that the flesh-colored microphone seated against my throat picked up my voice. "What is your status?"

My grandmother, Georgina—pet name Gamma, code name Big G—was out on a special operation. Reconnaissance at the newest guesthouse in our town, Gossip. The reason? First, she was an ex-spy, as was I, and second, the woman who'd opened the guesthouse was her mortal enemy and in direct competition with my grandmother's establishment, the Gossip Inn.

Who was this enemy, this bringer of potential financial doom?

A middle-aged woman with a penchant for wearing pashminas and annoying anyone who looked her way.

Jessie Belle-Blue.

It was rumored that even thinking the woman's name summoned a murder of crows.

"I repeat, Big G, what is your status?"

"I'm en route to the nest," my grandmother replied in my earpiece.

I let out a relieved sigh and exited my bedroom, heading downstairs to help

with the breakfast service.

In the nine months since I had retired as a spy, life in Gossip had been normal. In the Gossip sense of the term. I'd expected that my job as a server, maid, and assistant would bring the usual level of "cat herding" inherent when working at the inn. Whether that involved tracking down runaway cats, literally, or providing a guest with a moist towelette after a fainting spell—tempers ran high in Gossip.

What was the reason for the craziness? Shoot, it had to be something in the water.

I took the main stairs two at a time and found my friend, the inn's chef, paging through her recipe book in the lime green kitchen. Lauren Harris wore her red hair in a French braid today, apron stretched over her pregnant belly.

"Morning," I said, "how are you today?"

"Madder than a fat cat on a diet." She slapped her recipe book closed and turned to me.

Uh oh. Looks like it's time for more cat herding.

"What's wrong?"

"My supplier is out of flour and sugar. Can you believe that?" Lauren huffed, smoothing her hands over her belly while the clock on the wall ticked away. Breakfast was in two hours and Lauren loved baking cupcakes as part of the meal.

"Do you have enough supplies to make cupcakes for this morning?"

"Yes. But just for today," Lauren replied. "The guests are going to love my new waffle cupcakes, and they'll be sore they can't get anymore after this batch is done. Why, I should go down there and wring Billy's neck for doing this to me. He knows I take an order of sugar and flour every week, and I get it at just above cost too. What's Georgina going to say?"

"Don't stress, Lauren," I said. "We'll figure it out."

"Right." She brightened a little. "I nearly forgot you're the one who "fixes" things around here." Lauren winked at me.

She was the only person in the entire town who knew that my grandmother and I had once been spies for the NSIB—the National Security Investigative

Bureau. But the news that I had helped solve several murders had spread through town, and now, anybody and everybody with a problem would call me up asking for help. A lot of them offered me money. And I was selective about who I chose to help.

“I’ll check it out for you if you’d like,” I said. “The flour issue.”

“Nah, that’s OK. I’m sure Billy will get more stock this week. I’ll lean on him until he squeals.”

“Sounds like you’ve been picking up tips from Georgina.”

Lauren giggled then returned to her super-secret recipe book—no one but she was allowed to touch it.

“What’s on the menu this morning?” I asked.

Lauren was the boss in the kitchen—she told me what to do, and I followed her instructions precisely. If I did anything else, like trying to read the recipe for instance, the food would end up burned, missing ingredients or worse.

The only place I wasn’t a “fixer” was in the Gossip Inn’s kitchen.

“Bacon and eggs over easy, biscuits and gravy, waffle cupcakes and... oh, I can’t make fresh baked bread, can I?”

“Tell her I’ll bring some back with me from the bakery.” Gamma’s voice startled me. Goodness, I’d forgotten about the earpiece—she could hear everything happening in the kitchen.

“I’ll text Georgina and ask her to bring bread from the bakery.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Charlotte.”

We set to work on the breakfast—it was 7:00 a.m. and we needed everything done within two hours—and fell into our easy rhythm of baking and cooking.

My grandmother entered the kitchen at around 8:30 a.m., dressed in a neat silk blouse and a pair of slacks rather than the black outfit she’d left in for her spy mission. Tall, willowy, and with neatly styled gray hair, Gamma had always reminded me of Helen Mirren playing the Queen.

“Good morning, ladies,” she said, in her prim, British accent. “I bring bread and tidings.”

“What did you find out?” I asked.

“No evidence of the supposed ghost tours,” Gamma said.

We'd started hosting ghost tours at the inn recently, so of course Jessie Belle-Blue wanted to do the same. She was all about under-cutting us, but, thankfully, the Gossip Inn had a legacy and over 1,000 positive reviews on TripAdvisor.

Breakfast time arrived, and the guests filled the quaint dining area with its glossy tables, creaking wooden floors, and egg yolk yellow walls. Chatter and laughter leaked through the swinging kitchen doors with their porthole windows.

"That's my cue," I said, dusting off my apron, and heading out into the dining room.

I picked up a pot of coffee from the sideboard where we kept the drinks station and started my rounds.

Most of the guests had gathered around a center table in the dining room, and bursts of laughter came from the group, accompanied by the occasional shout.

I elbowed my way past a couple of guests—nobody could accuse me of having great people skills—apologizing along the way until I reached the table. The last time something like this had happened, a murder had followed shortly afterward.

Not this time. No way.

"—the last thing she'd ever hear!" The woman seated at the table, drawing the attention, was vaguely familiar. She wore her dark hair in luscious curls, and tossed it as she spoke, looking down her upturned nose at the people around the table.

"What happened then, Mandy?" Another woman asked, her hands clasped together in front of her stomach.

Mandy? Wait a second, isn't this Mandy Gilmore?

Gamma had mentioned her once before—Mandy was a massive gossip in town. Why wasn't she staying at her house?

"What happened? Well, she ran off with her tail between her legs, of course. She'll soon learn not to cross me. Heaven knows, I always repay my debts."

"What, like a Lannister from *Game of Thrones*?" That had come from a taller woman with ginger curls.

"Shut up, Opal," Mandy replied. "You have no idea what we're talking about, and even if you did, you wouldn't have the intelligence to comprehend

it.”

The crowd let out various ‘oofs’ in response to that. The woman next to me clapped her hand over her mouth.

“You’re all talk, Gilmore.” Opal lifted a hand and yammered it at the other woman. “You act like you’re a threat, but we know the truth around here.”

“The truth?” Mandy leaned in, pressing her hands flat onto the tabletop, the crystal vase in the center rattling. “And what’s that, Opal, darling? I’d love to hear it.”

“That you’re a failure. You sold your house, left Gossip with your head in the clouds, told everyone you were going to become a successful businesswoman, and now you’re back. Back to scrape together the pieces of the life you have left.”

“Witch!” Mandy scraped her chair back.

“All right, all right,” I said, setting down the coffee pot on the table. “That’s enough, ladies. Everyone head back to their tables before things get out of hand.”

Both Opal and Mandy stared daggers at me.

I flashed them both smiles. “We wouldn’t want to ruin breakfast, would we? Lauren’s prepared waffle cupcakes.”

That distracted them. “Waffle cupcakes?” Opal’s brow wrinkled. “How’s that going to work?”

“Let’s talk about it at your table.” I grabbed my coffee pot and walked her away from Mandy. The crowd slowly dispersed, people muttering regret at having missed out on a show. The Gossip Inn was popular for its constant conflict.

If the rumors didn’t start here then they weren’t worth repeating. That was the mantra, anyway.

I seated Opal at her table, and she pursed her lips at me. “You shouldn’t have interrupted. That woman needs a piece of my mind.”

“We prefer peace of mind at the inn.” I put up another of my best smiles.

Compared to what I’d been through in the past—hiding out from my rogue spy ex-husband and eventually helping put him behind bars when he found me—

dealing with the guests was a cakewalk.

“What brings you to Gossip, Opal?” I asked.

“I live here,” she replied, waspishly. “I’m staying here while they’re fumigating my house. Roaches.”

“Ah.” I struggled not to grimace. Thankfully, my cell phone buzzed in the front pocket of my apron and distracted me. “Coffee?”

“I don’t take caffeine.” And she said it like I’d offered her an illegal substance too.

“Call me if you need anything.” I hurried off before she could make good on that promise, bringing my phone out of my pocket.

I left the coffee pot on the sideboard, moving into the Gossip Inn’s spacious foyer, the chandelier overhead off, but catching light in glimmers. The tables lining the hall were filled with trinkets from the days when the inn had been a museum—an eclectic collection of bits and bobs.

“This is Charlotte Smith,” I answered the call—I would never get to use my true last name, Mission, again, but it was safer this way.

“Hello, Charlotte.” A soft, rasping voice. “I’ve been trying to get through to you. I’m desperate.”

“Who is this?”

“My name is Tina Rogers, and I need your help.”

“My help.”

“Yes,” she said. “I understand that you have a certain set of skills. That you fix people’s problems?”

“I do. But it depends on the problem and the price.” I didn’t have a set fee for helping people, but if it drew me away from the inn for long, I had to charge. I was technically a consultant now. Sort of like a P.I. without the fedora and coffee-stained shirt.

“My mother will handle your fee,” Tina said. “I’ve asked her to text you about it, but I... I don’t have long to talk. They’re going to pull me off the phone soon.”

“Who?”

“The police,” she replied. “I’m calling you from the holding cell at the

Gossip Police Station. I've been arrested on false charges, and I need you to help me prove my innocence."

"Miss Rogers, it's probably a better idea to invest in a lawyer." But I was tempted. It had been a long time since I'd felt useful.

"No! I'm not going to a lawyer. I'm going to make these idiots pay for ever having arrested me."

I took a breath. "OK. Before I accept your... case, I'll need to know what happened. You'll need to tell me everything." I glanced through the open doorway that led into the dining room. No one looked unhappy about the lack of service yet.

"I can't tell you everything now. I don't have much time."

"So give me the *CliffsNotes*."

"I was arrested for breaking into and vandalizing Josie Carlson's bakery, The Little Cake Shop. Apparently, they found my glove there—it was specially embroidered, you see—but it's not mine because—" The line went dead.

"Hello? Miss Rogers?" I pulled the cellphone away from my ear and frowned at the screen. "Darn."

My interest was piqued. A mystery case about a break-in that involved the local bakery? Which just so happened to be run by one of my least favorite people in Gossip?

And when I'd just started getting bored with the push and pull of everyday life at the inn?

Count me in.

Want to read more? You can grab **the first book** in [*THE GOSSIP COZY MYSTERY SERIES HERE!*](#)

Happy reading, friend!

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