

Murder, Money & Marzipan



Leighann
Dobbs

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Leighann Dobbs

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Murder, Money & Marzipan

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Chapter One

“She said the marzipan was *atrocious!*” Lexy looked down at the miniature fruits she had carefully sculpted the day before with the help of her assistant, Cassie. The tiny candies were made from her own almond paste recipe and had been carefully shaped, painted, and sugared to look like miniature versions of actual fruit. She thought they had come out perfectly.

Cassie wrinkled her forehead. Popping a tiny pear into her mouth, she chewed enthusiastically. “Tastes great to me. *Sergeant* Saunders is just mean and I’ll tell you, she doesn’t seem to like us at all.”

Lexy nodded in agreement. Amanda Scott-Saunders had been a judge at the national bakers competition, *Bakery Battles*, for the past ten years. She was known for her harsh criticisms and nasty remarks. She had brought contestants to tears more than once, much to the delight of the sponsors who claimed it was good for ratings.

Lexy thought it fitting that everyone called her “Sergeant Saunders” behind her back. The woman had all the sensitivity and finesse of a drill sergeant and delighted in crushing the hopes of contestants. She had taken a particular dislike to Lexy. No matter how pleased the other judges were with Lexy’s work, Saunders always found something to complain about. It was a miracle Lexy was tied for first place in the competition.

“She said if I kept producing food like the marzipan, I would be out of the competition.” Lexy felt her face flush with anger. “If you ask me, the competition would be much better off if *she* was out of it.”

Lexy heard a giggle from the booth next to hers. She swung her head towards the sound. Her eyes locked on the ice-blue gaze of Aurea Pearce, her closest competition with whom she was currently tied for first place.

“I guess the Sergeant didn’t like your little fruits,” she said in a sickly-sweet voice. Lexy noticed her lips were curled in a smile that didn’t reach her hard, cold eyes.

Lexy wasn’t fooled by the sweet, Barbie doll appearance of the petite blonde. Aurea was the type that acted nice to your face, but stabbed you in the back as soon as you turned around. She was a ruthless competitor who would stop at nothing to win.

Lexy plastered a smile on her face. “You win some, you lose some,” she said matter-of-factly as if the dressing down she received the afternoon before didn’t faze her in the least. She’d be damned if she’d let Aurea Pearce know it bothered her; the other woman would probably find some way to use it against her.

Lexy turned back to Cassie. “I’m going to put these in the community freezer.” She held up the tray of marzipan.

Cassie nodded, her head bent over a three-tiered wedding cake that was the subject of the days competition. Lexy smiled at the contrast of Cassie’s pink spiked hair against the traditional white roses she was applying to the cake.

Lexy took a deep breath. The sting of the previous days judging still hurt, but today was another day and she was determined not to let the harsh words of Amanda Scott-Saunders throw her off course and ruin her chances of realizing her childhood dream.

Lexy looked around the giant stadium hall that housed the set of *Bakery Battles*, a yearly competition of the best bakers in America. The space consisted of dozens of kitchen areas, one for each baker. She was honored to be chosen and thrilled she had

already made it through several rounds. She considered it one of the greatest accomplishments of her culinary career. The exposure for her bakery *The Cup and Cake* plus the chance of winning a \$100,000 prize and a spread in *American Baker Magazine* didn't hurt either.

With renewed vigor for the days competition, she hurried off to the giant community freezer to store the marzipan, the echo of her Christian Loboutin stilettos tapping on the concrete as she made her way across the vast stadium.

###

Lexy reached out for the smooth handle of the freezer, the tray of marzipan balanced in one hand. The door opened easily, welcoming Lexy in a blanket of icy air.

She felt herself shiver. *They must have the thermostat turned way down today.* Not wanting to spend too much time in the arctic environment, she hurried down the aisle to her designated storage spot. Her heel caught on one of the open holes of the thick rubber mat. Jerking forward, she caught herself from falling but not before a dozen assorted marzipan fruits fell to the floor.

"Damn it!"

Lexy put the tray on the shelf and bent down to retrieve the marzipan. With a surge of annoyance, she noticed a few pieces had bounced under the metal shelving. She almost had to lie on the floor to reach under the shelf to get them.

Her apron dragged through the dirt on the mat. She made a mental note to pick up a new one from the hangers in the back of the freezer.

Stretching her arm under the shelf she felt blindly for the fruit. Her hand encountered something squishy...and big.

"What the heck..."

Lexy put her face down at floor level to peer under the shelf. She felt a jolt run through her body. Her lungs burned, filling with a deep breath of icy-cold air. Her mouth opened to yell, but nothing came out. Her eyes blinked closed as if to erase what she was seeing. Fear squeezed her heart when she opened them again and realized the scene was still the same.

She was staring into the cold, dead eyes of Amanda Scott-Saunders.

Chapter Two

“Why were you in the freezer?”

“I was dropping off some marzipan...to freeze for later.” Lexy squinted up at the police detective. Feeling a bit light headed, she rubbed her temples.

“Are you all right, ma’am?”

“Yes.” Lexy shook herself. “It’s just that I don’t find bodies every day. It’s a bit disturbing.”

The detective- Detective Ryan, it said on his badge- put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You sit here and relax. Detective Stone will have more questions for you.”

“Detective Stone?”

“The detective in charge. Nik will be here shortly, until then just sit tight...and don’t leave the area.”

Detective Nik Stone. The name made her think wistfully of her boyfriend back home, Detective Jack Perillo. They had actually met under similar circumstances: Lexy’s ex-boyfriend had been poisoned with cupcakes from her bakery and Jack had been the detective in charge. Hopefully Nik Stone would be as easy to work with, and hopefully she could get things to go in her favor with a few well-placed flirtations, just like she had done with Jack.

Lexy heard a commotion to her right. The place was crawling with police who all seemed to stop and look in the direction of the commotion. Suddenly the detective was back at her side.

“This is the woman who found the body. Lexy Baker - Detective Stone.”

Lexy stuck out her hand, then felt her eyes grow wide. Her mouth dropped open as she stared at the head detective. Tall. Commanding. Exuding as much authority as any man Lexy had ever met.

Except Nik Stone wasn’t a man. Detective Nik Stone was one of the most beautiful women Lexy had even seen. *So much for getting things to go my way by batting my eyelashes.*

Nik grabbed Lexy’s outstretched hand. Even though her hands were delicate and perfectly manicured, her handshake was firm and strong - not a girly handshake at all. Lexy watched the detective pull up a chair opposite her. Her no-nonsense black flats planted on the floor seemed to accentuate her long, thin legs. Lexy noticed her willowy frame had been well equipped in the chest department. Lexy felt a pang of jealousy; the woman had the body of a showgirl.

Detective Stone leaned forward, her copper-red hair billowing around her alabaster skin like a cloud. She fixed Lexy with a commanding stare, her golden orbs drilling into Lexy’s green ones.

“OK, Ms. Baker, why don’t you tell me what you were doing here and how you found the body.”

Lexy recited the story of her tripping on the mat, then finding the body under the shelf in an attempt to retrieve the marzipan.

“I see. So you are in the competition?”

Lexy nodded.

“And what is your relationship to the judge?”

Lexy bit her bottom lip. “None. I mean, only that she’s a judge here. I didn’t know

her before or anything.”

“She judged your baking?” Nik fired off the questions rapidly, giving Lexy little time to think.

“Yes.”

“Favorably?”

Lexy felt a nervous tic start in her eye. “Well, not really. I mean, she was *supposed* to be critical of them.”

Nik nodded, then leaned even closer. “So, you might say you had an adversarial relationship with the victim?”

Lexy felt her shoulders start to tense up. “Well, not just me...pretty much everyone here did.”

She glanced around. The activity in *Bakery Battles Stadium* had come to a halt. Most of the bakers and their assistants were standing around, trying to get a good view.

She saw Cassie push her way through the crowd, elbowing people aside to get to Lexy.

“What’s going on?” Cassie looked from Lexy to Nik.

Lexy took a deep breath and lifted her chin toward the freezer. “I found another body.”

“*Another* body?” Nik arched a perfectly plucked brow.

Lexy felt her cheeks grow warm. She stabbed her index finger into her eye to stop her spastically twitching eyelid. “I found one before...not here...on a catering job back home,” she stammered.

Nik stared at her incredulously. “So, you make it a habit to stumble over dead bodies. That sounds a bit suspicious to me.”

“I don’t kill them, I just happen to be the one who finds them.” Lexy shrugged, then breathed a sigh of relief when the other detective - the nice one - returned, commanding Nik’s attention.

“The M.E. is almost done with the body. Did you want to look at it?”

Nik stood. “Yes, what was the TOD?”

“She said it’s hard to tell since the body was frozen but her guess is around 4 am.”

“Cause of death?”

“Strangled...with something very thin. We haven’t found it yet though.”

Nik nodded. “Have Styles and McManus interview everyone else in the stadium. Don’t let anyone leave until they’ve talked to them. And get the crew looking for what she was strangled with.”

Nik turned to Lexy. “You can go now, but don’t leave the city. I’m going to want to talk to you lat-”

A commotion over by the freezer door stole Nik’s attention. A third detective appeared in the doorway holding something up in his latex-gloved hands. “Found the murder weapon.”

Lexy felt her heart clench. He was holding one of the aprons the competition doled out to every contestant. The aprons were all the same, except each was embroidered with the contestants initials. The one he held up had the initials “LB”.

Amanda Scott-Saunders had been strangled with one of Lexy’s aprons.

Chapter Three

“I thought she was going to lock you up on the spot!” Cassie looked at Lexy wide-eyed.

Lexy nodded in agreement. Detective Nik Stone had seemed quite suspicious of her, especially after the apron was found, but Lexy knew Stone would need more than that to arrest her.

“I can’t say I’m sorry she’s dead,” Lexy admitted. “But I don’t like the way some of the evidence points at me.”

“Well, at least now we might have a better chance of winning the contest,” Cassie pointed out.

Lexy glanced over at the next booth. Aurea was huddled in the corner whispering with Grace Harvey, one of the alternate judges. Lexy felt her stomach drop as she realized someone would have to replace Saunders. If that someone was Grace Harvey, things might be even worse for her.

There wasn’t much she could do about it at the moment, so she turned her attention to more pressing matters.

“The filming is canceled for today, but I think we should still work on the cakes so they will be perfect for judging tomorrow.”

Cassie nodded her agreement, then went straight to the fridge at the back of the makeshift kitchen and pulled out several cake tiers. The next part of the contest would judge them on their cake-decorating skills as well as on the complexity and taste of the cakes.

Lexy had planned to “wow” the judges with a traditional white three-tier cake decorated to the nines with a quilted-texture fondant covered in white frosting roses and silver leaves and balls. The cake itself was vanilla and she was adding in raspberry liqueur filling to give it some extra punch.

The grooms cake was a funky contemporary design with geometric tiers offset and covered in bright, colors and decorations. The frosting was all smooth fondant cut out into interesting shapes. Chocolate fudge cake with toffee caramel filling would please the palates while the decoration of the cake would please the judges eyes. Or at least that’s what Lexy hoped.

The mornings events, however, had somewhat dampened her enthusiasm for cake decorating. *Would she even be around to present the cakes or would she be sitting in jail...or worse: disqualified from the competition?*

Lexy looked around the stadium. Each row was sectioned off with fabric in the back so she couldn’t see the entire room. From her kitchen she could see the other kitchens in the same row as well as the ones across from her. Glancing around, she noticed most of the bakers were focusing on getting their cakes made, but some were looking over at her suspiciously. *Did they all think she had done it?*

Lexy went over to the fridge and pulled out a bowl of golden caramel that had been setting up in preparation for its role in the grooms cake. She grabbed some toffee from her supply rack and started crushing it with a rolling pin, adding it in small amounts to the caramel.

“We need to do something to help catch the killer soon so I can put my energies into the contest and not have to worry about when Detective Stone is going to appear with

a pair of handcuffs in my size.”

Cassie nodded. “We’re both up to our eyeballs here with work, but maybe tonight we can set aside some time to talk to some of the other bakers and see if we can find anything out.”

Lexy popped a piece of toffee into her mouth, rolling it around on her tongue. She moved it from side to side savoring the buttery taste while she brushed the rest of the toffee into the bowl and covered it with plastic wrap.

“Yeah, it’s too bad we are so limited on time...” Lexy’s head jerked up. “Wait a minute, we don’t have a lot of time, but I know someone who does and she’s the perfect person to help us find the killer.”

Cassie arched her brows. “You don’t mean...”

“Yes, I do.” Lexy whipped off her apron and threw it on the shelf. “You stay here and mind the fort, I think I know just where to find her.”

###

Lexy stood in the wide entrance to the casino. The clamor of bells and blinking lights caused a momentary disorientation. She scanned the rows of slot machines looking for her grandmother’s familiar bluish-gray head.

She spotted her on the other side of the casino. Mona Baker, or Nans, as Lexy had called her since childhood, sat at her favorite “Wheel of Fortune” slot machine happily pressing buttons. Lexy smiled at the flushed look of excitement on the woman’s face.

When Lexy had made the reservations for her Las Vegas trip to compete in *Bakery Battles*, she had invited Nans along, knowing how much the older woman loved playing the slots. She figured since she had rented two rooms for her and Cassie anyway, it would be an inexpensive way for Nans to have a vacation. Little did she know she would have to avail herself of the older woman’s detective skills to help solve a murder.

Lexy aimed for Nans, navigating the sea of gamblers. She passed a little bar inside the casino. Someone inside the bar caught her eye. She slowed down for a better look.

Was that...?

It was! Amanda Scott-Saunders’s husband sat at the corner of the bar. Normally, the man was meticulously groomed; Lexy felt a pang of sympathy as she noticed his rumpled shirt, tired eyes and stubbled chin. Sympathy soon turned to suspicion, however, when she saw that one hand held a tall drink and the other was draped around the back of a chair that held a striking blonde. Her eyes narrowed as she watched them talking and laughing.

Hours after his wife was found murdered? She mentally added Peter Saunders to her suspect list, then continued to navigate her way over to the bank of blinking slot machines where Nans was seated.

“Are you winning?” Lexy asked as she approached the older woman.

Nans swiveled her head in Lexy’s direction only long enough to indicate she heard her, then returned to watching the reels spin.

“Not so much, about even,” Nans said holding her hand out flat and tilting it back and forth.

“Did you hear?” Lexy asked.

“Hear what?” This time Nans didn’t even turn her head.

“There was a murder this morning in Bakery Battles Stadium.”

That got her attention. Nans turned to face Lexy, the slot machine all but forgotten. “Really?”

Lexy told her about how she had discovered the body, the police inquisition and the discovery of her apron as the murder weapon.

“That nasty woman.” Nans looked like she’d eaten a sour lemon. “There’s probably a lot of people who would have wanted to kill her.”

“Only every baker in the competition. I also noticed her husband is in the bar over there,” Lexy tilted her head in the direction of the bar, “living it up with some blonde.”

Nans’ eyes widened. She craned her neck to get a view of the bar.

“And I noticed Aurea Pearce is very friendly with Grace Harvey. If Grace replaces Amanda it could throw the competition in Aurea’s favor.”

“Do you think she would stoop to murder just to win the competition? I know there is a lot of money at stake, but murder?”

Lexy worried her bottom lip with her teeth. *Did she think Aurea would stoop to murder?*

“It does seem a bit extreme, but no harm in checking her out, right?” Lexy shrugged. “Nans, I was hoping you and the ladies would help look into some of the suspects. Right now all the evidence points to me and I’m so busy with the competition...”

“Of course, dear.” She slid off her seat, grabbing her gigantic purse. “I’ll go back to the room and call Ida.”

Lexy felt relief wash over her. Earlier in the year she had discovered that her grandmother and her four friends had an odd hobby - they solved murders. In fact, they had been instrumental in finding the killer of Lexy’s ex-boyfriend and in helping to clear her name from the suspect list. Their investigative skills had also come in handy when Lexy had stumbled across the dead body of a client several months earlier. Lexy felt a lot better knowing they were going to be helping to find Amanda’s real killer and get the police off her back.

“Thanks, Nans. I knew I could count on you.” Lexy noticed the older woman squinting at something just over her shoulder.

“Who is that?” Nans asked.

Lexy turned. She spotted the object of Nans’ question about 20 feet away, making a beeline toward her. Detective Nik Stone.

###

Lexy’s stomach rolled over as she watched the tall red-head barreling toward her, a trail of detectives in her wake.

“Your assistant told us we could find you here.”

Lexy raised an eyebrow, afraid to speak. She noticed Nik looking at Nans. *She wouldn’t arrest a girl in front of her grandmother, would she?*

“This is my grandmother, Mona Baker - Nans, this is Detective Nik Stone.”

Lexy was surprised to see the stoic detective’s face soften as she reached her hand out to Nans.

“Call me Nikki, Ms Baker.”

Nik turned back to Lexy. “I need to ask you some questions. We’ve found out a few

things that make you a person of interest in this case.”

Lexy raised her eyebrows. “What?” she squeaked out.

“We reviewed the videos from yesterday. It seems Judge Saunders gave you quite a smack on your marzipan.”

Lexy shrugged. “I already told you that this morning.”

Nik flipped open her notebook thumbing through a few pages. “Yes, but what you didn’t tell us is that afterward, you said the competition would be ‘*better if Saunders wasn’t around*’.” Nik wiggled her fingers in the air to punctuate the last five words.

Lexy swallowed. “That’s just the sort of thing you say without really meaning anything. I was steaming about the bad judgment. I wouldn’t actually kill her over it!”

“Your competitor Aurea Pearce seems to think you might.”

Lexy felt her cheeks grow red with anger. *It would be just like Aurea to say that.* She took a deep breath. “Detective, Aurea Pearce is my biggest competition. She’ll say pretty much anything to cast suspicion on me.”

Nik nodded. “There is one more thing. We’ve done a little checking, and it seems this isn’t the first time you’ve been suspected of murder.”

“I already told you about my client...”

“Not that murder, your ex-boyfriend.”

“But I was cleared. I was even the one who caught the real killer - with Nans’ help.” Lexy turned to her grandmother who nodded in agreement.

Nik raised an eyebrow at Nans. “Be that as it may, I have a call in to Detective Perillo back in Brooke Ridge Falls regarding you, so if you are hiding anything, you better come clean now. Jack and I are old friends.”

Old friends? Lexy didn’t like the predatory gleam in Nik Stone’s eye when she said Jack’s name. Nor did she like the fact that Jack hadn’t mentioned he knew a gorgeous female detective out here. Then again, he probably wasn’t expecting her to get involved in a murder case.

“I’m sure you’ll find I’m not hiding anything.” Lexy bristled.

“Well, then, I trust you won’t leave the hotel. We may have more questions for you once we review the surveillance tapes and electronic room key records.” She nodded at Nans. “A pleasure to meet you ma’am.”

Nik turned in a billow of copper hair and strode off on her long legs, the detectives trailing behind her.

Lexy let out a breath she hadn’t even realized she was holding. Jack was going to be mad when he found out she had gotten herself involved in another murder. He wasn’t too happy when she’d investigated the last one and had made her promise she wouldn’t get involved in any more.

“Well, I can see why you are in such a hurry to find the killer.” Nans interrupted her thoughts.

“Exactly. Judge Saunders was nasty to everyone in the competition. That means we have a lot of suspects to weed through. I need to get busy finding out which one of them was *not* in their room at 4 am.”

“I’ll go back to the room and get the girls working on checking out Judge Saunders and Aurea Pearce. We can compare notes when you get up there.”

“Thanks.” Lexy bent over, giving Nans a quick hug before the women headed off

in different directions.

Lexy exited the casino making a mental “to-do” list. She had to put some finishing touches on the wedding cakes for tomorrow’s judging, then she wanted to talk to as many of the other contestants as she could to see if they had noticed anything that could help her find the murderer.

Most importantly, she needed to figure out how to keep Jack from finding out she was investigating another murder. She had a gut feeling that keeping their relationship intact depended on preventing Detectives Perillo and Stone from talking to each other. Not only to keep Jack from finding out about her involvement in the case but also to keep the two of them from rekindling any old *friendship* they may have had.

Chapter Four

“It must have been scary finding her body.” Corinne stared at Lexy wide-eyed.

“It gets your adrenalin going, that’s for sure.” Lexy looked around the other baker’s booth which had wedding cake decorations neatly laid out. “Did you hear if they are going to be starting up the filming again tomorrow?”

Corinne nodded. “The show must go on.”

Lexy studied the other woman. A perky girl in her mid-twenties, she was a good baker and a nice person. Lexy knew how much Corinne wanted to win *Bakery Battles* - her husband had left her with three kids and a mountain of debt. She desperately needed the money.

For a fleeting second, Lexy wondered if the death of Judge Saunders would help Corinne’s chances. If Corinne thought it would, could she have murdered her?

Lexy shook off her suspicions. Was she getting so paranoid that she saw potential killers everywhere?

“Did you notice anything suspicious about Sanders or see anything that morning?”

Corinne shook her head. “I didn’t get down here until six, and I heard she was killed much earlier. I was in my room all night with Kara.”

Most of the contestants had roommates - other bakers they had teamed up with to share expenses. This made things a little easier for Lexy and her investigation since each baker had someone who could vouch for their whereabouts. Of course, that assumed they were all telling the truth.

The baker in the next booth, Mikela, leaned across the table separating the booths. “The police came by asking us all where we were and if anyone could confirm we were in our rooms. They said they could tell if anyone left because of the electronic room keys. The doors record when they are opened and closed. The only thing is, if the room door is opened, they don’t know *who* left.”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t think anyone in the competition is too upset about Saunders, but I hate to think one of us killed her.”

Lexy felt a chill at the young woman’s words. The three woman looked around the stadium at the other bakers. *Could one of them be a cold-blooded killer?*

Mikela leaned in closer to Lexy and Corinne. “I didn’t say too much to the police - none of us really want to because we’re afraid of getting the competition closed down, but I did notice Judge Saunders was acting kind of funny.”

Lexy felt her heart beat pick up speed. “Funny how?”

“She was acting kind of secretive - more so than usual. I saw her getting chummy in the corner with Evan Westmore a few times.”

“Evan Westmore - the event coordinator?” Corinne made a sour face. “Who would want to get chummy with him?”

Lexy and Mikela chuckled. Westmore wasn’t exactly handsome. He was actually rather dowdy - a short, stubby man with a bad attitude. Given Saunders’s own nasty attitude, Lexy thought they might have made a perfect match.

“Hey, now that you mention it, I did notice she had some expensive new shoes and clothes. I didn’t realize competition judges got paid so much.”

“Did you see the Coach purse she had? I wondered why she seemed to be taking pains with her appearance. Maybe she was having an affair with Westmore?”

Lexy opened her mouth, pointed her finger at her throat, and made gagging noises causing the other two to collapse into a fit of giggles.

The laughter caught the attention of Janice, one of the other bakers, who came over to join them.

“We were just talking about Judge Saunders’s murder,” Corinne offered.

Janice raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, the police have been all over asking questions.” She looked around the room, then stepped closer to the other women. “Some I’d rather not answer.”

“Oh?” Lexy asked. “Like what?”

“They were asking us if we were in our rooms all night, if we had anyone in there, and what time we left.”

“Right, they asked all of us.”

“Well, I don’t really like my roommate, but I don’t want to be a tattle-tale either.”

“Who is your roommate?”

“Aurea Pearce.”

Lexy, Mikela and Corinne groaned in sympathy. No one liked Aurea, and to be saddled with her as a roommate seemed cruel.

“What do you know that you didn’t want to tell them?” Lexy asked.

Janice looked down at the floor. “They asked me to verify what time Aurea and I left the room in the morning. Apparently she had told them she left at 5 am. I told them I got up at 5:30 and left around 6 and that Aurea had left before me.”

“That sounds about right., I don’t see the problem.” Corinne said wrinkling her brows together.

Janice bit her lower lip. “Aurea made a lot of noise when she got up and it woke me. I looked at the clock when she left and it wasn’t 5 am like she said...it was 3:25 am - shortly before Saunders was murdered.”

###

“How long until you can get all these surveillance tapes looked at?” Nik perched herself on the edge of Detective Jake Ryan’s desk.

“Days, boss.” He shrugged up at her. “The bakers’ rooms are on all different floors and not all of them are staying in the hotel. It’s gonna take a long time.”

Nik chewed on an already stubby thumb-nail. They had questioned all the bakers in the competition and they were proving to be a tight lipped bunch.

“It’s too bad they don’t have cameras right in Bakery Battles Stadium. That would make our jobs a lot easier,” Nik said wistfully.

“That’s for sure. Unfortunately, the contestants wouldn’t hear of it. They didn’t want any cameras spying on their secret recipes.”

Nik nodded. “Well, you know how I love a challenge. What do we have so far?”

Jake hit a few keys on the keyboard, then swung his monitor in her direction. “We have a dead bakery contest judge - TOD about 4 am. We have a bunch of contestants who hated her - they might all have had a motive. We’ve been able to verify that about half of them were in their rooms at the time of death so they can be ruled out. We have reports that the judge and her husband were fighting quite loudly the day before. That’s about it.”

“The husband...does he have an alibi?”

Jake shook his head. "He was in their room alone at the time of the murder. He did seem upset when we first informed him of his wife's death, but when I went back to question him later, he was in the casino drinking and didn't seem upset at all. He *did* say they were having troubles, but to tell you the truth he was so drunk it was hard to get anything concrete out of him. I have a note to go back and question him again."

"What about Lexy Baker, the one who found the body? Saunders was strangled with her apron. Do you think she is involved?" Nik remembered the call she had put into Jack Perillo to check up on Baker. She pulled out her cell phone. No messages. *Same old Jack, gets so involved in his cases he forgets to look at his messages.*

"I'm not sure about her," Jake said. "She doesn't have much of a motive, even though the evidence points to her. Someone could be trying to frame her, or it could be co-incidence. Murder is pretty serious; most people don't kill someone over losing a contest...unless they have another reason."

Nik glanced at her watch. "We need to get more answers before the trail gets cold. It's too bad the contestants aren't more forthcoming with their information."

"They don't want to do anything to get the contest shut down. Maybe we should threaten them with pulling the plug on the whole thing unless they start coming forward with what they know," Jake offered.

Nik screwed up one side of her face while she thought about it. It might work, but then again, it could also backfire on them. What they needed was a way to get them to open up...to gain some sort of an "in" with the bakers.

A sudden inspiration hit. She snapped her fingers. "I've got it!"

Jake raised his eyebrows for her to continue.

"The bakers won't talk to *us*, but they will talk to *each other*, especially Lexy Baker. What if we could get close to her and let her do the work for us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Make friends with her, maybe feed her some information. Let her get the dirt from the other bakers. I've seen her snooping around - if she's not the killer, then she might be able to lead us to whoever is."

Jake chewed the end of his pencil. "That might work, but how do we get chummy with her?"

Nik looked down at Jake. His straight white teeth worked the end of his pencil. His baby-blue eyes stared up at her from his handsome, finely chiseled face. A face that exuded honesty and trust but that was dotted with just enough stubble to give him a roguish air. *What woman could resist a face like that?*

"Not we, Detective Ryan - *you*."

Chapter Five

Lexy leaned back against the pillows, stretching her legs out on the bed. Her hand absently patted the spot beside her where her dog, Sprinkles, would be lying if she were at home.

She missed Sprinkles. The little white poodle mix was a big part of her life but Lexy couldn't bring her to Vegas so she had left the dog with Jack.

Jack!

She cringed, realizing he'd probably heard about the murder by now. She'd have to call him and downplay her role in it.

"...out anything interesting?" Nans' question interrupted her thoughts.

"What?" She looked over at the older woman sitting at the round table in their hotel room. Her iPad sat in front of her with the crossword puzzle and pencil next to it.

The room was a decent size with two queen beds. Lexy lay on the one nearest the table. She could see into the adjoining room through the open door. She and Cassie had rented two rooms so the three of them would have lots of space. In the next room, she could hear Cassie making showering noises which reminded her that she needed to hit the shower herself to wash off the days accumulation of flour and sugar.

"I asked if you had found out anything more downstairs - you were going to talk to the other bakers." Nans raised her eyebrows at Lexy.

"Oh, right. Actually I found out something very interesting. I talked to Aurea's roommate - she said Aurea wasn't in the room at the time Judge Saunders was murdered."

Nans' eyes went wide. "That *is* interesting. Would she have a motive to kill Saunders?"

"Her good friend Grace Harvey is one of the replacement judges. If Grace takes Saunders's spot, she might judge Aurea's work more favorably and give her a better chance of winning. There's a lot of money at stake."

Nans tapped her lips with her pencil. "Murdering someone is a pretty drastic move to win a contest, even if the prize is \$100,000 and a magazine spread. I think the killer must have had a more pressing motive."

Nans' iPad erupted in a sequence of beeps and rings making Lexy jump. "What's that?"

"Oh, its FaceTime." Nans looked down at the tablet. "Ida's calling." She slid something on the screen, then peered down into it.

Ida's voice blared out of the tiny tablet. "Good evening Mona. How are things in Vegas?"

Lexy sat up on the bed leaning forward so she could see the iPad. The wide screen was filled with a closeup of her grandmother's friend and fellow amateur detective. The angle gave her face a somewhat distorted appearance magnifying her many wrinkles. Lexy stifled a giggle.

"Who's that?"

"Lexy is here. Say hi." Nans held the iPad up toward Lexy.

"Hi, Ida." Lexy waved.

"I hear you have another murder on your hands," Ida said.

Lexy nodded. She could see the sparkle of excitement in Ida's eyes on the screen.

Ida, Nans and two of their friends delighted in solving murders and mysteries. They even had a name for themselves: the Ladies Detective Club.

The four of them lived in the Brooke Ridge Retirement Center and spent their days gathering clues and solving cases. The funny thing was, they rarely even left the complex because most of their detecting was done on their iPads. They'd been instrumental in helping Lexy solve a couple of murders she had inadvertently gotten involved in and even helped out the police department on a few cases.

Some women took up knitting in their golden years; the Ladies Detective Club liked to find killers and solve mysteries.

"Ruth found something interesting about your suspect...Aurea Pearce, was it?" Ida continued.

"Yes. Put her on." Nans put the tablet back on the table.

Lexy heard a shuffling sound coming from the device. She saw the screen blur then fill with Ruth's face.

"Hi Mona and Lexy," she said. Without waiting for a return greeting, she got right down to business. "I did a background check on Aurea Pearce. It seems she has some money troubles."

"Oh, really?" Nans exchanged an eyebrow-raised look with Lexy.

"She's maxed out on credit cards to the tune of \$40,000 and is behind on house payments." The older woman leaned in closer, whispering into the iPad. "My sources tell me she has a gambling problem and may have taken out some unconventional loans."

"Excellent. Good work," Nans said.

"A gambling problem? Well she's come to the right place," Lexy said sarcastically, thinking that Las Vegas was the last place a person with a gambling problem should be.

Nans laughed. "Ain't that the truth. But if she's taken out unconventional loans, she might be getting pressure to pay them back quickly. Having a big win at the tables might save her from an undesirable fate."

"Or stacking the deck in the bakery contest to ensure she wins the \$100,000 grand prize," Lexy pointed out.

"True," Nans said. "We have other suspects to look into, though."

"Helen is busy checking out the husband and looking into Judge Saunders's background. I'll call you back once we have something." Ruth said.

"OK, I'll fill you in on what we've found here then too. Bye." Nans pressed a button and the screen went blank.

She turned to Lexy, a gleam of satisfaction in her eyes. "Well, I'd say we just found a more pressing reason for Aurea Pearce to want to tip the scales in favor of her winning the contest. Maybe even one that would justify murder."

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"Where are you off to tonight?" Lexy eyed her friend who was dressed in black leather pants, black leather ankle boots and a black T-shirt. Her pink tipped hair spiked up on top of her head like a bird's plume.

"Poker tables," Cassie said, poking an earring into her ear to keep the five already there company. "You?"

“I’m going to play the slots. It will be nice to take a break from baking, but I’m not staying out late. I still have some finishing touches to put on those wedding cakes before the judging tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yep, I’ll be back early too. See you later then?”

Lexy nodded, watching Cassie shrug on a leather vest, then head out the door.

Assessing herself in the mirror she decided her faded jeans, pink tank top, and pink-striped platforms were perfect for a relaxing evening at the slot machines. Her hair was still a little wet from her shower, so she piled it on top of her head in a messy swirl.

She applied a few swipes of makeup, then followed Cassie out the door.

The elevator dumped her off in the casino. Scanning the room for a good place to lose her money, she spied a bank of progressive slot machines in the corner. She started off toward them but was stopped by a vibration in her back pocket. Her cell phone.

It was Jack. Her stomach clenched. Depending on what Jack had heard about the murder, the call might not go so well.

“Hi!” She answered with forced enthusiasm.

“Hey, how’s it going out there?”

He didn’t sound mad. So far so good.

“Great. I’m in second place,” she said proudly.

“That’s awesome. I’m so proud of you!”

Lexy felt her heart soar. *He was proud of her!*

“I got a message from a detective I know out there. Nikki Stone. Would you know what that’s about?”

Her momentary happiness at his praise turned into dread, causing her soaring heart to sink like a stone.

“There was a little murder here…” She let her voice trail off, waiting for his response.

“A little murder?”

“One of the judges.”

“Let me guess, *you* are somehow involved in the murder.”

Lexy could hear impatience creeping into his voice.

“I found the body,” she squeaked.

She heard him sigh on the other end. “Are you in trouble? Do I need to call Nikki right away?”

Lexy felt her heart clench upon hearing how easily the red headed detective’s name rolled off his tongue. *Nikki*. She wondered what *kind* of relationship they had once had.

“No,” she answered quickly. Calling Nik Stone was the last thing she wanted him to do. “Everything is all straightened out. I don’t think Detective Stone needs to talk to you anymore.”

“Oh, OK. Well what happened?”

“One of the judges was murdered. I just happened to find the body. I guess *someone* has to be the one to find them.” She tried to make it sound like no big deal, then changed the subject. “How is Sprinkles?”

“Sprinkles is fine. We’re having a great time, but we both miss you. Maybe I can get

some time off work and come out there?”

Lexy felt a jolt of panic. She wanted to see Jack, but now wasn't a good time. He had been very clear during the last investigation that he took a dim view of her playing amateur detective.

She thought he was being a bit unfair. It's not like she went out looking for trouble. She just happened to get thrown into these situations that forced her to investigate. She was like a murder magnet.

Still, the last thing she needed was for him to come out and discover she was smack-dab in the middle of tracking down a killer. Or to get involved in it himself with Detective *Nikki Stone*.

“I miss you too. That would be great, but the contest schedule is really packed up until the end. I'm afraid I wouldn't have much time for you.” She held her breath, waiting to see if he took the bait.

“Oh. I see. Well, it's probably just as well. I'm working on a big case here.” Lexy felt her heart clench at the sound of disappointment in his voice.

“I'll be home in four days anyway; we can catch up on everything then. I can't wait to see you.” She hoped he heard the sincerity in her voice.

“OK, sounds good. I'll talk to you later then,” he said, then added, “So you're sure I don't have to call Nikki then?”

“Oh, I'm sure.”

They hung up, and Lexy shoved the phone back into her pocket. Guilt washed over her. She tried to convince herself the little white lie was for the best. The contest schedule *was* pretty busy. And she was sure the killer would be caught soon and she would be cleared. Once it was over, she could return to her normally blissful life with Jack and Sprinkles in Brooke Ridge Falls.

Unless the police didn't catch the real killer by the time the contest was over.

She thought about how Aurea's trouble with money gave her a good motive, but she wasn't one hundred percent convinced Aurea was the killer. She knew from the last murder case she had been involved in that sometimes things are not what they seem. She needed to rule out some of the other suspects before she could be confident that Aurea was the culprit.

She continued toward the slot machines passing the same bar where she had seen Amanda Scott-Saunders's husband earlier. She glanced into the bar, wondering if she should pop in for a little drink. *He was in there again!*

Recognizing a perfect opportunity to do some more investigative gathering, Lexy pivoted on her heels, changing her course to head straight for the bar.