

BROWNIES BODIES & BAD GUYS



LEIGHANN
DOBBS

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Brownies, Bodies and Bad Guys

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Chapter One

Lexy sat at one of the cafe tables next to the picture window in her bakery, *The Cup and Cake*, admiring how the princess cut center stone of her engagement ring sparkled in the midmorning sunlight. She sighed with contentment, holding her hand up and turning the ring this way and that as she marveled at the rainbow of colors that emerged when it caught the light at different angles.

Her thoughts drifted to her fiancé, Jack Perillo. Tall, hunky and handsome, her heart still skipped a beat when he walked in the room even though they'd been dating for over a year. Lexy had met Jack, a police detective in their small town, when she'd been accused of poisoning her ex-boyfriend. She'd been proven innocent, of course, and she and Jack had been seeing each other ever since. And now they were getting married.

Movement on the other side of the street caught her attention, pulling her away from her thoughts. Her eyes widened in surprise—it was Jack! *What was he doing here?*

Lexy felt a zing in her stomach. Jack wasn't alone. Lexy's eyes narrowed as she craned her neck to get a better look. He was with a woman. A tall, leggy blonde who was clinging to him like tissue paper. She clings to panty hose.

Lexy stood up pressing closer to the window, her joy in the ring all but forgotten. Her heart constricted when she saw how the leggy blonde was pawing at Jack, giggling up into his face. *Who the hell was she?* They looked very familiar with each other. Clearly Jack knew her ... and it seemed he knew her well.

Jack and the blonde started to walk down the street, out of view. Lexy pushed herself away from the window, stumbling over a chair in her haste to get to the doorway. She spun around, righting the chair, then turned, sprinting toward the door.

She reached out for the handle, jerking back in surprise as the door came racing toward her, almost smacking her in the face.

Standing in the doorway was her grandmother, Mona Baker, or Nans as Lexy called her. But instead of her usual cheery appearance, Nans looked distraught. Lexy could see lines of anxiety creasing her face and her normally sparkly green eyes were dark with worry.

Lexy's stomach sank. "Nans, what's the matter?"

"Lexy, come quick," Nans said, putting her hand on Lexy's elbow and dragging her out the door. "Ruth's been arrested!"

###

"Arrested? For what?" Lexy asked, as Nans propelled her down the street toward her car.

"Nunzio Bartolli was found dead. They think Ruth might have something to do with it!"

Lexy wrinkled her brow. Ruth was one of Nans's best friends. They both lived at the retirement center in town and along with two of their other friends, Ida and Helen, they amused themselves by playing amateur detective solving various crimes and mysteries. The older women were full of spunk and could be a handful, but Lexy had a hard time believing any of them would be involved in a murder. They thrived on *solving* murders, not *committing* them.

"What? How would Ruth even know him?" Lexy opened the door to her VW beetle and slipped into the driver's seat as Nans buckled up in the passenger seat.

"Nunzio was a resident at the Brook Ridge Retirement Center."

Lexy raised her brows. "He was? I heard he had ties to organized crime."

~~"Well, I don't know about that. He seemed like a nice man."~~ Nans shrugged, then waved her hand. "Now let's get a move on!"

Lexy pulled out into the street, glancing over at the area where she had seen Jack. She slowed down as she drove by, craning her neck to look down the side street where she thought they had gone, but they were nowhere to be seen.

"Can you speed it up? Ruth needs us." Nans fidgeted in the passenger seat.

"Right. Sorry." Lexy felt a pang of guilt. Of course, helping Ruth was more important than finding out what Jack was up to. It was probably nothing but her overactive imagination anyway. Lexy decided to push the leggy blonde from her mind and focus on Ruth.

"So what happened?"

"I'm not really sure. Ida said the police knocked on Ruth's door early this morning and took her in," Nans said, then turned sharply in her seat. "We should call Jack and see if he can help her. Why didn't I think of that before?"

Lexy's stomach clenched at the sound of her fiancé's name. She wasn't sure if she wanted to call Jack right now, especially with the image of him and the blonde fresh in her mind. *Should she confront him or let it slide?*

If it was innocent, which it probably was, she'd just make a fool out of herself by confronting him. It was probably a good idea to let some time pass before she talked to him. Lexy was afraid her impulsive nature might cause her to blurt something out she might regret later.

"Hopefully, he'll be at the station. I should call Cassie back at the bakery though, and tell her I've gone out for a while. She'll probably be wondering where I disappeared to." Lexy picked up her cell phone just as she pulled into the parking lot at the police station.

Nans jumped out of the car before she even had it in park. "I'll see you in there."

Lexy watched in amusement as the sprightly older woman sprinted into the station, her giant purse dangling from her arm. She felt sorry for any officer that might try to prevent her grandmother from seeing Ruth.

She made a quick call to Cassie, letting her know where she was and that she'd fill her in later. Then she made her way into the lobby behind Nans.

Nans was talking to Jack's partner, police detective John Darling, who nodded at Lexy as she joined them.

"Ruth isn't arrested!" Nans smiled at Lexy.

Lexy raised an eyebrow at John.

"We just had her in for questioning," John explained.

"Why?"

John rubbed his chin with his hand. "We found her fingerprints and some of her personal effects in Nunzio Bartolli's condo."

Nans gasped. "What? How would those get in there?"

John winked, pushing himself away from the wall he was leaning against. "You'll have to ask Ruth about that."

Lexy stared after him as he walked over to the reception desk, his long curly hair hung in a ponytail down his back which swung to the side as he leaned his tall frame over the counter to look at something on the computer. "Actually, she's free to go now. I'll bring her out here if you guys want."

"Please do," Nans said, then turned to Lexy. "Isn't that wonderful? I was so worried."

Lexy nodded as she watched John disappear through the door that led to the offices inside the station. John and her assistant Cassie had been married this past spring and she'd gotten to know him fairly well. She wondered if she should ask him if he knew anything about the blonde she had seen

Jack with but didn't want to seem like she was prying into Jack's business.

~~Lexy shook her head. She needed to stop thinking about the blonde. She trusted Jack. They were getting married, for crying out loud, and she didn't want to be one of those wives who kept her husband on a short leash. The best thing for her to do was to forget all about it.~~

The door opened and Ruth came out. Nans rushed over giving her a hug. Lexy felt her shoulders relax, relieved that Ruth wasn't in trouble.

"Oh, thanks for coming," Ruth said to Nans and Lexy.

"No problem," Lexy said. "Shall we go? I can drive you guys back to the retirement center, if you want."

"That would be wonderful," Nans said as the three of them made their way to the door. Lexy held open for the two older women, then followed them out into the summer sunshine.

Ruth breathed in a deep breath of fresh air. "It's good to be outside. For a while there I was a little worried I might be spending my golden years in a cell."

"Why would you think that? Surely you had nothing to do with Nunzio's murder?" Nans raised her eyebrows at Ruth as they walked to Lexy's car.

"Of course I didn't! But they did have some evidence that pointed to me," Ruth said, as she folded herself into Lexy's back seat.

"That's what John said." Lexy slipped into the driver's seat angling the rear view mirror so she could look at Ruth. "What was that all about?"

Lexy saw Ruth's cheeks turn slightly red.

Nans turned in her seat so she could look at Ruth, too. "John said they found your fingerprints and personal effects in Nunzio's condo. How is that possible?"

Ruth turned an even darker shade of red and looked down at her lap, pretending to adjust her seatbelt. "I was in his condo."

"What?" Nans and Lexy said at the same time.

Ruth looked up. Her eyes met Lexy's in the mirror then slid over to look at Nans. "I was seeing Nunzio. Actually, I went there quite regularly. So, naturally, my fingerprints were all over his condo. I was there last night and I must have left a pair of earrings there that the police were somehow able to trace to me."

Nans gasped. "You were there last night? The night he was murdered?"

Ruth nodded. "Yes, I was. But don't worry. I assure you Nunzio was *very* much alive when I left."

Chapter Two

“Why would someone want to kill Nunzio?” Helen slid the cut crystal creamer and sugar bowl over toward Ruth.

Lexy sat at Nans’s dining room table, across from Ruth, sipping a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Ida and Helen had been waiting for them in the Lobby when Lexy brought Nans and Ruth back. Now the five of them sat in Nans’s condo discussing the morning’s events.

“I have no idea,” Ruth answered. Lexy’s heart clenched when she noticed the other woman’s eyes misting over.

Nans must have noticed, too, because she grabbed a box of tissues from the living room and placed them on the table in front of Ruth. “You must be very upset, to have lost your ... friend. I had no idea you and Nunzio were so close.”

Ruth grabbed a tissue and blew her nose, then shrugged. “Well, you know how it is at our age. We realize none of us are going to be around for a long time. But to be murdered like that ...” She shuddered, looking up at Ida and Helen. “What happened to him?”

“He was shot. Apparently they used a silencer so no one heard; although most of the people around here are hard of hearing anyway. He was asleep in bed so he probably didn’t feel a thing.” Ida put a hand gently on Ruth’s shoulder.

“One thing is strange, though,” Helen said. “His condo was ransacked, as if the killer was looking for something.”

Lexy saw Nans’s eyebrows shoot up. “Ransacked? I wonder what they could have been after ... and if they found it.”

Lexy started to hear warning bells go off inside her head. She could tell when Nans got a bug in her ear about investigating a murder, and it appeared this was shaping up to be one of those times.

“Nans, you’re not thinking about looking into this yourself, are you?”

Nans shrugged, but Lexy recognized the bright sparkle in her eye.

“I don’t think you should go messing around with this. I heard he had ties to organized crime. This could be related, and that would be very dangerous.”

Unfortunately, Lexy’s words of warning seemed to pique Nans’s interest even more.

“That’s right, it could ... I wonder if the mob had him rubbed out?” Nans grabbed her giant old lady purse and started rummaging around inside it. After a few seconds she pulled out an iPad, placing it on the table in front of her.

“What are you doing?” Ruth asked.

“Just looking up some stuff on mob activity.”

“You can find that stuff online?” Lexy looked at Nans with wide eyes.

“If you know what to look for.” Nans winked at Lexy.

“Well, the man was eighty-five years old,” Ida said. “I highly doubt he was active anymore, *if* he was ever in organized crime in the first place.”

“Was he?” Nans raised her eyebrows at Ruth.

Ruth waved her hands. “Oh, I don’t know. He didn’t tell me everything he did, you know.”

“Well, can you think of anyone else who would kill him and then toss his condo?” Nans asked, looking back down at the iPad screen.

“Not really. Everyone seemed to like him. It’s such a shame. His whole family is in town for a big family reunion to celebrate his eighty-fifth birthday this week.”

Nans jerked her head in Ruth’s direction. “His whole family? Did everyone get along with him? Did he have a will?”

Ruth looked taken aback. "I don't really know. I wasn't privy to that sort of information," She said primly.

Nans looked up at the ceiling and Lexy could practically see the wheels spinning in her head. Lexy knew she was making a mental list of suspects as well as a list of possible motives. Now would be a good time for her to leave before she got roped into helping with an investigation.

Lexy went over to the sink and washed out her cup. "I need to get back to *The Cup and Cake*. I left poor Cassie to man the fort alone all morning," she said, making a big show of looking at her watch.

"Oh, wait dear. I was just going to make a list of possible motives ... don't you want to help?" Nans asked.

Lexy squinted at the four older women. "Do you guys really want to get involved in something like this? I mean, if there really is an organized crime connection, then this is nothing to screw around with."

"Lexy might be right," Helen said. "We could end up at the bottom of Brook Ridge falls wearing cement shoes."

Ida looked down at her feet. "Cement shoes? That really wouldn't go with my outfit," she said, causing the four older women to collapse in a fit of laughter.

"Come Lexy, now you sound like Jack. You're not going to turn into a stick in the mud now that you're getting married to him, are you?" asked Nans.

Lexy bristled at the comment. "No ... I just don't want you to put yourselves in danger. Can't you investigate something less dangerous, like who put bubble bath in the fountain downtown?"

Jeez, she really did sound like Jack, she thought, as she heard the words coming out of her mouth.

"Pfft ... that's kid's stuff. Not exciting enough for us."

Lexy sighed. "Well, I really do have to go. I can't tell you guys what to do, but I'm not sure I want to get involved in anything that has to do with Nunzio Bartolli."

"Okay. Well thanks for the ride," Nans said, as Lexy made her way toward the door.

"And for springing me out of jail," Ruth added.

Lexy turned at the door and nodded to the women. "You're welcome. Now try to stay out of trouble." She opened the door slipping out into the hall.

"We'll keep you posted." Lexy heard Helen yell as she closed the door.

Lexy felt her shoulders tense as she hurried down the hall toward the parking lot. She didn't have time to get involved in an investigation right now. She had a wedding to plan and a bakery to run.

Plus, Jack wouldn't be too keen on the idea of her investigating a murder with Nans. He never wanted to get involved in anything that has to do with Nunzio Bartolli's death and this time she feared he might be justified—messing around in Nunzio Bartolli's death could prove to be very dangerous.

Chapter Three

“Ruth was sleeping with a mobster?” Cassie held an éclair in the air halfway to her mouth as she stared at Lexy, wide eyed.

“No ... I mean, I don’t know. She was apparently involved with this guy and the rumor is he has ties to organized crime. I don’t know if that’s true or not.”

“Oh. Well it sounds like something fishy is going on.” Cassie bit into the éclair, making nummy noises that caused Lexy’s stomach to growl. In all the excitement, she’d forgotten to eat lunch. Lexy eyed the brownies in the bakery case, then reached in and grabbed one for herself.

Goopy chocolate covered her taste buds as she bit into the confection. The brownie was so fudgy that she didn’t even have to chew it. She closed her eyes and swirled it around in her mouth, enjoying the rich, dark chocolate taste as well as the instant sugar rush.

It was mid-afternoon and Lexy realized she probably should eat a proper lunch, but she was having an early dinner with Jack and didn’t want to fill up. The brownie was just about perfect, she thought, as she shoved the rest of it into her mouth.

Thinking about dinner with Jack reminded her about the blonde she had seen him with earlier. She had tried not to think about it all day, but it kept nagging at her.

Lexy eyed Cassie tentatively. Cassie was married to Jack’s partner, who was also his best friend. There was a reasonable explanation for the blonde, Cassie probably knew about it. More than likely it was something so innocent that Cassie didn’t even think to mention it. Lexy was just about to ask when the bell over the door chimed, signaling the arrival of a customer.

Looking over at the door, Lexy saw Brant Millet from the bookstore approaching the pastry case. Brant was tall with a long neck and gangly arms and legs. He reminded Lexy of a giraffe. She suppressed a giggle, picturing a spotted giraffe face on top of his long neck. He studied the case, his chin resting in between his thumb and forefinger.

“What can I get you today, Brant?” Lexy asked.

Brant squinted into the case then pointed at the lemon squares. “I’ll take two.”

Lexy boxed the squares up and handed Brant the box while Cassie rang up the purchase.

Lexy was considering how to phrase her question about the blonde to Cassie when the bell announced another customer. Another regular, this time a woman Lexy knew only as Susan, who came in three or four times a week. She slunk over to the case, her sleek black hair cascading over her shoulders as she leaned over to examine the pastry. She too, reminded Lexy of an animal ... a black jaguar.

Susan picked out a variety of cupcakes which Lexy boxed up, then rang up the purchase.

Lexy was still thinking about the blonde in the back of her mind, but before she could ask Cassie, the door opened again and two men Lexy had never seen came in looking out of place in dark suits. One was gigantic, tall and wide ... he reminded Lexy of a gorilla. The other very thin, with a long neck and small head, made Lexy think of an ostrich. They ordered a dozen brownies which Cassie boxed up and gave to Lexy to ring up.

The next two hours were filled with a steady stream of customers who cleaned out most of Lexy’s inventory while the two girls took turns serving them and ringing up their purchases.

Finally, the rush was over. Lexy glanced up at the clock ... she had just enough time to close up the shop, rush home and get ready for her dinner date with Jack.

Lexy went over to the door and flipped the sign to the “Closed” position while Cassie started cleaning off the cafe tables. Now was the perfect time to ask about the blonde.

“Hey, Cass ... I was wondering if you knew anything about a blonde woman that Jack might

know.” Lexy feigned disinterest, pretending she was engrossed in cleaning the top of the pastry case, while her heart thumped in her chest waiting for Cassie’s answer.

“Uhh ... you don’t know?”

Lexy looked up, narrowing her eyes at Cassie. “Know what?”

Cassie stood there staring at Lexy, the wide-eyed, nervous look on her face made Lexy’s heart drop.

“Cassie, what is it?” Lexy felt a jolt of panic. *What could be so bad that Cassie didn’t want to tell her?*

“That woman you saw with Jack? She’s his ex-girlfriend.”

Chapter Four

“Should I wear the black dress, or the lavender top and black pants?” Lexy stood in front of the mirror, holding the two outfits on hangers in front of her.

Sprinkles, her white poodle and Shih-tzu mix sat on the bed watching her intently.

Lexy choose the lavender top and slipped it over her head, then wriggled into the tight black jeans. Turning back to the mirror, she angled herself left and right to inspect the outfit from all angles. The top hung just below the waist, accentuating her slim hips, small shoulders, and generous breasts. The pants were just tight enough to show off her assets, but not so tight that she couldn't breathe. She had to admit, she looked pretty darn good.

Staring at her face, she inspected her makeup for smudges. The small amount of dark brown eyeliner and mascara accentuated her green eyes and the teeny bit of blush highlighted her high cheekbones. A swipe of raspberry lip gloss and she was good to go.

“Not too bad, huh, Sprinkles,” she said to the dog.

“Woof.” Sprinkles wagged her tail.

“I just hope it's enough to make him forget that blonde.” She turned back to the mirror, eyeing her brown hair that fell just below the shoulders. Her gaze traveled down her body to her legs which appeared short and stubby compared to the other woman's.

“I know just the thing!”

Lexy opened the door to her walk in closet and headed straight for the shoe rack. She had a weakness for designer shoes and had amassed quite a collection over the years. Her closet was outfitted with special shoe boxes arranged by color. She went to the black section picking out a pair of 6” high Jimmy Choo strappy black suede stilettos. They were sexy and elegant at the same time. She didn't wear them often—they had cost her almost nine hundred dollars—but were worth wearing tonight if it helped her compete with the blonde ex-girlfriend with mile long legs.

Lexy did a mental head shake. She wasn't in competition with anyone. She was way better than some blonde ex-girlfriend. That's why *she* was Jack's fiancée and the other woman was his *ex*.

But, it made Lexy wonder, why hadn't Jack mentioned the other woman to her? Maybe he hadn't had a chance, or maybe it just wasn't a big deal to Jack and he didn't even think it was worth mentioning ... or maybe he was hiding something from Lexy.

Lexy pushed the thought out of her head. That was ridiculous. She trusted Jack. Her imagination was just making a big deal out of nothing.

She grabbed her purse and ran downstairs, Sprinkles hot on her heels. In the kitchen, she peeked out the window at Jack's house which was on the street behind hers. Their backyards abutted each other and she could see his driveway was empty. He was probably on the way over to pick her up.

Lexy threw Sprinkles a treat and dashed out the front door. She was sure Jack would fill her in on the blonde at dinner, but even if he didn't she was determined not to act all clingy and mistrusting. The last thing she wanted was for Jack to know that she was jealous of one of his old girlfriends—if Jack didn't mention the woman at dinner, then neither would she.

###

Lexy took the top of the bun off her burger, piled onion rings on top of the patty, smothered it in ketchup and dropped the bun back on top. Lifting it she opened her mouth as wide as she could to

accommodate the giant sandwich.

Ketchup squirted out the side and dripped down her hands. She wiped it off as she chewed, savoring the delicious combination of sweet onion rings, salty ketchup and charbroiled meat.

Across from her, Jack was creating his own mess by digging into a plate of ribs. He smiled up at Lexy and she felt her stomach flip. Jack had a great smile. Lexy tried not to think about him bestowing that same smile on his blonde ex.

“I guess you must have heard about Ruth,” Lexy said taking a sip of her beer.

“Yeah, who knew she had such an active social life?” Jack looked up from his ribs and winked at Lexy, causing her to blush.

“I heard Nunzio was involved in organized crime. Is that true?”

“I don’t know. The way he was killed and the way his place was ransacked didn’t look very professional to me. He might have been involved with organized crime once, but I don’t think his death had anything to do with it.”

Jack put his ribs down and used his tongue to pick rib meat out of his teeth. Lexy watched him thinking he was probably the only man alive who could look sexy doing that.

“So, do you have any suspects? I mean, why would someone kill him like that? I don’t like the idea of Nans living in a place where people get shot in their sleep.”

Jack shrugged. “Right now we’re looking into the family. That’s usually the best place to start.”

“Really? Why would someone in his family want to kill him? And what would they be looking for in his condo?”

Jack put down his utensils, his honey brown eyes drilling into Lexy’s. “I hope you and Mona aren’t thinking about investigating this one.”

Lexy felt a tingle of annoyance. Jack had an aversion to her investigating murders. She knew it was only because he wanted her to be safe, but it still got her hackles up when he tried to tell her what to do.

Lexy looked down at her burger, removing the top of the bun and cutting into it with a knife and fork. “Don’t worry. I have no intention of getting into that. I don’t have the time. I even tried to talk Nans out of it, but you know how she is.”

Lexy balanced a bit of bun, onion ring, pickle, and cheese covered burger on her fork and carefully lifted it to her mouth. She’d learned through many dinners here, at *The Burger Barn*, that the giant burgers were much easier to eat with a fork, then trying to shove them in your mouth ... even though she still tried the shove-in-your-mouth method every time.

“Yes, I know how your grandmother is—stubborn! Seems to run in the family,” Jack teased.

Lexy bristled at the comment even though she knew Jack was teasing. So what if they were stubborn?

Nans and the *Ladies Detective Club*, as the four of them called themselves, had worked on many cases with the police department and had played a critical role in solving several of them. Jack should be thankful for Nans’s stubbornness.

She sighed, swirling a piece of onion ring in a puddle of ketchup. She was overreacting. Jack and Nans were old friends, he was practically like a grandson to her and she knew he was very fond of the older woman. This whole thing with the ex-girlfriend must have her out of sorts. Speaking of which ... Lexy was starting to wonder why Jack hadn’t mentioned anything about her.

“So ... anything else new going on?” Lexy asked.

Jack narrowed his eyes at her. “New? No, what do you mean?”

“Nothing,” Lexy pasted an innocent look on her face, “Just asking if there’s anything new.”

Jack looked at her sideways. “Lexy, is there something wrong?”

“No.” Lexy played with the food on her plate while Jack dug into his ribs as if nothing was amiss.

She noticed her engagement ring glinting off the lighting. *Was the ring less sparkly now?*

She took a deep breath. ~~She was acting just the way she had promised herself she *wouldn't* act.~~ And she was being ridiculous. She looked around the room. The old barn had a rustic decor, with antique signs and farm memorabilia. A family restaurant, it had comfortable seating and lighting that wasn't too dim or too bright. She and Jack's first date had been here and they'd had many fun dinners here since. She didn't want to ruin that by acting stupid.

She pushed her plate away just as Jack finished cleaning his off. He looked up at her, and for a moment her stomach clenched when she saw concern in his eyes. He was probably wondering why she was acting so strange.

Lexy smiled at him. "Wanna split dessert?"

Jack smiled back, signaling the waitress. "Absolutely."

The Burger Barn had super-sized pieces of cake, and it was a tradition for them to split one at every meal. Jack ordered the double chocolate and asked for two plates and forks.

They sipped coffees and ate the dessert, fighting and laughing over who would get the edge pieces with the most frosting. Just like old times; as if there was no ex-girlfriend waiting in the wings.

When they were done, Jack paid the bill and drove her home. He walked her to the door. Lexy felt unusually awkward as they stood in front of it. She wanted to invite him in, but the image of the blonde draped over him made her hesitate.

Lexy pretended to search in her purse for her keys as she felt the tension grow in the air between them. Jack put his hand on her arm and turned her toward him. Placing his thumb under her chin, he tilted her head up, forcing her to look into his deep golden-brown eyes.

"Are you sure nothing is wrong?" Jack's furrowed brow and concerned eyes made Lexy feel guilty for suspecting something was going on between him and his ex.

Her shoulders relaxed and she smiled. "No. Sorry. It was just a stressful day with Ruth getting pulled in to the police station and all."

Jack nodded. The concerned look in his eye turned to something else as his finger gently traced a line down her neck, past the hollow in her throat and down her cleavage, causing Lexy's heartbeat to kick into overdrive and tingles to race up her spine.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Lexy thought about it. The look in Jack's eye wasn't that of a man who was cheating. If he was, Lexy figured he'd probably want to high tail it out of there, but the glint in his eye told her he intended to stay ... for a long time.

Lexy raised her eyebrow, a smile tugging at her lips. She made a big show of looking at her watch.

"Well, I would, but I do have to get to bed early. I'm bringing day old pastries over to Nans's tomorrow at the crack of dawn," she teased.

Jack's lips formed a smile of their own. He wiggled his eyebrows up and down at her.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "I'll personally see to it that you get to bed very, very early."

Chapter Five

Lexy put the pastry box that held an assortment of day old pastries from her bakery on Nans's dining room table and opened the lid. Nans, Ida, Ruth and Helen peered into the box.

"Oh, what a lovely assortment," Ida said, choosing a pecan roll.

"You brought my favorite! Pistachio biscotti." Helen gingerly removed one of the crunchy biscuits from the box and put it on her napkin.

"You know I love eclairs. How can I resist?" Ruth bit into the chocolaty confection with gusto.

"Really, Lexy, this is too much," Nans said, picking a cheese Danish out of the box. "All this fatty food will harden our arteries."

Lexy noticed the threat of hardened arteries didn't stop any of them from taking a bite of their pastry as she picked a cream cheese brownie out of the box for herself.

"I've found some exciting information on Nunzio." Nans pushed her Danish aside and pulled the iPad she had sitting on the table in front of her. She tapped a few keys then turned the screen to face the rest of them.

"Look at these newspaper articles. He was arrested quite a few times on various charges but they never stuck. Of course, that was decades ago. But still, I think it proves there could be an organized crime angle to the case."

"All the more reason to stay away from it," Lexy mumbled around a mouthful of brownie.

"Oh. No, dear. That's what makes it exciting!" Nans's eyes sparkled, "Right girls?"

Ruth, Ida and Helen all nodded.

Lexy rolled her eyes. Apparently Nans wasn't going to back off on this one, no matter how dangerous it might be.

"But why would the Mob take him out now? He hasn't been active in that business in a long time," Ruth said.

"Yeah, you'd think they would have had him rubbed out long ago if he was a threat, not wait until he was in his last years," Helen added, with an apologetic look toward Ruth.

"Well, that's just one of my theories," Nans said. "The other one, of course, is his family."

"Right, one should always look to the family first," Ida said. "That's what they do on TV and in the movies."

"Why would his family want to kill him?" Lexy furrowed her brow at Nans.

"Money? Hatred? Revenge?" Nans offered. "You know, all the usual reasons."

"Was there any tension in the family?" Helen asked Ruth. "Did anyone hate him?"

"I don't think so. He never mentioned it. Although he did say some of his relatives didn't live up to his expectations. And he was very disappointed in a few of them." Ruth's brow creased. "Seems to me there were a couple that were always looking for money."

"Aha! That could be a reason for killing him *and* searching his condo!" Ida said.

"I suppose, but that seems rather drastic—especially during a big family reunion week," Ruth said.

"We need to talk to the family. Feel them out. Try to figure out if anyone would have killed him," Helen said.

"Maybe we should have a little memorial here for Nunzio and invite them!" Nans's eyes lit up and she clapped her hands together.

"That's a great idea!" Ida said. "Lexy could cater it."

Lexy's stomach felt queasy. "Oh no," she said holding up her hands, "I don't want anything to do with this."

"Lexy we wouldn't dream of having anyone but you cater it," Nans said. "Think of how good it

will be for business.”

Lexy wrinkled her brow. ~~She was always looking for ways to get new customers. But ending up on~~ the radar of the person who killed Nunzio Bartolli didn't seem like a good way to go about it. On the other hand, she found it almost impossible to say no to Nans.

“I'll think about it.”

“Great!” Nans beamed at Lexy.

“We also shouldn't forget about considering the organized crime angle,” Ida said.

“Yes, we should put out some feelers to our informants and see if anyone suspicious has come to town in the past few days,” Nans added.

They had informants? Lexy narrowed her eyes at Nans. She was about to ask what kinds of informants they had when a police siren outside the window caught her attention.

“What's that?” Ida said getting up to look outside. “Looks like someone's car got broken into.”

Everyone rushed to the window. Below, Lexy could see a late model black Lincoln Continental sitting in the parking lot with the front door open. A police cruiser was parked at an angle to it.

A tall, round woman with flashy jewelry and a flowing leopard print top over tight black Capri pants stood next to the car gesturing wildly with her arms. Lexy cast an admiring glance at her impossibly high platform shoes.

“What's she saying?” Helen asked.

Nans unlocked the window and pushed it open so they could hear what was going on.

“This is my father's car. Look at the window—it's been smashed! God only knows what's been taken. I want to know what you are going to do about this!” The woman yelled loudly, standing only inches from the police officer, her hands on her hips.

“Ma'am, please calm down.” The officer tried to steer the woman away from the car while the rest of the crew looked inside and performed various tasks that Lexy assumed entailed looking for fingerprints and evidence.

“Hey wait a minute.” Ruth pushed Ida and Nans aside so she could get a better look. “That's Nunzio's car!”

Ida narrowed her eyes, craning to see out the window over Ruth's head. “And apparently that must be his daughter.”

“This is wonderful news,” Nans said, rubbing her hands together.

“It is?” Lexy, Ruth, Ida and Helen all asked at once.

“Of course,” she replied. “This means that whoever killed Nunzio and searched his condo is still around. They didn't find what they wanted the first time so they looked in his car. Hopefully, they didn't find it in there either.”

“Why do you say that?” Lexy furrowed her brow, her stomach roiled knowing she wasn't going to like Nans's answer.

“Because that means they will keep looking and all we have to do to catch them is figure out where they are going to look next.”

Chapter Six

“Nans wants me to cater a memorial service for Nunzio Bartolli at the Retirement Center tomorrow.” Lexy straightened up from filling the pastry case in the front of *The Cup and Cake* and turned to face Cassie who was just coming out of the doorway to the kitchen with a tray of fresh, steaming turnovers.

“That sounds like a nice idea. You don’t want to do it?”

“Well, you know Nans. She’s only doing it so she can pump the relatives for information, to figure out who the killer is.”

“Cool! She can have them gathered in one place and then blurt out the name of the murderer like Columbo.”

Lexy narrowed her eyes picturing Nans, Ruth, Ida and Helen in beige trench coats with cigars. She noticed Cassie’s eyes light up a second before she heard the bell over the door and quickly turned to see who it was.

John Darling stood in the doorway. Of course, she could have guessed who it was judging by the look on Cassie’s face. But she never would have guessed he’d have a linebacker with him. At least, that’s what the guy standing beside him *looked* like.

He stood about six and a half feet tall and looked almost three feet wide. Lexy could tell from where she stood that he was solid muscle. His expensive looking dark blue suit must have been custom made—she didn’t think you could get tree-trunk sized arms like that on suits off the rack.

“Hi honey!” Cassie bubbled.

“Hi.” John smiled at Cassie, and then turned to Lexy. “Hi, Lexy.”

“Lexy?”

“What? Oh. Hi.” Lexy’s cheeks burned. She’d been too busy staring at the other guy to pay attention to John’s greeting.

“This is Braxton Daniels from the F.B.I. He’s in town working on a case with us.” John gestured to the giant beside him, then continued. “This is my wife Cassie, and this is Lexy.”

“Please call me Brax.” The linebacker stuck out a beefy, but well-manicured hand and Lexy watched hers disappear inside it. She looked up into his face. Square jaw, green eyes, smile like a toothpaste model.

She murmured a greeting, and her stomach did a flip when his gaze traveled from her eyes, to her mouth and down the rest of her body, then came to rest on her engagement ring. Right ... she was engaged. No harm in looking though. Lexy withdrew her hand and did her best to send out “not available” vibes.

“So, what kind of case are you working on?” Cassie asked.

“Organized crime. But nothing for you ladies to worry about.” Brax tore his gaze from Lexy and looked at Cassie.

“Organized crime? Does that have anything to do with Nunzio Bartolli?” Lexy’s radar immediately perked up.

Brax raised an eyebrow at her. “Why would you say that? Do you know something?”

“Well, no. It’s just that he was just murdered, and there were rumors about him being connected to organized crime, so ...” Lexy let her voice trail off.

“You made the connection,” Brax filled in for her, turning up the wattage on his smile. “So, I guess there’s more than just a pretty face under that apron.”

Lexy felt her cheeks grow warm and busied herself by taking the turnovers from Cassie and arranging them in the pastry case.

“So you think he was rubbed out by gangsters or something?” Cassie asked.

John and Brax both laughed.

“Well, it’s something we are looking in to,” John said, then lowered his voice even though no one else was in the bakery to overhear them. “His family isn’t above suspicion, either. We are looking at them very closely. In fact, Jack— ”

John stopped talking abruptly and Lexy jerked her head in his direction.

“Jack what?”

“I really shouldn’t say ... it’s part of the case ... he’s just keeping the family under surveillance. He’s going to be very busy with that.”

“Oh. Okay.” Lexy narrowed her eyes at John, her stomach sinking. It was more than *just* surveillance, she could tell. What was it that John had stopped himself from saying?

Brax cleared his throat and Lexy looked over at him.

“John tells me you have the best cinnamon buns in the area. I think I’ll take that one on top,” he said pointing to a gooey cinnamon bun that sat at the very top of the tray.

“I’ll take one, too,” John said as he walked over toward the self-serve coffee station by the window.

“How do you take your coffee?” He called back to Brax.

“Black.” Brax pulled his wallet out of the inside pocket of his jacket and paid for the order. Lexy put the pastries in a white bag which she handed across the counter to him. She noticed he made certain their fingers brushed as she handed off the bag. She pulled her hand back quickly afraid of the tingles that resulted from his touch.

“We gotta run,” John said, then looked at Cassie. “See you tonight.”

They walked toward the door. When they got there, Brax turned and looked back at them.

“Nice meeting you both,” he said, then aimed his gaze at Lexy, “I hope I’ll see you again soon.” Then he followed John out, shutting the door behind him.

“Wow. Did you get a look at him?” Cassie asked.

“Yeah. How could I miss him?”

Cassie sighed, “Boy, if I wasn’t married I’d be wanting to get to know him better.”

Lexy laughed. She had to admit Braxton Daniels was attractive. If she wasn’t engaged to Jack, she’d have been looking a lot closer herself. But in her rule book, engaged people didn’t look around on the side. Her mind conjured up images of Jack and his blonde ex-girlfriend across the street from the day before. She just hoped he was playing by the same rule book.

###

Lexy had her head and shoulders inside the bakery case, stacking a plate of cannoli that she and Cassie had just finished stuffing with rich ricotta cheese filling, when the door opened and Nans, Ruth, Ida and Helen marched into the bakery.

She smiled out at them from inside the case, finished her stacking, then unfolded herself from the awkward position and stood up.

“We thought we would come and pick out what we want to serve at the memorial. It’s all set for 2 P.M. tomorrow in the Sunset Room at the retirement center.” Nans stared into the case. Her keen eye scanned the pastries to see what would be most suitable for the occasion.

“How many do you think will attend?” Lexy asked. She could better gauge how many items to bring once she knew how many people would be there.

“Oh, I’d say about forty or fifty people, right Ruth?” Nans turned to look at Ruth who nodded solemnly.

“Then I suggest we do five trays loaded with cookies and bars. I can cut the bars into bite size pieces so people can sample several of them.”

“That sounds perfect. We’ll take some lemon squares, chocolate brownies, blonde brownies, hermits, chocolate chip cookies, oatmeal raisin, and snicker doodles,” Nans said, pointing to indicate each of her choices. “And we’ll have some samples to eat here with our coffees.”

Lexy cocked an eyebrow at her. “Of everything?”

Nans giggled. “No, just a couple of the brownies cut up will be fine.” The four women turned and settled themselves into a cafe table by the window while Lexy cut up the brownies which she brought to the table along with four ceramic coffee mugs.

“... he ever mention any place where he might keep something important?” Lexy heard Nans ask Ruth, as she put the brownies and mugs down in front of them.

Ruth scrunched up her face. “Not that I can recall. We didn’t talk about stuff like that?”

“What *did* you talk about?” Ida giggled and Ruth blushed.

“Do you all want coffee?” Lexy asked them.

“Oh, we can get our own. You don’t need to wait on us,” Helen said grabbing a mug and going over to the self-serve station.

Lexy grabbed a seat pulling it up to the table. She had been lucky to get this storefront in the old mill for her bakery. The floor to ceiling picture window was the perfect place to situate her cafe table since it had a spectacular view of the waterfall the town was named for. Looking out now, she marveled in the beauty of the water rushing over the falls and the river flanked by shrubs and trees in full bloom. It was no wonder her customers liked to linger at the tables.

“If you were the killer, where would you look?” Nans addressed the table from her spot in front of the coffee carafe.

The other four looked thoughtful. Ida picked a tea bag from the basket on the table and got up to put water in her mug.

Helen looked down at her already steaming coffee and shrugged. “Do you think he could have hidden it in one of the retirement center common areas?”

Ruth and Nans sat back down with steaming mugs of coffee. The smell of dark roast permeated Lexy’s nostrils and she got up to pour herself a cup.

Ruth tapped her index finger on her bottom lip thoughtfully. “You know it would be helpful if we knew how big the thing was.”

Nans nodded. “What could possibly be important enough for someone to murder Nunzio over?”

“Well, that’s easy,” Ida said bobbing her tea bag up and down in the water. “It’s either got to do with money, or he had something on someone.”

Lexy leaned against the self-serve station, the mug of coffee warming her hands. She really shouldn’t even be listening to this. She was afraid that if she listened, she would get sucked into investigating with them. Plus the less she knew, the easier it would be to convince Jack that she *wasn’t* investigating it.

Nans covered Ruth’s hand with her own. “Think hard. Are you sure Nunzio never mentioned anything he was hiding?”

Ruth pursed her lips together. “I don’t think so.”

“Or gave you something to hide for him?” Helen ventured.

Ruth shook her head. “No. I’d remember that.”

“Wait,” Ida said. “I’m sure he wouldn’t come right out and say that he was giving you some important thing to hide, especially one that was worth killing over. He might have hidden it at your

place when you weren't looking or given you something that you don't realize is important."

Ruth sipped her coffee while she thought about it. "Really, we weren't *that* close. Maybe he had another girlfriend he gave it to. The only thing he ever gave me was this locket."

Ruth grabbed a chain that hung from her neck and pulled out a giant heart-shaped locked she'd been wearing under her shirt.

The other woman looked at it and murmured about how pretty it was, even though Lexy thought it was a bit gaudy herself.

"What's inside it?" Ida asked.

"Inside?" Ruth furrowed her brow. "I never thought to look inside."

She wedged her thumbnail in between the two sides and the locket popped open revealing a small key.

"Oh, how cute ... the key to his heart," Ida said.

Nans leaned over the table to get a better look. "Cute my patootie," she said. "That key isn't a piece of jewelry—it's a real key and I bet it opens the lock to whatever Nunzio was hiding."

Chapter Seven

“I have to work late tonight ... on a case. I’m just going to shoot home and grab some leftovers out of my fridge. Maybe we can grill out tomorrow night?” Jack’s voice crackled from the cell phone Lexy had pressed to her ear as she pulled into her driveway.

“Sure, that sounds great.”

“Okay, well I gotta run. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Bye.” Lexy snapped the phone shut. It’s not like she was counting on seeing Jack tonight, he often had to work late when a case was heating up. But the last minute notice left her without plans.

“Oh well, such is the life of a police detective’s fiancée,” she said to herself as she opened her front door.

Sprinkles greeted her in a flurry of white fur as she pushed the door open. Lexy bent down to scratch the little poodle shih-tzu mix’s head.

“Looks like it’s a girl’s night in tonight, Sprinkles.”

Lexy dropped her purse on the couch and went straight to the kitchen with Sprinkles hot on her heels. She opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white zinfandel, uncorked it and poured it into a crystal wine glass from the cupboard.

Sprinkles danced around her food bowl, alternating looks between the empty bowl and Lexy.

“Are you hungry?” Lexy felt her own stomach nag at her. She filled Sprinkle’s bowl from a canister of dry dog food she kept on the counter then opened the fridge to rummage for her own supper.

“Let’s see ... leftover carrot cake, tuna, spaghetti and a slice of week old pizza. What will it be?” She stood back with her wine glass in her hand deciding which appealed to her the most. After a few seconds, she grabbed the carrot cake and a fork and sat at the small kitchen table.

The carrot cake was sweet and the cream cheese frosting was tangy, which balanced the sweetness perfectly. Lexy figured she was getting at least two of the basic food groups—vegetables from the carrots and dairy from the cream cheese. The wine wasn’t the best compliment to it, but she managed to drain the glass anyway.

Lexy pushed her chair back from the table, then crossed the kitchen to dump the cake plate in the sink. Sprinkles followed her eyeing the space between the plate and ground with hawk-like attention, just in case a crumb fell. Once the plate was in the sink with no hope of a stray crumb falling, Sprinkles made her way over to the door and scratched at it to go out.

“You have to go out?” Lexy asked the obvious. She held the door open for the little dog. Sprinkles wasn’t much of an outdoor dog, she usually just went out and did her business then ran back in. So Lexy was surprised when she took off toward the fence that separated her yard from Jack’s.

“Sprinkles come back!” Lexy slipped out the door after her, running across the grass in her bare feet. Lexy’s heart sank when Sprinkles ignored her and slipped through the missing board in the fence.

Lexy followed, barely squeezing herself through and popped out into Jack’s back yard. Sprinkles stood at Jack’s door wagging her tail. Lexy ran over to grab her.

She started to scold the dog, but her heart melted when those adoring brown eyes looked up at her and she reached down to pet her instead. She could hardly get mad at the dog, Sprinkles was used to making the trip between the two houses, and Jack spoiled her rotten. It was no wonder she wanted to visit.

“He’s not home, silly.” A movement inside Jack’s house caught her eye. Lexy peered through the window in the kitchen door. A white sheer curtain over the window obstructed the view, but Lexy could make out shadowy movements inside the kitchen.

Didn't Jack say he wouldn't be home?

~~She pressed her face against the glass to get a better look. Her heart froze in her chest. She could make out two silhouettes ... one looked like Jack and the other was a bit more shapely. A woman.~~

Just then Sprinkles let out a bark and leaped up against the door. The door swung in causing Lexy to lose her balance. She tumbled into the kitchen face first.

She stumbled a few steps, and then caught herself. Straightening up, a jolt of electricity pierced her heart when she saw who was standing in front of her. She sucked in a deep breath feeling as if the wind had been knocked out of her.

Standing in Jack's kitchen, looking like she was right at home, was the blonde she'd seen Jack with the other day. His ex-girlfriend.

###

Jack bent down to pet Sprinkles while Lexy and the blonde sized each other up. She was pretty up close, Lexy thought grudgingly, baby blue eyes and blonde hair. A little too much makeup, though.

Lexy's heart sank as she compared the other woman's clingy silk tank top and perfectly matched skirt to her flour covered oversized tee-shirt and jeans. The other woman's outfit was tasteful, but left no doubt that her tall frame carried a body of barbie-doll perfect proportions.

Lexy felt like a dwarf beside her, her curvy but petite frame seemed even shorter than usual considering she didn't have any shoes on to add to her height. To top it all off, the other woman was wearing a gorgeous pair of hot pink Steve Weitzman platforms which made her legs look even longer and her stature even taller.

"What are you doing here?" Was it her imagination, or did she hear guilt edge into Jack's voice?

Lexy slid her eyes over to meet Jack's, her heart clenching when she saw how nervous he looked.

"Sprinkles ran over from my house ... I thought you were working?" She glanced from Jack to the woman.

"Oh, I am. I just came home to pick up these leftovers for supper." Jack held up a Styrofoam container. Lexy remembered he *had* said he was going to stop in to pick up his dinner ... apparently he had just forgotten to mention it would be with another woman.

Jack cleared his throat. "Lexy, this is an old friend ... Simone." He gestured to the other woman. "Simone, this is my fiancée, Lexy Baker."

The two women narrowed their eyes at each other as they shook hands. Lexy got the distinct impression that Simone was sizing her up much the same way a snake sizes up its prey, right before it attacks.

"Oh, I didn't know you were engaged." Simone snuck a look at Lexy's ring finger. Lexy wondered if Jack had conveniently forgotten to mention that he had a fiancée or if it simply hadn't come up in conversation.

Jack stood off to the side, fidgeting and running his fingers through his hair.

"Are you working together?" Lexy asked innocently.

"What? Oh, no. Simone just happened to stop by unexpectedly."

"Oh, that was good timing. I mean since you just stopped by the house to pick up your supper."

"Actually, I was waiting for Jack," Simone said. "I'm only in town for a few days and I really wanted to spend some time catching up. I didn't realize he would be working tonight."

You didn't have enough time the other day? Lexy raised an eyebrow at the other woman but was smart enough not to voice her thoughts.

Jack came over beside Lexy. He tried to put his arm around her, but she shrugged him off, bending down to pick up Sprinkles instead.

“Well, I’ll let you two catch up then.” She turned toward the door without even a look at Jack.

Jack sprinted after her. “Lexy, wait.”

Her stomach flipped as he grabbed her by her arm and turned her to face him. Looking up into his eyes, she saw a pleading look pass through them. Lexy wrinkled her brow. This was all very confusing ... on the one hand, it seemed like Jack was trying to reassure her that everything was fine. But on the other, he had an ex-girlfriend in his kitchen.

Lexy didn’t know what to think and decided the best course of action was to polish off the bottle of wine she’d left on her kitchen counter before making any rash decisions.

Jack tried to lean in to kiss her, but she was still holding Sprinkles so he couldn’t get close enough. Which was just fine with Lexy ... she wasn’t sure she wanted a kiss from Jack right now.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” He said managing to brush his lips against her forehead. “We’re still on for tomorrow night, right?”

“Sure,” Lexy said, her stomach plummeting as she walked out the door. She wasn’t sure what was going on. She couldn’t say for sure that Jack was cheating on her ... it could be all innocent on his part.

But judging by the looks she was getting from Simone, everything wasn’t all innocent on *her* part. She could sense a hint of purpose and shrewdness behind those baby blue eyes. Jack might not be doing anything wrong, but Lexy knew one thing for sure ... Simone was up to something.

Chapter Eight

It was ten minutes till two the next day when Lexy finally managed to get the food for the memorial to the retirement center.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to make it,” Nans said looking at her watch pointedly.

“Sorry. I planned on getting here earlier, but I got a late start today.” Mostly due to the bottle of wine I drank last night, Lexy thought.

Balancing two trays of pastry in her hands, she looked around the room. It was furnished with overstuffed arm chairs and sofas. A comfortable room in hues of blue and green, it had a somber tone to it making it perfect for the occasion.

Nans and the ladies had brought in a podium, Lexy assumed for some sort of eulogy, as well as some tables. A few of the tables held photographs of Nunzio in various leisure activities at the retirement center—playing bocce, a bingo tournament and a fishing trip some of them had taken in the spring. The pictures made him look like a regular guy. Looking at the photos, Lexy wondered if he really was involved with organized crime.

Lexy made her way over to one of the empty tables and put the trays down, uncovering them and moving the bars and cookies around to her satisfaction.

“Do you need any help?” Ida asked.

“I could use an extra hand getting the rest of this stuff from my car.”

Nans, Ida and Helen followed Lexy out to the car and she handed them the other trays and some napkins and paper plates.

“I was wondering if Jack has let anything slip about Nunzio’s case,” Nans whispered as they made their way back inside.

Lexy frowned at the mention of Jack’s name.

“Not a thing.” Then she thought of Braxton Daniels. Thinking about the muscle bound F.B.I agent erased the frown.

“But I did find out the F.B.I. is here looking into it.”

Nans swiveled her head around so fast Lexy wondered if she would get a stiff neck. “Really?”

“Yep. He said they’re looking into every angle. But he didn’t give me any details or anything.”

“Oh, darn. You should try to get to know him better to get information out of him. Was he cute?”

Lexy cocked an eyebrow at Nans. “First of all, I don’t want to get involved in this investigation and second of all I’m engaged. Remember?”

Lexy watched the tray of brownies Nans was carrying weave and bob as she waved her free hand in the air. “Of course you are. I didn’t mean for you to sleep with him, but a little flirting never hurt anyone.”

Lexy thought that over as they placed the trays on the tables. She wondered if Jack had the same philosophy. Maybe she should adopt it herself? The thought of getting to know Braxton Daniels a little better wasn’t all that unappealing—just for the sake of getting information, of course.

Lexy was glad when people started to file in, interrupting Nans from pressing her further. She busied herself with making sure the coffee carafes were working and the tables were setup properly. She was just about to make her getaway, planning to sneak out and come back a few hours later to clean up, when Nans came over with the woman they had seen in the parking lot the day Nunzio’s car got broken into.

“Lexy, this is Gina Ricci. Nunzio’s daughter.” Nans introduced them and they shook hands.

“Lexy owns *The Cup and Cake Bakery* where all these came from.” Nans spread her hands to indicate the pastries stacked on the tables.

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