

Chaos in Mudbug

A Ghost-in-Law
Mystery Romance



New York Times Bestselling Author

JANA DELEON

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As she exited her hotel room, Jadyn heard the yelling downstairs and picked up her pace. Whatever was going on, she didn't take kindly to people yelling at Mildred, and was determined to stop that it stopped. The hotel owner had basically given her a roof and a makeshift family without so much as blinking an eye, and Jadyn wasn't about to have anyone verbally abuse her—not while she was within earshot.

She hurried down the stairs and stepped into the lobby. A red-faced man she recognized as one of the hotel patrons for the past week stood at the front desk, his hands clenched at his side and potbelly heaving up and down from his heavy breathing.

"I'm telling you those venison steaks were stolen from my room last night. As well as the head I was supposed to drop off at the taxidermist on my way home. I killed that deer, and by God, the spoils of the kill belong to me!"

Jadyn stiffened. Deer season hadn't even started yet.

Mildred glared across the counter at him. "You hit that buck with your pickup. Stop making it sound like you're the John Wayne of deer."

Jadyn relaxed a bit as she approached the counter. "Is there a problem here?"

The man barely glanced at her. "Nothing you can help with, honey."

Jadyn stiffened again. "I beg to differ. You see, I'm the game warden, and I'd like to know why you didn't report the accident to me."

He turned and gave her a full-body look, then smirked. "What were you going to do—give the deer CPR? Maybe call a priest?"

Jadyn stared at him. "I would have inspected the deer for disease. It can spread to other animals and infect the meat. I might have called a priest *and* a coroner, if your disrespect at the scene was as big as it is now."

His face turned a shade darker. "Are you threatening me?"

"Since I don't have a time machine, no. But I'm reserving the right to do so depending on what you say next."

"You're all crazy. All I want is my deer steaks. They were in a cooler in my room. This morning I checked to see if they needed more ice and they're all gone. Someone sneaked into my room and stole them, and that makes it the hotel's problem."

"Uh-huh." Jadyn glanced over at Mildred, who shrugged and mouthed "Helena." Jadyn held in a sigh. Mildred was probably right. Barring the existence of professional deer steak thieves, Helena was the only explanation that made sense. The only other person with a key to the room was Mildred, and Jadyn would bet her last round of bullets that the hotel owner hadn't taken up food theft in her later years.

"And the deer head?" Jadyn asked.

"Was bagged and sitting in ice in my bathtub. It's gone too."

Which was much more disturbing.

Jadyn was positive Helena had stolen the steaks. The ghost had the appetite of twenty people and didn't think rules should apply to her, especially when it came to her acquisition of food. But what in God's name had she taken the head for? A better question was, did she even want to know?

A second later, a bloodcurdling scream rang out from the floor above them and a door banged against the upstairs wall. Footsteps ran across the hallway above them, then down the stairs. They all turned to look at the stairwell. Finally, a middle-aged woman with a bad bleach job, clutching a tote bag and wearing a robe, ran into the lobby, then straight past them and out of the hotel, where she

jumped into a late-model sedan and tore off down Main Street as if she'd seen a ghost.

Jadyn looked at Mildred, who shook her head.

Maybe something worse.

The man's jaw dropped. "Shelia?" he called out, but by the time he'd managed to form the word, Shelia was probably halfway to Miami. He whirled around, glaring at Mildred. "What the hell kind of hotel are you running?"

Mildred frowned. "The kind that's not charging you for your stay, with the understanding that you, your cooler, and any plastic that contained heads or meat leaves with you within the next hour."

"This is a joke."

"Not at all," Jadyn said. "I think the offer was exceedingly fair, but if you'd like to discuss it further, I'm happy to take the entire situation up with Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries headquarters, or if you'd like to file a report about the theft, I'm happy to call the sheriff and let you explain the entire situation to him."

The man knew he was defeated. He gave both of them a dirty look, then whirled around and stomped up the stairs, muttering "stupid broads" as he went.

Jadyn waited until he was out of sight, then looked at Mildred. "I guess we should check out Shelia's room."

Mildred sighed and pulled a set of keys from under the counter. "Just one normal day—that's all I ask. Is that too much?"

"With Helena around?"

"You're right," Mildred said as she walked around the counter and headed upstairs. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Jadyn followed the hotel owner up the stairs and down the hall to the room that Shelia had fled. "Was Shelia with the deer killer?"

"Not in the same room, but apparently he knew her."

The door to Shelia's room stood wide open, so Mildred slipped the keys into her pocket, then paused to make the sign of the cross before peering inside. One look and the hotel owner yelled, "I'm going to kill her!"

Jadyn stepped past Mildred and into the room, needing only a second to process the scene in front of her and completely agree with Mildred's assessment.

The comforter and sheets on the bed had been thrown to the side, as if someone had jumped out of bed in a hurry. The set of antlers peaking out from under the comforter told the entire story. Jadyn walked over to the bed and threw the covers back, exposing the deer head, still partially wrapped in plastic.

"If that head bled on my new sheets, I'm going to kill her twice," Mildred said.

Jadyn grabbed the neck where the plastic bag was secured and lifted the entire thing from the bed. "It looks like the neck was covered with plastic. I don't see any stains, but for the record, I'd still kill her."

Mildred whirled around and stalked down the hall to the room at the back of the hotel that she'd "allocated" for Helena. She pulled out her keys, unlocked the door, and flung it open as if she were robbing the place. Jadyn hurried into the room behind her, not wanting to miss the show.

Helena sat on the bed, eating a blueberry muffin and watching television. Even if Jadyn hadn't already known Helena was the guilty party, her cat burglar outfit gave her away. She looked up at Mildred and Jadyn wearing an innocent expression that no one bought for a single minute.

"You people don't knock anymore?" Helena grouched.

Jadyn held up the deer head. "We had a free entry pass."

Helena stared at the head. "Oh."

Mildred put her hands on her hips and glared down at the ghost. “That’s all you have to say for yourself? Don’t even try to lie your way out of this. I already know you stole those deer steaks, and although it’s totally wrong, at least I understand that one given your new career as an Olympic eater. But this?” Mildred pointed at the deer head.

Helena had the decency to look a little guilty. Very little.

Mildred sucked in a breath and her eyes widened. “*The Godfather.*”

Jadyn frowned for a moment, then put two and two together and realized Mildred was referring to the movie and not a real person. “There was a marathon on television a couple of days ago.”

“Do you think this is funny?” Mildred asked.

“Well,” Helena said, “given how she tore out of the hotel, yeah, I find it hilarious.”

“I’m running a business here,” Mildred said. “How am I supposed to maintain a decent reputation if a woman is out there claiming she awakened to the head of a dead animal in her bed?”

Helena shook her head. “She’s not going to tell anyone. Neither is he.”

“You can’t know that,” Mildred said.

“Sure I can. See, Deer Killer claims he came here to fish, but he was really here to bang Robe Runner, who is *not* his wife. He keeps a separate room in case his wife gets suspicious and checks up on him.” Helena shrugged. “I figured they both deserved it.”

Jadyn rubbed the back of her neck with her free hand, not about to admit that she sorta agreed with Helena, at least in principle.

“That’s rich,” Mildred said. “Helena Henry, in charge of ethics and morality. I don’t suppose you’ve heard the one about cleaning up your own doorstep, have you? Well, you can start with Deer Killer’s bathtub and Robe Runner’s sheets.”

Helena shoved the remainder of the muffin in her mouth and her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. “Youuff a relf drag lately.”

Jadyn mentally translated that to “You’re a real drag lately” and wondered if Mildred would get it. Apparently she did, because she reddened and pointed her finger at the ghost.

“In the entire time you were alive, you allowed exactly two visitors into your home. If someone had moved into your property, then proceeded to destroy it while simultaneously running off your means of support and eating you out of house and home, you would have shot them and claimed self-defense.”

Helena rose from the bed, gave Mildred a long-suffering look, then disappeared through the bedroom wall.

“I always know I’m right when she leaves without arguing any longer,” Mildred said.

Jadyn studied the hotel owner for a couple seconds. “Out of curiosity, has there ever been a time when you’ve been wrong?”

“Ha! Not when it comes to Helena.”

Jadyn stared at the wall where Helena had disappeared and frowned. When she’d first realized she was seeing and talking to a ghost, she’d fought believing it. But Helena wasn’t exactly the kind of ghost you could brush off as active imagination or eyestrain. For all intents and purposes, Helena was as real to Jadyn as Mildred was. That was just plain weird, and something that confused her when she thought too long about it.

“What are you going to do about her?” Jadyn asked. “You can’t live like this forever. For that matter, neither can she. I haven’t known her for very long, but I can tell she’s bored. That strikes me as a problem.”

Mildred sighed. “You’re right. It’s something Maryse and I have been discussing. We have no way of knowing how long Helena will be here. She didn’t even have much of a chance to get bored the last time, and she still managed to wreak plenty of havoc before she ascended. The thought of her

hanging around for years makes me want to move to Alaska and not leave a forwarding address.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Unfortunately, no. I think we need to approach this as seeking a permanent arrangement...at least until we know Helena’s expiration date. But I have no idea what kind of permanent arrangement to make for a ghost. The fact that the ghost is Helena just makes the entire mess that much harder.”

“I can see that.” Jadyn hadn’t known Helena when she was alive, but she’d heard enough stories to know that the woman had been hell on wheels then. Fortunately, she’d kept to herself more. Now that only a handful of people could see and hear her, she seemed determined to stick close, regardless of what it did to the quality of life for the living.

“It’s getting harder to make up cover stories for the things she does,” Mildred said. “I’m afraid she’s going to get someone in hot water with the law one of these days.”

Jadyn nodded. “If she were alive, I’d say she needed a job, a hobby, or a friend.” Jadyn froze. “A friend. Maybe that’s the answer.”

“She already harasses everyone who can see her and everyone who can’t. There isn’t anyone left

“Not a live friend. A dead one.”

Mildred’s eye widened. “I understand where you’re coming from in a very general sense, but I don’t think you’ve thought it through.”

Jadyn frowned. “Why not?”

“Because instead of a companion *for* Helena, we could get another Helena.”

“Right! Wow. Dodged a bullet with that one. I’m not sure Mudbug could handle two Helenas.”

“Not even the devil himself could.”

Jadyn’s cell phone sounded and she pulled it out of her jeans pocket, frowning when she saw Colt’s name on the display. A call from the hunky sheriff would put a smile on the face of most of the women in Mudbug, but if you were the game warden and it was only 8:00 a.m., that call wasn’t nearly as flattering as one might think.

“What’s up?” Jadyn answered.

“I’ve got a situation in Miller’s Cove. A shrimp boat washed up, probably from the storm last night. It’s been beat pretty good and was half-sunk when Harley Koontz came up on it this morning.”

“Any sign of the driver?”

“No. And it’s not a boat I recognize, at least not offhand.”

She grabbed the pad of paper and pen off the dresser. “Give me directions to Miller’s Cove. I’ll head there right now.” She took down the directions and hung up the phone.

“Problems?” Mildred asked.

“A shrimp boat washed up in Miller’s Cove. No driver in sight and Colt doesn’t recognize it.”

Mildred’s expression turned grave. “That storm last night was a doozy. If someone got caught out in it, he could have been blown some distance. There are fishing villages branched out in every direction at least a hundred miles. It could have come from any one of them.”

Jadyn nodded. “Well, since it landed in the game preserve, it’s my problem now.”

“Be careful,” Mildred said.

“Always.” Jadyn headed out of the room, hoping the missing driver had abandoned his sinking boat and hitched a ride home. The stack of dead bodies that had piled up since she’d been in Mudbug was already bigger than she’d hoped to see in a lifetime.

Whoever said small towns were quiet and boring clearly had never lived in one.

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Sheriff Colt Bertrand stood at the edge of the cove, staring at what remained of the shrimp boat and wondering how much was left of the boat’s captain. It was a thought better saved for later in the day and after he’d had coffee and breakfast, but unfortunately, he didn’t get to choose. Equally

unfortunate, the back portion of the boat that would have contained the name of the boat had been broken off, leaving the boat and Colt facing an identity crisis.

“You don’t recognize it?” Colt asked, looking up at Harley.

Harley was fiftyish with a head full of silver hair that always had at least one piece sticking straight up in the air like Alfalfa. If you measured to the top of that sprig, Harley probably topped out near seven feet tall and weighed in at negative two. He had to be the tallest, skinniest person, with the longest limbs, that Colt had ever seen. He was, quite frankly, a walking scarecrow.

He was also a professional fisherman and tour guide and spent every waking moment on the water.

Harley stared at the boat and scratched his head, flattening the sprig with his finger, only to have replacement pop up an inch farther along his part. “It’s nobody from Mudbug. Bud Peterson has the same model, but he just replaced the floor in his a couple weeks ago—painted it some pansy-looking green color.”

Colt leaned over to inspect the bottom of the boat. “Dark gray.”

Harley nodded. “A man’s color.”

Colt hadn’t seen Bud’s unfortunate color choice for his boat floor, and he hoped Harley’s opinion on the matter never made it to the surly fisherman. Bud would snap Harley in two like a twig.

“Could be from one of the nearby villages,” Harley suggested. “If he shrimps the Gulf or the channels closer to New Orleans, I wouldn’t cross paths with him often, if ever.”

Colt nodded. He’d already figured that was the case. “Were you out last night?”

“Yeah. I was fishing out Buford Point way when I saw the storm brewing. Came in a bit earlier than predicted, but isn’t that the way it always goes? I’d packed up most of my stuff an hour earlier, figuring the weather would screw me out of another hour like it always did, but I still caught the front end of it before I made it back to town.”

“It was moving that fast?”

“A good clip. I was doing twenty miles an hour or so, faster when I got a straightaway, but it moved in quicker than I could run through the channel. Probably a good forty-mile-an-hour wind blowing southwest pushing it.”

Colt sighed. “Which means this boat could have traveled fifty miles or more by drift alone, and just during the storm.”

Harley nodded. “That sounds about right.”

Colt heard the engine of Jady’s jeep before it rounded a corner and emerged from the woods. She parked next to Colt’s truck and headed over, giving Colt a wave as she approached.

Colt held in a second sigh. The sight of Jady St. James in jeans, a T-shirt, and hiking boots, wearing no makeup and with her long dark hair in a ponytail, sent him to a mental state he hadn’t experienced since high school. Without a single bit of effort on her part, she was the sexiest woman he’d ever met. He’d been fighting his attraction from the moment he laid eyes on her at that first crime scene, but stubbornness had finally given way to desire and he’d kissed her.

He wasn’t sure what he’d expected from it. Maybe he’d been hoping that it would feel all wrong and then he could apologize for his presumptuousness and things could go back to normal. Normal for Mudbug, anyway. But instead, that one kiss had terrified him. And that was something a Southern man did not admit, especially when he was the sheriff.

Fortunately, he’d had to leave the next day for a law enforcement conference that had lasted a week. He’d hoped the time away would clear his head of Jady, but instead, he found his thoughts constantly drifting back to her—during workshops and dinners, and even in his dreams. On the drive back to Mudbug, he’d finally decided it was time to put up or shut up. Either he believed all women were bloodsucking vipers like Maria or he believed a woman could be good-looking and capable, and

still be warm-blooded.

~~This was the first time he'd seen the very warm-blooded Jadyn St. James since he returned from the conference. And aside from the problem the wrecked boat presented, Colt was almost relieved that their first meeting would be over business. Working a job together was a much better way to ease back into interaction with Jadyn—get him on firm footing until he could decide how to approach the elephant in the room.~~

“Morning, gentlemen,” she said as she stepped up.

Colt introduced her to Harley, whose eyebrows lifted when he caught the “new game warden” part, but he was smart enough to keep any opinions he had on the matter to himself.

“You thinking it got caught in the storm?” Jadyn asked.

Colt nodded and recounted the conversation he and Harley had about the wind speed and direction.

Jadyn blew out a breath, and Colt knew she'd already processed the variables and come up with the same conclusions he had. That was another thing—Jadyn was smart, which made it impossible to dismiss her as just another good-looking broad.

“Can you put out a request for any missing persons bulletins for the surrounding areas?” she asked him.

“I'll put it on the wire and make some phone calls as soon as I get back to the office.”

“Great. I'll give Marty a call and see if he can get this out of the cove and towed to his shop. Maybe I'll be able to find something in it that tells me who it belonged to.”

“Hell,” Harley said, “if the guy's missing, surely someone's looking for him.”

“Really?” Colt asked. “If you went missing, how long before someone would know?”

Harley frowned. “Well, now that I think about it, I guess wouldn't no one know until I missed a fishing tour. Yeah, I see your point. Hey, maybe I should get one of them girlfriend things...so's she could set up an alarm if I didn't come home.”

Colt smiled and clapped Harley on the back. “I think you should get right on that. I bet there's a girlfriend thing just waiting for you to show up and sweep her off her feet.”

Jadyn's lips quivered and Colt could tell she was trying not to smile.

“How about you?” Harley asked, giving Jadyn the once-over. “You got a man?”

Jadyn's lips and the rest of her froze and her eyes widened. “Me? No, I'm not in the market for a man.”

Harley nodded. “You go for women. I figured as much, being that you have a man's job. Oh well, I guess I'll have to check out Pete's tonight. Bet I could hook me a good one there.”

Jadyn's mouth dropped open as though she was going to respond, but she must have decided it was pointless, or safer, because a second later, she closed her mouth and pulled out her cell phone. “I'm going to give Marty a call and head back to town. I'll let you know if I find something on the boat. Nice meeting you, Harley.”

“Nice meeting you,” Harley said and shook his head as he watched her walk back toward her Jeep. “Damn shame about the woman thing. I bet she'd look good in a cast net and rubber boots.”

Colt grimaced. “Yeah, it's the bedroom outfit of choice for men all over the world. Listen, I best get going. I appreciate you reporting this.”

“Course,” Harley said, but his gaze was still on Jadyn, probably mentally dressing her in different fishing equipment.

Before he could offer up another ensemble, Colt headed for his truck, giving Jadyn a wave before she pulled away. With any luck, the shrimper would be having coffee and cussing at his insurance adjuster. Colt gave the boat one last glance before climbing into his truck.

The thing was, Mudbug hadn't seen luck in a long, long time.

Jadyn's heart pounded in her chest as she drove down the narrow dirt road that led back to the highway. But her uptick in pulse had nothing to do with her missing boat captain and everything to do with Colt Bertrand. Since her arrival in Mudbug, her job and Colt's had been intertwined, forcing her to spend more time with him than she was comfortable with.

Colt was everything a red-blooded Southern woman wanted in a man and probably more than most could handle. He was gorgeous to look at, built like an athlete, smart, hardworking, and one of her personal requirements, deadly. The last thing she'd come to Mudbug looking for was a man, but Jadyn could no longer deny her attraction for the sheriff.

The last time their jobs had crossed paths, things had ended in a gun-slinging showdown that had almost gotten them both killed. Then Colt had kissed her and despite the lack of bullet wounds, Jadyn was certain she'd been shot. Just not a flesh wound.

Her heart, on the other hand, had clenched as though it was in a vise. Then he'd left almost immediately for a conference and she'd spent the past week watching reruns on television and taking cold showers. Colt certainly knew how to get to a woman. That one kiss had marked the moment she'd given up completely on pretending she didn't want Colt Bertrand in every way possible.

But was it worth the risk to go for it?

Granted, if things didn't go the way she wanted, the only casualty would be her ego. But romantic rejection was the worst kind of ego bruise. Jadyn would be the first to call herself tough, but she was still human. Wanting someone who didn't want you back was the worst kind of suckage.

And that was the crux of the issue—Colt seemed to blow hot and cold. At times, Jadyn was certain of his interest. It was as if it were written in bold lettering across his face. Then just when she thought he was going to make a move, he'd retreat. She supposed she could give him the benefit of the doubt on this last one, as he had to attend the conference for his job. It wasn't his fault that they had a showdown with the bad guy and then he had to leave for work.

She frowned. But had he kissed her because it was an emotionally charged moment in which they'd almost died? Or had he kissed her because he wanted to kiss her? She'd hoped when he returned from the conference she'd be able to tell, but so far, he'd been back two days and the only contact he'd made with her was over the mystery boat.

Maybe he's tired.

That was certainly possible. Those professional conferences were often exhausting.

Maybe he changed his mind.

She sighed, certain that somewhere between "he's tired" and "he changed his mind" was the truth. The question was, which direction did the truth lean toward—ultimate bliss or decided embarrassment? More than anything, Jadyn wished she could get the answer to that question without putting herself out there. Without risking ultimate humiliation.

If she were a normal girl, she'd have a group of crafty girlfriends with clever ideas, just like the ones she saw on television shows. They'd be able to draw Colt's feelings out of him without him even knowing and with no exposure for Jadyn. But she was far from normal. And although she could quite happily—and surprisingly—claim a group of girlfriends, she wouldn't put Mildred, Maryse, and Helena in the "crafty" club, especially when it came to men.

Which left her with sticking her neck out or waiting. Patience had never been one of her strong suits, but then neither had volunteering for a beheading. She sighed again as she pulled in front of the café. She didn't have to make a decision right now. In fact, the worst time to make a decision was before you'd had coffee.

As she hopped out of her Jeep, Maryse bounded up the sidewalk waving and looking more like a teenager than the brainy scientist she was. Jadyn couldn't help but smile. As a botanist, Maryse was a serious professional, but once she left the lab, she exhibited a tiny bit of immaturity that translated to playful and passionate. With most women, it would be an annoying combination, but with Maryse, it was sort of charming. Probably because it was genuine.

"Jadyn!" Maryse called. "Are you going to have breakfast? I desperately need a cinnamon roll, or I may not make it through the day."

Jadyn smiled. Sometimes Maryse and Helena were more alike than either of them would be willing to admit. "I'm definitely having breakfast, but I'll leave the life-changing cinnamon rolls to you."

"Don't tell me you're still watching what you eat." Maryse rolled her eyes as they walked into the café. "I can't think of anything more depressing than counting calories."

"That's because you're blessed with one of those fat-repellent bodies," Jadyn said, a bit grudgingly. Since she'd arrived in Mudbug, Jadyn had watched Maryse consume more calories in one sitting than a lumberjack did in a week, and yet not a single extra pound ever appeared on her.

Maryse grinned as they slid into their regular booth in the back corner and gave their breakfast order to the waitress. "Luc says I talk it all off."

"Maybe when he gets home, but you're alone all those hours in the lab."

"I sing. Loudly. And I dance. Last week, the pest control guy caught me doing the samba with a push broom."

Jadyn laughed. "I would have liked to see the look on his face."

"Oh, it was classic, especially after I told him I'd been this way since the last time he sprayed."

"That's awful! And hilarious. Did you give him a heart attack?"

"He got all flustered and started assuring me the chemicals they use aren't toxic."

"So what did you say?"

"Nothing. I straddled the broom and started riding it around the lab like it was a stick horse. I swear he might have made two squirts of that stuff before leaving."

A clear mental picture of Maryse riding the push broom flashed through Jadyn's mind, and she couldn't help but envy her cousin's spirit. "I bet you were hell when you were a kid."

Maryse sobered and shook her head. "Not at all. I was mostly a drag. My mom's dying shook me up. I mean, I had Mildred and Sabine, but..."

A wave of sympathy washed through Jadyn. "They weren't your mother."

"No. And then I hooked up with Hank—biggest mistake of my life, but I guess I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't married him. Helena couldn't have left me the land, giving me enough income to fund my own lab, and Luc would have never come to Mudbug, and I would have missed out on the best part of my life."

The expression on her cousin's face when she spoke about Luc never ceased to tug at Jadyn's heart. Her cousin and the sexy DEA agent were so obviously enamored with and completely perfect for each other that it was almost depressing. No matter how hard she tried, Jadyn couldn't imagine herself in that level of bliss with a man. Perhaps it was a state of existence limited to only a few lucky ones.

"I'm really happy for you," Jadyn said. "God knows, you've gone through a rash of crap to get to where you are now."

"Did someone call me?" Helena popped through the café wall and into the booth next to Maryse. Maryse nodded. "Jadyn said 'rash of crap.' That must be what tipped you off."

"Cute," Helena said. "You two aren't going to rag on me the entire time I'm here, are you?"

"That depends," Maryse said, "on how long you're staying. And are you wearing...is that Hello

Kitty pajamas?”

~~It took Jadyn a couple seconds to figure out that Maryse was right. The fabric was stretched so tightly across Helena’s more than ample body that it had been too distorted for her to recognize, but now that she looked closely, that burst of pink was indeed a bow.~~

“Can’t you at least make them the right size?” Maryse asked.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” Helena grouched. “I practiced for hours last night, but never could get them in a larger size.”

“Maybe they don’t exist in a larger size in real life,” Jadyn suggested, “so you can’t make them appear.”

Helena frowned. “HmMMM. That’s an interesting thought. I’m going to have to test that theory later.”

Maryse stared at her in dismay. “I can’t wait to see what kind of trouble that will bring.”

“You’re ragging again,” Helena said.

“And I’m not done,” Maryse said. “What the hell were you thinking, stealing meat and putting a deer head in someone’s bed? That’s awful, Helena, even for you.”

“I just spent the last thirty minutes paying for it by doing laundry and scrubbing the bathtub with bleach. The fumes almost made me pass out.”

“Ha,” Maryse said. “If only it were that easy.”

“I don’t know why everyone is being so pissy about it,” Helena grouched. “He was a lousy cheater anyway, just like Harold.”

Maryse’s expression softened a little, and Jadyn remembered what her cousin had told her about Harold Henry. Helena’s husband had made a career out of banging cheap women in even cheaper motels, causing Helena to adjust her will and leave him one single item of inheritance—the fleabag motel where he’d spent most of his cheating time. A prenuptial agreement prevented Helena from divorcing him without paying him a fortune, and she had been determined that he get nothing, even if it meant dying before he did just to insult him.

Jadyn figured, even if Helena had long since ceased caring about Harold, it had to cut pretty deep that the person you married had that much disrespect for you. So she guessed a little sympathy was in order. If she’d been in Helena’s situation, she might have been tempted to do the same thing. Not saying she would have, but she understood the temptation.

“Okay,” Maryse said, “I’ll give you a pass on this one, but only because he was a lying, cheating bastard and she was a floozy. But Mildred gets to make up her own mind on this.”

“Fair enough,” Helena said. “So what’s up?”

“Nothing you’d understand with me,” Maryse said. “How’s the swamp holding up, Jadyn?”

“The swamp appears to be fine, but it may have claimed a victim. A fisherman found a shrimp boat washed up in one of the coves this morning, probably from the storm last night. The planking with the boat name is torn off and no sign of the boat captain, but we’re hoping he bailed and hiked it home.”

Maryse frowned. “I know most every boat around here. We could go to the cove after breakfast and I could take a look.”

“You’re not supposed to be in the swamp unless absolutely necessary,” Jadyn pointed out.

“I know.” Maryse sighed. “But this is getting old really fast. All my research is delayed because I can’t get fresh specimens. I’m practically unemployed until I can get back in the bayou.”

For the past couple weeks, Maryse had been working out of two rooms at the hotel, in an attempt to ease Luc’s mind. One of the drug-runners he’d taken down was out of prison and gunning for the men who’d sent him there. He’d already made one personal attack on a DEA agent’s family, so Luc had asked Maryse to limit her work to well-lit, occupied places. Jadyn knew being housebound, or

hotel-bound, was putting a serious crimp in Maryse's usual routine. Until she'd met Luc, her cousin had lived alone in a tiny cabin on the bayou that could be reached only by boat. For Maryse, being in the swamp wasn't just part of her work. It was therapeutic.

"All that aside," Jadyn said, "I'm having Marty tow the boat to his shop, assuming it's possible, of course. If you wouldn't mind taking a look at it there, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course," Maryse said, perking up a bit.

Jadyn knew the restlessness her cousin felt. Even something as small as looking at a boat could make the difference between feeling as if you'd done something relevant that day or feeling as if you'd wandered around accomplishing nothing.

She glanced over at Helena and frowned. Maybe that was the ghost's problem. Could it really be as simple as she didn't have a purpose? Jadyn looked at the ghost. "Do you think you can check at the beauty salon and see if anyone's talking?"

Helena's eyes widened. "Me? You want me to help with an investigation?"

"If you don't mind. Women talk about things that don't necessarily make it to the police. For all I know, this guy could have a wife who thinks he ran off with the babysitter and isn't reporting him missing."

Helena nodded. "But she'd tell her best friend, who'd blab to someone else. That's smart. I'll check the beauty shop and the antiques stores—see if I can find the usual gossips. If anyone's husband is missing, they're sure to be talking about it."

"Great," Jadyn said. "Thanks."

The ghost looked so pleased with herself that Jadyn almost felt guilty. Why hadn't she thought of it before? Mildred and Maryse had known Helena before she was murdered, when she was rich and essentially useless. She totally understood why they might not make the leap to Helena wanting to be needed. If Jadyn had known her before, she might not have latched onto that idea either.

A loud crash in the kitchen made them all jump and swivel to look in that direction. A couple seconds later, one of the cooks came stomping out of the kitchen and behind the bar.

"I can't work this way," he said to the woman at the register. "There's no bacon in the freezer. It's your responsibility to place the food order, yet twice this week, I've run out of basic ingredients."

Immediately, Maryse and Jadyn turned to look at Helena. The ghost stared at them for a moment then put her hands in the air. "I swear, it wasn't me."

Helena was as close as one came to a professional liar, but Jadyn hadn't known her long enough to know her tells. Maryse, on the other hand, could smell the ghost lying from another parish. She took one long look at Helena, then looked over at Jadyn and shook her head.

"I ordered five pounds of bacon," the woman argued. "I took possession of the order yesterday and did the inventory myself. The bacon was right there in freezer number two where it belongs."

"Well, it's not there now. So either you're crazy or the bacon's walking."

"Then the bacon's walking. Maybe you should have this conversation with the other cooks."

The man's face turned red. "Are you accusing one of my employees of stealing?"

"Unless that bacon grew legs, that's exactly what I'm doing. Figure it out, because Sally's not going to be happy if her food cost doubles and profits don't."

The cook spun around and headed back into the kitchen, the swinging door flapping in a frenzy behind him.

"That was pleasant," Jadyn said.

"Freda is no pushover," Maryse said. "Willie can get as angry as he wants, but if she says that bacon was in the freezer yesterday, I guarantee you it was."

Helena nodded. "Freda's practically a military commander. I always thought she was scary."

"Agreed," Maryse said.

Jadyn stared at the kitchen door. "I wonder who took it."

"Probably someone who works in the kitchen," Maryse said.

"That makes the most sense, but five pounds of bacon. That's a lot of breakfast."

"Or fishing bait. Catfish like it."

"Really?" Jadyn said. "You learn something new every day."

The waitress appeared and slid their breakfast plates onto the table. Maryse had two cinnamon rolls and hot chocolate. Jadyn had opted for the healthier and far less sexy egg white omelet with mozzarella and spinach. Helena took one look at Jadyn's plate and made a face.

"You don't have to worry about anyone stealing your food," Helena said. "Maryse's on the other hand..."

"Don't even think about it," Maryse said and held the fork above the ghost's approaching hand.

"I'll give you half of the deer steaks."

Maryse frowned and Jadyn could see her cousin wavering. *Steak* was the magic word with Maryse.

"Half of one," Maryse said. "But you have to take it and leave."

Helena rolled her eyes. "Of course. What do you take me for—an idiot?"

"Don't answer that," Jadyn said.

Maryse cut one of the cinnamon rolls in half and put it on a napkin. Helena scooped it up and disappeared back through the wall without a sound. "Hopefully, we can finish the rest of breakfast in peace," Maryse said.

"I still haven't gotten used to seeing her pop through walls," Jadyn said. "I mean, I see a whole person, and God knows, she's as annoying as real people."

Maryse nodded. "She's the most annoying person of all. I've seen her do the wall thing a million times, but there's still that couple of seconds when I wonder if it's not going to work and I'm going to have to dream up some absurd cover story."

The door to the café opened and two middle-aged women walked in and sat at a table near Jadyn and Maryse. One of them was clearly upset.

"I'm telling you, Bernice, I don't know what this town is coming to. Murder, drugs, chop shops. and now this thing with my laundry."

"You're sure someone stole it?" the other woman, Bernice, asked.

"Well, I think should know what I hung outside, and I'm certain only half of it was there when I went back to take it in. I could handle the towels and the cotton blanket, but the quilt really hacks me off. My grandma made that quilt."

Bernice shook her head. "Sharon Simmons said someone took two packages of shrimp off her back porch yesterday. She'd put them out there to thaw and not twenty minutes later, they were gone."

"If Colt Bertrand doesn't get this town under control, I'm not voting for him again. I thought someone younger would be more educated on crime and such, but things are only getting worse. Where you can't even hang out your own underwear without fear that someone will make off with them, well I just don't know what to say about that."

"That's weird," Maryse said.

"I take it Mudbug doesn't usually have much petty theft of random food and laundry?" Jadyn asked.

"Not that I've ever heard of."

"Do you think Helena had anything to do with it?"

"I can't see a good reason why. Helena can throw deer steaks on a grill, but she doesn't know how to cook shrimp. She's never had to know. And she would never use someone else's linens. She bitched night and day about cooties until Mildred finally bought her new sheets and towels for her room at the

hotel.”

Jadyn frowned. ~~It could be a coincidence that those things and the missing bacon had all happened recently,~~ but as a rule, Jadyn didn't like coincidences. In her experience, things that appeared to be linked usually were. “Do you think all the troubles will cause Colt to lose the next election?”

Maryse bit her lower lip. “I'd like to say no, but the reality is, small towns can be funny places. One day you're the hero, and the next day everything bad is your fault. I was hoping things would settle down to the point of boredom, and everyone would forget all the bad stuff, or at least push it to the back of their minds.”

“How long have things been happening?”

“I guess the first wave started when Helena was murdered and came back. That was over a year ago, but we had a rash of bad for a good while. Then, except for your basic small-town stuff, almost a year of quiet, until...”

Jadyn cringed. “Until I came to Mudbug.”

Maryse shook her head. “Until Helena returned.”

“But there's no way she could be at the root of the last month's trouble. We know who the bad guys were in all those situations, and some of the crimes exposed were going on long before Helena was murdered.”

“I know. It's not logical to pin it on her. But until someone proves otherwise, I'm convinced that Helena is the harbinger of doom. She shows up, and everything goes to hell in a handbasket.”

“So what's the solution? I mean, you helped her ascend before, but this time is different. This time, she wants to be here.”

Maryse sighed. “Whether we want her here or not.”

“You know earlier, when I asked Helena about spying at the beauty salon?”

“Yeah. That sort of surprised me.”

“It was an idea that crossed my mind.” Jadyn explained her theory to Maryse.

Maryse scrunched her brow. “Do you think it could really be that simple?”

Jadyn raised one eyebrow. “How bored are you right now?”

“I'm ready to set myself on fire for some entertainment.”

“Exactly. And you've only been sorta dormant for a couple of weeks. Helena's been at this for well over a year.”

“You may be onto something.” Maryse stared out the window for a bit, then looked back at Jadyn. “Okay, we'll try it. But we have to give her things to do that won't cause even more trouble.”

“I'm not even sure what that would be.”

“Nothing around food.”

“Naturally. What else?”

“She tends to play practical jokes when she doesn't like someone.”

Jadyn shook her head. “That seems a limiting rule, since I'm not sure she likes anyone.”

“Good point. Maybe we should have her patrol the swamps.”

“No good. She won't walk and I'm not letting her drive a boat again.”

“God forbid. Well, I don't see any straightforward option. The beauty shop thing was a good one. We might just have to play it by ear.”

“We might have to make stuff up.”

Maryse grinned. “I've never been above lying for the general good.”

“Then we have a plan.”

It took only a minute for Maryse to decide she didn't recognize the shrimp boat. Marty, the garage owner, had managed to drag the mangled boat out of the cove in one piece and tow the entire mess to his garage, where he'd parked it in the end slot.

"Sorry," Maryse said as she stepped onto a ladder and peered inside. "I've seen this same model, of course, but not with red stripes or this color decking. Unless someone in Mudbug got a new boat in the last couple of months, I don't think it belongs to a local."

"I appreciate you looking," Jady said.

Maryse stepped off the ladder. "I wish I could have helped."

"You did help. I'll concentrate my search on the villages surrounding Mudbug instead of wasting time polling the locals." She reached into her duffel bag and pulled out a pair of plastic gloves.

"You want me to help you search it?" Maryse asked.

Before Jady could answer, the door at the far end of the garage swung open and Colt walked inside. Maryse grinned and winked. "Never mind," she said. "You've got this."

Maryse skipped off across the garage, singing a hello to Colt as she passed. He glanced back, then shook his head as he stepped up to the wreckage. "What's she so happy about?"

"Nothing in particular," Jady said. "But I'm pretty sure Luc is at the bottom of the majority of her good moods."

"You may be right. I don't ever recall her skipping when she was hooked up with Hank Henry. In fact, back then Hank did all the skipping—skipping out on bills, skipping out on responsibilities, skipping out on his wife."

Jady nodded. "I've heard some of the Hank horror stories. It's hard to reconcile those stories with the man he is now."

"He's definitely made changes for the better, and God knows, no one expected him to. If you'd told me a year ago that Hank Henry would be a productive, responsible, married man about to be a father, I would have laughed myself into heart attack range."

"Maybe there are still miracles after the New Testament."

"I hope so. We might need one to figure this out." He pointed to the boat.

"I take it you didn't find any missing person reports?"

He shook his head. "I called all the local law enforcement offices myself and explained the situation. They're all going to pay a visit to the docks and ask around, but as of this morning, none of them have had a report or heard any gossip about someone's boat sinking."

Jady felt some of the tension leave her back. "I keep forgetting that he may have bailed and made it home. For all we know, he could be sleeping off the six-pack he consumed last night after sinking his boat. And all of us are out looking for someone who isn't missing at all."

"That's definitely the best-case scenario."

"Then why do I always gravitate to the worst?"

He stared at the boat for several seconds and frowned. "Maybe because worst case is all you've experienced since you've been here."

"I suppose that's true, in a work capacity anyway. But the rest of it has been better than I'd ever imagined it could be."

He raised one eyebrow. "Really? Do tell?"

Jady felt a blush run across her chest and up her neck. She hadn't meant to make such a personal statement, but now that it was out, she had no choice but to explain. "I guess I was thinking about Mildred and Maryse. When I first arrived, I expected polite because that's the Southern way of anyone."

raised with some manners, but they took it way beyond that.”

“They treated you like family from the moment they met you.”

Jadyn stared at him, slightly surprised. “Yeah. How did you know?”

He shrugged. “I’ve known them my entire life. Maryse, for all her recent skipping and singing instead of talking, is one of the most practical women I’ve ever met. And she has absolutely no verbal regulator. If she’s thinking it, she says it. So if she’s saying she likes you, bet your butt she does.”

Jadyn grinned. He definitely had Maryse down perfectly.

“If Mildred likes you,” he continued, “she’s going to try to take care of you. More so in your case because you’re Maryse’s family and Mildred practically raised Maryse after her mom died.”

“I suppose you’re right, although it feels odd to be mothered. My own mother wasn’t all that into it.”

“Well, be flattered that Mildred wants the job. She doesn’t suffer fools well and is a great judge of character. It speaks highly of you that she wants to be involved.”

Jadyn felt her face redden with the words.

Colt grinned. “You’re blushing. Good Lord, woman, don’t you know how to take a compliment? Surely you’ve gotten your share.”

Jadyn tried to think of something to say, but nothing came to mind that didn’t make her sound more pathetic. She could only hope that Colt found her blushing charming and not sad. That would be the death blow. No woman wanted the man she was attracted to feeling sorry for her.

“I guess so,” she finally managed.

Apparently sensing her discomfort, he changed subject. “So are you ready to do a search?”

She held up her plastic gloves. “You want a set or are you merely an observer?”

Colt took the gloves from her. “I’ll observe when I retire.”

She grabbed another pair of gloves and they climbed into the boat. “I figured we should check the storage compartments first...see if there’s any paperwork.”

Colt nodded. “I’ll take the cabin,” he said and ducked into the tiny cabin at the front of the boat.

Jadyn pulled the cushion off the back bench and checked inside, but all she found was netting and an anchor. She put the cushion back in place and checked both the storage bins in the floor, but both had sustained large holes so only items too big to fit through the openings still remained. She moved to the storage in the driver’s column, hoping this was where she got lucky, but when she opened the cabinet door, the only thing she saw was straight through to the concrete floor of Marty’s garage.

“Any luck?” Colt asked as he exited the cabin.

“Not even a scrap. The column storage and floor storage are both broken through. If any paperwork was there, it’s long gone now. What about the cabin?”

He held up a hat. “This is for a high school in one of the larger villages about twenty miles from here.”

“Well, I guess that’s a place to start.”

As they climbed out of the boat, Marty walked up and greeted them. “Sorry I couldn’t get over here when you arrived. My mom called all in a snit and I thought I’d never get her off the phone.”

“Anything wrong?” Colt asked.

Marty waved a hand in dismissal. “She’s ranting about someone stealing tarps and gasoline out of her garage.”

Jadyn frowned.

“Did someone break in?” Colt asked.

“Probably wouldn’t have to. I’m always telling her to keep the door locked, but I don’t think she does half the time. But it’s nothing to worry about. The way mom’s mind is going, chances are she didn’t have gas or tarps in there. Last week she was harping about someone stealing her clothesline.

Now, I ask you, why in the world would someone go to the trouble of stealing a cheap piece of metal wire?"

"Was the clothesline missing?" Jadyn asked.

"Yeah, but it could have popped and sprung off into the swamp. Mom's property backs up against it. That's far more likely than someone stealing it."

Jadyn nodded, but after what she'd heard at the café that morning, she wasn't as ready to dismiss his mother's claims as he was.

Marty waved at the boat. "I had to use some tie-downs to hold the back end together, but I'm pretty sure I got it all out...everything that was attached when it was in the cove, anyway. I scanned the area for the pieces that broke off, but didn't see anything except an oar handle."

"You did a great job," Jadyn said. "I didn't realize how much of the bottom had broken off until we searched it."

Marty nodded, but Jadyn could tell he was only half listening. His gaze was focused on the back part of the boat where the siding that would have contained the boat name had been ripped off. He narrowed his eyes on it and frowned.

"Is something wrong?" Jadyn asked.

"What?" Marty swung around to face her. "No. I don't think so. I mean...I don't want to tell you something wrong."

"If you see something off here," Jadyn said, "I'd love to know, even if it's just a feeling. Usually those bad feelings are our subconscious mind locking onto something that our conscious mind hasn't processed yet."

Marty scratched his head. "I don't know about all that. I was just thinking that the damage on the back of the boat looked funny."

"Funny how?"

"Well, if we assume the boat got caught in the storm and tossed about, then the back end must have slammed into something to break out those planks."

"That's what we're thinking," Jadyn agreed.

"But the thing is, the splintering on the back looks like the back was broken from the inside out." He studied the back of the boat once more and ran his finger across one of the broken planks. "Never mind. The more I think about it, the dumber it sounds. That couldn't possibly happen in a storm."

He looked back at them. "I'm going to lock up for lunch in about twenty minutes. If you need to stay longer, I'll give you a key."

"I think we're done," Jadyn said, "but thank you for everything. And remember to send me an invoice for the tow."

Marty waved a hand in dismissal. "I'd rather wait and bill the tow and storage all at one time. Hate doing paperwork. No sense doing it twice." He headed across the shop toward the office.

Jadyn looked over at Colt, who was studying the back of the boat and frowning. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" she asked.

Colt nodded, his expression grim. "If someone deliberately tried to sink this boat, it doesn't look good for our boat captain."

"We need to find out who he was. We may never find a body, but until we know who he was, then we have no way of knowing who would have wanted to harm him."

She pulled out her cell phone and snapped some pictures of the boat, then sent them to Colt. "If you can give me a list of the villages in the order you think they should be covered, I'll get started now."

"You kicking me off the job?"

"No! I mean, if you have the time to help, I would definitely appreciate it, but I don't want to

presume anything.”

~~“I’ve got some time, and I’d rather get a handle on this before tongues start wagging.”~~

Jadyn instantly recalled her conversation with Maryse about the security of Colt’s sheriff position, and she understood exactly why he wanted to get to the bottom of things. If this turned out to be a crime, people wouldn’t be happy waiting for answers, especially if it meant a killer was on the loose.

“That would be great. Unless you see any advantage to covering them together, we can split them and cover twice as many. If that’s all right with you.”

“That’s fine. I need to know if this man is sitting at home somewhere, bitching about his boat, or if he’s gator bait. I’ll go get started on that list. Drop by in twenty minutes or so and I’ll have that and a good map for you.”

He headed across the garage toward the exit. Jadyn stared at the boat a couple seconds more before heading after him. Finding out the identity of the missing boat captain was definitely the priority. But if he was gator bait, the job was just starting.

Was the wreck a horrible accident or an intentional act?

That was the one question Jadyn hoped she wouldn’t have to answer.

###

Downtown was so crowded with antiques shoppers that Jadyn had to park a block down from the sheriff’s department. She had barely exited her Jeep when she heard yelling. She looked across the street and saw two women standing outside the beauty salon.

Uh-oh.

Jadyn recognized the woman in the doorway as Millicent, the owner of the salon. She was always accosting Jadyn and trying to get her to come in for a haircut. Jadyn wasn’t hung up on her looks, but she’d seen enough people with odd haircuts exiting Millicent’s shop to send her to New Orleans for her hair styling.

The woman yelling at Millicent cinched Jadyn’s decision to never, ever let the beautician touch her hair. Yelling woman was in her midfifties and had probably gone to get her hair styled and gray covered. It was covered all right, but Jadyn wasn’t about to believe that the bright purple the woman now sported was what she’d asked for.

“You did this on purpose,” the lady with the purple hair yelled. “You’re a miserable cow, and I swear I’m going to sue if this doesn’t come out.”

“I put the same color on your hair that I always do. You saw the bottle. The only reason your hair would turn that color is if you put something else on it yourself. And given how cheap you are, I bet that’s exactly what happened.”

Two insane women arguing on the street wasn’t exactly her job responsibility, but given that Jadyn had sent Helena to the beauty shop, she was afraid she might be ethically responsible for the situation. But as she was about to step off the sidewalk and cross the street, someone jostled her from behind and Helena shoved a bag of popcorn in her hands.

“Hold this,” Helena said. “It will probably look weird if the bag was floating on Main Street, but a good show always deserves popcorn.” She grabbed a handful and stuffed it in her mouth, her cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk. She was still wearing the Hello Kitty pajamas but was now sporting military boots instead of slippers.

Jadyn narrowed her eyes at Helena. “What role exactly did you play in this show?”

“Who, me?” Helena did her best to look innocent but she managed to look about as benign as a serial killer.

“There!” Jadyn heard a woman yell down the sidewalk and turned to see a large middle-aged woman pointing straight at her. The fact that the woman looked completely deranged and was

dragging a small boy as she stomped toward Jadyn was more than a little disconcerting.

“You evil bitch,” the woman said as she stepped in front of Jadyn, wagging her finger in my face. “How can you steal popcorn from a child? What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Uh-oh,” Helena said and disappeared through the wall of the general store.

If it were possible, Jadyn would have followed Helena straight through that wall and shoved the entire bag in her mouth until she choked. Instead, she put on her surprised face and tried to come up with a decent cover story.

“I’m sorry. Some kid ran by—almost knocked me off the sidewalk—and dropped the bag as he went by. I was going to throw it away.”

The woman narrowed her eyes, trying to determine if Jadyn was lying. Finally she looked down at the boy. “Is this the woman who stole the popcorn from you?”

He sniffled. “I told you. It was the Invisible Man.”

She blew out a breath, clearly exasperated. “You and those damn comic books.” She snatched the popcorn out of Jadyn’s hands and went off in the other direction, the boy struggling to keep up with her pace.

Jadyn shook her head. The poor thing didn’t have a chance with that mother.

The shouting across the street increased in volume and Jadyn turned just in time to see Purple Hair grab hold of Millicent’s bangs and pull her down to the ground. Millicent was up in a second and launched at Purple Hair like she was playing tackle for the Saints. Jadyn hurried across the street, not certain Helena was at the bottom of the hair fiasco.

She grabbed Millicent’s arm and yelled at the two women, who were now rolling around in the street, but they were too angry to listen. A crowd had already formed and every second the yelling continued brought more people out of shops to see what was going on. The last thing Colt needed was store owners fighting with customers right in the middle of Main Street. Even though he had absolutely nothing to do with this fray, she knew some people would find a reason to lay the blame on him.

Desperate for a way to stop the two screaming banshees, she spied a water hose at the edge of the beauty shop. Before she changed her mind, she grabbed the hose and turned it full blast on the two women.

The shrieks increased a thousand times in volume and pitch when the cold water hit them. Immediately, they released each other and struggled up from the street, their gazes locking in on Jadyn. They were both drenched from the spray and had dirt and tiny flecks of asphalt clinging to every inch of their clothes and skin. But Purple Hair was in even worse shape.

A mass of the offending dye had run straight off her hair and onto her face, neck and top, leaving her looking like an extra on *Barney & Friends*. She glanced down at her outfit, then glared at Jadyn.

“Look what you did!” she yelled. “You ruined my shirt. I’m going to sue.”

“You’re not going to do anything of the kind.” Colt’s voice sounded across from her, and Jadyn peered around the two women to see him stepping through the crowd. He gave both women the once-over and shook his head. “You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”

“Me?” Purple Hair said, her eyes widening. “She’s the one who did this to my hair.”

“I did not do that,” Millicent said, clearly digging in her heels. “The chemicals reacted to something different on your hair or in your body.”

“Regardless,” Colt said, “that doesn’t excuse you fighting like children.”

Purple Hair threw her hands into the air. “What the hell am I supposed to do? I can’t walk around like this. My hair looks like an eggplant.”

“I’m sure Millicent will work with you until your hair is back to a normal color.” He looked over at the angry beautician. “Right?”

His expression clearly indicated that the only correct answer was “yes.” Millicent gave him a grudging nod, and Jadyn wondered if Purple Hair wouldn’t be better off shampooing her hair nonstop for a couple of days rather than allowing Millicent to put more chemicals on it.

“Show’s over!” Colt yelled. “Everyone get off the street and back to your own business.”

The crowd began to disperse, mumbling as they left. Purple Hair and Millicent gave Jadyn one final dirty look, then stalked back into the beauty shop. Colt looked over at Jadyn, his lips quivering, and finally the smile broke through.

“I can’t believe you hosed them down,” he said.

“Well, logic and yelling weren’t exactly effective, so…”

He nodded. “Sometimes, a cooling-down period is the best thing for everyone involved. I was just finishing up that list of villages when the beauty brawl broke out. Do you want to go over it now?”

Jadyn put the hose back against the beauty shop wall. “It’s probably best if I get out of sight for a bit.”

Colt grinned as they started down the sidewalk to the sheriff’s department. “I hope you don’t need a haircut anytime soon.”

“I’d borrow Mildred’s Weed Eater before I set foot in there.”

He laughed. “A solid plan.”

Shirley, the day dispatcher, looked up from her desk as they walked inside the sheriff’s department. Jadyn gave her a wave.

“Who won?” Shirley asked.

Colt pointed to Jadyn. “She doused them with the water hose.”

The dispatcher brightened. “I should have gone with you. That would have been worth the walk to see.”

Colt shook his head. “Remember the pleasure you feel right now before your next hair appointment. You’re always talking about that karma stuff.”

Shirley put her hands on her hips and frowned at Colt. “Even if I were unemployed and without a car, I swear to God, I’d hitchhike to New Orleans with a busload of devil worshippers and sweep floors for payment before I’d let Millicent touch my hair.”

Jadyn leaned over and held up her hand for Shirley to give her a high five. The dispatcher slapped her hand and gave her a satisfied nod. “At least someone else in this town has some taste.”

Colt rolled his eyes. “This is not your cue for another speech about how I need a haircut.” He waved at his office. “Let’s get going.”

Jadyn grinned at Shirley and followed Colt back to his office. She knew the dispatcher’s constant opinions on his life aggravated him. Likely, it made him feel that he was still the same child that Shirley babysat when he was a little boy. But Jadyn found it kinda sweet, in an annoying mothering sort of way.

She felt the same about Mildred. She loved that the older woman had taken her in and genuinely cared about her, but it also felt strange and sometimes slightly claustrophobic. In her case, she simply wasn’t used to older adults taking an interest in her life outside of how it affected their own. In Colt’s case, she guessed it was a manly man thing.

Colt closed the door behind them and she took a seat in front of his desk. He sat next to her and pulled a sheet of paper and a map of the area toward them. She glanced over at him and felt a slight blush run up her chest. In this case, Jadyn completely disagreed with Shirley. Colt’s a-bit-too-long, slightly wavy dark locks were as hot as the two-day stubble on his jaw. The man belonged on a poster for Sexy.

“Here’s the list of villages,” he said and pointed to the piece of paper. “That isn’t all of them, of course. There’s probably more out there that I haven’t heard of than I have, but those are the ones big

enough to support a shrimp house.”

Jadyn nodded. “So we check with the shrimp houses first and see if anyone recognizes the boat as one of the fishermen they buy from.”

“Exactly. Pricing varies a bit among the buyers, but not so much to make it worth a trip too far away from where he lives. Otherwise, he’d eat up the profit gain in gas.” He pointed to the map. “Given the path of the storm as it moved inland, I only covered villages to the east of Mudbug. So that leaves us ten shrimp houses to cover.”

Jadyn studied the map for several seconds, gauging the distance between the villages. “Great,” she said finally. “If we split up, we should be able to cover them all today.”

“I think so. If either of us gets a lead beyond the shrimp house, then we check in and decide whether or not to double-team the lead.”

“Perfect.”

“I’ll make a copy of these and we can get going.”

Jadyn rose from her chair as Colt gathered the map and list. She followed him to the door, where he stopped and turned to look at her. “If you run into problems, even something small, or something that doesn’t feel right, I want you to call me. You’ve got good instincts. If you are uncomfortable with someone or something, then there’s probably a reason for it.”

Jadyn felt a blush creep up her face at his compliment. He stared so intently at her that she completely lost her voice, managing only to nod.

“When we’re done,” he said, “maybe we can grab a bite to eat and exchange notes.”

He said it casually, like one law enforcement officer inviting another to beers after work, but Jadyn could hear an edge in his voice that told her the invitation wasn’t nearly as casual as Colt was trying to make it sound. And even if she’d been obtuse and completely missed that sign, the constriction of her chest would have been a dead giveaway.

“Sure,” she said, hoping she sounded remotely normal. “After a day of talking to fishermen, I’ll probably be dying for food and a beer.”

He smiled. “Give me a call when you’re on your way back to town. Unless something comes up first, of course.”

He exited the office, made copies, and filled Shirley in on their plans for the rest of the day.

“I’ll call if I get a line on a missing persons report,” she said. “You two be careful.”

“It’s just a wrecked boat,” Colt said.

The dispatcher raised one eyebrow. “That’s exactly how trouble starts around here.”

Jadyn followed Colt out of the sheriff’s department, glancing back at Shirley as she closed the door behind her. The dispatcher was staring out the window toward the bayou and frowning. It was an unsettling sort of frown.

Jadyn didn’t blame her. Nothing about this situation felt right.

Taylor Beaumont looked across her desk at the distraught woman sitting in front of her. One hand held the tissue Taylor had just passed her. The other clutched a Fendi handbag that Taylor knew was part of a recent collection and cost more than she'd made last year with her detective agency. The diamonds on her fingers and around her neck were probably worth more than she'd ever see her entire career.

"I'm sorry to be such a mess." The woman, who'd identified herself as Sophia Lambert, patted the corner of her eyes with the tissue, careful not to smear her mascara.

"Don't worry about it," Taylor said. "If people's lives were perfect, they wouldn't need me."

Sophia sniffed again and nodded. "I suppose that's true. You've probably seen more than your share of weeping women."

"I've seen a few. Please tell me how I can help you?"

Taylor had been intrigued by Sophia as soon as she'd walked into the agency. Everything about her screamed old money, and Taylor was rarely wrong when it came to old money. What intrigued Taylor most was why Sophia was here, when she could have easily afforded the poshest private investigators in New Orleans.

"I want you to find my husband."

Taylor's interest flew a million times higher. A wealthy disappearing husband was the sort of thing movies of the week were made of. Which brought her right back around to why Sophia had chosen Taylor's single-person, fairly green operation over the big agencies with tons of experience and lots of resources.

"How long has he been missing?" Taylor asked, figuring she'd get the business out of the way first, then get to the bottom of why Sophia had picked her.

"Well, technically twenty-nine years, but it's a bit complex."

Taylor froze, her pen poised on the tablet. "You might need to start at the beginning."

"Of course. I know it sounds strange, and well, it is strange." She blew out a breath. "I guess I should start with the explosion."

"Whatever you think," Taylor said.

"Okay. My great-grandfather started the first rubber refinery in the state, and every generation increased business and branched out further with the scope of what we do. One of our manufacturing plants uses highly flammable liquids for production. My husband, Sammy—Samuel Perkins—worked at one of the chemical plants as an operations director."

"So you met Samuel through your family's business?"

"Actually, we met at a bar in New Orleans, but my family still doesn't know that. They all think we met at college. The funny thing is Samuel never even went to college. His family was quite poor and he'd been working construction when I met him." She gave me a mischievous grin. "I might have lied to my family about his credentials to get him a job at the plant, but he was so smart and good at the work that no one ever checked."

"No harm, no foul," Taylor said.

"That's exactly what I thought! Anyway, my father was an engineer and far more interested in the inner workings of the machines than running the business, so he was quite happy to leave a lot of the decisions to my Sammy, who single-handedly brought us into the twentieth century by installing computers and automating systems. He was what they call an early adopter." She frowned.

"Tell me about the explosion."

"No one's quite sure what happened. Sammy said he needed to talk to my father, and the secreta

told him that my father had left for one of the power buildings near the bayou twenty minutes before Sammy left the office, presumably to talk to my dad. Twenty minutes later, the power building exploded.”

“Your father and Sammy were inside?”

She nodded. “The security cameras didn’t capture the area in front of the building, but they showed both of them entering the security gate that led to the dock and the power area. The explosion was so strong they never found any...they couldn’t...”

“They didn’t find the remains,” Taylor finished.

Sophia sniffed again and shook her head. “Before the firemen could even get the fire out, it started raining—one of those downpours that southern Louisiana is famous for—and a lot of the debris washed into the bayou. They searched the wreckage and the bayou for days, but never came up with anything concrete.”

“Except that neither man returned home.”

“No.”

“So what do you think I can find, all these years later, that the firemen didn’t discover during their investigation? My chance of locating something containing DNA almost thirty years later is practically nil.”

Sophia’s eyes widened and she sat forward in her chair. “But that’s just it—I’m not sure he’s dead.”

Taylor stared at her for a couple of seconds, trying to make the same leap, but couldn’t quite get there. “Let’s just assume he could have lived through the explosion. Why didn’t he come home? And where has he been the last thirty years?”

Sophia nodded, beginning to look a bit excited. “I saw this special on television, about people who’d been in horrible accidents and wandered away. Everyone thought they were dead, so no missing persons reports were filed. They were all rescued by Good Samaritans and nursed back to health, but not a single one of them knew who they were.”

“Amnesia?”

She nodded. “A couple of them started to remember as time passed, but several never remembered a single thing about their previous life. In every case, it was a chance meeting with someone who knew them before that exposed the truth.”

Taylor leaned forward, trying to keep up with Sophia’s leaps. “And someone who knew Sammy before saw him recently?”

Sophia beamed. “I think so. My friend Norma was doing some work with one of the local literacy organizations, delivering donated books to children in the villages southwest of here. She said she saw a man on a shrimp boat that was the spitting image of my Sammy. Only older, of course.”

Taylor sat back in her chair and tapped her pen on the desk, not sure how to proceed without completely dashing the woman’s hopes and not sure she had the tissues to handle it if she did.

“I can understand why you’d want to believe that Sammy somehow managed to live through the explosion,” Taylor said, “but none of us have any way of knowing what Sammy would look like today. It’s far more likely the man your friend saw reminded her of Sammy but he was someone completely different.”

“I’m well aware of how crazy this sounds. It’s exactly why I didn’t go straight to one of the big detective agencies. People talk, and the last thing I need is rumors circulating that I’ve lost the plot. I’m the CEO of Lambert Enterprises now. I can’t afford loose talk. The board of directors is just looking for a chance to get me out and anyone with a penis in. Sorry for the crassness of the statement.”

Aha, Taylor thought. Sophia’s seemingly odd choice now made perfect sense. “No, that’s all right.”

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