

A LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY — BOOK THREE

SEASIDE HARBOR

CRIME

IN THE

CAFFÈ

FIONA GRACE

A Lacey Doyle Cozy Mystery

Fiona Grace

Crime in the Café

«Lukeman Literary Management Ltd»

Grace F.

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"Very entertaining. I highly recommend this book to the permanent library of any reader that appreciates a very well written mystery, with some twists and an intelligent plot. You will not be disappointed. Excellent way to spend a cold weekend!" --Books and Movie Reviews, Roberto Mattos (regarding Murder in the Manor) CRIME IN THE CAFE (A LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY—BOOK 3) is book three in a charming new cozy mystery series by Fiona Grace.

Lacey Doyle, 39 years old and freshly divorced, has made a drastic change: she has walked away from the fast life of New York City and settled down in the quaint English seaside town of Wilfordshire. Summer is nearly here, and Lacey has fallen more in love with the town and with her chef boyfriend. She has even made a best friend: the new owner of a local B&B. And when her friend needs her services for the decoration of her inn, buying nearly everything in Lacey's antique shop, her business even gets an extra boost. Everything's going perfectly—until someone mysteriously dies in her friend's new B&B. Their village turned upside down and her new friend's livelihood now in jeopardy, it's up to Lacey and her dog to get to the bottom of the mystery. Book #4 in the series will be available soon!

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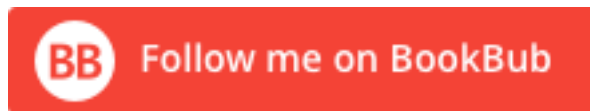
Fiona Grace

Crime in the Café (A Lacey Doyle Cozy Mystery—Book 3)

Fiona Grace

Debut author Fiona Grace is author of the LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY series which includes MURDER IN THE MANOR (Book #1), DEATH AND A DOG (Book #2), CRIME IN THE CAFE (Book #3), VEXED ON A VISIT (Book #4), and KILLED WITH A KISS (Book #5). Fiona is also the author of the TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY series.

Fiona would love to hear from you, so please visit www.fionagraceauthor.com to receive free ebooks, hear the latest news, and stay in touch.



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BOOKS BY FIONA GRACE

LACEY DOYLE COZY MYSTERY

MURDER IN THE MANOR (Book#1)

DEATH AND A DOG (Book #2)

CRIME IN THE CAFE (Book #3)

VEXED ON A VISIT (Book #4)

KILLED WITH A KISS (Book #5)

TUSCAN VINEYARD COZY MYSTERY

AGED FOR MURDER (Book#1)

AGED FOR DEATH (Book#2)

AGED FOR MAYHEM (Book#3)

CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, Lacey!” came Gina’s voice from the back room of the antiques store. “Come here a minute.”

Lacey gently placed the antique brass candelabra she’d been polishing onto the counter. The soft thud it emitted caused Chester, her English Shepherd, to quirk his head up.

He’d been sleeping in his usual spot, stretched across the floorboards beside the counter, bathed in a beam of June sunshine. He tipped his dark brown eyes up to Lacey, and his tufty eyebrows twitched with evident curiosity.

“Gina needs me,” Lacey told him, his perceptive expression always making her feel as if he could understand every word she said. “You keep an eye on the store and bark if any customers come in. Got it?”

Chester whinnied his acknowledgment and sank his head back onto his paws.

Lacey headed through the archway that separated the main shop floor from the large, recently converted auction room. It was the shape of a train carriage—long and narrow—but the ceiling stretched high like that of a church.

Lacey loved this room. But then again, she loved everything about her store, from the retro furniture section she’d used her past knowledge as a New York City interior designer’s assistant to curate, to the vegetable garden out back. The store was her pride and joy, even if at times she felt it brought her more trouble than it was worth.

She entered through the arch, and a warm breeze came in through the open back door, bringing with it fragrant smells from the flower garden Gina had been cultivating. But the woman herself was nowhere to be seen.

Lacey scanned the auction room, then deduced Gina must have been calling to her from the garden, and headed in the direction of the open French doors. But as she went, she heard a shuffling noise coming from the left-hand corridor.

The corridor housed the more unsightly parts of her store—the cramped office filled with filing cabinets and steel safes; the kitchen area where her faithful kettle and variety of caffeinated beverages lived; the bathroom (or “loo” as everyone in Wilfordshire referred to it), and the boxy storage room.

“Gina?” Lacey called into the darkness. “Where are you?”

“Cooley!” came her friend’s voice, muffled as if she had her head in something. Knowing Gina, she probably did. “I’m in the storeroom!”

Lacey frowned. There was no reason for Gina to be in the storeroom. A condition of Lacey employing her was that she wouldn’t overexert herself with any heavy lifting. But then again, when did Gina ever listen to anything Lacey said?

With a sigh, Lacey went down the corridor and into the storeroom. She found Gina crouching in front of the shelving unit, her frazzled gray hair piled on top of her head in a bun fixed with a purple velvet scrunchie.

“What are you doing back here?” Lacey asked her friend.

Gina swiveled her head to look up at her. She’d recently invested in a pair of red-framed glasses, claiming they were “all the rage in Shoreditch” (though why a sixty-plus-year-old pensioner would take her fashion cues from the trendy youths of London was beyond Lacey) and they slid down her nose. She used an index finger to push them back into place, then pointed at an oblong cardboard box on the shelf in front of her.

“There’s an unopened box here,” Gina announced. Then, with a knowingly conspiratorial tone, she added, “And the postmark says it’s from Spain.”

Lacey immediately felt her cheeks warm. The parcel was from Xavier Santino, the handsome Spanish antiques collector who’d attended her nautical-themed auction the previous month, in an

attempt to reunite his family's collection of lost heirlooms. Along with Lacey, he'd ended up becoming a suspect in the murder of an American tourist. They'd become friendly during the ordeal, their bond cemented further by Xavier's coincidental connection to her missing father.

"It's just something Xavier sent me," Lacey said, trying to brush it off. "You know he's helping me piece together information about my father's disappearance."

Gina rose from her crouch, knees cricking, and peered at Lacey with a suspicious gaze. "I know very well what he's supposed to be doing," she said, her hands going to her hips. "What I don't understand is why he's sending you gifts. That's the third this month."

"Gifts?" Lacey retorted defensively, picking up on Gina's insinuation. "An envelope filled with receipts from my father's store during Xavier's trip to New York hardly constitutes a gift in my eyes."

Gina's expression remained nonplussed. She tapped her foot. "What about the painting?"

In her mind's eye, Lacey pictured the oil painting of a boat at sea that Xavier had mailed her just last week. She'd hung it above the fireplace in her living room at Crag Cottage.

"It's the type of boat his great-great-grandfather captained," she told Gina, defensively. "Xavier found it in a flea market and thought I might like it." She gave a nonchalant shrug, trying to downplay it.

"Huh," Gina grunted, her lips pressed into a straight line. "*Saw this and thought of you.* You know how that looks to an outsider..."

Lacey huffed. She'd reached the end of her patience. "Whatever you're hinting at, why don't you just come out and say it?"

"Fine," her friend replied boldly. "I think there's more to Xavier's gift-giving than you're willing to accept. I think he likes you."

Though Lacey had guessed her friend was implying as much, she still felt affronted hearing it spoken so plainly.

"I'm perfectly happy with Tom," she argued, her mind's eye conjuring up an image of the gorgeous, broad-smiled baker she was lucky enough to call her lover. "Xavier's only trying to help. He promised he would when I gave him his great-grandfather's sextant. You're just inventing drama where there is none."

"If there was no drama," Gina replied calmly, "then why are you hiding Xavier's parcel on the bottom shelf of the storage cupboard?"

Lacey faltered momentarily. Gina's accusations had taken her off guard and left her flustered. For a moment, she forgot the reason why she'd stowed the parcel away after signing for the delivery, instead of opening it right away. Then she remembered; the paperwork was delayed. Xavier had said she'd need to sign an accompanying certificate, so she'd decided to stow it away for the time being in case she accidentally violated any finicky British law she'd yet to learn. With the amount of time the police had ended up sniffing around her store, she couldn't really be too careful!

"I'm not hiding it," Lacey said. "I'm waiting for the certification to arrive."

"You don't know what's inside?" Gina asked. "Xavier didn't tell you what it was?"

Lacey shook her head.

"And you didn't ask?" her friend prompted.

Again, Lacey shook her head.

She noticed then that the look of accusation in Gina's eyes was starting to fade. Instead, it was being overtaken with curiosity.

"Do you think it could be something..." Gina lowered her voice. "...illegal?"

Despite being confident Xavier had not shipped her some banned item, Lacey was more than happy to divert the topic away from his gift, so she ran with it.

"Could be," she said.

Gina's eyes widened further. "What kind of things?" she asked, sounding like an awed child.

“Ivory, for one,” Lacey told her, recalling knowledge from her studies of items that were illegal to sell in the UK, antiques or otherwise. “Anything made from the fur of an endangered species. Upholstery made with fabric that’s not fire-retardant. Obviously weapons...”

All hints of suspicion now entirely vacated Gina’s expression; the “drama” over Xavier was forgotten in the blink of an eye with the far more exciting possibility of there being a weapon inside the box.

“A weapon?” Gina repeated, a little squeak in her voice. “Can’t we open it and see?”

She looked as excited as a child beside the tree on Christmas Eve.

Lacey hesitated. She’d been excited to look inside the parcel ever since it had arrived by special courier. It must have cost Xavier an arm and a leg to send it all the way from Spain, and the packaging was elaborate as well; the thick cardboard was as sturdy as wood, and the whole thing was fixed with industrial-sized staples and tied with zip ties. Whatever was inside was obviously very precious.

“Okay,” Lacey said, feeling rebellious. “What harm can a peek do?”

She tucked an unruly strand from her dark bangs behind her ear and fetched the box cutter. She used it to slice the zip ties and prize out the staples. Then she opened up the box and sifted through the Styrofoam packaging.

“It’s a case,” she said, tugging on the leather handle and heaving out a heavy wooden case. Styrofoam bits fluttered everywhere.

“Looks like a spy’s briefcase,” Gina said. “Oh, you don’t think your father was a spy, do you? Maybe a Russian one!”

Lacey rolled her eyes as she placed the heavy case onto the floor. “I may have entertained a lot of outlandish theories about what happened to my father over the years,” she said, clicking open the catches of the case one after the next. “But Russian spy has never been one of them.”

She pushed up the lid and looked into the case. She gasped at the sight of what it contained. A beautiful antique flintlock hunting rifle.

Gina started cough-choking. “You can’t have that thing in here! Goodness, you probably can’t have it in England, full stop! What on earth was Xavier thinking sending this to you?”

But Lacey wasn’t listening to her friend’s outburst. Her attention was fixated on the rifle. It was in excellent shape, despite the fact it had to be well over a hundred years old.

Carefully, Lacey removed it from the case, feeling the weight of it in her hands. There was something familiar about it. But she’d never held a rifle, much less fired one, and despite the odd sense of déjà vu that had rippled through her, she had no concrete memories to attach to it.

Gina started flapping her hands. “Lacey, put it back! Put it back! I’m sorry I made you take it out. I didn’t really think it would be a weapon.”

“Gina, calm down,” Lacey told her.

But her friend was on a roll. “You need a license! You might even be committing an offense having it in this country at all! Things are very different over here than they are in the USA!”

Gina’s squeaking reached a fever pitch but Lacey just left her to it. She’d learned there was no talking Gina down from her panicky outbursts. They always ran their course eventually. Either that, or Gina would tire herself out.

Besides, Lacey’s attention was too absorbed by the beautiful rifle to pay her any heed. She was mesmerized by the strange feeling of familiarity it had stirred within her.

She peered down the barrel. Felt the weight of it. The shape of it in her hands. Even the smell of it. There was just something wonderful about the rifle, like it was always meant to belong to her.

Just then, Lacey became aware of silence. Gina had finally stopped ranting. Lacey glanced up at her.

“Are you finished?” she asked, calmly.

Gina was still staring at the rifle like it was a circus tiger escaped from its cage, but she nodded slowly.

“Good,” Lacey said. “What I was trying to tell you is that I’ve not only done my homework on the UK’s laws on possession and use of firearms, but I actually have a certificate to legally trade antique ones.”

Gina paused, a small, perplexed frown appearing in the space between her brows. “You do?”

“Yes,” Lacey assured her. “Back when I was valuing the contents of Penrose Manor, the estate had a whole collection of shooting rifles. I had to apply for a license immediately in order to hold the auction. Percy Johnson helped me organize it all.”

Gina pursed her lips. She was wearing her surrogate mother expression. “Why didn’t I know about this?”

“Well, you didn’t work for me back then, did you? You were just the lady next door whose sheep kept trespassing on my property.” Lacey chuckled at the fond memory of her first morning waking up in Crag Cottage to find a herd of sheep munching her grass.

Gina didn’t return the smile. She seemed to be in a stubborn mood.

“Still,” she said, folding her arms, “you’ll need to get it registered with the police, won’t you? Have it logged on the firearms database.”

At the mention of the police, an image of Superintendent Karl Turner’s stern, emotionless face appeared in Lacey’s mind’s eye, followed quickly by the face of his stoic partner, Detective Inspector Beth Lewis. She’d had enough encounters with the two of them to last a lifetime.

“Actually, I don’t,” she told Gina. “It’s an antique and not in working order. That means it’s classified as an ornament. I told you, I already did my homework!”

But Gina wasn’t budging. She seemed determined to find fault in the matter.

“Not in working order?” she repeated. “How do you know that for sure? I thought you said the paperwork was delayed.”

Lacey hesitated. Gina had her there. She hadn’t seen the paperwork yet, so she couldn’t be one hundred percent certain the rifle wasn’t in working order. But there was no ammunition included in the case, for one thing, and Lacey was quite confident Xavier wouldn’t send her a loaded gun through the postal system!

“Gina,” she said in a firm but final voice, “I promise you I’ve got it all under control.”

The affirmation rolled easily off Lacey’s tongue. She did not know it at the time, but they were words she would soon come to regret ever having uttered.

Gina seemed to relent, though she didn’t look too happy about it. “Fine. If you say you’ve got it covered, then you’ve got it covered. But why would Xavier send you a bloody *gun* of all things?”

“Now *that* is a good question,” Lacey said, suddenly wondering the same thing herself.

She reached inside the parcel and found a folded piece of paper at the bottom. She took it out. Gina’s insinuation earlier that Xavier had more than just friendship on his mind made her instantly awkward. She cleared her throat as she unfolded the letter and read it aloud.

“Dear Lacey,

“As you know, I was in Oxford recently...”

She paused, feeling Gina’s gaze on her sharpen, as if her friend was silently judging her. Feeling her cheeks grow warm, Lacey maneuvered the letter so as to block Gina from view.

“As you know, I was in Oxford recently searching for my great-grandfather’s lost antiques. I saw this rifle, and it jogged my memory. Your father had a similar rifle for sale in his New York store. We talked about it. He told me he had recently been on a hunting trip in England. It was a funny story. He said he had not known, but it was the off-season during his trip, and so he could only legally hunt rabbits. I researched hunting seasons in England, and the off-season is during the summer. I do not recall him saying Wilfordshire by name, but remember you said that was where he holidayed in the summers? Perhaps there is a local hunting group? Perhaps they may have known him?”

“Yours, Xavier.”

Lacey avoided Gina's scrutinizing glare as she folded up the letter. The older woman didn't even need to speak for Lacey to know what she was thinking—that Xavier could've told her about the memory in a text message, rather than going so overblown as to send her a rifle! But Lacey didn't really care. She was more interested in the contents of the letter than any possible romantic notions underpinning Xavier's actions.

So her father enjoyed *hunting* during his summers in England, did he? That was news to her! Beyond the fact she had no memories of him even owning a rifle, she couldn't imagine her mother being okay with it. She was extremely squeamish. Easily offended. Was that why he'd traveled to a different country to do it? It could've been a secret he'd kept from her mother entirely, a guilty pleasure he only indulged in once a year. Or maybe he'd come over to England to shoot because of the company he kept over here...

Lacey recalled the beautiful woman in the antiques store, the one who'd helped Naomi after she broke the ornament, the one they'd met again in the streets, when a sunburst behind her head had obscured her features. The woman with the gentle English accent and the fragrant smell. Could she have been the one who'd introduced her father to the hobby? Was it a pastime they shared?

She grabbed her cell to message her younger sister, but only got as far as writing, "*Did Dad own guns...*" when she was interrupted by Chester *yip-yip-yipping* to get her attention. The bell over the front door must have tinkled.

She returned the rifle to its case, clipping shut the latches, and went to head back to the shop floor.

"You can't leave that lying around!" Gina cried, switching from suspicion back to panic mode in an instant.

"Put it in the safe then, if it concerns you that much," Lacey said over her shoulder.

"Me?" she heard Gina shrilly exclaim.

Though she was already halfway along the corridor, Lacey paused. She sighed.

"I'll be with you in a minute!" she called out in the direction she'd been heading.

Then she turned, went back into the storeroom, and picked up the case.

As she carried it past Gina, the woman kept her cautious gaze locked on it and stepped back as if it might explode at any second. Lacey managed to wait until she'd fully passed before rolling her eyes at Gina's overly dramatic reaction.

Lacey took the rifle to the large steel safe where her most precious and expensive items were safely locked away, and secured it inside. Then she headed back into the corridor, where a meek-looking Gina followed her to the shop floor. At least now that the gun was out of sight, she'd finally stopped squawking.

Back on the main shop floor, Lacey was expecting to see a customer perusing one of the store's crammed shelves. Instead, she was greeted by the very unwelcome sight of Taryn, her nemesis from the boutique next door.

Taryn swirled on her spindly heels at the sound of Lacey's footsteps. Her dark brown pixie cut was slicked with so much gel not even a single hair moved out of place. Despite the bright June sunshine, she was dressed in her signature LBD, and it showed off every sharp angle of her bony fashionista figure.

"Do you usually leave your customers unsupervised and without assistance for that long?" Taryn asked, haughtily.

From beside Lacey came the sound of a low grumble from Chester. The English Shepherd didn't care for the snooty shopkeeper at all. Neither did Gina, who emitted her own grumble before busying herself with some paperwork.

"Good morning, Taryn," Lacey said, forcing herself into a cordial disposition. "How can I help you on this beautiful day?"

Taryn flashed her narrowed eyes at Chester, then folded her arms and pinned her hawk-like gaze on Lacey.

“I already told you,” she snapped. “I’m a customer.”

“You?” Lacey retorted too quickly to hide her disbelief.

“Yes, *actually*,” Taryn replied dryly. “I need one of those Edison lamp thingies. You know the ones. Ugly things with big bulbs on bronze stands? You always have them displayed in your window.”

She started peering around her. With her thin nose held up to the air, she reminded Lacey of a bird.

Lacey couldn’t help but be suspicious. Taryn’s store was sleek and simplistic, with overhead spotlights that beamed clinically white light over everything. What did she want a rustic lamp for?

“Are you re-styling the boutique?” Lacey asked gingerly, coming out from behind the desk and gesturing for Taryn to follow her.

“I just want to inject a bit of character into the place,” the woman said as her heels clicked behind Lacey. “And as far as I can tell, those lamps are very *in* at the moment. I’m seeing them everywhere. At the hairdresser’s. In the coffeeshop. There were about a million of the things in Brooke’s tearoom...”

Lacey froze. Her heart began thumping.

Just the mention of her old friend’s name filled her with panic. It had barely been a month since her Australian friend had chased after her wielding a knife, trying to silence Lacey after she’d worked out she’d killed an American tourist. Lacey’s bruises had healed, but the mental scars were still fresh.

So that’s why Taryn was asking for an Edison lamp? Not because she wanted one, but so she had an excuse to bring up Brooke’s name and upset Lacey! She really was a nasty piece of work.

Losing all enthusiasm to help Taryn, even if she was a supposed customer, Lacey pointed limply over to “Steampunk Corner,” the section of the store where her collection of bronze lamps lived.

“Over there,” she muttered.

She watched Taryn’s expression turn sour as she scanned the array of aviator goggles and walking canes, and the full-sized aquanaut’s suit. To be fair to her, Lacey wasn’t that keen on the aesthetic either. But there was a whole bunch of individuals in Wilfordshire—the type with long black hair and velvet capes—who visited her store regularly, so she sourced the items specifically for them. The only problem was, the new section blocked her previously unspoiled view across the street to Tom’s patisserie, which meant Lacey could no longer dreamily gaze out at him whenever the mood struck her.

With Taryn occupied, Lacey took the opportunity now to glance across the street.

Tom’s store was as busy as ever. Busier, even, with the increased amount of tourists. Lacey could make out his six-foot-three figure darting around, working at hyperspeed to fulfill everyone’s orders. The light streaming in from the June sunshine made his skin look even more golden.

Just then, Lacey caught sight of Tom’s new assistant, Lucia. He’d employed the young woman just a few weeks ago so that he would have more free time to spend with Lacey. But ever since the girl had started working there, the patisserie had been busier than ever!

Lacey watched on as Lucia and Tom almost bumped into one another, then both took a step right, another left, attempting to avoid a collision but ending up in comical synchronization. The slapstick routine ended with Tom theatrically bowing, so Lucia could pass on his left. He flashed her one of his bright-kilowatt smiles as she did.

Lacey’s stomach clenched at the sight of them. She couldn’t help it. Jealousy. Suspicion. These were all new emotions for Lacey, ones she seemed to have only acquired since her divorce, as if her ex-husband had slipped them within the pages of their divorce documents in order to make sure her future relationships were as fraught as possible. They were ugly feelings, but she couldn’t control them. Lucia got to spend significantly more time with Tom than she did. And the time she spent with him was when he was at his best—energized, creative, and productive, rather than snoozily watching

television on her couch. Everything felt unbalanced, as if they were sharing Tom and the ratios were massively skewed in the young woman's favor.

"Pretty, isn't she?" came Taryn's voice in Lacey's ear, like the devil on her shoulder.

Lacey bristled. Taryn was just stirring the pot as usual.

"Verrrrry pretty," Taryn added. "It must drive you mad to know Tom's over there all day with her."

"Don't be stupid," Lacey snapped.

But Taryn's appraisal was, to use a Gina idiom, "bang on." That is to say, she was totally right. And that just made Lacey more frustrated.

Taryn smiled thinly. A malevolent sparkle appeared behind her eyes. "I keep meaning to ask. How is your Spanish man? Xavier, wasn't it?"

Lacey bristled even more. "He's not my Spanish man!"

But before they could enter into a spat, the doorbell tinkled noisily, and Chester began to yip.

Saved by the bell, Lacey thought, hurrying away from Taryn and her snakelike suggestions.

But when she saw who was waiting, she wondered if it was a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Carol, from the B&B, was standing in the middle of the shop floor with a look of abject horror on her face. She seemed panicked, and was panting as if she'd run all the way here.

Lacey felt her stomach lurch. A horrible sense of *déjà vu* overcame her. Something had happened. Something bad.

"Carol?" Gina said. "What's the matter, ducky? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Carol's bottom lip began to tremble. She opened her mouth as if attempting to speak, but then closed it again.

From behind, Lacey heard the clip-clip sound of Taryn's heels as she hurried over, presumably wanting a ringside view of the unfolding drama.

The anticipation was killing Lacey. She couldn't bear it. Dread seemed to be flooding through every fiber of her body.

"What is it, Carol?" Lacey demanded. "What's happened?"

Carol shook her head vigorously. She took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I have some terrible news..."

Lacey braced herself.

CHAPTER TWO

What could have happened?

An accident?

A... *murder*?

God forbid, not another one!

“Carol?” Lacey asked, her vocal cords feeling squeezed.

The look of fear in Carol’s eyes as she paced back and forth across the shop floor was sending lightning bolts of panic straight through Lacey. Her stomach started somersaulting, as if she’d driven her secondhand Volvo off the side of the cliff and was careening toward the ocean below. She felt her hands begin to tremble as a succession of memories invaded her mind: Iris’s body lying on the floor of her manor house; Buck’s sand-smeared mouth as he lay deceased on the beach. Then the flashing images were joined by the sudden screech of police sirens in her ears, and that awful crinkly sound of the silver blanket the paramedics wrapped around her shoulders. And finally, she heard the voice of Superintendent Turner, echoing his warning in her mind. “*Don’t leave town, okay?*”

Lacey grabbed the counter to steady herself, braced for whatever awful news Carol was about to deliver. She was barely able to focus on the woman who was pacing around the shop floor.

“What is it?” Gina asked impatiently. “What’s happened?”

“Yes, please hurry up and drop your bombshell,” Taryn said, lazily, waving the Edison lamp carelessly as she spoke. “Some of us have lives to get back to.”

Carol finally stopped pacing. She turned to face the three of them, her eyes rimmed with red.

“There’s...” she began, snuffling on her words. “A... a... a *B&B* opening!”

A beat of silence passed as the three women let the revelation—or lack of one—sink in.

“Ha!” Taryn finally exclaimed. She slapped a twenty-pound note down on the counter beside Lacey. “I’ll leave you to deal with this crisis. Thanks for the lamp.”

And with that, she waltzed away, leaving a scent of smoky cedar perfume in her wake.

Once she was gone, Lacey turned her attention back to Carol, staring at her in disbelief. Of course, a new *B&B* was terrible news for *Carol*, who would be facing even stiffer competition for the tourist trade than she already did, but it didn’t make one jot of difference to Lacey! And considering the awful misfortune the town had experienced with the murder of Iris Archer and the more recent murder of Buck, she ought to know better than to run around town screaming over something so trivial!

All Lacey seemed able to do was blink. Her fury seemed to have routed her tongue well and truly to her palate. Gina’s tongue, on the other hand, was as loose as ever.

“That’s *it*?” she bellowed. “A *B&B*? You nearly gave me a bloody heart attack!”

“A *B&B* in Wilfordshire is terrible news for everyone,” Carol cried again, frowning at Gina’s response. “Not just me!”

“Really?” Lacey said, finally finding her voice. “And why would that be exactly?”

Carol shot her a daggered look. “Huh, well I should’ve known you wouldn’t understand. You are an outsider, after all.”

Lacey felt herself flame with rage. How dare Carol call her an outsider? She’d been here for several months, and had contributed to the local town in a myriad of ways! Her store was as much a part of the fabric of the high street as anyone else’s.

She opened her mouth to respond, but before she did, Gina snatched up a box of tissues from the counter and stepped forward, creating a physical barrier between her and Carol.

“Why don’t you take a seat?” Gina said to the *B&B* owner. “Let’s talk all this through.” Then she flashed Lacey a look that said, *I’ll handle this, because you’re about to blow.*

She was right. The panic Carol's non-event had induced in Lacey was starting to subside, but she really could've done without it in the first place. And she certainly could've done without Carol calling her an outsider! If anything could rile Lacey, that was it.

As Gina guided Carol to a red leather loveseat, offering her a tissue—"Here. Take one of these for your snoz"—Lacey paced away and took several calming breaths. As she did, Chester looked up at her and let out a sympathetic whinny.

"I'm all right, boy," she told him. "Just a bit rattled." She bent down and patted his head. "I'm okay now."

Chester whined as if in reluctant acceptance.

Bolstered by his support, Lacey went over to the loveseat to find out what was really going on.

Carol was full on sobbing now. Gina slowly rolled her eyes up until her deadpan expression locked with Lacey's. Lacey made a shooing gesture with her hand. Gina quickly vacated her seat.

Lacey perched beside Carol, the design of the loveseat forcing her to sit thigh to thigh with the woman; far closer than Lacey would ever choose if not for the circumstances.

"It's that bloody new mayor's fault," Carol wailed. "I knew he was trouble!"

"The new mayor?" Lacey said. She didn't know anything about there being a new mayor.

Carol turned her angry red eyes to Lacey. "He's had the east half of town rezoned. That whole area beyond the canoe club's been changed from residential to commercial! He's going to have a shopping mall built! Filled with horrible, characterless chain stores!" Her voice grew more and more incredulous. "He wants to build a *water park*! Here! In Wilfordshire! Where it rains for two-thirds of the year! And then he's going to build this monstrosity of a viewing tower! It'll be such an eyesore!"

Lacey listened to Carol's ranting, though she failed to understand why this was such a big problem. As things stood at the moment, barely anyone ventured beyond the canoe club. It was pretty much dead space. Even the beach on that side of town was rugged. Developing the area seemed like a good idea to her, especially if there was going to be a high-class B&B to service it all. And surely that would benefit all the businesses on the high street, with the increased tourism.

Lacey looked up at Gina to see if her expression might hold any clues as to why this was supposedly such a big crisis. Instead, Gina was barely hiding the smirk on her face. Clearly, she thought Carol was being overdramatic, and if *Gina* thought you were being overdramatic, then you really had problems!

"She's some go-getter from *London*," Carol continued ranting. "Twenty-two years old. Fresh out of uni!"

She took another tissue from the box and blew her nose noisily, before handing the soggy crumpled thing back to Gina. The smirk was immediately wiped from Gina's face.

"How does a twenty-two-year-old open a B&B?" Lacey said, her tone one of marvel rather than Carol's disdain.

"By having rich parents, obviously," Carol sneered. "Her parents owned that huge retirement home in the hills. You know the one?"

Lacey could just about bring it to her memory, though she'd barely ventured that way. From what she remembered, it was a very large estate. It would require an enormous renovation to turn it from a dated retirement home to a B&B, not to mention some development of the infrastructure. It was a good fifteen-minute walk out of town and there were only two buses an hour that served that part of the coast. It seemed like a lot for a twenty-two-year-old to take on.

"Anyway," Carol continued. "The parents decided to retire early and sell off their retirement portfolio, but each of her kids got to choose one property each to do what they wanted with. Can you *imagine* being twenty-two and being *given* a property? I had to work my fingers to the bone to start my business and now Little Miss Thing is just going to waltz in and start hers like that." She snapped her fingers aggressively.

“We should count ourselves lucky she decided on something as sensible as a B&B,” Gina said. “If I’d been given a huge house at her age, I’d probably have opened a twenty-four-hour nightclub.”

Lacey couldn’t help herself. She let out a bark of laughter. But Carol dissolved into tears.

Just then, Chester decided to come over and see what all the commotion was about. He rested his head in Carol’s lap.

What a sweetheart, Lacey thought.

Chester didn’t know Carol was being dramatic about nothing. He just thought she was a human in distress who deserved some comfort. Lacey decided to take a page out of his book.

“Sounds to me like you’re panicking over nothing,” she said to Carol, softly. “Your B&B is iconic. The tourists love the Barbie-pink house on the high street just as much as they love Tom’s window sculptures made from macarons. A luxury B&B can’t compete with your period property. It has its own quirky style and people love it.”

Lacey had to ignore the sound of sniggering coming from Gina. Quirky had been a carefully selected word to describe all the flamingos and palm ferns, and she could just imagine the different ones Gina would’ve chosen: gaudy, tacky, garish...

Carol looked up at Lacey with watery eyes. “You really think so?”

“I know so! And besides, you have something Little Miss Thing doesn’t. Grit. Determination. Passion. No one handed you the B&B on a plate, did they? And what kind of Londoner really wants to settle down in Wilfordshire at the ripe old age of twenty-two? My bet is Little Miss Thing will get bored soon enough and go off to greener pastures.”

“Or grayer pastures,” Gina quipped. “You know, because of all the roads in London? That she’ll be going back to... oh, never mind.”

Carol collected herself. “Thank you, Lacey. You really made me feel better.” She stood and patted Chester on the head. “You too, darling dog.” She dabbed her cheeks with her tissue. “Now, I’d better get back to work.”

She tipped up her chin and left without another word.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Gina started laughing.

“Honestly,” she exclaimed. “Someone needs to give that woman a reality check! She’s really in the wrong business if she thinks a twenty-two-year-old novice is a threat. You and I both know this London kid will be out of here as soon as she’s got enough money together to buy a warehouse apartment in Chelsea.” She shook her head. “I think I’ll take my break now, if you don’t mind? I’ve had quite enough excitement.”

“Go for it,” Lacey said, just as the door tinkled to usher in another customer. “I’ve got this.”

Gina patted her knees to get Chester’s attention. “Come on, boy, walkies.”

He leapt up and the two headed for the door. The short, slim young woman who’d just entered took a wide step to the left, in that tell-tale way of a person who was scared of dogs and expecting them to jump up and bite them.

Gina gave her a curt nod. She didn’t have much time for people who didn’t like pets.

Once the door had closed behind Gina and Chester, the girl seemed to relax. She approached Lacey, her patchwork skirt swishing as she went. Paired with an oversized knitted cardigan, her outfit wouldn’t look out of place hanging in Gina’s closet.

“Can I help you?” Lacey asked the woman.

“Yes,” the young woman said. She had a timid energy about her, her mousy brown hair that lay unstyled over her shoulders adding to her childlike air, and her large eyes giving her something of a rabbit-in-the-headlights look. “You’re Lacey, right?”

“That’s right.”

It never failed to make Lacey feel disconcerted when people knew her by name. Especially considering what had happened with Brooke...

“I’m Suzy,” the girl said, holding out her hand to shake Lacey’s. “I’m opening a B&B along the coast. Someone gave me your name as a good contact for furniture.”

Lacey wished Gina was still here so she could exchange a surprised look with her, but alas she was alone, and so she shook the hand being proffered to her. She couldn’t quite believe this tiny slip of a girl was the rich London graduate who had struck such fear into Carol. She barely looked over sixteen, and was as timid as a mouse. She looked like she was on her way to church, not about to open a business.

“What is it that you’re looking for?” Lacey asked, masking her surprise with politeness.

The girl shrugged bashfully. “I’m not really sure yet, to be honest. All I know is that I don’t want anything modern. The estate is far too big for modern. It would feel corporate and soulless, you know? It needs to feel cozy. Luxurious. Unique.”

“Well, why don’t we walk around the store and see if we can get some inspiration?” Lacey said.

“That’s a great idea!” Suzy replied, grinning a youthful smile of exuberance.

Lacey led her to Steampunk Corner. “I was an interior designer’s assistant for about fourteen years back in New York,” she explained as Suzy began perusing the shelves. “You’ll be amazed at where you can draw inspiration from.”

Suzy was peering curiously at the aquanaut’s suit. Lacey had a sudden vision of a steampunk-themed B&B.

“Let’s go this way,” she said hurriedly, diverting Suzy’s attention toward the Nordic Nook instead.

But nothing in her Scandinavian-inspired section seemed to spark excitement in Suzy, so they continued weaving through the store. Lacey had really built up quite the collection of items during her short months as an antiquarian.

They walked the length of Lamp Lane before ending in Vintage Valley.

“Seen anything that catches your eye?” Lacey asked.

Suzy twisted her lips as if uncertain. “Not really. But I’m sure you’ll be able to find something.”

Lacey hesitated. She thought the whole purpose of the shop tour was to find something *Suzy* felt inspired by, not her!

“I’m sorry,” Lacey said, a little perplexed. “What do you mean?”

The young woman was busy rummaging in her cloth purse and evidently didn’t hear her. She pulled out a diary, thumbing through the pages, then clicked the top of a pen and peered eagerly at Lacey. “Are you free tomorrow?”

“Free for what?” Lacey asked, her confusion growing.

“The renovation,” Suzy said. “Didn’t I...?” She trailed off and her cheeks went bright red. “Shoot. Sorry.” She quickly shoved the pen and diary back into her shoulder bag. “I’m new to all this business stuff. I get things in the wrong order all the time. Let me start at the beginning. So, my plan is to get the B&B furnished in time for the air show and...”

“Let me stop you right there,” Lacey interrupted. “What air show?”

“*The* air show,” Suzy repeated.

From the frown that had appeared between her eyebrows, Lacey deduced it was her turn to be perplexed.

“Next Saturday?” the young woman continued. “Red Arrows? Castle of Brogain? You really don’t know what I’m talking about?”

Lacey was stumped. Suzy may as well be talking another language. “You might’ve guessed from my accent, I’m not from around these parts.”

“No, of course.” Suzy blushed again. “Well, air shows are quite common here in the UK. You get shows all across the coast, but the Wilfordshire one is a special gem because of Brogain castle. The Red Arrows do a very exciting formation as they pass over it, and every high schooler studying photography wants to come and get a black-and-white shot of it. The juxtaposition of old war and

new war.” She printed the words in the air with her hands and giggled. “I know, because I was one of those high schoolers once.”

All four years ago, Lacey thought.

“There’s also about a zillion professional photographers who come as well,” Suzy continued in a way that made it clear to Lacey she was a nervous rambler. “It’s like a competition, everyone trying to snap THE image, the one that the tourist board will buy. And *then*, there’s the people who come to show their respects to their ancestors. And all the families who just want to look at planes doing barrel rolls.”

“I guess I need to brush up on my local history a little bit,” Lacey said, feeling woefully ignorant.

“Oh, I’m just a history nerd, that’s all,” Suzy quipped. “I love thinking about how people lived a few generations back. I mean, it wasn’t that long ago that people would go and shoot game for their dinner! The Victorians in particular fascinate me.”

“Victorians...” Lacey repeated. “Shooting.” She clicked her fingers. “I have an idea!”

Something about Suzy’s wide-eyed enthusiasm had made the dusty cogs in the abandoned part of Lacey’s interior designer mind grind back to life. She led Suzy into the auction room and along the corridor toward the office.

Suzy watched on with intrigue as Lacey opened up the safe and pulled out the wooden case containing the flintlock rifle, before clicking open the latches, raising the lid, and carefully removing the antique weapon.

Suzy drew in a sharp breath.

“Inspiration for your B&B,” Lacey said. “Victorian hunting lodge.”

“I...” Suzy stammered. “It’s...”

Lacey couldn’t tell if she was appalled or astonished.

“I love it!” Suzy gushed. “It’s a brilliant idea! I can just see it now. Blue tartan. Velvet. Corduroy. An open fire. Wood panels.” Her eyes had gone round with wonder.

“And *that’s* called inspiration,” Lacey told her.

“How much is it?” Suzy asked eagerly.

Lacey faltered. She had not been intending to sell the gift from Xavier. She’d just meant for it to be a creative springboard.

“It’s not for sale,” she said.

Suzy’s bottom lip stuck out in disappointment.

Lacey then recalled Gina’s accusations over Xavier. If Gina thought the rifle was too much, then what would Tom think when he found out? Maybe it would be better if she did just sell it to Suzy.

“...Yet,” Lacey added, making a snap decision. “I’m waiting on some paperwork.”

Suzy’s face lit up. “So I can reserve it?”

“You can indeed,” Lacey said, returning the smile.

“And you?” Suzy asked, with a giggle. “Can I reserve you, too? As the interior designer? Please!”

Lacey hesitated. She didn’t do interior design anymore. She’d left that part of her back in New York City with Saskia. Her focus was on buying and selling antiques, learning how to auction them and building her business. She didn’t have time to work for Suzy and run her own store. Sure, she could put Gina in charge, but with the increased tourist trade, leaving her to man the shop alone seemed a little unwise.

“I’m not sure,” Lacey said. “I have a lot on my plate here.”

Suzy touched her arm apologetically. “Of course. I understand. How about you just come by and check the place out tomorrow? See whether you’d like to take on the project once you’ve got a better feel for it?”

Lacey found herself nodding. After everything that had happened with Brooke, she thought she’d be more wary of letting new people in. But maybe she’d be able to heal from that whole ordeal

after all. Suzy had one of those infectious personalities that was easy to get swept along by. She'd make an excellent businesswoman.

Maybe Carol was right to worry.

"I guess there's no harm in taking a look, is there?" Lacey said.

This time next week, when Lacey was looking back on this moment with Suzy with hindsight, the idiom *famous last words* would spring to mind.

CHAPTER THREE

Lacey drove along the seafront in her champagne-colored Volvo, windows cranked, a gentle midday sun warming her. She was on her way to the former retirement home, soon to be Wilfordshire's newest B&B, with a surprise for Suzy in her passenger seat. Not Chester—her trusty companion had been far too content snoring in a sunbeam to be disturbed, and besides, Lacey was pretty certain Suzy was scared of dogs—but the flintlock rifle.

Lacey wasn't sure if she was doing the right thing by parting with it. When she'd held the rifle, it felt like it belonged to her, as if the universe was telling her she was supposed to take care of it. But Gina had planted a worm in her ear over Xavier and his intentions and she just couldn't see through the clouds.

"I guess it's too late now," Lacey said with a sigh. She'd already promised to sell it to Suzy, and it would look very unprofessional to back out of the sale now because of nothing more than a funny feeling!

Just then, Lacey passed Brooke's old tearoom. It was all boarded up. The refurbishment she'd done in transforming the old canoe shed into a swanky eatery had all gone to waste.

Thinking of Brooke made Lacey feel on edge, which was really the last thing she needed to add to the disquiet she already felt about parting ways with the rifle.

She pressed her pedal to the ground, speeding up in the hope she could leave those horrible feelings behind her.

Soon, Lacey reached the east side of town, the less populated area untouched by the sprawl of stores that spread from north to south and west to center, the area that, according to Carol, Mayor Fletcher was going to change for the worse.

Just then, Lacey saw the turning that led to the former Sunrise Retirement Home, and took a left turn onto it. The bumpy road sloped upward, and was lined with beech trees so tall they formed a tunnel that cut out the sunlight.

"That's not ominous at all..." Lacey said sarcastically. "Not in the slightest."

Luckily, the trees soon thinned out, and daylight reached her once more.

Lacey got her first glimpse of the house nestled into the hillsides. Her interior designer's mind switched immediately into gear as she assessed the exterior. It was a fairly modern-looking, red-brick, three-story mansion. She guessed it was a 1930s property that had been modernized over the years. The driveway and parking area were made of gray concrete—functional but unsightly. The windows of the manor had thick, plastic white frames—good for keeping out burglars, but a terrible eyesore. It would take more than a few strategically placed shrubs to make the exterior look like a Victorian hunting lodge.

Not that that was Lacey's problem to solve. She'd not made any decisions yet regarding Suzy's offer. She'd wanted to ask Tom for his advice, but he was working late fulfilling a last-minute order of rainbow-frosted cupcakes for the local YMCA's annual summer extravaganza. She'd also put a message on the thread she shared with her mom and younger sister, and had received a "*Don't work too hard*" response from the former, and an "*if she's paying good \$\$\$ then go for it*" from the latter.

Lacey parked her car in the concrete parking lot, then headed up the steps that ran alongside a large, unsightly wheelchair ramp. The disabled access to the property—and presumably, within it—would be a huge plus. Neither Carol's B&B nor the Coach House Inn were suitable for guests with disabilities, neither having external access from the cobbled streets, and having narrow internal stairs with no elevator inside.

At the top of the steps, Lacey reached a large glass conservatory-style porch. It was so '90s it reminded her of a leisure center.

The doors swished open, and she went inside, where her eyes were assaulted by a huge expanse of linoleum, harsh strip lights overhead, and tacky waiting-room blinds hanging in each of the windows. A water cooler went *glug glug glug* in the corner beside an array of buzzing vending machines.

So Suzy had been understating just how much work there was to do.

“Lacey! Hey!” came the young woman’s chipper voice.

Lacey peered around and saw her pop up from behind the reception desk—a huge, fake wood monstrosity that appeared to have been molded out of the very fabric of the building.

“I was just checking out the power socket situation back here,” Suzy explained. “Greg, the events planner, needs to know how many electricity points are available. He’s a total dragon, seriously. If I had more time, I’d hire someone else. But beggars can’t be choosers. So Grumpy Greg it is.” She grinned.

“What do you need an events planner for?” Lacey asked.

“The launch party, of course,” Suzy said.

Before Lacey had a chance to ask her any more about that, Suzy came out from around the big desk and embraced her. It took her by surprise. But in spite of the fact they barely knew one another, Lacey found it felt quite natural. It was as if the young woman was an old friend, even though they’d only first met less than twenty-four hours ago.

“Can I get you a cup of tea?” Suzy asked. Then she blushed. “Sorry, you’re American. You’ll want coffee instead, right?”

Lacey chuckled. “I’ve gotten a taste for tea since moving here, actually. But I’m good, thanks.” She was careful not to let her gaze trail over to the vending machine, and the watery, substandard tea it would presumably make. “Shall we do the tour?”

“Wasting no time, I like that,” Suzy said. “Okay, well obviously this is the reception area.” She opened her arms wide and grinned enthusiastically. “As you can probably tell, it’s basically a conservatory they added on in the nineties. Beyond ripping the whole thing down, I’ve no idea how to make this look like a Victorian lodge, but I guess that’s what your expertise is for. I mean, *if* you do decide to work for me.” She giggled and gestured toward the set of internal double doors. “This way.”

They entered a long, dimly lit hallway. A set of shiny plastic signs were screwed into the wall giving directions to the “TV room,” “dining room,” “garden,” and “nurses’ station.” There was a very distinct smell about the place, like talcum powder.

Lacey wrinkled her nose. The reality of just how much of an undertaking this would be was becoming evident, and Lacey felt a creeping sense that it would just be too much to take on.

She followed Suzy into the TV room. It was a humongous space, sparsely furnished, and with the same fake wood linoleum on the floor. The walls were covered in textured paper.

“I’m thinking we’ll turn this room into the drawing room,” Suzy began, waltzing through the room, her patterned gypsy skirt flowing behind her. “I want an open fireplace. I think there’s one boarded up behind this alcove. And we can put some nice rustic antique stuff over in this corner.” She gestured vaguely with her arms. “Or that one. Whichever you prefer.”

Lacey felt increasingly uncertain. The work Suzy wanted her to do was more than simple interior design! She didn’t even have the layout down. But she seemed to be a dreamer, which Lacey couldn’t help but admire. Throwing oneself into a task without any prior experience was how Lacey rolled, after all, and that risk had paid off for her. But the other side of the coin was that Lacey hadn’t had anyone around to be the voice of reason. Other than her mom and Naomi—who’d been an entire ocean and five-hour time difference away—there had been no one there to tell her she was being crazy. But to actually be that person, watching someone dive into an almost impossible task headfirst ... Lacey just wasn’t sure she could do it. She didn’t have the heart to bring someone down to earth with a bump and dash their dreams, but she also wasn’t the type to stand back and watch as the ship sank.

“The dining room can be accessed through here,” Suzy was saying, in an easy-breezy manner. She quickly led Lacey through to the next room. “We’ll keep this room as the dining room because it has access to the kitchen through there.” She pointed at a swing door to her right. “And it has the best view of the sea here, and the lawns.”

Lacey couldn’t help but notice that Suzy was already talking as if she was going to take the job. She bit down on her lip with trepidation and paced over to the sliding glass doors that took up the entirety of the far wall. The garden, though several acres, only contained grass and a few sporadically placed benches facing toward the ocean view in the distance.

“Gina would love this,” Lacey said over her shoulder, searching for a positive.

“Gina?” Suzy asked.

“The lady who works at my store with me. Frizzy hair. Red glasses. Wellington boots. She’s an amazing gardener. This would be like a blank canvas for her.” She looked back at Suzy. “She tried to teach me how to garden but I think I’m still way too New York City for plant life.”

Suzy laughed. “Well, when it’s time to do the garden, I’ll give Gina a call.”

Suzy continued the speedy tour—through the kitchen, back out to the corridor, along to the elevator and up to one of the bedrooms.

“They’re very well sized,” Suzy told her, as she gestured Lacey inside.

“I’ll say,” Lacey replied, calculating just how much furniture would be required to furnish them appropriately.

They’d need more than just the usual B&B room bed, closet, and bedside tables that most rooms had. They were big enough for a separate couch and armchair area, with coffee table, and for a dressing area with a vanity stool. Lacey could picture it, but it was going to take a heck of a lot of coordination to get it all done in time for Saturday’s air show.

“And how many rooms did you say there were?” she asked, peering nervously back out the door and along the dark corridor, which was lined either side with doors. She didn’t want to make it quite so obvious to Suzy just how much work would need to be done to get this place up to scratch, so as she ducked back into the room, she rearranged her features into something altogether more receptive.

“There’s four hundred square meters of accommodation in total,” Suzy explained. “Six bedrooms and a bridal suite. But we don’t have to do everything all at once. Just the drawing room, dining room, and a few of the bedrooms. Two or three would do to begin with, I think.”

She sounded so relaxed about the whole thing, despite not actually knowing the exact amount of bedrooms she wanted furnished!

“And you need that all done in time for the air show on Saturday?” Lacey asked, as if seeking extra clarification would somehow make it make sense.

“Actually, Friday,” Suzy corrected. “That’s when I’m holding the launch party.”

Lacey remembered Suzy mentioning Grumpy Greg the events planner, and the launch party, her question about when that was going to be had gotten lost in the moment when Suzy had hugged her by surprise.

“Friday...” Lacey repeated hypnotically, as she followed Suzy back out of the room and into the elevator.

The doors closed softly behind them and Suzy turned her eager eyes to Lacey. “So? What do you think?”

The elevator started its descent, making Lacey’s stomach flip.

“You have quite a gem here,” Lacey said, choosing her words carefully. “But the turnaround time is tight. You do know that, right?”

“That’s what Grumpy Greg said,” Suzy replied, her lips twisting, her tone becoming more morose. “He said organizing a full fireworks display in time for Friday would be nearly impossible.”

Lacey held her tongue, although what she really wanted to say was that sourcing a bunch of fireworks was significantly less difficult than turning a four-hundred-square-meter care home into a

Victorian hunting lodge with period furniture. If the events planner thought the turnaround was tight, then where did that leave her?

The elevator doors pinged open and they stepped out together into the main corridor, with its linoleum floor and myriad of signage and medical posters drilled into the walls.

Lacey caught Suzy peering at them, as if she'd only just seen them. As if it had only now occurred to her just how much work was needed to transform this place. For the first time, she looked a little overwhelmed. Worry began to shine in her eyes.

"Do you think I've bitten off more than I can chew?" she asked, as they headed back into the foyer.

Lacey's instincts to not disappoint her kicked in.

"I'm not going to lie," she said carefully. "It will be a lot of hard work. *But* I do think it's possible. I already have quite a lot of stock that would be appropriate for the theme. But there's some really big things you need to prioritize before any decorating can begin."

"Like what?" Suzy asked, grabbing a piece of scrap paper, as if hanging on Lacey's every word of expertise.

"The floors," Lacey began, pacing through the room. "This linoleum has got to go. The walls need to be stripped of that horrible textured paper. The artex ceiling. Opening up the fireplace alone will take a whole team..."

"So basically, gut the place and start again?" Suzy interrupted, looking up from her notes.

"Pretty much. And don't take shortcuts. When it comes to interiors, it's all about the small details. You need to create a fantasy. No fake wallpaper made to look like wood paneling. If you're going to go for paneling, make it real. Fake looks cheap. So sourcing that is an absolute priority."

Suzy went back to scribbling, nodding the whole time Lacey spoke. "Do you know a good handyman?"

"Suzy, you need *ten* handymen," Lacey told her. "At least! And a whole soccer team's worth of decorators. Have you even got the budget for all of this?"

Suzy looked up. "Yes. Pretty much. I mean, I won't be able to pay anyone until the hotel starts bringing in money, which might make it harder to find people to agree to do the work..."

Her voice trailed away, as she flashed Lacey a hopeful, puppy-dog look.

Lacey felt even less certain than she had before. Not being paid in advance would be risky, since she'd have to source a bunch of merchandise that would run into the tens of thousands of pounds. And taking on such a big project when the turnaround time was so tight, and when she had her own business to think about, may be unwise. But on the other hand, she'd really enjoyed the tour, and could picture how the place would look filled up with antique pieces. She'd also enjoyed accessing her old expertise over interior design, and combining it with her new talents for antiques. Suzy was presenting her with a unique opportunity, and the B&B was absolutely certain to turn a profit very quickly, indeed. Yes, it would be a huge financial risk, and a massive drain of her time and energy, but when would Lacey get a chance like this again?

Not quite ready to give Suzy a definitive answer, Lacey said, "Hold that thought."

She went out to her car and fetched the flintlock in its case and carried it back into the estate.

"The rifle!" Suzy beamed, grinning at the sight of it. She looked just as thrilled to see it as she had the first time Lacey had shown it to her yesterday at the store. "You brought it? For me?"

"Yup," Lacey told her.

She placed it on the reception desk and clicked open the latches.

Suzy reached in and took it out, running her fingers over the barrel lovingly. "Can I pick it up?"

"Sure," Lacey said.

Suzy lifted it and adopted a shooting stance. She looked like something of a pro, so much so that Lacey was about to ask her if she'd ever been hunting herself. But before she got the chance, there came the sound of the automatic foyer doors swishing open behind them.

Lacey turned to see a man in a dark suit striding in through the doors. Following behind him was a woman in a presidential-looking dark crimson skirt-suit. Lacey recognized the woman from town meetings. It was Councilor Muir, their local MP.

Suzy swirled too, rifle still in hand.

At the sight of it, the man in the suit barreled into Councilor Muir protectively.

“Suzy!” Lacey squealed. “Put the rifle down!”

“Oh!” Suzy said, her cheeks flaming red.

“It’s just an antique!” Lacey told the security man, who was still protectively huddling his arms around Councilor Muir.

Finally, a little hesitantly, he released her.

The councilwoman straightened out her suit and patted down her hair. “Thank you, Benson,” she said stiffly to the aide who’d been about to take a bullet for her. She looked embarrassed more than anything.

“Sorry, Joanie,” Suzy said. “For pointing a gun in your face.”

Joanie? Lacey thought. That was a very familiar way to address the woman. Did the two know one another on a personal level?

Councilor Muir said nothing. Her gaze flicked to Lacey. “Who’s this?”

“This is my friend Lacey,” Suzy said. “She’s going to decorate the B&B. Hopefully.”

Lacey stepped forward and proffered her hand to the councilor. She’d never actually seen her up close, just speaking from the town hall’s podium, or on the occasional flyer that was posted through the store’s letterbox. She was in her fifties, older than in her PR photo; the lines around her eyes gave her away. She looked tired and stressed, and didn’t take Lacey’s outstretched hand, since her arms were full cradling a thick manila envelope.

“Is that my business license?” Suzy squealed with excitement as she noticed it.

“Yes,” Councilor Muir said hurriedly, shoving it toward her. “I was just coming by to drop it off.”

“Joanie sorted this all out for me so quickly,” Suzy said to Lacey. “What’s the word? You expediated it?”

“Expediated,” one of the aides piped up, earning himself a sharp glare from Councilor Muir.

Lacey frowned. It was highly unusual for a councilor to be hand delivering business licenses. When Lacey had applied for her own, it had involved lots of online form-filling and sitting around in dingy council buildings waiting for the number on her ticket to be called, as if she were in the queue at the butcher’s. She wondered why Suzy would get the red carpet treatment. And why were they already on first-name terms?

“Do you two know each other from somewhere?” Lacey asked, venturing to find out what the deal was here.

Suzy chuckled. “Joan’s my aunt.”

“Ah,” Lacey said.

That made perfect sense. Councilor Muir had approved the rush job of switching a retirement home into a B&B because she had a family connection to Suzy. Carol had been right. There was a lot of nepotism at play here.

“Ex-aunt,” Councilor Muir corrected, defensively. “And not by blood. Suzy is my ex-husband’s niece. And that didn’t play any part in the decision to grant the license. It’s just about high time Wilfordshire got a decent-sized B&B. Tourism is going up year on year, and our current facilities just can’t keep up with demand.”

It was evident to Lacey that Councilor Muir was attempting to divert the conversation away from the obvious preferential treatment Suzy had been given. But it really wasn’t necessary. It didn’t change Lacey’s opinion of Suzy, since it wasn’t her fault she was well connected, and as far as Lacey was concerned, it showed good character that she was using her connections to do something rather

than just rest on her laurels. If anyone came off looking bad, it was Councilor Muir herself, and not because she'd used her influential position to grant a huge favor to her ex-husband's niece, but because she was being so shady and evasive about it. No wonder the Carols of Wilfordshire were so opposed to the eastern regeneration project!

The crimson-clad councilor was still spouting her excuses. "The town actually has enough demand for two B&Bs this size, especially when you factor in all the extra trade we'll get from luring back the old shooting club."

Lacey was immediately interested. She thought of Xavier's note and his suggestion that her father came to Wilfordshire in the summers to shoot.

"The old shooting club?" she asked.

"Yes, the one up at Penrose Manor," Councilor Muir explained, gesturing with her arm in a general westerly direction where the estate was nestled on the other side of the valley.

"There was a forest there once, right?" Suzy chimed in. "I heard Henry the Eighth had the hunting lodge built so he could come and hunt wild boar!"

"That's right," the councilor said with a businesslike nod. "But the forest was eventually cut down. As with many English estates, the nobles took up shooting game birds once guns were invented, and that turned into the industry as we know it now. These days breeders rear mallards, partridges, and pheasants just for shooting."

"What about rabbits and pigeons?" Lacey offered, recalling the contents of Xavier's letter.

"They can be shot all year round," Councilor Muir confirmed. "The Wilfordshire shooting club taught amateurs during the off-season, and they practiced on pigeons and rabbits. Not exactly glamorous, but you have to start somewhere."

Lacey let the information percolate in her mind. It corresponded so accurately with what Xavier had said in the letter, she couldn't help but believe that her father really had come to Wilfordshire in the summers to shoot at Penrose Manor. Coupling that with the photo she'd seen of her father and Iris Archer, the former owner, and it seemed even more likely.

Was that why the gun had felt so familiar to her, because somewhere in the back of her mind she had memories she'd not been able to access?

"I never knew there was a hunting lodge at Penrose Manor," she said. "When did the shooting club stop operating there?"

"About a decade ago," Councilor Muir replied. She had a weary tone, like she would prefer not to be having this conversation. "They ceased operations because of ..." She paused, evidently searching for the most diplomatic words. "...Financial mismanagement."

Lacey couldn't be certain, but there seemed to be an air of melancholy about the councilor, as if she had some kind of personal connection to the shooting club and its demise a decade earlier. Lacey wanted to ask more, to find out whether there may be more clues that led back to her father, but the conversation had swiftly moved on, with Suzy's enthusiastic, "So you see how much untapped potential there is here, and why you should totally get on board with the project!"

The councilor nodded in her stiff manner. "If you're being given a chance to get involved in the easterly regeneration of Wilfordshire," she said, "I would most certainly take it. The B&B is just the beginning. Mayor Fletcher has some very big plans for this town. If you make a name for yourself, you'll be at the top of everyone's contacts when it comes to future projects."

Lacey certainly was becoming more and more intrigued by the job offer. Not just for the huge potential to get her name out there—potentially earning a handsome profit while she was at it—but because of how connected it made her feel with Wilfordshire, and her father in turn. She wondered whether her father had seen all the potential in the town back in the days when he'd visited. Perhaps that was why he'd come here in the first place, because he saw a business opportunity and wanted to invest?

Or because he wanted to run away from his marriage and family and settle down in a place more suited to him, Lacey thought.

“Now, I must be going,” Councilwoman Muir said, beckoning her entourage. They leapt immediately to attention. “I have a surgery to attend. The locals are furious about the proposed pedestrianization of the high street. Honestly, you’d think I’d approved to have lava poured into the roads the way they’re acting.” She gave Suzy a quick, efficient nod, then left.

As soon as she was gone, Suzy turned to Lacey with an eager look on her face, the manila envelope containing her business license now clutched in her hands.

“So?” she asked. “What do you say? Want in?”

“Can I have a bit of time to make up my mind?”

“Sure.” Suzy chuckled. “We open in a week. Take up as much of that time deciding as you want.”

*

Lacey opened the door to the antiques store. Boudica and Chester came bounding over to greet her. She ruffled their heads in turn.

“You’re back,” Gina said, looking up from the gardening magazine she’d been perusing. “How did it go with wunderkind?”

“It was interesting,” Lacey said. She came over and took a stool at the desk beside her. “It’s an amazing place, with a lot of potential. And the councilwoman seems to think so as well.”

Gina folded her gardening magazine closed. “Councilwoman?”

“Yes, Councilor Muir,” Lacey told her. “She’s Suzy’s aunt. This whole B&B thing seems to be part of Mayor Fletcher’s plans to regenerate east Wilfordshire. Not that that’s Suzy’s fault, per se, but it does make her seem even more out of her depth. Who knows what her actual business plan looks like, or if it was just approved because of her aunt.”

Gina tapped her chin. “Hmm. So Carol was onto something after all.”

“In a way.”

“But putting all that political stuff aside,” Gina added, swiveling in her stool so she was directly facing Lacey. “What would it mean for *you* to get involved?”

Lacey paused. A small flicker of excitement ignited in her stomach. If she put all the nagging doubts to one side, it really was an amazing opportunity.

“It means I’d have responsibility for furnishing a four-hundred-square-meter property with period pieces. For an antique lover, that’s basically heaven.”

“And the money?” Gina asked.

“Oh, it’d bring in a *lot* of dollars. We’re talking thousands of pounds of inventory. A whole dining room. A foyer. A bar. Six bedrooms and a bridal suite. It’s a massive undertaking. Add to that the potential for more work in the future by getting my name out there, and the fact that having a B&B for special occasions like the air show will have a positive knock-on effect for the rest of the town...”

Gina was starting to smile. “It sounds to me like you’ve talked yourself into it.”

Lacey gave a noncommittal nod. “Maybe I have. But wouldn’t it be crazy? I mean, she wants it done in time for the air show. Which is on Saturday!”

“And since when did working hard scare you?” Gina asked sassily. She gestured with her arms to the antiques store. “Look at everything you’ve already achieved from working hard.”

Lacey was too modest to take the compliment, but the sentiment she could get behind. She’d become a risk taker. If she’d not quit her job in New York City and gotten the first flight to England, she’d never have built this wonderful life for herself. She’d be a miserable divorcee, still fetching coffee for Saskia like an intern rather than an assistant with fourteen years’ experience. Taking on

this work with Suzy was the sort of thing Saskia would fight tooth and manicured nail for. That alone was reason to do it.

“I think you know what to do,” Gina said. She picked up the telephone and plonked it in front of Lacey. “Give Suzy a call and tell her you’re on board.”

Lacey stared at the phone, biting her bottom lip. “But what about all the costs?” she said. “That much inventory in such a short space of time will be a massive outgoing all at once. Way more than I’d ever usually spend on stock.”

“You’ll get paid for it, though?” Gina said.

“Only after the B&B starts making money.”

“Which is a given, isn’t it? So you’re set to profit in time.” Gina nudged the telephone toward Lacey. “I think you’re looking for excuses.”

She was right, but that didn’t stop Lacey from finding another.

“What about you?” she said. “You’d have to mind the shop for a whole week? I won’t have time to do anything else.”

“I can run the store perfectly fine on my own,” Gina assured her.

“And Chester? He’d have to stay with you while I worked. Suzy doesn’t like dogs.”

“I think I can handle Chester, don’t you?”

Lacey looked from Gina to the phone and back again. Then, in one quick movement, she reached out, snatched up the receiver, and punched Suzy’s number in.

“Suzy?” she said the second the call was answered. “I’ve made my decision. I’m in.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“Oh, Percy, they’re wonderful!” Lacey gushed down the phone, looking at the opened box filled with silver forks she’d just received from her favorite Mayfair antiques dealer. She was in the cramped back office at the store, surrounded by binders full of checklists, sketches, mood boards, detail drawings, and a whole bunch of coffee-stained mugs.

“They’re all bundled into complete sets,” Percy explained. “Salad, soup, fish, dinner, dessert, and oyster.”

Lacey smiled broadly. “I don’t know if Suzy’s even planning to serve oysters, but if the Victorians had oyster forks on their tables, then we’d better have them on ours.”

She heard Percy’s grandfatherly chuckle through the speaker. “It does sound ever so exciting,” he said. “I must say it’s not often I receive an order for *anything you own that’s Victorian.*”

“Yes, well,” Lacey said. “I’m sure it’s not often that one of your buyers is tasked with turning a retirement home into a Victorian-themed B&B in a week!”

“Tell me, are you getting any sleep?”

“A solid four hours a night,” Lacey quipped.

Despite how hard she’d been working, she’d found the whole project thrilling so far. Exhilarating, even. It was like a mystery only she could solve, with a clock ticking away in the corner.

“Don’t run yourself into the ground,” Percy said, ever the gentle soul.

She ended the call, grabbed a marker pen, and put a large tick beside “utensils.” She was halfway through her list now, having pulled about a hundred favors, driven cross-country to Bristol and Bath to collect some particularly exceptional pieces, then *out* of country to Cardiff just for a gorgeous stone water feature that would look perfect in the foyer.

The foyer had proved the most difficult to design of all the rooms. Its architecture was basically a conservatory. Lacey had taken her inspiration from Victorian structures like Alexandra Palace in London and the greenhouses of Kew Gardens. Suzy had the decorators in there right now, ripping up that lino flooring, chucking out the dentist’s waiting-room blinds, and coating the white plastic frame with thin sheets of pliable metal, painted black to look like iron.

So far, the work had been fun, even with the sleep deprivation and long drives. But the dent to her bank balance was a little alarming. Lacey had collected thousands upon thousands of pounds’ worth of furniture, all perfect to fit with Suzy’s hunting lodge theme. And while she knew Suzy would settle the bill as soon as she’d made the money back, it still made her very uncomfortable to see the massive dip in her account. Especially considering the deal she’d made with Ivan over the mortgage at Crag Cottage. She’d hate to default on any payments to the sweet man who’d sold her her dream home, but if Suzy’s bill wasn’t settled by the end of June, she’d be forced to do just that.

The rifle alone was worth £5,000! Lacey had almost choked on her cappuccino when she’d researched its value in order to add it to Suzy’s bill, and had immediately messaged Xavier suggesting she wire him some money. But he responded with, *it is a gift*, which made her feel bad for having immediately sold it. But not too bad. Because what man innocently sends a valuable antique to a woman without having certain thoughts on his mind? Lacey was starting to accept that Gina might have been correct about Xavier’s intentions, and decided it was best to minimize her contact with him. Besides, she had a whole new lead to pursue in the search for her father now, with Penrose Manor’s former shooting club, so Xavier wasn’t the lifeline he’d once been.

In the main part of the store, Lacey could hear Gina bustling around. So far, the older woman had kept up with the demands of her new schedule pretty well. Her veto on heavy lifting had been temporarily suspended, and though Gina didn’t mind, Lacey worried about making a pensioner work so hard.

Just then, Lacey heard the bell go in the other room, and it was followed by the soft happy *yips* of Chester and Boudica. Lacey knew immediately that that meant Tom had arrived. She stopped what she was doing and hurried to the main shop floor.

Sure enough, her beau was there, feeding his special carob treats to the dogs. He looked up at the sound of her and flashed her one of his gorgeous smiles.

It felt like eons since Lacey had last seen or spoken to him. He'd been too busy making rainbow cupcakes, and she'd been elbow deep in Victorian antiques. Between the two of them, they'd not even had a spare moment to send a text, let alone be in the same place at the same time!

Lacey rushed toward him and gave him a peck on the lips.

"My dear," she gushed. "It's been so long. What are you doing here?"

"It's Thursday," he said simply. "Lunch date day."

With their busy schedules, they'd agreed to pause their daily elevenses and scale back to a slightly more manageable weekly lunch on Thursdays. But that plan had been made before they'd both taken on their last-minute contracts, and Lacey had just assumed it would be off the cards for both of them. She'd promptly allowed it to be pushed out of her mind by the long laundry list of Victorian wares she had to source.

"Did you forget?" Tom asked.

"I wouldn't say forget exactly," Lacey said. "It's just we're both so busy..."

"Oh," Tom said, the disappointment in his voice quite evident. "You're canceling."

Lacey felt awful. She'd not even realized she had anything to cancel in the first place. But she shouldn't have assumed Tom would just shove their plans entirely away. Apparently, only she was callous enough to do that.

"I'm really sorry," Lacey said, taking his hand and giving it a playful tug. "You know we're having the grand opening of the Lodge tomorrow. I'm literally working flat out for the next twenty-four hours to get it all done. I probably won't even have time to go to sleep tonight, so I can hardly spare an hour for lunch." She chewed her lip, filled with guilt.

Tom seemed to be averting his eyes. She'd obviously really hurt his feelings.

"It's one lunch," Lacey promised him. "I just have this final hurdle. Then after the party tomorrow evening, I'll be back to a normal schedule. And you'll have finished with the cupcake bonanza, or whatever it's called..."

"...Extravaganza," Tom mumbled.

"Right. That." Lacey swung his hands back and forth, trying to keep her tone light and breezy. "Then we'll be back to normal. Okay?"

At last, Tom nodded. She had not seen him look this dejected before. In a way, it was kind of heartening, especially considering how worried she'd let herself get over Lucia. Turned out a very good antidote for jealousy was being so sleep deprived she was practically an automaton.

"Hey, you know what? You should come to the party," Lacey said. She felt bad she hadn't thought to invite him before. It was supposed to be a grand opening after all, with fireworks and food, and distinguished guests and all.

"Me?" Tom said. "I don't think a pastry chef is highbrow enough for the Lodge."

"Nonsense," Lacey said. "Besides, I've never seen you in a tux, and I bet you look fabulous."

She saw a mischievous glint return to Tom's eye, reminding her of the Tom she knew and loved, rather than this sullen, disgruntled one.

"Well, as long as Suzy doesn't mind," he said. "But I can't have a late night. Me and Luce need to start baking at six a.m. tomorrow."

"Luce?" Lacey repeated. Then it dawned on her he meant Lucia.

He'd given her a pet name? One that sounded remarkably similar to the nickname Lacey herself had asked him *not* to call her, since it had been the same one her ex-husband used: Lacey.

All at once, Lacey's unsettled feeling over the young woman returned to her with the force of a gale. So much for her theory of being too tired to be jealous.

"Hey, that's an idea. I should take Luce out for lunch today!" Tom said, apparently oblivious to the slightly incredulous tone Lacey had failed to hide. "You know, as a thank you for all her hard work. We've been literally flat out since I hired her, and I've had to really throw her in at the deep end. It's been quite the learning curve and she's taken it all in her stride. She's a pretty remarkable young woman, really."

Lacey felt her hands tightening into fists as she listened to Tom gush about the woman he'd just decided to take to lunch in her place. A myriad of emotions swirled around in her gut. Disappointment, of course, because she was missing out on spending time with her favorite person. Jealousy, too, that some other person would be getting his attention instead. But it was more than that, and deeper. Her jealousy wasn't just because another *person* was getting Tom's attention, but because another *woman* was. A "pretty remarkable young woman" nonetheless, with her wrinkle-free skin, ever-optimistic personality, and glistening white, perfectly aligned teeth. Then adding on top of the jealousy came embarrassment—because what would the locals think? If they saw Tom out to lunch with a pretty young woman, how long would it take for the rumor mill to start churning? Taryn for one would have a field day!

"Who will mind the patisserie?" Lacey asked, clutching desperately at any excuse to stop it from happening. "If you and *Luce* are both out at lunch... together."

"Paul, obviously," Tom replied, a confused frown appearing between his eyebrows.

For a moment, Lacey wondered if his frown was a sign that the ever-oblivious Tom had actually picked up on the undercurrent.

"Although he was being particularly klutzy today," Tom continued. "He mixed up the whisk and the spatula. There really is something not quite wired right with that boy."

So his frown had been about Paul's lack of common sense rather than their relationship. Of course it had. Knowing the type of character Tom was, he probably had no idea that Lacey was jealous of Lucia, nor had any inkling as to *why* she might be. But from Lacey's perspective, she found it maddening that such thoughts didn't cross Tom's mind, because it made her look like a crazy woman pointing it out.

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