

LIVE *AND* LET
CHAI

BREE BAKER



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*For my sweet mama and her
unending love of the seaside*

CHAPTER



ONE

Welcome to Sun, Sand, and Tea.” I perked up at the precious sound of seashell wind chimes bouncing and tinkling against the front door of my new café. “I’ll be right with you.”

A pair of ladies in windbreakers and capri pants smoothed their windblown hair and examined the seating options. Sounds of the sea had followed them inside, amplified briefly by the opening door.

I bopped my head to a Temptations song and tapped the large sweet tea jug behind the counter. Until three months ago, owning and operating an iced tea shop on the shore of my hometown had been nothing more than a childish dream. I’d thought being a grown-up meant working a job I hated while wearing uncomfortable clothes, so I’d toed the line for a while, but my looming thirtieth birthday and a broken heart had changed all that.

Now I did what I wanted—in comfy clothes for significantly less money, but at least I could wear flip-flops.

I set a lidless canning jar of Old-Fashioned Sun Tea in front of the man sitting at my counter and beamed. “Let me know if I can fix you anything else, Sam.”

He frowned at his phone, too engrossed or distracted to answer. Sam Smart was a local real estate agent. He’d arrived in Charm during the years I’d been away from home, and from what I could tell, he was a type-A, all-stress all-day kind of guy—a little sweet tea was probably just what he needed. I nudged the jar closer until his hand swept out to meet it. “Thanks.”

“Everything okay?” I asked.

He flicked his gaze to mine, then back to his phone. “It’s Paine.” He shook his head and groaned.

“Ah.” I grabbed a thin stack of napkins and patted Sam’s shoulder on my way to welcome the newcomers. “Good luck with that.”

Benedict Paine had been a thorn in my side since the day I’d approached our town council about adding a café to the first floor of my new seaside home. Owning a sweet-tea shop was my dream come true, and honestly, I couldn’t afford the house’s mortgage payments without the business income. Despite the home’s fixer-upper condition, the price tag had been astronomical, making the café a must, and Mr. Paine had fought me the entire way, complaining that adding a business to a residential property would drag down the neighborhood. I could only imagine the kind of headache a man like Paine could cause a real estate agent.

The space that was now my café stretched through

the entire south side of the first floor. Walls had been strategically knocked out, opening the kitchen and formal dining area up to a large space for entertaining. The result was a stunning seaside setup, perfect for my shop.

From the kitchen, a private hallway led to the rest of the first floor and another thousand or so square feet of potential expansion space. A staircase off that hall provided passage to my second-floor living quarters, which were just as big and full of potential. The stairs themselves were amazing, stained a faded red, with delicate carvings along the edges. They were mine alone to enjoy, shut off from the café by a locking door. I could probably thank the home's history as a boarding house for my substantial second-floor kitchen. The cabinets and fixtures were all older than me, but I couldn't complain—the café kitchen was what mattered, and it was fantastic.

Seating at Sun, Sand, and Tea was a hodgepodge of repainted garage sale and thrift shop finds. Twenty seats in total, five at the counter and fifteen scattered across the wide-planked, whitewashed floor, ranging from padded wicker numbers with low tables to tall bistro sets along the perimeter.

The ladies had selected a high table near a wall of windows overlooking my deck.

I refreshed my smile and set a napkin in front of each of them. "Hello. Welcome to Sun, Sand, and Tea."

They dragged their attention slowly away from the rolling waves and driftwood-speckled beach beyond

the glass, reluctant to part with the amazing view for even a second.

“Can I get something started for you?”

The taller woman settled tortoiseshell glasses onto the ridge of her sunburned nose and fixed her attention to the café menu, scripted on an enormous blackboard covering the far wall. “Do you really make twenty flavors of iced tea?”

“Yes, ma’am. Plus a daily array of desserts and finger foods.” The selection changed without notice, sometimes with the tide, depending on if I ran out of any necessary ingredients.

“Fascinating. I came in for some good old-fashioned sweet tea, but now you’ve got me wondering about the Country Cranberry Hibiscus. What’s in that?” She leaned her elbows on the tabletop and twined her fingers.

“Well, there—there’s black tea, hibiscus, and, uh, rose hips, and cranberries.” I stammered over the answer to her question the same way I had to similar inquiries on a near-daily basis since opening my café doors. It seemed a fine line between serving my family’s secret recipes and sharing them ingredient by ingredient.

The woman glanced out the window again and pressed a palm to her collarbone as a massive gull flapped to a stop on the handrail outside the window. “Dear!”

“Oh, there’s Lou,” I said.

“Lou?”

“I think he came with the house.”

She lowered her hand, but kept one eye on Lou. “I’ll try the Cranberry Hibiscus,” she said. “What about you, Margo?”

Her friend pursed her lips. “Make mine Summer Citrus Mint, and I’d like to try your crisp cucumber sandwich.”

I formed an “okay” sign with my fingers and winked. “Give me just a quick minute, and I’ll get that over here for you.”

I strode back to the counter, practically vibrating with excitement. After only a month in business, each customer’s order was still a thrill for me.

The seashell wind chimes kicked into gear again and I responded on instinct. “Welcome to Sun, Sand, and Tea.” I turned on my toes for a look at the newest guest and my stomach dropped. “Oh, hello, Mr. Paine.” I shot a warning look at Sam, whose head drooped lower over his tea.

“Miss Swan.” Mr. Paine straddled a stool three seats down from Sam and set his straw porkpie hat on the counter. Tufts of white hair stretched east and west from the spaces below his bald spot and above each ear. “Lovely day.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. “Can I get you anything?”

“Please,” he drawled, giving Sam a thorough once-over. It wasn’t clear if he already knew Sam was mad at him, or if he was figuring that out from the silent treatment.

I waited, knowing what the next words out of Mr. Paine's mouth were going to be.

Reluctantly, he pulled his attention back to me. "How about a list of all your ingredients?"

Sam rolled his small brown eyes, but otherwise continued to ignore Mr. Paine's presence.

I grabbed a knife and a loaf of fresh-baked bread and set them on the counter. "You know I can't give that to you, Mr. Paine. Something else, perhaps?" I'd been through this a dozen times with him since Sun, Sand, and Tea's soft opening. Swan women had guarded our tea recipes for a hundred years, and I wasn't about to hand them over just because he said so. "How about a glass of tea instead?"

I cut two thin slices from the loaf, then whacked the crusts off with unnecessary oomph.

Sam took a long pull on his drink, stopping only when there was nothing left but ice, and returned the jar to the counter with a thump. "It's very good," he said, turning to stare at Mr. Paine. "You should try it. I mean, if you'd had it your way, this place wouldn't even be open, right? Seems like the least you can do is find out what you were protesting."

I didn't bother to mention that Mr. Paine had already tried basically every item on the menu as I plied him with free samples to try to get in his good graces.

Mr. Paine frowned, first at Sam, then at me. Wrinkles raced across his pale, sun-spotted face. "It's a health and safety issue," he grouched. "People need to know what they're drinking."

“Yes.” I arranged cucumber slices on one piece of bread. “I believe you’ve mentioned that.” It had, in fact, been his number one argument since I’d gotten the green light to open. “I’m happy to provide a general list of ingredients for each recipe, but there are certain herbs and spices, as well as brewing methods, that are trade secrets.”

“He doesn’t care about any of that,” Sam said. “He just wants to get his way.”

Mr. Paine twisted on his stool to glare at Sam. “Whatever your problem is, Sam Smart, it’s not with me, so stow it.”

Sam shoved off his stool. “And your problem isn’t with her.” He grabbed the gray suit jacket from the stool beside him and threaded his arms into the sleeves. “Thanks for the tea, Everly.” He tossed a handful of dollar bills onto the counter and a remorseful look in my direction.

I worked to close my slack jaw as the front door slapped shut behind him. Whatever grudge match Sam and Mr. Paine had going, I didn’t want a ticket for it. I put the unused cucumber slices away and removed a white ceramic bowl from the fridge.

Mr. Paine watched carefully, teeth clenched.

“Maybe you’d like to try the Peach Tea today,” I suggested. “Whatever you want. On the house.”

Preferably *to go*.

“How much sugar is in the Peach?” he asked, apparently determined to criticize. “You know I don’t like a lot of sugar.”

I pointed to a brightly colored section on my menu that highlighted sugar-free options. “How about a tea made with alternative sweeteners, like honey or fruit puree? Maybe the Iced Peach with Ginger?” I turned to the refrigerator and pulled out a large metal bowl, then scooped the cream cheese, mayo, and seasoning mixture onto the second bread slice, turning it face down over the cucumbers. “There’s no sugar in that at all.”

“Fine.” He lifted his fingers in defeat, as usual, pretending to give up but knowing full well he’d be back tomorrow with the same game.

I had quit hoping he’d start paying for his orders two weeks ago. That was never going to happen, and I had decided to chalk the minimal expense up to community relations and let it go. Though if he kept walking off with my shop’s canning jars with , he’d soon have a full set—and those weren’t cheap.

“Great.” I released a long breath and poured a jar of naturally sweetened peach tea for him. He was lucky I didn’t serve it in a disposable cup.

“What’s in it?” he asked.

“Peaches. Tea.” I rocked my knife through the sandwich, making four small crustless triangles.

“And?” Mr. Paine lifted the tea to his mouth, closed his eyes, and gulped before returning the half-empty jar to his napkin. He smacked his lips. “Tastes like sugar.”

“No,” I assured him. “There’s no sugar in that.” I plated the crisp cucumber sandwiches, then poured

the ladies' mint and cranberry teas, grateful that they were too busy ogling Lou out the window to notice the delay. "Fresh peaches, honey, ginger, lemon, and spices. That's it."

I knew what my tea really tasted like to him: *defeat*. He'd tried to stop me from opening Sun, Sand, and Tea because businesses on the beach were "cliché and overdone." According to Mr. Paine, if I opened a café in my home, Charm, North Carolina, would become a tourist trap and ruin everything he lived for.

Fortunately, the property was old enough to have been zoned commercial before Paine's time on the town council. Built at the turn of the nineteenth century, my home had been a private residence at first, then a number of other businesses ranging from a boarding house to a prep school, and if the rumors were true, possibly a brothel. Though, I couldn't imagine anything so salacious ever having existed in Charm. The town was simply too...charming. And according to my great aunts, who'd been fixtures here since the Great Depression, it had always been that way.

The place was empty when I bought it. The previous owner lived out of town, but he'd sent a number of work crews to make renovations over the years. I could only imagine the money that had been slowly swallowed by the efforts. Eventually it went back on the market.

Mr. Paine eyeballed his drink and rocked the jar from side to side. "I don't see why you won't provide the complete list of your ingredients. What's the big secret?"

“I’m not keeping a secret. The recipes are private. I don’t want them out in the world.” I wet my lips and tried another explanation, one he might better understand. “These recipes are part of my family’s lineage. Our history and legacy.” I let my native drawl carry the words. Paine of all people should appreciate an effort to keep things as they were, to respect the past.

He harrumphed. “I’m bringing the ingredient list up at our next council meeting. I’m sure Mayor Dunfree and the other members will agree with me that it’s irresponsible not to have it posted.”

“Great.” He never seemed to tire of reminding me how tight he was with the mayor. He’d used their relationship to the fullest while trying to keep my shop from opening, but even the mayor couldn’t prevent a legitimate business from being run in a commercially zoned space. I refilled Mr. Paine’s jar, which had been emptied rather quickly. “Let me know if there’s anything else you’d like to try.”

Mr. Paine climbed off his stool and stuffed his goofy hat back on his mostly bald head. “Just the tea,” he said with unnecessary flourish.

“See ya.” I piled the ladies’ teas and sandwich on a tray and waved Paine off. “Try not to choke on an ice cube,” I muttered.



The afternoon ebbed and flowed in spurts of busyness and lulls of silence. I supposed that was typical of a

new business in a small town, not to mention that Sun, Sand, and Tea hadn't had its official launch yet. I was due for a big grand opening, but fear and cowardice kept me from planning it. What if no one came and the whole thing was a flop?

I flipped over the CLOSED sign promptly at five and went upstairs to trade my sundress for exercise gear and hunt for my track shoes. I'd gotten out of shape while I was away, loitering behind a table at culinary school, in a city where I never felt completely safe, eating take-out and every meal on the run because I didn't have time to cook for myself while studying the art of haute cuisine.

Now none of my clothes fit and I wasn't happy about it. Luckily, Charm was a great place to get out and get moving, whether hiking the dunes, playing volleyball on the beach, or swimming in the warm, blue ocean. I hit the boardwalk with a brisk stride.

Waning sunlight glistened on the water, reflecting shadows of soaring birds and the occasional single-engine plane, and the heady scent of home hung in the air. It was the salty, beachy fragrance that clung to my skin and hair long after I'd gone inside, the humidity and seagrass, wet sand and a hint of sunblock. I could never quite put it into words, and my attempts had been wholly lost on the friends I'd made living inland. Maybe rather than just a smell, it was a sensation you had to experience to understand. Kind of like that perfect glass of iced tea. Or maybe it was just me. Some days I wasn't sure if it was sweet

tea or saltwater flowing in my veins. Probably a little of both.

I turned away from the beach and headed through the marsh, following the wooden planks beneath my feet. Tenacious green stems poked through stringy bundles of dead seagrass. Spring in Charm was lovely, but soon everything would be in bloom, lush and wild, the way I loved it.

Too soon, the bushy marsh shrank away, revealing a glimpse of Ocean Drive, the main road in town, in the distance. I slowed at the sight of an extra-large moving truck parked across multiple spaces outside the Gas-N-Go.

Was I no longer the newest full-time citizen of Charm? A curious thrill buzzed over my skin. Was the person with the truck new-new, or newly returned, like me? Did I know them from my previous life here? Or was I about to meet a new friend?

Booted feet moved beneath the truck's long metal belly, nearing the back corner at a clip. I nearly held my breath in anticipation.

The boots arrived in full view a moment later, attached to a pair of nicely fitting jeans and six feet of serious.

I gave a low whistle, and the man's head turned sharply in my direction. Keen gray eyes fixed me in place.

"Oh." He'd heard that? My heart raced and my cheeks burned with humiliation. I'd been caught whistling at a strange man. What was next? Catcalls from my porch?

Slowly, he raised a palm in greeting.

I spun on my toes and hightailed it back the way I'd come. I had far too much pride to meet a man who looked like *that* while I looked like *this*—basted in sweat, half-panting, and fully testing the integrity of my outgrown exercise gear. *No way. No how. Nuh uh.* I could only imagine what my crazy brown curls looked like after a couple of miles in a hasty bun.

I didn't slow my pace again until the regal outline of my home came into view. Ocean winds jostled the freshly painted *Sun, Sand, and Tea* sign over my cobblestone walk. The place was historic, majestic, and three floors of much-needed repair. A wide wrap-around porch welcomed guests and stretched into an elaborate deck out back. The backyard had come complete with a picket fence-wrapped garden and small greenhouse overlooking the sea. A lighthouse-like tower rose into the sky with windows on every face and the best views of the Atlantic I'd ever seen. There were decks and verandas at every turn, and I could almost see the faces of aristocrats-past enjoying a party at the owner's invitation. From the rear of my home I had a stunning eastern view of the sea, but the western-facing front of my home had a secret. There was a lovely view of the marsh and boardwalk, yes, but from the front windows of the tower, I could see all the way to the bay.

Unlike the other houses along the seashore, mine had a uniquely Victorian flair and sat at the northernmost tip of our island, high on a cliff, safe from vicious

seasonal storms and winds that threatened the town below. The nearest homes were all more than a stone's throw away, but if the old adage was right about good fences making good neighbors, then I supposed a few hundred feet or so between them worked well too. It was the perfect place to show off and make a statement. I thought wryly of whoever commissioned the masterpiece all those years ago and what they might think of a poor pastry-school dropout owning the place today, serving iced tea where they'd once held grand balls.

Despite the home's undeniable grandeur, the place could use a handyman. My windows needed to be replaced, along with the tile in all four bathrooms. Chipped baseboards and dinged walls made regular appearances throughout the house, and almost every step had a little squeak. The hardwood floors were in need of refinishing, and the entire place was drafty. Not to mention the shutters, fences, and exterior railings were all overdue for a fresh coat of paint. It was shabby in the best way, true, but still undeniably worn down—and I had big plans for polishing the old place up. *At minimum*. I couldn't even think about the hours of weeding that awaited me along the garden paths.

A rustling in the weeds drew my attention, and I arced my path as far from the sound as possible without falling off the boardwalk and kept moving. The sun had set while I'd walked, leaving me in the beautiful but useless twilight, squinting against shadows in the marsh. My sincere and lifelong fear of bees was

rivalled only by my fear of alligators, and I didn't want to come face-to-face with one if I could avoid it.

Something pale and bulbous on the ground caught my eye. The object was surrounded by smashed weeds and what looked like one of my café's canning jars. Doomed by relentless curiosity—and willing to wash and reuse my jar if possible—I inched closer, hoping I wouldn't meet an alligator.


As I crept over the bank, the mysterious shape registered with a snap: I was looking at the top of someone's bald head! I dashed forward and nearly swallowed my tongue at the sight of his face. "Mr. Paine!"

I scrambled through crushed grass and fell to my knees at his side. "Mr. Paine?" I scanned the scene frantically for help. "Are you hurt?" I asked, patting his cool cheeks. How did a grown man fall off the boardwalk? "Mr. Paine. Wake up," I ordered. "Open your eyes. Can you hear me?" I pressed two fingers to his wrist in search of a pulse, but my own trembling hands made it impossible to locate.

Hot tears swam in my eyes. "Hold on," I begged, moving my hands to his neck and roving inept fingertips over his sweat-dampened skin. Still nothing. "I'm going to call for help." I dug my cell phone from my pocket and dialed 911. "Please nod if you can hear me."

I sent up a thousand silent prayers, but Mr. Paine didn't nod. He didn't move a finger, eyelid, or lip. Something awful had happened to him, and I had no idea how to help.

CHAPTER



TWO

Half the town had turned up with the emergency crews, watching suspiciously from the opposite side of some flimsy yellow caution tape. I was quarantined on the business side of said tape, seated in an ambulance's open doorway and feeling helpless, wrapped in a blanket and waiting to make my formal statement so I could leave. I tugged the itchy fabric more tightly around my shoulders and hunched lower to corral my fading body heat. The temperature had plummeted since I'd left for my walk, and relentless wind had long-since dried my sweaty clothes, leaving my skin covered in goose bumps.

"Tea?" My great-aunt Clara's voice cut through my hazy thoughts. Her long silver and blond hair lashed her cheeks with each gust of wind. I'd called her and her sister, Aunt Fran, the moment I'd disconnected from the call with the emergency dispatch operator. They were my grandmother's sisters, but had functioned more like surrogate mothers than anything

else. Aunt Clara moved closer, holding a serving tray loaded with disposable cups of tea in her hands.

A passing EMT accepted her offering with a grateful nod. "Thank you, ma'am."

A fresh gust of wind kicked up, tossing sand and pollen into the air.

Aunt Clara turned her back against the gale, protecting her serving tray and attempting to cover the cups of tea with one arm. The airy fabric of her ivory kimono and ankle-length nightgown fluttered roughly against her narrow frame. While I'd been waiting to make my statement, she and Aunt Fran had been serving my tea to everyone in sight. I tried not to think of it as a massive inventory loss but more of a civic duty, an attempt to console the anxious crowd while we waited for a miracle. Mr. Paine was down, but maybe I had been wrong. Maybe he would be okay.

As if responding to my thought, the paramedics who had been diligently attending to Mr. Paine slowly reemerged from the weeds. They climbed on to the boardwalk with deep regret in their eyes.

One of them lifted his palms and faced the crowd. "I'm sorry."

The night grew silent, save for a few singing frogs and the continuous lull of breaking waves.

I dropped my head to hide my face and stared at my dangling feet. Mr. Paine was really gone. I'd argued with him this afternoon, and now I could never apologize. Tears rolled over my cheeks and dropped onto the sand below.

A pair of brown boots marched into view, stopping in the space before my sneakers. “Miss Swan?”

I raised my eyes at the sound of my name. The man from the moving truck earlier today peered down at me, a look of shock and recognition flashing in his serious eyes. He lifted the shiny silver badge hanging around his neck on a beaded chain. “I’m Detective Hays.”

“Everly,” I choked out, unsure what else to say.

He scrutinized me. “Did you know the victim?”

“I found him,” I said. “And yes, I knew him. Did you say victim?” The rusty cogs of my mind finally creaked into motion. “What kind of detective are you?” I glanced at the grass-lined bank where a black body bag was being loaded onto a gurney. I covered my mouth and turned away.

“Tonight? Homicide.”

My mouth went dry. “What happened to him?”

“Looks like poison.”

I gasped. The crowd behind me murmured. Phones lit up with fresh buzzes and dings as people texted the news to friends and family.

“Someone killed him? Intentionally?” My chest ached as it was wrenched with grief.

Detective Hays nodded.

Poison. The word rolled aimlessly in my addled mind. “Murder?” I whispered, trying to make the word sound logical. “Are you sure?”

The detective flicked his attention to a white panel van as it rolled into view and parked beside the

ambulance. “Preliminary evidence suggests it. We’ll know more soon. Meanwhile, I’m going to ask you to accompany me to the police station. I need a written statement from you, and I’d like to ask you a few questions, as well. I’d like to hear the details of the argument you had with the victim today.”

I leaned away from him. He said *statement*, but it sounded suspiciously like *confession*.

Panic welled in my chest. I wasn’t sure which was more horrifying: the fact that the detective thought there was a murderer in our little town or that he might think it was me. I swiveled my head in search of my great-aunts. Both were already moving in my direction, having handed off the trays of my tea samples to a pair of women who appeared as shocked as myself. They had clearly heard Detective Hays’s request.

The aunts shoved past a line of local policemen. “Excuse us,” Clara implored, begging their pardon with her signature touch of sweetness. “Move it,” Fran demanded in her typical no-nonsense style. Their flowing gowns and long, sleek hair streamed behind them like superhero capes, and their protective eyes were locked on me.

“Darling.” Clara patted my cheek and wrapped a bony arm around my shoulders. “This will be fine. I’m sure it’s standard procedure.”

Fran cocked a hip and narrowed her smart brown eyes at the detective. “Is it?” she asked.

The detective wrinkled his brow. “What?”

“Standard procedure,” she clarified. “Are you

taking her in so she can make a statement, or is taking her in *your* way of making a statement?”

“What?”

“She means,” Clara interjected, “is there some way Everly can do all that from here? She’s been through quite enough already, don’t you think? We can go inside and pour some sweet tea, then get whatever protocols and procedures you need out of the way without worrying the girl any more than she already is.”

The detective’s sharp gray eyes snapped back to mine, clearly unmoved by my aunts’ interruption or Clara’s request. “Are you worried about talking to me? Any particular reason for that?”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I hadn’t been worried before, but the way he looked at me implied I might want to reconsider.

A woman in a ponytail and black jacket approached with a clipboard and plastic bag. “Detective?”

He dragged his gaze begrudgingly from mine. “Yep.”

She handed him the equivalent of a gallon freezer bag with a yellow label covering most of the front and something solid stuffed inside: one of my tea jars. “We found this at the victim’s side.”

“Thank you.” Detective Hays turned the bag around in his palms and grimaced before facing the contents in my direction. “Is this yours?” He moved his attention from the tea jar in his grip to my eyes, then to the swinging sign above my front door bearing the same logo.

I made a choking sound, unable to speak.

He returned the bag to the woman. “Find out what was in this.”

“Yes, sir.” She turned and disappeared into the glare of blinding spotlights erected near the crime scene.

Detective Hays pressed wide palms over narrow hips. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to come with me to make that statement.” He looked at my aunts with a hint of disdain. “And I think I’m going to have to pass on that tea.”

Beside us, dozens of people scampered off, all moving double-time to dispose of their tea samples in the garbage cans nearby. The women who had been holding on to my serving trays set them carefully on the ground, then walked briskly away, taking multiple backward glances before breaking into a jog.

My eyes blurred once more, this time with humiliation and rage. “I can’t believe you just insinuated that my tea killed Mr. Paine in front of half the town.” The words fell like stones off my tongue. “This is my business,” I cried. “My livelihood and my entire life savings. How could you do that to me without any proof?”

The white van’s headlights flashed on and the engine sparked to life. A small black logo on the rear corner identified it as property of the county coroner.

Detective Hays watched, jaw clenching and releasing, as the vehicle rolled away. “Right now I’m more interested in why someone did *that* to *him*.”



The Charm police station was housed in a new brick building on the bay side of town, as far from my home as any place could be without leaving the island. The station faced the mainland, with great views of the bay and the two-mile bridge that carried travelers to and from reality. Until tonight, Charm had always seemed somewhat untouchable by the things news crews covered across the bay. We didn't have crime and corruption. Sometimes there was a bit of litter, but never anything like citizen-on-citizen violence.

Detective Hays opened the station door and held it for me to pass through.

While I'd never been to the police station, I had spent more hours than I could count inside the Nature Preservation Society office next door, volunteering with Aunt Clara and Aunt Fran. They were the only two beekeepers in Charm, and they went to great lengths to educate folks on the importance of nurturing the population of our buzzy little friends. I'd made posters, passed out flyers, and tried desperately not to get stung, never giving the policemen and women next door a single thought.

The building's interior wasn't what I expected. It was laid out in a similar way to the Nature Preservation Society, but it smelled like bleach and air freshener rather than dust and leaves. The white-tiled floor and pale green walls reminded me of a doctor's office, as did the uncomfortable silence. Curious eyes trailed us through the lobby, past a cop manning the front

desk and a cleaning crew dusting framed photos and emptying pint-sized trash bins.

“Right this way, please, Miss Swan.” The detective led me down a narrow hallway lined with office doors to a little room with a big mirror and no window. “Can I get you anything before we get started?”

“No.” Though *legal representation* crossed my mind. I took a seat and avoided eye contact. My scrambled brain raced with too many thoughts, some logical and some not. Everything whirled together into a cyclone of anxiety. I wasn’t sure I could answer any questions without crying.

The detective produced a pad of paper and a pen and slid them in front of me. “This is for your written account.”

I set one palm on the little stack of items and sniffled. Guilt twisted inside of me. Even if I wasn’t a murderer, I’d been mean to an old man on a daily basis for weeks. I’d gotten the café I’d wanted, despite his best efforts to prevent it, and I’d still let him bait and goad me about tea ingredients. And now he was gone.

“Let’s start with something simple,” Detective Hays said, pulling a chair away from the table and seating himself opposite me. He stripped off his black windbreaker and hung it over the back of his chair. The unassuming gray T-shirt beneath seemed out of place in the sterile room. “Why did you run when I saw you earlier tonight?”

The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood at

attention, and I shivered. His tone and disposition spoke of something more significant than the actual words he was saying. I had no idea what that might be, but my aunts had always said I had a sixth sense about people, and I was certain Detective Hays was about to change my life—probably for the worse.

“Miss Swan,” he prodded.

I lifted my aching eyes to meet his measured stare. “What?”

“I saw you on the boardwalk earlier, approximately half an hour before receiving a call that there had been a potential homicide nearby. Imagine my surprise when I discovered the woman who’d found the victim was the same woman who’d taken one look at me and run off only minutes after the victim’s estimated time of death.”

My mouth opened. Words clogged my throat. I’d run from the cute guy in the moving truck because I was gross and too vain to speak to him in my sweaty condition. “I didn’t know you were a cop.”

“Then why’d you run?”

I looked down at myself, and a humbling realization set in: I was still in the too-tight exercise pants. Still painted in sweat. Probably covered in bits of marsh weeds now and housing a swarm of gnats in my ratty hair. I dropped my face into waiting palms with a long groan.

“Care to elaborate?” he asked.

I rocked my head side to side. I did not.

“Miss Swan,” he began again, shifting in his seat

and resting his forearms on the table between us. “Is it true that you had an argument with the victim earlier today?”

I raised my head and gave the detective my most pleading look. “We fight every day.”

“Why is that, exactly?”

I rolled my shoulders and massaged the knotted muscles along the base of my neck, biding time and choosing my words carefully. “Mr. Paine’s on the town council, and he didn’t want me to open my café. He has a thing about businesses being located inside residences. Had,” I corrected myself.

“And you opened anyway.”

“Yes.” I willed my quivering lips to still. “It was within my rights, but he didn’t like it, so he came by every day to complain and drink free tea.”

His brows arched dramatically. “You didn’t make the man who gave you so much trouble pay for his tea?”

“No.”

“Why? You weren’t friends. He didn’t even want you to have the café. Why would you give him free drinks?”

I worked to settle my breath and folded my hands on the table. Why had I? It was the right thing to do, wasn’t it? Under Detective Hays’s scrutiny, I was no longer sure. “Once the café opened, Mr. Paine found something new to fuss about—he came around regularly to complain I didn’t provide an ingredients list for customers. I thought I could get him to change his mind about the idea of the café if he enjoyed the

product. You know. Kill him with kindness.” I winced at my word choice. “I didn’t mean that.”

“Which part?”

I shook off the sarcastic remark. I wouldn’t allow him to bait me. “I figured Mr. Paine would eventually see I’m a nice person running a respectable business, making quality products that he and the town could be proud of. It wasn’t like I opened a Hooters or had some grand plan to make Charm the next Hilton Head.”

“You don’t like Hilton Head?”

I rubbed my eyes, beginning to get frustrated. “Hilton Head is fine, but Mr. Paine hated commercialization. That’s all I’m saying. And Sun, Sand, and Tea wasn’t going to hurt his vision for the town. I thought I could win him over. Show him that my café added to the local charm.”

Detective Hays mulled that over.

The silence stretched palpably between us, unraveling my already frayed nerves.

“I would never have hurt Mr. Paine,” I pleaded, desperate to convince Detective Hays of my truth. “Even if I had wanted to, which I didn’t, I wouldn’t have used my tea to do it. A stunt like that would dishonor my family and completely ruin my business.”

I’d be lucky to sell another glass all week after Detective Big Mouth’s earlier comments. Charm was a fairly superstitious town, with as many legends and tall tales as actual facts, and locals seemed to prefer to former to the latter. I gripped the table edge. I would

become a campfire story. *The Sweet-Tea Slayer*, or something equally awful.

I swallowed a boulder of emotion and concentrated on Detective Hays's blank cop expression. "Think about it. No one will want my tea after this. I'll have to close my shop. I won't be able to afford to keep my house, and I've only lived there for three months." Panic replaced the shock and numbness in my limbs. I rubbed a circle on my chest where it was constricted with pain. "I can't go back and live with my aunts again." I launched myself to my feet and paced the floor.

Detective Hays put a hand on the butt of his side-arm and pushed slightly away from the table, as if he expected me to throw myself at him over the table.

His silence unnerved me, and I began to babble. "My aunts are bananas. Kind. Sweet. But totally batty. I just can't." I turned on him. "Why would you hold up my tea jar like that and ask to have the contents tested? You implied that my tea was the murder weapon while half the town was drinking it. They're all probably on their ways to have their stomachs pumped now."

A dark chuckle rolled in my throat, and I dropped back onto my chair.

"What?" Detective Hays relaxed his position, apparently satisfied he wouldn't need to shoot me.

"Irony," I said, dropping both palms onto the table. "He's finally getting what he wanted, and he won't be around to see it."

“Can you think of someone else who may have had reason to hurt Mr. Paine?”

“No.”

He shot me a disbelieving look. “So, everyone else in town liked him? He only had an issue with you?”

“Of course not. He was a cranky, crotchety old man who got on everyone’s nerves, but he was one of us. Part of this big, weirdo family.” I waved my arms around my head like a lunatic.

Detective Hays frowned. Clearly, he didn’t understand. Wait until he’d been here a little longer.

A new idea popped into my mind. “Was that your moving truck I saw you with earlier?”

He dipped his chin in silent affirmation.

“You live here now?”

“That’s generally what a moving truck indicates.”

I was suddenly unsure how I felt about that. “It’s not usually like this here,” I said, feeling the need to defend my town. “It’s usually nice. Quiet. Folks get along. There’s an unspoken camaraderie when you share a small space like this island. It’s different than anything I’ve encountered anywhere else. You’ll like it, if you don’t mind everyone in your business.”

“I definitely mind.” He tapped the blank paper before me with one tan finger. “I’d like a list of anyone else who you believe might have a reason to harm Mr. Paine.”

“Anyone else? Like, besides me?” I scoffed. “I just told you I couldn’t have killed Mr. Paine. It’s illogical and mean.”

“And you’re always what?” he asked. “Reasonable and kind?”

“I try to be,” I admitted. Though buying a fixer-upper home on a whim and arguing with an old man didn’t support either notion. “I’m not writing down a list of people for you to badger, if that’s what you’re asking. Talk to people. They’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

He cocked his head over one shoulder. “Like you’re doing?”

I was tired of the sarcasm. “I can’t tell you what I don’t know. I didn’t hurt Mr. Paine, and I have no idea who did. That’s all I know.”

Someone knocked on the door, then pushed it open. A policeman I recognized from high school gave the detective a pointed look.

“Excuse me,” Detective Hays said, rising to his feet. “Write your statement and sign it. Add the date.” He strode through the open door and vanished.

He didn’t come back.

Eventually, I turned to the notepad and began to recount the events of my evening, logging them as neatly as I could with shaking hands, the memories as vivid and visceral as if I were reliving each awful one. Grief knotted in my throat as I described seeing Mr. Paine in the weeds. Trying to wake him. Thinking he might’ve had a stroke or heart attack or some other thing that just happened to people all the time. Then learning it was murder.

The paper was stained and spotted with my tears

and bleeding ink when I finished nearly an hour later.

I poked my head through the open doorway, notebook clutched to my chest. "Hello?"

The familiar officer smiled at me from his post beside the door. "All finished?"

"Yeah." I held the paper out to him.

"Thank you. You're free to go. Your aunts are in the lobby to drive you home, and Detective Hays will meet you there."

I blinked. "At my home?"

"Yes." The officer scanned my writing, lifting the pages on the pad one by one. "Judge Helix has issued a search warrant."

Images of dirty dishes and discarded undergarments raced through my head. Detective Hays was putting his hands on my things, searching for evidence that I was a killer, and probably judging my character based on the disastrous condition of my home.

I turned on my heels and made a break for the lobby, half wishing I'd never left my house tonight and half wishing I could shove Detective Hays back into that moving truck and send him home to wherever he came from.