

LEIGHANN DOBBS

MURDER

ON A

MISSISSIPPI

STEAMBOAT



A GRIPPING 1920s HISTORICAL COZY MYSTERY

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A GRIPPING 1920S HISTORICAL COZY MYSTERY

LEIGHANN DOBBS

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CHAPTER ONE

JUNE 12, 1926

The mood in the forward lounge of the steamboat Miss Delta Belle was celebratory, but Nora Marsh could tell by the way her great-aunt Julia studied the room that she had murder on her mind.

Nora could see why. The polished dark-mahogany paneled walls had a certain somber ambiance. The chandeliers that twinkled from above cast deep shadows into the corners, making them a perfect hiding spot for someone with malicious intent. The carpet with its swirls of emerald and gold would mask even the largest of bloodstains. And the many discreetly hidden side doors provided the perfect access for a killer to slip out unnoticed, leaving the body behind on one of the leather Chesterfield sofas to be discovered by the next person who came through the grand French doors.

Not that her great-aunt was a murderer, heavens no! Aunt Julia was a famous murder mystery novelist. Well, Julia herself wasn't actually famous because she wrote under the male pseudonym Ridley Howes. Ridley was famous. Julia was sworn to secrecy by her publishers. But that didn't stop her from thinking about murder wherever she went.

"So many interesting characters here." Aunt Julia's blue eyes twinkled as she reached over to the small table in between their club chairs and spread some caviar onto a cracker. She had keen powers of observation and her skills had come in handy more than a few times over the years when they'd had the misfortune to stumble upon a real-life murder, about which Aunt Julia had lent her advice—whether the police had wanted it or not.

"You can say that again." Nora scanned the room, which held about half of the ship's one hundred and ninety-five passengers. There were all types here: young women in low-waisted beaded dresses, older women in crepe gowns with large flowers, men in suits or tuxedos. And hats galore.

Nora herself was no slouch in the mystery-solving department, but whereas Aunt Julia was better at noticing things that were out of place and analyzing clues, Nora's expertise leaned more toward human behavior. At least her high-priced doctorate in psychology wasn't going to waste.

The Miss Delta Belle was the showpiece of its kind and this was her inaugural voyage. The ship had been fashioned after the older steamboats that had dominated the Mississippi River half a century ago. Though the golden age of those boats had declined

due to the advent of the railroads, the desire to stay in a unique hotel with good food and fine surroundings had not. The Miss Delta Belle satisfied that desire, and over the next four days the passengers would be treated to a leisurely trip down the Mississippi, complete with the best entertainment and meals.

Aunt Julia, being very rich, and therefore very well known, had been given an invitation to join the trip by her dear friend Giles Hendricks, who owned the boat. Naturally, Aunt Julia had invited Nora to accompany her. Nora had been joining her aunt on excursions for years and it suited them both just fine.

Aunt Julia leaned over and whispered in Nora's ear, "Take those three over there. Quite fascinating."

Julia tilted her head ever so subtly toward a small table where three people sat. Nora had seen them board the ship with an overabundance of expensive luggage. One of them was a strikingly gorgeous blonde in her mid-twenties. As Nora watched them over the rim of her glass, the blonde laughed and swatted at the man's arm. Her husband? They were an unlikely pair as he was older, balding and paunchy. The third person was a gray-haired woman in a flamboyant dark-pink suit with the largest-featured hat that Nora had ever seen. The gray-haired woman was the man's mother, judging by the way she scowled at the blonde.

"Looks like someone doesn't approve of Junior's choice in women." Nora squinted at their ring fingers. The young woman had on long white gloves, but the man sported a thick gold band on his.

"Obviously. I'd say the young thing married for money and mother is wise to that." Aunt Julia swished her glass; the ice cubes in the non-alcoholic drink she'd been nursing like it was a Gin Rickey clinked against the sides. At least Nora hoped it wasn't a Gin Rickey: ever since prohibition, Aunt Julia had been known to bring a flask or two of her brother's bathtub gin on their trips.

Nora frowned at the drink. "Auntie, is that—?"

"And look at how nervous she is," Aunt Julia interrupted Nora. Whether she was so engrossed in her observations that she hadn't heard her niece speak or because she didn't want to answer the question, Nora wasn't sure, but Julia was right about the woman being nervous. Though she was laughing at her husband, her eyes scanned the room. As Nora watched, she adjusted her hat—a smart navy-blue felt number with a wide brim—forward on her head as if hiding her face.

"I wonder why she would be nervous," Nora said.

"Good question." Julia's gaze had already swiveled to the other end of the room. "And look at that gentleman there, the handsome one standing beside the bar."

Nora had noticed the handsome one. Not that she was looking. At the age of thirty-five some older ladies might refer to Nora as a spinster, but Nora was a modern woman and much too young to get tied down. She enjoyed traveling with Aunt Julia too much. But what was the harm in looking? Especially when the person in question had a pleasant olive complexion, thick black hair and dangerous brown eyes.

"He's also nervous. Look at him darting glances at the doorway. I heard—not that I was eavesdropping, mind you—but I heard someone say that he is quite a gambler.

Perhaps he owes someone money."

"Now, Aunt Julia, don't go making assumptions. You know what happens when you do that," Nora said.

"Yes, what happens is that I'm usually correct. His name is Max Lawton." Julia sipped her drink and glanced over at the man at the bar again. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I wouldn't mind writing him into one of my books. Of course, I'd change the name."

As Nora watched the man at the bar, another man stood up from one of the chairs, stumbling against an older gentleman with a cane who had been approaching an empty seat. The stumbler was young, perhaps Nora's age, and good-looking but not in the dangerous way that appealed to Nora. His good looks were more boyish, charming. Almost too charming.

The old man looked about to topple over and the younger put a steadying hand on his arm. "Very sorry, sir. My apologies."

The old man steadied, then brushed off his red silk vest, straightening his spine as if to gain some dignity. "Please do watch where you are going. What's the hurry?"

"This is just so exciting." The younger man thrust his hand out. "Johnny Stokes. Are you sure you're all right?"

The older man eyed Johnny's hand for a few seconds, then met it with his weathered one. "Doctor Percival Montford. And, yes, I'm fine."

Percival withdrew his hand, nodded at Johnny and then continued on his way.

Julia's shrewd gaze had zoned in on him. "And that one, is he drunk? I could've sworn I saw him bumping into someone else earlier out on the deck."

"Drunk? Now, where would he get booze? I don't think there is any on the boat, is there?" Nora looked pointedly at Aunt Julia's drink.

Julia shifted her gaze to Nora and made a face. "Oh this? It's a bland soda water. Not very interesting at all. Certainly nothing with spirits in it. Where on earth would I get spirits? Perhaps the man has a medical condition. I shouldn't be so quick to judge." Julia finished her drink in one big gulp.

A flurry of activity near the sweeping French doors that served as a grand entry to the salon grabbed their attention. Delilah Dove had arrived.

Delilah was a semi-famous singer who was providing the nightly entertainment on the trip. She was one of those rags-to-riches stories; girl from a poor family makes good. Nora thought she'd even heard something about Delilah's brother being some sort of criminal. Aunt Julia had been told she was quite expensive. She came complete with a band and backup singers.

Delilah comported herself with all the flair of a Hollywood star. She wore a scarlet gown that trailed behind her on the floor like the tail of a peacock. It had a long, flowing, chiffon scarf on the neck, which she periodically threw over her shoulder. Nora presumed it was to attract even more attention since she'd already done it twice and hadn't yet been in the room for five minutes.

Heavy bejeweled earrings dripped from her ears and her neck glowed with red gems, the center of which was a ruby cabochon the size of an egg. A ruby-and-diamond bracelet

glittered on her wrist every time she flicked the scarf. People flocked around her and she appeared to thrive on the adoration of the crowd.

But even as she basked in the spotlight, Delilah's eyes searched the room, coming to rest at the back. Nora followed her gaze to Max Lawton, his brown eyes narrowing as he returned Delilah's look. What was that about?

Nora turned back to the doors where a thin man in a dapper suit had arrived. He pushed through the crowd to stand next to Delilah, slipping his arm around her waist possessively.

Aunt Julia had been watching too. "That's Clifford Oxley. He manages the dinner show. Giles told me he persuaded Clifford to leave the Gilded Goose in New York City. Quite a coup. Though I think it might not have been too hard to lure him away. Rumor has it Clifford and Delilah are more than just manager and star."

"Clearly." Nora watched as Clifford kissed Delilah's cheek.

The crowd had thickened, so she could barely see them anymore. Johnny Stokes weaved around the edges bumping into people and Nora hoped he didn't knock anyone over. Her gaze slid back to Max who was watching Delilah, his expression dark. Maybe Clifford wasn't the only one who had designs on Delilah. Is that why Max had been watching the doorway earlier? Had he been waiting for her to show up?

"She is rather showy." Aunt Julia studied Delilah. "I hear she's all about the publicity. Even her stage name was carefully chosen to be memorable. Delilah Dove. Alliteration is always easier to remember, I use it in my books a lot."

"Well she certainly does know how to make a grand entrance. That's one for your books," Nora whispered, even though most everyone else had rushed to the front of the salon so there was no one around to hear her.

"Indeed. However, I find it much more interesting when one makes a subtle exit..."

Nora glanced over to see her aunt's gaze was now pinned on the opposite end of the room where the hat-adjusting young wife was tugging her husband through the side door.

"Now there's something mysterious to write about."

Vera Hinchcliffe breathed a sigh of relief as the door to the front lounge shut behind her and her husband Beauregard.

Beau glanced behind him as if wondering what had just happened. "Really, dear, I think we could have stayed a bit longer. Dinner isn't for three hours and mother is left in there alone and I—"

Vera shushed him by putting an index finger to his lips. His mother was the exact reason why she'd dragged him out of there. She didn't need her disapproving mother-in-law discovering her little secret.

Martha Hinchcliffe—or "the buzzard" as Vera thought of her—was always watching her, circling like a bird of prey waiting to swoop in and point out Vera's flaws to her son. Martha had wanted Beau to marry one of her friends' high-society daughters. Someone with a matching trust fund. Vera, with her modest secretarial position and questionable

family background, didn't fit the bill, though if Martha knew exactly how questionable Vera's background really was, the old biddy would probably have a heart attack.

When Vera had first met Martha, she'd had the tiniest hope that they'd someday get along like family. Maybe Martha would become the mother that Vera never had. But no matter how much she'd tried to get Martha to like her, it hadn't happened. Vera had tried complimenting Martha's garish outfits, agreeing with her every word and even going out of her way to see all her needs were met like some kind of servant, but the more Vera tried to ingratiate herself, the less Martha seemed to like her.

Martha could never find out the real truth; Vera had worked too hard to secure this marriage to lose it now. She turned to her husband, pouting her lips and making her eyes round and innocent. "Now you want me to look good for dinner, don't you, pookums?"

"You always look nice." Beau smiled at her and the love in his eyes softened her cold heart a tad. She'd married him solely for his money, but she had to admit she was becoming a bit fond of him.

Him; not his mother.

Which reminded her, she'd better get to their room before she was seen by the wrong person. She tugged Beau forward, the heels of her patent leather T-straps clanging on the metal stairs as they descended toward the cabin deck where their luxury suite awaited.

"It will be nice to relax in our room, just the two of us."

"It sure will." Beau reached back and pinched her butt playfully.

"I'm going to need all that time to pick out my outfit and powder my nose." She swatted his hand away, cursing her rotten luck. Of all people on board why did one of them have to be Agnes Banks? Who knew she was now calling herself Delilah Dove? What kind of a name was that anyway?

Vera had almost fainted when she saw the giant poster with Agnes' picture on it hung up in the front lounge. Now she would have to go through all kinds of gyrations to avoid her, which might be tricky considering they were trapped on this boat for the next four days. And Agnes—now Delilah—would be singing at dinner every night. What if their table was close to the stage, or if she roamed around from table to table as many of them did? Vera could not risk it; she'd have to skip dinner, but how to do that without raising suspicion from Beau or the buzzard?

Beau inserted the key in the door and opened it, stepping aside for her to enter first. Vera had seen to it that they had booked one of the largest, and most expensive, luxury staterooms. Beau could well afford it. And, of course, the buzzard had her own stateroom next door. Thank heavens they didn't have to share a cabin.

The room was like most lavish hotel rooms Vera had stayed in. Maybe a little smaller, but it had a queen bed, floral wallpaper and a separate bathroom. A large window looked out on the river. Vera had left the window cracked open—she loved fresh air. A breeze fluttered the silk curtains and she got an idea.

"Hachoo!"

"God bless." Beau turned to her, his eyes full of concern. "Pookie, are you feeling unwell?"

Vera sniffled and batted her eyelashes at Beau. "I think I do feel a cold coming on."
Beau frowned. "Maybe you should rest, let me fluff the pillows for you."

Vera went into the bathroom and started the bath. She needed time alone to think. She'd worked too hard to lose everything now. Beau and the buzzard could not discover her lies—it would be the end of easy street. Could her mother-in-law force an annulment if they discovered she'd lied about her past? She could not run that risk.

Hopefully she wouldn't have to resort to something drastic.

CHAPTER TWO

"They've left her all alone, let's go introduce ourselves." Aunt Julia sprang up from her chair. For a woman nearing eighty years of age, she was quite sprightly. She exuded a younger energy. The skirt of her green stout-waist dress rustled as she messed with it. "I'm sure there is a good story there."

Nora rose, and straightening the drop waist of her peach-colored sheath dress over her narrow hips she glanced back at the bar. Max Lawton was gone. He wasn't at the crowd in the front of the room, either. Curious.

Aunt Julia was already at the table introducing herself, she turned and motioned for Nora to speed it up. "... and this is my grand-niece, Nora Marsh."

"Martha Hinchcliffe." The woman managed a smile and held out her hand. Nora shook it. The woman had a surprisingly firm grip. "Pleased to meet you."

"We're in for a lovely trip." Aunt Julia glanced out the window. The boat was still at dock and you could see the Mississippi stretching out behind it like a blue ribbon. The river was wide in this spot and there were some buildings dotted along the banks, but mostly there were green fields as far as the eye could see.

"That's what I've been told." Martha gestured for them to sit and Aunt Julia—who studied people like an entomologist studied insects—plopped down next to her eagerly. Anyone of interest who Aunt Julia met eventually ended up as a character in one of her books.

"I saw you with a younger couple earlier. Perhaps your son?" Julia raised an eyebrow.

Martha cracked a genuine smile, pride shining in her eyes. "Yes, that was my boy Beauregard. My only child."

"And the woman?" Aunt Julia asked.

Martha's smile faded. "His wife. Vera."

"Such a pretty young thing," Julia said.

Martha's mouth pinched and she shifted in her seat. "Well, looks aren't everything, now are they? One certainly must consider character. One wouldn't want to spend the rest of one's life with a boring limp noodle."

"Certainly not." Julia's eyes shone with the excitement of a new find as she continued her interrogation. "But it's lovely of your son and his wife to include you on their trip."

Martha shifted in her seat. "Well, I suppose. Beau has always been an attentive son."

Momma's boy, Nora translated in her head.

"How lucky you are."

Martha snorted. "As you can see, he isn't much company. His nature tends toward the quiet side, which is why I always pictured him with a woman who was a bit more outgoing. Someone who could bring him out. But now that he has his wife to tend to, he's even less company."

Aunt Julia winked. "Young married people do need their time alone."

Martha frowned, perhaps picturing what that entailed.

"Oh look. Here comes Giles." Apparently Aunt Julia was done with her interrogation of Martha Hinchcliffe. She rose from her seat. "Come, Nora, let's say hello. Lovely to meet you, Martha."

Julia rustled off and Nora nodded at Martha and hurried after her aunt.

As she joined her, Aunt Julia whispered in her ear, "What do you make of that? Sounds like Martha would have chosen someone different for a daughter-in-law. Vera sounds boring."

"I'm not so sure about that. The way she was hiding back there seems to indicate there is another layer to Vera. Maybe Martha needs to look past the surface."

"That would be your area of expertise, dear. I think now that we have been introduced, the three of them bear further investigation. Martha would make a perfect murder victim—"

"Julia!" Giles Hendricks held out his arms. He was a happy man, short and balding with a gray mustache that twirled up at the ends. He wore an expensive pinstripe suit and a red tie. He kissed Aunt Julia on each cheek then held out his hand to Nora. "Nora, dear, so glad to see you again."

"And you." Nora had met Giles a few times before and liked him.

Giles turned to a tall man beside him. The man was in his late fifties and had thick white hair and a craggy, stern face. "This is our pilot, Sven Nordby. I practically stole him from the Green Line. He's one of the best river pilots in the south."

That explained the navy-blue outfit with gold epaulets and white captain's hat. Sven didn't crack a smile at the compliment, he simply bowed toward each of them as Giles made introductions.

"We're about to get underway. I was just introducing Sven around before he disappears into the pilot house." He turned to Sven, who looked eager to get back to his domain. "Would you ladies like a tour of the boat?"

Aunt Julia's eyes lit up. More settings for her mystery books danced in her head, no doubt. "That would be wonderful."

Giles held out both elbows and they each took one. "Then let's start on the sun deck. We can accompany Sven to the pilot house."

CHAPTER THREE

The pilot house wasn't very exciting. It was a small room with a large wooden wheel that sat above the sun deck directly in front of the tall smokestack. The room was a bit warm and loud with the noise from the boilers below. Sven seemed eager to get rid of them. He virtually ignored them as he instructed his staff of two stewards and a co-pilot to clear away the ropes and pull up the gangplank.

They didn't stay long before proceeding to the sun deck where they had a bird's-eye view of the landscape. The scene was impressive, with the setting sun lighting the undersides of the clouds in hues of pink and lavender, which were reflected on the water. Rolling green pastures dotted with crops and grazing cows flanked both banks.

"Just lovely," Aunt Julia said.

"Thank you. This is the best deck on the boat as it has no rooms and you get an almost three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view." Giles turned slowly, his arms spread. It was quite a view—the only thing blocking it was the smokestack and pilot house on the bow.

They walked to the stern and from this vantage point Nora could see down into the giant red paddle wheel. Aunt Julia leaned over the railing to get a better look at it, most likely trying to figure out if you could hide a body in there.

Giles grabbed her arm. "Careful, Julia, you wouldn't want to fall into that thing. The railing is not very high and it would be easy to topple over. If the ship were to jerk to a start, you would be killed, drowned and battered by the wheel."

"Really?" Julia didn't seem the least bit deterred. She was probably already planning a steamboat murder book. "I hardly think I would fall in. I'd tumble onto that ledge there." Aunt Julia pointed to a two-foot section on the other side of the railing that jutted out just below the deck.

"That's a safety feature to prevent such an occurrence, but let's not tempt fate."

Giles steered Aunt Julia away from the railing and launched into a spiel about how he'd renovated the boat to have the feeling of a golden-age steamboat but with more luxury. Nora could tell by the way he spoke about the ship that it was a passion of his and the success of this maiden voyage was very important to him.

They descended to the Texas deck, named after the state where this steamboat feature had been invented. Some of the crew's cabins were on this deck, along with

economy passenger cabins, and there was a lovely small lounge called the Texas lounge at the bow.

The next deck down was the cabin deck with its larger cabins and library in the middle, as well as the lavish forward lounge where they'd just been for the reception.

"Plenty of lounges for one to hide from the other guests," Aunt Julia remarked.

Giles, blissfully unaware that Aunt Julia's comment probably meant the lounges provided lots of places to stash a murder weapon or provide a false alibi, beamed with pride. "I want the guests to have plenty of places to socialize. The best part is on the main deck with the supper club, the first floating supper club of its kind." He gestured for them to precede him down the stairs.

The stairs to the dining salon were much nicer than the metal stairs that separated the decks. These were wide and carpeted, with fancy wooden bannisters polished to such a shine that Nora's hand practically slid off the railing. The smell of lemon polish gave way to the scents of roasting meat as they descended.

The dining room was already set up. Crisp white tablecloths draped round tables set for eight, with elegant white china that had the ship's logo stamped on it in gold. Crystal glasses sparkled under glittering chandeliers. The parquet floor was laid in a subtle checkerboard pattern of light and dark wood. At one end a stage sat several steps higher than the dining floor. A large space was open in front for a dance floor.

"I think you can see the dining will rival any fine restaurant." Giles gestured toward the stage. "And the entertainment... well, I'm sure I don't need to say anything about Delilah Dove."

"Indeed not. How in the world did you manage to hire such a talent?" Aunt Julia asked.

"It happened to be good timing. She was in between engagements and I made her an offer she couldn't refuse. There was stiff competition, too, but I practically stole her right out from under Glen Meyer's grasp!" Giles headed toward an unobtrusive door at the end of the room. "Would you like to see backstage? Normally this area is off-limits, but since you're with me..."

"I'd love to!" Aunt Julia was across the threshold before Giles could even get the door completely open.

The utilitarian look of the backstage area was quite a contrast to the lavish dining room. Back here the hallways were narrow, the doors plain and the walls white. Industrial tiles lined the floors. Some of the dressing-room doors were open and Nora could see a saxophone in one, with band outfits lined up on a rolling garment rack. People smiled and nodded, but no one engaged them in conversation.

"These are the dressing rooms. Our musicians' sleeping quarters are further down the hallway." Giles pointed down the hall where several doors, which were rather close together, lined the wall. Nora imagined the sleeping quarters were probably as plain as the hallway and much smaller than her stateroom.

The doors, other than those that went to the sleeping quarters, were open except one. Naturally Aunt Julia tried the knob. "What's in here?"

"Oh, that's just storage for the stage sets and decorations for holidays and such. Oxley

keeps that locked tighter than a drum. He takes this very seriously, you know," Giles said as he ushered Aunt Julia along the hallway. Poor Giles. Didn't he realize that telling Aunt Julia she couldn't get into a room would only make her more determined to see what was inside?

Nora glanced in another room as they passed. A young woman, her hair in the short curly-bob style of the day, sat at a lighted mirror applying bright-red lipstick to cupid-bow lips. Costumes hung on hooks on the wall.

"Most of the musicians share dressing rooms, but the star gets her own." Giles stopped at a door that bore Delilah Dove's name under a large gold star. He knocked. "Miss Dove?"

He waited a second then put his hand on the knob. "I guess she must not be in there. Would you like to see?"

"Of course," Aunt Julia said.

Giles cracked the door. It was a step up from the other dressing rooms, with soothing blue-gray walls and a large dressing table. A full-length mirror hung on one wall and there was a couch against another. At one end of the room was a long clothes rack stuffed with gowns. The wall opposite the dressing table was crowded with photographs of Delilah, both by herself and posed with performers from various shows. The dressing table had groups of similar photos that looked to go back several years.

A young woman stood next to the rack, her eyes wide as they piled into the room.

"Oh, Miss Sumner, sorry. Didn't realize you were in here," Giles said.

"That's okay, I was just tending to Miss Dove's costumes." The girl darted a nervous glance at the open door.

"Julia, Nora, this is one of the backing singers for Delilah Dove, Lily Sumner."

"Pleased to meet you," Lily said. Her voice was sweet. She seemed a little shy as she fingered the silky material of a turquoise gown.

Activity at the doorway drew their attention in that direction to where Clifford Oxley stood frowning in at them. "Where is Delilah?"

"She's not here apparently," Aunt Julia said.

Clifford's frown deepened. He turned to Giles. "And what are passengers doing back here? It won't do to have them traipsing about."

Giles seemed unruffled by Oxley's rude attitude. "These are my guests. Julia and Nora Marsh."

Aunt Julia stuck out her hand, giving Oxley no choice but to shake it and introduce himself. Nora did the same. His hands were clammy, and she resisted the urge to wipe her hand on her dress.

Clifford's gaze drifted over to Lily and his perpetual scowl deepened even further. "Have you seen Delilah?"

Lily shook her head.

He backed into the hallway. "Well then, I expect you've seen everything there is to see down here." He looked from Giles to Nora to Julia.

Giles cleared his throat and glanced at his watch. "Yes, I think we have. Dinner will start shortly, and I assume you ladies would like to freshen up. I will escort you upstairs."

As they headed back down the hall, the hairs on Nora's neck tingled. She glanced over her shoulder to see Clifford Oxley staring after them as if wanting to make sure they really did leave.

Lily Sumner slid the silky fabric of the sleeve through her fingers, stopping at the rhinestone-studded cuff. Turquoise and lime-green stones of all shapes and sizes glittered in a wide band that matched the plunging neckline. She laid it on her wrist, imagining what it would be like to wear it center stage under the spotlights. Lily's costumes weren't anywhere near this quality or as flashy. They were plain, black polyester, nothing showy, not even one hint of sparkle. Delilah wanted her backup singers to blend into the background.

Why couldn't Delilah get laryngitis or something? Then they'd have to let Lily take the lead. All she needed was one chance to show them that she could shine. She was sure her career would take off once she was out from underneath Delilah's shadow.

"What are you doing in here?"

Lily whipped around to see Delilah in the doorway, her hands on her hips, her expression angry.

Lily dropped the sleeve as if it was a hot coal. "Sorry, I was looking for my costume..."

"In here? Why would it be in here?" Delilah took a step inside and Lily stepped back against the wall, inching toward the doorway.

Gone was the poised and charming Delilah that audiences and the general public saw. This Delilah was angry, nervous. She'd changed over the past months since Lily had been singing backup for her and not for the better. Was it her fame turning her ugly, or was something else going on in her life? Lily suspected the latter. Delilah had been acting very jittery the past three nights that they'd been living on the ship setting things up and rehearsing and Lily thought she knew why.

Lily cleared her throat. "Umm... sometimes the laundry puts them on the wrong rack. Oh, and Mr. Oxley was looking for you."

Annoyance flitted across Delilah's face. "He was? When was that?"

"Just a few minutes ago." Lily backed toward the door. "It seemed urgent."

"Yes, well, you'd do best not to come in here without permission and keep your nose out of my business." Delilah stepped closer. "Don't think I haven't noticed someone sneaking out of your room. I don't think Mr. Oxley or Mr. Hendricks would approve of what you've been up to. You'd be smart to keep your nose clean and mind your own business."

"Yes, of course." Lily practically ran from the room.

She bristled at the threat, but arguing with Delilah wouldn't be good for her career. It was frowned upon for the performers to get too friendly. Especially between the men and women. Affairs weren't tolerated because they could cause a lot of problems. But it wasn't Lily who had been sneaking out, it was her roommate, Joy Morgan. Not that she would ever tell; she wasn't a tattletale like Delilah. And if she was going to tell on

anyone, she'd tell Oxley how she'd seen Delilah in a very intimate meeting with that handsome gambler, Max something-or-other. Lily couldn't say she blamed Delilah—Max was a lot better looking than Oxley. Then again, Oxley was a lot better for Delilah's career. Was that why she'd taken up with him? Is that what one had to do in order to get ahead?

Lily considered this as she shuffled down the hallway, careful to avoid the off-limits storage room, lest she get yelled at by Oxley too. Could she feign interest in someone like the gangly Oxley in order to advance her rise to stardom? Lily wasn't sure. Straightening her shoulders, she entered the dressing room she shared with Joy and started to warm up for the night's singing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nora wore a pink beaded cocktail dress that floated around her calves in whips of tulle to dinner. She was lucky that she had nice calves with these new shorter hemlines. Nora was determined to be trendy, even if some of the new fashions were a bit awkward to wear; like those cloche hats that kept falling down and covering her eyes, and the drop waists that she kept catching herself trying to pull up. And don't even get her started on the cigarette holders—all the movie stars looked so elegant with them but the cigarettes made Nora cough. Those things couldn't be good for your health, could they? But she did it all anyway. She wanted to do her part to be modern and help bring women forward.

Aunt Julia looked classy in an elegant peacock-blue dress that fell to her ankles. She accentuated the plain dress with strings of waist-length opalescent beads. At her age, she wasn't very interested in the latest fashions, but still made an attempt to look nice.

The dining room glowed with chandelier lighting. Outside it was dark, but lights could be seen on the riverbanks as the ship floated past various towns. The clank of dinnerware and the hum of conversation mingled with the smells of dinner that permeated the air.

"Oh look! There's Martha!" Aunt Julia tugged Nora in the direction of the woman they'd met earlier in the lounge. She was seated at a table with her son.

"Hello, nice to see you again. Isn't this lovely?" Julia gestured to the room as members of a small band took their places and started to play soft music.

"Yes, it is." Martha appeared a lot happier now as she turned to her son. "This is my son Beauregard. Beau, this is Nora and Julia Marsh."

"Lovely to meet you." Julia frowned. "But where is your lovely wife?"

"She's not feeling well." Martha looked as if she'd been presented with the most wonderful gift. "So it will be just Beau and me tonight."

"That sounds lovely, but I hope it's nothing serious," Nora said.

Martha glanced at Beau who fiddled with his fork. "Just a cold. I told her to rest so it didn't get worse."

"Good then." Aunt Julia glanced around the room. It was filling up with people taking their seats, which had been assigned so that guests could get to know one another. "Well I suppose we should find our table. Enjoy dinner."

Nora and Julia had found notes in their cabin assigning them to table eight. As Nora scanned the room, Aunt Julia whispered in her ear, "Did you see the look on Martha's

face? She was in her glory to have Beau all to herself."

"I did notice that. Though Beau didn't seem quite so happy. Anyway, I suppose that explains why the wife ran out the side door earlier. Perhaps she became suddenly indisposed."

Aunt Julia frowned. "Maybe."

Nora spotted their table over by the windows. "There's our table over there." She turned to her aunt. "Really, Aunt Julia, not everything has suspicious undertones, you know. Maybe you've been too immersed in your murder mysteries."

"I don't know. People often have sinister motives in real life, too." Aunt Julia pasted a smile on her face and proceeded to the table, which was already occupied by their dinner companions.

They took their seats and introductions were made. Across from Nora sat Birdie and Walt Smithson, a young couple clearly more interested in each other than anyone else at the table. To her right were Percival and Irene Montford. She recognized Percival as the gentleman who was almost bowled over by Johnny Stokes. Speaking of Stokes, Nora wondered if he was still stumbling around. She searched for him as the rest of the introductions were made and soon spotted him making his way over from the staircase. His gait was steady; apparently whatever had hampered his stride at the reception had worn off. He took his seat at the table with the Hinchcliffes. Nora's gaze fell on the table behind that, the one right next to the door that led backstage. Max Lawton sat alone, watching the door as if waiting for something... or someone. Delilah?

"... Don't you think so, dear?" Aunt Julia's question pulled her attention back to the table.

"Sorry, Auntie... what was the question?"

"Her brooch... isn't it lovely?" Aunt Julia was pointing to the woman next to her who had introduced herself as Beulah Entwhistle. Beulah's fingers fluttered around a diamond-studded brooch in the shape of a bird clasped at the neck of her modest black dress.

"Just beautiful," Norah said.

"Thank you. Harold gave it to me as an anniversary gift." She looked adoringly at the man beside her. "Forty years."

"Oh dear, that is a long time!" Aunt Julia, who had never been married, seemed horrified at the prospect of spending that long with someone.

"That's why we're on this cruise. It's an anniversary gift from our children," Beulah said.

"That's very nice. How many do you have?"

Nora picked up the menu as she half-listened to the Entwhistles chatter on about their children. The menu was varied. Some standard southern dishes like gumbo and some more gourmet selections. The anchovy relish might be nice and an avocado salad to start. Then purée of pea soup, maybe a lamb chop—

"Well at least they have something normal like steak," Percival piped in from beside her.

"I don't know, we're on the Mississippi, shouldn't we have collard greens and chicken-fried steak? I hope there is shoofly pie for dessert." Percival's wife, Irene, peered over the

top of the menu at him.

Percival shut his menu and started digging in his pockets. "Well, whatever it is, I hope they come and take our order soon. How long is this confounded thing going to go on for anyway? Where in the world did I put my pocket watch?"

As Percival became more agitated, Irene put a hand on his arm. "Now, dear, you probably left it on the dresser."

Percival huffed, air moving his white mustache. "I did not leave it on the dresser!"

"You have been a little forgetful lately, Percy," Irene persisted.

Beulah leaned across the table. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about at our age. I'm always forgetting things. Isn't that right, Harold?"

Harold nodded.

Percival scowled and patted down his pockets again. "I just had the darn thing at the reception earlier and I am not senile. I used to be a respected doctor!"

Several people at the next table looked around at his loud proclamation and everyone sat there awkwardly for a few beats.

Aunt Julia broke the silence. "Has anyone read any good books lately? I'm reading the latest Ridley Howes mystery and it's quite thrilling. Do any of you read him? He's simply brilliant!"

Nora snorted and held her napkin to her mouth to cover it up. To everyone else the question probably sounded like casual small talk, but Nora knew it was a way for her aunt to get praise for her books. She supposed she deserved it: Julia put a lot of work into the books and it grated on her not to be able to take credit.

"I do enjoy the books, but I thought the one before was a bit preposterous," Beulah Entwistle said, before giving her order to the waitress.

"Preposterous?" Aunt Julia was offended. "How so? I'll have the sliced tomato salad, clam broth and prime rib." Julia handed the menu over and the waitress continued to take orders.

Beulah leaned in. "It was the poison. I mean, how would one have access to so many different poisons? And would natural ones really be strong enough to kill?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised." Aunt Julia launched into an explanation of how the most innocent looking of plants can be poison, going into great detail about the various varieties to look out for. Beulah's eyes started to glaze over but thankfully dinner came before she zoned out completely. They tucked in and all mention of poisonings ceased.

The meal was as delicious as Giles promised it would be. Once the plates were cleared and coffee was on the table, Delilah Dove came out in a black gown glittering with an impossible number of rhinestones.

Aunt Julia leaned over. "That gown must weigh twenty pounds."

Nora nodded, though it didn't seem to impede Delilah's movements as she swirled gracefully from table to table. There were two singers accompanying her, but they blended into the background with their nondescript black dresses, plain black shoes and lack of jewelry, especially in contrast to Delilah's sparkling ensemble. Nora recognized one of them as Lily Sumner, who they'd met in Delilah's dressing room earlier.

Clifford Oxley stood by the door that led backstage, overseeing the entire thing. Norah

had the fleeting thought that maybe he was trying to make sure that she and Aunt Julia didn't try to sneak back there again, but as he watched Delilah sing, the scowl on his face turned sweet. Maybe Delilah brought out the best in him.

Nora took the opportunity to study the crowd. Most were enraptured by Delilah's performance. Not Beau Hinchcliffe, though. He squirmed in his seat, probably counting the minutes before he could get away from "mother" and back to his beautiful wife. Johnny Stokes managed to sit upright in his chair the entire time. Had he been drunk at the reception? And what had Aunt Julia been drinking?

When the music turned to a faster pace, Stokes got up to dance, which he did effortlessly with no evidence of his prior stumbling... until he tripped over a chair and almost landed in someone's lap. Perhaps he was just clumsy.

Nora loved dancing, so when a gentleman came to ask her to dance she was eager to get up on the floor. The band was good and the music lively and she discovered that dance partners were in good supply. She must have danced with every single man in the room. Not Max Lawton, though, he had left right after dinner. Perhaps he hadn't been looking for Delilah after all because he didn't stay for her singing. Nora had heard from one of her dance partners that there was a poker game in the forward salon. Maybe Max hadn't been watching the door at all and had simply been waiting for the game to start. Nora chided herself for imagining all sort of suspicious motives. She was getting as bad as Aunt Julia.

The night was filled with friendly conversation and dancing. Nora was exhausted and when she finally collapsed into bed at midnight she fell into a deep sleep. Which was why it was so startling when she was awakened by a scream two hours later.

CHAPTER FIVE

JUNE 13, 1926

Nora leapt out of bed and fumbled for her robe as she tried to get her bearings. It took a few seconds. She bolted for the door, her bathrobe fluttering behind her as she tried to shove her arms into the sleeves. Her first thought was to make sure Aunt Julia, who had the room next door, was okay.

Aunt Julia was looking into the hallway herself and, upon seeing Nora, she stepped out. She was wearing silk embroidered slippers and a thick robe over her nightgown. As they stood there trying to figure out where the scream had come from, cabin doors opened and passengers popped out their heads. One of those was Dr. Montford, another Beau Hinchcliffe.

Nora's suspicious nature and training in human behavior had her studying them. They were both wearing nightclothes. Had they been roused from sleep? She thought Beau had, given the way he was rubbing his eyes. Dr. Montford's hair, though, was perfectly combed, his eyes alert as if he'd been awake.

Heavy footsteps pounded on the metal stairs. A man appeared on his way to the sun deck above. "It came from up there! Hurry!"

They followed him up the stairs, which were placed in the middle of the deck. To the right was the pilot house; to the left a small crowd had gathered at the railing above the paddle wheel. The boat shuddered as it slowed. Two men hopped over the safety railing that Giles had warned Aunt Julia to be careful near earlier. One of those men was Max Lawton, the other a gentleman named Gus, who Nora had danced with.

Nora elbowed her way up to the railing and looked down. The paddle wheel was making its last turn, dredging up a mass of turquoise chiffon made almost transparent by the water. A hand, its red lacquered fingernails a contrast to the pale white skin, stuck up from a bejeweled cuff. It was the dress Delilah Dove had worn for her last number.

"Oh no! It's Delilah!" A woman with a short blonde bob and a pale-green dress shrieked.

Norah recognized the woman, who had been at the railing when they had arrived, as one of the backup singers. It did not escape her notice that the woman was not in her nightclothes like the rest of them.

A stern-looking Sven Nordby joined them, with Lily Sumner right behind him. Lily went straight to the other singer and hugged her. They stood side by side and Lily put her arm

around her, her jet bracelet and black beaded shawl glittering in the moonlight. It was more a measure of comfort than to ward off any chill since it was quite warm out.

The boat drifted slowly, a cool breeze ruffled Nora's hair, carrying with it the smell of the river.

Sven scowled at the crowd. "What has happened?"

"Someone fell overboard!" Percival Montford huffed, reaching in his pocket and coming up empty. Apparently he still hadn't found his pocket watch. "I'm a doctor, let me examine her."

"Is she... is she...?" Vera Hinchcliffe stood on the tiptoes of the fluffy pink ostrich-feather slippers that matched her robe to see the two men haul Delilah's body up from the paddle and over the railing. They placed her flat on the deck so Dr. Montford could do his examination. Norah had a pretty good idea that no amount of examining was going to help Delilah, judging by the gash on the side of her head.

Sven didn't look at all sympathetic as Percival bent over the body. Aunt Julia pushed forward for a better look. Dead bodies didn't faze her; on the contrary, they intrigued her. She'd seen enough of them.

Julia stepped over to the railing. Crouching down with a dexterity that belied her age, she reached out onto the safety platform. What was she after? Nora caught her eye but Julia shook her head subtly so Nora simply shrugged and turned her attention back to the crowd around Delilah.

Max Lawton stood staring down at the body, his fists clenched at his sides. Nora wondered if her earlier suspicion about them being romantically linked was true. He certainly wasn't falling to his knees in despair, but his expression of disbelief and disappointment indicated that he'd lost something very important to him.

Dr. Montford stood from his inspection with great effort. "She's gone."

The crowd gasped.

Vera shrieked and clung to Beau.

Sven Nordby started back toward the pilot house, but Aunt Julia, who had returned to stand beside Nora, interrupted him. "Mr. Nordby, did you see anything? You have a bird's-eye view from the pilot house."

Sven's perpetual scowl deepened. "No, ma'am. I'm piloting with eyes forward. The river might look nice and calm to a layman like you, but there are dangerous rocks and one must be alert at all times. And even if I were not, I could not have seen anything."

Aunt Julia looked surprised at that statement. "Oh, and why is that?"

"The smokestack hides the view." Sven turned and marched back toward the pilot house, drawing their attention to the wide smokestack which did, indeed, hide the sight of the paddle from the pilot house.

"Huh, I suppose he has a point." Aunt Julia tapped her fingers on her lips, her face screwed up in thought.

Nora was about to ask her what she'd been reaching for on the safety platform when a new group of people came rushing up. Nora recognized them as members of the band. Two saxophone players, a drummer and Clifford Oxley. They all had nightclothes on, Oxley in a black silk robe and the others in much less-expensive garb.

"What is going on? I heard that—" Oxley's gaze fell on the body, cutting off his words. He stumbled forward and fell to the ground next to it. "Delilah? No!"

He looked at the crowd, his expression helpless, then, shaking his head, looked back at the body. He picked up her lifeless misshapen hand, caressed it and then placed it back down on the deck before burying his face in his hands and starting to cry.

Now there was the reaction of a lover! Norah glanced at Max Lawton. He was looking down at Oxley with his gaze narrowed, his expression suspicious. Not really the reaction of a rival lover, but still interesting.

"What is the commotion?" Giles Hendricks came up behind them, his face falling as he took in the scene. "Oh, dear me. No. Not an accident on the maiden voyage. This is not good. Not good at all."

Aunt Julia leaned over and whispered to him. "Sorry, Giles, it might be worse than you think. I'm not quite sure this actually was an accident."

Giles managed to herd the onlookers to their cabins before Aunt Julia could spill her guts to too many of them. The body was removed to the lower deck and Giles ushered Julia and Nora to the smaller lounge on the Texas deck.

Nora pulled her silk robe tighter over her wide-legged oriental-style pajamas. She was glad she didn't prefer those sheer nightgowns that were all the rage. It would have been awkward to stand around with the other passengers wearing something like that.

Giles wrung his hands together nervously. "Now, Julia... why in the world would you think this wasn't an accident?"

"Well, as you yourself pointed out on our tour earlier today, there is a safety railing and a safety platform beyond that. It would be almost impossible to fall into the paddle wheel accidentally."

Giles pursed his lips. "Yes, but the railing is a bit short and if one were unsteady and it was dark, perhaps it's not beyond reason."

"She could have jumped." Nora really didn't think that was the case. Based on the short time she'd been able to observe Delilah it didn't appear as if she suffered from suicidal thoughts. She was outgoing, enjoyed performing and loved being the center of attention. Though that last part might hide some feelings of inadequacy; Nora hadn't spent enough time with her to say for sure.

Aunt Julia shook her head. "I don't think so. That scream was a scream of sheer terror. If one were to jump on purpose there would likely be no scream at all."

"I don't think we should go spreading rumors of murder around the boat. There's no sense in causing terror in the other passengers and... well..." Giles lowered his voice and looked down at the carpet. "I wouldn't want it to get into the papers. It could ruin everything for me. Besides, there's no proof, and as far as I'm concerned it could have been a terrible accident. Though I suppose that isn't going to look so great either. Maybe murder would be better..."

"I'm quite certain it wasn't an accident."

"But how can you be so sure?" Giles asked.

Aunt Julia reached into her pocket and pulled out a small red item, which she held up to the light. "I found this on the safety deck wedged between the edge trim. Do you know what it is?"

Giles shook his head.

"A fingernail. Bright red just like Delilah's. In fact, she's missing the middle nail on her right hand. I looked. And do you know how a fingernail could get wedged under there?"

"She grabbed it when she fell?" It was more of a hopeful question than a statement.

"Almost. She grabbed on when she was pushed. It's the only explanation." Aunt Julia started pacing the lounge dramatically. "I suppose the killer purposely pushed her over the railing. Then, when the safety deck broke her fall, they pushed again. Delilah went over the edge—the deck isn't very wide. But she was able to grab on. I can picture her trying to gain purchase, her legs dangling precariously above the wheel."

Giles shuddered. "You'd think she could pull herself up. She was young and healthy. Not overweight."

Aunt Julia spun around and pointed at him, like the detective in one of her novels. "Precisely! She most likely could have pulled herself up. If it had been an accident. But it wasn't, you see. And the person who pushed her was there to finish her off. Seeing that she was holding on and about to claw her way back up, they hopped over the railing and stomped on her hand until she let go and fell to her death."

Aunt Julia said the word "stomped" with such force that Giles jumped. His face turned white. "That's rather grim."

Aunt Julia shrugged. "Perhaps, but if you noticed the way her hand—the very hand missing this fingernail—was misshapen, you'll see that I am correct. I'm sure Doctor Montford will agree with my assessment."

Giles still didn't want to believe it could be murder. "Her hand could have been crushed in the wheel."

"I think not. When she fell into the paddle wheel she became lodged in the core. I watched them try to pull her out. If she hadn't she would have fallen into the river when the wheel turned. I'm sure the killer was hoping that she would be dumped right into the water. We might not have even known she'd fallen until it was discovered she wasn't on the boat."

"But if she fell on her hand—"

"Sorry, Giles, but she didn't. Her hand was raised in the air. So she couldn't have injured the hand in the fall. It had to have happened before. Which means this was murder."

Giles slumped into a chair. "I suppose I'll have to alert the authorities. Sven already has a call in to our destination port of Vicksburg. It's three days away, but that's the nearest port that can handle this boat. I was hoping they would simply collect the body and we could go on our way. Now I suppose there will have to be an investigation."

Aunt Julia frowned. "Yes, an investigation would be the thing. But just who would investigate? Local police?"

Giles shook his head. "No, I believe it goes to the county."

"And we're still in Mississippi."

"Yes."

"Darn it!" Aunt Julia did not look pleased. "That would be Artemis Leonard."

Aunt Julia spat out the name and with good reason; she had butted heads with Artemis on matters of murder before. Nora wouldn't exactly call them rivals, since Aunt Julia wasn't law enforcement, but when Aunt Julia had tried to help on a murder case at Grandview Plantation earlier in the year, Artemis had been quite unappreciative. Then again, Julia could be a little pushy in a quirky old-lady kind of way. But she had been the one to put the clues together to solve the case. And Artemis had taken all the credit, much to Aunt Julia's chagrin. Of course, Julia couldn't push for credit since people were starting to wonder how she knew so much about murder and clue collecting. She had to keep her pen-name secret. According to her publishers, a male author sold lots more books than a female author. Nora couldn't quite get on board with that thinking, but she supposed the publishing business might be a bit behind the times.

Judging by the way Aunt Julia's eyes were narrowed and the set of her jaw, Nora could tell the wheels in her mind were turning. This time she wanted a chance to find the killer first and prove to Artemis Leonard that she was the better detective.

"Is he that bad?" Giles asked.

"He's horrible. A grandstander. He'll drag the case out for weeks. He'll make sure it's in the papers," Aunt Julia said.

As she spoke, Giles paled. "I suppose I don't have any choice."

"Maybe you do." Aunt Julia sat next to him. "I don't want to brag, but I have quite an eye for clues. I read a lot of mystery books, you know, and have had a hand in solving some cases. Not that Artemis Leonard would admit it."

Giles looked skeptical. "What do you propose?"

"What if the murder was already solved before Artemis came on board? There would be nothing to put in the papers, we could keep the story contained and word might not get out to disparage the name of the Miss Delta Belle."

"That would be wonderful!" Giles' face lit up, then his smile dimmed. "But how would we do that?"

Aunt Julia glanced at Nora. "With the help of my niece here, I think I can solve the case. But I might need you to help us gain access to certain areas of the ship. Is that possible?"

Giles nodded eagerly. "Yes, of course."

Aunt Julia smiled. "Great. Now, where exactly is the body?"

"Doctor Montford said we need to keep it cold since we can't come into port for a few days. We have it near the freezers." At Nora's shocked look he added, "Not with the food, that's already been removed."

Julia nodded. "Then it will be well preserved."

Nora grimaced. Aunt Julia really was becoming quite desensitized when it came to matters of death.

Julia turned to Giles. "So back to the question at hand. Would you like me to try to solve the mystery?"

Giles nodded. "I would appreciate that very much."

Aunt Julia turned to Nora. "Well then, I best retire to bed. We only have three days to solve this so I must start my investigation with a fresh mind bright and early tomorrow."

CHAPTER SIX

Aunt Julia was up early the next morning. She sat at a small table under the window in her cabin. Her fountain pen flew across a piece of paper, ink splattering here and there because she was jotting down clues so quickly.

"What have you got so far?" Nora stood looking over her aunt's shoulder.

Nora herself was no slouch in the sleuthing department. She supposed some skills had rubbed off after helping her aunt work out various scenarios in her books, not to mention the handful of mysteries that seemed to crop up and need solving on their various trips. But her studies in psychology had also armed her with knowledge and various skills that helped in investigations. She knew that certain events in one's past could result in certain personality traits in their later years. She knew what traumas might turn one into a killer. She also knew which types of people might be violent, impulsive killers and which would prefer a premeditated murder. Her finely honed skills of observation enabled her to tell when someone was lying and she knew which questions to ask to get the answers out of a suspect without them even realizing she was interrogating them.

"Oh, I have many suspects, but the thing I wonder most about is... what was Delilah doing on the sun deck at two in the morning?"

"Good question." The scene flashed through Nora's mind. "She was fully dressed so presumably she had not been to bed."

"Was there a party, or was she meeting someone?" Julia asked. "I know that performers often have different schedules. Perhaps they did have a party after dinner was over, but with whom?"

Nora glanced out the window, watching fertile green countryside pass as they glided along. "Most of the guests were in pajamas. The Hinchcliffes and Percival Montford. The two singers and some men I recognized from the band were all in street clothes, which might indicate there was some kind of party happening, and Max Lawton wore a suit as did two of the men I remember dancing with. They did mention a late poker game so that could be why."

"Clifford Oxley and three others from the band had pajamas on, so apparently they weren't at the party, if there was one. And wasn't one of the backup singers on the sun deck when we got here?"

"Yes." Nora squinted her eyes and thought. The singer at the railing wasn't the one

they'd met previously. Lily had come up after, but hadn't she been in her street clothes too? "And the other one arrived soon after."

"Which brings up another question. If someone pushed Delilah, where did they go after?" Julia capped her pen and stood. "I think there was a good ten minutes or so between the scream and when we arrived on the scene. But others were already there. How long did it take them to show up?"

"I suppose we could ask."

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "Maybe, but we don't want to be obvious about our intentions. I think Giles wants to keep this all hush-hush. Wouldn't want to cause a panic with guests thinking there is a killer on board. On the other hand, we might want to let the suspects know that things are being looked into; could force them to make a mistake that proves they are the culprit."

"Hopefully the killer had a specific reason for killing Delilah and there's not some madman running about ready to push all of us overboard." Nora cocked her head to see what Julia had written on the paper. "So, who do you have for suspects so far?"

"Without knowledge of motive, I've started with the person closest to Delilah, which in this case appears to be Clifford Oxley."

"He did seem quite upset when he saw her."

Aunt Julia nodded. "Almost too upset, don't you think, dear?"

"His performance was a bit overly dramatic. Falling on the body and holding up her limp hand. But people grieve in different ways and I don't think we can necessarily read anything into that. If I had to give a professional opinion, I do believe that he was genuinely distraught. He would have to be a good actor to pull that off. Who else do you have?"

"Vera Hinchcliffe. She made an awfully quick recovery to be out at night." Julia's eyes narrowed. "Her behavior at the reception was quite suspicious, I just can't put my finger on why."

"Is it possible she really was sick? She seems... pampered. Maybe she needed an afternoon nap? Anyone with an ounce of curiosity would have wanted to investigate that scream. She was in her pajamas, which indicates she was roused from bed. I remember seeing her fluffy slippers." Nora smiled proudly. Aunt Julia would be impressed she'd remembered that detail. Obscure clues were really Aunt Julia's forte and Nora was working hard to get better at that.

"Very good." Aunt Julia pointed the nib of her pen at Nora. "But do you remember her robe? It was cinched tight. What was underneath? Pajamas or street clothes?"

Nora scrunched up her face. "I don't think one could see. But she came with Beau and I know he was in his room because his head poked out when we heard the scream. Wouldn't he have known if Vera wasn't in there?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps she was very clever about it. She seems the type. He poked his head out after I did and several minutes had already passed by the time I looked out. If he is a heavy sleeper, Vera could have slipped out, pushed Delilah over the rail, then run back and entered the cabin again pretending to him that she had simply been peeking out in the hallway to see who screamed." Aunt Julia paused as if considering the

plausibility of this scenario. "Then again, Beau appeared to be a bit agitated about something at dinner. He was nervous. Maybe they are in on it together."

Nora glanced at the list again, the name Max Lawton jumped out at her. "What about Max Lawton? He's on your list."

"Did you see the way he was looking at Delilah during the reception earlier? I suspect they are not strangers." Aunt Julia raised her left brow knowingly. "And he was one of the first on the scene and he was wearing street clothes. Not to mention he was glaring at Oxley when he was making that big scene next to the body."

"He didn't look like he'd lost a lover, but his demeanor was attentive, as if he was closer to the deceased than he wanted to let on," Nora said.

"I don't know if we can rely on Percival Montford to examine the body properly," Aunt Julia said. "He's clearly got some memory issues with that watch and he seems a bit contrary. Set in his ways."

"He does, but something is a bit off there. It's almost as if he protests too much about the watch. Most people with failing memories try to cover it up, they don't make a big fuss like Doctor Montford is doing. But I can't imagine why he would want to call attention to it. And even if he did, what would that have to do with our murder?"

"Interesting observation." Aunt Julia wrote down Nora's thoughts about Percival. "I wonder... would the killer have come back to the scene or stayed away? Perhaps if this was premeditated, the killer might have hidden some pajamas nearby to make it look like they had been roused from bed."

"Or worn pajamas to kill her." Nora ran a finger down the suspect list. Max Lawton, Clifford Oxley, Vera Hinchcliffe, the two backup singers. "Only two of our suspects were in pajamas. Clifford Oxley and Vera Hinchcliffe."

"Of course, it's possible that the killer simply ran off and didn't come back to the scene at all. That would be most logical. Unless the killer was very clever." The wrinkles on Aunt Julia's forehead increased. "And why did Sven Nordby not see anything? Yes, yes, I know that the smokestack obscured the view, but something must have been going on up here before she was killed. Surely he would have seen Delilah and her killer as they came up the stairs or walked the deck?"

"If they argued, surely he would have heard it. Not to mention her scream." Nora considered Sven Nordby. With his severe demeanor he was hard to read and she hadn't noticed anything that would lead her to believe he was the killer. But he was closed off and unemotional which would make it easier to hide. "You don't suspect him, do you? What motive would he have?"

"Maybe the motive didn't have anything to do with Delilah herself. She could have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. What if Sven is up to some shenanigans and Delilah just happened to witness something she shouldn't have?"

Nora considered this. "Shenanigans? Like what?"

Aunt Julia's eyes twinkled. "Who knows? Maybe there is some corporate espionage going on or an illicit affair or something illegal like a hidden supply of moonshine. Sven would be able to quickly run back to the pilot house before anyone was summoned by the screams. In fact, of anyone on the boat he would have the easiest getaway. Still, I

suppose the co-pilot would have noticed and the way Delilah died did seem rather personal.”

Nora blanched, remembering the misshapen hand. Violence like that usually happened when someone had personal reasons to hate the victim. “If someone really did stomp her hand to a pulp, I don’t think they liked her very much.”

“Or they were very angry with her.”

Visions of the look exchanged by Delilah and Max crossed Nora’s mind. “Like if she were having an affair.”

Aunt Julia must have been on the same page. “Or wouldn’t break things off with a current boyfriend.”

“I suppose we can’t assume the killer was on the scene when we were.”

“No, that’s a toss-up. Our best bet is to observe the suspects and see if any of them act out of character. You always say that’s the way to discover a person’s inner secrets. And if you ask me...” Aunt Julia tapped the paper with her pen. “Some of these suspects have big secrets.”

“Doesn’t everyone.” Nora glanced at the pile of Ridley Howes novels on Aunt Julia’s nightstand.

Julia stood up and put on her jacket. It was a smart gray tailored piece that matched her skirt. She looked very stylish today. “Let’s get down to breakfast. The room will be abuzz and we might glean something important. And perhaps one of our suspects will give themselves away.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Clifford Oxley carefully piled old theater props on top of what he'd just put into the trunk and closed the lid, glancing over his shoulder nervously. He didn't need to look because no one would be in here. The room was off limits and everyone knew that. No one would have seen him putting anything into the trunk, and even if they had they would never find what it was he had put in. Unless they inspected it very, very closely. If anyone did that, it could mean disaster for him.

His task done, he hurried to the door. Breakfast was already starting and he should show his face. Though it might not look odd for him to stay in his room so soon after Delilah's death, he'd already been seen about the ship and he wanted to make an appearance so no one would start looking at him too closely. It wouldn't be hard to act like he was upset—he really was broken up about Delilah's death.

Backing out of the room, he locked the door with the key he kept around his neck, checked it twice then took a deep breath, turned and—

"Oh, sorry! I didn't see you there." Lily Sumner was standing right in front of him. What was she doing creeping around down here? "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She shuffled her feet and glanced nervously down the hallway. Had she been watching him? What was she doing near the room? Did she suspect...?

"Can I help you?" Clifford asked.

"Yes, well. First, I wanted to say how sorry I am about Delilah. I mean, I know you two were close and..." She let her voice trail off as she studied him.

She was a wily one. Clifford had seen her nosing around. What was she up to? Blackmail? Surely he was imagining things; the girl simply wanted to give her condolences. The mention of Delilah's name brought real tears to his eyes.

"Thank you so much. She will be missed."

"Yes, she will. Terrible accident."

Clifford expected Lily to move away but she stood there as if she wanted something more. He rubbed his eyes and sniffed. Couldn't the girl see he was distraught? Why didn't she just move on? He didn't want to be rude. If she had been watching him, then she might know something about what he was up to and it wouldn't be smart to make an enemy of her. But it would be very smart to get her on his side. And the best way to get people on your side is to give them something they want.

Oxley took a deep, shaky breath. "Say, Lily, I was thinking... well... I know no one can replace Delilah, but we still need someone to sing at dinner here."

Lily's eyes brightened. "Yes, I understand. The show must go on."

"Indeed it must. I was wondering if you would take that role."

Lily looked away but not before Oxley caught the excitement in her eyes. He'd hit the mark: the lead-singer role was exactly what would get her on his side. "Unless, of course, you're not ready..."

"Oh, I'm ready. I just wasn't sure... I mean, it's so soon."

Was it too soon? Would it appear insensitive if he replaced Delilah? No, of course not. "It seems insensitive but the guests have paid for entertainment and the only other person that could do it is Joy."

"Oh no, Joy said she's not interested in the lead-singer role," Lily said quickly.

Oxley wondered if that was true or if Lily was afraid he might renege and offer it to Joy. Clifford really didn't care which one of them sang the lead—he had more important things to worry about—but Lily was up to something and he wanted her to feel as if she owed him just in case that "something" could get him in trouble. "Well, then you're the only one who can do it. I'm depending on you to save the day."

Lily took a deep breath and straightened. "Of course. You can count on me."

Perfect. "Okay then, I guess it's settled." Lily would work out very nicely. She had a great voice and was about Delilah's size. She would fit in the dresses and people always liked blondes.

"Great. I'm ready for this. You won't be sorry." Lily beamed, clearly happy with her new role.

"I'm sure I won't." Clifford brushed past her and hurried down the hallway, casting one final sad glance at Delilah's dressing-room door as he passed.

Lily smiled as she watched Clifford Oxley glance into Delilah's dressing room. Soon to be her dressing room. That had been easy. Oxley was clearly distraught and she'd hit him at the right time with the right amount of humility.

Delilah's misfortune had given Lily a chance. It did seem a bit ghoulish to take advantage of someone's death, but Lily's grandmother had always told her that when opportunity knocked, you better answer.

It had been easy to get Oxley to offer her the role, too. All she'd had to do was act like she knew he had a secret. Of course she had suspected for some time that he was hiding something. It was always good to find out people's little indiscretions: you never knew when that knowledge would come in handy. Like Joy's nightly excursions. Knowing about those had been the perfect bargaining chip to get her to back off from wanting the lead-singer position. It wasn't exactly blackmail. Just good business.

Lily stood in front of the dressing-room door and ran her finger over the star. Would this become her dressing room right away? What about all of Delilah's things? She supposed they would be packed up and shipped off to her family. For now she'd be happy

with being able to take over the lead singing and wear the dresses. She knew they would fit with minor adjustments; she'd tried one on once when they were at port and Delilah had gone ashore.

She turned, looking at the door Oxley had come out of. He had seemed a bit preoccupied. He'd made it clear that room was off limits. Apparently it was some sort of storage for the entertainment and visual-arts portion of the ship. It held decorations, costumes, paintings that they hung on the walls around the ship. Anything that added to the ambiance was stored in there. She supposed that was why it was locked up... some people would steal anything that wasn't nailed down.

But why was Oxley so concerned about it? Surely he didn't want anything stolen but it wasn't like he would be blamed. No, Clifford Oxley was up to something, which was good news for her. She could use that to keep him in line. He didn't need to know that she was unaware of the specifics, in her experience just hinting that you knew was enough. Then again, maybe she should leave well enough alone—she'd seen the murderous look in his eye when she'd stumbled upon an argument between him and Delilah. And, of course, he could always fire her, but if he thought she knew exactly what he was up to, he might want to keep her happy so she wouldn't tell.

Goosebumps ghosted up her arm. Even though Oxley looked meek, she had a feeling he was dangerous—but surely he wasn't a killer. Then again, she'd seen the look on his face when he'd seen Delilah talking to Max Lawton, too. He'd seemed mad enough to kill. Lily didn't want to get on his bad side. But if Oxley had a bad temper, she might be able to work that in her favor. An idea started to form and she turned back to her room. Things were looking up for little Lily Sumner.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Breakfast was held in the main dining room. The smell of bacon was enticing, but Nora headed straight for the coffee urns at the end of the pastry table. She liked to get her eight hours of sleep and that certainly hadn't happened last night. She'd need some extra help to navigate the day. She had no idea how Aunt Julia could be so chipper this morning. Apparently the prospect of a fresh investigation invigorated her.

The mood was somber. People clustered in groups, whispering. Giles looked positively distraught. He rushed over to Nora and Julia.

"Everyone is talking about Delilah," he whispered.

Julia glanced around the crowd. "That's only natural. Let them talk it out. It might be wise to make an announcement so they can get all the gossip out into the open and be done with it."

"Do you think so?" Giles looked doubtful.

Aunt Julia nodded. "Don't mention our suspicions, of course." Her gaze was riveted on Clifford Oxley who had just arrived. His eyes were appropriately red rimmed, and he appeared to be in a fog, as one would if someone close to them had just died.

Nora's focus was caught by a waiter wheeling a cart of silver domed dishes past them. Hopefully they were loaded with pancakes. Nora had seen eggs, bacon and fruit up on the buffet but she was really in the mood for pancakes.

Giles took to the stage, clearing his throat and clanging a spoon on a crystal goblet. "Attention!"

The crowd stopped whispering and turned to the stage. Nora and Aunt Julia headed for the plates on the buffet table.

"As you know, a terrible tragedy has happened." Giles looked appropriately distressed. "I want you all to be aware, however, that we have everything under control. The ship will stay the course despite our fallen singer. Everything will continue on as planned. We will not forget Miss Delilah Dove, but we must carry on and enjoy ourselves as she would have wanted. And I'm happy to announce that Miss Lily Sumner will be taking her place."

Giles paused as people clapped softly. He gestured toward the buffet. "Eat as much as you like!"

The prospect of food livened up the crowd and the level of noise grew as people headed to the buffet to fill their plates.

Nora was starving. She loaded her plate with scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy, sausage and pancakes, which she smothered in maple syrup. Aunt Julia spooned some eggs Benedict onto her plate with a side of grits and then scanned the room.

"Let's sit next to the Hinchcliffes, shall we?" She had a certain gleam in her eye as she headed off toward one of the round tables where the trio sat with loaded plates.

"Mind if we join you?" Aunt Julia hovered next to Martha Hinchcliffe.

"Not at all. Please do." Martha gestured toward two empty chairs and they sat down. Today she was wearing bright yellow and sported a hat with a brim as large as the platters they used for the pastries on the buffet table.

Aunt Julia made a process out of flapping open her napkin and depositing it in her lap. Nora was more efficient, having shoved her napkin into her lap in seconds in her haste to start eating. She was already on her second forkful when Aunt Julia spoke.

"Dreadful business last night. I hope it didn't keep you awake." Julia glanced at Martha out of the corner of her eye as she cut into the eggs Benedict, causing the hollandaise sauce and yolk to run down the side of the muffin.

"Not at all." Martha leaned toward Aunt Julia over her full plate, which was loaded with syrup-soaked pancakes, fruit and sausages, and lowered her voice. "I have a little something for sleeping."

"That's quite good to have." Aunt Julia turned her attention to Vera and Beau. "I saw the two of you out there, hopefully you were able to sleep after such an unpleasant accident."

Beau yawned. "Yes, I was. I'm usually a light sleeper but last night I was fast asleep when Vera woke me to tell me about the scream. Must be all the fresh air." He gestured toward the windows where the riverbanks rolled lazily by. They were passing a deeply forested area and the banks were lined with the lush green foliage of river birch, sugar maple, red oak and Virginia pine.

"It was a busy day." Vera picked up the lone piece of toast that sat on her plate and nibbled the edge. "I didn't sleep a wink after seeing... seeing... that."

"Yes, it was quite disturbing." Aunt Julia tucked into her food.

"I heard the announcement about Delilah's replacement. Is Lily one of the other singers?" Martha asked.

Nora nodded. "Yes. Aunt Julia and I met her in Delilah's dressing room yesterday when Giles gave us a tour of the ship."

Aunt Julia frowned. "Speaking of her dressing room, I wonder what will happen with Delilah's clothes and personal effects."

"Clothes and personal effects?" Vera looked down at her outfit, a smart tailored suit in blue with white polka dots. Maybe she was trying to figure out if she was the same size as Delilah, hoping to get one of those sparkly gowns at a discount.

"Oh, yes." Aunt Julia munched on a strip of bacon. "She had a lovely dressing room filled with clothes and personal memorabilia of her career. She had pictures dating back almost a decade. Might even have been someone famous in there. I didn't think to look, did you, Nora?"

"No. I suppose they'll pack them up and send them to her family." Nora glanced back

at the buffet. She was still hungry.

Vera put down her toast. "All this talk is very upsetting. Perhaps I should go lie down. I'm still unwell from whatever I had yesterday."

Beau jumped up to escort her and Aunt Julia forked up another bite of eggs. "Take care, dear, we wouldn't want you to be out of commission for the rest of the cruise."

Martha simply snorted, her dark eyes following them as they headed off toward the stairs.

"Such an attentive husband. You've raised him well," Aunt Julia said.

Martha's face flushed with pride as she soaked a piece of pancake in a puddle of syrup. "Thank you. Though I'm not sure about some of his decisions." Martha glanced up at the retreating couple. "I always thought he'd pick someone with a little more... personality. She's too agreeable. Not much of a challenge for my Beau."

"Indeed," Aunt Julia said, stealing a sideways glance at Nora.

Luckily, the Entwhistles appeared at the table then, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen after Martha's comment. Beulah's plate was filled modestly with a spoonful of eggs, one slice of toast and some fruit. Harold had a pile of bacon atop an omelet.

"Mind if we join you?" Beulah asked.

"We'd be happy to have you. It seems we have a vacancy." Martha pointed to the chairs just vacated by her son and Vera and the Entwhistles sat. Beulah took a few minutes to situate the large bag with knitting needles and yarn flowing out of the top that had been hanging from her elbow.

Aunt Julia introduced the Entwhistles to Martha Hinchcliffe.

"You knit?" Martha asked. "I've dabbled a bit but have only managed to make a tangled mess."

"I'm working on a hat right now." Beulah seemed pleased to show off her creation. Her brooch sparkled under the chandeliers as she pulled out a purple knitted section with needles jutting out at an angle.

As she was holding it up for all to admire, Johnny Stokes appeared at the table and took the seat next to Nora. Introductions were made again and everyone chatted amicably as they ate breakfast. Johnny must have been off the sauce as he was quite pleasant and not at all wobbly in a way he hadn't been before.

"That's a lovely hat. My grandmother knits," Johnny said around a mouthful of biscuits and gravy. His voice was cheery, but sadness flickered in his eyes as he looked at the knitting. It was fleeting; only a trained eye like Nora's would have noticed. He'd been close to his grandmother, but something had happened. Perhaps she'd died, Nora thought with a pang of sympathy for Johnny. Maybe that's why he appeared so unstable at times.

"Thank you." Beulah took a few more seconds to smile at the hat, then carefully put it in the bag. Her face turned somber. "I must say, I am tired after last night. I barely slept a wink. How about the rest of you?"

"Hard to get to sleep after that," Nora said.

Everyone nodded except for Johnny who seemed to be studying them. "After what?"

All eyes turned to him.

"You haven't heard about the incident?" Martha asked.

"Incident?" Johnny's fork hovered over his plate.

"I'm afraid there was a death." Aunt Julia studied Johnny as if expecting him to spring up and confess.

"A death? Who?" Johnny looked around the table and Nora wondered if he was genuinely unaware. There was something in his eyes that told her his interest wasn't just that of a detached fellow passenger. "And how?"

"Delilah Dove. The singer." Martha gestured toward the stage where a small group of musicians were playing a jazz tune.

Johnny's fork clattered to the floor. Maybe he wasn't as steady this morning as Nora had thought. He bent down to retrieve it and Nora couldn't see his immediate expression. Too bad; she'd wanted to use her skills to judge if he knew more than he was letting on, but when he came back up, his face was expressionless if not a bit flushed.

"Oh no. What happened?" he asked, setting the fork aside.

"She fell from the boat." Aunt Julia studied Johnny as she spoke. "Into the paddle wheel."

"How horrible." Johnny twisted his napkin in his hands.

"Ghastly," Martha added.

"Yes, well, it wasn't pleasant." Aunt Julia forked up the last bit of food from her plate.

"I should say not. And it was an accident?" Johnny asked.

"Of course!" Beulah's fingers flew to the brooch at her neck. "What else would it be?"

Aunt Julia remained silent but by the change in expression of the other diners, Nora could tell they were all considering the alternative.

"Will there be an investigation?" Johnny's fingers tapped nervously on the table.

"I suppose there must." Aunt Julia tilted her head and looked at the ceiling. "Why, I recall a similar situation in one of my favorite books. Murder on the Oceanic, written by Ridley Howes. He's such a wonderful author, don't you think?" Julia looked around the table.

"Yes." Martha nodded.

"We love him." Beulah turned to Harry. "Don't we, dear?"

"He's the best," Nora added.

Johnny looked concerned. "What happened in the book?"

"Someone fell off an ocean liner and everyone thought it was an accident... but the detective in the book cleverly revealed a secret motive for murder." Aunt Julia smiled proudly.

"Oh dear. Well, I hope that doesn't happen here." Martha looked around the room. "I wouldn't like the idea of a killer being on board."

"Oh." Aunt Julia looked apologetic. "I'm sure that won't be the case here."

"Let's hope not." Johnny placed his napkin on the table. "Well, I'm quite full. Nice to meet you all. I'll see you later."

He shoved up from the table and lurched off toward the stairs, having hardly touched the food on his plate.

Nora glanced over at Aunt Julia but her attention was at the other end of the room where Max Lawton sat with a full plate of food in front of him. His eyes weren't on his

food but on Clifford Oxley, who had come out of the door leading backstage and was making his way over toward the side door that led to the boiler room and maintenance area.

As they watched, Max tossed his napkin down and headed after Oxley.

Aunt Julia leapt up from the table. "All this talk of death has been a bit disturbing. I must take my leave. I think a nap will set me right." She managed a fake yawn. "Nora, will you accompany me to my room?"

"Of course." Nora pushed up from the table and said her goodbyes then hurried off to catch up with Aunt Julia who was actually heading in the opposite direction of the stairs.

Aunt Julia was already at the door to the maintenance area, her hand on the knob, looking over her shoulder to see if anyone was watching her.

"Aunt Julia, do you really think it's a good idea to go in there?" Nora looked over her own shoulder. No one was paying any attention.

"Of course it is." Aunt Julia looked at her as if she wasn't quite following along with the program. "Didn't you see that two of our suspects went through this door? One could be the killer."

"Exactly what I was thinking," Nora whispered. "And we could be his next victims."

Julia waved her free hand dismissively. "You're such a worrywart. Who would want to hurt an old lady like me?" She opened the door and stepped through.

Nora followed her into a dimly lit corridor. She could hear the swoosh of the water, the steam in the furnace and smell oil.

Aunt Julia cocked her head. "I don't hear anything."

"Maybe they've already killed each other."

Aunt Julia looked disappointed. "I hope not. Let's go this way."

She started off to their right and Nora followed. The hallway was so narrow there was hardly room to walk beside each other. Aunt Julia tried a few of the doors along the way—all locked.

Mercifully, the stifling hallway didn't go on for long. After about a hundred feet it opened up to a small deck. Max Lawton leaned against a railing, a cigar in his mouth, smoke drifting out into the air.

"Are you ladies lost?" He flicked ash into the churning water below and Nora craned her neck to look past him, wondering where Oxley was.

"Oh dear, yes we are. Isn't this the floor our cabins are on?" A flustered Aunt Julia turned to Nora. She could win an acting award.

"No, Auntie, I told you this isn't but you're too stubborn to listen." Nora smiled inwardly at her aunt's frown at the word stubborn. If Julia was going to put her on the spot, at least she could get a dig in.

Julia sidled over to the railing, looking out at the passing scenery. She craned her neck, perhaps looking for a body floating behind the boat. "Well, it is lovely here though. A nice private spot."

Max was watching Julia and not in the affectionate way one usually watches a kooky old lady. "I think you want the deck above."

"Yes, yes. Of course." Aunt Julia turned from the railing and waved a cloud of smoke from her face. "We'll just run along then. Nice meeting you Mr. ..." Aunt Julia raised a brow at him.

"Lawton, Max Lawton."

"Yes, well then, lovely to make your acquaintance. I'm Julia Marsh and this is my grand-niece, Nora."

They all shook hands. His was surprisingly warm for a potential cold-blooded killer, but his eyes weren't. There was something dark and wary about them.

Nora grabbed Julia by the elbow. "Now come along, Auntie, you know that you need to be good or I'll have to put you back in the institution."

Julia gave her a disapproving look but didn't say anything. As Nora led her aunt away, she smiled to herself. With a character like Aunt Julia, she had to get her jabs in when she could.

Max Lawton watched the two women go back down the corridor. The older one was a busybody—he knew the type and he knew she was up to something. She played the part of a senile old lady well, but he could tell acting when he saw it.

Had they followed him on purpose or was it Oxley they were after? More importantly, why? Did they suspect the truth? Max hoped not.

It was too bad; the niece was sort of pretty with her red hair and emerald eyes. She was sharp-witted too, judging by the comment about the institution. She seemed like one of those modern, fun-loving women. Max cautioned himself not to get too friendly with her; she was surely in on it with the aunt. Whatever "it" was.

The aunt was probably one of those old-lady types who fancied herself as an amateur investigator. That was the last thing Max needed. He'd have to keep a close eye on the Marshes and deal with them appropriately if they got too close to the truth.

CHAPTER NINE

"Really? An institution?" Julia asked later when they'd retired to her room.

Nora laughed. "I have to do something to amuse myself."

Julia shook her head and sighed. The amber liquid in her cut-glass tumbler swirled against the side.

"What do you have there, Auntie?" Nora glanced at the desk with its many drawers. Did Aunt Julia have a flask hiding in there somewhere?

"Just iced tea. Would you like some?" At Nora's look at the tumbler Julia added, "All we have in the cabin is these short tumblers."

Nora nodded. There was no use in questioning her aunt further. Besides, Julia was a grown woman and if she wanted to have a nip who could argue? Even if it was against the law, Nora would never tell; she didn't want Aunt Julia to get into trouble.

"We've had quite a few developments in the case this morning." Aunt Julia went to the desk and got a piece of paper. "I've been mapping out the suspects and this isn't much different than in my book, *Murder on the Eastern Express*. You see there are always certain types of suspects."

"It's the different types that interest me the most." Nora flopped into the club chair near the window and looked out as they streamed past a town with brick buildings and pedestrians in fancy hats. Model Ts chugged down the road, which was lined with quaint shops. This was the life, Nora thought, even if it did require solving a murder or two. "So, who was the killer in your book? Maybe we can skip ahead."

Aunt Julia pursed her lips then shook her head. "No, in my book it was the train conductor. That wouldn't apply here."

Nora leaned forward in her chair. "I don't know about that. Sven Nordby is pretty unfriendly and he was up near the scene but claimed to have seen and heard nothing."

"You have a point, dear. Perhaps we should consider him, but let's not overlook the clues. The pilot house is very noisy with that boiler below and the smokestack does hide the view."

"True, and everything about the murder is personal. Delilah would have had to meet the killer so that suggests she knew him, and the stomping on her hand was violent, it suggests anger. Unless there was some personal connection between Sven and Delilah we aren't aware of, I think we need to focus on our current suspects. We only have two

more days.”

“I’m sure it didn’t escape you that Max Lawton acted very suspicious. Why on earth would he be out on that small deck near the engine room?”

“Maybe he didn’t want to bother anyone with his cigar smoke?” Nora thought about the cigarettes in her bag. Even though smoking seemed to be all the rage—and that was the only reason she even considered partaking in the habit—she always tried to make sure her smoke didn’t blow in anyone’s face.

“Perhaps. He didn’t seem very happy to see us.” Aunt Julia tapped the pen against her lips. “And what happened to Oxley? Why was Max Lawton following him?”

“That might have just been coincidental timing.” Nora remembered the way Max had been watching Oxley and how he had left his full plate on the table. Who did that? Nora certainly never would, not unless something urgent came up. “But I don’t think so. No, he did follow him, but maybe he never caught up to him.”

“Oxley could have disappeared behind any of those doors and Max might have been waiting for him to come out,” Julia said. “And let’s not forget about that locked room that Giles showed us during the tour. That intrigues me.”

Nora smiled. No surprise there. Aunt Julia wasn’t one to let a locked room go unexplored, but did it have anything to do with Delilah’s murder? It was unlikely. Her thoughts returned to the possibility of a more personal connection. “If those knowing looks that Max and Delilah exchanged had meaning, then they knew each other. We already know that Oxley and Delilah were an item. Could be a love triangle and someone wanted to make sure it was a duet.”

“Just like in *Lovers’ Leap*.” Julia referred to one of her mysteries. “And there’s another person who has raised my suspicions. Johnny Stokes. Don’t you find it odd that he didn’t hear about the death until we told him at breakfast?”

“It does seem odd, but why would he pretend that he didn’t know?” Nora had a soft spot for Johnny, given his obvious affection for his grandmother.

“Maybe he thought it would be a good way to prove he wasn’t the one who pushed her. Trying to disassociate himself from the entire incident.” Julia wrote something on her paper. “I’m not counting him out, though his motive is a mystery.”

“And then there’s Vera Hinchcliffe.” Nora’s money was on her. The way she ran off anytime the murder was mentioned was classic behavior for someone trying to pretend to themselves that they hadn’t done something abhorrent. Maybe she was the killer?

“She is the type I like to make the killer in my books.”

“Maybe Delilah was the one she was trying to avoid at the reception.” Vera acted delicate and a bit ditzzy around Beau, but Nora noticed how shrewdly she played him. She was clever enough to be a killer, yet Nora sensed a certain sweetness about her and she’d seen longing in Vera’s baby blues when she looked at Martha, as if she yearned for her approval.

“But she has an alibi with Beau,” Aunt Julia said. “Though he could be in on it, too. Was he really sleeping until Vera woke him? Maybe he was and she snuck out then back in thinking he could give her an alibi, but wouldn’t that wake him? In any event she did recover pretty quickly from whatever caused her to run out at the reception, but then she

rushed off at the first mention of Delilah during breakfast.”

“It’s too bad the alibis are so hard to establish. Everyone was asleep. Or so they say.”

“Since we’ve determined the killer was likely known to Delilah, the next step is to ferret out the motive. That seems like your area of expertise. I assume you have some trick questions to trip them up?”

“I do.” Nora knew exactly how to phrase things so that the subject would stumble over answers or entrap themselves in a web of lies. It was one of her favorite things to do.

Aunt Julia capped her pen and looked out the window. “Well then, I guess we’d better go seek out our suspects and see what shakes out. With Artemis Leonard coming in two days, we don’t have a minute to waste.”

Nora thanked her stars there was a slight breeze on the veranda that ran along the edge of the boat, otherwise the thin fabric of her dusty-peach sheath dress would have clung to her like gravy on a biscuit. It was humid like only the south can be and being on the river added to it. Still, the lazy speed at which the boat glided along was soothing. Who would have guessed there was a murderer on board?

Beulah Entwhistle was seated in a rocking chair facing the shore, knitting needles racing along. Aunt Julia paused to speak to her.

“Hello there. Are you enjoying this lovely day?”

“Indeed! I’m almost finished with my project.” Beulah held up the hat, clearly pleased with herself. “Next I start on a scarf for my nephew.”

Harold was reading a hardcover and Nora could see Julia crane her neck to view the title of the book. When she realized it wasn’t one of hers, she scowled. “Oh I see you have the latest R.D. Hines book. I find the mysteries are not quite up to snuff, don’t you?”

Harold glanced up. “Not really. It’s quite engaging.”

“Hmmm... well, we must move along, need my exercise you know.”

When they got far enough away, Aunt Julia whispered, “Harold has no taste in books. Nice taste in jewelry though.”

Nora looked back to see if Beulah had her brooch on but couldn’t tell as they’d gotten too far away.

“Oh look! There’s Sven and Giles. Let’s hurry! We can catch Sven and maybe he’ll let something drop.” Julia took off like a racehorse determined to win a trophy. “Giles! Yoohoo!”

Giles turned and Nora couldn’t tell if he was happy to see Julia rushing after him or terrified. He nodded at both of them. Sven looked at them as if they were annoying insects and grunted.

Giles pulled them aside, out of earshot of anyone else. “Are you getting anywhere with the investigation?”

Julia shot a surprised look at Sven.

Upon noticing the look, Giles said, “Sven knows about your suspicions. He needs to

know everything that is going on."

"Tis quite unusual," Sven grumbled and shot an accusing look at Aunt Julia.

"Lucky thing that we can't have the police send a smaller boat to come aboard now," Giles said. "It will give you some more time."

"That is a lucky thing." Nora looked out at the river. When Giles had said that the next port that could accommodate the Miss Delta Belle was in Vicksburg she hadn't considered that the police could simply send a boat out and dock alongside. "Why can't the police send a boat out?"

"Rocks, ma'am," Sven said.

"Could you elaborate?" Aunt Julia asked.

"The river is full of rocks. Right now we are in a smooth section, but t'int safe to try to maneuver the Miss Delta Belle through most of the river here and try to hold a steady course or speed her so a boat could pull up alongside."

"Oh..." Aunt Julia smiled at Sven. "How convenient."

Nora figured she was making a note about that to use in her next book. Since Sven was starting to open up, Nora decided to feel him out about the murder. "And you're sure you didn't notice anything that night? No one running about on the deck? No screams or yelling?"

Sven narrowed his eyes at her. "Did I not tell you that before?"

"Well, yes, but I thought maybe after you'd thought about it..."

"I don't need to think about something like that. Now I must get back to help my co-pilot navigate." Sven glanced at Giles, then turned on his heel and stomped off.

"Friendly sort, isn't he?" Julia asked.

"He has his quirks but he's a darn good river pilot," Giles said. "Now, tell me, are you getting closer to figuring out what happened? Please tell me you have determined it was an accident after all."

"Afraid not. I'm more certain than ever that it was murder," Julia said.

Giles glanced around nervously. "Do you have any idea who did it?"

"I'm getting close, but I may need your help."

"I'll help with anything I can."

"I'd like to inspect Delilah's sleeping quarters and her dressing room. I've already inspected the scene of the crime but there might be something of interest in her rooms," Aunt Julia said.

"Of course." Giles looked at his watch. "Unfortunately I must run to another engagement and am tied up this evening. Will tomorrow do?"

Aunt Julia looked disappointed. "I suppose."

"Very well then. Sorry to rush off." Giles inclined his head at them and left.

Aunt Julia took Nora's elbow and continued around the veranda. "What did you make of Sven? He was very abrupt when you mentioned the murder. Maybe we should consider him more seriously as a suspect."

"I wouldn't be too sure 'bout that. He did avoid answering by being brusque and that is something the killer might do, but that sort of avoidance usually happens with someone more impulsive. Statistics show that a person as regimented as Sven would

have the patience to hide their guilt by drawing out the conversation and not storming away to end it."

Aunt Julia made a face. "If you say so. I suppose his alibi would be easy to prove or disprove, perhaps we should ask the co-pilot—"

Aunt Julia stopped short and Nora followed her gaze. Percival Montford and Clifford Oxley were standing at the railing. They appeared to be in a deep discussion about something and, by the way they were standing so close, it looked as if it was something they didn't want anyone to overhear.

"Is it just me or does it appear as if the good doctor and Mr. Oxley are more than acquaintances?" Julia asked.

"It's not just you." Nora could tell by their gestures and low voices there was an air of familiarity about them.

"Let's go find out." Julia headed toward them.

The two men saw them coming and stepped apart.

"Mr. Oxley! Doctor Montford! I didn't realize the two of you knew each other," Aunt Julia said.

Montford looked annoyed at her very presence but answered politely. "Clifford is my nephew, didn't I mention that? He gave us the tickets for this cruise."

"He did? How nice of him." Aunt Julia glanced at Nora then lowered her voice. "Such a shame about the tragedy but lucky thing we had a doctor on board. Not that you could have done anything."

Montford shifted uneasily. "Terrible loss."

Julia turned to Oxley. "I hope you will accept our condolences. We heard you were close to Miss Dove."

Oxley nodded, his expression turning somber. "I was. She was a great singer and an asset to the entertainment staff."

"Indeed. And so young. Hard to believe she just fell, what with the railing and all." Aunt Julia smiled up at Oxley benignly.

Oxley pulled at his collar. "Umm, well... yes, it was tragic."

"Yes, and so terrible to think of your loved one being subjected to such brutality." Nora studied Oxley's reaction. He cringed appropriately, but Nora sensed he was holding back. Was that because he was the killer and only acting disgusted?

Aunt Julia leaned in. "Tragic. I believe Giles mentioned something about an investigation..." She waved her hand in the air. "But I'm sure that's just a formality."

Oxley stopped fiddling with his collar. "I didn't hear anything about an investigation."

"Oh yes, of course there must be one. Don't you think?"

"I don't think so. I mean, it was an accident. No one needs to go poking around. Do they?" Oxley looked at his uncle.

Dr. Montford cleared his throat. "I suppose an investigation is warranted any time an unnatural death occurs but I'm sure the police won't find that there was foul play."

Nora wondered if his assurances were because he was oblivious to the fact that Delilah had been murdered or if he'd fixed things so that any evidence of foul play no longer existed.

Julia's pursed lips indicated she was thinking the same thing. "I'm sure they will be very thorough. Everything must be done properly, though. Giles has to maintain the reputation of the Miss Delta Belle."

"But no investigator has come aboard. Maybe they've already deemed it accidental?"

"I think I heard that the investigator will come on board in Vicksburg. Or maybe you're right. I really can't say."

Aunt Julia pretended not to be too concerned. Oxley, on the other hand, looked very concerned.

"Well, we shall let you go back to your discussion. I didn't mean to interrupt but thought it would be nice to give our condolences," said Julia. She then waited until they were out of earshot to speak again. "That was an unusual surprise to find Percival and Oxley are related. What do you make of it?"

"In itself it doesn't indicate guilt, but Oxley did seem concerned about the investigation." Nora mentally moved Clifford Oxley to the top of the suspect list. "Though he did seem appropriately disturbed when I mentioned the violent nature of her death."

"Indeed. And his uncle examined the body. Makes one wonder if he might have removed some clues pointing to his nephew. He probably knew Oxley was involved with Delilah. They must be close if Oxley gave him tickets."

"As you always say, the spouse or significant other is usually the killer."

"But I also always say, that we should continue to explore every clue. So just because Oxley has a few points against him doesn't mean we can rest. Artemis Leonard wouldn't, and I can't risk accusing the wrong person and having him prove that my investigation was faulty." Julia sighed. "If only we could get into Delilah's cabin and dressing room. Maybe we should check to see if Giles has a spare moment after all. I hate to give the killer an opportunity to cover his tracks."

Nora agreed, but since Giles was busy they had no choice. "Let's focus on the suspects. We still need to talk to Vera Hinchcliffe, Max Lawton, Lily Sumner and Joy Morgan and possibly Johnny Stokes. Maybe we can corner Lily and Joy tonight."

"Hopefully we will run into one of the others on our walk. Oh look, there are the Hinchcliffes." Julia waved at Martha who brightened and waved back. "Looks like our wish has been granted."

"What a lovely afternoon," Julia crowed as they joined the Hinchcliffes at the railing. They were on the starboard side of the boat and the riverbanks were lush with hardwoods and shrubs, their green leaves bright in the sunlight.

"It is indeed. Vera saw a deer on the side of the river earlier." Beau looked at his wife proudly, as if seeing a deer was some sort of magical feat.

"How unusual." Martha's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"Such an odd juxtaposition the beautiful countryside is to the grim event on the ship and impending investigation." Nora decided to get right to the thing that might cause the killer to do something drastic. Even though everyone knew Delilah had died under suspicious circumstances, she hadn't heard people mentioning an investigation, so once Aunt Julia had broken the ice with Oxley, Nora decided it might be just the thing to get a reaction.

Martha frowned. "Investigation?"

"Into the death of Delilah Dove." Aunt Julia lowered her voice. "I hear an investigator will come aboard in Vicksburg."

Vera gasped, her face turning pale.

Martha glanced at her with disdain. "It's nothing to get the vapors about."

Beau looked at Vera protectively. "I don't suppose that has anything to do with us."

"I suppose not," Aunt Julia said. "You were roused from sleep like the rest of us, weren't you? I mean, I did see you peeking out into the hallway, so I assume you were in your room."

"Of course I was in my room, where else would I be?" Beau looked confused.

Julia shrugged. "I was just thinking the killer might have pretended to be in their room." Her eyes settled on Vera whose face was now turning pink.

Vera fisted her hand on her hips and glared at Aunt Julia. "Now, you see here. My Beau was in the room sleeping. I can vouch for that. He's a good man and I don't appreciate you casting aspersions on his character."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Vera's hands flew to her lips. She glanced at Martha with round eyes. No doubt she regretted making the outburst in front of her mother-in-law. Nora got the impression Vera wanted Martha to think she was perfectly polite and flawless. She need not have worried though, because Martha was gazing at her daughter-in-law with sudden admiration in her eyes.

Julia rushed to apologize. "Oh dear, I am sorry. Didn't mean to imply a thing! Well, look at the time. We best go back to our cabins."

Julia tugged Nora away.

"Really, Auntie, you didn't have to be so blunt. Haven't we discussed how you should leave the questioning to me? I know how to do it so that the suspect doesn't realize they are being interrogated. Now Vera is mad and it's going to be difficult to draw more information out of her."

"Sorry, dear. Sometimes I can't help myself," Julia said. "But wouldn't you say that Vera's quick reaction indicated that she spoke the truth?"

"Yes. It usually takes a few seconds for people to make up a lie."

"Good then, the whole conversation wasn't in vain. Though it may not mean anything, Vera just confessed that she wasn't asleep at the time of the murder. Because how could she be so sure that Beau was actually there sleeping if she herself had not been awake?"

CHAPTER TEN

They made a circuit of the decks, Aunt Julia becoming more irritated on each pass as they didn't run into any of the other suspects. As they walked along the lower cabin deck, she cocked her head. "Do you hear music?"

Nora listened. She thought she heard the mournful notes of a saxophone. "Maybe, but the dining room is closed."

"Yes, but if someone is there perhaps we can wheedle our way backstage and get into Delilah's dressing room without having to wait for Giles." Aunt Julia headed toward the stairs.

As they descended, a few notes drifted up, but the music stopped before they got to the bottom. The dining room was empty except for the saxophone player, a tall fellow with friendly eyes and a ready smile. He was putting his instrument away.

"I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your playing." Aunt Julia nodded toward the shiny brass instrument.

"Thank you so much, ma'am, that means a lot." The man lovingly laid the saxophone in a blue-velvet-lined case.

"I'm Julia and this is my niece, Nora." Aunt Julia stuck out her hand.

"Kenny." The man shook her hand. "I was just practicing. I like to practice in the actual room as opposed to the dressing room. Helps me get a feel for the sound. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"Not at all. I have a great appreciation for music and I realize it must have been hard to play given what happened to Delilah Dove. Did you like working with her?"

Kenny shrugged and snapped the case closed. "She was okay. It's awful what happened."

"Yes, but I appreciate how professional you all are, never missed a beat." Aunt Julia tittered at her joke.

Kenny simply nodded. "Well, I best get to work. We're changing the stage to a moon and stars theme tonight."

He started taking the banners off the podiums that he and the other instrumentalists stood behind on stage. Currently the stage was decorated in a motif of musical notes.

Aunt Julia glanced toward the door that led backstage. "Let us help you. I'll get the door."

Before Kenny could refuse, she ran to the door and opened it. Since Kenny's hands were full, he nodded his thanks and passed through. Nora hurriedly picked up a decoration—a string of glitter G-clefs—and followed him.

They walked behind Kenny down the hall passing Delilah's dressing room with its closed door.

"Oh, how nice, you still have Miss Dove's name on the door." Julia tried the knob.

"Mr. Oxley is going to pack it up tomorrow. It's locked now, though." Kenny's brow furrowed as he noticed Julia's hand on the knob.

"Sorry, just curious."

"We need to put the decorations in there." Kenny nodded toward the locked room they'd seen on the tour with Giles.

Aunt Julia perked up. "We can go in there?"

"Right now we can. To switch out the stage. Usually it's locked too," Kenny said.

The room was about the size of Delilah's dressing room, but much less organized. As they'd been told, it was a storage room with various decorations, podiums, chairs, music stands and trunks full of costumes.

"It looks like you have plenty of things to work with here." Aunt Julia helped Kenny put the banners on a shelf.

"Yeah, we like to change it up," Kenny said.

Aunt Julia started wandering around. "Look at these decorations, so colorful!" She opened a trunk. "And these look like Christmas things. Wouldn't it be fun to travel on the Miss Delta Belle for Christmas, Nora?"

"Sure, if you don't like snow for Christmas." Nora handed the sparkly G-clefs to Kenny, who put them away.

"Uh... Mr. Oxley doesn't like us lingering around in here." Kenny started toward the doorway.

"Oh no?" Aunt Julia made her way around the room. "Why is that?"

Nora did her own survey of the room. She didn't see anything valuable, unless it was hidden in one of the trunks along the wall. She doubted that, as they were banged up and scruffy, with scratched paint, brass corners worn down to the black metal underneath and one even missing one of the oak straps.

"I guess he doesn't want things stolen. He had a problem with that in the past. He's usually here supervising."

Aunt Julia looked intrigued. "Really? I wonder where he is now?"

"Beats me."

"Oh, well, we won't linger then." Aunt Julia headed for the door. Kenny exited the room, making sure to leave the door closed.

Aunt Julia hovered in front of the star's dressing room. "It's so sad what happened. But you know I do wonder... what was Delilah doing up on the sun deck in the middle of the night fully dressed in a gown? Was there a staff party that night?"

Kenny shook his head. "No. Mr. Oxley frowns on late-night parties."

"She must have been with someone," Nora said. "Do you know who?"

Kenny's eyes shifted to the left, indicating that he might know but probably wasn't

going to tell. Perhaps he'd seen or heard something, but Nora wasn't sure how to press him on it.

"Where were you at the time?" she asked.

"I was asleep in my room." Kenny pointed to a doorway at the end of the hall.

"Do you all have your own rooms?" Aunt Julia asked.

Kenny shook his head. "We double up. I room with Buddy the drummer."

"And you were both asleep at the time?" Aunt Julia pressed.

"Yeah. I woke up and went into the hall. Mr. Oxley practically ran me over." Kenny glanced at the very end of the hall.

"Is that his room down there?" Aunt Julia asked.

"Yep."

"And which direction was he coming from?" Aunt Julia asked.

Kenny looked at her funny. "From his room, like I said."

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together and nodded. "Yes, I bet it was quite a shock to hear that scream and then find out who had done the screaming. Did it take you long to come out into the hall?"

Kenny thought about that. "I guess it took a few minutes. I was fast asleep. The scream woke me and it took a while to get my bearings. Then I grabbed my robe. Buddy was rummaging around for his and then we rushed into the hall."

"And you all ran up to the sun deck together?"

"Yes. Well, some of us were faster than others, but we eventually got there. By then they'd pulled Delilah up and..."

Aunt Julia patted his arm sympathetically. "I'm sorry to bring up such terrible memories. Well, I suppose we must run along. Thank you again for such wonderful entertainment."

"My pleasure."

They made their way through the empty restaurant. "That was interesting," Nora said. "Do you think Oxley could possibly have killed Delilah then rushed back down here and pretended he was coming out of his room?"

"The timing seems unlikely. I have an idea as to how we can find out, but for now we best get ready for dinner. At least there we will be able to corner some of our suspects."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That night in the dining room one never would have guessed there had been a murder on board. People ate their food and sipped sparkling water—Nora noted that Aunt Julia's glass was clear—as if they'd forgotten all about Delilah's death.

Despite Aunt Julia's earlier gaffe with the Hinchcliffes, Martha waved them over with enthusiasm. Tonight she was wearing a sky-blue gown loaded with rhinestones on the top and a matching ostrich-feather boa. The outfit was more fitting for a younger woman, but Nora was finding that Martha was rather unconventional. Interestingly enough, Vera was seated at the table next to her mother-in-law. Every other time Beau had been in the middle. Johnny Stokes was also at the table.

Vera looked radiant in a gold gown laden with pearls and gold beads that showed off her figure to advantage. She appeared relaxed and fully recovered from the excitement of the morning. Beau couldn't keep his eyes off her. In contrast, Nora had worn a lavender low-waisted dress that made it look as if she had no figure at all. At least it complimented her red hair and fair skin, or so Aunt Julia said.

Julia seated herself next to Johnny. "I do hope you are recovered from your shock during breakfast this morning."

He looked confused. "Shock?"

Julia lowered her voice but in a way that everyone could hear. "The death of that singer... Delilah Dove."

Johnny blanched. "Oh, yes. Well, that was disturbing."

"Indeed, even more so to discover it might have been... well... there's no easy way to say this. It might not have been an accident."

"What do you mean?"

"I heard that someone pushed her." Aunt Julia shot Nora an apologetic glance. At least she was starting to realize when she overstepped her bounds in the investigation duties.

Nora leaned over Julia to address Johnny. "Don't let my aunt worry you, she has an overactive imagination. Either way Delilah's death is a tragedy. So young... she must have been around your age, right?"

"Yes, she was a few years older." Johnny gulped his water, perhaps realizing that the way he'd said that implied he knew her age. He could have read it in any paper, but Nora

wondered...

"Oh? Did you know her?" Aunt Julia must have wondered too. Nora kicked her under the table.

"Know her? No. I mean, I just heard." Johnny fiddled with his fork nervously. "Why would someone want to kill her?"

Aunt Julia shook out her napkin and spread it on her lap. "I can't say. I don't suppose anyone here saw anything..." She glanced up, looking around at each of them.

They shook their heads.

Martha leaned in toward Julia. "Have you heard anything more about the investigation?"

"No. But I'm sure if it was murder, the killer will be brought to justice." Aunt Julia took a sip of water and stared at the suspects over the rim of the glass.

Beulah and Harry Entwhistle joined the table.

"It's a bit strange tonight." Beulah glanced at the stage where Kenny played a soft tune on the sax. The melancholy notes drifted out into the room, setting a somber mood. Later on the full band would join him and Lily would take over for Delilah. "To think just last night we listened to Delilah Dove and tonight...." She drifted off, her hand reaching up to fiddle with her brooch.

Johnny looked at her sympathetically. "It is, isn't it. But don't worry, we'll make the best of it." He cast a glance at Nora and Aunt Julia who nodded. The waiter came and they ordered dinner and the conversation turned to more mundane matters. At least Aunt Julia didn't bring up her mystery novels again.

Nora watched the others as she ate her pork chops. The chops were stuffed with cornbread and were quite delicious and the asparagus tips on the side were perfectly cooked. She would have loved a nice wine, but the ship was dry. The suspects all seemed a bit nervous, but who wouldn't be after having been informed a murder had happened? She noticed that Max Lawton wasn't in the dining room. Come to think of it, she hadn't seen him make any friends on the trip and he often ate alone. She assumed he preferred to spend his time at the gambling table and, perhaps, murdering passengers.

Vera barely ate a thing, though Nora supposed that was her norm. She wouldn't be able to eat much if she wanted to keep that figure. As Vera nibbled a piece of lettuce, her eyes darted about the room as if expecting the killer to come at her—or a police officer to come arrest her.

Johnny had taken an interest in Beulah, trying to calm her, as the old lady was visibly upset about what had happened to Delilah. Good thing she hadn't heard Aunt Julia mention murder—at least not unless she had very good hearing—but Nora supposed the rumor would get around to her eventually.

Johnny must have been a kind soul, as Nora had gathered from the look in his eyes when he'd talked about his grandmother. He joked with Beulah during dinner and, after the plates were cleared, he took her out on the dance floor when it became obvious she wanted to dance and Harold didn't seem to want any part of it. Johnny whirled her around somewhat carelessly. He wasn't a great dancer, stepping on her feet a couple of times but helping her not to fall. Nora made a mental note to avoid dancing with him.

When it came time for Lily to sing, the room quieted as if everyone was holding their breath. She took the mic but didn't launch into song straight away.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming to hear me... and I dedicate this song to Delilah Dove." Lily's voice had an appropriate tremble. She was a good singer. The first song was a little sad but then she jazzed it up with fast tunes and things got lively again. When the band played an instrumental version of the Charleston, Aunt Julia saw her opening to talk to Lily and Joy.

She pushed up from the table and inclined her head toward the table in the corner where the two singers were taking a break. Nora followed.

"What a lovely set. Such a sweet voice." Aunt Julia's compliments brought a smile to Lily's face.

"Thank you so much." Her smile faded. "Of course, given the circumstances it's bittersweet to be singing."

Nora studied Joy while Aunt Julia gushed about Lily's vocal abilities. Joy didn't look very happy for Lily. Was she jealous? And how had Lily gotten the coveted lead-singing role instead of Joy?

"At least a tragedy has a silver lining, but is it hard with only one backup singer?" Nora looked from Lily to Joy. "You both have lovely voices so it must have been hard to choose which one would become the lead. Did you do it by seniority? Or were there some other criteria?"

Lily glanced at Joy, then hurried to explain. "Well, honestly, Joy didn't want to sing the lead, isn't that right?"

Joy nodded. "Yes. I'm just not ready."

"One can't rush into things," Aunt Julia said. "I assume there was some sort of party last night? It was very late when Delilah was found but she was still in the gown she wore to sing. Were you all at the party? Whatever possessed her to go up to the sun deck?"

"Party? No. Well there was one earlier." Lily looked at Joy. "But we were in our cabin when we heard the scream."

Joy nodded. "They have strict rules here about us wandering around the ship. We were in our room. Both of us together."

"I see. So you have no idea what Miss Dove was doing. Perhaps she was meeting someone...?" Aunt Julia let her voice trail off.

Lily frowned. "Meeting someone? If she was meeting someone wouldn't they have been able to grab her to stop her from falling?"

Aunt Julia leveled a look at her. "One would think. But maybe they didn't want her to stop from falling."

Joy gasped. "What are you saying?"

"Oh, nothing really. Just the ramblings of an old lady with an overactive imagination." Aunt Julia laughed as if to lighten the mood. "I suppose the investigation will clear it all up."

"There's an investigation?" Lily fiddled with her rhinestone belt.

"That's what I heard. There seems to be some question as to what happened. Well,

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. I'll let you get on with your break."

Aunt Julia headed back to the table with both Lily and Joy staring after her. Nora followed her aunt.

"Sounds like they have alibis," Nora said when they sat back down. Dessert had arrived at their places. Bread pudding for Julia and shoofly pie for Nora.

Aunt Julia spooned up some of the bread pudding. It was crunchy on top, soft in the middle and gooey with caramel. "Yes, but remember that Joy was at the scene when we got there. She must have run up pretty fast. But then Lily came later. It would take a while to get there from their cabin, so did Joy simply run off faster? And why didn't they come together?"

Nora twisted in her seat to look at the two singers who were still sitting at the corner table. "Lily fits into Delilah's dresses almost perfectly." She'd changed twice that night already but, of course, the turquoise dress that Delilah had been wearing the night of her death hadn't been one of them.

"A stroke of good luck. Though if you ask me the other one did seem a bit jealous. She wouldn't fit into the gowns, though; maybe that's why Oxley wanted Lily to take over."

"Hopefully we'll get some answers tomorrow after the suspects have had the night to think about an impending investigation." Nora dug into her pie. It was thick and sugary and tangy with molasses.

"Maybe, but there is one suspect who we haven't spread the rumor to. Max Lawton." Aunt Julia surveyed the room with a keen eye. "I wonder where he is? Why isn't he here?"

"Maybe he has something to hide and is afraid that you'll drag the truth out of him." Nora was joking, but Aunt Julia seemed to take it as a compliment.

"Perhaps, but I think it's more likely that he's playing poker in the library this time." Julia scooped up the last of her bread pudding, then patted her lips with a napkin and pushed up from the table. "Shall we double-check on that on the way to our cabin?"

The library was located on the middle of the cabin deck. It had a formal look with tall bookcases, large round oak tables and Chesterfield sofas. There were matching club chairs atop a cobalt-and-ruby oriental rug. When Nora and Julia passed by, they noticed that several tables were occupied by cigar-smoking card players. Poker chips were stacked on the tables and the air was thick with smoke.

As Nora and Julia walked past the door, the men paid them no attention, concentrating on the cards fanned out in their hands. All except one man—Max Lawton. As they passed by the far end, he looked up, meeting Nora's eye. A shiver ran up her spine at the warning in his dark eyes. Sensing that it would not be wise to interrupt a poker game just to spread a rumor, they hurried to their rooms. They would have to try to question Max Lawton tomorrow... if they dared.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vera Hinchcliffe cracked open the door to her stateroom and peeked out into the hallway. The coast was clear. With one backwards glance at her snoring husband, she slipped out. It had been fairly easy to slip her mother-in-law's sleeping powder into Beau's bedtime hot chocolate and now he was out like a light. If it worked like it had the other times she'd done this he'd be dead to the world until morning. At least he'd get a good night's sleep, unlike her.

Worry gnawed at her as she tiptoed down the hall in her satin slippers. She'd been on edge ever since that strange old woman, Julia, had mentioned the pictures in Agnes'—Delilah's—dressing room. Pictures of Delilah's career could include one of Vera, and she couldn't have anyone see that, especially not if there was going to be an investigation as Julia had inferred. She planned to spend a leisurely life in restaurants and bars with Beau, not one behind bars alone.

As she carefully descended the stairs to the lower deck, she realized there was another reason she didn't want anyone to see that picture, too. She didn't want to disappoint Beau. Didn't want him to know she'd lied to him about her past. And, to her horror, she realized she didn't want to disappoint Martha either. Hopefully she wasn't getting sentimental about the old buzzard. Though now that she'd spent more time with her, she was starting to think that maybe she and Martha could be friends. Ironically, Martha had acted more friendly since Vera's outburst that morning.

Well, no time to dwell on that now: she had to focus on the task at hand.

The restaurant was spooky at night, empty and dark, with the moon shining in through the windows highlighting a patch on the dance floor. She practically ran as she crossed it to the door she knew led backstage.

The hallways backstage weren't anything like on the rest of the ship. They were plain, no fancy carpet or wallpaper. Just gray and ugly, like so many other backstage areas that Vera remembered from her former life as an entertainer. There were a lot of doors, but Delilah's wasn't hard to find. Vera pulled a hairpin out of her hair. Lucky for her, her past life had taught her some tricks when it came to getting into locked rooms.

One wall was covered with pictures. She was surprised Agnes/Delilah had taken the time to hang them up for a temporary job, but she always had been a bit full of herself. A smile tugged at Vera's lips as she scanned the photos. She'd had some good times with

Agnes, and while she had been showy, there had also been a bit of sadness about her. Back in the day, Agnes had always been worried about her brother. He'd fallen in with a bad crowd and she'd wanted to keep him from harm. Well, at least she didn't have to worry about him now.

Vera's gaze came to rest on a small framed photo in the center. Her own image, a little younger and with brown hair, smiled out at her. She was standing next to Agnes and their arms were around each other's shoulders. She paused at the tug of nostalgia, then snatched the picture off the wall, shoved it inside her robe, and hurried out of the room, making sure to lock the door behind her.

The ruby-and-diamond bracelet weighed heavy in Johnny Stokes' pocket as he hugged the wall of the Texas deck on his way to the dressing rooms. He was still reeling from what Julia Marsh had said about there being an investigation. He'd been sure they would rule Delilah Dove's death as an accident. An investigation was something he hadn't expected and now he couldn't risk that they'd find the bracelet in his possession, especially since his ticket might be traceable back to her brother.

Johnny had met Rodney Banks—Delilah's, or should he say Agnes'—brother during a small store robbery Johnny had been reluctantly involved in several years ago. Johnny wasn't a criminal, but he was desperate for money for medicine for his grandmother's ongoing illness. He loved Gram and would do anything for her, even risk going to jail. Rodney had gone on to bigger and better things and was now serving a sentence in the state prison, but they'd kept in touch. It was Rodney who had gotten his ticket and set him up on the cruise. Johnny had never met Delilah and that was just as well considering Johnny's real reason for being on the Miss Delta Belle.

He crept silently down the wide stairs to the dining room, making sure to stay to the edges so as not to have any creaks of the wood give him away. The dining room was empty, but he stuck to the shadows along the walls in case someone came in. He'd made it almost to the door that led backstage when it opened.

Johnny shrunk back into the shadows of the corner. The person coming out the door would have to turn around to see him. Hopefully that wouldn't happen.

He squinted into the dark. Who was that? It looked like Vera Hinchcliffe. What in the world could she be doing down here?

She was hurrying away from the door, her fur-trimmed robe clasped tight around her. It looked like she was hugging something to her chest. Had she stolen something? Had she been visiting one of the crew members for a secret tryst? Lucky for Johnny she was in such a hurry to get out of there that she never looked back.

He waited until she disappeared up the stairs, then slipped through the door she'd just come out of. The hallway was dark, but the dressing room was easy to find. Picking locks was second nature to Johnny. He let himself in and closed the door behind him.

There were two trunks in the corner. One was open and piled with clothing. Not show costumes. Johnny assumed those might be Delilah's regular clothes from her room. He'd

heard the gowns had been purchased especially for the show and didn't actually belong to Delilah. Someone had probably packed up her cabin and was now working on the dressing room.

The mirrored vanity had a brush, makeup, jewelry boxes and a few strands of dime store beads. Good, he wouldn't have to root around in the trunks for the proper place to put the bracelet.

As he pulled the bracelet out of his pocket, it snagged on his cuff. Darn, this was his best shirt. Oh well, couldn't be helped.

He placed the ruby bracelet on the dressing table beside a strand of jet-black beads and then hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

JUNE 14, 1926

The next day Nora and Julia greeted the morning with a stroll around the decks. Nora had dressed appropriately in a smart plaid skirt that hung below the knees, a crisp white blouse and a matching cloche hat. Aunt Julia was still dismissive of the shorter hemlines so she wore an ankle length dress of pale yellow and a wide-brimmed white straw hat with matching yellow band.

"The thing about a steamboat is that it is so delightful for strolling," Aunt Julia said as they walked along the outer rim of the cabin deck. "You have these lovely verandas that run the length of the boat and there are tables and chairs everywhere if you want to stop and rest."

"And lounges at every end in case you need a longer rest," Nora said as they passed the forward lounge. She peeked in to see if maybe there was a poker game and, thus, Max Lawton, but the room was empty. They still hadn't questioned the mysterious Mr. Lawton and Julia was hoping to run into him during their stroll.

"Oh look! There are the Entwhistles and the Montfords. This might be a good time to try to trip Percival up about his involvement in the murder."

Aunt Julia picked up the pace, stopping at the little round table that Beulah and Harry Entwhistle were seated at. Beulah had her knitting out, the needles clacking away. Percival and Irene Montford leaned against the railing, the scenery passing slowly behind them. Life on a riverboat sure was leisurely... when no one was falling overboard.

"... and I said to Harry, I'm certainly not getting forgetful. One just needs extra time to remember where we put things at our age, don't you agree?" Beulah looked at Dr. Montford.

"Indeed. I always remember." He reached in his pocket, presumably for his watch, then when he didn't find it checked another pocket, then upon not finding it again simply gave up, glancing sheepishly at Irene.

"Hello there, Miss Marsh," Irene greeted them.

"Julia and Nora, please! Surnames are much too formal." Aunt Julia settled in against the railing next to Dr. Montford.

Harry glanced over at her. "Have you heard anything more about the...?"

Aunt Julia feigned confusion. "The? Oh... do you mean the investigation?" She lowered her voice for the last word.

Beulah's needles stopped clacking.

Nora saw the perfect sequel to ask Percival Montford some questions and judge his reaction. "We didn't realize that you were related to Clifford Oxley. I assume then you knew Delilah. It must have been quite disturbing to be called upon to examine her body."

Montford's expression made it clear that he didn't consider talking about dead bodies to be proper deck-side conversation. "Yes, well... it would be disturbing no matter who it was. And I wasn't called to examine a body. I was called to provide medical aid. Unfortunately, Miss Dove was beyond that."

"Luckily we didn't know her well," Irene cut in. "Poor Clifford, he has been very upset."

Nora turned to her. "They were serious then?"

Irene frowned. "I'm not sure. I mean he does seem very much out of sorts, but he hasn't talked much about her. And being our favorite nephew, you'd think he would have brought her around before."

"Maybe it was one of those whirlwind romances and he hadn't had time." Julia turned to Montford. "I'm curious, though. When you were examining her, did you notice anything odd?"

"Odd? The poor woman had been mangled by a paddle wheel!"

"Yes, but I mean something that didn't belong. Perhaps something like a button in her hand or something under her fingernails..." Aunt Julia rattled off some of the clues she'd written about in her books, which made Percival regard her with suspicion. Maybe he was wondering if she was the killer. No doubt he thought it was odd she was asking so many specific questions.

Percival cleared his throat. "No, I can't say that I did. Then again, I wasn't investigating in that manner. I'm an MD, not a policeman, but I did happen to notice she had a broken jaw, crushed hand, three broken toes, various bruises and contusions, and a missing fingernail."

"Oh dear, that is very observant," Aunt Julia said.

Dr. Montford raised his left brow at her. "Indeed. And what is your concern in this matter?"

"She's macabre. It's all those murder mysteries she reads," Nora offered.

"Yes, I do get carried away. Well then, we must be running along." Julia pushed away from the railing, her eyes darting from Beulah Entwhistle to Nora. Nora sensed she was trying to send a message but she was darned if she could figure out what it was. Aunt Julia could be a bit mysterious sometimes.

"We must get on with our stroll. Have a lovely day." Aunt Julia started off. She grabbed Nora's arm after they got a good distance away. "Did you notice something odd about Beulah Entwhistle?"

"Beulah? No. Well, she was still working on that hat."

"No not that, you must be more observant. Her brooch. She wasn't wearing it."

Nora looked back.

"Don't look!"

"Do you think that makes her suspicious? Maybe she didn't feel like putting it on today or maybe her outfit didn't look good with a brooch." Nora looked down at her collar,

which was rounded and certainly wouldn't be any place to put a diamond brooch, especially not one like Beulah's.

"Maybe, but I wonder..." Aunt Julia let her voice trail off, making Nora also wonder exactly what she was getting at. No sense in asking, though; Julia would talk when ready.

"So what do you think, is Percival Montford hiding something?" Julia asked.

"He could be. He seemed sincere, but he's older and more patient. Notice how he was able to deflect your questions by saying he is not a policeman? And Irene said that Oxley was upset, but then didn't know if he and Delilah were serious."

"She was put out that their favorite nephew hadn't introduced them before. I assume that indicates he usually introduced them to his girlfriends," Julia said.

"It does. And did you notice how he didn't seem the least bit forgetful when he was spouting off details of Delilah's injuries?"

"I did indeed."

"Yet he keeps misplacing his pocket watch."

As they passed the stairs, an odor wafted up. Cigar smoke! Nora pulled Aunt Julia to a stop and whispered, "I smell a cigar. Perhaps Lawton is down there." She tilted her head toward the stairs.

Julia raised a brow; clearly she hadn't deduced that cigar smoke might equal Lawton. Chalk up one for Nora's skills of observation. "Let's take a look, shall we?"

They descended the stairs to find Max Lawton leaning against the railing, cigar smoke trailing in the air. He turned as he heard them approach, his brow lifting slightly.

Aunt Julia went right over to him, even though the look on his face indicated he didn't want company. "Mr. Lawton. How lovely to see you again."

"A pleasure." He looked past Aunt Julia to Nora, holding her gaze ever so slightly too long.

As if she would be interested in a murder suspect in that way!

"Exciting trip so far, wouldn't you say?" Julia asked.

"How so?" Lawton looked at the end of his cigar as if not at all interested in the answer.

"Well first there was a death... in fact, I believe you helped recover the body." Aunt Julia shivered. "Nasty business. That was very brave of you."

Lawton frowned at her as if wondering what she was getting at.

"Anyway," Aunt Julia forced on, unheeding of his hostile silence. "I hear they might bring in a detective. It seems maybe Miss Dove had a little help going over."

Lawton's brows rose in surprise for a fraction of a second. He had a good poker face—either from playing poker or being a murderer, Nora didn't know which, but nevertheless she saw through it. The news of an investigation seemed to have disturbed him.

"I don't think that's something you should go spreading rumors about." Lawton stared down at Julia.

"I have it on good authority." Julia backed away. "But, anyway, that's not uplifting talk for such a lovely day. Do enjoy your smoke." Julia waved at the cloud of smoke that had drifted in front of her face, then turned and walked away, leaving Nora to follow.

When they were out of earshot, Nora pulled Julia aside. "I thought you were going to

leave the questioning to me.”

“I am, dear. That wasn’t questioning, that was information dropping. We need to be sure that Mr. Lawton knows an investigation is imminent. Don’t worry, when it comes to interrogation I’ll let you have your way with him.” Julia started back on their rounds of the deck. “Now, let’s find Giles so we can get a look at Delilah’s rooms.”

It didn’t take long to find Giles: he was standing at the back of the boat overlooking the river and describing to a group of passengers various aspects of the countryside they were passing. He seemed to be in his glory, smiling and happy until he saw Aunt Julia, and then his demeanor became worried and anxious. He excused himself from the other passengers and hurried over to Julia and Nora who were waiting a discreet distance away.

“Has there been a development?”

“I’m narrowing things down. I think you could help me out, though. I’d like to get into Delilah’s cabin and her dressing room.”

“Of course. Come with me.” Giles held out his elbow for Julia and they all headed downstairs.

The dining area was being set up for lunch and they dodged waitstaff as they made their way backstage. Giles held the door open for them, but as they entered the back hallway, Aunt Julia stopped short, causing Nora to bump into her.

“Auntie, what is it?” Nora asked, half-afraid something was wrong with her aunt. Aunt Julia never had any ailments and was fit as a fiddle.

Julia stepped into the hall, craning her neck toward the end. “I cannot be certain, but I think that was Max Lawton. He was coming down the hall but when I stepped out he turned and hotfooted it the other way. Almost as if I’d scared him off.”

Nora craned her neck too, but there was no sign of him. “Really? How odd. Didn’t we just see him on the upper deck?”

And didn’t they just impart the information that there would be a murder investigation? How interesting that the very next thing he did was to come down there.

Aunt Julia nodded. “Yes, I wonder what he was doing down here.”

“I’m sure I don’t know. He’s not a member of the staff.” Giles seemed baffled by their interest in Max Lawton.

“Perhaps he was lost.” Aunt Julia turned and started down the hall. “Shall we continue?”

The entertainers slept down the hallway from the dressing rooms. Being the lead singer, Delilah had a room to herself, but it was cramped and sparse, barely big enough for a bed. Julia opened a few drawers of the small dresser then turned to Giles. “It’s empty.”

“Yes, I believe they were packing her stuff up to send to family. Most of her things are in her dressing room though. She spent most of her time there. Had it decorated quite nicely.”

“I remember.” Aunt Julia turned from the bathroom where she’d slid the mirror open to reveal empty shelves. “I think we need to look there.”

Giles nodded and they left, Giles locking the door behind them.

They opened Delilah's dressing-room doorto find Oxley bent over a trunk. He looked up, red faced. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry, err..." Giles apparently wasn't very good with coming up with something on the fly but at least he realized he couldn't admit Aunt Julia was investigating Delilah's death.

"I lost my glove when I was here the other day," Aunt Julia covered for him. "Have you seen it?"

"No." Oxley glanced around the room. It was pretty much the same as it had been except the gowns were missing. Lily must have taken them to the other dressing room. There were three trunks in the back. Two were closed and Oxley was filling the third. All three were scrubbed with worn hinges. One had a big splatter of red nail polish on the top. Oxley shut the trunk he'd been working on and locked the top. "No orphan gloves in here."

Giles pointed to the trunks. "Is this all of Delilah's things?"

"Yes."

"She sure had a lot," Giles said.

Aunt Julia wasn't interested in the trunks; she'd gone straight over to the photos on the wall. Nora could see why. One was missing from the center. Julia turned to the dressing table, her fingers trailing along the edge of a silver jewelry box.

"Lovely. Delilah did have good taste."

She opened it to reveal sparkling jewels nestled in a dark-purple-velvet interior.

"Those look like the real thing," Giles said.

"I believe they are." Aunt Julia picked up a ruby brooch and held it to the light. "Solid setting. Very well made."

A few long necklaces lay on the dressing table. They were in various jewel tones, the new style that flappers wore knotted at the waist. Nora had a few herself and knew they weren't very expensive, which was probably why Delilah had left them in a tangle on the surface of the dressing table instead of in the jewelry box. But something was out of place...

Aunt Julia was one step ahead of her. Her hand reached out to pick up a ruby-and-diamond bracelet that Nora recognized as the one Delilah had worn the night of the reception.

"That's interesting." Aunt Julia held the bracelet up to the light. "This is real, too." She picked at an ivory-colored thread that had been snagged on the prongs that held one of the rubies, then dropped the ruby bracelet into the jewelry box. She glanced around the room, her eyes falling on the trunks. "I trust you'll make sure this expensive jewelry gets to Delilah's family?"

"Of course." Oxley looked impatient for them to leave.

Aunt Julia sighed. "I don't see my glove. If you find it, please let me know. It's periwinkle."

Oxley frowned.

"That's blue-ish purple," Nora supplied.

"Oh, of course."

"Thank you." Aunt Julia turned to Giles. "Thanks for escorting us down here to look for

my glove. Although we didn't find it, the trip has been very enlightening."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Do you think I should have the salmon salad or the pork chops for lunch?" Aunt Julia peered over the lunch menu as they sat in her cabin after going through Delilah's dressing room.

"How about you get the salmon and I'll get the chops and we can split," Nora said.

"Good thinking." Aunt Julia put the menu down. "Now what did you observe from our visit to Delilah's dressing room?"

Nora took a deep breath. "Well, a picture was missing, so that supports our theory that the killer had a prior connection to Delilah. They must have been in the picture together."

"And the motive was not money, though I never thought that. It appears as if all her jewelry was there in the room." Aunt Julia looked out the window. "Do you think Max Lawton was heading to the dressing room when we saw him? If so, he wasted no time in getting there after we spread the rumor of the investigation."

Nora frowned. "But if Lawton was going to the room when he saw us and ran away, then that means he couldn't have taken the picture."

"There was another clue in the room, too." Julia looked at Nora expectantly.

This was clearly a test to see if Nora had noticed. Nora thought for a bit. Had anything else seemed out of place? The fancy jewelry box was out in the open filled with gems and the necklaces were lying on the dressing table, though those weren't worth very much. "The bracelet! All of Delilah's other fine jewels were in the jewelry box."

"Yes!" Aunt Julia seemed pleased that Nora was catching on to the art of investigating. "And what does that tell you?"

In Nora's studies, she'd learned that men and women behave differently. She was sure the people on the Miss Delta Belle were no exception. But she didn't like to make assumptions. "Delilah most likely wouldn't have put the bracelet there. By the looks of things, she kept her fine jewelry in that box."

"So I was right, the bracelet being on the vanity surface was out of place." Aunt Julia looked pleased with herself.

"Yes, and not only that, there's a high likelihood that a man put it there." Nora dug in her purse for her cigarette holder. She'd heard that smoking was a good thing to do while thinking. "A woman would have recognized that there was only cheap costume jewelry on

the vanity and probably would have put it in the jewelry box so as not to draw attention to it."

Nora produced the cigarette holder and then rummaged for a cigarette. Noticing Aunt Julia's frown she said, "I've heard smoking helps one think. And it is the modern thing to do."

Aunt Julia looked skeptical but interested. "I don't know. It doesn't smell very good."

Nora produced the cigarette and held it and the holder in her hand. She didn't want to be rude and light up in Aunt Julia's cabin, but wanted to finish the conversation. "We only have three male suspects... unless you include Sven."

"Sven is rather odd, but I think we should focus on Oxley, Stokes and Lawton."

"Oxley was in the room packing, though. It doesn't make sense that he'd take the picture or leave the bracelet." Nora stood.

"You're right, of course. I still think he could be the killer and, if not, maybe he noticed something that would point to the killer. It's worth talking to him again." Aunt Julia's eyes fell to the cigarette. "You say they really help you think? Would it help me to delve deeper into the case?"

"It might." Nora didn't see how. She wasn't even sure if she should be indulging in this habit, never mind her aunt, but she was game to give it a try and see if it made anything about the case any clearer.

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "I don't know. Maybe later if I get really desperate. You go have your smoke and I'll meet you in the restaurant in fifteen minutes. Lunch starts in twenty and we can slip in and talk to Oxley before they start serving."

Nora met Aunt Julia at the top of the stairs to the dining room.

"That was good timing," Aunt Julia said. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Not as much as some people seem to." Nora shrugged and started down the stairs. The dining room was set for service but no other passengers had arrived yet. Waitstaff bustled around putting the finishing touches to the tables. The stage was empty since the band normally only played for dinner.

Nora eyed the door to the backstage area. "Should we just walk in?"

Aunt Julia headed toward the door with a purposeful stride. "I always say, act like you belong and people will think you do."

No one was in the backstage hallway, though, so no acting was necessary. Julia headed straight for the star dressing room. They were in luck. Oxley was just closing the last trunk. He glanced up, clearly annoyed at their presence.

"I didn't find your glove," he said.

Aunt Julia looked disappointed. "Oh dear, I did so hope to wear those tonight at dinner. I have a matching dress and I'm still a bit funny about going bare-handed to formal events like the young people do these days." She shot Nora a pointed look.

"Well it wasn't in here. Maybe you dropped it somewhere else." Oxley practically pushed them back into the hall.

Aunt Julia wouldn't be budged. "So you've packed up all Delilah's things. It must have been a very sad task for you."

"Yes, it was. Very sad."

"And did you notice anything amiss when you were packing?" Aunt Julia glanced at the wall that had held the photos, now empty but for tiny holes where the pictures had been hung.

"I'm not sure what you mean." Oxley made to brush past them. "If you don't mind, it's been a very trying morning and I need to rest."

Nora studied him. He did look tired and emotionally drained. Then again, she supposed trying to hide the fact that you'd murdered your girlfriend could be emotionally draining. "What will happen to the trunks?"

Oxley turned to look at the three trunks neatly arranged in a row. They were fairly basic black trunks with oak strapping, and on the small side. "We'll put them on the freight deck and ship them to her mother when we get to the next port."

"How very sad," Aunt Julia said. "She wouldn't have wanted anyone here to have some of her things?"

Oxley shrugged. "I doubt it. I don't think she liked the other entertainers too much, and most of the gowns are costumes that stay with the show."

"I see. Have you noticed anyone odd in here? Looking for a memento, perhaps?" Aunt Julia asked.

Oxley made a face. "You think someone came in and stole your glove as a memento thinking it was Delilah's? I doubt it. Everyone is busy and no one seems interested in this room. Well, unless you count Lily Sumner, she's dying to get the star dressing room."

"So Lily was in here?" But Lily would have no need to remove a picture; everyone already knew she had a previous relationship with Delilah Dove.

Oxley nodded, his eyes filling with tears. "She wanted to use it as her own, but I couldn't let someone else take it. Maybe now," he sniffed, "maybe now that it's empty I should just let her have it."

"Now, now, that might be a good idea." Aunt Julia patted his arm soothingly and gave Nora a questioning look. Nora knew the question was whether or not he was faking. His tears were genuine so Nora shook her head. She didn't think Oxley was faking.

"Speaking of Lily, would you happen to know where she might be?" Aunt Julia asked.

Oxley guided them toward the door. "She might be in the staff lounge at the end of this hallway. The staff eat before the guests—it's a bit late but you might still be able to find her there."

They headed in one direction and Oxley in the other. Aunt Julia pulled Nora aside halfway down the hall. "Funny thing, Oxley packed the pictures but didn't notice that one was missing. I assume he would have mentioned that when I asked if he'd seen anything odd. What do you make of him?"

"I'm not really sure what to make of him. He does act odd, but it makes sense he would with his girlfriend being murdered. But there is one thing I noticed—the way his brow kept creasing and his eyes kept darting to the hallway. My instincts tell me that Clifford Oxley is definitely worried about something but it may not have to do with

Delilah's death."

They were in luck: Lily Sumner was still in the staff lounge and, even better, she was alone. She looked up as they entered, her face registering confusion. "The passenger dining room is down the hall."

"Oh, we know," Aunt Julia said. "We just wanted to congratulate you on how smoothly you have taken over from Delilah Dove. It's not an easy task, especially considering the circumstances."

The compliment must have made her nervous judging by the way she fidgeted with her sleeves.

"It's not and thank you. Didn't I see you in her dressing room the other day?"

"Yes."

"Did you know her?"

"No, we were getting a tour of the ship. You must be very sad about her passing, despite the fact that it was good for your career."

Lily looked a bit uncomfortable at that, her eyes darting to the doorway. "Yes, very sad. She was so lovely."

"Indeed, so odd that someone would want to kill her."

Lily simply stared at them. "I heard the rumors that her death wasn't an accident. You don't think there's someone dangerous on board the ship, do you?"

"If there is, hopefully they will be caught soon. That's why it's important for everyone to report if they've seen or heard anything..." Aunt Julia let her voice trail off.

"What do you mean?" Lily asked.

"Anything out of sorts. Like Delilah arguing with someone or someone strange visiting her or even someone in her dressing room after she died."

Something sparked in Lily's eyes. She'd remembered something!

"I did hear an argument that night, but I don't think that had anything to do with her death, do you?" Lily seemed agitated, looked at the door again.

"Maybe. Who did she argue with?"

Lily shook her head. Lowered her voice. "No, not her. It was Mr. Oxley and another man. I'd seen Delilah with the other man too. Tall, good-looking, mustache. I think his name is Max something."

"Max Lawton?" Nora asked.

Lily's brow creased in concentration. "I think so. I didn't listen too much. It's not polite to eavesdrop."

"Indeed it isn't," Aunt Julia said as if the very thought of eavesdropping would never cross her mind. "So, you heard them argue the night she died and then what?"

"Nothing. I went to my cabin. I room with Joy, the other singer. We're not supposed to stay out late or fraternize with the guests. It's so old-fashioned." Lily looked at Nora for support and Nora nodded, feeling pleased that Lily recognized her as a modern woman. It was nineteen twenty-six for crying out loud; women should be able to cavort all night if they wanted.

"So you have no idea what Delilah, or the other men, did that night?"

She shook her head.

"And you haven't seen anyone go into her dressing room?"

"No, just Mr. Oxley packing the trunks." Lily pressed her lips tighter. "No, wait, I think I did see the other man in the hallway here. Max Lawton, you said his name was?"

Nora nodded and glanced at Julia.

"Okay, well, we better get to lunch, I don't want them to run out of the icebox cake." Aunt Julia chuckled and ushered Nora out of the room.

"Well now, wasn't that interesting. Mr. Oxley failed to mention his little argument with Max Lawton," Nora said as Aunt Julia raced toward the dining room.

"Yes. Moves them both up on our suspect list now, doesn't it?"

Lily fiddled with the bracelet on her wrist as she watched the two women walk down the hallway toward the dining room. She didn't like that they were nosing around. They'd been poking about in Delilah's dressing room the day she'd died. What were they up to?

She glanced down at the jet bracelet. It wasn't very expensive, but it was pretty. Perhaps she shouldn't have taken it from the dressing room, but it was not like it was real. And she hadn't had much choice. She'd been trying it on when she heard Giles bringing the two busybodies in and never got the chance to put it back on Delilah's dressing table. Now that she was dead, well... it wasn't like she would miss the bracelet and since it was simply costume jewelry no one would think it odd that Lily was wearing it.

The only person that might notice it was new to her was Joy, but Joy had no concept about the value of jewelry—she couldn't tell dime store paste from a diamond. Not that Joy would say a bad word about Lily, not after Lily kept Joy's big secret of how she snuck out of their room almost every night. Silly, in this day and age, to have to sneak around like this but Mr. Hendricks was old-fashioned and didn't like the help to hang out after hours. He was too afraid it would bother the passengers on such a small ship.

Of course, Delilah had threatened to ruin that for Joy by tattling.

Like she could talk! Carrying on with two men. Delilah must have seen someone sneaking out of Lily and Joy's room while she was also sneaking around. Delilah had assumed it was Lily who had been sneaking off, but it had actually been Joy. Lily never snuck out. She'd had to beg, but had finally gotten Delilah to promise not to tell and had warned Joy.

Joy had been grateful that Lily hadn't let on about her extracurricular activities. Naturally that little act of kindness had paid off when there was an opening for the lead singer. Lily hadn't told on Joy and that had kept her from getting fired, so it was only right that Joy pretend she didn't want the lead-singer job so Lily could have it. One good turn deserves another. And it was only right that Lily have this bracelet, too.

Lily jangled it again. There was nothing to worry about. The old lady and her niece hadn't even glanced at her wrist and she shouldn't feel guilty. Delilah had been mean and hadn't deserved nice things. Now that she was dead, her jewelry would go to her family, and though Lily did feel bad that she'd taken this one little thing, her family would never

miss it. Anyway, she couldn't very well return it now. Oxley had packed all of Delilah's things already.

"Thank goodness they haven't started serving yet." Aunt Julia weaved her way through the full dining room, finally landing at a pair of empty seats at the Hinchcliffes' table just as the waiter was taking the orders. "Good thing we know what we want."

"Good thing," Nora agreed. She gave her order of pork chops to the waiter, and Aunt Julia followed with the salmon salad with a side of asparagus. "Oh, and save a piece of icebox cake for us to split, would you?"

"Well now," Martha said after they'd all ordered. "This is a lovely cruise despite the little... err... problem earlier."

"It is," Aunt Julia agreed.

Beau yawned, eliciting a pointed look from Martha. "Are you quite so tired? Yawning in public is so uncouth."

"Sorry, I slept so soundly last night that I think I overdid it. Can't seem to stay awake."

Martha narrowed her gaze. "Really? That happens to me sometimes if I take too much of my sleeping powder. You don't take it, do you?"

"Oh no. I don't have any trouble sleeping, do I, pookie?" Beau turned to Vera who giggled.

"No, you sleep like a baby."

Martha, Vera and Beau rambled on about sleeping until Nora felt like yawning herself. Mercifully, the lunch soon came and they all tucked in. Nora and Aunt Julia split their order. The salmon was perfectly cooked with a maple glaze and the greens crisp and fresh as if they'd been picked that morning. Nora marveled at how they could keep them fresh on the boat like that. The pork chops were tasty and the asparagus had a lovely lemon sauce drizzled over it.

"Well, we must be on our way. I'm working on a puzzle in the library and want to get back to it." Martha pushed up from the table.

Beau and Vera followed her lead. "We're taking a stroll. I want to get as much time out on the decks as we can before we pull into port tomorrow night. Would anyone like to join us?" Beau asked.

Julia glanced at Nora. Nora didn't really want to join them; their body language indicated they wanted to be alone and who wanted to spend the afternoon watching them snuggle and coo? "No, we have to go over your wardrobe, Auntie, don't you remember?"

Aunt Julia brightened at the excuse. "Yes! Yes, of course." She turned to Beau and Vera. "So sorry, we'll join you some other time."

After they left, Aunt Julia nudged her chair closer to Nora. "I wonder how to get some concrete evidence on Max Lawton."

"Good question. He's a cool customer. I doubt he'll give away what is actually going

on inside his head. We're going to have to catch him at something."

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "If he's the one who took the picture, he might have it on him, or he might be planning to get rid of the evidence."

"We can't very well search his room, and besides, he couldn't have taken it because when we saw him in the hallway the picture had already been taken and Oxley was in the room so he would have seen him," Nora pointed out.

"Maybe they are in on it together. Or he'd taken the picture earlier and hidden it somewhere."

"Now you're grasping."

"You may be right. Still, I think he is up to something, but it might be hard to find anything incriminating on him. Maybe one of us could get an invitation to his room, though." Aunt Julia gave Nora a pointed look. "I think he has eyes for you."

"Aunt Julia! Surely you aren't suggesting..." Nora shifted in her seat to cover her knees with the bottom of her silk jade-green dress. "I might be a modern woman, but I'm not that modern!" Max Lawton was rather handsome and wrangling an invitation to his room wasn't totally distasteful, but he was a suspect for crying out loud!

Aunt Julia looked disappointed. "I guess it was worth a try. We have to do something though. The boat docks tomorrow evening and Artemis Leonard will be coming on board. I need to have this case wrapped up before he gets his hooks into it!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Oxley could still be the killer," Aunt Julia said later on when they were in her room going over the clues again. "Did you notice anything in his demeanor when we were talking to him in Delilah's dressing room?"

Nora thought back to the encounter. "As I said back then, it was evident something was bothering him. What exactly, I have no idea. I mean, his girlfriend and the star of the show were just murdered. He was packing her things, which would put anyone out of sorts."

"True, but he didn't seem too much out of sorts."

"Good point. But then there are the pictures and bracelet. He wouldn't have taken the picture, and since he was packing everything there would be no reason to misplace the bracelet. It doesn't add up."

"No, it doesn't. I have my own theory on that... but then that means other parts don't add up." Aunt Julia eyed the cigarette holder that Nora had been fiddling with in her hand. "Everyone always looks so pensive when they smoke. Do you really think it will help me sort out the clues? Maybe I will try one."

Nora looked down at the holder, its silver tip glinting in the light streaming in from the window. "It's not as great as you might think."

"You're always trying to get me to be more modern. This might be the time." Julia snatched the holder from Nora's hand. "But not on the main deck, I don't know if I want everyone to see me. Let's go to that little private area near the boiler room where we caught Max Lawton after we saw him following Oxley. Passengers rarely go there so we can continue our discussion on the clues without anyone overhearing."

Aunt Julia walked purposefully along the deck, nodding to passengers with whom she'd made an acquaintance but avoiding any conversation. When they got to the restaurant she looked around furtively before opening the door to the maintenance area and stepping into the narrow hallway. She was becoming quite dramatic in her old age, almost like a character from one of her books.

She turned to Nora, holding her hand out for a cigarette, a conspiratorial smile on her face. "Looks like we made it here without anyone being the wiser."

But as they progressed toward the small deck area, the smell of smoke wafted out and it became clear they weren't going to be alone.

Aunt Julia sniffed, her forehead creasing. "That doesn't smell like cigarette smoke..."

A second later, she was proved correct as the deck came into view. Max Lawton was leaning against the railing, a piece of paper in one hand and a lit match in the other.

"He's burning the picture!" Aunt Julia lunged at the railing.

Max whirled around, a look of shock on his face. "What are you...?"

Max was tall and Aunt Julia had to leap to grab for the, now smoldering, paper in his hand. Unfortunately, she tripped, causing the upper half of her body to teeter over the railing.

Nora lunged forward, grabbing onto an ankle. Max grabbed an arm. Meanwhile Aunt Julia balanced precariously on the railing, her upper body carrying the momentum to topple her over.

"Let go!" Nora yelled at Max.

"What?" Max looked stunned. "She'll fall over."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Nora tugged on the ankle while Aunt Julia flailed for purchase.

"What are you talking about? She attacked me!" Max gave a heave and finally Aunt Julia teetered in the right direction and stumbled away from the railing.

Her gaze fell on the smoldering paper. He must have taken it out of the frame and was trying to destroy the evidence. She snatched it up and held it in the air. "Aha!"

Max cursed under his breath. "I figured you were going to be trouble. Give me that."

Aunt Julia blew on the paper. "Not on your life; this is evidence!"

Max stepped toward them. They'd maneuvered around such that he was blocking their escape. Only a wall was behind them. "I can't let that paper get out. It's too important. I don't want to take drastic measures to ensure it remains unseen."

Aunt Julia's bravado wavered only slightly as he advanced on them and she realized their predicament. Nora wracked her brain for a way out. He didn't seem to have a weapon so maybe they could rush him.

"Oh no. I need this picture to prove that you killed Delilah Dove!" Aunt Julia said.

Max stopped. A look of confusion spread over his face as he looked at the singed item in Aunt Julia's hand.

"Picture? What are you talking about? I didn't kill Delilah."

Julia snatched the paper to her chest. "A likely story."

But now that Max mentioned it, what Aunt Julia had in her hand didn't look like a photograph. It looked like a regular piece of paper.

"Is that what you think?" Max pulled his jacket open.

Nora gasped and stepped in front of Aunt Julia. "Don't shoot her!"

"Shoot?" Max looked amused as he pulled out a little billfold, which he opened to reveal a gold shield stating that he was a detective in the newly minted Bureau of Narcotics and Prohibition. "For your information, members of the Bureau of Narcotics and Prohibition don't go around shooting people or killing singers."

"You mean you're... but you were on the boat before Delilah was killed. You couldn't be investigating her murder."

"That's right." Max glanced behind him to make sure they were still alone as he put

his badge away. "I'm not here to investigate that."

"But why, then?" Nora asked. Oh no... had he said the Bureau of Narcotics and Prohibition? Nora glanced nervously at Aunt Julia, picturing those innocent iced teas and soda waters she claimed she'd been drinking. "Is it the moonshine? I swear Auntie doesn't have anything to do with that."

Amusement flickered in Max's eyes. He glanced at Julia. "You don't say. Don't worry, I'm not here about moonshine."

"Well then, why are you here?" Julia demanded.

Max sighed. "I suppose I'll have to tell you if only to stop you people from nosing around. You could ruin my investigation and get yourself hurt or worse. But you have to promise you won't mention it to anyone."

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. Clearly she was having a hard time transitioning from Max being her prime suspect to working for the BNP. But her curiosity won out. "Okay, we promise."

She glanced at Nora who nodded. She was curious too.

Max reached out for the paper. "First, hand it over."

Now that things had slowed down, Nora could see it wasn't a photo at all. It was a note. "We thought you stole a photo from Delilah's room and were destroying the evidence," she said.

Max took the paper from Julia and held it up for them to see. "You were close. This is a note I took from her room and I was destroying it, but not because I killed her. She was working with me to prove that Clifford Oxley is an opium dealer. I've been on his tail for some time and believe he is now using the Miss Delta Belle to move his product along the river."

Nora's brows shot up. "Seriously?"

"Does the government joke about things like this?"

"I suppose not," Nora said. "Are you trying to tell me that Delilah was an agent for the government?"

"No... She was a civilian. You might say we had some leverage to get her to work for us." Max shrugged as if using leverage on citizens was a given in his occupation.

"Her brother," Aunt Julia said.

Max's left brow quirked up. "You're astute. Yes, her brother, Rodney, is in jail for several bank robberies. That was one of the reasons she used a stage name. We offered a deal for a reduced sentence if she helped us out. Gotta use our resources as we can."

"So if you think Oxley is trafficking drugs, and Delilah was actually working with you to prove that, then was her relationship with Oxley just so she could get close to him?" Aunt Julia asked.

Max nodded.

"And if Oxley found that out, he'd surely kill her," Nora added.

"Well then, you should arrest him!" Aunt Julia handed back the note.

"I wish it were that easy. I need proof and so far I've got nothing." Max looked at the note. "That's why I had to make sure no one found this in her room. If Oxley killed Delilah because he found out she was working with someone in law enforcement, I don't want

my cover blown and him to know it was me.”

“Of course,” Nora said. “Now it makes sense. The way he seemed detached when he was packing her dressing room. He was upset but not in the way a lover would be grieving. He was angry and nervous about his drug business.”

“What makes you think that Oxley wouldn’t have guessed it was you?” Aunt Julia asked.

“I made it a point not to engage with him at all. In fact, I tried to avoid him so he wouldn’t even know I existed. But we argued when he found me backstage the night Delilah died. I was trying to get access to an area where I think he has the drugs stashed when he caught me. I had to pretend I was lost, but I’m sure he was suspicious of why I was down there.”

“We’re not certain he knew she was working to expose him,” Nora pointed out. “If he really is running drugs, then that would be enough by itself to make him nervous and not react normally to the death of Delilah. We can’t get too invested in believing he’s the killer.”

Aunt Julia nodded at her. “Very good. Now you’re thinking like a detective. We don’t want to be blinded to other possibilities.”

Max narrowed his gaze at Julia. “What is your interest in this anyway?”

Aunt Julia laughed. “Oh, nothing really. I’m just a hobbyist and Giles Hendricks is a good friend. But maybe you need someone unofficial on the case. We could help each other.”

Max looked skeptical. “How so?”

“Well, if you’re going to be looking for proof that Oxley is using the Miss Delta Belle to transport drugs, and we’re going to be looking for Delilah’s killer, there may be some common ground so we could compare notes, that sort of thing,” Aunt Julia said.

Max crossed his arms over his chest. “Lady, this is dangerous. You shouldn’t be looking for a killer at all.”

Aunt Julia simply gave him one of her looks, which eventually made him fidget and sigh. “Okay, I get it. You aren’t going to stop.”

“No. Especially since Giles will be calling the police in when we dock at Vicksburg.”

“Seems like that would be a good thing,” Max said.

“It would, except the detective happens to be Aunt Julia’s nemesis, Artemis Leonard.” Nora took out a cigarette and Max lit a match, cupping his hands against the wind. She leaned over to touch the cigarette to the flame, then blew out a stream of smoke. She supposed it looked sophisticated right up until she started coughing.

Max squinted through the smoke. “You mean you’ve done this sort of investigating before and run into this Leonard guy?”

“That’s right and I aim to hand him the killer. Now, you were one of the first on the scene that night, Max. What do you remember? Did you see anything?” Aunt Julia asked.

Max’s eyes got a faraway look. “I was supposed to meet Delilah on the sun deck that night, but apparently someone beat me to it. I had been there actually right before.” He looked at the matches in his hand. “Having a smoke. Then I went down to my room for something and that’s when I heard her scream.”

"You didn't see anyone?" Aunt Julia said.

Max shook his head. "No."

"Oxley didn't come up until much later, after you had pulled the body up," Nora pointed out.

"Perhaps that was to establish an alibi of sorts. He wouldn't want to show up right away and could claim he'd heard the scream and needed the time to get ready and come up from his room," Aunt Julia said.

"That could be the case, but it doesn't tell us anything," Nora said. "The killer might have wanted to show up early or late or not at all. Like Vera and Beau Hinchcliffe. Beau had poked his head out right away, but who's to say how long he had been in the room. Maybe he'd slipped in after pushing Delilah over. He even made it a point to make a big deal about how he'd slept so well the night that someone returned the bracelet and took the picture from Delilah's room... was that to provide himself with an alibi?"

"But what is his motive? Now I wonder if her death had anything to do with the drugs." Aunt Julia looked at Max. "If the two are related, it only makes sense to work together."

Max thought about that for a few seconds. "I could use some help. I suspect that Oxley is keeping the drugs in a storage room for the show. He keeps it locked. I can pick the lock—the locks on this ship are easy enough to pick—but he keeps a close eye on it. If you could distract him, I can get in there and have my proof. Once I have that I'm sure I can get a confession for her murder."

"If he's the killer," Aunt Julia said. "Though it will help me to know either way." Aunt Julia glanced at Nora who nodded. The prospect of working with Max Lawton wasn't entirely unappealing. "I say you have yourself a deal."

They shook on it. "Good. But don't do anything dangerous. I don't want that on my conscience."

"Oh, we won't." Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "I know the perfect thing. We'll distract Oxley tonight during the dancing after dinner. It's a big event, this being the last night, and all, so he's sure to show up at some point. The backstage area will be empty with everyone out front on stage, so you won't be seen."

"Okay, that could work and doesn't sound dangerous for either of you." Max's eyes flicked to Nora. "We'll meet right here afterwards and I'll fill you in on how I plan to arrest him."

Aunt Julia clapped her hands together. "Perfect! And we'll keep this on the hush hush?" She glanced around as if to reassure herself no one else was there.

"At least we agree on that," Max said.

"Good then, it's settled. Let's get going—there's lots to do and only two days left in which to do it."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vera Hinchcliffe smoothed her hair that had been pinned into a chignon at the base of her neck. The slate-blue gown with silver beading she'd chosen was both stylish and demure. It was sure to please Martha. And Beau. It made her happy to please Beau and, surprisingly, she found herself looking for the approval of Martha more often now too. But it would all be ruined if they knew what she'd done. And though her biggest problem had been solved, she still had a little matter to take care of.

"Oh darn!" She studied herself in the mirror, turning her head to the side as Beau came up behind her.

"What's the matter?" He seemed genuinely concerned.

"I forgot my gray pearl earrings, the ones you gave me for our three-month anniversary! I put them in the secret compartment in the trunk and forgot to take them out." Since Vera had brought so much luggage, Beau had arranged for the stewards to take some of their trunks to the freight area. Which, as it turned out, was a stroke of good luck for her.

"I'll go get them."

"No!" Vera stood and put her hand on his chest. It was warm and soothing. "You're not ready yet, you still have to dress and bathe and I'm all ready. We don't want to be late and upset your mother. I have the time. I'll go."

Beau frowned. "I don't like the idea of you wandering around on your own."

Vera laughed. "Now now, it's broad daylight. I think I can handle going to the freight deck. I know right where it is; Giles Hendricks showed me earlier today."

Beau looked as if he was making up his mind. "Well, if you're sure."

Vera pushed him toward the bathroom. "Of course I am. Now don't you worry. You go get ready. I need you to be all spiffed up for dinner."

She gave him a peck on the cheek and closed the door. Once she heard the water running, she grabbed the item she'd hidden, shoved it in the pocket of a light jacket that she threw over her dress so it wouldn't get dirty and headed out the door.

Johnny Stokes waited patiently in his room for everyone to go down to dinner. The ticket

Rodney had gotten from Delilah was for one of the smaller cabins on the Miss Delta Belle. Likely the worst room on the ship, but he could hardly complain. It was barely big enough to fit the twin bed, but it had its own washroom and was clean. Of course, being above the boiler room it was a bit noisy, but it was free and it gave him the opportunity to get on board the ship. An opportunity that would come in handy for his end goal.

The hissing of the boilers didn't bother him; he was a sound sleeper and with so much to do on the ship, he hardly stayed in it anyway. Except for now. Now he didn't dare exit, he didn't want anyone to see him and wonder why he wasn't going along with them to the dining room. He had an important mission, one that meant life or death to him.

He resisted the urge to peek out. He'd done that earlier and seen that nosey old lady, Julia Marsh, with her nose pressed to the lock on her cabin door. Why she would be doing that, he had no idea. Perhaps she was some sort of thief. She asked enough questions to be suspicious. He made a mental note to avoid her, questions were something he didn't need right now.

Putting his ear up to the door, he could hear people moving along in the hallway. His room was at the opposite end from the larger suites and the people would pass his door on their way to the stairs. Once he could hear no one else, it would be safe to exit.

It wouldn't take but a few minutes and then he could join the others at dinner and, hopefully, no one would be any the wiser.

Thankfully they would reach their destination tomorrow night and the trip would be over. If he played his cards right, no one would suspect what he'd done and he could exit the ship free and clear.

Nora emerged from her room in the new emerald dress with the beaded bodice and silk skirt at precisely five forty-five to find Aunt Julia inspecting the doorknob to her room. Julia looked spiffy in a sky-blue ensemble complete with a feather adorned hat and layers of opalescent beads.

"Aunt Julia, what are you doing?"

Julia straightened. "These locks really are easy to pick. I'll have to talk to Giles about that." She looked Nora over approvingly. "Are you ready for dinner?"

Judging by the gleam in her aunt's eye, Nora could see that she was excited at the prospect of distracting Oxley. Hopefully it wouldn't backfire.

Nora kept her eye out for Max Lawton as they made their way to the dining room. She didn't see him, not even when she took a detour past the library to peek in at the poker games.

As they stepped off the bottom stair into the dining room, she finally spied him at a table in the back. Their eyes locked and he gave an almost imperceptible nod before she was distracted by Martha Hinchcliffe waving in their direction.

"I suppose we may as well sit with them." Aunt Julia leaned in. "Gives us an extra chance to talk to some of our suspects."

No sooner were they seated than the Montfords joined them.

"Have you found your watch?" Aunt Julia's question caused Percival to look grumpy.

"I can't say as I've looked. I'm sure it's in my valise, or maybe the bureau."

"Or it could have fallen under the bed," Martha Hinchcliffe offered helpfully. "That happened to me once."

"Vera left something in her bag. It happens. In fact she had to get it out of her trunk earlier," Beau said.

"Yes, I did. Even young people forget." Vera shrugged and opened her beaded purse. The beads were a pretty violet-blue color that matched the soft chiffon dress she wore.

The band started to play muted tones of jazz and soon they were digging into prime rib and roast chicken. In between the main course and dessert Aunt Julia leaned over to Nora. "Looks like someone is joining us a bit late."

Nora's gaze swiveled in the direction Julia indicated and she saw Johnny Stokes coming down the stairs. He paused at the bottom and scanned the room for an empty seat. "What do you make of that?"

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "I'm not quite sure."

Finally, the tables were cleared and Lily and Joy took the stage. Lily was wearing a flamingo-colored gown with ostrich feather edging that Nora had seen in Delilah's dressing room. She fit into it almost perfectly except she didn't have the matching jewelry that Delilah seemed to have. Instead Lily wore only a subtle black bracelet and gold beads.

Soon Oxley emerged from backstage and leaned against the wall, watching the show. When the band picked up the pace, Aunt Julia pushed up from the table. "Wish me luck."

"Where are you going?" Nora asked.

"I'm going to distract Oxley. He certainly can't refuse to dance with an old lady!"

"Oh, but I thought I would—"

"You can take over when they launch into those modern dances."

Nora watched as Aunt Julia made her way across the room. The dance floor was getting full. Oxley looked reluctant at first, but eventually he couldn't resist Aunt Julia's powers of persuasion and they took to the floor. In the background Nora saw Max slip through the door that led backstage. Hopefully he would come up with something.

Aunt Julia was starting to look a little winded, so when the band started playing a faster song, Nora ventured out and tapped her on the shoulder.

"Oh, dear, would you like to dance? Mr. Oxley is such a good dancer!" Aunt Julia smoothly handed him off before the guy could complain.

Oxley hesitated. "I really must—"

"Don't be silly! You deserve a break. This trip must have been very hard on you." Nora nudged him along and he had no choice but to continue around the floor or be trampled by the other dancers.

"It has been rather hard." He glanced at the door that led backstage and Nora twirled him in the opposite direction so he couldn't see the door.

"I'm sure you must miss Delilah, but you're taking it very well," Nora said.

"The show must go on."

Nora drew on her knowledge of human behavior to analyze his response. Most

performers would say “the show must go on” but Oxley seemed more nervous than sad. Of course, if he was hiding drugs on board that might account for that.

“It’s commendable that you’ve done such a nice job here in spite of what has happened. The entertainment has been wonderful.”

Oxley narrowed his gaze on the stage where Lily was bee-bopping a jazz tune. “Yes, I suppose it has.”

“Lily was a great choice. Must have been hard to choose between her and Joy, they both have lovely voices.”

Oxley stiffened. “Joy didn’t want the position and Lily was happy to fill in.”

Nora saw a dark look in Oxley’s eyes as he watched the singers. Was it true that Joy didn’t want the lead job? If so, why? Perhaps she didn’t want to call attention to herself. She’d been one of the first ones on the scene at Delilah’s death, how was it possible that she’d gotten there so much sooner if she’d been in her room with Lily?

Oxley’s attention had drifted back to the door leading backstage and again she twirled him in the other direction. All this twirling was making her dizzy but she wanted to ask a few more questions to see his reaction. A chill crept up her spine—she could be dancing with a killer!

“You certainly like to take the lead,” Oxley said.

“Huh? Oh right. Sorry.” She’d been trying to make sure he didn’t see Max sneak out of the backstage area, though Max was smart enough to use the other door, which would be much less noticeable. “Speaking of the lead. It’s nice you took the lead on packing Delilah’s things. That couldn’t have been easy. All her personal items.”

Oxley sighed. “It was hard. But that stuff needs to go to her family and someone had to do it. But enough about depressing events, tell me, how are you enjoying the cruise?”

Oxley steered the conversation toward more general topics for the next four songs at which point Aunt Julia mercifully stepped in. Nora retreated to the table wishing prohibition was over; she could use a drink. Then the band took a break. Nora glanced over at Aunt Julia who nodded at her to indicate that she would keep Oxley occupied. Not much longer now. In ten minutes the band would start the last set and she and Aunt Julia could meet Max.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I must say, this is very exciting," Aunt Julia whispered. They'd slipped through the door behind the stage with much secrecy to make sure they weren't noticed and were now standing in the narrow, dimly lit hallway that led to the small deck where they had arranged to meet Max Lawton.

"That's one way to describe it." Dangerous, foolish and questionable were some others, though Nora had to admit she did see the appeal.

"I feel like the spy in my book, *Intrigue in the Garden*. Do you have any of those cigarettes? I think it would be appropriate on this mission." Aunt Julia turned to Nora.

"I don't think we have time for that." Had she created a monster with this cigarette business? She'd only been trying to appear modern.

Aunt Julia shrugged and they continued down the hallway, their steps echoing hollowly. Nora could hear the band and commotion coming from the dining room. At the end of the hall she could see the full moon bright in the sky, sending shafts of light dancing on the rippling wake created by the paddle wheel. Max Lawton leaned against the railing, a dark silhouette highlighted by the moon.

"Did you get into the storage room?" Aunt Julia asked.

"I did, but unfortunately all that was in there were stage props. Chairs, curtains, trunks full of costumes and some seasonal decorations for the ship. I searched them all. Thanks for keeping Oxley occupied." He glanced at Nora. "I hope you didn't have to do anything risqué."

"We simply kept him busy on the dance floor," Aunt Julia answered for them both. "He could hardly be rude and refuse us."

"I did get a chance to ask some questions and study his behavior." Nora dug for a cigarette. Maybe Aunt Julia was right about these things... hopefully they weren't addictive. "Of course, I could tell that he was hiding something, and he was worried, but I'm not sure it was just for himself."

"An accomplice!" Aunt Julia exclaimed.

"But who?" Max lit Nora's cigarette, and the yellow flame of his lighter glowed bright in the dark and lit the angles of his face.

Nora took a deep puff then exhaled, looking up at the sky where hundreds of stars twinkled. "I cannot be sure, he seemed to be watching several people. The singers or

maybe a member of the band, and I saw him glance at the Hinchcliffes' table. Of course, others were seated there too."

"Doctor Montford was there, wasn't he?" Aunt Julia said.

"Yes, he was."

"The one that examined Delilah's body?" Max asked.

Aunt Julia's expression was thoughtful. "Yes. He's Oxley's uncle and rather an unusual character. Forgetful with his belongings—he lost his pocket watch—but adamant the body had no additional clues as to the killer."

"Which he would be if he were working with the killer," Max said. "And if Oxley is a relation he could be covering for him. He could even be in on the drug smuggling."

Aunt Julia pursed her lips together. Thankfully she'd forgotten about smoking a cigarette, her mind now focused on ferreting out suspects. "I wonder if the doctor could mess with evidence. Naturally the killer would want to make sure the body doesn't have any little fibers or markings that point to them before we dock and the police come. Doctor Montford would be a great ally for that."

"And the body is in cold storage near the freight room. I imagine that area isn't monitored much. Plenty of opportunity for the killer to do something if the good doctor didn't mess with it while he was examining it that night," Max said.

"But let's not forget about the Hinchcliffes. Vera has acted a little strange this whole trip. I'm sure she has something to hide and then there is Johnny Stokes. He acts very odd sometimes, too. And he showed up late for dinner, maybe he slipped down to the cold storage to make sure he didn't leave any evidence," Nora said.

"Good points. And as I know from my mystery novels... err... from reading so many of them," Aunt Julia said, "one must not rule out any suspects."

"We need concrete evidence against someone. Preferably Oxley." Max played with the lighter in his hand, flipping it between his fingers. "Tomorrow the police will come and that's sure to make the killer nervous. They might take another trip down to check on the body for one last look to be certain they didn't leave any evidence on it."

"And let's not forget, someone has that picture that was missing from Delilah's wall. They might want to get rid of that if they fear the police will investigate," Julia said.

"And there's the drugs. They have to be on board somewhere," Max said.

"That leaves only one option. We need to keep a close eye on the suspects tomorrow," Nora said.

"We'll have to split up the duties," Aunt Julia said.

Max looked uncomfortable about that. "As an agent of the government, I can't condone putting civilians at risk. Distracting Oxley is one thing, but following someone who could be a killer is another."

"One person can't follow them all. We'll compromise: if we happen to find something unusual then we'll report directly to you." Aunt Julia gave Nora a look that indicated "directly" might not mean quite as soon as that. "After all, the drugs have to be somewhere. I hardly think Oxley would dump them in the river. There's a lot of money involved, I assume."

Max nodded. "There is. I suppose that's not a bad plan. But you can't give anyone any

hint that you know about those drugs. If Oxley has an accomplice, you don't want them finding out."

"Of course not." Julia looked solemnly at Max. "But it's very important to me to find the killer before Artemis Leonard comes on board. Giles is worried he'll alert the press and the Miss Delta Belle will be tainted with scandal. And, well... I do want to prove that he's not the only one who can find a killer."

Max nodded. "Very well then. If I discover anything about the killer, I'll let you know. If they are also involved in the drugs, then we'll be able to kill two birds with one stone. We should compare notes tomorrow. Meet here after breakfast?"

"Sounds good," Julia said.

"You ladies enjoy the rest of your evening." Max sauntered off.

Aunt Julia turned to Nora. "Well then, I suppose we should get to our rooms. We have a big day ahead of us tomorrow."

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

JUNE 15, 1926

Nora awoke bright and early on the final morning of their voyage eager to get going on the case. She hoped Aunt Julia had some better ideas than she did because today was their last chance to crack the case. Once Artemis Leonard came on board, he'd take over and they couldn't very well hang around trying to solve the murder. Unless, of course, he refused to let anyone leave the boat. Hopefully, Aunt Julia would be able to solve it before he even got on board. Nora really didn't want to hang around after they docked.

Aunt Julia was eager to get started too. She was wearing a smart navy-blue walking suit and brimming with energy. Nora herself was wearing a light summer dress in pale violet, perfect for the last day of travel.

"Well, this is it!" Aunt Julia exclaimed. "I feel like we will make a breakthrough today." She surveyed Nora. "You look lovely, dear. Dressing for someone we might be working with?"

Nora blushed. She wasn't, not really. Okay, Max Lawton was handsome, but they'd be going their separate ways after today. Still, a little flirtation was always good for the ego. "No, Auntie, I just wanted to look good on the last day. That way our new acquaintances will remember me looking my best."

Aunt Julia gave her a knowing smile but looked concerned.

"Are you worried about the case?" Nora asked.

"Not really worried... It's just there are some puzzling elements." Julia took a deep breath. "But never you fret. I think I have a plan. First, let's stroll the deck. We're docking today and maybe one of our suspects will give themselves away. It must be very stressful waiting to make their getaway. Once the boat docks they may feel they are free and clear."

"I suppose the rumor that the death wasn't an accident has been spread to the entire ship by now." Nora opened the door and stepped out onto the veranda. "Maybe the killer isn't even someone we've had under surveillance."

"Oh no." Aunt Julia gazed at the riverbank a few hundred yards away. "I feel certain it's one of the people we've met."

It was another gorgeous sunny day—at least they'd picked a week with good weather. Nothing worse than being stuck in a small cabin on a boat for days on end while it rained. Though the sultry heat of the south was a bit much for Nora. She was from New England

and used to a cooler, less humid climate. She fanned herself periodically as they strolled slowly along the veranda.

Aunt Julia, glancing out at the passing scenery, had a worried look on her face. "Do you think the boat is going faster?"

Nora laughed. "No. Are you afraid you won't solve the case before Artemis comes aboard?"

Aunt Julia huffed. "Not at all. Plenty of time."

Beulah and Harry Entwhistle were sitting in two of the veranda rocking chairs. Beulah had her knitting bag on the deck next to the chair. Purple yarn spooled out as her needles worked at quick speed.

"Look, I'm almost done with the hat." She held it up to show them. It really was quite lovely, with an intricate braid-like pattern.

"Gorgeous," Aunt Julia said, and Nora nodded her agreement. Nora had tried to knit once and only managed to produce a knotted clump.

"The soothing motion of the boat and the peaceful scenery just moving along is so relaxing that it seems to have made me knit faster. This is the quickest I've ever produced a hat, isn't it, Harry?" Beulah turned to Harry.

Harry looked up from his paper and grunted.

"I thought so." Beulah put the hat back into her knitting bag, and as she did so her smile turned to a frown. "Well, would you look at that." She reached into the bag and pulled out her diamond brooch.

"See, I told you you'd just misplaced it," Harry said.

"Oh dear, I guess I did." Beulah laughed. "Silly me, I've been looking all over for it."

"Oh no! So glad you found it," Julia said.

Beulah dropped the knitting and fastened the brooch to her collar. "I hope you enjoyed the cruise. I kind of hate to see it end. Seems like we just came on board."

"Yes, it sure is flying by." Aunt Julia glanced out at the riverbank again. "Well, we must continue on our stroll. We'll see you at breakfast?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Beulah returned to her knitting.

They walked a bit more, then Julia said, "That was interesting how the brooch was in her bag, wasn't it?"

"Was it? I could see how it could have fallen in there," Nora said. What was Aunt Julia getting at? "Is there something you aren't telling me?"

Julia stopped and looked at her. "All things in their time, dear."

Nora sighed. Leave it to Aunt Julia to be so vague. She didn't always share her ideas in a case unless she was one hundred percent certain. It was maddening. Though she supposed she couldn't blame her. She wouldn't want to make an incorrect assumption that pointed a finger at the wrong person. Every nuance should be noticed, but they might not necessarily mean what you think at first. It was when you put them all together that you got your answer.

"Julia, I've been looking for you." Giles Hendricks appeared at Aunt Julia's elbow. He looked nervous. No surprise there; once Artemis Leonard came on board later today he could cause quite a stir about the murder. The Miss Delta Belle's reputation, and most of

Giles' money, was at stake. If the papers found out about the drug trafficking, that would make things even worse. Nora didn't dare mention that to Giles. Sometimes it was better not to know things.

Giles pulled them further toward the stern and out of earshot of anyone else.

"Please tell me you've discovered the identity of the killer," he pleaded.

Aunt Julia smiled. "Don't worry, I will deliver the killer to you before Artemis Leonard can get involved. I assume the boat will dock on time?"

"Sven has assured me we will be right on time." Giles twisted his hands together. "He's already radioed ahead and Artemis Leonard will be waiting at port. That reminds me, we must make sure the umm... body... is as we left it. Sven wanted to see to that himself."

"Sven? Why would he need to do that?" Julia asked. "He seems so stoic about making sure he is piloting the ship, I'm surprised he can leave the pilot house."

Giles nodded. "He's very conscientious and not just about piloting the ship. He assured Mr. Leonard personally that he would make sure the body is not disturbed and now feels responsible."

"Perhaps I should accompany him on that. I'll need to know if anything is amiss," Julia said.

"And Doctor Montford should be there. He was the one who examined her," Nora added.

Giles nodded. "Sven says the stretch of river near Greenville is smooth and he can leave the boat in the care of the co-pilot. We'll hit there around two p.m."

"We'll be there," Aunt Julia said.

"That bit about checking the body was a bit unusual, don't you think?" Nora asked as Giles walked away.

"I see why Artemis would want the body checked, but what if one of the persons checking is the killer?" Aunt Julia said. "I suppose that's why he called upon Sven."

"Yeah, unless Sven is the killer. Let's face it, his demeanor is rather odd."

"Maybe he's just not outgoing. Though I do think it was strange that he didn't see anything. Yes, yes, the smokestack is in the way but still." Julia stopped at the top of the stairs. "I think after breakfast I might have another look around up there."

Nora glanced behind her in time to see Max Lawton passing by the top of the stairs. He winked. She tried to do the same but only managed to look like something had fallen in her eye.

Breakfast was an extravagant affair since it was the last one of the trip. The jazz band was playing and Lily and Joy sang a duet. The food was delicious, but Nora was disappointed that no new clues were gleaned. Other than seeing Max discreetly tail Oxley, nothing much happened and Nora was glad when it was time to meet Max. Hopefully he'd discovered something that would move the case forward.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Max was at the small deck leaning against the railing. He was smoking a cigar, the puffs of smoke trailing out behind the boat. Nora tucked her cigarettes further into her bag. She didn't want Aunt Julia to get any ideas.

Aunt Julia sidled up to him as if the place were crowded. It wasn't, only the three of them were there as usual. "I saw you following Oxley. Did your pursuit yield any results?"

Max shook his head. "Unfortunately all he did was talk to Giles Hendricks and prepare some things for the show."

"Darn!" Aunt Julia scowled.

"What about you?"

"We didn't make any new discoveries."

Max blew out a puff of smoke. "So what do you have planned next?"

"I need to follow up on something one of the band members told me earlier and then we're going to watch them take another look at the body."

"What is this clue from the band member?" Max asked.

"Kenny who plays the saxophone ran into Oxley in the hallway the night Delilah died."

Max raised a brow. "And...?"

"Well, it could provide Oxley with an alibi. Or not." Aunt Julia gave a half shrug. "I'll need to do further research."

"So he might not have killed Delilah, but he could still be moving drugs." Max stubbed his cigar out, thankfully. Those things did smell terrible and that enforced Nora's vow to quit smoking even though cigarettes didn't smell quite so bad. "It would be a good way to provide an alibi. Have one of the staff lie and say they saw him."

"I don't think so. If Oxley was going to do that, he'd have them lie and say they were all together. But Kenny said they were all sleeping. He was awakened by the scream and rushed out into the hall to find Oxley coming from his room," Nora said.

Max's gaze narrowed. "Coming from or going to?"

"I asked that," Aunt Julia cut in. "He said coming from but then I also asked how long it took for him to get into the hallway. I don't trust Oxley and have an idea, but it needs to be proven out. I try not to cast accusations without solid proof."

"A smart way to operate." Max's tone of respect indicated that he was starting to think of Aunt Julia in a professional capacity. Nora felt proud of her aunt. The woman really did

have a good head for investigating. She probably could have been a great investigator in her time, but women weren't allowed on the police force back then. She'd had to satisfy her crime-solving urges by writing about them in books. Nora didn't feel too bad, though: those books had made Julia a lot richer than being on the police force would have.

"Speaking of alibis, that's what makes this case sticky. Everyone was asleep. All the suspects were awakened by the scream. They all had to get robes and slippers before they could arrive on the scene. Or at least anyone who wasn't already out and about on the boat such as yourself did." Aunt Julia nodded at Max.

"So we should look at who arrived first on the scene." Max frowned. "I remember that one of the singers was there and a young man. Member of the band, I believe."

Aunt Julia nodded. "Yes. That was Joy. And Lily came later."

Nora tried to picture who had been there early and when each of their suspects had arrived. There had been a few people when they got there, including Joy. Then the boat stopped, and others arrived. The Hinchcliffes, Dr. Montford, Sven, Lily.

"If the killer pushed Delilah, then hid somewhere close by, they could easily have been on the scene to make it look like they'd just arrived," she said.

"Or they might have waited a bit so as to show up later," Aunt Julia said.

"We might also want to consider who wasn't there," Max said. "In my experience, the killer often doesn't want to be associated with the crime at all."

"But this case is a little different." Nora hated to sound like a know-it-all, but there was a big reason that made it so you couldn't apply normal deductions to it. "People were summoned by Delilah's scream. So, in this case, if the killer didn't want to call attention to himself by acting different, he would have shown up at the scene."

"Unless he was claiming he didn't know about the murder. That's what they do in normal circumstances," Aunt Julia pointed out.

"I don't think it's plausible in this case." Nora didn't usually get the chance to correct Julia. "No one could claim they didn't hear that scream, it echoed through the whole boat and things were quiet. So anyone who said they didn't..." Nora's voice trailed off. As usual Aunt Julia was on to something.

"Sven didn't hear it, but he was in the pilot house and, as we heard for ourselves, it is quite noisy," Aunt Julia said. "But there was one person who claimed to be totally ignorant of Delilah's death."

"Really?" Max asked. "Who?"

"Johnny Stokes," Nora supplied.

"You mean that guy who seems to have trouble standing straight?" Max asked. "He does act wired. Do you think he could have killed Delilah? And why?"

Nora shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's mixed up in the whole drug thing with Oxley. That would explain why he's so unsteady."

"These are all very good ideas." Aunt Julia glanced at her watch nervously. "Since this is the last chance for the killer to cover things up, I say we get going. I have to go back to the scene of the crime and catch up with Giles for the body viewing."

Nora grimaced. Dead bodies really weren't her thing: she was much better at studying live bodies and figuring out their intentions.

"I'll check out this Stokes character. My money is still on Oxley. If he's distributing drugs, he'll likely make a move after we dock but I'll keep watching today." Max looked at his watch also.

Aunt Julia nodded. "All righty then. The day is passing quickly. We better get to it."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Quiet, dear, I'm counting." Aunt Julia held up her hand to silence Nora as they walked up the carpeted stairs from the dining room. They'd left Max on the little deck, with plans to meet in the Texas lounge at four p.m. It would be too suspicious to come down here with the changeover, and all the passengers would be busy packing so the Texas lounge would be empty. Hopefully by then they would have narrowed things down enough to pinpoint the killer and get Max his evidence against Oxley. If it turned out that Oxley was behind both crimes then all the better. Aunt Julia loved killing two birds with one stone.

They'd hurried back through the now empty dining room. The stage had been cleared, the tables removed and a lone staff member was washing the floor. Since they were docking that evening, there would be no more meals on this cruise. The staff were getting it ready for its next voyage with a totally different roster of passengers and, hopefully, no murders.

Nora didn't much like being shushed, but she was used to Aunt Julia's quirks by now so she remained silent walking alongside her aunt up three flights of stairs to the sun deck. There was a balmy breeze, thankfully, as it was quite stifling and Nora's lovely linen dress was starting to stick to her.

The view was stunning from the sun deck. The lazy river wound out behind them and fields with rows of crops spread out along the riverbanks. Since they were close to Vicksburg there was more traffic on the river, boats both large and small sailed along.

They had come up the stairs by the stern and Aunt Julia walked all the way to the railing and looked out over the bright-red paddle wheel. A new railing had been built, this one much taller and with less chance anyone could go over. The deck was empty, which was a shame since it offered a gorgeous view, but ever since the death, people hadn't had much of a desire to come up here.

"It would have been very tight for Oxley to push Delilah over, stomp on her hand and then run back to his room in time to pretend as if he were coming out," said Nora.

Aunt Julia spun around and tapped her index finger on her lips. "He might be a fast runner. Maybe he even leapt over several steps to get down quicker? If he took these stairs here, that would be the fastest route, because the entertainers' rooms are at the stern. It wouldn't make sense for him to go all the way to the steps near the bow."

"But surely someone would have seen him?" Nora said. "These steps are the most

traveled. They are the ones we came up on. The ones near the bow are less traveled since all the cabins are further toward the back."

"Indeed, but Sven would have seen him going down the ones near the bow, no? And besides, no one else was up at that time of night."

They both turned to look at the pilot house sitting high above the deck. "Well, if Oxley has an accomplice, it could be Sven."

Julia's gaze narrowed. "Perhaps. But let's think out the timing here. It's one hundred and sixty steps from Oxley's cabin to the railing."

Nora nodded even though she hadn't been counting.

Julia turned to her. "Now, if you were being pushed over a railing at what point would you scream?"

Nora glanced at the railing. "Good question. I suppose the moment someone first pushed me."

"But what if that person had his hand over your mouth to muffle the scream?"

Nora pictured Oxley and Delilah at the railing and tried to get inside Oxley's head as the killer. "That's certainly possible. Perhaps he'd pretended it was a romantic interlude. He'd lean in close but instead of kissing her, he'd put his hand over her mouth and shove her over."

"She might have been too stunned to scream at that point." Aunt Julia peered over at the wheel. "She might have saved her energy, clinging on to the edge of the deck."

Nora joined her aunt in peering over. "Until he stomped on her hand, then she screamed as she lost her grip."

"But Oxley was already running according to what Kenny told us," Aunt Julia continued. "He would have had it planned out, I imagine. If he thought Delilah was working behind his back."

"So he could have made it down the stairs without anyone seeing him." Nora glanced back at the stairway. "It would be easy to jump the railing to get down faster and if people peeked out of their rooms, they really could only see if someone was on the landing to their floor."

"Let's not forget that people were sleeping. It takes a few minutes to wake up and process what you heard and then get your slippers and robe," Aunt Julia said.

"So Oxley could have simply rushed to the end of the hallway and waited for the other entertainers to open their doors?" Norah asked.

"That's one way it could have happened. If Oxley is the killer." Aunt Julia pivoted and looked toward the smokestack. Steam flowed out the top and the flags flapped in the breeze. "If the smokestack hid the area back here from Sven's view, it also hid Sven from the view of everyone back here."

"You don't think Sven was involved?" Nora asked. "He is a little odd, but what motive would he have? Do you think he's in on the drugs with Oxley?"

"I'm not sure yet, but things are coming together. It may be that the murder and the drugs are not related at all." Nora heard a noise behind them and they turned to see Giles Hendricks coming up the stairs. "Or it could be that Oxley had an accomplice. I need to check a few more things and I think I will have a good idea which it is."

Giles seemed surprised to see them. "Oh, hello. I was just coming up to collect Sven to inspect the err... body."

"Perfect, we'll follow along with you then," Aunt Julia said.

Giles glanced toward the pilot house, but of course they couldn't see anything because the smokestack was in the way. "That's not necessary, Julia. I wouldn't want to put you through that. I can tell you Sven's opinion."

"Nonsense, I'm not that delicate." Julia looked at Nora. "You don't mind, do you, dear?"

"Of course not." Actually, Nora did mind, but clearly it was important to Aunt Julia to look at the body herself. She'd done it dozens of times and wasn't squeamish. Would a modern woman be squeamish? Nora wasn't sure, but if she wanted to investigate murders with her aunt, she'd have to toughen up.

"I am ready."

Nora whirled around. Sven had snuck up and was standing behind her. He sure was quiet.

"Okay then, shall we?" Giles headed toward the stairs, but Sven held back.

"These women will accompany us?" He looked at Aunt Julia and Nora doubtfully.

"Yes," Giles said.

"Is no place for a woman," Sven said.

Nora bristled. "Women are doing all sorts of things that it wasn't their place to do these days. These are more modern times."

Sven simply lifted his left brow, his ice-blue eyes holding hers in an unwavering gaze. Then he bowed slightly and gestured toward the stairs.

Nora proceeded toward them, happy that she'd won a small battle for womankind. As she walked past Sven, she thought she heard him mutter "suspicious". She turned to look at him but he was gazing out at the river. Imagine him being suspicious of them? The nerve!

On the way to the cold-storage area, they passed Max. He appeared to be following the Hinchcliffes. Now that was interesting, had he found out something about them? Surely they wouldn't be involved in the drug running, but maybe he was following them to help Nora and Julia solve the murder. Nora caught his gaze and his lips quirked in a slight smile. He gave a slight nod of his head and she returned it before continuing on.

"I had the boat retrofitted with all modern freezers. New models. The original had iceboxes with ice. These run off the power of the ship," Giles rambled as they walked along an undecorated part of the boat. They were down near the kitchen, in a parallel corridor to the one that led behind the stage where the dressing rooms and entertainers' sleeping quarters were.

They came to the kitchen, which was empty. Pots and pans gleamed and a stainless-steel table sat in the middle, cleaned and ready for the next trip. Percival Montford came in behind them.

"Good timing, Doctor Montford. Thanks for coming." Giles walked to a pair of large

stainless-steel doors. A thick chain was threaded between the door handles and a padlock secured it shut.

"I locked the freezer to secure things." Giles pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the padlock.

"And you're the only one with the key?" Aunt Julia asked. "What if the staff needed to get in there for something?"

"They wouldn't. The freezer doesn't have food in it." Giles laughed nervously. "Wouldn't want the food inspector to shut me down. The frozen food is all taken out at the beginning of the trip and thawed properly in the refrigerator, so the freezer was empty when... it happened."

"How convenient," Aunt Julia said.

Delilah's body lay on a pallet, covered with a sheet. At least they'd stored her tastefully and with respect. Nora lingered by the doorway as the others gathered around. Percival pulled the sheet back and Nora shivered.

Delilah's hair was spread out in frozen strands. It had still been wet when she'd been laid here. Her skin had a dull grayish tone, her lips were slightly blue. Nora focused on the body language of the people inspecting Delilah instead of on the body.

Sven was as rigid as ever, observing as Dr. Montford inspected various areas of the body. That didn't really tell Nora anything, though; rigid was his usual demeanor. If he'd acted differently than normal it might have been a clue that he was nervous, but he appeared to be cool as a penguin, though if that was his usual demeanor, then maybe the fact that he was the killer wouldn't make him act edgy at all.

Giles appeared a little green. Maybe he didn't have the stomach for looking at dead bodies, much less for killing. That didn't preclude him from being a suspect in the drug running though.

Nora hadn't mentioned it to Aunt Julia because she knew Giles was her friend, but the thought had crossed Nora's mind that Giles could very well be the mastermind behind the drug trafficking, not Oxley. He may have even bought the boat as a cover for that purpose. And that would explain why he was so nervous about the police investigating the murder and adamant that Aunt Julia discover the identity of the killer. He wouldn't want the police inadvertently discovering his drug operation in the course of their murder investigation. But if that were the case, then that would mean he had no involvement in the murder. Giles knew how good Aunt Julia was at capturing killers—she was the last person he'd want on the case if he was guilty.

Dr. Montford was going about his business efficiently and without emotion, though Nora supposed he'd been trained in that manner. He had some notes written on paper that he consulted periodically. Nothing suspicious about that. Aunt Julia was the one who seemed most suspicious. There was nothing normal about an old lady looking over a dead body as if she were inspecting the table her butler had set for tea.

"This is exactly how you remember the body when you examined it upon her death?" Aunt Julia asked Dr. Montford.

Dr. Montford continued on his task, covering Delilah's face back up and lifting the sheet on her right arm. "It appears so."

He sounded confident but Nora had to wonder, if his memory was failing, would he actually remember?

"Of course, it's the same," Giles said. "Who would go around messing with a dead body?"

"You'd be surprised." Aunt Julia craned her neck to see what Montford was doing. "Let's take a look at those fingernails, perhaps one snagged on a piece of cloth or something."

Dr. Montford scowled at her. "I might have misplaced my watch, but I didn't forget how to examine a body. I still remember the important details. And my notes are extensive."

"Of course you do, I was just suggesting we take another look." Aunt Julia peered over the body at Delilah's hand that Dr. Montford was examining. "See right there... isn't that a tiny black thread?"

Montford squinted at the hand, bringing his face closer. He took tweezers from his pocket, removed something that had been wedged in her fingernail and held it up to the light. It was indeed a short black thread.

"Where do you think that came from?" Aunt Julia asked. "Could you have missed it the night she died?"

"I suppose I could have. I really wasn't thinking to scrutinize the body for clues." Montford placed Delilah's hand back under the sheet. "I'll set this thread aside for the police."

"I think we've seen enough." Sven's face showed no emotion. "I have a perfect memory and everything is as it was when she went in here. No one has been here."

"Of course no one has been here." Giles held up the key to the giant padlock. "The doors have been locked and I have the only key."

"I will report to Detective Leonard as such when he boards this evening." Sven spun on his heel and stalked off.

Aunt Julia looked reluctant to leave, but Giles and Percival Montford didn't waste any time. Nora couldn't wait to get out of there herself. She was still shivering as they said their goodbyes to the others in the hall.

"What did you make of that?" Aunt Julia asked her.

"Doctor Montford must have missed the thread the first time. If he is covering for Oxley, then he would have removed the thread. And if he isn't then there would be no need to."

Aunt Julia nodded. "Delilah was wearing a turquoise gown that night. It's possible her killer wore black and she snagged her nail on their clothing in the struggle."

Nora tried to remember what everyone was wearing that night. "Oxley had a black smoking jacket. But Max was wearing a black suit. Vera had pink on. What was Beau wearing?"

"Good question. We may have to question the suspects to find out. Now, let's go to the freight room, I'd like to check on something." Aunt Julia started down the hall. The freight room was on the bottom deck on the bow end of the boat.

"Do you mean about what Beau Hinchcliffe said about Vera leaving something in the

trunk?" Nora asked.

Aunt Julia tipped her head at Nora. "Very good, you remembered."

"I know Vera is acting as if she's got something to hide, but you don't think she's the killer, do you?" Nora hurried to keep up with Aunt Julia. She couldn't blame the woman; the hours were rushing by and soon Artemis Leonard would be coming aboard. But she wondered if her aunt was slipping and didn't remember the one clue that pointed to the odds of the killer being a man. "Remember the ruby bracelet on the vanity surface. A woman would likely have put that in the jewelry box."

"Yes, I remember that, dear. You are correct. However, there may be another reason." Aunt Julia looked at her very seriously. "Remember things are not always what they appear to be."

The freight room was a small, stuffy room with no windows. It was where they kept the trunks of passengers who didn't want them cluttering up their rooms. Nora, an experienced traveler, liked to pack light and was able to manage with two smaller suitcases she simply shoved under the bed after emptying.

The entry to the room was open, but there was a small office with a half door attached and it seemed they should stop. An elderly steward dozed on the other side of the half door, his cap pushed down over his face, snores drifting out into the hallway. Aunt Julia cleared her throat and he jerked awake.

"Oh... Hi there." He stood and straightened his uniform. "Can I help you?"

"Hello. This is the freight room?" Aunt Julia asked.

He looked into the room as if it might have changed. "Why yes, it is."

"Does one have to sign in?"

"Do you need to get into your trunks? If you want to collect them for packing we will start delivering them to the rooms in one hour," the man said.

"Oh no, I don't want to wait for that. I'd like to look for mine now, if you don't mind." Aunt Julia used her authoritative voice that typically worked on most anyone.

"Of course not." The man leaned back in his chair and gestured for her to go inside.

"I don't need to sign in or anything?"

"No, ma'am. I'm here to make sure everything in there is safe." The man settled back in his chair and pushed his cap down over his face.

Aunt Julia shrugged and headed inside. "You can see practically anyone could sneak in here."

"I see that, but why would anyone?" Nora asked.

"One never knows." Aunt Julia walked slowly down the rows of luggage. There were larger steamer trunks alongside the smaller, more modern valises. The room was hot and sticky and smelled like leather and old shoes.

Nora fanned herself and wished she'd worn flats instead of the T-strap heels that were now killing her feet. Who knew Aunt Julia would take her on a whirlwind tour of the steamer and just what, exactly, was she expecting to find down here?

"Some of this luggage has seen the world! Look at all these stickers. Paris, London, Milan. This one has been well used." Aunt Julia pointed to a small valise with scuffed corners and a broken handle. She bent down to look at the luggage tag. "Oh, it's that odd man Johnny Stokes'. Looks like he doesn't have much money. Seems strange that he'd be on this trip, don't you think?"

Now that Julia mentioned it, it did seem odd. The maiden voyage of the Miss Delta Belle was rather exclusive and a bit on the expensive side. "I think he's a gambler. I've seen him at the tables. Maybe he came hoping to fleece some of the rich passengers," said Nora.

"Maybe. Oh! Here are the Hinchcliffes' trunks." Aunt Julia stopped in front of a set of smart navy-blue steamers with brown leather corners. The trunks were well cared for. And expensive. Not that that surprised Nora.

"A nice set," Nora said.

Aunt Julia's attempt to unclasp the lock failed. "Darn, it's locked."

"And a good thing too. It's not nice to break into other people's luggage," Nora admonished.

"I wasn't breaking in. I was hoping it would just fall open." Aunt Julia's eyes landed on two trunks right behind the Hinchcliffes. "Those look like Delilah's."

They pushed an old wooden trunk aside and stood in front of the two trunks Aunt Julia had spotted. They did look identical, but then so many of the trunks looked the same. There was one right behind them that looked a match, with the brass corners worn clear to the base metal and two in the back row with similar hardware but in a little better shape. These had an address stuck on them.

"Annie Banks. I thought the trunks were going to Delilah's mother. Wouldn't her name be Dove?" asked Nora.

"Dove was a stage name, dear." Aunt Julia turned to Nora. "Remember things aren't always as you think."

"Yes, you said that before." It was getting a little annoying, too. Aunt Julia's little veiled messages could get tedious at times. Just for good measure and, perhaps, hoping to prove her aunt wrong, Nora craned to see if the other similar trunks had an address with the name Dove. Unfortunately, those were going to Wilsons and MacKenzies.

"Yes, these are the ones. I remember the brass corners were very dull with scratches." Aunt Julia bent down to inspect them.

"And there was a daub of red nail polish on the top," Nora said, as if to prove that she, too, could be observant.

"Yes, very good." Aunt Julia turned away and headed back toward the door. "Things are coming together quite nicely."

"They are?" Nora glanced back at the Hinchcliffes' luggage. "Did you notice something about the luggage, because I don't see anything."

"Not really, but the luggage is there, so Vera could have needed to fetch something as she said," Aunt Julia said.

"Yes, but that proves nothing."

"And Oxley really was packing up Delilah's things for shipping. You see it all adds up

to only one solution," Aunt Julia said.

"I see." Nora really didn't see but she didn't want to admit that she'd fallen behind in the deduction game. "So what do we do next?"

"Why, we go to our room and pack, of course. We must be ready before the boat docks. I feel that we will be very busy after we meet Max Lawton in the Texas lounge and it's best if we have all our things packed up. Besides, I need a little rest and to think things through." Aunt Julia turned to Nora. "Shall we meet in the Texas lounge at ten of four—I'd like to talk over the clues before Max shows up. I'm sure that after a little meditation in my room, I will have come to a most satisfactory conclusion."

Aunt Julia always had a lot of thinking to do at the end of a case. Nora could tell by the look on her aunt's face and the way she seemed distracted that her brain was busy sorting through all the clues. She was confident that Julia would know who the killer was once it was done. And besides, she did have a lot of packing to do. "Sounds like a plan."

They left the guard sleeping in his chair and headed to their rooms.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

Nora packed in record time. She changed into a smart linen suit for disembarking. They'd stay at the Stafford Hotel—one of Aunt Julia's favorites, she knew the manager there of course—and take the train back to Boston in the morning. It was hot in Vicksburg and she didn't want to melt. She tucked her hair up and decided on no hat. There'd be no breeze once the boat stopped moving and she didn't need to swelter under a hat.

She sat at the small desk in her room and thought about the case. She was getting better at figuring out the physical clues but still not as good as Aunt Julia. Yet she had something her aunt didn't, the power of observing the suspects. But what had her observations told her?

Oxley was up to something, clearly, but was it murder? Of course, there was the drug angle, anyone could be involved in that, but Oxley was a good candidate and Max had reason to suspect him. But why was Aunt Julia fixated on Beulah Entwhistle's brooch? Nora hadn't noticed the Entwhistles acting at all odd but sometimes suspects simply didn't act suspicious. Could they be involved? And what about Percival Montford? Aunt Julia seemed to think he might have something to do with all this.

Oh well, she was sure her aunt would make it all clear in a few minutes when she met her in the Texas lounge. Nora left her suitcases in the stateroom. All afternoon she'd been hearing trunks being rolled to the rooms so that those who had stored them could pack. She'd even heard Vera and Beau Hinchcliffe arguing about who would pack. Which reminded her that of all the people on the boat, Vera was the one acting the most suspiciously. Could she be involved in the drugs? The murder?

Aunt Julia was seated in a leather club chair near the front window of the Texas lounge. A tumbler of amber liquid swirled in her hand as she watched the Vicksburg port loom ominously closer. She turned when Nora entered then astutely noticed her gaze on the drink. "Would you like some cider, dear?"

Nora was dubious about the contents of the glass, but sensed no deceit in her aunt. "No thanks. I'd rather discover who the killer is. Have you figured it out?"

Julia glanced out the window again; she looked quite pleased with herself. "I have some ideas. How about you?" Her shrewd blue eyes turned on Nora.

"I have some too. You go first." Nora didn't want to admit she wasn't any closer to figuring out who murdered Delilah or if Oxley really was storing drugs on the ship. She

had some ideas about who was lying though. And possibly one suspect Aunt Julia might not want to consider.

"You didn't observe any other behavior since the last time we met?"

Nora sat in a chair across from her aunt, crossed her legs. "No. I was alone in my room packing. Well... I did hear the Hinchcliffes arguing about who would pack. What is it that you suspect them of?"

"You mean Martha, or Beau and Vera?"

"Beau and Vera."

"And was it an angry argument or were they each trying to be nice?"

Why would that matter? "Nice, I suppose. They were both offering to do the packing in an insistent manner."

Aunt Julia nodded. "Sounds like any other nice young couple."

"So they're off your suspect list? Did you notice something when you looked at the luggage?" Darn! Nora hadn't noticed anything when they'd looked at the luggage, but Aunt Julia had clearly had a reason to look there.

"Not necessarily, but the trunks were there so Vera might really have had to retrieve something she left. But there are so many other suspects. There's Oxley, and the good doctor and, if you think about it, anyone backstage could have been in on the drugs or had a problem with Delilah, not just Oxley. Lily got the singing job, and Delilah was not that nice to her or Joy."

"True and, while we're on the subject of that, there are a few others who would have had opportunity, and possibly motive." Nora purposely threw in some of the words Aunt Julia always used when talking about suspects.

Aunt Julia's left brow quirked up. "Oh? Like who?"

"Well, there's Sven. You have to admit he's a little strange. And due to his position as pilot he'd be the perfect person for Oxley to recruit to help with the drugs. And then, of course, there's Giles." Nora paused to gauge Aunt Julia's reaction. "And perhaps the Entwistles? You seemed very interested in her brooch."

"Yes, indeed. I don't think they are involved, at least not in the way you think. And I hardly think Giles would risk all he has to transport drugs." Aunt Julia glanced back out the window. The ship had slowed considerably and it was now pulling into the large dock where a man in a gray suit and top hat could be seen stamping his feet impatiently. "Oh crumb! There's Artemis Leonard. I do hope Max shows up soon and has something—"

The oak door at the end of the lounge burst open and Max Lawton marched in, dragging Johnny Stokes by the collar. "I caught him red-handed. This is your killer!"

Johnny looked around at them wide-eyed. "No! I swear I didn't kill anyone!"

"I caught him coming out of the Montfords' cabin." Max stood between Johnny and the door just in case Johnny wanted to make a break for it. "I assume there's something in the doctor's notes that you didn't want anyone to see."

"No! You have it all wrong." Johnny was close to tears. An odd reaction for a killer. Judging by the pleading tone in his voice and his body language, Nora tended to believe him.

"Now hold on, Mr. Lawton. I think we should listen to Johnny," Aunt Julia said.

Apparently she believed Johnny too. "Did you find the doctor's notes?"

Max grabbed Johnny and started patting him down. "Didn't have time to look."

Outside, they were tying the lines to the pier. A few more minutes and the gangplank would go down and Artemis would come aboard. Knowing him, he'd already have instructed the police not to let anyone off the boat.

"I told you, I don't have any note!" Johnny said.

Max was getting a little rough with his pat down, but coming up empty. "He must have ditched it when I was dragging him here."

"Let's not be too hasty," Aunt Julia said. "Did you catch him going in or coming out?"

"Coming out."

Aunt Julia nodded as if she knew something no one else did. Nora wished she would enlighten the rest of them. She turned to Max. "Any new leads, other than Johnny?"

Max shook his head.

Aunt Julia glanced out the window. "It won't be long before Artemis is here. You leave Johnny with me—" She held up her hand to Max's protest. "No, no, I'll be fine, he's no danger to anyone. I have a few questions for him."

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea." Max looked at Nora for help but having been in this situation with Aunt Julia many times she trusted the woman's instincts. Besides, Johnny Stokes looked more like he was going to curl into a ball and cry than anything else.

"Now I need both your help. I want you to gather the Hinchcliffes, Oxley, the Montfords, Sven Nordby, the singers Lily and Joy, and tell them to come here. Don't take no for an answer. Then go to Giles and tell him to bring Artemis Leonard here. I know who the killer is."

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

Everyone was already gathered in the Texas lounge when Nora returned after informing Giles of her aunt's wishes. Thankfully she didn't have to talk to Artemis, he was inspecting Delilah's body. Giles had said that he would bring Artemis straight to the lounge once he was done.

The room was abuzz with apprehensive conversation when Nora slipped in the door. From what she could tell, no one knew why they'd been summoned.

She skirted the edge of the lounge, not wanting to draw attention to herself. From the windows she could see the flurry of activity on the dock. Suitcases and trunks were being wheeled to waiting taxis and vehicles. The sun was low in the sky, giving everything a golden glow. It was pretty out and she was anxious to get off the boat, but even more anxious to see what Aunt Julia had in store.

She whispered in Aunt Julia's ear that Giles would be coming soon, then headed to the corner where Max Lawton was standing. He looked as uninformed as she. At least she wasn't the only one. She stood next to him and he leaned over and whispered, "Any idea what your aunt is up to? Is she always this dramatic?"

"I'm afraid so, but I do have to say she always does figure out who the killer is."

"Always? How many times have you people run across murders?"

"More than I'd like to admit." Nora leaned against the wall and studied the crowd. Did anyone look particularly guilty?

The door opened and Artemis and Giles stepped in. Artemis was a tall man who Nora might have considered handsome if he wasn't so annoying. He had a thin mustache and beady dark eyes. He always dressed in a nice suit but that didn't make up for his sour attitude.

Artemis scanned the crowd, his lips pursing when he noticed Julia. "You! I should have known." He turned to Giles. "What is the meaning of this?"

Aunt Julia stepped forward, undaunted. "Lovely to see you, Artemis! As you know, there has been a murder aboard and since we've been at river and not able to secure your fine services, I've taken the liberty of figuring out who the killer is."

The crowd gasped and several people squirmed in their seats.

"That's preposterous!" Artemis sputtered. "You're not an officer of the law!"

"No, but I am." Max flipped open his badge and shoved it in Artemis' direction.

Artemis squinted, his mustache twitching. "Feds? What is this about?"

"Just listen and it will become crystal clear," Aunt Julia said.

Artemis crossed his arms over his chest and addressed Max. "What is going on? Have you caught the killer or not? And why are you here? This isn't the sort of thing you usually investigate."

"We'll get to that later," Julia said. "Suffice it to say that the murder isn't the only crime."

"And I caught at least one of the perpetrators red-handed." Max looked at Johnny Stokes.

Johnny shrank back in his seat. "I didn't kill anyone."

"Don't worry, dear. All will be revealed." Aunt Julia turned to the crowd. "Mr. Stokes is correct. He didn't kill anyone. But someone in this room did."

The crowd murmured uneasily.

Max stepped forward. "Well look here, I caught him breaking and entering. At the very least he's a thief."

"That may well be, but you found nothing on him," Aunt Julia said. "That's because he wasn't taking things. He was putting things back."

Artemis frowned. "I don't follow you."

Aunt Julia stood behind Johnny with her hand on his shoulder. "Johnny here needed money for his grandmother. Sadly, he had to resort to the one thing he was good at. Pickpocketing. He even took one of Delilah's bracelets right off her wrist."

Several of the women checked their wrists.

"But he's repentant," Aunt Julia continued. "And it was for a good cause. His grandmother needs expensive medicine. I do hope he won't be charged; after all, he has given everything back."

Artemis did not seem convinced. "If he stole Delilah's bracelet then maybe he killed her to get it. And why did he give things back? Something is fishy here."

"When you hear the rest, you'll understand why." Aunt Julia left Johnny's side and started pacing the room. "You see, once Johnny heard that Delilah had been murdered and there might be an investigation, he felt it was too risky to keep anything he had stolen. He didn't want anyone to jump to the conclusion that he was also a murderer." Aunt Julia cast a look at Artemis.

"It's not a far jump," Artemis said.

"Oh but it is. Johnny is no killer." Aunt Julia continued pacing. "So, he returned the brooch to Beulah Entwhistle, the pocket watch to Doctor Montford and the bracelet to Delilah's room."

So that explained why Aunt Julia was fixated with Beulah's brooch. She'd worked out all along that Johnny was a thief and was trying to see if Nora would come to the same conclusion. That also explained why he bumped into people all the time. He wasn't drunk or on drugs and it wasn't an ailment, he used it as a distraction so he could steal things right off their person! Though how he got the brooch from Beulah's neck was a mystery. He must be very good. Nora checked her ears to make sure she still had her pearl earrings.

Beulah Entwistle's hand flew to her brooch. "I simply thought I'd knocked it into my knitting bag by mistake."

Percival Montford pulled his pocket watch out of his vest. "Well I'll be. I guess I'm not getting as forgetful as you thought." He looked at his wife.

"So he was returning the pocket watch when I caught him," Max said. "Are you sure he's telling the truth?"

"I think so." Aunt Julia pointed to Johnny's cuff where the fabric had snagged. "Delilah's bracelet had an ivory thread stuck on one of the jewel settings. I saved it. I believe if you test it you'll see it's from Johnny's shirt."

Artemis crossed his arms over his chest. "Still doesn't prove that he's not the killer."

"No, but there's more." Aunt Julia turned to Johnny. "When did you return the ruby bracelet?"

Johnny fidgeted as he answered, his eyes darting from Max to Artemis to Julia. "In the middle of the night after I found out there would be an investigation. I didn't even realize she had died."

"And where did you put it?"

"On her vanity table. There were some necklaces, colorful beads, so I figured that's where she kept her jewelry." Johnny fiddled with his cuff. Nora noticed a snag. The ivory thread!

"And did you notice anything strange in there?"

"Not in there, no. I didn't stay long enough to look around. Just threw the bracelet on the table and got out. It was kind of creepy with her being dead and all, plus I didn't want to get caught in there."

"Did you see anyone down there?" By Aunt Julia's tone, Nora could tell she'd already gotten this information from Johnny. But her aunt had a flair for theatrics and liked to introduce the information in the most dramatic way.

"I did." Johnny's eyes slid over to the Hinchcliffes. "I saw Vera Hinchcliffe running out from the door that leads backstage."

Vera gasped.

Martha eyed Vera. At first Nora figured it would give Martha another excuse to dislike Vera but she appeared to be looking at her with interest and appreciation. Nora would have thought Martha would be appalled to have her daughter-in-law implicated in such a sordid thing, but she actually looked almost proud.

Beau stepped toward Johnny. "Why, you liar. I ought to—"

Max held out an arm to restrain him. "Let him talk."

Julia looked at Vera. "Is what Mr. Stokes said true?"

"No." Vera's voice was shaky and she couldn't look Julia in the eye. "Well, maybe. Sometimes I can't sleep and..."

Beau frowned at her. "I don't remember you leaving the room in the middle of the night."

Vera cast her eyes down. "You were fast asleep and I didn't want to wake you."

Julia walked over to stand in front of Vera. "Are you sure? It seems odd you'd go all the way to the empty dining room and then venture backstage just because you couldn't

sleep.”

“I might have been sleepwalking?” Vera made it sound like a question as opposed to a statement.

“Really?” Aunt Julia turned away from her and started pacing again. “And were you sleepwalking when you went to hide what you took from the backstage area in your luggage yesterday?”

Beau bristled. “Hey, don’t talk to my wife that way. She went to retrieve some jewelry she’d left in there!”

Julia spun and shot a look at Vera. “Is that true?”

Nora almost felt bad for Vera; she could see the poor girl was near tears and unsure of what to say.

“Stop picking on my daughter-in-law.” To Nora’s—and apparently Aunt Julia’s—surprise, Martha Hinchcliffe put her arm protectively around Vera. “What does it matter if she was sleepwalking or getting something from the luggage or not? Delilah Dove was already dead by then.”

Vera looked up at her mother-in-law, her face wide with shock. Martha looked down indulgently, which calmed Vera and she relaxed against the old woman. “Now, now, dear. Don’t let this woman bother you. But if you know something, I think now would be a good time to tell.”

Vera took a deep breath. “Okay, I did go to her room, but I didn’t kill her. You see, I have a confession.” She looked at Beau from under her lashes. “I’m not the person you think I am.”

“I don’t understand.” Beau looked confused. Martha didn’t seem bothered at all; on the contrary, this revelation appeared to make her actually like Vera better.

Vera took Beau’s hands in hers. “I wasn’t exactly honest about my past. You see, I used to be a showgirl and I knew Delilah. Well, her name was Agnes back then. One night at dinner, Miss Marsh said that Delilah’s dressing room was loaded with pictures of her stage life. I was afraid there might be one of me.”

Martha looked positively excited. “Oh dear! And was there one?”

“Yes, and I took it and hid it in the suitcase later because I didn’t want Beau to find out I was common.” She looked up at Beau, a tear sliding down her cheek. “I don’t blame you if you can’t forgive me.”

“Well, of course he’ll forgive you!” Martha chipped in.

Beau looked at Vera. “But that makes me wonder, how come I didn’t wake up when you snuck out to get the photo?”

“I might have given you some sleeping pills.” Vera grimaced, apologetic.

Martha whooped and clapped her on the back. “Girl, you are resourceful! I’m starting to see a new side of you and I like it!”

“Well that explains why I slept so good. I might have to look into a prescription.” Beau pulled her into a hug. “But there’s nothing to forgive. I don’t care what you did before. I care who you are now.”

Vera hugged him, then pushed back to look up at him. “Really? You’re not disappointed I was in show business or that I lied about being a preacher’s daughter?”

Beau mulled that over. "The lying part isn't good, but I can see why you did it. Just promise not to lie to me ever again."

Relief was evident in Vera's smile. "I promise, pookie."

"Well that explains why you were so insistent on doing all the packing." Beau looked at Julia. "Vera couldn't have killed Delilah because she was asleep in our room right beside me when the scream woke me up. I swear."

Vera nodded profusely to back him up.

Artemis cleared his throat. "This is all very nice but all it proves is that you've done a great job of not catching the killer. Now if you'll let me—"

"Not so fast," Max interrupted. "I was at the scene early that night and remember seeing Beau and Vera come up together. They were in their pajamas."

"That's correct," Julia said. "So, unless they were in on it together, they are likely not the killers. Now why don't you tell us why you were there, Mr. Lawton."

"I was there to meet Delilah."

The crowd gasped.

"It's not what you think. Delilah was working with me on a case. That's why I was one of the first there. I remember seeing the Hinchcliffes arrive with a group of other pajama-clad passengers. I know who came on the scene right away and who didn't." Max scanned the crowd, his gaze coming to rest on Clifford Oxley. "Like Clifford Oxley, Delilah's boyfriend."

Oxley looked insulted. "You think I killed her? I loved her. Besides, I was in my cabin asleep. Any number of the entertainers can vouch for that. We all ended up out in the hallway about the same time."

"Not all of you." Aunt Julia looked at Joy Morgan. "Some people were on the scene way before you came up and in street clothes to boot."

"Well, I... I got there quick," Joy said.

"And who were you with?" Aunt Julia asked.

Joy's eyes widened as if trying to remember. Nora recalled she'd been with a man. She must have been out partying with him. Of course, that was frowned upon—something Nora thought was ridiculously puritan in this day and age—and if she admitted it she risked getting into trouble, but then again the man might be able to provide an alibi.

"Joy and I were in our room when Delilah screamed," Lily chimed in.

All eyes turned to Lily. Was she protecting Joy?

"But you came later, after the boat stopped. You walked up at the same time as Sven Nordby did. Joy was already there," Max said.

Lily glanced at Joy. "It took me longer."

Julia turned to Sven. "And you couldn't see anything because the smokestack hides the view from the pilot house. You had no idea what was going on."

"Ja. I tell you this already." Sven looked at Julia as if she was not piloting with a full wheelhouse. "I was doing my job when someone ran up and said there had been an accident. To stop the ship. But you cannot just stop the ship in the middle of the river and let it drift aimlessly. Certain protocols must be applied. We did that and I handed over to my co-pilot, then I go to the stern where the crowd was gathering."

"And Lily." Aunt Julia turned to the singer. "I remember you coming right behind him."

"So?" Lily said.

"You came from the direction of the pilot house, too."

Lily shrugged and shook her head as if not understanding what Aunt Julia was getting at.

Sven looked at Lily. "She was not in the pilot house. No passengers allowed."

"Of course, I understand," Aunt Julia said. "She must have come up the stairs on the bow side of the boat."

"Yeah, that's right," Lily confirmed.

"But the stairway closest to your room is in the stern." Aunt Julia pointed toward the back of the boat.

"Yeah, so?" Lily looked uneasy.

"You weren't in your room when Delilah died, were you?" Aunt Julia asked. "Joy just didn't correct you when you claimed you were because she wasn't in the room herself and, therefore, didn't know that you weren't either!"

"Not true!" Joy looked at Oxley, but he didn't seem to mind that she'd broken the rules. He was too nervous about something else and Nora had a good idea what it was.

"Oh no?" Aunt Julia continued. "Didn't Lily blackmail you into telling Clifford Oxley that you didn't want the lead-singer role, otherwise she would tell that you'd been sneaking out with your young man?"

Joy chewed her bottom lip, eyes filling with tears.

"I didn't!" Lily turned to Joy. "Tell them I didn't!"

Aunt Julia stepped closer to Lily who was becoming quite distraught. "You followed Delilah, didn't you? Maybe you were trying to get some dirt on her so you could blackmail her too. But something went wrong. Did you argue? Or did you just see it as a convenient opportunity to get rid of the one person who stood in the way of you finally getting your big chance on stage?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. No one believes that." Lily looked around the room for confirmation but from what Nora could see pretty much everyone seemed to think it was plausible. Oxley most of all, though he was probably just happy that the finger wasn't being pointed at him.

Aunt Julia stepped even closer. "Really? Then why did you come from the direction of the pilot house? I'll tell you why. Because after you killed Delilah, you hid behind the smokestack. If it hid the paddle wheel from view of the pilot house, then it also could hide someone standing behind it from view of the crowd at the paddle wheel. And if you stood on the west side, Sven on the north wouldn't be able to see you either. Once there was no one to see you come out from behind there, you hurried over to join the crowd as if you were just getting there."

"You can't prove any of that."

"Maybe not, but there is one thing I can prove." Julia pointed to the bracelet on Lily's wrist. "That matches the necklaces I saw on Delilah's dressing-room table. I think you took that from her room. Maybe after she died... or maybe before. But either way, I doubt Delilah would have given it to you. The two of you didn't get along. You'd have only worn

it if you'd known she wouldn't have noticed. You had it on the night she died, which means... you must have known it was her in the paddle wheel."

"That doesn't prove I killed her!"

"Maybe not, but I think there is solid physical proof. You were wearing a black shawl that night and one of the threads was found under Delilah's fingernail. I'm sure the police will be able to prove that thread came from your shawl."

Lily clenched her fists in frustration. "She was horrible! She deserved it."

"Now look here," Artemis said. "This is highly unorthodox."

Aunt Julia folded her arms over her chest. "Really? I believe I just got you a confession."

"Yes, but... I need to look at the clues, interview suspects." Artemis looked around the room.

Aunt Julia turned to Joy. "Are you still maintaining that you were with Lily when you heard the scream?"

Joy shook her head, looking at Lily in a scared manner. "No, ma'am."

"Fine, I did it!" Lily sobbed. "I only wanted a chance."

Artemis looked like he didn't know what to do.

Julia shrugged. "Sorry, Artie, looks like I wrapped this one up for you. Look on the bright side, I saved you a lot of work."

Artemis scowled and pulled out his handcuffs.

"Oh, and there's one other thing." Aunt Julia turned toward Max. "Agent Lawton wasn't here to investigate a murder. He was here on another matter. He's from the Bureau of Narcotics and Prohibition."

Everyone shifted in their seats nervously. Some downed their drinks in one gulp.

"Prohibition? But we don't have any illegal spirits on board, do we?" Dr. Montford said, looking down into his tumbler that appeared to be full of the same apple cider Aunt Julia had in hers earlier.

"Not liquor. Drugs." Nora leaned over and sniffed Montford's glass. Very strong cider.

Giles gasped. "There are no drugs aboard my ship!"

"Sorry, Giles, I know you have nothing to do with it, but someone in your employ was moving drugs upriver." Aunt Julia turned to Clifford Oxley. "And he had the perfect hiding spot in the stage storage area. That is, until the murder investigation made him scared."

"What are you talking about? There are no drugs in there." Oxley turned to Max, a faux look of innocence pasted on his face. "Feel free to search it."

"Don't bother," Aunt Julia said. "They're not in there anymore. Oxley found a safer place for them. He was able to move them to the freight room. Very clever to use packing up Delilah's dressing room as a cover for that."

"What are you talking about?" Oxley feigned surprise.

"I saw you packing three trunks in Delilah's room. You said her belongings were going to her mother. But only two are addressed to her. The third was addressed to Gregory Cavendish. I assume he's some sort of accomplice. You must have panicked that the murder investigation would expose your—"

Before Aunt Julia could finish, Oxley made a break for it, jerking open the door and

lurching out into the hallway. Max sprang into action, shoving through the group and sprinting out after him. He caught Oxley halfway down, leapt onto him and wrestled him onto the ground, before sticking his knee in his back and jerking the cuffs on.

"Well, that was exciting." Aunt Julia straightened her jacket. "Now that everything is tied up, I imagine we are all free to go, Inspector Leonard?"

Artemis looked like he wanted to argue, but there was nothing left to say. "Fine. You can all go. The sooner I don't have to interact with you, Miss Marsh, the better." He slapped the cuffs on Lily and led her away.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

Nora and Aunt Julia leaned against the railing on the deck outside their cabin and looked out over the passengers who were streaming onto the dock. The sun was starting to set and the evening light washed the scene with a golden glow.

"I don't know how I can ever thank you, Julia." Giles Hendricks pumped Julia's hand then turned to Nora. "And you too, Nora. It was a delight to have you both on the cruise."

"All in a day's work," Aunt Julia said. "I must say it was refreshing to actually have something to do. Cruises can get a bit tedious with all that eating and lounging about."

"In that case, I'm glad you enjoyed helping," Giles said.

"It's good to see justice was served, but what will happen to Johnny Stokes?" Aunt Julia asked.

She had a soft spot for the man. Johnny had told Aunt Julia that his grandmother had raised him, and they didn't have any money. She needed life-saving medicine and that was the only reason he was stealing. Delilah's brother Rodney had been worried about Delilah. She'd visited him in jail and told him she was working on a way to get him out. He wanted Johnny to check up on her and Johnny figured he'd use the trip to acquire some valuables he could pawn for Gram's medicine.

Nora supposed he could have made up the story, but all indications were that he was being sincere. The hand gestures, eye contact and position of his body all implied that he was telling the truth. He'd said he was in a discount room that was quite noisy as it was near the boiler and that was why he never heard Delilah scream. Nora had checked it out and found it was indeed noisy and far from the deck where Delilah was killed. She supposed that if he were a heavy sleeper he might not have heard.

Giles shrugged. "Artemis wanted to arrest him, but there was nothing to arrest him for. No one was missing anything. Nothing was found on his person, in his room or in his luggage. No one wanted to accuse him or press charges. Max Lawton talked Artemis into letting Johnny go, though I don't think he could have charged him anyway."

Nora smiled. Her assessment of Max Lawton had been correct. He was a good guy who fought for justice but still had a sense of fairness. Not as set in his ways as by-the-book Artemis Leonard.

"I hope his grandmother gets the medicine." Aunt Julia turned to Nora. "You did say you thought he was telling the truth?"

"Yes."

Aunt Julia pressed her lips together. "Maybe we'll make some inquiries..."

She was probably already trying to figure out how to pay for Johnny's grandmother's medicine. She had a soft spot for sick grandmothers. She also had a lot of money and liked to help people with it when she could, as long as they were deserving.

"Oh, there you are!" Martha Hinchcliffe sailed over to Julia and gave her a hug. "It was so lovely meeting you, and the way you figured out who the killer was was so exciting! You should work for the police or become a private detective."

Aunt Julia blushed. "It was nothing, really."

"We couldn't leave without saying goodbye." Martha gestured behind her to Vera and Beau who were gazing into each other's eyes, seemingly oblivious that Nora, Julia and Giles were even there.

"I see the events of the cruise have not strained the marriage." Nora gestured to the happy couple.

"On the contrary! They are closer than ever." Martha leaned in toward them and lowered her voice. "And honestly, I see Vera in a new light now. She's not the simpering wilted flower I thought she was. The girl's got moxie! And a very interesting past. She's going to introduce us to a famous piano player she worked with and maybe some starlets!"

"That's good. It's always great to get along with your children's spouses," Nora said.

"And with your mother-in-law." Vera hooked her arm through Martha's. "I feel like we started a new chapter on this trip."

Martha smiled at her. "Me too. I can't wait to live out the rest of it. Let's start with dinner at Delgado's."

Martha, Vera and Beau said their goodbyes and headed off to join the line of people disembarking.

"Well, I better go make sure everything is flowing smoothly," Giles said. "Thanks again."

"You're welcome." Aunt Julia shook his hand, then glanced over his shoulder. "Oh, there's Max Lawton and he's coming this way."

"Ladies." Max tipped his hat. "It's been a pleasure investigating with you."

"Likewise." Aunt Julia reached into her bag and pulled out a copy of Ridley Howes' bestselling book, *Murder in Marseilles*. "I have this gift for you. The detective in it is quite clever. Perhaps you could learn something for your own investigations."

Max looked over the book, an amused smile on his face. "You think I still need to learn something?"

Aunt Julia blushed. "Well maybe one or two things. The book is signed by the author, too."

"Oh really? I wouldn't want to take a signed book." Max flipped open the cover. "It might be valuable."

"Don't worry, I know the author. I can get another one."

"Thank you."

"What's going on with Oxley?" Nora asked. "Nice tackle, by the way."

Max smiled. "Thanks. I was looking for you to fill you in on that and to thank you both for your part in helping. He's locked in one of the dressing rooms downstairs."

"Locked in?" Aunt Julia looked disturbed. "The locks on this ship are very flimsy. I hope he can't escape."

"Doubtful," Max said. "Sven Nordby is guarding the door."

"Sven?" Nora was surprised. "I wouldn't think he'd want to get involved."

"On the contrary, he was quite upset that drug smuggling was happening on his ship right under his command. He insisted on helping." Max glanced out over the dock. "I'm waiting for a car from headquarters and we'll take him in. He's still trying to deny things but I think making a break for it counts as somewhat of a confession."

"I would think so." Aunt Julia laughed. "And you found the drugs?"

"Yep, exactly where you said they'd be," Max said. "Artemis Leonard was peeved that he couldn't take the collar, but he has his hands full with Lily Sumner. He's taking her off the boat after all the passengers have disembarked."

"That was uncustomarily nice of him," Aunt Julia said.

"At first he wanted to make a big show of dragging her off the boat, but Giles talked him out of it," Max said.

"Maybe he's not all bad," Aunt Julia mused. "Anyway, it has been a delight working with you."

"And both of you as well." Max bowed, his gaze lingering on Nora for a second before he turned and walked off.

"Now there's a man who might make a good husband for you, Nora. Handsome, smart and has an exciting job."

Nora turned from the sight of Max's retreating backside, interesting as it was, and leaned on the railing looking out at the dock. "The thought isn't totally unappealing, but I have no desire to get married. I have much too much fun traveling around with you."

"That's sweet, dear." Aunt Julia joined her in looking at the view. The stream of passengers had turned into a trickle and most were getting into cars—Renaults, Studebakers, Roadsters. "I suppose we should head down... oh wait, there's Artemis with Lily."

The pair were coming down the gangplank. Artemis' hand was on Lily's elbow. Her hands were clasped in front of her and a sweater was thrown over them so as to hide the handcuffs. At least Artemis was a gentleman in that respect. A police car swooped in and he put her in the back. Then he glanced at the boat, his eyes zeroing in on Nora and Julia. An unusual smile crossed his lips. It almost made him look human. Then he nodded and tipped his hat at them before getting into the passenger side of the car.

"What do you make of that? Was that his way of thanking us?" Aunt Julia asked.

"Beats me. At least he gave us some sort of recognition."

Aunt Julia turned away from the railing. "Yes, I suppose that's the best we're going to get. At least this time."

If you enjoyed Murder on a Mississippi Steamboat, don't miss **A Twist in the Tail**—the purrrfect read for mystery fans. We're pawsitive you'll love it!

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A TWIST IN THE TAIL

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'Talk about inconvenient. Not only did I have a dilapidated mansion and no money to repair it, two uppity cats and some cranky guests waiting for breakfast, there was also a dead body in the stairwell.'

Josie Waters is the enthusiastic new owner of the Oyster Cove Guesthouse – a ramshackle Victorian mansion high on a hill above the breezy seaside town of Oyster Cove, Maine. Josie has a history in Oyster Cove, but she's not going to let anyone – from her crazy friend Millie to her old flame Mike – stand in the way of making this venture a success.

But then Josie's first guest – a stuffy food critic – is murdered before breakfast, and the town sheriff suspects Josie could be to blame. **Thank goodness Nero and Marlowe – the guesthouse's resident cats – are also on the case.** Little does Josie know, this isn't their first investigation... but can they find the clues to the real killer before another guest is targeted?

Following her cats' noses, it isn't long before Josie discovers that the critic ruffled more than a few feathers in his day. In fact, from the rule-obsessed local Building Inspector to the guesthouse's pernickety maid, there's not a person in Oyster Cove who doesn't have a secret to hide... **could one of the locals be a cold-blooded killer in disguise?** And with her beloved guesthouse's very future on the line, can Josie solve the case in time?

A joy to read, with a twist you'll never guess! From the award-winning author of the USA TODAY bestselling Mystic Notch series. Purrfect for murder mystery fans, cat lovers and everyone in between.

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Discovering the 300-year-old skeleton of shipping tycoon Jedediah Biddeford in the ballroom wall is a big old hassle for **Josie Waters, owner of the Oyster Cove Guesthouse**. Especially when Biddeford's descendants turn up, certain that a family legend about treasure buried nearby must be true.

Josie is too busy dreaming up the perfect cake for the Oyster Cove's 250th anniversary celebration to worry about the Biddeford family – plus half the town – digging up her yard... **until one of her guests is murdered in the guesthouse garden.**

With worries that her guesthouse will get a reputation for being the kind of place you only leave in a body bag, Josie must put her detective skills to work to find the killer. **Lucky for her, Nero and Marlowe and their gang of cat sleuths are also on the case.**

From the old wharf, to the town common, to the guesthouse itself with its many nooks and crannies, **the cats are sure to sniff out the killer...** but can they help Josie stop the person behind the mysterious murder before they strike again?

A fantastic page-turner from a bestselling author, purrfect for fans of Agatha Christie, Adele Abbott, cat lovers and everyone in between!

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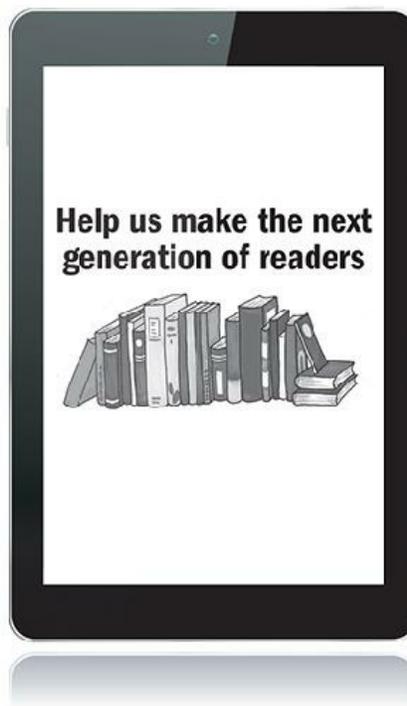
Fortune tellers and mediums have descended on the **Oyster Cove Guesthouse**, determined to solve the mystery of local seafarer Jedediah Biddeford's murder 300 years ago... especially if it leads them to the treasure he buried on the guesthouse grounds.

New owner **Josie Waters** has suddenly got bigger problems than burning the breakfasts: **she's up to her elbows in tarot cards and tea leaves...**

When one of the mediums is found dead with an ominous note nearby, everything points to Jedediah's ghost being the culprit. Suddenly, Josie finds that the fate of her guesthouse depends on not one murder but two, and she's not going to rely on a crystal ball for answers. Despite the fact that cookbooks and candlesticks keep mysteriously falling off tables, **Josie is sure there's no such thing as ghosts. But guesthouse cats Nero and Marlowe know better...**

Aided by her mom and eccentric family friend Millie, Josie sets out to prove the identity of the killer without summoning any spirits. **Luckily Nero and Marlowe know the truth about ghosts, ghouls and things that go bump in the night and they are on the case!** Can they make Josie realize she is scratching up the wrong tree before the killer strikes again?

From the bestselling author of the USA Today bestselling Mystic Notch series, purrfect for fans of Adele Abbott, cat lovers and anybody who loves to curl up with a page-turning cozy mystery.



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