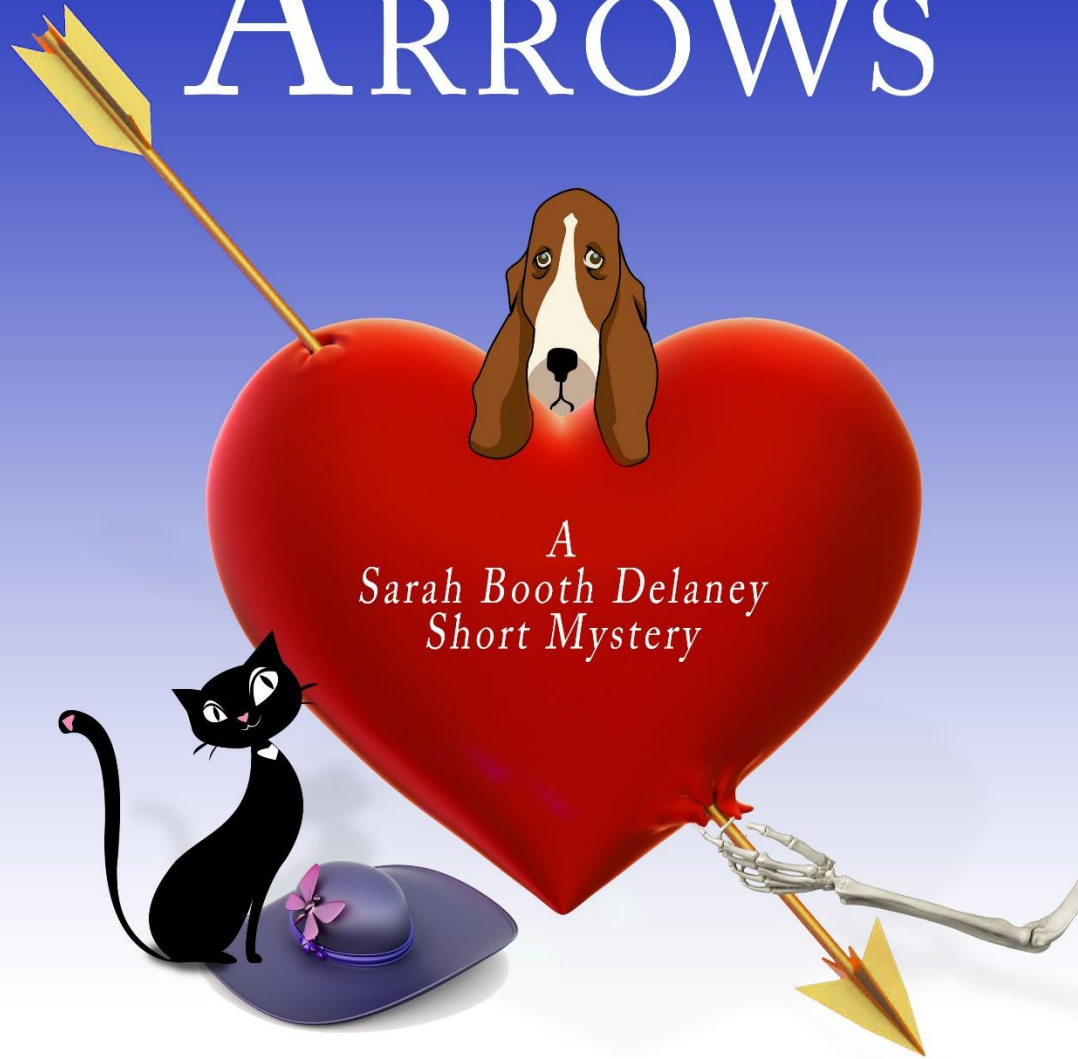


BONES AND ARROWS



A
Sarah Booth Delaney
Short Mystery

CAROLYN HAINES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Copyright © 2017 Carolyn Haines

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Bones and Arrows

Carolyn Haines

“Sarah Booth Delaney, don’t you dare try to circumvent my Valentine’s Party. Just because you’re the Eris of romance doesn’t mean you can skip-out of my toga party.”

Tinkie Bellcase Richmond stood in the middle of her extravagant tents, bonfires, lighted torches, and party gala, arms akimbo. Even though she wore a gold-trimmed slave toga, she tapped the toe of her five-inch stiletto in anger. Tinkie disdained the idea of bare feet or flat sandals, no matter the attire. She’d gone to great lengths to find gold-strapped stilettos and I had to admit, they set off her legs beautifully.

“My head’s not in the right place for this,” I said, pulling the shoulder strap of my toga to a less revealing position. It wasn’t that I didn’t like toga parties or the wonderfully wild lyre, cithara, tibia, and panpipes that tempted me with the thought of dancing like no one was watching. Instead, a blue mood had me by the short hairs. “I just want to go home and curl up with a book.”

“A book? You’d trade a party for a book? Even if you don’t have a date you should mingle and laugh and celebrate the occasion. Besides, it’s not even eight o’clock.”

Only my petite partner in the Delaney Detective Agency would throw a Roman god and goddess party as part of her celebration of Saint Valentine’s Day. She’d even hired someone to play the role of Cupid, the Roman god of love. “Who is playing Cupid? Tell me and I’ll stay a little longer.”

“You’re hoping it’s Coleman. That he’s come home from Quantico.”

I didn't bother denying it. The sheriff of Sunflower County, a man I had unresolved feelings for, was away for the month of February to attain FBI training in profiling. I heartily approved of the training, but I'd give a lot to see him in a diaper. Just the idea sent a flush up my cheeks.

Tinkie grinned knowingly. "I'm not telling you who Cupid is. He'll be here soon enough. The party just got started. You're turning into a real killjoy, Sarah Booth. I say that as your best friend."

She was correct. The long winter days had infected me with the virus of Gloomy Gus. I wouldn't label myself depressed—just melancholy. Either way, I couldn't push myself into the party spirit. I'd helped string the garlands of ivy with fake lotus flowers. I'd conspired with Tinkie to plan the menu. I'd admired the three beautiful singers, dressed as sirens, who were doing a damn good job of luring men to their sides. Tinkie had pulled out all the stops for this party, complete with musicians, actors, and a catering staff of at least twenty people.

She'd even managed to get me into a short, slave-style toga. All of my friends were costumed to the nines. Even Oscar, Tinkie's husband, was resplendent in a gold and purple trimmed long tunic. Like Jupiter, he carried a lightning bolt with great aplomb. He'd somehow applied a fake gray beard that looked real. Or it was possible Tinkie had driven him gray with her party planning.

"It's a wonderful party. Perfection. We could be in Athens celebrating the gods. It's not the party, it's me. I'm blabbed out." In truth, I had no idea how I'd pass Valentine's evening at Dahlia House, my home. I couldn't say why I felt the need to flee the festivities. I only knew my heart was heavy.

"You're missing Cece too," Tinkie said. Our journalistic friend, who was frequently the

life of the party, had taken a romantic cruise from New Orleans up the Mississippi River with her musical squeeze, Jaytee.

“I do miss her.”

“And you feel like you’re the only person here stag.”

I nodded. Tinkie read me like a book. “I’m just out of sorts.”

“Stay until midnight.” Tinkie was adept at compromise.

“Sure.” I pasted on a smile. My friend and partner in Delaney Detective Agency had put a lot of effort into this event. The least I could do was give myself a chance to have fun. “More punch! Maybe I’ll drown the blues.”

“That’s the spirit.” Tinkie winked. “Be careful, though, I upped the ante with some Everclear. All of my friends need a boost and a bit of relaxation. Allow yourself to enjoy.”

Was I preventing myself from enjoyment in some crazy self-punishment? I didn’t think so, but just in case I picked up a glass of punch and took a big swallow. If I was going to stay for the party, then I was going to be an asset instead of a sad sack.

I took another swig of the punch.

“Bottoms up.”

The voice came from behind me. Millie Roberts, owner of Millie’s Café and the best cook in the Southeast, looked fetching in a royal blue toga with a cluster of grapes at the shoulder. She wore a crown made from scuppernong vines, which she’d laced with grapes and tiny silver bells that chimed lightly whenever she moved. She gave me a big squeeze.

“You look lovely, Sarah Booth. Though a little grim. Is something wrong? Maybe you’re upset because Coleman is at Quantico for that special profiling class.”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “And Scott is working. Harold is here, but he brought a date.” I was

a little distressed that my male friends were otherwise occupied. I was spoiled with on-demand male attention.

“Harold isn’t dancing attendance, eh?” Millie was astute.

“No. He isn’t.” Harold, who worked at the Bank of Zinnia as Oscar’s right hand man, was also one of the best catches in the Mississippi Delta. “And I don’t want him to. I can’t help it. I’m not ready so Harold should date anyone he wants.”

Millie put her arm around me. “Take your time. Love isn’t something you can make yourself participate in. You have to seek it, Sarah Booth, but only when you’re ready. To quote one of my very favorite tabloid people, ‘You can’t hurry love.’” She nudged me lightly. “But there are dozens of good looking men here. You might not be in love, but what about a fling?”

I followed Millie’s gaze and had to agree. Tinkie had invited the entire Delta. Beautiful women and handsome men danced, chatted, drank, and generally did the fun things required to make a good party. Roman soldiers, senators, and gods danced with nymphs, goddesses, and harpies. It was a helluva party and everyone was having a great time, except for me.

“Look at that hunk in the scarlet toga,” Millie said.

“Great legs. Who is it?”

“Ronald O’Gorman from Greenwood. He’s a doctor. And that beautiful woman beside him is his wife, Susie. They’re real party animals. Hey, there’s Harold.”

As we watched, Harold handed his date, Prentiss Luce, a drink of the potent punch. She was a beautiful woman with honey-colored hair that cascaded halfway down her back in a series of intricate braids. I suffered a moment of real hair jealousy because my hair was so short. The bodice of her outfit was a metallic corselet, and the skirt was short pleats bound by a leather girdle. Very sexy.

“Prentiss looks terrific.” Millie wasn’t being mean. She just called them like she saw them.

“She does, sort of a female gladiator, right? I haven’t seen her in forever.” “She’s not as pretty as you are.” Millie gave me a squeeze before she released me. “For those of us who are single, Valentine’s Day can be difficult.” She leaned into my wig of beautifully braided tresses—a necessity since I’d accidentally burned most of my hair off while working a case—and whispered, “Who is that handsome man talking with Harold?”

I examined the helmeted centurion but couldn’t begin to guess who he might be. He wore the costume well, though. Good posture, nice legs, tantalizingly displayed by his short, pleated skirt. “I don’t recognize him. Tinkie said she was bringing in some ringers. Professional party people to keep the action rolling. It’s all part of her fun. Do you know who she hired to play Cupid?”

“I tried to weasel it out of her, without any luck.” Millie rolled her eyes. “Tinkie cannot be managed. All I know is that Cupid is so handsome Tinkie said he would make our wombs do the Macarena.”

“Tinkie said Macarena?” That was shocking.

Millie gave me a look. Before she could respond, gasps erupted from a group of gods and slaves. A light scream was followed by a loud burst of laughter. Millie and I went to investigate. When we pushed through the crowd, we discovered that Cupid, in all his splendor, stood before us, bow and arrow in hand.

He was no Coleman.

Cupid was a short, hairy little man with a beer gut. I instantly checked to see if he might have hooves, because he looked far more like Pan than Cupid.

“Clear the way! Clear the way!” he yelled as he tried to move the wall of humans surrounding him. “I’m on official business of love. Let me through.”

His demand was met with laughter.

“All right, asshats, let me pass.”

The crowd parted, and Cupid made a beeline for me. I had no idea what Tinkie had put him up to, but I backed away, fearing he might butt me like a goat. His piercing gaze bypassed me. He zeroed in on Millie.

“You’re a hot babe and you need some action. This arrow of love is meant for you.” He pulled back his bow and shot an arrow straight at her heart. I tried to push her aside, but my reactions were too slow. Time seemed to stop. The arrow slow-moed its way across the space and struck its target. Millie cried out and fell back into the arms of the very centurion she’d been admiring. She looked up at him, and I swear, little hearts with wings flew between them.

The Roman soldier grasped the arrow and removed it—revealing the rubber suction tip. It was a toy—I’d played with those arrows as a child. Millie was unharmed, except her heart had been rendered asunder. I could tell by the way she looked up at the soldier.

He assisted her to her feet, then removed his helmet. He was a handsome man with chestnut hair flecked with gray. “Claude Wilmon, at your service.” He nodded his head in a formal little bow.

“Millie Roberts,” she said. “Thank you for catching me.”

“The pleasure was mine.” He pulled her into an embrace. “I’ve been searching all my life for a woman like you, you goddess of fantasy and desire.”

“Kiss me, my fool.” Millie consumed tabloid news and adored old movies. She had the

Theda Bara man-stealing line accurate to the pronoun.

Claude needed no urging. He laid one on her with a searing passion that left my panties smoking. And left me wondering if this had somehow been staged. Tinkie was capable of a little drama, but Millie was never duplicitous.

“Shoot me! Shoot me!” Women began calling out to the furry little cupid.

“For god’s sake, shoot my wife. She lost her sizzle years ago!” Tildon Switzer pushed Bette forward. But not even Tildon’s ignoble behavior could distract me from Claude and Millie. The clench went on and on and on. Was he pulling a Hannibal and eating her face? Should I intervene?

At last I tore my gaze from the dance of *amore* going on between the smoochers. Cupid had shot my friend in the heart with a rubber suction-tipped arrow and...what? Made her fall in love with a Roman centurion named Claude who might be an ax murderer for all I knew? Such a thing was preposterous. Where was that hairy little bugger?

He’d vanished from the vicinity, but the proof of his existence was clutched in Claude’s hand. The little red arrow.

“What the hell just happened here?” Harold asked. He looked as worried as I felt.

Of all of my friends, Millie was the most practical. Though she wasn’t much older than the rest of us, she had assumed the maternal role, mother-henning us with food and common sense advice. Now she’d kicked over those traces. “I wish I knew.”

“Who the hell is that cupid? I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more unattractive man in a diaper. Did you see his legs and chest? He has fur!”

“I saw.” Not even Clorox could cleanse that image from my brain.

“Where is he?” Harold asked.

“He couldn’t have vanished.” Only Jitty, the Civil War ghost who haunted Dahlia House and bossed me around, had the power to truly vanish. Cupid wasn’t a ghost. He was a flesh and blood—and hair—a human male.

Harold adjusted the crimson stola he wore over a white tunic and we set off in search of the little god of love. “Prentiss is around here somewhere. I hope that little cupid hasn’t abducted her.”

“There she is,” I said, pointing to the crowd around the punch bowl. “She’s fine.”

“I’ll ask Tinkie who the little arrow-shooter is,” Harold offered. “She told me she’d hired some Adonis to play the part. Either Tinkie’s vision is going or she doesn’t know her mythology.”

“Here she comes.” I nodded toward the house where Tinkie steamed toward us like a runaway locomotive.

She was almost hyperventilating. “Where is that varmint wearing a diaper and shooting my guests with arrows? Have you seen Millie and Claude. They are in heat. I’m going to have to rent them a room.”

“Who did you hire to play Cupid?” Harold asked. “Did you find him in the catalogue for demented archery beasts?”

Tinkie whipped around and shook a finger at Harold. “I did *not* hire that person to be my Cupid. I hired Gregory Lent, a very handsome young man. Where that little satyr came from, I have no idea. He is ruining my party. Everyone is buzzing about him, and Millie has regressed to a sixteen-year-old hormonal girl. When I get my hands on him he’ll regret crashing this party.”

Although Cupid was minus the horns and hoofs, he did bear a strange resemblance to a

lustful satyr. “Where is Gregory Lent?” It seemed obvious to me that the person who could clear all of this up was the cupid Tinkie had hired. It didn’t take a Stephen Hawking to calculate that Gregory had to know something about the guy who’d assumed his role. It wasn’t as if an arrow-shooting, diaper-clad man roamed the fields around Hilltop, Tinkie’s home, waiting for a party to crash.

“I don’t know where Gregory is,” Tinkie said, and a sliver of worry flashed across her face. “He didn’t show up early, like he was supposed to do. He isn’t answering his phone. It just rings and rings. The last time I talked to him he was forty minutes early and he said he was pulling into my driveway.”

“Harold and I’ll look for him. Go take care of your guests.”

“What about Prentiss?” Tinkie asked with a glint of mischief. “She’ll be hunting for you, Harold. After all, *she’s* your date, *not* Sarah Booth.”

In all things, Harold was a gentleman. “Excuse me, Sarah Booth. I’ll meet you at the front steps. Tinkie is absolutely correct. Let me explain to Prentiss.”

When he was gone, Tinkie shook her head. “Prentiss is a nice girl. Loaded, and she earned it on her own. Her paintings are beginning to sell. She just opened a gallery in New Orleans. Harold could go a long way and do a lot worse.”

“I didn’t urge him to search with me.” I sounded defensive.

“No, you didn’t.” Tinkie touched my face. “Be careful. Of yourself and others.”

“Give me your cell phone,” I said. “I’ll keep trying to call Gregory.”

She handed it over. “Tell him if he sent that little man to do his job, he’s going to be in big trouble with me.”

“Try to get the short cupid’s name. That’ll put us a step ahead in figuring this out.”

Behind me the guests had begun to chant, "Toga! Toga! Toga!" Tinkie looked panicked. It was the perfect time to slip away and see if I could find any cloven hoof prints in the front yard. I'd track Cupid down and give him a kick in the diaper. I suspected that someone had played a prank on my partner by switching the cupids.

Flashlight in hand, Harold joined me on the front porch and we set out to check the shrubbery. Cupid had to be hiding nearby, unless he could fly. He was a short little devil and could easily duck under and crawl around the heritage camellias that Tinkie nurtured. The flowers bloomed in delicious reds, pinks, variegated, and the pale pink carnation camellias. They were the perfect flower for this February holiday.

"Cupid!" Harold called. "Suey, suey, Cupid!"

"Stop it," I said sternly but I couldn't hold back the giggle. "He's a satyr, not a pig."

"How does one call a satyr? I fear my farm experience runs to cows and pigs."

"Cupid!" I called. "Where are you?"

Harold charged into a thick bank of camellias that towered over his head. Tinkie's yard sloped gently, and the landscaper years ago had created thickets of the evergreen shrubs that produced showy flowers during the cold winter months.

Because I was wearing a short toga and knew too well the clutching limbs of a camellia cluster, I chose to stand in the driveway and dial Gregory Lent on Tinkie's phone. Harold could chase the satyr--I'd pursue the man responsible for sending the satyr.

I hit the redial button on Tinkie's phone. Somewhere in the camellia thicket, a phone rang with the song "Ride." Somebody had the heart of a striper.

"Harold, is that your phone?" I yelled into the camellias.

The phone stopped ringing, and the phone in my hand went to voice mail. "Hey, Baby,

this is Gregory. Tell me what you need and I'll bring it to you," was the message.

From deep within the shrubs Harold spoke. "Sarah Booth, I was almost on top of the phone when it stopped. It's hard as hell to see anything in these bushes."

"Harold, I think that's Gregory's phone." I hit redial and the music started again.

Not ten seconds later, I heard Harold exclaim, "Oh, dear. Sarah Booth, you'd better call DeWayne and an ambulance. I've found the good-looking cupid, and he's unconscious."

Harold and I managed to handle the situation discreetly, if anyone in a short toga can be discreet. I called DeWayne Dattilo, the deputy sheriff in charge during Coleman's absence. Harold called the paramedics, who arrived in no time and kept looking at me as if I'd grown a second head. Yes, I was freezing in a mini skirt made from a sheet. I'd also knocked my wig askew helping Harold drag the unconscious man out of the bushes, and in the dark I couldn't figure out how to put it back on properly.

In the ambulance headlights Gregory Lent's oiled torso glistened. The diaper he wore was so small it barely covered the essentials, and he was everything Tinkie had promised, a man who could easily pass as a male stripper.

The party in Tinkie's back lawn continued, the guests unaware of the tragedy not a hundred yards away. DeWayne identified the young man as Gregory Lent based on a driver's license found near his unconscious body. And the fact he was wearing a diaper. I did not relish the idea of telling Tinkie I'd found her cupid and he'd been rendered unconscious.

Doc Sawyer, Sunflower County's emergency doctor, waited until Gregory had been loaded into an ambulance and was on the way to the hospital before he sought me out. "Blunt force trauma to the right temple," he said. "Someone hit him hard with a bat or pipe or something. I won't know how bad he's hurt until I run some tests."

Gregory had been attacked along Tinkie's long driveway and dragged into the bushes. DeWayne had found footprints and drag marks. Had Harold and I not been looking for the little short cupid, the tall unconscious cupid wouldn't have been discovered for a long while.

"Do you think he'll be okay?" I asked.

"It can go either way, Sarah Booth. We don't know how long he's been like this."

"At least an hour." I knew that didn't sound good.

"I'll let you know when I know," Doc said, patting my shoulder. "I'll be in touch."

"Are you okay?" When Doc had driven away, Harold put his arm around me. "Do you want me to tell Tinkie? DeWayne needs to question every guest."

"Let me tell Tinkie. This is going to be a disaster. Her party for love has become a crime scene."

"Not your fault, Sarah Booth. Not her's either."

"Some Valentine party." I was worried. "Cupid was conked in the head on her front lawn."

He chuckled and hugged me closer. "A new case for Delaney Detective Agency. The mysterious cupid conker. Not to mention the cupid that disappeared. There's no sign of that hairy little devil and he's the person we need to corral. Obviously he's a replacement."

Harold was right. The solution to the attack on one cupid would be found in the apprehension of another. They had to be connected.

When we returned to the party, the scene was a mishmash of gods, goddesses, slaves, generals—all dancing to music of the period. It was damned impressive. I hated the chore in front of me.

Tinkie was surveying the food, making sure the offerings were plentiful. I motioned her away from the crowd and filled her in on what had happened.

“I was ready to murder Gregory, and he was lying out in my front yard all this time! I feel terrible.”

“Let’s just hope he is okay. Why did this happen? Why would someone go to the trouble of knocking out a hired cupid to substitute another?”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Tinkie said.

“Help! Help! Someone has stolen my wallet!” The cry came from a group of partiers gathered at the bar.

“My necklace is gone,” a woman on the other side of the gathering called out.

“My wallet is gone!” another man called out.

“This can’t be happening,” Tinkie said as her hands went to her ears. An angry expression crossed her face. “My diamond earrings are gone, too.”

“Someone has robbed your guests,” I said. The game became clear to me. The little cupid who’d so vividly captured our attention was a diversion. He’d commanded that we look at him while his confederates went around the party stealing. It was one of the oldest scams in the world.

“Now, now, Tinkie,” Doc Sawyer said soothingly as he waved some ammonia under her nose. He’d turned around and come straight back to Hilltop when I called him. “Sit up. I’d never have taken you for a woman with the vapors.”

“My cupid was *ambushed* in my camellias, and my guests were *robbed!*” Tinkie swooned again, but I pinched her hard and she sat up like she’d been electrocuted. “Dammit, Sarah Booth, that hurt. You can’t go pinching my thigh like that.”

“Quit pretending that you’re Aunt Pittypat and talk to us.” I tapped my forefinger and thumb together several times like a crab claw, promising her another pinch. “How did you happen to hire Gregory Lent for your cupid?”

“Let me think.” Tinkie sighed. “Have all the guest gone home?”

“They have. DeWayne made a list of all the things that were stolen. He interviewed everyone and let them go.” I didn’t want to tell her the total haul could be over two hundred thousand dollars. The clever thieves had also taken a lot of the Richmond valuables, stripping the house while the guests partied outside.

Oscar came to sit beside his wife, rubbing her arm in a comforting gesture. “We’ll catch the rascals and get everyone’s belongings back.”

Without any warning, Tinkie dissolved in tears against Oscar’s chest. He patted her back as she sobbed. “Give her a minute,” he said gently. “She’ll be fine. I found all of the party receipts. They’re on the kitchen counter. She hired Gregory Lent through a talent agency in Memphis called We Aim to Please. They offer strippers, clowns, magicians, sexy girls and boys. You know, whatever it takes to get a party up and keep it going.”

I went to the counter and retrieved the documents. Although I didn’t intend to pry, my

eyeballs popped wide at the cost of the services from We Aim to Please. Gregory Lent's fee was \$900 for the evening. The sirens, on the other hand, were a bonus package for \$1000. There were at least five other hired actors who'd enlivened the party.

Pushing past the cost, I focused on the company's logo. The address was on the west side of Memphis, and the owner of the company was one Jonathan French. I stored the number on my phone for a call in the morning. It was too late now, and we were exhausted. I returned to the parlor where everyone had gathered.

"You should take Tinkie to bed," Harold said, kneeling beside Tinkie as she slumped against Oscar. "It will all be fine. A good night's sleep and things will look brighter in the morning. Mr. Lent will be fine. Doc said he'd keep a sharp eye on him."

She only hiccupped and buried her face in Oscar's tunic. She was taking this hard, and I understood. She was the Queen Bee of Zinnia society. To have her guests robbed at her own home was unacceptable. The cruel attack on a young man—that was downright horrible.

"Let's go home," I said to Harold. Then a thought occurred to me. "Millie and Claude? Did they leave?"

"I hope so." Tinkie pushed to an upright position. "Did you see them? You'd think the arrow that little thief shot was the real thing straight from Cupid's bow. I thought I'd have to call the lawn man to turn the hose on Millie and that man."

We laughed with relief because Tinkie was back to herself.

"Millie needs a romantic encounter," I said. "She thought that guy was handsome before she was shot with Cupid's arrow. By the way, who is Claude?"

Tinkie frowned. "He's Prentiss Luce's cousin from Ittabeena. He lives in D.C. now, though. He runs a famous bar called the Poet's Corner. Big hangout for the beltway bandits

and a lot of local writers. They have poetry and fiction readings there.”

Millie would love that. In a cockeyed way, she and Claude were in the same business. She served food and he served liquor.

“So what did you do with Prentiss, Harold?” Tinkie asked.

It wasn’t until Tinkie said her name that I realized Harold had completely abandoned his date. Everyone from the party had gone home, yet Harold was still here. Once Gregory Lent was discovered, Harold and I were like bloodhounds on a trail. “What happened to Prentiss?” I dreaded asking.

“Claude and Millie took her home,” Harold said, winking at me. “I made sure she was taken care of. Prentiss isn’t a fool. She knows I was caught up in a tragedy. Yes, she was my date for the party but we aren’t romantically involved.”

Thank goodness. I didn’t say it out loud, but Tinkie’s words of caution came back to me. I would never want to intrude in Harold’s chance for happiness. “I hope she understands,” I whispered to Harold.

“She does. Prentiss and I go way back. She asked me to get her and her cousin invited to the party. Prentiss isn’t a fragile Delta blossom who wilts if a man doesn’t devote all of his attention to her. She’s a tough cookie. The art world isn’t for the faint of heart and her gallery in New Orleans is going gangbusters.”

“That’s good to know.” I was relieved. “I should head home too.” Although Dahlia House was only the first location I had in mind. I wanted to change clothes and go to the sheriff’s office.

“Tomorrow we’ll get to the bottom of this,” Tinkie said and then yawned. “Someone is going to pay big time.”

Dahlia House, aglow with lights, welcomed me home, as did Sweetie Pie and Pluto, my hound and elegant black kitty. The three horses raced the car down the drive and then bucked and stampeded in the opposite direction. Before I went inside, I hurried through the cold in my silly toga and fed them. Pluto and Sweetie Pie accompanied me to the barn but offered no help. They were miffed they hadn't been invited to the festivities at Tinkie's house, but even Tinkie's pup, Chablis, had been relegated to an upstairs bedroom.

I was almost finished putting away the feed buckets when Sweetie Pie set up a racket. She faced the barn door barking, her hackles raised. Pluto watched something in the night intently, but he remained perfectly still.

"Crap." I eased to the door, freezing to death in my skimpy costume. A cry of terror slipped from me when I saw a voluptuous naked woman riding a clamshell toward the barn. I'd never seen anything like it.

When the shell stopped not twenty yards away, the beautiful woman stepped to the ground and came toward me.

"Jitty, you are going to give me a coronary." I recognized my ghost and the goddess she portrayed. Venus on the half shell, as the Botticelli masterpiece was nicknamed. "I am done with gods and goddesses, and you are indecent. If your hair was an inch shorter, I'd be able to see possible." Aunt Loulane had always cautioned me against any public displays of possible. "Stay away from me."

“That toga would be cute if your legs weren’t all pried and covered in chill bumps. Girl, you look like you stepped out of the deep freeze. Any man who thought to touch that skin would regret it. Looks like you got a lizard disease.”

“Just because you can run around naked in thirty degree weather and not get cold is no reason to pick on me because I’m *alive*.” I stepped around the stupid clamshell even though I knew it wasn’t really there.

“Running around naked is freeing. You should try it.”

“It’s thirty-eight degrees.” I dismissed the idea.

“Girl, your erogenous zone is frosted over. You need to let a man warm you up and get that motor purring again. Remember, if you don’t use it, God will take it away from you.”

“Just because you were the goddess of love and bestowed your favors on every Tom, Dick, and Harry that walked past doesn’t mean I have to be promiscuous.”

“Okay, Iron Maiden. Keep all that love to yourself and see where it gets you. Alone on Valentine Day night. *All* alone. With no big, warm, man-body to heat you up or cuddle with you in front of the fire. No one to bump uglies with.”

“Stop it!” Jitty was a bruise masher from the get-go.

“Don’t get snippy with me, Missy.” Jitty was suddenly right in front of me. Her long, long hair wrapped around her body. “I know how to lure a man and bring him to his knees.”

“Goody for you, Venus. Your hairy little lovechild created by bumping uglies with Mars made a splash at Tinkie’s party. Too bad the real cupid was knocked unconscious.” That took some of the starch out of her pantaloons. Well, she wasn’t wearing panties of any description, but it changed her attitude.

“What happened to Cupid?” She shifted back to the beautiful woman who had once

served as my great-great-great grandmother Alice's nanny. Jitty and Alice had survived the Civil War, more as sisters than master and slave.

I gave her the details of the Cupid coup.

"Somebody done waylaid Cupid," she said, adopting the vernacular of a time long past. "Oh, lawd, somebody whacked love!"

"I only thought I was in hell at Tinkie's party," I muttered. "You're giving me visions of the fiery lake and I'm eager to jump in it if I can get away from you."

"Sarcasm don't touch me none at all." Jitty preened, a word I never thought I'd have reason to use.

"Stop that cornpone crap and talk normal."

"Cupid is supposed to be immortal," she said in her natural voice. "But I swear, Sarah Booth, you're deadly. Even a for-hire Cupid can't survive an evening with you without serious injury."

"I didn't bash his skull in."

"You didn't have to. That stony heart of yours broke him."

"I didn't even meet him." I edged past her and headed to the house. "I'm not talking to you anymore." I put my fingers in my ears. "Na-na-na-na-na-na." By the time I got to the back door and cast a glance toward the barn, Jitty and her clamshell had faded into the dark night.

I fed Sweetie Pie and a grumpy Pluto in the kitchen and then ran upstairs to change clothes. When I had my jeans, boots, and a warm red sweater on, I called the pets to the car and headed for the courthouse. DeWayne was competent and always a good friend, but I missed Coleman.

Coleman's schooling in Quantico came as a complete surprise—funding from the

Sunflower County supervisors was unexpected. He'd been gone ten days and I'd hoped he would put in a surprise appearance at Tinkie's shindig. My hopes were in vain. This was a perfect time for him to be at the FBI training center because things in Sunflower County had slipped into the winter doldrums until the robbery at Hilltop and the assault on Cupid. That had been unexpected.

Driving through the fallow winter fields that spread into the darkness on either side of the road, I felt as if the land could swallow me whole. That wouldn't be a bad way to go—I loved the Delta with a deep passion. The land was part of me in a way that defied explanation. My connection to the dirt was bone deep, but I missed that strong bond with another human. Coleman and I were involved in a dance. Would we or wouldn't we give in to the sexual attraction we shared? While my body said yes, my heart was a cowardly organ. Coleman, too, had reservations about pushing our relationship to a different level. We'd been to this point before, and he'd made another choice. One that put a wedge between us. Now, we had a solid friendship, but it wouldn't survive a crash and burn romance.

I parked at the courthouse and ran up the steps to the sheriff's office entrance. Though it was hard on midniht, DeWayne was at his desk, the office flooded with lights.

"Any breakthroughs?" I asked. No one had officially hired me to find out who clobbered Cupid, but since the crime occurred on my partner's front lawn and her guests had been skillfully robbed, I claimed it as a Delaney Detective Agency case. We wouldn't impede DeWayne; we would assist.

DeWayne looked up from a handful of preliminary reports. "The fingerprints I lifted on the sideboard where Tinkie's silver was taken don't have a match in the system. Thank goodness for technology—everyone at the party had a cell phone and I've gotten some photos

of the cupid that shot Millie. I'm running them through the FBI's NGI system.

"That's a real thing?" I'd read about the Next Generation Index that included both criminal and non-criminal likenesses. Big Brother was indeed watching.

"Real enough," DeWayne said.

The fax machine beeped and began to whirl. DeWayne swiveled in his chair and shot across the hardwood floor to catch the report that shot out of the fax.

"Wiley Ryan," he read. "He did seven years for a spree of robberies in the Birmingham area. He specialized in infiltrating high-end parties and robbing the guests. He's been out of the system for two years."

"That's what happened at Tinkie's house. He couldn't have done this alone. He had to have help with the robbery. And the bigger question, is he violent?"

"No record of any violent crimes. Strictly theft."

"How is he aware of who's having a party and what the theme is. I mean to come dressed as Cupid—how would he know?"

"Good question, Sarah Booth, and one I'll look into. The robbery obviously ties into the attack on Gregory Lent."

"I agree. Any word from Coleman?"

"I talked to him an hour ago. He was considering coming home, but I discouraged him. This is a once in a lifetime chance for him to learn at Quantico. He needs to take advantage of it. That training will help all of us when he returns."

DeWayne was correct. "We'll handle this. Tomorrow, when Tinkie's had a chance to recover from the shock, she'll help."

"I told Coleman I could count on you two."

“Any leads on what happened to Lent?”

“Lent is awake, and he said he didn’t get a look at his attacker. Someone snuck up from behind and hit him. They wanted him out of the way so Ryan could infiltrate the party and keep everyone’s attention focused away from the house.”

“We have to identify Wiley Ryan’s accomplices. I could check with the Birmingham police to see what they know about Ryan.”

“That would be a big help. I’ll deputize you,” DeWayne said.

“Coleman said to deputize me?” I couldn’t believe it.

“He said I’d need your help. If I deputize you, you would have the power to arrest.”

“Be careful. You know power goes to my head.”

DeWayne shook his head. “You can investigate and arrest, but you cannot touch any prisoners. Repeat after me.”

I followed the simple ceremony that made me an official deputy sheriff of Sunflower County. When it was over, DeWayne handed me a badge. “I know you really want to tune someone up. Coleman warned me about your propensity for violating prisoners. Just remember, at the end of the day, we both answer to the sheriff.”

And that was warning enough.

By the time I’d written my requests for reports on Wiley Ryan’s criminal past, using the official email DeWayne gave me, and sent them off, Valentine’s Day was a memory. I’d survived the romantic holiday alone, and not even Jitty was going to be able to give me grief about my single status.

I went home and fell into bed where dreams of hairy cupids tormented me throughout the night. At one point I awoke to the sound of strange music to find the cat-headed goddess Bastet dancing around my bed.

Jitty was determined to drive me to drink. Pluto sat like a sphinx on a folded quilt, ignoring the Egyptian goddess of felines, sexuality, protection, and perfume. I had to admire Pluto's dignity, and his refusal to play into Jitty's hands. She was a dedicated tormentor. And of course, my kitty was named after the Roman god of the underworld. Jitty couldn't get a thing over on him.

"Jitty, if you don't stop that music and dancing around wearing that cat head, I'm going to get up and call a priest to exorcise you."

"Priests can't bother me. I'm a goddess not a haint. I'm just tryin' to give you some lust mojo. Da-yum! You are determined to die an old maid."

I threw a pillow at her, but it just went straight through and hit the wall. "Get out of my bedroom. Now!"

A black sistrum shook at the foot of the bed and then it was gone—and Jitty along with it. Pluto stretched lazily and came to sleep spooned against me. "Jitty better stop pushing love at me or I'm going to become a nun," I mumbled to Pluto, who only purred louder.

The next morning I awoke with a sense of mission. The day for lovers was behind me, and the calendar marched toward Spring, when the days would grow longer and the loneliness would abate. It was a good day for investigating. I'd find out who had clocked Tinkie's real cupid, and who had robbed her guests. It was time to shake the lead out.

DeWayne sent over the reports from the Birmingham P.D.--Wiley Ryan was wanted in Alabama as well as Louisiana for robberies that used the same MO as the thefts at Tinkie's

party.

Wiley had attended bachelor parties and jumped out of cakes, Christmas parties as an elf, and sweet sixteen parties as a fairy tale character. At each party, the guests and hosts had been robbed.

But there had never been an act of violence.

Of particular interest was the fact that Wiley was a native of Panther Holler, Mississippi.

In a community of less than four hundred people, which was the last census report for Panther Holler, someone had to know Wiley. It was a quick drive south of Zinnia. I dialed my partner. "Time to shake, rattle, and roll," I said briskly. "Pull on your drawers, we're driving to Panther Holler. We might be able to find your stolen property. Chop-chop, your chariot is en route."

"You are a sadist," Tinkie said in a monotone.

"Yep. Be ready in thirty minutes. I'm on my way."

I was showered and dressed in just over ten minutes and out the door with Pluto and Sweetie Pie. When I pulled onto the drive at Hilltop, Tinkie was waiting, her little Yorkie, Chablis, in her arms. The camellia leaves in her hair told me she'd done some investigating on her own.

Even though she didn't feel great, Tinkie was dressed to the nines in designer jeans, boots, and a black wool tunic with red dots appliquéd down the left side. She looked terrific, except for the vaguely green tint to her skin. "Lovely shade you're wearing. Are you trying out for the role of Wicked Witch of the West?"

"Don't say it. I drank too much."

"I had no intention of saying a thing." I'd certainly had my share of bad nights and I

wasn't one to cast the first stone.

I chatted and Tinkie listened as we made the drive to the small community not far from the Mississippi River. A feed store and a quick stop were the heart of Panther Holler, but there was also a mechanic and a hair salon. I stopped at the feed store and went in to ask about Wiley Ryan.

The elderly woman behind the counter could have been eighty or a hard forty. It was impossible to tell. She wore a plaid flannel muumuu that looked a lot like a nightgown.

I wandered around the offerings of seeds, horse and cattle feed, fencing supplies, halters, and grooming tools. When I was certain we were alone in the store, I picked up some brushes and a currycomb and went to the counter.

She ignored my pleasantries but took my money. When she'd sacked my purchases, she handed them to me. "Those brushes have been there for over five years. What is it you really want?" She was nobody's fool.

"I'm looking for Wiley Ryan's family."

She stared at me a long minute. "Why?"

"He may be involved in a robbery."

"That banker fellow over in Zinnia?"

I nodded. News traveled fast in the Delta. "The Richmonds are friends of mine. In fact, Mrs. Richmond is out there in the car."

She got up and went to the front of the store and stared at Tinkie and the animals. "She don't look too uppity, holding that little dog."

I didn't respond to the uppity comment. "Can you tell me where to find Wiley Ryan's family?"

“I’m his mama.”

Well, it wasn’t exactly the answer I’d expected. I’d pretty much called her son a thief to her face. “I didn’t—”

“Wiley’s been in trouble with the law in the past. He told me he’d cleaned up his act, and I told him not to bring his bad behavior back home to Mississippi. If he had to plunder and steal, he was told to keep it across the state line. If he robbed that toga party, he messed up big time, but I don’t think he did it. Wiley wouldn’t do that. He’s got too much sense.”

“Mrs. Ryan, a young man was attacked last night.”

She pushed her dyed brown hair back from her face. “I heard. Wiley’s a thief, but he ain’t the kind to harm someone. Don’t be tryin’ to pin that on him.”

“He came to the party last night as Cupid. The young man who’d been hired to play Cupid was knocked unconscious and dragged into the shrubs. He was hit hard enough that the blow could have killed him or done permanent damage.”

“It might not look good for Wiley, but he ain’t violent.”

The front door opened and Tinkie slipped into the room with Chablis in her arms. “Did you get a lead on Wiley?” she asked. “It’s cold out there in the car.”

“Tinkie, this is Wiley’s mother.”

She gave Mrs. Ryan the once-over as she walked to the counter. “Mrs. Ryan, we’re private investigators. Where is your son?”

“Wiley may have robbed your friends, but he didn’t hit anyone. With Wiley’s record, an assault charge will put him in prison for the rest of his life. I’m not overly trustin’ of our legal system,” she said, going back behind the counter. “Why should I tell you anything?”

“If Wiley will return the things he stole, maybe we can help him.”

“And maybe you can get him killed.” Worry flitted across her face before she regained control. “Talking to private dicks ain’t never got my people anything other than trouble.”

Her cell phone rang. She checked the number but didn’t answer. For a long moment, silence stretched between the three of us. Then the phone rang again. She finally took the call. “Yes?” Her face changed and she looked at us fearfully.

“What’s wrong?” Tinkie asked.

“Someone took a shot at Wiley. He said they’re trying to kill him. They got him pinned down.”

“Who’s after him?”

“He ain’t givin’ me the details. The boy is under fire at my house. I gotta go help him.”

“I’ll call the sheriff,” I said.

“No!” She grabbed the phone from my hand. “No lawmen. My boy ain’t goin’ to jail.”

“You’d rather he be dead than in jail?” Tinkie asked.

“Neither.” She reached under the counter for a shotgun. “I’ll save my boy without help from any of you, especially a badge.”

I realized then that I had a badge. I’d forgotten I was a deputy. Now wasn’t the best time to bring it up. “Put the gun away.”

“Make me.” And Mama Ryan was out the door. For a frumpy older woman in a flannel nightgown and purple Barney slippers, she moved fast. She was in her truck and on the highway headed north by the time Tinkie and I loaded up and followed.

The Ryan home was down a narrow dirt path, brilliantly called Pig Trail Road, that ended at a brake surrounded by tupelo gum trees. The trees told me the area was sometimes underwater. This would be mosquito heaven in a warm month.

When we arrived, Mrs. Ryan got out of her truck and sent two quick blasts of buckshot into the trees. "Get out of here," she yelled.

Tinkie and I instinctively ducked down in the front seat, pulling the critters with us. "She's not right in the head," Tinkie said. "She might have killed someone."

"I think that was her intention. She's protecting her son, and just so you know, DeWayne deputized me last night." I had to tell her sometime.

"Dammit, Sarah Booth, why didn't you just arrest her?" Tinkie asked. "We could have taken her back to Zinnia and you could have given her a tune up."

"We weren't in Sunflower County, and I promised DeWayne I wouldn't abuse the badge." I mumbled the last part.

"Do you think she would have known you were out of your jurisdiction? It's not like we could really arrest her. You could have detained her. Put the cuffs on her. Then we wouldn't be hunkered down in the floorboard of your car praying we don't get blasted."

She had a point, but I had other matters on my mind. I peeked over the dashboard. "She's going inside. We have to follow."

Mama Ryan had almost reached the front steps when a bullet tore into the door of the cabin. She jumped back and dropped to the ground beside the wooden steps. She pumped five more rounds into the woods. "Come out, you coward," she called. "I'll show you what happens to trespassers."

As another volley of gunfire was exchanged, I opened my door to edge out.

"Where do you think you're going?" Tinkie grabbed my hair in a death grip.

"To go around the cabin. Let go of my hair!"

She gripped tighter. "You're staying right here."

Before I could do anything else, Sweetie plowed through the open door and headed for the woods. Chablis was hot on her heels.

We both made a grab for the critters, but they were gone and angling into the woods where the gunfire originated. Tinkie's hold on me faltered, and I slipped free and headed for the back of the cabin. She'd be mad, but I had to make my move. If Wiley was inside, he might be injured or dead.

As I neared the backdoor, I heard movement inside. I assumed Wiley was unarmed or he would have been firing back at the person blowing holes in the front of his mama's house. Assumptions could be deadly, so I entered with great caution. I'd just cleared the door when Wiley, still wearing only a diaper, came barreling out of the kitchen. He smacked into me and we both tumbled in a heap to the floor.

"Wiley Ryan, you're under arrest," I said, pulling the badge from my coat pocket and holding it in his face. Luckily I'd fallen on top of him. My weight had pressed the air from his lungs and he was gasping like a fish on land and flailing his arms and legs, to no avail.

"Get off me!" he huffed.

I was at least a foot taller than him and probably weighed more. I remembered DeWayne's warning about abusing the suspects. To my chagrin, I couldn't cuff him. DeWayne had given me a badge but no handcuffs. I grabbed his belt and used it to secure his hands together.

"How much do you weigh, you Amazon cow?" he asked.

"I could beat the snot out of you right now?" It wasn't exactly the visual I wanted in my brain, but too late. It was tit for tat and we were at an impasse, until the front door slammed and the heavy footsteps of Mama Ryan tromped toward us. She had a gun, and she'd use it if

she thought I was hurting her baby boy. In the distance I heard Sweetie Pie's deep baying howl as she gave chase. Chablis's little yip blended into the hound-dog melody.

Mama Ryan gripped my shoulders and pulled me off Wiley. "The shooter's gone. That hound dog of yours tore off after him and he hauled ass." She chuckled. "That's a fine dog. You wouldn't want to sell her, would you?"

"Absolutely not." I stood up and indicated for Wiley to follow suit. "I'm taking your son to jail, Mrs. Ryan. He'll be safe there."

The gun cocked. "Nobody's going anywhere. Get your partner in here."

She was a little late on the draw. Tinkie had already slipped in the front door and was right behind her—with a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniel's. Before Wiley could cry out a warning, Tinkie clocked Mama Ryan. She went down hard, the gun still clutched in her hand. I removed it and used it to motion Wiley to his feet.

"We're going to Zinnia before anything else happens."

"I can't leave Mama on the floor like that." With his hands belted together, he tried to help his mother to her feet.

Tinkie checked her pulse. "She's fine. She'll have a bad headache. Now get moving." She waved Wiley down the back steps. Just as I started to call out, Sweetie Pie and Pluto raced out of the woods and joined Wiley in the backseat.

"Let's go." We jumped in the car and I made tracks down Pig Trail Road.

"Who are you working for?" I asked Wiley. He rode in the back seat with Sweetie Pie on one side and Chablis on the other. Pluto, normally a cat of discriminating taste, was rubbing his head on Wiley's hairy shins.

"I'm not a rat." Wiley looked straight ahead, ignoring me. "I'm not saying a word."

Tinkie got on her knees in the passenger seat and leaned into the back of the car. “Tell us or I’ll take you back to my house—where you robbed my guests and nearly killed my cupid. Then I’ll get out my hot wax and turn you into a bald little satyr. I would take pleasure in ripping your fur out by the roots.”

“I didn’t hurt anyone. What are you talking about? There wasn’t another cupid.” He looked genuinely confused.

“You knocked the young man hired to play cupid out and nearly killed him. He’s still in the hospital. He could have swelling on the brain.” Tinkie put it on thick.

“I didn’t! I wouldn’t hurt anyone.” Wiley’s eyes were wide. “I’ve never hurt anyone in my life.”

“How did you know to come to the party as Cupid?” Tinkie demanded.

“The same way I learn about all the other parties. Someone emails and tells me the time, address, and what to wear. They never said anything about hurting anyone. I swear.”

“Who calls?” I asked. We weren’t far from Zinnia.

“I don’t know.” He sounded perfectly miserable. “I never wanted to know.”

“Ignorance is not working for us,” Tinkie said. “You’d better spill.”

“Or what?” Wiley sounded defeated. “You think waxing my back scares me? I’ve got real worries.”

“It wasn’t your back where I planned to start.” Tinkie was deadly.

“Enough.” The threats were getting us nowhere. “Wiley, you’re on the line for an attempted murder charge. We can help you. We *will* help you if *you* help us.”

Wiley hesitated. “I don’t know anything.”

“Make up your mind. I can take you to the Sunflower County jail, or I can take you to my

house for a chat. Up to you.”

“Not the jail.” Wiley’s voice broke. “I’ll tell you everything I know, but you have to believe me that I didn’t know anything about what happened to the young man.”

I turned the car right and headed to Dahlia House. Wiley Ryan was going to sing like a bird.

“I had nothing to do with the other cupid. I didn’t know there *was* another cupid. I showed up like I was told, and while the guests were busy having fun, I robbed them, just like I’ve done a dozen times before.”

“Someone attacked Gregory Lent. It makes sense it was the substitute cupid,” Tinkie pressed him.

“But it wasn’t me. Let me call my mama and make sure she’s okay.”

“Who tells you about the parties?” Tinkie had him on the hot seat and she wasn’t letting up. Since I was driving, I couldn’t contribute a lot to the interrogation.

“It’s all set up by email. I get the details and I hit the party with my helpers. We take what we can, just the obvious stuff. Then we clear out. I take the goods to a drop point and two days later, I pick up my share. It’s never enough, but I don’t have time to pawn the hot items so it’s the best I can do.”

“Are you affiliated with a talent agency in Memphis?” Tinkie asked.

I remembered the big money she’d paid for Gregory Lent and the female singers. The sirens had been cozying up to men all during the party. They could easily be pickpockets.

“No.” Wiley’s brows drew together.

I caught the visual in the rearview mirror. I’d thought he couldn’t get more unattractive, but the unibrow upped the ante.

“Never heard of that talent agency,” Wiley said. “Now call my mama. She better be okay or you two are gonna be charged with hitting an old woman.”

Tinkie sighed, and I knew a small burden had been lifted. It was bad enough to be robbed at her own party, but if she had *paid* for the thieves to be there, it would have added insult to injury. She pulled out her phone and dialed the number Wiley gave her.

When Mama Ryan answered, Tinkie assured her Wiley was unharmed and on his way to jail. There was a bit of squawking, but Tinkie convinced her Wiley was safer in custody than anywhere else.

Tinkie closed the phone and sighed. “For some reason, Wiley Ryan, your mama loves you.”

“Yeah, and I love her too. So sue me.”

We pulled down the driveway to Dahlia House, and Wiley leaned forward. “Look, I told you what I know. Let me go. I’m just a petty thief. I swear I didn’t hit anyone.”

“What you stole from Hilltop wasn’t petty. You stole a lot of expensive jewelry, silver, money, and art.” I had no sympathy.

“I want all of the stolen property back. I can’t believe my guests were robbed in my own home.” Tinkie meant business. “Where is all the stuff?”

“Are you nuts? I left it for pickup last night. Just like I always did before.” He sighed. “This time tomorrow, I would have been out of town and on my way home with enough cash to-
-”

“Who’s your partner?” Tinkie asked.

“I don’t have a partner, I have a boss. I’ve never met him, but his name is Jessie. I answered an ad in the newspaper that said easy money and lots of it. That’s all I know. We communicate by email. I’ve never met him. He sends me the information for the heist and I leave the goods at an appointed place. He leaves my cut there for me. That’s all I know.”

“Where are you supposed to pick up your money?” I asked.

“Like I’m going to tell you that.” Wiley flopped back in his seat and Sweetie Pie gave such a loud yodeling howl that he tried to cover his ears. Since his hands were belted, it was a futile effort. Sweetie Pie gave it to him again.

“She won’t stop howling until you tell me what I want to know,” I warned him.

“I can’t tell you anything. I could get killed if I talk. You’ll certainly get killed. This Jessie is no one to mess with.”

“You’re going to be deaf if you don’t talk.” As if on cue, Sweetie Pie changed the pitch so that even my ears throbbed.

“Who else was in on the theft?” Tinkie asked.

“Two members of the catering staff. I’ve worked with them before. I wouldn’t bother looking for them because they’re long gone.”

“Okay, here’s the deal,” Tinkie said. You tell us, right now, where and what time you intend to pick up your money. If Gregory recovers from the blow to his head, and if I get all of the things that were stolen back, we’ll consider letting you go.”

“Tinkie, I—” She couldn’t make that deal. She had no authority and neither did I.

She waved me to silence. “Make your decision right now, Wiley, or you’re toast.”

Wiley finally balked. “It’s too dangerous. I won’t tell you. I’m not a killer and I won’t have

your funerals on my conscience. Jessie doesn't mess around. He's a pro. And he won't be caught. He'll fight and hurt whoever is in his way."

"Cough up the information, Wiley, or we'll take you to the jail." I didn't agree with Tinkie's offer, but if Gregory Lent wasn't seriously injured and the stolen property was returned, I could live with it. DeWayne might want to arrest me and Tinkie, though.

Wiley pressed his belted hands to his hairy chest and looked out the window. "I'm not telling you anything more. You can try to beat it out of me, but it won't do any good."

"Don't tempt me." I pulled in front of Dahlia House, and we helped Wiley out of the backseat. He was shaking with cold. The diaper was incredibly unattractive on a grown man, and probably of bigger concern--he was freezing.

"Graf left some sweatpants and things here." I should have packed my ex-fiancé's belongings up and shipped them to him, but I hadn't. "I'll get you something warm to wear."

"Thank you. I've done a lot of demeaning things in my life, but wearing a diaper has to be one of the worst. Do you know how desperate a man has to be to run around in a diaper with rubber-tipped arrows pretending to be some love god?"

"A smart Cupid would have packed extra clothes," I said dryly.

"I guess I could have borrowed one of Mama's dresses, but somehow that didn't seem any better. She was going to get me some clothes at the Wal-Mart when she got off work. I should never have dragged this to her door. I just didn't have a choice."

"Why are you robbing people?" I wasn't interested in Wiley's fashion dilemma, but I was curious about his life of crime.

He looked back at me long and hard before he spoke. "I used to be a thief, before I met my wife. I did some time in the joint, but Donna could see beyond that. She said I was a good

man. She believed in me. I guess I felt I had to live up to her view of who I was.”

“You’ve been clean for years. Why go back to a life of crime?” I asked.

“I gave up stealing after I did my time. I’d learned my lesson and I was straight. I just wanted to take care of my family. Now I don’t have a choice. My boy needs expensive medical treatments. I couldn’t afford insurance working a minimum wage job, so we couldn’t get him what he needed. Stealing was the only way I could turn up quick money and he has to get the treatment or he won’t be put on the list for a kidney transplant.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Tinkie asked.

“Kidney failure. Diabetes. Poor kid is dying, and he’s never harmed a soul.” His voice was strained and he hurried up the steps to the front door so we couldn’t see he was about to cry. “I hope its warm inside. If I catch my death of cold, it’ll be on your heads.”

Tinkie looked at me and I knew her loyalties had shifted. Wiley Ryan was no longer the enemy. He loved his mama and he was stealing for a sick son. He was now our cause.

“He could be playing us,” I whispered.

“He’s not. I can tell.”

I put my hand on her shoulder. “Be careful.”

Wiley stamped his bare feet. “Hey, are you going to open this door or let me freeze to death on your front porch?”

Tinkie leaned close to me. “He’s like a little fuzzy puppy, Sarah Booth. I hope he’s house trained.”

I punched her hard on the arm and ran up the steps behind the diapered former cupid. The way his diaper was sagging didn’t bode well for any of us.

While Wiley took a hot shower and climbed into Graf's old sweatpants and shirt, I called DeWayne. Torn between my duties as a deputy and my sudden, strange desire to help Wiley avoid jail, I somehow didn't mention that the missing cupid was in my guest shower.

"Any leads on Gregory Lent's attacker?" I asked.

"No. Doc is letting Lent go home today. No serious damage done. He never saw the person who hit him, so he's not even a witness."

"What happened?"

"Lent said he was smoking a cigarette, killing some time, when he was struck from behind. The next thing he remembers, he woke up in the hospital."

"He doesn't remember anything unusual?"

"He did say that while he was smoking, he saw something glinting on the lawn."

"Glinting like a..."

"Sword or maybe a shield. Light reflecting on something metal. I figured it was part of someone's costume."

"I think you're right, DeWayne. That may be very helpful, except there were thirty men and women at the party with some kind of metal garb on. Armor, decorative metal..."

"We'll figure it out, Sarah Booth. We just need a direction to run in."

"I'm working on it. I'll be by the courthouse in a little while. Call if you need me."

Tinkie was in the kitchen making something hot for Wiley to eat—I hoped the deceptive cupid had a cast-iron stomach. Tinkie's cooking might be considered lethal. I plunked down at the kitchen table.

"I'm sorry for Wiley," Tinkie said as she stirred a pot.

"If what he says is true, yeah."

"Do you think he'll tell us where he makes his pickup?"

"I don't think he has a choice," I said. "You keep an eye on him. I'm going to talk to Lent before he gets out of the hospital."

I left Sweetie Pie, Chablis, and Pluto to help Tinkie guard Wiley while I drove to the hospital. Lent looked a thousand percent better, and he was perfectly willing to talk to me. I didn't even have to show him my badge.

He told me the same thing he'd told DeWayne, but I had a few additional questions.

"Gregory, who did you tell about the Richmonds' Valentine's Party?"

He considered for a moment. "Some friends. I mean I had to wear a big diaper. Like I wasn't going to talk about that?"

"Names?" I had my trusty Bic ready to ink the page.

"Well, yeah, I told some girls, but you can't talk to them. I don't want them to know I got knocked out and missed the party. They were impressed I was making nine hundred bucks for wearing a diaper."

"Tinkie will pay you anyway. Names?"

It turned out there was only one name. Victoria Nelson, a young woman whose family lived in Zinnia. It was a long shot, but until Wiley decided to spill the beans, it was the best lead I had, so I followed it.

The Nelson home was beautifully maintained. The lawn was clear of even a single leaf. Mrs. Nelson matched her house. Immaculate. And not very friendly. I explained why I was there.

“I heard what happened at the Richmond house. Of course we weren’t invited, thank goodness. But my Victoria has nothing to do with any of it. She wasn’t even home from Ole Miss.” The door slammed in my face with more force than necessary.

Had I felt Victoria had any potential as a lead I would have used my badge, but I couldn’t see any connection between a college girl Lent had tried to impress and a professional theft ring.

Since I was passing right by Millie’s Café, I stopped in to catch her up on the case. I hadn’t heard from Millie since she disappeared from the party. The way she’d fallen into lust with Claude the moment she was struck with the arrow left me curious. She’d admired Claude before Cupid smote her, but Millie was circumspect in her behavior. At the party she’d lost her inhibitions.

I wondered if she was still in lust with Claude, or if the heat of passion had subsided. I soon had my answer.

“He’s a wonderful man,” Millie gushed as she took my order for three lunches to go. I figured by the time I got back to Dahlia House Tinkie and Wiley could use some edible grub. Tinkie, for all of her good intentions, could turn a potato into a military weapon.

“You barely know Claude,” I cautioned. It was true, though, that Millie’s cheeks were flushed and her step was light. She looked like a schoolgirl with her first serious crush.

“I know that, Sarah Booth. I’m not a fool. We want to get to know each other. He’s invited me to Washington to see his bar.” She was glowing with happiness, and I found it hard not to clap and whistle. It had been a while since Millie had been interested in anyone.

“Do you think the arrow had anything to do with--”

“With the way I feel about Claude?” She put her pencil behind her ear. “I’ve had a lot of

resistance to falling for anyone. Too much potential pain. I didn't go to the party expecting to find a companion, but I did. It happened and there was nothing I could do to stop it. If that's magic or Cupid's arrow or just timing, I can't say. But that little hairy man in a diaper is a special person. Even if he is a thief. I'd give up all my jewelry for this feeling. I wish you'd just let him go."

"Let him go?" The words had an ominous ring. My gut was a little late in reacting, but when it finally did, I thought I might throw up. I'd left Tinkie alone with a thief and exhibitionist—and a master manipulator.

I tore down the road toward Dahlia House. I would never forgive myself if—I banished those thoughts. As soon as I parked, I grabbed my gun from the truck and raced up the stairs. The front door was wide open.

"Tinkie!" I called, my chest so tight I almost couldn't breathe. "Tinkie!"

There was no answer.

I pushed through the dining room and paused at the kitchen door. Leaning against it, I listened. Someone seemed to be trying to talk. I kicked the door open and ducked into the room, gun pointed.

Tinkie had been tied to a kitchen chair and gagged.

I pulled the gag from her mouth. "Are you hurt?"

"No," she said. "Thank goodness you're here. Wiley got away. He caught me by surprise and tied me up."

I looked at the nylon rope that had been used to tie her. "How did he know to get the rope from the tack room?" I asked.

Tinkie's blue eyes widened and she pressed her lips together.

“Dammit, Tinkie. You let him go!”

“He’s got a sick baby, Sarah Booth. What was I supposed to do?”

“Did he at least tell you where the pick up point is?”

Her grin would have lit a subway. “You bet he did. I’m tender-hearted, Sarah Booth, but I’m not an idiot.”

The Slocum Gin was a black splotch against the starry sky as Tinkie and I cut across a cotton field. We’d parked half a mile away down an old tractor path. Luckily it hadn’t rained in days, and the frost-covered ground crunched beneath our boots as we hurried toward the abandoned gin. My breath condensed in front of me and my fingers ached inside my gloves.

“I’m freezing,” Tinkie said.

“Just be glad we aren’t wearing togas,” I said. “What did the Greeks do during winter?”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care.”

“If we were wearing togas, we wouldn’t have any place to put our guns.” Idle chitchat was one of my social skills.

“Hush!” Tinkie grabbed my arm and pulled me to the ground as headlights swept the field when a car pulled into the old gin. “See, I told you Wiley wouldn’t rat us out. The kingpin thief is here.”

I wasn’t as easily convinced as my partner that Wiley had kept his mouth shut, though it didn’t make sense that the brains behind the burglary ring would knowingly walk into an

ambush. We ran across the field and ducked behind the back of the building. Though I strained my ears, I couldn't hear a sound.

"Boost me up," Tinkie said. "I can climb in that window."

"Okay. Just be careful."

I used my laced fingers as a stirrup and lifted her to the window where she could climb inside. "I'll go around to the front."

"Don't get hurt."

"I plan on staying very safe."

When she was inside, I eased around the building to examine the car parked out front. It was a beautiful Mercedes. Perhaps Wiley hadn't lied about meeting the moneyman.

When another set of headlights swept the front of the building, I was safely hidden behind the Mercedes. I hadn't expected two parties. And I knew Wiley wasn't driving a Mercedes. Nor the black Escalade that pulled into the lot. A slender person got out of the SUV holding what looked like an army rifle and slipped into the building without making a sound.

I felt in the back of my pants for my puny little pistol. Tinkie and I were greatly out-gunned.

When another vehicle, this one a loud truck with a bad muffler, pulled into the parking lot of the old gin, I realized I'd badly underestimated what was about to happen. I was positive of it when a short, barrel-chested man and a woman wearing a long flannel nightgown got out of the truck and walked toward the building.

"Pssst! Pssst! Wiley! Don't go in there. They have guns."

"And they have my money," Wiley said.

"My grandbaby needs medicine," Mama Ryan said. She brought forth her trusty

shotgun. "They'll give Wiley the money he earned. Or else."

"Stole," I whispered under my breath. "Not earned, stole."

"It's as much his as it is theirs."

Mama had a point.

"Don't go in there. You'll get hurt." I tried one more time to reason with them.

Wylie's answer was to push open the big creaking door and boldly step into the room. "I've come for my money," he said into the dark, echoey building. "Give it to me and I'll be on my way."

"Come and get it, little man," a female voice called out to him. "I hate to say it, Wiley. You're a talented thief, but you've about outlived your usefulness."

"Don't do anything foolish," a baritone cautioned the woman. A baritone I knew very well. Harold Erkwel was in that cotton gin. I realized too late that it was his Mercedes. What was Harold doing in the middle of this mess? I crept to the metal door that remained cracked open and peered inside.

"You should have minded your own business, Harold," the woman said. "What did you think would happen here? You've been kind to me, but now you're just a loose end I have to tie up."

"I came here to talk some sense into you," Harold said calmly. "You can return the stolen items. The young man who was attacked went home today. He's fine. Just give everything back and I'll help you with this, Prentiss."

Prentiss Luce? It wasn't possible. She was from a good family. She had every advantage. She—

"You're so naïve, Harold. So easy to manipulate. You never suspected a thing. When I

heard about the party from my gabby little cousin, Victoria, I knew you'd invite me if I asked. You gave me all the details. You virtually helped me set up the burglary. You were my unwitting accomplice--until you remembered I disappeared in the house for a while. Then you got suspicious."

"You can walk this back, Prentiss. Think about it."

"You were so concerned that you'd abandoned me while you went off with Sarah Booth to find the real cupid." She walked through a shaft of moonlight that came in from a hole in the roof. She held the gun where she could fire at will. "I was in Hilltop helping Wylie load up the Richmonds' silver and jewels. By this time next week, they'll be sold in New Orleans and I'll have another tidy sum stored away."

"Prentiss, if you'll give yourself up, I know Coleman will work with you. Tinkie and Oscar aren't vindictive. They'll speak up for you. I promise."

"It's ironic, you know. This is my last haul. I was going to sever ties with Wiley and friends."

"All I want is my money," Wylie said, advancing into the building. He was fearless and his mama had his back. "You promised and my boy needs it."

"You're a fool, Wiley. You thought we had a deal. I only paid you two percent of what you stole—a pittance. Now I don't have to do that." Prentiss swung the gun toward him. "There is no honor among thieves."

The spray of bullets came with such speed that Wylie and his mom barely jumped out of the way.

"Prentiss, don't!" Harold called.

There was no time for hesitation. I hurled myself through the door, doing a roll and

ducking behind a piece of rusty machinery as bullets pinged all around me. I chanced a look, but I didn't see Prentiss or anyone else. The building was dark and appeared empty, though I knew better.

"Harold?" I hissed.

My answer was another spray of hot lead. That gun of hers had to hold a thousand bullets. I was afraid to fire my gun for fear I'd hit an innocent.

"Sarah Booth?" Harold spoke from my right, and he eased up beside me. "Get out of here."

"Not a chance."

"You can't reason with her."

"I know, but I'm not leaving you. How did you figure it out?"

"No one in her family could believe she was making money in her art gallery. She never sold anything. Never really tried. I put two and two together. She asked me about Tinkie's party. She was too interested in the details. More than a social interest."

"How did you know to come here?"

"Tinkie told me. She called this afternoon. Don't be mad. She thought I might be helpful."

"Why didn't she just call DeWayne?" I was a little put out.

"She did. He's in the rafters. That's why I got here first."

"There's only one of her and four of us—six if you count Wiley and Mama Ryan. Let's take her down."

"She has an assault weapon," Harold reminded me. "We need a plan."

Another hail of bullets pinged all around us, then mowed across the building to the last

place I'd last seen Wiley and his mother. Prentiss had us pinned down. But she didn't know about Tinkie and DeWayne. I hoped.

"Prentiss, you're running out of time. Just put the gun down." Harold wasn't a quitter. He kept at Prentiss.

"Why'd you even agree to meet Wiley?" I yelled out.

"Loose end," she said.

I had to give it to Prentiss. She was confident. She'd meant to kill Wiley and made no bones about saying so.

It was a fatal mistake.

Wiley rushed out of the darkness toward Prentiss while Mama set up a barrage of cover for him with her shotgun. Wiley darted, spun, cut cartwheels, and handsprings as he evaded Prentiss's answering gunfire. The too-long sweatpants flapped behind him like he was a scarecrow.

When he bowled into Prentiss, knocking her backwards, two figures repelled from the roof of the old gin. Tinkie and DeWayne dropped like giant spiders right on top of Prentiss.

Without a second of hesitation, Tinkie whacked her upside the head with the butt of her gun. "I could have shot her, but I thought this would be more fun," Tinkie said as she stepped out of the rope harness and used it to tie Prentiss up.

I went to help but DeWayne held up his hand. "Tinkie's been itching to do this for the last half hour. Let her finish." DeWayne pulled out his cell phone and snapped photos of Tinkie hog-tying Prentiss. "Coleman is going to love this."

He turned to me. "I need the badge back, Sarah Booth. Coleman said if I didn't get it back, he was going to skin me."

Reluctantly I pulled it from my pocket and gave it to him. "I didn't get to tune up a single suspect. That's not fair. Tinkie got to."

Harold put an arm around me. "Fair is that we're all here and no one is harmed."

The door of the gin creaked and DeWayne sprang into action. Wiley and his mama were headed into the night. "Come on, Sarah Booth, you can help me arrest them."

It wasn't the victory I'd hoped for, but I did my duty. In less than ten minutes we had Wiley, Mama Ryan, and Prentiss loaded in Harold's vehicle for delivery to the courthouse. DeWayne had already picked up the two caterers who'd been in on the heist. They'd tried to run, but they hadn't gone far enough to avoid DeWayne's reach.

As DeWayne and Harold drove away, I stood outside the gin with my partner. "DeWayne will get all of the stolen items back," I assured her. "It's over."

"Not completely," Tinkie said, and when I pressed her for more information, she would only smile. "You'll see," she promised. "I'm planning another party."

The promised party was better than I could ever hope. It consisted of Tinkie, Wiley, Millie, and me. We sat in the Delaney Detective Agency offices at Dahlia House sipping mimosas and eating a tray of snacks Millie delivered. She was back in Zinnia after a weeklong vacation in Washington D.C. with her new beau.

"I'm in love," she told us without any embarrassment or hesitation. "It's the most amazing thing. Wiley, I know you aren't Cupid. In fact, you're a crook. But that arrow did something to me."

"That's ridiculous." I couldn't believe a gown woman was going to put her romantic life in

the hands of a hairy conman just because he showed up at a party in a diaper with a bow and rubber-tipped arrows. “You were shot with a toy.”

“Toy or not, it opened my heart. Claude is going to find someone to run his bar and he’s coming to Zinnia to help me with the café. We’re thinking about a liquor license for Millie’s Café.”

“That’s wonderful,” Tinkie gushed.

“While I appreciate this gentleman giving me a shot of love,” Millie said as she eyed Wiley, “I’m not certain he should be out of jail. Tinkie why aren’t you pressing charges?”

“He has his reasons, and I have mine.” Tinkie’s blue eyes were filled with mischief. “Wiley has agreed to help me with something.”

“What?” I asked. I was far more interested in my mimosa than in what games Tinkie had in mind to play with Wiley Ryan. The truth was, though, I was glad she’d convinced DeWayne not to pursue charges against the little satyr. And I suspected Tinkie had given him money for his son’s medical treatment. I couldn’t prove it, and she’d never admit it, but I knew the boy was at the top of the kidney transplant list. The condition that had prevented him from getting a new kidney had been successfully treated.

“Wiley, maybe you should show her?” Tinkie said. “See, I think Wiley has a special gift. I want him to bestow it on you, Sarah Booth.”

Red alert! Red alert! Tinkie was messing in my romance department. I stood to run out of the room, but I was too slow. Wiley had his toy bow and arrow, which was pointed right at my heart. As he released the string, I dove right, falling behind my desk. The arrow missed me by a hair and struck Sweetie Pie right in her chest.

Outside Dahlia House, I heard a strange bark. Before I could grab her, Sweetie was up

and dashing outside. Everyone ran to the window to see Sweetie Pie down on her front paws, tail in the air wagging, as she greeted a very handsome black lab.

“Sweetie Pie!” I called out. I could see the hearts flying between the two dogs. “Sweetie Pie Delaney!”

But she and the black lab disappeared around the house. I heard the yip-yip of two dogs playing. I knew without a doubt that if the lab didn’t have a collar, I was now the owner of two dogs. Sweetie had a mate.

I turned on Tinkie and Wiley. “Look what you’ve done.”

“The arrow was meant for you, Sarah Booth.” Tinkie wasn’t even dismayed. “Next time.”

“I need another pitcher of mimosas.” I took the empty pitcher and headed for the kitchen, the laughter of my friends following me. I’d just uncocked a new bottle of champagne when I caught the scent of chocolate. I whirled to find Cupid fluttering in the air behind me. He was the Cupid of Valentine cards with his perfect baby body and little white feathered wings. He dropped bonbons at me as he circled the room, bow and arrow at the ready.

I’d had it with the devious little demi-god. “If you shoot that arrow at me, I’ll spay you with Raid and then beat you to death with a flyswatter.” I put some oomph in my threat by picking up the yellow swatter from the hook on the cabinet.

“Looking for love in all the wrong places,” the little imp sang as he dove at me, his wings aflutter.

I ducked under the kitchen table. “Stop it. Get away from me. I swear—”

Cupid settled atop the kitchen table. His chubby little legs elongated and his body filled out with womanly curves in a darker hue. Because Jitty was a fashion diva, the diaper was replaced with a gorgeous red teddy. She still held the bow and quiver of arrows, but she

dropped them to the floor.

“I’m not gonna shoot you with an arrow of love. You fightin’ it so hard, your black old heart would probably abscess. Pus would spew everywhere and spray—“

“Stop it!” I covered my ears and stood up. “Stop it right now. You leave me alone. You and Tinkie and everyone else.” I was at the edge. “I want to love someone, but I can’t force it.”

Jitty jumped to the floor. She walked around me letting out a low whistle. “I won’t ever say this again, but just this once, Sarah Booth, you’re right.”

I slapped my ear, because surely I’d misheard. “What?”

“You’re right?”

“About what?”

She sighed and shook her head. “You and Diana Ross. It’s true. You really can’t hurry love. It’s just that I’m afraid you’ll miss out on the one man who can love you for the rest of your life.”

Jitty knew something. “Which man is that?”

A sly smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “You know I can’t tell you anythin’ like that.”

“Bu you know who my true love is.”

She didn’t deny it. She just changed the subject. “Love makes the world go round, Sarah Booth. I know you’ve been hurt, more than once. And you’ve hurt your fair share of men. But you can’t give up. You can’t hide out here in Dahlia House, pretending that work satisfies all your needs.”

“Who am I supposed to be with? If you’d just tell me, it would simplify things and I could get on with it?”

Jitty only shook her head. “Remember this, Sarah Booth. The heart is a muscle. If you

want it to grow strong in love, you have to exercise it.”

Her words stopped me cold. “Who said that?”

“Jitty the wise. Now get back in there with your friends. And open your heart. You never know who’s going to walk through the door around this place.”

Just as I heard Tinkie’s footsteps in the dining room, Jitty disappeared. The door pushed open and Tinkie stepped into the room. She sniffed. “I smell chocolate.”

“It’s just your imagination,” I said, grabbing the pitcher of mimosas.

“You aren’t mad at me, are you?” Tinkie asked.

I bumped the kitchen door open with my hip. “Even if I was mad, I couldn’t stay that way. I love you, Tinkie. Sometimes, the love of a friend is the best love of all.”

As we left the kitchen, I looked back to see Cupid fluttering above the sink. He gave me a big wink before the door closed. “Sooner or later, love is gonna getcha,” he sang so softly only I heard.