

A Pinch of Murder

A Cardamom & Co. Mystery

Book One

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CHAPTER ONE

A free sample from the Cardamom & Co. newsletter

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A Spice Like Snow

The morning of the Maple Festival smelled wrong.

Not bad. Wrong. There was the wet-bark smell I had come to expect from Cedar Hollow in late March, and beneath it the sweetness of the syrup vendors already setting up on the green, and beneath that — somewhere — a thread of something burnt and chemical that had no business being there.

“Methi.” I closed the back door against the cold and looked down at the cat, who was not looking at me. “Don’t pretend you don’t smell it.”

Methi twitched the tip of her tail, which is what she does when she is being insulted and would like me to stop.

I switched on the kettle. The shop was still dark, the way I like it for the first half hour — only the small lamp over the counter, throwing buttery light across the rows of brass jars. Cumin. Cardamom. Coriander. Three kinds of cinnamon, because Americans only know one. I had labelled them all in my own handwriting when I opened in October, and I still touched each jar in turn every morning, the way my Amma touched the brass lamp in our prayer corner in Madras. A small ritual to start the day. A small reminder that this — the wooden counter, the smell of dry chillies, the silence before customers — was mine.

Methi jumped up onto the counter and walked across the order pad, leaving a thin trail of orange hair.

“You are not staff,” I told her. “I have explained this.”

She sat on top of yesterday’s accounts and began to wash her face.

Outside, the light was the colour of weak chai. Maple Street was quieter than it should have been on a festival morning, but only just; the town was holding its breath the way Cedar Hollow does before it lets in a crowd. The big festival banner was already up across the road, strung between the post office and the library.

Cedar Hollow Maple Festival. Forty-seventh year. All welcome.

I had not yet decided whether I, after five months, counted as part of the all welcome or as part of the welcoming.

The cake stood on the marble at the back, where it had been standing since I carried it down from the flat at twenty to six.

I had baked it on Monday night, upstairs, with the windows open and the radio off. The buttercream I did at seven, down here, alone, in the last quiet half hour of the morning — saffron and cardamom beaten into one bowl, and eight rosettes piped out of one bag, and three silver dragees set in the middle with tweezers because my hands are not what my grandmother’s were. It took nine minutes. It is the only nine minutes of that day I would afterwards be able to account for without help.

I washed the bowl. I washed the bag. I put the cake under the glass and I did not look at it again, because a person who keeps looking at a cake is a person who is about to move a dragee, and a moved dragee is never once in the history of baking an improvement.

The bell above the door went off. I had not unlocked the door.

“It’s me, Asha, don’t shoot.”

Esther Whitcomb came in on a wave of cold air and Chanel No. 5 and bony righteousness. She is seventy-two, four feet eleven if she stretches, and has decided over the five months of our acquaintance that I am her project. She has her own key. I had not given her one.

“You stop locking that door,” she said. “It’s an insult.”

“It is a business,” I said. “Business doors lock.”

“It’s a small-town business.” She set her handbag down on the counter, which scandalised Methi, who jumped off the counter and stalked away into the back. “Big-town doors lock. We let the wind in.”

She had already opened her coat. Beneath it she was wearing two cardigans and what I had come to recognise as her Festival Sweater — knitted in the shape of a maple leaf so badly that it looked like a hand. Esther had been knitting it for three weeks. She had shown it to me, twice, at every stage.

“Your blend,” she said. “Have you ground it.”

“I always grind it Tuesday.”

“And today is —”

“Tuesday.”

“Then we are well.” She lifted herself onto the bar stool at the end of the counter with the small grunt of a woman who has earned her grunts. “Asha. Asha. Asha. Listen to me.”

“Mm.”

“There is a woman in town.”

“There are many women in town.”

“There is a woman in town from the internet.”

I poured the boiled water into the pot of chai I had already prepared for her — black tea, fresh ginger, six pods of green cardamom that I had cracked with the side of my knife, two cloves, and a single peppercorn that had taken me three months to convince Esther was a good idea. The smell rose, and the smell was correct. The smell of the shop on a March morning was correct. Whatever I had been smelling outside the back door was not coming from in here.

“Margaux Sterling,” Esther said, like the name was a fact she had taught herself last night. “Five hundred thousand followers. Mar-go, not Mar-gucks. I made that mistake at the Inn yesterday and I am paying for it. She is here to film the festival. She does food. Foods. She does foods on the internet.”

“Mm.”

“She gave Beau a one-star review at the weekend.”

I poured the chai through the small brass strainer my brother had sent me from Bangalore. Esther’s eyes were on me; she had told me about Beau’s review three times already this week and was now reaching the point of needing to tell me again.

“Beau,” I said carefully, “deserved some of that review.”

“Beau,” Esther said, “deserved none of it. Cedar Hollow defends its own.”

I slid the cup across to her. She wrapped both hands around it without looking, which was the only one of her habits I found tender.

“Beau’s pancakes,” I said, “have not changed since 1986.”

“They are the same pancakes. That is the point.”



The bell over the door went off again. Properly, this time — I had unlocked the front while I was making the chai. The cold rushed in and with it a smell I did not recognise. Strong. Expensive. Something built in a laboratory to suggest sandalwood without knowing what sandalwood actually smelled like.

A woman came into the shop and the shop became smaller.

I had not, I thought, ever seen anyone in Cedar Hollow wear a coat like that. It was cream — cream in late March, in a town with mud — and tailored close, and the buttons were the colour of bone. Her hair was the gold a salon makes when it is asked very specifically for that gold. She was not tall. She filled the room as if she were.

“Oh, hello,” she said. She smiled at Esther without seeing her. “I love this. I love this find. Tell me this is the place.”

“This is the place,” I said, because five months in retail had taught me to answer that question the way customers wanted it answered.

“Cardamom and Co.” She read the sign off the wall behind me with the slow appreciation of a woman who had been told her appreciation was valuable. “Cardamom and Company. Tell me there are four of you.”

“There is one of me.”

“Even better.” She walked toward the counter. She walked the way someone walks when they have, all their life, been the most-watched person in any room. She stopped two feet from me and put her hands flat on the wood — long fingers, two rings, a manicure too perfect for a muddy morning in Vermont. “I am Margaux. Sterling. You have heard of me?”

“I have heard of you.”

I felt Esther sit up half an inch on her bar stool.

“Wonderful.” Margaux’s eyes went over the shop in a long, slow sweep — the brass jars, the labelled racks, the small chalkboard that read Today’s Chai: Saffron-Cardamom in my careful hand. “I am here for the festival. I am here, mostly, for you. I have been told you are the only authentic Indian spice merchant in a hundred miles of New England and I have a thing for authenticity.”

“That is kind of someone.”

“Asha Iyer.” She said my name like a person who had practised it.

“That is correct.”

“Asha.” She leaned in a quarter inch. Her perfume came with her. “I have a question. A small, specific question. Before the festival. Before I bring my camera in here and make you famous. May I?”

“You may.”

“How long has it been,” Margaux Sterling said, “since you spoke to your cousin Nikhil in Mumbai?”

The shop, the shop’s particular morning silence, the smell of the chai I had just made and the smell of whatever expensive thing this woman had sprayed on her wrist, all of it stopped.

Esther’s cup made a small clean noise on the saucer.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

Margaux Sterling smiled. She had very white teeth, and a small dimple, and the most patient eyes I had ever seen in a room.

“I’ll be back at twelve,” she said. “Save me a piece of that cake.”

She set a small white pastry box on the counter between us. The lid was embossed in old-fashioned gold: The Hollow Inn. “Almost forgot. From Mrs Hollander this morning. Try the chouquettes — a small gift.”

And she walked back out into the cold, taking the laboratory sandalwood with her.

Methi, somewhere in the back, made a low and unfriendly sound.

Esther set her cup down with care.

“Asha,” she said, in an entirely different voice from the one she had walked in with. “Who is Nikhil.”

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