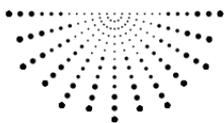


(EXCERPT) VANGIE VALE  
AND THE CORPSELESS  
CUSTARD

THE MATCHBAKER MYSTERIES, BOOK TWO

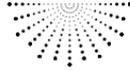


R.L. SYME





## DEDICATION

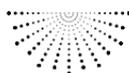


*For Kristy.*

“People in small towns,  
much more than in cities,  
share a destiny.”

-Richard Russo

## CHAPTER ONE



*Four Buttes, Montana*

*A*pril was totally the cruelest month in Montana. One day, there was streaming sun, and the next day, snow. I never knew which to prepare for, because even the weather people didn't seem to have a good handle on which face we would wake up to every morning.

I took the locals' advice, and wore layers, everywhere, in case I had to peel them off or put them on at a moments' notice. So when I showed up in Four Buttes, having left Saint Agnes in the midst of a snow storm, I was wearing too many layers for the beating-down sun only an hour north.

While I unloaded the back of the Tank—my too-wide green Hummer, which had been a gift from my over-worried father when I had to move to the Rocky Mountains—I was sweating. But the custards had to get out of the Tank and into the refrigerator, if I wanted the fillings to stay intact.

Nadine Winters had led the way, since I wasn't super familiar with the Montana backroads yet, and she parked her old gray car against what looked like a weathered railroad

tie, overgrown with grass, on one edge of a wide gravel drive. There were already two other cars, although we were supposed to be the first to arrive, and I started to sweat more.

I hated being unprepared.

This day had been referred to, by Nadine Winters, on more than one occasion, as the *movers-and-shakers* group, which I thought ironic for a Bunco group. But she didn't just mean the dice they threw. She meant, these women had some power.

Part of the reason why Nadine brought me along as a sub was so that I could meet them, and they could sample my baked goods. Potential clients, she'd said.

I was just glad my custards had set properly. Fenna Teuling, who was maybe the most movery-and-shakery woman among them, was apparently in love with a good old English custard. Nadine had me make custard tarts for the Bunco group, mostly to impress Fenna.

Hence the sweating.

"Let's help Vangie get these inside," Nadine said as she stepped out of her car. "Before Fenna gets here. It'll be a nice surprise."

Carolyn Murphy, whose husband owned the feed store in Saint Agnes, had driven over with Nadine, and she climbed out of the old car, looking down at her hands. "Let me take my gloves off first."

"Oh, just carry a box of custards," Nadine said, grabbing a box out of the back of the Tank. "They're not dirty."

Carolyn gave me a little smile and held out her hands for a box. Unlike me, she was a regular in this group, which pulled women from all over two counties, to play a game once a month, but mostly to rub shoulders. I suddenly wished I'd dressed up a little more than I had.

It had been tempting to wear my clergy collar, but I'd

heard there was another pastor in the group, and I didn't want to be presumptuous. I was here as a baker, and a substitute at that. Not as a mover-and-a-shaker.

I pulled out the last box of custards and ran after Carolyn, across the gravel drive and to the front door of the sprawling one-story house. There was more food in the back, but the custards were the most important.

The door was open and I walked in the side door of a charming little ranch house. A plump woman with gray-streaked dark hair closed the door behind me, pointing down the hallway and directing me toward the kitchen. Her heeled shoes made deep thumping noises on the natural wood floors. The ceilings and trim were also wood, and all the door knockers and accents were in thick, black wrought iron. Gilded paintings hung on the white walls, and where the hallway opened into a large room, a massive elk torso had been mounted with its head tilted to one side, like it was looking just over my shoulder.

"Just through there," said the woman behind me, pointing off to our left, where the hall opened again, and I could hear women's voices chattering away.

"Oh, Evangeline, there you are," called out Nadine, before I could see her. "Thank you, Vera."

"All I did was show her inside." The woman finally passed me, placing a hand on my shoulder and guiding me into the kitchen.

The all-wood-all-the-time look continued into the large, open kitchen. Floors, ceilings, trim, pantry doors...even the refrigerator had a finished wood door, like it was secretly blending in to the kitchen.

Three women stood around the island, opening the custard boxes. I recognized Nadine and Carolyn. The other woman had a shiny shock of wavy red hair. She couldn't

have been more than fifty, and her smile glistened, as she unpacked the individually-boxed custards.

“These are gorgeous,” said the redhead, an effusive undercurrent to her words. She picked up one of the white Match-bakery boxes, which were stuffed with white tissue paper and tied with the customary robin’s-egg blue ribbon. They were quite pretty, even if I did say so myself.

Of course, Emma did them all. My shop neighbor had come over to help me prep all the desserts for this event early in the morning—mostly to fill my ear with gossip about all the women who would be there.

“Wait until you taste them,” Carolyn Murphy said with a smile, transferring a few boxes into the open refrigerator. “Danny and I got to sample one last night.”

“Oh, Leigh, this is Vangie.” Nadine gestured between me and the redhead. “She’s the new pastor at Saint Agnes Community.”

“And a champion baker, I see,” Leigh said, reaching for my hand. I set the box of custards on one of the slate gray granite countertops and wiped my hand off before accepting hers.

“It’s good to finally meet you, Leigh.” I glanced off to the side as the woman who’d opened the door—Vera, I guess—came around to close the refrigerator door. Carolyn was too busy pulling custards out of boxes to pay much attention.

“Women pastors need to stick together.” Leigh winked one of her caramel-brown eyes at me and pulled at the box I’d just set down. “Thank you so much for making all our treats. These look incredible.”

“There’s more in the car,” I said, gesturing back toward the hallway. “I just wanted to get these inside so we could put them in the refrigerator until we set them out.”

“Let me help you,” said Vera, coming up behind me again, like an elderly pop-up doll. I may have jumped.

We left the other three women to unpack the remaining custards, and Vera clopped behind me all the way back out to the Tank. Built like a sturdy farmer, she could probably handle her own, but I still felt guilty asking her to carry boxes.

"Thanks for your help," I said, handing her the lightest of the long boxes—only containing a fruit tray and a plate of colorful macarons.

"That's why I come early." She looked down at the box, then looked into the long back of the Tank. "You can give me another box. Then you don't have to make another trip."

Reluctantly, I put another pile of cookies, stacking the boxes so they would protect the contents.

"I grew up on a ranch, Pastor Vale, I'm used to carrying my weight." There was an air of resignation in her tone, but determination, too. I liked Vera already. Even in her flowered linen dress and thick heels, even with her white gloves, she was ready to work.

"You can call me Vangie," I said, following her inside and pushing the front door closed with my heel.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she said, her head shaking. "Wouldn't be proper."

I smirked, internally, at all the less-than-proper things I'd been called in my days as a pastor. Not being addressed with respect was the least of my worries these days. Not getting shot was up there. Of course, as my neighbor, Sheriff Malcolm Dean would have said, I'd stuck my nose where it didn't belong, and gotten shot as a result. I preferred to think of it as *helping*, rather than *meddling*, but I couldn't control what Malcolm thought any more than I could hold back the dawn.

When we returned to the kitchen, the boxes had been put away, and Carolyn was gone. Nadine and Leigh stood, huddled around the kitchen island, whispering about something in fairly heated tones. As soon as they saw they weren't

alone, they both plastered on big smiles and came over to help carry.

I began to set out the spread, but the awkwardness of having interrupted a deep conversation didn't retreat. I wanted to ask Nadine if something was wrong, but I couldn't ask in front of all these strangers.

When Carolyn still didn't return, and we'd finished laying out the spread—along with Emma's encouraged decorations, bless her heart—Leigh took the boxes out an open door and Nadine grabbed the other two, following close.

They clearly had something they needed to discuss without prying ears, and I didn't follow. Instead, I kept fluffing paper and turning cookies, while Vera emptied bottles into a large glass bowl she'd placed on the island.

"How long have you known Leigh?" I asked, finishing with all the fluff I could possibly do, and turning to help Vera with the punch.

She finished emptying a green bottle of what looked like ginger ale and passed me the empty container. "Since she first got her post here. I'm not sure how long it's been. Maybe twenty years or so."

"Wow." I took the coke bottle over to the sink and began to rinse it. "I will admit, I'm a little blown away by how beautiful this house is."

"Oh, this was her late husband's house." Vera passed me another bottle. "I'm sure that, whatever we pay her at church, she couldn't afford this."

"You're one of her parishoners?"

"Yes." She walked around the island to the wood-covered refrigerator and pulled open the bottom drawer, where a large, deep freezer was hidden, as well. Vera removed a round plastic container. "I've been on the parish council for the last two years now."

I watched her remove the lid and use a pair of tongs to

pull out a ring of solid purple—it looked like ice cream, frozen in some molded shape. Vera placed the ring into the pink punch and it floated on the top of the already bubbly surface.

“Fenna isn’t in the backyard,” came Carolyn’s voice from across the room. “I don’t know who told—” She stopped when she saw me, then looked at Vera, and around the room like there should be others. “Where did Nadine get off to?”

“Are you sure she isn’t back there?” Vera asked, wiping her hands on the white towel that hung in front of the oven. “Her car’s here.”

“Leigh said she’d be in the backyard.” Carolyn had a nervous look about her, like she felt she was speaking out of turn. “But I went through the gazebo and the garden, and even down by the creek, and I can’t find her.”

“Did you need something?” I asked, gesturing around. “I’m done here, so I could help out if you need it.”

“Oh, no, dear.” Carolyn fussed with her hands and then clasped them, dropping them to her stomach. “I just need to speak with Fenna before...”

Leigh’s voice carried out, from the hallway, “CeeCee!”

Carolyn turned around and started walking toward the hall. *Is she CeeCee?* It certainly seemed like she was answering to the name.

I backed into the sink, feeling suddenly exposed. It felt like those days in seventh grade when all your friends decided you were out of the *club* for drama’s sake, and would never talk about their plans with you in the room. Adolescence. I do not miss it.

Vera followed Carolyn into the hall and I took the coke bottles toward the exit that Leigh and Nadine had taken with the boxes, hoping I was moving in the direction of the recycling. Instead, I stumbled into the garage, where a large white vehicle was parked in the center of a double-wide. Storage

shelves were built into one side, and a couple of large freezers into the other side. I didn't see the trash anywhere, and set the bottles on the ground beside the door.

Leigh and Nadine must have gone out a side door, because the only way back into the house would have put them through the kitchen. Whatever they needed to talk about where I couldn't hear them...it must have been important.

I went back through the heavy door, toward the kitchen, hearing voices as I approached. I caught the door before it closed with the customary weighted thud, and let it drop silently, listening to the conversation I was being so carefully kept from.

"And if I ask her not to come," Leigh was saying, in that almost raspy alto voice with the twinge of East Coast vowels, "I'll have the whole parish council on my back."

"I'm saying, I've already asked her." Nadine's response was crisp and to-the-point, almost on-edge. "Vangie was our last sub. So it's Iris, or the ghost."

The word chilled my skin, and I found my hand clasping ever-so-slightly on the doorknob. Believing in ghosts probably wasn't usual for pastor types, but I'd seen enough unexplained phenomena in haunted houses, growing up, I had to at least remain open.

"She's on her way, Pastor." That voice was most definitely Vera, because I would have recognized Caroline. "Nothing we can do except welcome her."

"I don't want a repeat of last time," Leigh said, a little more forcefully. "You know she and Fenna don't get along."

"Fenna doesn't get along with anyone," came the snorted comment from Carolyn. She was most certainly not impressed with the path of the conversation.

The doorbell sounded and the four of them went immediately silent. I heard footsteps and my hand pulled the door

closed without thinking. I let my feet fall a little more forcefully on the wood floor as I walked into the kitchen, smiling.

“Thank you for finishing the punch, Vera,” Leigh said, looking up as I walked in. “And Vangie. Thank you for bringing all this lovely food.”

There was still a tension hanging in the air, although all three remaining women were smiling. Carolyn held a bag of garbage, the white bag hanging from red strings. I offered to take it, and she reluctantly handed it over, like she appreciated having something to busy her hands with.

“The garbage can is alongside of the house in a cage,” Leigh called out as I made my way back toward the garage.

As I left, I heard two more voices in the hallway, but I scooted outside with the trash, leaving the garage via the side door and finding a big, wooden box. When I pulled the black wrought iron latch, the whole front came open, like a swinging gate, and I could walk inside the *cage*. There were two large cans, one blue and one green, with white writing on the sides. I opened the green, and found it full to the brim with branches and lawn trimmings.

When I opened the blue, the stench of rotting food hit me in the face, and I tossed the bag inside, letting the top slam back down. I bent over to one side, feeling on the edge of sick, and noticed something white sticking to the side of the cage. When I walked around, I realized that it wasn't sticking there, it was pinned. A gold-trimmed white glove had gotten wedged between the cage and the house, in the inch of gap space at the top.

I walked around the cage, letting the little gate-like door close behind me, and went to the side farthest from the garage door. Another gold-trimmed white glove lay on the ground, appearing to match the one stuck in the cage.

The gold edging made a bit of a lacy ripple effect, and I picked up the discarded glove. On the palm, near where the

artery would have been on the wearer, someone had stitched, in red lettering, the letters *F-A-T*.

My barked-out laugh seemed to echo against the wood-sided house. What an unfortunate set of initials. Or a super cruel joke. Either way, I needed to leave them just where they were, in case someone came back for them.

I looked up, expecting to see the roof, since the house appeared to be one-story, but along the back, it looked like there might have been a second story, over the garage, perhaps. A closed window sat just above the garbage cage.

Someone must have thrown the gloves out the window and missed.

I kept walking, along the garage, and around the house. If I'd kept going in the opposite direction, I would've eventually come around to the front of the garage, but this way seemed to lead into the backyard.

As I crested the house, I saw the gazebo Carolyn had mentioned, up against a tall line of bushes. The bushes seemed to connect to a perpendicular row of bushes, like they were making a square around something. The garden?

The yard appeared to stretch out, beyond that, to a little grouping of several trees with white blossoms just starting to peep out. It was a big place, without neighbors, backed up to a hill that seemed to stretch up behind the garden.

"Oh, Vangie, dear," someone called out. I turned to see Nadine waving at me from the big porch. There were two large glass doors leading back into the house, and she had one open. "Should we take out the custards? It looks like Fenna's arrived."

I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans and trudged up the deck stairs. Fenna Teuling was the person that Emma had filled my ear about the most. I was looking forward to meeting the woman who had single-handedly turned her father's family farm into one of the largest

corporate farms in the northwest. If only for the sheer novelty.

Wait.

Fenna Teuling. *F. T.*

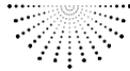
If her middle name started with an A...

I held up a hand and told Nadine to wait just a second. I ran around the house, hoping to snag the discarded gloves and hand them to their owner when I met her. No use having discarded gloves lying all over the countryside.

When I crested the edge of the house, however, the gloves were nowhere to be found. No slash of white tucked into the side of the house. No gold-crusted white glove on the gray-green grass.

They were both gone.

## CHAPTER TWO



“Where did you run off to?” Nadine asked when I came trudging back up the deck toward her. She had one hand on her hip, like a disappointed mother. I knew the gesture well.

“I thought...” I held back, still unsure of why a pair of gloves would bother me so much, but something seemed so...*off*. I couldn’t place exactly why. Shrugging my shoulders, I brushed it off. “I thought I’d left something over by the side of the house, but I guess not.”

“Leigh just got a text that Fenna is on her way.” Nadine held the door open for me and I walked into the bright, open living room. The house was an A-frame on this side, and the windows reached up for what felt like two or three stories.

The wood theme continued all through the house—they were nothing if not consistent. Animal heads, earth tones, wood...it was like being on the set of *Legends of the Fall*. Even the three card tables that dotted the room were earth-toned.

“I thought you said her car was here,” I said.

“It is. She probably walked home to grab something. She lives just over that hill.” Nadine pointed back toward the

shrubbed-in garden. "It's probably faster to walk over the hill than to get in her car and drive out to the main road and around to the ranch entrance, and then back through the ranch to her house."

I glanced out at the grassy hill. It wasn't too high, and just off in the distance was a small range of mountains. It made for a pretty picture—the blossoming trees, the bushes that would likely be full of lilac blooms in a month, the wavy grass on the hill, backdropped by the white-capped peaks. Montana was breathtaking, pretty much every second of the day.

"Oh, I forgot to give you these." Nadine produced a pair of white cloth gloves from her pocket. They weren't quite as nice as the ones I'd seen against the house, but they were still beautiful. They were satin, with a narrow V stretching from the wrist to the knuckles and filled with lace.

"What are these for?"

"We wear them when we play Bunco," she said, handing them over. "I brought an extra pair for you. Fenna insists on them."

"She does?"

"Yes." Nadine's shoulders raised and lowered, nervously. She looked around and leaned in. "Don't tell anyone I told you this, but we think she has some kind of a skin disease. She always wears gloves of some kind."

I tried not to look too interested, but this definitely caught my attention. "I'm happy to wear them. I wouldn't want to offend Miss Teuling."

Nadine crossed her arms, letting out a long breath through her nose. "She pretends it's about sanitation, but between you and me, everyone knows that's just an act."

"Emma told me a little bit about her, after you said she'd be here. I'm impressed at what she's been able to do with her father's business."

The former minister's wife snorted, hard. "You might be alone there."

"Meaning?"

She pressed her lips together. "We don't talk about these things as a group, of course, but... there are some people here who have been wronged pretty severely by the Teuling family. Either Fenna, or her father, Lars."

The information struck me as odd. "Then why invite her to your group?"

"Because she's Fenna Teuling." Nadine said her name as though no explanation was required. "If she wants to play Bunco, you let her play Bunco."

It was possible that my newness to the area was going to be a handicap in this area, because the logic still didn't make sense to me. It seemed like putting people who disliked each other together for an extended period of time was like asking for disaster.

But who was I to argue? I was only a sub. I clutched my gloves. "When should I put these on?"

"As soon as Fenna gets here." She led me past a couple of stuffed animal heads that seemed to be staring at me, and toward the sounds of other voices. "Don't tell anyone I told you about her hands. We don't talk about it."

I nodded, happy to stay complicit in whatever Nadine asked of me. Since I'd come to Saint Agnes, she had been a constant source of information for me. Her husband had once held my job at the church, and she was quite useful on more than one occasion. I didn't want to do anything to get her in trouble.

Voices echoed out from the kitchen. Coming around the corner, I found several more unfamiliar faces huddled around the custard boxes. Several of them remarked on how beautiful and perfectly decorated the custards were.

I waved off the compliments, giving a shy thanks. I didn't

want to admit that I had worked especially hard on these custards—practicing several batches before I got it just the way I wanted, to keep its structure well with all the berries piled on top.

The Matchbakery business was all well-and-good, but now that I'd hired more staff, I had to make sure business stayed up in order to keep my people employed. Once school was out, I planned to bring Leo on full-time until he left for Escoffier—which, after the winter he'd had, wasn't looking like it would happen any time soon—and I wanted to book some good summer parties and give him more direct experience with events.

If anyone could connect me to all the weddings and parties in this part of Montana, it would be this group of women. These custards had to be perfect.

Nadine went around the room introducing me to everyone, but I was having a hard time retaining all the names. I nodded at everyone, recognizing a few people from Nadine's conversations about the group. But the ones I'd really wanted to meet—Leigh, of course, and Fenna—were nowhere to be found.

I checked on the set of the custards, but it appeared they'd kept their form nicely. Only one of them appeared to be leaking, and I set another box on top of it, then put another up at that height, just for consistency.

Of course, I would eat the leaky custard. Wouldn't want someone else getting their hands on that one and putting up on Instagram. Hashtag: Matchbakery. Or more like #Matchbakeryfail. That was the last thing I wanted.

Although, looking around, this didn't seem much like the Instagram crowd.

More like the Facebook crowd.

Nadine ushered in two more women. One, a slighter older woman with gray hair under a stylish black hat. The

other was about sixty years younger, but had the same big, wide glasses—in tortoiseshell, instead of in black—and the same full lips and wry eyes. It was a little like looking at one of those *you'll never guess how she looks today* things that seemed to float around the internet, showing us what child actors had grown up to look like.

They had to be related.

Walking in behind them, Leigh glanced around the room and something was different about her. She'd changed clothes, for one, but her perpetual smile had faded just a touch. She met my eyes and made a beeline for me, wading through what was now a growing sea of strange faces.

"Almost everyone is here," Nadine said, catching Leigh as she walked by. "Have we started taking money yet?"

The red-haired pastor looked around her quickly-filling-up kitchen. "I guess we have to wait for Janice to show up with the Treasurer's box. Maybe we should start gathering our food and beverages and moving toward the living room?"

The crowd of women seemed to assent to that, and everyone began to pick up plates. Someone asked me to explain all the treats, and I took a second to point out the individually-boxed custards, wishing we'd waited for Fenna to arrive. I explained the macarons and the homemade dips and the exotic fruit salad and the fancy cheese tray.

Everyone seemed enamored with the food for a few seconds, and they began filling their plates. I snuck two of the custards out of the pile. The leaky one, and a perfect one with the little quenelle of sweet whipped cream still intact.

I wanted to save one for Fenna.

The perfect one, I slipped back into the icy refrigerator, and kept the leaky one off to the side for myself. Everyone gave beautiful compliments as they adjourned to the living

room with their plates. It was practically the middle of the afternoon, and several women began to eat as they chatted.

I couldn't listen to all the different conversations that were passing around the room, so I focused on watching the food go out the door. The macarons were popular, of course, and I'd made several different kinds, so everyone seemed to find something they liked.

The thinking-shoes woman, Vera, clopped through the kitchen, from the living room, with a few coats on her arm, and asked the room at-large if anyone would like to retire their coat. The older woman in the thick-rimmed black glasses offered hers up, though it was her younger twin who carried over.

"These are so delicious, Vangie," said a raspy voice near my elbow.

I turned around to find Leigh Peters with a half-eaten pink macaron in her hand.

"I have an apprentice who makes those now," I said, smiling at her. "He's going to a pastry school in the fall, now, and he's getting quite good at the macarons."

"Well, he's a master now." Leigh's smile hadn't faded even a watt since I'd first seen her. A person with a constant smile could go in one of two directions: Pollyanna, and The Joker. So far, Leigh seemed cool, but I was withholding my judgment. Sometimes, smiles covered more than they revealed.

"You have a familiar accent. What's that, Brooklyn?"

"I guess I haven't lost it yet," Leigh said, pulling another macaron off the plate. "But mind is nowhere near as thick as my sister's. She's only lived here a few years..." Her smile hitched, for just a few seconds, but she recovered quickly. "She'd just gotten divorced and needed a change of scenery, and that's definitely what this place is."

"Tell me about it," I said, with probably more feeling than I'd intended. To cover the odd moment of vulnerability, I

quickly grabbed a glass of punch. “Where’d you live in Brooklyn?”

“Park Slope.”

“Yeah, I know that area.”

“Really?” Her brow immediately went up. “Most people around here couldn’t tell Park Slope from New Rochelle. How do you know Brooklyn?”

“My mom grew up in Williamsburg,” I said, taking a long sip. “You have the exact accent she had.”

Another little hitch in Leigh’s smile at the word *had*, like she could read the coded *don’t ask me* message in my eyes. I didn’t talk about my mother. It was easy to forget Leigh was a pastor, until she started leaving silences like that, for a person to fill with all their unmentionables. Pastors were great at pregnant pauses.

But I didn’t give in. I knew that game.

“Well, I love Montana,” she said, after apparently realizing I wasn’t going to divulge anything. “I’ve been here for...a long time. There are things I miss about Brooklyn, of course, but it’s a different place than it was when I was growing up. It’s full of hipsters now. And restaurants that make salad in a beaker and have you inhale boxed smoke as part of your meal.”

I chuckled, covering my mouth, like a stealthy cough, but I knew exactly what she meant. Suddenly, the East Coast and home seemed so very far away. Even just listening to her accent was bringing up memories of my mother that had stayed long-buried. Tales of growing up under the Williamsburg bridge, and playing in the fire hydrants in the hot summers. Even just the cadence of Leigh’s words made me miss her. I needed to call my sister.

“How long have you lived here?” Leigh asked me, but before I could get the words out, a chorus of greetings clamored in the air. We all turned to the door, where a regal-

looking, tall woman with spikey blonde hair wafted into the room on a breeze of money.

Oh, yes. She had money, for sure. Even just the quality of fabric. I could see it from ten feet away.

“Iris,” someone called out, and the woman’s head turned. The name surprised me. I’d been expecting this to be Fenna, given everything I’d heard about her.

Nadine took Iris by the arm and led her into the kitchen, stopping to introduce her to me. There was an odd tension in the air that I didn’t understand, but I could feel it just as sure as I felt the presence of money when Iris walked through the door.

“Iris Hendricks, this is Pastor Evangeline Vale.” Nadine gestured to me, over the kitchen island, and the blonde woman looked me up and down, with arrogant, appraising eyes.

She did not offer to shake my hand.

I was a little offended, seeing as how my jeans were dressy, and the shirt I wore didn’t have any of the evidence of baking that most of my clothes had. I wore a nice, gray linen shirt with a ribbon tied into the neck. The cardigan that I’d worn over it, when I left the Matchbakery, was in the Tank, since the temperature had changed so drastically from Saint Agnes to Four Buttes.

Emma had even done my hair—as she often did when I needed to look presentable. I think there may even have been a bow clipped in there somewhere. I looked cute, dangit. There was no reason for Iris to get snooty with me.

Although, to be fair, her outfit had to be valued in the thousands of dollars. I was pretty sure you could only buy fabric that expensive in Paris and New York. Even a nice linen shirt was going to look like rags to a woman who paid nearly a grand for a Hermes scarf.

“What church are *you* the pastor of?” Iris asked, her tone sharp.

“Saint Agnes Community.” I kept all my words even, and attempted to act above it all, like I didn’t care that she was judging the crap out of me.

“Saint Agnes.” Her sigh was so dramatic, I looked around for an Academy Award I could hand out. “What a tourist trap.”

“She’s from Madison Falls,” Leigh whispered as Iris turned away. “By way of California, of course.”

From the other side of the room, someone clapped their hands, to call everyone to attention. “It’s time to begin,” Nadine said from the wide door into the living room.

“We can’t start without Fenna,” someone called out in a nasaly voice.

“We can always use the ghost,” Vera said, and I felt a blast of something cold skitter across my skin at that word again.

“Carolyn, let’s get out the treasurer’s box and we’ll start dividing up the bags.” Nadine moved toward the living room, motioning for her friend to follow. “She’ll probably waltz in just as we’ve gotten ready to play the first round.”

The rest of the crowd seemed to move, along with her, toward the living room, and I picked up a plate. Leigh grabbed my arm as I went.

“Watch out for that one,” she said, nodding at Iris. “She’d just as soon eat you for dinner as look at you.”

I couldn’t help the raise of my brows, or the shock that likely registered on my face. With a quick hand, I grabbed a few crackers and a couple pieces of fruit, and tried not to respond directly. I hadn’t quite figured out the dynamics of this group yet, and I didn’t want to say anything that would get me into trouble.

“We’re not going to wait for Fenna?” I asked, looking

around as the whole group seemed to move as one organism, away from the food. "I thought she was on her way."

"I guess not." Leigh popped a grape into her mouth and shrugged. "She'll have to be the ghost until she gets here."

"What does that mean, anyway?" I asked, pausing beside one of the big counters, hanging back from the rest of the women. "*Be the ghost?*"

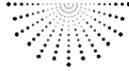
"Haven't you played Bunco before?"

"I looked up some rules on my phone, but..."

Leigh grabbed a glass of already-poured punch and followed me toward the living room. "Well, we need twelve people to play Bunco, and when we're short a person, we have what we call a *ghost* sheet, where there's a score, but no roller."

I still didn't fully understand, but at least I knew they weren't talking about ectoplasm and invisible 19<sup>th</sup> century duchesses, or something. I'd had enough trouble over the winter to keep me away from ghosts for the rest of my life.

## CHAPTER THREE



Once the treasurer's box had been set up, everyone paid seven dollars into the pot and were given a white score card in return. On the back of mine, it had a large *M* written in red letters.

Leigh pointed to the back of hers, which bore a similar letter. "Middle. We're at the middle table. Good. I can introduce you around."

I followed her to the second of three earth-toned card tables set up on the far side of the living room, near the large, stone fireplace. When we sat down, one other seat was occupied by a familiar-looking woman with glossy, brown hair in a stylish cut.

"Vangie, this is my sister. Marta Gallo." She gestured over. "Vangie's mom grew up in Williamsburg."

A twin Joker smile lit up the darker-haired sister's face. "So you know Brooklyn?"

"A bit." I nodded at the pair, wishing I'd kept my mouth shut about my mother. The last thing I wanted was to spend the day delving into *Vangie's past*. My default mode was asking other people questions. Not talking about myself. "I

heard you recently moved here,” I said, hoping to divert the *mom* talk.

“It’s been...what?” Marta glanced over at her sister. “Three years?”

The corners of Leigh’s smile dimmed just a bit, like the shine had gone off. “It’ll be three years exactly. This week.”

The two sisters seemed to share a minute of silence, although, over what, I wasn’t sure. They both dropped their eyes to their scorecards, and nodded.

“Do you like living out here?” I asked. “You’re sort of out in the country, in these hills.”

“It’s beautiful up here,” Marta said. “And I can work without distraction, which is nice.” She looked up when someone called her sister’s name, and smiled as Leigh got up and crossed to the other side of the room. With a quick glance at the other two tables, she leaned closer to me and dropped her voice. “I’m sorry about the awkward...well, about evading questions.”

“Totally fine.” I waved my hand like I was clearing the air, but Marta kept her somber look.

“Leigh’s husband passed away suddenly, three years ago. That’s what made me move out here.”

I nodded, sympathetically. I’d guessed as much, given their responses. But I found it was easiest to allow people to talk at their own pace. I took a sip of my punch to keep the silence going.

Two could play at this game.

“I’d been divorced, not long before that, and Don’s death was...well, it was sudden. Leigh couldn’t take much time off from work, but she was not doing well.” Marta’s features had darkened slightly, but she still had that wide, constant smile, and it was starting to unnerve me. “At first, I planned on a short-term stay. Just until she was on her feet, but...” She trailed off, glancing across the room.

Both our eyes settled on Leigh. She was looking at a slip of paper with the woman who had been taking the money, and they appeared to be doing math. I did not envy them that.

Leigh Peters had an air of confidence about her, like a person could trust her to do just about anything. It was hard to imagine her so broken up about something that she genuinely needed help. Perhaps it was all the stories Nadine had told me, in preparing me for this group, but she definitely projected the air of confidence.

I never would have guessed that she was holding back something like widowhood, which was tragic enough in its own right. But to be so young, as well. Leigh couldn't have been more than fifty years old.

"We fell into a routine," Marta continued, as we both watched her sister smile gently at the treasurer and move money from one pile to another. "I had to travel back every six or nine months to meet with my old girlfriend group that had been friends since high school. We'd lived within minutes of each other our whole lives, and that was the hardest thing about living here, if I'm brutally honest."

I nodded. "I had to leave my family and friends behind when I came here, too. It isn't easy."

"I thought I detected a hint of a Southern accent in there."

"North Carolina." I didn't offer any more. There was too much danger that I would start blurting out all the reasons that had brought me to Montana, in the same way Marta just had. With the middle of April quickly approaching, I wanted to get through my six-month review with the parish council, and finally put my past behind me. Clean slate.

Everyone deserved a clean slate.

"We're ready to start," Leigh said, sliding back into her chair. "I paid the seven dollars for Fenna so we wouldn't have

to worry about dividing things into elevens instead of twelves.”

Marta gestured at the empty seat. “Is that the ghost?”

With a flourish, Leigh produced an extra white sheet, turning it around so we could all see the *M* on the back. “This will be Fenna’s when she shows up. For now, she’ll be the ghost.”

“Vangie’s partners with the ghost for this round,” Marta said, her teeth flashing in a menacing smile. “Don’t worry, honey, we’ll walk you through it.”

I glanced around the room, looking for Nadine. The women were all gathered around their tables, most sampling the custards. Each table had a set of dice sitting in the center, along with four pens. There was one set of pink dice and pens, and the rest were black. I tried to remember the rules I’d read, but I knew this was going to be a learning curve. New games always were.

A bell sounded from the pink-dice table, and Marta started to roll. Once the bell sounded, everyone seemed to put their heads down and start counting, so I did the same. But I couldn’t help being aware of what was happening around me. There still seemed to be an odd sort of tension in the air that I couldn’t quite place.

I kept having to roll the dice for the *ghost* card, and with every movement, I found myself looking up, assuming I’d see Fenna come through the door. The game seemed to have gone on without her and part of me wondered if that was a regular occurrence.

“Bunco!” someone called out from the pink-dice table, and the bell immediately sounded.

Marta counted up all the points and glanced up with bright eyes. “You and the ghost move up.”

I took the offered paper and my glass of half-finished punch, and went to the *high* table. All the rules were swirling

around in my head, and I was trying to listen to the conversations about my custards, just in case anyone might make a comment without realizing I was in the room.

It was my first real test of the custard tarts, and I was interested to hear the critiques, if anyone had them. But more than anything, I wanted to know what Fenna thought about them, and I couldn't do that until she showed up.

Nadine was sitting at the *high* table, with the silver bell near her hand. "You won your round?"

"Me and the ghost," I said with a tight laugh, sliding into one of the two empty chairs. The other woman at the table was the treasurer, and she seemed mainly interested in arranging all the envelopes in a precise order at the edge of the table.

When Nadine rung the bell, I realized that we'd switched partners, and I was no longer with Fenna's ghost. But I lost that round, and had to go all the way down to the *low* table with Nadine.

I was finally starting to get the hang of how the game worked. When we sat down at the *low* table, I noticed that Vera had her white gloves on, and I was suddenly conscious of the fact that I hadn't put mine on yet.

The day had not gone at all as I had planned it to go, which wasn't unusual with catered events, but everything seemed disjointed and people seemed tense. By the time the bell rang again, I found myself watching the door even more closely, waiting for Fenna.

My team won that round, and when I moved back to the middle table, Leigh was still there, only this time, she was looking down at her phone with dark lines on her face. I leaned in, giving that sort of pastoral deference that I could occasionally pull off. No words. Just expectant standing.

Leigh glanced up at me, shaking her head. "Fenna's not coming."

“She’s not?” I looked at the offered phone screen.

There had been a series of texts back and forth between Leigh, and Fenna Teuling. Several in a row of Leigh texting, *where are you* and *are you coming* and *ETA* until, finally, Fenna answered at 2:04pm.

*Give me five minutes*, the text read.

Leigh’s *OK* response was followed by *We’re starting* and *Where are you?*

The time stamp on the final text was 2:44pm, which was a minute earlier than the time on the top of the phone. One minute ago, Fenna had texted, *I’m leaving town, probably for good. This is all your fault.*

A ghostly chill crossed my skin, pebbling up chill bumps. Who texted that they were leaving town for good, and then blamed someone else for it?

No one. It was the weirdest thing I’d ever seen.

“What does that mean?” I asked, keeping my voice low as the other women around us all engaged in some conversation or other.

“I have no idea.” Leigh’s brows drew together and she stared at the phone screen. “I was about to text her back, but it... This is so strange.”

“Is it something she would do? Or is it some kind of joke?” I turned my chair just enough that neither Vera nor the other woman at the table could hear me. “Is she pranking you?”

“That’s not like her.” Leigh shook her head, hard. “She has zero sense of humor. Besides, she likes these grand entrances. We always have to start without her, and then she descends like some kind of Greek god from on high, and graces the mere mortals with her presence.”

There was a bite underneath those words, and I knew it wasn’t fair to be so sensitive about her response, but the bite had an almost violent edge.

“She makes you start with the ghost a lot?”

“We used to wait for her,” Leigh said, almost off-handedly. “But it got to be where we would waste half an hour waiting, and then when she arrived, it was like she was mad that we were waiting, and we’d have to spend another half an hour watching her sulk before we could actually get down to the game.”

“Sounds like a joy to be around.”

Her lips settled into a tight line. “She can be...challenging. But I really think she doesn’t know any better. You can only work *so* hard against your family of origin.”

The little bell rang again, and Vera rolled the dice, at least doing a decent job of pretending that she hadn’t heard what we were talking about. I still couldn’t be sure of who had what kind of relationship in this little place, but I knew it was going to be a tightrope walk with my level of curiosity about the situation.

I wanted to just stop playing and ask Leigh all the questions. But after what had happened to me in February, I couldn’t afford to appear too curious. I didn’t want to get a reputation as a busybody, or a meddler, or anything nasty like that.

And yet. I couldn’t help how curious I was.

“Traveling!” yelled out a voice, and a large, fluffy, white dice went sailing from the high table to the low table. I tried to remember what *Traveling* was, but I couldn’t keep all the rules in my head.

Leigh gave me a kind glance while someone else rolled the dice, and said, “You’ll get up to speed on all the rules, don’t worry. It just takes a few rounds.”

Before long, the bell rang again, and I moved up to the *high* table with Vera, leaving Leigh behind, staring at her phone. I wanted to stay, if only to see any more texts that came in. But more than that, I liked Leigh. She seemed to

have a compassionate kindness, but an undercurrent of despair that drew me in like a riptide.

The empty card was still at the high table. The ghost, Fenna. Apparently, she had been winning every round since I brought her up there, and that meant she got to stay. And now, we were partners again, the ghost and I, so I started rolling for her, as soon as the bell tolled.

The text Leigh had received was still eating away at my curiosity, and in the back of my mind, I imagined Fenna actually sitting in the chair, being bored out of her mind with waiting for other people to take their turn. I couldn't imagine why she came to this game. By all descriptions, she seemed profoundly self-involved, almost to the point of unkindness. This was such a collegial game. I wasn't quite sure why she would come, once a month, with her white gloves and her lateness, and play a game with a bunch of people she didn't appear to like all that much.

I was stumped.

Someone at my table called out *Traveling* again, and the fluffy dice sailed toward us, overshooting the table by a couple of feet and landing against the fireplace. It stayed there, while the roll finished, and then it was retrieved.

Suddenly, I rolled three fives, and someone shouted out, "Bunco!" The bell dinged a few seconds later, and there were congratulations all around. I had no idea what I'd done, but apparently, it was good, because the ghost and I stayed at the high table, joined by Leigh and Iris.

The regal-looking blonde glared at my shirt again as she sat down. I wasn't sure why she was singling me out about my clothing choices. There were certainly people in the group dressed in less flattering clothes than mine. But Iris really disliked my shirt. Or she just enjoyed being judgmental.

As I learned more about this group, I realized, there was a

lot going on under the surface. A lot of hidden tension just waiting to explode out.

Leigh rang the bell and Iris started rolling. She didn't get any sixes, so she threw the dice over to me with a frown.

"I don't see why we can't just replace her," Iris said, like she was picking up a conversation she and Leigh had been having. "She always does something dramatic like this."

They had to be talking about Fenna, and I peeled my ears to pick up any juicy tidbits. I rolled, quietly, so as not to disrupt the flow of their conversation.

"I can't make that choice," Leigh said. "This is Nadine's group."

"Well, of all people, you should *want* to lobby for her to be gone. I've never understood it." Iris wiped absently at her shirt, like she was brushing off some nonexistent crumbs. "Nadine is too nice."

"Let it go, Iris." Leigh's voice was full of warning.

I passed the pink dice along with extreme care, not uttering a single word as I did, and Iris picked them up without missing a beat.

"You *know* she did this on purpose. I mean, come on, Leigh. She waits until the middle of Bunco group, and then randomly decides to leave town and texts you about it when we're all here at your house? And you don't find that the least bit suspicious?" Iris kept rolling, getting another six.

"She's got a flare for the dramatic, sure. But that's no reason to kick her out." Leigh kept marking scores down as Iris got them, not looking up from the paper.

"It can't be real," Leigh said. "I don't care what you think about Fenna. She's not going to take off like this."

"She's done it before."

"That was different."

I folded my hands carefully in my lap, staying as inconspicuous as I could, until the dice were eventually passed to

me. I was learning more from this side conversation than I had from all the others combined.

Suddenly, Iris rolled three twos and yelled out, "Traveling!"

The dice came up through the air and grazed the edge of the middle table on its way. It knocked a custard tart off its plate and the dessert went sailing, almost in slow motion, right onto the ample chest of Vera Bakken.

She squealed so loud, it seemed to split the air in two. Vera jumped up, yelling at the person who'd thrown the dice, and the whole room seemed to go into an uproar at once. When Vera clawed at the tart crust, the custard fell onto the bear skin rug that sat in front of the fire place. Nadine rushed Vera into the kitchen and several of the women followed along.

Leigh and I remained, standing over the food-stained rug. She stared at the blob, like a little kid whose ice cream cone had just fallen on the ground. I could practically see her lip trembling. The red juice of the berries had already seeped into the fibers, and Leigh bent down with her napkin.

She tried to clean up the custard and the berry juice, but it seemed to only get farther and farther engrained into the hairs as she scrubbed. I bent down next to her, looking around for a source of water. I did my best to apologize, but she waved me off, insisting it wasn't my fault.

My eyes fixed on the gold end of a hose, glinting in the sun, laying on the grass. "Here, take the other side of the rug. Let's go out and wash this off."

Leigh stared at the stain, uncertainty washing over her face. She looked so frustrated, and so lost, and all I wanted to do was help her.

I picked up the edge of the rug and we walked it outside, laying it over the deck railing so that the stain was hanging over the lawn edge. I left her on the porch and scampered

out into the middle of the lawn to pick up the end of the hose. As I unscrewed it from the sprinkler head, my eyes wandered out along the edge of the path that led up the hill.

Just on the edge of the pathway, two little pops of white stood out against the gray-green grass. Like they'd stood out near the dumpster.

I recognized the unmistakable gold glint of edging which would undoubtedly bear the same initials. *FAT*.

Fenna's gloves.

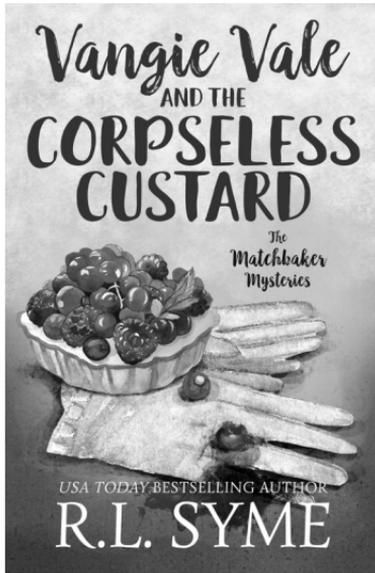


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