



Murder Is as Easy as

Pie

Janice Detrie

Murder Is as Easy as Pie
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For Frances Milburn who lights the way

Chapter One

When Vlad Chomsky staggered off the Tilt-A-Whirl, he thought his day at the county fair couldn't get any worse. Little did he know the worst was yet to come.

"Daddy, please can we go on the Tilt-A-Whirl one more time?" pleaded Kaitlyn, his five-year-old daughter, widening her eyes in a pitiful expression. "Pretty please, Daddy."

Vlad Chomsky had eaten only dry toast for breakfast and, after the dizzying ride on the midway attraction, his stomach was still revolving. Scanning the dusty pathway for the nearest trash can, Vlad exhaled slowly, then swallowed hard to force the bile back into his flip-flopping stomach. Holding onto the metal exit railing to steady himself, he took a few more deep breaths.

"Are you all right, Dad?" said Nicholas, his eleven-year-old son, staring at him with big, worried eyes rimmed with thick glasses.

"I'm fine, son. Just give me a few seconds to catch my breath. I haven't gone on a carnival ride in such a long time. I forgot how disorienting it can be." Vlad finally straightened up and raked his thinning hair back into place with his fingers. Then he tucked his wrinkle-free shirt into his Bermuda shorts.

"Daddy, you promised I could go on any ride I wanted. I want to go again," Kaitlyn grew more strident. "The Tilt-A-Whirl is the only fun ride I'm big enough to go on."

When they first arrived at the county fair, Vlad tried to interest Kaitlyn in the kiddie rides. His ex-wife, Maria, had warned him she'd be difficult. When he led her to the little helicopters that went up and down, she protested.

"No! I want to go on that ride," she said as she pointed to a ride that

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looked like two giant hammers welded together.

Vlad watched as each arm of the hammer rose high above the fair, turned upside down, then dove toward the earth. Luckily, a size chart was next to the ride that read: “You must be this tall to ride the attraction.” Kaitlyn tried to stand tall, rising on her tippy toes, but her head still was below the line.

“Sorry, Sweet Pea. Maybe next year,” Vlad said.

Nicholas looked relieved and said, “I’ll go with you on the helicopters. I’ll let you pull the bar to make it go up and down.”

“No, that’s a baby ride. I’m a big girl now.” said Kaitlyn, then ran to the Gravitron, a flying saucer look-alike that spun around with the riders standing up. Too short again. She was too short for all of the scary looking rides—except the Tilt-a-Whirl.

Both Nicholas and Vlad deemed the ride tame enough for all of them until Vlad actually twirled around in the darn thing. His head was jerked into the metal backboard so violently he feared whiplash. Just when the ride seemed to be slowing to a standstill and he relaxed, it pivoted in the opposite direction and spun wickedly again, faster than before. Once safely on solid ground, Vlad checked his watch.

“It’s almost time for the pie judging. We promised Beatrice we’d be there to cheer her on,” he said.

“Boring!” Kaitlyn yelled. “I hate pie, ’specially when I don’t get to eat some. I want to go on a ride.”

“Now, Kaitlyn. You promised you’d cooperate. If you’re a good girl, I’ll buy you some cotton candy.” He searched the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of his oldest daughter, Erin, who had run off with her friends from high school the second they had passed through the gates.

“No, ride. Tilt-A-Whirl again.”

Vlad frowned, tugging on his mustache nervously. He dreaded dragging a screaming Kaitlyn into the adult exhibition building. *Let’s try to avoid that scene*, he thought.

“Do you see Erin anywhere?” He shaded his eyes with his hand and peered into the bright sunlit midway.

“I can take her on the ride again, Dad,” Nicholas said. “I’m eleven. Mom lets me babysit once in a while. I can take her on the ride.”

Vlad looked at Nicholas’s earnest face and the long line forming at the ride’s entrance, then sighed. “I suppose you’re old enough to take her for a while. I’ll give you some money for cotton candy and soda. Please

bring her over to the adult pavilion when you're done."

Vlad bent down and pulled Kaitlyn's face between his hands, forcing her to look him in the eyes. "You are to listen to your big brother. He'll take you on the ride again, and then for a treat IF you're a good girl."

"I'll be good, Daddy. I promise."

"If Nicholas tells me you're good, we'll get corn dogs on a stick for lunch. Maybe a nice souvenir, too."

"Okay, Daddy, I'll be good. I'll listen to Nicky." She grabbed her brother's hand and tugged him toward the queue. "Let's go."

Vlad opened his wallet and handed thirty dollars to Nicholas. "That should be enough for ride tickets and a treat. Don't let her out of your sight."

As the two children joined the throng at the ticket booth, Vlad watched them with trepidation. Fluttering her arms overhead, Kaitlyn danced in and out of line as her pigtails swished about. He could hear Nicholas say, "You need to stand right next to me. Stop bothering the other people." Checking his watch again, Vlad hurried to the pavilion and scanned the crowd, spotting Beatrice's pixie haircut immediately.

Sitting in the second row of spectator chairs, Beatrice waved to him the minute he entered the crowded building, as her grey eyes shone with excitement. She gestured to the empty seat next to her and cleared away her purse so he could join her. Her powder blue bag matched the tiny flowers on her sundress, the spaghetti straps exposing her toned arms and shoulders. Catching his eye, she smiled, and he marveled again that she had agreed to marry him, especially after the disastrous river cruise when a ring of international jewel thieves interrupted their romantic getaway. But with the help of his elderly landlady and her irascible poodle, they solved the case, and Beatrice accepted his proposal.

"Excuse me. Pardon me." He apologized as he stumbled past the audience, mostly ladies, and ignored their annoyed looks.

She slipped her hand into his, and he ran his thumb over the diamond ring glinting brightly on her finger, a symbol of their hard-earned happiness.

"Some people are so rude!"

In the front row an angular woman dressed in a stiff linen shift shot a death ray glare at him. Her mouth curved down in a perpetual frown. When she caught Beatrice's eye, she snapped, "I might have known he

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belonged with you,” then twisted to face the small stage.

A flustered-looking lady hastily set up a microphone near the judging table where an assortment of pies stood waiting to be tasted and evaluated.

Vlad arched a quizzical eyebrow and jerked his head toward the grumpy woman. Beatrice’s face grew flush as she whispered in his ear.

“Don’t pay any attention to her. That’s Florence Heidt. Her strawberry chiffon pie won Best of the Fair for five years in a row, until my cherry berry peach pie won last year. She’s still mad about it. Claims I cheated. She’s come up with a new chiffon recipe this year. She’s sure it will beat mine.”

“I never realized pie baking was so cutthroat,” Vlad whispered back.

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “Only if you’re Florence Heidt. She can be vicious. But, then again, so can the judges, especially Alexandria Adams. No one wants to work with her. I should know. I’m on the County Fair Board.”

“Is she the woman who scheduled Garden Club meetings during the workday and then kicked you out because you missed too many meetings?”

“That’s her! And there she is, in the flesh.”

What imposing flesh! Vlad thought. A titan of a woman swept onto the stage like the *Queen Mary 2* sailing into port. Crimson and purple splotches embellished her pink dress. Meant to be airy and flowing, the gown on Alexandria’s solid build assaulted the eyes with hurricane force. A pink and red flower petal hat completed the look of a hand grenade tossed into a flower bed. Wisps of auburn curls lacquered into place outlined her broad face while her laser sharp eyes swept over the stage.

“This isn’t the right chair.” She pointed an accusing finger at the metal chair. “I need a cushioned chair if I’m expected to sit for any length of time. You of all people should know better. How long have you been running this? I’d expect a modicum of competence by now.”

The frazzled woman turned beet red. “I’m so sorry! I brought you an upholstered one from home but, with all the commotion, I left it in my van. I’ll send someone to get it right away.”

“My husband can get it for you.” Alexandria snapped her fingers. “Earl, get the chair from Donna’s van. The judging is about to begin.”

“Yes, dear. I’ll get right on it.”

A tall man, skinnier than the starving dogs in the SPCA ads,

hurried over to the stage. Donna brushed her fingers through her tangled hair and smiled wanly before she handed him some keys and he disappeared into the crowd.

“I suppose I can make do with this one for a while,” the haughty woman sniffed.

She perched on the chair like an emu settling on a sparrow’s nest and stared arrogantly at the audience. Vlad’s eyes were drawn to her brightly painted toenails crammed inside hot pink patent leather sandals. Even her toes loomed larger than life.

Donna, aka Ms. Frazzle, spoke into the microphone, “Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the Madison County Fair Pie Contest. We are most fortunate to have Alexandria Adams on board today. Alexandria has been the mainstay of our bakery judging for fifteen years. She truly takes the cake!”

The audience politely applauded as Alexandria slowly nodded her head in acknowledgment. Then she turned her attention to the dozen or so pies spread out on the table in front of her, inspecting each as if she were choosing the only genuine ruby from an assortment of fakes. Alexandria waited until all eyes were on her before she spoke.

“Here are the standards of a good pie. The building block of a prizewinning pie, the crust, must be tender and flaky, with subtle layers of buttery goodness and a perfect blend of salt and sugar. The filling is the heart and soul, presenting delightful flavors using only the freshest ingredients of the highest quality. The topping is the pièce de résistance, whether it be a fluffy meringue or a crumb topping, or a simple top crust sprinkled with sugar. It must provide the finishing touch of the pie eating experience.”

Ms. Frazzle added, “Alexandria will judge on these merits. One pie will be chosen as the Grand Prize Winner, the Best of the Fair. Who will be the lucky baker this year?”

“The Grand Prize Winner is determined by skill and creativity. Luck has nothing to do with it.” Alexandria shot a look of disdain at the wretched woman, whose face crumpled into near tears.

None of the first few pies met Alexandria’s exacting standards. The first pie, a two-crust cherry, had the misfortune of a tough, leathery crust. She spat the offending pastry into a napkin and deemed it a “dishonorable mention.” The coconut custard fared only slightly better.

“Too much coconut and not toasted to a nutty flavor.” She slapped

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a pink ribbon on the entry card.

Just then her husband appeared with the new chair, complete with cushioned seat and arm rests. Donna whisked away the offending chair, and Alexandria tested the spongy softness of its replacement with her hand before she settled back down. She dismissed her hovering husband with a wave of her hand and stared expectantly at her harried assistant.

Vlad leaned closer to Beatrice and said, “Perhaps a more comfortable chair will improve her disposition.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” she replied, shaking her head.

Alas, the lemon meringue had not been sealed properly to the edge of the crust and had emerged from the oven flat as a pancake. The meringue atop the banana cream pie was fluffy and high, but the vanilla cream filling turned curdy, not creamy. She wrinkled her nose and gave them honorable mention ribbons.

The crumb-topped apple fared better. She said, “At last, a pie that’s appealing rather than appalling,” then attached a red ribbon to the entrant’s card.

The judging continued until only two pies remained. Donna slid a chiffon pie to the center of the table. A fluffy green pastel cloud alighted on a perfectly fluted crust.

Alexandria arched her eyebrows and exclaimed, “What is this? I’ve never seen a chiffon this lovely color.”

She leaned closer to the entry card and read aloud: “Buttermint chiffon pie. How delightful! A truly unique creation.”

Florence Heidt glanced over her shoulder and gave Beatrice a smug smile before turning her attention back to the judge. Ignoring her, Beatrice sat poker-faced with a straight spine. Vlad reached over and gently squeezed her hand. She squeezed his back.

After cutting a sliver of the foamy chiffon pie, Donna placed the airy concoction in front of the judge.

Alexandria inhaled deeply and said, “What a delicious, minty aroma! A feast for the nose as well as the eyes.”

She picked up the fork, then paused to say, “A chiffon pie is a fragile creature. The egg whites must be whipped into stiff peaks but not allowed to get dry, then folded into a custard mixture that’s cooled to the perfect temperature. Let’s see if the baker has achieved this delicate balance.”

The green froth disappeared in her mouth as she slowly chewed,

then swallowed. “Ah, melt-in-your-mouth goodness. Perhaps the crust is just a tad mushy, but the light fluffy taste more than makes up for it.” She attached a blue ribbon to the entry card.

With excitement in her voice, Donna spoke, “The first blue ribbon of the day goes to this incredible pie. Will it be the Best of the Fair?”

A loud murmuring swept through the audience, and several heads turned to look at Florence, seated proudly in the front row. She had pleated the judging timetable into a makeshift fan and was waving it in front of her face. Once more she flashed a nasty smile at Beatrice.

“Last but not least, another lovely fruit pie,” Donna said, moving Beatrice’s pie in front of the judge.

Red and blue bits of fruit bubbled through the lacy lattice top, the rich jewel tones peeking through the diamond shapes.

“Nicely done. The twisted lattice work is exquisite. It surely took much time to create such perfect strands,” Alexandria commented. “We shall now see if it tastes as good as it looks. Pretty is as pretty does.”

As Donna cut a small wedge of pie and lifted it onto the plate, the judge continued, “Look how the pie held its shape. No runny juices. What a perfect scalloped edge to the crust!” She inhaled deeply. “And a delicious aroma. A suggestion of the scent of summer.”

Vlad gave his mustache a few tugs, tapping his foot with a staccato beat. Reaching again for Beatrice’s hand, he felt like biting his nails. She sat Zen-like, the corners of her mouth turning up in a slight smile.

“How can you stay so calm?” he whispered.

“The pie guru on YouTube says to keep everything chilled as you make a pie—including yourself,” she answered.

Alexandria lifted the fork to her mouth and savored her first bite. “A perfect crust. Well-constructed of flaky layers. Dissolves into delectable buttery shards in the mouth.”

She chewed slowly, then swallowed. She thoughtfully tilted her head before she spoke. “The baker has captured all the succulent flavors of summer as well. I detect cherries and peaches and some other fruit. Donna, what’s the name of this pie again?”

“The entry card reads: Cherry Berry Peach Pie,” she said.

Florence whispered loudly to her companion. “Some people bake the same old pie year after year. Just because they won once, they figure the recipe is a sure thing.”

Glad that Beatrice still held tight to his hand, he really wanted to

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make a rude gesture with his middle finger at the back of the nasty woman's head, but that would be sinking down to her level. Beatrice always made him choose the high road.

Alexandria knotted her eyebrows and said, "Ah, berries. But what kind of berries? Blueberries? I must have another bite to be sure." She shoved a bigger bite into her mouth. "Yes, certainly blueberries, perhaps wild blueberries, a subtle bitter taste. There's just a hint of some spice to enhance the flavor. It's a bit tangy. Perhaps just one more bite and I'll be able to tell what it is."

"Your taste buds must be very sensitive," Donna commented.

"The ability to distinguish the addition of even the slightest dash of spice is developed over years of training. A true gourmand is worth her weight in gold."

"We'd have to raid Fort Knox to come up with her weight in gold," Vlad whispered as Alexandria took a third bite.

Beatrice shook her head at him with a little frown.

"What can the unusual flavor be?" The judge knitted her brows with an intense expression as she slowly savored the bite.

Suddenly, she made a strangled sound and clutched her throat. As she opened her mouth in an attempt to speak, globs of fruit spewed out. Three or four gurgling noises emanated from her throat before the volcanic eruption of vomit spread across the plastic tablecloth like flowing lava forming a Jackson Pollock likeness of pie ingredients.

The entire audience looked stunned as her eyes bulged with the effort of expelling the pie. She half-rose from her chair, but immediately flopped back down like a limp rag doll. She grasped the edge of the table in an attempt to pull herself up, her mouth like a gaping wound.

"My mouf...numb., can't feel my hands, my legs," Alexandria struggled to speak. Suddenly, her body went rigid, her back arched, her legs splayed sideways, jerking and shaking, as though currents of electricity coursed through them. If not for the padded arms of the chair, she would have toppled to the floor.

Vlad turned to Beatrice and said, "What the hell?"

Her face drained of all color as she stared in disbelief at the scene unfolding before them. She clasped her hands together in a prayerful pose and muttered, "I don't understand."

Writhing in pain, Alexandria moved her hands down to press against her chest as if she was pushing her heart back into her body. She emitted

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a guttural moan that came from deep within, like a wounded bear in the last throes of death.

She managed to choke out a few words. “The pie...”

Those were the last words she spoke before she collapsed facedown into the vomit-covered Cherry Berry Peach Pie.

The audience froze in horror and disbelief.

Then Florence Heidt leapt to her feet, a gaunt figure in her shapeless dress. She whirled to face Beatrice, pointed a bony finger, and growled, “What on earth did you put in that pie?”

Chapter Two

The EMTs arrived in under five minutes, entering the chaotic scene with professional efficiency. As they pushed through the crowd, Earl Adams eased his wife off the chair before wiping away pie filling and vomit from her face. Down on the floor, he supported her head in his lap.

Rocking back and forth, he begged, “Stay with me, dearest. Don’t leave me. Please stay with me.”

Her unseeing eyes stared at the overhead light, and her slack mouth would issue no pronouncement of the Grand Prize Winner. Sprawled out, she covered most of the small stage as convulsion after convulsion rocked her body.

A buzz swept through the unbelieving audience. “Oh my God! What just happened? Is she dead?”

Vlad sheltered Beatrice in his arms, safe from prying eyes. As she buried her head in his chest, tears welled up in her eyes.

He whispered, “There, there. Ignore that nasty woman. Your pie had nothing to do with her collapse.”

The two EMTs bent down to lift Alexandria.

“Lift with your legs, not with your back,” the older one admonished his partner.

Unfortunately, they managed to lift her head and her feet, but her derriere was fused to the floor. They soon realized they needed help. The younger one whipped out his cell phone.

“I’ll call for help. Officer Roberts is manning the emergency tent. We’ll get him here to assist.”

When the police officer arrived, all three grappled with the unwieldy woman’s body. On the count of three, they hoisted her onto the gurney, groaning with the exertion.

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One of the EMTs said to Earl, “You can follow us to the emergency room.”

They whisked her to the waiting ambulance, sirens blaring as they pulled away.

“Are you able to drive?” the police officer asked the stricken husband.

“I-I don’t know. My wife usually does the driving. And she’s...oh, God, she’s...” He closed his eyes and moaned.

“I can take him to the hospital,” Donna jumped in. “My van’s parked right behind the building.”

“Aren’t you in charge of the contest?” the officer said, examining the big purple Organizer ribbon pinned to her chest. “I need your statement of what happened leading up to the incident.”

“Let me take him. I’m not needed here. My car is nearby, too,” Florence Heidt buzzed onto the stage like an annoying wasp, hovering between Earl and the officer.

“That would be most kind,” Earl said. “I’m in no condition to drive.” He held out his shaking hands.

Florence grasped him by the elbow and steered him toward the exit. “Come along, you poor man. You must feel horrible. Something surely was wrong with that pie.”

“Will she be all right? She looked terrible. All those spasms! I think she’s g-g-gone!” He put his hands in front of his face and started to weep. “I can’t bear it if she’s gone.”

“We’ll find out at the hospital. Let’s hurry.” Florence led the dazed man away.

The crowd began to filter out, still chattering about what they’d just witnessed. Vlad heard murmurs of “Did she have some kind of seizure? A heart attack? Maybe a stroke? I heard she had a peanut allergy. Was it something in the last pie?”

The officer waited until most had left, then surveyed the scene. “So what happened here?”

Donna wrung her hands as she spoke. “We were just about to finish the pie baking contest. Alexandria was tasting the last entry when she made a horrible sound and vomited like there was something wrong with the pie. Then she started having some convulsions.”

“And this is the pie she was eating?” The policeman nodded his head toward the red and blue mess.

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Globs of smashed pastry mixed with bits of cherries, blueberries, and peaches were scattered on the judging table under a film of partly digested pie.

“It’s my pie, officer.” Beatrice moved to the foot of the stage. “I baked it this morning. All the ingredients came from the Farmer’s Market yesterday. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“But Alexandria did notice something unusual. A flavor she couldn’t identify. She was eating her third bite when she collapsed,” Donna interjected. She gave a sideways glance at Beatrice and clutched the ends of her purple ribbon with both hands, twisting it round and round.

“Maybe she had an allergic reaction?” Vlad suggested.

“We’ll know more when the doctor examines her. No sense jumping to conclusions until we find out if the pie is the culprit.” Hands on hips, the police officer frowned at the offending pie, as though it belonged on a wanted poster in the post office.

“She’s been judging pies at the county fair for fifteen years. I organized each one of those contests. She’s never had a reaction like this before,” Donna said with a quiver in her voice.

The officer’s cell phone rang. The voice on the other end crackled as the policeman solemnly nodded his head.

“I see. Heart arrhythmia, respiratory problems. Maybe something she ingested. Quick acting. Okay, we’ll wait until then.”

Returning the phone to his back pocket, he cast his eyes upon Donna and then Beatrice. “That was the ER doc. Alexandria Adams has all the hallmarks of poisoning. They’re doing some bloodwork to see if they can determine the source. We’ll have to test samples of all the pies. This is now a crime scene.”

“A crime scene? Oh, my goodness! What will the fair association say?” Donna’s hands fluttered about like a moth trapped in a backyard lantern. “And Earl, that poor man! He must be devastated.”

“I’ll need both your names and phone numbers before you leave and the names of anyone else you can think of to interview as a witness. We’ll be contacting you down at the station shortly for a formal statement.” He pulled a notepad and pen from his breast pocket and looked expectantly at Beatrice.

In a numb voice, Beatrice gave the officer her information, her worried eyes betraying her dismay. She bit her lower lip as the officer

jotted down the information. Vlad also volunteered his name and number, keeping the interchange business-like and hoping he displayed a confidence he didn't feel. When the officer turned his attention to Donna, Vlad veered closer to Beatrice and held out a comforting hand. She slipped her hand into his, and they moved toward the exit.

"If that's all for now, Officer, we'll be leaving," Vlad said.

Just then Vlad's two kids burst through the door.

"Dad, we saw an ambulance leave the fairgrounds!" Nicholas said.

"The siren went roo-a-roo," Kaitlyn clamored. "It was so loud I covered my ears." She brought her hands up to her head to reenact the scene.

"And the lights were flashing. Everyone got out of the way," Nicholas added. "I wonder who got hurt?"

"One of the judges here in the pavilion got sick so they had to call the EMTs to take her to the emergency room," Vlad said.

"Is that why that cop is here?" Nicholas pointed to the police officer still talking to Donna. "Darn, we missed all the excitement. You just had to eat caramel corn before we came here," he accused his sister.

"I was real hungry. You said cotton candy is too messy. See, clean hands." She held them up for Vlad to see.

"It took you forever to eat your caramel corn," Nicholas said, clearly annoyed. "One little kernel at a time."

"Mom always tells me to chew my food. I don't wolf it down like you." Kaitlyn stuck out her tongue at her brother.

Vlad intervened. "Please, children, don't squabble. Can't you see Beatrice is a bit upset?"

"Why? Didn't she win a prize for her pie?" Nicholas asked.

"It's not that, Nicholas." Beatrice's voice shook. "I knew the judge quite well, and I didn't want her to get sick." She bit her lower lip, holding back tears.

"Did your pie make her sick?" Kaitlyn looked at the mess on the table. "That looks like your pie."

Vlad quickly answered, "Don't be silly. Beatrice's pie did not make anyone sick." He added with fake heartiness, "Who's ready for lunch? My treat."

"I think I'll take a pass and head home. I was up at four-thirty, rolling out pie dough and cutting fruit. I'm exhausted." Beatrice's body slumped forward like the air slowly leaking from a pinprick in a balloon.

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“Should I stop by your place once I take the kids to their Mom’s?”

“Yes, I’d like that. I have some leftover chicken salad we can have for supper,” she said with a forced smile.

“I’ll pick up a bottle of wine on the way,” he said as he gave her a kiss on her cheek and watched worriedly as she trudged out the exit.

“I’m still hungry, Daddy. I want a corn dog.” Kaitlyn tugged fiercely on his arm. “Let’s go eat.”

“Can I have chicken tenders and cheese curds?” Nicholas asked.

“Of course.”

“And a root beer float?” Nicholas added.

“Whatever you kids want.”

His cell phone rang. It was Erin, his missing in action teenage daughter, asking if she could catch a ride home with her friend’s mother. He gladly gave her permission to stay longer.

By the time the kids ate and finished deliberating over which cheap souvenir to buy, it was almost three o’clock. Maria, his ex, was weeding in the flower bed when he dropped the kids off. She looked up, face partly hidden by her sun hat, and gave him a wave. Kaitlyn scampered over to her, brandishing her laser sword and striking Star Wars poses. Nicholas sauntered into the house, wearing his new Space Force baseball cap. Vlad waved back, glad that Maria seemed too distracted to chat.

First, chilled white wine from the Kwik Stop store, then a drive across town to Beatrice. The only noise in the car was the hum of the air conditioner. Vlad finally allowed himself to relax. As he turned onto her street, he thought of all the ways he could comfort her: draw her a relaxing bath, bring her a glass of wine as she soaked, put on some uplifting classical music.

He spotted the two figures on Beatrice’s porch swing from a block away. A male wearing a Green Bay Packers baseball cap, a dingy white t-shirt, and motorcycle boots propped up on a large flower planter. His companion wore a wide-brimmed hat with peacock feathers tucked into the band, a turquoise boa flung around her shoulders, and a shimmery dress adorned with sequined flowers, the kind of thing only a geriatric burlesque queen would wear. When he pulled up, a chubby poodle emerged from behind the large planter and started yapping incessantly.

Now he knew the day was heading from bad to worse. Anytime his eccentric landlady and her not-so-handyman showed up, Vlad knew it was going to be trouble. Not to mention her obnoxious little dog.

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Vlad stepped out of the car, clutching the wine bottle and trying not to hyperventilate. He greeted them through clenched teeth, “Sandra Toombsbury and Norm Clodfelter. What a surprise to see you here!”

The elderly lady scrutinized him over the tops of her oversized glittery sunglasses and said, “We heard what happened at the pie judging. Possible poisoning! Right here in Crawford, Wisconsin. There’s not a moment to lose. Gaston is eager to solve another mystery.”

As though to demonstrate his enthusiasm, Gaston dashed up to Vlad and gave his ankle a little nip.

Norm cracked his knuckles and chortled, “So, Doc, when can we get started on the case?”