



## Basket Case: A Silver Six Crafting Mystery (A Silver Six Mystery)

By Nancy Haddock

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First in a crafty new cozy mystery series from national bestselling author Nancy Haddock

*There isn't much crime in Lilyvale, Arkansas, but local authorities have their hands full with Ms. Sherry Mae Stanton Cutler and her housemates—a crafty group of retirees who've dubbed themselves the Silver Six. But when Sherry Mae's niece, Nixy, arrives to keep them in line, Lilyvale also plays host to a killer.*

When Leslee Stanton “Nixy” Nix gets the latest call from Lilyvale detective Eric Shoar, she knows it means trouble. There’s been another kitchen explosion at her Aunt Sherry’s farmhouse, and the dreamy-voiced detective has had enough. If Nixy doesn’t check on her aunt in person, the Silver Six could become wards of the court. But the trouble Nixy finds in Lilyvale is not at all what she expects.

The seniors are hosting a folk art festival at the farmhouse, featuring Sherry’s hand-woven baskets, when land developer Jill Elsman arrives to bully Nixy’s aunt into selling the property. When Jill is later found dead in the cemetery, Sherry is suspected of weaving a murder plot, and it’s up to Nixy and the Silver Six to untangle the truth.

Recipes and crafting tip included!

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

A fun new series with a comfy, small-town vibe and lots of heart...The Silver Six truly sparkle! "New York Times" bestselling author Ali Brandon

A winner from the first page until the last! "New York Times" bestselling author Jennie Bentley

A slew of townsfolk I'd love to meet as well as a few I wouldn't all combined into a delightful and tasty mystery full of intrigue and twists..."Basket Case" is full of Southern charm, food...and mystery. Linda O. Johnston, author of the Barkery & Biscuits Mysteries

"Ms. Haddock, a masterful writer, obviously has humor running through her DNA and mystery deep within her bones. You can't help but admire her silver characters' energy, smarts and loyalty. I wish I had that much oomph in my gas tank. Add a bright and funny niece along with a handsome detective, villains who deserve their comeuppance, and this book hooks you. I'm looking forward to many more Silver Six books." L.A. Sartor, author of "Viking Gold"

#### About the Author

Nancy Haddock is the national bestselling author of *La Vida Vampire*, *Last Vampire Standing*, and *Always the Vampire*. A native Oklahoman and longtime resident of Texas with family roots in Arkansas, she now makes her home in the fascinating city of St. Augustine, Florida. A former speech pathologist and high school teacher, Nancy lives with her husband and a rescue dog named Baron in a little pink house on the beach with a fake flamingo in her front yard.

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As I climbed the porch stairs, I spotted my five-foot-nothing Aunt Sherry standing behind two six-foot folding tables that blocked the front door. A coatrack held small baskets of woven hemp and willow, and larger baskets made of those and other materials were scattered on the porch floor. A long swath of blue gingham fabric lay in and around the fallen baskets, the edges fluttering as if agitated by the swirling emotions instead of the mild breeze . . .

### Chapter One

I, LESLEE STANTON NIX, NIXY TO MY FRIENDS, HAD never been called on the carpet for anything. Up until four days ago, that is.

Now I had third-degree rug burns and the risk of being jobless.

Why? Because my boss at Houston's Gates Fine Arts Gallery, Barbra (like Streisand) Vole, had blown her nonexistent fuse when the Lilyvale, Arkansas, police detective Eric Shoar had called me at work. His fifth call in the last month, the second in the past ten days. Shoar's deep, dreamy Southern drawl had stirred my feminine interest, but deep and dreamy hadn't softened his complaints.

“We had another incident at Miz Sherry Mae’s yesterday,” he’d begun. “Neighbors across the road reported booming sounds and smoke coming from the kitchen.”

“Is anyone injured?” I’d asked on a gulp, my cell phone slick in my suddenly moist hand.

“Thankfully, no.”

“Did the fire department respond?”

“They don’t respond anymore unless I call them, but do you want whatever the problem is to go that far?”

“No, how can you think that?”

“Then prove you care. You have one week to get up here and see to your aunt and her housemates.”

“A week?” I’d echoed stupidly.

“This needs to be an in-person visit, ma’am. Not a phone call.”

“I hear you, but why the rush?”

“First, because the situation—whatever it is—seems to be escalating. Second, because my chief of police is asking questions about all the complaints coming in and why I’m taking the calls instead of the patrol units. I can’t deflect him much longer.”

“You’re investigating, so you’re doing your job. What’s there to question?”

He coughed. “My reports might be on the sketchy side.”

And the light dawned. “You’re protecting Sherry.”

“Miz Sherry’s ancestors founded this town, and she’s served on the city council. Even been the mayor.”

“That’s enough to cut her some slack?”

“That and having had her for a teacher, but understand me, Ms. Nix. This is serious. I don’t want a tragedy on my hands, and I don’t want Miz Sherry and her friends to be declared wards of the court.”

“What?” I’d gasped.

“If the chief believes that Miz Sherry and her friends are a danger to themselves or others, he’ll have to act.”

“You’d tell him they’re dangerous? You’d take away their independence? Their freedom?”

“Not if I can help it.” He’d paused, then continued, “I understand that you don’t think you know Miz Sherry well enough to stick your nose in her business, but none of her housemates have people left. We need this resolved, and you’re the only relative in sight.”

“I’ll get up there as soon as I can,” I’d said as I sagged against a wall.

“Good. Come by the station when you’re in town. I’ll be happy to help you if I can.”

With the threat of legal action against my aunt, I might’ve panicked and dashed off to Arkansas then and

there. My mother, Sue Anne, had been a late-in-life child, ten years younger than Sherry Mae. I was a surprise late-in-life baby, too, and we'd lived in Tyler back then. Though Sherry and her husband, Bill Cutler, made trips to visit us in Texas, I didn't remember visiting them in Arkansas. The families exchanged cards and letters and phone calls, but I didn't know my aunt well. Not until my mother had suffered a stroke a year and a half ago and Sherry Mae had come to say good-bye to her sister.

Sherry's husband had died just over three years earlier, but she had housemates—a temporary arrangement that had become permanent. Because she didn't have a deadline to be home, she'd been able to stay and support me through my mom's death and through the myriad of funeral arrangements. Always calm and steady. Always ready to advise me without being the least bit pushy. Always ready to share stories of herself and Mom as girls and young women. I'd grown close to Sherry Mae during those weeks, and I was grateful for the chance to relate to her as an adult. It had been fun to stay in touch since then with regular e-mails and holiday cards, phone calls and photos. So many photos that I should recognize each blade of grass and every plank of the original hardwood floor when I saw it.

Surprisingly, Barbra had given me time to be with my mom those precious days before she died, and time to take care of the services. After that, I'd used my weekends to wrap up her estate. Now, however, livid as Barbra was about my "sordid involvement" with the police, she wouldn't give me emergency leave. She had demanded that I finish out the week to complete our latest art installation—work overtime, in fact. Four days of Shoar's deadline shot, and Barbra had given me just until the middle of next week to return.

Which is why I'd packed a small suitcase on Thursday night, finished every task Barbra dreamed up until we closed on Friday, and then finally hopped into the no-frills white Camry I'd inherited from my mom. Purse. Check. Directions to Sherry's. Check. Sunglasses. On. I was ready to fight the weekend traffic leaving downtown Houston.

At least the April weather was on my side. Not too hot, not too cold, not storming. I had daylight saving time in my favor, too, though I saw more buildings than roadside bluebonnets on the way out of town.

Daylight melted into dusk, then dark, and my thoughts turned back to what waited in Lilyvale, southwest Arkansas.

Lilyvale. The town my mother's family had founded, but I'd never visited.

Lilyvale. The town my stupid portable GPS unit probably couldn't find.

Lilyvale. The place I didn't want to be, or at least not now. Not when I was so close to earning a promotion at the gallery.

Okay, so I was only next-in-line to the assistant director's assistant. Still, I'd made the gallery my life since owner Felina Gates had hired me. I'd busted my butt to earn double majors in fine art and art history, a minor in marketing, and a masters in art history. I excelled at my job, and I'd paid my dues. And now that Barbra was supposed to retire, I deserved the promotion.

I deserved a massage, too. The Shreveport motel bed I'd fallen into after midnight left me with more aches than I'd had after my first and final kickboxing class. Up again at the crack of dawn, I showered, went through my pre-drive checklist, and hit the highway for the last leg of the trip.

Though Sherry had mentioned that winter had lingered in Lilyvale, the day was sunny and clusters of early blooming wildflowers lined the two-lane country roads. The sight brightened my mood as I mentally made my schedule for the day. First, drop in on Detective Eric Shoar at the police station to prove I was in town as

ordered, and then visit Aunt Sherry Mae.

Just after nine, I cruised north on what appeared to be the Lilyvale main drag. The British male voice on my portable GPS kept telling me to make a U-turn as soon as it was safe. I ignored it.

Not a minute later, I found the picturesque town square my mother had spoken of, and felt the oddest tug of comfort. A sign proclaimed that Hendrix County Courthouse stood before me, a two-and-a-half-story limestone structure on slightly elevated ground surrounded by magnolia trees and a riot of lilies. Lilies graced the base of a small white gazebo on the courthouse grounds, too. Businesses lined each side of the square, and yet more lilies, tulips, and even daisies bloomed in large cement planters outside the shops.

Spring had not merely sprung here. Spring had reared up and slapped the soil into giving up riots of color.

As I looked for the police station, I circled the entire square and noticed how it was laid out. An inner circle ran closer to the courthouse and served through traffic. Two outer sections opposite each other held two rows of diagonal parking spaces for shopper convenience, and parallel parking slots lined the other two streets that bordered the square. After circling the inner street twice, I hadn't seen the police station, but did spot a shopkeeper opening her clothing store.

In a sleepy Southern town, I didn't give a second thought to asking for directions, so I parked in a diagonal slot next to a behemoth Buick land-boat with an elderly woman hunkered behind the wheel. The pristine powder-blue paint gleamed as much as the woman's coifed gray hair, and I gave her a friendly nod as I beeped my locks and took the two steps up to the broad sidewalk.

"Honey. Oh, honey," I heard behind me.

I turned to see the blue-Buick lady beckoning.

"Yes, ma'am?" I put my sunglasses on top of my head as I neared her.

"Honey, would you do me a little favor? Would you go in there"—she paused and pointed—"and tell Miss Anna that Miss Ida Bollings is waitin' for her medicine."

I glanced up at the picture window reading simply PHARMACY in old-fashioned lettering. Mental shrug. I didn't have an actual appointment with Shoar and had decided not to forewarn Aunt Sherry I was coming. Why not do a good deed? I'd deliver Miss Ida's message and ask directions to the station.

"That's Miss Anna for Miss Ida's medicine?"

"That's right, honey. They'll put it on my account."

Right, and let a perfect stranger walk off with a prescription. Possibly a controlled substance.

The inside of the store was as quaint as its sign. An antique oak glass-front cabinet dark with age sat along the left side of the space. Wood shelves filled with typical drugstore products ran down the middle and along the right wall of the store.

"Help you?" The question came from one of the two middle-aged clerks seated behind the oak cabinet.

"Um, yes. I'm a visitor in town, but Ida Bollings is outside and wants me to tell Miss Anna that she's waiting for her medicine."

“Sure. That’s Miss Anna in the back.”

I’d expected a clerk to take over, but what the heck. I approached Miss Anna, another woman of middle years who stood behind a raised counter, also made of oak, and also glowing with a dark patina.

“May I help you?” she asked brightly.

“I’m a visitor in town, but Miss Ida is in her car outside waiting for her medicine.”

“Good. I have it right here.” Anna produced a brown glass bottle that looked like it had been made in the 1930s. “Now tell Miss Ida to take just one tablespoon full at a time. A tablespoon from her silverware drawer will do, and no more or it’ll make her drunk.”

“One tablespoon,” I echoed, feeling like I’d landed in a time warp.

“The directions are right here,” Anna said, tapping the white label, “but we like to remind Miss Ida.”

“Do you ever remind her in person?”

Anna tilted her head. “Come again?”

“I’m just wondering why Miss Ida didn’t come in herself.”

Anna chuckled. “She doesn’t like to fool with dragging her walker out of the car unless she’s shopping for a spell.”

“So she sends strangers in for her prescriptions all the time?”

“Oh no. She’s discerning about people, our Miss Ida is. You have a good visit in Lilyvale.”

She handed me the bottle and reached for the ringing phone. At the front desk, I mentioned again that I was only a visitor just to see if the ladies would take over. They didn’t. They waved me off with a cheery “Tell Miss Ida hi, now!”

Still stunned that I was walking out of a pharmacy with a concoction that could make its recipient drunk, I delivered the bottle and one-tablespoon message to Miss Ida. Her eyes twinkled when I mentioned the drunk part.

“I’ll be careful, never you fret.”

I nodded. “Miss Ida, do you know where the police station is?”

“A’course, honey. You go to the end of the block, turn right, and go two blocks. The station is on the corner and the fire station is across the street.”

I’d no more than thanked her and returned to the sidewalk when the Buick’s engine revved and Miss Ida peeled out like an Indy champion. Must be eager for a hit of her medicine.

The Ida-and-her-walker episode had me wondering, though. Were my aunt and her housemates as physically well and mobile as Sherry had told me they were? Did they still drive? I didn’t talk with Sherry daily, not even weekly, but we’d chatted at least twice a month. When she’d mentioned the cold weather, she hadn’t mentioned she or her friends had caught the flu. Not even a mild cold. She had never indicated that any of

the Silver Six, as they called themselves, were ill or infirm in any way.

Of course, she'd never mentioned explosions and cooking accidents either.

Gripped by a sudden urgency to meet Detective Shoar, I drove to the cop shop, a building that turned out to be modern and bland compared to the pharmacy and the other downtown buildings. Tiled lobby floor with white walls, a reception window, and a green door to the inner sanctum of the station.

A young black man with a T. Benton name bar on his crisply pressed tan uniform took my name and request, and made a call. A moment later, Detective Shoar blew through the green door and introduced himself in a rush.

"You're Leslee Nix?"

"Nixy," I said automatically, stunned at his brusque manner. Not to mention he had a chiseled handsome face, and in short sleeves, well-worn jeans, and boots, he had a body artists would kill to paint. He smelled fine, too. Spicy with a mysterious undertone.

Detective Shoar narrowed his brown eyes. "You look about eighteen."

Not the first time I'd heard that, especially when I wore cargo shorts, a T-shirt, not-so-white tennis shoes, and my blah-brown hair in a ponytail. Never mind that I'm only five foot three.

I gave him my stock reply. "I'm twenty-nine. Our family has youthful genes."

"Hunh." He blinked then frowned. "You know where Sherry Mae lives?"

"Uh, sort of." I had Internet directions.

"Sort of" won't cut it. You can follow me out there," he said as he closed a big hand around my elbow and guided me to the glass front door.

"Why the hurry?"

"Because I just got a call that there's trouble at the house."

## Chapter Two

I SCRAMBLED TO MY CAMRY AND TOOK OFF BEHIND Detective Shoar. He didn't use his lights or siren, so it wasn't a challenge to keep up with the patrol car he drove. Not on the relatively level and straight streets with nearly zip traffic. It wasn't as easy to keep calm. Though he'd said "trouble" at the house, not "emergency," my breath clutched in my chest as I imagined a fire or worse raging at Aunt Sherry's. True, no screaming fire trucks followed us, but I'd forever blame myself if I'd come to Lilyvale a day too late.

I'd about worked myself into a baby ulcer when Detective Shoar's brake lights flashed and snapped me out of my head. I refocused my attention on the line of vehicles parked in the newly green grass just off the two-lane blacktop road. More cars, bearing license plates from as far away as Kansas and New Mexico, nosed along the split rail fence a few feet higher than the road. Beyond the cars, portable white tents rose in neat rows, and behind those, at the apex of a gentle upslope, sat a sprawling two-story farmhouse.

Sherry's home. I knew it immediately from my mother's and Sherry's photos, and I breathed easier just seeing it perfectly intact with no smoke boiling from the windows. But was Sherry hosting a giant garage sale?

Then I spotted a banner lashed to the rustic fence rippling in the breeze: FOLK ART FESTIVAL.

I mentally smacked myself for not remembering. Aunt Sherry's last letter had brimmed with news about the event, but I hadn't paid attention to the dates. Not important now. The crux was that the house looked fine. No one ran screaming from the grounds. So what kind of trouble call had Shoar taken?

His patrol car hung a right at the mailbox enclosed in a skinny-mini version of Sherry's farmhouse, and I followed him up the gravel driveway. To my left, on a chain-link fence, hung hand-lettered signs that read HANDICAPPED, POLICE, and FIRE. Talk about being prepared.

Shoar wheeled into the police-marked space, and as soon as I parked by a blooming dogwood, I shot out of my car and dogged his steps past clusters of people. Unnaturally quiet and watchful people.

Except for one man who stepped in Shoar's path.

"What's going on?" I heard Shoar ask the man, but I hustled past them.

As I climbed the porch stairs, I spotted my five-foot-nothing Aunt Sherry standing behind two six-foot folding tables that blocked the front door. A coatrack held small baskets of woven hemp and willow, and larger baskets made of those and other materials were scattered on the porch floor. A long swath of blue gingham fabric lay in and around the fallen baskets, the edges fluttering as if agitated by the swirling emotions instead of the mild breeze.

Sherry held one hand to her chest, the other hovering over a barrette in her hair. Her eyes held annoyance and a hint of fear. Three women and two men flanked her, looking on with concern but saying nothing. These were her housemates, I realized. The rest of the Silver Six. I remembered their faces from the Christmas card Sherry had sent.

A blonde, rawboned, big-chested woman wearing jeans and a summer sweater stood off to the side, her eyes wide with horrified fascination.

Opposite my aunt stood the snarling star of the showdown in progress. She leaned over the folding table, her bloodred fingernails scary-long and lethal-looking as she pointed at Sherry.

"You'll come to an agreement with me, Mrs. Cutler, and you'll do it soon or you'll be very sorry."

"But, Ms. Elsman," my aunt began.

"No 'buts,'" the Elsman woman interrupted. "I want that option on your land, and I will by God have it."

She tucked her asymmetrically cut black hair behind an ear, lifted a stiletto-shod foot, and deliberately speared one of the medium-sized hemp baskets lying on the porch.

Blame it on being tired and stressed, but the woman stomped on my last nerve, and my temper flared in a sonic boom of fury.

"Back up and back off, lady," I snarled, whipping off my sunglasses.

I heard heavy boot steps behind me—Detective Shoar’s, I guessed—but was too incensed to let him take the lead. I stormed to Sherry’s tables.

The woman casually turned and arched a brow. “My name is Elsman, Ms. Jill Elsman, and I suggest you stay out of this. It does not concern you.”

“Actually, it does.” The black-haired, black-eyed demon woman towered over me, but I stood straight and let her have it. “It so happens that Mrs. Cutler, the woman you just threatened, is my dearest aunt.”

“Nixy?” a voice said faintly.

I barreled on. “In addition, you happen to have flattened a fine piece of folk art.”

“That little basket?” Hellspawn snorted and gave the basket a shove with her shoe. “What do you know about real art?”

“According to my art degrees and my position at the prestigious Gates Gallery in Houston, I know quite a lot. I know something of the law, too, and I believe we’ll be filing charges of harassment, criminal mischief, and property damage. Or is it called malicious mischief in Arkansas, Detective Shoar?”

I looked over my shoulder and caught his expression of surprise.

“Criminal mischief covers it,” he drawled, but then his eyes turned all cop. “I suggest you leave now, Miss Elsman.”

“Suggest all you like, Detective,” she sneered, “but this event is open to the public.”

“However, since you’re creating a disturbance, ma’am, I think it best if you go now.”

She huffed, glared at me, and then snapped her fingers. “Trudy.”

I whirled to see sweater girl jump to attention. Aha. Hellspawn’s minion, it seemed. She scuttled after the wicked witch like a faithful, fearful dog at heel.

And Shoar? You could’ve knocked me over with one of Sherry’s minibaskets when he winked at me before he leisurely followed the routed twosome. I hoped he’d be certain they left because I needed to find out what the heck was happening here.

“Pixy Nixy?”

I had no more than turned when I was enfolded in Sherry’s gentle hug. Although I winced at the grade school nickname Sherry had resurrected, the strong wave of warmth from my aunt comforted me in a way I hadn’t known I missed. My mother had hugged me like this, and emotion swelled as I returned the embrace.

“Dear child,” she said as she released me, “I hardly recognized you with your hair up like that. Did I miss an e-mail telling me you were coming?”

“Um, no, Sherry.” She’d taken the barrette from her hair, and bangs fell over her left eye. She no longer looked frightened, but the sweep of bangs made her seem more vulnerable for some weird reason. I reached for a fast white lie. “I just thought I’d surprise you and experience the folk art festival. You’ve told me so much about it.”

“I see.” She gave me an *I know you’re fibbing* teacher look, and since she’d taught junior high and high school, the expression fit. Then she smiled. “Well, I’m glad to see you, but I’m afraid I’ll be rather busy today.”

“That’s okay. I’ll pitch in and help.”

“Not until the rest of us properly meet you.”

A tall, dapper man with a full head of white hair pulled up one side of his baggy khaki pants, then the other side, but they settled back on his bony hips as he moved to stand beside Sherry. He took my hand and bowed slightly. “Dwight Aloysius Baxter, at your service.”

“Dab, don’t hog the girl,” said a woman with short steel-gray hair. She wore a shirtwaist dress and an apron so blinding white, it could’ve been seen from space. Her facial structure held traces of American Indian ancestry a couple of generations removed and care lines etched her skin. “I’m Maise Holcomb, and this is my sister, Aster Parsons.”

Maise’s erect bearing gave me a flash of memory. Sherry had spoken of Maise and Aster, her first roommates, in the days after my mother’s death. Maise had been a U.S. Navy nurse during Vietnam, and Aster had been something of a flower child. Not antiwar, but pro-peace. The differing ideologies hadn’t split up the sisters, Sherry had said. They’d remained close.

Aster was more tanned than Maise, wearing her faded brown hair in a long braid, and decked out in more tie-dye than I’d seen since the gallery hosted a retro exhibition. She hugged me and I caught the essence of herbs. Rosemary? Lavender? Something both fresh and soothing, though I couldn’t place it before Aster released me and my beaming Aunt Sherry took over the introductions.

“Last but never least, Nixy, this is Eleanor Wainwright and Fred Fishner.”

I had to stop myself from gaping at the lovely and nearly wrinkle-free black woman with short salt-and-pepper hair decked out in an amber designer suit. I offered my hand to both Eleanor and her polar opposite, Fred. He was almost completely bald with a slight paunch covered by a white T-shirt and crisp light blue overalls. Screwdrivers and pliers and a dozen more tool-type gadgets poked out of every pocket. Even the two cargo pockets on both legs bulged. Then there was his walker, an overflowing tool belt strung across the front of it.

Fred banged his walker. His tools clanked, and arm muscles bunched. “Enough chitty-chat. I’m behind at my fix-it booth. See you later, missy.”

“I do believe Fred is correct,” Eleanor said in a cultured drawl as Fred clumped around the porch swing toward the driveway where I had parked.

“Right. We have tables to man, sales to make,” Maise said. “Quick time, now. Let’s get these baskets reorganized.”

I moved to help as Sherry untangled the blue gingham checked cloth from a willow basket. She draped the fabric on the table and arranged her display with Aster and Eleanor helping, Maise supervising.

I handed Sherry the last item—the basket Big Bitch Foot had stomped. “Aunt Sherry, I really need to know what’s going on here.”

“With the sale or that basket?” she asked innocently. “I can repair the basket, you know.”

“With that Hellspawn woman, Sherry. Please don’t dodge the question.”

“Elsman, dear, and, truly, it can wait.”

“No, it can’t,” I said more quietly because boot steps approached behind me. “I want to be prepared if she comes back.”

“She won’t,” Sherry said, smiling at someone over my shoulder.

“I agree,” Detective Shoar drawled. “I’m pretty sure the lady and her assistant will stay away for the duration of the festival.”

“Pretty sure?” I challenged.

“You lit into her hard. I don’t think she’ll want to go another round with you today.”

“And after that? Do you know why she was badgering Aunt Sherry?”

“I’ve seen her around town. Miz Sherry, mind if I borrow your niece for a few minutes?”

“Borrow away,” she said with a shooing wave. “Better yet, go shop.”

Shoar gestured for me to precede him, so I stomped down the porch steps, then ended up following him to his patrol car. He leaned his fine butt on the trunk and crossed his booted ankles.

“What?” I asked after seconds of silence. Yes, I knew about the cop silent-treatment trick. I watched my share of crime shows. Didn’t mean I couldn’t hurry Shoar along.

“It took you so long to get here, I sure didn’t expect you to jump to Miz Sherry’s defense.”

“I couldn’t leave my job until last night,” I said, sounding more indignant than I’d meant to.

“I’m not talking about just this time. I’ve been trying to get you to visit your aunt for a month.”

“Well, I’m here now, and I don’t do bullies. Which begs the question, why didn’t you call Hellspawn on her threat?”

“I didn’t hear her make it. I came up just as you went ballistic.” He paused and gave me a stern look. “You sure had a mouthful of legal terms handy. Why is that?”

“I’ve dated three lawyers. Now about Hellspawn. Do you know her?”

His lips twitched. “Three lawyers?”

“Different specialties. Hellspawn?”

“I don’t know her personally.”

“You want to expand on that?”

He shrugged. “She’s a land developer, from what I hear. I’ve seen her at the courthouse, and I’ve seen her having lunch with a couple of city councilmen, but I didn’t think much of it.”

“Why not? If she’s after Sherry’s land, I’ll bet she’s greasing palms.”

“That’s worth considering, but the lunches all took place at the Lilies Café.”

“Why do you make that sound unimportant?”

“Clark and Lorna Tyler own the Lilies Café and the Inn on the Square. The building was Lilyvale’s original saloon and hotel, and that’s where Elzman and her assistant are staying. That’s also where Jill Elzman had lunch with Clark Tyler and the other councilmen and women. Nothing smacked of clandestine meetings.”

“For a cop, you’re not very suspicious.”

He gave me a slow smile. “You seem suspicious enough for both of us, but I will tell you this. Sherry’s not the only landowner Elzman has approached, and a few have called in complaints about her.”

“No one will press charges?”

His expression darkened. “To my knowledge, she hasn’t done anything illegal yet, Ms. Nix.”

“Nixy.”

“Nixy, then. I suggest you talk to Miz Sherry and her friends about Elzman,” he said as he took a business card from his shirt pocket, “and keep me updated. Call anytime.”

I accepted the card. “Updated about Hellspawn or the kitchen incidents?”

“Both. Elzman may be all snap and no dragon, but better to keep her claws at a distance. If Miz Sherry wants, I can have a friendly chat with Elzman about her people skills.”

“What people skills?”

“Exactly.”

He gave me a quick smile, pushed off the trunk, and started for the driver’s door when I remembered something bugging me.

“Hey, Detective.”

“Eric.”

“The call you got at the station. That wasn’t through the nine-one-one line, was it?”

“Nope. Eleanor phoned me directly.” He beeped open his door. “I left another card with her when I was out here Monday evening. I think she has me on speed dial.”

We shared a smile that hung in time and space. I finally looked away, then back.

“Thank you,” I said, and he raised a brow. “I mean for taking a personal interest in my aunt and her housemates. That’s above and beyond.”

“Lilyvale isn’t that big. We look after our own.” He opened his car door, then glanced back at me. “But never doubt I have a job to do, Nixy. Protecting the public includes protecting people from themselves. Remember that.”

## Chapter Three

ERIC SHOAR HAD PROVED FRIENDLIER THAN I'D imagined he'd be, was for sure handsome, and oh my, his deep, dreamy drawl was more potent in person. However, his cop stare left no doubt where he'd draw the line. A line I wasn't eager to cross.

As he drove away, I checked my mental to-do list: Get my aunt and her friends to spill about the explosions and kitchen fires. Observe the mental and physical condition of the Silver Six, especially Aunt Sherry. Discover who Hellspawn was and what she wanted. Hopefully I'd have answers by tonight. Scratch that. I *would* have answers by tonight. I didn't have time for Sherry to stonewall me.

Besides, I mused after I snagged my wallet and cell phone from the car and headed back to the porch, Sherry should be tired enough tonight to give me straight answers. Every problem had a solution; every challenge could be overcome. The sooner I had the scoop, the sooner I'd sort things out and be home in Houston. We'd all go back to our normal lives, except that I'd keep closer tabs on Aunt Sherry in the future. Just in case she needed me.

I reached the porch to find she'd clipped her bangs back with the barrette again and was merrily chatting with several customers. It took a moment for her to see me, and when she did, emotion flashed in her eyes. Distress? Panic? Okay, I should've called to tell her I was coming. My mother had taught me better manners. But catching Sherry off guard was the point if I wanted to get to the truth and keep her and her housemates from winding up in court.

"I'm fine right now, but I'll take a break later," she said after I bagged a bread basket of woven white oak for a customer. "Go enjoy the festival for a bit. Stretch your legs before I put you to work."

She waved me away as more customers approached, but I didn't leave. No, she seemed too eager to run me off, so I stood at the porch railing, pulled out my phone, and began to take pictures while surreptitiously eavesdropping. I didn't overhear anything important, and soon was looking more than listening.

The first detail I noticed suggested that Sherry and her friends kept the property in excellent repair. The porch looked more or less recently painted, and so did the house itself. A lone crepe myrtle sapling about six feet tall stood near the first of the booths, mulch surrounding its base. Mulch-covered flower beds lining the porch teemed with iris blooms, the old-fashioned purple bearded iris my mother had grown. I recognized what my mom had called pinks, too, but couldn't name the white-flowered ground cover. Sherry's four forsythia bushes with their bright yellow flowers anchored each end of the beds. My mom had loved forsythia, too.

I gazed beyond the cars and booths to the far side of the yard and the thicket of pines and pin oaks interspersed with redbuds and dogwoods that defined the southern property line. Sherry's farmhouse sat on a half square block of land, and the miniforest ran along the back of the house and on part of the north side, too. I remembered that from the many photos Sherry had sent, all labeled to give me the feeling of being here. And while I did recognize the general layout of the yard and garden, moving in a space was always a different experience from seeing it in pictures.

"Nixy? Nixy, are you all right?"

I blinked at Sherry's upturned face. "I'm fine."

"You were a million miles away, child."

“I was thinking about how Mom used to talk about this place. You want a break now?”

“Not yet. Go shop. Buy that nice boss of yours a little gift.”

*Nice boss? Barbra?* I managed not to grimace, but with nothing else to do, I took Sherry’s suggestion to browse.

All art holds value to me, be it fine, folk, or way out there. One of my majors was in fine art, but I only squeaked through. Why? Because I can barely draw a recognizable stick figure. An eye for arrangement, for design, is more my thing, and I used that talent at the gallery to showcase the works of those who have true artistic gifts.

According to one of my professors, folk art was originally created from whatever natural materials were at hand, and esthetics took a distant second to function. Baskets were made for gathering food, gourds for carrying water, and the prettiest of aprons doubled for dust rags in a pinch. But folk artisans had long blended beauty with practicality, and as I strolled through the festival, that truth slammed home. In fact, the high quality of craftsmanship blurred the lines between fine and folk art at every turn.

The horde of shoppers must’ve felt the same way.

I drifted from display to display, snapping photos with my cell phone, astounded by the variety of items. Made of every kind of material from fabric to wood, clay to metal, artists offered quilts, furniture pieces, birdhouses, wall hangings, multimedia paintings, jewelry, and more. Very few vendors repeated goods, and when they did, the prices were comparable. No undercutting one another here.

In chatting up the several dozen artists manning their stations, I noticed distinct trends. That is, aside from the Southern drawls and Southern hospitality I found at each stop.

The first trend was that the artists were in their fifties and older. Second, they all lived in the area. Third, they’d all been doing this festival since Sherry started it three years earlier. Last, and most telling, they all sold their art for one driving reason: to supplement their limited incomes. Unlike other art and crafts festivals I shopped, not one vendor handed out business cards or directed shoppers to their websites for Internet sales. No one took special orders. The artists clearly loved creating their works of folk art, but none of them wanted to invest the time or money to run a web sales operation. Whatever customers wanted had to be bought today, or they were out of luck until the fall festival.

Were Sherry and her housemates supplementing their incomes out of necessity, too? Were any or all of them in financial trouble?

I searched my memory for the facts Sherry had dropped about her housemates in her letters. I knew each of the Six was retired, although I didn’t know what fields they had worked in. Well, except that Sherry had taught school, and Maise had been a nurse. I knew they were all over sixty-five, too, so it was a safe bet they were each getting social security benefits. Sherry may have a retirement fund or pension through the school system, and some of the others might have pensions, too. Of course, that was no guarantee any of them pulled in much monthly income.

As for coming to live with Sherry, Maise and Aster’s home had burned, I recalled. They’d stayed with Sherry as a stopgap, then the three decided to share the farmhouse. The arrangement gave Sherry companionship and security so she wasn’t ambling around the large farmhouse alone. Eleanor came to live with Sherry next. I dredged up something said about an evil landlord. On the circumstance of Fred and Dab joining the ladies, I drew a blank, but Sherry had happily quoted the *more the merrier* adage. Simple logic

dictated that the housemates pooled their financial resources, too.

If the Six did need extra money, even mad money, I needed to do my part.

With that in mind, I sought out Aster's booth on the south side of the farmhouse. Aptly named Aster's Aromatics, her setup stood in front of a large garden of plants I couldn't begin to name, and her tables overflowed with herbal everything—soaps, bath salts, lotions, eye packs, teas. No wonder Aster smelled of herbs. Maise manned the booth with her sister, and they put on a show of being delighted to educate me about the properties of herbs and aromatherapy in general. Still, I felt an odd undercurrent as I selected soaps and lotions for my boss and friends at the gallery. Hard to pin down, but a distinctly different energy from their cheerful welcome when we met on the porch.

Across the way from Aster and Maise, I located Eleanor and Dab presiding over tables featuring carved wood art. Human, animal, plant; and free-form figures; wall art; boxes; boats; and more drew buyers. Some figures were executed with amazing detail; others were more representative. None were painted, and the gorgeous natural wood grains took my breath.

I fell for exquisite napkin rings with a lily motif and bought a set of eight for my roommate Vicki's wedding gift. Which reminded me. With Vicki leaving, I needed to get serious about apartment hunting. Soon. I couldn't swing our two-bedroom place solo, not without touching the nest egg my mother had left me. I wasn't about to deplete those savings unless I invested in buying a place of my own.

Eleanor treated me cordially if a bit coolly, even after I bought the napkin rings. Then again, I sensed a natural reserve from her. Dab acted jovial, but I felt the key there was acted. That, or I was being paranoid and the housemates were simply interested in selling instead of gabbing. Made sense if they had money worries.

Or did they resent me for waiting so long to come visit?

Or resent me for visiting now?

I sighed and reached the backyard as a group of musicians launched into a lively bluegrass tune. No stage for these performers. They stood in the mown grass, the miniforest of trees the backdrop. With fiddles, guitars, banjos, basses, and mandolins they played and smiled at the crowd. Young children pushed closer to dance to the music.

After toe-tapping to two numbers, I went to investigate Fred's display. He didn't have a mere table or three. He had a whole shed that stood opposite the farmhouse back porch and deck. The shed's double doors were thrown open and a banner overhead read **FIX-IT FRED: BEST MECHANIC ANYWHERE, I FIX ANYTHING**. The shelves inside held small appliances like electric griddles, blenders, and a waffle iron I'd swear had been new in 1960. He also had a few old suitcase-style record players and vintage radios.

Fred himself sat on a tractor-seat stool at a wooden workbench marred with pits and scars. Glasses perched halfway down his nose, he tinkered with a toaster as I approached. Even now, using fine motor skills, the muscles of his upper and lower arms subtly flexed. No wonder, considering the loaded walker he lunged around.

"Mind if I take a peek inside?" I asked when he noticed me.

"Look all you like, but ain't nothin' for sale in there. Owners haven't picked them up yet."

“Not even that stand mixer?” I eyed the white KitchenAid that had to date from the 1970s.

“It’s a beaut, ain’t it? Lady who owns that still has all the attachments. She’s visitin’ her daughter for a spell.” He gave me narrow glance. “You cook? Bake?”

“Not much, but that mixer is a classic. It’s great that you can fix it.”

“Lotta classics around here, but it don’t mean they’re disposable.”

I met his serious, faintly warning gaze, and knew he spoke of more than household appliances.

“Fred,” a voice called, and I lost my chance to say more.

As I poked around in the shed, I overheard Fred consult with customer after customer about their lawn mowers, tractors, cars, and appliances needing repair. I’d about tuned out the conversations when one caught my ear.

“You better fix that stove in y’all’s own house, Fred. Maybe you wouldn’t have smoke pouring out the windows ever’ other durned day.”

I edged closer to eavesdrop, but stayed out of sight.

Fred humphed. “Stove’s not the problem, Bob. It’s Maise. She’s a helluva cook, but she don’t know ‘come here’ from ‘sic ’em’ about making fancy desserts.”

“What kinda desserts?” Bob asked, emphasizing the “de” in desserts.

“The woman’s obsessed with lightin’ fruit on fire. Pours good liquor over it, flicks that long barbeque lighter, and whoosh.”

“What fool kind of thing is she trying to make?”

“She calls it flambé but it always goes flamboeey. She’s too stubborn to quit, though. Says she won’t give up until she gets the dish right.”

I heard the man chuckle. “Well, we’re just across the road, you know. Can see your place easy from the kitchen window. You have our number, right?”

“We do,” Fred confirmed.

“Then holler if you ever need us.”

Fred greeted someone new, and I slipped away from his shed, considering what I’d heard. Igniting booze certainly explained the kitchen fires, but not so much the explosions. Not unless Maise was the mad scientist of cooks.

Hmm. Bob had to live in the subdivision across the way, one that looked to date from the 1970s. A drainage ditch, then a brick wall separated the neighborhood from the road. I recalled seeing it as I followed Detective Shoar. I’d lay odds Bob was one of the complaining neighbors, but he wasn’t testy with Fred. That was good.

I blinked, realizing I’d been staring into space again, and looked around. Three vehicles were parked off to my left near the fence—a rather beat-up red pickup, a blue Corolla, and a dark gray Cadillac. The Corolla

was Sherry's. I remembered her driving it when my mom died. Also on the left, some ten yards from Fred's shed, were two country-red outbuildings a little wider and deeper than single-car garages, and beyond those a barn the same color. Not a ginormous barn, but with typical high double doors. I startled when a standard-sized side door swung open. A harried woman about my age hustled out, shooing two children in front of her. I was a second from confronting her for being in a nonpublic area when I noticed the RESTROOM sign beside the door.

It seemed beyond progressive to have a bathroom in the barn, but it made sense for the festival. On-site facilities kept customers on the grounds ready to spend more money, yet renting porta potties would cut into the profit margin. Toilet paper, paper towels, and soap were cheap by comparison.

The woman and her children hustled away, but I spotted someone else skulking by the back of the barn. I blinked, squinted, whipped out my cell to take a picture. She'd covered her blonde hair with a blue ball cap but hadn't changed from the jeans and summer sweater she'd worn earlier. The one that enhanced her Dolly Parton chest.

Shoot fire. If Hellspawn's minion was here, was Hellspawn herself far behind?

Detective Shoar had been wrong about the troublemakers staying away, but I'd routed them once, and I'd do it again.

The minion peered out from behind the corner of the barn, spied me, and gave me a *come here* wave, but I was already on the move.

#### Chapter Four

I STOMPED THROUGH THE MOWED FIELD GRASS TO where the woman stood at the corner of the barn.

"What are you doing back here?" I demanded.

"Finding you." Coming from a tall, big-boned gal who looked like she could snap me in half, her breathy voice startled me. Deep but breathy. Like Marlene Dietrich doing Marilyn Monroe, and yes, I'd dated an old-movie buff.

The minion craned her neck, her gaze darting from me to the main yard and back. "I'm Trudy Henry."

"What do you want, Trudy?"

She hesitated, bit her lip, and again scanned the area as if looking for spies. "I want to buy one of your aunt's white oak baskets. One with the rope handle braided in with blue gingham fabric. I have money."

She wedged a fat roll of twenties from her jeans pocket, and I couldn't help but stare.

"Your boss pays you big bucks, huh?"

Trudy made a sour face. "This is from my savings. May I buy a basket?"

Sincere as she sounded, I shook my head. "I don't think it's a good idea to come back to the festival today."

Her shoulders slumped. "Can I buy one later if your aunt has any left over?"

"I'll ask her for you," I said more kindly. The girl was about my age but reminded me of an awkward puppy. "Is that all you wanted?"

"Actually, no. I need to warn you about Ms. Elsmann. I'm not supposed to talk about her business, but you need to know she's, uh, pretty determined to get, ah, what she wants."

I stiffened. "Which is what?"

"You need to ask your aunt about that. Like I said, I shouldn't be talking to you at all, but I'm worried about how far Ms. Elsmann will go." Trudy looked close to tears. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt. Please, talk with your aunt."

With a wave, Trudy galumphed off toward the back of Sherry's property and disappeared into the woods that extended to the next street over. In spite of not having visited Sherry before now, I *had* listened when my mother talked about playing hide-and-seek out behind the house. She'd mentioned her old home often in the weeks before her stroke, had longed to visit again. Then it had been too late to bring her.

It wasn't too late to help Sherry. Trudy's warning worried me even more than the kitchen fires, and my resolve to get these mysteries sorted out doubled.

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