

The Carnivore Catastrophe

Book One of The Pecan Bay Predicaments Series

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Chapter One

Double Whammy

If you're a mother, there is little in this world more terrifying than your own twin boys gobbling three slices of their sixteenth birthday cake each (one leaving pink strawberry frosting on the edges of his mouth, the other, lips murky and dark from rocky road), then being let loose on the streets days later in a perfectly legal fashion. Her babies were allowed, *encouraged* even, to snuggle up behind leathered wheels, left to pump accelerators at will, in what some called cars, but police officers identified in driver's safety courses as fully licensed weapons.

“Come again?” Beatrice Quincy asked through a laugh, not believing the words out of her son’s mouth.

She dug through a counter strewn with ingredients and spices, finding her wooden spoon buried under a bag of flour. As she stirred the shredded potatoes and smoked cheddar cheese into Campbell’s cream of chicken (America’s unglamorous secret weapon of many a casserole, she always maintained), she glanced at the stove clock.

Well this was fantastic. Her neighbors were due any moment for their Friday night barbeque and her side dish wasn’t even in the oven yet. She’d like to say this was a unique occurrence...

Tonight, it was her turn to host, and she wanted to make sure everything was just right. As in, no raw casserole this time. Even if she’d been powerless to an unfriendly storm that knocked out her electricity last time, she’d still served nothing but a little lump of tragedy. And Bobby wouldn’t stop joking about it!

“A car. I hit a *parked* car. Now my hood’s smashed and it won’t go.”

Parked car! Beatrice shook her head. These boys would never stop teasing her. Though it was unusual for Finn to be pretending some kind of crisis. Luca feigned them just to get her blood to spark. Luca was also the one who inspired her blood *to* spark with that drag racing fiasco last year.

Finn’s first few weeks of college must be simmering his serious shell, she thought with a wry smile.

“Right, right. Well, that’s too bad, son. I wonder what the other car looks like.”

Beatrice popped the hashbrown casserole into the oven, feeling ripe to show everyone this oven dish she’d found at an auction. The daisies done up in an array of

Mediterranean hues, from boater's blue to the clearest, most turquoise bay of water, gave her a little squishy tinge of joy just looking at it.

Was she being ridiculous? Probably.

“Mother, I’m trying to tell you something here. Will you stop what you’re doing for a second?”

If you stop joking for a second, she wanted to add. Still, she didn’t want to discourage goofiness. Life made more sense with a little splash of that and Finn could use more of it.

“Hang on, a police officer is calling me.” Finn clicked to the other line.

Now this was getting rich. Boy, did Luca train him well.

She clicked the oven light on and bent down for a look. How was it that the simple thrill of an auction find last week could remind her there was a life beyond being a mother? Beyond being an author of romance stories catering to a heroine who was nothing but a glorified harlot, beyond a reader of realistic love stories that kept her up too late at night, beyond a wife of a disloyal late husband?

Dishes, somehow it all came down to little hand-painted flowers. Something she liked that she didn’t need a ruling on by family or publishers.

Oven on, check. Timer set, check. The end of Bobby’s remarks, check.

“I’m back. If you’re too busy then I can call another time.”

“Sweetie, how about a real update? Let me guess, after two mere weeks, you’ve already graduated college? It wouldn’t surprise me, you know.”

“Well, my update is that I came close to totaling the car, Mama. And it’s all my fault.”

Never one speeding ticket. Never one *parking* ticket. All that next to Luca's illustrious total of four. Beaz hung her head with a sigh.

The oven buzzed and she set a bubbling mass of queso onto a tray as an appetizer. As she doled out a fan of warm tortilla chips, she tried not to think about her great uncle. Not the darn will. Her gut churned with greasy unease at what lay ahead tonight. What would her cousin Mary Anne think of her hiring a commercial real estate agent just weeks after Great Uncle Mike's death?

"Send a picture to both Luca and I and we'll have a good laugh like Luca pulled on me last time."

The line went as still as a sleeping schnauzer.

Why wasn't he laughing? Even Luca never carried a joke too far.

She felt her heart thunder up like a storm. News flash, the kid wasn't joking? She clutched her hand to her forehead as panic officially seeped in. "Finn are you in the hospital?" she whispered.

"I'm okay, no injuries at all! I just...well, I messed up, Mama. Like I said."

Visions of her worst nightmares crept in. "Are you sure? You're not stuffed in a thin bed in one of those flimsy gowns and surgeons aren't waiting in the background, knives gleaming?" Dear Lord. "*Which hospital?*"

Finn chuckled. "Mom, I think I know what a dorm room looks like! There's no knives nearby other than a butter knife with my peanut butter on it."

At the sound of that benevolent gale of amusement, her shoulders slacked. "Son, are you really okay?"

"Right as rain and even liked my PB and J. But my car's not."

She felt her entire chest relax. Then mother-mode of a different kind set in. “So what happened?”

“I was driving to debate club and texting the president that I’d be five minutes late. Only there was mist in the air. I nailed the back of a truck on a street by my dorm. I don’t remember knocking the side of the wheel so Bobby says my alignment must be off.”

“Bobby? You told Bobby before me?”

She heard a gulp on the other end of the line. “Bobby’s better at...emergency car scenarios.”

It’s like he was picking his words carefully, wasn’t he?

“Excuse me! I’ve handled plenty of breakdowns in my time. After your dad passed I even enrolled us in those courses. You know, the ones where we learned to change a tire? Oil? All that gunk even your dad didn’t care to know! But I did!”

“I know, Mama, I know. I mean, you wanted *us* to know it...”

“Fine. I wanted you to know it. Finn, you of all people don’t text and drive! You taught me that!”

Finn was not the irresponsible ham. He was the honey-voiced, number-crunching bookish sort, always there volunteering to read her drafts (cheeks gleaming red at the steamy chapters), listen undistractedly to any word she uttered and, ever since Tom died, to calculate which laundry detergent she should buy based on value and number of ingredients they could both pronounce. That they had a little robin’s egg of emergency savings was thanks to the resourceful Finn, her teenage accountant.

“I know. I was worried I’d make a bad impression on the president. Now I’ve made quite the impression on the back of a Ford. I’ve never been sorrier about anything,” he murmured softly. “Anyhow, I’ll work extra so I can pay for the repairs.”

Beatrice sighed relief. A sense of responsibility. Plowing into a parked car or not, at least he felt like he should pay for it all.

Fighting the urge to shriek and restate the obvious, *You ran into a parked car?*, she took a deep breath and said as cool and calm as anything out of the freezer:

“No, no, son. Just focus on your studies. You’ve barely attended your first semester of college and this isn’t going to derail you.” Beatrice tapped into a list of car-related saviors in her head. “I’ll call Fanny, she’ll know someone in College Station who can fix it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“This is your one get-out-of-jail free card for an accident of your doing. Not only that, it’s your *one* car, the only one I’ll buy you. So be more careful next time, eh?”

“I’ll be as careful turning on that ignition as if I’m picking up a porcupine.”

There was a knock at the front door. All she could think was: 18 years old and you didn’t throw baby food at Luca once, you probably didn’t even sneak out! She hoped Finn wasn’t one of those late blooming rebels that beamed toward the perilous quivers of anarchy in college.

When she opened the door, she was greeted only by the familiar scents of sweet jasmine and honeysuckle. All she saw was the early evening sun lancing her mighty live oak canopies into a golden, flickering yellow.

Her eyes fell to a plain white envelope on her doormat. Glancing up and down her leafy street, she saw no one. With the envelope absently in her hand, her mind skittered back to the phone call.

The memory of all her son's mild-mannered hugs etched in her heart brought her back. Screw-up or not, poor Finn. His apology bled so simple, so sincere. Would insurance cover the cost of repairs? Oh dear.

As a widow, a single, iron-heavy thought outweighed all others: if her children weren't taught well enough, it was only she to blame. Had she botched the job? Given them too much mac and cheese with not enough broccoli? Read *Where the Wild Things Are* one hundred too many times?

Beatrice strode back to the kitchen, dipping her finger into the seal of the envelope with relish. There was a minor but visceral thrill in tearing it open like she was peeling an orange in an orange peel contest as a girl. It was fun to be messy, ravenous for the contents of a curious letter.

Maybe it's just a clever marketing ploy she thought, not getting her hopes up, leaving nothing but rough edges in her wake. Since Tom passed, she no longer had to commit this minor act of mutiny in secret. Her late husband was an advocate for letter openers and felt very strongly about tidy letter reveals. It became easier to just use the bloody thing rather than get into a debate about it every day. Silver lining of widowhood was absolutely *no* more letter openers *anywhere*.

She reached for a small piece of paper tucked inside. The red type read:

Drop the price by half. If you don't, you'll never sell. You know you can't keep the steakhouse.

That's it. That's all the note was. No return address, no heading, no date, not a mention of impending roach infestations or tree-trim necessities. Nothing but eighteen fire-poker-red words. She felt the hair jut up on her arms and set the letter aside as if it were a ticking carpet bomb.

A fuel tank of worry lit inside her. Of course she knew she couldn't keep the steakhouse! She didn't need some anonymous nutbar telling her that. But what coward would write something like this? It was a violation of something, somehow. Like a criminal had just broken into her house. And drop the price to half of what it was worth? Her mind would have to creak with deranged cobwebs to do something like that.

She pushed the worry into a brooding cavity in her mind (usually reserved for budget constraints and new ways to write sex scenes) and got back to dashing her island counter with wine glasses and appetizers in haphazard strokes.

But the spooky feeling stayed. In fact, it was borderline anger now, five minutes later. Her teeth ground into each other and she felt her blood start to boil up all over again.

She'd hired the agent two days ago and this creepy note almost made her want to change her mind. No one had the right to tell her what to do. Especially someone who delivered the message in a sleazy blank envelope.

Alas, there was no overlord more brutal than a rayless balance of one's checking account. She couldn't afford to keep the steakhouse.

Period.

“Knock, knock!” Sophie called. “Is there a Beaz around?”

Beatrice, more commonly known as Beaz, felt her heart warm at the sound of her friend’s gravy-thick voice. A tall and willowy blonde, Sophie clicked and swayed and glided into the kitchen in a way that only Sophie could do. She didn’t spend money on food or wine and owned a modest house across the street.

But her clothes, how her clothes sang.

Heels and a silk suit that must have cost a mint, accented with jewelry so artfully staged, you barely noticed anything but her elegance. Coco Chanel would have approved, Beaz was quite sure. Also meant she’d come directly from work - yet again. They kissed each other’s cheeks and Sophie emptied her paper bag.

“I spent all day baking this. Can’t you tell?” Sophie set out a cardboard dessert box with a price tag on the outside next to a chilled bottle of rosé. Though her homemade banana cream pie was swoon-worthy, she hadn’t been able to make one for the barbeque in months.

“Ha! I don’t know how you do it, balancing the oven and the job. Speaking of which, who’s robbing who these days?”

With finely filed fingertips, Sophie tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Sophie’s long hair was swept up in her usual loose bun. Not once in her life had she gotten her hair colored and, as the years passed, her hair simply turned blonder, with flecks of

white scattered throughout. Even if her housekeeping and hosting skills suffered, Sophie's physical appearance never did. What would be better, Beaz wondered. Having the perfect style like Sophie or the perfectly decorated house like her cousin Mary Anne? Beaz had neither. In the end, it was just herself and her own arsenal of imperfection.

"Come on, Beaz. You know I can't tell you 'til the case is closed. Even then, not all of it. All I can say is this one is driving me *certifiable*."

"Just a tiny *smidgeon* of a hint. I'm dying to know which crystal clean CEO will be in the clinker eating instant mashed potatoes this month."

"No." Sophie popped a chip in her mouth like she was signing a contract with her final word written in plasma. "But on that note, did you know some prisons in Italy have their own bakeries? Hoodlums eat fresh panettone!"

"Interesting." But Beaz still pouted. "I always dream of being secretive but it never works out."

"That's because you aren't calculating enough."

"What does math have to do with undercover work?"

"Everything. It's about being deliberate after you've thoughtfully weighed your options. The only deliberate thing you do is make a silent vow to yourself to *never* be deliberate."

"Geez. If that's true, and I'm not saying it is," (it was, come to think), "but *if* it is, doesn't that fall into the free spirit scheme of things?"

Sophie tidied Beaz's display of wine glasses amidst the spice-strewn kitchen. "Yes, it does."

Beaz tried to ignore the clip of her friend's tone. A correlation between whimsy and lack of secrecy? Hmm. She shrugged, making a mental note to never tell Sophie anything on a whim anymore. On impulse – which was entirely different than a whim, there was no eccentricity involved whatsoever - she exclaimed, “Oh! You know what? I should show you something.”

Marching to the front hallway, Beaz handed the red-inked note to Sophie.

Sophie's lips curled up at the sloppy letter opening job; she knew all about the letter opener battle. “What is this?” she demanded, flipping it over and over, a darkness taking over her face.

Beaz shrugged. “If it's a love letter, they forgot to mention how gorgeous I am.”

Sophie didn't laugh. “Want me to send it to the lab for fingerprints?”

“No, God no. It's just freaking me out is all.”

Sophie handed it back to her. “A secretive person would never have told me about this. I'm very happy you aren't secretive. Please let me know if you get any more romantic deliveries.”