

Mistletoe Cake Murder by Lena Gregory

EXCERPT

Savannah Mills drummed her glitter-tipped maroon nails against the gear shift of her blue Mustang convertible as she rounded one last curve on the way to Trevor Barnes's mansion, where she and Leo Dumont would be married in a little more than a week.

Few streetlights lined the dark road, casting small pools of light against the slick pavement, compliments of an unusually rainy day in the small town of Boggy Creek, Florida. Gia Morelli would have preferred to head out to the mansion before dark, but they had to wait until after she closed the All-Day Breakfast Café for the day.

Savannah shook her head, tumbling her long blonde hair into her face. She sighed and tucked the strands behind her ear before returning to nail tapping her staccato rhythm.

Gia laid a hand over hers, stilling the steady *rat-a-tat-tat*. "Will you relax. Everything's going to be perfect."

"I know." She glanced at Gia, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

Gia just lifted a brow.

"All right, all right." Laughing, Savannah returned her attention to the road ahead. She rolled her shoulders, tilted her head from side to side. "Maybe I've been a little stressed lately."

Understatement of the year; better to keep that to herself. "Ya think?"

"Hey," Savannah pointed at her. "A good friend once told me no one likes a smart aleck."

Gia grinned. Nothing like having her own words thrown back at her.

As Savannah pulled into the cul-de-sac where Trevor's mansion stood at the far end, she slowed. Her mouth dropped open. "Oh, wow."

Long strands of evergreen garland, complete with pine cones and ivory bows, had been draped along the stone wall surrounding the grounds. The faux-snow covered garland twinkled with thousands of tiny clear Christmas lights, giving the impression of a winter wonderland, despite the ridiculously hot Florida weather of late. For just a moment, Gia could imagine the rain changing to fluffy white flakes that would bury the estate in rolling hills of snow.

Huge oak trees lined the inside of the wall, their moss draped limbs alight with lanterns that seemed to hover in mid-air, a welcoming invitation to crank up the air conditioning, grab a blanket, and snuggle up with a good book in front of one of the numerous fireplaces Trevor's mansion boasted.

"Wow," Gia repeated, not knowing what else to say.

Savannah stopped in front of the wrought iron gate and pushed a button on the remote Trevor had given her. As the gates slowly opened, she looked at Gia. "Trevor sure did go all-out."

"No kidding." Trevor's mansion and grounds were gorgeous on an average day, which was part of the reason Gia had wanted to hold Savannah's wedding there, but seeing it fully decorated for Christmas left Gia speechless.

"I feel like I'm at the North Pole, heading straight into Santa's castle." Savannah rolled through the gates and closed them behind her. "It's incredible."

"It sure is." The palm trees lining both sides of the driveway were strung with lights. Piles of boxes wrapped in pale pink and ivory paper with silver bows were piled beneath them. The fact that they hadn't turned to mush in the pounding rain told Gia they must be just decorative, made from some material that could withstand the elements, but they sure looked real.

"I can't believe Trevor did all of this for us." With her gaze darting everywhere, Savannah pulled into the circular courtyard and stopped in front of the house.

The gardens were transformed, glittering with lights and an abundance of poinsettias, evergreens, holly and other seasonal flowers that Trevor must have had added for the occasion. Icicle lights cascaded from the mansion's every roofline, peak and window. Warm light spilled out into the darkness from a towering Christmas tree standing sentinel in the center front windows.

"Did you know?" Savannah whispered.

Gia shook her head. Nothing she'd ever seen could have prepared her for the sheer wonder of Trevor's mansion ready to welcome guests for the holiday. Her own experience with Christmas was limited to a small tree she decorated in her room each year while she was growing up, then whatever business parties her ex-husband dragged her to so he could meet with his important clients, clients he'd later steal millions from. She shoved the thoughts away. No way would she allow anything to intrude on this moment. "I knew he was having the mansion decorated for Christmas, but I didn't expect all of this. I thought maybe some lights on the house and a Christmas tree."

Tears shimmered in Savannah's eyes.

"Hey, you okay?" Gia lay a hand on Savannah's shoulder.

She nodded. “I just can’t believe he’d do this. How am I ever supposed to repay him for this? I can’t even imagine what all of this must have cost.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Trevor had adamantly refused any kind of payment for the use of his mansion as a venue, threatening to revoke his offer if they even tried to insult him with payment, and now it seemed he’d gone way over the top with decorating. “Trevor seemed so happy and excited about doing it, so I’d say just be happy and grateful and enjoy it.”

The front door opened, and Trevor ran toward them, umbrella held over his head.

Savannah wiped the tears that tipped over her lashes and spilled down her cheeks. She rolled the window down, and rain splashed into the car.

Trevor leaned in and blocked the window with his body and the umbrella.

Thor, Gia’s Bernese Mountain Dog, barked in greeting from his spot in the back seat between Klondike and Pepper’s carriers.

“Hey, Thor.” Trevor reached behind Savannah to give his head a pat, then pointed toward the far end of the cobblestone courtyard. “I put you guys in the same suite you shared last time, and I had the canopy pulled out. I wanted to bring you in the front, so you could behold everything the way your guests will when they arrive, but I figure it’s better to keep you dry. I hope that’s okay?”

“It’s perfect, Trevor, thank you,” Savannah said.

He grinned and patted the window frame, then hurried ahead of them to the far side of the courtyard where a canvas canopy covered the entryway and the potty pavilion Thor would use.

Savannah shook her head, a brilliant smile lighting her face as she rolled up the window and followed Trevor. “The man thinks of everything.”

“Hmm...” Gia had to admit, that thought was about as surprising as finding out her mild-mannered friend was a millionaire...at least. “Who’d have thought?”

“Not me,” Savannah grinned, “that’s for sure.”

Even the potty pavilion was decorated for the occasion, with festive colored lights strung from every pine tree in the area.

Savannah parked right in front of the now covered archway and hopped out of the car without waiting for Trevor to come around with the umbrella. She ducked underneath and hugged him hard.

Gia climbed out and lifted the seat forward for Thor, who scrambled out and bolted straight for Trevor.

Knowing he would be safe with him, and that the potty pavilion—complete with cabinets, grooming area, and exercise equipment—was surrounded by a low stone wall, Gia leaned into the car

to grab Klondike's carrier. "Hey there, sweetie. I'll have you out of here in no time, and you and your buddy can run and get into all the trouble you want."

The little black and white kitten abruptly turned around and flicked her tail against the mesh door of the carrier. Apparently, Gia would not be forgiven so easily for putting her in there.

She sighed and hauled her carrier and Pepper's out of the back seat.

"Here, let me take them." Trevor took one in each hand and gestured with his elbow toward the potty pavilion. "Thor went to take care of business."

Gia peeked in to check on him and laughed. "If by take care of business you mean run straight to the obstacle course on the opposite side of the pavilion to play on the doggie playground, then you're absolutely right."

"What can I say? I like to spoil my dogs." Trevor offered a sheepish smile and swung a lock of too-long-in-the-front brown hair out of his eyes, seemingly embarrassed at his wealth—typical for him. "And, hey, at least it's covered so he won't be soaked and full of mud."

The thought of Thor barreling through the house leaving a trail of sloppy footprints in his wake made her shiver. "That's definitely a plus."

"And he's having fun," Savannah piped in as she popped open the trunk.

"An even bigger plus." Gia started toward the trunk to help her grab their bags.

"Leave that for now." Trevor nodded toward the house. "We'll get it all after the rain stops. Come on; I can't wait to show you your rooms."

Savannah shrugged and slammed the trunk closed, then followed him down the hallway toward the two-bedroom suite she and Gia shared last time they stayed with Trevor, which had been for Savannah's protection.

Gia planned to spend a whole lot more time exploring this time than they had then.

Trevor chatted at warp speed as he strode down the long hallway. "Okay, so, you have a meeting with the caterer for tasting and final approval of the menu promptly at ten tomorrow morning, this way you can both take advantage of Cole, Willow, Earl, and Skyla opening the café tomorrow."

Gia could kiss his cheek. A day to sleep in with no problems nagging at her. Maybe she and Savannah would sit up late and watch an old movie together, share a bucket of popcorn. A small niggle of sadness crept in. Now that Savannah and Leo were getting married, she'd probably be moving out of Gia's spare bedroom. Not that she'd made any effort to find a place yet, so Gia was just assuming. After Savannah was kidnapped last summer while showing a house, Gia didn't want to be the one to bring up the subject. Savannah would talk about her decision when she felt ready.

Hmm...maybe Leo would move in with them? Still, even if he did, things between Savannah and Gia were sure to change. She shook off the thoughts. This was Savannah's time, her moment of happiness. No way would Gia ruin even an instant of it feeling sorry for herself.

"I've already taken care of adding the servers, I hope that's okay. And the florist will be here a little after three to coordinate where you want the flowers, at least the ones that go in the outer rooms and the reception area. You're not allowed to see the actual spot where you'll get married until you're ready to walk down the aisle." Trevor twisted to maneuver the cat carriers up the spiral staircase and onto the loft-style second floor.

Thor bounded after him.

Savannah and Gia followed on their heels.

"You've already spoken with the DJ, so he's set to go." When Trevor reached a set of French doors to their suite, he stopped and set the carriers down, then started ticking items off on his fingers. "You have a week and two days until the wedding, and you're both working until the day before, so I want to make sure you have plenty of time to relax."

Though Gia would have loved to close the café for the week, she just couldn't afford to, so she settled on closing Friday for the wedding and Saturday for Christmas. Even though she was in Florida last Christmas, and was welcomed at Savannah's house, everything had been too new for her to fully immerse herself in the celebration. This would be her first true Christmas with her new family, and Trevor graciously offered to host it since everyone they loved would already be there for the wedding.

Trevor's voice dragged her back to the conversation. "That's why I stacked most of your appointments tomorrow, so you'll have time to rest afterward. Then, on Friday mid-morning, I have people coming to do mani-pedis and massages for the two of you and the bridesmaids."

Savannah laughed out loud.

"What?" Bright red patches crept up Trevor's cheeks. "Was that not right?"

"Are you kidding me?" Savannah flung her arms around his neck, hugged him tight, and planted a big kiss on his cheek. "It's perfect."

Trevor's face reddened to the point of almost purple, and Gia wasn't quite sure if it was from embarrassment or if Savannah was cutting off the circulation to his head. Thankfully, she released him before he passed out from either.

"Good, because the hair stylist will be here first thing Friday morning. Sorry I couldn't get it later in the day, but with Friday being Christmas Eve and all, it was the latest I could get him to come. It

doesn't matter anyway, though, because the photographer will be here at eight a.m., so she can document every single minute of your special day."

Gia's mouth dropped open, and she quickly snapped it closed. No need to further embarrass Trevor after he'd not only taken care of every detail of the wedding, but also set up last minute appointments to go over everything and ensure it would all be perfect the day of.

Trevor finally stopped talking and took a breath, then glanced back and forth between them. "What? Did I forget something?"

Who'd have thought Trevor, her good-natured, easy-going, kind-of-goofy, totally clumsy friend would turn out to be an organizational genius? Then again, she'd never have expected the owner of Storm Scoopers, the ice cream parlor down the road from her All-Day Breakfast Café, would turn out to be the wealthy owner of a mansion and grounds the size of a city block back in Manhattan either. Seemed Mr. Barnes was full of surprises.

"It's perfect, Trevor, thank you." Gia hugged him, careful to do so a little less enthusiastically than Savannah had.

"Now that the details have all been discussed..." A smile spread across his face from ear to ear, and he shoved the French doors open and stepped back with a flourish. "Behold!"

A giant evergreen sat against the far wall between two windows, all aglitter in pink and silver, with a bride and groom locked in an embrace to top it off. A wreath hung above the fireplace, the mantle draped in garland and lights.

Gia's breath shot from her lungs.

"What?" Trevor asked. "Too much?"

"Not at all. It couldn't be more perfect." Tears shimmered, deepening the blue of Savannah's eyes.

Trevor squeezed her hand. "Good, because I went all out in the honeymoon suite too."

"The honey...?"

"Yup. You said you guys didn't want to leave on your honeymoon until the day after Christmas, so I set up a special suite for you and Leo to spend your wedding night and Christmas night."

Savannah just stood, hand in his, staring at him, tears spilling over and down her cheeks. That was a first, not that Gia could blame her, but in all the years she'd known Savannah, she'd never seen her speechless.

Trevor rubbed a hand up and down her arm. "Thank you both for trusting me with this. I really enjoyed doing it, more than I can ever tell you, and I wanted to make it perfect."

“You definitely did, Trevor.” Savannah sniffed. “I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

“Are you kidding me? No thanks needed. I love planning events, but in case you haven’t noticed, even though I have a number of friends, I’m a little socially awkward and uncomfortable outside of my immediate friendship zone. This was like a dream come true. I got to plan not only one, but three events, and I don’t have to be the center of attention at any. You actually did me a favor.”

“What do you mean three?” Though Gia and Savannah helped plan the parts of the wedding that weren’t meant to be a surprise right along with Trevor, she wasn’t aware of any other events.

“The wedding, the rehearsal dinner, which is going to be awesome, and Christmas dinner. Thanks to you two, I will spend Christmas surrounded by my Boggy Creek family, something I’d never have done otherwise.”

Gia gripped his free hand. When they’d discussed making Savannah’s wedding as perfect as possible for her, especially when she was still somewhat fragile after everything she’d been through over the summer, Gia never expected anything like this. “Thank you so much, Trevor.”

“There’s really no need to thank me.” He turned to look her in the eye. “When I needed a friend, you were there for me. Now, it’s my turn to be there for you and Savannah. Savannah needs to be surrounded by family in a place she feels safe, and you need a proper Christmas with family, something you said you’ve never had before. Now, we all have what we need.”

Gia lay her head against his shoulder. If they could just get through the next week without anything going wrong, life would be just about perfect.