

# COME RAIN OR SCRY



THE WITCHES MURDER CLUB #7

SAMANTHA SILVER



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## CHAPTER 1



I stared down one of the most difficult things I'd ever had to do in my life, taking a deep breath as I prepared for the oncoming showdown.

"I'm going to make you suffer before I kill you," I snarled.

Beside me, Ashley sighed. "You're so dramatic. It's just a PDF, Storm."

"Have you ever tried to make one of these things work? It's impossible," I replied.

"It's not impossible. That's why I'm here. We're going to figure this out."

It had been a week since Gary had been killed and a few days since I'd finally found out that Molly, the local gym owner, was the witch who had murdered my parents. She was dead now, and I was coming to grips with living a life in which nobody was trying to kill me. A life where I could just relax.

A life where the biggest issue facing me was trying to format a newspaper that I now owned and make it look like a professional had created it rather than a toddler who randomly smacked the keyboard and thought their crayon drawings were high art.

And if I was to be completely honest, I was having a hard time coming down from where I'd lived my life. The thing no one tells you about long-term trauma is that even when it goes away, it's not as if your life goes back to being picture perfect and exactly the way it was before.

Your brain is still on high alert all the time, even when you know, deep down, that the threat is gone. It doesn't matter. You've been running on survival mode for so long, it's as if your brain doesn't quite trust that it's now okay to relax.

At least, that was how it felt for me. I still tried to face the windows and doors when I entered a room. I still scanned every face I saw and asked myself if that was someone trying to kill me. I was still on tenterhooks, and I had to regularly stop, take a deep breath, and tell myself that no one in the room was after me.

I knew that eventually, this feeling would go away. It would take some time, but eventually, I would feel safe again. But I wasn't quite there yet.

That was why one of the first questions the others had asked when Molly died was whether I was going to keep the name Storm Bancroft or if I was going to go back to my old name, my real identity, Taylor Coombs.

"I feel like Storm," I had replied as we sat in the coffee shop. "I am Storm now. She was created out of the ashes of Taylor Coombs's life, out of necessity, but she's who I am. I'm tougher. Stronger. But I've also got an amazing boyfriend. Incredible friends. People I love more than anything in the world. They only know Storm, and that's me, in every way."

Unfortunately, Storm sucked with computers. But then again, so had Taylor.

That was why we were now sitting in my office while I looked at the InDesign file I'd created that contained the perfect newspaper ready to be distributed tomorrow. Everything was set up, but the file wouldn't save properly. Every time I did it, something looked wrong in the final PDF that I had to send to the printer to get all the issues out.

My familiar hadn't been especially helpful. Jay, cute as he was, had spent most of the afternoon curled up in a sunbeam by the window, sleeping. At one point, my swearing woke him up, and he lifted his head, asking, "Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

“Of course I have,” I answered through gritted teeth.

“Well, then, I’m all out of ideas,” he replied before going back to sleep.

That was when I’d called Ashley. Not that she was a computer expert or anything, but she was better at using them than I was, and she was very good at talking me off the ledge, which was what I was going to need right about now.

“Okay,” Ashley said. “We’re going to take this step by step. First of all, the design on the computer looks good?”

“Yes,” I lamented. “It’s exactly what I want.”

“And the problem is it looks weird when you save as a PDF?”

“Exactly. Some of the colors look different. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Let me see.”

I double-clicked the file and showed her the pictures in question.

“Okay,” Ashley continued. “So it looks like the color profile is off. I did a class on this stuff when I was in college and had a graphic design elective. You’re basically choosing colors that look good on a computer screen but that you can’t print. So let me change the color profile as you’re working, and that way, all the colors you don’t like, you can turn into colors you do like.”

“Color profile? That’s ridiculous. Can’t a printer just make every color I want?”

“Nope, that’s not how it works. Unfortunately. Here. You want the CMYK color profile.”

“You just made all my neon colors boring,” I grumbled as I looked at the difference on the screen. Sure enough, it looked like the PDF.

“I did. But that’s because CMYK can’t print your neon colors. This is a local, small-town newspaper. Did you really need that much neon?”

“No, but I thought it looked cool,” I said. “Okay, thanks. I’ve got it from here. I’m going to write an article to add in at the last second about how you’re the best friend in the world and you saved the newspaper from looking like it was designed by a five-year-old.”

Ashley laughed. “Don’t go that far. You’ve broken virtually every single graphic design law there is.”

“It can’t be that bad, can it? I’ve looked at newspapers my whole life,” I replied, grimacing at the screen.

“It’s not *that* bad. But there’s room for improvement.”

“And you’re going to be the best friend in the world and help me? You don’t have any more important lawyer stuff to be doing right now?”

“I guess it depends on your definition of more important, doesn’t it? But no. The short version is, while I have work to do, none of it is more important than this, so I can stay and help.”

Warmth filled my heart. “Have I ever told you you’re the best friend a woman could ever ask for?”

“Once or twice, and maybe just a few seconds ago” Ashley replied, shooting a wink in my direction. Then, she turned back to the computer, and we got to work.

Two hours later, we were completely finished. All of the colors were perfect. The format was much nicer than the template I’d been using that Gary had, and Ashley had even managed to find room for an extra article I had thought I was going to have to push back to next week.

As soon as I clicked the “send” button on the email to shoot it off to the printer, I leaned back in my seat. “Done.”

“Then congratulations are in order,” Ashley said. “Good job. It’s not every day you start a whole new career all at once.”

“You’re going to be calling me William Randolph Hearst soon enough. But seriously, it’s bittersweet, doing this.”



“I can imagine. The dedication to Gary you’ve got here is beautiful.”

I gave Ashley a small smile of thanks. “I interviewed a ton of people. I wanted them to know what he was really like, you know? Everyone knew him here. And he was great. I never realized until the end how much he sacrificed for me. He gave his whole life to try and keep me safe. Only good people do that. He deserved a proper send-off.”

Ashley nodded. “And that’s what you’ve given him. Now, come on. Let’s go get some dinner to celebrate.”

“Did I hear someone mention dinner?” Jay asked.

“Oh, please. Like you get to come. Your only contribution to this was to tell me to try turning it off and on again. If I’d wanted to hear that, I could have called tech support. Or watched an episode of *The IT Crowd*.”

“Hey, if I understand humans and your technology correctly, that’s the answer to at least ninety percent of your problems when it comes to those electronics you used.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t the solution here.”

“I’m still a part of this. I still helped, even if the answer I gave wasn’t the correct one. I tried. Are you really going to punish me for trying?”

“You didn’t even care until food was mentioned.”

“I’m not pretending I did. But now, if you’re going out to celebrate, I deserve to be rewarded too. After all, didn’t you say you were going to frame a photo of me with ‘employee of the month’ written under it?”

“Yeah, but that’s a joke,” I muttered under my breath.

“I’m the only reason anything gets done around here.”

“You literally spent the whole afternoon sleeping in a sunbeam.”

“Yeah, making sure you kept your butt in the chair, because if I moved, then you would think you’d be able to leave too.”

“All right, fine,” I said, giving up. There was no way I was going to win this argument if these were the lengths Jay was willing to go to.

“Great! Where are we eating?”

I turned to Ashley. “Do you have any idea of where to go?”

“I was thinking 800 Degrees, maybe? It’s a nice night to sit on the patio.”

“That sounds great.”

“I agree. I love a good patio,” Jay said.

A longer-than-usual summer had led into a warm fall, which meant patio season was being extended for a few weeks before the chill of winter hit and everyone moved indoors for four or five months. Our own version of hibernation, if you will.

“800 Degrees it is,” I said, grabbing my bag. “Let’s do it.”

Jay jumped into my purse, and the three of us headed out into the afternoon.

Life was different now. But it was a good different. I could sometimes convince myself to relax for a few minutes. I had a community here. Friends who loved me. A business that I would do my best to help thrive. There was a lot of change, but the most important part of it—my friends—I could rely on. They hadn’t changed a bit.

Everything in Golden Hope was looking up.

## CHAPTER 2



**W**e reached 800 Degrees a few minutes later, after a short walk into town. I loved Golden Hope's small-town feel and the fact that I rarely had to get into my car to go anywhere so long as the weather was good.

We were seated as soon as we arrived at the restaurant. The heaters were on, which felt like overkill now, but I knew I would appreciate as the sun began to go down and the afternoon cooled off, and they had complimentary blankets to lay across laps.

"This is the best restaurant you've ever been to," Jay declared, poking his head out of the bag and closing his eyes as he turned toward the heater, letting the warm air hit his face.

I laughed as I picked up a menu and began perusing the options, as if I didn't know every single item on the menu here by heart already. The Witches Murder Club met here regularly. This was our local hangout, where we came to chat murder and mystery, but if we were lucky, we wouldn't need it for that anymore.

"You know, today feels like a day for new beginnings, and I've always wanted to try the pickle pizza," I announced.

"Pickles?" Ashley asked, raising an eyebrow skyward. "Really?"

"Yeah. It's on this list of specials for fall. Popcorn chicken and pickles, with a garlic base."

"Great. I'll leave you to eat that on your own."

Just then, I spotted Holly walking down the street. I waved, and she grinned when she saw us. She immediately picked up the pace and hustled over, plonking herself down in the chair next to Ashley. “Hello, ladies,” she said.

“How are you? You available to join us for a celebratory dinner? Or at least a drink?” Ashley asked.

“With you two? Always. What’s the occasion?” Holly asked.

“We’re celebrating Storm sending off her first-ever issue of the *Golden Hope Ogopogo* to the printers,” Ashley explained.

“That is exciting,” Holly said. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” I replied, warmth heating my cheeks as my friends celebrated my achievements. “It’s been a weird few days, but I’m looking forward to things finally settling down.”

“How are you handling it?” Holly asked.

I shrugged. “Funnily enough, in a lot of ways, it kind of feels like nothing has changed, you know? I’m able to relax here and there, but it’s kind of like when you take a piece of paper and scrunch it all up in your hand. You can let it go, and it’s going to regain its shape a little bit, but overall, it’s still going to be scrunched up, and you have to take the time to unfold it and flatten it again. That’s where I am. I’m working on flattening out the sheet of paper once more, but I’ve been scrunched up for so long that I haven’t gotten there yet.”

Holly flashed me a sympathetic look. “I’m sorry. But I understand completely.”

“But that’s also part of why I’m here—to celebrate. I want to celebrate Gary, his legacy, and also the fact that I did it! I managed to create an entire newspaper, which is going to be published, and there was only a one-week delay after his death, and that was unavoidable because of Molly trying to kill me.”

“I was reading up about the psychology of trauma,” Ashley added. “It helps to do things like this. Positive experiences. And enjoying the little things in life. Like

celebrating the publication of the first newspaper since Storm has inherited it.”

“Of course you’ve been reading about it,” I said with a good-natured laugh. “And thank you. I really appreciate it, and I appreciate you. It really helps to know that my friends have my back.”

“We totally do. Plus, now that you’re technically my boss, I have to stay on your good side, I guess,” Holly said, laughing.

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, please. You’re such a good employee that I could personally hate your guts, and I would still keep you on. As long as you don’t steal, and—I don’t know—hex some of our customers, then your job is safe.”

“Not that I would ever do that, but I’m glad to hear it. I like it. I never really saw myself as management material before, to be honest.”

“You’re smart, and you’ve got a very reasonable head on your shoulders. Those are two of the most important qualities for a manager. Plus, you’re good with numbers.”

“Which is a bit of a surprise. When I was in high school, my teachers always thought I was awful at math. But I guess that’s because I didn’t understand any of those triangle things. Like sine, cosine, and tangent. Those just flew out of my head.”

“One of the things I think school does incorrectly,” Ashley started, and I gasped dramatically, interrupting her. “What is it?”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you utter those words,” I said. “Ashley, criticizing school and learning? Truly, we must be in a whole new dimension since Molly’s death.”

“You’re so funny,” Ashley deadpanned. “Call Netflix, and maybe they’ll give you your own special. Anyway, as I was *going* to say, one of the things the school system does wrong, in my opinion, is label everything too broadly. Math is an enormous field. Absolutely huge. There are dozens of different branches of it. So maybe trigonometry wasn’t for you. That’s

all right. Not everyone can be good at everything. But you're obviously good at algebra."

Holly nodded. "I think that's what I'm coming to realize. And I really like the business side of the numbers. Trying to make sure we're not spending too much money, making sure that everything is running as smoothly as possible. And I really like managing staff, too. I just love the whole job. I never thought I'd be the kind of person who would take a management role. I thought I'd be serving my whole life."

"I'm glad you've found a career path that suits you," Ashley said.

"Me too. I love it."

"Good, because I'm loving that you're great at it," I said. "I have some skills, but I have no idea how they're going to translate to suddenly being a business owner. I imagine there's going to be a learning curve, and as much as I am awesome, and I like to think I'm good at everything, this is all a lot. I'm going to have to depend on my staff to keep things afloat for at least a few months while I try and sort everything out."

"You're busy for sure," Holly agreed. "Don't worry. I've been talking to the staff about it. They understand. They're a little worried, of course. I mean, they would have to be. These are their jobs we're talking about. They don't want to lose them. But they understand that you're not an idiot and that you're going to do your best to keep things going."

"Good. I'll come by tomorrow. Now that the paper is at the printer, I don't need to worry about it for a few hours, and the delivery guy has assured me he's ready to pick up the copies when they're ready. So I can come see what's going on at the brewery, make sure everything is running well. Wow. It feels like almost overnight, I've become an adult. I used to just hang around town, chatting to people, coming up with stories to write for the paper. Now, all of a sudden, I've got a real schedule to follow, businesses to look after. It's weird. It all feels so weird."

"It must," Ashley said. "I can't imagine. Your life has changed in so many ways. I mean, look at you. Today, you're

ordering a pickle pizza.”

I stuck my tongue out at her. “It looks like it could be good.”

“Ooh, they have pickle pizza here now?” Holly asked, grabbing a menu.

“I think it’s one of their fall specials.”

“I’ve always wanted to try that. I hear it’s good.”

“I can’t believe the two of you make fun of me for not liking cheese, and you’re about to order pizza with pickles on it.”

“That’s because not liking cheese is basically a crime against humanity,” I replied. “Whereas pickle on a pizza sounds like it could be disgusting, but so many people have said it’s amazing that I need to know for myself.”

“Exactly,” Holly agreed.

Ashley shook her head. “Sorry, I’m sticking with a classic ham and pineapple.”

“See, that’s controversial in and of itself,” I said. “There are a lot of people out there who think putting pineapple on a pizza is the worst thing ever.”

“I’m okay with pineapple, but I draw the line at pickles,” Ashley said.

“You know what the worst part of this is? No one has asked me what I think,” Jay said, his head still poking out from the top of my bag. “After all, this is going to be my meal too.”

“It has popcorn chicken on it. Is that all right with you?” I asked.

“I guess so. But pickles sound like a vegetable, and I don’t want any of that.”

“Fine. You don’t have to eat the them. That just leaves more for me.”

Our server arrived then, and the three of us placed orders for drinks and pizza. When she left, I leaned forward. “I’m going to call it now: the pizza is going to be delicious. It’s going to make ham and pineapple look like the worst combination in the world, and in a few minutes, we’re all going to have a new favorite flavor.”

Ashley put up her hands. “I guess we’ll see when it gets here. But I don’t trust it. I don’t trust pickles in general. They’re sketchy.”

“Do you have strong opinions about what other vegetables are shifty?” I asked with a grin.

“I’ve never trusted squash, personally,” Holly said.

Ashley laughed. “No. Although I do love pickled items in general. Kimchi is the best.”

“We agree there. Actually, you know what? I bet kimchi would be a great side with pizza,” I said.

I paused. It was nice, really nice, to be having a conversation about pickled side dishes that would go well with pizza. It was just a normal conversation. The kind of thing regular people talked about with their friends. There was no discussion about witches or wizards trying to kill me. No talk about what kind of magic we were going to have to use to bring someone down.

Just friends, sitting on a patio at the end of summer, waiting for their pizza to be delivered. And I liked this. I liked this a lot.

It didn’t take long for our drinks and then our food to arrive. As soon as it did, I grabbed a slice. “Okay, I’m diving right in,” I said and took a large bite. I wasn’t entirely sure what to expect, given that this was all new to me, but I was pleasantly surprised to find the tang of the pickles to be not unlike pineapple. It went really well with the popcorn chicken, and the garlic sauce was complementary rather than overpowering.

Ashley and Holly both looked at me, waiting for my judgment. I held out my hand, sticking my thumb out



horizontally as if I was the emperor in the movie *Gladiator*. Only instead of condemning a man to live or die, I was judging pizza.

You know, pretty much the same thing.

I slowly turned my thumb upward.

Holly grinned. "I guess that's a good thing. I'm trying this," she said.

Ashley looked incredulous as she took a bite of her ham and pineapple. "Are you serious?" she asked when she'd swallowed. "Is it actually good? Or are you just pretending because you decided this is a hill you want to die on, and you refuse to accept that it's terrible?"

"While that is something I would totally do, in this specific instance, it's not the case. It's actually good, Ash. You should try a bite."

"She's right," Holly agreed. "Wow. No wonder this is a trend that's gone big everywhere. This is delicious."

"I think you're both making that up to trick me into trying this," Ashley said, narrowing her eyes at me.

I shrugged. "Fine. Think what you want. That just leaves more for me."

"And me," Jay added, although Ashley wouldn't have been able to hear him.

"I totally realize this might be reverse psychology, but I'm falling for it," Ashley said.

I pushed my plate toward her so she could grab a slice, and she took it, carefully looking at the pizza as if a monster might jump out of it and attack her if she wasn't careful.

"What are you looking for, some kind of toxin?" Holly teased. "Just eat it."

"Fine," Ashley said. She took a careful nibble at the end.

"You didn't even get a piece of pickle on that," I said.

Ashley took a bigger bite, this one containing pickle, and chewed slowly, considering it.

“Well?” Holly asked.

She nodded. “I think you’re right. It’s not bad. It’s not my favorite, and I think I would have to eat more of it to get used to it, but it’s definitely not what I was expecting. It’s a lot tastier than I thought it would be.”

The three of us dug into our food, the conversation moving on to other topics. Jay begged for chicken, I ate the rest of my pizza, and as the three of us finished, I realized that I was happy. Really, really happy.

“This was a much better idea than getting groceries, which was where I was headed when I ran into you,” Holly said, leaning back in her chair as she sipped the last of her drink.

“I just love being able to relax,” I said with a smile, tilting my head toward the heater.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the night, coming from down the street.

## CHAPTER 3



“**W**hat was that?” I asked instinctively, turning to the others.

“Go look. I’ll stay here,” Ashley said.

Holly and I didn’t need to be told twice. The thing about being witches and part of the Witches Murder Club was that if there was trouble, we had to go check it out.

The two of us leapt out of our seats and ran out onto the street to see what was going on. About two hundred feet farther down the road, along the river, I could see a crowd forming.

“This way,” I said to Holly, who was already moving in that direction. The two of us joined the crowd of curious onlookers, and Holly reached over, wordlessly squeezing my hand.

We both knew what we had gone through less than a week ago. It was one thing to stop murderers in town, people who had killed residents. But it was entirely another when you were supposed to be the victim.

I swallowed hard as the two of us pushed through the crowd, slinking through to get toward the front. When I saw what had happened, I gasped.

Lying on the sidewalk was a man. He looked to be in his late thirties. His brown hair had been long, reaching past his shoulders, but it now draped across his face, hiding half of it, but not enough to conceal his expression of horror.

I looked up at the building next to us. This was River Road, which meant the buildings on this side of the street were about three stories tall. The ground level was retail space; right next to us was a local independent ice cream parlor that sold lots of freshly made cones in the summer. Above were two stories of apartments.

None of the windows were open in them, though.

“He fell from the roof,” someone shouted as she rushed toward the man.

“I’ve called 9-1-1,” someone else called out.

“Look at his arm,” Holly whispered in my ear.

I followed her directions, my gaze turning to the man’s body. He wore a simple black polo shirt, but on his left arm, just below the elbow, were a couple little pricks. They were fresh; the blood was still red. And they were tiny little dots. They would have healed quickly. That had to have happened in the couple of minutes before the man fell, tops.

“That’s weird,” I said slowly.

“You know what that is? A snakebite,” Holly said quietly. “When I was a kid, my best friend used to have snakes. They weren’t any of the dangerous ones, obviously. We were kids. Just garter snakes. But I know a bite when I see one.”

“Are you serious?” I hissed.

“Yeah. I’d recognize that anywhere. The question is, what kind of snake did it?”

“No, that’s not the question,” I replied. “The real question is: if this guy got bitten by a snake that killed him, where is it now?”

Holly frowned. “We don’t know it killed him. Maybe the snake surprised him when it bit him, and he just fell out of the window.”

I looked up at the building. “Every single one of those windows is closed.”

“The roof, then.”

“Which means there’s still a snake out there somewhere that may or may not be venomous but definitely has a taste for human flesh.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that bad.”

“It’s definitely that bad. I can’t believe how casual you are about a potential killer snake in town.”

“That’s because I don’t think it’s going to be a killer snake. Most snakes are gentle. They’re kind. And if you don’t bother them, they’re not going to do anything to you.”

“Who even are you, the Crocodile Hunter?” I asked. “Oh, wait, you can’t be. He died.”

“Not from a snakebite,” Holly pointed out. “But okay. We need answers. At the very least, we need to know if this guy died from a snakebite, and if he did, where the snake came from.”

“Do you know who he is?” I asked.

Holly looked closely at his face. “He looks familiar. I think he’s come into the brewery a few times, but I don’t know his name.”

“New plan, then: we split up, try and find out whatever we can, and we reconvene back at the table. I’ll text Ashley an update.”

“Got it.”

I pulled out my phone and typed out a quick message, pressed send, and immediately set about trying to find out whatever I could about the dead man. After all, the snake thing was worrying. Maybe it had just been an accident. But after having solved so many murders and figuring out who was trying to kill me, I wasn’t exactly inclined to give people the benefit of the doubt anymore.

I moved to the left, toward the building, and found a couple of women huddled together in the corner, crying. They were a bit younger than the man, but they obviously had known him.

“Hi,” I said quietly, trying to keep my voice as sympathetic as possible.

The women looked up. One of them had to be related to him. She had the same-shaped face and the same thin lips as the man on the ground. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail. The woman next to her, though, was blond and very slim, with a longer face and fuller lips.

The first woman looked at me. “I know you. You’re the reporter. The one who took over from Gary.”

“That’s me. Storm Bancroft.”

Before I had a chance to say more, the woman interrupted. “You have to write in the paper that someone killed him.”

I tried to hide my surprise. “I’m happy to present the public with the facts of the case. Can you help me understand them? I know this is difficult, but the more you can help me now, the more I can write.”

The second woman nodded. “Chloe’s right. He was killed. He had to be. No one would hurt Jeremy otherwise.”

“And you’re...”

“His girlfriend,” the woman replied. “Anne Samson.”

“And I’m Chloe Murphy. My brother, Jeremy, he’s the one over there. He’s dead. Oh, I can’t believe he’s dead.”

“Why do you believe someone killed him?” I asked.

“Because it’s not possible that it could be anything else,” Chloe wailed.

“She’s right,” Anne agreed.

“Okay. But this could have been an accident, right?” I asked.

“No. No, it couldn’t,” Chloe said. “Something is wrong. I’m telling you. Jeremy was at work. He was supposed to be working. He wouldn’t have gone up onto the roof. There’s no way. He wasn’t that kind of person. He would have been in the apartment until five o’clock. And even if he was, he wouldn’t have fallen off there. He was an athlete back in high school.

He had good coordination. He was a skier. He wouldn't have fallen."

"What about a medical emergency?" I suggested.

"Jeremy was healthy," Anne replied. "And he was afraid of heights. He wouldn't have gone near the edge of the roof. And he kept the windows of his apartment closed."

"Then let's say you're right, and he was murdered. Who could have done it?"

The two women glanced at each other, and I watched closely as they gave each other blank looks before turning back to me.

"There isn't any reason anyone would have wanted Jeremy dead. He was just a normal guy. He went to work. He came home. He spent time with me. He played football with his friends on the weekend. Who would want to kill someone like that?" Anne asked.

"Then why did you say he was murdered?"

"Well, it just couldn't have been anything else," Chloe said, sounding slightly confused, as if she hadn't considered the fact that someone would have had to kill him. "But you're right. Who would have wanted Jeremy dead? It's impossible. But there are no other options."

"What did he do for work?" I asked.

"He was a software developer," Anne explained. "He worked remotely, from his apartment. He didn't even have an office to go to. There were no coworkers to annoy. I mean, sure, he would have disagreements. But they were all on Zoom or Slack. The nearest coworker lives in Seattle. It couldn't have been anything like that. And here? In Golden Hope? No, everyone loved him. He has friends. Had friends. No enemies."

"There were no problems in his life?" I asked. "Nothing to do with money?"

"No," Anne said, shaking her head vehemently. "He had zero problems like that. He made good money in his job. He

was just a midlevel programmer, but with the cost of living here being lower than in the city, it ended up working out well. He could easily afford his mortgage, his car was paid off, and he wasn't the kind of guy to go out betting or anything like that. He had no vices. Jeremy was just an ordinary guy."

"This is going to sound like a strange question, but was Jeremy into snakes at all?"

Chloe frowned. "No. Why would you ask that? Jeremy was terrified of them."

"It's nothing," I said quickly. "But you don't think this could have been an accident at all? Or that he could have done this on purpose?"

"Not a chance," Anne replied. "I know, that's the first thing you have to think of. But he was happy. We were happy. He always talked about the future. We were thinking about moving in together. Next year, we were finally going to take the plunge on that."

"I just don't know what it could be, then," Chloe said, her voice hollow. "What happened to my brother?"

"The police will do their best to figure it out, I'm sure," I said, trying to sound as reassuring as possible. What I didn't tell her was that the Witches Murder Club was also on the case.

Mainly because I wasn't a fan of snakes either, and if Jeremy had been afraid of them, that meant there was a mystery snake slithering around, and I wanted to get to the bottom of where it was and how it had gotten here as quickly as possible.

"The police," Anne said, sighing. "I can't believe it. I still think someone has to have killed him. None of this makes any sense. You know, actually? I think I do know who would have done this."

"Oh?" I asked, my interest piqued.

"He was having issues with a local mechanic. Hank Thomas. The guy who runs the garage on the outskirts of town."



“I know the place,” I lied. Whenever my car had issues, it was pretty easy to use magic to fix them. I hadn’t been to a mechanic, well, ever. But it would be easy to find out about it.

“About two months ago, Jeremy’s car broke down. He went to see Hank, and Hank promised to fix it, charged him six grand. It sucked, but it had to be done. So Jeremy paid it, the car runs fine, and then two weeks later, it dies again, on the highway. Jeremy could have been badly injured, or worse. He went back to Hank, who said it was a whole other issue and that he was going to need two grand to fix it this time.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m sure.”

“Right?” Anne continued. “He was totally ripping Jeremy off. No doubt about it. And Jeremy was a smart guy. He obviously saw what was going on, too. Not that you need to be a genius to figure that out, anyway. So Jeremy knew Hank was trying to take him for a ride and called him out on it. He had the car towed to a different mechanic closer to Spokane. That guy took one look at it and told him Hank hadn’t done the work right the first time. He fixed it up, got the car working again, but told Jeremy he should go get his money back. So Jeremy went to Hank, told him what the other guy said, and demanded a refund. Hank refused. Said he’d done the work, and the car worked fine when he left, and that Jeremy must have messed something up. It turned into this whole thing. Jeremy said he was going to go to the media. Hank said fine, see if he cared.”

I raised my eyebrows. “I never met Jeremy. You’d think I would be his first stop.”

“Well, first, Jeremy decided he was going to put Hank on blast on social media. He went into the local Facebook group and put his experience there. Typed out everything that happened,” Anne explained. “He wasn’t really trying to rile anyone up or anything. He just wanted to explain to people what had happened and tell his story so that no one else went to Hank and also got ripped off.”

“But people got riled up?” I asked.

“The thing is, Jeremy didn’t realize that he wasn’t the only person to have these issues. And sure, people around here talk and all that sort of thing. A lot of people will tell you not to go to Hank. But he didn’t think it was going to be a big issue. Anyway, the thing is, everyone took advantage of that post to comment on all the bad experiences they’d also had with Hank. And before you know it, there are a hundred comments on that post, all blasting the guy and his garage and accusing him of ripping them off.”

“I see. And Hank blamed Jeremy.”

“Completely. About a week ago, Jeremy gets a phone call from Hank. Super threatening. He was so loud, even I could hear him through the phone, and I was sitting three feet away. He ordered Jeremy to take down the post. Told him he’d be sorry if he didn’t. Jeremy told him it was a free country, and people could type what they wanted on the internet. Hank said he’d call his lawyers, but I mean, come on. A guy like Hank doesn’t have lawyers. Jeremy ended up hanging up on him. I was initially kind of worried, actually. But Jeremy laughed it off. He said it was nothing.”

“And now you’re thinking it’s not nothing,” I said.

“I mean, what else could have happened? I didn’t even think of it at first, because I’d written it off. Jeremy wasn’t worried, so why would I be? And he never mentioned it again, so I thought it was finished. You know, the sort of argument people have and then move on. But now?” Anne hugged her arms around her torso and shivered. “Now, I don’t know what to think. Maybe Hank killed Jeremy as revenge for speaking out about him publicly.”

I nodded. “I’ll look into it. Make sure to tell the police too. They’re going to ask you questions.”

Chloe’s eyes widened. “I don’t believe it. I spoke to him just this morning.”

“What did you talk about?” I asked.

“Just ordinary things. We were planning on meeting up for coffee tomorrow morning to catch up,” Chloe said. “He was

busy. A project at work.”

Anne nodded. “Yes. It’s like that, his job. They get very busy, and then there are lull periods. This was busy. When he got like this, Jeremy laser focused on his work. He wouldn’t leave his apartment. That’s why I know he wouldn’t have gone up to the roof. So he couldn’t have fallen off it. And the window is a regular window height. You can’t fall out of that by accident.”

“And he lives above the bookstore?”

“Yes,” Anne confirmed. “His is the apartment on the top floor.”

“When I got here, just a minute or so after the scream, the windows above the bookstore were closed,” I said carefully, watching the reactions of both women. “So he must have been on the roof.”

Anne clasped a hand to her mouth, tears welling in her eyes once more.

Chloe nodded slowly. “I knew there was something weird. I’m telling you, this wasn’t an accident. Jeremy would have had no reason to be up on the roof.”

“What was up there?” I asked.

“A grill, some patio furniture, and a cornhole game,” Anne answered. “It’s not much. Just a place to hang out in the summer. He shares it with the people who live downstairs. Jess and Fred, the owners of the bookstore.”

I nodded. “So it was just a place where he’d go to relax?”

“Yeah. It’s nice when it’s sunny out,” Anne explained. “We would go up there a lot, just to hang out, but the Wi-Fi doesn’t reach, so Jeremy couldn’t work up there. Plus, he liked his desk.”

“So as far as you know, his whole plan today was work?” I asked the women, and both of them nodded.

“Yes,” Chloe said.

“It definitely was. I was going to come over later, but not until eight o’clock or so. He told me not to bother coming earlier; he wasn’t going to be finished with work before seven thirty, and he wanted a bit of time to clean up after that.”

“What was his work project?” I asked.

Anne shrugged. “He was always vague about that sort of thing with me. I’m a nurse. Technology isn’t my thing. I’ve never understood it, and Jeremy respects that. He talks about his job in vague terms, but he doesn’t go into specifics that would only bore me.”

“I don’t know about it either,” Chloe said, frowning in frustration. “I knew he was busy, but we hadn’t seen each other in about a month or so.”

“All right. Is there anything else you can think of that might help me figure out what happened or that could lead me to the truth? Anything going on in Jeremy’s life?”

Both women shook their heads.

“No,” Anne said. “I just... it has to be murder. It just has to be. It doesn’t make any sense. This couldn’t have been an accident. Jeremy was responsible. He was healthy. How does this happen to someone?”

“I’m really sorry,” I said, handing them my card. “In a few days, can you give me a call? I just want to make sure I write a good obituary for Jeremy in the paper.”

“I will,” Anne promised, taking the card. “Thank you. For caring about Jeremy. All these people here, they don’t care. They just want something to gossip about with their friends. I can’t believe it.”

“Can I ask how you found out what happened so quickly?” I asked quietly. “It must have been a shock, coming here and seeing Jeremy.”

Anne burst into a fit of sobs.

Chloe rubbed her back while answering me. “It was awful. I had an appointment here in town with my bank to open a new investment account. I’d just left the bank two minutes

earlier. I was trying to decide if I wanted to stop at the coffee shop before it closed when I heard the scream. It was piercing. I thought there might have been an accident, so I ran over to see what was going on, if I could help. And then I saw... I saw..."

Chloe's voice trailed off, and she began motioning at the ground with her hand, obviously unable to articulate that she had seen her brother's body lying on the ground.

"I had just finished a shift at work," Anne whispered, swallowing hard and standing herself up. "I'm a nurse at the walk-in clinic at the end of the road, here. I was heading home too. I'm two blocks up but on the other end of town, so I like to walk down River Road after my shift just to clear my head after the stress of the day, you know? I had already passed by Jeremy's place."

"Did you look up at it when you walked past?" I asked quickly.

"Yes," Anne said. "You know, I did. If it weren't for the fact that I knew he was still working, I probably would have stopped by. I wish I did. If only I'd stopped. Everything could have been different."

Anne started breathing quickly, and I put a reassuring hand on her arm. "Look at me, Anne," I ordered, and her eyes met mine. "This isn't your fault. None of this is your fault. You couldn't have known what was going to happen. You couldn't have stopped it."

"What if I could have, though? What if I had gone up there and said hello? What if I had interrupted Hank? What if I'd seen him there?"

"Then you might be dead too," I said. "And there would be two bodies lying in the street instead of one. You cannot ask yourself 'what if.' It will drive you crazy. You thought Jeremy was at home working. You had no reason to believe otherwise, and you did what was normal given the information you had. This isn't your fault. But you did look up to his apartment?"

“Yes. The window was closed, and the blinds were shut. That was so Jeremy. I remember thinking that when I looked up at it. He loved being outdoors, but when he was working, he was the kind of guy who wanted to be in the dark. Like he was nocturnal. So I smiled to myself when I saw that his blinds were completely closed and the window too. I kept walking. I smiled at Chloe as she walked past me, and about two minutes later, I heard the scream. I rushed back, thinking maybe I could help, but then I saw him. I saw it was him. And I saw Chloe. And the two of us just cried. I’m a nurse; I knew there was nothing that could be done for him.”

“All right. Thank you so much for the help.”

“Someone killed him,” Chloe said firmly. “It had to be that. It just had to.”

“I’m going to do my best to get to the bottom of this,” I said.

## CHAPTER 4



I spent about ten more minutes wandering through the crowd, but I didn't get any other pertinent information.

The police and EMTs arrived, and they had cordoned off an entire area around the body and put up barriers to stop the looky-loos from seeing anything, which meant the crowd quickly dispersed.

I headed back to 800 Degrees to find Ashley craning her neck, looking to see what was going on. Holly hadn't returned yet.

In front of me was a fresh margarita, and I took a grateful sip.

"Thanks," I said.

"I thought the two of you might need these when you got back. I heard someone died?"

"Jeremy something. Computer programmer here in town. It's kind of a weird thing, though. Do you know anybody in town who keeps snakes?"

"Like, as pets? No. Why?"

"Holly says he was bitten by a snake, and the holes in his arm were fresh. It had to have happened in the minute or so before he died. Personally, I'm thinking it might have been an accident. His girlfriend—she and the sister are convinced it's murder, by the way—said he was terrified of snakes. He could have been on the roof for some reason, had a snake show up, and it jumped at him and bit him, and in his panic, he fell off. The only question is, why was he on the roof? He was

supposed to have been working. And apparently, he was busy. But it's early days."

"Do you think it's worth looking into?"

"If only because I want to make sure there's no weird snakes hanging out around town. I might not be Saint Patrick, but I'd like to be aware of them if they're here and maybe find someone who *can* get rid of them. Snakes are creepy and weird."

"And some of them are dangerous," Ashley pointed out. "Do you think the snakebite could have killed him?"

"Maybe. I don't know a lot about them. The expression on his face was definitely one of horror. Maybe it was contorted from pain, from poison."

"Venom."

"What?"

"Snakes have venom, not poison."

"Isn't it the same thing?"

"Not quite. If you bite something and you die, then it's poison. If something bites you and you die, then it's venom."

"I'll be sure to shout out the accurate word if I'm ever bitten by the possibly *venomous* snake that's going around town."

"Good. It might help save your life," Ashley replied. "Accuracy in word usage matters. Especially when it comes to poison. Or venom. Or printing a newspaper."

"I wish a snake would bite me so I could escape this conversation," I replied just as Holly arrived.

"What did you find out?" Ashley asked.

"The victim is Jeremy Murphy. Local guy. His family grew up here. I think I used to work with his sister when I was in high school, at the same restaurant."

"Chloe?" I asked.



Holly nodded. “That’s her. I liked her. Anyway, I overheard someone talking to Chief Eddie; they actually saw what happened. Jeremy was on the roof, and he stumbled backward and fell off.”

“Did they say if there was anyone near him?”

“No, she specifically said that he looked like he just fell backward a few steps. And that she couldn’t see anyone else. No one pushed him. But she thought she heard a voice earlier, so she didn’t think he was alone up there.”

“So why wouldn’t the person he was with come down and tell the police everything?” I mused. “That’s kind of weird. And why was Jeremy up there? He shouldn’t have been. His girlfriend said he should have been working; he was in the middle of an important project. And how did he get bitten by the snake? Where did it come from?”

“There are a lot of questions here, none of which seem to be connected,” Ashley mused. “This is weird.”

“It’s very weird,” Holly agreed. “Is there another body on the roof? Did the other person get bitten? Who were they?”

“With the testimony from the witness, I’m sure the police will go up to the roof straight away. They’ll find a second body if it’s there, and we’ll hear about it soon,” Ashley pointed out.

“Yeah. Also, in case it does turn out that there’s something suspicious happening, I know Jeremy was having issues with a mechanic named Hank.”

“Oh, that guy,” Holly said, nodding. “Yeah, he’s in trouble in the local Facebook group.”

“Jeremy is the one who made the post calling Hank out for being a crook.”

Holly snapped her fingers. “He is too. It didn’t click then, but of course. Yeah. It’s about time someone called him out too. Hank is the worst kind of mechanic. The kind that just feeds on there not being a ton of great options here in town and people going, ‘Oh well, I guess I’ll go to him’ and then

getting ripped off. That thread had hundreds of comments from people complaining about how Hank treated them.”

“That’s insane. How is he even still in business?” I asked, shaking my head incredulously.

“It’s as I said about people not having a ton of choices. That and tourists. They have issues with their cars when they’re here, and they want to get them fixed before they drive back to wherever they’re originally from. Hank will happily take their money, especially knowing that they’re here for a ski holiday, so they might have a lot of it, and that there’s basically no chance of any recourse if things go wrong.”

“Either way, Hank was mad at Jeremy. He called him; his girlfriend overheard the call. He threatened legal action.”

Holly snorted. “A guy like that doesn’t have lawyers.”

“I think that might be what Jeremy thought. He wasn’t worried about it, at any rate. Or if he was, he hid it from his girlfriend. She didn’t even think about it until I started asking them who had trouble with Jeremy.”

“What about his job?” Ashley asked.

“He was a computer programmer, working remotely. Apparently, the closest coworker he has lives in Seattle. He was working on a big project for work, though. That’s why it’s apparently a surprise that he was up on the roof. Jeremy was the kind of guy who got lost in the work cave of his office, to hear Anne and Chloe tell it,” I explained.

“I don’t like this,” Holly said, shaking her head.

“Is there any way you can tell us what kind of snake bit him?” I asked. “You saw the bite, and you know about them.”

Holly shook her head. “No. I’d have to see the snake itself.”

“I really, really hope that if there is one around, it gets found quickly. But it’s weird. Like, why would there just be a snake somewhere in Golden Hope? Slithering around? And who was Jeremy on the roof with? It makes no sense.”

“Does Hank own snakes?” Ashley asked.

Holly and I shrugged in unison. “Beats me,” I said.

“What worries me is that there’s a lot of things going on here that don’t add up. There are a ton of questions,” Ashley said. “And the thing is, what if it’s not all natural?”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re thinking magic.”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? We have someone who was bitten by a snake on a rooftop—with no idea where the snake came from. We have someone who fell off the roof, and no one visibly pushed him. We have a witness who says they heard another person on that roof, but they haven’t emerged. Yes, it’s possible the witness was scared they’d be blamed. But everyone has watched enough TV shows to know that forensics teams can tell if someone has jumped or was pushed off a ledge. Regardless of how accurate that sort of work is, it’s in the common consciousness now that the police can tell these things,” Ashley continued.

“It’s still a long bow to draw to magic being involved,” Holly pointed out. “Jeremy wasn’t magical. Or at least, if he was, I didn’t know about it.”

“Me either,” Ashley said. “And generally, especially the families in this town who have grown up here, we know.”

“That doesn’t mean he wasn’t magical, though. Not for sure.”

“You moved here only a few years ago and still managed to find the magical community. Jeremy lived here his whole life. No, if he and his family were witches and wizards, we would know,” Holly said.

“I agree,” Ashley said. “But he wouldn’t have to be magical for another witch or wizard to kill him using magic. Perhaps by generating a venomous snake. Which would explain why there would have been a killer snake up there, on a random roof that had two people on it.”

“Well, it doesn’t sound any more ridiculous than any of the other theories we’ve come up with so far,” I said. “And if there is magic involved, then you know what that means.”

“The Witches Murder Club is on the case, because who else is going to be able to solve this?” Holly said.

“Precisely,” I replied. “Nothing against Chief Eddie, but this is above his pay grade if there was magic involved in Jeremy’s death.”

“I’ll call Montana,” Heather said. “It looks like the gang is getting back together.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I said, holding up my margarita glass.

“You know,” Holly said slowly, “there is one thing I can think of that might help us narrow things down. We have a prime suspect already, right? Hank.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“Well, what if he’s the kind of guy who keeps snakes? All we would have to do is head down to his garage or his home and have a look around.”

“If we get in there and there are large terrariums that look like they have anything in them, I’m leaving immediately,” I warned. “I cannot handle snakes.”

“That’s fine,” Ashley said. “But Holly’s right. If Hank has snakes, that would give us a pretty good idea if we’re on the right track and if we even need to investigate this.”

“We could always wait for the cops to have a look and see if they arrest him,” I suggested.

Ashley grinned. “I can’t believe you, Storm Bancroft, a woman who I have seen stare death in the face and laugh multiple times, is scared of snakes.”

My face flushed hot. “I’m not scared,” I lied. “I just don’t like them.”

“It’s fine to be scared of things, Storm,” Holly said. “I’m afraid of spiders.”

“I’m not scared,” I muttered, but I knew neither one of them believed me anymore. “Let’s do this. We’ll go. Or at least, all of us who want to. And I want to. I’m going to be

there, but I am going to leave if we happen to see snakes. Where does Hank live?"

"I'm not sure," Ashley said, pulling out her phone. "Let me ask a few people. I know someone who will probably know. We can go tonight. I bet he'll be getting interviewed by the police and won't be home."

"Good thinking," I said. "Okay. Let's get out of here and reconvene then."

I had woken up this morning thinking it was going to be just a normal day, and now I was going to commit another felony while trying to solve a murder that might have been committed by a witch or wizard. You never really knew what a day in Golden Hope was going to bring.

## CHAPTER 5



**W**e finished our food and went our separate ways.

“Does a murder mean you’re going to be going back to the pizza place more often?” Jay asked, poking his head out of my purse as we walked home. “Because I have to say, while the three of you kept talking about those pickles, the real star of the show was the popcorn chicken. I would like to be involved in this case.”

“Do you really want to be involved in the solving of a murder, or do you want to steal toppings off my pizza?” I asked.

“I don’t see why it can’t be both.”

“Okay. Well, in that case, what do you think about snakes?”

“They slither weird, and they need to be hunted.”

“Do you want to come with us tonight while we check out a guy’s home to see if he’s keeping any there?”

“It depends. Will there be pizza?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“Well, in that case, I’ll pass. I’ll just come to the next meeting that takes place at that restaurant.”

“I’m starting to feel like you’re not really into the helping-solve-the-murder part of things for some reason.”

“I’m just saying I think I would be better help if I were just involved in the meetings that happen to take place in the same

locale as where the popcorn chicken exists.”

“Of course you do,” I said, laughing to myself. “Okay, you don’t have to come tonight.”

“I think that would probably be best,” Jay said. “I’m rather full at the moment anyway. I think perhaps I overindulged just a little bit.”

“You literally asked if there were going to be more visits to the pizza place tonight.”

“Just because I ate too much doesn’t mean I wasn’t willing to eat more.”

“And suddenly, I realize just why I’m regularly having to clean up cat vomit,” I said dryly.

“It’s worth it, though.”

“I’m glad that’s how you see it.”

We reached home, and I stepped inside, taking a deep breath. I still instinctively tensed up as soon as I entered, keeping my senses alert, but after a couple of seconds, I let myself relax. It was fine. There was no one in here trying to kill me. Molly was dead. Everyone else associated with that time had either died or moved on. No one else even knew who I was.

It was one of the reasons I was keeping up the Storm Bancroft identity instead of going back to being Taylor Coombs. For one thing, it would have involved a lot of explaining. Explaining I didn’t necessarily want to do to every single person in this town.

Besides, it was time to let the past be. It was all over. As far as anyone who wasn’t part of the Witches Murder Club, Logan, or the other shifters in town knew, the Coombs family was gone. No one else had thought about them in twenty plus years, and I wasn’t going to give anybody a reason to start now.

I trusted everyone who knew my secret. The Witches Murder Club, well, they were my ride and die. There was no way they would ever reveal it to anyone. And Logan, of

course. That went without saying. He trusted the rest of his pack, and by association, I trusted them as well.

No, Taylor Coombs was dead and gone as far as anyone needed to know.

That made life even easier for me, continuing my false identity. My false identity kept me safe. There shouldn't be anyone out there left who still wanted to dredge up the past, but I wasn't going to be taking any risks.

Not anymore.

I headed to the couch and sat down with a sigh, pulling out my phone to text Logan.

*Hey, what are you up to tonight?*

His reply came through a minute later. *Working. There was an accident downtown.*

*I know. I was there, saw the aftermath. It's really weird. Listen, do you have any details about what happened or access to the toxicology reports on it?*

*No. That's all going to be done by the medical examiner in their own labs. We have the body right now, but it's just while we wait for the transport.*

I bit my lip as I considered the options we had. *Any chance you could get some blood from it? I don't need a lot. Just enough to cast a spell and see if there's venom in it.*

*I'll see what I can do but can't make any promises. I don't exactly want to answer questions about it if someone sees me doing it.*

*Just tell them you're a vampire. Problem solved.*

*I feel like that would only create more problems.*

*That's because you aren't creative like I am. Anyway, thanks in advance. I do appreciate it.*

*Does this mean the Witches Murder Club is back in action?*



*We sure are! Also, there might be a snake on the loose in town. We're not sure yet. So if you hear about anyone else being bitten or seeing it or anything like that, can you let me know?*

*Will do.*

*Right now, we're also thinking this might be magic related. That's why we're investigating. If it is, there's no way Chief Eddie is going to be able to figure it out on his own, since he'll be at a huge handicap, so we're going to do what we can.*

*Sounds good. I have to go, but I'll keep you updated.*

*Thanks. Talk later.*

I smiled at the phone, thinking about Logan. He had come through for me in the best way in the battle with Molly. Nothing fazed him; he was completely unflappable. An excellent quality in a doctor, if you asked me.

I decompressed with a bit of TV and got a text from Ashley in our group chat an hour or so later.

*I have an address for Hank. He lives near the outskirts of town.*

*Let's go now, I typed. We can stake it out, and if he leaves, we can go in.*

*I'm out for tonight, sorry. Jeff is out of town, so I'm taking care of both twins. But let me know what you find, okay?* Montana asked.

*Will do. I'm sort of hoping it's snakes. Also hoping it's not snakes at the same time. I really want this to be a simple case and hopefully an accident and not another murder. But at the same time, I don't want there to be a real, live snake on the loose. Especially if it's venomous,* I typed.

*I agree. I guess we'll see soon. Here's the address. Should we meet there?* Ashley asked.

We organized to meet at a nearby park, and I put my phone in my pocket and got up, getting ready to go.

“Sure you’re not coming?” I asked Jay as I headed toward the front door.

“Sure there’s not going to be pizza?”

“Sorry, bud. Not this time.”

“In that case, yes. But I will entertain you talking to me about this case when you return if you’d like. And we can brainstorm before the next pizza meeting.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you soon.”

I pulled open the front door and closed it behind me. The nights were starting to get cold despite the warm afternoons, and I pulled my hoodie close to me as I headed down the street at a brisk walk to warm up. I wasn’t about to start jogging. I could have been bordering on hypothermia, and there was still no way I would be desperate enough to jog.

Hank lived about a fifteen-minute walk away, on the outskirts of town. I didn’t want to take the car, even at night, and risk drawing unwanted attention to myself. Instead, as soon as I hit a patch of shadow created by a large fir tree, I cast a quick spell that rendered me invisible.

I reached the park where we organized to meet and called out softly, “Anyone else here?”

“I am,” I heard Holly reply a moment later from somewhere to my left. “You invisible?”

“Yeah.”

“I followed Holly’s voice and held my hands out in front of me as I walked toward her. Eventually, we reached each other, and I grabbed a part of her that I hoped was an elbow.

“Do you think he’s home?” Holly asked.

“No idea,” I replied, looking around. We were in a part of town that was barely developed. Around us, tall trees rose, shielding us from view, and the roads out here were so narrow that cars had to pull over onto the shoulder if they wanted to pass each other. Houses were few and far between; here in the park, Hank’s place was closest, and we were still over a hundred feet away from it.

“The cops are there,” Ashley’s voice said, sounding slightly out of breath, from about thirty feet away. “Come on. We have to check it out.”

The three of us, all invisible, held hands, making a witch chain so we wouldn’t lose each other as we headed toward Hank’s house. As we got closer, I could see the reflective paint on the police car shimmering in the light of the moon in front of the house.

It was a small cottage, made of wood, same as hundreds of others here in town. In the dark, I couldn’t make out the color, but a large window in the living room showed exactly what was going on inside.

There was Chief Eddie, standing casually in the middle of the room, his hands in his pockets. Next to him was another officer, looking a little bit more nervous, who kept glancing around as if he expected someone else to come out of the shadows at any moment.

On the other side of the room, standing up from the couch, was a man in his forties. His brown hair was graying at the temples. He was tall, wearing baggy clothes that hung over his narrow frame. He gestured a lot, and he was obviously upset.

“On the bright side, I don’t see any snakes from here,” Holly muttered next to me.

“He’s not liking the way this conversation is going,” Ashley said.

Just then, Hank threw up his hands as if in defeat then motioned around. He plonked himself down on the couch, and Chief Eddie and the other officer walked deeper into the house without him. I watched with bated breath while they disappeared for about five minutes then returned. There was more talking, more gesturing by Hank, and the next thing I knew, Chief Eddie was motioning for Hank to follow him.

Hank obviously wasn’t pleased, but he left, following the two officers. He obviously wasn’t under arrest, and as they came out of the house, the three of us instinctively moved

back, even though we'd all cast invisibility spells, and there was no way we were going to be detected.

"Come on. It'll be a more comfortable chat at the station," Chief Eddie was saying. "I hear what you're telling me, but I have a job to do too. And if you know anything that could help us, we want to learn that too."

"I don't know a thing, man," Hank whined. His voice was deeper than I'd expected; I suspected he was a long-term smoker. "I'm telling you, I'm just trying to relax and watch the game. The Kraken are playing the Leafs. It's about to go to overtime."

"I DON'T WANT TO DISAPPOINT YOU, BUT THE LEAFS ARE going to win most of their games until the playoffs," Chief Eddie said. He closed the door to the car, leaving Hank in the back seat. The other officer climbed into the passenger side, and Chief Eddie took the driver's seat, letting out a sigh as he squeezed into the car.

I didn't get to hear the rest of the conversation as the police car peeled away from the curb, doing a U-turn in Hank's driveway and heading back toward town.

As soon as it was out of sight, I started walking toward the front door. "Let's hope that conversation at the police station takes a while," I said.

I used a quick spell to unlock the front door and stepped inside. There wasn't really much risk of anyone seeing us. The nearest house was two hundred feet down the street. But all the same, I closed the blinds to prevent anyone else from looking inside before I undid my invisibility spell.

A couple seconds later, Holly and Ashley also appeared in front of me.

"Okay, let's split up," Ashley suggested.

"I am *not* taking the basement," I said instantly. "The idea that there might be snakes in here is bad enough, but if they're underground? No."

“I’ll do it,” Holly said. “But I don’t think we’re going to find anything. There’s no sign of anything around here that could indicate the presence of snakes. No equipment, no food, nothing. This just looks like an ordinary home.”

“Until we know for certain, I’d rather not make assumptions,” Ashley said. “Especially since it’s possible a snake just killed Jeremy this afternoon. If we see one, don’t kill it, but maybe use a paralysis spell.”

I nodded. “Got it. Also, the snake might not have come from here. Maybe he was keeping it somewhere else. Like, some sort of snake house somewhere. I don’t know where people keep those things.”

“Obviously,” Holly said with a light giggle. “There could be some sort of shed at the back of the property if he had a lot of them, but people who keep one or two snakes generally will just have them in their homes, like regular pets.”

“Okay,” Ashley said. “Holly, you take the basement, since you obviously know the most about this. I’ll go out the back and look for some kind of shed or other property. Storm, you look around here on the top level. We meet back here in five minutes. And don’t forget, if you see any other sign that Hank could be our killer, take a picture or remember it or something. Gather whatever evidence you can.”

“Got it,” I said.

The three of us split up, and I immediately went down the hall toward the bedrooms. The door to the room at the far end was closed; it had to be the master. I grabbed the handle, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

The interior looked completely normal. Hank obviously lived simply, and his bedroom was no exception. The majority of the space was taken up by a queen bed with simple gray sheets and a navy-blue blanket. To the right of the bed was a simple chest of drawers made of yellow wood, the kind every home in the world seemed to have back in the nineties.

On the other side was a decorative chair draped with a handful of clothes and a pair of jeans.

I checked the closet just to be sure, but there was no sign of snakes and no sign of anything that might have indicated Hank had a problem with Jeremy. Nothing.

I left the room and went back to the hall, doing a quick check of the bathroom. The medicine cabinet told me Hank was on some medication, and a quick Google search of the name told me the meds were for high blood pressure, but that was it.

The bedroom across the hall, however, held no evidence of snakes, but it was obviously a makeshift office. The laptop on the desk beckoned, and I figured this might be as good a chance as any to gather any other evidence that Hank could be our killer.

I pulled open the screen, and a text bar popped up, prompting me for a password. Magic sure came in handy sometimes.

I closed my eyes and let the power inside of me grow. I imagined the correct password being typed into the text box, and when I released my powers a second later, seven small circles appeared in the box. I pressed enter, and the screen flashed to life.

Grabbing the mouse to the side, I scrolled over to the emails, and what I saw made me gasp.

## CHAPTER 6



The email at the top was to Jeremy.

*Look here. This is the last warning I'm going to send. You have to take that post off Facebook. You're ruining my reputation just because you're not happy with the reality of how things are going for you. Just because your life is a steaming turd doesn't mean you get to ruin mine. So here's how things are going to go: you will take down the post, make another one apologizing to the town and telling everyone you overreacted. I don't care what excuse you give. Tell them it was your time of the month for all I care. But you take the post down, you make a public apology. If you don't, not only will I set my lawyers on you, but I'll make your life hell. You think I can't? I know where you live. I know how to get into that building. I'll make you regret being born.*

The email was unsigned, but that last line certainly was a threat. Hank had spelled out that he knew Jeremy's address and how to get into the building. Could he have gotten onto the roof and lured Jeremy up there somehow? Maybe it was simpler than we thought. Maybe the snake thing was something else entirely, and Hank had just shoved him off the roof. Or maybe the snakes were elsewhere.

There was a response from Jeremy below. My eyes immediately moved to the top right-hand corner of the email: he'd sent this reply at eleven in the morning, just a few hours before his death.

*Hank,*

*I don't appreciate being threatened. Please note that I have forwarded this correspondence to the police. I have spoken to an attorney, who is in the process of getting a restraining order. Do not contact me again.*

I pulled out my phone and quickly snapped a photo of the initial email and the response. I then went back to the inbox and glanced at the rest of the subject lines, but nothing stood out as being related to Jeremy's death. There were a lot of emails demanding payments, final notices, announcing that Hank's credit score had gone down, that sort of thing. He was obviously in a lot of trouble financially. Maybe the public post Jeremy had put up on Facebook was about to put the final nail in his business's coffin.

Maybe Hank had been so mad that Jeremy wouldn't accede to his demands that he went over to his home, lured him onto the roof, and killed him. After all, people had been killed for less.

I really wanted that to be the case. A simple, open-and-shut murder. The type of thing even Chief Eddie could solve in his sleep.

It wouldn't answer the question of where the snakebite had come from, but maybe there was an easy answer to that too. Maybe Holly had found something in the basement or Ashley had found a whole shed full of snakes at the back.

Either way, Hank had rocketed to the top of my suspect list.

Just to be safe, I took a picture of the list of emails in Hank's inbox with the subject lines visible. Then I quickly closed the laptop and cast a quick spell to erase my fingerprints before heading back out into the living room.

I gave it a quick look around before Holly emerged from the basement.

"Nothing there," she said, wiping an errant cobweb from her hair. "Just a lot of random car parts and other old crap that probably should have been thrown away decades ago. No sign of snakes."



The sound of the back door creaking open reached my ears, and a moment later Ashley appeared as well. “I don’t think there’s anything in the back. It’s a large, wooded area, though, so I gave it a really good look, just in case. The property goes back around three hundred feet before it hits a creek that’s wide enough that no one is fording it regularly. There’s not even a garden shed back there.”

“Okay, let’s get out of here. I didn’t find any sign of snakes, but I did go through some of Hank’s emails. He was threatening Jeremy. He knew where he lived. I’ll show you when we’re out of the home.”

The three of us took off then, making sure to leave everything exactly the way we had found it. We used magic to lock the door behind us and then walked back invisibly until we were safely inside my home.

“Okay,” I said, pulling out my phone and opening the photos. “This is what I have. Scroll through if you want to see the reply from Jeremy and the other emails in Hank’s inbox. He was obviously in trouble financially. And that’s a pretty explicit threat.”

Ashley took the phone first. “I wonder who Jeremy was speaking to for that restraining order. I imagine it must have been Michael. He’s the main lawyer in town who would deal with that sort of thing. I can ask him about it tomorrow.”

She passed the phone on to Holly. “Hold on,” she said a moment later. She squinted at the screen then used two fingers to make the picture bigger. “What time was it, exactly, when Jeremy died?”

“It was just after four twenty,” I said confidently. “I remember giggling when I looked at the time on my phone then, and it had to be less than five minutes after that.”

“Finally, the fact that Storm has the sense of humor of a fourteen-year-old boy comes in handy,” Ashley teased. “Why? What’s up?”

“One of these emails is an appointment reminder,” Holly said. “And I can just make out the text. His appointment was

at four o'clock."

I swore. "Who was it with?"

"With his accountant."

"That means, assuming he showed up for it, he has a rock-solid alibi," I said, my heart sinking. So much for the easy case that even a toddler could solve.

Holly handed me the phone, zoomed in on the relevant part of the photo. "I don't know how I missed that," I said, shaking my head.

"Well, there are like fifty emails on this page," Holly said. "We were in a rush. I don't blame you for not looking at them carefully. We're just lucky Gmail shows the beginnings of every email on the main line."

Sure enough, there it was.

*Appointment confirmation with Clark Forman, CPA. 4pm  
Wednesday, September 23<sup>rd</sup>. Please call if you need to resched*

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The rest of the email was cut off, but it didn't matter. There was enough there. Sure enough, Hank had had an appointment with his accountant at the same time Jeremy had been killed.

"There goes our prime suspect," I said, the dejection in my voice obvious.

"I didn't like him anyway," Ashley said slowly. "It didn't make sense. We still don't know where the snake would have come from."

"I'll call in the morning and confirm with the accountants that he was there," Holly said. "If not, things might change. But if he was, well, that's Hank as a suspect gone."

I frowned. "I guess you're right."

The others left then with promises to reconvene in the morning, and I went to bed feeling uneasy. Hank had been the perfect suspect, but it couldn't have been him. Which left us back at square one.

Had Jeremy been killed? Or surprised? What had happened? This whole case was weird.



WHEN I WOKE UP THE NEXT MORNING, I Poured some cereal into a bowl for breakfast and, after eating, almost immediately headed down to the office to make sure the delivery of the papers had gone smoothly. There were no emails in my inbox telling me I'd done everything completely wrong, so I figured we were good to go. I walked down to the coffee shop where Montana worked to get a little pick-me-up and also to make sure the papers were in the distribution centers here in town.

The *Golden Hope Ogotogo* was a free newspaper. Gary had made enough money from advertising that the paper paid for itself and made a tidy profit. It was offered at a number of places around town—outside the grocery store, outside a few of the coffee shops and some of the major restaurants—basically, anywhere people who lived locally stopped by regularly.

Overall, we printed five thousand copies a week, and that was enough to cover the whole town and anyone who needed one. Gary had told me once that when the delivery man returned the extra copies, there were generally fewer than one hundred leftovers. That was pretty much perfect; we both hated the idea of wasting paper by overprinting. Not only did that cost money, but it cost the environment too.

I reached the coffee shop, and my eyes immediately fell on the pile of newspapers outside the store. A pang hit me in the chest as my gaze landed on the front page, which featured Gary's face. It was a picture I had taken, actually, in his office about three months earlier. He had been laughing at something I had written, and I'd pulled out the camera to take a quick snap.

It was the perfect image to represent him. Gary, laughing so hard his eyes were almost closed, but what I could see of them were twinkling. His smile was wide. He was happy. So

perfectly happy. It was exactly the way he deserved to be remembered.

I reached over and grabbed a copy then folded it under my arm and entered the coffee shop. It was just after nine thirty, which meant most of the morning rush had dissipated, and Montana was behind the counter, fixing up a display of cookies.

As soon as she saw me, she smiled. “Storm. How’s it going? I heard about last night. Hank and his alibi.”

I nodded. “It sucks, but it is what it is. If he didn’t kill Jeremy, well, it’s good he’s got something airtight, because he’s an excellent suspect otherwise, and I don’t want someone innocent going to jail.”

“No,” Montana agreed. “It’s a really weird thing. It’s all anyone is talking about in here, of course, this morning. From what I’m hearing, not a lot of people really knew Jeremy well. He was the kind of person who kept to himself a lot, only had a tight circle of friends, but no one has a bad word to say about him.”

“Something doesn’t add up,” I said, shaking my head. “It really doesn’t. Where did that snake come from? How did it get on the roof? And where is it now? And who had it? I don’t like this.”

“Me either. It’s very strange. Normally, when someone is murdered, we have at least some idea as to who could have done it. But not this time.”

I nodded. “Exactly. We had one great suspect, but there’s no one else.”

“I’m sure as we look into it more, we’ll dig something up. Remember, the killer wants to keep their identity a secret. If they’ve had issues with Jeremy for a while, they might have tried to keep it quiet to stop attention from landing on them.”

“That’s a good point,” I agreed. “I’m going to go out today and talk to people. Being a reporter is an easy cover to dig up information about who might have wanted him dead, and it’s useful to have, too. After all, I really *am* a reporter. I do need

to write these articles. And I promised his sister and girlfriend I would write a worthy obituary for Jeremy. He does deserve that.”

“From what I can tell, he did seem like a good guy,” Montana said.

Just then, the bell above the door dinged, indicating that another customer had entered.

“Okay. Can I just get my usual?” I asked. “Thanks, Montana.”

“Sure. No problem. Jeff is back, so I can come join in on anything we need to do tonight too.”

“Cool. We’ll see where this goes. Honestly, I’m kind of hoping it turns out it was an accident. That there was nothing nefarious. But you never know.”

“No,” Montana said. “We don’t... yet.”

I paid for my coffee, went to the corner to wait for it, and then took a table near the window. Pulling out my phone, I saw a text from Logan.

*Sorry. Ended up having to work a double shift at the hospital. Just got home. I have the blood you wanted. I’m going to be up for about another hour, but then I’m crashing if you want to come by. Now or later, either works.*

I immediately replied. *You’re amazing! I’ll be there in five minutes.*

I stood up and immediately headed out, waving to Montana as I did. This was hopefully going to give us some of the answers we needed.

## CHAPTER 7



Logan answered the door and immediately kissed me. “You owe me,” he growled into my ear.

I laughed. “Sure sounds like it. Thanks for that.”

“I must say, you’re the first girlfriend I’ve ever had who has wanted me to steal blood from a dead body at the hospital as a gift. Most of the women I’ve dated just wanted diamonds.”

“What can I say? I’m one of a kind. Although I wouldn’t say no to diamonds, either.”

Logan chuckled. “I bet.”

“But seriously, this is important.”

“What’s going on?”

I caught Logan up on everything as he led me into the kitchen. He reached into his bag and pulled out a padded envelope, from which he took out a single plastic vial filled with the familiar dark-red blood.

“Is this enough?” he asked.

“Sure is. This can at least tell us if the snake killed him, if it was venomous, or what.”

I put the vial down on the kitchen counter, and Logan watched while I let the magic inside of me build. I closed my eyes and imagined the blood turning green if there was any sort of poison in the vial. No, not poison. Venom. I resisted the

urge to roll my eyes internally at the fact that I was now thinking about Ashley's specific definition of both.

I paused and opened my eyes.

"What is it?" Logan asked. "Not venom?"

I laughed. "No. I got distracted. Sorry. It's all Ashley's fault for being such a huge nerd. Hold on. Let me try again."

I repeated the process, but this time, I was able to focus. I thought about the blood reacting to venom, and after a couple of seconds, I grabbed the vial and let my magic loose.

The deep-red blood immediately turned into a teal green, the color of the ocean on Instagram photos taken of the Aegean Sea next to Greek islands.

"Venom," I declared. "And wow. This is a powerful one."

"How can you tell?"

"The speed at which it changed color and the intensity of it. This is something powerful. It's not just your regular, run-of-the-mill venom."

"Can you tell exactly what kind of snake it was?" Logan asked, eyeing the vial carefully, as if it contained answers.

"I can try," I said. I grabbed the vial once more and tried a few spells. The blood should have turned yellow if it was venom from any of the snakes I'd considered, but it didn't.

After trying seven or eight different spells, I frowned.

"What's wrong?" Logan asked.

"None of these spells are working. I think I've gone through all the types of poisonous—er, venomous—snakes I can name. Vipers, asps, cottonmouths, rattlesnakes, taipans. A few others. But it's not coming up at all. It's none of these. So what could it be?"

"Something that involves magic?" Logan asked with a shrug.

"A magical snake?" I frowned as I considered it. I'd never really heard of such a thing before, but of course, that didn't

mean they didn't exist. "Let's see."

I let the magic build up in me again and cast the spell, and the blood in the vial turned yellow even as the blood inside my own body went cold. "Shoot."

"It's magic, isn't it?"

I nodded. "Yup. Certainly looks that way. But the thing is, if I cast a spell to create a snake, I have to think of a specific type of snake. That's how brains work. If I tell you to imagine a snake, you're going to picture a specific type."

Logan nodded. "Sure."

"But if that was what had happened, the spell I cast should have recognized even a magically generated snake as having venom linked to the species that was generated. But that's not what happened here."

"What does that mean?" Logan asked.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "But I think this might be a worse situation than we thought. A magical snake killed Jeremy. He was probably dead before he fell off the roof. And I don't know where it came from or what kind it was."

Logan let out a low whistle. "Or where the snake is now."

"Exactly."

This was not good. This was *very* not good.



I LEFT LOGAN'S HOUSE SOON AFTERWARD TO LET HIM GET some sleep, taking the vial of blood with me. As soon as I left, I messaged the group chat.

*Emergency! It turns out there was venom in Jeremy's blood, probably enough to have killed him as he fell off the roof. And it wasn't from a normal snake, either. I think there's a magical one out there. We need to find it, and fast.*

Holly replied first. *Shoot. I can also confirm that Hank is off the hook. I just got off the phone with the receptionist at the*



*accounting firm; he was there from four until just after five. There's absolutely no way he could have been on that roof with Jeremy. But of course, I think at this point, we know that.*

*Ashley was the next to reply. So, now we have two problems: first, where did the snake come from that killed Jeremy? Was it created by someone? Was it therefore a witch or wizard who killed him? And secondly, where is that snake now? Could it potentially still pose a threat?*

*I think it does, I replied. After all, if you were going to generate a magical snake, you would make it a snake of a specific species. You wouldn't just conjure up a random-looking snake out of nowhere. I think this is some sort of permanent magical snake. But this isn't my area of expertise.*

*Ashley's reply was next. It could be a basilisk.*

*I frowned. Don't those kill people when you look into their eyes? Jeremy was bitten on the arm.*

The three dots showed up straight away, indicating that Ashley was typing, and about a minute later, her reply appeared.

*No. That's what humans think, but they don't really understand what basilisks are since they see them so rarely. In fact, most witches and wizards don't, either. Basilisks are magical serpents, yes, but their venom is different because of it. They do have to bite a person to kill them, but if you look into their eyes, you'll be hypnotized first. That's how they get you. Hypnosis that stops you in your tracks, and then they bite.*

*That sounds horrendous, Montana said.*

*When you're bitten, how long does it take to die? I typed.*

*Seconds. Like, under ten. As soon as the basilisk bites, the hypnosis is broken, but it's too late. You have to essentially cast a spell instantly reversing the effects, but that only works for witches and wizards, and they have to realize they've been bitten by a basilisk and not another snake, Ashley replied. For a regular person like Jeremy, with no magical powers, he would have had no chance at getting away from it.*

*What does a basilisk look like? Holly asked.*

*Apparently, they look a lot like king cobras. They have that same frilly fringe around their faces. And they're very long, just like cobras. They can get up to about twenty feet long, and their faces are huge. Much bigger than a regular snake. More like the size of a watermelon. They're all black, and they look like they're wearing armor; their scales are bigger than those of most snakes.*

I shuddered at the thought. *Where do they come from?* I asked.

*There are some witches and wizards who keep them illegally. Obviously, you're not allowed to have them just hanging around. There are also a handful who are licensed owners, but those are very rare. I think there's something like five witches and wizards in the whole world who have licenses to keep basilisks. Apart from that, they live in a different magical world and occasionally get transported to ours through magical wormholes. That's probably what happened here if we're looking at a basilisk.*

My mouth went dry. *Oh. Great. Cool. A magical snake that hypnotizes and kills people almost immediately that's come from another dimension through a weird wormhole.*

*I didn't say it was from another dimension.*

*Details, Ash. Details. It might as well be. A wormhole? Ugh. We have to find this thing if it's out there.*

Holly messaged next. *Yeah, that's terrifying. But how is it going to hide? If it's twenty feet long, it's not like it can just sneak into a back alley or something. People are going to notice it.*

*I don't know, but they're intelligent. And they're sneaky. There's a reason only a handful of them have ever been spotted on earth before, ever. And a reason why they're so heavily protected.*

*A basilisk fits with the description we had from the witnesses, at least, I typed. They said that Jeremy let out a shout and stepped backwards, like he'd been pushed, and then fell off the ledge. It could have been surprise and fear after the*

*basilisk jumped and bit him on the arm. And he was dead from its venom before he hit the ground.*

*In that case, we need to determine if the basilisk was put there by someone or if it arrived on its own through a wormhole, and we need to find it, Ashley said. If it came from a wormhole, who knows if it will strike again?*

I shuddered at the thought. There was a magical, deadly snake potentially loose in Golden Hope somewhere. And either it was being controlled by someone who murdered Jeremy, or it was on its own, free to wreak havoc and attack anyone it came across at will.

Either way, this situation was not good. We had to find either the snake or the person controlling it, and fast, before they struck again.

## CHAPTER 8



**W**e all agreed to meet that afternoon after Montana's shift ended but before Holly's started. We had to come up with a plan.

Personally, I wasn't a big fan of this whole situation. How were we supposed to find a giant snake from another universe? If that was what had happened, it was basically going to be us trying to find a way to trap it, and I didn't know how.

But the alternative option held more promise. What if someone had been illegally keeping a basilisk and had unleashed it on Jeremy to kill him? That, we could investigate. Either we would get nowhere, or we could actually find a murderer.

I reached the office, still working on my coffee, and opened up my email. While it was mostly spam, there were also advertising inquiries to deal with, invoices to send out, payments to make, and more. It was all very manageable—Gary had hired me not because he desperately needed a reporter but because he knew who I was and wanted to be able to protect me—but it still took about thirty minutes before I was done with my administrative work and ready to go.

The first thing I did was put my phone on speaker and dial Chief Eddie. He answered on the second ring.

“Storm.”

“I'm honored by the fact that you've got me as a contact.”

“I like to know what I'm getting into before I answer the phone, and you've never called to chat about the weather.”

“That’s a good point. Okay, let me get right to it: what can you tell me about Jeremy’s death?”

“Not much, Storm. It’s a police investigation. We’re investigating.”

“Are you looking at it as a murder?”

“The medical examiner hasn’t released their report yet. They only got the body last night.”

“Off the record, Chief. Come on. You know I’m not going to print any of this.”

“No, you’re just going to go off and investigate it on your own.”

“Only with the intention of writing a better newspaper article,” I replied, my voice coated with honey. “I’m just a simple reporter trying to get a story that lays out the facts for people. I’ve been talking to members of the public. They’re worried about what’s going on. They want answers, and they deserve them. Come on. Give me something to go on, and I’ll make sure you sound good in whatever article I write.”

Chief Eddie grunted on the other end of the line. He wasn’t a bad cop, and I knew that. Otherwise, I never would have made that offer. But he had an ego, and I wasn’t above pandering to it.

“All right,” he finally muttered. “I guess I can tell you what we’ve got. But it’s off the record, got it?”

“Crystal clear.”

“And I don’t want you and those friends of yours looking into this, either. There’s a murderer out there. Someone who could be dangerous. I don’t want yours to be the next body I found.”

“Understood. I’m just trying to write my article.”

Chief Eddie grunted, obviously not believing me, but then he spoke. “So, right now, we’re looking at it as a murder. It looks most likely. There are a few witnesses who think there was someone on the roof with Jeremy. But there are a few questions as well.”

“Do you know about the snakebite?” I asked.

“We do. We saw it. We don’t think it’s anything, though. It could have happened long before he fell.”

I bit my tongue, not wanting to tell Chief Eddie we knew that was incorrect. After all, what was the point? It was not as if I could tell him he was supposed to be on the lookout for a magical serpent that would hypnotize and kill him with a single bite.

“Do you have any suspects at this time?”

“I’d call him more of a person of interest,” Chief Eddie said.

“Is it Hank?”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Really, Storm?”

“What can I say? I’m a good reporter.”

“Fine. It was Hank. But he appears to have an alibi.”

“And you don’t have anyone else.”

The silence on the other end of the line betrayed to me that I was correct. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Okay, so you don’t. No other suspects? Nothing going on in Jeremy’s life?”

“Even if there was, that’s not the sort of thing I can tell a reporter. You know about the one suspect. That’s all you need to go on to write your article.”

“Sure. But you know, the people of this town deserve to know if there’s an actual suspect who doesn’t have an alibi out there somewhere.”

Chief Eddie sighed. “At the moment, we don’t have any persons of interest or suspects. But don’t put that in the paper. You’re not publishing again for another week, and I don’t want people to panic.”

“You got it. You said this was all off the record. I’m keeping my word.”

“Thanks, Storm. I have a feeling this case is going to be a troublesome one. You stay out of this, okay? Someone murdered Jeremy. Shoved him off a building. The science says it, and the witnesses say it.”

“There’s definitely, absolutely, one hundred percent no way he could have fallen?” I asked. “Stumbled accidentally?”

“That was the first question I asked as well. But I had some crime-scene people come in from Seattle. Real science types. They did the math. They say it’s technically possible he fell, but unlikely. Told me that when it’s only three stories, that’s not far enough for the projection to send him too far from the base of the building. Something like that. They used a lot of math words, so I don’t really know the details. But long story short, they told me he was almost certainly pushed. There’s something like a twenty percent chance that he jumped, but he would have needed a running start.”

“So he would have, say, gotten startled and fallen backwards?” I asked.

“Definitely not. The science types ruled that out completely. Besides, there were witnesses there. They thought they heard Jeremy on the roof, arguing with someone, before he died. Witnesses can be unreliable, but there are enough people who thought they heard the same thing that I believe them.”

“But no one actually *saw* anyone on the roof with Jeremy?”

“No,” Chief Eddie replied. “You were there yesterday, right? Look at the angles. They wouldn’t have unless whoever it was had stood right over the edge.”

“And the crime-scene unit says there’s absolutely no way he could have simply been scared by something and fallen backwards?” Like, say, a magical snake that had poisoned him, when he was terrified of them?

“Definitely not. If Jeremy had done this himself, he would have had to start off running. They were very clear about that.”

“Okay. Thanks, Chief.”

“No problem.”

“If you think of anything else you want in the paper, or, you know, even if it’s something you don’t want in the paper but you feel like sharing with someone else who cares about this town, I’m always here. And happy to chat off the record.”

“Stay out of this case, Storm.”

“Absolutely,” I said, making my voice sound as innocent as possible. “I’m just a lowly newspaper owner, letting the public know what a great job our Chief is doing.”

“Sure you are. I wasn’t born yesterday, you know. Stay safe, Storm. There’s a murderer out there. I don’t want you ending up on the wrong side of this.”

“I won’t,” I replied. “I promise. I have this covered.”

“I hope you do.”

Chief Eddie had no idea how much more danger he was in. I ended the call and bit my lip. At least the conversation with him had narrowed things down a little bit. This wasn’t a basilisk that had travelled here from some other dimension, entered through some magical wormhole, and just by chance ended up in Golden Hope. Someone had to have shoved Jeremy off that roof. And that meant there was another person on the other end. A witch or wizard, in all likelihood, who kept a basilisk and had used it to murder someone here in town.

We just had to find out who.

I pulled out my phone and typed what I knew to the group chat. Then, putting it down, I opened Facebook and scrolled to the local page.

Facebook was still the way to go when it came to local news and information. While a lot of people in town no longer used their accounts personally, especially the younger generation, most people kept one just to join the locals’ group.

Sure, ninety percent of the posts were from people who had lost their wallets, headphones, or dignity somewhere in town after a night out, enjoying a few too many drinks. But there were also posts from local businesses looking to hire



staff, alerts from locals about important things they had to be aware of—like highway closures in the winter—and chats about anything that seemed to be important in town.

And right now, Jeremy's death was important.

At the very top of the page, the most recent post, with hundreds of comments underneath it, had been made by Jeremy's sister. She had announced that there would be a candlelight vigil that night at the bookstore below his apartment and that anybody was welcome to come and celebrate his life and share stories about Jeremy.

I immediately opened the comments. The vast majority were, of course, people simply telling Chloe that they were sorry for her loss and that they hoped Jeremy would rest in peace. But a few others were starting a conversation in the comments, discussing what had happened, and discussing Jeremy's life. This was a great source of information. It might not help me find out who had killed Jeremy directly, but it could help to figure out what kind of person he had been.

*I swear, I saw someone shove him, one person said. He was murdered. You have to tell the police this, Chloe. I'm not a weirdo. I saw it. A pair of hands on his chest just before he fell. I couldn't make out who it was.*

Someone replied to that comment, starting a thread. *Seriously? A man died, and all you want to do on his memorial page is start this sort of thing? Go to the police yourself. This is not an appropriate place for this.*

The original poster responded. *I did tell the police. I don't know if they believed me. I want Chloe to know the truth, because she deserves to know what happened to her brother. Sorry if anyone thinks I'm being insensitive. I don't mean to be. I just want justice. Besides, I'm right, and that means there's a murderer out there somewhere that needs to be caught.*

Another person chimed in. *I heard Jeremy arguing on the roof just before he fell. I didn't see anyone, though. I think the murder theory is right. And sorry to anyone who's offended, but if there's a killer out there, it's more important that they're*

*caught and that the people who are still alive can be protected than coddling someone's feelings on the internet.*

*Chief Eddie obviously knows what's going on, someone else replied. He's caught all the other killers. Give him some time to figure this one out.*

*If there's a killer out there, I want the police getting to the bottom of this, now.*

*Well, posting on the internet is definitely the most useful thing to do.*

*Wow, I don't see you doing anything other than trolling.*

The argument quickly devolved into name-calling, and I realized I wasn't going to get any more useful information from this thread, but it did confirm what Chief Eddie had said. The crime-scene unit believed Jeremy had been pushed, and it appeared there was at least one witness who had seen the same thing.

I was really, really glad we weren't going to have to go digging through gutters for a magical murderous snake.

Just a run-of-the-mill magical murderer.

## CHAPTER 9



I continued scrolling through the comments, pen and paper at the ready. As I read through them, I began to get a picture of Jeremy. He had obviously been the type of person who kept to himself. Not a lot of people had stories to tell about him, at least not online, but a few mentioned kindnesses he had performed for them.

One older woman, who said she lived next door to him, mentioned how he would always happily come over and fix her computer when she needed it.

Another said Jeremy had randomly paid for her coffee a couple of days earlier. She asked him why he did it, and he said he'd had a good day at work and wanted to pass it forward.

I made a mental note to look into Jeremy's work. Just because none of his coworkers lived in town didn't mean they wouldn't be able to travel. He didn't seem to have had any issues with anyone he worked with, but I was open to anything.

Especially since our one suspect had an alibi.

As I continued down the list of comments, however, one more caught my eye. It had been left by someone named Eric Horne. *Jeremy wasn't as good a guy as you all seem to think he was. Ridiculous that just because he grew up here, you all assume the best of someone.*

Below were a bunch of comments.

*Wow, haven't you ever heard of not speaking ill of the dead?*

*This was a really bad idea, dude. Delete this comment. Really rude.*

*Not the time or place.*

*I don't know, you grew up here and we all think you're a douche.*

Evidently, most people were not pleased with Eric's comment. I clicked on his profile. Eric looked to be in his late twenties, with a neatly trimmed beard and short brown hair. His profile picture had been taken from the nearby mountain in the summer; he had obviously gone for a hike.

There was an employer listed for him: Golden Rentals. I knew the place. It was located right on River Road. In the summer, it rented out bikes; in the winter, skis and snowboards. I figured I could stop by there and see what Eric had to say about Jeremy.

As I closed the office, a jolt of pain hit me as I looked at the monitor on the desk, with my closed laptop connected to it. That was where Gary used to sit. I missed him. Missed his presence. Missed his lackadaisical attitude toward the paper. Missed how he just let me do whatever I wanted.

I let the grief wash over me for a few minutes. I didn't try to push it away. I had learned that lesson when my parents died. It was okay to feel grief. To be sad. It was okay to remember those we had lost and to let their loss wash over me for a little bit. I let myself remember Gary, even though it hurt, and I inwardly celebrated the life he had led and how he had died trying to protect me.

When I headed out into the street, I stepped into another gorgeous day in Golden Hope. I walked down to Golden Rentals and found myself in the middle of a store getting ready for the seasonal switch. At the front, large, bright-red sale signs on all the bikes announced a clear-out of this year's rental stock. Inside, the rows of bike gear were being slowly replaced with thick jackets and pants, gloves, and goggles.

Employees milled around, working on getting the changeover done quickly while still helping the odd passerby who stepped in, looking for some gear.

I immediately recognized Eric; he was carrying a bundle of ski poles toward the entrance. “Eric?” I asked.

He looked at me, plastering a customer-service-friendly smile on his face. “How can I help you?”

“I’m Storm Bancroft, owner of the *Golden Hope Ogopogo*,” I said.

“Right, I knew I recognized you from somewhere.”

“I saw the comment you made on the post about the vigil for Jeremy tonight, and I was hoping you’d be able to shed some light for me about what was going on with him.”

Eric scowled, putting down the pair of skis he was holding. “Oh yeah? I’m not saying anything on the record.”

“This isn’t going to go in the paper,” I promised. “Everything is off the record. I’m just trying to get a sense of the kind of person Jeremy was and what he might have been into that got him killed. Help me out here, okay?”

Eric shifted his weight from side to side. “You can’t quote me.”

“Sure. No problem at all. Just tell me what I need to be looking at.”

“Jeremy was running this online scam.”

“What?”

“You know what he did for work, right? He was a programmer. Had been for years. Anyway, Jeremy was really close with some people in San Francisco, and he fell hard into that cryptocurrency thing. You know, stuff like Bitcoin?”

I nodded. “I know the ones. There’s a bunch of them, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. A million little tiny coins on the blockchain that no one cares about but everyone is hoping will be the next big thing. Well, after cryptocurrency came NFTs. Pictures that

were supposed to be private. A whole bunch of celebrities were hawking them.”

I nodded. “I think I saw a video of that.”

“Well, Jeremy thought he was too late to make a killing with cryptocurrency, but he thought NFTs were the perfect way to make up for it. He started his own firm, selling NFTs to suckers who don’t know any better.”

“Is it really that easy?” I asked, my eyebrows rising. “Forgive me. I don’t know a ton about this space.”

“It’s not hard. You make some pictures. They can be anything. One of the biggest companies that did this was Bored Ape Yacht Club. All of their pictures were based off this same one bored ape, but he would be wearing different clothes in every NFT. There were thousands of them. Anyway, Jeremy made his own version. They were all pictures of different fish. Kind of stupid. He started a website, a Twitter account, and was apparently making good money with them. Only, it was a scam.”

“NFTs completely collapsed in value a few months ago, didn’t they?” I asked.

Eric nodded. “They sure did. They were inherently a scam, designed by people trying to cash out before things got ugly. But Jeremy did worse than that.”

“Oh?”

“The NFTs he was selling? He made up fake sales for them. Pretended they were actually worth something, that people were buying them. He would fake sales reports. I saw them. Then, he would use those fake sales to convince people to buy for real.”

“How do you know all of this?” I asked.

“I came across it online by accident. I was browsing, looking at some of this stuff, and I saw those. I didn’t realize it was Jeremy behind them at first. But one of the fish Jeremy made up had the same design as the mural by the library. I recognized it and got suspicious, so I looked into it more and found out Jeremy was the one behind it all.”

“How did you find out about the scamming?” I asked.

“I dug deeper. Just because I work customer service at the store here doesn’t mean I don’t understand how the internet works. I’m big into this new technology. I reached out to some friends, and we all did some digging. That’s how I found out about Jeremy. Then, my friend Josh, who lives in Phoenix, found out about the fake sales. He found the invoices that had been posted publicly and followed the scent. It turns out the companies that supposedly bought the NFTs were fake, and while Jeremy tried to hide his identity, Josh was able to gather proof he owned them.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. “So Jeremy was scamming people.”

“Yeah. And when the NFT market crashed, that’s when things started going really wrong for him. I could see the vitriol on public sites like Twitter, and I imagine he was getting emails about it too.”

“Did you confront him?” I asked.

“Once. About six months ago, right when I first found out about all of this. I told him it wasn’t right what he was doing. I told him that he was a scammer. Jeremy told me to get lost, basically. He said I didn’t know what I was talking about. He was just an entrepreneur making a living, and he hadn’t done anything illegal. And that even if he had, no one would ever prosecute him. The worst part is, he was right. Jeremy was scamming on a small scale compared to some of these other people. The SEC doesn’t care about some dude in his apartment, ripping off a few people on Twitter. They’re going for the big guys. Like Sam Bankman-Fried.”

“He’s the man who owned that big cryptocurrency site that failed, right?”

Eric nodded. “That’s him. Those are the kinds of people getting punished for this.”

“Were you upset when Jeremy blew you off?”

Eric hoisted a single shoulder skyward. “Sure, I guess. But I mean, what else was I going to do? It’s not like he had

actually ripped off anyone that I knew. I think he was purposely doing this stuff online so he could scam people he didn't know. Golden Hope is a small town. If he'd gotten anyone here mixed up in this, when it failed, word would have gotten around. He wouldn't have wanted that."

"So you don't know of anyone local who got caught up in this?"

"Nope."

"I heard that when the NFT market collapsed, a lot of the owners of these companies lost their shirts too."

Jeremy nodded. "That happened. But Jeremy wasn't one of them as far as I know. He understood that it was a gift. The problem was that a lot of the people involved in this fell for the classic idea that prices would go up forever. Or at least, that they would keep going up for long enough that they'd make way more money, cash out, and leave some other sucker holding the bag. Well, as it turns out, they were the suckers.

"But that wasn't Jeremy. After I found out about it, I kept an eye on him. Wanted to stop him from ripping off anyone in town, you know? And he got out from what I can tell. The NFT market collapsed, and he folded up his companies, but he kept the money."

"Can you tell me how you know this?" I asked.

Eric shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I'd really rather not."

"I don't care if it's illegal. I'm not about to tell any of this to the cops. If they connect the dots and find you, then you can answer their questions however you want, but as long as you didn't kill anyone, I don't care what crimes you committed to get this info."

Eric gave me a hard, piercing look as if trying to figure out if I was telling the truth. "Why are you trying to find all of this information?"

"Because I want to find out who the killer is. There's a murderer in town somewhere, and they belong behind bars. For everyone's sake."



Eric paused, licked his upper lip, then gave me a curt nod. “Okay, fine. But I’m telling you, if anyone else asks about this, I’m not admitting to anything. You’re not wired up or anything, are you?”

“No. This is Golden Hope. Here. My phone isn’t recording, either.” I pulled it out and showed Eric. He was obviously a little bit paranoid, but I couldn’t really blame him. I was used to committing crimes at this point, and I had magic behind me, but Eric was zero for two.

“Okay,” he finally said. “I broke into Jeremy’s place once, to check it out. Not because I had bad intentions or anything. But I wanted to know how he had made out. Like, he was scamming people. And I knew about it. I didn’t know who to tell. I just wanted to keep tabs on him so that if something ever came up and I had the chance to tell someone that mattered, I’d have something on him, you know?”

I nodded. Honestly, it didn’t sound all that different from what we did a lot of the time. “Sure, I get that.”

“I thought he was going to get away with all of this. But I wanted to have as much info as I could. People like Jeremy, they didn’t deserve to keep the money they had scammed.”

“How much did he have?”

“One point seven million dollars in the bank,” Eric replied.

“What?” My mouth dropped open.

“Yeah. I’m not joking. I saw his bank statements. He was making transfer after transfer out of his business accounts into his personal ones over the past year. That’s what he ended up with. He was loaded, and it was all on the back of running an NFT scheme.”

“He didn’t force anyone to buy those NFTs, though, did he?” I asked.

“No. He just tricked them with false sales data, so it’s at least fraud,” Eric said.

“Right. Definitely a scam. Do you know who any of his customers are?”

Eric nodded. “I compiled a bit of a list. It’s mostly just Twitter handles. But some of them have the person’s full name listed in their profile. Again, I wasn’t really going to do anything with it. I’ve had the list for a while. I just thought it might come in handy at some point.”

“Now might be that point,” I said.

“You think one of the people who lost money buying Jeremy’s NFTs might be his killer?”

“I mean, it’s a pretty good motive, wouldn’t you agree?”

Eric nodded. “Sure. Yeah, it does make sense. I can get you that list. What’s your email?”

I gave Eric my contact information, and he tapped away at his phone for a bit. “Okay. I emailed you the list. But none of them are local as far as I can tell.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“No. As I said, I mostly have Twitter handles. And they’re really just from people who complained publicly about the company. Anyone who kept their issues to themselves or went directly to Jeremy, I wouldn’t have details on. It’s possible he ripped off some locals.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“Look, I know it sucks to get ripped off. And the internet is kind of like the Wild West these days. But just because someone tricked you into buying something that wasn’t worth what they said doesn’t mean you get to kill them. Jeremy was a bad guy. I’m not sad he’s dead. All those people praising him on social media don’t know what he was really like. But I also don’t think the person who killed him should be allowed to walk free like that. I don’t like knowing there’s someone around who kills people out there.”

I nodded. “I agree completely. What about you? Where were you when Jeremy was killed? You know, just so I can rule you out as a suspect.”

“Here,” Eric replied straight away. “Watch. Hey, Lisa!”

“Yeah?” a woman’s voice called out from the other side of the room.

“Who was working here yesterday afternoon?”

“I was here, you were, Jesse, and Greg.”

Eric gave me a “there you go” look.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Yeah, no problem. As I said, I didn’t like the guy, and I know he was ripping people off, but I didn’t kill him. I had no reason to. He never did anything to me personally.”

“Do you know of anyone else who had anything against him?”

“Sorry. Didn’t even know the guy personally. Never introduced myself. I confronted him about six months ago, but that was the only time I even met him. I didn’t know him otherwise.”

“When you were in his apartment, did you notice anything that stood out at all? Anything out of the ordinary? Weird?”

“Beyond the fact that he lived like a nerd in the nineties?” Jeremy asked with a small smile. “Seriously, it’s like he was allergic to the sun. He had everything shut up, blackout curtains, all of that. Lived like a total nerd. I have heard he had a girlfriend, though.”

I nodded. “I met her yesterday. Anne Samson.”

“I’m not one to judge. Just because his place looked like a bachelor pad doesn’t mean he didn’t have charisma. Or the cash, although the way he lived, it’s not like he was spending large.”

“No?”

“Everything in his apartment was old. Not *old* old. But he hadn’t bought anything new, you know what I mean? It was all still the old stuff he would have had before he made all this money.”

I nodded. That was interesting. I wondered what Jeremy had planned on doing with all of his newfound wealth. Was he

simply going to save it? Or had he had something else in mind?

“Okay. Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Sure. As I said, Jeremy was a bad dude, but frankly, murder is worse than theft in my book.”

“Agreed.”

I left the shop and headed back toward the office, where I could look up that list of customers Jeremy had and see if anyone looked familiar or if any of them might have killed him.

After all, nearly two million dollars was a lot of money.

I got back to the office about ten minutes later, but as soon as I entered and had a look around, my Spidey senses went off. The hair on the back of my neck rose, and I froze. Instantly, I activated my magic and created an invisibility spell for myself. I was glad Jay hadn't come into the office today. I took a careful step forward as I looked around.

It didn't take long before I figured out the source of my unease: the laptop that I'd closed before I left was now sitting open. Someone had been here. Been through my things.

The question was: were they still here?

## CHAPTER 10



I let the magic build again and closed my eyes. I pictured myself sensing the auras belonging to every living thing in here. When I opened my eyes, I looked around. There was a fly, with a blue aura, buzzing in the corner. The daddy longlegs that had made his home in the ceiling at the far end of the room glowed red. But that was it. There was no one else.

Whoever had been here was gone.

I let out a breath as I killed the two spells I'd cast and reappeared once more. At least there was no imminent danger. But it didn't mean I was safe.

Who had been here? And why?

I crept toward the computer as if the intruder were hiding inside of it and ready to pounce, even though I knew that made no sense. Scanning the desk, I tried to remember what had been here. What was missing? Was anything missing? What was open on the screen? What was the intruder looking for?

This was the *Golden Hope Ogopogo*. We weren't exactly running a massive investigative journalism department here. There was no Deep Throat giving us insight into some sort of government conspiracy or anything like that.

One of the articles last week that had made page two was about changing parking regulations going into winter. What on earth would anyone want to look at my computer for? Even when it came to murders, I never printed any of the clues we uncovered in the paper. The Witches Murder Club was my own private hobby, and no one in town should have known I

was even involved in solving most of the murders around here, let alone connect it to the newspaper.

So, what was going on? Why was someone spying on my stuff?

Whoever it was, they had covered their tracks pretty well. The laptop screen still had the same tab open to the Facebook group where I'd found Eric's comment. Whatever they were looking for, they had closed it after they were finished.

And then, it also hit me: whoever this was had to have magical powers. I'd closed the laptop lid before I left, which meant that the computer would have gone to sleep. That was how it operated. And for someone else to get in here and open it again, they needed my password.

Now, admittedly, I was not exactly a person who generated random, wildly secure passwords. I had never really seen the need for it, and it wasn't like I was hiding anything super secret on this computer. My password was "stormbancroftisthebest." I know, I know.

But I still didn't think that was the sort of thing anyone would guess on a whim. Except maybe Ashley and Logan. They knew me well enough to figure out I would use that as a password. But someone else? No way.

That could only mean one thing: whoever had broken in here to spy on my stuff had magical powers.

I frowned. What were they looking for? Glancing at the window, I realized it was open. That had to be how they'd left. They must have heard me coming. I had to admit, I wasn't exactly the most subtle person on the planet. Whoever it was must not have had time to close the laptop lid before needing to leave.

I shuddered. I didn't like this. I didn't like it at all. But I also didn't know what I could do about it. I closed the window, cast a protection spell around the building just in case, and sat down at the computer, getting out the list of Twitter profiles Eric had gathered for me.

And I began to do my research.

It didn't take long for me to confirm what Eric had figured out before. Jeremy Murphy had founded a company called Floppy Fish about a year and a half ago. It had a flashy website, a Twitter account that posted regularly, and according to one of the websites that tracked this sort of thing, had sold over three million dollars' worth of NFTs.

According to Eric, that site was overestimating, but I found that a lot of people on the internet did. Still, nearly two million in actual sales was nothing to sneeze at.

Sure enough, Jeremy had been selling NFTs that were basically just pictures of fish decorated with cool patterns. Some were pretty elaborate, but when I looked at the prices on the site, I gasped.

Some were only a few hundred dollars. Which, sure, for a picture of a fish, was a lot of cash. But when compared to the fact that some were listed in the thousands, with a handful in the tens of thousands and a couple even costing over one hundred thousand dollars, suddenly, a couple hundred bucks looked like a steal.

"Who on earth would spend two hundred and fifty grand on *that*?" I said out loud to myself as I looked at one of the more expensive fish on the site. It was completely ridiculous.

And yet people had. I managed to find a few different threads on Reddit where customers of Jeremy's had posted about their purchases.

The oldest thread, from about a year ago, was full of people who were pleased with their purchases.

*I just spend fifty grand on more Floppy Fish*, one person posted, and I gaped at the screen. Fifty grand? On a single picture of a fish? I mean, okay, I knew Jeremy had been making sales. But it was one thing to see numbers on a sheet, and it was another entirely to hear from a person who was buying these things thinking they were a good investment.

*I'm just a baby investor, but I took out two hundred bucks from my savings and was able to buy a smaller fish. I'm going*

*to sell when the value goes up a hundred times over. I figure that'll be a good down payment for a house.*

*My wife wants me to stop buying NFTs, but she doesn't understand finance. She doesn't realize that by buying these, I'm setting us up for life, and that in ten years, we're going to be living a life she can't even dream of right now. She doesn't get it. So yeah, I bought another five grand worth today, but no one tell her. She'd be pissed at me if she found out.*

Yikes. That guy's marriage was probably not in a good way right now.

I skipped over a bunch of older posts that were all pretty similar in tone and style, but about six months ago, things had begun to shift. Originally, people had just been complaining. But then the tone changed.

*I put ten grand into these, and I'm starting to think it was a scam. I looked into those documents that were posted online showing that Floppy Fish had made a ton of sales. I ran them past my brother-in-law, who's a forensic computer science guy. He said the invoices were fakes. They're not real. There were never those major sales. We were ripped off. Floppy Fish was a scam.*

I clicked on the link below, which sent me to an image of the faked invoices. This must have been what Eric had found as well.

Someone in the comments asked, *where did you find these invoices?*

The original poster replied to them. *Someone posted them on a forum. It wasn't Floppy Fish themselves. I found them there and assumed they were real. Lots of people were saying good things about Floppy Fish. How they were going to be the next Bored Ape Yacht Club. How some celebrities had gotten in on them. And then I saw the invoices, and I thought okay, the sales are real. They're a good investment. But apparently, that was a lie.*

I shook my head. Taking anything on the internet at face value was such a bad idea in general.



*You can't believe everything you see on the internet, dude, someone else commented.*

*Yeah, well, I know that now, don't I? And it doesn't exactly help me. I've lost ten grand. What am I going to do? I never would have bought those to begin with if I didn't think this company had some major sales under their belt. I need to get in touch with the owner. Anyone know who it is? The company isn't answering emails or Tweets.*

*Below, however, was another comment. I lost everything too. My wife left me. She kept telling me not to buy NFTs, and I did it anyway, because I knew it was going to be a big thing, and in ten years, we'd be rich. Well, she started asking questions about where our retirement money went, I admitted everything, and she's gone. And now this stuff is worthless? It's bull. This is Floppy Fish's fault. They ruined my life. Someone tell me who the owner is so I can go over there and tell him how he destroyed my whole life. I'm going to make him feel pain he's never imagined.*

I raised my eyebrows. That last one certainly sounded like a threat. In fact, as I kept scrolling, even more angry customers came out of the woodwork. I pulled out the list of usernames Eric had recorded from Twitter. I was able to match some of them and add to the list.

I got deeper and deeper into it, and before I knew it, my alarm was going off. It was time to meet the others for pizza and to chat about who might have killed Jeremy.

My number of suspects was longer than Santa's naughty list, and that should help us get there.



AS I PACKED UP AND GOT READY TO GO, I WAS REMINDED OF the intruder, who I'd almost forgotten about in my hyperfocused state of trying to find people who'd had something against Jeremy. Who had come in here? And why? The frustrating part of this was that I had absolutely no idea.

There was no one left from the past. Molly was dead. Everything was over. And I wasn't involved in anything else that could lead to robbery.

Something strange was going on. I was going to have to tell the others. But first, we were going to have to find the killer in town.

When I reached 800 Degrees, the others were already waiting.

"No Jay today?" Ashley asked as I slipped onto a stool at the round table on the patio.

"Nope. Although he's going to be mad if he finds out our investigation took us to a pizza restaurant and he's not here. I think he had a big day yesterday and wanted to sleep it off a bit."

Ashley laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like him."

"I got a bit of gossip from work this morning," Holly said. "One of the employees at the brewery is friends with Anne, Jeremy's girlfriend."

"Oh?" Montana asked.

"As it turns out, Anne has a history of dating people she thinks she can use to get a step up. I'm not going to criticize her for that. We do what we have to to get ahead. But she also used to be married. To a man who then died in a supposed farm accident a year later."

I gasped. "Really?"

"When she was twenty. So about eight years ago. It wasn't here in Golden Hope. It was up in Spokane. That's where she grew up."

"Wait. If she killed her first husband for the money, shouldn't she be loaded?" I asked. "She wouldn't have to date someone new?"

"No," Holly said, shaking her head. "She should have been. But as it turned out, the husband had lied to her. He was older, in his forties. And he had an ex-wife he'd never divorced himself from. He just never bothered telling Anne

about it. Their marriage was illegal, and his will, which he'd made twenty years earlier, left everything to his wife. Anne had seen it and figured that meant her, but of course, it didn't. When he died, the original wife got everything, and Anne was left with nothing."

"Wow," I said, shaking my head.

"Something doesn't make sense, though," Ashley pointed out. "Why would she date Jeremy? I know he had a good job with computers, but that's a wage. It's not life-changing money, and it goes away when he dies and can't clock in anymore."

"I can answer that part," I said, and I laid out everything I'd learned about Jeremy, Floppy Fish, and the NFT scam he had been running.

"Almost two million dollars, just from selling pictures of fish online?" Montana asked.

"I'm in the wrong business," Holly murmured.

"You stay where you are," I joked.

"NFTs were the new tulips for a while," Ashley said. "Complete and total mania. I would see articles about them online, touting them as this next big investment. They were trying to get people in."

"They succeeded. Jeremy did, anyway," I said. "And I've managed to compile a list of people who were loudly complaining that they lost all of their money."

"I'm confused. Didn't everyone lose money in NFTs?" Holly asked. "I thought they went down the tubes a few months ago."

"Most people who bought them did, yeah," I said. "From what I can tell, anyway."

"Then why are they blaming Jeremy specifically?"

"Two things: first of all, they want some sort of scapegoat. It's easier to blame somebody else than it is to admit you made a bad decision and lost all your money. And secondly, it looks

like Jeremy did actually lure people into his specific NFT by anonymously posting fake sales records on forums.”

“I can’t believe that worked,” Ashley said, shaking her head. “Seriously? Don’t people know better by now than to take everything they see on the internet at face value?”

“It not only worked, but people are mad,” I said.

Our server arrived then, and we all placed our orders before getting back to it.

“That explains why Anne might have been with Jeremy, then,” Holly mused. “If she knew about the money he was making with NFTs and how he managed to get out before things went bad, she might have seen him as her next meal ticket. And then decided to kill him. If she killed her first husband.”

“I think it’s certainly a suspicious situation,” I said slowly. “But my question is, where’s the payoff? They weren’t married. Unless Jeremy had a will and listed Anne as his beneficiary, she wouldn’t be getting any of his money. It would just go to whoever his next of kin was, wouldn’t it? I guess his parents or his sister. One of them.”

Ashley nodded. “We need to get the details of that will, but I agree with Storm. It doesn’t sound like Anne would benefit financially from his death. I can find the records of her first sort-of husband’s death too. See if there might actually be something to this murder claim or if it’s just small-town tongues wagging because something slightly out of the ordinary happened to someone and they feel the need to come up with a more interesting version.”

“Great,” Montana said. “And in the meantime, we also have this list of people who feel ripped off by Jeremy. Do we have their real names?”

“Unfortunately, that’s one of the problems,” I admitted. “All I’ve got are online usernames. Which is going to make tracking them down more difficult. But here’s what I think: people tend to use the same usernames online on multiple

sites. I think we can track them down. There's people on TikTok that do this all the time."

"I've seen those," Montana said, nodding. "Some of those people are amazing. All they need is a username, and they find out everything about you."

"Exactly. I think we can use those same methods to find at least a few of these people who had something against Jeremy. A lot blame him for losing their whole life's savings."

"That's a pretty solid motive for murder," Ashley said.

"But the question is, were any of them in town?" I asked. "After all, from what Eric said, he didn't find anyone who actually lives here who might have been a victim."

"It's far from peak tourist season, but there are still people in the hotels. One of them could have come from out of town with the intention of killing him," Holly pointed out.

"In which case, they're probably going to leave town soon. If they haven't already. Maybe they'll have stayed an extra day or two because they don't want to draw suspicion to themselves, or they wouldn't have known how long it would take them to find Jeremy, but we have to act quickly," I said. "Or our killer is gone."

## CHAPTER 11



Our food arrived soon after that, and as we dug in, the conversation changed to other topics. I eventually broached the break-in.

“By the way,” I said, taking a sip of margarita, “I think you all should know someone broke into the office today.”

“What?” Ashley said. “Why?”

“I wish I knew. I have no idea. They didn’t take anything as far as I can tell. They looked at stuff on my computer. I think it was a witch or wizard, as they got into my password protected computer.”

“Yeah, let me guess, your password is ‘Storm is the best,’” Ashley said, rolling her eyes.

Whoops. “Well, okay, let’s pretend you’re not super far off,” I said, a blush crawling up my face.

Holly giggled while Ashley shot me a look. “Seriously? You included your first name in your password?”

“Hey, it’s not like it was *just* my first name,” I shot back.

“I think we can all agree that while Storm is a cybersecurity expert’s nightmare, it’s unlikely that any random person would have typed that in as her password without knowing her well. And the list of people that would do that is mostly at this table. And Logan,” Montana said.

“I agree,” I said. “That’s why I think it was someone magical. They cast a spell to get in.”

“But why?” Holly asked. “What were they after?”

“That’s what I don’t know. I can’t even begin to figure it out. I just don’t have a clue, and that means I don’t know where to look.”

“It’s worrying,” Ashley said. “I know none of us want to say it, but we’re all thinking of Molly.”

“She’s dead, though,” I said.

“Yes. She is. But other people who were alive back then aren’t.”

I shook my head. “No way. No. It can’t be anything like that.”

“What was the last thing Molly said to you before she died?” Ashley asked.

“He’s going to come after me, and he’s going to kill me,” I said. “But she was bluffing. It was all her. She told me about him, but that’s because she knew she was going to die. She was trying to scare me. That’s it.”

“I’m not so sure,” Ashley said.

A pit began to form in my stomach. “No. It was the words of a woman who was always trying to fool me. A woman who wanted me to suffer. She started saying it when she knew she was going to lose. She wanted me to spend my whole life looking over my shoulder for a bogeyman who probably doesn’t exist.”

“Storm, I get it,” Ashley said quietly. “You want to live a normal life, and you want this all to be over. But what if it isn’t? You have to consider that. If you refuse to accept this as a possibility, and Molly was telling the truth, then you’re in danger. And if you are, you need to be aware.”

I stared down at the slice of pizza on my plate.

Holly reached over and placed a hand on my arm. “It sucks, Storm. But Ashley is right.”

I took a deep breath. “It can’t be right. It can’t be. It was supposed to be over.”

“I know,” Ashley said. “It’s not fair. You didn’t ask for this, and we might be wrong. I certainly hope we’re wrong about this. But someone broke into your office today, and you don’t know why. You have to entertain this possibility for your own safety.”

“I just wanted to live without having to keep my guard up constantly,” I said, a lump forming in my throat. Tears threatened to come, but I blinked them back. I wasn’t going to cry about this. “I didn’t want it to be real.”

“None of us did. And I was with you that night. When I came up to you, you said, ‘Molly had a boss, and he’s coming after me. She said he was going to come after me.’ And then you passed out for a minute. I also thought she was making it up. That she just wanted to torture you. But we really have to consider that she might not have.”

I rubbed my hands up and down my face and looked at the others. Montana shot me a sympathetic look. Holly offered up a small smile. And I hardened. Ashley was right. A memory was forming in my mind, a vague impression of what she was saying.

“Okay. Until we know more about who broke into my office, we have to assume Molly was telling the truth. Because you’re right. Playing it safe was how I survived the last time, and it’s how I’m going to get through this too.”

“Good,” Ashley said.

“But that means we potentially have someone else to look into as well.”

“What do you remember from that night?” Ashley asked. “What Molly said about him?”

“Well, there is his gender, for one. She kept referring to ‘him,’ so it’s probably a wizard,” I said, thinking back. The memories of that night were painful, and I tried not to dwell too much on them. But right now, I had no choice. “I saw him. I saw him there that night.”

“What?” Ashley said. “And you didn’t say anything?”



I took a deep breath. “I... I wasn’t sure he was real. I’d kind of forgotten. Look, that night was a lot. I’m not one hundred percent sure what was real and what was fake. I guess I let myself think that maybe I’d imagined him. Or that I’d misheard. I thought it couldn’t be true.”

“It’s understandable,” Montana said softly.

“No,” I snapped, and I immediately felt bad about it. “Sorry. I don’t mean to lash out. I guess I didn’t realize to what extent I had let myself believe this was all fake. When it wasn’t. It wasn’t fake at all.”

“It’s a normal reaction to trauma,” Montana said. “Completely normal.”

I shook my head. “I should have been stronger than this. I shouldn’t have let myself forget. Or let myself believe it was fake. It might have cost me everything today.”

“You’ve been through too much,” Montana continued. “No one could be expected to see what you saw, to go through something like that, and to come out of it completely unscathed. Nobody. You’re not weak just because your brain had a normal reaction to stress and trauma.”

“Montana’s right,” Ashley said. “This is normal. You let yourself forget because it was too painful, and you thought it was over.”

I shook my head. “Why now, though? Why did it happen to me? I remembered it at the time. I remember it now. But why didn’t it click immediately after?”

“Brains are weird,” Holly said. “They really are. You’ve been through so much, it could be that was what made it snap, for lack of a better term. But the others are right. It’s okay that it happened. But now, tell us what you remember, because it might help save your life.”

I paused and took a deep breath. I reached for my margarita and took a gulp then started recounting the story of that night.

“I saw him. He was talking to Molly. This is the part I thought I’d imagined. Or dreamt. Even now, I can only just

barely picture it. They didn't know I was there. I was hiding. Jay was there, I think? I heard him talking to Molly. He told her that I knew too much. That the old man had told me about him. Who was that?"

"Albert, the old guy who accidentally turned himself invisible and went around town for days like that?" Ashley suggested.

"It must be," I agreed. Everything was hazy. Repressed memories were a heck of a thing. "Then, he said I had to die. I was too close to the truth. And that's when Molly attacked."

"Did you see him?" Montana asked.

"No. No, I don't think I did. I remember running. I wanted to. I needed to know what he looked like. But when I got there, I was frustrated. He was already gone. I don't know what he did."

"Probably cast an invisibility spell," Ashley said.

"I wish I knew. This memory... it's hazy. It's like watching a movie but through a layer of fog, you know what I mean? I can't remember everything. I can't picture everything. I'm getting glimpses of something here and there, but I can't see the whole picture."

"Just tell us what you can," Ashley said reassuringly.

Montana looked at me curiously. "Hold on a minute. You say it looks like fog?"

"Yeah," I said. "Why?"

"My mother told me about this. Years ago. She said there's a spell you can cast to make people forget. She said if people try to remember, their memories become fogged up. So they can't."

I stared at her. "What are you suggesting?"

"I think whoever this is cast a spell on you to *make* you forget. This wasn't you breaking down naturally because of what you went through. Someone did this on purpose."

Bile rose in my throat. “Which means he stayed there. He must have been watching. Seen what happened. And when Molly killed herself, he must have erased my memory of him.”

“That’s what it sounds like,” Ashley said. “It explains why you didn’t instantly think of him when you saw that the office had been broken into. Why you didn’t bring it up earlier.”

“How do I reverse the spell?” I asked Montana.

“Mom said it depended on the power of the magic of the person whose memory was erased. You’re getting glimpses here and there, so you’re obviously powerful. But you’re not getting the whole picture. Activate your magic, and try to remember. See what that does.”

I nodded, and closed my eyes, letting my magic build inside of me. Then, I thought back to that night. I still had the hazy memory, and this time, with my magic activated, it was as if the fog suddenly lifted. I found myself looking at the scene, clear as day, my memory as good as if it had just happened a couple of minutes ago.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ve got it. That’s what it was; he cast an invisibility spell. I ran to the front door, but I couldn’t see him. I let out a cry of frustration, and that was when Molly attacked.”

“Did he say anything else?” Ashley asked.

“No, but I thought about Albert then. Albert was the one who told me about him. And he was Molly’s boss, back when they were doing the illegal potions trade. He saw them together, arguing in the park in the middle of the night. Wow, I really didn’t remember any of this.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ashley said. He cast a spell on you.

“I know. But still. It’s insane to think that these memories were hidden from me.”

“He must not have wanted you to know he was going to be coming,” Ashley said quietly. “We’re very lucky that you had the break-in and were able to remember a little bit of this, that your magic was that strong. Because otherwise, we’d be nowhere. He’d be out there, biding his time, waiting for the

perfect opportunity to strike, and you would be none the wiser.”

A chill crawled up my spine. “You’re right. It’s insane. It’s completely nuts that this happened. Okay. But we’re not going to let him win.”

“What else do you know?” Holly asked. “Now that you remember.”

I closed my eyes and thought back to that night. New memories sprang to life. “I tried to get Molly to tell me who he was while we were fighting. I wanted more information. I thought I could goad her into telling me more about him, but it didn’t work. She would just laugh at me. Didn’t give me anything. Then, it was right when she was about to stab herself. She said it didn’t matter if she died; he was going to come and kill me. And then she did it. She died. She didn’t give me anything else to go on.”

“That’s disappointing, but we’re still going to figure this out,” Montana said firmly. “We’re not going to let whoever this wizard is win.”

“Do you remember more details about him from when you overheard them?” Ashley asked. “Literally anything?”

I thought back and shook my head. “No. But I would recognize his voice if I heard it again. I know that.”

“That’s something,” Holly said. “Okay. Where do we go from here?”

“Back to the past,” Montana said. “This is where it all started. We have to find out everything about Molly’s life back then and who she might have been dealing with. And we strike before Molly’s boss gets to Storm first.”

I sighed. Just when I’d thought I was safe, it turned out there was someone else out there looking for me. Would the hits never end?

## CHAPTER 12



The rest of the meal involved discussions about my safety. Initially, Ashley had wanted to go with a similar setup as we'd had when we knew Molly was actively trying to kill me, but I refused.

"No way. I'm not asking you to put yourself out like that again. Besides, that was different. We knew she was trying to kill me then. Right now, whoever this is, they're just sneaking around."

"They broke into your office," Ashley pointed out.

"And they were there when I got back. I'm ninety-nine percent sure of that. If he was actively trying to kill me, he would have had the perfect opportunity to do it then. I wouldn't have seen it coming. No. He's gathering information. I think he will try, but he's not doing it yet for whatever reason. I think it's smarter for me to keep living normally. Because you know what *will* get him to act? If he finds out we know about him. Right now, he has no idea."

Montana nodded. "I agree with Storm. She should keep living life normally. That will give us as much opportunity as possible to find out who he is and stop him before he attacks."

"It's a big risk," Ashley said.

"Not as big a risk as putting a giant target on my back. It's a race," I explained. "Can we find out who he is without letting him know we know about him before he decides it's time to act? Before he finds out whatever it is he was trying to get from my computer?"

Ashley bit her lip. “Okay. I don’t like this, though.”

“I think it’s the best of a bad set of choices,” Holly said. “Obviously, as much as possible, one of us needs to stay with Storm. He would also be less likely to try anything with someone else around. But we can’t be obvious about it. Storm is right; surprise is our best friend right now.”

“And how do we look into who it might be?” Montana asked.

“I’ll do it,” Ashley said. “I’ll find out what I can. If Storm does it, it will look suspicious. He’s obviously going to be watching her, but the rest of us, less so.”

“I can ask around too,” Montana said. “I was around back then, although I was little.”

“And me,” Holly agreed. “My parents don’t like talking about it, but they might open up. And I know they have a bunch of old boxes in storage. There might be something there. I can see what I’ll find.”

“Thanks, all of you,” I said, gratitude warming me through better than the heater next to the table. “I really appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Ashley said. “This isn’t over, and we’re going to get to the bottom of it.”

I had never been more grateful for the Witches Murder Club.

We separated soon afterward. I packed up a small piece of pizza for Jay, who I knew would otherwise riot, and headed home.

As soon as I got there, I pulled out my laptop while Jay munched away on his little corner of pizza on the table.

“Did I miss anything good? Other than the pie, I mean. This isn’t nearly enough.”

“You’re not going to be able to do much investigating if you’re too fat to move around,” I pointed out.

“Let me deal with that problem. I demand more if I’m going to help.”

“You got this pizza, and you stayed home all day. You could have come out.”

“You didn’t tell me you were going to the pizza place.”

“Okay, fine. But I did tell you I was going to work. Anyway, you have to be careful. There’s someone else coming after me. They broke into the newspaper offices this afternoon.”

Jay gave me a curious look. “Who is it?”

“The man I spied on that night when Molly died. We think he cast a spell on me to make me forget him. I was able to break it with my magic, but now we need to pretend we don’t know about him while we find out who he is. We know he’s a wizard, and he was around in the nineties. He was Molly’s boss. That’s all we know.”

“That’s not a lot to go on,” Jay pointed out.

“Tell me about it. That’s why we’re pretending I still don’t remember him. But whoever he is, he might be coming after me. Or it’s someone entirely different who broke into the office for their own fun reason. But the short of it is, I have someone out there coming after me, and so we have to be careful.”

“Got it.”

I opened the laptop. “But for now, we’re trying to find a killer we’ve got more leads on. I have to figure out who these people are. And pretend like I’m acting normally and not wondering who’s constantly trying to kill me.”

“I will say this about you, Storm: you’re very good at pretending you’re okay when you’re really not. You’re like a cat that way. Hiding our emotions is one of our best features.”

“Two days ago, you put your tail in the stream of water I had going in the sink while I was brushing my teeth, and you literally turned and glared at me with a gaze that could power a thousand suns. It wasn’t even my fault. It was your tail.”

“Your water got in the way of my tail. And that’s only because I wanted you to know I was mad. I’ve been mad at

you plenty of other times and haven't let it show.”

“Name once.”

“Absolutely not. Then you'll start gathering data and using the pattern to try and understand me more.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right, whatever you say.”

Pulling the computer toward me, I began investigating the usernames I had and trying to find real first and last names to go with the profile pictures and avatars.

I started off with the low-hanging fruit: people whose usernames were obviously their real names. First up was franciscarlyle8777. That was bound to be a first and last name, surely. I did a search of the photo he used as his avatar and quickly found a Facebook profile associated with him. His profile was private, but he had been tagged by somebody else whose profile was public in a couple of pictures taken yesterday in Dallas. There was no way he was our killer.

The next two users with their full names were similar. One had obviously been in New York City yesterday, while the other was on vacation in Greece. Neither one had been anywhere near Golden Hope.

But the fourth one I checked out had been. I recognized the name when I saw it: Ronald Burgmeister. I'd interviewed him for the paper a few months ago. He owned and ran one of the shops here in town. He had been upset when new regulations were going to make River Road more pedestrian friendly. He'd complained that it was going to ruin this town, that people needed to be able to drive places if they wanted to go shopping, and that it was going to turn all of River Road into a dead zone.

Of course, he seemed to be forgetting the fact that the bulk of River Road was already a pedestrian-only zone, that there was tons of foot traffic, and that people loved being able to park their cars on the outskirts of town and go for a comfortable amble through the streets along the side of the river.



But that didn't stop him from complaining, and Gary had sent me out to interview him and get his opinion on the new changes, which would have seen the pedestrian-only area increased in size.

"He's an idiot, and you're welcome to frame it that way in the article we run, but he won't stop calling me, and it's giving me a headache," was how Gary had put it. I smiled at the memory. That was Gary through and through.

I'd interviewed Ronald and included his ideas in the paper, along with interviews from a few other store owners, all of whom welcomed the pedestrian expansion. Ronald had called Gary, upset that people were telling him he was an idiot and blaming us for representing him incorrectly, although we had quoted him directly.

Yes, I could totally see Ronald being the type of guy to lose money to a scam and blame someone else. And to be fair, Jeremy *had* been running a scam. He hadn't made those initial sales he'd claimed. But was Ronald the kind of guy who would kill over it? I wasn't sure.

I glanced at the clock and sent Logan a quick text. *What are you up to tonight? Come over later if you're free?*

His reply came through a couple of minutes later. *Sure. I just woke up. I'm working later, but my shift doesn't start until ten. I can come over to your place if you want, but give me an hour or so to feel like a wide-awake shifter again?*

*No problem. I'm heading into town, but I'll be back.*

I checked the time. It was just before six, which meant the bakery was going to close soon, so I said a quick goodbye to Jay, grabbed my bag, and rushed out. I made it just in time to get a dozen cookies to feed Logan when he got to my place. I continued down River Road to the take-out sandwich place Ronald ran.

As soon as he saw me walk in, he recognized me and scowled. "I can't believe you'd show your face in here after what you did to me with that article. You did me dirty, young lady."

“If you hate me for that, then you’re really not going to be a fan of what I’m here for now,” I replied. “Jeremy Murphy.”

“The guy who got himself killed the other day? What’s that got to do with me? I didn’t know him.”

“Are you sure that’s the story you want to stick with? After all, I’m standing here, aren’t I?”

Ron shrugged. “Don’t know what you think you know, but I had nothing to do with his death.”

“What if I told you Jeremy was running the website Floppy Fish? The website that you happened to lose thousands of dollars on? And that I have proof you knew not only that Jeremy was running it but that he had forged old sales letters to trigger bigger sales?”

Ron gaped at me. “How do you know all of that?”

“I’m a good journalist. So now you see why I’m here, Ron. You might hate me, but if you don’t talk to me, I’m heading straight over to Chief Eddie with this info, and I’m sure you’ll get to enjoy the hospitality of Hotel Golden Hope Jail tonight if you don’t answer my questions.”

Ron scowled. “I’m not going to jail. I didn’t do this.”

“Yeah, we’ve never heard of any innocent people being locked up for crimes they didn’t commit before,” I replied dryly. “Are you sure that’s a risk you’re willing to take? Because trust me, if you didn’t do this, your best bet is to answer my questions and let Chief Eddie find out about this on his own.”

“How do I know you’re not going to go right to him from here, even if I do prove to you I didn’t do this?”

“My word. And yeah, you don’t think that’s worth a lot, but that’s because you’re a scumbag who would sell out his own sister if it got you ahead. But I’m not. I own the local paper now. I trade on my reputation. It’s not worth it to me. So you’re just going to have to trust me. And I can tell you this: if you don’t, I guarantee you I will go to Chief Eddie with everything I have. I don’t care about my article nearly as much as I care about the killer being found.”

“Well, it wasn’t me,” Ron shouted, stamping his foot.

“Let me determine that for myself. How much did you lose in the investment scam? And don’t lie to me; I can find out if you’re telling the truth.” I was bluffing, as I had no way of knowing that. I wasn’t going to be able to hack into his bank accounts or anything. But it worked.

Ron eyed me for about fifteen seconds, trying to decide what to do. Suddenly, he sighed, and his whole bravado deflated in front of me. “Fine. Yeah, I invested in Floppy Fish. I saw a thing on the news about NFTs. They were supposed to be this next big investment. Like Bitcoin was, back when it cost like two bucks to buy one, and then they went up to sixty grand. I’m supposed to retire soon, and sure, I have enough to make it here, but I don’t want to retire here. I want to move somewhere sunny. I was thinking Hawaii. Do you know how much more expensive it is to buy property there? Plus, I don’t just want any old apartment. I want something by the water. So I can just walk out from my back door and swim in the ocean. That’s going to cost me a bit, and I don’t have that kind of equity in my place here, and I definitely don’t have enough saved to make up the difference.”

“So you saw the news feature, and you thought this was your chance.”

“I mean, yeah. It’s the news, isn’t it? They’re not supposed to lie about this stuff. And they said it was early days, that most people didn’t know about this yet. I was intrigued. I did a bit of research online, and sure enough, I found a ton of information about it. So much stuff about how this was the next big thing. There were celebrities getting in on it, and they were cheap, right now.”

“How did you come across Floppy Fish?”

“It was getting a ton of press on the channels I was into. All the biggest Twitter accounts were talking about it. There were articles written by people in the industry. They were all talking about the big sales Floppy Fish was making and how they were emerging as one of the biggest players. And I mean, it’s kind of like Bitcoin, isn’t it? You want to be where the

money is. There were tons of other coins that never got nearly as valuable as Bitcoin. And there were still some Floppy Fish you could buy for a few hundred or a few thousand dollars. I figured why not? In five years, they might be worth a million each.”

“How much did you spend?”

“Fifteen grand,” Ron said, sighing. “And look, I get it. They’re worthless now. But it’s not my fault. I saw these places saying how much they were selling. I saw the documents posted online. Floppy Fish looked like they were making some big sales. But they weren’t. At least, not at first. It was a lie. A damned lie. And now my stupid fish aren’t worth anything. I flushed fifteen grand down the drain, and the best I can hope for is a one-week vacation to Hawaii every winter while I retire here. So yeah, I’m bitter about it. Because I was tricked into buying this stuff.”

“Did you ever think it was too good to be true?”

“No. But that’s not my fault. Look at Bitcoin. It was worth nothing a few years ago. The world is changing. And fast. This is an opportunity for the people who are smart enough to take advantage.”

“Like you?”

“Yeah, like me. I can see it. Everything is shifting. Technology is increasing at such a rapid pace. I missed out on the first few opportunities. Things like the dot-com boom back in the late nineties. People were starting all sorts of companies then and getting essentially free money. The ones who sold out before the bust made millions. I missed out on that. And then ten years ago, it was Bitcoin. But when I heard about NFTs, I knew that was going to be the next big thing. I wasn’t about to miss out again.”

“But you did.”

“Only because I got screwed over. It wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t have known this was going to happen. Everybody said NFTs were going to be the next big thing. They were supposed to be right. And it was time for something new.

Bitcoin had collapsed a few times. But NFTs? Celebrities were getting in on it. Big people with a lot of money. I should have gotten paid too. What happened to them? Did they all lose money?"

I shrugged. "I don't know."

"But the thing is, I didn't *only* lose money in Floppy Fish. I had bought a bunch of others too. Spent over twenty grand. But the bulk was in Floppy Fish. And I couldn't have known that Jeremy was making up those sales figures."

"Did you know it was him?" I asked.

"No. Not initially. I mean, come on. It was a big company. Or so I thought. I figured it was some bigwig in San Francisco behind it. After all, that's what they're all doing these days, right? I never thought it would be someone in our dinky little town."

"But you eventually found out about it?"

"Yeah. Not until after things started going downhill, though. I saw talk on Reddit about how Floppy Fish was actually a scam, how the guy who owned it forged the initial sales records, and I looked into it. That's how I found out about Jeremy."

"Was it hard?" I asked.

"No. The information circulated among people that knew this sort of thing, in Discords and stuff. It took me just a few hours to find out."

"And when you did, what did you do about it?"

"Look, I admit, my first instinct was to go downtown, wait around until I saw him somewhere, and punch him in the face. I was pissed. But what good was that going to do? Was it going to get me my money back? No, of course not. It might make me feel good for a couple minutes, but that was it."

These were surprisingly wise words from a guy like Ron.

He continued, "I gave myself a few days to cool down, and then I contacted a lawyer. He works out of Seattle. I'll tell him to talk to you if you need to call him. He's taking this case on,

on behalf of me and about twenty other people I got in touch with online. We were going to sue him. That was my plan to get my money back, and that's why I can tell you for sure I didn't kill him."

I nodded. "Now that he's dead, so is your case."

"I couldn't believe it when I heard," Ron growled. "That I'd get screwed over like this even more. It wasn't enough that he took that money from me on false pretenses. But now he's dead, and I'm never going to get it back. So you're darn right I didn't kill him. That would have gone entirely against my interests. Sure, I could have done it. And it might have felt good for a few minutes. But in the long run, you know what would have felt better? Having that fifteen grand back."

"I get that."

"Now I'm just totally screwed. Jeremy dying actually messed things up for me, a lot. I didn't kill him. I wouldn't have killed him. I just wanted my money back." Ron's fists were bunched at his sides, the knuckles white from him squeezing them so hard.

I had to admit, I believed him, and I felt for the guy. It must have been hard not only losing that money but then blaming someone else for that loss and having him die.

Still, I knew all too well that just because I wanted to believe somebody didn't mean they were telling the truth.

"Where were you when Jeremy died?" I asked. "Yesterday, around four o'clock?"

Ron shrugged. "Home. Alone. Can't prove it, obviously. But I'm telling you, I didn't do this. Talk to my lawyer. I wanted my money back more than I wanted revenge."

"Do you know of anyone else who was in town who lost their money with Jeremy?" I asked. "I'm trying to figure out who killed Jeremy."

"I don't, and I'm not," Ron replied, pursing his lips. Honestly, it made me believe him more. If Ron had killed Jeremy, shouldn't he be sending me straight to other people?

“Even if I did know who could have killed him, I wouldn’t tell you. I want them to get away with it.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Even if, because of them, you’re not going to get your money back?”

Ron jutted his chin. He had obviously never considered this. “Whoever it was probably felt the same way I did. We were in the same situation. I know why they did it. I don’t blame them.”

“Are you sure? Because they could have done the same thing. They could have gone to a lawyer and tried to be made whole by the justice system instead of shoving Jeremy off the roof of a building. Then you would all have had a chance to get your money back.”

Ron shifted his weight from foot to foot. “No. No, I don’t blame them.”

“Are they going to pay you back the money you have no way of retrieving now?” I asked.

Ron pursed his lips. “It doesn’t matter. If they go to jail, they’re not going to pay me back, either.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Still. They took away your chance at getting your money back.”

“That’s true,” Ron admitted. “Okay, fine. You’re right. I will tell you. I don’t know if he’s the one who killed Jeremy or not. But maybe if he did, I can get something from him. Who knows? Anyway, it’s Derek Powell. He goes by the username `getcashforgethos` online.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at the username. What was he, fourteen years old?

“And he’s in town?”

“Yup. Heard from him a few days ago. He said he had tracked down the owner of Floppy Fish and was going to visit the town he lived in. He was going to give him a piece of his mind. I thought he meant he was going to beat him up or something. I didn’t think of murder. But when I heard about

what happened to Jeremy, well, you know. That's where my mind went."

"Did you meet up with him at all?"

"No. But I do know he's staying at the Riverside Hotel."

I nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

"You aren't going to tell the cops about this, are you?"

I shook my head. "Not unless I find out you lied to me."

"I didn't. Look, I hated the guy, but I needed him alive. This screws me over, too."

I left Ron and immediately turned toward the hotel in question.



## CHAPTER 13



I checked my watch as I left. Logan was going to be at my place in about twenty minutes. I placed an order for Thai food, since the restaurant was right next door, and stopped by the Riverside Hotel. The front desk told me Derek was still registered as a guest, but the clerk was unwilling to tell me anything else.

I decided to take the risk that he was still going to be here in the morning and wasn't going to check out and leave in the middle of the night. After all, at this point, that would look more suspicious than waiting until the morning.

Grabbing the food on my way back home, I walked through the front door about two minutes before Logan did. The whole time, I kept my eyes and ears open, trying to see if there was anything out of the ordinary happening. Was someone following me? Could I sense them?

But everything felt normal. My witch's intuition wasn't telling me anything was wrong.

As soon as Logan entered, he came over and kissed me then went straight to the cupboard to grab some bowls while I pulled containers from the bag.

"How was your day?" he asked. "Did you find the killer yet?"

"No, but I've got some pretty decent leads to follow," I replied. "Oh, and there's also some bad news: Molly's boss is trying to kill me."

Logan paused where he was, bowls hovering in midair. “Molly’s boss? How is that possible? She killed herself. She wasn’t working with anyone.”

“That’s what we thought. But it turns out we were wrong.” I ran Logan through the events of the day, including finding out that parts of my memory from that night had been magically obscured to keep me from remembering what had happened.

“I hate to state the obvious, but this isn’t good,” Logan said when I’d finished.

“No. But right now, we have an advantage. He doesn’t know he’s been caught out. He probably thinks he got away with it and that he left before I noticed he was there. So now it becomes a race. We have to find him before he finds out what he wants from me.”

“Which is what?”

“That’s the part I don’t know. I don’t know what he was looking for on my computer. What information he could be after. It’s worrying, because it means I can’t hide it from him.”

“And do you have any idea who it is yet?”

I shook my head. “No. The others are asking around. Subtly, of course. Trying to find out what they can about that time.”

“What about that woman who worked on the task force?” Logan suggested. “What was her name?”

“Becky. Rebecca. She lives out near Mt. Baker. But she gave me her number. I could send her a text, but I’m not sure she’ll know anything that can help. She didn’t even know who Molly was.”

“Still, you never know,” Logan said. “What do you know about this person? For sure?”

“Only that he’s male,” I replied with a shrug. “Honestly, that’s literally all I’ve got to go on. Unless there are more memories in there that I’ve forgotten about, but I don’t think there are. I really used my magic to clear it all out. I heard him

talking to Molly, and I saw his shape as he ran off. That's all I know."

"And are you one hundred percent sure that he's a man?"

"Well, he looked and sounded like one."

"Yes, and Molly used her magic to look like a man, too, when she was doing her work under the name P."

I swore under my breath. "Don't tell me the one thing I had going for me, which could rule out half of the witch and wizard population, might not even be true."

"I'm not saying that's what's happened for sure, but I am saying you need to consider it. It's the easiest way for someone to disguise their identity, isn't it? Changing their appearance to not only look different but to seem like they're a different gender entirely."

"Yeah. And it's so easy for witches and wizards to do," I admitted.

"Besides, there's a patriarchal aspect to it too. If this person was high up on the chain, especially back in the eighties, they probably would have felt a male persona would have garnered more respect."

"As much as I hate to admit that's true, you're right. Shoot. So really, I'm back to square one. I know nothing about this wizard for sure. And they're trying to kill me."

"I mean, when you think about it, that's the most important thing to know," Logan pointed out.

"You're right. But I hate this. I really do."

Logan stood behind me and wrapped his arms around me. "I know. You hate this so much you still haven't actually put any food into your bowl. When it's bad enough to stop you from diving into food, I know it's serious."

I laughed as I leaned back against his chest, enjoying the sensation of safety that being around him brought. Logan would do anything for me. I knew that. "You're not wrong. Also, I did eat a bunch of pizza with the club. But I figured you'd be hungry. So eat up."

Logan filled his bowl, and I grabbed a spring roll, and the two of us moved to the couch. Jay was dead asleep on the back of it, but I was sure it wouldn't take long before the smell of the Thai food woke him up and he'd decide to inspect whatever was in Logan's bowl to see if it was fit for sharing.

Spoiler alert: it would be.

"Anyway, I'm back on high alert for the moment," I said. "We've now got two cases on the go. We need to find out who this is. I don't really care *why* they're coming after me. I really don't. I know Molly killed my family, and that's fine with me. Whether or not she was following orders from someone else, that's not important. I just want to live a normal life. I want to be able to walk home with Thai food without wondering if someone's going to pop out of the bushes and try to kill me. I want to be able to walk down the street without worrying if the people who are with me are in danger just because they know me. It's not fair, Logan."

I realized tears were streaming down my cheeks.

"It's not," he replied quietly. "It's incredibly unfair. I could tell you that you're the strongest witch I know and that it's amazing that you're dealing with it anyway, but you shouldn't have to be strong. You shouldn't have to choose between doing what feels like the impossible and living a normal life. You didn't choose this, and that's the worst part about it."

"You're right. I never asked for any of this. I just wanted to be Taylor Coombs. I thought I would be. And sure, I'm different now. I'm Storm Bancroft, and I will be forever, but it's not because I wanted to change. I was forced to. And I feel like I'm going to spend my whole life having to change who I am based on other people and their actions that force me into it."

Logan squeezed my hand. "I know. It's not fair. And there's nothing you can do about it but keep going. Those are your only two options. Give up or fight. It sucks, but it's reality. Sometimes, you just have to keep fighting."

I nodded. "Yeah. And there's no way I'm going to just roll over and die. That's what they want. They want me dead. I

heard them say that to Molly. So this is, once again, a me-or-them situation. And it's going to be them."

"I'll do everything I can to make this easier for you," Logan said.

"Thanks. I know you will. The others too. We're going to find out who it is, and then we're going to do what we have to."

"You can be strong and hate that you've been put in a situation where you have to be at the same time," Logan said. "In fact, I would be surprised if you reacted any other way."

"Yeah."

"Now, the shifters are going to be put on notice too."

"I don't want you doing anything visible."

"No, of course not. This has to be subtle. I get that."

"And subtlety is not one of my strong suits."

A smile crossed Logan's face. "No, it's not. But it is ours. We're going to take care of you, Storm. You're one of us now as far as the pack is concerned. You take care of finding out who's coming after you. We'll take care of the rest."

"Have I ever told you you're the absolute best?"

"Once or twice," he said with a grin.

## CHAPTER 14



Logan left a few hours later, having to get ready for his next shift, and I went to bed. I woke early the next morning. As soon as I got up, I did some research into Derek Powell. I wanted to know everything I could about the man before I confronted him.

It turned out that Derek didn't have much of an online footprint. No social media accounts apart from LinkedIn, where I found a picture of him and learned that he was from San Francisco. It was a little bit of a hike for him to get to Golden Hope from there, but he had made it.

Derek worked in sales for a technology company, and he looked to be in his forties. Black hair, tidy suit, not exactly the kind of person you'd expect to use the username `getcashforgethos` online. But of course, this was the internet, and you never could know. As far as I could tell, he was, unsurprisingly, single.

As soon as seven o'clock rolled around, I headed back down to the hotel. I walked straight through the front doors, past the reception desk at the back, and down one of the hallways toward the conference rooms. There were bathrooms down here, and I slipped into one and used some magic to change my appearance just enough so that I wouldn't be recognized. My jeans became a pair of khakis, I changed my jacket to look like a puffy, and I made my hair platinum blond.

Then, I headed right back down the hall and entered the breakfast buffet area.

The key to things like this was confidence. I strode into the breakfast buffet area and grabbed myself a yogurt and a bagel then sat down at a corner table and began to eat slowly. I wasn't sure how long it would take Derek to show up. If he even did at all. Hopefully, the allure of free food would bring him down eventually, though.

Sure enough, about twenty minutes later, he appeared. I recognized him from his LinkedIn photo, although he wasn't quite as perfectly polished as he has been in his corporate headshot. He stood about five foot eight, his black hair was tousled slightly rather than slicked back, and he wore a casual pair of jeans and a henley shirt. He loaded a plate with bacon, eggs, and a freshly made waffle, doused the waffle with syrup, then sat down at the table next to me.

Perfect.

"Derek," I said, grabbing my own food and moving, taking the seat across from him.

He looked up in surprise. "I'm sorry, have we met?"

"No. I'm Storm Bancroft, and I'm investigating the death of Jeremy Murphy."

Derek paused then grabbed the edges of his plate as if he was getting ready to stand up and leave.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

He eyed me suspiciously. "Why? You're not with the police. If you were, you would have shown me a badge."

"I'm not. I'm investigating privately at the behest of an interested party. But I can go to the police if you'd prefer. I can tell them all about how you lost thousands of dollars investing in Floppy Fish. How you found out that Jeremy had falsified the early sales records, driving prices on Floppy Fish NFTs up, before the whole market collapsed and became worthless. How you came here all the way from San Francisco, and how he just happened to die immediately after you arrived.

"Would you like me to go tell them that? Because we can have a nice conversation here, but if you leave, I will do it. I know the chief of police here in town. His name is Eddie, and

I chat with him often enough that I have his cell number in my contacts. Would you like me to call him? Or would you rather the two of us have a nice, polite conversation here, where you explain to me how this is all just a coincidence? Your choice, Derek.”

The man stared at me as if I was an alien. Finally, he moved his hands away from his plate and leaned back. “Yeesh. They sure make the women around here a bit wild, don’t they?”

“I thought you weren’t interested in hoes,” I said dryly.

“Is that how you found me? My username that I use online?”

“We’re not here to talk about me. We’re here to talk about you. And how you have a pretty good motive to have killed Jeremy.”

Derek leaned across the table and hissed, “Look, I didn’t do it, okay? You think I like this? You think I like knowing that I came to town right when a guy who screwed me over dropped dead? I was supposed to leave yesterday, but now I have to extend my trip just to make myself look less suspicious. I’m looking over my shoulder every second of every day. Do you know what that feels like?”

I almost laughed in his face. I knew it all too well.

“Okay, fine. Give me your side of things. How much were you in for with Floppy Fish?”

“Fifty grand. About a third of my total NFT portfolio.”

I tried to hide my surprise. This guy had invested a hundred and fifty grand just in NFTS? That was a lot of money. “And when it went down the tubes, you found out about the forged sales.”

“I did. And I was pissed. Like, I get it, okay? No matter what I’d spent that money on, I probably would have lost it all. There aren’t any other NFTs doing that hot right now. But the difference is, I believe they’re going to come back.”

“You do?”



“Yeah. Of course I do. Look at Bitcoin. Do you know, back in 2017, the first time it really went mainstream and hit the news, it went up to about twenty-five grand before collapsing? When it did, everyone said that was it. Bitcoin was over. It was never going to do anything again. Ever. It went down to about four grand. But then in 2021, Bitcoin rose again. It went back up, to eighty grand. Eighty. Everyone who cashed out after buying at twenty-five and seeing it collapse? They were suckers.”

“So you think holding onto your NFTs is, in the long run, still a good play.”

“Yeah, I do. And you watch. People are out there calling me an idiot right now. But they said that about half of Warren Buffett’s moves, too. Now look at him. In ten years, most of the NFTs I bought are going to be worth ten times what I paid for them.”

“But not Floppy Fish,” I finished.

“Right. Those are worthless. Ever since those documents got out, and it was proven that Floppy Fish was a fraud. Total scam. That’s what I’m pissed about. Because now, no matter what happens to the rest, those Floppy Fish NFTs I have are poisoned. They’re never going to be worth what they should be, and all because the owner forged sales documents. And worse, let them leak.”

“Do you know where the leak came from?”

“Nope. I don’t think anyone does. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. Jeremy scammed me.”

“And you tracked him down and came here. Why? Lots of people got scammed by him and didn’t travel a few states over to get their revenge.”

“I didn’t want revenge. I wanted to talk to him. Figure out if we could come to an agreement somehow, you know? After all, this is business. I’m a businessman. I thought there might be a way we could come to terms without necessarily getting the lawyers involved. If you know what I mean.”

“You wanted to get your money back before Jeremy got sued to the moon and back and there was nothing left for anybody except the lawyers,” I translated.

“Something like that. I didn’t have any nefarious plans. I wasn’t going to kill him. I’m not a murderer. I was upset with the guy, yes. But I was going to handle it like an adult.”

“Big words coming from getcashforgethos,” I said.

Derek winced. “Look, I was a lot younger when I made that username, okay? I wasn’t exactly as mature as I am now. I get it. It doesn’t look good. But I really, genuinely had no plans to kill Jeremy. And I didn’t kill him.”

“Did you meet with him?”

“Yes,” Derek finally admitted. “The morning that he died. I was going to leave the next day. But of course, when I found out what happened, I thought if anyone connected me to him, it would look much more suspicious. So I’ve extended my stay. I’m leaving two days from now instead. But I didn’t kill him. I really didn’t.”

“You saw Jeremy that morning? How did he seem? Where did you meet?”

“At one of the local coffee shops. He had to meet early in the morning, before his day job started. We met at seven thirty.”

“What did he tell you?”

“That there was nothing he could do. He gave me some cock-and-bull story about how he had also been hoodwinked by another company and how he had no more money. He was still working his day job. It was all gone. He told me I was welcome to sue, but it wasn’t going to have any effect. He wouldn’t be able to pay anything, and I’d still have to shell out for a lawyer.”

“Did you believe him?”

Derek snorted. “Not even for a minute. Jeremy was a bad liar. Typical nerd. The kind of guy who can make stuff up online, but in real life, he has no idea how to tell a falsehood

when he's face to face with someone else. He didn't have a clue. He still had the money. But he wasn't going to give it to me.

"I called him out on his lie to see what would happen, and he got defensive. Told me I could take him to court and to see what would happen then. He said I couldn't win this. He would always have that money, and he wasn't going to lose it. He said it would take so long for things to go through the courts that he could hide that money so no one could find it."

"What did you do then?" I asked.

Derek shrugged. "What else could I do? I told him he'd be sorry. Said that I'd make sure his reputation was destroyed. He told me he had a girlfriend and that she knew everything. Knew all about the business and how things were going. He said she supported him."

"Was that a lie?"

Derek offered a small smile. "Sure was. I figured there was nothing left to do then and there, but I figured that I could spend the day asking around, and I probably wouldn't have a hard time finding out who his girlfriend was. After all, I grew up in a small town just like this one. I know everyone is all up in everybody else's business all the time.

"I figured maybe Jeremy was right, and he would manage to hide everything. I could at least make sure his girlfriend knew all about it. Maybe she'd break up with him. It would be a minor victory, you know, but at that point, I was going to take what I could get."

"Did you find out about her?"

"A couple hours later, yeah. Anne, her name was."

I nodded. "That's right."

"I found out where she worked, as a dental hygienist at a nearby office. I never did get there, though. I was going to, and on the way, I saw all the commotion. I followed it, of course, and saw Jeremy lying there on the pavement."

"What did you think when you saw him?"

Derek ran a hand up and down his face. “Honestly? I’m ashamed to say that my first thought was to feel sorry for myself. I was never going to get my money back. I have a bunch of NFTs that are never going to be worth anything. Unless Jeremy’s death hitting the papers makes the price shoot up. But in this environment? I doubt it. Maybe five, ten years from now, if NFTs were worth anything, it would have bumped the price. But no. So yeah, I admit it. I felt bad for myself. But he had screwed me over with his scamming.”

“You don’t sound like you’re that sorry about what happened to him,” I said.

Derek shrugged. “I guess I do, a little bit. Not much. But he was a young guy. Not unlike me when I made up that stupid username. I’m not that person anymore. Maybe he would have become something else too. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just as I get older, I’m becoming more of a softie, but I don’t think someone should die just because they stole money. And I’m not just saying that.”

“Do you have an alibi for when Jeremy died?”

Derek shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I was in town. I was walking toward the dentist’s office. I was going to scope it out. I’d just come from the grocery store, where I was chatting with the lady behind the deli counter. She’s the one who told me about Anne. I guess you could ask her, but I doubt she’d narrow down a time for you. Security camera footage, maybe. But this town doesn’t seem to be big enough to worry about security cameras.”

“You’re not wrong. Okay. Thanks.”

“Are you going to tell the cops about me?”

I shook my head. “Not as far as things stand now.”

“So that means you believe me?” Derek asked. “You actually don’t think I killed him?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I mean, it’s as you said. I had motive, I had the opportunity, and I drove here from San Francisco. It looks

suspicious. I know that. But I'm telling you the truth when I say I didn't do this."

"Then for now, consider yourself believed," I said. "Until I find evidence showing otherwise. One more thing: do you know who else might have killed Jeremy?"

"You find a list of his clients, and you'll find a list of suspects. There's one local guy I know here. Ronald."

I nodded. "I spoke to him already."

"Right, that must be how you found me. Gave me up, did he? Well, I can't say I blame him that much. I just did the same thing, didn't I?"

I shrugged in a "well, yeah" kind of way.

"Other than that, sorry, I don't have a clue. I didn't know much about Jeremy coming in here. Only had a name and a town. And the knowledge that he'd screwed me out of thousands of dollars."

"What is your financial situation like otherwise?"

"Fine. I know, you're probably thinking I'm nuts for saying that when I admit that I invested a hundred and fifty grand in NFTs, but that was only part of my entire investment strategy, and I'm still convinced it's going to pay off. I still have over twenty years before I retire, and while yes, it would have been nice to have that extra fifty grand, it's not going to bankrupt me to lose it, either. I know better than to put all my eggs in one basket."

I nodded. "Okay. Thanks."

"I do hope you find the person who did this," Derek said. "I don't like knowing someone has been killed. It's not right. Money isn't something people should be killing over. I might be a capitalist, and I might be trying to make as much of it as I can, but the line has to be drawn somewhere. You can't just take a person's life like that."

I left Derek and the hotel, finding myself with more questions than answers. I didn't especially like Ronald or Derek for the murder, but of course, there were no guarantees

one of them hadn't killed him. I needed more information. I wondered if maybe the woman who worked the deli counter at the grocery store, could help.

## CHAPTER 15



**A**s I left the hotel, I texted the group what I'd just found out.

Holly messaged a minute later. *I'm not working until ten. I can come with you to the grocery store.*

*That would be great,* I messaged back. *I'll meet you at the coffee shop. I'll see Montana if she's working and give her this update.*

I headed right over, and sure enough, Montana was behind the counter. She smiled when she saw me.

"I saw the messages but couldn't reply. So you're going to the grocery store next?"

I nodded. "That's the plan."

"Do you think Derek could have killed Jeremy?"

I frowned. "You know, maybe it's just that I'm getting soft, but I don't think he did. I actually do believe him when he says he didn't do it. But at the same time, it's such a massive coincidence."

"I know, but they do happen," Montana said. "I do have a bit of gossip, but I'm not sure how valuable it is. Apparently, Anne and Jeremy were seen arguing a few days before his death."

I raised my eyebrows. "Do you know about what?"

"The customer I had was telling her friend all about it. They were in the movie theatre together, sitting about four

rows behind the customer. She said Anne told Jeremy he was being an idiot, and he had to hide the money as soon as he could. Jeremy told Anne he knew what he was doing, that there would be plenty for everyone, and that he could handle it.”

“Oh, wow.”

“That was all she heard. Anne then told Jeremy they would talk about this later, in private.”

I frowned. “I wonder if we’ve been looking at the wrong suspect this whole time.”

“That’s what I’m thinking too. Have you learned anything else about Anne?”

“Only that she’s a dental hygienist. I’m going to ask Ashley if she managed to dig anything up about the former husband and the farm accident. I wasn’t inclined to believe it at first, but given what we’ve just heard...” I trailed off.

“I agree with you. Good idea. Keep me informed. I’ll keep my ears open and see what else I can uncover.”

“Thanks, Montana.”

“Who knew this job would come in useful for more than just keeping my sanity as an adult woman with two young witches at home?” she replied with a grin. “Happy to help. Anything I can do.”

I stepped aside to let the other people behind me in line order, then grabbed my coffee and took a seat. Holly arrived about ten minutes later and waved. She stood in line, ordered her own drink, then joined me.

“Did Montana tell you the same thing she told me?”

“That Anne has flown up our suspect list? Yep. I’m going to message the group with this new info now. Let’s see if Ashley has anything for us.”

I summarized what Montana had told me, and a couple of minutes later, I saw that Ashley was typing away.



*I reached out to some friends of mine who know the area. One knew the case. Apparently, it was an accident through and through. Anne wasn't at home at the time. Her husband was out in the field. He had the motor running on his tractor, got out to adjust something, it started moving, and it crushed him. It sucks, but it happens. Nobody in law enforcement ever seriously considered her to be a suspect in his death. And as we know, she never benefited from it, either.*

*Well, that's a point in her favor, I typed. Still, we're not ruling her out. Not after what we've just heard.*

*I think that's smart. Are you still going to go talk to Doris at the grocery store?*

*Might as well, Holly typed back. We're here. And I don't have anything to do until my shift starts.*

*Sounds good. If you find anything else important, let us know, will you?*

*You got it.*

Holly and I got up and headed out, waving to Montana as we did.

“Good luck,” she called out to us as we passed.

As we walked toward the grocery store, Holly began to talk. “I asked my parents about that time, back then. They didn't want to talk about it. But I pressed the issue. I told them the person who was running everything here had a boss. Someone who was in charge of all of it. I wanted to know if they knew anything. But they didn't.”

“Are you sure they were telling the truth?”

“Yes. I told them it was the difference between life and death for you. That the person in charge back then was coming after you. I could tell then that if they really knew anything, they would have told me. But they didn't. They said they had no idea, that they kept their noses clean through the whole thing and worked hard not to learn anything about what was going on.”

I nodded. “That tracks. Thanks for trying, at least.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I couldn’t get more. I was hoping they’d know something. We’re really kind of nowhere on this, aren’t we?”

“So far, yeah. And Logan pointed out there’s no guarantee it’s even a wizard. It could have been a witch disguising herself.”

Holly grimaced. “There’s a thought. That’s the only evidence we had.”

“It’s not a great update.”

“Well, we’ll keep digging. We only found out about this yesterday.”

“I know. But I’ve never been the most patient person. I want to act now. Especially when someone is trying to kill me.”

“I can’t blame you there.”

“But okay. We find out what we can from Doris. Then, I’m going to come with you to work. I want to look over the books.”

“Great. I also have some ideas for the kitchen. I was reading online about how to run a successful restaurant. One of the things that came up time and time again was limiting the ingredients you need on the menu.”

“Oh?”

“I had a look, and one of the problems with the menus Leonard thought up is there are a ton of items on there that require a special ingredient that is *only* used for that dish. It’s super inefficient. I think if we work on it, we can tighten up the menu and save maybe ten, fifteen percent on costs. I was thinking we talk to Julian today.”

Julian King was the head chef of the kitchen at the brewery. “You’re amazing, Holly. Have I ever told you that?”

“Once or twice,” she replied with a grin.

We soon reached the grocery store, where sure enough, Doris was working behind the deli counter where she always

did. Doris was in her fifties, with graying brown hair she kept in a hairnet. She was the sister of the owner of the grocery store and had been happily slicing meats and doling out salads for customers since before I was born.

“Hello there, ladies,” she greeted us as we approached the counter. “What can I get for you this morning?”

“Information,” I replied with a smile.

“Always my favorite thing to give,” Doris said. “What’s up?”

“The other day, right around when Jeremy died, you had a customer,” I explained, pulling out my phone and bringing up the picture I had of Derek. “This guy.”

Doris grabbed the glasses that hung around her neck and put them on then gave the screen a good look. “Oh, sure. Yup, I remember him. Out-of-towner, and there aren’t too many of those left around here these days. Wanted a couple of sausage rolls. Why?”

“You wouldn’t happen to remember the exact time he was here, would you?” I asked.

Doris frowned. “Oh, no. I don’t pay that close attention to the time. It was the afternoon, but that’s all I know. But hold on, is it important?”

“It might be. It could prove whether or not he was involved in Jeremy’s death,” Holly said.

“Well, in that case, give me a couple of minutes. A few years ago, we invested in this fancy pricing machine,” Doris said as she shifted to the left to the machine and began tapping away at it. “It stores in its memory the dates and times for everything and keeps it for a week. I always wondered why anyone would want that kind of information, but there you go. Looks like it’s finally coming in handy. You think that man might have killed little Jeremy?”

“We don’t know for sure,” I said. “If he was here around the time of the murder like he says, then it wasn’t him.”

“Such a shame, what happened to him,” Doris said, shaking her head. “So young, that man. Always full of ambition. I knew him since he was little. He and his sister. I can’t believe it. I’m just glad their parents aren’t here to see what happened.”

“No?” I asked.

“They died a few years ago. In a car accident on the highway outside of town.”

“I knew I recognized the name Murphy,” Holly said, nodding. “I remember that. It was huge news around here.”

“Certainly was. Now, for that poor young man to have that happen to him. I’m hearing he was pushed. That’s what everyone’s saying.”

I nodded. “It sure looks that way.”

“Very sad. Here you go. Got it. I remember the sale. Two chicken-and-spinach sausage rolls. I remember because I only sold three of them that day. I keep telling Ken to stop ordering the chicken and spinach. Nobody buys it. But will he listen to me? Of course not; I’m just his sister. Time stamp on that: 4:17.”

“Thanks so much, Doris,” I said. Four seventeen was right around the time of Jeremy’s death. There was no way Derek could have bought the sausage rolls, checked out, left here, gone to Jeremy’s apartment, lured him to the roof, and killed him. There was just no way.

“That man there, did he do it, then?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Doesn’t look like it.”

“Well, I hope Chief Eddie finds out who did, and soon.”

“What do you think about Anne, his girlfriend?”

Doris shook her head. “I know what they’re all saying about her in town. How she killed her former husband, looking for his money. But you ask me, that’s a load of bull. People here love to make up stories to make our lives seem more interesting than they are. Anyone who’s ever seen those two together knows they were just a couple of lovebirds. There’s

no way in the world she would have done this to him. She's allergic to potatoes but buys him the potato salad he likes all the time. She just asks me to put it in an extra bag for her so that she can keep it in his fridge."

"Allergic to potatoes?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"I know. Never heard of that sort of thing, either. Frankly, if it were me, I'm not sure life would be worth living if I couldn't have fries. What's the point, really? But she seems happy enough. I suppose if you don't know what you're missing, it's not that bad."

"True," Holly agreed. "Okay, thanks, Doris."

"You bet. Need anything else, I'm always here."

The two of us left the store, and I couldn't help but feel as if something was tickling the back of my brain. As if something Doris had just said was important, but I couldn't quite place my finger on what it was.

## CHAPTER 16



“So I guess that rules out Derek,” Holly said as we stepped back into the street.

“Sure does. Unless he could use magic to be in two places at once. But even I don’t know how to do that.”

“No,” Holly agreed. “Okay. Well, I don’t like how few suspects we have, but hopefully, as we work through that list of people, we’ll find a few more. Is that your plan for today?”

I nodded. “But first, I want to meet with you and Julian to see what you’ve worked out.”

Holly smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“I appreciate the initiative you’ve gone to here.”

“I know you’re dealing with a lot. Not just in your personal life but professionally too. You just inherited a whole newspaper that has to go out every week, you can’t ask Gary how anything works, and then a brewery that was on its last legs on top of that? No, this is going to be a team effort, and if there’s one thing it turns out I’m pretty good at, it’s managing the restaurant side of things. If I can take that load off you, I will.”

I slipped my arm around Holly’s. “This is why you’re the best. You’re totally getting a raise.”

Holly laughed. “I’m just glad I’ve finally found something I’m really good at. My whole life, everyone told me I was just a pretty face and that it was a good thing, that I could find a man to take care of me one day, but I wouldn’t need anything

else. And I started to believe it, you know? I waited tables because I could be charming and get some tips, but I never really thought I would be more than that. I didn't believe I had it in me. Not until I met you and the rest of the Witches Murder Club. You're the ones who taught me that I was smart in my own right."

"Darn right you are," I said.

"And I love this job. I love being a manager. I really enjoy solving problems every day, trying to make things more efficient, and keeping up with what has to get done."

"And I am very lucky to have you," I replied.

We reached the brewery, and Julian was just getting ready for work. I went to grab him while Holly set up at one of the tables, spreading out all of her research. When Julian emerged, the three of us sat down and began our discussion.

"See, I'm thinking we need to pare down the menu," Holly began.

"Oh, thank goodness," Julian replied.

I laughed. "It sounds like this is going to be an easy sell."

"I used to tell Leonard this all the time. Why do I have to have vanilla in the cupboard? So I can make the one ice cream he insists on making fresh? There is nothing else on the menu using it. And the pork tenderloin. We use it for a single meal. It is nothing but a waste."

Holly grinned, her shoulders shifting back as she sat up with confidence, having Julian on her side. "That's exactly what I'm thinking. So I was looking through the menu, and I've found a few items that I think we can get rid of, but obviously, Julian, you're the expert."

"Yes, yes," he said. "I'm more than happy to help. I know exactly what we need to change."

"And we can revamp the menu completely," I said.

"That would be wonderful," Julian said. "We will streamline everything. The kitchen will be able to be so much more organized. Leonard wouldn't listen to me. He wanted all

of these items on the menu, and it makes life in the kitchen so much more difficult.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about that anymore. Okay, Julian, work with Holly to figure out the new menu. Maybe we can do something where we have a slightly different menu in the winter and in the summer? Some more hearty meals for the cold months and then lighter fare in the summer? For now, do something for the winter.”

Julian’s face broke into a smile. “You have no idea how much I’ve wanted this. We can base the winter menu on seasonal ingredients. Lots of squashes.”

“I love it,” Holly said. “Let me get the complete list of supplies we have available from our vendors, and how about you come up with some dishes you’d like to see here.”

“Great,” I said. “I’m going to head back to the office and leave you two to it. Can you have a sample menu ready for me by, say, the end of the week? And don’t worry, Julian, it looks like you’re never going to have to see vanilla again. Unless you make some more desserts that need it.”

“I’m looking forward to this,” Julian said. “Leonard believed himself to be a master restaurant owner, but he was inefficient. A wonderful man, but he thought this was his strength when it wasn’t. I will make you a menu worthy of a great restaurant.”

“Perfect,” I said, grinning.

I stood up, said goodbye to Holly and Julian, and headed out into the street. I wasn’t entirely surprised that Leonard had come up with the whole menu at the brewery himself. He was that kind of guy. He believed himself to be the best businessman in town but never realized that sometimes, the best move was to rely on the experts around you rather than insisting on doing everything yourself.

That was how he had gotten himself into so much trouble that he was going bankrupt just before he was murdered.

I headed back toward the office but didn’t go straight there. I wanted to clear my head. I knew there was something I



couldn't quite figure out about this case. Something that wasn't clicking. I had missed something. I could feel it. I just wasn't sure what.

I walked aimlessly through the streets of Golden Hope, thinking that maybe getting the blood flowing might get my brain to figure out what I was missing. I walked past the post office, past the bank, past the hairdresser, past the gift shop, and then it clicked.

Everything came together, and I knew who had killed Jeremy.

I stopped where I was, as if taking a single extra step might have resulted in me forgetting what I had just figured out. But no, I knew who had killed Jeremy. And now I needed proof.

I made a phone call and organized to meet with the killer later that day under the guise of getting more information then went straight to the office.

It was going to be a big day. Especially for Chloe. She killed her brother. She was the murderer, and I was going to get her to admit it.



I SAT DOWN AT MY DESK AT THE OFFICE ON HIGH ALERT. WHEN I'd called Chloe, I told her I needed to talk to her about Jeremy's death, that I had found extra information that made me believe I knew who the killer was, but I wanted to talk to her about it before I went to the police.

The subtext was that I knew it was her, and I was ready to make some sort of deal. I had made sure to suggest a public place to meet, where she wouldn't be able to cast a spell or use the basilisk without being seen, furthering the idea that I knew it was her.

But I fully expected her to strike earlier.

Once everything clicked, I knew what she would do. She would come here, to my office, and try to attack me here.

Where I was alone. Where no one could help me. And before I'd be expecting her.

Well, it was too bad for Chloe, because I knew she was coming. And I had the Witches Murder Club behind me.

I messaged everything to the team, and while Holly and Montana were at work, Ashley was willing and able to give me what I needed. She stopped by fifteen minutes later, dropped off what I asked for, then left.

I didn't want Chloe to get spooked if she realized there was more than one of us at the office. I had to do this on my own.

I sat at my desk, but there was no way I was going to get any real work done. I was waiting for a murderer to come after me, and with a murderous snake at that.

I wasn't a fan of what was going to happen, but Chloe needed to be put away for her crime. I needed to be able to prove it was her.

And that meant taking on the basilisk.

I mostly just stared at the screen, trying not to think of all the ways things could go badly, my senses all on high alert as I waited for Chloe to arrive. We were scheduled to meet in two hours, so she probably wouldn't waste any time in getting here.

I didn't know how much time had passed—it felt like hours—when I finally heard the snap of a twig outside the building. I let the magic inside of me build up. If she was going to come in with guns blazing, thinking she had the element of surprise, I wasn't going to get caught on the back foot. Not a chance.

But when Chloe walked through the door a moment later, she was calm. Cool. And there was no sign of a basilisk.

I let my face break into a smile. "Chloe. What a surprise. I thought we weren't meeting for a couple of hours."

"Oh, you know," she said, as if it was nothing and she was just visiting a friend. "I was in the area, so I thought I'd stop

by and see if you wanted to chat now.”

“Have a seat, then,” I said, every nerve in my body on high alert.

“So you think you know who killed Jeremy, then?” Chloe asked. “I’m so glad. I’ve been sick over it. Poor Jeremy. He didn’t deserve this.”

“No, he didn’t. And yet you killed him.”

Chloe smiled. “See, I knew you knew. When you called me today, I thought to myself, she’s figured it out. And you did. How?”

“Someone overheard you and Jeremy at the movie theatre. They thought it was Anne he was arguing with. But it wasn’t. It was you. They were four rows in front, so they wouldn’t have seen. They would have just assumed. And when he was killed, you said you were leaving the bank, opening up an investment account. An investment account you were going to need after you murdered your brother and inherited the millions of dollars he’d gotten from his NFT company.”

“You found out about that, did you?”

“Easily. But there’s one thing I don’t know: were the two of you in on it together from the start?”

“Unofficially. I wasn’t on any of the papers to do with the company or anything like that. But I had the marketing skills that Jeremy didn’t. He could do all the back-end stuff. The design of the NFTs, the coding of the store, that sort of thing. But I was better at bringing in sales.” Chloe shrugged her shoulders.

“The forged documents, was that your idea?”

“I made them myself.”

“And then Jeremy cashed out and had almost two million dollars to his name, but you weren’t happy with the way he was using it.”

“No. He was obviously going to get sued to oblivion. He needed to move that money into offshore accounts. The Caymans. I could get my half that way. But Jeremy was

convinced he had it under control. He didn't, and I knew he was eventually going to lose it all."

"But killing him fixed all of that. Not only were you going to get your half, but you were also going to inherit his as well since you were his only living relative."

"I got the idea from Anne and the stories going around about her husband. Everyone thought she was with Jeremy for the good money he was bringing in from the tech company, but she wasn't. She genuinely loved him. But this way, I had an easy scapegoat. She would be blamed if nothing else."

"You get the money, no one can sue Jeremy anymore, and you sail off into the sunset. Were you the one who broke into my office the other day?"

Chloe nodded. "There's no harm in admitting to that now, I suppose. I wanted to know what you were up to. I wanted to know if you had anything on me. But you don't keep anything written down here."

"No. And you wouldn't have found anything anyway. It wasn't until this morning that I realized it was you. Where did you get the basilisk?"

Chloe smiled an evil smile. "Oh, you figured that out as well, did you? I borrowed him from a friend who keeps them illegally. I knew Jeremy hated snakes, and I thought it would give me the upper hand. I was right. It took less than thirty seconds for him to die once I got him up onto the roof. I just showed up, knocked on the door, and asked if he wanted to hang out early. He was busy, but I told him I had something important to tell him. And I did. So he followed me. And that was that.

"And now it's time for you to die, too."

Suddenly, a basilisk appeared next to Chloe. I'd been expecting this, but it still didn't quash the hand squeezing my throat tight as soon as I saw it.

## CHAPTER 17



This was the most terrifying part of our plan. Instinctively, I wanted to close my eyes. Wanted to stop the basilisk from looking into mine. But I didn't. I stared right at it and immediately began to feel woozy.

I couldn't look away. I tried to force my eyes elsewhere, but they were captivated by the look of the snake in front of me. I tried to move, but I was frozen in place. Paralyzed. And then it began to slither toward me.

Was this the last thing Jeremy had seen?

The basilisk was huge. Twenty feet long, maybe, with a body that was at least a foot in diameter at its narrowest. Its scales were a green so deep it was almost black, and it slithered along the office floor noiselessly. Its eyes were red, oval shaped, but carved geometrically. It looked like rubies had been placed where its eyes belonged.

The interior of its mouth was all black, but its fangs were white. A gleaming white that stood out in contrast, and I knew it was meant to intimidate.

It worked.

I felt like Indiana Jones. Why did it have to be snakes?

"Sorry about this," Chloe said in a tone that made it obvious she wasn't the least bit sorry. "You got to the truth, which means I can't let you live."

I was trapped. My breath caught in my throat as the basilisk slid closer and closer toward me. Fear gripped me, but

there was nothing I could do. I was well and truly trapped.

A second later, the basilisk struck. I tried to shout as it sprang toward me, its fangs digging into my bare arm. Surprisingly, there was very little pain; it was like getting a flu shot, and a second later, the basilisk pulled away, releasing me from its hypnosis. I could move again. But I'd been stung.

“Any last words?” Chloe asked with a smile. “You have about ten seconds before you drop dead.”

“That’s what you think,” I replied with a grin. I immediately let my magic build up then sent a fireball directly at the basilisk. It freaked out, rearing upwards then turned and lunged toward Chloe.

She let out a scream, and I gasped as a second later, I noticed the mark on her leg. The basilisk had bitten her.

“Why aren’t you dead?” she asked me.

“I took a preventative potion,” I replied. “I knew you were coming. And I wasn’t going to let you kill me.”

“You ruined everything,” Chloe said. Then she collapsed.

Before the basilisk had a chance to turn around and re-hypnotize me, I generated a sword. I swung at its head and sliced it clean off. It fell to the floor with a louder thud than I would have expected, and the redness of its eyes faded to a deep maroon color.

It was dead.



WITH THE HELP OF THE WITCHES MURDER CLUB, WE managed to get rid of all the evidence. The basilisk’s body was destroyed with magic, and we were able to move Chloe’s body back to her apartment without being seen. Staging it to look like a suicide, Ashley left a note, purportedly from Chloe, in which she admitted to what she’d done so that the investigation into Jeremy’s death would end, and nobody

would find themselves accused of a crime they hadn't committed.

When we were done, we met at 800 Degrees, although we weren't feeling especially celebratory. Sitting in a booth, we ordered some snacks while I gave everyone a full rundown of what had happened now that it was all over.

"So she was the one who broke into the office," Ashley said. "What does that mean about Molly's boss?"

"Those memories I have are still real," I said. "Whoever that was, they exist. And they wanted me to forget about them. They wanted me dead."

"So the question becomes, do we still look for them?" Holly asked. "Or do we let sleeping dogs lie?"

I shook my head. "I want to find them. I need to know who they are. I need to know why they want me dead or at least to stop them from wanting that. I've spent years now living under this cloud of knowing there was someone out there who wanted me in the ground, and I need it to end. Even if it's hard. I need to be able to live a normal life without looking over my shoulder all the time."

"That makes perfect sense," Montana agreed. "You're right. You can't keep living like that. Just because they're not actively trying to kill you now—that we know of—doesn't mean we stop looking for them."

"I agree," Ashley said.

"By the way, I haven't had a chance to properly thank you for that potion. It definitely saved my life." I looked down at the bandage on my arm that covered the bite from the basilisk. As soon as we'd figured out that Chloe was the killer and that I was going to try to lure her in, Ashley had suggested making and taking a preventative antidote. After taking the potion Ashley had dropped off, I was protected from the basilisk's bite for twenty-four hours.

And boy, had it ever come in handy.

"You're very welcome," Ashley replied. "You haven't gotten this far just to die from a basilisk bite."

“I agree,” I said. “And I’m not going to let this mystery witch or wizard get to me. We found Jeremy’s killer, and now we can focus our energy on this new case.”

“The Witches Murder Club is going to get to the bottom of this,” Montana announced.

And I knew she was right. I was going to find out who Molly’s boss was. There was no doubt about it.



**BOOK 8 - CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MAGIC:** A STORM IS coming in Golden Hope—pun intended. Molly was working for someone, and they’re coming for Storm, who isn’t going to sit back and let this happen without a fight.

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Samantha Silver lives in British Columbia, Canada, along with her husband and the memory of a little old doggie named Terra. She loves animals, skiing and of course, writing cozy mysteries.

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