

Chapter Three

"You showed me the body, what else do you want?" Melody clutched her phone to her ear as she walked towards Old Gossip, glaring at Cindy. The ghost had been hanging around silently ever since Uncle Todd arrived. Now she scowled and shrugged, causing Melody to roll her eyes. "Seriously, what is it?"

"I don't know."

Great. Another one of *these* ghosts. Melody sighed heavily as she entered the café. "Okay, I have to go now. I'll call you to talk later."

"You are one of the rudest people I have ever met," Cindy sniffed, her hands on her hips. "Whatever happened to respecting the dead?"

Jane bustled over to Melody, her face practically glowing with excitement. The old woman hurried her to a booth despite Melody's protests. She filled a cup of coffee for the realtor before sliding into the other side of the booth and fixing her wide eyes on Melody's face. Melody gulped down a large swallow of coffee, wincing as it scorched her throat.

"I heard that you found David Fezioni's body two days ago and that your father's FBI friend is investigating. Murder, is it?"

Melody sighed. Uncle Todd had phoned her the previous night to confirm that it was, in fact, murder. He also stressed the importance to *please stay out of the case*. Melody had every intention of doing just that.

Cindy still hadn't told her why it was so important that David's body be found. In fact, the blonde kept disappearing for long hours, returning silent and scowling. When she wasn't pouting, she was critiquing Melody's choice of wardrobe. She didn't seem that interested in the case—which begged the question, why did she show Melody the body in the first place?

"It looks like murder," Melody confirmed reluctantly. "But Uncle Todd isn't sharing details about it with me, so I don't know anything."

"I bet it was Oskar Freyson," Jane continued gleefully. "Not because he's a Shifter, but he hated David, rest his soul."

Melody frowned. "How do you know that?"

"Didn't I tell you? David was in here last week when Oskar came in, and they got into *quite* the argument. I almost called the cops, but David left before I could. I heard that they knew each other from the city."

"It wasn't Oskar," Cindy blurted.

Melody ignored her. Uncle Todd seemed pretty certain that Oskar should be a suspect. She really hoped that it wasn't him, not only because he was paying her enough for the rest of the year with his business dealings, but also because she liked him.

Spending time with Oskar was easy. He knew exactly what he wanted, but was open to alternatives. It didn't hurt that he was so good-looking, but really, she got along with him so well that it didn't really matter what his face looked like.

"I heard your Uncle Todd talked with Oskar?" Jane raised her brows.

"I wouldn't know. I'm a realtor. FBI business is none of mine." Melody smiled politely. "I'm in a bit of a hurry this morning, can I just get some toast with one of your lovely Danishes?"

Jane looked disappointed but retrieved Melody's order. By this time Cindy was nowhere to be seen. The Dolphin Shifter was very demanding when it came to attention, and it was a relief to be alone in public for once since the ghost had arrived.

Melody wasn't naive enough to think that Cindy was gone for good, though. There had to be more to the story, and by the way, Cindy had reacted to Oskar Freyson when she had gone to his hotel room, he was probably part of the reason she was still hanging around. Perhaps the Dolphin and Alpha had been lovers? Or maybe Cindy hated him for some reason and wanted revenge? With ghosts, it was difficult to tell what the end result would be.

As she headed out of Old Gossip, she almost bumped into Elisabeth. Both women apologized, and Melody stepped aside to let Elisabeth into the café, but the younger woman grabbed her arm.

"Melody, I hate to ask, but your uncle is investigating David's death, isn't he?"

"Oh, Elisabeth, not you, too!"

The young woman twisted her hands. She looked truly ashamed, which made Melody regret the way she had reacted to the question. She let out a heavy sigh.

"Uncle Todd is a family friend, but yeah. He's investigating."

"So it really was murder? That's awful." Elisabeth shivered. "I moved to Blackcliff to get away from the crime and violence in the city. Was it somebody in town?"

Melisa patted the younger woman's hand. "It's nothing to be concerned about. David apparently had ties with organized crime back in the city, so chances are nobody in town was involved."

Elisabeth looked a little relieved, but not much. She shook her head. "It's just awful."

That night, Melody scooped up a plate of takeout Chinese from the only Chinese restaurant in town while Uncle Todd dug into a burrito. Even though he was in Blackcliff on official business, he couldn't say no to spending time with his best friend's little girl.

Melody was hoping to get a little more information about the investigation herself. Mostly about Oskar Freyson. She wanted to know if she should stop working for him. And maybe look for another man to fantasize going on dates with. She wasn't going to get involved in the case, though.

"Did you hear about the argument Freyson had with Fezioni?" she asked casually. "Jane Gardens, she's the owner of Old Gossip, told me all about it. Apparently, they nearly came to blows last week."

"I hadn't heard," Todd grunted around a mouthful of burrito. "But from what I can tell, Fezioni wasn't exactly the most popular character around town. Seems he was in a fistfight every other day."

Melody shrugged. "That's true. He was an outsider and not a very friendly one at that. He was always skipping out of paying Jane for meals at Old Gossip, and he owed Jeffery Miller money for the car he bought. There are also a lot of people unhappy with the work he did for them."

"What work is that?"

"Stuff like painting fences, mowing lawns." Melody shrugged. "From what I heard, he couldn't hold a steady job. Rachel Bradley swears he stole her grandmother's ring when he came over to fix her plumbing. Everybody pretty much hated him. He's even rumored to have poisoned Old Gabby's cats."

Uncle Todd made a face. "So, in other words, I have no shortage of suspects. That's going to make my job a lot more difficult."

Melody chomped down on a battered shrimp, nodding. She really didn't envy her uncle's position. "So, Oskar Freyson. Is he a member of your team? Is he new?"

"No. But he's always done his own thing and was never around when you needed my help."

"Is he a real suspect, or just...?"

"I told you to stay out of it." Uncle Todd pointed his burrito at her. "This is none of your concern."

"The ghost is still hanging around, and she is adamant Oskar didn't do it."

"You and your ghosts." Uncle Todd sighed. "Who is this ghost, anyway? What connection does she have with Fezioni?"

"I don't know. She won't tell me anything other than that I picked the wrong shoes or did my makeup wrong." Melody rolled her eyes. "She knows Oskar, though. Her name is Cindy."

Uncle Todd choked. "Cindy?"

Melody dropped her chopsticks. "Yeah."

"Tall, pretty, blonde? Mid-twenties? Shifter?"

"Yeah."

Uncle Todd shook his head. "Well. That explains a few things, then."

Melody waited. When nothing more was forthcoming, she flicked her uncle's knee with her index finger. "Like?"

"You have to keep this to yourself. No telling anybody else in town, okay?"

Melody's eyes lit up. Having a good secret was almost as good as hooking a twenty-pound bass on the line. She leaned forward eagerly. "I can keep a secret."

"Cindy was more than just a member of Oskar's community. She was engaged to his cousin. Two years ago, she was kidnapped and held for ransom. Freyson was tireless in trying to get her back. He paid the ransom, despite it being against FBI policy. In the end, though, all we got back was Cindy's body. Freyson was convinced that Fezioni was part of the group that kidnapped her. But he never had proof."

Melody's eyes widened. No wonder he was a suspect! "So he was in Blackcliff on the case?"

"The deputy director told him to drop it. Handed the case off to another division, said Freyson was too close to it. He never could let it go, though. A few months back, he took a leave of absence and followed Fezioni out here. I pray to God that he wasn't involved in this."

"But you think he is?"

"He might be, and that's all I'll say about it." Uncle Todd took another bite of his burrito, indicating he was done with the conversation.

"Oskar was right."

Melody jumped as Cindy appeared on the couch beside her. She set her plate of food down on the coffee table and glared at the ghost. "Where have you been?"

Uncle Todd rose a brow.

"Cindy. She says that Oskar was right."

He swallowed hurriedly. "About what?"

Cindy let out an annoyed huff. "My death. Fezioni was more than just involved in my kidnapping. He was the one that killed me."

"Oh." Melody fiddled with her hands. "Is that why you're here? To help Oskar prove that Fezioni killed you?"

"Fezioni killed her?" Uncle Todd's eyes widened.

"Yeah."

"I tried to escape and saw his face," Cindy said, and Melody relayed the information. "He killed me. It was quick, though. I don't really remember dying. Just being dead. That's something, right?"

Melody nodded. "I'm really sorry. But we know the truth, we'll make sure that everybody knows what happened. Don't you think it's time to move on now?"

"No." Cindy glowered at her.

"Look—" Melody ground her teeth together when the ghost disappeared. She turned to her uncle. "She's gone."

Uncle Todd looked grim. "Fezioni killed her, though. Oskar was right. That's motive. Crap. I really hoped... This stays between us, okay? And whatever you do, stay away from him, Melody. If he's involved in this... I don't want to think he'll hurt you, but we can't take chances. Promise me you won't go anywhere near him."

"I won't," she promised, and she had every intention of keeping that promise.
"Scout's honor."

Chapter Four

Oskar wiped a hand over his face as he climbed into his convertible mustang. After a long night of being interrogated by his friends and coworkers, he needed to take some time and clear his head. Part of him wanted to jump right into this investigation and help solve Fezioni's murder just to prove that he wasn't part of it, but that wasn't wise, considering he was the prime suspect at the moment.

A frown crossed his face when he saw Melody Zabat leave the police station where the FBI had taken up residence. She had a phone glued to her ear, but she kept glancing to her side while she spoke.

His first search about her when he came to Blackcliff and was looking at buying property showed that she was probably the best realtor in the town, but since she found Fezioni's body he had done a more thorough search.

What he had found surprised him. It turned out that Melody had been a part of no less than a dozen murder investigations over the past few years. Each time she had found the bodies and provided instrumental information that helped close the cases. Barton had gotten himself involved each time, too. It was quite the coincidence.

Oskar didn't believe in coincidences.

He followed her out of town, keeping his distance. She didn't seem to notice him and stopped on the bridge where Fezioni's body had been found. Oskar frowned. What was she doing here? He slowed and stopped, watching as she got out of her car. She had a fishing rod and tackle with her. Fishing?

His Eagle made a frustrated noise—he loved to fish as an Eagle, soaring over the water to dive-bomb the fish swimming against the currents. It had been too long since he had been able to indulge in that activity.

Oskar waited until Melody headed down under the bridge before he got out of his car. He couldn't really believe that she was going fishing in the same location she had found a dead body just days before.

Or put there, he thought grimly.

He didn't want to think that Melody was a murderer. She was a pretty woman, with spunk and fire that he found very attractive. However, he knew that even the most beautiful women were capable of extreme violence, and he couldn't take risks.

Moving quietly, he followed the trail under the bridge, crouching in the bushes to keep himself concealed. Just as he thought, Melody had abandoned her fishing gear and was poking around in the bushes and rocks. His heart sank. Was she looking for something she had left behind? Or maybe she was looking for clues.

Oskar grinned suddenly, almost wanting to laugh in relief. Of course. She was an adrenaline junkie. The kind of woman who sought out crimes, and then used their unassuming appearance to weasel their way into the suspect's confidence until she solved the case. Melody Zabat was an amateur sleuth in full Jessica Fletcher, *Murder, She Wrote* style.

Or she could be a murderer.

But Oskar didn't want to believe that. It had been a long time since he had met a woman that he felt instantly drawn to like he had with Melody.

He was about to stand and reveal his presence when she began talking. He instantly tensed, certain that he had been discovered, but Melody was still poking around the rocks and didn't so much as look in his direction.

"Are you sure he had your necklace with you?" A pause and Melody looked up and to her left. She let out an annoyed breath and put her hands on her hips, shaking her head. "Well, I don't see it now. If he had it, then it probably fell into the river and was washed away."

Oskar's brows knit. Did she have a Bluetooth device on? He strained to look, but when Melody turned he could see both her ears were clear.

"No, I am not going into the water looking for it." Another pause. "Because I didn't bring my swimming suit." She tossed her head and made an annoyed sound. "No, I am not skinny dipping... Because anybody could stop by and see me!"

Was she insane? It would explain the whole murder-chasing obsession she seemed to have. Pity. A woman that pretty really should have her faculties about her. Not that mental illnesses discriminated, or that less attractive people somehow deserved mental illnesses more. Really, he was just disappointed that it was *Melody*. He had been debating asking her on a date once his business dealings with her were completed, but he didn't have the understanding or patience to be able to support her if she wasn't all there. Or maybe he would. He could at least try. He was ready to start taking more personal responsibility in his life.

"What is the big deal about this necklace, anyway? Is it because you think it will prove that Fezioni killed you?"

Oskar's eyes widened. *What?*

"Why does it matter to you so much that Oskar knows that he was right? You do realize that if we find proof that Fezioni killed you, it only gives him more motive and if he didn't kill him—" Melody shook her head. "Then just tell me what you want!"

Oskar had heard enough. His heart was pounding, his throat dry. Barton must have told Melody about Cindy, and she must have seen him. This was just her mocking him somehow. His Eagle beat its wings and he sprang to his feet, striding towards the realtor as she continued to talk to the air.

"Okay, you can stop now," he snarled.

At least, he had been intending to. As soon as he started talking, Melody let out a blood-curdling shriek and jumped two feet into the air. She whipped around, hands coming up into a defensive posture. Oskar was so surprised by her reaction that he jumped back himself, his words dying in his throat.

"What are you doing here?" Melody demanded, her eyes narrowing. Her hands trembled as she put them on her hips, but she jutted out her chin and glared at him.

"What are *you* doing here?" he shot back. "And don't pretend that you didn't know I was here."

A wary look came to her eyes. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to hear you talking. Did Barton tell you about Cindy? Do you think it's funny to bring her up here, now?"

Melody's hands dropped. "Of course not. It's not funny at all. Look, I didn't know you were here. I was just talking to myself. I do that sometimes, you can ask anybody. I just remembered seeing a woman's necklace when I found the body, but Uncle Todd said no necklace was found, and I thought it might be important. I was looking for it."

Oskar's eyes narrowed. Talking to herself? Unlikely. And yet she seemed genuinely surprised to see him. "Assuming what you're saying is true, why pretend that you were having a conversation with Cindy?"

Her eyes darted to the left and she shrugged. "Uncle Todd told me that you thought Fezioni killed her, and sometimes it helps for me to pretend like I'm talking with somebody... Look, I didn't know you were here. I'm sorry that I upset you." She flinched suddenly and put a hand over one ear. "For the record, I think you're right. From what Uncle Todd told me, Fezioni makes sense for the kidnapping. I'm really sorry for your loss."

Despite himself, Oskar's shoulders relaxed. She just sounded so genuine. He'd met a lot of actors and charlatans over the years, and he could always trust his gut. Right now it was saying that Melody was telling the truth. At least, mostly.

"Okay. I'm sorry I scared you."

Melody's eyes flashed and she put her hands on her hips again. "Yeah, you should try not doing that. Everybody in town is convinced that you're a murderer, you know, and sneaking up on people might make them do crazy things. The last thing you need is to be killed by someone who thinks you're going to kill them, and not be able to clear your name."

Oskar's brows rose. "So you don't think that I'm guilty of killing Fezioni? Even after what Barton told you about Cindy?"

Again she glanced to her left. Oskar glanced that way as well, but there was nothing there. A nervous tick, perhaps? He studied her as she stood there in silence. She wore sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt, her hair pulled back in a messy bun. She was so unlike the women he was usually attracted to. But then, perhaps that was exactly what he needed. After all, none of his relationships had worked out so far.

Maybe I should keep my head in the game. Fezioni is dead but we still don't have any answers. Plus, I'm a murder suspect. That will be enough to scare her away, even if nothing else is.

"I don't know," she said eventually, then shook her head. "No. I don't think you did it. I don't think you were involved at all. It sounded to me like you wanted closure, justice. And you seem like the kind of guy that does things methodically."

"Methodically?"

"If you were going to kill Fezioni, it would be a much cleverer setup than this. You wouldn't even be a suspect. Besides, you have oodles of money. You'd have paid somebody to kill him."

She sounded so confident that Oskar had to be impressed. An amateur Jessica Fletcher she might be, but she knew her stuff.

"I'm barred from the investigation," he said slowly, watching her to gauge her reaction. "But I want to find out what happened here just as much as anybody else. You have got connections to the case, and you're obviously a clever woman."

Melody's eyes widened. "You mean you want to work with me to solve the murder? No. No way. I'm done with killers and murders. I've been forced into too many—" she winced suddenly and glared to her left.

What was she looking at?

"On the other hand, that might not be a bad idea," she ground out through her teeth. "I'll meet you for dinner. Uncle Todd doesn't want me going anywhere near you, but we're still working with the whole realty thing. I'll bring some property listings and there won't be anything he can do about it. Old Gossip at six?"

Oskar repressed a smile and nodded. "It's a date."

"It is not a date. It's a meeting." Melody glared at him for another moment before she gathered up her fishing rod and tackle and marched back up the trail. Oskar watched her go, then turned to the river. So this was where Fezioni died.

It was peaceful. Too bad Fezioni had to die in such a beautiful location.

His Eagle chattered and Oskar sighed, heading back to his car.