

## Chapter Five

Melody smoothed back a flyaway strand of hair as she stuffed her feet into her heels. She didn't dare look at herself in the mirror. Cindy had been insistent in dictating what she could wear.

No business suits. No casual dress. No bright red lipstick.

Melody would have ignored her 'suggestions' altogether, except the pampered princess had made a deal with her: if Melody followed her orders when dressing for this meeting with Oskar, then Cindy would finally spill the beans on what she really wanted.

Getting rid of Cindy's constant nagging would be worth it. Or so she had thought until the ghost insisted she wear a tight, mid-thigh length skirt with black leggings and a low-cut top that Melody hadn't worn since she was eighteen. It was a little tight around her breasts now, and she knew she looked utterly ridiculous. The gold bangles on her wrists and haphazard attempt at a twisty bun certainly weren't helping matters.

"This is ridiculous," she grouched, as she hobbled out to her car. "Are you trying to humiliate me?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Cindy replied, already sitting on the roof of the car. "The way you dress yourself is painful to look at. With that outfit, people can finally see that you have a bod to show off."

"I don't want to show off my 'bod'," Melody replied crankily. "I prefer to be comfortable or professional."

"You promised."

Melody glared at the ghost. "And if you don't come through with your end of the deal, I swear I'll..." There really wasn't anything she could threaten a ghost with. "I'll tell Oskar that you were madly in love with him and just using his cousin to get closer to him."

Cindy rolled her eyes. "You'll have to do a lot more than that to scare me."

Melody let out an annoyed huff as she started the car. She headed for Old Gossip, resisting the urge to stomp on the gas and speed her way there. There wasn't a lot of crime in Blackcliff, so the police cracked down on traffic violations with a

vengeance. Although given that she had helped half the force find their current houses, she might get a little leniency.

Nah, not worth it.

People stared at her when she got out of the car, and she bit back a groan of dismay. This was one of the most humiliating things a ghost had ever made her do. Why couldn't they be more like they were on TV shows, all mysterious and jumping in and out of reality, giving vague hints and being totally misunderstood?

Oskar was already waiting for her in the café. Melody joined him as quickly as she could, struggling with her five-inch heels. These things were made for standing or sitting, not walking. Certainly not for walking fast. Every step she took, she felt like she might topple over. She smiled apologetically at him when she slid into the booth opposite him.

The billionaire-Alpha-FBI agent's mouth gaped when he took her in. His gaze ran down her body, slowly, like a caress. Melody felt her face heating—she couldn't remember the last time somebody had looked at her like that.

"Sorry I'm late," she blurted. "I just got caught up with... things."

"That's okay." His gaze lingered on her cleavage for a moment before it snapped back up to her eyes. His face flushed and he shifted, clearing his throat. "Sorry."

Melody blushed, though she didn't mind his ogling. They had had some flirty moments in the past, but this was the first time he had shown outright interest. Maybe Cindy wasn't so insane for making her wear this.

"I thought this was a business meeting?"

For a moment she wanted to find an excuse for what she was wearing, but nothing came to mind, so she cleared her throat. "Yeah. I lost track of time and thought it would be better to just come in what I was wearing. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

Oskar smirked. "Just half an hour. Actually, I was worried you weren't going to come. I thought you might think that I'm a murderer."

"He's not," Cindy insisted, sitting in the booth next to Oskar.

"I know you're not."

Oskar's eyes narrowed at how confident she sounded. Jane bustled over, eyes wide when she saw Melody's attire and took their orders. Even when placing his order,

Oskar's gaze never left Melody. By the time Jane was off again, a deep flush had risen up Melody's neck and she fidgeted, uncomfortable with the intense scrutiny.

"What?" she demanded. "Are you mad that I don't think you're a murderer?"

"I just want to know *why*. You seem like an intelligent woman. It makes logical sense to think that I am the murderer. But you seem very confident that I'm not. It doesn't make sense."

"It's because I was with him," Cindy said. She tried to grab Oskar's arm but her hand slid right through. Making an impatient noise, she turned to Melody. "Tell him. Tell him you know because I was with him and I know he didn't kill Fezioni."

Melody avoided the ghost's gaze. "Oh, you know... you don't seem like that kind of person."

She winced as Oskar's eyes narrowed further. "Has there been a break in the case? Barton found something that indicates who really killed Fezioni? But he wouldn't tell you. Have you found something yourself?"

"Look, it's not important. I just know, okay?"

Uncle Todd was the only person who knew about Melody's secret, other than her parents. It wasn't something she was anxious to share with the world. She watched TV. She knew what happened to people who weren't society's definition of 'normal', and she did not want to end up in some padded white cell.

But Oskar was still staring intently at her, and by this time, Cindy was too.

"Tell him," she said.

Melody's gaze darted to the ghost.

"Tell him that you can see me. You asked me why I'm still around, well, this is it. I have something I need to tell him. So you tell him that I'm here. Right now!"

"What are you looking at?" Oskar twisted, his gaze going right through Cindy.

"Tell him!" the ghost shrieked, causing Melody to wince.

No. She couldn't. And yet somehow she found herself wanting to. It was a lonely life, not being able to trust anybody with her secret. Not having anybody to share her day-to-day life with. She often daydreamed about having a supportive man in her life to take care of her when she just didn't feel like doing it herself. As the Alpha of a community of Shifters, not to mention a billionaire, Oskar could do that.

*Great, now I'm a gold-digger.* She shook her head.

The fact was that she hardly knew him. They'd had a few business meetings, they'd seen each other occasionally on the street. It was hardly enough to trust him with a secret of this magnitude.

He reached across the table, putting his hand on hers. The warmth felt really nice, and Melody found her shoulders relaxing. Chances were he wouldn't believe her. But what if he did?

"Tell me."

"You'll think I'm crazy."

"No, I won't."

Cindy groaned in frustration, and Melody really wished the ghost would just go away. Even though this wasn't a date, there was a crowd in her opinion. "Tell him July 2, 2011."

Melody glanced around. Jane was serving another customer, and there was nobody else around. She wet her lips. "July 2, 2011."

Oskar's eyes narrowed then widened. He drew back sharply. "How do you—"

"Look, I know this sounds crazy, but I can see ghosts." The words popped out before she could stop them. "Right now Cindy is sitting right beside you. She has been bugging me for days now. She's the one that lead me to Fezioni's body, and she was with you when the murder happened. She knows you didn't kill him, and so I know you didn't kill him."

Oskar's throat worked as he stared at her. "That day under the bridge when you were talking to yourself—"

"I was talking to her." Melody held her breath. Would he believe her? For a long moment, they were both silent. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore. "What happened on July 2, 2011?"

Cindy stared at Oskar's profile, sorrow etched onto her face. "It was the day our son was born."

## Chapter Six

Nobody knew that date.

Cindy had told everybody that a previous boyfriend was the father of her child. Nobody knew that he had a child somewhere out there. They had decided when Cindy first realized that she was pregnant that the child would be put up for adoption. Sealed records.

Shifting was often hereditary, but as long as the adoptive parents knew that they were getting a child who would most likely Shift one day, there was no reason why the child wouldn't be perfectly happy with a family who wanted them, rather than being stuck with parents who would never work as a couple.

But there was no way that Melody would know that date. As Oskar stared at her, she gasped slightly, pressing her hands to her mouth while staring at the air to his side.

Oskar swallowed hard. "Cindy is here?"

Melody's eyes filled with tears. "I didn't know that you two were a couple."

"We weren't," Oskar replied harshly. "We got drunk at a party. If she was here—"

"She is," Melody interrupted. A look of confusion crossed her face. "And she wants me to tell you toad face. What does that mean?"

Oskar felt his shoulders relax. He laughed out loud, surprised by how suddenly he believed Melody. She could see ghosts? He really should think that she was insane, but he didn't. After all, he could turn into a giant bald eagle, how much stranger was seeing ghosts? He believed her, just as he believed Cindy was right beside him.

"Toad face. It was an inside joke between us. So she's here." He hesitated. "Cindy, I'm sorry that I couldn't stop Fezioni and the men that took you. I did everything I could. It just wasn't—"

"She doesn't blame you and doesn't want you to blame yourself, either. She tried to escape them. She heard them talking, they were going to kill her no matter what. There wasn't anything you could have done. And she wants you to stop hunting the rest of the crew. It's not good for you or the community. Besides, Fezioni turned against them. He killed most of the others, anyway."

Knowing most of them were dead helped ease a little of the pressure in Oskar's mind, but he shook his head. "I can't give it up. With those men still out there, there could be more people killed."

Melody glanced to his right and back at him. "She said that it's not your job anymore. It's up to the little man with the small eyes and bad suits to catch them, and he's getting close."

Oskar smiled at her description of the deputy director. That was so *Cindy*.

"She wants you to take care of yourself."

"Does she know who killed Fezioni?"

Melody shook her head. "She was with you hiking when he was killed. She doesn't really care about him, anyway."

"How could she not care about the man who killed her?" Oskar's voice was a low hiss.

"He's dead, she's dead. There's nothing more to do with him. She wants you to take care of yourself, and to tell your cousin that she loved him. That they would have had a very happy life together. She also wants you to make sure he doesn't end up alone his whole life." Melody shook her head. "I didn't think that you were that nice of a person." A pause. "Because you act like a stuck-up, spoiled brat, that's why."

Oskar laughed. It was such an appropriate response to Cindy that he felt his heart lighten. She really *was* there. "So this is how you had so much information about other murders, is it? Because you see ghosts that demand you help solve their cases?"

A pained look crossed Melody's face as she nodded. "It's a nightmare. They've never come to me around Blackcliff, although there was one time when a hiker got lost and died... Blackcliff has always been my sanctuary. I really hope that this doesn't end up being commonplace."

She glared at the space beside him. At Cindy.

"What did she say?"

"Something very rude. Now you promised to tell me what you wanted, so spill." Melody's hands clenched and she ground her teeth. "What do you mean, not yet? You promised me—"

She threw her hands in the air and sank back against the booth, shaking her head. Oskar watched her, half amused and half worried. Melody focused on him again as Jane came rushing over to them, her mouth set in a thin line and her eyes narrowed.

"Is everything okay, dear?"

Melody nodded, though she still looked annoyed. "It's fine. Just a little miscommunication."

Jane glared at Oskar, who did his best to smile back at her. The Old Gossip was named after its owner, from what he could see, and he had no desire to give her more fodder for the rumor mill than she had. She had already convinced half the town he was a killer. "Will our orders be ready soon?"

"Soon." Sniffing, Jane moved off again.

"She's gone," Melody muttered. "Just like that, she goes. She has got to be the most annoying ghost I have ever met. She refuses to tell me anything!"

Oskar laughed, reaching across the table to take her hand in his. "That sounds like Cindy. She always had to have things just right and she would never admit when she was feeling emotional. Would just flounce out dramatically. It's comforting to know she hasn't changed."

"Comforting to you, maybe." Melody shook her head. "She wants to tell you something, but refuses to say what."

Oskar's brow furrowed. "Do you think it might have to do with our child?"

Melody shrugged helplessly. "I have no idea."

It couldn't be that she wanted to tell him that she was secretly in love with him. They'd had their chance to be together, and there wasn't anything between them. Both of them knew it. So what could she want to tell him? Their child had been given up for adoption. She had assured him of that, and there was no way she could have actually kept the baby. He would have known.

Could it be that the baby actually died? But why would she lie about that, and why would she refuse to tell him that? His Eagle chittered.

"So... you really believe me?" Melody's brow was furrowed and she sucked her lower lip between her teeth. "That I can see ghosts, I mean."

"Yeah. I'm a Shifter. It's not that much more of a leap to say yeah, you can see ghosts."

"But it's not the same. There are thousands, hundreds of thousands of Shifters. You're real, I can see you. You can't see what I can see."

Oskar shrugged. His hand was still over hers and he squeezed it gently, smiling now. "I'm a good judge of character and I can usually tell when people are lying. I can see that you genuinely believe what you're saying, and really, you know things nobody else knows. Yeah, I believe you."

"Wow. I didn't expect..." She beamed at him, and Oskar was struck by just how beautiful she was. If there wasn't a booth between them, he would have kissed her.

She opened her mouth again, but the tinkling of the door opening drew both of their attentions. Barton, his face set grimly, marched over to them. Melody quickly snatched her hand away from Oskar's, while he frowned at his friend and colleague. From the angry set of Barton's mouth and the way his hands were half-clenched, something bad had clearly happened.

Oskar stood when the other agent got to them.

"Freyson, I need you come with me," Barton said, under his breath.

"Uncle Todd, what's going on?" Melody jumped to her feet.

"Go where?" Oskar demanded.

Barton glanced around the café. Everybody was staring at them. There were whispers going on behind hands, and a young woman with curly hair was clutching her heart, her face white, as though she thought the FBI agents were about to start shooting.

"I'd really rather do this in private," Barton said.

Oskar shook his head. "Are you arresting me?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that."

Melody gasped. "But he's not the killer."

"I thought I told you to stay out of this." Barton narrowed his eyes at Melody. "For once in your life, do as you're told."

Oskar felt the irrational need to punch the older agent in the face over the tone he took with Melody. He took a deep, calming breath. "What is going on, Barton?"

"A new witness has come forward, claiming they saw you and Fezioni leaving town together on the day of the murder. You don't have an alibi. So how about we



just go down to the station and get this all sorted out before we cause even more of a scene than we already have?"

Barton's brows rose and, as much as Oskar hated to take orders, he knew that the other agent was right. He nodded reluctantly and allowed himself to be shepherded into the middle of the other agents that had come with Barton. His Eagle screeched. Melody made a strangled choking noise and grabbed her purse.

"I'm coming, too."

Barton turned to her. "No. I don't want you involved."

"I'm already involved. Besides, I'm the one who found the body. There might be some more stuff I need to tell you."

"What sort of stuff?"

Melody's eyes widened. "*Stuff*."

So Barton knew about her secret? Oskar wasn't surprised. She did call him uncle, after all. Barton looked annoyed, but he nodded and waved for Melody to follow them. The people gawked at them as they left the café, but Oskar ignored them. He had bigger problems at the moment than gossip.