

Chapter Seven

Melody paced around Uncle Todd's office. As soon as they had reached the temporary FBI headquarters, he had stuffed her in here while he went to interrogate Oskar. He hadn't even listened when she hissed at him that she had ghostly information that was vital to finding the real killer. Maybe he had been completely serious when he told her he wanted her to stay away from the case.

Maybe he was going to ignore her 'ghostly information' because she wasn't listening to him.

"He's coming back." Cindy's sudden appearance made Melody jump, and the ghost smirked. "You know, for somebody who claims to talk with the dead all the time, you're really jumpy around us."

"Oh, shut up."

Cindy folded her arms and sat on the desk, pouting. Moments later, Uncle Todd came into the office. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his face was pinched. Melody poured him a cup of coffee, but he only scowled when he took it. He stared at her for a long time before he shook his head.

"When were you going to tell me that Oskar and Cindy had a child together?"

"I only just found out. How do *you* know?"

"Good question," Cindy muttered.

Uncle Todd sat heavily behind his desk. "Oskar just told me. It's not looking good for him."

"He didn't do it. Cindy was with him at the time of the murder, and she says—"

"Melody!" Uncle Todd put his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands. "I can't take the word of a ghost and present it as evidence. We've been over this before. I need facts that I can *see*. And you're not supposed to be involved in this case, remember?"

Melody put her hands on her hips and glared at her uncle. "So what you're saying is that you would prefer to send an innocent man to jail than listen to what I have to say?"

"I'm saying that you can't keep involving yourself in murders. And as for Cindy collaborating Oskar's alibi, I couldn't trust it even if she was telling me it herself. They had a child together. Fezioni killed her."

"Is he saying I'm lying?" Cindy cried, her perfectly manicured nails digging into her palms. "I'm not lying! Oskar didn't kill Fezioni."

"I believe you," Melody said, turning to Cindy. "Just sit down and shut up. You can't help with this."

"Neither can you," Uncle Todd said firmly. "Go home, Melody. Take a couple days off work. Leave town. Just leave this case behind. I don't want Oskar to have done this, but I have to follow the evidence. No." He shook his head as she opened her mouth. "I don't want to hear it. Go."

Melody glared at her uncle for a moment before she turned on her heel and stormed out of his office. Leave town? Unlikely. If he wasn't going to find out what had really happened, she would! It was the least she could do for Oskar, with his bright blue eyes and charming smile. His cleft chin. His honey-silk voice...

Crap, she thought. I have it bad.

It didn't take much for Melody to convince Jane to spill all the gossip she had heard about the murder. In fact, all it took was one juicy tidbit of her own. Melody nearly winced when she told the Old Gossip's owner that she had been on a date—a real date, she emphasized, not a business date—with Oskar when he was arrested, to get the older woman's gums flapping.

Melody learned a few things that she was certain the FBI didn't know. Like how Freddie Truman swore he saw Fezioni's ghost wandering around downtown with a horde of devil wolves following him. Or Skye Johnson's insistence that she saw Betty Easthope sneaking in and out of Fezioni's bedroom and that Betty was pregnant now.

In fact, Melody was certain that even if Uncle Todd had decided to talk with Jane Gardens, he would have been too impatient to weed through all of that nonsense in order to strike gold.

The day before the murder, Elisabeth was seen talking with Fezioni, and she had seemed very shaken by the encounter. Melody wasn't sure if it was relevant, but by this point, she was desperate to figure out what had really happened. Elisabeth was the last person she would suspect to be a murderer, but in her experience, anybody

could kill given the right circumstances. In any case, that encounter might be relevant to finding out the truth of what had happened.

The daycare was overrun with kids, as was expected, but Melody managed to get Elisabeth's attention anyway. Luckily, there were a couple of other workers at the daycare, so the two women could chat for a bit.

Melody went straight to the point. "I heard that you and Fezioni had an argument the other day and that it shook you up."

Elisabeth's shoulders tensed, though she had been nothing but happy to see Melody moments before. "Look, I'm really busy."

"I know, and I'm sorry for taking your time, but I'm trying to figure out what happened." Belatedly she realized that could be taken as an accusation, so she was quick to add, "I know that a lot of the guys around here are sweet on you, and if Fezioni threatened you, more than one of them might have taken matters into his own hands."

Elisabeth brushed the hair from her face and looked over the kids. Her arms crossed over her chest and she leaned away from Melody, just enough that the realtor knew it wasn't a conscious act. "It was nothing, okay? He was just complaining about how noisy the kids could be. It has nothing to do with his murder."

"Was there anybody else around? Somebody that might have gotten the wrong—" Melody cut herself off as a five-year-old boy wandered over to them. He eyed Melody warily but flashed Elisabeth a shy smile as he held out a daisy for her. Dimples flashed as his bright blue eyes crinkled.

Melody stared. The little boy was the spitting image of Oskar. The blue eyes, the dimples, the cleft chin. The shape of the nose, his ears, even the color of his hair. Everything about him was Oskar.

She became aware that Cindy was standing behind the boy, tears in her eyes as she twisted her hands.

"Now you know," the ghost whispered. "This is why I'm here and what I wanted to tell Oskar. I didn't know how, though. He never wanted our child. But he doesn't have anybody anymore. I thought I was doing the right thing by giving him up... I *was* doing the right thing. I would have been a terrible mother. But..."

"Like I was saying," Elisabeth said, as the little boy ran back to join the others, "my talk with David has nothing to do with his murder. I can't help you. I'm sorry

that your... friend or whatever he is to you has been arrested, but I'm sure that the FBI will figure out it wasn't him. Now I need to get back to work."

Elisabeth gestured to the gate, staring hard at Melody, but the realtor's gaze was still on the little boy.

"Who is that? I don't think I've ever seen him before."

Elisabeth frowned. "That's Julius. He's new in town. Only moved in three months or so."

"Ask her about his family," Cindy said. Her voice was hard, as though she already knew the answer to the question herself and just wanted Melody to know. "Ask her."

"His family," Melody blurted. "I usually know all the new families moving into Blackcliff. Are they staying with family or something?"

Elisabeth's frown deepened and she folded her arms. "What's this about, Melody? He's a little boy, he had nothing to do with this murder. And I'm not sure I like you asking questions about the kids in my care. Privacy accounts for something."

"I know. I'm sorry." Melody finally stopped staring at little Julius. "It's just that... I know that this is going to sound a little crazy, but he looks exactly like Oskar. And five years ago he had a child with this woman named Cindy. They gave the baby up for adoption, but I think it was a boy. But Fezioni kidnapped and killed Cindy two years ago."

Elisabeth's eyes widened until they were round and bugging slightly from her head. She covered her mouth with her hand and gasped. "Do you think David was here to kidnap Julius? They arrived close to the same time!"

"So he was adopted?"

"Yes." Elisabeth ran a hand through her hair. "Julius was adopted after he was born, but his adoptive parents died in a car crash last year. He's been through a few different foster homes and was just sent here. And I don't know everything, but his foster mother did say something about her birth parents being Shifters. Do you really think David was after him?"

Melody found the little boy again. Her brow furrowed. If Fezioni was after the boy, it just made Oskar's situation all the worse. Julius had to be the reason Cindy was still sticking around. But what did she want? For Oskar to step in and take him back, or what?

And how did this tie back to Fezioni's murder?

Chapter Eight

Oskar towed off before he stepped from the small hotel shower, unable to turn off the thoughts bouncing through his brain. All he really wanted to do right now was collapse in bed and sleep, but he had work to do, and so he wrapped a fresh, dry towel around his waist.

The door to the hallway opened just as he stepped from the bathroom.

He jumped towards the nightstand where his gun was, but before he got there he got a look at who it was breaking into his hotel room.

Melody. She jumped when she saw him and put her hand on her heart, closing her eyes briefly. "You scared me to death!"

Oskar frowned as she shut the door behind herself. "Really? You just broke into my hotel room—which is illegal, by the way—and you're telling me I scared you to death? I could have shot you. What are you even doing here?"

Silence answered him. Melody's eyes were wide and fixed on his torso. They moved down over his abs to trace the top of the towel. He glanced down to make sure he was fully covered and her eyes snapped back up to his. Her face went cherry-red and she quickly looked up at the ceiling.

"Sorry," she blurted.

Oskar strode to the closet and pulled out a complimentary robe, pulling it on. Not that he minded her ogling him like that, but his lack of dress was clearly uncomfortable for her. "Why are you here, Melody?"

"I was looking for evidence. I didn't think that you would have been released from FBI custody yet. Uncle Todd seems pretty convinced that there isn't any evidence to prove that you didn't kill Fezioni."

"That's a roundabout way of saying all the evidence points to me being the killer." Oskar sighed as Melody winced. "Look, I'm ridiculously wealthy, I'm the Alpha of the wealthiest Shifter community in the country and I'm an agent. All have their perks when you're being investigated for murder. For what it's worth, though, Barton doesn't think I killed Fezioni. He is following the evidence like he should."

Melody finally looked back at him and nodded briefly. She was wearing a summer dress covered in roses, and the cut emphasized her hourglass figure. It fell to just

above her knee, and she wasn't wearing any leggings. She had fantastic legs. Creamy, toned calves.

"Cindy should have told me you were in your room. But I haven't seen her for a while. I guess she wasn't keeping a lookout like I thought." A smile flashed at him, but it seemed nervous. "Ghosts. Can't rely on any of them."

"So what sort of evidence—"

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

Oskar's brows rose. "Sure. Can I get you something to drink?"

"I'm fine, thanks. So, you're rich. Like really, really rich. Why do you work for the FBI? You don't need to work, and really from what I've gotten to know about you, you're more of an alpha-male kind of guy, not somebody who takes orders from others. Which makes sense. Since you *are* an Alpha."

Oskar poured himself a small brandy and shrugged. "It's simple, really. I was born rich, and when I was seven I was kidnapped."

Melody gasped.

"The kidnappers wanted a substantial amount of money for my return. If it wasn't for the FBI agents who were assigned to the case, I would probably be dead. When I grew up, I realized that I wanted to help people the way they helped me, so I joined. Not that I seem to be *actually* helping people lately."

"Cindy's death wasn't your fault."

"Even if there wasn't anything I could have done to save her, I still *didn't* save her. It's my responsibility to ensure the safety of my Shifters. I failed her the moment she was kidnapped."

Melody took his brandy away. "Speaking of Cindy, I found out what she was too scared to tell you."

"Hey." Oskar tried to take his glass back, but Melody held it out of reach. Her eyes narrowed until he nodded in defeat and backed up to the bed. "What is it?"

"Well..." Her determined expression faded a little and Melody sucked her lip between her teeth, looking nervous. "Okay, this is a little more difficult than I thought it would be... You know what, I'm just going to come right out and say it. Your son is here."

Oskar's eyes widened. Her words rattled around in his brain, but he couldn't make sense of them. "Here? As in, in this town?"

Melody nodded. "His adoptive parents were killed last year in a car crash, and he's in a foster home here in Blackcliff. I saw him today. I don't know what Cindy wants you to do now, she won't tell me that, but I do know she wanted you to know about your son. I think maybe he's the reason Fezioni came here, too. Maybe he was looking to try to get more money from you. I don't know. But—"

"He couldn't have known that my son was here."

Oskar raced to his brandy bottle but stopped himself before he drank. His hands trembled. Being a father had never been on his list of priorities. When Cindy got pregnant, there was never a doubt in his mind that adoption was the best course.

But knowing that the son he had never seen was in this town, parentless, in foster care, hit him hard. Shifters were hard to adopt once they hit puberty. His son would be five already. His chances for finding a family were getting lower every year.

He sucked in a deep breath. "Thank you for telling me."

Melody put a hand on his arm to comfort him. "What are you going to do?"

"It depends on this investigation. I... I'm not sure I'm father material. But maybe..." He had failed Cindy, but maybe he would have a chance with their son.

He turned to Melody, smiling at her. "Thank you. And when you see Cindy again, thank her. I want to help people. Maybe it's time that I... I helped my own son."

Melody hugged him. "Whatever you decide, it's going to be okay, you know. You'll make a great father. If that's what you want."

Oskar held her tightly, closing his eyes. She used strawberry shampoo. He turned his face into her hair, inhaling. His arms tightened while the rest of his muscles relaxed. It had been a long time since he had felt like this, uncertain about his future and yet comfortable in sharing his uncertainty with another person. He let out a shaky breath.

When Melody pulled herself away, he was reluctant to release her. But she didn't withdraw very far. She looked up into his eyes and pressed herself to her toes, brushing her lips against his mouth. Oskar moaned, flicking his tongue over her lips. Cherry chapstick.

"I should go," she whispered.

Oskar's arms tightened around her. "No. Please. Stay."

A lip went between her teeth. "I just don't... I mean, you have a lot to take in, and if I stay, who knows what my uncle will think."

She grimaced and Oskar laughed. There was nothing he wanted more than to kiss her again and lose himself in her comfort and warmth, but she was right. Now was not the time for engaging in such activities. Reluctantly he released her and took a step back. He had the sense that the two of them had a real chance at making a relationship work. He didn't want to ruin it by moving too quickly.

Besides, between the investigation and learning that his son was in Blackcliff, this situation was complicated enough. It was time to just take a step back and think.

"I'll get dressed and we can go to dinner," he said. "That sound good?"

Melody nodded. "Yeah. That should be fine. I don't think Uncle Todd will be happy with me doing even that. He'll just have to deal. He thinks I should just abandon the whole thing, but I can't do that. I couldn't do it at the start, and I certainly can't do it now that I am more invested. It's not like I'm in any danger, right?"

Oskar retrieved a suit from his closet and frowned as he stepped into the bathroom to change.

Did Barton want Melody to stay away from the case because he was afraid that Oskar was a killer and was just using her? Or was there something else, something that could be putting her in danger? He shuddered—the thought of anything happening to Melody was far worse than the thought of being found guilty of a crime he didn't commit.

"You've told me what Cindy wanted me to know," he said, buttoning his pants. "Is there anything else she can do to help with the case? I mean, she says she was with me when the murder happened, so she doesn't know who the killer is. So she can't help with that."

He pulled on his shirt and stepped back into the main room as he buttoned it. Melody frowned at him.

"No, I guess not."

"Then I think Barton's right. You should try to stay away from the case. He's good at what he does, he'll find out what really happened."

"Yeah, but he doesn't have a ghost that can eavesdrop on conversations."

"Just stay away from the case, Melody. Please." Oskar stared into her eyes, trying to convey how serious he was.

She sighed, made a face, and nodded. "Yeah. I can do that."

Relief washed over him. "Thank you. Now let's go to dinner. Old Gossip?"

"Ugh, no! I mean, let's go to the hotel restaurant. Less *gossip* there."

Oskar laughed and nodded. As they left the room he put his hand on the small of her back. Being near her felt so right. It was better than anything he had ever felt before.