

Chapter Nine

Melody lay in bed, staring up at the vague shadows on her ceiling. Even though it was getting late, she was too wired to close her eyes. She felt like she should get up and do something since she couldn't sleep, but her brain was tied into too many knots to consider doing anything other than just lying as still as she could, thinking.

Dinner with Oskar had been nice. They'd talked about his son a little, and he told her he was going to look into getting custody or adopting Julius. He had quickly turned the conversation to her, though: her family, her schooling, her hobbies. His questions had been genuine, and by the time they were done eating, Melody realized that they were on a date. A real date.

Now she didn't know what to do with that information. She liked Oskar. It was fun talking with him, and he knew exactly what to ask to open her up and keep the conversation going. But where could this go? She wasn't looking for a relationship, and he was going to be responsible for a child soon. It was going to be a confusing time for him. Her, too.

Although studies had been done, and Shifters were more likely to form lasting romantic relationships. That was a huge perk.

I am not a gold-digger.

A voice came out of the dark. "Hey."

Melody groaned. "Not now, Cindy."

"I need to talk to you."

With another groan, Melody sat up and turned on the light. Cindy wrinkled her nose. "There's a hole in that shirt. I can see your belly button."

"They're pajamas. I don't need to be sexy when I'm sleeping alone."

Cindy shrugged. "Whatever you want. I just wanted to say thank you. I was scared that Oskar wouldn't care about our son being here. Thank you for telling him. Things are going to work out now. I might be dead, but Julius is going to be okay. I just wish I could... I wish I could say goodbye to my fiancé."

Melody nodded. "I understand. But he's going to be okay, you know. We all have to deal with death. People are tough."

"I suppose. It's different for Shifters, though. We have a hard time getting over death, especially the deaths of our significant others. But what now? I don't have anything left to stick around here for. Shouldn't I be seeing a light or something?"

"I don't know. My ghosts usually just go away and never come back."

"You're useless." Cindy rolled her eyes. "I'm tempted not to tell you what I found out about the case."

Melody straightened. Both Oskar and Uncle Todd's pleading for her to stay away from the case rang in her ears, but she pushed them aside. If Cindy had information, then she needed it. It wasn't like she was going after a killer, after all. She would get the information and relay it to Uncle Todd, and he could handle it from there.

"Please tell me."

Cindy cocked her head to one side and shrugged. "I'm not actually sure how relevant it is, but after Fezioni died, I was wandering around. Well. I was following that daycare woman. I wanted to know more about Julius' situation, and she was going to go look stuff up about him or something. I don't know what she was doing, I just know she was going to the city for something."

"I thought you said this had to do with the case."

"It does. She was driving to the city, and along the way she stopped and threw a baseball bat into the woods. That's odd, right?"

Melody swung out of bed. "Uncle Todd said Fezioni was hit by a baseball bat before he was thrown over the bridge. But Elisabeth? She's such a quiet, kind woman. Why would she want to kill Fezioni?"

"Maybe he threatened to kidnap Julius?" Cindy clapped her hands. "She's protective of those kids."

"Yes, she is," Melody muttered. "But why would Fezioni tell her that he was going to take Julius? I need to talk to her."

She knew she should tell Uncle Todd about this, but what would he do with it? Elisabeth wouldn't talk to him. Besides, Melody wasn't putting herself in danger by going to talk to her. Elisabeth wasn't going to hurt her.

Cindy vanished on the drive to Elisabeth's house, but Melody didn't spare too much time thinking about it. She was single-minded in her purpose. Her heart was beating harder than normal, but only because she was so close to solving this case. At least she thought she was.

Was Elisabeth the killer? What motive could she possibly have?

Elisabeth answered the door wearing a faded Care Bears bathrobe tied over flannel pajamas. She blinked at Melody, rubbing her eyes.

"I'm sorry for waking you so late. But I have something to talk to you about."
Melody quickly slipped into the house, despite Elisabeth's protests. "Uncle Todd found a baseball bat in the woods on the way to the city, and it had Bobby's name on it. It was covered in blood."

Elisabeth's face paled. "What?"

Melody turned away from her, going to the living room. On the way over she had kept thinking about what could have possibly motivated Elisabeth to kill somebody. On the mantle was a picture of Bobby. Melody picked it up, studying it.

"What are you doing here?" Elisabeth's voice rose to a higher pitch. "Get out. Get out of my home."

Melody took out her phone and brought up the article of Fezioni's death from the newspaper. There was a picture of him and she zoomed in on it. Holding the two pictures together, she turned back to Elisabeth. The younger woman paled, shivering as she looked at the two images being held side by side.

"They have the same eyes," Melody said, her voice quiet. "The same nose. Bobby looks more like you than him, but he is Fezioni's son, isn't he?"

Elisabeth sank down onto the couch, still staring at the two pictures. Melody turned off her phone and sat beside the other woman, putting a hand on her shoulder. She waited patiently, knowing that this couldn't be easy for the shy, quiet woman. Even though she longed to ask why Elisabeth was letting Oskar take the blame for a murder she had committed, Melody kept her mouth shut and waited.

The living were like ghosts in that way. If they didn't want to say something, they wouldn't.

"David and I were high school sweethearts," Elisabeth mumbled eventually. "He was the bad boy, and I felt special that he paid attention to me. Then I got pregnant and he didn't want anything to do with me anymore. It could have broken me, but Bobby... he's the best thing that ever happened to me and so I did everything I could to give him a good life. I put David in the past and I thought he'd stay there."

Melody put her arm around Elisabeth as the younger woman began to cry softly. Tears splattered on the glass over Bobby's face.

"When David showed up again, I was sick. I didn't want him anywhere near me or my son. And I told him that, but he said that it wasn't my choice. I didn't plan to kill him." Elisabeth snorted. "Or maybe I did. We met out on that bridge, and I had all my savings. I told him to take it and leave us alone and he just laughed at me. Said that it was nothing compared to what he had."

"He must have been referring to the money he got from kidnapping Cindy."

Elisabeth shuddered. "He... he told me he was going to take Bobby. That if I wanted to be in my son's life, I'd have to take him back. He said that he knew how to make people disappear and if I didn't do as he said, I'd never see Bobby again. And I snapped. He laughed at me when I grabbed the baseball bat."

The young woman sat up straighter. Her eyes hardened and she turned to Melody. Though tears were still streaming down her face, she looked determined and angry, every bit a woman who could have slugged a man in the head.

"He wasn't laughing when he went over the bridge. I did it for my son. I did it for Bobby."

Melody squeezed her hands. "I have to tell my uncle."

Elisabeth's shoulders slumped again, and she nodded. "I know. Just promise me something first?"

"Of course."

"Look after my son. I have no family, and you're the closest thing I have to a friend. I just don't want him to end up in the system. Please."

Melody squeezed the other woman's hands. It was a huge responsibility, but she couldn't turn down a mother's plea for help. "Yes. I'll look after him. I promise."

Elisabeth nodded her thanks, and with a heavy heart, Melody pulled her cell phone out again and dialed Uncle Todd. Elisabeth put the picture back on the mantle before she returned to Melody's side, leaning against her side as she started to cry again.

Chapter Ten

Melody nervously smoothed down her satin skirt, checking her reflection in the mirror. It had been several months since Elisabeth's arrest, and tonight was the first time since then that she had arranged for Bobby to spend the night with a friend so she could have the night to herself.

It was a huge adjustment, suddenly having a ten-year-old boy living with her, especially under these circumstances, but things were working out. Bobby was a good kid, and he was adjusting as well as could be expected.

Elisabeth's trial was still ongoing, but given the circumstances, it was hopeful that she would get a relatively light sentence. David's properties had all been resold by the government, through Melody, and she had put the money she earned from those sales into Bobby's college fund.

Tonight, though, was finally a night to have a break and just relax. She had kept in contact with Oskar as he took care of business in the city. His adoption of Julius was almost complete. He was coming back to Blackcliff for a few days.

And they were going to dinner.

It was a date. A real, honest-to-goodness date. Melody couldn't be happier, but she was still nervous. Now that they weren't solving a murder, would they still have things to talk about? Of course they would—she had a list of topics in case things lagged. Everything would be fine.

When Oskar arrived, he handed her a potted orchid. Melody's jaw dropped at the beautiful flower, gently taking it.

"Wow. It's beautiful."

"I remember you saying you liked orchids," Oskar said with an easy smile. "I couldn't remember if you liked them better than roses, though, so..."

He pulled a dozen red roses from behind his back. Melody laughed, although it quickly turned into a giggle as he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. She gestured him in and looked around for a place to put the flowers. It was a lovely gesture. None of her previous boyfriends had ever bought her flowers, not even on Valentine's Day.

"How are things at the office going?" she asked over her shoulder, placing the orchid on the coffee table.

"With the FBI?"

"Yeah. I guess with all of your millions—"

"Billions."

"Millions, billions, whatever. More than I've ever seen. How many offices do you have, actually? Like, you have your FBI office. Where else?"

"I have an office in each of my company buildings. One in each of my homes—"

"Homes? Multiple?"

Oskar nodded.

Melody narrowed her eyes at him. "I think I hate you a little bit right now. You have too much money."

"Is money all that matters to you?" Oskar teased. He waggled his eyebrows, and Melody fought to keep herself from smiling back at him. It was a futile effort, though. "But I don't actually have an office with the FBI anymore."

Melody's eyes widened. "What? Why? Did they fire you because you followed Fezioni out here?"

"No. I quit. I can't stand taking orders, and they are just too restrictive. All their rules and their strict chain of command. I mean, I could work my way up to the top, but why bother starting at the bottom with them when I'm already at the top with all of my other enterprises? So I quit, and I'm going to focus on being an Alpha and businessman full time. I think I can do more good that way. Besides, I don't need a gun to be badass."

"That you don't."

By this time Melody had finished trimming the roses and arranged them in a vase. She shook her head as she put them on her kitchen table, narrowing her eyes slightly at Oskar.

He really did have that top dog, alpha male mentality, but quitting anything—even if he hated it—was just not in his personality. There had to be more to the story than what he was saying.

"So where does your son fit in with this?"

"I'll take some time to adjust and help Julius adjust. It's going to be a big change for both of us. But I'm going to be moving to Blackcliff, at least for the time being."

He knows the town and he's got friends in school. I want a good place for him to grow up. I've been talking with the other Shifters, and a lot of them like the idea of getting out of the city, too."

Melody nodded. She knew some people would have a problem with having so many Shifters around, but they would have to deal. She would like Oskar being in town.

"Plus I'm still going to develop that ski hill and invest in a few hotels and new restaurants around here," Oskar continued. "So it's not like I'm going to be lacking in things to do."

"Good. Because I'm not going to start chasing ghosts all over the world with you so you can be a mega FBI star. I like being a realtor right here, thank you very much."

The smile on Oskar's face faded. "Speaking of ghosts..."

She knew what he was asking. Melody put her hand on his arm and squeezed gently. "I haven't seen Cindy since you started the process to adopt Julius back into your custody. I think she's moved on. That's a good thing."

"I know. I'm glad she found some peace."

Melody cupped his face, brushing her lips against his. His arms snaked around her waist, pulling her closer, and she gasped. Her heartbeat increased as she tangled her fingers in his hair, breaching his mouth with her tongue. He opened readily for her, answering her movements with his own.

She thrust her hips forward, grinding through their clothing. A moan escaped—if they didn't get going right away, then it was doubtful that they would be leaving the house all night. His tongue swirled around hers and she decided she wasn't that hungry after all.

His hand cupped her ass. His eyes widened as he traced beneath the curve. "Are you wearing any underwear?"

Melody giggled. "A thong."

Oskar's eyes grew hooded.

"Do you have dinner reservations?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yeah. We can cancel, though." Oskar's mouth moved to her neck, sucking on the sensitive skin. Bolts of pleasure shot through her veins, pooling thick and hot in her belly. "I'm not very hungry."

"Me, either."

"Correction." Oskar pulled back, his eyes twinkling. "I am *very* hungry. For something I can't get in a restaurant."

"Me, too," Melody blurted. Reluctantly she pulled away from his arms, but only so she could grab his hand and lead him to the bedroom. Excitement coursed through her, her eyes bright as Oskar kept kissing her.

They fell into bed with a tangle of limbs, shedding clothing, their movements becoming more heated and desperate as the months of separation and tension broke free, finally letting them come together in full passion. Melody dug her fingers into Oskar's back, their gazes locked with one another, their movements in sync as he entered her.

"Is this what you wanted?" he grunted, suddenly stopping. A frown furrowed his brow. "To be responsible for a child so suddenly?"

Melody thrust her own hips forward, but finding Oskar unresponsive, she sighed. Apparently, talk came first. "No. It's not what I wanted. Did you want to become a single father?"

"No. But I want it now." Oskar smiled, almost shyly. "I'd like it better if I had someone with me, though."

"It's a little early for that, isn't it?" Melody arched a brow. "I mean... this is only our first date."

"Date? I thought this was a business meeting." He began rocking his hips again, making Melody moan, and she forgot what she was going to say. "I'd love to take you on a million dates. No, make that a billion dates. One for each of those dollars I have too many of."

"Sounds good," Melody gasped. "Now shut up and kiss me."

Oskar laughed and obeyed her.

THE END