

A Marcall's Breakfast Cafe Cozy Mystery

Diamonds and Danger



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Chapter 1



“Good morning Gladys!” I call out as our resident town gossip, and fellow witch, shows up for her usual 6:30 am breakfast burrito and coffee. It’s only been a short time since the town re-opened after the pandemic and I’m thrilled to have customers eating in the café again.

“Hello to you dear,” Gladys responds as she pauses to remove her gloves and adjust her matching hat. Today’s ensemble is a baby blue pillbox hat with a small faux bird perched on top. Gladys Miller, a tall thin woman, with a shock of unruly gray hair, always dresses to impress.

“Dressing for spring today I see.”

“You noticed!” she responds proudly as she snaps the gloves shut in her purse. “I’ll have the usual.”

I’m not sure why she bothers to request this. Damien prepares her daily vegan breakfast burrito at precisely 6:27. And it’s always ready when she enters the café at 6:30. If she ever failed to show up, we’d have to go looking for her!

I inherited my grandmother’s vegetarian breakfast café after she passed away last summer. I never planned to return to Crested Peaks, but the thought of letting my grandmother’s dream go was unbearable, so here I am. I also inherited her demanding and feisty rabbit familiars: Marshall and Marcus. The café is actually named after them: Marcall’s Breakfast Café.

“What’s fresh on the news front?” I ask. And by news, I mean gossip. Laugh if you must, but Gladys’ ear for gossip helped solve a murder last fall and keep me out of jail.

“Rumor has it that there are two reality tv stars hiding out in Old Man Finley’s place. They’ve been there for several weeks.”

“Get outta here! Which show?”

“That one where the young fella dates a whole bunch of women at once and then picks one to marry at the end.”

“Wait, I watch that one. So, hang on a second, who exactly is staying in Old Man Finley’s place?”

“I didn’t catch the specific names, but they told me it was the guy of course, and then the girl who came in 4th place. Does that mean anything to you?”

“Gladys are you sure? They didn’t say the winner?”

“Oh, they definitely didn’t say that. It wasn’t the winner, I’m positive they said 4th place. Why, is that a big deal?”

“Because he’s supposed to be engaged to the winner! If he’s hiding out in the mountains with the 4th place girl something went seriously wrong.”

Gladys shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t make the news; I just report it.”

“If people knew the two of them are hiding in Crested Peaks, they’d go nuts.”

“Who’s hiding in Crested Peaks?” Damien asks as he appears from the kitchen with Gladys’ burrito.

“Your second favorite reality tv star might be hiding at Old Man Finley’s place with the Final 4 girl.”

Damien nearly drops the burrito. “You’re kidding me.”

“That’s what Gladys heard.”

“That’s huge!”

“I know!” I shriek.

“Wow Gladys,” Damien says beaming at her in disbelief and admiration. “You always have the goods.”

“So do you!” she replies as she takes the burrito from him.

She seats herself next to the window so she can watch everything happening outside. Gladys takes her reporting role very seriously.

Then the bell for the front door chimes again. It’s not an actual bell, but a spell I conjured instead, to alert us when someone enters. There’s one tone for Supernaturals and another for the Non Supernaturals that only I can detect.

I spent most of my life trying to deny my Supernatural abilities. My parents were Supernaturals but they were also con artists who were killed by another crook when I was very young. I felt like denying my heritage would ensure that I wouldn’t turn out like them.

What I didn’t realize all those years was that they weren’t con artists because they were Supernatural. They were just con artists period. It wasn’t

until I returned to Crested Peaks that I decided to embrace my abilities. My best friend Miranda, who owns the Bean Around A Bit Coffee Shop across the street, is helping me hone my talents.

And I have to admit, if it weren't for my being a witch, I probably would have been killed by the murderer I helped catch last fall. And I'm realizing just how fun and useful witchcraft is.

But the person who walks in the door just now is most definitely a Non Supernatural and my boyfriend Drew Bailey. Who also happens to be a detective for the Crested Peaks Police Department.

And who brought me in for questioning last Fall as the primary suspect in the murder of the café's landlord. *And* who kissed me back in high school and then didn't speak to me for ten years. Yeah, it's complicated.

"Detective Bailey," Gladys beams at him. "What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here on this bright spring morning?"

"I just happened to be passing by and thought I'd stop in for a Damien Special."

Damien beams with pride and then blushes. He's made no secret of the fact he thinks Drew is H.O.T. as he likes to say. Despite being married to his husband Tom for ten years. Who also agrees my boyfriend is oh so dreamy.

Yeah, I know, it's kind of annoying really. They all think he's hot. The gays, other women – both young and old – as I watch Gladys tear her attention from the window to ogle my guy.

"Good morning Gladys," he says flashing her his patented megawatt grin.

"Hello Detective, catch any bad guys yet today?"

"Nobody yet, but the day is still young."

"You're doing a fine job young man. Although I do wish you'd wear your uniform more often. I appreciate a man in uniform."

Drew chuckles softly, "I'm a detective now Gladys. I'm no longer a beat cop in uniform."

"I suppose." Gladys sighs while I roll my eyes in the background. All this adoration just makes him cockier and bossier than he needs to be. He hated that I insisted on investigating the very same crime that threatened to put me in jail for a murder I didn't commit.

Leave this to the professionals, Char he kept telling me. The body was discovered right behind my café. And all because there were secret tunnels underneath here that no one (well almost no one) knew about.

I most definitely was not going to just leave it to the professionals whose focus was on me nearly the entire time.

“Here you go Drew, your Damien Special.”

“Aw, thanks Damien, you’re the best.”

Damien puffs his chest out at the compliment but as he turns to leave, he catches the obvious eye roll I’ve aimed in his direction, and he sticks his tongue out at me as he heads back to the kitchen.

“What are you 12? I taunt.

“Maybe!” he yells back.

The Damien Special is a black bean breakfast burrito that he created and is famous throughout the ski area. It’s a special recipe and even I don’t know exactly what’s in it. I do know it’s a mixture of eggs, beans, cheese, potatoes, grilled jalapenos, and caramelized onions, all layered with a secret sauce. It’s so amazing, people are convinced I conjured up some kind of magic to make them, but I swear it’s all Damien.

Just then Marshall and Marcus hop out of the kitchen closely followed by their feline friend Stumpy.

“Hey lady.”

I look down at them. “Yes?” I don’t know why they still insist on calling me *lady*, but now I’m used to it. They were my grandmother’s familiars, and I inherited them along with her café and her amazing Queen Anne home complete with a huge wraparound porch and spectacular mountain views.

I also inherited the ability to communicate with them. I’m the only one who can hear them, so I have to relay their messages. And yes, that was an awkward conversation to have with the new boyfriend.

I can’t communicate with their cat friend, but they do, and they pass on his messages to me.

He lives in the restaurant next door, which used to be an Italian restaurant, until that owner was also murdered last fall. Rita, the landlord of our building, only recently found a new tenant for the spot, who hasn’t moved in yet. I’m not sure where Stumpy will go if they kick him out.

I often wondered about him last winter since the restaurant was closed, but the rabbits insisted he was okay.

The rabbits pause and waggle their crooked ears at me. “Stumpy says he just saw a body under some bushes in Snowball Park.”

They tell me this so casually, like these things happen all the time in Crested Peaks. “Really, and what was he doing in the park?” I ask somewhat dubious of their claim.

“Looking for mice.”

“Okay, and what did this body look like?”

Drew glances up from his breakfast with a raised eyebrow at the word *body*. I shrug at him, still somewhat doubtful about this.

“He says it’s a man whose face is covered in blood. He smelled him and he’s certain he’s dead.”

And now *I’m* a little concerned. I look over at Drew. “What is it?” he asks.

“Stumpy claims there’s a body in Snowball Park, under the bushes, with blood on his face.”

Chapter 2



“Are you sure?”

“They don’t normally kid about these things.” I start. “It’s hard to imagine there’s an actual body in the park, but I don’t think Stumpy is making up stories. Although maybe he’s mistaken about what he saw.”

“I’ll check it out just in case,” Drew responds, pulling his radio off his hip. “This is 20 Victor. I’ve got a possible body in Snowball Park. Requesting a patrol car for assistance.”

“Copy that 20 Victor, 16 Adam responding, we’re about three minutes out.”

“Roger that.” Drew says shoving his radio back in its holster.

Ugh. I hate that I find him extra sexy when he acts all policey in front of me. It’s like I’m one of his adoring admirers. I mean I am, but he doesn’t always need to be reminded of that.

“Let’s go check out a dead body,” I say as I take off my apron.

He holds up a hand to stop me. “Whoa. *Let’s* nothing. This is official police business. We don’t know what’s really out there and I need you to stay put.”

“Oh c’mon.” I pout. “I promise I’ll stay in the background and you won’t even know I’m there. It’s my rabbits who provided the information after all.”

“Technically it was the cat.” He points out. “And I can’t believe I just said that.” He adds shaking his head with a grimace.

I get it, the whole talking animals, witchcraft thing is hard to get used to. He knew I was a witch, considering my grandmother and my parents were. But the talking animal thing really threw him for a loop.

I finally had to come clean and let him know that I was not just talking *at* the rabbits, but that we were having actual conversations.

“Yes, but if it weren’t for the rabbits’ ability to communicate with me you wouldn’t know in the first place.”

He sighs in resignation and I know I've got him.

"You're just going to follow me as soon as I leave anyway aren't you?"

I nod my head.

"Fine. But stay out of the way. I'm not sure what's actually out there until I see it. I don't want you taking any chances."

"Yes sir, I promise you won't even notice I'm there. Hey Damien!" I shout back to the kitchen. "Keep an eye on the place, would you? I'm going to check on a possible body!"

"Sure thing!" he shouts back.

I almost have to laugh because he doesn't even ask why I'm looking for a body. He gets me. To be certain I don't really think there's a dead body. I think maybe Stumpy is confused. But I'm still curious.

I follow Drew out the door, but as promised I keep my distance. The park is a short walk from the café and the patrol car pulls up just as we arrive.

"I'm told there may be a body under the bushes on the west side," Drew says as he points toward the area. We all walk that way and there's definitely something big on the ground. Drew motions for me to drop back so I do. Could Stumpy be right?

He and the patrolmen check it out up close. He scowls and plucks his radio from his belt again. "Dispatch, this is 20 Victor we have a body with what looks like a gunshot wound to the head. I need someone from homicide and the ME's office on the northwest corner of Snowball Park."

Holy crap. Stumpy was right. And maybe even murder? Drew comes over to me. "This place is about to be swarming with cops, so you to go back to work."

"Was he murdered?" I ask, in shock.

"I won't know more until we investigate the scene, so please, do me a favor and go back to Marcall's."

"Okay, call me if you need anything." I tell him reluctantly. I know when pushing it is useless.

"Will do." He responds grimly as he returns to his duties.

A body with a gunshot wound. And when I came back to Crested Peaks, I thought this place would be boring.

I walk back to the café slowly, repeatedly turning back to watch the patrolmen wind bright yellow crime scene tape around the area and shoo

away the growing crowd of gawkers.

Damien asks me as I come in through the front door, "Hey, how was the dead body?"

"They're putting up crime scene tape now. Sounds like it was a gun shot."

Damien's eyes practically bug out of his head. "What?! You were serious? I thought you were just sneaking off to make out with Detective McHotty."

"No!" I fire back. "Stumpy told the rabbits he saw a dead body in the park, so we went to verify it. McHotty—I mean Drew - said it looks like a gunshot wound."

"That's horrible! Is it someone we know?"

"He didn't say but I have to think if it was, he would have reacted a little differently."

"I can't believe that. And if it's murder, that's the third one we've had since you came back. What's up with that?"

"Very funny." I glare at him although I'm secretly wondering the same thing.

When I was in grade school, I had this friend whose grandpa hated Angela Lansbury because of the show *Murder She Wrote*. For certain, Grandpa wasn't all there, and couldn't always separate fact from fiction, but he always pointed out that wherever Jessica Fletcher went, people died. It cracked me up. But now I'm feeling a bit like Jessica Fletcher myself.

I'm still barely in the cafe when my best friend Miranda, bursts through the door. "Have you heard? There's --"

"--a dead body in the park!" Damien and I respond in unison.

"Dang, I guess you have." she laughs. "You two are getting downright scary I hope you know. So, what happened exactly? One of my customers just said it's a guy with an ax buried in his head."

"What?" I laugh. "There's no ax, he was shot."

"How do you know that? Oh. Never mind. Detective McHotty is on the case and you have the inside scoop, don't you?"

"I walked to the park with him after Stumpy told us he saw a body in the bushes. But that's all I know."

Miranda glares at me. "Hey, you knew firsthand there was a body in Snowball Park, and you didn't come and get me?"

"There wasn't time, Drew called it in and then went to check it out. I was ordered to stay out of the way and keep quiet. I really don't know anything more, except that it's a body with a gunshot wound."

"Is it somebody we know?"

"I don't think so."

"This is crazy. Another dead body in Crested Peaks."

I'm beginning to take this personally.

When four more people come into the shop looking for breakfast, I'm too busy to talk to Miranda further. We've done a brisk business this week. People are anxious to get out and about. The spring weather has been unseasonably balmy, and customers are ordering and then sitting outside.

And today we get more and more stragglers who were watching the police activity in the park, and then decide they could use some breakfast while they're in the area.

The stories get more outrageous as the morning wears on. People are convinced they alone have the inside track and are telling me that they have it on very good authority that it's a famous football player/Rockstar/actor whose body they found.

Said famous person died from a variety of causes: strangulation, beating, stabbing. There are some very active imaginations in our little mountain town.

If this keeps up it could rival the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. One woman insisted that the reason they force the public to keep back, during an investigation, is so that no one will find out that the victim was killed by the CIA. And of course, the Crested Peaks Police Department is covering it up.

There's also rumors that the victim died from the virus and they don't want the public to know that and panic, so they're keeping it under wraps. I think it will be a long time before any of us are completely comfortable with life back out in the open again.

I'm glad that Drew at least mentioned the gun shot, because there were times, during the quarantine, as a first responder, that I worried about him getting sick.

I keep hoping I'll hear from him about the case, but by late afternoon, as we get ready to close, I assume that he's busy and he'll call me when he gets the chance. If it really is a murder, he'll have his hands full.

"Way to go boss," Damien pats me on the back as I magically change the Open sign to Closed. "Business was great today!"

"I feel kind of bad though that a good chunk of that came from the fact someone died and was just left in the park."

"Have you heard anything new from Drew?"

"Nope. Not a peep. But I'm sure he's already working overtime, solving the case."

"I'm heading out now. Bubbles will be looking for a walk. But let me know if you hear anything, okay?"

Bubbles is Damien and Tom's rescued pitbull, and she even acts like a dog named Bubbles. Damien's mother in law keeps hinting she'd like a human grandchild as well, but so far, he hasn't said much about it.

I don't know what their plans are, but I assume that if and when the time comes, he'll let me know. We've grown very close in the short time that I've been here, but I don't feel like it's my business to pester him about kids. I'll leave that to his pesky mother in law.

Chapter 3



After I finish some paperwork, I call out to the rabbits hoping they're here, and not out begging for treats from someone, so I have to track them down. I told them not to interfere in the police investigation in the park, but if they happened to overhear anything important, they should feel free to let me know.

"Marshall, Marcus, it's time to go home," I call out.

The two of them scamper out of the supply closet where they probably spent most of the day napping. But as we stroll through the parking lot to my ancient Prius, I notice that Stumpy the cat from next door has followed us all the way to the car.

I assume when he realizes we're going home he'll turn back, but he doesn't. He just sits there with the rabbits, waiting for me to open the car door. As I open the door and the rabbits hop in, I bend down and tell him, "Honey, don't you think you should go back home?"

I don't really expect a response, I can only talk to my familiars, and it doesn't work for every animal. Still, I don't want to be a jerk and just say "Shoo!"

"We told him he could come home with us," Marcus explains.

"But he already has a home," I remind him.

"Not really, the new renter for Tony's old place said he had to go to the shelter, whatever that is, because she didn't want some mangy old 2-footed cat hanging around all the time. It didn't sound like a place Stumpy would like, so I told him he could live with us."

"Do you think you should have asked me first?"

"Nah," says Marshall.

Sometimes I wonder why I even bother. But while both rabbits have jumped into the passenger seat, Stumpy remains on the ground looking up at me expectantly.

"What is he doing?" I ask the rabbits.

“He needs you to pick him up because he can’t jump very high on account of his stumps. Also, we’ll need to get some step stools for him so he can get up on the couch and the bed.”

“Well of *course* we will.” I wonder if the rabbits understand sarcasm as I pick up the cat and put him in the passenger seat with them. I suppose even if they do, they don’t really care. They’re obviously used to getting their way, and they’re the only living reminder I have left of my Gran. But do they have to be such bossy little old men?

Later that night, while watching tv with Stumpy, who's curled up next to me on the couch and snoring softly, I finally get a text from Drew.

Drew: Sorry for the late text. I've been working non-stop today, but I promise I'll make it up to you tomorrow. You won't believe how this case is shaping up.

Rats. I'm disappointed, but I'm getting used to life as a cop's girlfriend. Drew works a lot. And often weird hours. He doesn't always get nights and weekends off.

But now I'm really curious about what's going on with the case. I don't think it's anyone we know because I'm sure he would have already told me that. But what exactly could have him this busy and secretive?



The next morning, just as the sun cracks on the horizon, the four of us get into my car and head to the cafe. The air is just starting to warm up and smell of spring blossoms and it's glorious. I breathe deep and listen as the birds start their day too.

But I'm worried about the body they found yesterday. I still haven't heard anything new from Drew, and there was only a tiny blurb on the internet about a body in the park. It said they're withholding names until relatives can be notified. Nothing about a murder, and nothing about a gunshot wound, which means the police didn't release that information to the media.

As soon as I pull up to Marcall's, and open the car door, the three boys scramble to get out and look for adventure. Marshall and Marcus are wondering if they might find a body today. I tell them please don't.

While I don't know *exactly* how old the rabbits are, I do know they're very old. My grandmother won them in a poker game many decades

ago and they've been in the family ever since. So far, Gran and I are the only ones they've communicated with though.

As for Stumpy, he claims he's a war veteran who lost his back legs in an unfortunate enemy ambush. I'm not sure how true that is, but he gets along remarkably well for a two-legged cat. And now I guess he's part of the family too. He's certainly not as cantankerous as the rabbits, so he has that going for him.

Damien pulls up right after we do. "Girl!" he shouts out his car window. "I can't believe you didn't call me last night! What's going on with the investigation?"

I shrug, "I know about as much as you do. I only got a text from Drew saying I'd never believe what's going on."

"That sounds bad."

"My thoughts exactly. He said he'd make it up to me today which better include filling me in on everything."

Damien and I start on the day's breakfast right away. He tells me he's inventing a special donut and I'm all for it. The world can never have too many types of donuts.

Finally, after what seems like a very long morning, Drew walks in the café looking like he's been up all night.

"You look like you need a bucket of coffee."

"That bad huh?" he grimaces as he rubs his hand across an unshaven chin.

"No, the sexy, devil-may-care look is in these days."

"Sexy? Maybe I should work all night more often."

"Do you want me to ask Damien to make a pot of coffee for you? Or I could run across the street to Miranda's and get some."

"What I could really use is some breakfast and a big glass of oj. And then a shower."

"I can definitely get you breakfast and juice, but as for showers, we took those out last week."

"Ah, just my luck. What's the special of the day?"

"Damien has prepared a sweet potato, black bean, egg, and avocado burrito. How does that sound?"

"That sounds amazing! Throw in some hash browns, too would you?"

"Hey Damien! Drew wants the day's special with hash browns!" I shout back to the kitchen.

"Coming right up!" he responds.

Since I know Damien will insist on hearing what Drew has to say anyway, I fill him in on the latest news about how Stumpy now lives with me, courtesy of the rabbits.

Damien whips it together in record time and plops it down in front of Drew. "Did I miss anything?"

"Nope. I was just telling him about Stumpy."

"Oh good," he says as wait for Drew to start talking. Drew narrows his eyes as he regards the two of us crowding the counter and staring at him.

"Is it all right if I eat a few bites first?"

"Sure!" I tell him as we continue to look on in anticipation.

Drew digs into his burrito with Damien and myself silently counting each bite.

After several bites he finally sets it down. "Okay, here's the deal. You can't tell anyone else what I'm about to tell you. I'm serious, okay? There's a reason we haven't made any of this public. The body we found in the park yesterday belongs to Vinny 'Bubblegum' Rossini."

Drew pauses for dramatic effect. He expects us to be shocked. Maybe even horrified.

Instead we look at each other and immediately burst into laughter.

"What's so funny?" Drew looks aghast.

"Bubblegum!" I squeal as we break into laughter again.

"You make it sound like he's some kind of mobster." Damien titters. "Ohhhh Vinny 'Bubblegum' Rossini is in town. Look out everybody."

Drew glares at us like we're children he caught whispering in class. Then he takes another bite of his burrito. "That's because he is."

"Is what?" I ask. I still don't get this.

"A mobster," Drew replies, calmly taking a big swig of his orange juice.

"You're serious?" Damien asks.

"He got the nickname 'Bubblegum' from the fact he's never without gum. And he's a high-level operative in the Calazzo crime family syndicate. One of the FBI's most wanted for over a decade."

Damien blanches at the news. “What is the mafia doing in Crested Peaks?”

“That’s exactly what we’re trying to figure out. And why order a hit on him? Was it a rival crime family? An internal hit? We don’t know.”

“No wonder you were so busy last night!”

“And the FBI is breathing down our necks on top of everything else.”

I wonder what could be in Crested Peaks that attract the mafia? Back in the Gold Rush days, when it was the wild west, there was plenty of crime, but I can’t see how any of that would apply now.

“Did anyone report hearing a gunshot two nights ago?” I ask.

“It appears they used a silencer. And no,” Drew continues. “I can already see the wheels turning.” He pokes me in the forehead for emphasis. “Stay out of this Char. This is very dangerous. Vinny is wanted for killing dozens of men and women who appeared to betray the Calazzos. Whoever got to him is probably worse. Do *not* go poking into this.”

“I was only thinking out loud, that’s all.”

“Make sure that’s all it is. I mean it.”

After Drew finishes his breakfast, he thanks Damien for the delicious and much needed meal. He warns me one more time to stay out of the investigation before heading home to shower.

Chapter 4



Miranda rushes in, almost out of breath, after he leaves. "What did he say?"

I peek at Damien. In all the excitement we kind of forgot Miranda would want to know.

"Oh, c'mon you guys! You know you can tell me. We're a team."

"Drew has to know we'd be telling Miranda," Damien points out.

"True." I admit, albeit reluctantly. "The body they found belonged to some high-level mobster. Like a big deal kind of FBI most wanted type. And now the CPPD and the FBI need to figure out why someone like that is in Crested Peaks. And why someone else would want him dead because of it."

"The mafia. In Crested Peaks? That's just bizarre."

"Exactly. What could the mafia want with this town? Sure, we have amazing views and incredible weather year-round but that's hardly a huge money-making proposition." This still has me befuddled.

"Diamonds?" Miranda asks.

I laugh. "Diamonds? In Colorado? I know the state was pretty much founded on the Gold Rush, but we don't have diamonds here. Do we?" I'm convinced Miranda has us mixed up with some other place. Like an entirely different country.

"The Colorado mountains are actually full of gems according to Milo. Diamonds, sapphires, opals, peridot, lots of good stuff."

Milo is the town librarian and a Colorado history buff, plus Miranda's boyfriend, so if she got her background from him maybe she doesn't have it mixed up after all.

"How come I've never heard about any of this?"

"I don't know, you'd have to ask Milo more about it. I suppose part of it is that the terrain isn't exactly friendly here. You don't just walk across a mountain peak in search of diamonds. They learned that the hard way in the 1850's when they came here looking for gold. And a lot of the mountain

areas are federally protected lands, so even if you figured out a way to get to the gems, it's not like they're there for the taking."

"I don't know, it still seems so unlikely that the mob would come to Colorado looking for diamonds. That's more like a plot line from a movie."

"Don't look at me, I just work here! And speaking of working, I should get back to the shop. It's getting busy enough that I can start hiring back my staff and then some. But I wanted to buzz over here and see if you had any news."

"Promise you won't discuss this with anyone else. Damian and I are already under strict orders not to share what we know."

"My lips are sealed!" Miranda chimes as she sails out the door making a zipper motion across her mouth.

Damien pokes his head out of the kitchen. "Did I hear someone say diamonds?"

"Did you know that we have gemstones like diamonds and sapphires in Colorado?"

"Nuh uh!"

"Miranda said that Milo told her there's all kinds of that stuff in the Colorado mountains."

"I only know about the gold."

"Me too. I wonder if there's enough of these supposed gems to attract organized crime."

Just then we hear shouts mixed with drilling and hammering noises outside. We peer out the front window to see a work truck bearing the sign "Signs R Us" on their door. The new tenants!

We scurry outside to see what we can find out. Several work men are hoisting a large wooden sign up to the front of the building: *Alice's Tavern*.

We turn to each other excitedly. Sounds promising! We try to lurk around out front hoping to catch a glimpse of the new owner. But the workmen shoo us away from the front of the building. They don't want anyone in the way while they're lifting such a heavy sign in the air.

The windows are still covered with butcher block paper inside, but we know they haven't moved anything in yet. It's been vacant for months.

We step back several feet to watch them work. It's a bigger sign than most of the shops have along the street, and it takes two men to attach it to the front of the building, while another stands below giving orders.

In the blink of an eye one of the pulleys breaks and gives way, and the heavy sign swings out of control. The men on the ladder shout to the one on the ground but it's too late. The man underneath the sign is in shock. It's like he's cemented to the spot and can't move.

I concentrate hard and manage to throw him several feet away. It isn't pretty, but as the sign crashes to the ground he's no longer in its path. The man on the ground lumbers to his feet while the other two scramble down the ladders to reach him.

"Duke! Are you okay?"

"Uhhh yeah, I think so. I skinned up my elbow but it's better than getting hit by that sign."

"I had no idea you could move so fast!" The second man exclaims.

The man on the ground laughs nervously. "Yeah neither did I."

"C'mon you guys we better get the sign up before Alice gets here."

"You sure you're okay man? That was a close call."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. Let's get back to work." All three of them are visibly shaken and the man I threw to the side is pale, but at least they look like they're okay. Onlookers gather trying to figure out what all the commotion was.

Drew turns to me. "I take it you're not going to tell them?"

I brush it off. "Nope."

"That guy could have been injured really bad. Or even killed! You saved him Charlotte."

"That's okay. I don't need credit. Especially since I pretty much threw him into the ground. It would have been more impressive if I'd been able to stop the sign in the first place."

"Whatever you say boss. I still think you did a pretty amazing thing."

"I'm dying to meet the new tenant!" I say trying to change the subject as Damien and I slowly return to Marcall's.

"At least we know what kind of place it will be now. I bet they'll have beer and burgers."

"And french fries!" I remind him.

Chapter 5



Later that afternoon I'm surprised when an older woman with a tie-dyed t-shirt and long swirling skirt comes in to Marcall's. Her long silver hair perches atop her head in a messy bun and the numerous bracelets she wears on each wrist jangle merrily. "Good afternoon!" I greet her. "Welcome to Marcall's."

"Well hello there new neighbor!"

I smile. "Are you Alice by any chance?"

"In the flesh!" She gives me a half curtsy by way of greeting. "Are you Charlotte?"

"I am!"

"I've been eager to meet you! Rita told me you have a vegetarian breakfast cafe."

"I sure do, it was my grandmother's, but she passed away last summer, and I inherited it."

"Well I'm from Chicago where I also run the original Alice's Tavern, but I decided it was time to get out of the city and live in a place where I could actually relax once in a while. Take up hiking or fishing or whatever seems appropriate. Maybe I'll even learn to snowboard."

I like this Alice person. "And I notice you've already adopted the appropriate lingo."

"Oh yes, my grandson told me about that right away. The crucial difference between skiing and snowboarding. He said one should not mix up the two for fear of some kind of nameless, but harsh penalty."

"And I don't ski or snowboard anyway, so I can't really help you there, but we often have instructors who come in here to eat, so if you're looking for one next winter they'll be easy to find."

She claps her hands together excitedly. "Delightful! I know I'll love it here."

"When do you hope to open?"

"Tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow?" I'm completely confused. How is that possible? They haven't even moved in yet. The only thing they've done is install the sign.

"I bet you're wondering how that's possible aren't you?" she asks, a mischievous glint in her eye.

"I am. You haven't moved anything in yet."

"But that's where you're wrong. Come take a look dear."

I follow her out the door. This is puzzling news. The first activity we've seen at all over here, after they moved Tony's stuff out, was the new sign. How could they--

"Whoa!" I exclaim. "When did you move in?" The butcher block paper is torn down allowing me to look in through the window. The entire place has been redone in the style of a dark and rustic tavern. Gone are most of the Italian fine dining fixtures replaced with beer and liquor themed signs, plus a bar in the center.

For a second, I wonder if Alice is a witch, but then I remember that the door chime identified her as a Non Supernatural. And even if she were it would take incredible talent to pull off something like this overnight. Contrary to popular belief we can't just conjure up something like an entire restaurant from thin air.

"My crew has been working at night all week and they finished yesterday. We got lucky and secured all the permits in record time. We were just waiting for the transformation to be complete."

"That's great!" I tell her. "You must be very excited." She obviously has a hell of a crew to get something like this put together in a matter of days. And even in a small town like Crested Peaks, getting the right work permits can be a serious hassle but more power to her, I guess.

"Rita tells me you're a witch."

"I am!" I respond. It still feels a little strange to admit that so easily now. Not that I'm ashamed of being a witch. My Gran was a witch after all, but in my grandmother's day they kept it hidden for fear of reprisal.

But now, people find it rather interesting. And ever since I realized it was something to be proud of, I no longer hide it either. And yet I'm still a little surprised whenever it rolls off my tongue.

"Marvelous! I think we're going to have a lot of fun. Stop in soon and we'll have a beer together. I've recruited some of the very best Colorado breweries to keep us supplied with craft beer, so you can take your pick.

Why don't you and your handsome boyfriend come to the Grand Opening tomorrow night? Everything is on the house for my special guests."

"Sounds like fun! Welcome to Crested Peaks Alice. We're thrilled you're here!" I head back to Marcall's relieved that our new neighbor seems like she'll fit right in. It's taken so long to get a tenant in place we were beginning to wonder.

Given that the reason it was open in the first place was that the previous owner was stabbed to death, right in the middle of his kitchen, we thought Rita, the poor landlord, may never rent it.



It's such a gorgeous spring day that right before closing I tell Damien I'm going for a walk. As I stroll along Main St, I pause to enjoy all the flowers and trees bursting with blooms.

Shop keepers are out and about greeting people, and many of them are displaying extra decorations and flowers. Everybody is in an especially good mood now that business is picking up.

I'm grateful for this gorgeous day and that I live in a beautiful town. The mountain peaks surround us, and even though I see them every single day I'm also still in awe every single day at their miraculous beauty.

They're still topped with leftover spring snow this time of year, but the aspen trees are budding with green leaves while the wildflowers burst forth in a multitude of colors.

I'm so busy admiring Mother Nature's paint pallet that I run right into a man who apparently isn't stopping to smell the roses. "Watch where you're going lady!" he snarls.

"I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, how about a little less daydreaming and a little more awareness of where you're walking? You don't own the sidewalk."

"Again, I'm terribly sorry."

He glares at me one more time and stomps off with a huff. Well! Excuse me! It's not like I ran into him on purpose. Or that I didn't apologize. Sour puss.

It's rare actually to come across someone like that in Crested Peaks. The town is usually bustling with low key tourists enjoying the experience, or with locals who are already used to the laid-back atmosphere.

Not only does this guy's personality stick out like a sore thumb, so does his appearance. His expensive tailored suit and perfectly quaffed hairdo give him away as a non-local. Oh well. I glare back at him and then continue on my way. I refuse to let someone like that ruin my walk.

When I find myself in front of the library I wonder if Miles is in. Ever since Miranda told me about the Colorado mountains being a treasure trove of rare gems, I've been curious to learn more.

What if it's true? What if the mafia is hanging around Crested Peaks because they want to smuggle diamonds? Drew should know about things like this. Even though he told me not to investigate, it's not like I'm investigating a person, just things.

And maybe I'm just interested in learning more about Colorado and its history. Diamonds are interesting after all. And it could be fun to learn more about what's buried deep in these gorgeous mountains. By the time I've reached the library door I've almost convinced myself this is pure curiosity and nothing more. And maybe I'll even check out a book while I'm here.

I find Miles in his office, with the door open, so I assume he's not too busy. I gently tap on the door frame to get his attention. He breaks into a surprised smile when he sees me. "Hey Charlotte! What a nice surprise! Come on in! What brings you by the library today?" he asks motioning to a chair in front of his desk.

"I started this as just a walk but when I ended up here, I thought I'd pop in to say hello."

"I'm glad you did. We didn't get to see much of you during the quarantine."

"Isn't that weird? People who lived and worked just a few blocks away didn't see each other for weeks on end."

"Yeah," he sighs. "It was a brutal time for so many. And I missed the library. It isn't just a job for me. Books and learning are my passion. There are so many stories here. And facts and figures and art and everything!"

His enthusiasm makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. "And ironically, just when people most needed the books here, they couldn't access them." I point out.

He grimaces and puts his hand over his heart. "It broke my heart not being able to supply readers with books. I mean if books aren't an essential business what is, right? I was glad they could at least access the ebooks if

they wanted to, but I would have been happy to hand deliver each and every book, anyone needed if I'd been allowed to."

I don't doubt that for a second. "Did Miranda tell you that the new restaurant next door to Marcall's is Alice's Tavern?"

"No, she didn't. I wonder why?"

"She probably didn't have a chance to yet. I just found out myself this morning. Their grand opening is tomorrow night. You guys should come!"

"That sounds like so much fun. I've missed just hanging out with people, haven't you?"

"Yes! And this grand opening could be one of the biggest events this town has seen in a long time."

"Hey, speaking of big events, do you know anything more about the body they found in Snowball Park? That's pretty scary to think we could have another murder in Crested Peaks. Especially so soon after the last one happened."

"No, the police are being pretty tight lipped about the whole thing. Drew isn't sharing much either."

Miles laughs. "Is that because he doesn't want you investigating the case on your own?"

"No, that's not it. Okay, maybe." I glare at him. "Just because I'm a curious person doesn't mean I'm investigating. I just like to know things."

He looks doubtful. "You'll get no argument from me. I work in a library after all."

"Actually, I have a question you could probably help with." That segued easier than I thought it might. Or at least it did in *my* mind. "Miranda mentioned you once told her that the Colorado mountains might have diamonds in them."

"Oh, yes, definitely. Most people don't even realize it but the northern part of Colorado, in the late 90s, had the only modern diamond mine in the US."

"In the 1890s?" I ask confused.

"No, the late 1990s."

"So as recent as 25 years ago they were mining for diamonds in Colorado?"

"Yes ma'am. I told you most people don't even know that."

"Are they still mining there?"

"Nope, the mine shut down around the year 2000."

"Does the US have a lot of places with diamonds? I always just assumed people found them in South Africa but that's about it."

"There was an area in Arkansas that had a mine operating in the early 1900s, but otherwise no."

"So, it's kind of amazing that they've found diamonds in Colorado." Dating Miles must be a nonstop stream of information. No wonder Miranda finds him so fascinating. And hot too.

I have to admit, he's got this hot nerd thing going with his round glasses and sandy blonde hair that always seems *just woke up* messy. She said he's always trying to tame it, but it never quite does what he wants it to. If it were me, I'd just leave it messy.

"Of course it's amazing!" he tells me.

"Is that the only place they've found diamonds, or have they located them anywhere else in Colorado?"

Milo runs his hands through his messy hair while deep in thought. "It's funny you ask that, because it's been rumored for over a century that there are diamond producing volcanic pipes in some of the mountain regions, and one of them isn't far from here actually.

"It's called Gulver's Peak. But no one, that we know of, has ever been lucky enough to actually find them. There are even stories dating clear back to the Colorado Gold Rush that some of them either found diamonds, and didn't tell anyone, or some that were sure they knew where the diamonds were, but died trying to get to them. Who knows what the real story is."

My mouth drops. "So, we could be this close--" I hold my fingers up to indicate a tiny amount. "--to unmined diamonds right this moment?"

Miles shrugs. "I suppose. We have a great book here that you can check out if you want. It has tons of information on the different gemstones and minerals we have in Colorado. It tells you where you can expect to find them and all sorts of good stuff. It's a popular book, but I can see if it's in right now."

"Sure, why not!" With Drew so wrapped up in this case I need something to do to keep me occupied, other than worrying about why a high-level mobster was murdered near my restaurant. Learning more about all the hidden treasures in Colorado's mountains sounds kind of fun actually.

Miles checks the database on his computer. "Okay great, it's here, so I'll take you to it." He leads me through a winding maze of bookshelves which brings me back to my childhood where I spent many an afternoon devouring books.

I marvel at the number of books and the authors who sat in front of a typewriter, or a computer monitor, and took the time to write down words, one after the other until it made an entire book.

I breathe deep enjoying the smell of ink and paper. And then I sneeze. Several people look up from their books to glare at me for disturbing the peace. While I sometimes miss the experience of spending time in a library, I definitely enjoy being able to download a book instantly to my e-reader.

When we get to the spot where the book should be, Miles bends down and frowns.

"Is anything wrong?" I ask, noticing the scowl on his face.

He props his chin against his hand as he scans the shelf. "It's supposed to be here, and it should be in this exact spot," he explains, pointing to an open space left by the book's absence.

"Did someone return it to the wrong spot?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." He grimaces as he expands his search to nearby shelves. "Unfortunately, I don't see it anywhere around here, somebody may have used it as a reference and then didn't put it back where it belongs. It really bugs me when they do that by the way!"

"It's okay, if you happen to come across it though you can just let me know."

"I'll flag it in the system so if someone spots it, they'll know to save it up front for you, okay?"

"That's awesome. Thanks Miles. See you tomorrow night at the opening for Alice's Tavern."



By the time I return to Marcall's we're wrapping up for the day. Just a few stragglers remaining. Miranda pokes her head in the door while I'm cleaning up, setting off the Supernatural tone in the doorway. "Hey, you want to work on some magic tonight?"

"Yes, please!"

"I'll be over at 7."

"Okay, see you then."

After nearly 20 years of pretending I wasn't a witch, my skills are lacking to say the least, and there are a lot of things I don't know. My Gran tried to encourage me as a teen, but after what I'd been through with my parents I refused, and she didn't push it.

She had the wisdom to realize that someday if I decided to practice witchcraft, I'd find a way to learn. I feel guilty for not taking advantage of her talent when I had the chance, but Miranda has been a very good teacher so far.

After we close for the day the four of us troop out to my car. Stumpy is already fitting in and seems perfectly comfortable with the routine.

Chapter 6



At 7 pm on the dot Miranda shows up brimming with ideas about what she wants me to work on next. One is the ability to repel things by turning them around and forcing them to go the opposite direction. Incredibly helpful, but also incredibly difficult depending on what I'm trying to turn around.

When a deranged murderer held me at gunpoint in the Marcall's kitchen last year I caught him off guard by flinging bakeware at his head. I bashed him hard too. Broke his nose and gave him a concussion.

When it was all over, and I was safe, Damien complained that I ruined one of his best pans by leaving a huge dent in it. If only I'd had the ability to pick out his least favorite pans to pelt at the killer's head!

What we're working on tonight is much harder. It pretty much defies the concept of *an object in motion tends to remain in motion* because we're not just stopping it, we're then sending it back to where it came from.

But witchcraft often defies the laws of physics so here we are. I think about how I wish Drew could do this, just in case he's ever shot at. But as Miranda tells me, stopping something like a bullet is incredibly advanced magic. It's not as easy as they lead us to believe in the books and movies.

We start with a pillow, so when I mess up, as Miranda assures me I'll do, it won't hurt. Hurt my pride maybe but won't break anything. Although now that I think of it, I put all the breakable things in the other room. Just in case.

Magic that's done on the fly, almost by instinct, requires intense concentration. It's one thing to open a locked door by focusing on it. It's entirely another to fully concentrate on something that's winging straight for my head.

The first time Miranda tosses the sofa pillow at me I smack it away with my hand.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

No kidding.

The second time she does it I duck. "If you aren't taking this seriously..." she warns.

"I can't help it! It's instinct to move when something is speeding towards a person's head you know!"

"Me barely tossing a pillow in your direction is hardly speeding. And you have to override your instincts by focusing on your powers! Let's try it again."

This time I force myself to concentrate on the pillow instead of ducking, and it hits me in the face.

"That's better!"

"Better for who?" I ask.

Once again, I get hit in the face. "You have to keep your eyes open!"

Crap. This is so much harder than I realized. I have to concentrate as hard as I can at the object ricocheting toward my head and keep my eyes open.

After about six times of getting smacked in the face with the pillow, I finally manage to stop it right before it hits me, and it drops to the ground. "There you go!" Miranda shouts.

"But I'm supposed to aim it in the opposite direction." I protest.

"At this point I think you'd best just concentrate on stopping it. You need to walk before you can run."

Miranda throws the pillow at my head another dozen times, each time she throws it a bit harder, and each time I manage to stop it before it hits my head. On the 12th try it kind of sort of wobbles a bit in the air before it falls to the ground. I'm pretty sure I was *this* close to moving it in the opposite direction.

After nearly an hour of dealing with Miranda throwing pillows at me, with increasing force, I'm easily stopping it before it gets to me and then reversing it somewhat, but without nearly as much force as she's throwing it. "That's okay. This is a tricky skill to master and you're doing great so far. Let's do one last time and call it a night. Now really focus this time. Give it everything you've got."

I'm so ready for this practice session to be done, and to pour myself a glass of wine, that I hyper focus on the pillow the moment it leaves Miranda's hand. In fact, I'm so focused that I stop it mid-flight and send it straight back, hitting her in the face.

I'm elated and horrified at the same time. Miranda stumbles backwards in surprise while the rabbits laugh uproariously. And if you've never heard a rabbit laugh, you're missing out.

"That was impressive, " Miranda says in a very measured tone. "And now you owe me a glass of wine." She looks over at the rabbits. "Is it just me or are they laughing?"

"They're laughing."

"Stinkers."

We settle down on the couch with some wine and a small cheese plate. A much-deserved reward if you ask me. "Drew working overtime on the murder these days?" Miranda asks.

"I've barely seen him since it happened. They're working with the FBI and it's all very secretive. I know they're extremely concerned about why organized crime has shown up here of all places. "

"Miles mentioned that you stopped by the library today."

"He was very helpful. He says there's a book I should read. It's all about Colorado's gemstones. But it wasn't where it's supposed to be, so I guess I'll just have to wait on that."

"Do you really think it could have something to do with diamonds? Seems kind of far-fetched? Even though I'm the one who brought it up in the first place?" She laughs. "It was the only thing I could think of at the time."

"I guess, but it seems like anything can happen around here. After all, who knew that there was an entire underground tunnel system used for smuggling during the Gold Rush, and that it led to my very own cafe?"

"If organized crime is checking out our area it would have to be for something huge wouldn't it? Something they couldn't really get anywhere else. And according to what Miles said it sounds like diamonds could be it."

"Wouldn't it be wild if it were true? Aside from the whole murder and organized crime thing of course. We could be sitting on diamonds and not even know it?"

At that we both look down at my couch and then burst out laughing. "I said the almost the exact same thing to Miles!"

"And that's why we're best friends!" Miranda exclaims.

We spend the next hour comparing customers who frequent both of our places and going over the latest gossip from Gladys. We've been on high alert hoping for glimpses of the reality tv stars. We wonder if it would

be possible to sneak up to Old Man Finley's place to see if we could catch one of them.

Miranda finally stretches out her legs in front of her. "I guess I should be getting home now. The coffee world comes early these days."

"So does the breakfast world!"

Just as I see Miranda to the door, Drew shows up with a bouquet of fresh spring flowers. "Looks like I'm leaving just in time," Miranda says tilting an eyebrow at me. "Don't worry Andrew, I was just leaving! You have your girl all to yourself now."

Drew smiles and nods his head. He looks more tired than ever. "These must be for me. Although the rabbits would like to eat them if given the chance."

"Uhhh no, they're for you. To look at. Not to eat."

"Thank you. That's very sweet of you. I'll get a vase for them."

"I feel bad that I haven't been around lately, but this case is just kicking all our butts."

"Any new leads?"

Drew slides his hand down his face and sighs in frustration. He looks defeated. "Our intelligence tells us that the mafia boss known as The Jackal is either headed here or is here already and that's a really bad sign. It means that organized crime has a vested interest in Crested Peaks."

"The Jackal?" I'd laugh if Drew didn't look so worried. "Do they all have nicknames? First we have Bubblegum and now the boss who goes by Jackal?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "The worst part is we don't actually know who this guy is. There's no known picture of him on record. The FBI has come close to nabbing him before, but not close enough to identify him. He's one of the most dangerous and wanted men in the world."

"But you still don't know exactly why Bubblegum showed up in the park dead or why organized crime is interested in Crested Peaks?"

"No, we don't know for sure. We obviously have leads that we're running down, and several working theories, but not of them are rock solid so far."

"Would you like to hear my theory?"

"Sure!"

"Diamonds!"

"Diamonds?"

"Yes, it's the only thing that makes sense. I'm assuming that for organized crime to be setting up shop in Crested Peaks we'd need to have something worth a lot of money, otherwise why bother?"

"Go on."

"Miles was telling me--"

"--you told Miles?"

"No! But Miranda—"

"—you told Miranda."

"Well yeah, but you knew that would happen."

"I did."

I pause, waiting for him to say something more. When he doesn't, I continue with my theory.

"Miranda mentioned that Colorado mountains are full of unknown gemstones. Like, really valuable gemstones and minerals, and that Miles was the one who told her about that once. So, I asked him about it. He said we actually have diamonds here in Colorado and it's rumored that there's an ancient volcano buried near here in Gulver's Peak and it contains unmined diamonds."

I look at him expectantly, waiting for him to be excited that I've blown his whole case wide open. Instead he just stares back at me blankly.

"But what do you think of my theory?"

"Anything is a possibility. Although that's remote."

I pout.

"All we have so far is a dead mobster. We don't know who killed him. It's usually either one of their own, looking to move up in the hierarchy, or it's a rival crime family hoping to send a message. But in this case, we still don't have a solid lead to go on. We're investigating every possibility."

"So, you'll look into the diamond smuggling."

"When I get the chance, yes."

"Are you still up for going to the grand opening of Alice's Tavern tomorrow night?"

"Yes, I'm taking the night off no matter what!"

Chapter 7



Morning seems to come quicker than usual. It's never a good idea to stay up late when you have to be alert and friendly by 6 am.

But after the lunch crowd has filed out, I decide to update our inventory count. I never realized how much paperwork is involved in running a restaurant. I keep telling myself I need an assistant and now that we're operating at full steam again, maybe I should interview some people.

I hear the chime indicating a Non Supernatural has walked in the door, but I'm stunned when I see who it is. It's the rude guy from the sidewalk yesterday.

"Is it too late to order?" he asks.

Well hello to you too. "Of course not! What can I get for you?"

"I'm in the mood for pancakes."

I hand him a list of the various pancake specials we have for the day. "We have several different types of pancakes, we have a delicious vegan ginger lemon pancake that's out of this world, or if there's something different you'd like--"

"--Plain pancakes are fine." He interrupts

Why doesn't that surprise me? I let Damien know I need a stack of plain pancakes while I keep a watchful eye on the stranger. He's definitely not from around here. He's in another expensive suit and he's carrying a briefcase. Who carries a briefcase anymore?

"What brings you to Crested Peaks?"

"Business."

"What kind of business?"

He looks annoyed. "Just business."

This guy is really bugging me. I continue to watch him when Damien tells me the pancakes are up. I take them from the order window and place them, along with some silverware, in front of the Creepy Stranger as I've now decided to call him. "One order of fresh pancakes. What kind of syrup would you like? We have several different flavors--"

"--Plain is fine."

Who eats pancakes without syrup? Now I really don't trust him.

When he opens his briefcase to pull out a file, I make a yip noise and immediately cover my mouth with my hand. There's a thick book on Colorado gemstones under the file and I know it's the one from the library!

He obviously stole it because he didn't want anyone to know he was checking into diamond mining. Oh crap, what do I do now? Just act cool. Pretend you didn't see anything.

Creepy Stranger catches me staring wide eyed anyway and slams the briefcase shut. I'll just be cool until he leaves. But maybe I should call Drew and let him know there's a criminal eating plain pancakes at Marcall's right now. But if I call him, the mobster will hear me. I'll text him instead.

Me: Are you busy?

No, wait, that sounds weird. Are you busy? There's a mobster in the cafe.

Me: I need you to come over here asap.

No, wait, what if I'm wrong? I'll scare Drew to death and then he'll be furious that I dragged him here on a wild goose chase. Think, Charlotte, think. What should I say?

Me: If you're not too busy right now I think a mobster is enjoying plain pancakes at Marcall's.

Ugh. I don't know the protocol for alerting the police to a potential suspect. Why does this have to be so hard?

I slink into the kitchen never taking my eyes off Creepy Stranger until I close the door.

"What are you doing?" Damien asks so abruptly he startles me.

"Shhhhh!" I scold him waving my hand in a downward motion to get him to lower his voice.

"Why are we whispering?" he whispers.

I shake my head and point out toward the dining area. Damien tries to peek through the order window, but I pull him down low.

"What is wrong with you?" he hisses.

"The guy eating the pancakes is part of a crime family."

"Are you kidding me?"

"No! Why would I joke about something like that?"

"Did you let Drew know?"

"No. Not yet."

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know for absolute certain he’s in the mob. I’m just reasonably sure.”

Damien gives me that look.

“If I call Drew down here and it turns out he’s just a rude businessman from Denver or something then he’ll be mad at me because he’s busy trying to track down the real mobsters.”

“But what if you’re right?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying! If I am right, we have to keep an eye on him.”

Damien peeks up through the window again. “He’s gone.”

“No!” I stand up to see that he has indeed, gone. “Rats! Good thing I got a picture.” I snapped it with my phone when Creepy Stranger wasn’t looking, so I can show it to Drew and he can run it through their database, or whatever he normally does, and see who this guy really is.



Alice’s Tavern is hopping that evening. A band plays popular tunes in the background and neighbors are greeting neighbors. Happy to see each other and be able to socialize again. Alice greets us the moment we set foot in the door. “Howdy neighbor!”

“Hello Alice!” I shout over the music. “You have quite the party going here.”

“Isn’t it marvelous? I love Crested Peaks! And this must be your beau.”

“Yes, this is Andrew. Andrew this is Alice, Crested Peaks newest entrepreneur.”

“I’m glad you decided to give our sleepy little town a chance. I know Rita has been eager to get a new tenant in here. It’s been too long.” Drew tells her.

“Yes, it’s a shame what happened to the previous tenant and all. But Rita was happy to get a new one and while she drives a hard bargain she gave me a great deal on the place.”

“Jordan!” She snaps her fingers at a nearby waiter. “Get these folks a table and whatever they want okay?”

Jordan scurries over. “Right this way please,” he says as he directs us to the nearest open spot.

"Can I get you started with a craft beer?"

"That would be great. What do you have in an IPA?" I love IPA's. The hoppier the better. Drew is a big sissy and can't handle them. He complains they're too bitter, so he always opts for a wheat beer.

"We have a triple dry hop from a brewery in Ft Collins I'm sure you'll like."

"I'll take it!"

"And for you sir?"

Drew looks at me questioningly. "What do you have in a blonde ale?" I ask the waiter on Drew's behalf.

"We have a seasonal spring ale with peach."

"Oh, that's perfect." I tell him as Drew rolls his eyes at me. It's not my fault his girlfriend has to order beer for him.

I lower my voice which makes it extra hard to hear over the loud music. "I have something to show you."

"In public?" Drew asks. "Although that could be interesting." He muses.

I glare at him. "I'm trying to be serious here!"

He raises his hands in defeat. "All right, I apologize, what's up?"

"I'm pretty sure I've seen a member of the Calazzo crime family around town and he came into the café today and had pancakes. Plain pancakes I might add. With no syrup. Who does that? I think he's The Jackal!"

From the look on Drew's face I'm thinking I should have left out the rant about the pancakes.

"I even got a picture of him. He just looks creepy, don't you think?"

"Charlotte, I already warned you not to get involved in this."

"I did not go out looking for this, he came into the café all on his own." I show Drew the picture I took earlier. It's a little blurry but you can still mostly make out the guy's face.

"I have no idea who that guy is."

"Can't you just run him through your crime database or whatever and see what turns up?"

"On what grounds?" Drew asks as he looks around worried someone might hear us discussing this. "We don't just investigate people based on their pancake preference and the fact you think he 'looks creepy.'"

“It’s not just that! There’s a book in the library on Colorado gemstones that Miles was going to give me to read but it was missing. When the Creepy Stranger opened his briefcase at the café, I saw it in there. He must have stolen it from the library because the mob wants to smuggle diamonds out of Colorado.”

“You mean you saw a book you *think* resembles the one Miles suggested to you at the library. *And* you’re obviously investigating this since you’re talking to Miles about books. Even though, again, I’ve told you to stay away from this and let the CPPD and the FBI handle it. You have a great café and good friends, a superb boyfriend obviously, and talking rabbits, why must you put yourself in the middle of dangerous situations?”

“I don’t think I put myself in the middle of these things, I keep telling you, *they find me!*”

“I will make you a deal. If I learn that your diamond smuggling theory has merit, I will let you know okay? That still doesn’t mean you can help with the investigation. But if for some bizarre reason I learn that the mob is here to smuggle diamonds, you’ll be the first person I tell—”

I start to raise my finger to interject and make a point.

“—but unless and until that time comes, I still expect you to stay far away from this investigation. Got it?”

“I suppose,” I grumble.

“Now let’s just enjoy this rare night out okay? I see that Tom and Damien just showed up with their dog.”

I turn around to see them waving to us from the porch. They’ve brought Bubbles so they’re sitting outside. Bubbles looks very happy with all the attention she’s getting from the party goers. The rabbits have never met her. I wonder if she’d talk to them too.



Aside from Drew thinking my theories about diamond smuggling and Creepy Stranger being The Jackal are way off, dinner was great. I think Alice’s Tavern will be a huge success and it will be a blast having her next door. I hated seeing it empty for so long.

We stop on the way out to greet Tom and Damien and Bubbles. She gets her own Pupizza. A pup sized personal pizza that she eats in about 3 bites. She’s one of those dogs who always looks like she’s smiling and today she’s wearing a pink bow on her collar.

Damien starts to bring up the Creepy Stranger, but I give him a look that halts him in his tracks. I don't need another lecture from Drew about how we need to mind our own business.

Drew heads back to the station to continue working. I think he's more worried than he's letting on about all of this. If only he would let me help him. It's not like I'm trying to chase down the bad guys with a gun or anything. I'm just quietly investigating in the background while leaving the dangerous stuff to him.

I arrive home to two glaring rabbits. "Stumpy says you smell like a dog," Marshall informs me.

"That's because I saw Bubbles tonight."

"He says dogs smell weird." Marcus chimes in.

"Tell Stumpy I said thank you and I'll take that under advisement."

"He says you're welcome."

Somehow, I ended up with three talking animals under one roof. How did I get so lucky? When I was little, I often thought my grandma was just pulling my leg when she claimed to be talking to the rabbits. I wished that I could talk to animals, but I knew Gran was rather eccentric, so I thought it might all be just stories.

And now here I am having what are often bizarre conversations with the rabbits and their feline companion. And yes, some of what they've told me has been invaluable. After all, no one thinks to hold back while talking in front of animals. It's not like they can repeat what you say, right?

Chapter 8



The next day when Miranda stops by Marcall's I fill her in on Creepy Stranger and how I'm sure he has a stolen library book in his briefcase.

"Ohhhh Miles won't like that. He gets really angry when people try to steal books."

"Don't they have some kind of security tag on them?"

She laughs. "In Crested Peaks? No. Theft isn't a huge problem for the library believe it or not. Especially when you can buy a lot of books these days for a few dollars at most, and have it delivered to your doorstep. Stealing them isn't worth it."

"So, it would be easy to steal, especially if you were a dangerous mobster who doesn't want anybody knowing that you have that book!"

"Do you still have the picture of Creepy Stranger?" Miranda asks as I watch a lightbulb go on over her head.

"Of course!"

"What if he's staying at the Hotel Glacier? The chances are good, right?"

"We can ask Harvey if he's seen him." I shout back to the kitchen. "Hey Damien, we're going out for a bit."

"Okay, not looking for dead bodies I hope?" he shouts back.

"Not this time!" I tell him.

Miranda and I hurry toward the Hotel Glacier. It's the town's main hotel which dates clear back to the Colorado Gold Rush. In its heyday it was pure opulence. Where the rich and famous stayed. Now its main draw is its history, ghost stories, and paranormal activity.

Harvey likes to wax poetic about the good old days. It was considered an architectural miracle at the time, considering the materials they needed to build it had to be carried by wagons over treacherous mountain passes. It was even was the first in the area to have actual gas lights inside the building. No expense was spared.

Some ghosts still live there. A few of them are like Harvey and interact with guests, while some lurk in the shadows and torment the guests. Still others are likely just urban legends. But there are always tales of noises in the middle of the night. Things being moved when no one is around. Gusts of icy air blowing through rooms, even when the windows are closed.

They get a lot of tourists who stay there just for the experience. Halloween is their biggest holiday of the year where they host a huge bash. Harvey actually ran the Hotel Glacier back in the late 1800s but was caught in the middle of a shootout between the sheriff and a bank robber.

His spirit simply stuck around to help with the daily duties of the hotel. He's also been known to run off customers he doesn't like. Similar to Gladys, Harvey often has all the tea on who's doing what within the town. Although unlike Gladys he's limited to staying inside the hotel and can get a little grumpy when he thinks he's being used just for information.

Once we get there it takes a while to locate him. You can't just page a ghost after all. Well you can, but he'd just ignore it anyway. We have to be patient.

Standing around in the lobby and loudly talking about how we desperately need his expertise often helps. He eventually pops up out of nowhere to see what we want.

"Ladies! Long time no see."

"Hello Harvey!" we chorus.

"It sounds like you need my help."

"We do," I explain as I start to hold up the phone to show him Creepy Stranger's photo.

"So that's the only time you bother to come and see me, when you need something?" Harvey sounds particularly grumpy today. Who knew ghosts could get grumpy? "I can't move around town like the rest of you. No, I'm stuck here waiting for people to come to me. And everybody always wants something. Question after question. Where's this? Where's that? How do I get here? How do I get there? It's exhausting."

"I'm really sorry about that Harvey, it's just that we've been so busy with everything that's going on lately..." I start to show him the picture again, but he continues to complain.

"Oh sure, you're busy, you're all busy, you all have *lives*. Meanwhile I'm stuck here with nothing better to do than explain things to people and give them directions."

“I swear from now on we’ll make it a point to come visit you even when we don’t need anything.” Miranda promises.

“When you say that people only come by to see you when they want something, are you talking about the usual visitors, or has something changed? Have you been getting a lot of new or unusual requests recently?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. And I appreciate you asking. I have been summoned a lot recently by some of the most disagreeable types. New people I’ve never seen before. People who aren’t the usual tourists.”

“What do they want to know? You said they were looking for directions? What kind of directions? Just basic tourist type things like where’s the nearest coffee shop?”

“No, their questions were unusual.”

“How so?” I have to prompt him. Harvey isn’t just grumpy he’s dramatic and he’s obviously enjoying the attention. And he’s going to draw this out as long as he possibly can.

“That man who died in the park this week.”

“He was here asking questions?”

“Yes, he and his friend asked me if it was possible to rent a helicopter. They were rude too.”

“What did you tell them about the helicopter?”

“I sent them to Harry’s Helicopter Rides.”

This isn’t the first time we’ve dealt with Harry the helicopter pilot. Harry unknowingly flew a murderer back to Crested Peaks from Breckenridge recently, so the murderer could maintain his alibi. It wasn’t Harry’s fault; he had no idea he was transporting a killer. I doubt he’d appreciate getting mixed up in mob business now though. And what would *they* need with a helicopter?

“Do you recognize this man?” I ask holding the phone up to his floating white figure.

“I sure do. He was the dead guy’s friend. He’s staying here as a guest right now. I don’t like him either. He even asked me where the library was. That was weird. Tourists don’t ask about our library.”

I knew it! Miranda and I turn to each other triumphantly. He stole that book from the library.

“I’ve noticed him with another man quite a bit too. A disagreeable lot if you ask me.” He shudders. At least I think it was a shudder. I’m not sure ghosts actually do that.

“Do you know either of their names?”

“Nope, I don’t pay attention to that. It’s not like I work at the front desk or anything.”

“Okay, thank you Harvey, you’ve been very helpful. But we have to get back to our shops.”

“Wait, seriously? You’re leaving already? See what I mean? No one wants to hang out with a ghost. You all just use me.”

“I swear, we’ll be back soon just to say hello and we’ll stick around and talk okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He grumbles as he disappears with a pop and we dash out the front door and back to Marcall’s.

We’re so excited we practically sprint the entire way back. “I knew it Miranda, I just knew it. Creepy Stranger stole that book from the library, and more than ever I think he’s The Jackal. One of the most wanted criminals of all time who was in my café eating pancakes yesterday. Plain pancakes I might add.”

Miranda is confused. “Who’s The Jackal and why was he eating pancakes at Marcall’s? And who eats plain pancakes?”

Uh oh. I probably wasn’t supposed to say that. Drew knows that I tell Damien and Miranda everything, but this is serious. Like FBI most wanted murderer serious. But we’ve come this far together so I might as well tell her the rest.

“There’s a famous mafia boss known only as The Jackal. They don’t know his name, and no one actually knows who he is. But Drew says he’s either headed to Crested Peaks, or is here already, and I’m sure it’s Creepy Stranger who stopped by for pancakes yesterday, and who had the book he stole from the library in his briefcase.”

“Well don’t tell Miles. He’ll hunt him down himself. But wait, if no one has ever seen him and no one knows his name, how do they know it’s a he?”

Good question. That hadn’t occurred to me. But Drew definitely referred to him as a he so the cops and the FBI must know at least that much. “Are there any mob bosses who are female?”

“Not that I know of. Not in the movies or on tv at least.”

“I’m not sure that counts, but good point.”

“So, what do we do now?” Miranda asks. “Should we call Drew or the FBI?”

“If we do that, he’ll know I’ve been looking into this and he has repeatedly told me to stay out. ‘It’s too dangerous’ he bellowed at me. Besides, I already mentioned this to him, and he brushed it off. He insisted I mind my own business and let the cops handle it.”

“He’s probably right you know. I’m not sure we should be messing with international criminals.”

“We’re just following up on leads. We’re not arresting anybody or chasing them down. It’s not like I tackled Creepy Stranger yesterday and made a citizen’s arrest. I’m just looking into it. If I come across something that looks dangerous, I’ll call Drew right away.”

“I guess that would be okay,” Miranda admits reluctantly. “But you have to promise me you’ll call Drew if it gets the least bit dangerous.”

“I think we should go see Harry.”

“Okay.” Miranda seems a little reluctant. “Do you think we should ask Damien to come along? There’s safety in numbers, right?”

“Let’s ask him. You know he’s always up for a little sleuthing.” We poke our heads in the door at Marcall’s. “Hey Damien,” I call out. “You want to come with—”

“—I’m in!” he announces as he scoots around the corner.

“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.” I protest.

“I know you’re investigating something. Even though you’re not supposed to.”

I put my hands on my hips in defiance. “And how do you know that?”

He waggles a finger between the two of us. “I know how the two of you operate. And I can already tell you’re up to something. And wherever you just went now, without me I might add, you learned something new and now you’re looking into it further and you think you should take me.”

“You’re weird.” Miranda points out as she rolls her eyes.

“Amiright?”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I sigh.

“Then let’s go!”

The café is empty anyway, so I close up for the day and let the boys know we’ll be out for a while.

“Bring back some parsley!” Marshall shouts at me on my way out the door.



Damien was disappointed to learn that we went to see Harvey without him, so he's more than happy to come with us to talk to Harry.

"What did Harvey say, and I assume this is why we're going to talk to Harry?"

We fill him in as we walk to Harry's office. "So, the Creepy Stranger in the café yesterday is the mob after all?"

"It definitely looks like that."

"What did Drew say when you told him?" Miranda and I glance at each other looking guilty. "Drew knows, right?" He tsks at us.

"I laid out my theory for why I think Creepy Stranger is actually The Jackal."

"And?"

"He isn't exactly enthusiastic about it."

"But what did he say after you told him Harvey saw him with the dead guy? Surely that must have convinced him."

Miranda and I turn to each other again.

"Seriously you two. You didn't tell Drew any of that? That's kind of the most important part don't you think?"

"But what if we talk to Harry and he tells us that Creepy Stranger or Bubblegum Vinny just wanted a romantic helicopter ride with one of their girlfriends? Then Drew will be annoyed with me for wasting his time again."

"He's going to be especially annoyed if you end up dead because you're investigating organized crime when he specifically said you shouldn't."

"Pot? Kettle?" I stare him down accusingly. "You didn't say no when we invited you along did you? Like I told Miranda earlier, we're just following a couple leads, that's all. Once I get more information, I'll take it to Drew."

"We're all gonna die." Damien sighs.

"We're not going to die!" I scold him as I punch him in the arm. "We already know Harry personally, because of everything that went down last year, so it's not a big stretch that we would stop by here for a brief chat. You know, just among friends."

“Did Detective Bailey send you?” Harry asks relief crossing his face when he sees us walk in the door. Poor Harry. When he agreed to fly Bryce, the former business partner to my now landlord's deceased husband, he had no idea he was helping him get away with murder.

No doubt he's been rather traumatized ever since. But why is Drew the first thing he thought of upon seeing us?

“Why would Detective Bailey send us here?” I ask him.

“I left a message for him at the front desk of the police station when I realized that guy who was killed in the park, was the same guy who showed up here earlier this week asking me to fly him and a couple of friends to Gulver's Peak.”

It's all I can do to keep from shouting a loud war whoop because I was right. Instead I turn around and stare at Damien and Miranda, my eyebrows raised. “Did he say why?” I ask as I turn back slowly to face Harry.

He looks uncomfortable. “Should I wait to talk to Detective Bailey about this? Since he's the police and you're just...um...well... not the police?”

“You can tell us, and we'll pass it on to Detective Bailey.” I explain as Damien makes worrisome noises behind me and I signal him behind my back to hush.

We're on the verge of blowing this thing wide open, I can just feel it, and I swear if he messes this up because he's nervous about what Drew might do, I'll never forgive him.

Besides, I'm not really lying or anything. I realize we're not actually here on behalf of Drew, but since I have immediate access to him of course I'll pass on any pertinent information. Although that means Drew will know immediately that I've been investigating, but we'll just cross that bridge when we come to it.

“I guess that would be okay. They didn't say why exactly but the fella who showed up dead in the Snowball Park, and his two friends, said they needed to transport some heavy equipment up to the peak and would I be able to do that? I immediately thought it sounded suspicious, but I was willing to hear him out. Then, when he showed me what they were offering me, I knew something was up for sure.”

“What did they offer you?”

“He had a roll of bills. \$10,000 he said. Cash. Per trip.”

“\$10,000! Is that what people normally pay you?”

“Oh, heavens no,” Harry says laughing. “Not even close. And definitely not in cash like that. That’s when I knew they must be up to no good. I told them I’d have to free up some room on my schedule that I had already booked, and I’d get back to them later. Honestly, I was just hoping they’d give up and find someone else. When I saw the picture of the dead guy on the internet, I decided I should let the police know.”

“Can you tell me if this was other guy?” I ask as I hold the phone up.

“Yes. That’s him. I was right, wasn’t I? Those guys are no good.” Before I can ask anything more the phone rings. “If you’ll excuse me for just a second. It might be my 3:00 tour calling. They’re late.”

“Sure, of course,” I tell him.

The three of us put our heads together whispering about what we should do next.

“Why yes, Detective Bailey thanks for returning my call.”

Uh oh.

“I was just explaining everything I know to your friends. They said they’d be happy to fill you in.” There’s a long, uncomfortable pause as I attempt to swallow a large lump of awkward. Harry looks up at me. “Of course, I’ll put her right on.”

He holds the phone out to me. “Detective Bailey would like to speak with you.”

Oh dear. I gingerly take the phone from Harry as if I’m expecting it to bite me. Which, it actually might. “Hey Drew!” I offer with a completely false sense of bravado.

“Two words. Marcall’s. Now.”

I bite my lip to keep from telling him that’s actually four words. Somehow, I don’t think he’ll appreciate it.

Chapter 9



“I take full responsibility. I talked these two into coming with me even though they both urged me to call you first.” I explain.

“I don’t doubt that for a second,” Drew says as he paces around Marcall’s lecturing us. “What were you thinking, running off like that on your own? These guys are wanted killers. As in professional killers. They chop people to bits and throw them in the ocean never to be heard from again. You can’t keep trying to solve this crime on your own.”

“Now to be fair,” I point out holding up a finger to emphasize my point. “I came to you with my theory about The Jackal and diamond smuggling and you dismissed it.”

“And I still do! We don’t have enough evidence to assume that this Creepy Stranger guy you keep mentioning is The Jackal. We don’t even know if The Jackal is in Crested Peaks yet.”

“But Harvey said he saw the two of them together several times.”

“And that’s when you should have called me immediately and told me. Even if you thought I wouldn’t believe you. But you knew I’d be mad that you purposely went over to the hotel to discuss the situation with Harvey. *A ghost.*”

“And what am I supposed to tell my boss about that anyway? ‘Hey captain, my girlfriend has been investigating the organized crime case, even though I specifically told her not to, and she talked to a ghost at the hotel and he told her he saw these guys together, so lucky us, she’s practically solved the case.’ He’d laugh me out of the room. I’d be lucky if that’s all he did!”

“So maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t call you after all?” I offer. But Drew’s death stare shuts down that theory. “But if we hadn’t talked to Harvey then we wouldn’t have known to talk to Harry.” I protest.

“Harry called me and left a message! He did the right thing! Then I obviously returned his call while you three were there playing amateur sleuth.”

Oh yeah, I forgot about that part. Drew was irate and I suppose with good reason. Or maybe *some* good reason. I just got so excited when Harvey acknowledged that he'd seen Bubblegum Vinny with Creepy Stranger. I knew they were connected somehow.

"Should we mention the part about Gulver's Peak?" Miranda leans over and mutters at me from behind her hand.

"What about Gulver's Peak?" Drew asks, his agitation still clear.

I sigh, thinking it's just another thing he's going to dismiss. "Remember when I said I talked to Miles about the diamond mining, he specifically mentioned Gulver's Peak?"

"Yes."

"Harry said the mobsters wanted him to take them to Gulver's Peak."

"And you assume that makes your diamond smuggling theory correct?"

"I did at the time," I mumble.

"All right look, it's certainly *possible* you're right." I look up at him hopefully. "But don't get too excited just yet." He warns me. "I'll meet with Harry at the station this evening so he can make a proper statement and we'll discuss the *possibility* more then."

He continues to emphasize the word *possible*, but I'll take it. He's just been doing this job for so long he's a wee bit cynical. He can't imagine how anyone other than a highly trained police detective could solve a mystery. I consider reminding him how I helped solve the case last Fall but decide not to push my luck.

"I appreciate the fact that you three are obviously so committed to the well being of this town. I truly do. But I worry about you. I worry about your safety and I worry that you could inadvertently compromise this case.

"When we finally do figure out why organized crime is invested in Crested Peaks, we need to be able to shut them down. Okay? So please, I'm begging you, let the professionals handle this."

Damien and Miranda hang their heads like they're being scolded by their dad. "You're right Drew, I don't want to get in your way, and I definitely don't want to die anytime soon," Damien says.

He adds that last part for emphasis as he gives me a grumpy look. Although I don't blame them. I'm the one who keeps pushing this. Except it would be nice if they'd show at least a little loyalty to me.

"I'm with Damien, it's best that we let you guys handle this." Miranda pitches in.

Then the three of them turn to me, expectant looks on their faces. Et tu Brutus? "I apologize if I placed the two of you in danger at any point and I don't want to mess up your investigation either Drew. That's the last thing I want to do."

Drew narrows his eyes at me. I know he's waiting for me to swear I'll never investigate anything for as long as I live, but I don't want to lie point blank to the guy. I mean not right this second anyway. "Okay," he responds reluctantly, figuring that's probably the best he'll get right now. "I promise I will update you about the case as soon as I'm able to okay?"

The three of us nod our heads in agreement. I'm hoping he can get some useful information from Harry tonight at the station. I'd love to know more about what Bubblegum Vinny, Creepy Stranger and the third guy told him.

What? I said I didn't want to mess up his investigation and I mean it! Doesn't mean I'm not curious about what could happen.



That night Drew texts me.

Drew: Good news. Things went well with Harry and he's working with a sketch artist to try to identify the third man from the group. Your Creepy Stranger shows up as an accountant from San Diego. However, given the company he's keeping, I doubt that he's just an ordinary accountant. And yes, signs point to you being right that he's involved with organized crime so if he shows up at Marcall's again you need to call me. BUT DON'T DO ANYTHING ELSE.

I knew it! **Me: So, he is The Jackal?**

Drew: I didn't say that. I just meant that we're seriously looking at him for being a mobster. We just don't know what level yet.

I'm still thinking Jackal but whatevs. He'll just owe me when it turns out I'm right.

Drew: It's another long night for me, but I'll stop by Marcall's for breakfast tomorrow and fill you in on the details.

Me: Can't wait! Good night.

Drew: Good night. And please behave.

Me: You know me!

Drew: Yes.
Party pooper!

Chapter 10



Every time the door chimes with a new customer I look up anxiously. I want to know if the police department's sketch artist was able to get anywhere with Harry and what it may have turned up.

Who knows, maybe the third guy is The Jackal. Except my money is still on Creepy Stranger. I notice Drew didn't tell me his real name. It's not like I'd cyber stalk him or anything and try to learn more about him.

After what seems like an eternity Drew walks through the door. "He's here!" I hiss toward the back as Damien scurries through the kitchen door. The only other customers are a pair of teenagers in the corner who are playing some kind of video game on their phones, and I don't think they'd notice a bomb detonating in the middle of the restaurant.

I honestly feel bad for Drew. This case is wearing on him and he looks more tired every time I see him.

"Damien Special?" Damien asks.

"Yes please," Drew says looking grateful. "And coffee!"

"Coming right up!" Damien races back to the kitchen, so he doesn't have to miss a moment of the discussion.

"Did your sketch artist turn up anything new?" I know I should fuss over him more and ask him if there's anything I can do, but I'm dying to find out what he's learned since last night. I can play the doting girlfriend in a moment. Once he tells me something good. Besides I have tried to help him, I just keep getting lectured about it.

"I'm sure you'll be extremely interested to know that indeed, it appears the third man is none other than—

"—The Jackal!" Damien exclaims as he comes out of the kitchen with Drew's burrito.

"No. And shhhh!" Drew warns as he looks around the café to make sure no one is listening. "The third mystery man is a geologist from India - Dr. Aadiv Natt and he specializes in lost causes – someone who takes on the

cases that no one else is willing to take on. He's well known for finding hidden veins of rare gemstones in, let's just say, unlikely places."

He looks like he's about to swallow a ball of rubberbands. I, on the other hand, am trying really hard not to clap my hands with delight. I'm pretty sure I know where he's going with this.

He continues, "In light of this new evidence we are seriously considering your diamond smuggling theory."

"So, what's next?" I'm eager to move this investigation forward. And it isn't even my investigation. Even though I might secretly think it is in my head.

Dre continues. "Harry has agreed to call them and arrange a meeting at his office. He'll wear a wire and we'll be listening and hopefully they admit to something we can arrest them on."

"This is so exciting!"

"I can't believe this is happening," Damien marvels. "You solved another case!"

"I know!" I shout.

Of course, Drew has to shut everything down with an icy stare. "We haven't solved anything yet. It's just a working theory."

Damien opens his mouth to say something.

"And no, don't even ask if you can listen in."

Damien's mouth snaps shut as his face falls.

"Yes, I knew that was coming," Drew says.

Good thing Damien asked – or tried to – first, because I was on the verge of asking the same thing.

"Don't look so disappointed you two. After all I came over here bright and early to share this with you when I shouldn't say anything in the first place, right? And I admitted that you may be on to something with your diamond smuggling."

Damien and I mumble in agreement. He's right, at least we got that. Although I'm still wondering if I can find out a way to listen in on the conversation between Harry and the bad guys.



Everything is set. Harry is meeting with Creepy Stranger and the geologist at 3 p.m. to talk about hiring him to transport them to Gulver's

Peak. Drew and the FBI will be in a van nearby listening to the conversation.

The second the bad guys admit they're planning to smuggle diamonds out of Colorado, bam! The good guys move in and capture them. Although Drew said it's probably not that easy.

They'll need to openly admit that they're planning to drill on what's considered federally protected land and smuggle it out of Colorado. The bad guys aren't dumb and it's kind of a long shot that they'll just admit that up front to Harry.

As the clock inches toward 3:00 I get antsy. "Hey Damien, I think I'll go for a walk around town. The weather's so nice after all. You can handle things here, right?"

"Charlotte, don't you dare."

"What, don't I dare go for a walk?"

"Please. I know what you're up to. You're going to sneak around Harry's area to see if you can catch any of the conversation. This is an official CPPD *and* FBI investigation. You can get in big trouble for interfering."

"Oh Damien, don't be such a spoil sport, I'm not interfering with anything. I'm just casually passing somewhat nearby and might be able to pick up some of the conversation. They wouldn't be this close to catching them if it weren't for me you know."

"I get that, but seriously, this is big stuff. I can't let you leave here. What if we get a last-minute rush?"

I look around the empty café. "We're like 10 minutes from closing. I'm pretty sure you can handle the stampede by yourself."

"I insist you stay right here." He calls after me. I feel kind of bad that poor Damien has to say that to my back as I walk out the door. But only kind of.

Harry's office is close to Snowball Park so it's an easy walk to get there. He has a shop front where tourists stop in and reserve flights, but his helicopters are kept at a separate helipad closer to the airport, which is a little way out of town. Harry agreed to meet the bad guys at his office which makes it easy for me to find a spot close by to listen in.

There's more than one van parked nearby but I concentrate on each and determine that the blue one has three men inside it so that must be it. I sneak into a tea shop directly across from Harry's office, order a tea, and

tuck myself into the corner where I can see Harry and hear the men talking in the van. Have I mentioned lately how much I love being a witch?

The voices in the van are faint at first, and a little fuzzy, but the harder I focus on them the clearer they become. Obviously, I know which one is Drew's voice, but I don't recognize the other two at all so I'm guessing they're FBI.

And then I hear Harry's voice. "Hey, you guys, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Harry we're good. Remember you can't keep talking to us. Just have a normal conversation when the suspects show up. You can't let on that someone else is listening." One of the FBI agents reminds him.

"Okay, yeah, right, of course. I keep forgetting. This is really weird." Harry stutters. Poor guy is obviously nervous. I would be too.

Drew's voice cuts in. "Just stick to the plan like we practiced. Let them do most of the talking. We need them to ask you to fly them to Gulver's Creek and for how much. We also need them to indicate what kind of equipment they want you to carry, because that will give us a better idea of what they're up to. Don't get creative or try to catch them in the act. That's for us to worry about. You just need them to hire you for the job, okay?"

"Okay, got it."

I gasp out loud when I see Creepy Stranger and the geologist approach Harry's office. This is real. And a little scary. I hope Harry can pull this off. I have the best view in the house if they get to bust these guys.

Harry stands up to greet them and wipes his hands on his pants before shaking hands with them. He must be sweating. I can't imagine what he's thinking right now. Facing down the guy who might be one of the deadliest criminals in the US and trying to act normal at the same time.

"We're really glad your schedule opened up," Creepy Stranger tells him.

I still can't believe he eats pancakes with no syrup. That's your first indication he's up to no good.

"Yeah, me too," Harry responds his voice still a little shaky. "What was it you needed me to do again? By the way, where's your friend?"

"He's indisposed at the moment. No need to worry about him." The geologist points out.

"Of course, no worries." Harry wipes his hands on his pants again.

"This guy better not blow this," one of the agents in the van mutters.

"He'll be okay, he's got this." Drew responds.

"The two of us need to get to Gulver's Peak, along with some equipment that we'll need for our expedition. We don't need you to stay or anything, we'll be camping up there for several days. We'll pay you half the amount we mentioned earlier and then half when you pick us up." Creepy Stranger explains.

"Yeah, we need to make sure you come back for us." The geologist chuckles. Yuck. These guys are just weird. Harry makes a halfhearted attempt to laugh but it comes out more like a gurgle mixed with a choking noise and the two men look at him strangely.

"We may need to make several trips if the first one is successful. Would you be interested in helping us with that?"

"Sure, sure, I could probably help with that. What exactly are you doing up there?"

"Uh oh," the FBI agent mutters.

"That's none of your concern." Creepy Stranger growls.

"Oh, yeah, I understand. I just thought if I knew what kind of equipment you'll be carrying, and why you need me to take you there, I could be of more help." Harry laughs nervously.

One of the FBI agents swears inside the van. This doesn't seem to be going well. Instead of just waiting to let these guys talk, Harry is trying to get everything out all at once. This could end very badly. And we still don't have them admitting to much of anything.

"We're willing to pay you a lot of money to just fly us up there. That doesn't include you needing to know why."

"Of course, no problem." Harry wipes his hands on his pants again. I bury my face in my hands. This is so bad.

"Why are you so nervous?" the geologist asks. "You're acting fishy all of a sudden."

"Who me? No, why do you ask?"

I sit up straight on alert. It never occurred to me they could get suspicious and maybe even harm Harry. What if they shoot him? He could end up like Vinny!

When I hear Drew say, "All units be on alert, this is crashing fast. Move in on my mark." My heart races not only for Harry but for Drew and the other agents. Somebody could get hurt here. Or worse.

"I told you this was a bad idea!" the geologist scolds Creepy Stranger. "I said it seemed weird when he called us back. But oh no, you insisted we at least talk to him. He didn't act like this before you know." The geologist turns back to Henry, "What are you playing at? Huh? Are you trying to shake us down for more money? Is that it?"

"No, uh, no, that's not it at all!" Harry stammers as he waves his hands in front of him. "I swear it isn't!"

"Then what is it?" the geologist barks as he advances on Harry. "What's going on here?"

I'm terrified for Harry but terrified for the police too. And without even thinking, as if I'm acting purely on instinct, I focus on the door to Harry's office and I fling it open so hard the glass breaks.

"Hold your position!" Drew barks into the radio. "All units hold your position; it was just the wind!"

Meanwhile Harry, Creepy Stranger and the geologist all jump about a foot in the air when that happens. I hadn't meant to fling it open that hard. But it did the trick.

"What the hell was that?"

"It was just the wind man, let's get out of here. We don't need this."

"You're lucky." The geologist sneers at Harry. "Thanks, but no thanks."

I breathe a huge sigh of relief when they march down the street and Harry looks like he might cry, right before he slumps to the floor. I hate that we're right back to where we started, but I'm grateful no one got hurt. We'll have to figure out another way to catch these guys.

I also feel bad about the broken door, but before I can fix it, Drew and the FBI approach the office and I have to duck down so Drew doesn't see me in the window. I'll make it up to Harry later somehow. Although saving his life was pretty good but of course he doesn't know that.

If Drew knew I was here I'd never hear the end of it. I hide in the tea shop until they leave and then I scramble back to Marcall's just in case Drew stops by. I'm going to have to play dumb when he tells me what happened. Goodness this is getting complicated.

When I get back to Marcall's the door is locked, and the sign reads closed. Phew. I'm hoping that means Damien has left for the day because I don't want to have to explain myself to him right now. He'll just say he told me so.

My entire body trembles while I concentrate on the lock. *Open* I think as the lock slides open. I push open the door with shaking hands, but before I can close it behind me Alice is on my heels and I yelp I'm so startled.

"Oh, my goodness dear! I'm so sorry if I startled you! Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost. Although I guess in this town it's certainly possible. Do you know they have ghosts that live at the Hotel Glacier? You better sit down and let me get you a glass of water. I apologize for sneaking up on you like that."

Alice is funny. She's always a mile a minute. From one thing to the next. "I'm okay, really, just didn't eat enough lunch today, I guess. I'm feeling a bit lightheaded."

"But you run a restaurant sweetie!" She laughs such a deep earthy laugh I can't help but really like her.

"I know, the irony." I shrug. At least she seems to be buying my story. Still, she ventures back into the kitchen where she rummages around for a glass to put some water in. Good thing Damien isn't here. He's very particular about who's allowed in his kitchen.

"Charlotte?" she calls up.

"Yes? Do you need some help?"

"No, but there are two rabbits back here staring at me."

"Oh, yes, they belonged to my grandma. That's Marshall and Marcus."

"They look like they're hanging on every word."

Because they probably are. "They're just weird like that."

She comes back into the dining area with a glass of water for me. "Did you know there was a two-footed cat living next door when I signed the lease?"

"Yes, that's Stumpy. He lives with me now."

"Oh, I was just going to take him to the shelter." I swear I hear a growling noise from the kitchen.

"Eh, that's okay, he's no trouble really." I bite my lip to keep from laughing at the urge to tell her the rabbits invited him to live with us. As much as I like her, and even though she knows I'm a witch, I don't need to tell everyone their story. There are actually very few people who know that part. And even fewer still who would believe it.

"I stopped by to see if you would be interested in a flyer swap." She hands me a stack of flyers advertising Alice's Tavern. "And of course, I'm happy to put your flyers out as well."

"Great idea!" I tell her as I get up retrieve some Marcall's flyers under the counter.

"I'm so excited to be building a business and living here. I just love this town already!" she exclaims.

"I'm glad you're enjoying life in Crested Peaks. I lived here as a child but then left for a while. But I'm really glad I came back."

"Your grandmother raised you for many years, right?"

"Yes, she did."

"Rita mentioned that too." She responds to my quizzical look. I'm beginning to think Rita talks a lot! She may give Gladys a run for her money.

She pats my hand. "If you're sure you're okay I'll head back to my place now. Need to get ready for tonight's rush."

"Yes, of course I'm fine," I shoo her away with my hand. "Just a bit dehydrated. The water helped, thank you for being here."

"Anytime dear. And don't forget to stop next door again soon."

"I will see you soon I'm sure!"

She whisks out the door with her long skirt flowing behind her. It's so nice to have the place occupied again. It always seemed extra morbid to have it sit empty for so long, considering Tony was murdered right in the kitchen.

"All right boys, time to head home."

All three of them come scurrying from the kitchen. "What did you bring us?" Marcus asks.

"What do you mean what did I bring you?"

"You're supposed to bring things back whenever you go out." Marshall explains matter of factly.

"Says who?"

"Says us. Oh, and Stumpy."

"For your information I helped save a man's life while I was out."

"So, you didn't bring us anything?"

I groan as I turn on my heel and open the front door. I'm not sure why I bother arguing with these characters.

Chapter 11



When I get home from Marcall's, Drew texts me.

Drew: Takeout pizza for dinner tonight? My treat!

Me: Sure!

Now I'm worried - what if he knows? What if he saw me across the street from Harry's office and didn't say anything? But how could he have known really? Maybe I'm just being paranoid.

He shows up at 6:00 pm with a veggie supreme and a bottle of pinot noir.

Just when I think I've gotten away with it. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

Uh oh. "You look especially handsome this evening. Especially carrying wine and beer?" Okay I tried.

"Mmmm hmmm. And?"

"All right, how did you know?"

"The door to Harry's shop just flew open at the exact right moment and it flew open so hard the glass shattered, when there wasn't even a slight breeze in the air. Part of me is angry you were obviously hiding somewhere and watching. And part of me is impressed you threw the door open with that much force. "

"I was in the tea shop across the street."

"I also assume you heard the conversation."

"I did. I'm sorry you didn't get anything from it."

"We've issued an APB to all helicopter pilots in the area to be on the lookout for two men seeking transport to Gulver's Peak and the surrounding areas. If they take a job from these two then they'll be breaking the law, and could go to jail themselves for aiding and abetting. They're to contact law enforcement immediately if approached."

"So, you're not mad?"

"I should be mad, but you discovered the diamond smuggling theory which is looking more and more likely." I smile. "And part of me is just at a

loss. No matter how many times I tell you to stay out of this you turn right around and put yourself in the middle of everything. I'm just glad no one was hurt."

This might actually be easier if he were mad. "So now what?"

"We have to be *patient* and *wait*. Which means *I* keep investigating this and we wait to hear if they contact another helicopter pilot. The good news is a helicopter is really the only way to get up to that region so it's likely they'll try again with someone else. If and when they do, we'll get them."

"If it's any consolation, that whole situation today was pretty scary. I mean it really hit me how close Harry was to being in danger. And how much danger you and the other agents could have been in if things went sideways. I was really shaken afterwards and would prefer to avoid those kinds of close calls from now on."

"I'm glad to hear it," Drew says looking very relieved. "Now are we going to eat or what?"

I get out plates, napkins and wine glasses while Drew tries to talk to Stumpy. "So, he talks too huh?" he says looking at him while Stumpy stares back.

"He talks to the rabbits, but I can't hear him."

"Can he understand you? And what happened to his back legs?"

"I'm pretty sure he can. He told the rabbits he's a war veteran." I explain.

"A year ago, if someone had told me I'd be discussing actual conversations with rabbits who happen to be decades old, and a cat who claims to be a war veteran, I'd have said they're losing it."

"And yet, here you are! Any regrets?"

I'm relieved when he says, "Nope!"

We settle down with our pizza and wine. "Your magic is getting really good. You must be practicing a lot."

I'm pleased he noticed. "I've been practicing, and Miranda has been working with me. The more confident I get the easier and more powerful the magic is. We're going to start working on potions soon."

"If only there was a school in a faraway land you could go to, to study this." Drew laughs.

"So I could defeat the darkest wizard of all time?"

"Yes!"

"There are actual schools you can go to if you're magically inclined. Miranda went to one. My grifter parents moved around a lot so that wasn't something I could even consider at the time. Gran would have sent me to one but by then I didn't want to learn magic."

"You've come a long way just in the short time you've been here."

"I'm so lucky to have met such wonderful people since I've been back. I couldn't have done it without them."

"Including your dashing boyfriend?" he teases.

"Especially my dashing boyfriend! You saved my life last year."

"Although I probably wouldn't have had to save your life if you could keep yourself away from police business."

I wave my hand in dismissal. "Details, details." Poor Drew. Eventually he'll just give up and learn to go along with things. I'm sure of it.

Chapter 12



The next afternoon at Marcall's I'm there alone because Damien has a dentist appointment to repair a chipped tooth. The day is winding down and I'm thinking of closing early when the rabbits appear at my feet.

"Hey lady. We have something to tell you."

"Okay."

"We were just out in Snowball Park eating dandelions, and that plain pancake guy was there on one of the benches talking to some other guy."

"Go on." My pulse picks up.

"We thought it might be important since that other guy was talking to you about helicopters."

They're so weird sometimes. "What other guy?"

Marcus whispers in Marshall's long ear who then responds, "That guy who comes over to the house. The one you're always kissing."

"Detective Bailey." I sigh. Animals notice everything.

"Yeah, him. He should bring us parsley you know."

"I'll let him know, but I really need you to finish this story. What did they say?"

"We didn't hear everything because we were so busy chewing on the dandelions. Once those things go fuzzy, they're no good so we have to get them while they're fresh."

These two can be so exasperating. "Fine! What did you hear?"

"He said something about meeting a guy from Denver at 3:00 o'clock. At least I think it was 3:00 o'clock. Was it 3 Marshall?"

"Yeah, that sounds right."

These two are going to be so grounded.

"Why are they meeting at 3?"

"We already told you."

"No, you didn't!" I shout in exasperation.

They glance at each other like I'm the most dimwitted person they know. "We said we thought it might be important because of the helicopter."

My mouth goes dry. "What about the helicopter?"

Marshall sighs loudly. "The guy from Denver is giving them a ride in a helicopter."

"Did they say where?"

They shrug their shoulders. I'm not sure I knew rabbits could shrug. Never mind, I know exactly where they're going.

I'm not sure what to do next. Does Drew know about this? He must. They have an APB out. But what if this guy from Denver doesn't care? What if they offered him so much money, he decides not to turn them in? Or maybe they're forcing him to do it. Maybe they threatened him. I have to call Drew just in case.

And of course, he doesn't answer. The minute I get into something he thinks I shouldn't he's around every corner. When I have an actual emergency, he's occupied.

I'll call the front desk at the station and see if they can track him down.

"Sergeant Cooper, it's Charlotte Duffin and I'm looking for Drew."

"Hey there Charlotte, Drew's in Grand Junction this afternoon. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Grand Junction?" What? That can't be. Why is he in Grand Junction? He didn't tell me that.

"It was a last-minute thing. He's running down a lead. Is there something I can help you with? Is this an emergency?"

What do I say now? Emergency might be stretching it. I mean it may or may not be. And what if it's all a wild goose chase? And how can I explain the rabbits were the ones who overheard the conversation? I can't just demand that he put the FBI on the phone can I? I don't want to get Drew in trouble for sharing information with me either.

"No, not an emergency but if you talk to him tell him to call me please?"

"I will do that."

"Thanks!" I hang up the phone uneasily and pace. This may be our best chance to prove these guys want to smuggle diamonds, *before* they drill into the mountain. But if I can't reach Drew then what? I can't just let organized crime move into Crested Peaks.

"Boys! I'm going out. Wait for me here!"

"Don't forget the parsley!" they chorus.

Those rabbits have a one-track mind.

I close the café and break into a run toward Harry's office. I'm hoping he's in. Better yet, I hope he's willing to help.

When I arrive, the window repair men are there replacing the glass in his front door. I cringe. I feel bad I broke it. I'll find a way to let him know I need to pay for the damages later. Right now, we're racing against time.

"Harry!" I'm relieved to see him standing behind the counter carefully watching the workman.

He regards me with some caution which I understand. Considering I low key let him believe I was here on Drew's behalf last time. "Hi Charlotte. I've already spoken to Detective Bailey and if I remember anything new, I'm supposed to contact him directly."

"I'm not here about that." I assure him. Well, kind of. I really need to pay for his door!

"I need to hire you to fly me in your helicopter."

"Great! And when would that be?"

"Right now! It's kind of an emergency."

"Uh, well, uh, I don't normally do flights last minute. If it's an emergency shouldn't you call the police?"

"I tried and they weren't in."

"The police weren't in?" Poor Harry. He looks so confused. And he keeps getting drawn into the craziness. I really won't blame him if he refuses.

"Okay Harry, I'll just be completely straight with you. I know that you're aware of everything that's going on, and that you're right in the middle of it all." Harry pales. "I have it on very good authority that the mob has paid a pilot from Denver to fly them to Gulver's Peak at 3:00 p.m. today."

He backs up as if to avoid what I'm suggesting. "You should definitely contact Detective Bailey about that."

"I did and he's in Grand Junction for the afternoon. I'm desperate here. I'm thinking if we could just fly over the area and confirm they're there, and maybe even take some pictures, that would be all we'd have to do. They might not even notice us. Just pictures, nothing more. I swear."

Harry scratches his head. "I do have a camera installed on the AStar. Companies hire me to shoot footage for commercials and tv shows and

such."

I remind myself to play it cool and not jump up and down with excitement. I don't want to spook him. His last experience with law enforcement didn't go so great after all. "That's perfect." I tell him. "Just fly right over, get some footage and leave. Turn it over to Detective Bailey and they'll be none the wiser."

"I feel like I kind of messed up last time, I wouldn't mind making it up to the CPPD."

"You shouldn't feel bad about that at all. You did everything you could." Now *I* feel kind of bad. I don't want him thinking he's obligated to do this. Drew is right. I have a tendency to talk people into going along with my so-called schemes.

I suddenly realize that I may be more like my parents than I want to be. I just convince myself it's for the greater good and not for personal gain. "Don't put yourself at risk because of me. The police will have another shot at this some other time. Maybe we should just forget about this whole thing. I've left a message at the police station and Drew will get it sooner or later."

Just then a helicopter flies directly over town. It's moving fast and low and headed straight for the Gulver's Peak area. Harry and I look at each other wide eyed. "No. You were right to begin with." Harry insists. "These are greedy criminals who think it's okay to desecrate our beautiful mountains. And then what? They infiltrate our town and we become a hotbed of organized crime? We have to stop this before they get too far. Let's go!"

Well, when you put it that way.

We run to the back of the building where his car is parked and then race to the helipad. I've never even been in a helicopter and have no idea what to expect. Might have been nice to take a leisurely tour first but I guess it's too late for that now.

Harry parks next to what I assume is his AStar. I know nothing about helicopters, but I would definitely describe this as slick. It looks like the ones I've seen on television cop shows or the ones that tv stations use for news coverage. "Wow, that's pretty nice."

Harry grins at me like a proud father. "Isn't it? Law enforcement and hospitals often use these. It maneuvers well and provides about as smooth a flight as you're going to get. That's why I like it for touring. And did you

know that we have more medical helicopters than just about anywhere else because of our mountains?"

"I had no idea. It's not something I ever even thought about."

"Yep. If you're in a medical emergency in the mountains, the helicopter is your best way out."

"How did you get into all of this?" I ask as we buckle ourselves in and he goes through his pre-flight routine.

"Marine Corps." He offers simply.

I nod my head and sigh in relief. We're in good hands.

Next thing I know we're in the air and flying toward Gulver's Peak. The view from up here is incredible and I remind myself to take a tour for fun when this is all over. I wonder if Drew has ever done this? Assuming he's still speaking to me after this I could take him on a romantic date in a helicopter.

I don't realize how tightly I'm gripping the door handle until Harry reminds me to breathe. I'm not *that* scared. But this is quite the experience. Damien and Miranda won't know what to think when they hear about all of this.

As we fly effortlessly over the treetops, I'm stunned by how breathtaking the scenery is. If I thought it was majestic to stand at the bottom of the mountains and look up, it's a whole other world to see it up here. I'm almost in tears at how beautiful it is and then I'm angry over the thought of criminals drilling into the mountain for diamonds.

"Look over there," Harry's voice comes through the headset. There's a glint in the distance. Something reflecting the sunlight. As we get closer, we see it's the same helicopter that flew over us in town a little while ago. "Got em! I want to make sure I get clear footage of the tail number."

He flies a little closer than I'd like, but I guess if we've come this far there's no sense in only doing it halfway. We see three men walking around below us and when they look straight up at us, I get a very bad feeling. "Uh, Harry, I think we have enough. We should get back now."

"I agree. Let's go home."

Harry banks sharply in the direction we came from and heads back to the helipad. "We did it kid!" he shouts as we fist bump. As amazing as this whole trip was, I'll be glad to have my feet on solid ground again. I'm also hoping it will soften the blow for Drew when he sees the footage we got.

Looking out the side window though I catch a glimpse of something in my peripheral vision and I turn in my seat as my blood runs cold. "Uhhhh Harry."

"I see em'." he grunts.

I'm not sure if they're following us or chasing us but either way, I don't like it. "What do we do now?"

"Leave it to me."

I grip the seat tightly as Harry makes moves I'm not even sure how to describe. He races this way and that while beads of sweat appear on my forehead. Thankfully I notice the more nervous I get the calmer he seems to get.

"What are they doing?" I squeak.

"They're just trying to intimidate us." Harry explains.

"I think they're doing a very good job."

"Nah, we'll be okay." Harry says as he deftly maneuvers through a patch of clouds.

"What if they shoot at us?"

"If they were going to shoot at us, they would have done it already. They're just hoping I'll get nervous and do something stupid. But they don't know who they're dealing with." He turns to grin at me. "Like riding a bike," he proclaims as he banks sharply to the left again.

I notice the other pilot has trouble keeping up with us, but that doesn't make me feel a whole lot better. I know I keep telling Drew that I've had enough and that I'll stay out of police work this time for sure. But this time for sure, for sure, is it. I swear. I never intended to get us involved in a duel in the clouds.

And while I wouldn't dare use any of my unpracticed witchcraft on a helicopter, I've most definitely used the spell that ensures I don't get motion sick during this insanity. The first time I read about it in one of Miranda's spell books I thought it was silly.

But now I'm glad I memorized it. It's a spell I can only use on myself, but it works to stabilize my inner ear and trick it into thinking I'm just standing perfectly still on the ground. Harry obviously doesn't need it. His focus is razor sharp and unphased.

When I hear a siren, I'm sure I'm imagining it. What could be making that kind of noise clear up here? I still turn around in my seat to look. "Harry!" I shriek. "There's another one!" That's it. We are truly dead

up here. We're being chased by not one, but two mafia helicopters and we don't stand a chance.

"Hello boys, just in time!" Harry mutters.

What is he talking about? He's acting like they're friends of his or something. "It's the FBI," he explains when he sees my stricken look. "Some helicopters have sirens."

"Oh!" Is all I can manage.

Soon, the helicopter from Denver streaks past us, the FBI hot on its tail.

"Should we follow them?" Harry asks.

"No!" I shriek.

He laughs. "I was just kidding; we really are going home now."

"Oh, I knew that."

He laughs again.

When we arrive at the helipad there are cop cars and FBI everywhere. Oh boy. I think I've really done it this time. I wonder if it's too much to hope for that maybe Drew is still in Grand Junction and missed this entire thing? But as we land, I see him leaning against his car, his arms crossed over his chest and looking none too pleased. Yeah, I could have guessed that.

The moment the helicopter blades stop we're swarmed with just about every type of law enforcement personnel we can imagine. They don't have guns drawn or anything so I'm hoping we aren't in *too* much trouble. I turn to Harry, "I'm so sorry I got you into this. I have a bad habit of doing things like this."

Harry looks at me strangely. "Are you kidding? That's the most fun I've had in a quite a while. Having to talk to those guys face to face just left me speechless and out of control. But this..." He pats the control panel. "This is where I thrive. I could have said no to you after all."

"So, we're good?" I ask.

"We are more than good. Thank you for that."

Harry seems to have a strange sense of thankfulness, but I'll take it. As for me. I've never been happier to put my feet on solid ground.

"Ms. Duffin, you'll need to come with us please," one of the FBI agents announces.

We walk towards Drew when he says, "I can take it from here guys, thanks."

"Sure thing Drew."

The agents slowly fade away as Drew and I come face to face. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"My knees are a little wobbly but considering everything else, yes I'm good. Thanks to Harry."

"The FBI just forced the helicopter down in Gunnison and they're taking both men into custody as we speak."

"Both?" I'm confused. "There should have been three men."

"It was just the helicopter pilot and the geologist."

"What? What about The Jackal?"

Drew gives me that look. "We still don't know if that guy is The Jackal."

"How can he not be?"

"Charlotte."

"All right, fine. But whoever he is, he got away?"

"It looks like it."

"So there goes the whole case?"

"The FBI is interrogating both men right now. Hopefully they'll give everybody up and let us know where the other guy is, and it will all be over soon."

"What about Harry?" I ask as I glance back to see him being put into the back of a police car.

"He's fine. He's not under arrest. They just need to get his official statement and he'll be free to go."

"Why were you in Grand Junction?" I ask suddenly remembering how all of this started.

Drew sighs and rubs his hand across his buzz cut hair. "We were sent there on a wild goose chase. Considering what just went down the mafia obviously wanted us distracted, so they could get in there without interruption, at least initially, and determine what their next move would be.

"Assuming the geologist cracks, we should be able to determine what their exact plans were for getting diamonds out of the mountain and then out of Colorado."

"But they didn't count on the meddling girlfriend."

Drew cracks just the slightest smile and I swear it's the hottest thing I've ever seen. He nods his head. "They didn't count on the meddling girlfriend."

"We only intended to get camera footage of them in that spot. We weren't there to chase them down or anything like that. Just pictures. Then

straight home. We just hadn't anticipated a chase."

"You can tell all of that to the FBI in your statement."

"I'm not under arrest either am I?"

"No, of course not. You just need to give a statement like Harry is doing." At that he signals to an FBI agent who comes to get me.

"I have a lot of paperwork to finish myself, and we're still waiting to learn the outcome of the interrogation in Gunnison but let me know as soon as the FBI releases you, okay?"

"I will," I tell him, nodding in relief that he doesn't seem *that* mad for once.



After I give my statement to the FBI Drew drives me back to Marcall's to get the rabbits and Stumpy and then he takes me home. "Both the helicopter pilot and Dr Natt are still being questioned, but so far it looks like they don't know a whole lot about who is doing what within the gang."

"Surely they're just lying to save themselves, right?" I ask. After all this they can't just get away with it.

"I don't think so," Drew explains. "We're offering them a hell of a deal to roll over on any of these guys they've been working with, but they're still very vague on names and places. Sounds like the mob told them just enough to get them on board with the diamond smuggling operation but nothing more than that."

"So it is diamond smuggling for sure?"

"Indeed. You were dead on with that all along."

"Hmmm not so bad for a meddling girlfriend mediocre witch huh?"

"You are far more than a mediocre witch Char. Although meddling girlfriend might be pretty accurate."

Even I have to agree with him on the last part. "But what about The Jackal? Where is he?"

"If you mean Creepy Stranger we don't know. He's in the wind. As soon as the three of them saw you guys, they say he took off and sprinted straight into the trees. They obviously couldn't wait for him, so they took off in the helicopter. We have agents scouring that area right now but so far nothing."

"But what did the two you have in custody say about him?"

“They really don’t know much. The mafia is pretty secretive when it comes to their operatives. Unless you’ve been with them for a while, they don’t share information about their inner circle. The two we picked up today only know him as ‘Brad.’”

“Brad?! Brad?!” I shout. “That’s ridiculous. He’s The Jackal. I just know it!”

Drew shakes his head. “Hopefully we can find him and bring him in. Only then will we know for sure.”

“But what if you don’t find him? Then what?”

“The diamond smuggling shouldn’t be an issue anymore. If any of them were to even think about making another move on the area, we’ll know. We’ve effectively shut that part of the operation down.”

“So that’s it? That’s all there is? Kind of anti-climactic isn’t it?”

“Welcome to police work. Not every case is wrapped up neatly and tied with a pretty bow at the end. Although I’m not sure how a helicopter chase is anti-climactic.” Drew says turning to me as we pull up in front of my house.

“I really wanted to catch The Jackal though.”

“So do I but you have to remember there’s a reason that the FBI has been after this guy forever and still haven’t caught him. He’s incredibly clever. We may never catch him.”

“What? That’s horrible!”

“I know, but unfortunately we don’t always catch the bad guys. And we have to be okay with that or it will eat us alive.”

The more I think about it, the more I realize I appreciate just being a simple witch and vegetarian breakfast café owner.

Chapter 13



After about a week the town is finally quieting down again. Being swarmed by the FBI was a bit maddening. And it was all over the national news. But now that it's over and we all feel safe again maybe it will be a nice benefit to the local businesses.

Hopefully the tourists don't think we're overrun with crime or something. I watched some of the coverage on the news and there was a lot of footage of snow-capped mountain peaks combined with the colorful spring flowers. We could definitely see a boost in tourism this summer.

I'm pleasantly surprised to see Rita, my landlord, walk into Marcall's. "Rita! How nice to see you! It's been a minute."

"That's what happens when you leave the country for three months," she says laughing.

"Leave the country?"

"Yes silly, I've been in South America the whole time. Although I see you had some more excitement here."

Rita inherited the building that Marcall's, Alice's Tavern, and several other shops and restaurants rent on this side of the street. She inherited it after her husband, who was almost her ex-husband at the time, was murdered by a guy he tried to double cross in a land deal. They planned to tear down all of the shops to build high rise condos.

I was relieved that when all the dust settled, she decided to keep the shops and continue renting them to the current tenants. Except of course Tony next door who was also killed in the mayhem.

"I didn't even realize that you were out of the country. I just thought I hadn't seen you around because of the quarantine and all that."

Rita smiles. "Thanks to my spectacular assistant, who kept everything running so smoothly, it sounds like most people didn't even realize I wasn't here. By the way, what do you think of Alice?" she gestures with her head to indicate my new neighbor.

"Oh, she's great. She's doing a ton of business over there!"

“I’m eager to meet her.”

“You haven’t met her yet?”

“Well no silly, how could I meet her when I’m out of the country? My assistant has handled everything with the rental. It’s like she just appeared from out of nowhere. I was sure she’d insist on an even bigger discount than I was already offering – given what happened there last year.

“You know I had a hell of a time renting that place out. But she didn’t even haggle, just said she’d take the place and wanted to move in immediately. I was thrilled. I’m even more thrilled to hear the place is doing well.”

Now I’m confused. I’m certain that when I first met Alice, she mentioned how Rita told her I was a witch. She also mentioned that even though Rita drove a hard bargain, she negotiated a great deal on the rent. But now Rita is telling me a different story. “But you obviously talked to her on the phone, right?”

“Nope! Not a word. It was all so easy that by the time my assistant let me know she had a potential tenant; Alice had already signed on the dotted line.”

“Oh. Well I’m glad that it all worked out for you!”

“Me too! Sorry to cut our reunion short but I’m going to head over there right now and see if I can catch her. It was great to see you again and I’m glad business is obviously going well for you too. Let’s grab lunch sometime next week and catch up!”

“Yes, let’s do that!” I tell her.

I’m not sure why this makes me so uneasy but it all just seems rather odd. The first time I met Alice, and she brought up my being a witch, I was concerned that she had an issue with it. But when she said Rita told her I decided she was just making conversation.

And talking to Rita just now triggered something else. Alice had said something about meeting my handsome police officer boyfriend when I know for a fact, I hadn’t said anything about that beforehand. Yet somehow, she just knew.

And if Rita hadn’t told her any of this than who did? I have no idea who Rita’s assistant is, so I don’t think it was her. An unease settles around me. I also think about how Alice got the work permits in record time and then completely moved into the restaurant in the middle of the night.

I consider calling Drew but what am I supposed to tell him? He's extra happy these days that my diamond smuggling theory panned out. But I'm not sure how thrilled he'd be to hear me say Alice is kind of creeping me out.

For the rest of the afternoon I tell myself that she's probably just one of those people who wants to be in everybody's business. Some people are like that. Personally, I think it's a little creepy but whatever.

Then on a hunch I decide to visit Harvey. It's a nice day and I promised him I'd stop by and see him after all. Just to say hello. Except on my way out the door I grab one of the flyers from Alice's Tavern. Couldn't hurt to ask.

I walk down to the hotel and wouldn't you know it, Harvey is out front greeting guests. Most already seem to know about the ghosts, but some seem quite startled to see a 19th century ghost tipping his hat and welcoming them to the hotel.

"Good afternoon Harvey!"

"Charlotte! How nice to see you. Did you stop by just to say hello?"

"I promised you I would!" I feel kind of guilty. I'm not lying exactly. I did promise him I would. It's just not today. But I'm willing to chit chat with him for awhile if it makes him feel better.

After all I still don't know where any of this will lead me. Naturally we talk about what went down with the diamond smuggling sting. I remind Harvey that he played a big role in that because of his watchful eye and he puffs up with pride. It's true after all. And yes, I'm buttering him up hoping he won't notice when I ask him a question. "Hey Harvey, quick question."

"Yes dear."

I pull the flyer from my pocket and unfold it carefully. "Have you ever seen this woman by any chance?"

"Why yes, as a matter of fact I saw her several times with the first man that was killed. Why do you ask? Did they arrest her too?"

"Uh no, I was just wondering. I should probably be getting back to Marcall's now anyway. Don't want to leave Damien there alone for too long."

"Thanks for stopping by. You'll come back soon, yes?"

"I promise!" And this time I mean it. But now I have to hightail it back to the café. My heart races as goosebumps line my arms and I try to

decide what to do next. I don't know how Alice is involved in all of this, but she has to be.

Too many things about her seem weirdly coincidental but I don't really believe in coincidence. Especially not here and especially now that I realize she knew Bubblegum Vinny.

I try calling Drew but of course he doesn't pick up. "Really?!" I shout out loud at the phone before the voicemail kicks in. "Hey Drew, I just talked to Harvey at the hotel and he gave me some very disturbing news that you need to hear. Call me or come by Marcall's when you get this."

I arrive back at the café and try to decide my next move. Damien is about 30 minutes away picking up some supplies so he's no help. If only I would hear from Drew soon. What does this all mean? Is Alice part of the mob? That sounds crazy and yet it doesn't.

But what about Creepy Stranger who hasn't been seen since Gulver's Peak? Did Alice kill him and dump his body somewhere? Was I right to begin with and he's The Jackal and took off when the FBI arrested everyone?

"What's wrong lady?" Marshall asks when he sees me pacing. "You look troubled."

"This is going to sound weird, but I need to decide what to do about Alice."

"Good news! You don't have to do anything about Alice."

"Why is that?"

"We heard her say she was leaving town for a while."

"Oh no, are you sure?"

"Yes," Marcus adds. "She said she had to return to Chicago to deal with business there."

These animals hear everything!

"When did she say that?"

"I think it was a couple of hours ago." Marcus tells me looking at his brother for confirmation.

"Oh, it was definitely a couple of hours ago. Although we don't tell time very well so it may have been longer. Or shorter. We're not sure."

Great. So helpful and yet not so helpful.

I have to stop her from leaving if I'm not already too late. I'll just have to hope that Drew stops by here instead of calling. And soon!

“If Drew comes by tell him...” The rabbits look at me with blank faces. Drew can’t talk to them. “Never mind.”

I hurry over to Alice’s Tavern and thankfully the door is unlocked. I burst through it breathlessly and Alice is at the bar signing some paperwork. Her suitcases are on the floor next to her. Thank goodness!

“Alice!” I shout startling her so badly she nearly jumps straight out of her seat.

“Charlotte!” she responds with her hand to her chest. “You nearly frightened me to death. Is everything okay?”

“Oh. Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“What’s so urgent?”

Great. I raced over here with no plan whatsoever.

“I, uh, well, uh, I just wanted to say hello. And tell you to have a good trip.”

“Oh, thank you, I appreciate that. I’m not sure how long I’ll have to be gone. How did you know I was leaving? I only mentioned it to one other person in Crested Peaks.”

Oh, these darn rabbits. They may overhear helpful information but how am I supposed to admit that? “I didn’t know that until I saw your suitcases. And then I assumed you were going out of town.”

“But you said you came by to tell me to have a good trip. How could you have known that?”

I’m sweating like crazy. I’m the worst liar. If only I could use witchcraft to make me a better liar. And now Alice is really looking at me suspiciously.

“I came by to say hello, and then I saw your suitcases, and decided it would be polite to tell you to have a good trip.” I’m cringing just listening to myself.

“You came bursting through the door like it was a matter of life or death, it hardly seems like you stopped by just to say hello.”

My mind is whirling, and I can’t think of a single plausible thing to say. “Nothing is wrong back in Chicago is it? I mean I hope everything is all right.”

“Just some business with the restaurant back there that needs my attention, that’s all. Why are you so sweaty and flushed? You’re acting strangely.”

“I was just out walking and it’s pretty warm out.”

“Okay, well, glad you’re all right. I need to be heading out now though, so I’m going to lock up and—”

“No!” I shout so abruptly she nearly jumps again as I throw myself in her path. Where is Drew?

“Charlotte, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re trying to prevent me from leaving.”

“Now why would I do that?” I tell her trying to laugh in a way that makes the very idea sound preposterous, but it comes out sounding really fake.

“You tell me,” she says as she puts one hand on her hip and looks at me crossly. I can tell she’s losing patience fast and getting suspicious. “I think you know more than you’re letting on.” Suddenly she’s no longer the extremely friendly eccentric older lady from next door. Her face has taken on a harsh form and I regret coming over here by myself. “Jake!” she shouts suddenly.

Jake? Who’s Jake? I gasp out loud when Creepy Stranger walks out of her kitchen. I am in deep, deep trouble. “You!” I blurt out and instantly regret it.

Alice shakes her head. “Just as I suspected.”

My mind races. I can crack her across the head with a levitating liquor bottle from the bar, which could be enough distraction for me to run at least. But I’m not skilled enough to send two bottles in opposite directions to render Jake unconscious as well. Why haven’t I practiced more?

“Don’t even think about it.” She growls like she’s reading my mind. She snaps her fingers at Jake, and he pulls out a gun from his waistband and points it at me.

I can’t believe this is happening again. I’ve got to keep stalling somehow.

“I knew you were The Jackal.” I scowl at him.

“Ha!” shouts Alice startling us both. I turn to her. “I have worked nearly all my life to build up this empire. Me! A mere woman!”

Um. What?

She thumps on her own chest. “I’m the smart one! I’m the tough one! I’m the clever one! And yet everybody assumes The Jackal just has to be a man!”

My eyes grow wide in shock.

“Yes, that’s right, I’m The Jackal! I’m the mastermind behind this entire thing. And I have been for nearly 30 years! I’ve been unstoppable. At first, I thought it was cute that no one seemed to know who I was.

“I built my reputation on it. I enjoyed all the power I secretly amassed, but I’m not getting any younger and dangit I want some credit! Why can’t a woman be the head of one of the most powerful crime factions in the country? Why?”

Does she really expect an answer or is this just a rhetorical question? And why am I even wondering about that when I have a gun pointed at me? And I’m standing in front of one of the FBI’s most wanted criminals of all time?

“Did you kill Bubblegum Vinny?” I ask. If I’m going to die anyway I might as well get some answers.

“Of course I killed him! Do you think anything takes place on my turf without my say so? He turned snitch. Said he wanted to retire and was going to turn himself in to the FBI. I couldn’t have that, so I shot him.”

Jake smiles back at her. What a creep. I knew it all along.

“What infuriates me is that my entire diamond smuggling plan was thwarted by some two-bit mountain cop—”

“—Hey now...” I tell her.

She stares daggers at me. “—and his dimwitted girlfriend.”

“I’m obviously not that dimwitted if I helped stop you, am I?”

She steps toward me. “Do you really think you’re in any position to make wisecracks at me?”

She looks over at Jake. “Just shoot her.”

“Wait!” I shout as I wave my hands in the air. I know I need to concentrate harder than I’ve ever concentrated in my entire life if I hope to stop any bullets that he fires at me and I’m not sure I can do that. Especially with my heart racing and my mind wirling. And I might be able to stop one but there’s no way I could stop more than one at a time.

“Stop stalling! Shoot her now!”

“You really want me to shoot her here? It will leave such a mess. Let me just take her somewhere that no one will find the body. She’ll disappear without a trace.” Jake argues.

“What do I care about a mess? I’m leaving.” She retorts.

“If they find a bloody mess here and you’ve disappeared, you’ll be their number one suspect. If I take her somewhere else and kill her, they’ll

just decide you left and won't think much of it."

Alice, I mean The Jackal, ponders his argument for a moment. "Nope. Still don't care. And if you don't shoot her, I will." With that she reaches behind the bar and pulls out a gun to point at me too.

Great. Now I have two people who want to shoot me. There is absolutely no way I can stop bullets from two different guns at once. I'm dead.

"If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself." She smiles the vilest smile I've ever witnessed when Jake suddenly says.

"I can't allow you to do that." Then he turns the gun on her.

What?! Now I'm really confused. What is happening here?

"What the hell?" Alice responds. Clearly unsure as to which way to point her own gun now.

"Drop the gun Alice," he demands. I can't take my eyes off either of them I'm so confused. Part of me thinks I should try and run while they're distracted except, I'm distracted myself. What is Creepy Stranger, I mean Jake, doing? "I'm with the FBI."

"No you're not!" Alice laughs.

"I'm undercover. I've been deep undercover with your organization for three years."

Alice looks momentarily stunned. She obviously can't believe this all happened on her watch. Ha! Not so clever after all, huh Alice?

She then turns the gun on Jake. Who suddenly isn't so creepy. Or a stranger. While they have their guns pointed at each other my brain is telling me to run but my feet are suddenly stuck to the floor. It's like I'm mesmerized with watching these two stare each other down. I can't let her shoot him. He saved my life. Why doesn't he just shoot her?

And then it happens. I feel an energy building inside of me and I know she's going to fire first. I don't know how I know this or why he doesn't just shoot her. But I concentrate on the nearest bottle of liquor sitting on the bar as I fling it at her gun. She fires anyway and I watch in horror as Jake is hit and falls to the ground.

She whirls toward me and fires again just as I find my footing and dive under a table. She continues firing as I scramble to try and get away. I focus as hard as I can and even manage to knock one of the bullets astray.

I know I can only keep this up for so long though. How many freakin bullets does she have? I finally run out of tables to duck behind and

we come face to face. Alice stares at me with incredible malice as she prepares to fire one last time. But I focus on the chair behind her and send it sliding straight to the back of her legs. It hits her on her knees, and she plops down in the chair.

The look of surprise on her face would almost be laughable if she didn't still have a gun in her hand. But then the surprise is on me when shattering glass and splintering wood rains down on top of us and I cover my head.

The FBI and the Crested Peaks Police Department seem to be flying in the tavern from every direction. They're all shouting at her to drop her gun and get down on the floor. Meanwhile I'm hunched over with my hands covering my ears and shaking like a leaf.

It feels like an earthquake there are so many of them. One of them throws Alice to the ground as her gun skitters away and they leap on top of her to subdue her.

"Jake!" I yell, pointing at his lifeless body that's surrounded by a pool of blood. "Jake was shot!"

Several officers run to help him when I hear. "Charlotte! Charlotte! Where are you?" It's Drew!

"Drew!" I call out when he comes running over to me and helps me stand. He checks me everywhere. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Are you bleeding?"

"I'm all right." I reassure him. I have a few bruises from diving to the ground, and there's glass in my green hair from when they burst through the window, but otherwise, I'm in one piece. "But Jake, he got shot! I tried to stop her, but I was too late."

"It's okay, they'll take care of him. I just need to know you're okay."

"I think so, yeah. And I am really glad to see you!" I tell him nearly bursting into tears as I throw my arms around him and squeeze him as tight as I can.

"I got your message and went straight to the café. Those crazy rabbits and that cat wouldn't let up. I knew something was wrong when I found the door open and you weren't there, but the three of them kept pulling on my pants and butting their heads into my legs. It seems crazy but somehow I knew they were pushing me in the direction of the tavern."

"I still don't know exactly how all of it works but the rabbits were my Gran's familiars which meant they shared a unique bond. And given

that I can actually talk to them I think that bond was transferred to me when she died. As for Stumpy, who knows? I think the rabbits just talk him into stuff.”

“I still don’t understand much of it either, but I’m convinced they were telling me that you were over here and in trouble. Even if they can’t talk to me like they do you, they were definitely telling me in their own way.”

“I’m going to owe them extra parsley now.” I sigh.

Chapter 14



As Damien and I prepare the café for the Cinco de Mayo celebration I'm delighted when Jake comes in, his arm in a sling, looking far better than when I last saw him on the floor of the tavern, pale and lifeless.

"I heard someone is having a party!" he says beaming at us, his arm bound up in a sling.

"And you're the first to arrive!" I consider hugging him, but I don't want to hurt his shoulder.

It turns out that my hitting Alice in the head with the liquor bottle actually saved Jake's life because instead of shooting him center mass like she tried to, she ended up shooting him in the right shoulder instead. After surgery and some physical therapy, he should be okay.

"Please, sit down! Have a margarita!"

"I can only stay for a bit; I have a flight to catch back to Miami, but I wanted to thank you again for saving my life and I brought you this."

He holds up the *Guide to Colorado Gemstones* book I saw in his briefcase. My mouth drops open in embarrassment. I'd forgotten all about the book I saw him with. "Drew mentioned that you saw this in my briefcase and were convinced that I had stolen it from the library."

"I am so embarrassed." I stammer. "I don't know what to say."

When he laughs I get even more embarrassed. "I wanted you to know that I didn't steal it from the library, I bought it at the local bookstore as part of my undercover work."

"Of course you did."

"But now I would like you to keep it. To remember me by." He laughs again and I'm glad that he finds this amusing because I just feel like a dope. I'm glad he isn't mad about it at least.

"I will keep it forever. It will be a good reminder that I need to be much more careful before jumping to conclusions about people."

“You mean people who eat plain pancakes or just the next time you investigate a crime?” he says a twinkle still in his eye. Drew talks way too much.

“No! I am done with crime investigation. I’m leaving that to the professionals from now on. I’m just a café owner and happy to be one at that. And you are welcome back here any time for more pancakes. Plain or otherwise.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You helped uncover a major diamond smuggling operation after all. And unmasked The Jackal.”

“Don’t tell Drew that! I’m already in enough trouble as it is.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll get over it eventually. And he’s just worried about you.”

Once Drew realized I was okay, and that Jake was going to be okay, I got the longest lecture ever on why I need to stop being an amateur investigator, because even though I’ve only been back in Crested Peaks for less than a year, I’ve already been held at gunpoint by criminals twice.

And under two entirely different circumstances. But I maintain that I don’t go looking for these things on purpose, they just find me.

Drew’s ears must be burning because he shows up shortly after Jake leaves for the airport. “I see you got the book. The book that was *not* stolen from the library.”

“I did and Jake seems to think it was funny.”

“Oh, it was hilarious all right,” Drew says rolling his eyes at me.

Later, when Miranda and Miles join our party, and Miles sees me holding the book he says, “Hey, I didn’t get the chance to tell you that I found the library’s copy of that book under one of the bean bags in the reading nook.

“Someone must have been looking through it and didn’t put it away like they’re supposed to. I can’t stand it when they do that. It’s not that hard just to put it back on one of the re-shelving carts.”

Miranda, Damien, and I look at each other and laugh. I’d say we’d had too many margaritas but we’re really just getting started.

I’m excited when Dakota, my old friend from high school walks in the door. “Dakota!” we all shout.

“Hey guys! It’s great to see you!” Dakota just opened a cupcake bakery down the street called Dakota’s Delights. “I just wanted to stop by for a little bit and say hello.”

“How is the new bakery going?” I ask.

“We are swamped! And you’ll never guess who came in earlier.”

Miranda, Damien, and I turn to each other with worried looks on our faces. What now? “Dare I ask?”

“You all watch reality tv, right? The dating one? You won’t believe who has been staying in Crested Peaks all winter...”

Thanks for reading *Diamonds and Danger*! I hope you enjoyed it. I decided to write this during the quarantine, and it kept my fingers flying over the keyboard. Don’t miss the next in the Marcall’s Breakfast Café Cozy Mystery Series due in June: *Cupcakes and Crime*. The huge 4th of July celebration in Crested Peaks is disrupted when Dakota’s former boss drops dead in front of the entire town after eating a poisoned cupcake.

Follow me on Instagram @bethiskinner. You can also follow the real-life antics of Marshall and Marcus, 12 year old rescue rabbits @marshallandmarcus or Stumpy the cat @gambitthewondercat. Sign up for notifications at biskinnerauthor.com.