

A Marcall's Cafe Cozy Mystery

MURDER

Most Eggscellent



B I Skinner

A MARCALL'S BREAKFAST CAFE COZY MYSTERY

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Chapter 1



First thing Monday morning as I open the door to my somewhat-newly inherited cafe, Marcall's Breakfast Café, I'm greeted with the deafening noise of dozens of aluminum cooking sheets crashing to the ground. Marshall and Marcus, my grandmother's helicopter-eared rabbit familiars, nearly knock me down as they sprint off.

"We're outta here!" shouts Marcus as they head next door to the Italian Restaurant, Tony's Bistro, where they're no doubt hoping to score a handful of parsley from Tony. My own ears are serenaded with a litany of curse words from Damien the cook, and I'm almost afraid to go into the kitchen. I'm hoping this isn't an indication of how the week will play out.

I peek around the corner, "Hello! Is it safe to come in?"

Damien shakes his head at me, and I spy the pile of aluminum bakeware laying at his feet. "I pulled on one and they all came crashing down," he explains as he pinches his lips together in frustration. "I think those rabbits had something to do with it."

"The rabbits made all your bakeware fall to the ground?"

He shrugs, "I think they messed with it yesterday somehow."

"Yes, I'm sure they did, those tiny rabbits are devious. They no doubt put a curse on your bakeware, where at just the right moment it was sure to all come crashing down around you," I mock him, trying not to laugh at his plight.

Damien, who isn't a Supernatural being, is still a little nervous around talking rabbits. And no, most rabbits don't talk, not even the familiars. My grandma insisted they came that way, but we suspected for years that she performed a spell that allows them to talk out loud to their bonded Supernaturals. Non Supernaturals can't hear them but some like Damien know they can talk, and it bothers him.

Even I admit it's a little weird to hold entire conversations out loud with rabbits. And these two are just a pair of grumpy old men. No one is

exactly sure just how old they are, but legend has it my grandmother, as a young woman, won them in a poker game from a traveling gypsy, and they've been with her ever since. She even named her restaurant after them. But since Marshall and Marcus would be too long for a restaurant name it became Marcall's.

I doubt they're even capable of messing with Damien's cookware, but you never know with those two. They're well aware that they make him nervous and they do often play pranks on him. Although given that they're five pounds apiece, and aside from their ability to talk don't have magical powers, I'm not sure how they could have caused his bakeware to fall to the ground.

"Good morning my dear," I announce as I deftly tiptoe over the pans on the floor to give my cook a brief hug.

"Hello," he says glumly as he hugs me back. In the short time since I inherited the cafe Damien has become a dear friend. Which I desperately needed because coming back to Crested Peaks after Gran died was tough. I haven't been back since I graduated from high school, and I've been feeling out of my element ever since.

"Did you go on a hike yesterday?" I ask.

"We did! Tom put a picnic basket put together, and the three of us enjoyed a nice hike and dinner by the lake. It was very romantic and relaxing."

"Good! You deserved a nice evening for yourselves after dealing with your mother in law all week," I tell him as I roll my eyes in sympathy over his situation. Damien and Tom have been married for ten years, and Tom's mother has been nagging them for grandkids.

Their explanation that their Bull Terrier, Bubbles is her granddoggy isn't holding up as well as it used to. She's trying to convince them that their spare bedroom would make a wonderful nursery, and perhaps they should all go shopping to choose paint colors.

Damien waves his hands about in frustration, "I know she's Tom's mother, and she's part of the package, but heaven help me she can be so overbearing at times. It was a relief to have everything back to normal last night."

He imitates her as he raises his voice an octave and puts his hands on his hips, "I hope you realize I'm not getting any younger boys, and an

old heart like mine can only take so much waiting. I would like to at least *meet* my grandchild before I depart this life.”

I can’t help but giggle as my stocky, height-challenged chef prances around doing a perfect imitation of his mother in law, clutching at her heart as if she may keel over at any minute. We all know she’s incredibly spry for her age, and no where near dropping dead of a heart attack, just because she’s doesn’t have grandchildren yet. At least not of the two-legged variety anyway.

He laughs at his own joke, but then he indicates he wants me to clean up the mess on the floor. He knows I can do it using magic, but I’m always reluctant to perform spells in front of Non Supernaturals. Actually, I’m reluctant to perform magic in front of anyone. I’ve never had much confidence in my magical abilities. My grandmother was a fabulous witch while I consider myself mediocre at best.

Gran always said that was nonsense and that I was a fine witch, but my lack of confidence doesn’t help. Nonetheless there’s a pile of dirty pans on the floor that need to be picked up and washed. I concentrate on the pans as I carefully and slowly levitate the pile from the floor, to the counter next to the sink, but then my concentration waivers and I drop them with a clatter that makes Damien jump.

“Sorry,” I mumble.

“No problem, I’m just happy I don’t have to wash all of those myself now.”

I quickly fill the sink with hot water and dish soap that smells like lavender and peaches. Damien breathes in the pleasant scent. “Hey, nice job on the scented dish soap. That’s an interesting combination.”

I blush at the compliment. Even I have to admit that trick is rather clever.

“Oh, that gives me an idea!” he exclaims as he snaps his fingers. “What do you think of a peach and lavender scone?”

“Try it!” I tell him.

I don’t know what I’d do without Damien. He’s the cooking genius behind the whole operation. I do okay in the kitchen, but he’s practically a wizard in here even though he isn’t magical. My grandma did all the cooking herself in the beginning, but several years ago she hired Damien to help her and I’m grateful he stayed on after she died.

As I maneuver the bakeware into the soapy water, and try not to splash it everywhere, the bell over the front door jingles and Gladys Miller, our town gossip, calls out, “Hellloooo!” In a small mountain town news travels fast, but it travels even faster when Gladys has a piece of news burning a hole in her pocket. If you need to know something about anything, Gladys is the one to consult.

Damien rolls his eyes at me. “I’ll put her burrito together.”

I walk out to the front. “Good morning Gladys!” I call out cheerfully.

“I’ll have the usual dear,” she explains as if she’d request anything different. Every morning at precisely 6:30 a.m. she comes in for a vegan breakfast burrito and a cup of coffee. A tall woman, with a shock of fuzzy gray hair on top of her head, that she can never quite get to go the way she wants it to, she never leaves home without donning a matching hat and gloves. This morning she has a pink pill box pinned to her head, with matching pink gloves and purse of course. I often wonder how many of those sets she keeps in her closet at home.

I can also tell by the look on her face she has an extra juicy piece of gossip she’s dying to share this morning. Even though I only took over Gran’s restaurant a month ago I’ve quickly come to recognize the regulars and their quirky ways.

My grandma opened the vegetarian breakfast restaurant 20 years ago after my grandpa died, and it’s been a wildly popular place for the Crested Peaks locals to get their breakfast fix ever since. During ski season we get a ton of skiers on their way to the slopes who are often shocked that our huge, hearty burritos don’t have meat in them.

I was surprised that Gran left me the restaurant in her will and wasn’t even sure I wanted to accept it at first. But I feel like I owe it to my grandma, who built this business, and I owe it to the diners who love to come here, to keep it going.

And considering, when Grandma died I was in the process of being jilted by a fiancée who dumped me to star in a reality television series, in addition to being fired from a job where I mixed up my boss’s girlfriend, with his wife, when I transferred a call to him. Let’s just say that wasn’t pretty. Like it’s my fault my boss had a girlfriend and a wife to begin with.

Then Gran dies on top of everything else and it was just one more burden I didn’t need. But thankfully Damien agreed to stay on as the cook

and I packed up my things and headed west to the mountains. I'm still not sure if I'm capable of running a successful restaurant long term, but I'm giving it my best shot. It would devastate me if I ruined my grandma's business. When my parents were killed in a robbery that went awry, Gran took me in and raised me, and now I owe it to her to make sure the cafe lives on.

"By the way Charlotte, I must tell you that I think you're doing an amazing job with your grandma's place," Gladys tells me. "Although I don't know about your purple hair." She grimaces as she points to my lavender tresses. I may find witchcraft burdensome at times but it's definitely helpful when I want to don a new hair color.

"Awww, thank you so much," I respond sincerely. "About the restaurant I mean. Everyone has been so great and welcoming, and I'm extremely fortunate to have Damien."

Just then a couple I don't know walks in. "Hello!" I call out. "Welcome to Marcall's. Our main menu is posted above, and our daily specials are here," I explain as I hand them today's menu. "Just let me know what I can get started for you."

"Do you know the best places to see ghosts?" they ask me.

I smile knowingly. I may have been absent for ten years, but our town's haunted reputation remains. Crested Peaks is famous for its ghosts and haunted locales. It started as a gold mining town during the Colorado Gold Rush in the late 1850s, and it was nothing but the wild west back then.

Men shot each other over simple gambling or drink disputes in local saloons and hotels, many of which still exist to this day, and are haunted with some of Colorado's most notorious characters. And some even swear that on a clear, dark night, you can still hear the train whistle from a train that hasn't run since the 1950s.

"Harvey just ran some New York real estate developers out of the Hotel Glacier this morning," Gladys offers.

"Who's Harvey?" the couple turns to her.

"He's one of the ghosts who lives at the Hotel Glacier. He ran it back in the late 1800s, but he was caught in the middle of a gun battle between Sherriff Thompson and a bank robber one night. His spirit just never left, and this morning when those city slickers from New York came sniffing around he ran them out." She explains it so matter of factly it's hard not to laugh. As if every hotel had ghosts that chased unwelcome guests.

“Are you serious?” asks the couple.

“Of course, I’m serious! Why would I lie about something like that?” Gladys, as a witch herself, was raised in a Supernatural family and doesn’t always understand that there are those who have never met a spirit in their life. Much less believe in their existence.

The couple turns back to me their eyes shining bright in anticipation of their first encounter with a real-life ghost. “Do you think we’ll get to see him?” they ask.

“It’s a definite possibility,” I explain. “He doesn’t reveal himself to everyone who comes by, but occasionally you’ll see him greeting guests and tending to his old duties at the front desk.”

The wife claps her hands with delight. “Oh goodness, I’m so excited! But honey, we need to eat first if we’re going to search for ghosts all day.” Turning to me again she asks, “So have *you* ever seen a ghost?” I laugh and tell her that I’ve seen a few in my day. She looks impressed. If I told her they often invited themselves to my grandmother’s Christmas parties she’d be so shocked I don’t know what she’d do.

The husband orders the Damien Special, which is a massive breakfast burrito full of eggs, beans, cheese, potatoes, grilled jalapenos, and caramelized onions, along with a secret sauce he won’t even reveal to me. It’s too much spice for my taste, but it’s our most popular burrito.

The wife orders eggs, hash browns and wheat toast. Everything we use in the restaurant comes from small local farms, and I’m still amazed and impressed at how my grandma’s dream to build a vegetarian breakfast cafe didn’t only come true, but it thrives.

As the couple sits down at a table in the corner to enjoy their breakfast, I turn to Gladys once again. “So, spill. What’s the deal with these developers you just mentioned?”

Gladys’ face lights up, clearly excited to finally reveal her gossip. “Some pretty boys from New York City have been prancing around town in expensive suits with big, fancy watches like you see on the internet, and they’ve been meeting with the mayor, city council, and some of the bigger hotels and shops.”

“Really? Do you know what they want?” We don’t get a lot of developers here. There isn’t much space left to build anyway, and while the land is expensive, considering we’re right next to a ski resort, no one ever wants to sell.

Crested Peaks residents are invested in maintaining our small mountain town charm. The condos are all built closer to the ski resort, and the actual town includes numerous historic buildings that are most often described as charming and authentic.

What was once a “one horse town” still doesn’t have any stop lights. We don’t have enough car traffic to warrant anything more than stop signs and a few traffic circles. The commercial district consists of one long block where stores, pubs and restaurants operate in buildings that are over one hundred years old.

Some of have been rebuilt using as much of the same materials as the contractor could, while most have been remodeled to accommodate our modern practices like electricity and larger ovens in the restaurants. But overall a walk down Crested Peaks is like a walk through history.

I’m not surprised to hear that ghosts aren’t taking kindly to the news of real estate developers poking around. The ghosts are just as dedicated as the living, in our sweet town, to maintaining our traditional way of life. None of us wants to see any of these old buildings torn down.

With breath taking mountain peaks looming over us and snow-covered roofs in the winter the entire area looks like its very own postcard. At Christmas everything is covered in twinkling lights and sparkling snow, and during the Halloween season, when all the ghosts, goblins, witches and fairies come out to play, it’s one long celebration around here. Big city real estate moguls need not apply.

“Rumor has it they’re hoping to rekindle some interest in selling among the residents who have owned these places for a long time and want to cash out and retire to Florida. Since there isn’t a lot of space to build on anyway, they’re hoping to build up. Sean, the bellhop over at Hotel Glacier said they’re looking to build high rise condos here!”

“What?” I bellow as the couple looks over to see what the fuss is about. “They can’t build a high rise in Crested Peaks! It would ruin the entire town. Everyone would leave! What would this town be without our haunted hotels, the dog treat bakery, the coffee shops, the family owned restaurants?” I tick all our favorite places off on my fingers. There’s too many to count. It’s what makes Crested Peaks such a great place to live and visit.

“Marcall’s!” Gladys points out.

I gulp. Oh yeah, my place. It's all still so new even I forget it's mine sometimes.

Before I could talk to Gladys further about the developers, the morning rush comes in and almost overwhelms us. It was one customer right after the other which had Damien and me hopping all morning. And speaking of hopping, it was later in the morning that I realized I hadn't seen the rabbits since they sprinted out of here earlier.

When it finally slows down, I poke my head into the kitchen again. "Have you seen Marcus and Marshall since they ran off this morning?"

"Nope!" says Damien shaking his head. "But we've been so busy if they did come through here again, I may have missed them."

"I think I'll go next door and see if they're over there getting into the parsley," I tell him.

"Great! And when you're there get me some bread sticks will you? Fred owes me."

"Sure thing!" I call out as I hang my apron on the hook by the door and head out into the early afternoon sunshine.

Chapter 2



Crested Peaks shoppers are out in full force. It's August, so ski season obviously doesn't start for a while, and the summer tourists will drop off sharply after Labor Day Weekend. They all look like they're in a hurry to get their last-minute shopping in before the kids go back to school. I wave at my friend Miranda Summers across the street as she stands in the doorway of the Bean Around a Bit Coffee Shop that she owns.

I walk next door to Tony's Bistro and even though they only serve dinner, the door is open and a few servers bustle about getting things ready for the evening. Since everybody knows I'm from next door they mostly ignore me as I pass through.

I wave at Tony who appears to be arguing with Bryce Turner, the silent partner and cousin of our building's landlord. We occupy two of the six shops that are connected on this side of the street and Larry Hale, our landlord, owns all of them. Tony gives me a half wave but then goes back to his discussion with Bryce. They're not shouting or anything, but whatever they're talking about looks serious.

I don't want to bother anyone, so I let myself back into the kitchen area. Still no sign of the rabbits but the smell of simmering tomato sauce is so heavenly I want to crawl into the big pot and take a bath in it. Fred, Tony's head chef, waves at me as he tends to several pieces of chicken that he's grilling.

"Fred, that sauce smells incredible!"

He grins at me, his face flushed from the heat of the stove. "Should I put some in a jar for you to take home?"

"Would you?" I ask as I clutch my hands together like I was already praying he would do just that.

"Of course!" That's been one of the best parts about moving back home. Being a member of this close-knit community again. At the heart of Crested Peaks are its shops and restaurants and everybody here likes to

share with each other. Fred thinks nothing of sending me home with a jar of his homemade sauce and I love that so much.

I find Marshall and Marcus in the backroom talking to a gray tabby cat with stumps for back legs. They told me earlier that he was in the war. I ask which war and they said they didn't know, that he just talks about when he was in the war.

I'm not sure if he's just making up stories, but it could certainly explain the loss of most of his back legs. Life in Crested Peaks which includes witchcraft, hauntings and talking animals definitely takes some getting used to.

And as I suspected the rabbits are nibbling on parsley. "Hey guys," I greet them.

Marshall nods in acknowledgement but returns to his conversation about mice with the cat.

"Have you been over here eating parsley all day?" I ask them.

Marcus shrugs his tiny rabbit shoulders. "Pretty much."

"Don't you think you should come back now before you overdo it?" I ask.

"Is there anything of interest going on next door that we should know about?" asks Marshall. "Because if not, we may just stay here and keep eating parsley. Stumpy here is telling us all about how he chases mice at night." Then he laughs like the idea of chasing mice is ludicrous and who would do such a thing?

The cat glares at him. "I keep this place cleaned out and secure for the patrons."

"You bet Stumpy. We might as well go back now." Marshall says as he looks at me for assistance. I scoop both of them up in my arms and leave the back room.

Fred holds up a small paper bag for me. "Here's your sauce and the breadsticks that I owe Damien." Neither one of us are sure of what to do with them, now that my arms are full of rabbits. I could levitate it all the way back, but I'm worried I would drop it and break the jar of spaghetti sauce.

"Put in my mouth," I tell him as he places the fold in my teeth so I can carry the snickering rabbits back to their place. Our place I should say. This is what my life has come to. I have to carry things in my mouth like a retriever, because I have rabbits in my arms, and they laugh at me.

As soon as we get back, I set them down and they scurry away. I take the bag from my mouth and put the sauce in the fridge. I hold the other bag up to Damien, "Your bread sticks sir."

"Oh great!" he exclaims as he eagerly snatches the bag from my grip. "I love these breadsticks so much!"

The bell above the door jingles again and I turn back to see Miranda bearing cups. "Thought you could use a pick me up," she says as she holds up a cup.

"Definitely! What is it today?"

"London Fog Latte."

I eagerly reach to take it from her hand, "Ohhhh, thank you!" I love all types of coffee and tea, but this is one of my favorites. I try to make it myself at home, but I can never quite duplicate her recipe.

Miranda and I went to high school together, but she was a year behind me. We lost touch when I left town, so it's been fun reconnecting with her after moving back. I consider her and Damien my closest friends.

"It's been crazy busy over here!" she exclaims. "I was watching this place all morning, and you were so crowded. You're becoming even more popular than your grandma was."

"I'm just grateful it looks like we'll be able to keep this place open." I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Were you considering closing it?" she asks in shock.

"Oh, no, nothing like that, not once I got going anyway." I wave my hand at her in protest. "It's just that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to measure up to what my grandma accomplished here. I didn't know if people would accept a Marcall's that wasn't run by my grandma. But thankfully they have. This place was her baby and I'd never forgive myself if I ruined her legacy. "

"Well I think you're doing a great job sweetie and so does everyone else given the amount of traffic I see going in here."

"Thanks, everyone has been so kind since I've returned, and I don't know how I could do it without all of you."

"Hey Char, I'm all done in the back, do you need anything else?" Damien asks as he leaves the kitchen.

"Nah, I'm good. Is everything set for tomorrow?"

"Do you even have to ask?" Damien laughs.

"Not really," I smile.

“Bye ladies,” he calls as he walks out the door.

“You give that handsome husband of yours a kiss from me,” Miranda calls back.

“Will do!” he responds as he closes the door behind him.

“Sooooo,” I press Miranda “are you going to be seeing the gorgeous librarian again anytime soon?” She had two dates last week with Miles the town’s librarian and it sounds like things went really well.

Her cheeks flush and I assume the answer is yes. “As a matter of fact, he’s cooking me dinner tonight,” she tells me.

“Really? That’s so awesome! He must really like you.”

“You think?” she giggles.

“Well yeah, if he’s making you dinner already.”

“He is very sweet. And so nice to look at!” she adds, as we dissolve into a fit of giggles.

“What about you? Have you met anybody special since you’ve been back?”

“No way,” I tell her. “After what Lucas did to me, I’ve sworn off dating for the foreseeable future.”

“Just because Lucas is a lowlife scum doesn’t mean they all are,” she reminds me. “You know, Andrew is available again. Rumor has it his girlfriend left him because she didn’t like the idea of being married to a cop, and her daddy wanted him to come work for the family business instead.”

“Ewwwww!” I scowl as I lean back in my chair wrinkling my nose in distaste. “I do not need to see Andrew anytime soon. You remember what happened in high school.”

I knew Andrew in high school and while I must admit he was incredibly good looking back then, and probably still is, I don’t need a repeat. I thought we had something, but things went horribly awry and we haven’t spoken since. I know it’s been ten years, but I fear that isn’t long enough.

“Okay fine, I’ll let you off the hook this time, but I’ll be back with more eligible bachelors eventually.”

I roll my eyes at her, “Okay, you do that.”

“And now, I think I’ll go home and get ready for my date,” she tells me.

“I want to hear every detail tomorrow morning.”

“Of course!” she chirps as she walks out the door.

Just as I'm about to lock the door behind her, Tony squeezes himself through the front door.

"Hey again Tony, what's up?" I ask as I notice the worry etched into his face. "Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, everything is great, I just wanted to come by and say hello." He's obviously lying. He never stops in just for small talk. He's too busy for that. His restaurant is very popular.

"You looked like you were in an intense conversation with Bryce earlier today, I hope there's nothing wrong."

"Oh yeah, you saw that huh?"

"Yeah, earlier when I stopped by, it looked like you were arguing."

"That was nothing," he tries to tell me.

He's clearly agitated, and I still wonder if it has anything to do with his earlier exchange with Bryce.

"So how is business going for you?" he asks as he looks out the window.

"We seem to be getting busier and busier." He's still staring at something outside and clearly not interested in how my business is going at all. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's hiding from someone.

"Oh, that's great. Actually, I really am happy for you. You're doing well here, and your grandmother would be proud. She was a neat lady and I miss her, but I'm glad the business is still thriving. I know that's what she'd want." He even turns to look at me as he says this.

I'm surprised by his words. "Thanks Tony, I hope that I can do her proud."

"I don't doubt it," he says smiling back at me. But then just as quickly as he blew in here, with another glance out the window, he's gone again. "Nice talking to you," he tells me as he walks out the door. "Come by for dinner any time!"

"Thanks," I say to the closed door.

I return to my office to catch up on some paperwork before I leave for the day. That's the worst part about this job is all the paperwork. The inventory and the accounting and the ordering take up a huge chunk of my time. A boring chunk of my time for sure. But now I'm thinking that as well as the business is doing, maybe I can afford to hire an assistant to handle the paperwork for me. I know Damien would love that. If I could find someone who doesn't detest it as much as I do, it would be well worth it.

I spend the next couple of hours doing inventory and trying to catch up on what we need to order. Woe is me if I forget to order enough black beans and we run out in the middle of a breakfast rush. You can't have a successful vegetarian breakfast cafe without a steady supply of black beans. The customers and Damien would kill me.

Another one of his cooking secrets that even I don't know. His delicious black bean recipe. He tells me it's a family secret that has been passed down through the generations. Whatever it is, he slow simmers them for hours and adds onions, peppers, and corn and they're incredible. Our customers even purchase them in separate containers to take home.

And with football season coming up we're sure to have extra requests for them. People use them for dips, and nachos and in chili and black bean soup. I'm getting hungry just thinking about them when I hear shouting coming from next door.

It's so loud, that even the rabbits who were snoozing at my feet, get up and grumble into the other room. Marshall stomps his foot a few times on his way out the door to make sure I'm aware of his displeasure. I lean in closer to the wall to see if I can make out what's being said.

The old walls are thick, and I can't distinguish specific words, but I can tell that it's Tony and our landlord Larry Hale. This just gets curiouiser and curiouiser. First, I see him arguing with Bryce, then he ducks in here like he's hiding from someone, and now I hear him fighting with Larry. What is going on with Tony today?

The argument continues for quite a while when I hear the back door of the restaurant slam and then it's quiet. I glance at the clock and it's 4 pm, just before they open for dinner and high time that I get home for my dinner. I turn off the lights in the office, grab the tomato sauce from the fridge, and call out to Marshall and Marcus. "Time to go home boys!" I shout as they scurry around the corner.

"Did you get the organic carrots we asked for?" Marshall demands.

"The ones with the fluffy tops?" Marcus adds.

"Yes, I got the exact carrots you asked for," I tell them.

"What about the beet greens?"

"Beet greens too."

"Parsley?"

"Parsley?" I exclaim. "You spent half the day eating parsley at Tony's."

“Yeah, but you can never have too much parsley,” Marshall reminds me.

“Oh, I think maybe you can.”

“What was all the shouting about just now?” Marcus asks.

“I don’t know, but Tony was arguing with Larry about something.”

“When we were over there earlier, we heard him arguing with Bryce too,” Marshall informs me.

“I saw them arguing, but did you hear what they were talking about?”

Marcus crooks his head as he tries to recall if he heard anything, “It sounded like it was about money, but I wasn’t paying that much attention.”

I pause. “Now I’m kind of worried about him. He’s acting really weird today. Let’s just pop in there for a moment and check on him okay?”

The rabbits’ faces light up.

“No more parsley!” I announce as I shake my finger at them.

The hostess is manning the front desk already, setting up for this evening’s dinner shift. “Hi Belinda!”

“Oh, hi there Charlotte.” She eyes the rabbits at my feet. “Um, three for dinner?”

“Oh gosh no,” I tell her as the two of them nod their heads. These two are something else. I can just imagine the conversations they had with my grandmother. I need to ask them about it some time.

“I was just hoping to talk to Tony for a moment.”

She looks uneasy, like she’s searching for the right words. “Uhhhh, Tony took the night off. Is there something I could help you with?”

Took the night off? He never takes a night off. He works constantly. What is up with him today? “Nah, that’s okay, I’ll just talk to him tomorrow.”

“Okay, great, have a good night!” she says as we turn to leave.

“We should have asked for some parsley,” Marshall mutters under his breath.

As we make our way to the parking lot, I ask them again, “Can you think of anything else that might indicate Tony is in some kind of trouble? Anything that you overheard while you were there today?”

“No, nothing more than what we already told you. We didn’t pay much attention. It seemed pretty boring anyway.”

“I hope he’s okay. I don’t know him very well, but he seems nice enough. I’ll check on him again tomorrow to see if he needs anything.”

The three of us continue to the parking lot and I open the passenger door to my ancient Prius as the rabbits hop into the front seat. During the short drive home, the rabbits keep up a steady stream of chatter about all the useless gossip they picked up at Tony’s restaurant. Granted, most of it involves what the cat passed on to them, but I had no idea that our landlord was also having trouble with his soon to be ex-wife and his new girlfriend.

Sounds like the wife isn’t happy with his proposed settlement and the girlfriend (who’s young enough to be his daughter as they tell me) just wants him to get divorced so she can become the new Mrs. Hale.

Amazing what the animals overhear because no one thinks they understand, and in my case, can repeat. I make a mental note to remember that if I’m telling secrets, make sure the animals aren’t listening in.

We spend a quiet evening at home. Me, with my pasta and tomato sauce, and the rabbits with their organic greens. After dinner we gather on the couch to watch our favorite reality tv show together. This is how I spend most of my evenings.

The breakfast business comes with early hours after all, so I’m in bed by 9 pm most nights. The rabbits love to watch reality tv and make fun of the contestants. If they had thumbs (and I let them) they would tweet sarcastic comments about the shows, but until they figure out how to type, they reserve their color commentary for me.

We love to laugh at people who go on tv shows in the hopes of marrying someone they just met, but we all still watch it. I think we watch it mostly for the drama. The rabbits laugh and laugh at the crying jags and all the arguments. And they stomp their feet endlessly at the villains.

Along with the business, I inherited Gran’s house, a beautiful Queen Anne complete with a wraparound porch and incredible views of the surrounding mountains. I love to sit on the porch, drink coffee and read on Sunday mornings when the café is closed.

The rabbits insist the house is haunted, but I haven’t seen any ghosts in the month that I’ve been here, and never saw any when I lived here before. But I won’t be surprised if one shows up. It is Crested Peaks after all.

Chapter 3



The next morning Damien and I arrive at the restaurant at o-dark-thirty. Neither one of us are very talkative this early until he's made the coffee. He insists it must be made using a pour-over method only. "No pods in my kitchen!" he likes to proclaim.

I have to secretly admit though, it's really good coffee. But I don't tell him that because I don't want to give him the satisfaction. No sense in reinforcing his java related snobbery.

I open the back door and head to the dumpster with a bag of trash and fall flat on my face. "What the heck was that?" I exclaim as I prop myself up on an elbow to see what I tripped over. Damien comes running when he hears my scream and then screams himself.

"Holy crap!" Damien shouts. "Is he dead?"

I slowly creep up on the body to determine that it is indeed a body, and not just someone sleeping off a drunken bender in the alley. It's definitely a body. "We better call the police."

As he fumbles with the phone to dial 911, I force myself to get a better look. I gasp out loud when I recognize him. It's Larry Hale, my landlord, and the man I heard fighting next door with Tony just last night.

I've never seen the body of someone I know. I had them cremate Gran before I ever got here, and her ashes are stored in a pretty urn in a closet at home, until I can figure out what to do with them.

It's unnerving to see him lying on the ground, his face turned to one side as his eyes stare blankly into the distance. There's a lot of blood on the ground and it appears to have come from his head. I have a horrible feeling this was no accident.

I hear sirens grow closer with each passing moment and then they're on top of us. The other early risers, who have noticed the commotion, gather around and several gasp or cry out when they see Larry's body on the ground.

“All right everybody, give us some room,” the police detective barks out as he approaches the crowd. The crowd parts and Detective Andrew Bailey and I lock eyes. “Charlotte,” he nods at me.

“Hello Andrew.”

Damien’s eyes practically bug out of his head at this exchange. No one else seems to notice, they’re so focused on the body, but Damien never misses a thing. He raises his eyebrow at me from across the alley and I glare at him in response.

He’ll have questions later for sure. Right now, I just want the body removed from the alley. The entire thing – including seeing Andrew - is nerve wracking and it could mean there’s a killer roaming the streets.

“I need everyone here to go back to work and let us do our job. You’re all at risk of contaminating the crime scene!” Andrew shouts at the crowd gathered but to no avail. In a small town like this we don’t get a lot of excitement and this is way too interesting to pass up.

Andrew shakes his head in disgust and motions to the patrol officers who came with him to secure the area. As the officers usher people back and put up crime scene tape Andrew asks, “Who found the body?”

I reluctantly raise my hand.

“When?” Andrew asks.

I gulp. “It was less than ten minutes ago. I was taking the trash out when I tripped and fell over him.”

“Great. So, you’ve already contaminated the crime scene by flopping on top of him. Did you move anything on purpose? Touch anything? Did you see anything unusual beforehand?” he asks everyone who’s still standing around.

We all shake our heads numbly and murmur no.

“From the looks of it, I’d guess the body has been here for several hours,” Andrew tells us. “Do you know this man?”

“He’s my landlord. He owns this entire section of buildings,” I tell him.

I try not to, but I can’t help but look Andrew over. At over six feet tall, he’s even taller than I remember him. Because I’m 5 feet 10 inches tall myself, one of the first things I notice in people is their height.

I’m taller than a lot of men even and if I’m wearing heels, I often tower over them. I always liked that I had to look up at Andrew. And I hate myself for even remembering that. Especially at a time like this.

He's aged a little since high school but barely. If anything, he's even better looking which really bugs me. I wanted him to have shrunk several inches and gained about 100 pounds. And have tons of wrinkles and lost all his hair but no such luck.

His eyes are still the color of emeralds and his dark hair is now kept in a buzz cut which gives him a no-nonsense, I don't have time for my hair, look. I realize he must have worked hard for the last ten years if he's a detective already.

"It looks like he suffered a blow to the head, so I doubt this was an accident. Did either of you have any problems with him?"

Damien and I look at each other and shrug our shoulders. "No."

"I barely knew him. I've only had a little interaction with him since I took over my grandma's restaurant. Most of it has been through our lawyers."

For just a moment Andrew's face softens a bit. "That's right, your grandma. I'm sorry for your loss. She was a great lady."

I'm thrown off for a moment by his compassion. "Thank you. I miss her."

"I've never really dealt with him," Damien explains. "I'm mostly in the kitchen. Charlotte's grandma is the one who talked to him most of the time."

"Where were you last night?" Andrew asks me.

I'm surprised by this line of questioning. "Am I a suspect?" I ask.

Andrew sighs. "I'm just following procedure. The deceased was found directly behind your restaurant after all."

"I was home alone all night watching tv."

"Can anyone verify your whereabouts?"

I turn to the rabbits who are watching all of this with fascination. They both nod their heads enthusiastically. Fat lot of good that will do me. Non Supernaturals can't hear enchanted creatures talk. Besides, I don't know if rabbits count as reliable witnesses.

"Tell him we were home watching tv and can prove that because we know she sent that guy home because he was only there for the Instagram followers," Marshall suggests.

"No, no one saw me," I tell Andrew.

"What about you Damien? Where were you last night?"

“I was at home with my husband and our dog. We took Bubbles for a walk after dinner and stopped to talk to several of the neighbors.”

“I’ll need the name of those neighbors,” Andrew tells him as Damien nods his head and goes in search of paper and a pen.

“You can’t open the cafe until my men finish investigating the scene, and the coroner takes the body away,” Andrew tells me.

“Oh, come on, I have hungry customers gathering at the front door as it is, I can’t turn them away.” I offer.

“You’ll have to wait until we finish with the crime scene. I can’t run the risk of having any further evidence contamination.”

“Fine,” I mumble, “I’ll go tell everyone we’re closed today.”

After that Damien and I do our best to stay out of the investigators’ way. I realize it’s probably better that we’re closed today, considering a body right behind the restaurant isn’t the best way to attract customers. I feel a little guilty for thinking that, after all someone was killed, and we could all be at risk now. But I worry about keeping our momentum going and how this could spell trouble for the café.

Admittedly, I left out the part where I’m currently involved in a lawsuit with Larry over my grandmother’s lease. I don’t see how it’s relevant to the case and it’s certainly not worth killing over. For some reason he wants to break the lease now that my grandma is gone.

But my lawyers tell me it’s ridiculous and he knows it. Why he’s pushing this is anyone’s guess, but it’s been a huge hassle, so I just do what the lawyers tell me to do. Breaking the lease would mean more work on his part with having to locate and place a new tenant, when he had a perfectly good one already here.

It’s frustrating because he won’t even give a reason why he’s so adamant to kick me out. It occurs to me now that he’s dead this lawsuit may go away. I feel horrible even thinking that, but it would make my life easier. Suddenly I get a bad feeling that piece of information may be important after all, but I think I’ll wait to mention it to Andrew anyway.

As the police wrap up their investigation of the crime scene the coroner comes to remove the body. Also, probably not the best picture for business. It doesn’t take him nearly as long as it did the investigators though.

I suppose because he’ll do most of his work back at the morgue. I shudder at the thought. My landlord was likely murdered right behind my

restaurant, and I wonder if Crested Peaks is still as safe as it once was.

After the coroner leaves Andrew approaches us, “Until I have more answers, I need the two of you to stick close.”

“Are you telling us not to leave town sheriff?” I joke.

Andrew gives me a steely eyed glare. So much for a sense of humor. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you,” he growls at me. I hate that for some reason I think his voice is sexy. Here he is lecturing me on how I’m part of a crime scene and I’m noticing his deep voice. Ugh. What is wrong with me?

Chapter 4



Just then Miranda sprints into the restaurant. “Oh my god Char I just heard what happened, are you all right? Oh. Hi Andrew,” she purrs. What the heck is that all about I wonder? Why is she batting her eyes at him? Doesn’t she realize he’s the enemy?

“Miranda,” he nods at her as he leaves through the back door with the rest of the police crew.

“So, is it true?” she asks. “Was Larry Hale murdered right behind Marcall’s?”

“It looks that way,” I sigh and shrug my shoulders at her.

“Oh no, that’s awful! Who could have done such a thing?”

“I don’t know but we need to figure it out asap. Not only does this look really bad for the cafe but unless I’m mistaken, the police could consider me a suspect.”

“Wait. What?” Miranda squawks. “How could they think you’re a suspect?” But before I can get a word in edgewise, she continues, “Oh and speaking of police how hunky is Andrew?”

“Very,” Damien says firmly as he nods his head in agreement.

“What?” I groan. “He’s about as far from ‘hunky’ as you can get!” I use air quotes to emphasize the fact I don’t think he’s the least bit hunky. Okay, so maybe he’s slightly hunky. Or maybe a little more than slightly. He’s downright sexy and I hate that I think this and I’m certainly not admitting it out loud.

And the way he wears his gun and his badge on his belt makes him look every bit the alpha male he seems to be. He’s not the skinny, bean pole of a teenager he once was. He’s a big guy who obviously spends a fair amount of time in the gym and I’d be lying if I said I didn’t notice. But *they* don’t need to know that.

Miranda and Damien both stare at me like I’m bonkers. “I guess if you like that type,” I groan as I roll my eyes.

“That type?” asks Damien. “As in hot? Yes, I very much like that type!”

Miranda laughs and I pinch my lips together as I glare at the two of them. “We have more pressing matters to worry about here than whether or not Andrew is hot.”

“He’s also single!” Miranda says as she lays a perfectly manicured finger on top of Damien’s hand to emphasize her point.

“No way!” responds Damien. “I thought he and Gabby were pretty tight.”

“They were, but rumor has it, she left him because she didn’t like the hours he kept as a cop. She said as long as he was married to his job, he’d obviously never marry her, and they broke up.”

“Wow, I had no idea!”

I slam my hands down on the table making Miranda and Damien jump and the rabbits scuttle into the office to hide, “Will you two focus here? Someone was murdered behind my restaurant and we need to find out who did it before they pin it on me!”

“How do you know he was murdered for sure?” Damien asks.

“I don’t, until we hear more from the police,” I admit. “I hate the idea of Larry getting conked on the head right behind that door, but from the way the police were acting I assume someone killed him.” Damien and Miranda follow my gaze to the door and shudder in agreement. “This is bad if the cops are focused on me as a suspect, and the real killer is out there running free. I swear I will not let my grandma’s cafe go down for this!”

“But why would the cops suspect you? There’s no way you would do something like this.” Miranda argues.

“But what about my past with Andrew?” I point out.

“Hold the phone, you have a past with Detective McHotty?” Damien asks.

“We went to high school together.”

“Lots of people go to high school together, I’d hardly call that a past.”

“There’s more to it than that,” responds Miranda. “Andrew was her first kiss.”

“WHAT?” bellows Damien as the rabbits thump their feet from the office in protest. “How could you two have kept this from me for so long?”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” I tell him.

“If it wasn’t a big deal then why do the two of you act so weird around each other ten years later? There has to be more to it than that.”

“We kissed and then we never spoke again after that. Until today. End of story.”

“Seriously? Your first kiss and you literally haven’t spoken until today?” Damien stares at me in disbelief.

“Yep. He kissed me and we left, and he never spoke to me again.”

“That’s so weird,” marvels Damien.

“I think so too!” says Miranda.

“After all this time you’ve never asked him why he didn’t speak to you again?”

“Nope!” I reply.

“Can you imagine? And what if after all this time they’re like star crossed lovers, who are destined to be with each other, brought together again to fulfill their destinies all because of a murder!” she says waving her arms around for dramatic flourish.

“Ohhhhhh I love me a good star-crossed lovers’ story,” Damien squeals.

“Me too!” shouts Miranda as they high five each other.

I bury my head in my hands as I wonder how I ever got myself into this. I need to solve a murder and these two are writing scripts for soap operas. “Please guys, I’m begging you, we have to figure out who killed Larry. My reputation and my restaurant’s reputation are at stake here.”

“Okay,” Miranda and Damien say as they glance at each other and wordlessly promise to pursue this star-crossed lover’s thing at a later date.

“Do you have any ideas who would want to kill Larry? Was anybody mad at him or did they have a score to settle?” Miranda asks as she gets up and heats more water for coffee, since Damien and I already drank everything he made. She holds her hand over the water as it glows red for a moment.

I wish I could be that casual about my powers. She doesn’t even think about it or hesitate, she just does it. She heats it to precisely 200 degrees and then pours it over the grounds. She grabs three clean coffee cups while she waits for the water to drip through and rejoins us at the table.

I jump in. "I noticed something really weird yesterday at Tony's. I went over there looking for the rabbits and saw Tony arguing with Bryce Turner."

"Larry's cousin?" asks Damien.

Miranda nods her head. "And silent business partner. Rumor has it he invested a serious chunk of his own money into Larry's investments, but didn't want to be an active partner so he let Larry run it."

I nod my head glumly. "It definitely wasn't a friendly conversation either. It seemed pretty serious. And on top of that, just as I was closing up yesterday, Tony stopped over here and was acting sketchy."

Miranda snaps her fingers. "I saw that! He looked like he was hiding from someone."

"Yes, precisely, I was sure of that too. And then after chatting briefly he left as suddenly as he appeared. But it gets even better," I continue as Miranda and Damien lean in closer, eager to hear more. "I was in the office finishing up paperwork last night when I heard Tony arguing with Larry and it was loud."

"You didn't mention this before!" exclaims Damien. "What were they arguing about?"

"I don't know. The walls are too thick, and I couldn't make out what they were saying, but they were definitely fighting about something. *And* as we were leaving last night I decided to go over and check on him, but the hostess said he took the night off. Which he never does!"

Just then Marcus runs from the office into the center of the room, "Don't forget about the ex-wife!"

I point at him, "Yes! The ex-wife!"

"Tony has an ex-wife?" asks Miranda.

"No! Larry's soon to be ex-wife! Stumpy, the cat next door, told Marshall and Marcus that Larry's almost ex-wife Rita is furious because she thinks he's screwing her over on their settlement. Furthermore, Larry's girlfriend is also mad at him because she wants Larry to hurry up with the divorce and marry her instead."

Damien whistles, "Wow, he's not too popular around here these days, is he?"

"No, he's not and that's why the police need to be looking at suspects other than just me! There's probably a whole list of people who could have killed him, and we just need to figure out who it was!"

“We?” asks Miranda. “This is making me nervous. Maybe we should leave this up to the trained professionals.”

“But you saw how Andrew was with me, asking me where I was last night, and telling me not to leave town. If they’re focused solely on me, they’ll never figure it out. And it’s not like they’re going to believe me when I tell them I have information from two rabbits and a cat that might be helpful with their investigation.”

“She has a point,” says Damien.

“I guess,” says Miranda. “You just have to promise me that if this starts to look dangerous, you’ll tell Andrew everything you know.”

“Done!” I promise her. Kind of. It’s not her grandmother’s legacy that’s at stake after all. I’ll do whatever I can to clear my name with or without the police department’s help. “The first thing I want to do is talk to Tony because if anybody is looking guilty at this point it’s him.”

“I need to get back over to my coffee shop for a while, but I think the two of you should go talk to Tony, and see what’s up with him, and why he was fighting with Bryce and Larry yesterday.”

“Hey guys!” I shout at the rabbits who have gone back into the office. “I’m heading over to Tony’s for a bit.”

“Great!” Marshall shouts back. “Bring back some parsley!”

Chapter 5



The moment Damien and I walk into Tony's place he rushes over. His eyes are blood shot and puffy and his face is pale. He seems agitated and his words come out in a jumble, "What's going on? Is Larry really dead? I can't believe they found him behind your place. What did the police say? Do they have any leads? Are you in trouble?"

"Detective Bailey said it looks like someone hit him in the head, but otherwise they don't know much. I'm hoping we'll hear more soon."

He runs his hands through his short hair, and I notice he's also sweating a lot. His shirt is extra rumpled looking today as if he forgot to put on a new one, which is especially noticeable given that he's a big guy who looks like he often overindulges in his own pasta and bread sticks. Although I'd do the same thing if I ran an Italian restaurant that's for sure.

"Wow, tough break there huh Charlotte? You've only been managing your grandma's place for a month and now this. This can't be good for business."

I shake my head, "They wouldn't even let me open today with everything going on. By the way, did your hostess tell you that I stopped by here last night before I went home?"

He looks completely blank and I know she didn't. "Oh, um, yeah, she mentioned that. I decided to take the night off, it can be good to do that every once in a while. Was there something in particular that you needed?"

"I was just worried about you. When I was in here looking for the rabbits yesterday you were having an intense conversation with Bryce."

Tony pales and then stutters again, "Um, uh, yeah, we were arguing about um this season's fantasy football lineup."

I'm not sure how to respond to such a ridiculous claim. Who has that kind of discussion over football? Fake football no less. I'm on the verge of telling him there's no way I buy that, but thankfully Damien steps in.

"That's serious stuff man, the season is just around the corner."

“Bryce and I fight about the draft every year. And it’s been almost 7 years. We take it very seriously.”

I still think he’s lying, but now he and Damien are involved in an earnest discussion about football and I’m hoping their impromptu bonding session will lead to some serious answers from Tony. I definitely don’t think his sudden appearance and weird behavior in my café yesterday was about fantasy football either – especially since the rabbits thought they heard him arguing over money.

“Is that why you ducked into my restaurant yesterday to hide?” Tony whips his head around to look at me, his football discussion with Damien immediately forgotten, as he regards me with narrow eyes and worry consuming his face. Bingo.

He chuckles nervously, “Oh yeah, that. I just didn’t want to argue with Bryce further. It’s kind of ridiculous don’t you think?”

“And is that what you and Larry were fighting about yesterday too? Fantasy football?”

Now I’ve really done it. Droplets of sweat appear on his forehead and he’s clearly agitated with me. “Why are you suddenly so interested in who I talk to and when?”

“Charlotte mentioned that she was worried about you and that you haven’t been yourself lately. Since we’re neighbors and all that we should be looking out for each other don’t you think?” Damien soothes.

“If you must know, I got a violation notice from one of the city code inspectors. The electrician that Larry hired to do some work in my restaurant installed several faulty circuit breakers, and I’m the one who got blamed for it.

“I told him he owes me money, and he needs to hire someone else to correct the problem. But he’s claiming it’s my problem and not his. If he’s done any work over at your place you should double check by the way. You don’t want to get in trouble too.”

I nod my head. “I’ll do that. Thanks for the tip.”

“Is there anything else you want to ask me? Do you want to know what I had for breakfast this morning?”

“No, not really, but like Damien said we’re just looking out for you.”

“Of course,” he smiles at me but it’s no longer a friendly smile.

As Damien and I turn to leave I remember one last thing. “I hope your night off helped. Did you do anything fun or did you just stay home and relax?”

From the look on his face he obviously doesn’t buy my concern for one moment. “After I argued with Larry, as you so helpfully reminded me, I went for a long walk. I walked along the river to clear my head and before I knew it, I was at my front door. I felt better after that, so I watched TV and then fell asleep. You can ask Maria. She brought me to work this morning since my car was still here.”

“I hope your walk helped clear your head and that you’re feeling better,” I tell him as we turn to leave once again.

“Hey Charlotte wait, I may know something that could help. If you want to know more about Larry, you should talk to Rita his estranged wife. She was in here for dinner the other night, and after several glasses of wine she went on and on about how Larry was ripping her off and withholding money from her in the divorce. She’s sure he was hiding money from her and she said she would get it if it was the last thing she did.”

This certainly jives with what Marshall and Marcus said the cat told them. “Thanks Tony, I appreciate it.”

He tips a pretend hat in my direction and saunters back to the kitchen. As Damien and I return to Marcall’s I point out that he’s the second person to mention the ongoing problems between Larry and the ex-wife.

“To be fair, the first *person* was technically a talking cat who was repeating what he’d heard to talking rabbits so I’m not sure that counts.” Damien reminds me.

“But they were right, weren’t they? Sounds like there’s serious trouble between Mr. and Mrs. Hale and the whole town has heard about it. And now with Mr. Hale out of the way, that might mean Mrs. Hale inherits everything.”

Damien nods his head, “That gives her a reason to kill him before they’re divorced. Especially if she’s still mad he left her for Amber his mistress.”

We fall silent as we mull over the situation and pause in front of the café door.

“I want to talk to Rita too, to see what she knows, but Tony is definitely hiding something. And Is it just me or did he look sickly today? Like he hadn’t slept all night or something. It would make sense if he was the one

who killed Larry. I don't think he could do something like that and then just go on with his day as if nothing had happened."

"I know he was lying about arguing with Bryce over fantasy football."

I nod my head enthusiastically at the confirmation, "Yeah, I figured that. But how do you know for sure?"

"Bryce doesn't even play fantasy football. Not in any of the leagues around here anyway."

"Then why did he insist that's what they were fighting about and that they do it every year? Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. I've been playing fantasy football in Crested Peaks forever and Bryce doesn't play in any of our leagues. It's a small town and I can pretty much tell you exactly who's in which league."

"Are there other leagues he could play in that aren't in Crested Peaks?"

"It's possible Bryce plays in one that's strictly online, but I doubt it. I would have heard something about it. It's a tight knit community and we all talk in chat groups a lot. If Tony and Bryce had been arguing that seriously over draft choices year after year I'd know. The argument would have spilled over into one of the local groups."

"So why make up such a lame excuse? It just doesn't fit."

Damien drops his voice to a soft whisper, "The rumor is, Tony has a bit of a gambling problem. He probably shouldn't even be in a fantasy football league. He's been known to spend hours and hours on that stuff every week. He's also rumored to owe people money. The *wrong* people if you know what I mean."

"Then this goes back to the rabbits saying they thought the argument with Bryce was over money. I'm thinking Tony owes Bryce and Larry money, and the two of them intend to collect by any means necessary. It makes a lot more sense that Tony was arguing with each of them over money."

"Plus, there's the whole hiding in the café stunt yesterday." I grab Damien's arms and practically shake him I'm so excited, "You wouldn't hide from someone over a fake sports argument, but you would hide from someone you owed money to, right?"

"Now, let's not be too quick to make fun of fantasy football. It's a serious activity after all." Damien is quick to point out as he ignores my

massive eye rolling. “Those of us who enjoy the *sport*—” More eye rolling on my part. “--can get wound up about it from time to time.

“But yes, it seems in this case his behavior doesn’t mesh with that kind of argument. And I would bet it *is* about money. And I think we should tell Detective McHotty what we’ve learned.”

I groan loudly. This is never going to end is it? Maybe Andrew and the ex-girlfriend will reconcile so I don’t have to hear about this anymore. Then I realize I don’t really want him to get back together with the ex-girlfriend.

I secretly like the idea of an available Andrew Bailey and that bothers me. Ick. None of this makes any sense and we still have a murder to solve.

“I’m not going to tell Andrew anything yet,” I warn Damien as I wonder why he’s suddenly cringing and signaling me to stop talking.

“Why not? Do you have something you *should* be telling Andrew?” Andrew asks as I whirl around and come face to face with him.

Chapter 6



He's so close I can just barely smell his aftershave. It's woodsy and masculine and my pulse skitters at the sight of him. But I tell myself what's making my heart race is that he snuck up on me, and not that I'm happy to see him.

Damien nudges me in the back pushing me even closer toward Andrew, and I notice he doesn't step back, even though we're mere inches from each other. I'm also thinking that Damien may just be the next body they find in this town.

Andrew regards us with a grim look, "Damien. Charlotte. Could we talk inside for a bit?"

"Of course!" I respond as I unlock the door and usher them both in. "So, what's up, have you learned anything new about what happened to Larry?"

Andrew nods his head. "It was most definitely murder, and we believe we've located the murder weapon. The killer tossed it in some bushes in the park up the street."

"That's good, right?" I don't understand why Andrew looks so grim. "Now you'll know who killed Larry and arrest him won't you?"

"There's a slight problem. Your fingerprints are all over the murder weapon."

"What?" I wail. "That's not possible!"

"Larry was hit on the head with a heavy marble rolling pin," Andrew explains.

"Oh! Well there you go; we have one marble rolling pin and it's right where it always is, so there's no way it was a rolling pin from Marcall's. Show him Damien, go get the rolling pin."

"Of course," Damien explains as he leads Andrew and me back to the kitchen. "It's right...uh oh."

"What uh oh?" I respond sounding more frantic than I'd like.

Damien turns to both of us white as a sheet. “It’s not here,” he whispers.

“What?!” I screech again. I seem to be doing that a lot today.

“It’s gone,” he croaks.

Andrew turns to look at me and he’s not happy.

“That’s not possible, it has to be here, I just used it the other day to roll out pie crust for quiche. How can it be missing?” I frantically pull out drawers and rifle through them. “There must be some mistake, it’s been misplaced, I know it’s here somewhere.”

Damien joins in the mad search for the missing rolling pin, but after several minutes of practically tearing the kitchen apart, it’s clear the rolling pin isn’t here. I can’t believe this is happening. I didn’t kill Larry, but someone used my rolling pin, so it looks like I did. This is a disaster.

“Charlotte, you must realize how bad this looks. You’ve only been back in town for a month, and your landlord, with whom you’re involved in a very public, legal dispute, shows up dead right behind your restaurant, with a murder weapon that’s from your restaurant. My bosses are leaning on me hard to bring you down to the station for official questioning.”

Rats. I probably should have brought up the lawsuit when I had the chance. Now it looks like I was hiding it on purpose and then it’s my turn to pale, “Drew, you have to know that I had nothing to do with this.” And yes, I realize I’m using the name we all called him in high school, partly because I want him to remember just how far back, we go. Partly because it slipped out.

Naturally Damien doesn’t miss it and he twists his mouth up as if he’s trying not to laugh. Sure, laugh at me while I’m being accused of murder why don’t you. At least that means he doesn’t believe I could actually kill someone.

“Char, when I talked to you earlier, I got the distinct impression you were leaving something out. And you obviously did.” My deer in the headlights look must be a clear giveaway because he proceeds. “I questioned the rest of Larry’s tenants and they all confirmed that you’re fighting a legal battle with him on your grandmother’s lease. And it’s not exactly a secret.”

Great, thanks friends. Okay, so there may have been that time I stood in the middle of the dining area and told him if he didn’t watch it, I’d hex him. It was right after I arrived back in Crested Peaks and he had the

nerve to tell me that I couldn't re-open the restaurant after my grandmother's funeral. I didn't really mean it, I'm not even sure I'm capable of hexing someone or what it would even take to do it, but I was grieving and angry and I wanted to scare him until I could at least talk to my lawyers.

And besides, my lawyers told me to ignore him, that he had no legal standing to prevent me from operating the café. In light of what's happened today I guess ignoring him would have been the best thing to do.

"It's *my* lease now. And Larry doesn't, or I guess didn't, have the right to cancel it just because my grandma died. My lawyers tell me that even he knows that, and his own lawyers know that, and that he's just fishing for an excuse to cancel the lease for some unknown reason. They assure me It will be an easy case for us to win and therefore I have no reason to want him dead."

I have to give Andrew credit because he obviously could have easily thrown me in the back of the squad car, and escorted me down to police headquarters, but he hasn't. Yet. I don't know if that's because of our past or what, but hopefully he catches the real killer before it comes to that.

"I shouldn't even be here warning you about this, but you need to know, unless we find another clear-cut suspect soon, you'll have to come down to the station soon for questioning."

I raise my hands in resignation, "I get it, I'm not going anywhere."

"See that you don't," he tells me as he nods goodbye to Damien and heads out the door.

"One more thing!" I shout before he leaves. "Can you tell me what time Larry was killed?"

He pauses, like he knows he shouldn't. "Most likely it was just before 10 pm."

Chapter 7



As soon as Andrew leaves, Miranda strides into the cafe. “Oh my god, I thought he’d never leave, what happened, what did he say, does he have anything new to report, spill!” The words pour out of her mouth so fast her tongue practically trips over them.

“She called him Drew and he called her Char,” reports Damien.

“Nooooooo!” Miranda growls as her eyes light up.

“Are you kidding me? The murder weapon came from Marcall’s and you’re worried about what nickname I called him?”

“The murder weapon came from here?” Miranda gasps in disbelief.

“That’s what they tell me. They found it in the bushes by the park up the street.”

“Oh, so that’s what all the commotion was a while back. I wondered what they were doing,” she marvels. “But there’s no way it came from here. How is that even possible?”

“That’s what we thought, but my fingerprints are all over it and our rolling pin is missing, so I think Andrew’s right, but that still doesn’t tell us who killed Larry. And it’s more urgent than ever that we figure out who really did.”

“What do you need me to do?” offers Miranda, ever the loyal friend.

“Damien and I just talked to Tony and he swears he walked home last night to cool off, after he fought with Larry, and that his wife can vouch for his whereabouts. But both he and the cat that Marshall and Marcus were talking to, said that Larry and the soon to be ex-Mrs. Hale were having serious problems, and he thinks she may be involved in Larry’s death.”

“Let’s go talk to her!” insists Miranda.

“I’m right behind you. Where can we find her?”

Miranda stops to think. She knows this town far better than I. “She has a standing manicure appointment at Glam on the Peak every Tuesday at 3 pm.”

I glance at the ancient Felix the Cat wall clock, that's hung in the kitchen forever, and see that it's 3:45, so she should still be there. "Let's go!" Miranda and I walk to the beauty salon at a fast clip hoping to catch Rita.

"How do you know that Rita has a manicure appointment every Tuesday at 3 pm?" I ask.

"Because Tammy Sylvester owns the shop now. You remember her from high school, right?"

I hold my hand up and wiggle it to indicate a vague remembrance.

"Anyway, she owns the salon and when news of the affair between Larry and Amber first broke, Rita was having her nails done and Amber marched into the salon and confronted her. Even dumped an entire bowl of nail soak over her head. For a moment it looked like Rita was going to pull Amber's hair out."

I interrupt, "When did Tammy buy the salon? I thought Vivian Southwick owned the salon?"

"Wow, you *have* been gone for awhile haven't you? Vivian passed away several years ago and Tammy bought the salon from Vivian's daughter."

"And the next generation takes over..." I murmur.

Miranda continues unphased, "It was like a screaming cat fight. Tammy said it was horrible, but they couldn't stop watching. Everybody talked about it for weeks afterward. Tammy expected that to be the end of Rita's weekly appointments, so she was surprised when Rita showed up the following week right on time. So anyway, that's how I know that Rita should be here getting her nails done."

I think about how Amber and Larry have humiliated Rita in one of the worst ways possible. It could be even more reason for Rita to kill Larry. We walk in the front door and I'm 10 years old again coming here with my Gran while she gets her hair done.

I always hated the smell of the perms and hair dye's because they make my nose sting. You'd think that a bunch of witches could just color their own hair with a quality hair coloring spell like I do (and if I can do it anybody can), but I guess they like to come here and gossip.

With Larry's murder they'll no doubt have plenty to gossip about for some time. I just hope they aren't chatting about my impending arrest as the number one suspect.

“Hey Miranda, how’s it going?” Tammy greets us. “And, oh my goodness it’s Charlotte Duffin. I heard you were back in town!” Tammy runs around the front desk to hug me. I still only vaguely remember her. She was in Miranda’s year, but I remember she was a cheerleader.

“I’m so sorry about your grandma,” she tells me. While it’s always hard being reminded of my grandmother’s passing, I truly appreciate all the people who take the time to mention her. It’s like part of her will never leave here as long as people still remember.

“What can I help you two girls with today?”

“We’re just here to talk to Rita,” Miranda explains.

“Of course, she’s back at her usual station. Fair warning though, she seems extra touchy today. Everyone who has come in here stops to stare at her. You knew Larry was killed last night, right?”

Miranda and I look at each other and then back at Tammy. “Yes, we heard something like that,” Miranda says.

Tammy covers her mouth with her hand, “Oh no, I’m such an idiot. They found him behind your grandma’s café, didn’t they?”

I nod my head dismally, “Yes, unfortunately they did, and now we’re hoping to find someone who might have more information on why anyone would want to kill Larry.”

Tammy leans forwards and whispers to us, “It’s all anyone has been able to talk about today. Do you think there’s really a crazed killer in Crested Peaks?”

“Well I know it wasn’t me!” I tell her. She looks confused as we then stroll to Rita’s nail station. I’m glad that rumor hasn’t made the rounds yet at least. As we approach Rita, I notice that she’s a sophisticated looking woman with every hair in exactly the right place and the type who never leaves the house without her makeup done just so.

She eyes us warily as we approach her and sit down on either side of her in red vinyl chairs. I’m certain they’re the exact same vinyl chairs they had when I was a kid. The sparkly kind with silver trim. And Vivian either took extraordinarily good care of them, or she used witchcraft to keep them looking new over the years, because there isn’t a mark on them.

“Hi there Rita,” Miranda says gently, “First let me say I’m so sorry about Larry.”

Rita snorts. “Ha! Good riddance.”

She turns to me, “You’re Charlotte, aren’t you? The new owner of Marcall’s, where they found Larry’s body?”

People are watching us with growing interest, and it makes me uncomfortable. I’m sure the gossip train has been traveling hot and heavy through town today. It doesn’t help that I’m the new kid in town. Or at least new-ish.

“Yes, I am, and I’m sorry for your loss as well.”

“Pssshhhhhh! Like I keep telling people, good riddance! That bum finally got what he deserved. I don’t mind saying I wish I had thought to do that to him a long time ago. I’d certainly be better off. Larry was a cheap, cheating, son of a bitch. But before I forget, I’m sorry about your grandmother. She was a kind woman and I liked her.”

I deliver my standard, “Thank you, I appreciate that.” And I do appreciate it, but I don’t want to lose sight of why we’re here. Rita is clearly very angry. But is she angry enough to kill her ex-husband? Angry enough to swing a rolling pin at his head? From the sounds of it, she might be.

“Did you ladies come to the salon just to talk to me about Larry today? Although as you can see, everyone else is clearly talking about me.” She gestures to the crowd at the salon who then hurriedly pretends to resume their conversations, as if they weren’t attempting to listen in on ours to begin with.

“Yes, we admit it, we came here specifically looking for you. We were hoping maybe you could tell us a bit more about Larry. We heard that you were kind of upset about the divorce settlement—” Miranda starts to explain when Rita cuts her off.

“Who told you that?” she asks. “Oh, never mind, I can guess at about two dozen people who would have happily told you that. I know I’ve been the talk of the town for awhile now. Larry galivants around with that hussy, flaunting his relationship in my face, and everybody talks about it. Then he has the nerve to ask for a quickie divorce. Ha!”

Her voice drops to a loud whisper. “I’m certain Larry is hiding money from me, and until I find out where, and how much, he’s not getting rid of me.” Then she pauses for a moment and laughs so loud people turn to look at us again. “Turns out he didn’t have to get rid of me at all! I got rid of him!”

Miranda and I nod reluctantly in agreement. Neither one of us is quite sure what to say at this point. I’ve never talked to a widow who was

happy her husband was dead. And who knows, I may be talking not just to a widow but to a murderer. She's bitter and doesn't seem the least bit broken up by his death.

"What makes you think he was hiding money from you?" I ask.

"Just a gut feeling. I was married to the man for 20 years and I know him. He was dumb enough to brag about how he was going to hit it big soon. He always thought that, but lately it's like he couldn't help but throw it in my face.

"He always had these lofty ideas that were going to happen 'someday' but this time it was different. I thought he may have actually had discovered something."

"He even wanted me to know that I'd regret not being nicer to him. Suggested that once he finally got rid of me, that he and Amber would leave and live the high life somewhere, and he could finally be happy.

"Considering he was divorcing me he should have just kept his mouth shut, but he's such a fool he couldn't help but brag about this fortune he obviously thought he was coming into. So naturally I refused to let him get away with it.

"I told my lawyer to leave no stone unturned. If he really had finally come into a fortune, then after giving him twenty miserable years of my life he was going to share it!"

"Did your lawyer ever find anything?" I ask.

Rita shakes her head sadly, "No, nothing yet. And now that he's dead who knows if we'll ever find it. I didn't kill him, but I'm not surprised that someone finally did."

Even though Rita says she didn't kill Larry I'm not convinced. I assume most murderers don't come right out and admit it. Not at first anyway. Besides, she's a little too happy he's gone and has every incentive in the world to want him gone. Even if his death means she'll never find any hidden treasure, if there even is any. Larry still had enough money for her to do quite well with.

As we get up to leave Rita adds, "Make sure you question his girlfriend Amber. I've heard she's furious because he can't get rid of me fast enough to marry her. If anyone has reason to kill him it's her. But if she ever got the chance to actually marry him, she would have had even more reasons." She barks with laughter at her own joke.

“But if she killed him, before you divorced him, wouldn’t that leave her without any of his money anyway?” Miranda points out.

“Not if she knew where he stashed the extra money. Or if Larry had changed his will to include her, which I will know more about later when I talk to my lawyer. For all I know, she’s gathering the money right now and fleeing the country.”

If Rita is right, it’s crucial we get to the girlfriend before she runs off. If she really killed him, I need to prove that, so I can clear my name and return to making delicious black bean breakfast burritos for Crested Peaks.

I turn back as an afterthought “Do you mind if I ask what you were doing last night?”

Rita smirks, “I was salsa dancing with my friends. We go every week and I didn’t get home until the wee hours of the morning.”

Rita sees the disappointed look on my face. I guess I was secretly hoping she’d confess, and I could be done with this. I could solve a murder and get on with my life. “I’m telling you; talk to his gold-digging hussy!”

Maybe Rita has something. Maybe it was the girlfriend. Or maybe it was Rita after all. I don’t know. But I do know that time is running out for me to successfully clear my name and we have to get to the bottom of this fast.

Chapter 8



As Miranda and I leave the salon I turn to her. “Let me guess, you know where to find the girlfriend.”

“Never fear my friend,” Miranda assures me as she throws a comforting arm around my shoulder. “I happen to know that Amber works at the Woofing Beauty Dog Grooming Salon.”

“She grooms dogs?” I laugh.

“She does! Larry tried to buy the building where she works and that’s how they met. It was quite the scandal. The whole town was talking about it forever, so how they thought they’d keep it a secret is beyond me. And then it all blew up in the beauty salon that day.”

“Wow,” I shake my head in wonder. “So, both Rita and Amber had reason to kill Larry.”

“But Rita was with her group of friends salsa dancing most of the night.”

“So she says.” I point out. “Do you think Amber will even be at work today? Given everything that’s happened?”

“I guess we’re about to find out!” says Miranda as she pulls open the door to the salon.

Amber is there painting a white standard poodle’s toenails neon green. The poor dog is wearing a matching green bow in her hair and looking none to pleased. Amber looks up at us as we approach her station and her eyes are red and puffy. I’m surprised she’s here.

“Hi Miranda,” Amber sniffles. “Have you heard about Larry?”

“I did and I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Do you know the police won’t tell me anything because I’m not his wife? I just don’t get that. It’s me he loved. It’s me he wanted to marry as soon as he could get rid of that shrew who refused to give him a divorce. And now we’ll never get the chance!” she cries as she continues to paint the poodle’s toe nails. The poodle looks at her like she can’t believe she not

only has to endure getting her toenails painted, but then has to stand there and listen to Amber sob on top of it all.

“Amber, I’d like you to meet my friend Charlotte. She owns Marcall’s Breakfast Café now,” Miranda explains as gently as she can.

She glances up at me and I feel sorry for her. Her boyfriend was just murdered after all. Even if he was still married. Unless she’s the one who did it and this is all an act. Which I still think is a distinct possibility. Especially if what Rita claims is true, that Larry was hiding a large sum of money and Amber knows exactly where it is.

“Isn’t Marcall’s where Larry’s body was found?”

“Yes, kind of, I mean it was found behind my cafe.”

“What did he look like when you found him? I mean what happened? Do you really think someone murdered him? The police aren’t telling me anything!” And with that she lets out another round of wailing.

I’m not sure what to say to her at this point. I’m obviously not going to tell her I tripped over him and came face to face with his haunting, blank eyes and blood pooled beneath him. “He looked very peaceful,” I offer.

“Thank you for telling me that,” she snuffles.

Miranda jumps right in, “We understand that you were upset about Larry’s wife holding up the divorce for so long.”

“It was getting old. And extremely frustrating. I told him just give her what she wants. You’ll still have plenty of money after that anyway. The guy was loaded but oh no, he had to be so stubborn about that last little bit. He kept refusing to give in and now he’s gone, and it has all been for nothing.” Amber sobs again as the poodle shifts uncomfortably.

“Rita mentioned that she thought Larry wasn’t disclosing all his assets and that she thought he had money hidden somewhere. Did he ever mention any kind of side deal he was working on?”

She shakes her head, “No, he told me that Rita was just trying to hold up the divorce by claiming he had a bunch of money somewhere, but that she was lying just to get back at us. I can’t believe he let her go on like she did though. It made me so angry sometimes. Why couldn’t he just stand up to her? He wasted so much time on all of that.”

Amber and Rita are both outraged and had reason to kill Larry. At least in their minds anyway, I imagine. It also seems odd that Amber would show up at work only hours after finding out her boyfriend was killed.

Unless she already knew he was dead anyway because she's the one who bashed his head in with my rolling pin.

The more I think about that, the madder I get. How dare whoever it was take something from my business, my grandma's business, and use it in violence against another human being. Even if Larry was kind of a louse, he didn't deserve to die to like that.

"We had such a romantic evening last night too, if only we'd known it would be our last," she adds woefully.

"What did you two do last night?" asks Miranda.

"First we went to dinner at our favorite Greek restaurant Who Gotsa Bougatsa. We ate by candlelight and they played our favorite song and it was all so romantic."

I notice that Miranda has a confused look on her face, and she starts to say something, but then stops when she thinks better of it. I throw her a questioning glance, but she makes just the slightest head shake, like she doesn't want me to ask just then so I don't.

"Then we came home and watched *Steel Magnolias* on cable tv. It's my favorite movie."

"What did you do after that?"

"We went to bed."

"Together?"

"Well of course together. And when I woke up this morning, he had already left for work, but he left me a love note like usual. He really is the sweetest man."

I nod my head hoping Amber thinks I agree with her and will tell us more. "If you don't mind me asking, what time did you go to bed last night?"

"At midnight, that was when the movie was over."

I don't dare look over at Miranda because I don't want Amber to realize that we just caught her in a lie. If it's true that Larry was killed sometime before 10 p.m. last night, then they weren't at home watching a movie together and they definitely didn't go to bed together at midnight.

At first, I wonder how she could be that careless in making up such an obvious lie, but then I realize she thinks because the police wouldn't tell her anything that we don't know much either. I'm a little nervous as I think about how we could be standing in front of Larry's killer right now.

Admittedly, I thought the same thing about Tony and Rita but now it looks bad for Amber as well.

“I didn’t even realize he was dead until my friend Patty called me to tell me how sorry she was about Larry. She assumed I already knew about it.” She starts wailing again, but just as Miranda and I offer up our excuses for why we should be going, she stops crying long enough to ask us if we’ve talked to Bryce, Larry’s cousin.

“No, we haven’t seen him yet this morning. Why do you ask?”

“Because if Rita didn’t kill him, I’d bet on Bryce.”

“Really? Why is that?” I ask.

“I’ve never trusted him. And lately he’s been calling at all hours of the night, and then Larry runs out to meet with him. But he wouldn’t tell me what it was about.”

I mentally add Bryce to the list as well. Rita thought Larry was up to something, makes sense that his cousin and silent business partner might be in on it.

Miranda and I say goodbye to Amber and the green toe-nailed poodle, walk out the door and straight into Andrew. And I mean literally straight into Andrew. He’s so solid that when I run smack into his broad chest, I fall backwards, but he grabs me just in time before I hit the sidewalk. I feel like such a clutz for almost falling like that, but I enjoy the way he wraps his arms around me as he pulls me into him.

“Fancy seeing you two here.”

Chapter 9



He seems reluctant to let me go, but when I look over at Miranda and see her smug face, I push away from him.

“Why do you say it like that?” I ask.

“Because it seems like almost everywhere I go today I’ve come across someone who has talked to you first.” He stares at me and I swallow hard. It suddenly dawns on me that the police may not be thrilled that I’m helping in the investigation. Considering I’m their main suspect.

“Considering it’s my life and my career that are on the line here I have every right to talk to whoever I choose.” I tell him defiantly crossing my own arms over my chest in an attempt to appear bold.

“No, you don’t. You need to leave this up to me and the rest of the police force. This is a murder investigation, and you have no training, and no right to interfere. And if you don’t cool it, I can haul you down to the station and lock you in a jail cell.”

Miranda whips her head back and forth as she watches us interact. And it annoys me to no end that the smirk is still there.

I roll my eyes at him. “Okay, I’ll stop interfering in the investigation.”

“Good. Thank you. I promise, I am investigating this thoroughly and we’ll figure out who killed Larry. You just go back to your cafe, or better yet go home and relax and watch a movie. Make some cookies or take a bubble bath or do whatever it is you do when you’re not interfering in a police investigation.”

“Fine!” I fire back.

“Fine!” he responds.

Then he stomps into the dog salon, clearly in search of Amber, as Miranda and I walk back up the street.

“So, what we do now?” Miranda asks.

I look at her like she's completely dense. "We talk to Bryce obviously."

Her mouth drops open in an O. "But you just told Andrew that you'd stop interfering!"

"I *meant* I'll stop interfering after I talk to Bryce."

"Ohhhh you are such a bad girl!"

"Why no, I'm going home to watch movies and take bubble baths, didn't you hear him? Ugh. The nerve of that man. I can't believe he told me to go home and watch a movie. He makes me so mad. He's insufferable. And who does he think he is anyway that he can tell me what to do. I can't stand that guy."

Miranda tries desperately not to laugh.

"What? Why do you have that look on your face? What's so funny?"

"Youuuuu like him!" she sings.

"I do not!" I insist.

"Yes, you do, you looooooove him!"

"Stop making those sing song noises. We're going to talk to Bryce right now before Andrew catches us."

Now Miranda is skipping along the sidewalk and singing, "Char likes Drew! Char likes Drew!" People walk by her and stare, while I pretend I don't know her.

But she suddenly stops in the middle of the sidewalk and smacks her hand against her forehead, "I almost forgot!"

"Almost forgot what?"

"I guarantee Amber and Larry were never at Who Gotsa Bougatsa last night for dinner."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the restaurant is closed while Mr and Mrs Anastos are on a Caribbean cruise that their grandkids gave them for Christmas. I'm babysitting their parrot while they're gone."

"And she claims she and Larry were home together all evening and went to bed at midnight. Which, if he really was dead by 10 pm, then *she's* certainly hiding something."

Miranda grabs my arm, "Like the fact she killed Larry?"

"I think it's a good possibility."

“We need to tell Andrew!” she demands as she squeezes my arm even harder.

“I’m not saying another word to Andrew until we talk to Bryce. And then I’ll think about it.”

“Charlotte, we could get in a lot of trouble here. You heard him, he said if you didn’t stop, he’ll throw you in jail!”

“He’s not their lead suspect, his entire life isn’t on the line, mine is. I have every right to clear my name and Detective Bailey will just have to deal with that.”

“Okayyyyyyy,” Miranda responds. “I guess we’re talking to Bryce now. By the way, did you just want to melt when he rescued you from falling on the sidewalk and then held you in his arms?”

“Miranda!” I exclaim, getting more exasperated by the second.

“Okay, okay, focus on Bryce!”

“I suppose you know where to find him too?”

“Strangely, that’s one I don’t know, but let’s try Larry’s office. I bet they’ll know there.”

When we arrive at Larry’s office, we’re surprised to see Bryce frantically searching through stacks of files that are strewn all over the place. He’s also yelling at some hapless secretary and telling her to stay out of his way.

The poor woman looks like she’s been crying, and I wonder why Bryce didn’t just give her the day off, considering her boss was just found murdered and Bryce doesn’t seem to want her there anyway.

“Can I help you?” she asks us tearfully. “We’re actually closed today.”

“We just need to talk to Bryce for a moment,” I explain. “I’m one of Larry’s tenants.”

At the mention of Larry’s name, he looks up as vague recognition crosses his features, and for a moment maybe even a flash of anxiety. “Ladies, you’ve obviously heard about Larry’s unfortunate passing and I’m sure you’re concerned, as our tenants, about what will happen next. Let me assure you that Larry’s business continues as usual and you don’t have a thing to worry about.”

“I’m not one of your tenants,” Miranda points out.

“I am. I’m Charlotte Duffin, I own Marcall’s. Where Larry’s body was found.”

“Yes of course Charlotte, I know exactly who you are. How are you doing? That must have been a horrible experience coming to work today and finding Larry’s body behind your café. I can’t imagine how frightened you must have been. Have you talked to the police? Have they identified any suspects?”

“Believe it or not I’m their primary suspect.” If he had anything to do with Larry’s death, or as I suspect he knows something he’s not admitting to, best to let him think the police are zeroing in on me, so maybe he’ll let his guard down and tell us something.

“What? I can’t believe they would suspect you. That’s ludicrous. I mean everyone knows about your legal troubles with Larry, but that’s no reason to kill someone is it?”

“I certainly don’t think so. But now I just need to convince the police of that.”

“Is there something specific I can help you with today? As you can imagine we’re quite busy here trying to make up for the obvious void that Larry’s passing has created. And don’t worry, I’ll be around to visit with all of our tenants in the coming days to let them know that it will be business as usual.”

“You seem to be looking for something. I hope no one lost my rent check from last month,” I say in what I hope sounds like a joking manner.

“Awww no, that’s not it at all. It’s just that Larry was a bit of a control freak and insisted on keeping his own calendar and contacts private. Even his poor secretary didn’t know where they were.” Bryce nods at the secretary who looks like she’s ready to burst into tears at any second.

“I don’t want things to fall through the cracks now so I’m hoping to find everything I need, as soon as possible to carry on with our work. You know I spent the night in Breckenridge at my family’s condo. I was researching potential investment properties up there and meeting with clients, so when I got the call about Larry’s untimely death this morning,

“I drove back right away and just got in. Horrible tragedy this is. Just horrible.” He shakes his head in sorrow but I’m not sure I’m buying it. Still, Breckenridge is almost three hours away, and if he just now returned that could rule him out. If he was really in meetings his alibi should be easy to confirm.

“Did you talk to Larry at all last night?”

He shakes his head, “No, I was in meetings the entire time. You might want to ask his ditzy girlfriend that question.”

“We just talked to Amber, she told us she and Larry went to dinner and then came home and watched a movie together.”

“There you go. There’s your answer. Unless you think you have reason to doubt her?”

Miranda shakes her head, “No, no reason.”

“I don’t know what he saw in her. She’s just a gold digger who was after his money.”

I want to ask him more about Amber when the secretary pops her head through the door. “Bryce, a Detective Bailey is on the phone. He says he’s on his way here to talk to you about Larry.”

Bryce smiles but it looks contrived, “No problem Barbara, tell him I’m happy to talk to him at any time.”

Uh oh. If Andrew is headed here, we’re about to get busted a second time. “Thanks so much for your time, we’ll be getting out of your way now,” I tell him as Miranda and I spin around and dash out the door.

We run walk for an entire block trying not to call extra attention to ourselves, or run into anybody on the crowded sidewalk, as we make our getaway. We duck into an alley about two blocks away to catch our breath and regroup.

Chapter 10



I'm sure Bryce will mention that he talked to us anyway, but we'll just deal with that fallout later. "Let's go back to the coffee shop and hide out before we get in serious trouble," Miranda suggests, and I quickly agree. We peer around the corner and with no Andrew in sight we walk back to the coffee shop.

Miranda makes us each an espresso as we huddle at a table in the corner to talk. Damien joins us as the three of us go over everything we learned that morning.

"I'm with Amber, Bryce seems sketchy to me," Miranda points out.

"I know, but I'm not convinced that he had a reason to kill Larry. He's definitely hiding something, but that doesn't automatically make him a killer."

"What does he stand to gain by killing his business partner?" asks Damien. "Does he get the business now or does Rita? Considering he was just a silent partner, who let Larry run things, this could be a huge hassle now that Larry is gone. Imagine if Rita fights him on it as hard as she was fighting the divorce."

"Or, with Larry gone does he assume he can steamroll Rita, or even just offer to buy her out, and then the whole thing is his?" I surmise.

"You know Rita will be hashing this out with her lawyers today. I think those two may be scratching each other's eyes out before Larry is even buried." Miranda deftly levitates a plate of chocolate chip cookies to our table, oblivious to some of the looks we get from the customers in her shop.

"And there's still Tony to consider. The arguments with Bryce and Larry, and the weird behavior yesterday overall. It seems like everybody is hiding something," Damien points out.

"Amber told Charlotte and me that she and Larry had dinner at the Anastos' restaurant last night."

Damien looks confused. “Aren’t they on some Caribbean cruise or something?”

“They are.”

“So that’s a big lie.”

“And,” I point out, “she claims they went home, watched *Steel Magnolias* on tv, and then went to bed at midnight. But if Larry was killed before 10 pm that’s obviously another lie.”

Damien frowns.

“What?” I ask.

“*Steel Magnolias* wasn’t on tv last night.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Tom insists on watching it every time it’s on. We have the DVD, but whenever it’s on tv we have to watch it then too. It’s embarrassing really. He’s still mesmerized like it’s the first time he’s ever seen it. Except he knows every single line from the movie and has to say it along with the actors.”

Miranda and I look at each other like we’re sure he’s joking about this. But it turns out he’s not.

“And how do you know it wasn’t on last night? There’s always tons of stuff on TV, maybe Tom just missed this one.”

“I know because he was all set to watch it. We walked Bubbles and came home, and he popped popcorn. But then it was pre-empted by a baseball game. Tom threw a fit.

“Threatened to picket at the cable office, only it’s in NYC so that obviously wasn’t happening. Wrote several angry emails already to the channel. Sometimes I pretend I don’t know him.”

I’m stunned. “Amber lied about her entire evening.”

“Looks like it.” Miranda says.

We all pause for a moment, lost in our own thoughts.

“And what did you two find out about the almost ex-wife?” asks Damien.

“She’s openly glad that he’s dead. Said she wished she would have thought of it herself and that she’s convinced he has a hefty stash of money hidden somewhere, and that’s why she was delaying the divorce.”

Damien’s cringes. “Ouch! That’s harsh. But is she angry enough to kill him?”

“I think it’s possible. Amber is infuriated as well. Maybe she thought he was never going to divorce Rita and marry her anyway, so she wacked him on the head.”

Miranda snaps her fingers, “With Larry dead Rita stands to inherit everything. And with a divorce she only gets half. There’s your motive right there.”

“Yes, and then there’s still me,” I remind them.

“You didn’t kill Larry,” Miranda says as if I need that fact clarified.

“Obviously I didn’t kill Larry. Well, obviously to the three of us, but I’m still a suspect. It was behind my café, with my rolling pin, and Damien and I just happen to find the body. And with Larry’s lawsuit the police think I have motive.”

“Oh!” Miranda shouts and gives a little hop in her seat as if she just remembered an important detail. Damien and I turn to her in anticipation of her groundbreaking fact. “Tell Damien about how Drew saved you from falling and then pulled you into his arms and you embraced right in the middle of the sidewalk.”

Here we go again.

Damien’s face turns from shocked to extremely delighted in under a second. “Whaaaa? Hot Cop had his arms around you? What was it like? He does have very nice arms by the way. And I bet he smells good, doesn’t he?”

I roll my eyes, “You can stop pointing out how attractive he is.”

“No, I don’t think I can. Not when he’s that hot.”

“What would Tom say if he heard you talking like that?” I ask, thinking I’ve got him now.

“Oh, believe me, my hubs thinks he’s hot too. And when I tell him that you two have a history, he’s really going to be interested.”

“Great, just what I needed, to be on the tip of everyone’s gossiping tongue in Crested Peaks. It’s bad enough they’re all talking about the murder behind my café, now they can add my sordid love life on top of that.”

“Oh, c’mon, we don’t get a lot of excitement here, so let us enjoy your dilemma with the hot cop while we can. It’s like our own little live soap opera.”

“Now that there’s a murder to solve this should be enough excitement to last everyone for a long time I hope.” As Damien nods in

agreement I look out the window at Tony's restaurant. "I want to talk to Tony again. I just know he's lying about something.

"Out of all the people we've talked to today he's the only one who I know for sure argued with Larry *and* Bryce yesterday. Damien thinks he's lying about the fantasy football league and I think they were arguing about something much more serious. I'm guessing it's about money."

"If you hurry you can catch him before they start their dinner prep," Damien suggests.

Miranda levitates our dirty espresso cups toward the kitchen. "Damien has been promising to show me how to use my new hand torch to make cr me br lee. You should run over and see if you can catch Tony before his staff reports for dinner, and we'll join you as soon as we're done."

"I think I will," I tell them as I head toward the door and wave. "Wish me luck, and don't set anything on fire."

"Good luck!" they wave back. "Wait, isn't it bad luck to ask for good luck?" I hear Miranda mention as I close the door. I hope not because the last thing I need is more bad luck.

Thankfully the front door is unlocked, so I don't have to go all the way around back, so it seems luck is indeed on my side for the first time today. I don't want to startle Tony, so I call out first, "Hello! Hey Tony! Are you in here? I saw your truck in the parking lot!"

When he doesn't respond I assume he's in his office in the back and can't hear me. As I cross the dining room, I notice how quiet it is, unlike the din when it's full of talking, happy customers, but the moment I push open the kitchen door I scream.

Tony is on his back in the middle of the floor with a knife protruding from his chest. I rush forward as if there's something I can actually do when I realize, just like Larry this morning, he's most definitely dead.

I don't even think to dial 911 at first as I stand there gaping and horrified staring at his dead body. That makes two bodies in one day that I've literally and figuratively stumbled across and I don't quite know what to do.

It's like I'm rooted to the spot and can't move. I don't know how long I stood there, whether it was several seconds or minutes, but none of that matters when Andrew and several other police officers burst in through the

back door with their guns drawn shouting, “Crested Peaks Police put your hands where we can see them!”

I scream and throw my hands in the air as they surround me. Andrew looks stunned to see me standing over Tony’s body but at least he re-holsters his gun when he realizes it’s me.

Adding to the chaos Damien and Miranda also walk in through the kitchen door and Miranda screams as she sees both Tony’s body and CPPD’s finest pointing their guns at all three of us.

“Charlotte, what did you do?” Miranda shouts.

“What do you mean what did I do?” I shout back. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Stand down everybody!” Andrew orders as his officers look at him confused. “Just put your guns down, no one is going to do anything here.” The officers reluctantly re-holster their guns as they wonder why he isn’t more concerned about catching a suspect standing over a dead body.

“I need you to secure the crime scene while I talk to Ms Duffin and her friends for a moment.”

Layering on the commotion now, Tony’s staff arrives for the dinner shift and as they walk into the kitchen to see what the fuss is about, several of them scream as well. The hostess from yesterday even points at me and shouts, “You again!”

Great.

“Everybody back into the dining area!” Andrew barks. “Secure this area *now*!”

Andrew leads the three of us into Tony’s office while his officers make sure no one else wanders into the kitchen. I can’t believe Tony is dead.

And I can’t believe I’ve found a second body in the same day. Is this connected to Larry’s murder or do we have two killers running loose? I’m not sure which is worse.

Andrew glares at me, “Care to explain why I found you standing over yet another body?”

My eyes well up with tears as the enormity of all of this finally hits me. I’ve been back in town for all of a month and now I’ve been found with two dead bodies. Once again, I’m a royal screw up and I don’t even know how. I have the worst luck.

Although not as unlucky as the two dead men, I guess. I swallow hard and force the tears to stay back. I can't break down. Not right now. I have to stay strong for my grandmother's memory. I didn't kill either of these men and Andrew must know that.

"I came over here to talk to Tony."

Andrew continues with the steely eyed glare, "I hope you're not about to tell me you came over here to ask him about Larry's death *again*. Considering I told you to stop investigating it."

My cheeks flush when I realize I'm in trouble for that once again and I look at the ground sheepishly.

"Did you come in the front or the back door?"

"The front."

"It was unlocked, even though they weren't open for business?"

"Yes."

"Did he normally leave it unlocked during off hours?"

"I don't know for sure; I just know that I saw his truck in the parking lot, so I assumed he was here, and I walked in. I called out for him, and when he didn't answer I thought maybe he was back here and couldn't hear me. Then I came back here and saw him lying on the ground."

Miranda sobs and my tears threaten to fall again. Damien puts a reassuring arm around my shoulders, as I sink into him for comfort. I can't believe this is happening.

"Why did that woman point at you and say, 'you again' like she had seen you here earlier?"

"I stopped by yesterday on my way home to check on Tony and she was the hostess."

"Why were you checking on Tony? Did you make a habit of this?" Andrew asks as if he's growing more suspicious by the moment.

"He was acting strange yesterday and I wanted to make sure he was all right."

Andrew falls silent as he scribbles notes in his notepad. Then he points his pen at Miranda and Damien. "And what about you two? Where were you during all of this?"

"We were across the street and I was showing Miranda how to use her new kitchen torch. We told Charlotte we'd join her after."

"You knew she was coming to talk to Tony?"

Miranda nods her head tearfully.

“But you obviously weren’t with her when she discovered the body?”

“No. We weren’t.”

Andrew shakes his head. “Was anyone else here when you arrived, Charlotte?”

“No.”

“There’s no one to back up your claim that when you arrived Tony was already dead?”

“I guess not,” I whisper.

Andrew groans. “I’ve put this off as long as possible, but I’m afraid I have to take you down to the station for formal questioning.”

Damien and Miranda each take an arm as if to protect me from Andrew. “She’s not going anywhere with you!” she hisses. “She didn’t do this, and you know it! She was across the street with us in the coffee shop.”

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “If Andrew wants to officially question me, then let’s get it over with. The sooner we find out who the real killer is, the sooner I can clear my name.”

I lace my fingers through both of theirs and squeeze their hands. “I’ll be okay you guys. I’m sure I’ll be back soon.”

At least I hope this won’t take long, but Andrew’s eyes say otherwise. He gently puts his hand on my elbow and leads me out to his car. It’s strangely comforting, given the circumstances. His hand feels firm and warm on my arm and I wish it was for different reasons, like we were going out to dinner instead, or anything other than my being a suspect in two murders.

He opens the front door for me, and I slide in. “You’re not going to put me in the back in handcuffs?” I ask.

Placing one hand on the car door, and the other on the roof, he leans in so close, for one crazy moment I think he’s about to kiss me. “Not unless you want me to. I don’t exactly consider you dangerous.”

I swallow hard and ignore the butterflies that flutter around in my stomach and I can’t stop staring at his mouth. “I’m good up here.” *What is wrong with me?* I’m being taken to the police station for questioning on a double homicide and yet I’m acting like a high school girl with a crush.

Chapter 11



The police station is only a short drive, but the awkward silence makes it seem much farther. I'm not even sure what to say to him at this point anyway. I didn't do it seems redundant. I've told him repeatedly I didn't, and there's no way he can seriously believe that I killed either of those men.

I'm suddenly sad thinking about Tony. I didn't know him that well, but he seemed like a nice guy. The rabbits like his parsley. And then I realize he must not have killed Larry. Great. I thought he was the most likely suspect and now that he's gone all fingers really point to me.

Andrew leads me up the stone steps of the police station and with each one I'm increasingly nervous. What happens if I can't convince them I'm innocent? What will happen to my grandmother's café? She trusted me with her baby, and I get hauled off to jail, while it's shut down barely a month after I take over. I can't believe I've let my Gran down like this.

We walk down a long hallway, our feet echoing against the tile floor, as I picture every step leading me closer to my doom. I miss feeling his hand on my elbow and I wish he'd put it there again. Instead he opens the door and gestures for me to sit at the table in the middle of the room. I reluctantly pull out a chair and sit down while Andrew sits across from me.

He sighs heavily as he stares at the open file in front of him. When he folds his hands and looks up at me deep concern creases his face, "Help me out here Char. In less than 24 hours we have two bodies. One was behind your cafe, the other was next to your café, one was killed with your rolling pin, the other was stabbed, and both were conveniently found by you."

"I'd like to point out that Tony wasn't killed with one of my knives though!"

"And how do you know that?"

“Knives are very important to a chef and I know which knives are ours and which aren’t. The knife that was in Tony definitely came from his kitchen.”

“Here’s what we have so far. We have two victims, and both have connections to you. Both bodies were found by you. Your alibi for last night is that you were at home watching reality tv with your rabbits, and your alibi for the second murder is that you were drinking coffee with your friends, but they didn’t see you again until you were found with the body.

“You’re involved in a contentious lawsuit with your landlord, who was trying to break your lease, and the hostess at Tony’s Bistro claims you were seen lurking around the restaurant recently.”

“Lurking? I wasn’t lurking!” I practically shout. “I stopped in looking for my rabbits the first time, and the second time I wanted to know if Tony was all right.”

“You were only over there twice in the last couple of days?”

“Yes.”

“And what about earlier today, before you found Tony’s body?”

Rats. I forgot about that one already. “Oh, yeah, I stopped in again this morning.”

“And why was that?”

Is there anything he doesn’t know? “I wanted to see if he knew anything about Larry’s death.”

“Did he?”

“He didn’t admit to anything, but he didn’t look well, and he seemed very nervous. I’m sure he was hiding something.” I keep thinking I’m being helpful, but Andrew isn’t convinced.

“Why do you think he’s hiding something?”

“I saw him arguing with Bryce yesterday and when I asked him about it, he said they were fighting over fantasy football. But Damien said Bryce isn’t involved with any of the local groups. And later, as I was closing the café for the day, Tony came in and at first claimed he just stopped by to say hello but then he said he was hiding from Bryce. Later that same day I overheard he and Larry fighting.” This all comes out in a rush and I think Andrew is going to be happy with me, but he mostly looks annoyed.

“And yet you failed to mention this in the three times I’ve seen you today. Why is that?”

“I guess I didn’t think it was that important at the time?” I offer shrugging my shoulders. This all sounds so lame when I say it out loud, and I realize it would have been better to tell him all of this before, rather than insisting on playing detective myself.

“We also have eyewitnesses who watched you argue with Larry yourself less than a month ago, when you threatened to hex him over the lawsuit to terminate your lease.”

“To be fair, I don’t really know how to hex anyone.”

“We also have a copy of an irate email from you threatening to ‘end him,’” Andrew says sliding the piece of paper toward me. There’s no need for him to show me, I know exactly which one it was. I was very upset that day and had gotten a little carried away. Again, not something I obviously intended to follow up on. I clearly got my temper from my parents, but I certainly don’t take it as far.

“Charlotte, for what it’s worth, I don’t think that you killed Larry or Tony. But you have to understand how this looks, and we must investigate every angle as thoroughly as possible. You should also know that as the new person in town there are some in Crested Peaks who will automatically regard you as more suspect than the others.”

“Being a witch doesn’t help me either, does it?”

“Sadly, for some people, it doesn’t. Some of the old timers haven’t learned to accept the idea that many of the Supernaturals no longer feel the need to, uh, conceal their gifts. It isn’t fair, but it’s the way things are for now with some people.”

It suddenly hits me that Andrew burst into Tony’s restaurant with several officers, all with their guns drawn, as if they were expecting trouble. How did I not notice that before? “How did you know there was trouble at Tony’s?”

“We received an anonymous tip there was a life-threatening emergency at the restaurant. Given what happened next door this morning we took it very seriously.”

“Basically, someone else knew there was a body in there, probably the killer, saw me go in, and decided it was the perfect opportunity to set me up!” I pound my hands on the table in frustration. “Don’t you see Drew, I’m being framed! I didn’t do this!”

Drew holds up his hand to signal that I need to stop flipping out. “Right now, the evidence is purely circumstantial, and we don’t have

enough to hold you on.”

“I’m free to go?”

“Yes, you can go for now, but I’m ordering you to stay out of this investigation. Two people have already been killed. I don’t want you messing with something you aren’t trained to deal with, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I tilt my head. “Why Drew you almost sound like you care.”

“I do,” he says simply.

I turn and leave quickly before he can see me blushing.

Chapter 12



When I return to Marcall's, Damien and Miranda rush at me. "Oh my gosh, are you okay? What did they do to you? Did they take your fingerprints? Were you strip searched? Did you escape? What's going on?"

"Calm down you guys." It makes me feel really good in such a weird way that I have friends who care about me like this. It's not something I'm used to, and in the midst of all this chaos it's comforting to return home to people who care.

"Andrew just questioned me, and he said he didn't really think that I'm the killer but considering I'm the one who found both bodies it all looks very suspicious."

Damien is indignant. "He better not think that you killed Larry or Tony! You don't have it in you!"

I sigh. "I know. And I'm sure Andrew believes that as well, but he's being pressured to solve these murders fast. It won't be good for ski season if tourists think there's a murderer on the loose in Crested Peaks. I'm also the new girl in town and as a witch some people are already suspicious."

"That's discrimination! They can't do that!" Miranda says angrily.

"That's why it's more important than ever that we get to the bottom of who actually committed these crimes. I can't lose this restaurant over a case of mistaken identity. It's even possible someone is trying to set me up."

"And now that Tony is dead, I feel like we're back at square one. I know he was hiding something, but I don't know how to figure that out now. None of this makes sense but we're in serious trouble here. At least I am. I could go down for two murders and then obviously lose this café."

"We're in trouble," Miranda insists. "You're not going through this alone. We're going to figure this out if it's the last thing we do!"

"This may seem like a silly question, but can we open for business tomorrow?" Damien asks.

“Yes!” I exclaim. “I mean I assume we can, Andrew didn’t say we couldn’t. But will it look like we don’t care?”

“You obviously didn’t kill either of them so I think we should go about our daily routine as much as we possibly can. Especially since we were closed today. I say we show that we’re innocent by opening our doors first thing tomorrow morning. Let Crested Peaks know we have nothing to hide.”

“That settles it, Marcall’s is open for business! Time to go home boys!” I announce as Marshall and Marcus scurry out of the office.

“Is it true? Is Tony really dead?” they ask simultaneously.

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s true.”

“That’s too bad, he always gave us parsley,” Marshall laments.

“How did he die?” Marcus asks.

I take a deep breath. “Someone stabbed him.”

“Was it the man he was arguing with this afternoon?”

I stare at the rabbits. “What man?”

“I don’t know. We just overheard him arguing with a man again. Like the other night, before Larry was killed.”

Damien seeing the look of shock on my face asks, “What are they saying to you?”

“They said they heard Tony arguing with someone.”

I turn back to the rabbits. “Did you recognize the voice at all? I mean do you know if it’s a voice you’ve heard before?”

The rabbits look at each other in bewilderment. “I don’t know,” Marcus responds. “I don’t even know what they were saying, but you could tell they were mad at each other.”

I get excited about this clue when I remind myself it came from talking rabbits. I can’t exactly call Andrew and tell him we have witnesses. But it’s at least something, I guess. Something I need to investigate further. “Good job you two. That’s very helpful. Extra carrots for you in tonight’s salad.”

This cheers them up as we walk to the car. I think I’ll order a pizza tonight, because I don’t feel like cooking, and I just realized I’m starving. I haven’t eaten all day. The gruesome memories of both Larry and Tony’s bodies lying motionless on the ground isn’t the most appetizing thought.

The rabbits pepper me with questions on the way home. I don’t know how to answer them because I don’t have many answers yet myself. I

wish they could tell me who Tony, if it was indeed Tony, was arguing with before he was killed.

I don't know if that was who killed him, but I think it's a good possibility. Especially if they were arguing loudly enough, they could be heard through the wall, like the night before.

I was almost convinced that Tony killed Larry, but now that he's gone that means anybody could have done it. I get chills thinking that there's a killer in town.

I run through the suspects in my mind again as I prepare dinner for the rabbits. Rita and Amber are clearly the angriest, while Bryce also has a significant stake in the whole thing.

Tonight, the rabbits get a salad with beet greens, carrots and carrot tops, radish greens, green lettuce leaves, and a few bites of brussels sprouts which oddly enough is one of their favorites. They happily scarf it down as soon as I put it in their bowl. I have to admit their crunching noises are cute. Even if they are just a pair of grumpy old rabbits.

When the doorbell rings I assume it's the pizza I ordered, and I open the door without looking through the peephole. My grandma would yell at me considering I could just use magic to see who's at the door, but why bother when I know it's the pizza delivery guy.

Except it isn't. It's Andrew. My heart thumps rapidly as I wonder if he's here to finally arrest me for the murders. I scan the porch and don't see any other officers. Although maybe he just assumed I'd go quietly.

As if he's reading my thoughts, he puts his hands up. "I'm not here to arrest you, I'm just here to talk - off the record!"

I step back and gesture for him to come inside, and as I do then the pizza delivery guy shows up. I laugh as Andrew stares at the pizza box as greedily as the rabbits just stared at their greens.

"Would you like to stay for pizza?"

"Uhhhh, normally I wouldn't. I mean it wouldn't be appropriate, but I'm really hungry. I haven't eaten all day."

"I haven't either. C'mon, have a seat, I'll get some plates and beer. I assume it's okay if you enjoy a beer once in a while."

He appears to ponder whether he should have a drink. "I'm here on an unofficial basis after all. And considering I'm already breaking the rules by having dinner with you, I might as well have a beer too. And I'll have

you know I have beer more than just once in a while. I'm not just an old fuddy duddy!"

"Whatever you say detective," I tell him as I place a bottle of beer and a plate in front of him.

We're silent for several minutes as we both inhale numerous bites of our pizza. Pizza never tastes so good as when you're famished. It might as well be a gourmet delight. All that tomato-y cheesy doughy goodness.

"I could eat pizza once a week," I tell him.

He laughs. "I already do."

Our shared love of pizza breaks the tension somewhat, so I ask, "Anything new about either of the murders?"

"The knife came from Tony's restaurant."

"I figured it did."

He nods his head. "The handle was wiped clean and we questioned Fred the cook extensively, but I don't think he had anything to do with it."

"Do you think it was connected to Larry's murder?"

"I'm not supposed to share this information."

I shrug my shoulders. "If anyone asks, tell them I tempted you with pizza and beer and you were powerless to resist."

He laughs a deep, rich laugh, like he thinks I'm really funny and I get butterflies in my stomach again. Our eyes meet and there's a moment when I remember kissing him in high school and what an amazing kiss it was. But then he clears his throat, looks away, and the moment passes. Just like it always does with Drew.

"Care to share what you learned while you were running around town questioning people today?"

"I thought I wasn't supposed to interfere."

"You're not. But I know you were talking to people who knew Larry, so I'm genuinely curious about what you learned."

"Rita, the almost ex-wife says she was out dancing with friends about the same time Larry was killed but she's bitter. She's convinced he has money stashed somewhere that he wasn't telling her about, and that's part of the reason she's stalling on the divorce, because she wants every penny, she can get from him."

"Do you think she could have killed him?"

"Again, she's angry. And not the least bit broken up by his death. And with him gone pre-divorce I imagine she'll inherit everything. She

certainly has motive.”

“You obviously talked to Amber, since I saw you leaving there. What did she say?”

“She at least appears to be upset about Larry’s death. But she lied about where she was on Monday evening.”

“Did she tell you that they had dinner at Who Gotsa Bougatsa?”

“You know about that?”

“I know they’re closed while the Anastos are on vacation.”

“Okay, here’s one you don’t know Mr. Smarty Pants, she said she and Larry watched *Steel Magnolias* on tv and then went to bed--”

Andrew interrupts, “--She told me that too.”

I hold my finger up. “*But*, did you know that’s impossible?”

“Go on.”

“*Steel Magnolias* was not on tv, it was unexpectedly pre-empted by a baseball game.”

“Do I need to know *how* you know that?”

I wave my hand through the air. “Nah!”

“What reason did she have to kill him though?” he asks thoughtfully.

“Anger? Crime of passion? She’s also bitter that Larry hadn’t divorced yet. She expected to be married to him already, and yet he’s still battling Rita. She said she urged him to just give Rita what she wanted so they could finally be together.”

“I assume you didn’t talk to anyone else after I told you to stop?”

I can tell by the look on Andrew’s face he knows that’s not true. “Okay fine, I talked to Bryce after we saw you.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m shocked.”

“He was in Larry’s office and was nearly frantic looking for something in the files.”

“Yes, I noticed that.”

“What do you think that means?”

Andrews shrugs. “With Larry gone he’ll want to protect his investment, but if they weren’t prepared for the death of one of them in the first place, he may have a lot of scrambling to do. I’ve seen it happen before. A person who’s in charge of a business drops dead unexpectedly, without leaving any contingency plans in place.

“Everyone else is desperate to get into their files and email so they can keep running the business at least temporarily. Stuff falls through the cracks like appointments and payments, payments are missed, invoices are forgotten. It’s a big mess and they can even go out of business.”

“That’s kind of what Bryce was telling us. That Larry kept everything to himself so now they had to figure out exactly how much he hadn’t told them. And if Larry was hiding something big from Bryce that could be enough motive for murder.”

“It would have to be something really big.”

“I think it could be, considering it was potentially big enough for Rita to stall the divorce as long as possible.”

“Bryce told me he was in Breckenridge in meetings when Larry was killed. I assume that’s what he told you as well?”

“He did.” Andrew answers.

“Can I ask you if you confirmed that?”

“I talked to the people he said was meeting with, and they confirmed that they were indeed in a meeting until about 8 p.m. which would be too late for Bryce to drive back here on time.”

Andrew grows thoughtful. “So how were things going before all of this happened? I was hearing good things about your restaurant and I keep meaning to stop by but, well...”

“It was going really well! We still get tons of people who knew my grandma and we get plenty of new ones too. Lot’s of tourists stop in and we’re hoping to pick up significant ski business this winter...” I trail off knowing that we may not even have a restaurant then.

“I owe everything to my grandma. If she hadn’t taken me in after my parents died, I don’t know what would have happened to me. I could have ended up as a lost kid in the foster care system. If I lose her dream, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“She loved Marcall’s. She loved serving people great breakfast food, and she loved all the interaction like talking to people and getting to know them. She knew all her regulars and always asked about their personal lives. Everyone loved her so much, and now the entire place may be gone only a month after I got here. I feel like I’ve ruined everything.”

A big tear escapes and runs down my cheek and I hurry to brush it away before Andrew sees it. He puts his hand on mine and it feels so comforting and safe I want to just let go and weep. I’ve kept my emotions

bottled up since we found Larry's body, and I certainly don't want to let them go right now. There will be plenty of time for that when we find the killer. Until then I must stay focused.

"Do you mind if I ask you what really happened to your parents? I heard rumors, you obviously know that, but I've always wondered what actually happened."

I take a deep breath, oddly grateful for the distraction, even if it means talking about my parents. "My parents were con-artists, swindlers, grifters, whatever you want to call them. They were always looking for the next easy pay out.

"They got involved with some nasty people who practiced dark magic. One day they were running a con job, as usual, but they finally double crossed the wrong wizard, and he killed them. Just like that they were gone. And I was sent here to live with Gran."

Andrew looks at me with such concern and warmth in his eyes it makes my stomach do flip flops again. I kind of wish I could prevent that because I don't know what it means. Why is he bringing out that reaction in me? Why can't I just stay angry with him and leave it at that? I don't want to have gooey, sugary thoughts about him. But I can't seem to stop it.

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that," he murmurs.

"I think that's a big part of the reason I'm always hesitant to claim my heritage as a witch. It's why I'm reluctant to perform magic even when it would make my life easier. Besides, I've always doubted my abilities.

"I feel like I'm just an okay witch at best and I don't want to turn into my parents. I see the way certain people look at me. I know they're just waiting for me to turn into a criminal too and now here we are. I look like a murderer. Even worse than my parents."

I can't believe I just admitted all of that to Drew. He just seems so safe and I've wanted to tell someone that for so long. I never even admitted that to Gran. Never wanted her to feel responsible for what my parents did.

"Is that why you left Crested Peaks right after high school?"

I nod slowly. "I wanted to get away from here. I left small town life and went to a big city where no one knew me, or my parents and I could pretend to be someone else."

"But you're still you no matter where you go."

"You got it. I take me wherever I go. Imagine that? And then I came back here and thought I could make up for who my parents were, and fulfill

my grandmother's legacy, and now that's all gone haywire. The irony is I really like running Marcall's. And I've made real friends. I see why my grandma loved it so much and now..."

Andrew leans in close again. I breathe deep and silently curse myself for loving the way he smells. "You listen to me Charlotte Duffin. You are not responsible for what your parents did. They made their choices, and now you get to make yours."

"And while you may not want to hear this, you're not even responsible for your grandma's legacy. If you love what you're doing with Marcall's that's one thing. But you've carried the weight of your family your whole life. And now you've added your grandma on top of that and carrying the world on your shoulders must get awfully heavy."

My shoulders slump hearing that. Almost as if he helped take some of the weight from them just by understanding. I stare into his mesmerizing green eyes while the butterflies take flight and I know I'm in serious trouble where Detective Andrew Bailey is concerned. I gasp when he takes me into his arms without warning. It feels amazing just to be held like that. It's so secure.

When he finally lets me go, he gently tilts my chin up and gazes into my eyes. I know he's going to kiss me again and I'm so ready for this. As if he's reading my mind he murmurs, "I *am* going to kiss you again. Not now, but soon. And when I do, it's going to be amazing. I have a killer, or maybe killers, to catch first."

This has been the craziest day and I back up quickly wanting to squelch the butterflies that have turned into bats and are swarming my insides. And because I just can't help myself, I ask him, "Do you remember the first time we kissed?"

He looks pained that I would even ask. "Of course, I do."

After all I've been through today, I decide there's no need to hide from the truth of anything else anymore. It's just one more thing I've been carrying around all these years. "Why did you ghost me? Was it that awful? Did you hate me that much? Up until this morning you never spoke to me after that. Why?"

He sighs deeply and pinches the bridge of his nose as if the truth is just that painful. I wonder how kissing me could have been so awful. "I liked you. I still like you, a lot. I wanted to kiss you forever, and you can't

imagine how desperately I wish I had a better explanation for you right now, but I feel like I owe you nothing but the truth.

“Like you said, there were always rumors about your family. And my friends all warned me to stay away from you, and then one of them even mentioned it in front of my parents and they were furious. They said your family was no good and that you were trouble.

“I was a jerk. And I was young, and way too invested in what my friends and my parents thought, so I decided it was best just to stay away even though it broke my heart. And I am deeply sorry. I’ve thought of that often and regretted it more than you can imagine. And when you came back, I knew I needed to tell you what a jerk I am. I just didn’t think it would be under these circumstances.”

My first instinct is to be mad at him and lash out. But then I see how this has burdened him as well. Much like my parents’ past has burdened *me* and I forgive him. “It’s okay, my parent’s crimes affected a lot of lives. And I think it’s time we both bury that. For good.”

Drew stands up tall. “Well now I really have to catch these killers. Because I owe you a kiss. And I want to do it as soon as possible.”

Chapter 13



The next morning when I open the café, I'm not sure if we'll have a single customer. I know people are talking and maybe they're scared and thinking that I really am a killer. Maybe no one will ever show up again and we'll be out of business within a week.

As I flip the sign to "OPEN" and unlock the door, bright and early as usual, Damien puts his arm around me. "We're going to be okay; I just know it."

I wish I were as confident as he is.

I even open the door to see if anyone is out there, even though I don't expect to see a soul. I had dreams last night that everyone in town was pointing at me and mocking me.

And they were shaking their heads at me like they just knew I would turn out exactly like my parents. Gladys tiskied at me as she walked past the cafe muttering how the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

But what happened instead was nothing short of a miracle. Gladys was there all right, decked out today in a floral-patterned hat and white gloves, but she didn't pass by and glare at me. As soon as I held the door open, she pushed inside nearly knocking me over.

"I'm thrilled that you're open! I've been waiting out there for 20 minutes just praying you'd open today. You can't believe how miserable my morning was yesterday without my usual breakfast burrito. I think my body went into shock."

I'm stunned but my heart bursts with joy. Maybe we'll be all right after all. Gladys glares at me, her brow wrinkled with annoyance. "Why are you staring at me with your mouth hanging open like that? Didn't you hear me? I need my burrito quick."

"Yes, yes of course. Damien!" I shout.

"I'm on it! The usual for Gladys!"

As I ring up her purchase she leans forward and whispers, “I don’t believe for a second that you had anything to do with those murders.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that so much Gladys.”

“It is a little nerve wracking though. Two murders in Crested Peaks in one day. And you find both bodies! What are the odds of that?”

“Believe me Gladys, I dearly wish neither of those men had been killed, and I definitely wish I hadn’t found either one of their bodies.”

“The police can’t think that you’re responsible, can they? What kind of evidence do they even have?”

“I’m not really allowed to talk about the investigation. But the police are working on it and they hope to solve it quickly.”

“I saw you talking to that devilishly handsome detective outside the Woofing Beauty salon yesterday. I even saw him put his arms around you. If I were you, I’d take advantage of that sooner rather than later. He’s single now by the way.”

No wonder Gladys is known as the town gossip. She doesn’t miss a beat!

“And remember those city slickers I told you about on Monday?”

“I do!”

“I saw whatshisface, Larry’s cousin, arguing with them yesterday.”

I stop in my tracks. “You mean Bryce?”

“Yes! That’s the one. It looked like he was trying to convince them of something, but they didn’t want to play along. So, then he stomped off in a huff.”

That’s an interesting twist. What would the developers from New York want with Bryce? Or *not* want with Bryce perhaps if they were arguing over something. I want to ask Gladys more about it, but before I can do that hungry people swarm the café for several hours straight and the whole thing slips my mind.

I’m just so relieved people still want to eat here. They may be nervous about back to back murders in Crested Peaks, but they still want their breakfast burritos. Several ask if I know anything new about the investigation, but I just tell them the police are doing their best to solve the case.

Our steady business though has me thinking that maybe, just maybe, if we can solve the murders, I could actually make a go of it here. And then the other little voice in my head reminds me that Andrew plans to kiss me

when all of this is over, but I try to ignore that voice because I don't want to think about what might happen after that. I was left humiliated and heart broken in New York. I don't want any part of that ever again.

Fortunately, I don't have time to continue lamenting my misfortune in New York because a large group of chatting ladies swarms the café. They're all somewhere around middle aged, I would guess, and appear to be well off given their designer shoes and handbags.

They seem to know each other well, I assume they do this often and fortunately they're all hungry! I'm thrilled with how much business we've done today. So much business that Damien is worried about his black bean supply again.

I tick off their orders one by one: Vegan Lemon Ginger pancakes, several breakfast burritos, one peanut butter & chocolate smoothie, and an order of hash browns and eggs with whole wheat toast. As the last one pays for her order at the cash register, I point out, "You have quite a crew here. Do you meet for breakfast often?" I'm hoping that if they like what we have at Marcall's they'll return.

"We do all sorts of things together! We go hiking, skiing, salsa dancing every Wednesday, and our book club meets on Saturdays too, just fun things to keep active and enjoy our beautiful mountain town. It's so hard to meet people these days with everybody doing most of their socializing online."

I nod my head in agreement. "Rita Hale told me that she goes salsa dancing every Wednesday, is that with your group by any chance?"

"It is!" she exclaims. "Are you friends with Rita? It's a shame what happened to Larry though. Even if she was so mad at him, she could have killed him herself. I think I would if I were her. Who would blame her?"

I nod my head in surprise as I realize Rita lied to us when she pointed out she couldn't have killed Larry because she was with her salsa dancing club into the wee hours of the morning. When I finally recover my voice, I press Rita's friend. "Are you sure she wasn't there this week? She told me she never misses. Not for anything." Okay, I embellished that last part, but I want to make absolutely certain Rita missed their outing this week.

"Exactly! I think the last time she missed was a year ago when she fell hiking and messed up her ankle. She was out two weeks then, but she

hasn't missed a day since. That's why it was so odd that she skipped this week. She claimed she had a headache, but that doesn't sound like her.

"Maybe she met someone and is keeping him a secret," she says as she winks at me knowingly, and then joins her friends in the corner where they've moved two tables together to accommodate the group.

That means we now know that both Amber and Rita lied about where they were the night Larry was killed. "Damien!" I hiss through the serving window. He doesn't hear me. "Damien!" I say sharply enough that some of the customers turn and look my way. I smile at them like it's nothing and go back hissing at him.

"Pssst!" I clap my hands loud enough that he finally looks up at me. He gets so lost in thought as he prepares his amazing creations. He puts so much care into each and every one. Every customer is unique to him and deserves the utmost attention. It makes me sick to think of losing this place because then I'd lose Damien too.

I signal at him to come closer to the window.

"What is it? Please tell me you haven't found another body!"

"Bite your tongue," I hiss at him. "I just found out that Rita wasn't salsa dancing at all on Wednesday night like she said she was."

"What? Where was she?"

"That part I don't know, but that group of ladies is her salsa club and the vegan pancakes lady said Rita canceled on Wednesday for a headache, but the last time she did that was a year ago and her friend said it was so unlike Rita that even she wondered if Rita is hiding something."

"Seriously? Does she think Rita killed Larry?"

"Uh, no, not quite. I mean she said that Rita is probably angry enough to kill him, and she wouldn't blame her if she did, but she thinks Rita might have a new boyfriend she's keeping secret from everyone else."

Damien pauses to think this latest piece of news over. "A new boyfriend would make sense though, I mean especially if she was keeping him a secret. Gossip travels so fast in this town maybe she wants to keep a new beau to herself for a while. Maybe she didn't want Larry to know about it and complicate the divorce."

"Or maybe she killed Larry and doesn't want anyone to know!" I snap at him. I'm so frustrated. We have to catch this killer - or killers - before it's too late and all we do is run smack into dead ends. I don't know

how much more of this I can take, and this is a juicy clue that I want Damien to get excited about.

I'm dying to tell Miranda about the news but we're busier than ever today and there's no break in sight. I'll fill her in when we close for the day. I wonder if I should call Andrew. I wasn't out snooping around after all, I was just doing my job, running my business, and some ladies passed on the news.

He already knows I talked to Rita anyway. I assume he thinks it's a good possibility that Rita killed Larry. Even if I'm the department's main suspect I'm not his.

But once again I'm distracted because we're swamped with a bus load of tourists and non-stop customers until we close. I was just a kid when my grandma first opened this place, but I remember her arguing with people about whether or not a breakfast café, specializing in vegetarian and vegan dishes, could ever make it.

Based on today the answer is a resounding yes. It's not that grandma was opposed to eating meat, but she wanted to a place where she could prepare all her favorite breakfast dishes and share them with the world. Or at least with those who found themselves in Crested Peaks.

As soon as I watch the last customer leave, I flip the sign to "Closed" and Miranda shows up. She has several college aged students who assist her over the summer so she can usually get away easier than I can. She squeezes in the door and I lock it behind her.

As I turn to her, we say at the exact same time, "You'll never guess what I heard!"

And then, "Me first!"

And then, weirdly, "You first!"

Damien watches us in the kitchen doorway with a look of amusement and concern. "That was a little creepy. The two of you, in stereo. Miranda, I know that Charlotte has news about Rita that she's bursting to share..."

Miranda gasps and presses her hands to her face as she interrupts Damien, "I have news about Rita!"

"What is it?" I squeal as Damien shakes his head in defeat. He should know by now that he has no hope of ever corralling the two of us.

"Rita's lawyer's secretary was in the shop drinking coffee earlier and I accidentally overheard her talking to a friend about Rita."

Now it was Damien's turn to interrupt. "How do you *accidentally* overhear someone?"

"By using a distance listening spell to hear someone across the room."

"Oh, you have to teach me that one!" I beg her.

"I would love to. Actually, there are several I'm itching to teach you."

"Seriously?"

"Yes!" she shouts. "I've just been waiting for you to ask!"

"I'm so excited!"

"Ummmm, could we get back to the Rita stories?" Damien asks.

"Yes, I'm sorry, where was I?"

"You accidentally on purpose overheard someone with news about Rita."

"Rita saw her lawyer this morning and Larry never updated his will and because they were still married, Rita gets everything. And I mean everything, including Larry's portion of the business."

"Wow, guess what else?"

"What?"

"Rita's salsa club was in here earlier and she canceled on them at the last minute on Wednesday, and according to them, she never misses, so they're convinced she has a new man in her life because she was so secretive about why she canceled."

"Which means she lied about where she was when Larry was killed." Miranda points out.

"Both Rita and Amber lied about what they were doing that night," says Damien.

Miranda looks nervous, "Do you think we should let Andrew know about this?"

"I think we should talk to Rita first. Before she finds out that her friends blew her alibi and she has time to concoct a whole new story."

"I have it on good authority that Rita volunteers at the library every Wednesday afternoon," Miranda says.

"Gosh Miranda, how would I know this?" I tease her as her cheeks flush.

"Miles may have brought it up when I told him we ran into her at the beauty salon."

“Do you think it’s a good idea for the two of you to confront Rita together again? I think she may get suspicious at this point. Both of you conveniently finding her in just the right place and peppering her with questions about Larry again? She may get defensive and refuse to talk to either of you and then what?” Damien points out, always the voice of reason.

“He has a point, maybe you should go by yourself Char, just act like you’re there to check out the latest murder mystery book and lo and behold there’s Rita!”

I admit they’re probably right, so I walk to the library by myself hoping I can trip up Rita over her alibi. The library is much cuter than I remember it. Late summer wildflowers bloom all around and the floor to ceiling windows allow passers by to look in at the stacks and stacks of books. There are several readers cozied up in beanbags in front of the windows as well. It makes me want to stop and snuggle up in one of those and just read.

When I was a teenager, I didn’t know how to appreciate the mystique and warmth of a library but now I’m thinking I should take advantage of it. I climb the cement stairs and vow to spend more time here as soon as I solve these murders and clear my name. Maybe I’ll even volunteer like Rita does.

I don’t want to make Rita suspicious, so I pretend to browse the shelves as I tiptoe through the library. I enjoy the peace and quiet as I skim the titles in the mystery section, and for a moment I forget why I’m here. I’m so engrossed in all the colorful titles Rita is the one who sneaks up on me.

“Charlotte?”

I nearly drop the book I’m holding I’m so startled. “Oh, hey Rita, I didn’t know you work here!” I nod at the cart full of books that she’s pushing around.

“I’m a volunteer. I shelve books a few hours a week to help out.”

“That’s really neat.”

“And you, you like mysteries?” she points at the book in my hand.

“I love them!” I truly do, I just haven’t made the time lately to sit down and read. Something I clearly need to remedy. Once I’m through being personally involved in my own mystery that is.

“I heard *you* found a second body? That’s horrible! You must have been so scared.”

“Yeah, it’s been a rough couple of days. I just don’t know who would want to do such a thing. First your ex-husband and now one of his tenants, who could be next?”

Rita is clearly uncomfortable. “I’m sure I don’t know. No one I hope!”

“Oh of course! I hope this is the last of any death around here for a very long time. But then there’s still the problem of catching whoever could have done this.”

“I heard you were taken into custody for questioning right after the police found you with the second body.”

Ouch. Rita is getting testy. “They just felt like it would be best to question me down at the police station given the seriousness of the situation. They didn’t arrest me or anything. I went willingly because I’m more than happy to answer any questions they might have, if it means catching the real killer soon.”

Rita gives me a half smile. “No doubt. I’m sure you’re anxious to clear all of this up so you can get back to normal. And word has it that a Detective Bailey, who also happens to be the lead detective on this case, might have a thing for you? That’s awfully convenient considering you’re their main suspect.”

I blush at her insinuation. First of all, it’s none of her business and second of all the lightning speed at which word travels through this town is freaking me out. And what the heck has got into Rita? She’s much more defensive now than she was the first time we talked. “Hey, did you talk to your lawyer yet about Larry’s will? I know you mentioned yesterday that you needed to do that.”

Rita bristles and she tries to smile at me but it’s a cold smile. “Turns out I inherit everything from that weasel. He never changed his will to reflect our current relationship so the whole thing is mine.”

“Oh. Imagine if you’d gone through with the divorce already. You wouldn’t get anything additional after he died. Amber would inherit everything he had left, if they got married right away like she was hoping to do.”

“Yes, well, too bad for the gold digger. Listen, I’d love to stand here all day and chat Charlotte, but these books won’t shelve themselves.”

“Of course, I understand, I’m sorry to have kept you, I’m sure I’ll see you later,” I respond as I turn to walk away but then I take a shot of my own. “Oh, Rita, one more thing, your lady’s salsa group came into the café this morning and we had a nice conversation.”

I pause to watch her hand tighten around the book she’s holding and her smile wavers.

“I told them to come back anytime and they said they definitely would. Maybe next time you can come with them.” I turn and walk away before she can come up with another lie to cover the one she already made.

Chapter 14



I scurry back toward the café to share the news with Damien and Miranda, and who should I run into but Amber walking slowly along the sidewalk, staring down at her phone. I slow down and plant myself in front of her. She nearly runs into me before her head snaps up. “I’m so sorry, excuse me,” she mumbles.

“Amber?”

“Yes? Oh, hello Charlotte, I’m so sorry I almost ran right into you. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

I notice that she has been crying again. “How are you doing today?”

“Not so hot, as you can probably tell,” she says pointing to her tear stained face and red puffy eyes.

“Do you want to talk about it? We could sit down for a bit.” I point to one of the numerous benches that line the walkways and parks in Crested Peaks. The city likes to encourage travelers to slow down and take a break for a while and enjoy the beautiful scenery that we have to offer here. This may be a perfect way to get information from Amber.

She hesitates, but I put my hand against her back and gently guide her toward the bench. “Why don’t we sit down and rest a bit. It looks like you could use a friend right now.”

Admittedly I feel a little bad manipulating her like this, but for all I know she’s the killer, and as sympathetic as she might appear, I still have to solve this, even if the killer turns out to be a mild-mannered young woman.

“This has all been so hard. I just can’t stop crying and I don’t know what I’ll do now. I’m all alone,” she says as she wails on my shoulder. I dig around in my purse for a package of tissues and when I give it to her, you’d think I just handed her a gold coin.

“Thank you so much! You’re very kind. And how are *you* doing? I heard that you found Tony’s body. This must be hard on you too.”

I hate thinking of her as a killer, and maybe she genuinely feels bad about killing Larry and Tony. Confession is good for the soul, so if I could just get her to open up I could be done with the entire investigation. I ask as gently as possible, “Amber, can I tell you something?”

“Sure,” she snuffles.

“You told Miranda and me yesterday that you and Larry had dinner at the Anastos restaurant and then you went home and watched *Steel Magnolia’s* together.”

She stiffens and for a moment I think she’s going to confess right away but then she sticks with her original story. “We did. And it was our last romantic evening together. If only I’d known that...” she trails off.

I take her hand in mine to cement the moment and hopefully keep her from hitting me if she gets the urge. “We know that isn’t exactly the truth.” I don’t want to say the word lie and put her on the defensive. But then she slowly removes her hand from mine.

“What do you mean, it isn’t the truth? Are you calling me a liar?” She starts to get up and I’m worried she’ll bolt. I wonder how bad it will look if I have to tackle her in broad daylight.

“The Greek restaurant you mentioned – Who Gotsa Bougatsa – they’re on a cruise. Their grandchildren gave them a vacation for Christmas and the restaurant is closed for two weeks.” I watch her falter. She messed up and she knows it. More importantly, she knows that I know it. “And *Steel Magnolia’s* was pre-empted for a baseball game. It was on the schedule, but it didn’t air.”

She slumps back down on the bench as a whoosh of air leaves her like she’d been holding her breath for two days and no longer has to.

“Let me help you. Tell me what really happened the night Larry died. I promise I won’t judge you. I just need to know.”

“Larry was cheating on me!” she blurts out.

“He was?” That isn’t quite what I expected her to say. “Are you certain?”

“He’s been acting strangely for weeks. He takes calls and goes to meetings at all hours of the night. He’s hardly ever home these days. He claimed he was talking to Bryce, but I didn’t believe him. So, one night I followed him and saw him having dinner with a very beautiful and sophisticated woman. She looked like she had money. And she definitely wasn’t from around here.”

“Did you confront them?”

“No, I just watched for a while.”

I feel badly for her. I know what it's like to be dumped in such a cruel way. Although I can't help but think that gives her all the more reason to kill Larry. Maybe she wacked him on the head out of pure jealousy.

I'm almost afraid to ask, “Where did they go after dinner?”

“I have no idea; I couldn't bear to watch them together a moment longer, so I left. He came home really late that night.”

“But if you weren't out with Larry on the night he was killed, where were you? And, where was he?”

“That's just it! I don't know!” she wails. “I drove all over town looking for him. I saw his truck in the parking lot by your café, but I never saw him or the woman he was having an affair with. Then I just drove around for hours because I couldn't stand to go home to the empty house.

“Eventually I gave up and went home. I was so embarrassed that he cheated on his wife with me and now I'm getting what I deserve. He was cheating on me. I'm sorry I lied to you and to Detective Bailey, but I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't bear the thought of seeing Rita's smug face gloating over what Larry had done to me.”

“I'm sorry that you're going through all of this. You must feel very alone right now.”

This brings on a fresh round of tears as Amber throws her arms around me again. “You're so nice to me! Unlike that nasty wife of Larry's who just had to stop by the salon to tell me that because she was still married to Larry, and he never changed his will, that she inherits everything. Everything!

“As if I only loved Larry for his money. I swear I didn't, but it would have been nice if he'd thought to leave me something at least, and now everything is hers. And then she had to go out of her way to rub my nose in it. Larry's gone and she can't even leave it at that. I swear I hate her.”

I pat her on the back and let her cry for a while longer. I'm not sure what to do at this point. If Amber was supposedly driving around alone the night Larry was killed, she has no one to corroborate her story either. I need to tell Miranda and Damien about this. And I suppose I should clue Andrew in as well. Her suspicion that Larry was cheating on her is definitely a motive for murder.

“Thank you so much for listening to me and for being a friend when I need one, but I have a doctor’s appointment now,” she sniffles.

“Sure, no problem. I understand what it’s like to be betrayed by someone you love. I really do.” And I mean that too. Even if she is a cold-blooded killer. Admittedly it still doesn’t explain Tony’s murder, and as badly as I want to ask her if she knew Tony, I don’t think I’ll get much more from her today without her blubbering all over me again.

She leaves in the opposite direction that I’m going, and I beat a hasty retreat back to Marcall’s. I barely walk in the door when Damien, Miranda and the rabbits rush at me. “I think the rabbits have something to tell you,” explains Damien.

Chapter 15



I kneel down. “All right you two spill.”

“We talked to Stumpy the cat next door today—” Marshall starts.

While Marcus finishes “--he heard Tony say that he owed Bryce money for gambling debts and he was getting really worried that Bryce was going to do something bad to him.”

I look up at Miranda and Damien with my mouth gaping, thinking of course that they heard that. When I see their clueless faces, I remember only I can hear my rabbit familiars. I repeat what they just told me, and their jaws drop like mine.

“We need to tell Andrew this, this is serious,” Damien warns.

Miranda holds her hand up to stop Damien, “Hold on a sec, you were gone a long time, what did you find out from Rita? We were getting worried.”

“I not only talked to Rita, I ran into Amber as well, and while Rita didn’t admit to anything we didn’t already know, she still hasn’t confessed to lying about where she was on Wednesday night.”

“Does that mean Amber admitted she lied?” Miranda asks.

I touch my nose to indicate that’s exactly what she did.

“No way!”

“She told me that she thinks Larry was having an affair, she even saw him at dinner with another woman, and the night he died he never came home, so she was driving around town looking for him.”

“Do you think she’s telling the truth this time? Maybe he was having an affair, so she killed him. Considering she lied to the police after all.”

“That was my thought exactly. She claims that she lied because she was embarrassed, and didn’t want people, especially Rita, to know that

Larry was cheating on her. She's especially sensitive about it because that's how she and Larry got together in the first place."

"You need to tell Andrew about all of this," Damien insists.

"I will, I will, but now I want to find out more about Bryce and the money that Tony owed him. That's a possible motive for killing someone isn't it?"

"But if he killed someone who owed him money, he'd never get it back, right?" Miranda adds. "And even if Bryce killed Tony because he owed him money, then that still leaves us with finding out who killed Larry and why."

I run my hands through my long lavender hair. "This is all so frustrating! Every where we turn it's nothing but dead ends and more questions. Is there anyone in this town who doesn't have some big secret they're hiding?"

"We need to alert the professionals, Char," Damien warns.

"And I completely intend to do that after I talk to Bryce."

Damien sighs loudly. "I'm obviously not talking you out of this am I?"

"If you're so worried, why don't you come with me?"

"Oh, I already planned to do that!"

With that, Damien and I leave for Bryce's office. "I wonder what will happen with Larry's lawsuit against you now?"

"I've been wondering the same thing myself. Assuming I don't go to jail for murder--"

"—you're not going to jail for murder." Damien interrupts.

"Assuming the real murderer is caught in both cases I don't know what's next for Marcall's. I guess Rita inherits Larry's business, but I don't know if she'll want to run it. What if she buys out Bryce and then sells off everything after that? Then what? Or what if Bryce buys her out and does the same thing?"

When we finally arrive at Larry's office, I realize how nervous I am. How will Bryce react to being questioned about Tony? And dare I ask him about his future plans for Larry's properties? I don't know how any of that will play out.

"Hello!" I call out desperately hoping this isn't a repeat of the day before and I come across another dead body.

Bryce pokes his head out of an office. "Good afternoon Charlotte, won't you please come in, I've been meaning to call on you myself but then I heard you'd been taken into police custody, so I wasn't sure you'd be available. Are you out on bail?"

"I wasn't arrested, I was just asked to come to the station to answer some questions."

"Of course," he smiles. "Must have been miscommunication. You know how news moves around here. It may be fast, but it's often inaccurate."

"Speaking of news, we're hoping you can clarify something for us."

"Of course, anything for my tenants."

"We talked to Tony the day he was stabbed, and I noticed you and he arguing in the restaurant the day before and was curious about why. Are you willing to tell us what the argument was about?"

A flash of anger crosses his face but only for a second and then he's smiling at me again. *Like a Cheshire cat*. "I have to assume from the way you're asking, and your tone of voice, that you already have an answer from Tony."

My mouth is dry now from nerves and I swallow hard. "He said you were arguing about the draft in the fantasy football league, and that you have the same argument every year. But I don't think that's true."

Bryce gets an amused look on his face as Damien continues, "You're not in any of the local fantasy football leagues, are you?"

"No, I'm not. And I further suspect you already know what I was arguing about with Tony that day and you're just here to confirm."

"I'm told Tony owed you a lot of money from gambling debts," I blurt out.

Bryce shakes his head sadly. "That he did. And he had to miss this month's payment again and was trying to negotiate a smaller amount. I regret to say I refused to listen to him. I told him he needed to get the money to me on time or there would be consequences."

"I realize that threat may come back to haunt me now, so I kept quiet about it. I figure what does it matter now that he's dead? He can't pay me back anyway, so I thought it best to let the man rest in peace."

"So, you're saying you didn't kill Tony over his debt?" Damien asks.

Bryce chuckles. “Now what good would it do to kill someone who owed me money? He was behind on payments as it was, if I killed him, I wouldn’t get it back. At least with him alive I’d still have some hope of pay back.

“I was even thinking about suggesting he give me a stake in his restaurant as partial payment. Now I’ll get nothing back and I assure you, the debt was substantial. I don’t like giving it up.”

I’m glad he brought up the restaurant because it gives me another perfect opening. “One more thing Bryce.”

“Of course, my dear.”

“Larry owns six buildings here, that all have paying tenants, and as his silent partner I’m wondering what your plans are, now that he’s gone.”

“I’m glad you asked because that’s what I was planning to come and talk to you about. I have no interest in property management. What little I’ve had to do since Larry was killed has me bored out of my mind. And before you ask, Rita has already approached me about this, and I advised that we sell the properties and she agreed.”

That is definitely not what I wanted to hear. Obviously, I can’t predict what new owners would do. I feel so defeated.

Bryce sees my crestfallen face. “You never know, maybe the new owners would continue to rent to the current tenants. Or you could always look into getting a food truck. I hear those are popular these days.”

I smile and nod at him as I try my best not to give him a good pinch.

“If that’s all you need, I really have to get back to work. Larry’s files are a mess and if we want to sell the company, I have to get everything organized.”

“Thanks for your time,” I mumble as Damien and I leave him to his organizing and slowly trod back to Marcall’s. The wind is definitely out of our sails now with no new ideas as to what we’ll do next. Not only are we no closer to learning who killed Larry or Tony we may lose the café no matter what. This is the lowest I’ve felt since coming back to Crested Peaks.

Chapter 16



Damien is quiet as we walk until he suddenly grabs my arm and comes to a halt. “I insist we call Andrew right now with what we’ve learned. At least Bryce confirmed what the rabbits told you so that makes it easier to fill in Andrew.”

I groan and smack my hand to my head, “He made me promise to stop investigating on my own. He’s going to either kill me or throw me in jail, either one could be a big problem.”

“I don’t know, the way he’s been looking at you I think if you just bat your big turquoise eyes at him you could pretty much talk him into, or out of, anything.”

I land a playful punch on Damien’s shoulder and laugh. “That’s enough already! But yes, I agree I will call him the moment we get back to Marcall’s okay? I swear!”

But as we round the corner together we see Andrew waiting out in front of the café again. Damien and I look at each other and laugh. “Does he have radar or what?” I ask.

“Dare I even ask what the two of you are up to?”

“I promise I was just going to call you. We have some news for you.”

“May I remind you; you’re not supposed to have news for me. You’re supposed to be minding your own business and running your café.”

“To be fair, some of what we’ve learned we came about accidentally,” says Damien trying to help.

“And the rest?” Andrew asks crooking his eyebrow at him.

Damien shrugs his shoulders. “Not so accidental?”

“You know I’m telling you this for your own good. Two people have been murdered, both behind and next door to this place in the last couple of days. We don’t know who it is and the two of you and your friend are investigating things you shouldn’t.” He gestures with his head toward Bean

Around A Little Bit to indicate he hasn't forgotten Miranda is in on this too. "You need to leave this to the professionals."

"Does that mean you don't want to know what we've learned?" I ask teasingly.

He glares at me. "Obviously I want to know. I also want you to stop putting yourselves in harm's way."

I pause to concentrate on the lock as I unlock the door to Marcall's without using my keys. Both Damien and Andrew look at me in surprise. I'm actually surprised myself, because I did it without fretting about it first, or worrying about using magic in front of them. I just did what came naturally.

"How about I whip up a batch of my best peanut butter and chocolate smoothies for the three of us?" Damien offers. I suspect it's a peace offering to try and sweeten Andrew's mood.

"Peanut butter and chocolate? That sounds really good right now. If it's not too much trouble..." Andrew responds.

"Three smoothies coming right up!" Damien says as he disappears into the kitchen and within seconds, we hear the sounds of ingredients being pulled from the refrigerator while Andrew and I sit in the dining area.

"Spill," he tells me. "You need to tell me everything you know. Don't leave anything out, even if you think it isn't important. Let me be the judge of that."

I nod my head in agreement, but I think about how I'll leave out the part where a pair of cantankerous rabbits told me that Tony owed Bryce money and was behind on his payments. "Bryce told us that Tony owed him money on gambling debts." Okay so that's a slight lie but the important stuff is there.

"And when did you learn this?"

"Just now, I swear. I wanted to know what he plans to do with the business now that Larry is gone."

"What did he say to that?"

I shake my head sadly. "He and Rita intend to sell the properties."

He touches my hand briefly and the butterflies take flight in my stomach once again. They're getting quite a workout lately. "I'm sorry Char. Maybe the new owners will keep things the way they are anyway?"

"I really hope so."

"And what else did you talk about?"

I take a deep breath. “I confirmed that when I saw he and Tony arguing on Monday, before Larry was killed, it was over a gambling debt that Tony owed him. And he says it was substantial.”

Andrew cocks his head at me. “And how did you even know about something like that to be able to confirm it in the first place?”

Uh oh. “Uhhhh, well, I heard about it. You know how people talk around here.”

“Three peanut butter and chocolate smoothies coming right at you!” Damien announces just in the nick of time.

Andrew appears to let me slide for the time being, “So what did Bryce have to say about this so-called rumor?”

“He confirmed it. He said Tony owed him a lot of money, which I happen to think could be motive for murder, but he said he had no reason to kill Tony because then he wouldn’t get any of his money back. He also said he didn’t tell you about it to begin with because he didn’t think it was necessary.”

“Whether Bryce thinks it’s relevant or not is beside the point. I’ll definitely follow up with him on that,” he says as he scribbles away on his notepad.

“Also, I accidentally ran into Amber earlier!”

Andrew shakes his head in disbelief. “And what secrets did you pry out of Amber?”

“We already knew that she lied about going out to dinner and then home to watch a movie.”

“Right.”

I take another deep breath. Police work is hard. Especially when I’m not supposed to be doing it. “She admitted she lied and said that she was driving around town looking for Larry instead because she thought he was having an affair.”

“Which could give her motive to kill him.”

“That’s what I thought.”

I look at Andrew like I’m waiting for him to be impressed with my second revelation but turns out he already knew about that one. “We had multiple witnesses who reported seeing Amber driving around town, and looking distraught, about the time Larry was killed. Admittedly, you’re the one she fessed up to though and not the police.”

“I’m guessing that’s exactly why she confided in me. I just happened to be passing by and was literally a shoulder to cry on.”

“Who else did you talk to?”

My cheeks flush. He’s so good at this. “I may have run into Rita when I was at the library.”

“And why were you at the library?”

“They have books there?”

Andrew takes a deep breath too, but his is in frustration. “Go ahead, what did she say?”

“Nothing new really. Her lawyer confirmed that Larry never updated his will, which leaves her with everything but also gives her motive to kill him.” I’m not sure why but I leave out the part where I kind of baited her with news that her ladies group stopped into the café.

For some reason I want to keep that to myself for now. “I feel like we have more questions than answers, and I don’t know where to turn next.”

“Welcome to my world.” Andrew gives me a small smile while Damien looks sideways at me. I ignore him hoping Drew didn’t notice. “That is not an encouragement however, to continue acting like a cop, got it? Both of you!”

We both nod our heads. It doesn’t seem like we’re doing much good anyway as it is. We’re still no closer to catching a killer, or maybe even killers.

“I will let you in on something I learned today even though it’s against department regulation, and you have to promise me you won’t share it with anyone else.”

I cross my heart. “I promise!”

“Me too!” says Damien.

“I’m only sharing this with you because you have given me some solid information to work with, and I feel like I owe you, not because I consider you cops.” Damien and I lean in eagerly. “Tony didn’t walk home after his fight with Larry.”

“How did you learn that?” I ask in shock.

“Tony’s wife Maria. She said he was drinking and gambling too much recently, and she had threatened to leave him. When he didn’t come home the night Larry was killed, and when I told her that witnesses had seen and heard Tony arguing with both Larry and Bryce, she told us he

probably went to his favorite bar, got drunk, and then slept it off in his truck.”

Damien lets out a low whistle. “That’s huge.”

“It may or may not be. If Tony really did pass out in his truck, then it’s not. But if he went elsewhere, like back here, and killed Larry then yes, obviously it’s huge. And there’s another potential clue but it’s only speculation on Maria’s part.”

“What is it?” Damien asks eagerly.

“Don’t make me regret sharing this with you.”

Damien and I shake our heads vigorously.

“Tony mentioned to Maria that the last time he was in Larry’s office with the rent check, he accidentally saw an email open on Larry’s computer that contained explosive information that would change everything. He wouldn’t tell her what, but he admitted he was going to confront Larry with it. She said she tried to talk him out of it, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I nearly leap from my seat I’m so excited. How is Andrew not more charged up about this himself? “That may have been the argument I heard before Larry was killed! We thought from the beginning that Tony killed Larry, and this could be it! This could be our answer! I’m sure this means their deaths are connected!”

Andrew shakes his head. “At this point it’s purely conjecture. We don’t know what Tony thinks he had on Larry. And we only have Maria’s word that’s what Tony told her. We talked to the bartender at the Smoking Pepper Bar who confirmed that yes Tony was there and got drunk.

“He told Tony to hand over his keys, but Tony said he was on foot and left his keys back at his restaurant. The bartender said he watched him and said that yes, Tony walked off, but he didn’t see him after that.”

I sigh in frustration. “The whole thing just gets crazier and more complicated by the minute.”

And then as if on cue the rabbits appear in the doorway. “Those are the funniest little rabbits,” Andrew laughs. “They always look like they understand what I’m saying.”

Marshall purses his lips together in disgust and then he asks, “Are you seriously interested in this idiot?”

“He’s not an idiot,” I slip and say out loud.

Andrew turns to me in confusion. “What?”

“Uhhhhh she was just talking to herself!” Damien offers, trying to help.

“Ask Detective Hot Stuff if he knows Amber is pregnant,” says Marcus.

“Amber is pregnant?” I blurt out in shock.

“Amber is pregnant?” Damien and Andrew repeat.

Marcus turns to Marshall and shakes his head. “Don’t these people know anything?”

“Why are you just now telling me this?” asks Andrew. Now he’s really frustrated with me.

Rats, how am I going to get out of this one?

“Because, um, well, I...”

“You’re guessing Amber is pregnant, yes?” Damien offers.

“Yes, that’s it...” I’m talking slowly now hoping it will give my brain time to catch up. “I’m guessing that because, er, because...” And somehow, I remember her saying she was on her way to a doctor’s appointment. Oh, she really is pregnant. I practically shout, “When I saw her this afternoon, she said she was on her way to a doctor’s appointment, so I think she’s pregnant!”

Andrew is looking at me really weirdly right now. I don’t blame him, that was the worst case of mental gymnastics I’ve ever pulled off. I know my cheeks are red from trying to come up with the best lie possible, but if I told him the rabbits just called him an idiot *and* told me Amber was pregnant, he’d look at me far worse than he already is.

He shrugs his shoulders as if he still isn’t sure I’m right, but he scribbles more notes in his notepad. “I guess it’s worth checking out. It could certainly give her motive to kill Larry.”

“Is it possible that Amber killed Larry, and then Bryce killed Tony, for completely different reasons and they just appear to be related?” Damien asks.

I’m hopeful this could be true. If it is, I’m obviously off the hook and we can finally get back to normal around here.

“That would make it a big coincidence and in police work I rarely believe in it. But I’ll check it out. And when I say *I’ll* check it out I mean that *I’ll* check it out. Got it? Not we, not you, *me*. I’m the police detective. You two need to stay out of this and let the professionals handle it. Please.”

Damien and I both agree to stay out of Andrew's way and let him investigate our new clues. Although it's hardly fair that he's the one who gets to do all of this considering it's my familiars who have given him two major clues. Besides, he's got his hands full. I don't think it counts if I just happen to run into someone, and we happen to have a conversation about things, and I learn something new.

"Assuming I can trust the two of you from now on I'll be on my way. Thanks for the smoothie, Damien it was delicious!"

Damien blushes at the compliment. "Anytime detective, anytime!"

I roll my eyes so hard I think I might hurt myself. What is it with my friends thinking that he's so hot? I mean he is, but why does the whole world have to know it?

"Please let us know if you learn anything new, okay?" I beg him.

"I will keep you updated when I can."

Ugh. What does that mean? And he wonders why we can't seem to stop ourselves from investigating. Police work seems so slow and tedious. Why not encourage others to help out? We have discovered some pretty juicy clues on our own after all.

As soon as Andrew closes the door behind him, Damien spins around to face me. "Did the rabbits tell you that Amber is pregnant?"

"Yes!" I shout. "That's huge! Don't you think that gives her even more motive to kill Larry?"

Damien looks doubtful. "Maybe. But why would she want to kill the father of her unborn child?"

Marcus chimes in, "Because she's mad. First, he knocked her up and then he cheated on her. Why wouldn't she kill him? And now that she realizes she's not getting any money out of him, and Rita taunted her with that fact, she's probably extra mad. She might even go after Rita next."

We both turn to the rabbits in surprise, considering we almost forgot they were there.

"You're sure she's pregnant?"

"Yep!"

"Did the cat next door tell you this too?"

"Nah, this we got from one of the yappy wiener dogs from the Five Dachshund Bakery. They never shut up. They go on and on and on. It's enough to drive a rabbit mad! Don't ever tell a dachshund a secret, they'll announce it to everybody."

“You went all the way down to the dog treat bakery? Why?”

“Because she makes rabbit treats sometimes too!”

“Really?”

“And they’re delicious!”

“Do you two just roam the town, when I’m not looking, scavenging for treats?”

“Pretty much.”

Damien turns to me, “And with that, I’ll be on my way, unless you need me to do something else?”

“No, go home, I’m not sure what to do next. Andrew insists on investigating this on his own, everybody has secrets, and no matter what happens, we may not even have a café to come back to when Rita and Bryce sell it. I need to be alone for a while to figure out what to do next.”

Damien hugs me. “Why don’t I stay here with you so we can talk. Or you could come home with me. Tom will cook us dinner and we can just hang out and relax.”

“Thank you, but I’m actually okay for now, I need to go over some paperwork and figure out if there’s anywhere we could move the café. But I will definitely take you up on your offer for dinner soon.”

“Are you sure?” Damien looks at me skeptically.

“I’m completely sure.”

“Call me later and let me know you’re okay?”

“I will.” And I meant it. I have come to cherish his friendship and the thought of hanging out with him and Tom and their dog sounds wonderful, but I have some things I need to catch up on first.

Chapter 17



I'm finishing up some paperwork while the rabbits nap at my feet when I get a text:

Hi Charlotte, this is Rita. Meet me behind the Hotel Glacier asap. I have something important to tell you.

My first thought when I read this is to let Andrew know, but then I decide maybe Rita has something important to tell me that doesn't relate to the case. And I know he's busy, so I don't want to bother him. I don't want to take away from his investigation either.

I text back.

I'll be right there.

I tell Marshall and Marcus to wait for me at the café, that I have an important errand to run and I'll be right back. I wonder what Rita wants to tell me. It suddenly occurs to me that maybe Bryce is wrong, and Rita doesn't want to sell her shares of the business after all.

I wonder if that's even possible. Maybe that's what she wants to talk to me about. I hurry my pace to the hotel. The late summer sun is setting earlier now and casts long shadows across the pavement.

Before I know it, it will be October and Halloween. I remember how huge Halloween is in Crested Peaks. It's practically a month-long celebration with a huge party on October 31st, and then the ski resort opens the next day for Dia de los Muertos. We celebrate holidays in a big way here.

Although the way things are looking with the investigation I could be in jail by then, accused of two murders I had nothing to do with. I was really looking forward to decking out the café for Halloween too. Even thinking about a big bash and everything.

I'm not sure why Rita wants to meet behind the hotel instead of in it, but maybe she doesn't want Bryce to know about it. I circle around the historic hotel and wonder about the stories it holds. Given that it's over 100

years old, and lived through the Colorado Gold Rush, I can only imagine some of the mysteries that it holds.

As I walk around to the back of the hotel, for a moment I think the shadows are playing tricks on me and there's someone lying on the ground. Then I realize it's not a trick and someone is lying there. *Oh no, oh no, oh no*, I say to myself. *Not again. Are you kidding me?*

I sprint over to the body on the ground and I scream when I realize it's Rita. But then I notice her eyes are still closed. *Oh please, oh please, oh please*, I mutter as I check for a pulse and find one! Thank goodness! My hands shake so badly I can barely get 911 entered on the screen. When the operator answers I blurt out, "Please help me! Rita Hale is unconscious behind the Hotel Glacier and I think she's hurt!"

"Ma'am, what is your name?"

"This is Charlotte Duffin."

"Ma'am, is there anyone else around? Are you in a safe place?"

"Yes, I mean I think we're safe, and there's no one else around, it's behind the hotel. Please hurry!"

I breathe a sigh of relief when I hear the sirens right away. Good thing they're fast.

"Help is on the way please stay on the line until they arrive."

As the sirens draw closer, she asks me a series of questions. Is the victim still breathing, is she turning blue, does she still have a pulse and so on. Rita may be breathing but I'm suddenly having trouble with breathing myself. I'm finding it hard to catch my breath as my heart races so fast I think it's going to explode. What is happening in our town and why do I keep finding it? This is a disaster.

I think back to the conversation I had earlier with Amber and I wonder in horror if she could have done something like this. I think she's the only one outraged enough at Rita to kill her. And Larry too. Revenge is a strong motivator.

When the ambulance arrives the EMT's leap from the back and run to us with their gear. I'm still kneeling over Rita not even noticing how the pavement is digging into my bare knees. Considering I just found her husband in a similar manner two days ago I'm sure this is all just a cruel joke.

One of the EMT's helps me stand and carefully guides me over to the back of the ambulance to check me out as well. He takes my blood

pressure and puts an oxygen mask over my mouth for several minutes to help regulate my breathing once again.

Once he talks me through it and calms me down, I feel better. I glance over to where they're still working on Rita and pull the oxygen mask from my face. "Is she going to be okay?"

"It looks like she took a nasty knock on the head, and she probably has a concussion, but so far it looks like she'll be all right. I'm sure they'll want her to spend the night in the hospital."

When I see Andrew walking straight at us, a wrathful look on his face, I wonder if I can will myself to pass out to avoid him, but I don't think it will work.

"Is she all right?" he asks the paramedic as he jabs a finger in my direction.

The paramedic sensing that something is up looks uncomfortable. "Yes, she's fine detective, just got a bit lightheaded so I brought her over here to get her off her feet and compose herself."

"Can I speak to her alone please?"

"Sure thing!" he says as he scurries away. I want to call out to him to stay and save me, but that will only prolong the tongue lashing.

Andrew throws his arms in the air and then lets them drop to his sides in exasperation. "What were you thinking?"

I open my mouth to answer but then he cuts me off.

"Actually no, first of all, what happened here?"

"Rita texted me and asked me to meet her behind the hotel right away. She said she had something important to tell me."

"You dropped everything and ran off to meet someone you barely know *behind* a hotel?"

Well when you put it like that. "I was hoping that Rita wanted to talk to me about the lease for Marcall's. I thought that she was going to tell me that she changed her mind and didn't want to sell the properties after all. And I figured that maybe she wanted to talk in private."

"Did it occur to you for one second to contact me first, just in case?"

"Yes, actually it did."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to bother you. I know how busy you are." I give him my best puppy dog eyes hoping he'll take pity on me.

He groans. “Charlotte, there are two unsolved murders right now. Next we have an assault to add to that. You can’t keep running around town and talking to potential suspects. And once again you’re the first person to come across the victim and you’re still the prime suspect as far as the department is concerned.”

Oh no, I didn’t even consider that.

“Were there any witnesses? Did anyone else see you discover the victim or are you the only witness to this one too?”

“I don’t think anyone saw me,” I whisper.

Andrew looks so defeated I feel sorry for him. He looks as defeated as I feel. I didn’t mean to cause trouble for him or myself, it just seems to keep finding me. We move out of the way as the EMTs wheel Rita toward us on the stretcher.

She’s regained consciousness but her eyes are unfocused and she’s wearing an oxygen mask. She looks so small and pale on the stretcher and for the first time I’m truly scared about what is happening. If I arrived before Rita would I have been the one who got hit on the head? And did they plan to kill her and not just injure her?

Once again, I have too many questions and no answers. After they load Rita in the ambulance, and leave for the hospital, Andrew turns to me, “I have to go to the hospital to question Rita. I need you to go home and I am very serious about this. If you ignore my advice again, I’ll arrest you.”

I nod my head. “I’ll go home now,” I tell him glumly. And this time I mean it.

“I’ll drop you off at the café to get your things. And then you’re to get in your car and go straight home. I’ll contact you as soon as I can.”

The short ride to the café is tense and quiet. I’m worried I’ve messed up my life once again and now even Andrew’s. What if he gets in trouble because he knows me, and I continue to disobey his orders? I can’t bear the thought of ruining his life too.

As I get out of the car, I turn to him before I shut the door. “I’m sorry.”

“Please just do what I told you to do this time, okay?”

I nod my head and shut the car door with a thump. I trudge back into the café and collect the rabbits who, sensing my mood, are unusually quiet. After we get home, I fix their dinner salad which they happily gobble down,

and I'm glad to see someone has an appetite. I should make dinner for myself but I'm not hungry.

I pace around the house instead trying to figure out how this happened. Could Amber have done this? Is she clever enough to engineer something like this? Is someone trying to set both Rita and me up?

My phone rings and I'm relieved to see it's Andrew. I'm hoping he has good news about Rita.

"Hey there, please tell me you're calling with good news."

"Rita wants to talk to you at the hospital."

Chapter 18



“What? Why?” “I don’t know, she refuses to tell me, says she has to talk to you in person.” I can tell by the tone of his voice he’s thrilled about that. I can’t seem to stop getting in trouble with him, can I?

“Okay, I’ll be right over.”

Andrew clicks off without saying goodbye. Even if we do solve these murders, I’m afraid that kiss is getting more unlikely by the minute. I drive the Prius to the hospital because it’s faster than walking, and when I arrive at the front desk, they direct me to Rita’s room.

She looks much better than she did a couple hours ago. She has a mild concussion and the nurse said they’ll keep her overnight for observation.

Before I can talk to Rita, Andrew pulls me aside. “Rita tells us that she got a text from you asking her to meet you behind the Hotel Glacier.”

“What!?” I bellow. “That’s not true! I’ve never texted Rita in my life!”

“She said it came from an unmarked number. We can double check your phone easily enough and rule out that it was you who texted her,” he tells me as he holds out his hand waiting for me to surrender my phone.

I dig it out of my purse and grudgingly plop it onto his outstretched palm. “Officer Wilson!” he says as he waves at one of the officers nearby. “Can you check Ms Duffin’s phone for any recent text activity. Specifically, we need to know if she texted Ms Hale this evening.”

“Sure thing, I’ll get this right back to you,” responds Officer Wilson as he takes my phone away.

“What does it mean if someone is pretending to be me and texts Rita, then whacks her over the head? Maybe even tries to kill her? Do you think it was Amber?”

“It could mean someone is trying to frame you for something, whether it’s Amber or not I don’t know, but we’re bringing her in for

questioning. Considering she has lied to us repeatedly; she has a lot to answer for. Unfortunately, Rita didn't see who hit her over the head, they snuck up behind her."

"Why does she want to see me now though?"

"She has something she wants to tell both of us."

"Okay," I say somewhat reluctantly. "I guess we should go in."

Rita's eyes are closed when we walk in but as soon as she hears us, she opens them. "Thank you for coming you two, I wanted to confess something, but I need you both to hear it."

Andrew and I look at each other in shock. This could be it. This is where she fesses up to Larry's or Tony's murder or both.

"This will obviously come out eventually, so I might as well get ahead of the story. And since I lied to both of you, I feel it's only right to confess to both of you."

My heart is racing, and my palms are sweaty as I wait for the bombshell. "I wasn't dancing with my friends like I told you I was on Wednesday because I was seeing a plastic surgeon!"

"A plastic surgeon?" I practically shout. Now I'm more confused than ever.

"Dr. Rynke the world renown plastic surgeon from Aspen was in town last night, and I have a friend who swears by him, so he agreed to see me while he was here – for an extra hefty fee I might add – so I was getting fillers in my face.

"Considering my ex-husband, or soon to be ex, or I guess he's my deceased husband now, left me for a young tramp I wanted to look a little younger. So, sue me. But I don't want anyone to know about it. Dr. Rynke was only in town for the evening and I had to cancel on the gals at the last minute."

"Are you kidding me?" I shout. "You lied to a detective during a murder investigation because you were at the doctor's office? That doesn't even make sense! Why would you do such a thing?" Andrew puts his hand on my arm as if he's trying to prevent me from slapping her. This is not the answer I expected.

"My dear, when you get to be my age you need all the help you can get, but that doesn't mean I want to advertise it. And I don't trust this face to just anyone. It had to be Dr. Rynke and I didn't want anyone else to know. I assumed the killer would be found quickly - and obviously it's not

you Charlotte - so I took it for granted that I wouldn't have to say anything at all. Obviously, I had no idea it would come to this!" she says as she gestures around the hospital room.

"I'll need to check your story out with the doctor." Andrew reminds her.

"Yes, of course, I already told him and he's expecting your call. I hope that you can both forgive me for lying to you. And if there's any way we can keep this between ourselves I would really appreciate it."

"But you swear that you're not the one who texted me?" I interrupt.

"No dear, I don't even have your phone number. And I thought it was odd when you texted me and the number came up as unavailable. That didn't make sense. But Detective Bailey said right off the bat he didn't believe that you were the one to text me."

Andrew quickly looks at the ground as if there's something fascinating down there. Nice to know that he at least believes in my innocence even if the rest of his department doesn't.

Just then we're interrupted by Officer Wilson who tosses my phone to Andrew. "It's clean boss. That phone hasn't been used to text anyone today, except when she responded to Ms Hale. That's also the first and only time the phone was ever used to return any text to Ms Hale, period."

"I knew it all along," Rita responds smiling smugly.

"Is there anything else you need to tell us?" Andrew asks.

"Oh no, I think that was plenty don't you?"

"Just as long as it's the truth, that's all we ask."

"I promise, no more lying to handsome police detectives," she says giggling as she winks at me. "But do you know who hit me on the head?"

Andrew shakes his head, "No, but we're working on it."

"I would bet anything it was that hussy Amber. Especially after I made it a point to tell her that I get everything from Larry's estate, and that he didn't even think enough of her to change his will in case something happened. She was livid when I told her that, and I bet you she decided to get her revenge tonight. And she wanted Charlotte to take the fall!"

"I promise we're looking into every possibility," Andrew assures her. "We'll let you get some rest now and I'll be back in the morning to follow up, okay?"

We quietly leave Rita's room as Andrew turns to me. "Obviously I knew that you didn't hit Rita tonight, and when we looked at her phone and

saw that the text that claimed to be from you, was actually from a blocked number, I knew you hadn't texted her either. But that does mean that you need to be very careful from now on. I'm serious about this. No more sleuthing, okay? I don't care who calls or texts you or wants to meet with you, let me know first."

I nod my head. "Does this mean that I'm cleared?"

"You're not completely cleared at this point, but it works in your favor that you didn't send the text to Rita. You definitely are in the clear for Rita's attack anyway."

I'll take what I can get at this point, but I'm still at a loss as to why all these horrible things keep happening, and even worse they're happening around me.

"Did you drive yourself here?"

I nod.

"I'll have Officer Wilson follow you home and then park outside your house for awhile just to be on the safe side. At least that way if anyone is watching you, they'll see the police presence and hopefully think twice about trying anything else."

I should find that comforting, but all I can think is how the neighbors will respond to that. A police car parked outside my house when I'm already the suspect in two murders. As if the rumors and gossip about me weren't already running rampant.

Chapter 19



When the phone rings, for a moment I hope that it's Andrew, but the screen says it's the Crested Peak Tribune. Ick. They're probably calling to sell me a subscription. I decide to answer anyway and tell them to put me on their do not call list.

"Hi this is Charlotte," I answer very businesslike hoping they understand I'm serious about not wanting them to call me anymore.

"Hi Charlotte, my name is Joshua Simpson and I'm a reporter with the Crested Peak Tribune, and I was calling about a story we're working on involving you, and I was wondering if you'd care to comment."

"A story involving me? What on earth could you be writing about?" I don't think it's about the murders, there isn't much to tell yet. I may be a suspect but that hardly constitutes a whole story in the newspaper.

"We received a tip that you inherited Marcall's Breakfast Café and were told that you had a fascinating background, in addition to being a suspect in the recent murders in town, and that we should research your history. Turns out your parents were infamous too, and this is shaping up to be a great story, but I wanted to give you the chance to comment yourself."

Fat chance of that pal. "You got a tip? Who gave you the tip?" I demand angrily.

"It was an anonymous tip ma'am."

How can this be happening? Worst week ever and now a newspaper is going to tell the entire world my story. They want to reveal my deepest, darkest secrets and most shameful moments. The whole town will know the truth about my parents, and then it will look like I'm following in their footsteps by becoming a murder suspect.

I wish I'd never come back to this town. Why didn't I just sell Marcall's to begin with and stay in New York where I belonged? Sure, New York sucked, but even that didn't sink this low.

"When are you running the story?"

“We go to print in 48 hours. I just wanted to ask you for a comment.”

“No, I don’t have any comment. You’re a horrible, vile creature who just wants to ruin people’s lives to sell a few papers! You’ll be lucky if I don’t sue you and the newspaper right out of existence!” I press the screen as hard as I can to hang up wishing that made more of a noise on his end.

First, I get a fake text telling me to meet Rita who’s been attacked, and now I hear that someone has tipped off a newspaper reporter to my oh so fascinating life history. I’m sick and tired of this and as soon as I’m cleared of these murders, that is if I’m cleared of the murders, I’m leaving town. Marshall and Marcus and I will pack up our things and move far away from here.

After stomping around the house for a while I decide to go for a walk and clear my head. I leave the rabbits at home because given their short legs they they’re slow walkers, but at a sprint I don’t have a prayer of keeping up with them.

As I wander down the street to no where in particular, I think about how only a couple of days ago Tony claimed that he had gone for a walk to cool off and look how he ended up.

As I stroll through town, I realize the days are getting cooler and it gets dark earlier. Pretty soon the aspen trees will turn color and we’ll see a lot of tourists in town for that. There’s also an international film festival about the same time that brings a lot of people to town, and then of course we’ll be enjoying the Halloween season.

I brush away a stray tear from my cheek thinking about how I may not even be here to see any of it. Even worse what if somehow, I end up in jail?

I find myself in front of the Smoking Pepper, the bar that Tony was last in, and eventually I go in. I almost never go into a bar and have a drink. I prefer to drink my wine at home in a large glass in front of the tv, thank you very much. But at this point who even cares?

I step into the historic bar which is Crested Peaks oldest saloon dating back to the late 1800s. During Prohibition the sheriff’s wife ran a speakeasy in the basement where many of the towns finest politicians and police officers were known to enjoy a drink.

I tell myself that I’m just being paranoid, but it seems like the patrons are staring at me. Word is obviously spreading like wildfire and I

realize I need to make plans to get out of town as soon as I'm cleared of the murders. The newspaper story will be damaging enough.

The saloon consists of one long stretch of original heavy wooden countertop, with barstools attached and a handful of tables lining the other side of the room. I make my way back to a corner to hide when I hear a familiar voice. "Charlotte? Charlotte Duffin?" *Oh great, here it comes.*

I turn around with a smile on my face hoping to disarm whoever it is who's about to yell at me or ask me a bunch of uncomfortable questions. "Charlotte! I thought that was you!"

"Samantha? Why? How? What are you doing here?" We both laugh out loud at our mutual shock as we give each other a brief hug. I knew Samantha from New York and I can't imagine what she'd be doing in this old tavern in Crested Peaks. I knew her well enough to meet her for lunch occasionally, but not really well enough to tell her I was moving away. "I heard you left New York after that jerk Lucas dumped you. I'm so sorry that happened to you. Is this where you live now?"

I decide not to go into the whole sordid story of this week because why bother, she'd never believe me anyway. I don't think I believe me. "This is where I live now!" I tell her, as I think about how I may live here *now*, but the moment I'm free to move again I'll be gone.

"Do you have time for a drink? We can catch up!"

"Sure, why not," I respond. We each order a beer although as I eye the vast collection of colorful liquor bottles lining the back of the bar I'm wondering if I could use something stronger.

"I can't believe you live here! I heard that your grandma died, and left you everything, and that you moved to the Colorado mountains, but I had no idea it was here. I'm sorry about your grandma, by the way, were you two close?"

"She raised me after my parents were killed."

"Oh no, that must have been extra hard on you then."

"It definitely hasn't been easy. After Lucas humiliated me, and then I got fired, and then my grandma died, it was just one thing after another."

And that's not even the half of it!

"Why did you get fired? There were all sorts of rumors floating around. Now I can get the truth straight from you."

"You know how Perkins liked the ladies right?"

"And lots of em!" Samantha laughs.

“Precisely. One day we were swamped at the front desk, and when I answered the phone, I was distracted and I thought the woman calling was Perkin’s girlfriend, but it was his wife instead. When I told him that Stacey, his girlfriend was on the line, he answered in a way that made it clear to his wife that he thought it was Stacey calling instead.”

“Oh no!” Samantha says with her hand over her mouth laughing hysterically. “That jerk finally got what was coming to him.” But then she sobers up. “Except you got caught in the crossfire. That’s so unfair.”

“It was probably for the best anyway. He was such a toxic jerk to work for. I should have left a long time ago. And if it meant exposing him on the way out the door it was worth it.”

“And you got to come here. This is a beautiful town. You’re surrounded by mountains! It must be incredible in the winter when it’s covered with snow. Does it snow a lot here?”

I laugh at her big city mindedness. “We ski here. Which means we get like 20 feet of snow every winter. You should see what a pain it is to keep some of these places from getting buried.”

“You’re kidding me! That’s amazing. Maybe I should come back in the winter for a visit.”

“You should! Speaking of which, what are you doing here now? You’re not just visiting?”

Samantha rolls her eyes and groans. “No, I was here on business. My boss somehow hooked up with this small-time property investor, small-time compared to New York anyway.

He owns several properties here and he was hoping to sell them to us, so we could tear them down and build condos instead. My boss has been itching to get in here for years, but no one is ever willing to sell.

“And in my opinion, even if we finally convinced someone to sell, I doubt we’d get permission from the city council. This town is so beautiful no one wants to change it, and after spending time here I can certainly understand why.”

As Samantha tells the story the puzzle pieces that have been floating around in my head for days, in one big mess, slowly come together.

“Even I admit, it was a sleazy deal and I never liked the thought of it. Do you know that an actual ghost chased us from the Hotel Glacier? A ghost! No one back in New York will ever believe it. And then we backed

out of the whole thing anyway because of the murders, one of which was the property owner. Is that wild or what?”

“I can believe it,” I tell her.

“Then his cousin, who says he didn’t know about it to begin with, hits us up to let him sell to us. But my boss is just done with the whole thing. It turned into a huge mess that he didn’t want to deal with anymore.

“And the cousin was furious and threatened to sue us. My boss said good luck suing over a sketchy, possibly illegal, deal to begin with. And then I just heard someone at the bar saying some poor woman was assaulted just up the street earlier today. Is the crime rate always this high here?”

“Not really,” I respond not sure where I would even start if I wanted to tell her the whole story.

“Hey, are you okay, you look like *you’ve* seen a ghost.”

“In a way I have. Samantha, it has truly been great talking to you, but I need to get home now, I have some things I have to do.”

“It was great to see you Charlotte! I hope that things are going well in your new life. Send me an email once in a while, would you?”

“I will,” I tell her. And I mean that.

As I get up to leave, I suddenly remember. “One more thing. Did you happen to have dinner the other night with the property owner who was murdered?”

“I did,” she exclaims with a surprised look on her face. “How did you know?”

“Let’s just say a little birdie told me.” *Or maybe a stone-cold killer.*



I practically run back home I’m walking so fast and my mind churns a mile a minute. Some of these clues have been right under my nose the entire time, but maybe that’s why I missed them. They were too close to see clearly. I can’t believe that Samantha has been in town this week and this is the first we’ve run into each other.

And seeing her not only answered some big questions about what’s been happening, it also made it clear to me just how much I’ve come to love this place, and that I don’t want to leave after all. I want to stay here,

and I want to keep Marcall's. I want to build a life here and seeing Samantha reminded me how much I hate New York. But now I have work to do.

The first thing I do once I'm home is call the reporter. I'm tired of feeling like a victim and it's time to take my power back. I have nothing to lose and everything to gain. There's no way I can sleep after all this, so I work on a new plan all night. This is my last shot and it has to be a good one.

Chapter 20



The sun is just lighting up the buildings when the reporter leaves Marcall's the next morning. I'm satisfied with what I've done, and he tells me the story will run within a couple of days. My next task is to visit Rita one last time in the hospital.

"You're looking much better this morning!" I tell her.

"I feel better, although I still have a headache, but they said it's to be expected. I'm lucky you came along when you did, or the doctors tell me I might not be here. But what brings you here this morning? Don't you have a café to run?"

"I'm not opening the café this morning."

"Why not? It's not because of me is it? I'm going to be fine. Are you worried you could be next? And what is going on in this town?"

"It's none of that directly, I have some serious work to do today and I couldn't get it done and run the café at the same time. But I need to ask you what might sound like a really weird question."

"Shoot my friend. You know my secrets after all," she says with a wink.

"Do you happen to know of a secret hiding place Larry might have had? A place where he kept files or money or anything like that? Somewhere that he could stash something that even Bryce wouldn't have known about?"

A look of utter confusion crosses her face and I think we're doomed. She was my best hope at locating some sort of paper trail related to the developers, and possibly the money they paid him. I think that's what Bryce was looking for in Larry's office. But then I watch the lightbulb go on.

"Oh, I'm an idiot." I lean closer to her as my pulse speeds up. "Larry told me when we first got married, before he became a lying cheating scoundrel, or maybe he always was and I just didn't want to admit it..."

“Rita!” I warn trying to get her to focus.

“Oops, sorry, when we first got married was about the time your grandma opened Marcall’s, and Larry told me that no one knew of a tunnel that runs from Marcall’s, underneath the city, and over to the train station.”

“What?!” I yelp. A nurse passing by gives us a funny look.

“It’s unsafe because no one is sure how stable it is anymore. Back in the gold rush days smugglers would hide their stash in the tunnel. Larry often joked that if he ever needed to hide a body or something valuable, he would put it in there.

“But I told him he better not use it because for all he knew it might collapse on his head. Thinking back maybe this is something I should have encouraged...”

I shake my head in exasperation. There’s no telling what Rita could accomplish if she didn’t spend so much time thinking about how mad she still is at Larry.

“But where is this secret tunnel? How would I access it? You said it starts at Marcall’s, but I’ve never seen anything of the sort. I have no idea where to look. I don’t think my Gran knew about it and if she did, she never said anything.”

Rita sighs and shakes her head. “I have no idea. I’m so sorry.”

I’m crestfallen. I feel like every time we get two steps ahead; we’re shoved back several steps at once. How could there be a secret tunnel and I don’t know about it?

There would have to be some sort of entrance leading to it and I’ve never seen anything of the sort. But then it hits me.

“Rita, we may not know where it is, but I bet I know who does.”

I don’t want to get my hopes up but if I were a betting person...

“I have to go!” I shout as I leap up and sprint for the door.

“Be careful dear!” Rita shouts at my retreating back. I drive home as quickly as I can without getting pulled over for speeding. I have no time to waste. I know that Andrew will want me to fill him in, and I will once I know I’m on the right track for sure.

“Marshall! Marcus! Where are you?” I shout the moment I fling the front door open. The two of them tear around the corner.

“Did you bring us parsley?” Marshall asks.

“No,” I say trying to catch my breath.

“Beet greens?” asks Marcus.

“No!” I say as I lean over and put my hands on my knees. The adrenaline is flowing and I’m trying to slow down enough to speak clearly. “I didn’t bring you any food this time.”

“Why are you all excited then? Why did you call for us?”

“Please tell me you know where the entrance to the underground tunnels are in Marcall’s.”

They look at each other and giggle. “Of course, we do!” says Marshall.

“*Please*, how could we not know that?” asks Marcus.

“So, where are they?” Why is everyone trying my patience today? Can’t they all see I’m in a hurry?

“It’s in the utility closet,” they explain as if it’s as clear as the crooked ears on their heads.

“Are you kidding me? There’s no other door inside the utility closet.”

Then the two of them look at each other like I’m so dense they’ll never be able to train me properly.

“There’s a trap door, covered by a carpet square, on the floor,” Marcus explains.

“You have to pull up the carpet first to find the door. Larry put it there on purpose to hide it.”

“How do you know that?” I ask. But as Marshall opens his mouth to explain further, I hold up my hand. “Wait, let me guess, Stumpy the cat told you.”

“Of course!” they sing in unison.

“Great, I owe the cat one too. You two stay here, I have something to do.”

“Don’t forget the parsley,” Marshall shouts as I run out the door to my car.

I race to Marcall’s with my heart is pounding so hard I’m sure I can actually hear it outside of my chest. I sprint through the parking lot and in the back door. I don’t want Miranda to see me just yet. If the files aren’t where I think they are I don’t want to disappoint her again.

Damien is supposed to be at home enjoying the day off, so I don’t want to trouble him either. If the files are there, we can all celebrate together later.

I fling open the door to the utility closet in my office and throw the tissue boxes and paper towel rolls out that I have stacked there. Sure enough there's a carpet square. But how am I supposed to get it off? I squat down and balance on my feet as I claw and yank at the carpet square so hard, that when it finally comes loose, I fall backwards. Feeling sheepish with my own clumsiness I get back up on my feet and lo and behold there's a door.

I squeal with excitement as my heart continues to race. I yank and tug on the rusted steel ring on top of the door to no avail. It's just too heavy. I throw my hands up in frustration when I remember.

"Okay, Char you've got this," I mutter to myself. I concentrate as hard as I can on the trap door, while picturing it opening wide, when it finally squeaks on its old rusty hinges and opens up.

I put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming out loud. If what I think is in there is actually there, this will blow the whole thing wide open. And if not, then I'm back to nothing. I peer down through the hole but of course it's pitch black.

Once again, I concentrate on the space and then the entire tunnel is illuminated. It looks a lot like a crawl space you'd find in someone's house, except there's also a tunnel that leads into the distance as far as I can see. But when I see a pile of file boxes in the corner, I'm convinced I found what I came for.

I scramble down through the hole in the floor and run over to the boxes. I lift the lid of the one on top, guessing that would be the most recent one that had been used.

I see numerous documents but can't read what they say down here. I'll need to get them out in better light. I crawl up the small ladder with several files clutched in my now sweaty hand my heart pounding.

I sit down at my desk with the files and leaf through them. I'm stunned as I scroll through page after page of documentation from the developers from New York, or as I also now know them, Samantha's bosses, who want to build high rise condos right where I'm sitting.

They planned to take over all the properties on this block, bulldoze them and build condos. There are numerous copies of emails between Larry and the developers as well as handwritten notes that Larry recorded during their phone conversations. I realize one of these must have been an email that Tony saw in Larry's office and tried to blackmail him with.

Larry admitted, in the documentation, that there was no way the residents and the business owners in Crested Peaks, as well as prominent city council members, would ever support such a plan. The high-rise condos are in all the other big ski towns but not Crested Peaks.

We've avoided that like the plague because we love our quaint little town just the way it is. It's not one of those ritzy ski towns, but just a sleepy little town where you can still enjoy fields of wildflowers in the summer and romantic cottages with fireplaces in the winter.

No one would support this kind of development except obviously Larry. I curse out loud when I come across evidence of wire transfers consisting of substantial deposits in the Cayman Islands in an account for Larry. Huge bonuses for Larry, that they obviously paid in advance, and that I'm guessing even Samantha wasn't aware of.

As well as detailed notes about plans to break the current leases including Larry's lawsuit against me. I bury my head in my hands when I realize why he kept up a lawsuit he couldn't win. I'm furious that this was a big part of why I look like I could have killed him.

Aside from the plot to kick the current tenants out, the next step was to bribe and blackmail city officials. There's even a stack of photos of city council members in compromising settings. Rita was right, Larry was hiding money. And a lot of it. This had to be what Bryce was combing through Larry's office to find.

My hand trembles when I come across a printed copy of an email from Larry, to the developers, dated the day Larry was killed. It reads, "Tony Rossi knows. Demanding \$\$\$." The developers replied with, "We've already paid you more than we had anticipated, you can pay him out of your bonus or forget the whole thing. This entire project is becoming more problematic by the moment."

I realize it's definitely time to bring Andrew in on this. I have everything I need and then some. Although there's still one last nagging question that has been floating around my subconscious that just became clear last night.

I text Andrew:

Remember when you told me that you got an anonymous call that sent you to Tony's restaurant the day he was killed?

Yes.

Was it male or female?

It was male, why? What's going on? Call me!
And then I realize it definitely wasn't Amber.

Chapter 21



My hands shake even harder as I call Andrew on my cell phone. He needs to know about this right now. But just as I click on his name, a voice behind me tells me to put the phone down. I don't until I hear the gun cock and then I know I'm in big trouble.

"Get up!" the voice says.

When I stand up and turn around, I'm not surprised to see Bryce standing in front of me. He gestures toward the kitchen with the gun and I walk out there with trembling knees. He keeps pointing a very big gun right at me.

He sneers, "I want to thank you for locating those files for me. I've searched everywhere for them and couldn't understand how some dimwit like my cousin could have hidden them so well. I thought they might be here, since this is where I followed him the night I killed him, but I still couldn't figure it out. But you obviously found them. Where were they?"

My mind races as I think of ways to stall for time. "He hid them in a tunnel underneath here."

"I'm impressed, I had no idea there was a tunnel under here. And now you've done all the work for me."

"So, you did kill Larry."

"Of course, I killed Larry you idiot. I knew he was hiding something huge and I assumed it was money. I just didn't know how much or where he got it. But from the way he'd been acting I knew it had to be a lot.

"And when I saw him at dinner with a woman who was far too sophisticated to be from around here, I dug a little deeper and contacted some friends up in Breckenridge. I knew they had contacts in New York, so I asked them to look into it.

"Turns out the developers weren't as discreet as they probably should have been and had been bragging to their rich friends about how they were finally going to bag a real estate deal here."

Still stalling for time, I press him further. “But considering that you still didn’t know where the money was why did you kill him? Why not just blackmail him? Force him to share?”

“I hadn’t planned to kill him. Things just got out of hand. I followed him here late Monday night, where he was obviously planning to access his hidden stash of files, when you weren’t here. Except I didn’t know that at the time.

“That’s where I screwed up and interrupted him before he got near the tunnel. I confronted him and demanded to know what he was hiding. And do you know what he did? He laughed at me!

“He said he didn’t know what I was talking about and he rolled his eyes at me. Can you believe that? Rolled his eyes at me! Nobody rolls their eyes at Bryce Turner!”

I’m not sure what scares me more. The way Bryce is waving the gun around, or the fact he’s obviously unhinged. It’s like he can’t decide what he’s angrier about. Larry lying to him and coming into a lot of money he obviously didn’t plan to share, or Larry rolling his eyes at him.

He rants on. “Then he turned his back on me and tried to walk away. I mean the nerve of that guy. Lies to me, his own flesh and blood, and then when I want to talk to him about it, he disrespects me. Acts like I had no right to know what he’s doing behind my back.

“So, I grabbed the rolling pin from the counter, followed him out the back door, and smashed him on the back of his head. He dropped like a bag of rocks too.”

My legs are shaking so badly by now I’m surprised I can even stand up straight. If I had realized Bryce was this unstable to begin with, I might have taken the idea of him being Larry’s killer more seriously. There were just so many others who were openly mad at Larry he didn’t seem that obvious.

I steady myself against the counter. “And then you wiped the rolling pin clean so you wouldn’t leave any fingerprints behind.”

“That’s right missy! But I felt weird about just leaving it here so I tossed it in the bushes down the street, thinking if they didn’t have a murder weapon, it would take even longer to figure out what happened, and give me more time to think of a better plan. Except that idiot from next door was out stumbling around in the park drunk, and I was sure he saw me.”

“Tony?” I blurt out in shock.

“Yes, Tony, and why is this town so full of drunks and morons? I didn’t know just how drunk he was, and whether he recognized me, but I couldn’t take that chance. That rolling pin was the only thing that connected me to Larry at that point.”

“So, you showed up the next day and confronted Tony when you hoped no one would be around?” My blood runs cold as Bryce smiles a cruel, evil smile. This guy is nothing but a heartless killer. I knew I didn’t like him to begin with, but it’s hard to imagine someone this evil.

“And he actually didn’t recall seeing me the night before, until I showed up again in his kitchen. We argued about the money he owed me again, but then I saw the look of recognition on his face and knew I couldn’t let him live, so I plunged the knife right into his chest.”

I shudder at the cold and calculated way he talks about murdering people. As if they deserved it. “But why go out of your way to set me up?”

“That bonus just fell into my lap. I didn’t realize that Larry was suing you to break your lease, and when I first discovered it in his files it didn’t make sense. There was little chance of him winning that, but he was obviously hoping to get out of the all leases so he could sell the properties free and clear. I knew it would keep the police looking in the wrong direction.”

“And with Larry gone, you needed Rita gone as well in the hopes that you’d get everything, at least everything related to the business, didn’t you?”

He smiles at me. “You’re one of the smart ones, aren’t you?”

“You manufactured the text messages between Rita and myself last night, so you could kill Rita and set me up to take the fall for another murder. And you knew at the very least I would assume Amber had done it, given her hatred for Rita.

“So, if your plan to frame me fell through somehow, there was a good chance that at least Amber would go to jail. Plus, it was a great way to continue to throw me off.”

Then he waggles his finger at me and chuckles as if we’re just two old friends enjoying a joke. “I always knew I liked you. You’re different, you’re not like the knuckleheads from around here who live here for generations and never leave. I was obviously planning to kill Rita, but it turns out her head is much harder than Larry’s, I guess.

“But now I’m getting bored with this conversation and I have to take care of you and go collect my prize. And believe me, I won’t mess up this time. You’ll definitely be dead.

“And I’ll make sure it looks like a suicide, because you feel horrible about killing Tony and Larry, in addition to assaulting Rita and you just couldn’t live with yourself. Then I’ll take the files, thanks to you, find Larry’s money, and be on my way.”

Then, just as Bryce lunges at me, I spot the aluminum bakeware all stacked neatly on the shelf right above us, and I realize if I was ever going to be an amazing witch, now would be a really good time to start. The days of my being a mediocre witch, who tries to hide her talents, are behind me.

I concentrate hard on the bakeware as I fire numerous sheets and pans straight at Bryce. Who needs bullets when you have strategically placed kitchen supplies? Bryce screams as I pummel his body repeatedly with heavy sheets and pans one after the other.

They hit him with such force some of them bounce off him and I duck to avoid getting hit myself. When one hits him square in the face, he drops the gun, which I grab off the floor. Because what’s better than flying bakeware? Flying bakeware and a gun dropped at your feet that’s what.

But I’m so startled I nearly drop the gun when Andrew and about a dozen policemen burst through the doorway with their guns drawn screaming at Bryce to get on the ground. Only he can’t because he’s still being pelted with my baking sheets.

“Help me!” he screams as the cookware beats him about the head and face. Bruises appear on his face and arms, leaving his nose and lips bloodied and swollen. I concentrate on freezing the makeshift weapons, and then let them simply drop to the ground. Bryce is so terrified at this point he screams at the noise of the aluminum crashing to the floor.

The police surround him and quickly handcuff him as Andrew gently removes the gun from my hand. I forgot I picked it up. He gestures at the pile of bakeware with his head, “Nicely done,” he smiles at me. “Are you okay?”

My knees finally give out as I pitch forward and Andrew catches me once again. “Whoa! Easy there. Are you okay, are you hurt anywhere?” he asks as I enjoy the feeling of his strong arms encircling me once again. I’m thinking I should fall around him more often.

Chapter 22



I gulp in air. “I’m not hurt. I just saw my life flash before my eyes. How did you know? How did you know I was in trouble?”

“My phone rang, I saw that it was you and then just as quickly it went dead. I waited for you to call or text me back and when you didn’t, I knew something was up, especially since you had just asked about the anonymous caller. When I said it was male you figured out it was Bryce didn’t you?”

I breathe out a long sigh of relief and nod my head. “You know what though? Up until that moment I wasn’t sure if it was Bryce or Amber. But I feel kind of stupid now because it was clearly Bryce. I was so hung up on how angry Rita and Amber were I was convinced it had to be one of them. When Rita was assaulted last night of course I assumed it was Amber.”

“We brought Amber in for questioning after I dropped you off at home last night. While she had motive there were certain thoughts that kept nagging at me, and I couldn’t shake them.”

“Like what?”

“Remember how Bryce told both of us that he was in Breckenridge in meetings until late Monday evening?”

“Of course, and you said you confirmed his whereabouts with the people he met with and they said they were meeting as late as 8 pm. Was that a lie?”

“It wasn’t, but something still bugged me. So I checked with Harry’s Helicopter Rides-“

My mouth drops in shock as I realize where he’s going with this.

Andrew nods his head, “—and it’s exactly what you’re thinking. Harry picked up Bryce shortly after 8 pm and they flew back here, giving him plenty of time to kill Larry. Meanwhile, Bryce paid someone to drive his car back to Crested Peaks, just in case someone should ask about it.”

“I mistakenly blamed Amber much in the same way the CPPD blamed me. I seemed the most obvious suspect,” I said shaking my head. “I feel so dumb.”

Andrew leans forward and I breathe in his intoxicating scent and recall how much I like him being this close. “I’ll let you in on a little secret. We police detectives can make mistakes too. We get so focused on what appears to be the most obvious suspect sometimes we lose sight of the big picture. But hopefully, like you did, we continue to gather evidence and aren’t afraid to admit it when we’re wrong.

“And,” he adds. “We don’t try to solve these things on our own. We rely on other professionals, who have experience, to help us examine the evidence in case they might know more than us.”

I put my hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I had no idea that it would come to this. I’m officially retired from being a sleuth and now I’ll focus on becoming the best café owner I can be.”

And then I remember that I may not even have a café for much longer if Rita sells it. I may have solved a murder mystery, but I haven’t figured out how to keep my business yet.

Andrew sees me slump with defeat. “We’ll all put our heads together and see what we can figure out, okay?”

“Sure,” I nod my head and put on a fake smile for him. He may be a great detective, but I don’t know how he can get my business back for me.

“I have to go back to the station with Bryce, but Officer Stanton can stay here with you and take your statement now if you want, rather than making an extra trip down to the station.”

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“You’re sure you’re okay. He didn’t hurt you or anything?” Andrew asks as he squeezes my shoulder and even in the midst of this wild crisis my arm tingles where he is touching me. I can’t help but think that now that this has been solved, do I get my long-awaited kiss? “We’ll talk later, okay?”

I nod as Officer Stanton guides me over to a chair so she can get my statement. The adrenaline is wearing off and I’m tired. But just then Miranda bursts through the door with Damien hot on her heels.

“Charlotte! Charlotte! Oh Charlotte! Are you okay?” she shrieks as she moves toward me.

Officer Stanton fearing for my safety jumps in between us.

“Whoa!” Miranda shouts as she puts her hands up and for a second, I’m worried she’ll either get shot or tazed or plain flattened by the officer.

“It’s okay they’re friends of mine!” I shout.

Officer Stanton looks at Andrew. “It’s fine,” he reassures her. “And at this point I’m guessing it would take the entire department to keep those two from seeing Charlotte.”

Officer Stanton reluctantly steps aside as Miranda and Damien rush forward and nearly squeeze me to death.

“We just heard that you were caught in some kind of crazy shootout! Are you okay, are you hurt, did you get shot?” Miranda frantically searches every inch of me to make sure I’m not bleeding to death and there are no bullet holes in me. The Crested Peaks gossip machine must be in overdrive.

“I’m fine and no there was no shootout at the okay corral. However, Bryce broke in here and held me at gunpoint but I’m okay.”

Miranda throws her hands up to her face in horror. “What? Are you kidding me?”

“Hey what the heck happened to the cooking sheets? How did they end up all over the floor again?” Damien asks as he picks up one that bears a perfect indentation of Bryce’s head. “And why are some of them dented?”

I stand a little taller at this point taking pride in what I just did to defend myself. “I used magic to overcome a gun wielding maniac, that’s what happened.”

Miranda grins at me. “Well all right!”

“But right now, I think Officer Stanton is anxious to take my statement, so if you two want to wait around I’ll talk to her first, but then I promise to fill you in on every gory detail.”

Miranda agrees, albeit reluctantly, to let Officer Stanton have me for the time being. “I’ll help Damien clean up while we’re waiting, but we want every detail. You can’t leave anything out.”

Officer Stanton and I sit in my office so I can tell her everything that happened. As I talk to her, I watch my friends clean up my handiwork in the kitchen and my heart fills with warmth and pride. I love what I’m building here, and I see that it’s not just for my grandma but it’s for me too.

I want to build a successful business and keep getting to know my friends, and maybe even let something happen with Andrew as well, if he’s interested in pursuing it. And even if we can’t keep the café here, I still

have my grandma's house, so maybe Andrew is right. If we all put our heads together, we can come up with something.

It seems to take forever to give my entire statement to Officer Stanton. She needs every detail carefully documented, and by the time we're done I'm exhausted. But Miranda and Damien wait patiently. Eager to hear all the new details that I uncovered since I last saw them.

Once she's satisfied that I've told her everything I'm capable of remembering up to that point, she packs up her things and urges me to call the station if I think of anything I didn't already tell her.

As soon as she shuts the door to leave Miranda and Damien pounce, "How did you figure out Bryce was the one who killed Larry and Tony?"

I breathe deeply and then wonder out loud if we have any wine in the café. Damien springs to his feet and pulls a bottle of perfectly chilled chardonnay from the fridge. "Hey, you never know," he says shrugging his shoulders.

I sip the oaky wine and sigh with satisfaction as the cool beverage hits the back of my throat. "I wasn't certain at first, but when I remembered Gladys talking about the real estate developers she saw in town this week, I finally realized that information may not just be a piece of useless gossip.

"And then when I remembered that she pointed out she saw Bryce arguing with them after Larry's death I had an inkling that it was crucial to our case."

Miranda and Damien stare at me wordlessly as I continue my story. "Then when I ran into a friend from New York, who actually works for the developers, and she told me Larry planned to sell them his properties, I realized it was all connected.

"Then I remembered how right after Larry died, we found Bryce tearing apart Larry's office, obviously searching for something. I kept thinking why would he be so frantic? He was Larry's silent business partner and cousin so why the mystery?"

Miranda smacks her forehead with her palm, "And Rita told us she was certain Larry was hiding something!"

"Yes!" I shout. "That was two people who were convinced Larry was up to no good."

"And Amber was so convinced he was keeping secrets she started following him around at night!" she adds.

“Yes, the common denominator to all of this was Larry. Then when Rita said she remembered that Larry liked to hide documents in the tunnel underneath here—”

“Wait, the what?” shouts Damien.

“--we have a tunnel that runs under Marcall’s to the train station. They built it during the gold rush and obviously almost no one knows about it. Bryce sure didn’t.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. There’s no way there’s a tunnel underneath this place that no one knew about,” Damien says shaking his head and looking at me like he thinks maybe I got conked on the head after all.

I lead the two of them over to the trap door and show them the tunnel. Damien scratches his head. “That door looks like it’s really heavy how did you get that open yourself?”

I beam at them once again. “Magic!”

“You are just full of surprises, today aren’t you?” Miranda asks her eyes shining with pride at my numerous revelations. “Larry hid files in the tunnel?”

“Unfortunately, the police took them all so I can’t show you, but basically it was files outlining how he hoped to force us all out so he could sell the property to real estate developers from New York, so they could build high rise condos along this strip.

“The developers paid him hefty bonuses under the table, which he had hidden in an account in the Cayman Islands, and they also planned to bribe and blackmail city officials into going along with the entire scheme.”

Damien buries his head in his hands and then lets them slide slowly down his face. “Wow. There is no way the residents of Crested Peaks would ever go for that.”

“That’s why they had to do this all on the sly obviously. Bryce didn’t even know for sure what was going on, but he knew Larry was cutting him out of something. When he discovered me going through the files, he figured he’d kill me like he had the others and run off with the money himself.”

Because Miranda can’t help herself, she adds, “And then you not only defended yourself you had a little help from Detective Hottie as well!”

I sigh and stare at Miranda annoyed that she refuses to let this go. “Detective *Bailey* and his officers showed up shortly after I pummeled

Bryce with the cooking sheets and were a great help in detaining the suspect.”

Miranda bats her eyes at me. “That’s awfully romantic,” she says in that sing song voice again.

“Whatever.” I roll my eyes. If only she knew I was kind of thinking the same thing and am still wondering when he’s going to kiss me. But if I tell her that now I’ll never hear the end of it.

I’m now so drained I can barely keep my eyes open. This has been an unbelievably crazy day - crazy week actually - so full of extreme highs and lows that I’ve been running on nothing but pure adrenalin and now I’m ready to crash hard.

“Could you guys take me home now? I’m exhausted and I really need to go home and rest. And fill Marshall and Marcus in. After all they’re the ones who told me where the trap door was for the tunnel.”

Damien looks surprised. “They knew? And they never told us?”

“You know how those two are. They never thought it was important. When Rita said she knew there was a tunnel in here, where Larry talked of hiding things, but she didn’t know how to access it, I thought everything was a complete loss. But then I realized those two have been at this café for 20 years, they must know something. And sure enough they did.

“Are you going to tell Andrew that the rabbits told you where the tunnel was?” Miranda asks laughing even though she knows I won’t.

“I think we’ll leave that part out for now,” I respond realizing as soon as it comes out of my mouth it was a mistake.

“For now? Does that mean you plan to see him later? Even though the case has been solved? Is there something else you’re leaving out Charlotte?”

I ignore her on my way out the door but the two of them continue to hound me with questions about Andrew as we walk to the car. I’ve just been through a life-threatening incident, and solved a double homicide, and these two are the most interested in whether or not I’ll be seeing Andrew later.

I shake my head and laugh at my dear friends. I’m incredibly grateful for them but right now I need to go home, thank the rabbits for helping me crack the case, take a relaxing bubble bath and sleep. I have a restaurant to run after all and need to be up first thing tomorrow morning. *I* have a restaurant. I like the sound of that.

Chapter 23



I can barely get into the door of the house with the rabbits clamoring for attention. Marcus is smacking his head against my ankles like usual and Marshall binkies in circles they're so happy to see me.

"We were so worried!" Marshall announces as he continues to run circles around me and leap into the air binkying repeatedly. If you've never seen a rabbit binky it almost looks like they're leaping in the air and clicking their heels. Like they have so much happy energy inside it bursts forth. Which is extra impressive considering these two are practically ancient.

Marcus head butts my ankles several more times before asking, "What happened? Tell us everything! Did you find the trap door all right? What about the tunnel? Was what you needed down there? Did you bring parsley?"

I sit down on the ground cross legged and they both leap into my lap. These silly creatures make me laugh. "Thanks to you two we solved Tony and Larry's murders."

"It was Bryce wasn't it?" Marshall asks.

I'm stunned. "How did you know?"

"I just know these things," he calmly informs me.

"Oh, that is not true, you were insisting it was Amber not five minutes ago!" Marcus points out.

"Oh whatever, I knew it was one of those two!"

I still can't believe this is my life now. I run a successful café, for now anyway, I have talking rabbits who just helped me solve a double homicide, I'm thinking that my witchcraft isn't so mediocre after all, and the very handsome Detective Andrew Bailey owes me a kiss. Not bad for having my life completely upended just over a month ago.

"All right you guys, I bet you're hungry for dinner and I bought some extra parsley for you."

“Yes!” Marshall shouts as he starts in on a fresh round of binkies.

I prepare a plate of greens for the rabbits including a little extra carrot again tonight as a reward for a job well done. After that I heat up left-over pasta for myself, pour a large glass of syrah, and plop on the couch in front of the tv. I’m hoping to hear from Andrew, but I assume he’s extra busy dealing with the case, and I may not hear from him until tomorrow.

It’s so weird that this time last week I had no desire to see him, and now I’m looking forward to his next visit. I’m eager to hear his rich baritone over the phone or see his sparkling green eyes on my front doorstep.

I’m also dying to hear what happened after they left with Bryce. Did he confess to all or did he clam up and demand a lawyer? He already confessed everything to me, so I imagine it doesn’t matter, but I’m anxious to know if he told Drew everything he told me.

I finish dinner and create the greatest bubble bath I’ve ever made. I make pink, green and blue bubbles that smell like a combination of lemons and sponge cake. A strange combination when I first thought of it, but the scent is heavenly.

And it makes me hungry for cake. Maybe I’ll bake a cake tomorrow at the café. I bet my customers would enjoy that.

I’m so relaxed that I fall asleep for a moment in the bathtub when I hear knocking at my front door. “Charlotte! Are you in there?”

It’s Andrew and he’s on my porch. Wait, where am I? I’m so disoriented at first, I think I dreamt it, but then he knocks again. “Charlotte? Are you okay? Don’t make me break this door down!”

Obviously, I don’t need my door broken down by the cops. “Hang on! I’ll be right there!”

I scramble to dry off and grab my robe off the hook on the back of the bathroom door. I quickly glance in the mirror to make sure I don’t look too unruly. I have little tendrils of curled hair around my face from the steam of the bath, and my cheeks are flushed, but otherwise I don’t look too bad I think as I scurry for the front door. I throw open the door out of breath from having to dash to get myself together so quickly.

“Are you okay? What’s going on? I’ve been knocking forever,” Drew says with concern in his face.

“I was taking a bath and I fell asleep!”

He laughs. "I texted you several times, but when you didn't answer I got worried, so I raced over thinking something happened."

"Sorry, I guess I left the phone out here next to the tv. I was so tired I just wanted to enjoy a nice bath and then go to bed."

"I'm glad you're okay. I wanted to let you know that Bryce confessed to everything. He basically repeated what he already told you, and then filled in a few of the extra details. He should go to prison for a very long time thanks to you."

"And you," I point out.

"What about us?" Marshall shouts from the kitchen. Since I have no plans to tell Andrew that the rabbits talk, I ignore them for now.

"Oh, and Bryce said something that made no sense to me but I'm guessing it was more of a message for you?"

"What is it?" I can't imagine what more he would want me to know.

"He looked very smug when he said, 'By the way, I'm the one who called the reporter and tipped him off about Charlotte.' And then he sat back in his chair and crossed his arms like he was very pleased with himself. Please tell me you know what that means."

I laugh. "By now I've figured out that it was him. He obviously has a thing for anonymous tips. He called a local reporter and gave him a bunch of sordid details about my past, so that the reporter would look into me and write a story. He put together an entire expose about my parents, and how I'm now running Marcall's, and accused of murder and all that good stuff."

Andrew scowls, "I'm all for freedom of the press, but if I try hard enough, I can probably find something to arrest that jerk for."

"Nope, it's all good. I was mad too at first. I even hung up on him. But then I decided I'm tired of hiding, and being ashamed, and it's all going to come out sooner or later. So instead of people whispering and pointing behind my back I thought let's just announce the truth for all to see."

Andrew looks impressed. "How did you do that?"

"I met with the reporter this morning and told him my side of everything. All about my parents, and my grandma taking me in, and being accused of a crime I didn't commit. I left nothing out. The story should run soon. If people still want to judge me that's fine, but it's their problem now, not mine."

"Then if you don't mind, I'm going to call him tonight and tell him you're a hero who took down a murderer and saved our town from a high-

powered real estate developer from New York.”

“I don’t mind one bit.” I realize we’re still chatting on my front porch while I’m just wearing a bathrobe. “Would you like to come in for a bit, relax, have a beer?”

He hesitates for a moment and I think it’s all just been a scam. He doesn’t like me after all, and he had no intention of kissing me. He just needed to put me off, and solve the case, and now he’ll never speak to me again.

“I’d love to come in, I thought you’d never ask.”

Phew. It wasn’t my imagination after all. “I’m going to put some actual clothes on, you can help yourself to a drink in the fridge and I’ll be right back.”

“I happen to think your bath robe is perfect and you really don’t need to change on my account,” he tells me with an impish grin that makes me blush.

“I think I’ll put on some clothes anyway but thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” he shrugs. “I’ll just stay here and talk to your rabbits while I’m waiting.”

If only he knew just how accurate that statement is. I hurry to my bedroom to change while he busies himself in the kitchen. I put on a hoody and some sweats. I think about something fancier, but I’m too exhausted and I’ve been through too much today to care.

When I get back to the kitchen, he and the rabbits are in a stare down. “I swear, I still think it looks like your rabbits are trying to communicate with me. It’s so weird.”

“You don’t say?” I laugh at him.

We talk late into the night. He fills me in on some of the extras, including a conversation he had with Rita after they booked Bryce into the county lockup. She stopped by the police station because of course the Crested Peaks gossip line was hot and heavy tonight, and she already knew Bryce had been arrested. She talked to her lawyer and it looks like she’ll inherit everything, including the accounts in the Cayman Islands.

She’s not selling the properties and will renew everyone’s lease at the current rate. She’s also establishing a trust fund for Amber’s baby. She said the baby shouldn’t suffer because his father is a moron. Hopefully she leaves that part out when she tells Amber about the money. She plans to

hire someone to manage the properties so hopefully things will continue mostly uninterrupted.

After such a crazy, mixed up week things are really coming together. But when it's time to leave, Andrew lingers on my doorstep. "Would you be interested in having dinner with me on Saturday night?"

"I would love that," I tell him.

And then it happens. He leans in and kisses me and it's the most amazing kiss I've ever had. He gently places his hand on the back of my neck and continues to kiss me far longer than I had anticipated, when he first promised to kiss me when the case was solved. When he finally pulls back my knees shake for the second time today, this time for good reason though.

"I will see you Saturday Ms Duffin."

"Yes, you will Detective Bailey."

I close the door behind him and take a deep breath and smile. I think I'm going to like it here.

THE END

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RECIPE – EASY VEGAN LEMON GINGER PANCAKES

1 cup flour

1 T baking powder

2 dashes salt

1/8 t ground ginger

1 cup coconut milk

2 T raw sugar

1/8 t lemon oil

2 T sunflower oil

Toppings: Lemon zest, coconut whipped topping, vegan butter and/or maple syrup to taste

1. Combine flour, baking powder, salt, ginger, and whisk.
2. Combine coconut milk, sugar, lemon oil, and sunflower seed oil and stir to combine.
3. Whisk liquid ingredients into dry.
4. Let rest for up to one hour.
5. Fry pancakes on hot pan for 1.5 to 2 minutes per side.