

PUMPKIN ROLL

A CULINARY MYSTERY

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CHAPTER 1



So, what's the difference between a sociopath and a psychopath?" Sadie asked as she put the last plate in the dishwasher.

Pete Cunningham, Sadie's boyfriend—though that was such a juvenile term—looked up from where he was replacing a hinge on a flat-fronted kitchen cabinet. "One starts with an S and the other starts with a P," he said before going back to the task at hand—one of the two dozen items from his self-imposed honey-do list. They were in Jamaica Plain, a suburb of Boston, watching Pete's grandsons while Pete's son and daughter-in-law spent six days in Texas where Jared had just accepted a residency following his completion of medical school at Boston University.

"Funny," Sadie said with exaggerated dryness. "I meant in a psychological way—how are the disorders different from one another?" She sat down on one of the cheap kitchen chairs that went with the cheap kitchen table. Jared and Heather had been poor college kids for ten years, during which time they'd had three children; cheap was all they could afford. The din of little boys playing in the other room was at a moderate level, giving Sadie and Pete a rare chance at adult conversation.

Pete turned the final screw and stepped back to shut the cabinet, which now hung perfectly. "This question wasn't inspired by my grandchildren, was it?"

As if waiting for an invitation, three redheaded boys, graduating in height from tallest to shortest, ran into the kitchen. Kalan, the oldest, darted behind Pete, while Chance and Fig—a nickname somehow derived from Finnegan—held plastic swords above their heads, trumpeting a war cry in pursuit of their brother. All three boys had taken off their shirts to further emphasize their warrior physiques as only a six-, four-, and three-year-old could.

"Get 'em, Grandpa! Get 'em good," Kalan yelled.

Sadie smiled as she watched the show; it was her favorite—Grandpa Pete.

After using a series of karate chop actions to fend off the blows, Pete grabbed the plastic blade of one sword and then the other.

"I cut your hand off!" Chance yelled, tugging at his sword.

"Hand!" Fig repeated, pulling on his sword as hard as he could.

Pete lifted both swords until the boys had no choice but to let go. They stared at him with angry pouts.

"Gib it back!" Fig demanded.

Pete smiled. "I can't."

"Yeth you can." Fig held out his hand. "Gib it back!"

"It's almost time for bed." Pete put the swords on the counter behind him.

All three boys immediately began whining in protest.

"If you get ready by yourselves, we'll have dessert before story time."

Sadie lifted her eyebrows, and Kalan yelled, "Dessert!"

"Ice cweam!" Fig yelled.

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“Not ice cream,” Pete said, opening the refrigerator door. “Aunt Sadie made a pumpkin roll.”

“Bread?” Chance asked, crinkling his nose and sticking out his tongue. “Bread’s not dessert.”

“Not bread—cake.” Pete pulled out the platter of rolled cake with cream cheese filling.

“Cake!” all three boys said at once.

“But you’ve got to get ready for bed first,” Pete said, lifting the platter out of their reach and looking to Sadie for help out of the mess he’d made.

She turned to Kalan. “Will you help your brothers put on their pajamas?”

Kalan was only six, but he understood what it meant to be the big brother, so he grabbed an arm of both younger boys and began pulling them out of the room.

“Are you sure cake before bed is a good idea?” Sadie asked once they were gone. It was after eight o’clock and the pumpkin roll was supposed to chill for a few hours so that the filling would set up—it had barely been two. She’d planned to have it tomorrow evening.

“What’s the fun of having Grandpa stay over if you can’t have cake right before bed?”

It was hard to argue with such logic.

“I should have asked you first, though, since it’s your cake,” Pete said, holding the platter with both hands as though trying to determine what to do with it now. “Sorry.”

It was easy to forgive. “I wasn’t planning to eat it all myself.” Sadie took the platter and went up on her tiptoes to kiss Pete’s cheek as she passed him on her way to the counter. “You’re a fabulous grandfather,” she said, putting the platter down and heading for the newly repaired cabinet to retrieve some plates.

"I don't know about that," Pete said, watching her busy about the kitchen. "This may turn out to be the longest week of my life."

Sadie laughed and grabbed a knife to slice the roll. "Haven't you ever played Grandpa full-time?"

"No," Pete said, moving to the sink to wash his hands. "Pat went a few times when the kids went on vacations or had babies or what-not, and we had Brooke's kids for a weekend here and there, but I haven't been called upon since Pat died."

Sadie looked up at the casual mention of his late wife, liking that he was becoming more comfortable merging his old life with the new possibilities of their relationship. "Well, then, I'm glad I could be a part of this new experience," she said. "And rest assured, you're doing wonderfully—cake before bed notwithstanding." She grinned at him as she carefully sliced the cake.

"I appreciate the validation," Pete said with a nod, leaning against the counter as he dried his hands with a dish towel. "Even if I don't really deserve it."

Sadie carefully lifted each slice of cake spiraled with cream cheese filling before putting it on a plate. It was so pretty. A moment later, Pete's arms snaked around her middle and his lips pressed against her neck, sending a tingle down and then back up her spine. She turned in his arms, holding the knife out to the side so as not to appear threatening.

"I couldn't have done this without you," he said in a tender voice. "Aunt Sadie is amazing with these kids."

"I'm glad it worked out," Sadie said. She'd been very uncomfortable with the idea when Pete had first invited her. Staying in the same house with him didn't seem right, given that her reputation had suffered some painful blows in recent months, but the more she considered the possibility, the more she wondered why she cared so

much what people thought of her. She *was* a woman of high standards, and the people who truly cared about her knew that.

A phone call with Heather, Pete's daughter-in-law, assured her that the boys could share one bedroom, which would give Pete and Sadie their own separate rooms. Heather was warm and easygoing and loved the idea of having double coverage for her boys. Pete and Sadie had sat down and set specific rules—not venturing into one another's bedrooms, kissing kept to a minimum and only in vertical positions. Since attaining a new level in their relationship, they had both realized that age didn't factor into chemistry as much as they would have suspected.

It had been so nice to have uninterrupted time with Pete, and she'd always loved New England in the fall, which made the trip a good choice so far. She and Pete had arrived three days early—Pete stayed with the family, but Sadie had stayed at the Courtyard Marriott a few miles away in Brookline—so the boys could get used to them before their parents left for Texas. Sadie and Heather had hit it off as well in person as they had on the phone.

"It's been fun getting to know Jared and his family from the inside-out," she added, looking up at Pete and trying not to get lost in his hazel eyes.

"And they love you," Pete said. He leaned in for a quick kiss before eyeing the knife still in her hand. "Maybe I should let you get back to work before one of us gets hurt."

Sadie laughed and turned back to serving.

Pete pulled out a chair. "So, why the interest in psychopaths and sociopaths?"

Sadie shrugged. "I caught part of a *Law & Order* episode the other day. They seemed to be using the two terms interchangeably in the show. Are they two names for the same thing?"

“Well,” Pete said, folding his arms over his chest, “they’re both antisocial personality disorders, which means they function 100 percent on what they want.”

“That means they have no moral code?”

Pete shook his head. “Not necessarily. Many of them still live by a moral code, but only because it gets them what they want. The terms are often used interchangeably, but to those who care to differentiate, sociopaths are generally classified as such because they don’t fit very well in society. Psychopaths, on the other hand, have an uncanny ability to mimic the way normal people act. They can appear to play the part of average citizens whereas sociopaths tend to stand out more. Neither of them has a conscience—but one group can pretend that they do. The definition seems to change every few years though, so don’t quote me.”

“Are they all violent?” Sadie asked.

Pete shook his head again. “Many of them live relatively normal lives and are contributing members of society. They become dangerous once their disorder escalates to the point where they are aggressively acting on their most base instincts. They don’t think rules—including laws—apply to them. That’s usually where I end up coming in with my police badge.”

“That’s scary,” Sadie said. “To think there are people with no conscience living their lives among the rest of us.”

Pete nodded in agreement. “But, like I said, they aren’t all criminals. For example, Pat was involved in the PTA for years, and I’m pretty sure there were a few psychopaths involved in that organization.”

Sadie smiled to herself and moved to the table, putting a fork by each plate as she considered the vastness of Pete’s knowledge. Then she paused. “Shouldn’t the boys have been back by now?”

Pete cocked an ear toward the doorway. "I hate to interrupt them if they aren't screaming. . . . Wait."

Sadie heard it too. Whispers. She and Pete shared a quick look and then bolted toward the hallway that joined the kitchen and the living room. Sadie reached it first and came up short when she saw the three boys kneeling on the couch and peeking over the back in order to look out the big picture window. They were in their pajamas, she noted, but were obviously intent on something happening outside. She looked over her shoulder at Pete standing directly behind her, and he shrugged.

Slowly they moved into the room, Sadie veering to the left side of the couch and Pete toward the right. They leaned forward to look out the window, and Sadie scanned the street to figure out what the boys were looking at. After a few moments, she spotted a woman across the street, digging in a flower bed outside the house . . . in late October . . . at night. And she wasn't using a trowel to worry out some dead flowers; she was using a spade and making a pile of dirt on the sidewalk that led to the front door.

"Who's that?" Sadie asked Kalan, who was closest to her.

"Mrs. Wapple," Kalan said quietly.

"What's she doing?"

"Being weird."

"Does she do weird things a lot?"

Kalan nodded and folded his arms over the back of the couch, resting his chin on his hands. "We like to watch her when Mom turns off the TV."

"She's a witch!" Chance said.

"Witch!" Fig repeated.

Sadie's eyes flickered to the large cardboard cartoon witch on

the wall—one of a dozen decorations Heather had put up in preparation for Halloween next week.

“I think she’s just . . . digging,” Pete said. But Sadie knew he found it strange as well.

“Mr. Forsberk’s dog pooped on her grass, and she cast a spell on it and it got hit by a car,” Kalan said.

Sadie directed a look at Pete, inviting him with her eyes to help her out. He didn’t get the cue. “I feel bad for Mr. Forsberk’s dog,” she said, “but unless Mrs. Wapple was driving the car, then it was probably just a very sad accident.”

“It wasn’t,” Kalan said, still wide-eyed and sincere. “It was a spell. Mama even said.”

“Your mom said it was a spell?” Pete asked for clarification.

“Well, no,” Kalan said. “But she did say Mrs. Wapple is a witch.”

“A witch!” Fig said, loudly this time, and began jumping on the couch. Apparently his interest had waned. “A witch, a witch, a witch.”

Pete tried to shush him, and Sadie once again launched into her defense of the poor old woman digging across the street. Then Chance pointed out the window, his mouth open. Sadie followed his gaze and was startled to see Mrs. Wapple facing them, standing on the sidewalk that ran parallel to the street rather than on the walkway leading to her house. The streetlight down the block illuminated the gray hat made of some type of coarse fabric on her head and her long dark hair that fell in frizzy waves past her shoulders. As they watched, Mrs. Wapple lifted her hand and began drawing pictures in the air with her index finger.

“Okay, boys,” Sadie said, ushering them off the couch. “She’s just a silly old lady. And there’s cake in the kitchen, so let’s eat.” She

chose to believe Mrs. Wapple hadn't caught them spying, but was simply . . . being weird, like Kalan said.

"Cake!" Fig shouted as he bounded off the couch. Chance and Kalan followed, though Kalan kept glancing over his shoulder. Pete finished herding them into the kitchen, and soon they were arguing about which piece of cake was the biggest.

Alone in the living room, Sadie hurried to the right side of the window near the floor lamp where the pull cord for the heavy blue drapes was tacked behind the curtains. Before she pulled the blinds closed, she turned off the lamp, hoping it would make her less visible. Then she looked at Mrs. Wapple one last time. The woman was still on the sidewalk. Still staring with her finger pointing toward the house. No, not the house—pointing at Sadie.

Sadie swallowed and pulled herself a little further behind the heavy curtains. But she didn't take her eyes off the strange woman outside.

Mrs. Wapple lifted her hand so that it was pointing at the sky, and then she closed her fingers into a fist. Still staring in Sadie's direction, she punched her hand upward at the precise moment that the lightbulb in the lamp next to Sadie exploded with a pop. Sadie jumped out of the way as a thousand tiny shards of paper-thin glass tinkled to the floor.

"What was that?" Pete asked, stepping into the doorway.

Sadie looked at him. "The lightbulb exploded," she said, refusing to consider the coincidence that it had happened at the same time Mrs. Wapple had punched her fist over her head. Didn't lightbulbs have to be turned on to shatter like that? She looked out the window again, but Mrs. Wapple was gone.

She wasn't on the sidewalk; she wasn't digging in the garden. She was gone.

Sadie felt a strange tingling sensation wash over her skin like a cold breeze as Kalan's words came back to her: "Mama says she's a witch."

Good thing Sadie didn't believe in that kind of thing.

Pumpkin Roll

3 eggs
1 cup sugar
1 cup canned pumpkin
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon nutmeg
1 teaspoon ginger
2 teaspoons cinnamon

Filling

1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese (softened)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup butter, softened
1 cup powdered sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vanilla

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease a 11x15 jelly roll pan and line the bottom with parchment, wax paper, or a silicone mat. (The cake will stick to the pan otherwise since it's such a thin layer.) In a medium-sized mixing bowl, beat eggs. Add sugar; mix well. Add pumpkin; mix well. Add the rest of the ingredients; mix well. Pour batter into prepared jelly roll pan (mixture will be thick). Smooth out as evenly as possible. Bake for 20 minutes.

While cake is baking, spread out a large dish towel or flour-sack towel on the counter. Sprinkle with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup powdered sugar. After removing cake from oven, immediately turn cake out onto the sugar-coated towel. Remove parchment, wax paper, or silicone mat from

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bottom of cake. Roll the cake and towel up together the long way. (The towel keeps the cake from sticking to itself; the powdered sugar keeps the cake from sticking to the towel.) Put the towel-rolled cake on a cooling rack and let cool at least 30 minutes.

While cake is cooling, make filling by beating cream cheese until smooth. Add butter and beat until smooth. Add powdered sugar and vanilla. Mix well.

When cake has cooled at least 30 minutes, carefully unroll it from the towel. (It might crack; there's nothing you can do about that.) Spread with room-temperature cream cheese filling. Re-roll cake without the towel. Put cake on platter and cover. Refrigerate until serving—at least 1 hour, though 3 hours is best. (I usually cut the roll in half before I put it in the fridge or the freezer so it's easier to work with.)

Cake freezes well for up to 2 months when wrapped tightly in aluminum foil. Serve chilled or frozen.

Serves approximately 14.

CHAPTER 2



That's it?" Shawn asked on the other end of the phone the next morning, the Monday of what should prove to be a busy week.

"Isn't that enough?" Sadie asked, annoyed that he was so hard to please. Kalan had wanted to walk the three-quarters of a mile to school so she'd obliged him and was speed-walking her way back in order to work off at least some of last night's pumpkin roll—and the additional slice she'd had that morning. Calling Shawn, her twenty-one-year-old baby boy, and catching up while she exercised was simply good multitasking. Her breath fogged in the air as she spoke; a cold spell had settled across the East Coast overnight, but she was staying pretty warm due to the exertion. "Exploding lights and drawing pictures in the air is pretty out there, if you ask me."

"Well, I mean, it's weird. But you're in *Boston*, Mom, and it's almost Halloween. You'd think you could drum up something a bit more exciting."

Sadie huffed extra hard to make a point. "I'm not in *Boston Boston*," she corrected him. "I'm in Jamaica Plain, a quiet little suburb, and I think the excitement of the last year has completely destroyed any sense of normalcy you ever had," she said with only

slightly exaggerated disappointment. She really did worry that her involvement with five murder cases in the last twelve months had done some kind of damage to her son; he was a little too excited about helping her out with her newly formed PI business—Hoffmiller Investigations. Before he could defend himself, she changed the subject. “How’s that skip trace going?”

“You don’t have to call it a skip trace anymore, Mom. Use the lingo: skip.”

“Fine,” Sadie said, appreciating a turn-of-the-century Victorian home that stood on the corner. It had been beautifully restored—as had many of the historic homes in this area—and she wondered if it was on one of the walking tours the city offered. Sadie would love to see the famous hand-carved woodwork and stained-glass windows of the old colonial homes up close. And yet, while there were \$700,000 homes on this street, Jared lived a few blocks away on a tired-looking street full of bland little rental houses.

The front lawn of the next house sported latex zombie hands sticking up from the grass and a giant spiderweb that stretched from the eaves of the framed porch to the bottom of the steps. A very large, though realistic-looking, spider hovered just above the front doors. Sadie preferred the zombies.

A gust of wind blew a swirl of fallen leaves around her ankles, and she picked up her pace, imagining the cream cheese filling melting off her backside with every step. She tuned back into the conversation with her son. “How’s the *skip* going?”

“His mom’s neighbor saw his car leave early in the morning. I’m pretty sure he’s at least sleeping there. I’ve got a process server set up to go at eleven o’clock tonight.”

“Excellent,” Sadie said. “And you’re keeping good notes, right?”

“Perfect notes,” Shawn said.

Sadie could tell he was proud of himself and it helped her feel better about giving him some of her investigation work while she was out of town. She'd been an official private investigator—though Colorado didn't require an actual license other than the basic business license—for almost five weeks. On the one hand, most people would find what she'd done so far pretty boring work: locating parents who had skipped out on child support or heirs who needed to be found to fulfill the requirements of a will. She'd had one case of a cheating husband. On the other hand, however, Sadie loved the work! Most of her information hunting could be done over the phone or via the Internet, which made it infinitely flexible. And there was just something invigorating about unraveling a mystery—even a boring one.

During the first few weeks of being open for business, Shawn had helped her research a detail here and there, but when three full cases came in the day before Sadie was supposed to catch a plane to Boston, Shawn had said he would handle them himself. She had planned to supervise him, but he had hit the ground running and had done an impressive job so far without her.

"The other two cases are coming along as well," Shawn continued. "I have a lead on the deadbeat case that looks pretty good—I should know this afternoon. Do you have more for me to do?"

"I don't think so," Sadie said.

"But something new came in, didn't it?"

Sadie considered her options for a moment but couldn't deny that she had her hands full with three little boys and an inexperienced grandfather. Even if she wanted to do some of the work herself, the time simply wasn't there. Not this week. And she hated putting people off if she didn't have to, especially when she was still establishing her business. "I did have something else come in last

night. It's a woman looking for an ex-boyfriend from fifteen years ago."

"Why does she want to find him now?" Shawn asked.

"She has a fourteen-year-old daughter," Sadie replied, with no need to elaborate. "I've already scanned the social networking sites. I found nothing, which leaves us with only her last known information about him."

"I see. Fifteen years is a lot of time to dig through."

"I know." Sadie began taking deeper breaths as her exertion caught up with her. "I have to tell myself not to wonder whether or not it's the right thing to find him. If he's a mess, I . . ." She paused for a breath. "I might tell her we didn't find anything. We might not be able to find anything anyway."

"Maybe you should give it to Jane," Shawn suggested. "She's good at the outdated stuff."

Sadie frowned. While it was true that she'd used Jane Seeley, a reporter she'd met several months ago, to find bits of information she hadn't been able to locate on her own, she had yet to feel completely comfortable with the younger woman. Shawn had made peace with his poor opinion of Jane from the past—her investigative skills had him in awe—but Sadie couldn't quite get to that point. Her own reluctance made her question her misgivings. Was she simply holding a grudge?

Yes, she and Jane had gotten off to a rocky start, and Jane had followed it up with an article that Sadie was still recovering from, but Jane had also been invaluable in Portland and nothing but helpful and encouraging since then.

"She's never taken an entire case," she said out loud, pretending that was her only concern.

"Well, give me the case, then, and if I need her, I'll ask."

Sadie bit her lip and slowed her pace, taking in a bit more of the holiday decorations. Not all homes were in the holiday spirit, of course, but most of them displayed some type of tribute to ghosts and ghouls. Of course, just being located in New England meant that every home was decorated for the season with vibrant colored leaves. Even living in small-town Colorado, with its rich foliage that made autumn a treat, didn't compare to the sheer number of trees here in Massachusetts and the celebration of colors that exploded this time of year.

Jared's house was on the next street and she was ready to cool down. "I've already given you three cases," she said. Part of her hesitation was concern that Shawn was overcommitting himself, but part of her also felt the itch of wanting to take this case herself. No, she didn't have time, and, yes, she'd committed to not make this a working vacation, but . . .

"I'm caught up in all my classes," Shawn said, driving to the heart of her objections. "I promised you I wouldn't take your stuff on if I couldn't do it, and I won't, but fall soccer is over and basketball registration isn't until next week so I don't have much to do this week." Shawn worked at a local youth recreation center in Michigan. "I can do this, and I could use the money. I've got to get my hands on the new Xbox—it's awesome."

"Okay," Sadie said with a laugh. Such a big man, and yet such a little boy at the same time. She needed to trust him to manage his own time. "I'll e-mail you what I've got, but use Jane only if you have to, okay?"

"Deal," Shawn said, his tone both relieved and lighter. Sadie wondered when he was going to tell her that he'd changed his major from sports medicine to criminal justice. She'd figured it out about three weeks ago, thanks to her new skills at uncovering information,

but Shawn had yet to tell her, and she was content to wait him out. “I better head to class,” he continued. “We’re still on for Saturday?”

Sadie smiled, remembering the plans they had made when she announced she’d be traveling to his neck of the woods. Michigan was still several hours away, but closer than Colorado. He had school and some work meetings on Friday, but when he finished he would drive to Boston, probably arriving just a few hours after Heather and Jared got back from Dallas. They planned to all go to Salem on Saturday for a day of Haunted Happenings—an encompassing title of events hosted in the City of Witches every fall. Shawn and Sadie could then spend Sunday together before Shawn had to leave. She wished they could have more time together, but she didn’t want him to miss school for it. She had developed a continual fear that he might drop out of college altogether and didn’t want to tempt such thoughts.

“I am so excited to see you!” Sadie said. “It’s simply breathtaking here this time of year. Remember when we came with Bre—what, seven years ago?”

“How could I forget?” Shawn said. “It was humiliating to tell people we’d gone all the way to Boston to see yet another zoo. I hated it when it was her turn to choose the family vacation.”

Sadie laughed. “As opposed to your choice of Ohio so we could visit the Pro Football Hall of Fame?”

“Um, that’s practically a religious study, Mom.”

Sadie laughed some more. “You’re a silly boy.”

“But at least I’m not an animal freakazoid,” he said, referring to the name he’d made up for Breanna when he was little. Sadie hadn’t seen her daughter in months, not since she left for London on an internship with the London Zoo. It was hard coming to terms with the fact that Breanna might live the rest of her life in England. Sadie

felt sad every time she thought about that, but now was not the time to feel sorry for herself. She was seeing her boy this weekend in the most beautiful place in the world this time of year—two reasons to celebrate.

“I got your e-mail with the MapQuest map, by the way,” Shawn said. “You keep forgetting I have GPS on my phone.”

“It’s always nice to have a backup,” Sadie said. She’d had her phone for months and could barely figure out how to set the alarm, let alone use the fancy-Nancy apps Shawn had downloaded for her. “I also signed us up for the after-dark Ghosts and Gravestones tour that goes over the famous haunting of the city. They talk about the North End tunnels and the Lady in Black; it sounded like something right up your alley.”

“Sounds great,” Shawn said. “You got us in the Saturday night before Halloween?”

Sadie smiled, quite pleased with herself. “It was the first thing I did once I knew we were coming. I’d heard about it from people who had taken the tour before and didn’t want to miss it. I just hope it’s not too scary for you.”

Shawn laughed. “As long as you’re there to protect me, I’ll be okay. I better get going, though, I’ve got class in ten minutes. Enjoy those grandkids of yours!”

Sadie nearly corrected him but realized he was teasing her about how close she and Pete were getting. He also knew how much she wanted to be a grandma, rather than Aunt Sadie, and the thought that these boys might one day be *her* grandsons made her smile. “Alright, I love you, my boy.”

“Love you too, Mom. I’ll look for that e-mail about the long-lost boyfriend-father deal.”

Sadie ended the call and put her phone in her coat pocket before

pulling the collar up as a stiff wind came at her from the north. It had been nice weather when she and Pete arrived in Boston, but it had gotten colder every day since. Despite the temperatures, however, she loved autumn, loved New England, and was glad to be out of Garrison, Colorado, for a little while. Things had been changing for her over the last year, ever since the discovery of her neighbor's body in the field behind her house, and whereas she once felt perfectly accepted and comfortable in her small town, she now felt as though she were growing out of it. Most of her investigative work was from Fort Collins, an hour west of Garrison, but she'd even had a couple from Denver hire her; her world was so much bigger than it used to be.

She let out a breath and wondered where life would take her next. It wasn't that she regretted the changes—she'd always been open to adventure—but she missed the easy comfort she used to feel living in Garrison. It wasn't fair to give other people all the blame, though; she knew she approached them differently too, unsure what gossip they had heard or what decisions they'd made about her.

Cautious.

That's how she felt about even the people she'd been friends with for the last twenty-five years. Cautious was uncomfortable.

She looked up to see that she was only a few houses away from her destination. Instinctively her eyes moved to the house across the street from Jared and Heather's—Mrs. Wapple's.

The "Mrs." meant she was, or had been, married. Where was her husband? The yard was unkempt, the grass long and matted in places, and the front flower beds that bordered the small Cape Cod house were bare dirt—no flower stalks or landscaping remnants anywhere in sight. The hole from last night was filled, though a faint layer of dirt remained on the sidewalk. There were no Halloween

decorations, and even from here, Sadie could see where real spiderwebs clogged the corners of the recessed doorway and had caught stray leaves. A portion of rain gutter had broken away from the eaves on the east side and hung across the front window; the first heavy snow of the upcoming winter would likely rip it off completely.

The house was painted a medium-gray, but water stains had given it a mottled look. Jared and Heather's house, along with most of the houses on the street, had a hip-high chain-link fence. Mrs. Wapple's front yard was fence-free, though a six-foot-tall wooden fence with an additional foot and a half of latticework on top jutted out from the sides of the house and wrapped around the back half of the property, completely hiding the backyard from view. Sadie wondered what required *that* much privacy. She still stuck by what she'd told the boys last night, though—that Mrs. Wapple was just a silly old lady. She *was* intriguing, however, Sadie had to admit that.

The front gate of Jared's house creaked when she opened it, and she made a note to add "Oil the gate hinges" to Pete's list of household projects. All the houses along the street had an alley running behind them that led to single-car garages, or sometimes a carport. With garages in the back, the houses were even closer together. There was no street parking allowed overnight, which kept the street uncluttered.

Heather had decorated the front door with a ghost made of several layers of gauzy fabric. It had silent black eyes and an O-shaped mouth. As Sadie headed up the walkway, she watched it swing gently in the wind and had an idea about how to satisfy her curiosity about the witch across the street. That her plan involved baking—her favorite autumn pastime—was merely all the more reason to follow through.