

# One

## P

### PETRA

It was a fine night for spying. Bright moonlight flickered off the small quartz oval as Petra Everturn removed it from the print shop window. She slipped it into the pocket of her burgundy overcoat and strode away, clutching the rare—and somewhat illegal—Talmanian quartz she had placed there earlier. It would soon tell her everything she needed to know. Her black boots made almost no noise on the cobblestones as she quickly made her way back to the tea shop down the empty lane.

She headed down another street and turned onto Cordial Crescent, where Everturn’s Finest Tea Shoppe stood amid the glowing evening streetlights.

As she reached for her big brass door key in another coat pocket, she heard the slightest sound behind her. Hands grabbed both her arms before she could turn around.

“What’s that in your pocket?” a gruff voice asked.

“What’s *what* in what pocket?” she grumbled, trying to shrug out of the man’s grip.

He scoffed. “Let’s try a different route. Why are you spying on the print shop?”

Petra bristled. “Unhand me at once.”

Much to Petra’s surprise, he did, but then he spun her around to face him. A pistol was aimed at her middle, deftly held in the shadow of his coat. She looked up from the pistol into a scruffy face: weathered and bearded. He looked only a little older than her twenty years, but the beard made him seem much older. She would have taken him for a vagrant had it not been for the tailored suit and coat. Respectable men in Harrowdel did not have beards.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you want?” She slipped one hand inside her coat under cover of her crossed arms, trying to reach her own pistol without him noticing.

He grinned behind the beard.

*Just a little further.* Her fingers brushed the tip of her pistol’s handle.

“Me?” he asked, still grinning at her. “I want—” he reached out and yanked her hand away, lunging for the pistol holstered under her arm “—to know why you’re spying on the printer.”

“I don’t—” she began.

“Enough pretense,” he snapped, pointing both guns at her. “I saw you plant the crystal earlier, and I know what it does. Tell me now, or your sister will be running your little tea shop all by herself come morning.”

Petra clenched her fists. So, he not only knew how the Talmanian quartz worked, but who she was, too.

“Fine. Fine. But not here.” She glanced up and down Cordial Crescent. “I don’t think either of us wants the magistrate’s night guards joining our conversation, do we?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Very well.”

“And you’re going to give me my pistol back,” she said.

He laughed, twirling her pistol around his finger but still pointing his own at her. “And why would I want to do that?”

“Well,” said a sweet voice from behind him, “it depends on how much you want to live.” Petra’s younger sister Maisie stepped out from the shadowed alley behind the man, holding a shotgun.

Petra grinned and grabbed both pistols out of the man’s hands.

Maisie was the opposite of Petra in almost every way. Where Petra was tall and more imposing than most men, Maisie was short and nearly always smiling. Petra had long, black hair, and Maisie’s was curly and golden. They both had golden eyes just like their father, which was the only trait they shared. And neither of them was defenseless.

“I think we should still talk,” Petra said, jabbing one of the pistols in the man’s back and pushing him toward the door of the tea shop.

Maisie unlocked the door and drew the curtains once they were all inside. It was dark inside the shop, but Petra could see by the streetlight filtering in through the semi-translucent curtains. Cordial Crescent was in a well-lit section of Harrowdel’s merchant quarter, on the first of the city’s six levels. Each level rose up like enormous steps coming up from the port, and they were connected by lifts running up each plateau’s façade. The lifts down here on the First Rise were practical: massive steam-powered elevators that were big enough to transport entire carriages with horses between rises. As you went up to the higher rises, the lifts reflected the people who patronized them: too clean, frilly, and extravagant. That’s how Petra always thought of them, anyway.

Maisie bustled to the back of the shop, no doubt off to check on something in the oven. Petra caught a whiff of burnt pastry. She was just glad Maisie had come outside to check on her.

The man who had accosted her stood awkwardly by the door, his hands clasped in front of him, and his gaze alternating between the pistols in Petra’s hands, and the interior of the shop. He looked almost innocent standing there, as if he could be one of her brother’s friends caught in an act of wrong-doing.

In addition to his well-tailored suit and jacket, his fashionable shoes were highly polished, and upon closer inspection, his flaxen hair and beard were at least neat and trimmed evenly. The chain of a watch dangled from his vest pocket, and he had a bronze-set emerald pierced through his ear. He was definitely not from Harrowdel.

“Well? Who are you?” Petra asked, pushing him into a nearby chair. Even if he looked innocent now, he had been threatening her only minutes ago.

He grabbed hold of the small spindly table for balance. She brandished both pistols at him, inviting him to speak.

“Evan Rosslyn, at your service.” He mimed tipping a nonexistent hat.

“What do you want?”

“Exactly what I asked you before,” he said. “To know why you’re using a Talmanian quartz to spy on the printer.”

“It’s none of your business,” Petra said.

Maisie returned, having exchanged her shotgun for a tea tray. Petra suppressed a grin. Maisie was ever the helpful one.

“Do you work for the printer?” Maisie asked, setting the tea tray down on the table and brushing floury hands on her rose-colored skirt. She sat, ignoring Petra’s warning look, and

poured three cups of tea from the gold and white teapot, steam rising between them all like the curl of a question mark.

Petra kept both pistols leveled at the man.

“What? No, I don’t work for them.” He eyed the tea suspiciously.

Maisie took a deep drink out of her own cup. “Then why do you care if we were spying on him?”

After seeing Maisie drink the tea, Evan reached out and lifted his own cup to his lips, tasting it. Their shop was famous for its tea, after all. “Because I want to hire you.”

Petra laughed. “Hire us? To cater your wedding, or serve a private afternoon tea, you mean?”

He chuckled, but his fingers were clenched tight around the teacup’s handle. “Where did you get the crystal, anyway?”

Petra handed Maisie his gun and grabbed a biscuit from the tea tray. “How do you know what it is?” she countered.

“I travel,” he said, and gave a little cough. He drank some more tea, and said, “Well? Will you work for me? I think your skills suit the project. You would be compensated. And of course, if you do accept, I won’t report to the magistrate that the Everturns are in possession of a highly illegal Talmanian quartz.”

Maisie frowned. “That’s blackmail.”

“That’s life,” he said. He took another sip of tea and coughed again. This time, it was a deep, throaty cough, and he spat something into his hand.

“And that’s poison,” Maisie said.

He put the teacup back on its saucer slowly, staring at Maisie with his mouth open. Petra grinned. Maisie was ever the helpful one.

“What do you really want with us?” Petra asked.

“Perhaps I can find the antidote to the poison I wiped on the inside of your teacup before it really takes effect,” Maisie said, sipping her own tea carelessly. “If you tell us.”

He gaped at her.

“Truly,” his voice was panicked now. “I just wished to hire you. I saw you plant the quartz this morning, and I followed you back to your shop to find out who you were.” He coughed again.

Petra threw an embroidered napkin at him. “We are not spies.”

Evan coughed into the napkin and doubled over, hacking.

“Promise you’ll back off?” Maisie asked. She tapped him on the shoulder, and he looked up to see her holding a small glass bottle.

He nodded fervently, unable to stop coughing. She handed him the bottle, and he guzzled it.

Petra and Maisie shared a look as Evan coughed a few more times, then subsided.

Petra fingered the stone in her pocket. “Get out,” she told him. She was anxious to see what answers the quartz held for her.

“But—”

The girls hefted their pistols again.

“I really think we can help each other—”

“Don’t care,” Petra said, lifting him by his jacket collar then steering him toward the door. “We don’t want to see you here ever again.”

The bell over the shop door tinkled merrily as she shoved him into the street.

Maisie waved his pistol in the air. “And I’m keeping this. It’s pretty.”

Bewilderment, scorn, and disappointment fought for prevalence on his face as they slammed the door shut and bolted it. Maisie turned her back to it and laughed.

Petra shook her head and strode to the back of the shop, tucking her pistol back in its holster. Maisie was the only person she knew who would laugh in a situation like this.

“Well that was fun,” her sister said, following her into the kitchen at the back of the shop. The homey room was lit only by an old-style fireplace across from the bank of three ovens that normally kept the room at a high temperature. Their cat Biscuit lounged near the fireplace, eyes closed but his tail swishing around him. Evidence of Maisie’s recent baking was strewn everywhere—dough set to rise on the back of the counter, piping hot scones cooling on a tray in the corner, and a dozen or so petit fours on a baking sheet, half of them glazed, next to an assortment of bowls filled with different colors of confection waiting to cover them.

Petra snorted, eyeing the petit fours. “Where did you get poison?”

“Oh, it wasn’t poison,” Maisie said, double-checking that her ovens were off. “A few months ago, we accidentally ordered Abysmal Cherry root instead of Artisanal Cherry—it just causes rapid swelling and coughing. Marshmallow leaf clears it right up.” She took the glass bottle of ‘antidote’ from her dress pocket and put it on the counter.

Petra laughed. “Nice trick.”

“So, did you get it?” Maisie said, her tone growing serious.

In answer, Petra pulled the crystal from her pocket and held it up to shine in the firelight.

Maisie bit her bottom lip. “Do you think the printer really knows anything about Jiordan’s disappearance?”

“We’re about to find out,” Petra said, pulling a small device from the leather holster hanging at her hip. She had built it from a diagram they found in their father’s workshop in the basement, the same place they had gotten the crystal. “But Maisie, don’t be disappointed if it’s nothing. We have other leads.”

Maisie looked away and grabbed a bowl of glaze for the petit fours and began stirring it. The top layer of hardened sugar dissolved back into the mix. “I know. Let’s just watch it.”

Petra pressed the quartz oval into the waiting tines of the device with a snap. As soon as she did, light sprang up from the device, shining through the Talmanian quartz and projecting a moving image of the print shop in the air above the work table.

Maisie had called it magic when they first tested it. Petra knew the mechanics behind the projecting device since she had built it, but had no idea why the crystal, when exposed to light shone through an opposing piece of black quartz, could replay images it had been exposed to, and sounds to some extent. She decided it was only half magic, but only until she could find out the science behind it.

Petra and Maisie watched in rapt attention as the projection showed them the day at the print shop in amorphous scenes, listening for any mention of their brother, Jiordan Everturn.

The Harrowdel Gazette had reported last week that Jiordan, a well-known adventurer and explorer, had met his end in the mountains of Pruvia. It had been disturbingly similar to the time when Petra was eleven and found out about her parents’ deaths while they were on an expedition in Scitica. Jiordan, sixteen at the time, had taken over the tea shop from their parents, until about five years later when he too decided Harrowdel wasn’t big enough for him, and began exploring just like their father.

He had been missing for months now, maybe longer. After the article was printed, Petra

questioned the man who ran the Gazette, but he had told her he couldn’t reveal his source for privacy reasons. And she couldn’t threaten a fellow merchant with a pistol unless she wanted to be thrown in the magistrate’s dungeon for a while.

They watched the projected recording for hours, Petra’s hopes diminishing. Maisie’s normally cheerful expression turned inward, and she grabbed another bowl of icing to finish decorating the petit fours.

Finally, they watched the printer close up the shop and leave, and Petra unclipped the crystal from the device. The projection disappeared, leaving only disappointment in the air.

Maisie continued to ice the petit fours, adding unnecessary details to the frosted designs already decorating the little cakes.

“I’m sorry,” Petra said after several minutes of silence. “But it was just one lead. That idiot probably just made it up, like I’ve been telling you.”

“You’re probably right,” Maisie said, putting down a bag of purple icing.

Petra reached out and grabbed one of the cakes with purple flowers on it before Maisie could protest. Petra couldn’t bake if her life depended on it, but Maisie had been baking for the tea shop since before they had become its sole caretakers. Their father opened the shop after his first big expedition brought him fame and fortune. It had always been a dream of their mother’s. After they died, Jiordan took over, while Petra helped serve tea until she was old enough to help with the books. Maisie was always underfoot in the kitchen until their old baker realized Maisie had a talent for pastries.

The shop was filled with artifacts from their father’s expeditions, and a few of Jiordan’s, too. In the main part of the shop, an enormous woven tapestry depicting the Scitican harvest rites in rich purple and green hues hung above the marble fireplace; next to it, a large glass sphere on a stand which their father claimed was how a certain Pruvian tribe would tell weather; various timepieces littered the shop, the largest an enormous brass clock from Rancozzi; and their mother’s collection of tea paraphernalia interspersed between the artifacts like bits of confection on a buffet table. Jiordan’s collection was sparse compared to their father’s. Of course, their father had been an adventurer for much longer, and Jiordan had only a few years’ experience.

Petra gasped as the clink of a teacup hitting the floor sounded, and she saw their cat dart from the kitchen. “Biscuit!” she hissed. “Get back here!”

Maisie snorted. “It’s not like he’s going to help clean it up.” She went over beside the counter to crouch down over the teacup. “It’s only chipped. It’s not one of the good ones anyway.”

Petra rolled her eyes at the departed cat and grabbed a rag, bending down to help Maisie clean up the spilled tea.

*What had happened to Jiordan?* Petra wondered as she sopped up the tea. Despite what she had said to Maisie, she was worried. She remembered all too well the awful truth when her parents had died. Maisie, only three years younger than Petra, had been eight at the time.

But they had to find out for sure what happened to their brother, and she was running out of options. There were no other leads. Only half-baked ideas and half-true tales.