



# 1

The apothecary shop's bell rang as the door swung open. Sunlight streamed in, pouring over the stone floor.

The owner and town apothecary, Sybell Buslingthorpe, closed one of the green drawers in the cabinet under the front counter and straightened. She sucked in a sharp breath at the ache developing in her lower back. Pausing in her work of stocking supplies, she smiled up at the newcomer. "Good morning, Anya." She tucked away gray strands of hair that had escaped her low bun and swept loose herbs and flowers that dotted the counter into a small pile. "How can I help you today?"

"I need a refill of my usual poppy," Anya Thorne wheezed, her voice low and strained. The old goblin woman took slow, stiff steps across the room, her long black skirt swishing against the floor. A

## Murder in Mossyhollow

wince pinched her green face, emphasizing her need for pain relief. A cane wobbled in her bony hand, stabbing the floor with an uneven rhythm.

Sybell frowned at her friend. “You seem to be going through it quicker than recommended. Is everything all right?”

Anya braced against the wooden counter. Just standing seemed to steal her strength, yet she seemed determined to not let it stop her from going about her life. The woman shook her head, sending the knot of hair on top of her head tumbling down around her shoulders—a state of disarray uncharacteristic for the goblin woman. She answered, “I’m afraid things are getting worse. I’m in pain nearly every second of the day, and I just can’t move as quickly as I used to.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. When I last examined you, I had hoped you would have more time left before this wretched disease claimed you.” Sybell inspected Anya closely, noting her frailness and flushed cheeks, contrasting with her normal olive complexion. So different from the vibrant soul Sybell had grown up with. The wasting disease had stolen much from both of them already, and Sybell wasn’t prepared for the ultimate theft. Providing care over the past few months was her one relief. At least she was certain her friend wasn’t suffering needlessly. “I’m afraid I can’t increase your dosage of poppy until I’ve completed an additional examination, so

## Sarah Rodecker

I can only prescribe the same amount as last time. I can stop by your house to examine you and see if a higher dose would be safe.”

“Thank you, but no. I’m dying, Sybell, so I couldn’t promise I’d live long enough for a visit. The current dose should be sufficient to see me to my end.”

Sybell’s professional demeanor slipped. She pressed her lips together to keep from crying.

“Oh, dear.” Anya reached to comfort Sybell, dropping her cane in the process. It clattered on the floor, causing Jude Peaton, the shop assistant, to rush out of the back room where he’d been checking inventory. The elf’s wide green eyes relaxed when he found no immediate emergency, and he stood quietly as the women talked. At the slight narrowing of Jude’s eyes, Sybell bit back a rebuke. While he never expressed his distaste for goblins aloud, the rumors that they were all liars and thieves had damaged the opinions of most. That Anya and her family had risen above the rumors and become so well off was a testament to their upstanding character. Anya held herself and her family to a high standard to combat premature ideas others might have about their race. Sybell had been friends with Anya for decades, ever since their school days, yet she could say nothing bad about her. Others, however, believed Anya and her family cheated their way into wealth.

## Murder in Mossyhollow

Anya sighed and lowered her voice. “I feel my end in my bones. I just hope I live long enough to enjoy tonight’s dinner with my family.”

“Do you have something special in mind?” To Jude, Sybell said, “Would you please wrap up some poppy for Anya? Same dose as last time.”

He nodded and crossed to the large shelves in two long strides. With deft hands, he packaged Anya’s medicine.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. We’re getting together for a nice evening to celebrate the electoral debate. I’m looking forward to it. I’ve planned it for weeks.” Anya scowled. “Unfortunately, I had to invite Oswyn, as Bartram and Alyce wouldn’t come otherwise. He’ll likely cause a scene— fool that he is.”

Anya’s son, Bartram Thorne, and his wife, Alyce, were two of the town’s most notable citizens. The previous mayor had recently passed from old age, and Bartram was a candidate in the upcoming mayoral election. As far as most people were concerned, the Thornes were upstanding and respectable, and no one had anything bad to say about them, despite the townsfolk’s prejudice against goblins. Sybell supposed Anya’s hard work had paid off. Bartram’s and Alyce’s son, Oswyn, on the other hand, had a reputation of enjoying gambling and ladies a little too much.

## Sarah Rodecker

“Here you are, ma’am.” Jude handed Anya a small package. He didn’t release it until she had a steady grasp on the parcel’s strings. “You know the correct dosage?”

“Of course.” Anya waved him off, tucking the package into her basket and coughing.

“Make sure you follow the directions, Anya.” Sybell shared a concerned glance with Jude. Even though culture encouraged him to dislike goblins, he did work to combat his bias and would never wish them harm. “Just because you feel as though you’re dying isn’t a reason to hasten the end. After all, you have a family dinner to host.” Sybell smiled, hoping to bring comfort and compassion to her friend.

“I know.” Anya sounded offended, which might cause some to apologize, but in Sybell’s line of work, one couldn’t be too careful. Herbs and medicines were powerful things. Too much of a good thing could ruin—or take—a life.

“Have a good day and a wonderful dinner party.” Sybell reached across the counter and squeezed her friend’s hand. The frailty of her fingers, so different from the vibrant strength Sybell remembered from years past, sent a wave of sadness through her.

“I will.” Anya gripped Sybell’s hand. “Are you going to the debate this afternoon?”

## Murder in Mossyhollow

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Sybell adored local politics. “I’m interested to hear what the candidates say. Will you be there?”

Anya shook her head. Her hair pin, now barely hanging onto a cluster of gray strands, tumbled to the floor. Jude picked it up, and Anya tucked it into her basket. “I’m afraid I’ll be too busy getting ready for the party.” She shuffled to the door. Her hands trembled as she tried to turn the knob while balancing herself and her basket against her cane.

Jude, who stood closer to the door than Sybell, rushed over and pulled it open for her. He knocked a potted mint plant askew in his rush, and soil scattered onto the floor.

Sybell raced to help steady Anya. Sorrow crept into her heart as Anya struggled to regain her balance. A memory of clambering over fallen logs together by the river after school flashed through her mind. Those days were long gone for both of them.

“Thank you, young man,” Anya snapped as she hobbled outside. “Next time, perhaps you open the door for an old woman *before* she nearly takes a tumble.”

“Of course, ma’am. Sorry.” Jude’s cheeks reddened as he tipped his head to her, his brown curls hiding the points of his ears. Once Anya was gone, he closed the door. His expression shifted from embarrassment to fatigue, and his youthful features sagged.

## Sarah Rodecker

“I worry about her,” Sybell said. She returned to stocking, checking through the green drawers in the front counter. Her supply of feverfew was low. She’d need to refill it soon.

“She seems all right.” Jude checked the list of customers needing deliveries that day and set about fetching the necessary medicines. “Joan says Anya’s sickness doesn’t stop her from ordering the servants around all day.” Joan McPherson, Jude’s fiancée, worked as Anya’s housekeeper. “She might be a bit old and odd, but nothing we wouldn’t expect from a woman of her age and disease. Surely, she’ll have a little more time left, especially with us and her family caring for her.”

Sybell wasn’t convinced. “She’s dying, Jude. Judging by her weakened state and fever, her time is short.”

His mouth dropped open, likely sorrowful at the concept of a person dying at ninety and so quickly from a disease. Since elven lifespans easily reached a thousand years, to them, ninety was considered youthful. Most common terminal illnesses took decades, if not a century, to take a toll on elves’ bodies. Jude, at fifty, was an abnormality—working for Sybell and preparing for marriage instead of living at home with his parents for another thirty years. Many elder elves questioned Sybell’s decision to hire him, wondering if he was mature enough.

## Murder in Mossyhollow

The rest of the day passed smoothly, with a steady stream of customers and a few requests for house calls: a young dwarven girl bitten by a spider while helping her mother collect eggs, a middle-aged man who fell off a ladder because he thought it was a good idea to clean his own roof instead of hiring someone, and a woman who needed medicine to overcome melancholy during the early days after giving birth.

As the town clock struck five, signaling the time for businesses to close, Sybell dusted her hands on her apron and turned to Jude who swept the shop floor. “Once you’re done, you can go on home. I’ll lock up after you.”

“Actually, I was thinking of going to the debate.” At Sybell’s surprised expression, he added, “Joan is working tonight—preparing for the dinner party—so I don’t have plans.”

“Wonderful.” She’d pestered him to participate more in town politics for years. It was vital that younger members of society took an interest in the goings on of their town. It would ensure a brighter future for them. But Jude usually found excuses to wiggle out of political activities. Maybe he was finally growing wiser. “I’ll be glad to have the company.”

While he finished sweeping, she locked the back door, then returned to the shopfront. “Are you ready?”

Jude put away the broom and nodded.

## Sarah Rodecker

“Excellent. Let’s see what these candidates have to say for themselves. Maybe I can ask how Bartram is doing with his mother so sick.” She hoped for his sake—and hers— Anya would hold out just a little longer. At least until after dinner, so they could have one more bright memory and Anya could hear all about the good time they’d had.