

CHAPTER ONE

*NEW YORK CITY, 1999*

About two hours before midnight on a busy street in Manhattan, a man in a raincoat appeared out of nowhere. His sudden presence should have been startling, but no one took notice of him. That particular part of New York bustled with cars and people at all hours, so much so that nobody really saw each other in the crowds. Everyone had other business to attend to, and a stranger lingering in the shadows—even one who had quite literally materialized from thin air—did not capture their interest that October evening.

The man in the raincoat walked several blocks until the path broke off to reveal a cobblestone side street leading to a quieter patch of neighborhood. He stood at its edge and silently observed the area with a smile.

If anyone *had* bothered to take a glance at him that night, they might've found it slightly odd that the man's



raincoat was dripping wet when it hadn't rained anywhere nearby that day.

They might've found it odder still that he carried what looked like a snow globe in his hands, with the care of someone cradling a cherished pet.

But New York City was full of oddballs, so again, no one bothered with him.

Which is unfortunate, because had these passersby stopped to ask who he was and what he was doing there, they would've found the answer the oddest of all.

Because our friend in the raincoat wasn't supposed to exist yet.

CHAPTER TWO

*THE VISITOR IN THE RAINCOAT*

The same cobblestone street had a tiny bakery on the corner called the Biscuit Basket.

Ask anyone in the neighborhood, and they would tell you the Biscuit Basket was a “perfectly adequate bakery, now please get out of my way”—which was a sore understatement, because the bakery’s goods were far above average.

In the early mornings, when the sun had barely tinted the glassy skyscrapers along the East River, the aroma of freshly baked breads and chocolate croissants wafted from the tiny brick building and filled every inch of the street.

Despite its enticing smells and first-rate offerings, however, the bakery had only a scarcely adequate share of customers. On good days, mornings saw one or two adults who stopped by for a quick sugar doughnut before work. In the afternoons came the neighborhood kids fresh

from school, their pockets jingling with allowance money as they gathered around the colorful array of cupcakes along the counter. And of course there were the occasional weary ladies in large, fancy hats who needed two orders of peach cobbler, immediately if you please, for their evening book club every third Tuesday of the month.

But on bad days, the Biscuit Basket had hardly any visitors at all. On those days, the baker—a stocky and balding man named Henry—could be seen waiting behind the counter anxiously, or else rearranging the cakes at the display window for the thousandth time, or else trying to attract customers by offering free samples of strawberry-and-almond tarts to passersby.

It wasn't Henry's fault. No matter how hard he pounded the dough, no matter how fast he mixed the cream and sugar, the Biscuit Basket never seemed to entice quite enough customers to its corner of the street. Not when an enormous candy shop, a coffee shop, and two other bakeries sat just two streets over.

So on those lonely days, Henry would look wistfully at the untouched pastries that had grown stale and hope he had enough money to pay the rent.

It was such a day on that Saturday evening when our story begins. A few hours before the mysterious man in the raincoat appeared, the streets were cold and dreary and darkening with October gloom. Not a single customer had stopped by the bakery, where Henry had sat behind the counter for the better part of the day.

