

THE
CUT-
THROAT
CAFE
NICKI THORNTON



2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS

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*For my sisters,
Karen and Sandra*

Those Appearing in the Curious
Case of the Cut-Throat Cafe

Seth Seppi

Inspector Sagacious Pewter

Angelique Squerr

Nightshade

Herb Camphor

Cheery Damson

Leaf Falling

Dagger Tourmaline

Tendrill Vetch

Calamus

Granny Onabutter

Armory Opal

Kalinder Squerr

Gladys Tidings

Forever Young

A black and white illustration of a tree frame with falling leaves. The tree's trunk and branches form a large, irregular frame around the central text. Several leaves are shown in various stages of falling, some near the top and others near the bottom. The background is a dark, solid color, and the ground at the bottom is covered in a layer of fallen leaves.

PART ONE



1. SCRUMDIDDLYUMPTIOUS

‘**Y**ou are to do two things, and two things only.’ Angelique Squerr tossed her long hair, dark except for a stripe of red down one side. ‘You sit inside this cafe and you wait for me to come back. You do not cause any trouble.’

Seth Seppi knew that when a magical friend gave you instructions you should always pay attention. But he was entranced by the yellow umbrellas sprouting from circular tables that spilt out in front of the Scrumdiddlyumptious Cafe. Their fluttering

made it look as if a cloud of giant butterflies had landed in this corner of The Forum, a rather grimy and gloomy cobbled square in the centre of this interesting town.

Angelique tucked her red lacquered cane – a silver-topped magical instrument that she was never without – under her arm and looked ready to go. As she turned and sailed off to do something important, Seth was left with nothing but a heavy suitcase, a cumbersome basket and a feeling that he never did anything right.

Even so, as he lifted the basket and dragged his suitcase awkwardly through the noisily flapping umbrellas, he felt excited.

A smell of warm sugar and cinnamon filled the cold air. He passed only one customer braving the chill outside. A girl with a halo of untidy hair was sitting alone, slumped against the cafe window, her mouth open. She looked as if she'd nodded off halfway through eating a quite delicious-looking strawberry cupcake.

As he stepped inside, a rush of warm air welcomed Seth, along with a woman in a candy-striped dress, her hair in tiny plaits, arranging cakes behind the counter. She greeted Seth with a big, lipsticked smile. Seth smiled back shyly then made

his way to an empty seat near the back, but with a clear view of the window. He'd watch for Angelique. She'd hinted that even sitting here and waiting was something he could mess up. Well, he could wait. And he would prove he could steer clear of trouble.

After all, in this friendly cafe, with its walls painted a warm yellow that gave the feeling of being inside a cake or a bowl of custard, what could possibly go wrong?

He tried to position the large basket comfortably on his legs. He reached for a menu, even though today, Seth was less interested in food than looking about him.

Around him were about ten customers munching thick sandwiches, nibbling lunchtime sticky buns or slurping strange-looking foamy green drinks through striped paper straws. There was a comforting low hum of chatter and clink of teaspoons on china, and the smell of toasting cheese.

Seth found himself wondering: *Which of them?*

Because some of these people, reading books or filling in the crossword while they munched, had a secret. A secret that made this cafe the most exciting place he had been to in his life. Some of them were something Seth longed to be more than anything.

Some of them were sorcerers.

‘So is this where I get out?’ came a soft, lilting voice that didn’t disguise its grumpiness. ‘It’s not dignified being carried around in a basket. Hope you don’t expect me to like it. What are we doing here again?’

Not for the first time, Seth wondered whether it really had been a blessing to discover his cat could speak.

There was a girl at a table in the window who had hair as springy and green as moss, and Seth felt that with his slim frame, untidy hair and wide-set eyes, he was unremarkable enough to be able to sit here all day and just watch.

‘Nightshade,’ he replied softly, ‘we are waiting and we are blending in.’

He looked about him. Could he tell if someone was magical?

What about the dapper man in the pinstriped suit at the next table? His gold-patterned waistcoat was straining over his tummy, and two tufts of grey hair sprouted either side of his head as if a bat had landed there badly. The man licked his fingers after making quick work of a crusty sandwich crammed with slices of salami and cheese and went to pay at the till.

‘Scrumdiddlyumptious Cafe,’ Nightshade muttered. ‘Not at all Scrumdiddlyumptious in here. All right

for you. I bet you're just about to order something filling and smothered in sugar. Any chance of an ice cream?'

'If a crowd gathers because I've brought a talking cat to this cafe, Angelique will be mad,' Seth whispered into the basket. 'We're in Gramichee, one of the few towns where a cluster of magical folk live.' He repeated Angelique's words from when she explained everything to him earlier, 'But it's not a totally magical town. Sorcerers still have to be secretive.'

Imagine a place where people could walk down the street magicking mice out of fresh air, turning the walls to gold or making it rain fish. But then, Seth knew enough about sorcerers to understand that wasn't ever likely. Sorcerers took their magic seriously. Magic, as well as being incredibly rare, could be dangerous to do.

Seth couldn't stop a small sigh escaping him. Not long ago, he'd started to believe his destiny was to become a sorcerer. But right now he'd settle for being able to use magic to stir a spoon in his tea. Or to perform *any* spell well enough not to cause an explosion.

'So can you please just not talk?' he pleaded to his cat. 'They may even have a *no cats* rule.'

‘Well, that’s just blatant discrimination. Plenty of places welcome dogs, *adore* dogs, put down nice bowls of fresh water for dogs. Big mucky creatures. You never need to give a cat a bath, do you? You’d think we never came into cafes. Anyway, remind me, how is this all going to help with your magic?’

Seth put his mouth close to the basket. ‘Angelique thought it might be good for me to spend some time among magical folk.’ Although he suspected what she really meant was that *she* needed some help with him and his disaster magic.

The one thing Seth wanted most in his life, what he dreamt and longed for (apart from, right now, to taste one of those fascinating frothy green drinks), was to be an amazingly powerful sorcerer. The horrible truth beginning to dawn was that this cherished dream might never be realized. Every single time he tried to get a spell under control, it went spectacularly and despairingly wrong.

Angelique had effortlessly summoned a minuscule glow of magical fire in the palm of her hand. On his turn, he’d scorched himself so badly he hadn’t been able to practise for days because of the enormous bandage wrapping his hand.

His chance of ever passing the magical exam, the Prospect, and becoming an official member of the

magical world, seemed about as likely as flying to the moon.

Worse, he couldn't fight the growing suspicion that if he had inherited even a little of his mother's magic, there was something wrong with it. He stared despondently out of the window, where a boy about thirteen with close-cropped curly black hair and skin the colour of walnuts was threading his way through the yellow umbrellas. He paused by the sleeping girl before pushing open the cafe door, admitting a rush of eager spring air. He slid into a seat, combing the room with anxious eyes.

'Hello, Tendril – hot chocolate?' In one effortless movement the woman at the counter grabbed a wide-rimmed cup and pressed a button that filled the air with the sound of boiling milk.

'Thanks, Glad,' replied the boy.

The tiny girl with hair like moss leapt up. 'Hey, Tendril!' The crafty look on her face and the way she moved to the seat right next to his looked less like friendliness and more like a deliberate attempt to cut off any chance of escape.

The door opened again and in strode an older-looking boy with smooth, raven-black hair and dark eyes as unreflecting as jet. He was wearing a black cape swept about him as if he wanted people to

think he had leathery wings.

‘Usual please, Glad,’ he drawled, tapping his fingers on the counter.

‘Trickerchockerglory coming right away, Dagger,’ Glad replied, tossing her plaited hair. ‘Heard you made your first arrest. I’m impressed!’

Dagger jerked his collar up with a self-satisfied smile. He looked as if he was about to answer, then his hard eyes glittered as he spied the boy called Tendril. A look of fear crossed Tendril’s face and he pulled up the hood of his jacket. Dagger took the seat opposite him and the girl with green springy hair giggled unkindly.

Glad went to stand right by their table and planted her hands on her wide hips. ‘Just to say, if you apprentices are planning to play any pranks on each other, keep them out of my cafe. Otherwise you’ll all be banned. Using spells to give people rabbit ears and turn others blue!’ She shook her head as she went back behind the counter.

Apprentices. Seth caught right on to that word.

That meant they must all be training to be magical! Seth looked at the group with curiosity and envy. Apprenticeships were highly prized and were the very best way to learn magic, although using magic to give people rabbit ears and turning others

blue really didn't sound like spells that should ever be used.

Glad slid Dagger a giant ice cream in a tall glass, topped with foaming cream and chocolate sprinkles. He shrugged and loaded a spoon.

Even with his imposing air, the enthusiastic way he tucked into his ice cream suggested to Seth he might not be much older than Tendril.

'No more pranks? Aww, shame.' The girl with the green hair gave a sly look at Glad. 'Not here in the Scrum anyway!' Then she jerked down the hood of Tendril's jacket. 'Aww, you got rid of them. Your rabbit ears were so cute.'

Tendril fought to cover his head again and was trying to quickly drain his drink, but it was clearly hot.

Seth hated the way the girl squealed with cruel laughter. He found he was gripping the menu tightly, unable to take his eyes from the group.

Dagger leant towards Tendril. 'I didn't hear you say hello. You should be more polite to your friends.'

'Hello, Dagger,' muttered the boy. It was obvious he was desperate to escape, but was surrounded.

'Did you stop to have a quick chat with Myrtle? Only I notice she's gone to sleep,' Dagger said with a smirk.

There was another snort of laughter from the moss-haired girl.

Tendril began to sneeze. His breathing quickly became fast and shallow and soon he was fighting to get air into his lungs. His eyes were watering. He fumbled to reach his pocket.

Seth was almost on his feet, but then Glad was there and reaching into Tendril's pocket for him. She drew out a slender square-cut green bottle. He nodded, eyes watering, breathing raspy. Glad unscrewed the lid, sprinkled a few drops into a glass of water and handed it to the choking boy. He took a gulp and his sneezing immediately subsided, then he was breathing normally again.

'Did someone just give him something?' snapped Glad. 'If this is another prank, you'll all be banned. I mean it.'

No one said anything and Glad stomped off to clear the table outside, her angry steps echoing the furious beating of Seth's heart. And then, without warning, the menu Seth was clutching became a jet of flame that roared upwards. He shoved the burning menu into a jug of water and leapt to his feet, sending Nightshade's basket toppling to the floor. He glanced around, hoping for once he'd been lucky and put out the flare before anyone had noticed.

There was still a plume of smoke and the smell of scorching.

Seth grabbed the basket and his suitcase and dashed for the door, just as from outside there came a crash of breaking china. For a moment, Seth thought he'd managed to cause that too and almost collided with Glad rushing back in to the cafe. She had both hands clapped to her face below wide, terrified eyes.

On the ground outside, next to the sleeping girl, was a shattered plate and a mess of strawberry cupcake.

'Help!' Glad cried. 'Someone call a doctor! Now! It's Myrtle Rust, she's – she's – Oh my moon and stars! I think she might be dead!'