



JOSH ATEROVIS

# A CHANGE OF WORLDS

A Killian Kendall Mystery

Book V



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Book 5

**Josh Aterovis**

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## **Reader Advisory**

*A Change of Worlds* contains depictions of murder and violence, including gun violence. The story includes scenes involving death and grief, as well as supernatural elements connected to spirits and the afterlife.



## Prologue

The spirits were restless.

And so was he.

He shifted under the tangled sheets, turning first to one side, then the other, as though he might outmaneuver the invisible weight pressing in around him. For the first time in his life, he wished he weren't quite so sensitive to the ebb and flow of the ethereal plane. Ever since the excavation began, sleep had become elusive, broken by whispers and the prickling awareness that he was never truly alone.

At last, as he had every night for weeks, he surrendered with a weary sigh and reached for the lamp. Light pooled across the room, chasing the shadows to the corners but never fully banishing them. He propped himself up with extra pillows, the ritual long since practiced, and stretched out a hand toward the uneven tower of books on his nightstand. His fingers closed around a spine at random—though he smiled as he drew it free, for he didn't believe in randomness.

Very little in life happened by chance.

The book in his lap was an old companion, a worn, faded copy of *Touch the Earth*. Its sepia-toned cover gave little hint of the resonance inside: a collection of speeches, letters, and fragments of wisdom from Native voices, some well-known, others lost to history. He had read it so many times that he knew exactly what he was looking for before the pages even parted. There was a reason his hand had found this volume tonight.

He thumbed quickly, almost reverently, through the yellowed pages until he reached the passage that had been tugging at the edges of his thoughts. His finger traced down the familiar column of words, stopping at the one speech that never failed to ground him—or unsettle him, depending on the night.

The words attributed to Si'ahl, remembered now as Chief Seattle.

*"Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander away beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant-lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender fond affection over the lonely-hearted living and often return from the happy hunting ground to visit, guide, console, and comfort them.*

*"And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth, there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.*

*"Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."*

He closed the book and set it aside thoughtfully. He realized there was controversy about what Chief Seattle actually said in his speech, given in 1854 in the Salish language. Scholars quibbled over translations; journalists loved the version that read well in print. He didn't care. Even if the words were not verbatim, the intent lived in them, and that was what mattered to him—the sense of responsibility to the land, the plea for respect. Usually, the passage folded around his shoulders like a warm blanket and settled the restless edges of his mind.

Not tonight.

He looked over at the stack of books by the bed and thought about selecting another one—something drier, maybe, something that would distract—but the pull was too strong. The spirits were more insistent than usual. He could almost feel them pulling at him, tugging at the sleeve of his pajama shirt. He sighed and let the feeling wash through him.

He couldn't sleep until he'd checked on the site.

He hauled himself out of bed, joints complaining in the small, private way of age. He pulled on a pair of jeans over his pajama bottoms and a well-worn pair of work boots, then opened his bedroom door.

As he passed his grandson's bedroom, he stopped to peek in. The boy slept peacefully, just as the old man had expected. While the teen had many strong gifts, he had little sensitivity to the spirits. The old man

wondered, sometimes with a dull regret, how different things might have been if his grandson had been raised to respect the old ways, to respect the earth, acknowledge the spirits, to leave tobacco at the right moments. But the past was a tight knot; pulling at it now would do nothing. *What is done is done*, he told himself. *Everything happens for a reason.*

He took the flashlight from the basket by the door. It was a new moon, the sky a broad, black cloth smeared with a few indifferent stars. He'd need the light. His eyes weren't what they used to be.

He opened the door and the summer air folded over him: humid and sweet, carrying the green, damp scent of the forest and the faint metallic tang that came after the day's heat cooled. He let his hair down from its braid—an old rebellion that made him smile—and for a heartbeat a warm breeze threaded through the strands, lifting the scent of cut grass and new leaves. Winter had finally conceded, and the mercurial Maryland weather had rushed straight into a stubborn summer.

He set off toward the dig.

The path was rough, a narrow track worn by boots and deer hooves. The only way to the excavation was on foot. He'd walked it many times in daylight, but at night, the forest seemed to press around him like a thing alive, full of rustlings and small movements. He favored a slow, sure pace. Hurrying belonged to younger bodies. They didn't call him a tribal *elder* for nothing.

His smile faded as he neared the site. The sense of restlessness hardened into agitation. As he moved closer to the clearing, the air changed—thinner, somehow, as if the world had inhaled. He slowed, senses

narrowing to that single, uncomfortable needle of awareness.

As he stepped into the small clearing the archaeologists had created, he stopped in his tracks. Something was wrong. The white tarp they used to cover the pits at night was flapping in the breeze. He knew the students were very careful when they left for the weekend.

Someone had been there, someone who had no business being there in the middle of the night. A vandal? No wonder the ancestors were troubled.

He took another step into the site when suddenly he felt the spirits recoil, followed by a sense of alarm. He hardly had time to register the warning before there was a sound behind him, small and feather-light: a footfall meant to be unseen.

He started to turn, but it was too late.

The blow came hard—a blunt thing across the side of his head that burst his vision into white fire. Pain folded him in two. He hit the earth with the breath knocked out of him, the flashlight skittering away, its beam carving a frantic arc before vanishing into the trench.

He tried to raise himself enough to get a look at his assailant, but the world rippled. Heat and pressure tightened across his chest as if some invisible hand had clenched his ribs.

He heard the anonymous assailant pounding away in retreat—heavy steps, quickly growing distant.

A searing pain began to run down his left arm. He knew the feeling. He had felt this particular current of agony before. Memory supplied the name: heart

attack. The recognition did not bring comfort. He had survived one once, but survival had been a compromise, not a promise. Now, lying among the damp leaves and the overturned earth, he felt the familiar dread creep in along with the cramps and the nausea.

*So this is where I die*, he thought.

There were teachings yet to pass on, apologies to make, stories that had not found their listeners. He watched the tree branches stitch the sky into a gray lattice and felt the spirits draw close, relatives arriving for a vigil.

*I'm not ready*, he thought, and the words were small and honest and terrible.

## Chapter 1

I sat at my desk typing away at the computer, fingers flying, eyes blurring. It felt like I'd been at it for hours. A quick glance at the clock confirmed the depressing truth—I *had* been at it for hours.

Novak had bailed long ago. Not that I'd expected him to stick around anyway, but I also hadn't planned on being there that late myself. Unfortunately, the mountain of paperwork had other ideas. It never ceased to amaze me how quickly the stuff multiplied. Paperwork was like kudzu—you turned your back for a second and suddenly it was everywhere.

In the private investigation business, paperwork was as inevitable as taxes and just about as fun. Between lawyers and insurance companies, every tiny detail had to be logged, signed, stamped, or filed in triplicate. A client might forget your name the second their case closed, but heaven help you if a date on a form wasn't filled in properly.

I was just wrapping up a report on a case I'd finished earlier that day. An insurance company had sent us to look into a claim about a supposed work-related back injury. They suspected fraud. To be fair, insurance companies always suspect fraud. They love nothing more than to deny a claim. It just so happened that this time, they were right. The investigation had involved a whole lot of sitting in a borrowed apartment with stale coffee and cheap blinds, staring at a house across the street and hoping for something—anything—to happen.

Thrilling work, really. By the end of it I could've drawn every crack in the guy's driveway from memory.

Eventually, though, the payoff came. A few choice photographs of Mr. Bad Back trimming trees and hauling limbs the size of small children into his pickup truck were all the adjuster needed. Case closed, fraud exposed, and my sanity saved—barely.

I sent off the report and moved the case file to the top of my “done” pile, which barely deserved the name. Next to the Everest-sized stack of “to-do” files, it looked downright pitiful.

Business had been booming, all thanks to the Fenton Black case. After that little adventure hit the news, the phone hadn't stopped ringing. We'd had more work than we could handle, which sounded great in theory but was a nightmare in practice—especially with me still trying to juggle college. We'd even had to start turning away clients, something that had once seemed unthinkable.

Between cases, classes, and keeping the office afloat, the paperwork had drawn the short straw. It had been shoved aside and left to fester until it reached critical mass. With my freshman year finally behind me, I was trying to claw my way back to zero. So far, though, I'd only managed to make a tiny dent, and every new case—like the one I'd just finished—only added more weight to the pile.

At this rate, I'd graduate with a degree and a permanent dent in my forehead from banging it on my desk.

My phone vibrated on my desk, alerting me to a text message. I snatched it up to check who it was from, welcoming the break.

*Hey Killian, what's up?* It was from my friend Jake.

*Hey Jake. Still at the office trying to catch up on paperwork. Glad you texted. I needed a break.*

*Still at the office? Bro, you need to get out of there and go home*

*I know. Just so much to get done. What are you up to?*

*Not much, just sitting around the house trying not to die of boredom.*

*lol ...and I really did laugh. How are you doing?*

*Still clean if that's what you mean.*

*That's not what I meant but that's great!*

Jake had recently gone through rehab for drugs, and I knew he'd been fighting to keep from slipping up again. He'd been through some pretty rough stuff and had turned to drugs to escape.

A loud knock at the door caused me to jump. I kept the door locked when I was working in the evening.

"Who's there?"

"Special delivery for Killian Kendall," my boyfriend answered.

I breathed a sigh. "Just a second."

*Micah is here, I texted Jake. I'm gonna go. Talk to you later.*

I slid my phone in my pocket and jumped up to open the door for Micah.

He stepped in and swept me dramatically into his arms.

"I thought I might find you here." He kissed me on the tip of my nose. "I've come to rescue you from the perils and pitfalls of paperwork."

I laughed. "I have to get it done some time," I protested weakly.

The truth was, I desperately wanted to be rescued.

"It'll wait." He released me and closed the door. "What took you so long to get to the door? Have to hide your porn?"

"Ha-ha," I said dryly and stuck my tongue out at him. "For your information, I was texting with Jake."

"Oh really? How is he?"

"We didn't get to talk long, but he did say he was still sober."

"That's good, at least. You didn't ask him that, did you?"

"No! He volunteered the information. I know what the therapist said about supporting but not pressuring him."

"Okay, okay. I was just checking. Come on, let's go get some dinner."

"I dunno, Micah." I gave a glance at my desk. "I have so much stuff to do. Maybe we should just get some takeout and eat here."

"No way, Kill. You need to escape from this dump for a while. I'm taking you out to dinner, and I won't accept no for an answer."

I grinned. "How can I refuse an offer like that?"

I turned off the computer, locked up, and followed his broad shoulders down to the parking lot.

"Do you want to drive together, or should we take both cars?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's up to you."

"Both cars," I decided. "That way I can just go home later and we don't have to come back here."

I was in the car before I realized I had no idea where we were going. I simply stuck close to Micah and pretended I was shadowing a suspect. I needed the practice, anyway. Tailing was not one of my more polished investigative skills.

*I should have guessed*, I thought, as he pulled into the parking lot of what I had come to think of as our diner. It was one of the few places besides fast-food joints that would still be open so late.

"Hey there, boys," we were greeted by our favorite waitress, Brynn. She led us to an empty table and handed us menus. "What can I getcha to drink tonight?"

We placed our beverage orders, then perused the extensive menu. I closed mine after a few seconds and set it aside. I already knew what I wanted: they made a fantastic chicken Caesar salad.

I couldn't help smiling as I watched Micah trying to figure out what he wanted. He had a habit of sticking the tip of his tongue out the corner of his mouth when he was thinking. He reached up to brush aside his dark hair, which had gotten a little longish lately and often fell into his face, covering his warm, chocolate eyes.

He glanced up and caught me staring. With a sheepish grin he pulled in his tongue. "Have you already decided?"

I nodded. "I'm having the chicken Caesar."

"Sounds good. I think I'll have the same. This menu is too damn big. I can never make up my mind before she comes back. Then I end up panic ordering something I don't really want."

I laughed as Brynn returned carrying two large glasses.

"What's so funny?" she asked, setting our drinks in front of us.

"Micah says you bully him into ordering things he doesn't want."

She looked a bit baffled, which only made me laugh harder.

"We're both having chicken Caesar salads," Micah informed her calmly, giving me a kick under the table.

"Are you sure that's what you want, hon?" she asked him with a concerned expression.

"Yes, thanks, Brynn. Just ignore Killian. He's a little loopy from working too much."

She shrugged and went off to place our orders with the cook.

While Micah waited patiently for me to stop laughing, he cleared his throat and started fiddling with his napkin. That sobered me up quickly. Micah wasn't really the fidgety type, which meant something was on his mind.

"So...it's been really busy at work lately, huh?" he said after a moment.

I knew this wasn't what he really wanted to talk about, but I figured he needed to work up to whatever was weighing on him.

"It's been crazy. I was able to wrap up my current case today, though. I caught the guy red-handed. There'll be a nice paycheck coming in from that one."

"You've been making more money lately."

"That's the one good thing about being so busy. We can actually afford to turn away some of the less desirable jobs."

"What's an example of a less desirable job?"

"Divorce cases where the wife thinks the husband is cheating on her or vice versa. Things like that. They tend to get messy, and it's not fun dealing with people who are in such an emotionally charged place in their lives."

"I can imagine." He fell into a silence, seemingly lost in his thoughts. "I miss you," he said quietly after a while.

"I'm sorry, babe," I agreed with a sigh. "The downside of being so busy is that I hardly get to see anybody anymore."

"I've noticed," he observed dryly.

"I'll try to do better."

He shrugged. "I know it's not your fault. How's Adam?"

Another sigh. "You know as much as I do, really. I've barely even spoken to him at all this week. I'm never home except to sleep, and even then, I'm staying at the B&B more and more often these days. It's so much closer than driving all the way to Ocean City, and there's pretty much always at least one room open. To be honest, I'm starting to think Steve's holding a room back just for me."

"How is Steve?"

"I see him a little more, but he's so busy running the B&B that we never really get to talk."

"Is business picking up?"

"It's picking up, slow but steady."

Brynn delivered our meals, and, after checking to see if we needed anything else, left us alone once more.

We ate in silence for a few minutes before Micah tried again. "So, uh, how's Tad?"

"I have no idea, Micah. We just finished saying how I'm completely out of the loop these days, remember? Come on, what's really on your mind? I can tell something is bugging you, so spill. It's not like you to beat around the bush."

"I've been offered a job," he blurted out.

"Really?" I asked excitedly, before I realized he wouldn't be this nervous if it was all good news. "What kind of job?" I asked, more cautiously.

"As an investigative reporter. I'd be making considerably more money, and it would be a lot more prestigious."

"Well, that's great then, right?" He didn't answer. "What's the catch?"

Micah looked away. "It's in New York."

"What?" I must have misheard him.

"It's with *The New York Times*."

My mouth made the smallest sound. "Oh." The syllable came out thin and flat. It was hard to get anything else past the sudden, busy knot in my chest. Prestigious—yes. Important—obviously. But New York was awfully far away. "Wow."

He went on, words tumbling as if he needed to prove something. "It's an incredible opportunity,

especially for someone like me. It would be a huge jump. The paper here isn't exactly national."

"How did...how did they come to offer you the job?" My voice felt distant, like someone else's. An alarming thought occurred to me. "Did you apply?"

He grinned sheepishly—guilty and boyish all at once. "Remember a couple of months ago when I was feeling really restless at work?" I nodded. "I sent them my résumé just for the hell of it. I wasn't serious, simply annoyed with my editor and the office politics. I didn't think I'd actually hear anything back, but apparently one of the *Times* editors has a summer place down here and saw my work on the Fenton Black case. It impressed him enough that he saved my résumé. When a position opened up, he offered it to me. They haven't even posted it yet."

"Wow," I repeated. The word scraped my throat. "That's...impressive. Congratulations."

The sentence felt hollow even as I spoke it. Impressive. Congratulations. Words had so little weight when the world shifted underneath you.

It began to sink in with the slowness of an incoming tide: Micah could be moving to New York. Four hours...if traffic was on your side. Could our relationship survive long distance? Did I even want that? Four hours meant missed dinners, fewer mornings waking up in his arms. Four hours would make our stolen weekends into rarer treasures.

I imagined him on a train platform at dawn, a life stacked into a backpack I couldn't fit into. The thought tightened the muscles at my throat until whatever I wanted to say lodged there like a stone.

"I'm not sure I'm taking it," he said suddenly, and the words cut clean through the fog in my head.

"Huh? Why wouldn't you take it? It's your dream job."

"It is a great chance, but my dream is to have a life with you. I don't think that can happen if I'm in New York and you're here."

Heat rose through me—not the playful warmth of something good, but that animal alarm that narrows everything into a single point. Of course he said that. Of course he would.

"Micah, don't be ridiculous. You can't pass up this opportunity for me."

"Yes, I can. But...it's not just up to me, Killian."

"What do you mean?"

"We're a couple, Kill. We're in this together. Whether I take this job or not will depend largely on you."

My chest constricted. "On me? You're going to make me decide?"

"In a way, yes. I'm ready to take our relationship to another level."

That sentence—another level—sounded like a promise and like a demand at the same time. My heart began to hammer against my ribs as if it were trying to break free. For a dizzy second, I imagined him getting down on one knee right there in the diner. The image felt both terrifying and absurd. I knew I loved Micah. That had been obvious ever since we'd learned how to fit our pasts together. But marriage? I was only nineteen. I'd made fun of classmates who got married at nineteen. I wasn't ready for that kind of commitment.

"I want you to move in with me."

"Micah, I...you... What?" I'd been so sure he was about to propose that his actual words caught me off guard.

"Move in with me. I know you're not ready to get married, and, to be honest, neither am I, but this is the perfect solution."

"I...I..."

I sat there, stupid and stunned, the room narrowing to the two of us and the hard tile under my feet. He kept talking as if he had rehearsed this speech a thousand times...and maybe he had. "Think about it!" he urged, warming to the idea. "It makes perfect sense. If we lived together, we'd get to see each other more often. You were just saying how we never see one another. And you'd be even closer to work than you are at the B&B. Plus your stuff wouldn't be split between two places."

He was logical, practical—the same Micah who could balance budgets and emotions with equal care. It was tempting, the idea of waking up to his breathing, the lazy, stubborn way his hair fell across his forehead, the convenience of dinners that didn't have to be scheduled three days in advance. It was safety and treachery both. Safety because closeness felt like a balm, and treachery because any arrangement that asked me to give up the life I'd begun to build for myself felt, in its own way, like an erasure of my independence.

Then there were the late nights my job sometimes required. When I returned to an empty bed, I didn't feel guilty about disturbing someone else's sleep. That would all change if someone was waiting up for me, worrying.

I realized he was watching me closely, waiting for an answer.

"You've given this a lot of thought," I managed.

"I have." He smiled, and there was earnestness in it that made something inside me want to cave. "Of course, there is another option."

"And that is...?"

"You could come with me to New York."

I started shaking my head before he was even finished. "I can't. Everything I know is here: my family, my job, school. I can't just drop all that and move away. Not right now."

I felt like a child naming reasons why he couldn't leave home—practical, urgent, and somehow inadequate. There was truth in every excuse: Adam's kitchen, my small circle of friends, the cases I couldn't walk away from. But under those reasons was a hum of fear—of uprooting, of losing the particular scaffolding that had held me steady through the last few years. I thought of the days I had spent trying to find my footing after Seth's death, after my father kicked me out. Moving felt, in that moment, like risking the only solid ground I had left.

He reached across the table and took my hand like a small, steady anchor. "I know. That's why I came up with a viable alternative. Kill, I love what we have, but I want more. If you're willing to take the next step with me, then I'll stay. That would be worth more to me than any job anywhere."

His words were simple and devastating. The table between us felt suddenly like a map with a border down the middle—his life in one county, mine in another, and

a bridge that cost him a career and might cost me my life.

I wanted to be the person who could say yes without thinking. I wanted to be the person who could promise him what he was asking for. But a dozen half-formed fears crowded forward: Was I ready to be relied on in that way? Would staying mean he would always wonder what he had given up? Was it fair to abandon my own career for his?

I swallowed. My voice came out small but honest. "I don't know if I can make that decision right now."

Micah's fingers tightened around mine, not angrily, but as if to reassure himself as much as me. "Then tell me what you need," he said. "If staying is what you want and if you can be sure, I'll turn it down. I'd rather have you here than a byline in any paper."

"It feels like what you're essentially saying is that you'd just be staying here for me. If I wasn't part of the equation, you'd take the job." The words were sharper than I meant them to be.

"But you are a part of the equation. A big part."

I sat for a minute trying to grab hold of my spinning thoughts.

"I'm going to need to think about this," I said at last, the sentence coming out meadow-quiet because anything louder felt like a lie.

"I don't expect you to give me an answer tonight."

Relief and guilt arrived at once—relief because delay let me not be decisive, guilt because delay felt like politeness at the cost of something he wanted now. My

chest tightened. "I mean, what if I say yes and you just come to resent me for ruining your big chance?"

He didn't flinch. "That won't happen."

"How can you be so sure?" The question was small but edged with everything I couldn't say: What if every headline he wanted was a reminder of the thing he'd sacrificed? What if our small life started to strangle him?

"Killian, I've never been so sure about anything. I want to be with you. If you say yes, that's all I need. I'm happy enough where I am. I enjoy the work, and I make decent money. I just need...I need more of a commitment from you. I feel we're coasting along. We've been dating for almost a year now, and we're barely any further than we were six months ago."

The logic of his argument was infuriatingly sensible. I felt childish for wanting to argue. Moving in together was a big step, but so was turning down the kind of opportunity most people framed as once-in-a-lifetime.

"This is...a lot. Moving in, I mean. It's a big deal."

"Yeah, it is. I'll understand if you feel you can't. I'm not trying to pressure you."

"And yet, I feel like my choice is to move in with you or you move away."

His face shifted, realizing he'd boxed me into a corner. "I didn't mean it like that. I wanted to include you in this decision-making process. I've been offered this incredible job in New York, but you're here, And I get it. This is your home, where you have a successful, growing career and your family, not to mention school. I

can't ask you to leave all that. I want to stay here with you, but I need to be certain you're as committed to our relationship as I am before I pass on this job offer. I wouldn't be asking you to do this if I didn't think we could make it."

Hearing him weigh the practicalities of my life against his own ambition made my heart ache.

"You're okay with me taking a little time to think this through?"

He nodded. "Of course. I totally understand. It's a big decision."

"Are you disappointed?"

"That you didn't just jump on the offer?" I nodded, and he shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed, but the truth is, this is what I really expected. You never make any decision quickly. It takes you a while to get used to new ideas."

The familiarity of that—him knowing me so well—both soothed and stung. I blushed despite myself. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize for being yourself, Killian. I love you just the way you are, and I wouldn't change you for anything."

He said it like it was a fact. It should have been enough to make my throat unclench. Instead, it made me feel guilty for weighing my own anchors against his dream.

I gave him a small smile. "Thanks."

"Just don't take too long thinking about this. I have to let them know something within three weeks. That's when the guy I'd be replacing leaves, at which point they'll have to start advertising the opening."

I took a deep breath. "Three weeks, huh?"

"That doesn't mean you get the whole three weeks to stew over this," he added, a twinkle in his eye that tried to hold up the edges of a terribly serious conversation.

I grinned despite myself. "You know me too well."

"Damn straight—or not straight, as the case may be." He sounded relieved enough to joke. The ultimatum was out there now, and the ball was in my court. "Now come on, finish your salad. I'm not paying for food you don't eat."

The banality of it—food, a salad, light ribbing—was almost cruelly normal. I forced a laugh and dug in, playing at calm. On the outside I was composed. On the inside, everything was messy and loud. The future split into possible maps in my mind, one where we stayed put and Micah chose love over journalism; one where he left and we floundered on late-night calls until we grew apart and broke up; one where I uprooted my life, gave up my career and everything I knew, and found myself lonely in a city that would not soften immediately to me.

I wanted, more than anything, to sit down with Adam and unpack all of this with someone who knew my history, my fears, and the parts of me I didn't show to anyone else. I wanted counsel, bluntness, the kind of honesty that pinched but helped orient.

I finished the salad because Micah teased me into it, not because I was hungry. My appetite was long gone. But the ritual steadied me. Stab. Lift. Chew. Swallow.

The decision waited like a sealed envelope. I hoped I'd know how to unfold it. I hoped I'd do right by both of us.



## Chapter 2

I pulled into the driveway of the beach house, turned off the car, and reached for the door handle.

Instead of getting out, however, my hand fell away as I leaned my forehead against the steering wheel. I'd been thinking about Micah's offer all the way home, twisting and turning it, looking at it from every imaginable angle.

He wanted me to move in with him. He had this incredible job offer at *The New York Times*, and was willing to give it up for me. I loved Micah. I knew he loved me. Why wasn't I jumping at this opportunity?

A tap on my window startled me. I glanced up to see Kane smashing his face against the glass.

I chuckled as he stepped back to allow me to get out.

Slamming the door, I leaned back against it.

"You look like crap," my little brother commented with a grin.

"Gee, thanks, Kane. Way to make a guy feel good about himself."

"Have you been at the office all this time?"

"No, Micah came by and forced me to go to dinner with him."

"I'm sure he really had to twist your arm."

I shrugged. "I didn't put up too much of a fight, but you should see the pile of work on my desk."

"It'll still be there tomorrow."

"Thanks for reminding me," I groaned.

"Is that what's got you so bummed?"

"How do you know I'm bummed?"

"Killian, no offense, but when it comes to your emotions, you're as transparent as a pane of glass. So, is it work related?"

"No. Work is work. It's busy, but I can handle it."

"Then it must be something between you and Micah."

"How'd we get there so fast?"

"Because you don't have a life outside of Micah and your job, especially now that classes are over for the summer."

"Ouch."

"The truth hurts. So what happened?"

"Micah asked me to move in with him."

Kane's mouth fell open. "Wow!"

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"That's a big deal, Kill."

"I said that too."

"What did you tell him?"

"That I needed to think about it."

"What are you going to do?"

"Think about it."

"Dad's gonna have a fucking cow."

"Let me talk to him. And I haven't decided anything yet."

"That's still total bovine territory. What do you think Micah would do if you said no?"

"Move to New York," I said miserably.

"Don't you think you're overreacting a bit?"

"No. That's what started all this. He has a job offer at the *Times*."

His eyebrows leaped up. "As in *The New York Times*?"

"That's the one. He says he'll stay here if we take our relationship to the next level, but he needs more commitment."

"Heavy stuff."

"Yeah. It's a lot. I think he's been planning this for a while, and the job offer was just an excuse to ask me. You should have heard all the arguments he had ready."

"Valid arguments?"

"He said we'd get to see each other more—which is obviously true—and I'd be closer to work. I'd have one place to go home to every night instead of having half my stuff here and half at the B&B."

"They're pretty convincing arguments."

"Yeah."

"So what's the holdup?"

"I don't know."

"Do you love him?"

"Of course I do! I'm not sure if I'm ready to move in with him, but I know I love him. What sucks is that I know if he goes to New York, we might as well call it quits. I'm not cut out for a long-distance relationship, and I don't think Micah is, either."

"So, what? You're willing to just throw everything away?"

"I didn't say that!"

"Come on, Kill, you love Micah, and anybody can see that Micah is crazy about you. You're good together. Not perfect, maybe, but then what couple is? I

think you're good for each other. Don't screw this up just because you're scared of taking a chance."

"Are you saying I should move in with him?"

"My opinion doesn't matter. This is your choice, and you have to make it on your own. I just don't want to see you miserable a few months from now because you didn't go out on a limb for Micah."

"But you think I should do it?"

He sighed. "I just said..."

"I know what you said. I'm not asking you to decide for me. I just want to know what you think."

"Okay. Yeah, I think you should. What's the worst that could happen? A few months from now you decide it's not working, so you move out?"

"What if it ruins our relationship?"

"You just said it'll get ruined anyway if Micah takes the job."

"Yeah, but if he leaves now, I won't be the one who caused him to lose out on his dream job."

"Dude, that's some seriously twisted thinking."

"If he leaves and goes to New York, yeah, our relationship is as good as over. But if he stays for me, and then we break up anyway, he's also lost out on what could be a great opportunity for him."

"So essentially what you're saying is that you don't have any faith in your relationship."

"I... Damn. I hadn't thought about it like that."

"You can't just date forever. Micah's not that kind of guy. If you want to be with him, you're gonna hafta ante up, take a risk, go out on a limb, shit or get off the pot..."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture."

I threw my arm around his shoulder, and we started for the house.

"When did you become the wise one?" I groused. "I'm the older brother. I'm supposed to be giving you sage advice."

He grinned. "I'm sure there'll be plenty of chances for that. I'm just trying to get ahead of the game."

"What were you doing in the front yard, anyway?" I asked as we let ourselves into the house.

"I was on the porch talking on the phone with Lila when you pulled up. You still hadn't gotten out of the car by the time we finished, so I decided to make sure you were okay."

"How are things with Lila?"

Kane had started dating Lila after they met at a Halloween dance sponsored by my university's LGBTQ club the previous fall. They'd been together for over six months—a record for him.

He grinned. "Great! Better than ever. She's so awesome, Kill."

"I'm glad." I gave him a quick hug. "At least one of us knows what he wants from his relationship."

"What's this?" Adam asked as he came into the hall. "Are you and Micah having problems?"

"Long story," I groaned.

I threw my arms around the neck of the man I considered my father and gave him a big hug. I hadn't seen him for almost a week.

"I have plenty of time," he said, sarcasm practically dripping from his voice. "I have to wait up for Tad."

"Wait up for him? Where is he?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Isn't it a school night?"

"Why yes, now that you mention it, I believe it is.

Not that this ever seems to make any difference with him."

"Are you having trouble with him?"

"You might say that," Kane inserted, "but I'll let Adam fill you in on the details. I'm going up to my room. Good night, guys."

We said good night to Kane, and then Adam motioned me to the living room. "We might as well be comfortable while we swap sob stories."

After we settled on the sofa, he asked, "Who wants to go first?"

"Why don't you?" I needed a distraction from my dilemma, even if it was for just a few minutes. "What's going on with Tad?"

Adam threw his hands up in frustration. "I just don't know what to do with him. I'm not used to dealing with a headstrong teenager. I was spoiled with Seth, Kane, and you. Obviously, I wasn't grateful enough for having three well-behaved, respectful sons, so now I'm being punished."

"What's he doing?"

"What doesn't he do? He doesn't listen to anything I say. He pretty much does what he wants with no regard to house rules. He refuses to do the chores I give him. He goes out whenever he wants without telling me where he's going and comes home whenever he feels like it. He skips school. He doesn't go to his therapy appointments. It's driving me crazy."

I was aghast. "I had no idea it was this bad."

"I didn't want to bother you with it. You've been so busy with work and school. It didn't start off this bad. He was quiet and sullen, but at least he went to school and came home. He's gotten progressively worse."

"I'm sorry," I said miserably. "I feel like this is my fault."

I'd been the one who persuaded Adam to take in the abused runaway and former street hustler. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but maybe I should have given it more thought.

Adam sighed. "As much as I'd like to blame you..." He added a weak smile to make sure I knew he was joking. "...it's not your fault. I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to this. The only one to blame for his behavior is Tad himself, but he's not about to take responsibility for his actions."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

"I've tried everything short of putting a shock collar on him. Talking to him is like talking to a fire hydrant—he's just as responsive. You don't get any indication he's hearing a word you say. I tried grounding him, but he just totally ignored it. Kane's even tried talking to him. I don't know what else to do. Honestly, I think I'm nearing the end of my rope with this kid."

"What would you do? Where would he go?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his face wearily. "I need to see Ilana about this, I guess. She could tell me what the options are." Ilana Constantino was a friend of ours who happened to be a family-law attorney—something that had come in handy more than once in the past.

"Do you think it would help if I tried getting through to him?"

"It might. He does seem to have a sort of hero-worship thing going on with you. It certainly can't hurt anything."

"How is Kane making out sharing a room with him?"

He shrugged. "Okay, I guess. You know Kane. Not too much fazes him. It's not like Tad's violent or destructive. As far as I can see, he doesn't steal or anything like that. It's just his attitude, as if he's only rooming here. He's not even openly rude. He doesn't talk back, he's just politely distant."

"I'll talk to him. I promise."

"I'm sorry to have to drag you into this."

"Drag me into it? I'm the one that dragged you into it in the first place. He wouldn't even be here if it weren't for me."

"Still, you've got enough going on without me adding to it. What's this about you and Micah? Did you say you're having problems?"

I could hear the caution in Adam's voice.

"Not problems exactly, more like...an important decision I have to make."

Adam's eyebrows disappeared into his hairline. "He didn't propose, did he?"

I almost laughed at the expression on his face. I knew it was mean, but I couldn't help drawing it out a little. "What would you say if he did?"

"I'd say you're way too young to be thinking about getting married! Killian, you're only eighteen!"

"I'll be nineteen in a couple of weeks."

"That's...you're still...too young!" he sputtered.

I burst out laughing. "Don't give yourself a coronary, Adam. He didn't ask me to marry him."

He slumped back against the sofa with a relieved sigh. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry," I giggled. "Actually, he asked me to move in with him."

"What?" Adam was back at attention now.

"That's just as bad!"

I raised an eyebrow, at which he calmed down a little. "Don't exaggerate. There's a big difference between marriage and moving in together."

"Are you actually considering this?"

It was my turn to shrug. "I don't know. I haven't really started thinking about it yet. I was kind of in shock when he asked me."

"What's to think about?"

"Well, he had some pretty convincing arguments. We'd get to see each other a lot more. I'd be closer to work. All my stuff would be in one place. It's not like this is out of the blue, either. I mean, we *have* been dating for over a year now. Micah says he's ready to take our relationship to the next level. He wants more commitment."

"What about you? Are you ready?"

"I guess that's what I have to figure out."

"There must be another way to show that you're committed. Are there any other options?"

"Yeah, I could move to New York with him."

"What?" he screeched.

"He's been offered a job at *The New York Times*."

Adam stared at me in open-mouthed shock.

"And he's willing to give that up to stay with me. He just needs to know that I'm as committed to our relationship as he is."

Adam shook his head silently. "This feels like emotional blackmail to me."

"Adam!"

"Come on, Killian. Look at it from outside yourself for a minute. He's pretty much said, 'Move in with me or I'm moving to New York.'"

"Well...not exactly," I said, squirming slightly. After all, I'd pretty much thought the same thing at dinner.

"Killian, you know I like Micah. I like him a lot, in fact. In time, I'd even be honored to have him as a son-in-law. I just don't know if this is the right time. As much as you've matured in the last few years, you still have a lot of growing up to do. Micah's a little older, so maybe he's starting to think in terms of settling down. That doesn't mean that it's right for you."

"But what if it is? I don't want to lose Micah because I'm afraid to take a chance." I realized I was echoing Kane's words from earlier.

"In the end, this has to be your choice. Just be careful and make sure you've thought it through from every angle before you decide."

"You'll support me no matter what I choose?"

"You know I will." He pulled me against him for a hug. "You're my son no matter what, and I'll always be here for you. I just can't help but worry. That's what dads do."

I grinned. "I know. Thanks, Dad."

"It's late, and we don't both have to wait up for that juvenile delinquent. Let's make up a bed for you, and you can get some sleep."

I was feeling quite tired, so this sounded like an excellent plan to me.

We pulled out the sofa bed and made it up together, after which Adam tucked me in just like old times. I had to admit being treated like a kid again was kind of nice. I was surprised to find how much I longed for those relatively simple times when I didn't have life-altering "grownup" decisions to make.

*"Oh, who are you kidding?"* my inner voice reminded me. *"Your childhood years weren't exactly rainbows and sunshine."*

Still, there's something to be said for not having to make any decisions other than what kind of candy you want.

I fell asleep not long after that and didn't awake until the next morning. The sun was slicing through the curtains at an angle that immediately told me it was later than I usually got up. I looked at my watch. It was almost ten o'clock.

"Adam!" I bellowed as I bounded out of bed.

I was hopping around on one foot trying to pull on my pants when he stuck his head in the door and calmly answered, "Yes?"

"Why didn't you get me up? Now I'm late for work!"

"I decided you needed some rest. I called Shane, and he agreed. He said you deserved a break."

I sat down with a sigh.

"They're conspiring against me now," I grumbled to myself, loud enough for Adam to hear. "And to think that just last night I was wishing I could be a kid again. Now I remember why it's such a pain to have your choices taken from you."

Adam laughed. "You're welcome. Go hit the shower. I'll have breakfast ready when you come down."

"Yes, sir!"

I gave him a mock salute and mounted the stairs to my old bedroom two at a time. I still kept some clothes in a dresser there, even though the room was now shared by Kane and Tad. Kane's side hadn't changed much since I'd given up my bed for the new arrival, maintaining his unmistakable stamp of skater casualness. Clothes were thoughtlessly tossed wherever they happened to land as he took them off. Books and papers were scattered about his desk, and his bed was unmade and rumpled.

Tad's side, in contrast, seemed eerily tidy. All his clothes were put away. His desk was neat as a pin. His bed was even made, its corners in sharp hospital style. There were no personal effects in evidence. It reminded me of Adam's comments the night before that it was almost as if Tad were just rooming there. It had the impersonal feel of a hotel room. What was going on in his mind?

Dismissing those thoughts for the time being, I grabbed an outfit out of the dresser and went to take a shower. By the time I'd finished, Adam was waiting for me with a breakfast fit for a king—Henry VIII, to be exact, and I'd be the same size as that notoriously rotund monarch if I ate everything he'd prepared. He'd cooked

what looked like at least half a pound of bacon, scrapple, sausage, toast, and a half-dozen scrambled eggs.

I eyed the spread of food warily. "Um, Adam, I hope you invited over the entire Baltimore Ravens team."

"You're looking a little thin," he said with a sheepish grin.

"I'm fine, but that's not the point. I'd be sick if I ate even half of that. What were you thinking?"

"I guess I got carried away."

"I'd say. I would have been happy with a slice of toast and some jelly. I've kind of gotten out of the habit of eating breakfast."

"Killian!" He sounded quite horrified at my nutritional negligence. "Breakfast is—"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. It's the most important meal of the day. I can't help it if I just don't have much appetite in the morning. I assure you, I do eat."

"Probably junk food and those clogged arteries in a bag they serve at fast-food restaurants."

"Like you can talk about clogging arteries with your entire hog's worth of meat products," I objected, pointing at the table.

We both burst into laughter at the same time.

I ate my slice of toast, and Adam munched on a strip of bacon. At his concerned expression, I compromised and had a little of the scrambled eggs. He seemed at least somewhat mollified by my olive branch—enough, at least, to put the rest of the food away. I had a feeling I knew what they'd be having for dinner that night.

"What time did Tad get home?" I asked.

Adam rolled his eyes. "I think it was close to two. All he had to say was that I shouldn't stay up worrying about him. Apparently, he can take care of himself."

"Where is he now?"

"School...I hope. That's where he's supposed to be, and since he caught a ride with Kane, I can only assume he actually intended to go today."

"I promise I'll try to talk to him soon. So...what time did you and Novak decide he should expect me in the office?"

Adam gave me a look. "He said to tell you to come in whenever you felt like it since the work wasn't going anywhere."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I muttered. "I guess I'd better get going then."

"Can you do me a favor first?" he asked.

"Sure."

"One of my clients is having trouble accessing their project files through the shared drive, and they need to review the proofs today. Do you think you could drop off a hard copy at their office for me and save me a trip to Salisbury?"

Adam was a graphic designer and worked from home when he wasn't helping Steve at their bed and breakfast.

"No problem. Where's the office?"

"Downtown on the plaza. It's for a new regional magazine called *A Shore Thing*. They're hoping to launch by the winter. I designed their logo, and now they're considering having me build out their website."

"That's great!"

"It will be even better if I get the job. It could lead to a lot more work down the road."

He left the room and came back a minute later with a thumb drive.

"Old school, but it works," he said as he handed it to me. "Thanks, Killian. I owe you one."

"Happy to help."

I spent the drive back to Salisbury completely ignoring my situation with Micah, choosing instead to think about the growing gulf between Adam and Tad. I didn't understand Tad's behavior at all. He'd seemed so grateful when I arranged for him to stay with Adam.

True, he'd been a little distant even then, and I had to admit that I hadn't been there for him as much as I'd wanted. Just like everyone else, maybe he'd suffered from my absence lately.

I parked the car near the downtown plaza and walked the rest of the way. The Plaza was the historic Main Street of Salisbury, the small city where Novak Investigations had its offices and where I went to college. It was a brick-paved stretch of galleries, small upscale retail boutiques, antique stores, and law offices. I dropped the envelope off at the magazine's office, then decided to pop into a nearby art gallery since Novak wasn't expecting me right away.

Avant Garde was owned by Nikki Avanti, an old acquaintance I'd met while doing an investigation for my late cousin Aidan. His widower, my friend Will, worked and showed his art there, but I didn't know if he'd be there or not. Even if he wasn't, it was worth popping in to see Nikki.

As I approached the gallery, I took in the window display. I was a little disappointed to see it wasn't one of Nikki's life-sized erotic sculptures. Instead, it was an arrangement of large ceramic pots of varying shapes and sizes, one almost as tall as me. I shifted my gaze past the pots and into the gallery, and I froze mid-step. I recognized the guy standing inside talking to Will, even though his back was to me and I hadn't seen him for almost a year.

I spun on my heel and kept walking, hoping Will hadn't noticed me. Of course, my luck is never that good. I'd only taken a few steps when I heard a familiar voice call my name.

I stopped and slowly turned.

"Hey," he said with a nervous smile as if unsure of his reception. "Long time no see."

I took a deep breath and hoped my voice would sound steadier than I felt.

"Hi, Asher."

## Chapter 3

Asher.

I hadn't seen my ex since last summer, before he'd left for college.

He'd matured in the intervening year, losing much of his baby-faced softness. He looked like a man.

He was wearing his hair in a natural style, longer than I remembered ever seeing it. While always athletic, he'd beefed up since he left, and the tight, white T-shirt he was wearing really showed off his physique and created a striking contrast against his dark skin.

His eyes hadn't changed at all, though. They were still the same amazing silver that always reminded me of the ocean's surface in the moonlight.

"You look great," he said, echoing my thoughts about him.

"Thanks," I mumbled, blushing. "So do you."

He smiled, giving me that familiar tingling in the pit of my stomach. I looked away, suddenly becoming fascinated with the pots in the gallery window.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Good."

"How's work?"

"Busy."

"College?"

I shrugged. "Okay."

"Are you capable of answering a question with more than one word?" His teasing smile took the bite out of his voice.

I grinned sheepishly. "My first year went really well. Classes ended last week. I finished with a 3.56 GPA, which would have been higher if work hadn't gotten in the way a few times."

"I'd imagine the Fenton Black case really got in the way. I saw you on TV. You're pretty famous now."

My face grew even warmer than it had been. "I'm not famous. It was just a high-profile case."

"You're seeing someone, right?"

For a moment, I wondered how he knew that, but then I realized we were from a small town and people talk.

"Yeah. His name is Micah."

"How's that going?"

"We're...good."

I glanced at his face and found he was studying me closely. Had he caught the hesitation in my response? If so, what was he making of it?

He smiled again. "That's great. Classes are out for me too, so I'm home for the summer. I'm...single." He paused and tipped his head slightly to one side as if gauging my reaction. When I kept my face carefully neutral, he went on, "I'm going to get a job, but I'm taking a few days to just catch up with everyone. I'm over here seeing Will and Nikki right now."

We fell into an awkward silence. At least, I thought it was awkward. I didn't know what Asher thought. He was just watching me shift uneasily from foot to foot.

"I should get to work," I finally muttered. "I have tons of paperwork to catch up on."

"Okay. It was good to see you again, Killian. I've...missed you. I'd like to get together sometime so we can really catch up."

"Uh, yeah, sure. That would be great," I said, once again not meeting his eyes.

Hadn't we just caught up? What more was there to say? In an effort to get away from this uncomfortable conversation, I started backing away.

"I'll, uh, talk to you later," I said, hoping I didn't sound as dumb as I felt.

"I'll call you," he said with a little wave.

I waved back then turned and jogged away down the street. It didn't matter that I was going the wrong direction. I would walk over a block and head back. I wasn't about to pass the gallery again.

As I made my way to my car, I brooded about my brief meeting with Asher. I didn't like the feelings it had awakened in me. To be fair, I'd known I wasn't completely over him. He was my first boyfriend, the guy I'd dated for almost two years, and I couldn't just walk away from that. Seeing him again after so long had simply stirred up old memories—at least, that's what I tried telling myself.

*You're dating Micah now.* That thought only made me remember Micah's offer. I had these huge decisions to make about our relationship, and now Asher was back in the picture. Talk about bad timing! His presence could only complicate matters.

Then again, why should I let it? He hadn't been a part of my life in an intimate way for a long time. Even before we broke up, things were tense between us. We'd grown apart...or maybe just grown up. I couldn't deny

that there was still a strong attraction between us, though. Was it wrong for me to still be attracted to Asher while I was dating Micah?

I pushed it all out of my mind to concentrate on the drive to the office. The heavy downtown traffic provided a welcome distraction.

I arrived at the building housing Novak Investigations, a 1930s-era two-story brick structure. The first floor was home to a florist and a clock-repair shop. We shared the second floor with a dentist and, until recently, a lawyer. The lawyer had moved to a larger place on the plaza a few months before to be closer to the courthouse. So far, no one had occupied the vacant space.

One of my favorite things about our office was the door. It was like something straight out of an old film-noir movie: frosted glass with gold-stenciled letters reading "Novak Investigations."

I unlocked the door and stepped directly into my office, which doubled as the reception area/waiting room. It was barely larger than a walk-in closet. There was just enough room for my L-shaped desk and two hideous orange Naugahyde chairs.

I took a look at my desk and sighed. Was it my imagination or had the paperwork multiplied during the night? I needed to speak to my boss about this.

"Novak?" I called out.

"In here," he answered.

I stuck my head into his office to find my boss in his familiar thinking position: feet up on the desk and leaning back in his chair.

Shane Novak looked every inch the retired cop he was. Physically, he was still a match for many of the much younger officers. His almost-six-foot frame was remarkably fit, and his blue eyes were as sharp as ever. He'd taken early retirement when his wife was diagnosed with cancer . After her death, found himself bored and lonely, so he'd moved to the Shore and opened his own private-investigations agency.

The agency was a solo effort for a while, until he hired me to be his secretary one day after I literally ran into him...with my car. Although I was now his assistant investigator, I still handled all the secretarial work—which was becoming increasingly difficult as my caseload grew.

Novak's office was a huge contrast to mine. Where my space was downright spartan, Novak's was welcoming and full. The wall opposite the door was completely taken up by bookcases of many different heights and materials. They were all overflowing with law books, phone books, atlases, maps, and a set of encyclopedias that still listed the USSR as a world superpower. One case was reserved for his collection of detective novels, many of which were autographed first editions.

The focal point of the room was Novak's desk, a golden-oak monstrosity that was so huge I often thought the office must have been built around it. It certainly wouldn't fit through the door. Behind the oak behemoth was a bank of battleship-gray filing cabinets, each meticulously labeled and locked. Two large leather armchairs faced his desk, and a shockingly ugly humpbacked sofa sat under the room's sole window.

I'd had issues with that sofa when I first started working there, but we'd since worked out our differences. I ignored it, and it left me alone.

"Morning," I greeted him. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

He swung his feet off his desk and indicated that I should sit down. I plopped into the chair feeling a little worried. How would he react to what I was about to say? Novak had always treated me with a great deal of respect and tended to be very easygoing, but I'd never seriously suggested we hire someone else before.

"We've been really busy lately," I began.

He raised an eyebrow. "I noticed."

I laughed. "Then I'm sure you've also noticed the pile of work on my desk that seems to just keep growing."

He nodded.

"So...I was thinking that maybe it's time we hire a secretary."

He leaned back and started rubbing his chin.

"Now, before you say no, just think about it. We're busier than we've ever been before—so busy we're even starting to turn down cases. I think we can afford to bring in another person. It's getting harder and harder for me to keep up with the office work. My caseload is taking me outside the office more, which means I have even less time to catch up. It's especially frustrating during the school year when I'm trying to balance schoolwork, my cases, and the office work."

He looked slightly amused. Not the reaction I was hoping for. I rushed on.

"I'm not complaining. I love my job, and I love working here with you, learning from you. It's just that I could use a little help. And now's the perfect time to start looking, since we have all summer to find someone before my classes start up again."

I paused to take a breath.

Novak leaned forward and rested his arms on his desk. "Are you finished?"

I nodded sheepishly.

"You're right."

"You don't have to answer— Wait. Did you just say I'm right?"

"Yes. In fact, I've been thinking the very same thing. It's time we brought in someone else so you can focus on investigating. You're generating as much work as I am, which means you're busy with cases. We need someone who can focus solely on paperwork and keep the office running."

"Wow. I was expecting an argument, at least."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Usually I would have obliged, just for form's sake, but there's no point arguing about this. Like I said, I've been playing with ideas of expanding the agency for a while now."

I frowned. "Speaking of expanding, how are we going to fit both me and a secretary in that broom closet you call my office?"

"I was getting to that. I bought the building last month."

I blinked. "What building?"

"This one."

My mouth dropped open. "The whole building?"

"Yep."

"Are you kidding?"

"Not even a little."

A million questions were flying through my head.

"But...why? What are you going to do with it?"

You could afford that?"

Novak laughed. "I'm going to ignore that last one, because it's none of your business. As for the rest, Frank, the lawyer who just vacated the premises, owned the building and leased us this space. When he told me he was moving his office and was thinking about selling, I had a brainstorm. I approached him with an offer before he even put the place on the market."

"How much does a building like this cost?"

"Let's just say I got a good deal in exchange for a little *pro bono* work for him now and then."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Not much will change. I assumed the current leases with the flower shop, Tick Tock Clock Shop, and Dr. Schuster. I was debating whether I would rent out Frank's old office, but now that we've decided to enlarge the agency, I think we'll just knock a door through the wall and increase our own space."

"Wow. That sounds awesome!"

"Glad you approve." His tone was as dry as unbuttered toast. "Now let me run another idea by you. I've been thinking that it's time you applied for your own license instead of just working as my assistant."

"Whoa. Slow down. I can only take so much."

"I'm serious, Killian. If we're going to expand, you need to be fully licensed."

I could barely believe what I was hearing.

"You really think I'm ready?"

"I think you're more than ready. You already have more experience with actual investigations than your average beat cop. You're a natural, and, like I said, you're pulling in work on your own reputation. I'll write you a recommendation, and I'm sure Hank Kaplan will too."

Hank Kaplan, or Sergeant Kaplan as I usually referred to him, was on the local police force. He was an old friend of Novak's from their shared days with the Metropolitan PD. Sometime after Novak retired, Kaplan decided to move his family away from the city to the more rural Eastern Shore of Maryland. He'd turned out to be a good source for us in the past. It's always handy to have an "in" with the local police.

"What exactly is involved in applying for a license?" I asked, basking in Novak's approval.

"A lot of paperwork," Novak responded with a grin.

"Oh great! Just what I need—more paperwork."

Novak's grin widened. "Now that we've decided to hire a secretary, you'll have plenty of time. I'll take care of getting the forms. You can handle placing the ad in the paper."

"What should it say?"

"You're a smart kid, and you've been doing the work. You figure it out. Just make sure you include that the applicants should have some experience doing research. It would be nice to hand off some of that to someone else. Now, didn't you just say you have a lot of things you should be taking care of?"

I knew a dismissal when I heard one, so I made my exit and returned to my desk. I shoved the piles of

paper aside with a promise to get to them later and started drafting the help-wanted ad.

Once I had it worded to my satisfaction, I emailed it to Novak for his approval. He emailed me back so quickly I wasn't even sure he'd read it, but I uploaded it to the usual job sites anyway.

That finished, I turned to the stacks of work and started trying to get some of it off my desk. I was making pretty good progress when the office phone rang.

"Novak Investigations, Killian speaking," I answered.

"Killian! Just the guy I was looking for," said a vaguely familiar female voice.

I searched quickly through my mental files trying to put a name to the voice.

"Nikki?" I ventured.

"Hey, good guess!"

*What could she be calling me about? I wondered. Did it have anything to do with Asher?*

"I was just thinking about you earlier. I was at the Plaza. I had to drop some things off for one of Adam's clients."

"Asher mentioned that he saw you. Actually, that's why I'm calling. You should have stopped in."

"I was rushing to get to work," I fibbed. "How are you?"

I'd always liked Nikki, but it had been quite a while since I'd seen her last.

"I'm doing well, thanks...except for one thing. That's actually why I'm calling you."

"Oh?"

"It would be better if we could talk about this in person. Would that be possible?"

"When were you thinking?"

"As soon as you can manage it. Could I treat you to lunch?"

I glanced at the clock. It was after lunchtime, and I was still full from my late breakfast, but what the heck? Nikki had roused my curiosity.

"That works, but you don't have to treat me. Did you have somewhere in mind?"

"Why don't you meet me at the gallery? We can walk to one of the restaurants on the plaza."

"That sounds good."

"See you soon."

I hung up and stared at the phone, wondering why Nikki would want to talk to me. I shook my head and started straightening up my desk. There was no point speculating. I'd find out for myself soon enough.

I grabbed my keys, told Novak where I was going, and headed to the plaza for the second time that day.

I stepped into Avant Garde and looked around. The art on display was in a constant state of flux, pieces that didn't sell quickly being removed to make room for fresh items. Nikki co-owned the gallery with her brother, Derrick, whom I'd never particularly cared for. Last I'd heard, he was on an extended buying trip to Europe, and his absence was most noticeable in the type of work being offered. He'd favored abstract and modern pieces. While Nikki appreciated all styles, she tried to be a little more eclectic. Realistic watercolor landscapes hung next

to found-object sculptures, something you would never have seen when Derrick was in charge.

"Killian!" Will exclaimed as he came out of the office. He quickly crossed the room to give me a hug.

"Hey!" I greeted him with a warm smile. "How are you?"

"I'm good." He studied me for a minute. "I guess Asher caught up to you this morning."

I nodded and looked away.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah!" I said with a little too much force to be completely convincing. "I'm fine. It was just weird seeing him again."

"Yeah, sorry about that. When I saw you outside, I said something before I thought about it. He was out the door so fast, he didn't even say goodbye. I think he still has feelings for you."

Time to change the subject. "Is Nikki here?"

Will gave me a look that clearly said he knew I was full of shit, but he was willing to let it slide this time.

"She's on the phone. She'll be out in a minute."

I glanced around at the walls again, desperately casting for a topic of conversation that wouldn't involve my ex.

"Is that one of yours?" I asked, pointing at one of the paintings.

He followed my gesture and nodded. "Yeah, one of my newer pieces actually. What do you think?"

I walked over to examine it. It was a deceptively simple marsh scene, but the layers of color and detail

were exquisite up close. Off in the distance was a small hut, maybe a hunting blind or a crab shanty.

"I really like it," I told him.

"You do?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Of course! You're incredibly talented, Will. You should know that by now."

He gave me a pleased smile and an awkward shrug as Nikki appeared behind him. I tried to keep my face from registering the shock I felt at her appearance.

Nikki was known for changing her look often. In fact, I didn't know if I'd ever seen her twice with the same hair color or style. She'd outdone herself this time, however. She'd completely shaved her head and was wearing a vintage 1950s red-and-white polka-dot coat dress, complete with crinolines, pearls, and matching pumps.

"Killian, thanks so much for coming." She waited for my reaction, peering at me over her trademark horn-rimmed glasses. She had a pair in every color. Today's were red to match the outfit.

I had a theory that Nikki used her fashion as a type of performance art. Watching people react was part of the fun for her.

"No problem, Nikki," I replied coolly. "It's good to see you."

She looked a little disappointed at my non-reaction, but rebounded quickly. "Will, you'll be okay here alone while we run to lunch, right?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

Nikki turned to me and raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"I'm ready when you are," I told her.

"Great. Let's go."

I followed her down the plaza, watching with amusement when people turned to stare. In a fairly conservative city like Salisbury, Nikki really stood out. She led me to a trendy little café and settled at one of the small, round tables. "Is this okay?"

"It's fine." I sat down across from her.

"You know, you're just no fun anymore, Killian," she groused with a big grin. "Ever since you became a famous detective, you're just too good at hiding your thoughts."

I laughed. "I'm hardly famous. And it's funny you should say that. I was told just the other day that I'm completely transparent when it comes to my emotions."

"Maybe it depends on how well the other person knows you," she suggested with a knowing smile. "How is your boyfriend?"

"Micah's good."

"It was nice to see Asher this morning." She was fishing.

I refused to rise to the bait. "It was. I didn't even know he was back in town."

I hoped this wasn't all she'd invited me down here for.

As if in answer to my thoughts, she suddenly became all business. "Well, I didn't ask you to meet with me so we could gossip about your private life—or not gossip, as the case may be." I grinned in acknowledgement of my evasion. "I want you to consider taking a case."

That caught me off guard, but once again I kept my face as neutral as possible. "Oh really?"

We were interrupted at that moment by the arrival of our waiter. He was young, quite cute—and obviously gay. He gave me a dazzling smile as he introduced himself, practically ignoring Nikki, who simply rolled her eyes.

Once we'd placed our orders, Nikki got back to business. "If I remember correctly, one of the last times I saw you, I told you I was dating a Native American artist named Lily Snyder."

"I think I remember that."

"We're still seeing each other. In fact, it's become quite serious—a fact that has come as a surprise to no one more than me."

"Congratulations," I said before realizing it wasn't quite what I wanted to say.

"For what?" Nikki asked with a giggle.

"Managing to stay monogamous for this long? Staying with one person for longer than two months? I guess that is a cause for celebration."

"I didn't mean..."

Nikki waved off my apology. "I'm teasing, Killian. It's nice to see that you're still human. I was getting worried there for a while. Back to what I was saying, I'm still in a relationship with Lily, who's very active with her tribal association. In fact, she was elected to the tribal council last year. Her big thing is teaching the younger generation about their history and culture. As a part of that, she and her father, Fletcher, have been lobbying the tribe to join Pemberton University in co-financing an archaeological dig on her father's property. The university was very interested but didn't have enough funding to pull it off on its own. The council

finally agreed last fall, and the excavation started two weeks ago. It's supposed to be a one-month project, with all the artifacts recovered being returned to the tribe after they've been studied."

"Okay, so where do I come in?"

"I'm getting to that." She ran a hand over her bald head. "Lily's dad is something of a...I guess you'd call him a shaman." She watched me closely for a reaction. "Okay, I need some feedback here. If you find that hard to swallow, then we'll just have a nice lunch and say *ciao*. There's no point going on if you have trouble believing in the supernatural."

I laughed. "Nikki, if you only knew. Let's just say I have no problem whatsoever believing anything you could possibly throw at me that falls within the paranormal realm."

I knew I'd said too much when her eyes lit up. She leaned forward eagerly. "There's a story here. Spill."

I shook my head. "Don't get distracted, Nikki."

She grinned. "I won't, but we're not moving on until you dish the dirt. What did you mean?"

I sighed and tried to decide how much to tell her. It had to be enough to satisfy her curiosity. Then again, what did it really matter? It wasn't as if I could possibly say anything to surprise Nikki.

"Well, you know Steve bought that B&B out in the country?"

"Right. The haunted one. I read the story your boyfriend wrote."

I nodded. "Yeah. I'm the one who found out it was haunted."

Nikki frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I saw the ghost."

Her eyes widened. "You saw... So that means... What? You're...psychic?"

"My friend Judy says I have gifts. I tend to think of it more as a curse."

I laughed good-naturedly, but my statement wasn't far from the truth. If I could have exchanged my gifts, I definitely would have.

"So...you see dead people."

"Well, that's oversimplifying it. I seem to have the ability to see and interact with the past, especially if something really tragic has occurred. Sometimes, I see ghosts, which...is not as fun as you might think. Other times, I experience what happened at a particular place as if it were happening to me. That's even less fun than seeing dead people."

She shook her head in amazement. "I'm impressed. That must come in handy in your line of work, though."

"Not as much as you'd think. Unfortunately, at this point I don't actually have any control over my gifts. I don't get to choose when things will happen or what I'll see when they do. I don't even have veto power, although Judy says I might if I understood my gifts better."

"Hmm. In that case, you really might enjoy meeting Fletcher."

"Why? You think he could help me?"

"I have no idea. You'd have to ask him."

"Maybe I will, but I'd rather you not mention it, please. I'd prefer to bring it up myself, if I decide to."

"Of course!"

"So anyway, back to the case...?"

She laughed. "Yes. Do keep me on track. Where was I?"

"You were telling me about the archaeology project, and then you stopped to explain that Lily's dad is a shaman."

"Oh, yes. The project started two weeks ago. This past Sunday night, Fletcher had a feeling that something was wrong down at the dig site. Instead of waking up his grandson, he walked down there alone. When he got there, he was jumped by someone who struck him on the head. The blow alone wouldn't have been that serious, but he has a bad ticker and the shock caused him to have a heart attack."

"Oh my God! Is he okay?"

"Well, he probably would have died except his grandson is a shaman too...or I guess maybe a shaman-in-training, if that's a thing. Anyway, Jacy—the grandson—woke up and realized something was wrong, so he called 911 and took the paramedics to the site. They were able to resuscitate Fletcher."

"Do they know why he was attacked?"

"They think maybe someone was looting the dig. Some of the pits were disturbed, the tarps were removed, and there were signs of digging. It's hard to know exactly what was taken, if anything, but the tribe is understandably upset. What makes it worse is that the council feels the archaeological team is keeping them out of the loop about what's going on. Apparently, this isn't the first time the team has noticed signs of tampering, but nothing was ever said to the council."

"What kind of security is there at the site?"

Nikki shrugged. "I have no idea. You'd have to talk to Lily for the rest of the details. That's pretty much all I know."

"What about the police?"

"They're supposedly investigating the assault on Fletcher but not the thefts. They have no real proof that there have even been any, and even if there have been, they can't do much besides taking the description of the stolen items and letting the tribe know if they turn up somewhere. I had some art stolen a couple of years ago, and the case was never solved. No one was caught, and the pieces were never recovered. I have security cameras and alarms now, but even they can be circumvented if the thieves know what they're doing."

Our food arrived, and we stopped talking for a few minutes. As we began to eat, I thought about what Nikki had outlined for me. Since it was pretty clear where this was going, I decided to get right to the point.

"So, the tribal council isn't satisfied with the police investigation, they don't trust the archaeological team, and I'm guessing they want to hire a private investigator—which is where I come in."

Nikki smiled and swallowed. "Exactly. Except, at this point, it's just Lily. When Asher said he saw you this morning, it put the idea in my head. I called Lily and she thought it was a great idea. I don't know if she's had enough time to run it by the entire council, though."

"I'm not a licensed investigator yet, so all my cases have to go through my boss. I'll have to get his approval before I can take on anything officially. I'd also like to talk to Lily in person before I make any decisions."

"That's reasonable."

"Then there's the matter of my fees. A private investigator is not cheap."

"That's where the council will come in. Lily's an artist, so I know she can't afford you on her own. She's going to have to convince the council to hire you."

I shrugged. "I can email you my fee schedule when I get back to the office. That way she'll have something more firm to take to them."

"Sounds like a plan. You talk to your boss and get back to me. In the meantime, I'll let Lily know what we've discussed so far."

We finished our meal over chit-chat. When the sultry-eyed waiter dropped off the check, I made sure I snatched it up before Nikki could.

"Killian, if you don't let me pay, the deal is off," she threatened.

"If you don't let *me* pay, I won't take the case," I countered.

We glared at each other over the table for a few seconds before we both burst out laughing.

"Split it?" she asked.

I agreed, and we took care of the bill, leaving a hefty tip.

I followed Nikki back to the gallery and stayed to chat with Will for a while. Eventually, though, I had to tear myself away and return to the office. I still had a stack of paperwork waiting for me—and a potential new case to discuss with Novak.

## Chapter 4

When I got back to the office, I found it locked up again, which meant Novak was probably out on a case. After letting myself in, I just stood there, staring at the pile of paperwork. I was so sick of it. I was itching to work on a case myself. Unless something really big was going on, I'd usually be handling at least two at once. Lately, however, the accumulated mountain of office work had reduced my caseload to one. The job for Nikki would have interested me if only to get me away from my desk, although truthfully, the whole prospect appealed to me.

The most intriguing part about it was Lily's father, Fletcher. Judy was the only other person I'd ever met who had psychic abilities, but hers were very different from mine and mostly involved the present and future. While I wasn't exactly sure what being a shaman entailed, Nikki's suggestion that he might be able to help me kept running through my head. If I was going to be stuck with the damned gifts—and it definitely seemed I was—then it would be nice to have some control over them. Or at the very least understand them better.

I emailed a fee schedule to Nikki, then wrote up my notes from our meeting while everything was still fresh in my mind. When I finished that, I emptied my trash can, rearranged my desk, and checked my email before finally admitting that I couldn't put off the paperwork any longer.

With a sigh, I reached for the pile just as the phone rang.

*Yes!* I didn't care if it was a telemarketer, I'd stay on the line just to put off real work a little longer.

"Hello, Novak Investigations, Killian speaking."

"Hey, Killian."

"Hey, Micah," I greeted him guardedly.

"How's work going?"

I glanced at the pile of paper on my desk. "It's not really going anywhere. It's just kind of hunkering down for a long stay."

He laughed. "I wanted to call and check on you after last night."

"I'm okay."

"I know you're probably feeling this came out of nowhere, but I've been thinking about it for a while now."

I gave an edgy laugh. "A little warning would have been nice."

"I was waiting for the right time. Getting this job offer felt like a sign that it was time for me to make some important choices."

I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. I needed to change the subject—and fast—but how could I do that without being obvious?

"I haven't really had time to think about it as much as I'd like." Could I get any more noncommittal?

"I figured that. I'm not trying to rush you. I meant what I said last night. I want you to take your time thinking this through. You have to be sure about whatever you decide. I just wanted to check on you, make sure you were all right."

Screw being obvious. The subject had to change now!

"I saw Asher today," I blurted out.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, and for a few moments I thought Micah might have hung up. I was just about to say "hello?" when he spoke up.

"Interesting," he said. His tone gave nothing away.

"What do you mean?"

"Only that it's odd he showed up just as we're trying to make some important choices about our relationship." He paused. "And that you'd bring him up in the middle of this conversation."

"I didn't...I mean...it was just a surprise. I haven't seen him since last August."

"I guess he's home for the summer?"

"Yeah."

"How did you feel about seeing him again?"

"I'm not sure," I answered after a brief hesitation.

"It was very weird."

"What did he say?"

"Not a lot. We didn't talk long. He asked me how I was, how you and I were. Then he said he wanted to get together some time to catch up, or something like that. I was just trying to get away at that point. I felt really uncomfortable."

He sighed. "Damn. What lousy timing. Or maybe it's perfect timing."

"Come again?"

"Killian, I've always felt like you've never really gotten over Asher. Now here he is, and he wants to get together with you."

"I don't think he meant..."

"I think you should do it."

"What?"

"I think you should go out with him."

"*What?*"

"I think you should go out with Asher. Maybe it will help you settle your feelings for him once and for all. I doubt we can move on until you do."

"But...what about you?"

"What about me?"

"I mean, what if..." I didn't know how to put into words the thoughts flying through my mind.

Micah did it for me. "What if you realize you're still in love with him and he's the one you want to be with? Okay, yeah, that would hurt like hell. But Killian, I love you enough to take the risk, because I know we don't stand a chance unless you figure out what you want. The only way I can see that happening is if you resolve your feelings for Asher. So, if that means getting together to reminisce about old times, you have my blessing."

I didn't know what to say. I was shocked by the idea of Micah telling me to go out with my ex-boyfriend. How does one respond to that? On the other hand, I had to admit, the idea intrigued me. I couldn't deny the attraction was still there between us.

I shook myself. What was I thinking?

"No. I don't want to go out with him."

"Killian, don't say no right now. Just think about it."

"Micah, this is really weird."

"Why? Lots of people are friends with their exes. And besides, I want you to be sure about us."

The office door swung open and Novak strolled in, his briefcase in one hand and a sheaf of papers in the other. He distractedly waved hello as he walked past, his attention absorbed by whatever he was reading. More work for me, no doubt.

"Hey, Micah, Novak just came back, and I have to talk to him about a possible new case. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Kill, just think about it. If we do decide to move forward with our relationship, I don't want there to be any ghosts left to haunt us."

*Interesting choice of words*, I thought as I hung up the phone. Was he right? Was Asher haunting my current relationship? If so, he was one ghost I'd failed to notice. I'd thought things were great between Micah and me, at least up until last night. Micah hadn't given me any signs that he was dissatisfied with what we had, that he wanted more—or had he? Maybe I just hadn't noticed. I tried to think back over the last few months, but nothing stood out to me. I didn't like to believe I could be that clueless...what with being a detective and all.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I reached for my case notes. Time to talk to the boss.

"Knock, knock," I said from Novak's doorway.

He looked up from the stack of paper he still held in his hand. Frown lines creased his forehead. Whatever he was reading, it didn't look like good news.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked.

He nodded and tugged at his tie in an irritated fashion. His old uniform was very casual, but lately he'd taken up wearing suits. I figured it had something to do with our increasingly well-off client list. I could tell

Novak wasn't exactly thrilled about the suits, but he never complained.

I eyed the suit and decided to bring up the question that had been weighing on my mind. "You're not going to make me start wearing those, are you?"

Novak arched an eyebrow. "Wearing what? Clothes? They will remain mandatory in the office, yes."

"I meant the suit."

"Ah." He chuckled. "I'm tempted to say 'yes' just to watch you squirm, but no. We have very different styles and we appeal to different people. You'd just come across like a kid playing dress-up."

That was fine with me. I nodded. "Good."

"Now tell me what's really on your mind. You didn't come in here to ask about the dress code."

"I have a possible new case I want to run by you." When I noticed him glance down at the papers again, I asked, "Is that what you have there? A new case of your own?"

"Possibly," he replied with a sigh. He opened his briefcase and dropped the stack inside, then snapped it shut with a definitiveness that clearly said the subject was closed.

That happened sometimes. Novak would get a case so sensitive that he couldn't talk about it with me. They always seemed to weigh the heaviest on him since, by their very nature, they presented difficult problems.

He looked up, his attention now fully on me. "So, tell me about this one of yours."

"I got a call from an old friend this morning, Nikki Avanti. She co-owns the Avant Garde Gallery on the plaza."

"We've met. Interesting person."

"To say the least. She's been dating someone for about a year, a local Native American artist named Lily Snyder. Nikki tells me Lily and her father are very involved in tribal politics. They convinced the tribal council to allow an archaeological group to come in and do an excavation on his property."

"Why did they need the council's approval if the site was on his property?" Novak interrupted.

"I think the tribe is co-funding the dig, but that's all I really know. I haven't spoken to Ms. Snyder yet. This is all from Nikki, who wasn't as knowledgeable as I would have liked. I wanted to talk to you before I pursued things further."

He nodded. "Go on."

"The excavation began a couple of weeks ago, and everyone thought it was going well...until this past Sunday. Ms. Snyder's father, Fletcher Snyder, walked down to the site rather late at night and was attacked, apparently by a looter. Relations between the archaeologists and the tribe became very strained after it was learned that previous signs of looting weren't reported to the tribe. There's very little the police can do since Mr. Snyder didn't see his attacker, which is why the tribe wants to hire me to investigate. Well, technically, I think at this point Ms. Snyder wants me to investigate, but the tribe will have to agree."

Novak thought for a minute before saying, "My biggest reservation would be that it appears there's a lot of politics involved. That always makes for a messy situation. Otherwise, it sounds like an interesting case. What are your feelings?"

"It has my attention already. I've always been fascinated by archaeology. It would be a learning experience as well as a nice change of pace."

"So you want to take it."

"I guess I do."

"Then go for it. Set up a meeting with Ms. Snyder to get more details. You'll need to find out how the tribe works and how the politics will affect you. You'll also need access to the site and..." He cut himself off with a grin. "Sorry, I don't guess I have to tell you how to do your job."

I grinned back. "It's okay. You know I still value your mentoring. It's always good to learn from the wisdom of our elders."

Novak gave me a sour look. "I'd say you're already getting into the spirit of indigenous culture."

I laughed.

"Did you place the ad yet?"

"Yeah, I posted it online this morning."

"Online?"

"Yes. You see, there's this thing called the Internet. It's a series of tubes. Welcome to the 21st century."

"Okay, smart ass. I just meant I hope the quality of our applicants is up to snuff."

"Considering only old people read the paper these days, I'd say the quality will be just fine."

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever, whippersnapper. I have something for you before you get back to work." He popped open his briefcase once again and rummaged inside it for a few seconds. Pulling out some papers held together with a large clip, he slid the bundle across the

desk towards me. "That's your investigator's license application."

I stared down at the stack, a good quarter-inch thick. "You gotta be kidding me."

"Not in the least. Oh, it also includes your handgun-permit application."

"My what now?"

"Kid, as you well know, this is a dangerous occupation. You have to be able to carry some protection."

"I don't need a gun. That's why I took those self-defense classes."

"Those are great, and in hand-to-hand combat will give you an edge. It won't do you much good if the other guy has a gun and is out of reach, however. Trust me. As much as I hate to say it, there are times when a gun can make all the difference. You do need one."

"Fine, then I don't *want* a gun," I insisted stubbornly.

"Killian..."

"The one and only time I've ever fired a gun at another person, I killed him. I shot him three times, and watched him die right in front of me. I don't ever want to use a gun again."

"It was self-defense. If you hadn't shot him, he would have killed Jake and, most likely, you as well."

"Still..."

"Just fill it out. If you get approved, it'll make me feel better. You don't even have to shoot the damned thing. It's amazing how effective a gun can be without ever being fired. Oh, and you'll also need to be approved by a State Police Certified Handgun Instructor."

"This keeps getting better and better."

"It should be a breeze. And don't worry about all the fees. I'll cover them."

"Gee, thanks."

"Look, kid, this is what's involved if you want to get your license and keep working with me. I've got to know you're protected. Now, if you want to go out on your own..."

"No! That's not what I want."

"Okay. You'll do everything necessary then?"

"Yes," I conceded with a sigh.

"Good boy. Now get lost so I can go back to work."

I returned to my office and dropped the application onto my desk, where it landed with a thud. Leafing through the pages, I discovered more than half of them were informational only, outlining the multitudinous requirements and regulations involved in applying. The requirements—several head-and-shoulders, passport-type photos that had to be taken within thirty days of the application, two different fingerprint cards for each submission, and about five different forms—would take several days to complete.

What's more, I had to be certified with a handgun. I wasn't too worried about that. In one of my father's attempts to make me manlier, he'd forced me to take shooting lessons. I'd been a natural, hitting the target with deadly accuracy time after time. Even then, though, I hadn't been comfortable with the weapon.

I set the papers aside and picked up the phone to call the art gallery. When Will answered, I asked for Nikki, who came on the phone in a matter of seconds.

"Did you get the fee schedule I sent over?" I asked after the initial greetings were out of the way.

"Yeah, and I think I'm in the wrong business. No wonder the cliché is 'starving artist', and not 'starving private eye'."

I laughed. "Yeah, well, generally people don't try to kill you in the course of a sculpture."

"Unless one of my models is unhappy with my representation of his, ahem, assets." Did I mention Nikki specialized in life-size, erotic statues? "So does this call mean you're taking the case?"

"I'd like to talk to Ms. Snyder before I make any commitments."

Nikki snorted. "Ms. Snyder? She'd get a kick out of that. She'll insist you call her Lily. She's not one to stand on formality."

She gave me Lily's phone number, and we said goodbye.

When I dialed the number Nikki had given me, the phone was answered by a woman with a low, throaty voice.

"Ms. Snyder?"

"Speaking."

"This is Killian Kendall. I'm a private investigator—"

"Oh, you're Nikki's friend?"

"Yes, I met with Nikki earlier, and she told me a bit about your problem."

"Yeah, I talked to her a little while ago. Does this mean you're willing to take the case?"

"Actually, I need some more details from you before I make that decision. Would you be able to meet with me sometime tomorrow?"

"My father is being released from the hospital tomorrow morning. I guess Nikki explained all that to you."

"Yes, she did."

"Good. We could meet at his house in the afternoon if that works for you."

"That would be fine."

We set a time, and she gave me directions. After we hung up, I stared at the piles of paperwork cluttering the surface of my desk. I couldn't put it off any longer. With a sigh, I slid one of the stacks closer and dug in.

I pulled into the drive of the address Lily Snyder had given me. It was a large yard, heavily wooded, with a weathered, one-story dwelling set well back from the road. The house looked quite at home in its rustic setting, the cedar-shingle siding and the redwood deck that stretched across its front blended in well with the forest crowding in around the building, as if waiting patiently to reclaim the land the home sat on. The ground was covered with a carpet of pine needles, eliminating any need to mow a lawn. Wherever sunlight managed to slip through the canopy of treetops overhead, small patches of wildflowers added splashes of color to the idyllic scene.

I parked behind a silver pickup that I assumed was Lily's. An older-model green sedan was drawn up closer to the house. As I approached the front door, it swung open to reveal a woman I guessed to be in her

mid- to late-thirties. She was about my height with dark eyes and long, dark hair that she wore in a single braid over her right shoulder. She wore a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off, and snug, faded jeans. She was thin, but her exposed arms showed a wiry strength that belied her slight frame.

"You must be Killian," she greeted me with a warm smile.

"Yes. Ms. Snyder?"

"Lily. I won't answer to anything but Lily." I smiled, thinking about Nikki's prediction. "Come on in and I'll introduce you to my dad." She stepped back and held the door open.

As soon as I crossed the threshold, I noticed a spicy sweet scent that I couldn't quite identify.

Lily noticed my sniffing and grinned. "Dad's an herbalist, among other things. He grows as much of his stock as he possibly can and buys the rest only from well-established organic farms. He stores most of it in the house where he can keep the temperature regulated. That's probably what you smell."

I nodded, and she led me from the entryway into the living room. An invitingly plump leather sofa and matching chairs provided seating, while pine end tables supported cast-iron lamps and beautiful Southwestern pottery. Cases on the walls displayed a vast collection of artifacts—everything from arrowheads to tomahawks. A deep bookshelf held more stone tools, along with skulls, bones, feathers, and an interesting assortment of odds and ends. Behind them, the shelves were stuffed to overflowing with books.

An older man was reclining on the sofa. "You'll have to excuse me for not getting up to greet you. It's been a rough week."

"Killian, this is my father, Fletcher Snyder. Dad, this is Killian Kendall, the private investigator I was telling you about."

When we shook hands, I was surprised by the strength of his grip. However infirm he appeared at the moment, this was no weak invalid.

"Nice to meet you, Killian," he said. "Have a seat, and please call me Fletcher." It seemed everyone in this family was on the informal side.

I studied Fletcher, finding his age hard to pinpoint. His long hair was snow white, and his face was creased with a maze of wrinkles, but there was something startlingly young about his eyes.

I was so caught up studying him that it took me a moment to realize he was examining me just as carefully. Our eyes locked, and I felt a strange tingle at the back of my neck. I'd felt it before, years ago, the first time I'd ever met Judy, but this was an even stronger sensation. I had no doubt that I was in the presence of a powerful shaman.

He smiled, and his eyes twinkled merrily. "Nikki never mentioned you were gifted."

There was no point denying it. "I asked her not to, sir."

"Fletcher. None of this 'sir' business."

"Gifted?" Lily asked.

Fletcher peered at me intently another moment before answering. "Unless I've missed the mark completely, I believe young Killian is a spirit-talker." He

chuckled at my surprised expression. "And a rather strong empath...and maybe a few other things, as well. And...I think he might be two-spirit."

Lily turned to me with a thoughtful look on her face.

"A two-spirit?" I asked uncertainly. This meeting was not going at all the way I'd expected it to.

"Our ancestors believed that most people are born with either a male or female spirit, each of which is only half of the whole perfection that is the Creator Spirit. However, some are born with two spirits, both male and female. These people were held in a very high regard because they were seen as being closer to the Creator. These two-spirits often held positions of authority and respect within their communities—healers, mediators, shamans—and they usually had spiritual powers that set them apart."

My eyes widened as all the implications hit me. "But I'm not Native American."

"I didn't say you were." He smiled. "I don't believe two-spirits are limited to only our people."

"You said they have both male and female spirits. Does that mean they're gay?"

"By today's definition, perhaps, or at least bisexual. Some would probably be considered transgender. Traditionally, though, they were not bound by gender roles. But this isn't what you came here to talk about—at least, not directly."

"Um, right." I tried to gather my scattered thoughts. This man I'd never met before had just seen my gifts and known I was gay...and all we'd done was shake hands! "I...I wanted to get some more details about the

thefts and your assault so I could decide if I would take the case."

He smiled again, this time with an enigmatic twist of his lips that made me think he knew something I didn't. "Lily will be able to fill you in better than I can. Sometimes I don't remember things so clearly these days."

I found that really hard to believe. His mind seemed as sharp as a tack. I suspected it was just his way of involving Lily and possibly reserving his energy.

Lily had sat in the other chair and was following our exchange closely. She turned her attention to me with a bemused expression. "Where do you want me to start?"

I took a deep breath and pulled out my notebook, glancing quickly at what I'd jotted down from the meeting with Nikki to buy a little more time. "Why don't you tell me a little about the tribe? I'm afraid I don't know much about it."

"Well, we're the Pomocatan Tribe. We don't have Federal or State recognition, but we are an organized group with a governing council voted on by the tribe. Both my father and I currently serve on the council. We're Algonquin, as all the tribes around here are. There aren't many of us left, though. The early settlers in this area quickly did their best to annihilate the native population." She stopped and grinned. "But I'm veering off into politics and ancient history, always a danger with us Indians. We could be here all day if I get on that topic."

I laughed. "It's okay. What about the dig? How did it come about, and how does it all work?"

"It was Dad's idea," she said with a glance in Fletcher's direction. His eyes were closed, but I knew he was listening to every word. "This property has been in the family for generations. We knew there was an old village site in the woods, and were sure it could tell us a lot about our ancestors. When I contacted the university last year, they were enthusiastic, but didn't have enough money to launch the project on their own. The budget for the Archaeology Department isn't very substantial, apparently, and they get most of their funds through grants. They said if we'd help subsidize the excavation, they'd share all their findings with us. We agreed, on the provision that all artifacts found would be returned to the tribe after they were studied."

"She makes it sound a lot easier than it was," Fletcher inserted dryly. I glanced over to find his eyes were still shut. "The council was not happy about the whole idea in the first place, and the stuffed shirts at the university didn't want to agree to our terms. It took a lot of work and all my negotiating skills to come to an agreement."

"Why didn't the council want the excavation?"

"Some people felt it was disrespectful to dig up the ancestors' graves," Lily explained. "Others thought it was wrong to allow white people to disturb what they consider sacred ground. We were finally able to get them to see that the possible benefits—the knowledge and even the artifacts themselves—far outweighed their fears."

"Was it just the funding that you needed to council to sign off on, or the excavation in general?"

"Well, technically, we didn't need their permission for the excavation since it is Dad's property. We could have just gone ahead with the excavation without their approval, but to say it would have destroyed our relationship with the tribe would be an understatement. The property may be ours, but the history and artifacts belong to all of us. But as you said, and just as importantly, we couldn't afford to co-finance the excavation. We needed the tribe's help, and for that we had to secure their approval."

"That makes sense. Before, you said the artifacts would be a benefit. Other than knowledge and education, what value would they have?"

"Well, they have a certain market value, but we'd never sell them. We could, however, use them to open a museum. The Nanticoke tribe has a great museum in Millsboro, Delaware. If we could do something similar here, it would give us a place to educate not only our young ones but also the general public. While we have some artifacts that people have donated, these new ones would be documented and come with a history and a story, thanks to the archaeologists. If this first dig is successful, it might lead to future projects. Eventually, they could even get a picture of the entire village and what it might have been like."

I jotted a few quick thoughts in my notebook. "Okay. That makes sense and seems like a worthy project. So your tribe is putting up part of the financial backing, but what about the university?"

"They're actually providing the lion's share. I guess you could say I'm the liaison between the tribal council and the university. I've been working with the

head of the Archaeology Department, Professor Quinn Healy, to get all the funding in order. He was in charge of the actual dig preparations, putting together the crew and equipment. That took all winter. They started the actual dig two weeks ago, and everything seemed to be going great. Whenever we visited the site or talked to Dr. Healy, he told us they were right on schedule, or even a little ahead. The weather has been ideal, and they'd made a few wonderful finds already. They seemed very excited about some evidence of Adena influence. I wasn't even sure what that meant, so I had to get online and do some research. You see, the Adena culture was mainly centered in Ohio, but artifacts have been found in this area before..."

"You're chasing a rabbit," Fletcher said, cutting her off.

Lily grinned. "Sorry. I get so excited about all this I tend to go off on tangents."

"It's okay. I find it all really interesting. Maybe you can tell me more about that later. At that point, you had no idea anything was wrong?"

"No idea at all."

"When did you first start suspecting something?"

"I never did. What happened was..."

"I'll tell this part," Fletcher spoke up. He opened his eyes and focused on me. "The first glimmer we got that things weren't quite right was Sunday night. The spirits were agitated, even more so than they've been since this all began. I couldn't sleep, so I decided to walk down to the site and see what was wrong. When I got there, I was bonked over the head, and my heart, which isn't all that strong to begin with, decided to give out on

me. I didn't even get a glimpse of my attacker. I wouldn't be here talking to you now if Jacy hadn't woken up and known something was wrong."

"Jacy is your grandson?"

"Yeah. He's about your age. He's two-spirit as well."

"Why didn't the spirits keep him awake?"

"Everybody has different strengths. Jacy doesn't hear the spirits—or see them for that matter. His talents lie in other areas."

I wanted to ask what his talents were, but it really wasn't germane to the investigation. I had to stay focused. "What happened after that?"

"The police got involved," Lily replied. "They interrogated Fletcher as soon as he was able to talk. When they found out he'd been attacked, they questioned the archaeological team, who had noticed that one of the pits had been disturbed during the night. There was digging going on after they'd gone home."

"There's no security?"

"No, but from what I understand, that's pretty much the norm. It's in the middle of the woods after all, so they count on that and secrecy to keep people away. There just isn't enough money to put any sort of actual guard on the site. This isn't exactly a high-profile project."

"Do they know what was taken?"

Lily shook her head. "Not really. They just know that the pit was disturbed, and they admitted it wasn't the first time it's happened."

"Do you think I'd be able to see the site and talk to the team?"

"We'll arrange something, but, if possible, I'd rather keep your real involvement a secret."

"You don't want them to know I'm a private investigator?"

"No, I'd rather they didn't."

"Why? Do you suspect someone on the team?"

She shrugged. "I don't suspect anyone in particular, but they kept us in the dark about the disturbances, which makes me a little...untrusting, shall we say?"

"Then what do you want me to do? It's going to be hard asking my questions without them becoming suspicious."

"Can we just say you're a reporter?"

I thought for a minute. I'd never really gone undercover for a case before, and I had to admit I kind of liked the idea.

"That could work. People are vain. The idea of having their names in the newspaper might do wonders to loosen tongues. Although, if one of them is involved in the thefts, then they'll more than likely be just as closed-mouthed around a reporter as a PI."

"But a PI would probably put them much more on their guard than a reporter simply doing a puff piece for the local paper."

She had a point. "Who was the officer in charge of the investigation into Fletcher's attack?"

"Sergeant Kaplan," Fletcher answered.

"I know him. I'll talk to him and see if I can get anything else from him."

"I guess this means you're taking the case," Fletcher said with a grin.

I couldn't help smiling back. "I admit I'm hooked, but you knew that when I walked through the door."

He nodded happily. "I'm glad you're taking it. I feel you were sent to us for a reason. Unfortunately, you agreeing to take the case is only half the battle. Now we have to sell you to the council. They'll be the ones paying you, after all."

"Are you available tomorrow night?" Lily asked me.

"As far as I know. Why?"

"I'll call an emergency council meeting then. If you can be there, we'll present you to the council and take a vote."

"Do you expect opposition?"

"I always expect opposition," she muttered dryly. "If I said the sky was blue, someone would argue with me. I think in the end, though, they'll approve it. If artifacts that belong to the tribe are being stolen, they'll want to recover them—or at least stop the thief. If Fletcher vouches for you, that'll carry a lot of weight with the majority, which is all we need to make a decision. I'll be in touch with you to let you know what time the meeting will be. I'll try to get them to hold it here so Fletcher can attend."

"Just give me a ring."

"Thank you, Killian," she said, standing up.

I stood too. "You're welcome. It was a pleasure meeting you, Fletcher." I shook his hand again.

Lily walked with me out onto the front porch. "This really does mean a lot to us."

"I just hope I'll be able to help."

"I'm sure you will. Nikki says you're good."

I blushed slightly, but before I could think of an appropriate response, a motorcycle carrying a slender figure roared into the driveway. The bike skidded to a stop, and the rider slid off before the rumble had even died completely away. Two gloved hands removed the helmet, releasing a curtain of thick, shoulder-length, dark-brown hair. The hands brushed the hair back to reveal the delicate face of a boy around my age. I guessed him to be Jacy, Fletcher's grandson and Lily's nephew.

He considered me with dark, serious eyes that glinted with intelligence.

"Jacy, this is Killian Kendall," Lily said, confirming my guess. "He's going to be looking into the goings-on down at the excavation. Killian, this is my nephew, Jacy."

Jacy gave me a brief nod in greeting as he set the helmet down on the bike seat and walked towards me. He was a man of few words. He was taller than me by a few inches, and willowy. He pulled off his gloves and shook my hand, and I felt the same tingling I'd sensed with Fletcher and Judy. He must have felt it too, because his eyes widened slightly at my touch.

"Nice to meet you," I said.

He gave me a tiny smile. "You too. Is Fletcher home, Lily?"

"He's inside on the couch."

Jacy gave me another nod and went inside.

"He's a little shy," Lily explained with an affectionate smile. "He's very close to his grandfather, and has been beating himself up ever since Sunday—as if he could have done any more than he did. He wanted

to be here when Fletcher came home from the hospital, but he couldn't get off work."

I nodded. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow night. I'll phone you if I have any more questions, and you can do the same if you think of anything else I might need to know."

"Great! And thanks again, Killian."

I walked to my car thinking less about the case I'd just accepted—pending approval from the council, of course—than about the family who had asked me to take it. After hearing more details, I didn't think the job sounded nearly as exciting as it had before. The chances that I'd be able to find out much more than the police were remote, at best. My only advantage was that I would be able to give it a lot more time and attention. Other than giving me a chance to see an actual archaeological excavation, the work didn't hold a lot of interest.

Fletcher and Jacy, however, fascinated me. Could they teach me more about my gifts? I wanted to ask but had no idea how to bring up the subject. I'd just have to wait and see what happened.

## Chapter 5

I awoke the next morning to a drizzly, overcast sky. I would have preferred spending the day in bed, but work beckoned. Although I'd made respectable inroads into the pile the day before, there was still a rainforest's worth of paperwork on my desk. Groaning, I forced myself to climb out of bed and hit the shower before going downstairs.

Steve, standing behind the check-in desk in the foyer, looked up with a warm smile as I clattered into view. "Hey, Killian."

"Hiya, Steve-o," I said, ducking into the dining room.

Every morning, he laid out a continental breakfast for the guests. I grabbed a bagel, slathered it with cream cheese—the real kind, not that low-fat stuff—and joined Steve once more.

He eyed my bagel enviously. "That's not low-fat, is it?"

"Nope."

"Ah, to be young again," he said wistfully.

"I don't know why you're doing that stupid diet. It's not like you're fat."

"I just needed to get back in shape. I let things slide while I was getting this place on its feet, and now that it's running fairly smoothly, I can focus on my health again. All those nights of fast food were starting to catch up to me." He patted his stomach with a rueful expression. "What's on your schedule for today?"

"Still fighting paperwork," I grumped. "I don't think I was cut out to be a desk jockey. I might have a new case, though. I'll find out tonight."

"Anything exciting?"

"Maybe."

He nodded. It was a sufficient answer. My friends and family were used to my being cryptic about cases. "How about the situation with Micah? Adam told me what was going on."

"What about it?" I responded cagily.

Steve sighed. "You've not even thought about it yet, have you?"

"I have!" I insisted. "A little. Okay, not that much. But I have thought about it."

"Killian..."

"Steve, I really don't need a lecture about this. There's just been a lot going on. I haven't had a chance to give it my full attention yet, but I will."

"Don't leave him hanging too long, Kill."

"I won't. I've got to go now. I'll talk to you later." I rushed out the door before he could have a chance to continue the conversation.

*My mood now matches the weather*, I thought.

I did my best to avoid brooding about Micah on the ride into work. That was easier said than done. I knew I needed to make a decision, but I was scared of both options. If I said no, I wasn't ready to move in with Micah, would he really leave for New York? If I said yes and moved in, where would we be if things didn't work out?

And then there was Asher...

Luckily for the sake of my sanity, a distraction was waiting for me. As I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed a construction van sitting there. I heard the racket even before I reached the office door.

The renovation project had begun.

That certainly hadn't taken long. Novak must have had the whole project in the works already before he'd told me about it—which made me wonder how long he'd had this planned. I was lucky he'd told me at all. I could just picture arriving at work today to the shock of a construction crew demolishing my office.

The reception area, also known as my office, was in total disarray, just as I'd expected. All the furniture had been moved into one corner and protected with canvas tarps. A fine layer of sawdust already covered the floor. A carpenter wielding a saw was enlarging an opening that had been partly cut in the wall leading to the neighboring office. The noise was deafening. I had a feeling I wouldn't be getting any paperwork done that day—at least not at my desk.

Just then, the horrible screeching of metal on metal overwhelmed the roar of the saw, followed quickly by a sharp crack and an echoing silence. The carpenter cursed under his breath as he glared at his broken saw blade.

A worker peered through the hole from the other side with a look of consternation. "What happened?"

"Hit something," the first guy responded, earning himself a new nickname as far as I was concerned: Captain Obvious.

"What'd ya hit?" the other guy asked.

"Dunno, but it could make things complicated."

I turned from the workers and knocked on Novak's closed office door. There was no answer, so I let myself in. I was startled to find Novak sitting behind his desk working. He looked up in surprise as I entered, and I noticed the reason for his lack of response. He was wearing a pair of soundproof earmuffs. He pulled them off with a weary sigh.

"They've been here for hours already," he grumbled. "If I'd known it was going to be this noisy, I would have said to hell with expanding and just moved to a new office."

"I think you'll have a reprieve for a while. It looks like they've hit a snag."

"I'm not sure if I should be relieved or not. I think I'd just rather it was over."

"So, if I hadn't come to you yesterday about hiring a receptionist, was this going to be a surprise?"

"Actually, yes. I was going to give you a few days off, and the renovation would be done when you came back."

"Oh. Sorry for ruining the surprise. Then what should I do today?"

He shrugged. "We'll stick to my original plan. Take the day off. It's not like you can get anything useful done. I won't be here much longer myself."

"They'll be okay with no one around?" I asked, hooking a thumb in the direction of the outer office.

"They have a key to the front door."

"But not to your office?"

Novak gave me a sour look. "No, not my office. I'm not a novice, kid."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to imply you were."

"I know. I'm just in a bad mood. Why don't you get lost before I take it out on you some more?"

I grinned. "I can take whatever you can dish out, old man."

He grinned back, but before he could respond with a biting retort, Captain Obvious stuck his head in the door. "Hey, chief, we broke a blade, and we don't have another one in the van. We gotta run to the store. Also, we seem to be hitting something unexpected, so this might take longer than we first thought."

Novak heaved another sigh. "Any idea what you're hitting?" he asked as if he was afraid of the answer.

"Not really. We did some test holes and didn't see nothin', plus we checked over the plans and all, so we know it's not a load-bearing wall." He shrugged. "We'll figure it out."

"Does that mean we can't have a door there?"

"No, it just means it'll take longer to get one. I think. Or maybe not."

Novak nodded and waved him away. "Thanks for clearing that up. Just do whatever you need to do."

Captain Obvious gave us a sketchy salute and left.

"This is going to be a nightmare," Novak predicted grimly.

Since I had the unexpected pleasure of a day off, I decided to make the most of it by getting a head start on researching my case. True, I wasn't officially hired yet, but I had every confidence that Lily and Fletcher could be quite persuasive.

A hunt at the library turned up very little on the local tribes. Thinking maybe I was just missing something, I asked the librarian, who confirmed there were not many books on the subject. She did help me locate a few she thought might be helpful.

One was a children's book written so long ago it referred to the natives as savages. I was shocked it was still on the shelf. Another simply didn't have any information about the local tribes. The other two books covered the Algonquin in general, with only passing references to our local tribes. It was better than nothing, however, and it gave me a little more knowledge than I'd had before.

While I was reading one of the books, my cell phone rang, garnering me several annoyed looks. I quickly answered it, speaking in a hushed tone.

"Killian?" It was Lily.

"Hi, yeah. Sorry, I'm in the library doing some research."

"Oh, I'll keep it short, then. The meeting is on for tonight at Fletcher's house. Can you be here at six?"

"No problem."

"Great. See you then."

I went back to my reading, since what little information was available made me feel a bit better prepared for the meeting that night. After deciding which books might be beneficial, I checked them out and went back to the B&B, where I spent an hour or two studying them in my room.

Since the books were not overly informative, I decided to see what I could turn up online. Unfortunately, in this case at least, it turned out to be not

much. I managed to find the Pomocatan tribe's website, but it was an outdated, sketchy affair with very little actual information. A few other results came up in my search, but they were just mentions with no real substance.

I gave up and had an early dinner with Steve, thankful that he left touchy subjects alone. After finishing, I left for Fletcher's house. There were already several cars in the drive, so I parked on the road.

Jacy answered my knock. "Hi," he said shyly. "Come on in. Some of the council members are already here, but not all of them."

He led me into the living room. Fletcher was still on the couch, although sitting a little straighter than the last time I'd see him. An older woman with a cloud of cottony hair sat next to him, talking earnestly. Lily stood off to one side speaking to a middle-aged man with a florid face and light-brown hair who appeared quite perturbed. A mousy-looking woman about the same age as Lily was standing nearby, watching them with a worried expression.

At my entrance, the room fell silent, and all eyes turned my way.

"Everyone, this is Killian Kendall," Lily introduced me quickly. "He's the reason why I called this meeting. I'll wait until Hollis gets here to explain more."

The red-faced man grunted in a way that made it sound like he'd just stepped in something unpleasant.

"Killian, this is Gordon Wallace." Lily introduced him, and he gave me a weak handshake and a suspicious look.

"This is Eldora Little, and the lady on the couch next to Fletcher is Miss Celia Vessey." Eldora nodded timidly in my direction, while Miss Vessey waggled her fingers in greeting. "We're just waiting for Hollis Landon to get here so we can start the meeting. Hollis is the chief of our tribe."

"Jacy isn't staying for the meeting, is he?" Mr. Wallace interjected. "This is council business. It's bad enough we have to have a white boy here."

I'd taken an instant dislike to the man, and his words and tone just reinforced that impression. He looked just as white as I did. I carefully kept my expression neutral, however.

Lily's face clouded over, but before she could respond, Jacy spoke up. "No, Mr. Wallace, I won't be staying for the meeting. Since I do live here, though, I simply answered the door when Killian knocked." He turned his focus to Fletcher: "I'll be outside if you need me. I'm going to work on my bike."

I thought I detected a glint of amusement in Fletcher's eye as Jacy made a dignified exit.

There was no amusement in Lily's expression as she wheeled towards Wallace. "Was that really necessary?"

"What?" he responded with disdain. "You know that council meetings are for council members only."

"Of course, we all know that, you—"

The door opened again, cutting off any further argument, to admit another middle-aged man. He was about as opposite to Gordon Wallace as you could get. Where Wallace wore an ill-fitting business suit, short hair, and what seemed to be a perpetual sneer, the newest

arrival wore faded jeans held up by a pair of dusty suspenders, a plaid shirt, a John Deere cap over long, graying brown hair, and a kindly expression. He looked like a farmer.

"Excellent timing, as always, Hollis," Fletcher said from his post on the couch.

"What did I miss?" Hollis asked.

"Just the usual sparring match between my daughter and Gordon."

Hollis smiled and shook his head as if they were discussing two unruly children on the playground. "Well, I'm here now, so maybe we can get this meeting started."

He took the seat to Miss Vessey's left, on the far end of the couch from Fletcher. Wallace quickly claimed one of the other chairs, leaving Lily, Eldora, and me standing.

Lily shot him a dirty look, which he ignored.

"You can take the other chair, Eldora," Lily said. "I'll get chairs for Killian and myself from the kitchen."

"I'll help," I quickly volunteered.

"I've got it," she said, waving away my offer of assistance.

I stood awkwardly under everyone's gaze until she returned with the chairs.

"Okay," Hollis said once we were seated. "Since Lily called this special meeting, I guess I'll let her start. This has something to do with the dig, right?"

"Yes," she agreed. "Sorry I didn't go into more detail on the phone when I called you all. I thought it would be easier to go into it just one time while we were all together. Due to the recent circumstances surrounding the dig—the attack on my father, the news that the site

has been tampered with several times, and the lack of effort by the police—I thought maybe we should take matters into our own hands."

"What do you mean?" Miss Vessey asked.

"I suggest we hire a private investigator."

"By 'we' I guess you mean the tribe," Wallace commented.

"Yes. I meant the tribe."

"You're very quick to spend the tribe's money," he said with narrowed eyes. "First this whole excavation on *your* property, which I was against from the beginning..."

"No need to remind any of us of that," Lily said dryly.

"...and now you want to hire a private investigator? For what? If the police can't find this guy, why do you think a private eye can?"

"I think a private investigator can devote more time and effort to our interests."

"You mean your interests."

"No, I mean the interests of the whole tribe. The information gleaned from this excavation will benefit all of us."

"We've been over all this before," Hollis interjected patiently. "We know where both of you stand on that particular issue. What we're here to discuss tonight is whether or not we should hire a private investigator. What would this investigator be looking for exactly?"

"He'd be trying to find out who is stealing from us," Lily answered. "And, if possible, recover the missing artifacts."

"Do we even know there *are* missing artifacts?" Wallace challenged.

"I think we can assume the looter was getting something for his efforts, or else he wouldn't have kept returning," Miss Vessey pointed out with unarguable logic.

Wallace didn't appear satisfied, but let it go. He seemed less inclined to argue with the older woman.

"I'm guessing from the presence of this young fellow here that he has something to do with all this?" Hollis asked with a nod and a smile in my direction.

"I'm sorry," Lily said quickly. "I forgot to introduce you when you came in. Hollis, this is Killian Kendall. He's a private investigator who comes highly recommended."

I tried not to blush under Hollis's surprised stare.

"You've already picked out the investigator too?" Wallace growled.

"As I said, someone recommended him, and I approached him just to see if he thought the case was worth pursuing. He did."

"Excuse me for sounding rude, but you seem a little young to be a private investigator," Hollis said, addressing me directly for the first time.

I gave him my most charming smile. "I suppose I am on the young side, but I've been working in investigations for some time."

"He's solved several high-profile cases," Lily explained. "He worked on the Fenton Black scandal."

Hollis looked at me with renewed respect. "That was you?"

I nodded. "Yes sir."

"He's still just a kid," Wallace spoke up. "And white too. Don't we have enough white people involved in our business already?"

"Do you know any Native private investigators around here?" Lily snapped.

"He could give us an advantage in this situation," Miss Vessey inserted. "After all, the archaeologists might feel more comfortable talking to a non-Indian about what's been going on, even if he is working for us."

"Well, that's the other thing," Lily said. "I think it would be better if the archaeologists don't know that Killian is working for us. He could go undercover, if you will, posing as a journalist or something."

"He's not working for us yet," Wallace broke in again. "Personally, I think we should just cut our losses and shut down the excavation."

"What?" Lily was outraged. "It's barely begun! We'd lose all the money we've already put up for the dig. There's no sense in shutting it down!"

"There's no sense letting the artifacts be stolen from under our noses, either. If you ask me, it's those archaeologists stealing them in the first place. They never did want to turn them over to us. This is just their way of keeping what they find for themselves."

"Even if that is what's happening, wouldn't we want to recover those artifacts?"

"They're long gone by now."

"And why are you so sure of that? Maybe you're the one sabotaging this excavation. As you're so quick to point out, you've been against it from the start."

"What?" Wallace grew even redder. "Are you accusing me?"

"Okay, folks," Hollis interrupted. "Before things get out of hand, let's review what we're talking about here. Lily has proposed that the tribe hire a private investigator to look into the goings-on down at the excavation. The ultimate goal would be to discover who has been looting the site and to get our artifacts back. Lily, are you proposing that we hire Killian?"

"Yes. He's familiar with the situation, and he's expressed an interest."

The chief turned his attention to me with a questioning look.

I nodded. "I went to the library today to do some research just in case you decided to hire me."

"Ha!" Miss Vessey snorted. "Not much there to find. Precious little's been written about us."

Hollis continued. "Let's go around and get everyone's feelings on what's been proposed. We don't want to keep Fletcher up any longer than we have to. He's still recovering, after all. I'm sure we're tiring him out."

Fletcher looked anything but tired. He'd been following the conversation avidly, that same amused sparkle in his eye the whole time, despite his silence.

"I'll go first," Wallace said gruffly. "I oppose hiring this kid. I think we should just close down the excavation and move on to more important things. And furthermore, I don't appreciate being accused—"

"Thank you, Gordon," Hollis said over Wallace's aggrieved whining. "Eldora?"

I'd almost forgotten the timorous woman was even there, she'd been so quiet. Wallace glared at her, and she visibly shrank under his gaze. "I, well...I guess I think he's a bit young. He's hardly older than the kids I teach. Maybe we should look around a bit before we decide."

"Thank you, Eldora. Lily?"

"I vote to hire Killian for the reasons I've already stated. I think I've said enough for one night."

Wallace snorted.

"Celia?"

The old lady seemed lost in thought, and for a moment I wondered if her mind had wandered, until she began to speak. "I believe we should give the young man a chance. It's important for us to expand our knowledge and understanding of our ancestors, so the excavation should continue if at all possible. At the same time, we can't just allow someone to walk off with our history. We need to find out who is stealing those artifacts and put a stop to it. And recover the stolen items too."

I got the impression that her words carried a great deal of weight with everyone in the room. She was clearly the eldest person present, and she was treated deferentially.

"Fletcher?"

"I'm in agreement with my daughter and Celia. We should hire Killian. As for his age, well, that's not always the best measure of ability," he said slowly, "especially when the person in question is gifted."

Wallace came up in his chair with a start and positively crackled with indignation. "Oh, don't start with that mumbo-jumbo mysticism again!"

"Wallace, you had your say. It's Fletcher's turn now," Hollis admonished him sternly, sounding remarkably like a teacher scolding a misbehaving student. He turned back to Fletcher. "Are you telling us that Killian has...psychic gifts?"

Fletcher just smiled enigmatically.

Hollis then turned to me. Not knowing what else to do, I simply nodded. It was strange having so many people know about my gifts. It wasn't something I brought up often. My close friends and family knew, of course, but no one else.

"Well, I'd have to say that puts a different spin on things," he decided after a moment's silence. "I guess we should discuss the financial aspect of it."

Lily produced a printed copy of the fee scale I'd emailed to Nikki the day before and handed it to him. I explained our fee structure and answered the few questions that arose. There was some brief and predictably acrimonious discussion, mainly between Lily and Wallace, before Hollis called things to a halt. I was beginning to understand Novak's warning about politics.

"I think we've had enough discussion on the topic. Let's take a vote. All in favor of hiring Killian to look into this business raise your hand." Lily, Fletcher, and Miss Vessey raised their hands. Eldora's hand fluttered uncertainly, but a grim look from Wallace stilled it in her lap. "All opposed." Wallace's hand shot into the air, and after a few seconds of hesitation and another glare from Wallace, Eldora's joined his. "The chair votes yes, making the count four to two," Hollis announced. "Congratulations, Killian. You're hired."

Before I could speak, Wallace sprang from his chair. "This is a mistake. It's been a mistake from day one, but no one ever listens to me. Well, listen now. You mark my words, you'll regret this before it's over."

With his voice still ringing in the air, he stormed from the house, slamming the door behind him.

I glanced around the room, taking in everyone's reaction. Eldora stared after him with wide, frightened eyes. Miss Vessey's lips were pursed with disapproval. Lily rolled her eyes, while Fletcher still looked like he knew something the rest of us didn't. Hollis's face remained stony, revealing nothing.

"Did he just threaten us?" Miss Vessey asked with indignation.

"He's full of hot air," Lily said dismissively. "I keep hoping that one of these days he'll do the world a favor and float away."

Hollis cleared his throat, drawing everyone's attention. "Getting back to business, what happens now, Killian?"

"Well, I'd like to see the excavation site and talk to those involved. Right now, I'm still just trying to get a handle on what's happened."

He nodded. "I guess since you've already been working with Lily and Fletcher, they can be your contacts for the council. I'm sure they can answer most of your questions, but if there's something you need, feel free to contact me at any time."

"The same goes for me," Miss Vessey said with a smile. "I also have some books at home that might be helpful. You won't find them at the library, that's for sure."

I smiled back at her. "I'm sure they would be helpful, Miss Vessey. I'd appreciate that very much."

"Well, if that's all, I guess this meeting is adjourned," Hollis said. "Thanks for taking the leadership on this one, Lily."

"No problem," she responded as everyone except Fletcher stood. "I just couldn't stand by and do nothing."

"Killian, if you'd stay for a moment?" Fletcher asked as everyone started filing towards the door. I sat back down and waited expectantly.

After the door had shut behind the last council member, he said, "Things went pretty much the way I'd hoped they would. I'm pleased you were hired, but at the same time, I have to tell you I have an uneasy feeling about this. I sense there is a possibility of much danger ahead."

"What do you mean?" I was used to vague warnings from Judy, but it was rather unnerving coming from someone who was practically a stranger.

"I wish I knew." He shrugged. "The future is fluid. There is no one set path. Instead, every action carries with it an infinite number of possibilities. Some things are more susceptible to change, like a small stream easily diverted, while others are more like a mountain: immovable. The feelings I have about this are vague, but...dark. I sense some sort of danger waiting on this path, yet I don't know what it is exactly or how to avoid it. You'll need to use caution as you proceed with this investigation."

I nodded uncertainly. I wasn't exactly known for using much caution in my investigations. I was much more likely to run head-first into trouble and hope for the

best. I'd been incredibly lucky so far, but I knew I needed to start being smarter...before my luck ran out, especially since there was something in Fletcher's tone that made a shiver run down my spine. His earlier air of amusement was gone, and he was now deadly serious.

"What also concerns me is that I feel my grandson's presence involved with this sense of menace."

"Jacy?"

He nodded somberly. "He's tied to whatever is happening, one way or another." He shook his head. "I don't like it, but there is nothing I can do about it."

"Nothing you can do about what?" Lily asked as she walked into the room.

He smiled brightly at his daughter. "I was just talking to Killian about the investigation. I'm quite pleased he was hired."

"Me too, but you didn't answer my question."

"I know," he said with a grin.

Lily sighed as she dropped to the couch next to her father. "And that's all I'm getting out of you, isn't it?"

"For now."

She shrugged good-naturedly and gave me a 'what-can-I-do?' look. I forced a smile, even though I was still more than a little thrown by Fletcher's forewarning.

"When do you think I'll be able to visit the excavation site?" I asked, forcing my brain back to the case.

"I'll contact Professor Healy and try to set something up for Monday," Lily replied. "I'll give you a call and let you know as soon as I talk to him."

"That sounds good. In the meantime, I'll try to get in touch with Sergeant Kaplan. Maybe he can tell me a little more about what they found in their investigation."

"Such as it was," she observed dryly.

"In their defense, I didn't give them much to work with," Fletcher pointed out.

"They still could have shown a little more interest."

"Could have, should have, would have... It's done. We've hired Killian, so it's all moot. And now we're holding him up while we bicker."

"You're not—" I started to protest, but he cut me off.

"We are. We've taken up enough of your Friday night. I was young once. I remember what Friday night meant."

"Trust me, I didn't have any plans."

Fletcher gave me a skeptical look but let it go. "Either way, we thank you for coming to the meeting tonight. I know it wasn't exactly fun."

"Actually, it was helpful. It gave me a better idea of the players involved—on this side, at least. Gordon Wallace was especially interesting. Do you really think there's a possibility that he's sabotaging the excavation?" I asked Lily.

She shrugged. "I wouldn't put anything past him, but I really just said it to annoy him."

"And while we're on the subject of Gordon Wallace," Fletcher added, "please allow me to apologize for his rude comments about white people. Many Native people are a little wary of 'the white man' to begin with, but Gordon tends to take it a bit further since his father

was white. I think he feels he needs to overcompensate in order to prove his 'nativeness,' if you will."

"Or he's just a jerk," Lily countered.

"A distinct possibility," he agreed with a grin.

"On that note, unless you have more questions, we won't hold you any longer."

"I think that's all I have right now, but we'll be in close touch throughout this case, so if anything comes up..."

"That works. Thank you once again for coming tonight."

Lily walked me to the door and said goodnight. As I was going down the steps, I noticed the shadows moving out of the corner of my eye and let out a yelp. I spun around to find a startled Jacy coming around the corner of the house.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay. I'm just a little jumpy." Fletcher's words of warning were still echoing in my head.

"How'd the meeting go?"

"Well, I was hired..." I said slowly.

He laughed. "But I imagine my aunt and Gordon Wallace nearly came to blows a few times."

I laughed too. "It wasn't quite *that* bad."

"You're just being diplomatic. They're both as stubborn as mules and equally sure they are right. I just happen to side with my aunt on most issues." He studied me for a moment. "I'm glad you were hired, though. I'd really like to be involved in any way possible, so if there's anything I can do to help, don't hesitate to ask."

I remembered Fletcher's comment about Jacy's involvement, and almost said something, but bit my

tongue at the last minute. If Fletcher decided Jacy should know, he'd tell him. I made a noncommittal response and shifted towards my car.

Jacy's next words froze me midstep. "I can also help you with your gifts if you want."

"What?"

"You are gifted, aren't you? Fletcher hasn't said anything, but I thought for sure I felt something..."

"I...I am."

He breathed a small sigh of relief. "I'm sorry if I said something I shouldn't have. Fletcher is always telling me to think before I open my mouth, but it still tends to run on autopilot sometimes."

I smiled. "No, it's okay. You just caught me off guard. What did you mean, 'help me with my gifts?'"

"Well, um, no offense. I sensed them the other day when we met, and they felt a little...unfocused."

"Trust me, no offense taken. Unfocused is probably a very polite way of saying totally out of control."

He grinned. "When did your gifts start manifesting themselves?"

"I guess a couple of years ago. What about you?"

"They've been around in some form or another ever since I can remember, but they really came on strong when I was around sixteen. I didn't know what was going on. I thought I was going crazy."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Wow. This is kind of weird."

"What is?"

"Talking about this with someone my own age. I've only ever known one other person with gifts."

He smiled again. "We can talk about it anytime you want. I don't know nearly as much as Fletcher, but I'll help however I can."

"Thanks. Hey, uh, can I ask a rude question?"

He blinked for second, then said, "Um, yeah, sure. I guess so."

"Why do you call your grandfather Fletcher?"

"Oh. Well...that's kind of a long story. Do you have a little time?"

"Sure," I said, "but if you'd rather not talk about it, you don't have to tell me. Being nosy is an occupational hazard."

He laughed. "No, it's okay. I don't mind talking about it. We might want to get a little more comfortable, though." He walked over and sat down on the steps, then patted a spot next to him. The steps were wide enough that we weren't touching, yet he was close enough for me to feel his body heat.

"Growing up, I didn't even know Fletcher existed," he started. "My mother didn't have anything to do with him—or with Aunt Lily either, for that matter. I was raised to believe my grandmother's second husband was my biological grandfather. When I was sixteen, we were assigned a class project to do family interviews about our genealogy. No one would talk to me, which made me very suspicious, so I began to look into things for myself. Lily is the one who finally told me the truth."

"Sixteen was a tumultuous year for you," I commented. "Come to think of it, it was for me too."

"Just wait, it gets worse. That was also about the time I started figuring out that I might be...well...gay." He stopped as if unsure of my reaction.

"It's cool. I'm gay too."

He grinned. "I thought so, but...you know, I didn't want to assume. Anyway, when I found out that my mom had been lying to me all those years, and when she found out I was gay, we had a huge fight. See, my mom is very religious, so she did not take the news well...to say the least. The end result was that I moved in with Fletcher, but since I never knew him as my grandfather growing up, he insisted I call him Fletcher. It just felt right to us."

"Lily calls him Fletcher too."

"That's another story, one I'll let him or her tell you."

"That's cool. I didn't mean to pry."

"It's all good. You warned me."

I laughed. "You know, we have a lot in common."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I was kicked out of my house when I came out too. I live with the man I now consider my father. His name is Adam, and he took me in after his son was murdered."

"Oh wow. That's intense."

"Yeah, it was a really hard time, but things are much better now."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Yeah, I do," I said after an almost imperceptible pause. At least, I thought it was imperceptible.

Jacy must have caught it, however. "You sound a little uncertain."

"Oh no. I definitely have a boyfriend. His name is Micah. We've been dating for almost a year."

"But?"

"Now who's prying?"

"I just thought I sensed a 'but.'"

I stared out at the tree line, which was deepening into shadow as night fell. "We're going through a transitional stage right now, trying to figure out where we're heading with our relationship."

"Sounds tricky, especially if one of you isn't sure."

I looked over at him, but by then he was staring off into nowhere. It seemed that no matter how hard I tried to avoid thinking about the situation between Micah and me, it kept coming up. Well, I certainly wasn't going to sit and discuss it with someone I barely knew.

I stood up. "I really should get going."

Jacy quickly got to his feet as well. "I'm sorry if I brought up a sore subject. I shouldn't have pressed."

I shrugged it off. "No problem. It was really nice talking to you, Jacy."

He gave me a small smile, but he seemed to have reverted to his earlier shy demeanor. "You too, Killian."

I gave him a wave and took a few steps in the direction of my car, then stopped and turned back. "I could probably use that help with my gifts you offered earlier...if you're still willing."

His face lit up. "You've got it."

"Thanks. I'm looking forward to it. I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

"You bet. See you."

I felt him watching me as I walked to the car and climbed in, but when I looked back after starting the engine, he was nowhere to be seen. As much as I needed

help understanding my gifts, I had a suspicion that, instead of simplifying my life, I'd just complicated it exponentially.

Later that night, as I was getting ready for bed at the B&B, I was thinking again about Jacy's offer. I knew I needed to understand my gifts better, but what was I getting myself into with Jacy? What was his motive for offering? Was he just being helpful or was it something more?

I dropped my pants and, as I started stepping out of them, I heard a wolf whistle behind me. I spun around so quickly, my pants tangled around my ankles and I tripped, falling face first onto the bed.

"Damn it, Seth!" I growled as I pushed myself up.

He smirked. "Sorry," he said, without looking the slightest bit sorry. "Bad timing? Or best timing ever?" He eyed my package, highlighted by the tight boxer briefs I was wearing.

"I haven't seen you in months and you just happen to show up now?" I grabbed a pillow and held it over my crotch.

"Hey, I never got to see you in your skivvies when I was alive. Give a dead boy a break."

Seth had been murdered, an act of violence that started me on my path to becoming an investigator. He began appearing to me not long after he died. At first, I thought I was going crazy, but over the years, I'd accepted his visitations—although it was still disconcerting to have a ghost appear out of nowhere.

Seth seemed to especially enjoy startling me with his sudden arrivals.

"Are you here for a reason or are you just going to ogle me in my undies?"

"Can't it be both?"

"You never show up unless you have some unsolicited advice."

"That's not...entirely true. I also saved your ungrateful but perky ass that time in Caleb's barn."

"Oh. True."

"So, you owe me. Bye bye, pillow."

I rolled my eyes. "I didn't know ghosts were so thirsty. What do you want, Seth?"

He heaved an exaggerated sigh and sat down next to me. The bed sank under his weight. He seemed so real, so physical and solid, as if he were still alive. The only reminder that he was gone was that he never seemed to age. He hadn't changed a bit since the last time I'd seen him alive.

"Fine, have it your way. You're such a prude."

"Seth..."

"Okay, okay. I came to make sure you're going to take Jacy up on his offer to help with your gifts."

"I knew it! I knew that's why you were here!"

He rolled his eyes. "Whatever, Sherlock. It's not like that took a lot of detective work. I've been telling you to learn about your gifts as long as you've known about them."

"You mean nagging me about them. I already said I'd accept his offer."

"But knowing you, you're already coming up with reasons not to go through with it."

"Am not."

Seth raised a single eyebrow.

"You can't...read my mind, can you?"

"I don't have to. But for the record, no. Unless I'm lying."

I narrowed my eyes. "Fine, I'll do it."

"Good. Make sure you do." He stood up.

"Or what? You'll haunt me?"

He stuck his tongue out at me and started fading.

"Wait! Why haven't you been around much lately?"

He stopped fading but he was still opaque. It was a little unsettling, which is probably why he did it. "You haven't needed me," he said. His tone was matter-of-fact, but I thought I detected an underlying note of sadness.

"Now go to sleep."

And then he was gone.

How was I supposed to go to sleep after that?



## Chapter 6

In my ongoing efforts to avoid Micah, I decided to work over the weekend. That didn't keep me from sleeping in Saturday morning. It was almost noon by the time I showered and got dressed.

Once I was settled, I placed a call to Sergeant Kaplan. He was on duty and invited me to head right over.

I don't like police stations. I don't guess many people do, perhaps because they always seem so cold and sterile. Thankfully, I didn't have to wait in the reception area long before Sgt. Kaplan called me back to his office.

Hank Kaplan was a tall, burly man with blond hair and a ruddy complexion. His office wasn't all that small, but he was big, he made it seem smaller, and the low ceilings made it feel claustrophobic. He seemed so out of place it was almost comical. I always thought he would look much more at home on a Viking ship. His surname was Eastern European, but there was undoubtedly some Norse ancestry somewhere in his lineage.

"Have a seat, Killian," he said, lowering his large frame into his desk chair. "What have you been up to? I haven't seen you in quite a while. You're staying out of trouble, I hope."

"More or less," I replied with a grin.

He laughed a deep, booming guffaw. "I'm betting less than more. I heard about your escapades with Black."

I was never going to live that down. "Most of it was probably exaggerated. You know how the media is."

"Actually, I heard through the grapevine that you did a damn fine job with that case. You impressed a lot of people. Then again, I wouldn't expect any less from Shane Novak's personally chosen protégé. How is the old fart?"

"He's as ornery as ever."

He laughed again. "I'd be worried if he wasn't. Tell him I said hello."

"I will."

"Hey, you didn't come here to chitchat with me. What's on your mind? My superior powers of deduction tell me it's a case."

"Right on the first guess," I confirmed. "I've been hired by the Pomocatan tribe to look into the disturbances down at the archaeological excavation."

He nodded. "Makes sense. I know they've been dissatisfied with our investigation. It's actually a smart move. You'll be able to do a lot more than we can. We don't have the time or manpower to devote to something like this."

"That's what I figured. Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Probably not much more than you already know. The first we became aware of the situation was when Mr. Snyder was assaulted...last Sunday night, I think it was?" I nodded. "He didn't see who hit him, and there was no physical evidence that we could link to the attack. The site itself was crisscrossed with footprints from the excavation crew, and the surrounding area is leaf covered. When we talked to the crew the next day,

we discovered that wasn't the first time the site had been disturbed during the night. Again, there was no evidence or any way for us to really pursue the matter."

"You don't find it suspicious that they didn't report the disturbances?"

"After meeting everyone involved, and considering the circumstances, not really."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you met the professor in charge of the dig? Professor Healy?"

"Not yet."

"Oh. Well, you'll understand better when you do. He's a character. I can certainly see where there might be some tension between him and the Snyders, especially the daughter."

"Lily."

"Right. I suspect Professor Healy is one who does not take orders well. I got the impression he rather resented Ms. Snyder's involvement. Having the site looted would certainly place him in a bad light and quite possibly endanger his dig. I doubt he was willing to run that risk. Plus, since the looter had been digging during the night, they didn't know for certain what was taken, if anything."

"How can they not know what was taken? I thought archeologists kept really meticulous records."

"Apparently they do, but only of the artifacts they actually find. Since the looter was digging when no one was around, they don't know what he might have found and stolen. They just know that someone was digging. They'll be able to explain it better than I can."

"So basically, I'm starting from scratch."

"Afraid so. You've got quite a challenge ahead of you, but I have every confidence that you're up to the task." He paused and grinned. "Just watch yourself. I don't want to have to come visit you in the hospital again," he added, referring to a past case where I'd met the business end of a shovel...with my head.

"I think it's safe to say that neither of us wants that," I assured him with a chuckle.

"I'm sorry I can't be of more help with this case."

"It's okay. I really didn't expect any more. I figured if there'd been any evidence, something would have been done by now."

"You need anything else from me?"

"I think that's it. I won't hold you up any more."

"Hold me up? Please. You're giving me an excuse not to work. We had a homicide last night. Drug related, most likely. Around here, most of them are. It gets worse every year. For such a small city, our crime rates are way out of proportion." He shook his head sadly, and I was glad I didn't have his job.

"I need to be going, anyway."

We both stood up and shook hands. The visit had gone much more quickly than I'd anticipated, and I still knew nothing more than I had before.

I was lingering in the parking lot, trying to decide what to do next, when my cell phone rang. It was Micah. For one panicked second, I considered not answering it. Then I realized how cowardly that was and took the call.

"Hey. What's up?" he said.

"I just finished an interview with Sgt. Kaplan for my new case."

"You're working on a Saturday?"

"Yeah."

"I guess that means you were hired."

"Oh, yeah."

"I thought maybe you'd call me and let me know how the meeting went."

"I guess I forgot."

"Okay...so, how'd it go?"

"It was interesting. This one guy was very against their hiring me, but I got the impression he's against pretty much everything. There was a lot of discussion, then they took a vote, and I was hired four-to-two."

"So you decided to start the ball rolling today?"

"Yeah, there were some small things I could get out of the way so I can really jump in with both feet on Monday."

"I was hoping we could see each other this weekend sometime."

I was quiet for a moment too long.

"Killian, are you avoiding me because I asked you to move in with me?"

"I...it's just...maybe a little," I admitted.

"Kill, you can't put this off forever. Maybe we should sit down and talk about it. If it's making you that uncomfortable, I can take the request off the table."

"What about the job offer? You can't take that off the table."

"I can turn it down."

"But...it's such a great opportunity."

"What are you saying? You want me to take the job?"

"No! I mean...I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I want yet."

"When will you know?"

"I don't know." I sighed and slumped against my car. "Trust me; you'll be the first to hear when I figure it out."

"And meanwhile I'm stuck in this limbo. You don't call me, you won't see me..."

"Micah, can we please not do this now?"

"Do what? Talk about our problems? Killian, you can't keep on avoiding this."

"I know. I know. Just...give me a few more days. Please?"

"Okay. I'll back off, but we need to talk."

"I know."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"Just don't forget that."

He hung up, and I stood next to my car for several minutes before climbing in. I wasn't in the mood to work anymore—not that I really had anything else to do anyway. Since I certainly didn't feel like being around people, either, I decided to drive to one of my favorite places to get away and think: the zoo.

I spent a couple of hours just walking around watching the animals. Unfortunately, when I left, I wasn't any closer to an answer than when I'd arrived. I stopped by the office and found it empty, so I devoted myself to reducing the size of the paperwork pile for a while then headed home.

By the time I pulled into the small parking lot at the bed and breakfast, all I wanted to do was curl up in bed with a good book. Ever since Micah's phone call, I had slowly been sinking into a funk. I hated being forced

into a decision I didn't feel I was ready to make, and this definitely fit that bill.

I opened the front door and stepped into the foyer. Steve was behind the check-in desk. "Ah, uh, Killian! You're here," he stuttered a bit nervously.

Something in his voice made me stop. I got the impression he'd been standing there waiting for me.

"I'm here," I agreed.

"There's someone waiting to see you."

He was definitely acting strange. "Who?"

"It's—"

"Hi, Killian," Asher said, coming into the hall. "I thought I heard your voice."

"Asher." I tried my best to keep the frustration out of my voice. I really didn't feel like dealing with him at that moment.

"I hadn't heard from you, so I thought I'd just drop by the house to see you." He gave me a big smile. "Kane said you were staying here."

His face fell a little as I continued to stare at him in stony silence, but he forged ahead doggedly. "I was hoping maybe we could grab dinner together. If you haven't eaten already, I mean. Nothing fancy, just a diner or something." He paused again as if waiting for a response. When none came, he took a deep breath and tried one more time. "I'd really like to catch up. If this is a bad time, we could always set another night..."

I opened my mouth to tell him that it was a bad time and I didn't know when it would be a good one, but then I remembered what Micah had said. He'd encouraged me to go out with Asher. It had sounded ludicrous at the time, but at that moment, I was feeling

reckless enough that it didn't seem like such a bad idea after all.

I shrugged. "Why not?"

Asher gave me a lopsided smile. "That's not exactly the enthusiastic response I was hoping for, but I guess I'll take what I can get."

"I'll go change," I told him.

"Don't bother. Like I said, we're not going anywhere fancy, and besides, you look great."

I glanced down at my jeans and polo shirt. The outfit wasn't anything special, just my version of business casual, but if he was happy with it, then so was I. "My car or yours?"

"We can take mine," he offered.

I turned to Steve, who was staring at me with a look that clearly said *do you know what you're doing?* I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "I guess I'll be back later."

I followed Asher out to his car and climbed into the passenger seat. He slid behind the steering wheel and threw a nervous smile in my direction. "Thanks, Kill."

I tried the reassuring-smile thing once more, with equally shaky results.

We drove off in silence, neither of us seeming to know what to say. It was even more awkward than our first run-in. I was questioning my sanity for agreeing to this when Asher pulled into a small roadside mom-and-pop diner advertising daily specials and home-style cooking.

"Have you been here before?" he asked.

"No, I've driven past it plenty of times but never stopped."

"Is this okay?"

"It's fine."

"Cause we can go somewhere else if you'd rather."

"Asher, really, this is fine. I've wanted to try it out."

"If you're sure..."

I glanced over at him, and the look in his eyes stopped the biting retort forming on my lips. "I'm sure."

We climbed out and walked inside, where a middle-aged waitress sat us in a dimly lit corner booth. She dropped laminated menus in front of us before wandering off to fill our drink orders.

The awkward silence returned as soon as we were alone. I pretended to be enthralled by the menu. After a minute, Asher set his aside and studied me.

I kept my eyes on my menu for as long as I could, until his stare became more than I could take. I met his eyes. "What?"

"Why did you agree to come to dinner with me?"

"Huh?" That wasn't the question I had expected.

"You're clearly uncomfortable. I get the feeling you'd rather be anywhere but here. You've been staring at the menu forever, and I bet you've not seen a thing on it. Do you even know what you're getting?"

"Chicken and dumplings," I shot back without hesitation. I was almost positive I'd seen it on the menu.

Asher blinked, then recovered. "Why are you here?"

I sighed. "I don't really know. It was one of those spur-of-the-moment kinds of things."

"And now you regret it?"

"I wouldn't exactly say regret."

"What would you say, then?"

"I don't know. I feel weird. I haven't seen you, haven't even spoken to you, in months, almost a year, and now suddenly you want to hang out. It's...I need a little time to get used to it. You know?"

Asher nodded. "I guess I can understand that, but relax. I'm not after anything. I just wanted to see you again. Catch up on your life." He paused. "I miss you."

The waitress returned at that moment with our drinks, sparing me from the need to respond. "Y'all ready to order?" she asked in a thick regional accent.

"Yeah, we'll both have the chicken and dumplings," Asher said.

I was seriously hoping I really had seen them on the menu and hadn't made them up. They must have been there, though, because she made a note on her order pad and left us again.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

Asher laughed.

"What?" I asked.

"You weren't sure they were on the menu, were you."

I pretended to glare at him before giving up with a chuckle. "I was almost positive they were on there."

"You should have seen your face." He laughed even harder.

I started to laugh too, and soon we were both cracking up. It served to release the nervous tension and break the ice all at the same time. After that, I felt much more relaxed, allowing the conversation to flow. Our meals were served, and we continued to talk while we

ate. The chicken and dumplings turned out to be pretty good.

I caught him up on my life, telling him about school, some of my more interesting cases, Steve and Adam opening up the bed and breakfast, and Adam taking in Tad. I shied away from mentioning Micah as much as possible. That still seemed like a delicate subject, and under the current circumstances, one I'd just as soon avoid.

Then Asher took his turn filling me in on his time away at college. "It wasn't what I expected," he remarked thoughtfully. "I don't know what I was expecting, really. Everyone always makes college out to be this big life-changing experience, but it wasn't for me. Maybe it's only like that if it's your first chance for self-discovery. You know, kids coming from controlling or repressive families, on their own for the first time. My family was totally open, and I did nearly all my self-discovery with you in high school. Mostly, I just missed everybody at home."

"Did you at least like your classes?"

"Yeah, they were okay. I did really well. I didn't have much of a social life, so I had lots of time for homework and studying."

"Why didn't you have a social life?" That didn't sound much like the Asher I remembered. He was never a loner.

He shrugged. "I just didn't click with anyone there. The few friends I have aren't that close. I tried attending the gay/straight alliance, but it turned out that most of the people involved used it as a personal dating service. I quit going after the first semester. I went out

with a few guys, but nothing serious, and no one lasted very long."

His eyes caught mine and held them until I looked away, feeling slightly uncomfortable again.

Time to change the subject.

"Have you had any luck finding a job?"

"I've applied to a few places, but haven't heard anything back yet. If all else fails, I can always work with my dad again."

Asher's father was a successful optometrist. Asher had worked for him every summer during high school.

"Remember that time we almost got caught making out in one of the examination rooms?" he said with a giggle.

I laughed. "That wasn't as bad as the time in the boys' bathroom at school."

He guffawed loudly, causing several people to look our way. By now we were both laughing so hard we didn't care.

"I'd forgotten about that," he gasped.

We got caught up in reminiscing for several minutes, and when the next lull in the conversation came, it was the sort of comfortable silence that happens between two friends. I realized that I was completely comfortable with Asher for the first time that night.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"I was just thinking that I'm glad we did this."

"Me too," he agreed, looking quite pleased.

Just then, a fast-paced song with a pounding dance beat came on the juke box. It stood out because

there'd been a steady stream of country songs and light rock since we'd arrived.

"Man, I wish there was somewhere we could go dancing around here," Asher said suddenly.

"You like to dance?"

"That was one of the few things I did do at college. I went every weekend I could. In D.C., most places have college nights where it's eighteen and over."

"I know. Micah took me to Michelangelo's once."

"You've been to Michelangelo's?"

"Yeah."

"We could have been there at the same time."

"We would have never known it unless we tripped over each other," I pointed out. "That place is huge, and it was packed."

"It's always like that. But there's no place to go here, right? It's all twenty-one and over?"

"Ye-es..." I drew the word out.

Asher cocked his head to one side. "What does that mean?"

"Well, there's this place we go to sometimes where they know me and let me in."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but I don't know if they'd let you in or not. I usually go with Micah."

"We could try. I mean, if you want to. If you'd rather not, I can just take you back to the B&B."

I thought for a minute, staring at my plate. I was having a great time, and it had been a while since I'd been dancing.

I looked up. "Let's go."

After we settled the bill, which Asher insisted on paying, I gave him directions to Inferno. From the outside, the club looked like a warehouse: a two-story, white, cinder-block building with almost no windows. The parking lot was filled to capacity, as it was most weekends. The only thing that identified the plain building as a club was the inconspicuous sign over the entrance.

A tall, platinum-blond drag queen guarded the door, checking IDs with her omnipresent but oddly silent, bald sidekick. No one who knew Carmen wanted to mess with her. Those who didn't know her learned quickly and never messed with her again. Carmen could have easily handled the door by herself, but the bald guy, whose name no one seemed to know, was her enforcer. If someone got out of hand inside, he'd wade into the masses and physically remove them from the premises. Carmen always said she didn't want to break a nail.

That night, Carman was wearing a long, black velvet dress with rhinestones flashing here and there. Matching stones hung from her ears and at her throat. The outfit was topped off with a tiara perched atop her towering mountain of hair.

"You're looking particularly lovely tonight, Carmen," I complimented her as we approached. "Is it a special occasion?"

She patted her hair while looking Asher and me over suspiciously. "Sometimes a girl just needs to feel pretty. And speaking of pretty, where is that man of yours?"

"I'm on the town without him tonight," I said with as confident a smile as I could muster under her

disapproving glare. "This is my friend Asher. We went to high school together. He's home for the summer."

She sniffed. "And I suppose if I was to ask for ID, he would fall somewhere below the legal limit?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't ask," I admitted.

"Yes, I'll bet you were." She rolled her eyes.

"Sweetie, you must be this old to take this ride."

"Please, Carmen?" I batted my eyes and gave her my best puppy-dog look.

She sighed dramatically. "Go on, but if you get in trouble—inside or with Micah—I don't want anything to do with it."

"Thank you, Carmen!"

"Don't thank me. Just get out of here before I change my mind."

Asher and I ducked quickly through the door. The wall of music hit us as soon as we were inside. I could actually feel the beat vibrating through my body. Asher's face lit up as he looked around. This was a definite case of "you can't judge a club by its exterior."

The interior of Inferno was a kaleidoscope of visual imagery. Fog billowed from smoke machines, multicolored lights flashed, a strobe pulsated, and hundreds of male bodies in various stages of undress writhed on the dance floor. Columns were scattered around the room, each with faux-flames leaping from its top. A few raised platforms were set up with more of the faux-flames outlining their edges and go-go boys dancing their buns off on top.

"Nice job back there," Asher yelled over the noise. "This place is great."

I grinned and didn't even try to answer. I'd learned my lesson the first few times I'd been there. If I tried to talk too much, I wouldn't have a voice the next day.

We stood near the door for a few minutes while Asher took it all in. When the song changed, he grabbed my wrist with a yelp and pulled me towards the dance floor. "I love this song!" he screamed.

I fell into the rhythm of the music and soon lost myself to it. It was the first time I'd ever done this with Asher, and I quickly realized he was a great dancer. He was catching more than a few interested glances from those around us. I was getting my share of looks as well, but most of the regulars recognized me from all the times I'd been there with Micah.

We danced for a couple of hours before we both started to tire then made our way towards the door and into the cool air outside.

Asher wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Wow, now I know why they call that place Inferno."

I laughed. "I think I said something similar the first time I came here."

"If I had a dollar for every time I've heard that tired line, I'd be richer than Nazi Musk," Carmen grumbled.

"Cheer up, Carmen," I called over to her. "We had a great time, and no one got hurt."

She raised one carefully penciled eyebrow and pursed her bright-red lips. "Time will tell, Young One. Time will tell."

Her cryptic statement brought me crashing back down from my endorphin high. I wanted to ask her what

she meant, but Asher caught my wrist and pulled me toward the car.

"Come on," he said. "We should get going. Besides, I don't think she likes me."

"She's friends with Micah." I climbed into the car and sank back into the seat with a sigh. I was suddenly very tired.

"I guess that explains it, then," Asher said as he started the car. "At least it isn't anything personal."

We drove back to the B&B in silence. I fought to keep my eyes open the whole trip. When we pulled into the parking lot, I turned to face him. "Are you as tired as I am?"

"It depends on how tired you are."

"If you're too tired to drive home, you could stay here tonight." He looked at me sharply, and I hurriedly added, "In your own room."

He gave me a small smile. "I'll be okay, but thanks for worrying. I'll walk you to the door."

"I'm fine—"

"I'll walk you to the door."

We slowly climbed the porch steps and stood awkwardly in front of the door. I decided to be the one to break the silence this time.

"I had a really nice time tonight. I was nervous at first, but I'm glad we did this."

"Me too. I know I've said it already, but I've really missed you, Killian."

"I've missed you too."

As I spoke the words, I realized that I really had. My vision blurred with sudden, unexpected tears.

I was still blinking to clear my eyes when Asher stepped quickly forward and pressed his lips against mine.

It was over before I even had time to react, which might have been for the best since I'm not sure what my reaction would have been.

He smiled again and walked back to his car. I stood watching him until he had driven out of sight.

With a sigh, I turned and let myself into the house.

"I hope you know what you're doing," a voice said from the darkness.

## Chapter 7

A voice unexpectedly emanating from the darkness would be startling at any time. When you often experience dead people popping up out of nowhere, it's even more unnerving. I let out a high-pitched squeal and slammed myself against the door.

"For God's sake! It's just me." Steve stepped into the dim illumination of a nightlight.

"You scared the crap out of me," I panted. Then a thought struck me. "Were you waiting up for me?" His guilty expression was all the answer I needed. "Steve, I'm almost nineteen. You don't need to do that anymore."

"I wanted to talk to you," he said defensively.

I sighed. "I'm just taking a wild guess here, but I'm betting you don't want to talk about politics."

"Killian..."

"Don't start. Please. It's been a very long day."

"Just tell me what's going on."

I gave a short bark of slightly bitter laughter. "I wish I knew."

"Asher...?"

"He showed up earlier this week. I ran into him downtown. He said he wanted to get together some time to catch up. I avoided giving him an answer and left. But when I told Micah about it, he thought I should go out with Asher."

"That's very big of him."

"He said I needed to settle my feelings for Asher once and for all. I still wasn't planning on doing it until Asher asked me tonight...and I just figured why the hell not?"

"And?"

I shrugged. "We had a nice time. It was really awkward at first, until we both relaxed. After that it was almost like old times. We went to dinner, then dancing, and finally he brought me back here. End of story."

"What about that kiss?"

"Jeez! You're spying on me too?"

"I heard the car pull up and looked out the window. I wasn't spying."

"Semantics."

"The kiss?"

"Look, Steve, I'm tired. It's been a very weird day. I really don't feel like talking about this right now. I don't know what the kiss meant. I haven't even had time to process it. He kissed me. I didn't kiss him back, and it was practically over before it started. Don't make a big deal out of it, okay? Can I go to bed now?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Get some rest. Adam will be here in the morning."

I gave him a half-hearted wave and started for the stairs.

"Killian," he called. I stopped but didn't turn around. "I'm sorry if it feels like I'm interfering in your life. I love you."

I glanced back at the man who had been like my second father for the last several years. In the dim light, he appeared older and worn. Maybe I just hadn't taken the time to look at him lately. I knew he and Adam cared for me deeply. They'd sacrificed a lot for me. I walked back to him and gave him a big hug.

"I love you too," I told him.

"Good night," he said, kissing the top of my head.

"G'night."

He ruffled my hair, and I went up to bed.

Adam was indeed in attendance when I went downstairs the next morning. I found him in the dining room refilling the coffee carafe.

"Want some?" he asked as I walked in.

"Sure." I wasn't quite awake yet and figured I could use the caffeine boost.

Adam handed me a cup of steaming coffee.

"So..."

I knew what was coming and wished the java wasn't quite so hot so I could gulp it down in preparation.

"Steve told me you and Asher went out last night. I didn't even know he was back in town."

"He's home for the summer." I blew on the coffee in quiet desperation.

"Cool." I blinked. Not quite what I expected.

"Did you guys have a nice time?"

"Yeah, we did. I was pretty uncomfortable at first, but then I relaxed, and we really enjoyed ourselves."

"I'm glad you guys are working out your differences. Just be careful."

"I will," I said cautiously, still waiting for the other shoe to drop. Where was the lecture? Where were the questions about Micah?

"I saw your help wanted ad this morning. I didn't know you guys were hiring at the agency."

It took me a few seconds to follow the sudden shift in topic. "We decided we're too busy these days for me to work as an investigator and still keep up with the secretarial work, so Novak had me place the ad earlier this week. He wants me to get my PI license."

I decided not to mention the gun permit right then. I was still marveling at being treated like an adult and didn't want to risk a lapse back into parent mode.

"Wow! Your license, huh? That's a pretty big deal, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so. It'll mean I can take my own cases instead of working through Novak."

"That's great, Killian! I'm really proud of you."

I smiled and released the last bit of tension I'd been holding in my shoulders. "Thanks, Adam." I picked up a pastry and bit into it.

"So have you thought anymore about what you're going to do about Micah?"

And there it was. I knew it was too good to last.

"Not really," I replied after I'd swallowed.

To my surprise, Adam gave me a look and then let it go. What was going on? Had I slipped into an episode of *The Twilight Zone*?

"So, um, what's going on with you?" I ventured after a moment.

"Remember the client I had you deliver that proposal to earlier this week?"

"The magazine?"

"Right. They hired me. It should be a big account."

"Awesome! Congratulations."

"Thanks. It'll help a lot financially. Now, if only things with Tad were going as well as my business."

"Is he still causing trouble?"

"About as much as before, nothing new. I'm just fed up with the whole situation. Maybe you can get a chance to talk to him soon?"

I shrugged. "I have nothing planned for today. Why don't I go over later?"

Adam grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that." I wasn't sure why, but his grin made me nervous. "He should be home. I told him not to leave or have anyone over. Of course, that doesn't mean much when it comes to him."

"Where's Kane?"

"He drove up to visit his mother for the weekend. She's having some health concerns and Kane figured he should make an appearance."

"Health concerns?"

Adam shrugged. "A cancer scare. Evil rots from within." He clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes wide. "I shouldn't have said that," he mumbled, then dropped his hand. "Cancer is a terrible disease and she's still Kane's mother."

"I don't think anyone could really blame you," I said. "She did some truly awful things to you and Seth. And Kane too, for that matter."

"Still..."

"A cancer scare, you said? Does that mean it turned out not to be cancer?"

"I think they're still running tests. I'm getting all of this second hand through Kane so I don't have all the details."

Just then, Steve came bustling in, full of excitement. "You'll never believe who just called!"

Adam smiled and raised an eyebrow at his partner's obvious enthusiasm. "Judging by your level of giddiness, I'm guessing Meryl Streep?"

Steve laughed. "Even better! It was a reporter from *Southern Living*. They're writing an article about inns on the Eastern Shore, and want to feature Amalie's House!"

Adam jumped to his feet. "Steve, that's amazing! You can't buy that kind of advertising!"

"I know!"

I raised my coffee mug in a toast. "Here's to Amalie's House."

Adam picked up his mug as well. "And to *Southern Living*."

Steve floundered for a moment, then quickly filled a mug from the carafe and raised his as well. "And hopefully to a fully booked season."

We drank to the toast and chatted for a few more minutes about the article. Then I excused myself to go have my talk with Tad, leaving the two of them to their own celebration.

When I pulled up to the beach house, I was surprised to see an unfamiliar car parked in the drive. Immediately, my suspicions were aroused. What was Tad up to?

Intending to catch him red-handed, I shut the door of my car so gently it caused only the softest click. I let myself into the house just as stealthily and stood listening for a few seconds. Everything was completely

quiet. Had he left with someone? Then why was the car still in the driveway?

I heard a muffled thump from upstairs and slowly made my way to the second floor, being careful to avoid the squeaky steps. Living in this house as a teenager definitely gave me the advantage.

At the top, I stopped and listened again. I'd expected the noise to originate from the bedroom Kane and Tad shared, but instead it seemed to be coming from Adam's room. I recognized the sounds, the rhythmic creaking of a mattress. My mind recoiled from the obvious meaning until a low moan a few seconds later confirmed my suspicions. I couldn't believe Tad would do that.

I walked quickly to the room, no longer caring about stealth, and threw open the door. They didn't even notice me at first. The guy humping Tad was young and well-muscled. I vaguely recalled him being a few grades behind me in school, a jock if I remembered correctly.

Finally, Tad saw me standing there. Slowly turning his head and looking directly into my eyes, he gave me a small, smug smile. "Enjoying the show?"

Jock-boy stopped thrusting in surprise at Tad's voice. As he followed Tad's gaze to me, a horrified look came over his face. In one quick motion he leaped off the bed, yanking the bedspread up in a futile attempt to hide his nakedness. Tad made no such effort.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded.

Tad rolled his eyes. "Oh please, Killian. You know exactly what we were doing. You're not *that* innocent."

I struggled to maintain my composure. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so furious. "You know exactly what I mean," I managed between clenched teeth. "You weren't supposed to have anyone over. And in Adam's bed?" Jock-boy was still standing there, mouth agape and eyes wide. "For God's sake, get dressed! Both of you!"

The jock set quickly to obeying. Tad moved slower, arrogance showing in every movement.

"Please don't tell anybody about this," the jock pleaded as he stumbled in a rushed attempt to pull his pants on. "Please, Killian..."

"Just get out!"

He threw a desperate look at Tad, who shrugged. "Better do what he says."

The guy shoved his feet into his shoes without untying them, grabbed his shirt, and made a speedy exit. Tad had pulled on a pair of boxer briefs and was reclining on the bed again.

"Clothes," I snapped at him. "Meet me in the living room when you're fully dressed."

I turned sharply on my heel and left. Jock-boy was just peeling out of the driveway when I got downstairs.

Tad kept me waiting for several minutes before he sauntered in. "You could have knocked," he sneered, flopping onto the couch.

His perennially rosy cheeks were even more flushed than usual, making me wonder if it was from his exertions or if he might actually be a little embarrassed. I wasn't sure this kid was even capable of feeling shame.

"What is going on with you?"

"What? I get horny. You're a guy. You know what that's like."

I shook my head. "Why are you doing this? Why are you being such a jerk? Adam says you're skipping classes, ignoring the rules here, refusing to do your chores, staying out till all hours of the night, and now you're having sex with guys *in Adam's bed*. That's the height of disrespect. I don't understand."

"What's not to understand? I don't want to follow all these stupid rules."

"Well guess what? Life is all about following the rules. I realize you've been through a lot..."

"No, you don't realize anything," he interrupted angrily. "You came into my life, turned everything upside-down, then made all those promises to me before dumping me off with a bunch of strangers and disappearing. So, what? I'm supposed to be grateful? Gee thanks, Killian. Thanks for nothing!"

I was stunned. Realizing that at least part of what he'd said was true made me feel guilty. I pretty much *had* dumped him on Adam and then left him to fend for himself. I didn't understand the part about turning his life upside-down, though.

"What are you saying? You'd rather be with Razi still?"

"It was better than living here."

"But...but..."

"At least I knew where I stood with Razi. I was his houseboy, his sex slave as you put it once. He never hurt me, and he made sure I had everything I needed."

"He was a murderer!"

"He was good to me."

"He was not! I can't believe you could even compare him to Adam!"

"Adam doesn't even want me here. He doesn't care about me at all. The only difference between him and Razi is that Adam isn't interested in fucking me."

I stared at him open-mouthed. "Adam does care! You haven't even given him a chance. You won't let him get close to you."

"It's not like he's tried all that hard."

"Have you given him any encouragement?"

He shifted his eyes away, breaking his defiant glare for the first time. I'd struck a nerve.

"Adam really went above and beyond even taking you in."

"He's a real saint."

"Yeah, he is, actually. I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Adam. He took me in when I had nowhere to go—"

"I've heard this story before."

"Then maybe you should pay attention this time. Adam is a great person. He's been through hell, and doesn't deserve to be treated the way you're treating him. You could at least show a little respect. He opened up his house to a complete stranger and gave you a place to live. He provides for you, feeds you, and cleans up after you. And how do you thank him? You disobey the few rules he does have, disrespect him, and skip school."

He was beginning to look a little guilty. Thinking I was starting to get through to him, I softened my voice. "Adam really does care about you. He'd like to be there for you if you'd just let him. You could at least give him a chance."

He shrugged. Since it was better than his insolent attitude from earlier, I took it as a positive sign and pressed on.

"I'm sorry I haven't been around much. I've been swamped with my job and stuff, but that's no excuse. I promise I'll try to do better. And if you need to talk to me or see me, just call or text me. Okay?"

A slight nod was my answer. We were getting better. I sat down gingerly on the couch next to him. "So...what's going on with school?"

He scowled and drew his legs up to his chest. I sensed whatever progress we'd made slipping away.

"What's the point?" he said sullenly.

"The point? Tad, you need an education. What can you expect to do with your life if you don't even finish high school?"

"I'll be fine. I can always turn tricks. I know enough about the business."

A horrible thought crossed my mind. "Please tell me that's not what was going on when I got here!"

Tad laughed. "What would you do if it was? Throw me out?"

"Tad!"

"Chill, Kill. I haven't broken back into the biz again...yet. Aaron's just a horny closet-case. I noticed him staring at me on my first day at that stupid school. It didn't take much to get in his pants."

"Is he your boyfriend?"

Another laugh. "No. He's just a good screw."

I shook my head and decided to drop it for the moment. "What's wrong with the school?"

He shrugged and looked down.

"Come on, Tad. Talk to me."

He took a deep breath. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not like the kids here."

"What do you mean?"

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, as if he were struggling to explain himself. "They're all so... *naïve*. I've seen stuff they've never even dreamed of." He looked up at me with haunted eyes. For the first time since we'd started talking, he'd dropped all pretenses. "All they care about is who's wearing what or who's screwing who. I just can't relate. I haven't made any friends since I've been here."

"Have you tried?"

"I haven't even met anyone I wanted to be friends with."

"You're not the only one who's been through a lot."

He rolled his eyes. "Right, I'm sure rich little Susie Cheerleader has just been through hell."

"Don't let appearances fool you. You don't know what goes on at home for any of those people. I...I knew a family that seemed perfect from the outside, but they were abused at home. One of them finally snapped and started killing people. He actually murdered my friend Seth, Adam's son. The guy ended up killing his whole family except for one brother. That brother then moved out to California, where he started doing drugs. When he moved back here a year later, he was so hooked that he would do almost anything to get high. He started sleeping with a dealer and ended up almost dead again from an overdose."

Tad's eyes were huge. "How do you know all that?"

"He's a good friend of mine. I was involved in most of what I just told you, saw much of it firsthand. He goes to your school now. I'm sure he'd be a friend to you if you let him."

"Is he okay now?"

"Yeah, but only because he let people help him. He went to rehab and a lot of counseling. He still sees a therapist. It's the only way you can hope to get over something like that."

"Wow. I didn't know..."

"You haven't bothered to find out. You're sharing a room with Kane, who's been through a lot too. He's a great guy. You couldn't ask for a better brother. I'm sure he'd be a friend to you if you'd let him. He could introduce you to other people in your grade. He knows everybody at that school. He's pretty popular."

"I noticed. I didn't think he'd want to hang out with me."

"If you've been acting as aloof at school as you have here at home, it's no wonder you haven't made any friends."

He grimaced and looked down at the floor. "I'm probably worse at school," he mumbled under his breath.

"Look, Tad, you're already behind." He'd missed so much school when he ran away that, when he moved in with Adam, the school system had actually started him over in the last grade he'd completed. "If you keep skipping classes, they'll hold you back again. You really need to try harder. You know, if you just make a little

effort, people will meet you halfway and help you. Can't you at least do that?"

He shrugged again. Every time I thought I was starting to make progress, he retreated back into sullenness. A shrug seemed to be as much commitment as I was going to get from him, though, so I decided to move on.

"Now, about counseling..."

"No way! I'm not going back to that bitch. She was so obnoxious. She talked to me like I was some stupid little kid."

"Okay, so maybe she wasn't the right counselor for you. Sometimes you have to try a couple before you find one you feel comfortable with."

"How do you know so much about all this?"

"Because I see a therapist. I need it as much as you, maybe more."

He looked at me skeptically.

"Come on, I saw my best friend with his throat slashed, I got stabbed, beat up by my father, kicked out of my house, and had to shoot somebody I knew at point-blank range. You think I didn't need some professional help after that?"

He quirked his mouth up on one side, almost a smile but not quite. "Yeah, I guess I can see how that might mess with your head."

"Then tell Adam you don't like your counselor, and he'll find another one. And if you don't like that one, let him know, and he'll do it again. The important thing is to keep trying—and to be honest with Adam."

"What about the one you go to?"

"He's a good option, actually, especially now that I only see him once a month for maintenance check-ins. If anyone can help, he can."

He shrugged. "I don't know if anyone can help me."

"They can't if you won't let them. We do want to help, though, all of us: Adam, Kane, me...even Steve."

He squirmed a little. "It's hard to accept help. Especially after..."

"I know. Just try. That's all I'm asking. And I promise I'll be here more for you from now on."

He looked away, and I sensed he wasn't buying what I was selling. I couldn't really blame him. I'd made promises to him before that I hadn't lived up to. I needed to do something to show him I meant it this time.

"Hey, I don't have anything planned today. Why don't we hang out now?"

He shrugged. "It's not like I have any plans since you ran Aaron off."

"Oh, yeah. About Aaron..."

He sighed. "I know, I know. That was really low. I won't do it again."

"You'd better not. And you'd better be really glad it was me who found you and not Adam. Now, the first thing we're going to do is wash his sheets."



## Chapter 8

The phone was ringing as I came into the office the next morning. I climbed over a pile of lumber, fought my way under a drop cloth covering my desk, and sputtered through a cloud of sawdust—only to have the call go to voicemail before I could get to it. I flopped into the chair, raising another cloud of dust and setting off a coughing fit.

"I thought I heard someone out here," Novak said, sticking his head through his office door.

I looked up in surprise. "Hey. I didn't think you were here. Why didn't you answer the phone?"

"Damn thing's been ringing off the hook all morning. It's people wanting to schedule appointments for interviews. I figured I'd leave that to you."

"Gee, thanks," I responded dryly.

"That's why I pay you the big bucks."

"When should I set up the appointments?"

"I have Thursday free, if that's okay with you."

"Why does it matter if I'm free?"

"I want you to be here for the interviews. You're going to be working with whomever we hire just as much as, if not more than I will. In fact, you'll probably be doing most of the training, so you'd better be able to get along."

"Oh, that makes sense. Thursday's good for me."

"Great. Thursday it is. Schedule the first one for around ten and every half hour after that, with a break for lunch. Nothing after three." The phone rang just then, and he took the opportunity to duck back into his office.

The call turned out to be from another applicant. I got him scheduled, then checked the messages and returned calls for a while, setting up a few more appointments. I had four people lined up by the time I finished.

I was able to weed out several on the phone.

For instance, I politely turned down the woman who wanted to know if she could bring her Doberman to the office with her. "He gets so lonely when Mommy leaves," she'd cooed. "Don't you, Shnookums? Why just last week he got so upset when I went shopping that he ate the neighbors' cat. They were so angry! They wanted to put him down!" Her voice was actually filled with righteous indignation, as if she couldn't understand why her neighbors would be upset that her dog had used their cat as a chew toy. "They just don't understand you, do they? Do they?"

Once I'd managed to hang up on the kooky canine lady, I got about half an hour of work done before the construction crew arrived. At that point, all hope of accomplishing anything was pretty much blown.

I was on the verge of retreating into Novak's office when Lily called me on my cell. "I just finished speaking with Professor Healy," she reported. "Everything is arranged. They're expecting you to drop by today."

"Great! Any particular time?"

"No, just whenever."

"What did you tell them about me?"

"That you're a reporter doing a story about local archaeology."

"Okay, so I'll make sure to ask lots of general questions."

That wouldn't be too hard. I had a genuine interest in the subject. I didn't really like lying, but it was often an unfortunate necessity in this business. I tried to think of it more as playing a role. Luckily, I was a pretty good actor. Theater was one of my favorite classes in school.

"Sounds good. You're the professional."

"Where is the excavation? I know it's on your property, but that's about it."

"Oh yeah, I guess that information would be helpful, wouldn't it?" She chuckled. "Tell you what, meet me at Dad's house and I'll take you there and introduce you, then leave you to your sleuthing. When are you available?"

Before I could answer, one of the construction workers started up a saw, drowning out my response. I shot him a dirty look, which he didn't notice since he was busy attacking the wall. I couldn't see that they had done anything since the previous Friday except make a mess, so I supposed construction workers got the weekend off.

I moved quickly to the hallway where it was a little quieter. "I'm free now. My office is under siege. Soon my desk may disappear beneath a mountain of sawdust."

"Are you renovating?"

"Remodeling. We're expanding into the neighboring office. Is this a good time for you?"

"Yeah, let's do it. I'll meet you at Fletcher's in a few minutes."

"See you there."

I braved the office once more to let Novak know I was leaving, then drove over to Fletcher's place. Lily hadn't arrived yet, but Jacy came around the corner of the house as I climbed from the car.

"Hey," he said, breaking into a smile. "Are you here for your first lesson?"

"Lesson?" I asked in confusion. "Oh! No, I'm meeting Lily. She's supposed to show me to the excavation site."

"I could have done that. She didn't have to drive all the way over here."

"It was her suggestion. I just assumed you'd be at work. How is Fletcher feeling?"

He rolled his eyes. "He must be feeling better. He's just as ornery as he ever was and he's getting impossible to deal with. He's still supposed to be resting, but I keep catching him up and working with his herbs. He says boredom will kill him quicker than his heart."

I laughed. "Maybe I should duck in and say hi while I'm waiting for Lily."

"He'd like that. He thinks a lot of you."

"Really?" I was surprised and a little puzzled. I'd only met the man a couple of times.

"Yeah. My grandfather's a great judge of character, so if he says you're a good person, then you must be."

I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks, but luckily Lily pulled into the driveway at that moment. I turned to greet her, thankful for the distraction.

"You beat me," she said as soon as her car door swung open. "I hope you weren't waiting long."

"I just got here. Jacy and I were talking."

"Yeah, you didn't have to come over. I could have shown Killian to the site," Jacy chipped in.

"Well, I wanted to introduce him to everyone. Besides, my kiln is acting up so I can't do anything at the studio today. Are you ready, Killian?"

"When you are."

"Let's go." She set off towards the back of the house with long-legged strides, leaving me trotting along behind her like an eager puppy.

Lily generally moved with purposeful, solid movements, but when we reached the edge of the woods it was as if she had suddenly transformed into another person, graceful and fluid. Although she followed no discernible trail as far as I could see, she seemed to know exactly where she was going.

Never having been much of a woodsman, I felt like a flailing incompetent in her wake. She moved almost silently, ducking under branches and avoiding brambles with practiced ease. I had to stop every few feet to untangle the sharp thorny vines from my pants and shirt.

"How do you do that?" I finally asked after a particularly nasty thorn raked over the back of my hand, leaving a bloody welt to mark its passing.

She stopped and looked back at me, her face registering surprise at how far behind her I'd fallen. "I'm sorry. I forget not everyone had Fletcher around when they were children, to teach them how to move in the forest."

I looked at her curiously while I rubbed my hand. "Do you mind if I ask a personal question?"

"Why do I call my father Fletcher?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry if that seems nosy. I asked Jacy and he said it was your story to tell."

"Did Jacy explain anything to you?"

"He said he never knew Fletcher growing up, that he thought his grandmother's second husband was his biological grandfather. When he went looking for the truth about his family, you were the one who told him."

She nodded. "Right. I was pretty young when Fletcher and my mother got divorced. She remarried soon after. Fletcher moved away, and we didn't see much of him for quite a while, so her husband became the only father I really knew. My only real memories of Fletcher as a child are of his teaching me how to move in the forest. He was always very into respecting nature and embracing our culture, even before he became an herbalist."

"When Fletcher moved back to this area about fifteen years ago, my sisters refused to have anything to do with him. By that time, I was old enough to understand his reasons for leaving and I sympathized, being gay as well. I'm really the only one who has any contact with him. My younger sister Jasmine sees him from time to time, but they aren't close. Rose, Violet, and Daisy all refuse to even speak to him. Rose, Jacy's mother, doesn't speak to me either. She's a little...thorny, if you'll excuse the pun."

"Five girls and you all have flower names?"

She grimaced. "I've never understood what they were thinking. You ready to move on? It's not much farther."

"Sure, just take it a little slower this time, huh?"

She chuckled and started moving again.

"So where do the archaeologists park? I didn't see any cars at the house."

"What? Oh. On the other side of the woods. There's a tax ditch, which the county keeps cleared, that comes fairly close to the actual dig. If they drive their equipment in on four-wheelers, they don't have to walk as far with it."

"How many of them are there? Do they all have four-wheelers?"

"I think there's about eight of them, but I'm not sure. And no, they don't all drive up. Most have to walk. It's a little farther from their side, but they prefer to park together. That's fine with us. At least Fletcher's yard isn't full of cars."

The deeper we moved into the woods, the more uneasy I began to feel, as if many eyes were on me. A prickling sensation attacked the back of my neck, and the hairs on my arms stood up. The farther we went, the worse it got, until it was almost unbearable. I came to an abrupt stop and stared intently into the trees around me. The only other living thing I could see besides Lily and me was a plump gray squirrel chattering at us angrily for invading his territory—and yet, the feeling of being watched remained, as strong as ever.

Lily stopped and turned back. "Are you okay? Was I going too fast again?"

I continued searching the trees. "No, you're fine. It's not that."

"Then what is it? You look like you've seen a ghost."

I winced, but quickly attempted to cover with a weak smile. "It's nothing. I think my nerves are getting to me."

Lily gave me an odd look. "What's going on, Killian?"

"It's just... I feel like...we're being watched."

She raised one eyebrow. "Oh really?"

I tried another smile, but I doubted it was any more successful than the first.

"What exactly do you sense?" she pressed.

I shrugged. "I just sort of... It's almost like there's someone out there—or a lot of someones, maybe—and they're not happy that I'm here."

Lily studied me for several seconds before nodding slowly. "I guess Fletcher was right about you."

I felt my eyes widen. "The *we are* being watched?"

She shrugged. "Fletcher would say it's the spirits of the ancestors. Personally, I don't feel anything."

Just then, a slight breeze rustled through the leaves, and I thought I heard the indistinct sound of voices floating on the wind.

Lily seemed to hear it too. "That's them now," she told me.

"The spirits?"

She laughed. "No, the archaeologists. If the spirits are speaking, I won't be the one to hear them. I don't have any gifts, remember? Come on. Don't let them spook you."

We started off again, and soon the site came into view, looking eerily like the ghost of an Indian village rising from the past. A dusty, gray tent and two makeshift

canopies had been set up around a small clearing. Under one canopy stood several tripods, each bearing a large, shallow box suspended on chains. The other canopy sheltered a few folding lawn chairs, a large ice chest, and a folding plastic table—obviously the rest area. I couldn't see what was in the tent. An enormous tarp was piled off to one side, revealing the actual dig in the center of the clearing.

It looked much like what I'd expected from watching TV. Metal rebar spikes and white twine had been used to lay the area out in a precise grid, with excavation under way in several of its squares. I quickly counted seven people. Four of them were down on their hands and knees wielding trowels, while the other three appeared to be supervising.

From what I could see, most of them seemed to be around my own age. One man was definitely older than the others. I guessed him to be in his mid-forties. He was quite tall, with faded red hair and abundantly freckled skin. Another woman seemed to be a little older as well, maybe in her early thirties.

The older man looked up as we drew nearer and raised a hand in greeting. "Hello, Ms. Snyder," he called loudly, causing everyone else to glance in our direction.

"Hello, Professor Healy," Lily replied. "The excavation seems to be going well."

"Yes, the weather has been cooperating lately. The rains have held off, for which we are eternally grateful. May I assume this is the reporter you called about earlier today?"

"Yes. Professor Quinn Healy, this is Killian Kendall. As I said, he's writing an article on local archaeology."

Professor Healy eyed me suspiciously, making me wonder briefly if Lily had been wise to use my real name. His lips formed a smile that never quite reached his steely blue eyes as he held out his hand to shake mine.

"How did you learn of the excavation?" he asked. "I thought we had done a fine job of keeping this under wraps. It prevents the riffraff and rubberneckers from interfering, you understand."

"I know someone in the tribe who mentioned it to me," I prevaricated. Well, it wasn't a complete lie. "Don't worry, I won't reveal the location of the site or give any landmarks that would help locate it for the readers."

His smile became a little warmer and he nodded. "That would be much appreciated. Let me give you a quick tour. Afterwards, I'll introduce you to the crew, and you can ask some questions."

"I'll just leave you to it," Lily interjected. "I need to get back to the house." She turned to me. "Will you be able to find your way back?"

I wasn't at all sure I could, but before I was able to respond, Professor Healy stepped in smoothly. "If not, we'll make sure he has a guide to help him find his way."

"Thank you." Lily set off silently into the trees.

The professor watched her go, a thoughtful expression on his face, before turning his attention back to me.

"Is this the first time you've ever been on the site of an archaeological excavation?"

"Yes, it is, although I've done a little research on the subject."

"Like any good reporter," he said approvingly. "Then I'll assume you have a rudimentary knowledge of the subject. All the same, I'll review the basics quickly. Work started long before we actually arrived with trowel in hand. After the Snyders contacted us and we decided this was a viable site, we began our surveys. A base map was drawn showing the location of the excavation in order to pinpoint elevations and features such as trees, rocks, et cetera—in this case, mostly trees. During the excavation, we add to it to show where we've excavated and where any artifacts are found."

He walked over closer to the dig area with me trailing behind, then crouched down and plucked the taut string.

"We established a grid based on the cardinal points of the compass, using extremely accurate measurements taken with surveying instruments. This is all very important for future scientists and archaeologists. The grid is laid out with spikes and twine, then the squares are assigned coordinates by counting the number of units—feet or meters, we use feet—north and east of the datum point, which is located in the southwest corner of the site."

I was beginning to feel as if I were back in class being lectured to by one of my drier professors. This would all be good information if I had been writing for a science journal, but he was talking so fast I could barely keep up with my note-taking. I finally decided to forget about the notes for the moment and use the opportunity to study the other crew members.

The woman in her thirties kept stealing curious glances in our direction. She was about average height, thin, with rosy muscles in her arms and legs. Her dirty-blond hair was pulled back in a practical ponytail, and she wore no makeup. Like most of the other crew, she wore khaki shorts, a dirt-stained t-shirt, and grime-encrusted sneakers. Her appearance made it obvious she worked right along with her colleagues.

This was in striking contrast to Professor Healy, who was almost spotless in his fashionable jeans and button-down oxford, with its sleeves rolled industriously up to his elbows. Apart from having his hair ruffled by the wind, he looked as if he were there for a photo shoot rather than for any actual work.

The remaining crew members all appeared to be in their late teens or early twenties. Upon closer inspection, I decided the other person I'd guessed to be a supervisor was probably a little older than her companions, maybe in her mid-twenties. She was short and stocky, with close-cropped, curly, dark hair and intense brown eyes. She wasn't paying much attention to the two of us—unlike the pretty blonde girl she was assisting, who was watching us more than what she was doing.

I saw the darker woman catch the girl's wrist and point something out in the dirt. They both bent over it as she poked gently with the point of her trowel. It must not have been anything important, however, because after closer inspection she dropped it into the plastic five-gallon bucket where all the excavated dirt was being deposited.

In another square, a tall, well-toned black man with a shaved head was laboring diligently, while in the square next to him, a slightly pudgy Asian man also paid us no heed. The remaining crew member had pretty much given up any pretense of being busy and was simply watching us with a blank expression. He was of average height and weight, with straight brown hair that hung down over his pale blue eyes.

"Sometimes only a few test pits are dug," Professor Healy was saying, "but we'll be excavating the entire site over the course of several years, assuming this first season goes well and the Snyders and Pomocatan tribe are agreeable."

"Why wouldn't they be agreeable?" I asked.

As if surprised that I had interrupted his lecture, he seemed at a loss for words for a few seconds—a state to which I suspected he was not accustomed.

"Well," he finally said slowly, as if measuring his words carefully, "they may not feel we've accomplished what they expected. Archaeology is a science, and a meticulous and slow moving one at that. We rarely know what we will find when we start digging, and we don't always come up with things that would be exciting or interesting to the layperson. We gain knowledge with every excavation, but it's not always what others expect."

When I accepted his answer with a nod, he blithely settled back into his lecture. "I don't know how much you know about soil, but it is divided into layers, or strata."

I wanted to point out that we'd learned this in elementary school, but I bit my tongue and let him prattle on.

"The effects of human and natural actions over a long period of time cause visible changes in the color and texture of the soil, forming these strata. Each separate stratum, or layer, is excavated separately. We start at the top and work our way down. Each layer is completely excavated within the designated square before the next is begun."

He stood up and stalked toward the tent. "As artifacts are found, they are collected and carefully recorded in a log. Then they are placed in a bag marked with the grid coordinates and the layer number. This is known as their provenance."

"Have you found many artifacts since you started?"

Once again, he looked a little disgruntled at my interruption. "Ahem. Enough to show that this will be a worthwhile project."

"Like what?"

"Several projectile points, both whole and broken, some shell material, pottery shards, and quite a bit of lithic material so far."

"Lithic material?"

"Stone flakes and chips left over from knapping a projectile point or tool," he explained somewhat impatiently. "I'll show you later. As I was saying, we also encounter features—areas—which appear different from the surrounding soil because the ground was disturbed in the past. In this case, these could indicate postholes, trash pits, storage pits, burials, et cetera."

Having apparently come to the end of his lesson plan, he stood staring at me expectantly.

"Fascinating," I said.

And in truth, the information itself was fascinating. Its presentation had been something less than sparkling, however. I was very glad I didn't have any classes with Professor Healy.

He gave a satisfied nod at my compliment, as if it was the answer he'd been expecting. "A quick overview of how the excavation works. Now then, let's introduce you to my crew."

He walked towards the dirty-blonde woman, leaving me to follow.

"Elyse, this is Killian Kendall. He's writing an article about local archaeology. Mr. Kendall, this is Elyse Pike, my field assistant and former student. Ms. Pike now teaches a few courses at the college."

Elyse Pike gave me another one of those curious stares as we shook hands. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Kendall."

"Please, call me Killian."

She smiled back. "And you may call me Elyse. If I can help you with anything, just let me know."

She gave me a quick wink.

Was she flirting with me? Did she have something in her eye? What did the wink mean? I tried not to show my confusion. I thanked her politely, but did not return her wink.

Professor Healy moved on, dismissing Elyse without a word. "Our other project assistant is Susan Urban," he said, and the stocky, dark-haired woman looked up. "Susan is a master's candidate and has worked with me on various projects. Susan, this is Killian Kendall, a reporter."

I shook hands with Susan as Professor Healy went on to introduce the other crew members in one fell swoop. I guessed they didn't rate individual introductions. "The young lady Miss Urban is assisting is Bridget Foxwell. This is her first dig." The blonde girl around my age smiled and waved.

"The young man over there," he indicated the well-built black man, "is Israel Meeks. The gentleman next to him is Ricky Wong." Israel looked up from his work and nodded in greeting, and Ricky sketched a slightly mocking salute. As he did, a flash at his wrist caught my attention. I looked closely and saw he was wearing a watch with a thick leather strap and a gold face. A large, bright stone—was it a ruby? a garnet?—was set where the hands met, winking in the sunlight. The jewelry seemed out of place out there in the dirt.

The professor cleared his throat, and I shifted my attention to the last crew member. The young man hadn't taken his eyes off of us since I'd arrived. "The fellow who seems to be taking a break is Alexander James."

Alexander flushed crimson and ducked his head as he went back to excavating.

"Except for Elyse and me, the rest of the crew is made up of volunteers," he explained, "mostly students majoring in archaeology or history. Bridget, Israel, Ricky—and now Mr. James—are excavating their squares. If they find an artifact, it will be photographed, then collected and carried into the tent over there."

The professor seemed to be gearing up for another lecture. I glanced back at Elyse to find her still watching me with a curious expression. I looked away quickly before she could wink again.

"As the crew removes the soil," Healy droned on, "it's placed into the white buckets you see. When the buckets are full, their contents are sifted through these screens." He walked over to the tripods, and I realized the shallow boxes hanging from them had wire mesh bottoms. "That's to ensure we don't miss any small artifacts or fragments."

He headed for the tent and ducked through the entrance flap. I stepped in behind him to find another folding table holding a couple of boxes of plastic zip bags, several black felt-tip markers, a slightly battered laptop computer, a stack of paper, a large cardboard box, a few labeled bags holding artifacts, and a light scattering of dirt. Another box sat on the ground under the table. The air inside the tent was stale and smelled of mildewed plastic. My nose wrinkled in protest and I stifled a sneeze.

"This is where we catalogue and bag the finds," the professor continued.

I leaned over the table to examine the bags. They were hand labeled with numbers and letters followed by a brief written note. The one on top said, "Projectile point, brown chert." Healy reached over my shoulder and picked up the bag. He dumped its content into his palm, then held it out for me to see.

"It's an arrowhead," I guessed.

"More accurately, it's a projectile point," Healy corrected with a condescending tone. "Judging by its size, it was more likely used on a javelin than an arrow."

"How old do you think it is?"

"We suspect we may be dealing with a late archaic, early woodland site, which would make it

roughly 3,000 years old. Of course, that's not official. So far we haven't found anything we can accurately date, but the shape and size of the point, together with the pottery fragments we have, indicate that time frame."

"All of this will be studied more closely after the excavation is complete?"

"Yes. Each artifact will be cleaned at the lab, then sorted and stored until it can be analyzed. Once all the analyses are complete, that information must be interpreted and written into reports. It's estimated that for every hour of excavation, it takes at least twenty hours of laboratory and other work to complete an analysis and report." He dropped the point back into the bag, which he resealed before placing it on the table again.

"Here's something else you'll find interesting." He reached into the box and pulled out a larger bag, this one holding a grooved stone tool.

"A tomahawk?" I guessed.

"A stone axe," he corrected. "It's our largest find so far, quite an impressive piece."

"I'd assume something like that must be fairly valuable," I said, sensing an opportunity to ask some of the questions I really wanted answered. "What kind of security do you have here?"

He frowned and cleared his throat. "Well, to be honest, we don't have any security except for our isolation and anonymity, which is why we're relying on you not to reveal the location of the excavation."

"No security at all?"

"No. That's not uncommon at all for university-funded projects," he went on defensively. "We're working with a very limited budget, consisting almost

exclusively of grants. We simply can't afford any security measures."

"But..."

"Professor Healy!" someone called. I thought it might be Elyse.

He carefully replaced the axe in the box before sticking his head out the tent door. "Yes?"

"We found something I think you might want to see," she responded. Her voice was tight with excitement. "Bring the camera."

He stepped back inside, rummaged through the box under the table, and pulled out a dusty digital camera. "Excuse me," he said, ducking through the door.

I took his place at the entrance and watched as he approached Elyse and Ricky Wong, who looked as excited as Elyse sounded. Healy crouched down next to them and gazed intently at whatever it was they had found.

An eerie silence had fallen over the group. I realized that since I had arrived there had been a constant backdrop of the various sounds of work—low conversation, the soft scraping of trowel on soil, dirt being dropped into plastic buckets and sifted through screens. The sudden quiet added to the sense of anticipation as everyone waited with bated breath.

While I had been talking to, or rather listening to, the professor, I'd been distracted from the sensation of being watched. It suddenly returned with a vengeance, causing a shiver to run up my spine. I looked around again, but there was still nothing to be seen except trees.

"Is it what I think it is?" Elyse asked, breaking the oppressive silence.

"What do you think it is?" Healy answered carefully.

"It looks like a copper bead to me," she said, and excited exclamations went up from several in the group.

I wondered what the significance of a copper bead was, but that didn't seem like the best time to ask.

"It would appear you are correct." There was now an undercurrent of excitement in the professor's voice as well. "We must proceed very cautiously from here. It could be a single bead, or it could be a strand." He sat back on his haunches and allowed himself a small grin. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's too soon to tell, but we may just have another Nassawango site on our hands."

Now that he was speaking another language, I decided to act my part and ask a question. "Nassawango site?"

Professor Healy glanced up at me with a surprised look on his face, as if he'd forgotten I was there. "Ah, yes, the Nassawango site was a rather famous archaeological discovery made near Snow Hill, Maryland, in the '70s. It yielded a veritable treasure trove of artifacts and prehistoric knowledge—perhaps most interestingly, evidence of Adena culture predating that of other similar sites on the Eastern Shore."

I still wasn't at all sure what he was talking about, but jotted some quick notes in my book and decided to look it all up later.

The professor continued, "I hate to appear rude, but this discovery will probably have us all pretty busy for the rest of the day. Perhaps you can return another time?"

"How about tomorrow morning?" I suggested.

"That's fine," he said distractedly, his attention on the pit once more. He bent over and began taking pictures of the bead. I got the impression he'd already forgotten I was there.

I started to head back to the house, before realizing I had no idea how to get there. "I, uh, could use that guide back to the Snyder's, if it isn't too much trouble."

Healy looked up in irritation, but before he could reply, Elyse stood. "I'll take him," she volunteered.

The professor seemed surprised, but shrugged appreciatively and went back to the work at hand.

Elyse started into the trees. "It's this way," she said over her shoulder. "I don't blame you for wanting a guide. These woods can be confusing until you get a sense of direction."

She walked quickly and confidently, but with none of Lily's grace.

"I'm not known for my sense of direction," I admitted.

"No, you're known for other things."

I stopped walking and eyed the woman suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

She stopped as well and turned to face me. "I know who you are. I know you're a private eye. Now, why don't you tell me why you're really here?"



## Chapter 9

The archaeologist stood facing me, hands set on her slight hips, staring me down defiantly. She had a great poker face. I couldn't figure out if she was angry, excited, curious, or indifferent.

With a sigh, I decided there was no point denying who I was. I would just spill it all and hope for the best. If luck was with me, I wouldn't blow the case before I even got started.

"You're right," I told her. "I'm a private investigator. I've been hired to look into the thefts from the excavation and the assault on Mr. Snyder."

She frowned. "Who hired you?"

"Usually that would be privileged information. At this point, though, I don't see any harm in telling you. My client is the Pomocatan tribe."

She pondered that for a minute. "Why are you using a cover? Is that the right term? I mean, why not just tell us you're investigating the thefts and the assault? Why pretend to be a reporter?"

"It was the council's idea. They don't feel Professor Healy has been very forthcoming with them. Since he never even mentioned the possible thefts until after the assault, they don't really trust him."

She nodded slowly. "I can understand that. Professor Healy is a top-notch archaeologist, but he's a lousy people person. I warned him he should tell the tribe after the first time we noticed the site had been disturbed. He refused, saying he was afraid the tribe would get spooked and back out."

"I didn't really get to ask Professor Healy all the questions I wanted to, so maybe you could help me. You're the second in command here, right?"

She gave me a small smile. "I guess you could say that. It's a distant second, though. What do you need to know?"

"You mentioned the site had been disturbed. What alerted you?"

"When you were at the site, did you notice how carefully and evenly each square was being excavated?" I nodded. "Well, every night, after we stop digging for the day, depth measurements are taken, and then the whole area is covered by tarps. Several times, when we arrived in the morning, the tarps had been pulled back or not secured, and the ground had been disturbed. Measurements further proved that someone had been digging during the night."

"How many times did this happen?"

"Three times counting the night Mr. Snyder was assaulted."

"Do you know if anything was taken?"

She shrugged. "That's hard to say. This site has turned out to be an archaeologist's dream. The squares that were disturbed were turning up a lot of artifacts, so chances are something was found. There's no way of knowing for sure, though."

"Okay. What is Adena culture? The professor mentioned it when he was explaining the Nassawango site."

"Adena refers to a group of native peoples that primarily lived in the Ohio area between about two and three thousand years ago. They had a very advanced

culture and did a lot of traveling and trading. They were the first mound builders in North America and created extraordinary examples of prehistoric art. If we can link this site to the Adena culture, then we'll have a very exciting find on our hands. Native sites generally don't generate a lot of interest outside of academic circles."

"But an Adena-related site would?"

She nodded. "Most likely, especially in this area. Several archaeological sites have been found on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and in Delaware that are clearly Adena-related. They're known as the Delmarva Adena Complex, and they've produced some amazing stone artifacts, most of which were not fashioned locally. They're made of exotic stone types and styles known to be Adena."

"A copper bead would indicate that this is an Adena site?"

"It would be a good sign, although not definitive in and of itself. The local tribes didn't use a lot of copper, mainly because it wasn't available in this area. One bead, or even a strand of beads, doesn't necessarily mean this is an Adena site. It could just have shown up because the people traded with the Adena or some other group that made or passed on copper beads. Both the Adena and the local tribes were great traders, with routes stretching across the country."

"Have any of the other artifacts found indicated this might be an Adena site?"

"Again, that's hard to say. Everything has been roughly the right time period, but this area was a mishmash of cultures anyway. No one is sure if sites like Nassawango are actually Adena villages or if they were

simply influenced by them. The whole issue is something of an enigma, hence the excitement generated by a find like this. Any chance to better understand this culture is very valued.

"What's even better is that this site, like the one in Nassawango, is untouched. Most of the other Adena sites on the Shore have either been revealed by construction activities, or were found as the result of shore erosion. Almost all of them are lost now. Archaeologists weren't able to really study them before they were gone. It was all they could do to salvage as much of the cache as possible. If this site turns out to have ties to the Adena...well, the value to the scientific community would be incalculable."

"What about the looting? Doesn't that compromise your excavation?"

"Yes, to some degree, especially since we don't know what, if anything, has been found and removed. On the other hand, most sites have been looted or disturbed long before we ever get to them, so we're still ahead of the game on that score."

"Does Professor Healy have any theories about who the looter might be?"

She shrugged expressively. "If he does, he hasn't seen fit to share them with me."

"He hasn't talked to you about it at all?"

"You need to understand Professor Healy. He's not the friendliest man. We've worked together for years now, and I've never been to his house or even shared a meal with him except for official luncheons or banquets and things like that. I'm an acquaintance only, an associate. We're not friends. Besides, the professor works

on a need-to-know basis. If he has a theory, he wouldn't share it with me unless he felt there was some specific reason to tell me. For all I know, he suspects me."

"Would he have any reason to suspect you?"

She bristled slightly. "That's not what I meant."

"Excuse me. I didn't mean to insult you. What about you? Do you have any theories?"

She shrugged again, still a little sullen. "My guess would be collectors. Some of them can be very unethical. I wouldn't put it past them to come in and try to get some of the artifacts for themselves—to hell with any sort of scientific record."

"How could they have learned about it? I thought you were trying to keep the location a secret."

"There's no such thing as a secret if more than one person knows about it," she scoffed. "The entire council is aware of the dig, and most likely their families as well. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole tribe knows. Then there's the crew. Ideally, we'd like to think they're all professional enough not to mention the exact location, but let's face it: they're kids *and* they're all volunteers. They don't have much invested. Any one of them could have easily let something slip to the wrong person."

"Do you suspect anyone in particular? Do you have the names of any of these unscrupulous collectors?"

"No. Sorry, you'll have to find them on your own. In any case, we'd better be on our way. I want to get back to the excavation." She started moving again, then stopped and turned back to me. "Of course, you realize I'm going to have to tell the professor about this."

I grimaced. Apparently, luck was not with me after all. "What do you think his reaction will be?"

"He'll be infuriated."

"Do you have to tell him?"

"I can't risk his finding out that I knew and didn't say anything. He has the power to make or break my career at this point."

I nodded. "I see your point. I'll just have to hope for the best."

She smiled. "Thanks for understanding."

She walked away, and I hurried to keep up. We didn't talk much the rest of the way. Once we broke out of the trees, she shook my hand and started back without so much as a word. I watched her go before turning and approaching the house.

I knocked on the door, which was opened a few seconds later by Lily. "Hey!" she greeted me with obvious surprise. "You're back quickly. How'd it go?"

"Well, I was getting a great lecture until we were interrupted by an exciting find. I'm supposed to go back in the morning, but it seems I blew my cover."

"Come on in and tell us the whole story. I'm sure Fletcher will want to hear it as well."

I followed her into the living room, where Fletcher relaxed on the couch with a book laid open on his lap. He smiled warmly at me. "I heard what you said at the door. No need to repeat it for my benefit."

I sat down in one of the chairs and quickly launched into what had happened after Lily left. When I got to the part about the possible Adena artifact, she became very excited.

"That would be wonderful! It could provide our tribe with the kind of attention we need. Do you realize that we're not even recognized by the state, let alone the federal government? We have the genealogical evidence, the historical evidence, everything we need for recognition, but no! That would mean they'd have to give us money. Well, we don't need or want their money."

Fletcher's eyes were sparkling merrily. "Simmer down, Lily. Heart disease might run in the family. We don't want you to have a stroke. Even if they find it is an Adena site, I wouldn't hold my breath for state or federal recognition." He turned his attention to me while Lily calmed herself down. "Anyway, what were you saying about blowing your cover?"

"Elyse Pike volunteered to walk me back to the house. As soon as we were out of the professor's earshot, she told me she knew I was a private investigator and demanded to know what I was doing at the site."

"How did she know you're a PI?" Lily asked.

I shrugged. "I got a lot of exposure during the Fenton Black case. I was on the news quite a bit. I didn't think to warn Lily not to use my real name."

"Too late now. What did you tell her?"

"I figured at that point it was better to level with her and hope to make her an ally. I told her the truth, that I'd been hired by the tribe to look into the looting and the assault on Fletcher. She gave me some good information, stuff I doubt I would have been able to get from Professor Healy. That's just as well, since she's planning on telling him who I really am."

Lily made a face. "So much for the ally thing."

"Not necessarily," Fletcher pointed out before I could. "Even if the professor refuses to cooperate with the investigation, Killian now has a contact on the inside who may be willing to assist him."

"Exactly," I agreed.

"What now?" Lily asked.

"I show up tomorrow as we agreed...and gauge the fallout."

I talked to Micah on the phone later in the evening. He was careful not to mention his offer, but it hung heavily between us while we chatted. I knew I'd have to make a decision soon.

I slept restlessly that night. The memories of the eerie feeling I'd experienced in the forest came back to me in my dreams. The sensation wasn't quite malevolent, but it was definitely disturbing. I awoke several times, sitting up in bed and staring around me wildly, as if expecting to find someone else in the room with me.

Just before daybreak, I had an even more disturbing dream. Yet when I woke up, sweating and breathing hard, I could only remember a sense of being pursued. I gave up then and just got out of bed to take a shower.

I was already in the lobby when Steve came down.

"You're up early," he commented with surprise. I wasn't known for my early rising habits.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Something on your mind?"

I shrugged. "I think it's this case."

"Has it gotten that bad already? Or maybe it's a combination of things."

I knew he was implying the situation with Micah, but I didn't feel like talking about it, so I played dumb. "The case isn't that bad. It's just that I felt some weird things yesterday when I was going out to the site."

Steve's eyes lit up with interest. "What kind of weird things?"

He was something of a paranormal buff, who'd been thrilled with the idea that the house was haunted when he bought it. Of course, the excitement had quickly turned sour when it became obvious that the resident ghost was affecting business—and not entirely in a positive manner.

"Just...a vague feeling of being watched. It gave me the willies then, and it crept into my dreams last night."

Steve waggled his eyebrows. "Better do a good job on this case. The spirits are watching."

"Gee, thanks, Steve. Way to make me feel better about the whole thing."

He laughed and went off to prepare the continental breakfast. I decided to skip it, not really wanting anything to eat. I figured if I left early enough, maybe I could work for a couple of hours before the construction crew arrived.

My plan succeeded. I was actually able to put a sizable dent in the pile of paperwork before the workmen breezed in about mid-morning. Novak hadn't shown up by the time I left, which I assumed meant he was either working on a case or just couldn't handle the office.

I drove to Fletcher's house with a small knot in my stomach, unsure of my reception at the excavation. I loathed confrontations of any type. I hoped maybe Elyse had changed her mind and hadn't told Professor Healy, but it was a slim chance at best. Elyse was firmly under the professor's thumb. She would tell him and, just as she'd predicted, he'd probably be furious.

When I parked in the driveway, I noticed that Fletcher's car was the only one there. I didn't see any sign of Lily's, or of Jacy's bike either. Of course, the motorcycle could have been behind the house. I walked up to the front door and knocked.

At a muffled "Come in," I did so, and heard Fletcher call out, "I'm in the kitchen." He was standing at the stove, stirring something quite odiferous in a pot. "Hello, Killian," he greeted me brightly.

"Should you be on your feet?" I asked.

He waved his hand dismissively in the air. "I'm fine. It's not like I'm running a marathon. Someone needed a salve that I didn't have made up. Are you here to visit the site again?"

"Yes."

"Will you need a guide? I'm afraid I'm not quite up to that yet, but you could give Lily a call at home. Jacy is at work."

"I don't want to bother Lily. I can manage to find it on my own."

"Are you sure?"

I laughed. "Not really, but I'll give it a shot. I have my cell phone if I get hopelessly lost."

"You could always just ask the spirits for directions." His tone was casual.

I immediately tensed up. "Did Lily tell you about yesterday?"

He gave me an enigmatic smile. "She didn't have to. I knew you'd sense them. Tell me, how did they react to you?"

I struggled for words for a minute. "Not exactly hostile, but not really welcoming, either. Watchful would be a good way to describe them."

He nodded. "They haven't made up their minds about you yet. They'll remain neutral towards you for now."

"You mean they could...interact if they wished?"

"Interact, interfere, whatever you want to call it."

"Are they neutral towards you?"

"They are my ancestors. They know me."

"But they didn't help you when you were attacked. And they haven't protected their artifacts from the looter."

"They see things from a different perspective than you and I. They act when they feel it is necessary, and rarely when we can do something on our own."

"So you believe they are waiting for us to do something first? What happens if we don't stop the looting?"

He smiled again. "Maybe nothing. Maybe something. I guess we'll find out if you don't catch the person responsible."

A shiver ran up my spine. "I should probably get going."

He nodded. "Be careful."

I gave him a nod and let myself out. Hesitating at the edge of the trees, I told myself sternly, *you're being*

*ridiculous. They didn't bother you last time.* On the other hand, Lily had been with me then.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the woods. Nothing happened. The birds kept singing, the breeze kept blowing, no ghoulies appeared. I released a nervous chuckle and moved on.

It wasn't long, however, before the hair on my neck began to prickle. I sensed the spirits' attention being directed at me. I tried to ignore them and keep walking, yet the feeling increased the deeper I went into the forest.

Suddenly, unseen beings were crowding around me, pressing in on me from all sides. It was a strangely claustrophobic sensation, as if I couldn't breathe. I stopped and gasped for air. When I reached out a hand to lean against a nearby tree, I somehow missed and stumbled to my knees in the crisp leaves. The rich smell of forest loam wafted into my face while I continued to struggle for breath. The trees around me began to spin, and my sight started to darken around the edges. I fought to remain conscious.

"I'm here to help," I managed to choke out.

The sensation continued for several more seconds. Just when I thought I couldn't take any more, it stopped all at once.

While I caught my breath, I leaned my forehead against the rough bark of the tree I'd missed earlier. I wasn't sure what had just happened, but I was quite sure I didn't want it to happen again.

Were the spirits testing me, and, if so, had I been found worthy? Had my weak offer of assistance actually served some purpose? Could they even understand my words? Or had they just simply done what they'd

intended to do? Which would be what, exactly? Scare the crap out of me? If so, then they'd succeeded.

Hearing a twig snap behind me, I spun around to find an enormous snow-white buck standing a few feet away, his huge, spreading antlers like tree limbs sprouting from his skull. His round, chocolate eyes seemed to stare into me for a moment before he turned with lightning-quick grace and bounded away. Everything happened so quickly that, for a few seconds, I wondered if I'd really seen it at all.

I stayed on the ground a while longer, my heart pounding in my chest. After a while, I felt steady enough to get up, using the tree for support. I was thoroughly turned around by then, with no idea which way I had been heading. I stood still, trying to orient myself, until I felt a slight pull from one direction. With Fletcher's words in mind, I set off to follow it.

Almost immediately, I began to hear sounds of conversation and knew I'd gone the right way. I whispered a quick thanks to whoever might hear and kept walking. Soon, the excavation came into sight.

As I stepped into the clearing, several people looked up, their closed expressions telling me immediately that I wouldn't be welcome there. Elyse, who was working off to one side, refused to even glance in my direction.

Professor Healy straightened up from where he was bent over speaking to Susan Urban. He quickly moved to head me off before I could advance any farther into the site. I almost got the impression he wanted to block my view of the excavation.

"Mr. Kendall," he greeted me coldly.

I decided to take the offensive right from the start. "Good morning, Professor Healy. I guess Ms. Pike spilled the beans."

"Yes, and I must say that I don't appreciate being misled. If you'd come to me as an investigator, I would have cooperated fully, but I will not willingly participate in a witch-hunt."

I didn't believe him for a second but decided it would be counterproductive to call him a liar.

"A witch-hunt?"

"It's obvious that certain parties suspect me or someone in my crew of stealing artifacts and assaulting Mr. Snyder, as if I would stoop so low or allow something like that to occur beneath my very nose."

"They don't necessarily suspect anyone," I contradicted. "They only want the truth."

"Then why not come to me up front? Why send you in pretending to be a journalist and playing me for a fool?"

Ah, that was the real meat of the issue. The professor's pride was injured.

"No one intended to play you for a fool, Professor, least of all me. The tribe is understandably a little concerned. After all, you did fail to tell them about the looting when it first began."

He frowned deeply. "I didn't inform them about the suspected tampering because there was no proof that anything had been taken and because I feared something like this would happen."

"The artifacts are rightfully theirs. You didn't think they deserved to know that someone might have been stealing them?"

"Any stolen artifacts affect my study as well. I have just as much at stake."

"Professor Healy, with all due respect, this is their culture, their heritage. I think there is a difference."

His eyes narrowed. "Either way, you're no longer welcome here. I will not cooperate with you any further, and I've instructed my crew not to speak to you."

I cocked my head to one side. "You realize that this is not the best way to win back the trust of the tribe. It almost seems as if you have something to hide."

Professor Healy drew himself up to his full height and glared down at me. "We're finished here. You may leave."

I stared at him for a few more seconds then turned and walked away. We most certainly were not finished, but I needed reinforcements before I took things further. It appeared I would have to bring in Lily after all.

I went far enough away from the site that I couldn't be overheard before calling her. "You aren't lost, are you?" she asked as soon as I'd identified myself.

"Huh? No."

"Oh. Fletcher said I might have to come hunt you down in the forest if you got lost on your way to the site."

"Oh, no. I, uh, found it okay. It was after I got there that I ran into problems."

"What happened?"

"Well, as I suspected, Professor Healy wasn't happy. His pride is more wounded than anything, and he's quite upset. He threw me off the site."

"He *what*? It's not his property! If we want you there, he can't just throw you off."

"Well, while it is your property, it is *his* excavation. I don't want to start another argument, so maybe you could come down and attempt to smooth things over."

She sighed. "I'm not much of a diplomat. I wish Fletcher was well enough to walk that far. I'll give it a shot, though. Maybe I should see if Jacy can go with me."

"Is he more diplomatic?"

She snorted. "Just about anyone is more diplomatic than I am. That said, Jacy is a little unpolished still. He gets very defensive of his family and tribe. I think in some ways he's overcompensating because he didn't know much about his heritage as he was growing up. However, I was mainly thinking that he'd be a bit more intimidating than a woman by herself. Some of those academic types tend to be quite chauvinistic."

"Professor Healy does strike me as being rather patriarchal."

"I'll call Jacy, then. I don't even know if he can leave work on such short notice. Just meet me at the house, and we'll take it from there."

"Okay, see you soon."

I was too distracted as I walked back to the house to notice if the feeling of being watched was still there. If things couldn't be worked out with Professor Healy, this whole case would become a lot more difficult. How could I be expected to discover the truth when most of the people directly involved wouldn't speak to me? I

knew, though, that I would pursue this even if Healy and his crew were actively attempting to thwart me. I would hate to let Lily, Fletcher, and Jacy down. Plus, I was thoroughly hooked by that point. I was on the case for the long haul.



## Chapter 10

While waiting for Lily, I went back to the house and chatted with Fletcher. He was still in the kitchen, pouring the completed salve into small, amber-colored glass jars.

"What's that for, anyway?" I asked.

"It's an all-purpose skin salve, good for burns, rashes, itching, arthritis, shingles—you name it."

I sniffed the air. "It, uh, certainly is pungent."

He shrugged with a smile. "What can I say? It's made with comfrey leaves, calendula flowers, St. John's wort, chickweed, and a few other things. I steep all that together in oil, strain it, and then mix it with beeswax."

"And it really works?"

"Sure does. I've been using it since I was a child. This is one of the things that got me interested in herbal remedies. My grandfather passed the basic recipe to me, although I've modified it a bit over the years. My ex-wife even used it on the girls' diaper rash."

I studied him as he worked, wondering what it must have been like for him to leave his family. Did he know what he was giving up? Did he ever regret it? Did he even regret getting married in the first place?

I'd been out since I was sixteen and first realized I was gay. I couldn't imagine feeling obligated to marry a woman, but Adam had told me his own story before, which on the surface was similar to Fletcher's. He had married, had a family, and then left his wife and children to live his life as a gay man. Even knowing Adam's story, I still had questions.

"Go ahead and ask," Fletcher said without looking up.

"Huh?"

"The questions that are running through your head: go on and ask them."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Do you read minds too?"

He looked over at me and grinned. "I don't have to read minds to see that you have questions, but you're too polite to ask."

"It's really none of my business."

"I've given you permission to ask. It doesn't mean I have to answer anything."

I nodded. "I was just wondering why you got married? Did you realize you were gay after you were married or did you always know?"

"It's complicated." He finished filling the jars and placed the pot in the sink. Then he rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a sheet of labels, which he applied to the jars while he continued. "Attitudes are very different now from when I was young, especially where gay and lesbian folk are concerned. Heck, nobody even mentioned gay people back then."

He paused in his work and stared off into nowhere for a second, as if watching the past replay in midair. "I guess I knew what it was, but it was never something I applied to myself. Since I was an only child, my family—especially my mother—subjected me to a lot of pressure to get married, even from an early age. There were different expectations then, but I wasn't interested in women. I did everything I could to put off the inevitable. I joined the Army when I was eighteen

and went to Vietnam the next year. It was the tail end of the war so I wasn't gone long, but when it was over and I returned home, the pressure to get married had eased off. I guess the war was enough to prove to my family that I was a man, at least for a few more years. It still somehow never occurred to me that I might be a homosexual. I just thought I had other things on my mind."

He applied the last of the labels and lowered himself carefully into one of the kitchen chairs across from me. "Eventually, the pressure started up again: family members asking when I was going to settle down and start a family, my mother hinting she wanted grandchildren...that sort of thing. An aunt introduced me to Vida at a dinner party, and we were married a year later. The first baby, Daisy, came a year after that. The first few years weren't that bad.

"But then I began to get more involved in Native advocacy. I was at a rally for Native rights when I met a very charming younger man. He turned out to be gay, and, to make a long story short, I fell in love with him. I kept it a secret for a while, but eventually that gets to you, so I told Vida. To her credit, she'd known there was something missing in our relationship for a long time. She took it very well. I think she was a little relieved to find that our problems had nothing to do with her."

"You parted on good terms?" I interrupted to ask.

He nodded. "We've remained friends. I even used to go to dinner with her and her second husband before he passed away."

"I thought Lily said she didn't really know you when she was growing up."

"Well, those dinner visits came quite a bit later, after the kids were all pretty much grown and out of the house. Right after Vida and I were divorced, I moved west to live on a reservation and study with a famous medicine man. Although the love affair that made me realize I was gay was short-lived, I was involved with another man for many years. I only returned here after he was killed in a car accident."

"I'm sorry."

He smiled sadly. "Thank you. What we had was wonderful, and I would never trade it for anything. Would you like to see some pictures?"

"Yes, I would."

He stood up, and I followed him to the living room. He pulled out a couple of leather-bound photo albums from one of the bookcases and we settled onto the couch. He flipped through a few pages, then stopped and pointed to a picture of two men standing in the desert with their arms thrown around each other's shoulders, smiling into the camera. The rock formations and mesas in the background made me guess it was taken in Arizona, New Mexico, or another Southwestern state. One of the men was obviously a much younger Fletcher. I assumed his companion was his significant other. They both had long, dark hair and darkly tanned faces, but the other man was a little taller and more slender than Fletcher.

"That's Larry. This picture was taken sometime in the '80s."

A few pages later he pointed to another picture, this one of Larry in full Native regalia. "He was Navajo. This was taken at a powwow."

"He was very handsome," I said.

"Yes, he was," Fletcher agreed. His voice sounded far away, as if his thoughts had slipped through the years to join Larry once again. He kept the page open, fingertips brushing over Larry's face as though the paper somehow held warmth.

"We met at a community gathering out west," he said quietly. "I was still pretty green back then—just getting my feet under me, learning the traditions, trying to figure out who I was outside the life I'd left behind. Larry...well, he was light. That's the only way I know how to describe him. He walked into a room and people straightened up, like the sun had come out."

He turned the page, revealing a candid shot of Larry laughing mid-gesture, hair blowing wildly in the wind. Fletcher's smile softened into something fragile.

"He loved to tease me. Said I was too serious for my own good. He taught me that it was okay to take joy where you found it—even in small things. We'd spend whole evenings just sitting outside, watching the sky change colors. I'd never known quiet like that before...or peace like that."

He paused again, exhaling through his nose. "He was the one who convinced me to learn the herbs, to learn the old ways. He said I had patience in my hands, even if I didn't have it anywhere else."

We flipped a few more pages: pictures of them traveling, camping, standing beside friends; a shot of Larry smearing paint across Fletcher's cheek; another of them leaning against an old truck, eyes crinkled in the same private joke.

"He looks happy," I said softly.

"He made everything feel brighter," Fletcher replied. "I still miss him every day." He swallowed, throat tightening just enough that I heard it. "When he died, it was like someone had taken a hot iron and pressed it right through me. We'd planned to grow old there, surrounded by those mountains. Our whole life was built into that land—every trail, every street, every diner booth we'd ever sat in. After the accident... I couldn't breathe without tripping over a memory. I'd walk to trails and see him there. I'd hear the screen door creak and expect him to call my name. Even the wind felt like him."

He closed the album gently, palm resting on the cover as if steadying himself. "People always say time dulls the hurt. Maybe it does for some. For me, it just changed the shape of it. I loved him too much to pretend I could just carry on like nothing happened. So I came back here—to the Shore. I needed a place that didn't know us, a place where every step didn't remind me of what I'd lost."

He leaned back into the couch, eyes shining with the echo of old grief, but there was a thread of fondness woven through his features too.

"Funny thing is, after all these years, the hurt isn't the first thing that comes up when I think of him. It's the laughter. The lessons. The love. But for a long time, it was different. For a long time, I couldn't even look at these albums."

"Thank you for showing me," I said.

He nodded, clearing his throat. "It feels good to talk about him now. Like I'm keeping him alive in the way that still matters."

He opened the album again and pointed to a picture of Larry sitting cross-legged in the dirt, carving something with intense concentration. "He was making a flute here. Wouldn't let me listen until he perfected the sound. He practiced it for months. I still have it somewhere—tucked away in a drawer. Some things you just can't bear to part with."

His smile widened, rueful but warm. "He used to say I'd outlive us both out of sheer stubbornness. I guess he wasn't wrong."

He laughed softly, and for a moment, the room felt full—as if the space Larry once occupied still hummed with his presence.

"Enough of that," Fletcher said gently. "There are more stories where those came from, but I don't want to drown you in the past all in one afternoon."

"I don't mind," I said.

"I know," he replied, eyes kind. "That's why I'm telling you."

Just then, the door opened, and Lily bustled in. I hadn't even heard her car pull up. She stopped short when she saw the album.

"Is he boring you to death with the family photos?" she teased.

"No, I was enjoying it actually."

"He's being polite," Fletcher said with a chuckle. "I was bending his ear about things long past. You got here just in time." He shut the album, gently caressed its cover, and then slid it back onto the shelf from which he'd pulled it.

I almost felt as if I'd intruded on a private moment between Fletcher and his lost lover.

"Is Jacy coming?" I inquired.

She nodded. "They let him take the rest of the day off. He should be here soon."

She asked me to recount exactly what had happened when I arrived at the site that morning, and bristled at Professor Healy's witch-hunt comment.

"That arrogant son of a bitch!"

"Don't let his words affect you so deeply," Fletcher warned, for once without his characteristic twinkle. "You can't afford to lose your temper in this situation. Whatever else he is, Quinn Healy is not a stupid man. Proudful, perhaps, but not stupid. If you go in angry, he will use that to his benefit. If you insult him, then a resolution will become difficult, if not impossible."

Lily sighed. "I know. I'm just not the right person for this at all. I wish you could go instead."

"I didn't say you weren't the right person. I simply warned you to be careful. I can't go, so that makes you the right person." Suddenly, Fletcher frowned. "I do wish you'd talked to me before asking Jacy to go with you, though."

"Why?" Lily asked sharply.

"I...just have a bad feeling concerning him and this excavation..."

"I'll keep an eye on him," she promised.

He nodded his head, but his eyes still looked troubled.

The sound of a motorcycle roaring into the yard announced Jacy's arrival.

"Should we ask him to stay here with you?" Lily asked.

Fletcher pursed his lips and shook his head. "Not now. He's left work to go with you, and it would just upset him." He looked over at me. "You help Lily keep an eye on him."

I nodded as the door swung open and Jacy strode in with a concerned expression on his face. "Hi, Lily, Fletcher, Killian." He greeted each of us in turn, taking in our somber expressions. "What exactly happened?" he asked when he got to me.

I launched into the story once again. When I was finished, Jacy shook his head silently, his jaw set with suppressed anger.

"Jacy..." Fletcher said.

Jacy nodded and visibly relaxed. "I know. I have to keep my cool."

Fletcher gave him a tight smile. "Watch out for Lily, okay? Keep her out of trouble—and yourself, too, while you're at it."

Jacy nodded again. "I'll do my best."

"You always do," Fletcher said with a small sigh.

Jacy turned to Lily. "Shall we get this show on the road?"

"Are you ready?" Lily asked me.

"I'm ready when you are. If I don't say much once we're there, it's because I'll be watching everyone's reactions. Besides, it's probably better if you take the lead. He's already mad at me and probably wouldn't listen to anything I said."

"Not that he's likely to listen to me either, but okay. Let's get going."

We hadn't advanced far into the forest before I began to feel tiny tendrils of emotion snaking into my

consciousness. At first, I mistook the slight feelings of anger as my own, but it didn't take me long to realize the emotion was coming from outside. That was all the warning I had before I was hit by a rolling wave of pure unadulterated rage.

The sensation was different from what I had experienced earlier—there was no feeling of being overwhelmed by an unseen crowd—but it was just as intense. I staggered under its weight, reaching out and grabbing hold of a tree for support.

For a moment, I thought the rage was directed at me, but after a few seconds, I knew I was not the target. Who or what was, I had no clue.

I looked up to find that Jacy and Lily hadn't even slowed. Outwardly at least, they seemed unaffected by the fury of their ancestors. How could they not sense that anger? Then I remembered that Lily had no gifts, and Jacy's didn't deal with the dead.

Nonetheless, I wondered if it was creeping into their perceptions at all. I hoped not. If they felt it but didn't recognize the anger as coming from outside themselves, it would surely affect how they handled Professor Healy.

I knew I needed to warn them, but my head was still reeling from the emotional assault. I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment and tried to block the anger, but it was useless. I didn't know what I was doing. I felt like the little boy with his finger in the dike while more leaks sprang up everywhere. I was fighting a losing battle.

I pushed away from the tree and rushed after the others, who'd managed to build up quite a lead. Jacy too seemed to have mastered the skill of moving effortlessly

through the forest. He had no trouble keeping pace with his aunt, while I somehow got snagged on briars with every step. They both forged ahead with single-minded purpose, never once looking back to make sure I was still with them.

I was just catching up when Lily, who was in front, broke into the clearing, with Jacy and me not far behind. We found the entire crew crowded around one square, which, if I wasn't mistaken, was the same one where the copper bead had been found the day before. When they noticed us, they stared at us with identical surprised—and slightly guilty—expressions.

Professor Healy detached himself from the group and quickly moved to block us from coming any further into the clearing. He stood in front of us in a wide-legged stance, arms crossed tightly over his chest, and a deep scowl on his face.

"What now?" he barked indignantly. "Must we be continually interrupted from our work?"

He eyed us with distaste. The rest of the crew had averted their attention elsewhere.

"I understand there were some problems earlier this morning," Lily began. Her voice sounded calm, but I detected a slight edge in her tone.

"Only if you consider being lied to and spied upon a problem."

"Professor Healy, surely you must understand our concern in this matter—"

"I'll tell you what I understand. I understand that you hired this, this *child*..." He made "child" sound like a dirty word. "...to investigate me and my crew as if we were common criminals. Then, to add insult to injury,

you had him lie to me about it, pretending to be a reporter to gain my confidence."

"We didn't hire Mr. Kendall to investigate *you* per se, or anyone on your crew. We hired him to look into the thefts and the assault on my father. Where that leads is out of our hands. We have the right to know the truth, and you haven't exactly been forthcoming."

"What are you insinuating?"

"I wasn't insinuating anything, Professor, but you can't deny that you failed to inform us about the looting until after my father was attacked and the police questioned you."

"We don't even know whether anything was taken."

With all the rage roiling around in my head, I was having a difficult time following the conversation. I had to concentrate fully on every word spoken, which made it hard to keep an eye on the others' reactions.

"That's not the point," Lily snapped. Her patience was wearing thin. "You did know someone was tampering with the site, and we should have been informed. Besides, in all likelihood, there were artifacts stolen—artifacts that rightfully belong to us."

"That still doesn't give you the right to have us investigated. How are we supposed to work with a private investigator crawling around the site asking questions?"

"Now that you mention it, I would like to point out that this property you are working on belongs to my father, and you have no right to throw anyone off of it."

He drew himself up to his full height. "Your father may own this property, but this is my excavation,

and I will manage it as I see fit. Mr. Kendall was proving to be a disruption to our work."

"You'll mismanage it, more likely," Lily snarled. I groaned inwardly. So much for not losing her temper. "You allow artifacts to be stolen right out from under your nose, and then you deliberately keep that information from us."

"Mismanage! I've overseen more excavations that you can imagine, and I've never had an artifact stolen before."

"Then why didn't you come to us right away? What are you hiding, Professor Healy?"

"I have nothing to hide."

"Then why not allow Mr. Kendall to continue his investigation?"

Even with all the distractions, I could see that, while the others were trying hard to pretend they weren't listening, they were hanging on every word. Those facing away from the argument managed to keep from turning around, but they couldn't have been more obvious with their stiff backs and still hands if their ears had been perked up like dogs'. Those more or less facing the dueling duo couldn't resist peeking up often. No one seemed to be more interested than the rest, though, at least from what I could see.

"I do not appreciate being investigated by a child," Healy sneered, "and behind my back, no less. For all I know, the artifacts are being stolen by your tribe and he was just hired to confuse the issue."

"That's ridiculous! Why would we steal artifacts that are already ours and that we will get back when you're finished studying?"

"I can't pretend to understand how you think. I certainly don't understand going behind my back with this investigation."

"Well, I don't understand how you could justify not telling us about the looting. Maybe you're stealing them yourself so you don't have to return them to us."

This argument was quickly degenerating into a name-calling match. Nothing constructive was being accomplished. I'd have to step in soon. I had no idea how to handle the situation, though.

Throughout all this, Jacy was slowly edging his way closer and closer to the square that everyone had gathered around. They were all too focused on Healy and Lily to notice his movements. I'd kept him in the corner of my eye, but Lily's bold accusation snapped my attention back to the two of them.

Healy's lips curled back in a growl, and for a moment, I thought he might lunge at her. Instead, he just hurled his disdain. "That's so preposterous I won't even dignify it with a response. I think it would be best if you left immediately."

"If I left? Now you're trying to throw me off my own property?"

"As you pointed out just a few minutes ago, this property belongs to your father, not you."

"I'm here acting on his behalf. Maybe I should throw you off!"

The professor's eyes narrowed. "That would be a mistake."

"Are you threatening me?"

A sudden gasp drew my focus back towards Jacy. His face had drained of color as he stared into the square.

Now, every face was watching him, waiting for his reaction to whatever he was seeing. Even Healy and Lily had stopped arguing and turned to see what was going on. I glanced towards Healy and noted his widened eyes.

"Jacy, what is it?" Lily asked.

Jacy turned towards his aunt, a stunned look still on his face. "It's a burial," he said quietly.

Rage flashed through Lily's eyes. "And when were you planning on telling us about this discovery, Professor? Let me guess, after you'd had time to loot it completely?"

"We only confirmed that it was a burial this morning," he began stiffly. It was obvious that he was every bit as angry as Lily, but was trying to cover it now that he was on the defensive. "I was planning on notifying you today."

"I'm sure, just like we were notified about the looting. You know that finding a burial changes everything."

"Ms. Snyder, I assure you I don't need a lecture on archaeology from you."

"What do you need, Professor Healy? A lawsuit? This is the height of insult. You have no respect for my people or my ancestors."

What came next happened so quickly there was no time even to think, only react. Lily moved to walk around Healy in order to get closer to the burial pit, but Healy quickly stepped in front of her again. Lily's last bit of patience was spent, and she roughly pushed him out of her way. Healy grabbed her arm. Jacy instantly responded to the perceived threat to his aunt by springing across the distance between them in a single

leap. He brought his arm down heavily on Healy's wrist, breaking his grip on Lily, and inserted himself between the two of them. Jacy's eyes were black with fury. It was time to step in.

"Hey guys, maybe it would be best if we—"

That was as far as I got before Healy interrupted with an incensed roar. "How dare you touch me? I'll have you charged with assault!" He cradled his injured arm against his chest.

"You touched my aunt first," Jacy responded through gritted teeth.

"I've had just about enough of you people!" Healy yelled. "You're all insane. This whole project has been a nightmare from the start."

He swept his hands out in a dramatic gesture, brushing Jacy's chest in the process. I knew what was about to happen as soon as he touched Jacy, but I was powerless to do anything but watch. Jacy's fist flew out so quickly that anyone who blinked would have missed it. The sound of his hand connecting with Healy's face was unmistakable, however.

The next thing I knew, they were locked together in a tussle while I tried to pull them apart.

A stray punch caught me in the jaw, and I staggered back, blinking away stars. The rage that had been simmering constantly in my mind suddenly took over, and for a few seconds I wanted nothing more than to jump back into the fray, fists flailing. I struggled to once again separate myself from the spirits' anger.

When my vision cleared, I saw that I could have spared myself the blow and allowed Israel Meeks to handle it. The large black man was holding the two

combatants at arm's length while they cooled down. Lily was speaking intently to Jacy, who was nodding his head regretfully. The rest of the crew was standing around, nervously shifting from foot to foot while they waited for someone to take control of the situation.

I cleared my throat, and everyone gave me their attention. "I think it would be best if we left now," I said to Lily and Jacy.

They both nodded their agreement.

I turned to Professor Healy, who was looking quite disheveled. "I don't pretend to be an expert in these matters, but I know a burial is a pretty important find. Under the circumstances, maybe some sort of security can be arranged until this is all worked out."

The professor's eyes were still flashing with injured pride, but he was at least thinking calmly again. He gave me a jerky nod. "Yes, of course. I'll see to it myself."

"Thank you."

I motioned to Lily and Jacy with my head, and we started back towards the house. We walked along in complete silence, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Although the feelings of rage were still palpable, I was too busy worrying about the consequences of our little altercation to pay attention to them. I had a feeling that any hope of working things out had been destroyed with the first punch, and along with it, any hope of continuing my case.

Something was going on at that site, something important.

Why were the spirits so angry? Did it have something to do with the burial? Or was it connected to

the looting? Maybe it was a combination of both. Or another reason entirely. I didn't know enough to even make an educated guess. I just knew something was very wrong.

## Chapter 11

Fletcher was waiting for us at the door when we got back to the house, tension set in his lined face. One look at our expressions and he knew it hadn't gone well.

"What happened?" he asked as we all trooped into the living room.

"Things just went from bad to worse," Lily explained. "I was definitely the wrong person to send."

"I never should've gone either," Jacy added quietly. His face was impassive, but his eyes were filled with guilt and shame.

Fletcher's jaw clenched, and he made a visible effort to relax it. "We can play the blame game later. Just tell me what happened."

"I lost my temper. Healy and I got into an argument." Lily's voice was filled with self-disgust. "I accused him of mismanaging the excavation." Fletcher sighed and rubbed his face wearily. "Our little peace summit went downhill from there. I ended up suggesting he was actually the one stealing the artifacts so he wouldn't have to return them to us."

"You what?" Fletcher yelled.

"Then I discovered their latest find was a burial," Jacy said, "and that's when I punched him." He stood stiffly in front of Fletcher like a soldier awaiting his punishment.

Fletcher simply stared at him in disbelief. "This is bad," he muttered, lowering himself onto the couch.

"I...I don't know what came over me," Jacy said miserably. He sounded as if he might burst into tears at any second.

"I do," I spoke up.

They all turned to look at me.

"The spirits were extremely angry. I don't think I've ever felt rage like that. It almost overwhelmed me. I had to use all my strength just to keep it from taking over my own emotions. Is it possible that, even though neither of you is sensitive to the spirit world, the rage crept into your own emotions, especially since you were already angry to begin with?"

"Not just possible, but likely," Fletcher agreed. "I should have seen this coming."

"How could you?" Lily asked. "You can't blame yourself."

"I've not been open to the spirits lately. They've become too demanding, and there was nothing I could do," he explained. "If I'd been listening, I would have realized they were angry, and maybe I would have known better than to send the two of you into the thick of things. They've grown increasingly powerful since the excavation began. Having their graves disturbed would only stir them up even more."

"Well, what's done is done." Lily shrugged, pragmatic as ever. "The question now becomes, what do we do about it? I'm pretty sure we destroyed all hope of having any kind of civil working relationship with Healy."

"We have two choices," Fletcher decided after a few moments of thought. "We can either call off the excavation, or we can let someone else take over as the

liaison between the tribe and the archaeologists. Of course, that's assuming they still want to continue. Either way, we need to hold a purification ceremony at the site or the spirits may take matters into their own hands."

"What do you mean?" Jacy asked sharply.

"The White Man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds."

A chill ran down my spine at those words. "Is that a quote?" I asked in the silence that followed.

"It's attributed to Chief Seattle, from a speech given in 1855."

"Are you saying they could cause physical harm?"

"It's possible."

"But there's a ritual of some sort, a ceremony that would keep them from doing that?"

Fletcher shrugged. "It might help, or it might not. The idea is to purify the site of negative energy and evil spirits. That might let the ancestors rest. Or if there is something more going on, it might not."

"That's all outside my area of expertise, so I'll leave it to you," Lily interjected. "Maybe we can get back to the physical world for now, and you can worry about the metaphysical later. As far as the excavation goes, if it does continue, who would we get to be the liaison? I mean, it's not exactly a job for Wallace, and I can't see Eldora doing it."

"I think Hollis would be perfectly capable. He is the chief of the tribe, after all."

"Maybe we should consider calling it off altogether," she countered. "I know I've been one of the most outspoken proponents for the project, but after everything that's happened, I just don't trust Healy."

"You don't like him," Fletcher said matter-of-factly. "Neither do I, but that doesn't mean he isn't a good scientist. He made a bad decision in not alerting us right away about the looting. Then again, perhaps we made a bad decision in not letting him know we were going to hire an investigator."

"I hate to be insensitive," I interrupted, "but speaking of the investigation, do you still want me to continue looking into this?"

"Why wouldn't we?" Fletcher asked. "Nothing has changed. We still don't know who is looting the site. After today's revelation, we have even more reason to find this person, in case they have taken something from the graves. That would explain the ancestors' anger, after all."

"Well, to be honest, I don't have much to go on at this point. So far, I've run into three theories about the possible identity of the looter. Lily and Wallace have both accused the archaeologists, Healy suspects someone from the tribe, and Elyse Pike suggested it might be a private collector."

"You can't take Wallace seriously," Lily said. "What's more, we don't really have any reason to suspect someone on the archaeological team either. I was just speaking in the heat of the moment. I definitely don't like Healy, but I rather doubt he'd steal from his own excavation. Mismanage it, absolutely. But steal?"

"I should look into the archeologists, just to be thorough. It doesn't have to be Healy. It could be anyone on his team. Of course, that whole situation is going to be a lot more difficult now."

Lily and Jacy both looked like chastised children, which hadn't been my intention, so I quickly moved on.

"What about the tribe? I know that's not something you'd want to believe..."

"I wouldn't put it past Wallace," Lily said quickly.

I turned to Fletcher for his reaction. He wore a thoughtful expression. "If Gordon Wallace convinced himself that he was doing it for the greater good of the tribe, it could be something he'd do. I don't think he'd sabotage the excavation for purely malicious reasons, though. He has his flaws, but he's not especially mean-spirited."

"Ha!" Lily scoffed. "He treats Jacy like dirt."

"That really doesn't have that much to do with Jacy," Fletcher said. "Wallace behaves toward Jacy that way because he's threatened by him."

"Threatened by me?" Jacy repeated in disbelief.

"He's always had a rivalry of sorts with me. Gordon was raised Catholic by his father, so he's very uncomfortable with my spirituality." He grinned. "Rituals, ceremonies, and spirits are fine as long as they stay within the confines of the church. Go outside it, though, and you're dealing with the devil. He sees things very narrowly. He's never liked the amount of respect and political power I hold within the tribe. Plus, my being gay hasn't won me any points either. Now that I'm getting older and my health is failing, he foresaw my

influence waning. When Jacy came along, however, he represented the continuation of my influence. It's natural for Wallace to feel threatened by that."

"That doesn't make him any less mean," Lily countered.

"Is there anyone else in the tribe you'd suspect?" I attempted to steer the conversation back on course.

"Not really," Fletcher said. "To be honest, most of them don't care enough one way or the other to go to that length. So few are really interested in our heritage and culture. We've become too westernized."

"Maybe it's time I spoke to the council members, preferably individually." I wasn't looking forward to it, particularly—especially Wallace—but I would have to do it sooner or later.

Fletcher nodded. "We can help you set that up."

"Great. What about the idea of the looter being a private collector?"

"I suppose that's possible. They're pretty plentiful around these parts. Most of the ones I know collect purely as a hobby, though. I don't think any of them take it that seriously. Now, Donald Thompson does have an extensive collection. He's shown it to me a few times and it's museum quality, but as far as I know he found all his artifacts on his own farm."

"How do you feel about that?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"About people collecting artifacts?" I nodded.

"Well, I guess it depends on a couple of things—their attitude for one. If they collect because they have a real interest in our culture, I can hardly find fault with them. On the other hand, if they're only collecting curiosities,

then I have a little problem. It's one thing to walk into someone's house and see a tasteful collection of arrowheads." He gestured around the room to his own collection. "It's something else entirely to walk in and see your ancestor's skull glaring at you from the mantle."

"That's really happened?" I was astonished.

"Oh, yes. It's also considered disrespectful, to say the least, to take grave items. Now, Don Thompson, the man I spoke of earlier, he's one of the good kind of collectors. He farms a lot of land and most of it was native villages at one time. I think he gets a better crop of artifacts than he does of corn. In many ways, he's preserved a pretty hefty chunk of our history by collecting. Otherwise, most of it would have been destroyed by years of plowing."

"Where would I find Mr. Thompson?"

"He lives right up the road. If you want to talk to him, I can give him a call and let him know you're coming. We go way back."

"That would be great."

Fletcher stood up and walked into the kitchen.

"I'm sorry I didn't warn you about the spirits," I apologized to Lily and Jacy. "I tried to, but by the time I caught up to you, you were already at the clearing."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," Lily said. "If we'd been paying attention to you the way we should have, we would have noticed that you'd dropped behind. If we had, maybe the whole scene would have ended differently. All I could think about was getting to the site and confronting Healy."

Jacy nodded miserably. "I feel really responsible for screwing up your investigation. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"You didn't screw it up. It was screwed the second Elyse Pike recognized me."

"No, it was screwed even before that," Lily inserted dryly. "It started when I insisted you pretend to be a reporter. If I'd just let you do it your way, none of this would have happened."

I shrugged. "It's pointless to sit here now and play what-might-have-been. For all we know, Healy would have reacted exactly the same way if I'd shown up yesterday and told him I was a private investigator. Like you said earlier, what's done is done, and we just have to move forward from here."

"Do you still think you can figure out who the thief is?"

"I can try. I can't promise anything. It would have been a lot easier with access to the site and the cooperation of the archaeological team. Fortunately, there are other avenues left to explore, so we'll have to see how it goes. And who knows, maybe I can still get Professor Healy to work with me."

"I wouldn't hold my breath on that one," Lily growled.

Fletcher came back into the room. "Well, Don is home, and he said for you to feel free to come right over. He loves an excuse to show off his collection."

I asked for directions to the Thompson farm, which I entered into my GPS on my phone. I was about to climb into my car when Jacy called out from the front door and came loping across the yard.

"I meant what I said inside," he said when he reached my side. "I want to help with the investigation."

I remembered Fletcher's fears about Jacy's involvement and decided a vague answer might be best under the circumstances.

"I really appreciate that, Jacy, but I honestly can't think of anything you can do right now."

"If you do think of something, you'll let me know?"

"Sure," I answered automatically.

"Good. I'm going to hold you to that." He paused, then continued. "I also wanted to apologize for what happened in the forest."

"That wasn't your fault."

"It kind of was, at least in part. Even though I can't sense the spirits the way you and Fletcher can, I should have known I'd still be vulnerable to them. If I'd been prepared, they wouldn't have affected me the way they did."

"Prepared?"

"I should have taken the time to center myself, maybe even hold a smudging."

"A what?"

"Smudging? It's a Native American tradition. You burn sacred herbs so the smoke will purify you and drive away evil spirits. Plus, I could have blocked them if I'd been aware. You can too, you know. Or you could, if you knew how."

"I could?"

"Yes. Like I've told you before, I'd be happy to help you understand your gifts more. I know yours and

mine are different, but anything I don't understand I'm sure Fletcher will help you with."

I nodded. "Yeah, I could definitely use the help."

Jacy broke into a wide smile. "Great. Just let me know when you want to get together."

I returned his smile a little more tentatively. Why did I feel as if we'd just agreed to a date?

"Soon. I'd better go see Mr. Thompson now."

The Thompson farm turned out to be a two-story white frame house with jaunty red shutters, surrounded by a collection of outbuildings like a little village. All the buildings were well maintained, evidenced by fresh coats of paint and sparkling windows. I parked next to a brand-new Dodge pickup.

Before I was halfway to the porch, the front door opened to reveal an older man in jeans and a plaid shirt, who greeted me with a warm smile. "You must be the young fella Fletcher Snyder just called about," he said, holding out a hand. "I'm Don Thompson. And you must be...Kendall Killian?"

"Killian Kendall," I corrected as I shook his hand.

"Ah! I was close!"

I laughed. "Close enough."

"Fletcher said you wanted to see my collection of Indian stones."

"Yes, and I'd like to ask you a few questions too, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind, but I may not have all the answers. Come on in. No need to stand out here jawing in the yard."

He led me inside, where we were met by a beaming woman I assumed to be Mrs. Thompson. She was short, and almost as wide as she was tall.

"This is my wife, Helen," he stated, confirming my guess. "This is the private investigator Fletcher just called about."

"Can I get you anything to drink?" she asked me.

"No, thank you. I'm fine."

"Please don't take offense, but you look awful young to be a private investigator," she said, still beaming. "You remind me of one of our grandchildren. Doesn't he look a little like Benjamin, Don?"

Mr. Thompson scrutinized me for a few seconds, then shook his head dismissively. "I don't see it except they're both blond-haired and blue-eyed. You always think everybody looks like somebody you know. Come on, Killian, my collection is in here."

With a nod in Mrs. Thompson's direction, I followed her husband through a formal living room into a wood-paneled den that was clearly Mr. Thompson's domain. The front entry and the living room had been decorated with Victorian furniture and floral-patterned fabrics, whereas this room was definitely masculine. A brown leather sofa sat against one wall with a low coffee table crouched in front of it, heel marks scarring its surface. A huge TV faced the couch. A newspaper lay folded on the seat of a worn but comfortable-looking chair in the corner. An antique roll-top desk stood in the opposite corner with a ladder-backed chair pushed up under it. A glass-fronted bookshelf took up part of one wall.

All the rest of the wall space was covered with shadow-box frames filled with arrowheads, spear points, and a myriad of other stone tools. It made Fletcher's collection look modest in comparison.

"You found all of these?" I asked in amazement.

He chuckled. "Sure did. But you have to realize I started looking when I was younger than you are now."

I approached the wall for a closer look. "Where did you find them?"

"Every one of 'em came from right here on this farm. We own a coupla hundred acres. Some of it's wooded, but we farm a fair bit of it. I've lived here all my life. I was born in this house. My granddaddy built it, then when he died, he passed it on to his son, my father. He had no interest in farming, but it was all I ever wanted to do, so I got the place when I was old enough." He chuckled again. "By then, my daddy was happy enough to give it up, let me tell you. 'Course, farming ain't like it used to be, but we do well enough."

I thought again about the condition of the house and other buildings.

"How'd you find them all? Did you dig?"

"I never dug for a one of 'em. They're all what the professionals call surface finds. That means they were lying in plain sight on the ground, usually in fields after the spring plowing and a good rain had settled the dust. Washes 'em right to the top. I just walk around and pick 'em up. It's good thinking time. Very relaxing."

As I moved down the wall, I grew more and more impressed. Fletcher hadn't exaggerated when he'd called this a museum-quality collection. "I don't know

much about artifacts really, but all this must be worth quite a bit."

"Well, I've never had it looked at by professionals, but I suppose it is. And this isn't even the good stuff."

He walked over to the roll-top desk and took out a cardboard box, which he set on the coffee table. I moved closer as he began to pull out beautiful stone tools. When he'd lined everything up on the table, he selected a small propeller-like object and held it out to me.

I looked it over while he watched me eagerly. It had a hole drilled through the center of the cool, highly polished stone.

"What do you think that is?" he asked me, his eyes sparkling.

"I don't have a clue."

"Guess!"

"A propeller?"

He laughed. "Nope, I don't suppose they'da had much use for a propeller back then, and the hole goes the wrong way for that to work anyways. That's a stone used as a balance weight on an atlatl spear-thrower."

He picked up another item and held it out to me. "How about this?"

I traded the balance stone for the new object and inspected it. I was just as stumped on this one. It was about four inches long and shaped like an elongated spinning top, but what they could have used it for, I had no idea.

"A top?" I ventured cautiously.

"Nope!" he crowed gleefully. "That was a trick question. Nobody really knows what these things are, not even the bigwigs at the Smithsonian. Everybody has a different opinion. Some say it's a plumb bob, some say a net weight, some say it's a pendant. I say it's a divining stone, but who knows who's right?"

We played the guessing game a few more times, in each case with the same result. I would guess incorrectly, and Mr. Thompson would delight in telling me the object's real purpose.

"How did you learn all this?" I asked him after the fifth round of his little game.

"I bought some books and read up on them. I wanted to know more about what I was finding. There are a lot of people out there who collect Indian artifacts, you know."

"That's actually why I came to see you."

"Well, like I told Fletcher, I'd do whatever I can to help."

"Did he explain the situation?"

"Not in any detail, but I heard they had some stuff stolen at that archaeology dig they've got going on his property."

"Where'd you hear that?" I asked, suddenly very interested.

He thought for a second. "I think Helen may have told me. She hears all the gossip around these parts."

I made a mental note to talk to Mrs. Thompson before I left. "Her information is solid. The Pomocatan tribe arranged for an archaeological team from Pemberton University to mount an excavation on

Fletcher's property. The Snyders suspect someone is looting the site, and I've been hired to look into it."

"I don't really see how I can help with that." His eyes grew wide. "They don't think I had something to do with it, do they?"

"Oh no," I quickly assured him. "Fletcher knows you have an impressive collection, and he thought you might possibly know some collectors who are less scrupulous than you."

"Well now, I don't like to talk behind people's backs."

"I can understand that, Mr. Thompson, and if all I was looking for was idle gossip, it would be different. You knew Fletcher was in the hospital, right?"

"Yes. We heard he had another heart attack."

"He did, but what brought on that heart attack was an assault by the person we believe to be the looter."

"He was attacked?"

"He walked out to the excavation during the night, and someone struck him on the head. Fletcher collapsed, and his assailant fled, leaving Fletcher there to die. If his grandson Jacy hadn't gone looking for him, he might not have survived."

Mr. Thompson shook his head. "Right in our own backyard, practically. Well, that puts a different spin on things." He thought a moment before slowly beginning to speak. "I don't show my collection much these days. I'm doing it for you as a favor to Fletcher. I used to show it to just about anyone interested, especially other collectors. I guess I was showing off a bit."

"Then things got a little ugly. A few people decided they wanted to horn in on my territory. All my

property is posted no trespassing, but after I showed them my collection, I found a coupla fellas in my fields. Folks in these parts put a high store on private property, so it bothered me to find those guys going behind my back that way—not to mention that they were stealing from me.

"Now, one of 'em was a young man, not much more'n a kid, so I can understand. I had a talk with him, and he apologized, and that was the end of it. The other one, well, he was old enough to know better. I had a talk with him too, but it didn't do any good. I've had to chase him off my land more than a coupla times."

"Do you think he would steal from the excavation?"

"I hate to suggest such a thing, but if he'd steal from me, what's to keep him from stealing from somebody else?"

"Can you tell me his name?"

"Virgil McClain."

Mr. Thompson gave me directions to the man's home, which I jotted down.

"Is there anyone else?"

He thought for another minute, then shook his head.

I pulled out my card and handed it to him.

"You've been a big help. If you happen to remember anything else, please give me a call."

"I'll do that."

"Thank you. And thank you for allowing me to see your collection. It really was a pleasure. It's quite impressive."

He smiled. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. It was nice to show it off again to someone who appreciated it. My grandkids are sick to death of my lectures."

I laughed.

"You laugh, but they really are. Not a single one of my kids or their kids has any interest in the collection. I decided last year that I was leaving it all to the Pomocatan tribe when I go. Had it written up in my will and everything. The tribe doesn't know it yet, though, so I'd take it kindly if you kept it between the two of us."

"No problem, Mr. Thompson. I know they hope to open a museum someday. I'm sure they'd be honored to include your collection." He nodded happily. "Do you think I could have a word with your wife before I leave?"

He looked surprised. "Helen? Why would you need to talk to her?"

"Earlier you mentioned she'd heard about the thefts, and I'm curious to know where she heard it from. No one was supposed to know about them outside the tribe and the archaeologists."

He shook his head. "Good luck. That woman protects her sources more fiercely than any reporter I've ever seen, and she has a network to rival the CIA. Let's go see where she is."

We found Mrs. Thompson pattering around in the kitchen. She certainly didn't look like the Deep Throat of the local gossip underworld. She was more like Hollywood's version of the perfect grandmother, but I, of all people, should know how deceiving appearances could be.

"Killian wanted to speak to you before he left," Mr. Thompson said. "I'll be in my den putting away my artifacts. Just give a holler before you go, Killian."

Mrs. Thompson beamed at me. "He's so worried about his collection these days. He keeps his nicer pieces locked in a safe. He got them out just for you after Fletcher called. Did you change your mind about something to drink? I have lemonade."

"No, thank you. Actually, I had a question for you concerning my investigation."

She looked positively elated at the thought. "Oh, please feel free to ask me anything!"

"Mr. Thompson mentioned you had heard that items were being stolen from the excavation on Fletcher Snyder's property." She nodded merrily in agreement. "I was wondering where you heard that."

"Oh dear," she chirped. "As much as I'd like to help you, I can't reveal my sources!"

"It could be very important."

"Well, maybe if you convince me I should tell you..." She smiled coquettishly.

I realized she thought of all this as a game. I had to make her realize the gravity of the situation. "Mrs. Thompson, Fletcher Snyder suffered a heart attack because this looter assaulted him and left him to die. No one outside the tribe was supposed to know about the thefts. In fact, no outsider was supposed to know there was even a dig going on. It would be very helpful if you could tell me where you heard about them."

The smile dropped from her face, along with all her color. She became so ashen that for a moment I was afraid I'd gone too far.

"I...I didn't know it was so serious," she said. "I heard it from Pamela Morgan."

"I don't know her. Do you have any idea where she learned about it?"

"I would imagine from her mother, Celia Vessey."

"Miss Vessey from the tribal council?"

"That would be her."

I pondered her revelation for a moment, surprised that someone from the tribe would leak such sensitive information.

"Is it serious that she told me?"

"Not really," I assured her. "I was just curious about where the information had originated. Knowing it most likely came from Miss Vessey removes any thought of malice or suspicion. Thank you for helping. I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Oh no! You were just doing your job. I should have learned by now that gossip isn't always as harmless as it seems."

"I gave Mr. Thompson my card. If you think of anything else or hear something you feel might be helpful in catching this person, please give me a call. You can be one of my sources."

That brought a small smile back to her cherubic face. "I certainly will."

"Oh, and I'd appreciate it if you kept the information about Fletcher Snyder being attacked between the two of us. It's not common knowledge at this point, and I'd like it to remain that way as long as possible."

She nodded, her expression somewhat shamefaced. I felt bad for implying she was a gossip, but I needed to make sure the information stayed as close as possible. You never knew when something someone shouldn't know might tip his or her hand. Of course, if Pamela Morgan was leaking tribal business to outsiders, it would only be a matter of time before others knew about Fletcher's attack—at least, if Miss Vessey told her about it.

I called to Mr. Thompson, and I once again thanked them both for their assistance.

Driving back to my office, I thought about what I had learned. I had the name of another collector to interview, and I had discovered that Miss Vessey's daughter was something of a gossip. Not much really, but the smallest fact can turn out to be the key to the whole investigation. At the first chance, I'd write up detailed notes of my conversations while they were still fresh on my mind.

My next step would be to speak to the other council members. I wasn't looking forward to facing down Miss Vessey about her daughter's loose lips. I was looking forward to speaking to Gordon Wallace even less.

## Chapter 12

I was working at my desk later that evening, enjoying the peace and quiet, when the phone rang. I glared at it before answering somewhat resentfully.

"Killian?" It was Asher.

"Uh, hi."

"Man, you're hard to catch up with! I called your cell, your house and the B&B. Steve suggested I try you at the office. Isn't it kind of late to be there?"

I glanced at my phone and was surprised to see it was almost nine o'clock. No wonder my stomach had been growling.

"Sorry. I needed to write up notes of my investigation while it was still fresh in my mind, and I silenced my phone so I wouldn't be distracted. Then I started working on other things while the office was quiet and, well...here I am. I guess I lost track of time. You know what they say: time flies when you're having fun."

"Wow, I really envy that."

"Huh?"

"I think it's cool you're doing something you love so much. I mean, you're still in college and you have your dream job. I have no idea what I want to do after school."

I hesitated a second, then said, "You didn't think it was so cool when I told you I wanted to be a private investigator."

There was a long pause. "I'm sorry. I know I didn't support you then, and all I can do now is

apologize. I was selfish, only thinking about how it affected me."

Things were getting too serious for my comfort, so I decided to change the subject.

"Why were you looking for me?"

"Oh, I wanted to say again how much I enjoyed myself the other night. It was terrific getting together with you after all this time."

"Yeah, I had fun too."

"Great! Then how about we do it again soon?"

"I...uh..."

"Come on! You just said you had fun the other night. Come to dinner with me this Friday."

"I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"What's not a good idea? Eating? Killian, you have to eat anyway, so why not do it with me? You can't turn down a free meal."

"If I agree, you can't pay for me again. I'll buy this time."

"Do I take that as a yes?"

I sighed. "I guess so."

"What time is good for you?"

"I don't really have any plans, so whenever."

"I can pick you up at six if that's okay."

"That's fine."

"Great! I'll see you then!"

"See you then," I echoed.

I hung up and stared at the phone, already regretting my moment of weakness. What was I thinking? Sure, Micah had told me to hang out with Asher, but he probably didn't mean more than once. Of

course, I was still figuring out my feelings, so maybe it all counted as one big lump date.

Someone knocked on the door, making me jump guiltily. I hopped up to answer the door and somehow wasn't surprised to see Micah standing in the hall.

"Hey," he said with a warm smile. "I thought I might find you here." He held up two brown paper bags. "I brought Chinese takeout. I'm betting you haven't eaten."

I shook my head, feeling even guiltier for making another date with Asher. I'd have to tell Micah.

He set the bags on my desk before looking around the office. "Wow, they're really making a mess. How much longer before they're finished with the renovation?"

"God only knows," I said. "They aren't exactly the speediest workers. If they don't hurry up, though, I'm afraid Novak might commit homicide."

"Don't say that. Now if something happens, he'll be suspect numero uno."

"Only if you report this conversation."

"Which I would have to do as a good citizen."

I rolled my eyes. "I met a gossip today who protected her sources better than you."

He laughed and opened one of the bags. "I got double-cooked pork and beef with scallops. I figured we could share."

I smiled. Those were my two favorite dishes. "Sounds good." I pushed my paperwork out of the way so we wouldn't get sauce on it.

"How's the case going?"

I shrugged. "Slowly. We hit a major roadblock today. The guy running the excavation found out I was a PI, and now he's pretty pissed. He threw me off the site. When I went back with Lily and Jacy, they got in an argument with him, and punches were thrown." Micah whistled. "Yeah, to say relations are a bit strained would be an understatement."

"Why were you undercover in the first place?"

I pushed back in my chair to allow Micah more room to dish out our meal. "Lily wanted it that way."

"She's the landowner's daughter?"

"Right."

"And the other person you mentioned?"

"Jacy? He's the grandson."

"So he's Lily's son?"

"No, he's Lily's nephew. It's complicated."

Micah made a face. "Not that complicated. How old is Jacy?"

"Around my age."

"Cute?" He had unpacked the contents of the bags and was now busily dividing them between two paper plates.

I studied him while he worked, trying to figure out where he was going with this. "He's pretty—long hair, delicate features. He's offered to help me with my gifts."

Micah glanced up with surprise. "He's gifted?"

I nodded. "And so is his grandfather, Fletcher."

"Wow. That's pretty awesome."

"Yeah. And good timing. My gifts have been acting up again with this case."

"How so?"

"We're dealing with ancestral lands—and let's just say the ancestors haven't strayed far."

Micah raised an eyebrow, then looked around for something to sit on. I lifted a nearby tarp and dragged out a chair.

"Thanks," he said, pulling it up to the desk.

"Is this Jacy person gay?" Micah asked as we started to eat. He sounded perfectly nonchalant, but I knew him too well.

"Yes. Does it matter?"

"No," he said a bit too quickly. "I mean, I was just wondering if maybe he's interested in you."

"You're jealous!"

He shrugged. "Maybe a little. Can you blame me? I hardly see you anymore, our relationship is up in the air, and we barely even talk. I had to track you down at your office well after closing to even have dinner with you."

I squirmed miserably. "You're right. I'm sorry. There's nothing going on between Jacy and me."

He looked down at his plate. "What about Asher?"

My breath caught in my throat, but before I could come up with an answer, the phone rang. I stared at it for several rings before Micah spoke up again. "Are you going to answer?"

At first, I thought he meant his question, but then I realized he meant the phone. I snatched it up. "Hello?"

"Killian?" It was Lily, and she sounded upset.

"Yes. Is something wrong?"

"The police just left. Quinn Healy is dead."

"What?"

"The police said he was murdered. I don't know any details. They came here asking a lot of questions, and they talked to Jacy for a long time."

"Do they suspect Jacy?"

"I don't know. Do you think the looter did this?"

"I don't know enough to even start guessing about that yet. It could be completely unrelated, although that would be a pretty big coincidence. Where did it happen?"

"At the site of the dig, I think. I wouldn't have any idea, except the police are crawling all over the property."

"Do you want me to come over?"

"No, there's no need, I guess. I just thought you might want to know."

"You're right. Thanks for calling."

"I'll phone you again in the morning if anything else has happened by then."

"Okay. I'll see if I can find out some more details. If I don't hear from you, I'll try to stop by the house at some point."

"Thank you, Killian."

"What's going on?" Micah asked the moment I hung up.

"That was Lily. She said the police were just at Fletcher's house. Quinn Healy has been murdered."

"Who's he?"

"The guy who was heading up the excavation. He's a professor at Pemberton—or he was, rather."

"So it's a big deal. I'd better make sure the paper has heard of this. Mind if I use the phone?"

"Feel free." I slid the phone closer to him.

He quickly called his office. I ate while he talked to someone—I assumed his editor—relaying what little he knew. A few minutes later he hung up.

"There are no other reporters available right now, so they asked me to cover it. I'm going out to the site. You wanna come with?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Even if Healy's murder isn't directly connected to my case, which seems unlikely if it happened at the dig site, it's certainly going to have a big impact. The sooner I know exactly what's going on, the better."

We took Micah's car. I filled him in on what I knew of the situation while we drove to Fletcher's house. When we pulled into the driveway, we found several police cars parked on either side. We were approached by an officer as soon as we climbed out of the car.

She recognized Micah right away. "Jeez, you journalists are like vultures! The body's not even cool yet and you're descending. How'd you hear about it so quickly?"

"I never reveal my sources." He gave her a wink and a grin. "Who's in charge of the investigation?"

"Sgt. Kaplan, but he's busy at the scene of the crime. You'll have to wait here."

"Can you please tell him that Killian Kendall is here and would like to speak to him as soon as he has a chance?" I asked.

Her eyes darted in my direction as if noticing me for the first time. "Are you a reporter too?"

"No, Officer. I'm a private investigator. I was looking into some possible illegal activity at the

excavation site. I spoke to Sgt. Kaplan just last week. He knows me."

She stared at me for a few more seconds, before walking a few yards away to speak into her two-way radio. There was a pause followed by an answering bleat that I couldn't understand. She turned back toward us. "You can follow me."

Micah and I started towards her, but she held up a hand and shook her head. "Sorry, Newspaper Man, only the PI right now. The sergeant will talk to you later."

I looked back at Micah. He shrugged and nodded towards the officer, so I followed her across the yard and through the trees.

I expected the spirits to be frenzied, but they were surprisingly still. I could barely sense them at all. I wondered what that might mean, remembering Fletcher's warning about how the dead were not helpless. A shiver ran down my spine. What if we weren't looking for a human killer at all? I quickly pushed that thought from my mind. I was letting my imagination run away with me.

As we drew closer to the site, the area grew brighter and brighter. The police had set up powerful lights on tripods around the small clearing, making it blaze like midday. It looked much as it had when I'd been there earlier—except the archaeological team had been replaced by uniformed police officers.

I noticed Elyse Pike off to one side, her arms wrapped protectively around her slim body. She was talking to someone who looked very official. The tarp that had been laid over the burial site was pulled back,

but I wasn't close enough to see if the burial itself had been disturbed. Maybe the police had just uncovered it to make sure. I didn't see Sgt. Kaplan anywhere.

My guide stopped at the perimeter of the clearing and spoke softly with another officer who quickly crossed to the tent and ducked his head inside.

A moment later, Sgt. Kaplan emerged. He didn't look all that happy to see me. "What the hell are you doing here, Kendall?"

I was a little taken aback after our pleasant conversation just a few days earlier.

"I heard Professor Healy had been killed and thought it might have some bearing on my case. Plus, I was involved in an altercation with the professor earlier today."

"So I've heard. Care to tell me your version of what happened?"

I quickly outlined my visit the day before: how Elyse Pike had recognized me and revealed my real occupation to the professor and the chilly reception I'd received that morning. The sergeant was especially interested in what happened when I returned with Lily and Jacy.

He nodded when I'd finished. "That matches what Ms. Pike, Ms. Snyder, and Mr. Elliott reported, except you added a few details the others missed. Can you tell me again what Professor Healy said about adding additional security?"

"He said he'd see to it himself."

"What did you assume he meant by that?"

I shrugged. "Just that he would arrange some sort of security for the site tonight. I didn't actually give it much thought. I was pretty distracted at the time."

"Did you think he might spend the night himself?"

"That didn't occur to me, but I guess that's one interpretation. Is that what he did?"

The sergeant looked away. "I can't go into that right now. You'll have to wait for the official report."

"I don't understand. Can't you at least tell me what happened? I thought you were supportive of my involvement."

He looked back at me. "That was before it turned into a murder investigation."

"There's something else going on."

"Look, Killian, I know you're dating that hot-shot reporter, but I have to admit I'm a little disappointed that you showed up here with him." His voice took on a reproachful tone.

"Micah? He just happened to be in my office when I got the call from Lily Snyder. He called the newspaper and was assigned the story, so he offered to drive me down here." Sgt. Kaplan eyed me suspiciously. "I swear! That's all it was. It's not like I deliberately tipped him off about something top-secret!"

He nodded grudgingly. "If I fill you in, you have to give me your word you won't report it all directly back to him. We'll give him a statement, but most of what I tell you will have to be confidential—from the Snyders as well."

"Why the Snyders? I'm working for them."

"You won't have to keep it from them indefinitely, just until we make an arrest."

"I still don't understand."

He scanned the clearing as if making sure no one was listening. Everyone was bustling about, paying us no attention. "You'll just have to trust me. Do I have your word?"

"You're not leaving me much choice."

"Do I have your word or not?"

"Yes, you have my word."

"Thank you. Ms. Pike told us that after you left, Professor Healy shut down the excavation for the day and sent all the volunteers home. He told Ms. Pike that he intended to spend the night here at the site. She says it's a fairly common practice when they find something especially significant.

"After the day's fracas, she decided to call him earlier this evening. When he didn't answer his cell phone, she became concerned. After several more calls, she decided to drive down to check on him. When she arrived, she heard what sounded like someone running off through the trees. She called out, but there was no answer. Then she looked in the tent, where she found Professor Healy dead. She immediately called the police and waited at the scene until the first officers responded."

"How was he killed?"

"It appears that he was stabbed multiple times. We believe we have the murder weapon."

"You mentioned earlier something about making an arrest. Do you have a suspect?"

"We have a few people we're looking at closely. We won't know for sure until the various test results come back. We have a rush on them. Hopefully, we'll know something concrete by morning."

"It would be nice if things were wrapped up that quickly. Do you think the murder has anything to do with the thefts?"

"I'd have to say that would be the most likely scenario, one way or another."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it would be a pretty big coincidence if it didn't...and I don't believe in coincidences. Whether he was killed directly because of the thefts or if it was an indirect result, well, that remains to be seen."

"Had the excavation been disturbed when Ms. Pike arrived?" I gestured toward the burial pit.

"The tarp had been pulled back, but she hasn't had a chance to see if anything was actually looted."

A shiver ran down my spine at the thought. I remembered again how still the spirits had been on my trek through the woods. I suddenly wasn't sure that was a good thing. Was it the stillness of peace after killing the person they thought responsible for the desecration of their sacred burial place? Or was it the stillness of barely contained rage? Another shudder rippled through my body.

"Killian?" Sgt. Kaplan asked, and I snapped back to the present conversation.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about...who the killer might be." I wasn't about to admit I was trying to sense the spirit of the ancient dead who now lay uncovered just a few feet from where we stood.

He studied me for a second. "And who do you think it might be? Has anything turned up in your investigation yet?"

"Not so far. I'm just getting started. I have a few leads to follow, but nothing solid at all. Is Elyse Pike a suspect?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Should she be?"

"Not particularly. At least not based on anything I've learned. It's just that if she was the one who called in the murder, she could just be trying to throw suspicion off of herself."

"She'd have to be a pretty cool-headed killer."

"I've run across a few like that."

He shook his head. "I forget you've had so much experience with killers at such a young age. Ms. Pike claims she was with someone right up until she left to look for Healy. We can also check her phone records to see if she did, in fact, call the professor. If her story checks out with the estimated time of death, she most likely won't be a suspect."

Just then, an officer walked up. "They're ready to move the body, Sergeant."

"I'll be right there." He turned back to me. "That's all I can tell you at this point. Officer Stoker will see you back to the car. Tell your reporter friend I'll be out to give him a statement in about twenty minutes. Remember, everything I told you is strictly confidential. If any of it finds its way into an article in tomorrow's paper, it'll be the last time I cooperate with you. And I might throw your ass in jail for interfering in a murder investigation. The stakes have changed now, and I expect you to stay out of the way. You can keep looking

into the thefts as long as doing so doesn't interfere with our case. Anything you find out that might tie into the murder—even the remotest connection—I'll expect you to report to me immediately."

"Yes, sir," I snapped, a little annoyed by his attitude.

He sighed, then looked around quickly. In a low voice he said, "Killian, you have to understand that this is my job and I have to remain professional. I've already gone out on a limb telling you as much as I have. If any of this leaks to the media, it'll be my head on the block. Besides all that, this *is* a murder we're dealing with, and while I realize it's not your first murder, we could be dealing with someone extremely dangerous. I want you to be very careful from here on out. Got it?"

I nodded. "I'm always careful."

He rolled his eyes. "Right, and I'm the Pope. Now get going so I can do my job. We can talk more tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sgt. Kaplan."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." He waved me off as he headed toward the tent.

I turned to my guide, whom I now knew as Officer Stoker. "I guess I'm done here."

She led me back to the car, then stood talking to the other officer who had stayed behind. They both took a seemingly relaxed stance, all the while keeping a surreptitious eye on us.

"I feel like I'm being guarded," Micah grumbled with a nod in their direction. "How'd it go?"

I shrugged. "He wasn't very talkative. He said he'd be out to give you a statement soon."

"He didn't tell you anything?"

"Nothing I can share," I said carefully.

Micah turned to me in disbelief. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"He didn't tell me much, and what he did tell me was confidential."

"You're seriously not going to tell me?"

"I can't. I need to maintain my relationship of trust with Sgt. Kaplan."

"What about our relationship of trust?"

"This is my *job*, Micah."

"And this is mine."

"Before we get into a fight, can we just wait and see what Sgt. Kaplan has to say to you? This might not even be an issue."

Micah nodded, still clearly unhappy with the situation. Not that I blamed him, I guess. If he had information that might be significant to one of my cases, I'd want him to tell me. Still, I had promised Kaplan, and I wasn't about to compromise my sweet arrangement with local law enforcement.

The wait for the sergeant was not a comfortable one. We barely spoke to each other the whole time. Kaplan must have been delayed because forty minutes crept by and he still hadn't appeared.

Finally, almost an hour after I'd left him, Sgt. Kaplan emerged from the forest. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said to Micah.

The two men shook hands. "I'm Micah Gerber with the *Shore Times*. Do you have anything for me, Sergeant?"

"Probably not as much as you'd like," Kaplan replied, "but it's all I can give you at this point. Here's the official statement. You ready?" Micah hit record on his phone and nodded. "Professor Quinn Healy of Pemberton University was found dead by his assistant Tuesday evening around 8 p.m. A call was placed to the police department at 8:05 p.m., and we responded immediately. We found Professor Healy as reported. Foul play is suspected. An investigation is underway."

There was a long pause while Micah waited for Kaplan to continue. "That's it?"

"For now. We'll hold a press conference later tomorrow after we know a bit more. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do." He nodded in my direction and walked away.

Micah turned to me with an expectant expression. "He had to tell you more than that."

I shrugged. "A little, but not much."

"You're still not going to tell me?"

"I can't."

Micah pressed his lips together tightly. "Fine. Then let's go. I need to write up my story...such as it is."

## Chapter 13

I awoke with a jolt when my cell phone began to ring on the nightstand next to my bed. I scabbled for the damn thing while trying to focus my bleary eyes. It was only a little after seven.

"'lo?" I grunted, when I managed to answer.

"Killian? It's Lily."

I came awake instantly at the tone of her voice. I'd never heard her sound so upset. "What's wrong?"

"They just arrested Jacy."

"*What?*"

"They showed up at the door with an arrest warrant a little while ago and took him away." She sounded dangerously near hysteria.

I jumped out of bed and began to scramble about the room, pulling on clothes while I talked. "Take a deep breath and tell me what happened."

"It was so late when things finally settled down last night that I decided to spend the night here on the couch. I woke up this morning to pounding at the door. It was the police. They had a warrant. They burst in here and arrested Jacy!"

"What are they charging him with?" I hopped on one foot, squeezing the phone between my cheek and shoulder, while trying to pull on a pair of jeans.

"I don't know, but it had something to do with the fight he had with Healy."

"They didn't say why they were arresting him?"

"Well, they said they had some questions they wanted to ask him about Quinn Healy."

"Did they place him in handcuffs?" I managed to get the pants on and then tackled socks, once more balancing precariously on one foot.

"No, they just said they needed him to come down to the station with them. They had a warrant, but they said it would be easier if he accompanied them voluntarily."

I fell backwards onto the bed, which, it turned out, made putting socks on while talking on the phone a lot easier. "Then maybe they aren't actually arresting him. They really may just want to ask him some questions."

"You get a warrant and go to someone's house at seven in the morning to ask some simple questions?"

"Good point. How is Fletcher?"

There was a pause. "He's okay—worried, but okay. He keeps saying he should have done more to prevent this."

"I'll be right over. In the meantime, do you have a lawyer you can contact?" I grabbed a shirt and got one arm into it.

"I already called Franklin Larrimore. He works for the tribe. That was my first call. He's on his way to the police station."

"Good. Where are you now?"

"Still at Fletcher's. I was afraid to leave him alone with everything going on."

"Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes."

I finished pulling on the shirt, slid into some shoes, grabbed my keys and ran downstairs, texting Steve a brief message while dashing out the door.

I may or may not have broken a few speed laws on my way to Fletcher's...I refuse to incriminate myself. When something huge and white leapt in front of the car, however, I was probably going too fast for safety. I slammed on the brakes, causing the car to slide a ways before coming to a halt a few feet from the creature.

I might have been wrong, but it appeared to be the same deer I'd seen a few days before. I couldn't imagine there being more than one of these magnificent beasts—in those woods, at any rate.

The buck regarded me through the windshield, his large round eyes revealing an intelligence that left me unsettled. We stared at each other for several seconds before he turned with surprising speed and finished crossing the road in a single long leap.

I took a few more moments to gather myself before continuing at a much slower speed. I arrived at the house with my heart still hammering from the close call.

Before I'd even shut off the engine, Lily was at the front door waiting for me. "Thank you for coming over."

"Of course. Have you heard anything more about Jacy?"

She shook her head as she stepped back to let me enter.

"What about the lawyer?"

"He just called. He's at the police station trying to find out what's going on."

"Good." I followed her into the living room, where her father was sitting in one of the armchairs, looking rather ashen. "Hello, Fletcher."

He nodded distractedly in my direction. "I should have seen this coming," he muttered by way of greeting. "I'm supposed to be looking out for him."

I shook my head. "What could you have done? He's not a child anymore. He eventually has to learn to watch out for himself. Besides, Lily said the lawyer is there now. I'm sure it will all be straightened out quickly."

"This isn't over yet. Didn't you say you knew the officer in charge of the investigation?"

"Yes. I spoke to him last night."

"You were here last night?" Lily asked.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you let us know?"

"It was late," I said simply and hoped they would accept that.

Fletcher was too intent on his own train of thought to get sidetracked by my whereabouts the previous night. "Frank Larrimore is a good lawyer, but I'd feel better if you were there too. You know people, and you understand more about what's going on."

I turned to Lily, and she nodded. "I realize this isn't why we hired you, but do you think you could try to find out what's going on?"

"Of course," I replied quickly. "I'll do whatever I can to help."

I wasn't sure how I could learn more than their lawyer, but if it would make them feel better, I could certainly go to the police station. Although, after the previous night, I wasn't at all sure Sgt. Kaplan would talk to me.

I had Lily repeat the events of that morning, but she couldn't add much more than she'd already told me over the phone. The police hadn't really "burst in," however, as she'd put it earlier. They'd been quite polite, or at least as polite as they could be while waking everyone up and taking someone away to the station for questioning.

"Well, I guess I'd better take off," I said when I figured I'd learned all I could from Lily. "I'll check in with you later and let you know what's going on."

"Thank you. Oh...and Killian?"

"Yes?"

"Is your shirt on inside out?"

After putting my shirt on correctly, I left for town. I drove extra slowly until I was out of the more rural areas for fear of the white buck, but thankfully he didn't make another appearance.

At the police station, I was asked to take a seat and wait until Sgt. Kaplan was available. Time ticked by so slowly I began to wonder if he was keeping me waiting on purpose. I read through several outdated entertainment magazines, then called in to the office to let Novak know I'd be late—if I showed up at all. Finally, just as I was about to resort to the home-decorating magazines out of sheer boredom, the inner door opened, and Kaplan gestured for me to follow him.

"How'd I know you'd end up here before the morning was over?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Your finely honed detective skills?"

He snorted. "Coffee?"

"That would be lovely."

"Don't speak too soon. You haven't tasted it yet. I had to make it this morning." He stopped at a desk set up with a coffee maker and all the accoutrements, where he poured the black brew into two Styrofoam cups. "How do you take it?"

"Cream and sugar." My early-morning wakeup call had caught up with me while I was waiting, and I needed whatever boost I could get. Caffeine and sugar fit the bill nicely. "Lots of sugar."

He loaded my cup with sugar and powdered creamer before handing it to me and continuing to his office. I noticed he took his black.

Once we were seated, he at his desk and I in the same chair I'd occupied just a few days before, I took a sip of the coffee. I was immediately glad I'd requested all the extra sugar. Even with it, the brew was strong enough to curl my toes. I raised an eyebrow.

The sergeant chuckled. "I needed it after last night. Did you get any sleep?"

"A few hours."

"That's a few more than I got. So let me guess. You're here because we picked up Jacy Elliott this morning."

I nodded. "What's that about?"

"Just what you'd think. We needed to ask him some questions regarding Quinn Healy."

"Because of the incident at the site yesterday?"

"That depends on which incident you're referring to."

"The, er, altercation?"

"Nope. That would be considered assault, and without the professor around to press charges, that wouldn't amount to much."

"So what—" I broke off as it occurred to me what he was saying. "The murder?"

He nodded.

I stared at him in surprise. "Jacy is a suspect?"

"Now, I didn't say that."

"Then he isn't?"

"I didn't say that either."

"What's going on? Is Jacy a suspect or not?"

"We don't know yet. Possibly."

"Can we not play games on a few hours of sleep?"

"I'm not trying to play games. We don't know to what extent he's involved, if at all. We don't want to jump to any conclusions."

"Why is he even being considered as a suspect?"

"His fingerprints were found on the murder weapon." I stared at him flabbergasted. "Combine that with their scuffle earlier and you have enough to make him a person of interest, at the very least."

"What's Jacy saying?"

"Not a lot. The kid was closemouthed before the lawyer arrived, and hasn't said a word since. He's in a private conference with the lawyer now. I really need to get back in there and see if he's ready to talk. Why don't you wait here?"

I nodded, and he left the office.

My mind was abuzz with thoughts of the murder. I couldn't see Jacy as a killer, but then again, I barely knew him. My instincts said he was innocent, though,

and generally they turned out to be right. That left the question of how to explain his fingerprints on the murder weapon. I wasn't concerned about his reticence. Jacy was naturally shy, and he was smart enough to know that the less he said, the less the police could use against him.

I sat in Kaplan's office for another half hour before he reappeared. He dropped into his seat with a sigh. "Some days they really make you work for your paycheck." He picked up his empty coffee cup and stared morosely into it.

"What happened?"

"Not much. We're letting him go."

"Are you dropping the charges?"

"There are no charges to drop. We never charged him. This was strictly for questioning. The investigation remains open."

"Is Jacy still a suspect?"

"Absolutely."

"But you're letting him go..."

"We're not ready to charge anyone yet."

"Then he must have offered a good reason as to why his fingerprints were on the murder weapon."

"You'll have to get the story from him. I'm too exhausted to go into it. I'm going to go home and sleep."

"So, he's free to go?"

"He's probably gone already. Why are *you* still here?"

I laughed. "Okay, okay, I'm leaving." I stood up and started for the door.

"Oh, and Killian?" I stopped and turned back around. "I know this is probably a waste of time, but try to stay out of this, okay? This is a murder case, and we

don't need you nosing around. Now, having said that, let me just add that when you ignore me and get involved anyway, be careful, and for God's sake, don't screw up any evidence."

I grinned. "Got it, Chief!"

He shook his head. "If I was chief, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I'd have you tossed in a cell and throw away the key just for your own safety—not to mention the safety of everyone around you. Now get out." His weary smile softened his tough words.

I waved, then obliged. I found Jacy standing in the parking lot talking to a man with thinning brown hair, sharp eyes, and thin lips, who I guessed to be the lawyer. The man was wearing a well-fitted, charcoal gray suit and had a professional air about him.

Jacy looked up as I approached. "Killian! What are you doing here?"

"Lily called me. I was just talking to Sgt. Kaplan."

"Franklin Larrimore," the lawyer said, sticking out a manicured hand for me to shake.

"Killian Kendall, private investigator."

Larrimore arched an eyebrow. "They hired you quickly."

"I'm actually working on a separate matter. At least, we think it's separate. It could be related."

"What did the sergeant say?" Jacy asked guardedly.

"He didn't say much—which is how he described his questioning of you too."

Jacy gave me a weak smile, and Larrimore nodded. "He did the right thing by staying quiet until I got there."

"I didn't even know you were coming. I just wasn't about to say anything they might see as incriminating."

"Well, it was smart thinking," Larrimore concurred.

"What happened exactly?" I asked.

Jacy sighed. "Can I tell you the whole story on the way home? I was going to call Lily to come get me, but since you're here, maybe you could give me a ride?"

"Sure."

"I need to get back to my office," Larrimore said. "Jacy, if anything else happens, make sure I'm notified immediately. I don't usually work in criminal law, but one of my associates does, so if he's needed, he'll be available to you. Let's just hope this will be the last of it and his services won't be required."

"I sure hope so. Thank you, Mr. Larrimore. I appreciate your coming down here so quickly."

"No problem, Jacy. I've known you since you were born, and I've known your grandfather even longer. I'm just glad I could help. Killian, it was a pleasure meeting you." As he walked away, he pulled out a cell phone.

Jacy and I started towards my car. "I'm glad he got here when he did," Jacy said, with a glance over his shoulder in the lawyer's direction. "He helped a lot."

"Good. I'm sure it was a scary experience."

Jacy nodded emphatically. "Yeah, being shaken awake and told there was a cop who wanted to take me in for questioning is not my ideal way to start the day."

We climbed into my car and pulled onto the street. "What happened once you got to the station?"

"They put me in this room with a table and some chairs and left me alone for a while. Then Sgt. Kaplan came in and asked me to tell him again what happened yesterday at the excavation. So I did. I mean, I'd already told them last night, so I figured one more time wouldn't hurt anything.

"They asked if I went back later, and I said no. Then they pulled out a knife in a plastic bag and asked me if I'd ever seen it before. The knife was mine, but I wasn't about to tell them that. I usually carry it in a sheath on my belt. I noticed last night it was missing, but I decided I'd left it at work. It didn't take a genius to figure out that, if they had the knife, I must have lost it at the excavation when I was fighting with Healy."

"That must be the murder weapon. He said your fingerprints were on it."

Jacy nodded grimly. "That's what I figured. I decided it was in my best interest to stop talking at that point. They asked a few more questions, but I refused to answer. Then Mr. Larrimore got there, and they left me alone with him for a while. When they came back, he explained that the knife was mine but I'd lost it the day before, 'presumably during the altercation with Professor Healy'—his words, not mine. Then he told them I wasn't going to answer any more questions, so unless they were ready to charge me with something, they had to let me go."

"And that was it?"

"Pretty much. Well, I had to agree that everything Mr. Larrimore said was true."

Stopping at a red light, I turned in my seat to face Jacy. "Okay, look. I have to ask you this, so please just give me an honest answer and don't take offense. Did you kill Quinn Healy?"

Jacy's face registered shock. "No!" he answered without hesitation. "I can't believe you would even ask me that! I thought we were friends!"

"That's why I asked you. I needed to hear it from you and see your eyes when you answered."

A car horn sounded behind us, and I looked up to find the light had changed. Neither of us spoke for several minutes.

"For the record, I believe you," I finally said. "It doesn't really matter what I believe, though. The police are the ones you have to be concerned about and, right now, they're just looking for an excuse to nail you. You could be in real trouble. If they find any more evidence to link you to the murder, then you'll be under arrest."

"There can't be any more evidence linking me to the murder because I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Unless someone is setting you up."

He looked over at me with a startled expression. "You really think someone would do that?"

"I don't know. It's a possibility. If your knife was used in the murder, it could indicate someone was trying to make it appear that you killed Healy. Or maybe the killer just used the first thing he found. I wonder if there were any other fingerprints on the knife. I'll have to remember to ask Sgt. Kaplan about it."

"Then you'll be investigating the murder?" Jacy sounded hopeful.

I hated to burst his bubble, but I'd gotten a little ahead of myself. "Not unless it turns out to be directly connected to the thefts. The tribe didn't hire me to investigate the murder."

"Do you actually think it's unrelated?"

"Honestly, no. That would be stretching credulity, but right now I don't have any direct evidence."

"I know I said this before, but I really want to help with the case—even more so now. It's become personal."

"I don't know..."

"Killian, please!"

"Jacy, it could be dangerous. We're dealing with a killer here."

"Yeah, and it's my life on the line."

"We'll discuss it later," I put him off as we pulled into Fletcher's driveway. "Right now, I need to get back to my office."

Jacy sighed. "You're not even going to come in?"

"I can't. Tell Lily and Fletcher I'll be in touch later."

I arrived at the office to find the construction crew busily working in a cloud of drywall dust. Novak's door was closed, but I let myself in anyway.

"Shut the door!" he barked before I was even completely inside the room.

I did, and the sounds of construction became slightly muffled.

"How much longer will they be here?"

He sighed. "I think—I *hope*—they're almost finished. If I'd known it was going to be this much trouble, I would have shut down the office while they were working. Speaking of trouble, the phone has been ringing off the hook with calls from people wanting to make appointments. Do you have any idea how hard it is to hear with all that racket going on out there? No. You wouldn't, since you haven't been here."

I stifled a grin at his little tirade. "You're just jealous because you couldn't find any excuse to get away from your desk today."

He laughed. "Ouch. The truth hurts, kid. Have a seat and bring me up to date on your case."

I flopped into one of the armchairs and started filling him in on what had happened since I'd talked to him last—which turned out to be quite a bit.

"I read about the murder in the paper this morning, although there weren't many details." I winced, thinking about Micah, as he continued, "I figured that had something to do with your late arrival this morning. What's your impression of the kid? Do you think he had anything to do with the murder?"

"I asked him point blank, and he adamantly denied it."

"What did you expect, a full confession? What's your gut say?"

"My instincts say he's innocent, but I've been wrong before."

"Haven't we all? I'd say you're right a lot more often than you're wrong, though."

"He wants to be involved in the case."

"What do you mean? He wants to know what's going on, or he wants to be an active part of the investigation?"

"The latter. I tried to discourage him, but he seems determined."

Novak leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin. "I think you should let him."

"What? This is a dangerous case. There's a killer involved. Jacy doesn't have any experience with that sort of thing."

"Neither did you when you started. You said he was determined to be involved. My guess is he'll find a way to do it, whether it's official and through you, or on his own. At least if he's helping you, you can make sure it's on your terms. Give him some busy work and keep him out of trouble."

"Fletcher didn't want him involved."

"He's over eighteen, right? That's old enough to make decisions for himself."

I sighed. "We may be getting ahead of ourselves. I wasn't hired to catch Healy's murderer, only to find out who was stealing artifacts from the excavation. I suspect the person behind both will turn out to be one and the same, but I don't know that at this point. Unless the tribal council decides to extend the scope of my investigation, I might not even be involved. They could even pull the plug on the whole thing, now it's escalated to murder."

"True. It's always better to stick to what you were hired to do. I suspect you'll be asked to look into this matter, though." He leaned forward across his desk. "Do you have any suspects at this point?"

"Not yet. I haven't found out enough to start suspecting anyone."

"What are some possible motives for killing Healy?"

I pulled out my notebook and flipped through, looking at my notes. "Personal? From what I saw, he was an arrogant jerk. I can easily imagine someone wanting to kill him."

"There are a lot of jerks in this world, yet people don't generally run around killing them without some exacerbating provocation. You need to talk to people who knew him personally: friends, coworkers, students."

"Someone may have been trying to discredit the excavation."

"Murder seems like a pretty big step to take if your goal was simply to discredit the project."

"Maybe the looter got caught in the act and panicked."

"The use of Jacy's knife indicates forethought."

"So maybe it was planned. Or maybe the goal was to shut down the excavation, and when the looting didn't do the job, he or she resorted to violence."

"Who is this 'he or she,' then? Someone from the tribe?"

"It makes sense. Who else would want the dig stopped?"

"Then you can add the entire Pomocatan tribe to your list of people to be interviewed."

"I'll start with the council members. If anyone is in a position to know who is against the excavation, they are. In fact, one of the elders was pretty vocal in his opposition."

"I'd start with him then. Anything else?"

"Well, the most common motive for murder is personal gain. That would bring us back to the looter. If he or she was looting the site in order to sell the artifacts or add them to his own collection, he'd have a pretty strong motive for murder—especially if Healy caught him in the act or confronted him."

"You've got a list of artifact collectors to talk to, right?"

"Well, I have *a* collector to talk to, as in singular."

He shrugged. "It's a start."

"You know, before I waste any more time on this, only to find out I'm off the case, maybe I should call Lily and double check my status."

Novak gestured towards the phone on his desk. "Help yourself."

I pulled out my cell phone instead. "Sorry, Grandpa. I've got this."

He shook his head. "I don't know how we survived without those things. They've made the Rolodex practically a museum piece."

Smirking at him, I dialed Lily. "Hi, this is Killian."

"Oh, Killian. Is everything okay? We were surprised when you didn't come in earlier."

"I'm sorry, but I needed to get to the office. Besides, everything seemed to have settled down by that point. I figured Jacy could fill you in."

"He did, so it's all right. We were just worried that something was wrong."

"No, everything is fine. Actually, the reason I was calling was to see if you still wanted me to continue with the case."

"Absolutely. In fact, I just got off the phone with the last of the council members, and for once everyone is in complete agreement. We would like you to extend your investigation to clearing Jacy's name."

"Even Wallace is in agreement?"

"Yes, he agreed immediately. I think the murder shook him up quite a bit."

"Hmm. Well, okay. I'll get started right away."

"Thank you, Killian. This means so much to us."

"You're certainly welcome."

I hung up and turned to Novak, who'd been listening to every word. "I'm in."

"So I gathered. What are you going to do first?"

"I think I want to visit the site of the murder and see things for myself."

Novak nodded. "Be careful."

"Aren't I always?"

"Right, and I'm the Jolly Green Giant."

Why did everyone assume I was careless?

## Chapter 14

Except for the trampled undergrowth, there was little sign that the area surrounding the clearing had been crawling with cops the night before. The spirits had been uncharacteristically quiet as I walked through the eerily still woods. Believing I was alone at the site, I nearly jumped out of my skin when a figure rose suddenly from the excavation.

Elyse Pike and I stared at one another with identical spooked expressions.

"I didn't hear you coming," she said, her voice a little shaky. "I guess I was lost in thought. Anyone could have crept up on me."

I gave her a reassuring smile. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just didn't expect anyone to be here."

"I'm the only one. I couldn't leave the place the way it was last night, so I got permission from the police to come down and straighten things up as long as I didn't touch the tent. I guess they're mostly finished." She sighed and looked around the clearing. "God only knows when we'll get back out here—if ever. With Quinn—I mean, with Dr. Healy dead, we'll probably be closed down."

She seemed more upset by the prospect of the dig being cancelled than by Healy's death.

"If you do get shut down, what will happen to the artifacts you've already found?"

"They'll still be studied. I can oversee the project. Now that Quinn is gone, I'm the most experienced

archaeologist on staff, so I'll probably be offered his—" She broke off with a sheepish expression.

"His position?" I finished for her.

She nodded slowly. "I must sound horrible, thinking about my career when Dr. Healy was murdered only last night."

"We all handle grief in our own ways," I said judiciously. "I'm sure it hasn't even sunk in yet."

Walking slowly toward the burial pit, I glanced down into it and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Staring back at me was a partly uncovered skull, its surface stained brown from centuries in the ground. I felt almost as if a conscious spirit was regarding me from the dirt-filled eye sockets.

Shaking that thought from my head, I turned back to Elyse. "Was the site disturbed before you arrived last night?"

"I didn't even check the pit when I got here. I was looking for Quinn. I know the tarp had been pulled back, though, and it was definitely disturbed this morning. Since the police stayed around pretty much all night, it must have happened before I found...him." She grimaced.

"Can you tell if anything is missing?"

"Not for sure. We hadn't disturbed the grave, so I don't know exactly what was there. I really don't think the looter did much digging. Maybe that means I interrupted him."

"So you think the looter killed Dr. Healy?"

She nodded wearily and sat down on the ground. "It makes sense, don't you think? Why would anyone else pull back the tarp and disturb the grave?"

"Maybe Dr. Healy was working on the excavation after you left."

"Absolutely not." She shook her head emphatically. "That would be extremely unprofessional. He knew the situation with the tribe. He would never disturb the burial until everything was sorted out."

My gaze kept returning to the skull, which seemed to draw me with magnetic force. Somehow, the uncovered bones felt obscene, as if I was staring at someone's nakedness. I had a strong urge to pull the tarp over them.

Finally tearing my attention away once more, I refocused on Elyse. "What would have happened if Jacy Elliott hadn't seen the bones yesterday? Would the excavation have continued?"

"No! The excavation stopped once the bones were found. They were uncovered only shortly before you arrived, and everyone was still marveling over them. That's why we were all huddled around the pit. This was a pretty significant find, considering the other artifacts we've discovered so far. Adena burials are usually loaded with spectacular grave goods."

"That would be a very strong draw for the looter."

"Definitely."

"But you don't know what, if anything, was taken?"

"Right."

"I know you said Dr. Healy didn't talk to you about his thoughts on the looting, but what about you? Do you have any theories about who the thief could be?"

"First off, we still don't have any way to know if anything was stolen. And honestly, I have no idea besides what we talked about the other day. I just can't imagine it could be anyone on the crew."

I had a feeling she wasn't being completely honest. Unfortunately, I couldn't very well accuse her of lying, especially since I wanted her continued cooperation. If she was going to be the new director of the excavation, her goodwill would make my investigation a whole lot easier.

I carefully sat down next to her, trying not to think about the skull still glowering at me from its resting place.

"I know you've probably been over this with the police so many times it's the last thing you want to talk about, but can you tell me what happened last night?"

"Are you looking into the murder as well as the thefts now?"

"As you said earlier, the thefts are most likely connected to the murder."

"Right," she agreed with a nod. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, after you left, Quinn was quite agitated. He told everybody to pack up, that the excavation was officially on hold until things were sorted out with the burial and the tribe."

"How did the crew react?"

"There was a lot of grumbling." She gestured toward the pit again. "You have to realize this find is a once-in-a-lifetime sort of thing. It was extremely exciting for all of us. Everyone was very disappointed by the delay."

"Were you disappointed as well?"

"On some level, of course, but I'm not a novice. I've been doing this for a while, so I understood the difficulties Quinn was facing. I knew we had to proceed with caution, especially since relations with the tribe were already strained. You wouldn't believe the legal red tape involved in something like this."

"How did the professor respond to the grumbling?"

"He didn't. He was pretty distracted with his own thoughts. He went into the tent while the rest of us started taking the final measurements for the day and cleaning up the site. When we were almost finished, he came back out and pulled me aside. He told me he'd decided to spend the night out here just to avoid any more problems with the tribe."

I picked up a handful of dirt and let it run through my fingers. "And that's common?"

"Spending the night at the site? It's not uncommon, especially if there's been a valuable find or if you're dealing with a particularly delicate situation. In this case, it was a little from column A, a little from column B. The last thing we needed at that point was for the burial to be looted."

"Where were you when he told you this?"

"Right over there." She pointed to the area by the sifters.

"Was there anyone near you?"

"Why?"

"I was wondering how likely it was that Dr. Healy's plan to spend the night was overheard by the others."

"Do you suspect someone from our crew?" she asked sharply.

"I don't suspect anyone at this point. I'm just trying to cover all the bases."

She shrugged uneasily. "He wasn't trying to be especially quiet, and there wasn't a lot of chatter. I suppose anyone who was listening could have heard him."

"I know you said you didn't think any of them could do this, but what are your feelings about the crew?"

"They're a good bunch of kids. Most of them have a genuine interest in archaeology—or at least history. I mean, they're dedicating a good chunk of their summer to work on this project."

"What happened after you and the professor talked?"

"We finished up around the site, then everyone took off except for Quinn. I was the last to leave, and everything was fine at that point. Later that evening, I decided to check on him to see if he needed anything. Having spent some time camping out at excavations, I know what a drag it can be, especially if you're alone. I didn't get an answer when I called. At first, I wasn't all that concerned. After I called several more times and he still didn't answer, however, I started to get worried. I decided to drive out."

"Where did you park?"

She jabbed a thumb over her shoulder in the opposite direction from Fletcher's house. "By the access road, where we usually park."

"Were any other vehicles there?"

"Just Quinn's SUV."

"And you didn't see anyone as you came in?"

"Not a soul. Although, as I approached the clearing, I heard a thrashing sound—like someone or something running through the leaves."

I perked up. "Could you tell what direction it was going?"

"No. The noise startled me, but I didn't really focus on it because I was looking for Quinn. At the time, it didn't occur to me that it might be important. For all I knew, it could have been a deer—or even a squirrel. Everything sounds so amplified when you're alone in the forest."

"Did you see anything out of place when you came into the clearing?"

She ran her hand through her hair. "Right away I noticed the tarp was pulled back. I remember thinking that was odd, because the pit had been covered when I left. I called out to Quinn, but he didn't answer. Since I'd seen his truck out at the road, I knew he had to be around somewhere."

She stopped and took a deep breath as her face lost some of its color. "Of course, the first place I thought to look was in the tent." I followed her gaze to where police tape still marked the tent off limits. "It was horrible. I...I've never seen anyone dead before. I mean besides like at a funeral, where it's all sterile and peaceful. This was different...anything but peaceful."

A shudder rippled through her body.

"Can you describe what you saw?" I asked softly.

She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together so firmly they turned white. After a few seconds, she

started speaking again. "There was blood...all over the floor, splattered on the wall—everywhere. Oh God, so much blood." Her eyes flew open. She was deathly pale, making me worry she might pass out, but she kept talking. "He was lying on his side. It wasn't like in the movies, where the body always has a horrified expression on its face. He just looked blank, maybe a little surprised, as if he couldn't figure out what had happened."

"Did you check to see if he was still breathing?"

"No. I didn't go near him. He was clearly dead. I got out of the tent as quickly as possible and called the police. They told me to meet them at the road so I could lead them here. I can tell you right now, it seemed like an eternity before they arrived."

"How could you be sure he was dead?"

"He'd been dead for a while. The blood was already sticky. I know because I...stepped in it. I...I threw the shoes away when I got home." She closed her eyes again.

"I'm sorry to make you relive all this again."

She shook her head. "I understand. That's your job. It's just not easy. I may not have liked him all that much, but I respected him."

"You didn't like him?" I jumped on her statement.

Her eyes opened slowly as she turned to look at me. "I suppose I just made myself a suspect."

I gave her a small smile and paraphrased Novak from earlier that morning. "I dislike a lot of people without killing them. Not liking someone isn't necessarily a motive for murder."

She nodded, seemingly mollified.

"No, I didn't particularly like Quinn. He was a bit...old-fashioned, I guess you could say. He had certain ideas about the place of women on his projects. I think he would have much preferred to have a male assistant, though he certainly never said that in so many words. And as you saw, he could be extremely arrogant and pig-headed. Don't get me wrong. Once I learned how to avoid pushing his buttons, we got along as well as could be expected. After you'd known him for a while, you could work around his ego. I had nothing but the highest respect for him as an archaeologist and professor."

"What about the other crew members?"

"You'd have to ask them yourself."

"Can I get a list of their names and contact info?"

"I have all that in my office. I can print out a copy for you. When do you need it?"

"The sooner the better."

"Well, I'm pretty much done here. If you want, you can follow me back to my office and I can get the list for you right away."

"That would be great."

"Okay. Will you give me a hand with this tarp?"

Taking a final look at the bones, I helped her cover the pit. Even after we'd secured the tarp all around, I still felt the skull's empty-eyed stare.

I shrugged the sensation off as a figment of my imagination and turned to Elyse. "I left my car back at the Snyder's, so I'll have to meet you at the university."

"Just park by Hawkins Hall then. My office is in there."

She started into the trees, then stopped and cast one last look at the tent before hurrying off.

I watched her go until she faded from view before taking a quick look around the site myself. I pulled out my phone and took dozens of photos from every angle. I was itching to get into the tent, but I knew better than to try while the tape was still up. Sgt. Kaplan had been very helpful so far. I needed to stay on his good side.

The entire time I felt as if someone—or something—was watching me. After I had convinced myself there was nothing to be found, I hurried back to my car, grateful to get away from the site. I drove to Pemberton University, which was a familiar trip since I went to school there. We'd been out for a few weeks, though, and it was strange to see the campus so deserted. There were only a few other cars in the lot near Hawkins Hall.

As I parked, I saw Elyse getting out of her car. "Thanks for waiting," I told her. "I had one class in here last semester, but I don't really know the building that well."

She looked surprised. "You're a student here?"

"Yeah, I just finished my first year."

"Wow, I knew you were young, but not that young. Most of our crew is older than you. What are you studying?"

"I haven't declared a major yet, so I'm taking general studies for the time being. Next year, I'll have a couple of psychology and criminal justice classes that will be helpful in my profession."

She nodded and let us into the building. "I'm on the fourth floor, so we'll take the elevator. It's slow, but preferable to the stairs right now. I'm feeling very drained."

She pushed the call button, and we stood awkwardly while we waited.

I tried to think of a safe topic of conversation. "Is Professor Healy's office in this building too?"

"He has...er, had an office here, but he didn't really use it except for meetings or when he wanted to impress someone. His main office was in the same building as the lab."

"Which is where?"

The elevator arrived, and the doors slid open arthritically.

Pushing the button for the fourth floor, she answered, "In the old science building. They've been threatening to tear it down for years, ever since they built the new one. Until they do, it's home to our laboratory and state-of-the-art storage facility—a set of metal shelves in an old janitor's closet. We don't have much of a budget for the archaeology department."

The doors wheezed shut—well, almost shut—and we started our ascent with a disturbing lurch.

I grabbed the safety-rail tightly, making an effort not to watch through the gap in the doors as the floors passed by.

Elyse tried to smother a smile but didn't quite succeed. "Don't worry, it always does this. I haven't crashed to my death yet."

Somehow, I didn't find her reassurance all that reassuring.

"I'd like to see the lab," I said, attempting to sound relaxed, as if I rode in decrepit elevators all the time. What I really wanted, of course, was to get into Healy's office, but I couldn't very well say that.

"If you'd like, we can run by there after I print out the list for you."

"That would be great." The elevator finally jolted to a halt, and I exited as quickly as I could while still maintaining my dignity.

"My office is this way," Elyse said with another ill-concealed smile. She unlocked the door and swung it open for me to enter first. "Have a seat."

Her desk was cluttered but not messy. The walls were lined with several inexpensive bookshelves filled with textbooks and scholarly tomes on archaeology. A few artifacts were scattered here and there, along with framed photographs of Elyse on what appeared to be various digs.

While I was looking around, she quickly sorted through a pile of messages, which she set aside with a sigh. "Everyone wants to know what's going on with the excavation—as if I knew."

"What do you think will happen?"

She shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine at this point. I'm assuming the police will shut us down because of the murder."

"Once they've finished their investigation and gathered all their evidence, I doubt they'll hold you up any longer."

She looked pleased. "In that case, if the Pomocatan tribe decides they want to continue with things, I guess I'll take over. Of course, the university

will have to approve." Her face fell again. "I can't imagine the tribe will want to go on at this point, though, especially once they learn the grave may have been looted."

"I haven't discussed the subject with them yet so I can't really speak for the tribe, but you never know. They were certainly having personality conflicts with Dr. Healy. If the looting matter is cleared up, however, they may be willing to continue working with you."

"Do you think?"

"As I said, I haven't spoken to them about it, so I'm just postulating."

She smiled. "It's nice to know your Pemberton education is paying off with a good vocabulary, at least. However, you didn't come here to sit and discuss my academic future. Let me give you a copy of the list, then we can run over to the lab."

After she clicked away at her computer for a few minutes, her printer spat out a couple of sheets of paper, which she handed to me. "That's the name, address, and contact number for everyone on the crew. I think you met them all when you were there Monday."

I nodded as I glanced over the first page. "This is very helpful. Thank you. I appreciate your cooperation."

"I want the killer caught as much as anyone. As long as that monster is still out there, the site just isn't safe. That's why I was so startled when you showed up earlier. It had been in the back of my mind all morning." Her eyes grew wide, and she leaned toward me as if she were about to divulge a secret. "They say that, once you kill someone, the second time is easier."

I wanted to ask who *they* were, but let it go. Instead, I suggested, "It might be a good idea if you didn't visit the dig alone anymore."

She nodded. "You're right. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll definitely be more careful after this. Now, would you like to go see the lab?"

"Sure."

"It's on the other side of campus. We could drive, but since it's such a beautiful day, why don't we walk?"

"Works for me."

Facing another elevator ride from hell, I thought the stairs sounded pretty good right about then. Unfortunately, she'd already pushed the call button, and the doors were creaking open. I couldn't refuse to get on without looking like a weenie, so I sucked it up and stepped in.

Elyse watched me with obvious humor. "Do elevators always make you nervous?"

"Only this one."

She laughed heartily. "The old gal is really sounder than she looks. The safety inspectors check her every year, and she's never failed a test yet."

"A lot can happen in a year," I responded direly, but despite my pessimism we reached the first floor in one piece. Even so, I was quite glad I didn't have more classes in that building. On the other hand, if I did, I'd probably have a rock-hard ass from all the stair climbing I'd do.

As we walked across the campus, Elyse kept up a steady stream of tour-guide chatter. She knew a lot about the history of Pemberton, which apparently had started out as a nursing school in the late 1800s. The campus

had grown and changed a lot over the years, yet many of the original buildings were still in use.

Finally, we arrived at the old science building. It wasn't one of the original structures dating from the nineteenth century, having been constructed in the early twentieth century, but it was still outdated.

Elyse let us in, then led me up to the second floor. "There's no elevator in this building," she informed me with a grin. "Technically, it should have been made handicapped-accessible years ago. Since they're always talking about tearing it down, however, and they don't use it for classes anymore, the school has somehow managed to avoid doing so. If we had any physically challenged professors with offices in here, it would be a different story, I'm sure."

She slipped a key into a door and swung it open with a flourish. "Behold our impressive lab."

Whatever I had been anticipating, the reality fell far short. Although the room wasn't especially large, it was so sparsely furnished that it provided more space than you'd expect. A couple of large metal tables sat in the center of the floor, each with several high stools set around it. Down one side of the room stretched a long counter with a sink at one end. Several wooden racks stood on the counter, and cabinets hung on the wall above. A wooden table against another wall was stacked with several boxes. A corkboard hung on the wall to my right, its surface almost completely covered with notes and newspaper clippings. A slightly dusty computer sat on a battered desk under the row of windows.

"It's not what I was expecting," I admitted.

She snorted. "That's what everyone says, but hey, we were just thrilled to get a room with a sink. It makes cleaning the artifacts a lot easier."

"You clean them in the sink?"

"Anything that can be: stone tools, ceramics, glass, and so on." She pointed to a jar holding a handful of toothbrushes sitting next to the sink. "That's what we scrub them with. High tech, huh?"

"Wow!" was all I could muster.

"After we wash the items, we place them in the drying racks." She pointed to the wooden frames on the counter, which I noticed had screen bottoms. Going to the wooden table, she grabbed one of the boxes and carried it over to the closest metal table. "Once they are completely dry, they are labeled and placed in plastic bags." She lifted the lid and pulled out a Ziploc bag like the ones I'd seen in the tent at the site. "We try to keep like things together." She glanced at the lid. "This is all pottery shards."

I walked over to the table to get a closer look. The bag in her hand held a small, flat piece of brownish, rough-surfaced clay, barely bigger than a quarter.

"That's pottery?"

"That's what native pottery from around this area looks like. Not all that pretty, huh? I think we have some larger pieces in here." She rooted carefully through the box and pulled out another bag. "Here, this will give you a better idea." She opened the bag and shook the shard into her hand. It was slightly smaller than her palm, but a rough design could be seen on its surface, a sort of diamond pattern.

"There's a design."

"The potters pressed things into the clay while it was still wet. This is a net pattern. The vessel was probably much larger, but the pottery was very fragile, so we mostly just find little pieces."

She placed the fragment back in its bag, which she returned to the box.

Exchanging it for another box, she commented, "You'll probably find this one a little more interesting." She held up a flat, polished piece of stone, rectangular in shape, with several holes drilled through it.

"What is it?"

"A gorget. It was worn on a thong fastened around the neck."

"It's beautiful."

She handed it to me. While I took a closer look, she pulled out another bag that held several small, greenish, round objects, roughly the size of peas. "Copper beads. These are what we found the first day you were at the site. We brought them back for cleaning right away, since they're a pretty exciting find. We think there might be more. That's what we were looking for when we ran across the bones."

"These are what suggested the site might be Adena culture?"

"There were a lot of clues. These were just the biggest."

She returned the beads and the gorget to the box, which she put back on the table. "Well, that's the whole tour." She grinned at me. "Now we can get to the real reason you wanted to visit the lab."

"Which is?"

"You want to see Quinn's office."

"I was interested in the lab." I may have sounded a bit defensive, but I was annoyed that she'd seen through me so easily.

"Yes, but you were really hoping to get into Quinn's office. So let's go." She started for the door.

"Wait, you're just going to let me in?"

"As I told you earlier, I want this bastard caught. Besides, I actually do need to get some files from there. You can just tag along, as long as you don't do anything to get either one of us in trouble."

"I'll try to restrain myself," I replied dryly, following her out the door.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to tell you how to do your job. I'd just rather not lose mine."

"I understand, and I really do appreciate the chance to check out his office. I probably won't find anything, but you never know. If it would make you feel any better, I won't even touch anything."

Elyse unlocked the next door down the hall. Healy's office, like hers, was small and stuffy, its walls lined with shelf after shelf overflowing with books. Against the wall under the sole window sat a desk whose surface was clear except for a telephone, a file holder, an old-fashioned Rolodex, and a large, flat blotter-style calendar.

Elyse walked over and picked up two files from the holder. "I'm done. It's all yours."

"This shouldn't take long." I glanced over the shelves, which held only books. "He doesn't have any knickknacks like yours," I observed.

"He kept all his cool stuff in his other office. This was used solely for work. Not many people ever saw it

except those of us who were actually in the trenches with him, so to speak."

I moved to the desk and studied the calendar. Quinn Healy, it seemed, had been a doodler. He'd scribbled geometric designs all around the border, interspersed with the occasional note or tiny little drawing. I recognized a rough sketch of a gorget, maybe even the same one Elyse had shown me in the lab. In the upper-right-hand corner he'd drawn an arrowhead. Most of the notes had to do with meetings or appointments, but one caught my attention.

**Who is the looter?** he'd written in bold letters. And under that: **Talk to Charlie.** The name "Charlie" was underlined several times.

"Who is Charlie?" I asked Elyse.

"I don't know. Why?"

"He's written himself a note to talk to Charlie about the looter. Do you think he suspected this Charlie person?"

"I have no idea. I can't even think of any— Oh! Wait. He may have meant Charlene Howard!"

"Who is she?"

"She was his anthropology professor. I guess you could say she was his mentor. I think they were quite close."

"Did he call her Charlie?"

"I wouldn't know. He rarely spoke about his personal life, but it seems like a possibility."

"It's a place to start. Do you know how I could get in touch with her?"

She leaned over my shoulder and flipped through the Rolodex to the H's.

I chuckled. "Now why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you've probably never seen one of these before. And you promised not to touch anything."

I copied Professor Howard's phone number and address into my notebook. "I guess I'm done here. Thank you."

"No problem. I hope it helps."

I walked her back to her building. After we said goodbye, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Professor Howard's number. It rang several times before her voicemail picked up. I left a message asking her to return my call.

My next step would be to contact the crew members, but first I needed to run back to the office and write up my notes while things were still fresh in my mind. I'd learned a lot from Elyse. The investigation finally seemed to be getting off the ground.

## Chapter 15

Life is full of irritating little coincidences. For instance, I caught up on the paperwork just in time to start interviewing for our new receptionist/secretary.

I'd arrived at the office to find the construction was finally complete. Things had moved along pretty quickly after a certain point. All the equipment was gone, leaving a new door in the center of the wall and an overpowering odor of fresh paint. I was tempted to peek in but figured it was only fair that Novak see his new office first.

Instead, I sat down at my old desk and wrote up the notes from my meeting with Elyse. After that, I started working on the pile of paperwork, and in no time, I'd actually cleared it away. I stared at the clean desk in contentment. This was the first time I'd seen its surface in weeks. I'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

I was still basking in the glow of my accomplishment when the office phone started ringing. I scooped it up and practically purred, "Novak Investigations. Killian speaking. How may I help you?"

Silence met my warm greeting.

"Hello?" I could tell someone was on the line. I could hear faint background noises, and sensed that a live person was there but not speaking. "Hello?"

I checked the Caller ID, but the number was blocked. I gave my anonymous caller a few more seconds, then said good-bye and hung up. I told myself it was a wrong number, but I had an uneasy feeling about it.

Glancing at my watch, I saw it was later than I'd thought. I stood up and stuck my head into Novak's office, the only room with a window, to discover that it was indeed getting dark out. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been home for dinner. Of course, it wasn't like the old days when we all sat down at the table together. Ever since Steve opened the B&B, the family was rarely in one place at the same time long enough to have a conversation, let alone eat a meal. At that hour, I figured everyone had already finished, so it seemed I'd be dining alone.

The phone started ringing again. Since I was still in Novak's shadowy office, I just answered at his desk. "Novak Investigations."

Again, no answer. "Look, I know someone is there. Is there something I can help you with?" Silence. "Why are you calling?" I waited a few more seconds for a response, and when none came, I hung up again. By then I was getting thoroughly creeped out. It was time to go.

As I walked back out to my desk to grab my notebook, the phone started ringing yet again. I started to just leave and not answer it, but my curiosity got the better of me. What if it was someone who needed help? We got calls like that sometimes, prospective clients who were either too scared or too embarrassed to talk right away, as if they had to work themselves up to actually speaking.

I answered and, just as I'd suspected, no one spoke. I was about to hang up when I heard what sounded like a muffled sob.

"I know you're there. I can hear you crying. Do you need help? I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

Another ragged sob filled with raw pain ripped through the wire, causing the hairs to stand up on my arms. Then the line cut off abruptly.

I shakily sat down at my desk and stared at the phone. The calls had unnerved me. I waited a few minutes, but when the phone didn't ring again, I decided the time had come to go find something to eat.

I was in the parking lot when my cell rang. My first thought was that it must be the anonymous caller trying a different number. When I saw it was Micah, I breathed a sigh of relief and answered.

"Hi, Killian." He started speaking quickly, as if afraid I might cut him off. "I know you probably don't want to talk to me right now, and with good reason, but I'm calling to apologize about my behavior last night. I had no right to get mad at you. You were just doing your job."

"Micah—"

"I'm really sorry I was such a jerk. I wouldn't blame you if you were mad at me."

"Micah—"

"I overreacted when you wouldn't tell me what you'd learned from Kaplan. I've felt as if we've been drifting apart lately, and that just seemed like one more thing between us, but I honestly understand."

"Micah! I'm not mad at you."

"You're not?"

"No. I was a little hurt last night, but to be honest, I've barely thought about it since."

"Oh. Well..."

I realized how bad that sounded and rushed to explain. "I mean, I've been really busy with the case and all, so I didn't have much time to worry about anything else."

"Right." He didn't quite sound convinced. "I heard they questioned your friend down at the station."

"Yeah. They released him, though."

"Are you investigating the murder now?"

"More or less." I leaned against the car and ran my finger through the dust on the paint. It badly needed washing. "The tribal council asked me to clear Jacy."

"How's it going?"

"Today was good. I'm finally starting to move forward instead of simply spinning my wheels."

"That's cool. So what are you up to now?"

"I was just on my way to get some dinner."

"You haven't eaten?"

"Nope."

"Let me guess, you're still at the office."

I laughed. "Actually, I'm in the parking lot."

"Why don't you come over here? I'll cook something for you."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Besides, when was the last time you had a home-cooked meal? Come on."

I smiled. "Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Great. If I'm not here, just let yourself in."

"What do you mean, 'if you're not there'?"

"I have to run to the market real quick. I won't be long."

"Micah, don't go to any trouble. If you need something, I can easily stop and pick it up on my way."

"No, I have something special in mind. Just go with the flow, okay?"

"Fine," I gave in with a good-natured sigh. "See you soon."

Wondering what he was up to, I drove to his apartment as quickly as possible, hoping to catch him before he left. Unfortunately, I didn't see his car in the lot when I arrived, and he didn't answer my knock.

I fished out my keychain and unlocked the door. Micah had insisted I have a key in case of emergencies, although he hadn't specified what constituted an emergency. It was the first time I'd actually used the key, since I didn't usually go to his apartment unless he was there.

I found candles flickering all around the room. Micah must have run around frantically lighting them after we hung up. A bottle of wine sat on the counter that separated the kitchen area from the living room. I walked over to find a note tucked under it.

*Killian, help yourself to the wine. I think you'll like this one. You know where the glasses are. Make yourself at home. I'll be back soon. Love you, Micah.*

I smiled to myself and picked up the bottle. The label read *Montepulciano d'Abruzzo*. I'd never heard of it, but then, I wasn't exactly a connoisseur. In fact, I wasn't a big fan of wine, much to Micah's horror. He'd been attempting for some time to cultivate my taste for it and was constantly making me try new ones. I was slowly starting to come around but still hadn't found one that really stood out.

I carried the bottle into the kitchen and got a goblet from the cabinet. I had to hunt for the corkscrew,

then figure out how to use it. Having only seen other people do it, I had to wrestle with the cork for a few minutes before it finally popped out, which seemed like a lot of work for something I probably wasn't even going to like.

I sniffed the bottle and shrugged. It smelled like wine. I poured some, took a tentative sip. It wasn't bad. I took another taste and decided I might actually like this one.

I walked around the apartment sipping the wine while I waited for Micah. I finished my first glass and poured myself another. When he still hadn't returned by the time I'd drained the second glass, I helped myself to a third and turned on the TV. I was working on my fourth and watching HGTV when Micah finally got home.

"Hey, sweetie," I called from my spot on the sofa. He had paper bags in each arm, so I jumped up to help him...which was when I realized the wine had gotten to me. I steadied myself with the help of a chair, then proceeded to give Micah a hand with the groceries.

He grinned when he saw the open bottle. "I see you got into the wine." His expression changed to surprise when he picked it up and realized how much I'd had. "You drank all that on an empty stomach?"

I nodded sheepishly. "It's good."

"Are you feeling it?"

I nodded again, a little more emphatically, and lost my balance, catching at the countertop to keep from toppling over.

Micah chuckled. "Well, at least we finally found a wine you like. From the look of things, we'd better get

some food in your stomach before you move from tipsy to drunk."

"You'll get no arguments from me. I'm starving! What are we making?"

"*We're* not making anything. *I'm* making chicken Milano."

I pouted. "I want to help."

"In your state, I doubt you'd be of much use. I'm definitely not letting you near sharp objects."

I giggled. He had a point. "What's this you're making again?"

"Chicken Milano."

"What's that?"

"Sautéed chicken breast in a fresh basil and sundried tomato cream sauce over pasta."

"Mmm! That sounds delicious."

"It is. Now why don't you go sit down and watch your show? This won't take long, I promise."

I did as directed, and sure enough, about half an hour later Micah called me to eat. He'd set the table with a dark blue cloth and candles, creating a very romantic effect. When he refilled my glass, I commented dryly, "As if I haven't had enough."

He just smiled and went back into the kitchen to fetch a wooden bowl of salad, which he tossed and served. Another trip to the kitchen produced two plates, each bearing a layer of fettuccini topped with sliced chicken breast and cream sauce.

"*Bon appétit!*" he said, presenting the plates with a flourish.

"It looks amazing!"

"Let's just hope it tastes as good as it looks."

"Have you ever made this before?"

"Nope. I found the recipe online and thought it sounded like the perfect dinner for a special occasion."

"And what's the occasion? Getting Killian drunk on wine for the first time?"

Micah laughed. "That was just a happy bonus. There is no occasion, except it's nice to have you over for dinner."

I cut off a bite and popped it into my mouth. "Oh my gawd! This is incredible!"

Micah looked pleased. We made small talk while we ate, avoiding any touchy subjects. The conversation was pleasant, and the meal was every bit as delicious as it looked. After we finished, Micah took away the dirty plates and returned bearing a chocolate tart.

"Dear God, you're trying to spoil me," I said with a grin. "Either that or you're trying to seduce me."

Micah gave me an enigmatic smile and served the dessert. It was heavenly. I was quite full by the time I finished my slice.

We moved to the living room, Micah put on a movie, and we cuddled up together on the couch. I don't even remember what the movie was—although I'm pretty sure it had Kate Winslet in it. I don't know whether it was the meal, the wine, the comfort of Micah's arms wrapped around me, or a combination of all three, but I was asleep before the opening credits finished rolling.

I awoke disoriented the next morning, alone in Micah's big bed. Even once I'd placed where I was, I wasn't sure how I'd gotten there. The last thing I remembered was falling asleep on the couch. I slowly sat

up and caught the smell of coffee in the air. I glanced over at the clock and gasped. I was late, and the interviews for the assistant's position started that morning.

I leaped out of bed and immediately regretted it. My head was pounding. I let out a low groan and lowered myself gingerly back onto the mattress.

As if summoned, a boxer-clad Micah appeared in the door bearing a steaming coffee mug. "I thought you might need this."

I gratefully accepted his offering with a mumbled thank you. "How much wine did I drink?"

"Pretty much the whole bottle. I only had one glass. How's your head?"

I grimaced. "It feels like there's an entire high school marching band tramping through my brain...and what they lack in skill is more than made up for with enthusiasm."

He laughed. "Just go easy on it next time. It's all about moderation. And you should probably drink lots of water today."

I nodded, then instantly regretted it.

Micah smirked as he left the room. "I'll get you some ibuprofen."

I tried to stand again, with better results, and looked down at my naked body. "How'd I get in here anyway?"

"You don't remember?" he called from the other room.

"No. Should I?"

I was a little worried. What exactly had happened?

He appeared carrying three pills, which he handed to me and I promptly swallowed with a swish of coffee. "After the movie, I woke you up, and we walked back here. You got undressed, collapsed into bed, and promptly fell right back to sleep."

"I don't remember any of that." I rubbed my face. "I'm sorry. I guess I ruined your romantic night."

"Don't be silly. It was great just having you here, falling asleep listening to you breathing, waking up next to you..."

I knew where this was leading. I glanced at the clock again. "I need to go."

He frowned. "Already?"

"I have to run out to the B&B to shower and change. We're interviewing for the new office position today, and I need to look my best." I glanced in the mirror. "And this definitely isn't it."

"See, if you moved in, this wouldn't be an issue."

"Not now, Micah. Please. I can't deal with it this early in the morning, especially with my head feeling the way it does."

"When can you deal with it, Killian? It seems to me you're just avoiding the issue altogether. Last night was incredible, right?"

"Last night was incredible," I reluctantly agreed.

"It could be like that all the time. Just say yes."

"I...I need more time."

Micah's face fell. "Time's running out."

I bit my lip. "Soon." I pulled on my clothes from the day before and turned to face him. "I promise. I'll let you know soon."

He nodded, making no attempt to hide the hurt in his eyes. I gave him a quick kiss and let myself out.

I drove to the B&B at speeds that would have resulted in a hefty fine had there been any police on my route. I flew through the door and almost bumped into Steve.

"I thought you were upstairs," he said with a startled expression. "Did you sleep at home last night?"

"Er, no. I fell asleep at Micah's."

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Oh really?"

"I don't have time to explain right now. I'm already late."

I ran up the stairs without looking back, although I could feel his eyes on me as I went.

I took what had to be the world's quickest shower and threw on fresh clothes, then raced back out after another hasty exchange with Steve. I pulled into the parking lot of the office with only ten minutes to spare before the first interview. I opened the door to find several applicants already sitting expectantly on the hard plastic chairs in what passed for our waiting room, also known as my office.

Novak popped his head out of his office door like a prairie dog checking for danger. He wore a tight-lipped expression that did not bode well for my bodily integrity. He motioned me into his office without a word and shut the door behind me.

"Nice of you to join me this morning."

"I know. I'm sorry. I overslept, which isn't an excuse, but hey, I'm here now."

He sighed. "Are you at least ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"I don't think you know what you're in for."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say it's going to be a long day."

I groaned. My head was still killing me. The ibuprofen Micah had given me hadn't even quieted the brass section, let alone the percussion.

"Uh, maybe I should take something else for my headache before we get started."

He walked over, opened a drawer in his desk, and started pulling out bottles. "Name your poison," he said, lining them up. "I've got Tylenol, ibuprofen, aspirin, Tylenol with codeine—"

"Wait. Why do you have Tylenol with codeine?"

"Dentist."

"Will that make me sleepy?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not giving you prescription drugs for a hangover."

"How did you know it was a hangover?"

"I'm a PI." He tossed me the Tylenol and swept the rest back into the drawer.

I took a couple of caplets without water as Novak went over the game plan. I would join him behind his desk, while the applicant would take the remaining chair facing the two of us. Novak had a list of questions prepared, and he suggested we take turns asking.

"Should we play good cop/bad cop?"

He gave me a look. "I'm always the bad cop. But this is an interview, not an interrogation. Call in the first person."

I checked my schedule, then opened the door.

"Denise?"

A big-boned, freckled, red-haired woman in her late thirties stood up and walked in.

"Have a seat," Novak told her.

She sat and stared at us expectantly.

"As our ad said, we're private investigators looking for someone who can handle receptionist duties as well as occasionally assist in our investigations."

"Would that be dangerous?" she asked, somewhat eagerly I thought.

"Not at all," Novak said. She definitely looked disappointed. "Assisting us would mostly involve computer work here in the office. Are you proficient with a computer?"

"Oh yes, quite proficient. You might even say I'm a hacker. Would I get a gun?"

Novak was starting to look a little alarmed. "No, no gun. Do you have any experience with receptionist duties?"

"No, but I've always wanted to be a PI. I love true crime. Are you sure I couldn't have a gun?"

The interview went downhill from there. We said goodbye a short time later with a promise to call her if she got the job—as if there were any chance of that happening.

The next candidate became shifty when we asked for references. After a little questioning, we learned he'd been fired from his last four jobs because of poor performance.

"It's not my fault," he insisted. "I have a sleep disorder, and sometimes I just don't feel like getting out of bed."

Novak looked my way. "We're familiar with that disorder. Thanks for coming in. We'll be in touch."

The third person wanted to know if she could bring her dogs to the office with her—all six of them. The next several interviews were equally dismal. Either the applicants were woefully unqualified or they were borderline psychotic.

"I didn't believe you when you tried to warn me about how bad this would be," I whined after the sixth bad interview.

"You should always listen to me, kiddo. I know a lot more than you do."

"I don't know if I'd say *a lot* more."

"I would. We'd better hope this afternoon is an improvement over this morning. How's your head?"

I paused to consider. "Getting there. There's just a distant echo of 'Seventy-six Trombones' now."

Novak stared at me as if questioning my sanity but chose to let it go. "Good, then why don't you run down to the deli and pick us up a couple of corned-beef sandwiches? I have some phone calls to make."

"Yes, sir." I gave him a mock salute and ran off on my errand, all the while wondering if I would be stuck playing the dual role of investigator/receptionist forever. I found it hard to believe there were no qualified applicants in our city.

When I arrived back at the office, Novak was smiling like the cat that ate the canary. The look made me more nervous than the one he'd given me when I came in late.

"What?" I asked him warily.

"Let's just say I have an ace up my sleeve," he said with a smug expression.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Nope. Let's eat."

The afternoon's interviews were as unfruitful as the morning's. By the end of the day, we didn't have a single person I would consider hiring. Somehow, though, Novak had maintained his cheery mood throughout the entire process.

"I wish I knew what you knew," I muttered sourly after the last applicant had left.

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

"That was a complete waste of an entire day. I could have been out working on my case, but instead we sat in here interviewing people I wouldn't hire to clean up after my dog."

"You don't have a dog."

"The point is we still don't have an assistant."

"Ah, but maybe we do."

"What? You can't seriously be considering hiring anyone we spoke to today."

He chuckled. "Good God, no. I'd sooner take down my shingle and retire."

"Then what?"

"You'll just have to wait and see."

"Ugh. You know I hate that."

He just grinned. "So, I noticed you were in here last night clearing off your desk. Did you take a peek at the new office?"

"No, I figured I'd let you get the first look. After all, it is yours."

He gave me a look and that mysterious smile again. "Come on." He led the way through my office and opened the door to our new addition. It was a little larger than Novak's current office, with windows on two walls and another door opening to the front.

"That door leads to the old receptionist space." Novak explained. "For now, it'll remain empty, but it does mean this office has its own entrance."

"That should come in handy."

"So what do you think?"

"I think it's great, but I'd hate to be the one who has to move that huge desk of yours."

"Are you kidding? No one is moving that thing."

"You're not? You mean I get it?" I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Honored, I supposed, although it wasn't really the desk I would have chosen.

"Not on your life. That's my desk."

I blinked at him in confusion. "Huh?"

"This will be your office."

"My office?"

"Yes, your office."

"But...but...this is the bigger room."

"So? It's not all about size, kid." He chuckled at my expression. "You deserve it. You've worked your ass off since I hired you. Besides, it took me forever to get my space arranged just the way I like it. The idea of moving all my crap in here is too daunting to even consider. More importantly, if you stick around long enough, this will all be yours someday anyway."

My mouth dropped open. This was way too much to take in. I blinked away tears. "Novak—"

"Don't go getting all mushy on me. You're going to have to keep up your end of the bargain. Once you're a partner, you'll have a lot more responsibility. Which reminds me, have you finished that paperwork for your license yet?"

I shook my head. I wasn't about to tell Novak, but it was one more thing I'd deliberately placed on the backburner, along with figuring out my future with Micah and other things I'd have rather avoided indefinitely.

"Then how about if you get busy on that now? I'd like to be able to turn it in soon."

"Okay." I took one last look around my new office, already mentally decorating it, then reluctantly sat down at my desk to finish the application for the license. I could hardly believe that soon I would be a licensed investigator with my own office. Everything seemed to be happening so fast I could barely keep up. If only my case would go so smoothly.

"Hey, do you have plans for tomorrow morning?" Novak asked suddenly from behind me, startling me out of my thoughts.

"No, why?"

"I just talked to a buddy of mine, who said he can qualify you for your gun permit if you meet him at the range around ten. Would that work for you?"

"I guess so." I was not enthused.

"Great. I'll call him back and let him know." He gave me a thumbs-up and disappeared back into his office.

I turned back to the forms with a sudden feeling of dread in my stomach. I was not looking forward to firing a gun again, even if it was just at a paper target.



## Chapter 16

The smell of gunpowder hung in the air as I took my stance, feet shoulder-width apart, arms held out in front of my body at shoulder height. I aimed the gun at the target, tightened my finger on the trigger...and froze.

The last time I'd fired a gun I killed a man. That was three years ago, and it still haunted my dreams.

*You have to do this*, I told myself sternly. *Novak wants you to have a gun, and in order to carry a gun you need to qualify.*

Still, I couldn't pull the trigger.

*It's just a paper target.*

I'd barely slept the night before. Feeling unsettled after Novak set up my appointment, I went home to Adam. He, Kane, and Tad were just sitting down to dinner, so I joined them. I was fine while we were all together and talking, but as soon as my head hit the pillow later that night, I started dreading the test.

I'd arrived at the shooting range almost an hour before, hoping to get the test over with quickly, but that wasn't in the cards. Although I was on time to meet Lieutenant Donté Stark, Novak's buddy, he was running late. When he finally appeared, there was some confusion about whether I had to take the firearms safety course required by state law. After much discussion, he decided that since I'd taken a class when I was fifteen, I was exempt. I still had to be qualified, however, which was what I'd thought the meeting was about in the first place.

Then there was the whole gun issue. I had to be qualified with the type I'd be carrying. Since I hadn't purchased one yet, that posed a problem. I called Novak, who told me to rent a Smith and Wesson 9mm. When I passed the information along to Lt. Stark, he informed me he carried that very weapon, so I could just use his.

At long last we'd made our way to the actual range, and I'd frozen up. I stared at the target with a sick feeling in my stomach. I took a deep breath and held it, closed my eyes for a second, opened them again, and pulled the trigger.

I slowly released my breath. It wasn't nearly as bad as I'd feared. There were no flashbacks, no sudden panic attacks.

I aimed and fired again.

"How'd it go?" Novak asked the moment I opened in the office door.

"I qualified," I reported.

"What'd you score?"

"Ninety-six percent."

His mouth dropped open. "That's higher than I was shooting when I was still on the force."

I shrugged. "I've always been good with guns."

"Then why did you fight me on this?"

"My skill level had nothing to do with it. I just don't like guns. So I'm good with them? So what? What a useless skill. Maybe I missed my calling as a sniper."

"It's a skill that saved your life once and could very well save it again."

I looked away. "I took a life too."

Novak walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Killian, it's admirable that you have such a high esteem for human life, but you can't keep beating yourself up over something that was beyond your control. You stopped a killer the only way you could. If you hadn't done what you did, he would have killed Jake and you too. You may have taken one life, but you saved two."

"I still... I just don't like guns."

"You don't have to like them to be proficient with them, and apparently you're practically a sharpshooter." I made a face. "Look at it this way: knowing you're carrying a weapon will make *me* feel better."

"At least one of us will feel better," I mumbled.

"I hope you'll never even have to use it, but if you need it, it'll be there." He ruffled my hair. "Was it really that bad?"

I sighed. "No, I guess not. It wasn't as bad as I'd anticipated, anyway."

"You probably built it up too much in your head. Guns are just tools, like anything else we use in this business."

"Now you sound like Judy."

"Changing the subject, you need to pick out your new desk. Come on into my office. I have a catalogue."

Grateful for the reprieve, I flipped through the pages of the office supply catalogue while Novak chattered on about my expertise with guns. I tuned him out and concentrated on making the difficult choice between wood-grain and chrome. I decided I was more of a wood-grained kind of guy.

"I like this one," I told Novak, pointing at a picture and cutting him off in midsentence.

He looked at it and frowned. "Isn't it kind of small?"

"I never pegged you as a size queen," I said dryly.

He ignored me. "And you don't want some cheesy imitation wood. Pick out something bigger in real wood."

"Right. Bigger wood. Got it." He rolled his eyes. I looked at some more pictures, but the prices were exorbitant. "The real wood ones are expensive."

"Ignore the price tags."

"Did you win the lottery and not tell me? You just bought the building *and* had it renovated, and now you want to buy me an expensive desk too?"

"How about if you leave the finances to me, huh?"

"Seriously, though, these things are pricy."

"Just pick the one you like. The agency has been doing very well lately, and that's largely thanks to you. I have quite a bit of savings besides. You want your office to look nice, don't you? That's what potential clients will see when they come to meet you."

I glanced around and raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Then how do you explain your office?"

"What's wrong with my office?" He was getting a little defensive.

"Nothing...if you like caves."

"My office is not a cave!"

"I guess it suits your personality."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I grinned. "Nothing at all. Just, maybe, while you're throwing all this money around, you should consider hiring your girlfriend to redecorate your office."

He frowned deeply. "I don't think Judy would appreciate being called my *girl*friend. That sounds a little undignified for a grown woman."

"You'd prefer lady friend?"

"Just pick a desk," he growled.

Smirking, I went back to the catalogue. A bit more shopping turned up one I liked that wasn't too expensive, which I showed to Novak.

After giving it his approval, he asked, "So what are you going to do today?"

"I was planning on talking to the archaeology team."

"Good idea. Will you be taking Jacy along?"

"I hadn't thought about it."

"He wanted to be involved, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I'm still not sure it's such a good idea."

"In my opinion, you should think of him as an asset. You're dealing with a culture you don't know much about, but he's a part of it. He could be helpful."

I nodded, considering what he'd said. I hated to admit he might have a point. Even though Fletcher had specifically asked me to keep Jacy out of it, he was, as Novak had pointed out before, old enough to make his own decisions. I sighed and decided to call him. If he was available, I'd take it as a sign that he was supposed to be involved.

I pulled out my cell phone and walked into the outer office to dial Fletcher's number. It rang several times before he answered.

"Hi, Fletcher. It's Killian."

"Killian! How goes the investigation?"

"I think maybe I'm starting to get somewhere. I have a few leads I'm following up."

"That's great news. How can I help you?"

"Actually, I was calling for Jacy. Is he there?"

"Jacy?" I sensed a bit of hesitation in his voice.  
"Just a moment."

There were some rustling sounds, then I heard Fletcher calling for his grandson.

A minute later, Jacy came on the line. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jacy, it's Killian. I'm going to go do some interviews with the dig crew this afternoon. Would you like to come with me?"

"I thought you said it was a bad idea for me to give you a hand."

"I reconsidered. It could be helpful to have someone along who understands your culture more than I do. Are you still interested in being part of the investigation?"

"Yeah, I am. I'll need to clean up first. I was out working on my bike. Where should I meet you?"

"Do you know where my office is?"

He didn't, so I gave him directions.

As soon as we said goodbye, I started having second thoughts. I sure hoped that Novak was right about this...and that Fletcher wouldn't be too upset with me.

While I waited for Jacy, I looked up directions online to the addresses Elyse had given me. I could use the GPS on my phone to find them, but this way I could

map out the best route to avoid driving all over for nothing.

"This is your office?" Jacy asked after he arrived and had taken a moment to look around. He didn't seem especially impressed.

"For now. I'll be moving soon. Our new assistant will inherit this room."

"My sympathies to that poor soul. Where are you moving?"

I pointed at the newly installed door. "Right through there."

He laughed. "That's convenient."

Novak's office door opened, and his head popped out. "Ah, hello. I thought I heard voices."

"Novak, this is Jacy Elliott. Jacy, this is my mentor and boss, Shane Novak."

They shook hands and exchanged nice-to-meet-yous. Then Jacy turned to me expectantly.

"Are you ready?" I asked him.

"Are you kidding? I was born ready!"

Laughing, I grabbed my list of names and addresses printed out in the order we'd be visiting them and started for the door. "All right, Watson, let's hit it."

"If you're going to use Sherlockian references, you should say 'the game is afoot,' not 'let's hit it,'" Novak commented dryly.

I shrugged. "Welcome to the 21st century, Novak." I sailed out the door with Jacy on my heels.

When we reached the parking lot, Jacy caught my arm. "Hey, Sherlock, you want to take my bike?"

I bit my lip. The offer was tempting, but I knew it wasn't a good idea. "Not this time. We'd better use my car."

"That's cool. I was just offering."

I handed Jacy the list and my phone. "You can be the navigator. I've put everyone in the order I want to interview them. You just have to enter the address into my GPS and tell me where to go. The first one should be Bridget Foxwell."

Since I already had a pretty good idea where Bridget lived, we arrived there quickly.

"Does she know we're coming?" Jacy asked.

"No, and I prefer it that way. We might not catch everyone home, but the element of surprise usually works to my advantage."

"Right. So what's the game plan?"

"I'm going to do all the talking. You're just here to observe."

"Suits me. I don't want to stick my foot in my mouth and screw things up."

I nodded my approval and handed him a blank notebook. "If you hear something you think I need to ask them about, feel free to interrupt or pass me a message. Otherwise, just take notes and we'll discuss it after we leave."

We walked up to the door, and I knocked.

Before long, a blonde woman in her late forties opened it. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, we're looking for Bridget Foxwell," I informed her in my most professional voice.

"May I ask who you are?"

"My name is Killian Kendall, and this is Jacy Elliott. I'm investigating the thefts at the archaeological excavation Bridget is working on, and I wanted to ask her some questions."

The blonde woman nodded. "Just a minute. I'll see if Bridget is available."

She closed the door, and we waited patiently on the front steps.

After a brief delay, the door reopened, and a wary Bridget peered out at us, her eyes darting between Jacy and me. "Am I in some sort of trouble?"

"Not at all," I assured her. "We just need to ask you some questions. Would that be okay?"

"I don't know. How did you find out where I lived?"

"Elyse Pike gave me your address."

"Oh, well if Elyse gave it to you, I guess it's okay. Come on in." She stood back to allow us to pass, then led us into a formal living room. "Have a seat," she said, dropping into a cream-upholstered armchair and tucked her feet beneath her.

Jacy and I sat on an uncomfortably hard floral-patterned sofa. "Thanks for talking to us," I began.

She nodded. "I guess you're trying to find out who killed Professor Healy?"

Her lower lip trembled a little. For a second, I thought she might cry, but she regained her composure.

"I'm primarily looking into the thefts from the site."

"There have been thefts?"

"Most likely. You didn't know about that?"

"Well, I mean, I knew someone had been messing around the excavation during the night, but I didn't know anything was stolen."

"We believe it's likely that some artifacts were taken."

"Do you think that's why Professor Healy was killed?"

"It's possible."

"I just can't believe someone killed him!" she suddenly wailed, as the tears that had threatened moments before spilled down her cheeks. "I mean, we were just there with him earlier that day and then..." She gestured helplessly.

"I know this must be hard," I said awkwardly.

"I've never known anyone who was murdered before." She wiped at her eyes and sniffled noisily.

"Do you still think you could answer some questions?"

She nodded and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Her tears had already stopped for the most part.

"What were your impressions of Professor Healy?"

She looked confused. "My impressions? What do you mean?"

"What did you think of him?"

"Oh. As a person or as a teacher?"

"Well, both."

"I guess I respected him." She pushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "He was very smart. You could tell he knew what he was talking about, and he definitely loved his work. This was my first dig, so I

didn't really have anything to compare it to, but I thought everything was great. Some other people said things were weird, but I didn't know what they were talking about. I guess maybe they meant those thefts you mentioned."

"Do you remember who said things were weird?"

"I think it was Ricky and Israel. They weren't actually talking to me. I just overheard them."

"Was anyone else on the crew acting oddly that you noticed? Did anyone seem suspicious?"

She shook her head emphatically. "Everyone is so nice. I can't imagine anyone stealing anything."

It was obvious Bridget was not a star witness. We weren't going to learn anything important from her. If she wasn't even aware of the thefts, chances were she hadn't been observant enough to notice much else either. Still, she could have seen or heard something whose significance she didn't realize, so I doggedly kept going.

"What about Professor Healy? Had he been acting any differently? Did he say anything that didn't make sense at the time? Did he change how he treated anyone?"

She shook her head to each question. "Not that I noticed," she said when I ran out of things to ask.

I tried one more. "Do you have any idea why someone might have wanted to kill the professor?"

Her lip poked out again, and the tears started up. "No," she blubbered. "I just can't imagine."

"Well, I'm sorry to have upset you." I pulled out my card and handed it to her. "If you think of something, could you give me a call?"

She nodded through her tears and took the card.

"Wow, that was intense!" Jacy exclaimed after we'd let ourselves out.

"It was?" I asked, somewhat surprised.

"Well, I mean, all the crying..."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess I was just thinking about how little we learned. I hope we get more from the rest of these guys."

"I'm sure we will. She didn't seem like the brightest star in the sky, if you know what I mean—sweet and all, but definitely not bright."

I laughed. "True—a little catty, but true, nonetheless. So who's next on the list?"

Jacy read off the next name: "Alexander James."

Soon we were pulling up in front of a slightly rundown one-story house. Someone had once painted it a dull gray, but the paint had oxidized in places so that the structure appeared to have a pale, flaky rash. The white trim was peeling, revealing the wood underneath. The yard was weed-ridden and badly in need of cutting.

I parked the car on the street. We walked up the cracked pavement to the front door and I knocked.

A minute later Alexander opened it, eying us uncertainly. He had dark circles under his eyes and his hair stuck up in several places, making him look as if we might have woken him from a nap. He was wearing a faded black T-shirt and cutoff sweatpants. "You're the detective from the excavation," he said by way of greeting.

"Yes, Killian Kendall." I extended my hand, which he shook with a decided lack of enthusiasm. "And this is Jacy Elliott. You may have seen him around the

site." Alexander nodded. "We'd like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind?"

"About what?"

I noticed he still hadn't invited us in. "As you may have heard, I've been hired to investigate the thefts. We're hoping someone on the crew can help."

"Professor Healy didn't want us talking to you."

"I know, but Professor Healy is no longer in charge of the investigation. Professor Pike is, and she's cooperating fully. In fact, she gave us your address."

"Oh. Then I guess it's okay." He still didn't sound convinced, and he certainly wasn't happy about it. "I doubt I can help much though. What do you want to know?"

"Were you aware that someone was looting the excavation?"

"Of course. We all were. Professor Healy was upset about it and talked about it often."

"Did he say anything specific?"

"Only that he was mad and wanted it to stop."

"Did he have any suspects?"

He shrugged and shifted his weight. "He didn't talk to me directly. I just overheard him talking to Professor Pike."

I remembered Alexander listening intently when I was at the site. I had a feeling he didn't miss much that went on around him. He could be an excellent source of information—if I could gain his trust and get him talking. So far, he wasn't exactly forthcoming.

"Do you recall exactly what he said?"

He shook his head.

"Was anyone on the crew acting suspiciously?"

"I'm not even sure what that means. Everyone was acting normal as far as I know."

"What about Professor Healy?"

"What about him?"

"What were your impressions of him?"

Another shrug. "I guess he was good at what he did. I wouldn't really know. This isn't my area of study." He was becoming increasingly agitated. "I needed credits to maintain my scholarship, and I thought archaeology would be a fun class to take. God, was I wrong! I wish I'd never volunteered for this stupid dig! Now things are being stolen and people are being killed—" He stopped and glared at me as if it was entirely my fault. "You know what? I don't really want to talk about this anymore."

"Alexander, wait!" I called, but he stepped back inside and shut the door firmly in my face.

"Right," Jacy said after a few seconds. "I think that went well."

I snorted and started walking towards the car. "I wonder what his problem is."

"He seems a bit high strung."

"Yes, but he's also very observant. I bet he knows more than he's saying."

"Good luck getting it out of him." Jacy picked up my list. "Israel Meeks is next."

Israel lived alone in an apartment complex primarily rented to students. He explained he was keeping the apartment on his own during the summer until his roommates returned for the fall semester. He didn't seem particularly surprised to see us and invited us in immediately. I was expecting the typical college-

student apartment complete with hand-me-down furniture, so I was surprised to find a brand-new sofa and recliner facing a fully equipped entertainment center with a giant Smart TV. High-quality art reproductions hung on the walls.

"Nice place," I complimented him.

"Thanks." He motioned for us to have a seat on the sofa, while he dropped into the recliner. "My girl did a lot of it. She helped me pick out the sofa and stuff."

"She has good taste."

"Hey, she picked me, didn't she?" He grinned, and so did I.

"You don't seem surprised to find us here." I decided to confront the obvious.

His grin grew wider. "I got my sources."

"Bridget or Alexander?"

He laughed. "Bridget. She called me up bawling, saying you think she killed Healy. I figured it was just a matter of time until you showed up here—unless, of course, you got Bridget pegged for the culprit."

You couldn't help liking this guy. "We want to be thorough. Are you friends with Bridget?"

"I wouldn't say we're friends. We've hung out a few times. She's tight with my girlfriend. You know how it is. I'm just the only person on the crew she knows outside of work, so I guess that's why she called me."

"Would you be willing to answer some questions about what's been going on at the excavation?"

"Hey, man, I got nothing to hide."

Unfortunately, it seemed he didn't have much to offer either. As he kept up his congenial banter, I began to notice he wasn't giving us any real information. His

steady stream of quips masked the fact that he was avoiding my questions. Did he just not want to implicate the other members of the crew, or was he hiding something? I couldn't very well come out and ask him directly.

The one time he seemed to give me a completely candid answer was when we were talking about Healy. "He was a jerk. The only people that man cared about were long dead. He didn't know how to deal with the living. He wasn't the easiest person to work with, but he definitely knew his shit. I've worked with him on a couple of different sites and been in a couple of his classes. The man lived and breathed archaeology. That's the only reason I kept signing up for his projects. You could learn a hella lot if you knew how to handle him. Of course, he expected a shitload from his students too. He was hard on anybody who didn't live up to his high expectations. The only thing that made digs like this bearable was Elyse. She's a cool lady. I'm glad she's taking over now that Healy's gone."

"You don't seem that upset about Healy's death," I observed.

He grew serious. "Look, I ain't gonna lie. He wasn't my favorite person, you know? But still, I didn't wish him any harm. I was shocked when I heard what happened. I got cousins up in Philly, and there's always stabbings and shootings and stuff, but this is the fucking Eastern Shore of Maryland. You don't expect that kind of crazy shit here." He shook his head. "It freaked me out to be so close to it."

"Do you have any ideas about who might have been stealing the artifacts or who might have had something against Professor Healy?"

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Sorry, man. All I know is, the less I know the better off I am. I learned that from my cousins."

"So you're saying you do know something," I insisted.

"No. I'm saying I go out of my way to not know anything." I stared at him blankly. "If it ain't my business, I don't pay attention. I look the other way. I ignore it."

"Wouldn't that mean there's something to look away from, to ignore?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't say. I'm too busy minding my own business."

I could see that was about as far as I would get with Mr. Meeks, at least for the time being. Despite how unsatisfactory the situation was, I would accomplish nothing by pushing. Bridget had warned him of our arrival. If he'd known anything to begin with, he'd had plenty of time to figure out how he would handle us. Then again, it was entirely possible that he really did mind his own business to the point of ignoring what was going on around him. The most frustrating part was that I had no way of knowing which it was.

I thanked Israel for talking to us, gave him a card, and we left.

"Is it always like this?" Jacy asked as soon as we were outside.

"Always like what?"

"This boring? Does it always feel like such a colossal waste of time?"

I laughed. "Usually. Sometimes you get lucky, but most of the time it's like this. However, you never know when something that seems completely insignificant will take on a different light based on new information."

"I guess. I just don't understand how you do this day in and day out."

"There's more to the job than doing interviews, although I suppose that's the bulk of it."

"I'm starting to think I'm not cut out to be a detective."

"After just a few interviews? Man, you have no stamina."

"Hey, I have plenty of stamina, just not for stuff like this. I mean, what have we learned in the last two hours? That Healy was a jerk? I knew that before we started."

"We've learned a lot, actually. We learned that Bridget Foxwell lives with her parents and is well-off. We learned that Alexander James doesn't have a lot of money and is scared of something. We learned that Israel Meeks came into some money recently and is very tightlipped."

Jacy stopped walking and stared at me. "We learned all that today? Where was I?"

"You just have to learn to be observant and read between the lines. Sometimes you can find out more from what people don't say than from what actually comes out of their mouths."

"Okay." He started walking again. "I get the Bridget stuff. She had a nice house, and the blonde woman who answered the door was obviously her mom. And anybody could see that Alexander's house was kind of neglected, so you assumed they don't have much money, although maybe they just don't care."

"He's also depending on his scholarship to get through school," I pointed out.

"So are a lot of people in college, but I'll concede your point, just because you're probably right. I don't get how you know Israel just came into some money, though."

"His apartment. Everything was brand new, plus he's paying rent for the summer on his own. Those places aren't cheap."

"Maybe his family has money. Or maybe his roomies are paying him for the summer rent even though they aren't living there. That happens sometimes with college kids."

"You could be right. It's something to look into. For now, who's next on the list?"

"Susan Urban."

Susan lived nearby in another apartment complex. She answered my knock and, like Israel, didn't seem overly surprised to see us.

"Elyse said she'd given you my address," she explained after we'd sat down in her modestly furnished living room.

"You've spoken to Elyse?" I was a little surprised that she would tell the crew.

"We're friends. We've been working together for a long time."

"How long?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure exactly. Years now."

"Please don't take offense, but I couldn't help noticing that you seem older than most of the crew."

She smiled. "Why take offense at the truth? I am older. I'm a grad student. Quinn Healy was my professor. I've worked under him on many projects. The man was a genius, plain and simple. I'll miss him."

"You knew Professor Healy pretty well?"

"I don't know if anyone knew him well. He was a very private man. I had nothing but respect for him. He'd made me a sort of unofficial second assistant on excavations, after Elyse. We were both active in the state archaeological society. He served on the board."

"Were you aware of the looting?"

"Yes, pretty much everyone on the project knew about that."

"Bridget Foxwell said she didn't."

Susan quirked her mouth to one side in an effort not to smile. "I sometimes think Bridget doesn't know what day it is. She's not all that aware of her surroundings."

"Do you know if Professor Healy had any suspects for the lootings?"

"He wouldn't have told me if he did. Like I said, he was very private."

"Who might he have told?"

"I wouldn't know."

"What about Elyse Pike?"

"He may have told her."

"No, I'm sorry. I mean, how well do you know her? You said you were friends."

"Yes. She's every bit as brilliant as Quinn was, just not as showy. If the school chooses her to replace Quinn, she'll do a good job."

"What about the other crew members? What can you tell me about them?"

She thought for a minute. "I don't know any of them very well. I've been with Israel Meeks and Ricky Wong on other projects. They're good workers and take archaeology seriously—unlike Bridget and Alexander James. Alexander only signed up for the course to fulfill the requirements for his scholarship. He's not made any secret of that. Lord only knows why he volunteered for the dig. He's been miserable from the first day.

"Bridget...well, she tries. This is her first year, and I'd be willing to bet her last. I've seen her type before. Her attention span is about as big as her IQ. For now, she's gung-ho about being an archaeologist. Tomorrow, it'll be a marine biologist or an elementary-school teacher."

"You seem a little cynical."

She shrugged. "I've seen it too many times before. She gets everything handed to her on a silver platter. Her parents have spoiled her rotten. I'll give her this, though—she's not afraid to get dirty, and she's a good worker. She does whatever you tell her. I just don't think she'll stick with it for long."

"Do you have any ideas about who the looter could be?"

"My guess would be a private collector. They can be pretty unscrupulous in how they obtain their artifacts. I honestly don't think you'll find anything with the crew."

"Do you know anyone who would have wished Professor Healy harm?"

"I can't think of anyone. He was a brilliant man. Everyone who knew him respected him. It's an honor to have worked with him."

Later, on our way to the last crew member's home, Jacy observed, "For someone who claimed to like the professor so much, she certainly didn't seem terribly broken up about his death."

I nodded in approval. "You're catching on. No, she didn't, although everyone deals with grief differently. Not everybody expresses what they're feeling inside. Still, she didn't have any problem saying how she felt about Bridget. Of course, deep emotions are different from petty annoyance."

"I think she protested too much."

"What do you mean?"

"She went on and on about how much she respected him and what an honor it was to work with him. It almost sounded more like she was covering for something: how much she hated him, for instance."

"Good thinking. We should keep that in mind."

I filed Jacy's hunch away for future reference.

Our last interview of the day was with Ricky Wong. He lived near the campus in a house converted into student apartments. His was on the second floor at the top of a spindly staircase. He answered our knock and stared at us blankly for a moment before recognition

set in. A strange little smile flickered across his face as he invited us in. I wondered what, if anything, it meant.

His apartment was filled with an eclectic mix of electronics, comic books, and plants.

"My roommate is a horticulturalist," he explained. "He's at work right now. Won't you have a seat?"

I moved a stack of comic books off a chair and sat down. Once again, I noticed he didn't seem especially surprised to see us. I was getting used to that reaction.

"Were you expecting us?"

"Not exactly. I just figured that, with Healy out of the picture, it was only a matter of time before you tried to pump us for information. So, pump away." He smirked in my direction.

"Right. Well..." I wasn't sure how to take Ricky Wong and, therefore, I was uncertain how to proceed.

"Are you looking into the looting or the murder?" he asked, taking the lead.

"Both, actually. I'm mostly investigating the looting, and the murder to the extent it plays into that."

He nodded. "You want to know who I think the looter is."

"Do you suspect someone?"

"Not really. It could be anyone on the crew, maybe even the Great Professor himself."

"Even though he was murdered?"

"Maybe his accomplice offed him. Or his fence. He had to be selling the artifacts to someone."

"You don't seem too upset over Professor Healy's death."

"I couldn't stand him while he was alive. I'm not going to pretend to like him now that he's dead."

"If you didn't like him, why did you volunteer for the excavation?"

"There aren't a lot of options at this school. In case you haven't noticed, the archaeology department is miniscule. There's Healy and Pike. That's pretty much it. And Healy was in charge of everything. That's the only way he'd have it. He was an arrogant, misogynist pig—and maybe even bigoted."

"Why do you say he was bigoted?"

"He treated minority students differently than the other kids. He gave Israel and me harder assignments than Alexander and Bridget."

"Aren't you and Israel more experienced?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean he wasn't bigoted."

I couldn't fault his logic, or lack thereof, so I moved on. "Was Healy a good professor?"

Ricky pursed his lips. "He was an excellent archaeologist," he agreed slowly, as if it pained him to say something nice about Healy. "I don't think he was a good professor. There's a difference."

"You've worked with him before, right?"

"Yes, on several digs."

"Were there ever any problems with looting before?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly. "Not that I was aware of."

"Do you know anyone who might have wished to harm Professor Healy?"

"Everyone who ever met him?"

"Anyone in particular?"

"No, sorry."

"What are your impressions of the other crew members?"

"Pike is competent. She might be more than competent, but Healy kept her under his thumb, so it's hard to say. Susan Urban is an ass-kisser, extremely ambitious. She decided that the way to get what she wants is to ingratiate herself with whoever is in charge. Israel is a good guy. We've worked together on several projects. I don't really know Alexander and Bridget that well. Alexander is a little weird—standoffish and twitchy. Bridget seems nice enough, but on the dim side."

"Can you recall anything else that might have some bearing on the case?"

He thought a minute, and that strange little smile from earlier returned. "I suspect Susan was banging the professor."

"What?"

"I'm pretty sure they were having an affair. A couple of times I went by his office kind of late at night and she'd be leaving the building. I also overheard them talking once. He was saying something about how their relationship was wrong and had to end."

"Do you remember their exact words?"

"Um...pretty much 'the relationship is inappropriate and it has to end.'"

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. Healy noticed me at the door and asked me what I wanted."

"And that's all?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I never caught them in the act, if that's what you mean."

I decided I didn't care for Ricky very much. I had a giggling feeling I was missing something, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what.

"Then if that's all, I guess we'll get going." I stood up and handed him a card. "If you think of anything else, give me a call."

He let us out, and just as he went to close the door, I realized what had seemed out of place. I caught the door. "Oh, one more question. Where's your watch?"

Ricky narrowed his eyes. "My watch?"

"Yeah. I don't think I've ever seen you without it, but you're not wearing it now."

"I don't usually wear it around the house. It's in my bedroom. Why?"

I shrugged. "No reason. Just curious."

The corner of Ricky's mouth turned up. "You know what they say about curiosity and cats."

I grinned. "Good thing I'm not a cat."

"You rushed out of there," Jacy observed as we got back into my car.

"He gave me the heebie-jeebies. I'm not sure how much we can trust what he says."

"You're not going to look into Susan's possible affair with Healy?"

"Oh, I'll look into it, but I won't take Ricky's word until I have something else to back it up. My instincts are telling me Healy's murder is connected to the thefts, not personal, but I can't ignore the possibility."

"So where to now?"

"Back to the office. We're finished for today."

## Chapter 17

I paced nervously in the foyer of the bed and breakfast while I waited for Asher to arrive. He'd called soon after Jacy and I got back to the office and suggested I wear something nice. That was all he'd tell me. The rest, he said, was a surprise. I checked my watch for the fiftieth time to see that he still had five minutes before he'd be late. I sighed heavily.

"Stop pacing before you wear a hole through my Serapi."

I spun around to find Steve leaning against the doorframe, watching me with an amused expression.

"Your what?"

"The rug. It's an antique, hand-knotted Persian. Give it a break."

I grinned sheepishly. "Sorry."

"What's going on anyway? You're more nervous than a fat turkey at Thanksgiving."

"Sorry," I repeated. "I'm going out with Asher again."

He gave me a skeptical look. "Again? And you're this worked up over it? Are you sure it's a good idea?"

I shrugged. "No, but I already agreed, so what can I do? Besides, this was all Micah's idea to begin with."

"Somehow, I don't think this is quite what he had in mind."

"Like I said, Asher's on his way. I agreed to go out with him again in one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions."

"When did this spur-of-the-moment decision take place?"

"Monday," I admitted, a blush rising to my cheeks.

Steve shook his head and started to say something just as someone knocked on the door.

I jumped and raced to open it. Asher stood there looking absolutely amazing. He wore black dress pants and a button-up shirt whose silver color matched his eyes flawlessly.

He gave me a brilliant smile. "Perfect," he whispered.

I glanced down at my outfit and tried not to blush. I was wearing a cobalt blue dress shirt and my best pair of dark jeans. I had dressed to impress. I was glad he appreciated my efforts, but was suddenly unsure if the jeans were suitable.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Where are we going? Am I dressed okay? Should I change my pants?"

"You look fantastic. Don't change anything. And I'm not telling you where we're going. You'll find out when we get there."

He was grinning ear to ear, and as much as I wanted to know our destination, I couldn't ruin his fun. I turned to say goodbye to Steve, but he was gone.

I followed Asher out to his car, where he made a big production of holding the passenger door open for me. I shook my head as I slid in, questioning once more if I was doing the right thing.

We drove into the city and parked near the plaza. Since there were several restaurants in the area, I still had no idea where we were going.

Asher refused to give me so much as a hint. He led the way down the street, his eyes sparkling mischievously and his grin never wavering. He finally stopped in front of *Casa d'Italia*, one of the nicest restaurants in town, and whipped open the door with a flourish.

"We're eating here?" I gasped.

"No," Asher responded dryly, "I just thought you'd like a tour. Yes, we're eating here."

I stepped inside, still in a state of shock. The restaurant was notorious for its high prices. I looked around in awe, never having even been inside before. The lobby alone fulfilled all my expectations. The décor was exquisite, with marble floor and mahogany wainscoting, everything polished until it gleamed.

Although the maitre d' met us with a rather phony if polite smile, his expression clearly suggested he felt we'd wandered into the wrong building.

"*Benvenuti, signori*," he greeted us. "How can I help you?"

"We have reservations," Asher informed him.

"Davis, party of two."

The maitre d' looked down at the small, black leather book he carried. He seemed surprised when he found the reservation. "Of course. Follow me, *per favore*."

He led us through the dimly lit restaurant, where I couldn't help noticing that not only were we much younger than their average clientele, we were also the

only ones not wearing jackets. I was definitely the only person wearing jeans. Since the maitre d' hadn't made an issue of that, I assumed there wasn't a strict dress code, but I still felt underdressed. No one seemed to pay us any mind, however, so I tried to relax and simply enjoy the experience.

The rest of the restaurant was just as impressive as the entrance. Candles flickered on the tables. Large, potted plants were strategically placed to give patrons privacy. A live singer crooned standards from a small stage at one end of the room, where a few couples swayed on the small, parquet dance floor in front of it.

Our table was tucked into a romantic alcove, providing us with a little extra privacy. We sat down, and the maitre d' informed us that our waiter would be with us shortly.

"I can't believe you made reservations here," I said as soon as we were alone.

Asher smiled. "I wanted tonight to be special. Who knows? This could be the last time I get to take you out. I wanted to do it right."

My breath caught in my throat. I didn't know what to say.

Luckily, a young guy showed up at the table just then to fill our water glasses. His arrival gave me time to think, and after he left, I decided to change the subject.

"How's your summer going so far?"

He shrugged. "It's okay, I guess. I ended up working for Dad again, and I'm pretty much just working all the time. I'm not close to anyone down here anymore. That's probably been the strangest thing about coming home from college. I feel like I hardly know our old

friends from high school. Not that I was really close to very many people by the end there. You and I spent so much time together, and then, after that, there was Caleb..." He trailed off and frowned, as if he wished he hadn't brought up Caleb. That made two of us. His bright smile returned quickly, however. "I wish I could see you more."

I squirmed awkwardly, and he took pity on me. "How's the case coming?"

"Good!" I jumped at the offered escape. I only hoped I didn't look as relieved as I felt. "I think I'm finally starting to get somewhere. I still don't have any clear suspects, but at least I have some leads to pursue."

"Good, I'm glad."

The arrival of our waiter spared us further awkward conversation. He handed us our menus and went over the specials, then left us alone to make our choices. I tried not to shriek when I saw the prices. Maybe I'd just get a salad.

As if he could read my mind, Asher spoke up. "Order whatever you want. I mean it, Killian. If you only get a salad, I'll ask for two of the most expensive things on the menu."

Laughing nervously, I took a closer look at the menu.

When the waiter returned, I ordered Chicken Marsala, and Asher ordered Chicken Oscar. Then Asher began to make small talk, telling me stories about his year away at college. His steady stream of chatter served its purpose, beginning to calm me down.

The food was excellent, and once I finally truly relaxed, our conversation flowed freely.

We'd just finished the meal when the singer began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention for a moment?" I twisted around to get a better view of the stage. "I have a request from a young man, asking if I would sing something just for him and his someone special. This goes out to Asher and Killian."

My mouth dropped open. I turned to find Asher watching me closely, trying to gauge my reaction.

"You arranged this?"

He nodded, smiling nervously as the first notes began to play. When I recognized the song, I almost gasped. Although we'd never had an official song, "The Way You Look Tonight" was as close as we could get. It had a special meaning for us since I'd sung it for him once.

His smile grew more confident. "I told you I wanted tonight to be perfect."

I was speechless. I couldn't believe he'd gone to all this trouble just for me.

"Would you like to dance?" he asked me.

A barrage of questions hit me all at once. How would Micah feel about my dancing with Asher? We'd danced at the club, but not really together. What would the other patrons think of us? Would we get kicked out of the restaurant? What did all this mean?

One question, however, took precedence over the others: Did I want to dance with Asher?

"Yes."

With a delighted smile, he stood up and offered his hand, gently pulling me towards the dance floor. We got a few startled looks, but as I slipped into Asher's arms, everything else faded away. We moved slowly to

the music, my head resting against his shoulder. The song ended too soon, and the crooner launched into "Luck Be a Lady Tonight."

We reluctantly returned to our table, where our desserts were waiting for us. I dug into the chocolate torte with near orgasmic pleasure. I was almost finished before I noticed that Asher had only picked at his tiramisu.

"You don't like it?" I asked in total disbelief.

"What? Oh no, it's great."

"Then what's wrong?"

He forced a smile and shook his head. "Nothing is wrong. I guess I just have a lot on my mind. This has been such a nice night I hate for it to end."

"Thank you, Ash."

"For what?"

"All this. I've had a great time."

"Really?"

"Yes."

He looked around the restaurant, everywhere but at me. Despite the silence that had fallen between us again, he clearly had more he wanted to say. I waited patiently, until his eyes finally found their way back to me.

"I have something I need to tell you." He stared down at his plate. "You know how I said I didn't date much while I was at college?" I nodded. "I may have played it down a little."

I shrugged. "So?"

"I only seriously dated a couple of guys, but...I went out with a lot of them."

"There's nothing wrong with that." I shifted uncomfortably. I had a feeling I knew where he was going with this.

"None of them lasted very long though." He poked at the dessert, making little designs on the plate with the whipped cream.

"You know what they say about finding Mr. Right."

He dropped his fork and looked into my eyes.

"Exactly. None of them were right, because they weren't you."

"Asher—"

"No, listen to me. I tried to get over you. I tried to get you out of my head, but I can't do it. You're too much a part of me."

"Ash, I'm with—"

"I know you're with Micah now. I also know that you still have feelings for me. I can see it in your eyes, feel it in your body. Admit it, it felt right for you to be in my arms again."

"I..."

There was no denying how right I'd felt in his arms. It didn't change the fact that I also had feelings for Micah, however confused they were at the moment. Before I could say anything, though, Asher continued.

"I was controlling and bitchy before. I wasn't supportive when you wanted to become a private investigator. I wasn't a very good boyfriend, especially at the end. I know it's no excuse, but I was afraid. I mean, you almost died. I was so scared of losing you that in the end I drove you away. I was angry because you were

determined to pursue being a PI, even though you knew I was uncomfortable with it."

"Nothing has changed. In fact, I'm going for my license. It's just as dangerous as it ever was."

"I've changed. I've grown up, realized how much you mean to me. Maybe I don't even deserve a second chance. I know I screwed up royally with that whole Caleb thing. I'm sorry if I hurt you. There's no excuse, except that I was immature. We were both immature back then. We both made some bad decisions."

Although I heard everything he said, three words in particular kept echoing through my mind. "A second chance? Is that what you're asking for?"

He stared at me for a few seconds, then nodded slowly. "Yes. That's what I want more than anything: a second chance. I promise things will be different."

A long time passed while I turned his words over in my head. Asher played nervously with his napkin while he waited.

"I don't know," I said finally. "You're still going to college so far away."

"I could transfer to Pemberton, like we originally planned."

"You'd do that just for me."

"In a heartbeat."

I shook my head. "It's not that easy. I admit I still have feelings for you. Maybe I always will. You were my first love. But I also have feelings for Micah, and I can't just pretend they don't exist. We're going through a difficult time right now, so maybe I'm just feeling kind of vulnerable. I don't know what's going to happen with him, but I owe it to him to figure it out."

"So what are you saying?"

"I can't give you an answer right now."

"But you'll think about it?" He sounded so hopeful it almost broke my heart.

"I doubt I'll think about much else."

"I understand. I'll give you all the space you need from here on out, and I'll respect your decision, no matter what."

I nodded. "Thank you."

He gave me a small smile. "No, thank *you*. Tonight was incredible. I'm so glad you agreed to come."

"Me too."

Neither of us was in the mood to hang out after our talk, so Asher settled the bill and drove me home. Just as before, he insisted on walking me to the door.

I turned to give him a hug good night. "Thanks again for a wonderful evening."

"It was totally my pleasure," he whispered.

He pulled back and stared into my eyes. I knew what was coming. I could have stopped it, but I didn't want to. Our lips met in a passionate kiss, which quickly turned into another, and another.

He broke away first and gently stroked my cheek. "I'll wait to hear from you."

I nodded, my voice lost. As he drove away, I stood on the porch watching, lost in thought. I definitely had a lot to figure out, but I couldn't deny how nice it had felt to kiss Asher again.

After a few minutes, I let myself in—only to find Micah staring at me, his lips pressed tightly together and pain radiating from his eyes. My stomach dropped.

"I guess you made your decision."

"Micah! No! It's not—"

"Don't. I know what I saw. At least this saves you the trouble of actually having to tell me."

He brushed past me and started toward his car. If only I'd noticed it when we pulled up, but I was so used to other cars being in the small lot that I hadn't paid any attention.

"Micah, wait!" I called, rushing after him. He didn't slow. "Micah, please let me explain. I haven't made any decisions yet."

He opened his car door, still without turning or answering. Suddenly, I was angry at him. This was his fault. If he hadn't insisted, I would have never gone out with Asher.

"Why are you so angry at me? This was all your idea in the first place."

Micah wheeled around. "I never told you to make out with Asher. I told you to see him so you could settle your feelings for him. Apparently, you have. Fine. I hope you have a happy life together. At least we found out all this before you moved in. Now that I know where your heart really belongs, I can take the job in New York. So long, Killian. It was great while it lasted."

He jumped in his car and slammed the door. I had to leap out of the way as the vehicle lurched into motion, spraying gravel in its wake. I stood helplessly watching him tear down the drive, while my brain tried to catch up.

I needed to go after him. I couldn't leave things like this. I raced to my car and jumped in, but by the time I pulled onto the road, Micah's taillights were already out of sight. His apartment seemed like the

logical first place to check so I drove directly there. I lucked out and found his car in the lot. I parked next to it and ran up the stairs to his floor. I knocked, but got no answer. I knocked again—still no answer.

I leaned my forehead against the cool surface. "You might as well open the damn door, Micah. I know you're here. I have a key, and I'm not leaving until we talk."

"Just go away," came his muffled reply, his anger still palpable.

"Not until we talk."

The door opened suddenly, and I stumbled into his apartment.

"So talk." He slammed the door and faced me with his arms crossed tightly over his chest. His eyes were still flashing with pain.

"It wasn't what it looked like."

"It looked like you were kissing Asher."

"I mean, it wasn't what you thought. Yes, I kissed Asher. He took me to a romantic restaurant. They played our old song. We danced. I just got caught up in the romance and excitement of the evening, and I kissed him. That doesn't mean I've made up my mind about anything. In fact, I told him earlier tonight that I wasn't ready to make a decision yet. I still had too much to think about."

"He wants you back, doesn't he?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

"And you clearly still have feelings for him."

"You knew that before you told me to go out with him."

"Then what's the problem? It seems obvious that you should just go back to him."

"The problem, as you put it, is the feelings I also have for you."

"Not enough to move in with me, though."

"Micah, that's not fair. I haven't said no."

"Yet. It's just a matter of time. I'm not asking for a lifetime commitment, Killian. I didn't ask you to marry me. I asked you to move in. If that's such a big deal, then I think the answer is obvious."

"Nothing is obvious! I don't make decisions quickly, especially when my emotions are this confused. I was still trying to figure out this whole moving-in business when Asher showed up. Maybe it's not fair, but he complicated things. Then the case is taking up so much of my time and energy. I just need a little more time to sort through my feelings."

"I've given you time."

"I need more."

"I don't have any more to give you. I can't just put my life on hold indefinitely. I thought we had something—something we could build on, something that would last—but I was just fooling myself."

"No!"

"Yes. Whether you realized it or not, you made a decision tonight—and I made one too. I'm taking the job."

"Don't make a decision when you're angry at me. Let's talk about this. Please."

I felt tears building up and blinked rapidly in an effort to control them.

He sighed and slumped against the wall. "There's nothing to talk about, Killian. I'm not even angry at you. I'm angry at myself because I let this drag on so long when it was obvious from the start that you weren't ready. We're at different places in our lives. I mean, I guess on some level I've known that for a while now. I shouldn't have tried to push you into something you're not ready for, but maybe that's why I did it in the first place. I just thought..." He rubbed his face. "I thought if I pushed you, you'd realize that you wanted the same thing I did. Obviously, that's not going to happen."

A sense of panic swept over me as I felt things spiraling out of my control. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I think it's best if we break up. I'll take the job in New York, and you can figure out if you want to get back together with Asher without the added complication of our relationship."

"No! I...I don't want to break up. I'll move in with you. Just...don't go."

He slowly shook his head. "I love you, Killian." I opened my mouth, and he held up a hand. "I know you love me too. That's not enough right now. You can't move in just to fix this. You'd be doing it for all the wrong reasons. If we took that step, it would have to be because you wanted to, not because you felt trapped into it. And if you really wanted to, the answer would have been clear to you a long time ago. No, I think it's time I moved on. We've run our course, and it was great. I don't regret anything."

I couldn't hold back the tears anymore, and they spilled down my cheeks. "Micah, please..."

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment as if he was in physical pain. Then he slowly opened them once again, and pushed away from the wall. "I think you should go now."

This wasn't happening. Micah wasn't breaking up with me. My brain refused to accept it. He opened the door and looked away.

"Micah—"

"Killian, please...don't make this harder than it is. Just...just go."

I stared at him, but he refused to meet my eyes, gazing vaguely into the apartment instead. I could tell he was fighting his emotions. His jaw was locked, and his eyes swam with unshed tears. He still cared about me. I knew he did. If I could just get him to look at me, listen to me...

For a moment, neither of us moved, then I numbly walked out of the apartment, still expecting him to change his mind at any second. I'd barely cleared the threshold when I spun around, but the door was already closing.

To his credit, he didn't slam it, although the click of the bolt sliding into place held the same finality.



## Chapter 18

I stood in the hallway outside Micah's apartment for several minutes while my mind absorbed what had just happened. I wasn't sure how I felt. I was numb all over.

As if on autopilot, I walked slowly down the stairs and climbed into my car. I don't remember driving, but the next thing I knew, I was sitting in the driveway of the beach house. Subconsciously, I'd headed straight for the comfort and security of Adam.

I was fumbling with my key when the door swung open.

"I thought I heard someone pull in," Adam said. "I figured it was Kane, but then I saw your car—" He took a closer look at me. "Killian, what's wrong?"

"Micah..."

The words just wouldn't come out. I realized I was shivering, even though it really wasn't especially cool.

Adam took me gently by the arm and drew me into the house. "What about Micah? Is he okay?"

"He..." I took a shaky breath and forced the words from my mouth. "He broke up with me."

"Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry." He wrapped his arms around me.

Suddenly, whatever self-preserving force had been holding back my emotions broke as the realization flooded over me.

"I messed up." Grief choked my voice and tears began to stream down my face. "It's all my fault."

I sobbed into Adam's shoulder while he rubbed my back and made soothing noises. He didn't try to deny my guilt. That wasn't his style. He was simply there for me.

Eventually, I cried myself out, and Adam led me into the kitchen. He parked me at the table and began making hot chocolate while I sniffled quietly to myself. A few minutes later, he slid a steaming mug in front of me and sat down.

"So what happened?"

I stared into my mug for a few minutes, watching the miniature marshmallows slowly melt into the cocoa. "I went out with Asher again. He took me to *Casa d'Italia* and had the guy sing our song. We danced. Then he took me home." I stopped.

"And?"

"We kissed."

Adam closed his eyes and shook his head as if he knew what was coming.

"Micah saw it. He saw the kiss."

"Oh, Killian."

"He ran off so I went after him. I found him at home, but he insisted I'd made my decision and wasn't ready to move in with him, so he was leaving."

Adam sat there quietly for a few minutes, then said, "He's right."

"What?" That wasn't what I'd been expecting.

"About your decision."

"But I hadn't made any decision yet!"

"By not doing it, you were forcing Micah to do it for you. That way you didn't have to be the bad guy."

"That's stupid."

I realized I was gripping the mug so tightly I was afraid it would break. I loosened my grip, although I kept my hands wrapped around the ceramic. The heat was almost too much, but I welcomed the physical discomfort as a distraction from the emotional pain.

"Is it? Think about it. If you'd actually wanted to move in with Micah, this wouldn't have been such a big deal. Instead, you put off making a decision for weeks, leaving Micah hanging in limbo the whole time."

I frowned. "Micah said the same thing."

"Maybe you even went out with Asher with the subconscious hope of forcing Micah into a decision."

"Micah is the one who told me to go out with Asher."

"Did he tell you to kiss him?"

I sighed and pushed the mug away, its contents still untouched. "No. I don't know why I did that. It just...felt right in the moment."

"Does Asher want to get back together?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel about that?"

I threw my hands up. "I have no idea! I don't know how I feel about anything right now. It's like someone punched me in the gut. I can't believe Micah dumped me."

Adam studied me while he sipped his cocoa. "You know, you don't seem particularly heartbroken—indignant, perhaps even regretful, but not heartbroken."

I shrugged dismissively, not wanting to think about it right then. "Maybe I'm still in shock."

"Or maybe you were ready to move on." He pushed my mug back towards me. "I have an idea. Why

don't we plan something fun? Give you something to look forward to."

"Like what?"

"How about a cookout here? We'll get the whole family together, grill on the deck, maybe play some beach volleyball or something."

"You had me up until the volleyball."

"I said or something. Maybe board games. How about Sunday night? Do you have plans?"

I shook my head no. "Sunday should be fine."

"Great, I'll start planning it then. Just don't get too caught up in your investigation and forget about us."

I frowned. "I haven't forgotten about you."

Adam stood up and ruffled my hair. "Relax. I'm just kidding. I'm going to go make up the couch for you to sleep here tonight. I'll be in the den if you need me."

Left alone, I could no longer avoid my own thoughts. Adam's observations about my breakup kept echoing through my head. I searched inside myself for some indication of heartbreak, but he was right: I couldn't find it. There was certainly loss, an emptiness Micah had filled, sadness that was more like a dull ache. Equal to those feelings, if not stronger, however, was relief.

What kind of a person was I to be relieved instead of devastated after my boyfriend broke up with me? More importantly, what did that say about our relationship?

I absent-mindedly picked up the mug and sipped at the cooling cocoa while I examined my emotions. My mind went blissfully blank for a while, until the next thing I knew, I looked down at my cup and was surprised

to see I'd drained it. A sticky residue of chocolate and marshmallow had left a design on the bottom of the mug that resembled a relief map. I wondered if Judy would be able to read it like tea leaves, and if so, what answers might it reveal?

I sighed, rinsed out the mug, then wandered into the den where Adam was just finishing making up the makeshift bed.

"Do you need anything else?" he asked.

I felt drained and tired. "Just some sleep."

"Let's hope Kane doesn't wake you when he comes in."

After giving me a hug, he went upstairs to bed.

As exhausted as I was, I doubted anyone could wake me up. I wearily peeled off my clothes and dropped onto the couch. My eyes slammed shut, and I was well on my way to oblivion when I became aware of someone standing over me. I sat up with a startled gasp to find Kane illuminated softly in the bluish-white glow from the streetlights outside. He looked more ghostly than his brother ever did.

Kane grinned. "Did I frighten you?"

"You know you did, and you meant to," I barked, a little more forcefully than I intended. I was certain he'd positioned himself in that lighting on purpose.

He looked startled. "Jeez, sorry."

I rubbed my face. "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. I've had a tough night."

"Are you okay?" He moved out of the light to sit next to me on the couch. "What happened?"

"Micah and I broke up."

Kane's eyes grew wide. "What? Because you wouldn't move in with him?"

"No...um, at least not entirely. I...he, uh, saw me kissing Asher."

"You did *what*?"

I sighed and sank back into the couch. "I mean, it was a bunch of things, but that was the final straw."

"Hold up. You kissed Asher?"

"Kane, just let it go. I'm not in the mood. It was dumb. I know I shouldn't have done it, but it just happened."

"And Micah saw?"

"Yeah. And flipped out."

"Well, duh. So...are you getting back together with Asher?"

"No. I mean, I don't think so."

"Do you think you'll be able to work things out with Micah?"

"That doesn't seem likely either. I wish...I wish I was better at talking about relationship stuff. I think I let things go on too long with Micah."

"You *think*?"

"Okay, I know I did."

"So why did you let it go that far?"

I shrugged guiltily. "I'm not sure. I mean, I know I love him."

"Then why don't you want to live with him?"

"He said something tonight when we were breaking up, and I think he was right. We *are* at different places in our lives. He wants things I'm ready for and can't give him. I think I've realized that for a while. I just couldn't admit it...even to myself."

"You say you love him, but were you *in* love with him?"

The question caught me off guard. I'd never thought about the difference before. I certainly cared deeply for Micah, but was I in love with him? If so, why didn't I hurt more, now that our relationship was over?

I slowly shook my head. "I... I don't think I was..."

Kane gave me a small smile. "Too bad you couldn't have figured all that out before he got hurt."

"I didn't mean to—"

"I know, Kill."

"And I wasn't unhappy."

"I know that, too. You were content to just coast along until Micah tried to take your relationship to the next level. Then you shut down. You weren't able to admit to yourself how you really felt. You didn't want to hurt Micah, so you did what you always do: you tried to avoid making a decision."

"That's what Adam said, too. He said I was subconsciously trying to force Micah to be the bad guy and break up with me."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think that's true. I mean...maybe I was avoiding a decision, but I wasn't trying to get Micah to do it for me."

"Well, by avoiding making the decision yourself, you definitely forced Micah's hand."

I nodded sadly. "Yeah. Now I feel like shit."

"Don't make this all about you, Killian. You say you feel like shit? How do you think Micah feels? So what now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to do anything about the situation you've created?"

I sat forward and frowned. "Micah broke up with me. We're done. He's going to take the job in New York and move away. There's nothing to do."

"You're just going to leave things the way they are, after all you two have been through?"

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, but I didn't really have anything to say to that. He was right again, of course.

"And what about Asher?"

"What about him?" I asked defensively.

"You kissed him tonight."

"Yeah, thanks. I remember."

"Killian, you can't be this dense. You're a smart guy. Figure it out. What do you want?"

What did I want? Did I want to get back together with Asher? There had been valid reasons for our breakup. He'd said he was willing to transfer back here, but did I even want that? I had so many questions and so few answers.

I flopped back with another sigh. "I don't know. Really! Don't yell at me again. I have to make up my mind about him, too. I just don't know what I want yet. I need to think about it some more."

"Well, think quickly. He deserves for you to tell him what you want. You can't keep stringing him along. It wasn't fair to Micah, and it's not fair to Asher."

I covered my face with my hands. "Oh God. I'm such a bad person."

Kane sighed. "For fucks sake, stop making it about you. You're not a bad person. You're just a kid. But sooner or later, you need to start acting like an adult and take responsibility for your actions."

I blinked at him, feeling as shocked as if he'd slapped me. "Whoa. Where'd that come from?"

He gave a shrug. "I think we all let you get away with stuff we shouldn't—Micah, Dad, Steve, me...even Tad. You're so wrapped up in school and your job sometimes that you kind of forget about the rest of us."

"I...I don't mean to."

"I know. And that's probably why we let you get away with it."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

"I'll try to do better."

He smiled. "You'd better."

"When did you get so smart? You're the little brother. I'm supposed to be giving you sage life advice."

Kane laughed. "Oh, Killian. I've always been the smarter brother."

I hit him with a pillow. "You wish. Hey, how's your mom doing? Adam mentioned that you went up to see her over the weekend?"

His expression was hidden by the shadows, but his shoulders dropped. "Honestly, not great."

"What's going on? Adam mentioned a cancer scare?"

"It's more than a scare. I haven't told Dad yet, but she has pancreatic cancer."

"Is that bad? I mean, I know all cancer is bad, but some are more treatable, right?"

"It's...pretty bad. I looked it up online. It's like one of the most aggressive forms of cancer with one of the highest fatality rates."

"Are they going to operate?"

He shrugged. "They don't know yet. They need to run more tests. But from what I read, only like ten percent, twenty tops, are even eligible for surgery. I guess radiation is an option. I don't know. The article I read said this type of cancer kills quickly."

I suddenly felt awful for wallowing in my own pity party while Kane was dealing with something like that.

"Kane, I'm so sorry—"

He held up a hand. "Don't get me started. I've held it together so far."

"You have to tell Adam."

"I know," he said with a soft sigh. "I just...I know how much he hates her, and I can't really blame him. She was awful to him and Seth."

"And not much better to you. But she's your mom, and Adam is your dad. He'll want to be there for you."

He nodded. "I'll tell him. Tomorrow."

"Good. You can't go through this alone. And I'll be here too."

"See? You still get to play big brother sometimes."

I grabbed him and pulled him into a hug. He returned it, but quickly pulled away and stood up, the light catching him again. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, and, for just a moment, I saw the little boy who ran away and showed up on the doorstep all those years ago.

Then he shifted, drawing himself up to his full height and squaring his shoulders, and I realized how much he'd grown—physically and emotionally.

"I'm gonna get to bed. And let you get back to sleep. I was just surprised to see your car here when I got home."

"Good night. I love you, little bro," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched before he broke in a grin. "Love you too, smaller bro."

I rolled my eyes as he backed out of the room, laughing softly.

The rough bark of the tree bit into my back as terror forced my heart to beat in a frantic, staccato rhythm. The wan light from the crescent moon filtered through the bare branches above me, giving me just enough light to see shapes and forms, but nothing in detail. I tried to control my gasping breath, knowing that the slightest sound could give me away and lead to my death.

Someone was hunting me.

I heard something approaching, thrashing noisily through the dry leaves behind me. Only my hunter would be careless enough to make so much noise. Stealth was no longer to his advantage. He was coming for me, and we both knew he wouldn't stop until I was dead.

I could stay still and hope he passed me by, or I could make a run for it and hope to escape. Fear won out over reason, and I launched myself away from the dubious security of the tree. Maybe the noise the hunter was making would drown out the sounds of my own flight.

The very forest conspired against me as I blundered blindly through the darkness. Branches clawed at my face. Brambles grabbed greedily at my clothes. I tripped and stumbled over roots seemingly thrust between my feet. Each time I fell, I doggedly bounced back to my feet and continued running. I could feel the warmth of blood running down my face, mixing with the cold sweat of panic, yet I felt no pain. I had no room for anything but fear and the will to survive.

I burst into a clearing, barely having time to register the rectangular hole gaping obscenely in my path like a grave waiting eagerly for its grisly occupant. I veered to the left in an attempt to avoid it, but I was too close. My foot hit the very edge of the opening, causing the soft earth to crumble and send me crashing into the black void.

It wasn't as deep as I'd thought, only a couple of feet at the most. I struggled to get up again, only to feel agonizing pain shoot down my leg. I collapsed, rolling over just as a dark shadow fell on me. I looked up to find a figure looming above me, silhouetted against the sky, his features cloaked in darkness.

The hunter had caught his prey.

I woke drenched in sweat, the sheets wound tightly around my legs and torso. My chest heaved with my still-frightened gasps. Outside the windows, muted sunlight fought its way through an overcast sky to softly light the room. It was morning.

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, remembering the nightmare. Someone had been pursuing me through a forest, someone who meant me harm.

No, someone who wanted to kill me.

I shivered even though it was quite warm in the room. I'd had similar nightmares twice before, although they were a little different. After Seth had been killed—and I'd been stabbed in the process—I'd often dreamed that the killer was coming back to finish me off. Those dreams always had a certain fantasy-like quality to them, however, and the killer had never chased me that way.

The latest one felt so real.

Then, a few months before, I'd started having a recurring dream where *I* was the killer. They'd been terrifying, growing more and more vivid until the murder I'd committed in my sleep actually happened.

Fortunately, I hadn't actually committed the crime, only seeing it through the real killer's eyes.

But what did the new one mean? Or was it truly just a nightmare? Not every dream I had meant something, I reminded myself. Nevertheless, the images refused to fade.

I found my phone and checked the time. Regardless of how early it was, I knew I wouldn't be falling back asleep. I decided to shower and go to work, even though it was a Saturday. I needed the distraction.

I was ready before anyone else was awake, so I left a note for Adam on the table and took off. Once at the office, however, I found myself at loose ends. I'd caught up on the paperwork. I didn't have my new desk yet, so I couldn't start moving into my office. It was too early to start working on the case. Novak—being sane—was not in the office at the ass-crack of dawn on a weekend morning.

I sat at my desk trying to avoid the thoughts that had been lingering on the edge of my consciousness since I'd awakened. With nothing to do, though, they were inescapable.

Micah had dumped me, and as much as the truth hurt, I knew I deserved it. After he moved to New York, I might never see him again. In all honesty, that thought hurt more than the breakup. While I'd come to accept the fact that our relationship was essentially over, I still cared deeply about him and would miss having him in my life.

I laid my head down on my crossed arms. While I hadn't gotten the best night's sleep, I only intended to rest my eyes for a few minutes. The next thing I knew, it was midmorning and my cell phone was ringing. I groggily snatched it up and mumbled a sleep-garbled greeting.

"Killian?" It was Jacy.

"Um, yeah," I managed.

"Were you asleep?"

"No." I tried to wake myself up, but my brain refused.

"You were, weren't you. Must have been some party last night!"

"Jacy, did you need something?" My tone of voice made it clear that he had touched an unwelcome topic.

Thankfully, he picked up on that and got to the point of his call. "Yeah, I was wondering if you were going to be working on the case today. I'm off work, and I could tag along if you want."

I rubbed my eyes and tried to think. Jacy's company would be a welcome distraction. Maybe it

would keep my mind off the other men in my life, but what could we do that would be constructive? I had intended to interview the tribal council next, which didn't seem like the best idea with Jacy present.

"We could check out the other artifact collector, the one Mr. Thompson told me wasn't completely honest."

"Works for me. Shall I meet you at your office? I can be there in a few minutes."

"Yeah, I'm there already anyway."

"You were asleep at your office?"

"I wasn't asleep! Just resting my eyes. And please drop it, okay?"

"Yeah, sure. Consider it dropped. But...is everything alright?"

"It's fine."

He didn't sound convinced, but he let it go and said goodbye.

As soon as we hung up, I knew I'd better get some caffeine in my system quickly. I ran to a nearby coffee shop, where I purchased the largest cup of coffee they sold.

While waiting for Jacy, I flipped through my notebook and reread my notes from my conversation with Mr. Thompson about the other collector. His name was Virgil McClain. Mr. Thompson's directions were clear and concise, so I didn't think we'd have any trouble finding the address.

Jacy arrived, and we set out. The McClain residence was a small, tidy, two-story house with an attached garage. In response to our knock, a pleasant-looking woman in her early forties wearing a lime-green

sleeveless dress answered the door. She smiled politely at us and waited for the sales pitch.

"Hello, my name is Killian Kendall," I introduced myself. "And this is Jacy Elliott. We're looking for Mr. Virgil McClain."

"Virgil? He's in the garage tinkering with the lawnmower. If you just walk around the corner there, you'll find him."

I thanked her and followed her instructions. She watched us with open curiosity, then quickly ducked back into the house as we reached the corner. I suspected she was making a beeline to the garage door to eavesdrop.

Just as she'd said, we found Mr. McClain busy at work on the engine of a riding mower. He had pieces of machinery scattered around him in a semicircle and was staring with consternation into the motor's innards. I had a feeling we'd caught him at a bad time. He was a huge man, well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders, fading red hair, and a wide, florid face that was dripping sweat at the moment.

"Mr. McClain?" I ventured.

He looked up, obviously annoyed at the interruption. "Yeah?"

"My name is Killian Kendall, and this is—"

"Look, I don't believe in God, so if you're here to try and get me to go to church, you can just leave me alone."

"We're not from any church, sir. We were told that you collect Native American artifacts."

He scrunched up his face suspiciously and stared at me. "Maybe. What's that got to do with anything?"

"I'm an investigator, and my case deals with artifacts. Your name came up as someone with an impressive collection. I was wondering if you'd be willing to show it to us."

I could see his vanity warring with his caution. Although he wanted to show off his collection, he was also shrewd. I was rooting for pride, but caution won out.

"What exactly are you investigating?"

I suppressed a sigh. "I've been asked to look into a series of thefts from a local archaeological dig."

His face clouded over. "And you think I had something to do with it?"

"No, sir. I didn't mean to imply that. I'm talking to everyone in the area who knows anything about artifacts. I spoke to Mr. Donald Thompson a few days ago."

That was the wrong thing to say. If his face was cloudy before, it was positively stormy now.

"That bastard? He probably sent you to me, probably told you I was some sort of thief. What? Am I your chief suspect now?"

"Mr. McClain, we don't suspect anyone at this time. I was simply hoping you'd talk to us about your collection."

"Forget it. We're finished. Unless you know how to fix this damn thing, you can just go." He kicked the lawnmower's tire and glared at us.

"Well, thanks anyway. Sorry to have bothered you." I extracted a card and held it out to him. "If you change your mind and decide you can help us, here's my number."

He stared pointedly at the card without making a move to take it. After a few awkward moments, I slipped it back into my pocket and gave him a nod.

Before Jacy and I reached the car, the front door of the house opened again and Mrs. McClain beckoned to us. We approached cautiously, and she motioned us in. I hesitated for a second, unsure of what exactly was going on, then stepped inside.

Shutting the door, Mrs. McClain wheeled around with an excited expression. "Are you really a private investigator?" she asked, confirming my suspicion that she'd been listening at the garage door.

"Yes, I am," I told her.

Where was she going with this, and would it work to our advantage?

"Oh wow, just like on TV." Her eyes glazed over for a moment, during which I assumed she'd lost herself in visions of her favorite fictional PIs. Then she refocused on us. "I'm sorry about my husband. He gets a little testy when he's working on his toys. I should have warned you."

"It's okay."

"No, he was rude, but thank you for being polite. Do you carry a gun?"

I blinked at her sudden shift in topic. "Uh, not at the moment."

"Have you ever shot anyone?"

"Mrs. McClain, we really should be getting back to work."

"Oh." She looked terribly disappointed, then suddenly brightened. "Could I show you Virgil's collection?"

"Uh..." She'd caught me off guard. I was beginning to think she was either very lonely or a little unbalanced. Maybe both. "Are you sure that would be a good idea?"

Part of me wanted to see the collection, while the other part just wanted to get out of there.

"Oh, it's okay. Virgil will be busy in the garage for hours. Come on." With a wave, she started into the back of the house.

I looked at Jacy, who shrugged, a little smile tugging at the corners of his lips. I shrugged back, and we followed.

She led us into a small room that looked as if it had once been the spare bedroom, but which Virgil had obviously taken over to house his collection. Large stones were lined up in rows on top of the bedspread. Some of them were recognizable as axes or other tools, while some simply looked like rocks to me. Inexpensive black frames filled with arrowheads pressed into white cotton hung on the walls. It was an impressive collection, although I didn't see anything as spectacular as some of Mr. Thompson's finds.

Jacy's eyes widened as he took in the room. He bent over the bed and looked closely at the artifacts, being careful not to touch them.

I turned to Mrs. McClain. "Your husband has quite a collection here. Where did he get them all?"

"He finds most of them in the fields right around here. Just walks out there and picks them up."

"You said he finds most of them. What about the rest?"

"Well, I know he's bought a few here and there. He likes to go to antique shows and flea markets and stuff looking for them. He says it's not as much fun as finding them yourself, but he still enjoys it."

Jacy moved to the wall to examine the arrowheads, while I kept questioning Mrs. McClain. "Have you ever heard your husband mention the Pomocatan tribe?"

She shook her head no as a worried little frown creased her forehead. "Aren't they the ones on the news, the ones who own the land where that college professor was just killed?"

"Yes, although my investigation doesn't really have anything to do with Professor Healy's murder."

"Right," she said slowly. "You told Virgil somebody's been stealing stuff from them."

"Yes."

"But you don't think it was Virgil, right?"

"We don't have any suspects at the moment. We're just trying to get as much information as possible."

Her expression was growing increasingly concerned. "You know, perhaps I shouldn't have let you in here. Virgil would be really mad if he found out. Maybe you should go now."

I nodded as Jacy joined us once again. I didn't particularly want Virgil to catch us there either. I pulled out the card I'd tried to give her husband and handed it to her. "If you think of anything that might be helpful, please give me a call."

Her face lit up again as she looked at the card. "Oh, I will!"

The three of us started into the hall when we heard a door open somewhere in the house. Mrs. McClain stopped with a gasp, spinning around with a panicked expression. "He can't find you here!" she whispered frantically. "Hide!"

"Where?" I mouthed.

She yanked open a door and shoved us in hurriedly.

Jacy looked at me with huge eyes as if to ask, "*What now?*"

My heart racing, I glanced around.

We were in a bathroom whose only window was too small to squeeze through. We were trapped.



## Chapter 19

"What—" Jacy started to whisper.

Shushing him with a finger to my lips, I pressed my ear to the crack of the door, straining to hear what was going on in the house.

"Do you need anything, Virgil?" Mrs. McClain asked.

She sounded so scared I thought for sure her husband would notice and figure out something was wrong.

"Yeah, I need to shit," he said with a laugh.

"Don't think you can help me with that."

I pulled away from the door as if it had burned me. Did they have another bathroom? I couldn't take that chance. I pushed Jacy towards the shower and pressed my lips against his ear. "Get in!"

He stared at me in wide-eyed fear as he slipped behind the curtain with me at his heels. I could hear Virgil and his wife right outside the door.

"I was just going to clean the bathroom..." Mrs. McClain was speaking much too loudly. Surely Virgil had to know something was going on.

"For God's sake, Nancy, you can clean it later. I have to go now!"

"Wait! What did those boys want?"

"You know damn well what they wanted. I'm sure you were listening at the door like you always do."

"I do not!"

"Right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to take a goddamn shit in peace."

I heard the door swing open and Mrs. McClain gasp. Then the door closed firmly. Virgil was muttering under his breath, something about "crazy woman." There was a rustle of clothes, followed by a sigh as I assumed Virgil settled himself on his throne.

I looked over to Jacy and saw his eyes were still huge, but now two bright red circles had appeared on his cheeks. A bead of sweat trickled down his brow, drawing my attention to the rather stifling heat in the shower stall.

I took a deep breath and held it. I had a feeling I'd need it.

The next fifteen minutes seemed like an eternity. Even after Virgil washed his hands and left the bathroom, we had to wait, huddled in the shower, breathing shallowly through our shirts, until Mrs. McClain came to tell us it was safe to leave.

Once we received the all-clear, we wasted no time in beating a hasty retreat. As soon as we were safely in the car, Jacy burst out laughing.

"What?"

"Man, your job really stinks."

I snickered. "Yeah, it can be pretty shitty sometimes."

He laughed even harder, then gasped, "It really went down the toilet today."

At that we both roared with laughter, releasing all our nervous tension.

"Whew," he said a few minutes later, wiping the last of the tears from his eyes. "Seriously, though, I don't know if I'm cut out for detective work."

I chuckled again, wrapping my arms around my aching stomach. "I don't usually get trapped in bathrooms—especially while they're in use."

"Still, I'm sure other dangerous situations come up all the time, right?"

"I wouldn't say all the time, but I've had my share."

"You're more than welcome to my share too. I'm not exactly a thrill-seeker. I was scared to death back there."

"Hey, I was scared too."

"I wouldn't know what to ask people, either. You always seem to know the right questions."

I shrugged. "Novak taught me how to conduct an interview. That can be learned."

"Are you trying to recruit me as a PI?"

I laughed. "No, I'm only saying it's not always like it was today. Besides, you're the one who insisted on helping me in my investigation."

"You're right." He sighed. "I just seem to have gotten in over my head."

"Well, it actually wasn't such a bad idea."

"Really?"

"Yeah. While I may be able to figure out what kinds of questions to ask, there're a lot of things I don't know concerning this case. It's helpful to have you along."

He smiled. "I'll be more than happy to help you with anything you need, but maybe I'll just sit out the house calls from now on."

"It's a deal," I said with a grin. I thought Fletcher would be happy with that compromise. "Actually, you

can start helping right now. What did you think of Mr. McClain's collection?"

"It was impressive, but I'm not an expert on artifacts. My heritage was a complete mystery to me until a few years ago. If the goal was to see if any of the stolen pieces were in his collection, you should have taken one of the archaeologists."

"You may not be an expert, but you know more about this sort of thing than I do, even if it's just from seeing Fletcher's collection. As for the archaeologists, I don't trust any of them enough to bring them into the investigation."

"Not even Elyse?"

"I can't afford to trust anyone involved until I have a better idea of what's going on."

"Do you trust me?"

I glanced over to find him watching me carefully. "Yes, I do. Call it a gut instinct." He smiled. "Now, back to the collection: your impressions?"

He shrugged. "I have no way of even guessing whether any of his pieces came from the excavation on our property, but I'm pretty sure not all of the pieces were found locally."

"What do you mean?"

"When I first moved in with Fletcher, I was fascinated by anything Native. Fletcher has an extensive library, and I read everything I could get my hands on, especially about the Plains tribes. Some of the pieces in McClain's collection reminded me of pictures in the book. There may be something similar around here that I'm not aware of, but I suspect they were Plains artifacts. I don't know how he could have gotten them."

"Mrs. McClain mentioned that he sometimes buys artifacts, remember?"

"Right. That would explain it. He probably didn't even know they weren't local." He shook his head. "Finding them I can understand, but buying them? I wouldn't even know where to go."

An idea occurred to me. "Do you think there's a sort of artifact black market?"

"I have no idea."

"Elyse could probably tell us. We're not far from the college. Let's swing by and see if she's at her office."

"On a weekend?"

"Can't hurt to try."

Of course, Jacy was right, and she wasn't there. I called her cell, but she didn't answer. I left a message on her voicemail asking her to get back to me when she had the chance.

On the way back to the office, I started thinking about the long night ahead of me. I'd successfully distracted myself with work, but once I was alone, I was sure the fact that Micah and I had broken up would hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Hey, you okay?" Jacy asked, bringing me back from my thoughts.

"I'm fine," I replied quickly, if unconvincingly.

Jacy gave me a look that clearly said he didn't buy my assertion. "I can tell something's been bothering you all afternoon. You keep drifting off into your own little world. What's going on?"

I sighed. "My boyfriend and I broke up last night."

Jacy's eyes widened. "Oh! Wow. I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have cried."

I shrugged. "No, it's okay. The whole thing has just been very confusing."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I want to talk about it yet."

"That's cool," he said quickly. "I understand completely. If you change your mind, though, I'm here for you."

"Thanks."

The last few minutes of the drive were spent in silence. As I pulled into the small parking lot and stopped beside Jacy's bike, he turned to me. "So, uh, what's next on the agenda?"

"Well, it's a good thing you don't want to accompany me on any more interviews. I need to talk to the council members, and I think it would be better if I did it alone. Other than that, I'm pretty much at a standstill until I hear from either Elyse or Healy's friend Professor Howard."

"Um, I kind of meant what was next on your agenda for tonight."

"Oh. Right." I felt a blush creeping up my cheeks. "I don't really have any plans."

"You should come over to our house, have dinner with us. I know Fletcher would love to see you, and it would be a nice distraction for you."

"I couldn't just show up—"

"You're not just showing up. I'm inviting you. If it makes you feel any better, I can call Fletcher and check, but I'm sure it will be fine."

Before I could protest, he pulled out his cell phone. After a brief conversation with Fletcher, he grinned at me. "He said 'absolutely.' He's making plenty of food because Lily and Nikki are coming over for dinner as well."

"I don't want to intrude on your family get-together."

He laughed. "Fletcher predicted you'd say that. I'm to tell you you're not intruding, and he insists you join us."

I laughed. "Well, if he insists..."

"Great!" Jacy grinned as he jumped out of the car and onto his motorcycle. Checking over his shoulder to make sure I was behind him, he revved the bike to life, and it leaped into motion.

When we reached Fletcher's house, Lily's car was already in the driveway. We found Fletcher in the kitchen chopping something on the counter—I couldn't see what, since his body blocked my view—while Lily was stirring a pot on the stove.

Nikki sat at the table, chin propped in her hand as she watched the other two. Her face lit up when she saw us. "Hey, boys!"

Fletcher and Lily turned to greet us, Fletcher holding a large knife in his hand.

"What's for dinner," Jacy asked as he sniffed the air.

"Baked rockfish," Fletcher told him.

"With brandied rice and a wild-greens salad,"

Lily added.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jacy asked.

"You can join Nikki at the table and stay out of the way." Fletcher winked before turning back to the counter.

I could finally see that he was preparing a large, whole, silver fish. He had it sliced open and was performing some sort of surgery on it.

"There's no point arguing." Nikki grinned and kicked a chair out from the table. "They won't let me help either, so you might as well take a seat."

"Thank you so much for having me over for dinner," I said. "Are you sure there's enough? I hate to intrude."

Fletcher turned and glared at his grandson.

"Hey, don't look at me," Jacy protested. "I told him he wasn't intruding."

Fletcher rolled his eyes. "You're welcome in our home, Killian. We're happy to have you. Don't worry. This fish is plenty big enough to feed all of us."

"I don't think I've ever had rockfish."

He smiled. "Not like this, anyway. I'm going to cook it outside on a fire, much the same way our ancestors probably did."

"Shouldn't you be cutting it up with a flint knife then?" I asked with a grin.

He laughed. "I'm not so foolish as to give up all my modern conveniences. Why don't you and Jacy fill me in on your investigation?"

Jacy caught my eye and shook his head slightly. He didn't want Fletcher to know about our close call. I nodded and launched into a brief summary of the case so far, leaving out the part where Mr. McClain almost

caught us in his shower, and concluding with my thoughts about a black market for artifacts.

When I finished, Fletcher paused in his preparations and turned to face me with a thoughtful expression. "I haven't heard of any artifact black market, but then, I wouldn't. Are you aware of anything like that, Lily?"

She looked up. "Not really. The closest thing I know of would be that antique store out on Route 50. I went in there once and was appalled to see all the artifacts they were selling."

"Were any of them local?" I asked.

"I couldn't say, but I wouldn't be surprised. The place struck me as kind of shady. They're probably still open if you want to run by there now and check it out for yourself. Dinner will still be a while yet."

I looked at Jacy, who shook his head. "Help yourself, but like I said, I'm strictly a reference source from now on."

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. "This isn't an interview. I just want to check out the store."

Fletcher glanced over his shoulder at me. "What's this about?"

"Jacy decided he'd rather take a more passive role in my investigation." Fletcher nodded with satisfaction. "Which is fine, but I could use his help in checking out the antique store. He'll know a little better what we're looking at."

"Okay, I'll go," Jacy said quickly.

I got the impression he was more eager to end the conversation than to actually join me. Our experience at

the McClain's had soured him quite thoroughly on playing detective.

Fletcher consulted the clock. "Just be back in about an hour."

After we got directions from Lily, Jacy suggested we take his bike. While I'd had to turn him down when he offered before, I eagerly agreed this time.

He retrieved his extra helmet and helped me fasten it on. "Have you ever ridden a motorcycle before?"

"Nope. Is there anything I should know?"

He grinned. "Yeah. Hold on tight."

He swung his leg over the bike and stood straddling it, then patted the seat behind him. "Hop on."

Now that the moment of truth had arrived, I was a little more nervous than I had expected. I climbed clumsily onto the bike and settled behind Jacy, placing my hands on his hips.

"Uh-uh. That's not gonna do it. Hold on *really* tight."

I gripped the fabric of his shirt, but he just laughed. "Like this." He took my wrists and pulled my arms around his waist, bringing my chest up against his back.

A confusing wave of emotion washed over me: pleasure at the closeness of his body, guilt over Micah, and uncertainty about Asher.

"Now hang on," Jacy said. "And when I lean into turns, lean with me, but not too far. Just move with my body."

I was very glad he couldn't see my face, since judging by how hot it felt at that moment, I was sure it was a brilliant scarlet.

The bike came snarling to life, causing me to reflexively tighten my grip.

"Not too tight. I still have to breathe," he yelled over the roar of the motor.

I loosened my hold, and suddenly we were moving.

For the first few minutes, I was too busy fearing for my life to enjoy the ride. Once I began to relax a little, however, I started to notice that it actually wasn't so bad. In fact, the sensation of flying through the wind was exhilarating. Before long, I'd completely given in to the experience and loved every minute of it.

We passed our destination before we realized it and had to turn around. The store was a plain cinderblock cube set back a bit from the highway. It looked as if it had once been a gas station or garage whose bay doors had been bricked over to convert the building into a rather dreary retail space. A small sign sitting out by the road read, "Antiques ~ Books ~ Indian Artifacts."

When Jacy turned off the bike, the sudden silence seemed to ring in my ears. As he helped me off the bike, he asked, "So what did you think?"

"It was incredible!" I gushed. "I was sorry it had to end."

He grinned. "There's still the ride back, and I'll take you out any time you want." He looked around the deserted parking lot. "Do you think they're open?"

"The neon sign in the window says they are. Let's go check it out."

Inside, the first thing I noticed was the musty smell of old books. As my eyes adjusted to the dim interior lighting, I saw row after row of closely set shelves running the entire length of the building. A narrow aisle down the center led to an open doorway in the rear, above which a hand-lettered sign proclaimed that there were "More antiques in the back." A dusty, cluttered counter was to our immediate right, but there was no one in attendance.

"It looks abandoned," Jacy whispered.

I was about to holler out a "hello" when a man stepped out of the back room. He was tall and broad, his skin the color of dark, polished mahogany, his close-cropped hair starting to go salt-and-pepper on the sides. He looked us over suspiciously, leading me to suppose we weren't his usual clientele.

"What can I do for you boys?" he asked.

"We'd just like to look around, if that's okay," I said.

He nodded. "Let me know if you need help with anything."

We started making our way up and down the aisles, moving fairly quickly since what we were searching for clearly wasn't to be found there. Although the shelves mostly held books, scattered about here and there were a few small antiques and collectibles. A fine layer of dust coated everything. Obviously, cleanliness was not next to godliness in that establishment.

We finally worked our way to the back room. The guy I assumed to be the shop owner was repairing an old

chest of drawers and didn't even look up from his work when we entered. The room held a motley assortment of furniture and larger items, most of which had seen better days, but no artifacts.

Another hand-lettered sign pointed us toward a door leading into yet another room, where we finally found what we were looking for. A glass jewelry counter ran down the left side of the room, a tall display case stood against one wall, and several smaller cases hung on the other. All held Native American artifacts—probably more than Mr. Thompson's and Mr. McClain's collections combined. It looked like a museum, except everything had a price.

"You boys interested in Indian stuff?" the owner asked suddenly. I hadn't even realized he'd followed us into the room.

"You might say that," Jacy replied in a soft voice.

"You have a lot of artifacts," I commented casually.

The man smiled proudly. "I'm the biggest dealer in this area."

"Where do you get all these artifacts?"

His smile tightened slightly. "Here and there."

"I mean, I've never seen so many, and I've seen some nice collections. Do collectors sometimes sell their artifacts?"

The last of his smile faded away, and he just looked at me.

"My mom told me I'm part Native American," Jacy announced suddenly, drawing the man's attention away from me.

"Really?" he asked without interest.

"Yeah, so that's why I'm here. Someone told us you sold stuff like this."

"You'd like to start a collection?"

"Yeah, as long as they're local."

"I have artifacts from all over the country, but most of my pieces are from around here. How much are you looking to spend?"

Jacy shrugged. "That's not really an issue."

I was impressed. For someone who not so long ago was saying he could never be an investigator, Jacy sure was doing a great job of thinking on his feet. He was making a lot more progress than I'd managed with my more direct approach. I knew when to shut up and fade into the background.

"In that case, let me show you some things. We'll start with the more inexpensive items and work our way up."

"That sounds good."

The dealer unlocked the jewelry case and pulled out a tray of loose arrowheads that he laid on the counter. "These are just some miscellaneous points. All are authentic and local. They're two bucks apiece."

Jacy shook his head. "I'm looking for something more...special."

The man nodded and put the tray away. He pulled out another tray of arrowheads, these lined up neatly on foam rubber. They were of noticeably better quality than the first batch, even to my untrained eye.

"These are individually priced, ranging from five dollars up to around twenty-five."

Jacy took his time examining the selection, then finally shook his head. "Do you have anything cooler?"

I've seen stuff like this before. I'd like something rare, something really unusual."

The owner put away the tray and carefully locked the counter, then opened the large case against the wall. "I have some stone tools and other artifacts in here." He began pointing them out. "This is an archaic axe. Notice the full groove. It's a nice piece. This is a celt, which is essentially an axe without a groove. These are a mortar and pestle, used to grind up corn and grain."

"Is this all you have?" Jacy interrupted.

The man stopped and frowned at him. "Are you looking for something in particular?"

"Not really. I'll know it when I see it, but I haven't seen it yet. Like I said, the rarer the better."

"I don't keep my rare pieces just lying around."

"Can I see them?"

The man shook his head. "Not right now. I'm about to close up for the night, and I have an appointment I can't miss. If you're really interested, come back one day next week and I'll show you some things you might be interested in."

"I can come any day. When would be best for you?"

The man looked at him thoughtfully and rubbed his chin. "Let's say Tuesday afternoon."

"Great," Jacy assured him with a dazzling smile. "I'll see you Tuesday afternoon. Thanks for your help."

"My pleasure," he said, although no signs of pleasure were evident in his expression as he watched us go.

"What do you think?" Jacy asked when we were outside.

"I think you'd make a damn good PI."

He rolled his eyes with a snort. "Yeah, right."

"I'm serious. That was an impressive bit of detective work there."

"I just saw you weren't getting very far with your questions, so I thought I'd better come up with something fast."

"And you did. Seriously, Jacy, it was incredible how you handled that."

He flushed with pride. "Well, thanks." He handed me my helmet and started strapping his on. "Do you think he'll have anything from the excavation?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if we'd recognize it if he did. I need to try to get in touch with Elyse again. Maybe she can tell us what to look for."

I scrambled onto the bike after Jacy, wondering how many times I'd have to do it before I acquired his grace. I suspected I never would. You had to be born with it.

This time, he didn't have to instruct me on how to ride. I slid my arms around his waist and held on for the ride.

*I could get used to this*, I thought idly as we rode towards Fletcher's.

## Chapter 20

When we got back to the house, dinner was almost ready. After filling in Lily, Nikki, and Fletcher about the antique store, Jacy and I set the table while Lily and Fletcher finished the last-minute preparations.

The meal was delicious, the fish surprisingly tasty with the delicate flavors of herbs and smoke. The conversation was even better. I allowed the topics of discussion to flow around me, just listening to the easy banter between family members.

I suddenly realized the room had gone quiet, and I looked up to find everyone watching me expectantly. Someone had obviously said something to me. I grinned sheepishly. "Sorry. I must have zoned out for a second there. What did you say?"

"I asked if you had plans for this evening," Fletcher explained with a patient smile.

"No, not really."

"Then maybe you'd like to accompany me on my after-dinner walk. As much as I enjoy my solitary strolls, I'd enjoy your company even more."

I grinned. "That would be wonderful. I could really use some more relaxation time. Things have been pretty hectic lately. But should you be out walking?"

Fletcher chuckled. "Do you think this bunch would let me out of their sight if I wasn't? My cardiologist has granted his permission for me to start my evening walks once again." He turned to Jacy. "And what about you? Would you care to join us?"

Jacy had been watching us blankly, but at his grandfather's invitation, his expression turned to relief. "Sure." His tone was carefully casual, but I could tell he'd felt left out for a few seconds.

Lily and Nikki volunteered to do the dishes. Fletcher tried to argue, but Nikki overrode his objections. "I insist. You wouldn't let me help with dinner, so the least I can do is contribute to the cleanup."

After a bit more convincing, Fletcher agreed, and the three of us set out. I'd expected him to lead us to the road, where walking would be easier, but he headed across the backyard and into the trees. A mist was rising, giving a surreal, almost otherworldly effect to the scene.

We strode along in companionable silence for a few minutes, each of us simply enjoying the ethereal beauty of the forest.

When we were well away from the house, Fletcher cleared his throat. "Have you thought more about training your gifts?"

I threw Jacy a suspicious look. Had they been discussing my gifts and Jacy's offer to help me learn more about them?

Jacy shrugged, clearly indicating he wasn't in on it.

"Jacy offered to help me learn about them, but to be honest, I just haven't had time. I've had a lot of other things going on."

"It's kind and just like my grandson to offer to help you when he is still learning himself." Jacy blushed slightly and looked down at the ground. "I'm sure he has much he could teach you, but your gifts are different, so I'll also make myself available to you."

"You're both very generous, and I'll definitely take you up on that as soon as I have more time."

"You should make time."

"I don't know. I've got a lot on my mind these days."

"Then maybe right now is the best time."

I glanced over at him. "Why?"

He was staring straight ahead as we walked, not even watching where he placed his feet. "Part of learning how to control your gifts is learning how to control your thoughts. If you can do that, then perhaps it will help you with the other things on your mind."

I shook my head doubtfully, but accepted that Fletcher knew best and, besides, he obviously was not going to be deterred. To be fair, he had a vested interest in seeing me at my best. His grandson's whole life pretty much depended on my proving his innocence.

"How do we start?"

Fletcher's lined face broke into a pleased smile.

"With something easy. What do you feel right now?"

I frowned, unsure what he meant. "I don't understand."

"Tell me what you feel physically. I want you to be very aware of your body and what it is experiencing."

I thought for a few seconds before answering. "I can feel the mist on my face. It's cool and kind of moist. I feel the ground beneath my feet, the slight crunch of the leaves, the springiness of the loam underneath."

Fletcher nodded encouragingly. "Go on."

He wanted more? I struggled to come up with an answer.

"Maybe if you close your eyes," he suggested gently.

I stopped walking and closed my eyes. "It's...as if I'm being watched. There's a slight tingling at the back of my neck. I always feel that when I'm in these woods."

"Good! What do you sense from these watchers?"

I opened my eyes and gave Fletcher a questioning look. "Nothing right now. Should there be something?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. You said 'right now.' Does that mean it's been different in the past?"

I nodded. "I told you how angry they were the day we went to confront Healy."

"You know you can feel them when *they* want you to, but I expect you could feel them all the time if *you* wanted to. Close your eyes again and reach out to them. Don't try to focus on any one in particular, just get a general impression."

"I don't know how to do that."

"It's easier than you think. Relax, open yourself up, and reach out with your mind. You probably do it all the time without even realizing it. That's what makes you such an empathetic person. You're constantly opening yourself up to other people's emotions. This is the same thing, except the ones you wish to connect with are no longer alive."

A slight shudder went through my body at that thought. Apart from Seth, I'd been doing my best to avoid the dead for quite a while now. Reaching out to them on purpose went against everything I'd been trying to do for the last couple of years.

Perhaps, though, the time had come to start.

Stifling a sigh, I closed my eyes and tried to do as Fletcher said. I relaxed and extended my mind, following as if by instinct the faint mental trail left by the watchful feeling. Emotions began to trickle into my consciousness, emotions that I didn't recognize as my own—faint at first but growing steadily stronger. I named them aloud as they came to me.

"Confusion... Sadness... Anger..."

"Can you connect these emotions to anything? Do you know why they are confused?"

I tried to answer his question, but the emotions were all I could feel, with no explanation attached. I opened my eyes and shook my head, frustrated by my failure.

"You did well. Don't be upset." Fletcher's voice and expression were filled with encouragement. "Let's sit down. This next part works better that way."

We settled to the ground, cross-legged, in a rough circle about six feet across. Fletcher untied a small leather pouch from his belt. "First, we must give back to the ancestors—those who came before—but also those who are with us now, and those who will come after."

From the pouch he extracted a pinch of something dark brown, which he sprinkled solemnly on the ground in front of him. He handed the pouch to Jacy, who did the same before passing it on to me.

"This is dried tobacco," Fletcher explained. "As I'm sure you know, tobacco has always been sacred to our people. I grew and dried this leaf myself."

A fragrant scent wafted to me from my offering as I sprinkled it on the ground.

After I returned the bag to Fletcher, he tied it on his belt again. Then he faced Jacy, who'd been very quiet up to that point. "It's been a while since you were in Killian's place."

Jacy smiled. "Except I have no gifts when it comes to the spirits."

"No, but the first step of training is the same. Do you remember what it is?"

"Meditation," Jacy responded without hesitation.

Fletcher nodded approvingly, every inch a teacher pleased with his student. He turned back to me.

"What do you know about meditation?"

"Not much."

"Tell me whatever you do know or how you feel about meditation."

I shrugged, feeling woefully unprepared for my first lesson. "I guess it's some sort of spiritual act, as if you're looking inward. A lot of religions practice it."

"Meditating can be a spiritual act, but there is nothing intrinsically holy or special about it. It's simply a mindful quality, a focusing, both mental and physical. Its whole purpose is to tame your mind, to control your thoughts."

I nodded to show I was following him so far.

"The reason I started off asking you what you felt physically is because it is important to first be aware of your body in relation to the world around you. Once you achieve that, you can begin. Are you ready?"

I nodded again.

"You can meditate anywhere, but I've found it easiest to do it in a place that's peaceful. You just sit as we are now and relax your body completely. Rest your

arms on your legs and tuck your chin in slightly. Shift to a more comfortable position if you need to. Be conscious of what is above you, and also what is below. We believe that everything in nature has its own unique spirit: the sky over you, the ground beneath you, even the tree at your back. Reach out and find the spirit of the Earth, that energy of life, and tap into it. Use it to center yourself, as an anchor."

When he paused, I assumed I was supposed to do what he'd said. I wasn't sure how much I bought into the whole idea of nature spirits, but I tried to follow his instructions. I shifted around until I found a comfortable position, then relaxed my body as much as possible.

"Do I close my eyes?"

"If you want. It's not necessary."

I decided to leave them open. I tried to reach out as Fletcher had said, searching for the Earth energy. After a few seconds of nothing, I thought I felt a slight pulling from below. I tentatively extended my awareness toward it and was instantly rewarded with a sense of security and stability. A pleased smile spread across my face.

"Excellent!" Fletcher said proudly. "We have related to the body; now we relate to the mind. Although there are many techniques for relaxing, one of the easiest is to simply concentrate on your breathing. Focus on it. Feel it go in and out. Watch it with your inner vision. Don't accentuate or alter your breath at all, just notice it. Focus on how you exhale. After your breath goes out, there is a momentary gap, a space, before you breathe in. You're learning how to focus on your breathing, while at

the same time giving some kind of space to the technique.

"As you do this, you'll probably have many thoughts flooding into your mind. That's fine. Just acknowledge them, label them as thoughts, then return to your breathing. No matter how extreme or how random the thought, just let it go."

I began to focus on my breathing. Immediately, thoughts began to interrupt my concentration, just as he'd said they would. I tried to push them aside as they floated to the surface of my mind, but they kept on coming: a steady barrage of images, emotions, and ideas—most of them centering on Micah and our breakup.

"You're tensing up. Relax. Don't feel bad if your mind wanders," Fletcher corrected. "Just re-center on your breathing and continue. At first, you will be bombarded with thoughts, but as you relax, they will eventually subside. During a storm, the river is disturbed, sediment is churned up, and the water becomes murky. When the wind dies down, the mud gradually settles and the water becomes clear. Your mind works the same way. When the otherwise incessant flow of your distracting thoughts is calmed through concentration on the breath, your mind becomes unusually lucid. This is your goal."

"What do I do if I reach my goal?"

"What do you do?" He chuckled. "You enjoy it. This is a wonderful way to become aware of your thoughts and take control of them instead of allowing them to control you. At the very least, meditation will calm and center you. Sometimes, when you reach that

place of peace and stillness, you will see something the universe has been trying to show you but you've been too busy to notice. If that should happen, go with it. Don't be afraid or try to fight it."

"Heh. I don't think my brain will ever shut off long enough to let that happen."

"Not if you keep chattering," Fletcher chided gently. "Let's all just relax and meditate for a while."

Properly chastised, I went back to focusing on my breathing. Once again, thoughts of Micah intruded. I did as Fletcher had said and refocused on my breathing. More thoughts bubbled up: the case, Kane and his mom, Asher, even Jacy. Each time I realized my mind was drifting, I let the thought go and refocused on my breathing.

I don't know how long we sat there, but eventually everything extraneous faded away. Then it was just me and my breath. A sense of tranquility and harmony filled me.

Suddenly, the sound of a large body crashing through the leaves shattered my calm. My head snapped up just in time to see an enormous white buck explode from the fog, looking almost as if the mist had coalesced into solid form.

Jacy and Fletcher were both so deep in their meditation that they didn't even look up. Couldn't they hear the deer charging right at us?

I scrambled back as the deer leaped over Jacy's head and landed squarely in the center of our circle, throwing leaves and dirt across my body. I let out a whimper, but shockingly, neither Jacy nor Fletcher so much as flinched.

The buck took a step towards me, then slowly lowered his head until he was staring directly into my eyes, his sprawling antlers only inches from my face. His eyes were huge, dark orbs that almost seemed to hold stars within their depths. I knew without any uncertainty that he wanted me to follow him.

Was I dreaming? Had I fallen asleep while I was meditating, or was this some sort of vision?

Then I remembered Fletcher telling me that whatever happened, just go with it. So I went with it.

I rose shakily to my feet, using a nearby tree for support. As soon as I was standing, the buck was off, leaping gracefully through the trees. Even though I ran as hard as I could, he still easily outpaced me. Once I thought I'd lost him, until I caught a flash of white in the mist ahead. I kept running.

The white deer led me directly to the excavation site, which I realized a part of me had expected would be our destination all along. The buck stopped just inside the clearing, seemingly waiting for me to catch up. He stared at me for a moment before turning and walking majestically to the pit where the skeleton had been found. He stepped gingerly onto the tarp, then turned to face me. His gaze met mine, and once again I was struck by the impression that a universe existed in his eyes. I found myself falling into them, feeling as if I were floating in space.

I blinked and jumped. Where the deer had been only a moment before, there now stood a man. The buck was nowhere in sight. I started to back away until I noticed his eyes were exactly the same as the white deer's. A chill ran down my spine.

The man's black hair was shaved on the right side of his head, but short on top. On the left, it was long and tied in a knot into which he'd thrust several feathers. He was a little taller than I, broader across the chest and shoulders, his body tapering to a narrow waist. He was naked except for an apron of dark hide.

He began to speak, his language harsh and guttural to my ears—and completely unintelligible. As he continued, however, the meaning somehow began to sink in, almost as if he was somehow communicating directly with my mind and not just with words. "You want to know why we are confused. It is because our graves are being dug up. We understand and respect our descendants' thirst for knowledge but do not comprehend why our bones are being disturbed and our grave goods stolen by one who neither respects us nor seeks to understand us.

"You want to know why we are sad. It is because we grieve the disruption of our rest, but even more, we grieve how these people who dig up our bones have no care for the earth in which they dig.

"You want to know why we are angry. It is because we are robbed and disrespected in our death. Our bones have been disturbed; our belongings stolen for material gain."

While he spoke, I stood frozen in his gaze. Once he fell silent, it was as if he had released me from some sort of spell. Finding my voice, I asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you have the ability to hear us...and because you have sought answers. Few are those who can hear. Fewer still are those who listen."

My hands were shaking slightly. I balled them into fists and held them tight against my sides.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stop the desecration of our graves. Return our grave goods to us. Allow us to rest once more before it is too late."

"Too late?"

"The dead are not powerless. We have chosen so far only to watch, but we will not be silent indefinitely." He stopped and sniffed. "One man has died already, and death is still in the air."

My breath caught in my throat. "Are you saying you will kill the thief?"

His eyes narrowed. "I did not say that. We do not wish to do harm. We wish only to be left alone to our rest. If this is not done, however, then we will be forced to act." As he spoke, he reached up and pulled a striped feather from the knot in his hair and held it out to me. I took a few shaky steps toward him and accepted it. "After I am gone, this will be a sign to you that we have spoken. Remember my words and heed them. The killing is not over—and if you are not careful, you may join us as one of the dead."

A strange smile curled his lips as he began to fade before my eyes.

"Wait!" I called frantically. "Do you know who the killer is?"

He didn't answer, just continued to fade.

"Who is stealing from you? Who is disturbing your graves?"

My questions were futile. He was gone, leaving me alone in the clearing, his words still echoing through

my head. The killing wasn't over. And I might be one of the victims unless I stopped the murderer first.

I needed to talk to Fletcher, but I didn't even know how to find my way back to him. I'd blindly followed the deer through the woods and had no idea where I'd started or even what direction I'd come from.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to mentally retrace my steps, but it was no use. I'd focused all my attention on the deer. I had no idea how to get back.

I opened my eyes and gasped. I was staring across at Fletcher and Jacy, both of whom still appeared to be deep in meditation. Our circle remained unchanged. Had everything been just a bizarre dream after all?

At the sound of my gasp, Fletcher blinked and looked up at me with an inquisitive expression. "Did you manage to shut out your thoughts and find your peace?"

"I think I fell asleep," I told him ruefully.

Fletcher chuckled. "It happens to the best of us." He tipped his head toward Jacy, who I realized wasn't actually meditating. He snored lightly, his chin resting on his chest.

I grinned, feeling less like a failure now that I knew Jacy had dozed off as well.

"I had a strange dream, though."

"Oh, really?" Fletcher's eyebrows rose with interest. "Tell me about it, please. Dreams can sometimes be just as informative as the world around us." He paused. "And while you're at it, maybe you can tell me about that feather in your lap."

Startled, I looked down to find that, sure enough, a barred feather lay across my legs.

"Maybe it wasn't a dream after all," I whispered. An intensity came into Fletcher's eyes as he leaned towards me. "What happened? What did you see?"

"I'd reached the place you were talking about, that place of peace, when I heard something running through the forest coming toward us. As I looked up, a huge white deer jumped into the center of our circle." Fletcher's eyes widened. "I knew he wanted me to follow him, and remembered what you told me about going with whatever happens while you're meditating, so I did. He led me to the excavation site where he turned into a man."

"What did the man look like?" His voice was tight with excitement.

At that point the full import of my experience began to hit me. My heart raced and I was breathing as rapidly as if I'd just completed a sprint. I described the man who'd spoken to me.

When I finished, Fletcher nodded as if I had confirmed something he already knew, then he gestured for me to continue.

"He told me they understand your desire for knowledge, but they're angry about their graves being disturbed and their grave goods stolen."

"We knew that already. There must have been some other reason he spoke to you. Did he say anything else?"

"He said..." I took a deep breath. "...that the dead are not powerless, and if I don't stop the thief soon, they will be forced to act. And that the killing isn't over."

I left out the part where he said I might be one of the victims. I didn't want to worry Fletcher needlessly.

He sat silently for several minutes, watching me with troubled eyes while he thought about what I had told him. Finally, nodding as if he'd come to some sort of decision, he tried to get up. I quickly jumped to my feet to help him.

"Thank you," he said. "The damp has crept into my joints. I tend to forget I'm not as young as I used to be. I can't sit on the ground in the fog for hours anymore."

Had it really been hours? I checked my phone and was shocked to see that, sure enough, several hours had passed since dinner. I'd lost all track of time while we meditated.

"Would you wake Jacy for me?" He leaned against a tree for support. He seemed weary, as if a heavy weight had been dropped onto his shoulders.

"Why do you think he appeared to me?"

Fletcher studied me for a few moments. "Your gifts are strong, Killian, especially those dealing with the spirits. In fact, they're even stronger than I suspected. You caught on to deep meditation much quicker than most people, you had no trouble grounding yourself on your first try, and my most honored ancestor not only appeared to you as his totem, but also in his true form."

My mouth dropped open. "Your...most honored ancestor? You mean you know him?"

"His name is White Deer. He was a powerful shaman for our tribe in the time before the Europeans arrived. I have seen him and even spoke to him once many years ago when I was on my first vision quest in

this very forest. That was when he told me I would be a shaman as well."

"But why me? Why not Jacy? I'm not even Native American."

"Jacy has no talent for hearing or seeing the spirits. White Deer has chosen you, most likely because of your gifts. He can communicate with you."

"You've talked with him too."

"Yes, but that was many years ago. Now, I'm an old, sick man. You are young, and your gifts are powerful, and you're here with us. I suspect he senses that you are trying to help."

"I told them that once," I said slowly. "When the spirits seemed to be testing me. I told them that I was here to help."

Fletcher nodded. "And he heard you. You are caught up in what is happening now—for good or ill." He rubbed his face. "Could you please wake Jacy now? I'm feeling quite tired. I need to get back to the house."

"Of course. I'm sorry." I turned and gently shook Jacy's shoulder.

He blinked awake and looked around in drowsy confusion. "Did I fall asleep?" His voice was heavy with disappointment.

"Yes," I replied with a smile. "And you missed quite a bit too."

Jacy rubbed his eyes as he tried to wake himself up. "What did I miss?"

"Only the appearance of one of your—"

A scream ripped through the mist, cutting me off in midsentence. We all snapped around towards the sound.

"Where did that come from?" Jacy demanded.

"It sounded like it came from the excavation," Fletcher said. "Something is wrong. Go. I'll call for help." He was already pulling his cell phone from his pocket.

Jacy was off without another word, but I hesitated. Fletcher was weak. I wasn't sure I should leave him alone in the forest.

*"Go!"* Fletcher urged me.

The fear in his voice goaded me into action. I ran after Jacy, following the sound of his crashing steps through the fog.

What would we find when we reached the clearing? My chest constricted as I remembered White Deer's warning: Death was in the air.



## Chapter 21

A scene from a horror movie greeted me as I burst into the clearing right behind Jacy. Wisps of fog swirled around the still figure of Elyse, who was bent over something lying in front of her. She was weeping, the only sound to be heard in the eerily still forest.

Our sudden arrival caused the mist to shift, revealing a body sprawled on the ground. I recognized Bridget Foxwell, her brightly colored, striped tank top marred by a dark stain. The sight seemed so surreal that, for a moment, I wondered if this was all actually happening or if I was still caught in the dream world.

Something moved in my peripheral vision, snapping me back to reality. I spun around to find Susan Urban standing off to one side, arms crossed tightly across her chest, watching Elyse with a concerned expression.

"What happened?" I asked her, professionalism taking over.

"I don't know. We just got here and found Bridget like that."

"We need to move away. We may have already destroyed important evidence."

I carefully walked over to Elyse's side and knelt next to her to study the body.

Bridget looked even worse up close. Judging by her color alone, I suspected she was already dead.

"Elyse, can you go over and stand with Susan?" I asked softly.

She kept crying as if she hadn't heard me.

"Jacy, will you give me a hand? Maybe help her up?"

Jacy pulled gently on Elyse's arm, but she yanked away.

"It's all my fault," she wailed, her hands hovering over Bridget as if unsure what to do.

I looked sharply at Susan, who just shrugged helplessly.

"Elyse, don't touch her," I said. "This wasn't your fault. Please go with Jacy and stand over there by Susan."

She shook her head no. "It *is* my fault. I need...I need to do something."

"There's nothing you can do. Go with Jacy. Please? I need to check on Bridget."

Jacy once again tried to pull Elyse away. This time she allowed him to help her to her feet. He led her over to Susan, where she collapsed against the other woman and continued to sob.

I looked back down at Bridget. Although I didn't want to touch her, I needed to feel for a pulse just in case she was still alive. I pressed my fingers against her neck. Her skin was cold and damp to the touch. She was dead, and most likely had been for some time. I pulled my hand away and wiped it on my jeans, desperately wishing I could wash it. I studied the dark stain on her chest. A small hole in the center of the stain looked like a gunshot wound to me. Unfortunately, I'd had some experience with those.

"Shouldn't we report this?" Jacy asked nervously.

I nodded and pulled out my phone. The police dispatcher asked me to keep everyone at the scene until the first officers arrived to take over.

I decided to take a quick look around before the police cordoned off the area. Bridget was lying a few feet away from the pit where the skeleton had been found. Unlike in the vision I'd had earlier, the tarp was pulled back. It was obvious the grave had been looted again, for the bones were disarranged, scattered around the pit. Dirt had been mounded in one corner of the neat rectangular hole.

"Killian?" Jacy called.

I quickly rejoined him and the two women. Elyse had calmed down and was now merely sniffing. Her face was flushed and tracked with tears, her eyes puffy and red-rimmed.

"The police are on their way," I said. "What happened, Elyse? Why were you saying this is your fault?"

"Because it is." Her voice was devoid of any emotion, as if she had gone numb. I suspected shock was setting in. "Bridget stopped by my office yesterday to ask what was happening with the project. I told her nothing had been decided yet and then asked if she'd mind stopping by the site to see if the equipment was okay. Since I hadn't been out in a few days, I was a little worried about everything. She said she'd give me a call after she'd checked. When I never heard from her, I just assumed she was being her typical scatterbrained self, always forgetting to do things she was asked to do."

Elyse stopped and drew a shaky breath before continuing. "When I still hadn't heard from her by this

afternoon, I tried calling her to make sure she hadn't gone last night and failed to let me know. She didn't answer her cell phone, so I called her home number. I spoke to her mother, who hadn't seen her since yesterday. Mrs. Foxwell said it wasn't all that unusual for Bridget to stay out with friends overnight, so she wasn't too concerned.

"At that point I started to get a bad feeling. I decided to come down to check on things myself, but I didn't want to do it alone, so I called Susan." She wrapped her arms tightly around her sides and started to shiver. "Susan couldn't leave right away, and when we finally got here—" She nodded jerkily towards Bridget's body. Tears began to fill her eyes once more. "We found her."

She stopped and gulped a few times, then lost her tenuous control. "This is my fault," she choked out. "If I hadn't asked her to come down here, she'd still be alive!"

She burst into tears again as Susan shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Did you touch anything when you arrived?" I asked Susan.

She shook her head. "The first thing we noticed was how the pit had been disturbed, so we were being careful not to move anything. Then Elyse saw Bridget. She screamed and ran over to her, but I don't think she actually touched her. She just sat there and cried. I was trying to figure out what to do when I heard someone running towards us. I thought it might be the killer and was about to hide when *he* came charging in with you on his heels." She nodded towards Jacy.

Jacy seemed extremely on edge. He kept looking over at the disturbed grave and glancing nervously around.

"Maybe you should go back to the house so you can lead the police in when they arrive," I suggested to him. The police had just been at the site earlier that week, but he obviously needed something to do.

He wasted no time in fleeing the oppressive weight of the site.

I called Fletcher to let him know what was going on. Lily answered and promised to stay there until Jacy and I could get back.

With nothing else to do or say, the three of us fell into an uneasy silence. The wait seemed like an eternity, although the police actually arrived quite quickly, carrying large flashlights and led by Jacy. The first officer on the scene wasted no time in taking charge. He rounded up the four of us—Jacy, Elyse, Susan and me—and sent us back to the house escorted by a uniformed officer to wait for the detective in charge of the investigation.

About fifteen minutes later, a scowling Kaplan pulled up in an unmarked car. Our escort approached him and, after speaking to him for a few minutes, pointed in our direction. Kaplan looked over at us, his expression darkening even further when he spotted me. He nodded once, then followed the officer into the forest without another glance in our direction.

We cooled our heels for a good twenty minutes before he reappeared. His mood did not seem to have improved. He stalked over to our group and glowered at me for several moments before saying, "I'll speak to you

all one at a time to get your statements. Kendall, you can wait to go last."

"Sergeant Kaplan," I said quickly. "If you don't mind, I'd like to have a word with you first."

He glared at me for another moment before giving me a grudging nod. "Alright, then. Let's hear what you have to say." He jerked his head toward his car.

"Well, Kendall, you're right in the middle of things—as usual."

"It's not my fault this time, I swear. You can ask Jacy Elliott and Fletcher Snyder. I was with them when we heard a scream. Jacy and I left Fletcher and ran towards the scream. When we got to the clearing, we found Elyse Pike and Susan Urban. Elyse was crying over the body of Bridget Foxwell, and Susan was standing off to one side. I moved Elyse away from the body, checked for a pulse, then called nine-one-one."

Kaplan rubbed his face wearily. "Great. So any evidence that may have been left has been contaminated. What were you doing in the woods anyway?"

"We were, uh, taking a stroll with Fletcher. The doctor told him to walk every day for his heart." I didn't want to go into the meditation lesson with Kaplan.

"And you heard a scream?"

"Yes."

"And, of course, your first instinct was to run towards it."

I shrugged.

He shook his head. "I'd really rather not have to investigate your murder. Do you think you could start showing a little caution? The next time you hear

someone screaming in the woods, maybe call the police first?"

"Fletcher was calling the police already. My gut reaction when I hear someone screaming is to respond. She could have been in trouble."

"Yes, someone *could* have been killing her—and you *could* have been next on the list. Look, Killian, I'm not asking you to ignore people in need, just to think before you act."

"I'll try to slow down and think first from now on."

"Yeah, you do that." He sighed. "Why do I feel like we both just wasted our breath?" He held up a hand. "Don't answer that." He consulted his notebook. "The victim had no identification on her. What did you say her name was?"

"Bridget Foxwell."

"You're positive that's her?"

"Yes."

"You knew her?"

"I met her briefly when I started investigating the thefts, then interviewed her after Healy's murder. She was part of the archaeological team and a student at Pemberton."

"Was there any indication she knew something about what happened to Healy?"

"No. Not in the least. She didn't come across as the most observant person. I doubt she was an intentional target."

"What do you mean?"

"She was probably a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. From what Elyse Pike told me, I

suspect she stumbled across the looter in the act, and he panicked and killed her."

"What exactly did Ms. Pike tell you?"

"I'm sure she'll be able to explain it better when you interrogate her," I said, before briefly outlining the story Elyse had given me.

"And the other woman? Urban?"

"Elyse said she asked Susan to come with her."

He nodded. "Okay. I'm not done with you yet, but I need to get statements from the other three. Stay over there until I'm finished." He pointed in the opposite direction from where Jacy, Elyse, and Susan were being held.

While I waited for him to call me again, I thought about Bridget and what White Deer had told me. He'd said that death was in the air and the killing wasn't over. Sure enough, Bridget was dead. A chill ran down my spine as I recalled he'd also warned that I too might end up among the dead.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even hear Jacy approaching until he was right at my side. I jumped when I noticed him.

He gave me a weak smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

"Not your fault. I was a million miles away."

"Thinking about the murder?"

"Yeah, among other things."

"So, what's your take on it?"

"The murder?"

"Yeah."

I leaned back against the squad car next to us. "Assuming what Elyse told us is accurate, it looks like

Bridget came down to the site, caught the looter by surprise, and he shot..." My voice faded out as a sudden thought occurred to me.

"What?"

"Bridget was shot," I began.

"Right"

"Healy was stabbed to death."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, either the killer switched methods or there are two killers."

"He couldn't very well stab Bridget with the knife he used to kill Healy," Jacy objected. "The police have it."

"True. But if the killer had a gun, why did he stab Healy?"

"The killer used my knife to kill Healy and then left the murder weapon at the scene of the crime, which makes it seem like he was trying to frame me. Maybe the killer usually carries a gun, or he started carrying one after that."

I shook my head. "Everything you said makes sense, but it's all guesswork."

Jacy frowned. "I don't buy that there are two killers. That would be too much of a coincidence."

We fell silent, and a few minutes later Susan walked over. Kaplan spent a little longer with Elyse than he had with the rest of us, but eventually she too joined us.

Kaplan spoke to another officer briefly before coming over as well. "Okay. Ms. Urban, Ms. Pike, and Mr. Elliott, I'm finished with the three of you. I have your names and contact information if we need to get in

touch with you. You're free to go. If you ladies need a lift back to your car, one of my officers can take you. Just speak to the fellow over there." He indicated a uniformed officer waiting by a cruiser. "Mr. Kendall, I'd like another word with you."

Elyse and Susan wandered toward the police car, but Jacy hesitated, as if unsure of what to do.

"You go on inside," I told him. "I'll be in later."

He nodded and left.

I turned to Kaplan. "So...?"

"They corroborated your story," he said.

"Did you think I made it up?"

He ignored my question and asked one of his own. "What's going on with your investigation? Have you turned up anything interesting?"

"I guess that depends on your definition of interesting. I still have to interview the tribe's council members, and I'm working on a few leads I've come across, but I haven't really uncovered anything yet."

"You've found nothing that would help us with this murder?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Do you know anything more about what happened here?"

"Not much so far. From what we can tell, the body was out here overnight, which jibes with the story we got from Pike. Single gunshot wound to the chest. The M.E. will have to confirm it, but I'd guess she died pretty quickly. It looks like the bullet went right through her heart. Either the killer is a good marksman or awfully lucky.

"We found her car on the other side of the woods. The doors were unlocked, and her purse was on the front

seat, apparently undisturbed. We'll probably be out here all night and half the morning looking for evidence, but after everyone trampled all over the site, we're not expecting much."

"Do you think it's the same killer?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you have any reason to think it's not?"

"Just the different methods: Healy was stabbed, while Bridget was shot."

He shrugged. "Doesn't mean much."

"Assuming the two killings are connected, that narrows the focus of my investigation a little. They almost have to be related to the looting."

"We try not to make assumptions in my business. Just let the facts speak for themselves. Of course, we're short on solid facts in this case."

"Will you be watching the site now?"

"We don't have the manpower for that, but in addition to ourselves, we've got the sheriff's department and the state police patrolling the area. We've asked them to check up on any vehicles they see parked on the side of the road."

I frowned, remembering White Deer's warning. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah. Stay out of trouble."

"I don't go looking for trouble, you know."

"And yet it always seems to find you."

I sighed. He was right

"So, are we all finished here?"

"I suppose. Be sure to let me know if you find anything pertinent."

"Don't worry. You'll be the first person I call."

I started walking away, but he stopped me. "Oh, and Killian?" I turned back. "Your friend Jacy isn't out of the woods yet. Unless he has an airtight alibi for the time of the girl's murder, he's still a suspect."

Fletcher, Jacy, Lily, and Nikki were waiting for me when I went inside.

"What did he say?" Jacy demanded before I'd even sat down.

"I can't go into details—not that there really are any aside from what you already know."

"Jacy told us the girl was murdered," Fletcher said.

"There's little doubt of that."

"She was shot?"

I nodded.

"When?" Lily asked.

"Sometime late yesterday afternoon or evening, most likely."

"I don't remember hearing anything," Fletcher said with a frown.

"You're far enough away that I doubt you would hear a gunshot."

Nikki shuddered. "Could we be in danger here?"

I shrugged. "I don't really know. I wouldn't think so. It looked to me like Bridget surprised the looter and he shot her. I do suggest you stay away from the dig until the killer is caught, however."

"The police aren't going to be guarding the site?" Lily sounded quite indignant.

"I asked Sergeant Kaplan the same thing. He claims they just don't have the manpower."

"How many more people have to be killed before they find the manpower? How much more of our cultural heritage has to be stolen?"

"They're doing the best they can, Lily," Fletcher admonished gently.

"Are they?" she shot back.

"If the police aren't going to watch the site, maybe we should," Jacy spoke up.

We all turned and gave him identical blank stares.

"What?" I asked.

"Why don't we take turns staking out the clearing? You and I can just switch on and off."

"No way!" I exclaimed at the same time as Fletcher said, "It's too dangerous."

"Before you argue, think about it. The idea has actually been running around my head for a few days now. This isn't some spur-of-the-moment scheme."

"Fletcher's right," I objected. "It's too dangerous. Two people have been killed already."

"It really wouldn't be that dangerous if we got there early enough, hid, and just observed. I'm not talking about trying to catch anyone, only identifying the looter."

I looked over to Fletcher, who frowned deeply. He met my eyes, but I couldn't read his expression.

"What do you think?" I asked.

He slowly shook his head. "I don't like it, but..."

"But?"

"It may be a necessary evil."

"Great, I'll take tonight," Jacy said with satisfaction.

"Wait," Fletcher added. "I'll only agree to this if you promise not to reveal yourself. You'll stay hidden no matter what happens."

"I promise," Jacy said quickly.

Fletcher turned to me.

I held up a hand. "Scout's honor."

Fletcher raised an eyebrow. "Were you a Scout?"

I gave him a sheepish smile. "Uh, no. But I promise."

"I could take a turn too," Nikki offered. She received a dirty look from Lily for her effort.

"That's okay. I think two of us can handle it, especially if we're taking turns. And there's really no need to start tonight. Sgt. Kaplan told me they would be out there pretty much until morning. The killer isn't going to come back while the woods are lit up like midday and police are crawling everywhere. I think you can wait until tomorrow night."

"That makes sense," he agreed.

I glanced down at my watch. "I'd probably better go," I said. "I need to stop by my office and write up some notes."

"I'll walk you out to your car," Jacy offered.

"Thank you so much for dinner," I said to Fletcher and Lily.

"You're certainly welcome," Fletcher answered with a distracted smile. "Anytime."

After I'd exchanged goodbyes with everyone, Jacy and I left the house. Police were still scurrying around outside like ants whose hill had been disturbed. It was fortunate that no one had blocked my car.

"So what's next?" Jacy asked.

"I thought you wanted out of the investigation."

He shrugged. "I said I didn't want to go on interviews anymore, and I don't. I was just wondering what your next move will be."

"I need to talk to the council. I've neglected them too long."

Jacy frowned. "I really don't think it's anyone on the council."

"What makes you say that?"

"The desecration. I honestly can't imagine any of them doing that to our ancestors' graves, no matter how much they want the excavation shut down. Not even Wallace would go that far."

"That fits my hunch, but I still need to talk to them, just to cover all my bases. Plus, I haven't yet heard back from Professor Howard."

"Who?"

"She was a friend of Professor Healy's, a sort of mentor from what Elyse told me. Healy had jotted her name in the margin of his desk calendar, so I thought it might be worth getting in touch with her. When I called, however, I only got her voicemail. Maybe I should try her again."

"Well, if there are any new developments, let me know. Otherwise, I'll plan on staking out the site tomorrow night. I'll get back to you with a report Monday morning."

"Okay, just please be careful. Don't do anything stupid."

"Don't worry. You heard me promise Fletcher."

I sighed. "Yeah, but I've also seen how things can change in an instant. Just...be careful."

He frowned. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you had some sort of premonition?"

"That's not my area of expertise," I protested with a smile I didn't quite feel.

Jacy's eyes narrowed. "Killian—"

"Honestly, Jacy. I don't have premonitions—at least nothing solid enough that I would call them that. I just have a bad feeling about all this..."

Once again, something stopped me from mentioning White Deer's vague warning or my creepy dream.

"Okay. Don't worry. I'll be fine. I'm not going to take any undue risks. I'm just going to hide and watch. You know how quiet I can be in the forest. No one will know I'm there unless I want them to. I'm more worried about you."

A chill ran down my spine, but I shrugged it off.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not exactly silent when you move through the trees. And you're the one having the bad feeling."

"I'll be fine. Besides, after tonight, the killer might figure it's not safe to return. As for the bad feeling, it's nothing. I don't think..."

"Try not to let it get to you. You'd better get going if you want to stop by your office. I'll talk to you Monday morning, if not before."

"Okay. Thanks, Jacy—for everything."

"No problem, Kill. See ya."

As I drove away, something niggled at the back of my mind—something I felt was important but couldn't quite put my finger on. It bothered me all the way to the office, where I was finally able to push it aside.

I sat down at my desk to carefully record the events of the day in my notebook, along with my impressions and possible future courses of action. I jotted a reminder on my calendar to call Professor Howard and visit the council on Monday.

I was about to lock up and go home when I remembered to check our voicemail. The first message was from a former client who had a question about his itemized bill. I made a note to call him back on Monday as well. The second message was from one of the insurance companies we often worked for, saying they had a new case for us if we had the time. I scribbled another note. Monday was filling up fast.

I was still writing down the name of the insurance agent when the third message started. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and my pen stopped moving as muffled sobbing filled the air. I wondered if it was the same person as before. The crying continued for several seconds, then either the message cut it off or the caller hung up.

Suddenly, the empty office felt very creepy.

I dropped the pen on my desk and hurriedly left. I was down the stairs and in my car with its doors locked just a few seconds later, my heart pounding in my chest.

Why did the crying caller freak me out so much? Somehow, my previous idea that it was only a potential client too scared to talk just didn't seem likely anymore.

Driving home, I once again reviewed the events of the day. I was so distracted I almost didn't see the reflective eyes on the side of the road. I stomped on the break, slid to a halt, and waited while a buck and his doe calmly crossed in front of me. They were both the typical white-tailed deer so common on the Shore, but they still made me think about White Deer and his warning.

As I watched, a sudden realization hit me. When White Deer had warned me of more death to come, Bridget had already been dead for almost a full day. He couldn't have been referring to her.

That meant someone else was going to die before this was over—and I could be that someone.

## Chapter 22

Between the creepy caller and my scary realization, by the time I got to the B&B, I was thoroughly spooked. So when I got to my room and turned the light on to see someone sitting on my bed, I couldn't hold back the scream.

I quickly shut the door, hoping I hadn't woken any of the guests.

"Seth," I hissed. "What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you."

"It's been a long day and I'm exhausted. The last thing I need is you nagging me about my gifts. I started my training today. Happy now?"

"Yes, I'm glad you finally started, but that's not why I'm here."

"It's not?"

"No. Well, not exactly. I'm here about White Deer."

"What? Why? Am I in danger from him?"

"I don't think so. At least not directly.

He's...unpredictable. And powerful. But I don't think he means you harm. But if you were to get in his way..."

"What is White Deer, exactly? Is he like you?"

"No, he's...something else entirely."

"But what? If he's not a ghost, what is he?"

"It's complicated."

"Try me."

"He practiced very strong magic when he was alive. Part of that magic was ancestor veneration. The holy men or women of each village would carefully

prepare the bones of the dead, and the tribe would keep those bones with them, even moving them when they moved their villages. They wanted the spirits of their ancestors to stay with them. They communicated with them. And the more important or influential the person was, the more magic they imbued into their bones, and the stronger their connection to the land and their people. And if that person was a powerful wielder of magic themselves..."

"Are you saying his spirit is connected to the land?"

"Yes."

"Can anyone connect their spirit to a place or object?"

"It happens. Often without meaning to, even. It's how things become haunted, sometimes."

"Are you connected to anything?"

"Not exactly, not in the way White Deer is anyway. If I'm connected to anything, it's you. But I didn't come here to talk about myself. I should probably go, before I say too much."

"Wait! What about White Deer's warning that more death was coming?"

Seth shook his head. "I don't know any more than you do. Just be careful."

"I'm always—"

"You're not always careful, and we both know it. Just don't do anything stupid."

"I can't make any promises."

With that, he vanished.

As I finished getting ready for bed, I mulled over the new information Seth had given me. It was all

interesting, but why was it so important that Seth had shown up again? How did it tie into the case? Who was going to die next? And just how powerful was White Deer?

I had plenty of questions, and too few answers.

I woke up way too early Sunday morning, but despite a valiant effort, I could not go back to sleep. I glanced at my phone and moaned. I'd been looking forward to sleeping in for a change, but clearly that was a lost cause.

I crawled out of bed, showered, dressed, and made my way downstairs.

When I walked into the kitchen, Steve looked up with surprise from the tray of Danish pastries he was arranging artfully for the continental breakfast. "I didn't expect to see you this early."

"I didn't expect you to see me this early either," I said, pouring myself a cup of coffee. "I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep."

"Too much on your mind?"

"I don't know. Maybe. The case is getting pretty stressful now that there's been a second murder."

Steve placed a cheese Danish on a napkin and handed it to me. "And then there's Micah."

I flinched.

"Sore subject?"

"Honestly? Yeah. I've just kind of thrown myself into the case and tried not to think about him, but it still hurts."

"You miss him?"

I chewed while I thought about his question. "I do..." I replied slowly.

He raised an eyebrow.

"In a way, though, I'm almost relieved. It's nice not to have the weight of his expectations hanging over me. At the same time, I miss having someone to cuddle with, to eat dinner with, and just hang out with. You know?"

Steve sighed. "Unfortunately, I know all too well."

"Are you and Adam okay?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"Oh, we're fine, at least as fine as we can be under the circumstances. We just never really have time to ourselves anymore. I feel like all my spare time is eaten up by this place. It's so far from the beach house that I can't spend the night there in case something goes wrong here, and Adam needs to be there for the boys."

"Have you guys talked any more about his moving in here and renting out the beach house?"

"We have, but it just wasn't practical since Kane would have to change schools. We didn't want to do that to him in his senior year."

"But he graduated this year. What's the hold up?"

"Tad."

"What about him?"

"Adam doesn't want to uproot him again. He's just starting to settle in and show some improvement."

I was glad to hear there was improvement on that front, at least. Maybe my talk with Tad had done some good after all—and maybe it was time for another talk. I shelved that thought for the moment, though.

"Throw him off more than he already is? I don't think he has any special attachment to that school."

He reached over and ruffled my hair. "Don't worry about it, kiddo. This isn't your mess. We'll be okay. I just miss Adam, but this too shall pass. Speaking of Adam, are you going to be there for dinner tonight?"

"Dinner?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Don't tell me you forgot. Adam's been so excited about it."

"Excited about... Oh!"

"Remember now? He's having a few people over for dinner at the beach house tonight. I was under the impression you'd helped plan it."

"No, Adam came up with the idea the other night after I broke up with Micah. I've just had so much going on it slipped my mind. Don't tell Adam."

"I won't, but you'd better be there. You know Adam. He'll be heartbroken if you're not, and he's going all out, as usual."

"I'll be there. But you said he was inviting several people. I thought it was just family. Who else is coming?"

He shrugged. "Beats me. This is all Adam."

"What about you? Are you going?"

"I can't."

"You deserve a night off too. The B&B will be fine for one evening."

Steve was shaking his head before I even finished my sentence. "Two couples are arriving tonight. I have to be here to check them in. Go have fun for me." He glanced at his watch and picked up the tray of pastries. "I'm going to take these out. Some of the guests might be

early risers like you." He winked and whisked away through the door.

I took a bite of my pastry and thought about Adam. Dinner with him and the boys sounded great, but I didn't really have much to do today so maybe I should go spend the entire day with them. I'd been promising Tad I'd spend more time with him. This was the perfect opportunity.

I returned to my room upstairs and took a quick shower, then threw on some clothes and drove to the beach house. I let myself in and made my way to the kitchen. Adam was busy chopping an onion with his back to me. I didn't want to startle him with a chef knife in his hand, so I waited until he sat it down to make my presence known.

"Hey!"

Adam yelped and spun around. "Killian! I didn't even hear you come in. You scared me half to death."

I laughed. "Sorry about that. I promise I wasn't trying to sneak up on you." Maybe I was picking up some of Jacy and Lily's tricks after all.

"I wasn't expecting to see you before dinner, especially not this early in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep."

"That still doesn't explain why you're here."

"I haven't seen you guys much lately, so I figured I'd just hang out here all day."

Adam's smile faltered slightly. "Right. So...how was Steve?"

"Honestly? I think he misses you."

Adam sighed. "I know the feeling."

"You guys should really just move there already."

"But I love this place. And Tad seems to be putting down some roots finally. Maybe. He's so hard to read."

"That's what Steve said, and I know you love this place, but, come on. You'd love living with Steve again too."

Adam laughed. "I can't deny that, but Tad—"

"I'll talk to Tad. Is he still in bed?"

"Probably. Neither he nor Kane are exactly morning people."

"Maybe I'll go wake them up. See if they want to hang out."

Adam laughed. "You actually want to risk waking the sleeping bears?"

"They're sleeping twinkles at best. I think I can handle them."

"You're a braver man than I."

"It'll be great payback for all the times Kane pulled shit like that on me."

"Be my guest, but if you come back down physically maimed, don't say I didn't warn you."

I gave my best evil madman cackle and swept from the room. I ran upstairs and paused at my old bedroom door. It was dead quiet inside. I stifled a snicker, took a deep breath, and threw open the door with bang as I leaped into the room yelling at the top of my lungs. "Rise and shine, sleepyheads!"

Both Kane and Tad bolted upright in their beds, their eyes round with surprise. I bent double laughing as their startled expressions turned to disapproving frowns.

"You're an asshole," Kane said.

"Sweet revenge for all the times you jumped on me while I was sleeping," I said to Kane when I'd stopped laughing enough to talk.

"And what about me?" Tad asked crankily. "I never woke you up rudely."

"Sorry, Tad. You were caught in the crossfire. But I wanted to wake you both up anyway. I'm taking today off so we can hang out."

Kane rubbed his face. "What time is it?"

I checked my phone. "It's like nine."

"What?" Kane gasped, his face aghast. "In the morning? Why is it so early? What's wrong with you?"

"Come on, we never get to hang out anymore."

"And we're not hanging out at the buttcrack of dawn either."

"Nine a.m. is hardly the crack of dawn."

"It is too! I'm going back to sleep."

I turned to Tad. "What about you?"

He frowned. "I can't go back to sleep once I wake up."

"Wanna hang out?"

He gave an indifferent shrug. "Not really."

He got up and pulled on a pair of sweatpants over his briefs. He grabbed a t-shirt on his way out of the room.

I stood there feeling the sting of rejection.

Kane heaved a monumental sigh and sat up.

"Don't let the little shit get to you."

"I just wanted to hang out."

"Look, Kill, I'd love to hang out with you later, after a few more hours of sleep, but I already have plans

with friends this afternoon. I'll see you for dinner anyway, right?"

I nodded, still feeling a little dejected.

"And seriously," Kane continued. "Don't let Tad ruin your day. He's a selfish little bitch."

"Hey," I protested halfheartedly, "he's been through a lot."

"That doesn't mean he can be a jerk indefinitely."

"I thought he was doing better. Both Adam and Steve said so."

"If so, I haven't seen it. I think they're so desperate for signs of improvement that the tiniest baby steps are a big deal. If actually going to school and not fucking guys in the living room are a big deal, then we've set a pretty low bar."

"But hey, I mean, it *is* an improvement, right?"

Kane flopped back on the bed. "I'm just sick of everybody handling him with kid gloves. If I tried half the shit he pulls, I'd be grounded until my twenty-first birthday. We're all walking on eggshells around him all the time. Don't get me wrong, I'm sorry he went through all the stuff he went through, but I don't think it's fair that we have to pay the price for it."

"You're right. It's not fair. Go back to sleep. I'm going to go find him. It's time for another heart-to-heart."

Kane flopped back on the bed and pulled a pillow over his head. "Good luck," was his muffled response.

I went downstairs but didn't see Tad anywhere. I popped my head back into the kitchen. "Have you seen Tad?" I asked Adam.

He glanced up. "No. Did you look on the back deck?"

"No, I'll check."

I opened the back door and stepped outside. Tad was leaning over the railing, smoking a cigarette. I caught a whiff and realized it was a joint, not a cigarette. I clenched my jaw and had to force myself to relax before I approached him. I didn't want this to just turn into a huge fight.

"I guess you're going to give me a lecture about the dangers of weed, the scary gateway drug," he said without turning around.

I shrugged. "Hey, what you put in your body is your business. Although, I do think it's a little rude to be smoking up on Adam's back porch."

He took a deliberate drag on the joint, turned and blew the smoke in my direction. "Chill out, Killian, and save your breath. I don't need a sermon. Just because you're an uptight goodie-goodie doesn't mean I have to be."

"What's going on, Tad? I thought you were going to be more respectful."

"And I am. I haven't had any guys over since we had our last chat, I've been going to school every day, I'm even doing my chores like a good little boy. Why is it such a big deal if I smoke a little weed now and then?"

"Does Adam know?"

"If he did, I'm sure I would have heard about it by now. Although, I guess you'll run off and tattle to him now."

"I won't say anything if you talk to me."

"We're talking, aren't we?"

"No, we're verbally sparring. I feel like you've been on the attack this whole time."

"You know what they say: The best defense is a good offense."

"Why do you feel you have be defensive with me? I'm on your side here."

"Are you? If it came down it, I'm pretty sure you'd be on Adam's side."

I walked over and leaned against the railing next to him. "I owe Adam my life."

"Yeah, yeah. I've heard this story. And I'm supposed to be eternally grateful to him now too because he took me in."

I gave him a sharp look. "That's not what I was saying. Will you let me finish?"

He took a deep hit off the joint and held it, but arched his brow as if to say, "go ahead."

"I was saying Adam has done a lot for me so of course I love him and support him. That doesn't mean I don't support you too. I came here today specifically to hang out with you. And you've been acting like a jerk the whole time."

He blew out the smoke in a steady stream, then glanced over at me. "To be fair, you did wake me up by scaring the shit out of me. And you wonder why I'm in a bad mood?"

The corners of my mouth twitched as I fought a smile and lost. "You have to admit, that was kind of funny. Did you see Kane's face?"

For a second, I thought he was going to smile too, but then the moment passed and he took another drag on the joint.

"Can we at least have a conversation without you jumping down my throat every second?"

He frowned and looked away. "What do you want to talk about?"

"You said you've been going to school. Are things any better there?"

He shrugged. "I passed all my finals."

I blinked at him in surprise. "That must have caught your teachers off guard."

He finally broke down and smiled a little. "Yeah. I think some of them were really disappointed when they had to pass me. The finals counted for most of our grade."

"Did you make any friends?"

The smile disappeared again. "No."

"Did you try?"

He pinched out the joint and slipped the roach into his pocket. "It was too late to try. School was almost over, and everyone had already made up their mind that I was a loser."

"It's not like you gave them much to work with."

He didn't answer.

"Then I take it you're not very attached to that school?"

He gave a humorless bark of laughter. "You could say that."

"How would you like a chance to start over again this fall?"

He met my gaze with a curious expression.

"How?"

"Adam has wanted to move to Amalie's House with Steve for a while now, but they didn't want to interrupt Kane's senior year of high school. Now that Kane's graduated, Adam still won't consider it because

he doesn't want to disturb you. If you're not attached to that school, though, you guys could move, and you'd start in a new district this fall."

He mulled over my suggestion for a few minutes, before nodding slightly. "I don't give a shit about that school or anybody there."

"So you'd be open to moving?"

He nodded again.

"Do you want me to talk to Adam about it, or would you like to?"

"You can do it."

"That's fine. I'll bring it up later, maybe after dinner."

"It doesn't matter that much," he said with a shrug.

"Well, it kind of does. If he's going to move in the next couple of months, he needs to start planning. If he goes through all this, though, will you really give the new school a chance?"

He looked down at his feet. "I can't promise anything."

"Will you at least try?"

He gave a slight nod.

"Hey, that's all I ask for." I leaned against the wall next to him. "Now, what's going on with you and Kane?"

He looked over at me sharply. "What do you mean?"

"He seems pretty mad at you still."

"You mean he was talking shit behind my back? Shocking."

I raised an eyebrow. "And I guess you're blameless?"

He made a disgusted face. "Why is everything my fault?"

"I didn't say it was entirely your fault, just that you may share in the blame. I got the impression Kane is defending his dad, which is understandable, even if he's going about it the wrong way."

"What do you mean 'defending his dad'?"

"You've been giving Adam a hard time. Kane is just reacting to that."

"He's always on my case these days."

"Adam or Kane?"

"Kane. Since I started doing more chores around the house, Adam's eased up on me a little, but Kane has gotten even worse."

"How about I talk to Kane and see what's going on?"

He shrugged again. "Whatever."

"And maybe you can give Adam a break. He's trying hard, you know. He was willing to give up something he really wanted for you."

He had the grace to look genuinely remorseful. "I'm trying. It's not like I'm still having an 'inappropriate relationship' in his bed."

I froze. Something about Tad's wording rang a bell. I racked my brain trying to figure out why the phrase "inappropriate relationship" seemed so important. Then I remembered: Ricky had told me he suspected Susan Urban and Professor Healy were having an affair. He'd overheard Healy telling Susan that their relationship was inappropriate and would have to end.

I gave myself a mental kick. I'd let a lot of leads slide on this case. I hadn't spoken to the council yet, and I'd forgotten to follow up on the possibility that Susan and Healy were involved. I needed to talk to Elyse. If anybody was in a position to know whether Healy and Susan were having an affair, she would be the one.

"Hey, I said I wasn't doing that anymore," Tad said nervously, bringing my attention back to the present.

"Oh, right. That's great. I know you're trying, and you should keep trying, but something you just said reminded me of something important that I'd forgotten."

He nodded as if I had confirmed something he'd suspected all along. "So you need to go follow up on that, right?"

"I, uh, probably should. But I still want to hang out. This shouldn't take long. Why don't you go shower and eat breakfast? I'll be back by the time you're ready. I promise."

Tad pushed away from the railing and started toward the house. "Don't make promises you can't keep," he said flatly.

"No, really! I'll be back, and the rest of the day is all yours."

"Don't rush back on my account," he called over his shoulder as he disappeared into the house.

I sighed. It felt like everything with him was one step forward, two steps back. I followed him inside to let Adam know where I was going and that I'd be back in a bit.

"You don't have to be back here until six," Adam said with a funny expression on his face that I couldn't quite read. "That's when dinner will be ready."

"I want to spend some time with Tad."

"Maybe he can meet you somewhere."

I tipped my head to one side. "Why do I feel like you're trying to get rid of me?"

"I'm not," Adam said quickly. "I just have a lot to do to get ready for dinner and I don't need you boys underfoot."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're acting very strangely."

"No I'm not. Now go. Don't you have some detecting to do?"

I allowed myself to be shooed from the kitchen, but my suspicion was definitely aroused. What was Adam's problem?

I shook off his weird mood and focused on my case. I walked out to my car, where I flipped through my notebook looking for Elyse's phone number. When I found the page with her name on it, I saw that I'd jotted down her address as well. I decided to drop by unannounced. Maybe I'd get more from her if she wasn't expecting my visit.

Luckily, she lived in a tiny town called Whaleyville, about halfway between Ocean City and Salisbury, so it wasn't too much of a drive. She lived in a small bungalow that looked like it had been built in the 1930s or '40s. The neighborhood was a small farming community that had maybe once been a town but now barely merited a dot on the map. Her neighbor's houses were starting to look a little rundown, but Elyse's was

well cared for and seemed to have received a fresh coat of paint in the not-too-distant past.

Elyse answered my knock wearing a ponytail, sweatpants, and a faded t-shirt. Her face was flushed, and the few strands of hair that had escaped from her hair-tie looked damp. She seemed surprised to see me standing on her front steps.

"Hi, Elyse," I said brightly. "I had a few questions for you. I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"Uh, no. I was just working out, but that's okay. I could use a break. Come on in."

I stepped into a cozy living room. The furniture was upholstered in black fabric, and abstract art hung on dark red walls. Classic rock music was playing somewhere in the house.

"I need to get a bottle of water. Do you want anything?" she asked.

"No thanks. I'm fine."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

She left the room, and I took the opportunity to snoop a bit. A stack of magazines sat on an end table. I leafed through them quickly, finding the expected assortment of scientific and news journals along with a couple of popular entertainment magazines. I moved to the small desk in the corner of the room and scanned the top. There was a small stack of mail, mostly bills, and a note scribbled in almost illegible handwriting. I thought it said "Don't forget to get milk, Love, S," but I wouldn't swear to that in a court of law.

"You said you had some questions?" Elyse asked from the hall.

I jumped away from the desk and tried not to look guilty as she rejoined me.

"Um, yeah. When I was interviewing the archaeology crew, one of them mentioned something that slipped my mind until today. Professor Healy was overheard telling Susan Urban that their relationship was inappropriate and had to end. The person who heard this took it to mean that they were having an affair. I figured you'd be the person most likely to know if that was true."

"Absolutely not," she answered without hesitation.

I tipped my head to one side and measured the woman standing before me. "You sound pretty certain."

"I am."

"Then do you know what they were talking about?"

She took a sip of water before answering. "I have no idea what they were talking about, but I know they weren't having an affair."

"How can you be so sure? You've told me yourself that you weren't close to Professor Healy on a personal level."

"No, but I am friends with Susan. She would have told me if she and Quinn were involved."

"Not necessarily. Aren't there rules about professors being involved with students?"

She shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, there are."

"Then maybe she didn't want you to know."

"They weren't having an affair."

An alarm went off in the back of my mind and an idea started forming. I decided to change tack. "Why did you ask Susan to go with you to check the site?"

"I was scared to go by myself. I didn't know what had happened to Bridget—" She broke off and took a few deep breaths.

"No, I meant why didn't you take one of the other crew members, one of the men maybe?"

She leaned forward, visibly bristling. "Are you trying to say that women can't handle themselves? That we need a man to take care of us?"

"No, no," I quickly denied. "That's not what I meant. I just wondered why Susan and not someone else from the crew?"

She settled back into her chair. "Like I said, we're friends. We're closer in age, and we've been working together for a while. I don't really know any of the other kids well enough to just call them up and ask them to go with me down to the site."

"Exactly how close are you and Susan?"

Her eyes flashed. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You said you were friends, and you seem pretty confident she wasn't having an affair with Healy. It seems the only way you could be that sure is if you were having an affair with her."

"That's preposterous!"

"Is it?"

"I can't believe you'd even imply something like that!"

"What? That you're a lesbian? It's not like that's some great insult. I'm gay."

She blinked at me in surprise. "What?"

"I'm gay. I don't really care if you are or not. It wouldn't affect me or the case one way or the other. If

you are involved with Susan, however, that does affect the case."

"How... I mean... Why would you think we're...involved?"

"Your strong defense of her for one thing, although I guess that could just be the result of a close friendship. But also just a hunch. Call it gaydar."

"Hunches? Gaydar? That's hardly proof of anything."

"Look, are you gay or not?"

She glared at me for several seconds, hands on hips, before finally answering through gritted teeth, "Yes. Not that it's any of your damn business."

"Elyse, I'm not trying to get you. If you're not out, I'm not going to tell anyone. As long as your sexuality has nothing to do with this case, it will just stay between us." She relaxed slightly—until my next words. "But I still need to know if you were involved with Susan."

Her hands balled into fists at her sides, and for a moment I was afraid she would physically attack me.

"That's a pretty big leap from me being a lesbian to having an affair with Susan."

"Maybe, but there's that note on your desk where she's reminding you to pick up milk." I was going way out on a limb, but it seemed worth the risk.

"I...what? Were you going through my things?"

"It was on top of your desk. I didn't go through anything. It just caught my attention. Are you involved with her?"

"I don't see how my private life is any of your business."

She had pretty much confirmed my suspicions, but I still needed to hear her say it. "It's only my business as it relates to this case, and right now I'm afraid it does. I really don't want to pry, but I need to know."

"Why?"

"Because the more I understand about the relationships of the people around Healy, the better I'll be able to understand what happened."

She sighed. "Fine. Yes, Susan and I are dating."

"For how long?"

"I guess it's been almost a year now." She slowly sat back down. "It started off innocently enough, occasionally going out for drinks or dancing, just as friends. We had a lot in common. There aren't too many women in this field, let alone gay women. Gradually, we started to develop deeper feelings. I knew it technically wasn't appropriate, since I was a professor and she was a student, but you can't tell your heart not to fall in love with someone. We reasoned that since she wasn't *my* student and she'll have her Master's soon anyway, it really wasn't all that bad."

"And Healy found out about your relationship?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"We're not sure. We must have been careless—said something in his hearing, kissed where he could see us. He never said how he knew; he just confronted us about it. He spoke to me first and then to Susan separately."

"What did he say when he confronted you?"

"He told me my relationship with Susan was inappropriate and we should end it immediately."

That jibed with what Ricky had overheard between Healy and Susan. "Did he give you an ultimatum?"

"What do you mean?"

"When he told you to end your relationship with Susan, was there an 'or else'? Like, was he going to report you to the university?"

"No, nothing like that. He just said he trusted me to do the right thing."

"And what had you decided?"

"Susan and I were still discussing it when he was killed."

"What will you do now?"

She considered me carefully. "I guess that depends on what you do. Susan has almost completed her Master's program. She only has one semester left."

"Won't you be her professor now that Healy is gone?"

She paused. "Assuming they offer me his position and don't hire someone from another school."

"I'd think that would change things."

She sighed. "We haven't had much of a chance to talk about this since Quinn was murdered. I've been so busy trying to keep the project alive that we've barely had any time alone. Things are still up in the air."

"Well, I suggest you figure things out quickly—for your sake."

"Are we finished here?"

I nodded. "I guess we are."

She walked to the door and held it open for me to leave. As I passed her, she said, "I suppose this all makes me a suspect somehow."

I paused and looked her in the eyes. "There was never a time when you weren't a suspect. Everyone involved is a suspect. Now you just have a clearer motive than some of the others."

Before climbing into my car, I glanced back up at the house to find Elyse still standing in her doorway, watching me with a troubled expression.

As I drove away, I wondered how this new bit of information fit into the puzzle. I was finding more pieces every day, but I had no idea how—or even if—they went together. I wished I had the box-top picture to go by.



## Chapter 23

When I pulled into the driveway of the beach house, I was shocked to see Mom's car parked behind Kane's truck. I was out the door and halfway to the house before the engine even stopped. I charged into the kitchen, where I caught Mom in a bear hug.

"I didn't know you were going to be here!"

Ever since she'd moved to Pennsylvania to live with my Aunt Kathy, Mom's visits had grown further and further apart.

She gave me a wry grin. "That's because it was supposed to be a surprise, you goob."

"Yeah, way to ruin your big surprise, Kill," Kane said with a chuckle as he strolled in holding a can of soda.

Adam appeared in the doorway and made a face. "I should have known."

"Hey, I'm still surprised," I said.

"I thought I told you to be here around six."

"I told Tad I'd hang out with him today so I came back."

"We don't see you for days at a time, and the one day when I don't want you around, you decide to hang out," he teased.

"If you really want me to, I can leave!" I stuck my tongue out at him.

Mom laughed. "Boys! It's not that big a deal. Killian, why don't we get out of Adam's hair? We can go to the zoo. I haven't been there in forever."

"That's half an hour away," I said.

"So? Dinner won't be ready until six."

"Okay, whatever," I agreed with a casual shrug, although I was starting to think something sneaky was going on. Everyone was acting a bit odd. "But would you mind if Tad came along?"

"Not at all. Adam said he's been having a rough time lately."

"That's putting it mildly. Let me see if he wants to go."

"Great, let me grab my purse while you're doing that." She kissed my cheek and rushed from the kitchen.

As soon as she was gone, I turned and eyed Adam suspiciously. "Okay. What else do you have up your sleeve?"

"What? Can't I just plan a nice birthday dinner for you and have your mom come down as a surprise?"

"My birthday isn't until next week."

"Which is where the surprise comes in."

I laughed. "Fine. You got me."

He grinned and pulled me into a hug. "Have a good afternoon with your mom."

"I will. It's great to see her."

As I turned away, he slapped my butt. "And don't come back until six!"

I laughed. "You're still planning something, but I'll play along."

He winked. "You'd better if you know what's good for you."

I took the stairs to the second floor two at a time. Tad was sprawled across his bed playing with his phone.

"Hey, Tad, want to hang out with my mom and me? We're going to the zoo."

"Don't you think I'm a little old for the zoo?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're never too old for the zoo. Come on. It'll be fun."

He shrugged, but stood up. "Why not? It beats sitting around the house doing nothing."

It wasn't exactly an enthusiastic reaction, but at least he was going. He didn't say much on the drive over, only answering direct questions for the most part—and even then, with as few words as possible. Mom and I made up for his reticence by talking nonstop, catching up on each other's life. Even though we texted and video chatted on the phone regularly, it's still not the same as talking in person.

I grilled her about dating since she'd started going out again. "I'm just dipping my toes back into the dating pool," she insisted. "I'm not ready for a serious relationship."

"Like mother like son," I sighed.

She glanced over at me. "Okay. Fill me in. What happened with you and Micah?"

I told her about the breakup, avoiding the gory details since I wasn't in the mood. After that, I briefed her on my current case and my application for a PI's license.

Tad remained quiet for a while after we arrived at the zoo, shoulders hunched, hands shoved so deep in his pockets it looked like he was trying to disappear inside them. He trailed a half-step behind us, eyes fixed on the ground.

At first, I tried to encourage him to join us, but Mom laid a hand on my arm. She had a different approach. She didn't push him. She just walked beside

him at a comfortable distance, pointing out little things—a chipmunk darting across the path, a pair of prairie dogs squabbling in the shade—without ever expecting a response.

It's what she does best: she creates space without calling attention to the fact that she's doing it.

At the monkey exhibit, she made an exaggerated gasp that would've embarrassed me if I hadn't seen Tad's eyes flick toward her in spite of himself.

"Oh my gosh, look at him!" she said, leaning conspiratorially toward Tad. "The one with the little pot belly. He looks exactly like Killian's baby pictures."

"Mom," I groaned, but she only wiggled her eyebrows at Tad.

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not a smile yet—but a crack in the armor.

She bought him a soda without asking, pretending the wrong flavor came out even though I saw her press the button for Dr. Pepper instead of water, then asking Tad if he would "do her a favor and take it off her hands?" He mumbled something like "okay," barely audible, but he took the bottle and sipped it slowly as we walked.

By the time we reached the otters, Mom struck again. "You know," she said, "every single time we came here when Killian was little, he used to swear that one of these guys winked at him. He wouldn't leave until he was absolutely sure he winked back."

I opened my mouth to object, but Tad beat me to it—with a soft snort. "That's dumb," he muttered, but there was no bite in it.

Mom just grinned. “Of course it is. Kids are supposed to be dumb sometimes. That’s what growing up is for.”

And something in Tad’s expression...loosened. Like her words unlocked something small but important inside him.

At one point, we saw one of the free-roaming peacocks that wandered the grounds. I knew before she opened her mouth what story she was going to tell next.

Sure enough, she started telling a story about taking me here when I was six. It was spring and the peahen had a clutch of freshly hatched babies following her around. Before she could stop me, I ran over to pet one of the fluffy little peachicks. Unfortunately, the mama did not take kindly to my enthusiastic approach and had chased me with loud squawks and much flapping of wings. I’d fallen down and scraped my knee in my panicked flight, but was otherwise unharmed.

"Killian cried so hard that snot was running down his face," mom said with a chuckle. "He was afraid of peacocks for years after that. Guess he got over his fear of cocks eventually."

“Mom!” I said again, mortified.

But Tad laughed—a real laugh this time, short but bright. I felt it like sunlight cracking through clouds.

She nudged him gently with her elbow, the same way she used to do with me when I was a sulky teenager. “He was cute though. Although I might be a bit biased. Remind me to show you embarrassing photos some time.”

I rolled my eyes, but Tad was grinning ear to ear.

By the time the afternoon shadows stretched long, Tad was walking beside us instead of behind us. He commented on how the emus' looked like dinosaurs. He pointed out a zoo volunteer with a lizard on her shoulder. He even poked me in the side when I misread a sign and pronounced something wrong.

Seeing him like that—smiling, teasing, completely unguarded—hit me harder than I expected. For the first time since I'd met him, he looked like a fifteen-year-old. Not a runaway. Not a trauma case. Not a kid waiting for the next disappointment, the next person who'd demand too much or hurt him worse.

Just a teenager at the zoo with people who cared about him.

And that was all Mom. She hadn't demanded trust or confessions or gratitude. She'd just shown up with warmth, patience, and embarrassing stories—the holy trinity of motherhood. Bit by bit, she'd chipped away at the walls he'd built so carefully around himself.

Watching him open up like that made me love her all the more.

At one point when Mom left us to use the restroom, I threw my arm around his shoulder, half expecting him to shrug it off. Instead, he left it there and leaned into my body.

"Having fun?"

He smiled and looked away. "Yeah. Thanks for inviting me. At first, I felt like I was butting in on your time with your mom, but she's really cool."

"You're not butting in on anything. If I didn't want you along, I wouldn't have invited you. I can tell Mom likes you too."

He nodded happily. "I don't really remember my mom. It was always just my dad and me, and we were never close. Then it was Razi, and now it's Adam and Steve. I've only ever had men in my life. It's kind of cool to see what it's like to have a mom."

My throat tightened at the wistful tone of his voice. I ruffled his curls. "You can share mine, if you want."

He ducked his head, but I saw a blush rise on his cheeks. "That'd be cool, but I doubt she'd want someone like me for a son."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"A gay hustler? Come on. Why would a nice lady like her want me when my own dad didn't?"

"Hey, first off, why would she care if you're gay? I'm gay, and she doesn't love me any less. And you did what you had to do to survive. It's not that big a deal."

He ducked out from under my arm. "Maybe it is to me." He started walking away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mom watching us from over by the restrooms. She waved me towards Tad, and I understood that she was giving us some time alone to talk. I nodded and went after him.

I caught him by the elbow. "Tad, wait."

He stopped walking but didn't turn around. I waited for a small group of people to pass by, although they weren't paying any attention to us anyway.

"What just happened?" He still didn't respond. "Talk to me. Please?"

"What's to talk about?"

"Things were cool between us for a while. Don't close down on me now. If I said something wrong, I'm sorry."

He lifted one shoulder in a listless shrug.

"Everyone keeps acting like it's no big deal that I hustled, but it is." He turned to face me with haunted eyes. "It changes you. I feel dirty all the time. I let nasty old guys do stuff to me for money, Killian. How can that not be a big deal?"

"What other choices did you have at the time?"

"I could have gone home."

"Was that really an option?"

"I don't know."

I reached out for him, but he visibly stiffened, and I dropped my hand. "Tad, you did what you thought you had to do. When I said it wasn't a big deal, I just meant that no one judges you or thinks less of you because of what happened. Of course it changed you. I didn't mean to play down what you went through."

"I just feel so different from everybody else, like I can't relate to other kids my age."

"That's why it's so important that you keep going to counseling."

"You really think a shrink can help me?"

"Yeah, I do. You just have to find the counselor who's right for you."

He sighed. "I hate feeling like this all the time. It gets old, you know? Sometimes I think it would have been better if I'd just died on the street. I wish Razi had never found me and taken me in."

I stepped closer to him, and this time he didn't flinch away. "Tad, you're not thinking about doing anything stupid, are you?"

He arched an eyebrow. "Like what? Blowing my brains out? Jumping in front of a bus? Slicing my wrists?" He gave a cynical snort at my concerned expression. "Relax, Killian. I'm not gonna off myself. I said it would have been better if I'd died on the street, not that I'm going to kill myself now."

"Look, I'm sorry, but if someone I care about hints that he's thinking about committing suicide, I take it seriously."

He studied my face intently. "You really care about me?"

I tipped my head to one side. "Of course I do."

"Why?"

"What?"

"Why? Why do you give a shit about me? You'd never even seen me before I spilled the beans about your boyfriend at Michelangelo's last year. Then you go out of your way to help me, finding a place for me to live with your own dad. I've never done anything but cause you grief, yet you still say you care about me. I don't get it."

I shook my head. "Why does anyone care about another person? You want a simple answer, and I don't have one. There was just something... That day in Razi's apartment when you told me your story, I felt a connection with you. We went through so much of the same stuff. In my case, though, Adam was there for me when I needed someone, and I never forget how lucky I was. I wanted to do the same for you." I stopped and shrugged. "I guess I did a pretty shitty job of it, huh?"

He frowned. "Why would you say that?"

"I've not been very good about making time for you."

"It's not like you're my dad or something." He paused. "For the record, I don't think you screwed anything up. You're the only reason I'm even trying instead of just saying fuck it."

I gave him a small smile.

"Although, I wouldn't mind spending more time with you," he added with a cheeky grin.

I laughed. "How about if we make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?" he asked guardedly.

"I'll try to spend more time hanging out with you if you'll try harder to find a therapist you like."

He pretended to think about it for a few seconds, then nodded. "Okay, you've got a deal, but I'm going to hold you to it."

"Likewise, sweetheart."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Sweetheart?"

I grabbed him in a hug. "Yes, I called you sweetheart, and you're gonna like it."

"Hey, there you are," Mom called, as if she hadn't been watching the whole time from the other side of the ocelot cage. "I was wondering where you two had gone."

She rejoined us, and we continued meandering through the zoo.

At one point, Mom gave Tad a few dollars and asked him to get us all some more drinks from the soda machine. As soon as he ran off, she turned to me. "Is everything okay?"

I watched his retreating back and thought about her question.

"I think it will be."

"You guys seemed to be having a pretty intense conversation."

"We were. Every time I start to think we're getting somewhere, though, he seems to withdraw. I hope I broke through this time."

Mom slipped an arm around my waist. "Just don't get discouraged if he pulls away again. After all he's been through, it can't be easy on him. Despite his occasionally surly attitude, I really like him."

"He likes you too. He said it was nice knowing what it's like to have a mom."

Emotion welled up in Mom's eyes as we watched him jog towards us juggling two bottles of soda and water.

"Poor kid," she whispered.

He reached us and eyed Mom warily while he handed out the drinks. "Are you okay, Mrs. Kendall?"

Mom smiled and blinked away her tears. "I'm fine. I think something blew in my eye. And no more of this Mrs. Kendall business. Call me Meg."

He ducked his head and nodded shyly. I was amazed at how differently he reacted around her.

After the zoo, we strolled through the park, then drove to the mall and puttered around there for a while. Tad admired a shirt in one of the stores, and Mom insisted on buying it for him. He thanked her a dozen times before we reached the car.

We got back to the beach house a little after six. Although it was strangely quiet inside, I could hear music playing in the backyard.

"I guess they decided to move dinner to the deck," Mom said.

She went out the back door with Tad and me trailing behind, then stepped aside.

I froze in my tracks as a loud chorus of "Surprise!" greeted me. I looked around in open-mouthed shock at a sea of grinning faces. I'd known Adam was up to something, but his was way more than I'd ever expected. It seemed as if everyone I knew was there: Adam and Steve, Kane and his girlfriend Lila, Novak and Judy, Jake, Will, Ilana and her husband Lysander with their three-year-old daughter Melody, even Chris Silver, who I hadn't seen since I'd closed the Fenton Black case.

Mom grabbed my wrist and dragged me from the house. Tad slipped out behind me and moved off to one side. I glanced over to see him retreat behind his mask of indifference once more. I wanted to make sure he was included, but I was quickly caught up in the whirlwind of birthday wishes, despite being a week early.

"The food is getting cold. Everybody eat!" Adam bellowed, cutting the well-wishes short.

He'd prepared a huge meal. Looking at the amount of barbequed chicken on the table, I sincerely hoped he'd had help. Everyone started filling their plates chatting happily.

I was balancing a plate while trying to eat when Will approached. I sat the plate on the rail as Will gave me a huge hug

"Hey!" I said. "It's really good to see you. Sorry I've been missing in action lately."

He shook his head, smiling, "No worries. You're a hot shot detective now. I feel like every time I turn around, you're all over the news again on some big case."

I laughed. "It's not that often. It's happened like once. Maybe twice."

"At least three times, by my count. I'm surprised Netflix hasn't wanted to make a show about you yet."

"Oh please. Like that would ever happen. Besides, I'd turn it down even if it did. That would completely blow my ability to go undercover."

Novak was standing nearby and must have overheard our conversation. He turned toward us with an arched eyebrow. "Oh really? You'd turn down millions to keep getting hit in the head by shovels?"

"That only happened once!"

Will laughed. "Which is once more than the vast majority of people can say."

I shrugged with a grin. "Fair enough. But what's going on with you? Anything new?"

"Nope. Same old."

"Not even seeing anyone?"

He blinked and looked away for a second. "I go on a date now and then, but nothing serious. But anyway, enough about that. I'm boring. All I do is paint and work. You need to go make the rounds, bask in being the guest of honor."

I knew he was just trying to avoid the subject, but I took pity on him and let it drop. Will had been very briefly married to my cousin Aidan, before Aidan was murdered on their wedding night.

"Okay, but we need to hang out soon."

He nodded and moved off toward Adam and Steve.

I joined a little group consisting of Jake, Adam, Kane and Lila. Jake was midsentence as I walked up. "...so I start school there in the fall."

"Start school where?" I asked.

"Oh, hey Killian. I got accepted to Van Rensselaer," he said with a proud grin.

"Holy shit! Congratulations! Where's that?"

"Albany, in upstate New York."

"Oh wow. I'm going to miss you, but that's awesome."

I remembered he'd mentioned he was looking at a school in New York, but I hadn't known he'd made his final choice. I only hoped things would work out for him. Albany was pretty far away, and he wouldn't know anyone up there.

Jake turned to Kane. "What about you? Do you know where you're going yet?"

"Lila and I are going to St. Mary's." St. Mary's College was a small liberal-arts college in southern Maryland. That, too, was news to me. I wondered when they had decided that, then realized it must mean they were pretty serious about each other. They had been dating since they'd met at a Halloween dance sponsored by the gay/straight alliance at my university the previous fall—a relationship record for Kane.

How had I missed out on so much of my friends' lives? Was I *that* caught up in work and school? This party was meant to be a celebration, but instead it was making me feel disconnected.

I pushed the thought aside, but vowed to return to it later. For the moment, I just needed to have fun and enjoy seeing everyone.

After dinner, everyone stood around talking in small groups. I was chatting with Jake, learning more about the school he'd chosen when I saw Chris break away from Novak and Judy to refill her glass. Since I'd been waiting all evening for a moment alone with her, I quickly excused myself from Jake and made my way to her side.

"Hey." I held out my glass. "Mind topping me off as well?"

She grinned and started to pour the soda. "Somehow, I don't think we're each other's type."

I laughed. "How've you been?"

"I've been good, although life has been pretty boring since you stopped coming around. How about you?"

"We've been too busy to get bored."

"So I've heard."

"Really? You've been talking to Novak?"

"Well, you know, he called to invite me to this shindig," she said vaguely. "Were you surprised?"

"I stopped by earlier this afternoon, and everyone was acting funny, so I figured something was up, but I didn't expect all this." I indicated the whole group with a sweep of my hand. "I especially didn't expect to see you."

"Hey, it's your birthday, and I haven't seen you in months!"

"Technically, my birthday is next week."

"Yeah, well, your party is now, so go have fun."  
She gave me a little shove back towards the others.

I looked around and noticed Tad sitting on the steps going down to the beach, his back to the rest of us. I started towards him, then noticed Kane was momentarily alone while Lila was busy playing with Melody.

An idea began to form in my mind and I detoured over to the corner where he sat.

"Hey!" I dropped into the chair next to him.

He grinned over at me. "Did we get you?"

I grinned back. "Yeah, you guys got me. I totally didn't expect this, even after finding out Mom was here."

He snorted. "Some detective you are."

"In my defense, I had other things on my mind."

"Like what?"

I nodded in Tad's direction. Kane glanced over and his expression soured.

"Yeah, he seems to be messing everything up these days."

"I didn't say he messed anything up. What's with you anyway? You always seem to be on his case."

"Somebody needs to be."

"Why don't you stop giving him a hard time and try to be his friend?"

"I did try. He made it crystal clear he wasn't interested. I can't stand how ungrateful he is."

"Give him a break. He's been through a lot."

"So? That doesn't give him an excuse to be a jerk to Dad all the time. Besides, you went through a lot of shit too, and you're not like that."

"First off, everybody is different. We don't all react to things the same. More importantly, he's been through a lot more than I have. I had total support from your dad when I got kicked out. Tad had none. I never had to live on the street. I never had to hustle to survive. I never had to practically be a sex slave just to have a roof over my head. I never—"

"Okay, I get the point. He's had a shitty deal. Still, he doesn't even try."

"He's scared of getting hurt again, so he doesn't let anyone close. He's a good kid, though, under all that. I've had a couple of good talks with him today. I think he might start to make more of an effort now, but he's going to need a lot of help and understanding. He doesn't have any friends, and he feels really disconnected because of everything he's been through. He could really use your support. You're in the best position to reach out to him. I mean, you guys share a room. How hard have you tried?"

He shrugged guiltily. "Probably not as hard as I could have."

"Then why not start making up for it now?" I nodded in Tad's direction again.

Kane made a face, but pushed himself out of his chair, walked slowly over to Tad, and sat down next to him. Tad looked up, surprise registering on his face when he saw who it was. I hoped Kane would say the right things and Tad would be receptive.

I looked around the deck from my unobserved spot in the corner. Novak and Judy were deep in conversation with Lysander, while Adam, Steve and Will chatted in another group. Ilana and Mom were

standing near where Lila still played with Melody. Chris and Jake were having an animated exchange by the drinks table, Jake's hands waving in the air as Chris laughed at something he was saying. Everyone seemed happily engrossed in their respective conversations.

A sudden lump formed in my throat as a wave of longing washed over me. I missed Micah. It seemed wrong that he wasn't here with us—or, more exactly, here with me. I wondered how long Adam had been planning this, and if Micah had intended to come before our breakup. Was he sitting at home thinking about me right now too?

I stood up quickly, turning my back to the crowd and leaning over the rail to hide the tears in my eyes.

I was still struggling to regain control of my emotions when I felt a hand on my back. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to look up and see Mom watching me with a concerned expression.

"You okay?"

I shrugged.

"Missing someone?"

I bit my lip and nodded.

She pulled me close and kissed the top of my head. "It's okay, baby. You guys were together for quite a while. It's natural for you to miss him during something like this. Come on, let's take a walk."

She slipped her hand into mine and led me past Tad and Kane—who were so deep in conversation they barely noticed us enough to shift out of the way—and down onto the beach.

"What exactly happened between you guys? You glossed over all that earlier."

I quickly filled her in about Micah's job offer, how he'd asked me to move in with him, Asher's unexpected appearance on the scene, and how Micah had encouraged me to go out with Asher. She winced when I told her about kissing Asher and shook her head sadly as I relived the breakup with Micah. I was amazed I managed to get through all of it without going to pieces.

"So, Micah's taking the job in New York now?" she asked when I'd finished.

"As far as I know."

"In that case, I suppose there's no real chance you'll get back together."

"I sure don't see how."

"Would you want to even if you could?"

I hesitated a second while I considered her question. "Honestly, I don't know. I love Micah, but I don't think we're in the same place right now, and that's not going to change anytime soon."

She nodded. "I think you're right. You are only eighteen—well, nineteen next week. I think that's a little young to be settling down just yet, especially considering you've never quite had the chance to be yourself outside a relationship. You pretty much went directly from Asher to Micah. Speaking of Asher, what are you going to do about him?"

"I don't know. I haven't even spoken to him since the kiss."

"Are you avoiding him?"

"Not really. I've just been busy with the case and all." I paused. "Well, maybe I have been avoiding him a little. I haven't gone out of my way to talk to him, but as far as I know, he hasn't tried to contact me either."

"What if he did try to talk to you? It sounds like he's made it pretty clear he wants to pick up where you guys left off. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know!" I whined. "I don't know what I want anymore. What do you think I should do?"

Mom gave me a look. "I can't make your decisions for you, Killian."

"I know that, but...don't you have any motherly advice?"

She laughed softly. "That I can do, I suppose. Since you asked, I think maybe you ought to take a little time for yourself. As I said, you haven't been on your own since you were sixteen. Date some different guys, go out and have fun—just enjoy yourself. You only get to be young once."

She looked out over the ocean, and I wondered if she was thinking about her lost youth. She'd gotten pregnant with me when she was very young and had been forced into an unhappy marriage with my father.

I laid my hand gently on her arm. "I know you gave up a lot for me. I hope you know how much I appreciate it."

She turned back to me with a proud smile. "This isn't about me, but since you mentioned it, you're damn right I gave up a lot for you." Her eyes twinkled. "And for the record, I'd do it all again for the privilege of having a son like you." She pulled me into a quick hug, then released me. "But back to your relationship dilemma, I do think maybe you should just take some time for yourself. Try being alone for a while."

I shrugged. "I dunno. Alone is pretty lonely. I'm not sure how much I like it."

She started to say something, but at that moment we heard Adam yelling for us. "The party's not over yet. Come on back up here."

I figured he must be referring to the gift portion of the evening and decided to make some sort of disclaimer as we approached. "Guys, I really appreciate everyone's coming out just for me, but you really don't have to give me a bunch of presents."

"Who said anything about presents?" Adam quipped, and everyone laughed. "You'll get yours when it really is your birthday, and not before. Tonight is actually about something else."

"What do you mean?" I'd thought I had it all figured out, and then another curveball came my way.

"Well, I'll let your boss explain. Shane?"

Novak stepped forward with a small smirk. "You know, I think we really pulled one over on him. Killian, when you came to work for me a year ago, I never thought we'd be where we are right now—in the middle of expanding our offices while doing more business than I ever dreamed. In large part, that success is because of you."

I wondered where he was going with this. All eyes were on me as I shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

"Friday, you went to qualify for your gun permit, the last step of applying for your private investigator's license. All that takes several weeks to process, but I've spoken with a friend, who's assured me that you will definitely be approved."

A feeling of relief washed over me. I hadn't even realized I'd been that nervous about not getting my license. I felt a smile spread across my face.

"But that's not all," Novak continued. "I've decided to make a few more changes at the agency. Besides expanding into the space next door to give you your own office, I'm going to change the name of the business."

"To what?" I asked.

"How does Kendall and Novak Investigations sound?"

I gasped as my mouth dropped open. It took me a few seconds to find my voice. "W-w-what?"

"Yeah, I know I should technically be first since I'm older, wiser, more experienced, and better looking, but Novak and Kendall Investigations just doesn't have the same ring, you know?"

I stared at him in astonishment, completely at a loss for words. Novak just grinned back at me.

"So what do you say?" he asked after a few seconds. "Will you be my partner in fighting crime?"

"Yes!"

Everyone burst into cheering and clapping as Novak strode across the deck and pumped my hand, then leaned in to whisper, "Why do I feel like we just got engaged?"

I laughed and threw my arms around him in an impulsive hug.

Novak hugged me back, then stepped away and held up his hands to get everyone's attention. "Just one more thing, and then I promise to shut up so you can get back to partying."

Everyone laughed.

"As many of you know, Killian and I have also been interviewing for the position of receptionist slash assistant. So far, the most qualified person we've seen made Charles Manson look well adjusted. I'd just about given up when I had one of my famous brilliant ideas. I made a couple of calls, the person I asked thought it over thoroughly, and then agreed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you to our new assistant at Kendall and Novak Investigations: Chris Silver."

Once again, I found myself gaping like a fool as Chris stepped forward, gave me a wink, and took a little bow.

"And now, back to your regularly scheduled party."

I was quickly surrounded as everyone tried to congratulate me at once. I attempted to be gracious, but my head was spinning. All I wanted was to talk to Chris. After a few minutes of niceties with the others, I managed to grab her by the wrist and drag her off to one side.

"You're really coming to work with us?"

She grinned. "That's what the boss said."

"But what about school? And your family?"

"I'm going to transfer down here for school. It's not a big deal. In fact, we'll probably be in a lot of the same classes. After working with you on the Fenton Black case, I realized I liked playing detective, and the idea of becoming a cop lost a lot of its charm. I've seen the bureaucratic crap Dad has to put up with—dealing

with superiors, jumping through hoops, and mountains of paperwork."

I decided not to mention the mountains of paperwork I'd been dealing with the last few weeks.

"As for my family, after Novak called, I talked it over in depth with Dad and Kevin. They both support my decision. Dad said it was time for me to go out on my own. Kevin's old enough to take care of himself, and Dad will probably be retiring in the next year or so anyway. So...it's all settled. I'll be your new assistant."

I frowned.

"What?" Her expression became concerned.

"You don't want to work with me?"

"No! I mean, I do want to work with you, but are you sure you're going to be happy just being an assistant? You're going to be stuck in the office an awful lot."

"I thought about that. Of course I'd rather be out helping with the investigations, but Novak promised I'll get to do some of that too. I won't always be stuck in the office. In the meantime, I'll be getting valuable training from both of you, and if everything goes according to plan, one day I'll receive my license and join on as a full investigator."

"Well, if you're sure of what you're getting into, then I think it's awesome. I can't imagine a better person for the job, even if you are a bit overqualified."

She laughed and gave me a hug.

Just then, Novak joined us. "Glad to see you two are getting along. Killian, I hope you're not mad I hired Chris without talking to you first."

"Not at all. I think she's terrific for the position."

"Great! I—"

My cell phone rang, cutting him off midsentence. I didn't recognize the number, so I figured I'd better take the call. I held up a finger and moved farther away from the crowd.

"Is this Killian Kendall?" a female voice asked.

"Yes, it is. May I ask who is calling?"

"This is Charlene Howard. I just returned from out of town and received your message."

"Professor Howard, thank you for getting in touch."

"You said this had something to do with Quinn's death?"

"Yes. I'm a private investigator. I was hired to look into some thefts that had occurred at the archaeological site, but when Professor Healy was murdered, the two cases kind of merged. Would you be willing to talk to me about Professor Healy?"

"I don't know how much I'll be able to help, but I'll do anything I can to catch whoever did this. Quinn was like a son to me." Her voice sounded a bit shaky.

"I'm terribly sorry, Professor Howard."

"I am too. Why don't you come by my house tomorrow morning?"

"I can do that. What time would be good for you?"

"Let's say ten? Is that too early?"

"That's perfect."

After she gave me directions to her house, I stood staring down at the phone in my hand, hoping she would be able to help. You never knew where you might uncover the one bit of information that would change

everything, the one puzzle piece that made all the others fall into place. Maybe Professor Howard would provide that clue.

## Chapter 24

I arrived at Professor Howard's at ten sharp the following morning. She lived in a relatively new development just outside of town, one of those planned communities with a pretentious-sounding name and huge homes set on generous lots. This one was ironically named Blue Heron Heights, despite the fact that there were no herons—or even a body of water—in sight. The lack of mature trees made the yards look oddly flat and empty despite the oversize houses.

The professor's home, an attractive two-story with attached garage, was one of the more modest dwellings on the street.

As I raised my hand to knock, the door swung open to reveal an attractive, trim, older woman with short, steel-gray hair, wearing a black pantsuit, a voluminous black scarf and an inscrutable expression. She stared at me over her half-glasses in a way that made me feel as if I were a student who had misbehaved in her class.

"Hello, I'm Killian Kendall. You must be Professor Howard."

She shook my hand cordially, although her smile was reserved. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Won't you come in?"

She led me into a formal living room where all the furniture was upholstered in a creamy woven fabric. Even the carpet was the same shade of off-white. She offered me a seat, and I perched gingerly on the edge of the cushion, afraid I'd smudge the fabric.

Professor Howard looked me over. "You're younger than I expected."

I smiled. "I hear that a lot."

"You don't look any older than the students I used to teach."

"I'm not. I just finished my freshman year at Pemberton."

She seemed flabbergasted. "And you're already a private investigator?"

"Yes, ma'am. I knew what I wanted to do and was fortunate enough to find someone willing to take me on as an apprentice."

"I'm impressed. Good for you."

"Thank you."

"Have you solved any cases I would know of?"

"Are you familiar with the Fenton Black case?"

Her eyes lit up. "That was you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well! Now I'm even more impressed. And you're investigating Quinn's death?"

"Yes. As I said last night on the phone, I was initially hired to look into the looting. Now it seems as if the thefts, Professor Healy's murder, and the death of one of his students over the weekend may be connected."

She raised a hand to her mouth. "Someone else died?"

"You hadn't heard? I'm sorry. I just assumed..."

"I've been in Chicago speaking at a conference. It ended yesterday, and I didn't get home until last evening just before I returned your call. The only reason I even knew Quinn had been killed was because a colleague

called to tell me. I haven't heard any news since I spoke to the police last week. Who died?"

"Her name was Bridget Foxwell. She was one of Professor Healy's students and a volunteer for the excavation. It appears she was killed while checking on the site for Dr. Pike."

Professor Howard shook her head. "Foxwell? I didn't know her. How did it happen?"

"She was shot."

She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she reopened them, sadness clouded her expression. "This is terrible. I'll do whatever I can to help you. What do you need to know?"

"What can you tell me about Professor Healy?"

"Quinn was a brilliant archaeologist, highly respected in our field. He could have picked practically any university in the country at which to teach, but he chose Pemberton because he grew up in this area and was fascinated with the local tribes."

"How did you meet him?"

"He was my student, then later my assistant. We became friends, and eventually he grew to be like a son to my husband and me. He helped us move into this house a couple of years ago, then stayed with me when my husband died suddenly a month later. I don't think I could have gotten through that difficult time without him."

I couldn't help noticing how her experience with Healy differed from that of almost everyone else to whom I'd spoken.

As if reading my thoughts, she said, "Many people didn't get along with Quinn. He had a rather

prickly personality and was very much a perfectionist. He could be quite blunt and even a little arrogant at times, but he was a good person."

"Did he confide in you?"

"Sometimes. He wasn't close to his parents, so I was sort of a surrogate mother figure."

"Did he ever mention the looting?"

"We spoke about it a few times, yes. In fact, he called me in Chicago the day before he was murdered. He was very perturbed that something like that was happening right under his nose. He took it quite personally."

"Did he suspect anyone in particular?"

"He didn't mention anyone by name."

"But he did have an idea?"

"He seemed to think it was someone on his crew."

"Do you remember any comment he might have made that would give us an indication of who he suspected?"

She thought for a moment, then shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry. He didn't say anything specific. He was just venting his frustration."

"Have you met the members of his crew?"

"I know Dr. Pike, but none of the students. It's been several years since I actually had anything to do with the university."

"What can you tell me about Dr. Pike?"

"Elyse is a competent archaeologist, maybe even an excellent one, but she was overshadowed by Quinn's personality. She seemed very loyal to him, although I could never tell just how ambitious she was. It's

relatively rare for women to reach positions of authority in our field, and when they do, it's difficult to get our male colleagues to take us seriously. Archaeology is still very much an old boys' club. If I were in her place, I imagine I would have felt as if Quinn was holding me back. So far as I know, however, she never showed any indication of such an attitude. Either way, I think she'll blossom now that she's out of his shadow."

"You think she'll be offered Professor Healy's position at the college?"

"I think it's a safe bet. She's paid her dues working under Quinn for years. It would be quite a scandal if they brought in someone from another school. They'd have to have some concrete reasons not to promote Elyse."

"What about the other crew members? May I read you their names and see if you recognize any of them?"

"Feel free, but I can't promise anything."

I read off the list. The only one even vaguely familiar to her was Susan Urban.

"I've heard Quinn speak of her. She was a particularly promising graduate student, I believe. He hadn't mentioned her recently, though."

With that, I was pretty much out of questions. I thanked her for her time and told her to call me if she thought of anything else. I left feeling somewhat disappointed that I'd learned so little. Sure, she'd said that Healy suspected one of his crew, but so did I. And it was just a suspicion. Hardly earth-shattering information. Without a name or specific information, it didn't move me farther along in my investigation at all.

Since it was still fairly early, I decided to interview the council members. At least the day wouldn't be a total waste. I entered the first address into my GPS and set off to speak with Hollis Landon.

The tribe's chief lived well out in the country on a sprawling farm, the centerpiece of which was a well-maintained nineteenth-century farmhouse. Mrs. Landon answered my knock and told me her husband was "in the big barn out back."

Accompanied by their affable, overweight black Lab, I walked toward the hulking white structure, where I found Mr. Landon standing on a ladder working on the motor of an enormous tractor.

When he saw me, his face creased into a smile. "Killian, it's good to see you. How's the investigation going?"

"Actually, Mr. Landon, that's why I'm here."

"None of that Mr. Landon stuff. Call me Hollis. And what can I do for you?"

"I was hoping you'd have a few minutes to talk to me. I won't take up too much of your time."

He chuckled. "Take up as much as you want." He gestured towards the tractor. "That thing's not going anywhere."

He climbed down and wiped his hands on a rag he pulled from his back pocket. From the looks of the rag, it was probably adding more dirt than it was removing.

"I appreciate your help," I said.

"Anything to get to the bottom of this nasty mess. Have you heard any more about the girl that was killed out there over the weekend?"

"No, I haven't."

"That was a real shame. She was so young." He shook his head sadly. "Now then, what did you need to talk to me about?"

"Do you have any idea who could be behind all this?"

"You know, I've been thinking about it a lot, and I can't come up with a single person who would kill someone like that. It just doesn't make sense."

"People kill for a lot of reasons, few of which make sense to other people. Leaving out the whole killing aspect for a minute, do you know anyone who would benefit from sabotaging the excavation?"

"Is that what you believe was behind the looting?"

"I don't know yet, but it's one possibility."

While he turned the idea over, he rubbed his chin, leaving a black smudge behind. "I just have no idea," he finally admitted.

"I've heard some of the tribe members were against allowing the excavation."

"Well now, that's true, but I honestly can't see any of them going to such an extreme."

"Was there any one person leading the opposition?"

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't that organized. Whatever the case, the most outspoken was definitely Gordon Wallace. Again, as insufferable as he can be, I seriously doubt he would ever resort to violence."

"Do you think he'd be capable of sabotage?"

"You mean, stealing the artifacts in order to close down the project? I suppose I could see him doing that if

he convinced himself it was for the good of the tribe. I just can't see him killing someone in cold blood, though."

"If he was the one stealing the artifacts and Healy caught him in the act, he might have panicked."

"That would explain the stabbing, but not the shooting."

"Is there anyone else you can think of that might have something to do with all this?"

"The police seem to suspect Jacy Elliott. For the record, I think that's utter garbage."

"I agree, which is why it's all the more important that I uncover the real identity of the killer."

"I hope to God we're right. I think it would kill Fletcher if Jacy did have anything to do with it."

"I'm pretty certain we're safe there. I only hope I can find the killer before Jacy gets railroaded."

"I'm sorry I wasn't more help."

"That's okay. To be honest, I really don't think either the looting or the murders are directly connected to the tribe. I'm just trying to cover all the bases."

He smiled. "It's good to see such thoroughness."

"I'd like to interview the other council members as well. When do you think would be the best time to catch them?"

"Celia, that's Miss Vessey, you can most likely catch at home anytime. She doesn't leave the house much except to attend church and to get her hair done on Tuesdays. Are schools out yet?"

I nodded.

"Then Eldora will probably be at home as well. Lord knows, she never goes anywhere. You'd most likely

catch Gordon at his office. He's there more than he's home."

"I don't even know where he works."

"He's a city employee in the Public Works Department. Do you know where the Government Office Building is downtown?"

"Yes, I do. You've been a big help. Thank you, Mr... I mean, Hollis."

He grinned. "No, thank you, Killian. You're doing a fine job. I think we made the right decision when we hired you."

"I appreciate your faith in me. Let's hope it's well-founded."

"Oh, I have a feeling it is." He shook my hand, leaving me with a greasy palm.

I drove to Miss Vessey's next since she lived closest to the Landons. Her house turned out to be a small bungalow set on a neat, well-tended lawn that was more flower garden than grass.

As I was climbing out of my car, her front door swung open and a young man around my age stepped out. He was wearing a pair of skimpy running shorts and a form-fitting tank-top that showed off much of his darkly tanned body to its best effect. He stopped in his tracks when he noticed me, and unhurriedly looked me over, raking his eyes from my head to my feet, then back to my face. He must have liked what he saw, for his lips curved up in a predatory smile.

"Hello," he said. "I was just about to go for a run. Can I help you with anything?" His tone implied that there were several things he'd like to help me with, none of which were mentionable in polite conversation.

"My name is Killian Kendall. I'm looking for Miss Celia Vessey," I responded in my most professional manner.

"Granny Vessey? She's around back working in her garden." He tipped his head to one side and gave me what he obviously thought was a seductive smile. "Are you sure there's nothing I can help you with?"

"You already have. Is it alright if I just walk around to the backyard?"

Frustration briefly flashed through his eyes before he nodded. "Sure. Would you like me to show you?"

I was pretty sure I could find Miss Vessey on my own. However, it was obvious I wasn't going to lose this guy quite that easily, so I agreed.

He grinned and, with a gesture indicating I should follow him, started towards the backyard. I followed his pert bubble-butt, which he was swishing so hard I was a little worried he might dislocate something. He led me around the house and across the yard toward a large vegetable garden. Miss Vessey was sitting on a low stool with her back to us, bent over a small plant.

"Granny," the boy called out. "Someone's here to see you."

Miss Vessey sat up and looked over her shoulder. "Killian," she greeted me warmly.

"Hello, Miss Vessey. How are you today?"

"I'm wonderful, thank you. I'm never happier than when I have my hands in the dirt. Makes me feel connected to the Earth. I see you met my grandson, Skye." She threw him a meaningful glance. "Thanks for showing Killian back, Skye."

"My pleasure," he said with a brilliant smile in my direction. Miss Vessey had clearly dismissed him, but he wasn't quite ready to give up yet. "Is there anything I can get for you before I leave?" He seemed to be directing the question to his grandmother, but his eyes never left me.

"We're fine," Miss Vessey said firmly. "You go ahead and take your run so Killian and I can talk."

His face clearly showed his disappointment, but he slowly backed away, then turned and jogged off.

Miss Vessey watched after Skye with a mixture of amusement and annoyance on her face. She shook her head. "I don't know what to do with that boy. He's a bit of a wild one. He asked to live with me this summer because he said he didn't want to move back in with his parents after a year away at college. I think he really believed I'd be more lenient. If so, he's been sadly disappointed." She chuckled. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your company?"

"I had a few questions for you concerning the case."

She nodded once. "I thought that might be it. I hope you'll excuse me if I don't get up. It's easier to just stay down once I'm here." She smiled and winked.

I grinned at her. "You're fine."

"Sure, laugh at me now, but just wait until you're my age!" She cackled. "So, what questions do you have to ask me? Wait, first crouch down here so I don't have to break my neck looking at you."

I squatted next to her. "I'm talking to everyone on the council. I just came from seeing Mr. Landon. I was

hoping you'd have some ideas about who might be behind the looting."

Her expression became quite serious. "And the murders?"

"Well, yes."

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. After a few moments, she shook her head. "I really don't. I wish I could help you, but I can't think of a soul. If it had stopped at the looting, I might have suspected Gordon Wallace, but as much as I dislike the man, I can't see him killing someone."

"That's pretty much what Fletcher and Mr. Landon said as well. What about others in the tribe? Would any of them want to stop the project enough to resort to sabotage? It's possible the murders and the looting are unconnected."

"Possible, but not likely, I'd say. Besides Gordon and a few of his cronies, no one really cared enough about it one way or the other to even show up for the meetings when we discussed it. This is just my opinion, of course, and I'm no seer, but I don't think you'll find an Indian behind this."

"What makes you say that? Anything specific?"

She gave me a small smile. "No, just call it the gut feeling of a crazy old lady."

"I don't think you're crazy at all. We have to rely on intuition quite a bit in my line of work. To be honest, I have a hunch you're right. I'm just talking to everyone to be sure I've covered all the bases."

"Sounds like a good policy. I wish I could have been more helpful."

"You were very helpful."

She swatted at me playfully. "Don't lie. It's unbecoming for a handsome young man like you."

"Now, now, Miss Vessey, flattery will get you anywhere."

She laughed. "Killian, if I were a few decades younger, I'd be drooling over you like my fool grandson. Now get going before I decide I'm not too old after all."

Before I left for my next interview, my stomach reminded me that it was almost lunchtime. However, I decided to wait until after I'd seen Eldora Little. She lived in one of the many tiny hamlets that dot the Eastern Shore, hardly more than a collection of houses. It didn't even rate its own zip code.

A timid voice called from behind the closed door in response to my knock: "Who is it?"

"Killian Kendall, Miss Little."

"Who?"

"Killian Kendall, the investigator the council hired." I felt a bit silly yelling for the whole neighborhood to hear, but what could I do?

I heard several lock bolts slide back. A few seconds later, the door opened to the limit of a safety chain so Eldora could peer out at me. Seeing I was who I claimed to be, she allowed me to step inside.

I made it as far as her entryway, and that was it. Our conversation was brief and fruitless. The same questions I'd asked Hollis Landon and Celia Vessey, and the same responses. She knew nothing, didn't listen to gossip, and had no idea who could do such a terrible thing. The most interesting part of the conversation came when I asked about Gordon Wallace and she flushed a fetching shade of crimson. It was clear Eldora had a

crush on the loathsome Wallace, but if she knew anything else, she hid it well. I wondered how she survived as a teacher, since she seemed like someone who could be bullied by a kindergartener.

On my way back into town, I stopped at a fast-food restaurant and grabbed some lunch. Then I drove to the Government Office Building, where the pleasant young receptionist in the Department of Public Works greeted me cheerfully. "Hi. May I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Mr. Wallace, please."

"Is he expecting you?"

"No, I didn't make an appointment."

"I'll check and see if he's available. And your name?"

"Killian Kendall."

She picked up the phone and hit a series of numbers, then announced to Wallace that I was there to see him. She hung up and gave me a bright smile. "He'll be right out."

Sure enough, less than a minute later, a door off to one side opened and Wallace stood there glaring at me. He didn't seem as happy to see me as the receptionist had been. He jerked his head over his shoulder and growled an unwelcoming, "Come on."

I followed him through a maze of cubicles until we reached his. A computer sat on a smallish desk with a single swivel chair behind it. There was only one more place to sit, a piece of uncomfortable-looking, molded-plastic furniture. Wallace took the desk chair without offering me the other one. I sat down anyway.

"I only have a few minutes. If this is about the excavation, I don't know what I can tell you, except that I wasn't in favor of it."

"That was my understanding. Can you tell me why you were so against it?"

"I feel it's wrong to allow a bunch of white folks who have no respect for our culture to go digging through our ancestors' graves."

"Even if it means you could learn more about your ancestors?"

"What's there to learn from a few bones?"

"Quite a bit, actually. A skilled archeologist can figure out what their lives were like—"

"What difference does that make today? I say just let them rest in peace."

"Mr. Wallace, do you have any idea who could have been looting the site?"

"I have no clue. I wish I did know who it was. It makes me sick to think of someone stealing our history. I'd like a few minutes alone with him, if you know what I mean." He smiled nastily, a malicious glint in his eyes.

I had a feeling I did know what he meant, and I didn't like it. "Did you ever meet Professor Healy?"

"Unfortunately. He attended a meeting when we were discussing whether or not to allow him to dig."

"And that was the only time?"

"Yeah."

"You never visited the site?"

"Absolutely not. I had no desire to see that desecration."

The interview was going nowhere fast. I decided to try a few more questions, though if he kept up his antagonistic attitude, I'd have to give up.

"There is some suspicion that the looter might be someone from the tribe trying to sabotage the excavation. Do you have any theories about that?"

"If you're referring to Lily Snyder's patently ridiculous accusation against me—"

"I just meant in general."

"Nobody from the tribe would stoop so low as to steal from our ancestors' graves. No self-respecting Native American would do that. As much as I hate to admit it, I don't even think Jacy Elliott would be capable of such a thing."

For once, I actually agreed with him. "Well, if you think of anything that might be helpful, I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a call."

"The sooner it's all over, the better, as far as I'm concerned. The only good thing to come out of this mess is that at least we'll finally close down the excavation."

I wasn't so sure, but I wasn't about to contradict him.

I returned to the office and wrote up my notes from the day's interviews. Novak wasn't around, and I was uninterrupted as I worked, so it didn't take long. I sighed in frustration. As far as I could tell, the only useful bit of information I'd discovered was that Healy suspected someone from his crew, but I didn't know why or whom.

I pushed my notes aside and started packing the contents of my desk into boxes so when the furniture for

my new office arrived, I could move in right away. As I was finishing up, my phone rang.

"Hey, Killian." It was Jacy.

"Hey. What's up?"

"I just wanted to check in with you about the stakeout last night. I would have called earlier, but I had to work."

In all the excitement of Mom's visit and the surprise party, I'd completely forgotten about our agreement to watch the site.

"Right. How'd it go?" I hoped I was smooth enough to cover my forgetfulness.

"It was quiet. I didn't see anything. I fell asleep around two or three in the morning, but nothing had happened up to then."

"Great, so it's my turn tonight."

"Yeah. I didn't expect it to be that boring. I hope your night is more exciting than mine was."

I laughed. "Isn't that a curse of some sort? May your life always be exciting?"

"Could be, but if it stays boring, we'll never find out the identity of the looter."

"True. A little excitement might be okay, just not too much."

He laughed. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

I finished up what I was doing and decided to head back to the B&B to change and grab some dinner. I hung around there until it was almost dark, then drove over to Fletcher's house. After checking in to let them know I was leaving my car in their driveway, I set out through the trees. By then, I'd traveled between the

house and the clearing so many times I could find my way easily. If I got lost, all I had to do was open myself up to the emotions of the forest, and the seething anger would draw me towards the site.

I made it to the edge of the clearing and chose a place amidst heavy brush to settle in for my watch. It wasn't long before the cool dampness of the earth started creeping through my bottom. I shifted position as quietly as I could. As darkness fell and the temperature dropped, I found myself not only bored out of my skull, but also chilly and rather miserable.

*Should have worn warmer clothes*, I berated myself.

I noticed that the usual nighttime forest sounds were largely absent. It was almost completely silent. This unnerved me even more than being alone in the middle of the woods in the dark. To make matters worse, the spirits were restless and angry.

Apparently, after my talk with White Deer, I was no longer the target of their scrutiny, but that didn't mean their presence didn't affect me.

As the night wore on, I grew more and more unsettled. I found myself checking my phone every few minutes, which only made the time drag that much more. I was just about ready to throw in the towel and beat a hasty retreat when I heard a twig snap somewhere nearby.

I froze, my heart pounding. I suddenly wished I'd remembered to bring some sort of weapon—pepper spray, a baseball bat, anything. At that moment, I would have settled for a gun.

I strained my eyes in the direction I thought the sound had come from, hoping to glimpse a deer or some other harmless forest creature. For a few agonizing moments, there was nothing but darkness.

Then the moon slid out from behind a bank of clouds, spilling silvery light over the clearing to reveal a furtive human figure at the edge of the tree-line.

Something about the image reminded me of the nightmare I'd had a few days before, and my breath caught in my throat. Was the dream about to come true?

Things had suddenly become a lot more interesting.



## Chapter 25

I sat frozen in fear, my heart pounding in my chest. I didn't even dare to breathe, not wanting to do anything to draw the person's attention. I watched him move cautiously into the clearing.

Something about the way he moved suddenly seemed familiar.

"Pssst, Killian? Are you still here?"

Recognition hit me all at once. It was Jacy. But what was he doing at the excavation?

A sudden, horrible thought occurred to me. What if the police were right and Jacy really was the killer? Maybe he was out here to murder me too. All the pieces suddenly fit. The knife used on Healy belonged to Jacy, who was furious about the mishandling of the excavation and had shown his bad temper that day when he punched the professor. It would make perfect sense for the killer to volunteer to watch the site. What better way to keep an eye on things while throwing suspicion off himself?

Those frantic thoughts careened wildly through my head in an instant. Just as quickly, I swept them away as nonsense.

"Over here," I whispered, causing him to jump.

"You scared the crap out of me," he gasped with an uneasy chuckle. He walked over to my hiding place and crouched down next to me, his breath puffing white in the cold.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked.

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd keep you company."

I was more grateful for his presence than I wanted to admit. The long dark hours alone had crawled under my skin. "You didn't think I could handle it on my own?"

I could see him smile, a flash of white in the moonlight. "I know how lonely it got last night."

"We can't talk. It would scare away the looter."

"I didn't say anything about talking. I'm just here to keep you company. I can go back if you want."

That was the last thing I wanted. "Please don't. I'm glad you came. Maybe we can take turns keeping alert, and when one starts to get tired, the other can take over."

"That works. Do you mind going first?"

"Sure, no problem."

"We should lean against each other," Jacy suggested. "That way one of us can nap while the other one keeps watch."

It was practical. Completely practical. Still, my pulse ticked up a notch.

I shuffled around as quietly as possible so Jacy could settle next to me. As soon as he leaned his shoulder into mine, some of the tension knotting my spine released. His body was warm—solid, grounding.

We lapsed into silence.

A breeze rustled the bare branches overhead. Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted. My unease from earlier was almost gone. Just feeling the warmth of Jacy's body was comforting.

Soon, I felt him relax as his breathing became more even. He twitched a few times and then was still. He'd fallen asleep.

For a while, I stayed alert, scanning the shadows, listening for footsteps or the rustle of someone creeping along the fence line. But my eyes started to get heavy, and the cold settled deep in my muscles. I nudged Jacy awake. "Your turn," I whispered.

He stirred immediately. "Yeah, okay," he mumbled.

I didn't last long after that. Sleep dragged me under fast.

I awoke sometime later, damp and achy. My butt felt like it had fused with the frozen ground. I gave a soft groan as I stretched my legs.

Jacy jerked. "Damn! You scared me again. I think I must have drifted off."

"Some pair we are, sleeping on the job." I checked my phone. It was about one in the morning. "Do you think he'd show up this late?"

"I don't know. Both Healy and Bridget were killed not long after dark, and it was earlier than this when Fletcher was assaulted. You'd think the killer would catch on and come later, when there is less chance of getting caught in the act."

"That's a good point. Maybe there's something that prevents him from coming later."

"Like what?"

"I'm not sure. A job? A roommate or lover who would question a late-night absence?"

"Is that something you can look into?"

"Should be easy enough. I am an investigator, after all."

"At least that's the theory."

I elbowed him sharply, and he stifled a chuckle.

"Do you think there's any point in staying out here?" he asked after a few seconds.

I looked at my phone again. "Maybe just a little longer."

"Cool."

We fell silent once more. The quiet stretched—comfortable, surprisingly—and then Jacy cleared his throat.

"So, um, how are you doing with the breakup and all?"

His unexpected question caught me off guard, and for a moment, I didn't quite know how to respond. The cold suddenly felt sharper against my skin.

"Uh, I guess I'm okay."

"If you have to guess, you must not be sure."

"I mean, I miss him and all, but I'm starting to think that maybe it was for the best."

"Really? How so?"

"I was talking to my mom about this last night at the party—"

"Party?"

"Oh, everyone got together and threw me a surprise party last night."

"Was it your birthday?"

"It's next week, but the party was actually to celebrate my promotion to partner at work."

"Partner? Wow! That's really impressive. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"So you were talking to your mom?"

"Right. She said she thought I would benefit from being on my own for a while. I started dating Asher

when I was sixteen and then began seeing Micah right after Asher and I broke up."

"You mean you've only ever dated two guys?"

"Yep. What about you?"

"You're two up on me."

"Really?" I twisted around to get a better look at him. His face was half-shadow, half-silvered by moonlight. "You've got to be kidding. Didn't you say you came out at sixteen?" He nodded. "And you've never dated a single person?"

"Nope."

"You weren't interested?"

"I wouldn't say I was uninterested. I had a very bad experience when I was still dealing with my sexuality. I met this...guy. He was Native too...and everything I wasn't: confident, openly gay, and very sensual. He flirted with me outrageously, and I fell hard for him. Then I found out he was only interested in me for sex, so I walked away." He laughed softly. "I've always been too principled for my own good."

I laughed with him. "Me too, so don't feel bad."

"At least you're not a nineteen-year-old virgin."

"I was an eighteen-year-old virgin."

It was his turn to twist around toward me. "You dated someone that long without having sex?"

"Yeah. I had some issues, I guess. Don't get me wrong. Asher and I fooled around. We just never actually, you know...did it."

"Asher must have either been really in love with you or he had a lot of patience."

"A little from column A, a little from column B. He still loves me."

"You sound kind of sad about that."

"It's complicated."

"I'm listening."

"Asher showed up a couple of weeks ago. He wants to get back together."

"How is that complicated? Either you want to or you don't."

I gave a humorless snort of laughter. "I wish it was that easy. I don't really know what I want. I think Mom might be right that I could use some time alone. Problem is, I've never actually been all by myself, so the idea kind of scares me. Do you like being single?"

He shrugged. "I'm good at it."

"Just because you're good at something doesn't mean you like it."

"I was content until recently."

"What happened to change that?"

He shrugged again, but this time it was smaller, almost shy. "After my bad experience with Skye, I didn't want to date anyone for a while. Then I moved in with Fletcher. When he started training me as a shaman, I figured I should focus on that without the distraction of other relationships. Now the bulk of my training is pretty much complete, except for the ongoing stuff that you're constantly learning just by living. With more time on my hands and all, well...I've been feeling kind of lonely."

Something he'd said niggled at the back of my mind, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what exactly.

I sighed. "Great. I don't think I'll be very good at being single."

"Just because you don't get back together with Asher or Micah doesn't mean you have to be single. I'm sure there are other guys who would love to date you."

"Wouldn't that kind of defeat the purpose of being alone to figure out who I am?"

"Yeah, I guess it would." He sighed, and I suddenly wondered if he had been hinting that he was one of the guys who were interested in dating me. I didn't know how to tackle that question without embarrassing both of us, so I decided to let it drop.

Suddenly, the thing Jacy had said clicked into place so hard it was almost audible.

"Wait. Did you say the guy you had a bad experience with was named Skye?"

Jacy's head snapped around. Even in the low light, I could see the disbelief on his face.

"Don't tell me you know him..."

"I don't know him," I said slowly, "but I think I might've met him the other day. Does he live with Miss Vessey?"

Jacy frowned, thinking it through. "She's his grandmother, so...possibly. I don't exactly keep tabs on him. Last I heard, he went off to college out of state. I figured he'd stay gone."

"Well, he's back," I said. "And staying with his grandmother for the summer. He practically threw himself at me."

Jacy tipped his head back, letting a wash of silver moonlight illuminate his features. His expression was equal parts resignation and something that looked a lot like protectiveness.

"Yeah," he murmured. "That sounds like him. Skye always knew how to turn on the charm—especially when he wanted something." He let the words hang in the cold air for a moment. "You should be careful around him, Killian. He's...beautiful, sure, and he knows it. But he can be reckless. And selfish. And he doesn't think twice about using someone's feelings if it gets him attention."

"I didn't say he was charming. If anything, I found him off-putting, too aggressive, not willing to take no for an answer."

"Classic Skye." He turned away, but I could tell his mind wasn't on our stakeout anymore.

Neither was mine.

"Should we head back yet?" he asked after a few minutes.

A quick glance at my phone revealed that very little time had gone by since I'd checked it last. There didn't seem to be much point in sitting out in the cold all night, though. If we left immediately, I could still get in a few hours of sleep before leaving for the office in the morning.

"Yeah, nothing is happening here tonight."

Jacy rose gracefully to his feet, then offered me a hand.

As I stood up, I caught a glimpse of motion out of the corner of my eye. I quickly spun around to find the white buck standing over the disturbed grave. His eyes bored into mine for several seconds. I heard Jacy draw in a sharp breath. I half expected the animal to morph into White Deer, but instead, he turned and leaped into the trees.

"Was that...?" Jacy suddenly sounded breathless.

"White Deer."

"I've never seen..." He stared after the deer with wide eyes.

"I think he wanted you to see him."

"Why?"

"I have no idea, but I'm sure if he wants you to know, you'll find out eventually."

If I had hoped to get a few hours of shuteye before going to the office, I was sadly disappointed. Although Jacy invited me to stay at Fletcher's house, that seemed like a bad idea, so I insisted on driving back to the B&B. When I finally crawled into bed, however, my brain refused to disconnect and let me fall asleep. I lay there for hours pondering the significance of White Deer's appearance to Jacy, as well as trying to figure out the mess of my love life.

Somehow, I managed to doze for about an hour before my alarm went off. I seriously considered smashing it and going right back to sleep, but Jacy and I were supposed to meet with the antique-store owner that afternoon. Besides, I hadn't talked to Novak since the night of the party and needed to run over the case with him. I felt I was missing something important, and talking about it with someone who understood often helped me see things more clearly.

After a shower, I felt almost human again. A couple of cups of coffee later, I was ready to tackle the drive to work. I found Novak in his office when I arrived. I tapped on his doorframe.

He looked up from the file he was reading and gave me a crooked smile. "Howdy, Pardner."

I felt a grin spread across my face. "I can't believe you all kept that from me so well. Some detective I am."

"It wasn't really too hard. You've been totally wrapped up in your case."

"Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about." I dropped into one of the chairs in front of his desk.

"You need a sounding board?"

"Yeah. A lot has happened lately, and I can't help but think I'm missing something."

He looked at his watch. "I've got an appointment in an hour, but feel free to sound away until then. Do you have any suspects yet?"

"About as many as I started with, which is pretty much everyone involved. I haven't done a very good job of narrowing the field."

"So run down the list with me. Who are the possible suspects, and why haven't they been crossed off?"

"Well, first there's Elyse Pike. I understand from speaking to Professor Howard that archaeology is still something of a good-old-boys club. Healy overshadowed Elyse professionally, even though Professor Howard said she thought Elyse was as good an archaeologist as Healy. Elyse could have killed Healy in order to advance her career."

"In that case, wouldn't the lootings and the killings be completely separate?"

"Not necessarily. Elyse could have been stealing the artifacts in order to discredit Healy before she resorted to killing him."

"Then why bother continuing the looting after his death?"

"To be honest, I don't really suspect Elyse. I just haven't been able to rule her out."

"Fair enough. Who's next?"

"Well, it's Elyse again actually, but with or without her lover, Susan Urban."

Novak's left eyebrow leaped up his forehead. "Explanation, please."

"Elyse and Susan are dating. Susan was Healy's student—a graduate student, to be exact. Elyse says she and Susan became friends and, eventually, fell for each other. Healy found out somehow and ordered them to end their relationship."

"Was it an ultimatum, or did he just expect them to stop seeing each other?"

"Elyse didn't mention an ultimatum, but then, I suppose it would have been in her best interest not to."

"And the same question arises about why they would continue looting the site once Healy was out of the way."

"Maybe to throw suspicion away from themselves. Or I guess the looting and Healy's murder could be unconnected."

"Then how would you explain the girl's murder?"

"Bridget Foxwell? What if the two murders were unconnected as well? Healy was killed by Elyse and/or Susan for either career advancement or to protect their

relationship. Then Bridget was killed by a spooked looter who came armed after Healy's murder."

"I suppose that's possible, but it would be a mighty big coincidence."

"The murders were very dissimilar. Healy was stabbed to death in what seems to have been a crime of passion, while Bridget was shot."

"Eh. I just don't like coincidences. Who else do you have?"

"Virgil McClain."

"Who is he?"

"He's an Indian-artifact collector with somewhat loose standards as to how he acquires his pieces."

"You actually think he'd kill someone just to add some stones to his collection?"

"He's pretty unsavory, and some of those stones are quite valuable, but no, I really don't. He's just another one of those people I haven't been able to cross off the list with any certainty."

"Next."

"There's Gordon Wallace or some other unknown member or members of the tribe who were opposed to the excavation."

"I can see the looting, maybe, but do you think they'd kill to stop the project?"

"If it had stopped with Healy, then yeah, I could see it—especially if it was a crime of passion, as it appeared to be. They might have kept up the looting after Healy's death just to ensure the project didn't reopen under Elyse. I can even stretch it so far as to imagine them killing Bridget in a panic if she stumbled across them in the act. The one thing that doesn't fit is

the disturbance of the grave. No self-respecting member of the tribe would violate their ancestors' resting place that way."

"You've talked to the council and they agree?"

"Yeah. I even talked to Wallace. He's a jerk, but I don't think he would go that far."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but never forget that human beings possess the extraordinary ability to justify even the most indefensible actions if they believe they are in the right."

"In other words, don't cross them off the list."

"You're really not getting very far, are you?"

"You're supposed to be helping me, not discouraging me."

He laughed. "Anyone else?"

"Technically, there's Jacy. Although the police still seem to suspect him, there's no hard evidence besides the knife to tie him to any of the crimes, and he still maintains he lost his knife during the scuffle with Healy. I just don't think he had anything to do with it. Call it instinct. Other than that, I suppose there's always the unknown suspect with an unknown motive—someone I haven't even thought of or run across yet."

"I agree with your original assessment. You're missing something."

"Great. Would you please fill me in?"

"Sometimes you have to start with motive and work your way back to the suspect."

"You can't just tell me? You have to make it a riddle?"

"Use those little gray cells."

I sighed. "What do you think I've been doing? I stayed up most of the night trying to figure this out. I know I'm missing something obvious, but if I knew what it was, I wouldn't be here asking you. I feel like I can't see the forest for the trees."

"What's the most common motive for crime?"

"Greed?"

"Bingo. Who stands to gain the most from Healy's death? Or, who stands to profit from looting the site? I suspect everything stems from the looting, so that's the avenue I'd pursue first."

"I checked out a shady antique store that sells artifacts. We didn't see anything that jumped out, but Jacy told the owner he's looking for something unique. We're supposed to go back to the store this afternoon to see some rarer pieces. Not that we know what we're looking for. I wish we could take Elyse along with us."

"Even though you don't feel Elyse is the killer, you don't have any proof of it, so technically she's still a suspect. If she is the one who was looting the site and she's selling the artifacts to this dealer, you don't want to tip her off."

"It's so frustrating! This place could be selling the stolen artifacts right under our noses and we wouldn't know."

"What about the professor who called you at your surprise party? Could she help you?"

"Professor Howard? Maybe, but then we still have to figure out how to get her in there to see them without arousing suspicion."

"If you can't take Mohammad to the mountain..."

"Huh? I can't just walk out with the artifacts."

"No, but you could take photographs and show them to your expert."

"What am I supposed to do? Barge in and start snapping away with my trusty cell phone?"

"No. You use this." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a small rectangular case. "I just bought this, so if you break it, you can forget your big promotion."

"What is it?"

"My latest toy." He opened the case to reveal a black ink pen.

"A pen?"

"It's a video camera."

"Whoa! That's so cool. How does it work?"

"The lens is right here," he said, pointing to a tiny dot near the top of the pen. "It also has a built-in microphone, not that I imagine you'll need that feature for this case. It stores the video right in the pen." He unscrewed the pen to reveal a mini memory card. "When you're done, you can just download the footage onto any computer using the USB cord."

"I just clip it on my shirt and it will record everything we see?"

"More or less. The batteries will only last for about an hour and a half before it has to be recharged."

"That should be plenty of time."

"You do realize this is only part of the solution, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"Even if Professor Howard confirms that they are definitely selling the stolen artifacts—which she may not be able to do despite the video—you still won't know who stole the damn things in the first place."

"I could turn the case over to the police at that point."

"And maybe the owner tells the police who sold him the stolen goods. They still won't have any way of connecting the thief to the murders."

"Then you think I should figure it out for myself and then go to the police?"

"I think you should have a little more solid information to take to them before you go—ideally, something that connects the thefts with the murders. Aside from a signed confession, though, I don't know what it might be."

"I guess if I find out the antique dealer is selling stolen artifacts, I could set up surveillance on the store to see who he's getting them from."

"You're assuming the thief brings the pieces directly to the store and the owner doesn't meet him somewhere for the transaction."

I sighed. "This is all so complicated."

Novak stood up and ruffled my hair as he walked by. "You'll figure it out. I have faith in you or I wouldn't have made you my partner. Come on. Grab the pen. We'll run a test with it so you can learn how it works before my appointment."

## Chapter 26

I parked my car in front of the antique store and looked over at Jacy. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be. What about you? Is the camera running yet?"

I clicked on the camera pen I'd inserted into the neck of my polo shirt. "It is now. I feel like James Bond."

Jacy laughed. "That thing is so cool. This detective stuff is a lot more fun than I thought."

"It has its moments," I said with a grin. "We've got our story straight, right?"

"Yep. I'm starting a collection, and I want something really special to be my first purchase."

"Great. Let's go."

We walked into the store, where a small brass bell attached to the door announced our entrance. The man we had talked to the week before appeared from the back room.

"Hello again." Jacy gave him a bright smile. "We're back."

The man nodded, but didn't return the smile. "I didn't really expect to see you again."

"Why not? I told you I was starting a collection and I want it to be special. You said you have the biggest selection in the area, so why would I go anywhere else?"

The man nodded and finally cracked a small smile. "Come on back. To tell the truth, I just figured you were some kid playing around. You don't see too many guys your age interested in collecting, especially

the good stuff. I haven't even gone through my best pieces. It might take me a few minutes to pull some things for you."

"That's no problem, Mr.—"

"Joyner. Malcolm Joyner." Once we were all in the backroom, he pulled out a keychain and unlocked a door I hadn't noticed before. "I'll just be a minute or two." He disappeared through the door, shutting it firmly behind him.

Jacy raised an eyebrow, silently asking how he was doing. I gave him two thumbs up before slowly walking around the room, scanning the camera over all the artifacts on display. I didn't notice anything new from what had been there before, but I couldn't be sure. I only hoped the camera was working.

I'd just completed my circuit when Joyner came back, balancing a tray of stone tools that he slid onto the counter. Before he could shut the door again, I caught a glimpse of a dimly lit storage space piled with boxes and a few pieces of furniture.

I moved to stand next to Jacy, doing my best to direct the camera towards the tray. To get the right angle, I had to bend stiffly at the waist. Joyner gave me a strange look, probably wondering why I was behaving so oddly.

I decided to head him off before he became too curious. "I took some archaeology classes at school last semester. All this stuff fascinates me."

Dismissing my interest, he shifted his attention back to Jacy. "These are a few of my better pieces."

He picked up a polished stone shaped like a propeller blade with a hole drilled through the center. It

appeared similar to the one Mr. Thompson had shown me but glossier and made from a different stone.

"This is a bannerstone. They used it on an atlatl. Do you know what that is?"

I got the impression he was somehow testing Jacy. If I hadn't played that little guessing game with Mr. Thompson, I never would have known, and I'd just claimed to be an archaeology student. I hoped Joyner wouldn't spring any pop-quiz questions on me. Then again, if he did, I could always claim the course had only briefly covered Native Americans.

"Of course. An atlatl is a spear thrower." Jacy held out his hand for the object, which Joyner reluctantly passed to him. "Isn't this a fairly simple design for a bannerstone?"

Joyner nodded slightly. "It's a pretty common style." He selected another artifact from the tray. This one appeared to be an oversized arrowhead, as long as the length of my hand and almost as wide. "What do you think of this?"

Jacy's eyes widened. "It's beautiful," he said in a reverent tone. He had clearly dropped any pretense at acting and was genuinely moved by the item.

Joyner couldn't hide a proud—and somewhat predatory—smile at Jacy's obvious appreciation.

"It's a blade," he said, "and an especially fine one."

"Where did it come from?"

"It's local. Nice, huh?"

"It really is. Can I see it?"

Joyner handed him the blade, exchanging it for the bannerstone, which he carefully replaced. Then he

selected a flat, rectangular stone decorated with an etched geometric design and several carefully drilled holes. "How about this gorget?"

Jacy just shook his head. "How much are these?"

"Well, I thought I remembered you saying money wasn't an issue, so I brought out some of the nicer things I have on hand right now."

Jacy seemed to recall why we were here and snapped back into investigator mode. "Does that mean you get new pieces often?"

"On and off. It's not like I receive regular shipments. I never know when something new is going to come in."

"If I gave you my name and number, would you call me if something comes in you think I'd be interested in?"

"Maybe, if I felt it was worth my time."

Jacy took the hint and turned his attention back to the ancient object in his hand. "How much are you asking for this blade?"

"Well, since it's your first purchase to start your collection, let's say five-fifty."

"Five hundred and fifty?" Jacy clarified, not quite covering his shock.

"That's right."

"And the gorget?"

"Three-fifty."

"The bannerstone?"

"Six hundred."

Jacy looked back down at the blade with a new respect. I knew he hadn't come prepared to spend that

much, but if we didn't buy something, the chances we'd hear from Joyner again were next to none.

"I think you should get it," I piped up.

Jacy shot me a look, trying to keep his expression neutral but not quite pulling it off. "What?"

"Well, you obviously like it. You came to start your collection, so you might as well do it right. You can afford it."

I put a little extra emphasis on the last part, hoping he'd catch the hint that the investigation would cover his expenses. I'd just bill the tribe for the purchase.

He nodded and turned back to Joyner. "You know what, he's right. I'll take it."

"The blade?"

"Yes."

Joyner broke into a wolfish grin. "I'll wrap it up for you."

"Oh my God," Jacy gasped as we got in the car. "I just bought a six-hundred-dollar blade. My credit card is probably still smoking!"

"Don't worry. I'll cover it. I'll write you a check for the full amount when we get back to the office."

I pulled out the pen and turned off the camera.

Jacy shook his head. "This is insane. I almost panicked when he started quoting prices."

I laughed. "I could tell. We have an expense account for situations like this."

"You could have warned me in advance."

I laughed again. "Where's the fun in that?"

He laughed with me, before asking, "Did you get some good shots?"

"I don't know. Let's find out." I pulled my laptop out of its case, connected the cord to the pen, and plugged the other end into the USB port. I downloaded the file that popped up, waiting anxiously for it to finish transferring to my hard drive. I held my breath as I clicked on the file.

I released a sigh of relief as a surprisingly clear video of the store sprang to life on my screen.

"Looks like it. I can't believe the quality. It's better than I expected. And we also have one actual artifact for Professor Howard to inspect, in addition to this footage. Mission accomplished!"

"Do you think I'll ever hear from Joyner?"

Jacy had left the man his name and cell-phone number with instructions to call if any new items came in.

"Honestly? I doubt it. I thought he was acting a little suspicious. We can only hope the sale will outweigh his wariness. If he does contact you, though, let me know right away."

"Of course."

I'd seen enough of the video to know the camera had worked. I shut my laptop and glanced up towards the building. My breath caught in my throat. Joyner was standing at the door staring at us intently. I pasted on a quick smile and waved at him. No trace of expression crossed his face, but he did give me a terse nod.

Jacy followed my gaze. "Do you think he saw?"

"I sure hope not. Do you think he could see the screen from my lap?"

"I don't know."

"Shit." I inhaled noisily through clenched teeth. "Nothing we can do about it now. We just have to hope he thought we were checking out the blade."

I was quiet as we drove downtown, mentally berating myself for being so stupid.

"You shouldn't get so upset," Jacy said at last. "You don't know that he saw the screen."

"And I don't know that he didn't. Besides, whether he did or not, I was careless. I should have waited until we were back at the office to look at the video. I might have blown the case because of my screw-up."

Jacy sighed and slumped down in his seat. There was nothing he could say. We both knew I was right.

As soon as we reached the office, Jacy had to leave to get back to work. I promised to call him when I had his reimbursement check or when I knew something more about the video footage, whichever came first.

After he left, I went up to see if Novak was busy. I felt a need to confess my bungling. I wasn't Catholic, but at that moment I could have used a couple of Hail Marys—or Bloody Marys.

I found Novak on the phone. One look at my face, though, and he waved me in and started trying to end the call.

I laid the pen on his desk, then dropped heavily into a chair to wait.

A minute later, Novak hung up and turned his attention to me. "Did the camera work?"

"Yes."

"Did you get some good footage?"

"I think so."

"So what's wrong?"

"I may have compromised my investigation."

He raised an eyebrow as he leaned back in his seat. "How so?"

"When we got back to the car, I was so eager to see if it had recorded anything that I downloaded it right there in the parking lot. I glanced up to see Joyner—that's the owner—watching from the door."

"Did he see what you were doing?"

"I don't know. I'm hoping he thought we were admiring our new purchase. I waved, and he just sort of nodded back. He seemed a little brusque, but then, he always is."

Novak shrugged. "At this point, there's no way of knowing what he saw, so don't sweat it."

"Don't sweat it? I could have blown the case!"

"Or you could have made a minor mistake that amounts to nothing. You learn from it and move on."

"But what if he did see?"

"So what? You already got the footage. Even if it turns out he is fencing the stolen artifacts, chances are the looter already knows you're investigating."

"But if he realizes I'm catching up to him, he might panic."

"Which could work to your advantage. When people panic, they get sloppy."

"What if he just gets more careful?"

"What if the moon slips from its orbit and careens into Earth? Killian, you're getting upset over something that might not have even happened, and even if it did, it's not the end of the world. The antique store isn't your only avenue for catching this guy. In fact, even

if you confirm that artifacts taken from the dig are showing up at the store, you don't know who actually stole them, and you have no proof that the owner knew they were stolen. He could very well have bought them in good faith. He probably doesn't ask a lot of questions."

I took a deep breath. "Okay. So you're saying I should keep pursuing other avenues."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Who has motive and opportunity? If you think the artifacts are being stolen for profit, who stands to benefit the most? Who needs money that desperately?"

I nodded. "Right. Okay."

"You should also give Professor Howard a call and see when she can take a look at the footage you recorded."

"And artifact," I said absently, already thinking about where to go from here.

"Artifact?"

"Oh yeah. We owe Jacy five hundred and fifty dollars, plus tax. He bought an artifact."

Novak's eyebrow shot up again. "I'm assuming it was a necessary expense."

"Yeah. We had to convince Joyner that we were serious collectors."

Novak nodded. "Turn in the paperwork and receipt and I'll cut him a check before I leave today."

"Thanks."

I returned to my desk and quickly wrote up my notes, including the details of my blunder. I gave Novak the requested paperwork, then moved on to other matters.

First, I called Professor Howard. Without hesitation, she agreed to help me by viewing the video. I made an appointment to see her the next morning.

With that out of the way, I turned to the question Novak had raised. Who needed money? I remembered Alexander saying he was on a scholarship that he was desperately trying to hang on to, but I didn't know about the rest of them. I decided to call Elyse and see if she could shed any light on the financial status of the crew.

"Hello?" a woman answered. I was pretty sure she wasn't Elyse.

It took a second for me to recognize the voice.  
"Susan?"

"Yes," she replied warily. "Who is this?"

"Killian Kendall."

"Right."

I glanced down at my notebook to make sure I'd dialed the correct number. "I wasn't expecting you to answer the phone."

"Well...um. Look, Elyse told me you know about the two of us, so I guess it won't hurt to tell you I'm moving in with her."

"Really? But what about the school? Won't that seem—?" I cut myself off. "Sorry, it's none of my business."

"No, it's fine. Elyse needs me, and I want to be here for her. We're tired of sneaking around."

"Like I said, it's really none of my business."  
Despite my polite disinterest, I couldn't help wondering if Susan was moving in with Elyse because she couldn't afford to keep her apartment. "Is Elyse available?"

"Sure. Hang on a second."

A few moments later Elyse picked up. She'd obviously been standing nearby. "Hello, Killian," she said somewhat guardedly.

"Hi, Elyse. I was hoping you could help me out a little with some questions regarding the case."

"Oh. Okay. Sure." She sounded decidedly more relaxed once she realized I wasn't going to give her a hard time about Susan.

"Who among the crew was in need of money?"

She laughed. "They're college kids. They all need money."

"No, I mean serious need. Who might resort to theft to make money?"

"Oh, I see where you're going with this." She was quiet for a few seconds. "I'm not sure how ethical it would be for me to discuss such personal matters."

"Elyse, two people have been murdered so far, and an elderly man was physically assaulted. The time for caution is long past. I need to find out as much as possible about everyone involved. You know I can keep this in confidence if I have to."

She sighed. "You're right. Let me think." A little more time passed. "Alexander is on a full scholarship."

"I knew that. He mentioned it when I spoke to him before."

"He comes from a very poor family. He never had any spare cash. If we went out as a group, he'd never order anything for himself. He didn't ask anyone for money, but a lot of the time, someone from the group would buy him food or drinks."

"What about the others?"

"Israel is on a scholarship too."

"He is?" That one caught me by surprise. I pictured his expensively furnished apartment.

"Yes, but he always seems to have money. You've been to Britney's house?"

"Yes, when I was doing interviews."

"Then you know her family is comfortable. She was never strapped for cash. Ricky—"

I could hear Susan's voice in the background.

"Susan says that Ricky has a gambling habit. He goes to the casinos almost every weekend. He's invited her along a few times, but she's always said no."

"Does Ricky have money?"

Elyse relayed the question. "She has no idea," she reported. "And neither do I."

I paused as I tried to figure out how to best tackle my next question. Elyse spared me the trouble.

"I guess you want to know about me and Susan as well."

"Well, yes, but then again, I would hardly expect you to implicate yourself or Susan."

"Meaning, you don't trust us to tell you the truth."

"I didn't say that."

She laughed lightly. "No, but I understand your position. Honestly, I don't exactly make a fortune as a professor, but it's enough for me to be comfortable, at least with my lifestyle. Susan inherited quite a bit from her grandparents, and she also works part time bartending."

"If she has money, why does she tend bar?"

"She has enough that she doesn't have to worry, but the inheritance won't last forever. Besides, she says she likes bartending."

"Fair enough. I guess that's all the questions I have right now. Thanks for being so honest with me." *Assuming you were honest*, I added to myself.

"No problem."

I hung up and looked over the notes I'd jotted while I talked to Elyse. I had written three names with dollar signs next to them: Alexander, Israel, and Ricky. They all had opportunity, and they all possibly needed money. I added question marks behind Israel's and Ricky's names. Israel was obviously getting money from somewhere. Could it be the profit from stolen artifacts? If he was selling stolen artifacts, flaunting your money in front of your coworkers would be pretty stupid, but it wouldn't be the first time a criminal had made a dumb mistake. I had no idea if Ricky needed cash, only that Susan reported he gambled often, which didn't necessarily translate into financial difficulties. Maybe he won a lot. I needed to talk to the three guys.

I started to call Alexander, then stopped. I'd had solid success with my surprise visits. No need to fix something that isn't broken.

I stuck my head into Novak's office. "I'm leaving again."

"Fine. I'll get the phone. Don't worry about me." His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "I can't wait until Chris starts," he added under his breath, but loud enough for me to hear.

I chuckled. "Just let the voicemail pick up. I'll check back in later."

"That's what I was planning to do anyway. I'm just giving you a hard time."

"What's new? I thought I'd get a little more respect, now that I'm a partner."

"You earn respect, young one." He grinned. "Don't worry about coming back this afternoon. Any messages will wait until tomorrow."

Pulling up in front of Alexander's address, I was struck once again by how rundown the house appeared. I knocked and heard footsteps from inside.

The door swung open to reveal a pale, overweight woman with stringy black hair going to gray. She was dressed in a faded and stained lavender sweat shirt and grungy, baggy jeans. She eyed me suspiciously. "Yeah?"

"Is Alexander home?"

"You a friend from school?"

"Yeah," I fibbed.

"He's not here right now." She started to close the door.

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Nope." The door clicked shut.

Strike one.

I went to Israel's apartment next, but no one answered my knock. I wrote a note on a business card asking him to call me, and stuck it in his door. I was zero for two so far.

Ricky was my last chance for the day. It was almost dinnertime, and my stomach was starting to remind me that all I'd had for lunch was a couple of stale cookies rescued from my desk drawer.

Ricky answered the door almost before I'd finished knocking. His face lit up when he saw me.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Killian Kendall, PI." He smirked at me as if he'd just come up with something terribly witty, and I remembered why I didn't like him. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes if you have the time."

"I've got all the time in the world. Come on in."

As I entered, I noticed what appeared to be a skinny gorilla in a basketball jersey and cutoff sweat pants sitting on the couch playing some first-person shooter video game on the TV.

Ricky introduced me to his hirsute housemate.

"This is my roomie, Kyle. Kyle, this is Killian Kendall."

"Sup?" Kyle grunted, his eyes never leaving the TV screen.

"Sit down," Ricky offered as he dropped into a chair.

I took the only other chair in the room and glanced over at Kyle again. I'd never seen anyone so hairy. A dark pelt covered almost every square inch of exposed skin, including his shoulders and what little of his back I could glimpse from where he sat leaning forward on the couch. He was almost enough to make me believe in the existence of Sasquatch.

Ricky misinterpreted my stare. "You don't have to worry about Kyle. If he's playing, he won't even notice we're in the room. Right, Kyle?"

"Huh?" Kyle mumbled inattentively.

"Never mind," Ricky said with an I-told-you-so grin. "So what's up?"

"I'm just doing some follow-up interviews with everyone on the crew."

"Good luck with Bridget." He chuckled at his own sick joke, until he noticed my face. "Oh man, sorry. I guess that was inappropriate. I just have a really sick sense of humor. I think it's because I'm such a comic-book geek, you know? We're famous for our developmental problems." He grinned as if he were somehow proud of his lack of social graces.

"Anyway," I forged ahead, "right now I'm looking into the financial status of everyone on the crew."

"That's easy. Alexander is dirt poor, Israel gets money from somewhere but nobody knows where, Susan is some sort of trust-fund baby or something, and Doc Pike survives on her professorial salary. I'm assuming Bridget is out of the running, but she was filthy rich anyway."

"You know a lot about your colleagues' finances."

He shrugged with a smug expression. "I know a lot about my colleagues, period."

"Why?"

Another shrug. "I like to know everything I can about the people around me. For instance, I know you solved your first case when you were sixteen after your friend was murdered—and you blew away the killer in the process."

I tried not to flinch at his blunt presentation of the facts. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What's your financial status?"

"I get by."

"That's vague."

"My parents pay for college and give me spending money. Is that detailed enough for you?"

"What about your gambling habit? Do they give you money for that too?"

His eyes narrowed. He obviously didn't appreciate being on the other side of the rumor mill. "I don't have a gambling *habit*."

"I heard you hit the casino almost every weekend."

"So?"

"Doesn't that get expensive?"

"Not if you know what you're doing." His voice was cold and defensive now.

"And you know what you're doing?"

"I like to think so."

"So that doesn't cause any financial strain?"

"No."

I decided to change tack. "You said Israel always has money but you have no idea where it comes from?"

He nodded. His eyes were still guarded, as if he expected me to shift the topic of conversation back to his gambling at any moment.

"What did you mean by that?" I pressed.

"Just that he always seems to have cash but no job anyone is aware of."

"Family money?"

"He mentioned before that he was raised by his aunt and they never had a lot of money while he was growing up."

"Doesn't mean they don't have money now."

He shrugged. "You'll have to ask him."

It was obvious I'd set him on edge with my aggressive questioning, and he was clamming up as a result. It was time to leave.

"Well, thanks for talking to me."

When Ricky just nodded without moving from his chair, I figured I'd have to let myself out. I paused at the door. "It was nice meeting you, Kyle."

"Totally," he shot back, still engrossed in his game.

## Chapter 27

My mostly sleepless night was beginning to catch up with me. The only thing I wanted to do was go home and curl up in bed with a good book. Unfortunately, I knew I needed to return to the office and write up my notes. By the time I got there, Novak had already left for the day, so I had the place to myself. Ignoring the blinking message light on the phone, I sat down at my desk and started recording my conversation with Ricky.

I was just about to leave when my phone buzzed with a text from Asher: *Hey, haven't heard from you in a few days. Hope everything is okay. Let's hang out soon. Call me?*

I sighed. I was tired, hungry, and had no desire to deal with my ex. After my talks with Mom and Jacy, I'd pretty much come to the conclusion that I needed some time alone.

Still, it wasn't fair to leave him hanging, so called his number.

"Hey." He answered, somehow managing to fill that single word with so much warmth my resolve almost wavered for a second. "That was quick."

"Yeah, I got your text and I wasn't busy so..."

"Yeah, sorry about that. We haven't talked since our date. I've been trying to give you space to think about what I said, but I just really want to see you again."

"It's okay. We do need to talk. Listen, I was up pretty much all night on a stakeout, and I'm starving because I haven't eaten all day. I'm going to pick up

some dinner and run out to the B&B for a nap. Why don't you come over later?"

"Sure. What time?"

I checked my watch. It was a little after five.

"How about eightish?"

"Sounds great. See you later."

"Later."

I hung up and dropped my head to the desk. I felt like falling asleep right there, until a rumble from my stomach reminded me once again of more pressing needs. I locked up the office and drove to the nearest burger joint.

Once I had refueled my body, I got my second wind. My mind kicked into gear, and I started fretting about breaking the bad news to Asher. I knew he'd take it hard.

By the time I pulled into the B&B's driveway, I was wide awake and feeling a little queasy—whether from worrying or the fast food, I didn't know. Maybe a bit of both.

I went to my room and tried to nap, but it wasn't happening. I tossed and turned for a while, getting more and more upset, until I finally gave up. I decided a walk in the fresh air might help settle my nerves and my stomach.

Steve was in the foyer when I got downstairs.

"Hey. I didn't know you'd come in."

I gave him a half-hearted smile. "I was hoping to take a nap, but I couldn't sleep."

"You okay?"

"I'm not feeling very good, so I thought I'd take a walk."

"Are you sick, or is something wrong?"

I shrugged. "Does it have to be one or the other? Actually, nothing is wrong...exactly. I'm just a little nervous because Asher is coming over to talk."

"Talk about what? Why would that make you nervous?"

"I've decided I need some time alone right now."

"Ah. And he doesn't know that yet?"

"No. That's why he's coming over. I figured it was an in-person kind of conversation."

"I see."

"If he gets here before I come back, just send him out to look for me. I'll be somewhere in the backyard."

"Okay. It'll be getting dark soon. Do you want a flashlight?"

"I'll be fine, but thanks."

I strolled along the edge of the creek that ran through the property. When I reached the small dock, I walked out and sat on the end of it, swinging my feet over the edge. The fresh air seemed to help. I watched the sun go down, casting its brilliant hues across the surface of the water and setting the trees on fire. The show was breathtakingly beautiful, but I was so distracted it barely registered.

As the sun finally sank beneath the horizon, I decided to continue my walk. My stomach might have settled, but my mind was still in knots. I remembered the angel statue and thought I'd go visit her. I often found myself drawn to her when I needed to think.

I made my way along the path through the trees to the parklike area Steve and Adam had created around the statue and the graves she watched over. The white

gravestones and statue glowed eerily in the moonlight, lending a certain Gothic creepiness to the scene.

I was still sitting on the stone bench when I heard Asher calling my name. "I'm with the angel," I answered him.

"Where?"

I'd forgotten he'd never been in the backyard before and wouldn't know where the angel was located.

"In the trees. Follow the path."

The beam from his phone flashlight bobbed into view before he did. He took in the setting, then threw the light in my face.

"Dude, this is way strange. Why are we in a graveyard?"

"I come here when I want to think." I shrugged.

"It calms me."

"You're so weird," he said with warm affection.

"Thanks. You wanna get that light out of my face?"

"Sorry." With a laugh he turned off the flashlight, then walked over and sank down next to me on the bench.

I didn't know where to start, so we sat for a few minutes in silence.

"So..." he said finally.

"So..."

"You said we needed to talk. Since you already know how I feel, I guess I'm waiting for you."

"Yeah. Ash, it's been great seeing you again. Really great. I had so much fun on our date. And you're right. I do still have feelings for you."

"Why do I feel a 'but' coming?"

"I just think that right now we'd be better off as friends."

He stood up and took a few steps towards the statue, then stopped and turned back to me. I couldn't make out his expression in the dark.

"Does that mean you're staying with Micah?"

"No. We broke up."

"Over me?"

"That was part of it. He saw us kiss the other night. But there were a lot of other issues as well. We just weren't at the same place. He wanted more than I was ready to give."

"I don't understand. If you're not with Micah, why don't you want to get back together with me?"

"I think I just need some time alone right now. I've never really had that, you know? We started dating when we were sixteen, and then I pretty much went from our relationship into one with Micah."

"You just want to be friends?"

"Yeah. I think it would be good for us."

He rubbed his face, making me wonder if he was crying. I wished I could see him clearly. "I don't know if I can do the whole 'just friends' thing."

"Ash, come on. We probably shouldn't jump right into dating again."

"I was thinking about moving back here, transferring to Pemberton. I'm not happy up there, but I don't know if I could stand living near you all the time and not being with you."

"If you're unhappy then you should move back, but don't make that decision based solely on me. What would you do if I weren't part of the equation?"

He was quiet for a minute. "I guess I'd stay at George Mason."

"Then that's what you should do."

"What about us? There's still something between us. You can't deny that."

"I'm not trying to deny it. I'm just saying that, for right now, I need some time to myself. I don't know what might happen in the future. I'm not ruling anything out. Please try to understand."

He sighed heavily. "I do understand. It's just not what I wanted to hear."

"Yeah. I know. I'm sorry."

He shrugged again. "Don't be sorry. You can't help how you feel. Just...when—*if*—you change your mind...you know where to find me. I doubt my feelings for you will change anytime soon."

I stood up, walked over to him, and opened my arms for a hug. He leaped into them, squeezing me tightly. I pressed a kiss against his neck, and his grasp tightened.

"I love you, Killian," he whispered against my shoulder.

"I know. I love you too."

He pulled away and wiped at his eyes. "I'm gonna go."

"Okay. Maybe I'll see you again before the summer's over."

"Yeah. Maybe."

He turned and walked away, not using the flashlight this time.

I sat back down on the bench. My alone time had officially started.

Although I overslept the next morning, I still managed to wake up tired and cranky. It had taken me a long time to drift off, and then my sleep was restless. It was the second bad night in a row, and I was definitely feeling it.

I wondered if I was coming down with something. If I was getting sick, the timing couldn't be worse. I considered just staying in bed, but things were happening with the case and I couldn't afford a personal day.

I dragged myself through my morning routine and drove to the office, where I found Novak sitting at my desk. He gave me a look and raised one eyebrow, as if to ask where I'd been.

"Sorry. I know I'm late. I overslept."

He glanced at his watch. "I was beginning to wonder if you were coming in."

"I almost didn't. I feel like shit."

"You look it too. I have something that might cheer you up, though."

"A lifetime supply of chocolate? A coffee IV drip? An all-expense-paid vacation to Aruba?"

He laughed. "Not quite. Take a look in your new office."

I walked over, pushed open the door, and gasped. The room was fully furnished. The desk I had picked out was centered on a Persian rug. Matching bookshelves lined the facing wall, and two upholstered armchairs sat in front of the desk. The shelves were empty, and the desktop was clear except for one thing: a brass nameplate inscribed "Killian Kendall, PI."

I spun around. "I didn't order all this!"

Novak was smiling indulgently. "I know you didn't. I did...well, with Judy's help."

"But you've already done so much."

"I look at this as a business expense. I figure if you're going to be a full-fledged partner, you need a fully furnished office. We can't have clients coming to consult you in an empty room with only a desk in the middle. That's just not a professional image."

I shook my head, knowing there was no point arguing with him. "When did it all arrive?"

"Yesterday afternoon while you were out of the office. I had the delivery guys help me set everything up, but you'll have to do your own interior decorating. As you know from my office, that's not my strong point."

I looked around the room, already envisioning what I wanted. Curtains at the windows, some plants, books and knickknacks on the shelves, maybe one of Will's paintings on the wall...

"One more thing," Novak said, interrupting my decorating fantasies. He held out a long, narrow box—the kind in which business cards often come.

I took the box with a quizzical look. "I already have cards."

"Just open it."

I removed the lid and pulled out a card. My name was printed at the top, followed by "Private Investigator," and under that, "Kendall & Novak Investigations" and my contact information.

"Of course, you can't use them until you're officially licensed," he reminded me, "but there you go."

I blinked away the tears that suddenly threatened to spill over.

"Oh for God's sake, don't start," he snarked.

"I don't know what to say—"

"Thank you will be just fine."

"Thank you, Novak. I mean, really—"

"You're welcome," he cut me off. "Now get to work. You need to transfer all your crap to your new desk so Chris can settle into your old one on Monday."

"She's starting that soon?"

"That's the plan."

"Where will she be staying?"

"With me, at least for now. She's hoping to get housing on campus in the fall, but until then, I have extra bedrooms and I'm rarely home, so it won't be an imposition at all."

"Wow. I had no idea things were this far along."

"Everything just fell into place. I think Chris was ready for a change. She seems very eager to get started. I'm looking forward to having her aboard."

"She'll be great. She's really sharp. I enjoyed working with her."

Just then the phone rang. "I'll get it," Novak said. "You start moving in."

As he disappeared into his office, I grabbed the box of files and miscellaneous desk paraphernalia I'd packed. I was sorting the box's contents into my new desk when my cell phone rang.

Glancing at the caller ID, I answered, "Hey, Jacy."

"Hey, I have good news."

"What's that?"

"I heard from Joyner."

"Already?"

"Yep. He said he had a few new pieces coming in this afternoon that I might be interested in. He told me to drop by after work—even said he'd stay open late."

Alarm bells went off in my head. "Doesn't that seem a little fishy to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"We were just there yesterday afternoon. He didn't say anything about new pieces coming in then."

"No, but he did say he never knows when he might receive some."

"Right. Maybe I'm just being paranoid. We're still not sure if he saw me playing with the camera."

"What are you thinking? That he's going to lure me in there after hours and kill me? Wouldn't that be a little suspicious?"

"I don't know what I'm thinking. I just don't feel good about this. Come pick me up. I'm going with you."

Jacy laughed. "He'll start thinking you're my boyfriend. You're with me every time I see him."

"So? I don't want you going alone."

"Fine. I'll pick you up a little after five. Okay?"

"That's great. So how did last night go? I thought you were calling to report on your stakeout."

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot about that. It was quiet—same as the last few nights."

"I feel like we're wasting our time out there."

"What else would we be doing? Sleeping? Who needs sleep?"

I laughed. "I do."

"Hey, you got to sleep in a nice warm bed last night."

"No, I got to lie in a nice warm bed. I didn't sleep. Too much on my mind."

"Are you going to be okay staying out there tonight? I can do it again if you want."

"No, I'll be fine. You have to work all day. Besides, you've been out there three nights in a row as it is. You really shouldn't make it four."

"Very true. A good night's rest sounds fantastic right about now."

"You can even go to bed early if you want—just not until after we find out what Joyner has up his sleeve."

"It's a deal. I'll see you later."

"Later."

I unpacked a few more things before the office phone rang again. I stood up to get it since I didn't have a phone in my new office yet, but the ringing stopped before I even took a step. I sat back down, assuming Novak had answered it. A few seconds later, my assumption was confirmed when he yelled to tell me the call was for me.

I picked it up at my old desk. "Hello, Killian Kendall speaking."

"Yeah, uh, this is Israel Meeks. I found your card. Sorry I didn't call last night. I didn't get in until late."

"That's okay. I just had a few questions for you dealing with the investigation."

"That's what I figured. Ask away. I got nothing to hide."

"Actually, I'd prefer to talk to you in person. Are you free now?"

"Yeah, that's cool. You want me to meet you at your office?"

I glanced through the door at my unfinished office with a box sitting on my desk still half unpacked. "No, that's all right. I'll come to your apartment, if that's okay."

"Whatever works for you."

"Great, then I'm on my way."

After I hung up, I stuck my head through Novak's door. "I'm heading out for an interview. I shouldn't be long."

"Don't hurry back on my account," he retorted dryly.

Traffic was light, and it didn't take me long to reach Israel's apartment complex. He was obviously waiting since he answered my knock almost before my knuckles hit the door. "Come on in."

I followed him into the living area, where he dropped into the same recliner as last time and threw a leg carelessly over the arm. Dressed in a pair of low-slung jeans and nothing else, he looked like a Calvin Klein model. I had to force myself not to stare.

"Have a seat." He gestured towards the couch, then started talking as I sat down. "Man, I thought it was crazy when Healy got himself killed, but Bridget—" He shook his head. "That's some fucked-up shit right there."

"Last time I was here, you said you looked the other way and didn't pay attention to things that were going on at the dig. What about now?"

"What about now? Nothing's changed. I was straight with you last time. I don't know nothing about any of that shit, and I don't wanna know. I just can't believe Bridget got shot. My girlfriend's been all messed up over it. They were friends, you know? I mean, it even tore me up a little. You don't expect shit like that to happen to someone like her. She was harmless, never hurt anybody."

"Has anything occurred to you? Any ideas about who could be doing this?"

"No, and trust me, I've been thinking about it. What if somebody is picking off members of the crew one by one? I could be next."

"I really don't think that's what's happening."

"Yeah. Me either, but it crosses your mind, you know?"

I nodded. "I'm talking to everyone on the crew about their finances."

He frowned. "Why?"

"We need to know everything about everyone who was involved with Healy and the excavation."

He shook his head again. "I do all right."

"So I see," I said as I deliberately looked around the room.

He swung his leg down and sat up.

"What are you trying to say? I got it all honestly."

"I'm not trying to say anything. I've heard you're on a scholarship and your family doesn't have a lot of money. This stuff is nice and obviously costs a lot. I can't help wondering where the money came from."

"Yeah, I got a scholarship, but it was an athletic scholarship. I was starting power-forward in high school,

and I was salutatorian. I earned that scholarship. My family never had a lot of money, but we weren't dirt poor either. My aunt raised me. She has her own business, and I worked there from the time I was old enough to help and not just get in the way. I bought all this with my own money."

"Do you still work for your aunt?"

"Yeah. I work some nights and most weekends during the school year and full time in the summer. You want to talk to her?"

"That shouldn't be necessary. Why doesn't anyone seem to know about your job?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't talk about it much."

"Why not?"

"Look, I got dragged all through high school 'cuz of my job. When I got to college, I decided I wasn't gonna talk about it anymore. My girl knows and she's cool, which is all that matters. Nobody else needs to know where my money comes from."

"I need to know."

He shrugged with obvious annoyance. "Fine. My aunt has a flower shop. I'm a florist."

I stared at him in confusion. "You got picked on for being a florist?"

"Man, you gotta understand how it is. Where I come from, guys don't mess with flowers—not straight guys anyway."

"People teased you about being gay?"

"All the time."

"Then why'd you keep working there?"

"My aunt needed the help—and it was decent money. More than I'd be making at some dumbass Mickey D's job. Plus, I'm good at it." A note of pride crept into his voice.

"So...I guess I don't see what the big deal is now. Would you still get teased? I mean, that's so stereotypical. I'd think people our age would be over that stupid kid stuff."

"Ha. You don't know the guys on the basketball team then. I'd never hear the end of it. That's just how it is. It's a gay job, man."

I was way off topic, but his attitude bothered me, and I couldn't let it go. "A gay job? That's so lame. You're not gay, and you do it."

He shrugged. "It's just like hairdressers. I knew some dudes who did hair. Everybody always assumed they were gay."

"There's no such thing as a 'gay' job. Gay people work in all jobs."

He gave me a funny look and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Yes, I'm gay," I said in answer to his unspoken question.

"For real?"

"Why would I lie?"

"Man, I would have never guessed."

"See? And I've met gay cops and gay architects and gay reporters—"

"I get it. Hey, if I said anything offensive, I apologize. I got nothing against gay dudes. I just don't want anybody to think I'm gay."

I sighed. "Right. So you're a closet florist."

He smiled weakly. "Guess so."

I decided to wrap up the interview as quickly as possible. "Can you tell me anything about Alexander or Ricky?"

"Like what?"

I shrugged. "General impressions, anything you know about their finances, anything you think I should be aware of, even if it doesn't seem relevant to the case."

He thought a minute, his arms crossed over his chest. "Alexander is quiet. I don't know much about him except he always seems broke. Seems like a nice enough guy, though. Ricky, he's not so quiet. In fact, he never shuts up. Still don't know much about him 'cuz he doesn't talk about himself, only other people. He's always going on about somebody. I bet he's the one that told you I didn't have a job but did have cash flow."

I shrugged noncommittally. "What about Ricky's financial status?"

"Like I said, I don't know. He always seems to have money when we go out with the crew. That's all I can tell you."

"I've heard he has a gambling habit."

"More like a gambling addiction. He does talk about that a lot, always trying to get people to wager with him about stupid shit—like what plot coordinate the next artifact will be found in or who'll find it."

"I get the impression you don't like him much."

He shrugged, sending a ripple across his chest. "He's not my favorite person, but I don't hate him or anything. I can get along with just about anybody."

"Is there anything else you can think of?"

"Nope."

"Well, you have my card. If something else occurs to you, call me."

"Sure. No problem." He stood up and started towards the door.

"Thanks for taking the time to talk to me."

"It's cool. Hope it helped. Just, you know, don't mention my job to anyone on the crew, okay?"

I fought back a sigh. "As long as it doesn't turn out to be relevant to the case, I have no reason to bring it up."

He nodded. "Cool."

As soon as the door shut, I released the sigh I'd been holding in. For some reason, that exchange had left me drained and slightly depressed. I hadn't learned anything particularly new or helpful, except that Israel worked as a florist—and that homophobia was alive and well, even at college.



## Chapter 28

On my way back to the office, I remembered my appointment with Professor Howard. I glanced at my watch and saw I had just enough time to stop and pick up the blade. Although I was cutting it close, I managed to make it to her house only a few minutes late.

She graciously welcomed me in without mentioning my tardiness, offering me a drink as I followed her into the living room. After I declined, we settled into the same seats we'd taken the last time.

For a moment, I experienced a strange sense of *déjà vu*, which passed just as quickly when I began to pick up differences.

Although Professor Howard was once again dressed in black, today it was a turtleneck sweater and slacks. She looked more haggard as well, with dark circles under her eyes, and her posture wasn't as stiff. She picked up her glasses from the antique side table next to her, slipped them on, and looked me over.

"Tell me again what it was you needed my help with? I believe you said it had something to do with an antique store that was selling artifacts."

The tone of her voice made it clear that, on her list of 'Despicable Things of Which Humans Are Capable,' selling artifacts was only slightly better than torturing innocent bunnies.

"Right. My investigation led me to an establishment that sells a variety of artifacts, many of which the owner claims are of local origin. It's possible

he could be selling items stolen from the excavation that Professor Healy was leading."

"Do you think this man, the owner, could have something to do with Quinn's murder?"

"I don't know. It's possible. Or he might simply be the fence for the actual thief or thieves."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I'd appreciate your taking a look at some footage I shot secretly at the store and telling me if anything you see might have come from the excavation."

She frowned. "That would be impossible."

I felt my face drop. "Impossible?"

"I wasn't involved with the excavation. I've never seen any of the artifacts that were found, and only spoken briefly about them with Quinn. The best I can do is tell you whether they are from the right era, and even that will be difficult without having access to the pieces."

"I do have one blade we purchased."

"May I see it?"

I handed her the blade, and she quickly unwrapped the packaged tool and looked it over carefully.

"Well, I can tell you the chances are this did not come from the Snyder excavation."

"Why do you say that?"

"The site Quinn was working on is early Woodland period. This is early Archaic, a few thousand years too old. Of course, it's possible that the settlement was built on top of an older village site, but I think Quinn would have mentioned if they were finding artifacts from different eras." She handed it back to me.

"It's a fine piece, though. I don't even want to think about what you must have paid for it."

I shrugged. "It was an investment to gain the trust of the owner, more than an actual attempt to obtain evidence. I was just hoping we might get lucky."

"Then I hope it works. Do you need to use my computer to watch your video? If so, it's in my office."

"No, I have the file on my laptop."

I pulled my computer from its travel case and brought up the video.

Dr. Howard watched the screen closely while the file ran through to the end, then had me play it again, asking me to pause it a few times to study certain pieces.

Finally, she shook her head. "Several of the pieces are most likely from the right time period, but that means nothing. They could have come from anywhere. There's no way of knowing if they came from Quinn's excavation."

Disappointment welled up within me. On some level, I'd hoped this would be the big break in the case. Obviously, it wasn't to be. I forced a smile. It wasn't Professor Howard's fault.

"Well, thank you for helping. It was worth a shot."

She sighed. "I wish I could have done more for you."

*Me too*, I thought to myself.

Novak had his door closed when I returned to the office. Assuming he was occupied, I went back to setting up my new desk. I was glad for the mindless busywork, since I was very distracted with my own thoughts. My

progress on the case—or rather the lack thereof—deeply disappointed me. I'd been counting heavily on Professor Howard, hoping she'd provide me with the key to the case, but that hadn't happened. I was practically back to square one.

What did I really know now that I hadn't known when I started? Some idle gossip was all. The only person I could reasonably scratch off my list of suspects was Bridget. So far, no one had complained about my lack of results, but it was bothering me. I had expected to be farther along at this point.

I decided to read over my notes from the beginning, hoping to notice something I'd missed before.

An hour later, the only thing I had to show for my efforts was a headache and a pair of frown lines that I could feel creasing my forehead so deeply I feared they might become permanent.

"Knock knock," Novak said, echoing his words with a quick rap on the doorframe. "You busy?"

I shook my head.

He took in the still unpacked boxes and my expression. "I was going to tell you I was leaving the office for a little while, but that can wait. What's going on?"

"Nothing."

He raised one eyebrow.

"Really. It's nothing important. You have things to do. Go ahead. I'll be fine."

Instead of leaving, he walked in and sat down in one of the chairs facing the desk. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's up. You've been back for quite a while now. You've obviously not been setting

up shop, and you look like someone just ran over your dog. What's wrong?"

I groaned. "I'm totally frustrated with the case."

"Your professor didn't help?"

"It was a complete waste of time."

"She couldn't tell anything from the video?"

"Not really, but it wouldn't have mattered even if she could. There's no way of knowing where the pieces Joyner is selling came from. She could maybe tell if they're from the right time period, but that doesn't mean much of anything."

"So where do you stand now?"

I waved my hands about irritably. "The same damn place I was when I started. I've gotten nowhere on this case, and I've been working on it for two weeks."

"Here's where I'm supposed to say something wise like, 'Patience, Grasshopper,' but unfortunately, I know how you feel. It's very frustrating when it seems like you're spinning your wheels on a case. Still, you can't say you've gotten nowhere. You know much more than you did when you started."

"Like what?" I demanded.

He shifted in his chair. "You know more about the individuals connected with the case. You don't know when that knowledge could become useful."

"It hasn't been useful so far."

He shrugged. "So what? That's like saying I found my keys in the last place I looked. Of course it was the last place. Once I discovered them, why would I keep on looking? You don't know when a piece of information will become useful, but when it does, everything will suddenly make sense. The next place you

look, the next piece of information you gather, could put everything into perspective. Don't get too discouraged, kiddo."

I sighed. "I know you're right. I'm just tired and stressed and I think I'm getting sick."

He studied me for a minute. "Is something else bothering you besides the case?"

I rubbed my face. "Yeah. Personal stuff."

"I don't want to pry, Killian, but you know you can talk to me about things outside the office too, right?"

For some reason, the concern and sincerity in his voice made me want to leap across the desk into his arms and just cry. Instead, I squeezed my eyes closed, clenched my jaw and nodded.

After a few seconds, I'd pulled myself together enough to open my eyes again. Novak was watching me closely.

I took a deep breath and managed a weak smile. "Thanks, Novak. That means a lot. It's just...my love life is in shambles right now, and there's not much anyone can do, so I'd really rather not talk about it."

He nodded. "I understand. If you change your mind, you know where I am."

"I appreciate it."

He looked around the office, then cracked a smile. "It's really strange to be on this side of the desk for one of our talks." He stood up and leaned over to ruffle my hair. "Next time, my office."

The rest of the afternoon crept by at an agonizingly slow pace. I wanted to take a nap, but I was afraid if I fell asleep, I wouldn't wake up again for the rest of the night. I had to meet Jacy, go to the antique

store with him, then stake out the dig site until morning. I wasn't sure I'd make it through.

A little after five, Jacy let himself into the reception area. "Hello?" he called.

"In here," I said loudly.

He grinned as he walked into my office. I'd managed to get everything unpacked, so it was a little more impressive than it would have been earlier.

"Sweet. Your own office. You're moving up in the world."

"I don't know about that," I protested, but his words gave me a little thrill. It did feel nice to have my own office, as if I'd accomplished something worthwhile.

He looked around. "It's a little...minimalist..."

"I only moved in this morning. I haven't had time to decorate yet."

He flashed me a smile. "I'm sure it'll look fantastic when you're finished."

I smiled back. "We should get going."

Jacy's face quickly became serious. "Right. Should we take your car or my bike?"

I started to say my car for the sake of convenience, then realized I really didn't feel like driving. Besides, maybe a ride on the back of Jacy's motorcycle would wake me up.

"Your bike."

He grinned again. "Let's go."

The ride was just as exhilarating as I remembered, and I did indeed feel more alert when we reached the store.

As I climbed off the bike, I gave Jacy some last-minute instructions. "No matter what, don't buy anything

this time. It's pretty much useless. There's no way of knowing where the pieces come from. This whole thing has been a waste of time."

Jacy frowned. "So why are we here?"

"Just in case Joyner is connected to the thefts. We don't want him to get suspicious."

He nodded. "Okay. So don't buy anything, but still act interested."

"Right."

We walked inside and Joyner almost immediately emerged from the back. He nodded towards us, shooting me a look I couldn't read.

"Follow me."

He turned and walked off, leaving us to catch up with him.

He led us to the back room and went behind the counter, where he unlocked one of the display cases and pulled out a tray covered with a piece of black velvet.

"This came in after you left last night. I thought you might want to see it before I show it to my other collectors."

An alarm went off in my head. Why would he be showing his newest acquisition to Jacy, a kid he barely knew and who had only bought one thing from him? Why wasn't he offering it to his regular, presumably well-heeled, customers instead? Did he think he could fool Jacy into buying something by making him feel special? Or was this some sort of setup? I felt my whole body tense as I became much more alert.

Joyner whisked off the velvet to reveal a very plain, common-looking ax. His eyes darted back and forth between the two of us as Jacy's face clearly showed

his disappointment. I kept my expression as impassive as possible.

"This is it?" Jacy asked.

"It's a three-quarter groove, early Archaic. A nice piece for your collection." Joyner didn't really sound as if he was trying—and he was watching me.

"I'm sorry to have kept you open. I'm really not interested," Jacy told him.

"Oh, it's no trouble. Hang on just one second."

He quickly slipped through the door to the storeroom, which I now noticed had been slightly ajar. When he closed it firmly after himself, I felt a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach.

Jacy turned to me with questions in his eyes. "Do you think he has something else he wants to show me?"

"No. I think this was all just a ruse to draw us to the store," I whispered to him. "We need to get out of here."

Jacy's eyes grew wide. "What? Do you think we're in danger?"

"I don't know." I was already moving toward the door. "I just have a bad feeling. Come on."

He'd only taken a few steps before the door swung open, and Joyner reappeared, a grim look on his face. "Leaving so soon, boys?" he said in a low, threatening tone.

"I...we...need to go." Jacy was still desperately trying to play his role. "We'll let you close up."

I met Joyner's gaze and suppressed a shiver. He was glaring at me with smoldering animosity. What had happened behind that door? Was someone in there?

Joyner confirmed my suspicion with his next words. "I don't know exactly what you're up to, Mr. Kendall, but you might want to tread carefully."

My eyes darted to the storage room door, which was once again ever so slightly ajar. Was the killer watching me even as we spoke?

Joyner followed my gaze. "I think you'd better leave now. And don't come back."

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the sliver of darkness in the doorway. I was tempted to throw myself at the door and yank it open, but Joyner was between me and there, and he was not a small man.

Instead, I once more started moving toward the exit.

Suddenly I stopped. "Jacy, go on. I'll be out in a minute."

He hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'll be right there."

I had something more to say, but I wanted Jacy out of harm's way in case anything went wrong. I waited until Jacy had reluctantly left before I continued.

I looked directly at Joyner. "I'll let you in on a little secret. I didn't know for sure if you were involved in all this before now, so thanks for confirming that for me."

His eyes narrowed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think we both know that's not true. If you know my name, you probably know why I'm here." I jerked my head purposefully toward the storage room. "And I will find out who is in there. Count on it."

A nasty smile spread across Joyner's face. "Keep poking at the beehive, boy, and you're going to get stung."

"Is that a threat?"

"Oh yes. Count on it."

"What just happened?" Jacy asked as soon as I met him in the parking lot. He handed me a helmet and snapped the buckle on his own.

"I'll explain when we get back to the office."

Now that the confrontation was over, I was starting to shake. I wanted to get as far away from there as possible.

He nodded, accepting my curt response, and swung himself onto the motorcycle.

The ride back was nowhere near as pleasant as the one going. My mind was on other things, like Joyner's final threat still echoing in my head. I didn't regret what I'd done. Whoever was in that storage room already knew who I was and what I was up to. Like Novak had said, people sometimes make mistakes when they feel cornered.

Of course, people also became very unpredictable when cornered, and sometimes they lashed out. I could only hope I hadn't put Jacy in danger by involving him.

As soon as we came to a stop, Jacy was off the bike and staring expectantly at me.

I sighed. "Come on up."

I let us into the darkened agency and turned on the overhead light in my office, then collapsed into the closest chair and groaned. "I hope I didn't just fuck up royally."

"You're really gonna hafta fill me in, because I have no idea what you're talking about," Jacy complained as he dropped into the other chair. "What happened?"

"It was a setup. Joyner must have seen my laptop, or at least he saw enough to make him suspicious. He didn't have anything to sell you. It was a ploy to get us in there so we could be identified."

"Identified? By who?" He paled as understanding suddenly flooded his face. "You think the killer was in the back room?"

I rubbed my eyes wearily, feeling ten times as tired as I had before we'd left. "Yeah. Or at the very least, the looter. They're not necessarily the same person, although I think it's much more likely they are."

Jacy was sitting ramrod straight in his chair, staring at me in horror. "He could have killed us!"

"That would have been too risky. After all, we have no proof of anything yet, and he knows it. If we did, we wouldn't keep returning." He relaxed slightly, only to tense up again with my next words. "That doesn't mean we're not in danger."

"I was afraid you were going to say that."

"I'm sorry, Jacy."

"For what?"

"For dragging you into this."

He shook his head. "Um, no. You didn't drag me into anything. I practically forced my way into your investigation. If I'm in danger, it's my own damned fault. You tried to warn me."

"Just be careful."

"Don't worry."

"Joyner did make one major mistake, though."

"He did? What was that?"

"We now know he's connected to the looting somehow."

"Because he threw us out?"

"Yeah. And he knew my name. If he had just played it cool and let us go, we never would have been the wiser. He showed his hand, which could turn out to be the break I've been waiting for."

Jacy brightened a little. "Yeah, now all we need to do is find out who was on the other side of that door."

"That's the hard part," I said with a grimace. "I have no idea. It could be almost anyone."

We both lapsed into silence, lost in our own thoughts. After a few minutes, Jacy spoke up. "What do you think Joyner's involvement is exactly? Is he just fencing the stolen artifacts, or is he actually behind the thefts themselves?"

I took a few seconds to answer while I shifted gears in my exhausted brain. "I don't know. He could be doing nothing more than fencing the artifacts, but even so, he's at least in on the fact that they're stolen. Otherwise, he wouldn't have become suspicious of our poking around and asked someone—presumably the looter—to identify us."

"Are you sure that's what was going on?"

I nodded. "Oh yeah. I felt something was wrong as soon as we walked in."

He gave me a strained grin. "Your Spidey senses were tingling?"

"Something like that. Besides, why else would he go in the back room and then throw us out like that? He

knew who I was. That was his biggest mistake—using my name. And the door to the storage room was open. It's always been closed and locked before. Someone was back there—someone who knew who I was."

We fell silent again as I thought about how near the solution to the whole case had been...and yet so far. What if that was as close as I ever got to the killer? After all, they knew that I knew thanks to me running my mouth like some old-time noir detective. Maybe they'd get careless, but what if they just got more careful, or decided the risk was too much and just stopped everything altogether? Then I might never find out who was behind the looting and the killings.

"Argh!" I shouted, slamming my hand down on the desktop.

Jacy jumped at my unexpected exclamation.

"What was that about?"

"I could have blown the whole case," I said bitterly.

"Huh? How did you blow the case?" Jacy looked at me warily, as if waiting for another outburst.

I filled him in on what I'd said after he left.

"Joyner and the killer are warned now. They'll just lie low until it all blows over. I'll never find out who it was behind that damn door."

"You'll still figure it out."

I stood up and began to pace. "I don't know. It's not that easy. Whoever is doing this, whoever stole the artifacts and killed Healy and Bridget, he's left precious little evidence. I have almost no clues, nothing to go on. I was depending on him making a mistake. Instead, I made the mistake. I warned him off. Now he'll be twice

as careful. He could get away with this—and all because I had to open my mouth."

"Killian, you're being a little hard on yourself."

"Am I?"

"Yes. They already knew we were on to them before you said anything. It's not like it could have changed anything that much."

"But they knew we were on to them because I got careless. I slipped up and Joyner saw the computer."

"You don't know that for sure. He could have just become suspicious and set this up as a safeguard."

"It doesn't matter. Either way, I messed up. I wasn't paying enough attention. I shouldn't have insisted on being there every time you went."

Jacy snorted. "Uh, of course you had to be with me."

I shook my head. "I didn't need to be there after our first visit."

"What about the video?"

"That told us nothing."

"We didn't know that. Besides, I don't know what I'm doing."

"You're a natural."

"Really? I'm a natural?" Jacy looked inordinately pleased.

"Yeah. You're really good."

He grinned. "Nah. We just make a good team."

I gave him a tired smile.

"So...are you still going to do the stakeout tonight?"

I shrugged. I was feeling so drained. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but once Jacy reminded me, I

knew I had to go. What if something happened and I wasn't there?

I heaved a sigh. "Yeah, I suppose so."

He frowned. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine."

"Just...be careful."

"Don't worry. I think the biggest danger will be falling asleep in the bushes."

He frowned, not appreciating my attempt at humor. "Seriously, Killian. If you're not feeling well, maybe you shouldn't go."

"We might as well stick with it, just to keep an eye on things, if nothing else."

"Then let me take another night."

"No way. That would be four nights in a row for you. Stay in bed tonight, Jacy. You need some sleep."

He made a face. "So do you. But if you're going to insist on staying out there tonight, maybe you should take some sort of protection—"

"Like what? I'm not licensed to carry a gun yet. I probably wouldn't take one even if I could. Besides, the chances of anything happening tonight are next to none after my confrontation with Joyner. The looter has been warned off. There's no way they'd risk going out there tonight."

He nodded reluctantly, clearly not convinced.

"Look, even if they do show up tonight, I'm not going to confront them. I'm just going to observe, remember?"

It was his turn to sigh. "Okay. You're right. I just feel..."

"What? Are your Spidey senses tingling now?" I asked, half joking, but half serious. I knew Jacy was gifted, and if he was sensing some sort of danger, I wanted to know it.

He thought for a minute before answering. "No. Maybe? I don't know. I can't tell if it's really something or if I'm just being paranoid. I've never really been in danger before. I'm not used to it."

I laughed. "You never really get used to it. You just learn to deal with it. Now go home and get some sleep."

He smiled as we both stood up, then he surprised me by leaning in quickly and giving me a big hug.

"Promise me you'll be careful," he said again as he released me.

"I promise."

"And if you get too tired then just come to the house. You can crash on the couch or even bunk with me."

"Stop worrying. I'll be fine."

He looked deeply into my eyes, before turning and walking out. I couldn't help wondering what that was all about.



## Chapter 29

Several hours later, I was deeply regretting my resolve. I was feeling worse than ever and my lack of sleep was catching up to me with a vengeance. My eyes felt so heavy that it was a supreme battle to keep them open. I was definitely losing the fight.

I sat up straighter and drew in a deep breath, hoping the cool air would revive me, but I was beyond help. I stared into the darkness for a few minutes before my eyelids began to droop once again. The effort of keeping them open was becoming too much.

I was almost to the point of giving in and taking a short nap when I sensed a presence nearby.

My eyes snapped open, and my heart jumped into my throat.

At first, I didn't see anything. I was about to pass it off as a dream when a dark figure detached itself from a tree and moved towards me. I was half expecting it to be Jacy, so when he stepped out of the shadows and I recognized White Deer, I almost gasped. He looked more ghostly than ever in the silver moonlight. He held up a hand, warning me to stay silent.

He stopped in front of me, then crouched down and pressed his hand over my eyes. A kaleidoscope of images exploded in my mind—lightning striking a lone tree in a shower of sparks, a hawk dropping from the sky to snatch its prey, a fire blazing across a marsh—some of them flashing by too quickly for me to comprehend. None of them made sense, though they were all strangely exhilarating.

Then suddenly everything stopped, and I was left with the vision of an albino buck racing through a forest.

"Be vigilant," White Deer whispered into my ear as he removed his hand from my face. When I opened my eyes, I was alone—or at least, the shaman was nowhere to be seen.

The bizarre experience left me energized with a burst of adrenaline. Was it simply White Deer's way of keeping me awake, or was it something more? Was it a warning of some sort? If so, I wished he'd been clearer.

I heard someone else approaching the clearing. Was White Deer returning? Or had Jacy ignored my instructions and come out to keep me company?

A figure stepped into the moonlight, and for a moment I thought it was yet another spirit coalescing from the shadows. Then I realized it was in fact a flesh-and-bone person dressed all in black. He stood at the edge of the trees, looking around as if to see whether he was alone. After a minute, he began to pace.

I didn't move for fear of making a noise and alerting him to my presence.

I wished I could see his face, but it was dark and he kept his head down. There was something about him that seemed familiar, though. It wasn't until some small night sound caused him to stop and glance up that I finally got a good look at him.

It was Ricky.

Of course. It all made sense. Ricky was stealing the artifacts and selling them to Joyner to support his gambling habit. Healy must have caught him in the act or become suspicious and confronted him. In the heat of

the moment, Ricky had stabbed him to death. Then when Bridget caught him red-handed, he shot and killed her.

My first instinct was to jump up and tackle him, but I remembered our agreement was that I'd only observe.

Ricky resumed pacing, but he jumped at every noise. His edginess was catching. I found myself growing tense. What was he doing? Was he waiting for someone? There was a definite sense of anticipation in the air. We waited together for what seemed like an eternity.

Finally, I heard the sounds of someone else approaching. Ricky heard them too, and moved into the shadows to wait. Moments later, another figure stepped warily into the clearing, although he stopped just far enough back that I couldn't make out his features.

"You here?" the second person called softly.

"Shh," Ricky hissed as he stepped forward.

"Keep your damn voice down!"

"Sorry."

The sound carried easily to my hiding spot, even in their whispered tones, but they were speaking too low for me to recognize the second guy, if, in fact, I knew him.

"I didn't think you were going to show up," Ricky said accusingly.

"I got here as soon as I could. I don't even know why I had to come. This is crazy. What if we get caught? Why couldn't you just text me?"

"We can't do anything that could be traced back or incriminate us."

"What do you mean?"

"That Kendall kid is on to us."

"What?" Fear sharpened his voice, and for a second, I almost thought I recognized it.

"Calm down. I don't think they have any idea who was actually taking the stuff, but they've been sniffing around Joyner's. We're calling things off...for now."

"What do you mean 'for now'? I'm done, Ricky. I want out."

"You just don't get it, do you? It doesn't matter what you want. I own you. I have enough dirt on you to destroy you."

"Not without implicating yourself."

"Ever hear of an anonymous tip, dumbass?"

"Maybe I'll just go to the police myself, tell them everything that happened and how it was all your idea."

"That wouldn't be very smart. I was afraid you might do something stupid, so I've been keeping a few little mementos here and there for insurance purposes: things with your fingerprints on them, a tape of you sobbing about how you shot Bridget and left her out here in the woods to die, a surveillance video of you selling stolen artifacts to Joyner. I'll just tell them how you recruited me, how I had no idea anyone would ever get hurt, and how I was so afraid for my life after you killed Healy and Bridget that I couldn't come forward sooner."

"But that's not how it happened!" His voice was showing signs of panic, and as he became more and more frightened, it also rose in volume.

Suddenly, I knew who it was, but I didn't understand. If I was right, and it was Alexander out there

talking to Ricky, then Alexander killed Bridget. Did that mean he'd also killed Healy? What role did Ricky play?

"You have no proof," Ricky continued relentlessly. "I've never even had a speeding ticket, so at worst they'll charge me as an accessory after the fact. Meanwhile, they'll put you away for life. It would be your word against mine. Who do you think they'd believe—me or a confessed murderer?"

"It was an accident!" Alexander's voice broke, and his breath became ragged.

Ricky was pushing him to the edge. What was he trying to accomplish? "An accident, huh?" he pressed on mockingly. "You shot someone and left her for dead. Do you really expect anyone to believe it was an accident?"

"I didn't mean to kill anyone. I was just scared after Professor Healy's murder and..."

"You probably killed him too."

"No! I didn't!"

"You killed Bridget, why not Healy?"

"I didn't mean for Bridget to die."

Alexander was crying softly now, his arms crossed tightly over his chest and his shoulders hunched. If Ricky was trying to break him, he'd succeeded—but to what end? He'd admitted to shooting Bridget, but denied killing Healy. He seemed too distressed to be lying, but maybe it was all an act.

"God, you're so pathetic," Ricky sneered, then paused. "But I'll tell you what. If you do one more thing for me, we'll call it even."

"What?" Alexander sniffled suspiciously.

Ricky started pacing again. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. "Get rid of Killian Kendall."

A chill went down my spine. That was what Ricky had been angling for all along. He wanted me dead, and he wanted Alexander to pull the trigger. He was blackmailing Alexander to commit murder.

"What do you mean?" Alexander asked, but the dread in his voice showed he already knew what Ricky was telling him to do.

"Kill him," Ricky said as casually as if he were asking the guy to pick up his dry cleaning. "It shouldn't be that big a deal. They say the second time is easier."

Alexander uncrossed his arms and stood up straighter. "No."

"What?" Ricky stopped in his tracks. He clearly hadn't expected that twist.

"I won't do it." Alexander's voice, still shaky, now held an edge that hadn't been there before.

"You don't understand. It wasn't a request. Kendall has to go."

"Why?"

"He's getting too close." For the first time, Ricky's voice lost some of its confidence.

"I don't care anymore. Let him figure it out. I just want this whole nightmare to be over. I didn't want any of this to happen..."

"Maybe you don't care, but I do. I'm not going to jail because you're too incompetent to do what you're told."

"If I'm so incompetent, then you do it. I'm done."

"Damn it! If you don't kill the goddamn bastard, I'll turn you in."

"Don't threaten me, Ricky."

"Or what? You'll shoot me like you did Bridget?"

"Maybe." He sounded uncertain, even to me.

Ricky laughed—an ugly, scornful sound. "You don't have the fucking balls. You've got two days to get rid of Kendall. I don't care how you do it; just make sure he's dead. If you fuck it up, you're going down." He turned and started walking away.

"Ricky, stop!"

Ricky kept walking.

"Please. Don't make me do this."

There was still no acknowledgement from Ricky. Alexander suddenly started after him while pulling something from his jacket pocket. Moonlight glinted off metal, and I realized it was a gun.

Before I could call out a warning, Alexander pulled the trigger. The shot was deafening. I watched in horror as Ricky stumbled a few steps, then pitched forward.

Without thinking, I leapt to my feet and bolted into the clearing. "Stop!" I yelled with as much authority as I could muster.

Alexander swung around and pointed the gun right at my chest, his face a mask of horrified terror. "Oh God!" he whimpered. "Oh fuck! Oh shit!"

Considering the state he was in, he was more than likely to shoot first and think later. I had to calm him down.

"Alexander, it's okay. Just relax."

"Where—? What—?"

I'd reacted with no plan, and now I needed to think fast. "I, uh, I was on my way out here and heard a gunshot. Are you okay?"

He darted a glance towards Ricky's crumpled form on the ground, but I pretended not to notice.

"How much did you hear?" he asked.

"I heard a gunshot—"

"You're lying!"

"Alexander, listen to me—"

"You had to be somewhere close. You must have heard everything."

I needed to keep him talking. Obviously, denying that I'd heard his conversation with Ricky wasn't working. I'd have to try a different approach. Feeling a little lightheaded, I admitted, "Okay, yes, I heard you talking to Ricky."

His gun hand shook slightly. "What did you hear?"

"I heard him accuse you of killing Bridget and Healy."

"I didn't kill Professor Healy!"

"Okay, I believe you."

"Bridget was an accident."

"What happened? Maybe I can help."

He shook his head but started talking. "You can't help me now. I wanted to tell you. I even tried calling you a few times, but then I just couldn't get the words to come out. Now everything is fucked up. It's too late."

"It's never too late, Alexander. Just tell me what happened. I know people. I really can help." I could tell he was vacillating. He wanted to believe I could help him, but he was afraid. "Talk to me, Alexander."

His desire to explain himself won out, at least for the moment. "She...she caught me. I was out here digging. It wasn't even dark yet. I shouldn't have been here. It was stupid, but I needed the money."

"You were selling the artifacts you found to Joyner?"

He nodded. "It wasn't my idea. Ricky came to me and asked if I wanted to make some quick cash. He knew I needed money. He knew all kinds of stuff about me: how my mom is an alcoholic and that I take care of her, how I was on a scholarship, even that I needed more credits to keep my scholarship. He told me I should take this class. He said it would be easy, and he'd tell me what to do later." As he talked, Alexander kept the gun centered on my chest.

"You never asked what you'd have to do for the money?"

"No. I was afraid to ask. I just did what he told me. After the excavation started, he told me not to report all the things I found. He said if I found something good, to keep it buried and come back later that night to get it. I was supposed to take it to him, then he'd sell it and give me my cut. At first, I just found a few arrowheads. They didn't bring enough to even justify the risks. Then Ricky told me there was something good in his pit and I should dig there that night. It was an ax, and it brought a little more money.

"After that, he'd tell me whenever he found something good. Then he told me to swipe a few things from the tent after they'd been found but before they'd been catalogued. That was the first mistake. It made people suspicious. When I found out you were

investigating the thefts, I got really scared and wanted to quit.

"When we found that stupid skeleton, Ricky freaked out. He said I had to go dig there. I refused. I said I was done. The next thing I know, Professor Healy is dead and the police have shut down the excavation. I was so relieved, because I thought it meant the whole thing was over."

"But it wasn't?"

"Not even close. Ricky called me and said with Healy out of the way and the excavation shut down, I could dig up the grave without any danger of getting caught. I didn't want to, but he threatened to call the police and tell them I was the thief. I thought maybe if I did this one last thing, he'd leave me alone. And...I was afraid if they knew I'd been stealing the artifacts, they'd also think I'd killed the professor. So I went, but I took a gun with me for safety. I didn't know who had killed Professor Healy. What if they came back?"

"And that's when Bridget caught you in the act?"

"I was so scared. I was so busy digging that I didn't hear her coming until she was right there. I...I panicked. I just shot her and ran." He broke down and started to cry again. "I didn't mean to kill her. I didn't even know who it was at first. I thought it might be the murderer coming back. And now she's dead, and I shot Ricky, and now you—"

His gun hand drooped a little, and I saw my opening. I took a small step forward. If I could just get close enough, maybe I could use some of my defense training to disarm him. I spoke as calmly as possible.

"Alexander, it's okay. I think I can help you. I know the detective in charge of the investigation."

"No police!"

The gun snapped back up, and I froze.

"Listen to me! You didn't mean to kill Bridget. They'll understand that."

"No police," he repeated shakily.

"You can't just keep killing people, Alexander."

"I won't have to kill anyone else after you."

"The police will keep investigating. Eventually, they'll figure everything out. Then it will be even worse. Just let me help you."

"You're trying to trick me."

"You have to trust me."

"Oh God," he moaned. "I can't trust anybody. I have to kill you."

"Alexander—"

He moved toward me, stepping onto the edge of one of the tarps. There must have been something under it, because his foot slipped, causing him to stumble. In that moment of distraction, I lunged forward and tackled him.

We tumbled to the ground and slid into the shallow pit, all the time wrestling for control of the gun. He was stronger than he looked. Normally, I would have been easily outmatched, but desperation gives you strength, and I was fighting for my life.

One of his arms was trapped under our bodies, and I had his other wrist pinned down with both of my hands. It took all my strength to hold him as he twisted and bucked under me in an attempt to throw me off.

I wrenched his wrist, and the gun slipped from his grasp.

As soon as I released his arm to reach for the weapon, however, he clawed at my face, his finger ripping into my nostrils. I felt blood spurt, but I ignored the pain and concentrated solely on the gun. I had to reach it before he did.

Just as he was about to overpower me, my fingertips brushed the barrel. I had to get the gun out of his reach. Grabbing what I could of it, I threw it out of the pit and away from both of us.

He stared at me in disbelief for a second, then heaved me aside with a grunt. He clambered out of the pit in search of the gun as I scrambled up the other side. If I could manage to take cover in the forest, maybe I could find my way to Fletcher's house and safety.

I had barely reached the trees, however, when Alexander fired a shot from behind me. I waited to feel the impact, but it never came. He'd missed. I kept running, but now I could hear him chasing me. Another shot rang out, and this time the bullet whizzed through the leaves nearby.

I ran like I'd never run before, blindly racing through the trees. I felt as if the very forest conspired against me. Branches clawed at my face. Brambles grabbed greedily at my clothes. I tripped and stumbled over roots seemingly thrust between my feet.

Each time I fell, I doggedly bounced back up and continued running. I could feel the warmth of blood trickling down my face, mixing with the cold sweat of panic, but I felt no pain. I had no room for anything but fear and the will to survive.

When the sounds of pursuit faltered behind me, I took the opportunity to duck behind a particularly broad tree. I pressed myself against its trunk and tried to control my gasping breath, knowing that the slightest sound could give me away and lead to my death.

After a few seconds, the footsteps started again. Alexander was hunting me, and we both knew he wouldn't stop until I was dead. I could stay still and hope he passed me by, or I could make a run for it and try to escape. As he drew nearer, fear won out over reason, and I launched myself away from the dubious security of the tree.

I heard Alexander shout as I ran. He must have spotted me and was once again hot on my trail. I ran even harder, but I'd lost all sense of direction by that point. I had no idea what I was running towards. I caught a glimpse of white out of the corner of my eyes and turned my head to see the albino deer coursing through the trees to my left. We exploded into the clearing at the same time. Somehow, I'd gotten turned around in the woods.

I barely had time for my mind to register that I was heading towards one of the pits. I tried to jump to the side, but my foot landed on the edge, and I could feel the earth under the tarp crumble from beneath me.

I fell, twisting my ankle painfully in the process. When I tried to push myself up, the pain was excruciating. I choked back a yelp just as Alexander burst into sight. He pulled up short next to the pit and stared down at me triumphantly, his chest heaving with exertion.

Defeated, I dropped to the ground, feeling a strong sense of *déjà vu*. I'd been there before in a dream. I'd foreseen my own death.

As I stared up at the pistol Alexander was pointing directly at me, one thought kept running through my mind: *I wish I had a gun.*

At that moment, my dislike of firearms was the furthest thing from my mind. With someone pointing a deadly weapon at me, I wanted equal force to protect myself. Unfortunately, I didn't have it. I had only my wits, so I took one last stab at talking Alexander out of killing me.

"You don't have to do this—"

He cut me off quickly. "Yes. I do."

When I heard the resolve in his voice, I knew I was as good as dead. In his own mind, at least, he'd already pulled the trigger. To him, I no longer existed.

That knowledge allowed me to disconnect while I waited for the bullet that would finish my life. Since the moment I'd first confronted Alexander, survival had been my sole focus, and in the end, it seemed I hadn't made it.

I'd heard your life flashes in front of your eyes in the seconds before you die. In a way, I suppose mine did—although it wasn't like a movie playing out on some mental screen.

I simply saw the faces of those I loved: Adam, Steve, Mom, Kane, Asher, Jake, Micah—even Novak. There was no blinding moment of clarity, no overwhelming regret about unfinished business—just an empty, aching feeling of loss.

As often happened at critical moments in my life, time seemed to slow down as I stared up at Alexander past the gun in his hand. His eyes narrowed, his finger tightened on the trigger, a muscle twitched in his face. I waited for the blast and wondered which thought would be my last.

Just then, I noticed a sense of swirling energies gathering around us. Apparently, Alexander felt it too, because he suddenly looked up. His eyes grew wide, and I twisted to see what was happening.

The next several things happened in a blur. The enormous form of an albino deer charged toward us, head down, antlers forward. Alexander raised the gun and fired just as White Deer launched himself into the air, leaping over me in a graceful arc. He rammed into Alexander with a sickening crunch, sending Alexander flying through the air before he slammed into a tree.

The buck turned and locked eyes with me, his nostrils flaring. I blinked, and suddenly White Deer was once more in his human form. He approached me and knelt by my side, quickly running his hands over the ankle I'd twisted when I fell. I felt a tingling sensation where he touched me.

His eyes found mine once more. "You faced death with bravery, but it is not your time."

"Thank you," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper.

He nodded, then glanced back to where Alexander lay crumpled on the ground. "Remember, the dead are not powerless."



## Chapter 30

I heard someone crashing through the underbrush and ducked down. Was there another conspirator? I was incredibly relieved to see Jacy explode into the clearing, his face a mask of dread.

"Killian?" he shouted.

"Over here," I called.

I looked around, but White Deer was gone.

Jacy rushed to my side. "Holy shit! Are you okay? I heard a gunshot."

"Yeah, I think so. I might have twisted my ankle. Can you help me up?"

Jacy slid his hands under my arms and helped me up. I was surprised but pleased to find my ankle didn't hurt at all.

"Who fired that shot?"

"Him," I said, approaching Alexander.

I pulled out my phone, turned the flashlight on, found the gun and kicked it away.

"What the hell happened?" Jacy stared wide-eyed at the still form on the ground. "Is he dead?"

"I'm not sure."

I knelt down and felt for a pulse.

"He's alive. I'm not sure about Ricky though."

"Ricky?"

I scanned around with my flashlight until I spotted him on the far side of the clearing.

"Call nine-one-one," I told Jacy as I started toward the very still boy. "Tell them there was a shooting."

Thankfully, Jacy did what I'd asked without arguing.

I feared the worst as I approached Ricky. He hadn't moved since Alexander shot him. I squatted down and shined my light on him. There was so much blood. It looked like he'd been hit in the center of his back.

"They want to know if the shooting victim is alive," Jacy called.

I carefully pressed my fingers into Ricky's neck. "He has a pulse, but it's pretty weak," I reported. "He was shot in the back. He's bleeding pretty badly."

Jacy passed on the information, then said, "They're saying don't move him, just in case the bullet hit his spine."

I hadn't planned on it anyway. I stood up and moved a few feet away, where I turned off my flashlight and dialed Sgt. Kaplan's cell number.

"Kendall," he barked when he answered. "Let me guess. You were involved in the shooting at the Snyder excavation that was just called in."

"That depends on how you define involved."

"Are you bleeding?"

"No."

"Did you pull the trigger?"

"No, I—"

"Are you there now?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then you can fill me in when I get there. Don't go anywhere." He hung up.

I sighed and turned to find Jacy watching me carefully. He was off the phone too.

"Are the paramedics on the way?" I asked.

"Yeah, now tell me what the hell happened out here."

"I will, but first, what made you come out here, anyway? Did you hear the gunshots?"

"No. I had a dream."

"A dream?"

"Yeah. It's a recurring dream I've had for years now. It's always the same. Someone is chasing me through the woods. I'm running for my life because I know this person wants to kill me. Then I fall in a hole and he's standing over me. This time, though, I realized I wasn't actually the one being chased. It was you, and I was seeing it all through your eyes. When I woke up, I just knew I had to get to you as quickly as possible. I ran all the way here."

For a second, I was so surprised I couldn't speak.

"I had that same exact dream last week, and it came true tonight. That's exactly what happened. It was Alexander chasing me after he shot Ricky."

I could hear approaching sirens in the distance.

Jacy shook his head. "I don't understand. Why'd he shoot Ricky? Was he the thief? And how did he know you were even here? You were supposed to stay hidden."

The sirens were growing louder. "I was hiding, but I just reacted when Alexander shot Ricky."

"What do you mean? You reacted?"

"I...may have confronted him."

"You confronted the guy with a gun who'd just shot somebody? With a gun..."

"I didn't think."

"You could have been killed!"

"I know."

"Killian!"

"I know!"

The sirens were close now. Then the first few died out.

"One of us should probably go meet them and guide them back."

"They've been here so many times at this point, they probably don't need a guide. But before they get here, tell me what happened after the end of the dream!" Jacy insisted. "What happened after you fell in the pit? How did Alexander get knocked out?"

"White Deer."

Jacy shook his head in frustration. "White Deer? But how—"

"I'll explain later," I said firmly. "Just don't mention your dead ancestor to the cops."

"Oh for fucks sake—"

He was interrupted by the sounds of people approaching through the trees. "No one move," a man's voice called. "This is the police."

A powerful beam of light struck me in the face. I raised my hands in the universal sign for "don't shoot."

Within seconds, the site was swarming with police officers. Jacy and I were immediately handcuffed and moved to one side, while the two unconscious men were checked out and deemed to be nonthreatening. Floodlights were set so the EMTs could go to work.

A few minutes later, Sergeant Kaplan strode into the clearing, a deep scowl distorting his features. His hair was mussed, and his clothes were rumpled as if he'd been sleeping in them before rolling out of bed and rushing right to the crime scene.

After speaking to several officers, he finally made his way over to us. He glared at me for a few seconds, then shook his head.

"How are you always in the middle of every bad thing that happens around here, Kendall?" he snarled.

I gave him my most winsome smile. "No, really, you don't have to thank me."

"Cut the crap." He was not in a joking mood. Our usual sparring would have to wait until later, maybe after he'd downed several cups of strong coffee. He didn't look entirely awake yet. "What the fuck happened here?"

"I was doing a stakeout—" I started.

"A *what?*" he interrupted.

I bit back a smartass reply and took a deep breath. "I was staking out the site, hoping to catch the looter in the act. I wasn't planning on confronting him. I was only trying to ID him."

"Go on."

"Ricky and Alexander showed up and started talking."

"Who are Ricky and Alexander?"

"Ricky Wong and Alexander James. They were on Professor Healy's archaeological crew."

"They had something to do with the looting?"

"From what I understand, yes. Ricky recruited Alexander to do the actual stealing."

"And the murders?"

"Alexander killed Bridget Foxwell, possibly accidentally. I don't know about Professor Healy. Alexander claimed he didn't do it, and he didn't seem to know who did."

"And you overheard all this?"

"Well, not exactly," I admitted slowly. "I overheard some of it when Alexander and Ricky started arguing. Alexander wanted out, but Ricky was blackmailing him."

He held up a hand. "Blackmailing him with what?"

"Videos, photos, and recordings. A confession to shooting Bridget, among other things."

The detective shook his head. "Continue."

"Ricky told Alexander that he had to kill me, but Alexander refused. Ricky threatened him, then Alexander pulled a gun and shot Ricky. I, uh, acted without thinking and, well, I sort of confronted Alexander."

Kaplan stared at me as if I were a complete idiot. "You did *what*?"

"I confronted Alexander."

"You, an unarmed kid, confronted a man with a gun."

"Yes."

He stared at me for a few seconds. "Do you have any idea how stupid and irresponsible that was?"

I clenched my jaw and counted silently to ten. "I'm standing here, and you've got your killer and the looters. What more do you want?"

He steamed for a few seconds. "Take them to the station," he finally barked at a nearby officer. "Hold them until I get back to talk to them."

"Do you want someone to take their full statements?" she asked.

"No. I'll do it when I get there." Kaplan turned and started walking away.

"Are these handcuffs really necessary?" I called after him.

"Yes," the sergeant growled without even looking back.

The young officer shrugged apologetically.  
"Follow me."

The trip back to the police station was quiet for the most part. It wasn't my first ride in the backseat of a patrol car, though it didn't get any easier with repetition.

Once there, Jacy and I were placed in separate interrogation rooms to wait. After my adrenaline rush wore off, I was completely drained. I napped on and off, my head resting on the table. Several hours passed before I was finally led into Kaplan's office.

He was sitting behind his desk with a weary expression on his face and a huge mug of coffee cradled in his hand.

"Sit," he ordered.

I didn't need to be told twice. I slumped into one of the chairs facing him and stared down at my shoes.

"First off, I want to apologize for my attitude earlier."

My head snapped up. I hadn't been expecting that.

"You may have taken some unnecessary risks," he continued, "but you got the job done with no real harm to yourself, so I can't argue with the results. I've already taken Mr. Elliott's statement. Now I need to hear the entire story from you. Don't leave anything out. And I mean *anything*."

He turned on a digital recorder. After stating my name, his name, the time, and some other case information, he told me to start talking. I recounted the entire night, leaving nothing out until I came to White Deer's first appearance. I skipped his warning, but when I got to the part where Alexander caught up to me and had me at gunpoint, I had no clue how to explain White Deer's rescue without sounding like a crazy person.

I paused while I tried to figure something out, and Kaplan gave me a questioning look. "I, uh...hit my head when I fell," I lied, "so the next part is a little hazy. I'm not sure what happened exactly. The next thing I knew, Alexander was unconscious and Jacy arrived. He called 911 and I called you. That's pretty much it."

"And you didn't see what knocked the James kid out?"

"Uh, no."

"And you're sure about that?"

"Is Alexander awake?"

"He sure is."

"Does he remember what happened?"

"I'm asking the questions here and, right now, I'm more concerned with what you remember."

I took a deep breath and eyed the recorder. "I don't remember anything besides what I already told you."

Kaplan switched off the recorder and regarded me for several seconds. "Okay, spill. What aren't you telling me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Something happened that knocked that boy out, and whatever it was, you saw it. I don't buy for a second that you hit your head and don't remember."

I rubbed my face. "You're not going to believe me."

"Try me."

"There was a deer."

"Describe the deer."

"Are you going to have a lineup?" Kaplan didn't crack a smile, so I quickly continued. "It was male, huge antlers, albino."

"And it just attacked him?"

"It just kind of...head butted him. Really hard."

"You know that makes no sense."

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I didn't say I don't believe you. I just said it doesn't make sense. Deer are usually only aggressive during rutting season and that's in the fall."

I shrugged. "Maybe the gunshots spooked him."

"You know something."

"I've told you everything I know that's relevant."

"Kendall..."

"Fine, the deer was the spirit of the ancient shaman who's protecting the dig site."

Kaplan glared at me. "Now you're just being insulting."

"What's Alexander saying?"

He sighed, and, for a moment, I didn't think he was going to answer me. Finally, he said, "Pretty much what you just told me. He claims a huge white buck came out of nowhere, slammed into him, and then next thing he knew he was waking up in an ambulance."

"So, if he corroborates my story, why are you giving me such a hard time?"

"Because it's a stupid fucking story."

"Strange things happen."

"Strange things happen to *you*, Kendall. What am I supposed to put in my report? What are we supposed to tell reporters?"

"Can't you just say local P.I. Killian Kendall saved the day again?"

Kaplan snorted and rolled his eyes.

"So what happens now? With the case, I mean."

"We get warrants and search Ricky Wong's and Alexander James' houses. We're also looking for Joyner. At the moment, we only want to question him. If it turns out he was more than just an unknowing fence—and from what you've told me, it sounds like he might be—we'll charge him."

"Speaking of Ricky..."

"What about him?"

"Is he alive?"

"So far. He's still in surgery. He lost a lot of blood and suffered some internal damage, but they expect him to pull through."

"We still don't know who killed Healy."

"Not yet, but we'll find out. Leave that to us. You've done your part. Why don't you let us take you to the hospital to get checked out?"

I shook my head. "I'm okay. I just want to go home and fall into bed."

"You're a mess. You should probably get those scratches looked at."

"They're only scratches. I'll shower when I get home and put something on them."

"There's no arguing with you, Kendall. Promise me you'll see a doctor if any of them start looking infected."

"Sure, you bet. I promise. May I go now?"

He frowned, then nodded. "I'll have someone take you home."

"Thanks," I mumbled.

A minute later, the same young officer who'd driven us to the station knocked and stuck her head in the door, a friendly smile on her face. "Your chauffeur service is here."

I said goodbye to Kaplan and followed her out. As we were passing through the main room, I noticed a familiar figure disappearing through the backdoor.

"Hold on a second," I said to the officer and took off.

I caught up to him in the parking lot. "Micah," I called.

He stopped, shoulders tightening before he turned. His expression was carefully neutral—his customer service face—but when I got close enough for him to see the scrapes and bruises covering me, his eyes widened.

"Holy shit! What happened to you?"

"I was chased through the forest at night by a gun-wielding killer," I said, trying for humor but the frayed edges in my voice were obvious even to me. "How was your night?"

Micah stared at me a moment, then shook his head. "What do you want, Killian?"

The coldness in his voice hit me like a physical blow, but I tried not to flinch.

"I just... I saw you and...I don't want to leave things the way they are."

A long, awkward silence stretched between us. I broke first. "Say something."

He let out a breath and looked away. "There's not much to say, really."

"Micah, I'm sorry."

He lifted his gaze to mine, and for a second, I saw the hurt there—raw and unguarded. "I'm sorry, too. That doesn't really change anything, though, does it?"

I blinked rapidly, fighting off tears I absolutely did not have the emotional bandwidth for after the night I'd had.

"When are you leaving?" I asked.

"In a couple of weeks." His shoulders sagged slightly. "I'm still trying to find somewhere to live."

A tiny thread of hope tugged inside me. "Maybe we can talk before you go."

Micah shook his head almost immediately. "I don't think so, Killian. I'm just not...ready." He pressed his lips together, then added, more softly, "I need space. Real space. I'm still processing. My heart is broken. You don't get over that overnight."

That one hurt. Mostly because it was fair.

I looked down at the cracked asphalt and chewed the inside of my cheek.

"Maybe..." Micah said after a moment, voice unsteady, "maybe after some more time... I don't know. Maybe I'll give you a call once I'm settled somewhere."

I nodded, still staring at the ground. "I'd like that," I whispered.

Micah shifted his weight, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket like he wasn't sure what else to do with them. "I guess I should go." He took a steadying breath. "Bye, Killian."

I forced myself to look at him one last time. His eyes flicked to mine, then away, like it hurt him to hold the contact.

"Yeah. Bye," I managed.

He turned and walked toward his car. I watched him go until he pulled out of the lot, taillights shrinking into the darkness. Even after he was gone, I stayed fixed in place, feeling the cold seep into my bones.

A few minutes later, my police chauffeur approached, keeping her voice gentle. "Ready to go?"

I nodded and followed her to the patrol car. This time, she let me sit in the front.

I buckled my seatbelt, leaned my head back against the headrest, and shut my eyes.

The bruises throbbed. The exhaustion crashed over me. But worst of all was the hollow ache Micah left behind—an ache with no easy fix.

The officer kept up a steady stream of chatter all the way to Amalie's House. She didn't seem to need any response from me, which was good since I wasn't in any condition to contribute to the conversation.

When she pulled into the drive of the B&B, I thanked her and stumbled inside.

Somehow, I managed to drag myself up the stairs to my room. I pulled off my clothes, collapsed into bed, and promptly passed out.



## Chapter 31

I slept deeply and dreamlessly, my body sinking so far into the mattress I wasn't sure I'd ever claw my way back out. It was the kind of sleep that didn't heal so much as knock you unconscious until your cells finally stopped screaming.

A persistent knocking dragged me upward from the depths. I surfaced slowly, groggy and disoriented, until Steve's muffled voice reached me through the fog.

"Killian? Are you okay? Killian?"

I groaned and pushed myself upright, blinking against the dim light filtering through my curtains. My alarm clock swam into focus on the nightstand.

7:00 p.m.

I'd slept the entire day away.

"Killian?" Steve called again, sharper this time.

"Hang on!" My voice cracked like a teenager's.

I swung my legs out of bed, wincing as every muscle protested, and reached for the jeans I'd abandoned on the floor the night before. Pulling them on was an ordeal. I nearly fell over twice, hopping around like a drunk flamingo. As I caught myself on the dresser, I caught a glimpse in the mirror.

Yikes.

My hair was sticking out in a dozen different directions like I'd been electrocuted. Dirt smudged across my cheeks and jaw, but the grime didn't even come close to hiding the dozens of scrapes and thin clawing scratches. Blood crusted my nose and upper lip. My left cheekbone sported a darkening bruise, and my eyes

looked bloodshot despite—or perhaps because of—all that sleep.

I looked awful...but alive. And considering the alternative I'd been dodging last night, "awful" was a win.

I desperately needed a nice, hot shower—*desperately*—or better yet, a long soak in the tub, but Steve sounded two seconds from kicking down my door, so priorities.

He started talking as soon as I cracked the door open. "Sorry to wake you up, but I just thought I'd better check—"

Then he saw me.

His words died. His eyes went wide, his jaw went slack, and he looked like I'd just crawled out of a horror movie swamp.

"My *God*, Killian. What happened to you?"

I couldn't help it; a grin tugged at the corner of my mouth. His horror was too dramatic to resist teasing.

"Note to self: don't go skydiving at night," I said. "Landing is a bitch."

He did *not* appreciate the humor. "Are you okay?" he demanded. "I mean...Adam and I heard about the big break in your case, but we didn't realize—"

"Steve." I held up a hand. "I'm fine. Really. It looks worse than it is. Mostly scratches. Nothing a nice, long bath won't fix."

He gave me a look that said he absolutely did not believe that, but he let it slide. "Adam's been calling every half hour, checking if you were up yet. The news hasn't given many details, so he was worried..." His expression added the rest: *with good reason, apparently.*

“I’ll call him,” I promised. “Tell him to stop worrying. I’m in one piece. No permanent damage. Just...cosmetically challenged.”

That earned the faintest twitch of a smile.

“Right now, though,” I continued, “there’s a clawfoot tub calling my name.”

Steve nodded, though a crease of concern still lined his forehead. “Yeah, I guess so. But do me a favor and call Adam first, will you? He’s going to have a heart attack if he doesn’t hear your voice soon.”

“Okay, I’ll call him,” I said again, softer this time. “Promise.”

He exhaled slowly. “Alright. I’ll let you get cleaned up. Just...don’t pass out in there, okay?”

I managed another tired grin. “Scout’s honor.”

He left only when he saw me reach for my phone.

Adam answered on the first ring.

"Hey, it's Killian. Steve told me you were worried."

"I wasn't worried. I just wanted to check and see how you were."

"He said you've been calling every half hour." I tried to smother a chuckle.

"Okay, so I was a little worried. The news said someone got shot."

"I'm fine. Just a few scratches. No new holes."

"What happened?"

"What's the news saying besides the shooting bit?"

"Just that a couple of people were taken into custody in relation to the shooting at the archaeological excavation last week."

"That's all?"

"Yeah. I figured you were involved somehow. I knew you were working on that case, and Steve said he thought you arrived home late."

"I was, and I did."

"So what happened?"

"How about if I come over in a little while and fill you in?"

"What's wrong with right now?"

"I haven't bathed since last night. I'm covered in dirt and sweat, I'm sure I smell pretty ripe, and I feel crusty. A nice soak in a hot bubble bath would feel mighty nice right about now."

He laughed. "Oh. Okay. I guess that's a reasonable excuse. I'll see you later."

"Later." I hung up and stared at the phone.

Maybe I'd make one more call before bathing. I quickly dialed Kaplan's direct line.

Even though it had been more than twelve hours since I'd left him at the police station, I wasn't especially surprised when he answered. "Sergeant Kaplan speaking."

"Have you gotten any sleep?" I asked right off the bat.

"Kendall? I figured you'd be calling sooner or later. And to answer your question, yeah, I grabbed a few hours sometime this afternoon." He still sounded extremely tired. I didn't envy his position.

"What's going on? Any developments since I left?"

"No, we've just been sitting around waiting for you to wake up from your beauty nap so you can take over." At least we were back to our usual banter.

"Well, I'm awake, so debrief me."

He chuckled. "There's not much to report really. We brought in Joyner. He struck a deal with the State's Attorney and he's singing like a bird in exchange for a lesser sentence. He claims the whole thing was Ricky Wong's idea. They'd apparently worked together on some previous excavations, but Wong was afraid Professor Healy was getting suspicious, so he brought in James this last time. Joyner said that when James started stealing the artifacts, Healy thought it was Wong and confronted him. He claims Wong killed Healy, but we don't have any solid proof of that so far, only Joyner's statement."

"What's Ricky saying?"

"Nothing. He hasn't regained consciousness yet. The doctors say he's going to survive, although he may wish he hadn't once he wakes up."

"And Alexander?"

"So far, he's been charged with the murder of Bridget Foxwell, the attempted murders of you and Ricky Wong, and the thefts. We're waiting to see if anything else comes up in the investigation. There's still a possibility he killed the professor."

"Did you search their homes?"

"And Joyner's store. At James's we found some artifacts we assume were stolen. Joyner told us where to find the stolen goods at his store. Elyse Pike is coming in

to see if she can confirm that they're from the Snyder excavation. We didn't find anything at Wong's."

"Nothing?"

"Not a thing. Why? You sound like you were expecting something."

"I heard Ricky tell Alexander that he had artifacts with Alexander's fingerprints on them, a recording of Alexander confessing to Bridget's death, and a surveillance video of Alexander selling the artifacts to Joyner."

"Well now, that would be mighty handy to have. At the very least, it would be solid proof connecting Ricky as an accessory."

"But you didn't find them?"

"No, and my guys know how to do a search. They weren't in his apartment."

"And you talked to his roommate?"

I heard some papers shuffling. "Kyle Leonard, the talking Sasquatch? I guess you could call it talking. He hadn't even noticed Wong didn't return last night. He wasn't exactly helpful."

I thought for a minute. I'd promised Adam I'd be over to tell him the whole story, but I hadn't given him a time.

Finally, I made a decision. "Would you mind if I went over and took a look around?"

"How did I know that was coming? Knock yourself out, Kendall. I hope you come up with something we missed."

"Thanks, Sarge."

I hung up and then, finally—*finally*—went to make friends with hot water and soap. Although I'd

hoped for a long, leisurely soak, a quick shower would have to do for the moment. The soap stung like crazy, but it felt good to wash away the unpleasant mixture of dirt, sweat, and blood.

I didn't even take time to examine my wounds when I finished showering. I just threw on some clean clothes and headed for the door.

Halfway there, I remembered that I still hadn't picked my car up from Fletcher's.

While I was trying to figure out what to do, Steve came into the foyer.

"Are you on your way to see Adam?" he asked.

"Well, I was, but I just remembered my car is at Fletcher's. Any way you could give me a lift over there to get it?"

"Maybe in exchange for the full story of what happened last night."

I grinned. "Deal."

He wrote a quick note and left it on the desk for his guests, then we were off. On the way, I gave him the condensed—and sanitized—version of the previous night's events. I downplayed any real danger to myself, not wanting to upset him after the fact.

When we pulled in behind my car, I noticed that Lily's was there as well. I decided I should at least stick my head in the house and let everyone know I was okay.

Jacy answered my knock, his face lighting up in relief. "Killian! You look a lot better than you did the last time I saw you!"

I laughed. "Thanks. I feel a lot better too. I was just picking up my car, and while I was at it, I thought I'd check in."

"I'm glad you did. Fletcher wants to see you. Do you have a second?"

"Um, sure, but only a second. I'm supposed to be on my way to Adam's, and I still have one more stop to make."

"Come on in. We won't take too long."

I followed him into the living room, where Lily and Fletcher were waiting. Obviously, they'd overheard us at the door.

Fletcher beamed up at me from his chair. "We have so much to thank you for."

I waved away his thanks. "I was just doing my job."

"Maybe so, but because of you, Jacy will be cleared, and it looks like we'll recover all the stolen artifacts."

"So you've spoken to Sergeant Kaplan?"

"I called him a little while ago, and he gave me the good news," Lily said. "He told me the antique-store owner was cooperating with them. Apparently, none of the artifacts had been sold yet."

I smiled. "That is good news. What will happen with the excavation?"

"For now, I think we'll have to let it go." Lily was clearly disappointed. "Next year, we may try again if Professor Pike is still interested."

"We've been rude and missed the most important question," Fletcher interjected. "How are you?"

"I'm okay, considering. I can't say I came through it without a scratch..." I gestured towards my face. "...but that's about all I got. I guess I should consider myself fortunate."

Fletcher nodded. "I heard you were pretty scratched up. Jacy, would you please grab him a jar of healing salve?"

Jacy nodded and left the room, then returned carrying a small jar, which he handed to me.

"It contains comfrey, plantain, and calendula. Rub a little on the scratches and they'll be gone within a couple of days," Fletcher said. "Now, tell me about White Deer."

"Yeah, you never did tell me what happened," Jacy said accusingly.

"Well, um...he appeared right before Alexander and Ricky showed up and warned me to be vigilant. Then, when I fell and twisted my ankle and Alexander was about to shoot me, he showed up again in his deer form and attacked Alexander, throwing him into a tree and knocking him out cold. Then...he came back to me and touched my ankle and..."

"And?" he prompted.

"Honestly, I don't know. Like, when I fell, my ankle hurt so much I couldn't even get up. But after he laid his hand on it, my skin felt sort of tingly. Then when Jacy helped me up, it didn't hurt at all."

Fletcher looked mildly surprised, but merely nodded.

"What did he do?" I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but I needed to hear it from someone else.

"He healed you," the old shaman told me, a matter-of-factly as if it happened every day.

"He can do that?"

"Obviously." He had a twinkle in his eye.

"But how is that possible?"

"White Deer was a mighty shaman in life and remains so in death."

I tried to wrap my brain around what Fletcher had told me. While I'd known his explanation was the only one possible, it was still hard to accept.

"But...if he's so powerful, why didn't he help Healy and Bridget?"

Fletcher shrugged. "I hesitate to speak for him, but I'd wager he just didn't want to. He'd come to see you as an ally, whereas the archaeologists were just interlopers digging up his people's bones."

"Well, I guess whatever his reasons, I'm grateful. I wouldn't be here if he hadn't intervened. I'd better take off now. I have another stop to make before I go home. Thanks for the salve."

Fletcher gave me a warm smile. "You're welcome, but I actually have something else for you as well." He grabbed a book off the table next to him and held it out to me. "I want you to have this. I've read it so many times I practically have it memorized."

I accepted the gift and glanced down at the title—*Touch the Earth*.

"Thank you."

"Don't be a stranger. We consider you family now, and my offer to teach you how to use your gifts still stands. Your first lesson went well. I think you should keep learning."

I nodded. "Thank you. I've been looking for someone to help me understand my gifts for a long time. I will definitely take you up on that."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Good." He grinned. "I rather like having you around."

Lily laughed. "You've been adopted now."

I grinned back. "You won't hear me complaining!"

Jacy walked me out. "We will see you again, right?" he said shyly when we reached my car. "You're not just saying that to be polite to an old man?"

I smiled. "I'll be back. You can't get rid of me that easily. I really need the training you guys can give me. I don't understand anything that happened with White Deer."

Jacy grinned. "Neither do I. And don't let Fletcher fool you. He doesn't understand as much as he pretends. He's just learned to accept what he can't grasp."

My smile faltered a little. "That's easier said than done. But even aside from the training, I consider you a friend after all we've been through, and I don't have many of those these days."

Jacy gave me a hug. "Well, you've definitely got me."

As I drove away, I fully expected the albino buck to leap out of the woods, but it never happened.

When I reached Ricky's building, I noticed there were lights on in his apartment. That was a relief. It had occurred to me that I had no way to get in if his roommate wasn't home.

I ran up the stairs and knocked on the door. I waited a minute, then knocked again. After another long wait, the door opened a crack, still connected to the

frame by a security chain. A bloodshot eye stared out at me warily.

"Yeah?"

"Kyle? I don't know if you remember me, but my name is Killian Kendall. I was here a couple days ago to see Ricky."

"Uh, right. Um, Ricky isn't here right now."

"I know. Actually, I was hoping to talk to you and maybe look around a bit."

"Are you a cop? Because you guys were here earlier—"

"No, I'm not a cop. I'm a private investigator."

"Oh. Okay. Hang on." The door shut, I heard the chain slide off, then the door swung open. "Come on in, dude."

As soon as I stepped inside, the smell of pot hit me and I noticed a blue haze hanging near the ceiling.

Kyle grinned sheepishly. "It's been a hell of a day. You scared the shit out of me when you knocked."

I chuckled. "Sorry."

"I guess you know about Ricky, huh? Man. Talk about coming outta left field."

"You never suspected Ricky of doing anything illegal?"

"No way, man. I didn't have a clue."

I thought it would be a safe bet that not having a clue was a normal state for him.

"Do you know if he had any special hiding place where he kept things he didn't want other people to find?"

He scrunched his face up. "No. Sorry."

This was going nowhere fast. "Do you mind if I look around?"

"As long as you don't mind if I go back to my bong."

"Feel free," I said sarcastically. "Which room was Ricky's?"

He pointed roughly in the direction of one of the two doorways that led from the living and kitchen areas. When I walked in, I couldn't tell if the police had trashed the room in their search or if it was always like that. Judging by the way the apartment had looked on my previous visit, I suspected the latter.

I poked around for a few minutes, checking in all the obvious places—under the bed, in the closet, in the drawers—but turned up nothing. Was I wasting my time? Kaplan had said his men were good, and they hadn't found anything.

Where else would Ricky hide something he didn't want anyone to stumble across?

Suddenly, a light bulb went on in my head. I pulled out my phone and called Elyse Pike. "Elyse, this is Killian. Did Ricky have access to the archaeology lab?"

"Oh, hi, Killian. Um, the lab? Yeah, I guess he did. He volunteered to do some cataloguing for us a while back. It's not a popular job, so we jumped at the offer."

"Could he come and go as he pleased?"

"He had his own key, if that's what you mean."

"Is there any way you can meet me on campus?"

"Right now?"

"If possible."

"I suppose so. I just finished up at the police station. I was on my way home, but I can swing by there instead."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate it."

"You'll fill me in on what this is about when you get there?"

"I promise. Meet me by the old science building."

I returned to the living area, which had grown even cloudier in my absence. "I'm all done here. Thanks for letting me look around."

Kyle peered blearily in my direction and gave me a tight-lipped smile. A few seconds later, he released the breath he'd been holding along with a billowing puff of smoke.

"No problem, dude. You wanna hit? It's good shit."

"Uh, no thanks. I've got to go." I turned and let myself out. If I'd stayed much longer, I'd probably have gotten the munchies.

I quickly drove to the campus. On the way, I called Adam and told him I was running a little late.

He was not happy. "What's going on? Steve said he dropped you off an hour ago."

"I had some loose ends to tie up. I have one more stop to make, then I'll be done. I promise."

"Just try not to get shot at this time," he grumbled.

Elyse was waiting for me when I pulled into the deserted lot. "So what's this about?" she asked.

"Ricky told Alexander he had some evidence he was holding over him. Nothing was found in Ricky's

apartment, so I'm trying to think of other places he could have hidden it."

"And you think he put it in the lab?"

"It's a possibility."

"A remote one. People are in and out of there all the time."

"It can't hurt to take a look."

She shrugged. "We're here. We might as well."

While leading me through the dark building, she kept up a steady stream of nervous conversation. "I just can't believe Ricky and Alexander were involved in all this. Stealing, murder... It's mind-boggling. Maybe I was just too caught up in my own problems to pay attention, but I never even suspected. It's so scary to think I was working next to a killer all that time."

She unlocked the lab door, turned on the lights, then watched silently as I searched the room. It didn't take long. There were only so many places to conceal something. I gave a cursory glance through the boxes of artifacts, but they were an unlikely hiding place. Too many people had access to them. My search turned up nothing.

After I'd looked everywhere I could think of, I stood in the middle of the room and racked my brain for other ideas.

Suddenly, I remembered something Elyse had mentioned the first time she'd shown me the lab.

"Didn't you tell me there was a storage area somewhere?"

"Yes, in the old janitor's closet."

"Did Ricky have a key to that?"

"Yes." She was already moving towards the door, and I was right behind her.

She started downstairs.

"Your storage closet is on a different floor from the lab?" I asked in disbelief.

"We take what we're offered." She led me to a door that still bore the letters "a-n-i-t-o-r" affixed to its surface. Unlocking it, she swung it open to reveal a tiny room lined with metal shelves bearing dozens of labeled cardboard boxes.

"This could take a while," I muttered under my breath.

"I could help," she suggested. "Just tell me what we're searching for."

"I'm not sure exactly. Probably something like a thumb drive. Oh, and some artifacts."

"Killian, all these boxes are filled with artifacts. Can you be more specific?"

"Nope. Sorry. Just look for anything that doesn't belong here."

We started opening boxes on opposite sides of the room, rummaging in silence as we moved toward the back. It was obvious this room was seldom visited, because the dust was thick on the box tops. I started sneezing after the first four or five.

I was almost to the corner when I pulled a box off the top shelf. I noticed immediately that it was lighter than the others I'd checked. My heart sped up as I set it on the floor and pried open the flaps.

"Bingo."

Elyse came up behind me and peered over my shoulder. "What's that thing?"

I looked closer. Half hidden under a small, palm-sized external drive was a watch, its leather strap crusted in what appeared to be blood.

I pulled a pen from my pocket. Using the point to hook the buckle, I lifted the watch from the box and held it up. Its gold face and red ruby flashed in the light. The glass bezel was cracked, but I'd seen that watch before.

"Recognize this?"

"I think Ricky wore one like that," she said slowly. "In fact, I know he did. He often talked about how he'd won it playing poker."

A smile spread across my face. "If this is Professor Healy's blood..."

Elyse's eyes grew wide. "You mean...you think Ricky killed Quinn?"

I nodded. "We won't be sure until they do the tests on the blood, but we know Healy already suspected Ricky of thefts on other digs, and he was angry enough to take action. According to Ricky's fence, Healy confronted Ricky, and Ricky killed him in the heat of the moment. What I don't know is if he framed Jacy as an afterthought or if he'd planned it all along. If he planned it, then it was premeditated."

"But why hang on to all this?"

"Ricky kept evidence as a backup plan in case he had to frame Alexander for everything."

Elyse shook her head. "It's so diabolical."

"It's all just a theory right now, but I have a hunch I'll be proven right." I pulled out my phone. "Time to turn it over to the police."

Kaplan arrived in record time and was extremely pleased with my find. So pleased, in fact, that he

completely forgot to be surly or sarcastic. Instead, I got a hearty handshake and a sincere thanks. He said he'd update me as soon as they tested the blood on the watch.

Later that night, after repeating the story for Adam, Steve, Kane, and Tad until I was hoarse, I stood in front of the mirror examining my body. It was the first chance I'd had to really take stock of my injuries. There were scratches all over my face and arms, some of them pretty deep. My ankle was a little bruised but otherwise felt fine.

I grabbed the salve Fletcher had given me and dabbed it on the scratches and, since I figured it couldn't hurt, on my ankle as well. There was no denying that White Deer had healed me, but how?

There was so much I couldn't comprehend about my gifts and the supernatural. I didn't know if I ever would fully understand, but I knew I was far past the point of needing to learn what I could—and I knew it would be insane to not take Fletcher and Jacy up on their offer to keep teaching me. I trusted and liked both of them. I actually found I was looking forward to our next lesson.

I was brushing my teeth when I glanced up and almost choked on my toothbrush. Seth was standing right behind me.

I quickly rinsed my mouth and spun around, very glad I'd pulled on a pair of shorts after taking stock of my injuries.

"You've really got to start giving me some warning," I chided him.

"How? Ring the doorbell? Give you a call on your cell? Knock?"

"Knocking is polite."

"Well, it doesn't really matter anyway."

"Why not?"

"You might not be seeing much of me from here on out."

"What do you mean?"

"I only come when you need me. You'll need me less and less as you grow up and get control of your gifts."

"But...I don't want you to stop coming."

"I was never going to be around forever, Kill. I'm not like White Deer or, for that matter, even Amalie."

"What if I need you?"

"Then maybe I'll be back."

"Is this goodbye?"

He shrugged. "For now, at least."

"But—" I felt tears welling up.

"Hey, don't cry, Killer. At least we get to say goodbye this time, right?"

I half-laughed, half-sobbed. "Did it have to be in the bathroom?"

Seth smiled sadly. "At least you weren't on the toilet."

I wanted to hug him so much, but knew that was impossible. "I guess this is goodbye then. For now, at least. I love you, Seth."

"I love you, too, Killian. Always and forever."

And then he was gone.

A week passed before I heard from Kaplan. Seven days on the calendar, but it felt like an eternity. I had to exert every ounce of self-control not to call him

daily like some anxious helicopter parent checking on a science fair project. Part of it was plain curiosity—I was dying to know what was happening with the case—but the rest...the rest was harder to admit.

I was floundering.

The post-case crash hit harder than usual, leaving an empty ache in its wake. Without the mystery to distract me, I was left to deal with the emotional wreckage of my personal life. Between Seth's quiet goodbye, the emotional scene with Asher, and the shaky, unresolved ending with Micah, I felt like a puzzle missing several essential pieces. The silence wasn't peaceful. It was oppressive.

So I filled the time any way I could.

My new office became my distraction project. I reorganized it three times, bought plants I hoped I wouldn't kill, argued with myself about paint chips, and arranged my desk so many ways I lost track. It wasn't much, but it kept my hands busy when my brain threatened to spiral.

Chris started as our assistant, providing another welcome distraction. Training her gave me something to focus on besides my own mess. She was eager to learn and sharply intuitive, picking up on things I remembered struggling with when I was new. She asked smart questions, listened well, and her dry sense of humor kept me laughing.

We even started hanging out after work—grabbing dinner, browsing weird thrift stores, or just sitting in the office after hours talking about anything except our jobs. Jacy joined us occasionally, his calm, steady presence adding an easy and comfortable layer to

our trio. It surprised me how natural it felt, the three of us forming the early threads of a friendship that I hadn't realized I needed.

It didn't erase everything else, but it made the quiet less deafening.

I also had my second lesson with Fletcher and Jacy. This session focused again on grounding and the discipline of opening myself intentionally rather than just letting it happen to me. I struggled, but Fletcher remained endlessly patient while Jacy demonstrated techniques with calm confidence that made me both impressed and a little envious.

By the end of the lesson, I felt wrung out but proud. Fletcher clapped me on the shoulder and promised that next time I'd start learning how to shield myself from unwanted contact—something that felt long overdue after everything I'd been through.

I waited. I trained. I decorated. I tried to heal.

But beneath it all, I kept one ear open, hoping the next call would finally be Kaplan.

When my phone finally rang and I saw it was coming from the police station, I answered so fast it didn't even finish the first ring.

"It's about time," I said in lieu of a greeting.

Kaplan chuckled. "These things take time, Kendall. I wanted to make sure I had a complete report to give you before I called."

"I would have settled for regular updates. So what's going on?"

"Well, we owe you a huge thank you for your assistance with this case. The State's Attorney would have had no problem presenting a pretty airtight case

even without the full confessions we got out of all of them."

"All of them?"

"Yep. Alexander James, Ricky Wong, and Malcolm Joyner all cracked like eggs when presented with the evidence you found. Plus, the blood on the watch was positively identified as being Quinn Healy's."

"Then Ricky did kill Healy?"

"Yes, and it was just as you suspected. Healy asked Ricky to meet him at the site and confronted him about looting the dig. They argued and Healy threatened to turn him in. The knife Jacy Elliott had dropped during their altercation earlier that day was sitting on the table in the tent. Wong grabbed it and stabbed Healy to death, then left the knife in order to implicate Elliott.

"We don't think either Healy's or Bridget Foxwell's deaths were premeditated, but the James kid definitely showed up with the gun the other night with the intention to kill Wong. I think no matter what happened, Wong wasn't leaving there without a bullet in him. He's just lucky you were there."

"And Joyner?"

"He's admitted to knowingly accepting stolen goods, but claims he had no knowledge of the murders. I doubt we can prove otherwise, and really, he's probably telling the truth, if only just because he didn't ask any questions."

"That's it, then?"

"That's it. Wrapped up with a pretty red bow, thanks to you. Just a heads up, we're doing a press conference this afternoon and we'll be giving you due credit."

"You're saying I should be prepared for reporters to descend on our office like Biblical locusts?"

Kaplan laughed. "Something like that."

"I'll warn Chris and Novak."

"Chris?"

"Our new assistant."

"Moving up the ladder?"

"Hey, I'm a partner now, getting my license any day now. Got my own office and everything."

"Congrats, Kendall. Well deserved. Tell your boss I said hi. He is still your boss, isn't he?"

I snorted. "Novak will always be the boss."

I was getting ready for bed that night, going through the motions on autopilot, when I heard a dull thump behind me.

I froze.

For a heartbeat, I was certain it was Seth. The familiar prickle crawled across the back of my neck as I spun around.

But my heart dropped just as quickly. The room was empty.

The precarious stack of books next to my bed had simply given into gravity and fallen over, leaving a messy heap on the floor.

I let out a shaky breath, equal parts relief and disappointment tightening my chest.

Just books. Nothing supernatural. Nothing meaningful. Not this time, anyway.

I crouched to gather them, but one spine snagged my attention: the book Fletcher had given me. I hadn't thought much about it since the day he'd handed it to

me—chalk it up to distraction, exhaustion, avoidance...take your pick.

As I picked it up, I saw a sticky note jutting from the top. Odd. I hadn't noticed that before. Curiosity tugged at me, so I flipped to the indicated page. Fletcher's cramped handwriting sprawled across the note:

*Killian, this is my favorite passage in the book. I hope it speaks to you as it has to me.*

He'd marked a speech attributed to Chief Seattle. Even before my eyes scanned the page, my eyes were drawn to a single line, underlined in soft pencil, the graphite worn and smudged as if fingers had traced over the words many times.

*"The dead are not powerless. Dead, I say? There is no death. Only a change of worlds."*

I remembered Fletcher quoting them once, the words later echoed by White Deer after he'd attacked Alexander.

The dead were not powerless, as I knew better than most. But there was death. Just ask Professor Healy or Bridget Foxwell. Or Seth.

But maybe that was the point. Maybe power and permanence weren't the same thing. A life could end, brutally or quietly, and still send ripples through the world long after the body was gone. The dead didn't stay with us because they refused to leave—they stayed because we carried them. In memory. In guilt. In love. In all the ways they'd changed the shape of who we were.

I closed the book gently, fingers resting on the cover. Maybe there was a change of worlds, and maybe I didn't have to understand it yet. What mattered was the

world I was in now. Grief was a kind of haunting too, but not all hauntings were meant to terrify. Some just reminded you of what mattered enough to lose.

And maybe, just maybe, they reminded you of what was still worth living for.

The next morning, I found myself back in the office bright and early. My new desk, my new walls, my new life—none of it quite fit yet, but for the first time in a long while, I wasn't fighting that. Healing wasn't a straight line. It wasn't even a line at all. It was a messy, looping trail with detours and sinkholes and, if you were lucky, a few unexpected guides along the way.

Seth was gone. Asher was gone. Micah was gone. White Deer's presence hovered at the edges of my awareness, no longer threatening but not exactly comforting either.

And yet, despite everything, I didn't feel alone.

Chris chatted with me as she settled into her own space. Jacy texted to check on me before work. Fletcher called to arrange our next lesson, promising it would be "interesting" with his trademark warmth and humor.

They weren't replacements for what I'd lost—they were threads of something new.

Just like people, cases would come and go. Some would bruise me. Some might break pieces off. But I was beginning to trust that I could rebuild, maybe even stronger than before. The strange, unsettling, often painful things I'd learned about myself weren't burdens—they were tools, if I chose to use them.

I was the last to leave that night, and as I locked up and stepped out into the cooling air, I glanced back at

the faint reflection in the office window. Just me,  
standing under a streetlight.

No ghosts or shadows...just me.

And for the first time, that was enough. I didn't  
need answers tonight. I didn't need certainty.

I just needed the next step forward.

And I was finally ready to take it.

Time to change my own world.

## About the Author

Josh Aterovis is the award-winning author of multiple LGBTQ+ novels blending mystery, romance, suspense, and the supernatural, including seven novels and multiple short stories in the acclaimed Killian Kendall Mysteries series. His work explores themes of identity, chosen family, grief, healing, and queer resilience, often centering flawed but deeply human characters navigating extraordinary circumstances. Known for emotionally grounded storytelling and vivid atmosphere, Josh's books have earned a devoted readership among fans of queer fiction and genre-bending narratives.

In addition to his work as a novelist, Josh is an immersive theater creator and producer with Submersive Productions in Baltimore, Maryland, where he develops original, site-specific experiences that blur the line between audience and performer. His storytelling across both page and stage is driven by a passion for creating meaningful, transformative experiences that invite audiences to connect, reflect, and imagine new possibilities.

Learn more at [joshaterovis.com](http://joshaterovis.com) or [submersive.org](http://submersive.org).