



JOSH ATEROVIS

ALL LOST THINGS

A Killian Kendall Mystery

Book III

ALL LOST THINGS

A Killian Kendall Mystery
Book 3

Josh Aterovis

©2026 Josh Aterovis

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover Design: Aaron Barlow

Reader Advisory

All Lost Things contains depictions and discussions of physical and emotional abuse, sexual assault, child abuse, murder, trauma, and mental health struggles. While some sensitive content is discussed rather than shown graphically, the novel explores difficult and emotionally intense subject matter throughout. Reader discretion is advised.

*All lost things are in the angels' keeping, Love;
No past is dead for us, but only sleeping, Love.
At last.*

Helen Hunt Jackson

Blood was everywhere. It splattered the walls, pooled on the floor, even dripped from the ceiling. The metallic stench choked the air, so thick it seemed to cling to the skin. It was hard to believe all of it had come from just one body—but the scattered limbs and fragments confirmed otherwise.

The killer stood still for a moment, taking in the scene. A deep, unsettling satisfaction stirred in their chest. Some distant part of their mind recognized the wrongness of the feeling, but it didn't matter. Their heart thudded with a rush of adrenaline, equal parts fear and elation.

What now?

The simplest option would be to walk away. Leave the mess for someone else to find. It could be days before anyone noticed. The person that the bits and pieces had once comprised was not the sort anyone would miss, or if they did, it would only be to appreciate the fact that he was absent. The thought of someone stumbling upon the grotesque display was tempting.

But tempting didn't mean smart.

Even the most careful killer could make mistakes...a fingerprint, a fiber, something unnoticed. If the TV shows were even half right, then the forensic investigators could practically work magic. No, this couldn't be left behind. It was too risky.

Fortunately, the killer had a plan.

*Gasoline splashed across the floor, cutting through the
coppery stench with its sharp, acrid bite.*

The fire would take care of the rest.

Chapter 1

Kane gripped the dashboard in fear—whether real or feigned, I couldn't say with certainty.

"Killian, will you slow down?" he wailed.

"We don't have time to slow down. We're running late."

"And we'll never get there if you have an accident and we die in a fiery explosion."

I glanced away from the road long enough to give my little brother a skeptical look. "You watch too much TV."

"Okay, so cars don't generally blow up in real life, but still, you have to admit we'll be even later if you rear-end some poor, defenseless old lady in a Buick."

I was a little edgy after oversleeping and being violently awakened by a disturbing nightmare, but I had to smile at Kane's comment. And he claimed *I* was a drama queen.

"What's got you in such a weird mood, anyway?" Kane asked. "You never sleep through the alarm."

"Whereas you do on a daily basis."

He shrugged. "Yeah, so that's not unusual for me. What's your excuse?"

I frowned and shook my head slightly. "I had a nightmare."

Kane suddenly became serious as he studied my face carefully. "The same one as before?"

I shook my head. "Those seemed to have stopped finally. This one was even worse."

"Tell me about it?"

"I'd rather not." He made a face. "Later, maybe. Right now, I just want to forget it."

He nodded. "Are we picking up Asher this morning?"

Some days we picked up my boyfriend and some days we didn't. It all depended on our schedules. "Why do you think I'm rushing?"

"So that means you both have to stay after school?"

"Yep. I have play practice and Asher has Rainbow Alliance." We were doing *The Laramie Project* for our spring play, which was a really big deal for our high school. There were only eight roles, but I got one—and not just because I was openly gay. A couple of the other guys auditioning for the part were gay as well.

Kane sighed. "I guess I'll go to Rainbow Alliance then." He attended the gay/straight alliance sporadically as a straight supporter. One of the guys who went religiously had a crush on him, though, so Kane—one of the least homophobic people I'd ever known—eventually got tired of fending off the guy's persistent romantic overtures and had been avoiding the meetings. "So, how are rehearsals going?"

"You know what they say—the worse the rehearsals, the better the show."

He gave me a cynical look. "They actually say that?"

"They do, but I think it's just supposed to make us feel better. It's not really working. Opening night is only a week away, and I'm nervous as hell."

I picked up my cup of coffee, and Kane eyed it hungrily. I didn't usually drink the stuff, but I figured I

could use the caffeine boost that morning. Kane, on the other hand, was hopelessly addicted. He'd already finished his own.

"Forget about it," I said warningly.

"Oh, come on. You don't even like it."

"You've had enough. It'll stunt your growth."

"Is that what happened to you?"

I rolled my eyes. "Here come the short jokes."

"You started it."

As I set my coffee back in the cup holder, Kane made a dive toward it. I tried to snatch it back, and a brief tug-of-war ensued. The game ended when the hot liquid sloshed over the side and onto Kane's lap. He let out a howl and released the cup, causing me to splash myself.

With all the distraction, I failed to notice the car sitting at the stop sign in front of us. However, it got my full attention when it brought us to a sudden, bone-jarring, metal-crunching halt. We hadn't even been going that fast, I'd hit the brakes after the first coffee spill, but there was still enough of an impact to deploy the airbag. The safety device exploded in my face, scaring me as much as the actual accident.

I punched the bag down and checked on Kane. He was white as a ghost, but otherwise unscathed. I then turned to see what I'd hit and groaned. There was an older model, faded yellow Buick growing out of the front end of my own car. Kane's earlier joke about running into an old lady in a Buick suddenly seemed like a prophecy.

I sighed. "Do me a favor and call Adam."

"Sure, give me the dirty job," he grumbled.

"Kane." My voice was sharp. "Not now. Just call Adam and tell him I need him." Adam was our dad, Kane's biological and my surrogate. He'd taken me in when my own father kicked me out upon discovering I was gay.

I drew a deep breath and stepped out of my car. By now, the Buick's driver-side door had swung open and a tall, thin middle-aged man had emerged. At least he wasn't a little old lady.

"Are you okay?" the man asked me. He was in his late fifties or early sixties, with short-clipped, battleship gray hair and a clean-shaven face. Judging by his hairstyle and state of extreme physical fitness, I guessed he was probably retired military or a cop.

"I think so," I answered as I took in the crumpled front end of my beloved car. The front bumper had been shoved down and the hood had buckled from the impact. With the exception of a pair of busted tail lights, the Buick didn't appear to have a scratch. "I'm so sorry. I spilled coffee and got distracted. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Wish I could say the same for Bessie."

My stress level jumped several notches.

"Bessie?"

"Bessie," he said with slow deliberation, "was my trusted companion of twenty years. We've been through a lot together. It's hard to believe it could end like this."

I stared at him in horror, feeling as if I might throw up at any moment.

He chuckled. "Don't pass out on me, kid. Bessie is, or rather was, my car."

I felt lightheaded as relief washed over me. "Your car?"

"Yes, my car. Speaking of cars, I'm assuming you have insurance on your little windup toy there."

"Yes, sir!" Something about his military bearing made me want to salute. I dove back into the car.

"Is he mad?" Kane asked, his hand over the phone.

"Well, he's making jokes, so I guess he's not that upset," I answered as I rummaged through the glove box for my insurance card. "What about Adam?" He held up the phone, and I heard Adam's voice squawking hysterically. I made a face. "Better you than me."

It took me a few minutes to figure out which card I needed. By the time I returned, the man was waiting for me, business card in hand. He passed it to me in exchange for my information.

"You know, you can do all that through the app, these days," he remarked.

Duh. Of course. I was so discombobulated that I forgot all about the insurance app. I glanced down at his business card while I pulled out my phone. *Shane Novak, Private Investigator* was embossed on the card in neat, black lettering, and under that, a phone number and address.

"You're a private detective?" I was unable to keep the note of awe out of my voice.

Novak gave a grunt. "Sure am," he said distractedly as he poked at his phone. "Don't get too excited. It's nothing like it is on TV." He straightened up and looked me over from head to toe. "You're the famous Killian Kendall, huh?"

"Famous?"

"You're the kid that shot and killed that serial killer a couple of years back, aren't you?"

"What? Oh. Um, yeah." I wasn't used to people recognizing me on the street.

"I followed the story at the time. Interesting case. You handled yourself pretty well for an amateur. Not many kids your age would have had the guts to do what you did."

"Uh, thanks?" I was unsure of the proper protocol when someone compliments you on killing another person.

"Does your app scan?" he asked as he handed me back my insurance card.

"Uh..." I'd been so distracted by meeting a real, live private eye that I'd forgotten all about the app. I quickly pulled it up and tapped on the button that read "Had an accident?" As a matter of fact, I had.

I found the screen to exchange insurance information, and, sure enough, there was a scan option. I quickly scanned the QR code on his phone, then the app started asking me questions about the accident.

"Alright, that all I need," he said, pulling my attention away from the demands of the insurance app. "It was a pleasure getting rear-ended by you, Mr. Kendall." He pumped my hand once and turned toward his car.

"Wait! Don't we have to call the police or something?"

"Not unless you want a reckless driving charge. It's doubtful they'd even do anything, since no one was hurt. I'm not going to sue you or anything." He looked

down at the back of his car, currently buried in the front end of mine. "I probably won't even file a claim."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Bessie is older than you are, and you're going to have enough headaches with your insurance company. You don't need the police involved. Trust me. I was a cop for thirty years."

"But your car—"

"My car is fine. I was just teasing you about her dying. She's going to outlive me. Built like a tank. They don't make 'em like this anymore."

I must have had a dubious look on my face.

"Okay, here. Watch this." He climbed in behind the steering wheel and turned the key. After a few sputters and an asthmatic wheeze, the Buick roared to life. He got out, leaving the engine running. "Don't worry, she always sounds like that. Unless you want me to hang around, I should get going. I'm late for an appointment. If you need anything, just call me. My number's on the card I gave you."

I nodded dumbly, and we shook hands again. He got back into his car and pulled away from mine with a metallic screech, leaving a trail of broken glass from my headlights. He waved and then drove off. I turned to Kane, who had climbed out of the car in time to catch the end of my conversation with Mr. Novak.

"That went a lot better than I would have expected," he said.

I nodded. "He looked kind of scary, but he was really nice."

"A lot nicer than he had to be, considering you slammed into him."

"I didn't slam into him! I wasn't going that fast." Kane cast a pointed glance at the front end of my car, and I sighed. "Do you think it's totaled?"

He shrugged. "Beats me, but one thing is for sure. Dad is going to freak when he sees it. You'll be lucky if you ever drive again."

My stomach knotted up at the thought of Adam's reaction. He was a great guy and more of a father to me than my real dad ever was, but he tended to be a little overprotective.

"What did he say when you called him?"

"Well, after he stopped speaking in gibberish and I convinced him neither of us had critical head injuries, he said he'd get here as quickly as possible."

"Let's hope he doesn't have an accident on the way, then we'd only have Steve's car for transportation."

Steve was Adam's partner. He was an architect and worked in a town about an hour from where we lived. If we were dependent on his vehicle, things would get very complicated.

"Way to think positive there, Killian," Kane commented dryly. "Shouldn't you call Asher and let him know we're running a little later than planned?"

"Oh my God! I forgot all about him!"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket as Kane went to examine the damage to the car more closely. I called Asher's cell phone, but he didn't pick up, so I disconnected and called his home phone. His mom answered. "Hi, Mrs. Davis. This is Killian. Is Asher there?"

"Hi, Killian. Actually, you just missed him. Marcus took him to school."

Marcus was Asher's older brother. He lived at home and went to one of the local colleges. On mornings when I couldn't pick Asher up, Marcus drove him. However, I was certain Asher and I had agreed the night before that I would pick him up this morning.

"Oh. Was he mad?"

There was a long, rather pregnant pause. Mrs. Davis was one of the sweetest ladies I'd ever met. She loved me to death and hated it when Asher and I fought, which lately seemed to be more and more often. "He did seem a little upset. He said something about being late for a test."

"I'm sorry. I had an accident on the way there."

"An accident! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, and so is Kane. And the other driver. It just made us even later than we already were. I'll explain to Asher when I see him at school."

"Okay, sweetheart. I'm sure he'll understand when he hears what happened."

At least one of us was sure.

Adam pulled up behind my disabled vehicle just as I slipped the phone into my pocket. He was out of his car before the motor had even completely cut off.

"We're fine—" I broke off as Adam grabbed me in a rough hug.

"Are you sure you're okay?" His voice was thick with emotion.

"Ahm fahn." My response was muffled by my face being mashed against his shoulder. "Weally," I added for emphasis.

He released me from the bear hug but held me by my shoulders at arm's length to look me over.

"Hey, I'm okay, too, just for the record," Kane deadpanned.

Apparently satisfied that I was unhurt, Adam let me go and repeated the hug and inspection process with Kane. Once that was out of the way, he turned his attention to my car. "Oh my God," he whispered. He sounded as though he might cry.

"We're okay. Nobody got hurt," I reminded him.

"Yeah, it looks worse than it is," Kane chipped in.

"Our insurance premiums are going to skyrocket," Adam moaned.

After we finished taking dozens of photos from every angle for the insurance app, a representative from the company called. Adam took over as the policy holder, for which I was grateful.

After several minutes, he hung up. "They dispatched a tow truck to assess the damage," he reported. "They advised us against driving the car since the front bumper was pressed against the tires, assuming it would even start. They also said there could also be additional damage to the frame or the engine."

"Do you think it's totaled?" I asked him.

He took a long look at the car. "Probably."

"I'm sorry," I said in a small voice, feeling a little like I could cry.

Adam patted me on the shoulder. "Kane told me it was mostly his fault, but no one is in trouble. I'm just glad you're both okay. Cars can be replaced. You boys can't be."

By the time the tow truck arrived and Adam finished dealing with the insurance company, Kane and I

had missed most of our morning classes. Adam dropped us off at school, and we visited the office to get excused absences. I didn't run into Asher until the final period was over, and we only had a few minutes before we had to be at our respective after-school activities.

"Asher!" I called as I caught sight of his retreating back from the opposite end of the hall.

He stopped and waited for me to catch up, but he didn't look happy about it. His usually silver eyes were a dark, stormy gray. "Asher, I've been trying to find you all day."

"Well, here I am. We have to keep this quick. I'm running late. In fact, I feel like I've been running late all day, starting with this morning."

"Ash, I'm sorry about that. I overslept, then got into an accident on the way to get you."

A startled look softened his expression. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah, no one got hurt, but my car got busted up pretty badly. They had to tow it off."

He frowned again. "I'll call Marcus to pick us up."

"Adam can—"

"I'll call Marcus. I have to go. I need to be there before the meeting starts. I am the sole president, you know. Besides, don't you have play practice?"

I sighed. This had been a sore spot between us ever since I decided to step down from my position as co-president of the queer/straight alliance we co-founded to focus on drama during our senior year. I hadn't thought it would be that big of a deal—Rainbow Alliance was running smoothly, and Asher knew acting

was important to me—but apparently it was a big deal to Asher. It was months later and he was still pouting about it.

"Asher—"

"Oh, and would a phone call have killed you?"

"I did call, but you didn't answer. Then I called your house and your mom said you'd already left. Asher, I'm sorry. Really."

He deflated a little. "Yeah, to be fair, I did see your call but I ignored it because I was pissed that you were late."

"Well, I'm sorry. I should have called you sooner."

"You're absolutely sure you're okay?" When I nodded, he said, "We'll talk more later." He turned and quickly walked away.

True to his word, Asher had called his brother. Marcus was waiting for us in the parking lot when we got out of school.

"So, Killian, I hear you wrecked your car," he said conversationally as I slid into the backseat with my boyfriend. Kane had called shotgun.

"Dude, you should have been there," Kane started in enthusiastically. "It was awesome! He just plowed into that guy's rear end."

Marcus snorted and twisted around in his seat to face Asher and me. "Bet that was a first for you, huh, Kill?"

"Ha ha, very funny. I'm glad everyone thinks my accident is so amusing."

"I fail to see the humor in it," Asher said grouchily.

"Big surprise," Kane muttered under his breath, and Marcus guffawed.

Asher's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Nothing," Kane sang merrily. He and Asher hadn't been getting along any better than Asher and me for the last few months.

"So how'd Rainbow Alliance go?" I asked Asher. It was a measure of how desperate I was to distract him that I broached this touchy subject.

Asher shrugged. "It was okay."

"Okay? It was great," Kane crowed. "Marco has a new crush so he barely noticed I was there."

Asher rolled his eyes. "We had a new kid today. I talked to him a little after the meeting while we waited for you."

Play practice had run a few minutes longer Rainbow Alliance.

"He's a grade behind me," Kane added. "He's a little weird."

"How so?" Asher asked.

"Stays to himself, kind of quiet."

"He seemed really sweet." Was it my imagination or did Asher sound a little defensive?

"He probably just seems quiet because he can't get a word in edgewise when you're around," Marcus teased. Kane laughed good-naturedly.

"Is he gay?" I asked Asher.

"He said he's not sure, but I think he probably is. I don't think he's ever told anyone before. It took a lot of courage for him to come to the meeting."

"It takes a lot of courage for anyone to attend the meetings." Even though our school had become a pretty accepting place since Asher and I came out publicly the year before, it still had its share of bigots and loudmouths.

"That's why Rainbow Alliance is so important!" Asher was suddenly impassioned, coming out of his funk for the first time that day. "Our school needs this group. It makes us visible. Who's going to take over next year after we graduate? Nobody has stepped up or even shown any interest in being president. Brandy's already made it clear she doesn't even want to be vice president again next year. Nobody else has any leadership skills."

"Do you have to be gay to be president?" Kane asked.

"No." Asher sounded guarded. "It's a gay and *straight* alliance. Why?"

"I could be president."

Asher snorted. "Right."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kane demanded.

"Like you could take things seriously long enough to be the president."

"I could! And I'd do a damn good job."

"You don't even come to half the meetings."

"I'd be there if I was president."

"What if some other poor guy got a crush on you?"

"Poor guy? Marco texted me naked pictures of himself. That's like sexual harassment. And I was never even mean to him. I just...avoided him whenever possible."

"That's my point. You can't avoid people if you're the president."

"You avoided Trish when she decided she was bi and wanted to be in a three-way relationship with the two of us," I pointed out. Probably not my best move, judging by the nasty look Asher shot me.

"That's different. Trish is clinically insane."

"Look, if you don't want me to be president, just say so," Kane challenged.

"I don't want you to be president," Asher snapped back.

"Fine, but when Rainbow Alliance folds next year, don't blame me."

A tense silence fell over the car until Marcus couldn't handle it any longer. "So, uh, anybody want to see a movie this weekend?"

"No!" Asher, Kane, and I chorused loudly. Finally, something we could all agree on.

No one made any more attempts at conversation for the rest of the drive to our house. Asher didn't even say goodbye when I got out of the car.

"What got up his butt?" Kane asked as Marcus drove away. He smirked. "We know it's not you."

"I'm really not in the mood, Kane."

That was another sore subject—one that too many people around us knew about. Even though we'd been dating for almost two years, Asher and I had never had sex, at least not actual intercourse. We'd fooled around, done other stuff, but for some reason, I just didn't feel ready to take that next step—much to Asher's chagrin. "In case you haven't noticed, this has not been a good day."

"Sorry."

Kane sounded sincere, so I gave him a break. "Asher's been mad ever since I decided to step down as co-president of the Rainbow Alliance. He keeps saying he's over it but then he brings it up again. It seems like all we do anymore is fight."

"Maybe it's just sexual tension," Kane suggested impishly.

"You never let up, do you?" I started toward the door.

Kane followed me inside. "Sorry, sorry. I just couldn't resist."

"You don't help things with the way you purposefully bait him."

"Again, can't resist. He's such an easy target. He never used to be that prickly."

"Are you guys bitching about me again?" Adam asked with a smile as he stuck his head out of the den. He worked from home and used the den as his office.

"No, we're bitching about Asher this time," Kane answered as he started up the stairs to our shared bedroom. "But you had a fifty-fifty chance."

Adam's brow furrowed. "Something wrong?"

"Just the usual," he called back. "Asher's a jerk."

"What happened?" Adam asked me.

I dragged my backpack past Adam and into the den. I usually did my homework there while Kane did his in our bedroom. "Asher was mad that I didn't pick him up this morning."

"Even after you told him about the accident?"

"He said I should have called. Technically, he's right. I mean, I did call and he didn't answer, but I should have done it sooner."

"You were in a car accident. You'd think he'd cut you a little slack."

"There hasn't been much slack lately."

"Is he still mad about that whole Rainbow Alliance thing?"

"Yeah. Actually, it seems like he's mad about everything these days, especially if I don't do exactly what he wants me to do."

Adam ruffled my hair. "Relationships have their ups and downs. You guys have had pretty smooth sailing since things settled down after..."

I nodded. "I know. I just wish things could have stayed like that."

"Nothing ever stays the same, kiddo. Consider this a test of your commitment to one another. If you pull through, your relationship will be stronger than ever."

"And if we don't?" I asked, hoping he'd tell me I had nothing to worry about.

He gave me a reassuring smile. "Then you'll find someone even better."

That wasn't the answer I was looking for.

Chapter 2

The next week passed quickly. The repair estimates for my car were quite high, and the insurance company hadn't made a decision yet about whether they would cover the cost of repairs or just total it. In the meantime, Adam was driving Kane and me to school in the morning, and either Adam or Marcus would pick us up after. Things with Asher remained tense, but I didn't have much time to focus on our problems as the opening night of the play loomed ever closer. I was pacing in my bedroom, rehearsing my lines over and over to myself, when a knock came at the door.

"Come in," I called, expecting Adam or Steve.

The door cracked open and a familiar blonde head popped in, eyes squeezed tightly closed. "Are you decent?"

"Mom!"

She grinned and stepped inside, arms already open for a hug. I practically launched myself at her.

"You didn't think I was going to miss the opening night of your senior play, did you?" she asked.

"But it's such a long drive..."

After she left Dad, Mom had moved to Pennsylvania to help Aunt Kathy with her five wildly energetic kids. Between that and full-time nursing school, her visits were rare.

"Psh. It's nothing. I could drive here with my eyes closed...and I usually do."

I laughed and hugged her again, then stepped back to get a better look at her. "You're letting your hair grow out?"

"Or I'm just overdue for a haircut." She laughed self-consciously and tucked a loose strand of blond hair behind her ear.

I definitely got my looks from her—same blue eyes, same wavy dark blond hair, same pocket-sized build. For as long as I could remember, she'd kept her hair in a blunt pageboy cut. Now, it brushed past her shoulders.

"I like it. You should keep growing it."

She gave me a sarcastic salute. "Yes, sir!" But her eyes were sparkling. After what Dad put her through, compliments still caught her off guard.

"So, what brought this on? Are you seeing someone?"

She snorted. "Absolutely not. I have zero interest in dating."

"You're still young and hot. I think you need to get back out there."

Her eyes widened as she struggled to hide a smile. "I'm not sure this is an appropriate conversation to be having with your mother, but thank you...I think."

"Oh come on. I know a retired baddie when I see one."

"Retired? Excuse you. I'm *not* ready for the early-bird specials and bingo nights."

"Well, you are still in college," I teased. "How's school going?"

She groaned dramatically. "Ugh. I forgot how brutal studying is."

"Are you getting good grades?"

She gave me the classic mom eye-roll. "Yes, Father. Speaking of college, have you heard back from any of the schools you applied to?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"We're gonna be in college at the same time. I was accepted to Pemberton University!"

She grew serious. "That's where your cousin Aidan went."

"I know."

"You probably did. My brain's a bit scrambled lately with all my classes. What made you pick it?"

"It's a solid school, they offered me a scholarship, and it's close to home."

"Can't argue with any of that. But you don't exactly sound thrilled."

I shrugged. "I kinda had my heart set on the University of Maryland. But Asher didn't apply there. He wanted us both to go to Pemberton."

She nodded slowly. "I see. And how is Asher?" I shrugged. "What does that mean? Are you two having problems?"

"I wouldn't say problems..."

"Well, what would you say?"

I dropped down on the bed with a thump. "We're arguing a lot. Asher seems to be unhappy with a lot of my decisions. Sometimes I feel as if he's just looking for something to fight about."

Mom sat down next to me. "Have you tried talking to him about it?"

"Not really."

"Look, sweetheart, I don't want to butt in, but if you two are having problems—er, make that 'issues'—are you sure it's the best idea to base your college decision on Asher's?"

"It's a little late to worry about that now."

"True." She sighed. "Well, maybe you should try to talk to him. Communication is the key to a healthy relationship."

"You sound like Adam."

She grinned. "It's nice to know he's giving you good advice."

"You know he does. Adam's great."

She gave me a one-armed hug. "He is." Her smile slowly faded away as her gaze became distant.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

She blinked and forced her lips back into a smile. "Nothing's wrong."

"What were you just thinking?"

She sighed. "Sometimes I wish things had worked out differently."

"Differently how?"

"I guess I sort of...envy Adam."

"What do you mean?"

"I've just missed so much of your senior year. Soon you'll be graduating and heading off to college. Things are going on with you and Asher. I'm so far away...and Adam's right here, a part of it all, giving you advice. He's more your parent than I am these days."

"You'll always be my mom."

"I know, I know." She wiped at her eyes. "I'm just being silly. You're lucky to have Adam. *We're* lucky to have Adam."

I twisted around to give her a tight hug. "I love you, Mom."

She gave me a quick squeeze, then grinned wickedly and tickled my sides. "Hey, I didn't drive all this way to bring you down—I'm here to hype you up for your big debut! What time do you need to be at school?"

I glanced at the clock. "Actually...like, five minutes ago."

"Perfect. I'll drive you." She jumped to her feet and tugged me up by the hand. "Come on, let's go break some legs!"

"Uh, pretty sure it's just one leg. We're not mobsters."

She gave me a playful shove toward the door, both of us laughing as we headed out.

Opening night went great. I can't say the show went off without a hitch, but considering how bad it had seemed during rehearsals, our first real performance was a huge success. Judging by the audience's response, no one noticed the few flubbed lines, or, if so, didn't hold them against us.

The cast was taking its curtain call to thunderous applause when I noticed Asher coming up on stage with a bouquet of roses in his arms. He walked across the stage and handed it to me. I felt my face heat up until I must have matched the deep red of the roses exactly. If anything, the clapping and cheering grew even louder. Asher slipped his hand into mine as the cast filed off the stage.

The minute we were out of sight, he leaned in for a quick kiss. "You were amazing."

"Thanks," I mumbled, blushing more deeply. "I can't believe you gave me flowers in front of the whole school."

"You deserve them. You were the best actor in the play. I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time about it."

I shrugged. "It's okay. It all worked out in the end, right?"

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Right."

A strong negative feeling filled me. Although I couldn't quite figure out what it meant, I knew something was wrong. "What?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?"

"Something's wrong."

Asher frowned. "Nothing is wrong."

I opened my mouth to argue, but my family chose that moment to rush backstage.

"Killian, you were phenomenal," Steve crowed. "You deserve an Oscar."

"Tony," Adam corrected.

Steve grinned and rolled his eyes. "Whatever. The point is his performance was award-worthy."

"I agree," Mom said as she pulled me in for a hug. "I don't care if it's an Oscar, Tony, Grammy, or Heisman Trophy, just give my boy an award."

"Okay guys, jeez!" I interjected. "It was a high school play. Give it a rest."

Everyone laughed.

"How about we go celebrate a successful opening night?" Adam suggested.

"Where?" Mom asked.

"There's a great little all-night diner not far from here," Steve said.

Adam nodded in agreement. "Sounds good. Come on. Asher, you're coming, too, right? My treat."

Asher grinned. "I never turn down free food."

We rounded up Kane, who was busy flirting with a group of girls, and headed for the diner. I drove with Asher. Kane went with us, so I didn't have a chance to pursue my sense that something was wrong.

While the general mood at the diner was celebratory, I couldn't stop thinking about the bad feeling I'd had earlier. Something was wrong, but I had no idea what it could be. Asher acted as if everything was normal. He seemed oblivious to my fretting.

I was lost in thought when the table suddenly grew quiet. I looked up to see five pairs of eyes watching me expectantly. Obviously, I'd missed something.

"Huh?"

Everyone laughed.

"I asked you if you'd chosen a major to study at Pemberton," Mom said.

"Oh." I glanced over at Asher who was suddenly fascinated by his sundae. "Uh, not really."

"What do you want to do?" Steve asked around a mouthful of ice cream and hot fudge.

I shrugged. "Beats me."

"You don't have any ideas?" Mom pressed.

"Nope."

Kane flicked a walnut in my direction. "How about acting? You were pretty good tonight." High praise coming from him.

I smiled in his direction. "Thanks, but I like it here. I'd have to move to New York or LA to become a working actor."

"You could always be an architect," Steve said.
"You could work with me."

I wrinkled up my nose. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't think that's for me."

"I don't suppose you're interested in graphic design or advertising?" Adam asked with a grin. I just laughed.

Mom reached over and patted my hand. "That's okay. You have time to figure it all out. You don't have to declare a major right away; you can just take general study courses for now."

I nodded. "That's what I'd planned to do."

"Oh, so now you have a plan?" Adam teased.

I noticed Asher had remained silent throughout the entire conversation. I turned my attention to him. "So, what about you? Do you know what you plan to major in at Pemberton?"

His eyes flicked to mine for a second before sliding away. A sardonic smile turned up one corner of his lips. "It took me fifteen minutes to decide what sundae to get. What makes you think I know what I want to study in college?"

Everyone laughed, and the conversation moved on. Although I kept a smile on my face and participated in the light patter, inside I was still troubled.

As the days slipped by, I never seemed to find the opportunity to bring up my feeling of foreboding with Asher. Eventually, it just seemed pointless to even mention anything.

Graduation was just a few weeks away, but the closer it crept, the slower time seemed to move. I was

cramming the books I didn't need for homework into my locker when I suddenly remembered Asher saying something about the Rainbow Alliance officer elections happening that afternoon.

Since the play was over, I figured why not drop in? It might be a nice surprise. Maybe even a peace offering. I wasn't sure what I was hoping for exactly, but I thought it might mean something to him if I showed up, even just for the last couple of meetings.

It had been months since I'd made it to a meeting. The first thing I noticed as I walked into the room was several new people—like the pretty red-haired girl Kane was busy chatting up, or the guy with whom Asher was deep in conversation by the window. In fact, he was so engrossed he didn't notice me until I tapped him on the shoulder.

Asher's eyes grew huge when he saw me. For a second, I thought I saw a slight look of annoyance, but when a broad smile spread across his face, I decided I must have been mistaken. He grabbed me in a huge hug.

"I didn't know you were coming," he exclaimed as he released me.

I glanced at the boy Asher had been talking to and couldn't miss the look in his big brown eyes—blatant jealousy, clear as day.

"I decided to surprise you," I said, slipping my arm possessively through Asher's while maintaining eye contact.

Asher followed my gaze to the boy, and for a split second, something flickered in his eyes, something I couldn't quite name, but definitely felt.

"Ah, right. Killian, this is Caleb. He's new to the group. Caleb, this is my boyfriend Killian."

Caleb nodded grudgingly in my direction, and I gave him a wide, toothy grin in return. "Nice to meet you, Caleb."

He barely looked old enough to be in high school. Even standing next to me, he was short—maybe five foot three on a good day—and probably didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds. A mop of unruly brown hair fell across his forehead, and I couldn't help but imagine it was soft and silky, the kind you instinctively want to ruffle. His eyes were big and dark, sharp with intelligence, like a clever little deer sizing up a situation. His naturally olive skin had that pale, indoors-all-the-time look.

He was a cute kid, but something about him rubbed me the wrong way. Maybe it was the way he was blatantly ogling my boyfriend.

Asher quickly pulled me away in the direction of some of the other new members, but a peek over my shoulder told me Caleb was still glaring at our backs.

After introductions had been made, Asher started the meeting. The first order of business was the elections.

"As you all know, we've had a hard time coming up with candidates for next year's officers. I'll be graduating, and Brandy has declined to run again." A tall, heavy-set black girl shrugged apologetically. "So we're open to suggestions from the floor."

The kids in the room looked around at each other, but no one made any move to volunteer.

"Come on, guys, this is important. If we don't have officers, the group will be ineligible as an after-school club next year. I don't know about you, but I think it's important that we have a visible presence here."

"Things are better than they used to be," Max, a short-haired, openly lesbian jock, pointed out. "My teammates accept me completely. Maybe the group isn't really needed anymore."

"Things might be better than they used to be, but they're still not as good as they could be. Who has experienced any kind of harassment about your sexual orientation or gender presentation here at school in the past year, physical or verbal?"

Every single student raised their hand, including, to my surprise, Kane.

"Exactly." Asher went on. "Studies show that more than ninety percent of LGBTQ students in the U.S. experience some form of harassment at school. How many of you hear people use words like *gay* or *faggot* in a negative sense on a daily basis?"

Every hand in the room went up again.

"So, do you still think this group isn't needed?" When no one spoke up, Asher nodded, satisfied that he'd made his point. "You know, Max, since you are such an accepted and respected athlete, you'd make a great leader for the group."

Max bit her lip. "I could maybe manage the VP position, but there's no way I'd have time to be president and balance schoolwork, field hockey, and softball."

Asher took what he was offered. "Great." He wrote "Vice President" on the chalkboard, then

underlined it. Beneath it, he wrote Max's name. "Anyone else want to run for vice president?"

Brandy sighed loudly. "You made me feel guilty, so go ahead and put me down for another year as VP, but y'all feel free to vote for Max." Everyone snickered as Asher added Brandy's name to the list.

"Okay, guys, we still need a president."

Kane slowly raised his hand. "I'll run."

Asher glared at him, and, for a moment, I thought he was going to cause a scene right there in the middle of the meeting. To his credit, he clenched his jaw and wrote Kane's name under "President."

One of the new boys, whose name I'd already forgotten, raised his hand.

Asher pounced on him eagerly. "Do you want to run for president, too, Ron?"

Ron seemed disconcerted. "Uh, no. I just had a question."

Asher visibly deflated. "Oh. Go ahead then."

"Yeah, uh, no offense or anything, I thought Kane was straight," Ron said carefully.

"I am," Kane responded.

"So, uh, how can you be the president of a gay group?"

Kane turned to Asher with a raised eyebrow, an obvious invitation for him to answer.

Asher gritted his teeth. "This isn't just a gay group, Ron. It's a LGBTQ alliance. Officer positions are open to all members. Anyone can be president."

"Okay, but how can he understand what it's like to be gay?"

Kane sat up straighter in his chair, a frown creasing his brow. "I might not be gay myself, but I probably understand what it's like as well as most people in this room, maybe better than some. My dad's gay. Both of my brothers are gay. One of them was even murdered because he was gay. Remember that?"

Ron looked down, silent. Kane didn't let the moment hang.

"I'm not saying this to guilt anyone or win sympathy votes. I just want you to know—I get it, more than you might think. And honestly? I get picked on almost as much as anyone else here. Just showing up to these meetings makes me a target. I get called all the names, too. It's not even true in my case, but that's the point.

"It doesn't matter if you're actually gay or bi, or if someone just thinks you are. Or if you're harassed because of how you dress, or how you identify on the gender spectrum. It all comes from the same place—homophobia, misogyny, ignorance. And that's what we need to be fighting, together."

"So you think you'd make a good president?" someone else spoke up.

Kane nodded decisively. "I do. I want to make things better for all queer students in this school—and their allies. I want to make it a safe place for everyone."

A handful of people broke into spontaneous applause. I had to admit even I was impressed with Kane's impassioned speech.

Asher sighed. "Is there anyone else who'd like to run for president?" He sounded almost pleading, but I

think he knew before he asked that it was a lost cause. Kane had already won the election.

Brandy handed out ballots, waited for everyone to cast their votes, then collected the slips of paper and left the room to count.

While she was gone, Asher opened the floor for discussion. We were in the middle of debating the pros and cons of coming out to your parents when Brandy returned.

"Congratulations, Kane and Max," she announced. "You're the new president and vice president."

After the meeting, I quickly made my way to Asher's side while Kane enjoyed being the center of attention.

"I can't believe he pulled a stunt like that," Asher seethed.

I frowned. "Hey, it's not like anyone else was stepping up. Besides, were you even listening? I think he'll do a good job."

"He just wanted the position to get under my skin."

"Oh, please."

"Oh, please, nothing. You know as well as I do that the only reason he wanted to be president was because he knew it would upset me."

"That's ridiculous. He brought up the idea before he even knew you were against it. I don't understand why it's such a big deal."

"Your brother gets on my nerves."

"Yeah, I've noticed. What I want to know is why?"

"I don't know why." Asher paused. "Because he's a smug little jerk, that's why."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. I think I'm going to stay out of this one and let you two duke it out."

"You're always taking his side!"

"What? I'm not taking anyone's side."

"You probably voted for him, didn't you?"

"Who else was I supposed to vote for?"

"You know what? I'm—"

A voice interrupted our argument. "Hey, um, Asher?"

We turned to find Caleb standing a few feet away. I wondered how long he'd been listening, and whether anyone else had overheard us. I looked around, but everyone else seemed to be busy congratulating Kane and Max.

Asher forced a smile for the kid. "Hey, Caleb. What's up?"

"I was wondering if you could stay after and talk for a little while—like last week."

"Yeah, sure. My brother is picking me up, so he can give you a lift home again if you need it."

Caleb smiled. "That would be great."

I felt my frown deepen. I'd thought Adam was driving us home. Asher hadn't mentioned making other plans. I wondered if that was a spur-of-the-moment decision because of Kane's election, or if he really had made other arrangements and forgotten to tell me.

Asher turned back to me. His face was impassive, but his eyes were still stormy with anger. "I'll see you later," he said dismissively.

My eyes narrowed but I smiled as pleasantly as I could, determined not to let Caleb see that Asher and I were fighting. "Sounds great. It was nice to meet you, Caleb."

He barely spared me a glance. "Yeah, you, too."

I made a mental note to talk to Asher about Caleb later, after we'd worked out the issue of his ongoing feud with Kane. I sighed and turned away. Our laundry list of things to talk about kept growing, but the time never seemed right—or maybe I was just avoiding an unpleasant confrontation.

I collected Kane, and we went to meet Adam, who was waiting in the parking lot.

"I was elected president of the Rainbow Alliance," Kane burred happily as he piled into the back seat.

"Really! Wow, that's awesome! Congratulations, son."

"Thanks." He giggled. "Man, is Asher pissed off."

I twisted around in my seat to face him. "Please tell me that's not why you ran."

Kane looked offended. "Of course not. I really do think I can do a good job as president." His evil grin returned. "Annoying Asher was just a lucky bonus."

"Why is Asher mad?" Adam asked. "I'd think he'd be happy there was a president at all, since it means the group he started will continue after he graduates."

"He's mad because I got elected," Kane gloated.

"What's going on with you two anyway?" I asked. "You used to get along fine."

"That was before he turned into a prick."

"He's not a prick."

"Yes, he is, and over the last year he's gotten progressively worse."

"I think you two just rub each other the wrong way," Adam said in a placating tone. "You're two very different personalities."

"Do you think Asher is a prick?" I asked Adam.

He chuckled. "I think he can be a little prickly at times, but I wouldn't call him a prick."

I sighed and slumped into the car seat. Adam glanced away from the road long enough to meet my eyes. "More importantly, what do you think?"

I wanted to defend Asher, but I couldn't deny that he had been acting bitchy lately. Instead, I shrugged and changed the subject. "So, what do you know about this kid Caleb?"

Kane snorted. "You mean besides the fact that he has the hots for your boyfriend?"

I yanked down the sun visor on my side of the car, flipped up the mirror cover, and shot his reflection a dirty look.

He grinned back at me. "Asher mentioned him when he started coming to the meetings a couple of weeks ago. Remember?"

"Is he the one you said was kind of weird?"

"That's him."

"He doesn't even look old enough to be in high school."

"He's a sophomore."

"Really?"

"Yep."

"So how is he weird?"

"He's just sort of standoffish and quiet. Actually, I feel kind of sorry for him. He doesn't seem to have any friends."

"How do you know so much about him if he's a grade behind you?"

"Apparently, he's some sort of genius. He's in a few of my classes."

I stewed over that for a few minutes. "And you think he likes Asher?"

Kane met my eyes in the mirror. "It's just a crush, Kill. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

I nodded. I wanted to believe him, but I couldn't help feeling threatened. Even though it had been less than two years, it seemed that Asher and I had been together forever. In high school, a couple of years *is* forever. We'd had a few disagreements in that time, but we'd never really had any serious problems until recently. Our relationship had never been truly tested. Lately, though, it felt like we were being bombarded from all sides.

Kane may have thought I had nothing to worry about, but I wasn't so sure.

I forced myself to wait until after nine to call Asher. I was half hoping he'd call me, but somehow wasn't surprised when he didn't. I knew he'd still be upset over Kane's election.

"Hey," he answered, "I'm sorry about today."

"You are?" I hadn't expected an apology.

"Yeah. I was way out of line. I know Kane is your brother and you guys are close. I shouldn't have said those things. I'm sure he'll do a good job as president."

I felt like I'd entered an episode of the *Twilight Zone*. "Really?"

"Yeah. Besides, it's not like I'm going to have to deal with him. As long as the other members are happy, why should I care?"

"Where did this change of heart come from?"

"Just some things Caleb said while we were talking."

"Caleb..."

Something in my voice must have warned Asher that we were entering dangerous waters. "Yeah, he's a nice kid."

"Is he?"

"He really is. He's been through a lot."

"Has he?"

Asher chuckled. "Don't tell me you're jealous."

"I'm not jealous. It's just...you do know he has a crush on you, don't you?"

"He does not."

"He *definitely* does. You should see the way he stares at you."

"Oh wow. You really are jealous. He just looks up to me. He's been telling me about his life. He's been through some horrible things."

"Haven't we all?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, actually I don't. Why don't you fill me?"

"Killian, I can't really go into it. He told me this stuff in confidence."

"It's not like you're a freaking priest or something. You can talk to me. I'm your boyfriend. We tell each other everything."

"This is different. It's not mine to share." When I growled in frustration, he backtracked a little bit. "Baby, you know I'd tell you if I could. He swore me to secrecy. Just trust me. You have nothing to worry about."

Later, as I tried in vain to fall asleep, those words came back to taunt me. I wanted to trust Asher. Both he and Kane had told me there was nothing to worry about. So why was I so worried?

The killer swung the ax again and again, feeling an intense satisfaction with each sticky, wet thud. Warm blood splattered his face. It would have splashed into his mouth if his lips hadn't been pressed together so firmly.

He paused and looked over his handiwork. The body was barely recognizable as human. He hadn't planned to go that far, but it had felt so good he'd just kept chopping. He leaned against the ax as he struggled to catch his breath. His tongue crept out and tentatively licked his lips. A tangy, metallic taste flooded his senses.

I woke up retching. I could still taste the blood on my tongue.

Leaping from bed, I raced into the bathroom where I grabbed the bottle of mouthwash on the shelf and clawed frantically at the top. I swigged directly from the bottle, swishing the liquid around in my mouth until I couldn't stand the burn any longer.

I spat into the sink, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, then slowly raised my head to look into the mirror. The eyes staring back at me were filled with fear.

What was happening to me?

Chapter 3

I paused my studying when I heard Asher take another deep breath behind me, as if he were about to say something. But, just like the last five times, he let it out in a quiet sigh instead, words swallowed before they could form.

I gritted my teeth and tried to focus on calculus. This was my last final, and I was determined to crush it. Most of my exams had been waived because my grades were so high, but math was my weak spot, so I still had to face the calc test. The problem was I'd been staring at the same page for ten minutes. I knew Asher had something on his mind, but he seemed to be having trouble getting it out. He'd said he was coming over to study, yet he hadn't turned a page in his history book since he arrived.

Then the sighing started again.

I'd had it. I spun around in my desk chair.

"What?"

He looked up at me with a startled expression from his spot on my bed, sprawled on his stomach, history book between his elbows. "Huh?"

"I can tell you have something you want to say, so spit it out already. The suspense is killing me!"

A half smile formed on his lips. "You know me too well."

"Ash, you've been sighing so much I thought you were going to pass out from lack of oxygen. What's going on?"

He pushed his textbook aside and sat up, sitting cross-legged. "It's about Caleb..."

I bit my bottom lip, trying to keep my expression in check. Honestly, I was getting tired of hearing about Caleb. It seemed like *everything* was about him these days—Caleb this, Caleb that. The more Asher talked about him, the more I couldn't shake the feeling that something more was going on. Maybe Asher was starting to develop a crush.

"What about him?" I asked as neutrally as possible.

"Okay, see...this is hard. I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone, but I really need to talk to somebody about it."

I opened my arms wide. "If you can't trust me, who can you trust?"

Asher looked down at the bed. "Yeah. Okay. He, um...he told me his dad abuses him."

I blinked in surprise. That wasn't what I'd been expecting. "Abuses him how?"

"Hits him. Beats him up." Asher's voice was low, troubled. He still wouldn't look up at me.

"Oh my God, that's horrible! Shouldn't you report it to someone or something?"

He shrugged. "I don't think it would do any good. People have reported it before and nothing happened."

"What do you mean nothing happened?"

He looked up at me, and I could see frustration and pain in his eyes. "Just what I said—nothing happened. Social Services came out and investigated, but Caleb's dad told them he was only defending himself, that Caleb was a troubled kid and had attacked him. They believed him. It's so stupid."

I thought for a minute, then carefully asked my next question. "How do you know his dad isn't telling the truth?" Asher stared at me dumbfounded, but I persisted. "What if Caleb did attack his dad? How do you know he's actually being abused?"

"Have you seen Caleb? He's little. How would he be a threat to anyone?"

"Think about it, Ash. If the authorities investigated, don't you think they would have found signs of abuse if there were any?"

"Maybe they did a crappy job, or maybe they just believed Caleb's dad over Caleb. I don't know, but I do know Caleb wouldn't lie to me."

"You've only known him a few weeks."

"What difference does that make? Besides, why would he make something like that up?"

"Kane said he was kind of a loner. Maybe he said it to get your attention, to get you to feel sorry for him."

"I can't believe this. You're blaming the victim!"

"You don't even know if there is a victim."

"I thought you of all people would understand."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your dad abused you."

I sat back in my chair and stared at Asher in stunned silence. He at least had the grace to look a little guilty. Finally, I found my voice. "First off, my father punched me up when he found out I was gay. Before that, he never laid a hand on me. Secondly, what the hell does that have to do with Caleb?"

"I'm sorry, Kill. I just expected you to be more sympathetic." He was back to staring at my bedspread.

Why wasn't I being more sympathetic? I thought about it for a few seconds, and I had to admit it was because I was jealous.

I sighed. "Do you want me to talk to him or something?"

Asher's head snapped up. "No! He'd freak out if he knew I'd told you."

"Then what did you expect me to do?"

"I don't know. I guess I needed to talk to somebody about it. It's kind of a lot to deal with, you know?"

He sounded so pathetic that I suddenly felt horrible for giving him such a hard time. I sat beside him on the bed and put my arms around him. "I'm sorry. I'm being an insensitive jerk. I can't imagine having that kind of knowledge and not being able to tell anyone. You must feel so helpless."

Asher nodded his head against my shoulder. "I wish I knew what to do."

I squeezed him tighter. "Me, too."

I was walking down the hall at school the next day when I turned the corner and saw Asher talking to Caleb. They were standing close together, their heads tilted toward each other conspiratorially.

I felt a jolt of jealousy, which I quickly tried to tamp down. Caleb simply needed someone to talk to. He was going through a difficult time—so he claimed. Still, I decided it wouldn't be interrupting to stop and say hello to my boyfriend.

"Hey, Ash. Hi, Caleb."

Caleb jumped back guiltily and turned away. Asher gave me a dirty look. Okay, obviously I had interrupted something after all.

"I, uh, just wanted to say hi." I tried to keep the suspicion out of my voice.

"Hi," Asher said curtly.

Caleb glanced in my direction before quickly averting his eyes again. He wasn't quick enough to hide the huge shiner he was sporting. I couldn't hold back my gasp of surprise.

Caleb's shoulders slumped, and he turned to face me with a resigned look. The black eye was even worse upon closer inspection. It was an angry dark purple that surrounded his bloodshot eye and covered half his cheek.

"I fell in the shower," he said in a flat tone. He clearly didn't care whether I believed him or not.

Asher gave me another pointed look. I got the message. "I'd better get to class," I said weakly, then hastily walked off.

The dead look in Caleb's eyes haunted me for the rest of the day. I couldn't get him out of my mind. I was glad I didn't have any finals that day or I surely would have failed them. As soon as the last bell of the afternoon rang, I rushed to find Asher. I caught up to him at his locker.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

He jumped a little, then spun to face me with a deep frown. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Sorry! I didn't mean to startle you."

"I meant earlier, with Caleb."

"I thought I was saying hello to my boyfriend."

"Caleb freaked out when you left."

"He didn't seem that freaked out while I was there. Besides, how was I supposed to know he had a black eye? So, what? I can't talk to you anymore when you're with him? I have to keep my distance?"

He sighed. "No. You're right." He turned back to his locker and pulled out a book, then knelt down to put it in his backpack. "I'm just really upset about the whole situation."

I leaned my shoulder against the wall. "What are you going to do?"

He glanced up at me. "What do you mean?"

"About Caleb."

He stood up as he slung his backpack over his shoulder and slammed his locker door. "Nothing." He started walking away.

I pushed off from the wall and rushed after him. "What do you mean nothing? You can't just ignore something like that."

"I promised him I wouldn't tell anyone. I can't break my word."

"As a student leader, isn't it kind of your responsibility to report the abuse? I mean, it's not like they can ignore that bruise on his face. Now there's proof that he's being abused."

"I don't know."

I could tell I was getting through to him. "I think Caleb's safety outweighs any promises you made to him. You'd be doing it for his own good."

He nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right."

I slipped an arm around his waist. "I am."

"I'll call Social Services when I get home."

Caleb wasn't at school for the next couple of days and Asher was frantic with worry. He tried calling Social Services, but they couldn't—or wouldn't—tell him anything. He even tried calling Caleb's house, but when he asked for Caleb, Caleb's father just cursed at him then hung up.

Finally, on Friday morning, Caleb was back. I was with Asher when he spotted Caleb in the hall ahead of us. Asher's relief was palpable.

"Hey, I'll see you later," he said to me, never taking his eyes off Caleb. "I'm going to go see what happened."

He ran off before I could respond.

It occurred to me that Asher had grown very fond of Caleb in a short amount of time. Once more, I felt jealousy well up inside me, but I tried to repress it. It was only natural for Asher to feel protective of Caleb, I told myself. After all, Caleb had been confiding in him.

Asher caught up to Caleb and grabbed his arm. Caleb jumped and jerked away. He didn't exactly look thrilled to see Asher, but I couldn't hang around to see what happened next. I had to get to class. Besides, watching them from a distance seemed voyeuristic and made me feel like some sort of stalker.

I looked for Asher after school but couldn't find him anywhere, so I called him the moment I walked in the house. He didn't answer his phone, so I sent him a text asking him to call me. When he still hadn't called by nine that night, I tried him again but it went directly to his voicemail. I decided to try one last time before I went to bed. That time, he answered the phone.

"Hey," I said.

"Oh, hey." He sounded disappointed.

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"No. I mean, I thought maybe it might be Caleb."

I fought back a sigh as I dropped into the desk chair. "So what happened with him? He looked a little pissed off this morning."

"No, he was a lot pissed off. He was furious with me for reporting the abuse."

"Did you tell him it was you?"

"No. He just knew."

"Why was he mad? What happened?"

As we talked, I absentmindedly began tidying up my desk, which had turned into a chaotic mess after weeks of nonstop studying.

"This time, Social Services took him out of the house. He's living in a group home right now, and he hates it."

"He'd rather be getting beat up by his father?" I dropped a couple of books into my backpack and started sorting through the small mountain of papers, throwing some into the trashcan and stacking the rest.

"Apparently he's getting beat up at the group home, too. He said at least with his dad he knew what to expect for the most part. He'd learned what signs to look out for, and he had places he could go to get away. I...I just made things worse for him." He sounded as if he might cry.

"You got him out of an abusive situation—"

"And into another one. How did that help him at all?"

"He won't stay in the group home, right? Won't he get placed in a foster home?"

"He said one of the other guys there told him boys his age are much harder to place. The guy said he'd been bounced around from home to home, and each one seemed worse than the last. I've totally screwed up Caleb's life."

"Ash, you did what you thought was best."

"And I was wrong. I never should have listened to you."

That stung. "I couldn't know—"

He sighed heavily. "I know. That's what I said to Caleb, too."

"Is he still mad at you?"

"A little, but he did calm down. He called me earlier tonight. He's allowed one phone call a night. We talked until they told him he had to get off the phone."

"At least he's speaking to you."

"True. I just can't help feeling like I betrayed him. I should have at least talked to him first."

"You didn't betray him."

"Then why does it feel like I did?"

The conversation was going nowhere fast. I decided to change the subject. "You need to get your mind off Caleb for a while."

Asher snorted. "Like that's going to happen."

"You know we graduate in a couple of weeks." A halfhearted grunt was his only response. I pressed on. "You're not excited?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Come on! We'll never have to go to high school again. And we'll have all summer to hang out."

"I'll be working with my dad."

"Oh, yeah. Adam wants me to get a job, too. But we'll still have free time. We won't be working twenty-four hours a day."

"Where are you going to work?"

"I have no idea. I've never had a summer job before."

"There's always McDonald's."

"Ha ha. You're a comedian." I shifted the stack of papers and a business card caught my eye. I picked it up.

"You could maybe get a job at my dad's." Asher's father was a dentist. Asher worked part-time at the front desk every summer. "Or what about Steve's architecture firm? I'm sure they could use an office bitch for the summer."

I barely heard him. An idea was forming in my head, and my heart was beating faster.

"Killian?" Asher prompted when I didn't respond.

"I have an idea."

"What?"

"Remember when I had that accident?"

"Uh, yeah. I do seem to recall something about that. You still don't have your car back."

I nervously flipped the card over and over in my fingers. "Yeah, but remember the guy I hit?"

"Not really."

"His name is Shane Novak. He's a private investigator."

"So?"

"Maybe he'll hire me."

There was a long silence, then, "What?"

"Maybe I can get a job with him."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know. Anything."

"Why would you want to work for a private investigator?"

"I think it would be fun."

"Fun? Have you lost your mind?"

I frowned. "Huh?"

"Did you forget the last two times you tried to play detective?"

"Asher—"

"We almost died the first time, and your cousin *was* killed the second time."

"Yeah, it's not like I could forget that." My tone was sharper than I'd intended. I took a deep breath and tried again. "I still miss Aidan. But this would be different."

"How?" Asher scoffed.

"I'd be working with a professional."

"I don't think it's a good idea. I really don't want you to do it."

"Mr. Novak said it was nothing like you see on TV. It'll be perfectly safe."

His tone became a little resentful. "Have you already talked to him about this?"

"No. He told me that the day of the accident. Look, Ash, I'd really like to work for him. He seemed pretty cool, and I think I'd like the job."

"So what, I want doesn't matter?"

"I didn't say that. It's just...I think what I want should matter, too."

"If you take this job, I'll..."

"You'll what?"

"Nothing."

"No, what? Did you almost threaten me?"

"I just really don't want you working for a private investigator."

"Yeah, I got that," I snapped.

"And I got that you don't give a shit what I think or feel."

"Ash, it's not like that." I took a deep breath.

"Why are we fighting about this? I haven't even talked to Mr. Novak yet. It might not even be an option."

"But if it is?"

"Then we'll talk about it some more. It's something I'd really like to do. Just think about it. Okay?"

"Fine."

"Hey, even if I do end up working there, it'll only be for the summer. This fall, we'll be starting college together." A deafening silence answered me. "Hello? You there?"

"Yeah," he answered slowly. "There's, uh, something I need to tell you."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's not a huge deal. I mean—it could be. But it doesn't have to be."

"What are you talking about?"

"I was accepted at George Mason University."

I didn't answer for a second. "I thought you only applied to Pemberton."

"That was my plan, but you know that George Mason is my dad's alma mater. He really wanted me to go there, so I applied. And I was accepted."

"That's nice, but you're still going to Pemberton, right?"

"I...I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? The only reason I even applied there was because you made such a big deal about the two of us going to college together."

"I know, but it would mean a lot to my dad if I went to George Mason."

"It would mean a lot to me if you went to Pemberton."

"I, uh...I already accepted at George Mason."

I leapt up out of the chair. "*What?*"

"I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how."

"How long have you known?"

"A couple of weeks."

"Oh my God, I can't fucking believe this!" I was yelling now, but I didn't care.

"Kill, don't freak out."

"Don't freak out? I applied early decision to Pemberton just for you, then you applied somewhere else without even telling me." I raked my hand roughly through my hair. "*Then*, when you're accepted there, you make a decision without even discussing it with me. And you have the nerve to get mad at me for telling you I want to work for a private investigator? I don't consider *your* feelings?"

"It's not that big a deal!"

"Like hell it's not!" I started pacing. "The only reason I applied to Pemberton was for you. I didn't even want to go there! I wanted to go to the University of Maryland. Now you're going to be at a school that's three hours away, and the ironic part is we'd have been closer if I had gone to Maryland."

"Maybe we should talk about this later. You're upset."

"You're damn right I'm upset. We should have talked about this weeks ago."

"You're right. I should have talked to you. I'm sorry. I knew you'd freak out—"

"No, you knew you were wrong and didn't want to deal with the consequences. You know what? Maybe we *should* talk about this later. I'm so mad right now I might say something I'd regret."

"Killian—"

"Good night, Asher."

"I love you."

I hung up without responding and threw myself across my bed.

A knock sounded at my door a few minutes later. "What?" I didn't bother getting up.

The door opened and Adam stuck his head in. "Everything okay?"

"Not really."

He walked over and sat down next to me on the bed. "What's wrong?"

I sat up. "Asher and I had a fight."

Adam gave me a sarcastic smile. "What else is new?" When I didn't offer a smile in return, his quickly faded.

"This is different. He was accepted at George Mason University. He's decided to go there."

Adam's eyes widened in surprise. "I thought you guys were going to Pemberton together."

"So did I."

"Wow. What are you guys going to do?"

I shrugged. "We didn't get that far in the conversation. I was so mad he didn't talk to me first that I couldn't think about anything else."

He rubbed my back comfortingly. "That's understandable."

Suddenly I was fighting back tears. "I feel like everything's over."

"What do you mean?"

"We're graduating, getting jobs, and now we're going to different colleges hours away from each other. I feel like Asher and I are growing apart. It's like everything is ending all at once."

"Life is all about changes, kiddo. You either roll with the punches or you get beat up. Sure, you guys will be going to different schools, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything is ending. You're just entering a new phase of your relationship."

"So you think we should try a long distance relationship?"

"It's not like he's moving to the other side of the world. He'll still be home for holidays and breaks."

"You said it was hard when Steve lived just an hour away, and you guys saw each other all the time. We'll go weeks, or even months without seeing each other."

"What are you saying? You think you should break up?"

"I...I don't know. Maybe. We've been fighting a lot. We even fought earlier tonight before he told me about his decision."

"What were you fighting about then?"

"I told him my idea for a summer job."

"Which was?"

"I thought maybe Mr. Novak would hire me."

"Who?"

"The guy I rear ended, the private investigator."

Adam frowned. "I don't know if I like the sound of that."

I sighed. I didn't need another naysayer. "Why not?"

"Would it be safe?"

"Mr. Novak said it's nothing like what you see on television."

"I know that. I'm still not sure it's an appropriate job for a seventeen-year-old."

"I'll be eighteen soon. Besides, I think it sounds really interesting."

Adam shook his head. "I doubt he'll even have anything for you. From what little I know, I've always thought private eyes tend to be pretty solitary types."

I shrugged. "I guess I'll find out when I call him."

"I guess so." He sounded distinctly unenthusiastic.

I stood in the doorway staring at the man in the recliner. The man was snoring loudly, likely passed out in a drunken stupor. I hefted the ax in my hands. The weight was comforting somehow. It calmed my pounding heart.

I walked slowly across the room and stopped next to the chair. Looking down at the man, I felt an overwhelming wave of hatred wash over me, reminding me of why I was there. I raised the ax over my head and took a deep breath.

The man in the chair stirred, coughed, and blearily blinked awake. It took him a moment to focus on me standing over him, but as he did, his eyes widened in horror. Before he could make a sound, I swung the ax.

I jolted awake, heart racing, and stared up at the ceiling, disoriented and uneasy. What the hell was going on? Why did these dreams keep happening...and what did they mean, if anything? They felt disturbingly real, almost like I was the one holding the ax. The hatred I felt for the man in the chair had been overwhelming.

And familiar.

I hated my father with that same intensity. And Todd, the serial killer I'd shot to save my friend Jake. He'd deserved it. They'd both done enough to earn my hatred. But the man in my dream? I didn't even recognize him.

Maybe it was just my subconscious working through my past. I certainly had plenty of stress in my life at the moment. I decided that's all it was and tried to fall back asleep, but I lay awake for a long time in the darkness, half afraid the nightmare would return. It didn't, but I felt far from rested the next morning.

I avoided Asher all weekend, which wasn't really that hard considering he didn't call me, either. I hung out with Kane for a while on Saturday, much to his delight, and the rest of the time, I watched TV or YouTube. I even resorted to video games, I was so bored. I really needed more friends. I'd spent so much of my time with Asher the last few years, that I hadn't made time for anyone else.

I forced myself to wait until Monday to contact Mr. Novak, since I figured he wouldn't be in his office on the weekend. I made it until my lunch break on Monday before I couldn't take it any longer. I walked outside and dialed the number on his card. After several rings, his voicemail picked up. I left a brief message asking him to call me back when he got the chance, and hung up, disappointed.

The rest of the day dragged by.

I didn't see Asher until after the final bell rang. I was on my way to my locker when I found him talking to Caleb. I slipped away before either of them could notice me—or so I thought. I still wasn't ready to talk to my boyfriend. Unfortunately, Asher had other ideas.

"Killian, wait up," he shouted as I was leaving the building. I cringed inside, but tried to keep my face expressionless as he caught up to me. "We need to talk," he said.

I raised an eyebrow. "Now you want to talk?"

"I'm sorry. I really am." He did look truly remorseful. "I should have come to you right away. I just didn't know what to do. I knew you'd be disappointed. I felt terrible."

"But not terrible enough to tell me for weeks."

"How many more times can I say I'm sorry?"

"I don't know. You tell me." Asher looked as if I'd slapped him. "Adam's waiting for me. We'll talk later."

"When?"

"Call me." I walked away without looking back. I hadn't realized how angry I still was until I'd seen Asher standing in front of me.

Adam could tell I was upset as soon as I got in the car. "What's wrong?"

"Asher."

"Have you guys talked yet?"

"Not exactly."

"You shouldn't put it off."

"He's calling later."

I was extremely grateful when he simply nodded and dropped the subject.

"You know there are rumors that you and Asher are breaking up," Kane announced as he jumped into the back seat.

"What?"

"People keep asking me about it. I've been telling them that as far as I know, you're still dating."

"Who's asking? And why do they think we're breaking up?"

"Everybody. And maybe you guys shouldn't be so obvious when you're avoiding each other. And don't have those loud fights in the hall."

I slumped down in my seat. "Why can't people just mind their own business?"

"Because other people's business is so much more interesting."

"Is that all they're saying?"

"Well...not exactly."

I sat up and twisted around in my seat. "What else?"

He looked away. "Some people think you're breaking up because Asher is cheating on you."

My mouth fell open. "With who?" Before the question had left my mouth, I knew the answer. "Caleb, right?"

Kane's eyes met mine and he nodded sympathetically. "For the record, I don't believe it."

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks. At least not everyone thinks I'm a loser."

Adam cleared his throat. "Why would that make you a loser?"

"Everyone thinks my boyfriend is cheating on me."

"Not everyone," Kane hastily objected.

"Almost everyone," I amended with a sneer.

"Wouldn't that make Asher the loser?" Adam asked. "If he were cheating, I mean. Which he isn't, I'm sure."

"Why do people even care if we were breaking up?"

"Duh," Kane said. "You guys are like a celebrity couple. You're both popular and you're the most visible gay couple on campus. If our school paper was a tabloid, there would be some sordid rumor about you on the front page every week."

Adam chuckled, and I threw him a dirty look.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"Well, I don't like it."

Kane shrugged. "I'm not saying you have to like it; I'm just telling you how it is. Oh, and if you do break up, I want to be the first to know so I can sell the story."

"Kane!" Adam and I yelled together.

Later that evening, I was playing video games with Kane in the den when my phone rang. I was losing badly—partly because I rarely played, and partly because I wasn't paying attention. My mind was on other things. When I heard my phone, my first thought was that it was Asher, and I almost ignored it. Then I remembered my call to Mr. Novak. I didn't recognize the number when I checked, so I answered.

"Is this Killian Kendall?" It was a man's voice.

"Yes."

"This is Shane Novak. You left a message earlier today asking me to return your call. Is there a problem with the insurance?"

"No, no. I mean, maybe. They're taking forever, but that's not why I called. Thanks for calling me back, by the way. I, uh, had a question."

"Okay. Shoot."

"You wouldn't happen to be hiring, would you?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm looking for a summer job and I found your card and thought I'd like to work for you."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you want to work for me?"

I hadn't been expecting that question and I struggled for a few seconds to come up with a suitable response. "I like solving mysteries. I like searching for the truth, figuring out why something happened. I think I'd like working for a private investigator."

"You do know it's nothing like what you see on TV or in the movies, right?"

"You said that before, when we were exchanging insurance information."

"And I meant it. The majority of my work is very boring—insurance fraud cases, mostly. It involves long tedious hours and lots of paperwork."

I was slightly less enthusiastic after that description, but determined not to back down. "I could do that."

Mr. Novak chuckled. "I'll tell you what, kid, you've got tenacity. It just so happens that my last assistant quit on me a few weeks ago. I haven't had time to advertise the vacant position since my caseload is pretty heavy at the moment. Why don't you come in for an interview?" I heard some papers rustling. "Where's my calendar?" he muttered under his breath. "Oh hell. I'm busy the next few days but why don't you come in next week some time? Does Monday work?"

"Uh, yeah, sure. What time?"

"How about 3:30?"

"That works."

"Sounds good. I'll make myself a note."

"Thank you, Mr. Novak."

"Don't thank me yet. This is just an interview. No promises. See you next week."

I said goodbye and ended the call, my heart hammering in my chest.

Kane had restarted the game and was playing by himself, but he paused the action and turned to me when I hung up. "You got the job?"

"No, but I got an interview."

"Cool." He went back to his game. "Are you done playing?"

Was it my imagination or did he sound hopeful? I couldn't really blame him. It wasn't as if I'd been providing him much of a challenge.

"Yeah, I'm done. I'm gonna go hang out in our room."

Before I could reach the stairs, someone knocked on the front door. Since I was only a few feet away, I answered it. Asher was standing on the porch.

"I thought you were going to call," I said flatly.

"I was afraid you wouldn't answer."

I couldn't exactly argue. I probably wouldn't have.

"Can we talk now?"

I shrugged. "Why not?" I turned and started up the stairs, leaving Asher to close the door and follow me. Once in the bedroom, I sat on the bed.

Asher chose my desk chair. "Okay. I was wrong to make such an important decision without talking to you first. It was selfish and inconsiderate. Everything you said was right. I'm a jerk and I'm sorry."

"Do you know there's a rumor going around school that we're breaking up because you cheated on me with Caleb?"

Asher blinked at me in surprise. "What?"

"There's a rumor—"

He leapt off the bed. "I've never cheated on you! I swear!"

"I didn't say I believed it." Though there was a part of me that wondered. "So what do we do now?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to George Mason. I'm going to Pemberton. What do we do now?"

Asher shook his head in confusion and sat back down. "This isn't going the way I thought it would."

"What did you expect? That I'd simply accept your apology and everything would be fine?"

"No," he said slowly.

I could tell that was exactly what he'd thought.

"Asher, we have bigger issues than you going to a different college."

He frowned. "Like what?"

"It seems like all we do anymore is fight. You're keeping things from me. You spend more time with Caleb than you do with me."

"I told you, I didn't cheat with Caleb!"

"I'm not saying you did, but if other people are noticing that you spend enough time with him to the point where they think you might be cheating, then obviously it's a problem."

He looked ashamed. "So...what are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm just pointing out what we're dealing with."

"You think we should break up."

"Maybe."

Asher's jaw dropped. "I...I can't believe you said that."

I stood and walked to the window. "Why not? We can't even make this work when we live in the same town. How are we going to make it work when you're three hours away? I don't want a long-distance relationship."

Asher stood as well. I could see his reflection in the window as he stared at my back, a tortured look on his face. "But...I love you."

I turned to face him. "Do you? What do we really know about love? If you really loved me you wouldn't be lying to me."

"What kind of stupid shit is that? You know damn well I love you, and you love me, too. Or you used to."

I sighed and rubbed my face wearily. "I still do," I said softly. "I just...maybe that's not enough anymore."

He stared at me in disbelief. "So that's it? We're over? You're breaking up with me?"

When I nodded, Asher shook his head and started backing away as tears spilled down his cheeks. "You know what? Maybe you're right. Maybe this is for the best. Why would I want to date an asshole anyway?"

I closed my eyes in an effort to hold back my own tears. When I opened them again, he was gone.

What had I done? I hadn't planned on breaking up with him. Where did those words come from? I didn't feel any relief or closure, just turmoil and confusion. An unaccustomed numbness seemed to have taken over my emotions.

I walked downstairs and into the den where Kane was still playing video games.

"You can alert the press," I said woodenly. "We broke up."

Chapter 4

Somehow, the next few weeks managed to both race by and crawl. My days were a blur of constant activity as graduation drew nearer, but underneath it all, I missed Asher.

The last few days of classes felt like slow, drawn-out torture. Asher and I still weren't speaking, and the sympathetic glances people kept shooting my way only made it worse. I hated being the school's latest object of pity. The rumors had spread fast, and nearly everyone seemed to blame Asher for the breakup. I doubted it was easy for him either, but I didn't waste much energy feeling bad for my ex, especially since he was rarely seen without Caleb glued to his side. It was hard not to wonder if the gossip held some truth. Thankfully, I had other things to focus on, like graduation, my birthday, and a job interview that was coming up fast.

Graduation felt like a strange mix of freedom and finality. As I walked across the stage and accepted my diploma, I should've been buzzing with excitement—and part of me was. The cheers, the flashing cameras, the sea of smiling faces were all exhilarating, but underneath it all, there was a hollow ache I couldn't ignore. Asher should've been by my side, cracking jokes, talking about the future we'd planned. Instead, we were avoiding even making eye contact, and the space where he used to be felt louder than the noise around me. I was moving forward, but it didn't feel the way I thought it would.

I got a handful of really thoughtful birthday-slash-graduation gifts, but nothing came close to topping the "new" car from Mom and Adam. When I opened the

small box and saw the keys inside, I nearly forgot how to breathe. They belonged to a black Honda—used, but in excellent condition. I was so thrilled I practically tackled them both with grateful bear hugs.

The job interview had my nerves in overdrive. I was jittery by the time I reached Mr. Novak's office, tucked away on the second floor of a '40s-era, two-story brick building from the 1940s in downtown Salisbury. Halfway down the dim hallway, I spotted a pebbled-glass door with "Novak Investigations" stenciled in gold lettering—a detail that sent a chill down my spine. The whole thing looked like it belonged in a hard-boiled film noir movie.

I took a steadying breath and knocked. No answer. I knocked again. Still nothing. Hesitant but curious, I tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. I pushed the door open and stepped into a cramped little reception area.

"Hello? Mr. Novak?" I called.

The small room was overwhelmed by a rather battered wooden desk that looked like it had been there since the place was built. Behind it sat an empty equally ancient pitted-chrome and black leather swivel chair. The only other furniture in the cramped space was a pair of bright orange, fake leather chairs that looked like rejects from a doctor's waiting room circa 1975. In one corner stood a dusty artificial plant of some indeterminate species that I suspected did not actually exist in nature. A faded marine print hung on the wall over the chairs. The only thing in the room that seemed to belong to this century was the sleek, new computer perched on the desk. It practically gleamed compared to everything else.

"Mr. Novak?" I called again, a little louder this time.

Suddenly, a door behind the desk swung open and Mr. Novak stepped out. "Sorry about that, Killian," he said with a quick smile. "I was finishing up a phone call. Come on back to my office."

As I stepped in, I took a moment to look around. The office was decorated in what could only be described as Early American Yard Sale. The furnishings were an eclectic mix of old elegance and modern efficiency, but somehow it all worked.

His desk was a massive slab of scarred golden oak—so solid and imposing it looked like it had been built right there in the room. I couldn't imagine how it would've fit through the door otherwise. The surface was strikingly bare, free of the usual clutter, just polished wood worn smooth by years of use and a single antique brass banker's lamp with a green glass shade. Two large brown leather armchairs faced the desk, looking both intimidating and inviting.

One wall was completely lined with mismatched bookcases, each a different height, width, and shade of wood, like they'd been collected over decades rather than chosen as a set. The shelves overflowed with every kind of book imaginable—thick legal tomes, ancient phone books (seriously, did they even make those anymore?), worn atlases, and a set of encyclopedias that looked like museum pieces. One entire case seemed devoted to fiction, packed with both paperbacks and hardcovers, their spines creased and well-loved.

Behind the oak desk, a row of metal filing cabinets stood shoulder to shoulder, each meticulously

labeled and locked, forming an imposing wall of battleship gray. On the third wall, a humpbacked sofa hunched under the room's lone window, its shape almost beastly, like it was crouching, poised to spring at me the second I let my guard down.

Novak noticed that the books, especially, had caught my attention. "Go ahead, take a closer look. I guess you could say I'm something of a collector."

I walked over to the shelves and scanned the names on the spines—Janet Evanovich, Patricia Cornwell, Arthur Conan Doyle, Marcia Muller, Mickey Spillane, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Sue Grafton, Tony Hillerman, Agatha Christie, Faye Kellerman, Sharyn McCrumb, P.D. James, Val McDermid. There was no rhyme or reason to their shelving, but all the greats were represented.

"Most of them are first editions," he said. "Some are even signed by the authors."

"Oh wow." I was in awe.

"Are you a big reader?"

I nodded. "And mysteries have always been my favorite. I started reading Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys when I was a kid."

Novak chuckled. "You're still a kid. Take a seat, why don't you."

I sank into one of the big brown chairs and waited while Novak studied me in silence. I fought the urge to squirm under his gaze.

He cleared his throat, leaning forward slightly. "Alright, let's start with the obvious question. Why do you want to work here?"

"Well, to start, I need a job." I was relieved when Novak chuckled at my joke. "I'll be starting at Pemberton University in the fall, and lately, I've been thinking a lot about what I want to study, what I want to do when I grow up." I grinned. "Nothing really clicked...until I saw your card. Being a private investigator just feels...right."

"I'm not hiring a private investigator. I'm hiring an assistant. Essentially, I need a secretary. The job is mostly office duties—answering the phone, greeting clients, managing my schedule, filing...basic stuff. That little room out there," he nodded toward the reception area, "will be your entire world."

"I understand."

"Do you? It's not exactly glamorous work," he remarked with a raised brow.

"You have to start somewhere," I replied.

He snorted. "Fair enough. Are you saying you think you'd eventually like to be an investigator?"

"Yes, sir. That's the goal."

"You might change your mind once you realize how tedious it gets."

"I doubt that."

"What do you know about private investigations? Or, to put it another way, what do you think my job entails?"

"Well, when we talked before, you mentioned that you mostly handle insurance fraud cases. I did some research and found out that some private investigators also handle infidelity, missing persons, countersurveillance, cybercrime, and, um, something called process serving?"

He raised an eyebrow, seemingly impressed. "You've done your homework. I don't do countersurveillance or cybercrime—I'm happy when I can check my email without incident—and I stay away from process serving. That's surprisingly dangerous work. The rest does pop up here and there, but insurance fraud is the bread and butter."

"Would you ever let me help out with a case some time? Like, not now, obviously, but down the road, after I proved myself?"

"It's not completely out of the question. But trust me, you'd have a lot to learn first. As I said, I'm not looking for an investigator right now. My caseload isn't so overwhelming that I need an extra investigator. What I need is someone to take care of the stuff I hate, like phone calls, typing up reports, that sort of thing. Can you type?"

"Yes."

"Fast?"

"Pretty fast."

"I know it's a bit of a dumb question in this day and age, but given some of the people who've applied in the past, I have to ask anyway. Do you know how to use a computer?"

"Of course," I said, trying not to sound too amused.

"I said it was dumb. Can you answer a phone call professionally?"

I picked up an imaginary phone and held it to my ear. "Hello, Novak Investigations. This is Killian speaking. How may I help you today?"

He chuckled. "A few more questions. Do you have any experience working with confidential information or handling sensitive material?"

I almost asked if staying in the closet counted, but decided it probably wasn't an appropriate response for a job interview. "Not really, but I know how to keep a secret and be discreet."

"How's your memory?"

"Pretty good. I acted all through high school and had to learn lines."

"Acting is a good skill for an investigator, but what about your observational skills? Close your eyes."

"Huh?"

"Close your eyes."

I did.

"Now, describe what I'm wearing."

"Um...a beige button-up with tiny navy-blue ducks. I only saw your pants for a minute when you answered the door and invited me into your office, but I think they were dark blue. You were wearing a worn pair of dock shoes."

"Now name some authors on my bookshelf."

"Oh. Um...Agatha Christie, uh, the guy who wrote Sherlock Holmes...Doyle! And Chandler...Cornwell? Oh! Janet Evanovich. Mickey Spillane. Um..."

"That's enough." Novak leaned back in his chair. He stared at me for a few seconds then rubbed his chin. "I might regret this but you're hired."

I blinked in surprise. "Just like that?"

He shrugged. "I need an assistant. You're here. You want it. You're hungry, and I like that. Call it an old cop's intuition, but I like you."

"Thank you! You won't regret it, Mr. Novak!"

He raised a hand, cutting me off. "Hold on, don't get too excited. This is just the trial period, and don't forget, you're still just my assistant. If you don't work out, or if you decide it's too boring, we'll part ways. No hard feelings. Deal?"

"Deal," I said, already imagining what was to come.

He held out a hand and we shook on it.

A few weeks later, I thought back on that conversation with a bit of amusement. When Mr. Novak said that being a private investigator was usually boring, he wasn't kidding—at least, not from what I'd seen so far. Our one and only case involved a guy trying to scam workers' comp with a supposedly injured back. It mostly consisted of Mr. Novak spending long hours on low-stakes stakeouts, while I answered phones and typed up reports. Not exactly thrilling detective work.

Not that I minded all that much. Maybe the life of a P.I. wasn't all that exciting, but I did find it interesting. I was learning a lot just by typing the reports. Mr. Novak kept very detailed records of all his investigations. Some were hand scribbled in the small notebook he carried with him everywhere, and some I transcribed from a digital recorder. I preferred the written journal, even though his handwriting wasn't always legible. He was a former police officer, after all. When I was typing his recorded reports, however, I'd sometimes

get so bored with his narrative that my mind would wander and I'd have to backtrack.

"The subject left his house at oh-eight-hundred hours and drove approximately one mile to the grocery store, where he shopped using a motorized cart and had the bagboy assist in loading his car. Upon returning home, his oldest son came out and unloaded the car."

Scintillating stuff, let me tell you.

Although, there was a satisfying sense of accomplishment when Mr. Novak finally photographed the guy playing tackle football with his two sons.

I'd been working there for about a month when things suddenly got more exciting. It started off like any other day. I was alone in the office, when I heard someone knock. I could see a feminine figure outlined through the pebbled glass, but nothing more. Mr. Novak insisted I keep the door locked when he wasn't there, so I jumped up to answer the knock.

I swung the door open and was stunned to see Judy Cassara standing there, beaming. I'd met her a couple of years earlier when I'd briefly dated her niece in an ill-fated attempt to hide the fact that I was gay. Judy had unsettled me at first. She was a psychic and made a few eerie predictions when we met. But later, during the final showdown with the person who killed my friend Seth, she'd saved my life—and her nephew Jake's—when the house went up in flames. Afterward, she became Jake's guardian and took him back to California. I hadn't seen or heard from either of them since. She was the last person I expected to show up at our door.

"Aunt Judy!" I exclaimed.

She rolled her eyes. "Killian Kendall, I'm not your aunt. Even Jake doesn't call me that. It's just Judy."

I nodded mutely and gestured for her to come in, buying myself a moment to collect my thoughts. She stepped inside and gave the small, cluttered space a quick once-over, her nose wrinkling with mild distaste. She hadn't changed much. Her blond hair was longer than I remembered, but otherwise, she looked just the same. She was probably in her late thirties, but could easily pass for younger, thanks to a lean, athletic build that practically screamed yoga devotee and radiant, flawless skin that gave her a healthy, sun-kissed glow. She wore no makeup, but none was needed to enhance her piercing blue eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted out.

I didn't mean to sound rude. I just couldn't figure out why Judy was standing in my office.

"I stopped by your house first and Adam told me you were working here now," she answered, closely inspecting one of the orange chairs. She turned to face me, her bright smile still in place. "So, you're working for a private investigator. Why am I not surprised?"

"I mean what are you doing back in Maryland? Are you just visiting?" I couldn't think of anyone she might be visiting since, as far as I knew, she and Jake had no surviving family.

"Oh. No, not visiting. We're moving back." She casually sat on the edge of my desk.

"What? When?"

"As soon as I find a house."

"But...why?"

"I think it'll be for the best, for both of us." Her smile faltered a little. "California...didn't work out the way I'd hoped." She sighed and motioned towards my desk chair. "Why don't you sit down? I'd like to talk to you for a few minutes—that is, if I'm not interrupting your work."

"It's nothing that can't wait," I said weakly as I circled behind the desk and sank into my chair. Judy shifted around on the desk to face me. "You can grab one of those orange chairs if you'd be more comfortable," I offered.

She made a face. "I'll pass, thanks. This place could really use a makeover. I'm surprised you haven't redone it already."

I felt strangely defensive of my space, as humble as it might have been. "I haven't been here that long. Besides, it's not that bad."

"Sorry," Judy said with a laugh. "Occupational hazard. I am an interior designer, after all. My niche is being a *psychic* designer. That doesn't mean I can read your mind—just that I tune into the energy of a space, its vibe or personality, and design around that."

My eyes grew wide. That sort of thing might fly out in California, but I didn't see it going over as well on the Eastern Shore. "Is that...real?"

She winked. "Does it matter if it's real or not if my clients believe it is? But I didn't come here to talk about my job. I came to catch up and ask a favor. First, tell me what's been going on with you?"

"I, uh...I graduated." I didn't know what else to say. It had been over a year and a half since I'd last seen

her. How do you catch someone up on that much of your life? I didn't even know where to begin.

"I heard! Adam showed me some pictures. How are you and Asher?"

I frowned. Adam could fill her in on my graduation but not my love life? "We, um, broke up."

Judy's face fell. "I'm so sorry, Killian. I didn't know. Recently?" I nodded. "Please forgive me for being so thoughtless."

"You couldn't have known."

"Still, I'm sorry. I can tell it's still fresh. Let's change the subject. Do you like your new job?"

I managed a smile. "Yeah, I do. Right now, I'm pretty much just a secretary. I'd really like to get into the investigative side of things eventually."

"You will."

"Is that a prediction?"

She laughed. "Just a gut feeling. You're like a cat with your insatiable curiosity. And you have certain gifts that I think you've been given for a reason."

"Like what?"

"You'll figure it out."

I brushed off her cryptic comment as classic Judy. She had a knack for sounding mysterious, and I was convinced she did it partly just to keep people guessing.

"How's Jake?"

She shook her head slowly and seemed to age before my eyes. "That's actually what I came to talk to you about. Jake...isn't doing well. It's been rough since we left. He's had a hard time dealing with everything, which is understandable considering everything he went

through. I've tried to get him into therapy, but he skips sessions or refuses to speak when I make him go. He fell in with a bad crowd, rich kids who do nothing but party. He did so poorly in school this past year, they failed him. He should have graduated, like you, but now he has to repeat his senior year. It's been...challenging."

"Is that why you're moving back?"

"Yes. I'm hoping if we get away from those negative elements, he'll do better. We're not moving back to the same town, though. There are just too many bad memories. I'm looking for something here in Salisbury. In fact, I'm viewing a few houses later. All this leads me to my main reason for stopping by today."

I raised my eyebrows expectantly and waited.

"I was hoping that you'd reach out to Jake after we move back, befriend him again. I know he admired you a great deal."

"Admired me? For what?"

"Well, dear, you did save his life."

"You rescued both of us."

"I helped, but it was mainly just a case of being in the right place at the right time. You put your life on the line for Jake, and I don't think he's forgotten that. Will you at least go talk to him?"

"Of course. It'll be good to see him again. I would have done that without being asked."

"I know, but I wanted to warn you."

"Warn me?"

"He's changed, Killian. He isn't the same boy who left here."

"He wasn't the same boy even before he left."

She nodded sadly. "I know. And I don't expect him to be. I'd just like to see him happy again."

Before I could offer some mumbled words of comfort, the office door swung open and my boss bustled in. He stopped in his tracks when he spotted Judy sitting on my desk.

I jumped to my feet. "Judy, this is my boss, Shane Novak. Mr. Novak, this is Judy Cassara...an old friend."

"Not that old." Judy gave me a wink as she hopped off the desk and shook Mr. Novak's outstretched hand.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said.

"The pleasure is mine."

Was it my imagination or were there sparks flying?

"Have we met before?" he asked with the most charming smile I'd ever seen him muster. "You look familiar."

"I don't believe so, and I think I'd remember," Judy answered coyly.

They were definitely flirting. I tried not to giggle.

"So you're a private investigator?" she continued. "How did you get into such an interesting line of work?"

"I needed something to keep me busy after my wife passed away."

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"It's been a few years. You never stop missing them, but the pain fades."

Judy still seemed a little flustered. It was nice to know she was human after all. "Well, I'm glad you hired Killian. He has a talent for uncovering the truth."

Mr. Novak gave me a look that was half amused, half curious. "Is that so?"

I blushed under his scrutiny.

Judy turned to face me. "Well, Killian, I won't keep you from your work any longer. Just think about what I asked, okay?"

I nodded, and she gave me a quick hug before leaving.

Mr. Novak watched her go then turned to me with a smirk. "Isn't she a little old for you?"

I laughed. "She isn't exactly my type. She's...my friend's aunt." I wasn't sure how much to reveal about how we met. "She lives in California, but apparently she's moving to Salisbury soon."

"Oh, is she?" he asked, doing a decent job of sounding casual—but not quite pulling it off.

"Yeah, she's here looking at houses. She just stopped by to catch up and ask me to reconnect with my old friend Jake when they move back."

"Is Jake her son?"

"Nephew."

"Ah. And is she...single?"

"Uh, as far as I know." I kept my eyes firmly on my computer screen. I did not want to start laughing.

He nodded as if he couldn't have cared less, and started into his office. He paused in the doorway.

"Killian, could I speak to you for a minute?"

I looked up nervously. Was I in trouble? Had I messed something up? Was he angry that Judy had been there to see me about something personal? He jerked his head toward his office and I followed him in.

He placed his briefcase on the bare desktop and sat down. He nodded in the direction of the chairs, and I took a seat.

"Killian, we have an issue," he said after studying me for several nerve-racking moments. "You've been working here for about a month now, right?"

"Yes, Mr. Novak."

He leaned back in his chair and propped his feet on the desk. "And yet, you still insist on calling me Mr. Novak."

I blinked in confusion. Was that the only reason he'd called me in his office? "Sir?"

"Look kid, if we're going to be working together, we can't always be so formal. And while you're at it, drop this 'sir' business, too."

"Yes—um, right. Okay."

He threw his head back and laughed. "One thing's for sure, you were raised well."

I made a face. "Actually, my father was just really strict. I was expected to always refer to my elders as sir or ma'am."

"Elders, eh? Well, we're coworkers, and I prefer a more relaxed office. I had to deal with titles and sirs for thirty years as a cop. I got my fill. Call me Shane, if you want. If that doesn't sit right with you, stick with Novak. That's what my buddies on the force called me."

I nodded slowly. There was no way I was calling him Shane. Novak felt right. It suited him.

"So tell me, what do you think of the job so far?"

I considered my response carefully. "I like it."

He gave me a look. "Would you care to elaborate on that?"

"Well, it's not quite what I expected, but it's interesting."

He shook his head with a grin. "I think you're getting into the wrong profession. You should be a politician. You're already a pro at answering a question without actually answering it."

"No, really! I've learned a lot from doing your reports. It's just...I know you warned me that it was boring and I'd just be on the desk and all, but it's been even more boring than I expected."

He laughed. "What were you expecting? A shootout in the hallway? Or that I'd send you out on a case in your first few weeks on the job?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "I don't know what I was expecting. I just thought maybe you were downplaying it so I wouldn't set my hopes too high."

"Nope, that was me shooting straight with you. Now, in all fairness, that insurance case was exceedingly dull, but I'm actually glad it was your first. It gives you an idea of what you're getting into. So...you want out?"

"No! I mean, are you firing me?"

"I wasn't planning on it. I've been pretty pleased with your performance so far. You pay attention to detail and you're very professional. You do good work."

"Thank you, sir. I mean...Novak."

He smiled. "I mostly wanted to check in with you, do a temperature check. So we're good then?"

"Definitely."

"Then consider the trial period over."

"Do you think you'll ever let me help out on a case?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Eventually, if you stick long enough. I may start asking you to do some additional tasks to help me out in my investigations."

I perked up. "Like what?"

"Don't get too excited. Simple things like making phone calls, picking things up from a client, maybe the occasional Internet search." I must have looked disappointed, because he chuckled. "If you do well with those jobs, you'll move on to bigger things." I still must have looked somewhat dejected. "Remember what you said in your interview? You gotta start somewhere, kid."

I nodded. "You're right."

He grinned. "Damn skippy. I'm always right. That's the first thing you've got to learn!"

I couldn't help but laugh, and he winked at me. "Good. The second thing you have to learn is not to take me too seriously. I joke around a lot, but you'll have to learn to differentiate when I'm teasing and when I'm serious. If I tell you to get back to work, I expect you to get back to work. Got it?" I nodded. "Good. Then get back to work!"

I jumped up and gave him a mock salute. "Yes, *sir!*"

He rolled his eyes. "Just what I needed, a smartass," he grumbled good-naturedly as I started toward the front office. "Oh, and Killian?" I turned back. "If I didn't think you were worth the effort, I wouldn't be wasting my time on you."

I went back to my boring work with a glow of satisfaction.

When I got home from work that afternoon, I remembered that it was Steve's and my turn to make dinner. I found him in the kitchen, where he'd already started preparations, expertly cutting up a whole chicken. Both he and Adam were excellent cooks. Adam prepared the meals most nights, but, once a week, Steve and I took over to give him a night off. Dinner was always later on those nights, but Adam seemed to appreciate the effort. We kept Kane out of the kitchen as much as possible, aside from helping with cleanup. He could manage basic prep in a pinch, but when it came to actual cooking, he was pretty much a lost cause.

"What are we making?" I asked as I grabbed an apron and tied it around my waist.

"How does chicken with forty cloves of garlic sound?"

"Garlicky."

Steve laughed. "Actually, not as much as you'd think. The garlic becomes very mild as it roasts with the chicken. I've got the bird under control. Why don't you start the salad?"

I agreed and pulled the vegetables out of the crisper to start putting the salad together. Usually we chatted while we worked, but that day I was lost in thought. Seeing Judy again had brought up a lot of memories and, with them, some emotions I thought I had put behind me.

"You're awfully quiet," Steve said after a while.

I looked over at him and smiled apologetically.

"Sorry. You'll never guess who came to see me today."

"Judy Cassara?"

"You've been talking to Adam, haven't you?"

He grinned. "Yeah. He called to tell me she was thinking about moving back to the Shore and mentioned that she was looking for you."

"She's doing more than just thinking about moving back. She's here to look at houses."

"Really? I hope we're not looking at the same place."

"What?" I dropped the knife I was using to slice scallions and spun to face Steve. I couldn't have been more surprised if he had just said he was from Gallifrey. "Why are you looking at houses? Are you moving out? Are you and Adam okay?"

Steve laughed. "Whoa! Slow down, kiddo. Adam and I are fine, and I'm not going anywhere."

"Then why would you be looking at a house?"

"I'm thinking about getting out of the architect business. I've been in it for a while now and, to be honest, I feel like I've accomplished all I can there. I'm bored with it. I guess you could say I'm having a midlife crisis of sorts—or that's what Adam says, anyway."

"What does that have to do with buying a house?"

"Will you hang on? I'm getting there. It's always been a dream of mine to own and operate a bed and breakfast. I started making some inquiries—I have a lot of contacts—and I found a great place that's available right now. I haven't gone to see it yet. I have an appointment the day after tomorrow in the morning. You should come with me."

"That's Saturday," I said automatically. I was still processing everything he'd said, but I knew my plans for Saturday. They involved sleeping in and not much else.

Steve just laughed again. He knew me too well.

"So, let me see if I've got this straight," I said slowly, still processing. "You're thinking about buying a bed and breakfast?"

"No, I'm thinking about buying a house and turning it into a B&B."

"Won't that cost a lot of money?"

"Most definitely."

"You have that kind of money?"

"I inherited a hefty sum when my dad passed away years ago, and I've made good money as an architect. I've invested and saved, and with what I'll make selling my share of the firm to one of my partners, I think I'll have what I need. If I run into any snags, I have good credit. I could always get a new business loan."

"I had no idea you had that kind of money."

"I don't make it a habit to walk around talking about my financial status. You sound insulted. Should I have divulged my bank balance to you sooner?"

I rolled my eyes. "So you're really going to buy this house?"

"I don't know. I haven't even looked at it yet, but it sounds great on paper."

"And Adam is cool with all this?"

There was a long pause in which Steve's eyes didn't leave the head of garlic he was breaking apart. "It's hard to tell."

I gave him a skeptical look. "Since when is it hard to tell anything with Adam?"

"He says he's okay with it, but I can't help feeling that he's saying what he thinks he ought to say rather than what he really feels."

"What do you mean?"

"He gave me the whole 'follow your bliss' speech. You know—the one about not giving up on your dreams."

"Vintage Adam." I laughed. "So what's the problem?"

"It's just...I sensed there was something he wasn't saying."

"I'm sure it was just your imagination. If he's encouraging you to go ahead with this, he must be okay with it."

"I sure hope you're right."

"Would you like me to try and figure out if he's upset or not at dinner tonight?"

Steve glanced over at me. "How do you propose to do that?"

"I don't know. I think he's usually pretty easy to read. Maybe you could bring up how excited you are about looking at the house, and I'll gauge his reaction."

He shrugged. "It can't hurt anything. We can give it a shot."

When Steve brought up the subject of the house over dinner, I observed Adam carefully. Unfortunately, Steve was right. Adam's reaction was encouraging on the surface, but there was an oddly flat quality to his words, a lack of enthusiasm that made it sound as if he was simply going through the motions.

Usually, Kane and Adam did the dishes on nights when Steve and I cooked, but that night, I volunteered to

take Kane's place, hoping to get a few minutes alone with Adam.

I thought I'd start with something easy and work my way up to discussing the bed and breakfast. "I hear Judy came by the house today," I said as I scrubbed a pot.

Adam smiled. "Yeah. It was good to see her again. She looks great. Did she come by your office to see you, or did Steve mention it?"

"She came by the office. She wanted to ask me a favor."

Adam took the pot from me and began to dry it. "What kind of favor?"

"She wants me to be friends with Jake when they move back."

"Why wouldn't you be friends with him?"

"She says he's changed a lot. Apparently, he's had a hard time out in California. He failed his senior year and will have to repeat it here."

A frown creased Adam's face. "That's really a shame. I can understand him having a hard time with everything that happened, though."

"Yeah. I know I had a hard time, and Jake's situation was much worse."

"Was he in counseling?"

"Judy said he wouldn't go."

He shook his head. "Poor kid." He took another pan from me. "Did she fly all the way back here to ask you that? Couldn't she have waited until after they moved or, I dunno, called or texted?"

"Actually, she was here looking for a house. I guess everybody's house shopping, huh?"

I watched him closely but only got a "Sounds like it" in response.

"So how do you feel about this whole bed and breakfast thing? Steve was telling me about it earlier. It was the first I'd heard about it."

Adam looked over at me with one eyebrow raised. "Did he set you up to interrogate me?"

I gave him my most innocent expression. "What? No!" I didn't even have to lie. The interrogation had been my idea. "I was just wondering."

He looked unconvinced but answered me anyway. "I think he should follow his dreams. He's always wanted to have a bed and breakfast, and he's at a point in his life when he can seriously consider it."

"Why do I sense a 'but'?"

"There is no 'but'. Why don't you go watch TV or play a game with Kane? I can finish up these dishes."

I had the distinct impression he was trying to get rid of me. "You sure?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

As I passed the living room, Steve looked up expectantly. I gave him a shrug, and his face fell. I could understand his concern. Adam was definitely holding something back.

That night, I struggled to fall asleep. There was too much going on in my head. Seeing Judy had churned up a lot of memories I'd rather have left buried. I'd killed someone in cold blood. Sure, it was in self-defense, but I'd gone into that situation with a gun, fully aware of what could unfold. Even after nearly two years of therapy, living with that reality was still a heavy burden.

I was also worried about Jake. If he'd changed as much as Judy implied, could we still be friends? We'd been attracted to one another once upon a time, but so much had happened since then. Would that chemistry still be there? We were different people now.

The atypical, muted reticence I'd felt in Adam was affecting me as well, leaving me tense and somewhat nervous, as if something big was building but I didn't know what.

I finally dozed off sometime after two a.m. but woke up with a jolt less than an hour later. At first, I couldn't figure out what had awakened me. As far as I could remember, I hadn't been dreaming, and it was completely silent in the house. The only noise I could hear was Kane's deep, even breathing.

Becoming more alert, I slowly began to sense a presence in the room. The hairs on my arms stood up and a shiver ran down my spine. My first instinct was to duck under the covers and call for Adam, like a little kid who's just had a nightmare, until I realized I sensed no malice. I eased myself into a sitting position and gasped out loud.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor, bathed in a beam of moonlight, was my former friend and Kane's brother, Seth. The pale light gave him an otherworldly glow, making him look like a ghost.

Then it hit me—since Seth was dead and all, he was, in fact, almost certainly a ghost.

There was a ghost in my bedroom.
Or...technically, I was in his bedroom.

I had to be dreaming.

"Hey, Killer," he said with a familiar grin. "Long time, no see."

He looked exactly as he had the last time I'd seen him alive—ginger hair sticking up in every direction, jeans, and a fitted short-sleeved T-shirt. Even the impish expression on his adorable face was the same as I remembered it. An almost paralyzing ache spread through my body as I realized how much I missed him.

"You don't look any different," I managed to say in a strangled voice.

He cocked his head to one side. "I wouldn't. You, on the other hand... You've grown up, Killian."

"I have?"

He laughed. "In some ways, at least."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not the same scared little boy I met on my first day at a new school. You're much stronger now. You've been through a lot and come out a better person because of it."

"In what ways haven't I changed?"

"You're still fighting the real you."

I frowned. "I came out. The whole school knows. Asher and I dated for half our junior year and almost the entire senior year."

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what *do* you mean?"

He shook his head and stood up. "That's not why I'm here."

"Why *are* you here? Am I really even talking to you? This is all a dream, right?"

"Maybe."

"It has to be a dream. I'm way too calm for it to be anything else. Besides, if it isn't a dream, that would make you a..."

"Ghost?" He gracefully rose to his feet, strolled to the side of my bed, and leaned in close. I didn't feel any warmth from his body, even though he was close enough that I should have if he was real. I didn't even feel the touch of his breath on my cheek.

"Boo!"

I jumped and he laughed.

"Why are you here?" I asked him testily.

"I dunno. I just thought maybe you could use someone to talk to." He sat on the edge of my bed.

"I have plenty of people to talk to without resorting to a dead guy. Oh my God! Maybe I'm going crazy!"

"Plenty of people, huh? Name one."

"Adam, Steve, Kane...that's three."

"And I guess you've been talking to them about Asher?"

"What about Asher?"

"You guys broke up, right? Have you talked to anyone about that?"

"Of course! Well, I mean...sort of."

"Do you miss him?"

My breath caught in my throat. "Y-yes." My voice caught, unexpectedly.

"No one would know it by watching you."

"How do you know?"

"I keep an eye on you."

For some reason, I found that comforting. "So you crossed the void just to talk about my love life?"

"Crossed the void?" He smirked.

"Whatever."

"Actually, no. There is something else I need to talk to you about, but we haven't finished talking about Asher yet."

"Can't we just say we have?"

"Why don't you want to talk about him?"

I shrugged and glanced away. Kane was still out cold, which seemed to support the idea that this was all just a dream. Then again, Kane could probably sleep through World War III, so maybe that wasn't the most reliable indicator of reality.

"Killian?" Seth prodded.

I sighed. "Maybe it hurts too much."

"Do you still love him?"

I forced myself to look into Seth's bright green eyes. "Yes."

"So why don't you talk to him anymore?"

"He doesn't talk to me, either. Honestly, we stopped talking to each other long before we broke up."

"What happened?"

I slumped back against my pillows. "Hell if I know. It was just like...we drifted apart. Towards the end, all we did was fight. He didn't even tell me he'd decided to go away to college. And then there was Caleb..."

"What about Caleb?"

"Asher was spending so much time with him. All he ever talked about was Caleb this and Caleb that. Everyone thought Asher was cheating on me with Caleb."

"Did you think he was?"

I shook my head and fought back tears. "I don't know. Were they?"

"Are you asking me?"

"You are the supernatural being here."

"Doesn't mean I get to supply you with answers you have to figure out for yourself. Besides, how would I know? I'm not omniscient. It's not like I've been haunting Asher."

"Yeah, well, I'm new at this whole 'talking to ghosts' thing, so you'll have to forgive me if I don't know all the rules."

"No prob."

"Wait a minute. Does that mean you've been haunting me?"

"It was a joke, Killian. Besides, you haven't even decided if I'm a dream or a ghost yet."

"Well, which are you?"

He grinned. "Maybe I'm just your subconscious working out your issues." I stuck my tongue out at him and he laughed. "Didn't your mother ever teach you not to stick your tongue out at your subconscious?"

I laughed. "No. I think she forgot that particular life lesson. What else did you want to talk to me about?"

Seth suddenly grew more serious. "It's still sort of connected to Asher, but not exactly."

"Huh?"

"I can't explain, but something is happening tonight, something that will affect you."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I didn't like the serious tone in Seth's voice. "Could you be a little more vague?"

"I'm sorry, Killian. I really am. I can't go into details, but you're going to have to be very careful."

"I don't understand."

"I don't expect you to. Just remember what I'm telling you. Be careful. Watch your step."

"Will you stop speaking in riddles and just tell me whatever it is you're trying to tell me?"

Seth stood up abruptly. "If I could tell you, don't you think I would?"

"What do you mean?"

"You want everything to be simple, Killian. But it's not. Some answers you have to find for yourself."

"You're starting to sound like Judy."

"Then maybe you should start listening to her. She could teach you a lot...if you'd let her."

"Teach me? What does that even mean? I don't get any of this!"

Seth's hands clenched at his sides. "Maybe this was a mistake."

"What was?"

"Coming here. Talking to you. Maybe you're not ready. Maybe I'm not ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Just forget it. I never should have come." He turned away, stepping into the shadows. His edges blurred, as if he were dissolving into the darkness.

"Seth?" I called out. He glanced back at me.

"Was this all just a dream? Will I remember any of it?"

"I hope so, Kill. Pay attention to your dreams. They might be the difference between life and death."

His words were still hanging in the air as he simply vanished, leaving me wondering if I was losing my mind. Had I really been talking to Seth's spirit, or had I imagined the whole thing? Maybe I was still asleep and it was all some sort of bizarre dream.

That last explanation made the most sense, so I rolled over, pulled the blankets up around my chin, pushed all the confusing thoughts and images from my mind, and went back to sleep.

I felt strangely rested when I woke up the next morning, which only reinforced my idea that Seth's nocturnal visit had been a dream. Oddly enough, the dream was extremely vivid in my memory. I could recall every word we'd said, even the expressions on Seth's face. My heart ached at the thought of being with him again. I decided that seeing Judy, talking about Jake, and bringing up all those old memories had caused me to dream about Seth.

Then it clicked. Maybe I had seen him before, during the investigation into his murder. He'd never spoken to me, but I kept having this recurring dream where he appeared, silently guiding me to where he'd hidden his journal. I'd ended up finding it exactly where he'd shown me, though at the time, I'd convinced myself it was just a coincidence. Just a dream.

What if it wasn't?

But it had to be. There was no such thing as ghosts. Was there?

Either way, Seth's vague warnings and cryptic advice kept running through my head as I showered and dressed, ate breakfast, and drove to work. Once at the office, I mostly managed to put it all out of my mind as I

immersed myself in paperwork, but every now and then, his face would float back into view, and I'd feel a fresh pang of loss.

Right before I was about to leave for my lunch break, the phone rang. I scooped it up and answered with my usual, "Novak Investigations. How may I help you?"

"Killian?"

I would have recognized that voice anywhere, even with the note of panic it carried. Something was wrong. "Asher?"

"I need your help."

My heart was pounding in my chest. "What's wrong?"

"There's been a murder."

Chapter 5

"*What?*" I gasped.

"Did you see the news?"

"No. What's going on?"

"Oh God, it's terrible. They're blaming Caleb. I don't know where he is, and they're asking me."

"Blaming Caleb for what? And who's blaming him?"

"The police! They think he did it, but I know he didn't."

"Asher, calm down! What do the police think Caleb did?"

"They think he killed his father."

"They *what?*"

"They think he killed his father. It was all over the news this morning."

"Killed him how?"

"They're not saying. Maybe in a fire, because, at first, they were just reporting that someone had died in a house fire. I recognized Caleb's yard from the footage they showed and I got worried, so I stayed home from work. Later, the report changed, saying the police suspected foul play in the death, but that's all they've said. Some cops showed up at Dad's office looking for me, and he sent them to our house. They kept asking me if I knew where Caleb was. I told them as far as I knew he was still in the group home. After they left, I called the group home and someone told me Caleb ran away yesterday. No one knows where he is."

"Slow down and back up. Did the police say they were looking for Caleb as a suspect?"

"No, but why else would they be looking for him?"

"Maybe they want to notify him of his father's death."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that."

Another, much darker thought occurred to me. "How do you know he wasn't the one who died in the fire?" A deafening silence ensued. "Asher?"

"Oh my God!"

"Are you okay?"

"That... I hadn't even considered that. Oh my God..."

"They could simply be looking for him because he ran away from the group home. Their search may not be directly connected to the fire. Even if it is, it doesn't mean he's a suspect."

"No. Something's wrong. I just know it."

"I think you're jumping to conclusions. You have no idea who the dead body is. It could just be some random person you don't know at all."

"Caleb and his dad lived there alone. Who else would it be?"

"I don't know, Asher. I don't know Caleb, let alone his father. I certainly don't know who goes to their house. Why did you call me? What do you expect me to do?"

"I...I'm not sure. I didn't know who else to call."

I rubbed my forehead. I was starting to get a headache. "I think you should just chill out. This is probably a big misunderstanding. Somebody died in a fire. It's sad, but it may not have anything to do with Caleb. I have to go. I have work to do."

Another long silence stretched out. "Yeah, okay," he said finally, his voice very small. "Sorry to bother you."

I sighed. "You're not bothering me. It's just...I'm at work, you know? I can't talk on the phone all day."

"Yeah. Right. Sorry. Bye."

"Asher—" But he'd already hung up. I hung up, too, with another heavy sigh. That hadn't gone well at all.

I didn't recall Seth's urgent message from my dream until later that evening. He'd warned that something was going to happen the night before—something that would impact me and was somehow tied to Asher. A chill ran down my spine. Had I brushed off something more important than I realized? I quickly pushed the thought aside, chalking it up to an overactive imagination.

Playing it safe, I turned on the TV in time to catch the late new. The top story was about the fire. The anchorperson, a carefully coifed, fresh-faced young woman in a tailored tweed jacket, spoke while video from the scene of the fire rolled.

"A devastating fire has reduced a rural home to rubble in what authorities are now calling a suspicious blaze."

The house had pretty much burned to the ground. A few jagged, blackened sections of the first floor walls remained standing, but the still smoldering heap of debris was largely unrecognizable as a building. The video showed a uniformed firefighter sifting through the rubble. Police tape surrounded the area, and a few officers conferred in the background. I also noticed a

barn in one shot. It seemed to have escaped the blaze untouched.

While these scenes were flashing across the screen, the reporter was saying, "Officials have confirmed that the fire is believed to be the result of arson, and investigators suspect foul play in the death of a body discovered in the debris. The property is owned by a man identified as Ira Cohen, though the name of the victim has not yet been released. Authorities say details remain limited, but they will continue to provide updates as more information becomes available."

I turned off the TV and tried to lose myself in a book. Although it was by one of my favorite authors, it couldn't keep my thoughts from drifting to Asher's call and the news broadcast. It was looking as if Asher had been right, at least about Caleb's father being dead. I hoped he wasn't right about the rest of it. I didn't particularly like Caleb, but I didn't wish him ill.

After a while, I gave up on the book and just watched mindless television until my eyes grew too heavy to keep open. I went to bed and fell into a restless sleep filled with images of fire—tortured memories of the fire I'd narrowly survived myself, and jumbled images of the blazing interior of a house I'd never seen before. I snapped out of the nightmare with a jolt, sweaty and panting, to find my room filling with the soft light of morning. I glanced over at the clock and saw it was a little after six a.m. I tried to go back to sleep but it was no use. I was wide awake.

Eventually, I surrendered and got up. I dragged myself downstairs, where I was surprised and a little

disappointed to find Steve in the kitchen sipping a cup of coffee. I wasn't really in the mood to make conversation.

Steve seemed equally shocked to see me at that time of the morning. "What are you doing up this early?"

"Couldn't sleep." I rubbed my eyes tiredly. "You always get up this early?"

"Most days. I enjoy the quiet time, before the rest of the world wakes up."

I dropped into a chair across from him and laid my head on my crossed arms.

"So how come you couldn't sleep? Bad dreams again?"

"Yeah, but not like before."

For months following Seth's murder and the attempt on my life, I was plagued by relentless nightmares nearly every night. But with time—and a lot of therapy—they eventually became less frequent and, finally, stopped completely.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Not long. A few months maybe, off and on."

"And you didn't say anything?"

"It's nothing. Everybody has bad dreams now and then."

Steve gave me a careful inspection, then stood up and poured me some hot coffee. "Maybe you should go see Dr. Shimura again," he suggested gently as he set the steaming mug in front of me.

"It's not like that. Really. I promise." I stirred some sugar and milk into my coffee. "You know I'd make an appointment in a second if it was. As I said, this is different. I just need to get my mind off of things, that's all."

"You sure?"

I nodded and sipped my coffee. I was starting to develop a taste for the bitter drink. I didn't think I'd ever like it, but I was beginning to see the appeal.

"Well, since you're up anyway, why don't you come with me?"

I looked at him over the rim of my mug. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to view the house I'm thinking about buying, the one I told you about."

"Oh, right. I might not be very good company."

"So what's new?"

"Ha ha. Very funny."

"I'll take that as a yes. You can sleep on the way there. It's about an hour away."

"Where is this house?"

"Chicone"

"I've never even heard of it."

"It's very small, barely even a town. These days, it's pretty much just a handful of homes, a general store, and a post office. The house sits right on Chicone Creek, which was named after the tribe that used to live in the area. I think it's an Algonquin name. Most of the rivers in this area were named for the indigenous tribes that were located on them."

"So the river was named for the tribe, and the town was named for the river?"

"Correct."

"Sounds...rural. Will we— I mean, will you be moving there?"

"I don't know. I don't even know if I want the place yet. If I do, we'll have to work out all the details at

that point." He grinned. "You know, cross that bridge when we come to it."

I frowned. A little planning ahead never hurt anybody.

"I'm going to go for my morning jog. I'll need to shower when I get back. I'm supposed to meet the real estate agent at the house at ten sharp, so be ready at eight-thirty."

"Will do."

He drained his coffee, rinsed the mug out in the sink, and left for his jog, ruffling my hair on his way out.

I must have fallen asleep at the table, because the next thing I knew I woke in a puddle of drool to the sound of Adam banging pots around on the stove.

"What time is it?" I asked, blinking away the sleep from my eyes.

"Quarter after eight. Why?"

"Oh shit!" I shot up from the table, sending my chair tumbling in the process. I righted the chair then ran out of the kitchen, leaving Adam staring after me as if I'd lost my mind.

I showered and dressed in record time and was waiting by the car when Steve came out of the house at precisely eight-thirty.

"I would have waited for you, you know," he said with a grin.

"Didn't wanna make you late."

I did sleep on the way to the house, waking up when the car came to a stop and the engine died. I was confused at first until I remembered where I was and why I was there. My mouth dropped open as I got my first look at the property Steve was considering.

"Holy crap!" Awe filled my voice. "This is the house you're thinking about buying?"

We sat parked in the circular driveway in front of an imposing estate that looked like it had been lifted straight from the glossy pages of *Home and Country* magazine. To call it a house would've been laughable, like calling the Atlantic Ocean a pond. This was, without question, a mansion. It rose three full stories, not including the quaint, glass-enclosed cupola that crowned the roof like a decorative flourish. The wide two-story wraparound porch seemed to embrace the entire structure, its railings lined with white spindles. Ornate gingerbread trim adorned the eaves and gables, curling and looping in elaborate patterns that gave the entire façade a storybook charm—like a Victorian dollhouse built on a grand scale.

The grounds were equally spectacular as well. The jade green lawn, liberally dotted with elegant old trees, sloped gently down to the banks of a peaceful looking creek, presumably the Chicone.

"It's a possibility," Steve said calmly. "It makes a nice first impression, doesn't it?"

"You can afford this mansion?"

"Like I said, I inherited quite a bit. Not that there would be much left afterwards."

"But this place must cost at least a million bucks!"

"That would be a bargain," he said dryly.

"You mean I've been living with a millionaire all this time and didn't even know it?"

"Guess so," he said with a grin.

"Does Adam know?"

He laughed. "Of course Adam knows."

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

"You never asked."

Our discussion ended as a black Jaguar pulled up behind us.

"That must be Victoria," Steve said. "I've only talked to her on the phone. She's the listing agent for the property."

As we stepped out of our car, a woman unfolded herself from the driver's seat of the Jag and greeted us with a dazzling, practiced smile. Her skin was deeply tanned, making her bright white teeth stand out in contrast beneath a perfectly styled helmet of blonde hair. She was slim, dressed in a tailored tweed skirt and a crisp white blouse that gaped open just a bit too far, intentionally showcasing a stretch of leathery, sun-weathered cleavage.

"I'm Victoria Lecates," she said brightly, extending her hand. "You must be Steve. It's so nice to meet you. And this is?"

Steve shook her hand. "Yes, lovely to meet you, Victoria. This is my partner's son, Killian."

I took my turn shaking Victoria's hand and returned her smile.

Introductions out of the way, she swept her arm around in an all-encompassing gesture. "So, what do you think?"

"It looks nice from the outside." Steve sounded cautious.

"Trust me, it looks just as good on the inside!"

Victoria was undeniably perky, an energy I struggled with on a good day. Running on as little sleep as I was, I wasn't convinced I could tolerate it at all.

"Come on," she continued, flashing a smile so wide I could have sworn I saw her wisdom teeth. "I'll show you the house first, then I'll give a quick tour of the grounds." She spun around and bounded onto the porch with the enthusiasm of a high school cheerleader. All she lacked was the uniform and pom poms.

We followed her up the broad stairs onto the veranda. The front door was massive: deep-set paneled dark wood with an oval leaded glass insert. On either side of the door were narrow sidelights of the same leaded glass. Above the door was a transom of stained glass.

Victoria launched into her prepared introduction. "The main part of the house was begun around 1848 or '49 and completed by 1851. It's believed to have been built onto a much older dwelling that could date as far back as the mid to late 18th century. It's quite an architectural and historical treasure."

She swung the door open to reveal a beautiful foyer. The hardwood floors gleamed with a patina that only a century and a half of use and care could create. On the right side, a wide staircase with an intricately carved balustrade rose gracefully to the second floor. A broad hallway was directly ahead, and doors opened off on each side. We stepped inside, and I immediately smelled the musty yet pleasant scent that all old houses seem to have.

We had barely cleared the door before it swung closed with a loud bang, seemingly of its own accord.

We all jumped, and Victoria's perky expression faltered a little. Was it just me, or did she seem a little nervous?

"These old houses can be a bit drafty," she said with forced cheeriness.

I looked over at Steve, who had a slight smile playing around his lips. What was going on?

Victoria recovered and picked up where she had left off. "The house's original owner was Elijah Marnien. He was a successful ship captain who married late in life to a much younger woman named Amalie. The Captain had this house built just for her. Isn't that dreamy? He named the plantation Munquissock, which is the Nanticoke word for blackberries and was reportedly the natives' name for the area. There are still blackberries growing wild on the property."

I could have sworn she said it was named Monkey Sock. I found out the correct spelling later.

She continued her tour guide spiel. "The Captain and Amalie moved into the house long before it was really finished. They stayed in the sections that were livable and moved into the new rooms as they were completed. We know all this from letters Amalie sent to her sister, which were later collected into a book and printed as a bit of local history."

"Is the book still available?" I asked.

"Oh, it's long out of print, now. They may have a copy at the library. I only know what I've been told," she replied breezily, before continuing her well-rehearsed speech. "The Captain was often away at sea, leaving Amalie to spend long stretches of time alone in the house she loved so much. In the spring of 1857, he set sail once more, as he had so many times before. When he didn't

return on schedule and word of violent storms reached shore, Amalie fell into despair, convinced her beloved Captain had been lost at sea. Tragically, by the time the Captain did make it home, he found his beloved wife had died—some say of a broken heart. He lived on in the house for a few lonely years before passing away himself. Isn't it just the most heartbreakingly romantic—"

The sound of a door slamming upstairs cut Victoria off in midsentence. We all looked up at the ceiling.

"Is someone else here?" I asked.

"Of course not." She said quickly. "Old houses, am I right? Anyway, after the Captain passed away, the property passed through a succession of owners. It sat empty for an extended period right after the turn of the century. A doctor named Johnson from Baltimore bought it in the Roaring Twenties, and it became quite the swinging joint for a while.

"Over time, most of the surrounding property was sold off for farmland. When the Captain bought the land, it encompassed more than five hundred acres. By the time Doctor Johnson died in 1950, he had whittled it down to its present manageable size of five acres. His son left the house vacant for a number of years, and it fell into disrepair. It was meticulously restored sometime in the '60s and again in the early '90s. As you'll see, the kitchen has had a full remodel just last year. I think you'll agree that the house is in amazing shape considering its age. And that's the history lesson! Come on, let me show you around."

She led us on a tour of the house, which was just as impressive inside as it was out. It sat on an east-west elevation, facing east. The foyer and hallway split the first floor down the center. The entire south side was a single enormous space, originally intended as a ballroom. Two grand fireplaces balanced the room, and a row of wavy-glassed windows let in plenty of light while providing an exquisite view of the back property and creek. A parlor and a library, each with its own fireplace, took up the north side.

At the rear of the house, the oldest section had been transformed into a sleek, modern chef's kitchen. Like the other rooms, it featured a fireplace, but unlike the others, this one was built solely for function, not style. Massive and commanding, blackened with the smoke of many fires, it spanned most of one wall and had once served as the primary source for cooking and baking. Gleaming stainless-steel appliances and stark white now stood in striking contrast to the rough-hewn brickwork. Despite its contemporary upgrades, the space retained its historic charm, with dark wooden ceiling beams and smooth, timeworn brick flooring. The overall effect was warm and inviting, a comforting blend of past and present.

The second floor consisted of five bedrooms—three smaller rooms across the front, and two larger ones at the back. We didn't go into every room, but the ones we did look in were quite nice. The Captain had built the house for entertainment, expecting guests on a regular basis, so even the smaller rooms were open and airy with high ceilings and beautiful woodwork. The third floor,

originally quarters for the live-in servants, could easily be converted into four more bedrooms.

On the third floor, Victoria paused by a smaller, paneled door set between two bedrooms. "This leads up to the cupola. Would you like to go up?" She sounded as if she was hoping we'd say no, but Steve jumped at her offer.

She opened the door and hesitated. "I really don't like going up there." She gave a nervous giggle. "There are no lights, and the stairs are so narrow. To be honest, it gives me the creeps."

"We can go up without you, if you'd rather," Steve offered.

"Oh, no. I'm just being silly." She took a deep breath and started up, Steve and I on her heels.

Victoria made an attempt to pick up where she'd left off in her sales patter, but she sounded a little breathless. "The Captain built the cupola to allow his wife to watch for his return. Back then, the forest hadn't grown up, and you could see the bay from here. She'd watch for his ship..."

Her voice trailed off as a sudden wave of unease swept over me. My skin prickled with a strange, crawling sensation, and a faint dizziness made the staircase tilt slightly. I instinctively reached for the wall to steady myself, but just as quickly as it came, the feeling vanished, leaving me wondering if I was even more tired than I thought.

The view from the tiny room at the top quickly made me forget the disorienting sensation on the stairs. Windows with dozens of small, square panes surrounded the space, and, though several were cracked, the scene

beyond was still breathtaking. A simple bench had been constructed all the way around, and I could easily imagine myself sitting there for hours just watching the world pass by.

Steve interrupted my idyllic fantasy with a question that brought me crashing back to earth. "So," he asked, "tell me about the ghosts."

"The what?" I asked, as Victoria's eyes grew wide and her ever-present smile faltered.

"What have you heard?" she demanded.

Steve's eyebrows jumped up. "So it is haunted?"

"I... No, of course not!" For the first time since we'd arrived, Victoria was visibly flustered.

Steve was undeterred. "I saw some stories online but I wasn't sure if there was any truth to them."

"Every old house is rumored to be haunted," she insisted. "It's all nonsense—"

The door at the bottom of the staircase slammed shut at that moment, cutting her off and causing her to shriek.

"Nonsense, huh?" Steve asked with a smirk.

Victoria attempted a frown, though the effort was mostly lost on her Botox-smooth face. "Are you some kind of ghost hunter? This isn't a haunted house tour."

"No, not at all," Steve said quickly, flashing a disarming smile. "I'm genuinely interested in the house. Any paranormal activity would just be an added bonus."

She visibly eased, though tension still lingered in her posture. "Sorry. It's just that this place has been on and off the market for years. We've lowered the price again and again. The current owners have poured a fortune into renovations, but every time we get close to a

sale, buyers back out. People get spooked—literally. The rumors about the house being haunted don't help. I just assumed you'd heard the gossip from the locals. They love to spread those stories."

"I haven't heard anything yet, but I'd love to," Steve said eagerly.

I shot him a skeptical look. Was he serious?

"What?" he asked, a little defensively. "I'm into this kind of thing."

"You actually believe in ghosts?" I arched an eyebrow.

"I believe I'm not arrogant enough to think I've got the universe all figured out," he said. "There's so much out there we can't explain with logic or science alone. There's an entire supernatural dimension we barely understand. Maybe there are ghosts—as in, the spirits of the dead—or maybe they're lingering emotional echoes, like imprints left behind by powerful memories."

Victoria held up a hand. "Just to confirm, you're still interested in the house?"

"Yes. And I'd like to know everything you know about the ghost. Ghosts? Is there more than one?"

She shook her head, visibly relieved, and maybe just a little confused. "I'm definitely not an expert. Honestly, I usually try to steer clear of the subject altogether." She took a steadying breath. "But as far as I know, there's only one ghost. Most people think it's Amalie, the wife of the sea captain who originally built the house. Locals still refer to the place as Amalie's House, and, over the years, quite a few people have claimed to see her."

"In any particular place?"

"Actually, a lot of the sightings have been right here in this cupola. The door leading up here opens and closes frequently. The townsfolk say Amalie is still waiting for the Captain to come home."

"You'd think she would have caught on by now," I said dryly.

"And is this the only place she's been seen?"

"No, one of the most documented encounters was by the wife of the man who bought the house in the mid-70s. They were the first to really update the house. From the moment they moved in, though, they heard strange noises: doors opening and closing, footsteps—the usual. She claimed that she woke up one night to see a woman standing at the foot of her bed. She screamed, and the woman vanished into thin air."

"She actually saw a manifestation?"

"So she said. Her husband never witnessed anything himself, but that didn't keep the local papers from blowing the story out of proportion. And then word spread. It was right around the time the *Amityville Horror* craze hit, and the public couldn't get enough of that kind of thing. For a while, the house was quite the attraction. They even had a famous psychic come to the house to give a reading. She said she felt the presence of a very sad woman, the usual vague psychic stuff."

"So what happened then?"

"Eventually, the commotion died down, and they were left with a house that nobody actually wanted to live in. It's an exciting story, but who wants to live with a ghost? There was a succession of owners, but few stayed for long, aside from one couple who seemed to get a kick

out of sharing their house with a supposed ghost. They lasted thirty-five years."

"Has the ghost ever been violent?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Do you know which room the woman says she saw the ghost in?"

"It's the primary bedroom on the second floor, I believe. It's been used as a storage room by the past few owners. No one wants to actually sleep in there."

"Can I see it?"

"Of course. Let's go back down, and I'll show you."

Most of the house stood nearly empty, with only a few stray pieces of furniture scattered about—a lone chair here, a small table there. The room Victoria led us to, however, was a different story entirely. It was packed to the brim with furniture and forgotten relics spanning generations. Brass bird cages, ornate headboards, carved picture frames, and a chair with a broken seat were just a few of the items piled high, many partially hidden beneath layers of accumulated odds and ends. Judging by the thick dust and general neglect, the room hadn't been touched in quite some time.

Steve's eyes lit up. "I just want to jump in and start sorting through everything like an archeologist...but I'll restrain myself."

"All of this would convey with the house,"

Victoria commented a little too casually. "You can go through it at your leisure after you become the owner."

"I haven't made any decisions yet," Steve said hastily, but he wasn't fooling anyone. "Is there anything else we haven't seen?"

"Well, there is a basement..." She sounded even more reluctant about that than she had about the cupola.

"Let me guess," he said with a teasing smile.

"You don't like the basement either."

She wrinkled her nose and laughed. "I know. What kind of real estate agent am I, right? It's just that it's very dark down there, and I forgot my flashlight. There are no windows and only a single burnt out bulb. I asked someone to replace it, but no one's gotten around to it yet."

"I have a flashlight on my phone," Steve offered. "You don't even have to come down with me. I just want to take a look at it before I make any decision."

"Oh, it's in solid shape! I'm just not a basement kind of girl." She gave me a wink.

I almost said, "Neither am I," but I held my tongue.

We went downstairs, and Steve headed down to inspect the cellar. I opted to stay with Victoria. I figured if you've seen one basement, you've seen them all.

Steve wasn't down there long. After he rejoined us, Victoria led us around the grounds. During his travels, the Captain had picked up trees from all over the world. He had been determined to make his gardens the envy of the socialites of the day. As a result, the yard was full of rare and exotic specimens. Some were over a hundred and seventy years old, but many were descendants of those original plants. There were familiar species, like the enormous and dignified old magnolias and the graceful and melancholy weeping willows. Others were unfamiliar, such as an African elephant pine. The front and side yards were fairly well kept,

considering no one had lived in the house for years, but part of the backyard was tangled with dense undergrowth. Chicone Creek emerged from this junglelike copse and ran a picturesque course through the side yard.

Our tour concluded back at the front of the house. In the late morning warmth, the spicy smell of boxwood filled the air. I couldn't imagine a more bucolic scene. The eerie feeling I had experienced inside the house seemed miles away.

"Well, that's pretty much it." Victoria clapped her hands together, and once again I suspected she was a former cheerleader. Her chirpy cheeriness had returned almost as soon as we'd stepped outside. "The property you saw is actually only a portion of the total acreage. It extends a ways into the forested area behind the house and across the creek. A lot of it is overgrown, but you could clear out the brush to make a wonderful recreational area with trails."

"It's a beautiful setting, no question," Steve commented. "I appreciate you meeting us out here to show us around."

"Hey, it's my job." She flashed him a sparkly smile. "And my pleasure." There was more than a hint of flirtation in her voice. Apparently, she hadn't tumbled to the fact that Steve was gay, though he had introduced me as his partner's son. Maybe she thought he meant business partner. Or maybe flirty was just her default setting.

"I'll get in touch with you if I have any more questions," Steve responded politely.

Her smile dipped a few watts at the obvious dismissal, but she recovered quickly, "Great. You have my number, right?"

"Sure do."

We stood awkwardly for another minute before she finally said goodbye. We watched while she climbed back into her car and drove away. She wasn't even out of sight before Steve whirled around, hands on hips and wearing a huge smile.

"What do you think?"

"What? Of the Bates Motel?"

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad. Look at this place! It's a once-in-a-lifetime find. And it's haunted! Do you know what that means?"

"That we've officially become characters in a horror movie—the ones the audience yells at to *just leave already*?"

"No, it means I can haggle on the price. I should be able to get them to bring it down considerably. I bet no one else is even interested. Although I have to admit, after seeing this place, it's already selling at an incredible price. The property alone must be worth what they're asking. And the house is in incredible shape."

"You're using the word incredible an awful lot."

"That's because it's just...incredible. This is exactly what I've always dreamed of, and as an added bonus, it has its own ghost."

"You know most people wouldn't consider that a bonus. You don't really believe this ghost thing or is it just, like...good marketing?"

"Killian, you of all people should know that there are things beyond our understanding."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're the one who told us all about Judy and her psychic powers of perception. Why is it such a big jump to believing in ghosts?"

"She's not psychic...exactly. I'm not even sure I buy that. Are we really having this conversation?"

"Think about it, Killian! How often do you get the chance to communicate with someone who's been dead for over a century?"

"Not that often, I would imagine."

"I've wanted to do this ever since I was a kid and read my first book by Poe. I'm buying this house. I can't tell you how excited I am."

He didn't have to. Enthusiasm practically beamed from him like a lighthouse beacon. I was having trouble reconciling the always calm and rational Steve, the voice of reason for our family, with this animated man standing before me babbling about talking to dead people.

He started for the car. "Let's go home. I want to tell Adam all about it and contact Victoria to see how much they'll come down on the price. Maybe we can be in here before the summer is over."

Steve talked nonstop about ghosts and famous haunted houses all the way home. I wondered how I had lived with this guy for over a year and missed his odd obsession. The more I thought about it, though, the more clues I realized I had missed. His favorite movie was *The Sixth Sense*, he had something of an obsession with Edgar Allan Poe, and Halloween was his favorite holiday.

My crash course in the paranormal ended when we pulled into our driveway. I followed Steve to the kitchen where we found Adam stirring what looked like the makings of a pastry crust in a large mixing bowl. I knew right away that something was bothering him. He only baked when he was upset.

Steve immediately launched into an excited room-by-room description of the haunted house.

Adam cut him off quickly. "Killian, Asher's upstairs in your room. He's been here all morning. I think he's upset."

My mouth fell open. "Asher?"

"Yes. He insisted on waiting for you."

I hadn't seen Asher since graduation. What was he doing at my house, waiting for me in my bedroom? I ran upstairs and opened my door to find Asher sitting on the edge of my bed, staring at his phone and looking quite uncomfortable. Kane was sitting with his back to him, wearing headphones and playing a game on his Switch. I got the impression that they hadn't said much to each other.

"You're back!" Asher said as he stood up.

Kane glanced over his shoulder, then paused his game when he saw me. "I'll let you guys talk," he said, also standing. He glared at Asher as he passed.

I gave my ex a questioning look. It was weird seeing him in my bedroom again. "So, uh, why are you here?"

"I'm sorry. I just didn't know what else to do. They arrested Caleb."

I blinked. "Huh?"

"The police arrested Caleb. His picture has been all over the news. Someone on the boardwalk recognized him and called the cops."

"Right..."

"Killian, they think he killed his dad. It's horrible!"

"Look, no offense, but what does this have to do with me? Why are you here?"

Asher looked hurt, and, for a second, I felt bad. Then I remembered that he was the one who'd decided to go to another college without informing me, and my moment of sympathy passed.

"I...I need help."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You work for a private investigator. You have to prove that Caleb is innocent."

"First off, I'm a secretary. It's not like I'm running around with a magnifying glass looking for clues. Second, and more importantly, how do you know Caleb is innocent? He did run away, after all."

"I know Caleb. He'd never hurt anyone, let alone kill them."

"Not even his abusive father?"

"No!"

"So why did he run away?"

"Because he hated the group home? Because he was afraid? I don't know. I haven't talked to him since everything went wrong. Just...please, Killian, you have to help. You've solved murders before."

"Don't you find that the slightest bit hypocritical?"

"What do you mean?"

"Last year, you barely spoke to me for weeks after Aidan asked me to help Will. Just a few weeks ago, you were furious because I just wanted to work for a private investigator. Now you're asking me to take on a potentially dangerous job. I guess it's okay because you want it now, but not when I wanted it?"

"Look, you're probably right. I shouldn't be asking you, and maybe I'm a dick—"

"Maybe?"

"Fine, then I'm a dick. But I don't know where else to go. Please, Killian."

I sighed and rubbed my face. "Legally, I can't take a case. I'm not licensed."

"What about your boss?" Asher's voice had a hopeful tone. He knew he was wearing me down.

"I can't imagine he'd agree to anything like this. How would you pay him? This is his job. He isn't going to just drop his other cases to help a stranger."

"Caleb should be getting insurance money from his dad's death and the house burning down. He can pay him."

"You haven't even talked to Caleb about this yet. How do you know he even wants to hire a PI?"

"You think he wants to go to jail for murder?"

I had to concede that point.

"Look," he continued. "I know this is weird, and I don't have any right to ask you for help. I wouldn't be here if I had any other options. I'm scared, Kill. Please, please help me."

I sighed. "Fine. I'll talk to Novak, but I'm not promising anything."

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Don't thank me yet. Novak could very well say no. In fact, he almost certainly will." I paused, imagining Novak's face when I brought this up. I'd need more information if he was going to take me seriously. "Tell me everything you know."

"I mean, not much, honestly. They picked Caleb up last night on the boardwalk. It was all over the news this morning, along with a new statement from the police."

"A statement?"

"Yeah, now they're saying he chopped his father up with an ax and set the house on fire to cover it up. But that's crazy..."

He kept talking, but a surge of dizziness swept over me like a tidal wave, and I sat heavily on my bed. "W-what did you say?"

Fragments of my nightmares slammed back into focus, and I felt bile rise in the back of my throat.

...a blood-covered ax dripping in my hands...

"The news said the body was dismembered before the fire was set. That's all I know."

...the split second of fear in his eyes before the ax struck for the first time...

"Killian, are you alright?"

...the feeling of pure hatred coursing through my veins...

"Killian?"

A hand gripped my arm and gave it a firm shake, snapping me back to the present. Asher hovered over me, a concerned expression on his face.

"Are you okay? For a minute there, you looked as if you were going to faint or something."

"I...I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." I stood up. "I didn't sleep well last night, that's all. I've been having dizzy spells all day."

I could tell Asher didn't know whether or not to believe me, but thankfully he dropped it.

"So you'll look into this? You'll help me prove Caleb is innocent?"

I looked him in the eye. "Tell me one thing. Why does this mean so much to you?"

His eyes shifted away. "He's a friend."

"Is that all he is?"

"Would it matter?"

I sighed. "I guess not. Not anymore."

Asher risked a quick look in my direction. "I never cheated on you, I swear."

"It doesn't really matter one way or the other at this point."

"Killian, I—"

"You know what? I'm really tired. I think I need a nap. I'll talk to Novak on Monday and let you know what he says. Okay?"

Asher bit his lip and nodded. "Yeah. Okay. Thank you."

I sat back down on the bed and watched as Asher let himself out.

What was I thinking? I'd agreed to get involved in the murder investigation of my ex's new boyfriend.

Well, technically, I'd only agreed to talk to my boss about it. I was pretty sure he'd say no, but still, I had to be crazy to even consider it.

Then there were my dreams. Was it just a coincidence that I'd been dreaming about an ax murder and Caleb was accused of killing his father with an ax? I didn't really believe in coincidences, but the alternative—that I'd somehow foreseen the murder in my dreams—disturbed me even more.

I couldn't forget my weird dream about Seth, either. He'd warned me something was about to happen that would affect me, and it would be connected to Asher. A chill ran down my spine as I recalled I'd had the dream of Seth the night Caleb's father was killed.

What did it all mean?

My head was starting to pound. I didn't want to think about dreams anymore.

I slipped into the bathroom and took several pain relievers, then crawled into bed. It was only noon, but I figured I'd earned a nice long nap.

Chapter 6

I arrived at work early Monday morning, but Novak had still beaten me there. Although his office door was closed, I could hear the low rumble of his voice, making me think he had someone in with him. I soon realized he was on the phone. I waited until he hung up, then knocked on the door, eager to get the conversation over with.

"Come on in," he called.

I let myself in and took a chair. Novak looked me over. I was sure he could tell I was nervous, but he didn't make an issue of it. "You're here early this morning."

I nodded and shifted in my seat. "I'm not bothering you, am I?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. Unless I have a client in here, my door is always open to you. What's on your mind?"

I'd rehearsed the conversation in my head, but now that I was sitting in front of him, my mind went blank. "Did you, uh, hear about the murder last week, the one where the guy was chopped up and burned?"

Novak's eyebrows shot up. "I saw something about it on the news. Cohen, right? They think his son did it."

I nodded. "Uh, right. His name is Caleb—the son, I mean—Caleb Cohen."

"Do you know him?"

"Sort of. Well, yeah. We went to the same school."

"Where are you going with this?"

"Well, he's, uh, friends with my old...friend."

Novak gave me a look. "Does your *old friend* have a name?"

I blushed slightly. "Asher."

"Okay, so Asher is friends with the Cohen kid. Let me guess: he thinks the kid's innocent."

I felt stupid, but I nodded again. "He was hoping I could maybe help him out."

Novak's ever moving eyebrows leapt up his forehead. "Help him out how?"

"He wants me to look into the murder."

Novak started shaking his head. "That's what the police are doing."

"That's what I said, but he's insisting that Caleb is innocent, and the police are convinced he's guilty."

"Maybe he is guilty. Then what? Look, I understand that your friend wouldn't want to believe someone he knows could be a killer, but this is a matter for the police, not a P.I. Besides which, you're not even a private investigator."

"I know. I told Asher that."

"Then why are we even having this conversation?"

"I promised Asher I'd ask you."

"Well, now you have. Anything else?"

Memories of my strange dreams crossed my mind. I should have been relieved that Novak had shot down any idea of me looking into the murder, but I wasn't. I felt strangely disappointed. Despite my head telling me to stay out of it, something besides Asher was drawing me to the case.

"What's wrong?" Novak asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I just...I sort of feel I need to be involved somehow."

"Because of your friend Asher?"

I shrugged. "I guess." That was easier than trying to explain my dreams.

"You're just going to have to tell him it's out of your hands."

"It's not that simple."

"Why not? Why is this such a big deal to your friend? Or more importantly, why is it such a big deal to you?"

I frowned. How did I explain that Asher was my ex-boyfriend and that he was now dating the police's number one suspect? I hadn't come out to Novak, and while I'd never heard him say anything negative about gay people in the time I'd worked for him, the subject had never really come up. "It's...complicated."

"Try me. I'm a detective, remember? I bet I can follow."

"Asher and I...we have a long history."

Novak rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Meaning you used to date?"

My breath caught in my throat and my heart began to hammer. "Wha...?" I gasped.

"Killian, I've known you were gay since before you started working here. I'd have been a pretty poor investigator if I hadn't. I make it a point to know as much as possible about my employees."

"You mean...you don't care?"

"I wouldn't have hired you if I did. Why should it matter? For one thing, your sexual orientation isn't going to affect your job performance. For another, I worked

with gay people for years before I retired. DC is a very progressive city, you know. The Metropolitan Police Department was one of the first in the U.S. to have a liaison unit to the gay and lesbian community. They even had an office down on Dupont Circle."

I took a deep breath while I waited for my brain to catch up. I wasn't sure why I'd expected Novak to have a problem with my being gay. Was it because of his age? I knew that not everyone from his generation was homophobic. Maybe my uncertainty was because of his military bearing and former police work. I wasn't even aware he'd retired from the MPD. If he'd mentioned it before, it hadn't sunk in.

I realized Novak was still talking and forced my attention back to him. "More importantly, though, my grandson is gay. When he told me, I did a lot of reading on the subject so I could better understand. I can't say I completely get it, but then, I don't have to. I love my grandson and I'm very proud of him, and that's all that matters. It doesn't make a bit of difference whether he dates boys or girls." He stopped and seemed to be waiting for me to make some sort of response.

"I, uh, didn't know you had grandkids," I managed.

Novak chuckled. "I have two. My wife and I had one daughter, and she has two children. Shane, named after me," he couldn't hold back a proud grin, "is about your age, and Sophie is fifteen. They live in Columbia."

"The country?"

"The town in Maryland."

"Oh."

"So, was I right?"

"About?"

"That you and Asher dated?"

"Yeah."

"Past tense, correct?"

"We, uh, broke up a few weeks ago."

"Ouch. Sorry. I didn't realize it was that recent."

I shrugged and tried to act as if it didn't bother me. "We'd...run our course."

"It's none of my business, but did the breakup have anything to do with this Cohen kid?"

"No. Maybe. I don't really know. It was just...stuff."

"Right. Butt out, Novak."

"I didn't mean—"

"Sure you did, and you're right. It's none of my business. I didn't mean to pry."

"You weren't. Not really. Asher swears he didn't cheat on me, but he is dating Caleb now."

"Aha! So that explains his interest in all this, but not yours. If he broke up with you to date this other guy—"

"There's more to it than that."

"There usually is. Even if that had nothing to do with your breakup, I still don't get why you're involved. Why would you want to help prove your ex's new boyfriend is innocent?"

I sighed. "Like I said before, it's complicated. Asher and I have been friends for a long time—since we were little kids. We grew up next door to each other. He was my first boyfriend, and we dated for a year and a half. That's a lot of history to turn my back on, especially when he's begging for my help."

Novak nodded. "I tell you what, I still don't think you should get involved, but I'm starting to get the feeling you're going to do so whether I agree or not."

I started to argue but Novak raised a hand to silence me. "Don't get your feathers ruffled. Frankly, I admire your tenacity. I don't want you running off half-cocked, though. I'd rather know what's going on and give you a hand than have you playing detective behind my back."

I could barely believe my ears. "You mean you'll help?"

"I'm not promising anything. What I will do is call the police and see what's going on. I have a pretty good relationship with the department down here. I actually worked with a couple of the guys years ago back at the MPD. I'll see what I can find out. If they have some solid evidence against this kid, we won't waste our time. If they don't, well, we'll talk, when and if it becomes an issue. Does that work for you?"

"It's more than I expected."

"Good. Now tell me everything you know about this kid and what happened."

"There's not much on either account." I filled him in on what little I knew about Caleb and what Asher had told me concerning the murder. When I finished, Novak nodded slowly.

"If his father was abusive, the kid had a strong motive. I have to wonder why Social Services was so slow in removing Caleb from the home. There must not have been much in the way of evidence. It wouldn't be the first time a kid made up abuse charges to get out of an unhappy situation."

"I saw his black eye myself."

"That doesn't necessarily mean his father gave them to him. At any rate, there's no point in speculating right now. We don't know enough to even form an educated guess, and the police might have all the evidence they need to convict him. Let me call and see what's up. For now, why don't you get to work? I'll let you know when I find something out."

I stood up, then added, "Asher said that Caleb could pay us when he gets the insurance money—"

Novak waved me off midsentence. "If the kid's guilty, he won't be getting any insurance settlements, and if he's innocent, I'm not taking his money. He's been through enough. I occasionally do *pro bono* work. We'll just consider this one of those cases."

I nodded and scurried back to my desk, where I applied myself to my duties as best I could. The idea of starting my first official investigation really had me excited. Besides, I was still experiencing a bit of an adrenaline rush from coming out to Novak—not that I'd really come out to him, of course, since he'd already known. It was still new to me, though. My first few coming out experiences hadn't exactly been smooth, so Novak's reaction seemed almost too good to be true. The more I got to know Novak, the more I admired him.

I was staring blankly at my computer screen, lost in thought, when Novak called me back into his office. He was frowning as I dropped into one of the chairs.

"You sure know how to pick 'em," he grumbled.

"What do you mean?"

"I just got off the phone with Hank Kaplan. He's a sergeant for the local PD now, but we go way back."

He shook his head. "Man, I'm getting old. I can remember when he was a skinny, freckle-faced rookie, barely older than you. Anyway, he's the officer in charge of the Cohen murder case. Since he knows me, he gave me a little more information than I normally would have gotten from the police.

"Things are definitely far from cut and dried. Almost all the evidence was destroyed in the fire. An ax head was found in the rubble, along with the remains of the deceased. It was obvious from the skeleton that someone murdered Ira Cohen with an ax—not merely killed him, but brutally hacked him apart. Pretty nasty stuff." I shivered involuntarily, and Novak raised one eyebrow. "If you think the description is bad, just imagine being there."

I didn't have to try too hard. Memories of my nightmares flashed through my mind before I forced them away.

"They do know an accelerant was used to start the fire," Novak continued.

"Gasoline," I muttered as another memory from my dream resurfaced. I could almost smell the fuel.

"Most likely," he agreed. "The kid, Caleb, is essentially their only suspect, but from what Hank told me, all they have on him is circumstantial evidence at best. Apparently, it was common knowledge that Dad beat up Caleb pretty regularly. There are police records of several complaints of domestic violence, most called in by their neighbors." He glanced down at some notes he'd jotted while on the phone. "Travis and Paige Haynes. Social Services investigated, but didn't find enough evidence to remove the boy from the home. A

few weeks ago, there was an anonymous tip from someone directly to Social Services. This time, they took Caleb to a group home while they conducted a more thorough investigation."

I nodded. "I knew about most of that. Asher was the anonymous tipster. I was the one who convinced him to call."

Novak seemed a little surprised. "You left out that little detail when you were briefing me earlier."

"Sorry. It must have slipped my mind."

"Lesson number one: every detail is important in an investigation. You can't afford to let something slip your mind. It could turn out to be the key to the whole case. If you're going to work with me, you're going to need to get a notebook like the one I keep." He opened a desk drawer and tossed me a small spiral pad. "Don't rely on your memory. Write down everything you learn so you can refer back to it later."

"Couldn't I just keep notes on my phone?"

"Sure, if you want to be staring at your screen in the middle of a case."

"How is that different from staring at a pad of paper?"

"Writing something helps commit it to your memory."

"Is that true or are you just saying that?"

"Look it up. Anyway... What was I saying?"

"We were talking about the anonymous call who was actually Asher."

"Right. You distracted me."

"Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. But back to what I was saying before we derailed, the main reason Caleb is a suspect is because he ran away from the group home the same night his father was murdered. He claims he was hiding out at a friend's house, but he won't identify the friend, so the police can't verify his alibi. On the other hand, they also can't tie him to the murder. No one saw him at the Cohen house that night, and there's no physical evidence to prove he was there."

I frowned. "So how can they arrest him? Don't they need some sort of proof?"

"Like I said, right now, it's all circumstantial. They're holding him while they investigate, mainly because they consider him a flight risk. He ran away once, what's to say he won't do it again—and more successfully the next time?"

"There aren't any other suspects?"

"Not really. The kid's not talking, and while the elder Cohen was no peach, they don't have anyone else who had a strong enough motive to chop him into pieces."

"What do you mean, Ira Cohen was no peach? Was there something besides the child abuse?"

"Just a rap sheet long enough to deplete a rain forest—mostly drunk and disorderlies, barroom brawls, and DUIs. It would appear that Mr. Cohen liked to drink and hit people. He was night deskman at one of the sleazier motels in town. It's safe to say he wasn't exactly a model citizen."

"Well, what's your professional opinion? Is it worth our time?"

"To be honest, the police have a pretty shaky case against the boy, and they know it. Hank told me they're more or less spinning their wheels right now since the kid's not talking to anyone, not even his court appointed lawyer."

"So you think we should look into it?"

Novak leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I think there are a lot of unanswered questions. Normally I wouldn't get involved in a case the police were actively investigating, but the circumstances are a little different here. For one thing, Hank all but asked me to help them out. He was especially interested to learn my new assistant had a connection to the suspect. He said he'd like to meet with you."

"Meet with me? For what?"

"I'm not sure. I told him we'd come by sometime this afternoon. Don't worry. I'll be with you."

"You haven't answered my question. Are we going to get involved or not?"

"I haven't answered because I haven't made up my mind yet. I'm not sure I want to throw you into the deep end of the pool, as it were. You have almost no experience and zero training. I can teach you on the go, but it's not an ideal situation. I would've rather started you off on an easier, less dangerous case."

"You think it's dangerous?"

"Someone was chopped up with an ax. Does that sound dangerous to you?"

"I suppose it does, but it also seems like a very personal attack, not a random murder or the work of a serial killer."

"I agree. You have to really hate someone to chop them up like kindling. Either that or you have to be totally insane. That doesn't mean the killer isn't dangerous to you. He—or she—has killed once, so now there's a lot to lose. People can be extremely dangerous when they feel cornered."

"You're right." I knew that from my own experiences. "So what does that mean?"

"It means you've already made up your mind to get involved, the police had unofficially asked for our help, and a kid's life is at stake."

"So...we're taking the case?"

"Yes, *but*...there are a few rules you'll have to agree to. One, we will cooperate fully with the police."

"Okay."

"Two, you'll follow my lead and instructions at all times."

"Agreed."

"Third, and most importantly, you'll never, ever do anything alone or without speaking to me first."

I started to argue that I'd never do that, but then I remembered how many times I'd acted without thinking things through in the past, and how close I'd come to getting killed because of it. Maybe a little check and balance wasn't a bad idea.

"Deal."

Novak stood up and held out a hand for me to shake. "Then congratulations. You just took on your first case."

"We have an appointment to see Sergeant Kaplan," Novak told the uniformed woman behind the

thick, bulletproof glass window. "Shane Novak and Killian Kendall."

She picked up the phone. "I'll let him know you're here. Have a seat."

We sat down in two of the chairs by the window. A TV played in the corner and there was a skinny guy with glazed over eyes staring in its direction. I couldn't be sure if he was actually watching.

We didn't have to wait long before there was a buzz, followed by a loud click. A door swung open to reveal a man I assumed to be Sergeant Kaplan.

He didn't look anything like what I had expected. Novak had described him as a skinny, freckle-faced kid, but that had obviously been many years ago. Hank Kaplan was huge, burly, and reddish-blond with a ruddy complexion. He looked like a Viking, without the furs and helmet. Instead of a uniform, he was dressed in a dark gray suit—one that was surely tailored to fit his large frame.

He smiled warmly. "Shane Novak. God, it's been years. Come on in." He and Novak shook hands, then he turned to me. "And this must be your new assistant."

"Yes, sir. Killian Kendall." He pumped my hand in a firm but gentle handshake. I was glad for the gentleness, since my hand looked like a child's in his. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Your reputation precedes you." I must have given him a confused look because Kaplan chuckled. "Every person in law enforcement on the lower Shore knows Killian Kendall." His smile faded. "And on a more personal note, I worked with your father."

I frowned. "I feel like I should apologize."

"No need. But enough about that. Come on back to my office."

We followed Sergeant Kaplan through a common area filled with cubicles and into his office. The room wasn't really all that small, but the low ceiling and large-scale furniture made it seem cramped. The sergeant's bulky frame didn't help matters.

He lowered himself into his swivel chair and indicated the two armchairs facing his desk. "Have a seat." He rummaged through the clutter on his desk until he found a file, which he opened and laid in front of him. "So you have an interest in the Cohen case?"

"Possibly," Novak replied. "As I told you on the phone, we've been asked to investigate the murder by someone connected to Caleb Cohen."

"Right, but you never said how this person was connected."

"They're dating."

"I see. Does this person have a name?"

Novak looked at me. I didn't like dragging Asher into a police investigation, but I wouldn't have been sitting there if it weren't for him. "Asher Davis, sir."

He scribbled a quick note in the file, then turned his attention back to me. "Killian, you have some connection to the Cohen kid, too, correct?"

"Yes, sir. I know Caleb from school. We were in an after-school club together briefly."

Sergeant Kaplan chuckled. "Relax, Killian. This isn't an interrogation. You don't have to call me sir with every breath. Okay?" Waiting until I nodded, he

continued, "Would you say you were friends with Caleb?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"Tell me everything you know about him."

"You probably know more than I do."

"That's okay. Just tell me what you know."

So I did, and it didn't take long. I outlined the first time I'd met Caleb, how Kane had said he was a loner, and how Caleb had started confiding in Asher. I told him about the black eye, and, this time, I made sure to include that Asher had called in the anonymous tip to Social Services.

When I'd finished, Sergeant Kaplan eyed me thoughtfully. "Do you think Caleb would talk to you?"

I shrugged. "Maybe, especially if he knew Asher had asked me to help."

"Is that why you wanted to see us?" Novak asked.

Sergeant Kaplan grinned. "You didn't think this was a social visit, did you?"

Novak laughed. "I knew you had something up your sleeve, I just didn't know what. You should be aware that Killian has only been with me about a month. I haven't started training him yet."

"That's okay. If he gets anything out of this kid, it'll be more than we have now. He's sealed up tighter than a clam. Killian, I'll tell you some things we'd really like to know. If you can work them into your conversation with him, that would be great. Think you're up to it?"

"Sure, why not?"

The sergeant gave me an approving nod. "That's what I like to hear."

"So how will this work?"

"If you've got time now, we can head over to the Juvenile Detention Center. Usually, you'd have to be on an approved list to see him, but because you're helping us out, it won't be a problem. You'll be alone when you go in to talk to him, but we'll be watching and listening from another room."

I looked over at Novak for his approval. "We have time if you think you're ready to do it now," he said.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

"Great. Let's get going." Sergeant Kaplan stood and picked up a ring of keys from the corner of his desk. "You can ride over with me so Killian and I can talk."

I was expecting a patrol car, but Kaplan took us to a big, black SUV. I sat in the back and Novak rode shotgun.

During the drive to the detention center, Sergeant Kaplan briefed me on what information he wanted me to try to get out of Caleb. He was especially concerned about the friend Caleb claimed to have stayed with after he ran away.

"You can ask whatever comes to mind, anything you think could be important, but if you can find out who this supposed friend is that would go a long way toward making or breaking our case against him."

When he fell silent, my curiosity got the better of me. "So...you worked with my dad?"

Kaplan glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "Sure did."

"What did you think of him?"

"Honestly?" He shot me another look, as if trying to read my intentions.

"Yeah. Don't hold back."

"I thought he was an arrogant asshole who got what was coming to him."

I threw my head back and laughed. "We can definitely agree about that."

"We never got along. I don't have much stomach for corruption—one of the reasons I got out of the city—and he was as crooked as they come. And I have zero respect for a man who hits his wife and kid." He glanced over at me again. "But I'm glad to see you're doing well. Novak is one of the best out there."

"Aw, shucks, Hank," Novak drawled. "You're just saying that because I'm sitting right here."

"Nah, the kid can learn a lot from you."

The Juvenile Detention Center looked about as charming as it sounded. The squat brick building was not the most architecturally interesting structure I'd ever seen. Someone had made an effort, however. The small lawn was nicely landscaped, and an American flag flapped in the breeze.

I followed Novak and Kaplan inside, where Kaplan flashed his badge and had a brief conversation with a short, balding man who seemed to be in charge. After he explained why we were there and what we wanted to do, the balding man phoned for Caleb to be taken to one of the visitation rooms. Once I'd signed a register and received a visitor's badge, a uniformed guard arrived to take me to see Caleb.

Novak and Kaplan went in another direction that I assumed led to the observation room.

My nerves hit me as the guard led me through a large metal door that slammed shut behind us with an intimidating clang followed by a loud click. The guard smirked at my expression. "Believe it or not, you do get used to it."

"Personally, I'd rather not," I said dryly, and he laughed.

I followed him to another metal door pierced by a small glass window, but my mind was thinking about how close I'd come to ending up in this very building. I'd killed someone in cold blood. Sure, he was a serial killer, but if the court hadn't ruled it was self-defense, I would have been living here instead of visiting.

"I'll be right outside," the guard said, snapping me out of my thoughts as he unlocked the door with a key from a huge ring attached to his belt. "When you're finished, just knock on the door and I'll let you out."

I stepped inside the small room and found Caleb, dressed in a navy-blue jumpsuit, already sitting at a stainless-steel table. He had dark circles under his eyes and his hair looked lank and greasy, as if he hadn't showered for a few days. I was struck once again by how young he looked.

He seemed surprised to see me. "Killian?"

"Didn't they tell you I was here to see you?"

"No. All they said was that I had a visitor." He frowned. "I thought maybe it was Asher. What are you doing here?"

I took a quick look around as I sat down across from Caleb. On the other side of the room, there was

another door identical to the one that had been opened for me. There were no mirrors on the blank walls and no visible cameras. I wondered how Kaplan and Novak were monitoring the meeting. I forced my attention back to Caleb. "Have you spoken to Asher at all...since everything happened?"

He shook his head. "No. Why?"

"He asked me to look into...things." I was finding it hard to avoid mentioning his father's murder and his arrest. I knew I'd have to address them at some point, but I wasn't sure how to bring them up.

Unfortunately, Caleb just looked confused. "Look into things? What do you mean?"

"I work for a private investigator."

He quickly put two and two together. "So you're, like, going to find out who really killed my dad?" His tone was guarded, but his matter-of-fact mention of his father's murder shocked me. There was no emotion in his voice at all. At least I wouldn't have to be the first to bring it up.

"I guess I'm going to try."

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you helping me?"

That seemed to be the question on everyone's mind. The problem was, I couldn't explain my strange dreams. "Asher asked me to," I replied lamely.

He shook his head in disbelief. "And you just jumped in? Because Asher asked you to?"

I gritted my teeth. "I guess you could say that."

"But you guys broke up. You don't even like me."

I tried to resist the urge to look around once more for the camera. If they were indeed watching, I'd just been outed to Kaplan, too. "I never said—"

"You didn't have to. What's in it for you?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Look, do you want my help or not?"

"How are you going to find out who killed him?"

"I'll ask questions. Talk to people. Look around..."

"They think I did it."

"I know." His attitude was starting to annoy me. I was there to try and help him, and he'd been nothing but defensive from his first words. I decided it was time for me to take control of the conversation. "Did you?"

His eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed with anger. "Oh, great. And how are you supposed to prove I'm innocent if you think I did it?"

"First off, I never said I was going to prove you're innocent. I'm going to find out who killed your father, period. If it was you, then so be it. And I never said I thought you were guilty. I simply asked if you did it. So, did you?"

"No, I didn't." He practically spat the words.

"Good. So who did? Do you know anyone who would want to kill your dad?"

"You mean besides me?"

"Yeah. Besides you."

"Everyone who ever met him. He was a bastard, plain and simple."

"That doesn't exactly narrow it down. Is there anyone in particular? Who should I talk to? Help me out here."

Caleb pressed his lips together and released a deep breath through his nose. "He had a girlfriend. Her name is Nadine. I can't remember her last name. Tyndall? Tinkle? Something like that. I didn't pay much attention to her and tried not to be around when she was at the house."

I pulled out the notebook Novak had given me earlier and jotted down the name. "Who else? What about his job?"

"He worked nights at a motel downtown, the Ease Inn. I can't remember his boss's name. Skinny, with bad teeth. Total creeper."

"What about your mom?"

His eyes dimmed and he looked away. "She's dead."

"How long ago?"

"I was little. I woke up one morning and my dad said she was gone. When I asked him what he meant, he said, 'Dead, boy. Your mom is dead and gone.' Things got worse after that."

"How do you mean?"

"That's when he started hitting me. Well, hitting me more. Before that, he mostly just hit her. He only hit me when I was bad or did something wrong."

"Did he hit you a lot? After your mom died, I mean."

His eyes found mine and locked onto them. I couldn't look away. "Every day." His words were chillingly casual, as if he'd just commented on the weather.

It took me a moment to find my voice again. "Can you think of anyone else I should talk to?" He shrugged, so I prompted, "Did he have any friends?"

"He didn't have friends. He was too mean. I don't know how he kept a girlfriend. Then again, she was trash, too, so..." He sneered dismissively.

"What about your neighbors? Maybe they saw something."

"There's old Mrs. Fields on one side, but she's deaf and half blind. She wouldn't know if someone chopped Dad up in the middle of her living room." I flinched at the coldness in his voice. "Paige and Travis live on the other side. They don't have any kids. Paige is cool. She was always real nice to me. She'd let me come over sometimes when Dad was drinking. And she always gave me food. I guess I don't look like I eat enough. Her husband Travis was all right, too, but he's real quiet and he works a lot."

I was scribbling the whole time he talked. It was easier than looking into those eyes. They seemed like endless pools of misery, their depths formed from years upon years of pain and torture. Now that he'd stopped talking, though, I couldn't avoid looking up. He was watching me closely.

"Are you really going to help me?"

I measured my response carefully. "I'm...going to try."

He frowned. Obviously, it wasn't the answer he'd been looking for. "Don't bother."

"What? Why?" He'd lost me again.

"I can tell you think I did it. If you've already made up your mind, that's not the kind of help I need."

"Let's just be honest. You're right. I don't like you. Whether something happened between you and Asher before we broke up doesn't really matter anymore, because even if it didn't, it was obvious to everyone that you wanted it to. So no, I'm not exactly a fan of the guy who tried to steal my boyfriend—and succeeded."

"That's not—"

"I'm not finished. Whether or not I like you is irrelevant. I can't go into this with preconceived notions. If I do, I might miss something important. I have to keep an open mind, which means I can't assume you're innocent just because you say you are. I'm also not going to assume you're guilty just because the police do. I'm going to be as unbiased as I possibly can be. But if you don't cooperate with me, I won't be able to prove anything one way or the other."

Caleb thought for a minute, then nodded grudgingly. "Fair enough. I guess I have to take what I can get. It's not like I can afford to hire a decent lawyer."

"Didn't the State appoint one for you?"

"Yeah, but I don't like him. He thinks I did it, too."

"Why do you think everyone seems so sure you did it?"

"Probably because I ran away from the group home."

"Why did you run away?"

"Why not? It was better than staying there. If I wanted to get the shit beat out of me every day, I could have just stayed with Dad. Better the devil you know, and all that. At least I knew what to expect at home. I had places to go to get away from him when I needed to."

At the group home, nobody seemed to care if the fag got kicked around. I got sick of it so I left. Turned out it was shitty timing, but, unfortunately, whoever killed Dad didn't bother letting me know first."

"Where'd you go?"

He looked away. "Nowhere special."

"You had to go somewhere."

"I wandered around."

"The police said you told them you went to a friend's."

A scowl crossed his face. "You've talked to the police about me?"

"How do you think I got in to see you?"

"So, what, they're listening to us right now?" He looked around the room. "Is that it? You're working for the cops to trap me?"

"I told you, Asher hired me. I had to talk to the police in order to see you."

That seemed to mollify him somewhat. "Are you really a private investigator?"

"I work for one."

"But what about you?"

"I want to be a P.I. I guess you could say I'm in training to become one."

He sighed. "Yeah. That figures. I can't even get a real private investigator to help me."

"My boss is a real investigator. He'll be helping me."

"Why isn't he in here, then?"

"Would you rather talk to me or to a complete stranger?"

"You," he conceded begrudgingly.

"Now, what about this friend you told them you stayed with?"

"I, uh, made that up." He refused to meet my eyes.

"Then where were you from the time you ran away until the police picked you up?"

"I don't know. Wandering around."

"You have to be more specific than that. Come on, you know this just makes you look even guiltier."

"Sorry. Bad memory. Guess it's from all those blows to the head."

"Do you want my help or not?"

"Okay, okay. I *was* with a friend. It's just..."

"Just what? Give me a name, someone I can talk to."

"I...don't want to involve him."

For a second, my heart sank. Could he have gone to Asher? Then I remembered the panic in Asher's voice when he first called me. He'd said he hadn't heard from Caleb since he ran away. The emotion was definitely authentic. Asher wasn't that good an actor.

"You don't really have a choice. You can either involve him or stay in jail."

"Fine. I can stay here for now. It's better than the group home, and where else would I go?"

My mouth fell open. "You've got to be kidding me. This isn't about going back to the group home. If you could show you were somewhere else when your dad was killed, it would prove that you're innocent. You wouldn't even need me."

"I'm not getting him involved and that's final. You'll just have to find another way to prove I'm

innocent. Find who really killed the son of a bitch, then they'll have to admit it wasn't me."

I rubbed my face in frustration. I could tell I wasn't going to get any further with him on this point. His face had closed down and a stubborn look had settled over his features. I'd have to try a different approach.

"You were picked up on the boardwalk, right? How did you get there?"

"I got a ride. I hadn't been there long when the police grabbed me. I didn't even know what was going on at first. I thought they were going to take me back to the group home, so I ran from them. They caught me, and that's when I found out my dad was dead—and that they thought I killed him."

"So you didn't know he was dead before they found you?"

"Nope. First I'd heard of it."

"How did you feel?"

He thought for a moment. "I was surprised, but not exactly broken up about it. I hated his guts. Except for the fact that I was the number one suspect, I was kind of relieved."

"Relieved?"

"He beat me almost every day of my life for ten years. Wouldn't you be relieved?"

I thought about my own father and how I'd react if he died. I wouldn't exactly be relieved, since he was in jail and not a threat to me anymore, but I could see how Caleb might feel that way about his abusive father.

"Why were you at the boardwalk?"

He shrugged. "Why does anyone go to the boardwalk? I was just hanging out. I didn't think anyone would be looking for me. Who cares if a kid runs away from a group home? Nobody wants them anyway."

I tried to think of something else to ask him. I felt I was missing something and found myself wishing that Novak were there or that Kaplan had given me more questions. I tried to remember every police show I'd ever seen, but came up blank. I glanced down at my notebook. I hadn't even filled one page.

"Don't you have anything that could help find your dad's murderer?" I blurted out. "I don't even have any full names here."

He shook his head. "Sorry. If I knew more, I'd tell you."

"You could tell me the name of the friend you stayed with after you ran away."

Caleb's face hardened. "I told you—"

"I know. You don't want to get him involved. Fine. I guess we're done here, then."

He called my bluff and stood up with a shrug. "Okay. See ya." He walked to the other door and pounded twice with his fist. It opened almost immediately and another guard looked in.

"All finished?" She cast a curious glance in my direction.

"Apparently," Caleb responded flippantly.

"Caleb," I called, "if you change your mind about telling me or think of something that could help, get word to me."

"Whatever." He left the room without looking back.

I stood up and knocked on the door, feeling as if I'd failed some sort of test. I dejectedly followed the guard back to the main office, where Novak and Kaplan were already waiting.

"Great job," Kaplan greeted me.

I blinked in surprise. "What? I didn't learn anything."

"You got more out of him than we've been able to. You've got good instincts. It was obvious you haven't been trained in interrogation techniques, but you knew how to work him to your best advantage."

"I couldn't even get him to tell me the name of his friend."

"No, but he's being pretty tightlipped about that, so I didn't really expect him to tell you. I was hoping but not expecting. On the other hand, you did get the name of the father's girlfriend. We'd heard he had one, but no one seemed to know her name."

"It was only her first name."

"It's still more than we had. Quit giving yourself such a hard time. You did great."

I looked to Novak for his take, and he gave me a smile and a nod. "You did. I was impressed."

I was pleased with his praise but still felt I could have done more.

"Well, Killian, if you've had enough of this place, we can get going," Kaplan said.

"I've definitely had enough. I hope I never have to come back here again."

As we walked out, I wondered how I would ever manage to figure out who had killed Ira Cohen. I didn't feel we had much more information than we had before

we'd gone in. For all I knew, they had the right person locked up already.

Chapter 7

I decided to stop by Asher's house on my way home and let him know that Novak and I were taking on the case. As I pulled into the Davises' driveway, I was surprised to see a "For Sale" sign in the front yard of the house next door, my former home. I wondered why Mom hadn't mentioned that she was putting it on the market. Maybe she thought it would upset me, but I didn't exactly have good memories of the place. It had the neglected look of a house that had sat vacant for too long. I hoped the next occupants would be happier than my family had been.

Marcus answered the door at the Davises' and seemed surprised to see me. "Hey, Killian. It's been a while since you've been around. What's up?"

He was obviously fishing for an explanation, but he wasn't getting one from me. If Asher wanted his brother to know what was going on, he could speak for himself. "Hey. Yeah, it has been a while. Is Asher around?"

"He's upstairs in his room." He stuck his head inside and yelled for Asher, then turned back to me. "Come on in."

I stepped inside as my ex came thundering down the stairs. He, too, seemed surprised to see me. "Killian! What's going on?"

"I need to talk to you about some things."

Understanding dawned in his eyes, and he glanced in Marcus's direction. "Oh. Cool. Uh, we can talk outside."

Marcus looked as if he was dying to ask what was going on, but he reined in his curiosity and watched us go back out the door. I had a feeling Asher would be getting the third degree as soon as I left.

The door barely clicked shut behind us before Asher pounced. "What's going on? Did you talk to your boss yet? What did he say?"

We fell into step, walking down the same street we'd grown up on just like we'd done hundreds of times in the past. "Yes, I talked to Novak. At first, he thought I should stay out of it."

"But...but—"

"I said 'at first'. We discussed what had happened so far, and he agreed to call the police and see if he could find out anything more. After talking to the sergeant in charge of the investigation, Novak agreed to take the case."

Asher's face lit up. "Really?"

"Yes, but only on the condition that we cooperate with the police."

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means we're not going to sneak around behind their backs, and we tell them everything we find out—good or bad."

"I guess that's fair." He was still frowning. He clearly didn't like the provision but understood there was no avoiding it.

"The good news is that I got to talk to Caleb this afternoon."

Asher stopped walking. "Already? I haven't even been able to see him."

"One of the perks of working with the police."

"They got you in?"

"Yeah."

"Why would they help you?"

"They were hoping I could get more out of Caleb than they have. He's not talking to anyone, not even his court appointed attorney."

Asher's frown deepened. "So you're, like, trying to prove he's guilty?"

"No, and neither are the police. They're just trying to find the truth."

"That sounds like a load of bullshit."

I shrugged. "You know me better than that."

Asher had the grace to look embarrassed. "You maybe, but I don't trust cops," he backpedaled. "So, uh, how is he?"

"Caleb? Honestly? Pretty confrontational."

"What do you mean?"

"I was there to offer him help, and let's just say he didn't act like he really wanted it."

We started walking again as Asher mulled that over.

"What did he say?"

"Not much. I found out the first name of his dad's girlfriend, and that was about it. He wouldn't even tell me whose house he stayed at the night his father was killed."

"What do you mean?"

I looked over at Asher. "He stayed at some friend's house after he ran away from the group home. You didn't know that?"

A troubled expression on his face, Asher shook his head.

"He won't tell anyone who it was, even though it would provide him with an alibi. He just keeps saying he doesn't want to get his friend involved. Do you have any idea where he could have gone?"

He bit his lip and shook his head. He seemed to be deep in thought, so I kept quiet for a few seconds. When he did finally speak, his voice was so soft I had to lean towards him to hear. "Why didn't he come to me?"

I realized his feelings were hurt and stifled a sigh. "I don't know, Asher, but think about it. Would you really have wanted to harbor a fugitive?"

"Maybe that's it. Maybe he didn't want to get me in trouble."

"Yeah, that's probably it." I rolled my eyes. "You don't have any idea who he could have stayed with? Did he ever mention any other friends?"

"No, not really. In fact, he specifically told me he didn't have anyone else to talk to about his dad's abuse."

"Obviously there was at least one other person." Asher looked so hurt, I wished I had kept my mouth shut. Then again, sometimes the truth hurts. "Maybe he was an old friend Caleb didn't talk to much anymore."

"But he could still just show up at this guy's house and stay there overnight?"

"I don't know, Ash. There's a lot we don't know yet. It would help if he'd talk to me. If you do get in to see him, can you tell him he needs to cooperate?"

"Sure. Whatever."

I could tell Asher was too upset to continue discussing the case. I decided it would be best to simply leave him alone. "Hey, I need to get home. Adam will be wondering where I am. Are you going to be okay?"

He gave me an annoyed look. "I'm fine. I'm just going to keep walking for a while. See you."

"I'll talk to you later." I started back towards my car while Asher continued on alone. I turned around once to check on him. He was still walking away, shoulders slumped and head down. I sighed, knowing things would probably get worse before they got better.

"Hey, there you are," Adam said from the kitchen door as I walked in. "I was wondering what was taking you so long."

I looked at my watch. "I'm only half an hour later than usual."

He gave me a pointed look. "A lot can happen in thirty minutes."

I was tired. It had been an exhausting day. "You worry too much. I stopped by Asher's house on the way home."

Adam's eyebrows rose. "Asher, huh? First he showed up here last week, and now you're stopping by his house. Are you guys getting back together?"

"No. He's dating someone else."

"That's what I thought. So what's going on?"

"You know that ax murder that's been all over the news?"

Adam leaned against the doorframe and looked at me suspiciously. "Uh huh."

"Well, the guy the police arrested for the killing is Asher's new boyfriend."

His mouth fell open. "You're kidding!"

"Nope. And actually, Kane and I know him too—from school."

Adam straightened up. "Where is this leading?"
"Asher doesn't believe he's guilty."
"Of course not."
"Since I work for Novak, he asked me to look into the murder."
"He *what*?"
"He asked me—"
"You said no, right?"
"Well..."
"Killian!"
"I mean, at first I said no. I didn't want to get involved, but Asher was so upset I agreed to talk to Novak. I figured the boss would say no and take the pressure off of me."
"And did he?"
"Initially, but then he agreed to call the police—"
"Agreed' implies you talked him into it."
"I sort of did."
"I thought you didn't want to get involved."
"Okay, see, the more I thought about it, the more I felt drawn to look into things."
"You felt drawn?"
"Yes."
"What does that mean, exactly?"
"You've never felt you were supposed to do something, even though you didn't really know why?"
"I can honestly say that I've never felt I had to get involved in a murder investigation."
"What about Seth?" I shot back. Adam froze.
"We both felt we had to be involved then."
"That was completely different. He was my son and your friend."

"Caleb is Asher's friend."

"The police weren't interested in finding Seth's killer."

"The police may have arrested an innocent boy," I countered.

"They must have arrested him for a reason."

"Mainly because they don't have any other suspects. There's no real evidence tying him to the murder."

That caused Adam a moment's hesitation. "Then why do they think he did it?"

"They say he has a motive. His dad abused him, beat him up."

"Is that what this is about? Your father?"

"No. My father has nothing to do with it. I just... I feel I have to do this."

"You said your job with Mr. Novak was boring, that you wouldn't be in danger."

"Most of it is boring. And who says I'm in danger?"

"You're looking for someone who chopped a man up with an ax."

That sounded too much like what Novak had said. I was a little irritated that they didn't think I could take care of myself. "If it was Caleb, he's safely behind bars. If it wasn't, don't you think he deserves to have someone on his side, looking for the truth?"

"The last time I checked, that was what the police are for."

"Exactly. And the police asked for my help. They asked me to talk to Caleb."

Adam sputtered, "That's insane. I don't want you talking to a killer."

"What happened to 'innocent until proven guilty?'" I protested. "Besides, it's too late. I've already talked to him."

"What?"

"I talked to Caleb this afternoon. It was in the detention center, and the police and Novak were watching the whole time. It was perfectly safe. This is my job, Adam. More importantly, I'm eighteen. You can't exactly tell me what I can and can't do like I'm a little kid."

Adam pressed his lips together tightly and glared at me.

"Um, hey, guys," Steve said into the sudden silence that fell between Adam and me.

I jumped and turned towards him. I hadn't even seen him walk into the hall. "Maybe you should take a break, cool down, and continue this later."

"Maybe you should stay out of this," Adam snapped.

I blinked. That was completely out of character for Adam. Steve looked as shocked as I felt. I found my tongue first. "No, maybe Steve is right. I think we are both a little too heated to talk about this calmly right now. I'm going up to my room."

I went upstairs and shut my door. Thankfully, Kane wasn't there. I wasn't in the mood to deal with anyone at that moment.

About an hour later, I was lying on my bed, staring up at the ceiling when a soft tap came at the door.

I ignored it, but the door opened and Steve stuck his head in.

"Hey, can we talk for a second?"

I grunted, which Steve took as permission to come in. He was carrying a plate of food, which he placed on my desk before sitting on the edge of my bed.

"I brought you some dinner. You okay?"

"I'm fine." My eyes never left the ceiling.

Despite the fact that I had lived with Steve almost as long as Adam, we'd never developed the deep bond that Adam and I shared. Still, I respected his opinions and valued his advice. I just wasn't sure I was in the mood for them right then.

"So, that was kind of rough, huh?" When I didn't answer, he added, "Do you, uh, think maybe you were a little hard on him?"

"Great. Now you're up here to lay a guilt trip on me."

"I'm not trying to lay any guilt trips; I'm just saying this isn't easy for Adam."

"What isn't easy?"

"You know he worries when any of us is five minutes late, let alone half an hour. You could have at least called or texted. Plus, he's never been particularly comfortable with you working for a private eye, and then you come home and announce you're investigating a violent murder. You don't see how that would upset him?"

"It doesn't mean he can jump down my throat."

"From where I was standing, I didn't see any throat jumping. He was just concerned, as any parent would be. I can understand you chafing at Adam's

attempt to protect you, but it seemed like you overreacted a little. Is there something else going on?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

Part of me wanted to tell him about the dreams, but I didn't want him to think I was crazy. I shrugged and gave him the only explanation I thought would be acceptable. "I don't appreciate Adam telling me what to do."

"Hey, cut him some slack. He's done a lot for you, right? You know he loves you."

I grudgingly nodded. "Besides, he's got a lot going on right now, and this is the first time he's had to deal with having a kid transition to adulthood. He's afraid of losing you."

I frowned and sat up. "You mean if something happens to me during the investigation?"

"That, too, but also losing you in general."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Killian, think about it. For all intents and purposes, Adam has been your father for the last two years. He loves you like you were his own flesh and blood. You and Kane are his world, especially since he lost Seth. Now you're growing up, graduating high school, getting a job, going to college. He's afraid you're not going to need him anymore—that you're going to move out of the house and out of his life."

"That's ridiculous. I'm only going to college at Pemberton. I'm still going to be living at home. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're missing the point."

"Even if I were going away to college, I love Adam. He's never going to lose me. He's been more of a dad to me than my real father ever was."

"Maybe he needs to hear that." Steve reached over and ruffled my hair, then stood up. "Think about it for a while, and maybe try to talk to Adam when you feel up to it. Okay?"

I nodded and Steve let himself out. I got up and mentally replayed my conversation with Steve while I ate the dinner he'd brought me. Afterwards, I still didn't feel like getting into it with Adam again, so I decided to write down my thoughts about my interview with Caleb. There wasn't much, but I felt better having organized my impressions. I spent the rest of the evening watching videos until Kane came upstairs to go to bed.

When I arrived at work the next morning, Novak called me into his office first thing. I took my usual seat as he leaned back in his chair and looked me over.

"You did a good job yesterday."

"But I didn't learn anything new."

"Considering we pretty much threw you to the wolves, I'd say you learned a lot."

"Like what?"

"First, why don't you tell me your reactions?"

I pulled out my notebook and tossed it across his desk. He raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Those are my notes from the interview and my thoughts as of last night."

Novak nodded approvingly as he picked up the notebook and scanned my scribbled observations. "Not bad for a beginner." He pushed the tablet back to me.

"So, what did I miss?"

"It's not so much what you missed as what you're taking for granted. Sometimes you have to look between the lines. You say Caleb won't give us his friend's name, but that in itself tells us something." I stared at him blankly. "Come on. Think, Killian."

"I guess if he's trying to protect this friend, he must care about him."

"Exactly. This isn't just some casual acquaintance. It's someone he is willing to stay in jail for. This person means a lot to him. I know you probably don't want to consider the possibility, but any chance it's your ex?"

"Asher? Actually, I did consider that, but I really don't think it was him. When he first called me, he was in a panic because he didn't know where Caleb was and hadn't heard from him since before he ran away. The fear in Asher's voice was genuine. Then, last night, I stopped by his house and told him we were looking into things. He was pretty upset that Caleb went to someone else's house. He didn't seem to have any idea who it could be."

Novak rubbed his chin while he thought. "There is another alternative."

"What's that?"

"Maybe this mysterious friend doesn't exist. Maybe he can't give us a name because he wasn't with anyone. It could just be the first alibi that came to his mind, and now he has to stick with the lie."

I nodded. "That would make sense. When I was talking to him, he said something to that effect."

"Right. Though if he is trying to protect someone, his reaction would make sense as well. We can't rule out either possibility at this point. What else did you learn?"

"I got the girlfriend's first name. Not that it helps much."

"Granted, a last name would have been better, but a first name might be all that's needed to jog someone's memory. It gives us more than we had before. Anything else?"

"Not really."

"We know Caleb really hated his father, possibly enough to kill him."

"We knew that before."

"It's one thing to have someone else tell you Caleb hated his father, another thing altogether to hear it for yourself directly from his mouth. At any rate, it was a good start; you handled yourself very well."

I tried not to grin at his praise. Any thought of smiling vanished with his next words.

"You'll have plenty of time to think about all of this, because I have to go out of town this afternoon and I probably won't be back until Monday."

"What?"

"I know. The timing is lousy, but I can't help it. I do have paying cases, you know."

I sputtered, "But..."

"But what?"

"But that's three days plus the weekend."

Novak gave me a sardonic smile. "Very good. I'll make a detective out of you yet."

I wasn't amused. "That's too long to just do nothing! The trail will get cold!"

His eyebrows shot up and a smile tugged at the corner of his lips. "The trail?"

"You know what I mean!"

"Killian, settle down. Caleb didn't seem all that concerned with getting out of jail. Nothing will change between now and Monday."

"What if Caleb is innocent? Then every day we wait is another day the real killer has to cover his tracks."

"Trail, tracks? Are we private investigators or nature guides?"

"Novak!"

"Okay, okay. I can't change my plans. I'm still going to have to leave town, but if you really want, you can do a little work on the case while I'm gone."

"Thank you."

"Hang on. What do you have in mind?"

I drew a blank. I really had no idea where to go from here. I'd been counting on Novak to help with that.

"What? All that righteous indignation, and you don't even have a plan?"

"Well, I'd like to look at the house. I don't know why. I guess just to get a feel for where the murder took place." He nodded approvingly, so I took that as a good sign. "And while I'm there, I can talk to the neighbors."

He grinned, and I felt like a student gaining the favor of his favorite teacher, which I suppose in a way I was.

"That's just what I would have done. Why don't we run out there now?"

"What about your case? When do you have to leave town?"

"Not until this afternoon. I should probably be getting things ready, but if it will make you feel better about me leaving, then I can spare the time."

"Cool."

We drove over in Bessie, who, despite various clunks, bangs, and defeated sighs at every stop, was somehow still on the road. I did think I heard an occasional death rattle, and was convinced she would cut off and just refuse to start again. Novak, on the other hand, seemed much more confident in her abilities. Surprisingly, we arrived at the Cohen property without the car exploding or falling apart. I climbed out gratefully and took a look around.

What was left of the house sat on a patch of scraggly, weed-choked lawn with a lone scorched tree off to one side. An old barn sat back well away from the charred rubble. On one side of the yard, a row of Leyland cypresses separated the Cohens' lot from a modest rancher. On the other side was a narrow field, and beyond that, an old, neglected farmhouse. There was nothing across the road except acre upon acre of flat farmland.

The centerpiece of the Cohens' yard was a pile of blackened timbers. I could make out the shape of the foundation, and a portion of one wall remained standing. Clearly, it had once been a house, but it also had a sad, otherworldly feel to it. It was like the pyre of some huge legendary beast. The smoky smell of burnt wood and soggy ash still hung heavy in the air, even though the firemen had extinguished the flames days ago.

The odor yanked me back to the night Jake and I had nearly died in that fire, sending an involuntary shudder through me.

Novak eyed me carefully. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I tried to sound nonchalant, but it was an effort. "I was caught in a house fire once. This brings back a few bad memories, but I'm fine."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. What are we looking for?"

"I don't know that we're looking for anything, really. We're not professionals in either fires or forensics, so safety issues aside, we're not going to bother with the house itself at all. Just get a feel for the place, walk around, then we'll try talking to the neighbors."

"Okay," I agreed and began circling the house. Little memories kept stirring in my brain, images like ghosts from my past, roused by the scent of the recent blaze.

Jake's face illuminated by the blaze.

Heat so intense it felt like it would split my skin.

The deafening roar of the flames, drowning out everything but the fear.

The unshakable certainty that we were going to die.

I shook my head and tried to focus on the task at hand.

I went once around the house. I was definitely getting some unpleasant vibes from the place, but whether that was simply because I knew what had happened there or something more, I wasn't sure. Other memories flooded into my mind, this time from the

strange dreams—the blood, the fire, the hatred. What did it all mean?

I approached the barn and peeked in through the door, which was hanging crookedly ajar on its rusted hinges. Unsure how much I trusted the ramshackle structure, I decided not to go in. I slowly circled the building, peering in each window and door. I didn't see anything except the usual farm debris—an old tractor, moldy hay bales, and the like. After my loop around the barn, I rejoined Novak by the car.

"Finished looking things over?" he asked.

I nodded. "Not much to see, really."

"What were you expecting to find? A signed confession from the killer?"

Feeling a little silly, I shrugged. "No, although that would have been nice. I don't know what I was expecting. I don't even know if I have a feel for the place. I just feel sad and a little overwhelmed."

He patted me on the shoulder. "It's okay. Murder scenes still leave me a bit unsettled, too."

"It's not that.... Well, I don't know. Maybe it is."

"Don't let it get to you, kiddo. How about we try to talk to the neighbors?" I nodded. "Which one do you want to begin with?"

I pulled out my notebook and referred to my notes. "Mrs. Fields?"

"Works for me." Novak started in that direction.

On closer inspection, the farmhouse was not just neglected, but leaning toward decrepit. It was badly in need of a paint job, and several panes of glass had been replaced with cardboard and duct tape.

We stepped up onto the sagging side porch, knocked loudly on the door, and waited. When no one answered, we knocked again. Still no one came to the door, so we gave up and headed back across the field.

I looked over my shoulder once and thought I saw a curtain twitch, but it could have just been the wind blowing through a crack in windows that were far from airtight.

In order to reach the other house, we had to go out onto the road to get around the row of cypresses. In stark contrast to the place we had just left, the rancher and its yard were well kept. Carefully tended shrubbery grew along the foundation, and a floral wreath hanging on the front door bade us a merry welcome.

This time, our knock was answered quickly. A dark-haired woman peered out at us suspiciously. I guessed she was in her mid to late thirties, but it was hard to tell for sure. Her hair was cut off bluntly just above her shoulders in no particular style, and her brown eyes were guarded and wary. She was slightly overweight but tried to camouflage that fact with loose, ill-fitting clothing that only managed to make her look frumpy.

"Can I help you?" she asked cordially, but with a note of distrust, as if she suspected we were proselytizers about to try our best to save her damned soul from eternal hell.

"Hi. My name is Shane Novak." He flashed a friendly smile. "I'm a private investigator, and this is my assistant, Killian Kendall. Could we have a few moments of your time?"

Her eyes widened at the mention of a private investigator. For a moment, I thought she would slam the door in our faces, but she surprised me by stepping out onto the porch instead. "I'm Paige Haynes. Is this about...what happened next door?"

That struck me as a very mild way to refer to a violent murder and a fire that burned your neighbor's house to the ground, but who was I to judge?

"Yes, it is. We're cooperating with the police, but I have no official standing so you don't have to answer my questions if you don't want to."

"That's okay. Who are you working for, if you don't mind my asking?"

"We're not really working for anyone. We're here on behalf of the young man who's been accused."

"Caleb?"

"Yes."

"Is he okay? I've been worried about him."

"Killian spoke to him yesterday, so I'll let him answer that."

I was surprised at suddenly being handed the microphone, so to speak. "I...he...uh...he seemed okay. He said you helped him out when you could."

"He did?" She pursed her lips for a second. I thought she would burst into tears, but after blinking rapidly for a few seconds, she went on. "I did the best I could. It wasn't easy for him."

"You knew he was being abused?" Novak asked.

She looked away. "Everyone knew."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"I did. Twice. Nothing ever came of it. After a while, you just get to feeling there's no point in it anymore. Like I said, I did whatever I could."

"Did you see or hear anything the night of the murder?"

"Not until the fire was pretty high. By then, the fire trucks were almost here. Mrs. Fields called them, I think. She had a bout with her heart right after that, probably caused by all the excitement. I'm not sure if she's home from the hospital yet."

"So you didn't notice anything?" he pressed.

"No. You can see that our view of their yard is pretty well obstructed by the trees there. We put them in as a windbreak, and now they've all grown together."

"You didn't see anyone coming or going?"

"I don't pay much attention, really. We don't get that much traffic out here, but it's not like I run to the window every time I hear a car."

"Of course. What kind of neighbors were the Cohens?"

She frowned. "We didn't really have any problems, per se..."

"What do you mean?"

"Ira kept to himself mostly. He wasn't very friendly. When we first moved in, we tried to be neighborly, but he wasn't exactly receptive."

"Was he rude?"

"You could say that."

"Is it fair to say that you didn't like him very much?"

"From what little exposure I had to the man, there wasn't much to like."

"What about Caleb?"

She bit her lip. "Caleb was a different story. Such a sweet kid. When we first moved in, he'd sometimes come over here to get away from his father. That stopped after a while, though, when Ira figured out to look for him here. Anytime he couldn't find Caleb, he'd come pounding on our door."

"Would you know someone named Nadine?"

Her face turned sour. "You could say that. She was...well, I guess you would call her Ira's girlfriend."

"Do you know her last name?"

"Not off the top of my head. I only met her a time or two."

"Any idea where we could find her?"

"You know, I think she works at a hair salon in town. It has some corny name—a bad pun or something."

"That describes most of the salons around here. Do you think you could remember the name?"

"Every time I saw her, she gave me a business card and told me to come down and they'd fix me right up. She thought she was being subtle, but I just found it insulting. I usually threw them right in the trash can but let me see if I kept one of them. I'll be right back."

She disappeared into the house and returned a few minutes later with a business card in her hand. "The name is *To Dye For*. I don't know how I could forget a name like that. And her last name is Tingle. You can keep the card." She handed it to Novak, who tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Thank you, Mrs. Haynes. You've been very helpful. May we contact you again if we have any more questions?"

"I...suppose. Anything to help Caleb."

"Thank you. And here's my card if you happen to think of anything else that might be useful." He handed her one of his cards, and she studied it closely.

We were walking away when Novak stopped suddenly and turned around. "One more question, ma'am."

"Yes?"

"Do you think Caleb did it?"

"Do I think Caleb...killed Ira?" She seemed shocked that Novak would ask her that.

"Yes."

She thought for a minute. "I don't know. I honestly don't. I do know I wouldn't blame him if he did." She turned and walked into the house, shutting the door behind her.

We checked at Mrs. Fields' again before we left, but there was still no answer. Novak stuck another one of his cards in the doorjamb, and we made our exit amid Bessie's noisy protests.

"She thinks the kid did it," Novak commented, interrupting my dark thoughts on the chances of our getting back to the office alive.

"Mrs. Haynes?" I asked after my brain caught up.

"Yeah, and so far we've not heard anything that would make me think otherwise. How are you going to feel if it turns out he did do it?"

"It doesn't really matter much to me either way. I don't even particularly like Caleb."

"What about your friend Asher?"

I sighed. "He'd be crushed."

"Well, just because we don't have any evidence to suggest he didn't kill his father, we don't have any real evidence to suggest he did, either. We'll keep looking."

"Yeah, next week." I sounded bitter, even to myself.

He looked over at me with a crooked smile. "For someone who doesn't care whether the kid did it or not, you sure are intent on the investigation."

I shrugged. "Insatiable curiosity?"

He laughed. "I was hoping this trip would satisfy your curiosity until I got back."

"No such luck."

He grew serious. "Look, Killian, I don't want you going off on your own while I'm gone. Wait until I get back, understand?"

"I can't even talk to people?"

"What people?"

"Nadine Tingle? And I can keep trying Mrs. Fields, too."

"I suppose a little old lady is harmless enough. You can keep trying her if you want." He pulled out the business card Paige Haynes had given him and flipped it over in his fingers a few times. "As for Ms. Tingle, we're going right by her salon on our way back. Need a trim?"

I shook my hair about. "It is getting a little shaggy, don't you think?"

"I wasn't going to say anything, but now that you mention it..."

A few minutes later, we pulled up to the curb in front of *To Dye For*. It was a private home that someone

had converted into a beauty parlor, the type found in every small town in America. A discreet sign in the front yard bore the name of the business, as well as a silhouette of a blow dryer and scissors, and in smaller letters at the bottom, "Walk-ins welcome."

We walked in, per the sign, and six heads swiveled to stare at us. Two of them sported plastic caps and sat under dryers. We were the only males in the room, and I was the youngest by at least three decades.

"We're looking for Nadine Tingle," Novak said. I was impressed. He didn't sound at all intimidated. I was fighting the urge to hide behind him.

One of the ladies stepped forward. She was a large, daunting woman, with even larger hair that was an unnatural shade of orange. "And who are you?"

"My name is Shane Novak and this is my assistant, Killian Kendall. We need to ask Ms. Tingle some questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"Are you Ms. Tingle?"

"No. Anita Johnson."

I had to smother a laugh at how her name sounded when spoken aloud, but Novak managed to keep his cool—if he even caught it. "Is Ms. Tingle available?"

Anita shot me a dirty look. Apparently, I hadn't hid my amusement well enough. "She ain't here today."

"Do you know when she'll be back?"

"Nope."

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to give me her phone number or address?"

"Nope."

The back door swung open and a petite woman with bottle-blond hair strode into the room. "It's okay, Anita. I'll talk to him."

"Are you Ms. Tingle?" Novak asked.

"Oh please, call me Nadine," she drawled in a husky smoker's voice. "Unless you're with the IRS. In that case, you can call me tomorrow."

At first, I thought she was fairly young, but as she came closer, I could clearly see she was quite a bit older than my first impression. A web of fine lines bracketed her eyes and lips, and her teeth were tobacco stained. Her leathery skin was testament to a great deal of time spent either in the sun or a tanning bed. She was wearing tight-fitting, dark blue jeans and a low-cut blouse. I tried not to look directly at her freckled cleavage.

She reminded me of a less refined version of Steve's real estate agent.

Novak held out his hand. "Shane Novak. I'm a private investigator. This is my assistant, Killian Kendall."

We shook hands, then Nadine gestured towards the door. "Why don't we step outside? This room has more ears than a bushel of corn, and they don't mind telling what they hear."

Everyone pretended to ignore that as we followed Nadine's tight jeans out the door.

"You interrupted my smoke break when you burst into the henhouse." She lit up a cigarette. I hadn't even seen her pull one out, it just appeared between her lips as if by magic. "Hope you don't mind if I partake."

"It's your lungs," Novak replied breezily.

"Amen to that." She blew a stream of smoke straight up into the air. "I'm so tired of the government trying to tell me what I can and can't do with my own body." She took another puff while she studied us. "So, what do you want to talk about? This something to do with Ira?"

"Good guess. What can you tell us about him?"

"About Ira? Ha! Not much. Not much good, anyway. Mean son of a bitch—meaner than a hog-nosed snake—and a drunk to boot. And believe me, he wasn't a happy drunk."

"Weren't you dating him?"

"Honey, I haven't dated anyone since I was twenty. Dating is a young person's game. We met certain needs for each other."

"And what needs were those?"

"Some things a lady doesn't talk about," she gave me a pointed look, "especially in front of children."

I blushed, but Novak, ever the professional, nodded and let it go. "What about his son, Caleb?"

"What about him? Weird kid. Real quiet. Moody. Didn't see him much when I was around. He was always out back somewhere. Prob'ly kept girly magazines in the barn or something."

"Were you surprised to hear that the police believe he might have killed his father?"

She thought for a moment. "I was and I wasn't. I was surprised he'd have the balls to do anything as gutsy as kill someone. He was scared of Ira. Can't say I blame him. Like I told you, Ira was mean, especially to the boy. That's what I meant by 'I wasn't surprised'. I don't really

blame him if he did kill the bastard. My only question would be what took him so long?"

"So you're comfortable with the idea of Caleb committing this murder?"

"Comfortable? Who'd be comfortable with a thing like that?"

"I mean, do you think he did it?"

"Oh, well, that's something else entirely. I don't know. That's not for me to decide, is it?"

"What about you?" Novak said casually.

She took a long drag off the cigarette. "What about me?"

"Did Ira ever hit you?"

She released the smoke slowly, then took another drag. "He knew better."

"Can you think of anyone else who would have wanted to kill Ira?"

She snorted and a puff of smoke shot out her nostrils. "Sugar, just list all the people who ever met the SOB and you'll know who's wanted to kill him at one time or another."

"What about right now? Who would have wanted him dead at this particular time?"

She took one last drag of her cigarette, dropped it on the stoop, and crushed it out with a dainty little twist of her ankle before kicking it off into the grass. "I'm not saying anything one way or the other, understand? But have you talked to the folks down at the Ease Inn where he worked?"

"No. Is there any reason you would mention them?"

"You could say things weren't real good between Ira and his boss lately."

"And why was that?"

She smiled. "That's your job to find out, now isn't it?"

Novak smiled back. I could have sworn he was enjoying the banter. "I suppose it is. And who might I ask for when we visit the Ease Inn?"

"You might ask for Prince Charming, but God knows you won't find him there." She snorted at her own joke. "Ask for Phil Zaranski. He runs the place. I gotta get back inside now. I got Ethel under the blower and her hair's as brittle as dry spaghetti. I can't leave her too long. We're done, aren't we?"

"We're done," Novak agreed. "And may I say that it has been a pleasure indeed."

"You wanna come in and say goodbye to Anita?" Nadine asked with her hand on the knob and a wicked grin on her face.

"That's one pleasure I can do without."

She turned with a cackle and vanished inside.

Chapter 8

Working in an empty office the next day felt strange. I'd been there alone before when Novak was out on a case or running errands, but realizing I'd be on my own for the rest of the week was different. On one hand, it felt good to think Novak trusted me enough to leave me in charge for that long. On the other hand, I wasn't quite sure I trusted myself.

Not that I didn't know what I was doing—answering phones and taking messages isn't exactly brain surgery—but I really wanted to get back to working on Caleb's case. Novak had given me permission to interview some people, although he'd strictly forbidden me from going to the Ease Inn without him. With him gone, however, I was suddenly nervous about going out all by myself. When we'd spoken to Paige Haynes and Nadine Tingle, Novak had done most of the talking. He said I did okay with Caleb, but Caleb was just a kid. The idea of questioning an adult intimidated me a little.

I somehow managed to stay at my desk on Wednesday, but by Thursday afternoon I was going crazy. I decided to lock up and drive out to the Cohen house.

I parked in the same place Novak had a couple of days before. I climbed out and glanced across the fallow farmland to where Mrs. Fields lived, briefly wondering why the land hadn't been cultivated, since the time for planting was well past. Then I looked at the house and remembered how neglected it was as well. No one had mentioned a Mr. Fields, so I assumed the older lady was

a widow. Obviously, the house and property had become too much for her to handle on her own.

While I was studying the house, I thought I saw a curtain twitch at the same window where I'd seen movement on our last visit. I watched but didn't see anything more. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me back.

A chill ran down my spine, and I turned away. I'd come back to Mrs. Fields later. At the moment, I was a little spooked.

I couldn't see the Haynes's' house through the line of cypresses, but we'd already talked to Paige Haynes anyway. That left the barn. On a whim, I decided to explore the dilapidated building before I tried my hand with people. I hadn't gone inside on Tuesday, so an inspection seemed as good a way as any to postpone my first real solo interview.

I gently pushed against the barn door but it didn't budge so much as a fraction of an inch. I backed up and threw my whole weight against it. With an unhappy shriek of protest from the rusty metal hinges, it shuddered open about a foot, and I stumbled in amid a shower of dirt, cobwebs, and rotten wood. I used my highly refined powers of detection to deduce that no one had opened the door in quite a while. I figured I was probably wasting my time, but since I was inside, I decided to have a look around.

The comparative dimness of the interior momentarily blinded me. Although sunlight shafted through the few windows that weren't boarded up, it did little to dispel the gloom. Dust motes danced thickly

through the beams, making me wish I had brought an oxygen mask. I coughed reflexively.

As my eyes slowly adjusted, I began to make out the barn's contents. An odd shape in the center of the floor resolved itself into the rusty, forgotten tractor I'd seen through the window on our last visit. It looked like a relic from a farm museum.

Propped against one wall were several old, wooden-handled tools, the kind no farm should be without—a shovel, a pitchfork, a rake, and a scythe that would have been right at home slung over the shoulder of the Grim Reaper.

A line of stalls stretched along the longest wall, while a stack of old tires and bulky metal drums were piled up in one corner. In the opposite corner, a heap of straw lay moldering, the very sight of it making my nose twitch.

Several sneezes later, I ventured down the length of the barn, peeking into each stall, only to find they held nothing but more cobwebs. I was turning to leave when I remembered that the barn had a second floor. At first glance, I didn't notice any means of reaching the hayloft. It took me a minute to spot a wooden ladder nailed to one wall, leading up to the storage space.

The ladder appeared so rickety that I spent a few seconds debating the wisdom of climbing it. Finally, I decided I wouldn't be a very good investigator if I didn't check everything, so I started up the ladder. I quickly found it to be a lot sturdier than it looked. In fact, it seemed that someone had been maintaining it. Up close, I could see that a couple of the rungs had been replaced,

and while most of the nail heads were rusty, some were shiny and new.

If the door hadn't been opened in years, who had fixed the ladder and how had they gotten inside the barn? Logically, Caleb or his father could have made the repairs, but that still didn't answer the other half of my question.

Then I remembered circling the barn on Tuesday and peering in one of the windows. While weeds and briars were growing rampant around most of the building, the ground had been trampled bare in front of that particular window. Although I hadn't thought much of it at the time, someone must have been crawling in through the opening. My guess was Caleb.

When my head popped up above the level of the hayloft floor, my first impression was that no one had been up there in a long time. The only things visible were crumbling hay bales stacked about haphazardly, but it was so dark I couldn't see much. There were no windows on this level, and, as little light as there was downstairs, even less managed to filter its way up to where I was.

I pulled out my phone and turned on the flashlight. The bright beam revealed a thick layer of dust covering the floor. It didn't seem to have been disturbed recently, but Caleb had been at the group home for a little over a month. I didn't imagine it would take long for the dust to build up in this place.

I climbed the last rungs of the ladder and stepped into the loft, stirring up a cloud of dust in the process and setting off another round of sneezing. I heard something scurrying behind me and spun around in time to see a

small gray mouse dart behind a mostly intact bale of hay. I had to wait for my heart to stop pounding before resuming my search.

I walked carefully, unsure of how strong the floor was. The last thing I needed was to fall through and break a leg. I'd never hear the end of it from Novak.

A quick look around uncovered nothing more than dust, rodent droppings, and decomposing hay. I was just about to give up when a final sweep of the flashlight beam caught something shiny in a far corner. I made my way over to it and found a partially shredded potato chip bag. The mice might have gotten to it, but it wasn't that old. The "sell by" date was clearly legible. My hunch that someone had been up there not too long ago was right. I doubted the mice had brought the bag up all by themselves.

A closer look around revealed that the bales had been stacked more carefully than I first thought. In one corner, they were arranged as if to create a partition. I discovered a narrow gap between the wall of hay bales and the actual barn wall. The opening was just large enough for me to slip through.

I found a makeshift room on the other side. What I had assumed to be a solid stack of bales was actually only one bale deep. The area inside formed a cozy hiding space, perfect for a teenage boy looking to hide from his abusive father. A small glass oil lamp, half filled with fuel, sat on a milk crate. Next to it was a crude bed that was really little more than an old mildewed feather mattress with a sleeping bag on top. Several more empty chip bags were strewn about. Either Caleb had set up

house in the hayloft, or a hobo had taken up residence in the Cohens' barn.

My money was on Caleb.

Although I didn't really want to touch the grungy bedding, I decided if I was going to be a detective, I couldn't be that fussy. I lifted the sleeping bag and shook it out, but found nothing. Under the mattress, however, I made a few discoveries. There was a well-worn copy of a gay porn magazine, a bottle of lube, and, most surprisingly, a couple of unopened condoms. The magazine and the lube weren't so shocking—they could have been for Caleb's personal amusement. Unless they were just a teenage boy's hopeful fantasy, the condoms were a different story.

As I scanned the surrounding area, something in the deep shadows under the eaves caught my eye. I crawled back until I could identify what it was, then left it right there. Evidence or not, I wasn't about to touch someone else's used condom. I looked around a bit longer but didn't see anything else.

After climbing back down the ladder, I started sorting out what I had discovered. Caleb kept a secret hiding place in the barn, probably for when things with his dad got too intense in the house. It seemed very likely that he entertained someone there on occasion. This raised the question: who might that someone be? Was it the mysterious friend who sheltered Caleb when he ran away from the group home? I felt pretty certain it wasn't Asher. At least I didn't want to think it could be Asher. The idea of him having sex with Caleb on that dirty mattress disgusted me. I wanted to think he was

better than that. Maybe the neighbors would have some ideas.

Back outside the barn, I decided to start with Paige Haynes since I had already met her. I was about to walk around by the road when I noticed a very faint path leading through an even slighter gap in the cypresses between the two yards. I pushed through the branches to find myself in the Haynes's' backyard. A man working on a riding mower a few feet away looked up in surprise.

"Can I help you?" His tone was challenging. I guess he didn't have too many visitors popping through his shrubbery. He was of average height, clean-shaven, with short, dark hair parted on one side. He had the physique of someone who might have played football in college but was slowly losing ground to middle age spread.

"Are you Travis Haynes?" I asked.

"Yes, and you are?"

"My name is Killian Kendall. I was wondering if I could talk to you for a few minutes."

"Talk about what?" He was eyeing me suspiciously.

"I work for a private investigator, Shane Novak."

"Is this about Ira's murder?"

"Yes, sir, it is."

"Didn't you talk to my wife a few days ago?"

"Yes, and she was very helpful. I was just next door looking around, and a few more questions came up. Actually, that's why I came through your yard the way I did. I noticed a trail leading through that gap there."

"Caleb used it sometimes when I was out here working. He'd come over and give me a hand, chat about

his day, school, something he saw on TV—anything, really. I think he just needed someone to talk to. God knows, Ira was worthless." He shook his head. "You said you had questions. What kind of questions?"

"You and your wife looked after Caleb?"

He frowned. "I wouldn't say that. There wasn't much we could do. Like I said, I'd listen to him talk, and Paige would feed him every chance she got. That was about it. I wish we could've done more. He's a good kid. If he did this, what they're saying he did, he was driven to it by that asshole he called a father."

"I take it you didn't think much of Mr. Cohen?"

"The man was scum."

"Because he abused Caleb?"

"And about a million other reasons. But yeah, he liked to beat on Caleb whenever he was drunk, which was pretty much all the time. Poor kid."

"I was looking around the barn and found a hidden area in the loft that looked like Caleb spent some time up there, possibly with someone else. Any ideas who that might have been?"

He shrugged. "No idea. I never saw him with anybody besides his dad. I'm not surprised he had a hideaway somewhere, though. I kind of figured he'd found something when he stopped coming over here to get away from Ira."

"So you don't have any idea who Caleb's friends were? He never mentioned anyone?"

"He never spoke of any friends at all. The kid was a loner. What makes you think there was someone up there with him?"

It was my turn to shrug. "Just a hunch."

"Hunches are sometimes wrong."

"Maybe so. Can you think of anything else that might be helpful—anyone who might especially hate Mr. Cohen or any friends he may have had?"

"Everybody hated that son of a bitch. I don't think he had any friends. My wife told you about Nadine, right? Boy, if she isn't a piece of work."

"Yes. We went and talked to her after your wife told us where to find her."

"Did Paige tell you how they used to fight?"

"Your wife and Nadine?"

"No, Ira and Nadine. And I mean fight, not just raised voices. They'd be screaming and yelling, cursing at the top of their lungs, throwing and breaking things. Once she smashed his windshield with a baseball bat. Paige and I aren't the type to get involved in something like that, we keep to ourselves, but I think old Mrs. Fields called the sheriff a few times."

"Were they physically violent with each other?"

"I never saw either of them hit the other, but I wouldn't be surprised. God knows he hit Caleb enough. That man should never have been allowed to raise a child."

"Do you have children?" Caleb had already told me they didn't, but I just wanted to double check.

His face changed in an instant, his eyes dimming as if a switch had been thrown. I knew I had overstepped my bounds.

"No, we don't," he replied tersely.

It was obvious our conversation was over, or at least this line of questioning. I would have switched tactics if I'd had any other tactics to switch to. As it was,

I couldn't think of any more questions. Something in his eyes made me uncomfortable.

"Oh, well...um... I'd better go." I started backing away, stumbling over a tool he'd left on the ground. I caught myself and gave him an uneasy smile. "Um, thanks for your help."

He nodded stonily and watched me until I was on the other side of the hedgerow. I wondered what sort of nerve I'd hit and whether it had any bearing on the case. I made a mental note to get Novak's take on it when he returned. Other than the fact that he was touchy about the subject of children, the only thing I'd learned from Mr. Haynes was that Nadine and Ira had had a volatile relationship. The interview wasn't a total loss, but it didn't help much with the mystery of Caleb's loft lover.

I looked across the empty stretch of land between the pile of rubble and Mrs. Fields' house. She had an unobstructed view of the Cohens' yard and, more importantly, the barn. Maybe she'd seen something that could be helpful. Then again, Caleb had said she didn't see well. I trudged across the yard, figuring my assignment wouldn't be complete unless I at least tried talking to her.

Before I could even knock, the door swung open, seemingly by itself. I froze in mid step and was about ready to book it back to my car when a tiny figure materialized in the doorway. She was so pale that for a moment I thought she was a spirit. It almost seemed I could see right through her. Her hair was a snowy white cloud, so thin and wispy her pink scalp showed through. Her nearly translucent skin was almost the same color as

the faded pale blue of her thin cotton dress. Even her blue eyes looked washed out.

"You're the detective boy?" she asked in a voice that was as thin and brittle as she appeared.

"Yes. Mrs. Fields?" I managed to squeak.

"You'll have to speak up. I'm quite deaf these days."

I raised my voice and tried again. "Are you Mrs. Fields?"

"That's right. Are you looking into that terrible business that happened next door?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am."

"That was a horrible thing, a horrible thing. I've been here on this earth for almost eighty-five years, seventy of which I've spent in this very house, and I ain't never been so close to something so horrible. I never thought anything like this could happen here."

"It certainly was horrible. I hate to bother you, but would it be okay if I asked you some questions?"

"I don't know." She sounded uncertain. "Would I be safe?"

My heart broke at the fear in her voice. It was sad that a woman at her stage of life should have to be so afraid in her own home.

"I believe you would be safe, Mrs. Fields, but maybe it would be better if we talked inside." At the volume I had to speak, I felt I was broadcasting our conversation to the entire tri-state area.

"I guess that would be all right," she consented, "but I don't know what I'll be able to tell you that would be of any help."

She stepped back to allow me in, and I found myself standing in the kitchen. The room appeared to have been tacked on as an afterthought—which was probably the case, considering that most of the old homes in the area were built long before indoor plumbing. Although the counter was cluttered, the appliances so old I would have been surprised to find that they still worked, and the linoleum worn through in places, everything was sparkling clean.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked. "I have some cold water in the icebox, and maybe some fruit juice. I don't get to the market as often as I used to."

"Thank you, but I'm fine."

She nodded and started off down a dark hallway. "This way. We'll talk in the living room like civilized people."

As I went deeper into the house, a stale mustiness enveloped me. It smelled as if decades of odors had built up without a proper airing out. There were the household scents of bacon, lavender perfume, and powder, but underlying everything was a hint of decay. The air was stiflingly warm and damp, and when we reached her living room I realized why: all the windows were shut tight, with heavy curtains pulled across them. She had barricaded herself inside the best she could.

I got the impression that this was the only room she used anymore. Everything she could have needed except for her bed and clothes was crammed into the crowded space. An old, yellow, floral pattern sofa, vintage 1950s, sat against one wall under a water-stained, faded, dime store print. A large console TV, easily older than I, served as the room's focal point, and

she had pulled a broken-down recliner up close to it. A kerosene heater sat off to one side, dusty with disuse in the summer heat.

Mrs. Fields lowered herself carefully into the chair. It seemed to be a painful process for her. I stood by helplessly, wishing there was something I could do, but knowing there wasn't.

"I don't get many visitors these days," she told me once she was settled. "Please, have a seat."

I perched gingerly on the edge of the sofa. The cushion was as hard as rock, making me wonder if it had somehow petrified.

"I'm sorry I didn't invite you right in. This whole business has me a little scared. I guess you think I'm a silly old woman."

"Not at all. I'd be scared too if something like that happened next door to my house."

She stared closely at me. "Excuse my bad manners, but you look awfully young to be a detective. Then again, everyone looks young to me these days. Are you with the police?"

"No, ma'am. I work for a private investigator. And you're right, I am young. I just turned eighteen."

She laughed a little and shook her head. "I was eighteen once. Hard to believe now. I barely remember it myself. Now I'm old enough to be your great-grandmother."

I smiled. "Do you have great-grandchildren?"

"No. I never had any children. We always wanted them, but I guess the good Lord didn't see fit to give them to us. Me and my husband, I mean. His name was Raymond. He was a good man, hard working. He never

raised his voice nor his fist to me, not once in the fifty-some years we were married. He passed on years ago. I've been alone ever since. You get used to it after a while. Still, it's nice to have a visitor now and then."

I felt as if I would burst into tears at any moment. I couldn't speak around the lump in my throat. The best I could do was nod. Luckily, that was all the encouragement she needed.

"Now, I don't like to speak ill of the dead, but that Ira Cohen, he was nothing like my Raymond. That's who you're here to talk about, right?"

I nodded again.

"He was no good. Didn't treat his boy right. Didn't treat that girl right, either—yelling and cussing and carrying on."

"What girl?" I asked, finding my voice at last.

"Maybe I shouldn't say girl. At my age, they all seem like girls. I don't know her name, but she had blond hair. Not natural blonde. And she always wore tight pants or short skirts."

Nadine, I assumed. "You saw Mr. Cohen fighting with this woman?"

"Can't say I ever saw him hit her, if that's what you mean, but I heard them many a time, even with my hearing as bad as it is."

"Arguing?"

"You could call it that. Hollering and yelling, screaming the worst obscenities you ever heard. And with the boy right there."

"Caleb?"

"I believe that was his name. The lot of them kept to themselves, really. Hardly said more than a handful of

words to me the whole time they lived right next door." She shook her head sadly. "Caleb. From the Bible, you know. He was a quiet boy, kept to himself mostly, never caused any trouble. I hate to think he did that horrible thing, but I heard on the news that they arrested him, so I suppose the police know best. I reckon he just snapped. People do, you know. Just snap, sometimes. Poor boy."

She was drifting off subject, so I tried to gently steer her back on track. "Did you hear Ira and the woman fight the night he died?"

She thought for a moment. "Now that you mention it, I do believe they did. Not one of their big fights, mind you, just some hollering and cussing. Then she left."

"When did you notice the fire? Was it long after she left?"

"Yes, quite a while. The fire woke me up. It must have been well after 11:30. I don't sleep too well these days, so I stay up to watch the late news. She left hours before, when *Wheel of Fortune* was still on."

"Did you notice anyone else around the house that night?"

"Not that I can recall, but then I wasn't exactly watching it."

"Did you ever see anyone else at the house any other time, except for Ira's lady friend?"

She sat back in her chair and studied me with her rheumy eyes. I wondered what she was thinking. Finally, she spoke. "I don't see as well as I used to. One more thing gone, along with my hearing and about a dozen other things. Every once in a while, though, I'd see the boy come sneaking out of his house and cross the

backyard. He'd go around the side of the barn and climb in through the window. Now, I'm not a busybody, but I thought that was a bit odd, you understand?"

I nodded eagerly. She had my full attention.

"So I watched," she continued. "It was never very long before another somebody would come creeping across the field and climb through the very same window."

I felt my pulse speed up. "This happened often?"

"Fairly so."

"Could you see who it was?" It was too much to hope for, but I asked anyway.

"No, it was too far away. Just be glad I could tell it was a person."

"You couldn't describe him?" Of course, it could have been a girl, but I felt confident that whomever Caleb was meeting in the barn would turn out to be a male.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"Can you tell me where the person came from? Was it a boy or a girl? Big or small? Anything at all?"

"Came from out back, but I can't tell you much more than that. It was usually dark or close to it. For some reason, I always thought it was a boy, something about the way he moved, but I can't say for sure. He was small, though, that I know."

My pulse was racing now. Mrs. Fields was confirming my theory. "How long had this been going on?"

"I don't know for sure. Quite some time."

"Months?"

"I think I first noticed last fall, but it could have been going on before that."

"Mrs. Fields, thank you so much for helping me."

She looked surprised. "I helped you?"

"Yes, you really did."

She seemed pleased. "Well now, it's nice to know I can still be useful."

My heart broke again. This visit had been an emotional rollercoaster. I was excited to learn so much from such an unexpected source. At the same time, I ached for this lonely old woman, alone and afraid in her own home.

"Are we all finished?" she asked.

"I believe so," I managed. "If I think of other questions, would it be okay if I came back?"

She nodded. "You're welcome anytime, questions or no." She started to struggle up from her seat, but I jumped to my feet.

"I can let myself out, Mrs. Fields. You don't have to get up."

"It's all right. I want to lock the door after you."

I stepped forward and offered her a hand, which she gratefully took. I helped her to her feet, and she squeezed my hand gently.

"Thank you," she whispered. "It's a great world if you don't weaken."

We walked to the door, where I turned to face her once more. "Thank you again, Mrs. Fields."

"I'm glad I was able to help." She paused. "I enjoyed our visit, even if the conversation wasn't all that pleasant."

I surprised us both by suddenly leaning in and giving her a hug. She felt so frail in my arms, I was almost afraid I'd break her. I stepped back awkwardly, unsure what to say. "Thanks again," I blurted clumsily, turning to escape through the door.

"No. Thank you," she said softly, closing the door behind me.

I heard the locks turning as I walked away. I didn't look back. I didn't want her to see the tears in my eyes.

I felt so emotionally drained after my visit with Mrs. Fields that I drove directly home. My body was tired but my brain refused to stop. Both Travis Haynes and Mrs. Fields had said Nadine and Ira fought violently, and Mrs. Fields recalled Nadine and Ira having an argument the night he was killed. I wanted to talk to Nadine again, but it would have to wait until the next day. I was also more curious than ever about the boy Caleb was meeting in the barn. I wasn't sure it had anything to do with the case, but it was possible that Caleb was meeting the same friend he had stayed with the night he ran away from the group home.

I went into the office the next morning long enough to check the mail, then I was on my way to *To Dye For*. When I opened the door, Anita was busy, and no one else acknowledged my presence. Nadine was nowhere in sight.

Anita was in mid-rant. "I told you not to try that other place," she barked from behind her client, a wrinkled old prune of a woman wearing a guilty,

hangdog expression. "They might be cheaper, but you mark my words, you get what you pay for."

All the other ladies nodded and clucked in agreement, as if Anita's proclamation was some highly original statement.

Nadine appeared from behind a curtain carrying a small bowl containing a bluish-gray material and a small paintbrush. "Half those girls are just barely out of beauty school," she commented without noticing me.

"You here for a perm?" Anita asked sarcastically.

It took me a second to register that she had finally deigned to speak to me. "What? Oh, no. I'm here to talk to Ms. Tingle, if that's okay."

"Lordy, Nadine, you get more visitors these days than a rent-by-the-hour motel."

Nadine looked me over and winked in my direction. "He was here the other day with that hunky detective."

Anita eyed me as if she suspected me of eating the last doughnut at a Weight Watchers convention. "I don't remember him."

"He was hiding behind the other guy," another employee added helpfully while busily wrapping a middle-aged woman's hair around fat rollers. She was as round as she was tall and had been following the conversation with more attention than she was giving the client in her chair.

I frowned. I wanted to inform her that I wasn't hiding, and, while we were on the subject, I was standing right here so they could stop discussing me as if I wasn't present.

Nadine pointed towards a row of uncomfortable looking plastic chairs. "Have a seat over there, sugar. I gotta finish up with Betty Jean here. I'll just be a few minutes."

I took a seat and looked through the rack of magazines. It seemed my choices were limited to *Southern Living*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Modern Maturity*, or *Woman's Day*, all a minimum of two years out of date. I eschewed all of them in favor of my phone.

I'd only scrolled through a little of my feed before my nerves started getting to me. I was beginning to question the wisdom of coming here alone. What if I messed up the investigation? It had seemed such a good idea while I was lying in bed the night before, but maybe I should have waited to talk over my discoveries with Novak first. I didn't even know what to ask, and besides, Nadine just plain intimidated me.

I had plenty of time to stew in my self-doubt since Nadine's "few minutes" turned into a good half hour before she breezed past me in a cloud of cheap perfume and stale smoke. She paused at the door and waved a cigarette in my direction. "You've got until this is gone, then I gotta get back to Betty Jean."

I obediently followed her out. She lit the Marlboro between her lips, inhaled deeply, and blew the smoke in my direction. "I don't suppose you want one."

"One?"

"A cigarette."

"Oh, no. I don't smoke."

She eyed me up and down. "I didn't think so. Just as well. You don't even look old enough to buy a pack."

She took another puff. "A pretty boy like you, I guess you're gay."

I almost choked. "*What?*"

"Guys as cute as you are always gay. Nadine's Law."

I decided to ignore that. Things were not going the way I'd hoped. I needed to assert control of this conversation, and quickly. At the rate she was sucking on that cancer stick, I didn't have long.

"I know you and Ira fought," I blurted out.

That at least seemed to catch her by surprise. She took a long drag and released the smoke slowly. "Far as I know, that ain't a crime. Course, I mighta missed something along the way. That happens to me sometimes. You got a point?"

"Witnesses say the fights were pretty violent."

"Witnesses, eh? Like that old bat next door, I'd guess. What's her name? Fields?"

"Actually, several people have told me the two of you had very loud fights."

"Hmph."

"We also have witnesses who place you at the farm the night Ira was killed."

She almost swallowed the butt of her cigarette. "Look, little boy, you'd better be damn careful where you step. I've eaten babies like you whole for breakfast and finished off with toast and jelly."

"Are you denying you were there?"

"You're the detective, you figure it out."

"That line won't work on me. I can always go to the police with what I know." I was bluffing my way out

onto a very fragile limb. I just hoped like hell it wouldn't break under my weight.

She took a threatening step closer to me, and I fought the urge to retreat. Her smoke-sour breath tickled my nostrils as her sharp eyes drilled into mine. I don't know what she saw there—I would have guessed abject terror—but whatever it was, it was enough.

She backed down, but her expression let me know she wasn't happy about it. "I was there. We fought. I left. End of story. He was still in one piece when I left."

"What did you fight about?"

"Probably the same thing we always fought about—a fat lot of nothing. I don't even remember."

I didn't buy that for a second. "Why didn't you tell us you were at the house the night Ira was murdered?"

"I didn't see how it had anything to do with anything. I was gone long before he was killed."

"You could have gone back later."

"And I coulda walked on the moon, but I didn't."

"Why should I believe you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Look, you little snot—"

"Hey, Nadine." The door swung open, and the round woman from earlier stuck her head out. "I think Betty Jean is ready for her rinse."

Nadine shot me one last dirty look before charging back inside, slamming the door behind her. My knees buckled, and I staggered to my car, barely able to believe what I'd just pulled off. I was very glad I wasn't in Betty Jean's place just about then. She might not have any hair left after Nadine got through taking her frustrations out on her client.

I sat in my car for a minute while I thought about everything I'd learned in the last few days. I couldn't wait to talk to Novak on Monday. It was going to be a very long weekend.

Chapter 9

I managed to stay in the office all day on Friday. I returned a couple of calls from the day before, answered the phone, and organized my notes about my interviews with Travis Haynes, Mrs. Fields, and Nadine.

I spent a lonely Friday night watching TV by myself. Kane was out on a date—as he was almost every Friday night—Adam was working in the den, and Steve was reading in bed. I found myself really missing Asher, although I couldn't be sure if I missed *him* or just dating in general. I ended up going to bed early.

I slept late the next morning; got up just before noon and went downstairs to find Steve alone in the kitchen. He glanced up from the laptop on the table in front of him. “Good morning. It is still morning, isn't it? I was beginning to wonder if you'd ever get up.”

I frowned as I opened the refrigerator to grab a carton of orange juice. “Were you waiting for me?”

“I have to run out to Chicone this afternoon, but I didn't want to leave until you were up.”

“Oh. Why?” I got a glass down from the cabinet and poured myself some juice.

“I thought maybe you'd want to go with me if you didn't have anything else to do today. Nobody's home so it'll be pretty boring around here all by yourself.”

“Where is everyone?”

“Adam is taking Kane to stay with his mother for a week, remember?”

“No. Was I told?”

Steve shrugged. “Who knows? Adam’s not been himself lately. So, how about it? Feel like driving out to the house with me?”

I opened a package of cookies and nibbled on one. “What’s going on?”

“I’m meeting Victoria and a building inspector there. We have to go over the house, make sure everything is up to code, check for termites—things like that.”

“How long will that take?”

“It’s a pretty big house, probably a couple of hours.”

I sighed. It seemed my options were staying home alone or going with Steve to the haunted house. Not much of a choice. “I guess I’ll go with you.”

“Don’t sound so excited, sport.”

“I’ll try to contain myself. I mean, who wouldn’t be thrilled to spend a Saturday afternoon at the Addams family mansion? Scooby Doo, where are you?”

Steve laughed and gave me a playful shove towards the door. “Go get ready, Daphne.”

Heading for the stairs, I called over my shoulder, “I think I’m more of a Velma, to be fair.”

The drive to Chicone was filled with a constant stream of chatter about wiring, plumbing, and painting. Needless to say, Steve did most of the talking. I tried to pay attention and respond when appropriate, but honestly, I couldn’t have cared less about whether the house had PVC or copper pipes.

Victoria was waiting for us when we pulled up, standing on the front steps wearing a grin that still showed off her impressive dental work. “I’m so glad

things have gone so smoothly so far,” she gushed. “I’m sure the inspection will be a breeze. The current owners have done so much work on the place.”

She punched a code into the lockbox clipped around the door knob, removed the key, and unlocked the heavy, wood paneled door. We stepped into the foyer, and I made sure I carefully closed the door behind us. *Might as well spare Amalie the trouble*, I thought darkly.

“It’s just as beautiful as I remembered,” Steve said softly.

I had to agree. The foyer was spectacular—all paneled walls with soft rainbow colors cast across the hardwood floor from the stained-glass transom over the front door. Everything was covered with a film of dust, but it was easy to picture how magnificent it would be when polished and sparkling. The room was almost as big as our entire living room at the beach house. I leaned back against the door, wondering what it must have looked like when Amalie stepped through this entrance for the first time. What did she think when she saw the splendor and elegance? Was she used to such extravagance, or was she as impressed as I felt?

A sudden, sharp rapping at the door interrupted my ruminations and sent vibrations through my whole body. I leapt away with a yelp, thoughts of ghosts filling my fertile imagination.

Steve gave me a funny look. I got the impression he was trying not to laugh at me.

“That’s probably the contractor,” Victoria said. To her credit, she didn’t even crack a smile.

She opened the door to reveal a very ordinary—and very alive—middle-aged man in dark blue pants and

a lighter blue, button-up shirt. A tape measure was clipped to his belt and he carried a clipboard in one hand.

“I’m Reid Schubel, and you must be Mrs. Redden.”

Victoria laughed. “No, I’m Victoria Lecates. I’m Mr. Redden’s real estate agent.” She stepped back and indicated Steve. “This is Mr. Redden.”

Steve shook the inspector’s hand. “Please, call me Steve. It’s nice to meet you, Reid. This is Killian.”

Introductions out of the way, Victoria asked Reid where he wanted to start.

“I usually like to work from the bottom up. Is there a basement?”

Victoria led the way, with Steve and me trailing behind Reid. The basement, little more than a root cellar, didn’t take long. The first floor, however, was a far more extensive undertaking. Reid had to test every outlet in every room, turn every faucet on and off, flush every toilet, and look in every nook and cranny he could find—and, let me tell you, in a house that old there were lots of nooks and crannies.

The whole time, he and Steve kept up a steady stream of technical babble that wafted somewhere above my head, or at least beyond my interest level. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t dredge up much concern over lead paint tests, grounded wiring, plumbing checks, and structural integrity.

I was beginning to think that staying home alone would have been a better choice. By the time we reached the second floor, I was afraid I might slip into a coma at any moment.

When we got to the master bedroom, the one being used for storage, Reid stopped dead in his tracks. “Wow. This room is an inspector’s worst nightmare! Did you guys hire me just to clear it out?”

“We can skip it if you want,” Steve suggested. “The outlets have been fine in every other room. There’s no reason to believe this one would be any different.”

Reid shrugged. “That’s up to you. Just be aware that if you discover any issues after the sale, they’ll be your problem, not the seller’s.”

“Fair enough,” Steve agreed.

They started on to the next room, but I caught Steve by the elbow. “Do you mind if I poke around in here?”

He grinned. “Getting bored?”

“You have no idea.”

He turned to Victoria, who’d caught our exchange. “That’s fine,” she agreed with a smile. “You just can’t take anything out of the house.”

“I promise not to slip a Victrola under my shirt.”

She laughed. “Actually, you could start cataloging all this stuff. As far as I know, it’ll all transfer to Steve if he buys the house, so it would be nice to know exactly what’s in here. It’ll all have to be listed on the contract.”

She dug a small pad of paper out of her purse and handed it to me with a pen, then followed Steve out, leaving me alone in the cluttered room.

I looked around, unsure where to begin. With my limited knowledge of antiques, mostly gleaned from watching *Antiques Roadshow* with my mom, I didn’t see any great treasures right away. Most of the items seemed

to be detritus from the century and a half the house had stood there. I guessed each occupant had left their own contribution, and it had all ended up in this room. There was a broken midcentury phonograph, a couple of mismatched dining room chairs, a deteriorating wicker bassinet, several ugly lamps from the '60s—and that was just in the front. I dutifully jotted everything down, then pushed them off to one side.

As I moved further back, the items got older and looked much more likely to be antiques. There was a beautiful wooden bed frame with a carved headboard, and, next to it, a dusty armchair. The needlepoint seat of the chair had clearly served as a nesting spot for a few generations of industrious rodents, but it would be quite nice if we reupholstered it. I wondered who had left them there and why.

Suddenly, I spotted an ornate gilt picture frame jutting out from behind the headboard. To get to it, I had to wrestle with an old dresser, dragging it just enough to squeeze by, then clamber over a table missing its marble top. Once I reached the frame, I carefully slid it out from its hiding place, stirring up a thick cloud of dust that sent me into a fit of coughing and sneezing. The frame was unexpectedly heavy, and I soon understood why. When my eyes finally stopped watering, I saw that it held the portrait of a young woman.

The surface was dark with dust and age, but beneath the grime was a beautiful oil painting. The woman on the canvas had dark hair, pulled back from her face and hanging in curls at the nape of her neck. She wore a scoop-necked, dark blue dress with a white lace collar and an exquisitely intricate gold brooch on her

bosom. The artist had posed her with one hand resting lightly on the mantle of a fireplace that might have been one of those in the ballroom downstairs. She appeared to be barely more than a girl, her dark eyes large and framed by even darker lashes. Her expression was somber, but there was a sparkle of humor about her eyes, as if at any second her lips would twitch up into a smile. I sensed that the artist had caught her very accurately, and I wondered if she was the mysterious Amalie or some other former resident of the big house.

While I was examining the painting, I heard what sounded like soft footsteps behind me. I set the portrait down and turned, expecting to find Steve, Victoria, or Reid, but no one was there. The hair on the back of my neck stood up and a chill crept down my spine.

“Hello?” My voice came out in a hoarse croak. I cleared my throat and tried again, “Is someone there?”

There was no answer. I strained to pick up any more noises, but it was eerily silent. Not even the low rumble of Reid and Steve’s voices was audible. I wanted to leave the room and go find the others, but I was afraid to step out into the hallway, afraid of what I might find. Sounds that might or might not have been footsteps were bad enough, I didn’t want to come face to face with a ghost.

That thought made me giggle. I was being silly. I was eighteen years old, yet I was acting like a little kid scared of the boogiemán. I took a deep breath and walked boldly into the hall. I exhaled a whoosh of relief when I saw it was empty. There was still no sign of Steve and the others. They must have moved on to the third floor.

It was just my imagination, I decided. I would accept the easy explanation, for now, but I knew I wouldn't be doing any more cataloguing by myself in the near future. I caught up to the other and stuck with them for the rest of the inspection.

I didn't think Monday morning would ever arrive. I even got up and drove to work early, but still had to wait for Novak to arrive. I leapt from my seat as soon as he opened the door.

"Have I got news for you!" I crowed.

He stopped in his tracks and eyed me warily. "I hope it's something equal to the sinking of the Lusitania to merit that kind of enthusiasm."

"The sinking of the what?"

He sighed and came the rest of the way into the room, shutting the door behind him. "You are hopelessly uneducated. How did you ever graduate high school? Go to the library on your way home and pick up a book on American history. The Lusitania was a passenger ship that was torpedoed by a German sub while taking provisions to England during the first World War. Twelve hundred people died, but of course they haven't made a movie about it starring the latest Hollywood heartthrob, so I wouldn't expect you to have heard of it."

I rolled my eyes. "You do know they have Google now, right? Anyway, don't you even want to know what I found out?"

"Yes, but first I'd like to enjoy my coffee." He held a Styrofoam cup aloft. "And maybe read the morning paper. Can you give me that much time at least?"

I slumped down in my chair and tried not to pout. “I guess.”

Novak chuckled. “Alright, already. Enough with the puppy dog eyes. Come on back. I can drink my coffee while you fill me in on your big news. The paper can wait.”

I bounced up again and followed him into his office. Once we were in our usual places, he gave me an expectant look.

“Okay, so you know how you told me I could talk to Mrs. Fields, Mr. and Mrs. Haynes, and Nadine Tingle while you were gone?”

“I don’t remember mentioning the Haynes specifically, or the charming Ms. Tingle, but go on.”

“Well, I went back out to the house and decided to look through the barn, since I didn’t go inside on Tuesday when we were there.”

Novak frowned and sat up a little straighter. “That wasn’t part of our arrangement either.”

“I didn’t think it would be a big deal.”

“The barn didn’t look safe. You shouldn’t have gone in there alone. What if something had happened? Who knows how long you would have been in there before someone found you.”

“My car was in plain sight. Someone would have noticed and wondered what I was doing there. Besides, nothing happened. The building isn’t in as bad shape as it looks.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Okay, you’re right, but I’m fine. Can I just get on with my story? You can lecture me later.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Don’t think I won’t. Continue.”

“Thank you. So anyway, at first it didn’t seem that anyone had been in there for a long time. The door had pretty much rusted shut and everything looked like it had sat untouched for eons.”

“Eons?”

I ignored him. “But then I remembered there was a second floor.”

“Oh for God’s sake.”

“I found a ladder in the back corner that led up through a hole in the ceiling.”

Novak dropped his head to his hands. “I can’t listen to this anymore.”

I was practically speaking through gritted teeth by that point. “So I *tested* the ladder *before* I climbed it and noticed it had been maintained by someone.”

Novak looked up with sudden interest. “What do you mean ‘maintained’?”

“I mean some of the rungs had been replaced relatively recently and there were new nails, still shiny.”

“But I thought you said no one had been in the barn in eons.”

“No one had used the door, that’s for sure. When we were there on Tuesday, though, I found a path had been trampled leading to one of the windows. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but when I saw someone had fixed the ladder, I realized someone was probably coming and going through the window.”

“Caleb?”

“That’s my guess.”

“Was there anything in the hayloft?”

“Again, at first I didn’t think so. Then I found an empty chip bag, which led me to discover a hidden room.”

“A hidden room? What is this, a Nancy Drew mystery?”

I frowned. “Why does it have to be Nancy Drew? Why not the Hardy Boys? Is it because I’m gay?”

Novak chuckled. “I was just kidding. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

I shrugged. “You didn’t. I actually like Nancy Drew. And it wasn’t *really* a hidden room. The hay bales were arranged to create a wall, but whoever did it—I’m assuming Caleb—tried to make it look like a random pile of bales. Inside the little room he’d built, there was a bed, an oil lamp, a few dirty magazines...and some condoms.”

Both of Novak’s eyebrows arched up. “New or used?”

“Some of both.”

“Well, well, well.”

“I think Caleb was using the loft as a retreat from his father and for trysts.”

Novak rubbed his chin. “Very interesting. I don’t suppose you have any guesses as to who he was meeting up there.”

“None whatsoever. But I’m not done yet.”

“Really?”

“I also talked to Mr. Haynes. He had no idea who Caleb might have been meeting in the barn—as far as he knew, Caleb didn’t have any friends—but he did tell me that Nadine and Ira used to have violent fights. The sheriff was even called out a few times.”

“That could be pertinent.”

“The other weird thing about my conversation with Mr. Haynes was that he got very intense when I asked him if he and Mrs. Haynes had children.”

“Intense?”

“He just...changed, closed down. He seemed almost angry. The conversation was definitely over.”

“You still learned a lot.”

“Wait, I have more.”

“Good grief! Were you in the office at all?”

“This was all in the same afternoon. After I talked to Mr. Haynes, I tried Mrs. Fields. She answered the door this time. She confirmed that Ira and Nadine fought frequently, but she went one step further. She told me that Nadine was at the house the night Ira died.” Novak perked up. “*But*, she left long before the fire started. Mrs. Fields also told me that she used to see Caleb sneak into the barn through the window, and, soon after, someone else would crawl in as well.”

“Could she see who it was?”

“No, but she was pretty sure it was a boy.”

“Is that all?”

“Not yet. I decided to talk to Nadine again.”

“How’d that go?”

I made a face. “Not as well as I would have liked.”

“Meaning?”

“I confronted her about her fights with Ira, which she didn’t deny, but when I asked her about being there the night Ira was killed, she kind of got mad at me.”

“Most people don’t like being accused of murder.”

“I didn’t accuse her of murder!”

“It was implied. Tell me exactly what was said.”

I relayed our conversation as accurately as I could. When I finished, Novak leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. After a few minutes, he brought his eyes back down to mine. “You had a busy week.” I smiled sheepishly and waited for him to continue.

“On the one hand, you made a lot of progress. We should probably get in touch with Hank and let him know about the room in the loft. I’m surprised no one looked up there after the murder. They probably saw the door was rusted shut and assumed no one used the barn anymore. I wouldn’t be surprised if some poor schmo gets reamed over that slip up.

“On the other hand, you took some unnecessary risks and possibly alienated an important witness—a witness who may or may not be a suspect.” I hung my head as my face flushed with humiliation.

“However...I’d have to say that given your inexperience and my lack of better instruction, you did an outstanding job.”

I looked up at him in surprise. “Really?”

He gave me a warm smile. If I wasn’t mistaken, there might have been a hint of pride in his expression. “Really.”

I basked in his praise for a few seconds. It felt good to know Novak approved.

“So what do we do next?” he asked.

I blinked. “I don’t know. I was hoping you’d tell me.”

“Uh uh. This is your baby now.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let you know if you get too far off track. Look at your notes. What do we need to investigate that we haven’t checked yet? Who do we need to talk to?”

I took out my notebook and flipped through the pages. “We need to talk to Caleb again, and to Phil Zaranski at the motel where Ira worked. We also need to figure out who Caleb stayed with the night he ran away and who he was, uh, sleeping with in the barn. It could be the same person.”

“One minor correction: we don’t know that Caleb was sleeping with anyone.”

“What about the used condom I found?”

“That’s known in our business as circumstantial evidence. It could mean that Caleb was having sex with someone, or it could mean that Caleb simply jacked off into it.”

I blushed at Novak’s frankness. He smirked but left it alone.

“We deal with cold, hard facts,” he went on. “We don’t have room for guesses and suppositions. You’re assuming Caleb was sleeping with someone. Assumptions are the quickest way to screw up a case—or get yourself killed. We need evidence, an eyewitness, or a confession. It’s our job to find those things. Right now, according to Caleb at least, we know he stayed with a friend the night he ran away. We also know someone was meeting him in the barn periodically. Let’s focus on the identity of these mystery people—or person—and not worry so much about whether or not Caleb was screwing him.”

I nodded. “Where do you think we start?”

“Based on the three choices you laid out, I’d say Zaranski. We really have no leads to follow concerning Caleb’s mysterious friend, and we can’t get the ball rolling on a meeting with Caleb until I talk to Hank. Speaking of Hank, we need to let him know about the hidden room. Maybe they can lift some fingerprints from the lamp or magazines, or DNA from the condoms. Of course, that will only be useful if they have something to compare it to.”

“What do you mean?”

“They can run the prints through a database, but to find a match the person has to have a record or they won’t be in there. Even if there’s no match though, it could come in handy down the line if they narrow a list of suspects or arrest someone. Either way, Hank needs to know about the room. In fact, hang on. Let’s give him a call.”

He picked up his desk phone and dialed Kaplan’s direct line, putting it on speaker phone.

“Sergeant Kaplan speaking,” he barked.

“Hank, it’s Shane Novak. I’ve got Killian on speaker. He’s made some progress, and there’s a discovery out at the Cohen property that I think you’ll find especially interesting.” He quickly filled Kaplan in on the various information I’d discovered the week before, including Caleb’s love nest in the loft. I chipped in details here and there.

The sergeant was satisfyingly impressed when we wrapped up. “Damn. Good work, Killian. I’ll get some guys over to check out the loft ASAP. I can’t believe no one looked up there before.”

“They might have,” I rushed to say, remembering Novak’s dire prediction that someone would get reamed because of the oversight. “It was really dark up there, and I almost missed it myself. It just seems to be a pile of hay bales unless you look real closely.”

“It’s our job not to miss things,” Kaplan growled. “Still, you did a fantastic job finding it. Thanks. I just hope you didn’t mess up any possible evidence. You should have called us the second you found it.”

I flushed. “I didn’t think of that. I’m sorry. I’m pretty sure I didn’t mess anything up, though. I didn’t even touch the used condom.”

“We’ll see. Either way, don’t sweat it. You won’t get in trouble. We would have missed it altogether if it wasn’t for you. In the future, give us a call first.”

“I will.”

“I’ll send a team out to the barn right away. Thanks again, Killian.”

Novak disconnected the call and turned to me. “Good work, but also an important reminder that we need to work in tandem with the police. If you find something that seems significant, let them know right away. If they want to cause trouble, they can cause a lot of it. I could even lose my license.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling a bit like a chastised puppy.

“In this case, it’s merely a learning moment. You heard Hank. You’re not in any trouble. It’s just a good reminder that we’re technically mucking about in police business, granted, with their permission. We still need to be careful, though.”

"Got it. So, speaking of mucking about in police business, when can we talk to Zaranski?"

Novak laughed. "Don't you ever take a break? Let me read my paper and drink my coffee before it gets cold. Go do some of the work I hired you for. We'll head over to the Ease Inn this afternoon—if you behave."

I grinned. "I promise I'll be good."

Novak rolled his eyes. "I'll believe that when I see it."

The Ease Inn was far from a quality establishment. Maybe once it had been a respectable motel, but those days were long gone. What stood before us now was a rundown, seedy spot that seemed to cater mostly to drug users, sex workers, and people who'd fallen on hard times—the kind of place your mother would warn you to avoid.

The motel was laid out in a horseshoe shape, with a separate, smaller building in the center serving as the office. Everything was low-slung and grimy, built from cinder blocks that had once been painted light blue but had since faded to a dreary gray. In places, the paint had peeled away, revealing patches of the original white base coat underneath. The parking lot was cracked and crumbling, with weeds forcing their way up through the asphalt, and the patchy grass around the perimeter looked like it hadn't seen a mower in months.

After we parked, Novak laid out the game plan. "Okay, when we go in, you stay quiet. We want him to notice you as little as possible. In fact, I won't even introduce you. I'll get him talking, get him to give us

permission to look around, then I'll distract him. I want you to nose around."

My adrenaline immediately spiked. "What am I looking for?"

"Anything and everything. Specifically, anything that looks interesting, anything you think looks out of place or stirs your curiosity. You're a smart kid. Trust your instincts, and you'll know it when you see it. You've got a knack for this stuff."

I glowed at his vote of confidence but wished I were as sure about my abilities as he was.

A loud, annoying buzzer sounded when we opened the office door. A moment later, an inner door swung open behind the counter and a disheveled man appeared. He wasn't quite old enough to be considered middle-aged, but he looked as if he'd passed his halfway point a long time ago. He was painfully thin, with a receding hairline, a ghostly pallor, and bloodshot eyes. He'd apparently forgotten to shave that morning—and maybe every morning for the past week.

He eyed us suspiciously but kept his mouth shut. We probably weren't his usual caliber of clientele. Or maybe he thought I was turning a trick and Novak was my john. Then again, maybe he wasn't thinking anything. After studying him for a moment, I decided the last seemed most likely.

"We're looking for Phillip Zaranski," Novak informed him.

"What for?" the man asked nervously. I don't suppose one gets asked for by name very often in his line of business.

"Are you Mr. Zaranski?" Novak countered.

“Maybe. Who’re you?”

“We’re looking into the murder of Ira Cohen.”

Novak was the master of evasion.

Zaranski screwed his face into a frown. “I thought you guys had the killer. The paper said his kid did it.”

“We’re tying up some loose ends. We understand Mr. Cohen worked here. Is that correct?” I was impressed at the way Novak allowed Zaranski to think we were cops without actually saying so.

“Yeah, if you could call it that. He sat at the desk a few nights a week, so I could have off.”

“Do you own the motel?”

“Me? Ha! Nah, it’s owned by some outfit out of Baltimore. I just manage the place.”

“Would you mind if we took a quick look around?”

He scowled. “What for? Do you have, like, a warrant or something?”

Novak laughed. “You’ve watched too much TV, Mr. Zaranski. We were hoping you’d be cooperative and we wouldn’t need anything like a warrant. After all, if you’ve got nothing to hide, what harm could it do?”

“Yeah, okay, I guess you’re right,” he conceded reluctantly. He raised a section of the counter and stepped out of the way to allow us back.

Novak gave me a slight signal towards the back room with his eyes before he turned to Zaranski. “Why don’t you take me through the sign-in process, step by step, and then show me the logs for the last week Mr. Cohen worked.”

I slipped into the back room practically unnoticed. It was as shabby and dirty as the rest of the place. An unmade bed sat in one corner. The opposite corner held a small, unsanitary looking kitchenette—barely more than a hotplate, microwave, and dorm-style refrigerator. A beat-up recliner was parked in front of a huge flatscreen TV—the only thing that looked new in the entire room—and a desk took up the rest of the space. I headed straight for the desk.

It was a large, metal, institutional style affair with three drawers down each side. On its scarred top, three security monitors sat amid a scattering of trash and paperwork. I took a closer look at the monitors. One showed a view of the front office, with Novak and Zaranski still bent over a ledger on the counter, another was trained on the back parking lot, and the last was pointed down at what I assumed was the back door.

I pulled open the first drawer on the left, but there was only a messy stack of unused receipt books, pens, pencils, rubber bands, and paper clips. The next held a series of unremarkable folders with labels like: receipts, bills, etc. I didn't take the time to go through them since they looked fairly ordinary. The next few drawers were much the same. The bottom right drawer, however, was locked. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. I suddenly understood what Novak meant when he said I'd know it when I saw it. There was something in that drawer.

I scanned the top of the desk again and my eyes fell on a set of keys partly hidden by a greasy fast-food wrapper. I glanced towards the door, through which I

could still hear the drone of Zaranski's voice, punctuated occasionally by questions from Novak.

I grabbed the keys, flipped through them quickly, and found a likely candidate, the only small key on the ring. It slipped easily into the lock. I almost let out a yelp of joy when I felt it turn. I slid the drawer open and my stomach dropped with disappointment. The drawer held a stack of *Hustler* magazines and a bottle of cheap whiskey. I pushed the *Hustlers* aside and felt the flutter of excitement return. Under the porn mags was a small remote control. Why would someone lock up a remote control?

I picked it up and examined the strange looking device. There was no numbered keypad, just a few unmarked, color coded buttons. I pointed it at the TV and hit one of the buttons. Nothing happened. Then I realized the security monitors had changed views. Two now looked into empty motel rooms, but the third showed a naked man sitting on the edge of a rumpled bed. An equally unclothed woman knelt on the floor in front of him, bobbing busily between his legs.

It took me a few seconds to figure out what I was looking at. At first, I thought I had switched to some porn channel. Slowly, it dawned on me that I was actually looking at three of the motel rooms. Someone had wired them with hidden cameras.

“What the hell are you doing?” Zaranski yelled from the door.

My heart leapt into my throat, and for one panic-stricken moment, I didn't know what to do or say. Then I realized that the remote control was out of sight in my lap, which meant he didn't know what I had discovered

just yet. My mind raced as I tried to decide if I should bluff and wait to tell Novak later, or confront Zaranski with the evidence.

I decided to go with my gut and take a risk. I held up the remote and watched the color drain from his face. Novak gave me a questioning look.

“He wired the motel rooms with hidden cameras,” I explained.

Zaranski looked wildly around the room as if seeking an escape route. Novak quickly clamped a hand on his shoulder, ending any thoughts of a hasty exit. Even though Zaranski was much younger, there was no doubt that Novak could stop him without so much as raising a sweat.

“I do believe that’s illegal, Mr. Zaranski,” Novak commented lightly.

“It wasn’t me,” Zaranski bleated. “I don’t even know what he’s talking about. Ira must have done it.”

“You don’t lie very well, Phil. May I call you Phil? You know the next logical step would be to fingerprint those cameras. Whose prints will we find? My guess is yours. Am I right?”

Zaranski gulped. “Look, it was just for security, right? Things kept disappearing out of the rooms.”

Novak laughed derisively. “Who’d want to steal anything from this dump? Your batting average just keeps getting worse and worse. Soon I’m not going to believe anything you say. Besides, the hidden cameras would still be totally illegal.

“Here’s how it’s going to work. You’re going to have a seat.” He steered Zaranski gently but firmly in the direction of the recliner. Zaranski collapsed into it almost

gratefully. “Then I’m going to pitch you a couple of questions. You’d better hit a home run or you’re going to be out of the game. Now, why were you and Ira squabbling? I’m betting it had something to do with those cameras. You can tell me if I’m right. If you’re a very good boy and tell us what we need to know, then maybe, just maybe, we’ll forget what we’ve seen here.”

“Squabbling, who was squabbling? Me and Ira got on famously. Like brothers we were.”

“Yeah, sure. We understand Ira was a real peach.” Novak pulled out his cell phone and started poking at it. From my vantage point, I could see it wasn’t even on. Zaranski couldn’t see that though.

“Who’re you calling?” Zaranski’s voice jumped several octaves.

“Well, you see, Phil, you just struck out. I’ll give you three guesses as to whom I’m calling, and the first two don’t count. Here’s a hint: if you guess the police, you’ll be right.”

“Wait! Wait! No, look! Okay, okay. I’ll talk. Just hang up.”

“You’ll tell us the truth this time? No more bullshit stories about how you and Ira were best friends forever?” Novak asked, the phone still in his hand.

“Yes. I’ll tell you.”

Novak dropped the phone back into his pocket. “Start talking. What were you fighting about?”

“We weren’t exactly fighting.” Novak reached back into his pocket. “No, really! We weren’t! Ira found the remote, just like the kid did. There wasn’t any fight, not like you’re thinking. He started blackmailing me. Said if I didn’t pay up, he’d turn me in to the police. The

son of a bitch was bleeding me dry, and it's not like I have a lot to start with, you know? I wouldn't be working here if I did."

"How long was this going on?"

"The blackmail? A couple of months, I guess. His demands started out kinda small, but he kept asking for more and more."

"And this made you mad?"

"Hell, yeah! Wouldn't you be mad?"

"Mad enough to take an ax to him to stop the blackmail?"

"What?" he screeched, his eyes bulging in a most unattractive manner. "Is that what you're trying to do—pin it on me? No fuckin' way! I'm a lot of things, but I'm no murderer. I didn't kill nobody!"

"Can you prove that?"

"Huh? How?"

"Where were you the night of the murder?"

"If Ira was home, then I was here. It was only the two of us that worked nights."

"And that'll check out?"

"Sure it will. You can ask the people who checked in that night."

"You can rest assured we will be asking them, and it better be just like you've said."

"It is. I swear."

"Too bad your word doesn't carry more weight, Mr. Zaranski. Come on, Killian. Let's go."

I dropped the remote into my pocket and took a final glance at the monitors before following Novak out. The couple must have finished their business, because the man was getting dressed and the woman was

counting through a handful of crumpled bills. Romance was alive and well at the Ease Inn.

The office door had barely closed, cutting off the obnoxious buzzing sound, before Novak had his cell phone out.

“Yeah, I need to speak to Sergeant Kaplan.” He waited for a few moments, then continued. “Hank, it’s Shane Novak. Get a couple of your boys and head over to the Ease Inn, and you might want to hurry.”

He quickly filled Kaplan in on the high points of what we had discovered. I pulled out the remote and waved it in front of him.

“Good work, kiddo,” he said, taking it from me. “We’ve got the remote, Hank. I’ll wait here for the first officer on the scene and leave it with him.”

As soon as he had ended the conversation, I protested, “You told Zaranski you wouldn’t call the police if he told us the truth.”

“I said maybe.” He gave a shrug and a crooked grin. “Besides, how do we know he told us the truth?”

I chuckled.

We waited until the first patrol car rolled up so that Novak could give the officer the remote, then we went back to Novak’s office. The rest of the afternoon passed uneventfully while I dealt with mundane paperwork from Novak’s official, bill paying cases.

Just as I was getting ready to leave for the day, Sergeant Kaplan knocked on the door and strolled in. “Your boss here?”

“Sure am,” Novak replied from his office door.

“You got a minute?”

“Come on in.”

“You, too,” the sergeant said to me as he passed.

I followed him in and dropped into the other armchair, since Kaplan had taken my usual seat. It felt strange to be sitting in a different place.

“You guys have been keeping me busy today,” Kaplan said with a mock stern expression.

“You're welcome,” Novak replied with a smirk. “I assume you're here with news about Zaranski?”

“The man's a moron,” Kaplan stated. “Not only did he have surveillance cameras wired into several of his most popular rooms, but he recorded the shows, too. He kept videos of his little Peeping Tom operation. I guess he was saving them for slow nights. We found a whole cache of them on his computer. If I were a betting man, I'd wager there will be a few local bigwigs sweating it out when this story breaks.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It's been an open secret for quite a while that some people of influence use that dump for, shall we say, personal amusement. It's one of the reasons we hadn't raided the place a long time ago. Our hands were pretty much tied. Now this is too big to ignore or cover up.”

“What about Zaranski's alibi for the night Cohen was killed?” Novak asked. “Did his story hold up?”

“Unfortunately, it did. We managed to get in touch with a couple who, according to the desk log, checked in around the time of the murder. They confirmed that Zaranski was at the desk.”

“So we're back to square one?” I was surprised to find I was more than a little disappointed.

“I never figured him for the job anyway,” Novak said with a shrug. “He doesn't have the guts to commit a

crime like that. He's more the slimy, secretive type." He looked me over, taking in my glum expression. "Cheer up, kiddo. You did great finding that remote."

Kaplan nodded. "And the hidden room in the hayloft. We've searched it and taken a few things in for evidence. Keep up the good work, but stay safe. I'll let you know if we get anything more from Zaranski."

"Thanks."

Kaplan left, and I turned back to Novak.

"So, where does that leave us, kid?" he asked.

"In your office, sir," I answered flippantly. He shot me a look that would have peeled paint off a Porsche, so I hurriedly added, "You mean on the case?"

"Yes. I meant on the case."

"Well, I guess we're nowhere."

His eyebrows shot up in tandem. I felt as if I had failed some test. "Nowhere?" he repeated in disbelief. "What do you mean 'nowhere'? Just because Zaranski has an alibi? That's what this is all about. It's a matter of elimination. We can cross Zaranski off the list, and we helped get a scumbag off the streets to boot."

"We have a list?"

"Hypothetically speaking."

"Well, hypothetically speaking, who else is on this list?"

Novak rolled his eyes. "You tell me."

I sighed. "I don't know. Nadine?"

He nodded. "Who else?"

I frowned. "Caleb, I guess. We still don't have any real reason to think he didn't do it."

"Very true. Anyone else?"

I thought hard, but couldn't come up with any more names. "Not really."

"What about Paige and Travis Haynes?"

"Why would they want to kill Ira Cohen?"

"I don't know. There's something about them that strikes me as off. You said he acted strange when you asked if he had children. It might be worth our time to look into them a little more closely."

"If you think so..."

"And then we have the mysterious stranger who met Caleb in the barn."

"You think he's a possible suspect?"

"Everyone's a possible suspect right now."

I grinned. "Even me?"

Novak fixed me with a mock stern look. "I don't know. Where were you on the night Ira Cohen was murdered?"

I giggled nervously as he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a stack of index cards. I had been in my bed sleeping, at least physically, but my strange dreams were still unexplained.

"What are those for?" I asked, pushing the nightmares from my mind.

"I sometimes use these to keep track of a case. They help me organize all the facts and see them in new ways." He jotted something down at the top of the first one. "Okay, what do we know about Ira Cohen?"

"We know he abused his son, nobody seems to have liked him very much, and someone hated him enough to chop him up with an ax."

"We also know he had a volatile relationship with Nadine Tingle, and he was blackmailing his boss Phil

Zaranski.” He pushed the first card aside. “What do we know about Ira and Zaranski?”

“What difference does it make? We know Zaranski didn’t do it.”

Novak looked up at me, and once again I felt like a particularly slow student. “First rule of the detection business: don’t ever take anything for granted, no matter how insignificant it may seem at the time. Don’t throw any fact away as useless until you have the whole picture. Something that seems of no consequence can have a huge impact on something else later down the road or take on a different meaning in the light of new information. Now, what do we know about Ira Cohen and Phillip Zaranski?”

Properly chastened, I started rattling off information. “We know Zaranski was secretly taping couples in their motel rooms in, um, compromising positions.”

“Positions that likely included missionary, doggie style, and sixty-nine,” he quipped.

I tried not to blush. “We know that Ira found out and was blackmailing Zaranski. Zaranski probably hated him enough to kill him.”

“But he has that pesky alibi. What about the videos?”

“What about them?”

“Ira knew Zaranski had wired the room, but did he know Zaranski was recording? And if so, did he look at the videos?”

“What difference would that make?”

“It could make a big difference. We know Ira was a blackmailer. He was blackmailing Zaranski, after all. If he recognized some of the people on the tapes...”

A light bulb went on over my head and I finished his thought. “...then Ira could have been blackmailing others as well!”

“And that would give these hypothetical blackmail victims a strong motive for murder. A blackmailer seldom stops at one victim. It’s a definite possibility. The question is, did he find the videos and view them? If so, was he brazen—or stupid—enough to actually try extorting money from powerful people?”

“Well, we know he wasn’t exactly a model citizen. He abused his son and blackmailed his boss. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“Nor would I.” He finished writing on another card and slid it to one side. “Who else is there?”

“Nadine Tingle.”

“Ah, yes, the charming Ms. Tingle. What do we know about her?”

I frowned. “Not much. Just that she was involved with Ira in some way, but apparently didn’t like him all that much.”

“Or that’s what she wants us to believe, anyway.”

“You think she’s lying to us?”

“I think there’s much more to Nadine Tingle than meets the eye. It would be a mistake to underestimate her. She’s a lot sharper than you might think. She revealed very little about her relationship with Ira when we spoke to her, yet you found out they had a very volatile relationship, to say the least. They had loud arguments, and she even busted his windshield with a

baseball bat at one point, indicating she's not opposed to acts of extreme violence. We should definitely talk to her again." He made notes as he rattled off information.

"Maybe you should talk to her. She thinks you're hunky." I gave him an innocent smile and gestured toward the card. "Should you write that down?"

Novak gave me an incredulous look and went on. "Next."

"What about Paige Haynes, the neighbor?"

"She's another one who hasn't been completely upfront with us. She's trying to protect Caleb, although at this point, I'm not sure what from. There were no toys in the yard, no signs of kids, and the husband reacted badly when you mentioned children. Maybe Paige Haynes thinks of Caleb as a son, perhaps the child she can't have."

I stared at him in awe. "You got all that from a five-minute conversation?"

"Observation, kid. That's what this business is all about. You have to keep your eyes and ears open at all times. You have good instincts and a mind like a steel trap, but unless you learn how to harness them and put them to use, they won't amount to a hill of beans. Just like any talent, you have to learn how to use it to its fullest potential. What about Caleb?"

It took me a second to shift gears and catch up with him. "Caleb. All we really know is that he ran away from the group home on the night his father was murdered. He won't say where he was between leaving there and getting picked up by the police on the boardwalk, other than that he was with a friend. He was apparently meeting someone in the barn fairly regularly.

Maybe the same person, maybe not. Everyone thinks of him as a loner with no friends, but he claims to have at least that one friend he stayed with when he ran away. And I guess we should mention that he was being abused by his father and was easily angry enough to kill him."

"And he was dating your ex. What was his name?"

"Asher? Are you saying he's a suspect?"

"Technically, yes."

"But he would never—"

"What if he thought he was protecting his vulnerable new boyfriend?"

"Asher would never. He isn't violent."

"I'll make a note of that."

Novak busily scribbled away, then leaned back and thought for a moment, rubbing his chin. He gathered up all the cards, pushed everything on his desk to one side, and beckoned me closer with a crooked finger. I moved to his side while he laid the cards out as if he were playing some game to which only he knew the rules.

A pattern began to form. It started at the top with a single card that had "Ira Cohen" printed on it in neat, careful letters. Below his name, Novak had written all the relevant facts we knew about him. Beneath the first card, branching out, were others bearing the names Caleb Cohen, Nadine Tingle, Phillip Zaranski, Travis and Paige Haynes, Asher, and one blank. Under certain names were cards with a single question written on them. Under Caleb's name, there were two questions. One read, "Where was he between the time he left and the time the police picked him up?" The other said, "Who

was he meeting in the barn?” Under Zaranski’s was a card that said, “Who else was Ira blackmailing?” Under Paige’s was, “Why is she protecting Caleb, and from what?”

Asher’s name on the card still bothered me, but I ignored it for the moment.

“What’s the blank one mean?” I asked.

“Our mystery man. You can see what I’m doing here, right? It’s like a fill-in-the-blank puzzle.”

“Right. These are the questions that we need to answer.”

“*Some* of the questions. There will be more before we’re finished, you can count on that. Most of the time, answering one question only raises a dozen more.”

“Do they ever all get answered?”

“Only in the books, kid.” He gestured towards his bookshelf. “We just do the best we can. Right now, these are the questions at the top of our list.” He scooped up the cards and tossed them back in the drawer. “That’s enough for today. You should have been on your way home thirty minutes ago.”

I glanced at my watch. “Uh oh. I’d better call Adam, or he’ll be worried. Or angry.”

“Angry? Why would he be angry? Just because you’re a little late?”

I shrugged. “He’s been angry about everything lately.”

“Anything you want to talk about?”

“Nah. It’s nothing.”

Novak patted me on the back. “Well get going. We’ll pick this up again tomorrow.”

I started for the door, pulling my cell phone out as I went.

“Oh, and Killian,” he called. I stopped and turned back. “You’re doing a great job. I’m really proud of you.”

Chapter 10

Novak was sitting at my desk when I entered the office the next morning. I was surprised to see him, considering that I'd had to use my key to open the door, which was usually unlocked if Novak was in.

He tapped a long, skinny cardboard box sitting on the desk. "If you're going to be going around asking questions, these might come in handy."

"What is it?"

"Open it and see."

I lifted the lid to find the box filled with business cards. I gave Novak a confused look before sliding one out.

"Oh, wow," I breathed. My name was printed in bold in the center of the card and under it, the words *Novak Investigations* and the office phone number.

Novak grinned. "I thought you might like them. I kept them simple since you're not officially a private investigator yet."

"Thank you."

"No problem." He stood up and gave me a pat on the shoulder. "Like I said, you're doing a good job so far. Oh, after you check the messages and do whatever it is you do in the mornings, come on into my office so we can plan our day."

I nodded before sitting down and turning on my computer. I was pleased with Novak's approval and thrilled with the business cards. They made me feel so grown up. I slipped several into my wallet and stored the box in my top drawer.

After checking the voicemail messages and our email account, I stuck my head into Novak's doorway. "Is now a good time?"

He looked up from the file he was reading and gestured towards my usual seat. "After you left last night, I thought of another person we should add to our list of suspects."

"Who?"

"You tell me."

"I have no idea."

"Think. There is one person we haven't given due consideration in our investigation thus far."

I racked my brain but came up empty. "I can't think of anyone."

"Here's a clue: it's someone we both overlooked because we accepted something Caleb told us without checking the veracity of his statement."

"Can't you just tell me?"

"Come on! Use your little gray cells, as Poirot would say."

I was getting a little annoyed with Novak's game. "We've talked to every single person we know of who could possibly have any bearing on the case, with the exception of this mystery guy who Caleb may or may not have been banging in the barn. But we can't have overlooked him, we don't even know who he is."

"Ever so eloquently phrased," he drawled, "but wrong nonetheless."

"We can't talk to Ira. He's dead!"

"You're getting warmer."

"Are we going to hold a séance?"

"No. The person I'm talking about isn't necessarily dead, although we've been led to believe he or she is."

"Caleb's mother?"

"Finally. I thought I was going to have to draw you a picture. Yes, I'm referring to Rachel Cohen, the wife of the late Ira Cohen and Caleb's mother."

"But Caleb said she was dead. Why would he lie to us about that?"

"Maybe he doesn't know he's lying."

"Huh?"

"Are you always this slow, or are you just having a bad day?"

I rolled my eyes and grinned. "Can we quit with the insults already?"

Novak heaved a dramatic sigh. "Fine, but I hope you realize you are ruining my fun. Ira Cohen told his young son that his mother had passed away, but we really only have Ira's word for that—and we know he wasn't exactly the most trustworthy individual."

"If she's alive, then where has she been all this time?"

"Aha! It would behoove us to find that out, wouldn't it?"

"Behoove?"

"Do I have to add the dictionary to your ever-growing list of assigned reading?"

"I thought we were done with the insults. I know what the word means, I just can't believe you used it in a sentence. Do you *know* she's alive, or is this just one of your hunches?"

"I don't know anything for sure; it's just a little idea that occurred to me last night. What would you suggest we do next?"

I thought for a minute before answering. I'd been zinged enough for one day and wanted to make sure I got the answer to his pop quiz right this time.

"Well, as I see it, there are three avenues we ought to follow." Novak's eyebrows arched slightly. "We need to check up on Paige and Travis Haynes, find out why Travis got so defensive when I brought up children. We also need to keep digging into Caleb's mystery guest. Is he a suspect or possibly an alibi for Caleb? And third, we need to find out if Rachel Cohen is alive or dead, and what happened to her either way."

He nodded approvingly. "Surprisingly sound thinking."

"I'm not finished," I added quickly. "We can't rule out Nadine. Just because we know she left hours before Ira was killed doesn't mean she couldn't have gone back later and made firewood out of him."

With a proud smile, he began to applaud. "There's the deviously brilliant mind I knew existed in that pretty little head of yours."

I batted my eyes, "So you think I'm pretty?"

He ignored me. "So which of those avenues do you wish to explore next?"

I considered my choices. "I want to question Caleb again."

"And ask him what?"

"For one, who was he meeting in the barn loft?"

"An excellent question, although one I doubt he'll be too eager to answer. I'll call Kaplan and see if he can set up a meeting this afternoon."

"Why can't I go now?"

"Because I have other cases, you know—paying ones that fund your exorbitant salary."

I chuckled. "Burger flippers at Mickey D's make more than I do."

"But they don't get the glamour and excitement of being a P.I.," he teased. "Speaking of which, those reports aren't going to type themselves."

I dutifully returned to my desk feeling more than a little anxious about my coming talk with Caleb. The paperwork felt even more tedious than usual, my mind stubbornly locked on the case. Of everyone involved, Caleb fascinated me the most. He was at the heart of it all, yet we knew so little about him. What drove him? Could he really have murdered his father in cold blood?

I could barely wait to see him.

For my second visit ever to the Juvenile Detention Center, I went alone. Kaplan had called ahead, so it was surprisingly easy for me to see Caleb. All I had to do was tell them who I wanted to see and sign in.

Once again, a guard led me to the unwelcoming cinder block and metal visiting room. This time, I arrived before Caleb. I sat down on one of the cold metal chairs and waited. It was about ten minutes before Caleb made his appearance, looking sullen and pale. He seemed surprised to see me. A greenish purple bruise surrounded his left eye, and his lower lip was swollen and split.

I gasped. "Wow, you look like hell!"

"Gee, thanks. You really know how to make a guy feel special," he growled sourly. He slouched down in the chair across from me. It was pretty clear he didn't want to talk to me.

"Did they do anything to the guys who beat the shit out of you?"

"Are you kidding? Nobody gives a damn. I'm just a fucking faggot who chopped his dad up with an ax."

"Did you?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Did I what?"

"Did you chop your dad up with an ax?"

He sat for a minute without moving. I held my breath, and the only sound was the suddenly loud ticking of the clock on the wall. Then he calmly stood up and started for the door.

"Caleb, wait!" I called. "I need to hear your answer. Please."

He stood for another few seconds with his back to me, then slowly turned around and came back. He planted his hands on the metal table and leaned in.

"I was five years old when my mom died. I don't really remember her." His raspy voice was so low that I could barely make out his words. "My first clear memory is of my dad getting mad at me because I'd spilled a glass of juice. He hit me so hard I flew all the way across the room. For years, I lived never knowing what I would do that would earn me my next beating. His excuses started getting weaker and weaker, until he didn't need any reason at all. It was a complimentary gift. 'Thanks for staying; here's your beating.' Do you have any idea what it's like to live your whole life—twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, three-hundred-and-sixty-five days a

year—in constant fear? Never knowing when you would turn around and get the shit beat out of you for no reason?

"For a long time I hoped—I *prayed*—that someone—*anyone*—would do something—*anything*—to get me out of there. 'Just make it stop,' I'd beg God. It didn't take too long to realize that nobody was going to do anything. Nobody cared, and God doesn't exist. I was on my own.

"I started working to get myself out of there as soon as possible. I thought if I could just make it to graduation, I could get a scholarship and go away. I worked my ass off to get straight A's. You'd think he'd be proud of me for that at least, wouldn't you? Well, he wasn't. He resented me, said I thought I was better than he was. So he beat me more. The only way I could avoid the beatings was to avoid him. You can only hide so long before you have to come out for food or to go to the bathroom. He'd be waiting. And then it would be even worse, like he'd been saving it up.

"You want to know if I chopped my dad into little pieces and roasted him like a pig? God, I fantasized about killing him a million times. I killed him over and over again, a different way each time. It was like a game: How Many Ways Can I Kill Daddy? Sometimes I'd finish him off fast, just to get him out of my life, but sometimes I'd drag it out, torture him until he begged me to kill him. But you know what? When it came down to it, I never did anything except hide and take the beatings. You wanna know why? Because I'm a pussy—a weak, scared, worthless piece of shit. I don't know who killed

my father and I don't really give a damn, but I wish to hell I *had* done it."

He slumped back against the wall and slowly slid down to the concrete floor, his chest heaving and his eyes shining with hatred and pain.

I sat for a minute, trying to catch my breath. I'd never been in the presence of such intense emotion, not even when I had been face-to-face with the guy who wanted to kill me. Insanity is different from pure hatred. I didn't believe Caleb was evil, just horribly damaged.

"I...I don't know what to say."

Caleb's eyes slowly closed, releasing me from the pull of his gaze. "There's nothing to say. That's my life, shitty as it is. I'm a worthless punching bag and that's all I'll ever be."

"You're not worthless! Your dad is gone now. The abuse is behind you." I was suddenly desperate for him to believe it, to believe it myself.

His eyes opened again, but the hatred was gone, leaving only the pain. "Behind me?" He touched the bruise on his face. "It'll never be behind me." There was a quiet finality in his voice, as if this was something he'd accepted.

"You can move on. I'm going to get you out of here."

"And then what? You'll whisk me off to Never Never Land where I can live with the other Lost Boys? You'll kiss my boobos and make them all better? It doesn't work like that in the real world, Killian. Thanks anyway, though."

"So you'd rather stay in jail for something you didn't do?"

He gave me a strange look that I couldn't decipher. "What are my options? One foster home after another until I get kicked out of the system at eighteen? I'll just be another statistic."

"You don't know that. It could be different for you."

"And I suppose you're going to help me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'm going to find out who killed your father."

"Good luck. The police seem pretty damn sure it was me."

"We'll find you an alibi."

His eyes skittered away. "I told you I don't have one."

"Then we find the real killer."

"And then we'll spin straw into gold."

"God, you've got a shitty attitude. I'm trying to help here."

He slumped a little lower. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Good. How about you answer a few questions?"

"Like what?"

I took a deep breath and decided to start with an easy question first. "What was your relationship like with Travis and Paige Haynes?"

He frowned. "They're real nice, why?"

"Were they protective of you?"

"What do you mean protective? They did their best to watch out for me. There wasn't much they could do. They're the only adults who ever gave a damn about me. They would have let me stay with them, but Dad

knew they helped me. That was always the first place he looked."

"So what did they do for you?"

"Paige gave me food sometimes. Dad wasn't much on grocery shopping, and I never had any money. Travis talked to me a lot. They even gave me a Christmas present last year, a sleeping bag."

"Is that the one you kept in the barn loft?" His eyes narrowed, but he didn't answer. "I found it. I've been up there." Still no response. "I found the magazine, too, and the lube. Oh yeah, and the condoms. So what were they for, anyway? Were you meeting someone out there?"

He glared at me silently.

"Look, Caleb, I know you hid out in the barn. I can't say I blame you. I also know you met someone out there fairly regularly. I need to know who it was."

"There wasn't anyone." He spoke through clenched teeth.

"We know there was. He was seen climbing into the barn after you."

"There wasn't anyone," he repeated stubbornly.

"Caleb, this could be important. We need to talk to everyone involved. Maybe this person can give you an alibi. We could get you out of here."

"Find another way."

"Caleb, you're not being reasonable. We need to talk to this guy."

"I told you, there isn't any guy."

"I found a used condom! I guess you used it with yourself?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"This is crazy! How can I help you if you won't help me?"

"Then don't help me. It wasn't my idea anyway. Take it up with Asher." He stood up and walked to the door, pounding on it. "We're done here."

"Caleb, please. How can I trust you if you won't tell me the truth?"

"I guess you can't," he replied softly as the guard opened the door. He walked out, and the door slammed shut with an echoing crash.

I was very discouraged after my disastrous interview with Caleb. Not only had I failed to learn anything of significance, I had angered him to the point that he had walked out on me. I dreaded telling Novak of my ineptitude, but, to my surprise, he was very understanding.

"It happens to the best of us, kid," he assured me. "It's not your fault that he refuses to help us. It just makes me wonder what he's hiding."

"Do you think he's protecting someone?"

"Either that or he's guilty as hell."

I was driving home when I had one of my sudden brainstorms. I turned in the direction of my old neighborhood. A few minutes later, I pulled into Asher's driveway and jumped out of the car.

I hadn't spoken to Asher since the day Novak agreed to take the case. When I had last seen him, he'd been pretty upset that Caleb hadn't mentioned his other friend. I was pretty sure Asher wouldn't be any happier about the news that Caleb had been secretly meeting some guy in the barn. I'd have to tread carefully, but I

needed to find how much Asher knew. He might have spoken to Caleb.

Besides, I told myself, Asher deserves to know the truth.

Asher answered the door. Although I couldn't read his expression, he didn't seem overly excited to see me.

"Hi," was all he said.

"Hey. There've been some developments with Caleb's case. Can we talk for a minute?"

He nodded and stepped outside. He walked into the backyard, where he sat down at the picnic table. I followed and took a seat next to him. "Have you gotten in to see Caleb yet?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I've been to the detention center twice. They keep saying I'm not on his approved list, but they won't tell me how to get on it."

"I'll see what I can do. Maybe Sergeant Kaplan can get you added."

He glanced over at me. "Have you seen Caleb again?"

"Yeah. I was there this afternoon."

"How is he?"

"Uh, not so good actually. He has a black eye and a busted lip."

Asher's shoulders rose up as he visibly tensed. "And I bet nothing is being done about it."

I shrugged. "From what he said, no, nothing is being done."

"God! Can't you do something to get him out?"

"I'm trying, but he's not helping."

"What do you mean?"

"He won't tell me anything. He still won't say who he stayed with after he ran away, and now he won't tell me who he was meeting in the barn."

"Meeting in the barn? What do you mean?"

"I, um, found out that Caleb was meeting someone in the barn behind his house."

Asher shook his head in confusion. "How did you find that out?"

"Well, first I found his hideout in the loft. There were some, uh, signs that he wasn't always alone up there."

"What signs?"

"There were...condoms."

"So? That doesn't mean anything."

"Used condoms."

Asher's jaw tightened.

"A neighbor confirmed that she often saw him sneak out to the barn, and soon after someone else would slip in to join him. She said it looked like a boy."

"Why did you tell me that?" Asher was staring at the tabletop, his hands balled into fists at his side.

"What?"

He still wouldn't look at me. "Did you come here just to rub it in?"

"Asher...No! I was hoping you'd talked to Caleb and he'd told you something. This mystery guy could be important. Maybe it's the same person Caleb stayed with when he ran away."

"I think you just wanted me to know that Caleb was having sex with someone."

"What? No! Why would I—"

I reached out to touch his arm, but he leapt to his feet and turned towards me. "You just can't stand it that I've moved on, can you?"

"Huh?" I stood up too. This wasn't going well.

"You don't want me, but nobody else can have me, either. Is that it?"

"I never said—"

"You didn't have to. You can just drop the whole 'injured innocence' act. And you can drop dead, too, while you're at it. I'm sorry I ever asked you to help."

"Asher, I—"

"Save it, Killian. Goodbye." He spun around and stormed into the house, leaving me gawking after him. How had things gone so wrong?

I am not having a good day, I reflected as I climbed back into my car.

I thought of a hundred different things I could have done differently, could have said to Asher. Unfortunately, I was lying on my bed later that night staring up at the ceiling when those pearls of wisdom occurred to me.

"Damn, damn, damn," I muttered to myself.

"There's more damning going on in here than at a Baptist tent meeting," Kane said from the doorway, causing me to jump.

I glared at him. "I didn't hear you come up the stairs. When did you get back anyway? I thought you were at your mom's."

"A week was plenty. I talked Mom into bringing me home early."

"Was it a bad visit?"

"Not bad, exactly, just...not great. I don't fit in there the way I used to. My old friends and I have grown apart. It's like I don't even know them anymore. Mom still treats me the same as she did when I was thirteen, and everything I look at in the old house just makes me think of Seth. Nothing feels like home. My life is here now, not there."

I nodded. "That makes sense."

He smiled, seemingly happy that I understood. He crossed the room and dropped onto his bed. "So...I'm just guessing here, but I'd say you seemed a little upset when I came in."

"I don't want to talk about it," I sighed.

"Come on, what's wrong? Is the case not going well?"

"As a matter of fact, the case isn't going anywhere, but that's not my biggest problem."

"Then what is?"

"Asher."

"Oh, guy trouble. Sorry, can't help you much there. I'm probably the only person in this house who can't."

"It's not like there's anything anyone can do anyway, including me."

"I thought you guys were done."

"I still don't want to talk about it."

"Okay."

"I mean, he came to me and asked me to help Caleb. I didn't even want to do it! He talked me into it, then, when I start finding stuff he doesn't want to know, he gets mad at me."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"It's not my fault Caleb was cheating on him. Can you believe Asher actually accused me of only telling him so that I could rub it in?"

"Um, did you?"

"Of course not!"

Kane shrugged. "Then what do you care what he thinks?"

"He actually said I was just jealous because he's moved on!"

"Are you?"

"No!"

"Okay then."

"Why would I be jealous of Caleb? He's a liar, a cheater, and possibly a murderer."

"So you don't care that Asher is dating someone else?"

"No. I mean, I don't know. Maybe a little."

"Maybe you need to move on too."

"I'm trying. It would be a whole lot easier if I hadn't taken Caleb's case. Then I wouldn't have to see Asher."

"So stop working on the case. It's not like you're getting paid."

"But...but..."

"But what?"

"I need to know what happened."

Kane rolled his eyes. "Then quit whining about it."

"I wasn't whining!"

"Trust me, you were."

"Just shut up."

"You're the one who said he didn't want to talk about it, then wouldn't stop talking about it."

"Well, I've stopped now."

Kane looked at me for a minute, then came over to my bed and sat down next to me. "Don't let this get to you, Killian. If it becomes too much, drop it. It's not worth the grief. I know I can be a smartass sometimes, but if you need to talk, I'm here for you."

I bit my lip, then sighed. "I'm okay. I just needed to vent. Thanks."

"Anytime, Whiny."

I hit him with my pillow.

"Okay, so we ran into a few dead ends yesterday," Novak said the next day as he paced back and forth in his office. "That just means we take a step back, regroup, and devise a new plan of attack."

"I'm a failure as a detective," I groaned.

I was slouched dejectedly on the odious sofa. Overcoming my irrational fear of the ugly piece of furniture had been my way of compensating for my lack of control over the case. At least that was how I diagnosed the situation.

"Oh, stop. So you hit a few walls. Deal with it. We can't get around the walls, so we'll just go over them, under them, or through them—whatever it takes."

"How do we do that?"

"That's not the most important consideration right now."

"So you don't know, either?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying that right now we've got more important walls to scale."

I let loose my frustration. "Why are we talking about walls so much? Are we construction workers now? Who's paying for all these walls?"

He threw me a deadly look and went on. "I have two possibly important pieces of information that we need to look into. After our talk yesterday morning, I did a little research into Travis and Paige Haynes. It seems my hunch was right. They have no children—or I should say they *no longer* have any children."

"No longer...you mean..."

"They had a son. He would have been ten this year. He died when he was two."

"Oh my God, that's horrible."

"It gets worse. Apparently, he died from injuries resulting from physical abuse at his daycare center."

"Around here?"

"No. This all happened in New Jersey. The caregiver was convicted. They moved down here after the trial was over."

"I can't say I blame them for wanting to get away."

"And yet...did they really get away?"

"What do you mean?"

"They moved right next door to another child abuser."

The implications became clear. Travis and Paige Haynes suddenly had a very sound motive for murder.

"Yes indeed," Novak agreed as he read the dawning on my face.

"Do you think one of them killed Ira?"

"It's a possibility, but right now we don't have any evidence, only a guess. We don't know if they did

anything except try to aid Caleb in any way they could. It certainly warrants more investigation, though."

"Paige Haynes already admitted they were home the night Ira was killed. That probably means they don't have an alibi."

"We should still check. Maybe they had company that would be able to vouch for their whereabouts on the night in question."

"So we should talk to them again?"

"I think it would be a good idea, and from the sound of things, maybe we'd better try for Mrs. Haynes."

"What about the other piece of information? You said there were two."

"Ah, yes. Rachel Cohen is not dead."

I sat up with sudden interest. "Way to bury the lead! You know for sure that she's alive?"

"Not for sure, no, but I think it's very likely she's still alive. I know someone who works at the county records office. They did a search for me and there are no deaths listed for a Rachel Cohen in the salient time period and no estate settlements."

"Couldn't she have died somewhere else?"

"Possibly, but if her husband was still living here, her will would have been settled here. Since there's no record of that, I suspect Mrs. Cohen is most decidedly among the living."

"Then where is she?"

"That's what I don't know."

"How do we find out?"

"The hard way, I'm afraid."

"What do you mean?"

"This is where things get tedious, and you're going to have to shoulder the bulk of the burden yourself. I have to concentrate on my paying clients. I'll help you out as much as possible, give you some tips and advice, but you're going to do all the work. It'll be great training for you. The best way to learn something is to just jump in and get your hands dirty."

I looked at him doubtfully. "What will I be doing exactly?"

"Research, mostly. Boring, dull, monotonous research. Basically, you'll be making lots and lots of phone calls. Talk to everyone who ever knew Rachel Cohen and find out everything they knew about her. Go door to door, if necessary. The trail is pretty cold so this won't be easy, especially if she doesn't want to be found. It's a safe bet she changed her name. I think we can also assume she hasn't been using any of her former ID cards, but I can check those avenues just to make sure."

"What do you mean?"

"Motor vehicle records, Social Security number—that sort of thing," Novak rattled off.

"We have her Social Security number?"

"Well, no, but if we're lucky it might be in the motor vehicle records."

"This sounds pretty hopeless."

"Oh, we'll find her. It may take a lot of work, and there's a chance it won't be of any relevance to the case. The question is, is it worth the effort?" He raised an eyebrow in question.

"What do I do first?"

"It would be nice if we knew her maiden name. I can probably pull that up online from vital records. Then

I can start the process of searching for possible aliases using combinations of her first, middle, and maiden names. Statistically, that's what women use most often when they change their identities. Of course, she may have changed it to something completely different, in which case we'll come up with zip. Meanwhile, why don't you head over to the newspaper office and see if you can talk to the reporter who's covering the Cohen case. No sense going over the same territory twice. There's a chance he's already looked into the former Mrs. Cohen. Maybe we'll get lucky."

"He'll let me look at his files?"

"Not bloody likely. You'll have to ask questions and hope he's cooperative."

"And if he's not?"

He shrugged. "We'll be forced to be creative. Now stop asking questions and get going."

I stood to leave. "I somehow thought it would all be more exciting than this."

"Welcome to the glamorous world of the private eye, kid. This is what it's really all about, drudge work behind a computer screen. Of course, maybe you'd rather take my place. I'm getting ready to go on a high-speed chase down Route 50 while hanging out the window shooting wildly at the car behind me."

I shot him a dirty look and left him laughing at his desk.

I pushed open the tinted glass door leading into the lobby of *The Delmarva Times* office building. *The Times* was the region's largest local newspaper. The lobby was sparsely furnished, with just two chairs—one

of which was occupied by a dark-haired guy tapping away on his phone. My eyes landed on an intercom button mounted on the wall, accompanied by a sign instructing visitors to press it to. So I did.

An elegant older woman came to greet me. Her bright blue eyes peered at me over half-moon glasses, and her silver bob contrasted strikingly with her perfectly tanned face. She wore a tailored blue blouse, gray herringbone skirt, and minimalist jewelry—professional and timeless. Her name tag read 'Rose Mitchell.'

"Hi, there. How can I help you?"

Her speaking voice and smile were quite pleasant. I decided she was the ideal receptionist.

I couldn't resist smiling back. "Hi, my name is Killian Kendall. I work for Novak Investigations."

"How nice." Her tone made it clear she'd never heard of us.

"We're working on the Cohen murder, and I was wondering if I could speak to the reporter who's been covering the case for the paper."

Her expression told me all I needed to know about the chances that would happen. I nearly turned and walked out.

"That would be William Walters. Why don't you wait right here while I go see if he can spare a few minutes. Do you have a card I can give him?"

I proudly handed her one of my brand-new cards, and she disappeared through an inner door.

As soon as she was out of the room, the guy in the chair said, "He won't talk to you."

"Huh?" was my witty reply.

He glanced up from his phone, his eyes quickly looking me up and down, then stood with a brilliant smile that was all white teeth and dimples.

I hadn't paid him much attention when I'd entered, but I belatedly realized he was quite cute. Slim and about five foot ten, he had straight brown hair that he wore medium length and parted down the center. He'd made an effort to comb it back, but it had exerted its own will and flopped forward into his dark brown eyes. He pushed it back impatiently with a reflexive gesture.

"He won't talk to you. Walters is a notorious jerk."

"Oh. Well, I guess it was a long shot anyway." I shrugged awkwardly. Who was this guy?

"Did you say you're working for Novak Investigations? Does that mean you're a P.I.?"

"Something like that. I guess you could say I'm an apprentice P.I."

"That's awesome." I was surprised by his enthusiasm. "Our jobs aren't that different. We're both searching for the truth, just for different reasons."

"What is your job?" I asked.

For a second, he seemed surprised, but then he laughed. "Oh yeah, I guess that would help, huh? I'm Micah Gerber. I'm a reporter here."

"Oh. Nice to meet you."

"You too. Look, when Rose comes back and tells you Walters won't talk to you—because she will—meet me in the parking lot." Before I could even formulate a response, he was gone.

I was still processing our brief but confusing exchange when Rose reappeared.

"I'm sorry." Her expression was genuinely apologetic. "I'm afraid Mr. Walters is a little...er...tied up at the moment and can't talk to you."

"Oh. Is there a better time to talk to him? I can come back."

"No. I don't think there is ever a good time to talk to Mr. Walters." She carefully kept her face without expression.

"Oh, okay. Well, thanks for asking."

"I'm sorry," she apologized again as I turned to leave.

I gave her a reassuring smile. "It's not your fault."

True to his word, Micah was waiting for me outside. He fell into step next to me as I walked to my car.

"He wouldn't talk to you, huh?"

"Rose said he was too busy."

"Too busy, my ass. He's just a self-important, egotistical, over-inflated blowhard who won't lower himself to talk to anyone except to cut them down."

"I take it you two don't get along," I commented wryly.

"Does it show?" he asked in mock concern.

"Just a bit."

"Only a bit? I'll have to use stronger language next time."

I laughed. "So, is this just general dislike, or is there a personal reason behind your carefully hidden animosity?"

"Sheesh, and I thought reporters were nosy."

I blushed. "You're right, that was nosy. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"I was just kidding. It's okay. I'm the low guy on the totem pole around here—new to the job, fresh out of journalism school, and fairly young. You could say I'm cutting my teeth in this position, or you could if I had any teeth, which so far I don't. Not really. And mostly because of Walters."

I leaned against my car. "What do you mean?"

"Walters has been here forever. I think he probably reported Adam and Eve's exile from Eden. He's survived about a half dozen different editors, which gives him some sort of seniority. He has a strong dislike for anyone under thirty and especially young guys right out of college." He started pacing as he became more and more worked up. "He always says, 'Just because you went to some fancy-schmancy school doesn't make you a reporter. It has to be born in you, and, trust me, it's not in you.' He makes sure I get the shittiest assignments. I never have a chance at anything good, so I can't prove myself."

"That must be frustrating," I sympathized.

"You'd better believe it. Meanwhile, the guy's a hack. If he was actually any good, he would have moved to a bigger paper long ago. He's just a big fish in a small pond. Just once I'd like to scoop him, show everyone that I really am a good journalist."

"And humiliate him in the process?"

"Icing on the cake, my friend, icing on the cake," he replied with a cheeky grin. He joined me against the car.

I couldn't help but like my talkative new acquaintance. He was charming, confident, and funny—

not to mention drop-dead gorgeous. The only thing I couldn't figure out was what he wanted from me.

"So, why did you ask me to meet you in the parking lot?"

His smile faded as he suddenly became serious. "I have a proposal."

I batted my eyes. "But we've only just met!"

He snorted. "Not that kind of proposal. At least, not yet. What I'm suggesting is more of a...mutually beneficial arrangement."

"What kind of arrangement?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"I'll get you the information you need. I'll wait until Walters leaves for the day and go through his files. I know where he keeps the ones for his active stories. They're locked up, of course, but I also know where he keeps his spare key. I'll make copies of the relevant info and lock everything back up just the way I found it. He'll never know."

"Uh huh, and what do you get out of it? You said it was mutually beneficial."

"You mean besides the satisfaction of knowing I screwed Walters over?"

"Yes, besides that. I get the feeling that there's a rather big 'but' coming."

He spun around, twisting to look at his posterior. "Looks fine to me."

I tended to agree, but thought it best not to say so.

"Okay, okay, seriously," he went on. "It's simple, really. You get the better end of the deal."

"Why do I feel like you're trying to sell me a used car?"

"No, it's true! All I want is information. I want to be in on the rest of the investigation."

"What?"

"I want to be kept abreast of things, maybe even be involved, although that isn't a deal breaker."

"I dunno..." I wasn't sure how Novak would feel about a deal like that.

"Come on. These kinds of arrangements are made all the time. It's an exchange of information, a give and take, cooperation. How else are you going to get what you need?"

I hesitated.

"What do you have to lose?"

"Well..."

He sensed my weakening and pounced. "Just tell me what you need to know, and I'll hand it to you on a platter."

I sighed, and he grinned triumphantly. He knew he'd won.

"Okay. I need to know everything there is about Rachel Cohen, Ira Cohen's wife and Caleb Cohen's mother. Specifically, what her maiden name was, when she was last known to be alive, if anyone has any idea where she is—that sort of thing."

He frowned. "Hold on, I thought she was dead." Obviously, he'd been keeping up with the case.

"If she is, then we need some proof of it: death notice, obituary, whatever. Vital Statistics has no record of her death, so we're thinking she still might be alive."

"Really? Fascinating. I can't believe no one fact checked that. If she's alive, where's she been all this time? And why did she leave in the first place?"

"That's what we're trying to find out. We know Ira Cohen was abusive to Caleb, so it's possible that he abused her, too, and she ran to escape it."

"And left her kid behind?"

I shrugged.

"Okay..." He sounded a little less enthusiastic than he had before. Maybe the seriousness of the situation was starting to sink in. "I'll see what I can come up with. It may take me a while to go through his files. You might have to give me a few days."

"Why don't I give you my number, and you can call me when you have something?"

He perked up. "I like that plan."

He handed me his phone and I added my name and number, then handed it back. He glanced down at the screen, then looked back up with a charming—and disarming—smile. "So, Killian, is this your personal or work number?"

My heart skipped a beat as I tried to figure out whether he was flirting with me or if that was just his personality. "Work," I finally managed.

He pretended to pout. "Your cell would be even better, though, right?"

He was definitely flirting. He held the phone out again while giving me puppy dog eyes.

I hesitated for a second, then took it and added my cell number.

He smiled again as I returned his phone, and my knees felt a little weak.

"Perfect. I'll text you right now so you have my number," he said with a little wink as he tapped away at his screen.

"Uh, thanks," I said, brilliantly.

He glanced up. "My pleasure. I look forward to working with you."

I nodded as my phone buzzed in my pocket, then turned to open my car door.

"Talk to you soon, Killian," he called, backing away.

"Yeah, soon," I repeated.

I dropped into the driver's seat and took a deep breath. I realized I was looking forward to his call—and not just because of the case.

Chapter 11

Micah Gerber was still on my mind as I drove home from work that afternoon. I was fairly certain he'd been flirting with me, but part of me wondered if I was just reading too much into it. Maybe he was just using me to get a scoop. Or maybe he wanted a scoop of me.

Those thoughts were still running through my head as I pulled into the driveway and turned off my car.

I opened the front door of the house only to be greeted by an exuberant Steve, who grabbed me in a bear hug and swung me around like I weighed nothing.

"Uh...good to see you too," I wheezed.

He laughed and sat me down. "They accepted my offer! You're looking at the proud owner of one of the finest examples of 19th century architecture in the state!"

"That's great! Congratulations, Steve."

"Don't go anywhere! We're going out to celebrate. Adam, Kane, Killian's home. Let's go."

Kane came clattering down the stairs as Adam padded into the hallway barefoot and wearing his working glasses. "I'm in the middle of a project that I need to finish tonight. You guys go on without me."

Steve frowned. "Adam, it's a celebration dinner. It won't be much of a celebration without you. I'd really like you to come. I promise not to keep you out late. The job can wait a couple of hours, can't it?"

"Fine," Adam said with a sigh. "Let me get my shoes on."

We drove to the Cactus Café, a Mexican restaurant that was a favorite of ours. It was an unpretentious, intimate place with great food, live music,

and the cheesiest decorations you can imagine. Purple and pink sequined sombreros hung on the brightly painted walls between papier-mâché burros and strings of plastic chili pepper lights. We went there often enough that the waitresses knew us by sight, and when they heard we were celebrating, they brought us a round of sangria on the house.

Steve rattled on excitedly about his new acquisition as we munched tortilla chips and homemade salsa while waiting for our entrées. Adam was noticeably quiet. Kane and I tried to cover for his conversational absence by being overly effusive, but it was still painfully obvious. Steve's enthusiasm began to flag as the tension built. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore.

"You know, Adam, you could at least pretend to be a little excited for Steve."

Adam slowly raised his eyes to mine, his face completely expressionless and his gaze somewhat bleary. I realized the pitcher of sangria was almost empty, as was Adam's glass. I hadn't touched the stuff, and Steve's glass was still nearly full. Had Adam drunk the whole thing that quickly?

"Killian, it's okay," Steve interjected quickly.

"No, it's not okay," I argued. "This is really important to you, and he's barely said two words all night. He didn't even want to come. I'd like to know what his problem is."

"*My* problem?" Adam asked carefully. Fueled by alcohol and rising frustration, a fire was starting to glow in his eyes.

"Yes. What exactly is your problem?"

"You mean besides the fact that you're off investigating a violent murder?"

"This isn't about me or my job. Tonight's supposed to be about Steve."

"Yes. Let's throw a party for Steve and his dream home."

Steve frowned. "Maybe this was a mistake."

"For God's sake," I snapped, "what's wrong with you? This *is* his dream!"

"Yes, this is *his* dream. *His* dream! Not mine. Yet he's expecting me to just drop *my* life, move out of *my* home, give up *my* business, and for what? *For what?*" he shouted, and several people cast nervous looks our way. The guitar player continued strumming obliviously.

Steve looked as if he had been slapped. "I thought when I moved in with you that we would share our lives. I thought it was *our* house, *our* dreams. I've never expected you to give up anything. Maybe it would be better if you just stayed in *your* house."

"Maybe it would," Adam snarled.

Kane's eyes were darting back and forth nervously, and I was suddenly regretting that I opened the floodgate. "Hey, guys, maybe you should calm down before you say something you'll regret."

"I will not calm down, damn it!" Adam growled through gritted teeth. "I'm sick and fucking tired of being calm while my life spirals out of control. I don't feel calm, and I'll be damned if I'm going to pretend to be calm just to keep from embarrassing you."

He stood up abruptly, shoving the table back and toppling his chair. Steve's water tipped over, sending a cascade of cold liquid into his lap, making him leap to

his feet as well. This time even the guitarist took notice and stopped playing, an astonished look on his face.

The owner of the restaurant, a barrel-chested, animated little man, came rushing from the back as Adam stormed out of the restaurant. He approached our table with a concerned expression and fluttering hands. "Is everything okay?"

"Apparently not." Steve pulled his wallet out and tossed a wad of cash onto the table. "That should cover everything. Sorry for the disturbance." He followed Adam out the door.

"I'm so sorry," I mumbled, my face hot with embarrassment as I rushed to make my exit, Kane close on my heels.

Adam was already in the car by the time we got outside. Steve was staring across the parking lot, his jaw tight and his hands clenched at his side. I laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" He shook his head angrily and turned to go back inside. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"I'm calling a cab," he muttered darkly.

I watched him walk inside, then ran across the parking lot to the car, which Adam had idling. I tapped on the window, and he lowered it without looking at me.

"Maybe you shouldn't drive," I started.

"Get in."

"No. I think you've had too much to drink. Let me drive."

"I'm fine. Get in."

"I'm not getting in unless you let me drive."

"Fine. You can come home with Steve, then. Kane, are you getting in?"

Kane gave me a panicked look, and I shook my head no. "He'll come with me and Steve," I said firmly.

"Fine," Adam seethed. He put the window up and threw the car into reverse. I jumped back and watched in tight-lipped frustration.

"What just happened?" Kane asked, his voice a little shaky.

"Hell if I know."

We were still standing in the parking lot when Steve came back out. He looked surprised to find us there. "What are you guys doing here? Where's Adam?"

"He, uh, left us." Steve stared at me in disbelief. "I told him to let me drive since he'd been drinking and he refused."

Steve sighed and threw an arm around each of our shoulders. "We can share a cab."

The ride back to the house was very quiet. There wasn't much to say, and Steve seemed lost in his own thoughts. When we arrived at the house, Kane and I started for the door, but I realized Steve wasn't following us. I turned to find him walking slowly towards his truck.

"Aren't you coming in?"

He shook his head. "I think we all need some time to cool off."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure yet. A hotel. A friend's. Don't worry about it."

"Steve...I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I should have just kept my big mouth shut."

He shrugged. "It was bound to happen sooner or later. Maybe it's about time we got everything out in the open."

I bit my lip. "Yeah, but what's going to happen now?"

He gave me an unconvincing smile. "Don't worry about it, Kill. Things will work out for the best. You just have to believe that."

I nodded and watched while he got into his vehicle and left. With a sigh, I turned and went inside. Adam had shut himself in his bedroom, and I decided it would be best for both of us if I just left him alone.

I thought about the fight long into the night, wondering if Adam and Steve would break up or if they would somehow find a way to fix things. I also thought about Asher and me and wondered if we had done all we could to salvage our relationship. Had we given up too easily? I finally drifted off sometime in the wee hours of the morning.

The alarm went off only a few hours later, but I somehow managed to drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I was moody all morning at work—snapping at telephone solicitors and generally taking my frustrations out on the office equipment.

Luckily, a distraction came along before I could permanently damage the printer. The phone rang mid-morning, and I snatched it up with a growled greeting.

"I've got something for you," a male voice said before I'd even finished my hello.

The voice was familiar, but it took me a few moments to place it. "Micah?"

"Yeah. Can you meet me today at the Plaza Café around twelve?"

"Noon?"

"No, midnight." He laughed. "Of course, noon. It's my lunch break. I thought we could talk while we ate. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"Great, then it's a date."

"A date?"

"It's just an expression, Killian. In the words of the late, great, literary genius Douglas Adams, 'Don't panic.' See you at twelve...p.m."

Way to go, Killian, I thought as I replaced the phone in its cradle. *Keep this up and he's going to think you're a total dork.* Then I wondered why I cared what he thought of me.

"Who was that?" Novak asked as he emerged from his inner sanctum with a stack of paperwork.

"A possible source."

"Oh my, a source. How very cloak and dagger. Are you meeting him in a dark parking garage at midnight?"

I shot him a dirty look. "No. I'm meeting him at the Plaza Café at noon."

"And what exactly is he a source of, pray tell?"

"I'm doing what you told me to do, following up on the Rachel Cohen angle."

"The Rachel Cohen angle?" He laughed. "You've been reading too many detective novels."

"Sure, pick on Killian. That seems to be the favorite pastime around here. Besides, you're the one who keeps giving me mystery books to read."

"Hey, it's all in good fun, kid. Don't get testy on me now. I wouldn't tease you if I didn't think you knew I was only kidding."

"I know. Don't mind me. I didn't sleep much last night and I have a lot on my mind."

"If this case is starting to get to you, we'll back off. You can't let yourself get too caught up in things. It's not worth it. We're not even getting paid."

"It's not just the case, it's personal stuff, too. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"Don't overdo it, kid. If you ever need to talk about anything, I'm here for you."

"Thanks, Novak."

He went back into his office, ruffling my hair as he went. I realized how fond I was becoming of him. He was more than just a boss or mentor; he was fast becoming a trusted friend.

I arrived downtown a little early. For reasons I chose not to think about, I was nervous about seeing Micah again, so I'd left the office much earlier than I needed to. With about fifteen minutes to kill, I decided to pop into Avant Garde, an art gallery on the plaza that was owned by an acquaintance named Nikki Avanti. My friend Will worked there as well, so maybe I'd get to see both of them.

Nikki was busy with a customer when I got there. Haunting flute music was wafted lazily through the air, the perfect complement to the prominent display of Indigenous pottery that seemed to be the current theme.

As usual, Nikki looked as much like a work of art as the actual paintings and sculptures on display. I don't think I had ever seen her look the same twice. The last

time, her hair had been short, spiky, and neon pink. Currently, it was long and black with a rainbow of colors mixed in throughout. She wore a brightly colored, off-the-shoulder peasant blouse over faded, form fitting jeans that laced up in the front with a leather tie. Her black horn-rimmed glasses, silver feather-shaped earrings, and leather sandals completed the ensemble. She looked stunning.

She finished with the customer, who left carrying a large clay pot decorated with a geometric design, and turned to me with a pleasant, generic smile. It took her a second to recognize me.

"Killian!"

"Hi, Nikki."

"Will's off today," she said.

"That's okay. I just stopped by on a whim." I glanced around dramatically. "Where's Dante?" Nikki's brother, and co-owner of the gallery, was not one of my favorite people.

She rolled her eyes. "My dear brother is putzing around Europe. Officially, he's supposed to be scouting art for the gallery, but he's been gone an awfully long time. Not that I'm complaining."

I laughed and gestured towards the display. "It looks like you've gone native in his absence."

"Don't you just love this month's exhibit? I'm trying to change it once a month, to keep things fresh. I have to admit, this is my favorite one so far this year, although I admit I'm biased. Everything was done by a dear friend of mine, Lily Snyder. She's a local Indigenous woman, and just incredibly talented. I've been after her for years to do a show and she finally

agreed. Of course, I had to sleep with her to get her to do it." She let out a loud laugh.

My eyes widened. "I thought you had a boyfriend."

"Sam? He's ancient history. Decided he wanted to get married and have a big family. Ha! Can you imagine me with kids?"

"And now you're seeing..."

"Lily, yeah. Although, it's not all that serious. Maybe. Who knows?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make assumptions. I didn't know you were...bi?"

"I go where my heart—and libido—take me. Usually, it's to a guy, but occasionally it's a gal. When it's a woman, she's almost always a strong, independent woman like Lily. Not exactly the best type for a long-term relationship, but then I'm not really built for long-term relationships."

"Oh." I sounded a little lost, even to myself.

"So, are you still with that hot little package? What was his name? Asher?"

"No. We, uh, broke up."

"Oops, sore spot. Sorry. Well, hey, if you're available, Lily has this absolutely beautiful nephew—"

"I'm not exactly in the market," I quickly interrupted.

"Ah, one of those breakups, huh? My advice is just move on, sweetie. Don't dwell in the past. Dive right into the deep end and get yourself a new beau, even if he's just a rebound guy."

"Um, thanks." I started edging towards the door. I'd forgotten what a force of nature Nikki could be. "I'd

better get going. I'm supposed to be meeting someone at..." I glanced down at my watch and gasped. "Holy shit! I'm late. I gotta go! It was good to see you again, Nikki."

"You too, Killian. Bye bye."

"Tell Will I said hi!" I yelled as I ran out the door.

I dashed out the door and ran down the plaza to the café. Micah was waiting for me, seated at a table inside in the air conditioning.

"I was beginning to think you weren't coming." He flashed me his most charming smile as I slid into the seat across from him. "Either that, or you were still mixed up on that whole a.m./p.m. thing."

I laughed, slightly out of breath from my run. "Sorry, I was talking to someone and I guess I lost track of the time. She's one of those people who never runs out of things to say."

"It's all good. Is she your girlfriend?"

"Huh?"

"Were you talking to your girlfriend?"

"Oh. No. I'm...I mean, I'm...I'm single."

"Ah," he said simply, but the sparkle in his eye spoke volumes. I realized that was what he had been fishing for to begin with.

"So, what did you find out?" I asked.. switching gears

"Not so fast. Let's order first. I was waiting for you." He signaled a waitress over. While he ordered, I frantically scanned the menu, then panic ordered the first thing that sounded good. Can't really go wrong with a reuben, right?

After she left, he turned to business.

"All right, here's what I have."

He produced a manila folder and flipped it open, sliding it across the table to me. The top sheet had the name Rachel Cohen printed in bold type, followed by a list of names and contact information.

"You were right," he said. "There were no death notices for Rachel Cohen, and there would have been, even if the family couldn't afford a full obit. I did manage to find her maiden name in the marriage records. It was Gill. Both her parents were deceased at the time of the wedding, so that's a dead end. The marriage announcement was placed by an aunt, and I have her name and address, and the names and address of Ira Cohen's parents."

"This is great!"

"Hang on, I'm not finished yet. Take a look at the next page."

I did. At the top was a name and address—a familiar name. "Marco Martino?" I read aloud.

"You know him?"

"Yeah. I went to school with him. He had a crush on my brother."

Micah raised an eyebrow. "Walters interviewed him for an article. He claimed to be good friends with the Cohen kid."

I frowned. "That's news to me. How good a friend?"

Micah shrugged. "I don't know. I wasn't there for the interview, and Walters just had a few quotes scribbled down with the kid's name and 'good friend'. The quotes were pretty generic."

"You really came through for us, Micah. This is way more than I expected."

He flashed me a satisfied smile. "Well then, maybe you could repay me by going out with me sometime—dinner, a movie, whatever you like."

My heart began to pound, and I knew I had to be blushing furiously. I opened my mouth to speak, but he hurried on.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I read that wrong. I thought maybe I detected some interest, but you know, if I'm wrong..."

My face felt as if it might burst into flames. I took a deep breath. "No, uh, you're not wrong."

Micah broke into a relieved grin. "Whew. You had me worried there for a second. So you are gay, then?"

"Yes, I am. I'm just not used to people reading me so easily."

"Hey, you know...gaydar."

My breath caught in my throat as I remembered the first time I'd heard someone use the term gaydar. It had been Seth.

"You okay?" There was concern in Micah's voice.

"What? Oh. Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry."

"Hey, look, you don't have to give me an answer right now. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. You have my number, so if you feel like doing something sometime, call me."

"Okay," I mumbled, still blushing.

Our food arrived at that moment, sparing us from what promised to be a very awkward moment. While we ate—or rather while he ate and I picked at my food—he

kept the conversation light. We discussed our favorite movies and music, and discovered we had similar tastes.

As I became less flustered, I realized I was enjoying myself. I was actually disappointed when the waitress dropped off our check. I reached for it, but Micah beat me to it.

"I've got it," he said.

"I can pay. You're doing me a favor, after all."

"Yeah, but I was the one who suggested lunch."

"But—"

"I've got it." The firmness in his voice convinced me to give up.

"Thank you."

He smiled warmly and my heart skipped a beat.

"My pleasure."

When the waitress returned with his credit card, we stood up, and he held out his hand for me to shake. The contact lasted a little longer than it had to.

"Micah, thanks again for all the information—and for lunch."

"You're welcome. It was kind of exciting. I felt like a spy. Just don't forget that you owe me now." He paused, then his eyes widened. "I mean for the case, not the date. No pressure there. I just want the first shot at the story when it breaks."

"If it breaks."

"It will."

"You seem pretty sure."

"Call it reporter's intuition."

I laughed. "See ya, Micah."

"Bye, Killian. Call me."

"I will," I replied automatically.

He grinned. "Good. I'm going to hold you to that." He spun around and jogged off down the plaza.

I watched him go, taking in his broad shoulders, slim waist, and surprisingly nice butt, before snapping myself out of it. What was I getting myself into?

Armed with our new information, courtesy of Micah, Novak and I didn't waste any time getting to work. The very next morning we paid a visit to Samuel and Ruth Cohen, Caleb's paternal grandparents.

They were a dignified couple in their late sixties, residing in a modest yet well-maintained one-story house in a middle-class neighborhood. Samuel was slightly stooped, with iron gray hair and a full beard that still had speckles of black peppered through it. Ruth was short and round, with a look that suggested she was usually jovial. That particular day, however, she and her husband were quite solemn. They seemed saddened and, I thought, somewhat embarrassed when they realized the reason for our visit. Even so, Mrs. Cohen brought us each a glass of iced tea and did her best to make us feel welcome.

"We can't help you," Mr. Cohen stated firmly once we were all seated in their living room. "We haven't spoken to Ira in years. We don't know anything about his life...or his death, for that matter."

"It was a difficult decision," Mrs. Cohen added, "but we thought it best at the time."

Her husband nodded. "We still think it was for the best, although I wish we could have done more for Caleb."

"You see," Mrs. Cohen explained, "Ira was a difficult child, very rebellious. He would have nothing to do with our religion or the family business. He was always in trouble and coming to us for help, but he never wanted to take responsibility for his actions. We aren't wealthy people. It couldn't go on, so we had to put a stop to it."

"Then he went and married that little tramp."

It was like watching a tennis match, the way they jumped back and forth in their conversation.

"She wasn't really a tramp, Shmueli," Mrs. Cohen said reproachfully, "Just...flighty."

He snorted. "She was flighty all right. She flew right out of the nest."

"You're talking about Rachel Cohen?" I clarified.

"Her last name was Gill before she married Ira," Mrs. Cohen said. "She wasn't a Jewish girl, you know, even with a name like Rachel. I think she was Catholic. Is that right, Sam?"

Mr. Cohen rolled his eyes. "What difference does it make what religion she was?"

"And you know for a fact that she left?" I interrupted.

"Oh, she left," he snapped. "That's for sure. Just took off without so much as a goodbye."

"And she left Caleb behind! Now I ask you, what kind of mother would do such a thing?" Mrs. Cohen clucked disapprovingly.

I jumped in again. "Do you know where she went when she left?"

Mrs. Cohen shook her head. "No idea. Never heard a word from her."

"But she did leave? She didn't die?"

"Die? No, she ran off. Now, she could've died since then, and I don't suppose we would know."

"When was the last time you saw Caleb?" Novak asked suddenly.

Everyone jumped slightly. It was the first time he had spoken since we'd arrived. I think the Cohens had almost forgotten he was there.

Mrs. Cohen looked slightly flustered at the question, as if she couldn't see how it fit into the line of questioning. I couldn't say I understood any better. She glanced at Mr. Cohen before answering, but his expression didn't change. "I suppose it's been years. He was a little thing."

"So he didn't come here after he ran away from the group home?"

"Oh, no," she said with sudden understanding. "But then he wouldn't, really. He hardly knows us."

"Have you been to see him since he was arrested for killing your son?"

Mrs. Cohen's eyes widened as she raised a hand to her mouth. Mr. Cohen sat forward in his chair, an angry expression on his face. "No! I didn't want to upset Ruth, but it was obvious the apple didn't fall far from the tree."

"Then you think he's guilty?"

"The police think so or they wouldn't have arrested him."

Novak stood up suddenly. "I think we're done here."

Mr. Cohen stood as well, still on the defensive. "I told you we couldn't tell you anything."

"On the contrary," Novak said, "we've learned a lot from our visit, Mr. Cohen."

"You have?"

"Yes, we have. Thank you, Mr. Cohen, Mrs. Cohen."

Mr. Cohen looked as if he wanted to say something more, but Mrs. Cohen, a good hostess to the end, quickly led us to the door.

"What was that all about?" I asked once we were in the car.

"I didn't like the smug bastards," Novak said as he pulled away from the curb. "They abandoned Caleb just as surely as his mother did, yet they sit in judgment of her."

I thought about our conversation for a minute. "It's scary how much confidence some people place in the police."

"Meaning you don't share that confidence?"

"Not really. The first time I was involved in a murder case, the police didn't even believe it was a homicide until I nearly got killed, too. The last time, they insisted it was an accident—right up until two more people died. So, no, based on my limited experience, I don't have much faith in the police."

I suddenly remembered that Novak was a retired cop and quickly added, "At least not the local ones. And isn't it supposed to be innocent until proven guilty? But everyone just assumes Caleb did it just because he was arrested."

"We live in an age of trial by media," Novak commented sourly. "Guilt or innocence is decided in the

court of public opinion, and justice is for sale to the highest bidder."

I snorted. "We're a cynical pair."

"You're too young to be cynical. Then again, we are private investigators. We're supposed to be hard-boiled."

"I've always thought of myself as more sunny side up."

"Or over easy."

"Fried."

"Cracked."

We laughed.

"While we're out making calls, why don't we visit Rachel's aunt and see if she's available?" Novak suggested.

"Eggs-cellent idea."

"Enough with the egg jokes. What's her name again?"

"Omelette you guess."

He groaned and shot me a deadly look.

I flipped through my notebook. "Nola Vesper."

"Hmm. Sounds like a little old lady with white hair, who works in her garden while wearing a straw hat," Novak observed.

He couldn't have been more wrong. When we stopped in front of the address Micah had listed next to her name, we found a bright neon blue house, with orange shutters and a yellow door. A small army of garden gnomes of all shapes and sizes seemed to be holding a conference on her lawn.

We were still staring at the dwelling with a speechless mixture of horror and amazement when the

chatelaine herself appeared in the doorway. She definitely wasn't a little old lady. At first glance, she didn't seem to be a day over forty. She had sharp black eyes and thick black hair that she wore in a long braid. She was decidedly top heavy, which was accentuated by her skin tight, tube top and Daisy Duke cut-off denim shorts.

"If you're here to sell me vacuums, I don't need anything that sucks," she said from her front steps as we climbed out of the car. "If you're here to sell me encyclopedias, I know everything I need to know. And if you're here to sell me Jesus, we've already met and we've agreed to keep our distance."

"We're not here to sell you anything," Novak answered with an amused smile.

"Then why are you here?"

"We're here to talk to you about your niece, Rachel Cohen."

A person's eyes can tell you so much about what they are thinking. Only the most experienced gamblers and the very best liars can keep their eyes from betraying their hand. I wondered which Nola Vesper was. Her expression didn't change in the slightest at the mention of her niece's name, not even a hint of surprise.

"What about her?" she asked.

"Do you know where she is?"

"I haven't seen Rachel in years. It must be ten, at least."

"When she walked out on Ira Cohen?"

"I suppose."

"And her son?"

"Sometimes you don't have a choice." She came slowly down the steps and walked lazily across the lawn towards us. "But then you wouldn't understand that. You're a man."

"An astute observation. You still haven't answered my question. Do you know where Rachel is now?"

"What possible reason could you have for needing to know that? Whatever has happened here has nothing to do with her."

"You don't know that any more than we do."

"I know my niece—which is more than you can say—and I know she did what she had to do to survive."

"And you helped her."

The dark eyes appraised Novak. "What if I did?"

"Then you would know where she is."

"Maybe, maybe not. Either way, I'm sure as hell not going to tell you."

"You don't have to tell me," Novak agreed obligingly. "But if I were to get the police involved, tell them that Rachel is alive and that she's a likely suspect in the murder of her husband, you would have to tell them."

"I'll deal with that when it happens. In the meantime, I don't have to tell you shit, and I want you off my property."

Novak stood a moment facing her, then turned suddenly and motioned me into the car.

"And don't come back!" she yelled.

"Well, that was a waste of time," I griped as we pulled away. "We didn't learn anything."

"On the contrary, we learned quite a bit from Ms. Vesper."

"We did?"

"Yep. For instance, before now we weren't certain that Rachel was still alive. It was a strong assumption, but that was all. Now we know for sure that she's out there somewhere. We just have to find her."

Back at the office, Novak went to work tracking down Rachel Cohen. He said it would involve a lot of time consuming and tedious work, most of it on the phone and computer. We decided that I would make better use of my time by talking to Marco.

I found his address and drove to his house, a two-story Cape Cod. The lawn was freshly mown, but the hedges looked as if they were overdue for a trim. I was happily surprised when Marco answered my knock. He seemed confused to find me on his doorstep.

"Killian?"

"Hey, Marco. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Maybe." He fluttered his eyelashes, and I noticed he was wearing makeup. Marco had a reputation around school as a major drama queen. If there was a trend in clothing or hairstyle, Marco followed it. I was pretty sure the makeup was a new touch, though.

"Depends what you want to talk about."

"I want to talk about Caleb Cohen."

The corners of Marco's pouty lips pulled down into a frown as his bottom lip poked out even further.

"That's no fun. I was hoping you were here to ask me out."

"I thought you had a boyfriend."

He rolled his eyes. "So did I. Why do you want to talk about Caleb, anyway?"

"I'm working for a private investigator. We're looking into the murder."

Marco's eyes widened. "Wow. That's so...sexy!"

I fought back a sigh. "It's really not. Trust me. Can you just answer a few questions? It would be helpful."

He went back to pouting. "I guess. Come on in."

I followed him into a well decorated living room where he perched daintily on the edge of a wingback chair and crossed his legs. I sat on the couch facing him. For a second, I thought the soft, overstuffed cushions would swallow me whole, but I managed to fight my way back out. I felt at a distinct disadvantage, since I had to look up to make eye contact with Marco. In an attempt to regain some sense of authority, I stood.

"So, how did you know Caleb?" I asked, trying to ignore the smirk on Marco's face.

He arched one slightly overly plucked eyebrow. "The same way you did. We went to school together and he was in the Rainbow Alliance."

"And that's it?" He shrugged. Not exactly a definitive answer. "You told a reporter that you were good friends."

"I may have exaggerated slightly." He looked away, feigning boredom.

"Why would you do that?"

He shrugged, which for him involved a loose, rolling motion. "Maybe I just wanted to see my name in the paper."

His answer was almost shallow enough for me to buy it, but the way he refused to look at me made me suspect he was hiding something.

I decided to call his bluff. "You're lying."

His look of injured innocence was so phony I almost laughed out loud. When he saw my amused expression, he uncrossed his legs and flopped back in his chair in a huff.

"Fine," he snapped. "Maybe I did know him fairly well."

"How well?"

He sighed dramatically. "Does it really matter?"

"How well?"

"He was my so-called boyfriend, okay? Happy now? I dated an ax murderer." He buried his face in his hands.

I waited until he peeked out from between his fingers. "You dated Caleb Cohen?"

He seemed disappointed by my lack of response to his theatrics. "For like a month."

"Was he the boyfriend you talked about at Rainbow Alliance?"

"Yes. He didn't want anyone to know we were dating. He said he wasn't ready to come out."

"Then why did he start attending the meetings?"

"I talked him into coming. I told him we didn't have to tell anyone we were dating, and he didn't have to come out if he didn't want to. After all, Kane is straight—so he says, anyway."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "Kane *is* straight. And it's kind of disrespectful of you to constantly question that. Not to mention that it's technically sexual harassment to keep hitting on him."

He narrowed his eyes. "Damn, bitch. Did you come here just to read me?"

"No, sorry. That was out of line. I mean, it's all true and you should think about it, but you're right. That's not why I'm here. I'm here about Caleb. Do you know why he didn't want anyone to know he's gay?"

"He said his dad was really homophobic and would probably kill him if he knew. I'd seen the bruises he said his dad gave him, so I figured it was a possibility. Better to be safe than sorry."

"Did you ever meet his dad?"

"Only once, but that was enough. I went to pick Caleb up for a movie. Caleb tried to get out to the car without being noticed, but his dad followed him to the door. The asshole was drunk and yelling stuff the whole time. I'm pretty sure he called me a faggot. Caleb was mortified."

"You said you and Caleb dated about a month. That would mean you broke up before the murder."

"Yes. We broke up before school even let out."

"Why'd you break up?"

"At the time, I thought maybe he just wasn't ready to have a boyfriend, but the next thing I knew, he was up Asher's ass every second of the day." He smirked again. "Not literally, of course—at least as far as I know."

I ignored that last crack. "So you think he left you for Asher?"

That wiped the smile off his face. "More or less."

"How'd that make you feel?"

He frowned. "So you're my shrink now? How do you think it made me feel? Like shit. First, he wouldn't even tell anyone we were dating, then, he dropped me

for another guy and made a big production out of the fact that they were together."

"Did you ever have sex with him?"

Marco's eyebrows flew up. "Isn't that a little personal?"

"I'm not prying. I have a reason for asking."

He shrugged. "We fooled around."

"Was it ever in the barn behind his house?"

His disgusted expression made it seem as if I'd asked if he had sex with a barnyard animal instead of in a barn.

"Ew. No. I told you, I only went to his house once." He paused. "Well, actually, I was there a second time. Right after he broke up with me, I decided to try to talk to him. I drove out one evening, but when I got there, no one answered my knock. I was about to leave when I saw someone walking across the field towards the house, so I decided to wait to see if it was Caleb. When he got closer, I realized it wasn't. I started to just go, but then the guy kind of went towards the barn and disappeared from my sight. I waited a few more minutes, but didn't see anyone else. Then I got kind of spooked and went home."

"Do you think he went into the barn?"

"Probably. Either that or he vanished into thin air."

"Did you recognize the guy?"

"Yes. He went to our school."

I feared I already knew the answer and might not want to hear it, but I had to ask anyway. "Who was it?"

I braced myself for him to say Asher.

Chapter 12

"Finnegan Byrnes," Marco replied.

Wait. What?

"Who?" I was confused.

"Finnegan? You know, that weird kid who wears elf ears sometimes?"

"Uh...no." I couldn't place him, and you would have thought that would be memorable.

Marco shrugged. "He's a couple of grades behind you."

"Do you know how to get in touch with him?"

"Uh, no," he said, wrinkling his nose. "Why would I know that? I just told you he's weird."

"Caleb is weird too, but that didn't stop you from dating him."

"Caleb isn't weird! He's just..."

"A possible axe-murderer?"

His shoulders slumped. "Yeah. Okay. You've got a point."

I said my goodbyes and headed back to the office. I couldn't remember anyone named Finnegan Byrnes or anyone who wore elf ears to school. I stopped at a red light, and pulled out my phone to search for him on social media, but I found nothing. Either he didn't have any accounts or he didn't use his real name.

As I pulled into the parking lot of the office, I discovered my mentor standing outside, gazing up at the sky.

I locked my car, walked over to him, and peered up in the same general direction he was. "What are we looking at?" I asked after a minute.

“See that hawk up there?”

I searched. “No.”

“Right there, on the edge of the roof, just sitting there.”

“That’s a hawk? He seems kinda small to be a hawk.”

“It is small. It’s a kestrel—very common around here.”

“So why are we standing out here in the heat staring at it?”

Novak smiled. “Because it’s there.”

“Ah.”

“And I needed a break from the office.”

“Oh.”

He turned his attention to me. “Did you find out anything useful?”

“I think so.”

“Great. Let’s go up to the office, and you can tell me all about it. It’s hot out here.”

“So we’re done looking at the bird?”

“We’re done looking at the bird.”

I shrugged and followed him up to his office. Once we were settled in, I told him about my conversation with Marco and how he had given me the name Finnegan Byrnes.

“He should be easy enough to find. There can’t be that many families named Byrnes around here. Just do a search and call each one until you find a Finnegan. That’s about as Irish a name as Killian.”

“Shane is Irish, too, isn’t it?”

“But not Novak,” he pointed out. “How do you feel about a trip to Washington?”

The sudden shift in conversation took me by surprise. “D.C.?” I asked.

“No, state. Yes, Washington, D.C.”

“Why are we going there?”

He steepled his fingers together. “It’s our nation’s capital, a cultural center filled with national treasures like the Smithsonian Institution, art galleries, the National Zoo, et cetera, et cetera.”

“So, it’s a pleasure trip?”

“Oh no, it’s business.”

“But you just said—”

“I was merely pointing out some of the highlights of the city.”

“You are maddening sometimes.”

“I try.”

“Would someone please tell me why we’re going to Washington, D.C.?”

“All you had to do was ask.”

“I— You— Argh!”

“Temper, temper. You must have patience, Grasshopper. It is the most important tool in the P.I. trade.”

I released a monumentally put-upon sigh, and Novak finally took pity on me. “Very well, we’re going to the District of Columbia for one reason and one reason only.”

“And that reason is...?”

“Because that’s where Rachel Cohen is living.”

I was stunned. “You found Rachel Cohen?”

“Yes, or rather Rachel Shannon as she’s known now.”

“Shannon?”

“Her middle name. She was born Rachel Shannon Gill. When she married Ira Cohen, she took the name Rachel Gill Cohen. When she ran, she took her middle name as her last name.”

“How’d you find her?”

Novak pushed back in his chair with a smug expression. “Traced every combination I could think of using all her names. It’s not as easy as it sounds. Do you know how many people I found with various combinations of those names? I came up with well over one hundred and fifty, and that was just a cursory search. I narrowed the list by eliminating anybody not in the tri-state area, because I figured she wouldn’t have gone far. I focused especially on the DC/Baltimore area. People who want to disappear generally head for a nearby city since that’s the easiest place to get lost.

“I got a hit on a Rachel Shannon in DC. I still have some contacts there, so I called a P.I. friend and called in a favor, asked if he could go out and check up on her for me. He didn’t approach her, but she’s in the right age range. I think she’s worth interviewing.”

“You did all that while I was talking to Marco?”

“When you’re good, you’re good.”

“I’m thinking it wasn’t as hard as you make it out to be.”

He chuckled. “I got lucky, kid. It happens sometimes.”

“So we just drive up there and, what, knock on her door?”

“Pretty much.”

“When?”

“I was thinking maybe tomorrow. We’ll spend the night and come back Saturday. You up for it?”

“Yeah, sure, but what about Finnegan?”

“That will be our first order of business when we get back. Now go home and get things cleared with your family.”

“What time do you want me here tomorrow?”

“Just come in at your normal time. Oh, and good job with that Marco kid.”

I grinned. “Thanks.”

When I got home, the house was eerily quiet. Steve’s truck was still gone, so I assumed he hadn’t returned yet. I knew I needed to talk to Adam—and not just about the trip to D.C.—but I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

“Killian?” Adam’s voice echoed from upstairs.

“Yeah. It’s me.”

He appeared at the top of the steps and offered a smile. “Do you think we could talk?”

I sighed in relief. He didn’t seem angry, and he’d even suggested a conversation, saving me the trouble.

“Sure.”

He came down and we went into the living room, where I dropped onto the couch.

He joined me. “First off, I need to apologize for last night—and the last few weeks too, I guess.”

I nodded cautiously, unsure how I was supposed to respond.

“I was way out of line,” he continued. “I’m sorry I caused a scene at the restaurant, and I’m sorry I left you behind. You were right on both accounts. I should have

been happy for Steve, and I probably shouldn't have been driving."

"I, uh, did sort of provoke you in the restaurant," I admitted.

"Maybe, but that doesn't excuse my behavior. I've been bottling so much inside lately that it all just sort of bubbled over when I had too much to drink. All of it could have been avoided if I'd just talked to Steve."

"Speaking of Steve, are you guys okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I think so. He came home this morning, and we had a long talk."

I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. "Was it a good talk?"

He chuckled. "Yes, it was a good talk. We had a lot to discuss, most of which we should have said a long time ago. Some of it was just a matter of misunderstanding or pent-up feelings that we'd been avoiding. Communication is so important, Killian. I hope you can learn that now. It'll make things easier for you down the road. If you can't talk to each other, you don't have much hope."

"What did you guys decide?"

"About what?"

"The new house and all. Are we moving or staying here?"

"I think we'll probably have to move. Living in both places would be too difficult. They're just too far apart." He looked around. "I love this house, but as much as I hate to admit it, we've outgrown it. If we move, you and Kane will have your own rooms. More importantly, though, Steve and I want to make this work, so I guess that means moving." He frowned.

“You don’t seem very happy about that.”

Adam shrugged. “I’m still getting used to the idea. It’s all about compromise.”

“So you’re going to sell this house?”

“No, I’m not ready to let go of the beach house yet. We’re going to rent it out, at least for a while. We’ll probably need the extra income anyway. It would be unrealistic to expect the bed and breakfast to take off right away. And who knows? I’m not wishing the business to fail, but if it does, we might need this place to fall back on.”

“What about *your* business?”

“As Steve pointed out, my work can be done from anywhere. He doesn’t expect me to give up my job.” He paused and cocked his head to one side.

“You’ve really been worrying about all this, haven’t you?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, stop. We’re going to be fine. I’m sorry you and Kane got caught in the middle last night. That wasn’t fair to you guys. I was being very selfish.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. And again, I’m sorry.”

“So when are we moving?”

“There’s still some renovation that needs to be done—the top floor will have to be converted into an apartment for all of us—so it won’t be right away.”

We were quiet for a minute, then I asked, “Are you still mad about my job?”

“I’m not mad.” Adam sighed. “I guess I’m a little scared. I don’t like the idea of you being in a dangerous situation.” I started to argue, but Adam held up a hand.

“*But...*I know how much you love what you’re doing, and technically you’re an adult now, so I just have to deal with it.”

I couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face. It was nice to know Adam thought of me as an adult. “Thanks.”

He ruffled my hair. “You’re still my son, though. And you still live under my roof...”

I laughed. “I know. I’m glad you’re okay with it, or at least trying to be, because Novak wants to go to D.C. tomorrow to talk to a suspect.”

Adam’s eyes grew wide. “A suspect?”

“Well, a possible suspect. It’s also possible she had nothing to do with the murder. We just need to talk to her.”

“Why do *you* have to go?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Because it’s my case. I thought you said I was an adult.”

He sighed again. “Yeah. Yeah, you are. It’s just a little harder to let go than I thought. How long will you be gone?”

“Only overnight. We’ll be back on Saturday.”

He nodded slowly. “Okay, but I think I’d like to meet this Novak.”

I gave Adam a skeptical look. “Why? It’s not like he’s going to seduce me or something. He’s straight. And he’s a good guy.”

Adam snorted. “I’m sure he’s perfectly nice. That’s not what I meant. I’d just like to meet him, that’s all. You work for him, you talk about him a lot, and now you’re going out of town with him. I don’t think it’s an

unreasonable request. Why don't you invite him to dinner Sunday night?"

I shrugged. "I guess so. You'd better not embarrass me, though."

He threw back his head and laughed. "I'll do my best to conduct myself with dignity and decorum."

I grinned, but then another thought came to me and my smile quickly faded.

"What's wrong?" Adam asked.

"I just realized we're going to have to move in with Amalie."

Adam looked confused. "Who? Oh, Steve's ghost. I'm pretty skeptical about that."

"That's because you haven't heard her walking around and slamming doors."

He chuckled. "Don't you think if you'd given up the afterlife to hang around this plane of existence, you'd have better things to do than slam doors and stomp around?"

"Maybe she has unfinished business."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, for Pete's sake! Let's help her finish it then. We can't have her scaring away our guests."

I tried to smile at Adam's joke, but it bothered me that he wasn't taking the haunting seriously. Then again, I hadn't taken it very seriously at first either. Then I'd experienced it all firsthand. I was still hoping there was a logical explanation for everything that didn't involve dead people, but even the memory of those creepy footsteps made the hair on my arms stand up. I had a feeling Adam might change his mind once we were in the house.

Although Novak was a little surprised by Adam's invitation, he readily agreed to come to dinner. "It'll be nice to eat someone else's cooking for a change."

I refused to ride all the way to D.C. in Bessie and, after a little negotiating, we set out with Novak driving my car. The drive went quickly as we chatted about our families and got to know each other better. Novak seemed to be asking most of the questions, but I found I didn't mind telling him about myself.

When we arrived at our hotel, I was pleased to see it was a mid-priced place. It wasn't the Ritz, but it wasn't a dump, either. We checked in, dropped off our suitcases, then set out to look for Rachel Shannon.

The address Novak had found turned out to be a small, rundown apartment building on the outskirts of the city. There was a security door, the kind where you either had to have a code or someone inside had to buzz you in. Novak pushed the button for Rachel's apartment, but there was no response. We waited a minute, then Novak pushed it again.

Just then, an older Black woman with a small, collapsible shopping cart came out the door. She kept a watchful eye on us as she carefully shut the door behind her.

"Are you here to see Rachel?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

I looked up in surprise, then realized she must have seen what number Novak was pushing. The woman was small and frail, her back rounded with age, and her eyes magnified behind thick lenses. She wore a short, black wig styled in finger waves, a faded maroon dress

that hung off her frame like a sack, and black orthopedic shoes. She gripped the shopping cart as if it served as much for keeping her upright as it did for carrying groceries.

“Rachel Shannon?” Novak clarified.

“She’s my neighbor, but she’s not in right now.”

“Do you know when she’ll be home? We really need to talk to her.”

She studied us carefully, a note of suspicion in her eyes. “Well, I don’t know. Who are you and why are you looking for her?”

“I’m an old family friend and I haven’t seen her in years. She doesn’t even know we’re in town. I’d really like to surprise her.”

Her expression didn’t change. “I’ve known Rachel for several years now, and in all that time I don’t believe she’s had a single visitor.”

“We lost touch. Like I said, it’s been years. I was living away, but we’re back in the area now, so the first thing I wanted to do was look up Rachel.”

She still wore a doubtful expression, but she seemed a little more convinced.

“How nice. She’s at work now. She usually gets home around five-thirty, six o’clock and checks in on me. She’s such a nice girl. I got rheumatoid arthritis real bad, and my back ain’t what it used to be, so she does my shopping for me when I can’t get out.”

Novak chuckled. “That sounds like Rachel. Do you know where she works?”

She hesitated a moment, but then shrugged. “Up the street at the convenience store on the corner.” She pointed in the direction she was facing. “Not much of a

job for a young woman. I keep telling her she's gonna get shot one of these days, but she won't listen."

"Thank you so much for your help," Novak said. "We'd better get going now if we're going to catch her."

She grunted. "If it turns out she don't want visitors, you didn't hear none of this from me," she said as she rolled off down the street in the opposite direction from the store where Rachel worked.

"Good," Novak mumbled. "At least she won't be hovering around to hear us tell a different story."

"What are we going to say to Rachel?" I asked as he started off at a fast clip. I almost had to run to keep up.

"The truth, I think."

I shrugged. "Works for me."

We had no trouble locating the convenience store, a shabby place plastered with ads for cigarettes, vapes, and beer. The inside was slightly better. At least it was clean and reasonably well-stocked. Still, the thick bulletproof glass separating the cashier from the customers and the turnstile for transactions certainly lent credibility to the elderly neighbor's concerns.

The woman behind the counter was unmistakably Rachel Cohen. I knew it the moment I saw her. She was petite and slender, bearing a strong resemblance to her son—or more accurately, Caleb took after her. She had the same unruly light brown hair and those deep, sorrowful brown eyes.

She didn't pay much attention to us at first, most likely assuming we were just customers. Novak made a beeline for the counter.

“How can I help you?” she asked as we approached, her tone flat with boredom.

“Are you Rachel Shannon?” Novak answered.

Curiosity flickered in her eyes, but no caution or fear as of yet. “Yes, that’s me.”

“Formerly Rachel Cohen?”

That caught her attention. Her eyes went wide with fear, darting around the store as if already searching for the nearest way out.

“Mrs. Cohen, it’s important that we speak to you about your husband and son.”

“Who the hell are you?” she hissed.

“We’re private investigators working on behalf of your son.”

She looked confused. “Caleb hired you? To find me?”

“No. Caleb believes you are dead.”

I couldn’t read the look on her face, but it wasn’t what I would have expected from someone who’d just been told her child thought she was dead. I was unsure whether she was so stunned she didn’t know how to react, or she’d already known.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Mrs. Cohen—”

“Please, don’t call me that. I haven’t been Mrs. Cohen in a very long time and I don’t intend to start again now.”

“Okay, Ms. Shannon, are you aware of the fact that Ira Cohen is dead?”

Her eyes grew wide. “No! I had no idea.”

“Don’t you watch the news?”

“No, I don’t.” She paused. “Why would Ira’s death make the news? He was a mean, abusive, son-of-a—” She stopped and looked around as she seemed to remember where she was. The only other customer in the store was an elderly Asian gentleman who was buying a lottery card from a vending machine. He wasn’t paying any attention to us.

“Ira was murdered.”

Once again, she looked surprised at first, but then a funny little smile played at the corner of her mouth. “I can’t say I’m shocked. I never understood why someone hadn’t killed him ages ago.”

Novak frowned slightly. “The police have arrested Caleb for the murder.” He was watching her face carefully.

For a second, I thought she hadn’t heard him, then she said, “Did he do it?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out, ma’am.”

She looked around the store again. “Do you think we could talk about this later, after I get off?”

“At your apartment? We know where it is. We could meet you there.”

“You do?” she asked with some alarm.

“We’re P.I.s, remember? We’re paid to know things.”

“Fine. I get off at six. Come by around seven. I’ll talk to you then.”

“How do I know you’ll be there?”

“I will be.”

“Make sure you are, or we just might have to call the police.”

It was obvious from her expression that she wanted to avoid that at all costs. Novak produced a card and handed it to her.

“That has my cell phone number on it. If something comes up that prevents you from keeping our appointment, make sure you call me.” He turned and left, and I trailed out after him.

“Do you really trust her?” I asked as soon as we were outside.

“Not a bit,” he replied without hesitation. “That’s why we’re going to pull a stakeout.”

“My first stakeout!” I was excited.

“Yeah, be enthusiastic now, because you’ll be bored senseless by the end of it.”

“Where are we going to be? Are we getting the car?”

“We don’t need the car. In the city, that would be more obvious than not. Let’s see what kind of natural cover we have around here.”

We ended up sitting at a small diner across the street that had a window with a great view of the store. Luckily, they weren't exactly busy so we were able to nab the lone table near the window. Novak settled in with his laptop and told me to keep an eye on the store while he did some work.

Several hours later, Novak had consumed an entire pot of coffee, and I’d had more soda than anyone should ever drink in one afternoon. The waiter was not happy with us. I’d almost grown immune to his dirty looks.

I was just about to excuse myself to go to the restroom when Rachel finally emerged from the store. I

glanced at my watch. She was early, thank God. It was only four o'clock.

"She's on the move," I told Novak.

He looked up at me with amusement as he closed his laptop. "On the move, huh? You really watch too many movies."

He left enough cash on the table to cover our drinks with a generous tip, and we followed Rachel at a safe distance. She moved quickly, casting nervous glances around her, but didn't seem to notice us. She headed straight back to her apartment building, unlocked the door, and slipped inside, closing it behind her.

"I think she's trying to get the jump on us," Novak mused thoughtfully.

"But you threatened her with the police."

"If she was gone, with a two hour head start, there wouldn't be much they could do—especially seeing as how she hasn't actually done anything wrong. They really wouldn't be interested in her. I was just hoping to scare her into cooperating."

"It doesn't look like it worked."

"Thank you, Watson."

"Why do you get to be Sherlock?"

He gave me a look that spoke volumes, then walked over to the call buttons and pushed the one next over from Rachel's.

"Hello," came the thin voice of the old woman we had talked to earlier.

"Hello, ma'am," Novak answered. "We talked earlier. I'm Rachel Shannon's friend. We missed her at work because we decided to run out and buy her a gift,

and it seems she got off early. We'd really like to surprise her, so do you think you could buzz us in?"

"I don't know..."

"I would really appreciate it."

Her sigh was audible, even over the intercom, but the door buzzed and there was a loud click as the lock disengaged.

"Thank you," he called out as he caught the door and we slipped in.

The elevator didn't exactly inspire confidence, so we took the stairs up to Rachel's floor. Once there, we found her door, and Novak knocked loudly.

After a few seconds, Rachel's voice came from the other side of the door, "Who's there?"

"It's Shane Novak, Ms. Shannon. We spoke earlier. I think you'd better open the door."

There was a long pause before we heard the sound of a safety chain being slid aside and a deadbolt being turned. The door opened to reveal a very frightened looking Rachel Shannon.

"May we come in?" Novak asked.

She gave a helpless shrug and stepped back to allow us by her. The apartment was small and sparsely furnished. There was a nondescript sofa and two matching chairs, but no pictures on the wall and no knickknacks or personal effects. The place had the cold, impersonal air of a cheap hotel. In fact, there were almost no personal effects to make it feel lived in.

Then I noticed a cardboard box sitting on the floor in front of the sofa with several items tossed in haphazardly. Ms. Shannon had been packing.

I glanced over at Novak and saw that he had noticed the box as well.

“Were you leaving before we had our talk, Rachel?” he asked softly. She shrugged again. “You’ve kept things light so it would be easy to run at a moment’s notice. How many times did you do that before you became complacent and settled in here?”

“Look, I don’t know why you’re interested in me. I haven’t seen Ira or Caleb since Caleb was a toddler. They’re a part of my past. I did what I had to do, and I’ve moved on. It’s behind me.”

“Is it?” I startled both Novak and Rachel with the edge in my voice. I hadn’t yet spoken in her presence, but I found myself furious. “I wouldn’t have thought it would be so easy to forget your own child, the one you abandoned to a life of abuse and misery.”

Rachel looked as if she had been slapped, and Novak looked as if he wanted to slap me. Rachel recovered first.

“It wasn’t like that. You weren’t there. You don’t know what it was like. He beat me almost every day. I knew he would kill me if I didn’t leave. He’d never laid a hand on Caleb. I didn’t think I could support both of us, so I decided it would be better if I left him behind.”

“Better for him or better for you?”

“Enough,” Novak interrupted sharply. “This isn’t why we’re here.”

Rachel suddenly went on the offensive. “Why are you here?”

“The better question is why were you running? What do you have to hide?”

“I wasn’t running.”

“Then why the sudden packing?”

“I...you don’t know what it’s like to live in constant fear for your life. To never know if he’s going to find you and...and...kill you.”

“Nice try, but we told you Ira is dead. You’re not running from him. You’re running from us. What I want to know is why?”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth? Maybe he hired you to find me.”

While they were talking, I walked over to the box. Lying near the top, partly hidden by an old photo of a little boy I assumed to be Caleb, was a newspaper folded to the headline read, “Teenager Accused of Brutal Axe Murder: Father Killed in Shocking Attack.” I bent over and picked it up.

I held up the article. “Maybe you’d like to try again.”

For a moment, I didn’t think Rachel would respond. She seemed frozen in place, her eyes fastened on the piece of newsprint in my hand. Then all at once, she swung into action. She spun around and shoved Novak roughly in the chest with both hands. He stumbled backwards in surprise as she made a dash for the door.

The instant I realized what she was doing, I leaped into action, bounding over the couch and throwing myself in her path. We collided at full speed and went down in a tangle of arms and legs. The impact knocked the breath out of both of us, but desperation is a powerful motivator and she recovered first, scrambling to her feet and charging for the exit again.

Novak was one step ahead of her, however, and he stepped in front of the door, effectively barring her way since he was much larger than she was. “Now is that any way to treat your guests?” he chided lightly. “Why don’t we all have a seat and talk about that article you found interesting enough to keep, and more importantly, why you chose to lie to us about it.”

“It’s none of your damn business,” she half snarled, half sobbed. “Let me go. You can’t hold me here against my will.”

“No, but I can make a citizen’s arrest. If you’re going to be difficult, it may be our only option. Killian, why don’t you call 911 and see if we can get a police officer over here?”

“No!” Her eyes were wide and crazed with fear. “Don’t get the police involved.”

“Then tell us what’s going on, Rachel. What are you so scared of?”

She stood panting for a few seconds, then turned and walked slowly to the couch, where she collapsed with a defeated expression. “I tried to leave Ira several times, but...I kept going back. I couldn’t stand not being with Caleb. The last time I went back, Ira beat me so badly I couldn’t leave the house for a week. He told me that if I left him again, I’d better never come back. He said I would be dead as far as he was concerned, and if he ever saw me again, he would make sure I really was. I didn’t want to lose Caleb altogether. I...I never intended that. I wanted to see him, have visitation rights, maybe even get custody of him eventually.

“I stayed a couple more months before it got to be too much. Do you have any idea what it’s like to feel

your one chance to survive is to leave your only child with a monster? I had to get out of there once and for all. My aunt helped me set things up: new ID, new look, clothes, money, everything. It had to be a clean break, so I disappeared. I kept tabs on Caleb, mostly through my aunt. I knew he was doing well in school. I also knew that he believed I was dead. I thought it was best if I didn't confuse him by suddenly reappearing."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "How could you possibly think that it would be better for Caleb if he thought you were dead?"

"It's better than knowing I abandoned him, isn't it?" I wasn't sure, but I said nothing. She took a shaky breath and continued. "When my aunt started noticing the signs of abuse, I became terrified. I felt so helpless. I called Social Services a few times, but nothing ever came of it."

"So you decided to take matters into your own hands?" Novak asked.

"What do you—Oh! *No!* I didn't kill Ira. Maybe I should have, but I didn't. And I refuse to think that Caleb did it either."

"Why is that so hard to believe?" Novak argued. "You felt helpless, trapped, and in fear for your life with Ira, and you're an adult. Imagine being a child in the same situation. Maybe the only way Caleb could see to escape was to kill his father."

Tears were rolling down her cheeks. "What do you want from me? Why are you here? If you really think I killed Ira, you would have called the police."

“We don’t know if you killed anyone or not. We’re here to try to figure that out. Can you prove that you didn’t kill Ira?”

“How would I do that?”

“Where were you when he was killed?”

“I was—” She stopped and thought for a few seconds. “I guess I was at work.”

“Do you have a time card or anything that could prove that?”

“Yes, at least my boss would.”

“We’ll be checking on that,” Novak warned.

She nodded and wiped at her eyes. “So is that it? Are you done with me now?”

“I think so. It would be a good idea if you stayed put. We may need to get in touch with you again, and, if we do, I want to be able to find you without hunting you down. If we can’t find you, then we will contact the police and tell them you should be considered a suspect.”

She blanched. “I won’t go anywhere.”

“That’s what you said before.”

“I won’t. I swear.”

“I think you should talk to Caleb,” I inserted. “He deserves to know the truth.”

Shaking her head, she asked wearily, “What good could it do now?”

“It could do a world of good,” Novak added softly.

She looked back and forth between us, then tipped her head back against the couch and closed her eyes. “I don’t think I could face him.”

“He could really use someone right now,” I pressed.

“Just go. Please.”

“But Caleb—”

“I’ll think about it, okay? Just leave me alone.”

Novak motioned me to the door and I reluctantly followed him out. I didn’t say anything until we were down on the street again and walking back to the car.

“She won’t see him, will she?”

“No. I don’t believe she will.”

“He deserves to know his mother’s alive.”

“I thought you didn’t even like the kid.”

“I don’t. Not really. It’s just that—”

“It’s okay, kiddo. You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

“But I want to. I don’t know if I even understand it, though.”

“Then forget about it.”

I shook my head. “I wish it was that easy. Do you think I should tell Caleb?”

Novak looked me over. “You’ll have to decide that.”

“What would you do?”

He thought for a moment. “I honestly don’t know. I’m not sure knowing would do him much good at this point. She obviously doesn’t want to have a relationship with him. It might make matters even worse, not to mention that a suddenly resurrected mother would be quite a shock.”

“So you don’t think I should tell him?”

He patted my shoulder. “I can’t make that decision for you, Killian. I don’t envy the position you’re in. You have to do what your heart tells you.”

We drove back to the hotel where I continued to mope.

Finally, Novak decided we should get out of the room and do a little sightseeing. I hadn't been to the city more than a couple of times before, and then only visited the Smithsonian museums. Novak took me to several monuments. The mall was beautiful, sandwiched between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial with the Washington Monument in the middle, and practically everything was within walking distance. When the sun set and the lights came on, it was almost magical.

At least it would have been if I could have gotten Rachel Cohen's haunted face out of my mind.

While I really didn't like Caleb, I felt sorry for him. His mother had abandoned him and his father had abused him. It was almost enough to excuse his uncooperative and aggressive attitude.

I resolved to give him the benefit of the doubt the next time we talked. I wasn't sure whether I should tell him about his mother being alive, but maybe I hadn't been giving him a fair chance.

Chapter 13

Early the next morning, we set off for home. When we got back to the office, Novak ordered me to forget the case for the rest of the weekend and relax.

I didn't argue. I felt like I needed a little time for myself.

When I got home, I found Kane lying on his bed reading a magazine.

He glanced up as I came in. "Did you talk to Adam when you came in?"

"No. I didn't see him, so I just came up here to drop off my bag. Why?"

"Judy and Jake are in town to settle on a house. Apparently, they're coming over for dinner tomorrow night."

I frowned. "So is Novak."

"Your boss?"

"Yeah."

Kane grinned. "Should be interesting."

I'd planned on spending a restful Sunday just lazing around the house, but found I couldn't leave the case at the office. It was all I could think about—especially the mysterious Finnegan Byrne.

Much to my aggravation, Kane slept in the next morning. The second his eyes opened, I pounced on him. Literally. I jumped on his bed, straddling his legs.

"Do you know someone named Finnegan Byrne?" I demanded.

"What?" He blinked up at me owlishly. "Killian, I just woke up."

"I know. You're lucky I let you sleep in. Do you know him?"

He shook his head and pushed me off. "Who?"

"Finnegan Byrne."

He propped himself up on his elbows. "Finn? Yeah. He's a weirdo."

"That's what you said about Caleb."

"Yeah, well, Finn makes Caleb look positively normal. Why do you want to know?"

"His name came up in my investigation. I'm trying to figure out how to get in touch with him. You don't know his number, do you?"

"We don't exactly run in the same circles."

"Okay. Then how is he weird?"

"Let's just say he marches to the beat of a different drummer, or maybe a whole different band—and the music is all in his head."

"What do you mean? Is he like, um, mentally challenged?"

He laughed. "No. He's really smart, just...eccentric."

I raised my eyebrows. "Eccentric?"

"Yeah, but that's all I'm saying. If you're going to meet him, it would be better if you form your own impressions. For now, let's just leave it at...unique. Very unique." He had a twinkle in his eye and a smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Do you at least know where he lives?"

"Not really. Outside of town, I think, but I'm not sure."

"Well, that was...unhelpful."

He grinned. "Finding people is your job, isn't it? Can't make things too easy for you."

"You never make anything easy."

I tried to get it out of my mind, but finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I got on my laptop and looked up all the Byrnes in the area. There were a dozen—more than I'd hoped, but at least he wasn't a Smith.

I picked up the phone and started dialing. Eight calls later I hit pay dirt. When I asked if Finnegan was there, a man responded, "Not right now, can I take a message?" I'd grown so accustomed to the "you have the wrong number" response, I was surprised to actually get a different answer, and couldn't think of what to say at first. He had to ask a second time.

"Um, uh, no, that's, uh, okay," I stammered out. "Do you know when he'll be home?"

"That's like asking if I know when the wind's gonna blow," the gruff voice replied. "He comes home when he comes home. Are you sure you don't want to leave a message?"

"I don't think so."

"Just as well. He never answers them anyway."

"Then why do you ask?"

"It usually makes the person calling feel a little better."

"Does he have a job?"

"Finnegan?" He laughed. "No. He's probably at the beach or off practicing the bagpipes. I make him go far enough away that I can't hear him. There're plenty of wide-open spaces for him to make as much racket as he wants around here without driving his mother and me insane."

It took all my self-control not to repeat the word bagpipes. Who plays the bagpipes? It was beginning to sound like Kane's diagnosis of eccentricity was accurate.

"I'll call back later," I mumbled distractedly.

"Try around six o'clock. That's when we usually eat dinner, and the boy seldom misses a meal."

"All right, thank you."

I hung up, but my thoughts lingered on the mysterious Finnegan. He sounded like a very interesting person, and the idea of meeting him left me feeling equal parts excitement and unease.

It turned out I didn't have to call Finnegan back. He phoned me later that afternoon.

"Hello, this is Finnegan Byrne. You called here earlier today and I wasn't available. I was just wondering why you wanted to speak to me. May I ask who you are?"

"How... How did you get my number?" I was thoroughly confused. "I didn't leave a message."

"I know. That's why I called you back. If you had left a message, I wouldn't have. We have caller ID. Is this Adam Connelly?"

"No, this is Killian Kendall."

"Killian Kendall? As in Killian Kendall from high school? Aka He Who Speaks for the Gays?"

"I... Uh, yeah. I guess. I don't speak for anyone though."

"I always thought of you kind of like the Lorax."

"I... I work for a private investigator now?" It came out more like a question, but everything about our conversation so far had thrown me. I struggled to regain

some sense of control. "I was wondering if there was any chance we could get together and talk about Caleb Cohen."

"Caleb? What about him?"

"Do you think we could meet and talk in person? I don't really want to go into this over the phone. I'm happy to come to you."

"Sure, no problem. Phones are terribly impersonal, don't you think? You can't read the other person's facial cues. Not that I'm great at facial cues to begin with, but even if I was, then it would be even harder over the phone. And you'll have to come to me because I don't have my license. When's a good time for you?"

"Um, anytime is fine, really. I'm off today and tomorrow. When would be a good time for you?"

"Now?"

I checked the time. I should be able to fit it in before dinner. "Yeah, that would work. What's your address?"

He gave it to me, but I didn't recognize the road.

"Where is that?" I asked, trying to gauge how long the drive would be.

He gave me some sketchy directions that mostly involved landmarks, but it was enough for me to get the gist.

"Great, it should only take me about twenty minutes to get there from here."

"Nifty. That'll give me time to put some pants on."

I hung up, once again wondering just what I was getting myself into.

The Byrnes's house was fairly easy to find. It was just beyond the town limits—an old, two-story farmhouse painted white with green trim, set well back from the road.

I climbed out of my car and walked up to the door. I raised my fist to knock, but before I could, the door swung open to reveal a skinny boy around my height. He had a mop of unruly light brown hair with blond highlights; big, wide-set blue eyes; and full, pouty lips. His face was heart-shaped, and his nose turned up slightly at the end, giving him an impish charm.

His looks, pleasant as they were, were overshadowed by his attire. He was wearing a tight, baby blue T-shirt with the words "Think Big" emblazoned across the chest, but what really caught my attention was the fact that he was wearing a kilt. It was in a dark blue plaid that would have looked right at home on a Catholic school girl.

"Hi, Killian." He held out his hand for me to shake.

"Uh, hi. Finnegan?"

"In the flesh." He flashed me a cheeky grin. He followed my gaze and swished the kilt. "Oh yeah. I was going to put on pants but I got distracted. There was a bug on my bedroom floor."

"Ah." I didn't know what else to say.

"So you wanted to talk to me about Caleb?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let me change, and then we can go for a walk," he said before disappearing back inside, leaving me waiting on the front porch. It wasn't long before he returned, now dressed in a pair of Army surplus

camouflage pants and sturdy hiking boots. Without a word, he strode across the yard with purpose, forcing me to hurry and catch up.

"So, what did you want to ask me?"

"Do you know Caleb?"

"Yes, I know Caleb."

"How well?"

"About as well as anyone, I suppose. Better than most, probably."

We plunged into the woods at the rear of his property. It hadn't been cleared, but there seemed to be a faint trail that we were following. I grew up calling them deer trails.

"Are you friends?"

"I guess you could say that. Caleb doesn't really have friends. He stays to himself. He has a lot of walls to keep people out."

"He's been hurt a lot," I said without thinking.

Finnegan gave me a funny look, but all he said was, "I know."

"Did you ever talk about anything personal?"

"Maybe. If we did, it was told to me in confidence, and I'm not about to just tell all to the first hot P.I. that comes trotting along."

I noted that he'd called me hot, but didn't have time to dwell on its implications just yet. "I'm working for Caleb." I was stretching the truth a little, but he didn't have to know that. "Don't you want to help him?"

"I would love to help him; I just don't know how telling his business would help him."

"Did he ever talk about his dad?"

"Sometimes."

"How did he feel about him?"

"He hated him," Finnegan said matter-of-factly.

"Enough to kill him?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think it's in everyone to kill if they're pushed hard enough."

"Was he being pushed hard enough?"

"Definitely. But he'd never cracked before, so I don't know if I believe he did this time."

"So you don't think he did it, just that he was capable of it?"

He nodded and gave me a pleased smile. "That sums it up nicely."

"Do you have any reason to think he didn't do it?"

He looked over at me again, as if deciding how trustworthy I was, then stopped walking so abruptly I almost ran into him. I looked up to see that we'd arrived at the other side of the wooded area, which obviously wasn't as large as it had first appeared. He pointed across the field in front of us.

It took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. It was from a different angle than I had seen it from before.

"That's the Cohens' barn," I said in surprise. Next to it, on one side, was Mrs. Fields' little house, and, on the other, a wall of trees where the Hayneses lived. I looked over at Finnegan. It seemed as if Marco had been telling me the truth, and Finn had just handed me the evidence on a silver platter. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"What was me?" His tone was guarded.

"You were meeting Caleb in the barn. You were dating."

He frowned. "I don't think I would characterize our relationship as dating."

"But you were meeting him in the barn?" He nodded. "Did you have sex?"

"Criminy! You get right to the point, don't you? Is that a necessary question?"

"Yes."

He sighed heavily. "Then, yes, we did, but it's not like that's all we did. I was probably his only friend. We talked a lot, hung out, and, yes, sometimes we had sex."

"So you're gay?"

He frowned. "I don't like labels."

"Did you see Caleb on the night his father was killed?"

His eyes shifted away. "What do you mean?"

"He ran away from the group home that night. He claims he was at a friend's house. Was it you?"

"He won't tell you?"

"No, and it would be a huge help if we knew where he was. As it is, he doesn't have an alibi at all."

"If he had an alibi, would that clear him?"

"Probably not completely, but it would help a lot. It might even get him out of juvenile detention."

He thought for a minute, then nodded. "He was with me."

"What time did he get there?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I don't pay much attention to time. Early evening, I would say. It was still light out. He tapped on my window and scared the crap out of me. He couldn't just go up to the door because my parents didn't know anything about us. He sneaked in

and hid out in my room overnight. He left the next morning."

Finally, I was coming up with some answers. If only I could get them to make sense. "Were you and Caleb together all night?"

"Pretty much?"

"You never left him alone at all?"

"Maybe for a few minutes at a time. After all, my parents didn't know he was there. I couldn't stay holed up in my room all night. They would have gotten suspicious."

"How long were you gone when you left him? Can you be more specific?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Ten, fifteen minutes, maybe longer."

"That was a pretty big risk for you, taking him in like that."

"It wasn't really a risk—at least, I didn't know it was at the time. He was just a friend who needed help. If your friend shows up and needs help, you do what you have to do."

"Do you love Caleb?"

That seemed to catch him by surprise. "What?"

"I asked if you love Caleb?"

"Love?"

"Yes, love."

"That's, uh, a really strong word. I like him. I like being with him. Do I love him? I don't know."

"Does he love you?"

"How would I know?"

"I think you would know."

"Maybe."

"I think he's protecting you."

"Protecting me how?"

"He refuses to say who he was meeting in the barn or where he was the night his father was killed—two things that could help him. Why is he protecting you?"

He bit his lip and looked away. "I'm not...out to my parents."

"I got the impression that you were pretty much a free spirit."

"It's a long story."

"I have time. What? Are your parents religious or something?"

"Or something." He sighed and sat down on the ground, folding his legs under him like some sort of bird. "I guess I might as well explain. We used to be in a cult."

I wasn't expecting that. "Like an actual cult?"

"Oh yeah. The Children of the Eternal Dawn. Ever hear of it?"

The name was vaguely familiar, but it also sounded like every other cult I'd ever heard about.

"Maybe? But I don't think so," I admitted.

"It was all over the news a few years ago. Crazy cult leader, commune, abuse—the whole kit and kaboodle."

He paused like that would have triggered some memories, but I just shrugged.

"It was started by this guy named Elijah Crowe."

"Was that his real name? Because if you name your kid Elijah Crowe, he's either going to be a rock star or a cult leader."

He gave me a look, then continued. "I don't know, and that's not the point. He claimed he'd received divine visions about the coming of what he called the "Great Illumination," some sort of cataclysmic event that would cleanse the world of corruption and lead his followers—who he called Seekers—into, like, a new age of purity and enlightenment. His followers believed he was the chosen vessel, and he commanded absolute loyalty. He demanded that his Seekers abandon their past lives in pursuit of spiritual transcendence."

"Uh huh. And people actually bought that?"

"I guess he was persuasive. My parents joined when I was a baby, so I don't really remember any other life but that. In some ways, it was kind of a fun way to grow up, especially when I was younger. There were a bunch of kids so I always had somebody to play with, and there was a sort of overall lack of supervision so we could do whatever we wanted."

"Okay, but what does that have to do with coming out to your parents?"

"I'm getting there. Relax. For years, The Children of the Eternal Dawn operated in secrecy, hidden away in a sprawling compound deep in Western Maryland. Like I said, it was almost idyllic for us kids, but when you reached your teen years, that all changed."

His face shifted, like a shadow fell across his features. "I was lucky. Everything blew up before I was old enough, but some of my friends who were a little older...they weren't so lucky."

"What happened to them?" I asked in a hushed voice.

"The news called it sex trafficking. It all came out after the raid."

"Raid?" I asked, enthralled despite myself.

"Yeah. The FBI raided the compound. Two girls escaped, somehow, and went to the police. The FBI got involved. There was a big investigation, and some other people who'd left the cult came forward. That all led to a huge raid about three years ago.

"It was...intense. Terrifying. There were all these people swarming the compound, wearing black from head to toe, like full-body armor, and they had guns. We had guns too, so there was a lot of shooting. People died.

"A bunch of us holed up in the main building, and there was a sort of standoff. The leaders told us we were being persecuted for our beliefs. Some of this I learned later. It was all such a blur in the moment."

He paused and took a deep breath.

"They shot tear gas or something through the windows. It was chaos. There were gunshots, people screaming, kids crying, then someone grabbed me. It was a cop. He said we were being rescued. I just didn't know what we were being rescued from."

"So what happened?"

"A lot of therapy. And a lot of arrests. They found Crowe hiding in a safe room underground, along with a ton of evidence of abuse and sex trafficking, including several kids who'd been reported missing, and a bunch more who had no official documentation of their existence. They'd been born on the compound. I doubt Crowe will ever get out of prison."

"I...I don't even know what to say. I can't believe that happened to you."

"That's because it didn't."

"What?"

"It was a Netflix show I watched. I just don't want my parents to know anything about my private life. They're so annoying. I'd never hear the end of it."

He stood up and started walking back towards his house.

"Wait!" Once again, I rushed to keep up. "That doesn't even make sense. Why would Caleb care about that?"

He shrugged. "He's a good friend."

"That's stupid," I tripped over a tree root. "Will you stop?"

"Why? We're done here."

"Done? You haven't told me anything."

"What's your point?"

"You know more than you're saying."

"And what if I do?"

"It would be best if you told me everything."

"Best for who? You?"

"Best for Caleb."

"I'm not really sure you want what's best for Caleb."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind."

"No, what did you mean by that?"

"It doesn't matter."

His expression was stubborn, so I dropped it and changed the subject. "Would you be willing to talk to the police?"

That got him to stop. He reeled around to face me. "What? No!"

"You have to, Finnegan."

"Call me Finn. Only my mother calls me by my full name. And I don't have to do anything."

"But you could get Caleb out of jail."

"And what would it get me? I'd be out to my parents."

"Not necessarily. Maybe the police can keep it a secret, you know, like a confidential source. Besides, isn't Caleb's whole life more important than what your parents might think?"

"That's easy for you to say. You don't live with my parents."

"I don't even live with my own parents. My dad kicked me out when he found out I was gay."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. We all know your sob story."

"That's not—"

"Save it. I'm not talking to the cops."

"Finn, just think about it. Please? Caleb needs somebody on his side."

We'd arrived at my car, so I opened the door to climb in, then stopped as another question occurred to me. "How did you feel about Caleb and Asher dating?"

He seemed surprised—and maybe a little bothered—by the question. "How did *you* feel about it?"

I frowned. "Asher and I had broken up by then."

"Not according to the rumors."

"You can't believe everything you hear, but it really doesn't matter. We're not talking about me. Did you care that Caleb was dating Asher?"

His eyes shifted away from mine. "I told you, Caleb and I were never dating. We were just friends...with benefits."

"So it didn't bother you that Caleb was seeing someone else?"

He kept his gaze averted. "Not really."

"What about Marco Martino?"

Finn's eyes snapped back to my face. "What about him?"

I realized I'd slipped up. No one knew Caleb and Marco had dated. My mind raced for a way to cover my blunder. "I, uh, heard rumors that they were dating."

Finn's eyes narrowed with suspicion. "I hadn't heard that." He tipped his head to one side. "Wait a minute. How did you know to talk to me? If Caleb didn't tell you about me, who did?"

"Someone saw you sneaking into the Cohens' barn."

"Who?"

I hesitated for only a second. "I really can't tell you that."

His jaw clenched, but then he relaxed and nodded. "Confidential sources, huh?"

"Something like that." I turned away and slid behind the wheel. Before I closed the door, I decided one last reminder was in order. "Will you just think about going to the police?"

He gave me a look I couldn't quite read. "Maybe I will," he said softly, almost under his breath.

I got home just in time to help Adam and Steve in the kitchen. It was the first time I'd seen them together

since their big fight, but I couldn't detect any trace of tension or bitterness between them. It seemed Adam was right when he said things were okay after their talk.

Adam was making Chicken Milano, a specialty of his, and Steve and I were pretty much only there to serve as his sous chefs. At Adam's direction, I pounded chicken breasts, diced sundried tomatoes, and chopped fresh basil, while Steve made a salad and set the table. I was a little nervous about everyone meeting Novak, but the busy work helped keep my mind occupied.

When the doorbell chimed, Adam sent me to answer it. I swung the door open to find Judy and Jake on the front porch. With everything going on, I hadn't given the idea of seeing Jake much thought, but when my eyes met his, my breath caught in my throat.

"Hey, Kill." He grinned broadly, as if we'd just seen each other last week instead of last year. "What's up?"

He looked different, though it took me a moment to pinpoint why. His dark blond hair was shorter but still styled in that familiar shaggy surfer cut, his eyes remained the same striking shade of blue, and his skin held the kind of tan that only comes from real time in the sun. But he was thinner now, and despite the healthy glow of his tan, there was a hollowness to him. More striking than the changes to his body was the look in his eyes. I remembered them sparkling with mischief, a glimmer that always hinted he was up to something. That spark was gone.

I quickly pushed those thoughts from my mind and plastered on my biggest smile. "Hey, Jake! Oh my God, it's so good to see you!"

We hugged, then Judy demanded one, too. I led them into the house, where Adam and Steve emerged from the kitchen for another round of welcomes. Kane heard the commotion and came downstairs as well. We were all still in the front entrance when the doorbell rang again.

I was suddenly nervous again. "That's probably Novak."

Judy seemed surprised. "Your boss?"

"I forgot to tell you," Adam interjected as I went to get the door. "I hope that's okay."

"It's fine," Judy assured him. "I enjoyed meeting him when I was here last."

I opened the door, and, sure enough, it was Novak. He came in and a round of introductions ensued.

"Dinner is almost ready," Adam announced after everyone had met one another. "I'll just be a few more minutes. Why don't you all go into the dining room and get seated?"

Steve and I led the way into the dining room, and all the guests sat down around the table while we took drink orders.

Back in the kitchen, Steve caught my arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" I asked, still wearing my pasted on smile.

Steve was unconvinced. "You look like a deer caught in headlights. What's up?"

I shrugged. "It's weird seeing Jake again, and then Novak being here and all."

Adam overheard the last part as he hurried by with a steaming pot of drained pasta. "I told you I wouldn't embarrass you," he commented with a chuckle.

"It's not that..."

Steve patted me on the shoulder. "I understand. It must be weird for you, worlds colliding, but try to relax and enjoy yourself. I'm sure everything will be fine."

He was right, of course. Everything was fine. Dinner was delicious, the conversation was good, and, true to his word, Adam avoided embarrassing me. In fact, he was perfectly charming. Novak appeared to be enjoying himself, and Judy looked right at home. The only person who seemed a little quiet was Jake.

After dinner, Adam suggested we go out on the back deck for drinks and dessert. Steve acted as bartender for the adults, while Kane helped Adam serve the chocolate cake.

"Want to go for a walk?" Jake asked as soon as everyone had finished their cake.

"Sure," I said, and we headed down the beach.

"So," he asked once we were out of earshot, "where's the gay scene around here?"

I laughed. "What gay scene?"

He frowned. "There has to be something."

"Look, coming from California to the Eastern Shore of Maryland has to be some massive culture shock, but you grew up here. You know what it's like."

"I might have grown up here, but I wasn't out then. I was just figuring out who I was when...everything happened. Aren't there any clubs or anything?"

"Sure, in DC and Baltimore, maybe Rehoboth Beach. None around here, at least none that I know of."

"Great. So I'm going to be forced to live like a monk to atone for my sins in California. Is that what you're telling me?"

I laughed. "I didn't say that. Even if there were clubs, you're too young to get in."

He gave me a sly smile. "There are ways around that." I gave him a pointed look, but didn't press the issue. "How do you stand it? How do you meet people?"

I shrugged. "I don't. Asher's the only guy I ever dated, and I've not exactly jumped back into the dating pool since we broke up."

"What dating pool? It's more like a dating puddle. No, not even a puddle. It's a dating... What's shallower than a puddle?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Hey! Are you trying to say I'm shallow?"

"Perish the thought."

We laughed, and I decided I'd been wrong about Jake. Maybe he hadn't changed as much as I'd thought.

"Okay, so there's no gay scene, no dating scene, what about..."

I looked over at him, but he was staring down at the sand under his feet. "What about what?"

He glanced up at me. "Do you know where to score any good weed?"

My eyes widened. "What?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Pot. Ganja. Marijuana." He studied my face for a second, then sighed. "Right. Never mind. Forget I asked."

As we walked along, we fell into an awkward silence. I searched for something to say, but nothing I wanted to ask felt appropriate. Was he doing drugs? Is

that why he looked so thin? Didn't weed make you eat? Maybe he was on other drugs. What had happened in California? I didn't ask any of the questions going through my mind, and the heavy silence grew longer.

"This is so stupid!" Jake finally exploded. I looked at him questioningly. "Coming back here. It sure as hell wasn't my idea. I didn't want to leave in the first place, but I made the best of it. I made friends, learned where the good party spots were, built some kind of life for myself. Now, she just decides to pick up and move back. I don't belong here now."

I bit my lip and tried to think of an encouraging response, but Jake rushed on before anything came to me. "Everything's changed. I changed. I can't just come back and pretend to be the same person who left. I can't just pick up where we left off."

"I don't think anybody expects you to be the same person you were before."

He snorted. "That's what Judy's hoping. She thinks if she gets me back here that everything will be fine."

"Maybe we can't pick up where we left off, but we can start over, right?"

He stopped walking and looked me in the eye. "Can we? Really? Do we even want to?" There was a defiant, angry tone to his voice.

"I mean...Why not?"

He rolled his eyes. "You don't even know me anymore, Killian."

I frowned. "Wouldn't starting over entail getting to know each other again? You're not the only person who's changed in the last year."

"You're the same as you ever were, but I'm not. You won't want to be my friend when you get to know me."

"You're not even going to give me a chance?"

He stepped in quickly, bringing his body close to mine. "You want a chance, Killian? Go out with me."

"What?" I took an involuntary step back, but he followed, keeping so close I could feel his body heat.

"Let's go out. On a date. Tonight. We can ditch everybody, go find a party. This is a beach town. There has to be something going on somewhere."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times while I tried to come up with a suitable response. "I can't." It wasn't ideal, but it just popped out.

Jake shook his head and stepped away. "That's what I thought." He turned and started back towards the house.

"Jake, wait," I called, but he kept going. I rushed to catch up. "Come on, Jake. Don't be like that."

"Be like what?"

"I...I mean...I just..."

"Forget it, Killian. In fact, forget this whole conversation. You want to start over? Great. We're starting over right now."

"Jake—"

"Drop it."

There was a finality in his voice that made me listen. We finished the walk back to the house without saying a word.

When we arrived, Judy and Novak were deep in conversation. They certainly seemed to be hitting it off, even if Jake and I weren't. Adam, Steve, and Kane were

nowhere to be seen. I excused myself and went inside, where I found them in the kitchen.

Steve looked up from rinsing dishes and smiled in my direction. "Did you have a nice talk with Jake?"

I made a face. "Not really."

Adam looked over. "Oh dear. What happened?"

I sighed. "I'll tell you later. I don't really want to go into it right now."

He nodded. "Sure. Kane, can you finish loading the dishwasher? I think Steve and I should get back outside."

Kane agreed, and I trailed after Adam and Steve as they returned to the deck. Novak and Judy were no longer by themselves. Novak was attempting to carry on an awkward conversation with Jake, who seemed to be giving monosyllabic responses while Judy frowned in the background.

She made eye contact with me as I came through the door. I shrugged and gave her an apologetic look. Disappointment flooded her eyes.

We tried to make small talk for a while longer until Judy announced that it was time for her and Jake to get back to their hotel. Jake sullenly said goodbye and headed for the car. Judy went around giving everyone a goodnight hug. When she got to me, she whispered into my ear, "It didn't go well?"

I shook my head. "No, but I'll keep trying."

She gave me a sad smile. "I'd appreciate that, Killian." She squeezed my hand and left.

"I guess I should get going as well," Novak announced.

"It was so nice to meet you," Adam told him. "I've heard a lot about you from Killian. It's good to put a face to a name."

Novak smiled and shook Adam's hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you as well." He turned to Steve. "And you, too."

"I'll walk you to your car," I volunteered. I was dying to tell him what I'd learned from Finn that afternoon.

Novak gave me a strange look. "I'm capable of getting there on my own."

"I, uh, wanted to talk to you about the case."

He laughed. "It's the weekend, Killian. I told you, give it a rest."

"It'll only take a minute."

He gave in with a sigh. "Fine." He turned back to Adam. "Please tell Kane I enjoyed meeting him, too."

Adam nodded. "I will."

"So what was so damn important that it couldn't wait until the morning?" Novak asked as we walked toward the front of the house.

"I talked to Finnegan Byrne today."

He frowned and stopped walking, which wasn't the reaction I was hoping for. "What?"

"I looked up every Byrnes in the phone book, as you suggested, and I just kept calling until I found him. He asked me to come over so we could talk, so I did."

He shook his head. "Killian, I appreciate your enthusiasm for the case, but you're going to have to learn to leave it at the office. You can't let it consume you like this. I told you to take the rest of the weekend off, and what do you do? You go out on your own again. You

can't keep doing that. You're not even licensed. I could get in trouble if someone complained to the right people."

I felt myself turning red. I thought he'd be proud of my detective work, but, instead, I was getting a lecture. "I'm sorry," I mumbled.

He sighed. "So what did you find out?"

The moment was ruined. "It can wait until morning."

"If it couldn't wait until morning five minutes ago, why now? Don't go all pouty on me."

"I'm not pouting." He raised one eyebrow. "Okay, fine; I'm pouting." I quickly filled him in on everything I'd learned from Finn. When I'd finished, he no longer looked quite as perturbed.

He rubbed his chin. "Not bad. Not bad, at all. In fact, that was some pretty damn good work."

I perked up. "Really?"

"Yes. However, that doesn't change the fact that you went off on your own...*again*. Killian, I'm the boss. Yes, I gave you the reins on the investigation, but you can't just run out whenever you get the notion. You're doing a good job, but you're mostly untrained, and this is a potentially dangerous case. You followed someone you don't even know off into the woods. If he'd wanted to, he could have killed you and no one would be the wiser."

"My car was at his house. Plus, he's my height but even skinnier. I could take him."

"The point is, I need to know where you are and what you're planning at all times—for your own safety, if nothing else. Understood?"

Grudgingly admitting to myself that he was right, I nodded.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "Good. Then I'll see you in the office in the morning and we can talk about this some more. In the meantime, try to stay out of trouble for the night."

I watched as he walked to his car and drove away. I wasn't looking forward to picking up on the lecture in the morning, but I knew I deserved it. I had gone nosing around on my own after Novak had told me to take the weekend off. I hadn't informed anyone where I was going, and I'd stupidly followed Finn off into the woods. If he'd wanted to hurt me, I'd handed him the perfect opportunity.

I shook my head as I turned back towards the house, resolving to be more careful in the future.

Chapter 14

As I sat in the cold, sterile visitor room at the juvenile detention center, waiting for Caleb, I couldn't help but think I was spending far too much time in this place. If everything went according to plan, however, this could very well be my last visit.

I waited several more minutes before the door opened and Caleb appeared. He took one look in my direction and turned away.

"I don't want to see him," he snapped at the guard.

"Caleb, wait. It's important."

He paused but didn't face me. "What's so important?"

"I found some new information that could get you out of here."

He slowly turned and gave me a measuring look. His bruises had faded, but a sullen, angry expression still darkened his face. He seemed to consider my words for a few seconds before grudgingly walking to the table and sitting down across from me.

I waited until the guard shut the door before I began. "You know, you've really made it hard to help you. If you had just told me certain things up front—"

"Are you going to tell me what you found out, or are you just going to lecture me?" he interrupted.

Reminding myself of my resolution to be nicer to my client, I took a deep breath and tried not to grit my teeth. "I talked to Marco."

Caleb's eyes flicked to mine but he showed no other reaction. "Who?" His voice was carefully neutral.

"Your former boyfriend."

He shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Marco told me everything, Caleb. He said you guys were boyfriends, but you were afraid of your dad finding out, so you asked him to keep it a secret. He also said he was the one who talked you into attending the Rainbow Alliance meetings."

"Maybe he's lying. Did you ever think of that?"

"Why would he lie? What does he have to gain? While we're on the subject, what do *you* have to gain by lying at this point? Why can't you just stop all the bullshit and be honest for once? How am I supposed to believe anything you say if you can't even come clean when I already know the truth?"

"Fine. I was sort of seeing Marco. It wasn't serious, so I didn't see why it was any of your business."

"Or maybe you're just afraid I'll tell Asher."

His eyes narrowed. "There's no reason to tell Asher."

I shrugged. "Maybe not. I think it's strange that you've gone to such lengths to keep it a secret. Why didn't you want anyone to know?"

"Marco told you. It was because of my dad."

"That didn't stop you from being pretty open with Asher."

"I was more comfortable with being gay when I started dating Asher. Plus, I was living in the group home by then. I didn't really care if my dad found out."

"Did he?"

"What?"

"Did your dad find out?"

He seemed annoyed by the question. "I don't know. How is any of this going to help me get out of here?"

"It's not. Marco told me something else that will, though. He said he saw someone at your house one night after you broke up with him."

Caleb frowned. "Was he stalking me?"

"He said he went over to talk to you, but no one answered his knock. As he turned to leave, he saw Finn Byrnes walk across the field and crawl through the barn window."

He started shaking his head before I was even finished speaking. "That's stupid. I don't even know Finn Byrnes. You know, Marco is a little crazy. He has this bad habit of making shit up—"

"I talked to Finn."

Caleb fell silent. His eyes darted around the room, looking anywhere but at me.

"He told me you two had been meeting in the barn for months. He admitted that he was the one you were hooking up with in the loft."

I watched with a certain amount of satisfaction as Caleb's face slowly turned an interesting shade of deep red. He seemed to be struggling to form a sentence, but incoherent sputtering was all he managed.

"He also told me that you stayed at his house the night you ran away from the group home."

Caleb finally found his voice, though it came out strangled with fury. "You had no right!"

I blinked in surprise. That wasn't quite the response I'd expected. "What?"

"How dare you?"

"How dare I what? Try to help you? Isn't that what I'm supposed to be doing?"

"I told you I didn't want to involve him, and you went and dragged him into it anyway. I can't believe you'd go behind my back and dig all this up."

"Hey, I have a newsflash for you. That's what private investigators do. They dig stuff up. You asked me to help you get out of here, and the only way to do that is either to find out who killed your father or to prove you didn't. We're still working on figuring out who committed the murder, but now we have an alibi for you. You have a 'get out of jail free' card. Use it."

"No."

"Oh my God! Are you crazy?"

"I don't want to involve Finn."

"Is this because of his parents?"

"It's none of your goddamned business! I said I don't want to involve him, and that's final!"

I shook my head in amazement. "Are you in love with him?"

Caleb blinked. "Who?"

"Finn."

He gave a sharp laugh. "Why do you want to know, so you can report to Asher? I talked to him, you know. On the phone. He told me how you ran right to his house after you left here last time. You couldn't wait to tell him that I was meeting someone in the barn, could you?"

"You're avoiding my question."

"I know."

"So what now? Am I just supposed to pretend I don't know that you were at Finn's the night you ran away?"

"Exactly."

I ran my hand through my hair in frustration. "I really don't get you."

He shrugged. "I didn't ask you to get me, just get me out."

"You know, if you'd stayed at the group home, you wouldn't be here right now."

"No, I'd still be getting the crap beat out of me there."

"Is that really why you left?"

"That's not enough of a reason?"

"I meant..." I sighed. "I guess so."

"Are we finished?"

I thought about Rachel and once more debated whether to tell him I had talked to his mother. I came to the same conclusion as I had every other time I'd thought about it for the last two days: it would only make the situation worse.

I nodded sadly. "I guess we are."

I was halfway back to the office when I had one of my brainstorms. I quickly called Novak on my cell phone.

"Do you know what group home Caleb ran away from?" I asked as soon as he answered.

"I have the name and address somewhere in my notes. Why?"

"It just occurred to me that we've not talked to anyone there. Caleb said he ran away because he was

getting beat up, but he also seemed a little evasive when I questioned him on the subject. I'm wondering if there isn't more to the story."

I could hear the sound of paper shuffling in the background. "While I'm looking, how did your talk with Caleb go?"

I sighed. "About as well as any of our talks go, by which I mean not as well as I would have liked. He tried to deny even knowing Marco or Finn, but he finally admitted everything—more or less. He's still insisting that he doesn't want to involve Finn."

"So, he has an alibi but doesn't want to use it?"

"Right."

"There's something fishy going on there."

"I agree. I think maybe he has stronger feelings for Finn than he wants to let on."

"That would be unfortunate for your friend Asher. Ah, here we go—the Phoenix House for Youth."

"Phoenix? As in Arizona?"

"More like phoenix as in the mythical beast that rose from its own ashes, I would imagine."

I was glad he couldn't see me at that moment. I was pretty sure I was blushing. "Oh. Right. What are the chances of me getting to talk to someone there today?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether Hank has any pull there. From my admittedly limited experience, those places don't exactly welcome visitors, and they probably wouldn't tell you anything even if you managed to see somebody."

"Do you think you could find out if Sergeant Kaplan can get me in?"

"I'll see what I can do."

I went back to the office and did some paperwork while we waited to hear back from the sergeant.

Around mid-afternoon, he phoned with good news. He'd gotten me an appointment by calling in a few favors from a fellow officer who had worked closely with the head of staff at the Phoenix House. He gave me directions to the group home and agreed to meet me there in half an hour, suggesting that they might be more willing to talk to me if someone official was along.

The group home was based in a large, two-story farmhouse on the far side of town and out in the country, with a small, inconspicuous sign in the front yard, almost concealed by overgrown evergreen bushes. The side yard had been converted into a gravel parking area, and even though it already held several vehicles, including a marked squad car, I had no trouble finding a spot.

Kaplan climbed out of the cruiser as I shut my door. "Hi, Killian." He extended his hand in greeting. "Once I get you inside, I'm going to let you ask all the questions. I'm not here in any official capacity. Okay?"

"Sure." I pretty much knew what I wanted to ask.

We approached the door, and Kaplan knocked firmly. We waited for what felt like an unusually long time before it finally opened, revealing a tall, slender man in his late thirties. He was attractive in a sort of generic sense, with neatly styled light brown hair and a sharp outfit—jeans paired with a button-up shirt. A strained smile rested on his lips, not quite reaching his icy blue eyes.

"Hello," he greeted us politely. "You must be Sergeant Kaplan. I'm Rob Samson, head of staff here at the Phoenix House."

"Mr. Samson." Kaplan shook his hand. "This is Killian Kendall. As I mentioned on the phone, he's working with the police department in our investigation of Ira Cohen's murder. I was hoping we could talk to you about Caleb Cohen."

Mr. Samson frowned in my direction. "I've already been questioned about Caleb. I don't know what else I can add to what I said then."

"We've discovered some additional information since that initial interview. In light of these new facts, we have a few more questions."

"Very well, then. We can talk in my office." He stepped back and motioned us inside.

I stepped in first and took a moment to look around. I guessed I was standing in what had been the living room in the house's former life, but now it was laid out as a lounge. Several mismatched sofas that had seen better days faced a television, and a dusty, disused foosball table sat in a corner. Two teenaged girls looked up from the TV with lazy interest. The heavier of the two, with dyed black hair and too much makeup, went back to whatever show they were watching. The other girl, a waif-thin, freckle-faced redhead, checked me out with a predatory glint in her eye.

"Right this way." Mr. Samson ushered us to a room at the back of the house that had probably once been the den or family room. A door had been added for privacy, and a desk, several filing cabinets, and three chairs filled the smallish space. He sat behind the desk

and indicated that Kaplan and I should take the other chairs.

A picture on his desk caught my eye. It showed an attractive blond woman with a young child on her lap.

"My wife and son," he said proudly.

"You're married?" I wasn't sure why I was so surprised. Maybe because my first impression upon meeting him was that he was possibly gay, or maybe because I'd somehow assumed he lived on the premises.

He gave me an annoyed look. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. I figured you lived here."

His expression cleared. "Oh, no. There is live-in staff, but I'm not one of them. I'm lucky enough to go home at the end of the day."

"Can you tell me a bit about Phoenix House? I'm not really familiar with how a group home functions."

"Technically, we offer a residential treatment program for troubled youth. That means that most of our residents are sentenced here by the court. However, sometimes we do have children placed here because there's nowhere else for them to go. Often they're victims of abuse or neglect and too old to easily place in a foster home."

"Like Caleb."

"Yes."

"What was he like while he was here?"

"From what I remember, very quiet and reserved. He wasn't a problem resident."

"He told me he was abused while he was staying here."

Mr. Samson's face grew alarmed. "What? I never heard anything about this. Abused how?"

"He claims some of the other residents beat him up."

Mr. Samson frowned, but also seemed oddly relieved. "I'm pretty sure I would have known about something like that."

"Is it possible he just kept it quiet?"

"I suppose, although I don't know why on earth he would have. All our residents are encouraged to come to me or any of our staff with any problems that come up. We have an open-door policy."

"Did he have any close friends while he was here, anyone he might have confided in?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but then I'm not in a position to necessarily notice if he did."

I was growing frustrated with his vague non-answers. "Is there someone else who would know more, one of the live-in staff maybe?"

He frowned but nodded. "Perhaps Charlie can answer your questions. He's our head counselor and lives here in the house. I'll see if he's available. Excuse me." He left us alone in the office, although I noticed he was careful not to shut the door.

I looked around and realized that everything in the room was on the shabby side. The chairs were frayed and stained, the filing cabinets scratched and dinged, and the desk looked suspiciously like a government hand-me-down. I guessed the home operated on a shoestring budget.

I found myself suddenly grateful that I'd had Adam to take me in when my father kicked me out. Of course, if Adam hadn't, I'm sure my mom would have made other arrangements. She wouldn't have let me end

up here, but the possibility had existed. If things had been just a little different, this might have been my home.

"So, what do you think?" Kaplan asked, dispelling my thoughts.

"He's not very helpful."

"No, but if it makes you feel better, he wasn't any more forthcoming with our officer who interviewed him the first time. These guys tend to be pretty tight-lipped when it comes to their charges. Not that they give too much of a damn about the kids. They're just protecting their own asses."

Our conversation was cut short by the reappearance of Mr. Samson and a younger black man with piercings in both ears and a neatly trimmed goatee.

"Killian, this is Charlie. I told him you have some questions about Caleb."

I stood and shook Charlie's hand. He pulled a folding wooden chair from a closet I hadn't even noticed, opened it up, and we both sat down.

Mr. Samson remained standing behind Charlie, as if he was monitoring our conversation. I was getting the impression that Mr. Samson cared more about the Phoenix House's reputation than about the kids who lived there.

I turned my attention to Charlie. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to me."

He smiled. "No problem. I hope I can help."

I decided I already liked him better than Mr. Samson. "I understand Caleb was quiet, pretty much kept to himself while he was here."

Charlie nodded. "That's about right, yeah. I think he was having a hard time getting used to this place. Most kids have an adjustment period when they arrive, but he seemed to have more trouble than usual."

"He told me some of the other residents beat him up."

Charlie shook his head. "No way."

"You seem pretty sure."

"That's because I am. We have a strict 'no violence, zero tolerance' policy here. They know better than to fight, and if they did, we'd see it or hear about it. There's always an adult staff member somewhere nearby."

"You think he's lying?"

He shrugged. "I don't want to call the kid a liar, but let's just say he wasn't always truthful."

"What do you mean?"

"I caught him in a few lies while he was here. I facilitate group therapy sessions. It's not as impressive as it sounds. For the most part, the kids just sit around and talk about whatever is on their minds. We try to encourage them to work out ways to solve their own problems. A couple of times, Caleb...exaggerated the truth, shall we say, when it was his turn."

"How so?"

"Well, once he claimed both his parents were dead when I knew full well his father was alive and was accused of abusing him. Of course, I couldn't just say that in the middle of the session, so I talked to him about it later. He told me that in his mind his father was dead." He shook his head. "You know, later, after everything happened, that answer came back to haunt me. I

wondered if I should have placed more importance on what he said. At the time, I figured he was a hurt kid mouthing off."

Mr. Samson rested a comforting hand on Charlie's shoulder. "That's what any of us would have done."

I frowned. All this was very interesting, but I wondered where it left me with Caleb. I was beginning to think I couldn't believe a word he said.

"Did Caleb befriend anyone while he was here?"

"Not really. There were a couple of kids he talked to because they were in similar circumstances." He brightened up a bit. "There was a boy named Sven who actually got placed in a foster home."

"Caleb said that one of the residents here told him kids their age are seldom placed in a home."

Charlie nodded sadly. "Unfortunately, he was right. Sven is a rare case. And the guy who told him that was probably Deon. He's been here for four years, since his mom died of a drug overdose. He'll be eighteen in a few months, and, trust me, he's counting the days."

"Do you think I could talk to Deon?"

Charlie deferred to Mr. Samson, who seemed to be considering my request. "I suppose that would be all right, as long as I can be present."

I frowned. I doubted I could get much out of one of the kids with Mr. Samson hovering over their shoulder.

Kaplan caught my expression. "Actually, Mr. Samson, I wonder if I could have a few words with you alone while Killian talks to Deon."

Mr. Samson obviously wasn't happy with this arrangement, but reluctantly agreed.

"I'll go get Deon for you," Charlie offered, standing up.

"Before you go, do either of you have any idea why Caleb ran away? Was he just that unhappy?"

Charlie glanced at Mr. Samson again, and I sensed an unspoken question between them. Mr. Samson gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, and Charlie nodded. I fought to keep another frown off my face.

"I think Caleb would be the best person to answer that question for you," Mr. Samson said simply.

I was dying to know what they were hiding.

"I'll just go." Charlie slipped from the room.

"Wait a minute," Mr. Samson called, following him out.

Kaplan and I exchanged a knowing look.

I could hear the low rumble of Mr. Samson's voice from outside the room, but I couldn't make out what he was saying. He quickly rejoined us.

"Is there somewhere we can speak privately?" Kaplan asked him.

I could have sworn I saw the man grind his teeth, but he forced a smile. "Follow me." They left the office, and I found myself alone. I was tempted to snoop but didn't want to risk getting in trouble if someone caught me, so I waited patiently in my seat.

Charlie returned a few minutes later with Deon, a muscular black teen wearing a tight fitting, white A-shirt and red basketball shorts. The kid nodded in my

direction as he dropped into the chair Kaplan had vacated.

"I'll just, ah, leave the two of you alone." Charlie sounded uncomfortable about something, but I nodded in his direction and he backed out. Once again, I noticed the door was left open. I couldn't shake the feeling that Charlie was just around the corner, listening.

Deon rolled his eyes and grinned. "Don't mind him. We got some bad press a few months ago when one of the girls claimed a counselor had sex with her. Turned out it was all a crock of shit, but it put everybody on edge, you know?"

I nodded. That explained a lot. "So, you were Caleb's friend?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'friend'." He shrugged. "We lived in the same house, even shared the same room, but we weren't exactly tight."

"Did he talk to anyone?"

"This kid named Sven, and me, more than just about anybody else, but that ain't sayin' much. Oh, and there was Birdie."

"Sven is in a foster home now, right?" Deon nodded. "What about Birdie?"

"She's still here. She's got a while yet. In fact, you probably saw her when you came in. She's always in front of the TV. A skinny little redhead?"

I remembered the look in her eyes and nodded. "She and Caleb talked a lot?"

"No, not at all. But not for a lack of effort on her part." He grinned.

"What do you mean?"

"Birdie's more like a hawk. That girl is always looking for prey. She goes after every new boy that comes in here. Caleb wasn't much interested, if you get my drift, but she cornered him a few times."

"You knew Caleb was gay?"

"Everybody knew, or at least we all guessed. He was way more interested in Sven than Birdie. It was pretty obvious."

"Did it bother you?"

"Not much bothers me."

"Did it bother anybody else?"

He shrugged. "There were the usual stupid comments and name-calling, but that comes with the territory."

"Caleb told me he got beat up because he was gay."

"What? In here?"

"Yeah."

"Psh. Nah. Nobody got beat up."

"So he lied?"

"Guess so. Look, he came in here looking for trouble. He was always trying to start something with somebody. A few people got sick of it and told him off, but nobody ever laid a hand on him. We got too much at risk to just hit somebody, no matter how good it might feel at the time."

"I take it you didn't like him much."

"Didn't like him, didn't dislike him. He was just here, passing through like everybody else. I gave him his space and listened to him the few times he needed to talk. I try to do that, since, you know, I've been here the longest and all. I know how the system works—or

doesn't work, at least for us. He seemed to be settling down and then, boom, he ran." He shrugged again. "Can't say I miss him."

"Do you have any idea why he ran away?"

He glanced towards the door, then leaned in close and lowered his voice. I leaned forward to hear him.

"The night he took off, Samson called him in for a meeting. When he came back to the room, he was really upset—like, irritated or something. I asked him what his deal was, and he said they were sending him back to his dad."

I sat back in my chair and stared at Deon in surprise. "No one mentioned that."

He gave me a crooked smile. "Yeah. I figured. They were probably trying to be nice and give him a heads-up, but technically, they weren't supposed to tell him until the social workers got here."

"You think he panicked and ran?"

"I'm not saying he panicked. He didn't seem scared, just pissed off. Next thing I knew, he was gone."

It looked like yet another meeting with Caleb was in order, although I couldn't help wondering if it was even worth my time. It seemed I couldn't believe a thing Caleb told me.

I forced my attention back to Deon. "Thanks. You were really helpful. You can send Charlie back in now."

He chuckled. "No problem. Glad I could help."

"You did."

Charlie was back in the room so fast I had no doubt he'd been eavesdropping. The sheepish look on his face confirmed my suspicion. I decided to ignore the

spying and get to the point. "I think I need to speak to Mr. Samson again."

Charlie nodded, still not looking me in the eye. "I'll go get him."

Mr. Samson, along with Kaplan and Charlie, soon rejoined me. Mr. Samson looked quite grim. I wondered if Charlie had managed to fill him in on my conversation with Deon or if that was just his usual expression. Either way, I expected it to get even grimmer in the next few seconds.

"Anything you'd like to add?" I asked carefully.

"No." Mr. Samson gazed back at me placidly. "I think I've said everything I have to say."

"Then is there anything you'd like to amend?"

The director's face grew cold. "Meaning?"

"I know you haven't been exactly truthful with me...or the police."

Kaplan gave me a curious look. Mr. Samson's eyes narrowed. "Excuse me?"

"I believe you know why Caleb ran away."

"I never said I didn't." He chose his words carefully. "I said that Caleb would be the best person to tell you why he left. For the record, I don't know for sure why Caleb left. I may suspect, but I don't know."

"You told Caleb that he was being returned to his father."

Kaplan's head snapped around to look at Mr. Samson, who was turning an alarming shade of red. "That's confidential information to which you should not be privy," the director growled through gritted teeth.

"Well, I know now, and you should have told the police in the first place."

"Actually, I don't have to tell anyone anything. That's why we have strict confidentiality laws. Now, if you'll excuse me, this conversation is over."

"No, it's not." Kaplan spoke up, his voice strong with authority. "Mr. Samson, as I'm sure you well know, those confidentiality laws go right out the window in cases of murder. You should have been up front with my officer from day one. I could charge you with obstructing justice, but I'll consider overlooking that if you answer Mr. Kendall's questions. It will be easier on all of us. I hate paperwork and I'm sure you'd hate to lose your job. Or, if you prefer, we can always come back with a warrant."

Mr. Sampson looked like he was about to blow a gasket. Since Kaplan had clearly taken on the role of bad cop, I decided it was my turn to play the good cop.

I took a deep breath. "Look, I'm not trying to discredit you. I think this place is doing a lot of good, and I don't want to cause any trouble for you. I'm just trying to find out if Caleb Cohen chopped up his father with an ax. To do that, I need to know the truth."

Mr. Samson sat down behind his desk, his lips pressed firmly together. "Charlie, if you'll excuse us? And please shut the door on your way out." Charlie did as he was asked. As soon as we were alone, Mr. Samson sighed. "I'd like to point out I'm only doing this to avoid further official involvement."

I shrugged. "As long as you're doing it. I do appreciate your cooperation."

"What do you need to know?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"Did you tell Caleb he was being returned to his father?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Why did I tell him?"

"Well, that too, but why was he being returned to an abusive parent?"

"You should check with Social Services, but from what I understand, there was simply no proof that anyone had abused him, other than a few bruises that, quite frankly, could have come from anywhere. All we had were his accusations. After our experiences here, and an evaluation with a psychiatrist, it was determined that Caleb had fabricated the claims."

I sat in stunned silence as his words sank in. The case had just taken an unexpected turn.

My mind was churning as I drove away from the Phoenix House. The more I learned about this case, the more confused I became. Caleb claimed his father abused him and had done so for years. A psychiatrist believed Caleb was making it up. Rachel Cohen had confirmed that Ira beat her, but she insisted that he'd never laid a finger on Caleb before she left. Yet, I'd seen the bruises on him myself. I didn't know who to believe.

I did know, however, that I needed to warn Asher. At the very least, Caleb had been lying to him about Marco and Finn. I knew Asher wasn't going to want to hear what I had to say, but I had to tell him.

Instead of heading back to the office, I called Novak and filled him in on what I'd found out at the group home. He sounded as baffled as I felt. I asked if I

could take the rest of the afternoon off, and he agreed. I was relieved, seeing that I was already on my way to Asher's house.

When I knocked, Asher's mom answered the door. She seemed surprised to see me.

"Hi, is Asher here?"

"Yes, he is," she said slowly. "Hang on. I'll let him know you're here."

It felt strange for her to not invite me in. The Davises' house had practically been my second home for years. I waited on the doorstep until she returned a couple of minutes later looking uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry, Killian. He said he doesn't want to see you."

I blinked in surprise. I'd known he was upset when I left the time before, but not that upset. "Can you tell him it's important?"

"He, uh, seemed pretty adamant. I really am sorry. Can I give him a message?"

"Yeah. Please ask him to call me. Tell him it's urgent."

She frowned. "Is something wrong?"

I debated what to say. "I don't know. Maybe. I...I just need to talk to Asher."

I drove home feeling extremely dejected. Nothing seemed to be going right. I was more confused than ever about the case, my talk with Jake had been a disaster, and Asher wasn't speaking to me.

When I arrived home, I headed straight to my room. I wrote up my notes for the day, then sulked until Adam called me down for dinner. I was quieter than usual while we ate, so Adam and Steve insisted we

watch a funny movie to cheer me up. Despite my protests that I didn't want to be cheered up, they dragged me into the den and put on some dumb comedy.

Somehow, I managed to sit through the whole thing, although more often than not my mind wasn't on the screen. Still, it seemed to make Adam and Steve feel better, and afterwards they allowed me to escape to my room.

I wasn't in the mood to get online, and I couldn't concentrate on the book I was reading, so eventually I just turned off the light and tried to go to sleep.

Unfortunately, my mind refused to stop working. My day's discoveries and disappointments just kept cycling through my head. I was still awake when Kane got home from his date and prepared for bed. It wasn't long before his breathing let me know he'd drifted off. For some reason, I found that even more frustrating.

I sat up in bed, a low growl coming from the back of my throat.

"Calm down," a voice said softly in my ear.

I started and turned to find myself face to face with Seth. "Wha—?"

The familiar crooked grin flashed across his face. "You're never going to fall asleep if you're so tense."

I shook my head. "Obviously, I'm already asleep."

"How do you figure?"

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?"

He shrugged. "Is that what you decided after the last time we talked?"

I nodded, but his question shook my conviction. "I...guess. It seemed like the best explanation. Better than thinking I'm losing my mind, anyway."

"You're not losing your mind."

"I'm sure that's exactly what hallucinations tell people who are losing their minds."

Seth laughed. "So now I'm a hallucination. You sure know how to make a guy feel special." I reached toward him and his smile quickly vanished. "*Don't.*" His voice was sharp.

"Why not?"

"I'm not... You won't be able to touch me. It'll just freak you out."

I shook my head. "Like I'm not already freaked out? This is so weird."

"My being here?"

"Well, yeah. You're dead!"

"Would you rather I leave you alone?"

I had to think about that for a moment. Seeing Seth again made my heart ache, although I tried to cover it up with banter. Besides, it was nothing new. I'd been dreaming about Seth on and off since he died.

At least, that's what I tried to tell myself. The truth was these dreams—if they were in fact dreams—were very different from the ones I used to have on an almost nightly basis. In most of those, I'd just relive Seth's murder, or his killer would be taunting me.

"No," I finally decided. "I like seeing you again, even if it does mean I'm going nuts."

He gave me a serious look. "You're not—"

"Crazy," I finished for him. "Right. If you say so. Why are you here?"

"To talk to you."

"Did you just want to chat, or do you have another vague warning for me?"

"Does it have to be one or the other?"

I stuck out my tongue and made a face. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Asher."

"Of course." I sighed. "I must be the only person in the world with a ghost for a relationship counselor."

Seth chuckled. "You know, you could just find someone alive to talk to about all this, then I wouldn't be needed."

"So what specifically about Asher did you want to discuss?"

"Why are you still so hung up on him?"

I frowned. "What do you mean? I'm not hung up on him."

"Oh yeah? Then why do you keep running to tell him about every little negative thing you find out about Caleb?"

"He asked me to investigate! And I hardly think lying and cheating are 'little things'."

"He asked you to help prove Caleb innocent or guilty. He didn't ask you to find out if Caleb was seeing other guys."

"It came up during the investigation. What? I'm supposed to just keep all that to myself? I don't want to see Asher get hurt."

"Is that the only reason you want to tell him, or are you maybe taking some small measure of satisfaction in showing Asher that the guy he left you for wasn't all he made him out to be?"

My breath caught in my throat. Was there some truth in what Seth was saying? If I really thought about it, I had to admit that he wasn't completely wrong. I suddenly felt very ashamed.

"It...it wasn't the only reason. Especially not today. I found out that Caleb's possibly been lying about everything. Asher needs to know that."

"Asher's a big boy. He can take care of himself."

"So you think I shouldn't tell him?"

"I don't know, Killian. I'm just saying you need to evaluate your motives. You've been so focused on Asher for so long, I'm not sure you know how to move on."

"I don't understand."

"First, you guys were dating, then, after you broke up, you were angry and hurt, and now you're forced to work with him on this case. You can't get away from him long enough to get over him. Meanwhile, you're ignoring a perfectly nice guy who'd really like the chance to know you better."

"I am? Who?"

"Micah!"

"But—"

"But what? He's cute, charming, has a great job, and he likes you. Why haven't you called him?"

"I just...I haven't had time."

"Oh bull. Call him."

"Fine. I'll call him tomorrow."

Seth narrowed his eyes and gave me a stern look.

"Promise?"

"Yes, I promise! Sheesh!"

He broke into another grin. "Thank you."

"You know, what if we get married and have kids? What am I supposed to tell them when they ask how their daddy and I got together? 'Your dead Uncle Seth talked me into it?'"

He laughed. "Jeez, Killian, slow down. You've not even gone on a date with him yet and you're already talking about kids."

I had to laugh too. "Are we done talking about Asher now?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "I suppose."

"Good. Do you have a warning for me now?"

He seemed to think about that for a few seconds, then shook his head. "No. Not this time."

"So, I'll see you again?"

He nodded. "Probably. Is that okay?"

I smiled. "Yeah."

"So you don't think you're crazy anymore?"

"Oh no, I still think I'm nuttier than a fruitcake. I've just decided to go with it."

Seth laughed again. "Go to sleep. And don't forget to call Micah tomorrow."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't you need to poof off into the ether or something?"

He smiled, but started to fade out. It was almost as if my eyes had slipped out of focus. I found it just as unnerving as I had the last time.

Before he disappeared, he spoke once more. "You're not crazy...but you do have a gift. Talk to Judy."

"Wait. What?" But he was gone.

How was I supposed to fall asleep after that parting gift?

Chapter 15

The next morning, I woke up feeling far more optimistic than I had the night before. Seth was the first thing that came to mind, and I was surprised by how vividly I remembered my dream. I took it as some kind of sign. Before heading to work, I made sure Micah's business card was safely tucked in my wallet.

It took me all morning to gather enough courage to actually dial his number. I almost copped out and texted him instead, but I decided it was better to call. After I finally dialed, I started worrying that he might have lost interest while I listened to the ringing.

"Hello. Micah Gerber." I almost hung up.

"Hello?" he asked for the second time.

"Um, hey. It's Killian. Killian Kendall."

"Hey, Killian!" He sounded genuinely pleased. "I was starting to think you weren't going to call."

"I, uh, wasn't, but then...a friend encouraged me. So I did." Great. I sounded like an idiot.

Micah chuckled. "I'm glad you did. What's up? Any new developments on the case?"

"No. I mean, yeah, but that's not why I called."

"Oh. Okay."

There was a long, uncomfortable pause before I managed, "I was wondering if, you know, you'd like to maybe go out sometime?"

"I'd love to," he answered without hesitation.

I released a small sigh of relief. "Sweet. So, uh, when are you free?"

I could almost hear Micah's smile over the line. "How about dinner Friday night?"

"Yeah. Great. That's sounds great."

"Perfect. I'll pick you up around seven. See you then."

"Right. See you then."

It wasn't until after I'd hung up that I realized I didn't know where we were going or how I should dress. It had all happened so fast. I hadn't even given Micah my address, so how would he pick me up?

"Just what I needed," I muttered, "something else to stress over."

"Who are you talking to?" Novak asked from his office door.

I gave him a sheepish smile. "Myself."

Novak chuckled. "Is the stress of the case getting to you that much, kiddo?"

"You know," I rubbed my face, "I think it is."

His expression became concerned. "Maybe you should take a couple of days off."

"Nah." I shook my head. "I don't think that would help. In fact, it might even make things worse. I'd just stew over the case constantly anyway, but then I couldn't do anything about it."

He shrugged. "Don't let yourself get burned out, Killian. You have to learn how to leave this stuff at the office. Changing the subject, I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but did I just hear you make a date with someone?"

I felt my face heating up. "Um...maybe."

"So? Tell me about him." Novak looked at me expectantly.

"His name is Micah. He works at the newspaper."

"Is he the guy who helped us out with the case?"

"Yeah."

"I approve." Novak nodded and headed back into his office.

Shortly after lunch, Sergeant Kaplan called. There were no pleasantries or banter. He got straight to the point. "I need you to come down to the station."

The gravity in his voice put me on edge. "What happened?"

"I'll explain everything when you get here."

"Should I bring Novak?"

"You're the one I need to talk to."

"I'll be right there."

I stuck my head into Novak's office long enough to tell him what was going on—at least what little I knew—before I ran out the door.

At the police station, I was quickly ushered into Kaplan's office. I hadn't even sat down before he started.

"There's been another death."

I dropped the rest of the way to my seat. "Who?"

"Marco Martino."

I stared at him in shock. "What happened?"

"We're not sure. Since you told us about the hiding place in the barn loft, we've been keeping an eye on the property. Not twenty-four-hour surveillance, but we've been dropping by at least once a day just to check on things. This morning, an officer found Martino hanging in the barn."

"Oh my God! Was he... Did he..."

"We don't know. We're still trying to figure out whether it was murder or suicide. We're leaning towards suicide, but only because it's not easy to murder someone by hanging—especially if they put up any sort of fight."

"But why would he kill himself? And in the Cohens' barn of all places?"

"We were hoping you could help explain that."

"Me?"

"You talked to him in the course of your investigation, correct?"

"Yeah, but that was last Thursday."

"You know more about him than we do. What did you talk about?"

"Caleb, obviously. They dated secretly for a while."

Kaplan frowned. "Novak mentioned that Caleb and Martino had dated, but I didn't realize it was secretly."

"Yes."

"Why the secrecy?"

"Marco said Caleb was afraid his dad would find out he was gay and the abuse would get worse."

"Do you know if Marco was ever at the Cohens' house?"

"He told me he was there at least twice—once to pick up Caleb and once to try to talk to Caleb after they broke up. The first time, there was some sort of nasty scene with Caleb's dad. The second, he claimed he saw someone crawling through the barn window, presumably to meet Caleb."

"Did he identify the person?"

"He said it was Finnegan Byrnes."

"Who is he?"

"Another student at our high school."

"Have you talked to him?"

"Yes."

"Okay. We'll get back to him. First, let's finish with Martino."

"We are finished. That was pretty much it. Except, after a lot of arguing, I did manage to get Caleb to admit he dated Marco. He was way more concerned about Finn, though."

"What do you mean?"

"Caleb was meeting Finn in the barn, and he went to Finn's house when he ran away from the group home."

"This Finn person is his alibi?"

"Yes."

"And when were you going to tell me about this?"

"I just found out yesterday, and I was hoping Finn or Caleb would tell you. Right now, they're both unwilling to admit it."

"I can understand why Finn would want to stay out of it, but what does Caleb have to gain?"

"I think he's in love with Finn, or has feelings for him, at least. Caleb has been adamant that he doesn't want him involved. Finn doesn't want his parents to know that he's...whatever he is. Bisexual, maybe."

"But Finn told you?"

"Yes."

"And now you've told me, so that means I can at least bring him in for questioning. Where does he live?"

I flipped through my notebook and gave him the address. Kaplan called in an officer, gave him the information, and sent him out to pick up Finn.

"Can we go back to Marco for a minute?" I asked when the officer had left.

"Sure."

"Where...was he found exactly?"

Kaplan raised an eyebrow. "Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged sheepishly. "Morbid curiosity?"

"He was dangling off the edge of the hay loft."

I suppressed a shudder. "You said you thought it was most likely suicide."

"No, I said we're leaning towards suicide because hanging is a difficult murder method."

"But not impossible?"

"No, not impossible. The hard part would've been getting the victim's head in the noose while he was assumedly struggling. It's possible, I suppose, that he was unconscious when he was strung up, but without being too graphic, let's just say he had all the signs of someone who was hanged while conscious."

"I don't understand."

"Even if you're deliberately hanging yourself, panic sets in at a certain point." I stared at him blankly, and he sighed. "Fine, but you asked for it. Death by hanging isn't exactly pleasant, especially with a short drop or after being hoisted. Even if you're trying to kill yourself, it isn't instantaneous the way it is with a long drop, which breaks your neck and kills you immediately. With a short drop, you suffocate. Blood flow is cut off from your brain, and you strangle to death. It's slow and painful. In a suicide, your hands aren't tied behind your back as they are in an execution, so instinct takes over and you fight. You claw at the rope, try to climb it, anything you can do in an attempt to survive. Victims usually tear their flesh, rip their fingernails out, and have rope burns on their fingers and palms. Martino showed

all those signs, as well as the typical purple face, protruding eyes, and swollen tongue. Oh, and for the record, he also evacuated his bowels and bladder. Anything else you'd like to know?"

I shuddered and gulped several times in an effort not to gag. Poor Marco. I was sure the images would come back to me later, but for the time being, I tried to clear my mind so I could focus.

"Were there...were there any signs that someone might have been with him?"

"Unfortunately, no. There've been so many people up in that loft in the last week—you, officers, and obviously Martino—that any chance of looking for footprints is long gone. Why? You think maybe it wasn't suicide?"

"I don't know. I just can't imagine any reason he would have killed himself. He seemed fine when I spoke to him."

"Perhaps he acted based on something we don't know yet. We'll question Caleb again, and between him and Finn, maybe one of them will be able to shed some light on the situation."

I slowly shook my head. Something didn't feel right about Marco's death. "Will you let me know what happens after you talk to Finn?"

Kaplan thought for a moment. "I suppose I can do that. You've been a huge help on this case so far, although I wish you'd come to me sooner about Finn."

I looked down. "Sorry."

"In the future, don't withhold potentially important information. Is there anything else I should know?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Good, then get going." I stood up. "Oh, and Killian, there is one condition to my calling you. In light of this second death, I think you should back off."

I frowned. "What do you mean by 'back off'?"

"Just what I said. Leave things alone, at least until we have a better handle on the situation. Up to now, I was reasonably certain we had the right guy behind bars. If this Finn character does provide Caleb with an alibi, then we're back at square one—which means the killer is still on the loose. I don't like putting civilians in danger."

"You wouldn't be putting me in danger. I got involved in this case on my own."

"Be that as it may, I'm respectfully telling you to step away and let us handle it. As I said, you've been invaluable, but I think you've done all you can do. That's an order, by the way, not a request."

I didn't like it, but I knew better than to argue. I nodded and left.

Of course, I had no intention of backing off.

I was discussing the implications of the second death with Novak when Kaplan called again. Novak spoke to him for several minutes before hanging up.

"What did he say?" I asked before the phone was even in its cradle.

"Finn confirmed everything he told you. Caleb officially has an alibi now."

"So what's the next step?"

"Since they have no direct evidence tying Caleb to the crime, and he has an alibi, they'll most likely release him."

I sank back into my chair, frowning.

Novak watched me closely. "What's bothering you? You did what you set out to do. You got Caleb released, even though he resisted you almost every step of the way. Case closed. Mission accomplished."

"It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Something doesn't feel right."

Novak leaned in over his desk. "I don't like the sound of that."

"We still don't know who killed Ira."

"That's not what we were hired to do. We were hired to help Caleb, and we did. The rest is up to the police."

"But..."

"But nothing. The case is closed. This is the point where, if we were actually getting paid for our work, we'd submit the bill and receive our money. There's nothing else to do."

"I'm not sure Caleb is innocent!" I blurted out.

Novak sat back in his chair and stared at me for several seconds. "Now's a fine time to come to that conclusion."

"It's all the things that I've learned in the last week. They don't add up."

"Okay, let's say he did kill his father—although, if his alibi holds up, I don't see how he could have. If this were a normal case and the client had hired us to give him an alibi, we'd be finished, no matter what kinds of

doubts or hunches you might have. You can't keep investigating indefinitely. Our responsibility is to our client, and we've finished what we were engaged to do. You might never uncover the truth. Some crimes are never solved. You can't let the case consume you."

"So you think we should just drop it?"

"Yes, I do."

"What if Caleb is the killer?"

"Then it's up to the police to prove it."

I sighed. "That's so frustrating."

"Sorry, kiddo. Welcome to the real world."

I moped all afternoon. I knew Kaplan and Novak were right—I should back off from the case. The problem was I didn't want to. I wanted to keep investigating. I felt I was on the verge of some big discovery, and it was maddening to be told I had to walk away.

By the time I got home, I'd decided I'd do my best to follow their wishes, but I owed it to Asher to try once more to talk to him.

I tried his cell phone first, and was pleased when he answered. "Asher, it's Killian."

The line promptly went dead. I stared at the phone for a moment before deciding I must have lost the connection. I called a second time. That time it went directly to voicemail. I left a quick message then tried calling again. It went straight to voicemail again.

I dialed his house phone next. He answered, but I didn't even get his whole name out before the call ended. I frowned. I was beginning to think it was deliberate. I dialed once more.

He answered again, but there was no polite greeting. "I don't want to talk to you, Killian," he snapped. "Quit calling here."

"Asher, wait—" But he'd already hung up.

Getting hung up on three times in one night was my limit. With a sigh, I sent him a quick text saying it was very important that we talk as soon as possible. I sent it off, but I had a sinking feeling that I was wasting my time.

By the next afternoon, Asher still hadn't called or texted. I knew, because I was checking my phone every fifteen minutes, even at work.

Finally, I couldn't take it any longer. I picked up the phone and called Asher's house again.

"Hello." It was Marcus.

"Hey, Marcus. It's Killian. Is Asher there?"

"Oh. Uh, no, you just missed him. Sorry, Killian."

I sighed. "I really need to talk to him, but he's avoiding me. He hung up on me three times last night."

"I'm sorry, Killian. I know he's mad at you and all, but, for the record, I think he's being a dick about this."

"Thanks. Do you know where he went?"

"Ye-e-e-s..." He stretched the word out slowly. "Look, this Caleb guy he's dating—what do you know about him?"

"That's exactly what I'm trying to talk to Asher about. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I mean, he was arrested for murdering his own father, but you helped him get out, right?"

"I...guess you could say that."

"So, do you think he's really innocent?"

"I...don't know."

Marcus growled. "That's not what I wanted to hear."

"Trust me. I know the feeling. Wait, did you say Caleb is out now?"

"You didn't know?"

"I knew he might be released, but I didn't know he was out already."

"Yeah. That's where Asher is now."

"What? Where?"

"I'm not sure. He just said he was going to see Caleb."

My heart was suddenly racing. "Thanks, Marcus. I have to go."

I hung up and immediately dialed Kaplan's direct line. After several rings, it went to his voicemail. I waited impatiently for the beep. "This is Killian Kendall. I need to talk to you about Caleb Cohen as soon as possible. Please call me back."

I only had to wait about ten minutes for the detective to call me back.

"I thought I told you to drop it," he barked as soon as I answered.

"I just need to know where Caleb is staying."

"Why do you need to know?"

"I..." I stopped, took a deep breath, and tried to gather my thoughts. "He hired me to get him out. He's out now, and I'd like to at least check in with him—for my peace of mind, if nothing else."

There was a long pause. "Why do I feel like you're leaving something out?"

"You asked me to back off, and I am, but there are a couple of loose ends I need to tie up."

He sighed. "You'd better not be bullshitting me, Kendall."

"I'm not." *At least, not completely.* I just didn't see any point in explaining the whole situation with Asher.

"If I find out otherwise..."

"I'm backing off! I'm walking backwards as we speak."

"He's staying with the Haynes family."

"He's what?"

"He called them when he was released this morning, and Travis Haynes was there to get him within thirty minutes."

"But that's crazy! It's right next door to where—"

"I know. This whole case has been crazy from the start. I don't think anything would surprise me at this point." He paused, then muttered, "Famous last words."

"I'd better go, but thank you, Sergeant Kaplan."

"Just don't go doing anything stupid."

"I won't. I promise."

I hung up and leapt out of my chair. When I knocked on Novak's office door, he yelled for me to come in. I opened the door far enough to stick my head into the room. "Is it okay if I run out for a few minutes?"

Novak looked up at me over the glasses he only wore when he was doing a lot of paperwork. "What for?"

"Caleb was released earlier today. I thought I'd go check on him."

Novak raised an eyebrow. "How sweet. Are you taking him flowers, too? What's the real reason?"

I sighed, then decided to try the same tack I'd taken with Kaplan. If it worked for him, maybe it would work on Novak. "There are some loose ends I'd like to tie up before I drop it altogether."

"There are always loose ends. Get used to it."

"Come on! He hired me. Don't you usually meet with your clients after the case is finished?"

"Yeah, to get my check and give them my final report. Caleb isn't paying you, and I doubt he needs a final report. He got what he wanted—he's out of jail. Besides, I thought it was your former flame who asked you to investigate."

"But—"

"Oh, for the love of... Just go."

"Really?"

"I won't hear the end of it until you get it out of your system. Stay out of trouble, and don't be long."

"I won't!"

By the time I shut the door, he'd already turned back to his laptop. I grabbed my keys and raced out of the office before he could change his mind.

I spent the drive trying to decide what to say when I saw Caleb, but I still hadn't come up with anything by the time I arrived.

Becky Haynes answered the door and broke into an uncertain smile. "Hello. I didn't expect to see you again, now that Caleb has been released."

"Oh, well, I was just dropping by to check on Caleb," I fibbed.

"How nice. I guess we owe you a thank you for proving him innocent."

I'd done no such thing. I'd merely provided him with an alibi, but I decided it wasn't the best time to point that out. "You don't have to thank me. I was just doing my job. Is Caleb around?"

A slight frown tugged the corners of her mouth down. "No. You just missed him. A friend stopped by and they went for a walk."

"Oh. Do you know what direction they went? Maybe I can catch up to them."

She gave a vague shrug. "I didn't pay attention. May I...may I ask you a question?"

I was a little hesitant, but I nodded.

"Is Caleb...gay?"

My mouth dropped open in shock.

"I mean, not that it matters," she rushed on. "It's just...watching him with the boy that came by..." Her hands fluttered around for a moment as if she were reaching for the right words. "They seemed like more than friends. I would have thought he'd have told us."

"I, uh, think it should be his place to tell you," I said carefully. "If he is, I mean."

She nodded slowly. "I suppose you're right." She started to turn away and shut the door, but then caught herself. "Oh. Thanks again. Bye."

I walked out to the road and looked both ways, but I didn't see any sign of Caleb and Asher. On a hunch, I decided to walk towards the old barn.

I was still some distance away when I heard voices raised in a heated argument. I recognized Asher's voice right away. "I just don't understand why you went over there," he said, not quite shouting, but loud enough to make his frustration clear.

Caleb's voice was quieter. I couldn't quite make out his words, so I crept closer. It occurred to me that I was eavesdropping, and I felt a twinge of guilt, which I quickly quashed. I'd deal with the ethics of the situation later. At that moment, I needed to concentrate on the conversation.

"You've already said he was your friend," Asher snapped. "Several times. That still doesn't explain why you didn't come to me. What am I, chopped liver?"

I was close enough by then to hear Caleb's response. "I didn't want to get you in trouble."

There was a long pause, and I had to fight the urge to peek around the corner. I didn't want to get caught listening.

Finally, Asher spoke again. "I'd like to believe that."

"Then believe it."

"It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"There's too much you didn't tell me. How am I supposed to trust anything you say now?"

"I didn't tell you about going to Finn's because I was trying to keep him out of trouble, too."

"Then what about Marco?"

"What about him?" Caleb sounded cautious, as if he suddenly found himself on thin ice.

"What do you mean, 'What about him?' He fucking hanged himself in your barn, Caleb. Why would he do that?"

"I...I don't know."

"You're lying to me again! *This* is why I can't trust you."

"I'm not lying!" An angry note had crept into Caleb's voice. "I don't know why Marco committed suicide. How would I know something like that?"

"Then what does Marco have to do with you? If you don't know why he committed suicide, maybe you can explain why he picked your barn."

There was another long pause. "I don't know for sure—"

"Caleb!" Asher growled warningly.

"I wasn't finished! I don't know for sure, but maybe it had something to do with the fact that he and I...dated."

"What?"

"Not for long. It was only a few weeks."

"When?"

"Before you and I started going out. I swear."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"It didn't seem important. Like I said, I broke up with him before I started dating you."

"I... You know what? We'll come back to that. Even if you guys had dated, that doesn't explain why he chose your barn to off himself in."

"Killian told me Marco was practically stalking me. Maybe he was just plain crazy. Or..."

"Or what?" Asher asked obligingly.

"Or maybe *he* killed my dad and hanged himself out of remorse," he suggested excitedly.

"Why would Marco kill your father?"

"If he was crazy, maybe he thought he was protecting me or something."

"Did he know about the abuse?"

"Yeah. And he'd personally witnessed my dad being a jackass. Maybe it all just got to him and he snapped."

Caleb's crazy theory almost made sense, except that it left so many questions unanswered. I was itching to pop around the corner and start interrogating him, but then I'd have to answer some questions myself.

Suddenly Asher asked one of the questions I had in mind. "Why did he wait so long to snap? If he thought he was protecting you, why didn't he act sooner, like when you actually still lived here?"

"I don't know, Asher. I don't understand how crazy people think."

"It doesn't add up."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I just don't know what to believe anymore."

"You believe I'm innocent, though, right?" When there was no response, Caleb prompted, "Asher?"

"I...I don't know."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! You asked your nosy, interfering ex-boyfriend to get me out of jail, and you don't even believe I'm innocent?"

"I asked him to prove you innocent, which he never did. He simply provided you with an alibi, which turned out to be another guy."

"Are we going there again? Finn is just a *friend!*"

"So you keep saying. Who were you fucking in the barn? Marco?"

"If it was Marco, it happened before you and I were dating, so what difference does it make?"

"So was it Marco?"

"Yes," Caleb answered after a slight hesitation.

"How do I know you didn't keep having sex with him after we started dating?"

"Because I said so."

"Maybe that isn't enough."

"Then I don't know what else to say." Caleb's voice was resigned.

"In that case, I guess this conversation is over."

"I guess so. Does that mean *we're* over as well?"

"I...I don't know. I need some time to think."

"What's to think about? If you don't trust me, what's the point?"

"That's what I have to think about."

They both fell silent, and I wondered what was happening. Once again, I was dying to take a peek, but I resisted the urge.

Suddenly, Asher appeared around the corner.

I froze, wishing I were invisible, but his head was down and his mind was clearly elsewhere. He never once looked to the side where I was standing. If he had, there was no way he could have missed me.

I heard some scuffling sounds around the corner and quickly moved to the barn door just in time to see Caleb climb through the window. He was looking up towards the loft.

I ducked under the police tape and took a few steps towards Caleb. "That was some fast talking," I told him softly.

Chapter 16

At the sound of my voice, Caleb spun around, wide-eyed and startled. When he saw me standing there, his eyes instantly narrowed and he took on a defensive posture.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded. "Spying on me?"

I shrugged. "I was looking for you and just happened to overhear your argument with Asher."

"Cut the bullshit. You were eavesdropping."

"Maybe I was. So what? I wouldn't have heard you lying to Asher if I hadn't."

"I didn't lie."

"You told him you were having sex with Marco in the loft, but Marco specifically told me it wasn't him."

"Maybe he was lying. Did you ever think of that? Why have you taken everything he said as gospel, but you don't believe anything I say?"

"Because I don't have any reason to believe he lied to me, and you seem to be incapable of telling the truth. Don't forget that I know you were having sex with Finn in the loft."

"That doesn't mean I wasn't having sex with Marco up there, too."

He had a point. An uncomfortable one, but it was a point. "So you're saying you were cheating on Asher with both of them?"

"I wasn't cheating on anybody! I dated Marco before Asher, and Finn was just a friend."

"A fuck buddy."

"A friend I occasionally had sex with. No one ever said I was having sex with him while I was dating Asher."

"Were you?"

"That's none of your goddamned business! It's between me and Asher."

"You know what I think? I think you were juggling three guys at once, and I think you were lying and manipulating all of them."

Caleb closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and balled his fists at his sides. When his eyes reopened, they were dark with fury.

"I don't really care what you think," he growled through clenched teeth. "More importantly, neither does Asher. Why don't you just go away? Your job is done. Butt out. Asher and I will either work things out or we won't. You've interfered enough."

"But—"

"Shut up!" he screamed, taking a threatening step towards me, fist cocked. "Just shut the fuck up and leave us the hell alone!"

The sudden ferocity in his voice and his unexpected advance made me jump back. Belatedly, I realized I'd once again put myself in danger. I was alone in the barn with a possible murderer. Not only that, I'd antagonized him.

Caleb could see the glint of fear in my eyes. He shook his head in disgust. "You think I did it, don't you?"

"What? No!"

"You're a shitty liar. Why'd you even help me if you think I'm guilty?"

"I don't... I did it for Asher."

"Fuck you. Get lost!"

It was clear that it would be in my best interest if I left. The look I'd seen in Caleb's eyes had left me shaken, and even I knew I'd pushed things too far.

I slowly walked out of the barn and back to my car, only to find Asher leaning against the door wearing a furious expression. I stopped a few feet away, under his glare.

"Are you following me now?" he snarled. "Is that what it's come to?"

I had no fight left for Asher. I shook my head. "I'm sorry."

He shoved off from my car and got right in my face. "You're sorry? You're damn right you're sorry—a sorry excuse for a friend. I suppose you expect me to thank you for getting Caleb out. Or maybe I should thank you for planting doubts in my head about my boyfriend. Or what about following me around and eavesdropping on private conversations? Should I thank you for that, too?"

"I'm sorry," I repeated softly. "You won't have to worry about it anymore."

"I'd better not." He shook his head as he stepped back. "God, you're so pathetic." He started walking towards his car.

"Just be careful," I called before I could stop myself.

"Fuck off," he shot back over his shoulder.

I spent the next two days thinking about how I had ruined any chance that Asher and I could ever again be friends. Why couldn't I have just let it go? Kaplan and

Novak had both told me to back off. Both had far more experience in investigations than I did, but I'd thought I knew best. Even Seth had told me to walk away and let Asher handle things for himself.

I was so busy beating myself up that I almost forgot about Micah. Luckily, he texted me Friday afternoon. *"Still on for tonight?"*

I was momentarily confused but then remembered our date. I quickly texted back. *"Yeah, definitely. Looking forward to it."*

"Great! Me too."

"So, what are we doing? What should I wear? Do you need my address?"

"Yes, I guess that would be helpful. And it's a surprise, and you should wear clothes."

"Oh come on!"

"Nope. I want tonight to be a surprise."

"At least tell me if I should dress up or be casual."

"Hmm. How about this? Dress for fun."

"Dress for fun? What does that mean?"

"You'll figure it out. What's your address?"

I sent him my address, then, *"Do I at least get to know what time you're picking me up or is that a surprise too?"*

"Thanks! Let's say 7. See you tonight!"

I frowned at the phone, then glanced at the clock. A flicker of nervousness crept in as I realized that, in just a few hours, I'd be going on my first official date since Asher—or really, my first real date ever. With Asher, we'd gone straight from friends to boyfriends, skipping the whole courtship phase entirely.

By the time I got home, I was in full-blown panic mode. I burst through the door, bolted upstairs, and jumped into the shower. Minutes later, wrapped in a towel, I stood in front of my closet, staring hopelessly at the rows of clothes. I still had no idea what "dress for fun" actually meant. Did I even own anything remotely fun?

I was running around trying to get ready when Adam appeared in the doorway. He leaned casually against the jamb and watched with a grin as I tripped over a pile of Kane's dirty laundry and almost dropped the towel wrapped precariously around my hips.

"What's all the excitement about? I haven't seen you this jittery in ages. You're acting like you have a date."

"Actually, I do." I dove into my closet and began throwing clothes out onto the bed. "And I have no idea what to wear."

"You do? A real date? With whom? I haven't approved!" I popped out of the closet and gave Adam a horrified look. He laughed. "I'm kidding, Killian. I don't have to approve your dates."

"Oh. In that case, his name is Micah and he's a reporter." I retreated into the closet again. "He helped me with...with Caleb's case. He asked me out." I shrugged. "I said yes."

Adam caught me by the elbow and pulled me gently out of the closet. "Calm down. Why don't you tell me about him? While you do, I'll help you pick out the perfect outfit."

He steered me towards the bed and pushed down on my shoulders until I sat on the edge.

I sighed. "Well, he's cute."

Adam chuckled as he turned towards my now disheveled wardrobe. "That's always a good start."

"He's a few years older than me."

"How much older?"

"I'm not sure," I replied with an obligatory eye roll. "I didn't ask for ID. I'd guess in his early twenties. Anyway, he has brown hair and gorgeous, dark brown eyes. His hair does this really cute floppy thing. Oh, and he has the most incredible dimples."

"Sounds adorable, but looks aren't everything. Is he a nice guy?" He held up a pair of faded jeans and a black t-shirt.

"He seems really nice. That looks a little too casual, don't you think? He said to dress fun. What does that mean?"

"Fun, huh? Let's see..." He looked through my clothes again and shook his head. "For a gay boy, you have the worst wardrobe I've ever seen. Here, these aren't bad." He handed me a pair of dark blue jeans. "And dark jeans are good for going out at night."

They were one of my favorite pairs of pants because Asher had always told me they made my ass look great. I was pleased with Adam's choice, but a little sad at the reminder of Asher.

"Put those on, and I'll be right back."

I tried to push thoughts of Asher from my mind as Adam left the room. After all, I was going out with Micah. It was time to move on.

A few minutes later, I heard Adam rummaging around up in the attic. I was sitting on the edge of the

bed wearing just the jeans when he returned, slightly dusty and carrying an armful of shirts.

"These were Seth's," he said, dropping them next to me on the bed.

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't believe he wanted me to wear Seth's clothes.

"I just couldn't give them away," he continued. "Although I have no idea why I was keeping them."

He held up the first shirt.

Instead of looking at the shirt, I studied Adam's face. He gave me a big smile, as if this were the most natural thing in the world. If he didn't think it was a big deal for me to wear his dead son's clothes, why should it bother me?

I focused on the shirt. It was a vintage lavender western shirt with darker purple embroidery and pearlescent buttons.

"I'm not wearing that."

"No, I guess it's not really your color. Or your style." He picked up the next one. It was a red, ribbed short-sleeved shirt. "Try this on."

I pulled it on and started giggling. It fit like a second skin. "I think I need to be a little more...buff to pull this off."

"You look fine, but okay, off."

"I think maybe Seth had a different style than me."

"I grabbed a few more. What about this?"

He held up a light blue pullover that I thought I remembered Seth wearing. "I like that one."

"I do too. Try it on."

I pulled it on and stood in front of the mirror. The shirt was form-fitting without being tight. Even I had to admit I looked good.

Adam confirmed my opinion. "Perfect. It brings out your eyes. I've got just the finishing touch for it, too. Come here."

I followed him into his and Steve's bedroom. As always, their room was immaculate, the bed carefully made and nothing out of place. It was furnished and decorated in antiques, all from Steve's house. Adam's old stuff had gone into storage when Steve moved in, because, well, Steve's was better.

Adam opened a small wooden chest on his dresser and pulled out a braided silver chain. He slipped it around my neck, fastening it from behind me.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. "This is beautiful, Adam."

"It was Seth's, too, although he seldom wore it. He wasn't big on jewelry. I'd...I'd like you to have it."

"Adam, I—"

"Killian, please. It's taken me two years to get to this point, where I can start letting him go. You can't even begin to know how big a role you've played in my healing process. I may have lost one son, but I gained another. Not that you replaced Seth, I don't mean that, but...well, you've been a comfort to me. I couldn't love you more if I were your biological father. I want you to take the necklace. I think Seth would want you to have it as much as I do."

I reached up and touched the chain. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Now don't go getting all blubbery. Your date will be here any minute."

My date! I'd almost forgotten why we were even playing dress up. I raced back to my room to put my shoes and socks on. I had just finished when the doorbell sounded.

"I'll get it," Kane called from downstairs.

"No! I will," I yelled, but I was too late. I was only as far as the top of the stairs when Kane swung the door open.

There was Micah, looking better than I remembered in jeans and a charcoal gray shirt as tight as the one I'd rejected earlier. He definitely had the body to make it work.

"Hi. I'm here to pick up Killian," Micah said with a grin, showing off his dimples. "You must be his little brother."

"Yeah. My name is Kane. Are you guys going on a date or something?"

"Kane!" I snapped as I started down the stairs.

Micah's eyes followed the sound of my voice and found me. His smile actually seemed to brighten, if that was possible. "This is actually our first date," he answered Kane, his eyes never leaving me. "But if tonight goes well, I'm hoping there will be more."

Kane looked up at me with a salacious smirk. "Just don't expect him to put out."

"Kane!" I screeched, flying down the last few stairs. He took off like lightning, cackling all the way.

"Don't mind him." I could feel my face heating up.

I made a mental note to kill Kane when I got home.

"It's cool. Typical little brother. Trust me, I know. Are you ready?"

"I want you to meet Adam first," I said just as Adam started down the steps. "Adam, this is Micah Gerber. Micah, this is...my dad, Adam Connelly."

Adam blinked in surprise at my introduction, but recovered quickly and extended his hand for Micah to shake. They made small talk for a few minutes before Micah flashed me an apologetic look. "I hate to be rude, but we really need to get going. We have reservations."

"We do? Where?"

"You'll have to curb that detective's curiosity," he quipped with a teasing grin. "I told you, it's a surprise." He turned back to Adam. "I hope you'll excuse us, Mr. Connelly. I don't want to be late."

Adam practically beamed. "Call me Adam, and don't let me hold you up. You guys get going." He winked at me. "And don't worry, I won't wait up."

It hadn't even occurred to me, but now I was blushing again.

"Um, yeah, thanks. See you later, Adam." I gave him a hug before following Micah out to his car, a silver, two-door sporty model.

He shocked me by actually opening my door for me. Adam gave me a thumbs-up from the porch as I climbed in, and Micah carefully shut the door behind me.

He went around and got into the driver's seat. "So, feel free to tell me if this is none of my business,

but why do you and your dad have different last names, and why do you call him Adam?"

"Oh, he's not my biological father, although he's been more of a real dad than mine ever was. He took me in when my dad punched me in the face and kicked me out when he found out I was gay. Adam's son Seth...was my friend."

"Was?"

I took a deep breath. "Do you remember when a gay boy was killed in a park a few years ago?"

"I wasn't here at the time, but I've heard about it, even read the stories since it was one of the biggest things to happen in this area in decades. It was front page news at the time. Wait! Connelly. Wasn't the boy's name Connelly?"

"Yes. That was Seth."

"And you knew him?"

"I was the one who found him dead and got stabbed in the process."

"No way! You were the hero that shot the killer and saved that other kid? Your picture was all over those articles! I can't believe I didn't recognize you."

I sighed. "It's been a couple of years, and besides, it wasn't like that. I'm not a hero."

He looked over at me. "Yeah. Sorry. I, of all people, should know there's always more behind the story. So, how was it? Tell me everything about it. I mean, if you feel comfortable talking about it."

I hesitated, then shrugged. "Sure, I guess so. I'm over it for the most part. I think. Therapy works wonders."

He laughed. "If you'd rather not, it's okay. Curiosity is a professional hazard, but tonight is supposed to be special. I don't want to bring you down."

"Nah. It's okay. I don't mind."

I wasn't entirely honest. Aside from my family and my therapist, I hadn't really talked about it with anyone, so I was a bit anxious. Still, I had a feeling Micah would be a good listener, and my therapist had said that being ready to share with others was a sign of healing. So, I launched into the whole story from the beginning. It was the condensed version, but it was something. I got so wrapped up in recounting it that I didn't even notice where we were headed until we pulled into the parking lot of one of the nicest restaurants in town.

I gasped. "We're eating here?"

He flashed me a smile. "We're not just here for the view." He was out his door and opening mine before I could respond.

"Are you sure I'm not underdressed?" I asked.

"You look amazing."

Micah had reserved a table for us, and the maître d' seated us promptly. Dinner was incredible. The first thing Micah did was outlaw any discussion of Caleb's case for the night. That suited me just fine. I wanted to avoid thinking about Caleb and, by extension, Asher, as much as possible.

I learned that Micah had three younger siblings—two brothers and a sister—and that his coming out had been far smoother than mine. His family had been nothing but supportive. Both of his parents were blue-

collar workers, so Micah had worked to pay his own way through college.

"What made you want to become a journalist?" I asked.

He shrugged and looked a little sheepish.

"Promise not to make fun of me?"

"I promise no such thing."

Micah grinned. "Fine, but you have to tell me something embarrassing too. I've wanted to be a reporter since I was a little kid because that's what Clark Kent did."

"Superman?"

"The one and only."

"So...you couldn't get a job at the *Daily Planet*?"

"They weren't hiring! Can you believe it?"

"I guess becoming a superhero was out of the question so becoming a reporter was the next best thing."

He laughed. "Exactly. I just wanted to make the world a better place, and since I can't fly..."

I found myself more and more attracted to him, not just physically, but as a person as well. He seemed almost too good to be true.

"So what about you?" he said, interrupting my thoughts. "What made you decide to become a private investigator?"

"Does this count as my embarrassing confession?"

"I don't know. Is your answer embarrassing?"

"Not really."

"Then you still owe me. What's the scoop?"

"Okay, so after Seth, my cousin asked me to help out with another death—the guy who was killed at Pemberton University last year."

"That was right when I was starting here. Walters covered the story, but I was following it. A few students were killed, right?"

"Yeah, including my cousin. I'd figured out who the killer was but not in time to save him."

"Oh wow. I'm really sorry, Killian. You've been through a lot. And I keep dredging it all back up."

"No, it's okay. Like I said, seeing a therapist has really helped with the whole blame game."

"Okay, so pardon a really rude question, but why on earth would you still want to be an investigator after all that?"

"Because I want to prevent something like that from happening again. And, well, not to toot my own horn, but I think I'm pretty good at it. Or I will be when I learn more. And, like you said, I want to make the world a better place. I want to help people."

A big smile spread across his face. "And since you can't fly..."

"I'm no superman."

"I dunno. I think you're pretty super."

I felt like my heart skipped a beat. Could the night get any better?

He paid for dinner and then led me down to the beach to watch the sunset. We strolled along the sand, just above the water line, still talking and getting to know each other. As we walked, our hands brushed a few times and then, almost without my realizing it, his hand took mine.

The sun dipped below the horizon in a breathtaking explosion of color—streaks of pink, orange, yellow, and lavender spreading across the sky like brushstrokes on a canvas.

Micah suggested we sit and watch the stars come out, so we settled onto one of the stone jetties, him behind me with his arms wrapped loosely around my waist. I leaned back against his chest, enjoying the closeness of his body and the scent of his cologne.

It was a beautiful night for stargazing. The sky was clear, and each star stood out brightly. We spent a while pointing out constellations. Suddenly Micah jumped up and reached his hand down to me. "Time for phase two."

"Phase two?"

"Well, I guess it's really phase three. Phase one was dinner, two was the walk on the beach, and now it's time for three."

"And what is phase three?"

"You'll see."

"Come on! Haven't I been surprised enough for one night?"

He laughed. "Okay, okay. Do you like to dance?"

"Dance?"

"Yeah, you know, moving your body rhythmically to the beat of music?"

"I've never actually been dancing."

"Well, you're about to go now."

I started to protest but the words died on my lips. It had been a great evening so far, and I didn't want to spoil it now by being a dork.

We pulled up to an unassuming two-story brick building on the outskirts of town. A small sign above the entrance read *The Inferno*. If I'd been driving past, I wouldn't have even noticed it or, if I had, I would have assumed it was a warehouse or something.

Micah jumped out of the car as soon as it stopped rolling. I moved a little slower. I was very nervous, having never danced in my entire life—not counting slow dances with Asher. I'd never attended school dances. Asher and I had chosen not to make an issue of being the first out gay couple at school, and neither of us wanted to go with anyone else.

I hung back, but Micah grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the door, where a very large, very square woman was perched on a stool behind a sturdy podium.

"Hey, Carmen," Micah greeted her.

"Micah!" she boomed.

Her voice was surprisingly deep. Her hair was an enormous helmet of frosty blonde, and she was wearing enough makeup to keep MAC in business for the next year or so. Her tight, sequined dress strained at the seams, while the largest pair of high heeled shoes I had ever seen graced the skis she called feet. Miniature mirror balls hung from her ears. She looked as though her usual expression resulted from something between biting a lemon and constipation, but her face had creased into a broad smile when she saw my date.

"You look smashing tonight, darling," Micah told her.

"And you look good enough to eat, as usual. So introduce me. Who's your little friend here—emphasis

on 'little'?" She looked me over in a manner that made me feel a bit like a steak.

"His name is Killian, and you can keep your paws off. He's my date tonight."

Her already arched eyebrows soared even higher. "So you're robbing the cradle these days?"

"He's not that young, Carmen. He's legal, but I will encourage you not to ask for ID. Do me a favor? Please?" He batted his eyelashes so hard I was afraid he might pull a muscle.

"Hmph, and when have you ever done a favor for me?"

"Hey, nobody knows what you do for a day job, right?"

She pursed her lips. "You always gotta bring that up, don'cha. Smacks of blackmail, if you ask me. Get in before I change my mind. And make sure you both behave."

"You know me, Carmen. I always behave."

"Ha!"

Micah grabbed me by the wrist and pulled me through the heavy metal door. We went from total quiet outside to complete chaos inside. Fog billowed, multicolored lights flashed, a strobe pulsated, voices yelled, glasses clinked, raucous laughter rang out, and above it all, music blasted—a heavy, throbbing beat that made it almost impossible to stand still.

I managed.

Scattered throughout the room were pillars that stopped around eye level. At first glance, it seemed like flames were flickering atop each one, but I quickly realized it was just gauzy fabric billowing upwards,

illuminated by orange, yellow, and red lights. The effect was surprisingly convincing.

Once my eyes adjusted, I noticed that nearly all the dancers were male. More than a few had their shirts off, sweat glistening on their skin.

I was in my first gay club.

Micah, still holding me by the wrist, paid the cover charge to a guy sitting by the door, then dragged me around the perimeter of the dance floor, where it was slightly less crowded. He led me to a metal staircase rising up to a broad catwalk that went around the perimeter and overlooked the dance floor. There was a bar at each corner, and high, round stainless-steel tables with stools were set up at intervals. Most of the tables were full.

There were more guys up on the balcony, dancing, making out, or leaning on the railing watching the spectacle below.

I was in awe.

Micah snagged us a table just as it was being vacated by a couple of guys wearing bright makeup, body glitter, and not much else. "Wait here," he yelled over the din.

I sat on one of the stools and continued to look around in wonderment, feeling the way Alice must have felt when she fell down the rabbit hole. I was startled from my open-mouthed awe by a shirtless, smooth Latino guy sliding onto the stool across from me.

"This ain't no nursery school, sweetie," he said in a faint Hispanic accent. He was very attractive, and his sexy smile caused my already racing heart to speed up a little faster. "How'd you get in here?"

"I'm with a friend."

"Oh, so you got connections. They're good to have. You're a real cutie pie. You'd better be careful, though. Some of these guys eat boys like you for breakfast. Literally. If you wanna dance, look for me. I won't be hard to find. I'm the best damn dancer in this place."

"Like I said, I'm with someone, but thanks."

He shrugged—a graceful movement that caused all sorts of muscles to slide around under his bronzed skin. "Don't mean you can't dance with me. Just ask for Miguel. Everybody knows Miguel."

"Yeah, and most of them have slept with him at least once," Micah growled as he reappeared next to the table. "I believe that's my seat."

Miguel looked at him with a curled lip. "Ah, is it my fault everybody wants me? I do what I can to spread a little happiness. If I knew you only liked little boys I wouldn't have wasted my time with you." He turned back to me with a smoldering look in his dark eyes.

"When you get tired of this one—and trust me, you will—come find me. I'll show you a good time like you ain't never seen before." With that, he hopped down off the stool and sashayed his way down the catwalk, a supermodel at home on his runway.

"Friend of yours?" I asked as Micah settled on the stool Miguel had just vacated.

"I wouldn't go that far." Micah slid a glass across the table to me. I eyed it suspiciously, and he laughed. "I'm not trying to get you drunk. It's just a soda."

Feeling foolish, I grinned and took a sip. "So, what's the story with you and Miguel?"

"There is no story, and that's his problem. He went after me. I said no. The end. He doesn't get told no very often. Was he trying to pick you up?"

"I dunno. Maybe. I don't have a lot of experience with getting picked up. He told me to be careful, that these guys eat boys like me for breakfast."

Micah made a face. "At least he was telling the truth there." He took a sip from his glass.

"What are you drinking?"

"I'm of age," he said vaguely. "You want to dance?"

I looked out over the dance floor and blushed. "I don't think I can do that."

He laughed. "Just have fun. Move to the music, feel it. It doesn't matter what you look like, no one will be watching you."

"You will."

"I don't count."

"I think you do."

"Well, I want to dance, so come on."

"If you want someone who can dance, there's always Miguel."

Swatting at me playfully, he jumped down from the stool, went to the rail, and looked over the mass of gyrating bodies.

I glanced at his glass, which was still three-quarters full. I decided that if I was going to dance out there, I would need the fortification, so I grabbed the glass and threw it back. I gasped as it burned its way down my throat, leaving a warm trail behind it. After the initial shock, I decided it wasn't that bad. In fact, it was kind of nice.

I joined Micah at the rail. "Okay. I think I'm ready now."

"Great, let me get my drink."

He turned to the table, only to find his glass empty. His gaze shifted from the glass to me, and when he saw my sheepish expression, he burst out laughing.

"Are you really that nervous?"

I nodded, and he took my hand, guiding me toward the stairs.

"First times can be scary, but I promise I'll be gentle," he said, locking eyes with me, his smile warm and reassuring.

I allowed him to lead me onto the dance floor. At first, I just stood there awkwardly as Micah began to dance around me. His hands trailed across my body and finally settled around my hips. He started moving me around, swiveling my hips and forcing me to move. I giggled and let him guide me.

"Come on, loosen up, have fun," he purred into my ear.

His breath tickled, and I giggled again.

I don't know if it was the closeness of his body, the atmosphere, or the alcohol—I'd never drunk hard liquor before—but whatever it was, I felt my inhibitions slowly melting away. I began to dance, stiffly at first, and then gradually I became more and more comfortable. I tried to imitate Micah's movements and those of the guys around me. I must have been doing okay, because Micah seemed to be having a good time.

As the night progressed, my dancing got noticeably better. Or maybe it was just the sips I kept stealing from Micah's glass. I had several more guys ask

me to dance, and Miguel made another appearance. I turned them all down. Micah became more and more physical until we were practically grinding on the dance floor—not that we were alone in that. Plenty of others were doing the same, if not more.

Finally, he pulled me in close and yelled, "Are you ready to leave?"

I was having fun, but I was also sweaty and exhausted. I nodded, and we started threading our way towards the door.

As we stepped outside and I breathed in the comparatively cool fresh air, I realized just how hot and stuffy it was inside. The sudden quiet was equally surprising. I felt as if my ears were stuffed with cotton.

"Wow, it really is an inferno in there," I gasped, and Micah laughed.

"I see you survived, and even made it back out with the same one you went in with," Carmen commented, a puff of cigarette smoke punctuating each word. "That's unusual for you, Romeo."

"Very funny, Carmen. You know, you should be on stage instead of at the door."

"At my age? Honey, I'm just happy to not have varicose veins. You two kids have fun now, and don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"That leaves us a lot of leeway."

"You know it."

As we walked to the car, I asked Micah about Carmen. "What did you mean earlier when you said no one knew what her day job is?"

Micah laughed again. "It's a big mystery around the Inferno. Only a few people know who she really is. She always shows up here in full drag."

I frowned. "What do you mean, 'full drag'?"

He gave me a look. "You do know what a drag queen is, don't you?"

My eyes grew wide. "You mean that was a man?"

Micah laughed. "I can't believe you didn't know. And if that shocks you, man, if you knew what she did during the day..."

"Tell me!"

"Nope. Sorry. I made her a promise."

"How'd you find out?"

"By accident. Well, actually, just by being observant. I thought I recognized her. I did some digging, and it turned out I was right." He unlocked the car and opened my door for me again. I could really get used to that.

"Now my curiosity is killing me," I whined, once we were both buckled in and on the road.

"Sorry. I forgot you're as nosy as I am. Tell you what, promise to go out with me again sometime, and I'll tell you on our second date."

"You are good at blackmail, aren't you?" I pretended to think about it. "It's a deal. But only for the intel."

Micah grinned. "Whatever it takes."

"For the record, I would have gone out with you again without the extortion."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. I've had a really great time tonight."

He looked over at me and smiled. "Good. I'm glad. I have, too. I don't want it to end."

"Me either."

"You want to see my place before I take you home?"

"I'd love to. Where do you live?"

"Well, it's a little out of the way, but it's not a big deal. Do you have to be home at any certain time?"

I made a face. "I'm eighteen, Micah. I don't have a curfew."

Technically, Adam and I had never discussed curfews since it hadn't been an issue. I was always either at Asher's house or he was at ours, so everyone knew where we were pretty much at all times. Adam had said he wouldn't wait up though. Didn't that imply there was no curfew?

"Hey, I had a curfew until I moved out. If my parents had their way, I'd still have one."

"Adam trusts me. I'll just text him."

"It's cool that you and Adam have that kind of relationship."

"Adam's the best. I don't know what I would have done without him. God only knows where I'd be."

"Let's not get too bogged down."

He deftly turned the conversation to music as he handed me his phone and told me to find something I liked. I picked through his eclectic collection and chose a fun pop album, but we didn't pay it much attention. We talked over the music until we pulled into the parking lot of his apartment. It was modern—no more than a couple of years old from the looks of it—with lots of tinted glass and concrete.

As we rode the elevator up to his floor in silence, I began to rethink this move. Was it really such a good idea? I was pretty inexperienced when it came to dating but even I knew going back to the guy's apartment usually implied sex. Then again, Micah had been nothing but a perfect gentleman all night, why expect anything different now? Of course, we'd been around people all night, and here we'd be all alone.

What if he tried something? Would I mind if he did? Maybe I even hoped he would. I liked him. He'd even managed to keep me from thinking about Asher all night.

Except now I was thinking about Asher. He and I never went all the way when we were dating. We'd done just about everything else two guys could possibly do except intercourse. Not that Asher hadn't wanted to. I just never felt like I was ready. But I had to lose my virginity eventually. Why not with Micah?

The elevator stopped and Micah stepped out to unlock his door. I followed him in and looked around while he turned lights on and picked up a couple of stray glasses that he'd left out around the living room.

"Sorry it's a mess. I wasn't expecting us to come back here tonight. Would you like something to drink?" He backed away towards the kitchen area, which was separated from the rest of the room by a bleached wood bar.

"It's not a mess. It's very nice. What were you drinking at the Inferno?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I meant something more along the lines of soda or water."

I shrugged. "Whatever you have will be fine."

He smiled and turned around. "I think you could use some water."

I continued looking over the room. He'd tastefully arranged his black leather furniture with Art Deco accents. The walls were decorated with vintage movie posters in thin black frames. The room ended with floor-to-ceiling glass windows and a sliding door that led to a balcony. I made my way over to the door and looked out at the view.

"Nice, isn't it?" Micah commented from close behind me. I jumped slightly, and he smiled as he placed a glass in my hand. He reached around me, unlocked the door, and slid it back. "Go on out. I'll be right there."

I did as he invited and walked out onto the balcony. It was small, but since the only furnishings were two wooden deck chairs and a small round table, it didn't feel cramped. The night was beautiful, not too humid, and in the low 80s, on the cool side for summer in Maryland. I leaned against the rail and sipped my water.

Soft music suddenly filled the air, and I recognized the sultry tones of Etta James singing "At Last." I knew her voice and the music right away. I'd grown up with an appreciation of blues and jazz. It was a favorite of my mom's, and Steve and Adam had a large collection of recordings.

Micah appeared at my side. "Care to dance?"

I looked at him with a lazy smile, content just standing there with him. "We haven't danced enough for one night?"

"This will be a little different." He pulled me away from the railing and took the glass from my hand, setting it on the table. Then he drew me in close, slid his

arms around my waist, and started swaying to the music. I melted into him, slipping my arms around his neck and nestling my face against his shoulder. We fit perfectly.

We swayed in a slow circle on his balcony, wrapped in the glow from his apartment. I found myself reconsidering my stance on more dancing. It suddenly didn't seem so bad after all.

"I've really enjoyed being with you tonight, Killian," he whispered into my hair.

"Ditto." My voice was somewhat muffled by his shoulder.

He pulled back slightly and raised a hand to my face, stroked my cheek for a minute, then ever so gently lifted my chin. His eyes looked into mine, seeking permission. I leaned in and brought my lips to his. The kiss started out as soft as the touch of a feather, but things heated up quickly.

I don't know how long we stood there, just kissing, but I knew what I wanted to do. I broke away and looked deep into his eyes. "Can I stay tonight?"

Chapter 17

Micah stood there for a second staring into my face. I tried to read his thoughts, but his eyes revealed nothing. He stepped away, then slowly backed up until his legs hit one of the deck chairs, where he sat down with a thud.

Panic was rising in my throat.

"What's wrong?" I asked, but I was pretty sure I already knew the answer. I'd blown it. I'd pushed too hard, too fast, and now he thought all I wanted was sex.

"It's just—"

"Don't. You don't have to explain. That was stupid. I don't know what I was thinking. I'm sorry. Maybe I'd better just leave."

"Killian, don't be sorry. It wasn't stupid. You don't know how much I want you to stay the night."

"Then...what's the problem?"

"I don't know. I mean, I do know. It's just..."

"Use your words. You're a writer, right?"

"Killian, you just seem so innocent. You almost act...as if everything is your first time."

I sighed and dropped into the other chair. "It is."

His eyes grew large. "What do you mean? I thought you had a boyfriend for a long time."

"I did. We dated for over a year and a half, but I've known him all my life. We grew up together, and he was my best friend. We never even went on a real date. We never went through the whole 'getting to know each other for the first time' process the way you and I have been doing tonight. It wasn't the same at all. This is so

amazing. I mean, Asher and I, we never even..." I looked down at the floor, refusing to meet his eyes.

"Never even what?"

"We never had sex."

"You...you didn't...you mean...you're..."

"I'm a virgin. Technically, anyway."

"Two high school guys dating for years and you never did anything sexual? What? Were you, like, monks or something?"

"Well, I mean...we did some things." I blushed, but felt I'd gone this far so I had to keep going. "We did oral stuff. Hand stuff. Just no...butt stuff."

One eyebrow jumped up, but he simply asked, "Why not?"

"I...don't know." I'd never really thought about it before. "I guess...I guess I just thought sex outside of a relationship was kind of...wrong somehow. Like dirty. Immoral."

"But weren't you dating Asher?"

"Yeah, but...I guess things never felt...real. I just never felt ready."

"Wow. And you wanted me to..."

I forced myself to meet his eyes. "Yes."

"So what's different now?"

"Me? You? I don't know. I have to lose my virginity some time. And I thought maybe you expected it."

"No! I mean, I never expect sex from anybody, especially not on a first date."

"Oh."

"To be blunt, I don't want to be just the guy who took your cherry."

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't a hookup to me. I want it to be more than that. I like you, Killian. A lot. I was drawn to you the first time we met, and I've liked you more and more ever since. After tonight...I think maybe I could fall for you very easily."

"I like you, too," I told him softly.

"Okay. Then you see what I mean?"

"No."

It was his turn to sigh. "I would be so honored to be your first, but if and when that happens, I don't want it to be on our first date while you're half drunk."

"I'm not—"

"What if you wake up tomorrow and you regret it? It would ruin any chance for something between us. As much as I want you—and, trust me, I do want you—I'm not willing to risk that."

I stared at him for a minute as what he said sank in. "You...want me?"

He laughed. "Who wouldn't want you? You're absolutely beautiful, brilliant, fun, sexy, sweet, funny...Shall I go on?"

"No," I answered weakly. "Maybe."

He stood, crossed over to me, knelt down, and cupped my face in both hands, forcing me to look him straight in the eyes. "Killian, you're amazing. I've never met anyone like you. I want to date you. I want to get to know you better. I want to spend time with you. And then, I want to sleep with you...but only if it feels right."

"But I thought..."

He grinned. "You thought all gay guys are giant horndogs who'll hump anything that offers?"

I snickered. "I didn't say that."

"But that's what you were thinking. Don't buy into the stereotypes, Killian. I mean, don't get me wrong, a lot of guys are just out for sex, and maybe I used to be one of them. But I've learned the hard way that sex is great—really great when it's good—but you can't build anything real on sex alone. Not that there's anything wrong with sex just for the sake of sex if that's what you're looking for. I'm just looking for something a little deeper these days."

"Adam always says you need a solid foundation to start with." I hesitated as I tried to decide whether to ask the question that was at the forefront of my mind. I figured I might as well. He had said we should get to know each other better. "What did you mean when you said you learned the hard way?"

"I'll tell you about it sometime."

"What's wrong with right now?"

He smiled. "Okay, but let's move to the couch. It's more comfortable than me kneeling on the balcony."

I laughed, and we moved inside to the couch. I leaned back against one end and Micah took the other, our bodies turned toward each other.

He drew a deep breath. "You're going to have to bear with me. I've never shared this with anyone outside my family and my counselor. If I'm going to tell you now, I need to go through the whole thing without being interrupted, okay?"

I nodded. "I understand. I've never talked about the stuff I was telling you earlier, either."

He gave me a small smile, which slowly faded as he gathered his thoughts. "I guess I started realizing I

was different when I was about thirteen. All the other guys were going crazy about girls, and all I ever thought about was my best friend Justin. I knew I was gay, but I was scared to death to tell anybody. One day I was trying to get Justin to take his clothes off in our backyard. I was always trying to get him naked somehow. I don't even remember what excuse I was using that time. I didn't think we were where anyone could see or hear us, but Justin got mad at me. He said he was sick of me trying to get his clothes off and left in a huff. I can't really blame him.

"So I'm sitting there by myself, trying not to cry, when all of a sudden our neighbor Byron starts talking to me over the fence. He'd heard the whole thing. I panicked. I thought I was dead for sure, that he'd tell my parents and I'd be kicked out or disowned or something. I can't even remember what he was saying, I was so scared. But then he promised not to tell anyone if I came over to his house. I felt like I didn't have a choice.

"That was the beginning of...well, two years of torture. I was thirteen and lost my virginity to a forty-nine-year-old guy. He told me he loved me, but he didn't. Not really. He just wanted to own me. He tried to tell me who I could see and where I could go. I was scared to disobey him. He'd freak out if he saw me with someone I wasn't supposed to see. I pulled away from all my friends. I was either home alone or with him. He never hit me, but I always felt he was only seconds away from striking out. I was so scared, so trapped.

"Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I had some kind of breakdown. I was afraid to leave the house. I'd have panic attacks, start screaming and crying. My

parents didn't know what the hell was happening. They took me to a shrink, and it all came out.

"My parents were furious—I've never seen them so angry before or since—but not with me. They filed all sorts of charges against Byron. I don't know what happened after that. They kept me out of it as much as possible. All I knew—and all I cared about—was that I never saw him again.

"For a while, they thought maybe I wasn't really gay, that Byron had just perverted me or something. Eventually, with the help of my counselor, they realized that I had been gay before Byron, and I was still gay after him. They accepted it really well at that point, and they've been supportive ever since."

"Oh my God," I managed when he stopped for a breath.

"I'm not quite finished. Obviously, I was pretty messed up after that. Counseling helped some, but I wasn't ready to listen to what they had to say. I felt sure no one would ever love me. I was damaged goods, and nothing my shrink said could make me believe differently.

"Sex was the only way I knew to relate to people intimately, so that's what I used. I slept with half the guys in my high school—gay, bi, and straight. I guess all I really wanted was for one of them to love me. I thought, somehow, I could make them love me through sex.

"College was more of the same. Eventually I learned via a lot of broken hearts and even more counseling that you can't make someone love you just because of sex. It doesn't work that way. It hasn't been

easy to completely change my whole way of thinking, but I guess now you can see why I didn't want to sleep with you tonight. It would be too much like slipping back into my old habits, and I don't want that. I don't want to ruin my opportunity with you. I don't know where this is going, but I feel a connection with you. I want us to have a chance, and I want your first time to be totally special, unlike mine."

I struggled to find words to express all the emotions rushing through me. Part of me just wanted to cry, and part of me wanted to leap across the couch and comfort him.

"Micah, I'm so—"

"Killian, I don't need your sympathy or pity or whatever. I've done a lot of healing over the years. I'm not the kid I was then. There'll always be scars, but I'm good now. I'm happy. I didn't tell you all this to make you feel sorry for me. I wanted you to know the truth so you could understand where I'm coming from. It felt right to tell you."

I swung my feet off the couch and scooted towards him. He shifted so I could cuddle into his side. I took his hand, pulled it to my lips, and gently kissed it. "Thank you."

He looked down at his hand in mine and gave me a shaky smile, and all of a sudden, I couldn't stand it anymore. I quickly leaned in and pressed my mouth against his. We kissed, hard and passionately, for several minutes. His hands slid up and down my back, making their way under my shirt. His hands felt like fire on my skin. I needed to be closer. I straddled him without

breaking our kiss. I could feel his hardness under my butt and couldn't help throbbing against his stomach.

Suddenly, he broke away. "I need to get you home." His voice was husky.

I sighed but nodded, although at that moment I wanted to stay even more than before.

His eyes searched mine. "Can I see you again?"

I leaned in until my lips were brushing against his ear. "Try and stop me." I flicked my tongue lightly over his ear and he shuddered.

He gently pushed me away. "Don't you ever stop?" His voice was exasperated, but his smile indicated that he didn't mind too much.

I gave him my sexiest smile. "Do you really want me to?"

"Are you sure you're a virgin?" Without warning, he leapt up, picking me up with him and tossing me over his shoulder.

"You're stronger than you look," I gasped between giggles.

He laughed. "Nah, you're just light." He grabbed his car keys, swung open the door, and carried me out, still slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"You can put me down now."

"I don't trust you."

"What will your neighbors think?"

"Who cares?"

"Micah!"

He laughed and carefully set me back on my feet. "Behave?"

"Yes, I'll behave. Jeez."

We walked to his car in silence. "Thank you for sharing," I said once we were on the way back to my house. "I know it wasn't easy for you. It means a lot to me."

"You've told me things that couldn't have been easy, either. Besides, I trust you, so it was easier than I thought it would be. It's like I knew you wouldn't judge me."

I looked at him in confusion. "Why would I judge you? What happened with your neighbor wasn't your fault. And what happened after that, well, it's the past. It helped make you who you are today, and since I happen to really like who you are today, I have no complaints. Besides, who am I to judge anybody?"

He smiled at me and took my hand. "You get more and more awesome all the time, you know that?"

I rolled my eyes. "I do not."

"You do. And don't argue with me."

I sighed and closed my eyes happily. He turned the radio on and tuned it to a pop station. Before I knew it, I'd drifted off with his hand resting comfortably on my leg.

He gently shook me awake when we were in front of my house again. "You're home, beautiful boy."

I blinked awake and sat up. "I fell asleep."

He gave me a crooked smile. "Yeah, I noticed."

I returned the smile as I rubbed my eyes. "Walk me to the door?"

"Of course. Stay put."

He jumped out of his door and ran around to open my door with a flourish. I grinned and climbed out with the help of his proffered hand. We ambled up to the

front porch, still holding hands. I turned into his body and slid my arms around his waist, and he wrapped his arms around me tightly.

I tipped my head up and closed my eyes. "Kiss me goodnight?"

He obliged with a sweet, tender kiss that just about made me melt.

Breaking away, he stepped back, his hand lingering on my cheek. "I'm really glad you called me," he said softly.

"Me, too. I think this might have been the best date I've ever been on."

He smiled. "According to you, it's the only date you've ever been on. But for the record, it might be the best date I've ever been on, too."

We stood grinning at each other like idiots for a minute before Micah started backing away again. "I guess I'd better go."

"I guess."

"Bye."

"Bye."

"We'll do this again soon." He took another step backwards.

"Promise?"

Micah smiled. "Promise."

"Okay. Bye."

"You just said that," he teased.

"Oh." He reached the steps, then quickly turned, and trotted to the car.

I stood on the porch watching until the tail lights disappeared from view before letting myself in, my mind in a giddy haze.

"Did you have a nice time?" Adam asked from the kitchen door, startling me. I let out a little yelp, and he chuckled. "Sorry."

"I thought you weren't going to wait up for me!" I was prepared to be indignant.

"I didn't, goofball. I worked late, then decided to have a drink before I went to bed. Care to join me?"

"For a drink?"

"How does warm milk sound?"

"Disgusting."

He laughed. "Then how about a real drink?"

I was surprised that he'd offer me alcohol, but it made me feel good at the same time. It was one more way of showing me he really did see me as an adult now. I thought about it for a minute, then decided I'd had enough to drink for one night and shook my head.

"No, thanks."

"Join me to talk anyway? Tell me about your night."

"Okay." I followed him into the kitchen and sat down at the table across from a small glass about half full of amber liquid.

Adam slid in behind the glass and wrapped his hands around it. "So?"

"It was incredible. I really like him."

"Well, seeing as how he got you home at a fairly decent hour, I think I like him, too."

"Oh! I forgot to text you..."

"It's okay. You're home now and, as I said, it's not too late. What did you guys do?"

"He took me to dinner, and then we went for a walk on the beach. We talked and got to know each other, then went dancing at the Inferno."

Adam's eyebrow shot up. "He took you to a gay bar?"

"Only to dance."

"How were you able to get in?"

"Micah knows the drag queen at the door."

"Carmen?"

"You know Carmen?"

"Everybody knows Carmen."

"What's her day job?"

"Nobody knows that."

"Micah does."

"Did he tell you?"

"No."

"I can't believe he took you to a bar."

"If it helps, he only bought me soda." Adam gave me a pointed look and I shrugged sheepishly. "I had fun."

He sighed. "Well, obviously everything turned out fine. No point getting upset about it now. You came home after that?"

"Well, he showed me his place first."

His eyebrows leaped up. "Oh, you went back to his house?"

"Apartment," I corrected. "And it's really nice."

"Uh-huh..."

"We didn't do anything, Adam."

Not for lack of trying on my part, I added silently.

"I didn't say you did."

"Micah's a perfect gentleman. He opens doors for me and everything."

"I'm glad to hear that. He sounds like a nice guy."

"He is."

"And he's certainly hot."

"Adam!"

"What? I'm not blind."

"On that note, I'm going to bed."

"Oh, Steve wanted me to tell you that the sale of the house is finalized tomorrow."

"Amalie's house?"

Adam rolled his eyes. "After tomorrow, it will be Steve's house. He's doing a final walkthrough with Victoria before the signing. I think Kane and I are going. You want to come, too?"

I didn't have anything else to do now that I'd stepped back from Caleb's case. "Sure. Why not?"

"Great. Now get to bed."

I laughed. "Okay, okay. See you in the morning. Don't wake me up too early."

"Crack of dawn."

"I bite."

"I'll be sure to warn Micah."

"Ha! Good night, Adam."

"Good night, Kill."

Despite his threats, Adam let me sleep in the next morning. Kane and I took turns getting ready in the bathroom before having a quick breakfast. After eating, we drove two cars to Chicone. Victoria was waiting for us when we arrived.

The walkthrough didn't take long. We'd already been over the house twice before, so we knew what we were looking for. We finished the inspection without a single strange occurrence, making me hopeful we'd seen the last of our ghostly visitor. After the walkthrough, Steve and Victoria headed back to her office, and the rest of us headed home.

That night, we had a celebratory dinner. Adam even let Kane and I have one glass of champagne each.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep before I was snapped out of a deep sleep into full wakefulness. I laid still, trying to figure out what had roused me. It was quiet as a tomb in the dark bedroom.

I turned my head to look at the clock, which said four a.m. Maybe I'd just had a bad dream.

Suddenly I felt a subtle shift on the mattress, as if someone or something was in bed with me. I sat up with a jolt and found myself face to face with Seth. I stifled a scream and glared at him.

"Wakey wakey," he sang softly.

I hissed between clenched teeth, "God, Seth! What the hell are you trying to do, scare me to death?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

His grin belied his words, but I decided to ignore it for the moment.

"I see more of you dead than I ever saw of you alive. Don't you think there's something wrong with that?"

"You're grumpy when you wake up, you know that?"

"I'm grumpy when I get woken up by a dead person at four o'clock in the morning for no apparent reason!"

"Okay, okay, calm down! You'll wake Kane."

"You'd just disappear like you always do. You know, people are going to start thinking I'm nuts if I keep talking to myself."

He shrugged. "It's better that way. Trust me."

I gave him a skeptical look. "If you say so. Not that it matters, anyway, I guess. I think I'm nuts, too."

"You're not crazy. We talked about this the last time I was here."

"Right. The dead guy no one else can see assured me I'm perfectly sane. Sorry, that's not exactly comforting. First you start showing up, then the dream about the murder..."

"The dream is why I'm here. I think you should talk to Judy."

"Yeah, you mentioned that last time. What for?"

"She might be able to help you navigate what's going on."

"What *is* going on? Why can't you explain? Why do you appear to me? Why can I see and talk to you? I don't understand."

He sighed. "I know you don't understand. I'm sorry. I can't explain why you can see me. You just can. You're special."

"I don't feel special. I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"You're not. Talk to Judy. She's been through this."

"She has?"

"Well, not exactly, but she'll know how to help."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do."

"Why are you here?"

"To talk to you."

"Why?"

"I...choose to."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" The look on his face was utter frustration. "Killian, I fell for you. Hard. I feel...I feel like I was cheated out of what we might have had. I'll never know what it would have been like to hold you in my arms and have you hold me in yours, to really kiss you and have you kiss me back. I'll never know what it feels like to be loved by the person I'm in love with. All those things that everybody looks forward to, they were taken from me. You...you can't know what that's like."

He stood up and started to pace.

"I've accepted it as best I can, and I want you to be happy. So, I'm here to help...guide you. I guess you could say. I've...been allowed to be a part of your life, but only to a certain extent—and even then, only as long as you allow it. If you want me gone, I'm gone. I'd like to be here for you, though, if you'll let me."

I scooped back until my back was against the headboard. "Guide me through what, exactly?"

"That's one of those things I can't tell you directly."

"What does that even mean? Are there rules for this? Who makes the rules?"

"More things I can't talk about."

I ran my hands through my hair in frustration.
"Fuck. Then why are you here?"

He seemed to shrink in on himself. "I'm sorry.
Maybe this was a mistake. I'll leave you alone."

"No, Seth, wait." I held out a hand. "I don't mean
I want you to leave. It's just...you have to admit, having a
dead guy as your confidant is...a little strange."

He gave me a slight smile. It was a far cry from
his usual grin, but it was something. "Yeah, I guess it is."

We sat silently for several seconds.

"You know, I did care about you."

He looked away. "I know."

"And maybe, if we'd had more time, I would
have fallen for you, too."

He shrugged. "I guess we'll never know."

More silence stretched between us. "So, uh, how
does this work?"

"How does what work?"

"This." I gestured between the two of us. "How
does our new relationship work? Do you come when I
call you, or only when you feel like it?"

"I'm not a genie. You can't rub a lamp and make
me appear. I can't grant wishes, either." He sounded
annoyed.

"I didn't mean that. I meant will you just show up
at random times like you've been doing?"

"I'll be here when you need me."

"Um, okay. Well, you keep talking about what
you can't tell me, but what *can* you tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Can you, like, tell me stuff that
hasn't happened yet?"

He frowned. "I can't see the future. I'm not a fortune teller."

"But you seem to know things, sometimes before they happen."

"It's hard to explain. Time doesn't mean much on this side. Sometimes, I have a vague sense of things that *could* happen, possibilities."

"How is that different from seeing the future?"

He shrugged. "It just is."

"That feels like semantics. And you're starting to sound like Judy. Maybe *you* should talk to her."

"She wouldn't be able to see or hear me."

"But I can."

"Like I said, you're—"

"Special. So you keep saying. Whatever that means. Okay, then what can you tell me about these 'possibilities?'"

"It depends." I sighed, and he continued. "I can tell you certain things, information that won't affect anything directly. I can push you a little in certain directions. But some stuff you have to figure out for yourself."

It was my turn to frown. "Who decides the difference?"

"That's one of those things I can't talk about, but mostly I have to use my best judgement."

"What happens if you break the rules?"

"Then I wouldn't be allowed to come back."

"Allowed. You've said that a few times. I don't understand what that means. Do all ghosts have to be 'allowed' to come back?"

"I'm not a ghost. Not really. I mean, you can think of me that way if you want, but I'm not really haunting you."

"But ghosts are real?"

He looked away and shrugged.

"Seth..."

"Sorry! I'm not being cryptic just to confuse you, I promise. It's just another one of those things."

I took a minute to process everything. "So, is this how Judy knows things? Does she have a personal dead guy who shows up randomly and tells her stuff?"

"No. Judy has other gifts. But besides that, she's also a very smart, very observant lady. Don't ever underestimate her. She's a powerful ally."

"Ally? Am I at war?"

"I just meant that she can help you. So, anyway, do you like this Micah guy?"

"Subtle change of subject, there, Casper. If you didn't want to talk about the spook stuff anymore, you could have just said so."

He laughed. "Fine. I don't want to talk about it anymore. Do you like him?"

"I guess so."

"You guess so? That's not the most definitive answer."

"Okay, yeah, I do like Micah."

"What about Asher?"

"What about him?"

"Do you still have any feelings for him?"

"I don't know." I thought about it for a few seconds. "I mean, I suppose I still have some feelings for Asher. He was my first love. It's been hard seeing him

date someone else, especially someone I don't really like, but I have to move on eventually."

"Does that mean Micah is just your rebound guy?"

"No. At least, I don't think so. I want to give Micah and me a try. Asher and I had our chance, and it didn't work. Maybe we just weren't ready, or maybe we simply weren't meant to be, but either way it didn't happen. If Micah and I are meant to be together, then it'll work out."

"It doesn't always happen like that, you know. You both have to be willing to make it work. Timing is important, too."

I pulled the blankets over my head. "You know what? I don't really want to think about all that at..." I peeked at the clock then ducked underneath again, "...almost four-thirty in the morning. I like Micah, and for now, that's all I need to know."

"You're right. I should go. You need to sleep."

"*Now* you're worried about my sleep? You weren't worried about that when you woke me up."

He laughed. "There you go getting snotty again."

"Excuse me if I'm not at my best in the middle of the night. Can't you pop in for a visit during the day?"

"I could, but it's harder to catch you alone. Okay, I'm leaving. Goodnight, sleep tight. I'll be back."

"Why doesn't that comfort me?"

There was no answer. I peeked out again but he had disappeared.

As I snuggled back under my blankets, it occurred to me that the hardest thing to get used to in

this arrangement would be his sudden comings and goings.

Chapter 18

When I woke up the next morning, Seth was still on my mind. I was starting to think of our conversations as visits rather than dreams. I wasn't sure why that comforted me, unless maybe I was accepting my descent into madness. Whatever the source of my newfound calm, I'd take it.

As I was getting dressed, I remembered Seth's suggestion that I talk to Judy. It seemed like sound advice. I didn't know where her new house was, but Adam did and he happily provided the address.

In no time, I was parking on the street in front of a light blue, Cape Cod style bungalow.

I walked up to the front door and rang the bell. A few seconds later, I found myself face to face with a scowling Jake. "What are you doing here?"

I fought to control my expression. I'd promised Judy I would do what I could to be friends with Jake, but his attitude was making that very difficult. Still, I hadn't gone there to pick a fight with him. I forced a smile.

"Hey, Jake. I know we didn't exactly get off on the right foot the other night, but I'd like to hang out sometime, maybe catch a movie or something. What do you think?"

His frown lessened ever so slightly, but his eyes remained suspicious. "Like a date?"

"Just as friends."

He rolled his eyes. "Right. I forgot. I'm not good enough to date."

"Actually, I'm sort of seeing someone."

So what if Micah and I had only been on one date. I was hoping it would develop into something more.

He seemed surprised. "Why didn't you mention that before?"

I shrugged. "I wasn't sure where it was going then, but...I like him."

Jake leaned against the doorpost and gave me a small smile, his first since he'd answered the door. "So dish. Is he cute? What's he like?" He wagged his eyebrows. "Does he have a brother?"

I laughed. "He's very cute. And he has two brothers, but they're not local. Can I come in, or do we have to talk at the door?"

"Sure. Sorry." He stepped back to allow me to enter, then led me to the living room. It was obvious he and Judy had just moved in. Unpacked boxes were stacked everywhere, and the furniture was arranged haphazardly.

I took the only chair not loaded with boxes while Jake sat on the floor. I had just finished filling him in on Micah when Judy walked in on us. "I thought I heard voices. Hi, Killian." Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she wore a paint-splattered t-shirt and jeans, leading me to believe she had been working in another room.

"Hey, Judy."

I tried to come up with a way to get her alone without making Jake think I was ditching him.

Judy solved my dilemma for me. "I'm glad you're here, actually. Before you leave, may I speak with you for a few minutes?"

"Uh, sure." My mind was racing, wondering what she wanted to talk to me about.

"You might as well do it now," Jake interjected. His expression was sullen again. "I was just leaving. I have to meet a friend."

Judy seemed to have been caught off guard. "Who are you meeting?"

Jake's face darkened. "What? You have to approve of all my friends now?"

"I didn't say that. I just didn't know you'd reconnected with anyone since we got back."

"Who said I reconnected? Maybe it's a new friend. Shouldn't you know already? You are psychic, after all."

I sank back in my chair and tried to pretend I wasn't there.

Judy's jaw tightened. "Do we have to play this game? I mean, really, Jake."

He glowered at her. "Is this interrogation over? I don't want to be late."

"Just go."

He swept from the room, taking most of the tension with him.

Judy relaxed visibly when the front door slammed behind him. "Sorry about that." She came in and shifted some boxes to the floor so she could sit down.

I shrugged. "He seems really angry."

"That's putting it mildly. Right now, he's angry at the world in general, but me in particular. How was he with you?"

"Better than last time. He was pretty prickly when he answered the door, but he got better as we talked. I think we're going to go to a movie sometime soon."

She smiled at that. "Please do. I think you'd be good for him."

"Why do you want to speak to me?"

"What? Oh. Right. I don't."

"But...then why did you ask if we could speak before I left?"

"Because I thought you wanted to talk to me."

She had thoroughly confused me by that point. I just stared at her, slightly slack-jawed.

She chuckled. "Oh, don't look at me like that, Killian. I didn't need to consult my crystal ball to see you were struggling to figure out a way to talk to me without Jake around."

"You have a crystal ball?"

She threw back her head and laughed loud and long. "No! I was just kidding."

A sheepish smile spread across my rapidly warming face.

She sobered and studied me carefully.

"Something's on your mind. What's going on?"

I took a moment to try to organize my thoughts. It occurred to me that I hadn't come very prepared. I wasn't at all sure how to bring up such a delicate subject.

"Some odd things have been happening lately, and I don't know who else can help me with them."

She raised an eyebrow. "Odd how?"

"Well, um, it's kind of hard to explain. Can I ask you some questions first?"

"Of course. You can ask me anything you wish."

"How do your...um...powers work?"

"My powers?" She looked as if she wanted to laugh again but was restraining herself. "I'm not sure what you mean. I'm not Wonder Woman."

"You know...the psychic stuff. I remember the first time I met you, you popped out of the shrubbery and told me things you had no way of knowing. How did you know them? Does someone...come to you?"

"Someone? Like who?"

"Someone...dead?"

"No. It's not like that at all. I just...know.

Sometimes it's a dream, especially if it has to do with the future. Sometimes I have a strong urge about something, like a hunch. I may feel I have to go somewhere or speak to someone in particular. I won't know why, exactly, I'll just know I have to do it. Then other times, I simply know something beyond any doubt. I'll meet someone and suddenly just have this knowledge in my mind, almost like a memory or as if it had always been there. It's rarely detailed or exact, and it's not really under my control. If it happens, I know it's for a reason and I need to act on it." She paused. "Why did you ask if someone comes to me?"

I bit my lip and wondered if I should just come clean. Finally, I decided that if anyone would understand, Judy would. Besides, hadn't Seth told me to talk to her?

"You know how I said strange things have been happening to me?"

Her eyes widened. "Someone comes to you?" I nodded. "My God! Who?"

"Seth."

"Adam's son?"

"Yes."

"He comes to you? How? In a dream?"

"I...I don't know really. At first, I tried to tell myself it was just a dream, or maybe my imagination. Then I thought I was losing my mind. But now I'm not sure. I'm starting to think that maybe...he actually does come and talk to me."

"Like a ghost?"

"Or something like that. He says he's not a ghost exactly, but I don't know what that means. And he only comes to me when no one else is around. Oh, and he says he can't show up whenever I want him to, only when I need him."

"This is...wow. I've never known anyone who could actually converse with the dead, at least not in the way you're describing. I knew you were gifted, but this is ridiculous."

"Gifted?"

"We'll come back to that. First, tell me how and when all this started?"

"He just suddenly started appearing a few weeks ago." I paused as a memory surfaced. "Actually, a couple of years ago, not long after he died, I had a dream that he came to me in the same way he does now. He showed me where he'd hidden his diary and then he left. I thought it was a dream, but I did find the diary right where he said it would be, so maybe he really was there."

"You didn't see him again after that until recently?"

"No."

"But now he's been showing up more often?" I nodded. "What do you talk about when he comes?"

"Mostly he just gives me advice on my love life."

Judy blinked. "On...your love life?"

"Yeah. He's kind of a busybody."

"This keeps getting more and more bizarre. Why on earth would he do that?"

"I asked him that. He said because...because he loves me."

"A love that reaches beyond the grave. This is just incredible. Does he tell you anything else?"

"He's about as vague as you are. But he told me to talk to you."

"He told you to talk to me?"

"Yes."

"About what?"

"He said you'd explain what was happening to me."

"Explain it?" She snorted. "That's a tall order. I have totally different gifts than the ones you're describing. It's taken me most of my life to get a handle on my own, how does he expect me to explain yours?"

I felt my heart drop. I'd hoped she'd be able to make some sense of things for me. For a moment, I hadn't felt quite so alone.

My disappointment must have shown on my face. Judy softened. "I'm sorry, Killian. I'll explain what I can. Where should I start?"

"Start with gifts. You keep using that word, but I don't know what you mean."

"Well, that's simple enough, I suppose. Gifts are sort of like talents, but instead of being able to draw

pictures or play an instrument, we sense things others can't, like spirits or the future. The first time I met you, I sensed you were gifted, but I had no idea what form your gifts would take."

I frowned remembering our first meeting and the way she'd stared at me, as if she knew something I didn't. "This all sounds more like a curse than a gift. What if I don't want these gifts?"

"You don't really have a choice in the matter."

"Can't I just ignore them?"

"You could, but I don't think that would be a good idea. These things have a way of refusing to be ignored. If you don't control them, they could easily control you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not trying to scare you, but it's important that you understand your gifts."

"How can I understand them if you can't teach me? Why would Seth send me to you if you can't help?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean I wouldn't help. It's just...it's not every day someone tells me they can talk to ghosts. I'll do my best to help you, but since we have different gifts, I will only be able to do so much."

"And then what?"

"I'll talk to people I know who are gifted. Maybe one of them can help you. There are books I can check as well."

"Okay." I nodded. That was a start. "So, what's going on with me? You're sure I'm not going crazy?"

"Well, I can't promise anything." She laughed at my expression. "I'm teasing, Killian. Breathe. It sounds

to me like you're a sensitive and your gifts are starting to manifest themselves."

"What does that mean? What is a sensitive?"

"A sensitive is someone who is, well, sensitive to other planes beyond the one in which we move. They're more aware of things many people never see or feel. Sometimes this gift is called the sixth sense."

"Did I always have it?"

"Yes, but gifts have a way of showing up when they want to. Some people have them from a very young age, and some seem to develop them later. There are various types of gifts. Some people seem to have one strong, predominant gift, sometimes accompanied by a combination of other gifts of varying strengths. It would appear that your particular sensitivity is towards the dead, which in common terms would make you a medium."

I shuddered. "Lucky me."

"It could be worse. You could get glimpses of the future. Trust me. That's not all it's cracked up to be."

I thought of my dreams of the ax murder, but decided to focus on one impossible thing at a time.

"Okay, well if I'm a medium, then what are you called?"

"A small."

"What?"

"That was a joke. Some would call me a seer or precognitive, or maybe a clairvoyant since I can also sometimes see or sense things that are happening presently. Remember how I just knew something was wrong the night you were almost killed?"

I definitely remembered that. I suppressed a shudder.

"Have you seen any other gifts manifesting?
Experienced anything else you couldn't explain?"

"I've...had dreams."

"What kinds of dreams?"

"Confusing things that didn't make sense at the time, they just seemed like a nightmare, but then later...I think maybe I was dreaming about something before it happened."

Judy frowned. "Precognition, too? That at least I know something about."

"But you said I can't control it?"

"Not your dreams, not really."

"What about the ghost thing?"

"That I have to confess I don't know as much about. I don't think you can control if you see them or not, but there may be things you can do to protect yourself from them."

"Protect myself? Can they hurt me?"

"Again, this isn't my area of expertise, but yes. I believe it's possible."

"How do I protect myself?"

"That I don't know, but we'll find out. Have you seen any other ghosts or just Seth?"

I thought about my experience at Amalie's house. "Not seen, but I think I heard a ghost at the house Steve just bought."

"Steve bought a house?"

"Yes, out in the middle of nowhere. He's turning it into a bed and breakfast. But you're missing the point. I think it's haunted."

"Fascinating. So that means it's not just Seth."

"So...I might start seeing dead people everywhere?"

"Possibly. Any other questions?"

"Um, yes. Like a million. Why am I a sensitive? Where does it come from?"

Judy laughed. "I'm not completely sure, although it seems that gifts often do run in families. You should ask your mom sometime if anyone else in the family ever had a reputation for being psychic."

I rolled my eyes. "Right. That's easy enough to bring up."

"It might not be as hard as you think, and if, say, there's a grandparent, aunt, or uncle floating around with similar gifts, then you have a resource available to you close to home, so to speak."

"All my grandparents are dead, and my mom only has one sister. I'm pretty sure she would have mentioned it if Aunt Kathy talked to ghosts."

"I know this is a touchy subject, but what about your dad's family?"

I frowned. "Dad didn't have any brothers or sisters."

"Okay. Then that's a dead end, I suppose. No pun intended." Judy winked at me. "Any more questions?"

"Not at the moment, but hang on. I'm sure I'll have more in a second."

She laughed and got up to come hug me. "I'm here any time, day or night. If you need anything, you just let me know."

"Thanks, Judy."

I was resting in my bedroom later that evening thinking about everything I'd learned from Judy, when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I called.

I was glad I was lying down when I saw who it was. If I hadn't been, I might have fallen over from shock. It was Asher.

"Hi." He sounded almost shy.

I sat up. "What are you doing here?"

His eyes slid over my body. I'd forgotten I wasn't wearing anything but my boxer briefs, but I wasn't too concerned. He'd seen me in less.

"I came to apologize."

If I'd thought I was confused before, he'd just made me more so. "Huh?"

"I'm sorry."

"For...what?"

"For being a jerk yesterday."

"You were a jerk?"

"I should have listened to you."

"Wait. Start over. I'm lost."

"I should have never gotten mad at you about Caleb. I should have listened to you all along. You were only looking out for me."

A pang of guilt hit me. I wished my motives had been as altruistic as he was making them out to be.

"Where is this coming from?"

"I've been having some...doubts about Caleb, partly because of what you told me, but also just a feeling I've had lately, especially since he got out. I talked to Marcus last night and he told me I was being a dick. So, I came to apologize."

"It's...okay. Under the circumstances, I think you're allowed to be a little prickly. And I probably didn't handle things as sensitively as I should have. So, um, what kind of doubts are you having about Caleb?"

"I know he's been lying to me about so many things. I know you caught him in lies, and I'm pretty sure I haven't even heard about all of them. Right?"

"I...I...well...I mean..."

"It's okay, Killian. I won't get mad. I just need to know."

"Right." I didn't know where to start.

"What else has he lied to me about?"

I sighed. "It would just be easier to tell you the whole story and let you decide for yourself."

Asher walked over and pulled out my desk chair, then sat down. "Go on."

I told him everything I'd found out or pieced together. I explained what Marco had admitted to me and how that had led me to Finn.

When I finished, Asher shook his head sadly.

"Damn. I can't believe he used me like that. And I only saw what I wanted to see."

I shrugged uncomfortably. "They say love is blind."

He snorted. "I didn't love him. I thought I did, but I just liked him because I thought he needed me." He paused. "Unlike you."

I frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I shouldn't have said that. I didn't come here to start a fight."

"No, but you said it, so please explain. What did you mean by that?"

"Just that...I don't know. When we first got together, I felt like you needed me, like I was sort of your protector...or your voice of reason or something. But then, it started to seem like my opinions mattered less and less, that you were going to do what you wanted regardless of how I felt. I kind of feel like we grew apart."

"Or maybe I just grew up. At some point, we both needed to make decisions for ourselves, find our own ways. Is that why you applied to Georgetown behind my back?"

"Yeah, that was part of it. I'm sorry, by the way. I'm not sure I ever really apologized for that. Do you think we'll ever be able to be friends again?"

I hesitated, maybe a little too long. I could see his shoulders slump. "I hope so," I said finally. "But if so, it'll have to happen organically. I don't think it's something we can force, and I might need a little time."

"You're right." He stared at the floor for a few moments. "So, um, maybe I don't have any right to ask this, but do you think maybe you could, uh...continue looking into the murder?"

"What?"

"Please, Killian. I need to know whether he killed his father or not."

"I mean, that makes two of us."

"So you'll do it?"

"No."

"But you just said—"

"I'd love to know the truth, but I've been banned from investigating by everyone from the police to my boss. I'm not on the case anymore."

"What if he gets away with murder?"

"This is so crazy! You wanted me to get him out of jail, so I got him out of jail. Now you want me to put him back in?"

"Only if he's guilty."

"Why do you care? If you know he lied to you, just walk away and consider yourself lucky that you found out when you did."

"I wish it were that easy, but you know as well as I do, it's not. I need closure. I need to know."

I sighed. "I can't make any promises, but I'll think about it. Okay?"

"You promise? You're not just saying that to get rid of me?"

"A bit of both, really," I said with a grin. Asher's face fell, and I quickly added, "I'm kidding. I promise I'll think about it. If I can get Novak on board, I'll see what I can do. But I'm not going behind his back—he's done too much for me to repay him like that."

He nodded slowly, a hint of reluctance in his eyes. "Yeah...I guess that's fair." He stood up, glancing around my room. "I should probably head out. Honestly...it feels kind of weird being back in here."

I raised an eyebrow. "Try being in your underwear."

That got a grin out of him. "Been there, done that."

I chuckled. "Get out."

He made his way to the door but stopped just before stepping out, turning back to look at me. His expression softened. "Thank you, Kill."

For a moment, neither of us moved. I just nodded, the words catching in my throat. And then he was gone.

I woke up the next morning to a knock at my bedroom door. I sat up groggily and looked around. Kane wasn't there, so it must have been later than I first thought. A quick check of the clock revealed that it was, in fact, mid-morning. Obviously, I'd slept in. So why did I still feel so tired?

The knock came again. I started to get up to answer the door, but then decided it was probably just Adam or Steve making sure I was awake. I dropped back onto the bed. "I'm up," I called, hoping whoever it was would just leave so I could go back to sleep.

The door opened and Micah stuck his head in. "Hey, is it okay if I come in?" I yelped and scrambled to pull a sheet over myself.

Micah started laughing. He walked into the room and shut the door, even though I hadn't given him permission. "I've seen guys in their underwear before, Killian."

"Yeah, but not me. And I just woke up. My hair..."

He laughed again. "Your hair is fine. I kind of like it. You've got that whole messy, bed-head thing going on. It's very sexy."

I stuck my tongue out at him. "You're here awfully early, aren't you?"

"It's after ten."

"So, what's your point?" I grinned to let him know I was kidding. "Is anyone else here? Who let you in?"

"Your little brother. He told me to come on up."

I rolled my eyes. "Figures." I'd have to get Kane back for that little stunt. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure of this unannounced visit?"

He grinned. "I just couldn't stay away any longer. I had to see you again. I was going to call and ask you out, but then I decided I'd rather see you in person. Harder to turn me down that way."

I felt myself blush at his comments. "You say that as if I'd turn you down otherwise."

"So, would you like to go out again tonight?"

I nodded. "Sure. Why not?"

He gave me a crooked smile. "Don't sound so excited. I'll pick you up around six. Dress casual. See you later." He leaned in for a quick peck on the lips, leaving my heart pounding and my face flushed.

After he left, I showered, threw on some clothes, checked my email, and read the news online. By the time I made it downstairs to the kitchen, Adam was starting on lunch. He looked up as I entered the room. "Good morning. It is still morning, isn't it?"

"Barely," I answered with a sheepish grin.

"What's for lunch?"

"Just sandwiches, nothing fancy. Was that Micah here earlier?"

"Yeah. He asked me out again."

Adam smiled. "When?"

"Tonight."

"What about tonight?" Steve asked as he entered the room carrying his cell phone.

"I'm going out on a second date with Micah."

"A second date? Already? Is this serious?"

"It's a second date, Steve. Calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm. Should we start working on the wedding invitations?"

"I can design them," Adam said.

"Will the ceremony be formal?"

"You guys are hilarious," I said dryly.

Steve laughed. At least he was amused. "Okay, okay, but in all seriousness, do you need condoms?"

"Steve!"

Adam glared at Steve. "On a second date?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Oh come on, Adam. You were a teenager once. Hell, if I remember correctly, we had sex on our second date."

"Too much information!" I squawked.

Adam blushed. "We were grown men."

"And so is Killian."

"He's eighteen!" Adam protested.

"Which is, by any legal definition, an adult," Steve countered.

"I don't need condoms, okay? Can we please stop talking about this now?"

"We need to be able to talk openly and honestly about sex," Steve insisted.

"Not right now we don't." I hoped the finality in my tone would end the conversation. "I promise if and when I have sex for the first time, I'll use condoms."

Adam gasped. "For the first time?"

"We're not talking about this right now!" I stormed from the room, my face blazing.

I was sitting on the front porch later that evening waiting for Micah. I was mainly trying to avoid more talk about condoms, but the cool breeze off the ocean felt amazing.

I'd dressed casually as he had suggested: a pair of well-worn jeans that fit me like a glove and a blue short-sleeved polo shirt that brought out my eyes—or so Adam had insisted.

When Micah pulled up, I ran to his car and jumped into the passenger seat before he could get out and open the door for me.

"Hi." I turned to look at him and found myself slightly breathless, and not from the short run to the car.

He was smiling ear to ear, his dark hair falling adorably over his eyes. He was wearing a tight white t-shirt that hugged his chest and dark jeans. He looked delectable.

"Hi. This was the longest day. I couldn't wait to see you." He leaned forward and gave me a quick kiss before throwing the car into reverse and backing into the street.

I smiled and tried not to blush. "Where are we going?"

"Nothing fancy this time. Do you like pizza?"

"Depends on the pizza."

"I think you'll like this place. You up for it?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I'm up for anything."

Micah gave me a suggestive look. "Anything?"

I couldn't think of a comeback, so I blushed in silence. Micah found my reaction quite amusing.

We made small talk until we arrived at the restaurant Micah had chosen. It was a cozy, old-school pizzeria with a wine-bottle-turned-candle holder in the center of each red-checkered tablecloth. Besides pizza, they served the usual assortment of Italian fare, but we ended up just ordering a large pie.

We continued to chat while we ate, and soon the pizza was history. Micah paid the bill, and we walked out to the car.

"So what now?" I asked.

"Well, traditionally, this is the part where I drive you home and we share a lingering kiss good night."

"Oh." I felt my face heating up again and I was glad it was dark so Micah couldn't see me blushing yet again.

"I'm kidding, Killian. Do you need to get home right away?"

"No, not really. I work in the morning, but it's still early."

"Then how about we go walk on the boardwalk and people watch."

I smiled. "That sounds nice."

We managed to find street parking and walked to the boardwalk, where Micah bought me an ice cream cone from Dumser's Dairyland. When we'd finished our ice cream, Micah suddenly grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the ticket booth for the amusement park.

I laughed and pulled back. "Wait. What are you doing?"

"I have an idea."

"Are you going to tell me?"

"Let's go on the Haunted House ride."

"No!"

"Okay. That was vehement. Don't tell me you're afraid. It's just a silly ride. I thought it would be romantic."

"Romantic?"

"Yeah, you know, an excuse to cuddle."

"Okay, maybe, but I've had enough of haunted houses recently."

"Um, that sounds like a story I need to hear."

I sighed. "Okay. Here's the deal. Adam's boyfriend Steve just bought this huge old house."

"Hold up. Adam's gay?"

I glanced over at Micah. "I didn't mention that before?"

"No, only that he took you in after your father kicked you out and that he was your friend's dad."

"Oh. Well, yeah, Adam's gay. Anyway, Steve bought this mansion out in Chicone. He wants to turn it into a bed and breakfast. The only problem is that it seems to be haunted."

Micah's eyes lit up. "Really? Why do you think it's haunted?"

"To begin with, it's been rumored to be haunted for a long time, stories going back decades. Previous owners have claimed to have seen her. That's why the house sat empty for decades."

"The ghost is a she?"

"Yes. Her name is Amalie."

"You even know her name? That's incredible. Have any of you seen any signs of her?"

"Well, I heard footsteps and no one was there."

"But that's it."

"That was enough. So you don't think the whole thing is silly?"

"Silly? No way. I think it's really cool."

"You and Steve would really get along."

"But you know this haunted house isn't real, right?"

I laughed. "Yes."

"Then what's the big deal? I promise I'll hold you and keep you safe."

I gave in. "Well, with an offer like that..."

Micah's face lit up. "Perfect. I'll buy the tickets."

The Haunted House had been around since the '60s and was a bit of a local legend. We never went to the amusement park when I was kid, and as a teen, I'd always refused, preferring the Zipper or the Himalaya rides.

It turned out to be fun, though, with extra cheesy dark ride stunts that popped out at you to provide cheap jump scares. It really was the perfect excuse to be close.

Plus, it turns out that the haunted house ride is a great place to make out.

You really do learn something new every day.

Chapter 19

The next morning, I was glad to find Novak in the office when I arrived. I tapped on his door frame and stuck my head into his office.

“Do you have a minute? I have something important that I need to talk to you about.”

“I don’t think I like the sound of that. Come on in.”

We took our usual places, and I quickly jumped into my prepared presentation. “Okay, here’s the thing. You know I don’t believe Caleb is innocent. I just don’t have any evidence to prove he did it.”

“Right, but we’re done investigating. You did what you were ‘hired’ to do.”

“What if someone hired me to find the killer?”

“We’re already working for one client. We couldn’t take on another client with a conflicting agenda.”

“Technically, it’s the same client. Asher asked me to help free Caleb. Now, he wants to know who killed Ira Cohen.”

Novak rubbed his chin. “Let me guess. This will be more *pro bono* work.”

“Sort of.”

“And he’s trying to get you to keep investigating?”

“Ever since Caleb got out of jail, Asher’s had a bad feeling about him. He thinks something is off.”

“That makes three of us. I’m just not sure you need to get involved at this point. Didn’t Sergeant Kaplan tell you to drop the case?”

“He asked me to back off, and I did. But— Hold up. You think Caleb is guilty too?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. I agree with Asher’s sentiment that something is off. I’ve said from the beginning that Caleb’s story was fishy.”

“But if you think something is fishy—”

“Killian, we’re not superheroes. We’re not out to save the world from injustice. We do what we’re hired to do.”

“I told you, Asher asked me to keep investigating.”

“Sorry, we only accept so many free cases a month, and our quota has been met.”

“Technically, it’s the same client and case.”

Novak shook his head. “Why do I have the feeling that you’ll do this whether or not I agree?”

“I won’t if you tell me not to. I’ll respect that.”

Novak rolled his eyes. “And it would eat you alive.” He leaned back in his chair. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

“I just want to ask a few more questions, talk to a few more people, specifically Travis and Paige Haynes. And maybe Finn. To me, they’re the only other possible suspects—Paige and Travis because of their attachment to Caleb and the loss of their child, and Finn because he was involved with Caleb and provided him with a shaky alibi.”

"Why shaky?"

"He admitted he wasn't with Caleb all night. He left Caleb alone in his bedroom while he hung out with his parents so they wouldn't know Caleb was there. Caleb came and went through the bedroom window.

Finn's house and Caleb's house are actually really close as the crow flies. It's a relatively short walk through the woods."

"And what about the boy who hanged himself? How does he fit into this?"

"Caleb suggested that Marco may have killed Ira and hanged himself out of remorse."

"Judas Iscariot syndrome?"

I shrugged. "I don't buy it. I suppose it's possible, but something about it doesn't sit right with me."

"For the record, the police don't buy it either."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I grabbed a beer with Hank over the weekend. He said they suspect foul play. Although their chief suspect in Ira's murder was behind bars at the time, they still find it a bit of a stretch to accept that the two deaths are unconnected."

I started thinking out loud. "What if...what if Caleb and Marco were working together?"

"That still doesn't explain who killed Marco."

"Maybe it really was suicide. Maybe it spooked him when I talked to him. Did Kaplan say why he suspects foul play?"

"He didn't go into details, and I thought we were out of it, so I didn't push."

"That would have been helpful, but I don't think it's necessary for what I want to do."

Novak studied me carefully. "You need to be very careful you don't make this a witch hunt."

"I'm not following you."

“I’m starting to get the impression that you’re out to prove Caleb guilty more than to find the real killer.”

“What if Caleb *is* the real killer?”

“Then that’s all well and good, but your only focus should be to find the murderer, not dig up evidence against one particular person. If you develop tunnel vision, you’re only going to see what you want to see, which means you could easily miss—or misinterpret—an important detail.”

“I said I was going to talk to Paige, Travis and Finn because they’re all suspects.”

“Yes, but you believe Caleb is guilty.”

“So?”

“Let me play devil’s advocate for a minute. Didn’t you find out that Social Services believes Caleb made up the abuse?”

“Yes.”

“Then what’s Caleb motive for killing his father?”

“What was his motive for making up stories about abuse?”

“That could be a cry for attention,” Novak suggested.

“What if the Social Services psychiatrist was wrong about the abuse? It wouldn’t be the first time.”

He shook his head. “See, you’re trying to twist the facts to fit your perception of the situation.”

“How? Isn’t it possible that the psychiatrist was wrong?”

“Theoretically...”

“I got the impression that the main reason they dismissed the allegations of abuse was because Caleb

lied about other stuff. Just because he lied about some things doesn't mean he lied about everything. I saw bruises myself."

"They could have been self-inflicted."

"In which case, he's even crazier than I thought, so maybe he killed his father for the fun of it."

Novak threw his hands in the air. "I can't win with you. You've already made up your mind. Go. Do what you have to do. I'm not wasting any more of my breath arguing with you."

I stood up and started for the door, but turned back before leaving. "I'm sorry. I can't explain why, but I can't walk away from this. I promise I'm not just being stubborn. I have a feeling in my gut..."

He waved me away. "You're young and idealistic. Don't listen to a cynical old grouch like me. Follow your gut. But for God's sake, kiddo, be careful."

I nodded and let myself out.

Paige Haynes must have heard me pull up, because she was standing at the front door as I climbed out of my car. "Are you here for Caleb?"

"Actually, I'd like to talk to you, if you don't mind."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Talk to me? Why? Caleb is out of jail. Isn't this all over?"

"We still don't know who killed Ira Cohen."

"Who gives a damn? We're all better off without him. Why do we have to dredge it up again?"

"Because no matter how terrible a person Ira Cohen was, no one had the right to be his self-appointed judge, jury, and executioner. That's murder. Besides, I'm

pretty sure someone lied to me in the course of my investigation, and I don't like being lied to."

"Are you saying I lied?"

"Did you?"

"I don't have to stand here and listen to this."

"Did you kill Ira Cohen because he was abusing Caleb?"

"This is insane! I would never kill anyone!"

"Mrs. Haynes, I know about your son." She froze, and all expression left her face. I felt horrible, but I forced myself to go on. "It couldn't have been easy, moving in next door to an abusive father and his helpless son."

"You don't know what you're talking about. I think you'd better leave."

"Maybe witnessing Caleb's abuse day in and day out got to be too much for you. I know you tried reporting it, but nothing ever happened. Maybe you finally decided to do something about it yourself."

"Get the hell off my property." Her voice was ragged and raw.

"I don't even know if I could really blame you. You would have been doing it for Caleb, after all."

She suddenly snapped. Tears began to flow down her cheeks and she clutched her shaking hands against her chest.

"I didn't do anything for Caleb! That was the problem. I didn't do *anything*. We even saw Ira beating Caleb once in the backyard. You know what I did? I turned away. I went inside and cried. I didn't get out of bed for two days. How's that for doing something about it? I didn't even call Social Services. Travis did. Not

only did I do nothing to help, I never confronted Ira. Maybe if I had done *something*, none of this would have happened.”

“There was nothing you could have done,” someone said from behind her. She spun around, and I caught sight of Caleb. His eyes locked on mine, and I could feel the anger seething just barely below the surface. “You’ve done more than anyone could have expected. You and Travis gave me a place to stay when I needed it, and you never stopped believing in me. Come on back inside and rest. I’ll talk to Killian.”

She obediently turned and disappeared into the house without so much as a backwards glance. I wondered if she was used to following orders from the men in her life.

Caleb took her place in the doorway, then, after thinking about it, stepped out and shut the door behind him. His eyes were blazing with rage

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

“I’m trying to find out who killed your father.”

“No, you’re harassing Paige. I heard what you were saying to her. It’s bullshit, and you know it. Paige couldn’t hurt a fly. As for who did kill my father, I don’t care. The only reason I would possibly want to know is so I could give the killer a medal. Whoever offed him did the world a favor.”

“I can understand why you would feel that way, but we have to find out who committed the murder.”

“No. We don’t. All Asher asked you to do was prove I didn’t do it, and you did that. Thanks. Now just drop it and let us get on with our lives.”

“Actually, Asher is the one who asked me to keep investigating.”

That seemed to catch him off guard. “What?”

“Asher asked me to find the killer.”

He shook his head. “I don’t believe you. Why would he do that?”

“Ask him. He said it’s the only way he can move on.”

“So, what? He doesn’t trust me?”

“He doesn’t know who to trust right now, and you only have yourself to blame. You haven’t exactly been honest with him. You can earn his trust again, though. All you have to do is answer my questions truthfully.”

Caleb scowled. I’d backed him into a corner, and he knew it. If he refused to answer my questions, he’d be giving Asher more ammunition against him. “Fine. Ask.”

I suppressed the urge to gloat and asked the question that was at the forefront of my mind. “Did your dad really abuse you?”

The question seemed to catch him by surprise, but he quickly recovered. “You’ve been talking to the assholes at the group home, haven’t you?”

“Yes.” I stared at him expectantly.

He sighed in frustration. “You saw my bruises yourself. How do you think I got them? Oh, wait, maybe I walked into a doorknob or fell down the steps.”

“Just answer my question. Did your dad abuse you?”

“Yes! Paige just told you she saw my dad hit me in the backyard. He hit me almost every fucking day of my life since I was in elementary school. Those jerks at

the group home wouldn't know the truth if it bit them in their fat, lazy asses. They didn't even believe me when I told them their precious golden boy was knocking me around whenever they weren't looking."

Golden boy? "Deon?"

"Right on the first guess. They held him up as some shining example of the system. He was a product of the system, all right. He knew all the ways around it. As long as he didn't leave any bruises where they could see them and kept me quiet while he worked me over, he could get away with anything. He had all the other kids under his thumb, but I refused to do his bidding so he beat the shit out of me. I'm everybody's punching bag—Dad, Deon, those assholes in jail. God, I'm so sick of it!"

I was actually starting to feel sorry for him, assuming he was telling the truth. "What happened the night you ran away?"

"You talked to Samson, right?" I nodded. "I bet he didn't tell you about how he dragged me into his office to inform me they were sending me back home to dear old dad, did he?"

"He didn't, but Deon did."

"Yeah, well, that about sums it up. I wasn't about to let them ship me back for more 'tough love,' so I took off. I'd been thinking about running anyway."

"Did you know where you were going when you left?"

"I had an idea. Like I said, I'd been thinking about it before."

"What happened when you got to Finn's house?"

"I knocked on his window, and luckily, he was in his room. He let me in, and I spent the night there."

“Did he stay with you the whole night?”

“Yeah.”

“He didn’t leave at all?”

“Nope. We hung out, watched a movie on TV, then fell asleep.”

“What movie did you watch?”

“Ugh. Some stupid horror flick. I don’t remember the name. I’d never heard of it.”

“And the next morning you heard the police were looking for you, so you had Finn drive you to the boardwalk?”

“Yep. You know the rest. Are we finished?”

“I suppose so.”

“Good. Now maybe you can leave me the hell alone.” He frowned again. “Oh, and be sure to tell Asher I answered all your stupid questions.” He turned and went back in the house.

I walked slowly back to my car, mulling over everything Caleb had said. His story didn’t align with Finn’s, but he’d been more open with me than ever before. Granted, most of what he shared was information I already knew, so it wasn’t exactly groundbreaking. Still, it left me wondering whose version of events was closer to the truth. Looked like another visit to my eccentric, kilt-wearing friend was in order.

While Caleb and Finn lived within walking distance by foot, it was much longer by road. I was halfway to Finn’s when my cell phone rang.

It was Asher.

“Caleb just called me.” Asher sounded agitated. “I didn’t answer, but he left a voicemail. He said you just

left his house and he needs to talk to me. He wants me to meet him at the barn. What did you tell him?"

"I told him you'd asked me to keep investigating, and if he wanted to regain your trust, he had to be honest with me."

"And was he?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm on my way to Finn's now. I may have some answers after that."

"What should I do about meeting Caleb?"

"Wait until I talk to Finn. Afterwards I'll call you, and you can set it up to meet with Caleb."

"Why do I have to wait?"

"Because I'd like to be there when you talk to him."

"Oh yeah. I'm sure Caleb will love that."

"He won't know."

"Huh?"

"I'll park somewhere else and sneak into the barn before you get there."

"That's crazy."

"Consider it insurance."

"Against what? Do you really believe Caleb would hurt me?"

"I don't know, but I don't think we should take unnecessary chances."

Asher was quiet for several seconds. "Okay. I'll wait to hear from you."

I pulled into Finn's driveway just as he was coming out of the door. He was wearing cargo pants, an old band tee with the arms cut off and heavy combat boots.

He stopped and frowned when he saw me. “What are you doing here?”

“I have another question for you, so I can clear up a minor point.”

He shook his head. “I don’t have time. I was on my way out.”

“It won’t take long.”

He sighed. “Fine, but make it quick.”

“The night Caleb showed up at your house, were you with him the whole time?”

“Didn’t you ask me that before?”

“Yeah, but I need to clarify your answer.”

“It wasn’t clear enough last time? No, I wasn’t with him the whole time. I didn’t want my parents to know he was there, so I tried to act as normal as possible.”

“What did you do while you were in the room with him?”

“Huh?”

“Did you just talk? Listen to music? Watch a movie?”

“We just hung out. We talked. We may have listened to music. I don’t remember.”

“No movie?”

He was starting to look suspicious. “We may have watched a movie. Like I said, I don’t really remember. Is that all?”

“Yeah, that’s all. Except, just out of curiosity, how did your parents react when they found out about Caleb?”

“They were pissed that I’d let a suspected murderer stay in our house, but that was about it.”

“So they don’t know you two were lovers?”

He shot a quick glance over his shoulder, then turned a glare on me. “No, they don’t. And I’d like to keep it that way, so shut your big mouth and get the hell out of here.”

I nodded. “Okay. Thanks for answering my questions. You were very helpful.” I turned and started to get into my car.

“Wait. What’s that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

I simply smiled and gave him a cheery wave as I shut the door. As I drove away, I phoned Asher and told him to call Caleb and set up the meeting.

I drove back toward the Cohen property but pulled off the road, parking out of sight of the barn. Moving quickly and as quietly as I could, I made my way on foot to the building. After a quick sweep to make sure the coast was clear, I slipped inside and tucked myself into one of the old stalls, hidden from view.

I’d barely settled in before I heard someone entering the barn through the window. A moment later, I risked peeking through a crack and saw Caleb struggling to close the door more completely. He threw his weight against it and managed to force it shut. He stepped back, cast a quick look around, then started pacing.

It seemed as if we waited for hours before a car drove up outside, but my watch insisted it had only been fifteen minutes. A few seconds later, I heard Asher call out, “Caleb?”

“In here,” Caleb responded. “Come around the side. You’ll have to climb through the window.”

Once inside, Asher looked around nervously. “This is really creepy. Why did we have to meet here?”

“Because it’s private. Don’t tell me you’re scared just because Marco strung himself up in here.”

Asher gave Caleb a dirty look. “You said you needed to talk to me, so talk. What was so important that I had to drop everything and rush right over?”

“Did you really ask Killian to keep investigating my dad’s murder?”

He hesitated. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think, Caleb? You’ve lied to me over and over, or, at the very least, conveniently left out the truth. I need to know who the real killer is, for my own peace of mind, if nothing else.”

“In other words, you think I did it.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. You can’t even look me in my eyes anymore.” He took a step towards Asher, and Asher backed away. “See? You’re scared of me.”

“I am not! You’re just freaking me out.”

Caleb shook his head sadly. “You know, I really liked you, Asher. I thought you were different. I thought I could count on you. I guess I was wrong.”

Asher cast a desperate glance toward the window, from which he’d moved quite far away from by that point. “I shouldn’t have come. You’re twisting my words. I just need to know for sure. That’s all.” He started inching his way closer to his only escape route.

“Is that really all?”

Caleb took another step in Asher’s direction.

Asher stopped and stared at Caleb. His fear was palpable. “What do you mean?”

“Would you really be satisfied if you knew who killed my father?”

Another step.

“I...I don’t understand what you mean.”

“What if you didn’t like the answer?”

Another step.

I tensed for action.

Asher suddenly realized Caleb was getting closer and spun towards the window, but Caleb lunged for him, taking him to the ground with a thud.

I leapt to my feet, but before I could burst out of the stall, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and ducked back out of sight. Finn was descending the loft ladder as quickly as he could. He jumped off the last few rungs and rushed to help Caleb subdue Asher.

My stomach sank as I realized Finn had been there the whole time. How could I have been so stupid? I should have known Caleb had called him as well as Asher. He’d been on his way to the barn when I arrived at his house.

Did he know I was there? If he knew, he wasn’t worried about it. Maybe he’d somehow missed my entrance. I’d been pretty quiet when I slipped in.

I weighed my options. I could probably take Caleb, especially with Asher's help, but Caleb and Finn together were a different story. Despite Asher's fierce struggle, they were easily overpowering him. I wasn’t much of a fighter, and while both Caleb and Finn were on the smaller side, so was I.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and sent a quick text to Novak: "Send the police to the Cohen barn immediately. It's a matter of life and death." I could only hope he'd see the message in time.

Then I opened my voice recording app and propped my phone where I hoped it would catch any conversation.

When I turned my attention back to Asher, Caleb, and Finn, Asher had gone limp. For a panicked second, I thought they'd killed him, but then Caleb grabbed a coil of rope hanging on the wall and tossed it to Finn.

"You're the expert with knots. Tie him up."

Finn frowned. "What the hell are you doing?"

Caleb nonchalantly brushed the dirt off his clothes. "What do you mean?"

"I thought you were only going to talk to him, not attack him. Now what are you going to do with him?"

"You mean, what are *we* going to do with him?"

"Fuck that! I don't want to be involved in this."

"You're already involved, dumbass."

"Not with this." He pointed angrily at Asher's prone form. "I had nothing to do with him."

"Didn't you just help me knock him out a minute ago?"

"I...I acted before I had time to think. Why did you jump him? You should have just let him leave."

"He suspected something. He wasn't going to leave me alone until he knew the truth."

"So now what? What the hell are you going to do with him?"

"Get rid of him."

“How?”

“I don’t know yet. I’m thinking. Give me a minute. Tie him up.”

Finn threw down the rope. “This is insane. I’m leaving.” He started for the window.

Caleb grabbed the rope and threw it at Finn’s retreating back. “You can’t just walk away, damn it! I need your help.”

Finn whirled around. “Maybe you should have asked for it before you involved me in more of your stupid plots. Why couldn’t you just leave well enough alone? There was no way they could have proved anything against you. You were going to get away with it, and now you’ve gone and screwed everything up. You’re not taking me down with you.”

“I already can.”

Finn turned his back and walked away. “Just try.”

Caleb stared after Finn as he climbed through the window and disappeared. With his accomplice gone, Caleb turned his attention back to Asher. “Fuck,” he muttered under his breath. He retrieved the rope, returned to Asher’s side, and clumsily started tying him up.

I decided the time had come to make my move. I stepped out of the stall and cleared my throat.

Caleb was so startled he fell backwards onto the ground. His eyes darkened with fury as he scrambled to his feet. “Wha...What?” he sputtered.

“You’re busted, Caleb.” If I sounded pleased with myself, that’s because I was. I’d outwitted him at last. There was no way he could explain his way out of this one.

“How long were you—?”

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

He glanced down at Asher then back up at me.

“He attacked me. I was just defending myself.”

“Hello? I just said I was here the whole time. I heard everything. I know you attacked him. I also know you killed your father, possibly with Finn’s help.”

Caleb shook his head vehemently. “I didn’t kill anyone. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then what did Finn mean when he said he wasn’t going to be involved in any more of your plots? And what couldn’t they prove against you? What were you going to get away with?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Why did you attack Asher?”

“I told you, Asher attacked me. I was only defending myself.”

“You know, you’re a better liar when you have time to plan it out.”

“I’m not lying!”

“Give it up, Caleb. I know you’re lying. All you do is lie. I don’t think you’ve told me the truth once since I met you.”

“You can believe what you want. It’s my word against yours, and Finn will back me up.”

“Finn walked out on you. He made it clear that he’s sick of your lies.”

“You keep saying I’m lying, but you have no proof of anything.”

I took a slow, deliberate step in his direction.

“You’re right. I can’t prove anything—yet—but I know you killed your father. And I know how you did it, too.”

Caleb was beginning to look nervous. “What are you talking about?”

“You took an ax and attacked him while he was asleep in a recliner.”

He froze. “How did you know he was asleep in the recliner?”

“Maybe I’m psychic.”

“I don’t believe you.” He was definitely unnerved. “How do you know?”

“I was there, inside your head. I just didn’t know it was you until now. I saw the look in his eyes when he woke up and realized what was happening. I tasted his blood when it splashed in your mouth. I smelled the death mixed with gasoline.”

“Stop!”

“What’s wrong, Caleb? Can’t handle the truth?”

“You want to know the truth? Fine! Yes, I did kill the son of a bitch. They were trying to send me back here. Do you think I wanted to get beat on for three more years before I could move out? I was sick and tired of being his punching bag. It was only a matter of time until he killed me. I didn’t have a choice. It was him or me.”

“Did you plan it out ahead of time, or was it spur of the moment?”

“I hated his guts. I’d thought about killing him for years. It was my favorite fantasy. All I had to do was pick a method.”

“And you chose an ax?”

He shrugged. He seemed to be calming down. “I didn’t have a gun, and a knife didn’t seem...violent enough. I wanted him to suffer, to feel how I felt all those years. The ax felt right.”

I shivered at the cold, matter-of-fact tone in his voice. Images from my dream flashed through my mind. “But it was messy. All that blood... You were covered.”

He gave me a funny look. “I wore one of Finn’s wetsuits. I took it off before I left and burned it up with the rest of the house. All I had to do was wash my face and hands.”

I felt as if I was going to throw up. “So Finn was in on it?”

“He knew what I was doing, if that’s what you mean. He understood that it was the only way for me to be free of my father.”

“What about Marco?”

“What about him?”

“What part did he play in all this?”

He shrugged. “None that I know of.”

“Then why did he hang himself in your barn?”

“Beats me. I was in jail when that happened, remember? Maybe you should ask Finn.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He cocked his head to one side and smiled. “Let’s just say Finn has many talents, one of which is roping.”

“Are you saying Finn killed Marco?”

He gave an exaggerated shrug. “Like I said, I wouldn’t know. I’m just pointing out some interesting facts. Make of them what you will.”

“You’re a manipulative bastard.”

His lips twisted into a sick smile. “Maybe so, but look where it’s gotten me. I don’t have to worry about my dad beating the shit out of me for no reason, I’m living with two great people who actually care about me,

and you got me out of jail. I did thank you for that, right?”

“I’m going to make sure you go back to jail.”

His smirk was gone in a flash. “Oh come on, Killian. I killed the bastard in self-defense.”

“You hacked him to pieces with an axe while he was asleep in his recliner. How is that self-defense? That’s cold-blooded murder. I don’t care how much you hated your father or even if he deserved it—I can’t just look the other way.”

“Yes, you can. You can drop this stupid investigation and walk away. We can both pretend this never happened.”

“And what about Asher? Shall we pretend that never happened, either?”

He looked down at Asher with an expression that almost seemed surprised, as if he’d forgotten Asher was there.

“I heard you say you had to get rid of him. You can’t expect me to just walk away from that.”

He finally seemed to register that he wasn’t going to be able to talk his way out of this one. In a flash, he launched himself at me, but I was ready for him. I slammed my fist into his face. I’d never punched anyone before, and I was shocked at how much it hurt. I didn’t have time to dwell on the pain. While Caleb was stunned by my blow, I shoved him aside and made a break for the window.

Caleb wasn’t letting me go that easily, however. He caught up to me just before I reached the opening and tackled me from behind. My chin hit the windowsill on my way down, and, for a few seconds, I saw stars. I

blinked my vision clear as the taste of blood filled my mouth. Meanwhile, Caleb was trying to choke me.

I flipped over with Caleb still on my back, planted my feet against the wall, and shoved off, breaking his grip. Then I spun back around and drove the heel of my hand into his face. He reeled back, and I quickly followed up with a kick to the groin. While Caleb was doubled over, I jumped for the window.

I was halfway out when Finn suddenly appeared in front of me, his eyes wide with fear. He shoved me back inside. Since I already had one leg out the window, I lost my balance and fell hard on my back.

I looked up just in time to see a shovel descending toward my face.

Chapter 20

When I came to, my head was pounding. With every rhythmic throb, I felt a wave of sickness wash through me. I'd turned my head at the last second, so I hadn't taken the shovel in the face, but even so the blow had knocked me out cold. I could feel blood trickling down my neck, and I hoped like hell my skull wasn't cracked.

I tried to force my eyes open. It took a few moments and much concentration to focus my vision, but I slowly realized I was staring at the barn wall. I tried to move and for a second, I thought I was paralyzed, until I found I'd been trussed up, hands lashed behind my back and feet tied together. I struggled to roll over, only to fall back to the floor with excruciating pain shooting through my head.

Obviously, I wasn't going to be moving anywhere too quickly, so I needed to work out a plan to make the best of my limited resources. Since I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious, I wasn't sure when the police would arrive—assuming Novak had even called them. I had to act fast to survive.

As I waited for the blackness and nausea to recede before trying to move again, it occurred to me that the barn was deathly silent. Where had Caleb and Finn gone? What about Asher? Was I alone? Maybe I could get to my phone and call for help again. I rocked slightly to one side, and slowly eased my hands around to my pocket. The phone wasn't there. Then I remembered I'd left it in the stall.

I collapsed onto my stomach again and fought the urge to cry. I wasn't defeated yet.

Carefully, so as not to cause my head to ache any more than necessary, I looked around to see what was nearby. Asher was still stretched out where I'd last seen him, although I noticed they'd taken the time to finish tying him up before they left. They'd moved me to the side of the barn opposite the window. There was nothing within reach except for the pile of discarded tires.

I had to get the ropes off, but how?

I recalled seeing some old, rusted tools during one of my previous visits, and I was almost certain one of them was a scythe. If its blade still retained any edge at all, I might be able to use it to cut through the ropes binding my wrists. I scanned the barn and spotted the wooden handles leaning against the far wall.

Just the thought of crawling all the way over there made my head spin, but it was either that or wait for Caleb and Finn to come back. Gritting my teeth, I started worming my way forward, pausing every few scoots whenever the darkness threatened to overwhelm me.

At that pace, I knew I'd never make it in time. Taking a deep, steadying breath, I realized I'd have to do something drastic—pain be damned. Summoning every ounce of strength I had left, I rolled toward the wall.

I was not even halfway there when the nausea became too much. I flopped onto my belly and emptied the contents of my stomach onto the floor. That took more out of me than I would have expected, and I suddenly found that it was all I could do to hold my face out of the vomit. I managed to roll myself onto my back

and away from the worst of it, but I'd gone as far as I could go.

I'd tried and failed. It was just a matter of waiting for them to come back and finish me off. I would die an ignoble end—lying in a puddle of my own vomit, trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey waiting for the oven. I wouldn't get to say goodbye to Adam or Steve, my mom, Kane, Novak, or Micah...not even Asher.

Asher.

He wouldn't have been there if I hadn't told him to meet with Caleb. It was all my fault. I should have listened when everyone told me to back off. It wasn't just my own life I'd put in danger. Asher was going to die because of me. Without even realizing it, I started to cry.

"You can't give up this easily," a voice said suddenly. My whole body spasmed in fear. I tried to blink away the tears, but the form above me appeared only as a blur. "This isn't the Killian I know. He wouldn't just roll over and die. You've been in tougher situations than this. Come on! You have to keep trying."

"Seth?"

"Yes. Come on." He came into focus, standing over me with a concerned expression on his face.

"I can't..." My voice was thick with tears. "It hurts!"

"I know. You have to fight through the pain."

"Help me. Untie me."

"I can't interact with the physical world. You have to do this on your own. Come on, Killer. I know you can do it. You're strong."

"I'm not. I'm not strong." I squeezed my eyes closed and wished he would just leave me alone to die.

"You are! Listen to me, Killian. You can't give up. If you give up, they will kill you. They'll kill Asher. You have to find the strength somewhere inside you."

"I tried. I'm in too much pain."

"Then I'll do what I can, and damn the rules."

With that, I felt a sudden surge of warmth and strength flow into my body. My eyes flew open, but he was gone. I was alone again. The pain in my head had faded enough that I thought maybe, just maybe, I could reach the wall after all—but not by rolling. I'd had enough of that. Still on my back, I used my legs to push myself along, holding my tender head off the floor. It wasn't easy and it hurt like hell, but it was better than rolling.

After what seemed like a lifetime, I reached the tools. There was a shovel lying on the ground, which I realized was probably the one Caleb had used to bash my head. In a distracted sort of way, I noticed something wet on the back of the blade. It occurred to me that it was probably blood—my blood.

I turned my attention back to the other tools—a hoe, a rake, and...

Yes!

Leaning next to them was the scythe. Despite being rusted and pitted, the blade still had enough of an edge that I thought I could saw through the old, dry rotted rope. I was just lucky that Caleb had grabbed the shovel and not the scythe, or he might have decapitated me.

Using the wall to brace myself, I managed to work my way to a sitting position. Once I was upright, I

had to take a few precious seconds to allow the barn to stop spinning and my stomach to stop roiling.

With a stray thought about when I'd had my last tetanus shot, I started sliding the ropes binding my wrists across the edge of the blade. It didn't take long to realize that it was going to be a very slow process. I couldn't get a decent angle or enough pressure. I was sawing away when the handle began to slide along the wall.

"No, damn you," I gasped, but of course the scythe didn't listen. It slid slowly down the rough boards of the wall, almost in slow motion. With a thud, it landed on the floor beside me.

I almost burst into tears again until it occurred to me that I might be able to find a better angle this way. I repositioned myself and started sawing again. It felt as if it was going much faster, but I was sharply aware of precious minutes ticking by before the ropes finally fell loose. As quickly as I could, I spun around and started cutting the ropes that bound my feet, which went much quicker with the use of my hands.

Free at last, I slowly, shakily pulled myself to my feet, leaning heavily against the wall. After the barn stopped going around in circles like one of those carnival rides that always made me want to throw up, I took stock of my situation.

The window was tantalizingly close, but I wasn't sure I could maneuver myself through the opening without falling, which in my current condition was not an option. Besides, if Finn and Caleb were on their way back, they would undoubtedly see me. The door was the obvious choice, but it felt so far away, and I remembered clearly how difficult it had been to open the first time. It

hadn't looked any easier when Caleb forced it shut earlier.

The relief I'd felt upon freeing myself was fading, as was the accompanying surge of strength. If the wall hadn't been at my back, I wasn't at all sure I would have been able to remain standing.

I knew I had to make a move. I couldn't stay where I was all day. Maybe I could make it to my phone. I gingerly pushed away from the wall and took a few wobbly steps. I grabbed the tractor and held on for dear life while I waited for the world to stop spinning. My head was throbbing even when I stood still and the slightest movement caused blinding flashes of pain. My stomach felt like it was competing in an Olympic gymnastics floor routine.

I was trying to summon enough energy to cross the rest of the distance to the stall when I heard voices approaching. My heart started racing as I tried to figure out what to do. With a burst of energy that I didn't know I had in reserve, I stumbled across the floor to the stall door and dropped down out of sight. The brief expenditure took its toll as the nausea rose up again. I frantically fought it down to keep from betraying myself by retching.

"What the fuck?" Finn exclaimed moments later. I heard something hit the ground with a heavy, metallic thud.

"Where'd he go?" Caleb's voice cracked in panic. There was some scuffling around. "Here's the rope. Damn it! The fucker cut them off. You look outside. I'll look in here."

"Why would he hang around?" Finn argued. "If he got loose, he took off. The police are probably on their way. We should go."

"We have to find him. He was in pretty bad shape. I hit him really hard. He couldn't have gotten far. We weren't even gone that long."

"I think we should just set the barn on fire like you planned. If he's still in here—"

"We can't take the chance. Go look for him. We're wasting time."

There was no response, but I heard noises indicating that Finn was climbing back out the window. I could tell by the sound of breathing that Caleb was still in the barn.

I knew I didn't have much time. The stalls would be the first place Caleb would search. I looked around for something to use as a weapon but I didn't see anything. Then I noticed the edge of a board mostly buried under a rotting pile of hay. I carefully tugged it out, trying to make as little noise as possible.

The board wasn't very long, only a little more than a foot, but there were a couple of rusty, bent nails in the end. It would have to suffice. I pushed it behind my back so he wouldn't see it right away.

I only had to wait a few seconds before Caleb swung open the door of the stall and spotted me. A small, cruel smile twisted his lips. "Found you."

I forced a smile of my own. "I didn't know we were playing hide-and-seek."

"What did you think we were playing?" He stepped forward and grabbed me roughly by the arm.

I whipped out the board and smashed it across his face. "Tag. And you're it," I gasped.

I half pushed, half pulled myself to my feet and rushed past Caleb's crumpled form. He was holding the side of his head and screaming, but I didn't stop to assess the damage. I was running on pure adrenaline, heading straight for the door. I reached it and started tugging on the handle. It gave a few inches, but not enough for me to squeeze through. I yanked again, but before I could get it open, a pair of arms wrapped around me and started dragging me back.

"Let go!" I struggled, but I was too weak to put up much of a fight.

"Stop," Finn hissed in my ear. "I'm trying to help you, but you have to stop fighting me."

I wasn't at all convinced that he was going to help me, but the brief wrestling match had already consumed my scant remaining energy. The dizziness and nausea were back with a vengeance, and I was fighting just to stay conscious.

He dropped me to the floor next to Asher, who still hadn't moved.

"Just...stay there," Finn panted as he moved towards the stall where Caleb was still screaming and cursing.

Through my haze of pain and sickness, I began to get concerned for Asher. I hadn't seen what they did to him, but I'd been hit pretty hard and had come to. He still hadn't.

I pushed myself up on my elbow and leaned in close to his face. I could feel his breath on my cheek, so at least I knew he was still breathing.

I turned my attention to Finn and Caleb.

Finn was leading Caleb out of the stall. Caleb had one hand pressed to the side of his head as blood dripped freely down the side of his face. The collar of his shirt was already crimson. Finn looked shell shocked. He walked Caleb to the wall by the window, lowered him to the floor, and pulled off his own shirt to press against Caleb's wound. Then he straightened up and looked around helplessly.

"Bit off more than you can chew?" My voice sounded weak and shaky, even to me.

Finn focused on my face. "Oh God. We really fucked up, didn't we?"

"You'd better believe it. You do realize there's no way you can possibly get away with this, right? What was Caleb's plan anyway—to burn the barn down with us in it?"

Finn nodded jerkily. "He said he'd figured it all out. He was going to blame everything on Asher, saying that he was overprotective and jealous, so he killed Caleb's dad and then Marco, too, when he found out Caleb had been cheating with him."

"And me?"

"Asher was killing you to keep you from finding out what he'd done, and he accidentally got caught in the fire."

"Shut up," Caleb snapped suddenly. "Don't talk to him. We have to kill him. Where's the gas can?"

I closed my eyes for a second, which was a mistake. I wasn't sure I could force them back open, but I managed. It took another second to refocus on Finn, who was watching me as if waiting for direction.

"How are you going to explain Caleb's wound?"
Caleb growled, "Don't listen to him. We'll figure it out later. Just get the gas."

Finn started shaking his head. "No."

Caleb looked at him in disbelief. "What do you mean, no?"

"I'm not helping you anymore. This is stupid. We can't keep killing people."

"The killing will stop after these two."

"No. The killing stops now. I'm going to call an ambulance." Finn started for the window, but before he could reach it, Caleb grabbed the scythe I'd left on the ground and swung it at Finn.

I tried to scream out a warning, but Caleb moved too quickly. The scythe connected with Finn's back with a sickeningly wet thud. Finn stumbled forward with a strangled cry to crash against the window frame. He slowly slid down the wall with a whimper.

Caleb pulled himself to his feet, Finn's bloody shirt forgotten in the dirt. "Goddamn it, you fucking idiot," he snarled. "Did you really think I'd just let you walk out of here and call the police? You can die with them now. I guess Asher killed you out of jealousy, too. God! You're so pathetic. I don't know how you ever managed to kill Marco."

While he focused all his attention on Finn, I began to crawl toward him, reaching him just as he finished his tirade. As he started to turn around, I grabbed a piece of rope and threw myself against his legs. He tripped over me and hit the floor. Before he could recover, I wrapped the rope around his neck and pulled as hard as I could.

He clawed at my hands, thrashed around, and kicked with all his might, but I didn't let go. Even when he threw himself back, slamming my head against the wall, I held on as if my life depended on it—because it did. Even when the barn door exploded open and police officers poured in, I refused to let go. Kaplan had to pry my hands off the rope.

I watched distantly as Caleb fell limply to the floor and two burly officers flipped him onto his back and began to give him CPR.

Kaplan squeezed my cheeks and forced me to look him in the face. I realized he'd been asking me a question. "Killian, are you okay?"

I offered him a feeble smile. "I think I'm going to pass out now."

The next time I regained consciousness, I didn't even try to open my eyes. I wasn't sure I wanted to know where or how I was. Had the police rescue been a hallucination? Was I still in the barn, waiting for Caleb to finish me off?

I gradually became aware of two people conversing nearby, one male and one female.

"I don't know. It will depend on how he feels when he wakes up," the woman was saying.

"But he will wake up?" the man clarified. I thought it might be Kaplan.

Maybe I hadn't imagined his timely arrival.

"Oh, yes. We fully expect him to be fine. He has a pretty serious concussion, but that seems to be the extent of his injuries aside from a few minor cuts and bruises."

"Will he be doped up?"

"No, but he will have a monster headache. Does this have to be done right now?"

"I'm afraid that it's very important that I talk to him as soon as he wakes up."

"Would you like us to call you?"

"No, I think I'll wait right here if that's alright with you. Until we know for sure what's going on, I'd like to keep an eye on him."

"Of course, Sergeant. I have my rounds to get to, but I'll check back in shortly."

I guessed the woman was my doctor, so I figured I was in the hospital. I wasn't a private investigator for nothing.

I knew I should open my eyes and get it over with, but it was awfully nice just lying there. I started to doze off.

"Hank, I didn't expect to see you here," a new voice spoke up, suddenly snapping me to alertness.

Novak had arrived.

"Shane, hello," Kaplan responded. "I'm hanging around until Killian wakes up."

"What are the doctors saying?"

"He has a bad concussion, but that seems to be the worst of his injuries."

Novak huffed. "Have his parents been notified?"

"Yeah. His dad is on his way here. Sounded pretty frantic when I called."

"He's lost one son. I think he's a little paranoid that he'll lose another."

"Understandable."

"Is anyone else awake and talking?" Novak asked.

"A couple of them are awake, but nobody's talking. Let's just hope your protégé here wakes up soon and remembers what happened."

"I don't think you'll have to worry about Killian. He's sharp, maybe the sharpest I've ever worked with. The kid's only eighteen and he's better than most rookie officers I worked with when I was on the force. He has a natural talent for detection."

"Not to mention a natural talent for almost getting himself killed. He's been in the hospital a few times. I took a look at his files from the last time he was tangled up in a murder investigation."

I decided that I'd eavesdropped enough. I blinked my eyes open and took in the room. Novak and Kaplan stood near the door. At first, neither of them noticed that I was awake.

"Maybe you can answer some of my questions while we wait," Kaplan was saying. "What was he doing out there to begin with? I thought I told him to back off." His voice held more than a touch of reproach.

Novak sighed. "I warned him to drop it, too, but he's like a bloodhound—once he's on the scent, you can't shake him. He came in this morning with some song and dance about how he was sure the Cohen kid was guilty and he wanted to ask a few more questions. I didn't think there would be any harm in that. I thought he would get it out of his system."

"Well, there was harm, and a lot of it."

"It's not Novak's fault," I spoke up, my voice croaky.

They spun around with twin expressions of surprise that would have made me giggle if my head hadn't hurt so much.

Novak approached my bed with a concerned expression. "Killian, how do you feel?"

"Do you feel up to answering some questions?" Kaplan demanded.

"I feel like I got hit by a tractor trailer," I answered truthfully, "but I can answer some questions. First, though, where's my family?"

"They're on their way," Kaplan told me. "I called them about twenty minutes ago."

"Are you sure you're up for questions now?" Novak asked.

I nodded, which turned out to be a mistake. My head felt as if it could implode at any moment. I squeezed my eyes shut until the pain retreated. "Go ahead."

Kaplan set a mini digital recorder on the tray table and swung it over my bed. "I'm going to record this, if that's okay."

"Fine." The mention of recording reminded me of my phone, so I forced my eyes open. "Wait. Did you find my phone?"

"Your phone?" Kaplan asked.

"Yes. It was in one of the stalls. I started recording and hid it."

Kaplan's eyebrows jumped up, then he pulled out his cell phone and called someone.

"Are you still out at the Cohen barn? Great. Search the stalls for a cell phone. Let me know when you find it."

He ended the call and turned his attention back to me.

"Let's hope your phone has a good microphone. In the meantime, let's get your statement. When I start recording, I'm going to read you your rights, so don't get alarmed. For now, I have to treat you as a suspect. We did find you strangling Caleb Cohen, after all." He pressed the record button, waited several seconds, then read off the date, time, and a few other bits of official information, including my name, before reciting the Miranda rights and asking me if I wanted a lawyer present.

I shook my head gingerly.

"Please answer out loud. The recorder can't hear you shake your head."

"Uh, no, I don't need a lawyer. At least, I don't think so." I looked to Novak for assurance but he just shrugged, which wasn't very comforting.

"Can you tell me what happened at the Cohens' barn?"

I took a deep breath and started recounting my conversation with Paige Haynes. I explained how Caleb's story didn't match Finn's, and how Caleb had called Asher after I left his house. When I got to the part about how I hid in the barn to eavesdrop on Caleb's conversation with Asher, Kaplan's expression darkened but he didn't interrupt. Apparently, he was saving his questions for the end.

I glossed over the way I'd prodded Caleb into his admission by telling him the things I'd seen in my dream, although I supposed that would all be on the recording. I'd deal with that later. By the time I wrapped up my

story, I could tell both Kaplan and Novak were itching to start interrogating me.

Kaplan beat him to the punch. "So Caleb Cohen admitted he killed his father, Ira Cohen?"

I started to nod, but remembered the recorder. "Yes."

"He just blurted it out?"

"Pretty much." I felt a little guilty about lying, but I certainly didn't want to discuss the dream with Kaplan and Novak until I had to.

"And he implied that Finnegan Byrnes killed Marco Martino?"

"Yes."

"Then he clearly stated that he intended to kill you, Asher Davis, and Finnegan Byrnes?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. That's all I need to know for now." He reached out and turned off the recorder. "Now that I'm not taping our conversation, if you ever pull something like this again, I'll throw your ass in jail."

I frowned. "I caught the killer."

"The killer caught you. Not to mention that if we hadn't arrived when we did, you would have most likely strangled the Cohen kid to death."

My eyes grew wide as I remembered choking Caleb. "Is he okay?"

"He survived. He's got a pretty nasty gash on the side of his head from your makeshift club, but a few stitches closed it right up. He probably has a sore throat as well. Other than that, he's fine, at least physically. He knows he's in big trouble."

"What about Asher and Finn?"

"Byrnes is still in surgery. The scythe blade went pretty deep, punctured a lung and did some other internal damage. The surgeons say he should survive, but we haven't been able to talk to him yet.

"Davis is conscious, but unfortunately, doesn't remember much. He made out the best of all of you. He has a lump the size of a goose egg on the back of his head and a pretty wicked headache, but other than that, he was uninjured."

"I can sympathize with the headache."

"Your headaches haven't even started." Novak had been stewing silently while Kaplan updated me on the condition of the others, but he couldn't hold it in any longer. "I can't believe you pulled such a stupid stunt!"

"How was I supposed to know it would be so stupid? I called you as soon as I knew it was going bad."

"At least you admit it was stupid. My issue isn't even so much that you were there alone, although we've already had that discussion several times, but that you put yourself in danger. You confronted Caleb *after* you texted me. If you'd just stayed hidden until the police arrived, you'd be fine."

"If I'd stayed hidden until the police arrived, Asher might be dead. I did what I thought I had to do to protect him."

"If you hadn't told Asher to meet with Caleb, he wouldn't have been there in the first place."

"And maybe we wouldn't know who the killer is!"

"All right, you two. What's done is done," Kaplan interrupted. "It's over now. There's no point arguing about it. I just hope you've learned from your mistakes."

I closed my eyes with a sigh. "I have. Trust me."

"I hope so," Novak muttered.

"I was talking to you, too," Kaplan told Novak.

My eyes snapped open as Novak gave Kaplan a surprised look.

Kaplan continued, "I know you think highly of Killian's investigative skills—and justifiably so—but that doesn't change the fact that he's an eighteen-year-old kid with almost zero training. He shouldn't have been out on a dangerous case by himself."

Novak nodded tersely. "You're right. We were both at fault." He turned to me. "No more solo work for you until you're better trained."

"I still have a job, though?"

Novak arched one brow. "I think it's better to have you where I can at least monitor you."

Kaplan snorted. "Monitor? Hell, I'd say he needs twenty-four-hour supervision."

I frowned. "Can't someone admit I did a good job? I mean, sure I got banged up a little bit, but I did catch a murderer."

"You did," Kaplan admitted. "While I wish you'd been a little more careful—make that a lot more careful—you did manage to get an admission of guilt out of him, even if it is just hearsay at the moment. If your phone managed to pick up any of that, we'll have a pretty ironclad case. And based on what you said, I'm willing to bet that once the Byrne kid wakes up, he'll sing like a canary. Next time, though, try not to put yourself in danger—or almost kill the suspect."

I grinned. "Yes, sir." My smile slipped away as a question suddenly occurred to me. "What took the police so long anyway?"

Kaplan's expression took a dark turn. "We didn't know what the situation was when Novak called in the request for officers to be sent to the Cohen barn, so we radioed for a cruiser to check the premises. He must have shown up while Caleb and the Byrne kid were gone to get the gasoline, because he just peeked in the window and didn't see anything. The idiot didn't even go inside to look around. This is the same officer who also didn't find Caleb's hideaway in the hayloft."

"Wait...I don't understand. If he didn't see anything, where did all the police come from?"

"When he reported back that no one was in the barn, I called Novak and he said he was concerned because you weren't answering your phone, so I came down myself with more officers. We got there just in time to keep you from committing homicide."

"Justifiable! It was in self-defense."

"Maybe. That would have been for the court to decide and, if I'm not mistaken, you've been through that circus before."

Blushing, I quickly changed the subject. "What will happen to that first officer?"

"There will be disciplinary action. Let's just leave it at that."

Just then the door burst open and my family flooded in: Adam, Steve, Kane, and, much to my surprise, Micah. Everyone was talking at once. I couldn't understand a single word anyone was saying. A female nurse came bustling in behind them and tried to bring

some order to the chaos, but no one paid her any attention.

"Everyone, please!" she finally shouted over the din, and everyone fell quiet. "We can't allow this many people in the room at once. Two at a time, please."

They all exchanged looks, but no one made any move to leave. Steve stepped forward and made the decision. "Were you done with Killian?" Steve asked Kaplan and Novak.

Kaplan nodded. "For now."

"Then Adam, why don't you and Micah go first? The rest of us will draw straws or something."

Micah spoke up quickly. "No, you stay with Adam." He gave me a big smile. "Now that I see he's okay, I can wait my turn."

I smiled back at him, and everyone but Adam and Steve filed out of the room.

Adam stayed by the door, staring at me reproachfully. He couldn't decide whether to be angry, relieved, or upset.

"If you weren't eighteen, I'd ground you until you were forty," he said at last. "I'm damn well tempted to anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Do you have any idea..." He looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

"Adam, I'm fine, really. It's just a bump on the head, that's all."

"This is what I was afraid of when you told me you wanted to be a private investigator."

"These were unusual circumstances, and I made some bad decisions. It won't happen again."

He shook his head and sighed. "You can't promise that, Killian, and I can't ask you to. It's the job you've chosen, at least for now, so we just have to deal with it. I can hope something like this won't happen again, but there are no guarantees. Why couldn't you have picked something nice and safe, like lion taming or storm chasing?" He gave me a weak smile.

I held out a hand to him, and he finally approached the bed. He gave me a gentle hug, then stepped back to allow Steve to do the same.

Steve gave me a grin. "I really hate seeing you in a hospital bed."

"Yeah, well, I'm not exactly fond of being in one."

"You'll probably be able to come home with us today," Adam interjected. "In fact, I'll go see what I can find out right now. I'm sure Micah and Kane are itching to get in here, anyway."

He gave me another careful hug and a light kiss on the forehead, then he and Steve left. A few seconds later, Kane came in alone.

"Where's Micah?"

Kane rolled his eyes. "He sent me in by myself. He tried to say I should have some private time with you as your brother, but I think he wants you to himself." I couldn't hide a pleased smile, and Kane snickered. "You know, you probably shouldn't have sex in here. A nurse might walk in."

I glared at him. "Shut up."

He hopped onto the bed next to me and waggled his eyebrows. "So, give me all the gory details."

I laughed, which hurt my head. "You're too much."

He wouldn't be deterred, so I had to give him a quick rundown of what had happened. "I'll give you more details when I get home. For now, get lost. And send Micah in."

He snorted and hopped off the bed. "Yeah, yeah. You just want your hospital hand job."

"Kane!"

He laughed as he darted out the door.

My face was probably still red when Micah came in. "Hey, there," he said softly.

"Hi. I guess you got your story, huh?"

He waved my comment away. "I let Walters have it."

"You what? But that was your big break!"

"I wasn't worried about the story. I was more worried about you."

"But our deal..."

He shook his head, then came closer and took my hand, lacing his fingers through mine. "I don't care about the deal. You scared the hell out of me."

"How did you even know what was going on?"

"We have a police scanner at work. I heard there was an attempted murder at the Cohens' barn and immediately knew you were involved. I flew out of the office, probably broke several laws driving out to the property. You were already on your way to the hospital by the time I got there, so I came directly here. I was trying to find out what room you were in, but since I'm not related, they wouldn't tell me anything. I was just about to lose my cool and play the journalist card when

Adam and your family stormed in, so I just tagged along."

"You really gave up the chance to cover the story to come see me?"

"It was a no-brainer. It...it scared me, Kill. I didn't know what I'd find when I got here."

"As you can see, I'm fine."

"You'd better be! How else am I going to take you dancing again?"

"Just dancing?"

"We'll see." He stared into my eyes, and my breath caught in my throat. We stayed like that for a few moments without saying a word, just gazing into each other's eyes. Suddenly, Micah's face grew serious.

"Actually, I have an important question to ask you."

I felt a nervous flutter in my stomach. "You do?"

"Think I can kiss you?"

I pretended to think it over. "I don't know. I have one hell of a headache."

"I'll be gentle."

I smiled. "In that case..."

Epilogue

“I’ll get it,” I announced when the doorbell chimed.

“No, you stay there,” Adam ordered, jumping to his feet. “I’ll go.”

“Adam! For God’s sake, I’m not an invalid. I’ve been home for six days and I feel fine. I think I can open the front door.”

“The doctor said seven days,” he insisted stubbornly, although he did sit down.

I threw him a grateful smile as I escaped from the room to answer the door. I was beginning to feel like a prisoner.

After a night of observation, the doctors had released me with instructions to take it easy for one week. I wasn’t to do anything too strenuous or turn my head too quickly. If I hadn’t developed dizziness, poor coordination, memory lapses, or vision difficulties by that time, I’d be fine and could resume my normal activity. Otherwise, I might have suffered more serious damage, in which case, I was to get my tail back to the hospital pronto.

Adam had enforced compulsory rest until I was ready to scream. I needed a vacation from relaxation. A guy can only spend so much time online and watching television—and let me tell you, daytime TV really leaves something to be desired. My life was way more interesting than any soap opera.

Adam allowed me to feed and bathe myself, but that was about it. He waited on me hand and foot, and

Steve was almost as bad. The only person who acted normal around me was Kane.

The ringing doorbell was a welcome change of pace. It meant I'd get to see someone new. Except for Micah, no one else had come by all week.

I swung open the door, and my smile froze on my face. A beautiful young black woman stood on the porch holding a microphone and a rolled-up newspaper. Behind her, a beefy guy held a camera aimed at my face.

"Are you Killian Kendall?" the woman asked.

I guess the news had broken. I thought about just gently shutting the door, but decided that would be rude. "Um...yes?" I said hesitantly.

"I'm Vanessa Van Hope with WDMV TV News. Would you like to respond to this story running in tomorrow's paper?" She unfurled the newspaper in her hand and held it up. I saw it was *The Delmarva Times*, Micah's paper.

Why hadn't he given me a head's up on this?

The cameraman moved so we were both in the frame and the headline could be read. "BOY WONDER DOES IT AGAIN," it screamed in giant bold print across the top of the page.

"I, uh, haven't read it actually, so I can't really respond to it."

"It alleges you solved the Cohen murder."

"I... May I see the paper?"

She hesitated a moment, then handed me the paper. I noticed the date was tomorrow, as the reporter had indicated, and the byline was William Walters. I scanned the first few sentences.

“Local teen wunderkind Killian Kendall first made headlines two years ago after solving a series of murders in his hometown that had police stumped. Now it appears that Kendall has done it again. An anonymous source inside the police department has told The Times that Kendall actually cracked the recent sensational ax murder of Ira Cohen by his son, a local high school student.”

I stopped reading and looked up at the reporter, who was watching me expectantly. I gave her a wide smile, my best “No comment,” and shut the door.

I slumped against the door for a second. I could hear Ms. Van Hope outside yelling for me to just answer a few questions. I glanced down at the paper still in my hand and realized the circus was just starting. “Ohhhh, Adam...”

The next few days were a madhouse of reporters calling and ringing our doorbell. It turned out that the reason Micah hadn’t warned me about Walters’ article was because he hadn’t known about it. He was super apologetic, but it wasn’t his fault, and we all understood that. In fact, Adam loved the headline so much, he’d promised to get it framed.

In the end, just to get the truth out there—and maybe get back at Walters a little—I agreed to give an exclusive interview, but only to Micah.

The interview itself was actually kind of fun. I met Micah at a small cafe, and we holed up in a corner booth. He set out a recorder, and we just talked. He already knew most of the story leading up to the

confrontation in the barn, so, while we did rehash the investigation, he really focused on what happened after I left the hospital. Luckily, Novak had kept me informed.

"So what happened with your phone?" he asked.
"Did they ever find it?"

"Yes, and actually, the recording was surprisingly clear—well, except for one weird part."

"Weird how?"

"There was this section that was mysteriously blank." What I didn't mention was that it just so happened to cut out right when I started pressing Caleb for details about my dream. "Then, just as suddenly, the audio kicked back in—right when Caleb began confessing everything."

"That's...convenient. Do you remember what's missing?"

"Uh, no," I fibbed. "It was all sort of a blur."

"That makes sense. So was the recording enough to cinch the case against Caleb?"

"Yes, that would have been enough, but just as Kaplan predicted, once Finn came to, he couldn't talk fast enough. He filled in a lot of the blanks and even confessed to killing Marco."

It was common knowledge that Finn had been charged with Marco's murder, as well as accessory to murder for Ira's death, but none of the details had been released yet.

"Why did he kill Marco?"

"For several reasons, really. And I feel at least partly responsible."

"What do you mean?"

"Finn worked out that Marco had told me about seeing him entering the barn and he grew worried that Marco might know more than he did. He also thought that a second mysterious death would distract the police and possibly provide them with a plausible scapegoat."

"Right, didn't they suggest Marco might have been stalking Caleb? And that he killed Ira out of some twisted sense of protectiveness and then took his own life because he felt guilty?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, but how did he kill him? Even the police thought it was a suicide at first, right?"

"I don't know how seriously they ever considered suicide, actually. I think they were suspicious from the start. But Finn has quite a few...esoteric talents, one of which apparently includes roping."

"As in like cattle roping?"

"Yes. He said he lured Marco to the barn, roped him like a calf, and hoisted him up. Then left him to die."

He shook his head. "Jesus. That's really messed up. Not to sound insensitive, but why do you feel responsible for that?"

"Because it was my big mouth that made Finn think Marco knew more than he did."

"But you're not—"

"Responsible for other people's actions? I know that intellectually, but I also can't deny that Marco would probably still be alive if I'd been more careful. I've lost sleep over it."

"Okay, off the record, as someone who cares about you, that's crazy. No normal person would ever do something like that. You can't blame yourself."

I shrugged. "I'm working on it."

"I just can't fathom why Finn would do all that for Caleb?"

"Caleb..." I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. We were technically on record. "Caleb is...a very damaged person. He's incredibly manipulative. And he lies—easily and convincingly. One of the hardest parts of this case was trying to separate truth from fiction."

I leaned back, gathering my thoughts. "I'm pretty sure he was involved with Marco, Finn, and Asher all at the same time at one point. He had each of them wrapped around his finger in different ways. He convinced Asher he was just this poor, defenseless kid who needed protection—someone to save him from his awful life."

"And with Finn?" Micah prompted.

I sighed. "With Finn, it was different. I think Finn was genuinely in love with him, no matter what he said about it being just friends with benefits. Caleb had him believing that freeing him from his father was worth doing whatever it took, no matter the cost."

"So do you think anything Caleb said was true?"

"I... I think he was abused. We know Ira hit his wife, and there were plenty of witnesses who saw him beating Caleb too. Besides, that kind of rage doesn't just appear out of nowhere. In a lot of ways, Caleb was a victim. Every adult who should have protected him—his mother, his grandparents, the social workers, even the

staff at the group home—they all let him down. But that abuse seemed to break something inside him, turning him into a remorseless monster in his own right."

"So, where does that leave Caleb and Finn?"

"Between my statement and Finn's confession, the State's Attorney officially charged Caleb with his father's murder, three counts of attempted murder, and a laundry list of other serious charges. Finn's cooperation might get him a lighter sentence, but he's still being charged with Marco's murder and as an accessory to Ira's."

"So why do this interview? Why now?"

"Well, even though it's been all over the news, the police managed to keep my name out of it, for a while anyway."

"I'm actually impressed they managed that for as long as they did, actually, considering you're one of the people Caleb is accused of attempting to murder. A teenage boy hacking up his father with an ax and covering it up with his boyfriend? That's practically made for headlines. Especially the local news—they've been all over it."

"Yeah, I was hoping to stay out of the limelight this time around, but that hope ended with Walter's article. How'd he dig all that up anyway?"

"I'm pretty sure he recognized your name in the police reports and started sniffing around. Someone in the department must have been feeding him information."

"If I had to guess, I'd put money on that incompetent cop I inadvertently got in trouble twice," I said, shaking my head.

Micah chuckled. "Yeah, that tracks. So, what are you hoping to get out of all this?"

"Honestly? I'm just hoping that now the truth is out, people will move on to the next big headline."

If I'd hoped that sharing my side of the story would calm the storm, I couldn't have been more wrong. If anything, Micah's interview only stirred up more interest. A national newsmagazine show even reached out, wanting to feature the story. Novak was firmly against it, insisting that a PI's greatest asset is anonymity—which was perfectly fine by me. I didn't want to do it anyway.

It took a couple of weeks for things to finally settle down. By then, between doctor-mandated bedrest and a self-imposed lockdown to avoid the press, I was going stir-crazy. So when Micah invited me over for dinner, I jumped at the chance. He'd come by a few times for movie nights, but a parentally supervised visit wasn't quite the same—and I was desperate to get out of the house.

When I arrived at Micah's apartment, it was obvious that he'd gone all out. There were fresh flowers on the table, jazz playing in the background and a delicious scent filled the air.

"What did you make?" I asked after I greeted him with a kiss.

"A mess," he said with a smirk.

"Well, it smells amazing."

"It's nothing fancy. I'm not much of a chef. It's just chicken in a mushroom sauce."

"I can't wait to try it."

"You say that now..."

"Oh hush.

"I thought we'd eat on the balcony, if that's okay with you?"

"That sounds great, but is there room?"

He laughed. "It might be tight, but we'll make it work."

"Are we still talking about dinner?" I asked with a grin.

He pulled me close with an arm around my waist, and gave me a kiss. "Behave. If you distract me, I'll ruin the sauce. I just have to finish a few things then I can plate it up."

He let me go and headed toward the kitchen with me trailing behind him.

"There's a bottle of wine in the ice bucket there. Help yourself. Just don't tell Adam."

I threw my head back and laughed, then grabbed one of the glasses he'd set out and poured a small amount of the Pinot Grigio he had chilling on the counter.

"I promise I won't go overboard again."

"Oh, trust me. You weren't really overboard last time. I've seen much worse. You were just a little tipsy."

"Jeez. If I'm that slutty when I'm just tipsy, imagine if I were to get messy drunk."

Micah glanced up from the pan he was stirring with a horrified expression. "I don't think I'd be able to withstand the temptation."

I threw back the wine in my glass like it was a shot and reached for the bottle. "Then I'd better get drinking..."

He swatted at me with a dish towel, then threw it over his shoulder. "Okay, dinner is ready."

He started plating the food, which looked as good as it smelled. We carried our plates out to the balcony, where the table proved just barely big enough for both of us.

Despite his attempts to downplay his cooking, dinner tasted as good as it smelled and looked. Once we started eating, though, Micah fell uncharacteristically quiet, as if something was on his mind.

Immediately, my mind jumped to all the worst-case scenarios. Was something wrong? Was he going to end things between us? Maybe he'd decided I was too young and inexperienced. Or maybe he'd met somebody else.

I'd pretty much decided that this was a break-up dinner, when I finally decided I couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?" He tried to give me an innocent look, but he wasn't fooling anybody.

"Something is going on. You're acting weird."

"No I'm not."

"Micah, I know you. You've barely said a word since we sat down."

He sighed. "Nothing is wrong."

"Then what's bugging you."

"I'm just a little nervous."

"Nervous? About what?"

"Just something I was going to talk to you about."

Now I was nervous.

"Just tell me!"

“Fine. I was planning to do this over dessert, but I guess there’s no getting anything past a private eye.” He took a deep breath and his cheeks flushed ever so slightly, maybe the first time I’d ever seen him blush. “I like you.”

I blinked. “Well, yeah. I know. I like you too.”

“No, I mean, I really like you.”

“Micah, what are you trying to say?”

“I was going to ask you this in the hospital, but I chickened out.”

“Ask me what? If you don’t spit it out, I’m leaving.”

“What do you say we make this official?”

“I... What?”

That wasn’t at all what I’d been expecting.

“Will you be my boyfriend?”

I broke into a huge grin. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

Micah’s smile matched mine as he sighed with relief. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“You didn’t actually think I’d say no, did you?”

He shrugged sheepishly. “You never know.”

I stood and walked around the table to Micah’s side. He started to get up, but I pushed him back into his chair, then swung my leg over his and settled onto his lap, facing him. Cupping his face in my hands, I kissed him—deep, hard and long. When I finally pulled back, his eyes were heavy-lidded and glazed.

"Now you know," I said, my voice husky. "I'm thrilled to be your boyfriend. And I think we should celebrate...in the bedroom."

He blinked, still processing. "But what about dessert?"

I traced a finger along his jaw. "I haven't been alone with you in weeks. I have a different kind of dessert in mind."

A slow grin spread across his face. "I have a feeling I'm going to love being your boyfriend."

I leaned in and whispered into his ear. "Oh, I know you will."

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 or submersive.org.