

The background is a vibrant, textured red. In the center, there is a dark silhouette of a heart with a lightning bolt striking it from the top. The lightning bolt is composed of several jagged, branching lines that spread across the heart and extend slightly beyond its edges. The overall effect is dramatic and mysterious.

JOSH ATEROVIS

BLEEDING HEARTS

A Killian Kendall Mystery
Book I

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Josh Aterovis

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Reader Advisory

Bleeding Hearts is a murder mystery and contains depictions of death, including some graphic descriptions of violence and crime scenes. The story also explores themes of abuse, trauma, and interpersonal violence that may be distressing to some readers. Reader discretion is advised.

Prologue

There is a delicate-looking plant native to North America called bleeding heart. When it blooms, its long, arching branches are covered with tiny heart-shaped flowers, each one with what looks like a drop of blood coming out the bottom — hence the name. It likes shade and doesn't much care for wind.

Unfortunately, we were getting a lot of wind that day. From the window overlooking the garden, I watched it blow furiously through the brightly colored flowers. Many of them had already lost their petals, but so far, the bleeding hearts were holding their own. I couldn't say the same for myself. I was feeling more and more lost by the second.

Suddenly, I was possessed with an irresistible urge to go out into the yard. I didn't know why. Maybe I hoped the storm's fury would blow me away — or at least blow away the storm raging inside me. I opened the back door and walked outside. The wind buffeted my body. The driving rain instantly soaked through my clothes. It poured down my face, the raindrops mixing with my tears. I didn't care. I just wanted to stop hurting.

I fell to my knees in the middle of the yard. I had never felt so alone. In the course of the last two weeks I had lost everyone important to me. There was no one I could turn to, no one left to talk to.

I wanted to die.

Chapter 1

“This may be a ‘play class,’ but don’t expect any playing.” Mr. Tatum cast an imperious eye over the room.

After two previous years in the class, I’d heard it all before. The drama teacher never changed a single word of his first day speech. I could practically mouth it along with him, but I didn’t. I never did anything that was disrespectful or might get me in trouble. I was a “good kid.”

“This is a serious drama class,” he continued. “We’ll be doing serious work, and I will expect great things from you. If anyone took this class hoping for an easy ‘A,’ then raise your hand now. I’ll have you transferred to another class.”

As usual, no hands went up. All of us who took Mr. Tatum’s drama class knew exactly what we were getting ourselves into. His reputation preceded him. Those who were serious about acting admired him for it. Everyone else thought he was a tyrant.

Personally, I adored him. Drama was my one escape. I did well enough in my other classes. In fact, I usually managed straight A’s. Despite that—or maybe because of it—I didn’t fit in. The group I hung out with was pretty popular, but somehow their popularity never rubbed off on me. I was just the hanger-on. No one ever noticed me. It wasn’t like that in Drama, though. In that room, or on stage, I felt at home. I could break away from my humdrum life and become someone else. I could lose myself in a part and, for a while at least, forget who I really was. The drama crowd actually

respected me. Not that I was friends with any of them or anything, but they respected me. That was enough.

“Excellent,” Mr. Tatum said, preparing to go on with his rehearsed spiel. Just then, the door opened, and a head popped in.

“Yes?” Mr. Tatum snapped, somewhat annoyed at being interrupted.

The rest of the body came into view—and a nice body it was, I couldn’t help but notice. I’d never seen him before so he must have been new. He was taller than I was, maybe close to six feet, and willowy thin. He had red-gold hair that seemed to stick up in every direction and elfin features. In fact, he looked amazingly like an elf—even to his incredibly green eyes. I wondered if they were colored contacts. Then I wondered why I cared. Why was I so intrigued by this guy?

“My name is Seth,” he announced. “Seth Connelly. I just transferred to this school. Sorry I’m late. Still learning my way around. Here’s my paperwork.”

He handed the teacher a file and looked around the room. He carried himself with an air of confidence. Not arrogance exactly, but not far from it. His eyes met mine and lingered. I looked away first.

After Mr. Tatum had mulled over the file’s contents, he grudgingly admitted, “It appears this is all in order. Why don’t you find a seat, Mr. Connelly, and we can continue with the class.”

The new boy scanned the room and caught me staring at him again. I quickly glanced away, but it was too late. The next thing I knew, he was sitting down at the desk next to me. There were empty desks all over the room, but he had to choose the one beside me. Mr.

Tatum picked up where he'd left off. I could feel Seth's eyes on me, but I refused to look over at him.

"Hi," he said after a few seconds. He extended his hand. "I'm Seth."

I gaped at him a moment before sliding my hand into his. "Killian."

He held on a bit longer than seemed necessary, then smiled at me before turning back toward Mr. Tatum.

My head was swimming, and I suddenly felt warm all over. I wondered if I was coming down with something.

I tore my eyes away from him and focused them on Mr. Tatum but kept stealing glances at Seth. I hoped like crazy that no one noticed my sudden obsession. I barely paid attention to the rest of the class.

Finally, the bell rang. I scooped up my books and headed for the door with my head down.

"Killian! Wait!" I heard Seth call.

I waited just outside the door for him to catch up, but I didn't turn around.

"Hey." He came alongside me.

"Hey." What can I say? I'm a brilliant conversationalist. I started walking again.

"So look, I'm new here, and I'm still getting lost. Think you could show me how to find my locker?"

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled, still not looking at him. "Where is it?"

He gave me his locker number, and I led the way, neither of us speaking a word. I felt Seth studying me as we went. I thought I should say something to break the silence, but my brain seemed to have stopped

functioning. I couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound stupid in my head. The tension grew until finally he spoke up again.

"Killian. That's a different name. I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"It's Irish. My grandfather was from Ireland. He named me."

"Are you close to your grandfather?" Something in his voice made me look up at him for the first time since we'd left the classroom. He had a sense of sadness and loss about him that made me wonder where the question came from.

"No. He died when I was four. I don't really remember him."

I saw disappointment in his eyes. They were so expressive, every emotion laid bare as if you were looking directly into his soul.

"Why'd you ask if we were close?"

"No reason. Just wondering." He glanced away, then looked back at me again. "I'm not close to my grandfather. I'm not close to most of my family these days."

I regarded him curiously. I'd been brought up with Southern manners, however, and it would have been a breach of etiquette to ask him to explain further.

He read the question in my eyes anyway. "I'm gay."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"My family is pretty religious. I guess you could say it didn't go over well."

I looked around to see if anyone had overheard him, but as usual, no one was paying any attention to me.

For once, I was relieved. I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

When it became clear I wasn't going to respond, he sighed. "I think I can find it from here. Thanks, man. See ya around."

I watched him walk away, his shoulder slumped and head down. I'm not sure how long I stood rooted to the spot, maybe just a few seconds, maybe minutes. I was lost in thought and didn't care. The stream of people flowed around me, but I didn't notice any of them. As far as I knew nobody was gay at our school. At least, nobody was out. Then here's a new kid just announcing in the middle of the hallway. And people had seen me walking with him.

Suddenly someone grabbed me around the neck and put me in a headlock. "What are you doing, Space Boy? Waiting for your people to come back and get you?"

Asher Davis was the closest thing I had to a best friend. We'd grown up next door to each other and had been hanging out together forever, along with a couple of other guys from the neighborhood. Even so, living in close proximity was about all we had in common. When we were younger that wasn't as obvious, but as we got older and the other guys all became interested in sports, I was drawn more to books and drama. Although it would have made sense for me to find a new group of friends, that prospect terrified me, so I just kept hanging out with the same guys.

"Get off me, Asher," I snapped.

"Whoa, dude!" He let go and stepped back. I didn't usually stick up for myself. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing. I gotta get home.”

“Well, if you’re in such a rush, why were you just standing there in the middle of the hallway?”

“It’s nothing. I’ve got to go.” I started off down the hall.

Asher hurried to keep up with me. “Dude! Kill! Man, what’s up?” When I didn’t answer he added, “The gang’s getting together tonight to hang out, maybe catch a movie. You wanna go?”

“No thanks.”

By then we’d reached the door to the student parking lot. My dad had given me a brand-new car for my sixteenth birthday. Perhaps he thought it would make me popular. If so, he was destined to be disappointed yet again.

I headed for my car, Asher still on my heels.

Just then, Zachary Phillips intercepted us. Zack was another of the guys in our circle of friends. He was closer to my height, but in much better shape. He wasn’t my favorite person in the world, even though we hung out a lot. He had a bit of a mean streak, something I definitely wasn’t in the mood for at the moment.

“Hey, Zack,” Asher called out.

“Hey, Asher. Hey, Killian.” Zack watched me with narrowed eyes as I started to unlock my car.

“Didn’t I see you with that new kid right after the bell?”

I looked up, dropping my keys in the process. As I bent down to pick them up, I answered, “Yeah, his name’s Seth.”

“I know,” Zack sneered. “He’s in my second-period class. We all had to share five things about ourselves. You know what his were?”

I had the door open by then but didn't get in. I was frozen where I stood.

"What?" Asher asked.

"The first few were just stupid stuff—something about being from Baltimore and his parents being split up—but number five..." Zack paused dramatically.

"...number five was the best. Guess what it was. Never mind. You'll never guess. He said he's a fag."

"What?" Asher gasped. "He actually said that? Out loud? In class?"

"Yeah, man. He told the whole class that he's a fag." Zack laughed. "Well, he said gay, but you know."

"Who's a fag? Killian?" another voice cut in. I looked up to see Jesse O'Donnell walking toward us.

The other guys laughed.

Jesse was the fourth member of our little group. He wasn't the brightest bulb on the tree. He was also something of a bully, which probably explained why he and Zack were practically joined at the hip. You rarely find one without the other being somewhere nearby. Jesse towered over the rest of us, all gangly arms and legs. Most of the time he was a huge klutz, but on the basketball court, he was a genius.

Zack answered him. "No, at least I don't think so. But hey, you're being awful quiet there, man." He eyed me again.

I shrugged and started getting in my car.

"So who's the fag then?" Jesse asked again.

"This new kid who just transferred here. His name's Seth," Zack told him.

"No way! How do you know? Did he hit on you?"

“No! He better not, unless he wants to end up a dead fairy,” Zack quipped, and they all laughed again.

“He seemed nice to me,” I said before I had time to think.

As one, they all turned to stare at me.

“Don’t tell us you’re a fag, too, Killian.” Zack got a nasty gleam in his eye. It seemed as if Zack was always looking for a target. Being one of his so-called friends didn’t necessarily ensure you wouldn’t become his latest mark.

“I just said I thought he seemed nice. Why does that make me gay?”

“Because he is, Killian.” Zack sounded as if he were speaking to a particularly slow child. “You don’t hang out with fags unless you’re a fag.”

“Bullshit! Hanging out with you idiots doesn’t make me a moron.” I slammed the door angrily, started the car, and drove off, leaving them staring after me with their mouths gaping. I had no clue where my reaction had come from. I never did things like that.

I pondered my response all the way home. Thoughts were flying through my mind like bullets, and they seemed just as hard to grasp. When turned onto my street, I decided at the last minute not to stop at my house. I was still tense and confused from the strange scene in the parking lot and needed some time to clear my head. Driving around sometimes helped me think.

After a few minutes, I realized I was heading toward Ocean City, a resort town only 15 minutes from my hometown, so I decided to take a walk on the beach. Since we were having unseasonably cool weather for

September in Maryland, I didn't expect too many people to be there.

I was right. There were only a few cars in the lot, and those were bunched up close to the boardwalk. I parked by the beach, fed the meter, slipped off my shoes, and stepped out onto the sand.

I walked along the edge of the ocean, the waves lapping at my feet. I'd gone pretty far up the beach when I was surprised to hear someone call my name.

I turned and caught my breath.

Seth was jogging toward me. He had changed out of the jeans and polo shirt he'd worn to school and was now dressed in running shorts and a sweatshirt emblazoned with a cartoon cat I knew I should recognize but didn't.

"Hi, Killian," he greeted me, only slightly out of breath.

"Hi," I said, looking at my feet.

"What are you doing here?"

"I just needed to get out, so I thought I'd take a walk. The beach always calms me."

"I live here," he told me as if I'd asked. "Well, up the beach a ways. My dad has a house here. I like to jog by the ocean. It calms me, too." When I didn't say anything, he continued, "Look, if you don't want to talk to me, I'll understand. I mean I know I probably freaked you out when I said I was gay, but I hate lying. I did that long enough. It's better to get things out in the open right away. That's why I told you."

I still didn't say anything.

He seemed to have a real need to fill in the silence, so he went on. "I mean, I'm used to everybody

hating me. My own mother hates me so why shouldn't you—”

“I don't hate you,” I interrupted.

He stared at me in surprise for a few seconds.

“You don't?”

“No. I don't even know you. Why would I hate you?”

“Because I'm gay.”

“That's not a reason to hate somebody.”

“Everyone else seems to think so.”

“I've never been one to go with the crowd,” I said a little bitterly.

“I kind of guessed that about you. That's why I sat next to you.”

We stood there for a minute without speaking, then he asked, “Want to go grab a slice and talk?”

I thought for a few seconds, then shrugged.

“Sure, why not?”

We headed up to the boardwalk and found a pizza joint. After placing our order, we sat down at a table to wait for someone to call our number.

“So,” he began after an awkward silence. “Did you grow up here?”

“Yeah. I guess you could say I'm a native. My dad is State Attorney for the county.”

Seth's eyes grew wide. “Really? Wow. What's that like?”

I made a face. “It sucks.”

“How come?”

“It's a lot of pressure, high expectations. My dad always says that everything I do reflects on him, so I have to be perfect.”

“Nobody’s perfect.”

I snorted. “Tell him that. I’m just one big disappointment to him. He was like this god in high school. He was the president of his class, the star of his football team, perfect grades, perfect looks, and, apparently, he had every girl in school drooling over him. College was just more of the same. And his career has been one success after another. It’s like everything comes so easily for him that he can’t understand me. I couldn’t catch a ball if you held a gun to my head, I’m a wimpy nerd, and girls don’t even know I exist. At least my grades are good, but nothing I do is ever enough.”

“Wimpy nerd?”

I flicked my glasses. “I’m five foot six, and I barely weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds. I’m not exactly a Greek god.”

“Of course you’re not Greek. You said you were Irish, remember?”

I blinked a moment before he broke into a grin. I realized he was joking and chuckled.

“What about your mom?” he asked.

“What about her?”

“What does she think?”

I shrugged. “She thinks whatever Dad tells her to think. He’s kind of old-fashioned, like the man is the head of the house and all that. I guess I got my shyness from her. She has a way of melting into the background, almost like a chameleon. No one ever remembers meeting her. The only time she seems at all animated is when my father is around. She’s the perfect politician’s wife.”

He shrugged. “At least she doesn’t hate you.”

I frowned, remembering his comment earlier on the beach when he'd said his mom hated him. I wanted to ask him why, but once again, my upbringing stopped me.

“Go ahead and ask,” he said.

“Ask what?”

“You want to know why my mom hates me. It's okay. You can ask.”

“Um. Okay. Why does she hate you?”

“Because I'm gay. Duh.”

I didn't know what to say to that, so we sat in silence again until the girl behind the counter called our number. I leapt from the booth to pick up the pizza.

We made small talk while we ate. I filled him in on his teachers at school and what to avoid in the cafeteria—pretty much everything.

After we finished, I took a deep breath and asked the question that had been plaguing me from the beginning. “So when did you know you were gay...and how did you know?”

He paused for a moment, looking me in the eyes so intently I had to drop my gaze.

“It's kind of hard to explain, but I guess I always knew on some level. It just took a while to admit it to myself. I figured it out for sure when I was twelve, but for the next few years I tried really hard to be straight.

“See, my dad left about then, and I always thought it was because he realized I was gay. Then, a few months ago, one of my friends came out to me and said he wanted to date me. I liked him so I said yes, and we started going out. When my mom found out, she freaked. That's when she told me that my dad is gay, too,

and that's the real reason he left my mom. So she threw me out. I didn't have anywhere to go. Luckily, my dad took me in, or I'd be homeless."

I sat staring at him, my chin, I'm sure, hanging somewhere around my ankles. I'd never realized how sheltered I was in my little rural Eastern Shore town.

"So, anyway," he went on. "How did I know? Hmm. I just knew. I can't explain it really. I mean, beyond the obvious, my attraction to guys over girls. I can tell with other people, too, you know." A big grin started spreading across his face. "It's called gaydar."

"Oh, really?"

I suddenly felt a little nervous. I wasn't sure why. I mean, I wasn't gay, so what did I have to worry about? Sure, I'd never dated girls, never even been interested in them if I was honest with myself, but I'd never been interested in guys, either.

Had I?

Doesn't everybody take peeks in the locker room?

He was still smiling.

"Why are you smiling?" I asked testily.

Seth laughed. "I dunno. It's better than crying."

I glanced down at my watch and gasped. How had we spent three hours hanging out?

"Whoa, I'm late. I gotta go or I'm gonna get my ass kicked." I pulled out my wallet and threw some money on the table, enough to cover my part of the bill. I jumped up, then paused. "Bye, Seth. See you in school tomorrow. I... I had fun hanging out."

"Me too. See ya, Killer!"

I started walking away but stopped in the doorway and smiled back at him.

Killer.

I liked it!

Chapter 2

I shot my mom a text that I was running late and drove home as fast as I dared without risking a speeding ticket. That was the last thing I needed. I'd be grounded for months.

Dad was waiting as I walked through the door. "You're late."

"I know. I'm sorry, Dad," I replied hurriedly. "It was stupid of me. I had a fight with the guys and needed some time by myself, so I went to the beach. I lost track of time. I texted Mom as soon as I realized what time it was."

"Well, don't just stand there. Hurry and wash up for dinner. It's getting cold," he snapped.

I rushed upstairs and threw my backpack on the bed, then hastily washed my hands before rushing back down. My parents were already at the table. Dinner conversation was strained, as it was more often than not. But if I thought it was bad before, it was about to get worse.

"Buck Phillips called me this afternoon," Dad remarked casually.

That caught my attention. Buck was Zack's father. The Phillipses went to our church, but Buck and Dad weren't exactly friends. Buck was in construction and hunted a lot. He wore camouflage year-round even to church. Dad never said as much, but it was clear he thought they were beneath our social status. So why would Buck call my father? And why would Dad bring it up over dinner?

Dad continued, “He said there’s a homosexual at your school now.” He pronounced it carefully, overenunciating each syllable—ho-mo-sex-you-al.

Mom’s eyes flickered over to me for a second before fixing back on her plate. I wondered if that meant anything or if I was just being paranoid. Every conversation with my father was like avoiding landmines. I had to carefully examine everything he said and weigh my words carefully. I chose to say nothing.

Of course, Dad wasn’t about to let it go. “You know anything about it, son?”

“I met him, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You met it?” He seemed almost incredulous, as if I had said I’d eaten lunch with a zombie.

“I met him.” I stressed the pronoun but didn’t push it. I shrugged. “He’s in one of my classes. His name is Seth.” I was fighting hard to act casual and keep my cool. Losing my temper at the dinner table would not be good. Then again, it was never good to lose my temper with my father.

“I don’t care what its name is. It’s unnatural.”

I frowned, a fact my father didn’t miss. His eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you’re some kind of fairy lover, boy. I didn’t raise some bleeding-heart liberal. You know what the Bible says. You stay away from him. Do you hear me?”

I stared hard at my suddenly unappetizing chicken. “Yes, sir.”

I managed to gag down the rest of my dinner somehow, although I was so angry it was almost more than I could manage to even sit at the same table with him. He continued to expound his theory that gays and

lesbians were the downfall of every society from Greece and Rome on and how the queers would be the ruin of the United States of America if “we” didn’t take “our” country back. I could only assume “we” were the narrow-minded bigots.

As soon as I had eaten enough to be excused politely, I headed straight for my room. I called Asher on my cell phone. I hoped he wasn’t with Zack and Jesse. Even though I wasn’t super close to any of the guys, I was closest to Asher, and I needed to talk to someone.

He answered on the third ring. “Hey. What’s up, Kill?”

“Hey. I’m sorry about today in the parking lot.”

“Yeah, man, what was that about?”

“I don’t know. I just get so tired of hearing that kind of crap from my dad...I didn’t want to hear it from you guys, too, I guess.”

“What crap?”

“About Seth being gay.”

“But he is gay.”

“So what? Why does that make him a lesser human being?” I was starting to get angry again.

“Whoa, man, calm down. I dunno. I’m not saying he’s a lesser human being or anything. I just don’t want him to make any moves on me, you know? Or you, either. I gotta protect my buds.”

“I spent all afternoon with him, and he didn’t make any moves on me.” I surprised myself. I hadn’t planned to tell him.

“You what?” Asher yelped.

“I said I spent all afternoon with him.”

“Is that why you didn’t want to go with the guys, you were meeting him?”

“No, I didn’t plan it. I was upset after that whole scene in the parking lot and needed some time alone, so I went to the beach. I ran into Seth there. We started talking, and we ended up getting some pizza.”

“Whoa. You went on a date with him?”

“It wasn’t a date!” I screeched.

Asher laughed. “Chill out. I was only kidding. I know it wasn’t a date. It’s not like you’re gay. What’s he like anyway? Is he, like, all feminine?”

“No, not at all. He doesn’t really seem any different from you or me. Actually, he’s really nice. I kinda had fun.”

“Man, I wouldn’t talk about this in front of Zack or Jesse. You know how they are.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled. “I wasn’t even gonna tell you. It just kinda slipped out.”

“Well, make sure it doesn’t slip out in front of the wrong people.”

“I know, I know.”

“So, uh, did he say why he decided to be gay?”

“It’s not like that, Ash. You don’t decide to be gay. Either you are or you aren’t. Trust me, after hearing all he’s been through I definitely don’t think he chose it.”

“What do you mean?”

I hesitated. I’d already said more than I should have. “Well, I don’t want to talk about personal stuff he told me, you know?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s cool.”

“It was just some really bad stuff that happened to him because he came out.”

“Came out? Now you’re starting to sound like one of them.” He chuckled, and I forced a laugh, too. “Look, it’s not a big deal with me, but be careful. And whatever you do, don’t hang out with him at school. I know you like to be different, but this could get you hurt.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, Zack just pulled up so I gotta go. We’ll talk about this later, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Great, see ya later.” And he was gone.

I flopped back on the bed, more confused than ever. Everyone seemed to think I should avoid Seth. I knew how it felt to be the outsider, though, always getting left out, always being ignored. That was bad enough. How would it feel to be actively discriminated against?

I made up my mind to be friendly toward Seth—but not too friendly. Asher’s vague warning was still ringing in my mind, and he was right. I’d never really been picked on too much because I was friends with Asher, Zack, and Jesse, but that could change in a heartbeat. Everybody knows how high school politics work. One hint of weakness and the wolves start to circle.

I should keep my distance, at least in public, but I didn’t want to let the bullies win. I’d have to figure it out as I went.

The rest of the week was pretty much an average first week back to school—assessing the new teachers to see how much we could get away with, figuring out homework loads, catching up with school friends you hadn't seen all summer.

I'd decided to talk to Seth in class even though almost nobody else did. By then, the word was all over school that he was gay. People gave me funny looks, but for the most part no one mentioned it. In other words, things were pretty much normal for me. I didn't go out of my way to talk to Seth outside of class, but I didn't avoid him either.

If things were normal for me, it was painfully obvious that things were pretty bad for him. With each day that passed, it seemed as if he lost a little more sparkle, became a little less animated. It was hard to watch, but I didn't know what to do about it.

The weekend passed so slowly that I was actually glad to see Monday roll around. I wondered if the guys were avoiding me. They hadn't called me the entire weekend, but that happened sometimes so I tried not to think too much about it.

But then I didn't even see them on Monday, and that was unusual.

It was raining hard when school let out on Tuesday. I stood by the door for a while until it became obvious the downpour wasn't going to let up, then made a mad dash across the parking lot, splashing through puddles and getting wet to my knees.

I jumped into my car and turned on the defroster. While I waited for the condensation to evaporate, I dried off my glasses and looked around the almost empty lot.

I'd had to stay after class to talk to one of my teachers about a project that was due Friday—the second week of the semester and I had projects due already—and most of the other students had left by the time I finished. Even the sports teams were gone since they'd canceled practice on account of the rain.

I was following another car out of the lot when it suddenly veered toward someone walking on the side of the road.

I yelled—as if the other driver could hear me—but the car swerved away, splashing the person in the process.

That, I realized belatedly, was probably the goal all along.

As I drove past the now thoroughly soaked person, I recognized Seth.

I don't know why, but something made me pull over onto the shoulder. Maybe it was because my dad had told me to stay away from Seth, or maybe it was because I felt sorry for him. Or maybe it was just because I genuinely liked him. Whatever the reason, I tried not to think too much about it.

A few seconds later he walked by me, his head down and his eyes averted. He probably thought I was going to make fun of him or something.

I quickly rolled down the window, and a cold spray of rain spattered my face and glasses.

“Seth, are you okay?”

He turned toward my car with a surprised expression. “Hey, Killian. Yeah, I guess so. A little wet, but I'm okay.”

“A little wet?” I laughed. “You look drenched! Why are you walking?”

“My dad had an emergency and couldn’t pick me up.”

“Well, hop in. I’ll drive you home.”

He grinned at me, then ran around to the other door and jumped in.

“Why didn’t you just take the bus?” I asked after he was in.

He looked away. “I don’t really feel safe on the bus.”

“Oh.” I felt awkward. “Well, uh, you’ll have to tell me how to get to your house. All I know is that you live in Ocean City near the beach.”

He gave me directions, and we talked while I drove. The conversation was once again carefully general, mostly about classes and teachers. We both seemed to be avoiding anything more personal.

I glanced over and saw he was shivering, so I turned the heater on high and directed the vents toward him.

“Thanks. I can’t wait to get home and change out of these wet clothes.”

Home turned out to be an attractive two-story beach house with cedar-shingle siding.

As we pulled into his driveway, a concerned expression crossed his face. “My dad still isn’t home. His car’s gone. You wanna come in for a few minutes?”

I hesitated. Was he coming on to me?

“Just until I find out what’s going on. Please? If something’s wrong, I don’t want to be stuck here alone.”

I thought for a minute, then turned the car off. I looked over at him and smiled. “Sure.”

We made a dash for the house through the torrential rain, which was still coming down like it would never stop. Seth unlocked the door and held it open while I ran inside. He jumped in behind me, slammed the door, and slumped against it.

I looked back at him and couldn’t help but laugh. He was completely waterlogged from head to toe. Water dripped off him, forming a puddle around his feet. His hair was slicked down, and his clothing drooped, soggy with rain.

“What’s so funny?”

“You look like a drowned rat!”

He made a face, and I laughed again.

“What exactly does a drowned rat look like anyway?”

“Go look in the mirror.”

“Very funny.” He rolled his eyes, but he was smiling, too. “I wonder where my dad is. He sent me a text earlier saying there was an emergency and I should take the bus, but...” He glanced away. “You know. Let me call him really quick. Come on.”

He went off down the hall, dialing his phone as he went and leaving a trail of water on the hardwood floor for me to follow, which I did.

He went into the kitchen where he opened the refrigerator and stood in front of the open door while he talked to his dad. I stood around awkwardly until he hung up and turned to me.

“You hungry?”

I shook my head no. I was but I didn't want to impose. "Is everything okay with your dad?"

"Yeah. I guess. He got an emergency call from his friend Steve and had to drive to Delaware. He says he probably won't get home till tomorrow." He shrugged. "Oh, well. You want to hang out for a while?"

"Uh, I don't know."

"If you don't want to, I'll understand."

He was obviously lonely. It wouldn't kill me to stay for a little while.

"Okay," I agreed, and his face lit up. "But not for long. I don't want to get in trouble with my dad."

"That's cool. I understand." He pulled a couple of bottles out of the fridge. "You like root beer?"

"I love it."

"Well, here ya go." He handed me a bottle as he started for the door. "I've got to go dry off and change. The den is down the hall. Make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

I wandered into the den sipping my root beer. The room was furnished with worn but comfortable-looking furniture, a nice entertainment system, and pictures of Seth everywhere. Books were strewn about liberally and a large desk was up against one wall with a very expensive computer sitting on top of it. The room had a very warm, cozy atmosphere.

I walked around looking at the pictures. Seth seemed to grow up before my eyes. There was a woman in some of them—I assumed his mother—and a man in others—his father? A younger boy appeared in a few, and I made a mental note to ask Seth who he was.

I picked up a frame with a photo of all four of them together.

“See anything you like?”

Seth’s sudden voice made me jump and gasp, almost dropping the picture.

He started laughing.

“Holy crap! Sneak up on me, why don’t you?”

He had changed into silky black running shorts and a plain white T-shirt. He’d dried his hair but apparently hadn’t brushed it. It was standing up in every direction, even more than usual.

“Sorry, guess you didn’t hear me coming.”

“Obviously. I don’t usually gasp just because you enter the room.”

“My loss.” He gave me a shy grin.

I blinked in surprise, not sure what to say. He was definitely hitting on me.

An awkward silence stretched between us.

“Killian, I’m kidding. Lighten up.”

“Oh. Sorry,” I mumbled. “Um, maybe I’d better go.”

“No! I mean...you should hang out for a while.”

“I dunno. I should probably get home.”

“We can play video games or something. Do you play?”

“Yeah, but my dad...”

Seth wilted. “Yeah. Okay. I just had a really crappy day and kinda didn’t want to be alone right now, but I know how parents can be.”

I thought for a few seconds while Seth stood there looking miserable.

“Okay,” I replied at last, “I’ll hang out for a while, but I have to call my parents so they won’t freak out.”

I called my mom’s phone, and she accepted the fact that I would be home late without any questions, for which I was thankful. Sometimes, her general disinterest worked in my favor.

The interrogation would come later from Dad, but I would think of something before then.

“It’s cool,” I told Seth after hanging up.

“Yes! Killer’s the man!”

We played video games and talked about nothing for a while. Then suddenly he paused the game. “Are you sure you’re not hungry? Because I’m starving.”

I laughed. “I guess I’m kind of hungry.”

“Good. Come on, let’s see what we have in the fridge.”

Seth made us a couple of turkey sandwiches and we settled down at the table to eat.

“Well, I don’t seem to have made many friends in my first week of school,” he commented as I took a huge bite.

We sat in silence while I chewed, which gave me a chance to think of what to say.

“No, not many—but you made one at least. Me.”

He smiled and, for a few seconds, almost looked as if he were going to cry. I hoped like crazy he wouldn’t. Whenever someone else cried, it inevitably made me tear up as well. My dad always yelled at me for being a sissy and crying too much, but I couldn’t seem to help it.

“Thanks, Killian.” His voice was slightly husky. “That means a lot to me. Probably more than you know.”

“I think I have an idea.”

We took a few more bites, both of us lost in our own thoughts.

“I don’t get it,” he said suddenly.

“Get what?”

“I don’t get how you grew up in the same town as all these other jerks but you’re pretty much the only one who doesn’t treat me like some kind of pariah. I mean, some of kids in my classes are okay. Not everybody is openly hostile, but most people avoid me like I have some sort of disease.”

I shrugged. I didn’t understand it myself. I was risking a lot by being Seth’s friend. For some reason, the risk seemed worth it. I didn’t know what to say, though, so I said nothing.

After a few more minutes of chewing in silence, Seth asked, “Do you know what your name means?”

I blinked in confusion. Where had that come from? “No, I think it’s the name of a beer, but I don’t know what it means. Why?”

“‘Cuz I do.”

“Uh...okay, I’ll bite. What does it mean? And how do you know?” This was taking a very weird turn.

“I looked it up online. Killian means blind.”

I frowned. “Blind? What kind of a name is that?”

“What’s your middle name?”

“Travers,” I replied distractedly. I was still stuck on the whole blind thing. What kind of name means blind, and who names their kid that?

“Maybe it’s symbolic.”

“Symbolic of what? My glasses?” I scoffed.

“No, of your inability to see yourself.”

We had officially gone from a little weird to just plain freaky. I was starting to regret agreeing to hang out.

“You’re weirding me out, dude.” My words came out a little sharper than I intended. “I can see myself just fine, thank you.”

“Not really.” His voice was so soft now I could barely hear him. “Not the way I see you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I was getting a bit defensive now.

“I guess I just see you differently than you see yourself. Look, I haven’t known you for that long, but I can tell you’re kind of down on yourself. But you’re smart, funny, kind...not to mention drop-dead gorgeous. But you hide behind those glasses and your jock friends and drama, and no one ever gets to know the real you. Hell, you don’t even let yourself see the real you. You’ve buried it beneath so many layers you’ve forgotten it’s even there.”

My head was reeling. I’d heard everything he’d said, but certain phrases kept echoing through my brain. Drop-dead gorgeous? Me? Ha! Hide behind my friends? How did I do that? And what the hell was that part about seeing the real me supposed to mean? I latched onto the last one.

“What do you mean by I don’t let myself see the real me?” I demanded. “If I don’t see the real me, then who does? You?”

“Maybe.”

“You don’t even know me. We’ve barely talked and only hung out twice.”

He shrugged. “Sometimes that’s all you need.”

“Fine. You think you know me so well? Then why don’t you introduce me? I’d like to meet myself.”

“Okay, I will.” His voice was strange—kind of sad, but almost as if he had known what would happen. “Killian Travers Kendall,” he announced formally, “I’d like you to meet yourself.”

He suddenly leaned forward over the table and quickly pressed his lips against mine. For a second, I was so shocked I didn’t move, then suddenly my reflexes kicked in and I shoved him away so violently that my chair flipped over backwards, and I sprawled across the floor.

“What the hell was that?” I yelled.

Seth looked like he was about to cry again, but I didn’t care anymore.

“I thought...I thought you were gay.” He spoke so quietly that I barely heard him. In fact, maybe I didn’t hear him right.

“What did you say?” My voice had gone deadly calm, a trick I’d learned from my father.

“I said, I thought maybe you were gay.” Tears started rolling down his cheeks. “I’m sorry, Killian. I guess I was wrong. I’m so sorry. Please don’t hate me. You’re my only friend.” With that he sank down to the floor and buried his face in his hands.

I sat across the kitchen from him and watched him cry. I felt as though I should do something, but I had no clue as to what. My brain had shut down. Everything just went blank, and I felt completely numb. I couldn’t

even think clearly enough to leave, so I simply sat there. Occasionally, Seth would choke out another “I’m sorry” in between sobs.

Slowly, I began to come back to my senses. The first question that went through my mind was, am I gay?

I wasn’t so sure anymore.

The kiss hadn’t been that bad, really. I’d reacted more to the shock than to the kiss itself. Even in my addled state I knew that much. I thought about the way I’d been almost obsessed with Seth from day one. An image of Asher suddenly intruded into my thoughts.

What was that supposed to mean?

I needed to get out of there. I needed to think.

I struggled to my feet and started out of the kitchen, then paused at the door long enough to mumble, “I don’t hate you. I... I just need to think.”

And then I was gone, leaving him in a crumpled heap on the kitchen floor.

Luckily, Dad was at a late meeting when I got home, and I was able to go right to my room, calling out to Mom that I needed to do my homework and that I’d already eaten.

I fell backwards onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. I was so confused. Had I been blind to the real me all this time? Was that why I always felt so empty, so out of place?

I sat up and stared at myself in the mirror. My face was pale, and my eyes were red-rimmed, but I tried to look past that.

What did Seth see in me?

My wavy blonde hair was a little on the shaggy side. I had to admit my eyes were really blue, but they

were hidden behind my glasses. I was blessed with fairly smooth skin, with the exception of the occasional zit. I supposed if I were being completely impartial, I wasn't unattractive—but drop-dead gorgeous? No way.

True, girls asked me out now and then, some quite persistently, but they were just after me because of my friends. At least that's what I told myself. If I was completely honest, I had to admit I'd never been interested in any of them.

Why was that?

Asher flooded into my thoughts again.

I'd choose spending time with him over a girl any day, even if we were just watching TV or wrestling around in his bedroom.

Now that I thought about it, every time I wrestled with Asher, I got a hard-on.

That was normal, right? That happened to everybody.

But did everybody have erotic dreams about their best friend? The one and only wet dream I'd ever had—that I could remember anyway—had featured none other than Asher.

The clues were pretty obvious all of a sudden. I had been blind.

Chapter 3

I am gay.

The realization was almost overwhelming.

I am gay.

I kept repeating it over and over to myself. It didn't seem real—couldn't be real. I couldn't be gay. And yet, once I'd faced it, once I'd said it to myself, I knew I was. It felt...right, somehow. Like a truth I'd always known but refused to accept.

I am gay.

I didn't want to be gay. My parents would hate me. My friends would hate me. I'd seen how everyone treated Seth.

Oh my God!

What would Zack, Jesse, and Asher say? Or more importantly, what would they do?

I am gay.

Would the church kick me out? Just my mom and I attended. Dad said church was only for people who needed a crutch, which didn't stop him from spouting Bible verses when it suited him for political purposes.

Mom ignored him and went nearly every Sunday. That was half the reason I continued to go week after week—it was one of the few things Mom did without Dad's approval. I wasn't particularly religious, but I liked the idea that Mom and I kept this one part of our lives separate from him. I wasn't sure I even believed in God or anything the pastor taught, but I tried to be a good person.

Did God hate me?

I knew some churches believed that God hates gay people, but I was a little fuzzy on where our church stood on the subject. Apparently, I hadn't paid enough attention.

I am—

The phone buzzed, startling me out of my spiraling thoughts.

“Hey, Killian.” It was Asher. “I called you earlier, and you didn't answer? Where were you?”

“I was...at Seth's house.” My voice was somewhat shaky. I hadn't even felt my phone vibrate.

“You were where? Are you okay? You sound funny.”

“I was at Seth's house and I'm...” My voice trailed off. I was going to say I was fine, but suddenly it seemed pointless to lie.

“You're what, dude?” I didn't respond. “You want me to come over?”

“I don't think so, Ash.” I wasn't sure I could face him right then. I looked like a mess and didn't know if I would be able to bluff my way through it. Why was Asher showing such an interest in me anyway, especially at that moment? He'd never really paid much attention to me before the last few days. I was there if he was bored and that was about it.

“No, man, you're upset, I can tell. I'll be right over.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the line was dead. He was on his way.

Great, just what I needed. Since when did Asher become a nurturer? I rubbed my cheeks, trying to get some color back. There wasn't much I could do about

the red eyes. I flipped off the overhead lights and opened my laptop. Maybe if the light were dim he wouldn't notice. Plus, the computer would give me something to do so I wouldn't have to look him in the face.

Asher lived right next door, so he was at my place in no time. My mom let him in, and he was at my bedroom door far too quickly. He knocked and, for a moment, I thought about not answering it. Knowing Asher, however, I figured he'd barge in anyway.

"Come in."

The door flung open, and Asher charged in, his energy immediately filling the room. "Hey. Why's it so dark in here?" He flipped on the light.

So much for my dim-lighting plan.

I sighed. "Hey, Ash." I was glad I had control of my voice again at least. "You didn't have to come over. As you can see, I'm fine." I was hoping he'd take the hint and leave.

Not Asher. "I know I didn't have to. I wanted to. You're my bud. And you didn't sound fine on the phone." He came closer and peered intently into my face.

I looked away but not quickly enough.

"You've been crying," he accused me.

"No, I haven't," I lied. "I think I have allergies."

"I've known you forever, Kill. You don't have any allergies."

I hated lying, mainly because I was so bad at it. I was definitely out of practice. My dad had always seemed to be able to see through my lame attempts when I was younger, so eventually I just gave up trying. Having a prosecutor for a father is not all it's cracked up to be.

“Look, Asher, I’m fine.”

“What did he do to you?” Asher’s voice now held a hard edge.

“Who?” I stalled. He was making me even more anxious than I already was.

“Kermit the Frog. Who do you think? What did Seth do to you?” His voice kept climbing louder.

“Seth didn’t do anything to me.” My eyes shifted away. “And could you please keep your voice down?”

Did I mention I’m bad at lying?

“Did he hurt you?” Asher growled, taking a step closer to me. His voice was as hard as steel and dangerously quiet. I could feel the tension radiating from his body like heat. Surprised by his reaction, I looked into his eyes and saw an intensity I hadn’t known my laid-back friend had in him. “If he hurt you, I’ll kill him.”

In that moment, I believed him.

I couldn’t stand any more confusion. I felt my chest constrict, squeezing all the air out of my lungs. I was having a panic attack. I took a deep breath, then another, slowly calming myself until I was ready to speak.

I made my voice go steely to match his. “First of all, Seth did not hurt me. Second, why would it matter to you if he did? You’ve never paid any attention to me before. Why start now?”

Asher blinked in surprise, and the intensity drained away, leaving him looking like a hurt little boy.

“Never paid attention to you? What are you talking about? You’re my best friend, Killian. You’ve always been there for me. Whenever I’ve needed to talk,

I always knew I could come to you. I could never talk to Zack and Jesse like I do with you. I mean...maybe I haven't been the best friend in the world. I guess I kinda took you for granted and I'm always busy with the team. But you were just always there. But now, all of a sudden, Seth comes along, and you're hanging out with him. And he's gay. I don't get it. I...I guess I'm kinda jealous."

Now it was my turn to stare at him in shock.
"Jealous? Of what?"

"I don't want to lose you as a friend. Especially not to a—"

"Don't say it," I cut him off, an unspoken warning clear in my voice.

"I was going to say a new guy."

We stood there staring at each other for a minute.

My cell phone suddenly buzzed.

I glanced down. It was a text from Seth.

I'm so sorry...please talk to me.

I quickly positioned my phone so Asher couldn't see it.

"Look, you're not losing me as a friend. Why can't I just be friends with both of you? Why does it have to be one or the other?" Then before he could answer I rushed on. "Ash, I really need some time alone right now. I'm not feeling good and that's the truth. I'll call you later, okay?"

Asher frowned but nodded jerkily and left without saying anything else.

I quickly texted Seth back, *Hey.*

Look, I'm really sorry...I can't believe I was that stupid.

I hesitated a second, then decided to go out on a limb.

You weren't stupid. You were right.

WHAT?

I think maybe I am gay.

There was no response for several seconds, so I typed some more. *I'm still trying to figure everything out...I'm very confused.*

Can we get together to talk later this week? It'll give you some time to think first...how about Friday?

I dunno

Look, you need to talk to somebody...if not me then find someone else.

OK, I'll think about it.

Good night, Killer

I dropped my phone on the bed and caught my reflection in the mirror.

I am gay. I am a homosexual.

I wrinkled my nose. I didn't like that word.

I like guys.

That sounded better.

I'm gay.

The more I said it, the more right it sounded. There was still something strange about applying that word to myself, but I knew it was true. I was gay.

I couldn't tell anyone, though. I would just go on the same as ever. No one else had to know. True, Seth knew, but I was pretty sure my secret was safe with him. He understood what it was like to be out, and I was confident he wouldn't do that to me.

Besides, who would he tell? I was his only friend. Even if he did say something, no one would take

his word over mine. He was new to town, while I'd lived there all my life. He was an outcast, I was a local, one of them...for better or worse. My secret was safe.

I was starting to feel a little calmer about the whole thing.

I heard Dad come in downstairs, and all the fear from earlier came flooding back. What if he took one look at me and knew? Seth had known. Could other people tell? Did only gay people have that...what did he call it? Gaydar? Was that even real?

I scrambled for my book bag and dumped the contents all over the bed. I grabbed a book at and opened it, pretending to read.

I'd barely settled back on the pillow when there was a knock at my door. It swung open before I could even answer. It was Dad. The knock was simply a formality, and we both knew it.

“Doing your homework?”

“Yup,” I answered, looking up from my book.

“Good. Get it finished before you go to sleep.”

He left, shutting the door behind him.

He hadn't noticed anything. He hadn't screamed at me and ordered me out of the house.

I let out a shaky breath I didn't even realize I'd been holding.

What was I going to do? I'd narrowly escaped this time, but what about next time? How long could I hide it from him?

And what about my friends? What was I going to do about Seth?

A feeling of despair and confusion suddenly overwhelmed me. I realized how emotionally drained I was.

Pushing everything off the bed and onto the floor, I crawled under the covers without even taking my clothes off. I was asleep in minutes.

Surprisingly enough, I slept heavily. If I had any dreams, I didn't remember them the next morning.

The rest of my day was equally blurry. I couldn't tell you one thing that happened in school, except that I spent most of the day dodging Seth and Asher in the halls. I didn't have any classes with Asher, so he wasn't too hard. I had theater with Seth, however, and we bumbled through the whole period trying our best not to look at each other. It was positively torturous.

I took off as soon as the last bell rang and drove straight to our church. I needed to talk to somebody, and didn't pastors have a rule about confidentiality?

Or was that priests?

Or maybe it was lawyers.

At any rate, I figured it was worth a shot. I didn't know who else to turn to, and I felt distant enough from the church that I didn't really care if they knew. If they didn't like it, I'd just stop going. Mom would probably be disappointed, but Dad would actually be pleased.

There was one car in the parking lot. I pulled in next to it and climbed out, hoping it belonged to the person I wanted to see. I knocked on the office door and, much to my relief, Pastor Mike opened it. Mike, as he liked to be called, was the church's associate pastor, but

more importantly, he was also the youth pastor. I'd been hoping he'd be the one there since he was pretty young—only in his late-20s—and I felt more comfortable talking to him.

I didn't really know him that well since I wasn't active in the youth group at church, but I'd seen him around and he seemed approachable. He was short—shorter than me even—had curly brown hair, dark eyes, and always seemed to be smiling. He reminded me of an overgrown kid.

He was smiling now as he looked at me for a second as if trying to remember my name. “Killian, right?” I nodded, and he continued, “What can I do for you?”

“Uh...hi. May I talk to you?” I asked him somewhat timidly.

I couldn't recall ever speaking to him before. I was surprised he even knew my name.

“Sure,” he replied warmly. “Come on in.”

I followed him into his office, and he pointed me to a couch. He took the chair next to it.

“So, what's up?” he asked me once we were seated.

“I need to talk to you about some stuff.” He nodded as if to say, ‘go on.’ “But if I do, will you promise not to tell anybody? I mean, can I trust you?”

“Well, look, Killian, it's like this. If you trust me enough to tell me, then you have to trust me enough to do what's best with that information. What I mean is, if you tell me you're really depressed and you're going to hurt yourself, then I'll have to tell someone to protect you. But if you just need some advice or clarification on

something, then I think we should be able to keep it confidential.”

I looked at him for a minute, weighing my options. I didn’t know if I could trust him or not. If I told him, he might go to my mom. I really needed to talk to someone, though. He sat across from me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, waiting to see what I would decide.

Finally, I made up my mind. “Well, maybe you can answer some questions first.”

“I don’t pretend to know all the answers, but I’ll do the best I can.” He smiled again. He seemed very sincere. I wanted to trust him.

I nodded. “Does God hate gay people?”

Mike sat back in his chair and let out a little breath—not a gasp, more like a sigh. “Yowzers. You sure like to start with the hard questions, don’t you?”

I tried to smile but couldn’t quite pull it off. He noticed and quickly moved on.

“Actually, some people like to make that a hard question, but the answer is quite easy. No. God loves gay people just as much as he loves the pastor or anybody else. But I have a feeling that’s not really what you’re here to ask.”

“What if...what if someone in the church were gay? Would they be kicked out?”

“No, I don’t know of anyone ever getting kicked out of our church. You come fairly often, Killian. Think about what you see when you’re here on Sunday mornings. We have a very open church. Everyone is welcome. We believe that God’s love is for everyone, not just a select few. And you don’t have to be ‘good

enough' to meet his standards. He meets you where you are. Am I making any sense here?"

"I think so," I replied. "Does that mean it's okay to be gay? Doesn't the Bible say it's wrong?"

"Killian, that's a question I don't think I can answer for you. I've not studied it enough. Some people would say yes, the Bible lists it as a sin. Jesus himself never actually mentioned it, though Paul does a couple times. Then again, Paul also said women shouldn't speak in church and should never cut their hair and never wear jewelry."

He shrugged. "We seem to have decided that those don't count. Who gets to decide? Why do we pick and choose what matters? I don't know. Like I said, I don't have all the answers. I do know some people believe that the passages from the Bible often used to condemn gay people have been misinterpreted. I'm not speaking for the church officially at this point, but personally, I don't think it really matters."

I sat for a minute thinking about all he'd said.

"Killian?" Mike interrupted my thoughts. "Do you think you might be gay?"

For a minute, I froze, panic rising in the back of my throat. Then I found my voice, although it came out a little tighter than I would have liked. "Uh, no. One of my, um, friends told me he's gay recently."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "I'm not prying, but you seemed pretty concerned about how our church would react to a gay person. Does that mean this friend goes to our church?"

I looked away. "No," I answered softly. He sat in silence for a few minutes until I risked a glance in his

direction. He was watching me, a small smile still on his lips. I didn't see any condemnation or judgment in his eyes, though.

I sighed. "Maybe...maybe I'm gay. I don't know."

My eyes never left his face. I didn't want to miss his reaction.

His expression never changed, never wavered as he looked back at me. He nodded once, then reached out and patted my knee. "If you ever need to talk to someone, you can come to me. And don't worry. I promise I'll keep this confidential until you're ready to tell people yourself."

I felt my whole body relax. He didn't hate me. He wasn't going to tell my mom. He wasn't going to announce it to the whole church and have me kicked out. I fought the urge to sigh with relief.

Mike stood up and ruffled my hair. "Do you have any other questions for me? I don't know, something easy maybe, like why do bad things happen to good people?" He grinned to let me know he was kidding.

I grinned back and shook my head. "I guess I have enough to think about for now, but if something else comes up, is it okay if I come back?"

"Of course it's okay. In fact, I really hope you do. You're a good kid, Killian. I'm glad you felt you could talk to me."

We stood up, walked to the door, and shook hands.

I wasn't sure what that conversation had actually accomplished. I didn't really care what the church

thought about me. It didn't solve the problem of my family or my friends. I still didn't know what to do.

Yet, for some reason, as I sat in my car, I felt a little calmer. I'd told someone and they didn't freak out. He'd answered my most minor questions.

I only had a million more to figure out.

I knew who I needed to talk to next.

I texted Seth that night, taking him up on his offer to meet with me in private on Friday. He was the only person I knew who was gay, and I was sure he'd be able to answer a lot of my questions. Mike had been a good first step, but he wouldn't be able to shed much light on what it was actually like to be a gay teenager.

Seth texted back immediately. *Hey. I didn't expect to hear from you again. Figured you were blowing me off.*

No. I just needed time to think.

That's cool. Friday still works for me. Where do you want to meet?

I don't know.

I didn't really want to go to his house again after the last time.

I can come to you, if that helps, he texted.

Not my house. There's a park near my house though. We could meet there, by the pond. Around 7?

Sure. That works. See you there.

With that settled, I only had to make it till Friday. Which turned out to be easier said than done. The week seemed to drag by. I was constantly distracted, lost in my own thoughts.

I knew my grades were probably suffering, but I wasn't too concerned. It was still only the second week. I would catch up.

Friday finally arrived, but by the time the day was over, I wished it had never started. It got off to a bad beginning when my alarm failed to wake me, and I had to rush to avoid being late.

Then all the teachers seemed to be in a bad mood, and I got yelled at several times for not paying attention. Were they just noticing? I hadn't been paying attention all week. Why was Friday so important?

On top of that, I felt sick all day from nerves, so I couldn't eat lunch, which made me even crankier. I was hungry and felt like puking all at the same time.

When the final bell rang, I thought I'd escaped, but the day was far from over.

Gilly Sheridan was waiting for me at my locker.

I almost just turned and left when I saw her standing there but I needed the books in my locker for the weekend.

I sighed as I approached.

She'd briefly dated Asher last year. They only lasted about a month before Gilly ended it, but Asher would never talk about why they broke up. She'd been after me ever since.

Needless to say, I wasn't interested, even if it wasn't for the whole bro code thing. I definitely wasn't in the mood to deal with her today. She wasn't a bad person, just a little too persistent.

I forced myself to be polite. "Hi, Gilly."

"Hey, Killian. I was looking for you all day." She gave me a huge smile. Gilly was really pretty—blonde

hair, blue eyes, the works. I'm sure that smile usually got her whatever she wanted.

It wasn't working on me.

"Oh yeah?" I squeezed by her and spun my combination lock.

"Yeah. I wanted to see what you're doing this weekend."

I opened my locker and grabbed the books I needed, shoving them into my backpack. "Hanging out."

"Cool. Want to hang out with me? Maybe we can see a movie."

"Uh, no thanks."

Gilly frowned.

Usually, I was able to dodge her or turn her down politely. Of course, that wasn't going to work on the day from hell.

"Why not?"

"Uh...I'm...busy?"

"You're always busy. Why don't you want to go out with me? Is it me? Why do you hate me?"

Because I'm gay! I wanted to say it but bit my tongue.

"I don't hate you, Gilly. Why would I hate you?"

"I don't know. But why won't you go out with me?" She grabbed my arm. "Come on. It'll be fun. It's just a movie. It's not like we're dating." She grinned again and batted her eyelashes. "But we could be."

I felt my eyes grow wide, and she laughed.

"I'm kidding, Killian. Jeez. Lighten up. So...the movie? It's a date?"

I opened my mouth to...something. I wasn't sure what. Reply? Laugh? Scream for help? She still had a death grip on my arm, and I had no idea what to tell her.

Just then, I heard one of the girls in her clique calling her name. Gilly dropped my arm and turned toward her friend.

I saw my chance to escape and slammed my locker closed while spinning on my heel and dashing for the door.

That had been a narrow escape. I'd avoided her for the moment, but I might not be able to give her the slip so easily next time. I needed a plan.

Unfortunately, I didn't have one.

Then, as if my day weren't already crappy enough, I found Zack, Jesse, and Asher waiting for me by my car when I came out. It seemed like my day to get ambushed.

I eyed them suspiciously as I approached. I was beginning to dread getting my car from the lot. Maybe I'd start riding the bus. "What's with the welcome wagon?" I growled when I got close enough. "Did you guys get elected to be the parking-lot hospitality committee?"

"Funny, Killian," Zack snapped. "We need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About Seth." Zack again. It seemed he'd been chosen as the spokesperson for this intervention. My eyes immediately went to Asher, but he looked away, obviously uncomfortable.

"What about Seth?"

"You're spending too much time with him."

“Too much time? I haven’t spent any time with him.”

“Asher told us about the other day,” Jesse threw in smugly, as if that proved my guilt of some gross crime.

“Did he?”

I once again looked at Asher. He still wasn’t looking at me. He seemed to have suddenly found his shoes quite fascinating.

“Yeah, he did,” Zack confirmed. “And we’re worried that Seth is messing with your mind, turning you against us. You’ve not done anything with the group since school started, ever since you met this fag.”

“Seth is turning me against you?” I could feel my blood pressure rising. “I don’t need Seth to turn me against you. You guys are doing a damn good job for yourselves!”

Asher’s head snapped up, his eyes meeting mine for the first time since I’d approached.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s supposed to mean that I’m always the tag-along. Nobody ever calls me unless everybody else is busy. It means that I’m not really part of your little group, and I’m constantly being reminded of the fact. It means that nobody ever cared what I was doing or how I was doing until it started looking as if I might have a mind of my own. It means that if I don’t do exactly as you say and perform exactly as you expect me to perform, I get check-ups and lectures. I’m not your friend. I’m your mascot. At least Seth treats me like a person.”

Everyone looked shocked for a few seconds. I'd never blown up like that before.

Then Zack sneered. "Oh. I get it."

"Get what, Zack? Was I not clear enough for you? I can use smaller words if that helps."

"Nah, you were plenty clear. You're a fag, too, aren't you?"

I saw red.

Before I could think, I shoved Zack out of my way. "Go to hell! All of you." I yanked open my car door and threw my backpack in, then whirled around to face the guys again. "And get away from my car while you're at it, or I'll run over you!"

"You're gonna be sorry, Killian," Zack warned as he, Jesse and Asher started backing away. "You and your faggy little boyfriend."

I stood there seething as they turned and walked away. Asher cast a baleful glance back at me over his shoulder, but I turned deliberately and climbed into my car.

What right did he have to look like a kicked puppy? He was the one who'd betrayed me by telling Zack and Jesse I'd been hanging out with Seth. And he was the one who'd said they couldn't find out. Some best friend he'd turned out to be.

Screw all of them. I didn't need them.

As my adrenaline rush drained away, Zack's ominous threat echoed through my head. "You're gonna be sorry."

What did it mean?

How much did they suspect...or know?

I sure hoped Seth would be a good friend, because I had a feeling I'd just burned my bridges with the only other friends I had. Not that they were exactly a big loss.

Except for Asher, a voice whispered inside my head. I tried desperately to ignore it.

I drove home and did all my homework for the weekend, and it was still only four-thirty. I had over two hours to wait before I went to meet Seth at the park.

Calling Asher was out of the question. I never called Zack or Jesse anyway. I didn't have any other friends.

I looked around my room and spotted my shelf of old books that had belonged to my mother when she was my age. They were mostly Nancy Drew mysteries with a few others thrown in for good measure. I was a little embarrassed to have them sitting in plain view, but no one ever really hung out in my room except Asher, so I kept the books around for sentimental reasons.

I smiled as I remembered how much I'd loved them when I was younger. I used to imagine that I was in the stories with Nancy and the gang, helping them solve crimes by following the clues. In my fantasies, I was Killian Kendall, boy detective.

I thought about reading one then to distract myself. I'd read them all at least twice, though, and I wasn't really in the mood to read anyway. So I did what I always did when I had nothing better to do. I got online.

I watched some videos but quickly grew bored. It didn't take long until the subject that seemed to be perpetually on my mind lately resurfaced. I decided to

look up some videos about being gay. I googled “gay video” and quickly realized that the vast majority of hits were porno sites.

Maybe I’d need to be more specific.

But while I was there...

I had to admit I was very curious. It wouldn’t hurt to click just one of the thumbnails, right? I just had to remember to delete my browser history. I was pretty sure Dad checked fairly regularly.

I clicked on a link at random and almost fell off my chair. A video started playing on screen, two hard-bodied, naked men making out.

Of course, I’d seen naked guys before, in gym class, where I was too preoccupied trying not to stare to really notice anything, and the few other times I’d screwed up enough courage to look at porn. But I’d only looked at straight porn before and it hadn’t really done anything for me. I hadn’t allowed myself to look too closely at the men, and the women, well, they didn’t really catch my attention.

Certainly, none of the guys at school were hard like the men on my screen, and they certainly weren’t doing the things going on in the video.

Their hands were all over each other, grabbing, kneading, stroking. My eyes were almost popping out of my head.

One of the guys suddenly bent over and swallowed the other’s dick in his mouth. My face felt like it was on fire.

I fumbled to click off the screen but somehow hit my volume button instead. The sounds of male moaning suddenly filled my room.

I scrambled in a panic, slamming my laptop closed. I waited, red-faced and panting, for Mom to burst through my door asking what those sounds were, but nothing happened.

After I caught my breath, opened my laptop and quickly turned the sound off, then closed the window. I sat in front of my computer, trying to decide if I should visit another site.

I finally opted against it. I wasn't sure I was ready for that...and it made me feel a little dirty.

I closed my laptop again and stood up—and was immediately aware of the tent in my pants.

I guess that settled the whole gay thing once and for all. The video was the hottest thing I'd ever seen. I could still see them in my head, kissing, touching, naked bodies pressed together.

Just then, Mom called me to dinner, breaking me out of my reverie. I realized I'd slipped my hand down my pants. I yanked it out and pushed all thoughts of being gay from my mind before leaving my room. I didn't want to give anything away with my expression or behavior.

I hadn't forgotten the images I'd seen, however. I suspected I'd be seeing them again in my fantasies later that night.

When I got downstairs, I was surprised to find a vase of fresh flowers in the center of the table and an Etta James album playing on the old record player, one of Mom's most prized possessions.

I'd grown up on a steady diet of the classics sung by vocal legends like James, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah

Vaughn and, of course, Billie Holiday. They were Mom's favorites, and I'd grown to love them too.

The music itself wasn't unusual, but what was unexpected was that we never listened to music while we ate. Dad had a strange thing about it and didn't even like it when restaurants played background music.

"What's the special occasion?" I asked, sliding into my place at the table.

She shrugged. "There is no special occasion. Why?"

I gestured toward the flowers and sang a line along with Etta, "I'm on a lonely road that leads to nowhere, I need a Sunday kind of love."

Mom laughed. "I just felt like doing something nice for a change. You got a problem with that?"

"No, it's just unexpected. Where's Dad?"

"He called and said he had a meeting, so it's just us." She tucked a strand hair behind her ear and smiled.

I looked at her closely as if seeing her for the first time. My mom was very pretty in a muted kind of way. She'd had me when she was only eighteen, so that made her thirty-four. She wore her ash blonde hair shoulder length, but rarely did anything with it. Her soft blue eyes were seldom enhanced by makeup, but they were pretty without any. In fact, she hardly ever wore makeup at all.

Suddenly, I wondered why.

Dad was always asking her to. Given the way she did everything else he wanted, the fact that she didn't do this small thing suddenly seemed out of character.

Then I thought about the whole church business. That was another place where she stood up to my father. Maybe I had been underestimating her all this time.

“Why don’t you wear makeup?” I asked her. She looked at me in surprise. “What an odd question!”

“Not really. Dad is always asking you to.”

She smiled a funny little smile. “Then maybe that’s why.”

“Huh?”

Could the chief priestess at the shrine of my father really not be as devoted as she seemed?

Her smile broadened. “You have your little ways of standing up to him, and I do too. You’ve never expressed much interest in my personal appearance before. What brought this on?”

I shook my head silently, and she laughed. She blessed the food, and we made small talk while we ate, but my mind was busy trying to find other instances of my mother’s rebellion.

They were there. I’d just never thought about them before. In fact, I realized I actually hadn’t paid much attention to her at all.

As I thought about the various things she did to annoy my father—I think they call it passive-aggressive behavior—I suddenly had a new respect for my mother.

“You don’t like him very much, do you,” I interrupted her in mid-sentence. I hadn’t been paying attention, but I think she was talking about church.

“Pastor Mason?” she asked in a shocked voice.

“No, Dad.”

“Oh.” She sat there for a few seconds, fork still suspended halfway between her plate and her mouth. When she spoke again, her voice was so soft I almost had to strain to hear her. “Your father is a very difficult

man, Killian. So was his father. I've never told you this, but I think you are old enough to handle it. We weren't married when I found out I was pregnant with you. I wouldn't even consider an abortion, so his father, your grandfather, practically forced us to get married. Your Grandfather Kendall was a very religious man, very strict. Your father hated him back then. It's funny, except for the religious part, he's turned out exactly like his father."

She let the fork slowly drop to her plate. "You're right, though. I don't like him very much. My mother told me I'd grow to love him...but it hasn't happened yet."

She looked up at me, and I could see pain in her eyes. How had I never seen it before?

"Please understand what I'm saying here, Killian. I don't regret having you. You're the only bright spot in all of this, the best thing in my life. I see the way he treats you, and it makes my heart ache. I've always tried to make sure you've had everything you needed, that you had some measure of freedom, some way to escape: the car, your phone, the laptop..."

She shook her head as if to say it wasn't enough.

"Those weren't Dad's ideas?"

She gave a short bark of humorless laughter.

"No, but he certainly took credit for them, huh? The laptop was an easy sell; you needed it for school. And I managed to convince him the car was his idea, but I had to fight tooth and nail for the phone. I wanted you to have that independence."

"I had no idea..."

“That was the point, sweetie. I’ve learned how to work your father over the years. Maybe it’s a little manipulative but it’s all for you. It was better for both of us to not seem like it was us against him. Then he’d be even more stubborn.”

“What else have you done that I didn’t know about?”

She smiled sadly. “That’s not really important. Just know I’m on your side.”

I thought for a minute. “Asher?”

“What about him?”

“I remember Dad saying I couldn’t play with him when I was little, and then all of a sudden you said I could.”

She shrugged. “I may have had something to do with that.”

“Why didn’t Dad want me to play with him? Was it because he’s black?”

She shrugged again, and picked up her fork as if to say the conversation was over. We ate in silence for a few minutes.

“Why don’t you just leave him?” I asked quietly.

She sighed and set her fork down again. “It doesn’t work that way, baby. Your father’s a very powerful man in this area. He’d take you away, and I’d never be able to get a decent job. It’s a good-old-boys’ club around here. Everybody knows everybody, and most of them owe your father favors. I never finished college because I was pregnant, and your father never let me go back, so I have no marketable skills. I’m stuck.

“And I’m afraid that means you are, too, at least for a few more years. Maybe once you’re in college, I’ll

make a break for it. I just don't want you to get caught in the crossfire. It will be ugly, trust me."

"I do," I told her sincerely.

I knew how much Dad hated to be crossed. He was in a foul mood for days every time he lost a case. I shuddered to think how he'd react if Mom tried to leave him.

She nodded, and we went back to eating.

The rest of the meal was somewhat solemn. I had a new image of my mother now, and my respect for her had risen considerably. All those years she'd stayed in an unhappy marriage because she didn't want to lose me. The full impact of her sacrifice hit me like a ton of bricks.

When she stood to clear the table, I jumped up, gave her a hug, and insisted that she let me do it.

Once I'd finished the dishes, it was almost time to meet Seth at the park. I figured that if I walked there, it would be just about right. I could have driven, but I didn't want to get there too early and sit around waiting. It was nearly dusk, and it was a little creepy by the pond at night.

I told Mom I was going for a walk and left. I had plenty of time on the fifteen-minute stroll to think about things—and I had a lot to think about. So much had happened in the last two weeks.

I'd realized I was gay and admitted it to myself. I'd come out to an authority figure and to a new friend...who was also gay. Then I'd alienated all my old friends, maybe for good.

I'd been kissed for the first time...and it was by a guy. I wondered briefly if it counted if you hit them afterward but decided it did.

Then to top it all off, I'd found out that my mother was a real person after all—and I liked her. Who would have thought?

I wondered what Seth would add to my list that night.

Would he kiss me again?

Did I want him to?

I wasn't sure.

Part of me did, but part of me was scared, too.

I finally decided that if he did, I wouldn't stop him this time.

I was so lost in thought that I almost walked past the trail to the manmade fishpond sitting back in a dense patch of forest. The copse was small but thick, with lots of underbrush and high weeds on either side of the narrow trail circling the tiny body of water. The pond itself was a murky brownish-green, fed by drainage ditches and rainfall. We'd had plenty of the latter, so the water level was quite high.

Although the town had built cutesy little arched bridges over the ditches, everything still looked rather seedy, even in the middle of the day.

At night, it was downright creepy.

It was just at the edge of dusk, the time of day when it's hardest to see because the whole world looks like an old black-and-white movie with bad contrast. I didn't notice anybody near the pond, but I couldn't be sure, so I started to walk around it.

Maybe I'd arrived before Seth.

As I began to cross the first bridge, I thought I saw something move on the far side of the pond. I paused and strained my eyes, but I couldn't tell if I'd really seen anything or if it was just a trick of the shadows.

I picked up my pace as I got closer to the area where I thought I'd seen movement.

When I neared the spot, I called out in a hushed voice, "Seth?"

If it is Seth, I thought, he'll never recognize my voice. I wasn't sure why I wasn't louder, but a sudden feeling of terror had crept over me.

Goose bumps covered my arms, and the hair was standing up on the back of my neck. I almost turned and ran, but I told myself I was being stupid and kept walking.

"Seth?" I called again in my new raspy voice.

Still no answer, so I thought maybe I'd imagined the whole thing.

Then I saw a shape lying on the ground.

I froze in my tracks.

It looked disturbingly like a person.

Did someone have a heart attack?

I wanted to get out of there, but that seemed wrong if somebody needed help, so I reluctantly kept walking forward. I pulled my phone out of my pocket in case I needed to call 9-1-1.

I still wasn't close enough to see what was going on when a sudden crashing sound came from the undergrowth. I spun around in time to see a figure explode out of the trees and toward me with a feral snarl.

The figure slammed into me, cutting off my scream before it left my mouth. The impact sent the two of us rolling across the ground, my phone flying from my hand.

Fear gave me strength I didn't know I possessed as I tried desperately to get away, but my attacker seemed to have an equal source of inspiration.

At first, I thought maybe it was Seth playing a sick joke. The ferocity of the grip quickly made that seem unlikely. I couldn't turn around to see, since my attacker now had me from behind in a tight hold.

One hand abruptly let go, and the weight on top of me shifted. Before I could take advantage of that, the person raised an arm and quickly brought it down.

I saw a metallic flash in the moonlight.

It was a knife!

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The impact of the knife as it slammed into my side knocked the air out of me with an audible "oof." Almost instantly, a searing, paralyzing pain spread through my entire body. The knife was yanked out, and I felt blood gush from the wound.

He stabbed me.

My brain registered what had happened in a kind of detached manner. It was difficult to accept. I wondered idly if this was what they called shock.

The fight had gone out of me, and my attacker knew it. He let go of me, and I collapsed to the ground as he sat up over me, roughly flipping me onto my back.

I tried to get a look at my assailant, but the pain must have blinded me. I couldn't make out any facial features.

The arm rose again, then stopped.

I lay there staring helplessly up at the faceless monster above me, waiting for the knife to fall once more and finish me off. I could do nothing but whimper.

“Please no,” I whispered. Breathing was suddenly painfully difficult.

“Shit!” the person hissed. He lurched up and took off running.

What just happened? Was somebody coming? Is that why he ran off?

I didn’t move for a few seconds.

I’m still alive.

The thought was abstract.

The pain was all I was really aware of. I was having difficulty breathing. With each breath, the knife pierced me again. When I struggled to sit up, agony flashed through my body, and I felt myself blacking out.

I don’t want to die.

Darkness surrounded me, but I fought back. Somehow, I managed to roll onto my side. With a little more effort, I got to my hands and knees. I pressed one hand tightly against the wound and tried to stand up, but almost collapsed again. My head was spinning too much. I could feel the blood pulsing between my fingers with every heartbeat.

I wanted to scream, yet I couldn’t get enough air to cry, let alone call for help. I was also afraid my attacker would come back. Maybe he’d left me there to die, and he’d come back to check.

I had no idea where my phone went in the attack. For all I knew, it was in the pond. I looked around but couldn’t see it.

Although I could glimpse the lights of nearby houses shining faintly among the trees, I knew my chances of getting through the underbrush in my condition were next to none.

The figure lying on the ground once again caught my attention. I could see that it was definitely a person. It looked like a man—at least he had short hair. He hadn't moved since I'd first noticed him.

Maybe I'd interrupted a mugging, and the victim was just unconscious. Maybe I could wake them up to get help. If nothing else, maybe they had a phone I could use.

I began to crawl toward the still figure. My progress was excruciatingly slow. Every movement brought a wave of intense agony. Nausea rolled over me in palpable waves and sweat ran down my face. My vision swam in and out. It was all I could do to stay conscious.

Some detached part of my mind noted that my shirt was soaked with my own blood. I knew I was losing a lot, which probably explained why I was so lightheaded. I was leaving a glossy trail in the dirt.

After what felt like an eternity, I reached the figure. He was lying on his side facing away from me. I grabbed his shoulder and rolled him toward me.

As soon as the body fell flat on its back, I knew I wouldn't be waking him up.

His throat had been slashed open, the gash angry and raw.

It's amazing the little things you notice in a moment like that. I saw leaves and small pebbles stuck in the congealed blood around the wound, and I wanted

to brush them off. They looked unspeakably obscene, as if the gaping wound weren't obscene enough.

I felt the blackness swirling around me again and decided not to fight it this time.

In the last second before I allowed the darkness to overwhelm me, I looked up at the face.

My last thought before succumbing to the void was, *Oh, God, not Seth.*

Chapter 4

I was floating in complete darkness.

Or at least that's what it felt like.

I don't know how long I was there before I became aware. It could have been forever or no time at all. I was in no rush to leave.

Slowly, I began to notice a bright white light visible even through my closed eyelids.

The events leading up to my blackout flooded back into my consciousness with a sudden rush, and I crashed back into my body. I found myself wishing for the bliss of the darkness again. I remembered going to meet Seth. I remembered getting jumped. I remembered being stabbed. I remembered the pain.

The pain!

That was when I realized I was no longer in pain. Had I died? Was that what the black nothingness was? I tried to open my eyes, but my eyelids felt so heavy.

Through pure force of will I managed to open one eye only to quickly shut it again. The light was blinding.

I was tempted just to slip back into oblivion, but as usual, my curiosity got the better of me. I blinked my eyes open once more, a little more cautiously this time.

Well, I wasn't in heaven, that was for sure—not unless they hooked you up to machines and painted their rooms a sickly mint green.

A nurse wearing the typical uniform of brightly colored top over blue scrubs with white shoes walked into my field of vision. I guessed she was in her early

sixties. She looked pleasant enough, with close-cropped gray hair and a competent air.

I tried to speak to let her know I was awake, but all that came out was a coarse rasp.

She started at the sudden sound, then smiled warmly at me. “Ah, I see you finally decided to join us again, Sleeping Beauty. How are you feeling?”

I cleared my throat and tried again. “I’m not...” My voice was scratchy and harsh.

She quickly offered me a sip from a straw stuck in a cup of water.

The cool liquid immediately soothed my throat, and I was ready to make another attempt. “I’m not sure. How long was I out? Was I in a coma?”

“No, no coma,” she told me as she started checking machines and making little notes on her clipboard. “You were unconscious when they found you, and then they doped you up for the surgery. You’re just now coming around. Starting to feel some pain?”

Now that she mentioned it, the pain was starting to come back a little more with each breath. I nodded. I liked her. She was very straightforward.

“Alrighty then, we’ll take care of that.” She made some adjustments to the keypad on the IV stand and changed the bag at the top. “There, that should help soon.”

“What happened?” I asked her. “Am I okay?”

“You’re going to be fine. The doctor will be in shortly to tell you more. If you need anything from me, like more of the good stuff to knock you out or something to drink or you gotta pee, whatever, just push this little red button here.”

She showed me a small remote control attached to the wall with a wire. Besides the red call button, it had others to adjust my bed and control the TV.

“This will page us at the nurses’ station. Someone will come and check on you, although it might not always be me. Just don’t try to get out of bed. Got it?”

I nodded again, really hoping I wouldn’t have to pee. That sounded embarrassing.

She hustled about busily for a few more minutes, checking the various machines again, taking my blood pressure and temperature, then breezed out, waving at me as she went.

I played with the bed for a few minutes, raising and lowering it, as much to distract myself from my thoughts as for any real entertainment value.

Before long, the medicine started kicking in, and I found myself growing drowsy.

I was just about to drop back off to sleep when a tall black man with a thin mustache walked into the room. Judging by the white coat and the stethoscope around his neck, I guessed he was the doctor.

“Hello there, Killian,” he said.

He pulled up a chair (they were a lovely shade of orange—to go with the puke-green walls, I can only assume) and sat down so he was more or less at eye level with me.

“My name is Dr. Murray. I’m your primary physician, and I performed your surgery. It’s good to see you awake. You’re looking a lot better than the first time I saw you. You’ve been through a lot in the last twenty-four hours.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, do you remember what happened?”

I nodded slowly and tried to focus my eyes. The room was starting to look a little blurry. “I was stabbed.”

“Yes. The good news is you’re going to be just fine, though it’s going to take a while before you feel normal—several weeks at least. It’s never a good thing to get stabbed, but if you’re going to have a knife stuck in you, this was the best-case scenario.

“The knife entered at a perfect angle. It missed most of the important stuff and only punctured your lung. We’ve stitched up what needed stitching, so now you just need rest to finish up the job. Like I said, that’s not going to happen fast, and it’s going to hurt quite a bit, but that’s why God invented drugs.”

He smiled warmly and waited for me to laugh at his joke.

When I failed to respond, he continued. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you, and I’m sure someone showed you how to contact the nurses if you need anything. Any questions?”

“Are the police going to ask me questions now that I’m awake?”

He looked startled for a second, then burst into laughter. He had a big, booming laugh that annoyed the hell out of me.

“You’ve watched too many cop shows. No, they aren’t going to need to ask you any questions. You were awake enough just before surgery to tell us that you didn’t see your assailant. Last I heard, the police are saying you interrupted a mugging, classic case of being

in the wrong place at the wrong time. They haven't caught the bad guy yet, but they're looking."

I couldn't help feeling that he was talking down to me, yet there didn't seem to be any point in pressing the issue.

Besides, I was so sleepy.

Dr. Murray stood up as if to leave.

Through my fog I realized he'd left out some important information. I struggled to stay awake for a little longer. "Wait, what about Seth?" I asked.

Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe it had just been a bad dream, and it wasn't really Seth, or, if it was, maybe they had been able to save him, too.

"That was the other young man?" Dr. Murray's jovial manner was gone now. He was all business. That couldn't mean good news.

I nodded.

"Did you know him?" he asked.

Past tense. Definitely not good. I nodded again.

"I'm sorry. He was gone when the police got there."

"Gone?" I asked with a note of hope. Maybe he just meant he'd gotten up and walked away.

"I'm sorry, Killian. He was...already dead. There was nothing they could do." The doctor looked at me sympathetically and patted me awkwardly on the hand. "Try to get some rest. That's what's going to help you heal."

I wondered if he meant physically or emotionally. I suspected my physical wounds would heal faster, but I didn't have long to think or react before

drugs overtook me, and I slipped once more into darkness.

The next time I awoke, my parents were in the room with me. As soon as my eyes fluttered open, Mom was at the side of the bed.

“Are you okay?” she asked me.

“Not sure,” I mumbled truthfully. The meds had me pretty groggy.

“Of course he’s okay,” Dad barked from his chair across the room. “The doctor said he’s going to be fine. Don’t baby him. He’s sixteen, for God’s sake.”

Mom looked into my eyes, and our newfound bond let me know that she was still concerned for me. In the interest of domestic peace, however, she moved away from the bed and sat back down.

“What I want to know is what you were doing down at the pond at that time of night,” Dad said as if we were in the middle of a conversation. “Your mother said you went out for a walk. You weren’t meeting that faggot, were you?”

I closed my eyes and hoped he’d get the hint. I didn’t feel like dealing with him right then. I hadn’t even absorbed the fact that Seth was dead, and I had come too close to dying myself. I was still in the damned hospital, for God’s sake, and all he could do was start interrogating me.

“Killian,” he went on when I didn’t answer, “if some dog-walker hadn’t seen someone run out of the

woods wearing a stocking mask, then you'd be dead. I want some answers."

Join the club, I thought.

I fumbled around for the call-button with my eyes still closed, found it, and pushed.

"Were you meeting him there in the woods?" He was relentless. I was in a hospital bed with a stab wound, and he was grilling me as if I were a defense witness at one of his trials.

"Gary," Mom interrupted, "He's tired, he's hurt, why don't we just let him be for now? You can ask him all these questions later."

"Did I ask you?" he said to her in his I'm-so-calm-it-hurts voice.

I was about to page the nurse again when I heard someone come into the room.

"Did someone need me?" asked a chipper voice. "Oh, I bet I know who it is!"

Oh, great, a perky nurse—just what I've always wanted.

I opened one eye and then couldn't help opening the other one, too. She looked amazingly like Britney Spears in a nurse's uniform. I wondered if the meds were causing me to hallucinate. If so, I'd rather deal with the pain.

"Are you hurting again?" she asked me.

If you only knew how much, I thought.

Then she went on before I could even answer, "Well, we just gave you some pain medication not that long ago, so I can't give you anymore right now. I think you just need some rest." She turned toward my parents

and smiled brightly at them. “He really needs his sleep. Maybe you could come back later and visit with him.”

I liked her better already.

Dad glared at her for a second, then stood up and motioned for Mom to go with him. She started after him, but paused by my bed for a second and rested her hand on my arm before following him out of the room.

Nurse Britney turned her thousand-watt smile on me once they were gone. “Is that what you wanted maybe?”

I managed a chuckle but immediately winced. “You’re good.”

“Thanks, but you’d be surprised how many kids use that thing to get rid of their parents.” She laughed and started back out the door. “If you need anything else, don’t hesitate to page me.”

I was alone with my thoughts at last, still a bit groggy from the pain medication, but I needed to think.

Seth was dead.

Someone had killed him and come very close to killing me as well. From what Dr. Murray had told me, the police had pretty much closed the case, saying I had interrupted a mugging.

That didn’t make sense to me. At the very least, shouldn’t they have waited until I was more awake to ask me if I had seen my assailant clearly? I didn’t even remember talking to them. Didn’t they use witnesses’ descriptions to make those police sketches?

Not that it would have helped even if they had asked. I hadn’t seen him clearly. In fact, I couldn’t remember his face at all.

Hadn't Dad said something about someone wearing a stocking mask? That would explain it.

One thing stood out, though. The killer froze when he saw me clearly for the first time and then ran away—almost as if he knew me. He'd even cursed.

I wracked my brain trying to recognize the voice, but I'd been too scared, and the voice had just been barely more than a hiss.

My mind turned to the unthinkable. Why would someone want to kill Seth? Maybe it really was just a random mugging gone wrong. That was easier to believe than to think he was targeted specifically.

Somehow, though, I knew it wasn't as simple as a botched mugging. Why would anyone want to kill Seth?

In my heart, I knew the answer. I could hear it in Seth's own words.

"I mean, I'm used to everybody hating me. My own family hates me, so why shouldn't you..."

"Why would I hate you?"

"Because I'm gay."

His answer had been simple and honest. People hated him for no other reason than because he was gay. They didn't even know him, but they hated him.

Now he was dead.

What if he was killed because he was gay?

That couldn't happen in my town, could it? I'd grown up there. I knew everyone. Sure, most of them were ignorant small-town hicks, but they wouldn't kill somebody just for being gay...would they?

I knew it happened all the time, though. The news was filled with gay bashings, murders and suicides.

I was sure there were many others who never got national news exposure, cases swept under the rug.

Was that what was happening with Seth?

Suddenly, I found myself crying, softly at first and then harder, until my entire body was trembling from the sobs. They seemed to start from somewhere deep within me, somewhere I had never tapped before. I was weeping for Seth. I was weeping for all those who'd been killed, or had killed themselves, because of something they had no control over. In my mind, they were both the same. Society had killed the suicide victims just as surely as it had killed Seth.

I was also weeping for myself. I felt a deep sense of loss for what had happened in the park. Not even so much for Seth—if I was honest, I had to admit I'd barely known him. I had liked him, though, and we probably would have been good friends. I wept for the loss of that opportunity and all it represented.

Above all, however, I wept because I was afraid. I'd only just admitted to myself that I was gay. What if someone else found out? Would I be next? Would the killer return to finish the job?

I don't know how long I cried, but eventually I cried myself to sleep.

When I awoke again, Nurse Britney was gently sliding my arm into a blood-pressure cuff.

"Sorry to wake you up, Sport," she chirped. "I have to take your blood pressure. Oh, by the way, you had a visitor earlier, but only family can see you just yet, so he had to leave."

“Who was it?” I asked her groggily. I still wasn’t quite awake. It was hard to really rest in the hospital. It seemed as if people were constantly waking you up for one thing or another.

“Cute kid about your age, tall. I think his name was Ashley or, no wait —”

“Asher?”

“Yes, that’s it. Asher.”

Asher had been to see me? Why? Considering the way things had ended after school on Friday, he was the last person I would have expected to come for a visit.

They kept me in the hospital for a few days before releasing me. I was relieved to get out of there even if it did mean going home. I was ready for some real sleep.

But my rest wasn’t any better at home. I had terrifying dreams nearly every night. They were almost always some variation on the same theme. I would be at the park again by the pond. The shadows under the trees were dark and writhing, almost like living things. Most of the time, Seth was there, sometimes still alive, sometimes already dead.

The one thing that never changed was the horrifying presence of the killer. I could never see him clearly, but I could feel him watching, waiting. I would wake with a start, wet with cold sweat, my heart pounding in my chest, unable to fall back to sleep.

Thankfully, Dad hadn’t come after me again. I knew it was just a matter of time, though. He was prosecuting some big case and hadn’t been home much, a situation that was too good to last.

Asher hadn't come around anymore, either. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to or not.

Since I was pretty much bedridden, I had lots of time to think about what had happened. I had come to a few conclusions—fairly simple ones, at least to my mind.

Number one, whoever had killed Seth couldn't be allowed to get away with it. If the police weren't going to find him—and it didn't seem to me they were trying all that hard—then I would.

Number two, it was pretty obvious—to me anyway—that Seth had been killed because he was gay. I didn't buy into the whole mysterious mugger theory. It was way too pat, too easy.

My intuition told me it was more than a simple mugging. There was no doubt in my mind. For starters, I couldn't remember the last time there'd been a mugging in our sleepy little town.

Number three, the attacker had to at least be an acquaintance of mine, judging by his reaction when he saw me. That idea scared me the most, since it meant that someone I knew—perhaps very well—was a cold-blooded killer.

Between my dark thoughts, the nightmares, and the accompanying lack of sleep, I found myself slipping deeper and deeper into depression. I had a lot of time to think about being gay, too. It was clear to me by then that I was, and I had accepted it.

After what had happened to Seth, though, I was certain I could never come out. I felt trapped by circumstances over which I had no control. I wanted out,

but I was too much of a coward to do anything about it but hate myself and the mess I was in.

About a week after the murder and my stabbing, there was a knock at our door. Mom and I had been reading in the living room—or at least she was reading. I was pretty much just staring at my book. I couldn't remember the last time I'd turned a page. I'd read the same paragraph over and over without ever seeing the words.

She left to answer the door.

I set my book down and listened. I could hear the conversation clearly from my position on the sofa. I could tell it was a man as they exchanged greetings, but I didn't recognize his voice.

Then he introduced himself. "I'm Adam Connelly, Seth's father."

My breath caught in my throat. What was he doing here? Had he found out I was meeting Seth that night? Did he blame me for his son's murder? What if he told my mom I was gay?

"I'd like to see Killian if he's up to it," he continued.

My mother was silent for a moment, then replied softly, "I'll check."

As soon as she appeared in the door, I nodded nervously. I wasn't sure why he'd come, but I needed to find out. She studied me for a second, then turned and motioned to Mr. Connelly.

He entered the room and gave me a sad, uneven smile. Obviously, Seth had taken after his father. The man looked like an older version of his son, except tired

and worn out. “Hello, Killian.” He extended his hand for me to shake.

“Hi, Mr. Connelly.”

“Please, call me Adam. Seth spoke so much of you I feel like I know you. You were his only friend...” His voice cracked and he stopped to clench his jaw.

My eyes shifted to Mom. She was staring at me with a funny expression on her face that I couldn’t quite interpret.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” she murmured and walked away. What was she thinking? Had she figured it out?

Adam sat down in the chair closest to my makeshift bed on the sofa, and I forced my attention back to him.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted, feeling horribly inadequate. “I’m sorry for what happened—”

He waved his hand to stop me, and I faded out. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for. You may be the only person I know in this pathetic town who doesn’t have anything to be sorry for.”

He shook his head as if to clear it. “I’m sorry. I’m still dealing with a lot of anger, but finger pointing doesn’t accomplish anything. You’re probably wondering why I’m here.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I simply nodded.

“I have something for you.” He pulled an envelope from his pocket. “I found it in Seth’s room on his desk. It was a letter he started writing to you. I hope you don’t mind that I read it. It was one of the last things he wrote before he died. I think he tore it out of his journal. I guess he decided not to give it to you, but I

thought he'd like you to have it now. To remember him by."

He handed me the envelope, and I stared at it dumbly. Was I supposed to open it with him sitting there? I wasn't sure I wanted an audience for that.

"Please, if you don't mind, would you read it while I'm here?"

I could hear the pain in his voice. How could I say no? I opened the envelope with trembling hands and pulled out a sheet of lined paper, its edges still jagged from being ripped out of a notebook.

*Hey Killer,
I'm really sorry about what happened today. I'm
such a jerk.*

He must have written it the same day he kissed me.

*I guess I should call or text you this, but it
somehow feels more real to write it down. Maybe I won't
even send it to you. I just need to sort it all out first. I
don't know what I was thinking. Maybe that's the whole
problem. I wasn't thinking. I wanted so badly for you to
be gay that I guess I imposed it on you. I get so lonely
here and you were nice to me. And...well...you're really
cute. I wanted to find someone like me, maybe someone I
could love and who could love me. I guess I was
expecting too much. I know I've probably ruined
everything by now, but if not, if you can forgive me, I'd
still like to be your friend...if you don't hate me. I'm
really sorry I kissed you. I know I crossed the line. I'm*

*sorry I'm such a fuckup. Maybe I'll text you after all.
Apologizing here isn't going to help anything.*

The letter stopped there, but at the bottom of the page Seth had scribbled some notes.

*Travers = from the crossroads
Is Killian at a crossroad?*

My chest hurt reading his words. His pain was palpable even in his handwritten scrawl. I was very glad we'd texted, at least, so he didn't die thinking I hated him. But what did the last part even mean?

I looked up to find Adam staring at me intently. I knew I had to say something.

"We talked. After he wrote that, I mean. We talked and he knows—he knew I wasn't mad at him."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Seth talked to me, the night he died. He asked for my advice."

I felt my eyes grow wide and my face flush as a wave of nausea washed over me. So he knew.

He must have guessed what I was thinking. He leaned in and said in a low voice, "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me. I would never out somebody. That's your decision and your decision only."

I nodded and gave him a weak smile. "Do you know what he meant at the bottom there?"

Adam shrugged and leaned back in the chair. "I was hoping you'd know. It almost looked like some sort of code to me. Travers equals from the crossroad..."

“Travers is my middle name.”

“Ah. Then knowing Seth that’s probably what your name means. He’d been on a kick lately of giving great weight to name meanings.”

“Oh yeah. He asked me what my middle name was the other day. He’d looked up what Killian meant and...” I trailed off, remembering the kiss.

Adam smiled sadly. “That sounds like Seth. Always looking for meaning in the world.” He stood up and shifted awkwardly toward the door. “I guess that’s all really. I just wanted to give you the letter and thank you for being a friend to my son. I can let myself out.”

He started to leave, then stopped in the doorway. He stood there for a few moments then walked back over, leaned in close to me and once again spoke in a low voice.

“He’s right, you know. Seth was sometimes a little overly dramatic with the name stuff, but you are at a crossroads. You know you’re gay, but you don’t know what to do about it. There are several paths you can take, but only you can decide which one is right for you. Whatever path you choose now will have an impact on the rest of your life, in ways you can’t even begin to fathom yet. Take it from someone who chose to stay in the closet for far, far too long—choose wisely.”

He pulled his wallet from his pocket, fished out a business card and handed it to me. “And if you ever need anything, anything at all, just call me.” He rested his hand on my shoulder for a moment, then turned and left.

The front door had barely shut before Mom appeared in the doorway, a slight frown pulling down the

corners of her mouth. I quickly slid the card into my pocket.

She stood there for a while, then slowly crossed the room and sat down in the chair Adam had just vacated. She looked at the paper in my hand, and I reflexively crumpled it in my fist.

The silence stretched out. I could tell she wanted to ask something but didn't know how. I was afraid I knew what her question would be, and I didn't want to have to answer.

She took a deep breath. "Killian, are you gay?"

It was exactly as I'd feared.

I didn't know what to say, so I turned my face into the couch, refusing to meet her eyes.

We stayed like that for what seemed like an eternity, until it started to feel like some sort of standoff.

I was so tired. She was waiting me out, and I didn't have the energy to lie.

I finally nodded, just a single nod, still not looking at her.

She sat there for a few more minutes without saying a word. Just when I thought the silence would deafen me, she abruptly stood up and walked out of the room.

I felt as if she had ripped out my heart and taken it with her. I'd always heard people talk about a broken heart but the sudden painful ache in my chest made me understand exactly what it meant.

Sobs racked my body.

I don't know how long I cried, but I gradually became aware that a storm had come up. I could hear the

rain beating against the house. Thunder rumbled in the distance, getting closer with each crash.

I pulled myself up from the sofa and moved to the sliding doors that opened to our backyard. I stared out at the storm—the winds growing stronger, whipping the trees violently about while lightning flashed—and thought about how it was nothing compared to the storm raging inside my head. I could feel it slowly building up to the point where it was a force that couldn't be stopped.

When an enormous clap of thunder shook the house and the lights flickered, I didn't even jump.

I was at a crossroads.

Which path should I take?

Chapter 5

There is a delicate-looking plant native to North America called bleeding heart. When it blooms, its long, arching branches are covered with tiny heart-shaped flowers, each one with what looks like a drop of blood coming from the bottom—hence the name. It likes shade and doesn't much care for wind.

Unfortunately, we were getting a lot of wind that day. From the door overlooking the garden, I watched it blow furiously through the brightly colored flowers. Many of them had already lost their petals, but so far, the bleeding hearts were holding their own.

I couldn't say the same for myself. I was feeling more and more lost by the second.

Suddenly, I was possessed with an irresistible urge to go out into the yard. I didn't know why. Maybe I hoped the storm's fury would blow me away—or at least blow away the storm raging inside me.

I opened the door and stepped outside. The wind buffeted my body, and the driving rain instantly soaked through my clothes. It poured down my face, the raindrops mixing with my tears.

I didn't care. I just wanted to stop hurting, to stop feeling.

I fell to my knees in the middle of the yard. I had never felt so alone.

In the course of the last two weeks, I'd lost everything and everyone important to me. I had alienated all my friends. Seth had been murdered. And now my mother knew I was gay—something I'd only figured out for myself a few days before—and she'd been so

disappointed she couldn't even stand to be in the same room with me.

She was going to tell my dad and the only sure thing about his reaction was that it would be very bad. There was no one I could turn to, no one left to talk to. I found myself wishing that whoever had killed Seth had finished me off, too.

I wanted to die.

I'd never had thoughts like that before. I'd never understood how people could even consider hurting themselves, let alone killing themselves.

And there I was, trying to figure out the best method.

I knew where Dad kept a gun in his bedroom. He'd made me learn how to shoot. I was good, but I didn't like guns. There was no way I could follow through with that plan.

I could swallow some pills; except I didn't know what kind or how many to take. I didn't even know if we had anything that would work—and this was one job I didn't want to leave half finished.

I didn't think I could bring myself to slit my wrists.

Maybe I could just stay there in the storm and wait to die of exposure.

Even though it was barely the middle of September, the storm was the product of a cold front that had caused the temperature to drop abruptly. I was shivering violently, kneeling in the middle of my backyard in the pouring rain, lightning flashing and thunder crashing all around me.

I don't know how long I had been sitting there when a voice penetrated my dark reverie. "Killian!"

I got the impression it wasn't the first time they had called my name.

Before I could even raise my head, someone was at my side. I looked up through the rain pouring down my face thought for a moment that I was hallucinating.

Asher.

"Why... What are you doing here?" My voice was thick from crying.

"I saw you from my window. What are you doing out here? Come on. You have to get inside."

He grabbed my arm and tried to pull me up, but I pushed him away. "No, just leave me here."

"What? No way! It's freezing out here, and you're soaked."

When I didn't move, he knelt down next to me, carefully wrapped his arms around, gently picked me up, and carried me into the house.

I let him do it. I was past putting up a fight.

We entered through the sliding glass doors just as Mom came into the room.

"Oh my God," she gasped when she saw us. "What happened?"

We must have looked pretty bad. I was soaked to the bone from the torrential downpour, and Asher wasn't much better, even in just the few minutes he was out there.

He carefully lowered me to the couch before turning back to my mother.

"He was in the backyard. I don't know how long he was out there. I think he's okay, at least physically,

but...he's really upset. He needs to get into some dry clothes, though."

My mom stood staring at me with one hand over her mouth. She didn't respond at all. It was as if she hadn't even heard Asher.

"Mrs. Kendall?"

She looked at him as if she'd noticed him for the first time.

"Oh, Asher, I... Could you leave us alone for just a minute? Don't go far. I... I think we'll want your help. I just need a few minutes alone..."

"Sure, no problem, Mrs. Kendall. I'll go get some towels."

He cast me one last look as he left the room.

Mom walked slowly to my side and knelt on the floor. She reached out a trembling hand and smoothed back the wet hair that was plastered to my forehead.

"Baby, what were you doing out there?" Her voice was little more than a whisper.

I turned my head away. "I wanted to die."

A single, choked sob caught in her throat. "Oh, God! Killian, I'm so sorry."

She reached up and gently turned my face toward her. "Listen to me. I don't care if you're straight or gay or bi...or...whatever. I love you with all my heart, and that will never change. I've tried to protect you. I... I think I've always known you were different. And that's not a bad thing, it's just...it's going to take some adjustment on my part. I don't know anything about being gay, but I'll learn. I love you."

We were both crying as I rolled onto my side and hugged her tightly, ignoring the pain I still felt from my

wound. My adventure outside didn't seem to have helped it much.

"I love you, too." I couldn't remember the last time we'd said those words to each other. One of my earlier fears resurfaced. "You're not going to tell Dad, are you?"

She snorted. "Are you kidding? Of course not." She gently pulled away. I didn't want to let her go. "You need to get out of those wet clothes. We'll talk more later. Asher?"

He entered the room so quickly I knew he must have been waiting just around the corner so as not to disturb us. He was carrying a couple of towels.

Mom took the towels and handed them to me. "Can you help Killian upstairs to his room so he can change?" she asked Asher.

"Of course, Mrs. Kendall." They both helped me up, and Asher slid his arm around my waist to give me support. I leaned against him, and we started toward the stairs.

"And Asher?" Mom called. We stopped at the bottom step. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For finding Killian...and being such a good friend."

We stood there for a second before Asher nudged me into moving again. The climb up the stairs was slow and rather difficult. We took one step at a time, mostly in silence, until we finally made it to my room.

Asher helped me to my bed, then turned around. I thought he was leaving, but instead he shut the door and came back over to me.

“What are you doing?” I asked him.

He stood staring at me, a frown on his face. His wet long-sleeved tee clung to his torso, emphasizing his muscular physique.

I tore my eyes away from his chest and back up to his face.

Finally, he spoke. “Your mom’s wrong. I’ve not been a very good friend. You even said so yourself.”

“You’re friends with Zack and Jesse, and Zack’s always been the leader.” My voice was flat. I was simply stating the facts. “They’ve always come first. I should be used to that by now. Like I said, I’m the backup plan. Or I used to be. I guess I’m not even that anymore.” I shook my head. “Why are you even here?”

He ignored my question and started rummaging through my dresser, looking for dry clothes. He opened my underwear drawer, pulled out a pair of boxers, and tossed them onto the bed.

“That kid getting killed really upset you, huh?” He still had his back to me as he continued his search.

“Jeez, Asher, what do you think? I found him. And whoever killed him tried to kill me, too. No, I’m not upset. I’m just fucking fine and dandy here.”

Then, to my great embarrassment, I burst into tears—again. You’d think I’d have run out eventually, but I seemed to have a never-ending supply. How was I not completely dehydrated?

“Damn it!” He dropped the shirt he was taking from the drawer and rushed to my side. “Killian, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m so stupid sometimes. I just...I didn’t realize you were so close to him.”

“We weren’t that close. I just can’t stop crying. It’s all I do anymore.”

I was really getting tired of it, too. My eyes were aching from all the tears I’d shed. I probably looked as horrible as I felt. I was sure my face had to be red and puffy.

Asher picked up one of the towels and gently wiped off my face, then started drying my hair.

I felt like a little kid.

“What are you doing here?” I asked again.

“I guess this is my way of saying I’m sorry for being such a jerk.” He paused, then continued, “I had a big fight with Zack and Jesse earlier this week. I haven’t talked to them since.”

“About what?” I was confused. “I thought you guys were like super tight.”

He shrugged. “I wanted to come see you after...well, you know, but they didn’t think I should.”

“Shouldn’t hang out with fags, huh?” I snarled bitterly. “It might rub off on you.”

Asher froze.

We stared at each other for a few seconds, neither of us speaking or moving. Then Asher tossed the towel aside, retrieved the shirt he’d dropped, and pulled out a pair of sweatpants.

He brought them over and set them on the bed. He stood there for a moment, as if trying to decide what to do.

Suddenly, he reached down and took off my glasses.

“What are you doing?”

Instead of answering, he began pulling up my shirt.

“Hey!” I yelled.

“I’m just helping you with your shirt.”

“I don’t need help. I can do it by myself.”

“Oh, you can, huh? You can pull this wet shirt over your head without an extreme amount of pain?” I stopped struggling. He had a point. “Just let me help. It’s okay. I’ve seen you without a shirt hundreds of times. What’s the big deal?”

Sure, he’d seen me without a shirt when we were kids at the pool, or in the locker room, but this felt different, more intimate. We were alone in my bedroom. Plus, I was certain he would think it was a big deal if he knew that I was gay.

He was right, though. I did need help.

I gave him a dirty look but allowed him to help me untangle my arms from the damp material and pull it over my head. The maneuver still caused quite a bit of discomfort, and I could tell he noticed when I sucked in a breath sharply through my teeth.

Once my shirt was off and all I was wearing were some wet bandages and soaked shorts, I suddenly became very self-conscious. Although I wasn’t exactly unattractive, next to Asher I felt scrawny and pale.

“Help me get my shirt on,” I mumbled reaching for the dry one.

“You need to change those bandages first, Kill.”

I sighed. He was right again, of course.

“The stuff is in a basket by the couch downstairs.”

He was gone in a flash.

I decided to change my pants while he was out of the room, since that was much easier than pulling on a shirt. I remembered that Adam had given me his number and fished the soggy card from my pocket. It was a little worse for wear but still legible. I grabbed my phone and saved the number, then shucked off my wet shorts.

I was standing there in my sodden boxer briefs when the door flew open again. Asher stopped in his tracks, his eyes darting down to take in my state of undress. It didn't seem that he'd had time to even get downstairs, yet there he was, holding the basket of medical supplies.

He frowned. "What are you doing up? You should have waited for me."

"I'm not an invalid."

"Actually, you kind of are. Now sit down and let me change your bandages."

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. Will you just stop fighting me and let me help you for a change?" He was starting to sound exasperated, so once again I gave in and sat back down on the bed.

He set the basket on the floor next to me, then knelt between my legs and began to gently unwind the wet wrappings, flinching as he uncovered my wound.

It still looked raw and ugly. It wasn't healing quite as quickly as the doctors had hoped. They said my lungs were doing great, at least.

Small victories, I reminded myself.

Asher carefully applied the antibiotic salve before picking up the new roll of bandage.

“Arms up,” he murmured, beginning to wrap it around me. He had to put his arms around me with each pass.

He seemed to be going much slower than was absolutely necessary, or maybe it just felt like he was moving in slow motion.

I tried not to enjoy the closeness of his body too much. After all, he was strictly off limits. I was also trying very hard to ignore the fact that I was still sitting there wearing nothing but wet underwear.

“You shouldn’t be so nervous about your body, Kill.”

His soft voice in my ear made me jump. Was he reading my mind? “Wh-wh-what?”

“You look great.”

“No, you look great,” I argued. “I’m a skinny nerd. You’re so much more built than I am.”

“Who cares? You’re not a nerd. Well, okay, maybe you are a nerd, but you look fine.” He grinned up at me and secured the end of the bandage with tape. “There, you’re all set.” He stepped back to admire his handiwork before grabbing my shirt and helping me into it. After returning my glasses, he picked up the dry boxers and stood there holding them for a moment, unsure of his next move. He looked so awkward it was all I could do not to start laughing.

“I think I can manage the rest on my own. But thanks for all the help, Ash.”

“You’re welcome, Killian.” He hesitated a second. “I should probably go now, but I want you to know I’m really sorry I haven’t been a very good friend. I promise I’m gonna do better from now on.”

Then he totally shocked me by leaning in and kissing me on the cheek.

I was speechless, which Asher used to his advantage to slip quickly out of my room. He paused in the doorway and called over his shoulder, “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

I didn’t know what to think of Asher’s sudden about-face. He seemed to be making an honest effort to be my best friend again, but I couldn’t help being a little skeptical. He’d said he’d had a big fight with Zack and Jesse—over me no less—but what if they really just wanted to spy on me? I wouldn’t have put it past them—kind of a mission to see what the fag was up to. After all, Asher had reported to them before.

Except...Asher had seemed sincere, even sweet. And what was up with that kiss? He wouldn’t have thrown it in just to be convincing, would he?

I was more confused than ever. Even if he were sincere, would he still be as sweet if I told him I really was gay?

Then again, Mom knew I was gay and she loved me anyway. That knowledge was indescribably comforting. My earlier thoughts of suicide seemed a million miles away. It was amazing how different things looked all of a sudden, simply because Mom accepted me.

But what about Dad?

He couldn’t find out. I couldn’t imagine Mom telling him, so I thought I was safe for a while.

Suddenly I was exhausted.

All the conjecture, combined with my very emotional roller-coaster ride of a day, had worn me out. I

didn't have enough energy to tackle the stairs again, so I simply crawled into bed.

I'd just take a short nap...

Chapter 6

I had a vague impression that someone looked in on me at one point, but the next time I awoke, the sun was streaming brightly through the windows in my room. It seemed the storm had passed while I slept through the night.

I looked at the clock and gasped. It was almost noon. I must have been more worn out than I had thought.

I sat up and winced at the pain. I fought my way to my feet, then almost fell back onto my bed with a shriek of surprise.

Asher was sitting on my floor reading one of my Nancy Drew mysteries.

Usually, I would have been embarrassed that he'd found them, but I was so surprised to find him there that it didn't cross my mind.

He was wearing jeans and a white hoodie that lay in sharp contrast against his dark skin. With his loosely curled, dark-brown hair catching the light just right, he seemed to glow in the sunlight that shone on him like a spotlight. He looked like an angel smiling up at me.

"Good morning, Rip Van Winkle," he greeted me. "I was starting to think you were never going to wake up. I've read like half this book while I waited. It's actually pretty good. I think I know who did it."

"How'd you get in here?"

"Your mom let me in. I've been here for about an hour. By the way, she had to leave to do some chores. She asked me to keep an eye on you, so I did." He

grinned up at me. God, he was cute when he grinned.

“You need some help getting into the bathroom?”

“I think I can handle it. I can walk, you know.”

He still hadn’t stopped grinning. “Barely.”

I ignored him and headed for the bathroom, grabbing the bandage basket on my way. After taking care of necessities, I decided a bath was in order. At the very least, it would make Asher have to wait that much longer. Maybe he’d go home before I got out.

I stripped down and carefully took off the bandages while the water ran.

Usually, I preferred showers, but that was a little more than I could manage with my injury. I had to wash carefully around the wound. If any soap got in it, it stung like crazy.

On the bright side, I thought it looked a little better than it had before, less red and irritated. Maybe I’d be able to get the stitches removed before much longer.

As I climbed out of the tub, I realized I hadn’t brought any clothes with me. I’d have to go back to my room in just a towel, something I wasn’t especially looking forward to. Then again, after Asher had seen me in wet boxer briefs the night before, a towel wasn’t that bad.

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised to find Asher waiting for me. I was more surprised to find him propped up on my bed, still reading.

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you,” I said dryly.

“Thanks, I will.” He grinned again as he glancing up at me.

I was gratified to see his eyes widen at my state of undress.

He let out a wolf whistle. “Looking good.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and went over to get clothes from my dresser.

“Are you still being shy? You really shouldn’t be worried about your body, Kill.” He got off the bed, came up behind me, and poked me in the ribs. “You have a natural definition. You don’t even need to work out.”

I blushed. “I’m just skinny.”

He bent to examine my wound. “It looks a lot better this morning.”

He lightly ran his fingers around it, sending chills coursing through my body.

He’s off limits, I reminded myself sharply.

“Must be my magic touch,” he continued. “Sit down and I’ll put the bandages back on it for you.”

“I, uh, left them in the bathroom.” His closeness was starting to get to me, and I was fighting to keep myself under control. I still didn’t know what to make of his sudden interest.

While Asher went to get the bandages, I quickly pulled on a clean pair of underwear.

“Okay,” he said when he returned. “Have a seat. The doctor will see you now.”

I chuckled as I perched on the edge of the bed. I had to admit, it was nice getting so much attention— weird, since it was coming from Asher, but nice. I hadn’t been that happy since before—

I felt my face fall with the thought of Seth. How could I be laughing and having fun when he had been murdered?

“You’re thinking about Seth again, aren’t you?”
Asher asked, suddenly serious.

I nodded.

Asher pulled the tube of salve out of the basket and squeezed some around the stitches. “You can’t be sad forever, Kill. You’re hurting now because he’s gone, and it just happened so that’s to be expected, but you don’t have to be sad all the time. I mean, I hardly knew him, but I doubt he would have wanted that.”

“No, he wouldn’t.” I sighed. “It’s just...it isn’t right that he could be murdered in cold blood and no one even cares. No one seems to be trying to catch the killer. I could have been killed, too.”

Asher looked up at me from where he had knelt on the floor. “I know,” he murmured almost under his breath. Then he went on a little louder, “I’m sure the police are trying to catch the guy. They’re saying it was just a mugging. They’ll catch him eventually.”

“What if it wasn’t just a mugging?”

He stopped and looked at me intently. “What do you mean?”

“What if Seth was murdered on purpose?”

“Why would anyone want to kill Seth?”

“Because he was gay.”

Asher looked shocked. “But that’s not a reason...”

“We both know it is to some people.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, a troubled look on his face. “Then why stab you?”

I paused for a moment, then rushed on, hoping he wouldn’t catch my hesitation. “Maybe I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I walked up while the

killer was still there, and he simply reacted.” I paused again. “And there’s more. I think...I think the killer recognized me.”

“What? How do you know?”

“He kind of stopped when he saw who I was. He was going to kill me, too, but then he got a good look at me and just froze. He said ‘Shit,’ jumped up, and ran.”

Asher sat back onto the floor, his eyes wide. “Are you sure? I mean, there was a lot going on. Maybe you’re just confused.”

I shook my head. “No. I remember what happened very clearly.”

“Did you get a look at him?”

“No, the police said he was wearing a mask.”

“That’s scary, Kill, but it doesn’t mean Seth was killed because he was gay. Maybe the mugger knew you.”

“How many muggings have there been around here? I can’t remember a single one ever. Besides, I’ve been thinking a lot about this. I was there. Call it intuition, call it a hunch—I don’t know what it is exactly, I just know that it wasn’t a random mugging.”

Asher sat in silence for a minute, then got back up on his knees and reached for the bandage. “If you’ve thought so much about it, who do you think it was?”

“I don’t know...I haven’t really gotten to that part of it yet.”

“Well, anyway, arms up.” As soon as I’d complied, he started winding the bandage around me.

While he wrapped, I considered his question. Who could it have been? That was the obvious first question, but it wasn’t something I really wanted to think

about. I didn't have much choice, though. I had to think about whether I wanted to or not.

The first person to pop into my mind was Zack. I remembered his threat earlier the same day. He'd said that I'd be sorry—and my boyfriend, too, and we all knew he meant Seth.

Then I thought of Asher and his words that day last week in this same room: *"If he hurt you, I'll kill him."*

My body stiffened involuntarily under Asher's touch.

He noticed right away. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, it's nothing." I paused. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure. You know you can ask me anything."

"Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?"

He didn't answer at first. He just finished up the bandaging job, then sat back on his heels, leaving his hands still resting lightly on my sides. He kept his eyes turned down, not looking at me.

"I told you before."

"Tell me again."

He took a deep breath. "When I thought I was losing you as a friend to Seth, I realized how much you mean to me. And then you started acting so different—I wasn't sure what was going on. You were always snapping at people and getting mad and yelling. It wasn't like you, so I got worried."

He glanced up to see if I was listening, then quickly looked away again. "I didn't really like what Zack and Jesse were saying and all, but it was just easier

to go along with them like always. I figured you were just going through a phase and things would be back to normal soon. When you got hurt, though, it really scared me. I realized that I had almost lost you— I mean, lost the chance to tell you— I mean—”

“Tell me what?”

He sat there for a second, then looked back up at me.

“Did you love Seth?”

“What?”

“Were you in love with Seth?”

I couldn’t believe he’d asked me that. In essence, he was questioning if I was gay.

“No!” I answered truthfully. “I wasn’t in love with Seth. I barely knew him.”

He heaved an enormous sigh, and relief flooded into his eyes.

What was going on?

“Why would you ask me that?”

His eyes seemed to bore into mine. Suddenly, he leaned forward again and kissed me softly on the lips.

Time seemed to slow down. In the few seconds our lips were pressed together, I had a whole conversation in my head.

Does this mean Asher is gay?

Well, duh!

Straight guys generally don’t kiss their male friends on the lips like this. Not unless they are in the Mafia, and I’m pretty sure Asher isn’t.

Why didn’t he ever tell me?

Maybe for the same reason I didn’t tell him. Then again, I didn’t know until last week really.

Although, on some level, I suppose I've always known in my heart.

There's no denying how great this feels.

Nothing had ever felt more right than Asher kissing me.

Wait a minute! Asher is kissing me!

With that last thought, I jerked back and stared at him wide-eyed.

He slowly sat back on his heels, his eyes never leaving mine. In them, I could read both the fear of rejection and the depth of his feelings.

For a long moment neither of us spoke.

Finally, I pulled myself together. "You kissed me." My voice was shaky and a little hoarse, as if I'd just woken up.

"I-I-I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. It's just... I've been thinking about it ever since I read that letter..."

"Wait. What letter?"

"Seth's letter. I know I shouldn't have read—"

I had completely forgotten about the letter. What if Dad had found it? "Where is it now?" I asked with a hint of panic.

"Huh?"

"The letter! Where is it now?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter, a little the worse for wear, crumpled and folded, but safe from my father. He handed it to me.

I was very glad Asher had been the one to find it, especially considering what had just happened.

"I don't understand. Why do you have it?"

"When I went downstairs yesterday to get the bandages it was just lying on the couch. I grabbed it and

stuck it in my pocket and then I guess I forgot about it. I found it when I got home and... I read it. I'm sorry."

He stopped and seemed to be searching for what to say.

He took a deep breath. "Killian, I've liked you for years."

"You've what?" I yelped.

"Just let me finish. I need to say this. I've always known I was gay, ever since I can remember. But who was I going to tell? Zack? Jesse? No way! I was even afraid to tell you, even though I kinda always thought you might be, too. Then, when you started hanging out with Seth, I started to think that either you definitely were gay and you liked him, or you weren't but you didn't care about him being gay, and either way maybe you wouldn't care about me.

"And then when you were almost killed... Fuck. I was so scared, Kill. I made a promise that if you lived, I'd tell you the truth. I even went to the hospital, but they wouldn't let me see you. After that, I lost my nerve for a while, I convinced myself it was a sign. But I couldn't stop thinking about you.

"When I saw you out in the rain yesterday, all I could think about was getting to you. I knew you needed me. But it also kind of hurt 'cuz I thought you must have really been in love with Seth to be so upset. I was jealous of him, Kill. I wanted to be with you, and he comes in and steals you away, or at least that's what it felt like.

"Then I found that letter and I was more confused than ever. Seth said he kissed you, but you were angry, so maybe you weren't gay after all. But...there was something about the way you looked at

me yesterday when we are alone up here in your room. I don't know. I just...felt something. After I read that Seth kissed you, I couldn't stop thinking about kissing you. And then you were there, and we were so close, and it felt right...so I did it. I kissed you. But I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have. Please don't hate me."

He seemed to run out of words, so he just sat there staring at me hopefully. I wasn't sure what he expected, however. I wasn't sure what I felt. I needed time to think.

"Ash," I began, speaking slowly and deliberately, "I need some time to figure stuff out. All I can tell you right now is, yes, I am gay. No, I didn't love Seth. Not in that way, at least not yet. Maybe if we'd had more time..."

"But you don't like me."

"Ash, I didn't say that. I just meant—"

"It's okay, Killian," he interrupted. "I understand. Why would you want me? I'm just a dumb jock who treated you like shit."

He stood up and started for the door.

"Asher, wait!" I pushed myself off of the bed, ignoring the pain, and grabbed his arm.

He stopped but kept his gaze on the floor. I reached up and lifted his head until he was looking me in the eye, then I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him softly on the lips.

"Asher, right now I don't know what I want. I do like you. I... I guess I have for a long time. It's not that at all. It's just..." I growled in frustration. "I don't know how to explain it to you. I need more time. So much has happened so fast, and there's a lot going on right now."

My head is spinning. I mean, Seth hasn't even been buried yet."

Asher nodded, pulling gently away from me. "I guess I understand. I'll try to be patient." He paused. "Maybe I shouldn't even tell you this, but he was buried already, back up around Baltimore somewhere."

"What? Why didn't anyone let me know?"

"They probably didn't want to upset you."

"That's not fair! He was my friend. I would have wanted to be there."

"You weren't exactly in the best shape."

"That's not the point. I should have been told."

"Well, there's some sort of memorial service this afternoon. I read online that his dad wanted to have a service down here, too." He looked at his watch.

"Actually, it's in like one hour."

I made a split-second decision. "I want to go. Will you take me?"

"I dunno, Killian. Maybe that's not such a good idea. I mean, everyone's talking already because you were with him in the park and all."

"Please? It would mean so much to me. I need to go. It would be kind of like a chance to say goodbye."

He stared at me for a minute, then nodded slowly. "Yeah, okay. I'll take you. And I'll stay with you, too, so I can take you home afterward. We'll leave a note for your mom. You need to put something on, though. You can't go in just your underwear."

We spent the next forty-five minutes getting ready. First, we dressed me—it was a two-person job—then he ran next door to change. I sat on my front steps

waiting for him, which gave me a few precious minutes to think—the first I’d had since Asher’s big revelation.

I still wasn’t sure how I felt about Asher. I knew I liked him, but did I trust him enough to give him what he seemed to want from me? My heart screamed yes, but my head was a little more cautious. Especially troubling was the nagging thought in the back of my mind that Asher might be the attacker. He’d admitted he was jealous of Seth and felt as if Seth was taking me away from him.

Then there were his words that day in my room kept echoing through my head over and over: *“If he hurt you, I’ll kill him.”*

I honestly couldn’t believe that about him, but there was still some lingering doubt holding me back. Maybe I just didn’t want to admit that someone I’d known forever could be a killer.

If I really thought he was the kind of person who could murder someone in cold blood, though, then why was I getting in a car alone with him?

I pushed the thought from my mind and remembered what else he’d said. Everyone was talking about me being at the park that night with Seth. I knew the high-school grapevine was vicious, but that seemed a bit much. Someone had almost killed me. I was barely out of the hospital, and I was already the new juicy piece of gossip. Did they suspect I was gay? I wasn’t sure I was ready to deal with being out at school. I was still coming to terms with it myself.

Finally, Asher came back out dressed almost identically to me, all in black. He looked a whole lot sexier, however—at least in my opinion.

“What?” he asked me.

I tore my gaze away from him and tried to remember why we were dressed like that. I felt guilty for finding myself so attracted to one friend while on my way to the funeral of another. “Nothing,” I mumbled.

“No, tell me. Should I go change? Do I look stupid?”

“Definitely not. Let’s go, we’re gonna be late.”

The memorial service was being held at the same park where I’d found Seth, of all places. I was scared about going back, but I tried to tell myself that it was broad daylight and Asher would be with me. I’d never even been to a memorial service or a funeral before. I wasn’t sure what to expect.

When we arrived at the park, there were hardly any other cars. As we approached the pavilion where the service was to take place, I could just about count on one hand the number of people who had shown up to remember Seth.

I recognized Adam Connelly, Seth’s dad, standing next to a handsome dark-haired man with a mustache around his same age. Adam was talking to a man wearing a black suit and a clerical collar who I assumed must be the minister or priest or whatever. I didn’t know any of the other people there.

Adam noticed us as we approached. He broke away from the minister and walked toward us, the handsome man with him following a few steps behind.

“Killian, thank you for coming.” He embraced me gently, being careful of my injury. “You should be at home recuperating, but I appreciate your being here. I’m

glad there will be at least one person present besides Steve and me who cared about Seth.”

He turned to the man who had followed him over and motioned him forward.

“Killian, this is Steve Redden, my boyfriend. Steve, this is Killian Kendall. He was Seth’s friend.”

I shook Steve’s hand and exchanged pleasantries.

“This is my friend, Asher Davis,” I said, and another round of handshaking ensued.

“Did you know Seth, too?” Steve asked.

Asher looked flustered. “No, sir. I didn’t really get the chance. I brought Killian.”

“Thank you for coming anyway,” Adam said with a sad smile.

As hard as I tried to ignore it, the path to the pond drew my attention like a magnet. Memories of the last time I was there flickered through my mind as if I were watching an old filmstrip. I began to feel a little lightheaded.

“Come on.” Adam gently took my arm. “You’re looking a bit pale. You need to have a seat. Are you sure you should even be here?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, although I wasn’t at all certain I was.

With Adam on one side, Asher on the other, and Steve trailing behind, I felt a little like an invalid as we approached the pavilion. I scanned the gathering again and saw it had grown to maybe fifteen people while we talked. I suspected a few of them at least were plainclothes cops and reporters. It seemed so wrong that such a good person had been struck down so young, yet more people weren’t there to mourn his loss.

A sudden macabre thought occurred to me, causing a chill to run along my spine. What if his killer was one of those people present, pretending to mourn for the very life he had taken?

Asher noticed the shiver and leaned closer to whisper into my ear, “Are you okay?”

I didn’t answer him. I’d just noticed a familiar face toward the back of the group of would-be mourners. I stopped cold. Steve almost ran into me from behind.

What was my father doing there?

Political posturing most likely—it was, after all, an election year and a kid had been murdered in his county.

I didn’t know if he had noticed me yet, but then he slowly turned and locked eyes with me. He glared with an intensity that frightened me, and I knew the fight I had been avoiding since the hospital was imminent. I only hoped he’d have the decency not to start it during Seth’s memorial service.

I deliberately looked away, deciding I wouldn’t let him distract me from the reason I was there. I would have to deal with my father later, but for now, this was about Seth.

Adam insisted Asher and I sit in the front row with him and Steve. I felt very conspicuous, and I could tell Asher was uncomfortable as well, but we couldn’t exactly say no.

Once we had taken our seats, the minister stepped forward to the podium. For a second, a table set off to one side distracted me. Dozens of framed photographs, all of Seth, covered its surface. Many of

them were the ones I had seen at his house, but there were some new ones, too.

“We are here today for a very somber purpose—” The minister’s words brought my attention back to him. “—to remember a young man whose life was cut off before his time. Seth David Connelly was only sixteen when he was killed in a senseless and tragic act of violence.

“Perhaps we will never understand what provoked such a horrible event, but we may rest assured that Seth is no longer in a world filled with hate and prejudice. I am sorry to say I did not know Seth very well personally, so I am going to keep my comments brief today to allow you time to remember Seth in your own special ways.”

He read a brief passage from the Bible, something about God wiping away our tears and no more death or mourning.

I’d mostly stopped listening at that point, lost in my own memories of Seth. I snapped back to the present when Adam stood up and moved to take the minister’s place. He stood there for a minute without saying a word, gripping the podium as if it were the only thing holding him up. I thought he was going to break down, but he fought for control.

“My son was taken from me last week by an act of violence so horrible that it sickens me every time I think about it. Most of you here didn’t even know him. You only came because your editor or superior sent you. You’re just doing your job. Well, let me introduce you to my son. Seth David Connelly was a beautiful, brilliant, clever, and compassionate sixteen-year-old. He enjoyed

running on the beach. He liked writing poetry. Though he did well in all his classes, theater was his favorite. He loved acting. He wanted to be an actor, but now he'll never get that chance."

He choked up and dropped his head. When he raised it again, his eyes were bright with unshed tears, but he was once more in control. I admired his strength.

"There is so much I could tell you about my son. He was one of the greatest joys of my life. Due to circumstances beyond our control, we didn't see each other for three years. I only recently got him back, and now he's gone forever. Nothing will ever be able to fill the void his death has left in my world."

He took a deep breath. "But I haven't told you something very important about my son. It's only important because it was important to him. He was gay. He wasn't afraid or ashamed of it either, even though he had suffered so much in his young life because of it. He was a hero to me. He should have been a hero to all of us. He had the courage to accept himself.

"He saw things with his poet's heart. To him the world was always beautiful and exciting, he found deep meaning in even the most chance of encounters. He trusted people. We moved to this town in the hope of finding a safe place to live. Ironic, isn't it? It's even more ironic that this town, which prides itself on being welcoming, so totally rejected my son. In fact, there was only one person at his whole school who would even speak to him without calling him names and insulting him. To me, this person is also a hero." Adam looked at me with a sad, teary-eyed smile. "Thank you."

Adam looked around the small gathering, purposefully making eye contact with each person there. Most wouldn't hold his gaze. When he reached Dad, he paused. Dad stared back unblinking and stone-faced.

"I want to leave you with this thought. The police and our State's Attorney, who was kind enough to come today, have been quick to tell us that Seth's death was a random mugging gone wrong. But I want you all to ask yourself this: Based on what evidence? All his money was still in his wallet, his cell phone in his pocket. There has never been another mugging at this park. So far, they haven't put forth a single suspect. Why?

"I believe this was a hate crime, pure and simple. Seth had been receiving threatening notes at school. When I told the police about it, they wrote the notes off as childish pranks. Well, I'm sorry, but I don't think having your throat slit is childish."

Several people gasped, and Adam seemed to be struggling for control again.

"Nothing can bring Seth back at this point, but we can ensure that he gets justice. And that's my challenge to all of the reporters and police officers here today. Make sure Seth gets the justice he deserves."

He turned to the memorial table, kissed his fingers and held them out toward the photographs. "Goodbye, Seth. I love you!"

Adam took his seat and began to weep softly. Steve pulled him against his chest and allowed Adam to cry on his shoulder. No one moved for what seemed like an eternity. Then the minister slowly walked back up to the podium.

“Does anyone have anything they would like to say in memory of Seth?”

He almost sounded as if he hoped not. Again, another eternity seemed to pass. No one dared even move. It was as though they were holding their collective breath.

Just as the minister cleared his throat to give some final words, I stood up. Every eye was fastened on me, including the furious glare of my father. I looked him straight in the eye before turning to Adam.

“I am truly sorry for your loss, Mr. Connelly... Adam. It’s not just your loss, though. It’s the loss of every person who never got the chance to know Seth. I didn’t know him for very long, only two weeks really, but he was my friend. He was a truly good person, and that’s something we don’t have enough of in this world. He helped me realize a few things that I’d been blind to for a long time. I’ll miss him.”

I collapsed back into my seat and bit my lip. I had a feeling that speech would come back to bite me in the ass, but I knew it was the right thing to do.

I felt Asher’s hand fumble discreetly with mine for a second. He slipped his into mine, holding it below the sight of the people sitting behind us. It was not, however, out of the minister’s sight. He looked at us in surprise before once again clearing his throat.

“Well, if there’s no one else, I’d like to thank you all on behalf of the family for coming out to show your respects. Donations may be made in Seth’s memory to the theater club at the high school.”

He said a quick prayer, then hurried away. I imagined it was one of his more unusual services.

At the minister's dismissal, the crowd quickly dispersed. My father shot me a lethal look as he left.

Soon, it was just Adam, Steve, Asher, and I.

"So you don't think it was a mugger either?" I asked Adam quietly.

"Either?" He raised one eyebrow in an appraising look.

"I didn't believe that from the beginning," I told him. "But what can we do?"

"We can't do anything," Adam replied firmly.

"There's not much anyone can do at this point. I was thinking about hiring a private detective, but the few I've contacted so far turned me down cold. They said this isn't some television show where private detectives run around with guns. They mostly just do insurance work and spy on cheating spouses. They told me to drop it and let the cops handle it." Bitterness crept into his voice.

"Who cares if they sweep it under a rug?"

We both sighed at the same time.

"Maybe I can ask some questions around school," I suggested.

"Are you crazy?" Asher jumped in.

"Asher's right," Adam agreed. "That wouldn't be safe, Killian. We're talking about a murderer here. He killed Seth and he tried to kill you."

"No, he didn't try to kill me. If he'd wanted to kill me, I would be dead. He had the opportunity, and he didn't take it."

"Whoa. Hold on a second," Steve interjected.

"Two things there. One, you say 'he.' Do you know for sure your attacker was a man?"

“I don’t have any real proof, but I’m pretty sure it was a man. I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I’ve remembered some things that I think rule out a woman. The person felt solid, and I don’t remember feeling breasts. And they were strong. I guess it could have been a well-built teenage boy, too, but he seemed bigger than I am, but then I’m on the small side, so just about anyone could wrestle me to the ground, especially since he caught me by surprise. I was too busy fighting for my life to get a more precise idea of his size.

“I never really heard his voice because he just whispered. He...he was wearing a stocking on his head so I couldn’t see his face in the dark.”

I almost choked up as the horrible memories came flooding back.

“I’m sorry to make you relive all this,” Steve apologized.

I took a deep breath and managed to pull myself together enough to continue.

“It’s okay. It’s important that I remember.”

“Was there anything besides his size that made you think it was a man?”

I took another deep breath. “He just smelled like a man. You know what I mean?”

Steve nodded. “I think I do.”

“Jeez, Killian. You sound like a detective.” There was a note of respect in Asher’s voice.

Steve smiled. “He’s right. You’re doing great. What did you mean he had the opportunity and didn’t take it?”

“After he stabbed me, he flipped me over and raised his arm to stab me again, but when he saw me, he said ‘shit’ and ran away.”

“And you told the police this?” Adam asked.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked. “Weren’t you questioned?”

“I don’t remember. I even asked the doctor at the hospital if I should give a report to the police, and he laughed at me. He said they didn’t need one and that I’d told them I didn’t see my attacker when they brought me in, but I don’t remember anything after I passed out at the park. I couldn’t have been very coherent if I was even awake.”

“What kind of investigation is this?” Steve shook his head in disgust.

“It’s not an investigation,” Adam snarled. “It’s a cover-up.”

“Come on, Adam,” Steve said gently. “Don’t go all conspiracy theorist on us. It’s just small-town-police ineptness.”

“This police force is anything but inept,” Adam retorted. “I looked into it before I decided to move us down here. For a small department, they have an excellent record. They aren’t Keystone Cops. They’re well-trained professionals.”

“They don’t have many murders here, though. It could just be a case of being out of their depth.”

“Or it could be a case of no one caring about the dead gay boy.”

“You said something about threatening notes?” I interrupted, in an attempt to head off an argument that seemed to be heading down a well-worn path.

“Yes.” Adam rubbed his face. “There were three, each was printed from a computer, which makes them virtually untraceable. They wouldn’t have really led to anyone, but still, it would have been nice if the police had at least taken the notes somewhat seriously and not just dismissed them out of hand. They didn’t even take them as evidence. The notes were nasty, hateful. They said things like ‘God hates fags,’ and “Burn in hell,” and ‘Go away. We don’t want queers here.’”

“The police did say that if the notes had been more explicit death threats, they would have taken them into consideration,” Steve chipped in.

“How did Seth get them?” I asked.

“They were stuffed into his locker at school.”

“So it had to be someone our age!” I exclaimed. “See, you do need my help. Where else can you get inside information from school? I was Seth’s only friend. It’ll be natural for me to be asking questions.”

“It’s not safe, Killian.” Asher sounded a little worried. He’d been quiet for so long I had almost forgotten he was there.

“Well, actually,” Steve began as we all turned to look at him, “if you just stick to general questions, it can’t hurt anything. It’s not likely to be anything more than a mugging, but on the off chance it is, I doubt the killer will do anything to hurt Killian if they didn’t when they had their chance the first time. Meanwhile, if asking questions will help make you two feel better about the whole thing, then I say why not?”

We all sat in silence for a few minutes thinking about Steve's suggestion.

Finally, Adam nodded. "Okay. If you promise to be careful and not do anything needlessly risky or obvious, you can ask some questions. We should stay in contact about this. You still have my number?"

I nodded. "I saved it in my phone."

Adam turned to Asher. "Please keep an eye on him. If anything happened to either one of you, I don't think I could live with myself."

Asher didn't look happy at the turn of events, but he nodded begrudgingly.

"Killian is looking a bit tired," Steve observed. "Maybe you should get him home, Asher."

"Yeah, I am feeling a little drained," I admitted. "Although I can't say I'm looking forward to dealing with my father when I get home. You should be able to hear the fireworks from the other side of town. I still can't believe he came."

"I have to say, I was surprised to see him myself," Adam said.

"It's an election year," I joked halfheartedly.

"I hope I didn't make things worse with those remarks about the State's Attorney..."

"Don't worry. What you said will be totally overshadowed by the fact that I was here at all."

"You don't think he'll do anything...violent, do you?"

I shrugged. I really didn't know what to expect.

"Killian," Adam began, his voice deadly serious, "I know I said this before, but I mean it. If you need me for anything—and I do mean anything—I hope you'll

call me. I couldn't be there for Seth when he needed me most. I hope you'll let me be there for you."

We all stood up and exchanged hugs. After a round of goodbyes, Asher and I started off for home.

We didn't talk much during the drive. We both had a lot on our minds.

When we arrived at my house, Dad's car was parked next to Mom's in the driveway.

Asher pulled in behind hers and turned off the engine. We sat there in silence for a few minutes, neither of us wanting to face what was waiting for us inside.

"Do you ever wonder why you drive on a parkway and park on a driveway?" I asked no one in particular.

Asher, being the wise person he was, chose not to answer. He just got out of the car and came around to help me.

We approached the front door with more than a little trepidation. Before he opened it, Asher wrapped his arms around me for a brief hug.

We barely closed the door when Dad entered the hallway, Mom a few steps behind him. I could tell by the look on her face that this wasn't going to be pretty.

I braced myself for the barrage.

Chapter 7

“Asher,” Dad said in that horribly controlled voice of his, “I think it would be best if you went on home now. Your dad’s waiting for you. We just got off the phone.”

Asher shot me a look that was easier to read than a children’s picture book. He was terrified. “Yes, sir,” he replied softly, then turned and let himself out.

I was left standing all alone facing my father. I still hadn’t moved beyond the entryway.

“What were you thinking?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t play games with me, boy. What were you doing at that faggot’s funeral?”

Suddenly, something shifted inside me. I was tired of being intimidated and bullied by my father. I knew I had done the right thing, and I wasn’t going to back down.

I lifted my chin and stared him straight in the eye. “I felt I should go,” I said firmly.

“You felt you should go,” he mocked. “Well, isn’t that nice, Meg?” He addressed this to my mother. “You waited till your mother was gone, and then you and Asher couldn’t get out of here quick enough.”

“It wasn’t like that at all. We didn’t plan it. Mom was gone when I woke up. Asher mentioned that Seth’s memorial service was today, and I wanted to go.”

“Don’t talk back to me! I left you alone after the whole stabbing incident at your mother’s insistence—” He growled this as if the ‘whole stabbing incident’ were

somehow my fault. “—but this is too much. I want answers and I want them now. How could you publicly humiliate me like that? There must have been reporters from three different newspapers in attendance and you sit in the front row. Then, if that wasn’t enough, you stand up and make your little tear-jerking speech. That’s going to be all over the place in the morning.”

His concern for the family of the deceased warmed me. He was making me angrier by the second, but I struggled to remain silent. There was no point adding fuel to his rage.

“Start explaining, and let’s begin with the park. What were you doing there that night? You were meeting the faggot, weren’t you? After I explicitly told you to stay away from him.”

“I’m not a little kid. You can’t tell me who I can and can’t be friends with.” I did my best to match him in the control department. I had learned well.

“Yes. I. Can.” He was starting to lose his veneer of control, and I loved it. “I’m your father, and you’ll do as I say. You were going to meet him that night, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Then you deserve what you got,” he snarled, his control finally snapping. He took three large steps toward me, covering the entire length of the hallway in those few strides, and struck me across the face open-handed. I reeled backwards into the door. I vaguely heard Mom screaming for him to stop, but the ringing in my ears almost deafened me.

“It’s bad enough you run around with that nigger boy. I won’t have my son associating with faggots too!”

I'd never felt so much hate and contempt for anyone in my entire life. My hands were shaking with rage. I balled them into fists, and he actually took an involuntary step back.

"I will associate with whoever I want," I spat out.

He moved so fast I didn't even have time to flinch. His fist shot out and connected squarely with my face.

I felt my glasses snap as my head bounced off the door, and the world exploded. I slid to the floor with the metallic taste of blood in my mouth.

Mom shrieked again and tried to get to me, but Dad shoved her back roughly. She fell to the floor where she huddled against the wall and cried.

"You listen to me and you listen well, boy," he rasped. "Stay away from that Connelly man. You stay away from Asher Davis from now on, too. I don't know why he helped you, or what you did to get him to take you to the park, but you are not to see him anymore. If I find out you've been sneaking around again, this beating will look like fun. This is my house, and you will respect what I say."

"Fuck you!" I screamed at him. "You think you can just hit me, and I'll respect you? You lost my respect a long time ago."

He reached down and snatched me up by my shirt, suspending me in the air.

Once again, time slowed down in the eerie way it has of doing at important moments, as if to underline their importance. The pain in my face and side was intense, but somehow it only served to sharpen my senses. I could hear Mom moaning softly behind him, a

low keening sound that would have made the hair on my arms stand on end under other circumstances.

I struggled to focus on the face in front of me. Even without my glasses, I could see the fury in his eyes. My vision may have been blurry, but I was seeing my father with a clarity I'd never known before.

As I hung in midair, watching him draw back his fist to strike me again, I made a decision.

"Guess what?" I gasped. "I'm gay, too."

Everything froze in place.

Before, time had seemed to slow down. Now, it stopped completely.

Mom fell silent and Dad's fist stopped in mid-swing. I stared at him defiantly as I dangled there. We all held our positions, a bizarre tableau of a dysfunctional family.

I broke the spell. "That's right. Your very own son is a faggot. How does that make you feel, Pop? Proud? And guess what. You can't beat that out of me."

For a brief second, I could read utter hatred in his glare. Then his eyes went dead, as if someone had flipped a switch.

Suddenly, he released his grip on me, and I collapsed to the floor, gasping in pain. His fist dropped to his side, although it remained clenched.

For a moment, all was silent.

"Get out of my house." He couldn't even bring himself to look at me. "Take your shit and get the hell out. I never want to see you again. You're no longer my son."

He kicked me in the side so hard my vision exploded in white light and pure pain. Then the world went black.

I heard his footsteps retreating, then the back door slammed shut.

I tried to sit up and focus, but the pain was excruciating. Everything was blurry.

Suddenly, I felt someone over me, and, in a flash, I was no longer in the hallway. I was lying on the ground by the pond once again with a murderer bending over me, knife raised, ready to plunge.

I screamed and struck out at the figure.

“No! Please! Please don’t kill me! Oh, God, please, no!”

“Killian!” Mom’s frightened voice brought me back. “Stop! It’s me. It’s Mom.”

I managed to focus on Mom’s face. I wasn’t in the park. I was in the hallway of our house, and I was in a lot of pain.

“How badly are you hurt?”

“Bad,” I managed to gasp.

“Can you stand up? I’ll take you to the hospital.”

“I don’t think so,” I groaned.

She tried to lift me, but she was too small, and I was in no condition to help.

“Should I call an ambulance?”

I didn’t know why I had to make all the decisions, but I was glad she asked me that one. “Call Adam Connelly.”

She gave me a blank look.

“Seth’s dad.”

“I don’t know his number.”

“It’s in my phone. In my pocket.”

She fished out my phone and she frantically searched through my contacts.

For the first time ever, I was glad that one of the conditions of Dad allowing me to have a cell phone was that I wasn’t allowed to lock it—so that he could have access to it whenever he wanted.

I heard her talking frantically to someone—Adam?—but the pain was coming in waves, each one stronger than the last. I began to lose consciousness.

I faded in and out after that. I remembered Adam arriving and cursing a great deal.

“I shouldn’t have let him come home alone. I could tell he was afraid.”

“You couldn’t know,” Mom argued. “It’s not your fault. It’s Gary’s.”

“We can play the blame game later,” another voice joined in. I thought it was Steve’s, but I was in too much pain to open my eyes to see.

At the point, someone lifted me like a doll, and I blacked out again.

When I came to, I was back in the hospital, and a doctor was talking to Mom. It wasn’t the same doctor I’d seen before. This was a younger woman wearing green scrubs.

“He’s a lucky boy,” she was saying.

Funny, I didn’t feel so lucky.

“Considering the beating he took, he’s in pretty good shape. He didn’t need any stitches and no ribs were broken. He’s going to have some nasty bruises, though.”

“What about his stab wound?” Mom asked.

“Again, he was lucky. Somehow, it didn’t reopen. He’s probably going to experience quite a bit of pain in his ribs, though. There’s a lot of bruising.”

“Can you give him anything for the pain?”

“We already have. He’ll probably be very drowsy for a while.”

“Are you going to move him to a room?”

“We’d like to observe him for a few hours. We’re a little concerned he may have a concussion, but if there are no signs of anything more serious, he can probably go home tonight. Any other questions?”

“I...yes. When I went to help him, he started screaming ‘don’t kill me’ and he struck out at me. I think he believed I was the person who stabbed him.”

“That’s possible. He was probably having a psychosomatic episode.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

“They’re often called flashbacks. We see it most often with war veterans, but it can happen to anyone who’s been through a traumatic experience. In his mind, he probably reverted to the night of the stabbing and experienced it all over again, even to the point of believing he was there, and you were his attacker.”

“Will he have them again?”

“It’s possible, maybe even probable.”

If she said anything more, I missed it, because I faded out on that bright note.

The next time I came to, Mom was having a whispered argument with Adam. I didn’t have the energy to open my eyes, so I just listened.

“Meg, you have to press charges,” Adam insisted.

“I can’t do that. You don’t understand.” Mom sounded defeated and weary, as if it wasn’t the first time they’d had this particular conversation.

“You’re right, I don’t understand. How can you let him get away with this? He could have killed Killian.”

“Do you have any idea how powerful my husband is in this county? You aren’t in Baltimore anymore. Gary is the law. He has everyone in any position of power in his pocket. If I pressed charges, the only thing to come of it would be more trouble for Killian and me. And now that you’re involved, for you, too.”

“This is child abuse. He put Killian in the hospital. It’s not like he could just shrug that off.”

“You don’t know Gary. He could get away with murder.”

There was a long pause, then Mom murmured, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I know.” He sighed. “At the very least you should file a police report.”

“The hospital has to report it. Nothing will come of it.”

“I just don’t understand how you can let him get away with this.”

“You think I want to? I want to make him pay. I want him to suffer. But I have to protect Killian first.”

“He can’t go back there.”

“Of course not. Gary kicked him out.”

“That’s not what I meant. Even if your sorry excuse for a husband hadn’t kicked him out, Killian wouldn’t be safe there.”

“No. I just... I never thought... He’s never once raised a hand to either of us.”

“Well, he has now.”

“Where will he go?”

“What if...”

“What?”

“This might sound crazy, but he could stay with me.”

“I couldn’t ask—”

“You didn’t. I offered.”

“I don’t know...”

“Look, I realize I’m practically a stranger to you, but I want to help. Killian meant a lot to Seth, and God knows I have plenty of room. He can even stay in Seth’s room. The house feels so empty now. Honestly, it would be nice to have someone around. Besides, it might be good for him to have someone around who understands what he’s going through.”

“What do you mean?”

“Meg, I’m gay. The man waiting outside? That’s Steve, my partner.”

There was another long pause, and I wondered what Mom was thinking.

“Of course,” she said at least, sounding even more rattled. “I wasn’t thinking straight. I mean—”

“I know what you meant,” Adam said.

“You don’t think it will...look inappropriate?”

“Where else would he go? Do you have other options?”

She sighed. “No. I don’t. At least not immediately. Maybe it would be okay just until I figure out something more permanent. And...I don’t know.”

Maybe it *would* be good for him to be with you for now. This is all so new to me. God knows I'm completely ignorant when it comes to...homosexuality. But I don't want to impose. Are you sure it's okay?"

"I wouldn't have offered if it wasn't. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You're welcome to stay with me, too."

"Thank you, but I have to go back."

"Are you sure you'll be safe?"

"He's...he's never hit me before."

"You said he'd never hit Killian before either."

"Yes, but he didn't tell me to leave. I'm afraid if I don't go back, he'll come looking for me. Killian will be safer this way."

"I don't like it, Meg."

"I don't like it either, but I don't have a choice. I can't press charges, and I have to go back."

"Do I get a say in this?" I croaked.

"Killian!" Mom gasped. "You're awake."

I forced my eyes open and tried to focus but everything was blurry. I had a moment of panic before I remembered that my glasses had broken. Adam and Mom were standing over my bed with matching expressions of concern.

"How long have you been listening?"

"Long enough. I'm staying with Adam?"

"If you want to," Adam qualified.

"I want to. But Mom, I don't want you to go back."

Mom slipped her hand into mine. “Baby, you know I have to. At least for now. This is all just temporary until I figure something out.”

“You promise?”

“Promise. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I’ve been dealing with your father for a long time.” She leaned in and kissed my forehead. “Get some rest, sweetie. We’ll figure it out.”

I nodded and allowed myself to drift off.

The next time I woke up, a doctor was in the room talking to Mom.

“There’s no sign of a concussion,” he was saying, “but we’d like to keep him overnight for observation, just to be safe.”

“No,” I said.

The doctor and Mom both turned to me in surprise.

“I don’t want to spend the night here. I’ve had enough of hospitals.”

“Well, we can’t make you, but I would recommend—”

“No,” I said again.

She turned to Mom, but Mom just shrugged.

There was a bit more discussion, but I eventually prevailed, and Mom called Adam to come pick me up. He’d run home to get things ready while I slept, just in case I was released.

Somehow, I stayed awake while they wheeled me out to Adam’s car. An orderly helped Adam ease me gingerly into the back seat.

Mom knelt down beside me. “I’ll bring over your clothes, laptop and anything else you need tomorrow.”

She sounded very tired. I knew how she felt. “We’ll sort everything out then.”

I nodded and struggled to hold my eyelids open.

She leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I managed to mumble.

The painkillers were really strong. My last conscious thought was that I sincerely hoped Asher had made out better than I had.

Chapter 8

I woke up in a strange room. For a few disoriented moments, I couldn't remember where I was.

Then the events from the night before came back to me. Dad had beaten me up and kicked me out., and I was staying at Seth's dad's house—indefinitely.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I hardly knew Adam. It had seemed like the best option when I was in the hospital but I was having second thoughts now that it was reality.

After a few minutes, I decided it couldn't be any worse than living at home.

My anger toward my father throbbed like a dull ache in the back of my mind. I hated him with every ounce of my being.

I sat up and gingerly felt around my ribs. Definitely sore, but bearable. I took in the room for the first time since I'd been completely out of it when Adam brought me in the night before. I caught my breath when I realized where I was.

Adam had put me into Seth's old room.

Seth's presence was everywhere. I almost felt as if he were standing beside me while I looked around at the physical memories he'd left behind. There were academic trophies on a shelf, framed playbills on the wall, and a progress pride flag pinned over his desk.

Someone knocked lightly on the door, and I jumped, wincing from the pain in my ribs.

"Yeah?" I called out through gritted teeth.

"I take it you're awake?" Adam called back through the door.

“Yes. You can come in.”

He opened the door and stepped cautiously into the room, as if unsure of his reception.

“How are you feeling?”

“Well, I’ve been better, but I guess it could’ve been worse. On average, I’d say I’m surviving.”

He chuckled. “At least you still have your sense of humor. I brought you some medicine for the pain.”

He gave me a glass of water, along with a pill that I swallowed without the water.

“Your mom is on her way over with some stuff for you. I told her—and I’m telling you—you’re welcome to stay here as long as you need to.”

“Thanks, Adam. I can’t even begin to tell you how much this means to me.”

“There’s no need to thank me, Killian. I would have wanted someone to do the same thing for Seth when he found himself in the same situation. Luckily, I was able to take him in myself. I may not be able to do much, but I can offer you shelter when you need it most. My house is your house now. Seth would have wanted it that way. In fact, if he were alive, he’d insist.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

The doorbell chimed just then, saving me from having to come up with a response as Adam hurried off to answer it.

“Saved by the bell,” I muttered.

He was back in a few minutes with Mom and, much to my surprise, Asher.

Mom noticed my eyes light up when I saw Asher, and she broke into a grin. “He insisted on coming along. I guess I made the right decision in letting him.”

After greetings and hugs were over, she asked me, "Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"A little sore, but I'll live," I told her. "How are you?"

"Your father never came home last night, which is just as well. I'm not sure what to do. I'm going to see a lawyer this afternoon."

"A lawyer? For what?"

"I didn't sleep at all last night. Besides waiting for your father, I was also thinking about what happened." She turned toward Adam. "You were right. I can't stay with him. More importantly, I don't want to stay with him."

"You're divorcing him?" I asked.

She turned back to me. "How do you feel about that?"

"I think it's about damn time!"

"Killian!" she admonished, obviously trying to hide a smile. "Watch your language. Your mother is in the room."

"Sorry, but I don't think you should stay with him another minute."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay with me leaving him."

"Okay? I'm thrilled."

She laughed, but then quickly grew serious. "I can't just walk out, though."

"Why not?"

"You know your father. I want to have all my ducks in a row before I start packing my bags. That's why I'm seeing a lawyer."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

I turned to Asher, who'd been sitting quietly on the edge of my bed. "What about you? Did you have any trouble with your parents?"

He broke into a grin. "You won't believe what happened!"

"Hang on," Mom interrupted before Asher could go on. "I've already heard this story on the way over, so while Asher fills you in, why don't I get your stuff out of the car."

"I'll help," Adam volunteered.

After they left, Asher moved closer to me on the bed.

"K, now tell me all about what I'm not gonna believe," I insisted, snuggling up next to him.

"Wow, you really do seem to be feeling better," he said with a smirk.

"That pain medicine is good stuff, although I'm sure I'll be hurting again when it wears off. Now talk."

"Okay, so, when I got home, Mom and Dad were waiting for me, and I thought I was in big trouble, but they were more concerned about you. They asked what was going on, and I just couldn't take it anymore. I told them I was gay"

"What? Oh wow. What did they say? How'd they react? Is everything okay?"

"Everything is great. They were fine with it. Well, maybe fine is a little strong, but they didn't freak out. My dad's best friend and roommate from college is gay. We've always called him Uncle Billy, even though he's not really our uncle, you know? He doesn't live around here so I don't see him much, but him and Dad

are pretty close, so it didn't weird him out too much." He said all of that without taking a breath.

I was stunned. Not only had Asher come out to his parents, but they were okay with it.

Asher took advantage of my speechless state to sneak a quick kiss.

I looked at him in surprise for a moment; I still wasn't used to him kissing me.

Suddenly, I decided to throw all caution to the wind. I reached up with one hand and pulled his face to mine while my other arm snaked around his waist. The kiss was much more passionate than our last attempt, slow and sensual. I felt his tongue against my lips and parted them.

The kiss lasted only seconds—or maybe it was years. Who could tell? When he finally pulled away, I fell back onto the bed and Asher laid his head on my chest.

"Wow," he whispered after a moment.

"Yeah, wow," I agreed.

Asher sat up quickly and scooted away as we heard footsteps coming down the hall. Adam entered with a box and gave us a funny look—we probably looked guilty as hell—but he didn't say anything. Mom followed a few seconds later with another box.

"This is all your clothes," she said. "When you're feeling better, Adam will bring you to get your car. You'll be staying here until I figure some stuff out. I've got to run now to keep my appointment with the lawyer. Asher, do you want to go with me or stay a while? Adam said he could take you home later if you want to stay."

“I’ll stay!” Asher replied immediately, then added, “If you’re sure it’s okay, Mr. Connelly.”

“It’s fine,” Adam assured him. “And you can call me Adam.”

Mom came over to give me a hug and a few words about being a good guest for Adam. Then Adam walked her out to her car, leaving Asher and me alone again.

“Um, Asher?”

“Yeah?” he answered cautiously.

“What do you think that kiss meant?”

“I dunno,” he whispered. “Maybe that you like me?”

“I told you I did, Ash.” I reached out and took his hand in mine. “I’m just confused about some stuff right now. I probably shouldn’t have kissed you like that.”

“Are you kidding?” he exclaimed. “I’m so glad you did. I want to do it again right now. And again. And again.” He giggled, then grew serious. “But what are you confused about?”

I didn’t know whether to tell him or not. How do you tell your oldest friend that you’re afraid they might have killed someone?

I almost started laughing at the thought. The pain meds were definitely kicking in, making it harder to think clearly.

Finally, I decided to be honest and let the chips fall where they would.

“Asher, I have to ask you a question. Please don’t be offended. This is really important to me, okay?”

“Sure,” he answered quickly, beginning to look a little nervous.

I took a deep breath. Here goes nothing. “Where were you when Seth was killed?”

For a long time, he didn’t say a word. I watched the light in his eyes slowly go out, as if someone were turning down a dimmer switch. The affection and warm humor were replaced by hurt and cold anger. He slowly stood and stared down at me.

I pushed myself up, wondering if I had gone too far.

“So that’s it,” he said softly, almost to himself. Then his voice grew louder, anger punctuating every word. “That’s why you’re being so weird? You think I killed Seth? You think stabbed you? You think I’m a murderer?”

His face was white with rage. A single tear slipped out the corner of his eye, but he swiped it away angrily.

“I love you, Killian,” he snapped. “I’ve loved you for years. How can you think I would ever, ever hurt you? Do you really believe I’m the kind of person who could kill someone and then sit here with you like nothing happened? Is that what you think of me? If it is, then maybe you don’t know me at all.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say a word he spun around and ran out of the room. By the time I finally found my voice, it was too late.

“Asher?” I heard Adam call out.

His only answer was a slamming door.

Adam appeared in my doorway. “What happened?” he asked sharply.

“I was stupid and said something that hurt Asher,” I told him quickly. “Please, just go after him.”

Thankfully, Adam ran off after Asher without asking a bunch of questions first. I collapsed back against my pillow and let out a long, shaky sigh.

The wait for Adam to return was pure torture. When he finally reappeared at my door, the look on his face told me all I needed to know. It hadn't gone well.

"He hates me now, doesn't he?" I said sadly.

Adam shook his head as he came into the room and sat beside me on the bed.

"He doesn't hate you. His feelings were hurt. I tried to explain to him how everything that's happened has affected you. We had a good talk."

"But he didn't come back with you."

"He needs to cool off. Don't worry, he'll come around."

"Or not," I mumbled. "Where is he now?"

"He's waiting outside. I'm going to give him a ride home now if you think you'll be okay while I'm gone."

I nodded, and he stood up and ruffled my hair. "Just give him a little time, Killian. Trust me."

My thoughts were swirling, but the drugs were making it hard to focus. I fought it for a few minutes, then gave in and sank into the blackness. If I was asleep, I didn't have to think about any of it.

The following week was spent in recovery. Adam would allow me to walk from the bedroom to the living room and that was about it. He waited on me hand and foot. Although I joked that he was going to spoil me, it was actually starting to drive me crazy. Since Adam

worked from home, I felt like I never had a moment to myself.

The bright side of all that togetherness was that Adam and I got to know each other better. We talked a lot about Seth, as well as about Adam and his life.

I learned how Seth had come to live with Adam, and why his other son, Kane, still lived with Adam's ex-wife. Kane, it turned out, was the other boy who appeared in many of the pictures of Seth. Kane and Seth had been very close while they were growing up, and Seth had missed his brother terribly after coming to live with Adam, but the boys' mother wouldn't allow Kane to see Adam or Seth at all.

Adam choked up whenever he talked about his younger son. Kane's fifteenth birthday was coming up in a week, and Adam seemed pretty despondent about not being able to be with him.

I felt for Adam. I could tell just by the way he looked at the pictures how much he loved and missed Kane. I knew it had to be even harder as he dealt with his grief. I couldn't imagine anyone being cruel enough to keep a man's only living son away from him at a time like that.

When I asked Adam about it, he simply said it was more hopeless than ever, since his ex-wife was blaming him for Seth's death.

Adam's boyfriend Steve came over for dinner one night, which helped distract Adam a little. I even helped Adam cook, as much as he'd let me anyway, which mostly involved things I could while sitting at the counter, like peel potatoes. Steve lived an hour away, so he couldn't come over all that often, though I also

wondered if my presence was maybe putting a bit of a crimp in their style.

Having Steve around definitely reminded me how much I missed Asher. Not that he was my boyfriend or anything, but we did kiss. I hadn't seen him since our fight, but he did bring my make-up work from school as far as the front door, where he handed it over to Adam, so I figured that was a good sign, at least.

Mom came to visit fairly often, and we talked on the phone on the days she couldn't make it. She and her lawyer were devising ways to get her out of the house as soon as possible, but she was still afraid of what Dad might do when she tried to leave him.

On the bright side, she said he wasn't home much and, when he was, he barely spoke to her and never mentioned me. It was as if I had never existed.

Despite her positive attitude, I was worried about her, fearing he'd become violent again and she'd have no one there to help her.

By the end of the week, I was feeling well enough that I thought I might try to go back to school Monday morning.

On Saturday, after calling to make sure Dad wasn't home, Adam took me to pick up my car. I wanted to see Asher while we were in the neighborhood, but Adam thought I should wait for him to come to me.

As Kane's birthday drew nearer and nearer, Adam became more and more withdrawn and depressed. I desperately wanted to do something, but I had no idea what. Kane's birthday was on Wednesday, and it wasn't until Sunday afternoon when I had my brainstorm. I spent the next hour hatching a brilliant plan.

The first step was getting Adam out of the house. “Hey, Adam,” I said, as casually as possible while popping into the living room where he was watching a movie. “I had an idea.”

He paused the movie. “What’s up?”

“It’s been a long week, and all you’ve done is sit around the house and take care of me. You deserve a night out. Why don’t you and Steve have a date night?”

He gave me a confused look. “What?”

“You’ve barely seen him this week, and I’m feeling a little guilty about that, like I’m kind of in the way.”

“You’re absolutely not in the way!”

“Okay, but you still deserve a night out.”

“If I’m getting on your nerves and you need some time alone, you could just say so,” he said with a grin.

“No! That’s not—”

“Killian, I’m kidding. But a night out does sound pretty good. Maybe I’ll call Steve and see if he’s free. Are you sure you’d be okay alone for a few hours?”

“I’m fine. You could even spend the night if you want.”

His eyebrows jumped up, and my face grew warm.

“I just mean... I wasn’t...”

He laughed and pulled out his phone, letting me off the hook.

After a brief conversation, Adam and Steve settled on dinner, and Adam headed upstairs to shower. A while later, he came back down in dress pants and a

button-up with the top two buttons open, showing off some chest hair.

“Looking good,” I said with a whistle.

“Sorry, Killian, but I’m already taken,” he said with a wink. He grabbed his keys and started out the door but paused and looked back over his shoulder. “Don’t wait up.”

As soon as he left, I went to work on step two. I needed information.

I felt a little guilty about digging through Adam’s desk, but I justified it by convincing myself that the end would justify the means.

After only a few minutes of searching, I was rewarded with an address book. I was glad Adam was old enough to still keep a physical one. Every number I had was stored in my phone.

I flipped through until I found the number I was looking for, then excitedly dialed the number and listened while it rang once...twice...three times. I grew more anxious with every ring.

Just as I was about to lose my nerve and hang up, someone finally answered. “Hello?”

I couldn’t tell if it was a woman or a boy whose voice hadn’t yet changed.

“Hello?” I said hesitantly.

Now that I had someone on the line, I was second guessing my plan.

“Hello?” they said again.

I almost said “hello” back once more, but stopped just in time to cut off what could have become an endless spiral of salutations.

“Um...is this Kane?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?”

I sighed with relief.

Once I started speaking the words tumbled out in a rush. “You don’t know me, but my name is Killian. I know your brother Seth. Knew. I knew your brother. I’m, uh, really sorry for your loss.” That felt so inadequate, but I didn’t know what else to say, so I rushed on. “And I know your dad, too. Actually, I’m live with him now. Your dad, I mean.”

I paused to take a breath, and Kane jumped in. “You live with my dad?” He sounded confused.

Can’t say I blamed him.

“Yeah, it’s, um... It’s kinda a long story, but that’s not why I called.”

“Wait. Why did you call? Do you need to talk to my mom or something? She’s not home right now...”

“No, I called to talk to you.”

“Me? Why me?”

“It’s about your dad.”

“Is he there? Can I talk to him?”

“No, he’s out...” I almost said he was on a date, but realized I was in imminent danger of getting off track again. “He went out for a bit, and I found your number. He doesn’t know I’m calling you.”

“Huh?”

“Your birthday is this Wednesday, right?”

“Yeah?” He sounded even more confused.

“Look, this is very weird, and I’m a little uncomfortable.”

“Please don’t hang up!” I started talking fast again, trying to get everything out before he could end the call. “Your birthday is all your dad has talked about

for the last week. He's been so depressed because he can't be there with you. He misses you so much. Since he can't see you on your birthday, I thought maybe if you called that day, it would be better than nothing. Maybe it will cheer him up."

"We haven't spoken in years," he said slowly. "When Seth started visiting him last year, we were always going to try and get me to his house, but then Seth moved out, and I never saw him again. He didn't even leave a note or anything. I just came home one day, and he was gone. I never heard from either one of them. I figured they didn't want anything to do with me."

"It wasn't like that at all," I said gently. "Seth missed you terribly. Your dad misses you, too. It kills him not to see you. He has pictures of you everywhere. I know he would love to talk to you."

"Then why didn't he call me? Why didn't Seth?"

"Your, uh... Your mom wouldn't let them. She told them they couldn't contact you. I think maybe there were lawyers involved and stuff."

"Lawyers? But why?"

"Um..." I wasn't sure how much I should say.

"Was it because they're gay?"

"Oh. Um. Yeah, I guess."

"Well that's dumb."

"So you, um, you knew, huh?"

"Of course."

"And it didn't bother you?"

"Why would it? You love who you love. Besides, Seth was a great brother—" He stopped as his voice grew thick. He took a deep breath and continued. "He was the best big brother. He was more like my best

friend. I didn't care that he was gay. But wait. Back up. Are you sure my mom kicked him out?"

"That's what Seth told me."

"Wow."

He went quiet, and I didn't know what to say. I was starting to think this had been a mistake.

Finally, I asked. "Are you still there?" No answer. "Kane?"

"What? Oh. Yeah. I'm here. I'm just... I don't know. I guess I'm pissed. I've always tried to understand my mom, but I had no idea she was keeping me from Seth and Dad. She said he ran away. She always made it sound like they didn't want anything to do with me."

"Yeah, um, that's definitely not accurate."

"Like, I get why she might be mad about Dad. They were married. That has to be rough, finding out your husband likes dick more than he likes you, you know? But Seth? That's her son. How do you just turn your back on your own kid?"

I flinched, thinking about my own father.

"And why didn't Seth call or text me or hit me up online or something. I mean, I guess I'm a little to blame. I didn't try to contact him either. I was so mad when he ran away and didn't even say goodbye. I thought we were tighter than that. Do you know what happened, why mom kicked him out? Did she find out he was gay?"

"She, uh, caught him with a guy."

"She what?"

"Yeah."

"Oh God! What if he thought I hated him too? Is that why he didn't try to contact me?"

“I... I don’t know. I mean, I don’t think he thought that.” I didn’t actually know what Seth thought since we’d never talked about his brother, but it seemed like the right thing to say. “He, um, seemed really comfortable with his sexuality.”

Kane went quiet again, then asked, “Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Gay?”

I hesitated, but only for a moment. “Yeah, I am.” It still felt strange to say, but very right.

“Were you Seth’s boyfriend or something?”

“No, we were just friends, but he helped me accept myself for who I am.”

“Yeah, that sounds like Seth. Did he have a boyfriend?”

“No, he didn’t.”

I was hoping he’d stop asking me questions about Seth. I didn’t want to have to tell him he’d been ostracized and bullied at his new school and that I was the closest thing he had to a friend, and even that was stretching it.

“Are you my dad’s boyfriend?” he asked.

“No! I’m sixteen!”

“Oh. So you’re, like, the same age as Seth.”

“Yeah. We went to school together.”

“Does my dad have a boyfriend?”

“Um...maybe you should ask him that.”

“That means he does.”

“So, uh, anyway, you want to call him on Wednesday? Like as a surprise?”

“Duh. What’s his number? And... actually, can you give me his address too? Maybe I’ll write him a letter or something.”

I gave him Adam’s phone number and address.
“You promise you’ll call?”

“Yeah, bro. Definitely. The hard part will be waiting until my birthday. Look, I have, like, so, so many things I want to ask you, but I should probably go before my mom gets home. She’d ask a million questions about who I was talking to, and I’d rather not get into all that with her right now. Can we talk again some time?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Can I get your number too, then?”

“I called from my phone, so you have my number already.”

“Cool. Um... What’s your name again? I know you told me, but my head is kind of swimming, and I don’t remember.”

“It’s Killian.”

“Got it. Well, thanks for calling, Killian. You’ve really given me a lot to think about.”

“Yeah, uh, sorry for the info dump.”

“No, don’t be. I’m glad to know the truth. And it’ll be great to talk to Dad again. I can’t wait for Wednesday.”

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

I felt very satisfied with what I had accomplished. I couldn’t wait for Wednesday, either.

Chapter 9

I woke up the next morning full of excitement, an emotion I hadn't felt in quite some time. I was excited for three reasons.

First was my conversation the night before with Kane. I couldn't wait to see Adam's face when his son called on Wednesday.

Secondly, I was returning to school. After missing two weeks, I was anxious to get back. I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand being an invalid. At the same time, I was pretty nervous about it, since I knew I had been a main topic of conversation.

The third reason for my excitement was that I was getting new glasses. Mom was picking me up before school and taking me to the optometrist to replace the ones Dad had shattered when he punched me. I'd been going without ever since, which had resulted in more than a few headaches while I tried to stay caught up with homework. I couldn't wait to see clearly again.

I was ready and sitting on the front porch when Mom arrived to pick me up for my appointment. After the optometrist checked my eyes to see if my prescription was still current, he asked me the same question he always did when I got new glasses: "So, Killian, have you thought any more about switching to contacts?"

I started to answer with my usual "no thanks," but for some reason I stopped and thought about it. I'd always been turned off by the idea of sticking my finger in my eyes, but if other people could get used to it, maybe I could too.

More importantly, I felt like I was starting a new phase of my life. I'd come out to several people, and, while some of them hadn't taken it so well, to say the least, most had accepted me. It was time to make a fresh start, and that meant making some changes. Maybe the new me should be reflected in my appearance, and I could start by getting contacts. It may seem small, but it felt significant.

"Yeah, I think I'd like to try them," I told him.

He looked up in amazement. "You would?"

"Yeah, I'm ready for something new."

"Okay." He still seemed a little surprised at the change in our routine. "Well then, let's take another look at a few things."

He moved the machines back over my eyes and did a few more tests.

After a while, he sat back and said, "You have great eyes for contacts. You shouldn't have any problems. I think we even have your prescription in stock. You can take them home today."

Before I could leave, I had to practice putting the contacts in over and over until I could do it without flinching. It wasn't as bad as I'd feared, although it did take me about twenty minutes on each eye the first time. I was blinking a lot, but they were in. I decided to wear them to school.

On the way out to the car, I thought of another change that was way past due. It had been a while since my last trip to the barber, and my hair was looking decidedly shaggy. I asked Mom if I could get it cut after school. I was ready for a new style.

"We can go now, if you want," she replied.

“What about school?”

“You’re already late. The contacts took longer than I expected. You might as well look your best for your first day back.”

In the face of such rock-solid reasoning, I happily agreed.

I usually went to my dad’s barber, but when I told Mom I was looking for a change, she took me to her salon and turned me over to her own hairdresser, a woman improbably named Bambi. She was wearing a stylish suit that would have been appropriate in a boardroom.

Her hair, on the other hand, had more colors than a rainbow. It shifted as she moved, almost looking iridescent like a crow’s feathers.

“So, do you know what kind of style you want?” Bambi asked, seating me in her chair and making eye contact with me in the mirror.

Her hair held me in such a thrall that the question went right over my head. “What?” I asked, my eyes never leaving her head.

She smiled. My reaction must have been one she’d grown used to.

“What are you looking for? Do you have a style in mind? Want to go my do?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m just tired of this style. I want to look...nice. Do whatever you want.” I grinned at her.

She raised an eyebrow, which I noticed was pierced, and laughed. “Stylists live for clients like you!”

She walked slowly around the chair, studying me from every angle, then ran her fingers through my hair,

pushed it back from my forehead, fluffed it up, then slicked it down with a misting bottle. She walked around again, then stopped behind me and gave me a serious look through our reflection.

“I think we should do something similar to mine,” she suggested at last.

My eyes grew wide, and she burst into laughter.

“Just kidding, cutie. Don’t worry. When I’m done, you’ll have the girls falling all over you.”

I was tempted to inform her that I wasn’t particularly interested in having girls fall all over me. Then I decided my sexuality was one of those need-to-know type situations, and Bambi definitely did not need to know. And had she called me cutie?

She turned my chair so I couldn’t see the mirror and went to work on my locks with her scissors. At one point, a straight razor came out, and then she squeezed a glob of some goop into her hand and worked it into my hair before spending the next five minutes playing with it. I sincerely hoped it wouldn’t take me that long every morning.

About half an hour after she’d begun, she spun me around to give me my first look at the finished product. My hair was quite a bit shorter than before, very different from the shapeless mop I’d come in with. The sides were cut close, but it was longer on top, and somehow, she’d tamed my unruly waves into soft, neat curls. It was the sort of haircut you saw on actors or models, not me. I barely recognized the guy staring back at me in the mirror.

“So, what do you think?” she asked me.

“I love it! But...will I be able to make it look like that at home?”

Bambi laughed. “It’s a super low maintenance style.” She handed me the tube of goo she’d used. “Just rub a little of this between your palms and run it through your hair after you shower and let it air dry. It’ll do whatever it wants and look great, I promise.”

“Oh. Yeah. I think I can handle that.”

After Mom paid for my haircut and tipped Bambi—generously, at my insistence—we were off for school.

The closer we got, the more nervous I became. I’d been out for two weeks, and, in that time, I knew I had been the main topic in the rumor mills. Now, I had a new look that, for all I knew, everyone would hate. What if it made me look gayer? Or like I was trying too hard? What if people made fun of me?

I tried to summon up the courage from earlier, the courage belonging to that new Killian who was ready for change, but, apparently, he’d stepped out for the moment.

Mom noticed, of course. She glanced over at me with an amused smile. “Calm down. I can feel your nerves from here. You’re gonna be fine, Killian. You look so handsome with your new haircut. I’m sure everyone will love it.”

“But what if everybody hates it?”

“They won’t. And if they do, who cares? I know I’m just your mom, and my opinion doesn’t really count, but I think the new look is super sexy.”

“Mom!”

“What? I can’t say you’re sexy?”

“No! It just sounds gross coming from you.”

“You just look so grown up. The girls will be all over you.” She paused for a moment and then casually added, “Too bad you won’t be interested.”

I stared at her in surprise for a second, my mouth hanging open in shock. When she couldn’t keep a straight face, I realized she was joking, and we both burst into laughter. It was a little weird for my mom to be cracking gay jokes already, but I figured it could have been worse.

“You should have seen your face,” she gasped as we pulled into the school drop-off point.

I grabbed my backpack, then impulsively leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks, Mom. For everything.”

She started looking a little misty, and I decided it was definitely time to make my exit. I jumped out of the car and waved as I started backing toward the building. “I love you,” she called as she pulled away. “Have a great day!”

I turned and faced the school, took a deep breath, then released it slowly.

Here goes nothing.

Since I was late, I had to check in at the office. Everyone there was overly nice to me, telling me not to worry about being late and writing me passes. Essentially, I could have shown up five minutes before the final bell, and everything would still have been hunky-dory with them. I guess there were some benefits to being stabbed and having it splashed all over the news.

At my school, we have a four-period day, which means each period is much longer than with traditional seven-period days. I came in right at the end of my second period. The rest of the day went almost too well, with everyone going out of their way to be nice to me. So many people complimented me on my new look that it started to make me self-conscious. Was I that bad before? Prior to my makeover, no one had ever shown the slightest bit of interest in me.

I quickly discovered I really didn't like being the center of attention. I preferred my usual anonymity.

After the final bell rang, I looked for Asher. While I didn't love all the attention, the compliments had definitely given my ego a hefty boost, and I was feeling confident enough to try patching things up. Even though Adam said I should wait for Asher to come to me, I felt like the situation with him had dragged on long enough. I wanted to ask him to forgive me and see if we couldn't be friends again.

Unfortunately, I couldn't find him anywhere.

Since Mom had dropped me off, Adam was supposed to pick me up. I was leaning against the wall outside waiting for him, when Zack and Jesse approached me.

"Killian," Zack greeted me nonchalantly as he and Jesse took up positions against the wall on either side of me.

They didn't fool me, though. I knew it was no casual social visit.

"Zack. Jesse," I replied nervously.

"I think we need to talk," Zack continued.

"Yeah? What about?"

“I think you know,” he countered.

“I don’t think I do. I’ve been gone a while. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Stop playing games, Killian,” the ever-helpful Jesse chipped in.

“I’m not playing games. You guys are the ones who haven’t so much as spoken to me in weeks. I was in the hospital and then stuck at home, and you didn’t even bother to call and see how I was doing.”

“Well, you’re not at home anymore, are you,” Zack said.

“No, I’m not. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with...um, everything,” Zack explained, as if I was a particularly slow student. “Look, we’re not dumb. You start hanging out with Seth and you ditch us, then you’re in the park at night with him, you get stabbed, you get kicked out of your house, and next thing we know you’ve moved in with his dad. Now you’re back looking like this.” He waved a hand at my face. “It doesn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

“That’s good since neither of you is a genius. What exactly have you figured out, though?”

“You’re gay, aren’t you?”

I’d known I’d have to face the question eventually, but somehow it still caught me off guard. I wasn’t ready to come out to the whole school yet, and telling Zack and Jesse would be the equivalent of doing just that, but what could I say that they would believe?

I thought frantically for a few seconds, then decided the truth was always the best way to go—or in this case, part of the truth.

“Look, Seth and I were just friends. He didn’t have any here, and I felt sorry for him. I was meeting him that night, but just to talk. It was a classic case of wrong place, wrong time. And my dad kicked me out because I went to Seth’s funeral. You know what a dick my dad is.”

They stared at me for at least a minute. You could almost see the wheels turning in their tiny little brains. The silence was so heavy I almost forgot to breathe.

Suddenly, Zack pushed away from the wall. I couldn’t help flinching at his unexpected movement.

“Okay, Killian,” he said finally. “I’ll buy that for now, but we’ll be watching you. I just hope you can get back to normal now that the fag’s gone.”

I was suddenly so furious that my sight actually blurred. I’ve always heard the expression “seeing red,” and in that moment I knew exactly what it meant. It took everything in me to remain outwardly calm and quiet as they walked away. This isn’t the time or place, I repeated over and over to myself.

I was still trying to calm my pounding heart when Adam arrived. I climbed into the car, slammed the door and slumped down in the seat.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked.

“Nothing,” I snapped.

“Bad first day back?”

“No. It’s just...Arg! I hate stupid people.”

“There’s no shortage of those. Was it anything in particular or merely your everyday, average, run-of-the-mill stupidity?”

“Zack and Jesse just make me so mad. I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“No problem. If you change your mind, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks, Adam,” I said sincerely. “When I get back to your house, is it okay if I take my car and go see Asher? I think it’s time we talked about what happened. I know you said to wait for him to come to me, but I’m tired of waiting.”

“That’s fine. He might be ready by now, but don’t push it. If he still doesn’t want to talk, let it go.”

I nodded, but I had no intention of letting it go. I’d been doing that for too long already.

“By the way,” he added. “I love the new look.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled.

I drove over to Asher’s house and knocked on the door.

His mom answered. She was a short, slightly plump woman who always seemed to be in a good mood, with a ready smile. She was prone to wearing bright colors and combinations such as the lime-green pants and fuzzy purple sweater she had on right then. I loved hanging out at Asher’s house just so I could be around her. Her first name was Debra, but she went by Deb. She was always telling me to call her that, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. She’d always be Mrs. Davis to me.

“Killian!” she exclaimed in surprise and gave me a huge hug. “I hardly recognized you! You look so handsome. Asher’s been keeping us up to date on how you’re doing. Are you feeling better?”

“Much better,” I replied. “I went back to school today. Is Asher home?”

“No, he went out with Zack and Jesse.” That was news. The last I’d heard, they were fighting.

“Oh. Okay. Well...would you tell him I came by to talk to him?” I paused for a moment, then added, “Tell him I said I’m sorry.”

“I’ll do that, Killian,” she said. “And you take care of yourself, okay?”

“Thanks, Mrs. Davis. I’ll try.”

Tuesday was pretty much a repeat of Monday, except I drove to and from school, making sure I parked in a different part of the lot to avoid more awkward conversations with Zack and Jesse.

Asher had either dropped off the face of the earth or was still avoiding me. Since I hadn’t heard any rumors of his sudden disappearance, I could only assume the latter. It hurt that he still wouldn’t talk to me, but Adam kept saying he would come around eventually. If I heard “just give him time” once more, I thought I would scream. How much time would it take? I really missed him.

Wednesday was pure torture. Between Asher avoiding me and the anticipation of Kane calling that evening, I was distracted all day. I couldn’t wait to see the look on Adam’s face.

As soon as the final bell rang, I shot out of the building like it was the first day of summer vacation. I drove straight to Adam’s house and, as soon as I opened the door, the scent of garlic and spices filled my nose. I followed the smell to the kitchen where I found Steve at the stove stirring something in a big pot.

“It that spaghetti sauce I smell?” I asked.

He jumped and spun around. “Oh, hey there, kiddo,” he called out. “I didn’t even hear you come in.” Then he really took me in. “Whoa, new look! Very stylish!”

“Thanks.” I sniffed the pot. “Smells good. I didn’t realize you were going to be here tonight.”

“It was one of those last-minute things,” he told me. “Since today is Kane’s birthday, and I know how hard it is on Adam, I thought I’d come over and cook dinner for you guys. You know, offer a little moral support.”

“That was really nice of you.” I couldn’t hold back my grin any longer. I had to share my news or I’d burst. “I have a surprise that ought to cheer him up.”

“Oh, yeah? And what’s that?”

“If I told you then it wouldn’t be a surprise, now, would it?” I teased.

“What wouldn’t be a surprise?” Adam asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Steve called over his shoulder as he dumped dry spaghetti noodles into boiling water. “If I can’t hear what it is then neither can you.”

Adam walked over and slipped his arms around Steve’s waist while kissing him on the back of the neck.

“Hey, don’t distract the cook,” Steve laughed. “And if you’re trying to get the secret out of me, it won’t work because I don’t know it.”

Adam pulled away from Steve, picked up a spaghetti strainer, and advanced on me. “Tell me the secret or I’ll strain it out of you,” he growled menacingly.

We all cracked up.

The joking continued as I sat at the kitchen table under the warm yellow light from the overhead lamp and started my homework.

Meanwhile, Steve and Adam pattered happily around me preparing dinner. At some point, someone put on some music and the grooves mixed with the pungent smell of garlic and oregano filling the house.

The atmosphere in the Connelly kitchen was quite festive, and I realized that, for the first time in a very long time, I felt totally relaxed and happy.

I wasn't worried about my dad coming home and being in a bad mood or interrogating me over dinner. I didn't have to hide who I was. I was completely free to be myself, fully accepted.

I was home.

I stopped working to just bask in the moment. I wanted to commit it to memory. It was such a perfect domestic scene; unlike anything I'd ever experienced before.

Then, smiling to myself, I went back to my work.

I had to move when Steve started setting the table. I was loathe to leave the warmth and security of the kitchen, however, so I stretched out on the floor and kept working until dinner was ready.

We had just sat down to eat when the doorbell rang.

"Who could that be?" Adam wondered.

"I'll get it," I offered, hoping it was Asher.

I opened the door and felt my eyes bug out of my head. I'd only seen the person standing at the door in photos, but I recognized him immediately.

“Kane?” I gasped. “Oh my God! I thought you were just going to call. What are you doing here? How’d you get here?”

“You must be Killian,” he said softly, ignoring my barrage of questions. With a shy smile, he offered his hand.

I nodded as I shook it, my mind still processing this unexpected turn of events. I couldn’t believe Kane was standing on the porch.

He wore baggy jeans and a far-too-large gray hoodie that came halfway down his thighs, a red T-shirt peeking out at the collar. The oversized clothes made him look like a lost little boy.

I couldn’t help comparing him with Seth. Where Seth had the long gangly frame of a runner, Kane was stockier—more solid and less delicate. That wasn’t the only difference. Kane was also quite a bit shorter, and his hair was a darker shade of red, more auburn.

His eyes, though, were the same intense green as Seth’s. If Seth had looked like an elf prince, Kane looked like an elfin warrior.

“So, um...is my dad here?” he asked me after a few seconds.

I realized I was staring and quickly looked away. “Oh, uh, sorry, yeah,” I stuttered. “I just didn’t expect to see you. He’s, uh, in the kitchen.”

I moved aside to allow him in. As he stepped by, I noticed he had a backpack slung over his shoulder and was carrying a skateboard by the front axle.

“Who is it, Killian?” Adam called from the kitchen.

Kane's eyes lit up at the sound of his father's voice.

"Just a sec," I spun toward the kitchen and yelled before pivoting back to Kane. "How did you get here? Are you staying? Does your mom know you're here?" I was trying to keep my voice down, but it kept rising.

"I caught a bus and then a taxi," he explained, attempting to match my low tones. His eyes kept sliding down the hallway toward the kitchen doorway. "I don't know if I'm staying. I guess that depends on Dad. Mom thinks I'm spending the night with a friend for my birthday."

He got a impish glint in his eyes as a smirk spread across his face. "She's gonna lost her shit when she finds out I'm not really at Connor's house, but I don't care. That's what she gets for lying to me. I just had to see Dad."

"Oh, jeez," I moaned, wondering exactly how much trouble I'd gotten myself into. "Okay."

I took a deep breath and started again. "Okay, well, you're here now so...let's make the best of it. Hold on a second. I'll go in and set it up." The more I thought about the situation, the better it got. "Oh, man, this is so much cooler than just a phone call!"

Kane giggled nervously, and I shushed him. With another deep breath, I walked back into the kitchen.

"Who was it?" Adam asked. He and Steve had started eating while I was gone.

"You remember that surprise I mentioned earlier?"

Steve and Adam both looked up, their expressions filled with curiosity.

“Yes?” Adam said.

“Well, it didn’t turn out quite how I expected, but I’m pretty sure you’ll like this even better.”

“Did you order me something, Killian?” Adam asked me. “Whatever it is I’m sure I’ll love it.”

I sure hoped so. I took one more deep breath and called to Kane. “Come on in.”

He stepped slowly into the kitchen, as if suddenly uncertain of his welcome.

For a few moments, you could have heard the proverbial pin drop. Then Adam leapt up from the table with a clatter of discarded silverware and ran toward Kane, lifting him off his feet in a huge bear hug.

They spun around silently for a few moments before Adam set him down gently on his feet. When he pulled back, there were tears running down his cheeks.

He cupped Kane’s face in his hands. “Kane! Look how tall you are! How did you get here? Does your mother know you’re here?”

“I caught a bus, and no, she doesn’t know yet,” Kane answered. He sounded just as emotional as Adam.

“A bus? By yourself?” Adam pulled him in for another hug and looked at me over Kane’s head. “Was this your doing?”

“Sort of,” I admitted. “But I thought he was just gonna call.”

“Well, thank you,” he said, reaching out and drawing me into the hug as well. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

Steve cleared his throat, and our little huddle broke up. “I think a phone call might be in order,” he suggested gently.

Steve always seemed to be the voice of reason.

“Yes,” Adam agreed, although he didn’t sound very enthusiastic. “We need to call your mother. But first...let’s eat and just... enjoy this for a minute before all hell breaks loose. There’s plenty of food. Oh, Kane, this is my boyfriend, Steve. Steve, this is my son, Kane.”

“I knew you had a boyfriend!” Kane crowed.

“What?” Adam asked, confused.

“We’ll explain later,” I said. “Let’s just eat.”

“Okay,” Adam agreed happily. You could tell he was just happy Kane was there. “Wait! How could I forget? We have to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to Kane!”

After a rousing chorus of “Happy Birthday,” we set another place at the table and sat down to eat.

Although, there was a lot more conversation than eating going on. We started with explanations about how I’d found Kane, then Kane had to tell us about his bus ride, then we all spent a few minutes catching up.

My glow of contentment from earlier had only deepened, filling me with an unfamiliar sense of familial warmth.

When dinner was finished and we’d rinsed and stacked everything in the dishwasher, Adam sighed.

“Well, I think we’ve put this off long enough. Let’s call your mother.”

Kane pulled out his phone and called home. After a few rings, he began to talk, explaining quickly where he was.

We could only hear his side of the conversation, but things seemed to go downhill faster than an Olympic skier.

“But Mom—” he kept saying, as she apparently kept cutting him off.

Finally, he just sighed and held the phone out to his father.

Adam winced, but reluctantly took the phone. “Hello, Eve,” he said guardedly. “It’s been a long time.” He closed his eyes and listened for a moment. “No, I had no idea he was coming.” Pause. “No, I didn’t secretly sneak him down here.” Pause. “No, Eve, it’s not a kidnapping. Don’t call the police. There’s no sense in blowing this out of proportion.” Long pause. “That’s fine, then, I’ll look forward to seeing you.”

He ended the call and added, “About as much as I look forward to having all my teeth ripped from my head while having all my body hair plucked out and ice picks shoved through my eyes and...and—”

I couldn’t help it, I started laughing. Adam looked over at me with a half-smile. After a few seconds, he too began to chuckle. The tension broke, and soon we were all howling. The easy, comfortable feeling from earlier returned.

“What did she say?” Steve asked.

“A lot that I won’t repeat,” Adam said with a wry smile, “but the gist of it, once we’d established that I was a no-good, lying, kidnapping son-of-a-bitch that she never should have married, was that she’ll be down late tomorrow afternoon to pick you up, Kane.”

“You mean I get to spend the night?” he asked excitedly.

“Yep,” Adam confirmed. “And we’d better make the most of it, because it might be the last time until you turn eighteen.”

Kane sighed, but then brightened up almost immediately. “Can we play board games?”

We moved to the living room where we played board games as per the birthday boy’s request, accompanied by much laughing and joking around. Kane turned out to be very funny and clever once he relaxed.

Things bogged down a bit at one point, though, when everyone started reminiscing about Seth. We all got a little teary, until eventually Kane and Adam started telling anecdotes about Seth when he was younger, and, in no time, we were all laughing again, though now our mood held a bittersweet undercurrent.

The doorbell rang again, and everyone turned to look at me.

“What?” I asked.

“Is this another surprise?” Steve asked.

“If so, it isn’t mine,” I told them. “But I’ll answer it anyway.”

I flipped on the porch light as I opened the front door—and froze.

“Hi, Killian.”

I stood staring at Asher, unsure of what to say. He was just about the last person I expected to see.

“Mom said you stopped by,” he broke the silence.

“Two days ago,” I answered.

“Yeah, sorry about that.”

“It’s kind of late.”

I wasn’t sure why I was being such a bitch. After all, I was the one who’d wanted to reconcile. I guess part of me felt like he was interrupting my family time after totally avoiding me for over a week.

“Look, can we talk?” he said, sounding exasperated. “I don’t care if it’s inside or out, but I feel dumb standing at the door.”

I thought for a second, then called into the house, “It’s for me. I’ll be a few minutes.”

I stepped out onto the porch without waiting for an answer and shut the door behind me. I stared at him expectantly. He’d looked as if made a special effort with his appearance. I even thought I caught a whiff of aftershave. He stood with his hands stuffed into his pockets, looking everywhere but at me.

I waited, and he waited until, finally, I couldn’t stand the silence anymore. “You said you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah.”

“So talk.”

He shifted from one foot to the other, seemingly at a loss for words.

“So far, this could have been a text,” I said trying to make a joke, but it landed with a thud.

“Would you have answered?”

“Hey, I’m the one who came by your house, remember? I’ve been looking for you every day at school. You’ve obviously been avoiding me. Don’t act like this is somehow my fault.”

He sighed. “Look, I’m sorry, Killian. I’m sorry I got mad the other day, and you’re right, I have been avoiding you. I’m sorry for that, too. Adam explained to me how all...how everything that happened has messed with your head, how much it scared you, took away your sense of safety and made it harder for you to trust people.”

“He said all that?” I was surprised.

“Yeah. Maybe I should’ve understood it right away, but I wasn’t ready. I was upset that you could even believe for one second that I could hurt—let alone kill—someone. I’ve thought about it a lot, though, and I think I finally understand. I guess what I’m trying to say is...I’m ready to try again...that is, if you want to.”

“I... I do want to try, but...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

Frustration filled his voice.

“What if every time we have a problem you run off the way you did? Plus, after you told me all those things Adam said, maybe I shouldn’t even be in a relationship right now. And I’m not ready to come out at school. I...I don’t want to end up like Seth.”

My voice cracked and struggled to maintain my composure.

Asher shifted uncertainly, as if he weren’t sure what he should do. After a moment’s hesitation, he moved closer and wrapped his arms around me. I bit my lip to keep from crying as he just held me for a few moments.

He dropped his arms and stepped back awkwardly, avoiding looking directly at me.

“All I can do is say I’ll try my best not to run away again, but I don’t guess I can make any guarantees. It’s my personality. I hate conflict, and I’ll do whatever I can to avoid it.”

“Like I enjoy it,” I sniffled into his arm.

“I know you don’t enjoy it, but you don’t run from it either. Look at how you stood up to Zack and Jesse, and then to your dad. You’re a lot braver than you give yourself credit for.

“I guess... I guess what I’m trying to say is I’d like for us to try dating, but only if you trust me and you’re ready for a relationship. I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

“But...”

“Hang on. I’m not finished. I have no intentions of coming out at school either, whether we’re together or not. I don’t want to deal with that any more than you do. At least not for a while.”

He paused and his eyes darted in my direction. “And if you don’t want to date, I understand that, too, and I want us to stay friends. This isn’t like an ultimatum. We can go slow if that’s what you need. Whatever you decide, I’m here for you.”

I took his chin and turned him to face me. I stared into his eyes, trying to judge his sincerity, and found myself lost in their depths. I felt as if I were falling into the night sky, tumbling toward the moon.

How could I have missed noticing his eyes before? They were an odd color, kind of a silvery-gray. They were beautiful.

“What?” he asked.

“It’s...nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “I just... I need some time to think about it.”

Asher gave me a hurt look. “More time?”

“It’s a lot to process!”

“But if you weren’t ready, why’d you come looking for me?”

“Because I missed you, you big dummy. And I felt bad that I’d hurt your feelings. I’m not asking for a week or anything, just tonight. I’ll give you an answer tomorrow. I promise.”

He nodded, stepped back, then quickly stepped in close again and kissed me softly on the lips.

Without even giving me time to react, he spun around and leaped off the porch in a single jump. He stopped at his car and gave me an awkward wave, then jumped in and drove off.

I stood alone on the porch for several minutes before going back inside. Everyone was very respectful about my brief absence. In fact, they all studiously avoided asking me about it at all, which made me even more suspicious. I wondered if one of them had checked on me but shook it off and, soon, the mood from earlier was recaptured—for the most part. I was maybe just a little more distracted than before.

After a few more games, Adam announced that it was time for bed. This caused some discussion about where Kane was going to sleep. There were only two bedrooms. There was the couch in the living room, but it wasn’t very comfortable to sleep on, as I’d discovered during my recuperation.

Finally, we decided he would bunk with me. Steve, of course, was sleeping with Adam. We all took turns in the bathroom, then went to our respective rooms.

Seth’s bed was queen-size, so after some brief negotiation, Kane and I decided to share instead of one of us sleeping on the floor. I was a little worried that he wouldn’t want to sleep in the same bed as a bed with a gay guy, but it didn’t seem to faze him in the least.

We stripped down to our T-shirts and boxers, climbed under the covers, and I snapped out the light. We settled in, squirming and wiggling until we were comfortable. We said our good nights, and silence fell as softly as a blanket.

I was so tired I started drifting off right away. I was almost asleep when Kane cleared his throat and whispered, “Hey, I’m really you called me. I don’t even know how to thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. The look on Adam’s face when you stepped into the kitchen was all the thanks I needed. And seeing you guys together, seeing how happy you both were... It’s the closest I’ve ever felt to what a real family must be like. I’m an only child and my dad is nothing like yours, to say the least.”

“What about your mom?”

“She’s great, but we were never the kind of family that sat around and played board games. Or had any sort of fun, really.”

“Oh. Gotcha.” He went quiet for a few seconds, and I wondered if the conversation was over. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

I hesitated. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“When you called me last week, you said you were living with my dad because your dad kicked you out. How come?”

I decided to give him the condensed version. “He didn’t react very well when he found out I was gay.”

“How did he find out?”

Apparently, he wasn’t satisfied with just an abridged tale.

“I went to Seth’s memorial service. Dad was there and saw me. When I got home, he was really angry and started yelling at me.” I shrugged in the dark. “So I just told him.”

“Why was your dad there? Did he know Seth?”

“No. I’m sure he was there for political reasons. He’s the State’s Attorney for the county. Seth’s murder was kind of a big deal. We don’t have many random killings here, especially not teenagers.”

“But if he was there, why was he mad at you for being there?”

“I wasn’t supposed to hang out with Seth.”

“Because he was gay?”

“Yeah. He was furious that I was there. He said I embarrassed him. He said a bunch of horrible stuff, and I got so angry I just blurted out that I was gay too.”

“And then he kicked you out?”

“After he beat the crap out of me.”

Kane sat up. “He hit you?”

“Yeah. He put me in the hospital.”

“Fuck! I’m so sorry.”

I shrugged. “At least it got me out of there. I’m already happier here than I ever was there.”

He slowly laid back down and was quiet for a few minutes.

I once again thought maybe we were done, but then he spoke. “How did you know you were gay?”

“It’s funny, I asked Seth that same question the first time we hung out. I’ll tell you what he told me: you just know. I guess it’s the same way you know you’re straight, only I like boys instead of girls. Once, before everything happened, I was here hanging out with Seth,

and he told me he thought I was gay. He kissed me and I freaked out, but afterward it made me think about a lot of things that I'd been purposefully avoiding and...I realized he was right. I had just been blind, like he said."

He was quiet for a minute, then: "I have to tell you something. Please don't be mad at me." I tensed up. "I went to check on you when you were gone for a while tonight, and I saw that guy kiss you on the front porch. I didn't mean to, like, spy on you or anything. I hope you're not mad."

"No, it's okay," I said quietly and with more than a little relief.

"Is he your boyfriend?"

The kid was just full of questions.

"No. I don't know. Maybe."

He laughed. "Thanks for clearing that up. What's his name?"

"His name is Asher. We've been friends since his family moved next door in the second grade. He just told me recently that he's had a crush on me for years. We're still working stuff out. I don't know if we'll end up together."

"Do you like him?"

"Yeah," I answered quietly.

"Then you should date him. You deserve someone who makes you happy. You're such a nice guy."

"I'm just me," I said growing a little uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken. "I'm not perfect by a long shot."

"I didn't say you were, but I don't know many people who would go out of their way to find

somebody's son and bring them back together. That was really thoughtful and kind. In some ways, you remind me of Seth."

I heard him sniffle, and I fought my own tears that were threatening, blinking rapidly while staring up at the ceiling.

After a few seconds, he pulled himself together and said, "Sorry, I don't usually act like this, I swear. Just seeing Dad and being here in Seth's room and knowing he's gone, and you being so cool, it's just got me kind of up in my feels."

"Kane, you don't have to apologize to me. You've been through a lot. Believe me, I understand. And no one in my entire life has ever called me cool. I can die happy."

I realized what I'd said as soon as the words left my mouth, "I mean—I didn't—"

He snorted. "It's all good. I know what you meant. For the record, I think you're pretty cool. Hey, uh, would you be, like, my honorary big brother? Since, you know, I don't have one anymore?"

I took a deep breath and started blinking again. "Yeah," I answered, my voice raspy with barely contained emotion. "I would be honored to be your big brother."

I could see his grin even in the dark. "Thanks. I wish I lived here with you and Dad," he said wistfully. "That way I could be with you guys all the time."

"Well, maybe you can talk your mom into visiting again at least."

He sighed. "I doubt it. Like Dad said, Mom probably won't let me see him again until I'm eighteen."

“We’ll think of something.”

“You don’t know my mom,” he said darkly.

“There’s got to be a way. But for now, we’d better get some sleep now. I have school in the morning.”

“Can’t you just skip?”

I laughed. “I wish, but between the stabbing and my dad using me as a punching bag, I’ve already missed several weeks. I only started back on Monday, so I should probably go.”

He sighed again, much more dramatically this time. “Yeah, I get it. I guess it’s true that all good things do have to come to an end. Night, Killian.”

“Sleep tight, Kane.”

Chapter 10

How I ever got any sleep that night I'll never know, but somehow, I did. I woke up to my alarm the next morning and wanted to chuck my phone out the window.

Kane slept through the alarm, so I kept as quiet as I could as I got ready for school. I'd hoped to tell him goodbye in case his mom picked him up before I got home from school, but he didn't stir, and I didn't want to disturb him.

I might as well have stayed home for all the attention I paid to my classes that day. I was equally distracted with thoughts about what I was going to tell Asher when I got home and thinking about Kane. Kane had won me over in much the same way Seth had, but different at the same time. I'd been attracted to Seth, even if I hadn't been able to admit it. I simply felt protective of Kane—for all the good that would do. He lived in Baltimore, and there was no way I could protect him from where I was.

Hell, I couldn't even protect myself.

As soon as school was over, I went directly to Adam's house, or what I was starting to think of as home. There was a strange car in the driveway when I got there. I assumed it belonged to Kane's mom and I was glad I'd at least get to say goodbye before he left.

I let myself in and listened. It was dead silent. Where was everybody? I went looking but stopped in my tracks in the living room doorway. The queen of the fairies was posed imperiously in the exact center of the sofa. The woman was surprisingly tiny. She couldn't

have been over five feet tall, nor weighed more than a hundred pounds soaking wet. She had short, spiky, fiery-red hair, and her skin was as white and translucent as alabaster, in sharp contrast with her blood-red lipstick. She looked as if she'd be quite at home with wings sprouting from her shoulders.

The last thing I noticed was her piercing green eyes, the same color that both Seth and Kane had shared. She could have only been their mother.

She stared at me; her gaze so cold I fully expected to see my breath. I realized that, while her eyes may have been the same color as Seth's and Kane's, they held none of the warmth and compassion that was so evident in her sons.

"Who are you?" Her voice was just as brittle and cold as her gaze.

"I'm Killian. Are you Mrs. Connelly?"

"Ms. Douglas. I stopped being Mrs. Connelly years ago."

"Oh, well. It's nice to meet you. I'll, um, go put this in my room," I said, backing away.

"If you mean the room at the end of the hall, you might as well have a seat. Kane has locked himself in and refuses to come out. Adam has been talking to him for twenty minutes now. I'm getting ready to go find an axe and hack the damned door down."

"Oh, um, maybe I can talk to him," I said weakly. I spun around and ran upstairs, eager to escape her domineering presence.

Sure enough, there was Adam sitting on the floor with his forehead against the door. He looked up when I appeared.

“Killian,” he said with considerable relief, “maybe you could...” He pointed helplessly at the door. “He won’t open it.”

I tapped lightly on the door.

“God, why can’t you all just leave me alone?” Kane’s anguished voice was muffled by the door. “I’m not coming out. You can’t make me.”

“Kane? It’s Killian. May I come in?”

There was no response for a while, so I called again, “Kane?”

“Okay,” he said finally, “but if I open the door, only you can come in. Nobody else.”

I looked at Adam, and he nodded.

“Deal.”

I heard the lock turn and watched as the door opened about an inch. I pushed it back far enough to slip through, then shut it again behind me.

Kane threw himself dramatically across the bed face-down as soon as I was in the room. I went over and sat next to him, not saying anything at first.

Eventually, after he made no move to speak or even acknowledge my presence, I said, “Kane? What’s wrong? I mean, I know you don’t want to leave and all, but why are you locked in here like this?”

He mumbled something into the bed, but I couldn’t understand him. It sounded vaguely like “I ate one.”

“What?”

He rolled over and sighed heavily. “I hate Mom.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say.

Thankfully, Kane didn’t need any prompting now that he’d started. “She’s such a bitch. She burst in here

and started screaming at Dad like any of this was his fault. She was calling him names, vile stuff, and saying dumb shit. She called him a pedo!”

He sounded so deeply offended.

“Then she told me to go get in the car. I said no, that I wanted to talk to her first. She said she didn’t care what I wanted, that I’d just better do what she said because I was in enough trouble already.

“That’s when I got mad. I told her I knew she’d been lying to me and keeping me away from Dad all these years. I told her that Seth was dead because of her and I didn’t want to live with her anymore. I said I hated her and I do. I’m just so...UGH!” He punched the bed. “It’s just so unfair.”

I felt so helpless. Why were parents so awful to their kids? If my dad and his mother got together, we’d have the parents from hell.

“I don’t know what to say. You’re right. It’s not fair. But your mom is also kind of right, too.”

Kane gave me a sharp look.

“I just mean, you’re just a kid. You don’t get much say in this. None of us do, not even your dad. She holds all the cards.”

“I just...” He took a shaky breath as his anger drained away, leaving sadness in its place. “I just want to see my dad.”

He suddenly burst into tears, turning away from me quickly and burying his face in a pillow.

I lay down next to him and put my arm around him. After a minute, he rolled over and buried his face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around him and let him

sob. He had so much pain bottled up inside him; he just needed to let it out.

He turned his head to the side, and managed to say, “When Seth died, do you know how she told me? She said he’d gotten what was coming to him, that he was probably in the park looking for sex or drugs. I wasn’t allowed to act upset around her. She’d say there’s no point feeling sad for someone who chose that life. She kept asking if that was how I wanted to end up.”

He started sobbing again, and I realized the poor kid hadn’t even been allowed to properly mourn the death of his brother.

After a while, his sobs turned to sniffles, and eventually even those died away.

He sat up, wiping his face with his T-shirt. “I have to go with her, don’t I?”

I sat up as well. “Yeah, you do.”

“I’ll be back, somehow,” he vowed. “Can I call you?”

“Of course you can. Did you save my number in your phone?” He nodded. “Then you can call or text me any time. We can even Facetime if you really can’t go without seeing this cute face.”

He smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

Then, taking a deep breath, he stood and started for the door. I stood, too, and he paused with his hand on the knob, turned, walked back to me and threw his arms around my neck for a big hug.

“Thank you.”

“Like I said last night, there’s nothing to thank me for.”

He pulled away and wiped his face again, although there was no hiding the fact that he'd been crying.

He threw his shoulders back, lifted his chin high, yanked open the door, and stopped dead in his tracks as a startled Adam stared up at him from the floor.

Adam scrambled to his feet. "Are you okay?" he asked, looking back and forth from Kane to me.

Kane shrugged. "No, but I know I have to go with the witch."

Adam gave a little heartbroken sigh as his shoulders slumped. "I'm afraid so, champ."

Kane grabbed him in a bear hug that Adam returned, matching him in intensity. They pulled apart, Adam slipped his hand into Kane's, and they marched resolutely down the stairs. I trailed behind them much less impressively.

As soon as she saw Kane, Ms. Douglas stood up and swept past him to the front door. She stood on the porch and glared at Adam while he hugged Kane one more time. She threw a calculating look at me, as if measuring up a potential enemy, before spinning on her heel and stalking off to her car. I had to give her credit—she certainly knew how to make a dramatic exit.

"I love you, Dad," Kane whispered.

"I love you too, Kane." Adam sounded on the verge of tears.

There was entirely too much crying going on in that house.

Kane waved at me sadly and followed his mother to the car. Adam and I stood in the doorway until they were out of sight.

“Quite a piece of work, isn’t she?” Adam commented as he closed the door. There was a note of melancholy in his voice, but I sensed that he didn’t want to talk about it.

“I guess you could say that,” I replied. “Not how I would have described her?”

“How would you describe her?”

“A heinous bitch.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “You’re a good judge of character, Killian.”

He turned back into the house, and I closed the door and followed him into the den. I decided to do my homework downstairs while Adam worked at his laptop. I usually did my work in my room, but I felt he could use the company. He seemed to be okay, but I couldn’t help wondering if that was only an act. In effect, he’d just lost his son for the second time. If Ms. Douglas was as crazy and controlling as everyone said, who knew when he’d see Kane again?

I tried to concentrate on my homework but kept looking up to find Adam staring blankly at his screen. I had no idea what to say to him, though, so I stayed quiet and hoped my presence would be enough comfort.

About half an hour later, my phone vibrated. I pulled it out of my pocket and saw it was Asher calling. In all the excitement, I’d forgotten that I’d promised to call him and give him my decision as soon as I got home from school. I jumped up and excused myself from the room.

“Asher, hi. I’m sorry I forgot to call. There was a lot going on—”

“It’s fine, Killian,” he interrupted me. “Can we talk now?”

“Yeah, well, no... I mean—” I took a deep breath. “Can I come pick you up?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Great. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I went back into the den to grab my car keys. “I, uh, have to go talk to Asher,” I told Adam.

“Is everything okay?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” I told him honestly.

“Take a second and tell me what’s going on.” He stood up from the computer desk and sat on the couch, patting the cushion next to him.

I joined him and let out a sigh. “You know Asher likes me, right?”

“I’d have to be blind to not see that.”

I paused for a second at his ironic choice of words. “Well, remember how you talked to him after he ran off?”

Adam nodded.

“He came by last night. That’s who was at the door, but I guess Kane told you and you figured it out. He said he’d been thinking a lot about what you told him. He apologized for running off and avoiding me all week. Then he asked me to, uh, be his boyfriend.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I...don’t know. I mean, I like Asher. I’ve liked him for years. And now I find out he likes me, too. I should be thrilled.”

“But you’re not?”

“I don’t know what I am. Scared, I guess.”

“Scared of what? Do you still think he was involved in the attacks?”

“I dunno. Maybe? No... No, I don't. In my gut I know Asher couldn't have done it.”

“Do you think you're afraid of losing him altogether if the whole dating thing doesn't work out?”

“I hadn't even thought about that. Thanks for adding something else for me to worry about.”

Adam laughed.

“Honestly, I don't know what I'm afraid of. I just—” I floundered about, seeking the right words to explain myself but I couldn't find them. “What if I'm just not ready?”

“Then that's an answer in and of itself. And that would be understandable. You've been through a lot lately, and you haven't even had time to process all of it. If he cares about you, he'll accept that.”

I dropped my head back on the couch. “But what if that's just an excuse because I'm scared?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you overthink things?”

“Yes. Everyone.”

He chuckled. “What are you going to tell Asher?”

“I don't know.” I sighed. “I guess I'll figure it out when the time comes. Maybe the words will come to me when I see him.”

Adam ruffled my hair and stood up. “Well, you'd better get going. Asher is waiting, and I'd wager he's as nervous as you are. You shouldn't keep him waiting too long. I hope you figure out your heart on the way.”

As I drove to my old neighborhood, I brooded over what Adam had said about figuring out my heart. That was the problem. I couldn't figure anything out. I didn't trust my own heart. For that matter, I didn't fully trust anybody, not even those closest to me—Adam, Asher, my mom.

I thought about how the storm winds had battered the flowers that night when Asher found me. That was still how I felt—battered, raw, as if my heart were still bleeding.

I was so lost in thought that I drove right past Asher's house and almost pulled into my old driveway out of force of habit. I drove past, turned around and pulled up to the curb.

Asher was out of his house and in my passenger seat almost before I'd come to a full stop. He was wearing faded jeans and a dark blue hoodie under a denim jacket. He looked good.

"What took you so long?" he asked, snapping me out of my reverie.

"Oh, I, uh, got hung up with Adam. Are we driving somewhere?"

"It doesn't matter to me. This is your show. You said you'd pick me up, remember?"

"Oh, um. Right. How about the boardwalk?"

"That's fine."

We made small talk on the way there, both of us carefully avoiding the actual purpose of our "date." We found a parking space at the inlet, and I started toward the boardwalk.

Asher caught my arm. "Let's just walk in the sand," he suggested softly. "It'll be less crowded."

I hadn't been on the beach since the time I'd run into Seth, but I pushed that thought from my mind and agreed. It wasn't long before I started shivering. The wind off the water was more than a little chilly, and I wished I'd thought to put on something heavier than just a T-shirt. I hadn't planned on being outside by the ocean.

Asher noticed. "Here." He took off his jacket and slipped it around my shoulders.

"No, that's okay. You need it."

"Just take it, Killian. Why do you always have to fight me about everything? Just let me do something for you." Exasperation filled his voice. "Besides, I'm wearing a sweatshirt."

I gave in and gratefully shrugged the jacket on. It was big, but it smelled like Asher.

"Thanks," I said softly.

He nodded.

The beach was deserted except for the two of us and a few people off in the distance. The sun was quickly making its way toward the horizon. We walked toward the pier for a while, neither of us talking.

Finally, Asher spoke up. "Did you think over what we talked about last night?"

"A little," I replied quietly. "Okay, a lot."

Asher took a step closer to me so that he could hear above the sound of the waves. We were now walking almost shoulder to shoulder. I felt his hand brush against mine.

"And?" he prompted.

"I'm scared."

His hand slid gently into mine, our fingers interlocking as if we'd done this dozens of times before.

“Of what?”

“I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Do you still think I killed Seth?”

“No. I honestly don’t. It’s not that. I just don’t know how to explain it to you.”

I thought for a moment, and he didn’t push.

Suddenly, I stopped walking and dropped Asher’s hand.

As if a dam had burst inside me, words began to tumble out of my mouth almost faster than I could say them. “I was thinking on the way to your house about how I’m not sure I trust anybody anymore. When I was a little kid, I used to worship the ground my father walked on. I thought the sun rose and set on him. He seemed so big and strong and wise. But then I grew up and realized he was just an abusive control freak.

“I never understood my mom. Until recently, I never thought she cared about me. I mean, I know now she was just trying to protect me in her own way, but she always seemed so passive and distant. I have these vague memories of my dad yelling at her when I was younger, telling her not to baby me or show me too much affection or she’d turn me into a sissy.

“I’ve never really fit in at school, and even my so-called friends Zack and Jesse pick on me. And maybe you didn’t bully me the way they do, but I’ve always felt like second best with you, at least up until recently.

“I guess I learned to just keep people at arm’s length. If nobody got close, nobody could really hurt me. I thought I was safe behind my defenses.

“Then along came Seth, and he saw right through me. That really shook me. And when I finally decided to

go out on a limb and trust him, someone murdered him. That same someone—probably someone I know—then tried to kill me. And then my dad beat the hell out of me simply because I’m gay.

“I’m scared, Asher. I’m scared of getting hurt again.”

I walked away, my arms wrapped tightly around my body.

Asher followed me closely. “Killian, wait.”

I stopped under the pier.

“You don’t think I’m scared too? I’ve never done anything like this. But I’ve already given you my heart.”

“But that’s just it. I’m not sure I want it. I don’t know what to do with it. What if I break it? What if I hurt you the same way I’ve been hurt?”

With one hand, Asher gripped my shoulder and turned me around to face him. He slid his other hand gently around my neck.

“Maybe you will. Or maybe I’ll hurt you. Or maybe we’ll grow old together. I told you last night, I’m willing to take the risk if you are.”

He pulled me close and kissed me hard on the lips. I slowly melted into his embrace. The kiss grew more and more passionate until the whole world disappeared, and all my walls collapsed.

Asher lowered me to the sand, his body following, pressing his length against mine. We kissed for a while longer before I suddenly remembered where we were.

“Asher!” I gasped, my breath coming in short bursts.

“Mmm?” He had his face buried in my neck, his lips dragging across my skin, sending a tingling sensation flooded through my body.

I gasped again. “Asher! We’re on the beach!”

He raised his head and looked at me through heavily lidded eyes. “So?”

I grinned and kissed him on the lips again, then pulled back. “So, it’s cold and I’m getting sand down my underwear. Let’s go home and continue this in private.”

“You mean it?” he asked excitedly, searching my eyes.

“Yes. Think you can spend the night?”

I think I set land speed records on the drive back to Adam’s. Luckily, it wasn’t far, and we didn’t encounter any police on the way.

Asher and I burst through the front door of the house, giggling and tripping over each other in our haste.

“Whoa,” Adam exclaimed as he came into the hall to see what was going on. “You two sound like a herd of elephants. I thought I was being invaded by Hannibal.” We giggled again. “Make that a herd of giddy elephants. I take it you had a good time?”

“The best,” I replied breathlessly. “Can Asher spend the night?”

Adam’s left eyebrow flew up so high it was almost lost in his hairline. “Well, I don’t know,” he said slowly.

“What?” I was shocked. I hadn’t expected any pushback.

“I think I’d rather talk to your mother first.”

“What do you mean?”

“May I speak to you for a second in the kitchen?”
He cast a meaningful look at Asher. “Alone.”

“Um, yeah, sure.”

“Asher, why don’t you wait in the den?” Adam suggested.

Asher nodded, and I followed Adam into the kitchen.

“Obviously your talk went well,” he said when we were alone. “I’m glad and I support you and Asher, but I’m not sure this is the best idea right now.”

“I don’t understand. Just an hour ago you were telling me to date him.”

“I said date him, not fuck him.”

My mouth fell open in shock. “Adam!” If I’d been wearing pearls, I would have clutched them. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. We were just talking!”

“Oh? The evidence would suggest otherwise.”

“What evidence?”

He reached out and tapped the side of my neck where Asher had been kissing me. “Well, for one thing, that’s a hickey.”

I gasped in horror, covering it with my hand, although it was too late to hide anything.

“Look, I was a teenage boy once. I get it. Hormones and all that.”

I stood there futilely wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. I knew I had to be blushing because my face felt like it was on fire.

“But I know you two intend to do more than talk up there. I know I’m not your father and therefore have no right to tell you what you can and cannot do with

your life, but I've grown to care about you in the short amount of time you've been here. I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Asher won't hurt me," I said, though my voice didn't sound as sure as I'd hoped. After all, I'd been questioning the exact same thing not that long ago.

"Maybe not on purpose, but you're so young and inexperienced, Killian. I don't know Asher's experience level with sex, but I'll assume same-sex stuff at least is all new to him too. I'll give you the same advice I'd give Seth if he were alive. Don't rush into a sexual relationship. Let your relationship grow first. You're both just beginning to explore this new side of yourselves. Sex is great, don't get me wrong, but it complicates things. It could easily take over your relationship, especially at your age. Not to mention, you two weren't even speaking two days ago.

"But even more than that, you just went through a very traumatic experience—actually two traumatic experiences, Seth's murder and then your father's abuse. I don't think you've really dealt with either one. I'm not sure adding the emotional stress of a serious, sexual relationship while you're still in a vulnerable place is a great idea."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "I don't know what you mean about dealing with them. It seems like all I do is cry anymore. Isn't that dealing with it?"

"No, you're only releasing the pressure. That's better than holding everything in, but it's not dealing with the underlying issues. Until you address those issues, the pressure will always be building, threatening to explode and overwhelm you."

“Then what am I supposed to do? He wants us to be boyfriends. What am I just supposed to say? ‘Sorry, I’m too fucked up to date right now. You’ll have to wait until Adam decides I’m fuckable?’”

He snorted. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. All I’m just saying is that you should take things slow. Be his boyfriend if you want, but that doesn’t mean you have to jump right into bed. Besides, you’re putting me in an awkward situation.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your mom has entrusted me to take care of you while you’re here. How does it look if she finds out that I’m just letting your new boyfriend—that she doesn’t even know about, mind you—have sleepovers in your bedroom? It would look like I was condoning or even encouraging a sex relationship. There are enough stereotypes about gay men being predators or sex maniacs without adding fuel to the fire. You should have heard some of the things Eve was screaming at me before you got home today.”

“Kane told me.”

“Then you understand what I’m saying? If you talk to your mom and she says it’s okay for Asher to spend the night alone in your bedroom, then I’ll be fine with it, but I can’t allow it without her knowledge. Does that make sense?”

I nodded reluctantly. It did make sense, and now that I’d sobered up from the giddiness of our make-out session, I couldn’t imagine what I’d been thinking. That we’d just waltz in and say good night before going upstairs to fool around knowing full well Adam would know what we were up to? I knew I was blushing again.

“I don’t know what I’m doing anymore,” I said in a quiet voice. “I’m all over the place.”

He sighed. “I know, Kill. That makes two of us. I’m still dealing with my own issues. We’ll work through it all together, huh?” He pulled me in for a quick hug. “I’ll talk to your mom tomorrow and see what we can do about maybe finding a good therapist for both of us.”

I nodded, though still not convinced I needed therapy. I thought I was doing pretty well, considering.

“What about Asher?” I asked.

“We can find him a therapist too, if you want.”

I gave him a confused look, and he laughed. “I’m kidding, but I don’t think it’s a good idea for him to stay over. How about if we watch a movie together, and then you can drive him home? I have a great one that I know you guys will love. I guarantee you’ve never seen it before.”

“What is it?” I asked suspiciously.

“Just wait. It’ll be a surprise. I’m pretty sure you’ll love it, though. You might say it’s a classic.”

I frowned. “It’s in black and white and all the actors are dead, right?”

Adam laughed. “No, the actors are still very much alive and it’s in color. It’s not that classic. Just from the ‘90s.”

“You do know Asher and I weren’t even born yet, right?”

Adam groaned. “Don’t remind me! I’m so old.”

“You said it, I didn’t.” Adam threw a dish towel at me, but I dodged and ran from the room laughing.

I went back to Asher and filled him in on Adam's concerns. He was visibly disappointed that he couldn't stay over but agreed to watch a movie. It was better than nothing.

Asher and I settled in on the couch with a blanket while Adam made some popcorn. We kissed a little but jumped apart guiltily when Adam came in with the munchies. He kindly pretended not to notice.

Adam dimmed the lights and, when everyone was ready, he put a DVD into the ancient but still functional machine and pushed play on the remote control.

The film started right into a scene of some British school kids bullying a boy around our age during a soccer game. The boy walked off the field and a jaunty but unfamiliar song started playing as the words "Beautiful Thing" appeared on the screen.

Beautiful Thing was a British movie about two working-class teenage boys who fall in love. I related so much to the characters. One of the guys was a seventeen-year-old named Ste whose father abused him. Those scenes poked at open wounds, but Asher held me tightly and I made it through them without breaking down.

The dialogue was a little hard to understand at first because of their accents. After interrupting for the fifth time to ask Adam what they were saying, he turned on closed captioning, which helped a little, though I still didn't know what some of the slang terms meant. The soundtrack was fun. Adam said it was almost entirely by someone named Mama Cass, but neither Asher nor I had ever heard of her.

The movie was good, but even more than the story playing out on the screen, I enjoyed snuggling with Asher. I'd never really cuddled with anyone before, and I suddenly understood what all the fuss was about. It felt so good to have his warm body curled around mine, his breath on my cheek, his arms around me. His hands rubbed slowly up and down my arms while we watched, giving me shivers.

I wished like crazy Adam hadn't imposed the no-sleepover rule. At one point, when the boys in the movie were making out in a beautifully romantic scene, Asher gently kissed my neck, and I wondered if he was as hard as I was.

As the last notes of Mama Cass's "Dream a Little Dream of Me" faded away, Adam turned to us expectantly. "Did you like it?"

"Yes!" we answered in unison.

Adam just chuckled a bit. He turned his attention to the TV and changed the channel to the news. We all got a bit engrossed in the top story. It wasn't long, though, before I realized that Asher's breathing had become very regular, and his body had relaxed. He had dozed off.

"Asher fell asleep," I whispered to Adam.

He looked over and smiled at us.

"What?" I asked.

"You two look so peaceful. I hate to disturb him."

"Then don't. Let us sleep here. We won't do anything. I promise."

He thought for a moment, then seemed to make up his mind. "I'm going to trust you, Killian."

I broke into a wide grin. “Thanks, Adam.”

“In that case, I need to call his mother and let her know where he is,” he said, getting up.

I gave him Asher’s phone number, and he made the call. After speaking for a brief time, he hung up and snapped off the last lamp.

“I guess that means it was okay,” I whispered.

“You guessed correctly. His mom sounds like a very nice lady.”

“She really is.”

“Good night, Killian.”

“Good night, Adam.”

He started from the room. “Adam?” I called out softly.

“Yes?” He turned back toward me.

“Thank you...for everything. I’m glad you’ve been here for me. You’re like the dad mine never was.”

He stood silhouetted in the hall light for a few moments. I couldn’t see his face so I couldn’t judge his reaction. Just as I was wondering if he was going to respond, he slowly walked back to me, bent over, and gently kissed my forehead.

Before I could say anything else, though, he quickly left the room and turned off the hall light. I heard him go up the stairs and his door close.

The sudden silence was almost deafening, but it was a peaceful silence, and it wasn’t long before I joined Asher in sleep.

Chapter 11

I was standing in the park by the pond.
I could feel more than see another presence,
lurking just out of sight.

The shadows writhed and danced around me,
slowly closing in. I was turning, trying to watch all sides
at once, but it was hopeless.

All at once, the shadows began to take form,
become more solid, and from them stepped a figure
dressed in black from head to toe. Where his face should
have been, there was nothing—no features at all, only a
horrible blankness.

He was my attacker, Seth's murderer, and he'd
returned to finish what he'd started.

I tried to run, desperate to escape, but shadows
wrapped around my ankles, holding me in place where I
stood as he slowly drew closer.

Suddenly, he was behind me. His arm snaked
around my neck, and I felt the cold steel of a knife blade
cutting into my throat.

A trickle of blood ran down my collarbone.

Whatever spell was holding me broke in that
instant, and I was fighting with all my strength—kicking,
screaming, thrashing.

I didn't want to die.

“Killian!” A voice called my name, and my eyes
flew open.

I sat bolt upright. I was clammy with sweat, and
my heart was pounding so loudly I was sure it could be

heard in the next county. I couldn't see. It was pitch black, but still I looked around frantically for the attacker.

Where was he?

I felt an arm slide across my shoulders, and I cried out, flailing blindly. I hit flesh and heard a startled "oof" from the darkness.

"Killian, it's okay! It's me, Asher."

"Asher?" I whispered.

"Yes, I'm right here."

"It was a dream?" I asked shakily.

It had seemed so real, but already the sense of blind panic was fading, leaving only a residue of fear in its wake.

Asher's arms slid around me again, and this time I didn't fight.

"Yeah, it was just a dream," he murmured comfortingly. "You're okay now. I've got you."

"It was just a dream," I repeated, as if by saying it enough times I might convince my pounding heart to slow to its normal pace.

"It must have been a bad one. You woke me up throwing your arms around and kicking and crying."

"I'm sorry." I buried my face in his chest.

"Don't be sorry. You can't help it. It's not like you can control what you dream. Do you remember what it was about?"

"Yeah." I wished I could forget. The images were still sharp in my memory. "It was Seth's killer. He was after me and I was fighting... Oh, God, it was so horrible."

I squeezed Asher harder.

“I’m here. It’s okay, Killian,” he murmured into my hair. “It was just a dream. Go back to sleep, baby. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

Usually, I had trouble falling back to sleep after the nightmares, but I did feel safe wrapped in Asher’s arms and, much to my surprise, I was soon asleep once more.

I awoke the next morning on the couch with Asher’s arms still wrapped around me. The feelings of safety and warmth from the night before had not left me, even though the vestiges of the dream lingered on like the last shreds of mist in the morning sun.

I could get used to waking up like this.

Asher’s arms felt so good, so right. I wanted to stay like that forever, but nature’s call was coming in loud and clear. If I didn’t get up soon, I’d have an embarrassing problem on my hands.

I tried to slip out of his embrace without waking him, but he just tightened his grip. I tried again with the same results, so I gave up on not bothering him.

“Asher.” I said softly. When he didn’t respond, I got a little louder. “Asher!”

“Huh? Wha?” His eyes fluttered open, and he tried to focus on my face.

“I gotta pee. You hafta let me up unless you want to get wet.”

“Mm-kay. Sorry,” he mumbled, letting go and immediately dozing back off. I stared down at him for a minute, filing that bit of information away for future reference: Don’t worry about disturbing Asher’s sleep.

After relieving myself, I was wide awake, so I decided to take a shower. When I came out of the bathroom, I smelled bacon cooking—a sure sign that Adam was up. No breakfast was complete in the Connelly household without a helping of crispy bacon. I padded down the stairs in my stocking feet and made my way into the kitchen.

“Good morning,” Adam greeted me as I sat down at the table. He was quite chipper. I hate morning people.

“Morning.” I may not be a morning person, but I did make some effort to be civil.

“How’d you two make out on the couch?”

“With our lips,” I shot back. “And maybe a little tongue.” Adam gave me a warning glance, and I gave in. “We made out fine. Except, I had a nightmare, and Asher had to wake me up.”

Adam looked at me again, this time with concern. “Bad?”

“You could say that. Asher will probably wake up with some bruises—that is, if he ever wakes up.”

“What was it about?”

I sighed. “The same thing all my nightmares have been about the last few weeks: the killer. He was trying to finish me off.”

Adam left the stove and came over to sit across from me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were having nightmares?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t think it was a big deal. After everything that’s happened, I figured anyone would have nightmares.”

“I guess that’s true. When you dream about the killer, what does he look like? Can you see him clearly? Maybe your subconscious noticed things you’ve forgotten from all the shock.”

“I couldn’t see his face. It’s as if he didn’t have one.”

He rubbed his face and sighed. “I guess that would be too easy. I’m going to call today about that therapist. I keep forgetting with everything going on.”

I nodded and noticed smoke coming from the frying pan. “I think the bacon is burning.”

Adam jumped up and dashed over to the stove. “Not burnt,” he reported, “but it’ll be extra crispy. Go wake Asher. By the time he gets out of the shower, breakfast should be ready.”

I went into the living room where Asher was still asleep. I leaned over the back of the couch and gently shook his shoulder while calling his name. He didn’t so much as open one eye.

A rather mean idea began to form in my head and, of course, I loved it. I started tickling him.

As soon as my fingers dug into his sides, he sat up with a jolt and his head smacked into mine. He tumbled off the couch, and I fell backwards with a thud, both of us yelling “Ow!” in chorus.

“Everything okay in there?” Adam called.

“Dammit, Killian!” Asher whined as he pulled himself to his feet. “Why’d you have to go and do that?”

“I thought it would be funny.”

“I think it lost something in the translation.”

My hands were pressed to my nose. “Is it bleeding?”

He pulled my hands away and examined my nose. “No, it’s not bleeding, but you’re lucky I didn’t start throwing hands.”

“That’s what my dad is for,” I retorted.

I started giggling, and soon we were both rolling on the floor laughing. I got control of myself first and told him that he needed to hurry up and take his shower.

When he finished, he had to borrow some of my clothes since his overnight stay wasn’t planned. This proved to be a challenge, considering Asher was about a head taller than me. A T-shirt and a pair of elastic waist shorts solved the problem to everyone’s satisfaction—especially mine. The shirt clung to his chest like a second skin and the silky shorts showed off his athletic assets quite nicely.

“I can’t wear this to school,” he grumbled as we went down to breakfast.

“I dunno,” I said with a leer. “I kind of like it.”

“You would, perv,” Asher shot back. “And so will every girl.”

“Oh,” I said with a frown.

“Exactly. Besides, somebody might figure out I slept over here last night and then we’d never hear the end of it.”

“Fine. I’ll drive you home after we eat.”

“Then eat fast or we’ll be late.”

After breakfast, I drove him back to his house and waited while he ran in to change. Then it was on to school.

“We probably shouldn’t be seen together,” Asher said about halfway there.

“What do you mean?” I asked sharply. Was he regretting last night already? Or was he so serious about keeping our relationship a secret that he was going to start avoiding me?

“I mean more than usual. We don’t want anyone to be suspicious.”

“You think they’ll suspect something if they see us together?”

“Well...maybe. I mean, people are still talking about you and Seth.”

“So, what you’re saying is you don’t want to be seen with me at school.”

“No! I don’t mean that, Killian. Just...maybe we should keep a low profile, you know? I’m not going to ignore you or anything. I just don’t think we should be seen together more than normal.”

“Whatever.”

We didn’t talk much for the rest of the drive. I was too busy brooding over what Asher had said. He just stared moodily out the window.

We arrived at school and went our separate ways. School was pretty uneventful, but I was preoccupied with thoughts of Asher. Things had seemed so perfect the night before. Could they be falling apart already?

The only saving grace was that my school routine was finally getting back to the same old patterns, for which I was very relieved. I was tired of the whole special-treatment scene.

I didn’t see Asher once the entire day. Of course, he had said he didn’t want to see me more than usual, and lately not at all was exactly how often I saw him. By the time the last bell rang, I was ready to give him a

piece of my mind. I understood we had to keep a low profile but avoiding me altogether wasn't going to work either.

I was headed to his locker when Zack and Jesse appeared out of nowhere. Taking places on either side of me, they grabbed my arms and lifted me off my feet. I put up a token struggle, but I was at their mercy, and we all knew it. They swept me down a side hall and into an empty classroom, where they dropped me unceremoniously.

I spun around to face them. "What the hell was that about?" I was scared but decided to take the offensive. Maybe if I could keep them off-balance, I could find a chance to escape.

"We need to have a little talk," Zack said threateningly.

"I'm sick of our 'little talks.' I'm leaving,"

I tried to push past them, but they shoved me back roughly. I went from annoyed and nervous to terrified instantly. They'd never gotten physical with me before. I knew I didn't stand a chance in any sort of fight. They were so much bigger than me.

"We know what you and Asher were doing on the beach last night," Jesse growled.

"What?" I gasped. Deny it! my brain screamed. "We weren't doing anything on the beach."

"We saw you, dumbass," Zack taunted, jabbing me in the ribs for effect. "And now we know for sure that you're a faggot, and we know Asher is, too."

"Yeah, and you're both going down," Jesse piped up. "We don't want no fags at our school."

“How very enlightened of you, Jesse,” I snapped, my anger quickly overtaking my fear. “But I don’t know what you’re talking about. I wasn’t even at the beach last night. You must have seen somebody else.”

Jesse looked confused, but Zack wasn’t buying it. “Don’t even try it. We were at the arcade, and we saw thought we saw you guys, so we followed you. We saw you holding hands and sucking face with Asher under the pier. You’re a fuckin’ homo.”

“A cocksucker,” Jesse added with a nasty grin.

“A butt fu—”

“Enough!” I cut him off.

Obviously, there would be no denying it, but maybe if I just admitted it, I could at least control the narrative and get them off my back.

I tipped my chin up and squared my shoulders. “So what? Big deal. I’m not ashamed. And you know what? It’s none of your damn business. You can’t intimidate me or scare me.”

Jesse took a menacing step toward me. “Maybe you should be scared.”

“You know what we do to fags around here, don’t ya?” Zack added, his voice low and threatening, his face a mask of hate.

I backed away and glanced over my shoulder. There was only one door to this room, and Zack and Jesse were between it and me. My mind was racing almost as fast as my heart.

Zack and Jesse began closing in on me, Jesse a few steps closer.

My foot shot out, catching Jesse by surprise and nailing him in the balls. He released a wheezing, high-

pitched howl of anguish and collapsed to the floor just as Zack launched himself at me.

I tried to jump out of the way, but he caught my shoulder, and I spun as I fell. Zack dropped on top of me as if we were in a football game and I had the ball. I was at a distinct disadvantage. I'd never been in a fight in my life, unless Dad's beating the crap out of me counted.

I braced myself for the first punch, but it never came. Instead, the room lit up, and a voice boomed, "What's going on in here?"

It was Mr. Tatum, my theater teacher.

"Nothing," Zack said unconvincingly as he sat up.

I quickly disentangled myself from Zack and proceeded to put as much distance between him and I as possible. I grabbed my backpack, which had gone flying when Zack tackled me, and walked toward Mr. Tatum.

"It didn't sound or look like nothing," Tatum said, suspicion dripping from his words.

"We were just messing around," Zack insisted, shooting me a warning glance. "You know, wrestling a bit."

Tatum looked to me for confirmation. I didn't know what Zack and Jesse would do with their newfound knowledge, but Mr. Tatum had a reputation as a gossip around school. I was sure I didn't want the entire faculty to know I was gay. I reluctantly nodded my corroboration of Zack's lie.

"Well, take your wrestle mania somewhere else. Get going before I escort you to the office."

I could tell he didn't believe us, and I could hardly blame him. I wasn't exactly the wrestling type,

and Jesse was still struggling to stand, obviously still in pain and looking a little ill.

“Are you feeling all right, Mr. O’Donnell?” The teacher asked him.

“Not really,” he answered truthfully.

“Then maybe wrestling is not the sport for you,” Tatum said as I started out of the room. “May I suggest something less violent? Perhaps speed walking.”

“We’ll talk later, Kendall,” Zack called after me meaningfully.

“Not if I can help it,” I mumbled under my breath and picked up my pace.

I searched all over for Asher—while keeping a wary eye out for Zack and Jesse—but couldn’t find him anywhere. He wasn’t at his locker, no one I talked to had seen him, and he wasn’t answering my texts.

I was starting to get worried. Maybe I hadn’t been Zack and Jesse’s first stop.

I decided to drive to his house.

Mrs. Davis answered my knock. Her cheery smile was absent, making me feel as if I were seeing her naked and increasing my sense of dread.

“Oh Killian, I’m so glad you’re here. Asher is in his room. Go right on up.”

“Is he—”

I started to ask if he was okay, but then decided to just go see for myself and continued on toward the stairs.

I tapped on his bedroom door and heard his muffled voice tell me to come in. I opened the door and gasped. Asher was lying on his bed with the worst black eye I’d ever seen.

When he saw it was me, he attempted to sit up but dropped back as he winced and pressed his hand to his side.

“Oh, my God! What happened?”

“Zack and Jesse happened,” he said, confirming my fears. He spoke carefully because of his lip, but his bitterness came through loud and clear.

I rushed to his side and helped him sit up. “Holy shit,” I muttered under my breath.

Up close, he looked even worse. His left eye was swollen completely shut and his lip was split and puffy. There was a small cut on his right cheek bone.

I sat down next to him, being careful not to bounce the bed too much. I reached out to touch his face, but he jerked away from my hand.

I sighed. “They tried to jump me after school, but I fought back. Luckily, Tatum showed up before things ugly—or uglier, I guess.”

“They got me between classes, in the boy’s room.”

“Why didn’t you fight back?”

“I didn’t have a chance. It was two against one, and they took me by surprise. Besides, I’m not much of a fighter. They threw a couple of sucker punches, called me some names, kicked me when I was down.” His hand drifted to his side again. “Nothing too bad. I’ll live.”

I laid my head on his shoulder, but he immediately tensed up beneath me. I sat back up and tried to make eye contact, but he wouldn’t look at me.

“Did you report it?”

His eyes darted toward me. “No! Did you?”

I shook my head no. “Zack made some excuse about us wrestling. I don’t think Tatum bought it, but you know how he is. I was afraid Zack would tell him I’m gay, and then the whole school would know, so I went along with Zack’s dumb story. There wasn’t much he could do.”

He sighed. “Maybe you should have just told him. You know they’re not gonna give up that easily.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a frown.

“They’ll come after us again. I’ll be ready next time, but you don’t stand a chance.”

“You can protect me.” I tried to take his hand, but he snatched it away.

“I can’t be with you all the time, Killian. And besides, you know they’re going to spread it all over school. You might as well have just told Tatum. Our lives as we knew them are over.”

I sighed. “We messed up last night, didn’t we?”

“Yeah, we did.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. I could tell Asher wanted to say something but was holding back.

I decided to speak up first. “Okay, so maybe things will change for us at school. You know what? I’m not sorry. Last night was amazing. Maybe we were careless, but what’s done is done, and now we have to live with the consequences. There’s no sense in beating ourselves up over it. Zack and Jesse will take care of that for us.”

I attempted to smile, but Asher didn’t even try to return it. I continued seriously, “Maybe it won’t be so bad. At least we have each other. Seth didn’t have anyone.”

“That’s just it! I don’t want to go through this. I don’t know if I can. Maybe it’s too late, but...maybe not.”

“Too late for what?”

“Maybe I can convince them that they didn’t see what they thought they saw, or maybe... Oh, I know! I’ll say it wasn’t even us—”

“I tried that. They followed us, Ash. They know it was us.”

“Fuck.” He cast around for a glimmer of hope. “You know how dumb they are. I’m sure I can convince them that we were just...play fighting or something.”

“I admitted it.”

He was finally looking at me. “You did what?”

“I didn’t know what else to do so I admitted that I’m gay.”

His eye that wasn’t swollen shut grew wide as his voice kept rising. “Why’d you do that?”

“I don’t know. I panicked. I guess I hoped it would, like, take away the power they had over me, but instead... I... I thought they were going to kill me. You should have seen the look on Zack’s face.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind? I did see the look on Zack’s face. Right before he did this to me!”

I stood up. “I was scared, okay? Maybe I wasn’t thinking clearly, but it doesn’t have to be a big deal.”

“Oh yeah? Tell that to Seth.”

My blood ran cold as my breath rushed out of me. “What are you saying? Do you think Zack and Jesse killed Seth?”

He turned away again. “I don’t know,” he mumbled.

“If you know something, then you have to tell someone,” I insisted, urgency creeping into my voice.

His head snapped back around. “I don’t know anything,” he said through clenched teeth. “No. Scratch that. I do know you just ruined our lives.”

“If you know something about what happened, please tell me. It could help catch Seth’s killer.”

“I. Don’t. Know. Shit.” He bit off each word, anger punctuating every syllable.

“Asher—”

“For the last time, I don’t know anything about what happened to Seth. Drop it. Look, Zack and Jesse might be idiots, but they’re dangerous idiots. At the very least they’re going to make your life a living hell. And mine too. Unless...” He stopped, and his face slowly morphed from anger and fear to cold calculation.

“Unless what?” I asked.

“There’s no point in this ruining both of our lives. I’ll just tell them they misunderstood what they saw—that you kissed me but I’m not gay.”

“What the fuck? We were making out for like five minutes. You gave me a hickey.”

“I was just...confused. You messed with my head.”

“So... What are you saying? Are you breaking up with me?”

“I didn’t even know we were dating,” he said evasively.

I glared at him until he had to look away.

“Killian, we...we just got caught up in the moment.”

“Wow.” I started backing away toward the door.
“I never thought you’d be such a coward.”

He didn’t answer, just avoided my gaze.

“You know what? Fuck you, Asher. Last night you made me happier than I’ve ever been. You made me feel safe. And now you think you can just throw me away? For what? To protect your precious reputation? Are you fucking serious right now? Did none of that mean anything to you at all?”

He rolled over, putting his back toward me. “Just go, Killian.”

I stood there for a second then turned and stormed from his room, slamming the door on my way out. I practically flew down the stairs, skipping half the steps.

Mrs. Davis came rushing around the corner, a look of concern on her face.

“Is everything okay?” she asked as I yanked open the front door.

“No,” I barked, and rushed out, pulling the door closed behind me, though I did make a concerted effort not to slam it in her face.

My hands were shaking as I slid into the driver’s seat, so I sat there for a moment, trying to catch my breath.

I was so confused. What was wrong with Asher? Just the night before, he’d told me he liked me and kissed me like he meant it. Now he was ready to throw me under the bus in order to not be outed. Was he really going to claim I forced myself on him? Nobody would believe that.

Would they?

He was so much bigger than me. Plus, Zack and Jesse were there. They'd seen us with their own eyes.

Something told me they'd believe what they wanted to believe. Especially if it made me the bad guy. I was a convenient scapegoat—the outsider, the clinger-on, the traitor who became friends with the gay guy.

If I was honest with myself, part of me understood where he was coming from. He was scared. Hell, so was I.

We had good reason to be. After all, I'd witnessed first-hand what happened to Seth. I'd be stupid to think the same thing couldn't happen to me.

That didn't lessen the pain of betrayal, though. It seemed like whatever happened from here, I'd be facing it alone.

I took a deep breath and started the car. As I was about to put it into gear, I glanced in the rearview mirror and froze.

Standing at the end of the driveway behind my car was my father. He was glaring at me, arms crossed.

I threw the car into drive and floored it, pulling away with a violent jerk and a squeal of my tires, my eyes never leaving his reflection. It looked like he was yelling something, but I just sped away.

A few streets later, I pulled over again and put the car in park. I was shaking again, even more intensely than before, and felt like I was going to throw up.

I rested my head against the steering wheel and breathed in through my nose, out through my mouth. I'd read somewhere it helped calm panic attacks.

It wasn't working.

Everything felt so right when I woke up that morning.
How did it all go to shit so quickly?

Chapter 12

After I calmed down, I drove home. I needed to talk to somebody, and Adam the person I could think of. Unfortunately, when I went inside, I found a note from Adam saying that he and Steve were gone to get dinner and would be back soon.

I didn't feel like I knew Steve well enough to spill my guts in front of him, so my talk with Adam would have to wait. To kill time, I went up to what had become my room and started on homework.

I was interrupted a short while later by a buzz from my phone. I looked down to see it was a text from a number I didn't recognize.

All it said was, *Hey.*

Who's this? I replied.

Kane!

Oh! Hey! What's up?

Things are so bad 🤔

Why? What's wrong?

All mom and I do is fight anymore. I called her a liar tonight. I haven't left my room since.

I'm sorry. That sucks.

For real. She's such a bitch. No wonder dad went gay. 🤔

lol I don't think that's how it works.

Duh. I'm kidding. But I've been thinking...do you think being gay is genetic?

Uh...I don't know. What do you mean?

Like...do you think you get it from your parents?

Dad is gay. Seth was gay. Maybe I'm gay too?

My parents aren't gay. Why would you think you're gay?

I dunno. It was kind of nice when you held me when i was crying.

I don't think that means you're gay.

Yeah, you're probably right. Can I call you later?

Sure.

Cool. Later.

I took a deep breath. That was unexpected. Could Kane really be gay? Was it genetic? I hadn't thought much about it. I definitely didn't consider myself qualified to counsel someone else on this topic. I was confused enough on my own.

It occurred to me that I didn't really know very much about why people are gay. I'd accepted the fact that I was and never wondered why. I didn't have any clue what to tell Kane when he called later. It was time for some research. I opened my browser and googled "*What makes people gay?*"

I picked an article at random and started reading. The article said that nobody knows for sure what makes people gay, but that the scientific consensus was that sexual orientation is determined before birth. In other words, Lady Gaga was right. I really was born this way.

Although, the writer stressed that there is no one, single gay gene, and it's likely a complex combination of hundreds or even thousands of genes in specific combinations. The article also said that queer people can't control who they're attracted to, and that you can't change a person's sexual orientation through therapy, treatment or abuse.

I was still reading when Adam called me down for dinner. I hadn't even heard them come in.

I went down to discover they'd gotten an assortment of Chinese takeouts. They spent the next few minutes teaching me how to use chopsticks. I wouldn't say I was an expert by the time we were finished, but I was able to feed myself without wearing too much of the food.

After dinner, Adam asked me about my day as we started cleaning up. I glanced at Steve, and he noticed.

"You want me to leave you alone?" he asked.

"No," I said with a sigh. "It's fine. It's just...a lot."

Adam stopped what he was doing and sat back down at the table, then patted my chair. "Sit. Spill."

I did as I was told and launched into the story of my very bad, no good, terrible day. How it had started almost as soon as we left with Asher telling he was basically going to ignore me at school, how Zack and Jesse ambushed me, and how, when I couldn't find Asher after school, I'd driven to his house only to discover that they'd beaten him up. Then I told them about our fight. I was particularly proud that I managed to get through all of that without crying.

"Unfortunately, Asher's reaction is normal," Steve said when I'd finished, "especially if he's still uncertain about what he wants."

"Frankly, I'm more concerned about what he knows," Adam said with an edge to his voice.

"I admit it does sound as if he may know more than he's saying about Seth," Steve agreed, "but there's

no way of knowing what that might be, and it's useless to speculate. I think this situation with Zack and Jesse is far more worrisome. Something is going to have to be done about those boys. Their behavior is clearly harassment, and we can't allow it to continue. There are antidiscrimination laws now. I think we need to talk to the administration."

"Wouldn't I have to tell them I'm gay?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. The laws also protect perceived orientation, so even if someone is harassing you because they think you might be gay, the school can punish them. It doesn't matter if you really are gay or not."

"But everyone will assume I am, and I'm not ready to come out at school."

"You may not have a choice if Zack and Jesse tell everyone."

"Maybe Asher can convince them not to say anything," I said, but I sounded doubtful even to myself.

"Either way, they can't be allowed to get away with this. Someone could get hurt worse than a black eye."

"Maybe they already have," Adam said darkly.

"You think they might have been involved in Seth's murder?" Steve asked him sharply.

"Maybe—and if not, it's possible they know something about what happened."

"I can't very well walk up to them and ask," I objected, "especially not after today. In fact, I'll be doing everything I can to avoid them."

"Maybe we should go to the police," Steve suggested.

“And tell them what? That two kids at my school are picking on me? They didn’t even care that Seth was getting threatening notes.”

“Then what about your principal? Maybe they’d be willing to step in and question the boys.”

“That’s assuming he’d do more than the police.”

“If he was aware of the harassment, he could help protect you—” Steve began but I cut him off.

“The same way he protected Seth? Even if he took me seriously and protected me at school, if Zack and Jesse are determined enough, they’d just find me outside of school. They’re bullies, and bullies pick on people.”

“So you’re just going to do nothing?”

“I didn’t say that. I just think I can do more by flying under the radar.”

Adam interrupted. “Speaking of which, have you had a chance to start asking questions at school yet?”

“Not yet. I’m not quite sure where to start. I was kind of waiting until things returned to normal.”

He nodded. “Smart thinking. As for what to say, you’ll have to play it by ear. Just be very careful. Zack and Jesse are dangerous even if they had nothing to do with Seth’s murder. Now that they know you’re gay, they’ll probably be targeting you.”

We were back to that. It was time to steer the conversation in a new direction.

“Do you need any help cleaning up? I still have a lot of homework.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “I know an excuse to avoid helping with cleanup when I hear one.”

“No! I really do.”

“Go ahead. Steve and I can handle the dishes. There’s not much.”

I wasn’t about to argue. I made my escape and went back upstairs to finish my schoolwork. I really did have a lot to finish. I’d gotten distracted with my research.

I stayed up late waiting for Kane’s call, but it never came. When I gave up at last and went to bed, all I could do was toss and turn. I knew he’d probably just forgotten to call, but that didn’t stop me from worrying. I hoped nothing was wrong.

I finally managed to doze off after what seemed like hours. I don’t know how long I was asleep before the attacker was there, or how long he was there before I noticed him, but he suddenly appeared on the edge of my consciousness. Just a black smudge in my peripheral vision at first, but as I became more aware of him, he grew in clarity, although he still didn’t have a face.

He didn’t attack me, just stood there and stared at me. I couldn’t explain how I knew he was staring—it’s not like he had eyes—I just did. Somehow, his silent taunting was even worse than an actual attack, as if he were telling me he could have me whenever he wanted.

As he began to fade back into the shadows, I woke with a start, feeling quite unsettled, my heart pounding. There was no Asher to help me get back to sleep that time. I never did drop off again, for fear the killer would be there waiting for me like some real-life Freddy Krueger. As a result, I was tired and cranky at breakfast.

My bad mood continued throughout the rest of the weekend. Since Asher was still avoiding me, I stayed

in my room a lot. I wasn't very good company anyway. I didn't hear any more from Kane, so I continued to worry about him as well. At least it helped distract me from the situation with Asher.

By the time Monday rolled around, the black cloud over my head was my constant companion. It accompanied me back to school, where I found it impossible to concentrate in class. I felt like I was constantly on edge, always looking over my shoulder for Zack and Jesse, or a glimpse of Asher that never came.

I was getting some stuff out my locker between first and second periods when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I yelped and spun around to find Gilly Sheridan leaning against the locker next to mine. I hadn't talked to her much since she'd asked me out the last time. I hoped we weren't about to have a repeat of that awkward encounter.

"Hi, Killian," she greeted me cheerily.

"Hi, Gilly," I responded with my head as far in the locker as I could get it without stepping inside.

"Uh, can I talk to you?"

"Sure."

"I mean without your head stuck in the locker."

I reluctantly withdrew my head, shut the door, and looked at her.

Her expression was concerned. "Are you okay, Killian?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"You seemed really distracted in class this morning—actually, you've seemed distracted a lot lately. And, well, I've heard some stuff."

She had my full attention. “Like what?”

“Just...stuff,” she finished lamely. The bell rang, and she pushed away from the locker. “Maybe we can talk later. I’ll find you at lunch.”

Just what I need, I thought gloomily, something else to worry about.

I suspected I already knew what people were saying, but I wanted to confirm it. I needed to hear it for myself.

I zoned out through my entire next class worrying about what Gilly had to tell me.

As soon as the class ended, I practically ran to the cafeteria, just to wait impatiently for her. She sailed into the room after a few minutes, spotted me and motioned for me to follow her. She led me to a table in the far corner, where she took a seat facing the room.

I sat down across from her and got right to the point. “So what’s this stuff you’ve been hearing about me?”

“Well, you know I don’t believe any of it—” She looked away, refusing to meet my eyes. “— but, um, Zack and Jesse are saying that you’re gay.”

She was looking anywhere but at me.

I sighed. I guess it was inevitable. There was no way they were ever going to keep it to themselves, despite what Asher said. The question was, did I own it or deny it? Would it even do any good to claim I was hetero?

I looked over at the girl sitting next to me and thought about what I knew of her. Her family was religious, but she had a reputation for being something of

a crusader for the underdog. I'd never heard anyone so much as suggest that she was bigoted or mean-spirited.

I made an impulsive decision to be completely honest. If Zack and Jesse were going to tell everyone anyway, what did I have to lose? It might be good to have Gilly Sheridan on my side. She wasn't the most popular girl at school, but she was well-liked and respected.

I took a deep breath. "They're telling the truth for once."

I stared down at the table, wishing I had something to do with my hands. Neither of us had grabbed any food. Not that I could have eaten even if I had. My stomach was in a knot, and I was sure that if I'd put anything in it, I would have promptly thrown it right back up.

She stayed silent for so long I finally had to look up. She was watching me with a curious expression. Curiosity was better than hatred or revulsion, but for some reason it had me almost as worried.

"Is that why you'd never go out with me?"

I shrugged. "I guess so."

"Well, at least I don't feel like a total loser now."

A grin slowly spread across her face.

I hesitantly smiled back, just a little, although I was still nervous.

"You look like you're gonna vom. Chill. You don't have to worry; I won't tell anybody."

"Thanks, but you won't have to with Zack and Jesse running around telling the whole damn school." I grimaced. "I wasn't ready for people to know, but I guess I don't have much choice now."

“How’d they find out, anyway?”

I felt my face heat up. “They...didn’t say?”

“No, which is why I thought maybe they were making it up just to be jackasses like usual.”

“Oh.” It occurred to me that maybe I could have lied my way out of this, but it was too late.

“So?” She leaned in as if waiting for some juicy gossip. “What happened?”

“They, uh...saw me kissing...someone.”

Her eyes flew open wide. “A guy? Who?” She sounded so excited you’d have thought we were discussing her favorite show. “Does he go here?”

I felt sweat trickle down my back. “I can’t really say.” I desperately hoped she’d drop it.

She blinked, but then gave a little nod. “I guess I can respect that.”

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Can you at least say if he goes to our school?”

“Uh, I’d rather not.”

She sighed dramatically. “Fine. Keep your dirty little secrets.” Then suddenly her face lit up. “Oh, hey! If you really want to confuse people, we could always pretend to date. Nobody would believe Zack and Jesse if you were dating me.” She giggled. “Besides, that’s as close as I’ll ever get to the real thing.”

“I don’t—” I started to say, then stopped.

It occurred to me that it might be beneficial to have an in with the popular crowd when I started asking questions. Besides, as she’d said, a girlfriend might help me counter the rumors Zack and Jesse were spreading. I liked Gilly well enough. Maybe I should take her up on her offer.

“I need to think about it. Is that okay?”

“Of course. Here, give me your phone and I’ll put in my number. Call me later and we can talk more.” I handed her my phone, and she quickly saved her number in my contacts. “Now text me so I’ll have your number.”

I texted her and then sat awkwardly for a few minutes while she played with her phone.

“You know,” she said eventually, without looking up from her phone, “I’ve had a crush on you for years.”

What does one say to that? “Oh,” was my witty response.

“I always wondered what was wrong with me that you’d practically run away screaming whenever I asked you out. In all that time, it never occurred to me that you might be gay. I guess we only see what we want to see, huh? I was actually kind of relieved when I overheard Zack telling somebody you’re gay. I had to find you right away to see if it was true.”

“Well...now you know.”

She nodded. “Yeah, now I know.” She looked pensive. “To be honest, while it’s a relief to find out it’s not me, it still makes me kind of sad. I guess I’ve just liked you for so long I feel like I’m losing something, even though I never really had it. I guess that sounds stupid, huh?”

It did, but I felt like it would be rude to agree. I wondered if all girls had their own logic. What was I even supposed to say to that? All I could come up with was, “I’m...sorry?”

She laughed. “Don’t be sorry, silly. I’m not trying to make you feel bad.” She stood up and played

with one of my curls. "I'll happily settle for friends." I nodded dumbly. "Call me tonight."

"I will."

She smiled brightly, then ran off to get back to class.

I sat and thought about our awkward conversation and her offer. She didn't appear at all bothered by the fact that I was gay, really, aside from her disappointment. I remembered Asher telling me that her family was extremely religious, and her dad was really strict and a little weird, but Gilly seemed nice.

As far as I knew, she'd only gone out with a few guys and always only for very short periods of time. While she was popular, she was also considered something of a good girl. She and Asher had only lasted about a month before she broke things off with no warning.

I wished I could ask Asher about it, but that wasn't an option at the moment. I decided to talk to Adam when I got home and see what he thought about the idea of pretending to date her.

The bell rang signaling the end of lunch, and I realized I'd been so lost in thought that I hadn't eaten at all. I grabbed my backpack and rushed off to class. It was going to be a long afternoon.

I was just as out of it for my last two classes of the day. I did start watching opportunities to ask questions about Seth, but none arose. I wanted it to happen organically, so whoever I talked to wouldn't think enough of it to mention it to the wrong person. That's where the problem came in. I didn't really talk to

anyone even when I wasn't the current hot topic of the rumor mill.

I saw Zack and Jesse once in the hall between classes and ducked into a classroom to avoid them. I got a funny stare from the teacher, but I didn't care as long as I didn't have to deal with the dynamic duo.

After school I rushed directly home, happy to have avoided my bullies successfully for an entire day.

I waited until after dinner to bring up the subject of Gilly with Adam. When I finished telling him about our conversation and her offer, he thought for a minute.

"So she'd be your beard?"

"Huh?"

"That's the term for someone a queer person dates or marries so they appear to be heterosexual."

"Oh, then yeah. I can't grow one yet, but I guess she'd be my beard."

"And it was her idea?"

"Yeah, she suggested it. She wants me to call her tonight to talk about it."

"How do you feel about it?"

"Um... I don't know. I guess it would be kind of nice to have more time and to be able to come out on my own terms when I'm ready."

"Then, in that case, if you're sure she understands what she's suggesting, then maybe you should go for it. It might take the heat off you for now. Just make sure you're very upfront with her. Sometimes, girls think they can change you. Gilly sounds like a nice girl, though. She could be a good friend if nothing else. Every gay boy needs his hag."

"His what?" I asked.

He laughed. “When I was young—younger, we used to call straight girls who were best friends with gay guys fag hags.”

I frowned. “I don’t like the word fag.”

“I don’t either. I guess I’m showing my age again, huh? I wonder what they call them these days.”

“Maybe just friends?”

Adam laughed. “Yeah, I guess so.”

After I helped load the dishwasher, I went up to my room to finish my homework. Much to my relief, I got a text from Kane a short while later.

Sorry I never called last week. Nothing much has changed. I’ll try to call you soon.

I felt so sorry for him. I wanted to protect him, but I wasn’t sure how or from what. I had enough problems of my own, and he was too far away for me to do much.

I decided to call Gilly to see if we were on the same wavelength. Gilly answered but before I’d even finished saying hi, I heard a man in the background grilling Gilly about who was calling. I guessed he had to be her father. I couldn’t hear her response, she must have covered the phone, but finally she came back on the line.

“Sorry about that. I’m in my room now so we can talk without my dad breathing down my neck.”

“It’s okay. So, um, you wanted me to call.”

“I’m so glad you did.” She sounded as if she meant it. “Honestly, I didn’t really expect you to.”

“Well, I was thinking about what you said today. You know, about us pretending to date? Are you sure you want to do that? I mean, it doesn’t seem very fair to you.”

“Hey, I’m a big girl. Don’t worry about me. I offered, didn’t I? Look, at first it was kind of an impulsive sort of thing, but the more I think about it, the more I want to do it. I’m not really into any of the guys at school right now, so it’s not like I’ll be missing out on the boy of my dreams. If someone does come along, we can just break up. No big deal. I want to be your friend, and this is something I can do to help you out.”

“That means a lot to me, Gilly. I don’t know why you are being so nice to me. I’ve never done anything for you. It really doesn’t bother you that I’m gay?”

“I’m only asking for your friendship. I’m not one of those Kleenex people.”

She’d lost me. “Kleenex people?”

“Yeah, you know—the ones who use you and then throw you away like you’re a tissue.” She lowered her voice. “As far as your being gay, no, it doesn’t bother me at all. Why would it? Besides, I had an uncle who was gay.”

“What’s up with everybody having a gay uncle?”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” I was afraid to mention Asher for fear she’d connect him to the guy I was caught kissing.

“Okay, so...I guess this means we’re dating?”

Coming from Gilly Sheridan that sounded so weird I almost laughed out loud, but I managed to restrain myself. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Great! Hey, why don’t you come over for dinner tomorrow after school so you can meet my family? If you’re gonna be my pretend boyfriend, then you need to know them. Besides, my dad won’t let me date anyone he hasn’t met. We’re having this big family dinner

because my aunt is in town from California. Everyone will be here, and you can get it all over with at once.”

I gulped. “Who is everyone?”

I knew she had two brothers, an older brother named Todd who was a senior, and a twin brother named Jake, who only I knew by reputation since we’d never had any classes together. He ran with the surfer/skater crowd—which if you threw them and the stoners into Venn diagram it would be a perfect circle—so our social circles tended not to overlap. Besides her father being strict, that was pretty much the only information I had about her family.

“Oh, well, it’s not that many people, just my family, you know, my brothers, Mom and Dad, and my aunt. Wait till you meet Aunt Judy. She’s my mom’s sister and she’s a little...um...eccentric. She thinks she’s some sort of psychic or something. She says it runs in our family. Maybe I’ll tell your fortune?” She started giggling again.

“Who’re you talking to?” asked a male voice in the background. It wasn’t the same person who’d answered the phone. “Who are you inviting to dinner?”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

She sighed. “Todd. He thinks he has to watch out for me.”

“I do,” I heard Todd say. “That’s what big brothers do.”

“You mean eavesdrop? You’re so rude. I’ve told you a million times that you can’t just barge into my room whenever you want. Get out.” There was a pause, then Gilly continued. “Okay, he’s gone now. I swear, sometimes he’s worse than my father.”

“I wish I had a brother to watch out for me. I’m an only child.”

“You wouldn’t say that if you had a brother. They’re a pain in the ass. So now that you know all about my crazy family, how about dinner?”

“Well...”

“Please?”

“Okay,” I gave in. “I’ll check with Adam, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Who’s Adam?”

“Oh, uh...Adam is Seth’s dad. I kind of live with him now. My dad kicked me out when he found out I was gay.”

“Oh, Killian. That’s horrible. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not as big a deal as it sounds. I hated my dad anyway. I like living with Adam. He’s cool. He’s more like my dad already than my real father ever was. I do miss my mom, though.”

“She stayed?”

“Yeah, she’s afraid of him.”

“Well, he is pretty influential around here.”

“Yeah.”

“Can you do me a favor at dinner tomorrow and not mention who you live with now?”

“Um, okay...but why?”

“My dad is kind of weird about things like that.”

“What about your gay uncle?”

“Oh, he’s dead.”

“Oh, gosh. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it was really sad. He vanished a few years ago. Months later, they found him dead, buried in a shallow grave in the woods in the middle of nowhere.”

Some poor guy was out rabbit hunting, and his dog found him. Dug him up. It must have been awful. He was my mom's older brother, and I guess they were close growing up. She took it really hard. I always thought he was great, but my dad couldn't stand him. He wasn't even allowed to come to our house, so we only got to see him when we visited him with Mom."

Great, I thought irritably. What am I getting into?

"Did they ever catch his killer?"

"No. I guess it's one of those unsolved mysteries."

I shuddered and hoped Seth's death wouldn't go unsolved. I started to say something to that effect when I heard Todd's voice in the background again.

"Hang on." I could hear Gilly talking to Todd, but her voice was again muffled. Then she came back. "Hey, I have to go. You'll be here for dinner tomorrow?"

"I mean I have to ask..."

"Cool. Just text me later to let me know for sure. Buh-bye."

"Bye."

I hung up and flopped back on the bed. I mulled over the events of the day and how a brief phone conversation had changed everything. I had gone from dating Asher—however short-lived that had been—and having it spread around school that I was gay, to dating his ex...who was a girl.

Of course, Gilly was only my beard.

I giggled, picturing myself wearing a fake beard like a bad spy. Just call me Kendall, Killian Kendall.

I was still lying on my bed when the phone buzzed in my hand. “Hello. This is Kendall, Killian Kendall.” I put on my best English accent as I answered.

“Killian?” a shaky voice said uncertainly.

“Kane! Hey. Are you okay?” I dropped the accent, along with all traces of silliness.

“No.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to get out of here. It’s horrible.”

“What’s going on?”

“Mom watches every move I make now. She won’t let me do anything with any of my friends. I go to school and have to come right home. She took my phone away. She never speaks to me except to scream. She’s going through my stuff. Yesterday she slapped me. I mean, I said some pretty mean stuff to her, but she’s never hit me before. I hate her. She lied to me about Dad, she kicked Seth out, and then she dragged me back here even though she doesn’t even want me. I can’t stand it anymore.”

“Kane, slow down. How did you call me if she took your phone?”

“She’s not home right now. She locked my phone in a desk drawer, but I know where the key is. Don’t worry. I’ll put it back before she gets home...unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless I just run away. I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I want to be with you guys.”

“Look, if you run away, your mom will just take you back again and your dad would get in a lot of trouble. It would only make things worse. You’re going to have to do this the right way.”

“What right way?”

“I don’t know, but I know running away isn’t it. There’s got to be a legal way—”

“That takes too long. I want out now.”

“I don’t know. Hang on, I’m getting your dad. Maybe he’ll know what to do.” I didn’t wait for Kane to answer; I just took off for the living room, where Adam was reading a book.

“Adam, Kane is on the phone, and he’s really upset. I think you’d better talk to him. He wants to run away.”

Adam snatched the phone from my hand.

“Kane?” His voice was filled with tension.

He listened for a while, making comforting noises occasionally. Finally, he said, “Kane, listen to me, son. Hang in there for a few more days. I’ll call my lawyer in the morning and see what’s involved here. We’ll get you out of there, I promise. If your mom hits you again, though, call me immediately and I’ll come get you, damn her lawyers.”

They talked for a few more minutes, then said goodbye.

Adam rubbed his face tiredly, the stress plain on his face. “Thank you, Killian.”

“For what?”

“For being there for Kane. He told me he’s been talking to you and what you told him. You’re a good friend and a good person. You’ve proven over and over that I can trust you. I was too emotional to talk the other night when you said I was like a father to you, but I want you to know that I have come to think of you as a son as well.”

I took the few steps between us in one leap and gave him a huge hug.

I backed up and gave him a lopsided smile. “So do you think we can get Kane?”

“I’m not going to stop until we do,” Adam said with resolve. “I’m sick of Eve using him as a weapon against me. He’s not a pawn in some petty game of revenge.”

“I wish there were some way we could get him without a fight.”

“Me, too, kiddo, trust me. Unfortunately, when it comes to me, Eve won’t do anything without a fight. She hates me with a passion. But enough about that. Have you talked to Gilly?”

I quickly filled him in on our conversation and asked if it was okay for me to go to dinner at her house. He agreed without hesitation. We talked for a while longer, then watched TV until it was time for bed.

The nightmare came back with a vengeance that night. I was in my bedroom, Seth’s old room, and Seth was there, and, for the first time in my dreams, he wasn’t dead. He had a book in his hands, which he kept holding toward me, but I couldn’t move to take it. He seemed to be urging me to do something, but I couldn’t understand what. The faceless man stood malevolently in the background, not saying a word but making his presence clearly felt.

I awoke in a cold sweat, crying and shaking. Seth’s urgent if incoherent demands had made the dream even more upsetting than usual.

I wouldn’t be falling back asleep any time soon, so I decided to go down to the kitchen and have a snack.

I was rummaging through the fridge when I heard footsteps behind me. I spun around with a gasp, but it was just Adam.

“I thought I heard someone down here,” he said.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“It’s okay. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“You didn’t. I couldn’t sleep. You?”

“Nightmare.”

He sighed. “I called a therapist the other day, but they weren’t taking any new clients. They gave me the number for someone else they recommended, but I just got their voicemail. I haven’t heard back yet. I’m sorry.”

“Will counseling make the nightmares stop?”

“I don’t know, Kill,” he replied, his voice weary.

“I hope so. You’ve been through so much.”

“I think I’m doing pretty well, considering. It’s just these stupid nightmares...”

“You are doing amazingly well but remember what I said before. I suspect the nightmares are just a symptom. There’s a lot of stuff you haven’t really dealt with. You’ve just shoved it all down and ignored it in an effort to live your life as normally as possible. It’s like a defense mechanism, but you can’t go on that way indefinitely.”

“What about you? You’ve been through a lot, too. You seem all right.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“What do you mean?”

“Losing Seth has been incredibly hard—especially since a part of me feels I should have done more to protect him, taken the notes more

seriously...something. I blame myself for so much. I haven't been sleeping much."

I felt horrible. I'd never really considered that Adam might be having a hard time, too. In my mind, he was the strong one, the one who'd been holding everything together while I fell apart. Maybe I could be the one offering comfort for a change. "You couldn't know—" I started.

"Oh I know. At least I know that intellectually. And Steve keeps reminding me. I don't know what I'd do without him. He's been a huge support for me through this. Having you here has been a godsend. Maybe we should both stop suffering silently and be here for each other. What do you think?"

I crossed the kitchen and gave him a hug, which he returned. "Sounds good to me."

"Good. Tomorrow, I'll call that therapist again, and if I can't get up with him, I'll get some more references and get us some professional help, as well."

I nodded.

Adam pulled away and gave me a sad smile. "Now, how about I make us some warm milk so we can get back to bed."

I made a face. "People really drink that?"

"Hey, don't knock it until you try it. Sometimes, those old wives' tales really work."

I shrugged. "Well, it can't hurt."

Adam made us a couple of mugs of warm milk and sent me to bed. I don't know if it was the milk or just exhaustion, but, thankfully, I was able to fall asleep pretty soon after getting back in bed, and neither Seth nor the killer haunted my dreams anymore that night.

I overslept a little and was late getting to class, so I didn't get to talk to Gilly until after first period. We met by the door, and she gave me a big hug. I noticed our classmates grinning at us as they filed out.

"Does everyone know already?" It never ceased to amaze me how fast news travels in a high school.

"Sure seems that way," she said with an impish grin. "All I did was tell a few people, and it spread like wildfire." She shrugged. "I guess after the rumors that Zack and Jesse were spreading this is hot stuff. Who would have thought?" She giggled.

I laughed. "You're a mastermind."

"Nah, I just know how this stuff works. So, can you come tonight?"

"Yeah, Adam said it was fine."

She squealed with delight, then gave me another hug and a peck on the cheek before running off to her next class.

I was eating lunch later that day when someone sat down next to me. I looked up to find Asher slouching there with a hurt, confused look on his face. I hadn't spoken to him since the day Zack and Jesse tried to beat me up.

Before I could open my mouth, he said, "You're dating Gilly?" His voice was filled with equal parts of pain and anger.

"Well, yeah, kinda," I said meekly.

"You're dating my ex-girlfriend?" He hissed the last part, his eyes narrowing.

"Wait a minute! It's not how it looks—"

“Then how is it?” he interrupted angrily. “Huh? Tell me, Killian. You couldn’t have me, so you went for my ex? What kind of bullshit is that? I thought you were gay, or was that just a phase? Was I just a little experiment? You need to make up your mind.”

“Make up my mind?” I was getting angry now as well, and my volume was climbing. A few people nearby glanced over at us curiously, so I lowered my voice.

“Who was it that said they didn’t want to ruin their precious reputation? Who was it that backed off with us? Who was it that said they couldn’t handle all this? Here’s a clue—it wasn’t me!”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t run off and start dating your ex—who’s a girl—less than a week later.”

“I don’t have an ex. Besides, it’s none of your business who I date.” I lowered my voice even more and leaned in until our noses were almost touching. He refused to back off or look away. “You lost that right when you chose your reputation over us. You had your chance, and you blew it. Sorry, babe.”

I stood up, grabbed my backpack, and walked away without looking back. I should have felt great, but I didn’t. I felt like throwing up. I detoured into the first bathroom I came to and splashed cold water on my face.

I just told Asher off. The first time we’ve talked since he got beaten up over us and I told him off. It was almost as if someone else had taken over my body and spoken through my mouth. I’d been just as shocked as he was at what I was saying. Why hadn’t I told him the truth? Was I really so angry that he’d pulled away from me?

I stared at my dripping face in the mirror and almost didn't recognize myself. I'd changed so much over the last few weeks, in a lot more ways than just a physical makeover. What was I becoming? Was I choosing the right path? I had a desperate feeling that I was stumbling down the wrong one. Was it too late? More than anything, though, I wished could talk to Seth.

Gilly caught me in the hall between classes later that day. "Well, if the whole school wasn't already talking about us dating, they are after your fight with Asher at lunch."

"What?"

"Everybody's talking about how you guys had a fight over me in the middle of the cafeteria."

"Oh no!"

"No, it's great. I wish I'd thought of it."

"No, it's not great. Poor Asher. He's...he's my friend and now he thinks I'm dating his ex. This must be so embarrassing for him."

Gilly laid a hand on my chest. "You're so sweet. Don't worry about Asher. He's a big boy. If you want, I can talk to him."

"No, I should talk to him."

She didn't even know why Asher was really mad. What could she say that would make it better? She'd probably just make it worse. This was my mess, and I'd have to deal with it...eventually.

She smiled. "You're such a good friend. See you tonight."

She kissed my cheek again and disappeared into the crowd, leaving me standing there feeling like shit.

I wasn't a good friend. A good friend wouldn't be pretending to date his best friend's ex without telling him what was really going on. I made up my mind to talk to him as soon as possible.

Chapter 13

By the end of the day, the whole school had heard about Gilly and me. Guys I hardly knew were slapping me on the back and giving me thumbs up. Girls who'd never had the time of day for me before were waving, smiling at me and calling me by name from across the hall. It was truly bizarre. Like popularity in a box, just add beautiful girlfriend.

I didn't run into Asher anymore that day, although I was half hoping I would so I could apologize. I even waited around by the door closest to his locker, but he must have used another exit because I never saw him.

I drove home still feeling guilty for losing my temper with him but unsure what to do about it. It seemed like the sort of thing to address in person, so I sent him a text saying we needed to talk. He didn't answer.

Gilly said to be at her house for dinner by five-thirty. I didn't intend to arrive a minute early, so I headed home to kill some time.

When I got there, Adam was gone. I found a note on the refrigerator saying he was seeing his lawyer and probably wouldn't be back before I went to Gilly's, but he'd talk to me later that night.

I made myself a light snack. I was just sitting down to eat it while doing my homework when the doorbell rang. I got up to answer it. The glass in the front door was frosted, which I hated. I could never see who was on the other side, only shadows and movements.

For a split second, panic swept over me as the shapes reminded me of my dream, and I almost didn't answer the door.

I pulled myself together and opened it, only to immediately wish I hadn't.

Zack and Jesse stood on the porch.

I was so surprised that at first, I didn't know what to do. Then, I reacted and tried to slam the door, but my brief hesitation was all Zack needed. He was already in motion and managed to shove the door back.

"That's not very friendly, Killian," he said as I stumbled back. "We're just here to pay you a quick visit. I promise it won't take long."

I wasn't about to allow them into the house. I stood where I was, feet apart and arms crossed to try and hide their shaking.

"What do you want?" I demanded. I refused to let them see how scared I was.

"What kind of game are you playing, Killian?" Zack leaned casually against the doorjamb.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play games, fag." Jesse entered the conversation for the first time with his usual wit and charm.

"I don't know what you're talking about. What games?"

"What's going on with Gilly? We know you're a fag; you told us so yourself. Plus, we saw you with Asher." Zack spoke with exaggerated patience, as if he were talking to a particularly slow child. "So what's with the sudden switch?"

"I'm going out with Gilly."

“We got that much, what we want to know is why. Why date Gilly if you’re gay?”

“Maybe I changed my mind.” I was so nervous I could feel the sweat trickling down my back, but I tried to keep my tone flippant.

“You can do that?” Jesse asked in surprise.

Zack shot him a disgusted look.

I rolled my eyes. “You do know there is such a thing as bisexual, right?”

“But you said you were gay.”

“I’m just trying to figure stuff out.”

Zack poked a finger in my chest. “Look, Killian, I don’t know what you’re up to, but don’t forget we’re watching you. If you hurt Gilly, we’ll hurt you. Got that?”

“Yeah, I got it, Zack, but since when are you guys the protectors of Gilly’s virtue? I think she can take care of herself. Besides, you’re pretty pathetic if you don’t have anything better to do than follow me around all the time and keep tabs on my love life.”

Zack straightened up and squared his shoulders as Jesse moved into position behind him. Why hadn’t I kept my big mouth shut? It was about to get me in trouble again.

I was gearing up to try fast-talking my way out of whatever was coming when Adam pulled into the driveway.

Zack glanced over his shoulder and clenched his jaw as Adam started climbing out of his car, a slight frown on his face as he took in the scene on the porch.

Zack reluctantly started backing away from me. “We’ll talk more later,” he said loudly enough for Adam to hear.

“Are we leaving?” Jesse asked.

I swear he would be out of his depth in a puddle.

“Yeah, we’re done here. For now,” Zack told him.

“Who was that?” Adam wanted to know as they drove off.

“Zack and Jesse, otherwise known as Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dumber.”

“The guys who have been harassing you? What did they want?”

“They were trying to figure out what I’m doing with Gilly. I think it really confuses them. It’s more than their tiny brains can handle.”

Adam put his arm around me and steered me into the house. “That mouth of yours is going to get you in trouble one of these days.”

“It almost did just then. Your timing is impeccable.” I went on to recount the whole scene with Zack and Jesse.

“I don’t want you coming home alone anymore,” he said when I was finished. “We’ll have to figure something out for when I can’t be here. It’s not safe. That could have gone so many ways.”

“Maybe, but it didn’t. I’m okay. I don’t need a babysitter. I just won’t be stupid enough to open the door anymore before I know who’s there. So, what did the lawyer say? I didn’t think you were supposed to be back this early.”

“I’d like the record to show that I’m aware you’re changing the subject and I’m allowing it to happen. The meeting went well. Ilana thinks we have a good chance. She’s very confident.”

“Ilana is the lawyer?”

“Yes, Ilana Constantino. She’s a family lawyer. I met her a few months ago at a PFLAG meeting.”

“PFLAG?”

“It stands for Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Ilana and her husband have a gay daughter. Ilana has agreed to take my case and get the wheels turning on this custody thing. She’s going to start by contacting Eve’s lawyer. I told her to expect all hell to break loose when Eve finds out.”

“What happens if Eve gets ugly?”

“Oh, it’s not a matter of if, only the degree of ugly. I guess I’ll just have to get ugly back. This is my son we’re talking about. I’m not playing nice anymore. I’m tired of being the good guy while my kids get hurt.”

We walked as we talked, and ended up in the living room, both of us on the couch.

“Where will Kane sleep when he moved in?” I asked.

“Good question,” Adam answered. “I’ve been thinking about that. Since there’s only two bedrooms, we’ll have to get creative. So far, I’ve come up with three options. First, there is a small attic area that we could renovate to make a third bedroom, but it would be tiny and that would cost a lot. The good news is, Steve’s an architect, so I’m sure he could come up with something cool, and I can afford it. I think. I guess it depends how long Eve drags out this legal battle.”

“What’s option number two?”

“We convert the den into a bedroom. It’s not ideal since there are no closets.”

“Plus, it’s your office. Where would you work?”

“I can work anywhere. I could set up my desk in the living room.”

“Okay, but what’s the third option?”

“We get rid of the queen bed in your room and put in bunk beds or twin beds and you guys share. But I know that’s asking a lot so—”

“No! I love that idea. Let’s do that one. If Kane is cool with it, I mean.”

Adam looked concerned. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ve always wanted a brother, and we already get along. Besides, maybe having someone else there would stop the nightmares.” I paused. “And honestly, it would be nice for it to start feeling more like my room and less like Seth’s. Sometimes, I almost feel like he’s haunting me.”

Adam’s face fell, and, for a second, I regretted saying that, but then he nodded. “I hadn’t even thought about that. I boxed up his clothes to make room for you when you moved in, but I didn’t even think about how it was still very much his room. Whether Kane moves in with you or not, we can get some new furniture and redecorate. I’m sorry I was so thoughtless. We’re really figuring this all out together, aren’t we?”

“It’s really okay, Adam. You’ve done so much for me. That’s a really small thing. But that makes me think about that therapist stuff. Did you call him today?”

“Yes! Thank you for reminding me. Still didn’t get an answer, so I got some names from Ilana. She said

she really recommended one in particular and that she's send him an email introducing me after I left. I'm going to contact him soon, maybe tomorrow. I want to talk to your mom first, though. I'm sure she'd like to have some input on the situation, and she'll have to give me your insurance information. She may even have to sign some paperwork since you're a minor and I'm not your legal guardian."

I went quiet for a few minutes, lost in my thoughts, until Adam finally asked, "What's on your mind, kiddo?"

"I'm a little nervous about telling a complete stranger everything that's happened, but I know I need to see someone. I think it's all really starting to get to me." I recounted my altercation with Asher at lunch.

He frowned when I finished. "You need to explain to him what's going on, Killian. You shouldn't leave things like that hanging for very long."

I nodded miserably. "I know. I tried to find him this afternoon, but he's probably avoiding me again. Not that I blame him this time."

Adam looked at his watch. "As much as I'd like to keep talking about this, aren't you supposed to be getting ready for your dinner with Gilly's family?"

"Getting ready?"

"Meeting the girlfriend's family is a big deal, you know." He was grinning now.

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"As far as her family is concerned, she is. You should at least make an effort to look nice."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing now?"

“Nothing...if you’re going to school. Why don’t you go change? It doesn’t have to be anything too dressy, just a little less...beachy.”

I looked down at my T-shirt and faded jeans and realized he had a point. I ran upstairs and changed into a pair of khakis and a button-up shirt over a white T-shirt. I checked myself out in the mirror and thought I didn’t look half bad.

I went back down and presented myself to Adam. Once he’d given me his approval, it was time to head over to the Sheridan’s house. I didn’t want to be late and make a bad first impression.

I entered the address Gilly had given me into my phone and followed the GPS directions out into the rural roads of our county.

When I pulled into the drive, I was sure I’d entered the address wrong. The house was old, and so huge it could almost have been described as a mansion. Although it had seen better days, it was aging with typical Southern grace.

After double-checking the address, I parked the car in the circular drive and walked up to the broad stairs leading up to the wraparound porch. The front door opened before I could even knock.

Gilly stood there looking a little anxious. “Are you sure you’re ready for this?” she asked before I could even say hi.

“What do you mean?”

“Think you’re prepared to meet my crazy family?”

I grimaced. “Do I have a choice?”

She laughed tensely. “Not really.” She stood back and allowed me to step inside.

The moment I walked through the door, I felt a change in the air. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. A chill ran over me, and with it came a strange sense of foreboding. For a second, it looked like the entire front entry area was on fire, but then it was gone.

I stopped in my tracks. Was I losing my mind? What had just happened?

Gilly gave me a funny look. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

I smiled weakly and shook off the strange feeling.

“I’m all right. Just a little nervous, I guess.”

“You’ll be fine. Don’t let my nerves get to you. It’s just been utter chaos around here since I got home from school, so I’m a little frazzled. Come on. I’ll give you a quick tour and introduce you to everyone.”

She led me through the entrance hall and into what had probably once been called the front parlor. It now served as a formal living room, lavishly furnished with worn antique furniture that I was sure had to be family pieces. Dark oil paintings of who I presumed to be ancestors hung on the walls in heavy gilt frames, watching over the room with slightly disapproving expressions.

Two men sat on the sofa. One I recognized as Gilly’s older brother, and I assumed the other was her father. They were in the middle of a conversation when we entered the room, but they stopped and politely shook my hand as Gilly made the introductions, though her

father wore an almost identical expression to the man on the wall behind him.

“Killian, this is my father, Tom Sheridan, and my brother Todd. Dad, Todd, this is Killian Kendall.”

Tom Sheridan was a rather unimposing man—average height, graying hair and a little pudgy around the middle. His outfit of light-blue oxford shirt and tan dress pants revealed little. He could have been anything from a CEO to an accountant. The only feature that stood out about him was his pale blue eyes, which seemed to hold a startling intensity, especially when compared with the rest of his ordinariness.

Todd Sheridan, on the other hand, was anything but ordinary. Everybody knew who Todd Sheridan was. I’d only seen him from a distance and didn’t really know him at all, but he was one of the hottest guys in our school.

He was tall and lightly muscled, with eyes the color of a summer sky and straight white-blond hair that just brushed his shoulders—the prototypical California surfer boy, but right here in Maryland.

He was a masculine version of Gilly, every bit as beautiful as she was, and about as physically perfect as anyone I’d ever met in person.

I almost melted as I shook his hand.

“After you get the tour, why don’t you join us back in here,” Mr. Sheridan offered, snapping my attention away from his attractive son. At least, it was posed as an offer, but it sounded more like a command. “The men can get to know each other while the women prepare dinner.”

I managed a polite smile before Gilly propelled me from the living room and into what appeared to be a formal dining room, empty except for an enormous table that was set and waiting.

“Don’t mind him,” she murmured. “He can be a little old-fashioned sometimes.”

A better word might be chauvinistic, I thought, but decided that wasn’t the time to quibble about semantics.

From there we entered the kitchen, which was bustling with activity. Two blonde women were busy preparing enough food to feed a small army. They were playfully arguing over who was going to remove the turkey from the oven but stopped when we appeared.

“This must be Killian,” the smaller woman gushed. “We’ve heard so much about you. I’m Janice Sheridan, Gilly’s mom.”

She held out a manicured hand for me to shake. She looked fragile enough to break, but it was obvious where Gilly and Todd had gotten their looks. She was a stunning woman. She wore her blonde hair swept up in a sophisticated chignon, and her eyes were the same shade as Gilly’s and Todd’s.

Still, as nice as she seemed, I couldn’t help but feel there was something slightly fake about her.

While Mrs. Sheridan was busy with her introduction, the other woman had quickly slipped the turkey from the oven. When Mrs. Sheridan noticed, she tried to take it away from her, and the two of them began playing tug-of-war with the roasting pan. I fully expected to see the bird hit the floor at any minute.

“Will you guys grow up?” Gilly teased affectionately.

The other woman, who I assumed to be Gilly’s Aunt Judy, released the turkey to Mrs. Sheridan and turned to face us with a smile. She bore an amazing resemblance to Gilly and her mother. They all shared the same fine bone structure, blonde hair, and intensely blue eyes.

Judy must have been younger than Mrs. Sheridan, though, because she looked more like Gilly’s older sister. Her hair was cut bluntly just above her shoulders. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that proclaimed, “I only do what the voices in my head tell me to do.”

“Afraid not,” she said with twinkling eye. “We’ll still bicker the way we did when we were kids when we’re eighty years old and in a nursing home.” She held out a hand and gave me a warm smile. “I’m Judy Cassara, the other sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” I responded, shaking the proffered hand.

As soon as we touched, her eyes widened slightly, and she gripped my hand harder, as if she thought I might pull away as she stared deeply into my eyes as if trying to see inside me.

Another chill ran down my spine. Then, the moment passed, and she released my hand with a thoughtful look.

“Almost done,” Gilly said, grabbing my other hand and tugging me away.

I glanced over my shoulder at Judy to find she was still watching as Gilly dragged me through the door.

Gilly ushered me into a small room that, from the looks of things, had once been a playroom. Over the years, however, as the kids had grown, it had evolved into more of a game room. The border at the ceiling was still a childish pattern of crayons, letters of the alphabet, and numbers, but a slightly battered sofa sat against one wall facing an entertainment center filled with all the latest electronic equipment. I noted several gaming systems, from an old school Nintendo to the latest consoles.

Gilly's twin brother Jake was so busy playing a game that he didn't even turn to acknowledge us when we entered. I'd seen Jake around the halls quite a bit and knew who he was, but we didn't have any classes together since I was in mostly advanced classes, and, well, he wasn't.

Like his older brother, Jake was working the surfer-boy look, but where Todd was thoroughly masculine, Jake was somewhat more delicate. His shaggy hair was darker than Todd's and Gilly's, more like a dark honey with lighter highlights. His face was thinner than Todd's, his cheekbones more pronounced with a natural blush. His eyes were so huge you almost felt you could get lost in their depths. There, at least, he had something in common with Todd and Gilly. His eyes were the same impossibly sparkling shade of blue.

"You could at least say hello," Gilly complained with a playful swat at the back of his head.

Jake paused his game and turned around to greet me. For the second time that night, I found my breath catching in my throat over one of the Sheridan boys. He

smiled, and I felt my knees buckle at the sight of his dimples.

“Hey,” he said in a softly husky voice.

“Hi,” I managed to squeak.

“You’re friends with Asher Davis, right?”

“Oh, um, yeah.”

At least, I hoped we were still friends. I wasn’t so sure anymore.

“We had gym together last year. Seemed cool. Want to play?”

“Uh, no, that’s okay.” I sucked at video games unless they were the shoot-em-up type, at which I was pretty good. Jake was playing a fighting game, however, and those made me nervous. “I think your dad wanted me to go talk to him after I got the tour.”

“Oh, please.” He rolled his eyes. “We won’t torture you like that. This is your first time here. Come on, play with me.”

“You’re in the middle of a game,” I tried.

“I can start over.”

“Gilly—”

“I don’t mind,” she chimed in.

“I don’t know how to play.” It was my last gambit, and I realized it was doomed before the words were out of my mouth.

Sure enough, Jake smiled and said those famous last words uttered by everyone who plays video games: “It’s easy. I’ll teach you.”

Translation: I know how to play, and I can kick your ass.

I sighed and admitted defeat. Jake scooted over on the couch so I could sit down. Gilly perched on the

arm to watch my slaughter. Jake handed me a controller and launched into an explanation that might as well have been in Greek for all I understood. Not aiding my comprehension was the fact that I kept forgetting to listen to what he was saying because I was so caught up in just watching his lips move.

Eventually, we started playing and, as I'd predicted, he beat me soundly. We played a few more rounds with similar results until Mrs. Sheridan called us to dinner.

If I'd thought the introductions were awkward, dinner brought a whole new meaning to the word. Tension hung thick in the air, yet I couldn't figure out its source. I tried to pass it off as just a case of nerves. Maybe I was telegraphing my own stress. Deep down, though, I knew that what I was sensing was not coming from within.

I didn't have a lot of time to figure it out. Mr. Sheridan kept up a steady bombardment of questions lobbed directly at me—easy questions such as where I was going to college and what did I intend to do with my life.

I tried to answer them and still sound somewhat intelligent, but when the majority of your responses include the phrase “I don't really know yet,” that's a pretty tall order.

There was very little other conversation. Everyone was intent on their food, which was delicious and seemed to keep multiplying like a miracle of Biblical proportions. The biggest challenge of the meal was trying to avoid staring at Todd and Jake, both of whom were conveniently seated right across the table

from me. I was so stressed I had heartburn even before I finished eating. I'd never been so relieved to see dessert served.

Afterward, the women cleared away the dishes while Mr. Sheridan herded the men into the living room. To say I felt acutely uncomfortable in that environment would be an enormous understatement. I watched the women start clearing the table and wished I could stay with them in the kitchen. I envied their escape.

Within minutes, the conversation had completely lost me. Todd and Mr. Sheridan were talking about sports, which I'd never paid the slightest bit of attention to. My dad wasn't even into them, so I hadn't even absorbed any knowledge by osmosis.

At least Jake seemed as disinterested as I was. I managed to dodge direct questions by asking Mr. Sheridan his opinion and staying quiet the rest of the time. My strategy seemed to be working, and I thought Mr. Sheridan was even starting to like me.

Then Gilly appeared at the door. Her father glared at her with annoyance.

"Mom said I was excused from washing dishes," she said meekly. This wasn't at all the forward, confident girl I knew from school. "Would it be all right if Killian and I took a walk? I want to show him the yard."

Mr. Sheridan reluctantly agreed, and I gratefully slipped from the room under his watchful eye. We didn't talk much as we walked around the backyard, which was huge and well landscaped. The property abutted a small inlet that fed in turn into the Chesapeake Bay, though a small stand of trees hid the view of the water from the

house. A path led through the trees to reveal an old boathouse built out on a dock over the water. It made for a picturesque scene.

After my tour of the property, we settled onto a swing hanging from the ceiling on the back porch. It would have been the perfect place to watch the sun set over the bay had it not been for the trees. I wondered who'd planted them and why. It seemed like such an odd choice. Maybe they hadn't realized they'd grow so tall.

I was thinking about how I would cut down the trees if I lived there, when Gilly spoke up, breaking the peaceful silence.

"Have you talked to Asher yet?" she asked.

I jumped guiltily. I'd almost forgotten she was even there. "No. I couldn't find him and he's not answering my texts."

"Oh. I think he's really mad about us. He sent me a pretty nasty text tonight."

"What did he say?"

"Just something about how he guesses I'll date anybody these days. I don't get it. I mean, I broke up with him a long time ago. We even stayed friends, so I don't know why he would care. I've gone out with other guys since then, and it didn't seem to bother him, so I figured the problem isn't me dating, but me dating you. Is that what you guys were fighting about today?"

"Sort of," I ventured, hoping she wouldn't pursue it further.

Fate stepped in at that moment to distract her when the back door opened, and her father stuck his head out. "Gilly, your mother could use your help after all. Killian will be fine for a few minutes."

She quickly stood up. "I'll be back as soon as possible," she apologized.

"No problem," I assured her. I was actually looking forward to a few minutes alone to collect myself, but it wasn't to be. As Gilly disappeared into the house, her father came out onto the porch. He leaned against a post and gave me a measuring look. I shifted uncomfortably while I waited for him to speak.

"So," he began slowly, "you're my daughter's new boyfriend."

"Yes, sir." I was mortified to hear my voice fly up an octave on the second word.

"We're a religious family," he informed me. "Do you go to church?"

"Yes, sir. My mother and I attend a church in town."

I hadn't been in weeks, but he didn't have to know that.

He nodded. "Good. Glad to hear it. Then I hope you will treat her with the respect she deserves, if you know what I mean."

His tone left little doubt that the consequences, should I fail to do so, would be dire indeed.

I gulped. "Sir, I intend to treat Gilly with the highest respect."

He nodded once. "Good. See that you do. You seem like a nice young man. I'd hate to see things end badly."

With that vague threat hanging in the air, he turned and walked back inside.

The door hadn't even shut behind him before Judy stepped out of the shrubbery and sat down beside

me on the swing. I wondered how long she'd been lurking there.

"Charming, isn't he?" she said.

"Oh, um...I guess he's just protective."

"I think you mean overprotective. He acts like he owns poor Gilly and treats all her boyfriends like they're trying to steal her away. That's why none of them last very long. Either they get tired of it, or they don't measure up and he demands that Gilly end things. At least you're the right skin color and you answered his questions correctly. You might even last longer than usual...if you were actually Gilly's boyfriend. But you're not, are you?"

I almost jumped off the swing, but she laid a hand on my arm, keeping me in place.

I gaped at her for a moment, then finally managed to get a word out. "Huh?"

I didn't say it was an intelligent word.

"You and Gilly aren't really dating." She gave me the same searching look she'd given me in the kitchen. "When we touched...I saw things."

I snatched my arm away. She was definitely creeping me out.

"Saw what things?"

She closed her eyes for a second, apparently choosing her words carefully. When she opened them again, they seemed sad somehow.

"I know you're not Gilly's boyfriend because you're only attracted to boys."

"What? No, I'm not. That's crazy." I was getting panicky.

“Don’t be scared. I don’t judge, and I won’t tell. I simply see.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sometimes, I see many things, hidden things.”

The hair on my arms stood up. I’d definitely entered Weirldsville, and Gilly’s whole family lived there.

“Did... Did you see anything else?” I asked hesitantly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know, but I couldn’t resist asking.

Her eyes locked onto mine, and she held out her hand.

“Give me your hand.”

I hesitated.

“I won’t hurt you. I promise. It just helps me see more clearly.”

I tentatively placed my hand in hers.

She closed her eyes, sat for a moment, then began to speak. “You’ve been hurt. Deeply. And you’ve not yet healed. I see you’re afraid—and with good reason. You’re in danger. Someone wishes you harm, someone...” She frowned. “Someone closer than you think. Your paths intertwined; they converge repeatedly. You’re at a crossroads with many branches before you, but there is only one you will survive. Watch your step carefully.”

My heart was racing at her words. They were so similar to what Seth had written. Her eyes opened, and she blinked as if coming out of a trance before focusing on me. Then she abruptly stood up, looking unsettled, and began to walk away.

“Wait!” I called after her. “Do you know who it is? Who’s after me?”

She paused and turned back to me, her face lost in the shadows. “No. I can’t see that. You must discover that for yourself. It’s your path.”

She turned and melted into the darkness.

It took all my strength to keep from running for my car and hightailing it out of there. I tried to convince myself I didn’t believe a word she’d said, but the chills running up and down my spine belied that assertion. She’d hit too close to home for comfort.

I was actually relieved when the door opened and Gilly stepped out. Before she was halfway to the swing, though, she stopped. “Oh, I’ll go get us some iced tea. Be right back.”

I almost called out to her, asking her to stay, but I bit my tongue and let her go.

She’d barely gone inside before the door opened again. My mind was still swirling with Judy’s words, so it took me a moment to realize that it was Todd, not Gilly. He didn’t notice me on the swing as he walked to the porch rail and leaned against it. I was debating whether to make my presence known when he turned around and saw me. He started a little, then threw me an unreadable look.

“I didn’t see you there.” His voice was flat, still not giving me an indication as to how he felt about me.

I shrugged and said, “Sorry,” although for what I wasn’t sure.

“You’re awfully quiet.” He came over and sat down beside me.

I couldn't help thinking that this was all like a carefully choreographed play or TV sitcom, with everyone coming and going in such a seemingly synchronized way. I felt as if I were running the gauntlet. Maybe the Sheridan clan had arranged it. I could picture Mr. Sheridan gathering the whole family around a whiteboard and laying out the game plan with X's and O's.

"So Gilly's finally got you." Todd's voice snapped me back from my weird daydream.

"Huh?"

"Aren't you the guy she's been after for so long?"

"Oh, I guess." I laughed nervously.

Something about his manner was setting me on edge. It wasn't anything he'd said, but more his demeanor. It didn't help that he'd sat a bit closer to me than was comfortable. I was feeling a little flustered by his nearness.

I subtly tried to scoot away from him, but since I was already sitting against the arm of the swing, I didn't really have anywhere to go.

"You guys don't seem to be all that enthusiastic about it." He looked at me closely, and I felt even more uncomfortable, as though he were seeing through me.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that you don't have the body language you usually expect to find in two people who are first going out."

"Get lost, Todd," Gilly said, suddenly coming up behind us. We both jumped. I hadn't even heard the door open. "Since when are you an expert on body language?"

“Chill out, Gilly. I’m just looking out for you, that’s all.” He stood up and moved away from the swing.

“Thanks, Todd. I appreciate it, but you have to remember that I’m a big girl now. I’m only eighteen months younger than you. I can take care of myself.”

Todd gave her another one of his indecipherable looks, then turned to me again. I could tell there was more he wanted to say, but he just shrugged and walked back into the house.

“Sorry about that,” Gilly said as she filled the once-more-vacant spot next to me and handed me a glass of tea. “I warned you I had a weird family.”

“It’s okay,” I told her as I set the glass on the floor, “but I really think I need to be getting back home.”

I was kind of worried that if she left me alone again, Jake or Gilly’s mom would climb out of a window or something. They were, so far, the only family members who hadn’t ambushed me.

Gilly frowned. “Oh. Already?”

“Yeah, I, uh, didn’t finish my homework.” I had, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Okay,” she smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Well, will you come in and say goodbye to everyone first, at least?”

“Yeah, of course.” I was already dreading it.

“Um, before we do that, I just have to say that it’s been really nice having you here tonight.”

“It’s, uh, been nice being here.” I was stretching the truth a little, but it seemed the polite thing to do.

“So many times I’ve imagined what it would be like if you were here with me...what I would do...what you would do.” She was slowly moving closer and closer

to me. Once again, I found myself pressed into the arm of the swing.

“Uh, Gilly, I really need to go—”

“Just one thing first,” she whispered.

Then, before I could react, she leaned forward and pressed her lips against mine.

I’m kissing a girl, my shocked brain informed me.

I placed my hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently but firmly away. I could clearly see the hurt in her eyes.

“Gilly, we can’t do this,” I said softly. “I can’t do this. I’m gay, remember? We’re not really boyfriend and girlfriend.”

“I... I know, but I thought maybe if we...that you...”

She faded out and stared at me with a horrified expression. A single tear escaped her eye and rolled down her cheek.

“Oh, jeez, Gilly.” I patted her clumsily on the hand. “I’m sorry. I just can’t...”

She gave me a weak smile and wiped the tear away. “No, I’m sorry, Killian. I guess I thought that if we kissed you might actually like me.”

“I do like you, Gilly,” I said, feeling exquisitely awkward, “but not that way. It’s not that you aren’t a great girl. You are. If I weren’t gay, I’m sure I’d like you a lot. I mean, I like you now as a friend, but if I were straight, I’m sure I’d like you as more than a friend—”

Gilly reached out and placed a finger on my lips to shut me up. “You don’t have to apologize or explain anything, Killian. I was out of line and I’m sorry. We

agreed that this was only for show. I just got carried away. I know that sounds stupid, but I've thought about you for so long. I wanted to know what it felt like...just once. I promise I won't do it again."

I nodded thoughtfully as her words sank in. She was doing a lot for me, pretending to be my girlfriend, and she was getting nothing in return. Maybe one kiss would be all right.

I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers before I could change my mind.

The kiss was nothing like the ones I'd shared with Asher. There was no spark or excitement. I felt absolutely nothing. I sat back and stared at Gilly expectantly.

She kept her eyes closed for a few seconds, then opened them slowly and gave me a bittersweet smile. "Thank you, Killian," she whispered.

'You're welcome' seemed rather egotistical, so I just nodded and stood up. "I guess I should get going."

She stood up as well. We hugged briefly before going back inside, and, after saying a quick but polite goodbye to everyone, I made my escape from what was surely one of the strangest nights of my entire life.

Chapter 14

As tired as I was, the moment my head hit the pillow all I could think about was what Judy had said on the porch.

Someone was after me, though she couldn't tell me who. She'd also said he was closer than I thought, which was really saying something since I already knew the killer recognized me. Unless the person who was after me and the killer weren't one and the same.

That thought sent a chill down my spine.

There was also the question of how did Judy know all those things? Was she really a psychic? She'd grown up with a gay brother, so maybe she just knew what signs to look for. That might explain how she knew I was gay, but not the rest. My mind just kept going around in circles.

It took me forever to fall asleep. When I woke up the next morning, Judy's prophecy—if that's what it was—immediately popped into my head. It totally distracted me all morning at school as well. At one point, I paid enough attention to realize that I had no idea what we were talking about, which would be a bad thing come test time, then I just spaced out again.

I was still in my own little world at lunch when I realized someone had sat down next to me. Somehow, I wasn't surprised to see the only member of Gilly's family besides her mother who hadn't cornered me the night before.

I sighed with resignation. "Hello, Jake."

“Hi, Killian. Can I talk to you for a few minutes?” His dark blonde hair was tucked behind his ears.

“Sure, why not.”

“You were friends with Seth, right?”

That was about the last thing I expected him to say. I debated how to answer him, but I figured there was no use denying it. The whole school knew I had been friends with Seth.

“Uh, yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“I heard you’re even living with his dad now.”

“Um...” I wondered how he knew where I lived but realized that Zack and Jesse must have spread that around, too. They’d been to the house, so they certainly knew, and I assumed Asher had told them at some point.

Did I admit it to Jake, though? Gilly had told me not to mention around her father that I was living with Adam, but what about her twin? I finally decided that if she hadn’t wanted me to tell him, she should have mentioned him.

“Yeah, I am.”

He looked around the tables near us, then leaned in closer to me. “Wasn’t Seth gay?”

Seth had been very open about his sexuality, and I wasn’t about to force him into the closet now that he was dead.

“Yes.”

“Is it true that his dad is, too?”

That was a little different. However, by that point, I was curious to see where these questions were leading.

“Yeah.”

“Then, um...are you?”

I mentally slapped myself. I should have seen that coming. These were dangerous waters. What was I supposed to say? I decided to go with a non-answer.

“Um, hello? I’m dating your sister.”

“Yeah, I know, but that’s not what I asked.”

I bit my lip. Obviously, I had underestimated him. He was sharper than he appeared.

“Look, Jake, do you think we could talk about this later?” I threw a meaningful glance at the tables full of people nearby.

“Oh. Yeah, sure.” He shrugged. “Can I ask you one more question, though?”

I was hesitant but agreed.

He leaned in again and lowered his voice even more. “Do you really think Seth was killed in a mugging? I mean, you were there, but that just doesn’t feel right to me.”

I was so shocked I couldn’t make my voice work. After several seconds of slack-jawed silence, I recovered my ability to speak. “What do you mean?”

“Doesn’t it seem strange that the only openly gay student at our high school gets mugged and killed two weeks after school starts? Call me suspicious, but that sounds awfully fishy to me, especially since he was treated so badly here.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. For a second, I even wondered if he was setting me up. Red flags were going up everywhere, reminding me of Judy’s words: “Watch your step carefully.” I decided it was very good advice for that situation.

“Why does it matter to you?” I sounded more defensive than I’d intended.

Jake looked around again. He seemed as paranoid as I felt, which I found very interesting.

“You’re right. Let’s just talk about it later, okay? When do you want to meet?”

“How about after school? You can meet me at my car. Do you know what I drive?”

“Yeah, I think Todd parked next to you this morning. I’ll meet you there but wait for me. I have to talk to Mr. Johnson after school for a few minutes about an assignment that’s late. I’ll see you then.”

“Okay,” I said, wondering what strange new twist my life was about to take. “See you then.”

Gilly found me after school, and we walked out to the parking lot together. We leaned against my car and talked while we waited for Todd and Jake. Neither of us mentioned the kiss from the night before. We seemed to be studiously avoiding that topic by mutual consent. Other kids were straggling out of the building, and many of them stopped to say hi to us. I still wasn’t sure how I felt about being part of the school’s newest “It” couple.

“So how for-real is your Aunt Judy?” I asked after an awkward lull in the conversation.

“Who knows? Why? Did she get to you last night while I was gone?” Gilly tucked a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear. I nodded, and she went on, “We don’t really take her all that seriously, but there have been some spooky coincidences.”

“Like what?”

“Well, by far the freakiest one happened a few Christmases ago. Aunt Judy was really emotional all day, and when we went over to Uncle Rick’s house, he asked what was going on and she burst into tears. She said she just had this overwhelming feeling that it was the last time all her siblings would be together for the holidays. Everybody told her she was being silly, but then a few months later, Uncle Rick disappeared. When they finally found him, we all remembered what Aunt Judy had said.”

I felt the hairs on my arms stand up again. “Oh wow. So she really is a psychic.”

Gilly shrugged. “That sounds so silly. It’s not like she has a crystal ball. She says she just sees stuff that other people miss, that she’s more sensitive.” She gave me an appraising look. “Why? What did she say to you?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“When did she talk to you?”

“While you were inside.”

“She and Todd both?”

“And your dad.”

“Oh, no! I’m so sorry. Is my family stalking you?”

We both laughed, though mine was a little more uncomfortable.

“Actually, maybe,” I said just as Jake came running toward us. “And speaking of stalkers, here’s another one.”

“What? Why am I a stalker?” Jake asked, confused.

Todd walked up just then. “Because you’re a sick little pervert.” He grinned as he grabbed Jake in a headlock, making him struggle for a minute before releasing him.

Jake rubbed his neck as if it hurt. “Knock it off, Todd, or I’ll tell everyone about the magazines under your bed.”

Todd shot him a strange look, as if unsure whether Jake was serious. Apparently satisfied he wasn’t, Todd asked, “Are you two brats ready?”

“I’m going to Killian’s. He’ll drive me home later,” Jake said, shifting his backpack from one shoulder to the other.

Gilly turned to me with surprise. I’m sure my expression mirrored hers. I’d thought Jake and I were just talking. He hadn’t mentioned anything about going home with me.

Todd regarded me searchingly for a moment, then shrugged. “Suit yourself. Gilly, you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.” Then she leaned over and kissed me hard on the lips. “Have to keep up appearances,” she whispered in my ear and, with a lingering look at me, got into her brother’s car.

After they had driven off, Jake and I climbed into my car.

“So, when did the plans change?” I asked as I buckled my seatbelt.

“Sorry. I just wanted to go someplace where we can talk in private. I figured your house would be best.”

“What’s all this cloak-and-dagger business about, Jake?” I started the car and pulled out.

“I just need to talk to you about some stuff, and I don’t want to be overheard. Somebody’s always listening in my house.”

“So I’ve noticed. What stuff do you want to talk about? Seth?”

“Partly.”

“Jake, we’re in a moving car, and as far as I know there’s no one in the back seat. I think it’s safe to talk.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “It’s just that this isn’t easy for me. I’ve never told anybody this before.”

“Told anybody what?” I shouted in exasperation.

“I’m gay!” he shouted back.

I almost drove off the road. Once I had the car back under control, I looked over at him.

“Or maybe bi. I don’t know.” He was slumped in the seat, staring at his hands in his lap. He looked as if he might start bawling at any second. That was the last thing I wanted. I knew how much courage it took to come out to somebody.

“It’s okay,” I said softly. “Your secret is safe with me. I’m not going to out you or anything.”

He looked up hopefully. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.” He grinned. “I figured you were safe since you were nice to Seth and all. I mean, I guess it’s not really a *secret* secret. Some of my friends know. They’re chill. My family can’t know, though.”

“Yeah, I get that.” After meeting his family, I definitely got that.

“But you’re okay with it?”

“Yeah.” I made a split-second decision. “You wanna know why?”

“Yeah?”

“Because I’m gay, too.”

“I knew it!” he crowed. “I figured when you started hanging out with Seth, but then I was confused when you started dating Gilly...”

“Gilly and I are just friends.”

“But that kiss she just laid on you...”

“It’s kind of like a cover, so no one knows I’m gay for right now. Not that I’m ashamed of it or anything. I just think it’s probably safer for me right now if no one knows. Plus, when I do come out, I want it to be on my terms, you know?”

“Yeah. That makes sense. Were you and Seth...?”

“We were just friends. He’s the one who helped me realize that I’m gay. Gilly knows, by the way. She asked me, and I admitted it. She’s even the one who offered to be my beard.”

“Beard?”

“My fake girlfriend so people think I’m straight.”

“You think you’re in danger?”

“Yeah. I think I could be. Plus, I think more people will talk to me about Seth if they don’t know I’m gay.”

“Then you do think it was more than just a mugging. I mean, why else would you think you’re in danger for being gay or want to ask people about Seth?”

“You know, you’re a lot smarter than you let on,” I commented dryly.

“I’m not sure if I should take that as a compliment or not.” He gave me an adorable grin.

At the sight of his dimples, I almost ran off the road again. “Take it as a compliment.” I could feel my cheeks heating up.

Even without looking at him, I knew he was still grinning.

“Okay, but only on one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You keep your eyes on the road while you’re driving.”

We burst out laughing. Before I knew it, I was pulling into the driveway. “Well, this is where I live now.”

“This is a really cool place.” He flashed me another one of those killer smiles.

I felt as if I were melting. “It’s not quite your house.”

“Our house is too big. It’s like living in a museum. It’s been in my dad’s family for years. All our money is family money. This is so much cooler. I’d love to live on the beach. I could just walk out my back door and go surfing.”

“I wish I surfed,” I said as we climbed out of the car.

“I could teach you,” Jake offered eagerly.

“Like you taught me how to play that video game?”

We laughed and went inside. I introduced Jake and Adam, who went back to work on his computer while Jake and I wandered up to my room to talk.

As we settled at opposite ends of the bed, I returned to our earlier conversation. “So you think Seth was murdered, too?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, it’s the only thing that makes sense to me. I really don’t understand why the police aren’t doing more.”

“We believe it was more than just a mugging, too. Adam thinks maybe the police are purposefully ignoring important information.”

“Like what?”

“There were letters in Seth’s locker. The police dismissed them as dumb pranks, but they could mean the killer goes to our school—or at least has a contact there who knows something. Did you have any classes with Seth?”

“No, but I saw him a lot in the halls and stuff. I guess I kind of watched for him. He was the only out gay guy I knew. And then you started talking to him at school and stuff, so I started wondering...”

“Did you ever see him with anyone else?”

“Mostly just you.”

“But was there anybody else?”

He thought for a minute, then spoke slowly, as if carefully considering each word. “This is hard. Not just hard to remember who I saw him with, but also because I feel like I’m, like, casting suspicion on anyone I name.”

He sighed. “But I guess if there’s even the smallest chance any of them did it...” He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Yeah, anyway, I saw him talking to Zack Phillips, Jesse O’Donnell and Asher Davis once—or they were talking to him, to be exact, kind of surrounding him. Seth didn’t look very happy, but you know how Zack and Jesse are. Another time I saw him with just Asher. I saw him with Becca Rosinski. And I think I saw him with Marcus Davis once.”

He hesitated for a moment before continuing quickly. “I saw him with a few other people, but I don’t really know them. Besides, they all seemed to be just talking to him after class, you know? Not like a real conversation.”

I started to ask him about the hesitation, then I decided it would wait. I was more distracted by the news that Asher had talked to Seth at least twice. He’d never mentioned it to me. Could it be what he was hiding from me or was there more? I pushed that line of thought from my mind and forced my attention back to our conversation.

“Did Seth look angry or scared or uncomfortable with any of them?”

Once again, Jake thought for a moment before answering. “It’s hard to say—maybe with Zack, Jesse, and Asher. I guess he also looked uncomfortable when it was just Asher. Not really with Becca. I couldn’t tell with Marcus because I only saw them from behind.”

“What about the other ones?”

“I’m not sure.” His eyes flickered away.

I was positive he wasn’t telling me everything, and this time I decided not to ignore it. “You have to tell me everything, Jake.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean whatever it is you’re not telling me. It’s obvious you’re trying to protect someone or something, but this is really important. I need to talk to everyone who had anything to do with Seth. Even if they didn’t kill him, they might know something, maybe something they don’t even realize they know.”

He sat there for a few minutes before finally making up his mind. “Look, Killian...I did see him talking to someone else, but I can’t say who it is yet.”

“Why are you protecting this person? What if they’re the one that killed Seth?”

“I... I just can’t believe that. Please, let it go for now and give me a chance to ask them about it first.”

“Okay,” I gave in with a sigh.

His whole face lit up with a smile as he impulsively jumped across the bed and tackled me. We wrestled on the bed for a few minutes before he finally got the advantage. He had my body pinned with his and was holding my arms above my head.

His face was just inches from mine when our eyes locked and we both froze. We stared at one another for what seemed like an eternity before he suddenly jumped back.

“Sorry.” He was slightly out of breath, even though I knew we hadn’t wrestled that hard.

“What are you sorry for?”

He seemed at a loss for words, so I took pity on him. “Never mind,” I said as I got off the bed and checked my phone.

There was a strange tension in the room for a few minutes. We avoided looking at each other, and neither of us spoke. Finally, he broke the silence. “Hey, Killian, can I ask you a question? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

That certainly piqued my curiosity, though it also made me cautious. “Um, sure, ask away.”

He bit his lip, then blurted out, “Do you like anybody?”

“Like how?” I knew what he was asking; I just wanted to hear him say it.

“Like as in...do you, you know, like someone?” He blushed a furious red.

I couldn’t help smiling. I stared at my phone so he wouldn’t think I was laughing at him. “Maybe.”

“So you do. Can I ask who?”

“You can ask. Doesn’t mean I’ll tell you, though.” I was enjoying teasing him way too much.

“Why not? Don’t you trust me?”

I realized it was a serious question for him, and I wasn’t being very sensitive. I slipped my phone back into my pocket, walked back over to the bed, sat down next to him, and looked directly into his eyes. “Honest answer... I don’t know who to trust anymore. But you seem cool, and today has been fun, so I hope we can be friends. I’m just not sure we’re at the talk about your crushes stage of friendship quite yet. Does that make sense?”

He looked away, but not before I could see disappointment. “Yeah, I guess so.” He stood up. “I should be getting home. Do you think you can take me now?”

I felt awful. I could tell I’d disappointed him, but what could I do? Tell him I was attracted to both him and Asher? Asher and I weren’t even talking, and I’d just met Jake. Not to mention that I was currently dating his sister. Sort of. Oh, what a tangled web...

“Yeah, sure,” I said with a sigh.

We made small talk as I drove him home, comparing classes and teachers, discussing our favorite movies, and arguing about our musical tastes. I liked pop

and older stuff, while Jake preferred R&B and hip hop. In between, he must have thanked me a dozen times for being so honest and accepting with him.

I dropped Jake off and was pulling out of their driveway when Judy stepped out from behind one of the two enormous bushes on either side of its entrance. She stopped in front of my car as I slammed on the brakes and managed to stop just short of hitting her. I was very glad I hadn't been going any faster. My heart was pounding as I started to open my door.

Judy motioned for me to stay where I was. She walked around and climbed into the passenger seat. She looked older than she had the day before. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail and wasn't wearing any makeup. There were dark circles under her eyes.

"What is it with you jumping out of the shrubbery? I could have hit you!" I accused her angrily.

"But you didn't. I needed to speak to you privately."

"So you jump in front of my car?" I was exasperated.

"We're talking, aren't we?"

I shook my head in wonder. Obviously, there was no winning with this strange woman. "So what was so important that you had to risk your life to tell me?"

"I'm leaving to go back to California tomorrow."

"Well, thank you for the information. I'll miss you terribly." I was still rather miffed about the near accident.

"Killian, please take this seriously. I needed to tell you before I left that you're in danger."

"You told me that last night."

“Things have changed since then. You’re in even more danger now. I had a dream last night.”

Now she had my attention. “A dream? About what?”

“There was a faceless man watching you from the shadows, but you didn’t see him. He didn’t come after you, but he will soon. He fears you.”

At first, I was speechless. When I finally found my voice, it came out a bit shaky. “I have that dream all the time.”

She gave me a measuring look. “When we first shook hands, I felt something in you. I thought you might be gifted.”

I stared at her in dumbfounded shock.

“If you’re having dreams like that, it sounds like I was right,” she continued.

I found my tongue. “What do you mean gifted?”

She hesitated. “Do you believe in supernatural powers, Killian?”

“Like...seeing the future and stuff?”

She tipped her head slightly to one side. “Among other things.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

“I believe that some people are born with certain...talents. The same way some people have a natural ability to draw or a knack for music, others are born with a special sensitivity to things—for lack of a better explanation—on another plane. I call these talents gifts.”

My head hurt as I tried to process what she was saying. “And you think I have these...gifts?”

“Possibly.”

Panic gripped my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. “The dreams I’m having might be visions of the future?”

She shook her head. “Not necessarily. They could just be warnings. Of course, there’s always the possibility they’re merely bad dreams.”

“But you said you felt something when we shook hands…”

“Yes. I did.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed my throbbing temples. Suddenly, her earlier words sank in, and my eyes popped open. “Wait a minute. You said the killer fears me? I fear him!”

“You fear him because he’s a threat to you. He fears you for the same reason.”

“How am I a threat to him?”

“You’re the only one who can stop him.”

We sat staring at each other for a few more seconds. I was in shock, and she seemed to be in thoughtful contemplation.

Then, without warning, she opened the door and climbed out.

Leaning back in, she said, “You are a remarkable young man with a promising future, Killian. Just be careful. You’ve lost a lot and been hurt so much already—and you’ll most likely be hurt more before this is over. Eventually, if a soul is hurt enough, it can become calloused. You must not allow that to happen. You’d stop feeling—and then you’d be dangerous.”

She slammed the door and faded back into the bushes.

For a brief moment, I almost wanted to laugh because she reminded me of the Homer Simpson meme, but that was simply hysteria setting in.

I sat there for a while longer pulling myself together before driving off. I wasn't sure I bought her ideas about giftedness, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to Judy than met the eye. I decided I'd be wise to heed her warning.

My sleep was troubled again that night.

I was walking through the park, but I was convinced a shadowy figure was following me. I kept catching glimpses of someone out of the corner of my eye, but every time I turned, there was no one behind me. Somehow, though, they kept getting closer and closer and...

I woke suddenly from the nightmare and sat up in bed to find Seth standing at the foot of my bed. I almost screamed before I realized it had to be a dream within a dream, like some kind of nightmare inception.

He didn't do anything at first, just stood and stared thoughtfully at me. Now that the moment of panic at finding a dead boy in my bedroom—his bedroom?—had passed, I didn't sense any ill-will or danger from this dream version of Seth. In fact, he felt just as calm as the real, living Seth had felt, and I found that almost comforting.

Then he moved around to the side closest to me and, much to my surprise, laid down on the floor and scooted under the bed. I watched in amazement until he wiggled backwards and emerged holding a book. He

looked up, made eye contact with me, then proceeded to repeat the process, except, the second time he emerged from under the bed, the book was gone.

I blinked and he vanished too.

That was certainly different. Weird, but oddly reassuring after the string of horror movies most of my dreams had been lately.

Still, it was a while before I was able to fall back to sleep after that.

I crawled out of bed the next morning feeling as if I hadn't rested at all. Unfortunately, that was becoming a pattern.

I dragged myself down to breakfast and then on to school. The day pretty much went by in a blur. My grades for the semester were going to be mediocre at best if things didn't change.

After school, I saw Marcus Davis, Asher's older brother, walking across the parking lot. He was a senior on the student council and, by all accounts, a pretty nice guy. He'd always treated me well. He looked nothing like his younger brother. He was built like a football player, much beefier than Asher.

I remembered Jake saying he'd seen Marcus talking to Seth, so I ran to catch up with him before he could reach his car, a beat-up old Honda that he treated like a Corvette.

It was time to really start my investigation.

"Marcus, could I talk to you for a second?"

"Hey, Killian. We can talk if you're fast. I've got to get to work. If I'm late one more time, I'm dead meat."

“This is going to sound weird but humor me. Did you ever talk to Seth Connelly?”

“Talk to him? Yeah, I guess so. He was in my Spanish III class. Man, that kid could speak some *español*. He was really advanced. Made the rest of us look *estúpido*.”

“No, I mean did you ever have a real conversation, not just class stuff?”

He raised an eyebrow and gave me a funny look. “I don’t know, maybe once or twice.”

“Do you remember what you said?”

His other eyebrow jumped up to join the first one. “Not really. Nothing important, I’m sure.”

“Well, if you think of anything, will you let me know?”

“Yeah, sure, Killian, but what’s this about?”

“Nothing. I mean... You know, it’s, uh, been hard. Because I found him. His body. In the park. And I knew him. Or, like, we’d talked. So... Yeah.” My incoherent train of thought finally derailed, sparing both of us further horror.

He blinked a few times, then said, “Cool, cool, cool. Well, I gotta run.”

He turned to walk away, but one more question occurred to me. “Wait! Did you ever see him with anyone else?”

“What difference does it make? Why do you care?”

“Oh...um...I mean, I was pretty much his only friend here. I’m just trying to find out what was going on with him before he died. I need...you know...um...closure.”

“You’re one weird dude, Killian. I don’t know who he talked to. I didn’t keep tabs on him.” He started away, then turned around and kept walking backwards. “If you need closure, maybe you should talk to Asher. He’s the one still moping around ‘cuz you guys broke up.”

“What?” I screeched, but he just spun around and loped off toward his car.

I wanted to chase after him but decided against it since people in the parking lot were watching me curiously after my high-pitched outburst. I’d already attracted more than enough attention for one day, so I got in my car and left.

All the way home, I thought about what Marcus had said. Asher was moping about us? Did he really feel like we’d broken up? He was the one who’d said we’d never really even been dating in the first place. Everything had happened so fast. Did that mean there was still a chance for us to work things out? I couldn’t believe Asher had told Marcus about us or, more importantly, that Marcus would just blurt it out in the middle of the school parking lot.

What about Jake? another part of my brain piped up. I couldn’t deny I was attracted to him, and I was pretty sure he was attracted to me, too.

Where did Judy’s warning play into all this?

There were too many questions. I didn’t know what to think.

I walked into the house and dropped my backpack by the door on my way to the kitchen to grab a snack. My phone buzzed. It was Mom. “Hi, Mom. What’s up?” I answered.

“Killian,” she sounded tired—or maybe weary was a better word, “I need to talk to you about something important. Is now a good time for me to come over?”

Chapter 15

I was waiting nervously in the living room for Mom to arrive, pacing back and forth like one of the big cats at the zoo. Mom wouldn't tell me on the phone why she wanted to see me. All she would say was that it was the kind of thing we needed to talk about in person. I could tell something was wrong.

Finally, I heard her pull up outside. I was at the front door before she even got out of the car.

Her appearance confirmed my fears. Something was definitely wrong. Her clothes were rumpled and wrinkled, as if she'd slept in them.

When she straightened up, the wind caught her hair and blew it back from her face, and I felt my knees buckle under me. I had to grab the doorjamb to keep from falling. One whole side of her face was an angry purple bruise, and her left eye was swollen shut.

As she came toward me, I noticed she was walking with a slight limp.

I tried to swallow around the lump that had formed in my throat, tried to say something—anything—but I couldn't find my voice. I wanted to run to her and take her in my arms, but I seemed rooted to the spot.

She stopped midway across the yard and attempted to give me a smile. "I make a pretty sight, huh, kiddo?"

Her voice released me from my state of shock, and I leapt from the porch and ran to her, catching her in an embrace.

"Oh!" she gasped as I squeezed her. "Be careful, honey. I have a few cracked ribs."

I backed away quickly, actively fighting tears, and looked at her again. She was in even worse shape up close.

“He did this to you, didn’t he?” I finally managed to whisper hoarsely.

She looked at me for a minute, then linked her arm with mine and started toward the door. “Come on, let’s go on inside.”

We made our way to the living room—I wasn’t sure who was leading whom—and settled on the couch. I suddenly felt like a little boy again, frightened and confused and just wanting my mommy to comfort me. I laid my head gently against her shoulder. She heaved a long heavy sigh and began to stroke my hair.

“What happened?” I finally asked.

“We fought.”

“Obviously. But what about?”

“That hardly matters.”

“It was about me, wasn’t it?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What will you do now?”

“I’m going to live with Kate in Pennsylvania.”

I sat up and turned so I could look into her eyes. “What?”

“I can’t stay here, Killian. That became very clear last night. I’m going to move in with Kate and help take care of the kids for a while.”

Kate was my mom’s sister, but I didn’t know her very well since she and my dad didn’t get along at all. Her husband had died about a year before, leaving her with a bunch of kids to raise alone. I didn’t know any of my cousins, wasn’t even sure how many there were. She

was up to at least six or seven, last I'd heard. I hadn't seen any of them since I was four or five, and I only had the vaguest memories of that visit. There'd only been three then—a boy a year or two older than me, a girl a year younger, and a toddler—but I could clearly picture my aunt who was enormously pregnant at the time with kid number four. I had a fuzzy memory of playing with the oldest boy, but I couldn't even recall his name. Hayden? Caden? Something like that.

“You're just leaving? You can't let him get away with this again, Mom.”

“Trust me, I'm not. I'm done being a doormat. After I drove myself to the hospital last night, I told the doctor everything that happened. She called the police, who came and took a formal statement. I pressed charges. Adam was right. We should have pressed charges after he beat you. I was just afraid of the repercussions.”

“What's going to happen now?”

“That's a good question.” She stood up and limped slowly to the window looking out over the beach and the ocean. “I haven't been home. I spent the night in the hospital and all day talking to my lawyer. I haven't seen or spoken to your father since he...did this. I'm not supposed to go to the house without a police escort. Knowing your father, he'll squirm out of this somehow. No matter what happens, though, he's going to be very angry. He knows a lot of people around here. I don't think it's safe for me to stay in town.”

I nodded with a frown. “You'll definitely be safer at Aunt Kate's, but that's so far away. I won't get to see you very often.”

Mom turned to look at me in surprise. “You’re going with me.”

“What?”

“I want you to go with me.”

“But I don’t even know Aunt Kate.”

“You’ll love her. I talked to her last night. She can’t wait for us to get there.”

“You made these plans without even asking me?”

“I just assumed you’d want to be with me. I think you’ll like it there. She lives in a nice town with good schools. You’ll have all your cousins around to keep you company.”

“I’ve never even met them!”

“So you’ll get to know them.”

I stood up and started pacing. “But...but...”

“But what, Killian?” Exasperation filled her voice.

“I don’t want to go.”

“You...don’t want to go?” I could tell she was hurt.

“I don’t want to leave. I like living with Adam. I’m happy here. I don’t want to move away right now. I ___”

I almost said that I couldn’t leave until I’d found out who killed Seth, but I stopped myself just in time. Somehow, I doubted Mom would think that was an acceptable reason for staying.

Her face crumpled. “I don’t understand.”

“I just can’t drop everything and go. I’m happy now. Maybe you can move in with me and Adam.”

“No.” She was starting to get angry now. “That’s not far enough. I need to leave. I have to get as far away

from him as possible. You of all people should understand that. Do you see what he did to me?" She pointed to her face. "And I want you away from him, too."

I bit my lip. "He's left me alone since I moved in here."

"So far. What happens if he decides his gay son is becoming too much of an embarrassment? What if he decides you're a handicap to his campaign? You're no safer here than I am. I wouldn't put it past him to try and use you against me."

"I'm willing to take that risk."

"Well, I'm not, damn it! You're all I've got now. This is your life we're talking about. Do you want to end up dead like your friend Seth?"

My breath caught in my throat, and I stared at her in horror. She glared back at me, her eyes flashing with anger—but beyond that, I realized, fear.

Then suddenly her eyes changed. All the anger drained out as if someone had pulled a plug, leaving only the fear. She swayed in the center of the room, and for a moment, I thought she was going to collapse. I rushed to her side, but she waved me off. She walked to the nearest chair and lowered herself gingerly into it.

"I'm sorry, Killian. That was uncalled for. You're right. There's no sense in dragging you out of school and away from your friends. You're as safe here with Adam as you'd be anywhere. If your father wants to find us, Kate's is the first place he'll look. She never liked him, and she's the only family I have. We'll talk to Adam. If it's okay with him, you can stay here." She

rubbed at her good eye and sagged back farther into the chair.

“It’s fine with me,” Adam said from the doorway, making us both jump. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Or eavesdrop either, for that matter. I came in, and I guess you didn’t hear me, but I couldn’t help hearing you.”

Mom looked at him silently, then turned and looked at me. I nodded. She sighed again and stood up.

“Then it’s settled. Killian, you’ll stay with Adam—at least until school is out. Maybe after that you can come up and spend the summer with me.”

“Mom, I’m sorry—” I started.

“Killian, it’s okay. Really. Now that I think about it, it makes a lot more sense this way. Kate has enough kids in the house without adding yet another. Plus, you’d be in a new place with no friends. At least here you have Asher.” I tried not to flinch at that. “Besides, Adam’s proven he’s responsible. He’s been good to you, better than your own father.”

“Meg, I said it was okay with me and it is. I’ve grown to think of Killian as another one of my sons. I just want to make certain you’re sure about this.”

“I don’t have time to be sure,” she said wearily.

“I need to go. I have to call the police and go pick up my things from the house, then drive to my sister’s tonight. I’m already emotionally and physically drained. I just want to leave now before I get any more tired.”

“Can I do anything to help?” Adam’s voice was filled with concern. “Why don’t you stay here tonight and drive up tomorrow?”

Mom shook her head. “You’ve already done more than anyone could ever have expected.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I am.”

“I know you’re tired, and we don’t have to figure all this out tonight, but if you’re going to be so far away, we should probably consider some sort of legal guardianship situation. If something happens and I can’t get up with you...”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. You’re right. I... I can’t think about that right now though.”

“I have a really wonderful family lawyer that I’m already working with on another matter. I could ask her to draw up something for us, if you like.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you, Adam. Honestly, just...thank you. It feels inadequate, but it’s all I have right now.”

“It’s more than enough.”

She turned toward me, holding out her arms, and I took her gently into mine. She seemed so frail. We stood quietly like that for a few minutes before she pulled away.

I looked into her tear-streaked face and realized how much I loved her. I knew I would miss her, but I also knew I had made the right decision. I had unfinished business I needed to deal with. There was peace inside of me, and I could see it reflected in her eyes.

“I love you, Mom,” I whispered.

“I love you, too. This isn’t forever. I’ll be back and forth. I have doctors’ appointments I’ll need to keep, and Adam and I will have to work out all the details of

the guardianship. And I can't be away from my baby on Thanksgiving, so I'll definitely be back in a month."

We hugged again, and then she turned to Adam. "Take care of my boy, Mr. Connelly. If anything happens to him, you'll see what I'm capable of." She said the last part with a smile, but I had the feeling she was deadly serious.

"I will," Adam promised solemnly. "I'll take care of him as if he were my own. As for Thanksgiving, we'll expect you to stay here and have dinner with us."

Mom nodded and looked at me one more time before she started to leave. I walked her out to the car. Adam followed as far as the front door, where he stood watching us.

She opened the car door, then paused and gave me a shaky smile. "Are you sure you won't come with me?"

"I can't."

She reached out a hand and rested it on my cheek for just the briefest second, then turned to get into the car.

"Mom—"

She stopped and faced me again. I leaned in for one last hug, kissing her on the cheek before stepping back. She reached up to the spot where my lips had brushed her, and I saw a tear slip out of the corner of her eye. Then she quickly ducked into the car, backed out onto the street, and sat there looking at me for a moment. Finally, she waved one last time before pulling away.

I watched until she made the turn at the end of the street and drove out of sight. Even then, I stood staring at nothing until I felt Adam's arm settle around

my shoulders. He pulled me back toward the house and into the living room.

“It’s not forever, Killian.” He said as we sat on the couch. “She’ll be back in a few weeks.”

“I know. It won’t even be that much different from the way it’s been since I moved in with you. It’s just weird to know your whole family is out of reach in one way or another. You’re the only family I have now.”

“As I told your mom, I consider you one of my sons.”

“Well, then I guess I have a brother now, too. Any news on Kane?”

“Ilana called today. She said things are going well. Eve’s lawyer has been very cooperative so far, although they have in no way even suggested that I’ll get so much as visitation rights, let alone custody.”

“When will you know more?”

“I’m not sure. These things are complicated. Without Eve’s cooperation, this could be a long, drawn-out process. With Seth, it was easy—she didn’t want him. He was too much like me, in all the wrong ways.”

My eyes widened, and I had trouble controlling the smile that was fighting to spread across my face. If I’d been a cartoon character, a light bulb would have just appeared above my head. Nothing distracts me from a bad mood like a good project, and I’d just thought of a great one.

Adam could tell something was up. “What?” he asked me suspiciously. “I’m not sure I like that look you just got on your face. You’re up to something.”

“It’s nothing. I just remembered I have homework.”

“I’ve never seen you get so excited about homework before.” If his tone were any drier, it might have spontaneously combusted.

“First time for everything.” I jumped to my feet and headed for my room.

“You’d better not be up to something, Killian,” he called after me.

“Who, me?” I gave him my best innocent look, grabbed my backpack, and bounded up the stairs.

I shut the door and whipped out my phone to text Kane. It only took a few minutes to explain my brilliant plan.

Kane loved it and thought it just might work.

With that out of the way, I turned to my homework, just so my little fib to Adam wouldn’t be a total lie, but then groaned as I remembered I actually did have quite a bit. I probably deserved it for lying. I dumped my books out and got to work.

Jake called later that night after dinner. I’d finished the dinner dishes and was still working on a paper for history, so I was thrilled with the distraction...and even more so by who was providing the distraction.

“Hey,” I said, hoping I didn’t sound too excited that he’d called.

“Hey, Killian. I was thinking about our conversation, and I’ve decided to tell you about the other person that I saw talking to Seth. I haven’t said anything to them yet, but I will before tomorrow afternoon. How about you come over to my house around three? I mean,

as long as you don't already have plans. I know it's a Saturday and all—"

"I'll be there at three," I cut him off.

"Great, I'll see you then."

I hung up, my mind going a hundred miles an hour trying to figure out who Jake was protecting. It had to be someone he liked or he wouldn't care. I didn't really know Jake all that well. I knew who he hung out with in general, but I didn't really know who his actual friends were. Could the person in question be part of that group? I couldn't picture a homophobic killer among them since they tended to be pretty chill and generally more tolerant than the general student body. Hadn't Jake even said he was out to some of them?

Then again, I reminded myself, just because someone was having a conversation with Seth didn't mean they were the killer. In fact, the killer might never have had any direct contact with Seth before the night of the murder. That was a depressing thought.

Suddenly, this seemed like a bigger project than I could handle alone. The more I turned everything over in my mind, the more muddled it all became.

In movies and books, they always make lists when they are trying to figure stuff out, so I decided to give it a try.

I pulled a notebook out of my backpack and turned to a blank page, where I wrote a heading at the top: *People Who Talked to Seth*.

Under that, I listed Asher, Zack, Jesse, Becca, and Marcus. That was all I had so far.

I looked at the list and sighed. It wasn't very much. I added a check next to Marcus's name since I'd

already spoken to him—for all the good it did—and then drew a big question mark to represent Jake’s mystery person.

I stared at the page for a few more minutes, but for the life of me, I couldn’t see anything useful. It sure didn’t make the killer pop off the page the way it always did in the movies.

Frustrated, I threw the notebook across the room.

What was I doing? I wasn’t a detective. I could barely do my calculus homework. How was I supposed to find a killer? By making a list? I laughed bitterly at myself.

I was too tired to think about it anymore. I swept everything off my bed, got undressed and crawled under the covers.

I’d worry about it in the morning.

I was watching a group of people from a slight distance away. I could see them clearly, but none of them seemed to notice me. It was almost as if there was a pane of one-way glass between us.

I looked closely and realized I knew almost everyone in the group: Zack, Jesse, Asher, Marcus, Jake, Kane, Becca Rosinski, and someone else I couldn’t quite make out. Seth stood off to one side, not included in their little huddle.

They were talking casually among themselves when suddenly the shadows around them began to undulate and swirl as if coming to life. Several wisps of darkness separated themselves and formed into a familiar figure.

The faceless man.

No one else seemed to notice him as he drew closer to the group. I wanted to scream and warn them, but I couldn't make a sound.

He paused a few feet away from Seth and turned his head in my direction.

Even though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was looking right at me. I felt as if he was smiling cruelly at my futile attempt to cry out to Seth.

Without warning, he reached out and grabbed Seth. There was a knife in his other hand, and with one smooth, effortless motion, he drew it across Seth's throat.

Seth crumpled to the ground, where he lay motionless in a growing pool of crimson. I tried to scream once more, but still nothing came out.

The faceless man's cold laughter rang in my ears.

Why could no one else hear it? The others hadn't even noticed that Seth was dead.

The killer closed in on them. I tried to throw myself forward to stop him, but I couldn't move. I was helpless to do anything but watch in horror as he deliberately reached for Asher.

He turned to look at me again, mocking my inability to stop him, then raised his knife in preparation to kill once more.

"Killian!" someone screamed my name, but I didn't answer. I had to stop the faceless man. "Killian!" the voice screamed again, louder this time.

I turned to see who it was and found myself looking up at Adam leaning over my bed, one hand on my shoulder. I was still shaking from the dream.

Residual images skated around the edges of my consciousness.

“Are you okay? You were having a nightmare.”

“It was awful,” I told him groggily.

“It sounded like it.” He sat down on the edge of my bed, a concerned look on his face. “I talked to that therapist yesterday, but with everything going on with your mom, it slipped my mind when I got home. I don’t have an appointment set up for you yet—I still don’t have your medical and insurance information and, since I’m not your legal guardian yet, he needs to speak to your mother—but at least I got the ball rolling. I’ll call her tomorrow—or today I suppose.”

I nodded absently. I was only half listening, my mind still on the dream.

“Do you think you can go back to sleep?” he asked me.

I nodded again, and he stood up, ruffling my hair before leaving the room.

Even with the nightmare fresh in my mind, I was asleep again in minutes. My body was just too exhausted to fight it anymore.

If I had any more dreams that night, I mercifully didn’t remember it in the morning.

I kept myself busy the next day to keep from dwelling on the latest twist in my nightmares.

I got up, showered, and ate breakfast while watching a few Saturday-morning cartoons. Then I decided to clean my room, which had become amazingly messy in the short time I’d lived there.

I was half under the bed trying to reach a stray sock when something caught my eye. Someone had shoved a slim, blue-bound book between the slats and the mattress.

My weird dream of Seth crawling under the bed to fetch a book flooded back into my mind, and my entire body prickled with goosebumps.

For a long time, I just laid there and stared at the book, not even daring to reach out and touch it. My mind just couldn't accept what I was seeing. This was Seth's bedroom. He had to have hidden the book. Who else could it have been? But then, how did I dream about it? How was that even possible? I was certain I'd never looked under the bed, so I couldn't have noticed it even subconsciously only for it to resurface later in my dreams.

Then I remembered Judy saying I had gifts. I'd mostly shrugged her off as a kook, but could she be right? Could this be somehow related to that? Did I have some sort of vision?

Only one way to find out.

I reached out, my hand trembling, and reverently slid the book out of its hiding spot. I backed myself from beneath the bed and sat up to inspect my find. It looked like a journal of some sort, about five by eight inches, and bound in soft blue leather.

Part of me wanted to open it and start reading right then and there, but another part wanted to respect Seth's privacy. If I kept a journal, I wouldn't want anyone else to read it, even if I were gone.

But what if Seth had wanted me to find it? Maybe he came to me in a dream just to show it to me.

That sounded preposterous even in my head. Those kinds of things didn't happen in real life. I was just trying to justify my morbid curiosity.

I sat on the floor staring at the book in my hand trying to decide what I should do. I finally decided not to decide—at least not right then. I'd put it back where I found it and think about what I should do.

Not long after I'd returned the journal, I found the notebook I'd thrown across the room the night before. Any distraction from cleaning and the journal was welcome, so I sat on my bed and looked at the list again.

I still didn't know what I was doing, but maybe if I talked to everyone on it, I might find out something more. I'd already questioned Marcus and all I'd gotten from him was that crack about Asher, which I'd almost convinced myself was just Marcus being a jerk. At any rate, I still wasn't quite ready to talk to Asher.

I moved to the next names on the list, Zack and Jesse. I didn't have to think long about that one. I did not want to ask them about Seth. I'd have to find someone else to do it for me. Maybe Gilly?

The last name was Becca. She was one of the popular girls, which meant I didn't know her very well—but Gilly might. Maybe she'd even have her number.

I texted Gilly, and, sure enough, she had Becca's number and gave it to me once I explained why I needed it. She also agreed to try and talk to Zack and Jesse without raising too much suspicion.

I took a deep breath and sent Becca a text.

Hi Becca. This is Killian.

Killian who?

Killian Kendall. We go to school together. Gilly gave me your number.

Oh right. You're Gilly's new boyfriend. Cool. Why are you texting me?

What an ego boost. I had officially been relegated to accessory status. Just what I'd always wanted.

Oh well, if it meant I had an in with the people I needed to interview, I could deal with it.

I have a somewhat weird question. Can I call you? I texted.

Um...I guess. This better not be some weird sex thing. I'm not having a threesome with y'all.

WHAT? NO! It's not like that, I swear. Hang on. I'll just call.

Becca answered on the first ring. "What's this about?"

"I just have some questions about someone at school."

"Okay." Becca somehow managed to stretch those two syllables as if she were pulling taffy. She had an annoying way of speaking so slowly that you sometimes felt you needed to put a chain on her words and drag them from her mouth. I wished I'd just kept texting her.

"Did you ever talk to Seth?"

"Seth was, like, that gay guy who died, right?"

"Right." I held my breath.

"Yeah, I used to talk to him all the time. He was in my art class. He was really cool. That was so sad what happened to him."

"Did you ever speak to him outside of class?"

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“Do you remember what you talked about?”

“Um, probably just about art stuff, you know? He was helping me with a project. I got an A on it. It was really awesome. It was this painting of—”

“That’s great, Becca,” I interrupted. If I let her go off on a tangent, we’d be there all day. I tried to gently steer her back to the conversation at hand. “Did you ever see him talking to anyone else?”

She thought for a minute, or at least I assumed she was thinking. She got quiet, but maybe she was just filing her nails or something. I was about to ask if she was still there when she spoke again. “You know, I did see him talking to some guy a couple times, but I can’t remember his name.”

I immediately thought of Asher. “What did he look like?”

I heard someone talking to her in the background, and then her voice answering, kind of muffled.

“I don’t know. I have to go,” she finally replied.

“Wait! What did the guy look like? You have to have some idea.”

“Why is it so important? Were you hot for him or something? He’s like a surfer or something, maybe a skater. Who gives a damn? I have to go. My boyfriend is waiting.” And with that, she ended the call.

I snarled with frustration.

Everyone I talked to turned out to be a dead end. The only information I’d managed to glean from Becca was that Seth might or might not have spoken to someone who might or might not have been a surfer...or maybe a skater. We lived in a beach town. That

described half the guys in my school. Could she have been any more ambiguous?

Then again, it tied back to my suspicions about the person Jake was protecting. His crowd was the surfers and skaters.

I glanced at my watch. It was only a little after two, and I wasn't supposed to be at Jake's until three o'clock, but what the hell. I was tired of sitting around my half-cleaned bedroom. I decided to leave a little early.

By the time I arrived and parked, it was already two-thirty, only half an hour before he was expecting me.

I knocked on the door, and Todd answered.

"Are you here for Gilly or Jake?" he asked, then before I could answer, "Because Gilly's gone shopping and Jake went surfing, although he might be back by now. He took the boat. You can check out back." With that, he closed the door in my face.

I shrugged and headed around to the backyard. Gilly had shown me the old boathouse and dock the night I'd had dinner there, so I knew where to find it—good thing since it was hidden from view.

I followed the path through the woods and, just as I was about to step into the open, I saw Jake coming out of the boathouse. For some reason, I stopped.

He hadn't seen me yet, so I observed him unnoticed. His hair was damp and tousled, and he was wearing a full wetsuit with a backpack slung over his shoulder. He paused outside the boathouse and dropped the backpack, then bent over to rummage through it. He pulled out a big towel and hung it over the door handle.

He then proceeded to unzip his wetsuit and peel it down to his waist.

I caught my breath at the sight of his naked chest. I watched in mesmerized silence as he grabbed the towel and began to dry off his upper torso. He wasn't overly buff, but like most surfers, he had a well-defined swimmer's body. He was an even golden tan all over—at least what I could see. He finished drying off and hung the towel again before reaching back into the bag to pull out a T-shirt, which he slipped over his head.

Then he unzipped the wetsuit the rest of the way and pulled it off. I almost passed out. I had a completely unobstructed view of his perfect, pert butt.

All of a sudden, it hit me that I was spying on him without his knowledge. A wave of guilt washed over me, and I took a quick step backwards...and bumped into something warm and solid. I let out a yelp as I spun around to find Todd watching me with narrowed eyes.

"Like what you see?" he said in a low, dangerous-sounding voice.

"Todd! No!" I gasped. I would have been gasping even if he hadn't just scared two years off my life since I was still catching my breath after seeing Jake naked, but his sudden appearance didn't help. What was it with the members of this family always popping up when you least expected them? "I was just... I mean, I... I just didn't want to interrupt..."

"Killian? Is that you?" Jake was still down by the boathouse.

"Yeah," I called back, without taking my eyes off Todd.

“Come on down, I’m just putting everything away and locking up. I went surfing this afternoon. The waves were awesome, but it was a little chilly.”

I watched Todd for a hint as to what I should do, but his expression gave nothing away. We stared each other down until I started to feel like a little rodent cornered by a snake in a nature documentary.

“Go,” Todd said finally, his voice low, “but see to me before you leave. We need to talk. Oh, and if you hurt Gilly, I’ll make you regret it.”

I didn’t need to be told twice, though I had no intention of talking to him before I left if I could help it. I turned and shakily walked down to the boathouse as quickly as possible without looking back. My heart was racing at my close call.

Jake, now fully clothed, was locking the boathouse door. “Hey, Killer,” he greeted me.

I froze in my tracks. “What did you say?” I snapped, my voice sharper than I’d intended.

He looked up at me in surprise. “I just said hey.”

“No, what did you call me?”

“Killer? I’m sorry. You don’t like that?” He straightened up, leaving the lock hanging open in the hasp.

“No. I mean... It’s fine. You just caught me off guard. Seth called me that. No one else ever has.”

“Really? You’d think it would be a natural nickname for Killian, especially with that killer smile of yours.” He added the last part with that incredible grin of his.

Those dimples got me every time.

I forced a laugh and tried to relax.

He turned around and bent to pick up his backpack. I couldn't help picturing his bare butt once again.

I must have had a funny expression on my face when he faced me again, because he gave me a smirk.

"What?" he asked.

"What what?" I responded wittily.

"You just had a weird look on your face."

"Did I?"

"Yes. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," I managed.

"Are you sure?" His eyes sparkled, letting me know he was teasing me now.

"Yeah."

"Positive?"

"Yes!" I said with exaggerated exasperation.

"Oh, good. Because I was just wondering..." His smirk grew into a full-fledged grin. "How long were you watching me from the trees?"

Chapter 16

My mouth was moving, but nothing was coming out. How was I going to explain this? Did Jake see me? Even if he didn't, Todd would tell him I'd watched him change, and he'd be mad at me.

As my panic mounted, Jake burst into laughter.

"Killian, I'm kidding. I knew you were there the whole time. Did you enjoy the show?"

"You jerk!"

Was it all a setup? Did he and Todd plan it?

He was laughing so hard he was almost bent double, clutching his stomach. I, on the other hand, failed to see the humor in the situation.

He started to wind down. "You should have seen your face," he gasped, which set him off again.

A few minutes later, he finally seemed to get himself together. "Whew. Sorry. You just looked so freaked out. Relax. It's not a big deal. I saw your reflection in the window. Do you think I always change out in the middle of the yard? I wanted to see how far I could go before you said something."

I felt like my face was about to explode into flames. I couldn't remember ever having felt more mortified in my entire life. I had no idea what to say or do. Should I just leave?

Then, before I could move beyond frozen to fight or flight, he stepped close, his chest brushing mine, leaned in and gently kissed me on the lips.

It was over so quickly I didn't even have time to process this new and highly unexpected development.

He stepped around me and walked away up the path toward the house while I still stared straight ahead, wide-eyed and stunned.

I stood where I was until I'd calmed down enough to follow him.

"By the way," he said when I caught up to him by the backdoor, "don't expect a repeat performance anytime soon."

"I...I...I don't," I stuttered, and he giggled again.

"Oh, and one more thing," he said with his hand on the doorknob, "don't worry about Todd."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he gave me a look that effectively said, "Shut up."

I followed him inside, wondering the whole time where the nervous, self-conscious kid from the other day had gone. This confident tease was another whole side of Jake that I hadn't even known existed.

Obviously, I still had a lot to learn about my new friend.

"Let's go to my room," he said, and started up the stairs.

I trailed after him as he led me down a long hall and into a bedroom furnished with an unmade full bed against one wall, the sheets rumpled and the blanket hanging off the end, a dresser wedged between the hall door and an open closet overflowing with both clean and dirty clothes, and a painted wooden desk positioned under the window.

A wheeled desk chair sat in the middle of the floor, and surfing posters covered almost every square inch of the walls. Pretty much every flat surface in the room was covered with layers of clutter—school papers,

books, random rocks and shells, a few outgrown toys, and God only knows what else. It was too much to take in.

I suddenly didn't feel nearly as bad about the state of my room while simultaneously resolving to finish cleaning it as soon as I got home.

Jake tossed his backpack in the general direction of the closet and threw himself backwards onto the bed where he sprawled out, legs akimbo, and looked at me expectantly.

I decided it might be wise to keep some distance, at least until I'd figured him out a little more. I took the desk chair and swiveled it around to face him.

We stared at each other for a few seconds in awkward silence. Jake looked a lot less cocky now that we were in his room. The seconds stretched into minutes with neither of us saying a word.

Jake began to squirm and even had the grace to look a little guilty. He was probably wondering what was going through my mind.

I was enjoying the sudden shift in power until I realized how sleazy that was. Then I just felt bad.

I decided to break the silence at the exact same moment Jake spoke up.

"So, you wanted to talk about—" I started as he blurted out, "Killian, I'm sorry—"

"Sorry?" I repeated stupidly.

"For that whole thing down by the boathouse." He looked quite sheepish. "Please don't be mad at me. I know it was kind of shitty. Sometimes, I just do things without thinking. My doc calls it poor impulse control. He wants to put me on meds. I'm all for it, it's, like,

basically speed, right? But my dad says I'm just an idiot and I don't need to be drugged up, I just need to grow up. I don't know. But I do know I'm sorry if it made you uncomfortable. I shouldn't—"

"Jake!" I said loudly, cutting off his verbal diarrhea. "It's...okay. Trust me, I'm not mad. Let's just forget about it."

As if I could forget how beautiful his body was.

He looked down at his lap, then back up at me through his incredibly thick lashes. Our eyes locked for several seconds as I felt my face heating up again.

I broke first and glanced away.

Was he still toying with me? I couldn't tell. I felt as if I had to constantly be on my guard with him.

I risked a glance back at him to find a slight smile tugging at the corners of his lips.

"Why are you blushing?" he asked.

"Why don't we talk about something else?"

Smooth as ever.

"Why are you always avoiding my questions?"

"Why are you always asking such personal questions?" I countered.

We stared at each other for a few more seconds before my resolve cracked and I smiled. He grinned back, and we both relaxed.

"So," I decided to try again, "you said you wanted to talk to me about the other person you saw with Seth."

"Well...yeah...about that..."

"Come on! Don't tell me you're backing out on me now."

“Not backing out so much as offering a rain check.” He gave me an apologetic, lopsided smile. He was the undisputed king of lopsided smiles.

I couldn’t stay angry at him. I sighed. Might as well give in with dignity, I thought. “So what is it now?”

“Well, the person in question asked me to hold off until they can talk to you themselves.”

“They? How many people are we talking about here?”

“Just one. I’m keeping things gender neutral.”

“You weren’t trying to keep things gender neutral outside,” I couldn’t resist teasing.

I was surprised when he flushed a fetching shade of red.

“I thought we were gonna forget about that,” he mumbled.

“Sorry.” I didn’t even sound convincing to myself.

Jake shot me a dirty look, though I could tell he was enjoying our verbal sparring.

“Hey, if you saw me naked, would you be able to just forget about it?” I asked.

His eyes immediately lit up with the same impish look he’d had outside, and I knew I’d goofed.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” he mused. “Only one way to find out...”

In one smooth motion, he launched himself off the bed and pounced on me like a cat. The chair spun, dumping us both onto the floor, where Jake quickly gained the upper hand. He straddled my waist and began to tickle me.

“Stop!” I gasped out between bouts of hysterical giggles.

I tried to push him off, and we ended up wrestling for a few minutes before I somehow managed to pin him to the floor, my bodies pressed together, legs interlocked, faces only inches apart.

I suspected he’d let me win, but I didn’t care. I was too busy savoring our contact.

A feeling of *déjà vu* swept over me. The last time we’d been in this position in my room, he’d pulled away, and the moment had been lost. I decided history wasn’t going to repeat itself this time. Not if I had anything to say about it.

I moved slowly and deliberately, giving him plenty of time to protest. I brought my face ever closer to his, our gaze never wavering until the very last second, when he closed his eyes and lifted his head to meet my lips.

We were kissing for the second time that day, but this time I kissed back, and it lasted a lot longer. The kiss started off gently—we were both a little uncertain—until I let go of his wrists. Then his arms wrapped around my back and things quickly grew more heated. His tongue brushed against my lips, which I parted instinctively, and soon, we were full on making out, hot and heavy.

I couldn’t help comparing him to Asher, the only other person I’d ever kissed with this much passion. Asher was more controlled, or, at least, more in control. Jake felt wild and sloppy and uncontained. I decided neither was better than the other. They were both pretty damn great. Ten out of ten. No complaints.

As the kiss went on and on, I felt myself growing hard. Apparently, Jake felt it, too—not all that surprising considering my erection was pressing into his crotch. He responded by grinding up into me, revealing his own excitement. My breath rushed out, leaving me limp in his arms.

Jake rolled me over, maneuvering so he was on top. He started kissing down my neck, and I found it harder and harder to breathe.

When he resumed the grinding, I thought I might die right there. He rose, straddled me again, and slid his hands up along my sides, pushing my shirt out of the way as he went. Then he bent down and pressed his lips against my bare chest.

“I can feel your heart beating,” he whispered.

I reached up and ran my hand through his still-damp hair, then slid my hand behind his head to pull him in for another kiss.

He broke away again and trailed kisses down my chest and stomach. He hesitated when he reached my pants.

Just then, I heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Obviously, Jake heard them as well, because he was on his feet in a flash, panic in his eyes. He stood there a moment with a “what-do-I-do-now?” look on his face before grabbing my hand and yanking me up, too.

We had just gotten our clothing straightened out and our erections hidden as best we could when the door swung open.

I almost jumped out of my skin.

It was Todd.

He looked at me and then at Jake, taking in our flushed faces, and his eyebrows drew together in a frown.

“You can’t just barge in here, Todd,” Jake yelled. “And don’t look at me like that. We weren’t doing anything. We were only wrestling.”

“Oh, yeah, right, Jake,” Todd snapped. “Do you think I’m stupid? You should be glad it was me and not Dad.”

Jake’s eyes grew wide. “You’re not going to tell him, are you?”

Todd’s frown deepened. “I probably should.” He glared at me. “What kind of an asshole are you? Gilly could be home at any minute, and you’re up here screwing around with her brother.”

“I’m not—”

But he didn’t let me finish. “And you!” He jabbed a finger toward Jake. “I saw what happened down by the boathouse. You’re throwing yourself at him. You’re both pathetic. You deserve each other, a couple of little queers. If it weren’t for Gilly, I’d kick both of your asses. Get out, Killian. I’ll deal with you later. Right now, Jake and I are gonna have a little chat.”

“Todd—” I tried, but he quickly cut me off.

“Out!”

I cast one last look at Jake. He was red-faced, jaw clenched, glaring back at Todd and refusing to meet my eyes.

I dropped my head and walked out of the room.

Gilly was coming through the front door as I reached the foot of the stairs. “Killian, I thought that was your car. What are you doing here? Have you been

waiting long? Never mind, I just got home. This is perfect. I was going to call you later tonight. You know how we throw a Halloween dance here every year, right?"

I nodded. Everyone knew about the Sheridans' Halloween party. It was practically legendary. I'd never been, but I'd heard all about it. It was the social event of the year for the high-school crowd.

"Well, it's next weekend. You're coming, right? I mean, of course you're coming. You're my date. Have you thought about what you're going to wear?"

She was talking so fast I could barely keep up. I didn't want to go, especially after my afternoon with Todd and Jake, but I didn't know what to say without admitting I'd just been upstairs making out with her twin brother.

Gilly must have read my expression, though, because her face fell. "Please say you're coming, Killian. I know I kind of messed up with that kiss, but I really don't want to be alone at the party. Besides, it'll look weird if you're not there. Everybody thinks we're dating."

I sighed unenthusiastically. "Yeah, of course I'll be here."

She frowned. "You could at least sound a little excited."

I heard a noise at the top of the stairs. It was Jake. Our eyes locked and, for a moment, everything else faded away.

Then Gilly's voice broke through and brought me down to earth. "Killian? Are you okay?"

I forced my eyes back to Gilly. “Oh, yeah, sorry. I’m fine, and of course I’ll be your date, but I hafta go right now.”

Gilly looked from me up to Jake and back at me. Her eyes narrowed, and for a moment I thought she was going to make the connection. Then her face cleared, and she linked her arm possessively through mine as she walked me to the door. “Okay, Killian. I’ll call you later to discuss our costumes.”

“Great.” I backed out the door, looking up at Jake one more time before spinning on my heel and jogging off to the car. Todd had been standing behind him, glaring at me with eyes full of disgust. I wondered how much he’d overheard.

I had a lot to think about as I drove home. How did I feel about Jake?

Obviously, we were attracted to each other, but was it more than just physical?

I’d seen him around at school for years, but we’d never actually been friends. How well did I really know him?

We definitely would have gone further if Todd hadn’t come in when he did. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Part of me wanted to so badly, but another part warned me that this could be dangerous territory.

For some reason, it all felt easier with Jake, maybe because I didn’t have the emotional baggage with him that came with Asher. Or maybe because it was all pure animal lust with Jake.

Then there was Gilly.

Would she be hurt if I ended up with her twin brother? She'd known I was gay from the beginning, but that didn't mean she wouldn't be upset. I couldn't even pretend to understand how a girl's mind works. There was that kiss on the back porch the night I met her family. Then she was all excited that I was going to be her date for the costume party.

I couldn't forget about Todd, either. Where did he fit into the equation? He'd seemed to have it in for me from that first night. Why? Was he just the typical protective older brother? That was probably all it was, but it still made me uneasy. Now that he'd figured out Jake and I were gay, what would he do?

To top it all off, Jake had backed out on telling me who he'd seen with Seth again. I still wasn't any closer to learning who killed Seth. I had to come up with a plan soon.

One thing was for sure, the Sheridans had definitely complicated my life, and it's not like things were exactly simple before.

I arrived home to be greeted by an extremely happy Adam.

"Guess what?" he shouted before I even had the door closed.

"What?"

"Ilana called. Eve's lawyer contacted her today—on a Saturday no less! He told her that Eve decided not to contest my request for custody. All we have to do is sign the paperwork and Kane will be moving in with us!"

He grabbed me in a huge bear hug, lifted me off my feet and swinging me around the hallway, then

stumbled over the rug and almost dropped me before finally setting me back down.

“Steve’s on his way over, and we’re gonna celebrate! Oh! I almost forgot. Kane called soon after Ilana and said to tell you the plan worked, but he wouldn’t explain what that meant.” He stopped and gave me a speculative look. “Does this have anything to do with your sudden interest in homework last night?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” I said with a grin.

“Are you going to fill me in?”

“No.”

“Fine, then, I won’t tell you my last piece of good news.”

“What? You have to tell me!”

“Not until you tell me about this secret plan of yours and Kane’s.”

“I’ll do it when Kane gets here, I promise. Now please tell me the other good news. Ple-e-e-ase?”

Adam gave a huge mock sigh, then broke into another grin. He was too thrilled with the way things were working out to even pretend to be upset.

“Okay, well, Asher called in the middle of all this excitement and wanted to talk to you, so I invited him to the celebration dinner. He should be here in about half an hour.”

I felt my smile freeze and then slowly melt away.

“What’s wrong?” Adam asked. “Did I screw up? I thought you’d be happy. You guys have hardly talked in weeks.”

“Asher...hasn’t been very...happy about Gilly and me.”

“You didn’t tell him it’s just a cover?”

“I tried, but he won’t talk to me.”

“How hard did you try?”

“I mean, I texted him... He never answered. And I looked for him at school but couldn’t find him.”

“And it was easier to just avoid dealing with it. You shouldn’t have let it drag on this long. You should apologize tonight. Just clarify the situation and patch things up.”

“Well, there’s one other problem...” I was thinking about Jake.

“What’s that?”

“It’s...kind of hard to explain.” I felt myself start to blush.

“Does this have anything to do with that boy you brought home the other day? Gilly’s brother?”

It never ceased to amaze me how perceptive Adam could be.

“Yeah, his name’s Jake.”

“And you like him?”

I blushed again.

Adam gave me a sharp look. “What exactly is going on with you two?”

“Nothing! Um...well...it’s kinda hard to explain.”

“You just said that. Let’s give it a try, huh? Let sit down.”

I followed Adam into the living room and perched nervously on the edge of a chair. I haltingly began to tell him all about Jake and me, from our first conversation in the lunchroom, to the flirtation, to our interrupted make-out session.

When I finished, Adam sat thinking for a moment. Finally, he said, “Killian, you’d better be very

thankful that Todd came in when he did. He stopped you from making what could have been a very big mistake.”

“What do you mean?”

“How well do you even know Jake?”

“I...I mean...I guess not that well.”

“Do you trust him?”

“I like him.”

“That’s not what I asked. Do you trust him?”

“I don’t distrust him...”

“Look, Killian, you’re young. I get it. And you’re exploring your sexuality for the first time. And you’re meeting other guys like you. You’re going to be experimenting, and that’s inevitable.”

I was blushing furiously. Why did I feel like I was about to get the birds and the bees talk?

“What you were experiencing today was lust. It’s easy to be carried away by lust no matter how old you are, but especially at your age. I just want you to be careful. Jake seems like a nice boy, but you don’t really know him. Just a few weeks ago, you were head over heels for Asher. Now it’s Jake.”

“I still like Asher.”

“Which means you need to be even more careful. I know I can’t stop you from fooling around, but I hope you’ll at least take some advice from me. Wait until you love and trust the other guy for your first time. It’ll be so much more special.”

I nodded. What he said made sense. “Okay. But how will I know if I love him or I’m just attracted to him?”

“You’ll know. And trust me on this: it’s worth the wait. Maybe it’ll be with Jake, or maybe not. Maybe

it'll be with Asher, maybe not. Maybe it'll be with someone you haven't even met yet. But when the time comes, I want you to promise me one thing. If and when you do have sex, you'll use protection. I'll even buy you condoms if you want."

My face flushed hot again. "I'm not doing that!" Adam raised an eyebrow. "I'm not! I'm not ready for all that. Sheesh."

"Maybe I'll still get you some, just in case."

"Can we please stop talking about this now?"

Adam laughed. "I just don't want you to get hurt, Killian. I got a later start on this, but I still have a lot more experience. And I'm lucky to have found that right guy."

As if on cue, we heard the front door open, quickly followed by Steve's voice. "Adam?"

I watched Adam's face light up. You could see the love he'd just been talking about reflected in his eyes.

"We'll finish this later," Adam said, practically flying from the room.

I followed as he met Steve just inside the door. Adam leapt into his lover's arms, and they just seemed to melt against each other.

"I'm so happy for you, babe!" Steve mumbled into Adam's shoulder.

They hugged for a few more seconds and then stepped apart.

"Let's get dinner started. The other guests will be here soon." Adam grabbed Steve's hand and pulled him toward the kitchen.

“Who else is coming besides Asher?” I asked, trailing behind them.

“Ilana and her husband and my long-time friend Bryant and his current beau. Ilana said something about bringing some guests that were in town, so I guess we’ll see. We’re making extra just in case.”

The next twenty minutes were spent cooking pasta and making the garlic and clam sauce that would go over it. When the doorbell rang, Adam went to get it.

Once he was gone, I asked Steve a question that had been bubbling in the back of my mind since he’d arrived. “Why don’t you live here with Adam?”

Steve carefully set down the pan he was holding and turned to face me. He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You picked a good time to bring up a very complicated question. The short answer is that, when we first discussed it, we didn’t think it would be a good idea. Seth was moving in, and my job was hours away. Plus, things were still up in the air with whether or not Adam would have visitation rights with Kane. We feared me living here would complicate things. Of course, he didn’t get them, but we didn’t know that when we were making those decisions.”

“Why didn’t you move in once Seth came and you knew he was gay, and Adam wasn’t going to get to see Kane?”

“Well, all that didn’t happen overnight. The whole court case with Kane took months. By the time everything was settled, we had fallen into a comfortable routine. It didn’t come up again until Adam and Seth moved down here. We were talking about it then, but

when Seth was murdered, it didn't seem like the best time to press the issue."

I nodded. I had more questions, but we could hear voices coming toward the kitchen. Steve turned back to the stove just as the whole party came bursting through the doorway. Apparently, everyone had arrived at the same time.

Adam introduced me to the group. First, there was Ilana, a tall, elegant woman with bronze skin, golden brown eyes, and curly glossy brown hair that tumbled down her back. She looked to be somewhere in her early thirties.

Her husband Lysander appeared to be perhaps a little older. He was a very handsome and distinguished black man with close-cropped hair graying at the temples and a pencil mustache. They had different last names, although I missed his, so I assumed she had kept hers for professional reasons.

Ilana's guests turned out to be Lysander's daughter from a previous marriage, Nila, and her partner, Heather.

Over dinner, I learned they'd been together for four years, having met as freshmen in college when they were both eighteen.

Heather looked like the quintessential college student—long curly brown hair pulled up into a ponytail, a sweatshirt bearing the university's initials, jeans, and glasses.

Nila, on the other hand, had the exotic beauty of an actress or a model. She wore her long, straight black hair parted in the middle and hanging on either side of her face like a curtain. This only served to accentuate her

high cheekbones, straight nose, and pouty lips. Her dark skin seemed to glow in the kitchen lighting. She was quite stunning. I was not at all surprised to learn she was majoring in acting.

Then there was Adam's friend Bryant and his boyfriend, Calvin. Bryant had wavy brown hair that he wore unstyled. He looked pretty buff under his sweater and khaki slacks. He had pushed up the sleeves of his sweater, showing that both of his arms were fully tattooed.

Calvin, who looked quite a bit younger than his boyfriend, had longish bleached blonde hair and piercings in almost every conceivable place one could stick a piece of metal through—several places on each ear, eyebrows, nose, and lip. He was very tall, thin and wore oversized, baggy clothes. He also had a few tattoos, though not full sleeves like Bryant.

A few steps behind everyone else came Asher, looking a little lost and maybe just a touch pouty.

I gave him a small smile to let him know I didn't mind his being there, and he offered a halfhearted version in return.

After all the introductions had been made, most of the group headed for the living room. Steve and I stayed behind to finish up the food preparation. Asher stayed, too, standing around awkwardly for a few minutes before sitting down at the table.

We all made small talk, but it seemed forced and more than a little uncomfortable—at least for Asher and me.

Eventually, Steve put him to work setting the table, which helped break the tension hanging in the air.

When dinner was ready, we called everyone in. Even with the extra leaves in the table, it was a tight fit, but the atmosphere was festive, and no one seemed to mind.

Kane was the main topic of conversation. Everyone was very happy for him and Adam, with the possible exception of Asher. Not that he wasn't happy for Adam, but he didn't know Kane and it was obvious he was distracted. I kept catching him staring at me with a slight frown.

Once dinner was finished and everyone started back toward the living room with several bottles of wine, Asher asked me if we could talk. We excused ourselves and walked upstairs to the room I would soon be sharing with Kane.

"Killian," he said as soon as I closed the bedroom door, "we need to talk."

"I know," I agreed. "I need to explain some things to you."

"I need to explain some things to you, too."

"I'll start," I offered, and quickly rushed on before he could say anything. "I'm not really going out with Gilly. It's just a cover so I won't get harassed at school. I need to find out who killed Seth, and I can't do that if everyone knows I'm gay. Or maybe I could. Not as many people seem to care as I thought. It's just that those who do care have been very vocal about it. Anyway, I'm still just as gay as I was before. I wanted to tell you all this right away, but well, you pissed me off and, well, I guess I lost my temper. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me, too." He sat on the bed and stared down at his hands. "I was an ass that day in the

lunchroom. I was jealous and hurt, and I just said a bunch of shit I shouldn't have. I want to ask you to forgive me for all the stuff I said...and see if maybe we can start over...or something...maybe?"

He glanced up at me hopefully.

"I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me, but what do you mean by start over?"

"I don't mean as boyfriends or anything—at least not yet—but I'd hate to lose the best friend I've ever had over something like this." He gave me his best puppy-dog eyes.

Who could resist that? I closed the distance between us as he stood up to meet me, and we wrapped our arms around each other in a tight embrace.

My phone interrupted our moment.

"I should probably get that." I reluctantly disengaged myself from our hug. "Not many people call me."

"Killian!" Kane started screaming before I even had the phone to my ear. "Did you hear?"

"Yeah, Kane, I heard," I laughed. "And it's a good thing I heard before you called. I think I'm deaf in that ear now."

Kane laughed, too. "Your plan worked. I told Mom I wanted to live with Dad, and when she asked why I told her it's because I relate more to him since I'm gay, too."

"What did she say?"

"Well, she just sat there for a minute, then she walked out of the room. A little later she came to my bedroom and said she'd called the lawyers, and it was being taken care of." Kane's voice changed at this point

from supercharged excitement to uncertainty. “She seemed really sad, Killian, like I had let her down.”

“I’m sorry, Kane. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea after all. I mean, it is kinda lying.”

“No, even if I’m not sure, it was right ’cuz it means I get to come live with you guys now! Hey, I’d better go. I don’t want Mom freaking out at this point. I just had to call you. Thanks, big bro!”

“You’re welcome, Kane.”

I hung up and turned to find Asher had slipped out of the room while I was on the phone.

I started to go look for him when the phone rang again. It was Gilly calling to plan our costumes.

I was eager to get off the phone to look for Asher, so I agreed to whatever she suggested without really hearing a word she said. I told her we had company, and I couldn’t talk for long.

While we were talking, my phone kept buzzing. I assumed it was Kane texting me, so I ignored them.

After we hung up, I realized I had no idea what I had agreed to wear. I shrugged it off, figuring I’d find out sooner or later.

I checked my texts only to find it wasn’t Kane after all. It was Jake, and it was a series of messages.

Hey.

I’m really sorry about everything that happened today.

the boathouse

in my room

Todd

I don’t know what’s going on with me

I'd blame it on the moon or something but I don't even know if it's full or what

Anyway, I'm just really sorry.

I quickly text back, *Jake, it's okay. Don't worry about it.* Then added, *Are things okay with Todd?*

Don't worry about him. I can handle my brother. Can I call you really quick?

Yeah, but I can't talk long.

My phone rang almost instantly.

"Hiya, Killer," he practically sang when I answered.

I winced a at Killer, but I quickly recovered since I could hear the cheeky smile in voice, which made me picture that lopsided grin I liked so much.

"I just wanted to hear your voice...and make sure you weren't just blowing me off over text. You're really not mad at me?"

I laughed. "No, I'm not mad."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Good. 'Cuz I like you."

"I like you, too, you goof."

"No, I mean I like you. A lot. I want to spend more time with you, but I don't know how with Gilly and Todd and all."

"Hey, we're friends, right? Friends spend time with each other."

"Do you think maybe we could be more than friends?"

"Maybe, but let's take things one step at a time for now. I think we were moving a bit too fast today. It's probably a good thing Todd walked in when he did."

He sighed. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Well, I probably won’t see you really before the party, but I know what you’re wearing so I’ll look for you.”

“At least one of us knows what I’m wearing. What is it?”

“You don’t know? You literally just got off the phone with my sister. I was listening the whole time.”

“That makes one of us, then, because I wasn’t paying much attention. Don’t tell your sister.”

He laughed. “Maybe I will and maybe I won’t. What’s in it for me?”

“Jake...” I wasn’t in the mood to flirt. I still needed to go find Asher.

“Fine. Gilly wants you to dress up in some costume she found in a thrift store. She showed it to me, and I guess it’s pretty cool. It’s like this long black hooded cloak that goes over this tunic thing and tights, with a fake sword and all. It looks kinda creepy, but cool. Gilly bought a cloak of her own, so I guess you guys are going as a medieval couple or somebody from Middle Earth...I dunno.”

“Did you say tights?”

“I haven’t decided what I’m wearing, so I guess you’ll be surprised.”

“Tights?”

“Hey, I have to go. I just wanted to apologize and all. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“I have to wear tights?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed. “And I, for one, am looking forward to seeing it! Bye, Killer.”

His calling me Killer snapped me out of my horror at the thought of wearing tights. “Bye, Jake.”

I hung up and turned around to find Asher standing in the doorway staring at me accusingly.
“Jake, huh?” he asked quietly.

Chapter 17

My mind raced as I tried to decide what to say. How much had he heard? If he'd been there for more than a few minutes he'd heard me tell Jake that I liked him. "Uh, yeah, Jake Sheridan," I said lamely.

Asher closed his eyes for a second, then opened them again. Pain flashed out of them like the beam from a lighthouse. "So...you're not dating Gilly...but you are dating her twin brother?"

"I'm not dating Jake."

"But you like him."

"Asher—" I wasn't sure where I was going with it but felt I had to say something.

"You don't have to explain anything to me, Killian," he interrupted quietly. "You don't owe me anything. You said you wanted us to be friends and that's all we are."

"It's not like that," I tried again.

"Look, I heard you tell Jake you like him. You also told him you wanted to take things slow, which must mean you're planning to pursue something with him. I didn't even know he was gay—or bi or whatever he is—but it's obvious where that leaves me."

I opened my mouth again, but he stood up and held out a hand to silence me.

"Don't say anything, please. It'll only make things worse. I'll be okay, if that's what you're worried about. I've lived without you just fine so far, and I'll survive again. Yes, I care about you a lot—maybe I'm even in love with you. How would I know? I've never been in love with anyone before. I don't have anything

to compare it to. I do want to at least be friends with you. Just...I think I'll need some time. I'll let you know when I'm ready. I'd better go now before I do something that would embarrass us both."

He turned and walked toward the door.

"Asher, wait!" I yelled.

I was louder than I'd intended, but it had the desired effect. He stopped in his tracks, although he kept his back to me.

"Will you let me get a word in somewhere? Yes, I like Jake. Yes, he is gay, and yes, I'm attracted to him. And yes, maybe it could develop into something more, but for now, we're just friends—same as you and I. I never stopped liking you, but I don't think I'm in love with anyone—you or Jake. I do know I need time to figure all this out, the same as you do. In the meantime, I hope you don't think I'm being too selfish because I want to stay friends with you."

Asher slowly turned and faced me again. "I don't think you're selfish, and I don't want to be, either. If being with Jake is what makes you happy, then I want you to be with Jake. But I don't want to lose our friendship. It's the best thing in my life."

We both moved toward each other at the same time and hugged tightly.

"No matter what, we'll always be friends," I whispered into his hair.

He pulled back a little, keeping his arms around my neck, then leaned in for a quick peck on the lips.

"I really should go, Kill."

"Okay," I said, dropping my arms.

He turned and left, closing the door behind him.

I fell backwards onto my bed and stared up at the ceiling.

“Well, that could have gone worse,” I said out loud.

It could have gone better, too, to be fair.

Then again, everything was out in the open now. And did I really have room to complain? I had two hot guys who both wanted to pursue a relationship of some sort with me.

Sure, I was also possibly being stalked by a murderer—maybe, if I believed Judy—but all things considered, life wasn’t all that bad.

The next week passed quickly with preparations for Kane’s arrival. He was supposed to arrive on Friday. On Monday, Adam bought a second-hand dresser and a set of twin beds to replace Seth’s old bed.

I made sure to retrieve Seth’s journal from its hiding place and stash it away under the mattress of my new bed. I still hadn’t read a single page of it, though not for lack of interest. It had occurred to me that it might contain clues to his murder, but I still couldn’t bring myself to open it. The very idea felt like such an invasion of his privacy.

I spent some time every day arranging and rearranging the room, trying to make it perfect for Kane.

When I wasn’t moving furniture around like a demented Sims, I was at the Sheridans’ since Gilly had somehow roped me into helping them decorate for the party. They were going all out to make the place look like a haunted house. Mrs. Sheridan was planning a big

renovation project, but the kids had talked her into waiting to start painting until after the party so it could look creepier.

Faux cobwebs were draped everywhere, and plastic spiders were stuck on the walls with museum putty. They had also been stockpiling white sheets from the thrift store, so every piece of furniture was covered.

It was starting to look creepy even in broad daylight, and I couldn't wait to see it in the proper lighting.

While we worked, Jake and I maintained a friendly but polite distance. I made a deliberate effort to avoid ever being alone with Todd, though he kept a watchful eye on us at all times, never letting Jake and I be unattended in the same room.

Gilly seemed blissfully ignorant of the tension, for which I was eternally grateful. Mrs. Sheridan was always around somewhere, but I never saw their dad.

On Tuesday, I finally let Gilly talk me into trying on the costume she'd picked out for me. From Jake's description, I was prepared for a cheap, mass-produced costume, but it was actually very well made. It definitely had a sort of renaissance festival air to it, and, considering the tunic was baggy and flowy and the opaque black tights were stretchy, it fit surprisingly well.

The tunic was black velvet with gold embroidery around the neckline and a matching braided gold belt to cinch it in.

My favorite part was definitely the cloak though. It was heavy and flowed majestically behind me when I walked. I would need to find some shoes to wear with it,

but, overall, it was better than I expected. I even thought I looked pretty decent in it.

I talked to Asher a few times although we didn't really hang out or anything. We mainly just ran into each other between classes now that he wasn't actively avoiding me.

Mom called on Wednesday with an update about Dad. She said between the report the hospital made after Dad beat me, and the charges she'd pressed after he attacked her, he was in deep doo-doo—her words, not mine.

“This all might actually be bigger than the asshole can slither out of this time,” she said, sounding surprised. “I still can't believe it. Turns out domestic abuse charges are more than he can sweep under the rug. His office had to recuse themselves due to conflict of interest, so it's being transferred to the neighboring county, and from my lawyer told me, there's no love lost between the state's attorney there and your father.”

To ensure fairness, her lawyer was also trying to get the case moved to a different county to avoid bias with the judges. Most of the local ones golfed with Dad so there wasn't much chance for impartiality.

So far, he'd managed to keep it fairly quiet, but once the media got ahold of the story, it would be a different story. While the charges were only a misdemeanor, if he was found guilty, it would still likely mean the end of his career. I couldn't say I felt sorry for him at all. He deserved whatever happened to him.

In equally good news, Mom was settling in very well with Aunt Kate. She loved being around all the kids.

“I’d forgotten how stinking cute little ones can be,” she said. “I kind of miss when you were that age and things seemed simpler.”

“I’m glad you’re liking it,” I said, “but I’m kind of glad I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“You’ll always be my baby, and don’t you forget it. Now, what’s this about you having a girlfriend? You’d better not give me any grandchildren any time soon.”

“Mom! It’s not like that!”

I quickly explained the whole beard thing, conveniently leaving out my complicated love triangle. Quadrangle?

She sighed heavily when I finished. “Just be gentle with her, Killian. Girls are tender when it comes to crushes.”

“It was her idea, Mom.”

“I know, but we do dumb things for love. Trust me.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s limited to any one gender, though.”

She laughed. “You’re probably right, but still promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I will.”

Thursday night, I had another weird dream—not a nightmare, but another visit from Seth. In the dream, I “woke up” to find Seth sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed. He gave me an exasperated look that was clearly trying to communicate something, but even in my dream, my sleep-addled failed to understand.

With an exaggerated eye roll, he slid off the bed, reached under, and pulled out the journal. Then, still

using over-acted mimed movements, he opened the book and pretended to read. Then he pointed at me before pointing back to the book.

“You...want me to read it?” I asked.

He nodded vigorously.

“Are you sure?”

He nodded again, then slid under the bed to return the book, arching his back and sticking his rear up and wiggling it provocatively.

He re-emerged and gave me a wink. Then, in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

“Message received,” I mumbled as I fell back onto my pillow.

As I lay there waiting for sleep to reclaim me, I wondered what was going on with me. I felt like some kind of sex freak lately. I was even attracted to the dead boy in my dreams.

Is this what everyone was talking about when they joked about teens and hormones? If so, I guess I was a late bloomer. But I was apparently making up for lost time.

When I woke up the next morning, the strange dream was the first thing on my mind. I thought about retrieving the journal right away, but then I realized I had to get ready for school. And then I remembered that it was Friday, which meant Kane would be all moved in by the time school let out, and the journal was all but forgotten.

School seemed to drag by at an interminably slow pace. When the final bell rang, I swear I was the first student out the door. I was so excited that I drove home at what was probably an unsafe speed. I was

officially gaining a brother and, having grown up as an only child, I was really looking forward to it.

I pulled up beside Eve's car, raced up the steps and across the porch and burst through the door.

Kane was just coming down the stairs as I made my dramatic entrance. When he saw me, he skipped the last few steps with a single leap and threw himself at me with a feral howl, flinging his arms around my neck in a huge bear hug that I thought would break my spine. For a little guy, he had surprising strength.

When he finally let me go and I had caught my breath enough to speak, I gasped, "Kane! I can't believe you're actually moving in!"

"I know! It all happened so fast. One day I'm wishing I could live here and the next here—I am. And I owe it all to you!" With that, he launched himself at me again. If this kept up, I'd need a neck brace before long.

"Well, isn't this touching?" a caustic voice said from above.

I looked up to see Eve standing at the top of the stairs in all her fairy splendor. She was wearing a long white airy dress with a scarf that created an eerie effect of wings.

As she walked down the stairs, the dress and scarf swirled around her in a mesmerizing ethereal display that made it seem as if she were floating.

When she reached the bottom, she broke the spell by speaking once again. "Is this your little boyfriend, Kane?"

"Mom, this is Killian. You met him last time, remember?"

Her eyes raked over me, her disapproval clear. “I’m afraid not.”

“He lives here with Dad. He’s been like my brother to me.”

She shot me withering glance, then fixed Kane with a piercing glare. “You only had one brother. His name was Seth, and in case you’ve forgotten already, he was murdered because he was gay.”

My mouth dropped open at the coldness in her voice, quickly replaced by cold fury when I saw the raw pain in Kane’s eyes.

“Well, Kane, you know how to get in touch with me if you change your mind about...” She waved her hand dismissively. “...all this. I think I’m done here, and I have a long drive ahead of me.”

With that, she swept past us, her scarf actually dragging across my face as she blew by. When she reached the door, she stopped.

At first, I thought it was for dramatic effect, but suddenly she spun around, stepped to Kane, and enveloped him in a tight hug.

I was surprised by the sudden display of emotion. I hadn’t thought she possessed any. It was over as quickly as it had begun, however, and she was out the door before Kane could react, leaving him stunned and more than a little confused.

He stood still for a moment, too overwhelmed to even know what to do. He looked over at me, his eyes wide with surprise and confusion.

“What... What was that?”

I shrugged. “I guess the wicked witch has a heart after all.”

He frowned. "It was the Tin Man who didn't have a heart."

"You get the point."

"But what was that hug about? Why did she do that when she's been a bitch all week. She's hardly said a word to me since we put our plan into action."

"Yeah, but she's still your mom. I'm sure she still loves you even if she'd mad at you," I assured him with as much conviction as I could muster. I wasn't sure that's how always worked—just look at my dad—but I felt like it's what he needed to hear, so I stuck with it.

"She's probably going to miss having you around."

He looked at the door. "You think so? Maybe I should have told her I loved her before she left."

"She isn't gone forever. You'll see her again."

"Will I? She was pretty mad. How can you be sure? What if she doesn't want anything to do with me ever again? What if this was all a mistake?"

"Kane, listen, take a deep breath. You need to calm down. Where's your dad?"

"He and Mom were fighting, as usual. It... It got really bad. She was accusing him of doing stuff to me and Seth to turn us gay, like gross stuff. Dad finally had enough and said he was going to go for a walk or something while we finished getting my stuff out of her car. He's been gone a while."

It looked like I'd have to handle this one on my own.

"Okay, well, even if she's mad now, she'll get over it. You're her son."

"You don't know my mom. When she discovered Seth was gay, she kicked him out and never saw him

again. She didn't even mention him. It was like he was dead before he actually died. And now he really is dead, and I never got to say goodbye to him."

A single tear rolled down Kane's cheek, and I realized that he was grieving for Seth as much as for his mother. This had to be an incredibly emotional time for him. His desire to live with his father essentially meant he had given up his mother. He was working himself into a full-blown breakdown.

I took him by the shoulders and steered him over to the couch where I gently pushed him down before sitting next to him.

Kane's grief was almost palpable. Watching him, it made me realize that Adam was right. I had never really grieved Seth's death myself. I'd gone from stunned numbness to keeping myself distracted by rebuilding my life. I had grand intentions of finding his killer and seeking justice, but I'd barely made any progress. I'd mostly just pushed him from my mind.

Of course, my grief was nothing compared to Kane's. Seth wasn't my brother and I'd only known him for two weeks. Still, we were becoming friends, and we would have been even better friends if we'd had the chance.

It all seemed so surreal. I hadn't really known Seth that well, and yet, there I was, living in his house, with his dad, sleeping in his room, and now his brother was there too. I was living the life that was meant for him.

It was an unsettling thought. I felt as if I'd suddenly found myself in an episode of *The Twilight Zone*.

I heard the front door open, followed by footsteps.

“Adam?” I called.

“Yeah?”

“We’re in the living room.”

He stopped short when he saw Kane’s face.

“What happened?” His voice was suddenly tight with fear.

Without waiting for an answer, he rushed to Kane’s side. Kane threw himself into his arms and burst into tears.

“What did Eve do now?” he asked me.

“She didn’t really do anything. He’s afraid he’ll never see his mom again,” I explained.

“I wanted to be with you so bad that I didn’t think about how it would make her feel,” Kane said in a tear-filled voice. “I think I hurt her feelings. What if she hates me now?”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Adam soothed. “It’s just, well, your mother hasn’t had an easy life. She’s been hurt by a lot of people, including me. That’s made her very guarded with her emotions. It’s not that she doesn’t have any; she just has a hard time showing them, aside from anger, anyway. You probably did hurt her feelings, but she’s an adult, and she should act like one and not take that out on you. That said, I’m absolutely sure you’ll see her again.”

“How can you be sure? She never saw Seth again.”

“Seth didn’t live with me that long. I’m sure they would have reconciled in time.”

I felt I was intruding on a private moment, so I slipped out of the room and left them to talk. I went up to my room—our room now to find that Kane had moved his stuff in but hadn't had a chance to put anything away yet. I decided to give him a hand.

That turned out to be harder than I'd anticipated. I didn't know where Kane kept things or how he liked them arranged. I hadn't made much progress half an hour later when Adam and Kane joined me. Kane's eyes were red, but he seemed much better.

We worked together for a few hours, Kane directing Adam and I, until we had his clothes and other stuff put away. By then it was past time for dinner, and since Adam hadn't had time to cook, we went out to a Mexican restaurant to celebrate.

While we were waiting for our food, the subject of the Halloween party came up when Adam asked how preparations were going.

"It's going to look great," I reported, before turning to Kane. "You should come with me."

"But I won't know anybody," he protested.

"It'll be a great chance to meet people before you start school next week. I'll be with you so I can introduce you."

"But I don't have a costume."

"We can fix that pretty easily," Adam said.

"We'll just go buy something after dinner."

I could tell we were wearing him down, so I went in for the kill. "Come on. I want to show off my new little brother."

He couldn't hide the grin that spread over his face at that. "Okay, but are you sure it's okay if I just show up at these people's house?"

"I'm sort of dating one of the hosts, so I'm sure it'll be okay."

His eyes grew wide with undisguised delight. "What? You didn't tell me you were dating someone! Who is he? What's his name?"

Adam snorted, and Kane gave him a confused look.

"Her name is Gilly," I said, "And it's a long story."

Kane looked thoroughly confused. "It must be a long story if you're dating girls now. I thought you were gay."

"I am. She's just a cover so I didn't get outed at school."

"Ohhh, I see. So you're not, like, boning or anything."

"Kane!" Adam and I said in unison, and he cackled.

"I'll text Gilly right now just to be sure if it makes you feel better, but I know it'll be fine. It's a big party. No one will notice one more person."

As I shot off the text, Adam asked, "How big?" His paternal instincts were kicking into overdrive. "Will there be drinking? Will their parents be there? Maybe Kane shouldn't go after all..."

"Adam, relax. They have this party every year. It's a big deal. I'm sure there will be adults there. Everything will be fine."

He sighed. “Okay but call me if anything starts to get out of hand. I’ll stay up until you get home.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I said. “I’ll watch out for him.”

“It’s not Kane I’m worried about,” he said with a meaningful look, and Kane crowed in utter delight.

Our food arrived at that moment, sparing me from further derision.

Gilly texted back while we were eating saying, “Of course! The more, the merrier!” Adam was still a little concerned, but Kane was elated.

After dinner, we headed to the nearest big-box store to look for a costume, but the pickings were slim. Most of the store had already switched over to Christmas decorations, but we managed to find the Halloween dredges in a clearance aisle.

While it was very picked over, we were able to put together a fairly decent vampire costume. Not entirely original, but it could have been worst considering it was so last minute.

We went home triumphantly with our spoils and spent the rest of the evening talking and relaxing. It felt natural and right, as if Kane had always lived there.

Before we knew it, the time had come to say goodnight. We still had some running around to do the next day before Kane and I went to the party.

After all the bedtime rituals were finished, Kane and I settled into our respective beds. Adam came in to say goodnight, then turned the lights off on his way out.

A heavy silence descended with the darkness. It wasn’t long, though, before I heard sniffing sounds from Kane’s side of the room.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly, barely more than a whisper.

“Yeah. I guess so. It’s just...there’s so much going on right now and I’m so confused...and it’s kinda weird being here for the first night. Do you think I could sleep with you like I did last time?”

“Well, the bed’s not as big as before, but come on over.”

The words had barely left my mouth before he was sliding under the covers next to me. He wiggled around for a few seconds, then rolled over and settled with his back to me.

I lay there for a while just watching him breathe. Then I slipped my arm over him and started to drift off.

Just before I crossed the threshold between wakefulness and sleep, I heard Kane’s barely audible voice. “Tell me again how you knew you were gay.”

I thought for a moment before I answered. I’d already told him once, but I knew he was trying to figure things out for himself. I decided to go into more detail than last time.

“Well, like I said before, Seth told me he thought I was and then kissed me. He really freaked me out! I even hit him. Later, though, I started thinking about it and realized he was right. I wasn’t interested in girls—at all. More importantly, I was interested in guys. I enjoyed Seth’s kiss. I felt something I’d never felt before, almost as if it had awakened a part of me that I had ignored until that moment.

“At first, I didn’t want to believe it, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. I was gay. I felt really scared at first, but Seth was really

supportive. Later, after...everything happened, I talked a lot to your dad. He's pretty smart, you know. He helped me understand that there's nothing wrong with me and I have nothing to be ashamed of. It's just the way I am. When I'm ready, I'll come out at school, but there's no big rush. I'll do it when the time seems right."

"Killian," he asked when I stopped to take a breath, "do you think I'm gay?"

"I don't know, Kane. That's kinda something you have to figure out for yourself. I can't decide for you."

"Would you be mad at me if I wasn't?"

I sat up, and he rolled onto his back so he could look up at me. The faint moonlight shining through the window was enough to see him clearly. I could tell he was worried about my response.

"Why would you think I'd be mad at you?"

"I just don't want to disappoint you. Right now, you're my only friend here. I want you to like me."

I ruffled his hair. "Don't be silly, Kane. Of course I like you. I don't care if you're gay, straight, bi or anything else. I just want you to be who you are and that's it. Just be Kane. Don't let anybody try to make you something you're not."

He sat up and threw his arms around my neck, squeezing so hard I could barely breathe. "Thank you, Killian," he whispered fiercely into my ear.

We lay back down with my arm around him again. Just as I was about to doze off once more, Kane spoke again. "I don't think I'm gay. I like girls."

I stifled a chuckle and squeezed him gently, pulling him tighter against my chest. "Okay."

“And I like you holding me, but it’s not like it gives me a boner or anything.”

This time I laughed out loud.

“You’re not mad?” he asked.

“No.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

“Good.”

“Now go to sleep.”

He giggled but finally quieted down and let me fall asleep.

I dreamed about Seth again that night. I woke up to find him sitting on the edge of my bed. I was starting to get used to his visits. This dream somehow felt even more real, as if I could reach out and touch him. I glanced over at Kane, but he slept on.

Seth held a finger to his lips. “Shh. Don’t wake him. I’m here to see you.”

My breath caught in my throat, and chills rippled across my skin. This was the first time he’d spoken in my dreams and my heart ached at the sound of his voice. I felt tears welling, but he just smiled.

“It’s all right. I’m okay,” he said kindly.

“But what—”

He shook his head. “No questions. Sorry. We don’t have much time. You have to read the journal. I thought I’d gotten the message across last night, but...”

“I kind of have a lot going on,” I whispered, gesturing toward Kane.

“I know, but this is important.”

“Why? What’s the rush?”

“There are things in here that you need to know.”

“What kind of things?”

“I can’t tell you. I’m already bending the rules telling you this much. You have to figure the rest out for yourself. Promise me you’ll read it.”

“What rules? What are you talking about?”

“Please, just promise me.”

“Okay, I promise.”

His face lit up with a grin. “Thanks.”

Kane stirred in his sleep. I glanced down at him, and when I looked up again, Seth was gone.

I felt a sense of loss even as I tried to tell myself it was just a dream. It had felt so real, though. Hearing his voice just hit differently, somehow. I suddenly had an overwhelming need to make sure the journal was still under the mattress. I knew I wouldn’t be able to fall back asleep until I’d actually touched it.

I slithered out of bed as carefully as possible so as not to wake Kane, then slid my hand between the mattress and the box spring. I sighed with relief when I felt the book. I pulled it out just to make sure.

“What’re you doin’?” Kane asked sleepily, startling me and making me fall backwards onto my butt.

I looked up at him peering blearily at me over the edge of the bed and willed my heart to stop pounding. “I, uh, couldn’t sleep so I thought I’d read for a while. Just go back to sleep.”

Kane nodded, then rolled over and burrowed under the blanket.

Instead of getting back into bed with Kane, I climbed into his bed and turned on his bedside lamp. I

hoped it wouldn't disturb him, but he didn't so much as move a muscle.

I opened the cover.

The inside page was inscribed "This journal belongs to Seth David Connelly." I recognized his handwriting from the letter Adam had given me. I'd read it so many times, I had it memorized.

I ran a finger across his name and thought about the vision I'd just had. While I knew it was only a dream, it still gave me a sense of peace I hadn't felt before about reading Seth's most private thoughts.

At the bottom of the page, he'd written a date and, "This journal was given to me by my father on the day I moved in with him."

I turned the page to his first entry. I quickly realized it was a more complete version of the account he'd given me about how he'd come to live with Adam. He'd written it as if it were a fictional tale or short story. It was fairly long, but I couldn't stop reading. Tears trickled down my cheeks as I turned the pages.

He'd ended his narrative on his first day at school. I couldn't believe it when I saw he'd actually mentioned me.

After that, he'd written the entries in a more typical journal style, interspersed with an occasional poem, notes or random thoughts. They were fairly regular at first. They had a positive vibe, even though it was quickly evident he wasn't going to find the easy acceptance he'd hoped for at his new school.

Then the entries became more sporadic, recording only unusual or memorable events. They also became increasingly cynical and negative. He mentioned

the notes, and the harassment by Zack, Jesse and Asher. It hurt to see Asher mentioned, though Seth did say that Zack and Jesse did all the talking. There were other people who gave him a hard time—names hissed in passing, dirty looks and general avoidance—but Zack and Jesse came over and over.

It seemed his only bright spots were the few times I'd spoken to him. He wrote about me a lot. It was strange to read about myself, seeing myself through someone else's eyes. He talked about how cute he thought I was, and how he suspected I might be like him.

I felt a wave of guilt for not being braver. I wished I'd talked to him more, stood up for him, been a better friend. I wished I'd kissed him back.

All the wishing in the world couldn't change what had already happened though. Some part of me knew I wasn't to blame. I was doing the best I could. I'd been confused, trying to figure things out. I was getting there...just not quickly enough to make a difference for Seth.

He'd started recording the day I came over and he'd kissed me, but the next page had been torn out, obviously the letter Adam had found and given to me. The entry after that was made after we'd texted. He was filled with relief.

I turned the page and started reading.

After two weeks of either being ignored or picked on by everyone in school (except Killian, of course), something weird happened today. This totally hot guy came up to me in the hall and asked if he could talk to me in private. I'd never seen him before so I was a little

scared that he was just trying to get me alone to bash me, but I agreed against my better judgement. He was so hot I probably would have agreed to let him beat me up if he'd asked nicely. (Not that I'm into that.) He took me into an empty classroom and asked me if it was true that I was gay. I said yeah and waited for him to call me a slur or hit me or something, but he just stood there for a while, kind of staring off into nowhere and biting his lip. It was kind of creepy, to be honest. Finally, I was just like, Are we done here? Then he grabbed me and tried to kiss me. I shoved him away and was like, What the hell? Then he got all freaky and weird, talking all this crazy shit about how gay people were going to hell. I was just like, So why did you just try to kiss me then? And then he SLAPPED ME! Across the face. Like a bad telenovela. I couldn't believe it. Hot or not, this guy is seriously fucked up. I just started walking away, but he grabbed my arm really hard. I tried to pull away, but he was so strong. I told him to let go or I'd report him, but he just said I didn't understand. I told him I didn't want to understand, I just wanted him to let go and stay the hell away from me. He suddenly looked like he was going to cry or something. He let go and I got out of there as quickly as possible. I hope he just leaves me alone. That's all I need, some psycho closet-case stalking me.

There were no more entries after that. I flipped through the next few pages, but they were all blank. I went back to check the date of the last entry.

He'd written it the day he died.

A chill ran down my spine as realized they were likely the last words he'd ever written.

What was so important that I'd dreamed about Seth three separate times? What was Seth—or my subconscious—trying to tell me? What was I missing?

The only new information was that someone had come on to Seth, someone who was obviously very conflicted about his sexuality.

Was that it? Did that same person somehow follow him to the park and slit his throat? But how? Did he follow him home and lie in wait? That seemed very premeditated, but if the guy was obsessed enough, then it could have happened.

Maybe he'd just wanted to talk to him again, but then things went wrong. So many scenarios were running through my head, but I had too little information.

The bigger question was who was the mystery man?

Seth had thought the guy was hot.

I tried to form a mental picture of everyone I had connected to Seth. Of those, I only considered Asher hot, and I really didn't believe he was involved. His brother Marcus was attractive enough, but again, I couldn't see him involved. Plus, neither of them had any religious hang-ups with homosexuality.

I didn't think either Zack or Jesse was hot at all. Of course, my admittedly low opinion of them probably colored my perception. I supposed someone else might find them attractive.

Then there was the other guy Jake had seen talking to Seth. What if the person Jake was protecting and Seth's mystery man were one and the same? I was

going to have to pressure Jake to tell me. He could be unwittingly shielding the killer.

It also occurred to me that there was no way I knew every single person Seth had interacted with in his time at school. I only had the list of names from Jake, and a half-assed description from Becca.

I looked over at the clock and saw it was almost three-thirty in the morning. I wasn't going to solve the mystery that night. I sighed and turned off the light, then slid deeper under Kane's blankets.

I stared at the ceiling for a while before finally drifting off.

Chapter 18

Saturday morning started with an enormous family breakfast—cooked by Steve since Adam had overindulged the night before and was quite hungover.

Afterward, I volunteered to take Kane around to get a few more things he needed since Adam was still under the weather. It also allowed us to spend more time together, getting to know each other better.

We had a great time running errands and just being silly, but, in the back of my mind, my thoughts kept drifting back to Seth's journal and the identity of his mystery guy.

Before we knew it, though, it was time to get ready for the Halloween party. Adam helped Kane and me with our costumes. We decided not to use too much makeup on Kane since no one knew him yet and we wanted everyone to see what he really looked like. He just wore his usually messy hair slicked back and popped in a set of plastic vampire teeth. The costume looked pretty cheesy in full lighting, but I assured him it would be dimly lit at the party.

My costume didn't require any makeup, especially considering my face was pretty much hidden when my hood was up. I was still a little self-conscious about the tights, but Adam and Kane assured me they looked great with the tunic, which was thankfully long enough to hide my bulge and my butt, though just barely.

The cloak was heavier than I remembered, and I realized that it would get hot eventually unless Gilly let me take it off. I didn't think she would, though, since it kind of made the costume.

Besides, it also kept my butt out of sight.

When we were dressed, Adam took a ton of pictures. Then he made sure we had our phones—I didn't have anywhere to keep mine, but Kane had pockets and held it for me—and said to call if we needed anything. After some final reminders about our curfew and the usual parental warnings, we were off to the party.

I thought we were arriving early, but when we pulled up, the drive and front yard was already full of cars. I had to park on the road.

“Wow, there are a lot of people here,” Kane commented. He tried to sound casual, but his nerves showed through.

“You'll be fine,” I told him. “Remember, just be Kane. Everyone will love you.”

He took a deep breath and nodded.

We got out of the car and started walking toward the house. Before we reached the front door, the welcoming committee intercepted us.

Jesse was a zombie—his costume, but any other interpretation is probably also correct—and Zack was a vampire. Zack's eyes narrowed when he saw Kane's costume.

“Well, well, well,” Zack started in right away in his smarmy voice. “What do we have here? Who's your friend? Don't tell me this is your boyfriend? What will Gilly think?”

“Hello, Zack,” I said evenly, keeping a tight rein on my temper. I suddenly felt extremely protective of my new little brother. “This is Kane. He just moved here. He's like a brother to me, so back off. If I see you

anywhere near him for the rest of the night, I'll make sure you regret it."

Jesse took a menacing step in my direction, but Zack reached out a hand and stopped him. "Is that a threat?"

"Yes."

"Don't start something you can't finish, fag."

"Who said he can't finish it?" a new voice cut in.

I spun around to find Asher and Marcus coming up behind us. Kane looked somewhat scared, but Asher and Marcus just looked pissed.

Zack eyed the brothers warily as they squared off next to Kane and me. "What's going on, Marcus? You a fag lover now?"

"Quit being such an infected asshole, Phillips," Marcus growled. "And while you're at it, you can quit using the word fag. I've lived next door to Killian for years and he's a good guy—as you should know since you used to be his friend."

"Used to be is right. I don't hang out with f—" Zack bit off the epithet at a warning glance from Marcus. "I don't hang out with queers."

"No, you prefer to surround yourself with imbeciles and half-wits who think you're hot shit, when, in fact, you're just a reeking pile of fly-covered excrement."

Jesse, looking confused as he swiveled his attention back and forth between Marcus and Zack, seemed a little unsure of what role he was supposed to be playing. He totally missed the fact that he'd just been seriously insulted.

Marcus continued, “Stay away from my brother and his friends. If you mess with one of them, you mess with me—and trust me, you do not want to do that. I will make sure that every second of your waking life is as miserable as you make everyone around you, and then I will haunt you in your dreams. Do I make myself clear?”

Zack threw me a dirty look, then sniffed and turned. “Come on, Jesse, they aren’t worth it.” He walked away, still trying to maintain his tough-guy act. Jesse trotted along behind him while casting confused looks back in our direction every few steps.

I turned back to Marcus and Asher. “Thanks, guys.”

“My pleasure.” Marcus glared at Zack’s retreating back. “Zack Phillips is and always has been nothing more than a bully. I’ve wanted to tell him off for years now. I never could figure out how Asher put up with him.” He turned to me. “Hey, Killian, I’m sorry I was kind of rude the other day when you were asking me about Seth. I was having a bad day, but that’s no excuse for being a jerk.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “You weren’t a jerk. And even if you were, you more than made up for it just now. Also, you might suck at Spanish, but you are a maestro of the English language.”

He laughed. “I’d better be. That’s going to be my major at college next year. So who’s your friend here?” He dropped a hand onto Kane’s shoulder.

“Marcus and Asher, this is Kane, Seth’s little brother. He moved in with us this week. Kane, this is my best friend Asher and his brother Marcus.”

Asher's face lit up when I called him my best friend. Everyone shook hands, and together we set off toward the house once more.

When we walked inside, even I was impressed with what we saw—and I'd helped set it up. Everything looked different at night.

The enormous entry hall was decorated to look like a haunted house. Cobwebs were draped everywhere, and battery-powered candles flickered eerily in silver candlesticks and sconces. Dance music thumped from speakers in every room, and people in costume were milling about all around.

Suddenly, someone was at my elbow, propelling me forward. I flinched away, thinking it was Zack or Jesse, but it turned out to be Gilly.

"Hey," I exclaimed.

"Killian, can I talk to you for a second?" She may have phrased it as a question, but her tone left no doubt that I really didn't have a say in the matter.

"Yeah, but hold on. This is Kane, Seth's brother. Kane, this is—"

"Yeah, great, hi," she mumbled, pulling me away again.

I shrugged toward Kane, Asher, and Marcus, then allowed her to drag me off toward the kitchen.

As soon as the door swung shut, Gilly dropped my arm and faced me. "What's going on with you and Jake?"

"What?"

"Todd said he walked in on you and Jake messing around. I wouldn't have believed him, but I saw the way you looked at him the other day."

“Gilly—” I started, but she cut me off, which was just as well since I hadn’t decided what to say or how to handle this yet.

“Killian, you know I like you. I can’t believe you would go after my own brother—while we’re still dating no less!”

“Uh, Gilly, it’s not like you and I are really dating. It’s just a cover...and it was your idea. You know I’m gay. And besides, I’m not going after your brother.”

“Did you kiss him?”

That caught me by surprise. I didn’t have an answer ready.

My hesitation was all the answer she needed.

“You did! You son of a bitch!”

“Gilly, I didn’t go after Jake.” I was starting to get annoyed.

“Oh, yeah, I guess he’s going after you, then? Is that it?”

“Yeah, that is it, actually,” said Jake, walking into the room. “You guys might want to keep it down. I could hear you as I was coming down the hall.”

We both stared at him for a moment, Gilly with fury and me with surprise. Then we both reacted at once.

“Jake, you don’t have to—” I started.

“You can both go to hell!” Gilly shouted.

Jake and I stared at Gilly in shock.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she seethed. “You, Jake! You knew how much I liked Killian, yet you stand there and calmly tell me you went after him? And you!” She spat in my direction. “You think you can just play with my emotions, then throw me away when you find someone else?”

“Gilly, it’s not like that, and you damn well know it.” I was getting pissed. “You said from the beginning that you understood I didn’t and couldn’t have any feelings for you beyond friendship. You said that pretending to date me would be okay with you. You said that you just wanted to be friends, and this was something you could do for me as a friend. If that’s not how you really felt, then you should have said so upfront and I never would have played this stupid game.”

I watched her deflate right in front of me and immediately regretted my angry words. Once again, I’d hurt someone I cared about because of my temper.

“Oh, I didn’t realize this was all just a game. I’m sorry, Killian. You’re right. I was stupid to think you could love me. Why would anybody ever love me?” She burst into tears.

“Gilly...” I said awkwardly.

“Save it.”

Jake shifted from foot to foot, obviously uncomfortable.

“Look,” I said, “there’s a party going on out there, and you guys are supposed to be hosting it. Why don’t you go get your costumes on and let’s all try to have fun. Okay?”

“Fuck you!” Gilly snarled, storming off out the back door of the kitchen.

I stared after her for a moment, then turned to Jake. “Damn. Well, that went well.”

“Sorry about that,” Jake said darkly. “Welcome to our dysfunctional family. We may look like the Waltons from the outside, but trust me, we’re more like the Mansons. I should have known Todd would say

something, even after he said he wouldn't. He's such an ass. And I just made it worse. Maybe I should have stayed out of it."

I shrugged. "Probably, but you did what you thought was best at the time. At least you were honest. Will she be all right?"

He shrugged as he turned to walk away. "I guess we'll see. I should probably go get my costume on. I'll meet you in the backyard."

"What did you decide to be?" I asked before he could get away.

He glanced over his shoulder with a pale imitation of his usual grin. "It's a surprise. You'll find out soon enough. See you outside."

I went back to the front hallway to look for Kane, Asher and Marcus, only to discover that an obnoxious bunch of giggling girls had replaced them. I headed out to the backyard to see if I could find the boys there.

The music gradually got louder as I walked through the house. By the time I reached the back door, it was almost deafening. When I stepped outside it was as if I had walked into a wall. An almost physical wave of vibration and sound washed over me.

I stood in the doorway and stared in awe. What looked like the entire student population had turned out, not only from our school but maybe from some of the neighboring schools as well.

Strands of fairy lights had been strung through the trees, and bright lights illuminated a makeshift DJ stage at the far end of the yard toward the water. Dance music pumped out of huge speakers set up in strategic locations. Bodies were writhing, wiggling, bumping, and

grinding everywhere. It hit me for the first time that the Sheridans were *rich* rich.

Someone pushed me from behind, reminding me that I was blocking the door, so I stepped out into the mass of bodies to start my futile search for someone I knew. I hadn't really paid attention to what Asher and Marcus were wearing, but vampires were everywhere. There was also the usual assortment of goblins, ghosts, ghouls, cartoon characters, superheroes and current movie villains.

I spotted a few efforts that were a little more creative: a line of girls wearing parkas and strapped into folding lawn chairs to make a ski lift, a quartet of cheerleaders who I could have sworn were actually on the football team, and my favorite, a scantily clad guy in a hula hoop shower.

I felt as if I were looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. There were so many people, all of them in costume. I was getting a little worried that I wouldn't be able to find my friends.

After searching for what felt like forever, I was about to give up when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I whirled to find Zorro giving me a dashing smile. On closer inspection, he turned out to be Asher.

"Great costume!" I yelled over the music.

He was dressed all in black, with leather boots, mask, and a long flowing cape. He wore tight leather pants and a blousy silk shirt open halfway down his chest.

How had I missed that earlier? I decided he couldn't have been wearing the whole ensemble when I first saw him.

“Yours, too,” he screamed back.

“Gilly found it.”

“I know. I heard you discussing it on the phone with Jake.”

Time to change the subject.

“Where’s Kane?”

Asher pointed behind me, and I turned to search the crowd. It took me a minute, but finally I spotted him and Marcus talking to a group of three girls dressed as fairies in skimpy outfits identical except for color.

Judging by the way Kane was ogling the shortest fairy’s generous cleavage, I thought it safe to say he was definitely straight.

Marcus wasn’t in costume.

“What’s Marcus supposed to be?” I asked.

Asher rolled his eyes. “Nothing. He refused to dress up, said it was for kids. I pointed out that we are kids, and besides, it’s a Halloween party. That’s kind of the whole point. He told me to shut up, so I did.” He shrugged expressively. “Do you want a Coke?”

I shrugged. “Sure.”

“Cool. Be right back.”

Asher was barely gone before I felt another hand on my back. I spun around but didn’t recognize the guy in the Batman costume standing there. Whoever was under the mask and skin-tight costume, he was in very good shape.

He motioned to me to follow him. I looked back after Asher, but he wasn’t paying attention.

I remembered Jake had said he would meet me in the backyard. I wasn’t sure if this was Jake or not, but I decided to follow the caped crusader and see what

happened. There were hundreds of people around, so I figured I was safe.

He led me away from the lights and crowds and into the shadows of some nearby trees, where he turned to face me with a strangely unnerving smile.

I suddenly felt uncomfortable and questioned the wisdom of following him. I started to back away, but he moved quickly and grabbed my wrist.

“Leaving so soon?” he rasped in what obviously wasn’t his real voice.

Something about his voice caused a chill to run down my spine. I tried to yank my hand away, but he held on tightly.

“What’s going on? Who are you?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, and you’re freaking me out.”

“I am Vengeance! I am the Night! I am Batman!” he said and laughed coarsely.

“Killian?” Asher called.

“I’m over here,” I called back quickly.

I turned to see Asher walking toward us. He took in the scene before him and frowned.

“Is everything okay?”

Batman quickly let go of my wrist and stepped back.

“No. I mean—” I was suddenly unsure.

Was I just being paranoid? I was freaked out so maybe I was simply overreacting. Surely, no one in their right mind would try anything in a place this public. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself if it turned out to be nothing.

Just then, the music stopped abruptly in the middle of a song. I glanced toward the stage. Standing in the spotlight, microphone in hand, was Gilly.

She looked amazing. Her long, shimmering gown fell to her feet. She'd piled her hair artfully on top of her head with just a few tendrils falling softly around her face. Her cheeks were bright red, although I couldn't tell if it was from anger or makeup.

I turned back to Batman, but there was no sign of him.

"Who was that?" I asked Asher, but before he could answer, we were distracted by Gilly.

"Hello, everyone," she said into the microphone. "I hope y'all are having a good time so far." An enormous roar greeted her. "Please remember that no drugs or alcohol are allowed at my parties. If you are caught with either, you will be asked to leave."

Scattered boos met this statement.

Gilly ignored them and plowed on. "Before we turn the music back on, I have an important announcement to make."

I noticed someone moving quickly toward the stage, though I couldn't quite tell who it was.

"It's time you found out the truth about someone you all know," Gilly went on.

"She wouldn't," I muttered under my breath, Batman all but forgotten. A new crisis had taken center stage, literally and figuratively.

"He's lied to everyone, and I was a part of that lie—something I now deeply regret."

I felt as if someone had dumped cold water all over me. I took a few steps forward as if I could somehow stop her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the person shoving through the crowd was going even faster toward the stage.

“I’m talking about—”

Before she could finish, the person—a guy—who had been pushing toward her dove onto the stage with a spectacular belly flop, grabbed the cord, and yanked the microphone out of her hand.

When he scrambled to his feet, it became obvious he was supposed to be a pirate, although I still couldn’t see who it was or if I even knew him.

The pirate and Gilly launched into a heated argument, some of which the fallen microphone picked up.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Gilly snarled.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t do that. Not here,” the pirate shot back, and I recognized Jake’s voice.

They both seemed to realize at the same time that they were broadcasting their conversation and quickly moved away from center stage. Jake motioned for the music to start up again, and soon everyone had gone back to dancing, forgetting the little drama that had just transpired before them.

It wasn’t so easy for me. I was convinced she had been about to out me when Jake interceded on my behalf.

“Killian, are you okay?” Asher asked, reminding me he was there.

I turned toward him with a shaky smile. “I think Gilly almost outed me in front of the whole school. She’s mad at me because—”

“No, not that. I mean the guy in the Batman costume. Who was he?”

“Oh.” I’d almost forgotten about him. “I don’t know who he was.”

“You just ran off with a complete stranger? After all that’s happened?”

“I thought it might be Jake. Then I realized Jake was up on the stage with Gilly, so he couldn’t have been Batman.”

“Well, what did he want?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know that, either.” I frowned. “He gave me the creeps, though. I’m glad you showed up when you did.”

Asher shook his head. “Kill, you have to be more careful. There’s still a murderer running around out here. Remember?”

“Of course, I remember. Do you really think I could forget that? I was almost killed.”

“So I’d think you’d be a little more cautious.”

“We’re in the middle of how many people? I figured I was safe.”

“He led you right into the shadows. He could have done whatever he wanted to you over here and no one would have known. They certainly wouldn’t have heard anything over this music.”

“So it wasn’t the best idea to just follow him. I made a mistake. I’m sorry. We don’t even know what he wanted, though. It didn’t have to be something bad.”

Asher gave me a look. “No, I’m sure he just wanted to ask you to dance.”

“Hey, we’re here to have fun so let’s not argue about this. Okay?”

“Fine. Just don’t go running off into the shadows with strange guys anymore.”

I grinned at him. “Why, Asher, are you jealous?”

Asher rolled his eyes, but I noticed he didn’t exactly deny it.

I walked over to him and ran a finger across his exposed chest. “You are jealous, aren’t you?”

He smiled a little. “Maybe just a smidge.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Just a smidge?”

He moved in closer, and I could feel his breath against my skin. “Okay. A lot.”

“Um, Asher, don’t look now, but I’m in the shadows with a strange guy. What should I do?”

He leaned in a little more. “I’m not strange.”

I tipped my head in to kiss him just as I heard, “There you are!”

We jumped apart guiltily. It was Kane, grinning ear to ear.

Marcus stood behind him with a suggestive leer.

“What were you two doing over here in the bushes?”

“Not what you’re thinking, perv,” Asher groused.

“Not yet, anyway,” I added under my breath.

“Uh huh,” Marcus said, clearly not buying

Asher’s denial. “So, Killian, what was that little stage show all about? Did it have anything to do with you?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s an affirmative. I also think it’s safe to say that Gilly and I are no longer a couple.”

Marcus shook his head. “That’s pretty fucked up. What did you do to her?”

I blushed and glanced over at Asher, who was watching me carefully, waiting for my answer.

“It was mostly a misunderstanding,” I mumbled. Time to change the subject. “Have you seen anyone dressed in a Batman costume?”

“Batman? I don’t think so. Why?”

“A guy dressed as Batman asked me to come over here, but I don’t know who he was or what he wanted.”

Marcus looked at me in confusion. “Uh, okay. So what happened? Where’d he go?”

“Beats me. He was here one minute, then when Gilly started making her little announcement, he disappeared.”

“Weird. And you have no idea who it was?”

“None. At first, I thought maybe he was Jake.”

“You thought who was me?” Jake asked as he appeared at my side.

Up close, his pirate costume was really pretty impressive. He’d obviously put a lot of work into it. I didn’t know how much he and Asher had spent on their outfits, but they’d spared no expense. Jake even had a papier-mâché parrot stitched to his shoulder and, if I wasn’t mistaken, a real sword strapped around his waist.

“Nice dive earlier,” I said.

Jake grimaced. “Thanks. I think I got a splinter in my nipple.”

“That was you who jumped on stage earlier?” Kane asked, entering the conversation for the first time.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” I realized I hadn’t made any introductions. “Jake, this is my new little brother, Kane. Kane, this is my friend Jake. He’s Gilly’s brother.”

Kane smiled and extended his hand. Jake answered Kane’s smile with one of his patented lopsided grins.

Kane turned to me. “So Gilly was the girl who dragged you off earlier and then was just on stage?”

“Right.”

“And she was your fake girlfriend?”

I sighed. “Was, being the operative word.”

“Worry about all that later,” Jake interjected.

“Right now, we’re supposed to be having fun. We paid a lot of money for this DJ, so let’s dance!”

“Let’s go!” Marcus yelled.

“You guys go ahead,” I said quickly. “I need to talk to Jake for a minute.”

Asher gave me an intense look but turned and followed Marcus and Kane without putting up an argument.

“What’s up?” Jake asked.

“Like you don’t know. What the hell was she thinking?”

He sighed. “She was angry and hurt, so she decided to lash out. Just be glad I was near the stage and realized what she was doing in time to stop her.”

“She probably said enough. When we’re not a couple anymore on Monday, people will put two and two together and figure out what she was going to say.”

Jake shrugged. "I did what I could. It's not like people haven't been talking anyway."

"Even since I started dating Gilly?"

"Not as much as before, but some. Becca told a few people you called her up and asked about Seth and...well..."

I groaned. "So I'm pretty much out at school."

He shrugged. "It's still just rumors. You can always deny it."

"What's the point? I was never popular anyway, unless you count my fifteen minutes of fame while I dated your sister. Still, I can't believe she was going to out me."

"She really liked you a lot."

"And that's an excuse?"

"No. It's just...she's been through a lot, Killian. There's a lot of stuff you don't know about my family."

That certainly piqued my curiosity. "Like what?"

He shook his head. "I really don't feel like talking about it, especially now. Can't we just go have fun? It's a goddamn party."

"Yeah. Okay. Just one more thing. Do you know anyone here dressed up as Batman?"

He rolled his eyes. "Have you seen how many people are here, Killian? I haven't even been outside that long, and between my stage dive and hanging around with you in the bushes, I haven't exactly had time to mingle."

I grinned. "I guess that's a no."

"It's a no. Why did you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Just curious."

We found the others and rejoined the group. Asher, Kane, Jake and I hung out dancing, joking, and just generally having fun for the next several hours. Marcus came and went with a few of his friends. Everyone seemed to get along, although there was definitely some tension from Asher toward Jake. If Jake noticed, however, he didn't let on.

Fortunately, there was no more drama with Gilly. In fact, I didn't even see her anymore that night. I never saw Batman again, either. I caught a glimpse of Zack and Jesse a few times, but they kept their distance.

The party started winding down around twelve-thirty. Adam wanted us home by one anyway, so Kane and I decided to leave. We said our goodbyes and headed toward my car.

The closer we got to the road, the darker it got. It seemed the security light at the end of the driveway had burned out. By the time we reached the car, the only light came from the sliver of moon that hung low in the sky.

That was enough to see that all my windows had been smashed.

Chapter 19

“Oh, shit!” I gasped. I could still hear the sound of the party coming from the backyard, but the distance muffled it, making it seem farther away than it was. I suddenly felt very vulnerable standing out in the street in the dark.

“Killian?” Kane sounded scared. I knew how he felt.

“Come on.” I grabbed his wrist and practically dragged him back toward the house.

“What are we going to do?” Kane whispered.

“We’re gonna call the police from the safety of the house.”

Jake spotted us as we returned to the house. “I thought you guys were leaving.”

“So did we.” My voice shook a little.

“Someone smashed out all the windows in Killian’s car,” Kane told him.

Jake gasped. “What?”

“We need to call the police and Adam, but we didn’t want to wait out there. The security light is out so we didn’t feel safe.”

“Holy shit! I’m so sorry, guys. I feel responsible since it happened while you were at our house.”

“It’s not your fault,” I replied, “It’s probably just a Halloween prank, but after everything that’s happened...”

I pulled out my phone and called the police first, then Adam. Adam sounded panicked, which didn’t help calm my jangled nerves. He said he’d be right there and hung up. He actually beat the police. He grabbed us both

in a bear hug and didn't let go until I told him I couldn't breathe.

By then, word had spread, and many people made their escape before the cops could show up. When the police finally did arrive about half an hour after I'd called, they kept everyone who was still there in the backyard until they knew more.

Soon the whole area out by the road was lit up brighter than the dance floor. I suspected they were treating the whole thing more seriously because of my stabbing back in September and Dad's legal troubles.

They worked while Adam, Kane, Jake, and I watched from a distance. Asher and Marcus joined us after a while.

Eventually, one of officers came over to us. "Mr. Kendall?" he asked Adam.

"No, I'm Adam Connelly. Killian is staying with me while his mother is out of town."

"Connelly?" the cop asked with raised eyebrows. "Any relation to the Connelly kid..."

"He was my son."

"I'm sorry," the cop said quickly. "That was insensitive. I'm Sergeant Hoetz."

"It's okay, Sergeant. You couldn't know."

He nodded. "Well, here's what we've concluded so far. In light of what happened last month and how it involved Killian here, we took this more seriously than we normally would have. I mean, windows smashed at a party might be upsetting, but it isn't an earth-shattering event. But under the circumstances...well, as you can see, we took precautions.

“We searched the car and the surrounding area and kept everyone on the premises who hadn’t left already. We found a scrap of material caught on a piece of glass. We may be able to match it up with one of the people still here. We’re trying to do that now.

“We are also taking names and releasing people as we can. We don’t want to keep everyone here all night, but things took a nasty turn when we found this in the front seat of the car.” He held up a plastic zip-lock bag with a folded piece of paper inside. “Someone threw it in after the windows were smashed. It was on top of the broken glass.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s a note.”

“What does it say?” Adam asked.

Sergeant Hoetz reached into his pocket, pulled out a pair of rubber gloves and slipped them on. Opening the bag, he drew out the note and opened it.

It read: *“Killian, you’d think after last time you’d learn. This is just a warning. Next time you won’t be so lucky.”*

We all stood stunned as Hoetz refolded the note and sealed it back in the bag.

Adam snapped out of it first. “That proves that Seth’s death was murder, and now the killer is after Killian.”

“Mr. Connelly, calm down,” Hoetz said soothingly. “It doesn’t prove anything, necessarily. It just means that someone is unhappy with Killian and is trying to scare him. Maybe he stole someone’s girlfriend or something.”

Adam snorted. “Here we go again, huh? My son was murdered, and no one wants to do anything about it.”

“Mr. Connelly, I understand your grief, but there was no proof—”

“No. You do not understand my grief. And there’s plenty of proof, but no one will even look at it. How was that note written?”

“It was computer generated. Red ink on white paper.”

“That’s exactly like the threatening notes Seth was getting before he was murdered.”

Hoetz pulled out a notebook and jotted something on it, flipped it closed, and stuck it back in his pocket. “We’ll look into it, Mr. Connelly.”

“I hope so,” Adam said angrily. “But excuse me if I don’t have much faith in the police.”

“There’s something else,” I said, speaking up for the first time.

Everyone turned to face me.

“Go ahead, son,” Sergeant Hoetz encouraged.

“Someone approached me during the party and tried to get me off by myself. My friend Asher followed and interrupted. If he hadn’t, I don’t know what might have happened. There was something about the guy that made me uncomfortable.”

“Did you know who it was?”

“No, but he was wearing a Batman costume.”

The sergeant spoke in his radio, telling everyone to look out for a Batman costume. “Is there anything else?”

I shook my head “no” just as another officer approached Hoetz and asked to speak with him for a minute. Hoetz excused himself, and they walked off to one side where they conversed quietly with their heads together for a few minutes before he returned.

“Folks, I’d like to ask you to hang around a while longer if you can. There’s a chance the person who did this is still here. We’ve got the remaining kids rounded up and we’re going to attempt to match the fabric. With a little luck, we could wrap this up tonight.”

“This is a nightmare,” Adam mumbled, rubbing his forehead.

“Do you really think it was Seth’s murderer?” Kane asked, his voice tense. “You think he was here?”

“I don’t know,” Adam sighed. “I probably shouldn’t have even let you come here tonight, with a killer still on the loose.”

Kane’s eyes were wide. “Dad, I’m scared.”

“Me too, kiddo. Me too.”

Me too, I thought. I felt a pair of arms slide around me from behind, and I jumped, twisting awkwardly to see who it was.

“It’s just me,” Asher assured me quickly.

I turned the rest of the way into him and returned the hug. I needed one.

We waited for over an hour. Asher and Marcus stayed with us the entire time. Finally, Hoetz reappeared, but judging from his deep frown, I guessed he didn’t have good news for us. I was right.

“We weren’t able match the fabric sample at first glance, but that was pretty much wishful thinking anyway since so many people left before we got here.

Not that there's any lack of suspects—a couple hundred of them, to be exact. We've collected a list of names, which I'm sure is woefully incomplete. We'll start calling tomorrow. Maybe someone saw something. For now, you can head on home. I appreciate you waiting around. I'll let you know if we turn up anything.”

I sighed. Several hundred suspects didn't sound very promising. Of course, I had my own list...with Zack and Jesse at the top.

Once we got home, Adam sent us straight to bed, but I stayed up the rest of the night thinking. I was too unnerved and had too much on my mind to get any sleep. I had more trains of thought than I had tracks, but by morning I'd come to some conclusions.

For one, I decided I was ready to come out at school. Gilly and I were through, and if Jake was right and everyone already suspected I was gay anyway, what was the point in trying to hide it. I was tired of hiding and lying. It just kept hurting people I cared about.

As a bonus, maybe my coming out would goad the killer into making a move. Sure, I was essentially offering myself as bait, but if it meant the killer might be caught, it would be worth any danger to me. At least that's what I reasoned at four in the morning.

I also decided to confront Zack once and for all. I was feeling very reckless and angry by that point, ready for action.

Finally, I decided to give Asher another chance. I wasn't ruling Jake out completely, but it seemed Asher was always there for me, no matter what. He was definitely proving himself to be a true friend, and isn't that one of the things you should look for in a boyfriend?

With that last thought playing through my mind, I fell asleep just as the first rays of light broke over the horizon.

Adam let me sleep in that morning, for which I was truly grateful. I didn't wake up until well after noon, but the first thing I thought of when I opened my eyes were my resolutions from the night before. I was still tired, but I got up anyway. There were things I needed to do, and I didn't want to put them off.

Adam and Kane were in the den but followed me into the kitchen when I went downstairs.

"How are you feeling this morning?" Adam asked.

I shrugged as I opened the cabinets and stared inside. "I don't know. Really drained, but I did a lot of thinking last night. I made some decisions."

"Why don't you tell me about them while I make you breakfast," he suggested. He opened the refrigerator and pulled out a carton of eggs and a pound of bacon.

My stomach lurched at the thought of all that greasy food. "Actually, I think I'd rather just have some cereal."

He looked down at the eggs in his hand with a doubtful expression. "Cereal isn't exactly comfort food."

"I don't think my stomach is up for that kind of comfort."

He nodded and put the food away, pulling out a gallon of milk instead. He set it on the table and gave me a gentle push toward a seat. "Sit." He ordered as he got me a bowl and a box of my favorite cereal.

“So what decisions did you make?” Kane asked as I poured the cereal.

I finished adding milk and took a bite before answering. “I think it’s time I faced some things instead of pretending they don’t exist.”

“What kinds of things?” Adam sat down across from me.

“I’ve decided to come out at school.”

They both stared at me in shock.

Kane recovered first. “What?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Adam asked with concern.

I shrugged. “I don’t really have much choice. Everyone already suspected anyway, even when I was dating Gilly. Add to that the fact that she practically outed me at the party last night—”

“Kane told me about that,” Adam interrupted. “I’m sorry, Killian.”

I shrugged it off. “I just think I’d rather be honest than keep pretending to be something I’m not.”

I decided not to mention my bait-and-trap strategy. I didn’t think Adam would go for it.

“I’ve never been one to encourage others to stay in the closet,” Adam said after a moment, “especially after my own experiences. I don’t know if this is the best decision, though.”

“Why not?”

He hesitated.

“Is it because of Seth?”

Adam clenched his jaw and nodded.

“I’ll be careful, Adam. Seth was all alone. I have people looking out for me. Besides, it’s not like I’m

going to get on stage at an assembly and announce it. I'm just going to stop pretending."

"Still..."

"This is what I want to do."

He stood up and walked to the counter, keeping his back to me.

Kane shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "So, uh, you said you made several decisions, right? What else did you decide?"

"I'm also going to confront Zack. I want to do that today, before I lose my nerve."

Adam whirled around. "Absolutely not!"

I sighed. "Adam, I'm tired of being a doormat. Last night, I stood up to him for the first time and he backed right down. He's a bully, a coward."

"Is Zack the jerk from last night?" Kane asked. "The one in the vampire costume?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Well, you had backup last night, too."

"What do you mean by confront him?" Adam asked.

"Just tell him to leave me alone once and for all—and all my friends. Plus, I'd really like to find out why he hates me so much. We used to be friends...kinda. I can't believe this is all just because he thinks I'm gay."

"That could be all it is, though, Killian." Adam leaned back against the counter. He looked tired and old. "Bigots don't need any other reason to hate someone."

"It just doesn't make sense to me."

"I wish you'd rethink this. It's really not wise to provoke him right now. What if he's the one who smashed your car windows? What if he killed Seth?"

“I don’t know. I could see him smashing my windows. That’s the kind of cowardly thing he’d do, but I just can’t see him actually killing somebody. I think he’s all bark and no bite.”

“But you don’t know that for sure, and that’s what scares me. The killer could be anyone, even someone you trust. Just because you think you know someone doesn’t mean you really do. I don’t want you taking any unnecessary chances.”

“So you don’t think I should try to talk to Zack right now?”

“I really don’t.”

I turned to Kane for his opinion.

He shrugged. “Don’t drag me into this. I don’t even know him.”

“Fine. I won’t talk to him now.”

Adam nodded.

“Is that all?” Kane asked.

“Well, no. This one isn’t up for negotiation, though.” I shot a stern glance in Adam’s direction, causing him to look a little worried. “I’m going to give Asher another chance.”

Adam and Kane broke into twin grins. “Now that’s a decision I think I can fully support,” Adam enthused.

“Even I can tell he’s crazy about you and I’m just a dumb straight boy” Kane teased.

I laughed. “I guess I don’t make up my mind very quickly. Besides, it was complicated.”

“Speaking of complications, what are you going to do about Jake?” Adam asked.

My smile faded away. “I don’t know. I like him, but...it’s different between Asher and me. We have a history, you know? I just met Jake.”

Kane blinked. “Wait. Jake is gay, too?”

“Oops,” I said sheepishly. “Yeah, but don’t say anything. He may not want people to know.”

Kane shook his head. “I never would have guessed he was gay.”

“You should know better than to stereotype people,” Adam admonished gently.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” He paused, then turned to me. “So is everyone at your school gay?”

I laughed again. “No. There are a thousand students at my school, and I only know three gay people, counting myself. Statistically, that’s not even close to the ten percent there should be.”

He nodded with satisfaction. “Hey, it’s not like I care. The more of you guys that are gay, the more chicks that leaves for me.”

We all cracked up, then I grew serious again. “So you guys think Asher and I make a good couple?”

Kane patted my hand. “Follow your heart, Killian. You’ll know what’s right.”

I tried not to smile at his serious tone. “Thanks, oh wise one. How’d you get so smart?”

“I dunno. Good genes, I guess.”

Adam snorted as I rolled my eyes.

“What?” Kane asked with mock innocence.

“On that note, I’ll be going,” Adam said.

“Where to?” Kane asked.

“Well, now that everyone is awake and I’m reasonably sure no one will do anything risky—” He

gave me a meaningful look. “—I’m going to go check on your car. The police impounded it last night and I need to see what we have to do to get it released and repaired. While I’m there, maybe I can also see if they’ve learned anything more overnight.”

“You want me to go with you?” I offered.

“No, stay and finish your breakfast. I shouldn’t be long.”

I stared down at my now soggy cereal and made a face.

Adam left while I dumped out that bowl and started again from scratch. After I’d finished, I rinsed out the bowl and got a handful of cookies to dunk in my glass of milk.

Kane grabbed one of my cookies and dipped it in my glass.

“Hey, get your own!”

He bared his teeth, which were covered with chewed chocolate cookie.

“Lovely. Did you have fun last night?”

“You mean up until the whole car thing? Yeah, I really did.”

“You and Jake seemed to hit it off.”

He shot me a funny look, and I quickly added, “I meant as friends.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He smiled. “He seems really cool. I also liked Asher, by the way.”

“I think he liked you, too.”

“Well, I mean, who can blame him? I’m pretty awesome.”

I laughed. “And so humble, too.”

“Careful or I’ll steal all your boys.”

“Jake is all yours. Stay away from Asher though.”

Just then my phone started vibrating. I glanced down. “Speak of the devil, it’s Jake. You want me to tell him you want to go on a date?”

Kane stuck his tongue out at me. I was still laughing as I answered.

“Hey,” Jake said. “I was calling to see how you are, but I guess you’re okay.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I was a little shaken up last night, but I’m fine. What’s going on there?”

“The police are still here. They came back this morning to search the grounds, even the house, because people could come and go as they pleased. My parents are not happy, let me tell you.”

“It’s not exactly your fault.”

“Oh, I know. That doesn’t mean they aren’t mad, though. This place is a total wreck. Usually, we would have all day today to clean, but they had to come back early with all the drama. I’m sure we’ll still have to clean it all up, but that’ll have to wait until the cops leave.”

“All this just because somebody broke my windows?”

“Well, that plus apparently Zack is missing, too.”

“Missing?”

“Yeah, his mom called earlier. He never went home last night and he’s not with Jesse. She’d already called Jesse, and he said he left Zack at the party when the cops arrived. His mom wanted to see if he crashed here, but we haven’t seen him since last night, so he called the cops, and now they’re looking for him, too.”

“I’m sure he’ll turn up. You can’t get rid of cockroaches that easily.”

Jake snorted. “True. Anyway, sorry the party ended on such a rotten note for you.”

“Again, not your fault. We had a great time except for that.”

“And the whole mess with Gilly.”

“Oh yeah. That too. Thanks for reminding me.”

“No problem. Hey, the police are banging on the door. I’d better go see what’s going on.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you later. And if you need any help cleaning up, call me and I’ll give you hand.”

“Thanks, but, uh, you’re probably not the most popular person around our house right now, so that might not be such a good idea. Later, Killer.”

“Bye.”

“Who’ll turn up?” Kane asked as soon as I hung up.

“Huh?”

“You said somebody would turn up and something about cockroaches.”

“Oh. Zack. Apparently, he didn’t go home last night. Probably found a new bridge to sleep under like the troll he is.”

Kane snickered.

“I should probably call Asher. I’d really like to see him today.” I waited but Kane didn’t move. “Don’t you have something to do?” I asked.

He raised one eyebrow, a gesture I’d seen Adam make many times. “Why? You want to be left alone so you can call your boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend!” I felt my face flush.

“Not yet anyway. You know, you could just go to our room instead of kicking me out of the kitchen.”

Once again, he had a point. I was about to run upstairs when my phone started ringing again. It was Adam.

“Killian?” Adam sounded tense. “Listen carefully and don’t argue, okay?”

“Um, okay.”

“Good. After we hang up, lock all the doors and check the windows and don’t go anywhere until I get home.”

“What? Why? What’s going on?”

“Just do as I said.”

“I will, but, Adam, what’s going on? You can’t just say that and not explain. You’re really scaring me.”

“I’m sorry, Killian. I’m at the police station, and it’s total chaos here. They just found Zachary Phillips’ body floating in the creek behind the Sheridan’s house.”

The phone suddenly became heavy, and my arm slowly dropped to my side. I could still hear Adam’s voice squawking, but I no longer understood what he was saying.

As if from a distance, I heard Kane asking me what was wrong. I felt him come up behind me and gently take the phone from my hand. I heard him talking to Adam, asking him what was going on, when he’d be home.

The next thing I knew, he was standing in front of me. “Killian, snap out of it. I need your help.”

He shook me by the shoulders, and I forced myself to focus on him.

“Why are you acting like this? Didn’t you, like, hate that guy? You were planning to tell him off just a little while ago.”

I shook my head to clear it. “I’ve known him since we were kids. We grew up together. I was saying such terrible things about him, and now he’s gone. He’s dead. So much death...”

Kane raised his voice. “Killian, listen to me. All Dad said was that they found Zack dead in the creek. That doesn’t mean he was murdered. Maybe he got drunk and fell in. Don’t jump to conclusions yet. Why would anyone want to kill Zack?”

“I don’t know. It’s too much to be a coincidence. I just know that this is bad—very bad.”

“Of course it’s bad. It’s always bad when a kid dies. But worry about that later. I need your help. Dad wants us to lock all the doors and windows.”

We went around the house locking and checking all the doors and windows on the first floor—and, after some thought, the windows on the second floor as well, just to be safe. Maybe we’d watched too many horror movies, but by the time we were finished we’d thoroughly spooked ourselves.

“We need some way to protect ourselves,” Kane insisted.

“Like what?” I asked.

“I dunno. Oh wait! I know.” Kane ran upstairs, returning a minute later with his baseball bat.

“Well, you’re ready for any fastballs, at least.”

“Hey, I can do some serious damage with this thing.”

“I’m sure, but what about me? Have an extra catcher’s mitt?”

He rolled his eyes. “Make fun of me all your want, but when I bash some creep’s brains in, you’ll thank me.”

Suddenly, the absurdity of the situation hit me, and I started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Kane sounded a little insulted.

“It’s broad daylight. What do we think is going to happen? We let Adam freak us out, and, sure, we should be cautious and all, but I’m not going to live my life in fear.”

Kane grinned sheepishly. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I’ll go out this away before Dad gets home.”

“Nah, let’s hang on to it. Doesn’t hurt to have it nearby.”

“I’ll leave it by the door then, how about that?”

“That works.”

He stood the bat in the corner, and we headed into the den, where we turned on the TV to distract ourselves. Kane chose an action movie with a lot of car chases, but my mind quickly wandered back to Zack.

I still couldn’t believe he was dead. Sure, he’d always been a bit of a jerk, and lately had been an outright asshole, but we’d still grown up together. I’d known him since first grade when he decided that him, me, Jesse and Asher would all be friends whether we liked it or not. Even back then, he was the ringleader, Jesse was his devoted sidekick, and Asher and I just went along with whatever he wanted because it was

easier than arguing. That had remained our dynamic until...well, until Seth showed up, really.

Everything changed after Seth's arrival.

Although, to be fair, I guess he really just changed me. My burgeoning friendship with Seth made me see Zack differently, made me stand up to him, causing the first real friction our dysfunctional friend group had ever faced. And it didn't stand up to even that little bit of conflict before the entire house of cards fell apart.

Even with all his stupidity and bullying, though, I hadn't wished him dead. I just wanted him to leave me alone, or, even better, grow up and stop being such a dumbass. But there I was, saying all those awful things, calling him a cockroach and a troll, and he was dead the entire time. A wave of guilt washed over me.

My thoughts must have shown clearly on my face. "What's wrong?" Kane asked after one look in my direction.

"Just thinking about Zack. I feel really bad for saying all those mean things about him while he was dead."

"Did him dying make him less of a jerk while he was alive?"

"No, but still...I was always taught that you don't speak ill of the dead."

Kane rolled his eyes. "Please. If you didn't like him when he was alive, why pretend he was some great person now that he's dead? Besides, you didn't know he was dead when you were saying that stuff."

"I guess you're right."

“Of course I’m right. Do you want to watch something else? You don’t seem very into Fast and Furious...whatever number we’re up to?”

“No, watch whatever you want. I think I’ll go take a shower before Adam gets home.”

Kane nodded approvingly. “Good. I wasn’t going to say anything, but you stink.”

I tossed a pillow in his direction and went upstairs.

Adam was home by the time I’d finished and gotten dressed. He and Kane were talking quietly in the den when I came back down. They both looked up and fell silent when I entered.

“What?” I demanded.

“What do you mean?” Adam asked carefully.

“You stopped talking when I walked in the room. You must have been discussing me.”

Adam and Kane exchanged glances, then looked back at me.

“Sit down, Killian,” Adam said.

This wasn’t going to be good. No conversation that started with the words “sit down” was ever good. I crossed the room and sat on the couch next to Kane.

“Does this have to do with Zack?” I asked.

“Yes. I didn’t want to go into it over the phone. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“Tell me what? What’s going on?”

Adam swallowed and took a deep breath.

“Killian, Zack was murdered. His throat was cut, just like Seth’s. Obviously, there’s a lot we don’t know yet, and won’t know until they do an autopsy, but it’s a little much to be a coincidence. It’s hard to believe that we

have two killers running around this little town slashing the throats of teenage boys. The police don't understand yet what the connection could be, but they're taking it very seriously this time. They do think it was Zack that either broke your windows or left the note or maybe both. The fabric fragment that the police found matched a tear in Zack's costume."

"But that doesn't make sense. If Zack was the killer, who killed him? And if he wasn't, why would he leave the note?"

"As I said, the police are working on it. Now that they're taking the case seriously, it's not up to us to figure it out anymore. As of right now, I want you to stay out of this, completely and totally, and until they catch this killer, I want to know where you are at all times. I don't want you going anywhere alone and nowhere after dark, period. You're to come directly home after school."

"But I—"

"But nothing, Killian. I don't want you involved."

"I'm already involved."

"And I was an idiot to allow it. I don't know what the hell I was thinking. This is a cold-blooded murderer we're talking about. He's already killed two boys, one of whom was my son. You and Kane are all I have left. I don't think I could bear to lose either of you at this point. I couldn't bear it! Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I sat stunned for a second as the impact of what Adam had just said sank in, then I was off the couch and throwing my arms around Adam in a tight hug. After a

few beats, I felt Kane slide in next to me to complete the group hug.

After a bit, I pulled away. "I should probably call Asher before he sees this on the news."

Adam nodded. "Good idea."

I quickly dialed Asher's number. He picked up right away.

"Hey! I was just thinking about you. I almost called earlier but didn't want to wake you if you were still asleep. Are you okay?"

"Um, well, I'm okay, but something else has happened."

"What?"

"Ash, Zack is dead."

The line was dead quiet.

"Asher?"

"How?"

"He was murdered. Last night at the party. His throat was cut, like Seth. The police found him this morning in the creek."

"Jesus Christ."

"Are you okay?"

"We've been friends since elementary school. Sure, he was a jerk sometimes, but he was still my friend."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Are you by yourself?"

"No, Kane and Adam are here."

"Can you come over?"

"Hang on. I'll ask."

I checked with Adam, but he told me flatly he didn't want me to leave the house, but that Asher was welcome to come over.

I reported back to Asher. "He said I can't go, but you can come over here."

"I'm on my way."

When Asher arrived, Kane was playing video games in the den and Adam was on the phone in the living room—I think talking to Steve—so we went up to our room for privacy.

Once alone, Asher enveloped me in a tight hug.

"I can't believe Zack is gone," he said.

"I know. It's wild. I don't think it's even sank in yet."

He let go and sat on the edge of my bed. "Poor Jesse. He must be devastated. Do you think we should check on him?"

I made a face.

"What?" Asher asked.

"Look, I know it might sound insensitive or whatever, but after what Zack and Jesse put me through the last few weeks, not to mention what they put Seth through before that, I don't really care how Jesse is feeling."

"Killian!"

"What?"

"He's still our friend."

"Maybe he's your friend, but he stopped being mine when he called me a faggot and tried to beat me up."

"Damn. That's harsh."

"Is it? In case you forgot, he did beat you up."

Asher cringed. “So you don’t care at all that Zack is dead?”

“Of course I care. But like Kane said to me earlier, there’s no point pretending he wasn’t an asshole. He was a bully, and he made my life miserable. I hated his guts.”

He frowned. “Better be careful who you say that around. It could make you a suspect.”

I gasped. “I didn’t! I wouldn’t! I was with you the entire time.”

“I know you didn’t do it, Kill. I’m just mean you should be careful what you say.”

It hadn’t even occurred to me that I might be a suspect. “Just because I hated him doesn’t mean I wanted him to get murdered.”

“I know. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sure you’re not a suspect. Murdered. God. It could have been any of us.”

“You don’t know that. Maybe Zack was targeted for some reason. Maybe he was bullying somebody else and they got fed up with it. We don’t know.”

He stood up and started pacing. “That’s just it. We don’t know. Any of us could be targeted because you’re being targeted.”

“What do you mean?”

“That guy in the Batman costume, your broken windows, the note. You’re in danger. Maybe you always were and I was just naive, but it seems more real now. And if you’re in danger, that means anyone who is close to you is at risk, too.”

I hadn’t thought about it like that. I was fine with being reckless with my own life, but not people I cared

about. The idea of something happening to Adam, Kane, Asher, even Jake, because of me was terrifying. I didn't know what to say, though, so I just dropped down onto Kane's bed.

He paused in front of me. "What if I hadn't shown up when I did?" he went on. "What if that guy killed you instead of Zack?"

"But it wasn't me, Ash. I'm right here. We don't even know if those things were connected"

"But what about next time? What if it is you next time?"

"Now you're starting to sound like Adam. He won't even let me leave the house. I mean, I get it, but we can't live our lives in constant fear."

He resumed pacing. "We have to, Kill. At least until they catch him. You need to take this seriously."

"I am taking it seriously, but I refuse to let this asshole scare me."

He stopped and glared at me. "You should be scared! We should all be scared. I'm scared shitless."

"If we're scared then he wins."

"This isn't a game! It's not about winning or losing. It's about surviving."

"Why are you so mad at me?"

"I'm not. I mean, maybe I am a little. I just don't understand why you're being so blasé about this."

"I don't understand why you're freaking out."

"Because I don't want to lose you, you idiot!"

"You won't."

"You don't know that!" he yelled. He took a deep shaky breath, then turned away from me and started again. "I don't know that. Zack died last night. You

could have died last night. You could have died in that park. What if your Dad had killed you in his rage? If something happened to you... If I lost you, I'd never have been able to tell you how crazy I am about you. I would have never had the chance to tell you how I feel about you."

"You've told me before."

"No, I haven't. Not really."

"Oh.' I got up and walked around to stand facing him. Well, I'm here now."

His eyes met mine, and I could see they were filled with fear and...something else. Something I couldn't quite identify.

"I love you, Killian," he said.

I blinked. "You... you what?"

"I love you. I love you so much it hurts. I love you so much that I hated Seth when I thought you were getting close to him. I love you so much it drove me into a jealous rage when you started dating Gilly. I love you so much I felt like you'd ripped out my heart and stomped on it when you said you'd kissed Jake. I love you much that I overlooked all that just to be close to you, because, even if I couldn't have you, I still wanted to be a part of your life. And, right now, I love you so much that even the idea of losing you makes me feel like I'm losing my mind."

I took a step closer to him. "You love me?"

"I just said so, didn't I?"

"I... I love you, too."

His eyes widened in shock. "You do?"

"Yeah, I had already decided that I was going to ask you to be my boyfriend today."

“You were?”

“Yeah. You can ask Adam and Kane. I told them as soon as I woke up.”

“But what about Gilly?”

“I think it’s safe to say I’m single after last night.”

“And Jake?”

“I hope we can all be friends, but I don’t feel for him what I feel for you.”

“I think I can live with that.”

“So is that a yes? Do you want to be my boyfriend?”

“I want to be your boyfriend more than anything I’ve ever wanted. And, I promise, this time I don’t care who knows. I’ll scream it from the roof. I’ll put it on social media. I’ll put out a press release...”

I laughed and slid my arms around his neck. “No need for all that. I’ve got all I need right here.”

For the first time since he’d arrived, a hint of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “So...we’re dating then? Officially?”

I pulled him close until our chests pressed together, then kissed him softly but firmly. As I pulled away, his eyes stayed closed, but his lips were curled into a big smile. “Yes,” I said. “It’s official.”

His hand slid up behind my neck and he pulled me back in for another kiss, this one a lot longer and much more sensual.

The next time we broke away, his eyes were open and filled with a mix of wonder, happiness and lust.

He grinned. “I missed this.”

“Me too,” I said, then I leaned forward and kissed my boyfriend again.

Chapter 20

Since my car was now considered evidence in a murder, it was still impounded come Monday morning, which meant that Adam had to drive me to school. He had to take Kane to finish his enrollment anyway, but it also meant we'd both have to be picked up after. I missed my car already.

I looked for Asher first thing after I arrived. We'd decided not to act any differently at school, but I knew the first day back after Zack's death would be tough and I wanted to touch base with him.

Despite his generous offer to come out via press release, neither of us was ready to be open about dating just yet. We were still unsure how we'd be received and figured a little grace period while we got used to being a couple might be nice.

Unfortunately, I didn't find him before the homeroom bell rang.

I wasn't sure exactly what to expect regarding Zack, but the reality turned out to be worse than I'd feared. Very few details had been given about Zack's death on the news, but that didn't stop the story from taking on a life of its own. Word of his murder quickly made the rounds of the gossip grapevine, growing like a macabre version of the childhood game Telephone throughout the morning.

By lunchtime, I'd heard at least five different stories, none of which remotely resembled the truth. I'd heard a rumor that it there was a serial killer going after students and the police suspected a teacher. I'd heard someone say that Zack had drowned while skinny

dipping with a girl. Someone else claimed Zack killed Seth and Seth's ghost had come back to exact revenge. Each new story was more outrageous than the last.

To make matters worse, Jesse didn't show up to school, which sparked whispers that he was missing too, or that they signed a suicide pact.

The worst part, however, was the beautification of Zack Phillips.

In life, Zack had never enjoyed true popularity. He'd been well-known because he was good at sports but hadn't been admired or especially liked. He was too mean-spirited for that.

In death, however, the student body practically made him a saint. Girls walked through the halls weeping and the guys looked sad and shaken. Everyone went on about how great he had been. I couldn't help wondering if they were talking about the same guy I'd known.

The only bright side to the whole thing was that Zack's death took all the attention off Gilly's theatrics at the party. Not a single person mentioned it in my hearing, though quite a few people stopped me to tell me they were sorry to hear about Zack, since we were friends and all.

I barely managed to resist telling them all to fuck off.

On Tuesday, Adam let me drive Kane and myself to school using his car. During morning announcement, we learned that the school had brought in grief counselors to speak to the students about Zack's death. Anyone could get out of class to go talk to them whenever they wanted.

I couldn't believe it. Where had the counselors been when Seth was murdered?

By Wednesday, the atmosphere of public mourning continued unabated. Jesse returned to school, which ended the rumors of his death, but everyone gave him a wide berth. I saw him a few times in the hall, looking lost and alone, and I almost felt sorry for him.

Almost.

Then I remembered how he'd threatened me and beat up Asher.

I reached my breaking point on Thursday in homeroom during morning announcements. We had just been notified about a special assembly to be held the next day when something in me snapped.

"That's it!" I stood up so abruptly my chair flew backward into the desk behind me, causing a surprisingly loud clatter.

Every eye in the room turned toward me. The teacher, Mrs. Chalk, looked shocked to see it was me causing the disturbance. I couldn't remember the last time I'd spoken up in class without being called on.

"This is so ridiculous," I snarled. "You're all a bunch of hypocrites."

"Mr. Kendall!" Mrs. Chalk stood up, eying me warily, as if I were a wild animal on the attack. "I think you should sit back down."

I ignored her. "How many of you could even stand Zack when he was alive? Now everyone's acting like he was their best friend. He was a jerk and you all know it."

"That's enough," Mrs. Chalk said sharply.

“No, it’s not enough. A few weeks ago, another student was murdered and nobody gave a damn. Where was his assembly? Oh, that’s right. He didn’t matter because he was gay.”

Mrs. Chalk visibly softened. “Mr. Kendall...Killian, this isn’t the time or place. I understand you’ve been through a lot—”

“No, you don’t understand. Seth was my friend. I was the one who found him with his throat sliced open. I was almost killed, and all anyone could talk about was whether or not I was gay. Well guess what, everybody? I am gay.”

The other students stared at me in shock. No one knew quite how to react.

“That’s right. I’m gay. I’m queer. I’m a *fag*.” I spat out the last word, and several people flinched. “So go ahead, make fun of me. Pretend I don’t exist. It doesn’t matter to me. You know why? Because I’m proud of who I am. I’m not going to lie about it anymore. If you don’t like it, then that’s your problem.”

I stood glaring around the room, daring someone to say something.

Most eyes looked away as my gaze swept over them. No one said a word, not even Mrs. Chalk.

As my anger and adrenaline slowly drained away, I was left wondering how to gracefully end my diatribe. Did I sit down and pretend nothing out of the ordinary had happened, or did I make a dramatic exit by storming out?

I was saved the decision by the bell signaling first period. Everyone burst into motion as they sprung from their desks and tried to crowd through the door at

the same time. The room had never emptied so quickly. In a matter of seconds, I was alone with Mrs. Chalk.

She made a feeble attempt at a smile. "If you need someone to talk to..." she began uncertainly.

I grabbed my bag and fled the room without responding.

I wasn't exactly in the mood to go to my next class, so I decided to skip. I drove home before I remembered that Adam would be there, which meant I'd have to explain why I'd left school before first period. I took a deep breath and walked inside.

Adam appeared in the hallway. "What are you doing home? Are you okay?"

I leaned back against the door, giving him my best puppy-dog look. "Remember how I said I wouldn't get up in an assembly and come out at school?"

"Ye-es," he said slowly.

"Well, it wasn't an assembly..."

"Oh, God, Killian! What did you do?"

I sighed. "I kind of lost it in class."

"Maybe we should sit down while you tell me this."

He headed back into the den, and I followed.

Once we had settled on the couch, I explained all about what had happened at school since Zack had been killed. I ended by describing how I'd reacted that morning when they announced the assembly.

After I'd finished, Adam whistled through his teeth. "Well, you certainly know how to make a scene."

I shrugged miserably. "Sorry."

“You don’t have to apologize, kiddo. I probably would have done the same thing if I’d been there.” He considered a minute, then added, “Maybe minus the coming out.”

“You think that was a bad move?”

“You know my thoughts on the subject. I just don’t want to see you go through the same hell Seth did. Who knows, though? It could be different for you. He was an outsider. You’ve grown up with these kids.”

“I just got so mad at the way they’re acting like Zack was such a wonderful guy. He was a jerk! And that damn assembly! Nobody even cared when Seth was murdered.”

“Again, while I don’t think it’s right, I can understand. Zack attended school there all his life. His family is well-known. Seth went there for two weeks.”

“You don’t think it had anything to do with the fact that Seth was gay?”

“I don’t know, Kill. Maybe it did or maybe it didn’t. Either way, does it really change what happened?”

“I guess not,” I admitted grudgingly.

“And to be fair, you don’t even know what they did or said after Seth died because you weren’t there. You were in the hospital. Do you know for sure they didn’t have an assembly?”

“No,” I admitted in a small voice, feeling very silly.

“There’s something else you need to think about. Now that you’ve outed yourself, you have to face your classmates eventually. Are you going to be okay with that?”

My eyes widened in horror. That hadn't even occurred to me. "Fuck!" I groaned.

"Killian!"

"What am I going to do?"

"You're going to march in there and act like you meant what you said. You're going to be proud of who you are, regardless of what anyone says or does."

I nodded weakly. It was easy for him to say. I was the one that would have to face the looks and jeers.

"You've been through enough today, though."

He ruffled my hair. "Why don't you stay home?"

Tomorrow will be soon enough to face them."

"Too soon," I mumbled. Even so, I was grateful for the reprieve.

"Want some good news?"

I nodded vigorously.

"I finally got something concrete from the police this morning."

I sat up with sudden interest. "What?" Adam had been calling the police every day to check on the case's status. All they would say was that they were still reviewing the evidence and if there was any significant progress, they would let him know.

"The medical examiner has placed Zack's estimated time of death at or around midnight."

I slowly leaned back into the cushions as that bit of information sank in. I was a little lightheaded from relief. I'd been with Asher, Kane, and Jake at midnight. That meant no one in my inner circle could have killed Zack.

As much as I'd felt in my gut that none of them could have done it, there was still a tiny voice in the

back of my head. That voice had been silenced with this news.

Another thought hit me. It also meant I had an alibi. If I was ever a suspect, I wasn't anymore.

I gave Adam a smile. "What does that mean then?"

"Honestly, I don't know if it means anything. It was just nice to get some information for a change."

I nodded. I'd have to tell Asher I wasn't a suspect.

Asher!

I suddenly realized that I needed to warn him about my coming out. Then again, the whole school probably knew by now.

I checked my phone but there were no texts, so maybe word hadn't gotten out yet. Everyone in class had looked mortified so maybe they didn't want to talk about it.

Who was I kidding?

I'd made a huge scene and I'm sure they couldn't wait to talk about it. It was more likely that no one wanted to talk to Asher about it since they knew we were friends.

I really wanted to tell him before he found out from someone else. It was almost enough to send me back to school, but not quite.

Instead, I watched the clock impatiently until school let out. The wait was interminable. I'm not sure who suffered more while waiting, me or Adam.

As soon as the clock ticked over, I started begging Adam to let me drive over to Asher's house. I wanted to tell him in person. Adam still didn't want me

to go anywhere by myself, but it didn't take too much whining before he agreed to let me drive directly there, as long as I texted him the moment I arrived. I was out the door and in the car before he could change his mind.

I parked in front of their house and shot a quick text to Adam while keeping a wary eye on my old house. The yard was a little overgrown, which was highly unusual, and the house looked dark. He wouldn't usually be home that time of day, but I didn't know if he'd been suspended or how any of that worked. Could you suspend the state's attorney for being charged with domestic abuse? Probably not unless he was convicted, right? Which meant he was probably at his office.

When I finally mustered up the courage to get out of the car and knock, Marcus answered the door.

"Killian, hey! Come on in. Dude, did you hear about Zack? Well, I mean, I'm sure you did. Wasn't that awful? He died while we were at the party! I mean, we were right there! It could have been anybody!"

"Not really," I said without thinking.

"What do you mean?" Marcus asked.

"Well, just that...if the murderer killed Zack, he must have had a reason. I don't think it was just a random murder any more than I think Seth was killed in a random mugging."

"Whoa! You think Zack's death is connected to Seth's?"

I'd forgotten the police still hadn't released the details of Zack's murder, only that he'd been found dead in the creek and that foul play was suspected. I had already said way too much and wasn't sure where to go from there.

“Yeah. I mean, I guess. It just makes sense, you know? I mean, I just assumed—”

Smooth, real smooth, Killian.

“You know more than you’re saying, don’t you?”

“Hey, is Asher here?” I was trying to change the subject, but it had also just occurred to me that I hadn’t called first so it was possible Asher wasn’t home yet.

“He’s upstairs in his room. Have you talked to the police?”

“Something like that,” I called over my shoulder as I took the stairs two at a time.

Marcus followed me to the base of the staircase, and for a moment I thought he was going to chase me all the way up. Instead, he simply shrugged and wandered off.

I heaved a sigh of relief and walked down the hall to Asher’s room. I stood in front of his door for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and knocking.

I watched with amusement mixed with apprehension as Asher answered and his eyes widened in surprise. What if he wasn’t happy to see me?

“Hi,” I said, suddenly shy.

We hadn’t been alone since we’d agreed to be boyfriends.

Asher quickly calmed me by breaking into a huge smile. He stepped back and opened the door wider. “Hi, come on in.” His voice was soft, making him sound as shy as I felt.

I entered the room, and he shut the door behind me. Without saying a word, we moved toward each other and melted into an embrace.

For a few seconds, we simply enjoyed being in one another's arms. I didn't want to let go, but eventually Asher pulled back with a concerned expression.

"Are you okay? What happened in school today?"

I groaned. "So you already heard, huh?"

He shrugged. "It was all anyone was talking about by the end of the day. Are you okay?"

"Just peachy."

Asher grabbed my wrist and pulled me over to his bed. He flopped down, yanking me with him. "Tell me what happened."

I cuddled into his side and laid my head on his shoulder as I explained my mounting frustration with how the school was handling Zack's death, and how I'd finally snapped in class that morning.

He nodded when I'd finished. "That's about what I heard. For once, the grapevine was actually accurate."

"What's everybody saying?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know, but I had to ask.

He shrugged. "Some people were making jokes, about what you'd expect, but others seemed kind of impressed."

"Impressed?"

"Yeah. You stood up for yourself. More importantly, though, you made a scene." He chuckled.

"You're not mad?"

He gave me a confused look. "Why would I be mad?"

"Well, I mean, I outed myself."

"So?"

“Well, we agreed to keep things on the downlow for now.”

He kissed the top of my head. “We agreed to keep our relationship quiet for now. This is about you. It was your choice to come out. It may have been made in the heat of the moment, but I support you.”

“You’re not afraid that people will assume you’re gay because we’re friends?”

“We’re more than friends, Kill.”

“Yeah, but nobody else knows that.”

“Yet.”

The mischievous twinkle in his eye made me a little nervous.

“What do you mean yet?”

“I told you the other day. I don’t care who knows about us.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’re planning something, aren’t you?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

“No, tell me now or I’ll...tickle you!” I swung a leg over him and began to dig my fingers into his sides.

He laughed and squirmed under me until he managed to slip away because I was laughing just as hard as he was.

He leapt to his feet and stood panting and giggling. I watched him from where I lay sprawled on the bed.

Our eyes locked, and we gradually stopped laughing. I slowly got up and approached him. Our arms slid around each other, our gazes never wavering for a moment.

Time seemed to stop.

Nothing else existed as I looked into his beautiful silver eyes. It was just the two of us.

Our faces drew steadily closer until our lips met in the softest, most romantic kiss I had ever experienced.

In that moment, in that utterly perfect moment that would be burned into my memory for the rest of my life, I knew I loved him. I'd said the words before, but I knew it now in a way I hadn't before, a way that filled my heart and soul and body.

I was so overwhelmed that, for a moment, I thought I might start crying.

I pulled away and buried my face in his neck.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded, but I was ready to speak just yet.

We held me tight, and we stood there with our arms wrapped around each other, my head on his shoulder. The notes of an old song that Mom had listened to over and over when I was little began to float through my mind.

Soon, the words followed, and I turned my head and softly began to sing.

"Someday, when I'm awfully low, when the world is cold, I will feel a glow just thinking of you and the way you look tonight."

I was very self-conscious about my voice. It wasn't that I couldn't sing. I'd often been told I had a decent voice. I'd even been in chorus all the way through middle school, often getting solos.

However, I'd lost my confidence and stopped singing when my voice changed. It had become low and husky, which turned out to be perfectly suited to the old ballad.

“Oh, but you're lovely, with your smile so warm, and your cheeks so soft. There is nothing for me but to love you, just the way you look tonight.”

As I sang, Asher started to sway and soon we were slow dancing while staring into each other's eyes.

“With each word your tenderness grows, tearing my fear apart. And that laugh wrinkles your nose, touches my foolish heart.”

Asher swirled me around dramatically, and I couldn't help but laugh before I quickly got back into the song, my confidence growing as I went.

“Lovely, never, never change. Keep that breathless charm. Won't you please arrange it? 'Cause I love you, just the way you look tonight.”

As the last notes drifted away, Asher swept in with another one of those wonderful, tender kisses. This one quickly escalated to a deeper level of passion.

He walked me backwards until the back of my knees hit the edge of the bed and we tumbled onto the mattress where things heated up even more.

We rolled around, first with me on top, then him. Our hands seemed to be everywhere at once—running through his hair, under my shirt, squeezing his ass. Somehow, our shirts seemed to come off without our lips ever breaking contact. It was as if I were in some sort of trance, completely caught up in the moment.

I crashed back to reality when I felt him fumbling at my zipper.

My hands caught his, and his heavy-lidded eyes raised up to meet mine.

“Wait,” I gasped.

“What are we waiting for?” he asked with a lazy smile.

He leaned in and kissed me again, immediately making me forget everything but his mouth.

I felt the button on my pants pop and that time I sat up.

“No, wait,” I said again.

“What’s wrong?” Asher asked, sitting up as well.

‘I’m... I’m just... I’m not sure,” I stumbled over my words.

Asher looked confused. “Not sure about what?”

“I’m not sure I’m ready.”

He still looked confused. “Ready for what?”

“To, like... go all the way.”

His eyes grew round. “Oh. Oh! No, no, no. I mean, I’m not sure I am either. I wasn’t trying to like...do it.”

“Then what are you trying to do?”

“Jeez. I don’t know, Killian. I was just...doing what felt right. I want to be with you. I’ve thought about it so many times.”

“You have?”

“Yeah. Haven’t you?”

I looked down at the tent in my pants. “Not really?”

He looked incredulous. “Not ever? Not even a little?”

“I mean, maybe a little. But I don’t even know what I’m doing. What if I do something wrong?”

He laughed a little. “You won’t. Just do what feels good.”

“Have you done this before?”

He blinked. “Done what? Like, make out? Sure. And I know you have too. I heard about Jake.”

I felt my cheeks burn hot. “We didn’t get very far.”

“Only because Todd walked in on you.”

“Either way, that’s as far as I’ve ever gone. What about you?”

He shrugged. “I’ve gotten to second base a few times, always with girls though, never with a guy before. And I’ve never...gone all the way.”

I frowned. “What’s second base?”

“Like...hand stuff.” It was his turn to blush.

“Oh. But not, like...mouth stuff?”

His face turned an even darker shade of red.

“No.”

“What do you want to do with me?”

“All the stuff?”

“Even butt stuff?”

“Eventually, yeah.”

“But not right now.”

“I don’t think you can just jump right into that. Don’t you have to, like, prepare and stuff?”

“You’re asking me? I just got my first kiss two months ago and I punched him afterward. I’m not exactly an expert.”

He laughed again. “Well, you haven’t punched me yet, so I think we’re making progress.”

He ran his fingers up my arm, and I broke out in goosebumps.

“You’re so sexy,” he said, his voice growing husky.

My eyes drifted over to his naked chest. His muscles were so defined. I definitely wanted to feel his chest again. “So are you.”

“So what are we waiting for?”

“I just... I guess I’m nervous.”

“Like I said, you can’t do anything wrong. We’ll figure it out together.”

“Not just about that. Remember that time you wanted to spend the night, and Adam dragged me off for a heart-to-heart chat?”

“Yeah. Cockblocker.”

I snorted. “I’m being serious. He said something that I can’t get out of my head. He said that sex can change a relationship and that I should wait until I’m sure.”

Asher’s face fell. “You mean you’re not sure? Like about me?”

“No! I mean, yes! Wait. I’m sure I love you. I’m just scared about the sex.”

“I told you I’m not trying to fuck.”

“Sex is more than just fucking. What if we screw everything up?”

“You think me seeing your dick will screw everything up?”

“Yes? No! Fuck. I don’t know, Asher.”

He sighed and turned to face me, “Look, Kill, we don’t have to do anything. The pants can stay on—for now anyway. I’ve waited this long; I can wait until you’re sure you’re ready. But I want you to know that I am definitely sure. I’ve wanted this for so long. I’ve wanted you for so long. I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

He took a deep breath. “I love you. I have for years. I don’t think I ever realized how much I loved you until I saw you with Seth. God! I was so jealous. I wanted so badly to just tell you how I felt then, but I was scared. Then when you got stabbed, I was so scared I would lose you.

“That’s when I finally found the nerve to tell you how I felt. I thought everything would be perfect—but nothing went right. First, I panicked and acted like an idiot, then there was Gilly. When you told me she was just a cover, I thought maybe I still had a chance, but then I heard you talking to Jake, and it was like I had lost you again.

“And now, after all that, you show up and tell me you love me.” He reached out and touched me again. “It still doesn’t feel real. I never feel happier than when I’m with you, and when I’m not with you it’s like a part of me is missing. You’re all I ever think about. As much as I love you, though, I don’t want you to do anything you’re not ready for.”

His words hit home, and I blinked back tears. In that moment, I decided that maybe Adam didn’t know everything, and some things I had to choose for myself. And I was choosing Asher.

“I’m sorry I put you through all that,” I started. “Or I guess we put each other through it. It took me a while to see what was right in front of my eyes...but I do now, and I know what I want. I hope the rollercoaster stops here, but I can’t promise anything. Who knows what’s going to happen tomorrow or the next day? All I can tell you is that I love you and I want this to work. I

want us to work. What I'm trying to say is that I'm willing to take the risk if you are."

"What risk?"

I grinned. "You seeing my dick."

He threw himself backward with a bark of laughter. "You make my head spin."

I swung myself over him and straddled his crotch. We'd both lost our erections during our talk, but I felt him throb under my butt and knew he'd be back at full mast before long.

I ran my hands over his chest, just like I'd been thinking about a few minutes before. I glanced up to see him watching me with a serious expression.

"What?" I asked.

"Just a few minutes ago you weren't sure. Now you're sitting on my dick and rubbing all over me."

I gave him a smile. "I guess you made a pretty convincing argument."

"I wasn't trying to convince you of anything."

"Maybe that's why I'm sure."

"Will I ever understand you, Killian Kendall?"

I slowly leaned over him until our chests were pressed together and ground my hardness against his.

"What would be the fun in that?" I asked teasingly.

With a growl, he wrapped his arms around me and flipped me onto my back, sliding his body between my legs and pinning my arms to his bed.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked, his eyes flashing.

"Whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?"

I grinned. “Within reason.”

He grinned back, then closed the distance between us and captured my mouth with his.

Sometime later, I lay watching Asher as he slept. Our bodies were pressed together, legs intertwined, with one of his strong arms supporting my head, his other hand splayed across my stomach. We were still naked, though the sweat had dried, along with the layer of cum that had coated our torsos.

He’d fallen asleep in the afterglow of his orgasm, but my mind was racing. I didn’t regret a thing. In fact, just the opposite.

I kept reliving moments in my head:

The sight of his erection springing out when I’d pulled down his underwear.

The feel of his hands on my bare bottom.

The intense sensations as we’d writhed together, skin to skin.

The way he breathed into my mouth as we peaked together.

And then the gentle kisses that had followed as we came down.

I finally understood what all the fuss was about. And we’d barely scratched the surface.

I felt so safe lying there in his arms. It was a nice feeling—one I could definitely get used to. I wanted to savor it as long as possible, but as much as I wanted that moment to last forever, I knew I had to get back before Adam started to worry. I’d already been gone much longer than I’d anticipated.

I slipped out from under him and, with a soft kiss on his lips, stood up.

I picked up my pants, which were inside out with my underwear still tangled in the legs. I freed my briefs and slipped them on, then pulled the legs back through.

As I did, my phone fell out of my pocket and clattered to the floor, waking Asher.

He sat up and blinked at me as I retrieved my phone.

“You’re leaving?” he asked.

“I can’t spend the night. Adam would kill me.”

Speaking of Adam, I glanced down and saw I’d missed several calls and texts from him.

“He still might,” I said with a groan.

I shot him a quick text telling him I was fine, we just fell asleep, and I was on my way home.

By the time I’d finished that, Asher was out of bed and had pressed himself against my back. I could feel his boner pressing against my butt.

I twisted to give him a look. “Already?”

“I can’t help it,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“You’re just look so hot standing there in your underwear.”

“Down boy,” I replied with a laugh. “If I don’t leave now, Adam will show up here to drag me home.”

“Aren’t you driving his car?”

“He’ll find a way.”

Asher laughed and went to fetch my shirt while I put my pants on. He pulled on a pair of sweatpants as I finished dressing then walked me to the door, where he gave me one more lingering kiss before I left.

I had a lot to think about on the drive home.

I was not at all looking forward to facing my classmates the next day. I dragged my way through my morning routine even more than usual. I toyed with the idea of playing sick, but I knew Adam would never fall for it.

I knew Adam was right. I had to face them eventually. Maybe it was better to just get it over with. I was too nervous to even think about eating though.

I parked in the student lot and trudged toward school.

As I walked, I noticed everyone seemed to be watching me out of the corner of their eye. Although no one said anything to me directly, I suspected they were all talking about me behind my back. I was glad that Kane was by my side, seemingly unfazed, but even with him there, I felt my shoulders begin to hunch.

Suddenly, I remembered what Adam had said about marching in proudly. I immediately stood up straighter and lifted my chin.

I said bye to Kane and made a quick stop by my locker, then I headed toward homeroom. It seemed much further away than it ever had before.

At the last minute, I realized I needed to take a detour to the bathroom. I was extremely nervous, a condition made manifest through my bladder.

After I'd relieved myself, I splashed some cool water on my face, then stood staring at my reflection in the mirror. Would I look any different to my classmates now that they all knew I was gay? Would they see me or just another gay boy?

I heard the morning announcements start and glanced down at my watch. I was late to homeroom. I couldn't put it off any longer.

I opened the door as quietly as possible, but Mrs. Chalk noticed me anyway.

"Killian," she said nervously and everyone in the room turned to look at me. "Why, uh... Why don't you take your seat?"

It was a struggle to keep my chin up as I crossed the room and slid behind my desk, but I managed.

Once I was settled, Mrs. Chalk began speaking. "Yes, well, er, as you all know, the, uh, assembly is this morning."

She paused and cast an anxious glance in my direction, as if she expected a repeat of my previous day's performance. I studied the top of my desk, looking for patterns in the faux wood grain.

"Go directly to the auditorium after the bell instead of to your usual first-period class."

I held my breath. Was she actually going to let the episode slide without comment?

"Now, about what happened yesterday..."

I sighed. Of course, that was too much to hope for.

Mrs. Chalk gave me an uneasy smile. "We understand you've been through a lot, so we're going to make allowances this time. Just don't let it happen again."

I blinked.

Don't let it happen again? That was it?

The bell rang, and everyone jumped up and rushed from the room.

“Killian, could I speak to you for a moment?”
Mrs. Chalk called.

I knew it was too good to be true.

I approached her apprehensively. I was sure she was about to tell me I had detention or was suspended.

“Killian, I spoke to Dr. Martinez about yesterday’s, er, incident.”

I felt my stomach sinking. Dr. Martinez was our principal. “I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what came over me.”

She smiled nervously. “Under the circumstances, it’s understandable. It’s been stressful for all of us, but even more so for you since you were friends with...the, uh, murdered boy.”

“His name was Seth,” I told her sadly.

“Yes, Seth.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, while we do understand, your outburst was still inappropriate. You’ve never been in trouble before so, as I said, we’re going to let it go this time.

“However, you do need to deal with your grief and anger. The school has special grief counselors available right now, and of course there are always our own guidance counselors here for you if you need to talk to someone.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Chalk, but I’m going to be seeing a therapist soon. My, uh, dad is setting it up.”

“Oh. Well, good. I hope it helps.”

“Thanks.”

“Okay. Well. You’d better get going. You don’t want to miss the, uh...” She petered off awkwardly.

I just nodded, then turned and walked away.

Much to my surprise, Asher was waiting for me in the hall. “Did you get in trouble?” he asked, falling into step beside me.

“Not exactly. She just told me I needed therapy.”

Asher snorted. “I could have told you that.”

I punched him lightly in the arm.

“Are you sure you’re up for this assembly?”

I shrugged. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not really.”

“Then I guess I’m ready.”

“I doubt it’ll be as bad as you think. I heard it’s not really so much about Zack as it is because of Zack.”

“Huh?”

“They’re holding it because he was killed, but it’s not like in his honor or anything.”

We walked into the auditorium, which was rapidly filling up with students.

“Come on.”

Asher started toward the stage, where Dr. Martinez stood talking to a young man in a police uniform. Behind them sat the school’s three guidance counselors and the vice principal.

“Uh, can’t we just sit in the back?”

“You want to look like you’re trying to hide? Let’s sit right down in the front row. Show them you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

I wasn’t quite convinced, but I followed him anyway.

Halfway to the front, someone shoved me roughly.

“Fag,” he spat. It was one of the football players. I didn’t know his name.

Before I could respond, Asher spun around and glared at him. “Back off, asshole.”

“Or what?” he sneered.

“Or I’ll report you for harassment. Did you know that it’s illegal here in Maryland? I could get you suspended.”

I blinked. I remembered Adam and Steve mentioning that harassment was illegal, but it had completely slipped my mind.

How did Asher know about it?

“Students, please take your seats,” Dr. Martinez announced from stage.

The football jock glared at Asher for another moment, then turned and walked away.

Asher started for the front of the room once again.

“Where’d you learn that?” I had to hurry to keep up with him.

He shrugged. “I’ve been doing some research.”

“What kind of research?”

“I just wanted to be prepared for idiots like him.”

I mulled that over while we found seats in the front row and sat down just as Martinez started the assembly.

“As everyone is well aware, we’ve suffered several tragedies already this year,” he said. “The school has made grief counselors available. They’ll be here for at least another week, longer if we think they are still needed.

“However, we felt that wasn’t enough. We decided to hold this assembly as a way to allow you all to vent your feelings and emotions. We’ll talk about

ways to deal with grief and depression. We also have a representative from the police department here to speak to you about safety. And finally, after our presenters have finished, we'll take questions. Mrs. Berdan?"

The school's ancient guidance counselor stepped up to the podium and started droning about the stages of grief.

I zoned out and thought about how Asher had defended me and what he'd said. He'd even done research. Obviously, he really had made some sort of breakthrough. Suddenly, he seemed more comfortable about what was going on than I was. Of course, he wasn't the one who was out to the entire school.

After Mrs. Berdan finished her mini-seminar on giving yourself permission to grieve, one of the other guidance counselors lectured us on how to recognize the signs of depression.

Finally, the police officer came forward to tell us about the precautions we could take to avoid being the next murder victim. Of course, he didn't put it in exactly those terms, but that's what it boiled down to. He recommended the buddy system.

Asher ran a finger across the back of my hand. "Want to be my buddy?" he whispered with an evil grin.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing, but I couldn't stop the jump in my pants. I had trouble concentrating on the rest of the officer's speech.

When he was done, Dr. Martinez stepped back up. "Thank you, Officer Porter. Does anyone have any questions?"

I turned to see hands fly up all over the auditorium. Several teachers were positioned around the

room to hand cordless microphones to those with questions.

The first person called on was a freshman from the looks of him. “Is it true that Zack Phillips had crabs all over him when they pulled him out of the water?”

A few girls shrieked as Martinez sputtered.

The teacher snatched the mike from the boy’s hand and gave him a dirty look. He sat down sheepishly.

“I cannot comment on the investigation,”

Martinez managed between clenched teeth. “Are there any questions that do not involve obscene curiosity about the gory details of Zachary Phillips’s unfortunate death?”

Every hand dropped.

Martinez shook his head disappointedly. “If there are no further questions, one of your fellow students has asked for a few minutes to speak to you. Asher?”

My mouth fell open as Asher stood up. He gave me a quick wink before jumping up on stage, foregoing the steps.

Dr. Martinez frowned, but Asher just stepped up to the podium and gripped the sides.

I noticed his grip was so tight his knuckles had gone white, but that was the only sign of nerves.

“I think everyone knows me,” he said, looking around the room. “I’m Asher Davis, and I’m on the soccer team.”

Several people in the audience cheered. We were the current state champions, and Asher was one of the star players.

Asher grinned, then grew solemn. “I’m not here to talk to you about sports, though. I want to talk about

something much more serious. Zack Phillips was my teammate and friend, but he wasn't the first student to be murdered this year. That was Seth Connelly."

"Faggot!" someone in the back of the room called out.

Several teachers moved in that direction while Asher went on. "As some moron just proved, most of you knew that Seth was gay. He didn't make any secret of it. What you may not know is that the harassment he faced on a daily basis as a result of his sexuality is illegal. Anyone who called him names or threatened him could have been suspended or even expelled.

"Either Seth didn't know that, or he decided he could handle it on his own. Seth was also receiving threatening notes, also considered harassment. He didn't report those, either. Maybe if he had, he wouldn't be dead now."

Many in the audience gasped.

Asher looked out over his fellow students. "It's possible that Seth was murdered because he was gay. That would make it a hate crime. Imagine being hated for something you have no control over. Imagine being picked on every day because of who you are. Now imagine being killed because of it.

"Many of you sitting out there were among those who bullied Seth. While some of you may not have tormented him yourselves, you probably looked the other way while others did. No one in this room—" he paused and turned to look directly at the faculty on stage "—no one is innocent in Seth's death. We all participated in creating an environment that allowed something like this to occur.

“That’s why, with the full approval and cooperation of Mr. Martinez, I’m proposing we start a gay/straight alliance in our school. You don’t have to be gay to be a member. You only have to believe that building understanding and tolerance is more important than fostering fear and hate. We’ll be revealing the details of the first meeting during the morning announcements soon. Thank you.”

Asher started to step away from the podium and Martinez came up behind him, but then he spun around and grabbed the mic again.

“Oh, I almost forgot. By now, most of you have probably heard about Killian Kendall’s big announcement yesterday morning in homeroom.”

I felt the eyes of everyone around me turn toward me as I tried to sink down in my seat. I wondered if Adam would appreciate the difference between me announcing I was gay during an assembly and Asher doing it for me.

Asher grinned. “Yeah. I’m his boyfriend.”

For a moment, the auditorium was so quiet you could have heard a mouse fart. Then someone slowly started clapping. Someone else joined in, and, soon, the entire place was roaring with applause, whistles, and screams.

Asher jumped off the stage and dropped down next to me. He took my hand in his and squeezed it. I was still too shocked to even react.

Martinez had to yell for quiet several times before he got the room calmed down.

“Thank you, Asher,” he said when he could finally be heard. “As Asher said, I and the faculty fully

support the formation of the gay/straight alliance. We, the administration, clearly failed on a very basic level if Seth didn't trust us enough to come to us for help when he was being harassed. We obviously have a lot of room for improvement, and I am saying publicly before you all that we must do better moving forward. We will do better, starting right now.

"I am committed to making this school a safe place for all. The well-being of every single student in this school is my top priority. We have a zero-tolerance policy here, and it will be strictly enforced from here on. In fact, the young man who called out that slur just now is hereby suspended, and if there's a next time, he will be expelled.

"If you feel you are the victim of harassment based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability, report it immediately. I give you my word that it will be taken seriously.

"Do you all understand?"

Dead silence greeted his question.

"I said, do you all understand?" he repeated more firmly.

"Yes," the crowd responded weakly.

"I'll ask one more time and I expect you to convince me this time. Do. You. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Good. Then, that ends our program for today. Thank you for your cooperation and attention. I expect good things from you. You may return to class."

The room erupted into excited chatter as I slowly turned to face Asher. "I can't believe you did that!"

“Me, either.” He grinned. “I’m shaking like a leaf.”

Once he mentioned it, I noticed his hand trembling in mine.

“How long had you been planning that?”

“Well, I started thinking about it after the party last Saturday. I talked to my mom and dad, and they supported me, so I talked to Mr. Martinez on Monday. I’ve stayed after school every day this week to talk to him about it. He took a little convincing at first—he’s more afraid of all the Christian parents and right-wing nuts than he’d like to admit—but he came around.”

I shook my head in wonder. “I can’t believe you.”

“Believe it, baby.”

He jumped up, pulling me with him.

One of Asher’s teammates from the soccer team walked by and gave him a high five. Right behind him, several girls stopped to tell us how awesome they thought it was that we were brave enough to come out. Soon, we had a small crowd around us, all of them offering support and goodwill.

I couldn’t believe what was happening. I felt as if I were in a dream, but it was a good one for a change.

Then, in the background, I noticed Jake staring accusingly at me and Asher. My heart skipped a beat as I realized how he must have felt hearing about Asher and me in that way.

“I’ll be right back,” I whispered in Asher’s ear and left him to his circle of admirers.

“Jake,” I started as I approached him.

“You couldn’t even tell me to my face?” he snapped, cutting me off.

“Jake, I’m sorry. I had no idea—”

“God, I was so wrong about you. You’re just a self-centered jerk.”

“Jake, listen—”

“No, Killian, you listen. Stay the hell away from me and my family or you’ll be sorry.”

I bit my lip as I watched him storm away. What a life-changing day. Asher had officially outed us as a couple, announced the formation of a gay/straight alliance, and ensured that the school would enforce their nondiscrimination policy.

Unfortunately, one simple fact overshadowed all else: I’d lost a friend and gained an enemy.

Chapter 21

The next few weeks passed by in a rose-colored haze that only someone who has experienced those first intoxicating days of new love can understand. Everything revolved around Asher. Nothing else seemed to matter—or if it did, it did so only in the abstract, as if it were all far removed from us.

I did keep up with the developments on Seth's and Zack's murders, even though those seemed to be few and far between. At least the police were now taking both killings seriously. Publicly, they insisted they were examining the evidence and were confident they would find the killer.

Privately, through Mom's lawyer, we learned that the renewed attention on the police department thanks to a public outcry after Zacks' death and the charges against Dad had spurred an external investigation into the initial handling of Seth's murder. It didn't look good for Dad or the chief of police, though that was the extent of what we knew. They were keeping the details of the investigation close to their Kevlar vests.

While I wished for faster results on both fronts, I was too caught up in my new romance to be a detective. Besides, Adam watched me like a hawk to make sure I left everything to the professionals.

The police did finally release my car, and Adam got the windows replaced, so I had that back, at least.

Jake refused to speak to me after the big announcement. I'd tried several more times to explain to him that I hadn't known what Asher was planning, but

he never let me get more than two words out. Finally, I gave up.

Like her brother, Gilly was still pretending I didn't exist. In fact, the only person in the Sheridan family who still acknowledged my existence was Todd, and that was only to glare daggers at me every time I ran into him in the halls.

For the most part, no one else really seemed to care that Asher and I were dating. In fact, several people who I would never have expected to do it had gone out of their way to let us know they supported us.

The first meeting of the gay/straight alliance went off without a hitch. Only ten people showed up—all straight females with the exception of Kane—but we weren't expecting a miracle. We had confidence that in time it would grow.

Of course, not everything was a fairy tale—no pun intended. A few jerks still made crude comments under their breath every time one of us walked by. There were more than a few incidents of name calling, but we knew it could have been worse. As time went on and it became obvious that our supporters outnumbered our detractors, those incidents became more and more infrequent.

Despite my earlier antipathy, I was starting to feel worse for Jesse than for Asher and me. He'd really changed since Zack's death, becoming quiet and withdrawn. I knew Zack was the real brains behind their dynamic duo—what little brains there were—and I was sure Jesse must have really been missing him.

I almost reached out to him a couple of times—after all, we did grow up together and we'd once been

friends, sort of—but each time, I remembered how he'd made my life a living hell and I kept my distance. Besides, I had enough stuff to deal with on my own. I could only hope he was getting professional help.

Adam and I started therapy, and while I liked the guy, we were still in the early days of building a rapport. I'd only had two sessions, and I hadn't opened up much. I felt like Adam was getting more out of it than me, and I wasn't sure if that was on me or the therapist, but either way, I kept going.

Before I knew it, Thanksgiving was upon us. I was super excited. Mom was coming down for a huge feast that Adam and Steve had been planning for weeks. In addition to Mom, we were also expecting a few other couples whose families were either too far away or not exactly welcoming.

Adam and Steve spent the entire day before Thanksgiving cooking. Kane and I helped out where we could, but mostly we were assigned to cleaning duty. The entire house was dusted and vacuumed and polished to perfection.

Thanksgiving morning, I woke up early, too excited to stay in bed any longer. I couldn't wait to see Mom for the first time since she'd moved to Pennsylvania to live with Aunt Kate.

She'd called the night before to make sure it was okay with Adam if she brought one of my cousins along for the ride. I had apparently met this cousin and had vague memories of him, but we hadn't seen each other

since we were little kids. They expected to get there a little after noon.

The morning flew by as Steve kept everyone busy with preparations for the meal. Altogether, we were now expecting thirteen people. Adam jokingly called it our very own coven, and Steve commented that he hoped it wouldn't be our last supper.

I lived with a bunch of would-be comedians.

Kane and I had put all the leaves in the dining table and set up a couple of card tables. Adam and Steve had been in the kitchen since daybreak, and the whole house was filled with the aroma of roasting turkey, dressing, and sage.

We were so busy that no one even noticed Mom pull up until we heard the doorbell. I almost broke my neck racing to the door, yanking it open and throwing myself into her arms.

After a long hug, I stepped back to take her in. She looked fabulous, better than I had ever seen her. Her hair was a little longer than it had been when she left, and she'd had it styled. She had makeup on—the first I had ever seen her wear. It was just enough to accentuate her natural beauty. She looked younger than I'd ever seen her.

“You're so pretty!” I gasped.

She grinned. “You don't have to sound so surprised. I was young when I had you. And you look pretty good yourself there, sport.”

“True love must agree with him.” Adam had a grin of his own as he came up behind me. “Hello, Meg. It's great to see you. I'm so glad you were able to come.”

“I wouldn't have missed it for the world, Adam.”

Then, with a raised eyebrow, she turned her attention back to me.

“True love? I know you and Asher are dating but didn’t know we were throwing the L-word around like that.”

I felt a blush creep up my neck as a new voice entered the conversation. “I dunno, he doesn’t look like a lesbian to me, Aunt Meg.”

It had to be my mystery cousin, although I couldn’t remember his name.

Mom laughed and stepped aside, revealing my cousin, whatever-his-name-was. He looked nice, with wavy dark blond hair and bright green eyes that reminded me of a cat. He was older than I was by a few years, at least, and also taller. There was something about him that made me think he smiled a lot—as he was doing at that moment. He had a great smile. I instinctively decided I liked him.

“Killian, this is your cousin Aidan,” Mom introduced. “He’s thinking about transferring to Pemberton University next year so I thought this would be a good chance for him to see the area.”

Pemberton was one of several colleges in nearby Salisbury. It was on the list of schools I was thinking about applying to next year.

I waved a greeting, and he responded by waggling one of the suitcases in his hands.

“Oh, excuse my rudeness!” Adam exclaimed. “Let me help you with those. Come on in, and I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping. I hope you don’t mind sharing a room with Killian and my son Kane.”

“Sounds like fun.” Aidan followed Adam in as Mom and I trailed behind.

“Aidan, this is Adam,” Mom said a bit belatedly. “I guess you could say he’s Killian’s surrogate father now that Killian is living with him.”

Adam glowed at his introduction, then said, “Meg, I hope you don’t mind sleeping in the den. It’s not the most private, but the couch pulls out.”

“It’ll be fine,” Mom replied. “It’s sweet of you to put us up.”

Kane had followed me to the door, so our little entourage paused long enough for another round of introductions, which was repeated again a few seconds later when Steve wandered in to see what all the commotion was about.

Once their bags had been stashed away, Steve assigned everyone a last-minute task. We all worked busily until the other guests began arriving. Ilana and Lysander were the first on the scene, with a bottle of wine in hand.

Then Asher made his entrance, after having begged off from his family dinner so he could eat with us.

The last two couples from our celebration dinner a few weeks back, Bryant and Calvin along with Heather and Nila, arrived at the same time.

Calvin had bleached his hair until it was practically white with matching eyebrows that almost vanished against his pale skin. With his light blue eyes, he almost looked as if he had faded since I saw him last. Most of the time he did seem to fade into the

background. Bryant was definitely the dominant force in their relationship.

Heather was also quiet, though not to the extent Calvin was. Her long brown hair was pulled back into a braid that hung down her back, and her brown eyes peered out uncertainly from behind her glasses. She was wearing a white shirt and plaid skirt that made her look like a Catholic schoolgirl. She was very pretty, but, like Calvin, she was overshadowed by her partner in some ways.

Nila's dark bronze skin practically glowed. She was wearing her hair in many tiny braids with a gold bead at the end of each one. The beads complemented the other gold jewelry she wore—multiple earrings, a nose ring, a necklace with a stylized geometric design, bracelets on both wrists, one arm cuff, and several rings on her fingers. On anyone else, it would have been too much, but she pulled it off. With her ankle-length form-fitting white dress, she made a stunning entrance. It was hard to take your eyes off of her.

Dinner was fantastic, as I knew it would be. The conversation was lively, and by the time we were scraping the last bites of pie from our plates, I felt as if we were all old friends.

We left the dishes to sit while we gathered in the living room, accompanied by various moans and groans about having eaten too much.

“Let's go around the room and each of us say one thing we're thankful for,” Aidan suggested once we had settled into various states of semiconsciousness.

“Let's not and say we did,” Mom teased. “I think I'm going to fall asleep.”

“Come on, it’s Thanksgiving,” I backed Aidan up.

“Just one thing?” Bryant asked mischievously. He threw a lascivious grin at Calvin, who giggled.

“Yes, just one thing,” Adam agreed, “and please remember that this is a family show.”

We all laughed.

“Who wants to go first?” Kane asked.

Steve spoke up. “Why doesn’t Aidan go first since it was his idea?”

“Okay. I have mine ready anyway. I’m thankful that I have already made so many good friends down here, and I haven’t even moved yet.”

“Awwwww,” we all said in unison and then burst out laughing again.

Aidan looked to his left. “Nila?”

“Hmm, let me think. I’m thankful for all of you, also. It’s hard to be so far away from my birth mother at holiday time, but it’s nice to be here with my father and Ilana and such good people. And I’m always thankful for Heather.”

“Hey, that’s two things!” Bryant yelled as Heather turned bright red.

“Judges?” Kane asked Adam and Steve.

They exchanged a look. “We’ll allow it,” Adam ruled. “Heather, you’re next.”

“I’m thankful for having met Nila,” she said quickly and turned to Bryant.

“Oh, is it my turn already? Hmm...let me see...where to begin?”

“You’re gonna lose your turn if you don’t begin soon,” Adam threatened jokingly, and everyone laughed.

“Okay, okay...jeez!” Bryant pretended to pout for a second, then turned serious. “I’m thankful for people like Adam and Steve who do such selfless things as taking in kids who need a place to live, then inviting strays to Thanksgiving dinner when their own families tell them they aren’t welcome. The world is a better place because of you.” He raised his wine glass in a salute.

Everyone sat silently for a moment, caught off guard by the sudden sincerity.

“And I’m thankful for Calvin. Ha! That’s two!”

Everyone laughed.

We all looked at Calvin expectantly. He blinked as if surprised to find himself the center of attention. He cleared his throat nervously, then began to speak so softly I had to lean in to hear him.

“I’m thankful for the support and encouragement that Bryant gives me. I don’t know what I’d do without him. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t even be alive.”

It was the most I’d heard him say all evening, and I wasn’t surprised to see tears suddenly appear in Bryant’s eyes. He reached over and took Calvin’s hand while swiping at his eyes with his other hand.

There had to be more to their story than met the eye, and I wondered what it was. I knew it was really none of my business, but as usual, that didn’t temper my curiosity.

“I’m thankful to have this beautiful woman as my wife,” Lysander said into the silence that followed Calvin’s little speech. “And honey, why don’t you tell them what else we have to be thankful for.”

Ilana positively beamed. “I’m pregnant.”

The room erupted into a cacophony of congratulations, back slapping, hugs, and how-far-alongs. Eventually everyone settled back into their seats.

“My turn?” Steve asked.

“Yup,” we all chorused.

“Well, I’m thankful that Adam and I have decided it’s time for me to move in here.”

Another round of excited chatter followed this announcement. That was even news to me, albeit welcome news.

Then it was Adam’s turn. “I’m thankful for so many things. It’s hard to choose just one.”

“It was your rule!” Bryant complained.

“Rule overruled,” Adam shot back with a grin.

“Seriously though, I am very thankful this year. In some ways, more so than in years past. Losing Seth made me appreciate what I do have so much more. And even though I lost one son, I regained a son I thought I had lost forever and acquired a new son I never expected. I love both of you boys so much. You are truly my greatest blessings in life.”

I felt a lump form in my throat, and from the look on Kane’s face, I knew he was as touched as I was.

“Wow, I have to follow that, huh?” Kane’s voice was a little shaky. I noticed several people dabbing at their eyes. “I’m thankful for my family—my whole family: Steve, Dad, and Killian. Your turn, Asher.”

Asher turned to look at me for a moment before facing the room once more. “I’m thankful that sometimes true love does conquer all.”

This was met with another chorus of “awws,” and I knew I was blushing again.

I regained my composure and took my turn. “I’m thankful that for the first time in my life I feel completely loved and accepted by everyone who is important in my life.”

I heard several more sniffles from around the room. It seemed like almost everyone was fighting tears by that point.

When Mom began to speak, her voice was thick with emotion. “As I sit here and look at my son—happy, healthy, safe...in love and loved by so many people—I can’t help but be so very thankful that he is even here and alive. I know what a gift that truly is, and my heart aches for you, Adam.”

I looked at Adam to see his shoulders shaking with barely suppressed sobs.

“You’ve lost so much,” she continued, “and yet you’ve given so much. I can’t even begin to tell you how thankful I am for the way you’ve taken Killian in, even to the point of loving him like your own son.”

She stood up and crossed the room to hug Adam as he seemed to collapse under his grief.

Without even thinking, I moved to hug him as well, and it wasn’t long before I felt Kane at my side.

When I went back to my seat, everyone in the room was openly wiping away tears.

“Well, that turned out to be more emotional than I thought,” Aidan said, and everyone laughed, grateful to break the somber tone the night had taken.

Once we got ourselves back together, a concerted effort was made to lighten the mood. We played a few games until everyone who wasn’t spending the night had to leave.

The rest of us stayed up a little longer, talking and relaxing, but soon, my eyes were growing heavy, and Kane had started dozing off. Adam announced that it was time for bed.

“You should stay over,” I suggested to Asher, who was also looking very sleepy.

“Are you sure four people can sleep in your room?” Adam asked doubtfully.

“Why not?” I replied with a shrug. “We have sleeping bags.”

“Did you even check with your cousin? I hope you’re at least planning on giving him your bed.”

“The floor is cool with me,” Aidan spoke up quickly. “Reminds me of summer camp.”

“It’ll be like a slumber party,” I said with a laugh.

“Oh! Can we do each other’s hair and makeup too?” Kane added mockingly.

I threw a pillow at him while Asher called and got permission to stay.

As soon as he hung up, Kane said, “Great, now we have to listen to you two make out all night.”

I chased him up the stairs and tackled him on my bed, where I proceeded to commence tickle-torture.

He was screaming with laughter when Asher and Aidan joined in. They came to Kane’s defense by attacking me, and it quickly turned into an all-out tickle war, until Adam called a stop to the ruckus.

“Don’t make me regret allowing Asher to stay over,” he said warningly, but his grin belied his threat.

After we’d calmed down, we hashed out sleeping arrangements. Kane ended up giving his bed to Aidan and roughing it on the floor in a sleeping bag.

Asher and I shared my bed. With two other people in the room, there wasn't much chance of anything happening.

After the lights were out, we cuddled into each other. I was almost asleep when Aidan's voice snapped me back from the brink.

"So, uh...you guys are, like, a couple, huh?"

Kane snorted. "What tipped you off?"

Aidan laughed, but I was suddenly worried. I'd just assumed Mom would have warned him.

"Does that bother you?" I asked.

"No, not at all. I'm pretty open about stuff like that. If it bothered me, I wouldn't have jumped into that little tickle war—or even been here at all for that matter. I think I was the only straight person here besides Aunt Meg."

"I'm straight," Kane piped up from the floor.

"Sorry, and Kane."

"And Ilana and Lysander," Asher added.

"Okay, okay...I was exaggerating to make a point. I won't do it again, I promise."

"I guess there were a lot of gay people here tonight," Asher said thoughtfully, or maybe he was just tired. It was hard to tell in the dark. "You were definitely in the minority. That's weird."

"Not really," Aidan said. "If you think about it, it kinda makes sense. You know that old saying, 'Birds of a feather flock together?' I think in a way it's true. I mean, you're naturally going to want to be around people who accept you for yourself and who are most like you. That's probably the real reason Aunt Meg invited me to come down here."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, she said she thought I’d like to see the area before I moved down here next year, but I’ve been here before when I was visiting campuses. I’ve already put in for the transfer, so it’s not like I’m going to change my mind at this point. I think she knew it was going to be mostly gay people here today, and this is her way of telling me it’s okay with her if I’m gay.”

“Why would she think you’re gay?” Kane asked.

“Kane!” I said in exasperation.

Aidan just laughed. “It’s okay. He’s just being upfront about it. I respect that. And to answer your question as honestly as I know how, Kane...it’s probably because I’m not real sure myself.”

“You said you were straight earlier,” Kane insisted.

“I know, but I think it’s just from habit. I guess you could say I’m still trying to figure things out. If I’m being honest, I’d say I’m probably bi, but I’ve never acted on it. I grew up in a tiny town in rural Pennsylvania. It’s very backwards. That’s one reason I wanted to transfer to another school. I go to a community college now and I just want to get out of there, figure out who I really am.”

“Oh,” Kane said.

“In a way, I envy you two—Killian and Asher, I mean. You’ve got everything all figured out and you have each other. You seem so happy together.”

“It’s not been easy,” I pointed out.

Asher snorted. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“My brother was killed because he was gay.”

Kane’s voice was filled with pain.

“I know,” Aidan replied simply. “I’m sorry.”

“Killian almost died, too,” Kane continued.

“I knew that, too, but I’ve never heard what happened exactly.”

Between the three of us, we told him the whole story—from the first time I met Seth to the present.

“Wow! You guys have really been through hell and back.”

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Asher mumbled.

He seemed to be getting very tired. He buried his face in my chest, his hair tickling my chin.

“But it’s awesome how you’ve each come out stronger because of it. In a way, it forced you to deal with issues you probably would have let sit unresolved until you were older...like me.”

“I guess,” I said slowly, “but for me, it wasn’t that I really thought I was straight. I’d never actually thought about it either way. Once I was forced to consider it, I knew. It was just a matter of admitting it to myself.”

“Killian is very good at ignoring things he doesn’t want to deal with,” Asher mumbled into my chest.

I swatted him.

“And very good at poking his nose into things he should probably stay out of,” Kane added with a laugh.

“Hey!” I protested.

“To be fair to Killian, it sounds like things work out for the best whenever he pokes his nose into things, as you put it,” Aidan said, coming to my defense. “You wouldn’t be living here now if it weren’t for him.”

“That’s true,” Kane admitted. “And he knows I’m grateful. I just like to give him a hard time. But not the same kind of hard time that Asher gives him.”

I was glad the darkness hid the blush I could feel heating up my face,

“Go to sleep, Kane.” Asher’s voice was muffled from where his face was still on my chest, but his annoyance came through loud and clear.

“It is late,” Aidan observed. “But maybe we can I talk some more in the morning before I leave, Killian?”

“Sure, but I don’t know what I can tell you. It’s not like I’m an expert on this stuff.”

“More of an expert than I am—at least you’ve been through it. Good night.”

“Good night.”

“G’night,” Kane added.

Asher mumbled something that might have been “good night,” but it was really anyone’s guess.

The next thing I knew it was morning, and Adam was banging on our door, telling us we’d slept late enough.

Personally, I disagreed. I felt as though I had just fallen asleep.

My arm was numb from Asher’s lying on it all night. When I pulled it out from under him, he blinked sleepily up at me. There was an imprint on his face from the creases in my T-shirt, and, with his hair matted down on the side he’d been laying on and his eyes all bleary, he looked so cute I couldn’t resist leaning in for a lingering good-morning kiss.

“Bleah!” Kane yelled. “Not before breakfast, please!”

We all laughed. Asher and I tumbled out of bed onto the floor, where we engaged in an impromptu wrestling match.

Aidan sat watching us with an amused smile on his lips and a thoughtful look in his eye. I had a feeling he wasn't thinking about the scene before him at all.

The morning flew by as everyone pitched in to clean up the mess from the previous evening. Before I knew it, the time had come for Mom and Aidan to leave for home.

I realized that Aidan and I hadn't had time for our talk, but then I didn't know what I could have told him anyway, so it was just as well.

The goodbyes weren't too drawn out. Mom would be back in a few weeks for Christmas, and there was a chance Aidan would be coming with her.

As they were getting in the car, Aidan paused and turned to me. "Oh, Killian, about our talk last night. I've been thinking about it all day, and I'm pretty sure I've got everything figured out—it's guys. Thanks."

With that, he winked and ducked into the car.

Mom and Adam both shot me quizzical glances. I just grinned and gave Aidan a thumbs-up. I'd let him tell them in his own time.

A couple of days later, Asher and I were cuddling on the couch watching a movie after dinner when Adam stuck his head in the door.

"Hey, boys, Steve and I are going to run over to his place to start packing. He's decided to move as soon as possible so he'll be settled before Christmas. Kane is

coming with us. Do you two want to come along or stay here?”

I looked at Asher and grinned. “Stay here,” we answered in unison.

Adam rolled his eyes. “How’d I guess? Just behave, huh?”

I gave him my best innocent expression. “Of course.”

He shook his head and sighed.

The door had barely closed behind them before our lips met. Soon, the movie was forgotten as we made out. When the credits came on, we surfaced for air long enough to turn the TV off, then returned to the business at hand, clothes flying off in every direction.

We were interrupted a few minutes later by my phone buzzing insistently.

“Ignore it,” Asher growled as my head popped up.

“It might be Adam checking in on us,” I protested.

I sat up and grabbed my phone. I frowned. “It’s Jake.”

Asher mirrored my frown. “Why would he be calling?”

I shrugged and answered. “Hello?”

“Hello, Killian.”

The hoarse voice wasn’t Jake. It sounded familiar, but I couldn’t place it. Why did it fill me with such a sense of foreboding?

“We were interrupted at the party. I won’t let that happen again.”

Then it clicked. The last time I'd heard that voice, its owner had been wearing a Batman costume. "Who is this? Why are you calling from Jake's phone?"

Asher sat up with a concerned expression on his face.

"I know all kinds of things about you, Killian."

Something in his voice made my heart skip a beat. "What do you want?" I sounded frightened even to myself. I hated to be so obvious.

He must have heard it as well because he chuckled, a throaty, rusty sound. "We have unfinished business."

"Just leave me alone!"

"Who is it?" Asher whispered.

I shook my head, but my mind raced. Could it be Jake? Was this some sort of sick joke? Was he trying to scare me because of what had happened with Asher? But he'd been on stage at the party when Batman had me alone.

Then Batman spoke again, and I knew it was no joke. "I can't leave you alone. It's gone too far now. It's time to put an end to this once and for all."

"Put an end to what? I don't understand."

"Don't you? You're the one who keeps stirring things up. I know you've been snooping around, asking questions. And as if that wasn't enough, you have to go spreading your filth everywhere you go. I should have killed you in the park when I had the chance."

I suddenly grew cold all over as I realized who was on the other end of the line. I'd been looking for him for weeks, but Seth's killer had found me first, just as Judy had warned.

Asher put a hand on my arm, and I jumped. I'd almost forgotten he was there. "Who is it?" he asked again, louder.

I stared at him wide-eyed, unable to answer.

"I've decided to go out with a bang," the killer went on, "and you're going to help."

"I'm not helping you with anything!"

"I think you will. In fact, you're going to come to me."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm hanging up and calling the police."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. See, I figured you'd put up a fight, so I arranged a little insurance policy. There's someone here who'd like to say hello."

"Killian?" The voice on the line was filled with such pure terror, it was almost unrecognizable.

"Jake?"

"Oh, God, please do what he says!"

"Are you okay?"

My only answer was a horrifying whimper before the killer's voice filled my ear once more. "You have exactly half an hour to get to here before I kill him. Your time starts now."

"Wait! Where? I don't know where you are."

"Oh, Killian. I thought you were smarter than that. I'm disappointed. Where was the last place we talked?"

"The Sheridans' house..."

"Exactly. I'll be watching for you. If I see anyone except you come near the house, he's dead. If I even suspect you've called the police, I'll kill him slowly. You've got twenty-nine minutes. Tick, tick, tick..."

“Please, don’t hurt him—”

“Twenty-eight minutes.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t say anything.

“His death will be on your conscience.”

I heard a strangled cry in the background and screamed, “No!”

“You’ll be here?”

“Yes,” I choked out.

“Good. Time is ticking. Oh, and bring Asher. I know he’s there with you.”

The line went dead.

Chapter 22

I slumped into the couch, staring at the phone in shock.

“What’s going on?” Asher asked. “Should I call the police?”

“No!”

My head was spinning. The room grew darker. I gasped for breath, then suddenly everything went black.

I was in the park, lying on the ground looking up at the dark outline of the killer looming over me. An excruciating pain shot through my side, and the taste of fear was sour in the back of my throat.

All at once, the figure above me morphed into Asher. He knelt down next to me. “Are you okay?” Panic edged his voice.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. You must have fainted or something.”

I sat up. “We have to go.”

“Go where? What are you talking about? Who was that on the phone?”

I scrambled to my feet but had to lean against the wall again as the room started spinning. “It was the murderer. He has Jake.”

Asher’s eyes grew wide as he leapt to his feet. “I’m calling the police.”

He reached for the phone, but I snatched it from his hand. “No police! He said he’d kill Jake unless you and I show up at the house alone within thirty minutes.”

“Me?”

“He must have heard you talking in the background. He knew you were here with me. He said you have to come with me.”

“Killian, are you crazy? We can’t go over there! That’s suicide. We have to call the police.”

“He said no police! He said he’d kill Jake if he saw police.”

“But they’re trained professionals. They know how to deal with this. They’ll figure it out.”

“We don’t have time for them to figure it out. He only gave us half an hour, and the clock is ticking!”

“Killian, this is crazy! We’re just two kids. The police are armed—”

“I can get a gun.”

Asher stared at me as if I’d lost my mind.

“Where are you going to get a gun?”

“My dad has guns. I had to learn how to shoot them. Remember?”

“No way, Killian! No fucking way!”

“I can’t let him hurt Jake. This is all my fault.”

“How is it your fault?”

I pushed away from the wall, grabbed my shirt from the floor and yanked it over my head as I stumbled toward the door. “We’re wasting time! You can stay if you want. I’m going.”

I was in my car with the engine running when a fully clothed Asher slid into the passenger seat. “There’s no way I am letting you go there alone.”

I threw the car into reverse without answering him. I broke every safety law in the books on my way to my old house. I was very relieved to see that Dad’s car wasn’t in the driveway when I came to a screeching halt

in the driveway. It would make breaking and entering so much easier.

I was out and sprinting up the front steps almost before the car stopped moving. Without even pausing, I fumbled with the keys, even dropping them several times before I managed to unlock the door.

I burst in and took the stairs two at a time up to my parents' old bedroom. I yanked open the bedside-table drawer, breathing a sigh of relief when I saw the pistol was still there.

I took it out and examined it carefully. It was loaded, just as I'd hoped. I'd despised the shooting lessons at the time, but I was very grateful for them now.

I shoved the gun into my pocket and turned to run back downstairs but froze in my tracks.

A disheveled Gary Kendall stood in the doorway, blocking my exit. He was scary enough, but the rifle in his hands made my blood run cold.

"So it's not enough that my shit-stain of a son has to be a fairy, and that you and my worthless whore of a wife had to do everything in your power to ruin my career—hell, ruin my entire life. Now you have to break in and steal too? Tell me, son, what's to stop me from blowing a hole in your chest right now? Self-defense, I'll say. I was napping on the couch when I heard someone breaking in. I thought I was being robbed. How was I to know it was my own flesh and blood?"

"I... I didn't break in," I managed.

"Psh," he scoffed. "I break a window, and nobody knows the difference."

"I would," Asher said from behind my father.

He spun toward Asher, and I used the distraction to pull the pistol.

He leveled the gun at Asher's chest. "Fucking nig—"

I fired a warning shot. It hit the doorframe, sending splinters of wood into my father's face. He flinched and leaped back, turning to stare at me in wide-eyed disbelief.

I had the pistol pointed right at his face.

"I missed on purpose. It won't happen again," I said, my voice surprisingly steely. "I don't have time to deal with your bullshit. Drop the gun."

He glared at me, hatred seeping from every pore, but made no move to drop the rifle.

"I said drop it," I growled through clenched teeth. "I won't hesitate to shoot you. Who would miss you? A disgraced abusive politician under multiple investigations. Nobody ruined your life but you, you miserable son of a bitch. You made the choices that brought you to this point. Now drop the gun or I shoot."

"You wouldn't..." he challenged, though he didn't look so sure.

I tightened my trigger finger, a small act that wasn't lost on him.

With a roar of frustration, he let the rifle drop to the floor.

"Asher, grab it," I ordered.

Asher jumped forward to grab the rifle then quickly moved back out of arm's reach.

"Come farther into the room and move over by the window," I instructed Dad.

When he'd done as I said, I edged my way toward the door.

"We're going to leave now, and you're not going to say anything to anyone unless you want to be humiliated even more by being outsmarted by your faggot son. Got it?"

He wouldn't even look at me by that point. He simply nodded.

"Good. Have the life you deserve."

I spun and raced down the stairs with Asher hot on my heels. The car was already moving before he was even fully inside. We peeled out of the driveway as he slammed his door shut, and I tore off down the road at very unsafe speeds.

Asher clenched his teeth and held onto the dashboard with white knuckles, the rifle held between his knees, but he knew better than to say anything.

At some point during my confrontation with my father, a cold fury had overtaken me. I felt strangely removed from everything, as if it were happening to someone else and I were merely watching from a distance.

We barely beat our deadline to the Sheridans' house. It was completely dark except for an odd, muted flickering in the window of the door. The only illumination besides the moon was the single security light at the end of the driveway, which had obviously been repaired after the disastrous Halloween party.

I parked the car under the light and pulled the gun from my pocket. I carefully checked to make sure the safety was on before tucking it into the waistband at the small of my back.

Asher watched my movements with wide-eyed horror. “Fuck! Please, please don’t do this.”

“You don’t have to go inside. Just get out of the car and walk up to the house. You’ll be safer that way. Leave the rifle. I don’t want the killer to see it and know we’re armed.”

“I have never been so scared in my entire life, but if you think I am going to let you go in there alone, then you must not know me very well.”

I barely even registered Asher’s heartfelt outburst. I was hyper focused on the task before me, filled with a seething hatred for this person who had killed Seth and made my life hell in the months since. He had to be stopped, and I wanted to be the one who stopped him.

“Then let’s go.” My voice was deceptively calm.

I got out and stood for a moment, staring defiantly at the house. I couldn’t see anyone, but I knew the killer was watching us from one of those blank windows.

I began to stride purposefully toward the front door with Asher right beside me muttering, “Oh God! Oh fuck! Oh God!” with every step. The dark house seemed extremely sinister, but my pace never faltered.

The door was unlocked and swung soundlessly open when I turned the knob. There wasn’t even an ominously creaking hinge. The source of the flickering light turned out to be a small oil lamp sitting in the center of the floor.

I stepped cautiously into the hall and glanced around, but I could see nothing beyond the limited circle of illumination cast by the almost ineffectual flame.

There was an odd smell that I couldn't quite place at first, a kind of chemical scent. Fresh paint?

I flipped the switch next to the door, but nothing happened.

The electricity had been shut off.

I took a closer look at the oil lamp and noticed a scrap of paper tucked under its base. As I leaned down to pick them both up, the security light went dark. The meager glow the lamp provided suddenly seemed less than adequate. I felt a little of my bravado slip away, and a tendril of fear begin to creep into the space left by its departure.

I stared down at the paper and the three words written on it: "*HIDE AND SEEK.*"

"What does that mean?" Asher whispered.

"It means the bastard is playing games with us. He wants us to find him." My fury rushed back with a vengeance. This little game might have been meant to scare us, but it only served to make me more determined to catch the killer.

I patted the gun and thought that the game was more like tag...and I was it.

"Let's call the police," Asher hissed. "We're here now. We followed his stupid rules. He won't know..."

"No!" My voice sounded unnaturally loud in the complete silence that surrounded us. I lowered my tone and said, "No, let's find him."

We began our search downstairs. I tried to picture the layout of the house. I'd been in it often while we prepared for the party, but everything took on a different perspective in the warped light from the oil

lamp. Doors I thought were close by now seemed so far away as I attempted to find them in the eerie shadows.

It was a nerve-wracking process, made worse because the wick kept threatening to gutter out and leave us in total darkness. The tension of every nighttime game of hide-and-seek was intensified by the life-and-death situation we faced.

We stepped cautiously into the living room. It was empty and, like the rest of the house, eerily quiet. We moved on into the family room.

At first, I thought it was as empty as the first room, but then I noticed a shape in one of the chairs in front of the dark TV. The chair was fully reclined with the footrest up, and, though it was angled away from us, it looked like someone was in the chair, head back as if they were napping.

I edged closer, and the glow from the oil lamp illuminated an arm. It looked like Mr. Sheridan. I took another step, and light finally reached his face.

Blood ran from his mouth and the open wound across his neck, staining the front of his white dress shirt.

I gasped, and Asher retched.

“Is he...” Asher asked quietly.

“He’s dead.” There was no question. His eyes stared blankly at the TV, though an expression of horror was frozen on his features.

“We have to call nine-one-one,” Asher insisted.

It was too late for Mr. Sheridan, but I nodded.

“Call them.”

We had no idea what else awaited us. If there was even a remote chance that someone could be saved, then time was of the essence.

Asher whipped his phone from his pocket and quickly dialed, then held a whispered conversation with the dispatcher.

“Tell them not to use their sirens or lights,” I said, remembering the killer’s warning.

He nodded and relayed my request, but then had to explain that it was an active crime scene.

He listened for a second then looked at me. “She says to wait for them outside.”

“No.”

“She said it’s not safe for us to be in here.”

“No shit, but we have to find Jake.”

I started off, leaving Asher to trail behind, still whispering into the phone.

I searched the playroom, but it was empty. When I tried to open the kitchen door, it wouldn’t budge, so we backtracked and started down the hallway.

Asher gripped my arm so tightly it hurt. I hissed in pain, and he relaxed his hold. He pointed shakily at the wall, where I noticed a smeared, bloody handprint.

My head started to spin again as my stomach lurched. I leaned against the opposite wall while I pulled myself together.

“We should wait outside,” Asher insisted.

I shook my head and pushed away from the wall to continue to the kitchen with Asher close behind. I stopped abruptly in the doorway, and Asher bumped into me.

“What the—” His voice died in his throat as he took in the room.

There was blood everywhere, sprayed obscenely across the front of the white cabinets, streaked all over

the door of the refrigerator, even splattered on the ceiling. There was a puddle of dark fluid on the floor that looked as if something had been dragged through it. A set of bloody footprints led to the door to the back stairs.

Then I noticed the body. It was on the floor against the door to the playroom, lying on its side in a puddle of blood, facing us. It was Mrs. Sheridan, and her throat had clearly been slashed as well.

“Fuck,” Asher whimpered.

I agreed entirely.

What if we were too late. What if Jake was already dead?

Just then, we heard a creak from the floorboards above us. A chill ran down my body. Someone besides us was still alive in this house, and that kept the flame of hope burning that we might still find Jake alive.

Asher quickly told the dispatcher that we’d found a second body, and she repeated her instructions for us to wait outside.

I once more ignored them and headed back to the entrance, but as I looked up at the wide staircase that seemed to lead to nowhere, the top lost in inky blackness, it fully hit me that a ruthless killer waited for us at the top of the stairs. He’d already killed at least four people. For all I knew, Jake was already dead too, and we were next.

I turned and faced Asher, taking in the terrified expression on his face. He was willing to follow me even at the risk of his own life. How could I do that to him?

“Wait outside,” I said.

“What about you?”

“I’m going up.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

“No. Somebody needs to be here to meet the police, fill them in.”

“Then come with me.”

“I can’t. Maybe... Maybe it’s not too late.”

Asher looked like he was going to cry, so I quickly stepped forward and wrapped him in a tight hug.

“If anything happens to me, just know I love you,” I whispered into his ear.

He gripped me harder. “Don’t say that!”

“I love you,” I repeated.

“I love you too, but nothing is going to happen to you.”

I started to pull away, but he wouldn’t let go.

I gently disentangled myself from his arms and cupped his face, then took the oil lamp from his hand, turned, took a deep breath, and stepped onto the first stair.

I climbed cautiously, the paint fumes growing stronger as I went. I’d stop after each step and listen, but I didn’t hear any more sounds. When I reached the top, I turned back to find Asher still standing at the foot of the stairs, staring up at me with a look of total anguish.

I didn’t know what to do, so I gave him a little wave, then immediately realized how lame that was.

He didn’t wave back.

I turned back and stepped into the upstairs hallway only to find every door closed. The only light came from the lamp in my hand.

I took a step forward and noticed something on the floor.

My heart jumped, but I quickly realized it was just several five-gallon buckets of paint and cans of paint thinner lined up on a drop cloth, evidence that Mrs. Sheridan's delayed renovation was finally in progress.

The killer's game of hide-and-seek suddenly felt more like a sinister version of *Let's Make a Deal*, except I'd be losing much more than money if I chose the wrong door.

I remembered which door led to Jake's room, but, afraid of what I might find there, I went to the door across from his first. I slowly turned the knob and pushed the door open as the feeble light from the lamp spilled through.

Even before I saw her on the bed, the pastel color palette told me this was Gilly's room.

She was laid out on top of the bedspread, her arms lying limply at her sides. The front of her pale pink shirt was stained crimson with her blood. I knew without getting any closer that she was dead.

I quickly backed out and shut the door.

I leaned my forehead against the cool wood, trying to decide if I could go on. If I left now, if I went back downstairs to Asher, we could probably still escape.

I knew I couldn't do that, though. I couldn't live with myself if there was even the slightest chance that Jake was still alive and I left him behind to die.

Besides, I had unfinished business with the killer. If I could only figure out his identity, that might help level the playing field.

After reading Seth's journal, I strongly suspected that Seth had been killed because he'd rejected the

killer's clumsy overtures, but how did Seth's murder connect to Zack and the Sheridans? What was the common denominator?

I knew it had to be someone from our school, someone who was attractive, someone who was at the Halloween party, and someone with access to Jake's house.

Suddenly, everything fell into place.

I knew who the killer was.

I was still reeling from my epiphany as I turned toward Jake's room. I stopped. Something was different about his room.

It took me a second to figure out what it was. Then it struck me. There was a very dim glow showing through the crack at the bottom of the door.

As I stood there looking at that sliver of light, I felt my remaining reserves of courage drain away. Every gory discovery had eaten away at my resolve, and now, a sense of dread washed over me so strongly that my knees buckled.

I had an intense feeling—a certainty, almost—that death waited in the room beyond. Every sense I had was demanding that I get out. It took all my strength not to run screaming from the house.

I closed my eyes, making a concerted effort to summon back some of the courage I'd felt earlier. I drew myself up as straight as I could, squared my shoulders, and took the few steps across the hall to Jake's door. I reached for the knob, but then stopped and looked down at the lamp in my hand.

I reached back and touched the gun tucked in my waistband, thinking that I just might need both hands. But I also needed all the light I could get.

I carefully sat the lamp on the floor, then gripped the handle, took a deep breath, and threw open the door.

It was dark inside. The only light came from a single candle in the center of the room that flickered wildly and almost blew out from the breeze created when I opened the door. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust, but when they did, I couldn't hold back the cry that escaped my throat.

Jake was laid out on his bed, just as Gilly had been, and, for a moment, I thought I really was too late. Then he rolled his head toward me, his eyes wide with terror, and I realized he was tied up, but, mercifully, still alive. A piece of tape covered his mouth.

The moment I took a step toward him, I sensed movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw the dark figure out of my nightmares emerge from the shadows. Just as in my dreams, he was dressed in black from head to toe, his face obscured by a mask. I resisted the urge to flee and instead confronted my enemy.

“Hello, Todd.”

The killer stopped and cocked his head to one side. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he reached up and pulled off the mask, revealing the face I'd expected to see.

Todd stared back at me with burning hatred. “You think you're so damn smart, don't you, Killian? A lot of good it did you. You're going to die tonight.”

I've always heard that Lucifer was God's most beautiful creation. Standing there looking at Todd, I had

no doubt that evil could wear the mask of beauty quite easily.

“You said you’d let Jake go if I came.” I tried to keep my voice steady.

“I lied. I do that a lot. Never trust someone who’s tried to kill you.”

“You can have me. Just let Jake go.”

“I can have you? Oh, how generous! Here’s a newsflash for you—I already have you. And Jake. Why would I let either of you go?” He paused and peered into the hallway. “Where’s your little boyfriend? I saw him get out of the car, so I know he’s here with you.”

“We found your mom and dad.” I said, hoping to distract him.

“You were supposed to. Where’s Asher?”

“And Gilly?”

His eyes narrowed. “Where is Asher? I’m not asking again.”

“He’s downstairs.”

“Call him up here. Now.”

“I can’t.”

“Call him. Or I’ll kill Jake right now.”

I heard Jake whimper, muffled by the tape across his mouth, but I kept my eyes on Todd.

My mind raced. “He got sick when we...when we found your mom. He almost passed out. I left him outside.”

He growled. “It’s fine. Maybe he’ll be a good boy and wait for me to finish with you two so I can deal with him. If not, who cares? You’re the one I really wanted anyway. And now I’ve got you.”

Part of me just wanted to grab the gun and blast the smug look off his face, but a larger part needed to understand his reason for doing this. So many questions were left unanswered.

They all bubbled to the surface with one word: “Why?”

He seemed momentarily confused. “Why what?”

“Why all this killing? Why Seth? Why Zack?

Why...why kill your family?”

His expression hardened. “Seth was a fucking faggot. He deserved to die.”

“Then why did you kiss him?”

Emotion flashed across his eyes, but it was gone before I could identify it.

“How do you know that?”

“I read it in his journal. Is that why you killed him, Todd? Because he turned you down?”

“He didn’t turn me down!” He took a threatening step toward me, and I instinctively reached for the gun. “I don’t know what he wrote, but he kissed me. I stopped him and told him he was going to hell. That’s where all fags go. He’s burning now, and you’ll be joining him soon.”

My hand tightened on the butt of the gun nestled in the small of my back, but I left it where it was for the moment.

“What about you?” I asked quietly.

“I’m not gay!” He made an angry slashing gesture through the air, and a metallic glint took me back to the night in the park when he’d stabbed me. He was once again holding a knife, and some disconnected part of my brain wondered if it was the same one that he’d

used to kill Seth, stab me, and murder his family. I'd read somewhere once that serial killers often use the same weapon as a sort of lucky talisman.

I forced my mind away from those thoughts. "Why did you kill Zack? He wasn't gay, was he?"

Todd shook his head. "No. Just stupid. Stupid people are dangerous. I almost had you that night, but then we were rudely interrupted. I was so angry that I got careless. He saw me smash your windshield and leave the note. He read it after I left. The idiot actually had the nerve to try and blackmail me in exchange for staying quiet. He's quiet now, isn't he?"

He laughed coldly, and I felt a chill run down my spine.

"And what about your family? Why...why Gilly?"

He was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice carried a note of regret. "I didn't want to kill her. She got in the way, and I didn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?"

"I had just killed Mom and Dad when she came home. She was supposed to be gone longer. She wasn't supposed to be involved."

The matter-of-fact tone he used as he described murdering his parents horrified me.

"She started screaming, tried to call the police." He ran his free hand over his face. "I didn't really have a choice. So I killed her."

"Why kill your parents at all, though? I don't understand."

"Why would you? Nobody understands. Maybe I don't even understand."

He stopped and stared at me blankly.

When he started again, he was talking but clearly not seeing me. Lost in his own mind.

“I killed Dad first. He was watching TV in his recliner. I just walked up behind him and—” He made a slashing motion across his neck with the knife.

“Mom was harder,” he continued. “She heard the commotion and walked in just in time to see him bleeding out. She caught me off guard. Almost got away. I had to chase her down the hall and into the kitchen before I caught her.”

I stared at him in horror as he rambled on.

“That’s when Gilly came home. She was supposed to be out with friends until later tonight. I was expecting Jake, but not her. I felt bad about her, though, so I put her to bed. She always said her room was her sanctuary. She hated when I went in there without asking, but I think she’d want to be there.”

He looked up and took in my expression.

“Don’t look so shocked. It was long overdue. Everybody thinks we’re such a fucking perfect family. Dad’s a deacon at church, Mom volunteers at every function, the whole family in the front row every fucking Sunday.”

He scoffed. “If only you knew what went on behind closed doors. We’re punished at any imagined sin. Dad beats the shit out of us every time we do anything he decides is wrong, and Mom just stands by and watches. Nothing is ever good enough. I’m never good enough. I’m just a fucking—”

He broke off suddenly and ran his hand through his hair, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Todd, I’m sorry you were abused, but the killing has to stop. How will killing Jake help now? What difference will it make?”

“Oh, it was more than just abuse,” he rasped. “A few years ago, Daddy decided to teach me a lesson. He’d found some magazines in my room. I thought I’d hidden them, but nothing was ever safe from him. He wanted me to see what happened to faggots, so he packed me in the car and we went to visit Uncle Danny.”

My stomach sank as I realized where this story was going.

“Dad was convinced that Uncle Danny must have done something to me, touched me or something. Why else would his son like looking at naked men? And maybe he did. Maybe he did stuff to me, and I blocked it out. I don’t know. That’s what Dad said.

“Uncle Danny denied it, said he’d never do something like that, but Dad dragged him outside and started hitting him. And he kept on hitting him. And he didn’t stop. And then Uncle Danny was dead.

“Dad made me help him wrap the body in a blanket and put it in the trunk. Then we drove out to the woods, and he made me bury the body. He said it was a lesson for me, that all gays died a horrible death and burned in hell for eternity, but that it wasn’t too late for me to be saved. He made me kneel there in the woods in the middle of the night, right on Uncle Danny’s grave, and pray for forgiveness. Then we drove home and acted like nothing ever happened.”

“Jesus,” I whispered.

“Oh, you can leave him out of this. He let it all happen. Just...watched. He’s useless. That’s why I

decided to take things into my own hands. I sent Seth to hell. One less queer in the world. I punished my father and mother. And now I'm going to kill three more fags."

He looked up at me through his hair. "He'll be the most fun." He pointed at Jake, who had been following our exchange with terror-filled eyes. "Isn't that right, Jakie? You see, Jake here was always the golden boy. He could do no wrong. I was the older brother, so I was supposed to know better. Half the time, I took the blame even when it wasn't my fault, just to spare him and Gilly. I was always trying to be a good big brother. Do you know how many beatings I took for you, Jake?"

Todd walked over to the bed as I slid the gun from my waistband, still keeping it behind my back.

"And how did you repay me?" Todd was now speaking solely to Jake. It was almost as if he'd forgotten I was there. "By turning into a little faggot and screwing around with Gilly's boyfriend. Maybe I should have seen it coming. You were always so pretty."

He dragged the tip of the knife down Jake's cheek as Jake whimpered through his gag.

I aimed the gun at him. Things had gone far enough. "Todd, drop the knife and back away."

Todd glanced idly over his shoulder, freezing when he saw the weapon in my hands.

"Well, well, well. It looks like Little Killian finally grew a set after all those years of following that jackass Zack around like a sheep. I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"Back away from Jake now. I won't shoot you unless you give me a reason."

He looked at me and sneered. “Like I haven’t given you enough reasons already? You’re a pussy, Killian. You’ll never shoot me. You can’t do it.”

He turned back to Jake.

I looked down the sight on the barrel of the pistol and centered it on Todd’s back. My finger tightened, but I hesitated.

I’d threatened to shoot my father but would I have really followed through? When it came down to it, could I take the life of another human being?

“Maybe you should just shoot me.” His voice was softer now. There was almost a break in it. “It all ends tonight no matter what. I’m dying with or without your help. But not before Jake.”

Before I could even register what was happening, he thrust the knife toward Jake’s chest.

“No!” I screamed.

I pulled the trigger.

Everything went into slow motion, each detail engraving itself permanently into my memory.

The sound of the gunshot was deafening.

The bullet hit Todd just as he brought the knife down, driving him back and spinning his body on impact.

The knife struck Jake in his left shoulder but sank deep.

I stumbled back after I fired the shot. I wasn’t in a proper stance. My foot hit something and I heard the sound of shattering glass behind me, but I didn’t look. I didn’t dare turn away from Todd.

He stood facing me, disbelief written on his face, as I stared back.

I'd shot him.

I'm not sure which of us was more shocked.

Then, without breaking eye contact, he reached with his right hand for the knife protruding from Jake's chest and viciously yanked it out.

Jake let out a strangled scream, and I fired a second shot, this time hitting Todd squarely in the chest. His body jerked as the bullet ripped through him, sending him stumbling backwards.

The knife slipped from his grip and bounced with a clatter as it hit the floor.

Todd's mouth opened in a scream, but no sound came out. I pulled the trigger once more, and he slammed back into the wall before slowly sliding to the floor. He stared at me for a few more seconds, then I watched as the life left his eyes and his body slumped against the bedframe.

I kept the gun trained on Todd, my hands shaking and my ears ringing.

He remained motionless.

He was dead.

I had killed him.

I seemed unable to take it all in. I had just killed someone.

Yes, I had done it to save my friend, and ultimately, myself and Asher, but still. A life had ended, and I had taken it. I would have to live with that for the rest of my life.

I stood with the gun still pointed at him for a long time—I couldn't begin to guess how long. I was in shock. It could have been seconds, it could have been minutes, it could have been hours.

Gradually, though, I became aware of a crackling sound and a steadily increasing heat at my back. I dropped the gun and slowly turned around.

The lamp lay on its side, the chimney shattered on the floor. The oil had leaked out and caught fire from the exposed wick and was quickly spreading.

I rushed out into the hall and tried to stomp out the fire, but it was no use. The oil flared up as quickly as I extinguished the flames.

I had to get Jake out of here and fast.

I rushed to Jake's side and stared down at him with my heart in my throat. His eyes were closed, and he wasn't moving. He was so pale and there was so much blood that, for a second, I feared it had all been for nothing, but then I noticed the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

There was still hope.

I began fumbling with the knots, which were slippery with Jake's blood. I wasted several precious seconds before I realized it was hopeless.

Then I remembered the knife.

I searched the floor and spotted the blade half under the bed. I snatched it up and started sawing through the thick ropes. By the time I got him cut loose, the flames had completely engulfed the doorway.

I had to find another way out. I turned and spotted the window. I ran to look out, and my stomach dropped. There was no way. We were on the second floor with nothing below us but the hard ground.

The smoke was growing steadily thicker, making it harder and harder to breathe.

We needed air.

I remembered a fire safety class that said to get on the floor in a fire because the air would be clearer. I dragged Jake off the bed and lowered him to the floor, then rushed back to the window to open it. It was stuck. I started coughing.

I grabbed the desk chair and smashed the glass outward. For a moment, I stood gulping in the cool, fresh air greedily.

Then, with a deafening whoosh, the fire behind us suddenly burst into a raging inferno fed by this new source of oxygen. I dropped to the floor next to Jake as a blast of superheated air washed over us.

All I could think about was the pain. It was like the gust of hot air in your face when you open a hot oven but a thousand times hotter. My eyes felt like they'd been dried out, and my skin hurt so much it was all I could do to not scream.

Slowly, my mind began to function again. I forced my eyes open and stared at Jake's face. He looked so peaceful.

For a moment, I wanted to give up.

Todd may have not gotten the satisfaction of killing me, but I was going to die anyway.

My mind turned to Asher. He'd tried to talk me out of coming. He'd tried to stop me from going upstairs. I should have listened. Now I'd never see him again.

Then I heard something.

Voices?

At first, I thought I was imagining it, but then I listened intently and realized I could hear someone calling over the roar of the flames.

Asher.

And...a second voice? But who?

I pushed myself up to my hands and knees and screamed, "Help!"

"Killian?" It was Asher. "Where are you?"

"I'm trapped by the fire!" I called back. "Jake is alive, but he's hurt. He's unconscious."

"Is the bed burning?" It was the other voice. A woman, but I couldn't recognize it over the sound of raging inferno.

I looked over at the bed. The flames hadn't yet reached it.

"No."

"Get the blanket and wrap it around yourselves, then run through the fire as quickly as you can."

"Are you sure?"

There was a pause. "There's no other way."

I grabbed the heavy quilt and yanked it off the bed, then pulled myself to my feet. The heat was almost unbearable. I felt like I could feel my skin blistering. I had to hurry.

I tried to lift Jake, but he was dead weight. I let out a sob, and almost crumpled to the floor, but then Asher's voice carried over the din, "Come on, Kill. You can do it! I believe in you."

Through sheer willpower, I reached down deep inside and somehow found the strength to heave Jake up to his feet. I grabbed the quilt and threw it over our heads, tucking the loose ends around our bodies as tightly as I could with one hand.

It wasn't perfect, but I was out of time. It would have to do.

The light from the fire even penetrated the thick material of the quilt so I could see Seth's face quite clearly.

"I'm going to get you out of here," I promised him.

I squeezed my eyes shut and ran as fast as I could in the direction of the door, half carrying, half dragging Jake's limp body.

The heat was like nothing I had ever felt before. Every nerve in my body was shrieking in agony, and every breath seared my lungs and throat.

The quilt began to unwind from around us, tangling in my feet and tripping me. I would have fallen, but I crashed into what I assumed was the doorframe with a bone-crunching thud, the full weight of Jake's body adding to the impact. I ricocheted off, and the momentum actually carried us through the door and into the hall.

"This way!" a voice shouted from off to our right.

I stumbled blindly in that direction and didn't stop until I slammed into someone.

"Oof!" they grunted from the impact, and we went down in a tangle of smoldering fabric, arms, and legs. The quilt was ripped off us, and I saw Asher's soot smeared face, his eyes wide with panic.

Behind him stood Judy.

"Hurry!" she yelled. "We need to get out of here. That fire is spreading fast. This old house is going up like dry tinder."

"Jake is unconscious," I gasped, greedily gulping the comparatively cool air. "He's lost a lot of blood."

“Then we’ll have to carry him. Now move!”

It was much easier for the three of us to lift Jake, especially with Asher taking most of his weight. I tried to help, but an excruciating pain shot through my shoulder where I’d run into the door. I clenched my teeth and did my best to ignore it.

We staggered toward the stairs and careened down as quickly as we could. About halfway down, Asher missed a step and slipped. He crash landed on his butt, wrenching Judy and I off balance, and we half slid down the remaining stairs, landing at the bottom in an undignified heap.

We paused for a moment to catch our breath, but before we could even get back on our feet, a series of loud pops sounded from upstairs. The flames must have reached the cans of paint thinner.

“Come on,” Judy cried.

We hefted Jake once more, but we hadn’t gone more than a few feet before another, much bigger explosion shook the entire house.

“What the hell was that?” Asher yelled.

Before anyone could respond, an ominous creaking above our heads stopped us dead in our tracks. Seconds later, a large section of the ceiling crashed down only a few feet away, showering us with sparks and burning debris.

Suddenly, the front door flew open with a bang to reveal several uniformed police officers. We all stood staring at each other in surprise before the officers leapt into action.

Someone scooped up Jake. Other strong arms rushed the rest of us out of the burning house. Heavy

blankets were wrapped around our shoulders as we were herded toward a group of cruisers and a single ambulance parked in the yard away from the house.

“Is there anyone else in there?” one of the officers asked.

“No one alive,” I answered numbly.

He gave me a startled look, but I just turned to look at the house. Flames were leaping from the window of the bedroom where we’d been only minutes before. They could already be seen behind the glass of some of the other windows as well.

I heard someone call for the fire department and more ambulances, but everything was receding quickly, as if I were hearing it from afar.

Then everything went black.

The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground staring up at the stars. I had an oxygen mask over my face, and an emergency medical technician was kneeling over me with a concerned expression.

Over his shoulder, I saw an anxious Asher.

The EMT’s face relaxed when I focused on him.

“Hey there, champ. How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” I mumbled through the mask. “I just passed out. Take care of Jake.”

“He’s being cared for,” the EMT replied. “Don’t worry about him. I’m here to check on you. You got a little crispy in there. Inhaled a lot of smoke too. You really need to quit.”

When I didn't laugh at his little standup comedy routine, he quickly moved on, "Are you injured anywhere else?"

"My shoulder hurts. I ran into a wall."

He began to check me over as carefully as possible, but I still yelped with pain when he got to my shoulder.

"Sorry, kiddo. I need to see what's going on here." A few unpleasant moments later, he stopped torturing me and sat back. "I think you've dislocated it," he reported. "If that's all it is then that's easy enough to reset, but we'll need to get you to the hospital for some x-rays first, just to be sure. Out here in the field, all I can do is immobilize your arm and give you something for the pain. Think you can handle it?"

I nodded.

"Atta boy."

He worked quickly, and he had me fixed up with a sling in no time. Then he handed me a couple of pain relievers. "Take those and try to keep your arm as still as possible. I'm going to go check on your friend now, but if you need anything more, just holler."

Asher quickly took his place as I swallowed the pills dry.

Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. "You almost died in there."

"I was ready to give up but then I heard you calling."

"Are you... Are you okay?"

"I...don't know," I answered honestly. I couldn't take my eyes off the burning house.

"What happened in there? I heard gunshots."

“I shot him. I killed Todd.”

“Todd?”

“I had to. I did it to save Jake.”

“Todd was the killer?”

I tore my gaze away from the blaze to look at Asher. His eyes were wide with horror.

“I had to do it,” I pleaded with him, and his expression softened.

“You did what you had to do. If he was the killer, then he deserved it.”

“I didn’t want to. But he wouldn’t stop. He was going to kill Jake.”

I tried to sit up, but pain shot through my shoulder once more. I managed to force myself into a sitting position using my other arm. Asher placed a hand on my good shoulder to steady me, his eyes filled with concern.

“Maybe you should just lay down—”

“He killed Seth, and Zack, and Gilly. He tried to kill Jake. He was going to kill me. I shot him, Ash. I shot him three times.”

“Kill, it’s okay. You’re okay. You saved Jake. You did it. I’ve got you.”

I collapsed against Asher’s chest as sobs racked my body. He gently wrapped his arms around me, my injured arm cradled between us. He rocked me back and forth on the lawn while I watched the house burn over his shoulder.

I thought about what he’d said.

Had I saved Jake?

I glanced over at the ambulance where they were working on him. They had him inside so I couldn’t see

him, only the backs of the EMTs working to keep him alive.

I was too late to save Gilly or her parents, just like I'd been too late to save Seth. But maybe, just maybe, I'd saved at least one life tonight.

I searched for Judy and spotted her talking to a police officer who seemed to be recording her. Why was she even here? I thought she'd returned to California.

Just then, another ambulance screamed onto the scene, lights flashing, and one of the EMTs jumped out of the ambulance where they were attending to Jake and started across the lawn toward the new arrival.

"Excuse me," I called out to her as I sat up.

She paused.

"The boy you're trying to save, will he be all right?"

She crossed over to us and squatted down with a kind smile. "Are you the kid who pulled him out of there?"

I nodded. "I had help."

"Well from what I hear, you were a real hero. You got him out in time. He's injured pretty badly, and he inhaled a lot of smoke, but he's going to make it."

I sagged against Asher in relief.

Every square inch of my body was in agony—I only hoped the painkiller would kick in before the adrenaline wore off—but Jake was alive.

For the moment, that was all that mattered.

Chapter 23

I woke up with a gasp, sitting bolt upright.

Now that the faceless man had a face, he'd stopped haunting my dreams, but the nightmares hadn't stopped. He'd just been replaced by fire and Todd's unseeing stare. Seth sometimes still made guest appearances, but his presence felt more comforting than anything. He could transform a nightmare into a good dream simply by his arrival.

He hadn't shown up tonight, however—only the flames.

I was concentrating on my breathing, trying to calm down, when I felt a hand on my back.

“You okay?” Asher asked.

“Yeah. Just a dream. Sorry I woke you.”

“Shh, don't be. It's all good. I got you.”

I laid back down and snuggled into his side as he wrapped his arms around me tightly. He spent almost every night with me since I was released from the hospital.

I'd only had to stay one night for the smoke inhalation. My shoulder was reset in the ER, and I'd had to wear a sling for the first few days, but it was getting better each day. I only had to take painkillers a few times a day.

Jake was still in the hospital. Because he'd been unconscious, he'd inhaled a lot more smoke and searing hot air, damaging his airways and lungs. Combined with the stabbing, which was quite deep and had done some considerable damage to his shoulder requiring surgery to repair, he'd been in an induced coma ever since the fire.

Judy kept us updated on his progress. The doctors assured her that he would make a full recovery.

I eventually fell back to sleep and mercifully didn't wake again until the sun was streaming through the window.

For a moment, I was confused. Something had woken me, but what? Then I saw Asher sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Breakfast is ready," he said, reaching out to play with my hair. "You might want to get a move on. We got some news."

I sat up. "Jake?"

He nodded. "I don't know anything more though. Adam is on the phone with Judy now."

I jumped out of bed and rushed for the door.

"Whoa!" Asher said with a laugh. "You might want to put some clothes on first."

I looked down and realized I was naked. I gave him an embarrassed smirk and grabbed a pair of sweatpants from the floor, pulling them on as I hopped around on one foot.

Asher shook his head. "Not that I'm complaining, I'm definitely enjoying the floor show, but it would probably be easier if you slowed down."

I stuck out my tongue at him while I pulled the pants over my hips. I grabbed a T-shirt and pulled it on as I yanked open the door and dashed downstairs, Asher following at a more sedate pace.

Adam was just hanging up as I slid into the kitchen, almost knocking him over.

"Well, good morning to you," he said.

Mom turned around from where she was standing at the stove finishing up cooking breakfast. “You sure know how to make an entrance,” she said drily.

Mom had driven down as soon as Adam called her to tell her what had happened. She’d been there before they even released me from the hospital, and she’d been staying with us ever since. I had to admit, it was nice to have her around.

“That was Judy?” I asked as Asher joined us in the kitchen, taking a seat at the table next to Kane.

“Yes, Jake is awake.”

“Since when?”

“They brought him out of his coma last night.”

“How is he doing?”

“Judy said he’s doing as well as could be expected. He’s...upset, understandably. They have a therapist coming to see him today.”

“When can I see him?”

Adam and Mom exchanged a look.

“What?” I demanded.

“You should probably give him a few days,” Mom said gently.

“Why?”

“He’s been through a lot. You’ve had a few days to process it all, but he’s been unconscious.”

“Judy will let us know when she thinks he’s ready,” Adam added, then glanced at Mom again. “But you should also be prepared that he may not want to see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“It might be upsetting for him. You could be a reminder of what happened,” Adam explained.

“Do you know something? Has he said that? Why do you and Mom keep looking at each other like that?”

Adam sighed. “We don’t know anything. It’s just a possibility we’ve discussed and thought you should be aware, just in case.”

I nodded and sat down at the table next to Asher. “Then I guess we’ll have to just wait and see.”

I hesitated in the door to the hospital room.

A nurse was checking the machine next to the lone bed in the room.

She noticed me and stopped to give me an encouraging smile. “It’s all right. He’s just sleeping. You can come on in.”

I walked slowly to the bedside and stared down at Jake. His long hair had been chopped off unevenly. It had been almost a week since he’d woken from his coma. I’d finally gotten the go-ahead from Judy the night before.

“What happened to his hair?” I asked in a soft voice.

“It got singed pretty badly in the fire,” the nurse explained. “They cut off the burned parts in the ER. They weren’t trying to make him pretty.” She gave me another smile. “I’ll leave you boys alone.”

She left, but my gaze was fixed on Jake. He looked so peaceful lying there. You never would have guessed that barely two weeks before his entire family had died violently.

I reached out and took his hand.

At my touch, his eyes fluttered open. For a second, he seemed confused and maybe a little alarmed, but then he saw me and all the pain and confusion I had expected suddenly came into focus.

“Hi,” I said. It felt inane, but I didn’t know what to say.

He attempted a smile but didn’t quite pull it off. “Hi. How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long. A few minutes maybe.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“Hey, I’ve been in the hospital. I know how little sleep you get.”

He gave me another sad smile. “What do you think of my hair?”

“It’s different.”

He scoffed. “It looks like shit.”

“It’ll look better after you get a real haircut.”

“I keep reaching for it, but it’s all gone.”

“Short hair suits you.” There was an awkward pause. “How are you feeling?”

He made a face and glanced away. “Physically or mentally.” His eyes met mine once more. “Why don’t you pull up a chair and sit down? I think we need to talk.”

I’d been dreading this moment, but I did as he said. I decided to take the initiative and get the hard part out of the way.

“I guess I should...say I’m sorry.”

He looked surprised. “For what? Saving my life?”

“Well, I mean, I—”

“Killing Todd?”

I winced.

“Killian, I don’t blame you for what happened. In fact, I owe you my life.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he cut me off. “I don’t know what that’s really worth at the moment, but if you hadn’t done what you did, I wouldn’t be here at all.”

“If I’d waited for the police maybe—”

“If you’d waited for the police, I’d probably be dead, and you know it.”

“But I.. I shot your brother.”

“You didn’t have a choice.” He paused. “Aunt Judy told me you may have to go to trial.”

I nodded miserably. “It’s looking that way.”

“But can’t you say you were just defending yourself?”

“Yeah, the defense lawyer Mom hired says we don’t have anything to worry about, that it’s only a formality. Since everybody knows my dad, though, there’s a clear conflict of interest, so they’re moving the trial to Wicomico County. The lawyer thinks I’m pretty much guaranteed a ruling of justifiable homicide. Even so, it’s scary. The whole thing has gotten so much publicity, they couldn’t just ignore it.”

The story had been all over the papers and local news. Several national television networks had even called and asked for interviews. Adam did his best to protect me and screen it all, and, of course, we turned down any interviews.

I just wanted life to go back to normal, but I didn’t know it would ever be normal again.

"Speaking of your dad, how are things there?"

"Not great." I shrugged. "Not that I have any sympathy for him. Everything is his own fault. He was already under investigation, but with the increased attention, people are really out for blood now. After all, he basically tried to sweep Seth's death under the rug, and then, as a direct result of him ignoring that murder, the killer killed several other people, and then his son used a gun registered in his name to shoot the killer. It's...not good optics. And that's without even mentioning the fact that he beat up his own son and wife and put them both in the hospital.

"They're even looking into some past cases that he oversaw. Some people have come forward to say he showed clear bias against cases involving queer people. I think it's safe to say his career is over. He may even face jail time if the state brings any formal charges, which seems increasingly likely."

I realized I was rambling and talking almost entirely about myself. "But I mean...that's all nothing compared to what you must be going through."

He looked away. After a few minutes, he started speaking, his voice thick with emotion. "It's hard waking up to realize you're an orphan. Even my siblings are gone. Aunt Judy is doing what she can, but I just... I feel really alone."

"I would have come sooner—"

"I know. I..wasn't ready. I don't know if I'm ready now, but my therapist said I needed to see other people. She also thinks it would be good to talk about what happened with somebody besides her and Aunt Judy. But it's hard, you know?"

“Yeah,” I agreed. I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk about what happened either, but I couldn’t exactly say that. “What, uh... What do you want to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Where do we even start? I guess you can tell me what happened after Todd stabbed me and I blacked out. I mean, I know you shot him, and I know there was a fire, and that you rescued me, but that’s about it.”

“There’s not much more to tell,” I said quickly. “I started the fire by accident. I tripped over the oil lamp. It spread so fast. I’m, uh, sorry I burned your house down.”

Jake gave me a look. “I’m not. It’s not like I’d ever want to live there again after what happened. Besides, Aunt Judy says there will be insurance money, maybe a lot of it. Plus, whatever I inherit. She says I definitely won’t have to worry about college.” He gave me a sour version of his famous lopsided smile. “So in way, maybe I should be thanking you.”

I gasped. “Jake...”

“I’m kidding. Mostly. I mean, it’s not like I had good memories there. You heard what Todd said. It was hell growing up there, and that wasn’t even all of it.”

“Jake, you don’t have to—”

“I know I don’t have to, but I feel I owe it to you. You almost died trying to save me, even after the way I treated you after...” He sighed. “And there are some things I need to get off my chest.”

He closed his eyes and seemed to be gathering his strength. When he opened them again, they were filled with an even deeper sense of sadness.

“Todd told you a little. I guess the technical term is physical abuse. Dad physically abused us. It was all of us, but he seemed to be a lot harder on Todd, especially after he found the magazines under his bed. They were bisexual porn, not even like...hardcore gay stuff. I don't even know where he got them, but Dad freaked out. He was screaming and yelling about Uncle Danny, and he kept hitting Todd. It was awful. I just remember hiding in a closet with Gilly. We thought he was going to kill Todd.

“But then, all of a sudden, Dad left with Todd. Part of me thought we'd never see him again, but the next morning, there they were at the breakfast table acting like nothing had ever happened. I... I didn't know what happened until Todd told you.”

He paused and took a deep, shaky breath, then continued. “I guess Todd had always been a little odd, but he changed after that. He became really obsessed with church, as if he was trying to make up for something.”

I remembered a comment Jake had made once in the school parking lot. “One time you told Todd that if he didn't leave you alone, you'd tell your parents about the magazines under his bed. Is that what you were talking about?”

“Yeah. That was a really fucked-up thing to say. I'm sure he didn't have any magazines anymore. I was just trying to get to him.”

“So...Todd was gay? Bi?”

Jake shrugged. “I don't know. We never talked about it. After that time he caught us together, he went on and on about how it was a sin, yet the whole time he

was just staring at me with this really creepy expression. I almost felt like he was jealous or something. Then he asked me why I hadn't told him."

"What did you say?"

"That it was none of his business. It wasn't like he'd told me about himself. He just stormed away. We didn't really talk about it after that."

"So what happened? What finally pushed him over the edge? I'd pretty much given up and left the investigation to the police. I wasn't bothering him anymore. What made him snap like that?"

Jake stared up at the ceiling. A single tear escaped and slid down his cheek. "That was my fault."

I shook my head in confusion. "How could it have been your fault?"

He didn't answer for a few seconds, then began falteringly. "Dad... I..." He stopped and drew a shaky breath. "After Asher made his big announcement at the assembly, I was really upset."

"Jake, I'm so sorry about that. I should have told you right away about Asher and me, but I didn't know how. And I didn't know he was going to come out like that on stage."

He shrugged slightly. "What's done is done. But like I said, it really upset me—to the point where I was having all kinds of really dark thoughts about hurting myself."

He paused and gulped a few times. "Then I found one of those flyers that Asher was passing out all over school about the GSA. It had some hotline on it for gay and lesbian youth, so I decided to call. I ended up talking to some counselor for like an hour. I guess it helped,

because I really didn't think about it again until Dad found the flyer in the trash.

"I think by now you can guess his reaction. He went ballistic. He assumed it was Todd's flyer, and, for whatever reason, Todd didn't bother to correct him. He just took the beating...and I let him. I was scared to admit it was me.

"That night, though, Todd came to my room after everyone was asleep." Jake started crying. "He said I owed him. He...he..."

"Jake, you don't have to tell me anymore." I was horrified. I didn't think I wanted to hear the rest of it.

He shook his head and pulled himself together. "He wanted me to...do stuff with him. I told him no, but he kept insisting. I told him if he didn't leave me alone, I'd tell Dad he tried to rape me. We both knew if I did that, Dad would probably kill him.

"He left me alone, but the next day..."

"Jake, I'm so sorry."

"It was all my fault."

"No! It wasn't. Todd made his own decisions. It's not your fault!"

Jake turned his head and looked directly into my eyes. "Isn't it? If I had told you the first time you asked me that it was Todd I saw talking to Seth, maybe you would have figured it all out sooner. When I talked to him about it, he promised he'd tell you himself. I knew he wouldn't, but it took the pressure off me."

He paused and wiped at his eyes.

"You know what the worst part is? I even suspected that maybe Todd had something to do with Seth's murder. I was even more sure after Zack. I just

couldn't let myself believe it fully. It was like if I didn't say it out loud, it wasn't real."

"Okay, maybe you should have told me, but you're still not to blame for his actions. Todd was obviously very broken. He was sick."

He laughed bitterly. "My whole family was sick, every single one of them. My dad was abusive and beat my uncle to death, my mom just let him abuse us kids, and my brother was a psychotic murderer. So what does that make me?"

"You and Gilly seemed...normal."

"Gilly was so obsessed with you that she was convinced she could turn you straight."

I shrugged. "Compared to the rest of your family, that seems pretty normal."

He stared at me for a second, then started laughing. There was a slightly hysterical tinge to it that set me on edge, though, and his laughter slowly dissolved into tears.

I didn't know what to say after that, so we sat in awkward silence for a few minutes. The only sounds in the room were Jake's sniffles.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "So, uh, when do you get out of the hospital?"

"Probably tomorrow," he said, reaching for a tissue to blow his nose, then wiped his face with the back of his hand. "I guess I'm going to live with Aunt Judy. She's the only family I have left now. She wants me to move to California with her."

"Are you going to go?"

He shrugged again. "I guess. It's not like I really have a choice. She says it'll be a fresh start for me."

“I mean, she’s kind of right. You have a chance at a new beginning somewhere without all the bad memories.”

He looked me in the eye once more. “Then why does it feel like the end instead?”

I didn’t stay much longer. We didn’t seem to have anything else to talk about. I couldn’t exactly tell him how Asher had been such an amazing source of support through everything, barely leaving my side. Or how everyone at school was treating me as if I were some sort of hero.

I certainly didn’t feel like a hero.

After a few more minutes of awkward small talk, I said goodbye and made my exit.

I ran into Judy as she was getting off the elevator. “Killian! I’m so glad I didn’t miss you.”

“Hey,” I replied awkwardly.

I hadn’t seen her since the night of the fire, and I still wasn’t sure how I felt about her.

“Did you just come from seeing Jake?”

I nodded.

“Thank you. I know that meant a lot to him.”

“It was rough.”

She gave me a sad smile. “I’m sure it was. I’ve been meaning to stop by and see you, but I’ve had my hands full.”

“It’s okay,” I mumbled.

“Do you have a few minutes right now?”

I couldn’t very well say no without appearing rude, so I allowed her to lead me over to an empty waiting room.

Once we were seated, I looked everywhere but at her. I was staring at an outdated magazine cover proclaiming some scandalous celebrity affair when she started speaking.

“First off, I wanted to thank you for saving Jake’s life. I’m only sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

I looked up at her. “Why were you there at all?” That question had occurred to me several times since that night. “I thought you were flying back to California.”

“I did. Then I started having nightmares every night, premonitions about my family dying and the house on fire.”

Something about that phrase triggered a memory. The first time I entered the Sheridans house, I’d experienced a flash of a vision. For the briefest of moments, I’d seen the house engulfed in flames. I’d brushed it off at the time, but now the hair stood up on the back of my neck.

“I finally flew back to Maryland without telling anyone,” Judy was saying. “I had just arrived that night. As soon as I landed, I knew something was wrong. I tried calling my sister and, when she didn’t answer, I even tried the landline several times, but no one picked up. So I rented a car and drove to the house. I knew as soon as I arrived that I was too late.”

“You weren’t too late. You saved our lives.”

She shook her head. “I was too late to save my sister. Or Gilly. You saved your lives. I just helped a little.” She tipped her head to one side and gave me a measuring look. “I make you uncomfortable, don’t I?”

“No!” I said quickly—too quickly.

“Is it because of my gifts?”

I started to deny it again, then decided there was no point in lying to a psychic. I shrugged instead.

“You shouldn’t be afraid of them, Killian. Mine or yours.”

“I don’t have any gifts,” I insisted, but I thought about the split-second vision of flames and Seth showing me his journal.

She raised one eyebrow. “Maybe not, but I think you do. If it turns out I’m right, you’ll be forced to deal with them eventually. Trust me on that.” She reached into her purse and pulled out a card. “If it ever happens, I want you to feel free to call me. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

I reluctantly accepted the card.

She stood up and stared down at me expectantly, so I rose as well. She enveloped me in a hug, which I returned halfheartedly at best. She stepped back and gave me a smile.

“Good luck, Killian. You have a bright future ahead of you, as long as you keep your eyes open.”

She winked at me and walked away.

I stared down at the card she’d given me. It simply read “*Judy Cassara, Interior Decorator*” with her phone number and address in California printed underneath.

I hadn’t even known she was an interior decorator. It struck me as such an innocuous occupation for someone like her.

I tucked the card into my pocket and started for the elevators once more. Asher was waiting for me at

home. If ever I'd needed a hug from my boyfriend, it was right then.

Adam parked the car, and we climbed out. Several months had passed and spring had exploded full force upon the Shore seemingly overnight. The week before, temperatures had been in the low forties, while that day we were comfortable in short-sleeved shirts.

Brightly colored daffodils were blooming in clusters, and the sky was a brilliant, clear blue. It was an idyllic scene except for the fact that we were in a cemetery.

It was my first time coming to Seth's grave. Kane's too. Only Adam had been to visit before.

Kane carried a small potted perennial to plant on his brother's grave. Adam carried a garden trowel, and I had a jug of water, even though we'd had plenty of rain recently. The ground squished slightly under our feet as Adam led us across the manicured lawn.

Wordlessly, Adam, Kane, and I knelt in a small semicircle in front of Seth's simple granite headstone. I ignored the wetness seeping through the knees of my jeans.

Adam dug into the soft earth, then shook the plant out of its pot and placed it tenderly in the hole. Kane filled in the dirt around it, and I watered it.

It was a bleeding heart. It wasn't blooming yet, but it would in time—just as we would heal in time.

Already, signs of healing were evident. My nightmares grew further apart, Adam wasn't quite so afraid to let us out of his sight, and much to our relief, I

had been cleared of all charges. Kane had even started talking to Eve a little, now and then.

Steve was all moved in, which felt so natural, there hadn't even been an adjustment period. It had involved some redecorating, though, as Adam let go of some things to make room for Steve's furniture that he didn't want to part with, but I thought it was kind of symbolic of the blending of two households.

The house was maybe just a little small for four guys, but no one seemed to mind. We felt like a family.

Adam had invited him to come to the cemetery with us, but Steve said he thought it should just be the three of us, those who were closest to Seth. He was always thoughtful, like that. He said he'd have a special dinner ready for us when we got home.

Asher and I were still happily dating. The GSA had grown a little over the last few months, and a few more guys had started to attend—a couple of them even came out, saying Asher and I were inspirations to them. We'd chosen the name Rainbow Alliance, and dedicated the club to Seth.

Jake had moved to California with Judy, and I hadn't heard a word from him since. My texts went unread and my calls unanswered.

My therapist said to give him space and time and maybe he'd come around, but, if not, that was his choice to make, and it might be what he needs to heal.

I did my best to respect his decisions.

We'd gotten an old-fashioned Christmas card from Judy around the holidays with a photo of her and Jake tucked inside. Jake looked as if he'd been forced to

take the picture against his will. She'd simply signed it "Judy and Jake."

Adam had muttered that, for once, he would have preferred one of those long newsletters with updates about each member of the family. Steve had pointed out that they probably didn't want to think about the past year, let alone write about it. Adam conceded.

Mom had gone back to Pennsylvania after a couple of weeks, but she'd returned for Christmas, which was nice, if a little somber.

Perhaps most healing for me was the fact that official charges had been filed against my father, including obstruction of justice and civil rights violations. Both he and the police chief resigned, but the police chief was cooperating fully with the state and, as my lawyer put it, he was singing like a canary.

If Dad was found guilty, which it sure looked like he would be, he was facing the possibility of years in prison. Under federal law, the penalties for the obstruction charges, which included tampering with witnesses and influencing a legal process, could result in up to ten years behind bars. Since some of his decisions had resulted in death, the civil rights violations carried even heavier consequences—up to life in prison, potentially.

Then there were the fines, which were substantial, and on top of all of that, were the civil cases...even the threat of a class action lawsuit.

To say my father's career was over was an understatement, and I have to admit that I took great pleasure in that. My therapist said that was completely normal and that I shouldn't feel guilty about it. I didn't.

Adam clearing his throat brought me back to the present. Kane was blinking too. We must have all gotten a little lost in our thoughts for a few minutes.

“I feel like we should say a something, but I can’t think of anything that feels appropriate,” Adam said. He sounded emotional.

Kane reached out and traced the engraved letters of Seth’s name. “Thanks for being an amazing big brother. I miss you.”

Adam nodded and wiped away a tear. “Thanks for being an amazing son. I miss you too.”

Not to be left out, I said, “Thanks for being an amazing friend. I also miss you.”

“Remember that time Seth found an abandoned baby squirrel that fell out of its nest and insisted on hand feeding it?” Kane asked.

“Ha.” Adam said. “I sure do, because I’m the one who had to get every two hours to feed it during the night. Remember how he used to check on Mr. Clements because he said, and I quote, he was all alone and it just broke his heart?”

They exchanged stories of Seth’s big heart and sweet nature for several minutes while I just listened. I’d experienced his kindness firsthand, but I didn’t have stories to share the way they did.

Finally, they wound down, chuckling at a particularly funny story of Seth insisting they stop the car so he could rescue a cat that he thought had been hit by a car, but it turned out to be a skunk. He got sprayed for his efforts, and Eve had refused to let him get back in the car, making him walk the last half mile to their house and burning his clothes.

“He was always looking out for the strays,” Kane said.

“Must be why he picked me,” I said softly.

Adam pulled us both in for a hug, then kissed his fingertips and touched the headstone.

We sat for a moment longer, then Adam stood first with Kane following.

“We should probably get going,” Adam said.

“Don’t want whatever Steve is cooking up to get cold.”

“Go ahead,” I said. “I’ll catch up. I just want a minute alone.”

Adam patted me on the shoulder, then he and Kane headed back to the car.

I watched them go for a few seconds, then turned back to the grave.

“Hey,” I said, suddenly feeling a little silly talking to a stone. “I just wanted to say thank you. You changed my life in so many ways I don’t even know where to start. Everything is so much better now. I love living with Adam and Steve and Kane. I still sometimes feel like I stole your life, but my shrink says I shouldn’t think like that, and that you would have wanted me to be happy. After hearing so many stories about you from Adam and Kane, I’m starting to think he’s right.

“But anyway, I thought maybe you’d like to know that the guy who killed you is dead. He won’t hurt anyone else. Turned out he was just a sick kid himself. Maybe you already knew that, though. If so, then I guess you know that I killed him. It’s a lot. But I’m dealing with it.

“Oh, and I don’t know if that was really you that showed me your journal or just a dream, but it was you,

thanks. And if you can just show up whenever you want, maybe you should come say hi sometimes. I really do miss you.”

I started to get up, but then remembered the letter he’d written me. “One more thing... I think I chose the right path. Thanks for helping me open my eyes. I love you.”

I stood and started back to the car.

About halfway there, I glanced back over my shoulder and froze.

For just a second, I thought I was Seth standing by the grave, a big smile on his face.

But then I blinked, and he was gone.

“Just wishful thinking,” I said to myself, then turned and hurried to catch up to my family.

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.

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