

JOSH ATEROVIS

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

A Killian Kendall Mystery
Book II

REAP THE WHIRLWIND

Book 2 of the Killian Kendall Mysteries

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Reader Advisory

Reap the Whirlwind is a murder mystery that includes depictions of death, some of which are described in graphic detail, including the death of a main character. The story explores sensitive themes such as depression, sexual assault, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and acts of violence. Reader discretion is advised.

Prologue

I stood at the edge of the water, the grass damp beneath my bare feet, gray fog curling around my ankles like fingers. The river stretched out before me, black and endless, swallowing the moonlight in its oily sheen. Not even the stars dared reflect on its still surface.

It was quiet. Too quiet. That kind of stillness that sets your teeth on edge, awakening a primeval fear.

Then the water stirred.

First, just a ripple.

Then another.

I stepped back, heart jackhammering, but the fog pressed tighter, thick as grief, wrapping around my throat. Something broke the surface—a hand. Pale, skeletal, the skin sloughing off at the knuckles.

Another followed.

And another.

Reaching, grasping.

I tried to scream, but the sound stuck in my chest, frozen there like everything else inside me.

"Help me," whispered a voice, burbling to the surface from beneath the dark water.

I knew that voice. Knew it the way I knew the taste of tears.

It was Joey.

Slowly, his face rose up from the depths, bloated and grinning, his long blond hair flowing behind him, until he broke the surface. His milky eyes locked onto mine, trapping me in his gaze.

"You left me to die." His voice still sounded wet, somehow.

"No," I croaked, stumbling back.

But my feet slipped on the wet grass.

A hand grabbed my ankle, its grip like a vise, despite the clammy, spongy feel of its skin, and a girl emerged next, her mouth working like she was trying to scream underwater.

"This is all your fault," she gurgled.

"I didn't know—" I tried to say.

But then came another hand, grasping at my other leg.

"You killed me," he accused.

One after another, they rose from the water like memories I thought I'd buried, but they clung to me now, hungry.

"I'm so disappointed in you."

"You promised..."

"You still want me, don't you?" Joey again, inches from my face. "Then come and get it..."

Their hands clutched at my legs, cold and sodden and impossible to fight. Nails dug into my skin, dragging me down, down, into the black river. Cold water encased my body until it closed over my head. I kicked, clawed, screamed—but it only filled my lungs with silence.

The darkness swallowed me.

And then—

I sat bolt upright, gasping.

The room was dim, morning light gilding the edges of the blinds. Sweat plastered the sheets to my skin. The sound of my breath—fast, ragged—was the

only thing that tethered me to the present, to my childhood bedroom.

But the weight was still there.
Like water in my chest. Like hands on my ankles.
Like guilt.
Like grief.
It was time.

I opened the door and stepped into the well-appointed office, closing the door behind me. The room was intimately lit by incandescent table lamps instead of institutional fluorescent overhead lighting. A thick rug covered the floor, and two leather armchairs sat facing a massive dark-colored wooden desk. Glass-fronted barrister bookcases lined the walls.

Behind the desk sat a small man, slightly balding, wearing a dark brown, high quality suit, and glasses.

"Hello, Will," he said. "It's been a while."

"Yes," I said simply.

"Sit down, please," he motioned toward the chairs and smiled encouragingly, and I sat on the closest one. "It's good to see you. What brings you here?"

"You said when I was ready to talk to call you."

"And you're ready to talk now?"

I nodded.

"Why now and not before?"

I shrugged.

"Just ready? Or did something happen that made you change your mind?"

"I keep having these dreams..."

He sat, waiting for me to elaborate.

"I don't even know where to begin," I said. "So much has happened since I saw you last. I need to talk to someone. I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Instead of starting at the end and working back, why don't we start at the beginning? Pretend we've never talked before. Tell me everything."

The beginning. It seemed like so long ago now. Could it really have been only a few months?

"That could take a while," I said.

He shrugged and pushed a button on his intercom. "Cheryl, cancel the rest of my afternoon appointments, please."

"Yes, sir," she answered.

He looked up and smiled, his kind eyes radiating understanding. "Now we've got plenty of time."

I took a deep breath.

Chapter 1

Nothing can stay the same forever. We get in trouble in life when we think it can and will. Everything changes, or as King Solomon said in the Bible and The Byrds sang in the '60s, to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. It's not a particularly easy lesson to learn. Or a fun one for that matter. I learned it the summer between high school and college, and my life would never be the same.

We burst into the house, laughing and shoving each other playfully. We were both sweaty from playing basketball on the driveway. The black macadam drew heat like a magnet. For what must have been the millionth time, I looked at my best friend Joey and thought about how different we were. We were a study in contrasts, a true testament to the old adage that opposites attract. We'd been inseparable since we were toddlers, but we couldn't have been more different.

Joey was tall, a little over six feet, and I was...well, short. I was five four barefoot, but I eked out five foot five in shoes...if the heel was thick enough. He had poker-straight pale blonde hair that he wore long, cut off bluntly just above his shoulders. He'd pulled it back into a ponytail while we played, but half of it had fallen down and was stuck now to his face. My black hair was so curly I had to keep it cut short or it sprung out into an afro. Joey had a year-round tan that darkened to a golden brown on the first day of summer. I had pale white skin that burned over and over without ever turning into a tan, turned an unflattering shade of red if you even looked at

me funny, and broke into freckles across my nose at the first hint of sunlight. Joey had these huge puppy-dog brown eyes while mine were a deep blue.

Actually, my eyes are my favorite feature. They are so dark they are almost violet, framed by incredibly long black lashes. My other best friend, Laura, was always saying that she would kill to have my eyes.

The differences didn't end at the physical, however. Even our personalities were polar opposites. Joey was gregarious and boisterous, while I was quiet and thoughtful. He was caught up in the popularity games at school, collecting friends like trading cards and moving seamlessly between cliques. He was desperate to become an influencer and spent huge amounts of time filming videos that never got more than a few dozen likes. I was content to stay in the background and focus on my two besties. I almost never used social media. Joey took everything at face value and rarely looked past the surface, while I tended to be introspective, always looking for a deeper meaning in things.

Laura, Joey, and I were almost inseparable all through school, earning us the nickname the Three Musketeers. We'd grown up in the same neighborhood and played together since we were old enough to walk.

Since we'd graduated a few months ago though, things had started to change. We didn't see each other nearly as much as we used to. Laura met Gabriel, or Gabe, as he preferred to be called, at her summer job on the boardwalk in Ocean City. They started dating, and were soon inseparable. Then, it turned out that they were even attending the same college, and a summer fling turned into something more serious.

College turned out to be the biggest blow to the Three Musketeers in more ways than one. When Joey and Laura started college at Pemberton University, a small liberal arts school founded in the early twentieth century as an alternative to the stuffier, business-oriented college on the other side of town, I was left behind. It was my own choice, and it had seemed like the right call at the time, but I'd since questioned my decision.

Both Joey and Laura had been accepted at other schools, but picked Pemberton when I chose to take a year off to work before going to college. Officially, I was recovering from academic burnout, taking a break from the pressures of academic life and using the gap year to recharge, de-stress, and refocus on my academic goals.

The truth was my parents would only agree to help me pay for college if I went to Christian school, and I couldn't imagine going off to school without Joey and Laura. My plan was to save up enough money to pay for my own tuition at Pemberton...eventually. Sure, I'd be a year or two behind my friends, but at least we'd be at the same school, and, in the meantime, we were still in the same town, keeping the Musketeers intact.

There was only one problem in our cunning plan: I'd hardly seen them since classes started. They had an entire new life of settling into classes, attending campus events, and meeting new people.

Meanwhile, nothing really changed for me. I was still working at my dad's church and dating my on-again-off-again—more off than on—high school girlfriend, Beth. She was from the neighborhood, too, and, while she was a year younger and had never really been a part

of our little clique, she'd been around enough that when we started dating, no one was surprised.

If Beth had her way, we would have been engaged long ago. I was always the one who put things on hold, and Beth was the one who talked me into going out again. I was perfectly content just to hang out with Joey and Laura. In fact, Beth was the only girl I had ever dated. Going to dances with Laura because she didn't have a date doesn't count.

Laura claims I have a problem with commitment, and maybe I do, but I think I've just watched too many romantic movies. I want the kind of romance where you light up when you hear their name and melt down when they walk into the room. I wanted fireworks, and there were none with Beth. We got along fine; she was familiar and comfortable, but there was just no...spark.

Since Beth was in her senior year of high school, we still hung out now and then, though not as often as she'd like. I tried to keep my schedule as open as possible, just in case I heard from Joey.

My vigilance paid off. After several weeks of not seeing each other, Joey had finally called me that morning to see if I wanted to hang out. It was a Saturday, so I invited him over. We weren't doing anything special—just playing some basketball, Joey beating me soundly every game—but I was surprised how much I had missed him. Just being with him again filled a hole in me that I hadn't even fully recognized was there.

Without thinking, I suddenly grabbed him in a tight hug.

"Dude!" he said, pushing me away roughly.
"What the hell was that for?"

"Language!" my mother called from the next room.

Joey rolled his eyes, and I shrugged. "I dunno," I answered, choosing to ignore my mother. "I guess I just miss you."

"Yeah, well, I guess I miss you, too, but you know I don't like all that touchy-feely gay sh—" He stopped himself just in time, then finished with "...stuff."

That was another difference between Joey and me. Though we were both an only child, I was from a very affectionate family and I wasn't afraid to show my affection. Joey's mother was a single mom who worked a lot and was always tired when she was home, which meant that we spent a lot more time at my house growing up. He barely remembered his dad, who left them when we were about five or six and was never heard from again.

Maybe it was all that, or maybe it was just his personality, but, either way, Joey was reserved emotionally. He was the typical macho guy who never showed his feelings and called everything outside of his narrow version of masculinity "gay." I knew he didn't mean anything by it, so I never let it get to me.

"Let's get something to drink," he said as he headed for the kitchen, dribbling the ball as he went.

"Don't bounce the ball in the house," Mom called.

I trailed after him, mentally kicking myself all the while. I knew better than to be physical with him. Anything more than a high five or fist bump was strictly off limits.

"God! When are you going to get out of here?" he said as soon as we were in the kitchen. "It's like we're still twelve."

"Right, like I can afford that. It's not like being a church secretary pays that much."

"So get a roommate."

"You make it sound so easy."

"People do it all the time."

"Well, I don't want to live with a stranger and I don't know anybody."

"Well, it just so happens that I do."

My eyes lit up. "You?"

"No, not me, dumbass. You know I'm still living at home, too. Every penny I make goes right to ye olde tuition fund."

I felt my face heating up and knew I was turning red. Thankfully, Joey had his back toward me as he hunted in the fridge for something cold. He emerged with a carton of orange juice, grabbed two glasses out of the cabinet, and proceeded to pour OJ all over the counter as he tried to get it in both glasses at once.

"Jeez, Joey, wreck the kitchen, why don't you," I complained.

"You sound like your mom," Joey grumbled as he mopped up his mess with a towel. "Anyway, there's this guy in one of my classes, his name's Aidan, and he mentioned the other day that he's looking for a roommate for a two-bedroom apartment. I told him I'd ask you."

"Why'd he get a two-bedroom if it's just him?"

"I don't know, Will, what difference does it make? Are you interested or not?"

"I don't even know this guy...what's his name? Hayden?"

"Aidan. And I know you don't know him, but I do. He's a nice guy. I think you two would get along. Look, he's having a kind of housewarming party tonight. Pretty lowkey. I told him I'd bring you if you were interested, so why don't you go with me? That way you can meet him, see the apartment, see if you like him...the whole nine yards."

He handed me my glass of OJ and started gulping his down, spilling it down the front of his shirt in the process.

"I won't know anyone there," I protested.

"Ha! I knew you'd say that. I just told you I'd be there, plus Laura and Gabe will be there."

"Laura and Gabe?"

"Yeah, Gabe has classes with him too. I think they're the same age. Bonus, there'll only be, like, one or two other people there, so you don't have to worry about your terminal shyness."

"I don't want to crash his party, especially if there aren't even that many people going."

I was getting weaker, and Joey knew it.

"I told him I might bring you so you're not crashing anything." I hesitated, and he moved in for the kill. "There's going to be someone there I want you to meet besides Aidan."

"Who?"

"Come and you'll find out."

I played my last ace. "I'm supposed to go out with Beth tonight."

"So cancel!" he yelled, throwing his hands up.
"Come on, Will. You just said you missed me. Here's your chance to spend some time with me plus meet some new people and maybe find some new digs. Live a little. Beth will get over it. She always does."

I sighed, and Joey grinned. He knew he'd won. Why he still got any pleasure from his victories was beyond me since he always won. You'd think he'd be used to it by now, the manipulative bastard.

"What should I wear?"

"Whatever you want. It's just a kickback, not a debutante ball."

"A what?"

"Look it up."

"Oh, so you don't know either."

"Shut up." He laughed and punched me in the arm.

"Ow!" I shoved him back, and soon we were wrestling around the kitchen, crashing into the table and knocking over a chair.

"No roughhousing inside!" Mom called.

We froze and looked at each other, then collapsed into a giggling heap on the floor...just like old times.

An hour later, I stood in my room with a towel around my waist as a puddle of water collected at my feet. I stared at my buzzing phone, wondering if there was any way I could avoid picking it up. Beth's name and photo filled the screen. I dreaded the inevitable confrontation when I broke off our date tonight...for the third time in a row.

The phone stopped vibrating and went dark as I breathed a sigh of relief.

A second later, it lit up with Beth's laughing face again. I'd taken the photo one afternoon when we were all at the park. Beth was on a swing and Laura had been pushing her, her mousy brown hair blowing around her face. The photo was cropped so you couldn't see all that, just her expression of unrestrained laughter, making her somewhat plain features joyfully radiant.

Which definitely would not be her reaction once I disappointed her yet again.

I couldn't put it off any longer. "Hello?"

"Hey! I thought I was going to have to leave another message," Beth said, sounding half amused, half annoyed.

"Sorry, I was taking a shower," I said lamely.

"Oh yeah? Getting ready for our date tonight?" she teased.

"Actually..."

"So what are you wearing?"

"Listen, Beth, about tonight..."

"No! Will!" she interrupted. "Don't do this to me again. Tonight was going to be special. You promised. Just you and me."

"Something came up." I was dying, and I knew it.

"Let me guess, that something is named Joey, right?"

"I didn't even mention Joey..."

"You don't have to. Everything with you has something to do with Joey. Joey always comes first with you. When is it my turn? You treat me like you treat Laura."

"What's that supposed to mean? What's wrong with how I treat Laura? She's one of my closest friends."

"That's just it, Will." She sighed. "Laura's your friend. I'm supposed to be your girlfriend. And you treat both of us like a very distant second. Anytime Joey wants to do something, we both get shoved aside. At least Laura has found someone who knows how to treat her."

"Did she...did Laura tell you this?"

"She didn't have to. Look, Will, this obviously isn't working. I thought things might change when you graduated and Joey started college, but nothing is ever going to change. You aren't committed to us. I think we should take a break until you figure out what you want."

"Wait a minute. You're breaking up with me?"

"You can call it that. Just don't call me until you've figured things out. It's your move this time."

"Figured things out? What's to figure out? What I want is that...that spark of chemistry. That feeling that everything is alright when you're with them, that you're finally home. Don't you want that?"

"Yes, Will, I do," she said quietly, "but the thing is, I thought I had it—with you. I'm sorry you don't feel the same way. I hope you find it. Goodbye."

"Beth..." I tried, but she'd already hung up.

I stood there with the phone in my hand for several minutes replaying my conversation with Beth in my head. She had said so much it took a while for it all to sink in, and when it did, I didn't know whether to be angry, laugh, or cry. Maybe all three would suffice.

The car horn sounded, letting me know that Joey had arrived to pick me up for the big shindig at Aidan's. I checked myself in the mirror and was somewhat surprised to see that I was wearing jeans and a short-sleeved, dark-blue pullover collared shirt. I didn't remember choosing that particular outfit, but then I had been kind of preoccupied with my thoughts since Beth's phone call. At any rate, it would do. At least the blue brought out my eyes.

"Hey," I said as I slid into Joey's little sports car. It was his pride and joy, even if it was barely big enough for both of us. His only complaint was the backseat was too small to get it on with his seemingly never-ending revolving door of nameless girls.

"Hey," he gave me a close look, then threw the car into reverse and backed onto the road. "Okay, what's wrong?" he asked as soon as we were moving forward.

"What do you mean?" I tried the dumb approach.

"Come on, Will. We both know you're a terrible liar, and I know you well enough to know when something is bothering you. Is it this whole apartment thing? 'Cause if it is, I'll back off. It's not that big a deal. Your parents are just a drag sometimes. Okay, all the—"

"It's not that," I cut him off. "Beth and I broke up tonight."

"So? You guys break up like every other week. It's a tradition. You'll be dating again next week."

"I don't think so. This time was different. She broke up with me."

"Whoa!" He looked over at me to gauge my reaction.

"Look at the road, please," I said automatically. Having driven with Joey before, I knew we needed all the help we could get.

"So, what happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You? Mr. Let's-talk-about-our-feelings?"

"It's just... I need some time to process some stuff she said."

"Like what?"

"She said...I don't know. I just need to think about it."

I definitely wasn't ready to tell him what Beth had said. Maybe I'd be in the place to frame it as something we could laugh about at some point, but I wasn't there yet.

"She really got to you, huh?"

"Yeah."

Thankfully, he dropped it, and the rest of the short ride was spent in silence. It wasn't like Joey to be particularly thoughtful, so I assumed he had something on his mind as well.

I was snapped out of my own thoughts when he pulled into the parking lot of our destination—a recently renovated nineteenth-century brick warehouse-turned-apartment building down by the river district. The project was part of a rejuvenation effort for a long-depressed area, and—in addition to a facelift, extensive landscaping, and high-end finishes, according to the huge leasing sign out front—had included the installation an exterior glass elevator designed to look like a grain lift, complete with a wrought iron gate.

"Uh, are you sure I can afford this place?" I asked.

"Will," he said in a warning tone. "Just relax. You're just meeting the guy and seeing the place. You're not signing anything."

I made a physical effort to do as he said as I followed him to the elevator. He pushed the button for the fourth floor, and we started up.

"He's on the top floor?" I asked.

"Chill."

The elevator doors opened, and Joey walked confidently to a door and knocked. After a moment, a guy around our age answered the door. He had wavy dark blonde hair and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen. I wondered if they were contacts. He was taller than I was, of course, but shorter than Joey, so that put him at about five foot ten.

"Hey, you made it!" he said, breaking into a wide grin bordered by twin dimples.

Joey and the guy did that weird bro hug thing where you clasp hands and sort of pat each other on the back. I've never gotten the hang of it, so I was relieved when he simply stuck his hand out to me for a traditional handshake.

"Hey, you must be Will. I'm Aidan," he said.
"Aidan Scott."

"Hi, yeah, I'm Will Keegan."

Joey had already moved inside, leaving me standing awkwardly in the hall.

"Come on in," Aidan said. "I've heard a lot about you."

I forced a smile. "Well, you're ahead of me."

He laughed as I entered a large, airy room with high ceilings crisscrossed with steel girders and exposed brick walls. Enormous floor-to-ceiling multi-paned windows with the original wavy glass still intact lined the outside wall. Sparse furnishings made the room look even larger, though what was there looked high quality. A black leather sofa and matching recliner faced a state-of-the-art TV mounted on the wall, with what looked like the latest gaming system set up underneath. R&B dance groove blasted from surround sound speakers. There was a complete lack of anything hanging on the walls. It looked like he'd just moved in, which, considering school had only started a few weeks before, was probably accurate.

I was relieved to see Laura and Gabe sitting on the sofa, so close a sheet of paper couldn't have slipped between them. A leggy blonde had draped herself over the recliner like a carefully positioned model in a Vogue fashion shoot. Joey was nowhere to be seen.

Laura waved to acknowledge my arrival, then went back to her conversation with the blonde.

"Welcome to my home. It's not much, but I guess it's home for now. At least for one year according to the lease," Aidan said.

"Are you kidding? It's awesome," I said sincerely. "This place must cost a fortune."

"It's not that bad," he said unconvincingly. "You want to see the rest of the place?"

"Um, sure." I was still wondering where Joey had disappeared to.

"Cool. Then prepare yourself for the grand tour," he said. "You've already seen the entryway, or the foyer

as I prefer to call it. On your right, you'll note the lavishly furnished living area. If you turn to your left, you'll enter the large and spacious kitchen complete with all the gourmet accoutrements one could ever desire. Julia Child, eat your heart out."

I laughed since the kitchen was barely large enough for the both of us. A built-in table and the three chairs around it took up most of the space, and the missing Joey occupied the rest as he made himself a drink, pouring a generous portion of a clear liquid into a glass of ice.

"Hey, leave some for the rest of us," Aidan joked, then turned back to me. "What do you think so far?"

"Small, but functional," I said helpfully.

Aidan narrowed his eyes. "Have you been talking to my real estate agent?"

I laughed again, and Aidan motioned me back into the living room.

"As we continue with the guided tour, we will now be entering this stunning hallway where you'll find these three doors!" He switched now to a game show host voice. "Well, Will, what will it be? Door Number One? Or maybe you'd like to try Door Number Two? Or how about trying your luck with Door Number Three?"

One door was straight ahead at the end of the long, narrow hallway, and there was one door on each side toward the far end, one left, one right, directly across from each other.

"Um...let's try for Number Two," I said, picking the center door.

"Oh, jeez, Will. I'm sorry, but Number Two is appropriately named because you chose the bathroom.

But we have some lovely parting gifts, don't we, Jimmy?" He dropped his voice an octave and boomed, "That's right, Aidan. We'll be sending Will home with a lifetime supply of Charmin. Enjoy the go!"

I laughed so hard I snorted, which of course caused my face to begin to burn. I imagined I must have been pretty close to the color of a tomato. Aidan acted as if I hadn't just made a rude porcine noise and went on with his game show host shtick.

"But the game's not over yet. You get one more try, Will."

"Door Number Three."

"Excellent choice," he said as he swung open the door, "and may I just say that is a lovely shade of red you are wearing. Very flattering."

The spacious room we walked into now was evidently Aidan's bedroom. It held a queen bed, two dressers, a desk with only a small lamp and a closed laptop sitting on it, and an open closet full of clothes...and there was still plenty of room to spare.

"If you decide to be my roomie, your room will be across the hall," Aidan said in his normal voice. "Come on, I'll show you."

We crossed the hall as he opened the door with a flourish. I stepped in expecting a copy of the room I'd just seen, but was surprised to find it was half the size and stacked to the ceiling with boxes.

"I, uh, haven't finished unpacking yet," he said sheepishly. "I know this room is smaller, so to make it fair you would only have to pay a third of the rent instead of half."

"Are you sure you can afford that?" I asked automatically.

"Oh, money's not a problem. That's not why I wanted a roommate. It's more for the company. I'm from a big family, and it's weird going from that to living by myself. I thought I could offset the culture shock by having someone else live here. I mean I have the extra room so it made sense. Not that I'm expecting you, or whoever moves in, to be my best friend or anything. I know you and Joey are tight. It'll just be nice having someone else here. Oh wait, I almost forgot! There is a bonus to having the smaller room. Check this out."

He shoved boxes aside until he had cleared a path to the window. I followed him and looked out. I had to give it to him; the view was spectacular. The window overlooked the river, the lights from the apartment building sparkling and dancing across its black surface. An iron fire escape just outside the window formed a sort of balcony that would be awesome on a summer night.

"Do you have a boat?" I asked him after a moment, still looking out the window.

"Uh, no. I'm not rich."

"Too bad," I said with a little laugh as I pulled myself away from the window and turned to face him.

He grinned. "Sorry to disappoint. You ready to head back? Don't want everyone to think we ditched them."

I was reluctant to leave the view and even more reluctant to return to the group. I wasn't in a party headspace, even though Aidan's good humor had lifted

my dark mood somewhat. I followed Aidan back to the living area anyway.

Someone had changed the playlist, and the vibe was decidedly more chill. The mood seemed to be as mellow as the music. Laura and Gabe were still sitting closely on the couch with plenty of room for another person, but Joey had perched himself on the arm of the recliner next to the leggy blonde, who, I couldn't help noticing, was resting her hand rather possessively on his thigh.

Everyone stopped talking as we entered the room. I took the seat next to Laura, and Aidan sat cross-legged on the floor.

"Hi, I'm Will," I said to the blonde, since no one seemed to be planning on introducing us.

"Nice to meet you, Will. I'm Mackenzie," she said. "I've heard a lot about you from Joe here," she added, giving his leg a little squeeze to punctuate her pronouncement.

I lifted one eyebrow and tried to make eye contact with Joey, but he seemed to suddenly find the carpet pattern extremely fascinating.

"Joe seems to have been doing a lot more talking about me than to me, because I'm afraid I've never heard anything about you."

For a moment, everyone froze. An awkward silence followed, and I forced a laugh in an attempt to undo the damage. Everyone smiled nervously. Joey was still busy trying not to look at me.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that the way it came out. I've, uh, had a bad day."

"It's okay, I understand," she said graciously. She had a rather pronounced southern drawl that I couldn't quite place. I guess she was pretty if you liked the type: long white-blond hair, big blue eyes, pouty lips, and big boobs—she had the whole package.

Personally, I thought Laura was much prettier. She was biracial, her father black and her mother was Indigenous, giving her flawless golden-brown skin, large almond-shaped eyes so dark they were almost black, high cheekbones and jet-black, poker-straight hair that hung almost to her waist.

She and Gabe made a striking couple. Gabe was Hispanic and quite handsome, with a square jaw, straight black hair that he wore short and carefully styled, and dark eyes that sparkled whenever he got excited about a topic, which was often. He was only a year older than Joey, Laura, and I, but he seemed much more sophisticated. Maybe that was just because I hadn't known him all his life, as I had Joey and Laura. I didn't have any milk-shooting-from-the-nose memories about him. He seemed to be good for Laura, complementing her in almost every way. His dark good looks matched hers perfectly.

"So you had a bad day?" Laura asked after a brief but loaded pause.

Leave it to Laura to pick up the one thing that I didn't want to talk about.

I waved my hand dismissively. "I don't want to talk about it. So, Mackenzie, do you go to school with Joey...er, *Joe*?" I put extra emphasis on this new name. I'd never heard anyone call him anything but Joey for the entire eighteen years I'd known him.

I ignored the looks on everyone's faces: the dirty look Laura shot me, the curious ones from Gabe and Aidan, and the uncomfortable expression on Joey's face. I kept my focus carefully on Mackenzie's pointy little face.

"Yes, we're both in Professor Strauss' American History class. That's where we met on the first day of school." She cast a smile in Joey's direction, but he was still engrossed in the plush pile. "He asked me out the next day, and we've been going out ever since. But, I mean, it's only been what? Two weeks? So I guess that's why you haven't heard of me," she added quickly.

Well, that explained why Joey had been so busy the last few weeks. I was surprised how hurt I was.

"Yeah, you're right," I said with venom in my voice. "Two weeks is not long enough for a best friend to tell someone they have a new girlfriend." I stood up. "If you'll excuse me, I think I need some fresh air."

"Will!" Laura said sharply.

"I...I'm sorry. I'm going to...go take a walk...or something," I mumbled as I made a beeline for the door. I paused at the door long enough to say, "I've had a bad day."

I found my way back down to the ground level and wandered around the building into the grassy backyard that butted up against the river. The wooden bulkhead made a great seat, so I plopped down and dangled my legs over the surface of the water.

I had just about gotten myself under control when I felt someone come up behind me. I didn't have to look up to know it was Laura.

"Okay, that was appalling. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I've had a bad day," I repeated softly.

"So you keep saying. Wanna tell me about it?"

"No."

"How 'bout you do it anyway." She sat down next to me and swung her long legs out over the water, tapping my foot with one of hers.

"Beth and I broke up today."

"So? You're always breaking up or getting back together. Call her tomorrow, and tell her you're sorry."

"It's not like that this time. She broke up with me."

"Oh. Oh wow."

"Yeah, I got the feeling it was pretty permanent this time."

"Will, I don't know how to say this tactfully..."

I snorted. "Since when have you been tactful?"

"Okay then, have it your way. Why are you so beat up about Beth dumping you for a change? You've dumped her enough times. You don't like being on the receiving end?"

"It's not that. Actually, I don't even care that much. I mean, we've been together for years, but..."

"A 'but' is never a good sign, sweetie, and there was always a 'but' with Beth."

"Yeah. She never felt like *'The One,'* you know?"

"I know. So what's really bothering you, then?"

"Something she said."

"Am I going to have to drag every word out of you? I mean. I will if I have to, but maybe you could just make this easier on both of us and spit it out already."

I kicked her foot. "She said that I always put you and her second."

"Me? How did I get into this?"

"She said that I always put Joey first. Do you feel that way too?" I looked over at Laura for the first time. She was looking out over the river, the reflected light playing softly over her even features.

She didn't answer at first, and, when she finally began to talk, I had to lean in closer to catch what she was saying. "You never knew this," she said. "I never told anyone, but I had a huge crush on you for the longest time."

I gasped, but she shook her head before I could speak. "Let me finish. I used to get so hurt whenever I would call or text you to hang out and the answer was always 'Joey and I are doing this' or 'Joey and I are doing that.' It was even worse when it was 'Joey and I *might* be doing this or that.' I wasn't even competition for a possibility."

I started to protest, but she held up a warning finger to silence me.

"I'm not finished. After a while, I guess I just sort of accepted the fact that Joey would always get top billing as far as you were concerned. But I still wanted to be close to you, so I infiltrated your little club. We became the Three Musketeers, and we lived platonically ever after. All for one, right? As long as Joey was 'the one.'"

There was a slight bitterness to her tone. I was dying to say something, but didn't dare interrupt after two warnings.

"I got over you eventually," she said. "And I wouldn't trade your friendship for anything now. If nothing else, I learned what I want from a relationship—friendship or otherwise. Gabe not only knows I exist, but he makes me a priority. He treats me right, and I'm crazy about him. But to answer your question, yeah, I do feel like I always came second to Joey."

"Why... Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Like what? 'Hey, Will, I'm in love with you but you barely acknowledge my existence?' Or how about 'Hey, Will, why is Joey so great? What's wrong with me?' Or 'Hey, Will, notice me, dammit?' What exactly was I supposed to say?" She swiped angrily at a single tear rolling down her cheek.

I had only seen Laura cry a few times as long as I had known her. It unnerved me worse than anything she had said.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, "I'm so sorry, Laura."

"It's ancient history." She took a deep breath and gathered herself. "I moved on. Like I said, Gabe is the greatest. I feel so lucky to have met him." She cut her eyes at me. "Okay, maybe I'm not as over you as I thought," she added with an ironic laugh, "but I am moving on."

We sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Did you know Joey and Mackenzie were dating?" I said at last.

Laura sighed. "He still comes first doesn't he?"

"I didn't... It's just..."

"It's okay. I should be used to it by now. Yeah, I knew."

"Why didn't he tell me?" I tried to keep the whine out of my voice, but I still came out sounding like a petulant five-year-old.

"Maybe because he knew this would happen."

"What do you mean?"

"Will, every time Joey has ever had a girlfriend, you've been jealous. You do nothing but pick them apart and criticize their every move. Maybe Joey wanted a little grace period with Mackenzie before you started in on her."

"I'm not jealous," I said defensively.

"Oh, please."

"I'm not!"

"Then what was that whole scene up there?"

"I was just surprised. I mean, you saw the way she was all over him. 'Joe has told me all about you,'" I mocked in an exaggerated southern drawl.

"See, there you go."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Laura hurried on, "Look, Will, I have a serious question I need to ask you, but listen, I want you to be honest with me...and with yourself."

"Of course, Laura," I said indignantly, "You know I would never lie to you."

"Not on purpose, maybe."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind. Here's my question, and I don't want you to answer until you are one hundred percent sure. Got it?"

I was suddenly nervous, but I nodded anyway.

She took a deep breath. "Are you in love with Joey? I mean as in romantically in love. Because if you

are, you need to face that and deal with it and figure out what it means. You can't just keep on hurting everyone around you. You know I'll always love you no matter what."

"Are you... Are you asking me if I'm *gay*?" I asked in amazement.

"Will?" We both turned toward the voice. It was Joey up by the parking lot. "Hey, Will? Laura? Are you guys out here?"

"We're down by the water," Laura called back. She turned back to me, grabbed my hand, and squeezed before quickly releasing it. "Think about what I said, and remember I love you."

She jumped up and moved off into the shadows as Joey approached.

"I, uh, didn't interrupt anything, did I?" he asked.

"No, we were just talking," I said slowly, though my mind was racing.

"So, uh...what did you think of the apartment?"

"It was great—airy and light with a great sense of the original integrity of the building. Great color schemes and tastefully decorated. Everything a guy could want," I said sarcastically. "Why'd you come here, Joey? It wasn't to talk about the apartment. Or are you that eager to pass me off on Aidan?"

"It's not like that. Mackenzie just thought I should make sure—"

"Mackenzie. When were you going to tell me about her? Was I going to be invited to the wedding?"

"Jesus, Will. We've only been dating two weeks! I was going to tell you tonight. I told you there was someone I wanted you to meet. Do you think I'm stupid

enough to invite you to a party she was going to be at if I wasn't going to tell you about her? I would have told you sooner but...I guess I needed some time with her just to myself first."

I looked out across the river. "We're growing apart," I said softly. "Laura and Gabe, you and Mackenzie...me and nobody."

"We're not growing apart, we're growing up. You're my best friend, and you always will be. Nothing will ever change that. But we're not fourteen anymore. We can't spend all our lives together. We're all going to have families and careers. It can't be just the three of us forever."

"I don't want things to change."

"Everything changes. If you don't change, then you're dead. Make the most of it. Now that Beth is out of the picture, date new people. Try some new things. Get out there and live. You can start by moving in with Aidan. He's cool. You won't find a better roommate, and you really need to get out of that house. I think it would be good for you to be more independent."

"I'm sure I ruined any chance of that happening with my bad first impression," I said sourly.

"Nah, he's not like that. He almost went after you when you stormed out. He was worried about you. Like I said, he's a really nice guy. I wouldn't just set you up with anybody."

I gave him a sharp look. "Set me up?"

He snorted. "Not like that, you homo."

"I'm not—"

"I'm kidding! Shit. Chill."

We fell into silence while I mulled over everything that had happened in a short twenty-four hours, especially what Joey had just said. Finally, I stood up, dusted the dirt off my bottom, and started for the building.

"Where're you going?" Joey asked, trotting to catch up.

"To see if that roommate position has been filled."

Chapter 2

I lay awake for hours in my bed that night, staring at the ceiling, my childhood bedroom lit only by moonlight. My mind refused to turn off. So much had happened in one day—too much for my brain to absorb so quickly. I replayed snippets of conversation from the day over and over, like a slideshow on constant rotation.

Joey: "You should move out..."

Beth: "Joey always comes first..."

Mackenzie: "We've only been going out for two weeks..."

Laura: "Why wasn't I ever good enough for you..."

Joey: "We're growing up...things change..."

Things changed, all right. I knew that logically. But I didn't have to like it. I especially didn't have to like the way things were changing for me. Didn't I get any say in any of this?

There were two conversations that I wasn't sure what to think of. The first was with Aidan when I asked if he still wanted me to be his roommate. In my mind, at least, that was far from certain after my horrible behavior, but he'd acted as if nothing had happened. If anything, he seemed excited.

I knew my parents would be the opposite of excited when I told them. They tended to be a little over-protective. I was an only child, and my father was a rather conservative Southern Baptist pastor. We'd been close when I was younger, but we'd grown apart as I'd aged. When his longtime secretary quit the year before, and he asked me to take over, I think he'd seen it as a

chance for us to get closer, but that hadn't really happened. I was pretty sure he was harboring some hope that I'd follow in his footsteps, but that wasn't happening either.

Dad blamed our strained relationship on my friendship with Joey, insisting he was a bad influence, mostly because he was. Joey attended church with me occasionally when we were little kids, but quit by the time we were in middle school, insisting it was a bunch of baloney used to control weak minds. Every time I'd ever cut class or ditched school or did anything remotely rebellious, it was entirely Joey's doing. I was, by nature, a bit of a rule follower.

Despite all that, the truth was that if there was any blame to be had, it was probably more on my father. He was never around, spending almost all of his waking hours working, either at the church office or visiting parishioners or who knows what else. We never did typical father-son activities—never played baseball or went fishing. I saw him in the pulpit every Sunday and at prayer meetings on Wednesdays and several times a week for dinner, and that was about it. There were people who attended my church who seemed closer to my dad than I felt. Maybe some of that was on me, I could have tried harder or something, but overall, I felt like it was the dad's job to be there for their kids, not the other way around.

Somehow, though, he still managed to take up a lot of space at home, even with his absence. He may have not been there physically, but his rules were still in play—and he had a lot of rules, from what TV shows we were allowed to watch, to what music I could listen to,

even who my friends were. I think the only reason he allowed me to remain friends with a hellraiser like Joey, besides the fact that we were inseparable, was because he hoped Joey's utter "boyness" would rub off on me. My father always seemed slightly disappointed that I wasn't more of a guy's guy. I was too sensitive, too artistic, too soft, too much of a mama's boy.

Of course, I was a mama's boy. She practically raised me alone, albeit with his influence coloring every decision. His child-rearing philosophies tended to be a bit old-fashioned, and Mom was more than capable of carrying them out to the letter of the law. That said, she was at least willing to consider the spirit of the law. She definitely looked the other way when she could, or would "forget" to tell my father about my infractions whenever possible.

They were both overprotective, and I knew they wouldn't react well to my announcement that I was moving out. I could already hear their response when I told them: "You're doing what? We don't even know this young man! Does he go to church? Does he do drugs?"

The truth was I didn't know. I didn't really know anything about Aidan except that his dad was dead. But Joey had said he was a good guy, and I instinctively liked him. I generally trusted my instincts. He was funny, nice, and he'd seemed genuinely happy that I was moving in. We'd made arrangements for me to start moving some time later that week.

All I had to do was figure out how to tell Mom and Dad.

The other conversation I was uncertain about was Laura's question down by the river and all that it implied.

I'd been trying to avoid thinking about it all night, but my mind kept going back to it anyway. It was like having an ulcer in your mouth. Even though it hurts, you just can't keep your tongue away from it. No matter how I tried to distract myself I always ended up in the same place.

Was I in love with Joey?

The idea was preposterous...wasn't it? That would mean I was gay. That, of course, was impossible. Right?

My rhetorical questions went unanswered, even in my own mind. No one jumped to my defense; no one rushed to reassure me of my heterosexuality. It was just me and my thoughts, and they refused to leave me alone.

I'd been raised in the church. All my life I'd heard that homosexuality was wrong, that it was unnatural and against God's law. I couldn't be gay, I just couldn't! I worked at the church. My dad was the pastor. There was just no way I could be gay!

Then why wouldn't Laura's question stop haunting me?

Finally, in frustration I threw back the sheets and jumped out of bed. If I couldn't fall asleep, then I'd find something to physically distract myself. I turned on the light and rummaged through my closet until I found what I was looking for

I flipped through my old sketchbooks until I came to a charcoal drawing I'd done for a school art class. It was supposed to be a study for a painting, but I'd abandoned it in favor of another project I'd been working on at the time. What better time to return to it than the wee hours of the morning?

The assignment was to draw a landscape that was symbolic of where we were in our lives at that time. I'd sketched out the rough shape of a beach scene from one of my favorite places on earth: Assateague Island, a beautiful barrier island that straddles Maryland and Virginia. It's mostly protected park land, home to feral herds of small, shaggy horses, beautiful beaches, and abundant wildlife. It even boasts its own scenic red-and-white-striped lighthouse on the Virginia side of the island.

The scene I'd sketched was simple, though—just the suggestion of a dune with a sand fence tracing its way across it, dune grass, and a wave breaking on the beach. Faint footprints disappeared into the distance. At the time, I'd thought it was too generic, and it was, but I had an idea for how to develop it.

I cleared off the top surface of my worktable, turned on the adjustable lamp, and dropped the sketchbook into the pool of warm light. The table was arranged under the wide double windows to catch as much natural light as possible, but natural light wasn't an option at two in the morning. I stared at the sketch for a few minutes.

I picked up a stick of charcoal and started changing a few small details. I darkened the sky, starting at the top and slowly getting lighter as I neared the horizon. Then I drew over the grass, making it look as if it were blown violently in the wind, bent almost parallel to the ground. I lifted out a streak of lightning over the waves.

The foreboding storm definitely matched my mood, I thought, but it still needed something. With a

flash of inspiration, I added a black funnel cloud dropping down from the sky to touch down where the footprints and the horizon converged.

I sat back and studied the drawing. The tornado really represented the way I felt like everything in my life was veering out of control, but something was still missing.

Then, I knew what it needed. There was nothing affected by the storm, just an empty beach. It needed life.

But what kind of life?

I thought of several ideas and discarded each almost as quickly as it came to me. The stocky little ponies were too sturdy to represent how I felt. The diminutive sika deer were too delicate and exotic. A bird was too free. I needed something inconsequential, something most people never thought twice about.

I glanced over at the window and froze. Plastered to the windowpane was a small, bright green tree frog. He was perfect.

I quickly added the little frog into the sketch, drawing him clinging tightly to a stalk of the coarse beach grass.

With a contented sigh, I sat back and admired my work. I was happy with it, but I was still wide-awake. I decided the sketch would make a great painting and there was no better time than the present to get started.

My painting supplies were already scattered around, so I began the tedious process of transferring the drawing onto watercolor paper. I carefully outlined my drawing on tracing paper so that the end product looked like a coloring book outline. Then, using graphite

transfer paper, I copied the lines I had traced onto the watercolor paper. A long process, but one that I felt necessary for a good, clean image with no eraser marks or mistakes on my finished painting.

Next, I masked out the areas I wanted to stay white or lighter, and, when that was dry, I began to layer in translucent colors. I started with broad washes for the sky, the water, and the beach, then came back in with darker colors, slowly building the details.

I saved the frog for last, really taking my time to blend each element until it almost looked like he could jump off the paper.

By the time I was done, the sun was just starting to break over the horizon. I stepped back to admire the painting and had to admit that it was probably one of my favorite pieces ever. And best of all, it had accomplished its purpose as well. I was completely exhausted.

I took the time to clean my brushes, then dropped into bed, where I fell asleep almost immediately.

My alarm went off about two hours later. With a groan, I rolled over and turned it off. I wanted to just go back to sleep so badly, but it was Sunday. The last thing I wanted to do right then was go to church, but when your dad is the pastor it's not exactly an option, at least not as long as I lived at home.

I dragged myself out of bed and into the bathroom. Maybe I'd feel better after a shower. I started the water, and, as I turned to get a towel, caught my reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the door.

There I was in all my glory, wearing only a baggy pair of boxers that sat low on my bony hips—short, skinny, and pale, with a black charcoal smudge across my nose and matching circles around my eyes. I looked like I was fifteen at the most, and a sickly fifteen-year-old at that. Instead of painting a beach, I looked like I should be going to the seaside to take in the salt air for my consumption.

I stuck my tongue out at my reflection and turned away from the disappointing image.

I did not, in fact, feel better after my shower. I didn't feel better after I ate breakfast, or after I drank a cup of coffee—which I hate and usually never drink—or even after I got to church. I somehow managed to get through the morning, although I'm pretty sure I dozed off a few times during the sermon.

I was feeling pretty self-satisfied as I drove home, but it turned out to be the afternoon that I should have been worried about.

It never would have happened if I hadn't been so tired, if I'd had all my wits about me. But I *was* tired and I *didn't* have all my wits about me, and when Dad started in on me about leaving my room in such a mess that morning, I snapped.

"You won't have to worry about it after this week," I said before I could stop myself. I knew as soon as the words left my mouth that I'd messed up, but it was too late.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked sharply as Mom froze on her way out of the room.

I tried to think of a plausible lie, but I was so tired I just wasn't up to the effort. I always was a lousy liar anyway.

"I'm moving out this week," I mumbled finally.

Mom slowly turned around with an odd, fixed expression on her face. Meanwhile, Dad looked as if I'd kicked him.

"What did you say?" Mom asked in a falsely cheery voice, as if she must have misunderstood and thought that it was going to be a funny story to tell the deacon chairman's wife the next time she talked to her.

What could I say? Just kidding? It was too late to turn back now. I took a deep breath. "I'm moving out this week," I said firmly.

For a long time, no one spoke. I realized I was holding my breath and let it out in a loud whoosh.

"Where are you planning on living?" Dad said slowly.

"An apartment. It's down by the river in this cool old renovated warehouse."

"That area is so dangerous!" Mom said.

"Not anymore, Mom," I whined. "They've fixed it all up."

"And how do you intend to pay for that?" Dad asked tersely.

"I'll have a roommate?"

Dad's eyes narrowed. "Who?"

"A friend of Joey's from college."

"Do we know him?" Mom asked, then a panicked look crossed her face. "He is a boy, isn't he? Oh Will, don't tell me you're moving in with a girl!"

"No, calm down, Mom. He's a guy, and you don't know him. I only met him last night. He seems very nice. His name is Aidan. He said I'll only have to pay a third of the rent because I'll have a smaller room..." I faded out under Dad's glare.

"Will, I don't approve," he said ominously.

Big surprise, I thought, but caught myself just in time from saying.

"I'm eighteen," I said instead, in what I hoped was a reasonable tone of voice. "It's time I moved out. If I'd gone to college I would have left already. At least I'll be in the same town."

"What did you say this boy's name is?" Mom asked.

"Aidan..." I realized I couldn't remember his last name. "Aidan."

"Aidan Aidan?"

"No, Aidan something, I can't remember his last name," I admitted sheepishly.

"You're not moving anywhere," Dad said, as if that settled everything.

I clenched my jaw and counted to ten.

"Actually, Dad, I am," I insisted. "Aidan is going to help me move later this week. I'll still be working at the church, so it's not like you'll never see me."

Dad threw up his hands and stood up. "I think you're making a huge mistake. The real world is very different from living here at home. You'll be exposed to temptations and lifestyles that are ungodly, and you won't have us to take care of you."

"You can't take care of me forever. Don't you think it's time for me to start growing up?"

"If you're in such a rush to grow up, fine. You can do this on your own. You won't get any support from your mother and I. Not a dime. But mark my word, you'll come crawling back." He stalked angrily out of the room.

Mom stared after him for a minute, then turned back to me. "Just know this will always be your home and you can come back whenever you want," she said before rushing out after him.

Over my dead body, I thought. I would never give him the satisfaction of returning.

I went upstairs to my room and slept for the rest of the afternoon. When I woke up that evening, I started packing. Staying busy kept my mind out of areas I wasn't ready for it to go and reinforced my decision. Putting things into boxes made it all seem more real.

Everywhere I looked, though, something made my thoughts skitter right back to the forbidden place: a love note from Beth, one of Joey's outgrown t-shirts in my closet, a Polaroid picture of Joey, Laura, and me with our arms thrown around each other's necks.

Joey called once, but I ignored the call. When Laura called, I tried the same ploy, but I should have known she wouldn't be put off so easily. After two more missed calls, she appeared in my doorway.

"Hey," she said softly as her eyes swept over the mess in my room. I'd pulled everything out of my closet, and it sat in haphazard piles all around me.

"I'm busy," I said, keeping my eyes carefully averted to avoid her probing look.

"So I see. You wouldn't talk to me on the phone, and I know what that means. You're pouting."

"I am not!"

"Fine, then you're avoiding me, and you should know better than to avoid me. I figured I'd corner you in your lair, but didn't expect for it to look like a thrift store exploded. Need a hand?"

"I've got it," I said.

"Are you okay, Will?"

"I'm fine. I just have a lot to do."

"Are you really okay? Look at me and tell me you're okay."

"I said I was fine, didn't I?" I snapped, still not looking at her.

"I know what you said, but I also know when you are lying to me."

"Everybody thinks they know me so well."

"For someone who is so transparent with their emotions you do a pretty damn good job of keeping people away. What are you so scared of, Will?"

"I'm not scared of anything. Look, I've got a lot of packing to do. If you're not going to help, why don't you just go home? And standing in the door psychoanalyzing me is not helping. All you are doing is pissing me off."

"I noticed. I'm sorry. I'm also sorry if what I said last night upset you. It just seemed like it needed to be said."

I didn't answer, just kept on shoving things into the box in front of me. She waited a few beats, then sighed and started picking her way carefully around the room.

"Wow, this is good, Will," she said after a moment.

I glanced up to see she'd worked her way over to my work table and picked up the painting I had done the night before.

"Thanks," I mumbled, quickly turning my attention back to my packing.

"It's really different for you. Very moody. Does it represent something?"

"Sort of," I admitted reluctantly.

"It's beautiful and...I don't know, strangely disturbing, somehow."

"Gee, thanks."

"No, it's a compliment. What's it mean?"

"It's my life right now; dark, stormy and out of control."

"So you're the frog?"

"I guess you could say that."

She suddenly went quiet. I sensed that her attention had shifted from the painting to something else. I heard the bed creak as she sat down on the edge. Still, she didn't say a word.

Finally, I couldn't stand it anymore, so I turned to see what she was doing. She was holding the picture of the three of us that I'd found earlier, staring at it as if it held the secrets of the universe.

"Do you remember when this was taken?" she asked quietly.

"Yeah, that's the summer we all went to Busch Gardens. We were what? Fourteen?"

"Yeah, that was the summer I realized that you'd never love me the way I wanted you to. You spent the whole vacation following Joey around like a lovesick

puppy dog, and I followed you. I might as well have not even been there."

Somehow, everything led back to Joey. We'd come full circle. Why did things have to be so complicated all of a sudden?

"What do you see?" she asked, holding the picture out to me.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at it."

"I am. What exactly am I looking for?"

"Take it. Look at us. What do you see?"

I took the photo and looked closer. I was in the center with Joey on my right and Laura on my left. Joey's head was thrown back slightly as he laughed at some joke, almost certainly his own and probably something inappropriate, knowing him. His eyes were locked with the camera in a typical Joey expression of confidence and maybe just a little challenge. He was always challenging something.

It took me a few seconds to figure out what Laura was talking about, but then it clicked.

"You see it, don't you?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"You have to deal with it, Will, for your own sake."

She stood up, patted me on the head, and left.

I sat looking at the picture for a long time before I turned the lights out and went to bed, but even as I drifted off to sleep, the image in the image seemed to be burned into my retina. I could still see it on the inside of my eyelids.

Joey was the only one who seemed conscious of the camera, oblivious to everything else but his own posing. The rest of us lesser beings were too caught up in our objects of desire. Laura's gaze was fixed longingly on me, but all my attention was focused solely on Joey, a look of complete adoration in my eyes.

I avoided so much as even thinking about Laura and Joey for the rest of the week. It wasn't that hard. They were in school and I was at work during the day and busy moving at night.

Aidan came over several times in his beat-up Ford pickup and, under Dad's disapproving gaze, we'd moved a few boxes at a time. He was very polite and, under different circumstances, probably would have made a good impression on my parents. I could tell he was charming Mom, at least. Dad wore a permanent frown and barely spoke two words to him the entire time.

Friday night, Aidan came over, and we loaded up the last of my furniture. After we loaded that into the new place, I made one more trip to get the last few odds and ends in my car.

On my return, Aidan threw open the door dramatically before I could even knock.

"Welcome home!" he said with a grin, complete with dimples.

I smiled back and pushed past him; the box was starting to get heavy. "I guess this *is* home now, huh?" I said and laughed. I couldn't believe how excited I was...and a little nervous.

"Yep. Home is where the heart is or something like that," he said as he followed me down the hall to my room.

"Does that mean my heart is here now?" I sat the box on top of a pile of even more boxes. We'd slowly cleared out his stuff during the week, replacing them with mine.

"I sure hope so. The rest of you is here. Although..."

"Although what?" I asked as I rummaged around, searching for the box cutter I knew I'd seen earlier.

"Sometimes, I get the impression that your heart is somewhere else."

I looked up sharply, but he was busy opening up one of my boxes with the box cutter I'd been looking for. I decided to let his remark go without comment.

We spent the next hour or so unpacking enough of my stuff that I could at least sleep there that night.

"Hey, Will?" Aidan asked hesitantly after a while.

Something in his voice made me put down the box I was poking around in and give him my full attention. A slightly concerned expression clouded his green eyes. "Yeah?" I asked carefully.

"I have something I need to tell you, and I guess I should have said something sooner, like before you moved in and all, but..."

"Please tell me it's just that you wear colored contact lenses," I said with a forced smile.

"Huh?"

"It's just that your eyes are so green... Oh, never mind."

"My eyes? They're natural." He still seemed confused as if he couldn't quite figure out how we'd started talking about his eyes. "Look, can we maybe sit down to talk?"

Oh no, you never had to sit down to talk about something good. My feeling of unease heightened. What was he going to tell me? Was he from a mob family? Was that why he could afford this apartment? He did say he was from a big family.

I sat down heavily on the bed.

Aidan looked around uncomfortably. "Uh, I was thinking more like the living room."

"Oh," I said weakly and followed him down the hall.

I sat on the couch. He took the recliner, sitting on the edge of the seat as if he might bolt at any second. His body language certainly wasn't putting me at ease.

He blinked at me for several long seconds, then stood up and began to pace, as I grew more and more nervous.

"I don't know how to say this," he said finally, "so I'm just going to say it and let whatever happens happen. Will...I'm gay." He stopped pacing and looked at me anxiously.

I waited for the punchline. When it became apparent that it wasn't coming, I stood up and walked to the windows.

"Did Laura set you up to do this?"

"Laura? What does she have to do with this?"

"Did she?"

"No, she doesn't even know."

"Does Joey know?"

"No, no one down here knows yet. You're the first person I've told since I moved. Well, my cousin knows, but he doesn't live in town and he's still in high school. I only told you because, well...I thought you should know since we're going to be living together and all."

"You should have told me before," I managed. My voice was tight.

I was desperately trying to stay calm, but my delicate façade was dangerously close to crumbling. I couldn't believe this was happening right now, when I was so confused about myself. I'd avoided thinking about it all week, and there I was, slapped upside the head with the same issue from a direction I'd never even suspected.

"You're right. I should have told you earlier, and I'm sorry. It's... It's really scary to tell people. You never know how someone will react. And you don't want people to hate you, especially someone you like, you know? But, I mean, it's not going to change anything, right? It's not like I'm going to hit on you or anything. I'm still the same person I was before. It's just...now you know a little more about me."

"A little more than I wanted to know," I snapped, and regretted it immediately. I could see the hurt written all over his face, even in his reflection in the window. "I'm sorry, Aidan." I sighed as I finally turned to face him. "I didn't mean that. It just...you just caught me by surprise. You're probably regretting that you even asked me to move in. The first time you met me I acted like a rude jerk and stormed out like a brat, and now, my first

night here, I freak out because you try to be honest with me."

He gave me a lopsided smile, a weak shadow of his usual luminous, double-dimpled grins but more than I could have managed in his place. "Hey, you were having a bad day that first time, remember? And, as far as tonight goes, well...I would have to go through something like this with whoever moved in. It could have gone worse. You haven't thrown anything at me. To be honest, you've taken it better than most people I've told."

I sat back down. "I thought you said I was the only person you've told besides your cousin."

"Down here. I came out to pretty much everyone at once back home. I grew up in a pretty rural area, very conservative and trumpy. They don't call it Pennsylvucky for nothing. Most of my friends didn't take it well. I didn't know that it's better to come out gradually, and I didn't have a support system built up yet, so it was pretty rough. The people who would have supported me were too shocked to be much comfort when I needed it. That was when I made up my mind to transfer down here. I would have never got through the rest of last year if it hadn't been for my Aunt Meg. She was my rock through everything."

"What happened?"

"Well, some people just stopped having anything to do with me, and honestly, that hurt, but those were kind of the best-case scenarios. Some people felt it was their duty to go out of their way to tell me how they felt about 'alternative lifestyles.' A few were really nasty about it. But Aunt Meg's son is gay—that's my cousin

who lives down here—so she had my back, and really helped my Mom understand. She's the one who suggested that maybe this would be a better area for me. I was already looking at Pemberton, that just cemented the decision."

We fell silent for a moment, until he asked, "Does it bother you?"

"That you're gay?" I thought for a moment. "No, it doesn't bother me," I said, and I meant it. "It just adds to something I was already dealing with."

"You want to explain that?"

"No, not really. Not yet anyway. I've still got a lot to figure out."

He gave me a suspicious look but didn't push the issue. "Well, if you change your mind, I'm here for you."

"So, uh...how did you know?" I asked, partly to divert his attention back to himself and partly because I honestly wanted to know.

"Actually, my cousin helped me. He came out about a year ago. He's two years younger than me, but he just seems to have everything together. He has a really sweet boyfriend who he's crazy about and who's just as crazy about him. And his family is like...dream family. When I came down for Thanksgiving last year, I saw how happy he was, how completely and unapologetically himself he was, and I realized that I desperately wanted that too."

I nodded thoughtfully. "So you just knew you were gay?"

"Let's just say I had a strong suspicion. Anyway, I asked him the same thing you just asked me. He may be younger than me, but he's, like, wise beyond his

years. He said, 'Either you are or you aren't. You just know. You either like girls or you like guys.' Or, I guess, sometimes both, or maybe neither, but when you boil it down like that, it was pretty obvious, for me, anyway."

I nodded again, lost in my own memories of Joey. I didn't like where I was going with that train of thought. Aidan said something else, but I didn't catch it since I was so distracted. I realized he was waiting for me to say something.

"Huh?" I said wittily.

"I said, 'Do you want to see a picture of my cousin and his boyfriend.'"

"Oh. Um, sure."

Aidan pulled out his phone and flipped through his photos, then held out his phone for me to take. I glanced down. It was a selfie of Aidan with two guys, one a white kid with wavy blond hair and bright blue eyes and the other was black with a halo of dark, loose curls framing his handsome face. They were laughing in front of a Christmas tree.

I mustered up a smile. "They look happy together."

Aidan grinned. "Yeah. They're awesome. Do you recognize him?"

"Who?"

"Killian."

"Which one is Killian?"

"The blond."

I took a closer look. He didn't look familiar. "Should I?"

"You haven't seen him on TV?"

"TV? Why would he be on TV? Is he like an actor or something?"

Aidan laughed. "No, but to hear him and Asher tell it, you'd think he was some kind of celebrity around here. Killian's friend, Seth, was murdered last year, and Killian investigated it and caught the killer."

"Oh, wait! I think I do remember that now. Didn't the murderer end up killing a bunch of other people too? But then the kid, I guess your cousin, saved another kid from a fire or something?"

"Yeah. I don't know all the details but he was all over the news and was like some kind of local hero."

"Yeah, I saw that, but I would have never recognized him. That was a while ago. But it's pretty cool that he's your cousin. Maybe I'll get to meet this celebrity some time."

"Actually, you might get to meet him tomorrow. He and Asher are dying to see the new place and meet the roommate, so I invited them to come over tomorrow. They might even stay the night, kind of like a slumber party. If that's okay with you, I mean."

"They want to meet me?"

Aidan actually blushed a little. It was nice not to be the one doing the blushing for a change. "I, uh, I mean... I guess maybe I've, um, talked about you. A lot. I was pretty excited about you moving in. But, yeah, I probably should have checked with you first. You just moved in and everything. Maybe you're not ready for guests—"

"Hey, it's your apartment."

"No, it's our apartment now. I can totally postpone their visit. I don't know what I was thinking."

"No, it's okay. Don't postpone. It's fine. As long as they don't want to see my bedroom, because I doubt I'll be finished unpacking by then." I laughed.

He started talking about stuff we could do while they were here, but my mind had already drifted to thinking about how I'd gone from not knowing any gay people to living with a gay guy who had a gay cousin who'd be hanging around our apartment.

Dad would flip out if he found out.

And what about me?

That was a question I still wasn't ready to face. One thing was clear, however—living with Aidan was going to make it a lot harder to ignore.

Chapter 3

I was in my room unpacking later that night when Aidan appeared in the open doorway. "Knock, knock."

I looked up from the box of art supplies. "What's up?"

"I thought maybe you could use a break. I baked cookies. You want some while they're still hot?"

I laughed. "Do you bake cookies often?"

He shrugged and looked a little embarrassed.

"When I'm in the mood. Why?"

"Nothing. I just think I'm going to like living here."

Aidan grinned. "Good! Then my cunning plan is working. Come on. The cookies are getting cool."

I pushed the box aside and followed him into the kitchen. A sheet of freshly-baked chocolate chip cookies was cooling on the table and their heavenly scent filled the air. I grabbed one to find it was the perfect temperature, still warm but not too hot.

"Best roommate ever!" I gushed before biting into the gooey cookie.

Aidan grinned as he poured two glasses of milk. He slid one across the table to me as he sat down. I dropped into the chair opposite him.

"So," he said after we'd downed several cookies each, "tell me more about you. You're an only child, right?"

"Yeah."

"What's that like? I come from a big family."

"I dunno. Lonely? I was always a little envious of my friends who had big families. It was like they had built-in playmates."

Aidan rolled his eyes. "Assuming you get along. But didn't you grow up with Joey and Laura?"

"Yeah. We all lived in the same neighborhood." I didn't want to talk about them, and it must have shown. Aidan didn't pursue it.

"What about your parents? They still together?"

"Yeah. Dad's a Baptist minister and Mom's a stay-at-home mom."

"A minister? Wow. What was that like?"

I shrugged and grabbed another cookie. "It was just my life. I mean, I guess it had its challenges. It's a lot of pressure being a PK."

"PK?"

"Preacher's kid. Everybody expects you to be the perfect model child. And you're always at church when your friends are playing sports or doing fun stuff like going to the movies. Not that I was allowed to see that many movies."

Aidan's brow furrowed. "Not allowed?"

"My dad was pretty strict about what media we could consume. 'Junk in, junk out,' is one of his favorite sayings."

He frowned. "So, uh, I guess he probably wouldn't be too thrilled to find out you're living with a gay guy, huh?"

I dipped the remaining half of my cookie in my milk. "That would be putting it lightly. Which is why I don't intend to tell him. What he doesn't know won't hurt me, right?"

"Message received. So, um, does that have anything to do with whatever you're dealing with?"

"No...well, yeah. Maybe. I guess it does in a way."

Once again, he picked up on the fact that it was a subject I wanted to avoid and dropped it. "Gotcha! So what do you do? How come you're not in school like Laura and Joey?"

"I work at my dad's church as I guess what you'd call a secretary, but I do just about anything and everything that you can imagine. And before you ask, no, it's not what I want to do with the rest of my life. That's the thing...I don't know what I want to do with the rest of my life. I know my dad wants me to be involved with the church, but I don't know what I want. That's one of the reasons I haven't gone to college. I decided to wait a year, and hopefully I'll figure something out between now and then."

"One of the reasons?"

"Well, I'm also saving up to pay my own way through college. My parents would only pay if I went to a Christian school and, well, I didn't want to."

He pulled a face. "Can't say I blame you. What about a girlfriend? Didn't Joey mention you had a girlfriend? Becky or something?"

"Beth and I broke up. That was part of the reason I was having such a bad day last Saturday."

"Was it a rough breakup?"

"Not...exactly."

"So you broke up with her?"

"No, she broke up with me."

"I see, said the blind man."

I laughed. "It's complicated. We dated on and off all through high school, but there was never really any future in it. Not for me anyway. Really, it's just as well that she broke it off. I would have just let things drag on forever. At least now it's over and done with. See, I didn't feel the same way for her as she apparently felt for me. She wanted more from me than I felt like I could give her, and I don't think I ever would have been able to. It's hard to explain. There just wasn't...it wasn't...I just didn't feel anything with Beth."

"I understand what you're saying. I went through the same thing." He seemed to realize what he was saying at the same time I did. He rushed on, "Not that it means anything as far as, you know, you or anything. I was just saying that for me..." He trailed off into an uncomfortable silence.

I rushed to fill it. "So tell me about you." I didn't want to lose our growing rapport, but I did want to get the attention off of me. That seemed like a safe enough topic.

"Well, like I said, I come from a pretty big family. There are six of us kids altogether. I'm the oldest. My dad died three years ago from cancer, so it's just been our mom and us since then."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, it was rough, especially at first. My mom had to go back to work, and I had to help a lot with my brothers and sister."

"Just one sister?"

"Yeah, poor Siobhan. It's just her and Mom against all us boys. She's only two years younger than me, though, so she helped out a lot, too. And to be fair,

my brother Liam did what he could, but with three boys under ten, it was still a lot of work."

"What are your other brothers' names?"

"Declan, Conor and Rory. Mom was really stuck on the whole Irish name thing."

"I think it's nice. How old are all of them?"

"Let's see...Siobhan is seventeen, Liam is fifteen, Declan just turned twelve, Conor is nine, I think, and Rory is the baby. He's only five."

"Oh wow. So he was only two when your dad passed away?"

"Yeah. He doesn't even remember him. We do our best to keep his memory alive though."

He was starting to get a little emotional, so I decided to shift the subject again. "Well, it's great that you were able to get away for college."

"All thanks to my Aunt Meg. She left her husband and moved in with us, and that freed me up to be able to go away to college. That was about the same time I started realizing I was queer, so when things got ugly up there I was able to just pick up and transfer to Pemberton."

"So are you, like, planning on coming out down here?"

"Honestly, I'm not exactly in the closet. Not that I plan to fly a rainbow flag or hang photos of naked men everywhere around the apartment, but if it comes up in conversation, I'm honest. Oh, and there's a LGBTQ student group on campus that I might check out at some point, too. I think it's called Haven. I got a flier for it during orientation."

I nodded, my mind in overdrive. I hope there was enough distance between Pemberton and my dad's church. The last thing I needed was for word to get back to him that I was living with a gay guy. He'd go ballistic.

I realized I'd been quiet for too long, so I quickly said, "So, uh, what are you majoring in?"

"I just changed my major to psychology when I transferred, so we'll see how that goes. I was doing criminal justice and some psych courses are part of that. I found them interesting so I switched over."

"Okay, wait, I'm confused about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, the first night I met you, you said you weren't rich, and just now you said that your mom had to go back to work to support the family but—and I don't mean to be rude, so tell me to buzz off if this is too personal—I was under the impression that money wasn't an object. I mean, this is a pretty nice apartment and you're giving me a break on the rent and all..." I trailed off sheepishly. "Now that I've said that out loud, it's totally none of my business." Maybe he had, like, an OnlyFans or something. Did I really want to know that, if he did?

"No, it's a fair question, and I can see how that would all be confusing. If it was up to my mom and me to pay for my college, I'd be living at home and going to community college still. But thank God for rich relatives!" He laughed. "My dad's mother is stinking loaded. We only see her once a year at Christmas because she lives in Belgium. Dad was her only child, and we're her only grandchildren, so she's paying for all

of us to go to college. She has trust funds set up in case she kicks the bucket."

"Must be nice!"

"Yeah, I guess it is, now that you mention it. It's funny the things you take for granted. I don't even think about it. It's just something I've always known. God knows, she reminds us of it every time we see her."

"You don't sound like you like her very much."

He thought for a moment, then slowly said, "I'm grateful to her for what she's doing for me and my siblings. I mean, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for her. But I've always got the impression that she does it out of a sense of duty rather than any real affection. She's always treated us like the poor relatives, which to be fair, we were. I guess Dad was kind of a disappointment becoming a public school teacher instead of taking over the family business and being some vapid socialite. So no, I don't like her."

"She sounds, um...interesting."

"You know, she didn't even come to Dad's funeral. She was in St. Moritz and didn't want to end her vacation early. She just sent flowers. Can you believe that?"

"No. I don't even know what St. Moritz is."

"Some town in Switzerland with a luxury resort."

"Oh. I went to Wisp once on a youth group trip with my church."

"Wisp?"

"It's a ski resort in Western Maryland."

He laughed. "I'm sure it's just like that."

"So your dad turned down all that to be a teacher?"

"Yeah, although I think it was just to piss off my grandmother, really. They were a lot alike, except he didn't have the money to throw around once she cut him off. He was kind of emotionally distant, as if he didn't know how to show affection. I don't know what his dad was like. He never talked about him, and he was dead long before I was born. My mom was affectionate, though, so I guess that made up for it."

"Sounds like my family. My mom is very affectionate, but my dad is too preoccupied with work. I guess I'm more like my mom, though. Joey and Laura always complain that I'm too cuddly."

"What? There's no such thing as too cuddly!" He shook his head.

"Tell them that!"

He reached for another cookie. "That's like saying you can have too many warm chocolate chip cookies."

I laughed. "I think we're going to get along just fine."

The next day was a flurry of activity as Aidan and I really started setting up house. For two guys on their own for the first time we had a surprising amount of stuff. Most of mine consisted of my art supplies, and most of Aidan's was either electronics or weight equipment. The weights at least explained Aidan's physique, which was nicely toned, to say the least.

We chose a large section of the living room closest to the huge windows to be my studio. We placed Aidan's in-home gym next to me so we could talk while I painted and he worked out. Setting up all my crap just

the way I wanted it took up a sizable chunk of the afternoon, but Aidan seemed content to watch me while he did sit-ups, push-ups, and reps or whatever you call them.

Aidan seemed fascinated by all my paraphernalia, occasionally asking what something was and what I did with it. The last thing I pulled out of its protective cover was the painting from the previous weekend.

"You did that?" Aidan exclaimed, dropping his weights with a heavy thud.

"Yeah," I said shyly

I was a little self-conscious about my art. Outside of my art teacher and fellow students in high school, for the most part only Joey, Laura, and my parents had seen most of my work. Mom and Dad recognized that I had some talent, so they more or less passively supported my interest in art, but they seemed to think of it as a phase that I would outgrow—like my rock collection or my chemistry set. Most of my encouragement came from Mr. Takahashi, my art teacher, and he was the sort of exuberant teacher who encouraged everyone, so it was hard to really gauge how others might react to my work.

Aidan stood up and moved closer to get a better look at the painting. "Damn, Will," he said under his breath. "I mean, that's good. Really good. You're talented."

I felt a blush begin to creep up my neck.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"You just do this as a hobby?"

"Yeah."

"Have you ever sold anything?"

"Are you kidding? I'm not good enough to sell this stuff. I've never even had any real art classes, just school stuff and some kiddie classes when I was younger."

"Who says you have to have art classes? Haven't you ever heard of natural talent? If your other stuff is this good, then you're a heck of a lot better than some people I've seen showing in galleries."

"You know art?"

"Some. I'm hardly an expert, but like I was telling you last night, my dad was a bit of a snob. He made sure us kids were exposed to culture, as he put it. Most of our family outings involved museums. Some of the stuff he dragged us to see looked like something my youngest brother did the day before in Pre-K. The worst was the time he took us to see a toilet. I'm not kidding. It was just a regular toilet that the guy had bought at your average hardware store and stuck in the middle of the museum and called it art. I kept thinking it was a joke, but people were talking about how it was emblematic of something or other. Don't ask me. I felt like I was in the Emperor's New Clothes and I was the only one who could see he was naked. Maybe I'm just not sophisticated enough for that, but I fell in love with some of the other stuff, like the old Masters, the Impressionists, the Surrealists."

"You know more than I do. At least you had the opportunity to see that kind of stuff. The Eastern Shore's idea of culture is the Delmarva Chicken Festival. I envy you for that."

"Well, I envy you for your talent. I love art, but I can't even draw a stickman."

"I guess that makes us even then, huh? We can agree to envy each other."

Aidan laughed, then asked, "Do you have any more paintings here?"

"Um...I think I left most of them at home...well, Mom and Dad's. I didn't know what I'd do with them here."

"Next time you swing by there, pick them up. I'd like to see them." He bent close to the painting of the frog again. "This actually reminds me of some stuff I saw at a show in Philly one time, years ago. I can't remember the artist's name but he was up-and-coming, like the next big thing. Hey, maybe that could be you. You could be the next big thing!"

I felt a blush coming on again. I hated having both fair skin and a predisposition to blushing.

"You don't like getting compliments or talking about yourself, do you?" Aidan asked, noticing my discomfort as he straightened up.

"Not really. I guess it makes me kind of uncomfortable."

"Why?"

"I dunno. I guess I feel like I don't deserve the compliments."

His eyebrows jumped up. "But you have to know how talented you are."

"You're just saying that to be nice. I mean what else could you say? 'Man, Will, that sucks.'"

"I wouldn't say I liked it if I didn't. First thing you need to know about me is I'm always straight...well, bad choice of words, but you know what I mean."

I laughed as he grinned at me.

"Just accept the compliments for what they are and say thank you," he finished.

"That's easy for you to say. You're so...confident and outgoing."

"And you have low self-esteem."

"Thank you for your diagnosis, Dr. Scott, but I could have told you that."

"Why do you think you have low self-esteem? I mean you're cute, talented, funny..."

"Do you think we could continue this session at another time," I interrupted loudly as I felt my face blaze with color. "Your cousin will be here in an hour, and we still have empty boxes and crap all over the place."

"Hmm...aggression, deflection...the subject is exhibiting signs of classic avoidance," he said in a phony German accent.

"I'll show you avoidance," I growled playfully as I tackled him. We rolled into a laughing heap on the floor where we wrestled for several minutes. I wrestled with Joey all the time, but I was no match for Aidan. He had me outweighed and out-muscled. There was no contest, but as we rolled across the room, I suspected that he was giving me a lot more openings than I would have ever gotten if this were a serious fight.

We were so caught up in our wrestling match that we didn't even hear the knocking or the door swinging open. The first we knew of our visitors was when someone called, "Hello? Aidan?"

Aidan let go of me so quickly that my head bounced off the hardwood floor. "Ugh," I grunted and stayed still while I waited for the stars to stop spinning.

Aidan scrambled to his feet, towering above me. His shirt was pulled halfway over his head, and he hastily tugged it back into place. His face was flushed from our exertions, but the shade of red only deepened in a blush as giggles came from the direction of the door.

"Are we interrupting something?" a guy asked.

"No, I mean...uh...we were just playing around," Aidan stammered.

I'd never seen him so flustered. I was definitely enjoying watching the usually unflappable Aidan come unflapped. Uncharacteristically, I decided to push things a little farther. I ran my hand up his leg to his thigh. Aidan yelped and danced away to a safer distance and glared at me as I laughed.

"We have guests, *darling*," he said deliberately, then turned back toward the door. "Come on in, guys."

I sat up, still giggling, and saw the two guys from the photo Aidan had shown me the night before. They definitely made a striking couple. They were even cuter in person, somehow. Their eyes darted back and forth between Aidan and me. I waved cheerily.

Aidan held out a hand and effortlessly pulled me to my feet. "Will, this is my cousin Killian and his boyfriend, Asher. Guys, this is my roommate, Will."

Killian looked from me to Aidan. "And they were roommates..." he said in a stage whisper.

"Yeah," Asher said, a grin almost splitting his face in two, "roommates." He placed air quotes around the word.

"No!" I gasped. "I mean... Yes! Just roommates. That's all."

Aidan started cracking up.

"But when we walked in you two were..."

"We were wrestling!"

Killian's eyes twinkled. He made air quotes and repeated, "Wrestling."

"I swear! That's all. Right, Aidan?"

Aidan couldn't stop laughing but did manage to choke out, "That's what I tried to tell them from the beginning, before you decided to feel me up."

"I didn't... I was just... I'm not..." I sputtered.

Aidan was bent double laughing, while Killian and Asher still stood awkwardly in the doorway. Aidan waved them in as I attempted to salvage what little dignity I had left. What a way to make a first impression.

"You should see your face!" Aidan howled.

I chose to ignore him. "Just put your stuff over here by the wall for now," I said, playing the host. "The couch opens up into a bed if you stay the night. Sorry about all the boxes. We weren't expecting you to be here this early, and, um, we got distracted."

"Obviously," Killian said with a grin. "We'll help you clean up."

Wiping tears from his eyes, Aidan finally stopped laughing. "You guys don't have to clean. Sit back and relax. We've got this."

"Nah, we can help too," Killian insisted. "That way it'll get done quicker and we can all hang out."

You can't argue with logic. Everyone chipped in to straighten up the living room. The last step was to break down all the empty boxes, then Aidan carried cardboard out to the recycling dumpster, leaving me alone with the guys.

"So, how did you meet Aidan?" Killian asked after a few seconds of awkward silence.

"Through mutual friends."

"Cool. Do you go to Pemberton too?"

"Uh, no. My friends do though."

"Gotcha. Did you grow up around here?"

"Yeah. Lived here my whole life."

He nodded. "So are you gay?"

Asher elbowed Killian as I felt my face heating up. "Uh, no."

"Bi?"

"Killian!" Asher snapped.

"What? I'm just asking..."

"You'll have to excuse him," Asher said, looking a little embarrassed. "He has an incurable case of chronic curiosity."

Killian threw his hands up. "I'm just trying to get to know him!"

I chuckled nervously. "It's okay. I'm straight, but I'm cool with..." Where was I going with that?

"...everything." I finished, feeling extraordinarily lame.

Killian quirked an eyebrow. "I'd hope so if you're living with Aidan. He's a great guy."

"Yeah, he is. In fact, he's so great he made cookies. You guys want some?"

Asher's face lit up. "Cookies!"

"I'll take that as a yes." I grabbed the cookies we hadn't polished off the night before and joined the boys on the couch.

We were just digging in when Aidan got back.

"You started the party without me?" He poked his bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout.

"Oh yeah," Asher said around a mouthful of cookie, crumbs spraying everywhere. "You missed all the fun of Killian grilling poor Will like he was a hostile witness."

"I was not!" Killian protested.

"You kind of were," I said with a straight face.

Killian looked aghast. "Was I? I'm so sorry!"

Asher and I burst into laughter.

"I'm just giving you a hard time," I assured him.

"It's all good."

Aidan vaulted over the back of the couch and settled on the far end from me on the other side of Asher. "Great. Glad we're all getting along. Who wants to play a game?"

"Spin the bottle?" Killian asked, wagging his eyebrows suggestively.

"You just want to make out with me," Aidan shot back.

Killian screwed up his face. "Ew! You're my cousin."

"Oh, so you want to make out with Will?"

I laughed nervously as Asher grinned. "I'd watch that," he said suggestively.

Killian shoved Asher. "That's it. We're breaking up."

"Finally!" Asher crowed. "Now I'm free to date Aidan."

Killian threw an arm around me. "Whatever. I'll just snuggle with Will." I giggled and gave in to the air of silliness, laying my head on his shoulder and batting my eyes at Asher.

"Damn, you guys," Aidan said, shaking his head. "I just meant Clue."

Killian lit up as Asher groaned. "I love Clue!" Killian exclaimed.

"That's because you always win," Asher grouched.

"Well, we could play Monopoly," Aidan offered. "But those are your only choices. I don't have any other games."

"Why not both?" I suggested. "We've got all night."

Killian nodded thoughtfully. "The little one has a point."

I pushed Killian away. "Hey, watch it with the short jokes."

Asher laughed. "Don't mind him, he's just glad there's someone shorter than him for a change."

The playful bickering went on all night. It was as if we'd all been friends forever. We played Clue, which Killian won as predicted, followed by a marathon game of Monopoly that Aidan eventually won in the wee hours of the morning. Asher was looking droopy by then, and I was just as tired, so I suggested we all hit the sack.

Aidan and I helped Asher and Killian make up the sofa bed, then we retired to our respective rooms.

Maybe change doesn't have to be so bad after all, I thought as I undressed. Who needs Joey and Laura when you have friends like Aidan, Asher, and Killian?

Chapter 4

I brushed my teeth and went through all my evening rituals, then, just before I got into bed, I decided I was thirsty. I didn't want to disturb anyone else if they were trying to fall asleep so I eased open my door and padded softly down the hall to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

As I neared the living room, I overheard Asher and Killian talking quietly. I heard my name, and, even though I knew I shouldn't, I stopped to listen.

"Will seems nice," Killian was saying.

I felt horrible for eavesdropping, but I didn't move.

"Yeah. And cute too. Too bad he's straight."

They giggled, and Asher was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Are you attracted to him?"

I saw movement under the blankets as Killian turned to face Asher.

"What are you talking about, silly?"

"You were pretty cuddly with him."

"I was just joking around. Just like you were joking about dating Aidan. You *were* joking weren't you?"

"Ha. Yes."

"Look, you're my boyfriend. That means something to me. You're my number one. There is no number two. Even when we're not together, I think about you all the time. I would never even consider cheating on you."

"I wasn't saying you would, but just because we're dating doesn't mean you're blind. I'm sure you still find other people attractive."

"Well, sure, but Asher, I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. After all we've been through together, how can you doubt that for even a single second?"

"It's not that I doubt it. I mean, I love you too, and I know you love me. It's just...you've only ever dated me, you know? Sometimes, I just wonder if... Never mind. You're right. I'm just being silly."

"Yes...you...are..." Each word was separated by a kiss and was punctuated emphatically at the end with a passionate embrace.

I backed slowly away and returned to my room, the glass of water forgotten. My thirst had been replaced by a sharp pang of...was it jealousy? Not quite. More like an aching longing. I wanted what they had so badly that I could hardly breathe. I'd never even come close to having that depth of relationship with Beth. Would I ever find that kind of love?

Unbidden, an image of Joey suddenly leapt into my mind. I mentally swatted it away in annoyance.

"Stop it!" I hissed out loud at myself. "I am not in love with Joey. It's just because Laura put the idea in my head. I'm not even gay."

But this time, the idea wouldn't go away so easily. I felt like there were two people arguing inside my head.

"Why can't you be gay?"

"Because..."

"Because why?"

"Because...I dated Beth."

"And you never felt anything for her beyond friendship."

"That doesn't mean I'm gay. I just haven't met the right girl yet."

"What about Joey?"

"He's just my friend. That's all."

"You saw the photo, how you were looking at him."

"That was just admiration for my friend. I looked up to him."

"Sure, keep telling yourself that."

With a growl of frustration, I threw myself backwards onto my bed. Apparently, I couldn't even win an argument with myself. Maybe it was time to settle the question once and for all. At least then I could stop avoiding Laura. She was getting harder and harder to dodge. I knew it was just a matter of time before she showed up at my door again. She'd only tolerate so many missed calls and unanswered texts.

I decided to tackle the issue logically and make a mental list of all the things that I never felt for Beth that I saw in Killian and Asher.

One: Beth was never my top priority. As she'd complained, she was never my number one. Except on this list, and I doubt she'd appreciate the irony.

Two: I didn't think about her all the time. In fact, I hardly ever thought about her when we were apart.

Three: I definitely didn't want to spend the rest of my life with her.

Okay, so it was obvious that I did not love Beth, but that didn't mean that I was in love with Joey. I took

the same list and measured my feelings for Joey against them.

One: Everyone said Joey was my top priority so maybe he was. I had to admit his decisions were usually set in stone where my life was concerned. Strike one.

Two: Joey and I were almost always together. Well, at least we had been before he'd started college. When we weren't, I missed him terribly. Strike two.

Three: Did I want to spend the rest of my life with Joey? I certainly couldn't imagine my life without him, but did I want more than just friendship? I tried to picture what it would be like to come home to him after work every night, sit down to dinner with him, crawl into bed next to him at the end of the day...

I sat up with a jolt, my heart pounding in my chest.

I didn't like where that was leading. What I was feeling went against everything I'd ever been taught. I couldn't be in love with my best friend. Could I? It was getting harder and harder to deny.

The idea shook me.

I felt a sudden need for the comfort of light, so I crawled across the bed and reached for the lamp on my bedside table. My hand was shaking so hard, however, that I couldn't twist the little knob that turned it on. In frustration, I threw my hands up, knocking off the clip-on shade in the process and toppling the lamp onto the floor where I heard the light bulb smash.

I cursed as I fumbled in the darkness. I found the shade and was feeling for the lamp when a soft knock came at my door.

I heaved a sigh, crawled back to the foot of the bed, and went to open it. Aidan eyed the shade in my hand and gave me a curious look.

"The party's over, dude," he said in a hushed voice.

To my utter embarrassment, I burst into tears. I threw the shade across the room and threw myself face down on the bed.

"Will! What's wrong?" he asked, his voice filled with concern.

I heard the door close, and, a few seconds later, felt his hand on my back.

"Look, Will, I know we don't know each other that well yet, but I already consider you a friend, so I'm going to make the same offer to you that applies to all of my friends. If you want to talk about anything, I mean anything at all, I'll always be here to listen. I'm a good listener, and I won't judge or repeat anything you tell me. You have my word."

I cried all the harder. I felt the hand leave my back, quickly followed by the sound of the window opening. Cool air washed over me.

"Let's step out for some fresh air, shall we?" he said formally.

I looked up to find Aidan straddling the window sash with one leg flung out on the fire escape. He held out a hand and smiled. I was so surprised, I simply got up and took his hand, allowing him to help me through the window, sniffing like a little kid the whole time.

We sat down Indian style next to each other, our knees almost-but-not-quite touching. We sat in silence, broken only by an occasional sniff.

Finally, he said, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I think I'm in love with Joey!" I blurted out and started crying again.

"Wow...um...that's not what I expected," he said in a stunned voice.

"Does that mean I'm gay? I don't wanna be gay. I can't be gay!" I wailed.

"Shh, shh, shh," Aidan hissed.

He sounded so much like a snake with a lisp that I started giggling through my tears, then I hiccupped.

"People are trying to sleep," he said seriously. He was eying me as if he were afraid I was losing it...and maybe I was. He continued, "As far as Joey goes, I don't know if you're gay or not. Maybe you're bi. Or maybe you just love Joey, you know like a fluke. But if you are gay or bi, then you need to face it and accept it. It's not that bad, you know."

"Yes, it is! You don't understand! I'm a Christian."

"So? I didn't realize the two were mutually exclusive."

"They are according to my dad."

"Well, no offense, I mean I've never even met your dad, but I'm pretty sure he's not God."

"But the Bible..."

"Christianity is based on the teachings of Jesus, right?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Show me where Jesus ever once even mentions homosexuality."

"It..." I thought for a minute. "He doesn't."

"Exactly. And the Bible doesn't say anything about homosexuality as we know it anywhere else either."

"But it does, I've read it!"

"No, you've read a modern interpretation of an ancient language written in the context of a vastly different culture; an interpretation that's changed multiple times over the centuries to say what the religious leaders of the time wanted it to say."

I stared at him wide-eyed. "I thought the Bible hadn't changed since it was written."

He snorted. "Of course it has."

"But it's the word of God..."

"At best, it's the words of whoever wrote it. It's a collection of different books and stories that were written over thousands of years by dozens and dozens of different authors, each with their own reasons and goals for writing it. There are entire passages that were added to the original text centuries later."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I've never heard about any of this."

"Of course not. It's hard to convince people to believe your particular interpretation when you have to admit the entire basis of your belief system has a flawed foundation to begin with."

"You said the Bible doesn't condemn gay people?"

"The original languages of the Bible didn't even have a word for homosexual, not as we think of it today."

"How do you know so much about the Bible?"

"Well, when an entire religion goes to great lengths to condemn you based on the teachings of a book, I thought it would be best if I knew that book as well as they do—or, in the case of most of them, better. So I did some studying on my own. It just seemed that, from what I know about myself and everyone else I've ever met who was gay, no one chooses to be gay. Either you are or you aren't. There's nothing you can do about it but accept it and try to live your life the best way you know how.

"It didn't make sense to me that God would create something that he hated, so I read some books on the subject and watched a lot of Biblical scholars who know a hell of a lot more than I do. You'd be amazed at how different some of the oldest versions of the scriptures are from what we have today, especially in context of the time they were written.

"So yeah, these are the conclusions that I came to. I'm not saying that they are the absolute truth. To be fair, I wasn't raised religious. We went to church now and then, but we weren't devout. I guess you'd say I'm agnostic, at best, though atheist is probably more accurate. You take it all pretty seriously, huh?"

"I mean, my dad's a pastor, so yeah."

"But that's your dad. What do you think? Are you Christian just because it's how you were raised or because it's what you actually believe for yourself?"

I sat silently for a moment. "I...I don't know. I guess I've never thought about it that way before."

"Well, if you believe it for yourself, then yeah, I guess it matters what God thinks, but if you don't...then

it's all just a mental exercise, right? Unraveling a lifetime of brainwashing."

"You definitely sound like a psych major."

Aidan laughed. "Guilty."

"So, uh, how will I know if I'm gay?"

"I think you'll just know, Will. Or maybe you already do and all you have to do is accept it."

"Now you sound like Laura. Why does everyone keep trying to be my shrink?"

"Maybe because they care about you and want to help you."

I looked over at him and saw nothing but sincerity. A sudden shiver went through me.

"Jeez, you're going to get sick! Here we are sitting out here on this cold metal half-naked."

I realized that we were both sitting on the metal grill of the fire escape in nothing but our underwear—thin cotton boxers for me, and form-fitting boxer briefs for him. We were experiencing unseasonably cool weather for September, but I'd been so engrossed in our conversation that I hadn't even noticed. Once the temperature was brought to my attention, though, I could see the goosebumps on my arms.

"Let's get back inside," Aidan said as he stood up and pulled me to my feet. We climbed back into my bedroom, and Aidan shut the window while I crawled into bed and pulled the blankets up to my chin.

"Think you can sleep now?" he asked me. I nodded. "You've got a lot to think about." I nodded again. "If you need me, I'm right across the hall."

He let himself out, closing the door softly behind him.

For a moment, I felt a sense of panic, afraid to be alone with my thoughts, afraid I wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

I shouldn't have worried. I was exhausted. My last thought before drifting off was that I was lucky to have moved in with a guy like Aidan.

I was rudely awakened the next morning by loud pounding on my bedroom door. I came up kicking and flailing, heart racing.

"Time to wake up, Sleepyhead!" Killian and Asher yelled through the door.

I flopped back down. "I'm awake," I grumbled sleepily. "And suffering from cardiac arrest thanks to you."

"What?"

"I said—"

"What?"

"Just open the door!"

The door cracked open. "Are you decent?" Killian asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh darn," he said with a grin as the door swung open and their heads popped into my room. "We didn't think you were ever going to wake up. Aidan is making breakfast."

"What time is it?"

"It's like ten already," Asher said.

I groaned. "Too early!"

"Aw, come on. We want to hang out before we have to head home."

"Fine. I'm getting up." I crawled out of bed and started pulling open drawers in my dresser trying to remember where I'd put what.

"So..." Killian said from behind me.

"So what?"

"So, are you and Aidan an item or what?"

"I told you last night that we weren't."

"Yeah, but there was that interesting little scene when we got here yesterday, and then last night I got up to pee and ran into Aidan in the hallway. He was sneaking out of your room. He just looked embarrassed and hurried into his room."

"We were wrestling when you got here, and he wasn't sneaking anywhere last night. He was probably just trying not to wake you guys up." Killian arched an eyebrow. "Seriously! We were only talking. Aidan's my roommate, and fast becoming a friend, but that's it."

"Okay, if you say so, but I know chemistry when I see it." Asher elbowed him in the side, and Killian rolled his eyes. "Anyway... What were you guys talking about that late at night?"

I rolled my eyes. "Has anyone ever told you that you ask too many questions?"

"All the time."

"Well, some things are none of your business."

Asher laughed. "If I had a dollar for every time I've told him that..."

Killian sat on the edge of my bed as I pulled out a pair of underwear and a shirt. "Hey Will, have you ever heard of gaydar?"

I rummaged through a drawer for a pair of jeans. "Nope. Is that like radar?"

"Kinda. More like a sixth sense."

"So what does it do?"

"It helps gay people identify other gay people."

I straightened up with the jeans and eyed Killian warily. "That's not real."

"It kind of is. It's like you just know."

I looked at Asher, still standing in the doorway. He shrugged. "I mean, yeah. It's kind of a real thing."

"So what's your point?"

"I don't have a point. But you know, if you ever want to talk to anybody..."

Was he saying what I thought he was saying? My knees suddenly felt weak. I sat down on the nearest thing at hand, which happened to be a box that was still in the room and much to my surprise found myself going right through the top. With my feet in the air, I struggled to pull myself out of the empty box while Killian and Asher laughed hysterically. I finally succeeded...in splitting it open, but at least I was out.

"I'm going to take a shower," I said with as much dignity as I could muster and, grabbing my clothes, made my exit. I squeezed past Asher in the doorway, leaving Killian rolling on my bed in tears, gasping for breath in between uncontrolled fits of laughter.

I took my time in the bathroom, but when I finally emerged, Aidan had a towering stack of pancakes waiting.

"Wow, you are going to spoil me!"

"Just don't expect this every day," Aidan said.

"He wouldn't let us eat until you were out of the shower," Killian informed me, sounding slightly put out.

Aidan rolled his eyes. "And yet, somehow, you survived."

"Barely!"

"Everybody's here now, so dig in!"

We made short work of the pancakes, and everyone pitched in to clean up the kitchen, though it was a tight fit with four of us in the tiny room.

After eating, we set to unpacking the rest of the boxes. With two extra sets of hands, the work went quickly and, by lunchtime, the apartment looked like we'd always lived here.

We were making two large pizzas disappear when someone knocked on the door. Aidan and I exchanged glances, then both of us raced the short distance to the door, laughing all the way. He got there first and pulled the door open with one hand while holding a drooping slice of pizza in the other.

A strange woman stood in the doorway. I wouldn't have described her as pretty, but she was definitely striking, with a prominent nose and sharp eyes behind chunky, black-rimmed glasses. She looked to be in her mid- to late-twenties, with short, dark hair that was artfully messy. She wore a thin white crop top under faded bib overalls, and funky faux leopard-skin fuzzy sandals. Those last items caught and held my attention.

"Hiya! I'm Nikki. I'm your neighbor across the hall. I just thought I'd stick my head in and say welcome to the neighborhood. I was going to bring a fruit basket, but then I thought, who the hell brings fruit baskets these days?"

We stood blinking at her for a moment; neither of us knew quite what to say. Aidan recovered first. "Uh,

thanks. I'm Aidan Scott, and this is my roommate, Will Keegan," Aidan said.

My attention wandered back to her feet, which she waggled in greeting. I quickly looked back up and held out my hand as my face heated up.

She took my proffered hand in a firm grasp with an amused smile on her face. "Like my shoes?" she said. "I like to dress with flair! Life is too short to wear boring clothes, you know? I think some of the other residents have betting pools on just how bizarre I can get. I'm always trying to top myself. Gotta do my part to keep their lives interesting."

I grinned back. I liked her already. She had a comfortable manner that put me at ease. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure! I love seeing other people's spaces. You learn so much about people from what they choose to surround themselves with, you know?"

"Well, we just moved in so I don't know how revealing it will be just yet," Aidan said as she stepped into our apartment.

Killian and Asher stood up, each with a slice of pizza in their hands, and I realized another round of introductions was in order. "This is Killian and Asher. Guys, this is our neighbor Nikki." I turned to Nikki. "Would you like a slice of pizza?"

"No thanks, I'm a health food freak. You know, organic foods only, almost a vegetarian, but I just can't give up seafood."

She walked around the apartment while she talked, giving the room a thorough inspection. I got the impression she didn't miss anything. Her eyes lit up

when she spotted my drawing table. She quickly crossed over for a closer look.

"Oh, wow! Who's the artist?"

"That would be me," I said, raising a hand like I was back in school.

"Sweet! May I?" She made a motion toward the table.

"Uh, sure. Help yourself."

She looked over my supplies for a few minutes.

"Quite the set up you've got here, Will. Nice quality, no junk. You must be a serious artist."

"No, it's just a hobby."

"Don't listen to him," Aidan said as he walked over. "He's really good. Look at this." He pulled out the frog painting with a dramatic flourish.

Nikki's eyebrows shot up above her glasses.

"You did this?"

"Yeah," I mumbled as my face once more turned into a furnace.

She leaned in for a closer look. "Dramatic. Nice detail. Almost surrealistic. I like the symbolism." She straightened up and peered at me over her glasses. "Are you represented?"

"I guess you could say the frog."

She gave me a blank look. "Come again?"

I blushed. "Well, the frog kind of represents me because lately I've been feeling like I'm caught in a storm—" I stopped abruptly as she began to laugh.

"That's not quite what I meant. I meant, are you represented by an agent? A gallery? Do you show anywhere?"

"Oh God, no!"

"You should be."

"I'm not good enough—"

"Bullshit. Pardon my French. I'm an artist so I know what I'm talking about. More importantly, I own my own gallery, and I'm always looking for new talent. I'd like to see some of your other work. You do have more, right?"

"Yeah," I said with my head spinning. "But it's not as good as this..."

"Let me be the judge of that. Let's see 'em."

"I don't have them here. They're at home. I mean my parents' home."

"Is that nearby?"

"Um, yes."

"Great. Any chance I could see them some time? If I like your other work as much as what I see here, I might be interested in exhibiting a few of your pieces. We could see what kind of reaction we get, maybe do a show. You know, after we test the vibes."

I blinked at her like a demented owl.

"Am I going too fast for you?" Nikki asked.

I nodded mutely.

"You have your own gallery?" Killian asked, coming to my rescue.

"Yes! Well, my brother and I own it. My father started it, and he left it to us when he retired and moved to Italy. It's called Avant Garde, and it's on the old Downtown Plaza."

"Cool. You look pretty young to have your own gallery."

"I didn't know there was an age limit, and actually I'm thirty."

"The health food must work," Aidan quipped.

Nikki laughed and turned her attention back to me. "So what do you say, Will? Can I see your work? And would you be interested in maybe taking a shot at being a professional *artiste*?"

"I, uh...I don't know..."

"Come on, Will," Asher said. "How often do you get an offer like that?"

"Why don't you think about it for a while?" Nikki suggested.

"I don't mean to sound rude, but can I ask you a question?" I said hesitantly.

"Hey, you can ask me anything you want. I don't insult easily. You have to have pretty thick skin to dress like I do."

"Well, what do you get out of this?"

She threw her head back and laughed loudly. "A shrewd businessman! I love it! Okay, let's see, what do I get out of it? Well, I'm assuming you mean besides the altruistic pleasure of helping out a fellow artist?"

I heard Asher mutter to Killian, "Quick, get a dictionary." Nikki winked at me.

"Yeah, besides that," I agreed.

"Well, it's standard procedure for the gallery to get a commission on anything we sell, usually between thirty and fifty percent. I'd only ask thirty from you since you're just getting started. More importantly, though, I get the pleasure and credit, keyword 'credit,' of discovering an up-and-coming artist. If you make a splash, then Avant Garde gets exposure and publicity, and I can start building a reputation of my own instead of riding on Daddy's coattails."

I nodded. "I need to think about it."

"Sure. Why don't you and Aidan come over to my apartment for dinner tomorrow night? You can meet my new boyfriend and see some of my work."

I looked over to Aidan, who nodded encouragingly. "Okay," I said.

"Great! It's a date! Toodles." And with that she let herself out, leaving behind the slightest hint of patchouli.

"Wow! Will's a real live artist!" Asher exclaimed.

"Slow down. It seems too good to be true," I said.

"Don't be so negative," Aidan scolded. "She's like a force of nature, isn't she? I bet if anyone can make this work she can."

"She seemed cool to me," Killian added.

"She could be a kook for all we know," I argued.

"There's an easy way to find out," Aidan said, pulling out his phone. "What did she say the name of her gallery was?"

"Something guard?" Asher offered helpfully.

"Avant Garde," Killian supplied. "It's French."

"Here it is," Aidan said. "It's definitely a real gallery. Hang on. Yeah, according to the About page, the gallery was founded by Giovanni "Gio" Avanti and it's now run by his children Dante and Nikolia. I'm assuming Nikolia is Nikki."

"See?" Asher said triumphantly. "She's legit."

"Anybody can build a website and say whatever they want," I said stubbornly. "That doesn't mean the gallery is actually any good."

"Then how about this," Aidan said. "We have some time before Killian and Asher need to head home.

Why don't the four of us drive downtown and check out the gallery for ourselves? That way we'll know exactly what we're dealing with."

"What if it's not open on Sunday?" Asher asked.

"Oh, shit!" I gasped.

"What?"

"Today is Sunday!"

"And..."

"I missed church!"

"Too late to worry about it now," Aidan said philosophically. "The gallery is open. Their hours are on the website. Let's go."

Chapter 5

The Plaza, as it's commonly known, is a brick courtyard created by closing off a section of Main Street running through the old shopping district in the heart of the city. Tall Victorian-era brick buildings lining the pedestrian-friendly corridor, with fountains, sculptures, and flowerbeds scattered along the way. The old storefronts mostly housed restaurants, upscale boutiques, lawyers' offices, and antique stores. The idea was a well-intentioned attempt to revitalize the downtown area, but the reality was a little on the shabby side.

It didn't take long to find Avant Garde once we were there. It stood out since it was the only place on the Plaza with a life-sized sculpture in the window of two demons caught in the act of making love. At least, I assumed they were demons. They looked like regular people aside from the fact that they had wings and something resembling horns coming out of their heads. The statue looked like it was made of bronze, and it must have weighed a ton.

We all stood in silent awe for several minutes before anyone spoke.

"Well...isn't that...anatomically correct?" Aidan said.

"I wouldn't know. I'm still a virgin," Asher said with a giggle.

"You two might have to wait outside," I said, only half joking.

"Why?" Killian asked.

"It might be over twenty-one-plus only!"

"That eliminates you guys, too," Killian pointed out reasonably.

We finally managed to tear ourselves away from the amorous couple and entered the gallery, which was indeed open.

There were no other pornographic statues in view, but everything I did see looked terribly expensive and elegant. I felt out of place in my jeans and t-shirt. To be fair, I was also having trouble picturing Nikki in there.

I was just about to suggest we leave when a tall, thin, dark-haired man in a tailored designer suit seemingly appeared out of thin air. "Hello, this is Avant Garde. Can I help you with something?" His tone clearly suggested that he seriously doubted that would be the case.

Before I could muster up a response, Aidan stepped forward and offered his hand. Mr. Armani looked at it disdainfully for a moment before reluctantly shaking it, then casually wiped his hand on his pant leg as if it had possibly become contaminated by Aidan's touch.

"I'm Aidan Scott," Aidan said in a cool, cultured voice that was so unlike his usual voice that I almost did a double take. "This is my client, Will Keegan. Perhaps you've heard of him." He managed to make it sound like he was a fool if he hadn't.

Sir Stuffy Suit began to look a bit flustered. Meanwhile, I'm sure I was turning a lovely shade of crimson judging by the burning in my cheeks.

"He's being called the next big thing. We met earlier today with Ms. Avanti," Aidan swept on. "She

expressed an interest in perhaps representing Mr. Keegan in this area. We thought we'd stop by unannounced and have a look around. We can't be represented by just anyone."

"Of course," Mr. Armani gushed. "I think you'll be pleased with Avant Garde. We may be a small gallery, but we've had some wonderful success on the international market. As you can see, we cater to a very specific clientele."

"Yes, so I see," Aidan said, allowing just a hint of disapproval to enter his voice. "I just hope the scope isn't too narrow."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I'm afraid you don't," Aidan agreed. "We'll look around now. Thank you." It was clearly a dismissal but the man seemed hesitant to leave us alone in the gallery.

"Please let me know if I can help you with anything—" he tried.

"I doubt that very seriously, but thank you ever so much once again."

The man looked completely unnerved by that point. He began to back away with a slight bow that would have been laughable if I wasn't so nervous that we'd be discovered as total frauds at any moment.

"That was freaking awesome!" Killian whispered as soon as the guy vanished through a curtain on the back wall.

"Shh!" I hissed, then reeled to face Aidan. "What was that?" I growled as quietly as possible while still letting him know exactly how I felt about his little performance.

"What was what?" he asked innocently.

"The next big thing? Nobody's calling me that!"

"I did, earlier today. Remember?"

"Your client?"

"Will, calm down. You're gonna pop a vein."

"What if Nikki finds out about this?"

"Relax. I know his type. He won't dare breathe a word of this to Nikki. He would never admit to anything that might make him look bad. He'll wait and see if we say anything, see what take we give her, then he'll try to spin it to make himself look better. Trust me. I'm telling you, I grew up in places like this."

I threw my hands up in defeat and started to look around. The work displayed was a diverse collection of modern, abstract, and traditional art, ranging from sculptures and paintings to mixed-media collages. They seemed to have something for everyone, although I couldn't help but wonder if the athletic couple in the window might not put off the more conservative folks. Or maybe that was the point.

We did find one more statue on a platform in the back of the gallery. Once again, it was life-sized and erotic, but this one was of two men. One was standing facing the viewer, and the other stood behind him with his arms around him in an intimate and touching embrace as he kissed his neck.

Once again, we were all struck silent at first. Asher was the first to break the mood. "My God, he's hung like a horse," he whispered loudly.

We all cracked up. I thought for sure Mr. Armani would come running, but we actually made it out of the gallery without running into His Stuffiness again.

"Well, what did you think?" Aidan asked as we walked back to the car.

"I think I wanna try that!" Asher said with a leer directed at Killian.

"Not about that, you perv." Aidan laughed.

"About the gallery."

"I thought it was cool but kinda...prissy," Killian volunteered.

"I think that sums it up pretty well," I agreed.

"Especially that stuffed suit."

"Stuffed Armani suit," Aidan corrected me. "And I agree, too."

We all turned to look at Asher.

"I'm horny!" he announced happily.

When we got back to the apartment, Asher and Killian came in long enough to grab their bags before they had to leave.

"So how are you doing? I've been thinking a lot about what we talked about last night," Aidan asked as soon as they were gone.

"You and me both," I said with a sigh. "I'm okay, I guess."

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

"No, and I don't think I will. Not right now, anyway. I'm just going to let it slide for the moment. There's no reason I have to make up my mind right this second."

"Ignoring it isn't going to make anything go away."

"Thank you, Doctor Scott."

"Hey, ultimately, it's your life, your decision, but it's not really the kind of thing you can just ignore indefinitely, for your own sake."

"Or what? I'll self-destruct?"

Aidan looked thoughtful. "Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time it's happened."

Before I could pursue that intriguing line of thought further, someone knocked on the door. I was closer so I answered it to find Joey looking slightly annoyed.

"Just the guy I was looking for," he said. "I haven't been able to get up with you all week. What's up?"

"I, uh...you know, um, busy...with moving and work and stuff..."

He stood there for a moment while I stared back, then he gave me a "what's up" look with his hands spread, palms up. "Uh, can I come in or are we just going to talk here in the doorway?"

"Oh, yeah, sure." I stepped back to allow him in, shutting the door behind him.

"Hey, Aidan!" he said as he strolled into the living room and dropped into the recliner, legs spread wide, hands on the armrests.

"Hiya, Joey." Aidan glanced back and forth between us, clearly uncertain of his welcome.

I desperately tried to communicate telepathically that I wanted him to stay in the room with us, but I guess my psychic skills were still lacking, because he started backing toward the hallway.

"Well, I have some school work I need to knock out before tomorrow, so I'll be in my room if anyone

needs me," he said, and then he was gone, shutting his bedroom door behind him.

I turned back toward Joey, my stomach in knots.

"So..." I started lamely.

"I came by earlier, but no one answered the door," Joey said somewhat accusingly.

"Oh, yeah. We, um... We weren't here."

"Yeah, I figured that out on my own, thanks. Are you avoiding me?"

"Why would I be avoiding you?" I said evasively.

"You don't answer my calls or texts, I haven't heard from you all week and usually you can't go more than a few hours without at least sending a meme, and now you're acting like you can't wait to get rid of me."

"I told you, I've been busy."

"Too busy to call your best friend?"

"Yeah, well, my best friend was too busy to tell me about his new girlfriend, so isn't that a little like the pot calling the kettle black?"

"Are you still mad about that? I said I was sorry. Are you really mad that I didn't tell you or are you mad that I'm seeing someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"You act like a jealous girlfriend sometimes."

"I do not!"

"Yeah, you do. But I didn't come here to pick a fight."

"Why *did* you come?"

"Aren't you the one who said you missed me just last week? And then you ghosted. I just wanted to hang out with my best friend."

"Oh, so I still have that title?"

"Of course. Who else am I going to talk to about stuff?"

"What about Mackenzie?"

"We've been going out for three weeks. I've known you for eighteen years. Besides, you don't tell your girlfriend everything."

I sighed. "Fine. I missed you, too."

"I thought you were busy."

I shrugged, and he rolled his eyes.

"You really are so much like a girl," he grumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, my hackles rising.

"Chill, dude. I just mean you get so pissy about the smallest things then pout about it forever."

"I wasn't pouting!" He raised an eyebrow, and I gave in with a sigh. "Okay. Maybe I was pouting a little."

He laughed. "No kidding. Now come over here and sit your bitch ass down. I have to fill you in on my week, then I want to hear about how the move went. You know, if you weren't so busy being a big baby, I would have helped. But anyway, there's this girl in one of my classes. She's so hot—"

"Hold up. Aren't you dating Mackenzie?"

"It's only been three weeks! We're not married."

I shook my head as I took a seat on the couch. Classic Joey.

He ended up staying until almost midnight. After a while, Aidan came out and joined us to watch a movie. I went to bed that night thinking that maybe things didn't have to change so much after all.

Monday morning started off with a lecture from my father as soon as I arrived at the office. He was, predictably, very disappointed that I missed church on my first Sunday not living at home. I apologized multiple times, explaining that I just forgot to set my alarm and overslept after moving, but that was not an acceptable excuse for him. I was pretty sure there were laws about workplace harassment, but when your father is also your pastor who is also your boss, certain lines become blurred.

After work, I swung by my parents' house to pick up the rest of my paintings. Dad wasn't home, thankfully, so I only had to deal with Mom. She was fairly emotional and must have told me she missed me a half dozen times, but it could have been worse. At least she didn't lecture me.

The apartment was empty when I got home, but I did find a note slipped under our door. The handwriting was a barely legible scrawl that screamed serial killer, but I managed to decipher "Dinner at 6," so I assumed it was from Nikki.

I was watching TV, stretched on the couch when Aidan got home.

"Lucy, I'm home," he called as he burst through the door.

"Hey, Nikki said dinner is at six."

"Cool, then I have time for a shower."

He was back out shortly, freshly showered and wearing a tropical print shirt and khakis.

"That is one ugly shirt," I couldn't help but say.

Aidan grinned. "You're just jealous, cuz you don't have fresh fits like me. Is my client ready for his first business dinner?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"Good, let's go."

We walked across the hall and tapped on Nikki's door. She answered it almost immediately wearing a brightly colored sarong with a matching scarf wrapped around her head like a turban.

"Aidan, I love your shirt!" she said. "Come on in."

The first thing we saw as we stepped in was a life-sized statue of a mermaid and merman wrapped around each other with their heads thrown back in apparent ecstasy. It was sitting in the middle of what should have been the living room, but Nikki apparently used it as her studio. I guess we now knew who the sex-crazed sculptor was.

Nikki followed our gaze. "Like it? I just finished it last night. I haven't gotten it out of here yet. You'll have to excuse the mess."

"It's...lifelike," Aidan said carefully.

"I use live models for the initial sittings. I do a small clay model and some sketches that I then use to create the statues."

"Where do you find fresh mer-people this time of year?" Aidan asked.

Nikki laughed. "I have my sources. This piece is most likely already sold. I just have to get it to the gallery so they can see it."

"How do you get it out of here?" I asked.

"The elevator."

"Isn't it too heavy?"

"It's nowhere near as heavy as it looks. It's hollow for one thing. More importantly, though, it isn't actually bronze. It's recycled aluminum that I paint with a metallic paint and then age and oxidize it."

"Cool."

"While we're talking shop, are those your paintings?"

"Yeah." I held out the stack.

She took them and began to look through them carefully. She went through the stack of about fifteen paintings twice, then pulled out four, stood them on the couch, and stepped back. After a few more minutes of scrutinizing, she put one back in the pile and handed the rejected pieces back to me.

"These," she said. She had chosen three of my most unusual pieces, a study of a door on an abandoned house, a window of another abandoned house, and an architectural detail of an old country church.

"Are you sure?" I asked. I was somewhat dubious.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"We went to the gallery yesterday," I told her. "Are you sure these will...fit in?"

"Oh, God, you must have met Dante."

"Would that be the guy wearing an Armani suit with the stick up his butt?" Aidan asked.

"That would be him." Nikki sighed. "Dante is my brother and the other co-owner of Avant Garde. As you can probably imagine, we have somewhat differing ideas about how the place should be run. But to answer your question, Will, the whole reason I like these pieces is

because they aren't like the other things we have. You don't want to blend in. You want to stand out."

Considering how I'd spent most of my life trying desperately to blend in and not stand out, I was still somewhat unconvinced. She must have been able to tell by my expression.

"Have you ever seen one of your paintings framed and matted?"

"No."

"Do you mind if I go ahead and frame these?"

"I guess not."

"Good, then come by the gallery...um...Saturday and see what you think then."

"Okay," I agreed.

"Dinner's ready," a voice called from the kitchen.

Aidan and I turned confused looks toward the strange voice just as a barefoot man appeared holding a steaming pan of something cheesy. The dish wasn't the only thing that was piping hot. The guy carrying it was stunningly beautiful, with long, curly chestnut-brown hair pulled back into a messy man bun, intense dark eyes, heavy stubble, and two silver hoop earrings in each ear. He wore loose-fitting, striped linen pants, an oversized button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms, and a pair of hot pink oven mitts. He looked a lot younger than Nikki—not much older than Aidan and I, in fact—but after my miscalculation with Nikki's age, I was hesitant to make assumptions.

"Will, Aidan, this is my boyfriend, Sam. He cooks. I hope you like vegetarian lasagna."

"I guess we're about to find out," Aidan quipped.

The lasagna was delicious, and Sam was just as interesting as Nikki. I turned out to be right about his age, though. He was only two years older than Aidan, and a senior at Pemberton. He and Nikki met when he saw her flier advertising for a live model.

I couldn't help but wonder if he was the model who was "hung like a horse," as Asher had so eloquently put it. I kept taking what I hoped were surreptitious glances at his crotch whenever he stood up, but it was impossible to tell since the hem of his shirt kept blocking my view.

"So are all your sculptures so...spicy?" Aidan asked during a lull in the conversation.

"You mean filthy?" Nikki replied, then laughed. "I guess you could say I specialize in erotic art."

"She's really gaining a name for herself," Sam chimed in. "She's sold pieces to collectors all over the world."

"Sex sells," Nikki quipped, waving her fork dismissively. "The truth is I'm a nepo baby."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"My father was a renowned art expert and critic, the kind of guy who could make or break your career," she explained. "Highly respected. He met my mother at a fashion show in Milan. She was modeling at the time, barely eighteen. He was in his fifties. They had a whirlwind affair that resulted in Dante. For some ungodly reason, they decided to get married and, a few years later, I came along. It wasn't long after that when mommy dearest decided she wasn't cut out for motherhood and ran off with some B-list actor. They

both died of a drug overdose at a hotel in Cannes before I was even six."

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," I said, horrified.

"Don't be. I never even knew her and, frankly, it doesn't sound like I missed much. The end result was that Dante and I were raised in various European countries by a succession of nannies, most of whom were sleeping with my father at the time. At some point, he decided that we needed to be more grounded, so he moved us here to be closer to my mother's parents. Mind you, they'd never even met us before that. I was probably around twelve at the time. I'm sure I was absolutely insufferable. I know for a fact that Dante was. In our defense, Salisbury, Maryland is a far cry from Paris, Prague, and Amsterdam.

"He opened Avant Garde and tried his best to be a supportive, present father figure. To his credit, he waited until I graduated high school before he grew bored and decided he missed Europe. And eighteen-year-old models, which are few and far between in these parts."

"You found me," Sam said with a grin.

"Yeah, but you're not exactly my dad's type," Nikki said dryly. "Anyway, he lasted long enough to establish the gallery's reputation as a real force in the art world despite the fact that it was located in the middle of fucking nowhere, then he jetted off to Italy and turned the business over to Dante and I. I'm pretty sure it was just a ploy to try and force us to get along."

"Did it work?" Aidan asked.

She gave him a look. "You've met him. What do you think?"

He chuckled. "I'm guessing not so much."

"You guessed correctly. We've fought all our lives, and I don't see that changing any time soon unless Dante manages to get that stick out of his butt—your words, not mine—and let's face it, that's not going to happen. But enough about me, although, I have to admit, I am my favorite topic. Tell me more about you guys. Did you grow up here? Are you in school? Are you guys a thing? Aidan, have you ever thought about modeling? I'm always looking for subjects..."

I was sputtering before she finished shooting off her list of questions, but Aidan just took it in stride with a laugh.

"Will grew up here, I grew up in Pennsylvania. I go to Pemberton, Will works. We are just roommates and only met like two weeks ago so we are definitely not a thing. And no, I've never considered modeling and, while I won't write it off completely, I'm not sure I'm confident enough to be one of your muses."

Nikki was visibly delighted with Aidan's rapid-fire responses.

"So wait!" she said with excitement. "You're telling me that you're not an established couple? But the chemistry is *palpable*! Please tell me you're both part of the rainbow mafia at least."

"I'm guilty as charged," Aidan said with a charming smile. "I'll let Will answer for himself."

"Why start now?" she shot back, waggling her eyebrows.

It was my turn to laugh. "I'm..." I started to say 'straight,' but the word caught in my throat. I glanced

over at Aidan, who just gave me a small smile, then shrugged. "Figuring it out."

"That's fair," Nikki said. "Anyway, what are you studying at school, Aidan?"

She'd moved on so quickly, but I felt like something momentous had just happened. I stopped listening to the conversation that continued to flow around me while I stared at the remains of my vegetarian lasagna on my plate.

Why did I say that? There was nothing to figure out.

I could feel myself starting to spiral and made a deliberate effort to shake it off. When my mind finally managed to tune back in, Sam was in the middle of a story about some old rich lady who'd offered him a very large sum of money to be her live-in houseboy after the unveiling of the statue he'd modeled for. He was, in fact, hung like a horse.

The rest of the week was comparatively uneventful. Joey, Mackenzie, Laura, and Gabe came over for a movie night, which seemed to go well enough. I was careful to be on my best behavior, and, if I felt a few pangs of jealousy at the possessive way Mackenzie treated Joey, I did my best to just sit in those feelings and not let them get the best of me.

Aidan and I continued to get to know each other. I was quickly coming to think of him as a true friend. I wondered what effect, if any, it would have on my friendship with Joey, which despite the movie night, continued to grow ever more distant.

By the time the weekend rolled around, I was starting to get excited to see what my paintings looked like framed. I dressed in a button-down shirt and my best pair of jeans and drove downtown once again, only without an entourage.

Loud electronic music poured out of the open door of Avant Garde and drifted down the plaza, drawing me in like the visible scent of a fresh pie cooling on a window sill in an old cartoon. I spotted Nikki the moment I stepped inside. She was hard to miss. The tips of her hair were now a deep red, as if she'd dipped her hair in blood, and she was wearing a matching mini dress that was cinched at the waist with a length of chain with a padlock on one hip. Black patent leather boots and dangly silver earrings completed the outfit.

She was busy hanging a painting as I approached and didn't notice me. I looked over her shoulder and gasped when I saw what she was hanging.

She spun around at my gasp, knocking the painting askew on its hanger. "Oh, Will! You startled me. I didn't hear you come in. What do you think? Your door looks different, huh?"

Did it ever! I hardly recognized it as my work. I couldn't believe the difference a mat and frame could make. She'd chosen a simple cream-colored mat with a frame that mimicked the feel of the weathered wood in my painting.

"Wow!" was all I could manage.

"See? You know you've got talent when you impress yourself," she said with a chuckle as she straightened it.

"It's not that—" I said quickly, but she cut me off.

"Of course it is. Every artist feels the same way the first time they see their work displayed properly. There's a bit of vanity in it, sure, but that's only natural. Call it pride in your work or something like that."

"It just looks so different. Did you do anything to it?"

"I would never tamper with someone else's work. It's all yours, kiddo. All I did was stick a mat and frame on it. The others are over there," she said, pointing them out.

I went and stood in front of each one, taking them in with a sense of wonder. She'd chosen the perfect frames for each one, accentuating the artwork without distracting.

Nikki followed me silently, enjoying every second of my reaction.

"Nikki!" a male voice bellowed, ruining our moment. "Why are there mermaids having sex in my office?"

Dante barreled into the room, but came skidding to a halt when he saw me. "Oh, excuse me. Mr. Keegan, wasn't it?"

"They're not mermaids; they're mer-people. One is clearly male. And they're in your office because a potential buyer is on the way here, and your office is bigger than mine. It's what you get for claiming the bigger office. I understand you two have met."

Dante glared first at Nikki, then at me as if this were somehow my fault. "Yes, Mr. Keegan came in last week with his agent. I'm assuming from your presence

here today that we are, in fact, representing you in this region?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Dante!" Nikki said in an exasperated tone. "Get that damn stick out of your ass. Will is my neighbor and a friend and, yes, we are representing his work."

Dante looked pissed for a moment, then spun on the heel of his expensive Italian leather shoe and stormed off in the direction he had come from.

"Sorry about that," Nikki said with a little sigh. "We should never be working together. Father says that after he dies, we'll inherit the place and then one of us can buy the other out if we are so inclined, but, until then, he technically still owns it, so here we are."

"Couldn't you just work somewhere else?"

"Sure, but then I couldn't make Dante's life a living hell, and what's the fun in that?"

I laughed, and she gave me a wink.

"Come on back to my office. I'll have you fill out the paperwork, and then I need to get you to write on the back of each painting."

"Write what?"

"The title of the piece and any information about what inspired it or where it is. Then write 'Original Watercolor by Will Keegan' and sign it. Buyers love that shit. Makes it more personal."

I nodded and followed her into her office. It turned out to be just as cluttered as I would have imagined. She shifted a stack of catalogs from a chair onto the floor to clear a space for me to sit, then handed me a pen and some forms. It was mostly personal information for something called an artist's bio, and an

agreement to pay thirty percent of any sales facilitated by the gallery.

While I was filling them out, Nikki asked, "Can I ask you a question?"

I looked up. Something about the way she'd asked that made me nervous, but I said, "Uh...yeah, sure. I guess."

"I know you and Aidan said you're not together, but would you ever consider posing together?"

"Uh...what do you mean?"

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about the two of you since dinner the other night. There's just something about your physicality, the height difference, I don't know. I have this idea for another fantasy-inspired couple."

"Would we have to be nude?"

"Preferably, yes."

"No way!" I could feel my face heating up.

"Oh! Sorry. I didn't mean any offense. Not all my models are couples. Sam posed with another male model and he's definitely not into guys." She winked.

"I'm not offended. I just..." My blush deepened.

Nikki laughed. "You know, not all my art is erotic." She handed me a binder with glossy full-sheet photos of her past work. More than half were erotic, often mythical beings in the throes of passion, but the rest were simply beautiful expressions of love and affection, some suggestive, perhaps, but not explicitly sexual. Both male and female couples and same-sex couples were represented.

"Well, anyway, no pressure. But let me know if you change your mind."

I didn't think there was much chance of that happening, but I nodded anyway.

"Is Dante an artist, too?" I asked to change the subject.

"He thinks so," she said with a most unlady-like snort. "His stuff is that modern expressionist crap in the gallery. I wouldn't have it here if it weren't for him. Of course, he says the same thing about my 'pornography.'" She shrugged.

I finished the paperwork, which she took and filed in a folder with my name on it, and we returned to the gallery floor. I wrote the requested information on the back of each painting with a felt-tip pen and, after admiring my paintings once more and taking a few pictures, I headed home, my head still swimming.

In just two weeks my entire life had changed. I'd moved out of my childhood home, met a whole new set of friends, my paintings were hanging in a gallery, and I'd accepted that I might like guys. Or at least one guy.

What next? I wondered.

If someone had answered my question at that moment, I would have never believed them.

Chapter 6

I made it to church Sunday morning, much to the approval of my parents, then spent the afternoon hanging out with Aidan. I was getting ready for bed later that night when my phone started vibrating. It was Joey calling to ask if he could come over. He sounded serious so I quickly agreed. He was at the door in minutes.

"How'd you get here so quick?" I asked as I let him in.

"I was already in the parking lot." He pushed past me in a cloud of alcohol fumes and glanced around uneasily. "Can we talk somewhere private?"

"Have you been drinking?"

He rolled his eyes. "Private?"

I frowned but decided not to push it. Instead, I shrugged and led him to my bedroom. Joey had been drinking alcohol since middle school. Sometimes, Laura and I joined in, but he took it far more seriously than we did. Laura thought he had a problem, but I always defended him, saying he just liked to have fun and let loose. I didn't like when he drove drunk, though, and he'd obviously driven over here after drinking.

He followed me into my room, but even after I closed the door, he still seemed agitated.

"Can Aidan hear us?" he asked.

"I don't know. Jeez. Maybe. What's this about?"

"Can we go somewhere else?"

I remembered my last serious, late-night conversation, and opened the window.

"After you," I said with a mock bow and a sweeping gesture toward the fire escape.

Joey quickly climbed out, and I followed.

"Damn, this would be a sweet place to smoke weed," he said, leaning on the railing and looking out over the river.

"You're smoking weed now?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

"Oh, grow up, Will," he said with a sharp look in my direction. "Everybody smokes. It's legal now. You sound like your mom, and I thought we were finally free from her nagging."

I frowned again. "Whatever. What's this all about? Why all the secrecy?"

He took a deep breath and turned away again. "There's no easy way to say this so, uh, I guess I'll just say it."

"Say what?" I was getting nervous.

"I just thought you should know that there are rumors going around campus that Aidan is gay."

I sat for a moment trying to decide what to say. It wasn't my place to out my roommate, but, then again, he had said he wasn't exactly in the closet. I decided to take a cautious approach.

"What is this high school?" I said with a little laugh. "I thought we left that dumb kid stuff behind when we graduated."

He shot me a look. "It's not dumb."

"I mean, who is spreading these rumors, and, more importantly, why do they care?"

He turned to face me. "I heard it from a girl in one of my classes."

"How does that even come up in class?"

He threw up his hands. "What difference does it make? You're missing the point."

"Seriously, though. How did that come up?"

"The professor said something about diversity and inclusion, and someone else asked if that included queers, and he said yes, and I made a joke that Pemberton is a glorified community college, not some fancy-pants school for fairies, and a bunch of people jumped all over me saying that there are LGBQRSTU or whatever students at Pemberton and I needed to be more sensitive, so I said name one, and she rattled off a list of names, most of 'em I've never heard of, but one of them was Aidan Scott."

My frown deepened. That seemed very not cool to just share the personal information of a bunch of people in the middle of class like that. "How do you know she's not just making stuff up? Or maybe there's another Aidan Scott."

"Oh yeah, sure. That's such a common name. And of course, I asked how she knew, and she said he was at some queer club the night before."

I did recall him mentioning attending an LGBTQ student group when he'd told me about himself.

I sighed. "Well, I don't feel like it's my place to say anything, but if the cat's already out of the bag..."

Joey looked confused. "What?"

I shrugged. "Aidan is gay. Or bi. I don't know. None of my business."

A range of emotions played across his face—confusion morphed into understanding, followed by surprise, then settled on contrite. "Oh man, Will, I'm sorry about getting you into this—" He broke off as

confusion re-entered the chat. "Wait a minute, you knew?"

"Yeah."

"For how long?"

"Since the night I moved in."

"Did he like...hit on you or something?"

"No! Jeez, Joey. Nothing like that. He just felt like he should tell me since I'd be living here and all."

"He should have told you *before* you moved in!"

"Yeah, he admitted that and apologized."

"And you're just...okay with it?"

"You said yourself that he's a really nice guy. And he is. That didn't change."

"Yeah, but he's...gay. Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it's Aidan's life. He can tell who he wants. He only told me because we were going to be living together. And because I don't want my dad to find out and flip out. Can you imagine his reaction?"

I laughed, but Joey just turned to stare out over the water, clearly processing everything I'd said.

After a few minutes of heavy silence, I took a deep breath.

"Hey, Joey? As long as we're getting things out in the open, I do have something I need to tell you."

Joey looked over nervously at me, almost as if he knew what was coming and didn't want to hear it. His muscles tensed, and, for a second, I thought he was going to bolt, but with an almost visible effort, he stayed still.

"A few weeks ago, when I broke up with Beth, she said something that really upset me."

He relaxed slightly. "Yeah, I remember. You wouldn't tell me about it in the car. I asked, but you said you didn't want to talk about it."

"Right. Anyway, part of what she said involved Laura, so I asked her about it."

"Was that when I found you guys down by the river?"

"Yeah. I...well...it upset Laura, but she was honest with me. She backed up what Beth said, then she went on to ask me something that has been bugging me ever since. I think I finally understand what she was trying to tell me."

Joey looked away again and his hands tightened on the railing. I wondered if Laura had talked to him or if he just suspected. Or maybe I was just on high alert and reading things into it that weren't there. After all, Joey wasn't the most perceptive or sensitive guy in the world.

"I thought she looked like she was crying," he said, "but Laura never cries so I just thought it was reflections off the water."

"It wasn't the water. She was crying. Joey, Laura asked me if I was in love with you."

"*What?*" He spun toward me, his eyes wide. "I can't believe Laura would ask something like that! Don't worry about it, Will. I'll straighten things out."

"Joey..."

"I mean that's the craziest thing I've ever heard..."

"Joey..."

"She must have lost her fucking mind!"

"*Joey!* Listen to me. She's not crazy. She's right. I am."

He froze and stared at me. wild-eyed.

"I... I am in love with you."

I don't know what I expected him to say. That he loved me back? That he was cool with it? But he didn't say anything. He just stared.

"Joey?"

No response. It was like he was frozen.

"Joey, say something."

He blinked, then finally said, "So...you're gay?"

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

"You don't know? What do you mean you don't know? Either you want dick or you don't." He stopped as a horrified expression crossed his face. "Fuck! Do you want my dick?"

"No! God. And it's not that simple. I mean, maybe I'm just bi..."

"Just bi?" His tone suggested that wasn't any better.

"Or maybe it's nothing," I added quickly. "I mean, I know I love you but that doesn't mean anything, right? We're still buds. Hey, it took me two weeks just to admit that."

He stared at me for a few seconds with an unreadable look in his face, then abruptly raked his hands through his hair and spun away. "You mean you love me like a bro or like a fa—" He stopped himself. "Like a gay guy?"

I moved to stand next to him. He didn't turn to look at me.

"I mean, I do love you like a bro, but also...also, maybe more than that."

He didn't say anything, but his fingers curled around the railing and squeezed until his knuckles turned white. I reached out a hand and laid it on his arm, but he snatched away like my touch burned his skin.

"Joey? I..."

"Look, Will, I don't know what this is about. Maybe Aidan's, like, brainwashed you already, or Laura put this in your head. I don't know. I mean, we've been best friends forever, but this is... I just... If you're suddenly into dudes then you're not the same guy I've known for all these years."

"Of course I'm the same guy. Nothing's changed."

"Everything's changed!" he shouted.

I was growing frustrated as well. "It's not like I just woke up one morning and decided to like guys. It's... I guess it's always been there. I just wasn't ready to face it."

"What about Beth?"

"There was never anything with Beth. You, of all people, know that."

He dragged a hand over his face. "Fuck. Introducing you to Aidan was a huge mistake."

"This doesn't have anything to do with Aidan. It started a long time before he came on the scene. Laura's apparently known for years."

"Well, I didn't know," he snapped. "Fuck. Fuck! I don't think I can handle this. I don't know what you want..."

"I don't want anything." I reached out toward him again, but he threw himself backward, his back pressing up against the railing behind him.

"Don't touch me!" He shook his head as if to clear it. "Look, there's no way I can be friends with a gay guy. I just can't. So you get yourself straightened out and then let me know, but until then, don't call me."

"You can't be serious..."

"I am. I'm not gonna be associated with a fag."
He spat the last word.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My head was spinning, and a dull roar began building in my ears. I almost missed what he said next.

"I mean it, Will, stay away from me. Don't call me. Just get help."

He turned to crawl back through the window, and without thinking, I grabbed his arm. He shook me off violently and shoved me.

I stumbled back into the railing.

"I said don't touch me!" he shouted.

"Joey...wait..." My vision was blurring with unshed tears. "Nothing has changed..."

"Stop fucking saying that. Everything has changed. Everything. All those nights I spent at your place...or you at mine. All that time you were probably perving on me."

"What? No!"

"Did you ever touch me when I was asleep?"

"No! It's not like—"

"Save it, Will. I can't believe you lied to me all this time."

"I didn't..."

He spun around, kicked the ladder down to the next floor with a loud clang, and started climbing down.

"Joey!" I screamed after him. He didn't even look up. He jumped to the ground and started walking away, never once looking back. "Joey, please!"

"Will?" Aidan called from the window behind me. "I heard shouting. What's going on? Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay!" I managed before collapsing into a heap on the metal grill of the fire escape as tears started falling freely.

Aidan was through the window in a flash and kneeling next to me. His strong arms wrapped around me and me pulled tight against his chest while I sobbed on his shoulder.

He let me cry for a few minutes, but when I showed no signs of slowing down, he asked, "What happened? Was that Joey?" His voice rumbled in my ear pressed against his chest.

"Yes," I choked out. "He knows you're gay."

"Oh." He said simply. "I guess he didn't take it well?"

I took a deep, very shaky breath. "He didn't like it, but he really didn't take it well when I told him I was, too."

That confession started me crying all the harder. Aidan's arms tightened around me.

"Oh, Will. I'm so sorry," he whispered.

For a while, we just sat there, Aidan holding me while I bawled. Eventually, I cried myself out, my seemingly endless flow of tears finally exhausted, along with the rest of me. When my sobs turned to sniffles, Aidan pulled me to my feet and helped me back through the window, led me to the bed and tucked me in, pulling the blankets up to my chin, then sat next to me.

He didn't try to placate me with empty platitudes or assure me everything was okay. He just sat with me, offering comfort with his strong, steady presence.

When even my sniffles had dried up and my eyes started growing heavy, he finally spoke. "Think you'll be okay for tonight?" he asked. "I can stay as long as you need me to."

"I'll be okay," I said, though I sounded less than convincing, even to myself. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me. That's what friends are for." He stood, then hesitated a moment before leaning down and placing a light kiss on my forehead. "I'm right across the hall if you need me."

Then he turned out the light and left the room.

I didn't go to work the next day. I didn't even get out of bed. In fact, I had Aidan call in sick for me before he went to school. I spent the whole day sinking deeper and deeper into despair. Dark thoughts swirled endlessly through my mind.

I'd lost Joey.

I'd ruined everything.

My best friend hated me.

What if he told my parents?

My life as I knew it was over.

By the time Aidan got home from his classes and checked on me, my eyes were almost swollen shut from crying on and off all day. He took one look at me and turned back around without saying a word. An hour or so later, he reappeared with a steaming bowl of something.

"Here, eat this," he said.

"I'm not hungry," I mumbled.

"Have you eaten today?"

"No," I admitted in a small voice.

"You need to eat."

"Don't wanna."

"I made chicken noodle soup. From scratch. The least you can do is try it."

I could tell I was fighting a losing battle, so I pushed myself up in bed and let him hand me the bowl of soup. He stood over me while I forced down a few bites, but when my stomach threatened to rebel, he finally accepted defeat and took the bowl away.

I resumed decaying.

Over the next few days, I barely left my room and ate only when Aidan forced me. By Wednesday night, he'd grown so concerned he called in the big guns.

My bedroom door burst open to reveal Laura posed dramatically, deep concern written all over her face, and Aidan peering anxiously over her shoulder.

"God, it stinks in here.," she announced. Then over her shoulder, she added, "You were right to call me."

She swept into the room. "Okay, listen up. I'm super proud of you for being honest, with yourself and that dickhead Joey, but you've wallowed long enough. Time to get up and shower and move on with your life."

"You told her?" I asked Aidan, who was still hiding in the hallway.

"I didn't know what else to do," he said, apologetically.

"Don't blame him. He's worried about you. Now get up."

"But Joey—"

"But Joey nothing. This isn't about him. It's about you. Besides, he'll come around. You know how clueless he is. Just give him some time."

"You weren't there. He was so... angry."

"That's because he hates to be the last one to know something. What you should have done is convinced him that this was all his idea, somehow. Then he'd be bragging about how he always knew and going on about what a great ally he is."

"Laura, it was like he hated me. What if he doesn't come around?"

"He will. I'll make sure of it."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"Then life goes on. Your life will go on. With one less asshole to worry about."

My face must have fallen along with my stomach, because she sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I know this sucks. Your entire persona has revolved around Joey for most of your life. But you have to be your own person eventually. We're all growing up, changing. Learning new things about yourself is just part of the process."

"But Joey—"

"Oh my God! Fuck Joey! Fuck him with a barbed wire dildo. You've devoted far too much of your life to that ungrateful neanderthal already. If he can't see what an amazing, caring, wonderful person you are then he doesn't deserve your friendship, let alone your damn love. Now get your cute little ass out of that bed and take a shower. Now! You reek!"

I stared at her, slack jawed, for several seconds, then we both burst into laughter.

"Fine," I said with a little spark of attitude as I climbed out of bed. I pushed past her and Aidan, went into the bathroom and shut the door.

"How come he didn't listen when I tried to get him to shower?" I heard Aidan ask with an uncharacteristic whine in his voice.

"Sometimes it just takes a woman to get the job done," Laura answered smugly.

The rest of their exchange was drowned out as I started the shower.

Laura's little pep talk did help. I was still sad, but she'd managed to snap me out of my funk enough to function, at least on the most basic level. I wouldn't say I was back to normal, but at least I was about to get up and go to work the next morning.

Over the next few days, Laura checked in often. At home, Aidan treated me like an invalid, insisting on cooking dinner each night. I appreciated their concern, but by the time the weekend rolled around, it was becoming a bit suffocating.

I laid low on Saturday, and on Sunday, I just couldn't bring myself to go to church. I knew Dad would flip out again. I'd only been living with Aidan for a few weeks and I'd already missed two Sundays, but I just didn't feel like going. Maybe it was guilt over the whole gay thing, or maybe it was what Aidan had said about being brainwashed. I'd been thinking a lot about our conversation and, while I was still unsure how I felt about it, a lot of what he'd said had resonated with me, leaving me questioning things I'd long taken for granted.

When I went to work on Monday morning, he was waiting in my office. My stomach sank as soon as I

saw him. I thought I was about to get another lecture about missing church. It turned out to be so much worse.

"Son," he said, "We need to talk."

"I know. I'm sorry about yesterday. I just wasn't feeling well and—"

"This isn't about missing church again," he interrupted. "You know my feelings on that subject. This is about an anonymous email I received late last night."

I felt my knees buckle, so I quickly sat down.

"An anonymous email?" I repeated.

"Yes. The sender made some...concerning accusations," he said, and the room began to spin. I gripped the edge of my desk and tried to keep my breathing regular. "Now, of course, I don't believe them—" His tone suggested otherwise, as did the hint of fear in his eyes. "—but I need to hear it from you."

"What—" My mouth felt bone dry. "What did it say?" I rasped.

"I'd let you read it for yourself," he said as he laid a sheet of paper on my desk.

It was a printed email.

Dear Rev Keegan

*I think you should know that youre son is living
with a homosexual and hes in love with another man
A friend.*

Some friend.

I knew without even checking the email address that it was from Joey. The spelling mistakes, the improper use of punctuation, calling my father 'Rev Keegan'—something Joey has done since he was a little

kid when most people referred to him as Pastor Lowell—they were all Joey's hallmarks. I glanced up at the sender's email address anyway and, sure enough, it was Joey's alt account. He wasn't even smart enough to make a burner.

Why would he tell my dad? What did he hope to gain from this?

I wasn't even angry, just defeated. And nauseated. I fought down the urge to projectile vomit all over the sheet of paper and my desk.

"Son?" Dad sounded anxious.

My first instinct was to deny it. An anonymous letter wasn't exactly proof of anything. But the truth was, now that I'd said it out loud and sat with it for several days, I could no longer deny that I was in love with Joey, even if he had rejected me and stabbed me in the back. And if I was in love with a man, that probably made me gay. Right? Isn't that how it worked?

The realization burst through my mind like an atom bomb.

I was gay. Or, at the very least, I was not straight.

But gay felt right, now that I'd allowed myself to think it. I knew at that moment that there was no going back. I was so sick and tired of lying—to myself, most of all.

I raised my eyes to my father's and nodded. "It's true," I said softly.

His spine straightened and his eyes hardened.

"That boy you moved in with is a homosexual?"

I nodded.

"And you think you're in love with him?"

I blinked. "What? No!"

Dad looked confused. "But the email says..."

"I'm not in love with Aidan. I've only known him for a few weeks."

"Did you know he was a homosexual when you moved in with him?"

"No. I didn't find out until after."

"Why didn't you tell me? We could have gotten you out of there."

"Because I didn't want to get out of there. It didn't matter to me."

He sputtered. "What do you mean it didn't matter? Of course it matters." Then he stopped, as if he'd just remembered the rest of the email. "But if you're not in love with your roommate..."

"Joey. I'm in love with Joey."

Dad stared at me for a long moment, then sighed. "I hoped it wasn't true. I didn't want to believe it even though I've suspected it myself a number of times."

My eyes widened. He'd thought I was gay, too? It seemed like everyone had known but me. Why hadn't anyone ever said anything to me?

"Does Joey know?" he asked.

"Well, he's the one who sent you this email, so..."

Dad frowned and glanced down at the paper.

"Why would he do that?"

"Let's just say he didn't take it so well when he found out."

Dad nodded as if that made perfect sense. He walked over to the window and stared out for what felt like the longest few minutes of my life.

During those interminable minutes, everything began to sink in. I'd come out to my father. And myself,

for that matter. As the implications of that hit me, it was as if my mind snapped free from its mooring and began to drift away.

Finally, Dad began to speak, his back still to me. "Son, if this is true then we have a decision to make."

I tried to focus on what he was saying, but it seemed like I was listening through a tunnel, watching from a distance. My body was still there, clutching the edge of the desk for dear life, but the rest of me had withdrawn to a safer place.

"If you continue to pursue this lifestyle," he continued, "then you will have to be removed from your position here at the church. We just cannot accept that lifestyle."

From my remote vantage point, I wondered what lifestyle he kept referring to. As far as I knew my lifestyle wasn't any different than it had always been. Aidan seemed to have a pretty decent lifestyle from all I had seen. I decided not to ask, though. That would require going back.

Dad waited for a moment, then turned to face me. His face sagged with the weight of his disappointment. "Will, you are my son and I love you. I will always love you, no matter what. But as the leader of this church, I cannot have my employees living in sin. I cannot accept homosexuality. If this is the life you choose, as your father, I will be deeply saddened, but, as your pastor, I will be forced to take action."

With that, he turned and walked away, his shoulders bent as if he were carrying a great weight. I wanted to scream after him that it wasn't a choice. No one had bothered to ask me if I wanted to fall in love

with Joey. No one had asked me if I wanted to be gay! Instead, I just stared at Joey's email on my desk.

I sat for a few minutes after he left, then I went into autopilot. I switched on my computer and typed up a letter of resignation. I printed it out and left it on top of the email, then walked out of the church without another word.

I was sitting in the recliner at home, staring at the TV when Aidan got home.

"Hey, Will," he called as he came in, then stopped in his tracks. "How come the TV's not on? Is everything okay?"

I slowly turned my head to face him. "I quit my job today."

"What? Why?"

"Someone wrote an email to my dad and told him you were gay."

"What? Who would do that?"

"It wasn't signed, but I know it was Joey. It was from his alt account."

"That asshole! Why would he do that? Wait. Why would you quit over that? I mean, you could just move out if it's causing you problems. Or I could move out! I shouldn't ruin your life."

"You're not going anywhere. It's your apartment. Not that it even matters. Nobody is moving out."

He ran his hands through his hair. "But this wouldn't have happened if you hadn't moved in with me."

"I was in love with Joey long before I met you. It was just a matter of time. That was the other part of the email. He told my dad that I was in love with a man."

"Shit. Did you deny it?"

"No. I told him it was true, that I was in love with Joey."

Aidan stared at me, mouth agape. "You did what?"

"I'm tired of lying, to myself, to other people. I'm gay, and you were right. It's time for me to accept that and deal with it."

"I didn't mean you had to tell your dad and quit your job!"

"Well, I did. It just sort of happened." I shrugged. "You know my head hasn't been screwed on straight lately." I snorted. "No pun intended. Hey, you don't seem very surprised that I said I'm gay."

"Will, no offense, but that's the least surprising thing you've said since I walked through the door. I mean, I guess I thought it would take you longer to deal with it, you know, with all your religious trauma and brainwashing to work through, but I figured you'd get there eventually."

"I don't think I've worked through anything yet. There's just no point denying it anymore."

"What are you going to do now?"

My phone rang, saving me from trying to answer a question for which I didn't have an answer. I answered automatically, without even checking the caller ID.

"Will?" It was my mom. She sounded like she'd been crying.

"Yes."

"Will, your father said you quit today."

"Yes."

"Will, why?"

"It was either that or get fired."

"He said it was because you think you're gay."

"Yes."

"Oh, Will! You can't be!" she cried.

"Mom, I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do about it."

"There's counseling. I've read about it online..."

"Is that even legal in Maryland?"

A strangled sob filled my ear, "You know we can't accept this; we can't condone it."

"I know," I said quietly. I felt a tear slide down my cheek.

"I'll always love you, Will."

"I know, Mom."

"Your father says you're not welcome back here unless you get counseling." She burst into sobs. "He says to read Hosea 8:7," she managed to choke out before I heard the click of the phone as she hung up. The line went dead, but I held the phone numbly to my ear.

I finally stood up and walked down the hall to my room, Aidan trailing behind me asking if I was okay.

I didn't answer him. I just went to my bedside table and picked up my worn Bible. I traced a finger over my name, engraved in faded gold on the cover, then flipped through the pages to Hosea and found the indicated verse.

"For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind."

Chapter 7

The next few days saw me plunge back into depression, even darker than before. Nothing Aidan said could lift me out the dark miasma of despair that I sunk deeper into with every passing day. Even Laura's commands fell on deaf ears.

For the first time in my life, I found myself contemplating suicide. Even worse, the idea wasn't at all as repugnant as I'd always imagined it would be. It held a certain alluring charm, a promise of escape, of no more pain and confusion.

I didn't dare mention it to anyone, but, as each day passed, I grew more and more obsessed with the idea of killing myself. I'd never asked to be gay, and I damn well didn't want to be gay. My family had disowned me, my best friend hated me, I'd lost my job—what did I have to live for? It seemed like the perfect solution.

I even drew pictures of the various methods I was considering. One showed me seemingly asleep on the bed...until you noticed the empty pill bottles lying next to me. Another showed me hanging from a noose tied to the fire escape. My personal favorite, though, was of me in a pool of blood with my wrists laid open. I'd meticulously drawn in minute details of severed veins and sliced flesh.

Friday morning dawned gray and miserable, which perfectly matched my mood. I decided it was the perfect day to bring one of my sketches to life.

Who would even miss me?

I waited until Aidan left for class, then pulled my sketchbook out of the closet where I'd been hiding it and tried to decide which scenario I liked the most.

I immediately discarded the hanging one for purely practical reasons. I didn't know how to tie a noose, and, while I was sure I could find a tutorial online, we didn't have any rope. Besides, my Internet research had said it didn't always work and was a painful way to die even if it did.

After checking the medicine cabinet, I had to forget the OD method, too. The strongest thing we had was cough syrup and some mouthwash. I somehow doubted they would do the job. On the other hand, if by some miracle they did work, at least I'd have nice breath when they found me.

That left me with slashing my wrists. I was morbidly pleased, since a bloody death appealed to the dark romantic side of me.

I sorted through our knives, disappointed to realize we didn't have many to choose from, and what we did have were all too dull to cut through hot butter. How did Aidan do all that cooking without a decent knife?

I needed a sharp knife. It needed to be quick and deep, before I lost my nerve. I finally chose one that felt marginally sharper than the rest. It would have to do.

But where to do the deed?

My bedroom? I liked the idea of being found on my bed, but it would make such a mess.

Maybe the kitchen? It would be easier to clean, but Aidan loved cooking, and it seemed kind of rude to ruin his space like that.

The bathroom? The bathtub was the classic choice for good reason.

The thought of a note went through my head, but considering the circumstances, I didn't think one was necessary. Those involved would know why, and no one else needed to know.

Then I thought about writing up a will, but I didn't have anything worth leaving to anyone. I also wasn't at all sure I was of sound mind at the moment, and I was pretty sure that was a requirement.

Finally, I ran out of stall tactics. It was now or never.

I walked to the bathroom, pulled back the shower curtain, and sat down in the tub. The porcelain surface was cold against my skin. The bottom of the tub was still wet from Aidan's morning shower, soaking through my boxers.

None of that would matter in a few minutes.

I took a deep breath, placed the edge of the blade against my wrist...and froze.

I couldn't seem to make myself do it.

Suddenly, the tears came. I hadn't cried since Dad confronted me in my office, but it was as if a dam had broken.

I couldn't even kill myself right.

I was still in the tub gripping the knife, sobbing, when I heard the front door shut.

What was he doing back so soon? I couldn't let him find me like this!

I scrambled to get out of the tub, but my foot slipped and I fell hard, my head bounced off the back wall and the knife skittering from my hand.

"Will?" Aidan called again, closer now.
I grabbed the knife and pushed myself to my knees.

"Are you okay?" He appeared in the bathroom door. "Did you fall—" he stopped cold, his eyes locked on the knife in my grip. "Oh, my God, Will...what are you doing?"

I stared at him in horror.

"Will, hand me the knife," he said softly as he took a slow step toward me.

His movement snapped me out of my shock at being discovered. "No! Stay back!" I pressed the knife against my skin so hard it finally broke the skin. I felt a warm trickle of blood run down my wrist.

Aidan's eyes bulged. "Don't!" he shouted.

"Why?" I asked, my voice barely audible. "Why shouldn't I kill myself? What do I have to live for?"

"You have your whole life ahead of you. You're only eighteen. I know things are bad right now, but this isn't the answer." As he spoke, he inched slowly closer to me.

"Then what is the answer?"

"I don't know, Will, but I promise this isn't it. I'll help you figure it out, though. I know someone who can help. He's my professor. I think you should talk to him."

"A shrink?"

"He's a psychiatrist, a good one. I think he can help."

"You think I need to be fixed, too."

"No, I just think..."

"No!"

"Please think of all the people you would be hurting."

"Like who? My parents? I'm not even welcome in their home anymore. My best friend? He doesn't want anything to do with me."

"What about Laura? Or me? I care about you, Will." He'd gradually crept closer until he was now within arm's reach. He stretched out his hand and looked at me pleadingly. "Please Will, don't do this. Give me the knife. Right now, all you can see is the darkness, but there is light, I promise. I promise you, Will."

As he spoke, I could feel whatever was fueling me drain away. The knife slipped from my fingers with a clatter, and I crumpled slowly after it, my body wracked once more with enormous sobs that seemed to originate from the depths of my soul and shudder their way through my whole being.

Aidan was at my side in a flash. He snatched the knife and threw it into the hall, then climbed into the tub with me, wrapping his arms around me while he gently rocked me and I sobbed into his shoulder. I felt his tears mixing with my own, and I knew he was hurting with me, sharing my pain. It somehow made it that much more bearable.

"I'm getting blood on your shirt," I blubbered.

"I don't care," he said gently, then lifted me up like a small child and carried me to my bedroom where he carefully laid me down on the bed. "Don't move." He ducked from the room but quickly reappeared with a dish towel which he wrapped tightly around my wrist.

"It's not deep. I'll get a bandage, and you'll be fine," he said.

Then, he retreated to the hallway where he flipped through his phone and made a call, all while keeping a wary eye on me—as if I might run at any second. He spoke in low tones that I couldn't quite make out, not that I tried all that hard. I was deeply exhausted.

After he hung up, he picked me up again and carried me back to the bathroom. There, he sat me on the toilet and turned on the shower. I didn't even protest, I was so wiped out. I felt as if I had been turned inside out, beaten, and then turned right side out again.

He turned back to me, picked me up once more and placed me under the spray, boxers and all. The cold water hit me like a slap in the face, but even with the bracing chill, he still had to practically hold me up. By the time he managed to turn off the water, he was as soaked as I was.

He wrapped me in a thick, fluffy towel before lifting me yet again to carry me back to my bedroom. He laid me on the bed, then turned to pull some clothes out of the dresser, laying them out next to me while dripping the entire time.

"Think you can get dressed while I change?" he asked gently.

I nodded, and he left. I slid out of the wet boxers and pulled on the dry pair he'd set out, then obediently started dressing, feeling somewhat like a little kid but not really minding all that much.

Aidan returned in a dry outfit much quicker than I would have thought possible and helped me finish getting dressed.

"Let's go," he said as we finished.

"Go where?" I asked meekly.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then let's go."

Aidan's car pulled to a stop in an area clearly marked 'No Parking' in front of a small, one-story building in a far corner of the Pemberton University campus. Over the door was a wooden sign declaring it to be Hamilton Hall. I'd toured the school with Laura and Joey before I decided to take a gap year, but I didn't remember this unassuming hall. Like most of the other buildings surrounding us, it was faced with red brick and white trim, but this one was obviously a later addition and not part of the original layout.

Aidan jumped out of the car and came around to open my door. "Come on."

"Why are we here?" I protested weakly.

"Follow me," was all he said.

I climbed out and followed him through the front door and down a short hallway to a solid wood door bearing a brass plaque engraved with the name Dr. E. H. Wohler.

Aidan knocked and, without waiting for an answer, opened the door. He ushered me into a room so small that, if you sat on the provided sofa, your knees would almost touch the wall in front of you. It looked like someone had commandeered a supply closet for their waiting room. A pleasant looking, slightly plump middle-aged woman with short, tightly-permed graying hair sat at a desk behind a half-wall that served as a counter. She looked up as we entered.

"Hi Cheryl," Aidan said. "I called Dr. Wohler earlier. He's expecting us."

"Yes, go right in," she said. She had a pleasant voice to match her pleasant appearance.

I balked slightly at that point, but Aidan took me gently but firmly by the arm and pulled me along past Cheryl to a closed door, where he knocked again. A male voice invited us in.

When Aidan opened the door and we stepped in, the room actually took me by surprise, even in the shape I was in. The difference between the sad, cramped lobby and this large but cozy space was night and day. The harsh overhead fluorescent lighting had been replaced with lamps spilling pools of warm light. Thick oriental rugs covered the industrial grade carpet, and, instead of a worn institutional couch, there were two inviting brown-leather armchairs facing a large wooden desk.

A man was standing behind the desk waiting expectantly for us. He was on the short side, not much taller than I was, with a receding hairline, kind eyes behind a pair of dark-framed glasses, and a neutrally pleasant—if curious—expression. He wore a comfortably-worn gray tweed suit.

"Hello, Aidan, it's good to see you," the man I presumed to be Dr. Wohler said. "And you must be Will?"

I looked uncertainly at Aidan, wondering how much he had told Dr. Wohler.

Aidan and the doctor shook hands.

"Thanks for seeing us on such short notice, Professor," Aidan said as he gently pushed me into one

of the two chairs. He sat down in the other, and the doctor settled into his plush executive chair.

"It's really no problem. I always try to make time for my most promising student, and, besides, I just happened to have office hours this morning. You're lucky I had a cancellation on my schedule, though." He said the last part with a small smile. "I just hope I can be of assistance. You said on the phone that it was an emergency?"

I turned a glare on Aidan, but he didn't even glance in my direction. "Dr. Wohler, can we have your complete confidentiality about what we're going to say?"

For a moment, the doctor looked somewhat insulted, then he glanced at me, and an unspoken message seemed to pass between him and Aidan. He nodded, "Of course, as you know, any information that should come out while we are talking is held in complete confidence."

Aidan turned to me now. "Can I tell Dr. Wohler what's going on?"

I thought for a moment, then nodded my consent.

He proceeded to succinctly outline the events leading up to my depression and my attempted suicide that morning. It took far less time than I would have expected.

When he finished, Dr. Wohler sat for a minute tapping his chin with one index finger, his expression unreadable.

"Thank you for that, Aidan," he said finally. "I'm sure it's very helpful for Will to have you here supporting him. Will, would it be okay if we spoke alone for a few minutes? I won't ask Aidan to go far—he can

wait just outside—but I would like to ask you a few questions and I'd like you to answer them without any help this time. Is that okay?"

I looked to Aidan, who nodded encouragingly, so I also nodded.

After Aidan had slipped quietly from the room, Dr. Wohler pulled a small device from a drawer and sat it on his desk. "Would it be alright if I recorded this? I find I can focus on you better if I'm not taking notes."

"Yes," I answered in a small voice.

He pressed a button on the device, then turned his full attention to me.

He began asking questions, and he seemed to have an endless supply.

How long have you been feeling this way?

Can you describe your mood on most days?

Have you noticed changes in your sleep, appetite, or energy levels?

Are you having trouble concentrating or making decisions?

Do you feel hopeless, worthless, or guilty?

Have you ever had thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life before today?

How often do these thoughts occur?

Have you made any plans to act on these thoughts?

Do you have access to means to harm yourself (e.g., firearms, medications, etc.)?

Have you ever attempted suicide before?

Have you ever been diagnosed with a mental health condition before?

Has anyone in your family struggled with depression, suicide, or other mental health conditions?

Do you use alcohol or drugs?

Do you have a support system—family, friends, or others you can talk to?

What helps you feel better, even temporarily?

Do you have any personal goals or future plans that are important to you?

When he finally ran out of questions, he gave me a warm smile that crinkled his eyes. "Thank you for being so open and honest with me, Will," he said after a few seconds of carefully studying my face. "I'm sure it comes as no surprise to you that you are experiencing a pretty deep depression. It sounds to me like it's environmental, brought on by the sudden changes in your life. That's the bad news."

He paused for me to take that in, then continued. "The good news is that depression is treatable. Since your depression seems to be primarily triggered by your present situation—along with some residual issues that you need to resolve regarding your upbringing—we can, most likely, work through it in some one-on-one therapy sessions.

"Before we can really delve into those issues though, I'd like to give you a prescription for some mild antidepressants, get you out of this funk, get you so you're thinking a little clearer. It will be easier to handle poking at sore spots once your depression is under control. How does that sound?"

I nodded hesitantly.

"Do you understand what causes depression?" he asked.

"My brain."

"Yes, it is a mental condition. Depression happens when the brain's communication system isn't working as well as it should. Brain cells—neurons—send messages to each other using chemicals called neurotransmitters. One of the most important neurotransmitters for mood regulation is called serotonin. You've probably heard of it before."

I nodded again.

"When there's an imbalance in these chemicals, or when the brain isn't using them effectively, it can lead to symptoms of depression, many of which you've been experiencing. But depression isn't just about serotonin; things like genetics, stress, and trauma can also contribute. Treatment options like therapy, lifestyle changes, and sometimes medication, can help restore that balance and improve your mood over time. Is all of this making sense?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. Now, I have a few more questions. I know it's a lot. Just bear with me. We're almost finished. This time, I want to narrow in on what happened this morning."

Without waiting for a response this time, he launched into a second barrage of questions.

Can you tell me what happened leading up to the attempt?

What was going through your mind at the time?

Did you believe you would die, or was there part of you that hoped to be stopped?

What made you decide to stop?

*After the attempt, did you feel relieved,
disappointed, or something else?*

Do you still feel suicidal now?

*Have the thoughts gotten stronger or weaker
since the attempt?*

Do you have a plan or intent to try again?

Do you feel safe right now?

*What would make things feel more manageable
for you?*

The second round of questions was harder for me to articulate, but I tried my best. When we were finished, he gave me a smile.

"You're doing great, Will. And again, I appreciate your candidness. I'm going to be honest with you now, too. I am a little concerned for you. I think you're probably what I'd classify as a medium risk, which makes this a little harder. If you were at high risk, I'd have to seriously consider hospitalization for stabilization.

I started to panic and it must have shown in my face, because he held up a calming hand.

"Steady there, Will. I don't believe that's the best option for you right now. If we don't go that route, however, we'll need to create a safety plan."

"A safety plan?"

"Yes. Think of it as a way to head off another attempt to harm yourself, but you'll have to make a commitment. I'll help you identify warning signs that you are at risk again. We'll come up with some coping strategies you can use when you're feeling suicidal. I'd like to make Aidan a part of the plan, if you are both willing, because a crucial part of the plan will be

contacting trusted friends when you are in distress. I'll also give you a crisis hotline in case he isn't available in the heat of the moment, and, of course, you'll have my contact information as well. Does all of that sound doable?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. I would have agreed to just about anything to avoid being hospitalized.

"I'm glad to hear it. Then, for this next part, is it okay if I bring Aidan back in? I'd like him to be a part of formulating our plan."

"Yeah, that makes sense."

He pressed a button on his phone and spoke into the receiver, "Cheryl, could you send Aidan back in please?"

When Aidan was seated beside me again, Dr. Wohler said, "You were right to bring Will here, Aidan. We've had a good talk and we've concluded that he is depressed, which I'm sure comes as no surprise. Now I'd like the three of us to work on a plan together, if you're willing to do that."

Aidan opened his mouth to reply, but Dr. Wohler held up his hand again.

"Before you agree, I want to be very clear that this is a big responsibility. I told Will that he's right on the threshold for hospitalization. That means he'll require a lot of support. I need you to be very sure you're up for that."

"I am," Aidan said confidently.

Dr. Wohler smiled. "Good. I wasn't trying to scare you, just making sure everybody knows what they are agreeing to."

He pulled open another drawer and rummaged around a bit before producing several small boxes. "Will, I'm going to send you home with some medication samples. This is a mild drug with very few side effects, and it's not habit-forming. You won't feel an immediate difference. It takes a few weeks to get into your system. If, by that time, this doesn't seem to be working for you, then I want you to tell me that. Our relationship will rely on you being honest with me. This may not be the right drug for you, but I promise there is a right one. This isn't an exact science, though, and we may have to try a few before we hit the right one. I'm betting this one will be the ticket, however. I've had a lot of success with it."

"What do they cost?" I asked, suddenly remembering that I was unemployed.

"These are on the house. As is this visit. Consider it a favor for one of my favorite students." He tapped the boxes. "If these work for you, we'll figure out a strategy for our next steps. Many pharmaceutical companies offer steep discounts or even free medication in certain circumstances, but I don't want you to worry about that right now.

"Now, Aidan, pay attention to this next part, please. You should take one of these a day for the first week, then two a day starting the week after that. I'm giving you a two-week supply. That's the earliest that you would start to see an effect, though it often takes longer. I'd like to see you again before these run out. We'll evaluate its effectiveness at that time. Still with me so far?"

"Yes," Aidan and I said in unison.

"Aidan, I addressed that to you because I'd like you to administer Will's medication until he's in a better frame of mind. Are you okay with that, Will?"

I frowned. I wasn't a child. I could take my own meds.

Dr. Wohler leaned in and caught my eye. "Will, do you trust Aidan?"

I thought for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Yeah, I do."

"Good. I think you know that not too many roommates would go to this length for someone they've only known for a month. I'm asking Aidan to hold on to this medication because you're in a fragile state of mind right now. I don't think it would be wise for you to have them in your possession. I'm doing this for your safety. Do you understand?" He paused and waited for me to respond.

"Yes."

"Okay. Then, is that an acceptable plan for you?"

I nodded, feeling a little shaken.

He turned to Aidan. "Are you okay with that plan, Aidan?"

"I am," he answered, again with no hesitation.

"Excellent. Now let's talk about removing access to means. Aidan, I know you understand that, but Will, that just means locking away medication, firearms, or, in this case, knives. This isn't meant to infantilize you or punish you. It's about keeping you safe. Does that make sense?"

"It does," I answered in a small voice.

"I'm glad. Aidan, Will said there are no firearms in the house, and I'm giving you his medication, but will

you do a sweep of the house when you get home and remove anything you think could pose a threat to Will's safety?"

"Absolutely."

"Very good. Now let's talk about some strategies for when—and I do mean when—those feelings start to arise again."

The three of us talked about some coping strategies for me to try if I started feeling overwhelmed or suicidal again. Then Dr. Wohler said, "There's one more thing I want you to do for me before you go, Will. I'd like you to make a covenant with Aidan that you will not hurt yourself before talking to him. Can you do that?"

I looked down at my lap and nodded somewhat hesitantly.

"Can you say it out loud?"

I looked up, startled.

"Look at Aidan and say it, please. Tell him that you promise not to hurt yourself without talking to him first."

I slowly turned my head until I was looking into Aidan's piercing green eyes. I saw myself mirrored in them, looking like a deer caught in headlights. I focused on the twin images of myself and forced the words from my mouth. "I promise I won't hurt myself without talking to you first," I whispered hoarsely.

"Good!" said Dr. Wohler. "Thank you for making that pledge. Aidan, take care of him, keep an eye on him, and call me if anything comes up that you can't handle. He probably shouldn't be left alone for a few days. Do you have some friends to help out?"

"We'll be okay," Aidan said with determination. I was glad someone was confident.

"Good. Then, Will, I'll see you in two weeks."

The next few days went by in a blur. Aidan was almost always with me, and when he wasn't Laura was. Once, Gabe even spent a tortured hour trying to make conversation while I stared dumbly at the television. But most of the time it was Aidan who watched over me. He even started sleeping in my bed—chastely, of course. As far as I could tell, he never strayed from his side of the bed.

At first, I thought the constant attention would be suffocating, but, in reality, I found it comforting. It was nice to know someone cared that deeply.

When the next Monday arrived, Aidan stayed home from school again.

"You can't keep missing classes for me," I protested.

"I've made arrangements with my professors. Everything is under control. Don't worry about it."

So I didn't. While I wasn't feeling any huge difference from the medication just yet, one benefit seemed to be that things felt a little duller, less sharp, or maybe just not as important. Then again, maybe that was the whole point of the meds.

We settled into a nice, comfortable routine, and I slowly began to feel better. It wasn't a huge dramatic shift, but I could feel the black curtain of depression begin to lift. I saw Dr. Wohler again, like we'd discussed, and he was pleased that the medicine seems to be doing

its job. He got me a prescription that Aidan filled, again insisting that I not worry about it, and we continued on.

As I improved, Aidan started to return to his classes. He claimed he hadn't fallen behind, but I noticed he was doing a lot more work at home. Or maybe it just seemed like more work since he did it almost entirely in the living room where he could keep an eye on me.

The only downside of my rising spirits was that my restlessness rose right alongside it. I was unemployed, didn't have classes to keep me busy like Aidan did, and I was quickly running out of streaming shows to watch.

One of my coping strategies we'd developed with Dr. Wohler was to work on my art, so I threw myself into new drawings and paintings. I wasn't sure any of them were actually good, but it *was* a good distraction.

I was working at my drawing table one evening with Aidan sitting nearby, as usual, supposedly reading, but he was at my elbow if I so much as sighed. I needed a reference for some trees in the sketch I was working on, and I knew I had drawn some from life last year. They were in a sketchbook, which was in a box of stuff in my closet.

The second I moved to go get it, however, Aidan was on his feet.

"What do you need?" he asked.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not an invalid, you know. I'm capable of getting things for myself."

"I know, but I can get it for you."

"You don't have to."

"But I want to. What do you need?"

"It's a particular sketch book in a box of sketchbooks in my closet. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack if you don't know what you're looking for. I'll get it."

"No, I've got it. What color is the cover?"

"Brown. The same as all the rest of them."

"Then what sketch are you looking for?"

I sighed. "It's some trees. Birch trees. A stand of them."

"Okay. I can handle that," he said, and headed for my room, or our room, I guess, since he was still sleeping in my bed.

When he hadn't returned after several minutes, I began to get antsy. "Did you find them?" I called without looking up from my sketch.

"What are these?" he asked quietly from directly behind me. The closeness of his voice caused me to jump, and I spun around to see what he was talking about. He was holding one of my sketchbooks, the one I'd used for my suicide fantasies. I'd forgotten they were even in there.

"They were...from before," I said softly.

Looking at them now, I felt a strange horror, as if someone else had drawn them. It seemed impossible that they had come from my mind and my hand.

Aidan ripped the pages from the book with such a sudden, savage motion that I jumped again. He angrily shredded them one by one, then gathered all the tiny pieces and carried them into the kitchen. I followed behind, unable to look away. He tossed the paper into the sink, opened a drawer, pulled out a box of matches and lit the pile on fire.

A chill ran down my spine as I watched the flames lick at the shreds of paper, eerily illuminating his tight-lipped expression. The fire burned out quickly, leaving only a blackened pile of ash that Aidan washed down the drain.

The whole episode bothered me more than it should have. I just couldn't forget the look on Aidan's face. I was done drawing for the night.

We ended up going to bed earlier than usual, and I was extra glad for Aidan's presence in my bed that night.

Chapter 8

I awoke suddenly with the acrid smell of smoke still in my nostrils. I pushed myself into a sitting position and felt a sticky wetness on my hands. I looked down to see they were covered in blood. Whose? Mine? A knife lay on my pillow, glinting in the semi-darkness. I looked for Aidan, but he wasn't next to me in the bed. I was alone.

Suddenly, fire was all around my bed, jumping and leaping closer and closer like a living thing. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The flames crept closer, and I squeezed my eyes closed so I wouldn't have to watch my skin burn away like the paper in the sink.

"Will! Will!"

Aidan's voice sliced through the nightmare and my eyes flew open to see his face, wide-eyed and frightened above me.

"It was just a bad dream," he was saying. "You're okay. I'm right here."

My heart felt like it would beat right out of my chest, and my breath came in ragged gasps.

Was it really just a dream? It felt so real.

But it must have been. I was in my bed and there was clearly no fire, no smoke, no blood. I wasn't alone. Aidan was there. He'd wrapped me in his arms, but the terror still clung to me like stubborn fog in the early morning sunlight.

"It's okay, Will," Aidan whispered as he pulled me closer. "I've got you. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

I felt my body slowly begin to relax into his, and I snuggled closer. I hadn't felt so comforted since I was a little kid being held by my mom after a bad dream. I slowly drifted off to sleep.

The nightmare stayed away for the rest of the night, and I awoke the next morning with Aidan's arm still around me. I sat up suddenly, waking him in the process.

"Mornin'..." he mumbled sleepily.

I looked around the room for signs of a fire. It was silly, I knew, but the nightmare images were still so vivid in my mind.

"Whatcha lookin' for?" Aidan asked.

I lay back down without answering. Aidan raised himself up on one elbow to look into my face. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Before I could answer, my phone began to ring. Aidan looked around for it. It was charging on my side of the bed, and since I hadn't made any move to answer it, he leaned over me to grab it up. His face was just a

fraction of an inch from mine, so close I could feel his breath on my lips.

Our eyes locked, and he froze, the ringing phone momentarily forgotten. It stopped abruptly, and the sudden silence brought us back to ourselves. Aidan quickly rolled back to his side of the bed. We carefully avoided looking at each other for an awkward moment before the phone began to ring again.

"I've got it," I said quickly, and snatched up the phone. "Hello?"

"Will! Just who I was looking for! Did I wake you?" It was Nikki.

"No, uh... No, I was awake."

"Oh, because I just called, and the phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail, but I hate leaving voicemail and nobody ever listens anyway, so I called back. Guess what? I've got some good news. How soon can you get to the gallery?"

"The gallery? Um...I don't know."

"What about the gallery?" Aidan asked.

"Nikki wants to know how soon I can get to the gallery," I told him.

"An hour?"

"What about classes?"

"It's Saturday."

"Oh." The days all sort of blurred into each other when you didn't have a job and never left the house. "An hour," I relayed to Nikki.

"Perfect! See you then! Ciao!"

"See you then," I said to a dead line. I dropped my phone and turned to Aidan. "Nikki wants me to come to the gallery. She said she has good news." I paused. "Have you ever noticed how you can hear the exclamation points when she talks?"

Aidan laughed as he sat up. "Do you think she sold one of your paintings?"

"Whoa! You think so?" That hadn't even occurred to me. In fact, I'd almost forgotten I even had any paintings there.

"I bet so," he said. "Why else would she want you to come to the gallery?"

"Or maybe they haven't sold and she wants to get them out of there."

"That wouldn't be good news."

I had to concede his point.

"Well, let's get dressed and go find out," Aidan said as he jumped up. "No point lying around speculating." He started out of the room, but paused in the doorway. "You take your shower first. I'll cook us breakfast. This calls for a celebration!"

"We don't even know what we're celebrating," I called after him.

"Who cares? I'm just glad we've got some good news for a change."

I had to admit, I felt a little flutter of excitement in my chest. The first I'd felt since everything happened with Joey and my Dad.

After we both showered and enjoyed a delicious omelet that Aidan whipped up, we arrived at Avant Garde only a little later than the hour I'd promised. Bluegrass music was serenading walkers-by on the plaza from the open door of the gallery. A banjo jangled merrily as we walked into the seemingly empty showroom.

As we were standing there trying to decide what to do next, Dante pulled his favorite trick of seemingly appearing out of nowhere.

I made a mental note to ask Nikki how he did that.

When he saw us, he made a face like he'd stepped in dog shit. "Nikolia, it's your latest pet, the next big thing."

Nikki swept in through the curtain on the back wall with a wide grin on her face, pointedly ignoring her older brother. "Will! Aidan! Thanks for coming in on such short notice. Guess what?"

"I sold a painting?" I guessed.

Nikki frowned. "No, I'm sorry Will; you didn't sell a painting..." I felt my face drop before she went on, "...you sold all three!"

"What?" Aidan and I chorused, then I added, "You're kidding! How?"

Nikki laughed. "I stirred things up a bit, called a few people to come see them, told them you were a newly discovered talent and boom! Once they saw them, the work sold itself."

"I can't believe this!" I said.

"I can," Aidan laughed.

"Now before you get your hopes up, I priced them on the low side since you are an unknown at this point, but now we have a benchmark. They only go up from here. We never discussed prices so I hope you aren't disappointed."

I was surprised to realize I hadn't even thought about money. Just the fact that someone thought my art was good enough that they wanted to pay for it was enough for me at the moment.

"How much?" I asked.

"Three hundred."

I blinked. "Dollars?"

"No, pesos. Of course dollars."

"For all three? But that's great!"

"No, not for all three. Each."

"Three hundred dollars *each*?"

"That's nine hundred dollars," Aidan said helpfully in a somewhat awed voice.

"Minus my commission of course," Nikki said with a wink.

I felt like I needed to sit down, but there was nowhere to sit.

Nikki continued, oblivious to my state of shock, "I want to capitalize on this, stir up some interest."

"Whoa, slow down. Capitalize how?"

"I still have one of the paintings here. The buyer is on his way to pick it up now. In fact, I was afraid he'd beat you here, you took so long. I want to get a photo with the two of you and the painting. He's stupid rich and very connected, so I know the paper will run the photo. It'll cause a little stir."

"A stir about what?"

"You, obviously. How would you feel about doing a one-man show?"

My head was spinning. Things always seemed to happen faster than I could keep up when Nikki was around. "A show? Me?"

"I'd like to strike while the iron is hot, so to speak. The people that bought your paintings are the types who like to brag about their latest acquisitions to

all their rich friends, so you can be sure your name will be circulating right now, especially once our photo hits the paper. Do you have any more paintings ready to go?"

"I've been working on some stuff but they're probably not good enough for a show. How many would we need?"

"Well, that depends on how big they are, doesn't it? But let's say, hmm, maybe around twenty. And you let me decide what's good enough for the show."

"Twenty?" I felt faint. "When would you need them?"

"Let's see... It's the beginning of October now. Ideally, we'd open before Thanksgiving and the holiday rush, so let's say mid-November. That would give you about a month. You wouldn't have to do anything but paint; I'll take care of everything else. Think you can pull it off?"

"Do I have a choice?" I said. This wasn't the kind of opportunity one passed up. "I'll make it work. It's not like I have a job to worry about."

"That's the spirit! Oh, that reminds me...I ran into Aidan the other day in the hall, and he mentioned that you'd quit your job. It just so happens that we could use some extra help here at the gallery. We can't pay a lot but it's better than nothing, and we could work around your painting schedule. Interested?"

"Are you serious?"

"Rarely, but in this instance, yes."

"What would I be doing?"

"Some light office work, doing some inventory of our stockroom, watching the floor for us if one of us can't do it, helping with sales, manual labor...you know, the usual."

"And Dante is okay with this?"

"He will be. I can be pretty persuasive when I need to." I believed her. "Besides, anything that means less work for him will always win out in the end."

"Will you teach me that trick of Dante's?"

"You mean his appearing douchebag trick?"

I laughed. "Yeah, that one."

Nikki laughed. "Sorry, that's top-secret, but I can tell you that he desperately wanted to be a magician when we were kids and he practiced his tricks for hours. So, does this mean you want the job?"

"Hell, yeah!"

"Great! You're hired! You can start next Monday."

Just then, a tall, very tan gentleman with white hair and a beige linen suit breezed through the door.

"Nikolia, darling," he boomed. "It's a joy to see you, as always. Did you tell Gio I said hello?"

"Of course I did, Angelo. He sends his regards. But what a coincidence that you came by for your

painting while the artist himself just happened to be here. Let me introduce you."

Nikki wouldn't be getting any awards for her acting any time soon, but I allowed her to sweep me up into a photo shoot while Aidan watched from a safe distance, not even bothering to hide his amusement.

Everything was happening so quickly. I could only hope I didn't look as overwhelmed as I felt in the photos.

Aidan insisted we have a celebratory dinner after Nikki's big news. While I was grateful that Nikki had somehow sold three of my paintings and handed me a one-man show *and* a new job on a silver platter, I couldn't help feeling that I didn't deserve any of it, or that it was all somehow a well-intentioned plot hatched by Nikki and Aidan to cheer me up.

Still, Aidan seemed excited enough for both of us, so I allowed him to persuade me. He took us to an Italian place just down the street from Avant Garde, and even insisted on paying. I felt guilty, but it's not like I was flush with cash at the moment, so, once again, I gave in.

We watched a movie when we got home, but when the credits finished rolling and we headed down the hall to bed, Aidan turned right into his room. "Goodnight," he called as he started closing his door.

"Oh, you're, uh, sleeping in your room tonight?"

"Yeah, I figured you were doing so much better that maybe we should try sleeping in our own beds tonight. Is that okay?"

What was I supposed to say? I nodded and attempted a smile, though I'm guessing by his expression that it was somewhat unconvincing. "Yeah. Of course," I said, and turned into my room.

"I'm right across the hall if you need me," Aidan called as I closed my door.

I went on autopilot as I stripped down to my boxers, turned off the light and crawled into bed. Then I proceeded to lay awake, staring at the moonlit ceiling while my mind ran at a hundred miles an hour.

Would I be able to finish enough paintings to fill a one-man show in one month?

What would I even paint?

What if they all sucked?

What if they all sucked and no one bought them?

What would working for Dante and Nikki be like?

What if I hated it?

What if Aidan had kissed me that morning?

That last question brought me to a screeching halt. I'd somehow managed to not think about our awkward moment in bed this morning, when he'd

hovered over me, his face inches from mine, our eyes locked.

I'd clearly seen what he was thinking in that moment. I know, because I was feeling it too.

Suddenly, it seemed of the utmost importance to know what Aidan's lips felt like against mine.

Almost without even thinking, I got up and walked across the hall to Aidan's door. I rapped lightly.

"Come in," he answered right away, obviously having as much trouble sleeping as I was.

I opened the door and then just stood there stupidly, suddenly unsure of what exactly I was doing. What was I hoping would happen?

Aidan was sitting up in his bed, his bare chest glowing in the moonlight. He was looking at me with a confused expression. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No, I just... I missed you," I said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

For what seemed like an eternity, he just stared back at me. I could see his mind turning my words every which way, seeking out every implication of my appearing in his bedroom after midnight. I felt like a little kid waking up his daddy after he had a bad dream. This was stupid. I should have stayed in my own bed.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you," I mumbled, and turned to leave.

"Will, wait," he called.

I turned back to see him toss the sheets aside and pat the bed next to him.

"You're not bothering me."

I slowly stepped into the room, shut the door, and walked to the side of the bed before hesitating again. My heart was racing, and I couldn't keep my hands from shaking.

In the near darkness, I could feel as much as see Aidan searching my face, his eyes seeking mine out. Then he reached out and tentatively took my hand, pulling me gently onto the bed.

The kiss was so soft, so quick that I almost thought I was still imagining it. The second one, though, was much more decisive, as if we both now knew what we wanted. He pulled back and searched my eyes once more. I reached around his neck and pulled him back to me for another kiss, this one much longer and more passionate.

I don't know how long we stayed like that, kissing as if our lives depended on it. I was lost in the moment. It was like my first kiss all over again, but so much better. The first time I kissed Beth, I had wondered where all the fireworks were.

There were plenty of fireworks with Aidan.

I felt his hand slide over my shoulder, across my chest, and down my stomach as his kisses moved down my neck. He left a trail of angel kisses down my chest

and stomach where his hand had passed just moments before. His mouth lingered over my navel, and he tickled it with his tongue. I felt my breath rush out as my stomach did somersaults.

His mouth moved back up to meet mine, but his hand slid under my boxers. I almost jumped out of the bed when he found his target. Then, in a blur of motion, he broke away, and before I could even think, our boxers were off and he was on top of me, kissing me once again with a passion that caught me off guard. Our bodies began to move in synchronicity as the fireworks turned into an all-out explosion.

Afterwards, as I lay wrapped tightly in his arms listening to his regular breathing, I began to question what had just happened. Did I love Aidan, or had I just gone to him because I missed the security of having someone next to me? Was I just craving attention? Was he just available?

I didn't have any answers. My mind was too muddled and I didn't have the energy to pursue that line of thinking at that moment. I pushed all thoughts from my head, focused on his breathing and how safe I felt in his arms, and soon fell into a deep sleep.

The doubts were back with a vengeance as soon as I opened my eyes the next morning, though. My first coherent thought was, "Oh my God! What did we do?"

Of course, I had all the evidence I needed spooned against my back, his arm tight around my chest.

The biggest question for me was did I love Aidan?

I wasn't sure.

I was sure that I was hurting from Joey's and my family's rejections. Maybe I just needed to feel loved for one night. But that would make me one hell of a horrible person, using Aidan like that.

Of course, I hadn't gone expecting all that to happen...had I? Or was that exactly what I was hoping would happen?

Aidan was without a doubt the most caring guy I had ever met. I knew I could love him, but I also knew I still had a lot of unresolved feelings for Joey.

I felt Aidan stir behind me. His lips brushed my shoulder, then my ear. "I love you, Will," he whispered.

I sat up with a jolt.

"Will?"

"Aidan, last night..."

"Was incredible. You can't imagine how long I've wanted to do that, to hold you in my arms. It was so hard lying next to you all those nights, so close and yet..."

"Aidan..."

"I've wanted so badly to tell you that I loved you, but I knew I had to wait, that you had to make the first move."

"Aidan, last night was a mistake."

Punching him in the stomach wouldn't have created the effect those words had on him. He seemed to cave in as his face fell. "What?"

"We shouldn't have...done what we did."

"Done what? Say it, Will. We shouldn't have had sex? What do you mean? You came to me. I thought you wanted me."

"I don't know what I wanted. I still don't. That's the problem. I still love Joey, and right now I can't separate what I feel for him and what happened last night. Maybe I did want you, but what if I only went to you because I needed to feel loved, because I couldn't have Joey?"

"I don't understand this." Aidan ran his hands through his hair. "Do you...do you have feelings for me?"

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

Aidan stood up abruptly, realized he was still naked, and grabbed the sheet to cover himself, clutching it like a security blanket.

"Aidan, I do love you," I said hurriedly. "You've become my best friend these past few weeks. I don't know anyone else who would have done what you've done for me. I'm just so confused right now. I don't know if I love you the way you want me to love you."

"You didn't seem confused last night."

"I...it's just...I still have all these feelings for Joey."

"Joey's straight. He's not just straight; he's homophobic. He outed you to your family. He's done actual harm to you. How could you possibly still have feelings for him? I'm here, right now. And I'm telling you I love you with everything I am. Isn't that enough for you? Aren't I enough for you?"

"It's not that you're not enough. These feelings I have for Joey, I've had them for years. I can't just make them go away. I don't have an on-and-off switch. I wish I did. And maybe...maybe once he gets used to the idea, maybe he'll be okay with it."

"Oh, God! Wake up, Will! It's not going to happen. The guy's an asshole. I hadn't told you because I didn't want to hurt you and I thought you had enough to deal with, but ever since you broke the big news to your old pal Joey, he's been hell-bent on proving his heterosexual masculinity. Mackenzie dumped him weeks ago when she found out he was cheating on her, and he's been screwing everything with tits ever since. He's become the campus sleaze overnight."

"No..."

"Yes. He's also managed to maintain an almost constant state of obnoxious drunkenness at every party that's been held since school began, whether he was invited or not. He's been kicked out of more parties than I'll ever attend. He hasn't spoken to me since he found out I'm gay except to call me a fag in front of his new

friends. Actually, do you want to know what his exact words were?"

I didn't, but Aidan was on a roll.

"He said, 'That's the fag that turned my old best friend gay. Can you believe I used to be friends with a fag?'"

The last statement hit me like a blow.

Aidan saw it written all over my face and his eyes widened in horror. "Oh, God, Will, I'm sorry."

I stood up and staggered to the door.

"Will, please, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have..."

I walked across the hall to my room and shut the door behind me. Immediately, Aidan was knocking and talking through the door. I quickly turned the lock.

"Will, please open the door. Talk to me. Don't shut me out."

I looked around the room with a strange sense of detachment. I didn't feel connected to anything, like I'd become completely untethered from my life.

"Will! I shouldn't have said that. It was wrong. I was hurt. I'm sorry. Please open the door."

I walked to the window and threw it up with a bang.

Aidan sounded like he was crying now; he'd stopped banging on the door. "Will, please forgive me..." he sobbed.

I didn't feel anything anymore but I felt I owed him at least that much, so I turned back. "I forgive you," I tried to say, but it came out as a kind of croak, so I cleared my throat and said it louder.

Then I climbed out the window and onto the fire escape. For a brief moment, I realized I was naked outside, but I didn't care. What difference did it make?

I swung one leg over the railing, then the other. I stood for a second, balancing precariously on the outside of the railing, my hands gripping the top rail, my heels barely on the platform. I looked down. The ground seemed so far away.

I heard a key fumbling in the lock of my door, and I thought it was strange that I didn't know Aidan had a key to my room. Not that it mattered.

"Will...No!"

I let go and fell forward.

For a brief moment I felt like I was flying.

I was finally free.

Then the ground started rushing toward me.

"WILL!"

Chapter 9

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

Beep

I've always been sensitive to repetitive noises. They annoy me in a way that few things do. The first thing I remember thinking as I was slowly dragged back to consciousness (very much against my will) is how much I wanted that damn beeping to stop.

Beep

Beep

Beep

It wasn't even all that loud. In fact, it was rather soft. But it was incessant. Insistent. Grating against my nerves and disturbing my sleep.

Beep

Beep

Beep

I had to make the noise stop. But that meant I had to wake up.

Beep

Beep

Beep

Oh, but I didn't want to wake up. Floating in this darkness was nice. I didn't have to deal with life's problems.

Beep

Beep

Beep

The infernal beeping just kept going. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't seem to lift my lids.

Beep

Beep

Beep

I tried to move my hand, thinking I could find the source without the effort of opening my eyes, but that wouldn't move either.

Beep

Beep

Beep

I tried to speak, but even that proved to take more effort than I could manage. Maybe I was dead. Was this hell?

Beep

Beep

Beep

I couldn't stand it. Putting forth a herculean effort, I parted my lips and forced the words past them.

"Make...it...stop," I rasped.

"Will? Oh my God!" I heard a voice that sounded like Aidan.

"Is he awake?" Another voice that sounded suspiciously like my mother.

"I think he said something," said Aidan.

"What did he say?"

"I don't know. I couldn't understand him. Will! Will, can you hear me?"

I mustered up some more energy—I was quickly depleting my meager supplies—and said again, "Make it stop."

"Oh, my God! He's awake!" Aidan screamed.

"Nurse! Nurse! He's awake!" Mom yelled. She continued yelling this as her voice faded away.

The beeping was still there so I tried again, but this time I decided to be a little more specific, "Make...the damn...beeping...stop."

"Oh, my God! Will, we've been so scared!" Aidan babbled on as if I hadn't just asked, quite reasonably, I thought, that he turn off the beeping. "You're in the hospital—"

That explained the beeping.

"—and you've been in a medically induced coma because your head injury caused swelling on your brain. The doctor said it's a miracle you're even alive. I'm so glad you're awake. You were in a coma for two weeks. They were even starting to talk about what to do if the swelling wouldn't go down or if you were permanently brain damaged. Oh, and you also broke your arm."

I seriously considered sinking back into the beckoning darkness at this point, but that incredibly irritating beeping was still droning on in the background of Aidan's relieved prattle.

I decided to try one last time, "Please make it stop."

"Make what stop? The pain?"

"The beeping."

"Beeping? What... Oh, the heart monitor. I can't. It's what lets us know you're alive."

"I wanted to die."

"I...I know. I'm glad you didn't, though." His voice sounded thick with emotion, and I was suddenly glad I couldn't see his face.

I heard voices coming closer. One was my mother again, talking to someone whose voice I didn't recognize.

"I'll have to have a look at him before I can say, Mrs. Keegan. There are tests we'll have to run, but if he's talking, that's a very good sign," he was saying. His voice stopped above me. "Will? I hear you're talking. I'm Dr. Cherrix. Can you hear me?"

Finally, someone with some authority.

"Yes. Please make the beeping stop."

He chuckled. I was in agony and this guy had the nerve to laugh at me? Just for that, I decided to go back into my coma.

"Is the beeping bothering you?" he asked.

Duh. Why else would I ask you to turn it off?

"Yes," I replied simply.

"We'll get to that in a minute, but only if you can stay with me long enough to answer some questions."

Ah, nothing like blackmail while you are lying half-dead in a hospital bed.

"Do you know your full name?"

I didn't feel like playing stupid games, but if the prize was ending that incessant beeping, I'd do what I had to do.

"William Spencer Keegan."

"Do you like to be called William?"

"No."

"What would you prefer I call you?"

"Will."

"You're doing great, Will. Now, can you open your eyes?"

"No."

That was a step too far. The darkness was my friend.

"Can you try for me?"

"No."

"If you open your eyes, I'll make the beeping stop."

He was playing dirty, but what choice did I have? I tried to open my eyelids again, but they still felt like lead weights.

Was it my imagination or was the beeping growing louder?

With what felt like a superhuman effort, I managed to pry my eyes open a tiny bit, but the light was so bright they immediately snapped shut again.

I wondered if the effort would count for anything.

"That was good, Will. Now try again."

Apparently not.

I sighed. Or I would have if I wasn't busy fighting a battle of wills with my eyelids. I finally forced them open again and, after much blinking and adjusting to the bright light, somehow managed to keep them open this time.

As the dancing spots slowly faded, I saw Aidan, Mom, and a man I assumed to be Dr. Cherrix hovering over my bed. All were wearing concerned, earnest expressions. Dr. Cherrix looked as if this were his usual expression. He was a serious looking middle-aged man, with graying ginger hair, pale blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion.

"Hi," I said.

They all broke into smiles.

"Hello! Welcome back," Dr. Cherrix said. "Now that I've got your attention, I want you to try a few more things for me. Can you move your fingers?"

With what felt like a great deal of effort, I managed to wiggle my fingers.

The doctor looked pleased. "How about your toes?"

I wiggled those too.

"Good! Can you feel this?"

He laid a hand on my arm.

"Yes."

"And this?"

He moved his hand to my ankle.

"Yes."

"Do you know what month it is?"

"Is it the same month that it was when I jumped?"

Mom and Aidan flinched, but Dr. Cherrix didn't even blink. "No, you were unconscious for two weeks."

"Then I guess it must be November."

"Great! How many fingers am I holding up?"

I was starting to feel like a trained monkey.

"Three."

"And now?"

"Still three."

"And now?"

"One."

"Fantastic!" He made some notes on a clipboard.

"Do I get a banana now?"

He looked up with confusion. "Hmm? A banana? Are you hungry?"

"No, never mind. Can you just make the beeping stop?"

"I'll make you a deal. You stay awake for me, and I'll make the beeping stop. Do we have a deal?"

Anything to make the beeping stop. "Deal."

"Good answer," he said approvingly. He punched some buttons on one of the several machines that appeared to have sprouted from my body while I was unconscious and, at last, the beeping stopped.

"Thank you," I said sincerely.

"You're welcome."

"Did you make the beeping louder before I opened my eyes?"

"I sure did," he grinned. "We do what we have to do to get the job done. It may be a little early to say, there are quite a few more tests I'd like to do, but I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that there appears to be no permanent damage from your failed attempt at flying."

When no one even made an attempt to laugh at his weak stab at humor, he hurried on, "Well, I'll give you a chance to talk to these people here. They haven't left your side since you arrived, you know. You're a very fortunate young man to have such caring people around you."

He turned to Mom and Aidan. "Don't keep him up too long, though. I know he just woke up, but rest is still a high priority."

"How much longer will I have to stay here?" I asked as he started for the door.

He looked back in surprise. "You just woke up and you're already in a rush to leave?"

"How long?"

"That depends on what our tests show. If everything checks out, you might be able to leave as soon as tomorrow, provided you pass your psych eval."

"My what?"

"Don't worry about that right now," he said. "One step at a time. Get some rest. Your body has been through a lot."

He turned and left. I turned my attention to my mom and Aidan.

"Psych eval? I'm not crazy."

Mom and Aidan exchanged glances.

"Will," Mom said slowly. "Do you remember why you're here?"

"I jumped off the fire escape." She seemed taken aback by my matter-of-fact tone, so I elaborated, "I tried to kill myself."

"Well...um...that's what they'll want to talk to you about. Not right now, of course, but sometime soon. They won't release you until they are sure you won't..., um, try again. They may want to move you to another facility for a while. Not that you're going anywhere just yet. And when you are released, you'll be coming home with me and your father, of course."

"No."

"What?"

"I'll go back home with Aidan."

"What?" they both said in perfect unison.

I closed my eyes. "I want to go back to the apartment."

There was a long silence, then Mom said, "I don't think that's a good idea."

I opened my eyes again even though it was the last thing I wanted to do.

"I don't really care what you think. I don't want to go back with you."

She looked like I'd slapped her.

"But that's your home..."

"It stopped being my home when Dad told me I wasn't welcome there anymore. Where is he anyway?"

She glanced at Aidan again, but didn't answer.

"See? He couldn't even bring himself to be in the same room with me while I was in a coma," I said bitterly. "Why would you think I'd feel welcome there?" I turned my attention to Aidan. "Do you want me to come back?"

It was a loaded question, and we both knew it. How much Mom knew or guessed, though, I didn't know.

"If you want to come back, of course it's okay with me," he said quietly. "It's your home, too."

"Then I'm going home with Aidan," I said with as much finality as I could muster. "I'm tired now."

And I was. I felt like I had just completed a cross-country marathon.

Mom looked upset, as if she wanted to say more, but she just patted my hand, the one that wasn't covered by a full-arm cast, and said, "Of course, sweetie, you get some rest. We'll talk more when you wake up."

That, of course, was exactly what I was afraid of.

Just before my eyes slammed shut, I saw her shoot Aidan a look that clearly said, "We need to talk."

When I woke up next, the sun was slanting low across the floor with a warm glow that told me it was late afternoon. The overhead lights were out, and Aidan was slumped over in the room's one chair, fast asleep. Mom was nowhere to be seen.

As I lay there watching Aidan sleep, it occurred to me how much he had given up for me—first to stay home while I was battling my depression and then sitting here in the hospital waiting for me to wake up. I knew without any doubt that he loved me.

I also knew that, logically, I should love him, too. He was everything anyone in their right mind would want in a guy—loyal, kind, honest, loving, patient, forgiving, persistent, funny, and hot to boot!

But then, people in their right mind don't jump off fire escapes, do they?

I did love him.

I just couldn't shake my feelings for Joey. My mind couldn't accept this new version of Joey, the one Aidan had described right before my big jump. I needed to see it with my own eyes.

Aidan stirred, and his eyes flickered open, immediately making their way to me. "You're awake," he said.

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," I said, but my voice came out in a raspy croak so it lost some of its zing in the process.

Aidan grinned. "A bit grouchy, aren't we?"

"In the past month I found out I was gay, lost my best friend, my dad disowned me, lost my job, and failed to off myself. Twice. I think I have a right to be

grouchy." That little mini-rant took a lot out of me, leaving me almost gasping.

"Yeah, we know you've had a rough time, Will. So get over it," he snapped.

I blinked in surprise. Where were the sickeningly sweet and equally empty platitudes I was so used to?

He wasn't finished, however. In fact, it seemed like he was still building up steam.

"It's time to stop feeling so damn sorry for yourself. So what if you're gay? So are, like, ten percent of the world's population. You don't see them jumping off fire escapes! They're throwing parades, for God's sake!

"And so what if your best friend dumped you? If he can't accept you for who you are, what kind of friend was he to begin with? You deserve better.

"So what if you lost your job? You already have a great job lined up at Avant Garde—which is still waiting for you, by the way.

"So what if your dad says you aren't welcome in his home anymore? Your mom has been by your side since I had to call her to tell her about your *very nearly successful* suicide attempt. She obviously loves you. And even if she didn't, you have a home with me. It's not like you're out on the street, like many, *many* other gay kids.

"And I guess, as usual, I'm chopped liver. Do I even register on your radar at all, Will? After everything I've done for you? You'd think after all this, that I'd at least count for something."

His chest was heaving as he slumped back in his chair.

I sat in stunned silence for several minutes while Aidan pulled himself back together.

He stood up. "I was supposed to let them know when you woke up," he said tersely. He started for the door, and then paused. "You know, I've been beating myself up for the past two weeks, blaming myself for your attempted suicide. I shouldn't have said what I said, even though I was hurt. I lashed out and I shouldn't have. I've felt so guilty, like I pushed you off that fire escape. Everyone kept telling me it wasn't my fault, but I wouldn't believe them...until just now. Now, I see that it was your own selfishness that made you jump. I'm not going anywhere. I'm still your friend and I'll be here for you as much as I can, but I'm not going to feel guilty anymore. And I'm not going to let you make me feel like shit anymore, either."

He swept from the room, leaving me feeling raw and guilty. I knew he was right. I had been selfish. I was still selfish, because all I could think at that moment was how much I wished my failed attempt to end my life had been successful. I didn't deserve someone like Aidan. Maybe I didn't deserve happiness at all.

I blinked awake sometime later. I had no idea how long I'd been asleep.

"Hello, Will." A voice said from nearby.

I turned to find Dr. Wohler sitting next to my bed.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

I eyed him warily. "Physically or emotionally?"

"Let's start with physically. I imagine that's an easier answer."

"My arm hurts and my head is killing me."

"Yes, I would imagine so. They'll give you some more pain medication when we're finished, but I need you to be as alert as possible for this conversation, so I'm afraid you can blame me a bit for the amount of pain you feel right now. I'm sorry."

"I guess it's okay."

"You broke a promise you made to me."

"I know."

"And you broke a promise to Aidan. He's been blaming himself."

"I... I know. I'm sorry."

"That's a start. Can you tell me about what happened? What led to you jumping? Help me understand what happened."

I glanced around the room, but we were alone.

"What did Aidan tell you?"

"That doesn't matter. I want to hear it from you."

I haltingly recounted that last day at the apartment, how Aidan had almost kissed me that morning, how he'd decided to go back to his bed that night, how I'd laid awake before going to him, and what happened after that.

I told him how I felt the next morning, the mix of shame and regret, the uncertainty, the rush of guilt over my unresolved feelings for Joey. Finally, I told him about Aidan's angry response, and how hearing those things about Joey, especially what he'd said about me, seemed to break something inside me.

"And how do you feel about all that?" he asked when I wound down.

"I... I don't know. Aidan said I was selfish."

He raised an eyebrow. "When?"

"Earlier today."

"And what do you think?"

"I think...maybe he was right."

"You were hurting," he said gently.

"Does that mean I wasn't selfish?" I asked.

He sat back and eyed me carefully.

"Some would say that suicide is the ultimate act of selfishness, that the person driven to commit such a drastic act is thinking only about what themselves. *They* want the pain to stop. *They* want to escape. *They* don't want to face their problems anymore. They say it's the people left behind who have to deal with the repercussions of their selfishness."

"I never thought of it like that," I said softly.

"I'm not saying I agree with that thinking," Dr. Wohler said. "I believe suicide is the last act of desperation."

I thought about it. "It could be both."

He nodded. "Perhaps. I think we'd be more productive if we spent less time placing blame and more time figuring out what made you do what you did and how we can prevent it from getting to that point again.

"Will, you've let yourself become controlled by your circumstances. You're like a small bird being buffeted by a violent storm."

I thought about the little tree frog I'd painted back when I was still living with my parents. It felt like a lifetime ago, but it had only been a couple of months.

"These things happening to you seem incredibly overwhelming as they're happening," Dr. Wohler

continued, "but they are here but for a moment and they're gone tomorrow, to be replaced by new problems.

"Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Will, you've been given a second chance, but it's up to you what you do with it. You might not be as fortunate next time. I don't believe that things happen randomly. By all accounts, you should be dead, and yet here you are."

"I was doing so much better," I said softly. "But then, when Aidan and I fought and he told me what Joey said, it was just like something snapped inside me. I wasn't thinking clearly. Or I wasn't thinking at all. It was like I was on autopilot."

"You were overwhelmed by your pain, which is understandable, but when you're that focused on your pain, you miss the good things that are happening around you. You know, the doctors told me that Aidan hasn't left this room except to eat and shower. They were worried about him, concerned he might collapse."

I turned away. "He deserves better than me."

"Don't you think that might be up to him to decide? At the very least, he could continue to be a source of stability and encouragement for you, but you have to allow him in first."

"But I broke my promise. I promised I wouldn't hurt myself without talking to him first. And then I locked him out and jumped."

"That's a pretty big breach of trust."

"Yes. So why would he even care about me anymore? Why sit here in my hospital room waiting for me to wake up? Why is he willing to let me come back?"

"Maybe for the same reason you still have feelings for Joey. Emotions aren't always so cut and dry."

"It feels like I'm taking advantage of him."

"Are you?"

"I... I don't know. Not intentionally."

"Besides guilty, how does knowing he sat with you for the last two weeks make you feel?"

I thought about it. "Cared for."

"Anything else?"

"Like, even though I haven't treated him fairly, I know I can still count on him. Maybe. He was pretty mad at me earlier. He said he'd never let me make him feel like shit again."

"He was exhausted and emotional. You may find that Aidan is more cautious going forward, less trusting, but I don't think he'll turn his back on you."

"What if I just hurt him again?"

"That might happen. All relationships are a calculated risk. We make ourselves vulnerable. In time, you can rebuild his trust in you, but only if you make an effort. You can start by considering his feelings more. He's sacrificed a lot for you."

"Maybe I don't deserve that."

"Again, that's not always for you to decide. Aidan clearly sees something in you that has inspired this level of care and loyalty. Maybe it's time for you to start seeing what he sees."

"You make it sound so easy."

He smiled. "It's only as hard as you make it. But enough about Aidan. You know, he wasn't the only one here day after day. Your mother was, too."

"But not my father," I spat.

"Perhaps not. But your mother was. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it."

"What do you think it means that she was here, possibly against your father's wishes?"

"I... I guess it means she still loves me."

"I'd say so. Do you think it means she would still like to have some sort of relationship with you?"

"I guess."

"You should talk to her."

I decided to change the subject. For some reason, it was easier to talk about Aidan than my mother. "So what happens next?"

"Well, that's what I'm here to help decide, isn't it?"

"Wait. Is this my psych evaluation?"

He chuckled. "Were you expecting someone else?"

"I don't know what I was expecting. Are you going to institutionalize me?"

"I don't know. Do you think you should be institutionalized?"

I hesitated. "I don't want to be."

"I don't want you to be either." He sighed. "While they are necessary sometimes, they're not fun places to be, and not always all that easy to get out of once you're in there. I'd much rather we work on a plan to help you keep healing without institutionalizing you, if possible, but a lot of that will depend on you."

"What would that look like?"

"We'd start by upping the dosage of your medication. It seemed to be working well for you before things got derailed."

"Would I go back to Aidan's when I get out?"

"Is that what you want?"

"I... I think so. If he's still willing to have me."

"Maybe we should all talk about what that might look like together. Despite his loyalty, you did hurt Aidan, after all. I want what's best for you, but not at Aidan's expense. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course. I don't want to hurt him anymore."

"I'm glad to hear that. That's a good start."

"When would I get out?"

"That will mostly depend on what Dr. Cherrix says. I'm going to recommend your release on the condition that you see me twice a week. There are many issues that you haven't even begun to deal with. Do you think that sounds like something you can agree to?"

I nodded again.

"Good. For now, just concentrate on getting better. Get some rest." He patted my leg and then left me alone with my thoughts.

Dr. Wohler was right. I had betrayed Aidan twice over, and he was still by my side. I owed him so much...and yet Joey still had first place in my heart. If I ever wanted to move on, I knew I would have to find out if everything was lost with Joey or if there was any hope of salvaging our friendship.

I had to talk to Joey.

When I woke up next, it was completely dark outside. The overhead lights were off, but light spilled in from the hallway, illuminating Mom asleep in the chair.

She woke up as soon as I stirred, or maybe she hadn't been asleep after all. She quickly moved to my side.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Like I jumped off a four-story building."

She gasped. "Will!"

I guess it was still too soon. "Does Dad know you're here?"

"Yes."

"And he's okay with it?"

"It doesn't matter. You're hurt and I'm here, that's all that matters."

"Thanks," I said softly.

She was quiet for a minute, then said, "I don't approve of the way your father has just cut you off."

I smiled at her. I understood that this was her way of apologizing. "But you don't dare go against his wishes, huh?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

She was right, that said...something. I nodded.

"That doesn't mean I understand or approve of...well, you know, but I do still love you with all my heart, and I always will. You're my miracle, twice over now."

"Miracle?"

"We tried so hard to have a baby, for years. The doctors told us I was incapable, that we'd never have a natural child. I wanted to adopt but your father said no, that God had told him to be patient and trust in him. And

then...all of sudden, I was pregnant, against all odds. I... I should have never allowed your father to separate us. I'm sorry, Will."

I nodded again since it was too hard to talk around the lump in my throat.

She stayed for quite a while. I told her about my art and Nikki and my new job at the gallery, how I liked the apartment, what a good friend Aidan was—but we carefully avoided any mention of my sexuality or my father.

I couldn't help but feel a little like I was walking on eggshells still, and that made me uncomfortable and a little resentful. I tried to remind myself that this was a big step for her and I should give her time, but I was lying in a hospital bed after a suicide attempt. I was pretty messed up mentally, and that was at least partially the fault of my parents and their reaction to me getting forcibly outed by my former best friend.

After a while I began to get drowsy from the pain medicine so Mom told me to go back to sleep.

"You should rest," she said as she stood up to leave, but then stopped and cocked her head slightly to one side. "You know, I spent a lot of time with Aidan these last two weeks."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I said nothing.

She gave me a small smile. "He's a nice boy, Will."

She patted my hand and left, leaving me wondering if that meant what I thought it did.

I ended up having to stay two more days in the hospital while they ran a battery of tests on me.

Mom stopped by several times a day, though Dad himself never did show up. Instead, he sent the hospital chaplain to try and talk me into turning my back on my sinful ways. According to him, my homosexual sickness had led to my suicide attempt, as it did most gays, but if I would only repent, I would be freed from my unnatural desires.

Unnatural for whom? They seemed plenty natural to me.

I was about to climb out of bed and physically throw him out of the room, but thankfully, Aidan stopped by at just the right time to ask him politely but firmly to leave.

Aidan had continued coming every day to sit with me, but he wasn't spending the entire day anymore. We still hadn't talked any more about what happened, but he was acting pretty much the same as he ever did.

Laura and Gabe stopped by and brought me a card and a balloon. Killian and Asher called and sent flowers. It was honestly nice that so many people cared about my wellbeing. There was no word from Joey, but I tried not to dwell on that.

All of the many tests Dr. Cherrix and his team ran on me came back encouraging. Apparently, my two-week mandatory nap had allowed my body to heal for the most part. In fact, if it wasn't for my cast, you'd never guess I'd done a belly flop from the fourth floor. Even most of my bruising had faded. I was quite stiff, but the physical therapist assured me that would go away as I moved around more.

Dr. Cherrix finally released me on the condition that I'd take it easy for the next few weeks.

When it came time to leave, Aidan was there to drive me home and help me inside. When he opened the door to our apartment, a loud roar greeted us, "Welcome home!"

The apartment seemed to be full of people. There really weren't that many, but it seemed like more since they were all crowded into our small entryway. I saw Laura, Gabe, Nikki, Sam, Asher, and Killian. I was most surprised to see Mom. Dad was once again nowhere in sight.

There was cake and ice cream, and everyone took turns signing my cast. No one stayed too late, though, since I still tired quickly.

As soon as they were gone, Aidan gave me a pain pill, then helped me down the hall and into bed. When he started out of the room, I called him back.

"Aidan," I began awkwardly, "I'm sorry...about...about everything."

"It's okay, Will—" he started, but I cut him off.

"No. Please let me say this. I'm sorry I came to you like that before I was ready. I'm sorry I broke my promise to you. I'm sorry I was so selfish. But, most of all, I'm sorry I hurt you. I hope you forgive me someday."

He stood for a moment, then quietly said, "You're already forgiven, Will." He turned to leave.

"Forgiven but not forgotten?" I asked.

He paused but didn't turn around. "No, not forgotten."

And he was gone.

As I fell asleep with the aid of the pain pill, I wondered if the damage I had done to our friendship was

going to prove more permanent than the damage I'd done to my body.

Chapter 10

I hatched a plan over the next several days that I was sure would either exorcise Joey from my life forever or let me know conclusively if there was any hope for our friendship. My plan would go into effect that Friday night. According to Aidan, Joey had become a party animal, and there was never any shortage of parties on a Friday night in a college town. All I had to do was find the one he was at and get him alone.

Easy, huh?

I would have to wing it from there since I had no clue how he would react to seeing me again, but I felt confident that I knew Joey well enough to handle it.

Friday morning, I waited by the door for over an hour to "accidentally" catch Sam in the hall. I told him I was itching to get out of the house and asked him if he knew of any fun parties going on at school that night. He mentioned a few that he'd heard about and offered to go with me, but I begged off saying I couldn't be sure I would feel up to going by that night. I needed to confront Joey alone. That last thing I needed was an audience.

The only hitch was that I had to get out of the apartment without arousing Aidan's suspicion. Not that he was keeping the eagle eye on me that he had been before everything happened. Things had grown decidedly more distant since that fateful morning. He was still kind and helped when he could—like figuring out showers with a giant cast—but he was back in class full time and was no longer waiting on me hand and foot. I decided to slip out before he got home. I'd leave a note or something so he wouldn't worry.

I spent all afternoon fretting over what to wear. I wanted to look my best. Why? I don't know. It's not like Joey ever cared what I was wearing. But I cared, and this carried a lot of weight for me, so I tried on and rejected outfit after outfit.

Finally, I settled on a bright yellow, short-sleeved polo shirt that Joey had given me for my last birthday and a nice pair of jeans. I'd only worn the shirt once—yellow wasn't my color—but I thought it was a nice touch. As an added bonus, it was also too big, which meant it fit over my cast without cutting it. Not that I would have minded cutting it. I'd only kept it because Joey gave it to me. I took one last look in the mirror and decided I looked completely ridiculous in my oversized shirt that looked like a safety vest, but it would have to do.

As near as I could figure, I had at least three hours to kill before I could start my party rounds. I was going to go crazy if I sat around the apartment, and I needed to be gone before Aidan got home or I knew he'd have a million questions. I decided to take some pictures while the light was still good. I scribbled a quick note for Aidan—which I could only hope he could read considering I was forced to use my non-dominant left hand—then grabbed my camera and headed out.

My next challenge arose when I arrived at my car only to realize I hadn't driven since I'd broken my arm. Luckily, I had an automatic or my clever plan would have been over before it even began. I managed to awkwardly wedge myself into the car and then I was off to drive around waiting for inspiration.

Though I often joked about the Eastern Shore's insulated, sometimes backward lifestyle, it's undeniably beautiful. Flanked by the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay, the Delmarva Peninsula, as it is commonly called—named for the state of Delaware, the ten counties of Maryland, and two counties of Virginia that comprise it—remains largely rural, with farmland and wetlands dominating the landscape. Even the small city where I live is surrounded by flat fields that stretch in every direction, and just beyond the city limits, you're as likely to spot a white-tailed deer as a person.

I wanted to drive to Assateague Island, but it was an hour away and I knew I didn't have enough daylight left, so I contented myself with the wooded countryside that weaves itself around the picturesque Wicomico River. I stopped often to snap photos: an abandoned house, a forgotten graveyard, a gloriously elegant blue heron hunting in the reeds, a tiny country church catching the golden hour light just right. The sun set in a spectacular display of color that would make a great backdrop for a painting.

By the time dusk settled and the moon began her reign over the night sky, I had taken well over two hundred photos. I was confident that at least some of them would produce a great composition for a painting.

I glanced at my car clock as I drove down the darkening roads. It was show time.

The first party I hit was just getting started and no one seemed to know Joey, so I quickly moved on.

At the next party, several people knew Joey, although no one looked impressed, but none of them had any reason to think he was coming there. One guy

snarked that he would probably be at an off campus frat party, since that was where all the booze would be. It just so happened that the frat party was the third stop on my list, so I headed there next.

The frat house in question was a huge, older two-story house that had seen better days. The paint was flaking a bit, a couple of shutters were missing, and the grass desperately needed cutting. A tall privacy fence closed off the backyard, but the front door stood open so I let myself in and started asking around.

It didn't take long at all before some girl said she'd heard Joey say that he was coming to this particular party. "Although, to be honest, I hope he doesn't come," she added with an eye roll. "That guy is a creep. Why are you looking for him anyway? Did he sleep with your girlfriend or something?"

I made an excuse and wandered off thinking that it would seem that Aidan's reporting about Joey's reputation was accurate. I still needed to see for myself, though. Call me stubborn. Or stupid. I should have left then, but, instead, I found an out of the way corner with a view of the front door and settled in to wait for Joey to make his appearance.

While I waited, I entertained myself by people-watching. This was apparently *the* party to be at. The house was filling up quickly. Beer was practically a food group, with everyone chugging red cups like it was their job. Music blasted from somewhere deep inside, and a few people were already drunk enough to think dancing was a good idea. A few couples were making out like they were in a CW teen drama. Well, good for them—at least someone was enjoying themselves.

This may come as a surprise, but I've never been a party animal by any stretch. Even to my untrained eye, though, it appeared that at least half those present were stoned as well as inebriated. The smell of weed floated through the house like incense.

I noticed several girls eying me hungrily. I felt like fresh meat in the lion cage at the zoo. At one point, a flirtatious redhead pressed a cold bottle into my hand, but I managed to get rid of her and quickly passed the beer on to the first empty-handed person I encountered. I figured I needed all my wits about me for my mission, not to mention I was still on pain meds, and it seemed unwise to mix when I still had to drive home.

After a while, I got bored and took a lap of the first floor, just in case I'd missed Joey's entrance. In the kitchen, I spotted a back door and decided to step out for some fresh air. It was really starting to reek inside—a nauseating blend of beer, weed, sweat, and hormones.

I stepped out into a large fenced-in backyard with a very dirty in-ground pool that no one had bothered to cover even though we were well into the fall, as evidenced by the collection of leaves floating on the surface. A couple, a guy and a girl, were smoking on the far side of the pool, heads bent close, but I didn't pay them much attention. Otherwise, the yard was empty. The damp, chilly weather probably had something to do with that.

I turned to go back inside and almost bumped into a petite girl around my height who was just coming out of the door. She looked me up and down and smiled. "Hi there. I don't think we've met. I'm Caitlin."

"I'm, um, Will," I said.

"Hi Um Will. How'd you get that cast? You don't look like the rough and tumble type."

"I fell four stories off a fire escape."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Must have been one hell of a party!" She produced a cigarette, lit up, and took a deep drag before blowing the smoke in my direction.

"Something like that," I muttered, fanning away the smoke and already trying to figure out how to gracefully disentangle myself.

She gave me a quick smile, all perfect white teeth and practiced charm. She was objectively pretty—honey-blonde hair that fell just past her shoulders, pale blue eyes, and cupid-bow lips like a vintage perfume ad. And yet, if I'd needed a final confirmation of my sexuality, she sealed the deal: nothing.

"Do you go to PU?" she asked.

"No, I'm, uh, meeting a friend here, actually."

"Too bad. What's her name? Maybe I know her."

"Him. My friend's a guy. His name is Joey Taylor."

Her expression changed in the blink of an eye. "You're friends with Joe Taylor? You should choose your friends more carefully."

"We've been friends our entire lives. He's my best friend. Or he was. We drifted apart recently, and I was hoping to run into him here."

"Well, I hope you don't. You seem like too nice a guy for an asshole like him."

"Why do you say that? What's he done?"

"For starters, he's a jerk. He'll sleep with anything with a pulse, apparently."

"Apparently? I mean, are you sure those aren't just rumors?"

Another drag from her cigarette. "He cheated on his girlfriend with a girl in one of his classes. She didn't know he was dating someone, but found out when the girlfriend confronted her in the middle of campus in broad daylight."

"Maybe that was, like, a one-time thing. I mean, everybody messes up, right?"

She rolled her eyes. "Spoken like a true man. No, not everyone cheats."

"I didn't say—"

"He didn't even pretend to be remorseful, just stopped talking to both girls and moved on to the next. And the next. And the next. I think he's slept his way through half the female population of the campus in the last few weeks, with zero concern for anyone's feelings. Wham, bam, without so much as a thank you ma'am."

"Oh," I said in a small voice. Joey had always been a bit wild, but this didn't sound like the guy I'd grown up with.

Caitlin wasn't finished. "Plus he's almost never sober anymore. I've heard that he's shown up for one of his classes completely trashed a few times. The professor threw him out." She lowered her voice and leaned toward me, "I've even heard he got some poor girl pregnant, then told her he'd pay for the abortion. That he didn't want anything to do with a kid."

I shook my head in disbelief. If everything she was saying was true, then it sounded like Joey was in some sort of crisis. He needed help.

Caitlin laid her hand gently on my good arm. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you your old friend is such a loser, but you're better off without him."

"Hey slut, if you're trying to get in his pants, it's a lost cause," a familiar voice slurred from behind me. I spun around, but not before seeing a look of disgust mar Caitlin's pretty face.

Joey was leaning against the doorframe, wearing a plaid shirt open over a band tee and baggy jeans, hair tucked behind his ears. His face was twisted into a sneer, his eyes slightly unfocused, clearly very drunk. The smell of alcohol almost knocked me over.

"He's a fag, Katie, and he's only here to beg for my cock, so get lost."

I blinked rapidly as I felt my face heat up, but before I could defend myself, Caitlin spoke up. "My name is Caitlin," she said sharply. "And why don't you get lost. Nobody with any self respect wants your diseased dick."

"That's not what you said before," he said, pushing away from the door and swaggering unsteadily toward the two of us. "Maybe you two want to share."

"You're fucking disgusting," she said as she moved farther away.

I managed to find my voice. "Joey, I need to talk to you."

"What's to talk about? You're a faggot. I'm not. End of discussion."

"Please? Just a few minutes?" I was embarrassed to be begging in front of Caitlin, but it was as if I couldn't help myself. "Please, Joey."

A foreign smile spread slowly across Joey's face, cruel and ugly. "Okay," he said, "I'll do you a favor if you do one for me. Follow me."

He turned and re-entered the house, weaving through the crowd and up the stairs to the second floor as if he knew where he was going. I followed wordlessly.

Apparently, he did know where he was going; he walked confidently to a closed door, opened it, and entered. He shut the door as soon as I followed him in, and immediately started unbuttoning his pants.

"What are you doing?" I asked, although I had an awful feeling that I knew.

His jeans dropped to the floor, then he pushed his boxers down. His soft dick flopped out. "It's what you wanted, isn't it, Will? A quick suck off your old pal, Joey? Well, here it is. Come on, I don't have all night."

"Joey, pull your pants up. I just want to talk to you."

"Suck first, talk later. Come on, get on your knees, fag boy."

"No! Joey..."

He grabbed his dick and shook it, then started jerking off, hard and fast, as it grew semi-hard. I wanted to look away but I couldn't.

"Stop it," I hissed.

Joey sneered. "I can see how much you want it."

"No, I do not want it," I yelled. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me. You're the perv. You want it. I see it in your eyes."

I turned away, desperately fighting back tears, sickened by the grain of truth in his words. Part of me did want him, but a much bigger part was disgusted.

"I thought I knew you," I said with a catch in my voice, "but I don't know who you are anymore. What happened to you? I feel like I've lost my friend."

"What happened to *you*? You're not the only one who lost a friend, dumbass. You used to be normal."

"I am normal!"

"No, you ruined everything when you decided you were secretly in love with me. Well, here I am. Here's your chance, the only one you're ever going to get."

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm just having fun, letting loose, finally living my own life without anybody telling me what to do. What's wrong with you?"

"You've become a drunk asshole who sleeps around with anything with breasts."

"What's wrong, Will? Jealous again? I should have known you were a queer by the way you hated every girlfriend I've ever had. You just wanted me for yourself the whole time. You're a pathetic little fag."

I'd had enough. I grabbed the knob and started to yank the door open, but Joey was always quicker than I was. He hit me in the back before I even got the door halfway open, slamming it shut and pinning me against it. He spun me around painfully using my broken arm and pressed my back against the door, pinning the cast between our bodies. I gasped in agony as he panted, his foul breath hot in my face.

"What's the rush? I'm almost there. Don't want to miss the big show."

His other hand hadn't slowed down the whole time. His body suddenly tensed and he began to shoot onto my leg. "Look at all that going to waste. You should have swallowed it, Will. Maybe it would turn you into a real man."

I struggled to free myself but he slammed me against the door, sending new jolts of pain through my arm.

"Where ya goin', Willie?" he rasped. "We were just getting' started."

Just then, someone banged on the door and shouted, "Hey, everything okay in there?"

Using the distraction my would-be savior provided, I brought my knee up sharply into Joey's groin with all my strength, then wrenched my broken arm from his grasp, slamming him in the face with my cast at the same time. He stumbled back then bent double, groaning in pain.

I didn't wait to see if he was okay. Frankly, I no longer cared. I just yanked the door open and escaped, racing past the guy standing outside the door. He shouted something after me, but I ignored both him and the pain in my arm as I took the stairs two at a time and plunged into the crowd at the bottom.

I snatched a cup out of someone's hand, disregarding their indignant protest, and gulped it down, only to find myself bent double, coughing and sputtering when it turned out to be something I could only guess was undiluted gasoline based on the taste and burn.

My throat felt raw, my arm was throbbing, my heart was pounding, and my mind was swirling. I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry, but there was hardly room to move. I found myself being jostled around the throng like a leaf caught in the current of a fast-moving river.

A sudden wave of nausea swept over me, and I began to push and shove my way in the direction of the hallway. I managed to find a mercifully empty bathroom and slammed the door shut just in time to get violently sick. Afterward, I slid down to the cool tile floor and tried not to think about how dirty the bathroom floor in an off-campus frat house probably was.

Eventually, the knocking on the door brought me out of my stupor and I pulled myself up using my one good arm. I splashed some cold water on my face and stared at my reflection in the mirror as what had just happened began to sink in. A pair of haunted eyes stared back at me. Everyone had tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen. Joey was no longer the same person I grew up with. My friend was gone.

I began to shake uncontrollably. Then came the sobs. Followed by another round of puking. I stayed there for quite a while, crying, mourning the loss of my best friend. I was grateful for the lock on the door, but eventually the almost constant banging and yelling got to me, and I reluctantly gave up my sanctuary.

I'd had more than enough of the party, so I started weaving my way toward the front door. By the time I got there, though, I was fighting another round of nausea. Between the traumatic experience with Joey and whatever it was I'd drank out of that cup, my stomach was in full revolt. I barely cleared the front steps before

upchucking the last of my stomach's contents into the shrubbery.

"Being with Joey always affects me that way, too," a feminine voice said from the shadows.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand as I peered into the darkness. The glow of a cigarette butt drew my eyes to the dark form of someone sitting under the low hanging branches of an enormous magnolia tree that took up most of the front yard.

"Caitlin?" I hazarded a guess.

"Yup. Come on in. It's quiet, and Joey isn't likely to find us unless he passes out and rolls under here."

I needed a few minutes to calm myself before driving anyway, so I crawled into the cave-like space and leaned back against the tree trunk next to Caitlin. "What are you doing out here?"

"I had to get out of there. Besides, the fresh air is good for your lungs. Smoke?" she asked as she offered her cigarette.

"Uh, no, thanks."

"Good. Don't start. It's a nasty habit." She stubbed out the butt and looked over at me. "So, are you really gay?"

I drew in a sharp breath. "Yeah."

"Hey, it's cool with me. It just figures that the first nice guy I meet in months would be gay. You don't have a thing for Joey, do you?"

"I used to."

"But not now?"

"No, not anymore."

"Not after tonight?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"I tried to warn you."

"Some things you just have to see for yourself."

She continued to stare at my face as if she were memorizing my features. "I'm sorry," she said softly.

"For what?"

"For your loss."

"What do you mean?"

"You lost a friend tonight, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," I said, and suddenly there were tears rolling down my cheeks again. I swiped at them angrily.

"Don't," Caitlin said. "Don't be ashamed to cry. He made me cry, too."

"You? What did he do to you?"

She looked away. "I was one of those dumb girls who fell for all his lies and promises."

"I'm sorry. But hey, at least you can move on now and forget about him. I suppose that's what I have to do, too."

"It's not that easy. You have all those memories of him, and I have my own little reminder."

"What do you mean?"

She lit up another cigarette and took a long drag. "I'm the girl he got pregnant," she said, still not looking at me.

For a minute I was too stunned to think of anything to say, then I said the first thing that came to my mind, "You shouldn't be smoking."

She laughed, but there was no humor in the laugh. "Why not? I'm going to have an abortion."

Neither of us spoke for a while.

"You don't think I should, do you?" she said at last.

"I didn't say that," I said quickly.

"No, but you're thinking it, I can tell." I stayed quiet. "You don't know what you're talking about," she went on as if I were arguing with her. Maybe she was arguing with herself. "I can't afford to raise a kid on my own. I can't even afford a damn goldfish. I just started school. Oh my God, if my parents found out, we'd both be dead."

"It's not the baby's fault," I said softly. I wasn't sure why I said that. It was clearly none of my business.

She stared at the cigarette for a minute then in a quick violent motion, ground it out angrily. Then, just as suddenly, her mood switched again, and she began to cry.

"I don't know what to do," she whispered. "I can't believe I was so stupid. I'm so scared."

I sat in uncomfortable silence unsure of what to say. Then an idea popped into my head. I blurted it out before I even thought about it. "I...I'll help you raise the baby."

She stopped crying with a hiccup and stared at me as if I had lost my mind. Maybe I had.

"Are you crazy? You can't be serious?" she said when she'd found her voice.

"Yes...I mean no...I mean..."

"You don't even know me."

"No, but I know Joey. Or I used to. And the baby is half his, right? Plus, I'm an artist so I can watch the baby while you're at school. I don't have a lot of money,

but you can get help from social services, and I'll help with what I can."

"You just finished puking and crying over that jackass. Why do you care?"

"If he isn't going to take care of it, then someone has to."

"Why you?"

"I've been cleaning up Joey's messes for eighteen years, I'm used to it. And...I guess I just feel kind of responsible in a way."

"How could you possibly be responsible?"

"It's kinda my fault Joey has become like this. I drove him to it."

"How are you responsible?"

"I...I told him I loved him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"You told him you loved him and..."

"And he freaked out."

She sighed. "Look, Will, you're an incredibly sweet, incredibly naïve, kind of dumb kid. I hope you find happiness and the man of your dreams. But this isn't your fault, and you don't owe me anything."

"But I..."

"Look, when did you tell him you loved him?"

"I dunno. A few weeks ago. Maybe a month."

"Well, good news. He's been a party animal since school started. He knocked me up two months ago. If he went completely off the rails after your talk, at best he used your big announcement as an excuse."

I blinked at that revelation, but she wasn't finished.

"Thank you for your offer, but this is my problem and I'll deal with it. I was the one who was stupid enough to fall for his load of shit. I was the one who didn't insist he use a condom when I knew I wasn't on the pill. That makes me responsible for this..." she gestured helplessly at her still flat stomach. "Me and Joey. And I think it's safe to say I can't count on him for anything."

"But you can count on me. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Joey was like a brother to me. So that makes me this baby's uncle, sort of, right?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she seemed to be considering my impulsive offer for the first time. "That seems like a bit of a stretch."

"Just let Uncle Will help."

She laughed. "I'm starting to think you're just a nut case."

I grinned. "I am almost certainly a nut case, but one that's making a serious offer to help."

"I'll give you one thing, you're persistent."

"Yep."

"Will you stop bugging me if I promise to at least think about it?"

"If you promise you'll actually think about it."

"I promise. To be honest, this little freeloader is all I can think about anyway."

"Great! Let me give you my phone number and stuff."

"Hey, I'm not promising to do anything but think about it," she warned.

"I know, but you'll need my number if you decide to take me up on my offer, right? Besides, if nothing

else, maybe we can start a support group, you know, for those affected by Joey Taylor."

"We'd have plenty of members. For the record, I still think you're crazy."

"I know. So what's your number?"

With a sigh, she gave me her number, which I saved in my phone before sending her a quick text, waiting until she received it to slide my phone back in my pocket.

"Okay, now you have mine, too. Be sure to save it. Anyway, I wish I could say it's been a pleasure meeting you, but this night has been an absolute nightmare. Hopefully, next time we meet it will be under better circumstances. I'd better get home before my roommate gets worried."

She laughed again. "Must be nice to have a roommate who gives a damn. I'll give you this, you little weirdo, you've given me something to think about. I'm still not promising you anything, though. I don't owe you anything."

"No, but maybe you do owe something to the baby."

She gave me an odd look that was a mix of exasperation and thoughtfulness.

I started crawling out from under the tree just as a bloodcurdling scream ripped through the night. Another quickly followed it. They sounded like they were coming from the back yard.

"Sounds like Joey struck again," Caitlin said darkly.

"Maybe I should check it out," I said uncertainly.

"Are you going to follow behind him cleaning up his messes for the rest of your life? Go home, Clark Kent. You've done enough good for one night."

She was right. I turned toward my car again, but a strange sense of dread hit me and I stopped in my tracks. Something was wrong, and I just knew that Joey was involved.

I was standing there, stuck in an indecisive loop, when a tall, dark-haired guy vaulted over the fence separating the backyard from the front. He hit the ground running and slammed right into me in his haste, sending me sprawling.

He paused long enough to help me up. "Holy shit! Sorry man," he panted as he pushed his sweaty dark hair out of his eyes.

"What's going on?" I asked as the feeling of dread grew.

"Some chick just found a dead guy in the pool."

Chapter 11

"Who? Who died?"

Panic closed in around me, squeezing all the air from my chest. Some part of me already knew the answer, but I needed to hear it.

"I don't know, man. Who cares? Fuck that shit."

"No, wait!" I grabbed the guy by the arm. He could have easily shaken me off—he towered over me—but instead he just looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "It might be my friend. Are you sure he was dead? What did he look like? What was he wearing?"

He pulled his arm away. "I only got a glimpse, dude, but fuck, he sure looked dead to me."

"Please! What did he look like?"

"Long blond hair? Like a flannel shirt? I don't know. I think somebody already called the cops." He paused then started backing away. "You hear that? Sirens. This party's busted. Sorry, man, I hope it's not your friend, but I'm not catching a charge tonight. I'm out." He turned and joined the steady stream of guests who were exiting the premises as quickly as they could.

I spun toward Caitlin. "That sounds like Joey—"

"Come on!" she said, grabbing my good arm before I could even finish my sentence and pulling me toward the street. "Let's go."

"Go where? We can't just leave!" I protested, but she continued dragging me along. She was stronger than she looked.

"We can and we are. We don't want to be here when the cops arrive."

"But Joey—"

"If it is Joey and he's actually dead, there's nothing you can do."

"What about the police?"

"We were in the front yard under the tree the whole time. We didn't see shit. Besides, didn't you say you had a fight with him? That could make you a suspect."

Suspect? That implied he was murdered. No one had mentioned anything about that, just that there was a dead guy in the pool who, according to the fence dude, just happened to match Joey's description. We had fought, though. That much was undeniable. I thought about his semen on my pant leg. Would that be considered evidence if someone had killed him?

"Where's your car?" she asked, stopping so suddenly that I ran into her.

"Around the corner, why?"

"You're taking me home," she said. "Now."

I was done arguing. We ran the rest of the way to the car and jumped in. I pulled away just as two patrol cars pulled up, lights flashing, an ambulance not far behind.

As the lights faded into the distance, Caitlin and I were both silent, both lost in our own thoughts. Joey couldn't be dead. I'd just seen him. Maybe the guy in the pool wasn't Joey. There had to be more than one guy with long blond hair at that party, right? Or maybe he wasn't dead, just extremely drunk. There was an ambulance so that had to be a good sign, right? Do they send ambulances for dead people?

"Where are you going?" Caitlin asked, startling me. I'd forgotten she was even in the car.

"Huh?"

"Where are you going? You don't even know where I live. We're going the wrong way."

"Oh... I.. You..." I gave up trying to form a coherent sentence and pulled a U-turn.

She lived on campus, so I dropped her off near the dorms.

"Thanks, Will," she said when I pulled to a stop. "You're a sweet guy. Stop blaming yourself for the loser that Joey turned out to be. If it is him, then he deserved whatever happened. I'll be in touch." She leaned over and kissed me quickly on the cheek. "Maybe."

I watched her walk up the path and disappear around the corner of a building, wondering if I'd ever hear from her again, then pulled away in a sort of numb trance.

The drive home took longer than it should have. I missed a turn and had to backtrack twice. When I finally got home, I just sat in the car for a while, thinking about everything that had happened that night. Scenes flashed through my mind: Joey's face, twisted with cruelty in the dark room. The look in my eyes in the bathroom mirror. Caitlin chain smoking under the tree. A body floating in the pool.

I didn't see the last one for myself, but my imagination was more than up for the task of filling in the graphic detail. In my mind, it was Joey, the pool water stained red with blood.

Aidan was sitting up waiting for me when I finally went inside.

"Where were you? I was worried," he demanded, jumping to his feet.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled distractedly.

"Your note said you were going to take pictures. It's been dark for hours."

"I'm sorry," I said again, and headed for the hallway.

"I didn't know if you'd had an accident, if you were okay...if you were even alive..."

The weight of that night's events combined with Aidan's nagging tone broke something inside me. "I said I'm sorry!" I yelled as I spun around. "What more do you want from me?"

Aidan's wounded expression caused instant regret.

"Well, excuse me for giving a damn. I guess I should know better by now." He pushed past me and started toward his room.

"Aidan, wait!" I called wearily. This wasn't what I wanted or needed right now, but I owed him an explanation. Or something, at least.

He stopped but kept his back to me, his shoulders tense.

"I went to talk to Joey. It...it didn't go well."

He slowly turned around.

"He... He tried to..." I stopped and tried to swallow the bile that kept rising in the back of my throat. "He tried to force himself on me. I... I think he was going to rape me." I started crying but kept going. It was as if the words wouldn't stop coming. "He pinned me against the wall and tried to force himself on me. He hurt me."

All the color had drained from Aidan's face. "Oh, my God," he whispered.

"I hit him, pushed him away...then I ran."

Aidan took a few quick steps forward as if to hug me, but I flinched when he raised his arms, and he stopped in his tracks, letting his arms fall limply to his sides.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, examining my face for damage.

"I think he's dead," I choked.

Aidan's eyes flew open wide. "You killed him?"

"No! He was alive when I left him. I only kneed him in the crotch and decked him with my cast."

"Then why do you think he's dead?"

"Some guy said they found a body in the pool. He described Joey. I don't even know what happened. We left before the police got there."

"We? Were you with someone? Was Laura there?"

"No, I was with a girl named Caitlin when...when they found the body."

"Who's Caitlin?"

"I met her tonight. She was one of Joey's conquests. He...hurt her." I don't know why I didn't tell him about Caitlin's pregnancy. I just didn't feel it was the right time.

"Where is she now?"

"I took her home."

"Why did you leave before the police got there?"

"Caitlin wanted to. She said I would be a suspect, and we didn't have anything to add anyway because we were in the front yard under the tree the whole time."

"Under the—? Never mind. Why would you be a suspect?"

"Because of our fight."

"Did other people hear you?"

"Yes. He took me to a room upstairs. We were alone, but he kept slamming me against the door. Some people heard us, I guess. Somebody banged on the door, asked if we were alright." I glanced down at my pant leg. "Oh yeah. His, um...cum is on my leg. That could be like evidence, right? Do you think I'm a suspect?"

"Holy shit, Will." He ran his hands through his hair. "Slow down. You don't even know for sure if the guy in the pool was Joey. You're taking the word of some stranger. Even if it was Joey, you don't know that he's dead. Maybe he just passed out or something. He's been partying pretty hard lately."

I met his eyes. "Maybe. He seemed pretty messed up when he attacked me."

He looked down at his watch. "It's almost time for the late news, maybe they'll have something on there about it." He moved into the living room, turned on the TV, and started flipping through the channels until he found the local news just as it was coming on.

"Good evening," the anchor, a blonde woman with a severe blonde bob, said as she stared directly into the camera. "I'm Savannah Blake, and this is WMAC News at Ten. We begin tonight with breaking news out of Pemberton University, where tragedy has struck the local campus community."

The screen cut to a live shot of flashing police lights outside the frat house with yellow tape in the distance.

"Details are still coming in, but we have confirmed with both the city's chief of police and campus security that a Pemberton University student has

died tonight at an off-campus party. Authorities have not yet released the student's name, pending notification of family."

The camera cut to a pre-recorded interview clip with a heavy-set man with salt-and-pepper hair. The scroll across the bottom of the screen identified him as Police Chief James Rowan.

"At this time, we are actively investigating the circumstances surrounding this student's death," the chief said. "We are working closely with campus officials and urge anyone with information to come forward."

They cut back to the anchor in the studio.

"Authorities have not yet confirmed whether the death was accidental or if foul play was involved. Students and community members gathered near the scene, expressing shock and grief."

Cut back to a clip of a young woman in a PU sweatshirt, visibly shaken, speaking to reporters on the street outside the frat house. I could see the tree Caitlin and I had sat under in the background.

"It's just heartbreaking," the student was saying. "We were all having fun, and then suddenly, somebody started screaming. No one knew what was happening. You just don't expect something like this to happen, you know?"

The screen shifted to some canned footage of the Pemberton campus.

"University officials have released a statement saying they will provide counseling services for students affected by this tragedy. Meanwhile, police continue

their investigation, and we will bring you updates as more details emerge."

Back to the anchor, looking solemn.

"For now, our thoughts are with the family, friends, and the entire Pemberton University community during this difficult time. Stay with us as we follow this developing story."

She moved on to her next story, something about hog futures. Joey's death was just another story unrolling on the teleprompter in front of her.

I slowly lowered myself into the chair and sat, stunned, for a moment as Aidan turned off the TV.

"Have you ever wondered what they mean by hog futures?" I said finally. "What kind of future does a hog have really? Ham or bacon? Sausage or scrapple?"

"Will, are you okay?" Aidan asked, approaching slowly, as if I was an easily spooked feral animal of some sort.

"Maybe it isn't Joey," I said halfheartedly. "She didn't say his name."

I sounded like a child who believes that as long as you don't say it, it didn't happen. But I knew in my gut that it was true. Joey was gone. It felt like a part of me was suddenly missing, leaving a gaping hole in its place.

"No, we don't know for sure," Aidan said softly. "You should go to bed. It's late and you need to rest."

I nodded, too far gone to argue. As I stood up, I realized my arm was throbbing from my tussle with Joey. I must have winced because Aidan frowned.

"Are you okay? You said Joey hurt you?"

"My arm is killing me," I grumbled.

Aidan's frown deepened. "I hope that asshole didn't do any damage. Hang on."

He vanished into his room and returned a few moments later with one of my pain pills

"Here. Take this," he instructed.

I popped the pill obediently and headed for my room in a sort of trance. I didn't turn any lights on, just stood in the darkness for a few minutes. Without warning, a feeling of loss and loneliness so powerful I almost cried out overwhelmed me. I turned and crossed the hall to Aidan's door, where I knocked lightly.

"Yeah?" he called warily.

I opened the door. "Can I... Can I sleep with you tonight?" I sounded like a small child at his parents' door after a nightmare.

"What do you mean?" Aidan said cautiously.

"Just...I'm afraid to be alone," I said shakily.

He thought for a moment, then nodded slowly.

"Okay."

I closed the door behind me and undressed in the darkness, then crawled into Aidan's bed, being careful to stay on my side. We lay in silence with our backs to each other.

I waited until I thought he had fallen asleep before letting go. The tears came hot but silent at first and slowly built into muffled sobs as I tried not to wake Aidan.

I was surprised but grateful when I felt his strong arms circle around me, and I found myself crying myself to sleep in his arms once more.

I woke up early the next morning after a fitful night's sleep. Aidan was already in the shower, but I headed straight for the living room. I wanted to watch the news to see if there were any updates.

I had to sit through a story about a tractor trailer accident on Route 50, but then the headline "Pemberton Tragedy: New Details Emerge" scrolled across the screen.

"Authorities have now released the identity of the student who tragically died last night at an off-campus party. Joseph Taylor, an eighteen-year-old freshman from Salisbury, was found dead during a party at an off-campus frat house. His untimely passing has left the campus community in mourning."

My stomach dropped and my head spun as they cut to a closeup of Joey's school ID photo with his name below.

"According to police reports, Taylor was discovered in a backyard swimming pool by another student. The house belongs to Omega Kappa Zeta, a fraternity with a long history of causing disturbances with their rowdy parties. Investigators are still working to determine exactly how Taylor ended up in the water, but they have confirmed that alcohol was present at the gathering and believe it may have played a role in his death."

They cut to footage of students gathered on campus, some placing flowers and candles at a makeshift memorial.

"Fellow students say they are in shock."

They shifted to a young woman standing outside a dormitory, hugging her arms around herself.

"I can't believe he's gone. He was always the life of the party."

Her name wasn't displayed, just the caption: Taylor's Classmate. The camera cut back to the anchor in the studio.

"Police continue to investigate the circumstances of Taylor's death, but his passing has raised concerns about off-campus parties and student safety. Are these gatherings putting college students at risk? Police say incidents involving alcohol and underage drinking are a growing concern at Pemberton and other area universities. And that may not be all these students are using.

"We go now to our investigative reporter, Mark Reynolds, who takes a closer look at the risks of these parties and what's being done to keep students safe."

I turned off the TV, cutting the reporter off mid-sentence.

"I'm sorry, Will," Aidan said softly from behind me. I hadn't even noticed him there.

The empty feeling from the night before was still there, but now it had eased into a dull ache. I didn't cry. I had done my mourning the night before.

"I... I should call his mom or something..."

"Not now. There'll be too much going on. Later, after things have settled down."

I nodded.

My phone buzzed. It was a call from Caitlin.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Did you see the news?"

"Yes. Are you okay?"

"I guess." A pause, then. "It's not like I'm his chief mourner or anything. What about you? You were his friend, after all."

"I'm fine." I wasn't, but what was I supposed to say?

"Do you have someone with you?"

"Yeah, my—" I started to say 'roommate,' but I changed my mind at the last moment. "My best friend is here with me."

Aidan had been studiously staring at his phone, pretending he wasn't listening, but his head snapped up at that. He quickly looked back down at his own phone.

"Good. You shouldn't be alone."

"Did you think about my offer?" I asked carefully.

Aidan glanced up again.

"Not yet," Caitlin replied. "Don't rush me."

"Sorry. It's just, with Joey gone—"

"With Joey gone, what? That just means there's zero chance he'll be helping out if I have the baby instead of just almost zero. I wasn't counting on him anyway, but at least I could have sued for child support or something."

"What about his mom?"

"What about her? I don't know her and I don't want her help either, considering she managed to raise a son like Joe." She sighed. "Look, maybe she's a great person and he was just a bad apple or whatever, but, either way, she's dealing with enough right now with the death of her son, right? She doesn't need to know about a kid that may or may not even be around this time next week, so keep your mouth shut."

"Yeah. Okay," I agreed.

"I mean it, Will. This isn't your secret to share."

"Got it."

She sighed again. "Bye, Will."

"Bye."

She ended the call.

The moment I lowered my phone, Aidan was all over me. "What was that all about?"

"You shouldn't have been eavesdropping," I said, part defensive, part joking.

"You saw me sitting right there. Besides, you just said I'm your best friend. Best friends tell each other everything."

I sighed. "Caitlin is pregnant, and she's thinking about getting an abortion."

His eyebrows drew together. "And that concerns you how?"

"The baby is Joey's."

Aidan blinked in surprise, then quickly recovered. "I repeat, and that concerns you how?"

"I feel responsible somehow. I know it's ridiculous," I rushed on to drown out the protest that was already forming on Aidan's lips, "but I can't help it. Besides, I like Caitlin. I want to help her." I paused for a moment, then spit out the next part super fast, "I told her I'd help her raise the baby if she doesn't have an abortion."

"You *what*?" Aidan stared at me in abject horror. "Have you lost your fucking mind? You don't know anything about babies! You don't even know her. You just met her last night, for God's sake! How do you know she's not lying? How do you know the baby is Joey's?"

And even if it is, you have no obligation to this person. Babies are a lifelong commitment. You cannot get yourself involved."

"I'm already involved. That baby is a part of Joey. All that's left of him now. Joey was a huge part of my life for eighteen years. He was my best friend. I feel like I owe it to him to be there for his baby."

"Do you have any idea how crazy that sounds? Maybe he was your friend for a long time, but that guy was horrible to you at the end. Whatever bond you may have had once was broken when he couldn't accept that you're gay, and then obliterated when he attacked you. You don't owe him anything. Besides, why can't she just put the baby up for adoption? Why are aborting it or keeping it the only options?"

I paused for a moment. "I don't know. I didn't ask." I felt foolish for not thinking of that option myself. "I guess I can mention it to her, but if she doesn't want to put the baby up for adoption, I'm telling you, I want to help."

"Will, you need to talk to Dr. Wohler about this. You are not responsible for someone else's actions. I had to realize that when you tried to kill yourself. At first, I blamed myself, but I didn't make you jump off that fire escape, just like you didn't make Joey become a drunken asshole who knocked up this random girl—who, I cannot emphasize enough, you do not know. That was his choice. You didn't make Joey have unprotected sex with her. That was their decision. You are not responsible for any of this."

"I've already given my word to Caitlin. I'm not breaking my promise."

"You didn't have any problem breaking your word to me when you took a flying leap off the balcony!"

I froze.

"Will, I'm sorry..."

"You said you forgave me for that."

He sighed. "Forgiven but not forgotten...remember?"

"Then let's just say I learned my lesson. I'm not breaking my promises anymore."

He stared at me for a minute. I could read the frustration easily in his eyes.

"You need to think really hard about this. This isn't healthy at all. In fact, I think we should call Dr. Wohler and try to get you in for an emergency session right now."

"No. I don't feel like talking to him right now."

"Because you know he'll tell you how insane this is."

"I'll talk to him when I'm ready, alright? But it's not going to change my mind on this. That baby is all that's left of Joey. I... I can't just abandon it."

"Ultimately, it's not your choice, and, quite frankly, it's none of your business. That decision is up to her alone. It's her life, her body."

"I know, but maybe if there's some offer of support, someone willing to go through it with her, help her out, maybe that will make a difference..."

Aidan shook his head. "Will, this is crazy, but clearly you're not going to listen to reason, at least from me. I just hope Caitlin does the right thing for everybody

involved. Sometimes, not bringing a life into the world might be for the best."

He left the room, his ominous words hanging in the air like stale cigarette smoke.

My phone buzzed again, distracting me from my thoughts.

It was Laura. She was crying when I answered. "Did you see the news?" she choked out between sobs.

"Yeah."

"I can't believe he's dead."

"Yeah, I know." I didn't know what to say.

"I mean, he's been so different lately, but I never expected... God, what's happening to us? I can't believe Joey is gone. Are you okay?"

"I mean... I guess so."

"You don't even sound that upset."

"I...I think I'm just numb." I didn't think it was the best time to tell her what had happened the night before.

Her voice changed, a note of concern colored her words. "Are you there alone? Is Aidan around?"

"He's here, but he's not my nursemaid. I'm fine. I...I lost Joey before he ended up in that pool. This just makes it more...final."

"Will!" she sounded shocked.

"The Joey that died last night isn't the Joey we grew up with, Laura. I...I have to go."

"Will?"

I disconnected the call and sighed. I'd deal with Laura later. I wasn't emotionally ready to deal with her grief at that moment. I had my own to process, and I needed all the strength I had just for that.

I had a sinking feeling that the full repercussions of Joey's death hadn't even begun to make themselves known yet.

I waited until that afternoon to call Joey's mom. She sounded as upset as one would expect. I had intended to just offer my sympathy, but she surprised me by asking me to come over, and I couldn't exactly refuse. She was like a second mother to me, growing up.

After convincing Aidan that I was fine going alone, I drove over. I parked in front of the house I'd spent so much time in over the years. For a moment, I just stared at the little yellow rancher, remembering all the good times I'd had there with Joey, all the sleepovers, the scraped knees, the tire swing that used to hang from the tree in the front yard, the endless games of basketball on the driveway.

A fresh wave of grief washed over me. There'd never be memories made here with Joey again.

I pulled myself together and forced myself to trudge up to the front door. I hesitated at the doorstep. I hadn't knocked on that door in years, but somehow, I didn't feel I had the right to just walk in anymore. Joey was gone. This was no longer his home.

I knocked.

A woman I didn't know answered the door and stared at me questioningly.

"Hi. I'm, um, Will Keegan. Mrs. Taylor is expecting me? I think?" I sounded unsure and apologetic.

Luckily, the woman gave me a warm smile. "Of course. I should have recognized you but I don't think

I've seen you since you were about knee high. I'm Mel, Joey's aunt. You probably don't remember me."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't."

"Don't be sorry. It's been years. I don't get up this way nearly enough. Come on in. Monica is in the living room."

Joey's mom was seated on the couch, looking at a photo album on her lap. She was so entranced she didn't even notice my entrance. Next to her sat another woman I didn't know but assumed to also be a family member.

For as close as Joey and I had been, I realized I didn't know any of his extended family. He never talked about them. I knew his mom, of course, but that was it. His father ran out on them when Joey was a toddler, and they'd never heard from him again.

Mel followed me into the room. "Will, this is our other sister, Misty. We flew in as soon as we heard."

Both women glanced up as Mel took a seat on the other side of Joey's mom.

Mrs. Taylor's face crumpled when she saw me, but she somehow held it together. "Thank you for coming, Will." She turned to the woman Mel had introduced as Misty. "Will was Joey's best friend since they were old enough to walk. They were inseparable."

"More like twins than friends," Mel added. "I remember having to take both of them to the National Zoo because Joey refused to go without him."

A vague memory of someone taking Joey and I to the zoo in Washington D.C. when we were like five or six came rushing back to me. I guess that was Mel, although I still didn't remember her at all, just a hazy impression of a grownup shaped chaperone. If you'd

asked me who took us to the zoo that time, I probably would have said it was Mrs. Taylor.

I looked back and forth between the three sisters. They looked nothing alike, aside from the fact that they were all varying shades of blonde. Joey's mom was pretty in a sort of hard way. With ash blonde hair that she always wore long, well past her shoulders, and big brown eyes, I'd always thought she looked much younger than other mothers of kids our age. She suddenly looked much older than I'd ever seen her, her face haggard, her eyes sunken. Then again, I wasn't sure I'd ever seen her without makeup before.

Mel, in contrast to Mrs. Taylor's slim build, looked like a bulldog in comparison, complete with hanging jowls and a stubborn expression. Her dirty blonde hair was cut mannishly short, and she was built like a fireplug. Misty, on the other hand, looked like a chicken, long-necked and gangly, rail thin, and beady-eyed, with bleached blonde hair so light it was almost white.

Mrs. Taylor reached out and I stepped closer. She grabbed my hand and held onto it like it was a lifeline and she was drowning. Which, in a way, she probably was.

"When the police showed up at the door last night...I just couldn't believe it," she said, her eyes filling with unshed tears. They were red and swollen as if she'd been crying a lot. "I kept saying that they had to be wrong, that it couldn't be my Joey. But then I had to go identify him. They called him 'the body.' 'We need you to come identify the body,' they said. I said, he's not just a body, he's my son." She almost seemed to be talking to

herself. "It was Joey..." She broke off in a muffled sob, but somehow managed to choke it down. "Thank you for being such a good friend to my Joey." With that, she dissolved into sobs, still clutching my hand while I shifted uncomfortably, wishing I were anywhere but here.

Eventually, she stopped crying and insisted I sit next to her and look at photos of Joey's childhood, kicking Misty off the couch to make room. Looking at the photos was torture. I felt like a molten ball of lead filled my stomach, but I stayed for what I thought was a decent amount of time before making my excuses.

"Oh, Will?" Mrs. Taylor called as I stood up. "You weren't at that party last night, were you?"

My heart dropped.

"Actually, I was, Mrs. Taylor, but just for a few minutes. I... I didn't stay."

She seemed surprised. "Then I think the police are looking for you."

I gasped. "What?"

"They described you and asked if I knew anyone who fit that description. I told them you did, but they said you weren't on the list of people present when they arrived. Several people said they saw someone wearing a bright yellow shirt fitting your description go upstairs with Joey and come back down in a rush. They said you might be the last person who saw him alive."

"I...I left before... He was alive when I left..." I stammered.

She nodded as if it were what she had expected to hear. "I told them you were a good boy. Tell me, Will, how was he?"

What could I say? "Honestly, Mrs. Taylor, he wasn't good. He was drunk. He, uh, wasn't himself."

She started to cry again.

"I'm so sorry," I said helplessly. "I'm going to miss him." And I would. I'd miss the friend who grew up with me, but not the man he became.

I turned to leave once more, but she called out again. "One more thing."

I turned back.

"Was he wearing his necklace?"

I knew immediately which necklace she meant, a silver chain with a small oval charm depicting a saint of some sort hanging from it. I'd never seen Joey without it. It was his father's, the only thing he left behind when he split. Joey cherished that necklace more than any other possession he owned, convinced his father left it for him, like some kind of protective talisman. As far as I knew, the only time Joey had ever been inside a church was when he was baptized as an infant, but he never took that necklace off.

I tried to remember if I had seen the necklace or not. It was so much a part of him that I just took it for granted, but I tried to recall if he'd actually been wearing it the night before. I mentally walked through the painful encounter with Joey until I found what I was looking for. When he'd shoved me against the door, I'd seen the chain around his neck.

"Yes, he was," I said through clenched teeth. The memory caused a visceral reaction that made me want to vomit again. I swallowed several times, then managed, "Why?"

"It wasn't on him when they found him. I would like to have it back. It meant so much to him..." Her voice broke again, and Mel patted her back.

I mumbled another apology and took the opportunity to escape the suddenly oppressive house. I'd spent so much time there over the years, but it felt hollow without Joey's presence, as if he'd been the heart and soul of the home.

I sat in the car for a long time, resting my head against the steering wheel. I guess I needed to add "talk to the police" to my to-do list. Was I suspect? Could I be arrested for fleeing the scene of a crime? Was I a material witness? What even was a material witness? Did I need a lawyer?

I was in over my head. I needed to talk to a trusted adult. Too bad I didn't know any anymore.

Chapter 12

When I got back to the apartment, I told Aidan what Mrs. Taylor had said.

"So the police are looking for you?" he repeated, looking as exhausted as I felt.

I shrugged. "Sounds like it. What should I do?"

"Do you have anything to hide?"

"No."

"Then you should go talk to them before they have to hunt you down. That makes it seem like you're guilty of something."

"But... I don't want to." I sounded like a whiny little kid even to myself. "I'm scared," I added, which did not help.

"Will, did you kill Joey?"

"What?" I gasped. "No!"

"Then go talk to the police and get it over with. The longer you wait, the worse it will be."

"Will you go with me?" I asked in a small voice.

Aidan was shaking his head no before I even finished the question. "No way. I'm not involved and I'd prefer to stay that way. You can do this, Will."

I sighed. I hated when he was right.

I decided to go before I lost my nerve. I headed back out and looked up the police station on my GPS. Once I started driving, though, I realized I had no idea what to do once I got there. Who did I ask for? The police chief? He was the only person I'd seen on the news, but you didn't just ask for the police chief, did you? Everything I knew about police work, which wasn't

much, I'd learned from watching reruns of *Law and Order*.

I'd never been to the police station before, but I guess I had some sort of preconceived notion of an old, rundown dump with flickering fluorescent lighting and stained carpet. What I found couldn't have been farther from what I had envisioned. The police station was housed in a modern, multi-story brick building that looked more like a high school than a jail.

I finally worked up enough nerve to go inside where I found a lobby reminiscent of a doctor's waiting room, complete with sofas, tables, and magazines. It was empty, aside from a scruffy, scrawny guy with his eyes glued to the talk show playing on the mounted TV.

A bored-looking uniformed officer sat at the front desk, separated from the lobby by a thick layer of bulletproof glass.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I, uh, need to talk to somebody working on Joey Taylor's death. Uh, Joseph Taylor."

The woman took a little more interest in me.

"What about? You have information about his death?"

"No!" I said quickly. "He was my friend and I went to see his mom today and she said you were looking for me."

She raised her eyebrows. "Looking for you? Who was? Why?"

"I don't know. I mean, I was at the party. People saw me with him. But I don't know what happened after that."

"Save it for the detectives. Have a seat."

I perched on the edge of the couch and waited for what seemed like ages before a door buzzed and swung open to reveal a well-dressed, middle-aged man with a craggy, clean-shaven face and brown hair just starting to gray at the temples. His bushy eyebrows hooded his dark eyes, making him look slightly sinister. He eyed me for a second, making me feel like a bug under a microscope.

"You the kid who wants to talk about Joseph Taylor?"

I nodded, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Then right this way."

He led me through an open office area filled with cubicles and into a room with a table and chairs. I'd seen enough cops shows to know it was an interrogation room. My palms began to sweat.

There was a woman sitting at the table waiting for us in the room, younger than my guide by a couple of decades, with a round face and a smooth, warm brown complexion. She was also well dressed in a dark blazer over a striped button-down shirt, gray slacks and a pair of no-nonsense heels. Her curly black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and her sharp, dark eyes took me in as I stepped through the door.

She stood and nodded a silent greeting. I nodded back nervously.

The man who'd brought me back stepped in and closed the door. "Have a seat."

I sat down at the table across from the woman, who reclaimed her seat. The man remained standing. They both just stared at me for several long seconds, then the woman started tapping a ballpoint pen against a notebook on the table in front of her.

Just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the man cleared his throat and said, "I'm Detective Grafton, and this is my partner, Detective Hammett. We're working the Taylor case. Why don't you start with your name?"

"My name is Will Keegan."

They exchanged glances.

"We've been looking for you, Mr. Keegan."

"Yeah, that's, um... That's what Mrs. Taylor, Joey's mom, said when I went to see her this afternoon. Am I in trouble?" I asked, instinctively directing the question at Detective Hammett. I sounded guilty even to myself.

Detective Grafton gave me a sharp look. "I don't know, are you?"

Detective Hammett cocked her head to one side. "Were you at the party held at the Omega Kappa Zeta house this past Friday night?"

"Briefly," I said tightly.

Authority figures had always scared the pants off of me. I'd been sent to the principal's office once when I was in the fifth grade for something Joey had done and I'd gotten blamed for. I cried all the way there and was so hysterical by the time I arrived that they had to call my mom to come pick me up. I was feeling a bit like that at that moment.

Hammett made a note. "Do you remember what you were wearing that night?"

"Yes, a yellow shirt and jeans."

"Did you see or speak to Joseph Taylor while you were there?" Grafton asked.

"Joey. He hated the name Joseph. Um, yes. We talked."

"Do you know what time you talked to him?"

"No."

"Why were you there?"

"I went there to talk to him. I'm not even into parties." I knew I was giving them more information than they needed, but I was nervous and having trouble organizing my thoughts. "He was drunk. He suggested we go upstairs, so we did."

"Upstairs where?"

"He took me to a bedroom. He seemed to know where he was going. I just followed him."

"What happened when you got to the bedroom?"

"We talked."

"What did you talk about?"

"We talked about...our friendship."

"Was it an argument? Did you raise your voice at any time?"

"I... Yeah, we had an argument."

"Over what?"

I felt my already flushed face blaze. I was getting quite dizzy. "I...I...uh...recently told Joey that I was...um...gay...and he didn't...take it well."

"Did it become physical?"

I started. "What do you mean?"

Detective Grafton looked up from his notepad.

"Did you fight?"

"He, uh... He threw me against the door a couple of times."

"Were any punches thrown?"

"I..." I swallowed. The room was spinning.
"I...hit him."

"Why? Did you feel threatened?"

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, but nothing came out.

"Look, kid, you'd better tell us everything. We're going to find out eventually anyway, and it's better if it comes from you."

"It's not like that," I said quickly. "It's just...Joey...tried to...force himself on me," I managed to choke it out then rushed on, "He was drunk or he never would have done anything like that..."

"Is that why you hit him?"

I nodded. "I kned him in the balls, then hit him with my cast," I told them, indicating my broken arm as if I were presenting Exhibit A in court.

The two detectives looked at each other, exchanging meaningful glances. "And then what happened?" he asked.

"Nothing. I mean, I left. Ran back downstairs."

"And then you left the party?"

"After I got sick in the bathroom."

Grafton flipped the notebook closed. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Keegan. If we have any more questions, we'll be getting in touch with you."

"That's it?" I asked in surprise.

"You were expecting more?" Hammett said with a sardonic smile.

"Just...I mean, why were you even looking for me? How did Joey die?"

They exchanged glances again, this time they almost seemed to be having a discussion without words.

Finally, Hammett sighed. "When the coroner checked your friend over, there were some unexplained injuries: a dislocated nose and some slight bruising in the groin area. Our job was to explain those injuries. You've just helped us do that. As long as he was alive when you left him—"

"He was!" I asserted firmly.

"Yes, that was corroborated by witnesses who saw you flee the upstairs bedroom. The official finding will cite the cause of death to be accidental drowning. We have to write our report up, but I expect that after you left, he somehow managed to get downstairs and onto the pool deck without anyone seeing him. Considering the amount of drugs seized at the party that isn't as hard to believe as one might think, plus everyone agreed the yard was pretty much deserted for most of the night. Then in his drunken state—which is supported by other statements, by the way—he fell into the pool, maybe hit his head and drowned. The medical examiner confirms that he had enough alcohol in his system to stun a bull elephant."

Detective Grafton seemed eager for me to leave. "Once again, Mr. Keegan, thank you for your time and cooperation. You've helped us close this case."

I nodded and stood up, and Detective Grafton opened the door and walked me out.

"Thanks again for coming in, kid. You did the right thing," he said, before closing the door in my face.

I should have felt relieved that it was just a tragic accident, but I didn't. It all felt too pat, the evidence fit together a little too neatly, the detective felt a little too eager to close the case.

Something felt off.

Joey's funeral was held a week later on a suitably dreary and dismal Monday morning. The clouds hung heavy with the unrealized threat of rain and the wind whipped through the gathered mourners like an angry wraith.

Aidan came with me, for which I was very grateful. I wasn't sure I was up for attending on my own.

The service was graveside and, despite the inclement weather, quite a few people had shown up to remember Joey. Most of them I didn't know—family, I supposed—but I saw a few familiar faces: old neighbors, people from school, and, of course, Laura, who came with Gabe.

And then there was Beth. It was the first time we'd seen each other since our breakup, and it was every bit as uncomfortable as you might think. We exchanged an awkward hug that only served to confirm my recent realizations.

As I settled on one of the metal folding chairs between Laura and Aidan, it struck me how much I had changed since Beth and I had dated. I felt like a completely different person.

Just to drive that point home even more, Mom and Dad arrived with Mrs. Taylor and her sisters, Mel and Misty. Mrs. Taylor and Mom each gave me a hug, but Dad just walked right past me to take his place behind the lectern. Apparently, he was the officiant, which made sense, but, for some reason, I hadn't anticipated.

The service itself was mercifully brief and poignant. Dad focused on how no man knows the day or hour and the tragic end of a promising young life. He kept looking directly at me as he said that phrase: tragic end of a promising young life. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was trying to say.

The third time he tried to glare me into submission, I deliberately looked away. As I did, someone caught my attention. A stocky man with a receding hairline and dark sunglasses stood off to one side, half hidden by a large grave monument. The sunglasses seemed especially suspicious considering the heavy cloud cover. As I watched, he reached up and wiped his eyes. I wondered who he was and why he was trying so hard to avoid being seen.

I forced my attention back to my father for the remainder of the service. As Dad started the final prayer, I checked for the mysterious man but he was gone.

Mrs. Taylor cornered me before we could slip away. "Thank you for being here, Will," she said, gripping my hand painfully. "Are you coming back to the house?"

"I'm afraid I can't, Mrs. Taylor," I said, relieved that I had a legitimate excuse. "I'm actually starting a new job today."

She looked taken aback for a second, but quickly forced a teary smile. "Oh, well, I'm glad you were able to make the funeral, at least."

"I couldn't miss it, Mrs. Taylor. Joey was my best friend."

Her lip trembled as she pulled me into a tight hug.

When I finally managed to disentangle myself, I said my goodbyes, and Aidan and I headed back to the car. After dropping Aidan off at home, I drove downtown to Avant Garde.

Nikki was waiting for me and pounced before I was even fully inside the gallery. "There you are! So, the first thing we need to talk about is the one-man show," she said. "Do we need to cancel it?"

"I...uh..."

"I mean we've lost a lot of time, and I'm assuming you didn't paint any masterpieces while you were in that coma."

"No, I mean...I..."

"How long are you stuck with this?" She asked, tapping on my cast.

"They said six to eight weeks..."

"And it's been how long?"

"Three?"

She sighed. "Can you even paint with that fucker on your arm? Are you right-handed?"

"Yes..."

"Yes, you can paint, or yes, you're right-handed?"

"Yes?"

"Okay, don't freak out on me here, but we are getting seriously crunched for time. We need to have at least fifteen to twenty paintings. The show is scheduled and the invitations have been sent, so we're locked in unless we just cancel it altogether. I mean, we could always reschedule but it's not a good look unless you have a really good story. Not that being in a coma isn't a good story, but I'm assuming you'd rather not make that a part of your artist statement. That only leaves us with

three weeks to get the work finished and get them all matted and framed. I'm fine with staying up all night to get them hung, but that means you need to do at least a painting a day between now and then. Think you got that in you?"

"Can we... Can we slow down? I just walked in. Whatever happened to, 'Hi, Will, welcome to your new job? How was your weekend?'" I was feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

"Hi, Will! Welcome to your new job! How was your weekend? Think you got that in you?"

"My weekend was horrible, actually."

Nikki frowned. "Why was your weekend horrible?"

"My best friend died. That's where I was this morning, at his funeral. Oh, um, thanks for letting me come in late, by the way."

"Oh, my God! Your friend died and you came to work? You could have just taken the whole day and started tomorrow. Wait, was that your friend on the news?"

"Yeah. Joey."

"I'm so sorry, Will. I didn't know. Now I feel like an absolute cunt. Why didn't you tell me? I just figured you had a doctor's appointment or something."

"It's not a big deal. I mean, it is, but it isn't. It's...complicated. We'd grown apart lately. Actually, we had a huge fight the night he died."

"Jesus. How long did you know each other?"

"Since we were kids."

"Do they know what happened yet?"

I frowned. "The police think he fell in the pool and drowned."

She covered her mouth. "Oh, Will! How awful. And you fought with him? Are you sure you're up to starting work today?"

"Yeah, I'm...fine. Or close enough, anyway. I need to stay busy, keep my mind off of things, you know?"

She didn't look convinced. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

She sighed. "Okay, but if it gets to be too much, just let me know. Promise?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks."

She paused for a moment, as if gathering her thoughts. "Let's circle back to my earlier questions. Can you even paint with that cast on?"

I shrugged. "I think so. I haven't tried yet, but I'm pretty sure I can hold a paintbrush." I hoped I was right.

"Does one painting a day sound doable?"

"Sure." It sounded lowkey terrifying, but I wasn't going to say that.

"Great! Oh, and I had a stroke of genius in the shower the other day," Nikki said, already entirely too pleased with herself. "I think your showstopper should be the frog painting—the first one you showed me."

"Oh." The word slipped out before I could mask my reaction.

I could see why she picked it. It was arguably the best thing I'd ever painted, but that was exactly the problem. It was personal, too personal. The idea of hanging it on a gallery wall, of putting a price tag on it, made my stomach tighten.

"That's cool, right? I really want this show to make an impact."

"Yeah, um...totally."

"Atta boy," she grinned. "Now let's get to work."

She went over my responsibilities, which, at least for my first day, mostly consisted of standing around and doing nothing while I waited for customers to wander in. She showed me how to accept payment if I made a sale, but she spent the majority of our time coaching me on how to read clients by asking them leading questions in order to steer them toward the kind of art they'd most likely purchase. We even role played with her pretending to be various types of customers.

The only thing I didn't learn was how to do Dante's little appearing trick.

When I got home that evening, I pulled out the frog painting. But when I saw it again, my earlier doubts returned with a vengeance. It was, without question, the most personal thing I'd ever created. Could I really let someone else own it?

I stood there, staring at it for so long that Aidan finally noticed and came over.

"Hey, you okay?" he asked, his voice casual but concerned.

"Nikki wants to make this the centerpiece of the show, but I'm not sure I want to sell it," I admitted.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It just feels...too intimate."

"What do you mean?"

"I put so much of myself into it. It almost feels like I'm selling a part of me, like a piece of my soul."

Aidan leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. "Well, nobody's forcing you. Just tell Nikki you want to keep it. Or can't you mark it as not for sale?"

"I guess. Do you think I'm being dramatic?"

"Will, you're always dramatic. But hey, that comes with being an artist, right? You feel things deeply. But it's your painting, so you get to decide what happens to it."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm probably just being ridiculous. I should include it."

"That's not exactly what I said, but okay," Aidan said with a raised eyebrow.

Once the decision was made, a weight lifted off my shoulders. I'd leave it up to fate. If it sold, it sold. I could use the money, and, besides, if I'd painted it once, I could always paint it again. In theory. Then again, who knew if I could ever recapture that particular spark—the perfect alchemy of excitement, hope, fear, and confusion that had fueled it the first time?

The next several days were blessedly uneventful. I went to work during the day and spent the evening painting. It took a little trial and error, but it turned out I was able to hold a paintbrush and manage fairly well, even with the cast. Sketching was a lot harder, but I figured it out. The paintings themselves were coming along well and I'd managed to stay on schedule, finishing one painting a day. The pictures I'd taken the day Joey died had turned out great, so I had plenty of material for inspiration, and the artwork was a welcome escape from my thoughts.

Aidan and I continued to work on rebuilding the trust between us, and, in turn, piece our friendship back

together. It was a slow process. We were sleeping in our own rooms after that first night, but he'd returned to sitting next to me while I painted, sometimes reading or doing class work, sometimes just watching, sometimes chatting with me if it wasn't too distracting.

I hadn't heard from Caitlin, but, on Aidan's advice, I waited for her to call me. I was at home painting when she finally called. I was alone for a change—Aidan had gone out with some friends from one of his classes. I was working on a particularly detailed portion of the painting when the phone started ringing, so I ignored it at first. Eventually, it stopped, but then immediately started up again.

With a sigh, I dropped my paintbrush in the water well and grabbed my phone. When I saw Caitlin's name, however, my attitude changed.

"Caitlin, hi," I answered. "I've been hoping you would call."

"Yeah, sorry I haven't called before this, but this isn't the kind of thing you decide overnight, you know?"

"Yeah, sure. It's okay."

"Look, Will, I've been doing a lot of thinking and..." A long pause followed, and, for a moment, I thought we'd lost our connection, but then she continued. "Look, I don't feel like going into this over the phone. Can you meet sometime tomorrow to talk about this?"

"Of course. Um...how about during my lunch break. I'm working at Avant Garde, an art gallery on the Downtown Plaza. There's an outdoor café nearby where we can meet, if you want."

"That works. I know which one you're talking about."

"Great!"

"Okay, I'll see you then."

"See you tomorrow."

I hung up wondering what kind of news I'd be getting the next day. I hadn't been able to read anything from her voice, but I had a feeling whatever she decided would affect me deeply.

I was alone at work the next morning when a uniformed deliveryman entered the gallery with a large padded envelope in hand.

"Will Keegan?" he said.

"That's me," I said in surprise.

"Got something for ya. You have to sign for it."

He held out his device, and I scrawled a vague approximation of my signature using my finger before he handed me the package.

I glanced at the label but it only had my name and the address of the gallery, with no return address.

"Hey, wait...who's it from?" I called to his retreating back.

He paused at the door long enough to yell back, "Beats me, buddy. I only deliver 'em."

I looked at the envelope again. The label was in all caps, printed from a computer, revealing nothing.

I gingerly tore open the top, and peeked inside. The only contents were single folded sheet of paper. I slid it out, opened it, and read the lone sentence written in the same anonymous font as the label.

"IT WASN'T AN ACCIDENT"

My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach as a ringing started up in my ears and the room seemed to tilt dramatically.

The note seemed to imply something I'd felt in my gut all along. Joey's death wasn't an accident. It was something far more sinister. Or was I reading too much into four words? But what else could it be referring to?

Maybe there was something else in the envelope.

I tipped the envelope over my hand and gave it a quick shake. Something small and metallic shot out, fast as a spark—I barely saw it, but my hand snapped closed just in time.

The moment I opened my fingers and saw it in my palm, I knew exactly what it was. I'd seen it a thousand times—but always around Joey's neck.

It was his missing necklace.

I stared at it while the world around me receded. Who sent it? How did they get it? Why send it to me with an anonymous note? If it was someone at the party, how did they even know who I was, let alone where I worked? And, most importantly, what was I supposed to do with it?

The obvious answer was to take it to the police, but they'd already closed the case? Would they listen to me? Would they even believe me?

My brain came back around to my first question: Who sent it? It almost had to be someone I knew, or at least someone who knew me.

The very thought sent a chill down my spine.

The only person I knew of who was at the party who also knew who I was and where I worked was Caitlin. But if she'd found the necklace, why ship it to

me? Why not just hand it over? Plus, she'd only learned where I worked the night before. Was that even enough time to ship a package? It had to be someone else, but who?

I curled my fingers around the necklace once more and made a decision. I had to go to the police. Whether they listened or not, I knew it was the right thing to do. I'd go right after work. I would have asked Nikki and gone right then, but a quick glance at my phone reminded me that it was time to meet Caitlin, and I didn't want to postpone our talk.

Where could I put the necklace for safekeeping? I took a closer look and realized the thin silver chain was broken, which explained why it wasn't on Joey when they found him. I knew there was no way he'd even take it off willingly. My heart ached at all the memories it brought back.

I quickly tied a little knot in the broken ends of the chain and fastened the necklace around my neck, tucking the pendant under my shirt. It was as good a hiding place as anywhere, and it felt right to have it close to my heart.

I carefully folded the note and slipped it into my pocket, then tossed the envelope into the trash as I headed for the front door. "I'm going to lunch," I called to Nikki as I left.

The day felt deceptively bright with my thoughts tangled in the shadows, still reeling from the arrival of the package and the questions it dragged in with it. I tried to distract myself, to focus on the weather—how the crisp, clear November air almost made the

suffocating summer heat of the Eastern Shore feel like a fair trade.

The air was cool, the kind of chill that clung to your skin, tailor-made for sipping apple cider at an outdoor café. Soon enough, the café would retreat indoors, switching to hot cocoa behind its quaint, old storefront, but for now, the wrought iron tables still sat exposed in the plaza—cold, black circles under a blue sky that pretended nothing was wrong.

I stared at the steam rising from my mulled cider and let my mind wander as I waited for Caitlin. Who could have sent me the necklace? It couldn't be the killer. Why draw attention when they were well on their way to getting away with murder, assuming Joey was, in fact, killed. Did someone see what happened? And if so, then why didn't they just go to the police themselves? Could it be some sort of hoax?

I was pulled from my spiraling thoughts as Caitlin slid into the seat across from me, tossing a small purse on the table. I smiled a welcome, and hoped I didn't look as distracted as I felt. The necklace held a chokehold on me.

"Thanks for meeting me, Will." She was all business.

"Of course. Do you want a drink?" I gestured toward the café.

"I already ordered before I came over. You were zoned out."

"Ah, yeah. I guess I have a lot on my mind."

"Don't we all?" she said, her voice as dry as an unbuttered saltine. "Anyway, I've been thinking a lot about what you said. And honestly? It's still hard to

wrap my head around the fact that there's a human being forming inside me right now. It doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel anything, really—just distant, like...an abstract idea I can't quite believe is happening.

"I mean, I get it. Technically, it's not even a baby yet. Just a fetus. Cells dividing. But even knowing that, it doesn't feel like *that* either. I've watched the videos, read the timelines. I know where it's supposed to be in its development. But I don't feel excitement, or connection, or wonder, or whatever people are supposed to feel. Just this...deep sense of dread.

"Still... I keep thinking about what you said that night. That it's not the baby's fault I fucked Joey. That it shouldn't have to pay for my mistake. I can't shake that."

"Look, I shouldn't have said that stuff. This is your life, your body. I don't get a vote. I crossed a line."

"Maybe. I mean, yeah, you definitely did. But... I get it. You'd just dealt with Joey and his grossness. You were rattled. Emotions were high. So, fine. I'll let it slide. But the thing is... I'm not sure you were entirely wrong."

"I...wasn't?"

"All I know is that I've never been more scared in my entire life. I don't know anything about babies. I don't think I have a maternal bone in my body. My biggest focus right now is finishing school, because, whether I keep this thing or not, I *will* build a better life than the one I had. My mother was a single teen mom, and I've spent my entire life determined not to repeat her mistakes." She paused, then added, more softly, "But maybe... maybe this kid deserves a shot, too."

"So...what does that mean? You're keeping the baby?"

"I don't know yet. But I'm not going through with the abortion. At least, not right now."

A waiter approached just then carrying a steaming mug on a saucer. He placed it in front of Caitlin and headed back inside.

I waited until he was gone to ask, "Are you sure?"

"No. But it's also not an impulsive decision. I stopped smoking the night we talked, the night Joey died. I just..." She stopped and took a sip of her drink. "None of that matters, really. I don't know why I'm telling you all of this. The whole reason I wanted to talk to you today was to tell you I don't expect you to help me with the baby. This is my responsibility. I know the offer was made in the heat of the moment, and you hadn't even considered what it—"

I broke in, "What about adoption?"

She blinked and sat her cup down with a clatter, sloshing a little of the frothy coffee drink over the side. "What about it?"

"Couldn't you just put the baby up for adoption?"

A flash of emotion crossed her face so quickly I didn't have time to identify it. Agitation? Surprise? Uncertainty?

"I... I haven't considered it," she said.

"Why not? Wouldn't that solve a lot of your problems?"

"It would also create new ones. Dealing with the adoptive parents, going through nine months of pregnancy just to hand over the baby, living for the rest

of my life knowing I had a child out there somewhere who would, no doubt, be curious about me and could show up at any minute? No thanks. If I carry the baby to term, I'm keeping it."

I nodded. "Fair enough. I figured it was worth asking."

"Well, thanks for covering all the bases, I guess. And for meeting me. You seem like a good egg."

"Hold on. You're right. When I made that offer to help you, it was in the heat of the moment, but I've had a lot of time to think about it since, and, well, the offer is still on the table."

"What exactly are you offering here?"

"I don't know. Do you have anyone else? Have you told your family?"

She shook her head. "No. It's just me."

"Then I guess, I'm here for whatever you need. Somebody to go with you to doctor's appointments, a Lamaze coach, a shoulder to cry on, a babysitter once the baby is born—you set the boundaries, and I'll respect them. I just... I'd really like to be a part of the baby's life."

Her eyes narrowed as she considered my offer. "Babies are expensive and money is already tight between tuition and rent. What about monetary help?"

"I'll do what I can. I don't have much money right now, but I might have more soon. I have a show soon—"

"A show?"

"An art show. I'm an artist. I thought I mentioned that."

"You said you worked at a gallery but I don't think you mentioned that you're an artist. Or, if you did,

it didn't stick. Baby brain. So is this like your own show?"

"Something like that," I mumbled. I could feel my face heating up. "I just started working at the art gallery here on the plaza, but hey've already sold a few of my paintings."

"That's pretty cool. I'd love to see some of your work."

"They're all at my apartment right now. They haven't been framed or anything yet, so they're not that impressive, but why don't you come for dinner one night this week? That way you can meet my roommate Aidan."

"Why would I need to meet your roommate?"

"Well, you know, just in case you keep the baby. You'd be seeing a lot of him."

"Why? Are you two a couple?"

"No, just friends," I said quickly, maybe a bit too quickly.

Caitlin gave me a suspicious look, as if she weren't convinced.

She studied me for a second, then said, "I still don't get why you're doing this."

I struggled for a moment before I could find the right words. "I, um... I guess this baby is all I have left of Joey now," I said at last. "He meant a lot to me. He was like a brother to me. I don't remember a time without him in my life, sticking up for me, pushing me out of my comfort zone. Even though things went bad at the end, it doesn't change everything that came before."

She shook her head. "That sounds nice, but how do I know you're not just saying all this to relieve some

overactive sense of obligation and then when I actually need you—poof, you're gone? My past experiences with guys have been pretty consistent. Let's just say I haven't found them to be the most reliable of all God's creations."

"I give you my word."

"No offense, but I don't even know you. That's not worth all that much to me."

I shrugged. "I don't know what else to tell you."

She shrugged too. "I guess you'll just have to prove yourself. Until then, I'm not expecting much."

"Do you have a doctor?"

"Sort of. I'm going to Planned Parenthood. In fact, I have an appointment later this afternoon."

"For an abortion?" I asked, aghast.

"It's just a check up. I haven't scheduled the abortion yet."

"But don't they just do abortions?" That's what I'd always heard at church.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "No, they offer all kinds of healthcare for women. Abortions are just a tiny fraction of what they do. If I tell them I've changed my mind about the abortion, I'll just continue with the neonatal stuff."

"And you'll let me know what you decide?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, by all means, you'll be the first to know." Her tone was sarcastic, but I chose to take it at face value.

She picked up her purse and started rummaging through it.

"Let me get it," I said, pulling out my wallet.

"Starting already, Uncle Will?" she said with a wry smile.

"I guess so."

"If you insist." She stood up, but forgot to close her purse first. Her wallet and a tube of lipstick fell out onto the ground. I quickly bent to pick them up for her. As I did, Joey's necklace slipped out of my shirt and swung out in plain view. I'd somehow managed to forget all about it during our conversation.

Caitlin's gaze was glued to the charm as I straightened up. I quickly stuffed it back under my shirt.

"Joey had a necklace like that," she said sharply, her eyes narrowed again—this time with suspicion.

"It is Joey's," I told her. "Or I guess it was his. Someone...gave it to me after he died." It was the truth, just not the whole truth.

She stared at my neck where the chain was still visible for a moment longer, then dragged her eyes back up to meet mine. "Anyway, what night do you want me to come over for dinner?"

"How about Wednesday?"

"Sounds good. See you then."

I watched her as she walked off down the plaza. You would never have known she was pregnant. I wondered when you started showing. I made a mental note to do some research about pregnancy when I got home. I'd better start reading up on the subject if I was going to be a good uncle.

Chapter 13

When I left work that afternoon, I drove directly to the police station. I did not pass Go. I did not collect \$200.

The lobby was a little more crowded for my second visit. There was a Hispanic family crowded onto the couch, a woman with dirty hair and threadbare clothes in one of the chairs, and a very twitchy fellow who was mumbling under his breath in the other. The same scrawny guy from before sat in the same seat at the far end, still enthralled by the TV. Was he just always there?

A man sat behind the glass that day. I approached him and said, "Hi. I'm here to see Detective Grafton or Hammett. Are they available?"

"Who can I say is asking and what's this concerning?" he asked.

"I'm Will Keegan. It's concerning the death of Joey Taylor," I explained.

"Have a seat," he ordered.

All the seats were taken, however, so I just stood against the wall and played on my phone.

About thirty minutes later, I was about to give up and leave when an interior door opened and Detective Grafton popped his head into the room. He wore a frown that may or may not have been permanent. He waved me back, and I once more followed him through the cubicles, but this time he led me into a cramped office that, from the looks of the photos on the wall, he shared with Detective Hammett, though she was not present at

that moment. Coffee cups and stacks of papers cluttered the tops of both desks.

"So what's up, kid?" he said as he sat down behind his desk. He didn't offer, but I sat down in one of the chairs that inhabited the no-man's land between the two desks and turned it to face him.

"Someone sent this to me today," I said as I produced the letter. It was a little worse for wear after spending the better part of the day in my pocket, but I smoothed it out best I could and handed it to him. Then I took off the necklace and handed it over as well.

Grafton's frown deepened as he read the note. He glanced at the necklace, then back up to me.

"What wasn't an accident?" he said finally.

"I think they mean Joey's death," I said, trying not to sound too surprised that I had to explain something so painfully obvious to a detective. "The necklace is Joey's. He *never* took it off. Mrs. Taylor told me it wasn't with his things when she, um...after she, uh, identified him and she received his—"

"Look, son," he interrupted, and I felt my spine stiffen. I hated being called 'son' by people who aren't my father. Actually, I hate it when my father calls me son, too.

"We investigated this death backwards and forwards. We had some questions, but you were the one that wrapped up the loose ends. Your friend was drunk. No, he was absolutely wasted—way over the legal limit. I don't know how he was even standing. If he hadn't drowned, he may well have died from alcohol poisoning. No one saw anything out of the ordinary and, trust me, we talked to everybody there *and* tracked down those

like yourself who chose to leave before the real party got started. In fact, nobody saw Mr. Taylor or anything even remotely suspicious in the time between when you two disappeared upstairs together and before he was found floating face down in the pool. For the record, if there *were* any suspicion of foul play, you'd be suspect numero uno. As it is, it's an open-and-shut case. Drunk college kid falls into a pool and drowns. Sad story, but not a new one. I'm sorry someone played a sick joke like this on you."

"So you just think it's some kind of joke?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I think. But I'll tell you what; if it'll make you feel any better, I'll make a note on the case file and keep the letter. If anything like this happens again, we'll look into filing some sort of harassment charges."

"What would make me feel better is if you took me seriously. He never took this necklace off. Never. Not once in the entire time I knew him."

"Look, he was so drunk it could've fallen off and he wouldn't have even noticed. Hell, maybe it broke during your little scuffle. Someone finds it, recognizes it, remembers you're his best friend, and decides to mail it with this melodramatic note. Classic college prank."

"I don't go to that school. Nobody there knew me, let alone that Joey and I were childhood friends."

"Okay, then riddle me this, boy genius. What exactly do you expect me to do here? You've already manhandled the necklace—worn it, even. This note? It looks like you ran it through a blender and sprinkled it with guilt. If there were prints, congratulations, you've probably wiped them clean. How'd it even get to you?"

"In an envelope. From a delivery service."

"And I'm guessing you saved that, right? For, I don't know, the obvious investigation that might follow?"

"No," I said, suddenly feeling about two inches tall. "There was no return address, so I threw it away."

"Well, there you go. You've destroyed the chain of evidence, obliterated any forensic leads, and tossed the one thing that might've traced this back to whoever sent it. So even if I did think something fishy was going on—and I don't—there's officially nothing left for me to work with."

I didn't bother arguing. Grafton had already decided how this was going to go, and nothing I said was going to change that. I stood up, resigned. "Can I at least keep the necklace?"

He gave a noncommittal shrug. "That's between you and the mom. Far as I'm concerned, it's just a random piece of jewelry. Only reason I'd think it was even his is because you say so."

I picked up the necklace and fastened it around my neck once again. Then I stood and started to leave. "Sorry for taking up your valuable time."

"Look, kid, I'm sorry," he said as I reached the door. "I know he was your friend, and you want his death to mean something. But take it from me—after twenty-five years on the job, I've seen more deaths than I care to remember, and the truth is most don't have meaning. They just happen. There's an old saying that says 'there's no dignity in death.' It's just a shitty deal all around."

"Yeah," I agreed, "it is."

As hard as I tried to forget my surprise package and concentrate on my painting that evening, my mind refused to let go. Grafton had dismissed the idea of Joey's death being anything but an accident so easily, but the necklace was bothering me. Together with the note, it was just more than I could ignore. I just didn't buy the idea that it was some sort of sick joke.

After staring at a half-finished painting for so long my paintbrush dried up, I couldn't stand it anymore. I gave up and went to look for Aidan. I found him in his bedroom busily typing away on his laptop.

I tentatively tapped on his door frame. "Aidan, can I talk to you for a minute?"

He immediately pushed back from the computer. "Of course," he said.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and reached up to touch the necklace.

"Something happened today," I started. "I got a strange package at work today, addressed to me with no return address. Inside was a note and this necklace. It was Joey's. The note said 'It wasn't an accident.'"

Aidan's eyes grew wide.

"I took them to the police after work, but the detective basically said the case was closed. They're convinced Joey fell in the pool and drowned because he was so drunk. He wasn't even interested in the note or the necklace. I think he only kept the note to humor me."

"Will, maybe they're right. They are the police, after all."

"Yeah, but Joey never took this necklace off. Ever."

"Then how did whoever sent it to you even get it?"

"The chain was broken."

"If he was drunk, that could have happened at any time that night."

"Okay, but why send it to me? Nobody there even knew who I was. How would they get my name and where I work? And why send the note? The detective thought it was a prank, but who could be that cruel?"

"Okay," he said slowly. "I think I see your point."

"Then I'm not crazy to feel like there's something more going on here?"

"No, you're not crazy. Something is definitely off."

"What should I do?"

"What do you mean?"

"If the police don't believe me, I can't just ignore it. I have to do something."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea..."

"Aidan, what would you do in my place?"

He sighed. "Yeah. Okay. But you can't go off half-cocked. If you're right and Joey's death wasn't an accident, then that means there's a killer running around out there who thinks they've gotten away with murder. They might not be happy if you start sniffing around."

"I've thought of that, too. That's why I'm asking you for advice."

"Well, the first step would be to find out who sent you the necklace, right?"

"But how? There was no return address."

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe try contacting the delivery company. They usually keep

records or tracking info. I don't know what else to tell you."

Checking with the delivery company sounded like a good idea. Having something concrete to do instantly made me feel better.

"Thanks, Aidan," I said as I stood to get back to my painting. "Oh! I, uh, also saw Caitlin today."

He raised one eyebrow. "How'd that go?"

"Eh. Okay I guess." As I filled him in on our conversation, his lips pulled down into a slight frown. When I got to the part about inviting her over for dinner later that week, he grimaced.

"I hope you know what you're doing," he said. "I still think you're crazy, but I can tell there's no changing your mind, so you've got my support, I guess. Have you talked to Dr. Wohler about this?"

"Speaking of crazy, huh?" My lame attempt at a joke went over like a fart in an elevator. "Uh, no. I haven't had time, but I promise I'll call him soon and set up an appointment."

"Like tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure. Tomorrow."

I beat a hasty retreat and returned to painting.

I ran by the delivery company on my way to work the next morning but the guy working the counter wasn't very helpful. In fact, he was downright surly. He said they couldn't share details with me and if I wanted to talk to the person who accepted the delivery, I'd have to come back on Saturday because they only worked on weekends.

It wasn't an entirely wasted trip. If the necklace was mailed over the weekend, it definitely ruled out Caitlin, who hadn't known where I worked until later that week. I felt better about that, at least.

I rushed home after work on Wednesday to make spaghetti—the only thing I was relatively sure I could pull off in such a short amount of time. I didn't have much experience in the kitchen, but I was pretty sure I could follow the recipe Mom had been kind enough to text me when I asked.

I divided my time between painting and making the sauce from scratch. By the time it was finished, the kitchen looked like I'd been slaughtering hogs, but I was quite proud of the results.

Aidan got home just as I started boiling the water for the pasta.

"Smells good!" he called. Then he came around the corner and stopped in his tracks, his face stricken.

"Jesus Flippin' Christ," he groaned. "How did you manage to get tomato sauce on the ceiling?"

"The blender went..." I mimed the explosion that had sent sauce flying all over every surface in the room, including myself.

"Did you get burned?"

"Not too bad."

He gave me a dubious look.

"It tastes good, though. Want to try it?"

"Sure," he agreed with a beleaguered sigh.

I was gratified when he made a little "mmm" sound when he tasted the proffered spoonful of sauce. Less so when he immediately put me to work cleaning, though he did pitch in and help.

The place was once more presentable when Caitlin arrived promptly at seven. Conversation around the table was polite and mostly generalities, but after the dishes had been cleared, we all settled into the living room for some real conversation.

"Well, I've thought about everything," Caitlin began. "The baby, what you said the other day, you know. And I decided that I'd be crazy not to accept your offer. If I'm keeping the baby, I'm going to need all the help I can get."

"What about your parents?" Aidan asked.

"I haven't told them yet," she said with a frown. "I don't know if I even want to. They're going to totally freak out. My stepdad is a strict Mormon. We don't exactly get along."

"What about your mom?"

"My mom is... How should I put this? She's...heavily medicated. Officially, for anxiety. Avoiding real life at all costs is more accurate. We don't really have a relationship, especially after she converted. Needless to say, I never joined the church."

"And your biological father?"

"We haven't seen my real dad since I was twelve."

"How old are you now?"

"I'll be nineteen in January."

"Do you work?"

"I'm a full-time student."

"What's your major?"

"I haven't decided yet. Hey, I feel like I'm being interviewed for something here."

I was getting the same impression, so I quickly stepped in and changed the subject. "How'd the doctor's appointment go?"

She accepted the change in subject but was still giving Aidan a wary side-eye. "It was fine. The doctor said the baby was doing well, right where it should be."

"When do you go back again?"

"Oh, not for a while."

"Really? Why so long?"

"It's not like you go every week," Caitlin explained. "This was my eight-week. As long as there are no problems, I don't have to go back until like...sixteen weeks or something. That's when they do the ultrasound."

"Can I go with you?"

Caitlin and Aidan both looked at me as if I had suddenly sprouted antennae and ordered them to take me to their leader.

"What?" I said defensively.

"You want to go with me to see the doctor?" Caitlin asked.

"Yeah, I've been reading all these articles and stuff and I'd like to be involved as much as possible. Well, as much as you feel comfortable with anyway."

"We'll see when it gets closer," she said dismissively.

"Oh. Okay."

We all sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few minutes. Finally, Aidan broke the moment. "So, uh, did Will tell you about his big show?" he asked Caitlin.

The sudden shift in subject seemed to catch her off guard as if she had been thinking about something else. "Oh, his art show? Yeah, he mentioned it."

"Are you going?" he asked.

"When is it?"

"It's, um, next Friday," I admitted. "I know it's short notice, so I understand if you can't make it."

"I wouldn't miss it. Is it formal?"

"Yeah, technically it's by invitation only, but I'm sure Nikki won't mind."

"You are the star," Aidan said dryly. "I'm sure you can invite whoever you want."

I felt my face heat up.

"Hey, weren't you going to show me your paintings?" Caitlin asked. "That's the whole reason you invited me over in the first place."

"Oh. Right." I'd been half hoping she'd forgotten.

I showed her what I had finished, and she was gratifyingly impressed.

"Wait until you see them matted and framed. You wouldn't believe the difference it makes," I told her. "I'll probably be working right up to the last minute, but I'll take what I have finished so Nikki, she's my boss, can get a head start. The last few she'll be getting framed like the night before. We'll really be up against the wire. She's calling in some favors with her framer."

"It'll all work out," Aidan said, resting his hand on my shoulder, his thumb moving in a slow, familiar circle.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Caitlin clocking the gesture with a look that said she noticed

more than she let on. Much to my relief, however, she didn't say a word.

First thing Saturday morning, I ran by the delivery service again. I got there a few minutes before they opened, so I sat in the parking lot until I could go in.

The woman behind the counter looked like she'd lost a long-term battle with a tanning bed. Her skin had that distinct, overcooked-leather texture that made guessing her age a gamble—she could've been fifty or seventy-five, give or take a decade. Her eyes were startlingly sharp and blue, like they hadn't gotten the memo from the rest of her, and her hair was a snowy white cloud. The wrinkles? Deep enough to map out a small river system, probably from all the sun damage.

"Hello, can I help you?" she said with a cheery smile. Her name tag read "Edna."

"I hope so, Edna," I said, with a smile of my own.

I'd intended to shoot straight and hope for the best, but now that I stood before this grandmotherly woman, I decided a more tactful approach might work better. I'd have to improvise.

"An old friend sent me a present last Saturday, and I'd like to send her a thank you card, but the thing is, we've lost track of each other and I don't even know her married name now. She only signed her first name on the card. Do you think you could help me?"

"Well, I'm so sorry, but I just don't see how I could possibly help," she said, wearing the kind of faux-disappointed expression you'd expect from someone

auditioning for a soap opera—and not landing the role.

"We don't release that kind of information."

"Oh. Okay. Well, thanks anyway," I said, turning to leave. The disappointment on my face was very, very real.

"Unless..." she said, drawing the word out like it was salt water taffy.

I turned back slowly, doing my best not to look too interested. I was starting to think I was dealing with a very cheerful sadist in grandma's clothing.

"Unless?"

"I suppose," she said, eyes twinkling, "if the file just so happened to be up on the screen, and I just so happened to step into the back room for a few minutes...well, whatever happened while I was gone wouldn't technically be my fault."

I blinked. Was this really happening?

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Will Keegan."

She tapped a few keys, glanced up at me slyly, and, unless I was completely losing my mind, winked. Then she turned and disappeared into the back room like this was all totally normal.

I stared after her, wondering if I'd somehow wandered onto a hidden camera show. Shaking my head, I leaned over the counter to get a glimpse of the screen. Bad angle. The glare from the overhead lights made it even worse. I leaned farther, squinting.

"Gotcha!"

She burst through the door like a jack-in-the-box from hell, and I yelped, nearly falling flat on my butt as she cackled like she'd just won the lottery.

"I'm just joshing ya. This job gets pretty boring, you know?"

Okay, I was officially convinced this woman had wandered away from a psychiatric facility. I started inching toward the door, careful not to turn my back on her again.

"Did you get what you needed?" she asked, all casual.

"No, but don't worry about it," I said, keeping my voice calm. I didn't want to spook her.

"Nonsense," she said briskly. "You've come this far, you might as well see it through. Let's see... the name was Joey Taylor. That sound right?"

I froze. No. It didn't sound right at all.

"That's impossible," I said once I could breathe again. "Joey's dead."

Her eyes widened. "Well, someone used his name to place the delivery."

"Do you remember what they looked like?"

"No, I'm sorry. I don't."

"Was it a man or a woman?" I asked, panic starting to fray the edges of my voice.

She shook her head. "I don't remember. We get so many people through here, after a while they all blend together. Especially at my age."

I looked up. A security camera was mounted right above the desk.

"What about the surveillance footage?"

Her smile thinned. "I can't show you that."

"But maybe you could just—"

"Only the manager has access," she cut me off.

"And honestly, I don't even know how long we keep the

recordings. I think I've helped as much as I can. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," I muttered, turning to go. "Me too."

The next week passed in a haze of paint and frantic brushstrokes. For once, I managed to shove all thoughts of Joey and his cursed necklace to the back of my mind and just focus. I took a few days off, barricaded myself in our living room, and cranked out piece after piece—sometimes two or three a day—just to make sure Nikki had enough to work with. By Thursday afternoon, I'd dropped off the last of them, running on caffeine and sheer willpower.

Needless to say, I slept like the dead that night—which was just as well, because Friday hit like a freight train. The day was a blur of last-minute chaos as we scrambled to prepare for the show that evening. Every piece already on display had to be stashed away in the storage room just to make room for my work. The final batch of paintings arrived from the framer just in time, and then came the slow, nerve-wracking process of arranging them.

Nikki agonized over the placement of each one, shifting some painting four or five times before deeming it "just right." She kept muttering about flow and the exchange of ideas, like this was a philosophical debate and not a collection of landscapes, nature, and architectural close-ups. I humored her, but all I saw was drywall, nails, and indecision.

Once all the paintings were in place to her satisfaction, the lighting had to be adjusted so that each

piece was perfectly illuminated in its own personal spotlight.

Next, buffet tables were set up to hold the hors d'oeuvres and beverages being delivered later that afternoon. Since I was still underage, Nikki had bought sparkling cider along with champagne. High top tables draped with long tablecloths were placed strategically around the room.

While Nikki supervised the last-minute details, I found myself drawn toward the frog painting. We'd been in such a rush earlier, I hadn't really stopped to take it in.

Nikki and her framer had nailed it. The cream-colored mat brightened the piece without stealing focus, and the frame looked like it had been scavenged right off a beach, all weathered wood and texture, like driftwood shaped by time. It added just the right touch of magic.

For a moment, I wanted to yank it off the wall and take it home, but it was the centerpiece, the crown jewel of the show, holding court in its carefully chosen spot. After all the effort we'd put into getting the layout just right, I couldn't justify wrecking the balance now. Still, I couldn't help the little pang in my chest. Letting it go was going to hurt.

By the time everything was set just the way Nikki wanted it, we barely had time to rush back to our apartments to shower and get dressed. Dante, who'd been conspicuously absent during the physical labor portion of the preparations, generously agreed to be on hand to receive the catering.

I took the fastest shower of my life, threw on the outfit I'd laid out that morning, and rushed into the living room where Aidan was waiting.

Then I stopped dead.

He was in a sleek black suit, bow tie perfectly knotted, shoes so shiny I could probably see my anxiety reflected in them. He looked devastatingly handsome.

I glanced down at myself—dark jeans, favorite sweater. Not exactly Met Gala material.

"I feel...underdressed."

He gave me a once-over. "You just look a little...casual. Didn't you say this was formal?"

"Yeah, but I don't own anything formal. I thought maybe I could swing the quirky artist vibe."

"Jeans and a sweater are 'quirky' now?"

"I don't know what I'm doing!" I said, hands flailing.

"Okay, breathe. We can fix this."

"I don't have time to breathe!"

He was clearly trying not to laugh. "Then we'll just have to improvise. But you're not leaving the house like that."

"Glad to know you're enjoying my fashion crisis."

"Always," he said. "Now, do you have anything nicer? Cooler?"

"I mean, my church clothes, but they scream Easter Sunday, not art show chic."

My panic was now in full swing.

"Deep breath," Aidan said, all soothing tones and calm competence. "Let's see what we can find in your closet."

He marched me back to my room like we were storming a fashion battlefield and immediately started digging through my embarrassingly uneven wardrobe.

"Hey, what about these?" he asked, holding up a pair of black jeans that looked vaguely familiar.

I blinked. "I think those from middle school. There's no way those still fit."

"Only one way to find out. Pants off."

I laughed nervously. "Wow, Aidan, this hardly seems like the time..."

He rolled his eyes and tossed the jeans at me. "Just try them on, Romeo."

While he dove back into the closet, I reluctantly swapped out my jeans. To my surprise, the black pair slid on without protest—well, maybe a little protest. "Okay, they're snug, but I'm not dying."

Aidan peeked over his shoulder. "They look great. Now let's fix the top half." He pulled a dress shirt from the rack and held it up. "Too big. Why are all your shirts trying to eat you?"

"I thought baggy was in."

"Maybe, but this is giving 'kid playing dress-up in dad's closet.'"

"Sorry I didn't keep my full wardrobe from eighth grade."

He snorted. "Let's check my closet. Maybe we can salvage this look yet."

I followed him across the hall. "Your stuff's not going to fit me either."

"I'm pretty sure my clothes are smaller than yours."

He had a point. He did wear his clothes fairly form-fitting to show off all his hard work.

He threw open his closet, perused the options, and produced a silky black-on-black striped shirt like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. "Try this."

I hesitated. "That's...a lot of black. I'm going to look like a goth vampire."

"You'll look like a tortured artist. It's on theme. Just put it on."

I peeled off my sweater and slipped into the shirt. Aidan stepped back, arms crossed, tilting his head like a gallery curator. "Hmm. Not bad. Needs tailoring though. Turn around."

I did as told, and he fussed behind me, tugging and adjusting something.

"What exactly are you doing back there?"

"Making you hot. Hold still."

After a minute, he spun me around and pointed at the full-length mirror. Somehow, the shirt was sleeker, fitted—less "dad's shirt," more "brooding genius."

"I have questions, but I'm afraid of the answers."

"Good. That means it's working. Now, black shoes?"

"Yeah, I've got my dress shoes—"

"Perfect. Go. Put. Them. On. We have a show to steal."

I mock-saluted. "Aye aye, Captain Couture."

Once my shoes were on, Aidan hustled me out the door and straight across the hall to Nikki's place. He knocked, and the door swung open like it had been waiting for dramatic effect.

There stood Nikki, balancing on one bare foot, the other clad in a pink stiletto, while attempting to jam a silver earring shaped like some kind of many-armed

deity into her ear, which seemed like a terrible idea given all the hopping involved.

She was dressed in a skintight, high-shine hot-pink mini dress that looked like it had been vacuum-sealed onto her body, possibly made of rubber...or melted bubblegum. Her hair, which had been a totally different color just an hour ago, now matched the dress perfectly. I had no idea how she'd managed that transformation so fast. Witchcraft, probably.

With one final bounce, she got the earring in, slipped on the second shoe, and scooped up what I thought was a heap of black leather from the floor. It turned out to be a dramatic ankle-length coat, which she whipped on like she was about to cast a spell.

"Look at you," she said, calmly eying me, as if seconds before she hadn't been hopping around on one foot like a demented flamingo. "Very chic."

"Or like I'm late to my own funeral," I said dryly.

"No, you look artistic."

"I told you!" Aidan crowed.

"Something is missing though," she said, hand on hip and head cocked to one side.

"My dignity?" I suggested.

"You never had that to begin with," Aidan quipped.

"Ah, I know. Come here."

I took a reluctant step forward, and she pounced on me, mussing up my hair with both hands.

"Hey!"

"Oh, hush," she chided as she unbuttoned the top two buttons of my shirt. "Your curls needed to be a little looser."

"Are you implying that Will, of all people, needs to loosen up?" Aidan interjected.

I ignored him.

Nikki gently touched the chain she'd exposed.

"Oh, the necklace is a nice touch," she said.

My hand went immediately to Joey's charm. I had forgotten I was even wearing it. I hadn't taken it off since the police station. I felt my jangled nerves calm just a bit. It made me feel good to know that in a way, Joey would be with me tonight—the old Joey, who had been my best friend for eighteen years, not the jerk he'd become at the end.

Nikki stepped back and gave me a final once-over, then nodded as if she were satisfied with what she saw. "Let's go. It's showtime."

Chapter 14

Aidan and I drove to the gallery in his truck, and Nikki drove her own car. We didn't talk much. I was too nervous and, after a few monosyllabic responses, Aidan gave up any effort on his part.

Dante had the gallery open when we got there, but, thankfully, no one else had arrived except the guitarist Nikki had hired to provide live music. The food was all laid out on the tables, and the bartender was hard at work polishing glasses.

Nikki had beat us there and immediately pulled me into her office for a pep talk.

"Okay, listen up. Everyone's going to want to meet you. Smile, shake hands, be charming. But don't let anyone trap you in a conversation for more than a few minutes—keep moving. And for the love of all things unholy, steer clear of the Glitter Guild."

"The what now?"

"You'll know them when you see them. A flock of very determined widows in aggressively loud outfits, think sparkles, sequins, floral polyester, the works. They travel in a pack and will monopolize you for the entire night if given half a chance."

"Noted." I knew their type from church, so I felt confident I could handle them.

"If someone asks about your inspiration, flip it. Ask them what they think it means. Whatever they say, look deeply impressed and tell them they completely nailed it. If they ask how much it costs, point them to me. And remember: if you can't bedazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit."

I nodded, although I strongly suspected I had just been baffled rather than bedazzled.

Nikki grabbed both my shoulders and looked me dead in the eyes. "Hey. You're a good artist. This night is going to be great. People are going to feel something when they see your work. So breathe, soak it all in, and try to enjoy it, okay? You only get one first solo show."

I almost teared up at her unusual display of sincerity.

Then she ruined it by smacking me on the rear. "Now, get out there and bedazzle these bitches!"

We emerged to find Aidan and Dante maintaining a careful, mutually disinterested silence. With an exasperated sigh, Nikki took charge, grabbing Aidan by the elbow and planting him by the front door with strict instructions to check invitations. Making it invite-only had been her idea. "It creates a sense of exclusivity," she'd said, which I took to mean: it made people with deep pockets more likely to show up.

Seven o'clock came and went, and the gallery was still awkwardly, echoingly empty. I tried not to panic. Nikki, completely unfazed, leaned in and said, "This crowd likes to make an entrance. Trust me, they'll show. Fashionably late is practically a religion."

Sure enough, about fifteen minutes later, the trickle began. One by one, the guests drifted in like they were doing us a favor. And soon, the pattern became clear: they'd step inside, take a slow lap around the gallery, stop in front of each painting like they were judging a dog show, then make their way over to me with a carefully curated compliment and just the right amount of theatrical enthusiasm.

Before long, the gallery was swarming with well-dressed people sipping champagne and whispering to each other as if the paintings might get offended if they spoke too loud. I stood there smiling like a polite hostage, wondering if anyone could tell I felt like an imposter in my outgrown and borrowed clothes, silently praying I wouldn't spill anything or accidentally say something that revealed I had no idea what I was doing.

I was very relieved when Killian and Asher arrived with a tall, handsome older man with reddish hair. It was nice to see familiar faces. They spotted me and made a beeline in my direction, foregoing the ritual circuit.

I excused myself from a lone member of the Glitter Guild who'd somehow become separated from her pack, leaving her vulnerable, and met them halfway. "I'm so glad you guys are here."

"Are you kidding? We wouldn't miss this!" Killian said, practically vibrating with excitement. "This is amazing! I've never been to something so swanky."

"Yeah, I feel like I should've rented a tux or something," Asher added, tugging at the collar of his button-down.

They both looked perfectly fine in their khakis and collared shirts—but I got it. I'd felt the same way not long ago.

"Everyone seems to have forgotten their manners," said the redheaded man with a charming smile.

"Oops," Killian said with zero remorse. "Will, this is my dad, Adam Connelly. Adam, this is Aidan's

roommate, Will. You guys are still just roommates, right?"

My face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Yes!" I blurted, a little too defensively. Luckily, Aidan was safely across the room, being accosted by a middle-aged woman who looked like she wanted to climb him like a tree. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Connelly."

I briefly wondered why Killian called his dad Adam and they had different last names, but I figured now wasn't the time for a deep dive into family dynamics.

"Please, call me Adam," he said warmly. "It's nice to finally put a face to the name. Congratulations on the show."

"Thanks. And thanks for coming," I said, hoping my face had stopped being an inferno.

"Come on. Let's go see the paintings," Killian said. "That's why we're here, right? Maybe we'll even buy one."

"You mean maybe I'll buy one," Adam said with a wink in my direction as he allowed Killian to drag him off. Asher followed, shaking his head but smiling.

Laura and Gabe arrived next, looking like they'd just stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine. Laura was stunning as always in a silver gown that shimmered just enough to catch the light without screaming for attention. Her hair was slicked back in that impossibly chic way that only works if you're a supermodel...or her.

Gabe, on the other hand, looked like a rockstar who'd gotten lost on the way to the Grammys. Fitted tux jacket, vintage band tee, black jeans, and those smug no-

sock loafers. He pulled it off effortlessly. Basically, he looked how I wish I looked.

It was great to see everyone, but I couldn't help wondering if Caitlin would make an appearance. As it got later and later, it seemed less and less likely that she would make an appearance. I was just about to give up on her when she seemed to materialize from thin air at my side.

"Jeez," I exclaimed. "Are you taking lessons from Dante?"

"Who's Dante?" she asked.

"Never mind."

She was dressed to kill in a sleek black dress that hugged her figure just right, paired with a black satin wrap and strappy heels. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a sophisticated chignon, and her gold jewelry was simple and elegant. Without a word, she slipped her hand into the crook of my arm and smiled as if she had been attending high society social functions all her life.

A camera flashed from somewhere, but by the time I whipped around to figure out where it came from, there was no sign of it. Before I could question it, though, someone grabbed my other arm and started raving about a painting I'd done of an old shack in Worcester County. Apparently, they were positive it was on their grandfather's property on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. I told them how amazed I was that they could recognize it from my painting. For about two seconds, I felt guilty for flat-out lying... and then I remembered it's art, not a crime scene.

The night dragged on, and by the time people started trickling out, my face was sore from all the fake

grinning. I took a look around, only to realize that not one, not a single painting had sold. Great. Just great. As soon as I saw a window of opportunity, I yanked Nikki aside.

Before I could open my mouth, Nikki beat me to it. "Congratulations, Will! You were absolutely amazing," she gushed. "And what a show! Big success."

I blinked in confusion. "But...I didn't sell anything."

Nikki stared at me like I'd just asked her to explain quantum physics. "What do you mean?"

"Well, all the paintings are still here..." I trailed off, hoping for a miracle.

Nikki burst out laughing. "Of course they are. Didn't I explain how this all works? They don't take the paintings home tonight. They put their name down for the pieces they want, and we deliver them later once they're paid for. We don't actually handle the sales in person at the party."

"Oh..." I said, feeling about as bright as a burnt-out light bulb. "So... did any of them sell?"

Nikki's expression shifted. "Oh, Will, I hate to disappoint you, but tonight was more about exposure than sales," she said with a concerned expression. "We only sold...all of them."

"Wh...what? All of them?" My brain short-circuited for a second.

"Every last one," she grinned, looking like she'd just won the lottery. "There was even a bidding war on a few of them. And the critics were impressed, too."

"Critics?" I squeaked, feeling my palms get clammy.

"I didn't want to stress you out more," she admitted, "but yeah, we had critics from the local paper, D.C., Baltimore, and even one national website. They all know my father and respect the gallery. I can't guarantee the reviews will be glowing, but you'll find out soon enough. They won't wait long, especially if they liked you. You know how critics are. They'll all want to claim they spotted your genius first." She rolled her eyes, clearly unimpressed by that predictable circus.

"Reviews?" I whispered, now feeling like I'd just stepped off one of those dizzying carnival rides where you're not sure if you're going to puke or pass out.

"You're starting to sound like a parrot, Will," Nikki teased.

With a quick spin, she directed me toward the small group of people in the corner—Aidan, Adam, Killian, Asher, Laura, Gabe, and Caitlin. They were the last ones standing, aside from the bartender cleaning up and the guitarist packing his gear. Dante was nowhere to be seen.

"Now, be a good little bird and go tell your friends the good news," Nikki said, giving me yet another playful pat on the behind. I was getting more action from her than anyone.

I sighed and followed her instructions obediently, still trying to process the unexpectedly good news that had somehow totally blindsided me.

I stumbled over to the group, still kind of in a daze. When they saw me, they all rushed toward me at once, bombarding me with a chorus of excited chatter.

"We sold all the paintings," I blurted out, and, suddenly, everything went silent. After what felt like an

eternity of stunned silence, they all exploded into cheers, high-fives, and enthusiastic back-thumping.

"You're a star now, for sure!" Asher yelled, practically bouncing with excitement.

"You sure look the part," Killian added, giving me an approving once-over. "Are those pants painted on?" Asher elbowed him sharply in the ribs, and Killian gave him a mock-innocent look. "What? You're the one who said, and I quote, "Damn, who knew Will's been hiding a donk you could set a drink on.""

My face blazed like the summer sun as Asher looked like he wanted to strangle Killian with his bare hands right there in the middle of the gallery.

"Yeah, Will," Caitlin chimed in, saving the day. "I didn't get a chance to tell you earlier, but you really do look amazing."

I shot her a nervous grin, supremely uncomfortable with all the compliments. "You're the one who looks amazing. Guess that's why you were so fashionably late, huh? Had to make an entrance."

"You all look great," Adam interrupted. "Not to break up this mutual admiration society, but we should probably get going. We still have to drive all the way back to Ocean City. Congrats again, Will. Oh, one more thing. What are your plans for Thanksgiving?"

"Oh, right. That's next week, isn't it?" The holiday had snuck up on me, mostly because every time I thought about it, a wave of dread hit me. I still wasn't welcome at home, and it would be my first big holiday without my parents.

"Same time every year," Killian said.

"Yeah, um, I guess I don't have any plans," I admitted.

"Then why don't you come for dinner with Aidan," Adam said.

"I wouldn't want to impose—"

"I insist. I cook enough to feed a small army. You won't be an imposition at all."

"It's true," Aidan spoke up. "He really does cook enough for like a dozen more people than actually show up."

"We eat leftovers for like a week," Killian groaned.

"I've never heard you complain," Adam shot back. "Anyway, you'll come right?"

"Sure, I'll come," I agreed. I had a feeling Aidan had wrangled my invitation, but it was sweet of them either way. "Thank you for inviting me."

Just then, Adam seemed to realize we were still surrounded by my other friends.

"And what about the rest of you? Do you have holiday plans?"

Laura and Gabe both said they'd be spending it with their respective families, but I noticed Caitlin stayed very quiet.

"What about you?" I asked her. "What are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"Oh you know...the usual."

"You don't have plans, do you?" I pressed.

She shrugged.

"Then you should come with Aidan and Will," Adam said, his tone leaving no room to argue.

I thought I saw Aidan's face fall for just a second, but he covered it quickly. "Yes," he said. "You should come with us."

If I hadn't seen his expression moments before, I wouldn't have questioned his sincerity.

"Yes. Please come," I added.

Caitlin laughed stiffly. "Okay, okay. Clearly, I'm outnumbered here. I accept your very generous invitation. Thank you for including another stray."

"Great! Then it's decided. I'll see you all next Thursday. Oh, and Will? You should know that at least one of your paintings is going to a good home, and you are more than welcome to come visit it anytime you want."

"You bought one?" I asked in surprise.

"Of course! I thought I'd better buy a Will Keegan original while I could still afford one."

I laughed at the absurdity of his claim. "I would have painted you one for free."

"But then I couldn't say that I bought one at your first show, could I?" he said with a wink.

"Which one did you get?"

"A gorgeous, moody portrait of a very introspective blue heron."

I lit up. "That was one of my favorites! I'm so glad you got it." My smile faltered a little as I realized that if all the paintings had sold, then the frog painting was gone, too. But I pushed the thought aside. Tonight was a win, and I wasn't about to ruin it with sentimentality.

Killian and Asher had been whispering behind Adam for the last few minutes, but now Killian spoke up.

"Adam, can we stay with Aidan and Will tonight?"

Aidan looked surprised for a split second before his face broke into a wide grin.

"Did you even ask or did you just invite yourself to a sleepover like a couple of bratty ten-year-olds?" Adam asked, clearly already knowing the answer.

Aidan laughed. "It's fine. They're always welcome."

"Then sure, why not? But how are you getting home? I guess you expect me to come back and get you?"

"I'll drive them home," Aidan said quickly, and Killian shot him an appreciative smile.

With that decided, Adam said his good nights and headed out. As soon as he was gone, Laura suggested the rest of us go somewhere for a celebration. Nikki overheard and shooed us out before I could protest. We walked down the plaza to an ice cream parlor that kept late hours.

"So," Laura began once we were all crowded into a corner booth with our ice cream, "I don't think I know everyone here."

"I'm Killian, and this is my boyfriend, Asher," Killian spoke up. "I'm Aidan's cousin."

"I'm Laura, one of Will's oldest friends, and this is my boyfriend, Gabriel."

"Call me Gabe," Gabe said as he shook Killian's and Asher's hands.

"And this is Caitlin," I said to Laura.

Laura looked confused, not an expression one usually sees on Laura's face.

"And Caitlin is..." she said.

"I...knew Joey," Caitlin said, choosing her words carefully.

Laura looked even more confused. "You must not have known him long," she said bluntly. "I know I'm out of the loop here, but this is ridiculous, Will. Are you two dating?"

I laughed. "No, we're not dating," I said. "We're just friends. We met at a party and found out we have a lot in common."

Laura gave me a look that let me know that she knew there was more to this story and she expected to be filled in completely later. I nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Not to change the subject," I said to change the subject, "but since everyone is here that I wanted to talk to I might as well get it all over with at once. I have something I need to tell you all." That got everyone's attention. Everyone watched me now as they ate their ice cream. "Last week I got a package in the mail. Inside the package was Joey's necklace and a note that said 'It wasn't an accident.'"

Five spoons stopped in mid-air. Only Aidan kept eating since he knew the whole story already.

Laura was the first to break the silence. Her spoon hit the bowl with a sharp clatter as she leaned in, sudden and intense. For a split second, I genuinely thought she might haul me across the table by my collar, but instead, she pressed her hands flat against the table,

locked eyes with me, and enunciated, with terrifying precision, "H-what?"

"Is this some kind of sick joke?" Caitlin asked, looking pale all of a sudden.

"Who sent it?" Gabe asked.

"What wasn't an accident?" Killian looked lost.

Asher didn't say anything. He just looked like he knew what was coming and didn't like it one bit.

"I don't know who sent it. There was no return address," I replied. "I even went by the shipping center it came from, but it was sent using Joey's name. I think whoever sent me the note was trying to tell me that Joey's death wasn't an accident."

"You mean he was murdered," Laura said in a tight voice.

"Did you go to the police?" Gabe asked.

"Yeah, but they brushed it off as some kind of sick prank. The detective said someone at the party must've found it and sent it just to mess with me. But that doesn't make any sense. No one there even knew who I was, let alone where to send something."

"So you're taking this seriously then?" Laura said. She sounded rattled.

"My gut tells me there's more to his death than an accidental drowning. I think the necklace and the note just confirm it. I just... I don't think I can just ignore them. The person that Joey had become those last few weeks, that wasn't the real Joey. If someone killed him, then I can't just let the murderer get away with it. No matter what happened between us at the end, he was still my best friend for eighteen years. I can't just write that off."

Laura nodded, and I could see the shift in her eyes, the moment her grief aligned with mine. If anyone would understand, it was her. "You're right," she said quietly, but with conviction. "We owe it to him—and ourselves—to find out what really happened. Not just for closure, but because the truth matters. And if the police won't listen, that only leaves us."

"So what are you two suggesting?" Gabe asked. "That we try to catch the killer ourselves?"

"Wait," Asher interrupted before I could respond. "I don't mean to be insensitive or anything, but what does this have to do with me and Killian? We didn't even know Joey. I mean, I'm sorry for your loss and all, but..." He trailed off.

"Well, Aidan told me about how Killian caught that killer in your town, the one that killed your friend. Since you're the only people I know who have actually had any kind of experience investigating a murder, I was hoping you'd...maybe...help me out." It sounded a lot sillier when I said it out loud.

Killian's eyes lit up immediately, but Asher's jaw clenched. "No way, Kill," he said quickly. "You remember what it was like last time. You almost died. Besides, there's no way Adam would let us get involved in something like that again."

But Killian was already hooked. "Who said Adam has to know? Besides, this isn't anything like last time. I'll just be...advising. Plus, we don't know any of the people involved so we won't be at risk."

Asher let out a low moan and pushed his ice cream away, as if he'd lost his appetite.

"So who all is in?" Killian asked.

"I am," Laura said resolutely.

"Where Laura goes, I go," Gabe said.

"You know I'm behind you," Aidan said, laying his hand gently on the back of my neck.

"I'm in," Killian said cheerily.

Asher's head thumped as it landed on the table. A muffled "Count me in, too" emerged from him in the form of a resigned sigh.

Everyone except Asher turned to Caitlin.

"The only reason I'd want to find Joey's killer is to congratulate them on a job well done," Caitlin spat out.

Laura's eyes grew wide, and her head swiveled toward me, "Okay," she said carefully. I could tell she was fighting not to deck Caitlin right there in the ice cream parlor. "I'm ready for the rest of the story now."

I sighed. "Caitlin is pregnant."

"Wonderful," Laura snapped. "I'll buy the cigars. Go on."

"The baby is Joey's." Caitlin's tone was brittle. "When I told him, he told me to get an abortion. And I would have, too, if it hadn't been for Will."

"I see," said Laura. "And how exactly is Will involved?"

"I told you, we met at a party," I jumped in, trying to cut it off before things got out of hand.

"The night Joey was killed," Caitlin filled in helpfully.

Laura's eyebrows jumped. "And what were you doing at the party?"

"I went to see Joey. We had an argument. Caitlin and I started talking and...well...I offered to help. With the baby."

"Help how?" Laura's eyes flashed between Caitlin and me.

Caitlin finally seemed to grasp how dangerous Laura could be and had fallen silent, leaving me to answer her question. Aidan had suddenly found searching for Reese's Pieces in the bottom of his sundae completely engrossing. Killian was hanging on every word while Asher's head was still resting on the table. I wondered if he had fallen asleep and, if so, I was terribly envious. Gabe just looked as if someone had dropped him onto the set of a soap opera and failed to give him a script.

I knew I had to tread carefully as I considered how best to navigate the minefield that was Laura's temper. She was not above causing a scene in public, and I wasn't in the mood for an embarrassing impromptu meltdown. Even with that knowledge, I still somehow blurted out, "I want to be a part of the baby's life."

Laura's eyebrow arched so high it almost disappeared into her hairline. "What does that even mean?" she asked, voice dripping with disbelief.

I glanced at Caitlin for backup, but she was busy pretending her nails were suddenly extremely fascinating. Clearly, I was on my own. "Well, uh... I want to be there for support. Like, um, financially, and...stuff?" I trailed off, feeling like a deer in headlights.

That was all it took. Laura shot up from her seat, her chair scraping back with enough force to rattle the

table. "I'm sorry, you're what?" she asked, her voice a pitch that could probably shatter glass.

Suddenly, the restaurant felt a lot quieter. The only other patrons, an older couple, shot us wary glances, like they thought we might be on drugs...or worse—TikTokkers. The owner was also giving us a look of pure suspicion.

"Laura, sit down," Gabe hissed.

She sat, but it was obvious that what she really wanted to do involved beating me senseless with the napkin dispenser. "We need to talk. Now." Her tone left no room for argument. She stood again and tilted her head toward the door. I got the message.

"We'll, um...be right back," I said as I also stood.

Gabe and Aidan got up to let us out of the booth. Laura stalked toward the door with me following more slowly behind. I felt like every eye in the room was on us as we made our exit.

"What in the hell are you thinking?" Laura asked as soon as we were outside.

"Laura, please don't fight me on this," I said, exhaustion clear in my voice. "I'm so tired of everyone questioning every decision I make."

"Then stop making reckless decisions."

"Laura..."

"Just explain this to me, please."

"It's just... This baby is a part of Joey. It's all I have left of him. I can't just walk away."

Laura shook her head. "Do you even hear yourself? Do you know how crazy that sounds?"

"My mind is made up. I don't want to fight about this."

She let out a heavy sigh. "Fine. Like you said inside, it's your life. But you're wrong about one thing—you're still my oldest and dearest friend, and that makes this my business too. I know I haven't been there for you lately. I've been so wrapped up in my own grief that I just...didn't feel like I could face yours too. That's not really an excuse, and I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I want you to know that, from now on, I'll be here for you, no matter what you decide. Now that Joey's gone..." Her voice caught, and she swallowed hard before continuing. "Now that Joey's gone, I don't think I could bear to lose you, too."

I took Laura's hand, squeezing it gently. "It means a lot, and I'm sorry, too. You're right. You are my friend, and that does make this your business. Your support means more than you know."

She nodded slowly, then her expression shifted. "There's something else I've been meaning to tell you. I know you well enough to guess that you've been blaming yourself for Joey's spiral at the end, and, by extension, for his death. But, Will, it's not your fault."

I opened my mouth to argue, but she raised a hand to stop me. "Let me finish. You and Joey were close, but there were things he never told you."

I blinked, caught off guard. "Like what?"

"Things about his dad," she said quietly. "One time, he and I were hanging out without you—you were probably at some church thing, I don't know—and we got drunk. You know how he was always taking beer from his mom's stash. Anyway, in vino veritas or whatever, but he confided to me that he was absolutely *terrified* of turning out like his dad. Said it like it was

this...curse hanging over him. I asked him what he meant, and that's when he told me that his dad was an alcoholic. A mean one. Not just sloppy drunk, but nasty. Screaming matches, broken dishes, walking on eggshells all the time. Mrs. Taylor finally got the courage to kick him out after years of it wearing her down. Joey said he was too little to really remember the worst of it, but once he got older, his mom filled in the blanks. Told him how bad it had gotten, how it was tearing their family apart. How she was scared to death Joey would pick up those same demons without even realizing it."

I felt my chest tighten. "I didn't know all that..."

"He said after his dad left it was like he vanished into thin air. No calls. No letters. Nothing. Just...gone. Like Joey had never even existed."

"Why didn't he ever tell me? I thought we told each other everything."

"Yeah, he didn't want you to know," Laura continued, her voice soft but firm. "He was afraid you'd think less of him."

"I would never—"

"I think," she interrupted, "deep down, despite all his bitching, he envied your family. The one he could never have."

"Envied my family?" I echoed, confused.

"Yeah," Laura said, squeezing my hand. "His dad was gone, his mom was always working, and even when she wasn't, she was too exhausted to really be there. And there you were, right next door with this seemingly perfect family. Two parents who loved you, a stay-at-home mom..."

I shook my head, the old frustration rising up. "My family was far from perfect."

"I know that," she said quickly. "But to him, it was. The grass is always greener, right?" She paused, letting the weight of her words sink in. "But the point is Joey was a ticking time bomb. Alcoholism runs in his family, and he's been drinking since middle school. He completely went off the rails when he started college. None of that was your fault. Whatever happened that night...it's not on you."

I felt a lump in my throat, but I nodded. "Thank you for telling me. Maybe, someday, I'll believe it." I exhaled, the weight of the words almost unbearable. "But all of this just makes me want to find his killer more. Someone took away his chance to prove he wasn't his father. And they need to pay for that."

Laura pulled me into a tight hug, then pulled back, slipping her hand into mine once again. "Now that we got all that mushy stuff out of the way," she said, her voice hardening as she squeezed my hand with surprising strength, "know this. I'm keeping a close eye on little Miss Caitlin. I do not trust her."

I grinned, feeling the tension ease slightly. "You're just jealous there's a new woman in my life."

"Never forget, I was here first," she said, a sly smile on her face as she looped her arm through mine and tugged me toward the door.

I glanced over to see everyone watching us through the window. I stuck my tongue out at them and we went back inside.

"So where do we start?" Laura asked as we rejoined the rest of them at the table.

"Start what?" Aidan asked.

"Well, if we're going to find Joey's killer, we have to have some sort of plan," she said, sounding like a teacher explaining something to a particularly slow pupil.

Everyone turned to look at Killian.

"What?" he asked.

"You're the only one here who has, you know, caught a killer," I reminded him.

"We didn't exactly catch the killer," Asher said in a pained voice. "It was more like he caught us, and Killian just kinda blew him away."

"Oh," I said in a small voice. "We'll have to, um, keep that in mind as a backup plan..."

"But we did do an investigation first," Killian said with a withering glance at Asher, who merely snorted in response.

"At least you've had *some* experience with this kind of thing," Laura said. "That's more than the rest of us combined. But that brings us back to my question, where do we start?"

"Well," Killian said slowly, "the obvious place to start is figuring out who might've wanted Joey dead."

"Everyone who knew him?" Caitlin offered, deadpan.

I gave a weary nod. "He wasn't exactly Mr. Popularity toward the end. He was drinking heavily, lying, acting like a jerk, picking fights, breaking hearts—"

"

"And that was just with Will," Laura cut in, bone-dry.

I shot her a dirty look. "He was also sleeping around. A lot. With people who weren't exactly single. He made plenty of enemies."

"Start with people who were at the party," Killian said. "Who found him?"

I hesitated, feeling like an idiot. Why hadn't I asked that when I was at the police station. "Uh. I... don't know."

"I heard it was Keiyara Parker," Gabe said.

"Oh, I know her," Laura said. "She's in one of my classes."

"Can you talk to her?" Killian asked.

Laura shrugged. "Sure. I'll corner her Monday between Shakespeare and lunch."

"Where was the party?" Killian continued. He was on a roll.

"A frat house off campus," I said quickly. I knew that one. Small victories.

"Then someone should talk to the frat bros," Killian said.

"Me?" I squeaked.

"Why not you?" he asked, clearly enjoying my horror.

"Aren't they like a bunch of jocks and meatheads?"

Gabe snorted. "Not at Pemberton. We're not exactly a division one school. Our Greek life is pretty tame aside from an occasional party here and there. I know a few of the guys. Want me to handle it?"

"Yes, please," I said.

"What am I asking?" Gabe said, pulling out his phone like he was about to start taking notes.

“If anyone saw anyone suspicious—”

“Half the people there were on one or more substances,” Caitlin cut in. “They were all acting suspiciously.”

“—or anyone who didn’t belong,” Killian continued, ignoring her. “And ask about the necklace. Maybe someone found it during cleanup.”

“Oh, ask if anyone saw Joey head toward the pool,” Laura added.

“Police already asked all that,” I said. “Everyone claimed they saw nothing.”

“Well, somebody saw something,” Gabe said, nodding at the necklace on my chest.

Killian suddenly sat up straighter. “What if the killer sent it?”

“Why would the killer send me the necklace?” I asked. “With a note, no less. What was he going for, dramatic flair?”

“Some killers want attention,” Aidan said. “They get off on it. They want people to know how clever they are.”

“Isn’t that more of a serial killer thing?” Gabe asked, frowning.

“Who says we’re not dealing with one?” Aidan countered.

They were officially in a murder nerd-off now.

“The M.O. doesn’t fit,” Gabe said. “Joey drowned, right?”

“As far as I know,” I replied.

“We need to confirm that,” Gabe said, eyeing me. “You’ve got a contact at the police department, right?”

“Contact is a strong word,” I said, thinking of my last tense encounter with Detective Grafton.

This whole thing was starting to feel like signing up for a group project and realizing your teammates were all chaos goblins.

“Try to get the autopsy report,” Gabe said.

“Can just anyone just get one of those?” Aidan asked, eyebrow raised.

“I guess I’ll find out,” I said with a grimace.

“If not, let me know. My cousin’s a dispatcher,” Gabe offered. “But I’d rather keep her out of it unless we have to. She’s got a very nosy mom energy.”

“What about Mckenzie?” Laura asked suddenly.

I blinked. “What about her?”

“She was pissed when Joey cheated on her. Could be worth a conversation.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Caitlin chirped.

“Didn’t you, uh, sleep with Joey while they were still dating?” I asked.

She gave me a withering glare. “I never said that was me. I mean, it was, but in my defense, he lied and said he was single. She knows that. We’re both women scorned. We have a lot in common. We’re practically a club of the betrayed. Maybe we’ll get matching mugs.”

“Any other exes?” Killian asked, moving on.

“I’ll ask around,” Caitlin said cheerfully. “We can grow the club.”

“Are we missing anything?” Gabe asked.

“Common sense?” Asher offered helpfully.

“There’s one more person,” I said slowly.

“Who?” Killian and Gabe said at the same time, like an off-key duet.

“Joey’s mom. She might’ve heard something from the police.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Laura said, and I exhaled in relief. I wasn’t ready to face that tidal wave of grief again.

“But,” she added, looking at me with puppy-dog eyes laced with steel, “will you come with me?”

I sighed. So much for the easy out. “Yeah. I’ll go.”

“Think you can poke around Joey’s room while you’re there?” Killian asked casually.

“We’ll try,” Laura said. “If it comes to it, we’ll offer to help pack up his things. A good deed with a side of emotional espionage.”

“I think that’s enough to give us a solid starting point,” Killian said.

“More than enough,” Asher muttered under his breath.

“Let’s all talk to our people and regroup at Thanksgiving,” Killian suggested, pretending not to hear him.

“Laura and I won’t be at your Thanksgiving,” Gabe pointed out.

“Can we meet up after?” Killian asked.

“Where?” Laura asked.

“Our apartment,” Aidan offered. “Killian and Asher can come with us—if Adam’s cool with it.”

“He won’t mind,” Killian said confidently.

“Then it’s a plan,” Gabe said.

Killian suddenly held his hand out, palm down like we were the cast of a Disney sports movie. Laura caught on first and stacked her hand on his. I smirked

and added mine. One by one, the others followed, until only Asher was left. He rolled his eyes so hard I thought they'd stick, then slapped his hand on top.

"Remember," Killian said solemnly, "we're a team. No lone wolf heroics. We find proof, we go to the cops. Deal?"

"Deal," we all echoed.

"Then let's get this son of a bitch."

Our circle broke into hugs and awkward goodbyes. No one really wanted to leave. It felt safer in the group, like nothing bad could touch us while we were together.

But Joey had been alone the night he died. Out by the pool. I wondered if he'd felt the danger coming or if it hit him before he even knew what was happening.

God, I hoped it was the latter.

Chapter 15

Having a real plan and knowing my friends were behind me filled me with a sense of purpose and renewed energy. With the art show out of the way, I could finally fully focus on figuring out what really happened to Joey.

Naturally, I waited until Monday to start my very first assignment. Nothing says "dedicated" like procrastinating all weekend. All I had to do was get the medical examiner's report from Detective Grafton. Easy, right?

I spent so long marinating in the police station lobby that I half-expected to receive my AARP card before Grafton finally emerged to get me.

"Back again?" he said, skipping over the whole "hello" thing. Charming as ever.

"Yeah, thanks for seeing me," I said, practically jogging to keep up with his long strides.

He didn't bother with small talk. Or any talk, really. We walked in silence to his office, where he sat down and stared at me like I was a particularly disappointing sandwich. Once again, Detective Hammett was conspicuously not present.

I sat without being asked, because, apparently, we were skipping all the pleasantries again. "So, um, how is Detective Hammett?"

I knew polite chit-chat wasn't his thing, but I figured I'd try it anyway. Rookie mistake.

His eyebrows contorted into a V-shaped scowl. I resisted the urge to comment on how that couldn't be good for his already-wrinkled forehead.

"Detective Hammett is fine. I'll be sure to let her know you asked after her," he said, in a tone that suggested he absolutely wouldn't be doing that.

"It's just that she hasn't been around the last couple of times I stopped by."

"I'm sure if you called ahead, she'd happily clear her schedule just for you."

I blinked, unsure if that was sarcasm or a threat. Either way, I decided not to respond.

"What exactly are you doing here, kid? If you're here to gossip, I've got better things to do. If you've got a point—which, frankly, I doubt—get to it."

Such a warm, nurturing presence. I took a breath and asked the question that brought me there in the first place. "Can I get a copy of the medical examiner's report for Joey Taylor's death?"

He looked at me like I'd asked for the nuclear codes.

"What?"

"Can I get a copy of—"

"I heard you. What I don't understand is why in God's name would you want that?"

Great question. Too bad I didn't have a good answer ready. Luckily, he didn't really need one.

"Never mind. I can guess. You still think your friend was murdered, and now you're cosplaying as a detective. Look, kid, this isn't some true-crime podcast. I've told you, he got drunk, fell in a pool, and drowned. Tragic? Sure. Murder? No. Time to let it go. This obsession of yours is not healthy."

Wow, thanks, Doc. Diagnosis: crushing grief and an overactive imagination. Very professional.

"About that report..." I pressed.

He leaned back and sighed like I was the one wasting his time. "Autopsy reports are public record. If you're so determined to get one, go fill out a form at the medical examiner's office. It'll cost you. But I'm telling you one last time—he died in an accident. Move on. Go live your life. Stop chasing ghosts."

"I wish I could," I said. "But I don't think it was an accident. And I'm going to find out who did it, with or without your help."

I stood up and stormed out, which would've felt a lot more dramatic if I didn't trip over the chair leg on my way out.

"Stay out of police business, kid," he yelled after me.

So far, I was zero for two. My big detective debut was off to a stunning start. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this whole amateur sleuth thing after all.

Later that night, Laura called to let me know that Joey's mom had gone home with one of her sisters for Thanksgiving so we wouldn't be able to talk to her until she got back. I'd be lying if I said I was even slightly disappointed. That was one task I'd gladly put off as long as possible. On the other hand, I was dying to know if Gabe or Caitlin had fared any better, but I'd have to wait for their report.

The next few days crawled by, the way time always seems to stretch and drag just before a holiday. When I got home from work Wednesday evening, however, Aidan met me at the door, blocking my

entrance and wearing a grin so smug he might as well have been twirling a villainous mustache.

"What's going on?" I asked, eyeing him warily.

"I have a surprise for you," he said, practically vibrating with excitement.

"A surprise?" I repeated, eyes narrowing.

"Yeah. Go check the living room," he said, gesturing grandly.

I hesitated, half-expecting someone to jump out at me, but I stepped into the living room, Aidan eagerly following close on my heels.

As soon as I rounded the corner, I stopped dead in my tracks.

There, right in the center of the once-empty wall, hung a painting. My painting. The frog. The one I'd poured my heart into. The one I thought I'd said goodbye to forever.

I turned to look at him, blinking in disbelief. "I...I thought it sold."

"It did," he said, smiling. "I bought it."

"You...? But...why?"

"Because I knew how much it meant to you."

My throat closed up. Tears welled in my eyes before I could stop them. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise," he said softly.

And that was it. The dam burst and I launched myself into his arms, crying—but this time, out of something that felt like joy. Relief. Gratitude.

"Thank you," I blubbered into his chest, my words muffled by his pecs.

He wrapped his arms around me without hesitation, holding me tightly, and pressed a kiss against

the top of my head. And for the first time in ages, the ache in my chest loosened. Just a little.

At last, Thanksgiving arrived.

After one of Aidan's special breakfasts, we spent the morning being lazy, curled up on the couch watching the Macy's parade pass by, all B-list celebrities and giant balloons, followed by the dog show, naturally. After that, we switched to video games, killing time until it was time to head out.

Caitlin met us at the apartment, and the three of us piled into my car.

Killian lived about forty minutes away in Ocean City, but it felt like a lot longer since the car ride was a little on the tense side. Aidan was still keeping Caitlin at arm's length, and she seemed perfectly fine with letting the silence do most of the talking. I spent most of the counting the minutes.

I was deeply relieved when we finally pulled up to a charming, two-story beach house, its cedar shingles weathered just enough to feel lived-in, not old. As we walked toward the front door, the ocean came into view—cold and steel-gray in the late November light, but shimmering faintly with the distant, stubborn promise of summer.

We were a little early, but an enthusiastic Killian and Asher greeted us at the door, completely unbothered. They pulled us into the warm hum of the kitchen, where Adam and another man—dark-haired, mustachioed, and movie-star handsome—were orchestrating what looked like a full-on masterpiece of a feast. A stocky teenager

with a mop of shaggy ginger hair was on veggie duty, chopping away like a pro.

"Adam, Steve," Killian called over the clatter of pans. "This is Will, Aidan's roommate, and his friend Caitlin. You've all met Adam, but this is his boyfriend Steve, and the gremlin over there is my little brother Kane."

Kane paused just long enough to flip Killian the bird, then flashed us a grin bright enough to rival the kitchen lights. His eyes were deep green and full of mischief.

"Hey," he said with a wink. "Ignore Killian. He's just bitter I got all the looks in the family."

Adam groaned. "They're not even related," he stage-whispered. "Can you imagine if they were?" Then, turning to us, "Anyway, we're glad you're here. Really."

"Yes, welcome," Steve added warmly, slipping an arm around Adam's waist. They both wore matching aprons embroidered with the word HIS in bold script.

They were the first adult gay couple I'd ever met. And only the second gay couple at all—Killian and Asher being the first.

"Thank you so much for inviting us," I said. "I would have been sitting alone in the apartment otherwise."

"Not on our watch," Adam said.

The doorbell rang just then, and Killian and Asher raced off to answer it. They returned quickly with a striking couple, friends of Adam and Steve named Ilana and Lysander. Ilana was carrying a tiny bundle that turned out to be their brand-new baby, Melody, causing Adam and Steve to absolutely lose their minds.

Another round of introductions was somehow managed in between rounds of cooing and babbling at the impassive infant. All the commotion brought a petite woman with shoulder-length blonde hair from somewhere else in the house. I knew she had to be related to Killian as soon as I saw her. They had the same blue eyes.

"Oh my gosh! You guys made it. And with the baby!" she exclaimed. "I was setting the table and thought I heard baby talk!"

"This is my mom," Killian said to us, drawing her attention away from the baby, long enough to say hello.

His mother? She looked far too young to have a son Killian's age. I was growing more confused with every introduction of a new family member. What was up with Killian's family dynamic? He called his dad Adam, Adam was gay with a very handsome boyfriend, he had a brother that he wasn't related to, and a beautiful, young mother. I'd have to pull Aidan aside at some point to get the whole story.

"You can call me Meg," she said with a warm smile, before turning back to Ilana and Lysander.

"Where's that other daughter of yours?"

"Nila can't make it this year. She's taking a turn with Heather's family this year."

By that point, the kitchen was so packed with people that Adam shooed everyone out so he and Steve could finish preparing dinner.

Meg led us all out to the back deck overlooking the beach. It was cool, but not too chilly, and the waves breaking against the shore made a gorgeous backdrop.

Killian and Asher went back in to get drinks for everyone.

We were chatting over cups of spiced cider when the last of the guests arrived, yet another gay couple, named Bryant and Calvin. Bryant was around the same age as Adam and Steve, tall, with skin tanned to a warm glow, wavy dark hair, and muscles that rippled under his tight sweater. Calvin was his opposite in nearly every way—thin and fragile-looking, with skin so pale it was nearly translucent. His white-blond hair was neatly tucked behind his ears, and his icy blue eyes were so light they seemed almost colorless.

"Sorry we're late," Bryant boomed. "It takes time to look this good."

Everyone chuckled.

"You're not late," Aidan said. "We're just early birds."

After another round of introductions, conversation flowed easily until Adam called us to dinner. We gathered around two large tables crammed into a room barely big enough to hold all of us. The seating was intimate, to say the least—we were elbow to elbow—but everyone was in high spirits.

Once everyone was settled, Adam stood, wine glass in hand.

"Before we dive in," he began, "I just want to say how honored Steve and I are to have all of you here today. Some of you are familiar faces, and it's wonderful to see you again. And some are new. Welcome."

He paused for a moment, staring thoughtfully into the ruby-red contents of his glass. "Thanksgiving is traditionally a time to spend with family. But for a lot of

us, for a lot of reasons, that doesn't always mean the families we were born into. What I've learned—what many of us have learned—is that family can be the people we choose. The ones who show up. The ones who love us as we are. The ones who stay."

He glanced around the table, gratitude filling his eyes.

"Today, you're our family. All of you. And we're so thankful to share this day with you."

He raised his glass, and the rest of us followed suit.

"To family," he said.

"To family," we echoed.

"But if the family grows any bigger, we may have to rent a venue next year," Steve added wryly, and everyone laughed.

"If that's what it takes, then we'll do it!" Adam declared. "Now, let's eat!"

Dinner was incredible. I'd never seen so much food. The turkey was so big I thought someone must have shot Big Bird; plus there was ham, candied yams, green beans, mountains of fluffy mashed potatoes, gallons of gravy, two kinds of stuffing, warm yeast rolls, coleslaw, artichokes, Brussels sprouts, homemade cranberry sauce, and six different kinds of homemade pies for dessert. Steve and Adam must have been cooking for days. The atmosphere was festive as food was passed around and conversation flowed as freely as the wine.

When everyone had eaten their fill—and then some—Adam and Steve went around the table with an after-dinner wine and coffee. Even Kane was allowed a

small glass of the sweet red wine. Only Caitlin refused, covering her glass with her hand and smiling with a shake of the head.

When everyone was finished, Adam stood up. "And now it's time for phase two of our new annual tradition. If everyone would follow me..." We managed to waddle into the living room where we sat in a loose circle on chairs, the sofa, and the floor.

Once everyone was settled, Adam once again spoke up. "Last year Aidan came up with this little gem, and we're going to continue the practice if everyone is game. We'll go around the room, one person at a time, and say one thing that you are thankful for. If you absolutely can't keep it to one thing, a panel of judges will evaluate the merit of each request on an individual basis."

The others laughed and looked at Bryant, who tried to look innocent but failed miserably.

"Who'd like to go first?" Adam asked.

"I will," said Lysander. "I'm thankful that we now have a happy, healthy baby girl. For those of you who were here last year, you'll remember that it was one year ago tonight that we made the big announcement."

Ilana smiled down at the sleeping bundle in her arms. "What can I add to that?" she said.

"That's it?" Adam said.

"Sandy said it all," Ilana said.

"Okay, new rule," Adam said. "You have to come up with your own thing to be thankful for."

Ilana laughed. "Then I'm glad Melody is finally sleeping through the night."

"Amen to that," Lysander said and threw back the rest of his drink as everyone laughed.

Bryant reacted quickly to refill Lysander's glass.

"Good thing I'm driving," Ilana said with a wink.

Next was Calvin, who raised his glass in yet another toast. "Here's to Adam and Steve. Thank you for opening your home to us strays year after year."

Bryant clinked his glass to his partner's. "I'll drink to that!"

"That doesn't count as your turn!" Adam said quickly.

Bryant rolled his eyes. "Just for that, I'll say I'm thankful for anal retentive friends who can't resist micromanaging every second of the holidays. Emphasis on the anal."

Adam threw his head back and laughed loud and long. "Hey! I resemble that remark! And somebody has to make sure you all get fed."

"And you do a great job of it," Steve said with genuine appreciation.

"Oh stop. I wasn't fishing for compliments. Anyway, it's my turn, so I'm thankful that it's been almost a year since anyone in my family has been threatened, held at knifepoint, or nearly burned alive. In fact, no one has had anything worse than a cold. It's been deliciously dull. And for that, I am thankful."

Steve nodded. "Same here." Adam gave him a pointed look, and he quickly added, "I mean, I have my own, don't worry. I just really agree with what you said." He took a breath and continued, more sincerely now. "I'm thankful that I've been lucky enough to find my soulmate—and even luckier to love his family like my

own, and to be welcomed by them in return. I'm genuinely happy and content with where I am in life." He turned to the next person with a smile. "Your turn, Meg."

"Well, I'm thankful most of all to get to see my handsome son again and see how happy and well-adjusted he is these days. Now, I would like to petition the judges for a second item, if it pleases your honor."

Adam gave an exaggerated sigh. "You're pushing the limits, Meg, but I suppose we'll allow it."

"Thanks, you're a dear. I'm also thankful that things have been going well for me up in Pennsylvania. The divorce is now final, and I've managed to get back into school. I'm excited about my future for the first time in a long time. Now I'm done. You're next, Kane."

"Um..." Kane thought for a moment. "I'm thankful that my mom is talking to me again, and things are better between us, so now I get to see my mom and my dad, which, of course, means more presents at Christmas." He waggled his eyebrows, and everyone chuckled.

I made a mental note to add that to the list to ask Aidan about later.

"My turn," announced Killian. "I'm thankful for two things. Is that okay?"

"Go ahead," Adam said with exaggerated weariness. "We already set a precedent with your mother."

"K, well, I'm thankful that my real dad remains behind bars where he belongs and where he can't hurt anyone else."

"Here, here," Meg muttered under her breath.

Real dad? Behind bars? I added that to the ever-growing list to ask Aidan.

Killian continued, "I'm also thankful that I found my soulmate, too, but to make mine different from Steve's, I'm glad my soulmate found me."

Asher smiled goofily at Killian while the chorus of aw's died down. "I'm thankful that Killian and I have decided to go to college together so we won't have to date long distance next year," he said. "Hey, we're applying to Pemberton so maybe we'll be going to school with you, Aidan."

"And Caitlin, too," Aidan said. "My turn? Well, mine is a multiple part thanks but it's technically all part of one big package."

"I'll be the judge of that," Adam said jokingly.

"If not, I'll throw myself on the mercy of the court. I'm thankful that Aunt Meg brought me down here with her last year because that one trip changed my life in so many ways. I was able to accept that I was gay with a little help from my not-so-little cousin, Killian, it solidified my decision to transfer to Pemberton, and, this is the part I'm most thankful for, I made the best friend I've ever had in my whole life. As a bonus, he's also my roommate. I'm thankful for you, Will."

I flushed crimson and stared down at my feet, but it was my turn and every eye in the room was on me. I cleared my throat and spoke up, "I guess it's my turn, huh? Most of you don't know me, so a little background may be in order, if that's okay?"

"Motion granted," Adam said gleefully. He was clearly enjoying his role as Thanksgiving mediator. And the bottomless glass of wine.

“Thanks. Um... well, only Aidan knows this, but about a month ago, I went through...I guess you could call it a crisis.” I paused, the weight of it all suddenly a little heavier in the quiet. “I had to finally face the fact that I’m also gay.”

“Welcome to the club!” Bryant called out, and a wave of warm, supportive voices followed—welcomes and affirmations from everyone around the table. Everyone except Aidan, who already knew, and Caitlin, who sat silently.

I managed a small smile. “Thanks. But, uh... it wasn’t easy. My dad disowned me. And my best friend didn’t exactly handle it well—actually, he handled it pretty terribly. I had a complete breakdown and...I ended up trying to take my own life.”

The room went completely still. Mouths dropped open, expressions frozen in collective shock. It was such a perfectly timed moment of stunned silence that I almost laughed. Almost.

“There were a lot of things that pushed me to that edge,” I continued quietly, “but the biggest mistake I made was trying to run from everything instead of facing it. I wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t be alive, if it weren’t for Aidan.”

I turned to him then, the emotion rising in my throat. “He didn’t just save my life once—he saved it twice. And I mean that literally. He’s been there for me through everything. Even when I was a complete mess, he never gave up on me. He’s been the kind of friend I never expected to find, let alone deserve. He’s taught me what true friendship looks like. He pushed me to get

help, to keep going, to fight for myself when I didn't think I could."

I swallowed hard, then lifted my glass. "So, yeah...I'm thankful for Aidan. And I'm thankful that I'm still here. That I got a second chance."

I suddenly realized that everyone in the room was staring at me, most with tears in their eyes, and I felt a blush creep up again.

Aidan pulled me into a hug. "And I'd do it all over again," he whispered into my ear.

"Ahem," Caitlin cleared her throat, and the attention shifted to her. "It figures I'd have to follow that."

Everyone chuckled, including me.

"I don't know any of you, really—I've only known Will for a few weeks—so don't expect anything that deep from me. But you've all made me feel so welcome, like I was part of a family, which isn't something I'm used to, if I'm being honest, so thank you all. And thank you, Adam, for inviting me."

"Of course! You're stuck with us now," Adam said. "We'll expect both you and Will again next year."

"Be careful what you wish for," Caitlin said with a smirk.

We lingered for a while, talking and laughing as the evening wound down, until Lysander and Ilana stood up, saying it was time to get Melody to bed. Their departure was the cue for everyone else to start gathering their things, which was fine by me—we still had to drive home and meet with Laura and Gabe.

Killian and Asher were driving separately, so Caitlin, Aidan and I headed out after thanking Adam and Steve again for having us.

As soon as we climbed into the car, I texted Laura to let her know we were on our way. Then I turned to Aidan, unable to hold back my questions any longer.

"Okay, so...what's the deal with Killian's family?" I asked.

Aidan laughed. "Ha! Yeah, I probably should've filled you in before we got there."

"I mean, maybe it's none of my business, but I'm confused. There's Adam and Steve, a brother he's not actually related to, his mom Meg, a dad in prison..." I trailed off, trying to piece it all together.

Aidan snorted. "Yeah, I get it. It's a lot. Basically, Killian's biological father was a huge asshole. Didn't handle Killian coming out very well. Beat him, kicked him out of the house, then started taking it out on Aunt Meg. That's when she packed up and moved in with us. His dad ended up in prison on some political charges or something. I don't know the full story."

"Wow," I said, stunned. "And I thought my dad was bad. But what about Adam and Steve?"

"Adam's oldest son, Seth, is the boy who was murdered. He and Killian were friends. When Uncle Gary kicked Killian out, Adam took him in. Kane is Adam's youngest kid, and Steve's just Adam's boyfriend."

"So...wait. Adam's not even related to Killian?" I asked, still trying to wrap my head around it. "He just...took him in?"

"Yeah," Aidan said, nodding. "At first it was supposed to be temporary, but it ended up becoming...well, family."

From the back seat, Caitlin's voice chimed in, a little quiet but clear: "Chosen family."

"Exactly," Aidan said, glancing at her in the rearview mirror with a small smile.

"Like...choosing your own family?" I asked.

"Pretty much," Aidan said. "It's when people build real, lasting bonds with each other—not because they have to, but because they choose to. It's about love, trust, and showing up for each other, no matter what."

"We learned about it in class," Caitlin added. "Our professor said chosen families are especially important for people who get rejected by their biological families, like a lot of queer folks. But really, anyone can build one. It's about finding the people who actually see you, and stay."

As they spoke, something clicked into place in my mind. Adam's toast about family being the ones who choose you, the ones who love you no matter what, that wasn't just a sweet sentiment. It was their reality. It was their survival.

I thought about Aidan and how he'd become such an integral part of my life. He was family now. And Laura, of course. And after that Thanksgiving dinner, it seemed like Adam and Steve had adopted me into their little chosen family, as well.

Then I thought about Joey. He'd been part of my family, for sure. Losing him felt like losing a piece of myself. I couldn't change what had happened between

us, couldn't undo the mistakes, but maybe I could still do right by him.

I owed him that much.

I owed it to our family—chosen or not—to find the person who had taken him away.

Laura and Gabe were waiting for us in their car when we pulled up. We all took the elevator up to the apartment, where we made small talk until Killian and Asher arrived. Asher's mood seemed to have darkened considerably since we left them, and I wondered if they'd fought on the drive over or something.

Killian quickly brought things to order once everyone was seated in the living room. "We've had a week to start looking into things," he said, looking around our little group expectantly. "Has anybody come up with anything?"

Nobody jumped to answer.

"Will? Why don't you start," he volunteered me.

"I don't have much to report," I admitted, then walked them through my disappointing run-ins with the psycho at the delivery office and Detective Grafton.

"He did say we could fill out a form to request the autopsy report from the ME's office, but I checked their website and it's like a hundred bucks. It costs a lot less for the family, though. I wonder if Mrs. Taylor got one."

"We can ask when she gets back," Laura suggested.

With my failures out in the open, it seemed to break the ice for everyone else to share theirs, and since Laura had already mentioned Mrs. Taylor, she went

next, explaining how Joey's mom was out of town for the holidays. She hadn't had any luck with Keiyara Parker either. Keiyara had missed class on Monday, Wednesday's class got canceled, and Friday was Thanksgiving break, so she hadn't seen her.

Gabe reported that none of the frat brothers he spoke to had noticed anything strange or out of the ordinary until Joey's body was discovered, and nobody knew anything about the necklace.

Caitlin went next, but, apparently, Mckenzie hadn't even been at the party, and claimed she didn't know anything. She was sad that Joey was dead, but they hadn't spoken since she dumped him for cheating.

"So she says," Killian pointed out. "Did she say where she was? Does she have an alibi?"

Caitlin gave him a look. "I don't know. I'm not a fucking cop. I wasn't taking witness statements."

"What about any other exes?" Gabe asked.

"More like one-night stands," Caitlin said. "I talked to a few who I knew of, but they all said basically the same thing. It was casual, they barely knew him, it's all so sad, blah blah blah."

Killian frowned. "So, basically, we learned nothing and got nowhere."

"Maybe this was a bad idea," I said quietly.

"You think?" Asher spat.

"I just mean...none of us really know what we're doing," I continued. "We're just fumbling around in the dark."

"Don't get discouraged," Killian said. "We're just getting started."

"Yeah, and it's already been almost a month since he was killed," Caitlin pointed out. "Talk about a cold trail. Why are we even doing this?"

"Because he was our friend," Laura snapped. "Because we loved him. Maybe you don't give a damn about him, but we do. If you're so ready to give up, maybe you shouldn't be here."

The room went quiet, tension crackling.

Finally, Killian spoke. "Look, I know it's frustrating. I feel it too. But we're not done. Not even close. We still have people we haven't talked to. Joey's mom isn't even back yet. And there's Keiyara." He looked around at all of us. "If she saw anything, anything at all, that could be the lead we've been waiting for."

"And if she didn't see anything?" Caitlin asked. "What do we do then?"

"Give up?" Asher said hopefully, earning himself a warning look from Killian.

"It's way too early to give up," Gabe said firmly. "How about I try to get my hands on the autopsy report? I'll talk to my cousin, explain that Joey was a close friend of my girlfriend's, maybe play the sympathy card a little. Even if she can't give me a copy, maybe she'll at least tell me what it says."

"Why is this report so important?" Caitlin asked.

"It might...tell us something we don't know," Gabe said, though he didn't sound fully convinced.

"Well, that wouldn't be hard," Aidan said under his breath, earning him a sharp look from Laura.

"I think I have some mutual friends with Keiyara," Laura said, still glaring at Aidan. "I'll ask

around, see if I can find out where she lives, and hopefully go talk to her."

"I'll go with you," I offered. "We can ask her about the necklace, too. Maybe seeing it will jog her memory."

"Do you think there's any way we could get a look at the backyard of the frat house?"

"What for?" Caitlin asked.

"Just to poke around. Maybe something the cops missed. It's a long shot, but we don't have a lot else right now."

"Wouldn't the police have already found anything important?" Aidan pointed out.

"Probably," Killian admitted. "But it doesn't hurt to double-check. Besides, we're not even sure what we're looking for yet."

"I can do it," Gabe volunteered. "What exactly am I supposed to be looking for?"

"Anything that feels wrong," Killian said. "Trash, something hidden, damage to the fence, disturbed ground—anything that seems out of place."

Gabe nodded, but still looked unsure.

"Okay," Killian said, clapping his hands together lightly. "Sounds like everyone's got a task. Let's plan to meet back here one week from tonight and share what we find."

He looked almost optimistic. The rest of us, not so much. But even if it wasn't much, at least it was a plan. As everyone started gathering their stuff to leave, I understood better than ever what Adam had meant: when your real family was gone or had let you down, you found a new one—the ones who stayed.

And whether we liked it or not, we were in this together.

Chapter 16

When I arrived at work the next morning, Nikki was waiting. "The reviews come out tomorrow," she announced.

"Don't you ever say hello?" I said grouchily. I hadn't slept well the night before. I had a nightmare that I was wading through dark water, finding body after body floating face down, and when I turned them over, it was all of my friends: Aidan, Laura, Killian.

"It's a waste of time and breath. Why not just get right to the important stuff?"

"Because it's polite?"

"You know," she said absently, "you'd better get some more paintings done pronto so we can get them up in here."

"I've been working on some ideas."

"Great! You know, you never even asked me how much money you made at the show," Nikki said, switching subjects like a racecar changing lanes.

I'd thought about it, sure—obsessively, even—but it felt rude to bring it up. When I admitted that, Nikki just burst out laughing.

"Buddy, you're gonna have to lose that polite streak real fast. Pushy has to be every artist's middle name, or you'll get eaten alive. People in this business are sharks. Want to know now?"

"Yes, please," I said, trying to sound casual.

"Pushy!" she barked, pointing at me like a coach at tryouts.

"Uh...yes, tell me."

"Pushier!"

"Er...um...tell me now, bitch!" I blurted.

She doubled over, laughing. "Okay, that was a little much. You definitely need assertiveness training—but points for enthusiasm."

I grinned sheepishly. "So...the sales?"

Nikki gave me a wicked look. "Might want to sit down for this."

"Why? Is it that bad?"

"You tell me. I priced your paintings between five hundred and a thousand bucks each. After my commission, you cleared just over ten thousand."

For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

"Ten...thousand?" I echoed, my voice doing a weird squeaky thing.

"Better shut that mouth before you swallow a fly," she teased. "Not bad for a month's work, huh? Of course, you can't pull a show like that every month. Maybe once or twice a year if you're lucky. But the good news is you've set a benchmark. From here, your prices only go up."

"I've never had that much money at one time before," I managed finally.

"Don't go picking out a mansion just yet," Nikki warned. "It sounds like a lot, but if that's all you had to live on, it wouldn't stretch as far as you'd think. There's a reason they call it starving artist, you know. Now, if—and that's a big if—you became famous and your prices shot up, sure, you might make it big, but those stories are rare. The reviews from the show will play a big role in what happens next, but even if they're not glowing, don't get discouraged. Plenty of now-famous artists got shredded by critics when they were starting out."

Sometimes even a bad review can help if it gets people talking."

I couldn't help wondering if she was trying to prepare me for bad reviews without saying it outright. I opened my mouth to ask, but at that moment, an older couple walked in, looking for a painting for their living room—something with green and gold, the lady said.

Before I knew it, Nikki was off on a passionate (and slightly terrifying) rant about how art shouldn't be bought just to match the drapes. By the time she finally wound down, the whole thing about the reviews had completely slipped my mind. The couple left, looking a little dazed, but with a painting tucked carefully under the gentleman's arm.

Just before closing, Laura swept through the door.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Nice to see you, too," she said dryly. "I came to pick you up. Mrs. Taylor is home and she feels up for a visit."

"I don't know if I feel up for a visit," I said weakly, but I knew it was futile to argue with Laura.

She hung out until I closed up and let Nikki know that I was leaving, then we set off for Joey's house in Laura's little red Camry.

"Let me do the talking," Laura said as we pulled into the driveway.

"Cool. How about if I just stay in the car then?"

"Oh, for God's sake, Will! Grow some balls! Why are you so scared about seeing Mrs. Taylor again?"

"I just don't like dealing with other people's grief," I said. "I don't like dealing with other people's

grief, okay? I've got enough of my own. Plus, it's all just...too real. It's like getting hit by an emotional freight train. It overwhelms me."

Laura rolled her eyes and threw open her car door with a dramatic sigh. "Come on, Theresa Caputo, and bring your psychic friends with you."

"Very funny," I grumbled as I followed her up to the front door.

Mrs. Taylor answered the door looking like she'd aged a decade in a month. Her hair was wild, her eyes ringed with dark shadows, making her look rather like a ruffled raccoon.

"Come on in," she said. "I'm sorry the house is such a mess. I was out of town, and then, well, I just haven't felt like doing anything since I got back."

"It's fine, Mrs. Taylor," Laura said soothingly. "We're not worried about the house."

We settled in the living room, which was still cluttered with funeral detritus, stray plastic cups, napkins and paper plates. After a few minutes of awkward small talk and trading old stories about Joey, Laura finally steered us toward the real reason we were there.

"Mrs. Taylor, we're trying to understand what was going on in Joey's life before... everything happened," Laura said carefully. "He just seemed different, somehow, and we feel like we need to know why in order to move forward."

Mrs. Taylor nodded. "He was different, that's for sure. I don't know what was going on with him."

"Did anything unusual happen in the last few months?"

"Not really. Well...except...he developed an interest in his father. He wanted to find him."

Laura could barely contain her excitement. "And did he?"

"Not that I know of. I discouraged him, of course. He dropped it after a while."

"Why did you discourage him?"

Mrs. Taylor stared past Laura's shoulder for a long moment before she spoke. "Joey doesn't really remember his father, but I do. He wasn't a good man. Oh, he could turn on the charm when he wanted something—or someone—but as soon as he got it, it was like a switch flipped. He'd turn cold and cruel. Or worse, he'd act like you didn't even exist."

She gave a small, bitter laugh. "I was young when I met him—young and stupid. Kicking him out was like finally being able to breathe after years of suffocating. And when he disappeared for good, it was an even bigger relief. I didn't want Joey to ever see that side of him. I thought I could protect him." She shook her head. "Guess I didn't do such a great job of that, huh?"

"It wasn't your fault," I said quietly. Both Laura and Mrs. Taylor turned to look at me, like they'd forgotten I was even there. "Whatever happened to Joey... it wasn't your fault."

Was I saying it for her? Or for myself? Maybe both.

Mrs. Taylor gave me a small, tired smile. "Thank you, sweetie. Maybe I'll believe that someday."

Me too, I thought.

Laura cleared her throat, glancing nervously at me. "Mrs. Taylor, I hope you don't mind me asking, but, um, did the police ever...tell you the official cause of death?"

Mrs. Taylor furrowed her brow. "They said he drowned. Isn't that what happened?"

Laura's gaze flicked in my direction again, and she shifted uneasily. "Yes...but sometimes there's, uh, more information in the autopsy report. Did you ever see it?"

Mrs. Taylor's face tightened, and a flicker of distress passed over her features. "No," she said quickly. "I didn't want to see that. They said it was an accident, and...I didn't want to know more than that. It's enough to know he's gone." She paused, biting her lip, and shook her head, clearly trying to push back tears. "I just...I don't need to think about it any more than I already have."

Laura cleared her throat again, her voice softer. "I'm really sorry to bring all of this up, Mrs. Taylor. We don't mean to upset you."

Mrs. Taylor turned away, dabbing at her eyes, her shoulders slumped with the weight of her grief. "It's fine," she murmured, though the pain in her voice was obvious. "It's fine. I'm just a mess. Don't mind me."

"You have every right to be," Laura said gently before shifting gears. "Would you mind if we looked around Joey's room? Maybe we'll find something that could help us understand what was going on with him."

Mrs. Taylor was quiet for a long moment. Then she sighed, the sound full of pain. "I haven't been in there since he..." Her voice cracked. She cleared her

throat and said, "Well, it doesn't really matter now, does it? Go ahead."

She led us down the hall but stayed in the doorway, hovering for a moment before turning and walking away, her sadness trailing after her like a shadow.

There was a long pause before she slowly walked away. Once Mrs. Taylor's footsteps faded, I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding.

Laura and I stood in silence for a moment, neither of us knowing exactly what to do next, then she turned to me and grabbed my arm.

"Oh my God," she groaned, her voice barely above a whisper. "That was so much harder than I thought it would be. Now I get what you mean about her grief—it really is...overwhelming."

"I told you!" I hissed back.

Laura rubbed her temples as she looked around the room. "I don't even know where to start."

I glanced around the room as well, fighting the flood of memories that hit me all at once. It looked exactly the same as the last time I was there, like Joey had just stepped out for a minute. The posters on the walls, the piles of dirty clothes, the random assortment of books and things scattered around—it all felt so...normal, almost like he could walk back in at any second.

"Me neither," I finally muttered. "It feels...wrong, going through Joey's stuff."

Laura gave me a sympathetic look. "It's not like he's going to care."

"Still, it just feels weird," I said, my voice tight.

"We're his best friends," she replied, moving to the small desk by the bed, the same desk we'd spent hours doing homework on. "You know he wouldn't mind."

"Maybe there was a time he wouldn't've, but toward the end..." I trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

"Look, we're here now," she said with a sigh, "we might as well do what we came to do." She opened the center drawer of the desk and started sifting through it. I heard the rustling of papers, a pen clattering against the wood, but I couldn't bring myself to join her. Instead, I turned toward his closet.

The door creaked as I opened it, revealing his clothes still hanging, his shoes in a haphazard pile just like they always were. I ran my fingers over the sleeves of his sweatshirts, memories of him wearing them suddenly so vivid that I had to step back to steady myself.

I hesitated, then started rifling through the items in the closet one by one, trying to keep my mind focused on the task. Shirts, jackets, hoodies. The same clothes he wore almost every day. Nothing out of the ordinary. Not that I knew what I was looking for.

"Anything?" Laura asked from across the room, her voice distant as she continued rummaging through the papers.

"No," I replied, my voice quieter than I meant it to be.

I reached for a threadbare T-shirt at the back of the closet, trying to steady my breathing. It had been his favorite shirt for years, featuring his favorite big-boobed

anime heroine. The once-vibrant colors had long since faded, and the shirt had so many holes from constant wear that it barely held together. But he'd saved it. I held it against my cheek for a second, breathing in his scent.

"We're just looking for clues," Laura said, a little too casually, like she was trying to convince herself as much as me. "We might find something important. You know, something that helps us understand why he—"

"I know," I cut in, not wanting to hear the rest. My heart twisted painfully as I put the shirt back.

I closed the closet door, feeling the weight of the room settling around me. I wasn't sure what we were supposed to find here. We were wasting our time, dragging up old memories for nothing.

"Oh! What's this?" Laura said suddenly as she straightened up.

"What's what?"

"It looks like a letter."

I crossed the room and leaned over her shoulder as we both tried to decipher the barely legible handwriting.

"I think we just hit the jackpot," she breathed.

Dear Joe,

How's my little slugger? Probably not so little anymore, huh? I can hardly believe it's been almost fifteen years since I last saw you. You were just a kid in dinosaur footie jammies, and now I guess you're starting college this fall. Man, do I feel old!

I know I've missed so much, and I get that you're probably pretty mad at me. Can't say I blame you. I've got a lot of regrets, but, hey, doesn't everyone? I know I

made mistakes. It's just hard to admit sometimes. You reach a point where things seem too far gone to fix. But when I got your letter, it hit me like a ton of bricks. I could hardly believe that you reached out to me. After all this time.

I enjoyed reading all your updates. Congrats on graduating high school. I've been well. You know, doing my thing. I guess I haven't done such a great job of staying in touch. Life gets in the way sometimes. You know how it is. Papa is a rolling stone, you know? I don't tend to stay in one place for long. I'm living on a houseboat these days, currently in Virginia, so it's a miracle your letter even found me.

Listen, I want to make it up to you. We've both been through a lot, and yeah, I've done some things I'm not proud of, but I'm not the man I was back then. Not that I'm perfect, but I'm trying, Joe. I'm trying.

How about this? If I head out tomorrow, I could be back in Salisbury in a week. I've already leased a slip at the marina there, so why don't you meet me there next weekend, and we can catch up? Just the two of us. I know I'm asking a lot, but this could be a chance to start over. Maybe we'll be able to figure it out, or at least take that first step. If you're up for it, my number is 727-555-0198. Feel free to call or text. That way, I'll have your number and I can let you know when I arrive in town, and we can make arrangements.

Hope to see you soon, if you're up for it.

Your Old Man.

Laura finished reading first, her mouth twisting in a frown. "God," she said, voice low. "This guy. This

guy. Acting like missing fifteen years is just...a whoopsie."

I didn't answer right away. I kept reading the letter again, even though every word made my stomach twist tighter. Life gets in the way. I've got my reasons. Like there was ever a good enough reason to forget your kid even existed.

"He didn't even apologize," I muttered. "Not really. Just made excuses."

"Yeah," Laura said, her voice sharp. "He basically says, 'Sorry you feel that way.' Real accountability, Dad of the Year."

I let the letter fall back onto the desk. My chest felt tight, like I couldn't quite catch my breath. "Do you think Joey went to see him?" I asked quietly.

"I don't know," Laura said. "He must have, right? It's dated like three weeks before he died. He wanted a father so bad, he was willing to give that asshole a chance."

Neither of us said anything for a long moment.

"Poor Joey," Laura finally whispered. "He deserved so much better."

"Maybe meeting him was, like, the final straw," I suggested. "Like that's what pushed him over the edge."

"Or..." she paused dramatically. "What if he had something to do with Joey's death?"

I stared at her in horror. "His own father?"

"If you can even call him a father. More like a sperm donor."

I shook myself and glanced back at the letter.

"What's his name? Is there an envelope?"

"I didn't see one."

We searched the rest of the desk's contents and the room as well, but didn't find anything more.

"Should we ask Mrs. Taylor what her husband's name was?" I asked.

"I don't know," Laura said thoughtfully. "It might upset her even more to know that Joey went behind her back and found his dad against her wishes."

"So how do we find him? I guess we can assume he's Mr. Taylor, but that's a pretty common last name."

"But how many own houseboats docked at the marina?"

"Good point," I said. "I guess we could go ask around."

"I can't do it right now," Laura said, sounding genuinely disappointed. "This took longer than I thought it would, and I'm meeting Gabe for dinner. Maybe you and Aidan can go tomorrow."

"I can go by myself."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

A chill went down my spine. "Do you think he's dangerous?"

"You're the one who just suggested he might have had something to do with Joey's death. At the very least, his past history suggests he has some violent tendencies, at least when he's drunk." Her voice took on an overly casual tone, telegraphing that she was about to say something that was almost definitely going to annoy me. "Why don't you want to go with Aidan? I thought you guys were getting close lately."

I sighed. "Really, Laura?"

"What?" she asked, the picture of innocence.

"Are we really doing this now?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Aidan and I are just friends."

"Then it won't be an issue if you take Aidan. I'm just saying you shouldn't go alone."

"Fine, if it ends this conversation, I'll take Aidan with me."

She smiled as if she'd won. "Good boy. Are we done here?"

"Very done."

"Then let's go."

Laura gently slid the letter back into the drawer, and, without speaking, we made our way back to the living room. Mrs. Taylor stood by the window, her arms folded tightly across her chest, staring out at nothing. She turned when she heard us.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked.

Laura and I shared a quick, uncomfortable glance. "Not really," Laura said carefully. "But thank you for letting us look."

Mrs. Taylor nodded, the movement almost mechanical. "Of course. You didn't happen to find his necklace while you were in there, did you?"

I froze as my stomach dropped.

The necklace.

I'd completely forgotten I was still wearing it.

Wordlessly, I pulled the chain out from under my shirt. Mrs. Taylor's eyes widened as if I'd just produced a ghost.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "I've been wearing it so long, it slipped my mind."

She took a small, shaky step toward me, her gaze fixed on the charm. "What do you mean?" she whispered. "How... How did you get that?"

I fumbled with the clasp, pulling the necklace off and holding it out to her. "Someone mailed it to me," I said. "Anonymously. No return address. I...I took it to the police, but they didn't care."

She stared at the necklace like it might bite her. "Someone sent it to you? Why?"

"I don't know," I said, my voice low. I didn't have the heart to tell her about the note that came with it, the one that suggested it was sent for a reason.

Mrs. Taylor's hand hovered near the necklace, trembling slightly, but then dropped back to her side like she couldn't bear to touch it.

"Keep it," she said, voice cracking.

"What? No—" I started, but she shook her head.

"You should keep it. Joey would want you to."

"But it..it meant so much to him," I said, feeling helpless.

"And you meant so much to him," she replied.

"Please. Wear it for him."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and slowly fastened the necklace around my neck. Mrs. Taylor gave a small, brittle smile.

We said our goodbyes after that—stilted, awkward, painful—and stepped out into the cool evening air. I didn't realize how heavy the house had felt until the door clicked shut behind us.

Laura let out a long, shaky sigh once we were back in the car.

"Jesus," she said. "That was brutal."

"I warned you," I mumbled, staring out the window.

"I'm sorry for giving you a hard time earlier," she said, starting the engine. "Honestly? You didn't even scratch the surface of how bad it was going to be. Thank you for coming with me though. I couldn't have done that alone."

We pulled away from the curb, but in my mind, I was still standing in Joey's bedroom.

"Do you really think Joey's dad could've had something to do with this?" I asked after a minute.

"Killing his own son?"

Laura's hands tightened briefly on the steering wheel. "It happens more often than you'd think," she said grimly. "And we don't know anything about this guy. For all we know, he's been rotting in prison for murder for the past fifteen years."

I turned to look at her, heart pounding. "You really think he could be a suspect?"

Laura nodded. "I think he's moved straight to the top of the list. We'll know more once you and Aidan track him down."

I looked away again. What would we find if we did manage to track him down? A grieving father, a murderer, or something else altogether?

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of someone trying to break our front door down. Heart hammering, I stumbled out of my room, tugging on a pair of sweatpants. I nearly collided with Aidan, who appeared in nothing but his boxers, hair sticking up in

about nine different directions, and looking like someone had personally offended him by waking him up.

"What the hell is going on? It's six o'clock in the fucking morning," he grumbled, as if it was somehow my fault.

"I don't know," I muttered, rubbing sleep from my eyes as another round of aggressive knocking rattled the door. "But I guess we should find out before they wake the entire building."

I yanked the door open to find Nikki standing there, brandishing what looked like a rolled-up newspaper. Without so much as a "good morning," she swept past me into our apartment.

"Oh, good!" she chirped when she spotted Aidan blinking at her like she was a hallucination. "You're up too! Perfect! Come on, come on."

"I wasn't up until someone decided to wake me from a very nice dream," Aidan grumped.

Nikki immediately turned her glare on me. "You woke Aidan up?"

I sighed. It was way too early to play the blame game. "Is there a reason you're here at the crack of dawn, Nikki?"

"Yes! Look at this!" she said, waving the bundle at Aidan. "You both need to see. The reviews are in!" She tossed everything onto the kitchen table with a flourish. The newspaper unrolled dramatically, launching the magazine onto the floor at my feet.

"We really need a new paperboy," Aidan muttered, shuffling over.

I bent down and picked up the magazine. It was the *Mid-Atlantic Monthly Art Journal*. Classy. The cover

was some painting of a lighthouse that looked like it belonged in your grandma's bathroom.

"Page forty-eight," Nikki barked, already flipping through the newspaper like a woman on a mission.

I obeyed, finding the page and immediately scanning for my name. It jumped out at me halfway down the second column under the heading "New Talent."

I started reading aloud, trying not to sound too much like a fourth grader giving a book report.

"Promising New Artist Debuts in Maryland. Avant Garde, the internationally renowned art gallery founded by Giovanni Avanti and now managed by his children, Dante and Nikolia Avanti, recently played host to a delightful new artist by the name of Will Keegan. That's me!"

"No shit, Sherlock. Keep going," Aidan said, yawning.

I pushed on. "Keegan, only eighteen and still obviously in the early stages of his career, shows great promise for the art world. His watercolor paintings of old buildings are reminiscent of Andrew Wyeth, though without much of the soul and depth that is so evident in Wyeth's work."

I stopped, frowning. "Wait, I'm soulless?"

"It's called constructive criticism," Nikki said breezily. "Now keep reading."

"It's his more interpretive pieces, some bordering on surrealism, which truly capture the imagination. They show a complex and sometimes tortured inner being. Overall, the twenty paintings on display were an

impressive first showing for a talented and charming young man."

I paused. "So I'm charming now?"

"Keep reading!" Nikki and Aidan barked at the same time.

I gave them a look but obeyed. "With his candid and unique views of the world around him, Keegan is a welcome addition to the art community. Look for great things to come from this artist's brush."

"That's it?" Aidan asked, sounding like he was personally offended there wasn't more.

"It?' That's amazing!" Nikki crowed, practically bouncing. "They loved you! And they mentioned the gallery! This is priceless publicity!"

"They said I had no soul," I reminded her, sulking a little.

"Please. If you had a soul, you wouldn't be a real artist," Nikki said. "Besides, look, there's a great photo in the paper, too."

Aidan and I both leaned over the table at the same time, immediately smacking heads with a solid thunk.

"Ow. Jesus," Aidan grumbled, rubbing his forehead. We both leaned in again, more cautiously this time.

Sure enough, there I was, in my signature black-on-black look, looking broody as hell with Caitlin on my arm, smiling directly into the camera like she belonged on the red carpet.

Aidan stared at it for a few seconds, then turned and walked away, grabbing the remote and flipping on the TV like he couldn't have cared less.

What was his problem? I'd heard of getting up on the wrong side of the bed, but he was acting very peculiar. Whatever was going on, I wasn't going to let him ruin my moment. My first reviews were positive. Mostly. Even if I was apparently soulless and only charming in a tortured sort of way.

I skimmed the short article under the photo. It didn't say much—just a little blurb about the show in the Lifestyle section—but it was still exciting. I tried to ignore the sour feeling that crept in when Aidan didn't say anything.

"Well, I should probably get back," Nikki said, glancing over at Aidan. "Sam's still asleep. I don't want him waking up and thinking he got abandoned."

She pulled me into a quick hug. "Celebrate today, Will. You deserve it."

She waggled her fingers and let herself out, leaving the apartment blessedly quiet again—except for the morning news anchor blathering away on the TV.

I got the impression that she was picking up on Aidan's strange behavior and was tactfully giving us a chance to talk.

"Sure, she let him sleep," Aidan said as he turned the TV off and tossed the remote onto the couch. "I'm going back to bed."

"Aren't you even a little bit happy for me?" I asked. I knew I sounded whiny, but I couldn't figure out why he was acting like I'd done something wrong.

He sighed heavily. "Oh, I'm thrilled—you and your fiancée must be over the moon."

"My what now?" I said, blinking.

“Your fiancée. Caitlin.” His voice dripped sarcasm.

“Caitlin?”

“They spilled the beans in the caption, lover boy,” he called over his shoulder, already stalking down the hall.

“What caption?” I shouted, but his door slammed before I could pry it out of him.

I bent over the newspaper again and found the caption under the photo I’d missed in my rush to read the article earlier. “Keegan and fiancée Caitlin Stewart talk to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Curran of Baltimore,” it read. I barked out a laugh. Obviously, some clueless reporter had gotten their wires crossed.

Unfortunately, Aidan wasn’t laughing.

I rushed down the hall and knocked on his door. No answer. I pushed it open. He was lying on his side on top of the covers, his back to me.

“Aidan, you don’t seriously think Caitlin and I are engaged, do you?”

“Why not?” he said flatly, still facing away.

“You’re obsessed with the baby. You’re always talking about Caitlin. You dragged her to Thanksgiving at Adam’s. Getting married is just the logical next step. Hell, you’d probably do anything to stay in that kid’s life.”

I stared, completely thrown. “I...I thought you supported me.”

“I tried, Will. I really did.” His voice cracked, and suddenly everything clicked.

“You’re jealous,” I said, stunned. “You’re jealous of Caitlin. And the baby.”

He rolled over, his face twisted with pain. “Of course I’m jealous, you idiot! I’m in love with you! How can you not see that?”

I froze. “You...what?”

“I told you,” he said, sitting up. “The night we slept together. I told you I loved you. It wasn’t some heat-of-the-moment thing. I meant it.” He shoved himself up and crossed to the window. “I’ve been here—every time you needed me. When Joey hurt you. When you tried to kill yourself. When you decided to hunt Joey’s killer. Always. I was there. And what’s it gotten me? Jack shit. I’m still just good old reliable Aidan.”

He turned back to me, breathing hard. “And you know what? I’d do it all again. Because I love you. But just once...I need to know it matters. That I matter.”

He collapsed onto the edge of the bed, face buried in his hands.

I knelt in front of him and gently pulled his hands free.

“You do matter,” I said, my voice shaking. “Aidan, I’m so sorry. I don’t even know who I’d be without you. I was scared I’d already messed everything up, so I tried to keep things platonic. I thought I was protecting you. But I wasn’t. I was hurting you worse.” I swallowed hard. “You’re my best friend. My anchor. My—”

“But you don’t love me,” he said, flatly.

“I...I don’t know...”

Aidan pulled away like I’d slapped him. “That says it all, doesn’t it?”

He stood and walked to the door, shoulders slumped. “I’ll be fine. I always am.”

The bathroom door clicked shut. A moment later, the sound of the shower roared to life.

I sank down to the floor, numb.

I'd taken him for granted. Assumed he'd always be there to catch me when I fell, to comfort me when I broke. I'd leaned on him without ever once thinking maybe he needed someone to lean on, too. And now...now I might have lost him.

The thought nearly shattered me.

I was still sitting there when Aidan reappeared, damp, towel slung around his waist, surprise flashing across his face when he saw me.

I looked up at him, and everything inside me broke wide open.

"I do love you," I whispered.

He squeezed his eyes shut like he was in pain, then looked at me again, raw and wrecked.

"Not again, Will," he said, voice rough. "Don't...don't do this to me again."

"I'm not. I mean it. I love you."

Tears spilled down his cheeks, unchecked.

"No," he said hoarsely. "It'll always be something else. Joey. Caitlin. The baby. You'll never put me first."

"No!" I cried. "Maybe I'll always love Joey, some part of me. But I'm here now. I want to be with you. I want you."

He shook his head, broken. "If Joey walked through that door right now and said he loved you, what would you do?"

"Joey's dead," I said helplessly.

"What if, Will?" he shouted. "What if?"

I closed my eyes and forced myself to face it.
"If Joey walked in right now..." I said quietly,
"I'd tell him he was too late. That he shattered my heart
once—but someone else put it back together. Piece by
painful piece. And when it was whole again, I realized it
didn't belong to him anymore. It belonged to you. It
always has."

I held my hand out. "Please, Aidan. Let me give
you my heart."

He froze—so still he barely seemed to breathe.
And then, slowly, he moved toward me.

"Do you mean it?" he whispered.

"Yes," I said.

He took another step. Then grabbed my wrist and
yanked me to my feet. His arms locked around my neck,
and I wrapped mine around his waist. His skin was hot
and damp under my palms as I ran my hands down his
back.

I kissed his neck, his shoulder, the curve of his
chest. My hands found the edge of the towel and let it
fall.

He caught my wrists. "Will," he said, his voice a
low rasp. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything. I love
you."

Aidan pulled me in and kissed me like a
drowning man grabbing his last breath.

"I love you too," he said against my mouth.

And then he grinned—that gorgeous, reckless
grin—and lifted me as if I weighed nothing at all and
threw me onto the bed.

Turns out, the first time hadn't been a fluke after all.

The fireworks were still there—hotter and brighter than ever.

Chapter 17

I awoke a few hours later, my back against his chest, his arms around me, our legs tangled. There were no misgivings this time, only a sense that everything was just as it was supposed to be. I wriggled around so I could see his face.

My stirring woke him, and his eyes fluttered open. I smiled and kissed him softly on the lips.

"It wasn't a dream," he whispered in an awed voice.

"No, it's for real," I said softly. "I love you, Aidan Scott."

A patented Aidan original grin spread slowly across his face, complete with dimples, and I realized how long it had been since I'd seen one.

"Say it again," he said.

I giggled. "I love you."

"One more time."

"I love you. I love you. I love you."

He kissed me again, and before long we were working our way toward another fireworks display—until my phone started ringing from my room across the hall.

"Mmm... let it ring," Aidan murmured against my skin.

"It might be important," I said, though my resolve was already weakening. I'd never been good at ignoring a ringing phone.

"If it is, they'll call back," he said, his lips trailing down my neck—making me forget entirely why I was protesting.

The ringing stopped...only to start up again a few seconds later.

I sat up. "It must be important."

Aidan sighed. "Fine. But I'll get it. Don't move." He stood, then leaned down for one more quick, lingering kiss. When he straightened, he just stood there for a moment, staring at me—like he couldn't believe I was real, sitting naked in his bed.

I stared back, forgetting the phone altogether. He was almost too beautiful—like Michelangelo's David, come to life. Dark blond curls framed a face that looked carved by an artist's hand: high cheekbones, a strong, even nose, those full, devastatingly kissable lips. His eyes—deep, intense green—were locked on me. His body was muscled without being bulky, every line perfectly defined from years of working out.

Conflicting waves of emotion crashed over me—fierce love and desire, tangled with guilt for every time I had taken him for granted.

The phone started ringing again, snapping us both back to reality.

Aidan gave me a look that was half amused, half exasperated and dashed out of the room. He returned a moment later, holding out my phone.

"It's Laura," he said.

I took the phone and answered. "Hello?"

"Will?" Laura said. "What's going on? I didn't think you were ever going to answer. I called the gallery, and Nikki said you had the day off. And then when you didn't answer I started to freak out. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," I answered, smiling up at Aidan.

"Everything is great."

"You weren't still asleep this late, were you?"

"No, I wasn't asleep," I said carefully.

"Why are you being so weird? Well, weirder than usual," Laura said. "Anyway, I talked to my friend—the one who knows Keiyara—and I found out where she lives. She's in the dorms on campus. I thought we could go talk to her after work, but since you're off today, how about going now?"

"Now?"

"Yes, now. I don't have class until later this afternoon."

"I can't."

"Why not? You have the day off. What could possibly be more important than finding Joey's killer?"

"Nothing, it's just—"

"Great, then let's go."

"It's, uh, not a good time."

"Then when?"

"I don't know."

"For God's sake, Will! Do you even want to do this? I thought you wanted to find Joey's killer."

"I do!"

"Then act like it. We have to talk to Keiyara. Killian said it could be important."

I was running out of excuses. The truth was, I just didn't want this moment with Aidan to end.

"You should go," Aidan murmured into my ear. He'd slid back onto the bed beside me, close enough to hear the conversation while lazily tracing circles across my chest.

"But...what about us?" I whispered, holding the phone as far from him as possible.

"We're great," he said with a lazy grin. "Besides, I'll come with you. I'm free. I slept through the only class I had today."

I sighed. Clearly, the current was moving too fast to swim against. If Aidan was willing to come along, there wasn't much point in fighting it.

I lifted the phone back to my ear. "Okay, let's do it."

"Awesome! How soon can you meet me in front of Tubman Hall?"

"I don't even know where that is."

"I do," Aidan said.

"Two hours," I told her. We definitely needed showers, and maybe a quick breakfast. I'd worked up a sweat...and an appetite.

"Perfect," she said. I could hear the satisfaction in her voice. "Oh, and Will...was that Aidan I heard just now? Are you two...?"

She let the question dangle, but I knew exactly what she was fishing for. Smirking, I said, "Bye, Laura," and hung up.

Revenge was sweet—and nothing tortured Laura more than unanswered questions.

I tossed the phone off the side of the bed and turned back to Aidan. His arms immediately wrapped around me.

"A couple of hours, huh?" he said, voice low. "Plenty of time to pick up where we left off.."

He didn't have to ask twice.

We were late meeting Laura. She was sitting on the curb, arms crossed, when we finally pulled up. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Aidan behind the wheel.

"He came along to help," I said as soon as I opened the door.

"At least you're here," she grumbled. "What took you so long?"

"We were, uh...in the middle of something when you called," Aidan said with a wide grin. I couldn't hold back one of my own even as I felt my face flush.

Laura glanced between us, her eyes narrowing, then widening in sudden realization.

"Oh my God!" she exclaimed. "You two are finally together, aren't you?"

I blushed even harder, and Aidan just nodded happily.

"About damn time! When did this happen?"

"This morning," I mumbled.

"Twice," Aidan added with a snicker.

I thought my face might burst into flames.

"Jesus! Um, overshare much?" Laura said with a slightly stunned expression on her face.

For a second, I worried Aidan might have pushed too far—but then she lunged forward and pulled both of us into a fierce hug. Aidan just kept on grinning like a fool as she stepped back.

"Okay, enough mush," Laura said briskly. "Wipe that dumb look off your face, Aidan. As long as you're here, you might as well help."

"Yes, sir, madam, sir!" Aidan said, snapping to attention.

I giggled, and Laura rewarded me with a scathing glare. The emotional moment was over. I made an effort to become more serious.

"So what's the plan?" I asked, trying to redeem myself.

"Why do we need a plan? We're just going to talk to Keiyara," Laura said.

"All three of us?"

"Well, I didn't know Aidan was coming, did I?" she snapped.

"If we all show up, it might feel like an ambush," I pointed out.

"Good point," Aidan said.

"Do we even know if she's in her room?" I asked.

Laura hesitated. "No."

"I think we need a plan," Aidan said, earning a glare from Laura.

"Then come up with one," she said.

"First, we need to find out if she's actually there. Why don't you call up and check?"

Laura clearly resented Aidan stepping into the leadership role, but she couldn't argue with the logic. She stalked over to the call box and punched in Keiyara's room number while we followed.

A girl answered almost immediately.

"Is Keiyara there?" Laura asked.

"No, she's in class," the roommate said.

Laura glanced at us. I shrugged.

"Okay, uh, thanks," Laura said awkwardly.

"You want to leave a message?" the girl offered.

"No, that's okay. Thanks anyway."

Once she hung up, Laura turned back to us.
"Now what?"
We stood there awkwardly.
"That was my only idea," Aidan admitted.
"We could search her room," I suggested.
"Search her room?" Laura echoed.
"Yeah, like we did with Joey's room. Look for anything unusual."
"Will, I barely know her. How would I even know what's normal for Keiyara? And besides, how would we get in? You really think her roommate's going to let us just waltz in?"
"Her roommate sounded nice," Aidan said.
"Maybe we could talk to her. Maybe Keiyara told her something."
"So, what, we just knock and hope for the best?" I asked.
"We need a plan!" Aidan said brightly.
"Here's a plan, dork," Laura said. "You distract the roommate, Will and I will poke around."
"I thought you didn't want to search her room."
"Well, I've changed my mind," she said huffily.
"Why do I have to be the distraction?" Aidan asked.
"Because you're hot."
"And I'm not?" I protested.
"You're cute. Aidan's hot," she said with exaggerated patience. "He'll be more distracting."
"I think Will's hot," Aidan said, grinning.
"Thank you," I said, vindicated. "Besides, what if she's a lesbian?"
"Oh my God, focus!"

"How am I supposed to distract her?"

"You're a guy, she's a girl—you'll figure it out. Improvise!"

"I'm not exactly an expert on flirting with women."

"Wing it, Romeo."

"If he's Romeo, does that make me Juliet? I want to be Romeo."

"Hey, you're the one with a thing for balconies."

Ouch! I swung my cast at her, and she ducked, laughing.

"So I'm the bait while you two snoop," Aidan said. "Nice."

"You weren't even supposed to be here, remember? Adapt and overcome, that's what good leaders do," Laura said loftily.

"That's what a good leader would do. What do you do?" he shot back.

"Very funny. Are we going to stand here all day or actually do this?"

"How do we even get in?" Aidan asked. "Don't you need a student ID?"

Laura whipped out her ID and scanned it against the pad. Nothing.

"You don't even live here," Aidan pointed out.

"Hey, it was worth a shot."

Just then, a red-haired girl with earbuds exited, oblivious. I caught the door before it shut.

"Problem solved," I said, grinning.

We slipped inside and took the stairs to the third floor.

"Okay," Laura whispered. "Aidan, you knock. Will and I will hide around the corner."
"Why are you hiding?"
"We just are! Stop arguing."
"I'm not arguing, I'm asking sensible questions—"

Laura knocked and dragged me around the corner before he could finish.

From my spot, I could just see Aidan but not whoever answered the door. He looked completely out of his depth.

"I...uh...hi," Aidan stammered.

"Hey, Aidan," said a female voice, confused.
"What's up?"

Relief flooded Aidan's face. He obviously knew her.

"Keisha! Hi!"

"So, what are you doing here?" she asked. "Miss an assignment?"

"Assignment? Oh, no. I, uh..."

"How did you even get in?"

"I, um..."

She laughed. "Boy, you are not trying to hit on me!"

"What? No! I mean...yes?"

I couldn't hold back a loud snort of laughter. Laura elbowed me hard.

"Is someone with you?" Keisha asked suspiciously.

"Um...yes?"

Sighing, Laura pulled me out of hiding and walked over. I followed, still choking back laughter.

"Hi, I'm Laura," she said smoothly. "And this is Will."

Keisha studied us warily.

"We were friends of Joey Taylor," Laura said.

Blank stare.

"The guy who died at the party about a month ago?"

"Oh, right."

"We heard Keiyara found him and we were hoping she might have said something to you about that night."

Keisha shrugged. "We're not exactly besties. She doesn't tell me much, and I don't tell her anything. Honestly, I can't stand her. She's like the Energizer bunny—guys in and out of here all the time. I have to study at my girlfriend's place or the library."

"You two don't get along?" I clarified.

"Oil and vinegar. I'm sure somebody in campus housing thought they were doing us some kind of favor by pairing us up, but they can fuck right off. Just because we're two black girls does not mean we have anything in common."

"Would you mind if we looked around her stuff real quick?" Laura asked.

Keisha grinned. "Help yourself. Hell, take whatever you want. It's such a mess, she probably wouldn't even notice."

"We're not stealing anything—" I started, but she waved me off, ducking inside.

A moment later, she reappeared with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

"I'm off to class. Room's all yours. Just leave my stuff alone and nobody gets hurt."

She slipped past us and headed for the elevator. We stood there, slack jawed, watching her until the doors slid closed.

"We have a class together," Aidan said unnecessarily.

"You are such an imbecile," Laura growled.

"What? I got us in, didn't I?"

"No, Will and I got us in. You almost got a date."

"We can stand out here and argue, or we can take a look inside," I said as I started into the room. Laura and Aidan followed.

You didn't need to be a detective to figure out which side belonged to who.

Keisha's half of the room revealed a type-A personality. Her bed was neatly made, the corners of her khaki-colored duvet tucked tight like hospital sheets. A small collection of framed photos—smiling family members, a dog in mid-bark, a very butch lesbian in a wooded setting—sat arranged on her desk beside a row of neatly stacked textbooks. Above her bed, a carefully pinned lesbian pride flag added a much-needed splash of color.

Keiyara's side, by contrast, was pure chaos. It looked like a garbage truck had taken a wrong turn and dumped its entire load. Fast-food bags oozed the scent of old grease, and half-empty cups sweated rings onto the battered nightstand. Discarded makeup products, crumpled papers and other junk cluttered the desk, while clothes lay in tangled heaps on the floor, chairs, even the window ledge.

I suddenly felt very bad for Keisha.

"How do people live like this?" Laura said with disgust. She nudged the closest pile cautiously with her foot, as if afraid that something alive might be hiding in it.

"Where do we even start?" I asked.

"With a shovel?" Aidan suggested.

"We'll never find anything, even if we knew what we were looking for," Laura lamented.

I picked up a pile of papers and flipped through them. They were all school assignments. I dropped them back in their place and picked up another pile which turned out to be the same thing.

With a matching pair of sighs, Laura and Aidan started pawing through piles of their own. We worked for a few minutes, trying to keep things pretty much where they were just in case Keiyara did have some sort of order to the chaos.

"Hey," Aidan called, just as the door handle rattled. We all jumped to our feet, instinctively clumping together in the center of the room.

The door swung open to reveal a rather startled-looking girl with long braids and just a little too much makeup. She was wearing skin-tight jeans and an equally tight, low-cut shirt that made the most of her considerable assets.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing in my room?"

"Hi, Keiyara," Laura said quickly, her voice too bright. "Keisha let us in. I'm Laura Duvier. We have a class together?"

Keiyara blinked, still confused. "Okay, but what are you doing here? And who are they?" She motioned sharply toward Aidan and me.

"These are my friends, Will and Aidan. We just want to talk."

Her eyes flickered uneasily over us before locking back on Laura. "Talk about what?"

"You found Joey Taylor at that party, right?"

Immediately, her whole body stiffened. "Yeah. So?"

"We were friends of Joey. We just have a few questions."

Keiyara hugged her books tighter against her chest like a shield. "Look, I'm busy. I don't have time for this."

"It'll only take a minute," Laura coaxed.

"I can't help you," Keiyara said, inching deeper into the room. Her voice had an edge—brittle and anxious.

"But you don't even know what we want to ask."

"I already told the police everything," she snapped. "I found him. That's it."

"Please, Keiyara," Laura said softly. "Just listen."

For a moment, Keiyara hesitated. Then she dropped her books on the desk with a sharp thud. "Fine. One minute."

"How did you find him?"

She swallowed hard. "I needed air. I stepped outside and...there he was. Floating face-down. It was..." Her voice trailed off, her eyes glazing as the memory seemed to replay itself.

"Was anyone with you?" Laura asked gently.

That snapped Keiyara back into the room like a whip crack. "No! I was alone."

"You're sure?" I pressed. "When I went inside, there were people smoking out back."

"You were there?" she asked sharply, eyes narrowing. "Wait. What did you say your names were?"

"Laura Duvier," Laura started, but Keiyara waved her away.

"Not you. Them."

"Aidan Scott and Will Keegan," I said.

Something shifted in Keiyara's face—panic? Recognition? Whatever it was, Keiyara hesitated, visibly calculating. "There was no one else around when I found him. The backyard was empty."

It felt like we were getting nowhere. I was ready to leave, but Laura clearly wasn't done. She had that look—the one that said she smelled a lie and wasn't about to let it go.

"Who else was with you?" she asked, voice deceptively casual.

Keiyara's eyes flashed. "I said no one!"

"Who's the guy, Keiyara?"

"For Christ's sake, are you calling me a liar?"

"Who was he?"

"Get out. Leave me alone."

"Not until you tell me. If you didn't see anything, maybe he did."

"I said nobody saw anything!" Her voice cracked on the last word.

"What are you scared of?" Laura pressed, her voice low, almost kind.

"I... I'm not scared." The lie rang hollow.

"You know it wasn't an accident. What do you know?"

"I don't know anything!" Keiyara produced her phone from her cleavage. "I'm calling campus security."

Aidan shifted uneasily beside me. Maybe we had pushed too hard.

"Just tell us who he was," I said. "Then we'll leave."

Keiyara hesitated. Then, with a choked sound of frustration, she relented. "I don't know his name, okay? I was fucked up, high as shit. He was just some guy. Cute. Sweet. We wanted some privacy, so we went out to the pool house. No one was around."

"What happened then?"

"We were... busy." She looked embarrassed but kept her chin up. "And then he said he heard voices. I told him to ignore it. He did. Afterward, when we came back outside, that's when we found...him."

"And the guy?"

"He freaked. I screamed and he just bolted—jumped over the fence like it was nothing. Left me there with a dead body."

"That's awful," Aidan said softly, but I barely heard him. I was back in that moment—the scream, the guy vaulting over the fence. I remembered. I'd talked to him.

We'd gotten what we came for. Sort of.

"Thanks for talking to us," Aidan said politely, as if Laura had actually given her a choice.

"Just get out," she snapped. "And stay the hell away from me."

The door slammed behind us so hard the walls shook. Down the hallway, a few doors opened and curious faces peeked out, like prairie dogs at the zoo.

Laura flashed a smile. "It's cool. We're good."

The heads retreated.

"That was a little intense," Aidan said cautiously.

"Do you think we were a little hard on her?"

Laura shrugged. "It worked, didn't it? We know someone else was there with Joey."

"All we know is that some guy thought he heard voices. We don't even know his name or even what he looks like."

"Actually," I said, "I do."

They turned toward me, twin expressions of shock.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Caitlin and I were in the front yard that night. We heard Keiyara scream. We were still there when a guy jumped the fence. I talked to him. I think I'd recognize him if I saw him again."

"Great," Aidan said dryly. "So what now? Set up a line-up?"

I shrugged. "Maybe Killian will have ideas."

"Either way," Aidan said, "we know something else too. Keiyara's the one who sent you the necklace and the note."

Laura lifted a skeptical eyebrow. "And how do you figure that?"

Aidan grinned and pulled a crumpled sheet of paper from his pocket. It had four words typed in bold: **IT WASN'T A ACCIDENT.**

I gasped.

"Rough draft," Aidan said smugly. "She messed up the grammar—'a accident' instead of 'an accident.' She must've fixed it before she sent it."

"How considerate," Laura muttered.

"But how did she know where to send it?" I asked. "Why send it to me at all?"

"That I don't know," Aidan admitted. "Maybe she heard or saw more than she admitted."

"Should we go back and confront her?" I asked.

"Not now," Aidan said. "She's too wound up. Give it time."

I glanced at Laura. She wasn't listening. Her forehead was furrowed in deep thought. I waved a hand in front of her face. "Hey, you good?"

She blinked. "Huh? Oh. Yeah. I'm fine. Just...something's bugging me but I can't figure out what."

"Just one thing?"

She looked back at Keiyara's door.

"Well, should we get going then?" I asked.

"You two go ahead. I'll call you later," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I just need to think."

There was no point arguing, we'd driven separately, so Aidan and I headed for the elevator.

"What was that about?" I asked when the doors closed.

"Who knows?" Aidan said, shrugging it off.

"Laura's always up to something, isn't she?"

We were pulling out of the parking lot when I spotted a familiar face walking across campus.

"Oh hey, hang on," I said to Aidan, releasing my seatbelt and jumping out of the car.

"Caitlin!" I called.

She turned at the sound of my voice and waited while I jogged over.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, looking past me to the car where Aidan still sat in the driver's seat.

"We found Keiyara. We just finished talking to her."

That brought her attention back to me with a quickness. "Really? Where does she live? Did she tell you anything?"

"She's in Tubman Hall," I said, pointing over my shoulder. "And yeah, apparently, she was the pool house when Joey died," I said. "But she was...preoccupied."

Caitlin's confused look shifted as the implication clicked. "Does she see anything?"

"Not really. The guy she was with thought he heard voices. I think he's the one we saw jump the fence that night."

"Did you get his name?"

"Not yet. Keiyara insists she doesn't know. That's our next move."

Caitlin nodded thoughtfully, staring over my shoulder at the dorm. "Interesting. I should go. I have class."

We said goodbye, and I walked back to the car.

Aidan looked a little put out when I climbed into the passenger seat, but I leaned over and kissed him.

"Hey," I said. "I'm all yours. I promise."

He smiled. "You better believe it, Mister. Let's go. We've done enough sleuthing for today. I can think of better things for us to do, things that don't involve Laura or Caitlin."

"Oh really?" I could hardly wait.

I woke up the next morning, and for a few disoriented moments, I couldn't remember where I was. Then I felt Aidan's arms around me, and it all came back to me. After we got home, we'd only left his bedroom long enough to grab our food delivery for the rest of the night. Aidan insisted that it was our bedroom now, which made sense since it was the bigger room, but I would miss my view of the river—though not enough to argue. And I definitely wouldn't miss the fire escape and all its associated memories.

I lay for a while just watching him sleep. I didn't want to get up, but I had to get to work.

I carefully slipped out of bed without waking Aidan. I started the shower, then went into my old bedroom to get my clothes. When I went back into the bathroom, I was startled to find Aidan waiting for me in the shower. Before I could say a word, he pulled me under the hot spray, boxers and all. He cut off my protest with a passionate kiss.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he asked while I caught my breath. He took the bar of soap and started to wash me while I slipped out of my wet underwear.

"I was going to after I took my shower."

"I woke up, and you weren't there."

"I'm sorry," I said with another kiss. "I won't let it happen again."

"Good," he said as his soapy hands slid down my sides. "See that you don't."

"Aidan, I have to go to work," I protested faintly.

"I'll drive you."

"How does that make a difference? I still have to be there at the same...ooohhh," the rest of my case was cut off by Aidan's convincing counterargument.

That morning, I learned that fireworks go off even in the shower.

Since Aidan did end up driving me to work, he had to pick me up, too. As soon as I got in the car, I could tell something was up.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Let's wait until we get home," he said, not looking at me.

"Aidan, you're scaring me. What's going on?"

He sighed and glanced over. "It's Keiyara."

"What about her?"

"She's dead."

I gasped. "What? When? What happened?"

"I don't know. Laura called right before I left to pick you up. She didn't have any details. She'd just heard it through the campus grapevine."

"Are we sure?"

He shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road. "I guess it could just be a rumor, but that would be a wild coincidence, don't you think?"

I pulled out my phone and tried searching for her name, but nothing came up. I called Laura, but her phone went directly to voicemail.

We rushed inside as soon as we got home and turned on the TV, hoping to catch the local news.

Luckily, we'd only missed the first few minutes. The anchor, a heavysset guy who'd been on the channel for as long as I could remember, was talking about where you could go to see holiday light displays. I spaced out a bit while waiting for the next segment, but tuned back in when I heard him say, "We turn now to more disturbing news from Pemberton University. Just one month after the campus was rocked by the tragic drowning death of freshman Joseph Taylor at an off-campus party, the university is now facing another heartbreaking loss."

The scene cut to aerial footage of campus with emergency vehicles parked outside a residence hall.

"Authorities have confirmed that, late this afternoon, a student was found dead in their dorm room in what police are calling 'an apparent suicide.' The discovery was made by the student's roommate, who immediately contacted emergency services."

A photo of Tubman Hall faded in, and my stomach dropped.

"The student's identity has not yet been released, pending notification of family. No details have been provided regarding the method or circumstances, but investigators say no foul play is suspected at this time."

Cut to a face I recognized. It was Detective Hammett.

"We understand the concern and heartbreak this brings to the community," she said. "At this point, we are conducting a full investigation and working closely with university officials to provide answers."

I frowned as they returned to the anchor. Detective Hammett worked homicide. What was she doing there if it was just a suicide.

The anchor continued, pulling me from my thoughts. "This latest tragedy has prompted renewed questions about student mental health and the emotional toll of campus life. We've reached out to Pemberton University administrators for comment, but so far, there has been no official statement. However, the university's counseling center has announced expanded walk-in hours and emergency support services for students in distress.

"If you or someone you know is struggling with thoughts of self-harm, help is available. You can call or text the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988, 24 hours a day.

"Coming up: What universities are doing nationwide to improve mental health access—"

Aidan turned off the TV, and we both sat staring at the blank screen.

Finally, I found my voice. "I don't think she killed herself," I said, my words barely above a whisper.

Aidan was quick to respond. "Don't jump to conclusions. Maybe she saw more than she was letting on, and felt guilty. Or maybe she was scared we'd find out she sent you the necklace."

"Either way, doesn't that make us responsible for her death?" My voice was small, filled with doubt.

"No!" Aidan said firmly, shaking his head. "We're only responsible for our own actions." But there was a hesitation in his tone, like he was trying to convince himself as much as me.

"But if it was suicide, what if confronting her was what triggered it? And if it was murder, maybe we somehow led the killer right to her. The timing is too convenient..."

"We didn't kill her, Will."

"What difference does it make if she's dead?"

"It makes a big difference. Maybe she would have done it anyway. Maybe she had something to do with Joey's death and she just couldn't live with the guilt."

"What?"

"We only have her word for what happened that night, and she admitted to being there."

"Don't forget that Caitlin and I saw the guy she was with jump over the fence."

"Right, but maybe he was involved, too."

"You think they both killed Joey and they're covering it up?"

"Stranger things have happened. Maybe Keiyara felt guilty and sent you the necklace."

"But why kill Joey at all?"

"I don't know!" Aidan sighed, clearly frustrated. "I'm just throwing ideas out there. We don't know anything for sure."

"Exactly. There's so much we don't know," I said, running a hand through my hair. "We need to find the guy she was with that night."

"But how?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Maybe we need to get Killian involved. An emergency meeting."

"I'll text him and see if he and Asher can come over before Thursday." He pulled out his phone and started texting.

After a long moment of silence, I spoke again, the thought weighing on me. "I just can't shake the feeling that she'd still be alive if we hadn't gone to talk to her."

Aidan slumped back in his chair, letting out a deep sigh. "Yeah," he muttered. "Maybe you're right."

Chapter 18

"It's not our fault," Laura said adamantly.

She, Gabe, and Caitlin had come over as soon as we called an emergency meeting. Killian couldn't come until Friday, but we still felt like we needed to touch base after the latest news.

"We don't even know what happened yet," Gabe said, agreeing with his girlfriend. "No details, at least."

"We know we were there that afternoon and, just a few hours later, her roommate found her dead," I pointed out.

"Poor Keisha," Aidan said softly.

"You saw her," Laura said. "Did she seem like someone who was stable to you?"

"She didn't seem suicidal," I shot back.

"And I guess you're some sort of expert just because you tried twice and failed?" she snapped, and I gasped.

"Hey," Gabe said sharply. "Not cool."

Laura was blinking rapidly. "Fuck."

I abruptly stood up, fighting back tears. In a flash, Aidan was on his feet with his arms around me. He glared over my head at Laura.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he growled.

Laura stood too. "I'm so sorry! That was totally uncalled for."

The tears were starting to leak out so I turned my face into Aidan's chest.

"Maybe we should just leave," Gabe said. "We're all shaken, tensions are high."

"I don't care how upset you are, you don't say shit like that," Aidan said, anger coloring his voice.

"Aidan..." Gabe started.

"No, Aidan's right," Laura said, sounding shaky.

"I...I don't know what's going on with me lately. I think this is all starting to really get to me but that's no excuse. Will, I'm truly sorry."

I sniffed and pulled away from Aidan's protective embrace.

"I know. It's okay."

"No, it's not okay. I can't believe I said that. I feel awful." Tears were running down her face, too.

"Well, now we both feel awful," I said with a valiant attempt at a smile.

"We can't let this tear us apart," Gabe said gently.

"We all need to take a deep breath, okay?"

Aidan reached for my hand.

I suddenly realized that Caitlin had been very quiet through the entire exchange and looked over to where she sat. Her eyes were locked onto my hand clasped in Aidan's, a strange look clouding her expression.

When she noticed me watching her, she gave me a tight smile and shifted her attention away.

We all sat back down, with Aidan a lot closer to me than he had been, but we didn't really have anything relevant to say. Aidan shared his theory that Keiyara and her mystery man may have been involved in Joey's death, but no one had much appetite for detective work after our emotional outburst.

Laura and Gabe soon made their excuses and left. Caitlin waited until they were gone before she, too, stood to leave. She'd been extremely quiet the entire time.

I walked her to the door, where she paused and glanced over my shoulder. Aidan had disappeared down the hall.

"So, I take it you and Aidan are together?" she asked, almost too casually.

"Oh yeah. In all the excitement, I guess we forgot to mention that. It, um, just sort of happened. Like, yesterday."

She nodded and gave me another tight smile. "Good for you," she said. "Look, can I borrow some money? For the baby? I need to get some tests done and they're not cheap."

"What kinds of tests?" I asked, feeling panic tighten in my chest. "Is the baby okay?"

She shrugged. "That's what the tests are for."

"How much do you need?"

"Like, a couple thousand."

"Two *thousand*?" I thought maybe I'd misunderstood her.

"About that."

"I...I don't have that much right now. At least not until I get paid for the show."

"When will that be?"

"I'll ask Nikki. When do you need to get the tests done?"

"As soon as possible."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

"That won't be necessary."

"But, I mean, I can be there for you—"

"I'll be fine on my own. I always am." She turned on her heel and walked away.

I stood there for a minute, wondering what was going on with everybody in my life. I was beginning to feel like Aidan was my only source of stability. I closed the door and went to find him.

Aidan was extra attentive all night, even though I kept assuring him I was fine. I'd just been shocked in the moment, but I knew Laura well enough to know she didn't mean to hurt me.

"Her mouth just works faster than her brain sometimes," I explained later that night as we were lying in bed. "She's...sharp-tongued at the best of times, and she lashes out when she's stressed. I'm sure she's feeling the same guilt we are. She's just overcompensating."

Aidan raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure you're not the psych major here?"

I snorted. "Yeah right."

"Maybe you should consider it. You know, if the whole world-famous artist thing doesn't pan out."

I snuggled into his side and he wrapped an arm protectively around me. "Nah, one shrink in the family is enough," I said, and we drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, he insisted on driving me to work again. When he picked me up, though, he headed for the river, but instead of turning toward our building, he went the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the marina. I thought we could look for Joey's dad."

"After what happened with Keiyara?"

"We still don't really know what happened there," he said. "We've jumped to a lot of conclusions, but we have very few facts. They haven't even officially released her name. What if it was just all one big coincidence and it wasn't even her who died?"

"That would be a pretty big coincidence."

"Yeah, but we don't know. That's my point."

"Was Keisha in class today?"

"No," he admitted. "But let me put it this way, do you want to stop looking for Joey's killer?"

"No! I just don't want anyone else to get hurt."

"Yeah, that's totally reasonable. So we just have to be a little more careful going forward."

"And how do we do that?"

"I don't know. I just figured we should get back on the proverbial horse and continue the investigation, reclaim some normalcy, and nose around."

"Nose around? Now you sound like Laura." I put on my best old-timey gangster voice, "We're gonna nose around, see. Don't get in our way or you'll be sleepin' with the fishes, see. We just happen to gots a pair of concrete shoes in your size, see."

"Oh, I see, alright. I see you're terrible at accents."

"Technically, you hear that," I pointed out in my own voice, then added, "See?"

He grinned, and, for a moment, things felt normal again.

We parked and walked around the marina for a few minutes looking for someone to talk to, but the place was deserted, perhaps not surprising since it was almost December. Most of the boats were covered for the

winter. I pulled my coat tighter around me against the cold air blowing off the river. The temperatures had dropped dramatically the last few days.

Finally, we found an older man with a shock of white hair sticking out from under his baseball cap on board a small boat named the Mildred Belle. He was struggling to pull his canvas boat cover down far enough to snap it on and didn't notice us until we drew alongside him on the dock, startling him a little.

"Excuse me," I called. "Sorry to bother you, but we're looking for Mr. Taylor. We think he has a houseboat docked in this marina."

The man eyed us suspiciously. He was deeply tanned, rough and weathered by years in the elements, but his dark eyes were diamond sharp, taking in every detail. I began to feel vaguely guilty under his gaze.

"Nope, sorry," he said finally.

"Okay, sorry for interrupting," I said and we turned away.

"Hang on. Would you young bucks mind giving me a hand here, mebbe?"

I exchanged glances with Aidan, who gave me a subtle nod. "Sure," I agreed.

We stepped aboard his boat, and, for the next few minutes, helped him pull the cover taut enough to snap in place.

"Thanks, I appreciate the help," he said when we'd finished. "She's named after my wife."

His non sequitur threw me, and it took me a second to realize he meant the boat.

"She must have been flattered," I said. I wasn't sure how I'd feel having a boat named after me, but I supposed it would be an honor.

"She died two years ago, a year before I got this gal."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"She'd suffered for a long time. Cancer."

I didn't know what to say. Mercifully, Aidan stepped in. "My dad died of cancer, too," he said. The two men stood in a companionable silence for a few moments, sharing a common grief.

"Terrible disease," the older man said, finally. "You wouldn't happen to be looking for Jack Taylor, would you?"

"Jack Taylor?" I said cautiously. I didn't know if that was who I meant or not.

"Yep."

"Possibly?"

He looked at me with renewed suspicion. "Why are you looking for him?"

"He's my best friend's father."

"Well, now, that's mighty interesting seeing as how Jack's boy jus' died a few weeks back."

"Yes, I know. His name was Joey."

He nodded as if I'd spoken the secret password. "Jack was right broken up over that. I was here the day he got word. On the radio! Can you believe it? Helluva way to hear your boy is dead."

"Yes, sir, it is. I wanted to find him to tell him how sorry I was."

"Well, I'm sure he ain't here today, it being winter and all."

"Oh. I was under the impression that he lived on his houseboat."

"You can mebbe get away with that down south, but it's not much fun up in these parts. With his boy gone, I 'spect he'll head back to warmer climes soon enough."

"Well, if you happen to see him, could you tell him I was trying to get in touch with him? I'd really like to see him before he leaves. I can give you my number..." I searched my pockets for something to write with or on, even though I knew I didn't have anything.

"Hang on, I have something in my backpack in the car," Aidan said, and jogged off.

"How'd you know his son?"

"We grew up next door to each other."

"And you didn't know his daddy?"

"Mr. Taylor wasn't around. Joey only reconnected with him recently."

"I see." His eyes narrowed. "To hear Jack talk, that boy was his whole life."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I said nothing. We fell into an awkward silence while we waited for Aidan to get back. Thankfully, it wasn't too long before he returned with a pen and a sheet of paper.

I quickly wrote my name and number on it and gave it to the man whose name I hadn't even learned.

"Will Keegan, huh? I'll be sure to give this to Jack if I see him," he said. "Thanks again for the help."

It was a clear dismissal.

"Sure. And thank you for passing on my message," I replied, wondering if Mr. Taylor would ever see that hastily scribbled note.

I glanced back a few times as we walked to the car. Each time, he was still standing on the dock staring after us.

"Another dead end," I sighed as Aidan put the car into reverse and backed out of the parking spot.

"Maybe not. Let's wait and see."

"The longer we wait, the longer the killer has to get away with murder."

"The killer hasn't gotten away with anything yet. We still have a chance here, Will. Don't give up."

"I'm not giving up. I just hate this feeling that we're spinning our wheels while people keep getting hurt. Who's next?"

"There isn't going to be anyone next. We're going to get this guy."

"I hope you're right."

When we got home, Aidan hung back, letting me enter the apartment first. As soon as I stepped through the door, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Curtains had been drawn over the windows and a table was set in the center of the living room, complete with plates, silverware and a bottle of something chilling in a bucket of ice. Twinkling battery-powered candles covered every available surface.

"What's this?" I asked.

Aidan slid his hands around my waist from behind, pressing against my back. "Surprise?" he said softly in my ear.

I twisted to face him. "Did you set all this up before you left to get me?"

"I may have had some help," he said with a little smile. "I just wanted to surprise you, to show you how much I love you. There's been so much going on—"

I grabbed his face and pulled him in for a passionate kiss.

"Ah, you're home!" a voice called from behind me, and I leaped back.

"Relax," Aidan said with a chuckle. "That's just the help I mentioned."

I turned to find Nikki standing in the kitchen doorway beaming.

"So you were in on this?" I asked.

"As an accomplice only," she said. "Aidan did all the work. I just kept an eye on things until he got back, to make sure nothing burned."

"What did you make?" I asked him.

"You'll see. Nothing fancy. Lower your expectations."

"Don't listen to him," Nikki interjected. "He's just being modest. I had to restrain myself from tasting everything, it smells so good, and it's not even vegetarian. I'm going to send Sam to him for cooking lessons."

"Oh stop. From what we saw, Sam is a great cook already. Besides, we don't even know how it turned out. We haven't tasted it yet."

"Well, if it tastes anything like it smells, it's going to be delicious," Nikki said as she started toward us. "I'll leave you two love birds alone now. Enjoy your dinner. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

She sailed out the door, pulling it closed behind her.

I went in for another kiss, but that time all I got was a quick peck on the lips.

"Save it for dessert," he said with a grin. "We can't let the food get cold."

Dinner turned out even better than it smelled. He'd made a pork tenderloin with baked apples and a sweet apple cider reduction, roasted Brussels sprouts and fingerling potatoes with an apple crisp and vanilla bean ice cream for dessert. Despite his protestations, it was as good as any meal I'd ever had in a restaurant.

Afterward, we left the dirty dishes on the table as we retired to the bedroom to make love, grabbing a few candles on the way to set the mood. We took things slow and easy, just enjoying each other's bodies.

As we lay content in the afterglow of our lovemaking, I told Aidan about Caitlin asking me for money.

"Do you trust her?" he asked, raising himself up on one elbow.

"I want to. She's just...so hard to read."

"That's putting it mildly."

"To be fair, she barely knows us, she's pregnant, and the baby daddy is dead, likely murdered."

"All true. Do you think she'll actually let you be a part of the baby's life once it's born?"

I frowned. "I don't really know, and I think that's part of what's bothering me."

"Well, before you give her any money, maybe you should ask her to sign some sort of contract."

"A contract?"

"Yeah, guaranteeing you access to Joey's baby."

"I can do that?"

"I mean, if you're helping pay for all this stuff, I think you have the right. Maybe you should talk to a lawyer."

"Right, because I know so many of those."

"You know at least one. Ilana."

"From Thanksgiving?"

"Yeah. I think she handled the custody stuff with Kane. I know she handled all the legal stuff with Killian."

"Do you think I could call her?"

"I don't see why not. I'll text Adam and get her number for you. But that can wait until morning. Enough talk about babies...unless you want to try to make one right now."

"Again? Already?" I asked, already running my hands down his hard torso.

"Are you complaining?"

"Definitely not."

We were both completely drained after round two, but as we lay there, catching our breath, all I could think about was how I never wanted this to end.

I swung a leg over him and pulled him closer, feeling his fingertips gently trace patterns along my spine.

"I wish we could stay like this forever," I whispered.

He chuckled softly. "Naked in bed? Me too."

I swatted his chest playfully. "No, silly. It's just...I think this is the happiest I've ever been."

His hand froze, and suddenly, he sat up, his eyes flashing with sudden intensity.

"Marry me," he said.

I blinked, staring up at him in shock. "What?"

"Let's get married."

I sat up too, heart racing. "Are you... You're serious, aren't you?"

"Completely," he said without hesitation. "I was going to wait until Christmas, get a ring, make it all perfect, but I can't wait. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Will. I want to grow old with you."

I couldn't process the words. "Married?" I repeated, my head spinning.

"It doesn't have to be anything big or fancy," he continued. "Just you and me, maybe with some friends, but mainly just us, declaring our love and making a promise to each other."

I couldn't believe we were talking about this. Marriage? I was eighteen, barely out of the closet, just beginning to figure out who I was, in my first real relationship. We were in the middle of trying to figure out who killed my best friend—the one I'd had very unhealthy obsession with not that long ago. And then there was the baby.

But I pushed all of that aside and focused on one question: Did I want to spend the rest of my life with Aidan?

"Yes," I whispered, barely able to believe I was saying it.

Aidan's eyes widened, unsure. "Wait... Do you mean..."

"Yes, I will marry you, Aidan Scott. Yes, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Yes, I—"

Before I could finish, he pulled me into a kiss, cutting off any more words. His tears were warm against my cheeks.

When we broke apart for air, I couldn't help but tease him. "Does this mean I have to change my name to Will Scott?"

He laughed, tears still streaming down his face. "I don't want you to change a thing, Will Keegan. I love you just the way you are."

When we got up the next morning, we found a blanket of snow had fallen during the night, covering the world with a soft layer of white purity. It was magical and beautiful and perfect. I took it as a sign that I'd made the right decision accepting Aidan's impromptu proposal.

I was staring out the window when he came up behind me and hugged me against his chest. I melted into his embrace with a contented sigh. I spent a few minutes just enjoying his arms, but then my mind wandered to thoughts of Caitlin and the baby.

"Did you say you could get Ilana's phone number?" I asked him.

"Sure. You want me to text Adam?"

"Please."

His arms slipped reluctantly from around my waist as he went in search of his phone. I followed him out to the living room after a minute.

"I just sent you the number," he said. "I'm going to go take a shower while you call her." He planted a kiss on me on his way.

I pulled up Aidan's text and tapped the number. While it connected and started ringing, I noticed my

hand was shaking. I took a deep breath and tried to settle my nerves.

The phone rang once, twice, three times. I was just beginning to think that maybe her office wasn't open yet when a soft, cultured voice answered.

"Constantino Family Law, Jeanine speaking. How may I help you?"

I almost hung up, but I caught myself just in time. "Hello?" Jeanine asked into the line.

"Um, yes," I said quickly. "I'm calling for Ms. Constantino, please."

"May I ask who is calling?"

"My name is Will Keegan. I met Ms. Constantino at Thanksgiving, at Adam Connelly's house."

"I'll see if she's available. Please hold."

I sat listening to a soft jazz version of a popular R&B song while I waited nervously. Would she even remember me? I got my answer a moment later when her warm voice came on the line.

"Will, it's Ilana. How are you?"

"I'm good. Thanks for taking my call. I wasn't sure if you'd remember me."

She laughed. "How could I forget you after that speech you made? What can I do for you?"

"Well, uh, I think I'd rather talk to you in person. It's kind of complicated. Can I make an appointment?"

"Of course. Let me look at my schedule." The line was silent for a few seconds except for the sound of the keyboard clicking in the background. "Is this afternoon too soon? I have an opening at 4:30."

"That would be wonderful," I said with relief.

"Sounds good. I'll see you then."

I was still sitting in the living room holding the phone when Aidan came back out from his shower. One look at the man I was now engaged to and all my nervousness about the baby flew right out of my head...only to be replaced with nervousness about planning a wedding.

"So, uh, when exactly are you thinking about getting married?" I asked.

He gave me a funny look. "Did you talk to Ilana already?"

"Yeah, I made an appointment for this afternoon. But the wedding...?"

"I hadn't thought that far ahead. But I don't really want to wait. How about we just elope and tell everyone later?"

I felt my eyes bulge. "Like now?"

He shrugged and gave me a grin. "Not this very minute, but, like...soon."

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I... I think I'd kind of like to have a wedding."

"Like a big wedding?"

"No, it doesn't have to be big. More like what you said last night, just our closest friends and family."

"I think that sounds nice," he said. "But I'd still like to do it sooner than later, if you're okay with that."

"I guess so," I said. "I just don't know anything about planning a wedding."

"Me either. I'll do some research."

"Should we tell everybody?"

"Do you want to?"

I thought about it. "I think so. I mean, it would be hard to keep it secret."

"Then why don't we tell all our friends when they're here tonight? We can tell them all at once."

I nodded. That sounded like a solid plan. I gave him another kiss and went to take my turn in the shower.

Turns out, not telling people your good news is really hard. I felt like I would explode all morning at work. I was extremely distracted, to the point that Nikki asked me why I kept staring off into nowhere with a big, stupid grin on my face, but I just shook my head and stayed quiet.

When I came back from lunch, Nikki met me at the door.

"There's someone here to see you," she hissed loud enough to be heard all over the plaza.

I looked around but didn't see anyone in the gallery.

"He's in my office," she explained. "He looks a little shady to me."

My heart started racing. "Did he say who he was?"

"No. All he would say was that he needed to speak to you and you only."

Until that moment, it had never really occurred to me—perhaps naively—that I might be in danger too. Suddenly, my mind was flooded with terrifying possibilities. What if the killer saw me as a threat? What if he thought I knew more than I actually did? We hadn't exactly been subtle in our investigation. More often than not, we'd charged in with a sledgehammer when a flyswatter would have done the job.

"Stay by the door," I said to Nikki. "If you hear anything suspicious, get out and get help."

Her eyes grew wide, and she grabbed my wrist.

"Will, are you involved with the Mafia?"

The tension broke as I tried not to laugh in her face. I almost succeeded.

"What Mafia? This is the Eastern Shore. The most organized crime family we have are redneck chicken farmers."

"That's what they want you to believe," she said ominously.

"That's what who— No, never mind. To be knowledge, I'm not involved with any gangsters," I assured her.

I left Nikki standing anxiously at the front and made my way back toward her office, knocking lightly before pushing the door open. I didn't want to startle whoever was waiting.

Inside, a middle-aged man with a receding hairline sat slumped in a chair, staring at the giant statue in the corner like he didn't know what to make of it. His clothes were worn but clean. There was something familiar about him, though I couldn't place it right away.

"Hello?" I said cautiously. "I'm Will Keegan."

He stood up with an awkward sort of energy and gave me a strained smile. "Hey there, Will. Sorry for showing up unannounced. Your mom said I could find you here."

I blinked. "Nikki's not my—wait. My mom?"

"Yeah, yeah. I didn't know how else to find you. Denny down at the marina said you grew up next to my boy—"

"Hold on." I cut him off. "You're Joey's father?"

"Right," he said, almost sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Should've led with that, huh? Name's John Taylor. Most folks call me Jack. Denny said you wanted to talk to me about Joey, so...here I am." He shrugged like that explained everything.

"I gave Denny my number. You could've just called."

"Yeah, well, I must've jotted it down wrong or something," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "Tried calling—wrong number. Figured it'd be easier to just track you down. Denny mentioned your last name, so I drove by, and, sure enough, Keegan on the mailbox. Knocked, had a nice chat with your mom."

He said it like he deserved a medal for the effort.

Then it hit me where I recognized him from.

"You were at the funeral," I said. "Standing off to the side."

He blinked, startled. "Yeah. I didn't want Monica to see me. Joey didn't want her knowing we'd been in touch."

"Why all the secrecy? Joey was eighteen. He could make his own choices."

Jack grimaced. "Monica never forgave me. I was a lousy husband. Not much better as a dad, I guess. I had a problem—still do, depending on who you ask. Alcohol. But I've been clean for a few years now. Doesn't erase the past, but hey, I'm doing my best. When Joey reached out...it felt like a second chance, you know?"

I noticed how easily the conversation kept circling back to him.

"I was working the docks down in Norfolk when his letter found me. Quit my job the next day, packed up my boat—" he laughed a little, like it was some grand romantic gesture. "I mean, when life hands you a chance, you take it, right?"

"I gave him my number in the letter I wrote, and he did call. That went alright, a little awkward, but you know, what do you expect? We were strangers. We made arrangements for him to come see me when I arrived."

"And did Joey come see you?"

He hesitated, looking away. "Yeah. He did. Didn't exactly go how I imagined, though. Kid showed up drunk out of his mind. Broke my heart, honestly. I snapped, lost my temper. Yelled at him. Told him he was throwing his life away, just like I did."

I stared at him. "Real welcoming."

He didn't flinch. "Maybe I wasn't gentle, but what was I supposed to do? Pretend it was fine? Kid needed a wake-up call."

"You think yelling fixes everything?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

Jack's expression hardened for a second—the same flash of temper I'd seen in Joey. Then he shrugged again, the anger sliding away into practiced indifference.

"Guess he inherited my temper, along with my weakness for the bottle," he said. "Told me I had no right to tell him anything. Maybe he was right. He left. And then a few days later, he was gone."

He referred to Joey's death like it was just bad luck.

"Joey wasn't himself those last few months," I said tightly. "College...everything... None of us really knew what was going on."

Jack nodded, like that excused him. "Yeah. Pressure does things to people."

He leaned in, his expression pleading. "Tell me about him. Please. Tell me about the son I never got to know."

Part of me wanted to walk out. But I didn't. Maybe because I saw the regret was real—even if it was all tangled up with Jack's need to exonerate himself—so I agreed. Nikki gave me the afternoon off with a sympathetic nod, and Jack and I found our way to the same little café where I'd gone with Caitlin, though we were inside this time considering the recent snowfall.

We sat there—me with hot chocolate, him with coffee—while I tried to piece together a picture of Joey. I stuck to the good memories as much as I could, even though I couldn't help noticing how much easier it was to see Joey's selfishness in hindsight, how the drinking hadn't created all the problems—it had just amplified what was already there.

Jack soaked it all up, nodding, laughing too loud at the funny parts, brushing away an occasional tear when it got too much. And for all his selfishness, for all the excuses he made, I believed him when he said he regretted not getting to know his son. I knew in my gut that he hadn't killed Joey, at least not in cold blood. He may have started Joey's slow process of self-destruction, but he hadn't shoved him in the pool that night. I felt confident that we could cross him off our list of suspects.

When I finished, he looked at me, eyes hollow. "Wish I'd gotten more time with him. Wish I could've known the man he was gonna be."

He didn't apologize. Not really. Didn't take the blame, either. In his head, he was just the victim of bad timing—another guy who life had kicked around.

I almost told him that Joey had deserved better—from all of us. That if he'd been a better man from the start, maybe Joey would still be here. But what would be the point? He wouldn't hear it.

Instead, I just made my excuses and said goodbye, then left to make my appointment with Ilana.

Chapter 19

Ilana's office was about half an hour away, in a restored Victorian house in a small town named Berlin. I climbed the steps to the front porch, where the frosted glass in the upper portion of the door read "Constantino Family Law" in stenciled gilt letters.

I hesitated, unsure whether to knock. It felt more like arriving at someone's home than a business. After a moment, I decided just to open the door.

I stepped into an elegantly decorated foyer. A thick Oriental carpet stretched across the polished hardwood floor and a brass chandelier hung from an ornate medallion in the center of the ceiling. Two leather armchairs sat facing an enormous dark-stained oak desk that served as a receptionist's station.

Ilana stood behind the desk talking to a young woman as I entered. Her face lit up in a warm smile when she saw me, and she stepped out from behind the desk.

"Will, it's good to see you again," she said as she offered her hand. "Come on back to my office. Hold my calls please, Jeanine."

She led me into her office, which was even more impressive. It had clearly once been a library—bookshelves lined the walls, filled with heavy law volumes and a scattering of knickknacks and framed photos. A large fireplace dominated the back wall, and in the center of the room sat a French Rococo-style desk with gold trim. Two matching armchairs faced it across a small rug.

"Thanks so much for taking the time to see me so quickly, Ms. Constantino," I said as I stepped inside.

Ilana smiled and waved me toward one of the chairs. "Call me Ilana," she said as she sat on one of the armchairs instead of behind her desk. "And you sounded like it was important. Have a seat."

She looked perfectly at home among the books and dark wood, as if the room had been built just for her.

"It is," I said, as I perched on the other chair.

"Why don't you tell me what's going on?"

I quickly outlined the situation as succinctly as I could. She'd already met Caitlin, so at least she could put a face to a name.

When I finished, she thought for a minute, tapping one long manicured nail against her lips.

"Let me see if I have this right," she said. "You would like me to draw up some documents that give you legal visitation rights to a baby that isn't yours—or even related to you—to make sure the mother doesn't skip out on you and take the baby with her...in exchange for money."

"Something like that," I said halfheartedly. When she broke it down like that, it sounded sort of crazy.

"Well, I have to say, this is a little unusual. Are you sure this is what you want to do? How well do you know Caitlin? I feel like I recall her saying she didn't know anybody at Thanksgiving, including you."

"I mean, I haven't known her that long, but it's not about her. This is Joey's baby."

"It is about her, though. She's the mother and she's the one you will be dealing with. Are you sure you

can trust her? Have you seen any sonograms?
Anything?"

"Do you think she's not actually pregnant?" I was stunned. That had never even occurred to me.

"I don't think anything, Will. I'm just asking you the kinds of questions you should be asking before you hand over any money. Has she agreed to this legal arrangement you're proposing?"

"Well, I haven't brought it up to her yet..."

"What about her parents?"

"She told me she has a bad relationship with her parents."

"What about the paternal grandparents?"

"You mean Joey's mom? What about her?"

"His father isn't in the picture?"

I shook my head no. "Just his mom."

"How does she feel about all this?"

"I...I don't know. I don't think she even knows about the baby."

Ilana sat back in surprise. "Don't you think someone should tell her?"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Wouldn't that be Caitlin's responsibility?"

"I suppose, although you are getting yourself involved pretty deeply here."

"Could she...cause problems?"

"Well, she does have legal rights—for visitation, at the very least. And she could have a claim to the baby if anything happened to the mother or if the mother was deemed unfit."

"I would never want to keep the baby away from its grandmother. I can't imagine Caitlin would either."

Ilana sat back. "Look, sweetie, I'll be happy to write up any agreements you want. You're a legal adult, and it's not my place to tell you what to do with your life. I just don't want to see you get hurt. You seem like a nice guy, and there are a lot of people out there who like to take advantage of nice guys. Maybe you should at least talk to Caitlin before we go any further."

I stared down at my hands. "Yeah, maybe you're right. What do you think I should do?"

"First of all, find out if she'll even agree to your terms. I would also suggest you tell Joey's mother about the baby. It could save you some serious headaches down the road, and she may even be willing to help out financially. And, frankly, if I were you, I'd ask for some proof that the baby is healthy. Once all that is in place, give me a call, and I'll write up the papers for you."

"How much is all that going to cost?"

"We can talk about that when you call me back."

"You don't think she'll agree."

She gave me a sad smile. "I hope I'm wrong."

I left feeling more confused than ever. Was Caitlin just trying to con me out of some money? I didn't want to think that about her, but Ilana had placed doubts in my mind. I needed to talk to Caitlin as soon as possible.

When I arrived home, however, the thought completely slipped my mind.

Once again, the curtains were drawn and candles were flickering. No enticing aromas filled the air tonight, though. Instead, I found a trail of rose petals scattered on the floor leading to my old bedroom, then on to the window that opened onto the fire escape.

There, I found Aidan, his back to the window as he leaned against the railing, looking out over the river. The red rose petals stood out brilliantly against the background of white snow, broken only by Aidan's footprints.

"You're going to spoil me," I said, and he spun around.

"That's the idea," he said with a grin. "But this is a special occasion."

"And why is that?"

"We're celebrating our engagement."

"I thought we did that last night," I said with a grin. "Several times."

He answered with a grin of his own. "Why don't you join me out here on the fire escape?"

My feet felt frozen to the floor. I hadn't been out there since I jumped.

"Don't you think it's time we replace the bad memories with some good ones?" Aidan held out a hand.

I took a deep breath and accepted his hand, letting him help me through the window. Then, to my surprise, he went down on one knee in the snow.

"I know I asked you this last night, but I want to do it right this time," he said. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a ring box.

"Oh my God," I whispered.

He opened the box, and inside was a beautiful silver ring with an intricate gold design winding around it. He pulled the ring out and held it up to me.

"William Spencer Keegan, will you marry me?" he said.

I felt a tear roll down my cheek. "You know I will. Yes, I'll marry you."

He slipped the ring onto my finger. It was a little big, but it didn't matter. I noticed a matching ring on Aidan's hand, and I drew him up for a lingering kiss.

"Let's do it now," he said in a husky voice.

"What? Right now?"

"No, but before Christmas, maybe next week."

"That's crazy," I laughed.

"Why? I don't want to wait. I want to do this now."

"Sure, why not?" I said, feeling exhilarated. "But what about the marriage license?"

"I, uh, actually called today to find out what we needed to do. One or both of us just has to go to the county clerk's office and apply, which is pretty simple, then you have to wait at least 48 hours before you can get married. If you want, I can go get it tomorrow. It's good for six months so we have plenty of time to figure it all out, in case it doesn't all come together as quickly as we'd like."

"Okay. Wow. You've got this all figured out. So who will perform the ceremony?"

"That I don't know. Why don't we ask Adam if he knows anyone?"

"Good idea," I said with a giggle. "Wait, I have an idea. Let's not tell anyone what's going on. Let's throw a surprise wedding!"

Aidan laughed. "And you thought my idea was crazy?"

"No seriously! I read about it online. Some celebrity couple did it. The guests thought they were

going to a party and then...boom! Surprise wedding! I thought it sounded so cool. We can tell everyone we're having a Christmas party."

"What if they have other plans?"

"We tell them it's important to us that they come."

Aidan laughed again. "I think it's the craziest thing I've ever heard, but I love it! Let's do it!"

"Adam will have to be in on it if we're asking him to find someone to do the ceremony," I pointed out.

"That's good, though. He can help us plan it. After all, I've never planned a wedding before, let alone one that's happening in one week."

"Can we continue discussing this inside?" I said, suddenly realizing how cold it was out here.

Aidan laughed, and we crawled back through the window.

We called Adam right away. Aidan put him on speakerphone so we could all participate in the conversation. As soon as we started explaining what we had in mind, Adam became as excited as we were.

"We were hoping you'd know somebody who could perform the ceremony," Aidan finished.

"It just so happens that I do. And you know him too. Bryant is ordained."

"Bryant is a minister?" I gasped.

"Ha! God no. He got ordained online to officiate a friend's wedding. I'm sure he'd be delighted to perform your ceremony. I'll call him as soon as we hang up."

"Thanks, Adam. Um, we were also hoping you might help us plan the wedding."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"I'm honored. Of course I'll help. When are you thinking?"

"We were thinking before Christmas..."

"What? So soon? How are you going to pull that off with school and work?"

"Well...we were hoping that would be part of what you could help with."

Adam laughed. "That's a tall order, but I'll do my best. Do you have a vision for this shotgun wedding?"

"No, everything has happened so quickly. We really don't."

"Okay, let's start with the decorations. Have you thought about that at all? Candles? Flowers? Do you have colors picked out? What about favors? Do you have anything in mind?"

"Whoa, slow down," Aidan said. "We don't want to go overboard. We don't want to spend a lot of money. We just want something simple and meaningful. We're only inviting a few close friends."

"Simple doesn't mean it can't be special," Adam said. "Why don't you boys leave everything to me? It'll be my wedding gift to you."

"You don't have to do all that. We were just hoping—"

"I know. I want to do this. Now, quit arguing and let me get to work. I've already got some ideas."

"Thank you, Adam," Aidan said sincerely. "This means a lot to me."

"And to me, too," I chipped in.

"It means a lot to me that you'd even ask. This is going to be magical. Thank you for letting me be a part of it."

"Thank you...for everything."

We hung up, and I immediately curled into Aidan's chest. "This is all happening so fast."

He wrapped his arms around me. "I know. It's not too fast, is it?"

"I don't know. No, I don't think so."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No. I know I want to do this. It feels right. My brain just needs a little time to catch up."

Aidan chuckled. "Take all the time you need, babe."

"But not more than a week," I said with a laugh.

He kissed the top of my head. "If this is too much, we don't have to go through with it. I can call Adam back right now."

"And ruin his fun? I couldn't do that."

"I'm serious, Will."

"I know. And so am I. Let's do this."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. This is one thing I'm sure of, at least."

"What do you mean? Oh, shit! I can't believe I forgot. How'd your meeting with Ilana go?"

I sighed and snuggled closer to him. "Not so great. Or I guess it went fine, just not the way I thought it would go. And that wasn't the only surprise of the day, either."

I proceeded to tell him about my visit from Joey's father, my realizations about Joey, and my conversation with Ilana.

"That's a lot," he said when I finished. "How are you feeling about all that?"

"Hard to say," I said thoughtfully. "It's a lot to process. I feel like I've always known that stuff about Joey on some level, but I just couldn't admit it to myself because he was my best friend and, well, I worshipped the ground he walked on. I guess telling Jack about him brought it all into focus."

"And you've had some distance from him for a while now and accepted that he's gone."

"Yeah, that too. But talking about our families and growing up also made me realize how much I miss my parents. But I don't know how to fix that. I don't even know where to start."

"That's not just on you. Your mom was there for you when you were in the hospital, so I think she'd be open to having some level of relationship with you, but your dad didn't even bother visiting."

His blunt statement of facts hurt, but it was the truth. There was no denying it.

"Maybe we should invite Mom to the wedding," I suggested.

"Do you think she's ready for a surprise gay wedding?"

I sighed. "Probably not."

"What about Caitlin?"

"You think we should invite her to the wedding?"

"I mean, sure, if you want to, but that's not what I was asking."

"Oh, you mean the conversation Ilana said I need to have with her."

"Yeah. How do you think that will go?"

"Who knows? She can be a little prickly sometimes."

"That's putting it mildly."

"You really don't like her, do you?"

"I think it's more that she doesn't like me."

I pulled back far enough to see his face. "What makes you say that?"

"Just the way she was shooting daggers at me with her eyes when she found out we were dating. If looks could kill..."

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm surprised you didn't notice."

"I guess I did notice that she seemed a little off. It was right after that when she asked for money, too."

He nodded. "Yes, I noticed that, too."

"So you think Ilana is right, that I should be cautious with her."

"I've always thought that."

I sighed and laid my head back on his chest. "Why does everything have to be so complicated?" I moaned.

"Life is messy. We just do the best we can."

Friday night, Killian and Asher arrived bearing pizza. Killian burst in with great enthusiasm, Asher trailed behind with considerably less excitement. There was a weird tension between them, and I wondered if they'd once again been arguing on the drive over. Asher had made his feelings about Killian's involvement in our investigation crystal clear.

Laura made her appearance not long after, informing us that Gabe would be a little late since he

was still in class, which helped ease some of the awkwardness caused by Asher's pouty silence. Caitlin showed up right on time.

We decided to get started since Gabe already knew most of what we had to share. Laura, Aidan and I took turns filling in Killian and Asher on our progress. There was a lot more to report than there had been the week before, so it took a few minutes, and, at times, we were all talking over each other.

"Okay," Killian said when we finally finished our reports. "So, just to recap, Will and Laura talked to Joey's mom, then Will found and talked to Joey's dad and has mostly ruled him out as a suspect. Y'all talked to Keiyara, who claimed that she was in the boathouse with an unknown guy when Joey was killed, she also claims they heard voices, and you suspect she probably knew more than she wanted to let on. She almost certainly sent Will the necklace. But now she's dead, possibly by suicide, and we still don't know who she was hooking up with in the boathouse. Oh, and Will and Aidan are finally dating officially. Did I get everything?"

"That last one doesn't have any bearing on the case," I pointed out.

"No, but it's by far the most exciting," Killian said with a grin. "And it's about damn time."

"So what's next?" Caitlin asked impatiently.

"We need to find out who was with Keiyara in the pool house that night," Killian said.

Just then, Gabe knocked on the door, so we took a short break to let him get pizza and catch him up before we resumed.

"So how are we supposed to find this mystery guy?" Laura asked once we were all seated again. "Will and Caitlin might have seen him, but we have no clue who he is."

"There were only so many people at the party," Killian pointed out. "Maybe Gabe can talk to the frat bros again and describe him. He didn't appear out of thin air. Somebody there has to know who he was."

"And if they don't?" Aidan asked.

"Somebody has to. Eventually we'll find him."

"I'm getting to be a regular around there anyway," Gabe said with a mouthful of pizza. "I'm surprised they haven't asked me to pledge. I went there yesterday to look around. They had no problem with it, said the police were done and they didn't care. So I went around back and found a back gate as big as life, and it's not even locked. Anyone could have gotten into or out of the back yard without going through the house."

"Great, so that means it wasn't necessarily someone at the party," Aidan said dejectedly. "It could be literally anyone."

"Not necessarily," Killian said thoughtfully. We all turned to face him. He thought for a moment before continuing. "Think about it. If it was an outside person, let's call him Mr. X—"

"Mr. X?" Asher said with a derisive snort.

Killian shot him a dirty look but continued, "How would he know Joey was going to be at this particular party? How'd he know to find him in the backyard?"

"Maybe he followed him," Laura suggested.

"Or he could have done what I did and just party hopped until he found the right party," I said.

"If he party hopped, then he was still *at* the party at some point. He didn't have to come in through the gate in the backyard."

"You know what, I think Killian is right," Gabe said. "It had to be someone at the party. I think the gate was an escape route, not an entrance."

Everyone started to speak at once.

"Let me explain," Gabe yelled over the din. "Nothing about this feels planned. It seems like a spur-of-the-moment, crime of passion sort of thing. The killer didn't check to see if anyone was in the pool house, he left the necklace, which probably fell off in some sort of struggle, and a pool isn't exactly the most reliable murder weapon. Chances are he didn't even mean to kill Joey. I mean, what if someone had found Joey before he drowned? Or what if someone inside just happened to look out the window and saw him bop Joey on the head?"

"Head bopping is a new addition to the scenario," Killian quickly pointed out. "Is there a reason you included that?"

"Oh yeah, that was the other thing I found out. My cousin said the cause of death is public knowledge unless it's a continuing criminal investigation. Since the case is technically closed, she could tell me what the report said. Your detective could have told you, too. He was just being difficult."

"He's hardly my detective," I said sourly. "So what did the report say?"

"Technically, Joey died of drowning, but..." Gabe paused dramatically, "...my cousin confirmed that Joey did have a pretty serious head wound, which is probably

what kept him from getting out of the pool once he was in it. The medical examiner said it could have been sustained when he fell into the pool...if he fell backwards and struck his head on the edge."

Killian picked up where Gabe left off. "Or someone could have bopped him in the head."

"Exactly," Gabe said. "While I was in the backyard, I looked around a bit. They have these big-ass rocks surrounding their flowerbeds, like grapefruit sized. I found one that looked out of place, like it might have been moved. So I took a closer look at it, and there's something on it that may or may not be blood."

"What did you do with it?" Caitlin asked.

"I ran inside and got a plastic bag from the guys, then picked it up with my shirt and wrapped it up in the bag. It's at my house now."

"Great!" I said excitedly. "That's solid evidence we can take to the police!"

"Not so fast," Aidan said. "We've tampered with evidence by moving it."

"Not to mention," Caitlin added, "that they've already made it clear they don't think Joey was killed. What are we supposed to do? Just waltz in, plunk a rock down on their desk, and tell them that they are wrong? That we, being the seasoned professionals that we are, have solved their little mystery for them? I'm sure they'll be ever so grateful. Probably even give us the key to the city." Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

"And what if it's just barbecue sauce?" Laura chipped in. "Then we'd look like idiots."

I sighed. "You're right. You're all right. They already think I'm some nutcase who's gone crazy with

grief over the death of his best friend. Why prove them right?"

"We're not giving up," Aidan said. "We just need to find some more evidence first."

"What if..." Caitlin said slowly, drawing out the word as if an idea was just occurring to her. "What if Keiyara killed Joey?"

"What?" I asked. I hadn't even considered her.

"We know she slept around, her roommate told you. Maybe she'd hooked up with Joey, too. Maybe she fell for him and he hurt her. We only have her word for it that there was someone else there with her, this mystery guy. We know she had the necklace and sent it to Will. Maybe she did commit suicide, because she felt so guilty over Joey's death. Maybe your visit to her sent her over the edge. You said she was scared and acted like she knew more than she was saying."

Caitlin's words chilled me. It was a solution that fit all the facts...except one.

"We know there was a guy there that night, though," I said. "You were there when he jumped the fence. And that was after we heard Keiyara scream."

"Not to mention that's a lot of maybes," Laura said dryly.

Caitlin shot her a dirty look.

"Laura's right," Killian said, "That's all just conjecture." Caitlin looked ready to argue but he rushed on. "I'm not saying there's no truth in it at all, but that exact scenario doesn't fit the facts as we know them. We have no proof Keiyara even knew Joey, let alone that they'd hooked up. And like Killian said, you know she was with somebody because you saw him. Now, maybe

she killed him earlier, then proceeded to fuck some rando to create an alibi, but that would make her a real psycho who probably wouldn't kill herself out of remorse. Plus, why didn't the guy see Joey in the pool when they went to the pool house?"

"If we assume Keiyara was telling us the truth," Laura began, "or at least mostly the truth, then she couldn't have killed Joey. We're assuming she committed suicide, but if she didn't, then that means someone killed her. It's a little much to believe that there are two murderers wandering around killing college students at Pemberton. I think we can assume that the same person killed both Joey and Keiyara."

"But why would he kill Keiyara?" Caitlin asked, obviously not happy that Laura was throwing a wrench into the cogs of her neat little theory.

"He or she," Gabe said, and everyone turned to look at him. "What? The killer could be a woman. Caitlin was literally just saying it could have been Keiyara."

"Fine, he *or she* could have thought that Keiyara knew who he *or she* was," Laura continued.

"Maybe another visit to Keiyara's roommate would be a good idea," Killian said. "What was her name?"

"Keisha," Aidan and I said at the same time, and I added, "But I don't know that she would be all that helpful. They didn't get along, and I don't think they talked all that much."

"Still, they shared a room. Maybe she saw Keiyara with Joey. Maybe she'd know if Keiyara had been acting any differently since she found Joey, or if

she was the suicidal type. She probably knows more about Keiyara than she thinks she does."

I nodded. "Aidan and I can go see her. She knows Aidan already."

"Great," Killian said. "So, what do we know? According to Keiyara, she was with a guy in the pool house, probably while Joey was being killed. She says the guy heard voices from out by the pool, but they didn't bother to look. We know that Keiyara must have found the necklace, either before or after she found Joey, and, at some point, decided that Joey's death wasn't an accident and sent the necklace to Will with the note."

"Though we still don't know how she knew who I was," I said.

"We know that Keiyara died the same day you went to see her," Gabe picked up.

"We know that Joey was seeing his father secretly behind his mom's back." I froze with the last word still on my tongue.

I watched Laura's eyes widen. "No way, Will!" she said quickly.

"You don't know that," I argued.

"There's no way."

"It's as likely as anything."

"What are you two talking about?" Aidan asked in exasperation.

"Joey's mom," Laura said.

"What if she found out that Joey was seeing his father behind her back?" I explained.

"Wouldn't it have made more sense for her to kill Mr. Taylor, then?" Gabe asked.

"This is crazy," Laura insisted. "How would Mrs. Taylor even know where to find him? And why confront him at a party when he still lived at home? It just doesn't make sense."

Killian nodded. "I agree that it's really unlikely, but we have to look at every possibility. Someone should talk to her."

Laura sighed. "Then it should be me."

"Then the only other thing we have to do is identify our mystery man."

"Is that all?" Laura scoffed.

"I can do that," Caitlin offered.

"I think that's something that will take all of us," Killian said, and Caitlin shrugged.

"Are we done then?" Laura asked. "Gabe and I are supposed to meet up with some friends of his tonight."

"I'd almost forgotten about that!" Gabe exclaimed.

"Yeah, I think we're done, unless anyone can think of something else," Killian said, looking around. No one spoke up, so he went on. "Then we'll meet one week from tonight, unless someone learns something important."

"Actually," I said with a look in Aidan's direction, "Aidan and I have a special favor to ask everyone."

That got their attention.

Aidan took over. "Will and I want to invite you guys to a rather unusual party we're throwing next Friday night. It's kind of a surprise party, but the surprise is for

you all. It's top secret, but we want you to be here at seven o'clock sharp."

"What's going on?" Laura said suspiciously.

"You'll find out then," I said with a grin.

I could tell she was loath to give it up that easily, but Gabe grabbed her by the elbow and started steering her toward the door. I walked them to the door as they bundled up.

"We're not done," Laura called as Gabe dragged her out. "You will tell me about this weird surprise party."

I just laughed and closed the door in her face. I turned to find Caitlin pulling on her coat as well.

"Oh, hey," I said quietly so Killian and Asher wouldn't overhear me from where they were helping Aidan clean up. "Can I, uh, talk to you for a minute?"

She frowned slightly. "Is this about the money? I was kind of hoping you'd have that tonight."

"That's part of it, yeah. Hang on, I'll grab my coat and walk you down to the car."

I let Aidan know where I was going, and he gave me an encouraging smile and thumbs up.

"So what's this about?" she asked as soon as I closed the apartment door.

"I, um, went to see a lawyer today."

Caitlin stopped in her tracks. "A lawyer? For what?"

"Well, Aidan suggested it, actually. He thought that maybe you and I should sign some sort of agreement that I'd get to be a part of the baby's life before I started handing over money."

"Why is this any of his business?"

"Well, he is my boyfriend. And I think maybe he's right. So I talked to a lawyer, and she's willing to write up some sort of agreement for us, but she said that I should talk to you first to, you know, make sure you're okay with it."

"Gee, nice of you to ask me. What a fucking concept."

"It's not that I don't trust you—"

"No, I think that's exactly what it is."

"Listen! I just need some sort of protection. That's all. She also said we need to tell Joey's mom."

"I already told you I don't want her involved."

"She has legal rights, Caitlin. She needs to know she has a grandchild. Besides, maybe she'd be willing to help financially, too."

Caitlin calmed down a little at that. "But what if she wants to take the baby?"

"She can't. You're still the mother. But if something happened to you, she might be able to get custody."

"Well, I guess that's fair." She pursed her lips, then relaxed with a small huff. "I guess I can sign your stupid contract or whatever. It'll just say you get to see the baby or whatever?"

"Yeah. I just want to be sure I get to be Uncle Will."

She nodded.

"Oh, and, um...one more thing. Ilana also suggested that I should see a sonogram or something before we sign the papers."

Caitlin's eyes narrowed sharply. "So now I'm a liar? Is that it? You think I just made the fucking baby up?"

"No!" I said quickly. "She just said—"

"I don't care what this bitch said. You're calling me a liar."

"I'm not! I swear! It was just her advice. That's all."

"Well fuck her advice and fuck you. You can keep your damn money." She stormed off down the hallway.

I rushed to keep up with her. "Caitlin—"

"Fuck off, Will."

I caught up at the elevator. "Just listen! Put yourself in my place. My lifelong best friend turns out to be a giant asshole, and somehow manages to get himself killed. Then I find out he has a baby on the way, that a part of him is still alive. Of course I want to be a part of the baby's life. Joey turned out to be pretty messed up, and maybe that was due to who he was as a person or maybe it was because of his crappy childhood or genetics or whatever, but I just want to help make sure his child has a better chance at life. And I want to protect me—and you—in the process."

She whirled around to face me as the elevator doors opened. "How does any of this shit protect me?"

"I mean...if we sign a legally binding agreement, then I can't, like, just decide I won't help pay for stuff. And it would set the boundaries for my involvement." I was making stuff up on the fly, but I was pretty sure it all made sense.

She stepped into the elevator, still glaring at me, but as the doors closed, she said, "I'll think about it."

I sighed. Would anything ever be easy? Still, at least she seemed to be considering it. That would have to be enough for now.

Chapter 20

Everything was pretty much cleaned up by the time I returned to the apartment. Killian and Aidan were chatting in the kitchen, while Asher stood in the doorway, still looking upset.

"I'll get our coats," he said loudly when he saw me. He started down the hall toward my old bedroom where everyone had thrown their coats earlier.

"Killian, I want to thank you for all your help with this," I said quietly as I joined him and Aidan in the kitchen. "Even if we never find anything out for sure, at least I'll know I tried."

"You don't have to thank me, Will," he said. "I love doing this, and you're a friend. I'm just glad I can help."

"It's not caused too much stress on you and Asher, has it?" I asked, knowing full well it had.

Killian shrugged. "I dunno. I don't know what's going on these days."

"I can tell you what's going on," Asher snapped.

I spun around to find him standing there holding their coats, his usually handsome face twisted in undisguised anger.

"Not now, Ash," Killian sighed.

"Why not? Will asked, so let's give him the whole story. You know I never wanted to get involved with this in the first place."

"Ash—" Killian tried again, but Asher was running at full speed and there was no stopping him.

"I only went along with this stupid investigation—against my better judgment, I might

add—because I could see how much *you* wanted to be involved. Why you'd want to get involved in another murder investigation after the last time, I still don't understand, but I agreed anyway. But it's different now. People are being killed. I want out. I want you out."

He wheeled around to face me, and I physically flinched.

"You should all drop this before one of you gets killed."

"We don't know that Keiyara was killed," Killian said. I pressed back against the counter, wishing I was anywhere but stuck in a small room while they had a fight. Aidan was looking back and forth between Killian and Asher like he was watching a tennis match.

"For God's sake!" Asher yelled. "What do you need? A signed confession? Do you want Will to get killed? Or your own cousin? We're not professionals, Killian. We don't know what we're doing. We have no business being involved in this."

"You're just overreacting because you're scared," Killian said, and I grimaced. Even I knew that was the wrong approach.

"Yes, I'm scared!" Asher bellowed. "What blows my mind is that you're not."

"We're getting close, though, Ash, I can feel it," Killian said. He was unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. "I've only been involved from a distance so far, and that's not going to change. I'm not in any danger. You're not in any danger. This is completely different from last time."

"What about the rest of them? They're the ones putting their necks on the line while you play puppet

master. Are you even listening to me? Don't my feelings matter at all?"

"Of course they do, but I can't leave Will like this. He needs me."

Don't drag me into this, I thought.

"Well, I need you, too." Asher shouted. He dropped the coats and spun away, rushing toward the door.

Killian threw me a helpless shrug and ran after him, scooping the coats up as he went. "Sorry," he said, pausing in the doorway.

"Don't apologize. Just go after him."

He nodded and started to turn. "And Killian," I called, "if you need to drop out of this, I'll understand."

"No, somehow I don't think that would be the best idea," he said quietly.

I heard the apartment door close as I turned to Aidan. "Maybe this was all a mistake."

He shrugged. "They'll work it out. They've been through a lot worse. If we're right and someone did murder Joey—and maybe Keiyara—we can't just let them get away with it. Besides, you saw Killian. This stuff is in his blood. He wants to be involved. Hell, if we let him, he'd be out there knocking on doors himself."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I know. I just feel like this investigation is doing nothing but causing problems, and we're no closer to finding the killer than we were when we started."

"Hey," he said, pulling me in for a hug. "That's not true. We know who sent you the letter. We know there's somebody out there who may have heard the

killer. We may even have the actual murder weapon in our possession."

I wrapped my arms around his back and squeezed. "You're right. Thanks for always being there to talk me down," I mumbled into his chest.

He kissed the top of my head. "Just doing my job."

Aidan and I went to see Keisha as soon as I got home from work the next day. We were gambling that we'd be able to catch her before she went to dinner or evening classes. We got into the building using the same tactic as before, but when we got to her floor, we were stopped by yellow crime scene tape stretched across the door of the room she had shared with Keiyara.

"Duh," I sighed. "We should have known. Now what do we do?"

"I didn't know they used crime scene tape for a suicide," Aidan said thoughtfully, fingering the tape as if he hadn't even heard me.

"Keisha obviously isn't here," I said. "How are we going to find her?"

"Let's try the room next door," Aidan suggested as he dropped the tape, strode to the room next door, and knocked.

The door was quickly opened by a giggling heavy-set girl with black hair and clothing, black lipstick, purple eyeshadow and heavy eyeliner. "Yeah?" she said with a toss of her hair.

I was almost blinded by the reflections off her ear jewelry, studded in multiple piercings all the way around

the outside edge of her ear. There was enough metal there to forge a small sword.

"We're looking for Keisha. Do you know where she's staying?"

"No, I don't know. Ask the girl over there," she said and indicated the door opposite Keiyara and Keisha's. "She's tight with Keisha." She shut the door without further comment.

"Nice girl," Aidan mumbled as he started across the hall.

A pretty Black girl answered his knock. Her dark eyes took us in before she spoke. "Yes?"

"We're looking for Keisha," Aidan said again. "Do you know where she's staying?"

"Why are you looking for her?" the girl said in a challenging tone.

"It's okay, Lake," Keisha said, appearing next to her in the doorway. "They're cool."

Lake gave us a final once-over and must have decided we didn't look too threatening. She stepped back and allowed Keisha to take her place in the door.

"Well, well, well," Keisha said with a small, unconvincing smile. "Two visits in one week. Careful there, stud, or I might think you got the hots for me."

Aidan smiled. "I'm sorry about Keiyara," he started.

Keisha snorted. "Now I know you didn't come up here to extend your sympathy about my loss. I made it clear last time you were here that I couldn't stand the girl. Just 'cuz she's dead doesn't mean I suddenly think she was my best friend. So let's cut the crap. Why are you really here?"

"We're still trying to figure out what happened to my friend Joey," I said, deciding it was time to step in.

Keisha gave me a look. "Yeah, you mentioned that last time. But I'm not sure I wanna be involved. How do I know that isn't why Keiyara ended up DOA?"

"Do you think Keiyara killed herself?" Aidan asked suddenly.

Keisha's eyes grew wide, and she looked up and down the hall as if she were afraid someone was listening. "What the hell are you doing, Aidan? Get in here, before you get us all in trouble."

We followed her into Lake's room, and Keisha shut the door behind us. Lake was studiously pretending to read a book, giving us the illusion of privacy.

"You can't go around just saying stuff like that in the middle of the hall," she said tensely. "What's wrong with you?"

"You don't think it was a suicide, do you?" Aidan pressed.

"I don't know what to think," Keisha said with a sigh.

"What happened? How did you find her?"

"I came back from a class, and when I opened the door, there she was, on the floor face down, not moving at all with a little puddle of blood under her. I knew she was dead as soon as I saw her. There were empty pill bottles on the floor near her with some pills spilled out and a gun in her hand. It didn't look like a peaceful death, if you know what I mean. I just slammed the door and called the cops."

"Pill bottles?" I interrupted. "Do you think that's what killed her, an overdose? Or was it the gun? Did she shoot herself? Where did the blood come from?"

"I don't know. I didn't exactly stick around to find out, and nobody has told me anything more than what was on the news. But the pills are really what's confusing me. Keiyara wasn't a dooper, especially not sitting in our room all alone. Maybe at a party or something she'd smoke or pop some E, but she wasn't a druggie. I never saw her doing anything stronger than that. I don't even think she was on any prescriptions besides antibiotics for an occasional STI. I had to explain to her how to refill a prescription one time."

"So where did the pills come from?" Aidan asked.

"Beats me."

"Then what about the gun?"

"Don't know that either."

"Would you have known if she had a gun in your room?"

"You saw her side of the room. She could have had a rocket launcher over there, and I wouldn't have known."

I jumped back in. "Do you know if anyone in the building heard a gunshot?"

She shrugged and glanced at Lake, who was still pretending not to listen—badly. Rolling her eyes, she looked back at us. "I didn't hear anything. I was in class. Most of us are in the afternoons. I only ever run back to my room after lunch if I forget something."

"Had she been acting any differently since she found Joey's body at the party?" I asked.

"Not that I noticed, but like I told you before, I try to stay out of her business."

"What happened when the cops arrived?"

"They evacuated the building as soon as they showed up. Two cops, a man and woman, came to talk to me after a while. They told me they thought it was suicide and that I couldn't return to the room. As if I wanted to. No thank you. They said if I needed anything out of the room, I was supposed to give them a list and they'd get it for me. Seemed a lot of trouble to go to if a girl had just committed suicide. I asked if she'd left a note, and they looked at each other and then the woman said no. I asked them if they were sure it was suicide. The man got kind of snotty and said they knew what they were doing and that it was in everyone's best interest if I didn't suggest it was anything but a suicide."

"The two cops weren't named Grafton and Hammett by any chance, were they?" I asked, although I was fairly sure I already knew the answer.

Keisha looked surprised. "Yeah, they were. You know them?"

"We've met," I said wryly.

I remembered Detective Hammett on the news and wondered once again why homicide detectives were involved with a suicide? Did they think there might be a connection between Keiyara's death and Joey? She did find his body, after all. If so, why were they so intent on passing this off as a suicide? Were they covering something up? What was going on?

"You and Keiyara never talked about her finding Joey?" Aidan asked while I was thinking.

"We never talked about anything. I knew she'd found some guy dead in a pool but only because everybody on campus knew she'd found him."

I pulled up a picture of Joey on my phone and showed it to her. "Did you ever see her with this guy?"

She stared at my screen. "Isn't that the guy who died?"

"Yeah. Did you ever see them together before he died?"

"Never saw him at all before his face was all over the news."

A flash of inspiration hit me. "What about this?" I pulled Joey's necklace out from my shirt. "Have you ever seen this? Maybe in your room?"

Keisha took a closer look. "Maybe. If it's the same one I'm thinking of, yeah. She showed it to me, asked me who was on it. As far as I know, the girl never set foot in a church, but she knew I went every week. I guess she thought I'd know who the saint was. I tried to explain that there's a big difference between Catholics and Baptists, but she didn't get it. I swear, talking to her was like talking to a wall sometimes."

"So Keiyara did have this necklace then?"

"Well, I can't say for sure—I don't know a saint from my elbow—but I think so."

"Did you ever hear her mention my name? Will Keegan?"

She gave me a funny look. "No. Why?"

"We think she mailed this necklace to me, but we don't know why or how she knew my name."

She shrugged. "Sorry, I can't help you with that."

I looked at Aidan and an unspoken message passed between us. We were done here. Aidan thanked Keisha for talking to us, and we left with more questions than we'd started with.

All the way home, we discussed the different possible scenarios created by the new information we'd just gleaned from Keisha. We came up with nothing. The things Keisha had told us just didn't make sense.

Did Keiyara commit suicide or not? And if not, why were the police saying she did? How did Keiyara know my name and where I worked? The whole situation made me uneasy.

Maybe an emergency meeting was in order.

As soon as we got home, I called Laura, Gabe, and Caitlin, and scheduled a meeting for the following night. Then I had Aidan text Killian to let him know, but made sure he understood that we didn't expect him to show up, especially if it would cause more trouble with Asher. I had a feeling he'd be there anyway.

Adam called twice the next day with questions about the wedding, but other than that, it was a quiet Sunday. I was afraid to do anything until we talked to the rest of the gang and got their take on the situation with Keiyara.

Aidan was working out while I tried to distract myself with painting when he suddenly dropped his weights with a thump and turned to face me.

"Will, I have a question, and I think it's something we need to talk about before the wedding."

That didn't sound good. I put my paintbrush down and gave him my full attention. "Is something wrong?" I asked nervously.

"No, at least I hope not. It's just...we haven't really talked much about this whole wedding thing once Adam took over. It's less than a week away, and I just want to make sure we're still on the same page. I'm not pushing you too fast, am I?"

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"No! I mean, I know I want to do this, but I want to be sure you do, too. We can't get married just because you think I want it or out of some sense of guilt. It has to be because you want it as much as I do."

"Well, it's all happened pretty fast. I mean, two weeks ago we weren't even a couple. But yeah, I'm pretty sure I want to do this. I know I love you, and I know without a doubt that you love me." I smiled at him. "Besides, this is exciting, isn't it? Getting married and surprising everyone, starting a real life together, putting all the past behind us and looking only to the future—our future."

Aidan smiled back. "Yeah, it is pretty exciting. I guess I just want to be sure that you're sure, you know what I mean? With your background and all, I know this can't be easy for you."

"My background?"

"Well, you were raised in the church. Your dad's a pastor. He won't even talk to you. I know that early on you thought that God would hate you because you were gay. We talked about it once, on the balcony, remember? Do you still think that? Or what?"

"I mean, like I said the other night, I still feel like there's unfinished business with my parents. But everything else...I think I made my peace with it a while ago. Honestly, I'm not even sure I believe in God anymore. I mean, if there is a God, I don't think I'd want anything to do with one who doesn't approve of our love.

"I thought a lot about what you said—about the Bible being mistranslated over the years, about people twisting it for their own purposes—and I realized that what I feel in my heart matters more than what I was told as a kid. It's actually kind of freeing, realizing you can think for yourself instead of blindly accepting everything you're taught. There were always things that didn't sit right with me, but I never had the courage to question them before.

"It's still hard sometimes. I catch myself thinking something or reacting in a certain way—when you've heard the same thing your whole life, it sticks with you—but...it doesn't weigh me down anymore."

Aidan sat and grinned at me.

"What?" I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

"You are so amazing," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Most people who have been through what you have would have driven themselves crazy with guilt."

I frowned. "Guilt isn't what makes me crazy."

"Will, you're not crazy."

"I jumped off a balcony..."

"You were having a rough time. You were depressed. That doesn't make you crazy."

"What about getting engaged and married within one week? Does that make me crazy?"

He laughed. "If so, at least we're both crazy. I'm certainly crazy about you."

I pretended to gag. "Okay, that's enough cheesy mush for one day, you meathead. Go lift something heavy and let me paint in peace."

He laughed again but grabbed his dumbbells without arguing, and we went back to working in companionable silence.

Killian, sans Asher, was the first to arrive for the emergency meeting I called that night.

"Where's Asher?" I asked him as I let him in.

"Don't ask," he grumbled.

"Did you have another fight?" Aidan asked.

"Another? We're still having the first one. I didn't even tell him about this meeting. I knew he'd just flip out."

"What if he finds out?"

"I'll worry about that if it happens."

Another knock came at the door. This time it was Caitlin.

As I took her coat, she leaned in and whispered into my ear. "Can I talk to you after the meeting?"

"Sure. Is anything wrong?"

"We'll talk later."

I was still trying to figure that out when Laura and Gabe arrived. I couldn't help but notice that Gabe looked an awful lot like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. He couldn't hide a smug smirk, and I wondered what was going on. Laura looked a little cross, so whatever it was he knew, I was willing to bet he hadn't shared it with her yet. I hoped that whatever news he had

would help untangle some of the mysteries we were left with after our meeting with Keisha.

Since I was the one who had called the emergency meeting, I started things off. "I asked you all to come here tonight because Aidan and I talked to Keisha yesterday, and I thought it raised more questions than we got answered. We thought it was significant enough that we all needed to talk about it together."

With Aidan's help, I gave them a detailed rundown of what we had learned from Keisha.

"So was it a suicide or not? That's the question, right?" Gabe asked when we'd finished.

"That and, if it was murder, why did the police label it a suicide?" I added. "Wouldn't it be better to have the campus warned if a killer was running around?"

Killian sat forward. "The police may not want to create panic."

"I think it's obvious that she killed herself," Caitlin said. "You're all blowing this out of proportion, trying to find a mystery where there isn't one. She was a troubled girl who got in over her head and offed herself."

"Then why wasn't there a note?" Laura asked.

I looked down at my lap. "Not every suicide leaves a note," I said softly.

A heavy silence fell over the room, and I glanced up to find horrified expressions on everyone's face. No one seemed to know what to say.

"God, Will, I'm so sorry," Laura said. "I'm always putting my damn foot in my mouth these days."

"It's all good," I said, deliberately keeping my tone light.

Aidan spoke up, shifting the attention back to our discussion. "Will's right, though. We learned that in our psychology class."

"What's the consensus?" Killian asked, picking up on Aidan's cue. "Did she kill herself or was she murdered?"

"We don't even know for sure that Joey was murdered?" Caitlin said before anyone could speak. "I mean, it looks like this Keiyara chick wasn't exactly wrapped that tight. Maybe she found the necklace and made the rest up."

"What did she have to gain?" Aidan argued. "Besides, she didn't strike me as bright enough to come up with all this on her own. No, I think she either knew something or someone thought she knew something and she was taken out of the picture."

"I agree with Aidan," I said. "I think someone killed Keiyara to silence her."

"I think she committed suicide, but I don't think that necessarily means Joey wasn't killed," Gabe said. "If Keiyara was murdered, then we're no longer dealing with someone who acts in the heat of the moment. They've moved into carefully planned and carried out premeditated murder."

"So, do you really think Keiyara killed herself, or would you just prefer that to dealing with a cold-blooded killer?" Killian asked.

Gabe grimaced. "Maybe it's more the latter," he admitted.

"But why would the police lie?" Laura asked.

"They may know more than they're ready to admit," Killian said. "For the record, I think she was

killed. Just because Joey's death seems to be unplanned, it doesn't mean the killer couldn't feel trapped and think he had to kill again to protect himself."

"Well," Gabe said dramatically, his self-satisfied expression from earlier returning, "I have some information that isn't affected by how Keiyara died."

That got everyone's full attention.

"What information do you have?" Killian asked.

"I know who Keiyara's mystery man is."

Everyone began talking at once.

"Wait, wait, wait," he called, grinning the whole time. It was obvious he was enjoying the attention. "One at a time."

"Who is it?" we all yelled in perfect unison.

"His name is Robbie Meade," Gabe said, chuckling. "He doesn't go to Pemberton. He's from the tech school, but apparently he came with a friend from PU."

"How did you find this out?" I asked.

"More importantly, why didn't you tell me?"
Laura demanded.

"I wanted it to be a surprise when I told everyone at once," he explained, wisely answering Laura's question first. "I just found out today. I swung by the frat house between classes and told them I was looking for someone who was at the party. The first guy I asked had no clue, but someone else overheard and said it sounded like his friend, Robbie. I asked him what his last name was, and he told me, but then he got all cagey and asked me why I was looking for him. I told him someone thought they saw him with my girlfriend, and the guy just laughed and said it sounded like Robbie. When I

asked for his phone number, though, the guy clammed up, said he wasn't about to get his friend in trouble."

"Well, at least we have a name now," Killian said. "That's a lot more than we had before. We just have to find this guy and that should just be a matter of doing a Google search. If that doesn't work one of us can call the office at the tech school and weasel it out of someone there."

"Why don't we do it now?" I asked.

I was ready for this to be over, and it seemed like Robbie Meade was our last chance.

"Actually, now isn't a good time," Laura said quickly. "I should get going. I have a project due tomorrow that I haven't even started."

Gabe looked a little put out. "What? Since when?"

Laura rolled her eyes. "I've been talking about it all week."

Gabe frowned. "You have?"

"You never listen to me," she said with a sulk.

"Well, it's a good thing we drove separately," he said, still looking a little confused. "I'll stay and help."

"Is the meeting over?" Laura asked Killian.

We all exchanged glances. What was going on?

"Ask Will," he said. "He called the meeting."

She turned an expectant look in my direction.

"I guess," I said. What was she up to?

"Great," she said, bouncing to her feet. "Then I'll see everyone Friday night at Will and Aidan's surprise...whatever the hell it is."

She shrugged on her coat and started for the door.

"Maybe I should go see what that's all about," Gabe mumbled as he grabbed his jacket and rushed after her.

"That was a bit odd," Aidan said with a frown.

Caitlin sniffed. "If you ask me, she's a bit odd.

Can we talk now?" she asked me.

"Sure," I answered.

"In private?"

"Oh, right. We can talk in my bedroom."

As we left the room, I could feel Aidan and Killian's curious stares on my back.

"What's up?" I asked once we were in my room.

"I've been thinking about that agreement," she said. I couldn't read her voice, and her expression was guarded.

"Yeah?"

"If I agree to sign it, I have concerns of my own."

"About what?"

"You and Aidan."

I blinked in surprise. "What about me and Aidan?"

"Now that you're dating, how does he feel about the baby being a part of your life?"

"He supports me. He said it's my decision."

"And how do I know you guys won't get some sort of gay baby fever and decide you want to take my child away from me?"

"What? That's crazy. I don't want to raise a child. I just want to be a part of its life. I'm just Uncle Will, remember?"

"I want it in writing."

"Fine. I'll talk to Ilana and have her add that to the agreement."

"I'm not saying that I'll sign this damn thing. I'll have to read it first, and think about it."

"That's...reasonable."

"I don't think you understand. I won't let anything or anyone hurt my baby...or me. And that includes you and Aidan."

I felt a chill run up my spine at her words. Was she threatening me or just trying to make me understand how much the baby meant to her?

"The baby means a lot to me, too, Caitlin," I assured her. "I want what's best for him or her, too. If that's what this is all about, then understand that I'm not trying to take it away from you. That's the last thing on my mind. I want to be a part of this child's life, and I'm certainly not going to do anything to intentionally hurt it...or you."

She smiled tightly, but the expression didn't quite reach her eyes. "Good. That's what I needed to hear."

She patted me on the cheek and slipped past me back into the hall. I got her coat for her and let her out.

Killian and Aidan were still in the living room, sitting close together on the sofa with their heads bent toward each other, speaking in soft voices. They stopped talking abruptly as I approached.

"What were you guys talking about?" I asked as I sat down on the other side of Aidan.

"Nothing," Aidan said, slipping his arm around me.

"If you were talking about nothing, then why'd you stop when I came over?"

They exchanged glances.

"What's going on?" I pressed.

"Maybe we should try calling this Robbie person," Killian suggested.

His attempt to change the subject wasn't even subtle, but I suspected my chances of getting anything out of either of them was slim to none, so with an exaggerated sigh to make it clear I knew what was going on, I gave in.

"Shouldn't we wait for the others?" I asked.

"I don't think it's a good idea to wait," Killian said. "What if the same thing happens to him that happened to Keiyara? Then we would never get the chance to talk to him, and we'd never know what, if anything, he saw that night."

"Good point," I agreed, and slid out from underneath his arm to grab my laptop from our bedroom. When I came back, I wiggled my way in-between the two cousins so we could all look at the screen.

We quickly discovered that we didn't know which spelling Robbie used on his last name. There were multiple people named Robert or Rob with last names spelled Mead and Meade and even one Mede in the area, and, of course, there was no guarantee that any of them was the Robbie we were looking for.

We decided that there was no way out but through. We just had to call them all until we found the right person. We struck out on the first three tries. Although all the Roberts were perfectly polite, they weren't the guy we were looking for.

I dialed the next number, putting the call on speaker while it rang.

"Hi, I'm looking for Robbie Meade," I said when a male voice answered.

"Yeah, that's me," the guy said cautiously.

"Who's this?"

"Do you go to the tech school here in town?"

A pause, then, "Yeah."

I felt my pulse quicken, and, for a second, I didn't know what to say. I'd gotten used to all of us receiving negative answers to that question, after which we'd politely tell whomever we were talking to that we had the wrong number.

"Were you at the party the night Joey Taylor died?"

The line was perfectly quiet. For a panic-stricken moment I was afraid he'd hung up. "Please don't hang up," I said in a rush.

"I'm still here," Robbie said quietly. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"My name is Will Keegan. I was there, too. We met briefly...right after you jumped the fence. Remember? You told me Joey was dead. Joey was my best friend. Please, I just have some questions about that night."

"What questions?"

"I think someone was with Joey right before he died, and I think it's possible they killed him."

"That's not a question."

"We talked to Keiyara," I said.

"Who?" He was playing dumb.

"The girl who was with you in the pool house."

I heard a sharp intake of breath. "Look, I'm sorry about your friend but there's nothing I can do to help you," he said with finality.

"Wait!" I called. "Please, just answer a few questions. Keiyara told us you said you heard voices. What did you hear?"

"I don't want to get involved."

"You're already involved. You were in the pool house with Keiyara that night. What you know could help catch a killer."

"I don't know anything. I'm telling you, I can't help you. I've been hiding in my apartment ever since my buddy called to tell me the girl I hooked up with was found dead in her dorm room. Then he called back yesterday and said some guy was asking around about me at his frat house. I'm not stupid. I can see what's going on. I'm next on this serial killer's hit list. I'm leaving town tomorrow for good. I'm moving to Maine to live with my dad."

"If you're leaving, then it can't hurt to tell us what happened that night."

"You're not listening to me. I didn't see anything."

"But you heard something."

"For fuck's sake, just leave me alone!"

"If you don't talk to me, I'll have to go to the police," I said desperately.

"No! Fuck! Don't get the police involved."

"Then just talk to me," I pleaded.

He sighed heavily into the receiver. "Look, I heard something..."

"Something?"

"Someone. Voices. They were talking out by the pool. I wasn't paying attention at first, except to hope they stayed out of the pool house until we were done, you know? Then they got louder, like they were fighting."

"Did you recognize the voices?"

He let out a short burst of nervous laughter.

"Hell, no. That's why this is all so fucking messed up. I don't even know anybody at Pemberton except my friend. He's the one that brought me that night. Damn, I wish I'd never gone."

"Could you hear what they were saying?"

"I was kind of distracted at the time," he said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. "I didn't catch what they were saying. All I know is that they sounded like they were arguing. The guy sounded...I don't know, pissed off. He was loud, sounded kinda drunk. The girl was quieter, but she sounded more upset than he did."

"Wait! He was arguing with a girl?"

"Yeah."

My heart was pounding. "Are you sure you don't remember anything they were saying?"

"I'm sure, man. I told you, I wasn't listening, and I was kinda busy, you know?"

"But you're positive it was a girl?"

"I'm not sure of anything. It sounded like a guy and a girl, but, for the last time, I didn't see them and I didn't hear what they were saying. Okay? That's it. That's all I know. I gotta go. I've got another call coming in."

"Wait..." I tried, but the line went dead as he ended the call.

I sat staring dumbly at my phone for several seconds until Aidan spoke up, "So...the killer was a girl?"

"A girl..." Killian said thoughtfully. He and Aidan exchanged a look.

"Okay, that's it," I said firmly. "I let it go earlier but enough of these meaningful glances between you two. Spill it."

"It's nothing," Aidan said quickly, but I fixed him with a glare.

"Tell me what you two were talking about or you're sleeping on the couch tonight."

"You can't kick me out of my own room!"

"Try me."

He sighed. "Fine, but you have to promise not to freak out. We were just talking about how it almost feels like the killer is always one step ahead of us...almost like they know what we're doing."

"Well, we've not exactly been secretive," I pointed out.

"Still, it does seem to be just a little too coincidental."

"So what are you saying? You think the killer is one of the Scooby gang? One of us?"

"Not just any of us," Killian pointed out.

"According to Robbie, Joey was arguing with a girl."

"There are only two girls in our group," I said.

"Which narrows it down a bit, doesn't it?" Killian said.

"No. It's not Laura or Caitlin."

"How do you know?" Aidan asked gently.

"You can't be serious! I've known Laura forever. Just because you two have been butting heads lately doesn't make her a murderer. And Caitlin was with me when Joey was killed, so it couldn't have been her. Besides, what did she have to gain from Joey's death?"

They exchanged another look.

"I wish you two would stop that!" I snapped.

"Will, think about it," Aidan tried again. "You'd known Joey forever, too, but his behavior took you completely by surprise. So much so, in fact, that you didn't even believe me when I first told you about it. You had to see it for yourself. You have to admit that Laura's been acting strangely. What about the way she left here so suddenly tonight, as soon as Gabe told us Robbie's name?"

"That's why I thought it was important that we call him right away," Killian explained.

"And you remember she stayed in the hallway the day we talked to Keiyara after we left. Maybe she went back as soon as we left. There's just too much that doesn't fit."

"So you're convinced that Laura is the killer?"

"No, not convinced. It's just a possibility that we have to look at. To be honest, Caitlin is just as good a suspect."

"But she was with me when—"

"She was with you when Joey was found, not necessarily when he was killed."

"What do either of them stand to gain from Joey's death?"

"They don't need to gain from Joey's death. We've already decided that it was a crime of passion,

committed in the heat of the moment, not planned out like Keiyara's murder."

"Well, I don't believe it. I don't believe it was either one of them. Caitlin just isn't a killer and, for all we know, there could be a perfectly reasonable explanation for the way Laura's been acting."

Aidan and Killian exchanged one more glance.

"I hope you're right," Aidan said with a sigh.

I took a shaky breath. "Laura is like a sister to me. I can't lose her too."

Chapter 21

The next morning at work, I was busy in the back room, attempting, without much success, to force some sort of organization on the mess that had accumulated back there over the years. Hearing a noise, I looked up to find Nikki in the doorway with a worried expression on her face.

"Will?" she said. "There's a Detective Grafton here to see you."

I straightened quickly, dropping the clipboard in my hand with a clatter. Why was he here? Did someone else die?

Grafton's unpleasant face appeared over Nikki's shoulder. "I'll talk to Mr. Keegan right here if that's alright with you, Ms. Avanti," he said in a manner that made it clear that her approval was not really required.

Nikki looked at me, and I gave her a curt nod. She turned and walked stiffly back to the gallery. Detective Grafton stepped in, letting the door shut behind him.

"Mr. Keegan," he said conversationally, "since we last spoke, some interesting things have been happening. Your name keeps popping up everywhere I turn."

"Oh?" I asked carefully. I had a feeling that the less I said, the better it would be for me in the long run.

"Yes. Do you have anything you'd like to tell me?"

"I don't know," I hedged. "What things are we talking about?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, but why don't we start with Miss Parker's unfortunate demise? You probably heard about that on the news. What you may not know is that, while we officially released a report of suicide, we were still investigating her death. As you well know, Miss Parker was the person who found your friend, Mr. Taylor. There were many things about her death that didn't wash. That reminded me of our conversation about your suspicions concerning the death of your friend. We took a second look at Mr. Taylor's death and we found a few things that took on a different shade in the light of Miss Parker."

"Why are you telling me all this now?"

"Two reasons. Number one, you and your junior detective club have been royally fucking up our investigation. You're blundering through this whole thing like the proverbial bull in the china shop, destroying evidence everywhere and, in the few incidents where you've not destroyed it, you've outright stolen it."

"I... We..."

"We know all about the rock Mr. Maza so kindly kept for us. We swung by and picked it up on the way here."

I was starting to get nervous. Was I in trouble? Could he charge me with something? Obstructing an investigation? Tampering with evidence? To be fair, there was no investigation when we started, but I wasn't at all sure I would be able to convince a judge of that if it came down to it.

"What's reason number two?" I asked, even though I wasn't sure I really wanted to know.

"Number two is simple. For your own protection, you need to stop this stupidity now. This isn't a game. It's not a TV show. Real people are dying, and you kids are in way over your heads. We're talking about a cold-blooded killer who has already murdered three people. Let's not make it four."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, goddammit, despite myself, I kind of like you. Or, at least, I admire that you didn't just give up when I told you the first time. You knew something wasn't right and you stuck with it, for better or for worse. But we're on the case now, and you need to back off, for your own good."

"Wait! Did you say three?" My blood ran cold as his words sank in. "Joey, Keiyara, and...who?"

"I have half a mind not to tell you, but it'll hit the news sometime today anyway. We're trying to keep a lid on it as long as possible, but it's inevitable."

"Who?" I insisted, fighting a rising feeling of panic. "Who is the third?"

"Robert Meade, age nineteen, student at the tech school, attended the party the night Mr. Taylor died, and was with Miss Parker when she found Mr. Taylor. But you already knew all that. You talked to him on the phone last night, right before he was murdered."

"What? How...?"

"Phone records. In fact, the only reason *you're* not a suspect is because we know where your call was placed from and you wouldn't have had time to get to his house."

My mind was swirling. "He got another phone call while we were talking," I blurted out.

"We know. Another of your cronies—a Ms. Duvier, I believe."

My mind whirled. Laura had called Robbie? Why? And then he was killed shortly after. I felt sick to my stomach.

"But you know when he was killed?"

"Yeah. It was just minutes after you got off the phone with him. The neighbors heard the gunshot and were able to pinpoint the time of death almost to the minute. His friends found him less than half an hour after your call."

Did that give Laura enough time to get there? Possibly. We talked for a while, then called all those wrong numbers first.

"So he was shot?"

"Yep, five more times than was necessary. Didn't even bother trying to stage it like a suicide this time. Put six rounds in him and left him bleeding on the doorstep."

"Oh my God," I whispered.

"Are you scared, Mr. Keegan?"

I nodded, fighting the urge to projectile vomit all over the detective.

"Good. You should be. You might be interested to know that our killer is getting sloppy. Or cocky. Or desperate. All three are bad, but the last one is the most dangerous. Desperate people do stupid, reckless things. You've been poking a beehive, and, if you don't stop, you're going to get stung. I hope you're scared out of your mind, kid. Fear might be the only thing that keeps you alive. Now, stay out of police business. That's not a suggestion."

A wave of anger suddenly burned through me, making me forget the nausea. "If you'd done your job in the first place, I wouldn't be in police business," I snapped.

He stopped on his way to the door and turned slowly back to face me.

"You're not wrong, and that's why I'm going as easy on you as I am. And why I'm probably telling you more than I normally would. But I'm warning you, we're on it now, and I want you out of it. Got it?" He turned to leave again.

"Do you know there was a girl with Joey the night he died?" I called out.

He turned sharply on his heel and crossed back to me, coming much closer than before, until he was looming over me. "What did you say?"

"It was a girl, with Joey, right before he died. They were arguing—"

"How do you know that?"

"Robbie told me last night when I called. You mean the junior detectives found something out the big bad policemen didn't know?"

"Listen, kid," he growled, poking a sausage finger into my chest, "I've tried to be nice up to now, but you're really pushing it. You're goddamn lucky I'm not bringing you up on obstruction charges...and even luckier that you're not six feet under. Two kids are dead because you wanted to play detective. Does it make you feel better that you were right? Does that somehow justify their deaths? They'd be alive right now if you stayed out of it."

"And a killer would still be walking around scott free."

"Newsflash, buddy. The killer is still walking around, and if you don't back off, you can bet your sweet ass that you'll be the next to die. Then your dead friends can thank you in person for getting them killed."

He stared down at me for a few seconds before turning and walking away. "Stay out of this, kid," he said as he opened the door. "I mean it."

When Nikki found me a few minutes later, I was crying so hard I couldn't talk. I was still crying when Aidan arrived to take me home. By the time we got to the apartment, I had pulled myself together enough to tell Aidan what had happened. He was as shaken up about the news of Robbie Meade's death as I was. He already knew about the police visit to Gabe's house. Gabe had called him as soon as they left.

"Grafton was way out of line," Aidan said. We were sitting on the couch, Aidan with his arms around me, holding me close. "He can't know that Robbie died because of us. He should have never said that."

"He's right," I sniffled. "We're as much to blame for his and Keiyara's death as if we'd killed them ourselves."

"That's insane," he argued. "The killer would have found them herself eventually. What were we supposed to do, just let her get away with Joey's death?"

"At least no one else would have died."

"You don't know that. We did what we thought was best, and I still think it was the right call. If someone is crazy enough to kill once, chances are they'll do it

again. Especially if they get away with it the first time. This killer always seems to be one step ahead of us."

I sat up and pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Will. I didn't mean to bring that up again."

"Laura called Robbie last night."

He froze. "What?"

"While I was talking to him. That's why he hung up on me. He had another call coming in. Grafton said it was Laura."

"Why would Laura call him?"

"To get his address?"

"Will, don't go jumping to conclusions."

"You and Killian are the ones that suspected her."

"We said it was a possibility. Look, we'll talk to Laura and figure it out—"

"No."

"What?"

"We're done."

"What do you mean? We can't just—"

"Aidan, we're done. This...investigation is over. I'm calling it off. Three people have died. I can't lose anyone else. I...I can't risk losing you."

He pulled me into his chest again, and I cuddled into him gratefully.

"You're right," he said, rubbing his hands over my back. "I just wish I could be there when they bring this bitch in, after all she's put you through. I'll talk to Killian and the others."

"Thank you. I'm so lucky to have you," I whispered.

By some sort of silent mutual agreement, the topic of Joey, his killer, or the other murders didn't come up the rest of the night. We watched some TV and went to bed early. The next morning though, it seemed Aidan assumed it was open season again.

"What happened after Joey attacked you and you ran away?" he asked out of nowhere while we were eating breakfast.

I stared at my bowl of cereal for a second, then pushed it away. I seemed to have suddenly lost my appetite.

"Do we have to talk about this now?" I asked plaintively.

"I'm just trying to settle all the loose ends in my mind."

I sighed. "I ran downstairs and then I went outside."

"Right away?"

"Huh?"

"You went straight outside after you came downstairs?"

"No, I was upset. I knew I was going to throw up so I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in. Why?"

"I'm just trying to create a timetable between when you last saw Joey and when Keiyara and Robbie found him in the pool. How long were you in there?"

"We're out of this, remember? It's up to the police now."

"For my peace of mind, Will. How long were you in the bathroom?"

"I don't know. I forgot my stopwatch."

"Five minutes? Ten?"

"More like fifteen or twenty."

"That long to blow chunks?"

"No, once I was in there I didn't want to come out. It was like... I don't know. It was my safe space. I was...devastated." Even just thinking about it was making my hands shake. I slid them under my legs. "I just sat there on the floor and cried until the banging on the door became too much. Then I went outside."

"And Caitlin was there? Under the tree?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Okay? That's it?"

"Yeah. That's all."

"Aidan, what's going on? What was that all about?"

He got up, walked around the table to my side, and bent over for a kiss.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I've got to get to school now, and you've got to get to work. I'll see you this evening."

The next couple of days passed without incident. I assumed Aidan must have talked to everyone because there was no mention of continuing the investigation. I couldn't speak for anyone else, but to me at least, it was obvious that we'd been playing out of our league.

Neither Aidan nor I was in exactly a party-planning mood, so we left all the wedding plans to Adam. We were going to be almost as surprised as our guests.

On Wednesday, Caitlin called and said she'd sign the agreement if I included her revisions and handed over five thousand dollars. I felt a little like I was being

blackmailed, but Nikki had finally paid me for all my sales and I had the money, so I agreed.

I called Ilana and asked her to write up the agreement. She suggested Caitlin and I come by her office the following day and she'd go over the agreement with us.

Caitlin was strangely quiet on the ride over to Ilana's office Thursday afternoon.

"Are you okay?" I asked her as I parked the car.

"Yeah, why?"

"You just seem kinda distant."

"This is a lot, Will. The whole baby thing, there's a killer running around murdering people, you're pressuring me, and I'm trying to figure out what's best for me. I'm overwhelmed. Give me a break."

"I'm sorry," I said in a small voice. "I'm not trying to pressure you or make things worse."

"Well, you are, so let's go sign these damn papers and maybe that'll be one less thing for me to worry about."

The explanation of the papers was long and somewhat boring, filled with legalese and formal phrases that didn't make much sense. After that, the actual signing of the papers was surprisingly quick and more than a little anticlimactic. It seemed hard to believe that simply signing my name on a few lines could make such a huge difference to so many lives, including one that was yet to be born.

Once we were back in the car, I handed Caitlin a check.

She frowned. "I was expecting cash."

"You wanted me to just walk around with five thousand dollars in cash? Did you want them in small, unmarked bills, too?" I tried to make it a joke, but she just pursed her lips and shoved the check into her purse.

She was quiet all the way home. After I dropped her off at her apartment, I just started driving. I needed some time to myself and I wasn't ready to go back to the apartment. I'd expected to feel celebratory after signing the papers, but instead, I felt a vague sense of dread. I tried to convince myself that I hadn't made a mistake. I was just guaranteeing that Joey's child would be a part of my life.

It took me a while to realize I was subconsciously driving to my old house. When I did, I decided that it was a sign and continued. I parked on the street in front of my childhood home and just took it all in. I was surprised to see Dad's car in the driveway in the mid-afternoon. He was almost never home during the day. He practically lived at the church.

I shifted my attention to the house. It looked like every other cookie-cutter suburban house in the neighborhood, but a few things made it distinctly ours: the basketball net over the garage door, the front door my dad had painted "heavenly blue" when I was in middle school, the trees we'd planted together one Arbor Day when I was in elementary school.

So many of my core memories were made right there, but, on some level, they felt like they'd happened to someone else. I remembered them, but distantly. I felt like a different person. My life had changed so much in the few short months since I'd moved out. I'd changed so much.

I didn't get out of the car. Once I was there, I wasn't sure why I'd come. Was I expecting a warm greeting with open arms? If so, I suspected I was at the wrong address. I remembered Mom's voice on the phone the day they found out I was gay. *"Your father says you're not welcome back here..."*

Just as I was about to start the car and drive away, the door swung open to reveal my mother. She waved, a confused expression on her careworn face.

With a sigh, I got out of the car and started across the lawn.

"Will?" she said as I got closer. She looked older than the last time I had seen her. "I thought I heard a car pull up."

"Hi Mom," I said. I couldn't think of anything to say, so we stood there awkwardly, looking at each other through the screen door for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, I said, "I don't know what I'm doing here. I shouldn't have come."

"No, I'm glad you're here," she said softly. "Come in. Please?"

She held the screen door open. I hesitated just a second before stepping inside. I hadn't been in the house in months, but nothing had changed. Everything was right where it always was.

Mom headed for the kitchen, and I followed.

"Where is Dad? Why is his car here?" I asked as we walked.

She didn't answer until we were in the kitchen. She sat in one of the worn wooden chairs that had been around longer than I had and let out a deep sigh.

"Your father is sick, Will."

"Sick? With what?"

"It's his heart. He had some kind of attack last Sunday, collapsed at the pulpit."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He didn't want you to know. You know how he is. It's...it's been hard. He's not recovering like he should be. The doctors say he needs surgery, but your father refused. He says it's in the Lord's hands and he trusts in his timing."

"How do you feel about that?"

She laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. She just sounded tired. "I wish he'd get the surgery, but you can't tell him anything, the stubborn old goat."

"Can I... Will he see me?"

She thought for a moment. "Maybe. These last few days, I've felt like he was starting to make peace with the world, almost as if he's saying his goodbyes." She rubbed her eyes, then looked up at me. "He actually apologized to me for not being a better husband yesterday."

"When can we go?"

"We can go to the hospital now, if you want. But let me go in first to talk to him. He's...he's so weak now. I don't want to upset him..."

"You don't want to upset him if he still doesn't want to see his gay son," I finished for her.

She looked away, then stood up slowly and walked out of the room. I noticed that she moved like an old woman, as if every movement were an effort.

I walked over to the refrigerator and looked at the photos and notes attached to the door by the alphabet

magnets that had been there since I was a toddler. There was a grocery list, a dentist appointment reminder, a few other bits of ephemera, but the thing that caught my eye was a photo of Joey and I, taken in the backyard when we were about ten or eleven. We were both squeezed into the tire swing, grinning like idiots. I touched the picture, almost like I needed to know it was real, that we really had been happy at some point.

"I remember the day we took that," Mom said from behind me.

I jumped. I hadn't even heard her approach.

"It was the fourth of July," I said.

"You fell and scraped your knee later. You would have thought you'd lost your whole leg the way you carried on."

"Joey pushed me," I said, almost to myself.

"Hmm," she hummed softly. "He always was the wild one. I still... I still can't believe he's gone. My heart breaks for Monica."

I turned to face her. "Have you talked to her?"

"We went over right after...after it happened. And I saw her at the funeral, of course."

"But not lately?"

She shook her head. "No, but I should have been checking on her. I just got caught up in other things, and then all this happened with your father." She forced a smile. "Speaking of your father, are you ready?"

"I guess so," I didn't sound very convincing, even to myself.

She nodded. "No surprises, though, Will. And don't be too shocked when you see him."

I drove separately, though I followed her all the way to the hospital. We parked and went inside, where we had to check in at the front desk and get name tags, then she led me silently through the halls until we reached his room.

The door was closed, and, as instructed, I waited in the hall while Mom knocked lightly, then let herself in.

I stood awkwardly in the hallway, wondering if he'd refuse to see me even now, when he was on what very well might be his deathbed. Then I wondered what I was hoping to get out of this. The goodbye I never got from Joey, maybe?

The door opened before I could spiral any deeper, and Mom nodded and motioned me in.

Dad was lying slightly elevated in a hospital bed in the center of the room. A single chair sat next to the bed. If Mom hadn't warned me, I probably would have gasped out loud when I saw him. He was wearing a hospital gown, and tubes and wires seemed to sprout from everywhere on his body. He was a pale shadow of his former self, gray and faded.

"Will, I...I didn't want you to see me like this," he said weakly.

"Like what, Dad?" I asked, trying to keep my voice light and knowing there was a slight quiver in it anyway. "You look great."

"I look like death warmed over. I won't be here much longer. I...I'm glad you came."

"Don't say that, Dad." I moved closer to the bed and sat down on the edge of the chair.

"Why not? It's the truth. I feel it. I see it in the doctors' faces, although they're scared to say it. I see it in your mother's face, although she's terrified to even think about it. I'm not afraid to die, Will. I've been preparing for it all my life. I know where I'm going. I have peace about death. What I don't have a peace about is how I left things with you. And here you are. God brought you to me so I could make my peace with you before I go."

"Dad, stop talking like this. You're not going anywhere. If you'd just get the surgery—"

"Son, I know I handled things badly." He continued like I hadn't even mentioned the surgery. "I know I hurt you."

"Don't worry about that. I'm okay now. You should listen to the doctors—"

"If you're okay, it's no thanks to me. You almost died. If that had happened, I don't think I could have forgiven myself." He held out a trembling hand. I hesitated a second, then slipped mine into his. His skin felt dry and papery, but his grip was tight.

I was amazed at the difference that had come over him. Could this be the same man who had practically disowned me just a few months before?

"I handled things badly," he went on. "I should have known that you're my son and, above all else, family comes first. I...I made a mistake. I thought I was doing what was right, as far as the church was concerned, but I never stopped to think about whether or not it was right for you, for our family. I'm sorry, Will. I failed you as a father."

"You know I'm still...gay, right?" I asked hesitantly. I wasn't sure if that was too much, but I felt

like I had to say it. I needed to know just how conditional his apology really was.

"I know, Will," he said. His eyes closed, and for a second, I was afraid he'd passed out...or worse. But then they opened again. "I still can't say that I accept it. I'm sorry. I don't understand. Everything I've ever been taught says that homosexuality is wrong, but my heart says that you're my son—the same sweet, gentle, talented boy you've always been, not just some faceless sinner. I don't know if I'll ever be able to accept it, even if I had all the time in the world, but I love you and that's all I can offer right now."

"It's enough, Dad," I said around a lump in my throat.

"I'm...I'm a bit tired now," he said. He did look even worse than he had when I'd come in, if that were possible, and his voice sounded weaker.

"I'll let you rest," I said softly.

His eyes fluttered shut. If the various machines he was attached to hadn't kept their steady soft beeping, I would have thought he'd passed away then and there.

I turned to find Mom slumped against the doorway, tears rolling down her cheeks. She shook her head, signaling me not to speak, then slipped into the hallway. I followed.

"That's what he's been waiting for," she said once the door was gently closed. "He'll go now."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been hanging on. I wasn't sure why. Now I know."

"For me?"

"Yes, he needed to know you forgave him."

"Then why didn't he call me?"

"You know your father, Will. He's a proud, stubborn man. I think he would have called you eventually, but it's not easy for him to admit he's wrong. I'm just glad you're here now. I've...I've missed you."

"I'm getting married tomorrow, Mom," I blurted out suddenly.

"Married? To who?"

"Aidan."

She turned and wobbled down the hall to the little waiting room, where sat down heavily in one of the chairs. I followed, unsure if I'd pushed too far.

"I don't expect you to be happy," I said quickly. "I just wanted you to know. It seemed like you should know."

"Don't tell your father."

"I won't. I wasn't..."

"How can you get married? You're so young!"

"You were my age when you married Dad."

She sighed. "You're right. I was. I thought I was so grown up then. But you...you're still my baby. I feel like I barely know you anymore."

"That's because I'm not the same person I was when I moved out, Mom. So much has happened."

"I know. But you'll always be my little boy, no matter how old you are." She shook her head and gave me a weak smile. "So tell me all about this wedding."

"Not much to tell. I don't even know all the details. A friend of ours is doing all the planning. We're just showing up. It's kind of a surprise wedding."

"A surprise wedding? I've never heard of any such thing. When is it?"

"Tomorrow night at six. And there's more."

"More?" she repeated in a voice that made me wonder if she could handle more.

"This is complicated. Before Joey died, he got a girl pregnant. As far as I know, Mrs. Taylor doesn't even know so don't tell her. I think that should be up to the baby's mother, but I want to be a part of the baby's life, like an uncle, or a godfather sort of thing. We signed papers..."

She stared at me dumbstruck for several minutes before she spoke.

"What? Why would you do something like that?"

"Joey was my best friend, Mom. I loved him. This baby is all I have left of him."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not asking you to understand. I just...I wanted you to know."

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks as she buried her head in her hands.

"I need to call Aidan, let him know where I am," I said as I pulled my phone from my pocket.

"I'm going to go check on your father," she said as she fled from the waiting room.

I dialed Aidan and was relieved when he answered on the second ring.

"Hey, the papers are all signed," I told him.

"Good. Where are you? I expected you back a long time ago."

"I'm at the hospital."

"*What?* Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm not here for me."

"Then who?"

"My dad. He had some sort of heart attack this past weekend, a bad one."

"Did your mom call you?"

"No. After we signed the papers and I dropped Caitlin off, I just...ended up at my parents somehow."

"Oh, wow. Unannounced? How'd that go?" he asked carefully.

"It's...complicated," I said. "But better than it could have, I guess. Mom told me about Dad, and we went to the hospital to see him. He looks so sick. They don't know how he's lived this long without surgery. Mom said it was just because he wanted to see me again, but he was too stubborn to make the first move. Aidan...it was like he was a different man. He apologized for how he treated me, said he'd failed me as a father."

"Wow."

"He still can't really accept the whole gay thing but he said he loves me and he should have handled things differently."

"That's better than nothing. Did you tell him about you and me?"

"No, but I told Mom."

"How'd she take it?"

"I'm not sure. She was kind of stunned, I think. My news about the baby kind of took precedence, though."

"Jeez, Will, you really know how to dump it on someone, don't you?"

"Everything just kept coming out. I don't think I could have stopped even if I'd wanted to. I should

probably stay here for a while. I'm sure Mom will have a lot of questions once everything sinks in."

"Okay. Call me if you need me. I love you."

"I love you, too, Aidan."

I hung up just as I noticed several nurses rushing by. They burst through the door to Dad's room.

I stood frozen for a moment, then dashed after them, but I was intercepted at the door by a male nurse, who stopped me and said I couldn't go in. A few seconds later, Mom came out of the room, her face pale and taut with fear.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I was just standing next to his bed when all of a sudden all these alarms started," she said shakily. "Then the nurses came in and kicked me out."

"Is he...?"

She burst into tears and threw her arms around me. I gently steered her toward the waiting room, where she eventually calmed down enough to make a few calls to church folks to update them.

While she did that, I called Aidan and filled him in.

I felt like I'd barely hung up the phone before the elevator doors opened and Aidan stepped out. I hadn't even known he was coming, but I ran gratefully into his arms.

Then, much to my surprise, Aidan and my mother exchanged hugs.

"One of these days, we actually have to hang out outside of a hospital," Aidan said to her.

Mom actually managed a chuckle. "Doesn't that sound nice?"

We all settled into a long, tedious wait. After some time had passed, a young doctor came out to tell us that Dad had suffered another heart attack and had slipped into a coma. They didn't expect him to come out of it. "There's nothing we can do. I'm sorry."

"How...how long?" Mom asked.

"There's no way to know. It could be hours, it could be days, but it's just a matter of time now."

After that, they allowed us back into his room. He looked surprisingly peaceful, like he was just sleeping.

We sat with mom for a few more hours. The staff very kindly left us alone as visiting hours came to a close. Eventually, though, Mom insisted we go home and get some sleep.

"I'll let you know if anything changes," she said when I tried to argue.

Aidan and I drove our separate cars back home where I collapsed into a fitful sleep filled with nightmares.

Chapter 22

I called Mom first thing the next morning while Aidan made breakfast. She said there'd been no change since the night before.

While I was on the phone, a polite knock came at the door.

"Who could that be? Can you get that?" I asked Aidan.

"Well, we know it isn't Nikki, or she'd be beating the door down by now," he said as he started for the door.

When he opened it, Adam swept in with his arms loaded with shopping bags, which were brimming over with flowers, ribbon, and Christmas lights. In all the confusion of Dad's crisis, the wedding had completely slipped my mind.

"Oh my God!" I gasped.

"What is it?" Mom asked on the other end of the line.

"I forgot all about the wedding! We'll have to cancel it."

Both Adam's and Aidan's faces fell so quickly it would have been comical if I wasn't so upset.

"What's going on?" Adam asked Aidan, who proceeded to bring him quickly up to date.

Meanwhile, Mom was talking to me. "No, you can't cancel your wedding. Your father—well, I can't say he would have wanted you to go ahead with this, but he would want you to be happy, and if this is what will make you happy, then... At any rate, don't cancel it.

Please. You heard the doctors. It could be today or it could be next week. They just don't know."

"It doesn't seem right..."

"Will, you've been living your own life separately from us for months now by your father's choice and my silent agreement. You shouldn't stop now simply because his is coming to an end. I want you to do this. Celebrate life. Please."

"If...if you're sure."

"I am. I love you, Will."

"I love you, Mom. I'll try to come by to see him sometime today before the wedding."

"Okay. Tell Aidan I said hello and thank him for being there last night."

"Aidan's been there for me many nights. He knows how grateful I am."

"Well, now he needs to know how grateful I am."

"I'll tell him."

I hung up and turned to face Adam and Aidan.

"The wedding is still on," I said.

"Woohoo!" Adam and Aidan yelled together.

Adam quickly grew serious again. "I'm sorry about your father, Will."

"Well, like Mom said, I've been living without him for months now..."

"It doesn't make it any easier."

"I... I should take a shower," I said as I felt tears building. I fled to the bathroom where I turned on the shower to cover the sound of my muffled sobs.

I should have known I couldn't fool Aidan. He followed me right in and wrapped me in his arms.

"Are you sure you want to go ahead with this?" he asked me when I had calmed down.

"No, but I feel like we should anyway. I feel like if we don't do it now, we might never do it."

He squeezed me tight. "Why don't you call and tell Nikki you won't be in today. You've got too much going on, your dad, the wedding, everything with Joey's killer."

"No, I need the distraction. I'll go in for at least part of the day. I want to go see Dad this afternoon, too."

"Do you want me to go with you?"

I sighed. "Yes, but you don't have to. One of us should be here. I'll be okay. Are we supposed to wear anything special for tonight? Like am I supposed to pick up a tux or something?"

"I hope not. I'll go ask Adam."

He left me to my shower and reappeared as I was getting dressed.

"Adam says he has everything covered and not to worry about what we're wearing."

"One less thing to worry about, at least," I said with no small amount of relief.

By the time I was ready to leave for work, the entire entryway was filled with bags full of decorations.

"Holy crap, Martha Stewart died and left us all her shit," I moaned.

Adam laughed as he appeared from behind a seven-foot undecorated live tree that had miraculously sprouted in the middle of our living room. "Get in the spirit, Will!" he said. "You guys should have been decorated by now. What kind of self-respecting gay couple are you?"

I started to answer that we were the type of gay couple who until recently had been trying to find who killed their best friend, but I stopped myself just in time. Aidan stepped in to fill the awkward pause left by my second thought.

"We're still trying to get the hang of this whole couple thing. Give us a little time and we'll figure it all out."

"Thank you for everything, Adam. I've got to get to work," I said and made my exit.

How am I ever going to get through this day? I wondered as I drove to the gallery.

I filled Nikki in about Dad as soon as I arrived, and she told me to let her know if work got to be too much or if I needed to leave.

Work did prove to be a distraction, however. There were lots of people out looking for unique Christmas presents. Not too many bought anything, though. For the most part, when they got a look at the prices, reactions ranged from shock to abject horror.

Finally, though, the façade of geniality just proved more than I could keep up, and I asked Nikki for the rest of the day off.

"No problem, *bello niño*," she said with a soft caress to my cheek. "I will see you tonight. Take care."

I drove straight to the hospital. I found Mom dozing in a chair next to Dad's bed. As for Dad, I had to look closely to see the movement of his chest before I was even sure if he was breathing.

I had only been to one funeral, besides Joey's, in my entire life. It had been for a great uncle on my father's side. I had thought then that he looked like a wax

dummy, as if there had never been any breath of life in him. Dad looked exactly the same laying in that bed, as if his spirit had already left. I wondered if Mom could see it, too, or the nurses. Or maybe it was just my imagination.

I walked to Mom's side and touched her lightly on the hand. She jumped and looked wildly about for a second before she focused on me. Her tired face lit up when she saw who it was.

"Will, you made it."

"I told you I'd be here."

"I didn't think you would be able to with everything going on."

I gave her a hug and then stood by Dad's side, looking down on him.

"Can he hear us?" I asked.

"They think so. They said to talk to him. The doctor said that many times he's seen people who hold on until their families tell them it's okay to go, and then they just slip quietly away."

I looked over at her. The unspoken words had been as loud as the spoken. "Is that what you want me to do?" I whispered.

She looked at me as tears filled her eyes. She gave a jerky nod and then stood up and walked out quickly.

I looked helplessly after her for a moment, then turned slowly back to my father.

"Dad?" I began in a raspy voice. I cleared my throat and began again. "Dad, it's Will. I...I don't know what to say." I cast about desperately to find the right words. How do you tell someone it's okay to die? Then it

occurred to me that you simply make it so that there is nothing holding them here.

"Dad, I want you to know that I forgive you." I choked up, and it was a while before I could continue without crying. "I know I disappointed you. I wasn't what you hoped I would be. I'm sorry, but I'm doing the best I know how. And I think I'm doing all right now; I'm going to be okay. Don't worry about me. I've got my friends. I've got...Aidan. He loves me. And I love him. He's good to me, Dad. And I've got Mom. Don't worry about her either; I'll take care of her. So I guess what I'm trying to say is, it's okay to let go. You don't have to stay here and suffer any more. Dad...I...I love you."

I broke down and cried at his side for a few minutes. When my tears had run their course, I backed slowly away. At the door, I turned to find Mom waiting for me, tears rolling silently down her cheeks. She took me in her arms, and we cried together.

I wasn't in much of a celebratory mood when I arrived back at the apartment. I tried to shake the heavy mood as I rode the elevator up, but it wasn't easily dislodged.

As I came through the door, I received my first glimpse of the magic Adam had created in the relatively short time I'd been gone. It was so spectacular that I stopped dead and just gaped.

The entryway had been turned into a tunnel of fairy lights and pine garlands. It ended at the living room, which had been transformed into a beautiful sanctuary. All the furniture had been removed and folding chairs had been set up in a semi-circle facing the

huge windows. In the center of the windows stood a Christmas tree decorated completely in gold and white. All the other decorations in the room carried on the simple, elegant theme: gold and white bows were fixed here and there with sprays of pure white lilies; white pillars held gold candles that had been set up inside frosted glass globes with wreaths for bases. The result was stunning.

Adam was putting some finishing touches on the tree and didn't hear me come in.

"Adam, this is...incredible." I gasped.

He spun around and a wide grin quickly spread across his face. "Do you like it, then?"

"Like it? Are you kidding? I love it! It's absolute perfection."

"Good, I was hoping you'd approve. Aidan hasn't even seen the finished results yet. You're the first."

"I'm honored. Where is Aidan?"

"He's in his room, working on his vows."

"His what?" I asked in panic. "We were supposed to write our own vows? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Aidan just decided a little while ago. But don't worry, I'm sure Bryant will have some vows for you to use."

"If Aidan's writing his own, I have to write my own," I wailed. "I'd better get to work."

I dashed back to my old room and threw open the door to find it packed full with the furniture from the living room.

"Whoa!" I exclaimed.

Aidan opened the door to our bedroom across the hall. "You're home!" he said with a grin.

I closed the door and gave him a kiss on the lips. "I can't believe you decided to write your own vows without telling me!" I whined. "Now I have to hurry up and write mine."

"You don't have to," he said. "I just had so much that I wanted to say I decided to write my own."

"Well, I want to do it, too."

"Then you'd better get to work. Time's running out, and it isn't as easy as you'd think."

"I never thought it would be easy! This is your fault. You're the one who started this." I squeezed by him to get into his room. He followed me in and quickly scooped up a notepad that was lying open on the desk. He ripped off the top page and tossed the notebook to me.

"Get to work. I'm pretty much done, so I'll go see if Adam needs any help."

He left, shutting the door behind himself, and I set to work.

Several hours later, the door opened again. A small pile of crumpled false starts and frustrated attempts surrounded me. I turned expecting to see Aidan, but it was Adam. He was holding a white bundle in his arms.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said, "but it's almost time to start. Your guests will be arriving soon, and I have a surprise for you. I got your sizes out of your closet and well...here. Consider it one last wedding present."

He held out his bundle, and I saw now that it was clothing—white dress pants and a fitted white button-up shirt. I accepted with a hug.

"Thank you, for everything," I said, feeling overwhelmed.

"You're more than welcome. Now get dressed. Bryant is here already. I'll send him back with Aidan in a minute."

I quickly pulled on the clothes Adam had bought me and found that they fit perfectly. I was reading over my completed vows when a soft knock came on the door.

"Come in," I called.

Aidan entered, followed by Bryant.

"You ready?" Aidan asked.

"As I'll ever be," I answered. "Thank you for doing this on such short notice, Bryant. It means a lot."

"Oh please, thank *you* for allowing me to be a part of your special day," he said with a warm smile.

"Although, I must admit, this is a highly unusual wedding, even for me, and I'm used to nontraditional ceremonies."

"Heh, yeah. So, uh, what do we do?" I asked.

"Well, Adam said to keep things simple so I did. I'll welcome everyone, ask you to share your vows, then we'll exchange rings."

"Short, simple and elegant, just like me," I joked.

"Must be why I love it so much," Aidan said with a grin.

"Okay, you two, save it for the ceremony. Do you have the rings?"

We handed him the rings Aidan had bought, and I found myself getting truly excited about what we were about to do. There had been so much going on that I hadn't had time to think about it, but now my heart was racing.

After that, it was just a matter of waiting. Adam was greeting the guests as they arrived and making the big announcement. Steve, who had been in on it all from the first, was recording their reactions so we could watch it later.

Finally, after enough time had gone by for me to develop a severe case of butterflies, a soft rap came at the door, and Adam popped his head in.

"Bryant?" he said. "You're up."

Bryant slipped out, and Adam stayed in the doorway.

We could easily hear Bryant as he addressed our small group of friends. "Friends, we are here today to share with Aidan and Will a most important moment in their lives. They have learned to know and love each other, and now they have decided to live their lives together. I would like to thank all of you on their behalf for being here. You have each been invited because you are important to them, and they wanted you to share this moment with them.

"I'd like to start this ceremony by reading a poem written by the great queer icon Oscar Wilde. The title is "We Are Made One with What We Touch and See."

*"We are resolved into the supreme air,
We are made one with what we touch and see,
With our heart's blood each crimson sun is fair,
With our young lives each spring-impassioned
tree
Flames into green, the wildest beasts that range
The moor our kinsmen are, all life is one, and all
is change.*

*And we two lovers shall not sit afar,
Critics of nature, but the joyous sea
Shall be our raiment, and the bearded star
Shoot arrows at our pleasure! We shall be
Part of the mighty universal whole,
And through all Aeons mix and mingle with the
Kosmic Soul!*

*We shall be notes in that great Symphony
Whose cadence circles through the rhythmic
spheres,
And all the live World's throbbing heart shall be
One with our heart, the stealthy creeping years
Have lost their terrors now, we shall not die,
The Universe itself shall be our Immortality!"*

As the last words faded away, soft guitar music began to play. Adam signaled to us, and Aidan offered his arm, which I took. Together, we walked down the hall and into the living room. As we entered, everyone stood up, and I got my first glimpse of our guests.

There, beaming back at us was everyone in my life who mattered to me. Killian and Asher were the first faces I focused on. To their right stood Killian's mom Meg and Kane and beyond them, Caitlin, wearing a slightly stunned expression. Behind them stood Ilana and Lysander. Gabe and Laura were there, and Nikki with her boyfriend, Sam. Steve was across the room with his phone pointed in our direction.

The entire front row was filled with people I didn't recognize, but I assumed were Aidan's family. The woman was already dabbing at her eyes with a tissue—

she looked so much like Meg that she had to be Aidan's mother. Her blonde bob was a few shades darker than Meg's, but they shared the same blue eyes, leading me to deduce that Aidan must've gotten his green eyes from his father. The rest of the row looked like his siblings: three boys and a girl.

My breath caught in my throat and tears welled in my eyes when I spotted Mom at the back of the room, standing just inside the door. She looked worn out, tired beyond measure, but she was there and she was smiling with tears in her eyes.

Aidan squeezed my hand, and I realized that he must have had something to do with her being there.

A boy who looked to be in his early teens—and almost exactly like a younger version of Aidan—was playing the guitar. He glanced up, met his older brother's eyes, and broke into a proud grin.

Bryant was standing in front of the Christmas tree, and as the last notes of the song faded away, we turned to face him. That's when I noticed that it was snowing outside the window, the perfect final touch.

Adam took his place next to Kane as everyone sat down and looked at us expectantly.

Bryant spoke again. "Will and Aidan, all of us know that the two of you are deeply in love. But beyond the warmth and glow, the excitement and romance, what is love? Real love is caring as much about the welfare and happiness of your partner as about your own. Real love is not possessive or jealous; it is liberating; it sets you free to become your best self. Real love is not total absorption in each other; it is looking outward in the same direction together. Love makes burdens lighter,

because you divide them. It makes joys more intense, because you share them. It makes you stronger, so that you can reach out and become involved with life in ways you dared not risk alone.

"Aidan, do you find within you a love that unites you and Will?"

"I do," said Aidan.

"Do you find within you the courage to resist the many deaths by which love can die? Are you willing to love Will into his unique fullness, and to take the risk and the vulnerability of love again and again?"

"I am."

"Will, do you find within you a love that unites you and Aidan?"

"I do."

"Do you find within you the courage to resist the many deaths by which love can die? Are you willing to love Aidan into his unique fullness, and to take the risk and the vulnerability of love again and again?"

"I do and I am."

"Aidan and Will, as you have affirmed your willingness to join together, I now invite you to make the promises of your covenant together. Aidan?"

"Will, these past few months have been so difficult for both of us. There were many times when, if you'd told me this day would ever come, I would have laughed in your face...or cried because I wanted it so much. But here we are, and I can't even find words to say how happy I am. I have been so fortunate to find you.

"I now join you to share all of life with you, its responsibilities and freedoms, its joys and sorrows, to love and care for you. As we continue to grow in our

love for each other, I will always love you, and listen to you, and speak the truth to you, and try to be the best person I can be for you. I look forward to spending the rest of my life with you, as long as we have together."

I took a deep breath and tried not to cry. "Aidan," I started and then realized I was going to have to read my vows if I ever hoped to get through them. I pulled them out of my pocket and tried to ignore the sniffing coming from the rest of the room. "Aidan, when I met you a few months ago, I never in my wildest dreams thought I would be standing here now, doing what I am doing. I hadn't even accepted who I was at that point. That's still a work in progress, but, in reality, my love for you goes so far beyond labels or gender. It doesn't have anything to do with being gay or straight; it just has to do with the fact that you are a beautiful person and I love you. I love you with all my heart and with all my soul. You've been there for me so many times, even to the point of saving my life...more than once. Now, I give you the life that you saved. I look forward to living that life with you, sharing all that the future brings, and celebrating each day as a gift, as long as we both shall live."

Bryant reached into his pocket and pulled out the rings. He held one up for everyone to see. "These rings are the symbol of the vows just taken, a circle of wholeness; an unbroken, never-ending, perfect form. These rings mark the beginning of a long journey together filled with wonder, surprises, tears, laughter, celebrations, grief, and joy. May these rings glow in reflection of the warmth and the life which flows through the wearers today."

He handed the ring to Aidan. "Aidan, place this ring on Will's hand and repeat after me, 'I give you this ring as I give you my love and faithfulness.'"

We repeated the process with me placing the ring on Aidan's hand.

"Aidan and Will, go into the world and fulfill your lives. Hold fast to your ideals. Give one another new experiences of joy. Challenge one another that you might grow together. May this love now sealed with your mutual covenant mature and enrich the experiences of you both. May your home be a happy one and your lives fulfilled.

"Aidan and Will, why don't you seal your vows with a kiss?"

He didn't have to ask twice. We stepped forward and kissed softly.

"Friends and family, it is my great honor to pronounce Aidan Matthew Scott and William Spencer Keegan, husband and husband."

With that, everyone rose to their feet with a thunderous round of applause..

The small, informal reception that followed was the perfect complement to the ceremony. There was even a beautifully decorated three-tiered wedding cake complete with two grooms, one with black hair and one with blond. How Adam had managed to pull it all off in only one week, I'd never know.

Everyone stayed for the festivities, including, to my surprise, Mom, although the smile she had pasted on her face was beginning to look quite strained. Who could blame her? Dad was at home, quite possibly dying, while

she attended her son's marriage to another man. Considering she'd been a pastor's wife her entire adult life, I knew this couldn't be easy for her. I was touched that she was there at all.

She wasn't the only one who wasn't one hundred percent on board with our surprise nuptials. I could tell Laura wasn't exactly thrilled, though I hoped her expression had more to do with not being in on the surprise. Aidan and Killian's suspicions also tugged at the back of my mind, but I swatted them away. I refused to believe Laura could be a cold-blooded killer, and my wedding wasn't the time or place for that sort of thinking anyway.

Then there was Caitlin. I'd noticed that she'd had a strange expression on her face throughout the ceremony, and now she seemed to be positively glaring in our direction every time I looked her way. Whenever she noticed that I was looking at her, though, she would quickly rearrange her features into a poor imitation of a smile. It came out as more of a grimace, though, as if she were experiencing some sort of sudden attack of gastrointestinal pain.

Eventually I disengaged myself from Aidan, no easy task since he seemed to have become so attached to my arm that I thought he might have to be surgically removed, and made my way over to her.

Once there, however, I didn't know what to say. She didn't make it easy on me. She stared at me with her arms crossed and an unreadable expression on her face.

"Um, hey. You okay?" I said after an awkward pause.

"Why wouldn't I be?" she said icily.

"I don't know, but your body language is speaking pretty clearly," I said in what I hoped was a lighthearted manner.

"And what is it saying?"

"Um...I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Oh, I'm grand. That was some surprise you guys pulled here tonight. I sure as hell didn't see it coming. God, I wish I had a drink."

I blinked in surprise at the venom in her voice.

"We didn't want to make a big deal out of it. We wanted it to be a surprise."

"Well, you succeeded. It makes me wonder what else you've been keeping from me."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can see the writing on the wall, Will. You've got your perfect little family now. Except, where does that leave me?"

"What?" I was lost. "What do you mean?"

"You want the baby, don't you? Once it's born, you're going to want it all for yourself."

"No! That's crazy!"

"Oh, so now I'm crazy?"

"No, I mean...we literally just signed papers that limit my access."

"Sure, that's what you say now. I'll bet you're already planning ways to get rid of me."

"Where is this coming from?" I looked around to see if anyone was close enough to bail me out of this bizarre encounter. Everyone seemed to be involved in their own conversations, completely oblivious to the bizarre parallel universe that I'd somehow slipped into.

With a sudden intensity that took me off guard, Caitlin leaned in and grabbed me tightly by the wrist. Instinctively, I pulled back, but her grip was like iron.

"You're a lying little snake," she said in a low voice that sent chills down my spine. "I see right through you."

Just then Killian approached us with a big grin on his face. "Congratulations, Will!"

Caitlin quickly let go, and I took the opportunity to move a few steps away from her, just out of reach. At first blush, Killian seemed to be oblivious, but then I noticed how he kept sneaking little glances at Caitlin out of the corner of his eye. "Everything okay here?"

"Just congratulating the blushing bride," Caitlin said through gritted teeth before turning and walking away.

"What was that about?" Killian asked.

I shrugged and rubbed my wrist. "I'm not sure. I guess she doesn't like surprises."

"Well, it was quite the surprise! How did you manage to keep it from everybody?"

I forced a smile. "It wasn't easy. Only Adam and Steve knew."

"They even kept it a secret from me and I live with them!"

I looked around the room for Aidan. I spotted him off by himself, talking on his phone. After listening for a few seconds himself, he looked around the room. When his eyes met mine, he quickly looked away and disappeared down the hall.

Was it my imagination, or was he acting a bit guilty? What was going on? Why was everybody acting

so weird? Did someone slip something in the punch?
First Caitlin, and now Aidan.

Thinking of Caitlin again, I turned around to see if she was still there, just in time to see her leaving with her coat on. Everyone else was still deep in conversation.

"I wonder who Aidan is talking to on the phone," I said, in what I hoped was a casual tone.

"Oh, uh...I dunno."

Something in his tone made me suspicious.

"Killian, what do you know? What's going on?"

"You should ask Aidan. I, uh, hafta pee. Excuse me."

I sighed. So much for casual. But at least he'd confirmed that Aidan was up to something, and Killian was probably involved. That most likely meant they hadn't given up on the investigation after all, which definitely concerned me.

Another glance around the room told me everyone was still engrossed in their conversations, so I started off down the hall to find Aidan.

He was in our bedroom, talking in a hushed tone. When he noticed me in the doorway, his eyes widened for a split second, then he smiled and held the phone against his chest.

"Hey, babe, you need something?" he asked cheerily. Curiouser and curiouser, I thought, especially considering that he almost never called me babe.

"I was just wondering where you'd disappeared to," I said, giving him a chance to come clean.

"I have to take this call, and then I'll be right out. Go enjoy the party."

"Who is it?"

"Who is...uh...who?"

I sighed again. "On the phone, Aidan. Who is it on the phone?"

His mouth opened and closed soundlessly several times.

"Okay, look, never mind. Forget I asked. You look like a freakin' goldfish. I'll get back to our guests."

"Will," he called, and I stopped, "I...I'll tell you later, okay?"

"Whatever," I said with a disgusted wave. "I think there must be a full moon."

"Huh? Full moon?" he called after me, but I was gone.

The party was still going strong, but my head was starting to throb. I thought some fresh air might be good for me, so I grabbed my coat and slipped out of the apartment. I was a little disappointed that no one even seemed to notice my departure.

So much for being the guest of honor.

There was no sign of Caitlin anywhere, so I wandered to the back of the apartment building. I was standing by the river with my head thrown back, staring into the sky when Asher found me.

"Hey, I thought I saw you leave," he said. "How come you're out here? The party's inside."

"I know. That's why I'm out here."

"Not much of a party person, huh?"

I shrugged. "I was right."

"Right about what?"

"The moon is full."

"Is that why you're out here, to admire the moon?"

"Everybody's acting weird. It must be because of the full moon."

"I don't know about everybody else, but you sure are."

"Caitlin flipped out on me, Aidan's acting all secretive. Even Killian is acting strange."

"Okay, first off, Killian is strange. Second, Caitlin is pregnant. Aren't pregnant women supposed to be emotional? You know, hormones and all? As for Aidan, I don't know, maybe he's planning a surprise wedding present. You guys seem to be into surprises."

"What am I doing, Asher?"

"Um, right now? You're staring into the sky. Your neck is going to get stiff, by the way. What do you mean?"

"I mean, what am I doing with my life? Getting married? I'm eighteen! And to a guy? I mean, three months ago I didn't even know I was gay." I gave a short bark of edgy laughter. "I've been messing around with a killer. I may have indirectly gotten two people killed. I could have been killed myself, or one of my friends...I've lost my fucking mind!"

"Hey, Will, take a deep breath. You've got to calm down," Asher said calmly. "I'm no expert or anything, but I'm pretty sure you're supposed to have cold feet *before* the wedding."

"Who had time?" I laughed again. I was definitely teetering on the edge of hysteria.

"Maybe that's what this is, you're moving too fast. So just take a second and breathe. Do you love Aidan?"

"Yes, of course."

"You know he loves you. What more do you need? No one's saying it'll be easy, but if you love each other, you can make it through anything."

"You're right," I was starting to calm down, my panic subsiding. "I should have listened to you to begin with. You're the one who didn't want to get involved with this stupid investigation."

He sighed. "I didn't want anything to do with this whole thing, but if you'd listened to me the police would have let the killer get away with murder."

"But maybe Keiyara and Robbie would still be alive."

"Or maybe they wouldn't. Keiyara clearly knew more than she was saying. She knew enough to send you the necklace. If you hadn't taken that note seriously, maybe she would have gone to the police and the killer would have done the exact same thing. He doesn't seem to like leaving loose ends."

"She."

"Huh?"

"The killer is a she. You said he."

"You know that for sure?"

"Robbie told me, before he was killed. He said he was pretty sure that the person with Joey when he died was a female."

"Oh." He didn't seem to know what to say.

"You really think Aidan and I can make it?"

He looked over at me. "Yeah, I do. I think if anybody has a chance you guys do."

"What about you and Killian? Do you guys still have a chance, or did I screw everything up?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I don't know. I hope we still have a chance. I love him, and I know he loves me, but I just don't know. I do know one thing, though. If things are screwed up, it's not your fault. That's between the two of us. You've really got to stop carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. Now, are you ready to go back in and celebrate?"

"Yeah, sure." I said, and we started back toward the building. We only took a few steps before I stopped again.

"What now?"

"Just something you said..."

"Damn. What did I say?"

"You said the killer doesn't like loose ends."

"Yeah? And?"

"I'm the biggest loose end of them all."

"Whoa, that's not what I meant."

"But you can't deny it."

"Will, this isn't what you should be thinking about tonight."

"Why not? Death has been all I've thought about for the last few months. It seems pretty fitting to think about it on my wedding night. And I have a feeling I haven't seen the last of it yet."

"What do you mean?" He looked spooked.

"My dad is dying. Like, actively, as we stand here. And Joey's killer is still out there...and I just can't shake this feeling that something is going to go wrong. Maybe I'm not meant to be happy. Maybe I'm cursed."

"Cut it out, man. I'm sorry about your dad, and I know it's hard with everything going on, but this is your wedding night, so try to put all that aside for now and

just enjoy it, huh? All those problems will still be there tomorrow, I promise."

"Yeah. You're right. Let's go."

We walked back inside in a companionable silence. I was glad to have a friend as grounded as Asher. Everyone cheered as we re-entered the apartment.

"There you are," Aidan said, a hint of worry in his eyes. "Nobody knew where you'd gotten to."

"I was just outside with Asher, getting some air," I said.

Mom approached us just then.

"Congratulations to both of you," she said with just a hint of stiffness. "It was a lovely ceremony." She turned to Aidan. "Thank you for including me. I...I may not understand all of this, but it's clear that you care deeply for my son, and that's enough for me." She pivoted back to me. "I should get going, though. I want to check in on your dad before it gets much later."

"Of course. I understand. Thank you for coming. It...it means a lot." I gave her a kiss on the cheek, and she squeezed my hand before grabbing her coat and heading out.

"Come meet my mom and sibs," Aidan said, tugging me by the hand.

His mom was lovely, and, where my mom had been visibly uncomfortable, she was unquestionably thrilled.

"Please, call me, Gwen. Welcome to the family! I'm so looking forward to getting to know you," she gushed.

His siblings were sweet, and just as obviously happy for their big brother.

The party came crashing to a halt a little after midnight when my phone rang. "Will?" It was Mom, and she sounded as if she were crying.

"Dad?" The single word was all I could manage to squeeze past the sudden lump that had formed in my throat.

"The doctor thinks it's time. He said I should call the family together. You're the only family..."

"I'm on my way."

Chapter 23

I looked up to find the whole room had gone deathly quiet and every eye was on me.

"It's, um... It's my dad," I said hoarsely.

"I'll drive," Aidan said as he swept into action, scooping up the car keys and my coat.

"We'll come, too," Killian said, and Asher nodded.

"Me, too," Laura said immediately.

"We'll stay and clean up the apartment," Adam assured me, and everyone else was quick to agree. "Don't worry about anything here. Just go."

We were out the door in record time and speeding to the hospital. We traveled in separate cars, Aidan, Asher, Killian, and me in one car, Gabe and Laura in another. Once there, we went directly to Dad's floor, stopping just outside the door.

"You go on in," Aidan said gently. "We'll be right out here in the waiting room."

I nodded, but didn't move. With all the death that had surrounded me over the last several months, I had never actually seen anyone die. I wasn't looking forward to my own father being the first. Even with everything that had happened between us, he was still my father.

As I stood there, frozen, I felt a hand slip into mine. It was Aidan.

"Come on," he said softly, "I'll go with you."

That gave me the strength I needed, and we stepped forward.

Mom looked up as we came in. She was sitting next to Dad's bed, his pale, limp hand in hers. She was

still wearing the dress she'd worn to our wedding, but her hair was mussed and there were dark circles under her red-rimmed eyes.

Mom gave me a shaky smile, then turned back to Dad's still form.

"Will's here," she said to him. "We're all here now."

There was no response from Dad. He looked like he was already dead, but the steady beeping of the machines attested to the fact that, for the moment at least, he was still alive.

Mom stood up and we hugged, then, in a soft voice, she said, "You should say your goodbyes. I'll wait outside."

She hugged Aidan and thanked him for being there, then slipped from the room.

Aidan patted me on the back, lending me silent strength.

I approached the bed, but couldn't bring myself to touch him.

"Hey, Dad," I said, but my voice broke. I took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm here. I'm really glad we got to talk last time. I know things have been a little rocky with us lately, but I love you, and I know you love me. I'll take good care of Mom, I promise."

I wasn't sure what else to say. I wished I had something profound to say, but I had nothing.

I glanced up at Aidan, hoping for inspiration, but his eyes were squeezed shut. I suddenly realized how difficult this must be for him. It had to be bringing back painful memories of losing his own father.

"Why don't you go to the waiting room?" I said.

My husband opened his eyes and attempted a smile.

"I'm okay."

"Go. I'm fine." He looked unsure, so I added.

"Really."

He nodded, and let himself out.

I turned back to Dad, still unsure of what else I was supposed to say. How did you say goodbye to your father?

Then it occurred to me that I'd never gotten this chance with Joey, so maybe I should make the most of it while I had the chance.

"I... I got married tonight," I started. "It happened really quickly. Maybe too quickly, if I'm being honest. I'm a little freaked out. Not because I don't love Aidan. I do. And I know without any doubt that he loves me, too. But what if I'm not a good husband? I'm kind of a mess. I mean, I tried to kill myself twice in the last few months. I don't know what I'm doing. But maybe...maybe nobody does. Maybe we're all just out here faking it, and all I can do is my best."

I looked down at him but he still hadn't moved a muscle. The steady beeping continued. Could he hear me? Did it matter?

"Did Mom tell you Joey got a girl pregnant before he died? I'm going to help raise it, be like an uncle. Maybe. The baby's mom is kind of crazy so hopefully she sticks to the plan. That baby is all I have left of Joey. Well, that and his necklace.

"It's so crazy that he's gone. It still doesn't feel real. And soon you'll be gone, too, I guess. I'd tell you to say hi to him for me, but if there is an afterlife and it's

anything like what you taught me, I doubt you guys would be in the same place."

I chuckled to myself. I was rambling through my stream of consciousness, but if he didn't like it, he'd just have to wake up.

"To be honest, I'm not sure what I believe anymore. That's probably the most upsetting thing I've told you tonight. Aidan taught me a few things about the Bible, but I guess I was kind of questioning things even before that, you know? Or maybe you wouldn't know. You always seemed so confident in your beliefs. Blind faith. Maybe I'm just not cut out for that. You always said I asked too many questions.

"But I feel like I'm getting close to figuring it all out. Or closer anyway. I feel like happiness is attainable. It's been a rough ride getting here though. And, honestly, you were a big part of the reason why it was so hard. How could you just turn your back on me like that? How could you choose religion over your own son?"

I felt a hot tear run down my cheek and I swiped at it angrily, finally allowing myself to feel all the pain and anger I'd bottled up.

"Here I am spilling my guts at your deathbed, and you couldn't even bring yourself to visit me when I was in a coma. I know I told you last time that I forgave you, but I haven't yet. Not really. Maybe I would have in time, if you'd lived and made some sort of effort. And I guess I'm glad I got to hear you admit you failed me, but that was too little, too late. How do I know you even meant it? Maybe they were just the words of a dying man trying to clear his conscience."

I sighed and wiped my eyes again.

"I guess, in the end, it doesn't really matter, does it? It's all you could give, and it's more than many people ever get. So, I'll heal...in time. Maybe I'll even be able to forgive you. But I can guarantee you that I'll do it on my own terms. And I'll do it as an openly gay man with an amazing, supportive husband who loves me for who I am."

I took a deep breath and stood up.

"I guess that's all I have to say. If this is really goodbye, then...I love you. Despite everything, I do love you. Goodbye, Dad."

I walked out to the waiting room, and Mom jumped to her feet.

"Any change?" she asked.

"No change at all," I told her.

"I'll... I'll go check on him," she said, and rushed off.

"Are you okay?" Aidan asked.

"Yeah. Surprisingly, I'm good. I...got a lot off my chest. I feel like I may have actually gotten some closure."

I looked around and realized that Gabe, Killian and Asher were missing.

"Where are the guys?" I asked.

"They went looking for a soda machine," Laura said.

She looked tired, slumped down in one of the uncomfortable chairs in the waiting room.

I went over and sat next to her. "Can we talk?"

"About?"

"Us?"

"I'll give you guys some privacy," Aidan said, stepping into the hall.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

"For what?"

"The wedding? You looked pissed back at the apartment."

"Am I mad at you for throwing a surprise wedding? No, not really. Maybe a little at first, but mostly just because I felt left out."

"I'm sorry. It was a crazy idea."

She laughed a little. "Crazy doesn't begin to describe it. But, for the record, I'm happy for you. You deserve some happiness after the last few months, and Aidan is a great guy."

I leaned in and hugged her awkwardly.

"I miss us," I whispered.

She sighed as I sat back. "Yeah, me too, but I guess we'll never be the same again. Joey is gone, you've got Aidan, I've got Gabe. It's different, but that doesn't mean it won't be just as good."

I smiled. "Yeah, maybe it'll even be better. Joey was kind of a jerk."

Laura's eyes widened. "I never thought I'd hear Will Keegan say those words."

I grinned. "I guess I've changed, too."

"Hell yeah!"

"You know, there was a moment when Killian suspected that maybe you were the killer, but I knew it couldn't be you."

Laura shifted and sat up. "Yeah, I know. He talked to me."

"He did?"

"Yes. He wanted to know why I called Robbie that night."

I tilted my head. "Why did you?"

She shook her head. "It was stupid. I was so mad at Gabe for not telling me. I was feeling left out again, like Gabe was in this little club with you and Killian, and I was getting pushed out. It felt like you and Joey all over again, with me on the outside, as usual."

I opened my mouth to argue, but she rushed on.

"I said it was stupid. I know. But I decided I'd be the first to call him. Only I wasn't the first. By the time I tracked him down and called, he'd already talked to you, and he basically hung up on me when his doorbell rang."

"That was probably the killer," I said as the hairs on my arms stood up.

"Yeah, that's what it sounds like." She rubbed her eyes, then blinked at me. "You know, I think I've had enough of this whole detective thing to last me the rest of my life. I'm glad the police took over."

"Me too," I said. "And I'm especially glad that none of us got hurt for our stupidity."

Just then, a nurse went running by, quickly followed by another.

I jumped up and moved into the hallway, Laura right on my heels, just as the nurses burst into Dad's room. A moment later, one of them escorted Mom out.

"What's going on?" Mom demanded.

"Ma'am, you and your family will need to wait out here. A silent alarm went off, and we need you to wait here until the doctor can talk to you."

"What alarm? Please tell me what's going on."

Just then a doctor in a white coat came rushing past us and into the room.

"Excuse me," the nurse said, "I need to get back in there."

She left us alone in the hall. Aidan slid an arm around my waist. We stood awkwardly watching the door for a moment, but when nothing happened immediately, we all filed back into the waiting room. We were soon rejoined by Killian, Asher and Gabe, arms loaded with sodas nobody wanted. There wasn't enough seating for all of us, so I paced while Mom sat on a chair, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, not saying a word.

After several minutes, the doctor appeared in the doorway.

"Mrs. Keegan," he began. He looked tired, as if it had been a long night and it wasn't about to get any better. I knew what was coming. "I'm sorry."

He continued talking, but I stopped listening. My world had shifted yet again. My father was dead. My mom was a widow. Just a few hours before, I was getting married. The tonal whiplash of this day was starting to catch up to me. I turned into Aidan's chest and started to sob, then realized my mom probably needed me, so I tried my best to pull myself together.

She was holding up remarkably well, though, already discussing what arrangements needed to be made. There were a few formalities, papers to be signed, calling the funeral home, things like that. Mom somehow handled all of that like a pro. Aidan and I stayed with her, but we sent Asher and Killian back with Laura and Gabe.

We didn't leave the hospital until after three in the morning. I drove Mom back to our old house with Aidan following in his car. We didn't talk much on the ride.

Once we arrived at the house, there wasn't anything to do. Mom told us to go home and get some rest, and even apologized for interrupting our wedding night. We hung around for a few minutes, but, truthfully, I was beyond exhausted, so I finally allowed Aidan to take me home.

We arrived back at the apartment building just after four a.m. Nikki's door flew open as soon as we stepped off the elevator. As soon as she saw our faces, she threw her arms around me in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry, sweetie," she murmured in my ear, "as if you haven't been through enough already, now this. I couldn't sleep. I was so worried. Every time the elevator came up, I was out the door. Caitlin came by. I told her what was going on, and she said she'd be back tomorrow, or well...I guess later this morning. Listen to me babbling on, as if you care about all this right now. You need to rest. Don't even think about coming in to work tomorrow. You take some time off."

She gave me a quick peck on the forehead, and then she was gone, her door shut. I stood for a minute, feeling rather like Dorothy must have felt after the tornado had dropped her off in Oz.

"Caitlin," Aidan said under his breath, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth.

"What about her?" I asked.

"Never mind," he said and went to our door. As he slipped the key into the lock, the door swung open at his touch. It wasn't even latched.

"Adam must have forgotten to pull it closed," he muttered as we stepped in.

My mind was so numb that it took a minute for it to register that all the wedding decorations were gone and all our furniture had been returned to their original places. The tree had been left up but other than that, you would have never known a wedding had taken place in this same room only hours before.

My mind kept going back to the name Aidan had uttered in the hall, Caitlin.

Aidan came up behind me and began to massage my shoulders. Then he kissed the side of my neck.

"Why don't you go get in bed?" he said softly.

"I'm going to get myself a drink, and I'll be right there."

"Why did you say Caitlin's name just now, in the hall?" I asked.

He sighed. "It'll wait till morning."

"No, it won't. I want to know now. Is this something to do with that phone call tonight? I know you and Killian kept digging into things. Laura told me. I thought we were letting the police take over."

He sighed. "We were, but there were just too many loose threads," he said. "And you know how Killian had a hunch that it was someone close. We were worried that by the time the cops figured it out, it might be too late. So we just asked a few questions..."

"Laura said Killian asked her about calling Robbie."

"Yeah, she was easy. Caitlin was more of a challenge," he went on. "We really had to get creative."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, maybe it was petty, but I couldn't stop thinking about that caption under your photo in the paper. It was such an oddly specific mistake for a reporter to make. So Killian tracked down the reporter and asked her where she got that idea. Turns out, Caitlin was introducing herself as your fiancée all night."

"What? Why would she do that?"

"To make herself seem more important? To get attention? Claiming something she thought was already hers? Who knows? But it did make us wonder what else she was lying about."

"I managed to find her parents' names and her hometown from a friend in the admissions office. I looked them up and called them. It turns out she made everything up. Her mom and dad never divorced, her mom isn't on any medications, and they aren't strict at all. Definitely not Mormon. They had no idea she was pregnant. There's more, but it's late. There's no point going into it now."

"But why—"

"Why would she lie? I've been trying to figure out the same thing."

"Do you think she's the killer?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his face. "It's possible. She had time while you were in the bathroom, she could have killed Joey and then gone to the front yard. Or maybe she's just a pathological liar."

"Should we tell the police what you found?"

"Probably. But that will wait until tomorrow. It's late, and I don't know about you, but I'm beat. It's been a long, emotional day. Let's go to bed and approach all of this in the morning with fresh minds."

There were a million questions flying through my head, but exhaustion won out. I nodded and stumbled off down the hall, my mind reeling.

I pushed open the bedroom door, but something stopped me cold. I didn't know why, exactly—just that primal feeling of fear, the kind that prickles at the base of your skull and whispers that something isn't right.

"Who's there?" I called out, my voice tight.

"What?" Aidan answered casually from the kitchen.

I stepped back, one foot retreating into the hallway. That's when I heard it—soft, sharp, and chilling: "Stop."

The word sliced through the air, low and urgent.

I froze.

"Will?" Aidan called again. "Do you need something?"

"Don't speak," the voice hissed. "Don't move or I'll kill you right now."

The shadows shifted. A shape emerged—first a gun, then an arm, and finally, a figure stepping fully into the dim light.

Then I saw her face.

"Caitlin," I said quietly, almost mournfully.

She tilted her head, the gun never wavering.

"You don't seem surprised."

"Somehow, I'm not."

She took a few more steps toward me, and I instinctively backed away, despite her warnings. "You're not as smart as you think you are," she taunted as she stepped into the hallway.

"I don't think I'm smart at all," I said. My voice was flat, drained. "I defended you over and over. I wanted to believe in you. Guess you fooled me. You fooled us all."

"Not quite all of us," Aidan said from the other end of the hall, his voice eerily calm.

She whipped around, gun raised.

"I know the truth, Caitlin," he said, taking a step closer.

"What truth?" she barked. "You don't know shit."

"I talked to your dad tonight," Aidan replied. "He told me everything."

Her eyes narrowed, but the hand holding the gun faltered just slightly.

"Yeah, he called me too," she snapped. "Told me all about your little chat. I guess they sold you some sob story. Well, it's all lies."

"Someone's lying, that's for sure. But I don't think it's your parents."

"Are you calling me a liar?" her voice rose.

"Well, you are the one standing here in our apartment holding us at gunpoint. You have to admit that hurts your credibility just a smidge. Plus, knowing everything I know now..."

Caitlin's lips curled. "Exactly what is it that you think you know?"

"I know about the hospitals. All the stays. Your dad said they started when you were just a kid. He told

me about the dog—how you killed it when you were ten because it chewed your dolls. About the girl you nearly beat to death in high school because you were convinced your boyfriend cheated on you with her. You were locked away for that one for a long time."

"Shut up."

"He said you disappeared the moment you turned eighteen. They were terrified to let you go, but they couldn't stop you. And then you just vanished. Until you showed up here."

Her hands trembled now, just a little.

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I could only watch her unravel, one thread at a time.

"That's... that's not true," Caitlin stammered, her voice trembling.

"Maybe you thought you could start over here," Aidan said. "A clean slate. New town, no past. Then you met Joey."

"Stop..." she warned, but her voice cracked.

"Maybe you liked him. Or maybe you saw an opportunity. But he was too broken to play into whatever fantasy you were spinning."

"No! He... he said... he said..."

"And then the lies started stacking up. One on top of the other. How were you going to explain the baby, Caitlin?"

Her eyes ricocheted back and forth between us, panicked and cornered. "It's Joey's baby—"

"There is no baby," Aidan said, cutting her off coldly. "Maybe there never was. We talked to your roommate. She told us you're still getting your period. She's seen your menstrual products in the bathroom."

Caitlin's grip on the gun tightened. Her arm quivered, just slightly. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"You used the baby to manipulate Will. You preyed on his grief. You saw someone vulnerable and kind and tried to take advantage of him."

Her expression twisted. "He's an idiot. And so was Joey. This is all his fault. I was pregnant. He told me to get an abortion, then when I asked for money, he told me to go fuck myself. He called me disgusting."

"So you killed him," Aidan said flatly.

"I..." she hesitated. "No. I mean... I didn't mean to. We fought. He said awful things. I snapped. Hit him with a rock. He fell in the pool. I didn't help him. I just...left. I let him drown." Her voice dropped into something close to wonder. "But I'm not sorry. I'm glad he's dead."

"What about Keiyara? Robbie?" I asked.

"I did what I had to do to protect myself."

"They didn't even know who you were."

"She saw me with Joey earlier. Maybe she put two and two together. Maybe she hadn't yet. But she might have."

"She still let you in to her room. That's not what someone does if they're scared of you, if they think you're a killer."

"She had to go," Caitlin snapped. "And so did Robbie. Loose ends."

Aidan's jaw clenched. "Is that what we are? Loose ends? What are you going to do? Kill us too? You think that'll fix it? I'm not the only one who knows all this. The police will know everything within hours."

"And I'll be long gone by then. Besides, what difference do two more make?" She cackled, a high, unhinged laugh.

"Caitlin, please," I said, stepping forward. My voice cracked. "I don't understand. I tried to help you. I was your friend—"

"You never gave a damn about me!" she screamed, the gun swinging wildly toward me. "All you cared about was that baby. 'He's all I have left of Joey.' God! I hated you for that. I only stuck around because you all started your little detectives club. I had to make sure you didn't get too close."

"And you got all the inside information," Aidan said, calm but firm, drawing her attention again. "You used us. You played everyone. But it's over now. You're either going to prison or an institution. You don't have any other moves."

I flicked my eyes toward him. He was still at the end of the hall, framed in the light from the kitchen, his face calm, almost radiant in its stillness. It felt like a final stand.

"Shut the fuck up!" she shrieked.

"Or what?" he said, lifting his chin. "You'll shoot me?"

The gunshot shattered the air.

I didn't think—I just launched myself forward, crashing into Caitlin as the echo rang in my ears. We hit the floor hard in the dark bedroom, grappling for control of the weapon in a tangle of limbs and fury.

She fought like someone possessed, wrenching the gun from my hands and slamming it across my cheek. Blood filled my mouth, but I barely registered the

pain. I threw a wild punch, then another, and another. Some landed. Some didn't. I just needed to stop her.

She caught me with a solid blow, and my vision went white-hot. I reeled back, blinking, and found myself cornered against the dresser.

The muzzle of the gun was inches from my face. "Say hi to Joey for me," she whispered, eyes wild.

My hand scrabbled behind me, desperate. My fingers closed around something—corded, heavy.

I yanked.

The ceramic lamp came down hard, glancing off the side of her head with a solid thud. The gun fired, the shot cracking past my ear and blowing out the mirror behind me.

I didn't wait. I surged forward, snatching up the lamp like a club, and brought it down on her skull—over and over until she crumpled beneath me.

Panting, bloodied, I scrambled to my feet. I grabbed the gun, hands shaking, and trained it on her unmoving body.

She didn't flinch. Didn't twitch.

I backed into the hallway, heart still racing, never taking my eyes off her.

"Aidan?" I called. There was no answer.

"Aidan?"

I tore my eyes from Caitlin, heart pounding, and looked down the hallway for Aidan.

His feet were splayed out awkwardly in the middle of the hallway; the rest of him out of sight in the kitchen.

"Aidan!" I screamed, panic flooding my chest. My legs moved before I could think, but I came up short at the door.

"Oh, my God..."

He was on his back, still dressed in the white clothes Adam had given us for our wedding, but now a dark red bloom was spreading across his chest.

I dropped to my knees beside him with a broken cry, pulling his head into my lap. His skin was pale, clammy. I brushed his hair back with shaking fingers.

His eyes fluttered open.

A flicker of hope sparked in my chest. "Oh God, Aidan," I gasped. "You're okay. You're going to be okay. We're going to be okay, right?"

"I'm sorry..." he whispered, eyes barely staying open. "Tried to keep her talking..."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," I choked out. "You were perfect. You were brave. It's going to be fine, I promise. Just stay with me."

"...called the police..." he murmured.

"Shh. Don't talk. Just hold on, okay? You have to hold on. Don't leave me. Please don't leave me."

"...I love you, Will..." His voice was so soft I might have imagined it.

"I love you too, Aidan," I sobbed. "I love you so much. Please, please don't go."

His eyes opened one last time and met mine—really met them—as if he was memorizing the shape of my soul. And then they closed.

I felt the stillness settle into him like a final silence.

I knew he was gone.

"I love you. I love you. I love you," I sobbed, the words spilling out like a broken prayer. I pressed a kiss to his lips and wrapped my arms tighter around him, rocking his body gently in my lap like I could lull him back to life.

I didn't hear the sirens. I barely registered the pounding on the door. I just kept holding him, crying into his hair, whispering his name like it might tether him to me.

When the police finally burst in, voices shouting and boots thundering down the hall, I didn't look up. They swarmed past me, filled the room, shouted commands I couldn't understand.

But they were too late.

Too late for Aidan.

Too late for me.

Epilogue

"Looking back, it's so clear. I should have seen it, should have known."

"Known what?" Doctor Wohler asked. "That your new friend was a very sick young woman? That she ruthlessly killed your best friend and two others? That she would try to kill you and your husband? How could you have known any of those things, Will? Your only crime was trusting someone."

"And it got Aidan killed."

"It's useless to blame yourself. We've talked a lot about how we can never be responsible for someone else's actions. What they do is fully their own choice, no matter what the circumstances. In this case, it sounds like Caitlin has an entire history of violent mental illness. You couldn't have known that, and you're not responsible for what happened."

"But..."

"But what?"

"I should have listened when Killian and Aidan first said they suspected her."

"What would that have changed? Chances are you would have proceeded with your investigation exactly as they did. You did all you could. And what you did saved your life, and almost certainly others."

"But not Aidan's. Maybe...maybe my life isn't worth living without him."

"You have your whole life ahead of you, Will. I know it's hard to believe right now, but you'll heal. You'll fall in love again. You'll experience joy and

happiness. And you'll experience more loss and pain. That's all part of being alive."

"I feel like all I've experienced these last few months has been loss and pain."

"You've experienced more than your share. I can't deny that. But you still have Laura. You still have your friends. You still have your job and your art. You still have your mother."

My mother. I couldn't deny that she'd been a rock since that horrible night.

"I've moved back in with her. I couldn't bear to go back to the apartment. And she's all alone now with Dad gone."

"It sounds like that's the best option for both of you. You can be there for each other. You're both still mourning the loss of your partners."

"I haven't seen Killian and Asher since Aidan's funeral. It was...hard. I'm pretty sure Killian is blaming himself, too. I probably bring back too many memories."

"Give him space. You all need time to heal. Then reach out when you're ready. His response will be up to him, obviously, but all you can do is try. Assuming you'd like to maintain that friendship. It's also okay to let it go if that's what you want."

"I don't know what I want."

"And that's okay, too. You're dealing with a lot right now. Give yourself some grace."

I managed a small smile. "That's my mom's name. Grace."

He smiled back. "It's a lovely name. How's the job going?" he asked.

"It's going okay. I just started back a couple of weeks ago. Nikki gave me a lot of time off."

"That was kind of her. Are you painting?"

"Yes. That's like the one thing that seems to help."

"Yeah. She had the abortion the same day we talked about it at the café, when she told me she wasn't going through with it."

"Then why lie?"

"To get money from me. I think that was her plan from the beginning—maybe even with Joey. The more I think about it, the more I believe she just expected other people to take care of her. She didn't want to work or put in effort. She just wanted to manipulate people into giving her what she wanted. At first, I think she thought she could seduce me like she did Joey. When that didn't work and Aidan and I started dating, she used the baby. She's a con artist. Maybe even a little psychotic."

"I always hesitate to diagnose someone I haven't treated personally, but it certainly sounds like she had some kind of personality disorder—narcissism, at the very least. I imagine she would've faked a miscarriage eventually, milked that for sympathy and money, and then moved on once she'd drained everything she could."

"Probably." I shrugged. It didn't really matter anymore.

"And the girl who sent you the necklace—how did she know where to find you?"

"Detective Grafton has a theory. He thinks Keiyara saw me arguing with Joey earlier that night. A lot of people did. Or maybe she and Robbie were the

ones smoking in the backyard when Joey found me with Caitlin. Either way, she connected me to Joey. Later, the paramedics took Joey's body away, she found the necklace. Maybe she picked it up, planning to return it, but once his death was ruled an accident, she must've had doubts. Or at least suspicions. She'd heard Caitlin and Joey arguing. She'd seen his body. Maybe she saw or heard more than she admitted. Grafton thinks she saw my photo in the paper, the one Nikki took of me posing with my painting and the buyer. That's really the only way she could've known where I worked."

"That makes sense. Is it alright if we shift gears for a moment?"

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that, but I nodded.

"Thank you. I have an important question, Will, and I want you to be honest with me. Have you had any thoughts of self harm recently?"

I let out a dry laugh. "Thoughts? Yeah. Constantly. It's like this low, persistent hum in the back of my mind. But I'm not going to act on it. I made a promise to myself—and to Aidan—not to go down that road again."

"Are you finding yourself fantasizing about it or making any kind of plans?"

"No. Not like that. It's more like...fleeting thoughts that pop up when things feel especially dark or overwhelming. Which, lately, is most of the time."

"There's actually a name for that. It's called passive suicidal ideation. And yes, it's serious, but it doesn't mean you're broken. It means your brain is trying to cope with something that feels unbearable."

You've been there before, so your mind knows that path. That doesn't mean you'll walk it again, but it's something we need to pay attention to.

"Thoughts like these aren't a failure. They're a signal. And reaching out isn't weakness. It's survival—life pushing through, even when it hurts.

"There is good news though. Therapy, medication, and connection can make a big difference. They won't erase the pain overnight, but they can make it bearable.

"We've talked about this before, but I really believe you'd benefit from meeting with me regularly. Do you think you could commit to that?"

"Yes," I said, my voice firm. "I'll do it for Aidan."

He eyed me thoughtfully for a second. "That's a good place to start, but eventually, I hope you'll do it for yourself. You're worth that, Will."

I shrugged. Maybe I'd believe that someday. "I should go. I've taken too much of your time as it is."

"Nonsense, it's quite alright. That's why I'm here."

"Still, I should get home, check on Mom. Thank you for squeezing me in today."

"I'm glad you called. Stop by Cheryl's desk on your way out and set up a regular appointment time. How does once a week sound?"

"It sounds good. Thank you, Dr. Wohler," I stood to leave but paused by the door and turned around, my hand on the knob. "You know, my dad once told me to look up a Bible verse, right after he found out I was gay. It was Hosea 8:1. Do you know it?"

"No, I'm afraid I'm not that familiar with the Bible. Can you quote it?"

"Oh, yeah. I can't get it out of my head these days. It says, 'For you have sown the wind, and you shall reap the whirlwind...' I've thought about that a lot. Do you think that he could have been right?"

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. I don't really believe in God anymore, so I guess I don't believe there's some divine being up in the sky punishing me for being gay, which is what Dad meant, but it does feel like I made choices that have had a ripple effect of hurting everyone around me."

"No, Will. I may not be much of a Bible scholar, but I think that's just how you're interpreting these tragic things that happened around you. You didn't cause Joey's behavior any more than you caused Caitlin's cruelty, and I think, in your heart, you know that."

"Maybe. At least I'm trying to get there."

"Maybe you should flip that sentiment around and take back your power."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't reap what you don't sow, Will. You have to put into the world what you hope to receive. You're not reaping the whirlwind. I think you've weathered the storm...and come out stronger for it."

Suddenly, the painting I had done so many months ago popped into my head. It described my situation so perfectly then, and it still fit. I saw the tiny frog clinging doggedly to that thin blade of grass while a raging storm whipped furiously around him. He might bend but he wouldn't break. He was a survivor.

Like me.

A small smile turned up the corners of my mouth, and I looked up to find Dr. Wohler smiling back at me.

"See you next week." I said as I slipped out, closing the door behind me.

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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