



JOSH ATEROVIS

# THE TRUTH OF YESTERDAY

A Killian Kendall Mystery  
Book IV



**THE  
TRUTH  
OF  
YESTERDAY**

A Killian Kendall Mystery

Book 4

**Josh Aterovis**

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## **Reader Advisory**

*The Truth of Yesterday* contains mature themes, including murder, violence, sexual content, drug use, sex work, and depictions of abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual). The story also explores grief, trauma, and homophobia. Reader discretion is advised.



*We are all liars, because  
The truth of yesterday becomes a lie tomorrow,  
Whereas letters are fixed,  
And we live by the letter of truth.  
The love I feel for my friend, this year,  
Is different from the love I felt last year.  
If it were not so, it would be a lie.  
Yet we reiterate love! love! love!  
As if it were a coin with a fixed value  
Instead of a flower that dies, and opens a different bud.*

*DH Lawrence*



We like to imagine life as a story, neatly divided into a beginning, middle, and end. But real life rarely follows such a tidy arc. We often underestimate the power of the past. After all, it's behind us—so how could it possibly shape the present?

The truth is, the past may be over, but it's rarely finished — especially when it's been left unresolved. It lingers, subtly reshaping our perceptions, our emotions, even our sense of reality. What we thought was buried can suddenly rise again, not behind us, but directly in front of us.

Like echoes traveling back from a great distance, or ripples spreading across a still pond, the past has a way of returning, haunting us with what might have been, taunting us with unrealized potential, terrorizing us with truths we tried to ignore, tormenting us with losses too great to bear.

Each of us, in our own way, tries to outrun the past. Some close their eyes in the classic ostrich approach — if I can't see it, maybe it can't see me. Others keep moving, hoping speed will outpace memory. Some manage to convince themselves it never happened at all. There are as many strategies for avoidance as there are pasts to avoid.

But in the end, if we live long enough, the past catches up. And if we're not careful, we may live just long enough for it to do so — and no longer.



## Chapter 1

I sat slumped in my chair, eyes on the clock, counting the seconds until I was free while the professor droned in the background. I'd stopped listening at least half an hour earlier. Luckily for me, he wasn't saying anything of real importance. The class was a complete waste of time. The professor had a love affair with the sound of his own voice, and we students were mere voyeurs. I could have simply read the book and showed up for the tests, and done just as well. Unfortunately, attendance counted as much as test scores for this professor, so I had to make an appearance.

Finally, the class ended, and I was the first person out the door. I was supposed to meet Micah, my boyfriend, on the other side of town. He'd told me he had something he wanted us to talk about. I had no idea what he had in mind, but that phrase alone was enough to strike fear in my heart.

Or maybe I was just overreacting. It didn't have to be anything serious.

I started my car and checked the dashboard clock. If I hurried, I could swing by my office, check my messages, and still have no problem meeting Micah on time, as long as the roads weren't too congested. Despite being only a small city on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, Salisbury had its share of traffic woes.

I made it to the office with no major delays. I parked my car in the small lot next to the building and ran up the stairs to Novak Investigations. Shane Novak, the private investigator I worked for, was out on business for the afternoon. As his assistant, I mainly did a lot of

paperwork, but now and then I also got to help out on some of his cases. I'd even been assigned one of my own recently, which was why I'd wanted to stop by the office.

I sat down at my desk and opened my work laptop. The first thing I did was turn on some music. I hated being in the office when it was empty and silent as a tomb.

"I didn't think you were coming in this afternoon," someone said behind me a few moments later.

I jumped and spun around. "Oh, hey!" It was Novak. "I didn't think you'd be here, either. I just wanted to check our messages."

"I finished up early, so I decided to get some work done while it was quiet." He gave me a meaningful look.

Novak was a retired police detective, and he looked the part. You could tell at a glance that he used to be in law enforcement or the military. He wore his iron-gray hair in a buzz cut and kept his body fit and lean, but it was more than that. There was something in the way he carried himself. Although his age was hard to guess, I knew he had to at least be in his late fifties, and it wasn't impossible that he was even older. When his wife died soon after he retired, it hadn't taken him long to realize he wasn't cut out for sitting around the house. That was the beginning of Novak Investigations.

I made a face at him and turned off the music. "Don't worry, I'm not staying long. I wouldn't have even known you were in if you hadn't snuck up on me."

Novak chuckled. "I didn't sneak up on anybody, and you're fine. I'm just giving you a hard time. Since

you're here, why don't you give me a quick update on the Knox case?"

My mentor was referring to my first official solo case. He was keeping a close eye on my progress — not that I minded. I was a little nervous about flying solo, even if it was a routine cheating-spouse job.

The client had walked into the office the week before and asked for Novak. When I asked what she wanted to speak to him about, she looked me dead in the eye and said, "I think my rat-bastard husband is cheating on me. If he is, I want proof so I can file for divorce and bleed him for every damned penny he's got."

You'd be surprised how often we hear variations of that statement.

Or maybe you wouldn't.

Novak already had a full caseload, but after talking to Mrs. Knox, he decided that I was ready to handle what appeared to be a fairly straightforward case.

"Well, I've been doing surveillance on Mr. Knox. As you know, his wife thinks that if he's having an affair, then it's happening either at work or when he goes away on business trips. I've been following him back and forth to work every day, and so far he's been a good boy. He hasn't taken any side trips, unless you count the grocery store one night and the liquor store another."

Mr. Knox worked as a salesman for a seafood-distributing company

"What about during the day when you're at school? How can you be sure he isn't cheating then?"

"I thought of that. I'm paying the receptionist to alert me if anything unusual happens or if he leaves

unexpectedly. She already said he doesn't have any regular visitors at work."

Novak raised one eyebrow. "How do you know you can trust her? What if she's the one having the affair with Knox?"

"She didn't seem to like Mr. Knox very much. That's what gave me the idea of making the offer to her in the first place. I was asking questions about him, and I could tell she didn't care for the guy. Every time I said his name, you'd have thought she smelled something bad. When I asked her what she thought of him, she told me he was smarmy and had a reputation for being a ladies' man. I asked her if she'd like to make a little extra cash, and she jumped at the chance. Actually, she seemed sort of excited to help."

"So what's the deal? She calls you if he does something suspicious?"

"Or texts me, whichever is easier. She might not always be able to call if there are people around."

Novak shook his head. "Just keep in mind she's not a professional. What if she lets something slip?"

"I didn't tell her why I was investigating him. She assumed I was hired by the company to look into him, and I didn't exactly correct her."

Novak looked impressed. "Sounds like you've got it under control." He turned to go back into his office. "Keep up the good work, kid."

I glowed. His praise didn't come often, so when it did, I tried to soak it in.

I checked the time on my phone and decided the messages could wait until the next day. I hated being late and didn't want to keep Micah waiting.

Fortune smiled upon me, and traffic was light on my way to the diner where I'd agreed to meet Micah. So light, in fact, that, with my rushing, I managed to arrive a few minutes early. I didn't see Micah's car in the parking lot, so I went in, got a booth, and ordered a soda while I waited.

"Somebody joining ya, or you ready to order?" The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a chipped front tooth and greasy grayish-brown hair falling out of a half-hearted ponytail, stared at me with a blank expression. Maybe she'd had a rough day. Or a rough life.

"I'm waiting for someone." I gave her a small smile so she wouldn't hurt me.

She didn't return the gesture as she stalked away without another word. She wouldn't be winning any personality contests in the near future.

I was just beginning to get a little concerned that Micah wasn't going to show up when I saw his silver Toyota pull into the lot. I watched him unfold himself from behind the steering wheel and turn to face the restaurant. He stood by the car for a minute, just staring into the windows, almost as if he was posing. I waved, but was pretty sure he didn't see me.

He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts and moved quickly across the parking lot, where I lost sight of him. He reappeared inside a few seconds later and quickly spotted me.

"Hey, Killian," he said, sliding into the booth across from me. He brushed his floppy brown hair out of his dark eyes and smiled.

My heart skipped a beat. He was so gorgeous.

"Hey, I was beginning to think you were standing me up." I grinned to let him know I was only teasing.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said distractedly. "I got hung up with the story I'm working on right now. I told you they finally gave me one with some real weight, right?"

"Yeah. The county council thing." Micah was a reporter for the local newspaper. "It's about time you got a real story, especially after all the attention you attracted with your piece about Amalie's House."

He shrugged.

Amalie's House was a pre-Civil War mansion turned bed and breakfast, owned and run by my surrogate father, Adam, and his partner, Steve. The place came complete with its very own ghost.

When the inn opened, Micah wrote an account of the haunting. The article received a huge response — almost all positive — leading Micah to start a weekly series on local haunted hot spots. As a result, he'd gained more respect at the paper.

He'd told me the day before about being assigned his first big story, the possibility of major corruption and payoffs in the county council. He was as excited as I'd ever seen him about his work.

Sitting across from me in the diner, though, he seemed withdrawn and preoccupied. I wondered if something had gone wrong. I hoped the newspaper hadn't taken the assignment away already and given it to their star reporter, a jerk named Walters.

"Is everything okay at work?"

"Oh, yeah, things are going great. That's why I was late. The council member who we think is up to his

eyeballs in graft made the mistake of firing his secretary last week. She's just dying to blow him out of the water. I was on the phone with her, and she was talking so fast I could barely write it down quickly enough. Of course, everything will have to be verified. I've really got my work cut out for me on this one, but it could be huge."

"That's great." So it wasn't the story he was upset about. While I figured he'd tell me in his own time, I was not known for my patience. Before I could dig further, I noticed the waitress was once more approaching our table.

"Ready to order?" Her tone suggested she was half hoping we'd change our minds and leave.

I started to say we needed another minute since Micah hadn't even glanced at the menu yet, but he spoke first.

"I'll have a hamburger — lettuce, tomato, and ketchup, no pickle," he said.

Between the tension I was sensing from Micah and our waitress's dour mood, I suddenly didn't have much appetite. "I'll just have a house salad."

"Drinks?"

"Water is fine with me," Micah said.

I held up my still-full glass. "I'm good."

She made the proper notes on her little pad and moseyed off toward the kitchen.

After she left, the silence got real heavy, real fast. Micah just sat there, staring at his hands, twisting them like he didn't know what to do with them. It was subtle, but definitely not like him. And the more I watched and waited, the more it put me on edge. When someone as

steady as Micah starts acting off, you know something's up.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "So, what's wrong? What did you want to talk about?"

"Hmm? Oh, it'll wait until the food gets here."

"Why? Are you afraid I'll lose my appetite if you tell me now?" I tried to keep my voice light, but inside I was tensing up like crazy.

"It's not that."

He looked away, suddenly entranced by the giant fish tank near the door.

"Micah, what's going on? Are you breaking up with me?"

He turned back to face me, his eyes wide. "No! At least...I hope not." He sighed. "Killian, where are we going?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Our relationship. Where is it going?"

"I...I don't understand what you're asking."

"Killian, we've been dating now for a few months, but I'm starting to feel like you're not really invested in this, in us."

"Is this about...sex?" I was, for all intents and purposes, a virgin. I'd only had one other boyfriend, with whom I had never gone "all the way." Micah had said from day one he didn't want our relationship to be about sex, and, to his credit, he'd never pushed me. We still fooled around, we just hadn't had intercourse.

"No, this isn't about sex." He sighed. "You know it's not about sex. I mean, sure, I'd love to have sex, but it's not like we don't have fun. But I need more from you than just fun, someone to go to dinner with or to the

movies or out dancing. I feel like this is just casual for you, like you're constantly holding me at arm's length."

"Micah... I... Wow!"

"I told you it should have waited."

"No, I..." I paused and took a deep breath. "Look, Micah, I don't know what to say. I thought we were doing fine."

"We are. We're doing just fine. But that's the problem. I don't want to just do fine. I want to do great. I want to be completely satisfied in our relationship."

"And you're not."

"No, I'm not. I feel like you're keeping part of yourself from me. I don't know you any better now than when we started dating. I feel like we're at the stage in our relationship where you need to either shit or get off the pot, as my grandfather used to say. You need to either commit to us or move on. I need you to let me in."

"I thought I was..."

"Did you really?"

Before I could answer, our charming waitress appeared at the table with my salad and Micah's burger. She plopped the platters down in front of us unceremoniously and stomped away.

I looked at the limp, dreary salad and realized I'd completely lost my appetite after all. Micah was apparently experiencing a similar predicament. I pushed the salad to one side.

"Look, Killian," he started again, "I care about you. I really do. I've never known anyone like you. You're so smart and funny. I enjoy being with you, and God knows you're never boring." He worked up a weak smile. "And, of course, it doesn't hurt that you're one of

the cutest guys I've ever met." The smile slowly disappeared. "But I'm not just looking for a casual fling. I'm looking for someone to share my life with."

I stared down at the table. "I care about you too. I've loved spending time with you and getting to know you."

"But?"

"But I'm only eighteen. I don't know what I'm looking for. You're only the second person I've ever dated."

"Are you saying you want to see other people?"

"No! I'm just saying I'm kind of winging this whole thing. I...I want to be with you. I want to do whatever I need to do in order to make this work."

"So...what are you saying? You'll let me in?"

"I...I don't know what that means."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair.

"Sometimes—"

"Sometimes what?"

"Sometimes I feel there's something coming between us. Or someone."

"What do you mean?"

"He's still here, between us, almost like he'd never left."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Asher. That's what this is all about, isn't it? You can't let go, can't move on."

I blinked. "Asher? How'd he get into this?" Asher was my ex-boyfriend. We'd broken up months ago, and he'd moved away when school started. I didn't understand why Micah would bring him up after all that time.

"I think you still have feelings for him."

"That's not..." I stopped with the word 'true' still on my tongue.

Was he right? If I was honest with myself, I had to admit Asher was at least part of the reason I hadn't been moving faster with Micah. I'd been hurt pretty badly after our breakup, and wasn't at all eager to rush into another situation where I'd be that vulnerable again. Micah was right when he said Asher was coming between us, just not in the way he thought.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too. Sorry won't fix this, though."

"That's not what I meant. Look, I don't have feelings for Asher. Trust me. I'm definitely over him. The thing is...he hurt me. A lot. He was my first love, and he broke my heart when he lied to me and dumped me for somebody else. I just—"

"You're afraid I'll hurt you?"

I nodded.

"I wish I could promise you I'll never hurt you, but nobody can make a promise like that. All I can tell you is that hurting you is the last thing in the world I'd ever want to do."

"So...how do I fix this? How do we fix it?"

"I think we both have to be willing to take a risk."

"What do you mean?"

"Taking this to the next level means taking a risk — for both of us. We risk getting hurt, risk losing what we already have. But that's the nature of love—there's always risk. The question is whether what we have, or

what we *could* have, is worth it. For me, it is. But only if you're willing to commit just as fully as I am."

"I..." I stopped, at a loss for words. My brain was going a mile a minute trying to keep up, but I was starting to feel overwhelmed. What if I didn't have an answer for him right that moment? Would he walk away and never look back?

Luckily, Micah responded to my unspoken question before I could launch into a full-fledged panic. "You don't have to tell me right now. That wouldn't be fair. I don't want to put you on the spot."

He pulled out his wallet, pulled out some cash, and tossed it on the table.

"Take your time and think about it. Be sure you know what you want, and then call me. I won't call you. If I don't hear from you in a reasonable amount of time, I'll know you decided it wasn't worth the risk, and I'll try to understand."

He stood up and looked down at me sitting with what I'm sure must have been a stupefied expression.

"Micah, wait..."

"For what?"

"What's a reasonable amount of time?"

He forced another smile. "I want you to have time to think about this, about what I'm asking of you. There's no real timetable. I'm not giving you a deadline or anything. I hope I'll be talking to you soon, but if not, no hard feelings."

He turned and walked out the door.

I watched him through the plate-glass window as he crossed the lot once more, climbed into his car, and drove away without ever once looking back. I was still

sitting there several minutes later when the waitress came back.

"Can I getcha anything else?" she asked with complete and total disinterest, as if our food wasn't still sitting untouched on the table and my dinner partner hadn't just walked out on me.

"I, uh, think we're done here." I slid out from the booth. "Keep the change."

"Do you want a doggie bag?" she called after me.

"No thanks," I said.

Whether she heard me or not I didn't know and didn't particularly care.

I was sitting in my room that night with a school book open in front of me on my desk, ostensibly studying.

In reality, I can't begin to tell you the first thing about the chapter I was supposed to be reading. My conversation with Micah kept replaying over and over in my mind. I wondered what I could've said differently, and what I was going to do about what he'd said.

I liked Micah. I really did. It wasn't entirely out of the question that I could fall in love with him...if I let myself.

But that was the problem.

Micah was right. I had been holding a part of myself back from him.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered if he was also right about the reason. Maybe I wasn't as over Asher as I'd led Micah — and myself — to believe. I still missed him. If I was honest, I couldn't deny it. We'd broken up almost six months before, and things

had been rough between us for a while leading up to our split. Still, he was my first boyfriend, and I loved him. Had loved him. And maybe a part of me always would love him.

I wasn't sure I was ready to do what Micah was asking. Could I really take that next step, put myself out there and risk getting hurt? My birth father, Seth, Aidan, Asher — I'd lost so many people in my life that, at some point, I started building walls. Call it self-preservation. It wasn't intentional, but it was real.

I knew it wasn't fair to expect Micah to keep waiting in limbo, but I didn't know if I could open up the way he needed me to. Letting him in meant risking losing him. But at this point, it looked like I might lose him anyway.

I slammed the book shut and let my head drop onto the desk with a thud. "What am I going to do?" I moaned out loud.

"Why do you always have to make everything so hard?" a familiar voice asked from behind me. I snapped my head up and around so quickly I felt something crack in my neck.

"Ow!" I yelped. "Damn it, Seth. You scared the crap out of me."

My deceased friend reclined on the bed, arms behind his head, feet crossed at the ankles. He wore what I was beginning to think of as his uniform: faded jeans, black sneakers, and a clingy black T-shirt.

Unfortunately, it was not uncommon for me to see dead people, especially Seth. We were friends before he was brutally murdered. Actually, I'd been his one and

only friend in the end. And he was my first same-sex kiss.

Seth was the only openly gay kid in our high school back then, a fact that made him terribly unpopular. Being the first is never easy, but he had started me on my own coming-out journey. Years later, the school had an active Rainbow Alliance and the administration actively protected the LGBTQ kids.

After Seth's death, when my biological father found out I was gay and kicked me out, Seth's dad Adam, who was also gay, was the only person I'd known to turn to. He'd taken me in without a second thought and become more like a father to me than my real one ever had. Of course, Adam didn't know his dead son had a bad habit of showing up in my bedroom unannounced.

"What? No hello?" Seth grinned at me from his perch on my pillow. "No 'Gee, Seth, it's been a long time, how've you been?'"

"You're dead. I don't have to ask how you've been. I wish you wouldn't just appear like that. And what is it with people sneaking up on me today?"

He sat up and pulled his long limbs into a cross-legged position. "Oh, quit being such a drama queen. I didn't sneak up on you. I was just lying here. For God's sake, you're never happy unless you have some sort of crisis going on."

"That's not true." My protest came out whinier than I had intended.

"Okay, so maybe it was a little harsh, but you do make mountains out of molehills. Shall I list examples?"

"Please don't."

He shrugged and grinned, satisfied he'd made his point.

"So where have you been the last few months? I'd pretty much convinced myself you were just a stress-induced hallucination. When was the last time I saw you? At the barn?"

"Yes, at the barn. I got in a little trouble over that, broke a few rules. I guess you could say I'm on probation."

"Probation? What rules?"

"I've told you there are certain rules I have to obey if I'm to be allowed to come here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I meant what rules did you break?"

"Oh. Well, that's another rule. I can't tell you what the rules are, remember?"

"You just like being mysterious."

He stuck his tongue out at me. "No, there really are rules. Although, I have to admit, this whole mystical-entity thing does appeal to me. Look, we're supposed to help out by dropping enigmatic hints, no direct advice. And we're never allowed to interfere. When I gave you the strength you needed to escape from those ropes, I crossed the line."

"You gave me...what? What are you talking about? Who makes these rules?"

"Pretend I didn't mention that, okay? If I keep this up, you'll never see me again. Anyway, I didn't come here to enlighten you about how this all works."

"Why did you come?"

"You need me."

"I do?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I'm here to help you figure out what to do about Micah."

I rolled my eyes. "It's like having my very own fairy godmother."

"Fairy something, anyway."

"Seth..." I said warningly.

"Right. So, once again, you've managed to turn something simple into a full-blown quandary."

"Simple for you, maybe."

"It should be for you too. Do you like Micah?"

"Yes. You know—"

"Do you care about Micah?"

"Yes, but—"

"Do you love Micah?"

That one stopped me cold.

"Killian, do you love Micah?"

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

"Yes, you do. Quit hiding and face the truth. If you don't stop being an idiot you're going to lose him forever."

Hearing his words so closely echo my thoughts from earlier caused my stomach to lurch. I didn't want to lose Micah.

"I think maybe I do love him."

"Then tell him so, and then let him help you get past your fears and insecurities. He'll work with you if he knows there's something to work for. If you don't give him anything, though, what reason does he have to stay?"

I stood up and started pacing. "I don't even know why he'd want to stay with me. I mean, I'm a freaking mess. I'm scared to let someone care about me, I'm hung up on my ex, and I'm sitting in my bedroom talking to a dead guy."

"Hey, leave the dead guy out of this. Micah wants to be with you because he loves you. Asher is a part of your past now. He'll always be a part of you, but you have to let him go."

I stopped pacing and faced Seth. "What if I can't?"

"Can't what? Let Asher go? Sure you can."

"You sound so confident."

"That's because I am sure. I know you, Killian. Deep down you know you can too. You're scared, and it's okay to be scared. Just don't let fear control your life."

I sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, near Seth but not too close. He looked as solid as I was, yet I was afraid if I touched him I'd go straight through him.

"You're right. I have to stop being an emotional mess. It's time to move on. I'll call Micah now."

I jumped back up and reached for my cell phone.

He grinned. "That's the spirit. No wait, that's me." He cackled at his own awful pun.

I groaned. "Are we finished here?"

"Almost. Just one more thing. Since you're confronting your fears about Micah, don't you think it's also time you confront your fears about your gifts?"

I froze. "What?"

"Your gifts. You haven't forgotten them, have you?"

"No, despite the fact that I've been valiantly trying."

Gifts: That was what my friend Judy called my unwanted abilities to see spirits and sometimes catch glimpses of the past or future. I called them a curse.

"Why are you so scared of them, Kill? You have them for a reason."

I set my phone back on the desk. "Yeah, well, I didn't ask for them."

"You didn't ask to be blond either. Or have blue eyes. Or to be gay."

"That's different."

"No, it's just another facet of who you are, and the sooner you deal with it, the better."

"I'm doing just fine without them, thanks."

"We'll see."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He stood up and stretched, his body twisting in an almost feline manner. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it."

"No, tell me!"

"Sorry, I can't."

"You can't just say something like that and not explain."

"Sure I can. I'm enigmatic, remember?" He seemed to be taking entirely too much pleasure in my squirming. "Now, as much I'd love to, I can't sit here and argue with you about your gifts all night. I have to go."

"Seth...please." I frowned. "There. I'm begging. Are you happy now?"

Seth's goofy grin faded. "I'm sorry. Really. I'm not just being a jerk. I can't tell you what I meant, but

you'll find out soon enough. Just believe me when I say you're going to need to deal with your gifts sooner or later...and the sooner the better."

"You're scaring me."

He broke into a smile again. "Don't be scared. Just deal with them already. I'm going to leave now and let you call Micah."

"Wait! When will I see you again?"

He shrugged. "Who knows? When you need me."

"Seth, wait..."

"Can't. Sorry." He flashed me one more goofy smile, and then he was gone.

It's very disconcerting to have someone simply vanish right before your eyes.

## Chapter 2

Micah didn't pick up when I called, so I left a message saying I was ready to talk. I thought about being somewhat more forthcoming, but then decided that news of the sort I had to share would be better delivered in person.

I hadn't heard from Micah by the time I went to bed.

The next morning, I'd tailed Mr. Knox, the allegedly unfaithful husband, to his job, checked in with my buddy at the receptionist desk, and finally went to the office to finish a little paperwork before my first class of the day.

Micah finally called as I was walking to my car to head to school. After all his talk about needing to know where I stood, he certainly seemed awfully nonchalant about getting my answer. Then again, maybe he was expecting the worst and was putting it off. I knew plenty about that.

"Hey," I answered. "Thanks for calling me back."

"Sorry it took so long. This story is moving fast. I was up late working on it, then up early this morning."

"I hope you're getting enough rest."

"I'll be fine. It's only temporary. You said you wanted to talk? Does that mean you've thought about what I said?"

"Yes. Can we meet to talk later today?"

"I should be able to get away this evening."

"That's fine. Want to come over to our place?"

"Yeah, I can do that. Do I get a hint, at least?"

I thought about letting him stew, but I just didn't have it in me to be that cruel. "I think you'll like what I have to say."

"I'll see you tonight," he said, relief clear in his voice.

The rest of the day went by in a blur. I barely paid attention in class, and I almost forgot to follow Mr. Knox back to his house. All I could think about was Micah. I was so excited to see him and tell him what I'd decided that I couldn't focus on anything else.

After I got home, I changed my clothes twice while waiting for him to show up. I finally settled on a dark-blue, form-fitting, long-sleeved shirt that I knew Micah loved because he said it brought out my eyes. I completed my outfit with a pair of jeans he always claimed made my butt look nice.

"You're acting like it's your first date," Kane commented, glancing up from his homework as I gave myself a last once-over in the mirror.

My honorary little brother was quite the expert on dating. He'd had more girlfriends at sixteen than most people had in their entire lives. He'd recently broken up with the girl he'd gone out with all summer, saying he had to keep his options open now that school was back in session. Attracting girls was not a problem for him. He had bright green eyes and shaggy reddish-blond hair that he wore in a disheveled fashion, which seemed to drive the girls wild.

"I'm as nervous as if it were," I said.

"Why be nervous? Anyone with half a brain can tell he's crazy about you."

"Is that how you were able to tell?"

Kane clutched his hands over his heart. "Oh, that hurt...right here."

Being the mature older brother I am, I stuck my tongue out at him and left to wait downstairs.

Of course, Micah chose to arrive the moment I had to use the bathroom. The doorbell rang, and seconds later I heard Kane clattering down the stairs.

"I'll get it," I yelled, knowing from experience that if Kane answered, it would only lead to embarrassment for all involved, but mostly for me.

"From the bathroom? Don't be stupid. I've got it."

I heard the door open and swore under my breath.

"Hey, Micah," Kane said. "Good thing you got here when you did or Killian would have tried on everything he owns."

"Argh!" I howled. I washed my hands and burst from the bathroom to find Micah standing on the front porch. He looked fantastic in a dark-gray sweater and black jeans.

"You could have at least invited him in," I said.

"Like you gave me time. Anyway, I'm going out. Tell Dad I'll be home by ten o'clock."

"Okay, be careful." For all our bickering, we were actually pretty close, and I often caught myself being protective of him.

He threw me a look and loped off toward the old truck Adam had bought to use at the B&B. He let Kane drive it when they didn't need it.

I turned back to Micah, who was still standing just outside the door.

"Um, come on in."

He stepped into the hall where we stood awkwardly for a few seconds, neither of us quite sure what to say.

"Do you want to go to my room so we can talk?" I finally asked.

"Sure."

He followed me upstairs and into the room Kane and I shared, where the uncomfortable silence returned.

"I thought about..." I started at the same time Micah began, "You said you wanted..."

I giggled, and Micah smiled. It was what we needed to break the tension.

I started again. "I've been thinking about what you said, and you were right — I *have* been keeping you at arm's length. And yeah, I have my reasons. I've been hurt, betrayed by people I trusted, and I've lost more people than I care to count. But what you said about risk really stuck with me. And it made me realize...there's something important I need to tell you."

Michah's expression was unreadable.

I took a deep breath. "Micah, I love you."

I watched his face intently for a reaction. I saw something flash in his eyes, but I couldn't identify it before it was gone.

"What does that mean?" he asked guardedly.

Not the response I'd been hoping for. I took a second to gather my thoughts.

"It means I've decided the risk is worth the reward. I want to make this work. You'll probably have to help me sometimes, but I want to try."

"What about Asher?"

"What about him?"

"Do you think you're really over him?"

"If I'm being honest with myself — and you — maybe not completely. Not yet, anyway. Who knows? Maybe I never will be, but he's a part of my past now. I have to move on, and I'd like to do that with you. I do love you. I realized that last night. I was scared to death at the thought of losing you."

"That scared you more than the possibility of getting hurt?"

I nodded. "I was afraid to let you in because I was afraid I'd lose you and I'd just get hurt again. Then I realized I was going to lose you by not letting you in. That would have hurt just as much...because I'm already in love with you."

Finally, something truly changed in his eye, and I saw a vulnerability that hadn't been there before. "You are?"

I nodded and offered him a smile. "Yes, I am."

He drew in a shaky breath and slowly released it. "Good, because I didn't want to say this yesterday, but...I love you, too."

I threw myself into his arms, and we tumbled backwards onto the bed. I kissed him firmly on the lips, and without hesitation he started kissing me back. He rolled us over so he was on top. After a few minutes, he gently pulled away and lifted himself up onto his elbows so he could look me in the face.

"God, you're so beautiful, Killian. I could just stare at you all night. You know, this is exactly the way I hoped it would happen, but I was too afraid to believe it actually would."

"Oh, ye of little faith," I teased.

"It's not going to be an easy road, though. You know that, right?"

"I never thought it would be. You're going to have to be patient with me. I doubt I can drop all the walls at once. I might need your help."

"We'll work on it together. You know you're not the only one with walls though, right?"

"You too?"

He shifted his weight off me and onto the bed. I cuddled into his side, my head on his shoulder. His fingers played with my hair. I didn't think he was going to answer at first, but finally he took a deep breath.

"I think everybody has walls to some degree — if they've lived at all, anyway. Some are worse than others. From my experience, it seems gay guys have more walls than most. I guess we have to start building our defenses sooner than other people."

I twisted around so I could see his face better. "You've told me about being abused by your neighbor and how you reacted by having sex with a lot of people, but you've never mentioned falling in love. Am I the first person you've ever loved?"

Micah softly stroked the side of my face. "No, I fell in love once before, when I lived in D.C. We lived together for a while."

That was news to me. "Why'd you break up?"

"I moved here, he stayed there. Neither of us wanted to do the long-distance thing. We made a mutual decision to just call it quits. We both agreed we'd run our course and there was no sense in waiting to break up until things got ugly. At least that way we could stay friends."

"Did you?"

"For a while. Then the phone calls and emails got further and further apart. Eventually, we just stopped talking. About the same time I met you, actually."

"Do you still love him?"

"I'll always love him, but I'm not in love with him anymore."

"Are you over him?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes. I don't think I really was before I met you, but I know I am now. I never expected my relationship with him to be a forever thing."

"What about us? Are we a forever thing?"

He stared into my eyes for several seconds before answering. "I don't know. I guess that remains to be seen. Any other questions, sir?"

"What? You know everything about my past. I'm just trying to learn more about yours."

"You know everything that's important. You know I love you. You know I want to be with you. What more do you need?"

"Um, how about a written guarantee? Satisfaction or my money back."

He threw his head back and laughed. "I'll satisfy you, you little brat." He jumped up, straddled my waist, and began to tickle me.

I laughed, wiggled, and writhed under him as I gasped for breath. "Stop!" I finally managed to shout. "Stop! I'm gonna pee!"

He collapsed on top of me where we both panted and giggled.

"If anyone walked in right now they'd never believe you were only tickling me."

"Um, we're fully clothed. I realize you're a little inexperienced, but you do know you start by getting naked, right?"

I shoved him off and punched him in the arm. "Not funny."

He sat up and reached into his pocket. "I have something for you."

That caught my attention. "What is it?"

He pulled out a small, gray jewelry box.

"Oh, is that what I felt? You mean you weren't just happy to be lying on top of me?" I was joking but I didn't take my eyes off the box.

"Oh, I was quite happy to be there. I'm sure what you felt was the real thing. I bought this to give you no matter what you decided. If we broke up, it was something to remember me by. If we didn't, then...well, here."

I took the box gingerly and held it in my lap, half afraid to open it. "Always prepared. You'd make a good boy scout."

"Open it, please."

I looked down apprehensively at the box. What if it was a ring? I wasn't ready for that.

I tentatively pried open the lid and felt all my anxiety drain away. Nestled against the plush cream lining was a beautiful rainbow pendant on a delicate silver chain. The pendant was a small inverted, stained-glass triangle framed in silver.

"I went with silver because you don't seem like the gold type," Micah said softly. "It's a pride necklace."

"It's beautiful."

"I hope you like it. I've never seen you wear much jewelry, but I noticed it in the store and..."

"I love it." I leaned forward and kissed him on the lips.

"Want me to put it on you?"

"Please."

He took the box from my hands and freed the necklace. After fiddling with the clasp until it opened, he moved behind me on the bed and put the chain around my neck. The pendant lay perfectly in the hollow at the base of my throat.

"Stand up so I can see," he whispered in my ear.

With a little shiver, I did as he asked.

"You look incredible." He gave me a seductive smile.

I draped my arms around his shoulders. "So do you."

"It's a shame to waste all this sexy. What do you think about hitting the Inferno?"

The Inferno was a gay dance club located on a back road in the last place you'd expect to find a club of any sort, let alone a gay one. We'd been there a few times, and I'd been delighted to discover that I loved to dance. While I was technically underage, Micah knew the bouncer, a bulldog of a drag queen named Carmen, who allowed me entrance without too much trouble.

I jumped at the chance to go dancing. I texted Adam telling him where Kane and I were so he wouldn't worry, and we headed out.

If you didn't know what you were looking for, you'd never suspect the Inferno was anything other than

a warehouse. From the outside, it was quite unremarkable: an unassuming, two-story brick building with no windows, and surrounded by a few scraggly pine trees and acres of fields. An inconspicuous sign above the large black metal door was the only indication you'd arrived at the right place. That and the gravel parking lot full of cars. It was a Friday night and the joint was jumping.

On one side of the door stood a tall, broad-shouldered, bald man who appeared to be looking for an excuse to bash in someone's face. I'd never heard him utter a word in all the times I'd been to the club. On the other side, under an overhang, was a podium with a high barstool behind it. On the stool sat Carmen.

No one who had ever met Carmen was likely to forget her. She was very large, for one thing, easily topping out at six foot six without her heels — which must have added at least another three or four inches — and built like a tank. Her square face would never be described as pretty, or even attractive. She compensated for her lack of looks with an abundance of makeup and hair big enough to have its own zip code.

That night, Carmen's wild wig was a bold Pepto-Bismol pink, unapologetically bright and impossible to miss. Her silver-sequined mini dress clung a few sizes too tight and barely skirted the line of decency—but it showcased her legs to perfection. Her signature mirror-ball earrings swung with every dramatic turn of her head. I couldn't see her shoes, but based on past visits, I was pretty sure I could use them as skis. The whole look was crowned with a pink feather boa, draped theatrically over her broad shoulders, tying the entire spectacle together.

While the Eastern Shore wasn't the most liberal part of the state — rednecks and country bumpkins abounded — no one ever feared any trouble with Carmen and her silent sidekick on duty. I'd heard she kept a large pistol somewhere on her person and she knew how to use it. I didn't doubt the rumors for a second, not that she'd ever need the weapon with Mr. Tall, Dark, and Ugly on the scene.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't my favorite boys," she said, waving a large, red lollipop around.

"You say that to all the boys," Micah replied with a grin as he handed her enough cash to pay our cover.

"You know it, honey. Micah, darling, are you still running around with this *child*?"

We went through some version of this shtick every time we came. It was our thing.

"He has a name, Carmen," Micah said with a wink.

Carmen snorted. "I know your name, don't I, Killian baby?"

She waved the lollipop under my nose. I noticed it was shaped like a penis and smelled like watermelon.

"Hi, Carmen."

"The infant speaks! He's a pretty one, Micah. I have to give you that. Just be sure you hide him if the big bad police ever raid us. You know they've started that shit up again in some places. We may have to start throwing bricks again."

"So I've heard, and I promise, Carmen." Micah held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

She laughed heartily. "I was never a scout but I have a better idea of what you can do with those fingers, honey."

Micah just grinned and slipped an arm around my waist, guiding me into the Inferno, where the sound of Carmen's laughter was quickly drowned out by the cacophony of sound.

The club's name was quite fitting.

The noise may have been the first thing to hit you as you entered, but the heat was close behind. For some reason, it was always hot as Hades inside the building. I suspected it was meant to encourage guys to take their shirts off...as if they needed any encouragement.

Once our eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, a smorgasbord of sights and sounds awaited us. Multicolored strobes flashed, laser beams sliced through the haze like lightsabers, and fog machines created such a miasma we almost had to feel our way along the dance floor. A wall-to-wall mass of male bodies was gyrating, bumping, and grinding to the heavy beat of the dance music blasting from every angle. Sweat and glitter sparkling on the dancers' skin created a dizzying and mesmerizing effect.

The décor was simple: an industrial look with lots of concrete and shiny black metal. Chimney-like columns spaced at regular intervals around the room spouted flames — not real ones, but a gauzy material illuminated with red and orange lights from below and blown upward by fans. Spiral staircases led to a wide, metal-grid catwalk that went around the whole room and overlooked the dance floor. Tiny pedestal tables sat near the walls, each with four stools bolted down around it.

Even after coming here for months, I was still in awe of this place. Everywhere I looked there were guys kissing, touching, dancing, and laughing. Maybe it was just all the pheromones in the air, but it made me feel almost euphoric.

"Ready to dance?" Micah yelled into my ear, the only way I could possibly hear him over the din.

"Hell, yeah!"

A few hours later, we slipped out the door into the fresh, cool air. Although the party was still going strong inside, I was completely exhausted. Dancing is strenuous exercise.

"With all that heavy breathing you two should at least be naked," Carmen said lazily.

"Don't you ever want to be inside?" I think it was the first thing I'd ever said to her besides hello.

"In there? Are you kidding?" She snorted.

"Honey, I'm way too old for all that foolishness. I'd throw out a hip or something. No, I'm content to just sit here and breathe in the ambiance of youth and beauty."

"Oh, come on." Micah scoffed. "We both know you could dance circles around most of those guys in there. You're healthy as a horse."

"And just as big." She produced a cigarette from her cleavage and lit up. "Now you boys run along. It must be past the little one's bedtime."

"Yes, mother." I shot her a grin and started for the car.

"Sassy little thing, isn't he?" Carmen yelled.

"Keep an eye on that one, Micah. I like him."

Micah chuckled as he trotted to catch up to me. "Did you sneak one of my drinks again tonight? I've never seen you so playful with Carmen."

He was referring to the first time he'd brought me to the Inferno, when I'd been so nervous I'd fortified myself with his alcoholic beverage before hitting the dance floor.

"Nope, all I drank was the bottled water you got me. I just figured if she was going to dish it, she could take it. Hey, remember our first date when you promised me if I went out with you again you'd tell me who Carmen really was?"

"I did?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Well, I lied."

"No fair. You promised."

"You're the detective. You figure it out."

"I hate it when people tell me that."

I was at the office again the next day, plugging away at the stack of paperwork that kept building up on my desk, when Judy Cassara swept in as only she could. Judy was a slender, attractive woman with a deceptively ordinary appearance. She wore her straight, blonde hair cut off bluntly just above her shoulders and tucked behind her ears. She was wearing a worn pair of jeans and a faded T-shirt, looking as if she'd come from working in her garden — which she probably had. She took a great deal of deserved pride in the tiny, but exquisite, flower gardens she had created in just the few short months she and her nephew Jake had been living in their small house.

She was also a psychic.

"Hi, Judy," I said. "Novak is out on his case."

She and Novak, a widower, had been dating for a few months, and she occasionally dropped in unexpectedly to see him.

"I know. Actually, I'm not here to see Shane. I'm here to see you."

"Me? Oh, did you find someone to teach me about my gifts?"

"Yes, you. And no, I'm sorry, Killian. I know I promised I would find someone, and I do have feelers out, but unfortunately, I've been distracted lately. That's actually why I'm here. I need to talk to you about Jake."

For a time, back before Asher and I had started dating, Jake and I had a brief but intense flirtation. I'd ended up with Asher, while Jake and I remained just friends. We were barely even that these days, though, so I couldn't imagine why Judy was there to see me about him. After his entire family had been killed, he'd gone to live in California with Judy. They'd only recently moved back to Maryland.

"What about Jake?"

"Well...hang on." She grabbed one of the chairs that sat against the wall and dragged it over to my desk. She settled into it and took a deep breath. "I'm worried about him. I think he may be doing drugs again."

"Oh, well, I really wouldn't know. We don't talk that much anymore."

"I didn't expect you to know. That's why I'm here. I want you to find out."

"Huh?"

"I want to hire you to find out what's going on in Jake's life."

"Hire me?"

"He won't talk to me. I've asked him, but he won't say a word. I know things have been hard for him since...well, you know, but we've always been able to talk — at least we could before we came back here. I'm beginning to think moving was a mistake."

"Wait a minute." I was still confused. "What about Novak? Why don't you just hire him?"

"I think that would make things just a little too awkward. I mean, I'm seeing Shane, and there's already enough tension between the two of them as it is. Shane thinks I let Jake get away with too much. He's eighteen, though, so I can't baby him anymore."

"But you can hire me to follow him around?"

"Oh, don't sound so judgmental, Killian. If he'd talk to me, I wouldn't have to do this. He's my responsibility now. I'm worried sick about him. I've been having...feelings. Premonitions. Whatever you want to call them."

"What kinds of feelings?"

"I'm afraid he's in danger. But I don't know what sort of danger and I need to find out. Please, will you do this for me? As a favor? Not that I won't pay you."

Judy was the one who first insisted I had gifts. While she didn't have a crystal ball or read palms — at least as far as I knew — she did occasionally get "feelings" about things, and she was almost always right. She also had premonitions sometimes: little glimpses of the future — rarely enough to actually be helpful, but creepy nonetheless. While I had no problem with Judy's

gifts, I would have appreciated her keeping them to herself. I had some serious doubts when it came to my own.

I also had doubts about investigating Jake. "I don't know..."

"Please, Killian. It would mean a lot to me."

"I just don't feel comfortable following my friend around. I mean, I'm not even that good at this. I'm still learning."

"Shane says you're a natural, one of the best he's ever seen even without training. I know you can do this, and I know you'll do it well, because you care about Jake, too. If he's involved with drugs or something else illegal, his life could be in danger. If you refused to help me and something happened to him, how would you feel?"

Great. There was a guilt trip too. Could her visit get any better?

She was right, though. I knew if anything happened to Jake after I'd turned her down, I'd never forgive myself.

I sighed. "Okay, I'll do it."

"Thank you, Killian. But there's one more thing."

"What's that?"

"I want you to keep this quiet."

"Of course."

"I mean, from Shane."

"You don't want me to tell Novak?"

"No. Not yet. Let's see what's going on first."

"It's not good to keep things from the person you're dating."

Or from your boss, I thought, but didn't add. I didn't like the idea of trying to hide an investigation from Novak.

"Killian, darling, as much as I appreciate your concern, I don't need relationship advice. I mean that in the kindest possible way. I know you don't like keeping things from Shane, but you'll have to trust me that it's best for now."

"Fine."

At least I understood why she'd come in to talk to me while she knew Novak would be out.

"Please don't be upset with me. You'll understand later."

"Whatever. How do you want me to start? Stalk him?"

She sighed. "He gets out of school at two-thirty. I don't know where he goes afterwards. He doesn't come home some nights until eight or later. There've been a few nights he didn't come home at all. When I ask him where he was, he just tells me not to worry about it. If I get angry, he tells me to mind my own business. I grounded him, but it didn't faze him in the least."

"Can't you take his car away from him?"

"I could, but he'd just find another ride. At least this way I know he's doing the driving. If he is into drugs, I have to say I've never seen him high or out of control when he gets home."

"So what makes you think it's drugs? You said earlier that it could be something else illegal. Like what?"

"I don't even know. I simply had a feeling it involves drugs. I have no real evidence besides his

erratic behavior, which could, I guess, be nothing more than typical teenage rebellion."

"Then what makes you think it's not just that? Is there anything besides coming home late?"

"He's been buying a lot of stuff recently, and I have no idea where he's getting the money from — certainly not from me."

"Stuff like what?"

"A new phone. Electronics. Clothes. I don't know what else. That's just what I've noticed."

"Is there anything more?"

"Just the gut feelings I mentioned. You know, I've come to trust my gifts, Killian. Speaking of which, have you thought any more about what we talked about concerning your gifts?"

"No. Back to Jake..."

"Killian, you know you really should learn more about your gifts. I think they're very strong."

"I'm not interested."

"But you have to be. They can be dangerous if left untrained, or they can be a marvelous tool if you know how to use them. You were given them for a reason, you know."

"You sound like Seth," I said crossly.

"Is he still coming to visit you?"

"I hadn't seen him for a few months, but he showed up the other night."

"Relationship problems?"

"Actually, yeah. But he also said I should deal with my gifts. As I told him, though, I'm doing just fine without them."

"For now, maybe..."

"Right now is all I'm worried about. Is there anything else I need to know about Jake?"

She gave me a disappointed look, but moved on. "You know what he drives, right?"

"A dark-blue Jeep?"

"Yes. That's all I can think of right now." She stood up and pushed the chair back to its original position. "You'll let me know as soon as you have something?"

I looked into her eyes and recognized the pain and fear that she was making an effort to hide.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'll keep you updated."

She bit her lip in a most un-Judy-like fashion. "Thank you."

### Chapter 3

When I woke up the next morning, I was still uncomfortable with the idea of investigating Jake. I'd slept fitfully, perhaps because my conscience wouldn't allow me a peaceful night's rest.

I tumbled out of bed and sleepwalked through my morning routine of shower, dressing, and a quick breakfast.

Arriving at the Knox's house a little early, I parked across the street and a couple of doors past his house, then slumped down behind the wheel of my car to wait for him to leave. I was having a hard time holding my eyes open. I turned on the car radio, but even a high-energy dance song couldn't keep me awake.

At some point, I must have dozed off, because I was roused suddenly by the sound of a car door slamming. I jerked upright, blinking in the bright sunlight like a startled owl. For a moment I couldn't remember where I was, then I recalled what I was doing.

Knox started his truck with a roar and backed out of his driveway. I waited a few seconds for him to put some distance between us before I pulled out after him.

Although Novak had given me a few lessons in tailing someone, he said it was mostly common sense. You stayed far enough back that the average Joe would never realize you were following him, but not so far that you could easily lose him.

Usually, Knox took the same route every day directly from his house to his office building, which means I could zone out a bit on the drive. This time he surprised me by making an unexpected turn.

In my sleep-deprived state, I almost drove past him. At the last second, I swung widely onto the street behind him, going just a bit too fast. I held my breath, hoping my reckless tactics hadn't attracted his attention, and released a sigh of relief as he continued on at the same speed, seemingly unsuspecting.

At least that woke me up.

I was excited that his change of routine meant something interesting was about to happen, but instead he just turned into a drive-through coffee shop. I drove past but pulled into a nearby parking lot and waited for him to get his order and get back on the road.

From there, he went directly to his office. I decided to check in with my receptionist-spy, so I waited a few minutes and then went inside.

The front office of the seafood company always smelled ever so faintly of fish. The nondescript furnishings and industrial-grade carpet all looked relatively new and clean, but the scent lingered like the worst air freshener ever.

Sharla worked alone at the front desk. She looked up as I entered, and a bright smile lit up her face.

Sharla was young, not much older than I was, and very enthusiastic. She wore her hair natural, but her makeup was anything but. It would be somewhat of an understatement to say she was liberal with her application — though she still had a long way to go if she wanted to catch up with Carmen. She favored bright colors that popped against her dark skin. She was dressed in a businesslike gray skirt and matching jacket, but she'd added her own flair to the outfit by hiking the skirt up a few inches and not wearing a blouse under the

jacket. The edges of her lacy black bra showed just a little. I was surprised they let her get away with that in a professional setting.

"Hey there, Mr. Detective Boy!" Sharla seemed to think of my investigation as a wonderfully fun game, which worked to my advantage most of the time, but occasionally grew a bit grating.

"Shh. It's our secret, remember?" I winked at her, making her giggle.

"So what's up? Is this a rendezvous? Do you have a new assignment for me?" Her eyes grew large and round. "You want to sneak into his office to look around?"

I laughed. "No, nothing like that — at least, not yet. I just thought I'd check in and see if you have any news for me."

"Well, I don't know if it's news or not, but do you want to know about stuff like business trips?"

"Business trips? Yes, that would be very helpful. Is Mr. Knox going out of town?"

"He's going to D.C. next weekend for a conference, but knowing Mr. Knox, he'll mix in a little pleasure too." She giggled again.

"Oh really?" I leaned against the counter. "What do you mean?"

Sharla looked up and down the hall conspiratorially before whispering, "I've heard he isn't always alone on these trips, if you catch my meaning."

For the first time, I began to think Mrs. Knox might perhaps have some basis for her fear.

"What makes you say that? Have you seen anything to suggest he's having an affair?"

She shook her head, which set her oversized hoop earrings to swinging. "No, I've not been around long enough to see anything, really, but I've heard stuff from some of the other girls here in the office. Nothing direct, you know? Just little comments here and there."

"What about this D.C. trip? Do you know where he's staying?"

She held up one long finger capped by a curving nail painted fire-engine red. "Hang on." She began to tap away at her keyboard, her fingers flying. She clicked her mouse a few times then grinned up at me as her printer gasped to life and spit out a sheet of paper. "You should hire me."

She made it sound as if finding something on her own computer was a major accomplishment.

"Maybe we will."

I laughed, but it got me thinking that it might be a good idea to hire a secretary or receptionist, since it would free me up a lot.

The phone rang just then. Before answering it, she handed me a printout confirming a reservation at a hotel in Washington, D.C. for that Friday night through Sunday morning.

"Can I keep this?" I asked as she hung up.

"Sure, but if anybody asks, you didn't get it from me."

"Thanks. What's his schedule like on that Friday? Is he off the whole day or what?"

She hit a few more keys. "He has a late morning meeting scheduled so he'll have to come in at least for that."

"You're the best. You've been a huge help. Now, you remember what to do if anything unusual happens, right?"

She grinned broadly. This was her favorite part.

"Sure do. I send you a text saying he's left." She made a face. "I still wish you'd let me be a little more creative. Can't I say something like, 'The chicken has flown the coop'?"

I laughed again. "You watch too much TV, Sharla. If you really want to say 'the chicken has flown the coop', go ahead. I'll know what you mean."

She clapped excitedly.

I pulled a twenty out of my wallet and slid it across the counter.

Sharla slid it right back at me. "Keep it this time. I'm having too much fun to get paid. I feel like I'm one of Charlie's Angels."

"Except you're cuter than any of them."

She beamed. "And it's about damn time they had a black one."

I was leaving my last class of the day later that afternoon when I remembered that I needed a particular book for one of my courses I was taking, so I made a detour to look for it at the campus bookstore.

I found the book and went to the checkout area, choosing the shorter of the two lines. When I noticed my clerk, I was doubly glad for my selection. He was cute in a slightly awkward sort of way. He was roughly Micah's height but slighter in build, with full, red lips and short, light-brown hair. I couldn't make out what color his eyes were behind his black-framed glasses. I studied them

while he waited on the person in front of me, trying to figure out what color they were exactly. I had just decided they were hazel when I realized he was staring back and had said something I'd missed.

"Huh?" I tried not to blush.

"I said, 'Can I help you?'" He seemed to be fighting back a smile as he pushed his glasses up.

I handed him the book and gave in to the blush.

"Sorry, I guess I zoned out for a second there."

He flashed me a big smile. "Happens to me all the time."

As he rang me up, I noticed his gaze kept straying to the rainbow pendant around my throat.

"Nice necklace," he said after giving me my total.

"Thanks. It was a gift." I started to add that it was from my boyfriend, but for some reason the words wouldn't come out.

"Have you heard of Haven?"

"Um, not really." It sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

"It's the queer club here on campus. We meet every Thursday night. Our next meeting is tonight if you're free. You should come."

I felt my blush deepen and wondered why. I wasn't ashamed of being gay. I'd been out for several years and had actually helped Asher start the Rainbow Alliance at our high school.

Maybe I just wasn't used to being so easily identified as gay by a complete stranger, an unintended consequence of Micah's gift that I hadn't considered. Part of being a good PI was being able to blend in and have few identifiable features that might stand out or catch

someone's attention. I was already at a bit of disadvantage due to my height, so I'd have to remember to take the necklace off before I did any covert surveillance.

The cashier cleared his throat, and I realized he was still waiting for a response. "Oh, um, I'll think about it. Thanks for the invitation."

He smiled. "Cool. I hope you decide to join us. New folks are always welcome. My name's Noah. I'm the vice-president. The meetings usually start around eight in the student lounge in Wicomico Hall. They're really informal."

"How many people normally attend?"

"It varies. Lately, we've had anywhere from twenty to thirty people showing up."

My awkwardness was fading the longer we talked, and I found myself a little intrigued. With nobody waiting behind me, I decided to ask him more about the group. "So what does Haven do?"

"Well, we sponsor a lot of educational and awareness stuff on campus. We put on events a couple of times a year — during LGBTQ History Month and Transgender Day of Visibility in March and a few other things here and there."

Someone came up behind me, and Noah greeted the customer before turning back to me. "Hey, hang on." He grabbed a piece of scrap paper, scribbled something on it, and handed it to me. "That's my cell phone number. Call me if you're thinking about coming. Sometimes we have to change when or where we're meeting at the last minute. Or, you know, we could just talk." He flashed me a huge smile.

"Uh, thanks." I could feel my face heating up, so I quickly spun around and started walking away.

"Oh, hey," he called. I turned around to find him holding out the book I'd just bought. "You forgot this."

I grinned sheepishly and took it from him.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. What's your name, by the way?"

"Killian."

"Cool name. I like it," he said with a smile, then turned to focus on his next customer.

I felt butterflies in my stomach.

"You're with Micah," I told myself firmly as I walked back to my car.

The damn butterflies didn't care.

I was cutting it close getting to Jake's high school before it let out for the day, but I arrived just in time. I parked in a visitors' space at an angle with a good view of the student lot.

While Jake and I were the same age, he'd taken so much time off from school to recover from injuries — both mental and physical — received when his family died, he'd fallen behind and had to be held back a year. He was a senior, which put him one grade ahead of Kane.

I was once again trying to justify following someone who was supposed to be my friend when I spotted his Jeep leaving the lot. Quickly pulling out a few cars behind him, I made sure to keep at least one vehicle between us at all times. Unlike Knox, Jake knew

what I drove, so it was even more important than usual to make sure I was discreet.

I tailed Jake to a mall on the far side of town, which struck me as odd. Did people still hang out at the mall? Maybe he was just doing a little shopping. I followed him inside, keeping my distance but making up an excuse as I went, just in case he spotted me.

That was another lesson from Novak: always have a cover story prepared. Unless they're pathological liars, most people have trouble coming up with a convincingly innocuous explanation on the spur of the moment. If Jake did see me, I'd tell him I was looking for a new jacket now that it was starting to get cooler.

I followed him around from store to store for about an hour, somehow managing to avoid being noticed. He didn't seem to be shopping for anything in particular. If anything, he almost seemed to be killing time.

I was just about ready to give up when I noticed a sudden shift. He began to behave in a very suspicious manner, throwing quick glances over his shoulder and generally acting guilty. Although I was able to stay hidden by popping in and out of stores or jumping behind racks of clothes, my spy tactics were drawing attention and making it rather hard to keep a good eye on my quarry. At first, I thought maybe he had sensed me following him, but quickly realized he was up to something.

I ducked behind one of the large potted palms in the middle of the mall and watched him through the fronds as he took one final glance around, then turned quickly down the hall leading to the restrooms.

I cursed under my breath. There was no way I could follow him in there without him seeing me. That would be a dead giveaway — no cover story in the world could justify bumping into your friend in the men's room after trailing him across a shopping mall.

I waited.

Several guys came and went — a dad with a toddler holding his hand, a tired-looking retail worker in a department store polo, a teenage boy glued to his phone. The flow of traffic through that narrow corridor was typical, uneventful. Except Jake was taking a long time. A really long time.

Ten minutes passed.

Then twelve.

My mind started to race with possibilities, none of them good. Was he meeting someone in there? Dealing drugs? Making some kind of under-the-table deal? Engaging in...something else?

I scanned the mall corridor, weighing my options. A janitor's cart stood nearby, unmanned. A mall cop strolled lazily across the upper level. The air smelled of Auntie Anne's and the cheap perfume wafting from the nearby kiosk.

I shifted my weight, trying not to look too suspicious.

At thirteen minutes, I decided I had to get closer.

I approached slowly, pretending to check my phone, then veered casually toward the hallway as if heading for the restrooms myself. Just as I reached the corner, the men's room door swung open.

I froze, half-hidden in the hallway's shadow.

Jake emerged, glancing over his shoulder once more before stepping out. His eyes swept the corridor — casual, but alert. His jaw was tense, and he rubbed the back of his neck as though trying to shake off whatever had just happened.

What stood out most, though, was the way he paused at the water fountain just outside the restroom. He leaned over, took a drink, then just stood there — staring at nothing. He looked... drained. Not the bored, aimless Jake I'd seen earlier while he was browsing stores, but someone who'd just gone through something real. Something heavy.

I slid into the alcove by the vending machines as he finally turned and headed back out into the mall.

Fifteen minutes in the men's room. Nothing in his hands, no evidence of a purchase or transaction. His face was flushed, but not with excitement — more like shame or stress.

What the hell had he been doing?

I gave it a thirty-second count before cautiously approaching the bathroom myself. I hesitated at the entrance. What was I expecting to find? A secret door? Someone still inside waiting to do...whatever it was they'd been doing?

Whatever I was expecting, I was destined to be disappointed. The room was empty, save for the canned pop music playing faintly from hidden speakers and the faint buzz of flickering fluorescent lights. One of the stall doors was slightly ajar. I nudged it open with my foot. Nothing.

I checked the other stalls — same deal. Clean enough, no signs of anything shady. But something

about the air felt thick, charged. I couldn't explain it — just a lingering sense that something had happened there. Something not meant to be seen.

I backed out, my mind racing.

I had no proof of anything, but my instincts were screaming. Jake hadn't just gone to the mall to kill time. He hadn't browsed aimlessly because he was bored.

He'd been waiting for someone.

And that restroom?

That had been the meeting point.

I hurried out, scanning for any sign of him. But Jake was long gone, already out in the parking lot, maybe even home by now.

Part of me wanted to shake it off, chalk it up to paranoia. But another part — the part that had been trained by Novak and sharpened by hours of following Knox — knew better.

Something was going on.

And now, I was in it deeper than I wanted to admit.

I practically ran outside just in time to see Jake pulling out of the parking lot. I jumped into my car and backed out of my spot, only to get stuck behind an old lady in a vintage Buick doing a thirty-five point turn in slow motion. By the time I was able to squeeze around her, Jake was out of sight.

I glanced at the time and remembered I had to get over to Knox's building soon so I could trail him as well. I debated whether I should just forget about Jake and focus on my official case, but I decided I was too invested. I made a calculated guess — or a wild hail Mary — that he might be heading home.

I was thrilled when my gamble paid off and I spotted his car turning into the neighborhood where he and Judy lived.

I tailed Jake until he turned into his driveway. As I passed by, I hoped and prayed he wouldn't glance up at his rearview mirror and see me, or, if he did, that he wouldn't recognize my car.

My choice almost caused me to miss Knox — just a few seconds longer and he would have been gone. He was leaving a little early, but I arrived just in time to fall in behind him. Traffic was light, letting us make good time back to his house. I parked and watched him walk up to the side door.

Since he was going to D.C. the following weekend, I would be as well. I'd have to call Mrs. Knox the next day to see what she knew of the business trip, then speak to Novak about making the arrangements. He would have to approve any trips.

I wished I could talk to him about Jake, but I had made that promise to Judy. With a sigh, I started the car and drove home.

"I think you should go," Adam was saying as he washed and rinsed the dinner dishes while I dried and put them away.

We were discussing the LGBTQ club on campus. I'd filled him in on my encounter with Noah at the bookstore and his invitation.

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

One of the hardest parts of starting college had been meeting new people. In high school, I'd known everyone, at least enough to feel like I belonged. We'd

grown up together, shared classrooms, inside jokes, and a deep and abiding hatred for Mrs. Fitzborough. Familiarity had made things easier, for better or for worse.

Starting at Pemberton, where I didn't know a single soul, was like being dropped into cold water. My adolescent shyness and insecurities returned with a vengeance. I felt like I was back at square one, fumbling through introductions and pretending to be more confident than I was.

Knowing Asher was going through the same thing at a college hours away didn't make it easier. If anything, it made it worse. When I applied to Pemberton, I thought we'd be doing this together. Navigating awkward orientations and late-night dining halls side by side. But all those carefully laid plans went up in smoke the moment he applied to Georgetown behind my back.

That betrayal had been the final crack in something already starting to fracture. And now, instead of the two of us facing the unknown together, I was facing it alone.

Adam handed me a plate, snapping me out of my thoughts. "You'll know that guy Noah," he said.

"I just met him today for five minutes in the bookstore. I hardly think that means I know him."

"You said he seemed nice."

"He was nice."

"Cute?"

"What does that have to do with anything? I'm dating Micah."

"Doesn't mean you're blind. It was just a question, Kill. From your response I take it he was cute though, huh?"

I sighed. "Yes, he definitely was. Why do you think I should go? I mean, what's the point?"

"Well, first off, it never hurts to have more friends. Secondly, if Haven is involved with queer education on campus and in the community, it's a great cause. And thirdly, you probably have something to offer. Some of these kids may be struggling with issues you've already dealt with, like figuring out whether they're gay and coming out."

"If they're going to a queer club in college, I'm pretty sure they already know if they're gay or not."

"Not necessarily. Everyone comes out on their own timeline. A lot of people don't even start figuring out who they are until they leave home. And some still struggle. Look at me, I didn't come out until I was in my late-thirties. Honestly, I wish something like Haven had existed when I was in college."

"Yeah, but that was a different time."

"Hey, watch it. It wasn't *that* long ago."

I laughed, but he had me thinking. It would be nice to make some new friends, and I had been interested when Noah was telling me about it. I just needed a little nudging. I glanced at the time and realized that it was early enough that I could still make it if I left soon.

I debated for a few minutes, then excused myself, ran upstairs and searched for the pants I'd been wearing earlier to retrieve the slip of paper Noah had given me from the pocket. I pulled out my phone and dialed. I was just about to hang up when someone answered.

"Hello?"

"Noah? Hi. This is Killian. We met in the bookstore..."

"Oh, hey. You're the cute little blond with the rainbow necklace, right?"

I blushed at the cute-blond remark and almost stuttered when I answered. "Right."

"Are you calling about Haven?"

"Yeah, are you still meeting tonight?"

"Sure are. You thinking about coming?"

"Yeah, if that's okay."

"Of course it's okay! Haven is open to everyone. Do you know where the student lounge is?"

"Not really."

"Then how about if I meet you in front of the main doors at Wicomico Hall and we can walk in together? That way I can introduce you to everybody and it's not so intimidating."

"Okay, if I leave now I should get there by like quarter of 8 at the latest."

"Great. See you then, Killian."

"Sure thing."

I felt the butterflies in my stomach again as I slipped out of the house.

## Chapter 4

During the drive to school, I thought about Steve and the B&B. I knew he'd sunk a small fortune into buying and restoring the old house — a fortune he had partly inherited and partly saved from his successful business. Except for a small safety net he'd invested, nearly all his money had gone into the project. Not to mention the time involved. He was spending a lot of time at the B&B, and I wondered if Adam missed his partner. It had to be hard living in two different places. If there were guests, one of them always stayed at Amalie's House while the other stayed with me and Kane. Technically, we were old enough to take care of ourselves, but Adam liked to keep the family together as much as possible.

Business was still a little slow, so some nights, we were all together at the beach house. Kane occasionally stayed over at the inn on weekends so he could help out. If there were rooms available, I would spend the night now and then since it was closer to work and school.

Any further contemplation was cut short by my arrival at school. In my distracted state, I'd been driving on autopilot...and I must have been driving considerably over the speed limit since I was there way ahead of schedule. I was lucky no cops were out.

Although I was somewhat early, I decided to head on over to Wicomico Hall anyway. As I approached, I noticed several people standing and talking in the illumination of the old-fashioned light posts. One of them was Noah. When he looked over and

caught my eye, he immediately broke into a smile. He said something to the guy he was chatting with and walked toward me.

"Hey, Killian. I didn't know if you'd come or not."

"I'm here." I had an amazing talent for stating the obvious.

"Well, good." To his credit, he said that without a trace of sarcasm or teasing. "Let me introduce you to some people." He led me back to the others gathered in the lamplight: two guys and a girl.

"Everybody, this is Killian." They all turned to face me wearing polite smiles. "This is Peter." He indicated the short, pudgy guy he'd been talking to when I'd arrived. Peter had straight, mousy-brown hair, almost no discernable lips, and dull, incurious brown eyes. "Peter is the co-president of Haven. The other co-president is Val. She'll be here eventually. She's always late."

Noah pointed to the second guy. "This is Raj, he's the secretary. That's Sujin." Raj and Sujin waved cheerily.

Raj was a tiny bundle of energy, small with a dark complexion, straight black hair, and huge, dark eyes. He was constantly in motion, hopping and bouncing from one foot to the other, dancing to music only he could hear.

Sujin was square and solid, with black hair cut bluntly just above her shoulders, and thick glasses.

Noah grabbed my elbow and pulled me toward the doors. "Come on. I'll show you where we meet. See you guys inside in a few minutes."

"I'm never going to remember all the names," I said as we entered the building.

"Don't worry about it. We'll probably do one of those lame introduction games tonight where everybody has to say their name, major, and what shampoo they use or something like that. Peter seems unusually fond of them." He shrugged. "I guess they serve their purpose. You know, I just realized that I assumed from your necklace that you were gay, but I should know better than that."

"Would I be here if I wasn't?"

He shrugged again. "Allies are welcome, too. We're a safe space. But you are queer?"

"Yeah. I am."

"And does the necklace mean that you're out?"

"Pretty much. I mean, my family and friends all know. I don't make any effort to hide it. I came out in high school. I had a boyfriend, and literally everyone in the school knew we were a couple after my ex announced it at an assembly."

He stopped in his tracks. "You're kidding!"

I laughed. "Nope. I swear."

"Man, that's cool. I was out in high school too, but not on that level. I just told some friends and left it at that. So you mentioned your ex. Are you seeing anyone now?"

I glanced over and noticed him look at me from the corner of his eye. Was his interest merely polite conversation, or was there something more behind it? I decided that clearing the air up front might save us both trouble.

"Yeah, I have a boyfriend."

"That's cool." His tone was casual, but I thought I saw a flash of disappointment. "Does he go to Pemberton?"

"No, he's a reporter for *The Times*."

"Oh damn, you got a sugar daddy!"

I laughed. "No, nothing like that. He's just starting out."

While we were talking, he'd led me down the hall and into a rec room complete with pool tables, table tennis, a couple of arcade games, and other distractions. At the back of the room, there was a glass partition that sectioned off a lounge area with tables, couches, and chairs. A TV hung on one wall. Two girls shared one of the sofas, a slim black guy lay sprawled on the floor, and a burly white guy slouched in a chair.

"This is where we meet," Noah said, swinging open the door.

The conversations broke off as we entered. "Hey, Noah," the burly guy called, echoed by the others.

"Hey, guys, this is Killian," Noah said. "That's Olivia and Felicia on the couch, Anthony on the floor, and Everett in the chair."

I wasn't sure which of the girls was Olivia and which was Felicia, but they were similar enough in appearance that I doubted I could have told them apart anyway. They both had short, dark-brown hair, brown eyes, and not a hint of makeup. They both wore glasses and shapeless, baggy sweatshirts over faded jeans. They almost looked like twins, but something about the way they were sitting made me think they might be dating.

Anthony waved. "You can call me Tony." He had the thin, lithe body of a dancer and sharp, chiseled

features — like a statue that had just stepped off its pedestal. I waved back.

"Ooh, fresh meat!" Everett's smile let me know he was only joking. The way he dwarfed his chair, it was easy to see that he was a giant, but a gentle one if my initial impressions were accurate — and they usually were. He had curly, reddish-brown hair with a matching beard and greenish-blue eyes.

Noah waved a finger in the big guy's direction. "Careful, Ev. He's taken."

"Figures. All the cute ones are either taken or straight."

"Hey, then what does that make me?" Tony shot back.

"A single queer thot."

They both laughed as Noah and I took our seats on one of the other couches, me in the center and Noah by my side.

Another group of students made their way across the rec room in our direction, the ones I'd met outside plus several additions. As more and more people arrived, the names were no longer getting connected to faces. A few I recognized from my classes, but I didn't know any of them by name. I was actually kind of surprised to learn they were queer, but then I remembered that just because they came to these meetings didn't necessarily mean anything.

Peter called the meeting to order, and, as predicted, started one of those annoying games in which everyone had to announce their name, major, preferred pronouns and favorite animated movie.

Peter was just about to start the meeting when a striking Latine girl rushed in. She was petite but curvy, with long, glossy waves of black hair, wide brown eyes framed by thick lashes, and full red lips that looked like they belonged in a makeup ad. A snug sweater and even tighter jeans hugged her figure, and a black leather backpack hung off one shoulder as she caught her breath and scanned the room.

"And Valora makes her grand entrance, as always," Raj said under his breath while writing something in the notebook on his lap. If he hadn't been sitting on the other side of me, I probably wouldn't have heard him.

"Sorry I'm late," she said in a lightly accented voice.

"It's okay, Val," Peter said with a grin. "It's not like it's unusual. We were just getting ready to start."

"Cool, then I didn't miss anything?" She settled gracefully into a spot on the floor next to Tony.

"Well, you missed the introductions."

Val blinked in surprise for a second. "If we're having introductions, does that mean we have someone new?" She scanned the group — now about twenty-five strong — and quickly picked me out. "Aha, I haven't seen you before, have I?"

I smiled. She was the kind of person I liked immediately. "Probably not. My name's Killian. This is my first time here."

She giggled. "You make it sound like an AA meeting. Hi, my name is Valora and I'm a lesbian." She giggled again. "I'm only teasing. Don't turn all red on me. You can call me Val."

"Val is our co-president," Noah reminded me.

"Can I move on now?" Peter asked impatiently.

Val arched an eyebrow and leveled an icy glare in his direction that didn't seem to faze him in the least. I decided Val was the people person, while Peter was the administrator. They probably made a good pair.

"God forbid we should get off schedule. Yes, you may get on with your agenda now," Val said.

Peter stuck his tongue out at her, and she reciprocated, then they both broke into wide grins.

"They're always like this," Noah whispered.

I tried not to shiver as his breath tickled my ear.

The meeting itself was rather unremarkable. I was a little lost for most of it, as they were mainly discussing the success of their LGBTQ History Month celebration. They also talked about plans they already had in the works, including a Halloween costume dance that didn't appeal to me at all. I still had unpleasant memories of the last one I'd attended a few years before.

The official meeting ended promptly at nine, but most people hung around and chatted in small groups. Noah invited me to stay too, and since I figured it was a good way to get to know people, I did. I ended up surrounded by Noah, Val, Peter, Tony, and Everett. Val had moved to the couch next to me in the spot vacated by Raj. They all seemed very interested in the new guy.

"Well, what did you think of your first meeting?" Val asked me.

I shrugged. "It was okay."

"Only okay?" Noah sounded disappointed.

"Well, I didn't really know what you were talking about most of the time. It'll be better once I get more involved."

"Then you'll probably be back?" I thought I detected a note of hope in his voice.

"Probably."

"Can I ask a personal question?" Val said.

"Would saying no even slow you down?" Peter teased.

"Nope," she shot back with a grin. "So, are you Noah's new boy toy?"

Noah quickly jumped in before I could answer. "He's dating someone, Val."

"Yeah, I met Noah at the bookstore earlier this week. He saw my pride necklace and invited me."

"The campus bookstore?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"You go to Stinky?" she asked with surprise in her voice. Stinky was the affectionate nickname given to Pemberton University due to its initials.

"Yeah, I'm a freshman."

"Damn, I'm sorry. I thought you were like sixteen and Noah was robbing the cradle."

I laughed. I was used to being mistaken for a lot younger than I was. Sixteen was actually an old estimate for me. Maybe my looks were finally starting to mature.

"No, I'm eighteen."

"Still a baby," she said.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"And you?" I asked Noah.

"Twenty."

I looked to Peter.

"Twenty-one," he said.

"Nineteen," Everett volunteered.

"Twenty," Tony called from the floor, where he was now doing some sort of stretching exercise.

"Oh, I guess I am the baby of the group, then," I said.

"Just those of us here now," Peter said. "I doubt you're the youngest in the whole group. I know there are other freshmen."

"Besides," Everett said, "you're probably more mature than most of us anyway."

"Speak for yourself," Val shot back quickly.

I grinned. "I have a question. How many of the people who attend the meetings are queer?"

"Most of us," Noah said. "There are maybe three or four straight girls and a couple of straight identifying trans folk, but everybody else is at least bi."

"Most straight people, especially guys, are too scared to come because they're afraid their friends are going to think they're gay too," Peter said.

"And we all know how horrible that would be," Val said sarcastically.

"But that's one of our goals," Noah went on.

"We're trying to change the way people look at being queer so it's not such a negative thing."

Val grimaced. "It's slow progress."

"But at least it is progress," Everett said. "Almost everybody knows I'm gay, and the vast majority just don't give a shit."

"That's because you're a big ol' white boy." Tony unwound his body from the pretzel in which he'd twisted

himself. "They're afraid you'll bash their skulls in if they say anything." Everett opened his mouth to protest, but Tony wasn't finished. "Not that you would, and I'm not saying that everybody has a problem with it secretly, but there's definitely still a lot of prejudice and bigotry on this campus. Try being gay and black. That's two strikes against you."

"The Latin community is probably even worse," Val said. "Machismo is a real problem. I grew up in a mostly Puerto Rican neighborhood in Baltimore. I've seen plenty of guys get the shit kicked out of them just cuz they weren't macho enough. They get called names like *maricón* and *pato*, and most of the time they aren't even gay. Imagine how the poor guys who really are gay feel. They gotta hide it or get out of there. I never let anyone know I liked girls until I was in college — not even my best friend. I dated guys all through school and just pretended I didn't put out cuz I was a really good little Catholic." She shrugged. "I'm probably going to hell now. Think I need to confess?"

"Nah, you're too far gone for help now," Peter said.

"What about you, Petey?" Val asked him. "You have any problems with people knowing you're gay?"

"Outside of my family, you mean? Not really. I'm too boring for the straights and too ugly for the gays. Nobody cares which way I swing," Peter answered.

"Oh, stop with the pity party," she said. "What problems did you have with your family?"

"Just the usual. Mom flipped out, Dad disowned me, and my brother acts like he'll catch AIDS if he gets too close to me."

"That's the usual?" Noah asked. "Then I'm glad I'm unusual. My parents were a little shaken at first, but they educated themselves, and they're okay with it now."

Peter sighed. "I guess your experience is more the norm, really. And to be fair, my parents are better now. They've had a few years to deal with it, but it was ugly at first."

"My mom still doesn't know," Tony said.

"My dad doesn't, but I think my mom knows," Val said. "At least she's stopped asking me if I'm dating any nice boys at college."

"I'm another one of the lucky ones, I guess," Everett said. "My whole family had no problem with it at all, but then we're a pretty liberal bunch, and they'd assumed I was gay since I was a little kid. What about you, Killian?"

"My family?" I shrugged. "Well, my biological dad didn't take it so well — beat me up and kicked me out. That was right after a close gay friend of mine was murdered and I was stabbed in the same attack."

The stunned looks around the room almost made me laugh.

"Yeah, rough week. Anyway, my murdered friend's dad took me in, and I've been living with him and his partner ever since. My mom divorced my dad and moved to Pennsylvania, but she's very supportive."

Noah's jaw was somewhere around his knees. "Wow!"

"Yeah," Val said. "I think you win the hard-knock-life award."

"Hands down," Tony seconded, while Peter and Everett nodded.

I laughed. "I didn't know it was a competition."  
"You're right, it's not," Noah said. "But did you notice the common denominator in every one of these instances of homophobia?"

"Religion?" Everett guessed.

Peter shook his head. "My family isn't religious at all."

"Toxic masculinity?" Val suggested.

"Closer," Noah said. "But I think it all comes down to misogyny."

"Down with the patriarchy!" Val yelled, fist pumped in the air.

"This conversation could get deep and go all night, but it's getting late and I still have work to do," Peter said.

Everett sighed. "Me too. I was just putting it off as long as possible."

"You know," Val said thoughtfully, "I'm really glad you came along tonight, Killian."

I blinked in surprise. "You are? Why?"

"Because I've known some of these guys for several years and this was the first time we've ever sat down and talked about our lives like that."

I shrugged. "It had nothing to do with me."

"Sure it did," Noah said. "If you hadn't been here we wouldn't have gone off on that tangent. See? You're already making positive changes in the group. Now you *have* to come back."

I laughed. "Fine. As long as nothing else comes up at work, I'll be back."

"Where do you work?" Noah asked, as everyone stood up and started gathering whatever things they had brought.

"Uh, well, actually I'm a private investigator."

That time I had to laugh at the way everyone froze in place and turned to look at me in shock.

"For real?" Tony's eyes were wide.

"Yeah, for real."

"Whoa. You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" Everett said.

Val chuckled. "Well, we hope to see you next week, Mr. PI."

The group quickly scattered in different directions, leaving me alone once again with Noah.

"Walk you to your car?" he asked.

I shrugged. "If you want. You don't have to."

"I want to."

We left the building making small talk. Once we reached my car, I could tell he had something to say.

"Spit it out."

"Huh?"

"Whatever it is you want to say."

"Oh. Am I that obvious?"

"Yup."

He took a deep breath. "So, uh, how seriously are you dating this guy? Do you go out with other people? Like are you guys open?"

"No, we're seeing each other exclusively." I felt a little bad shooting him down, but he seemed to expect my response.

"And I can tell you're not the type to cheat, so let me just say that, if anything ever happens and you break

up with him, give me a call, okay? In the meantime, friends?" He held out his hand.

I smiled. "Friends."

We shook on it.

He held on a little longer than necessary, then slowly backed off a few steps before turning and jogging away.

I watched him go before climbing into my car.

I called Mrs. Knox the next day between classes and learned that she knew all about the business trip. She confirmed that she wanted me to follow him. An all-expense-paid trip to D.C. sounded great to me, especially since it was only a three-hour drive.

After classes were over for the day, I went to the office to talk to Novak. I found him working at his desk. He stopped when I stuck my head in.

"What's up, kiddo?" he asked.

"There's a new development in the Knox case," I said, still in the doorway.

"Sit down and fill me in." He closed his laptop and indicated my usual spot.

Novak's office was a comfortably eclectic space. The first things you noticed were the mismatched bookcases taking up one whole wall. All different heights and woods, they were filled to overflowing with books. There were law books, old phone books, atlases, maps, and a set of encyclopedias that was easily older than I was. One case was reserved for his collection of detective novels, many of which were signed and/or first editions.

In the center of the room sat his desk, a huge expanse of scarred golden oak. I always figured the office must have been built around it, since there was no way that mother could have fit through the door. Its top was usually completely clear, unless he's working on a case. Then it was apt to be quite cluttered with files, papers, photos, and more. At the moment, it only held a file and his laptop.

Behind the oak behemoth stood a daunting procession of battleship-gray filing cabinets, each one meticulously labeled and locked. Two large leather armchairs faced his desk.

For the most part, I liked the room. There was one exception, however: the odd, ugly, humpbacked sofa he kept on the wall opposite the bookcases and under the room's lone window. I know furniture is incapable of harboring ill will, but I swear that sofa is evil. It seemed to crouch malevolently off to one side, its carved claw feet gripping the floor for traction, waiting for some poor, unsuspecting soul to make the fatal mistake of sitting on it. Then, moving with a swiftness that belied its ungainly size, it would devour the hapless victim whole, before perhaps spitting out a shoe.

I moved quickly toward an armchair while carefully avoiding looking at the sofa. Luckily, I reached my chair unmolested.

I quickly filled Novak in on Knox's business trip, what Sharla had told me, and how Mrs. Knox wanted me to follow him.

"Will it interfere with your school work?"

"No, Knox doesn't check in until late afternoon and he has a morning meeting scheduled. It won't leave

him much time to get there with traffic. I only have morning classes on Fridays, so I should have no trouble driving up there before he arrives."

"Have you been to D.C. much?"

"Not really."

"Damn. I have too much on my plate or I'd go with you. Do you know anyone who's familiar with the city?"

"Micah used to live there."

"Do you think he'd be willing to go along with you? We can hire him as a consultant if we need to."

I smiled. "I bet he'll be willing to go without the monetary incentive."

Novak chuckled. "I'd imagine you're right, there. Ask him, and let me know what he says. If he can't go, I don't want you going. You don't know the city well enough to be running around on your own."

As much as I liked the idea of having Micah along, I felt I had to defend myself. "I don't need a babysitter."

"I didn't say you did. I just think it helps to have a guide who knows the city. That is, if you think you can handle working with your boyfriend around without getting too, shall we say...distracted."

I blushed. Novak didn't have any problems with my being gay — in fact, he'd told me that his grandson was gay — but it still seemed odd to hear him make comments like that.

"I think I'm professional enough to not get too distracted."

Novak let out a guffaw. "Kid, you wouldn't be the first person to get distracted by sex. Tell you what,

though, you do your job well enough, and maybe we'll work something out so you have some free time. Deal?"

"Deal," I said, my face burning.

Later that night after dinner, I called Micah and asked him to come over. I was bursting to talk to him about going to D.C. with me.

"What was so important that I had to drop everything and rush over here?" he asked when we were alone in my bedroom. "It sounded like you had something to tell me. Or maybe you just wanted to see me."

He pulled me in for a long, sensual kiss, and I almost forgot why I'd asked him over.

"Keep doing that and I'm going to lose the ability to think, let alone speak."

Micah chuckled and gave me one more kiss.

"Well, we can't have that. So what's up?"

I quickly filled him in on Knox's upcoming business trip. "So anyway," I wrapped up, "Mrs. Knox wants me to follow him up to D.C., but Novak doesn't want me going alone, so...I was hoping you could come with me."

Visibly tensing, Micah sat up and shook his head.

"Uh, no. I don't think I can do that."

I frowned. "Are you busy?"

"No. I just don't think it would be a good idea."

"But...why not?"

"I just don't." He seemed extremely uncomfortable.

"I don't understand. Look, it was Novak's idea. He said if I didn't have a guide with me, somebody who knows the city, then I can't go."

"I'm sorry, Killian. Can't you find someone else?"

"Like who? I don't know anybody in D.C. I don't get it. I thought you'd jump at the chance to spend a few nights alone with me in a hotel. You don't want to go with me?"

"Of course I do...if it was anywhere else..."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

He took a deep breath. "Look, you know how I lived there the whole time I was in college..."

"Yeah, that's exactly why I asked you, because you've lived there."

"Well, I'm not in any rush to go back. Not all of my memories from that time are good ones. In fact, I have some pretty unhappy associations with D.C. If you were going anywhere else, I'd be thrilled that you'd asked me."

"What kind of unhappy associations?" My curiosity was suddenly piqued. I could actually see him close off before my eyes. "Okay, I can see you don't want to talk about this, so I'll withdraw the question and save you the trouble."

"This isn't a courtroom, Killian, and you're not a lawyer," Micah said quietly. "You can't withdraw a question and expect it to be stricken from the record. You're right, though. I'm not ready to talk about it yet. I promise I'll tell you sometime, just...not right now."

"Skeletons in the closet," I whispered, remembering a conversation we'd had when we first started dating.

"What?"

I shook my head. "Never mind."

He sighed. "How about this? I'll think about it."

I shrugged. "That's better than a flat no."

"Yeah. I'm not trying to be a dick. I just wasn't expecting you to ask me to go with you. It brought back a lot of memories. I'm sorry."

I gave him a half-smile. "I'm sorry too. You'll tell me when you're ready. Or I'm ready, whichever it is. Don't worry about it. I'll live."

He wrapped me in a tight hug. "I love you, Killian. Don't ever doubt that."

"I love you too."

He moved toward me until he was standing so close I could feel his body heat — almost touching, but not quite. I slid my arms around his waist and pulled him against me, my lips finding his. After we kissed for a minute, he backed gently away.

"I should probably go."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I have a lot to think about. You don't have to walk me down. I can let myself out."

He gave me one last quick kiss before heading out, leaving me alone in my room with my thoughts.

About an hour later, I went downstairs to get a drink of water when I heard the low rumble of male voices coming from the den. I stopped in my tracks when I recognized Micah's. I thought he'd left.

Micah, Adam, and Steve all glanced up and smiled when I appeared in the doorway. At least they didn't seem surprised or uncomfortable to find me

standing there, as I imagined they would be if they'd been talking about me.

"We were just talking about you," Steve said.

Oh.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Mostly good." Micah gave me a grin and a wink while patting a spot next to him on the sofa.

I settled at his side, then looked from my boyfriend to Steve to Adam.

"Were you here the whole time?" I asked Micah.

"Yeah. I stuck my head in to say bye, and we started talking."

"So, uh, what all did you talk about?"

"You want him to recap an hour of conversation?" Adam teased.

I shrugged, though I couldn't shake the feeling there was more beneath the surface, something left unsaid.

"Well, the short version is that I've decided to go with you to D.C."

I practically bounced off the couch. "Really?"

"Really."

"Oh, my gosh! That's great! Oh, thank you so much."

"Thank Adam and Steve. They're the ones who helped me decide."

I calmed down as I remembered what Micah had said about the city holding some bad associations. "Are you sure you're okay with going there?"

"I'll be fine. I want to help you. And I think it's time I faced some of my demons. It'll be easier with you by my side."

I grabbed Micah in a tight hug. "You're the best. I can't wait to tell Novak."

I was extremely excited. Not only was I getting ready to follow my first case on my own into the city, but this would also be Micah's and my first time away together. I knew it was for business, but I couldn't help being excited by the idea of spending a few days alone with my boyfriend. I had a feeling it would be a weekend to remember.



## Chapter 5

The following week was uneventful, and I felt all the longer for my anticipation for our trip to D.C. Mr. Knox drove to and from work without deviating from his usual schedule, Jake drove back and forth to school, my classes were boring for the most part, and I spent the rest of my time catching up on paperwork at the office.

Novak managed to book us a room in the same hotel where Knox was staying, which was not easy considering it was also hosting the conference. Mrs. Knox was paying dearly for it.

Friday finally arrived, and Micah and I left after my morning classes. The drive was pleasant until we hit traffic just outside of D.C. The last leg of the trip was excruciating. I was terrified Knox would beat us there, which would make my job a lot harder.

Finally, we arrived at the hotel, and my anxiety was temporarily forgotten as we stepped into the lobby.

"Wow!" I tried to keep my mouth from dropping open. Places like this made me realize that, at heart, I was little more than a country bumpkin.

I'd never been in such a luxurious hotel before. Tall, white columns rose from the brightly polished white marble floor to meet a high, vaulted ceiling from which enormous crystal chandeliers were suspended.

The wainscoting was rich, dark wood that I thought might be mahogany, above which original oil paintings hung on silk-covered walls. The smell of wood polish and some identifying scent that just smelled like wealth.

The furniture arranged around the lobby on thick oriental rugs all appeared to be authentic antiques or, if not, high-quality reproductions. Classical music played softly in the background.

"One thing's for sure," Micah said. "This guy you're following has expensive tastes."

"His company is paying for all this. He's here for a conference." I started across the expanse of marble toward the young woman behind the desk, hoping I didn't look as out of place as I felt.

"Hello. I believe you have a room reserved under the name Kendall."

I'd never checked into a hotel before. I felt so grown up.

"Of course, Mr. Kendall," she said, click-clacking away on the keyboard. "Are you here for the conference?"

"You could say that," I replied.

She gave me a curious look.

"I mean, I'm hoping I get to see the city while I'm here."

Her bright smile returned. "You really should make time to see the Smithsonian, at least."

She dipped a key card into a machine and slid it into a cardboard sleeve.

"Is one key card good?"

"Could I get two? I, uh, always lose one."

"Of course."

She programmed the second card and added it to the sleeve, then handed them to me.

"Enjoy your stay!"

I collected Micah and we headed up to the room. It was small, clearly not one of their best rooms, but it was clean and the bed was a queen. I threw my suitcase on the bed and popped it open, pulling out a change of clothes that I hoped would help me blend in — a pair of khakis and a pale blue button-up.

Micah watched me drop my pants and step out of them with a twinkle in his eye. "Are you sure you have to rush right back out?"

"Sorry, babe," I replied as I pulled my shirt over my head and slid the new one on. "You know the drill."

Micah and I had already discussed how the surveillance would work. We both knew this was a business trip for me, which meant I had to do my job. I was going to return to the lobby to watch for Knox to check in and keep an eye on him after that. If he started to leave the hotel, then Micah would step in as my guide. It wasn't a perfect plan. If Micah took too long to reach the lobby when I texted him, we could lose Knox. Still, it was the best we could come up with. We were afraid that the two of us lurking around the hotel would be too conspicuous.

I finished buttoning my shirt and turned to grab the rest of my businessman drag.

"I know, but damn, you don't have to tease me," he said with an appreciative leer as I bent over.

I snorted. "Keep your pants on, Romeo."

"One of us has to."

I laughed as I tugged the khakis over my butt, and Micah sighed dramatically.

"How do you make even the most boring outfit known to man sexy?"

"You're just horny," I said, as I ducked into the bathroom to attempt to tame my curls.

"Can you blame me?"

I emerged and dug a book out of my suitcase, then gave Micah a quick kiss.

"I don't know how late I'll be, but if you manage to stay awake, I'll make up for it later?"

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He squeezed my butt, then patted it. "I'll hold you to that."

I headed back downstairs, where I picked a spot that afforded me a clear view of the main door and the front desk while keeping me mostly out of sight behind a large potted plant. I settled into the plush chair and pretended to read.

About an hour later, Knox finally entered and made directly for the desk, followed by a bellhop pushing a luggage cart laden with two large suitcases and a garment bag. How much did this guy need to pack for a weekend?

He checked in, accepted his keycard and headed for the elevator. I stayed put until the door closed behind him, then went over and pretended to push the UP button. While I "waited" for the elevator to arrive, I watched to see which floor Knox stopped on — the one above Micah's and mine.

As soon as I knew where to go, I pushed UP for real. Almost immediately the other elevator slid open. The ride was agonizingly slow and I was almost frantic by the time the doors opened. I was just in time to see the bellhop carrying the last of Knox's bags into the

room. I hesitated for a second, but Knox didn't reappear before the bellhop emerged tucking a five-dollar bill into his pocket.

I made note of Knox's room number, then cased the hallway looking for a place where I could unobtrusively keep an eye on him. Luckily, about halfway along the corridor in the opposite direction from the elevators was a small alcove with two chairs, a tiny table, and a fragrant fresh flower arrangement. While it wasn't ideal, it would have to do. Chances were fairly good that, if Knox came out of his room, he'd head for the elevators and not toward me. As long as none of the other folks on the floor noticed me hanging around and reported me to security, I'd be okay.

I checked my watch as I settled into one of the chairs. It was a little after four.

Stakeouts have to be one of the dullest experiences on earth. Easily the worst part of being a private detective. You can sit for hours — sometimes days — doing nothing but watching a door, waiting for something, anything, to happen. I had a book with me, of course, but I couldn't let myself get pulled too deep into the story. If Knox made his move and I missed it because I was lost in a chapter, I'd never forgive myself. So I read in fits and starts, barely skimming paragraphs, my attention split down the middle. For someone who loves reading as much as I do, it was torture.

It was just before six when Knox stepped out of his room. He'd changed from his traveling clothes into a business suit. Pulling the door shut, he strode off down the hall toward the elevators without looking in my direction.

I remained where I was until the elevator doors closed, then watched the lighted numbers descend to L. Remembering how slow the elevator was, I ran for the stairs. The last thing I wanted was to lose him that early in my surveillance. I raced down the steps two at a time and was panting when I reached the bottom.

I took a deep, calming breath and hoped I had composed myself somewhat before I entered the lobby. Scanning the room as casually as possible, I felt my stomach drop. Knox was nowhere in sight. I crossed the room as quickly as possible without running, cursing under my breath with every step, and looked outside. Still no sign of him.

Then I remembered the convention. It was being held in the building itself. Didn't weekend conferences often start on Friday evening? I quickly ducked back into the hotel and caught a bellboy by the sleeve. "Excuse me. Can you tell me where the conference rooms are?"

I guessed the bellboy was around my age, but had the misfortune to bear a more-than-slightly simian appearance. In his uniform, he looked like an overgrown organ grinder's monkey. Instead of jumping up and down while demanding a quarter, though, he smiled politely and gave me directions.

I thanked him and hurried off, not quite at a jog, but not far from it. I rounded the last corner and came to a screeching halt. To my vast relief, my quarry was standing not too far from me talking to another man in a suit. Luckily, Knox's back was to me, and I was able to survey the area before slipping back around the corner.

It was going to be harder to keep an eye on him in the conference room. Not only was there no

convenient alcove setup, but there would be people coming and going constantly. More importantly, I probably looked fairly shifty standing at the edge of the corner with my back pressed against the wall. I forced my body into a more casual stance, as if waiting for someone to come along.

What was I going to do about Knox? What would Novak do?

I peeked around the corner again and watched while he and the man he was talking to seemed to finish up their conversation. They shook hands and moved toward one of the conference-hall doors.

"Can I help you?" a voice asked from behind me, causing me to jump guiltily.

I spun around to find a smug member of the hotel staff glaring at me the way one might look at a pile of offending doggie doo that had somehow managed to situate itself under one's foot. The man facing me was a little above average in height with stiffly gelled dark hair and beady eyes that glared down his long, thin nose.

"Um, yes..." My mind raced to come up with a cover story.

Damn it! I'd forgotten Novak's first rule of private investigation.

"Is this, uh, where the, er, conference is being held?" I managed.

Weak, but it would have to do.

The man arched an eyebrow. "Yes, indeed it is. Are you attending the conference?"

"Oh, um, yes. I'm staying here too," I added just to be safe.

I showed him my keycard, which did seem to make an impression. I could almost read his mind: at least I hadn't crept in off the streets.

"Could I be of assistance? Show you to the correct conference room, perhaps?" He paused meaningfully and then sprung his trap. "Which conference are you here for?"

Crap! There was more than one? Or was it a trick question? I hadn't even thought to check to see what conference Knox was attending. Had Sharla or Mrs. Knox told me? I realized it was probably on the print out Sharla had given me but I hadn't paid attention. A major screw up. I just hoped it would be a learnable moment and not tank my investigation completely.

"The, uh, one for sales," I replied lamely.

"Ah, yes. That one."

He looked mildly disappointed that I'd managed a passable — if not particularly intelligent — response. Still, being thought a little dim was better than getting unceremoniously tossed out on my ass.

"It's right this way. Follow me." He walked briskly past me and around the corner.

I couldn't very well refuse — not if I wanted to get out of this while attracting as little attention as possible. I held my breath, stepped around the corner. Much to my relief, Knox was nowhere in sight.

I decided to risk a question. "Are there other conferences going on this weekend?"

My guide gave me an irritated look. "No, this is the only one."

So it had been a trick question. I could tell he didn't appreciate having to admit it.

He ushered me through a set of doors into a ballroom that had been transformed in what looked like a TED Talk stage. Dramatic lighting illuminated the stage, and large LED screens showed closeups of the speaker, who was saying, "If you haven't registered and received your name badge yet, please don't forget to do so as soon as our introductory session is over."

Clearly, the first session had already begun. At least my lack of plastic-coated ID wouldn't be too obvious. I took a seat in the back row.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I scanned the room for my quarry. I spotted his sandy-blond hair about halfway toward the front. At least I could keep an eye on him now, even if it did mean sitting through a few boring speeches.

Boring turned out to be an understatement. By the time eight o'clock rolled around, I was struggling just to keep my eyes from slamming shut. When the speaker finally stopped for a break, I pretended to check emails on my phone while Knox walked by. I couldn't believe in just thirty minutes they would actually be starting back up for yet another two hours. I wanted to cry at the very thought. At least one thing was certain: I wasn't cut out for sales.

I texted Micah to let him know what was going on, then stood up and stretched before making my way out into the hall with the last of the stragglers. I found Knox at the registration table picking up his name badge. Registration was a casual affair at this point, most people having already signed in, and the remainder of the badges and conference kits were simply laid out with no one manning the table.

That gave me an idea. I decided a little camouflage couldn't hurt, and as soon as Knox moved away from the table, I sidled over and found an unclaimed badge. I quickly slipped the lanyard over my head, then double checked the name. I'd be Topher King from Kingline Enterprises for the night. Picking up a kit, I moved into a corner out of the way and waited. Knox never left my sight.

The second half of the evening session was every bit as scintillating as the first. I was approaching a comatose state by the time the last speaker finished up, until the polite applause as he stepped off the platform startled me into full alertness. He was replaced a moment later by the man who'd been giving directions when I first entered.

"That's all for this evening," he said, sounding about as awake as I felt. "We'll see you all back here in the morning at eight-thirty. And don't forget the complimentary continental breakfast."

I groaned inwardly as everyone stood and moved toward the doors. That meant I'd have to be up early so I could keep an eye on old Knox. God only knew when I'd be getting to bed tonight.

I watched Knox pass, waited while a few more people went by, then stood and followed. He stopped in the hall to chat with some other Finding a group of men talking among themselves about their plans for the rest of the evening, I pretended to join them. When Knox disappeared around the corner, I started to extricate myself when one of the other men, an older guy with tortoiseshell glasses and a gut that threatened to burst a

few buttons jutting from beneath his blazer, glanced at my name tag.

"Topher? Topher King?" he boomed. "Look at you! All grown up. I haven't seen you since you were just a little thing. You must be proud of your old man for being this year's recipient of the Lifetime Achievement in Sales Award."

"Oh, um, yeah. Heh. Very proud," I said.

"Where is he, anyway? I haven't seen him yet."

"He's getting in, uh, tomorrow morning," I said, edging away.

"Well, hang on just a sec. Let's get a picture together."

"No! I mean, I, uh, um...I look terrible. Heh. You know how it is, traveling all day, sitting in the conference..."

"Bullshit. You look as good as the rest of us," he said and brayed an annoying laugh. "Come on, guys! Selfie!"

The men quickly circled me, throwing their arms around my shoulder, as the annoying loud one took a photo.

"I'll be sure to tag you!" he said as they broke up.

"Great," I said with zero enthusiasm. The real Topher King would be very confused very soon.

"Anyway, I should get going. Early morning tomorrow."

"Oh, come on," one of the other guys said. "The night is young. Join us for a round at the hotel bar."

"Not tonight fellas, but I'll, uh, get a round tomorrow night."

That was something people said wasn't it? I couldn't waste any more time or I'd lose Knox. With a

wave, I backed away, then turned to rush toward the lobby.

As I was scurrying away, I heard one of the other guys say, "He really looks great for thirty, doesn't he?"

To my relief, Knox must have paused to chat with someone in the lobby, because as I rounded the corner, he and another man were just approaching the elevators. I hurried across the lobby, trying to look inconspicuous as Knox pressed the call button. His companion shook his hand and peeled off toward the hotel bar. Knox stepped into the elevator alone. I hung back, watching from a safe distance until the doors slid shut, then strolled casually over just in time to see where he was headed to.

The elevator stopped on his floor. With a sigh of resignation, I turned and jogged for the stairs. I made it to the hallway just in time to catch a glimpse of his door swinging shut.

He could be in for the night or he could just be changing before going back out. I couldn't afford to leave, so I took my post again, sitting in one of the rather uncomfortable chairs in the alcove, and prepared to wait.

Two hours later, two things were becoming increasingly obvious: Knox wasn't going anywhere and no one was joining him. I decided to risk returning to our room. I would just have to return early enough in the morning to be back in what I was beginning to think of as my own private alcove long before Knox arose in the morning.

I wasn't exactly thrilled as I set an alarm on my phone for an ungodly hour, but what choice did I have? It was all part of the job.

I rode the elevator down one floor and let myself into the room as quietly as I could in case Micah was asleep.

Once my eyes adjusted to the near-darkness, I could just make him out on the bed — one arm flung over his head, the blanket pushed down to his waist, revealing the band of his underwear. My gaze drifted up his torso, moonlight silvering his skin, making him look like a sculpture, marble-smooth and heartbreakingly beautiful. My breath caught. He looked so serene, so unguarded. I felt something tighten in my chest.

I was supposed to sleep next to that?

I'd stayed over plenty of times, usually after long nights of dancing when we'd both collapsed into bed too tired to do much more than sleep. We'd fooled around, sure, but I always stopped things before they went too far. Micah had never pushed. He respected my boundaries, and I appreciated him for that.

But standing there, watching him sleep, something felt different. Maybe it was the hotel room, or maybe I was just finally ready. I slowly peeled off my clothes, sliding under the covers beside him.

What was my deal with sex, anyway? There had been times I wanted it — with Asher, and definitely with Micah — but something always made me pull back. Fear, mostly. Fear of getting it wrong. Of looking stupid. Of the pain. Of it not being like the stories — perfect and glowing and magical.

And maybe, deep down, I knew that sleeping with Micah would tear down the last of the walls I'd been hiding behind. With him inside me, I'd be

completely vulnerable. Exposed. And I'd never thought I wanted that with anyone.

But watching him breathe softly in the moonlight, vulnerability didn't seem so terrifying anymore. In fact, it started to sound kind of beautiful — especially if it meant being wrapped up in him, skin to skin, nothing between us but trust.

I suddenly realized I'd boned up while I laid there watching my boyfriend sleep.

"Perv," I whispered to myself, ignoring my erection as best I could. Micah never stirred.

I rolled onto my side to watch his face, drawn to the quiet rhythm of his breathing. I wanted to feel his body against mine, skin to skin. I wanted to kiss him, to wake him and whisper a question I wasn't brave enough to ask: would he take my virginity?

But I didn't do any of that.

Instead, I reached out and let my hand rest lightly on his arm, soaking in his warmth. He didn't stir. I stayed like that, watching him sleep, until my eyes finally grew too heavy.

All too soon, I was awakened by the rude blaring of the alarm. For a few confused seconds, I couldn't remember where I was or why the room was still pitch black. Then I felt Micah stirring at my side, and it all came back to me.

I fumbled with my phone, finally managing to turn off the alarm. I did *not* want to get out of bed, but I forced myself into a sitting position with my legs dangling off the edge while I tried to wake enough to think clearly.

"What time is it?" Micah asked.

"Too early."

I was trying to summon the energy to stand when I felt his hand slide across my back, warm and gentle. A shiver rippled through me and, suddenly, I was very awake.

"I didn't even hear you come in last night."

"I didn't want to wake you."

"I wish you had." I felt him sit up, and a second hand joined the first in its exploration of my back.

"I should go. I need to make sure I'm in place before Knox leaves his room." I didn't move.

He ran his hands up my arms and over my shoulders, causing another chill to course through me. He leaned in so close I could feel the heat from his body as his hands traced down my chest.

Part of my brain was yelling at me to remember Novak's warning about not letting sex become a distraction. But a much bigger and louder part was telling it to shut the fuck up and mind its own business.

"God, Killian, you're so beautiful," Micah whispered as his lips brushed my ear, echoing my thoughts about him from just a few hours ago.

When his lips found my neck, it was like fire racing through my veins. A soft whimper escaped me before I even knew it was mine. He eased me closer with a gentle pull at my shoulders, pressing our bodies together. I melted into him, all thoughts of work dissolving as I gave myself over to the moment.

I tilted my head so I could look into his eyes. Even in the dim light, I could see everything written

there — desire, yes, but more than that. Love. A deep, quiet kind of love that made my chest ache.

His lips found mine, and I twisted toward him, my whole body reaching. The kiss started slowly, a gentle press, but it deepened fast as heat bloomed between us. Micah shifted, lowering me carefully onto the bed, never breaking contact, his body covering mine like a warm, steady weight.

Something throbbed against my leg, and I realized it was him. I was pretty sure I was guilty of the same. His hands roamed everywhere, gliding over my skin like he needed to memorize it.

Normally, that would be where I stopped things, where instinct or fear made me pull away. But in that moment? I couldn't have pulled away if I tried. Every nerve in my body was electric, my breath already coming in short, uneven gasps.

Then he paused. Slowly, he pulled back just far enough to meet my gaze, his eyes searching mine.

“I love you,” he said, quiet and steady.

“I love you too.” The words left my mouth before I even thought. There was no doubt in them.

He kissed me again — briefly this time, though no less passionately — before tracing his lips down the curve of my neck. When he found that soft spot beneath my ear, my back arched reflexively, a shudder running through me. He lingered there, teasing, before continuing his journey down my neck, across my chest, lower still.

My thoughts were drifting, hazy, until I felt his fingers slip beneath the waistband of my underwear.

“Micah,” I gasped, not knowing if I was stopping him or calling him closer.

He froze. “Should I stop?”

I looked up into his face. “No. Don’t stop.”

His expression softened, tender and focused. “I promise I won’t hurt you.”

“It’s not that. I just...” I hesitated, heart pounding with a mix of nerves and anticipation. “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

He smiled then, a smile so sweet and patient it nearly undid me. He leaned down and kissed me, soft as breath.

“That’s okay,” he whispered. “I’ll show you everything you need to know.”



## Chapter 6

*Wow!*

That was about the only coherent thought I could muster for a while, following what had turned out to be the most amazing experience of my life. Of course, I wasn't particularly trying to be coherent. I was simply basking in the afterglow.

"Wow!" I thought again, except I must have said it out loud the second time.

Micah chuckled. "I wish you'd stay that easy to impress," he said.

My head was resting in the hollow between his shoulder and his neck, his arms wrapped around me, our legs intertwined.

"Just make me feel like that every time, and I'll stay impressed," I murmured into the soft skin at the base of his throat.

His fingers trailed gently down my spine, causing goosebumps to rise — among other things.

"You can't be ready to go again already."

"Tell him that." I mumbled.

"Hey, I'm not complaining, but I'm not as young as you are. I need a little time to recover."

"Oh, yeah, you're so ancient. You're what, five years older than I am?"

"More like seven."

I sat up and looked down into his eyes. He was just as beautiful in the golden, early-morning sunlight as he'd been in the moonlight.

"Okay, old man, I'll give you time to recover. You get ten whole seconds before I ravage you. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six..."

"God." He grabbed me and pulled me down on top of him. "I've created a monster."

"...five, four, three..."

"Is this what our relationship is going to become now?"

"...two...hey, you asked for it, mister...one." I swung my leg over him and leaned down to cut off his retort with a deeply passionate kiss. His response was almost immediate. "See? Now that wasn't so hard, was it? Oh wait, maybe I should say difficult, 'cuz that sure feels hard to me."

Micah choked down another laugh. "Don't you have work to do?"

"Oh shit!" I yelled, sitting up so suddenly the room actually spun for a second.

I frantically tried to find the clock or my phone or anything that could tell me the time. I finally found the clock under a pillow that must have gotten tossed during our lovemaking.

I uncovered it and let out a yelp. "I'm late!"

I leapt off the bed and began running aimlessly around the room searching for clothes.

"Do I have time for a shower? No, I definitely don't have time," I babbled. "Do I smell like sex? Of course I do, I'm covered in cum. Fuck, fuck, fuck..."

Micah sat up and watched me with obvious amusement. "I thought we didn't have time for that," he quipped.

I ignored him.

"Killian, chill out," he said soothingly. "It's okay."

Did he have to sound so maddeningly calm?

"Chill out? Easy for you to say. You're not the one who probably just blew his whole case."

I couldn't believe how much time had gone by since the alarm went off. How could I have been so careless — especially after I'd promised Novak not to get distracted? I was furious with myself.

"You don't know that you've blown anything," Micah said, then with an evil grin, added, "Except a couple of loads."

I stopped in my tracks long enough to glare at him.

Grin still in place, he slipped from the bed, picked up my underwear from where he'd thrown them earlier, and held them out to me.

"You're a great detective, Killian. If this guy's cheating, I know you'll catch him at it one way or another."

I took a deep breath. I needed to calm down so I could think. As my thoughts slowed, an idea began to form in my devious little mind, a way to salvage the situation. If Knox was busy with the conference until noon, that was the perfect time to search his room.

I dressed quickly and started for the door.

Micah caught my arm on my way by him and gave me a quick kiss on the lips. "Good luck, Kill. I love you."

I stopped long enough to give him a real kiss goodbye, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"I love you too," I said as I pulled away, somewhat reluctantly. I yanked open the door and paused again. "And...thank you for this morning. It was incredible and amazing and you were amazing and...I'm sorry I have to run off after..."

He smiled. "Killian! It's fine. Just go. I understand."

As I took the stairs two at a time, one thought kept repeating in my head: I wasn't a virgin anymore. Some people might've argued I hadn't been for a while, depending on how you define it, but to me, I had been. So yeah, it was a big deal.

And yet...I didn't feel all that different. Well, maybe a little sore — tender, really — but in a way that left a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth. I'd enjoyed every second of it. More than enjoyed. I'd felt sexy, wanted, connected.

And now that I knew what I'd been missing, I couldn't help wondering why I'd waited so long.

Focus!

I need to focus on the case. Think with your big head, I scolded myself. There will be time for the other one later.

I burst out of the door and onto Knox's floor.

The hallway was completely empty...and that was when the flaw in my plan hit me. I didn't have the first clue about how to get into his room. Maybe I could take his keycard somehow or sneak in while the cleaning crew was busy.

Of course, those things probably only worked in movies and novels. Novak had never given me any

lessons on breaking and entering. Being a retired cop, he generally shunned such lawless tactics.

I, on the other hand, had no such qualms. "Whatever Gets the Job Done" was officially my new motto. If only I had the knowhow.

Since I was alone in the hall, I approached Knox's door for a better look. It appeared tamperproof, at least to my amateur eyes. I wondered how anyone broke into modern hotel rooms. They must have some sort of Bond-type gadget: a card that deciphered the door code or something. I tried the handle on the off chance it was open. No such luck.

I pressed my ear against the door thinking maybe someone was inside. To my complete and utter surprise, it swung open as soon as my ear touched its cold surface. I almost stumbled into the arms of a brassy blonde woman standing on the other side. She wore a white fluffy robe knotted around her slim waist and a pissed-off look on her face.

I straightened up quickly and tried desperately to think of some reason why I might have been jiggling her door handle. Once again, I was caught without a cover story. If my first solo case were an exam, I'd be flunking badly.

"Hang on," she said into the cell phone she had pressed against one ear. She eyed me up and down. "Do you work here?" Her voice was a high-pitched whine.

Relief swept over me.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation. She'd saved me the trouble of coming up with an excuse.

Taking a closer look at her, I suspected I'd found the proof I needed that Knox was cheating. I'd met his

wife, and this, quite definitely, was not Mrs. Knox. The woman standing before me had to be his mistress, but I needed to make sure.

"Well, for Christ sake, do something!" she shrilled.

"Um, what exactly do you need?" I asked hesitantly while my mind ran ahead full-tilt.

She heaved a monumental sigh. "I told them down at the front desk that the damn toilet was overflowing. Now will you quit standing there like a dolt and do something?"

"Um, I'm not the plumber." I thought quickly. "He's been called. They just sent me to see if I could help with anything. Want me to take a look?"

"Well, I sure as hell don't want you to just stand there. Do something!"

I stepped around her and started for the bathroom while she trailed after me grumbling into the phone. "I swear, as nice as this place looks, you'd think they'd have better customer service."

"Did this start after your husband left?" I asked as casually as I could.

"Ha," she said into the phone. "He wants to know if it started after my husband left." Then to me: "I don't have a husband."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just assumed the man who rented the room..."

The toilet was indeed overflowing. A small lake had formed on the tiled bathroom floor and was starting to seep through the dam of towels she'd piled in the doorway. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do now that I was there.

"No, it didn't start after the bastard left. It started before. He just told me to deal with it. Now you deal with it."

She turned away and continued her conversation on the phone while I made a show of stepping gingerly into the water and jiggling the handle on the commode.

Niagara Falls kept flowing.

"I know!" she yelled in response to something the person on the other end of the line said. "He's married, alright, but not to me. Oh, no. I don't have the moneybags Old Fort Knox has, the frigid bitch. Why am I so stupid? I've been going along with him for two years now — putting up with his sudden calls asking me to meet him for a weekend, putting up with his sneaking me in and out of his rooms while he's gone, putting up with not seeing him for weeks at a time, knowing that he's with her. But do you think he ever does anything for me? No. I'm just supposed to come running whenever he calls. I'm just supposed to sit around waiting for him to come back. I'm just supposed to deal with the fucking toilet when it overflows, while he runs off to his little conference. I can't even have him for one day. Is that too much to ask? Is it?"

While she was working up a full head of steam, I noticed her purse sitting on the counter. A quick check confirmed her back was to me, so I leaned over and opened the bag. Pulling out her wallet, I flipped it open to her driver's license. She was Camellia Ledbetter. With a name like that, I'd want to get married too. She lived in D.C., so he must have seen her only when he was away on "business trips."

I dropped the wallet back in and noticed an envelope addressed to her. It had been ripped open and its contents removed, so I grabbed it and stuffed it in my pocket. When another glance to confirm I had avoided detection, I shifted my faux-attention back to the toilet.

"You're damned right it's not fair!" she was shrieking. "I'm still an attractive woman. I could find someone else, someone who'll marry me. Hey, why aren't you doing anything?"

It took me a second to realize that the last bellow was directed at me.

"I think we should wait for the plumber," I said.

"Then what the fuck are you doing here? What good are you? And why aren't you in uniform?"

She was just noticing that now? Since I'd gotten what I needed — more than I needed actually — it was time to make my exit.

"You called so early I didn't have time to put my uniform on," I said glibly. She gave me a confused look as she tried to work that one out. "Why don't I go see if the plumber is here yet?"

I made a beeline for the door.

The elevator was opening just as I passed. I glanced in at a hotel staff member with a plumber in tow. I felt a rush of adrenaline when I realized what a close call that had been.

I trotted down the stairs to our room feeling flushed with the pleasure of my accomplishment. Letting myself in, I found a surprised Micah sitting up in bed, clutching the sheet to his chest, his eyes large and round.

"Killian!" He sighed, dropping the sheet to reveal that he was as naked as the day he was born. "You

scared the hell out of me. I thought you were the cleaning lady, and here I am still naked."

"Sorry." My apology was somewhat unconvincing on account of the giggles.

"You certainly seem to be in a better mood," he said.

"I should be. I just closed the case!"

"What? That's great!" He jumped up and grabbed me in a huge bear hug. "I told you you're a great detective."

"Actually, it was just dumb luck. I came really close to missing it altogether."

"But you didn't, and that's what counts. I'm going to order a celebratory breakfast."

He sat me down and started for the hotel phone.

"I'll call Novak while you do that." I was eager to tell him of my first big success on my own.

"Don't you think it's a little early?"

"Are you kidding? Novak rises before the sun."

A little smirk spread across Micah's face.

"Hmm...If I remember correctly, he's not the only one."

I grinned back as I pulled out my cell phone and called my boss. He answered on the second ring.

"Guess what?"

"Hello, kid," he replied evenly. "You know, most people start their conversations with a salutation of some sort, such as hi, hello, hey, yo, or even wassup."

"Hi, hello, hey, yo, wassup. Now guess what."

"You closed the case?"

"Oh," I said as I deflated.

"Sorry, I guess you wanted to pop the big news. Let's try that again, shall we? I don't know, Killian, what?"

"It's not the same now," I said.

"Well, I still don't know the details."

That brightened me a little. "He is cheating on his wife."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Yes. I met her, she's currently in his hotel room, and I even managed to get an envelope with his mistress's name and address on it. Plus, I talked to her myself. It's been going on for some time now."

"She told you that?"

"Yes. Well, she thought I was there to fix the toilet, but—"

"To fix the... Never mind. I probably don't want to know. Great job, kid. I knew you had it in you."

"It was dumb luck actually. I didn't even know she was in the room at first. Knox must've snuck her in while he was in the conference. I was keeping an eye on him so I couldn't very well be in two places at once. If I hadn't, er, overslept this morning, I probably never would have realized she was there. I just happened to be casing the room when she opened the door, and I practically fell in."

"Still, you had the presence of mind to act when the opportunity presented itself. A good seventy-five percent of our trade is blind luck."

"Well, whatever it is, the case is closed. I'll be home this afternoon, I guess. You want me to come in and type up the report tonight, or will tomorrow morning be soon enough?"

"Actually, didn't I promise you some free time if you finished up this case quickly?"

"Oh, yeah." I'd almost forgotten in all the excitement.

"Why don't you stay one more night? Have Micah show you the city. I'll even pay for the room. Consider it a little bonus for a job well done."

"Are you serious?"

"Yep. You earned it, and besides, this is the first case you've closed on your own, officially anyway. You deserve a little celebration."

"Oh my gosh! Thanks so much, Novak."

"Don't thank me. Just keep up the good work."

"Oh, I will."

"I don't doubt it. Now go have fun. And, Killian?"

"Yeah?"

"I hope you get to sleep in tomorrow morning too." I could hear the wink in his voice as he hung up, and I felt my face burn bright.

"What did you get all excited about?" Micah asked, coming out of the bathroom in a robe. "And why is your face so red?"

I waved off the second question and just answered the first. "Novak said we could stay another night, on him, as a reward for finishing up the case so quickly."

Micah's eyebrows flew up. "Really? Wow, that's pretty damned nice of him."

"Tell me about it. He said to have you show me the city." He frowned a little, and I quickly rushed on.

"Oh, come on, Micah." I said. "I don't want to stay in the

hotel room all day and night. Show me stuff I've never seen before."

He gave me a sexy smile. "I could do that right here in bed."

"Or we could go out and then come back for that."

"You're not going to give up, are you?"

"Nope."

He sighed. "Fine, I'll give in now and spare us both the bother."

"Woohoo!" I jumped into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist.

"Don't get too excited. We don't even know what we're doing yet."

"What is there to do?"

He shrugged. "There're museums, shows, clubs..."

"I don't want to go to a stuffy old museum, not this time anyway. I've done that already on school field trips. I want to go somewhere I've never been before. I want to have fun. I want to celebrate."

"A club, then?"

I stuck out my bottom lip. "We can go to a club at home."

Micah laughed. "The Inferno is about as much like the clubs here as a kitten is to a full-grown tiger."

My eyes lit up. "Oh, really?"

"Really. We have all day to decide what we're going to do. Now, what do you want for breakfast?"

I smiled slyly. "You."

"Holy sea of men, Batman," I yelled to Micah as I stood at the railing overlooking more writhing bodies than I'd ever seen in one place in my entire life.

Micah laughed — or at least, I think he did. The noise was so deafening that any sound he made was swallowed by the pulsing beat of the music. I had no idea how he'd even heard me over the thunderous bass that I could feel vibrating through my entire body.

The lighting was dim, shifting in flashes of red and blue, and the haze from smoke machines gave everything a dreamlike murkiness. Compared to the Inferno — my only other experience with a gay club — this place was a monster. You could fit four Infernos in here, and it was packed wall to wall with at least six times the crowd. Within minutes, I could feel sweat trickling down the middle of my back.

"Quit gawking," Micah shouted in my ear. "Someone's going to mistake that open mouth for an invitation."

I snapped my jaw shut and took another look around.

Michelangelo was *the* premier gay club in the D.C. area — infamous, extravagant, and unapologetically over the top. In the center of the main dance floor stood a towering white statue that bore a striking resemblance to Michelangelo's famous *David* — with one rather prominent modification. This version of David was sporting an erection that could only be described as heroic.

Above the statue, the ceiling was painted in a flamboyant parody of the Sistine Chapel. There were still naked figures draped across clouds, but in this

interpretation, they were all glistening, chiseled men, most of them locked in suggestive pairs or tangled in writhing clusters.

Massive video screens lined the walls, pulsing with abstract patterns and color explosions in sync with the relentless music.

The club had two dance floors — a smaller, more intimate space on the lower level and a cavernous, high-energy one upstairs.

We'd settle on Michelangelo mostly because it just happened to be 18 and up night, which meant I could get in without a special favor. All we had to do was flash out IDs and pay the cover at the glitzy entrance, and then Micah took my hand and whisked me down a narrow dimly lit corridor packed with bodies. He'd led me up a flight of stairs to a balcony overlooking the upper dance floor.

I was still reeling from the sensory overload. I'd never felt more out of my element — or more like a total hick.

"It's a little tacky," Micah shouted, "but lots of fun. You ready to dance?"

I looked out over the masses down below me. "As I'll ever be."

He led me back down the stairs, and plunged into the sea of bodies. It was at least an hour later before we broke free for a much-needed breather. Micah clutched my wrist and started pulling me back down the hall. I noted that he really seemed to know his way around.

Suddenly, someone going the other way grabbed Micah's arm and let out a high-pitched squeal. "Oh my Gawd!" He had a Middle-Eastern look: olive complexion

with dark, almost black eyes under heavy eyebrows, and a hawk-like nose. His black hair hung to his shoulders in soft curls. He was strikingly handsome, not someone who would be easily forgotten.

"What are you doing back in town?" he yelled. "We've been looking for you. Are you here because you heard?"

He was gripping Micah's arm as if he thought my boyfriend might bolt at any second.

Actually, judging by the look on Micah's face, that was entirely possible. He had the same expression in his eyes as the raccoon we'd found in the garage when I was a kid. Dad had cornered it and shot the poor thing with the very pistol I'd later use to put down a serial killer who was hoping to make me his next victim. I'd cried about the damn raccoon for hours.

"I'm sorry," Micah said, trying to shake the guy off his arm. "I think you must have mistaken me for someone else."

Hawk Nose hung on like a leech. "No fucking way, sis," he slurred.

I figured he was on something. I wasn't exactly an expert on drugs, but his eyes were glassy and unfocused, and his pupils were far too dilated.

"I'd know you anywhere," he insisted.

"Well, I don't know you," Micah said.

He snatched his arm away, sending his cling-on stumbling, and yanked me off down the hall before Hawk Nose could recover his balance. I almost had to run to keep up with Micah.

He pulled me into a lounge filled with plush red chairs and low-slung sofas arranged in cozy clusters. A

sleek bar stretched across one end of the room. Like the rest of the club, it was packed with men. There didn't seem to be a single corner of the place that wasn't saturated with testosterone. Most were already entangled with at least one other person, some with more than that, but plenty of hungry eyes still tracked us as we crossed the room.

"I'm not sure whether to be flattered or frightened," I shouted to Micah.

The volume level was slightly lower there, so I didn't quite have to scream.

"What do you mean?"

He pushed me gently into a recently vacated chair and straddled my legs.

"All those guys staring at us."

Micah snorted. "They stare at anything with a dick."

"Gee, thanks. You really know how to make me feel special."

He laughed. "I didn't mean it like that. You would definitely be of special interest to most of them. You're a twink."

"I'm not a twink!"

"You're young, hot, and blond. Of course, you're a twink. At least to most of these guys."

"Hot, huh?"

"Oh yes. Very hot. If you ask me, you're the hottest one here."

I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer to me. "I might have to argue about that."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, because I happen to think that you're the hottest one here."

"How about if we call it a tie?"

I pretended to think it over. "I suppose I could live with that."

He leaned in and gave me a deep kiss that started a familiar tingle in my crotch.

"Keep doing that and I'm going to want breakfast again."

Micah threw his back and laughed. "Is that what we're calling it now? Hey, I have to go pee. How about you?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Okay then, don't move. I'll be right back."

He leaned in and kissed me again, then jumped up and started for the door.

Watching him cross the room, I realized I wasn't the only one interested in his progress. It made me feel good to be with someone other people seemed to find as attractive as I did. They could look as much as they wanted...provided they didn't touch. I was admiring his tight butt as he vanished through the door.

While I was still looking in the direction he'd gone, I noticed Hawk Nose slip out behind him. I sat up sharply, debating whether I should follow, when I felt a presence behind me.

I spun around and to find an angel hovering over me.

Not really, of course, but that was my initial impression. He was backlit by a bright spotlight, giving his halo of strawberry-blond curls a fiery glow. His white shirt hung open and loose, the fabric catching the

light like wings unfurling behind him. The effect was otherworldly.

As he stepped around to face me, it became clear he was very real — and, to my surprise, seemingly even younger than I was. He was a little shorter than me, with a pale, creamy complexion and rosy-red cheeks that were as smooth as a baby's bottom. If he'd ever picked up a razor, it certainly hadn't been for his face. He had the biggest pair of blue eyes I'd ever seen, and perfect little rosebud lips. Golden curls framed his face in soft ringlets. He looked like he'd stepped straight out of a Renaissance painting.

"You're with the guy who just left, right?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"The one Razi followed out. Is he your boyfriend?"

I glanced toward the door, still debating whether to stay put or chase after them. "Who's Razi?"

He snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"Dude, are you on something? Focus. Razi's the guy who just grabbed your man in the hallway. Thinks he knows him. So—is he your boyfriend?"

I shook my head, struggling to keep up. "Who are you?"

"Tad."

"Tad who?"

He pulled a face. "Tad Young, if you really need a last name. I'm here with Razi."

I gave him a once-over. "Speaking of tad young... aren't you a little underage to be in here?"

He rolled his enormous blue eyes.

"Original. Haven't heard that one before. And you don't look much older."

"I'm eighteen."

"Good for you. Anyway, Razi thinks he knows your guy. What's his name?"

I hesitated, suddenly cautious. "Why should I tell you?"

"Is it Micah?"

My eyes snapped to his.

He grinned, all perfect white teeth. "It is, isn't it? Razi was right."

"Who is this Razi? And how does he know Micah?"

I wondered why Micah had pretended not to know him.

Tad, if that was his real name, shrugged. "I think they used to work together."

"Where?" I was suddenly interested. I knew next to nothing about Micah's life here in the city.

Tad evasively shifted his eyes away and shrugged again. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"Why don't you ask Micah?"

"Because I'm asking you," I snapped.

"Sheesh. Don't get your panties in a twist, pretty boy. I should have never come over here." He turned and started walking away.

I was on my feet in a flash. I grabbed his elbow, making him turn to face me.

"Hey, I'm sorry. Let's start over, huh? I'm Killian."

He smiled. "Hi, Killian. You've already made fun of my name, so we don't need to go there again."

"I apologize."

"It's cool. I'm used to it."

"Is that your real name?"

He looked at me suspiciously for a second, then nodded slowly. "It's short for Thaddeus."

"So where did Micah and, uh, Razi work?"

"Look, I don't know for sure, so I probably shouldn't say anything."

I pleaded with him with my eyes.

Heaving a sigh, he gave in. "Razi said he used to be in the business."

I frowned. "What business?"

Tad gave me a measuring look. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Will you just—"

"Okay, okay. Jesus. You need to chill. The same business Razi is in."

"Which is?"

He looked around, as if to make sure no one was listening, then leaned toward me conspiratorially, slipping an arm around my shoulder. "Razi is a high-end escort."

Suddenly, the room seemed to recede, the noise falling away like a wave pulling back from shore. A rush of heat swept through me, followed by a chill that prickled my skin. There it was — Micah's big secret. The one thing he hadn't trusted me enough to share. And now, it all clicked into place with a sickening clarity.

Micah had sold his body for sex.

He'd been a sex worker.

## Chapter 7

Tad yanked his arm back suddenly, as if he'd been burned. The crowd came flooding back into focus as he hurried away. I started to call after him when I felt someone slip his arms around my waist from behind. I jerked my head back to find it was Micah.

"Who was that?" Although his voice was falsely bright, his eyes staring after Tad were troubled and distant. "Was someone trying to pick you up? I knew I shouldn't have left you alone."

I pulled away from Micah's embrace and turned to face him. "That was Razi's boyfriend," I said, matching his faux-cheerful tone as his eyes flew wide open in surprise and his mouth turned down sharply with dismay. "You remember Razi, don't you? You used to work together, after all."

"We need to talk."

"You think?"

"Killian, it's not what it seems."

"Oh, my mistake. Then, you weren't lying to me about having been a hooker?"

He looked as if I'd slapped him for a few seconds, then glanced around nervously. So far no one was paying us too much attention, although a few heads were beginning to turn as my voice climbed in volume. He turned his attention back to me. "I wasn't a hooker and I never once lied to you. We're not having this conversation here. Let's go."

He started toward the door but I didn't budge.

"So, what? You're not even going to hear what I have to say? You're just going to accept the word of a perfect stranger in a club?"

He had a point. I reluctantly let him draw me out of the room. A stunned guy fighting back tears as he was dragged through the hallways must not have been too unusual for Michelangelo, since we hardly garnered any attention during our exit.

As soon as we were in the relative quiet of the parking lot, Micah let go of my hand and turned to face me. "What exactly did that kid say to you?"

"He knew your name. He said you used to work with that guy Razi as an escort."

Micah's face fell. He took a deep breath and looked up at the sky.

My stomach dropped again. "He's telling the truth, isn't he?"

"I...I always said there was stuff in my past I wasn't ready to talk to you about. You knew that." He sighed. "Well, now it's not a secret anymore. Can you understand why I wasn't exactly eager to share that little piece of information out on our first date?"

"Our first date, maybe, but we've been seeing each other for months. When were you going to share it with me? Never?"

"I was going to tell you this weekend."

"Oh, please. You expect me to believe that?"

"I was. Ask Steve and Adam."

"Steve? Adam? What do they have to do with this? They know and I don't?"

"It's what we were talking about the other night, when you went to that thing at school. They thought

you'd be able to handle it if I told you about my past. I was planning on telling you while we were here."

"Adam and Steve found out before I did?"

"Will you stop twisting my words? I needed advice about this from someone who knows you." He looked around again. "Can we not discuss it here? I'd rather continue in private. I'm sorry. I'll explain everything, I promise."

"Just get the car."

He reluctantly backed away a few steps before turning and jogging off.

"Men," a husky, smoke-and-acid-filled voice said from behind me.

I turned to find a tall, rail-thin black man leaning against the wall, a long cigarette between his fingers. He took a drag from the cigarette and released the smoke with his words. "What did he do, baby? Did you catch him with another guy?"

I shook my head in confusion.

"He'll explain all right. He'll have an answer for everything. I know his type. They think a handsome face can get them out of anything. Don't you fall for it."

"I..."

"A pretty boy like you could have any guy in this place. You remember that. Oh, and also remember that all men are dogs."

"I don't—"

A car pulled up behind me, and Micah called out, "Killian?" saving me from trying to think of a suitable reply.

I turned almost gratefully to climb in.

"Remember!" the guy shouted after me. "Dogs!"

"What was that about?" Micah asked as I slammed the door.

I turned my head and stared out the window. I was holding it together—for now. A meltdown wouldn't help anything, and I knew it. But there was a lot to process, and I needed time to sort through it all before we got back to the hotel.

After making a couple more unsuccessful attempts to start a conversation, Micah lapsed into a tension-filled, uneasy silence that lasted until we were alone in our room.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked as soon as the door closed behind him.

"Oh, so now you want to talk."

"Killian, you're angry, and I can understand that."

"You're damn right, I'm angry."

"What are you mad about exactly? Is this about my past, because I wasn't ready to tell you, or because of the way you found out?"

As angry as I was, I had to admit that was a good question. Would I have been this upset if he'd told me himself? The answer was obviously no. I was pissed off because I'd heard it from some club kid. If he'd really discussed it with Adam and Steve — and that would be easy enough to verify — then maybe he really had intended to tell me over the weekend.

With rational thought came a sudden deflation. I felt the anger drain out of me as if someone had pulled a plug. I wasn't ready to stop being mad, though, damn it. The self-righteous indignation served as a sort of shield against the other things I was feeling.

With that gone, I was left with a terrible sense of vulnerability. The man to whom I had given my body that very morning used to do the same thing for money. I was extremely uncomfortable with the idea, to say the least.

My thoughts must have been written clearly on my face.

"I think I need to explain," he said, sitting heavily on the edge of the bed.

He patted a spot next to him, but I took the one chair in the room instead. I wasn't ready to be that close to him yet. "What's to explain? You used to sell yourself for sex."

Micah rubbed his face wearily. "It's not like that, Kill. You don't understand."

"You were a hustler, right? How hard is that to understand?"

"I wasn't a hustler. Or a hooker. It's not like I was standing on a street corner picking up tricks."

I shrugged. "Does the terminology really matter?"

"Yes. Yes, it does. There's a big difference, to me at least."

"Well, for God's sake, please educate me."

"I was an escort."

"I don't—"

"Hustlers work on the street. They're usually runaways, often just kids who get picked up by random johns and just barely earn enough to survive...or all to often support their drug habits."

"So...what? You only fucked rich guys for money? I'm still not seeing a big difference."

"It wasn't like that..."

"Then what was it like, Micah? You believe just because you, what, got a phone call instead of waiting on a street corner it somehow makes what you were doing better?"

He took a deep breath. "I think I'd better explain everything."

"I don't really want to hear any more, thanks."

"Please hear me out, okay? Please?"

I started to refuse again, but the guy's voice from the club echoed in my head: "He'll have an answer for everything." What could it hurt to hear him out? Things couldn't get much worse, and — who knew — maybe Micah's explanation would help me make sense of it all. Unlikely, sure. About as likely as me sprouting wings. But at that moment, I figured I had nothing left to lose.

"Go ahead," I said.

Micah sighed, staring down at his hands. Now that I'd agreed, he didn't seem to know where to begin. After a few deep breaths, he finally spoke — haltingly.

"I told you my parents were supportive when I came out. I never had problems there, but we didn't have much money, especially after the legal stuff with the guy who abused me...and all the therapy that came after. We got a settlement, but it wasn't much, and it didn't last. They used almost everything to pay for my first year of college. I had a few scholarships — academic ones — but they barely covered anything.

"I got a job at a pizza place, but it still wasn't enough. The hours clashed with my classes, my grades started slipping, and I lost my scholarships. I was too proud to ask for help. I thought I'd have to drop out."

He rubbed his face, and I knew we were heading into the harder part.

“Then this guy I knew from school — he suddenly had money. I mean real money. He used to be in the same boat as me, scraping by, so I figured he was dealing. One night, I’d had a few drinks and asked him about it. He said he had an offer I couldn’t refuse. Turned out, he’d started an OnlyFans. Said it was easy money.”

Michah shrugged. “So I gave it a shot. Figured I wasn’t bad looking, so why not? Started with solo stuff, but then people started offering money for collabs. That’s actually how I met Paul — the guy I ended up dating...”

His voice faltered, and for a brief second, something flickered in his eyes — something raw. That wasn’t an old wound. It was fresh.

But he pushed on. “We got popular. As our following grew, people started offering us money to have sex with them — together or separately. We turned them down at first, but it was tempting. That’s when we were recruited.”

“Recruited?” I asked.

“By a high-end escort agency. One of our subscribers messaged us with a proposal. He said it was a classy operation — good pay, flexible hours, and you didn’t have to sleep with clients if you didn’t want to...though the money was a lot better if you did. He promised they’d work around my class schedule. I could earn in a week what I made on OnlyFans in six months.”

He looked up, checking my reaction. Inside, my stomach was a tangled knot, but I must've kept my expression neutral, because he went on.

"My view of sex back then wasn't what it is now. You know about what happened with my neighbor. Even after years of therapy, I hadn't worked through it all. I told you about that on our first date. So... what the guy was offering seemed like the perfect solution. So we said yes.

"The agency would call with a job. If it fit my schedule, I'd take it. I went to museums, theater openings, dinners, yacht parties, even flew overseas a few times — places I never imagined I'd see. And yes, I slept with some of them...most of them. But I never did anything I wasn't comfortable with. The money was unreal. It paid for school and gave me financial freedom I never thought I'd have.

"I quit after graduation and took the job in Salisbury. That's when Paul and I broke up."

That flicker of pain crossed his face again. The same one from earlier. Paul clearly still had a hold on him.

"What is it?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You keep flinching when you talk about him. Don't keep more secrets. You loved him, didn't you?"

He hesitated, but then: "Yeah. I did."

"What happened?"

Micah ran both hands through his hair. "Things started breaking down during my last semester. I was getting serious about life after school. I wanted to move

forward — with Paul. But he wasn't ready. He wanted to stay in the business. I didn't."

He took a breath. "I went back to counseling. This therapist...she was good. The best I'd had. Or maybe I was just ready to hear what she had to say. She helped me realize how much I was still using sex — first looking for love, then for money. And that I needed to stop. That I needed a fresh start."

He looked over at me. "When I graduated, I had job offers. One here in D.C., the other with the paper on the Shore. Paul begged me to stay. But I needed out — out of the city, out of that life. We fought. We cried. And in the end, I moved. I asked him to come with me. He said no."

"So...he's the guy you told me about before?"

He nodded.

I was quiet, trying to process all of it. One question still hung in the air. "Do you still love him?"

Micah sank his face into his hands. "Of course," he said softly.

I swallowed. "Do you want to go back to him?"

His head snapped up. "What? No. Why would you even think—?"

"Because it hurts you to talk about him. I see it in your face."

"I let go of Paul a long time ago," he said firmly. "I'll always care about him — he was my first love. But I wouldn't have said I love you if I didn't mean it. I wouldn't have started this relationship if I couldn't give you everything. It's like you and Asher."

"Then why does it still hurt so much?"

Micah went quiet. For a moment, I thought he might cry. But he pulled himself together, just barely.

"The guy at the club," he said finally. "Not the kid talking to you — the other one."

"Razi?"

A flicker of disgust crossed his face. "Yeah, Razi. He used to work for the agency too. Left to go solo, like most guys do eventually. He and Paul were friends, though I never understood why. Paul insisted Razi had some deeper side...something worth saving.

"Razi thought I was back in D.C. because of Paul. He thought I already knew."

"Knew what?"

Micah swallowed hard.

"Paul was killed a few days ago."

"Oh!" I felt a rush of relief at that revelation, followed almost immediately by shame. "I...I'm sorry."

I knew I was blushing hotly even though there was no way Micah could have read my thoughts and known how callous they were.

"I don't expect you to feel bad," Micah said, making me feel worse. "It's not like you even knew him."

"Still, he meant something to you."

"But not to you. Look, I imagine you have a lot to sort out. I'm going to take a walk and leave you to your thoughts."

I started to protest that it wasn't necessary, but clamped my mouth shut when I realized how much I really did want to be alone for a while. Instead, I simply nodded, and he let himself out.

I threw myself onto the bed, giving in to a few minutes of unfiltered self-pity. In just one night, my fairytale romance had curdled into something more like a twisted Brothers Grimm story — and it felt grim indeed. My Prince Charming wasn't at all the man I thought he was.

Then, inevitably, the dragon of rational thought reared its ugly head. The truth was, nothing had *actually* changed. Micah was still the same man I'd been dating for months — the same one I'd trusted with my virginity just that morning. He hadn't changed. The only difference now was that I knew more about him.

*Still*, hissed that bitter little voice inside me, *he hid his past from you. He might not have lied, but he definitely didn't tell the whole truth.*

*In fairness*, countered the more reasonable part of me, *he did say there were things about his past he hadn't told you yet — and that he planned to tell you this weekend.*

The fact remained: no matter how justified Micah felt in the choices he'd made, the truth about his past made me deeply uncomfortable. Maybe that was the small-town boy in me talking. Sure, Maryland was a blue state, but the Shore was still rural and deeply conservative. Was my reaction something I could get past?

I didn't know.

But one thing I did know was that I still cared about Micah. That answer came easily — and with it, the ache in my chest intensified.

Emotionally and physically drained, I finally let go. My rational mind surrendered, and the tears came in

waves — hot, bitter, self-indulgent. By the time I cried myself out, exhaustion pulled me down into the uneasy beginnings of sleep.

I awoke with a start when Micah let himself into the room. I glanced at the time and saw it was two o'clock in the morning.

"Where've you been?" I struggled to sit up, my mind still fuzzy from being awakened so abruptly.

"In an all-night coffee bar down the street. You weren't the only one who needed to think. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"S'okay."

He started undressing, and despite myself my heart began to beat just a little faster. He pulled back the blankets on his side of the bed and slid under the covers before turning his back to me.

I stared at his back for a while, then finally scooted over and draped my arm over him. His body stiffened for a moment, then he squeezed my arm and relaxed. Neither of us spoke, and, eventually, I drifted off into a restless sleep.

I woke up to a morning dreary enough to match my mood. The sky was leaden and heavy with the promise of a downpour before the day was out. Micah wasn't there, but a note he'd left on the desk informed me he'd gone for breakfast and would bring me something back.

I was just getting out of the shower when Micah returned carrying a small paper sack. "I got you a bagel with cream cheese. I hope that's okay."

"It's fine. Thank you." I turned away to get dressed.

I sensed him move up behind me and then felt his hands on my waist. I tensed up under his touch, and his hands fell away.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Not...really." I kept my back to him as I pulled on my clothes.

"Are we okay?"

"I don't know. Just give me some space, okay?"

"What's going on? Are we breaking up?"

"No!" I snapped. Then sighed. "I mean...I just need a little time to process."

"Process what? Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"And I love you. There. We just processed."

"It's not that simple, and you know it." I turned to face him. "If it was as easy as just saying those three words, I'd still be with Asher, and you'd still be with Paul."

Hurt flashed in his eyes at the mention of Paul's name. At least I thought that was the source of the pain until he spoke. "It always comes back to Asher, doesn't it?"

"What? Wait. That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean, then?"

"Like you said just last night that, while you would always love Paul, you've moved on. That's how it is for me when it comes to Asher. I loved him, but that wasn't enough to make it work. Same thing with you and Paul. If it wasn't enough for me and Asher, and it wasn't enough for you and Paul, how do we know it's enough for us now?"

He sighed and knuckled his eyes. "Just tell me what to do to make this right."

"I don't know. I don't think there's anything anyone can do. You can't just wave a magic wand and fix everything. I mean, nothing is really broken. It's just a lot to take in, you know? I'm trying."

"What is the problem exactly? That I didn't tell you? I'm sorry, Killian, but at least everything's out in the open now. There are no more secrets. We can rebuild the trust."

"That's not even it. Not really. I'm still a little hurt at the way I found out, but I know that wasn't really your fault. It was just totally shitty timing."

"Okay, but if that's not the problem, what is?"

"I'm just having a lot of trouble with the whole idea of you being an escort."

He sat down heavily on the bed. "Oh."

"I still just..."

"It's a part of my past. I can't change what happened, and I wouldn't if I could. I'm not ashamed of what I did, you know. It put me through college, and it's a big part of who I am today. I wouldn't be the same person if I hadn't gone through all that. I was good enough for you to fall in love with me. What's changed except you know more about me now?"

"In my head, I know you're right. My heart just needs to catch up. I think we should just go home. I need a few days to work through all this on my own."

"Oh, great. You're asking for the infamous break. Everybody knows that's the death knell for a relationship."

"Micah, I'm not breaking up with you. I'm not even asking for a break. I just need a few days. Can you give me that, please? This is a lot for me to take in. I mean, I'm just a dumb kid from the boonies."

"Don't sell yourself short, Killian. And don't sell us short either."

We finished packing in silence, and after a cursory look around the room to make sure we weren't leaving anything, we left. I grabbed the bagel on the way out. I just might need the sustenance for the long ride home.



## Chapter 8

The drive home felt every bit as long as I'd feared it would. Micah and I didn't arrive until late morning, and we barely spoke the entire time. When Micah dropped me off, I just mumbled, "I'll call you soon."

I went inside, dropped my bag in my room and went in search of someone.

"Where's Adam and Steve?" I asked after looking around and only finding Kane at home.

He paused his video game. "At the B&B."

"Both of them?"

"Yeah, something happened last night."

I could tell he wanted me to ask what happened, but I was in no mood to deal with anyone else's problems. I was also in no mood to sit around the house doing nothing, so I drove to the office only to find it empty. Since it was Sunday that wasn't such a surprise.

I typed up my report, relying heavily on my notes because my mind wasn't exactly at peak performance. Afterward, I was left with nothing to do except fret. I dropped the report on Novak's desk and went home.

Neither Adam nor Steve had returned yet, so I shut myself in our bedroom. Kane could tell I was in a bad mood and gave me a wide berth — for once without asking a bunch of nosy questions. I spent the rest of the night feeling sorry for myself and trying to figure out what to do about Micah.

The next day, I forced myself to go to class, although later I couldn't recall a single thing we'd discussed.

After school, I stopped by the office. As far as I could tell, Novak hadn't been in yet. My report still sat where I'd left it the night before. I watched videos online until it was almost time for Jake to get out of school for the day. I wasn't sure following him would do any good, but it sure beat sitting around the office doing nothing.

Once at the high school, I parked in almost the exact same spot I'd chosen the time before. As I sat and waited for the final bell to ring, my mind began to wander. Of course, the first place it went was directly to Micah.

I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that Micah had been an escort. He'd told me about his troubled childhood, about the much older neighbor who had seduced him and kept him quiet with mental abuse. He'd explained how it had affected his self-esteem and his view of sex, and as a result, how he'd slept his way through practically the entire male population of his school. He'd also assured me his views of sex had changed as he'd gotten older, and he never wanted his relationships to be based solely on sex again.

None of that information had prepared me for the big news, however. And despite his assurances otherwise, I still couldn't help wondering if Micah really would have told me if Tad hadn't spilled the beans first.

The dismissal bell rang, registering vaguely at the back of my mind.

I was much more consumed with the question of how knowing about Micah's past would affect me. Being an escort had shaped his character. As he'd said, he wouldn't be the same person I knew if that hadn't happened. I'd fallen in love with him, so obviously I

liked who he was. Still, the idea of him having sex with someone for money unsettled me. I couldn't deny that, even though some part of me knew I was being puritanical.

I was so caught up in my thoughts I completely missed Jake leaving the school. In fact, I didn't notice anything until his Jeep drove past. I cursed as I quickly started my car and pulled into the line of vehicles waiting their turn to get out of the lot.

I was furious with myself for being so careless. I should have been paying more attention instead of getting lost in my own head. Novak always warned me never to allow my personal life to interfere with my investigation, yet that was exactly what I had done.

My frustration grew as the kid in front of me took forever to merge into traffic. I couldn't figure out if he was busy texting or just being overly cautious, but either way I almost popped a blood vessel waiting for him to go.

I finally managed to get out of the parking lot, and the chase was on. Jake had a considerable lead, but I quickly made up for the lost time — while simultaneously venting my frustration — by driving like a maniac until he was once more in sight. It was just plain luck that he hadn't turned off the main road. If he had, I'd have lost him for sure.

I fell a few cars back from him as Novak's training took over, leaving my mind free to go back to worrying. Why did the fact that Micah had been an escort in college bother me so much? Was it just because I'd grown up sheltered? I had to admit, I could be a little prudish — maybe more than I liked to think.

Everyone has a past, and most people's pasts include a variety of sexual partners. Did it really matter if some of Micah's had paid him? If I truly loved him, his past shouldn't matter — or at least, that's what people always say. So if it *did* matter to me...did that mean I didn't love him after all?

How could I even be sure if what I felt was truly love? I knew I enjoyed being with him — that part was easy. I missed him when we weren't together. I thought about him constantly. And I was undeniably, overwhelmingly attracted to him. But was that enough? Was that what love was? Or just infatuation, lust, comfort?

What even is love, really? People talk about it like it's this self-evident truth — you'll "just know," they say. But I didn't just know. I was confused. How do you define love when you're in the middle of it? How do you tell the difference between love and wanting to be loved? Between needing someone and truly knowing them — and choosing them anyway?

I'd loved Asher in my own way, and probably always would. But even that love was hard to define. What I felt for Micah was different. It had a different texture, a different rhythm. Did that mean I loved Micah less? Or was love simply a different experience each time, shaped by the people involved, the timing, the baggage we brought with us?

If I truly loved Micah, shouldn't that mean accepting him completely — past, present, flaws and all? Then why was I struggling so much with this one part of him? It wasn't like he'd committed some unforgivable crime. He hadn't hurt anyone. He hadn't betrayed me.

He'd done what he needed to do to survive. And while the morality of sex work could be debated, that debate mostly depended on who was holding the measuring stick. In many countries — even in parts of the U.S. — it was legal, regulated, even normalized. More importantly, he wasn't doing it anymore. That chapter was closed.

And honestly? I wasn't sure I could handle it if it weren't. I could admit that. I was too insecure for that kind of open-ended comparison.

Maybe that was the heart of it. Insecurity. Was that what this was really about?

Had Micah been comparing me, even subconsciously, to all those other people he'd been with — people who probably knew what they were doing in bed, people who were confident and worldly and practiced? I could hardly compete with that. I barely knew what I was doing, let alone how to be someone's fantasy.

Why *was* he even with me?

I was just some awkward, inexperienced kid from a nowhere town, still figuring myself out. Meanwhile, he was this brilliant, beautiful, self-assured man who'd lived more lives in a few short years than I had even imagined. What if one day he realized I wasn't enough? What if he woke up and saw how much better he could do?

What was keeping him from leaving?

I was so caught up in that train of thought I didn't even notice when Jake turned off. I just suddenly realized he was no longer in front of me. I had no clue when I'd passed him or where. I let loose with a string of

curses as I pounded the steering wheel in anger. Jake was definitely gone, and I had no idea where.

I fumed for several minutes before I could even begin to calm down. I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I was having a very rough day. Clearly, I wasn't focused enough to do any surveillance. Maybe I wasn't focused enough to do anything. I thought about just driving home and locking myself in my room again.

I pulled into a gas station to turn around when a sudden thought occurred to me. I might not know where Jake was going, but I was pretty sure where he wasn't going. We had been driving in the opposite direction of his house when I lost him. That made it the perfect time to search his room, assuming I could manage to stay focused on the job at hand and not allow my thoughts to distract me again.

When I arrived at Judy and Jake's house, I was pleased to see that my hunch had paid off. Jake's car was nowhere in sight. Better yet, Judy's van was parked in the driveway, so that meant she was home.

As I got out of my car, Judy opened the front door.

“Hi, Killian. I thought I heard someone pull in. Everything okay?”

“Hey, Judy. I was hoping I could take a look around Jake's room while he's out.”

She hesitated, the flicker of conflict clear on her face, then stepped aside and nodded.

“I suppose that's fine. Technically, we have an agreement. I don't go into his room when he's not home without his permission. But...I guess *you're* the one going in, not me.”

She tried for a smile, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"I hate going behind his back, but I can't just keep standing by and doing nothing. Something's wrong, I know it is. I just don't know *what*, and it's killing me."

The pain in her voice stopped me cold. Without thinking, I stepped forward and pulled her into a quick hug.

"I get it," I said. "I feel awful doing this, but I'll do everything I can to figure out what's going on. I promise."

She gave a small, grateful nod as we pulled apart.

"I know you will. I have complete faith in you. And I'm sorry for putting you in this position."

"You're just doing what you have to do."

She followed me to the door of Jake's room, but didn't follow me in when I opened the door and stepped inside. She gave me one last sad smile, then pulled the door closed.

I looked around with a twinge of guilt, both for feeling like I was half-assing this investigation for Judy and because of what I was about to do. While it was one thing to snoop through a complete stranger's personal belongings, it was quite another to be doing it to a friend. I felt as if I was violating a trust between us.

Jake's room looked like a typical teenage boy's room. A few posters were plastered on the walls, a Star Wars movie poster and a couple of others for various bands. Clothes were scattered wherever they'd landed when Jake had removed them. A dirty plate sat on the floor and, nearby, a toppled-over glass with a dried skim of milk inside. A musty, male scent pervaded the space, reminding me of an empty locker room.

The room itself was on the small side, with most of it taken up by a full bed, a dresser, a desk, a bookcase, and an entertainment center that held a very large, state-of-the-art TV and all the latest game systems.

I whistled softly at the electronics. Judy was right. That stuff had definitely cost a bundle. Where had Jake gotten the money to buy it all?

I realized that was exactly what Judy hired me to find out.

Where to start? I surveyed the room and chose the desk. I began opening drawers and sifting through the contents, trying to leave as little sign that I'd been there as possible. I hadn't done many room searches, but I'd assisted Novak a few times.

I couldn't help smiling as I remembered my first search the previous summer. I'd found a stash of illegally filmed videos showing some local officials in compromising positions at a sleazy motel. The manager had been taping them with hidden cameras for his own pleasure. The fact that it also netted him a lucrative income blackmailing the folks on the tapes was just icing on the cake. We'd called in the cops, and he was promptly arrested. Last I'd heard, he was in jail — where he belonged.

My search of Jake's desk, however, turned up nothing more than a few bad test grades and a single marijuana roach all the way at the back of the bottom left-hand drawer. God only knew how long it had been there, and it was hardly the kind of problem I suspected Judy was worried about. Hell, for all I knew, it was Judy's. She struck me as the type to indulge in a bit of the herb on occasion.

With the desk out of the way, I moved on to the dresser, which contained nothing except clothes. I'd never realized Jake was such a label whore. Almost everything bore the name of an expensive brand, and it all looked new, some items with the tags still attached. I almost fell over when I saw the prices. How could he afford to shop at these places? I was beginning to understand why Judy was so worried. The deeper I dug the more questions I had.

In the closet, I discovered more new clothes and a few boxes of outgrown toys and games. Dust bunnies large enough to pose a threat to small pets had set up camp under the bed, but they were unchallenged for the space. When I peeked beneath the mattress I found nothing. Next, I carefully searched the bookcase, checking behind the books and feeling along under the shelves. The only thing I learned was Jake favored science fiction and seldom dusted his room. The dust was so thick it made me sneeze.

Unless I had missed something, which was entirely possible, nothing was left but the entertainment center. It had only a few places where something could be hidden, mainly a small cabinet with doors at the bottom and a carved wooden box on one of the shelves.

When I opened the cabinet doors, I was greeted by a minor avalanche of sex toys. And by minor, I mean full-on, adult-themed Mount Vesuvius. Dildos of varying shapes and sizes launched themselves at me, a couple of Fleshlights and an assortment of various other masturbation aids rolled out after them, trailing behind a string of silicone beads, and a small army of half-empty lube bottles.

I yelped — not quite a scream, but definitely not manly — and instinctively tried to catch what I could. Mistake. Big mistake.

Everything was sticky.

I fought the overwhelming urge to gag. I might have blacked out for a second. There are things your brain can't unsee...or untouch.

I stood there, frozen, hands held out like I'd just handled radioactive jellyfish. I was utterly, viscerally grossed out.

And to top it all off? I could tell — even in my horror — that this was the good stuff. Top-shelf, limited edition toys. I wasn't an expert, but I'd been on the internet. I'd seen some things. And I knew this gear didn't come from the bargain bin at Spencer's. This was an investment.

In what, I didn't want to know.

After making sure I hadn't missed anything in the cabinet, I shoved everything back in and slammed the doors closed. Considering the way it all had just fallen out, I wasn't too worried that he'd notice if anything was in the wrong place.

That left only the carved wooden box. It was the size of a shoe box and looked high quality, possibly antique — ornate, slightly worn. It stood out in the room, and I wondered where it could have come from. It didn't seem like Jake's taste. Maybe a family heirloom he couldn't bear to part with?

I lifted the lid, half-expecting something dramatic, maybe even damning.

Instead, I found...condoms with a travel-sized bottle of lube nestled beside them. Practical, if not

exactly scandalous. A pair of fingernail clippers. Okay. A lighter and a pack of rolling papers — not surprising, considering the faint smell that sometimes clung to Jake’s hoodie. A couple of movie ticket stubs, curling at the edges, and finally, a cheap silver ring, the kind you buy on a whim from a boardwalk vendor, maybe with your last ten bucks and a little buzz of summer romance.

I stared at the collection, then sighed. It was about as exciting and incriminating as a bowl of cereal. No hidden clues. No secret diaries. Just the standard-issue detritus of a teenage boy’s private life.

I started to put the box back on the shelf but paused. It felt surprisingly heavy for the handful of random items I’d found inside. A prickle of suspicion crept up my spine. I dumped everything out and gave the now-empty box a shake. Something shifted with a soft shuffle, like paper sliding against wood.

A closer look confirmed my hunch — the outside of the box was a lot deeper than the inside. I turned it over and examined the base, spotting a faint seam around the bottom panel. It was rigged to slide out.

Using my thumbs, I nudged the panel until it shifted just enough for me to wedge in my fingers and pry it open. What I found inside nearly made me drop the whole thing.

A thick wad of cash — all hundred-dollar bills — stuffed into the hidden compartment. My heart skipped a beat. Where the hell had Jake gotten that kind of money?

But that wasn’t all. Nestled alongside the cash was what I first assumed was another movie ticket. On closer inspection, I realized it was for the Equality Ball — a black-tie event I’d read about in the paper, known

for drawing politicians, celebrities, and high-profile donors. Tickets started at \$300 a pop, and it was still weeks away.

Beneath the ticket was a photo printed on plain white paper — clearly from a home printer. It showed a distinguished man in a tailored suit shaking hands with an older gentleman. Half of the older man's face was cropped out, but I recognized him immediately: a state senator. The other man, though...I'd never seen him before, but something about the composition made it clear he was the focus. Who was he? And why was Jake hiding a picture of him?

I snapped photos of the money, the ticket, and the photo with my phone, then carefully slid the hidden panel back into place. I returned the original items to the top of the box and set it back on the shelf, aligning it perfectly with the faint dust outline.

By the time I stepped away, everything looked untouched. But my mind was anything but calm.

I moved to the doorway and paused to scan the room as critically as possible, finally deciding that if there were any more secret hiding places, they would have to stay hidden. So far, I'd managed not to leave any signs I'd been there, and I didn't want Jake to suspect his room had been searched.

While I couldn't imagine what it could be, some sort of innocent explanation could exist for everything. If so, I didn't want to alienate my friend or cause problems between him and Judy for no reason.

I found Judy sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of hot tea steaming in her hand. She pushed another mug in my direction.

"Sugar?" she asked.

I took the chair next to her. The tea was so strong I had to add several spoonfuls of sugar before I could drink it. We sat and sipped in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"Did you find anything?" she asked finally.

"I found a joint in one of the desk drawers." I decided to start small and work my way up to the big stuff. She waved that aside. As I'd suspected, it wasn't high on her list of concerns. "I also saw that he'd bought an awful lot of rather expensive clothing over the last few months."

"In the last month, actually."

"Do you have any idea where he got the money?"

"No. None. He doesn't have a job, at least not that I'm aware of. It would be great if that's all this turns out to be."

"Did you ask him where the money came from?"

"Yes. He told me he was 18 and it was none of my business and stormed off."

I frowned. "Same thing with the electronic equipment?"

"You mean the TV and all? Yes. He just showed up with it one day. He wouldn't say where that came from either, only that it was a gift."

"From who?"

"Like I said, he wouldn't tell me anything. That's why I came to you."

I took a deep breath. "Do you know anything about the carved wooden box?"

She gave me a confused look. "I've seen it. Where it came from I have no idea. It's one more thing

that just showed up one day. It was the least of my worries, so I didn't pay much attention to it. Why?"

"It has a false bottom. He had some things hidden in the secret compartment."

Her eyes narrowed. "What kinds of things?"

"A wad of money that probably equals about six months of my salary, if not more, a ticket to the Equality Ball, and a photo of a man I don't recognize."

Judy frowned. Obviously, it wasn't what she'd been expecting. "What in God's name is he doing with a ticket to the Equality Ball? Those things are harder to come by than plutonium."

I shrugged. "No clue."

"Who was the man in the picture?"

"Don't know that either, but he was with a state senator."

"Well, what did he look like?"

"Distinguished." I realized that wasn't the most vivid description. I pulled out my phone and brought up the photo, zooming in on the man's face, then slid it across the table toward her. "Here, take a look. Recognize him?"

She stared at it for a long moment, then shook her head. "Never seen him before in my life. But..."

"But what?"

"As soon as I saw him, I got a bad feeling."

I studied her face. Her eyes had gone distant, troubled. "What kind of bad feeling?"

She hesitated, then shook her head slowly. "I don't know exactly. Just... death."

I blinked. "You think he's dead?"

“Possibly. But probably not. Unlike your gifts, mine are more about what’s coming than what’s already happened.”

“So what are you saying? That he’s going to die?”

“Maybe. Or someone close to him. I can’t say for sure. And I could be wrong.”

“Possibly? Maybe? You aren’t sure?” My voice was sharper than I intended. “What good are these gifts if they aren’t actually helpful?”

Judy’s shoulders slumped, and she rubbed her forehead like she was trying to ease out the pressure behind her eyes. “I’m doing my best,” she said quietly.

I sighed. “I’m sorry. I was out of line.”

She nodded. “I get it. This is all so vague. It’s just...that’s not how gifts work. They don’t hand you neat answers tied up with a bow. They’re more like...flashes of insight. Or like tools. They don’t do the job for you. You have to figure out how to use them.”

She glanced back at the photo, still open on my phone. “All I can say is that when I looked at that man, I felt death. I don’t know what it means yet. But tuck it away. It might make more sense later.”

I nodded and slipped my phone back into my pocket. Judy sighed and dropped her head in her hands. I hated to see her look so dispirited.

"It could all be something completely innocent."

She looked up, and a single raised eyebrow spoke eloquently. "I hope you're right. But where is all that money coming from? How can he afford those clothes? Who gave him those expensive electronics, assuming they were even a gift? Even if he had a job, what *legal*

job could an 18-year-old high school student have that would be making that much money?" She shook her head, frustration edging into her voice. "And now I have even more questions. How did he get a ticket for the Ball, and why would he even want one? And who the hell is that man in the picture?"

I couldn't stand to see her so upset. "I don't know but I'm going to find out."

She gave me a faint, tired smile. "That's why I came to you. Finish your tea."

Typical Judy, I thought, as I obediently took a sip. But as I drained the cup, I sputtered and plucked something off my tongue.

Judy, completely unfazed, reached over and took my mug. She swirled the dregs a few times with practiced ease, then poured the remaining liquid into the sink and peered into the bottom of the cup like it was a crystal ball.

"Wait a minute," I said, narrowing my eyes. "You actually read tea leaves?"

She gave a small shrug and a bemused smile. "Not often. But I picked it up from a woman who lived in my neighborhood back in California. She claimed she was of Romani descent."

I raised an eyebrow. "Did she now?"

"She also read tarot and palms," Judy continued, unbothered by my skepticism. "Fascinating woman. Lovely, but wild as hell. I'm not nearly as good as she was, but she said I had a knack. My real gifts lie elsewhere, though."

I watched her swirl the cup again. “Okay, Madame Judy, what exactly are you looking for in there?”

“Shapes. Patterns. Their positions. The way they relate to each other.”

“And what do mine say?”

She studied the leaves intently, her brow knitting slowly as the seconds ticked by. Finally, she said, “A vulture. A dagger. And flags.”

“That’s not ominous at all. What’s it supposed to mean?”

Her mouth tightened as she stared at the cup a beat longer before answering.

“Battles. The flags usually represent war — not literal, more symbolic. The dagger’s placement indicates danger ahead, possibly to you, possibly to someone close. And the vulture...” She hesitated. “The vulture is never a good sign. It can mean a powerful enemy. Evil. Sometimes...death.”

I let out a low gasp. “Death?”

Judy stood abruptly and rinsed the mug out under the tap, as if scrubbing away the unsettling imagery might cancel it out. When she turned back around, her eyes were even more troubled.

Trying to inject some levity, I offered a shaky smile. “All that from a few soggy leaves? Maybe next time I’ll just go with coffee.”

“Divination tools are just a focus,” she said quietly. “They help channel intuition. The interpretation — that’s where the gifts come in. Killian, I’m genuinely worried about you.”

“Because some damp leaves are throwing shade my way?” I scoffed, trying to play it off — but my voice came out a little too high-pitched, even to my own ears.

The truth was, I didn’t like it. Not the vague predictions, not the sense of dread creeping up my spine. And I definitely didn’t like words like battle, danger, and death being tossed around like party favors.

“It’s not just this reading,” she said, voice low. “I’ve been having dreams...bad ones. Foreboding feelings about Jake. And lately, those feelings are extending to you.”

“So what, now I’m cursed by association?”

“I’m serious,” she said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have pulled you into this.”

“It’s a little late for second thoughts,” I said, softening my tone. “I care about Jake too, you know. If he’s in trouble, I want to help.”

“I know you do,” she said, then hesitated.

“But...?” I prompted.

“These battles...” Judy said quietly. “I think one of them is learning to face your gifts.”

I let out a long sigh. “I mean, I’m open to it now — finally. I know it took me a while, but what can I do without a teacher?”

“Honestly? Not much,” she admitted. “I reached out to an old friend in California who could communicate with the dead, but only in trance states. And even then, they must initiate the contact. Their gift isn’t like yours. I haven’t given up, but with everything going on with Jake...”

“I understand,” I assured her quickly. “It’s not like I’m in a huge rush to deal with all of this anyway. I

know it's something I need to do, but it feels like going to the dentist, you know?"

She chuckled, though it carried a rueful edge.

"Unfortunately, that's a very apt comparison. Skip the dentist long enough, and your health suffers. Ignore your gifts long enough, and...well, it could be dangerous."

A chill ran down my spine. "What do you mean? How could it be dangerous?"

"Right now, your gift burns like a beacon," she said, her tone soft but serious. "You don't have any control over it. Some things are drawn to it — like moths to a flame."

"Some...things?"

"Like Amalie," Judy said. Her eyes held mine, steady and unblinking. "But not everything drawn to you will be as benign as she was. Right now, you can't stop them from finding you, and some may not want to be ignored."

I swallowed hard. "But if I learned more...if I understood my gifts...could I stop them?"

"Possibly. At the very least, you might learn to shield yourself so you're not constantly broadcasting to whatever's out there." She paused, then added in a lower voice, "And there's more."

I froze. "More?"

"Some entities won't just want your attention. Some may actively want to harm you. And right now, you're not equipped to protect yourself."

The blood drained from my face.

Judy must have seen it, because she pulled me into a sudden hug. "Oh, sweetie, I'm not trying to frighten you. I just want you safe."

I pressed my face against her shoulder for a moment, letting her words sink in, then pulled away. "I was already convinced after Amalie. But now...now I know. I'm ready. More than ever."

She nodded. "I believe you. The ball's in my court now. I'll do my best to focus on finding someone who can help you."

"Thanks," I murmured.

"Of course, sweetheart." She checked her watch and sighed. "You'd better head out before Jake comes home."

"But you never read your own leaves," I said, glancing toward her still-full mug.

Her eyes flicked that way, and something unreadable crossed her face. "I think I've done enough reading for today."

She grabbed it and dumped it in the sink, then rinsed it out without looking inside. Maybe I wasn't the only one who sometimes regretted having gifts.

## Chapter 9

I sat in my room that night, brooding about — what else?—Micah and my so-called gifts. The truth was, I didn't want to deal with either. My go-to defense strategy could be summed up as Ostrich Syndrome: bury my head in the sand and pray the problem goes away. Spoiler alert—it never does. All it really does is give the problem time to circle around and sink its teeth into your exposed ass.

I should know. I've been bitten more than once.

Where Micah was concerned, we clearly needed to talk. I just wasn't ready.

As for the gifts, Judy's warning still haunted me. I knew I needed to learn how to control them. My experiences with Amalie had made it painfully clear. But how was I supposed to do that without a teacher? It wasn't like I could just do a Google search for psychic teachers. Or maybe I could, but I had a feeling most of them would be crackpots and kooks.

And what if learning to control them just flung open the floodgates to even more psychic weirdness? What would be next? Reading tea leaves at brunch? Telling fortunes at carnivals in a headscarf and bangles? Or maybe I should skip the small stuff and aim straight for my own reality show — *Psychic Killian: Ghosts, Gossip, and Guilt Trips*.

Then again, reading soggy leaves sounded a whole lot better than seeing dead people.

Someone knocked on my door, causing me to jump.

"Come in," I called, but no one entered. "Hello?"  
Still nothing.

With a sigh, I got up to check, but the hallway was empty.

"Very funny, Kane," I said.

I shut the door and turned back to the bed, only to practically jump out of my skin.

"A bit on edge, aren't we?" Seth asked. He was lying on his side, head propped on one hand, his lips twitching with barely suppressed laughter.

"I suppose that was your idea of a joke."

He waggled his eyebrows. "Well, you said you don't like it when I just appear unannounced, so I knocked this time."

"Admit it. You love scaring me."

"Hey, it's one of the only perks of being a ghost."

"If you weren't already dead..."

"Be nice. I came to talk to you."

"And that's supposed to make me want to be nice?"

Seth rolled his eyes expressively and sat up.

"Seriously, Killian, we need to talk."

"About what? If this concerns my so-called gifts, I've already had one lecture about them today. Unless you're going to be my mentor, I don't need another."

"Oh, well, I was going to bring that up, but it's not the main reason I'm here. While we're on the subject, though, what's happening there? No luck finding a teacher?"

"Not yet. Judy says she's still looking but all this stuff with Jake has taken her attention...understandably.

She did scare me half to death—" I realized what I'd said and broke off. "Er, sorry."

He snorted. "Why be sorry? We both know I'm dead. It's not a taboo subject. How did she scare you?"

"She said one of the reasons I needed to learn how to control my gifts was that I'm essentially a beacon that could attract unwanted attention from certain entities."

Seth nodded. "She's not wrong. You're like a fuckin lighthouse."

"She also said that some entities might want to harm me, but I don't know what that means? Do you?"

He looked away and shrugged. "Beats me."

"You know more than you're saying," I accused.

He gave me a helpless look. "You know the rules."

"No, actually, I don't know the rules. You just keep talking about them without telling me what they actually are."

"I've told you..."

"Yeah, yeah. The first rule of ghost club is that you can't talk about ghost club. Why are you even here, anyway? You said my gifts weren't the main reason you came."

"They're not. This thing with Micah..."

I groaned. "I should have known. You're always meddling in my love life."

"It's not like that," he said defensively.

"Oh really? So you're not about to tell me not to make snap judgments? You're not going to recommend I talk things out with him? And you're not going to suggest I give him the benefit of the doubt?"

“Ha! You don’t know me as well as you think you do. I was *also* going to say it wouldn’t hurt to educate yourself before you made any decisions.”

I stuck my tongue out at him, then frowned.  
“Educate myself?”

“Yes. I think you need to be more sex-positive. You’re kind of...puritanical.”

“Hey!”

“Well, you are. You flinch every time the subject comes up, like it’s radioactive. Maybe you should do some research on escorts and sex work in general. Find out what it actually looks like instead of leaning on the stereotypes.”

I made a face. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because right now you’re walking around with blinders on. You keep thinking of it as dirty, or dangerous, or morally bankrupt, but at the end of the day, it’s work. People trading their time and energy for money. That’s all a job is, Killian. You think it’s more noble to shuffle papers in an office for forty years? Or to bust your back in a factory until you can’t stand straight anymore? At least escorts are honest about what they’re selling.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “That’s not the same thing.”

“Why not? You think your boss isn’t renting your life by the hour? Only difference is, your job comes with health insurance and doesn’t scare the neighbors. But it’s still your body, your mind, your hours on the clock. You give pieces of yourself away to pay the bills, same as anyone else.”

I opened my mouth, then shut it again.

He smirked. "See? You want to look down on it because it makes you uncomfortable. But that's not about them. That's about you. You want Micah to trust you, you're going to have to get over the idea that his former job made him less than. It didn't then and it doesn't now. It makes him someone who figured out how to get paid for what people are already desperate for. Some folks would call that smart."

"I'm not condemning anything," I muttered.

"Aren't you?"

"No, I'm not." A pause. "...am I?"

He gave me a look that clearly said, *Figure it out for yourself.*

"Why is everything always so hard?" I asked plaintively. He opened his mouth to answer, and I rushed on, "And please don't say I make it hard."

He grinned at me. "Then I don't have any other answers."

I grabbed a pillow from behind me and threw it at him. I was more than a little surprised when it went right through him.

"Neat trick, huh?" He gave me a self-satisfied smirk. "Oh, close your mouth. It's really not cute."

"You know," I said slowly, "I almost forget sometimes that you aren't really here."

"I'm here. You just forget that I'm not really alive."

"Why is it that you don't creep me out but Amalie did?"

He thought a minute before responding. "Well, you knew me. The fact that we were friends may make it easier. Plus, she and I aren't quite the same thing. Amalie

wasn't here by choice the way I am. She couldn't just come and go, she couldn't leave whenever she wanted to. She was trapped by her pain and anger, and you couldn't help sensing those emotions."

"What do you mean, I couldn't help it? Was it because I could see her?"

"No..." He dragged the word out.

"Is it because I could talk to her?"

"No..."

"Oh, great? Is this another gift?"

"Possibly."

"Possibly? It either is or isn't. So which is it?"

"I shouldn't have said anything," he said sheepishly.

"Well, you did, so explain what you meant."

"Have you ever heard of empathy?"

"Judy said I'm probably an empath when we were dealing with Amalie."

"Yes. It's part of what makes you such a good investigator."

"How would that help?"

"It usually makes it very easy for you to read other people, to understand their true intentions and judge their character — the way you just get an instant impression about someone."

"Or the way I can sometimes just know someone is lying to me without really knowing how?"

"Yeah. Most of the time it's probably not even something you do consciously. It's pure instinct. It's a part of who you are."

"That seems like that could actually be a useful gift."

"They're all useful, Kill. They're tools, just like anything else. Empathy can also be a handicap, though. It can sometimes cloud your judgment. You get so caught up in someone's pain or loss that they can manipulate you, maybe without even trying to."

"Like with Caleb."

My last big case had involved a kid accused of murdering his abusive father. I'd known instinctively there was something wrong about him, but I'd let his story of abuse and his pain overshadow that...and almost ended up dead in the process.

"Right. Understanding your gifts, both their strengths and their weaknesses, could help you to avoid similar situations in the future."

"Do I have other gifts?"

"I don't know."

I gave him a skeptical look.

"Really, I don't. I only know you're an empath because it's pretty obvious. It's already manifested. I've told you before, I'm not a fortune teller. I can't see the future."

"Oh." I flopped back on the bed, disappointed.

He grinned down at me.

"What?"

"At least I've got you interested now."

"Between you and Judy's vague warnings, of course I'm interested. I'm also terrified, but I guess that's nothing new."

Seth gave a little bow. "And scene. Well, I've done what I came here to do. I guess I'd better be going."

"Wait," I called, sitting up suddenly.

"What?"

"Don't just vanish. Do you have any idea how creepy that is?"

"Nope." He gave me a broad wink, and then simply wasn't there anymore.

"Jerk!" I yelled at the thin air.

The bedroom door swung open to reveal a rather startled-looking Kane. "What did I do now?"

"I wasn't..." I started to say I hadn't been yelling at him, but stopped short. That would only lead to the obvious question: *Then who were you yelling at?* Explaining that his dead brother had been the target of my outburst wasn't exactly going to make things better. I tried to think of an excuse, but my mind went blank.

"You know," Kane said with an injured expression, "you're the one who's been a jerk lately. You're always in a bad mood, and I'm really getting sick of it. You're not the only one with problems, you know."

I suddenly felt like the biggest asswipe in the universe. "You're right. I've been selfish and moody. I really am sorry."

He looked somewhat mollified but just gave a noncommittal shrug. He wasn't ready to let me off the hook that easily.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Do you really care?"

"Of course I care. You're my little brother." I patted the bed next to me, the very spot Seth had just vacated.

With a sigh of relief, he shut the door and came to sit next to me on the bed. "It just seems that everything's been going wrong lately."

"Like what?"

"Whoa." That was a lot to unpack. I figured I'd start with what seemed like the easiest piece. "Okay, back up. What happened with you and Jen?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. I thought things were good, and then out of nowhere, she just dumped me."

"Were you even that into her?"

"I mean...not really. She was cool and all, but...I wasn't planning on marrying her or anything."

"So you're not crushed because she was The One. You just bummed because your rizz took a hit?"

He turned red but smirked like he kind of enjoyed the accusation. "Nah, my rizz is fully intact, thanks."

"Then what's the big deal?"

He hesitated. "I guess...I dunno. She caught me off guard. Like, I didn't even see it coming."

"And you were probably gonna break up with her anyway, right?"

"Yeah, actually. I'd been thinking about it for a couple weeks."

I raised an eyebrow. "So what you're really upset about is that she beat you to the punch."

He gave a sheepish grin. "Okay, yeah. I guess that's it."

"So, bruised ego. Got it."

He groaned. "You make me sound so shallow."

I grinned. "I mean, if the shoe fits..."

He chuckled, the tension easing just a little from his shoulders. "Okay, fine. I'm a little shallow."

"Only a little?" I teased. "Wow. Personal growth."

We laughed, then I quickly turned serious.  
"What's this about Jake?"

The question was professional, but I worked hard to keep that out of my voice. I didn't want Kane thinking I was asking out of anything other than brotherly concern.

"Well, you know how when Jake first moved back, we hung out a little?" Kane said. "We weren't, like, besties or anything, but we did stuff. Talked. Now I barely see him. And when I do, he practically acts like we're strangers. I asked around. His friends say he's ghosting them too — either ditched them outright or avoids them like they've got the plague."

I frowned. The more I heard, the more ominous it all felt.

"Do his friends know what's going on?"

Kane shook his head. "Nobody has a clue. A couple said it happened gradually. Others said he just flipped a switch. Either way, whatever's going on, he's hiding it really well."

I sighed and figured it was time to let him in on what Judy had told me.

"Judy's worried too."

Kane's eyes widened. "She doesn't know either?" His voice was tinged with disbelief. In his mind, Judy was practically omniscient. If she was stumped, then we were officially in uncharted territory.

"She's another person Jake's shut out. He barely even comes home anymore. She's so worried she hired me to look into it."

His mouth fell open. "You're investigating Jake?"

“Yeah.” The guilt hit me again, just as strong as ever.

Kane blinked a few times, then his face shifted from shock to something more thoughtful. “Well... I guess if he’s not telling anyone what’s going on, it’s not he’s left anyone much of a choice. If someone you care about is in trouble, you don’t just sit around doing nothing.”

I stared at him, caught off guard. That was...surprisingly mature.

“I mean, it sounds like he’s into something shady, right?” Kane continued.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Got any theories?”

He leaned back, thinking. “Sex? Drugs? Rock and roll?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Hey, you asked.” He threw up his hands. “I haven’t seen anything to go on.”

“Well, I might have.” I told him about the stash in the hidden compartment—the cash, the Ball ticket, the photo.

Kane’s eyebrows shot up. “Maybe he’s dealing drugs?”

“Then what’s with the Equality Ball ticket? And who’s the guy in the picture?”

“Maybe he’s hoping to make connections at the ball. You know, network.”

I gave him a skeptical look. “With who? The governor? Oprah?”

“I don’t know how this works! Do I look like I sell drugs?”

“Define ‘look like.’”

He gave me a look. “Okay, fine. That doesn’t explain the picture either.”

“Exactly. Who’s that guy?”

“Maybe he’s Jake’s supplier.”

I shook my head. “He looked like a politician. Definitely not sketchy enough for a drug lord.”

Kane was quiet for a second. Then he said, “Maybe he’s a target.”

I blinked. “A target?”

“You know...maybe Jake’s supposed to...kill him or something.”

I burst out laughing. “You think Jake’s an assassin now?”

Kane grinned. “It sounded less dumb before I said it out loud.”

“Oh no, trust me. It was dumb the whole time.”

He chuckled. “Okay, fine. But seriously, if Jake’s not dealing drugs, and he’s not moonlighting as a hitman, where’s all that money coming from?”

I hesitated. “There’s...another possibility.”

He gave me a wary look. “I don’t like the way you said that.”

“You remember what Micah told me? About how much money he made as an escort?”

Kane’s eyes widened. “You think Jake’s...turning tricks?”

“Where did you learn that phrase? Who even says that? Actually, never mind. I don’t want to know. But it’s just a theory. We shouldn’t jump to conclusions yet. I’ve only just started looking into this.”

Kane nodded slowly, then said, “Too bad you can’t get into that Equality Ball. If Jake’s going, it’d be interesting to see what he’s up to.”

And just like that, a lightbulb flicked on over my head. “Who says I can’t get in?”

He blinked. “Aren’t the tickets, like, crazy expensive? Can you afford that?”

“No, but Novak has contacts out the wazoo.”

He winced. “That sounds painful. Think he can get you into the Ball?”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask him tomorrow. In the meantime, would you keep your ears open at school? Listen for anything — gossip, rumors, whispers in the locker room. Even if it sounds stupid, let me know. Sometimes the dumbest stuff holds a kernel of truth.”

“You got it.”

“And Kane? You know you can’t tell anyone about this, right?”

He gave me a look. “No duh, Killian. I’m not thirteen anymore.”

“Sorry. I just... I’m really proud of you, you know.”

He blinked. “Really? You’ve never said that before.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “Yeah. We’re not as close as we used to be. None of us are.”

“Is that what you meant earlier? About the family falling apart?”

“Yeah. I hardly see Steve anymore. He basically lives at the stupid B&B. Dad’s almost as bad. When they are here, they’re too busy to talk. And now you’re busy

too. School, work, Micah...it's like I'm the last one at the table and all the chairs are empty." He sighed. "I guess I do sound like a little kid, huh?"

"You don't sound like a kid," I said gently. "You sound like someone who's paying attention. And you're right. I've been just as bad."

He nodded. "I know."

"Well, that's going to change. I want us to spend more time together. And maybe talk to Adam and Steve too?"

He hesitated. "They've got enough stress right now. Business is slow, and they're barely seeing each other as it is. I'll wait until things settle down."

"What if they don't settle down?"

He gave a small, mature shrug. "Then I'll suck it up. I'm a big boy, remember? I can live without my daddy."

"Okay, but I'm here now, and I promise I'll do my best to be around more."

Kane gave me a long look, like he was trying to decide whether to believe me. Then he smiled — small, but genuine.

"Okay," he said, standing and heading for the door. "But if you turn into a workaholic again, I'm dragging you out for milkshakes."

I chuckled. "Deal. But where are you going? You just said you wanted to hang out more."

"I do, but not right now. I have a date."

"Already? You were just whining about Jen dumping you!"

He grinned and gave me a wink. "I move on quickly. Just call me the rizzler."

"I will never call you that."

He laughed as the door clicked shut behind him, and for a moment, the room was still.

I sat there in the quiet, wondering just how deep this rabbit hole with Jake was going to go — and hoping, for all our sakes, that it wasn't too far to climb back out.

My plan to ask Novak about the Equality Ball was promptly derailed the next morning. The moment I stepped through the office door, I could tell it was going to be one of those days.

Our tiny reception area — barely big enough for my desk and the two hideous orange chairs Novak liked to pretend were vintage — was filled beyond capacity. A woman I didn't recognize sat perched nervously on the edge of one chair, holding her purse in front of her like a shield.

The other chair was occupied by Mrs. Knox — yes, that Mrs. Knox, wife of the perpetually unfaithful Mr. Knox — currently mid-rant, loudly accusing Novak of overcharging her.

This was not uncommon. Clients were happy to pay when we brought back good news. Bad news? Not so much.

Also crammed into the room were our regular UPS guy, waiting patiently with his device, and a man from one of the insurance companies Novak occasionally did freelance work for. He was one of those bland, forgettable types — someone I'd seen enough times to know I should recognize, but who somehow erased himself from memory the second he walked out the door.

It was about four people too many for a space that already felt like a closet with delusions of grandeur.

I dealt with the UPS guy first, signing for the package so he could escape. Then I ushered the insurance rep into Novak's office to wait. By the time I returned, Novak had somehow managed to not only calm Mrs. Knox down but had also charmed a check out of her.

A true professional.

Once Mrs. Knox was gone — check in hand and parting glares delivered — Novak vanished into his office without a word, leaving behind only the small, birdlike woman still occupying one of the hideous orange chairs.

Now that I could get a proper look at her, I took in the details: mousy brown hair in a boxy, outdated cut that did her no favors, pale and slightly watery blue eyes, a rather beaky nose, and an outfit that was clearly expensive but managed, somehow, to look frumpy rather than fashionable. She was extremely thin, so her clothes just sort of hung off of her. Her shoulders were drawn in as though she were trying to disappear into herself.

She looked absolutely terrified. I got the impression she would have bolted long ago if not for the sheer number of people who had stood between her and the exit. Even now, with only the two of us in the room, her gaze kept flicking toward the door, as if still debating whether to make a break for it.

I approached gently, not wanting to spook her further. "Can I help you?" I asked.

She flinched at the sound of my voice, then blinked rapidly like a startled deer. “Um, I...I don’t know...”

Her eyes drifted longingly back to the door.

“Are you here to see a private investigator?”

That got a reaction. Her eyes darted to mine for a split second, but just as quickly slipped away again.

“Maybe.”

Okay, not the most decisive person I’d ever met.

“If it would make you more comfortable,” I said, softening my tone even more, “you can speak directly with Mr. Novak.”

Sometimes clients — especially the nervous, reluctant kind — preferred to speak only with the real investigator. I was used to being mistaken for just the receptionist, especially by people who didn’t expect a PI’s assistant to look like someone still in college. Or detention.

She hesitated, her knuckles whitening on her handbag. “Is he...very busy?”

She’d seen him go into his office with the insurance guy, so she knew he was occupied.

“At the moment, but if you’d like to wait, he shouldn’t be long. What’s your name? I’ll let him know you’re here once he’s free.”

That simple question seemed to rattle her even more. Her eyes widened. “I...I’d rather not. Maybe...maybe this was a mistake.”

She made a slight move to stand, panic blooming in her expression.

I offered what I hoped was a reassuring smile — though, judging by her wary expression, I might've looked more like a shark baring its teeth.

"If you'd rather not give your name, that's fine," I said calmly. "Happens all the time here."

"Really?" She sank cautiously back into the chair, though she stayed perched right on the edge, clearly still weighing her escape options.

"Really," I said, nodding. She relaxed a bit more — if only by a millimeter.

Just then, the office door flew open again, and she flinched hard, as though expecting someone to burst in waving a weapon.

I turned toward the noise, already bracing myself for whatever fresh chaos had just arrived.

It was Micah.

"Hey," I said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

He gave me a funny look that I couldn't quite read. "I came to talk to you."

"Oh..." I glanced toward the woman, who was trying desperately to pretend she wasn't there. "This isn't a good time."

He sighed. "Relax, Killian. I'm not here to talk about that."

"Then what do you want to talk about?"

"I want to hire you."

## Chapter 10

"W-what?" I must have heard him wrong. "What did you say?"

"I said," he spoke slowly, over-enunciating each word, "I want to hire you."

"To do what?"

He sent a meaningful look in the direction of the room's other occupant, who was staring at the purse in her lap as if it was the most fascinating thing she'd ever seen.

Just then, the door to the inner office swung open and the insurance company representative came out, followed closely by my boss. "We appreciate your work, Mr. Novak," the agent said. "As always, you completed the assignment ahead of schedule and to your usual standards of excellence. We'll be in touch when we find ourselves in need of your services again."

"Let's hope for your sake that isn't too soon," Novak said genially.

The plain little man let himself out while Novak cast a curious glance in the direction of Micah and the Bird Lady.

"Someone would like to speak with you privately," I said, with a slight incline of my head toward the woman.

Novak smiled. "Of course. Why don't you come on back?"

The woman smiled gratefully at me as she followed him into his office.

As soon as the door closed I turned back to Micah. "Well?"

He took a deep breath. "I want you to look into Paul's murder."

I sat for a second staring dumbly back at him. "You want me to investigate the murder of your ex-boyfriend?" I asked slowly, making sure I had this right.

"Yes."

"You don't think that's asking a lot?"

"I know it's asking a lot, but if Asher was murdered, wouldn't you want to know the truth? Speaking of Asher, didn't he ask you to help his new boyfriend when he was accused of killing someone? I just...I need to find out what really happened to Paul so I can move on."

"I thought you'd already moved on."

"Romantically, yes. This is different. Now it feels like there's unfinished business. I cared about him once, and he deserves justice."

"What about the police?"

He grimaced. "Apparently they aren't trying very hard."

I frowned. "What gives you that idea?"

"I know people back in the city, people in positions of authority. I called them to verify what Razi had told me. It seems the murder of a known gay sex worker isn't very high on the police's list of priorities. There's no family demanding justice, and the public couldn't care less. There's enough crime in the city that something like this tends to get pushed to the back burner, especially if it isn't an open-and-shut case. They just don't have the manpower on the police force."

"So you want me to find out who killed him?"

He nodded. "I don't know who else to turn to. I know things aren't perfect between us right now, but I'll hire you as if I were any other client."

"I don't know if I'm the right person for this, Micah."

"I think you are. You've done this before. More than once, even. Everyone says you're already one of the best."

"That was on my home turf, so to speak. They were all local. I'm familiar with the area. I don't know anything about Washington D.C. Novak didn't even trust me to tail Knox there without your help."

"And I'll help you again."

"What if you don't like what I find?"

"Then I'll deal with it. At least I'll know the truth."

I shook my head. "I wouldn't have any idea where to start."

"I do. I know names, friends, people at the agency, places he hung out. I even have a key to his apartment — assuming he didn't change the locks after I left."

"You...still have a key to his apartment?"

Micah reached into his pocket and pulled out his keychain. He searched through them, selected one and worked it off the ring before sliding the silver key across my desk. "I don't know why I kept it. It just felt wrong to throw it away. Now I'm glad I hung onto it."

I stared down at the key. Micah was wearing me down and he knew it. I was running out of arguments and, despite myself, I was becoming interested. This

case was tailor-made to be catnip for me: a murdered queer person the cops didn't care about? How was I supposed to just ignore that?

Besides, up until the Knox case, everything I'd done had been local. If I was any good as an investigator, I should be able to solve a case anywhere. This would be the perfect test of my skills.

Then there was the part about Micah's being able to move on. If I wanted to try and make things work with him — which I had to admit I did — helping him find closure might be necessary. I still wasn't certain we could work things out, but I was pretty sure we wouldn't have a chance if he was haunted by the unsolved murder of his ex-boyfriend.

I sighed and picked up the key. "Tell me what you know."

Relief flooded Micah's eyes. "Thank you, Killian." His voice was filled with sincerity. He grabbed one of the chairs and pulled it closer to the desk.

"Don't thank me yet," I muttered.

Micah took a slow, steady breath. "Let's see... I don't know as much as I wish I did, honestly. Last I heard, Paul was still working for the same agency we both used to work with back when I was in the business. It's actually pretty respected, at least as far as escort agencies go — known for being reliable, discreet, professional. The owner's name is Neal. I talked to him once or twice over the phone, but we never met in person. He's a behind-the-scenes kind of guy. Keeps his profile low, which is probably smart in that line of work."

As he spoke, I scribbled notes in the small, dog-eared notebook I always kept on me. One of Novak's first and most repeated lessons: never trust your memory — and never trust the cloud. Ink and paper were eternal, he claimed, unless you were dumb enough to leave them out in the rain.

Micah went on. "Far as I know, Paul hadn't dated anyone seriously since I left. There was that guy we saw at the club — Razi — they were friends. There was history there, but I never got the full story and I didn't pry. Then there's Sabrina, our neighbor. Assuming she still lives in the building. She was sweet. They were close. He had a few other casual friends, but honestly? He was kind of a loner when he wasn't working."

He gave a small, sad smile. "It used to crack me up — Paul was so shy in real life, but he could turn on this whole other persona when he was working. You know the type: sweet, soft-spoken, a little mysterious. The kind of guy who made you feel like you were the only person in the world. Very boy next door. Clients ate it up."

There was a pause. Something shifted in his expression — like a ripple over the surface of still water.

"Razi was the one who found him," he said finally, voice quiet. "No one had heard from Paul in a few days, which wasn't like him. Razi went to check on him. I guess he had a key. When Paul didn't answer, he let himself in. He found him. Called the cops."

Micah's jaw tensed, and his eyes unfocused, staring somewhere past the wall.

"He was strangled," he added, almost too softly to hear. "They said the apartment was wrecked — like

someone had torn it apart looking for something. Stuff was broken, drawers dumped. But apparently, nothing was taken.”

“You think it was a robbery gone wrong?”

He gave a small, joyless laugh. “That’s what the cops thought — at first. But Razi said they dropped that theory pretty quickly once they realized nothing was missing. Just destroyed.”

I nodded slowly. “If it turns out to be some random break-in with no connection to Paul, it’s going to be damn near impossible to figure out who did it.”

“I know.” His voice was tight. “But...please. Try.”

I looked down at my notes, scanty as they were. “Tell me more about Paul.”

Micah blinked. “What do you mean?”

“What was he like? Not just the sweet, quiet persona — the real Paul. Was he secretive? Who did he confide in?”

Micah considered that, brows drawn. “He wasn’t secretive, exactly. Not in the obvious way. It’s not like he lied or covered stuff up. But he didn’t volunteer much either. He listened more than he talked. You’d pour your soul out to him and feel better afterward — and it wouldn’t hit you until later that he never shared a damn thing about himself in return.”

“So he wouldn’t confide in anyone?”

“If he did, it wasn’t me.” He looked down at his hands. “There were parts of him I never really got to know. And we lived together.”

I hesitated, then said, “I know I’ve already asked, but I need you to really think before you answer this

time. What if I dig into this and find something you won't like? What if Paul was involved in something...more than escorting? What if he wasn't the person you thought he was?"

Micah's face tightened, but he didn't look away. "If that's the truth," he said quietly, "then I'd rather know it than keep holding on to a lie."

He looked at me — and this time, there was no hesitation in his eyes. Just pain. And determination.

"I need to know what happened to him, Killian. Even if I end up hating the answers."

I nodded. "Then I'll talk to Novak about it."

"Novak?" he asked with a confused expression.

"I work for him. I can't just take a job. Since I don't have a license, technically, you'll have to hire Novak and then he'll 'assign' me to investigate."

"Oh. Right. So...should I hang around to meet with him?"

"Let me talk to him first."

"Okay, sure. Will you call me as soon as you find out?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Thank you, Killian." He stood up and pushed the chair back to its place before turning to me again.

"You can't imagine how much this means to me."

As soon as Micah left, the second thoughts started flooding in.

Maybe this was a terrible idea. Could I truly be objective? I might not have any personal connection to Paul, but Micah sure as hell did. Paul was his ex, the guy he'd lived with, loved, slept next to. If I was going to take the case, Micah would have to help me. I didn't

have any other contacts in D.C. But dragging him through the wreckage of a dead relationship while chasing a killer? That was a recipe for emotional fallout — and I'd be the one left to deal with it. Could our already shaky relationship even withstand this case?

And yet, not taking the case came with its own risks. Micah would be crushed if I refused the case. He might say he understood, but he'd never forget it. It would drive a wedge between us.

Maybe we were doomed either way?

I was beginning to feel like a fox cornered by the hounds.

Then it occurred to me that Novak might not approve of my going off to D.C. on my own to chase a murderer. In fact, he might even flat out forbid me to go.

Which, of course, only made me want to take the case even more. Nothing made me want to do something more than being told I wasn't allowed to do it.

Still, this wasn't just about stubborn pride or Micah's pleading eyes. Paul had been killed. Brutally. And if there was even a chance I could find out who did it — well, maybe that was reason enough.

Novak was in the office with the mysterious woman for what seemed to be an unusually long time, leaving me far too much time to overthink the situation. When the door opened at last and she followed Novak out of the office, I thought she looked just as uneasy as she had when they'd gone in. Whatever had taken so long didn't seem to have helped with her nerves.

They crossed the room without speaking, and Novak held the door open for her.

"Thank you," she said in a small voice.

"You're welcome, and try not to worry," Novak said.

She cast him a look that clearly spoke her feelings about the chances of not worrying. Then she turned and scurried off, seeming to draw in on herself as she went.

Novak closed the door and turned to me. "Busy morning."

"That's an understatement. Do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure, I always have time for you. Come on in."

I followed him into his office and took one of the leather chairs. He closed a case file that was open on his desk and slid it into a drawer. That struck me as a little odd, since I usually typed the files for him from his handwritten notes.

"Is that woman a new client?" I knew from experience there was no point asking about the file straight out.

"Yes, I'll be handling her case."

"Let me know if you need any help. I don't have any cases right now," I said — at least none he knew of.

"Thank you, but this is a rather delicate situation."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid I promised her complete confidentiality."

"Even from me?" I was a little offended.

"Yes, even from you." He stopped and grinned. "And don't go acting like you're the injured party here." He paused dramatically. "How's your investigation of Jake going?"

My mouth fell open. "How do you know about that?"

Novak laughed. "You think I'm not aware of what's going on under my own nose? I wouldn't be much of an investigator if I couldn't keep track of what my own employees were up to."

"You followed me?"

"No, don't be dramatic. I knew something was bothering Judy, and I knew you were up to something besides the Knox case. I asked Judy point blank what was going on and, when she confessed her concern about Jake, it was clear she was holding something back. I put two and two together and came up with you. I didn't know for sure until just now, though."

"So you tricked me into admitting it. Damn, you're good. But...aren't you mad that I took the case without talking to you?"

"I wish you'd talked to me first, but I, of all people, know how persuasive Judy can be."

"You don't think she should have just asked you?"

"I can certainly understand why she didn't. Things are dicey enough between Jake and me as it is. If Jake found out I was following him, the whole situation would just go all to hell."

I frowned. "Not that it'll be much better if he finds out I'm following him."

"Better you than me. As long as it doesn't interfere with your other work, I'm okay with it, especially if it'll help put Judy's mind at ease. This whole situation has really been weighing on her. To be honest, I've thought about looking into things myself anyway,

but didn't want to overstep my bounds. But while we're talking about overstepping bounds, you're not entirely off the hook. We should probably address the fact that you technically can't accept a case without going through me."

I shifted guiltily. "I mean...it's sort of just a favor, right? Not a real case. It's not like I'm going to charge her..."

Novak raised an eyebrow. "Another pro bono case? It's only been a few months since your last one."

"So you think I should charge your girlfriend?"

He threw his head back and guffawed.

"Girlfriend? I'm too old to have a girlfriend. And I'm just giving you a hard time for not telling me about this sooner. Why don't you fill me in on what you've found out so far?"

"I guess it can't hurt now. I've actually been dying to talk to you about it." I told him about my search of Jake's room and my discoveries.

When I was finished, he thought for a minute.

"Well, what you found could have several different explanations, but I don't like any of them. What are your thoughts?"

"The two things that bother me the most are the photo and the Equality Ball ticket. I just can't figure out how they fit in. I can't do much about the picture, but I could do something about the Ball."

"And what would that be?"

"I could attend."

Novak cocked an eyebrow. "And just how do you propose to get a ticket at this point?"

"That's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about," I said with a grin. "I was hoping you could use your contacts to score me one."

He pushed back in his chair. For a minute, I thought he was going to tell me there was no way, but then his expression grew thoughtful.

"I might be able to do something," he said. "I'll look into it and let you know."

"Great!"

"Don't get your hopes up. That thing is not easy to get into."

"I know."

"You have no idea. Anyway, what else did you want to talk about? You said that was just one of the things?"

"Well, actually, the other thing doesn't have anything to do with Jake..."

Something in my tone must have set off Novak's internal alarms. "Then what does it have to do with?"

"It has to do with Micah."

"Get to the point, kid."

"Well, Micah's...um, old roommate..."

"Meaning former lover."

I tried not to blush. "Right. Ahem. Well, Micah's ex...boyfriend was murdered last week. He lived in D.C."

"That's horrible. I'm sorry to hear that, but what does it have to do with you?"

"Micah wants me to look into the murder."

"No."

"What?" I was surprised at the firmness in his curt answer, even though I'd been half-hoping that would be his response.

"A murder is a matter for the police. You don't need to stick your nose into it."

"What about when we were looking into the Ira Cohen murder?"

"That was a different set of circumstances. The police were at a standstill in their investigation and we were working in cooperation with them. They welcomed our assistance."

"Micah has heard that the D.C. police aren't really trying to solve this case, so maybe they would welcome the assistance too. They're really overworked, after all."

"How do you know so much about the police in D.C.?"

"Micah has contacts. They told him the murder of a known escort wasn't high on the police department's list of priorities."

Novak nodded as if that made sense. "An escort, huh? That does change things. And he's Micah's ex?"

I blushed again, but thankfully, he didn't seem to expect an answer.

"Why you? Wouldn't an investigator who knows the city be a better choice?"

"That's what I said, but Micah really seems to want me to do this. He said he'd help."

"Of course he will."

"It was your idea for him to help me with the Knox case, so it'd be just like that except he'll be even more helpful since he knew the victim and his friends. He's a built-in source."

"Yes, yes, I only have myself to blame. And I suppose he's familiar with the escort business too?"

Novak's tone was sarcastic, but I answered anyway, trying not to blush again. "Uh, very."

Novak sighed. "I see. Well, I have to admit familiarity with the victim and the area would give you a distinct advantage." He seemed to be thinking for a minute. "On the other hand, if he used to date the victim, he might be too close, too emotional. People might be less likely to talk in front of him, to say things about his ex-boyfriend that are less than flattering."

"Oh. Right. I see what you mean. But I still need a guide, so what should I do? Leave him in the car? Make him wait outside while I talk to people alone?"

"Either would be viable options, but let me think about it. There's just one more major problem."

"What's that?"

"As we just discussed, you don't have a license yet. Micah can't hire you."

"I know, but Micah can hire you and then you can just assign me the investigation. Like we did with the Knox case."

"That case will never stop haunting me, will it?"

"So you'll consider it then?"

"I'll consider it, but if I agree, it will be on three conditions. First, you'll report everything back to me — and I mean daily reports."

"Of course. I'll need someone to hash things out with anyway."

"Second, if you get in over your head, I'll step in and help. No arguing."

"I think it's pretty much a given that I'm already in over my head," I said dryly.

"You're the one jumping in the deep end. But don't sell yourself short, kid. You're a good investigator. A little more time and you'll be a great one."

I flushed with pleasure at his praise. "What's the third?"

"You have to promise me you won't take any unnecessary risks."

"I never take—"

"Promise."

"I promise. So I should tell Micah it's a go?"

"I said I'd consider it."

"Oh. Okay. Sure. So...how long will it take you to consider it?"

"As long as it takes me. Now get back to work."

"But—"

"Now!"

I jumped up and hurried back to my desk. I tried to catch up on office work, but I was very distracted waiting for Novak's answer. He made me wait until almost lunchtime before he appeared at his office door.

"I just got off the phone with Louis Silver, an old buddy of mine on the Metropolitan P.D. He confirmed what you said about the case not being a top priority. Officially, it's because they don't have any solid leads. Unofficially..." He shrugged. "He didn't say it outright, but I got the sense you're right — the victim's line of work probably isn't doing the case any favors."

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying go ahead and write up the contract and send it over for Micah to sign. But you'll need to include Lou in your regular reports. He's agreed to meet with you and share what he knows...for a price."

My eyes narrowed. "What kind of price are we talking about?"

Novak chuckled. "A few tins of Fisher's caramel popcorn and our combined body weight in Dolle's salt water taffy." He grinned at my expression. "What can I say? The man's got a sweet tooth and zero access to decent boardwalk treats in D.C. Don't worry — I'll cover it. Call it a bribe for an old friend."

"Thanks, Novak."

"Don't thank me yet. There's more. Lou has a daughter around your age who's been hounding him about becoming a cop. He thinks tagging along with you on this case might cure her of the idea. She'd act as your guide in the city, assuming she agrees."

I blinked. "Wait. How is working with me supposed to discourage her?"

Novak leaned back in his chair, amused. "He's hoping once she sees how tedious a real investigation is — stakeouts, interviews, paper trails — she'll lose interest. Plus, he's banking on the fact that this case is a little...unsavory. He says she's been pretty sheltered. Exposure to the seedier side of things might scare her straight. So to speak."

I frowned. "Unsavory? Paul was a high-end escort, not some streetwalker."

Novak waved that off. "The only difference is the zip code and the paycheck."

I shook my head. "Okay. So what's this mystery guide's name, and when do I get to meet her?"

"Her name's Christina. Lou still has to run the idea by her. He's supposed to call back this afternoon. If she's in, she'll meet you when you get to the city."

"Fair enough. I'll start on the paperwork in the meantime."

"One last thing," Novak said, suddenly more serious. "I know I said I'd back you up if you got in over your head — and I will — but I just took on a new case that could eat up a lot of my time. So don't count on me for regular hand-holding. You're mostly on your own here."

I gulped, but nodded. "Understood."

He gave me a half-smile. "If I didn't think you could handle it, I wouldn't have said yes. Just don't make me regret it."

As I turned to draft the contract, a creeping suspicion began to take root. It had been remarkably easy to get Novak's blessing for what was shaping up to be a complicated — and potentially dangerous — case in a city I barely knew. Too easy.

Was he trying to get me out of his hair?

And if so, did it have anything to do with his newest client, the fragile, birdlike woman? Was her case the one that would be taking up so much of his time?

I shook off the thought. Probably just my overactive imagination running wild.

Setting it aside, I called Micah to share the good news. As expected, he sounded more relieved than I'd heard him in days.

"So when do we start?"

"Right away. You can help by typing up everything you told me earlier. I took notes, but it'll be better to come from you. Be sure to include everything you can think of no matter how small or insignificant you think it might be: full names of everyone involved,

addresses if you have them, phone numbers, any details you didn't include before."

"Okay, I can do that. Then what? Do we start interviewing people?"

"Well, actually, I'm not sure you should really go on those with me."

"What? Why not?"

"Novak suggested that old friends and...coworkers...might not speak as freely in front of you."

"Okay, I guess I can see that, but won't you still need a guide?"

"Novak has already taken care of that. An old cop buddy of his is going to be my contact up there and his daughter, who's my age, is going to be my guide."

"Wow. That all happened quickly. So when do you get started?"

"We're just waiting to get confirmation on everything, and then I should know more."

"Right away. First thing you can do is type up everything you told me earlier. I've got notes, but it'll be better in your own words. Include every detail you can think of, even stuff that seems small or irrelevant — full names, addresses if you've got them, phone numbers, anything you left out the first time."

"Okay, I can do that. Then what? Do we start interviewing people?"

I hesitated. "Actually...Novak suggested that make you shouldn't come with me on those."

"What? Why not?" His frustration was clear in his voice. "I can be objective."

"It's not that. He thinks your old friends — and former coworkers — might not be so open with you standing there. You being there could change what they say...or if they talk at all."

He sighed. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But won't you still need someone to help you get around?"

"Already covered. Novak pulled a few strings. An old buddy of his from the MPD is going to be my contact. And his daughter — who just so happens to be my age — is going to be my guide."

"Wow. That was fast."

"Novak doesn't waste time." I laughed. "We're just waiting for confirmation. Once it's a go, I'll head down and start digging."

Micah promised to get me his write-up that evening, and after hanging up, I cleared my calendar and wrapped up my backlog of paperwork to keep the rest of the week wide open. It was mid-afternoon before Novak called me into his office, his expression unreadable.

"Just got off the phone with Lou. His daughter's in. Gave me her cell — she's expecting your call."

I took the number as, despite myself, butterflies flapped around in my stomach like they were late for a meeting. Why did this feel like I was being set up on a blind date?

I dialed before I could overthink it.

"Hello?"

Her voice was deeper than I expected — rich, calm, and clear.

"Hi, Christina? This is Killian Kendall. My boss, Shane Novak, said your dad talked to you about helping me out with an investigation?"

"I prefer Chris, and yeah, he mentioned you might call. You sure didn't waste any time. So how does this work? Do you want to go over the case? And how soon are you looking to start?"

"As soon as humanly possible. When are you free?"

"I've got classes during the week. Unless you want to schedule everything around my school hours, weekends are better."

"Same here. What about this Saturday?"

"Saturday works. Are you good driving in the city?"

I laughed. "Not even a little. I live in Ocean City, grew up on the Shore. I've never even driven over the Bay Bridge by myself."

"No problem. Here's what you do: drive to New Carrollton Station and take the Metro in. Orange Line. Get off at the Smithsonian stop. Meet me at the Washington Monument. Can't miss it."

"Got it. How will I find you?"

"I'll be the goth chick in all black. You?"

"Uh...short and blond?" I winced. "Kind of like a lost hobbit with a notebook."

She laughed. "Okay, Frodo. See you Saturday."

When I hung up, I stared at the phone for a long moment.

So my new partner was apparently Wednesday Addams. And we were investigating a murder in an unfamiliar city. And the victim was my boyfriend's ex. Simple, right?

And yet...I couldn't help the weird spark of excitement bubbling up inside me. This was what I'd

always wanted, right? A real investigation. A real mystery. Even if it was tied to a part of Micah's life I hadn't exactly been thrilled to learn about.

Still, if I happened to learn a little more about Micah in the process — well, that would just be a bonus.



## Chapter 11

Saturday morning, I woke from violent dreams of medieval carnage — grimy, hollow-eyed men hacking, slashing, and clubbing each other to pieces on a gore-slick battlefield. I sat up feeling like I'd taken a flail to the skull.

I had a suspicion that Judy's cryptic tea-leaf predictions of impending battles were to blame. They were permanently lodged in the back of my brain.

Rolling out of bed with a groan, I stumbled to the bathroom. Not exactly the auspicious start I'd hoped for on day one of investigating the murder of Micah's ex. A hot shower and some deep breathing made me feel marginally more human. I forced down a slice of toast, despite my stomach's protests, and hit the road.

The drive up Route 50 was as uninspiring as ever. The Eastern Shore is famously flat. Parts of it are incredibly beautiful, but none of those parts come anywhere near that particular stretch of highway. The one highlight, as always, was the towering span of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge — a man-made marvel slicing through the sky, daring you not to look down.

I arrived at the New Carrollton Metro station by late morning. Since it's the first stop on the Orange Line, the train was nearly empty when I boarded, and I had no trouble finding a seat. I settled by a window, watching the world blur past as the train thundered along the tracks, pausing every few minutes to gather more passengers.

With nothing to do but wait, my thoughts drifted — inevitably — to my so-called “gifts.”

I still wasn't sure what to make of them. They didn't feel like a gift at all. More like a door someone had cracked open in my mind without asking, leaving me exposed to things I wasn't ready to see — flashes of emotion, flickers of insight, things that weren't mine. Dead people. Just the thought of it was exhausting. And frightening.

There was this unspoken expectation — from Judy, from Seth, even from myself — that I should do something with them. Hone them. Control them. Let them guide me. But what if they led me somewhere I couldn't come back from? What if tapping into whatever lived inside me opened a floodgate I couldn't close?

A chill skated down my spine despite the warm hum of the train. After what I'd experienced with Amalie, I wasn't sure I ever wanted anything to do with them again. And yet, ignoring them wouldn't make them go away. I'd already tried that. Besides, according to Judy and Seth, they could also be dangerous if left untrained.

So, here I was: stuck between fear and responsibility. I knew deep down I had to face the truth of what I could do, however uncomfortable that truth might be. But embracing it meant giving up the illusion of normalcy I'd worked so hard to maintain. It meant changing — maybe even becoming someone I didn't recognize.

The train rattled on, now packed with people who had no idea what kind of storm I was trying to hold back. I looked out the window and forced myself to take a

breath. Whatever these gifts were, they were part of me now. And like it or not, they might be the only thing that could help me make sense of what was waiting on the other end of this ride.

Finally, I pushed those thoughts aside and distracted myself by pulling up the email Micah had sent the night before. It contained everything I'd asked for — names, numbers, addresses, a quick character sketch of everyone Paul had been close to. I'd already read it twice, but I skimmed through it again, more out of nervous energy than necessity, while mentally reviewing my game plan for the day.

First on the list was Razi. According to Micah, he'd been one of Paul's closest friends — and the one who'd found him. He'd given Micah his number at the club, and Micah had included it in the dossier. My plan was to call, reintroduce myself, and — if luck was on my side — convince him to meet.

After that, I planned to check out Paul's apartment. I had Micah's old key tucked in my pocket and could only hope it still worked. If it didn't... well, I'd cross that bridge when I came to it. I wasn't quite sure what I'd do—bluff the landlord? Pick the lock? Stage a distraction? Either way, I'd figure something out. What worried me more was Chris. I had no idea how she'd react to the idea of poking around a murder victim's apartment. I could only hope she'd go along with whatever I said and not try to take over the investigation or get squeamish about the whole thing.

I snapped out of my thoughts as the train pulled into the cavernous underground of the Smithsonian station. The arched concrete ceiling, with its honeycomb

pattern, seemed designed to swallow the roar of the trains and absorb the endless shuffling of tourists. I joined the slow-moving current of passengers heading toward the escalators and let myself be carried upward into the blinding light of the National Mall.

Emerging at street level, I paused for a moment to get my bearings. The Capitol loomed at one end of the Mall, the Washington Monument at the other, both gleaming against a backdrop of hazy summer sky. The broad expanse was flanked by the city's crown jewels: the National Gallery, the Air and Space Museum, the Museum of Natural History, the American Indian Museum, and the stunning silhouette of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. I'd always loved this part of the city. It felt like standing in the heart of something larger than yourself.

But I didn't have time to be a tourist. Somewhere out there, Chris was waiting.

I set off toward the towering obelisk and began circling its base, scanning the crowd for my goth guide. Despite the sheer number of tourists milling about, it didn't take long to spot the only person dressed head-to-toe in black.

Before she noticed me, I took a moment to size her up. She was about my height—slim but with the wiry posture of someone who could probably scale a fire escape without breaking a sweat. She wore a loose, long-sleeved black band shirt advertising a group I'd never heard of, paired with baggy cargo pants and worn black combat boots. Her hair was dyed black and styled in a choppy cut—short in the back, longer in front, with chin-length bangs swept dramatically to one side. Her skin

was strikingly pale, a stark contrast to the inky palette of her clothes, and unless my eyes deceived me, she wasn't wearing a lick of makeup.

She looked more like a ghost than most of the actual ghosts I'd encountered.

So much for blending in.

"Here goes nothing," I mumbled under my breath and started toward her.

As soon as she spotted me approaching, her steely gray eyes locked onto mine. "You're Killian, right?" she asked the moment I was close enough to hear.

I nodded. "And you must be Chris." I offered my biggest smile, but her sober expression didn't even twitch. "I'm impressed you recognized me from my terrible description."

She gave a small shrug. "You could've just said 'cute, gay, blond kid.'"

I blinked in surprise. "Wait — I'm gay?"

She blinked right back. "You didn't know?"

I fought the urge to laugh. "No, I meant — yeah, I knew. But how did you know?"

She shrugged again. "Just a hunch."

"Do I—what? Act gay?"

She frowned. "How does one 'act gay'?"

Great. We were definitely not off to a smooth start. I cleared my throat and tried again. "Forget it. Sorry about that. Look, I'm really glad you're helping me with this case. I appreciate it."

"No problem," she said. "My dad thinks this will make me change my mind about becoming a cop. Among other things."

I raised an eyebrow but wisely kept my questions to myself.

"I'm old enough to make my own decisions," she said. "And I've wanted to be a cop since I can remember." Another shrug. "How old are you, anyway? You look younger than me."

"I'm eighteen."

"We're the same age then. You in college?"

"Freshman year."

"Me too. Where?"

"Pemberton U." When she gave me a blank look, I added, "It's in Salisbury, on the Eastern Shore. What about you?"

"Georgetown."

My stomach sank a little. My ex went to Georgetown. Great. Just my luck if they were besties.

She must've noticed my expression because she quickly added, "Anyway, we should probably get to work. Want to grab coffee while you fill me in?"

We found a coffee shop, grabbed some drinks and a table, and I outlined everything Micah had told me. It wasn't much so it didn't take long.

"I'm hoping your dad can fill in some blanks at some point," I said as I finished up.

"Well, it's not his case, so I'm not sure how much he'll actually know, but maybe he can dig up something useful. So...how did you get involved in this anyway? You're a long way from home. What's your connection?"

I hesitated, the weight of the truth catching me off guard. "Uh, well...Paul, the victim, was my boyfriend's ex. Micah asked me to look into his death

because the cops aren't—" I stumbled to a halt as I realized her dad was one of the cops I was about to criticize.

Her face darkened instantly, a shadow crossing her features. "No, don't stop. Actually, I can fill in the blanks myself. The police aren't exactly falling all over themselves to find whoever killed the fag, right?"

"Something like that," I muttered, unable to meet her eyes.

She shook her head, frustration and anger evident in her tone. "Figures. That's exactly why I want to be a cop — to stop this kind of shit from happening. It's disgusting the way some lives just don't seem to matter. Black people, trans and queer people, women...Goddess forbid you're all three, or even just any random combination."

Her passion took me by surprise. I kept my expression neutral, not wanting to make her regret opening up.

She took a deep breath, shifting gears. "Anyway, enough of that. What's the plan? What are we doing?"

I cleared my throat, grateful for the change in subject. "The plan, right. First, I want to talk to Razi — he was one of Paul's close friends. I've got his number, so I'll try to get him to meet with me. Then I'd like to take a look at the apartment, see the crime scene, if possible. And maybe talk to your dad. Novak said he wants me to check in with him regularly?"

She nodded firmly. "Sounds like him. He probably just wants to keep tabs on me."

"I think it's Novak's way of keeping tabs on me, actually."

She shrugged. "Let's start with Razi, then."

I pulled out my phone, dialed the number, and listened as it rang... and rang. Just as I was about to give up, a male voice finally answered.

"ullo?" It sounded as if I'd woken him up.

"Is this Razi?"

"No."

I waited a beat. "May I speak to him?"

"He's not here."

The voice was vaguely familiar, and I realized it must be the kid from the club. What was his name? "Is this Tad?"

A pause. "Who's this?" He suddenly sounded more awake, and more than a little startled.

"Do you remember last week at Michelangelo? I was with the guy Razi knew. You talked to me in the lounge."

"Um...it's a little hazy."

I was going to have to work for this. "My name is Killian. My friend's name is Micah."

Another pause. "What do you look like?"

"Blond hair, blue eyes."

"Still nothing."

I gritted my teeth and took a deep breath. "You told me that my boyfriend used to be an escort."

"Oh. Yeah. Now I remember. You're cute."

I bit back a sharp retort and took another deep breath instead. "Thanks," I managed. "Look, it's very important that I speak to Razi. Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Not really. He's on a job. What do you need to talk to him about?"

"It's kind of personal. I'd rather tell him about it."  
"Does it have to do with your boy? What's his name? Mikey?"

"Micah, and no...not exactly."  
"Oh. Well, does it have anything to do with Paul?"

"You knew Paul?"  
"Kinda. I wasn't around that long before he was killed, but I met him a few times."

Novak always told me being flexible was the most important attribute of a good investigator. It would probably be useful for an escort, also, but that was beside the point. It was time to change my plans slightly.  
"Could I talk to you?"

He was quiet for a minute. "I dunno."  
"I'm not going to cause trouble. I promise. It's really important."

"Why?"  
"Micah wants to know what happened to Paul."  
"He was killed."  
"We know that. He wants to know why."  
"I don't know that."  
"But you might be able to help me figure it out."  
"You? Shouldn't that be up to the— Shit! You're not the cops, are you?"

"Me?" I laughed. It was somewhat forced, but I didn't think it was noticeable, especially to someone who didn't know me. "No way. I'm a private investigator."

"Aren't you a little young?"  
"Well, I'm technically still in training, but I've already helped solve three murders." I saw Chris's head snap up at that remark, her eyes widening with a new

respect for me. "Besides, the cops don't give a damn about Paul. To them, he's just another gay escort, and as far as they're concerned, the city's better off without him. If I don't find out who did this, Paul might never get the justice he deserves." I was laying it on thick, and could only hope it would prove effective.

There was dead silence on the other end of the line and, for a moment, I thought I'd laid it on too thick and he'd hung up. Then, finally, he spoke. "Okay. If I give you directions, can you find me here?"

"Yes," I replied without hesitation. I signaled to Chris to get her attention. "I'm going to repeat the address back to you so I'm sure I have it right, okay?"

I spoke for both of their benefits. I wanted Chris to pay attention so that she could tell me if she knew where the address was, and I wanted Tad to know why I was repeating everything. Chris nodded her understanding. I was beginning to think we might work well together after all.

"Okay." Tad rattled off an address, which I repeated right back.

Chris nodded. She knew where it was.

"Got it," I said. "You'll be there for a while?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Okay, good. I'll see you soon then. And, Tad? Thanks."

"Yeah. You might want to hold your thanks until after you talk to me. I told you I didn't know him that well."

"Every little bit helps."

"We'll see."

I turned to Chris as I ended the call. "And we're off."

"We'll take the Metro." She stalked off purposefully in the direction I'd come from, leaving me to scamper behind. "It's not a great neighborhood," she said when I caught up to her.

"Dangerous?"

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "All cities are dangerous, that's not the point. But most of D.C. has been pretty gentrified at this point. They just keep displacing the poor and disenfranchised out to the fringes. You could say we're heading right into the fringes. We might stand out a little, which means we might draw unwanted attention. If it comes to that, I'll protect you. Just keep your eyes open and stay near me."

I must have given her a startled look, because she broke out in the first genuine smile I'd seen. "My dad's a cop. I've had every type of self-defense training you can imagine. I may not look all that tough, but, trust me, I am."

Something in the tone of her voice made me inclined to believe her.

We got our fare cards figured out and boarded the train. We would have to backtrack to L'Enfant station and switch from the Orange Line to the Green. The trip wasn't really that far, and we didn't talk much.

I found myself distracted, turning over in my mind how Chris had pegged me as gay right away. What had given it away? I was just wearing a plain pullover and a decent pair of jeans—I hadn't thought my clothes were particularly telling. Maybe it was how I walked, or the way I styled my hair? I'd never really given it much

thought before, but now it bugged me. Being too memorable could be a problem for an investigator.

“Gaydar,” Chris said suddenly, breaking the silence.

I gave her a blank look.

“That’s how I knew you were gay when I saw you,” she explained.

I eyed her warily. There was something almost unsettling about how she seemed to have read my thoughts.

“I’ve been sitting here thinking about it,” she continued, “and I figure if we’re going to work together, we need to trust each other, right?”

I nodded cautiously.

“Well...I’m gay too.”

“Oh, wow.”

I frowned, wondering if my own gaydar might be malfunctioning.

Chris misread my expression and quickly added, “That’s...not a problem, is it?”

“No! Not at all,” I said quickly. “I was just doubting my investigative skills. And maybe my gaydar, too.”

She laughed softly. “I think the whole Goth look throws people off the lesbian stereotype. And it’s not usually the first thing I tell people, you know. Not that I’m closeted or anything — I’m pretty outspoken. About a lot of stuff, for that matter. My dad calls me an activist, and it drives him crazy.”

“So you’re out to your dad?”

“I’m out to everyone, but yeah, my dad and brother were the first people I told. That’s actually

another reason I think Dad wants me working with you on this case. He thinks if I get exposed to the ‘dark side of the gay lifestyle’ — his words, not mine — then maybe I’ll change my mind and decide to be straight or something.” She shrugged. “I tried to tell him prostitution isn’t just a gay thing, and being gay isn’t a choice anyway, but he’s older and pretty set in his ways. Not homophobic, really — just old-fashioned. I think he still holds out hope that it’s just a phase.”

She sighed, a little bitterly. “But honestly, I’m as sheltered as he thinks. Growing up gay in the city with a cop for a dad, you learn a lot — whether you want to or not.”

With that she hopped up and started toward the door. "This is our stop," she called over her shoulder.

I hurried to join her just as the train came to a halt. After we left the station, Chris stopped to get her bearings.

"Where do we go now?" I asked.

"I'm not sure."

"But I thought—"

"I know it's this general area. Don't worry, I'll find it."

She dashed back into the Metro station, leaving me gaping after her. She reappeared a minute later and headed off confidently down the street. I scrambled after her with a feeling I'd be doing that a lot.

"I got directions," she said when I fell into step next to her.

"Yeah, I figured that," I said.

She walked as if she knew exactly where she was going, her ground-eating stride causing me to trot along.

It seemed as though I had to take two steps for every one of hers. At that rate, it didn't take too long to find the address Tad had given me. Like most of the buildings in this area, the apartment building was run down and a little shabby.

Chris stopped at the main entrance. "He's on the second floor?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Okay, so what's the plan now? Do I go in with you or do I stand guard?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead. "There are advantages to both," I said slowly. "If you go in with me, you might pick up on something I miss, but if you stay outside, then you can get help if something goes wrong."

I didn't even want to think about the sorts of things that might go wrong, but I'd been in situations without backup before and I knew how important it could be.

"On second thought, maybe you should be the lookout."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll follow you up to the second floor and keep out of sight until you're in the room, then I'll stay near the door. If anything goes wrong, you just scream like a banshee, and I'll get help."

I nodded and crossed my fingers that we wouldn't have to put that plan into action. I led the way up the dingy stairwell. Chris stayed on the stairs, according to plan, while I rapped on the metal door.

"Yeah?" came a muffled response from the other side.

"Tad? It's Killian Kendall, we talked on the phone?"

There was a pause long enough to allow him to peer through the peephole before he released the locks. The door opened a few inches, still attached to the frame by a thick chain. From the two-inch slice of him in view, he was bare-chested and tousle-headed.

"Are you alone?" Tad asked.

"Um, yes," I fibbed.

The door shut for a second, then reopened just wide enough to allow me to slide in. Tad quickly hooked the chain back in place, locked a deadbolt, closed a security latch, and shot the locks home. I began to feel a little trapped and fought a rising sense of unease.

He turned to catch my uncomfortable expression. "I've lived here less than a month, and I've already been mugged twice," he commented casually. "This building has lousy security...as you probably noticed since you just waltzed in here. You could say I'm a little paranoid."

"I, uh, guess I can't blame you."

I tried not to stare at him as he led me into the living area. He was wearing nothing but a pair of tiny gym shorts, and I had a feeling he'd only pulled those on to be polite. His body was pale, slender, and taut with just the slightest hint of definition. His reddish-blond curls were springier than the last time I'd seen him, making the halo effect even more striking. Once again, I was struck by his ethereal beauty.

"You can sit down." He curled up on the black leather couch in the center of the room, folding himself onto the cushions with a cat-like grace that I envied. I felt like a Neanderthal in comparison as I plopped self-consciously into a matching armchair.

Tearing my attention away from him, I took in the apartment. It was elegantly sparse, with lots of black and chrome. Not much to offer in the knick-knack department aside from a few generic but tasteful objets d'art, including a carved wooden staff artfully displayed alone on a table as if it were a museum exhibit. In fact, the entire space felt a little like a museum, or like a nice hotel. There was very little real personality to the place. I suspected Razi had either rented the apartment already decorated or given some interior designer free rein without ever putting his own stamp on the room. There was a slight hint of incense hanging in the air, a spicy scent that conjured images of street bazaars and ancient temples.

I turned my attention back to Tad to find him studying me with the same care I'd given him and the room.

"You don't look like a detective," he said.

"I'm a private investigator," I said, playing the semantics game. "What do you think a detective should look like?"

He grinned. "Fatter, older, and uglier."

I laughed. "Then I guess I should be flattered that I don't look the way you expected."

His eyes sparkled with humor. "Do you go to Michelangelo's very often?"

"Last week was my first time."

"What did you think?"

"It was fun, but it kinda got ruined."

The sparkle faded. "Oh, yeah. Sorry about that."

I shrugged. "Well, that's what I'm here to talk about."

"Right. So shoot."

"You said you'd met Paul?"

"A couple of times."

"What was he like?"

Tad thought a moment before answering. "Quiet. He was friends with Razi, but they're really different. Razi is loud and intense and likes to be the center of attention. Paul would rather sit in a corner and just watch everything. You'd forget he was there sometimes. But everybody seemed to like him."

"Somebody didn't," I said before I could stop myself. "What did he look like? I never met him." The question wasn't really relevant to anything, but I was curious. It would also help Tad loosen up if I started with questions that were relatively easy to answer.

"He had blond hair with blue eyes and was pretty small and...I dunno...quiet somehow. He was really cute if you took time to look at him, but most of the time if there were a lot of people around, you just kind of missed him somehow."

Apparently, Micah had a type. The description was admittedly vague, but he could have been describing me. "Do you have any pictures of him?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you tell me anything about him besides that he was quiet? What kind of a person was he?"

"I didn't know him that well. Razi seemed to like him, and Razi doesn't have many guy friends. I think he feels threatened by them, like he sees them as competition. He didn't seem to feel that way about Paul." He fell silent, and I allowed him a minute to think.

Another one of Novak's interrogation tips was to let silence sit there. Most people abhorred a vacuum almost as much as nature and would eventually feel compelled to fill it. Sure enough, eventually Tad started talking again.

"Paul was always really nice to me. He seemed...concerned about me, I guess. Always asking how I was doing and telling me if I ever needed a place to go I could stay with him. And not like in a creeper sort of way, you know? He wasn't hitting on me. It was like he genuinely cared. I think he and Razi might have even fought about me."

He stopped as if he'd said more than he'd intended.

That caught my attention. "Why would they fight about you?"

"Um..."

His gaze drifted off somewhere over my shoulder, and I could tell he was searching for something to tell me — probably a lie. I decided to head him off.

"How do you know Razi? Is he your boyfriend?"

"I guess you could say that."

"Well then what would *you* say?"

He shrugged. "Razi took me in when I didn't have anywhere else to go. I was living on the street, sick, hungry... He took me to the doctor, fed me, and let me stay here."

"He sounds like a saint."

Tad made a face. "Not exactly. In exchange, he gets sex whenever he wants it."

I raised an eyebrow. "And you're okay with that arrangement?"

"It's better than the streets. And let me tell you, Razi knows what he's doing. So I guess it's not all that bad."

"Are you gay?"

He seemed surprised by the question. "What?"

"Are you even gay?"

"Yeah." I could tell he was still so surprised by the blunt question that he'd answered truthfully.

"How'd you end up on the street?"

He looked away. "Why does that matter?"

"You never know what will matter."

At first I didn't think he was going to answer, but finally, without ever looking in my direction, he began to speak in a low voice. Once he started, it was as if a dam had burst, the words flowing out of him until he'd spilled the whole story.

"I grew up in this little bumfuck town in Virginia. My mom died giving birth to me, so it was just me and my dad. I think...in some twisted way, he blamed me for her death. We were never close, but he took care of me, you know? There was always food in the house. I had clothes. He wasn't neglectful. It just felt like he was doing it out of some...sense of responsibility or something.

"I've known I was gay for a long time — since I was twelve or thirteen, maybe earlier. I used to mess around with my best friend when we had sleepovers. I don't know if he was gay too, or just curious. We never talked about it. It just...happened. And then it stopped. He started dating girls, but I still liked guys.

"I got on the apps, met this guy who lived here in D.C.. He was a little older than I was and lived here in

D.C. He was older than me. Not by a lot, but enough. We started seeing each other, but I kept it quiet. Real quiet. He'd come visit when my dad was working late, or I'd say I was hanging out with friends and sneak off to meet him.

"Then one night, my dad came home early. I don't even remember why — something about a busted water heater at work. And he walked in on us. Right in the middle of...you know.

"It was bad. He went completely berserk. Screaming, throwing things, saying shit I don't even want to repeat. My 'boyfriend' — and I use that term loosely — bolted. Didn't even try to help. He just vanished. I never saw him again.

"And my dad..." Tad shook his head, his voice catching for the first time. "He beat the shit out of me. I really thought he was going to kill me. He never touched me after that night, but I always felt like it was seething just under the surface, that he could crack at any second. He barely spoke to me, wouldn't even look at me. I knew he hated me. Every day I stayed there felt like I was suffocating."

He paused and finally looked at me, just for a second, eyes rimmed red but dry.

"So I left. I spent a few nights with a friend, a girl from school, but her parents said I couldn't stay. I didn't know where to go, but the guy I'd been dating lived in D.C., so I hitchhiked here like a complete idiot. Didn't even know his address. Hell, I barely knew his real name."

He took a shaky breath and looked down at his hands.

"I've never been so scared in my life. Every night I thought something bad was gonna happen. And most nights, it did. One night I was begging for money outside a gay club. Not Michelangelo, some gross, seedy place with a much older clientele. Sometimes, the guys would give me a little money if I...did certain things for them. Or let them do certain things to me."

I've never been so scared in my life.

"Anyway, the next thing I know there's this guy telling me to come on. He looked a little younger, better dressed, but still. I figured he thought I was a hustler — which I guess I pretty much was — but what the hell? I'll do what I have to, get a warm bed for the night.

"But instead of taking me to a hotel, he brings me here. Tells me to sleep on the couch. Says if anything's missing in the morning, he'll track me down and cut off my dick." Tad let out a weak, incredulous laugh. "I didn't sleep at all. I kept waiting for him to do something, to try something. But he didn't. Next morning, he cooked breakfast. Took me to a doctor. Then shopping. And...I never left."

"So...that was Razi? He just...took you in?"

"Yeah. Just like that. For a few days, I kept thinking I'd wake up and it would all just be a dream...but then he started asking for his payment, and I knew it wasn't."

"Did he hurt you?"

Tad blushed. "Not so I minded."

"Did you feel forced?"

He shrugged one shoulder. "I knew it was what I had to do if I wanted to stay here. He never said it in those exact words, but I knew. And it's not just sex. I

also clean the apartment, wash the dishes, do the laundry, make appointments. And some other stuff."

I wondered about the "other stuff" but didn't press it.

"Did Razi ever try to contact your father?"

"He never even asked me my story."

"What about Paul?" I asked gently.

Tad tensed, his wariness returning. "What about him?"

"Did he ever ask about your story?"

He hesitated, clearly weighing whether or not to trust me. Finally, he gave a small nod. "Yeah. He's the only other person I've ever told. Besides you." He frowned. "I don't even know why I told you."

"Is that what he and Razi fought about?"

He gave a half-shrug. "Maybe. I don't really know."

That was probably as much as I was going to get out of him on that subject, but it didn't take a detective to put the pieces together. If Paul really was the good guy everyone said he was, he would have had issues with Razi's living arrangement with a runaway fifteen-year-old. Maybe Paul wanted to contact Tad's father — or worse, the authorities. I doubted Razi would've taken kindly to that. He might not have wanted to lose his personal houseboy... or get arrested as a pedophile.

"How old are you again? Fifteen?"

He nodded.

"Are you in school?"

He rolled his eyes. "No. I dropped out."

"And how old is Razi?"

That question struck a nerve. Tad suddenly sat bolt upright, his back stiff as a board, eyes wide with fear. “You can’t turn him in,” he said quickly, his voice rising. “Please, you can’t do that. I know it’s not perfect, okay? But I’m fine. I swear. It’s better than living on the street. I can’t go back to my dad. That’s where they’d send me. You don’t know what it was like. I can’t go back.”

“There are other options,” I said, though even I didn’t fully believe it. “If your dad abused you, they wouldn’t just toss you back into that situation.”

He shook his head, panicked. “Yeah, right. ‘Other options’ like a foster home? I’ll pass. Look, I’m almost sixteen. That’s the age of consent, right? In a couple months, it won’t even be illegal.”

His voice cracked on the last word, and in that moment he looked heartbreakingly young. Scared. Desperate.

“Is Young even your real last name?” I asked softly.

The flash of surprise across his face gave me all the answer I needed. But he still responded, defiant.

“What difference does it make? You’d just use it to track down my dad. Or the cops. I swear, if I get sent back, I’ll run away again. And maybe next time there won’t be a Razi. Or maybe...” He swallowed hard. “I’ll kill myself before I go back.”

“Tad.” I leaned forward, lowering my voice. “I’m not going to turn him in. I promise. Not unless I have to. But I’m being honest with you — I’m not comfortable with this whole setup.”

He crossed his arms. “Well, it’s none of your business anyway.”

Realizing I’d done a great job of shattering any sense of rapport we’d built, I tried to reverse the damage.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to make you feel unsafe. I just...” I exhaled. “You know, my dad beat me up too when he found out I was gay. Then he kicked me out.”

Tad blinked. I saw the flicker of curiosity in his eyes, despite his resistance. “Where’d you go?”

“I was lucky. My friend’s dad took me in. He’s gay too.”

“Your friend or the dad?”

“Both, actually.”

His eyebrows lifted. “Whoa. That’s kinda badass. Must’ve been nice — like having a gay brother or something.”

“It probably would’ve been, yeah. But my friend was murdered. That’s...actually what got me into the whole PI thing.”

His eyes widened, the snark gone. “Oh. Damn. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s been a couple years. Doesn’t hit quite as hard anymore.”

“Your mom still around?”

“She left my dad not long after I moved out. But yeah, she let me stay with Adam — my friend’s dad. I still live with him.”

"Do you guys have...an arrangement?"

It took me a second to realize he meant like the one he had with Razi.

"No! I mean, he's more of a dad to me than mine ever was. And he has a boyfriend. And I have a boyfriend."

I was rambling.

He nodded slowly, his whole body beginning to uncoil. He curled back into himself on the couch, less like a kid preparing to bolt and more like a cat preparing to nap. I was just about to ask my next question when someone started pounding on the front door.

Tad jumped like he'd been hit with a jolt of electricity.

"Honey, I'm home," a voice sharp with sarcasm called from the hallway. "Let me in."

"Shit," Tad hissed. "It's Razi. I thought you'd be gone before he got back."

"Will he be mad that I'm here? I mean, I came to talk to him."

"I don't know," Tad said, glancing nervously at the door as the pounding continued.

"Just let him in. I won't say a word about anything we talked about, okay?"

Tad gave me a searching look, then nodded. "Okay."

He padded toward the door, and I stood up, preparing for whatever came next. Best-case scenario: time for interview number two. Worst-case? Chris and I would be testing that emergency plan very soon.



## Chapter 12

When Razi blew through the door, I was afraid it was going to be the worst-case scenario. "I really wish you didn't lock this place up like fucking Fort Knox. I can't even let myself into my own home. Feels like a jail with all those damn locks. Oh—"

His verbal barrage came to a screeching halt when he spotted me standing awkwardly by the chair. He quickly rearranged his expression into a semblance of pleasantries.

"I didn't know we had company. Hello. Wait, I remember you. You're Micah's little friend, right?"

I tried not to bristle at the condescension in his voice. "My name's Killian."

"Like the beer." He was wearing obviously expensive clothing — dark slacks that fit like a glove, with a high-quality, white, button-down shirt open at the collar, and very pricy leather shoes. His black hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the nape of his neck.

He looked at me like I was the juiciest steak on the butcher's counter. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?" He spoke English with only the slightest hint of an accent, but his careful pronunciation made me think it wasn't his first language.

I kept my gaze evenly on his, not wanting to let him know how uncomfortable he made me. "I'm a private investigator. Micah asked me to look into Paul's murder."

His eyes widened in surprise for a second, but his polite mask quickly slipped back into place. This guy

was an excellent actor. I'd have to watch his every move for the slightest nuance.

"Paul Flynn?"

I nodded.

"So that's why you were at Michelangelo."

I decided not to correct him.

"Well, what do you want with me?" he asked.

"I'd like to talk to you. You were a friend of Paul's. You knew what his life was like. And you were the one who found him."

He shrugged with purposeful nonchalance. "I doubt I can tell you anything useful."

"Can we sit down?"

"Oh yes. Please excuse my horrible manners. Sit down."

I took the chair I'd been sitting in before, and Razi took Tad's place on the couch. When Tad made a move to sit down next to him, Razi shot him a look that I couldn't quite interpret. Tad seemed to have no such trouble. He paused for just the slightest second, then cast a quick glance in my direction before leaving the room.

"Now we can speak in private," Razi said. "I hope you weren't waiting too long. He's not the most fascinating conversationalist."

I shrugged. "We were fine. I like him. He's a nice kid."

Razi's eyes narrowed slightly at my intentional choice of words, but he didn't comment.

"Is he related to you?" I asked innocently, as if I hadn't just received the whole story of how Tad had ended up with him.

Razi arched an eyebrow. "Do we look related?"

I shrugged in answer. "I've known siblings who didn't look anything alike."

"We'd certainly be very disparate siblings. No, we're not related. He's a friend. I'm doing him a favor. He needed a place to live, so I let him stay here in exchange for cleaning the place and a few other small favors."

"That's really kind of you." I hoped I was keeping the sarcasm out of my voice.

Something of it must have slipped through, though, because his eyes narrowed again. The rest of his face remained set in its carefully bland expression, but all he said was, "I know what it's like to be in his position."

"Really?"

"Yes, but that has nothing to do with why you are here. You came to talk about Paul."

It wouldn't be as easy to weasel information out of Razi as it had been with Tad. Tad was younger — naïve and innocent, in many ways — and, more importantly, looking for someone to trust. Razi was older, more experienced, and obviously a lot more suspicious. I was having a hard time estimating his age. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say he was in his twenties, but I couldn't pin it any closer than that.

"Yes, I did. How well did you know him?"

"He was one of the very few people I called friend."

"What was he like?"

"Nice. Kind. Good. Those words may sound empty, but they describe Paul very well."

"He was an escort?"

I didn't mean anything by the question, but I could tell Razi took it wrong. His body stiffened, and his jaw tightened.

"Yes, he was an escort. That doesn't make him any less nice, kind, or good. Paul had his reasons. He had his story."

"I didn't mean to imply he wasn't. What do you mean, he had a story?"

"We all have stories. You know I'm an escort too?"

I nodded, and he continued. "Most of us get into it for the money. Some of us need it more than others."

"What was Paul's story? Did he need money?"

"That is not my story to tell."

"But I can't hear it from Paul and it could be important. Please?"

Razi sighed. "Fine. I will tell you. Paul was a senior in college when he decided to come out to his parents. He thought he was ready, but they were very conservative. They didn't take it well. Cut off all his support unless he agreed to get therapy. Of course, he refused, but he had to find some way to support himself. One of his friends was in the escort business and got him an interview with his agency. He was perfect. He had this sort of innocence about him that the clients just loved. He was successful enough that he stayed in it even after he graduated. You make more money on your own, with no middleman, so most guys go solo eventually. They don't usually stay with an agency. Paul did."

"Why?"

"Paul wasn't the ambitious type. He said he was earning a good living without having to do anything but show up for his appointments." He shrugged. "Who can argue with that?"

"What about his family?"

"What about them?"

"You said they didn't approve of his being gay."

"That would be putting it mildly. They wouldn't have anything to do with him for a long time. When Paul's father died, he had to find out from the newspaper. That was really hard on him. He went to the funeral, but no one would even acknowledge his presence. Then a few weeks later his mother called. Pretty soon, he started going to see her every once in a while."

"How was that?"

"I don't really know. Paul didn't talk about it. He was very reserved. He never actually told you how he was feeling. Sometimes it was obvious, like when his father died, but most of the time you never knew what was going on in his head."

"Do you know if the rest of his family was still antagonistic?"

"I have no idea."

"Did you ever meet his family?"

He let out a short bark of laughter. "You must be joking. No, I was the last person Paul wanted to introduce to his family. They were rather racist as well as homophobic. Real flag-waving, red hats."

"How long ago did his dad die?"

"It was a couple of months ago, maybe six at the most."

"Did Paul have any enemies?"

"Ha! No. Everybody loved Paul."

"People keep saying that, but obviously someone didn't like him."

A slight frown tugged down the corners of his mouth. "I thought the police said it was just a random burglary gone wrong. Why are you even investigating this?"

"I'm investigating because Micah needs closure, and the police have some suspicions about the burglary theory. Nothing was taken after all."

"Maybe Paul interrupted the burglar. As far as I'm concerned, it's still as valid a theory as any."

"Maybe so. You found him, right?"

"Yes." His eyes shifted away.

"Can you tell me about that?"

He took a deep breath. "It's hard to talk about."

"Take your time."

"I hadn't heard from him for a few days. That wasn't unusual lately, but if he didn't call me, I'd generally call him after about three or four days just to check in. When he didn't answer his phone, I started getting worried. Finally, I just decided to go over. I had a key so I could feed his fish when he was going to be away for a few days. He had a huge tropical fish tank."

He paused for a moment.

"So you let yourself in?" I prompted.

He nodded. "It was trashed — completely and totally trashed. All his paintings were torn off the walls and destroyed. He loved art. His fish tank was shattered. Every table had been tipped over, lamps smashed. It was horrible."

His eyes had unfocused as if he were seeing it all again.

"And Paul?"

"I didn't see him at first. He was in the bedroom door. Just lying there, like a doll someone had simply thrown away. I knew he was dead as soon as I saw him. I've...seen dead people before."

I took note of that last comment. I was pretty sure he hadn't realized what he was saying, but I wondered what it meant.

"I know this is hard, but can you describe the body?" I asked. "What position was he in? Was there blood? That sort of thing."

He took a ragged breath. "It wasn't a peaceful death, that I can tell you. It wasn't one of those cases where the person just looks like he's sleeping. I don't know if you've ever seen a strangling victim. I hadn't. Not before that. It's horrible. I...I'll never be able to forget it."

I let him sit in silence for a few minutes to collect himself before asking my next question. "Would you have noticed if anything had been stolen?"

"I didn't look around. I called the police as soon as I saw he was dead. And it was such a mess, I don't know how you'd know if anything was missing."

"Could the killer have been looking for something?"

"How would I know what the killer was doing?"

"Who do you think killed Paul?"

"I told you, I think it was a burglar."

"Burglars don't usually take the time to trash the place they're robbing. Can you think of anyone else who

might have wanted Paul dead? What about coworkers? Did he have another job?"

"No, he didn't need another job. He was making more than enough doing what he was doing."

"Could it have been another guy with the agency? Someone jealous of his success?"

"Who knows, although most escorts at the agency don't even know each other. It's not like they share an office."

"How did you meet Paul then?"

"Let's just say we worked together a few times, years ago. Sometimes clients have specific requests."

"So he could have worked with other guys since then. Do you know how I could get in touch with any of the other escorts there?"

"No clue."

"Okay, how about clients? Could it have been an appointment gone wrong?"

He shrugged. "Anything's possible."

"What about the guy who owns the agency? Neal, right? Can you put me in touch with him?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry you don't know or sorry you won't help me?"

Another shrug.

"Didn't you used to be with the agency?"

"Yes."

"And you don't know how to get in touch with Neal?"

"We don't exactly send Christmas cards."

"Why are you avoiding my questions?"

"I've answered your questions. You wanted Paul's story and I told you."

"But now you're giving me non-answers. Don't you care about finding out what happened to Paul?"

"Paul is dead. Nothing you do is going to bring him back." His voice was hollow.

"What if he was murdered by a serial killer who preys on escorts? You could be next."

"We lead risky lives. We meet strangers for a living. We all know that every appointment could be our last. We try not to think about it, but we know it. I know it. Paul knew it. You accept the risk and do your job."

"So that's it? This is just one more risk?"

"Pretty much."

"You have no intention of helping me find out what happened to him, do you? You don't give a damn about Paul."

He looked me squarely in the face, his black eyes flashing. "The only way you can survive this business is to not give a damn. No one gives a damn about you. Not the police — we're scum to most of them. Not the clients — it's strictly business. And not the agency, if you work for one — you're a replaceable commodity. Nobody gives a damn about Paul."

"Micah does."

He snorted. "How nice. I'm sure Paul would appreciate that if he were still alive, especially since he never heard from Micah after he left. What good does Micah's concern do Paul now?"

"We can find out what happened to him and make sure he gets justice."

"Justice? What a joke. There is no justice — not for us." He stood up. "I think it is time for you to go away, little boy. I can't help you anymore."

I stood up with a sigh, figuring that was all I was going to get out of him. I had a feeling he knew more than he was saying, but this wasn't the time to press it. Razi escorted me to the door and unlocked Tad's assortment of security measures.

A thought struck me, and I spoke up before he could open the door. "What's your story?"

His eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Earlier you said you all had stories. I know Paul's. I know Micah's. What's yours?"

He opened the door. "My story is my own. Leave now, please."

I watched him for a second more, then walked out. The door closed firmly behind me.

Chris waited until I reached the stairwell before falling in beside me as we descended. "Well?"

"I learned a lot, but I'm not sure if any of it is relevant. Frankly, I learned more from Tad than I did from Razi."

"Is he the one who went in after you were already inside?"

"Yeah. He knows more than he's saying, but whatever he knows, he sure isn't telling me."

"He wouldn't say anything?"

"Nothing I didn't already know or couldn't find out from Micah. I did discover things weren't very good between Paul and his family, but Razi doesn't seem to think they could have had anything to do with the

murder. Not that his opinion carries much weight. I want to meet them myself."

We reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped in the lobby.

"Do you see this Razi guy as a possible suspect?" she asked.

"Well, Razi says he and Paul were friends, and both Tad and Micah back that up. Still, he might have had a motive. He's got a sweet setup now with Tad. According to the kid, Paul didn't approve of their — for lack of a better word — relationship. He said Razi and Paul had a fight about it."

"Why didn't he approve?"

"Well, first off, Tad is fifteen, plus he's a runaway. He was a street kid on the fast track to becoming a hustler when Razi took him in, but it wasn't exactly out of the kindness of his heart. The kid cleans and sleeps with Razi in exchange for food and a roof over his head."

"Holy shit. That's like textbook trafficking. We're reporting that, right?"

"Not exactly..."

"What? Why not?"

"It's not that simple. Tad freaked out when he thought I might report it. He doesn't want to go back to his abusive father and he's terrified of the system, probably rightfully so, based on my experiences in a past case. Like he said, at least he has a roof over his head and food—"

"And he's basically a sex slave. Human trafficking is illegal, Killian!"

"So is being an escort, but we're not reporting that. Tad is there by choice. He's not being held prisoner. He could leave whenever he wants, but where would he go? Back to the street?"

"That's exactly my point. He doesn't really have a choice. You know, I've heard that at least forty percent of homeless youth identify as gay or bi."

"Look, I want to help him too. I'm just not sure turning him over to the system is the best way. Let me think about it. Besides that, I'm not one hundred percent sure he's not involved."

"You think he could be the killer?"

"It's possible. Like I said, Tad mentioned that Paul and Razi were fighting over him. If he felt Paul was threatening what he sees as his security, maybe he did something drastic to protect himself. He was getting pretty freaked out when he thought I might say something."

"What about Razi? If they were fighting, do you think he could have killed Paul?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He's definitely hiding something. But is losing a pet houseboy worth killing your best friend over?"

"People have killed for less."

"I mean, sure, I guess. But...I don't know."

"But you think Tad has a stronger motive. Do you think he could be a killer?"

"Anybody can be a killer, but I hope he's not. I kind of like him. Then again, I've been fooled before."

She looked over at me. "You're going to have to tell me a few of these stories sometime."

"Sometime, but not today," I said.

"Fair enough. Back to Razi, did you learn anything else from him?"

"Not much. He has some history he doesn't want to talk about. Actually, he has a lot of stuff he doesn't want to talk about. If all escorts are as guarded as him, this isn't going to be easy."

"Nobody said it would be easy. Where to now?"

"I guess we can try and find Paul's apartment, see if the key Micah gave me still fits."

"You have a key?"

"Yeah, Micah used to live with him. He held onto it after he moved out."

"So...we're just going to barge into a homicide scene that presumably the police are still investigating?"

"You think they're still investigating?"

"The murder just happened last week, and the case is still open with no leads. I doubt they've released the apartment yet, but I guess it's worth checking out. We can get a feel for the building if nothing else. What's the address again?"

I gave it to her and she whistled. "That's a much better part of the city, close to Dupont Circle. It's a really expensive area. He must have been making good money to afford to live there."

"Despite the building, it's not like Razi's place was a dump. Apparently money is not an object when you're a successful escort."

"Maybe I'm choosing the wrong career. Back to the Metro, then."

"Killian," a voice called from behind me. I turned around to see Tad running down the stairs. He'd thrown

on a T-shirt and a pair of sandals but still looked completely disheveled.

"Tad?" Chris asked under her breath.

"Yep."

"Razi's in the shower," Tad said, out of breath. "I only have a minute, but I didn't want you to leave without saying bye. He didn't say anything to me after you left, but he was in a pretty bad mood. Did he seem mad that I let you in?"

"He's hard to read. Why?" I was suddenly concerned. "What would he do if he was mad? Would he hurt you?"

Tad grimaced. "I hope not. I don't really know. He's never actually been mad at me before. Annoyed, maybe, but not mad. I just don't want him to kick me out."

I felt bad for the poor kid, and even worse that I might have caused more trouble for him. "Do you have a cell phone?"

"No. I can't afford one."

I pulled out my wallet, found one of my cards, and scribbled my cell phone number on the back. "Well, that's my cell. If he hurts you, call me. I'll come get you personally."

Tad blinked in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"Very. Even if you just decide you want out of your arrangement, call me."

He frowned. "I owe him. He saved my life. And besides, where else would I go? I'm not going back home."

"What if your dad wanted you back? Maybe he's changed his mind since you left. He might have realized how much you mean to him."

Tad rolled his eyes. "You obviously don't know my dad," he said. "I'm not going back. I don't care what anyone says."

"Well, I won't make you do anything you don't want to do." I didn't want him to be afraid of contacting me just because he thought I might hand him over to his father. "Will you call me if you need me?"

He looked at the card in his hand, then slipped it in his pocket before giving me a lopsided grin. "I dunno. Maybe, maybe not. No promises."

"It doesn't have to be this way, you know."

"It's not that bad, really. Better than the streets. Better than home." He shrugged. "It could be worse."

"Maybe it could be better."

He looked at me for a minute without saying a word, but his expression spoke volumes. It was obvious he was torn between what he felt he owed Razi and wishing things could be different. His eyes shifted to Chris, as if noticing her for the first time.

"I'm his assistant," she said quickly.

"You guys won't turn me in, will you?"

"No, I won't turn you in."

He looked to Chris, who shrugged. "Hey, I only do what he tells me to do."

He seemed satisfied and started backing toward the building. "I need to get back up there before he finishes his shower."

"You'll probably be seeing me again," I said.

"And remember, call me if you need me."

He grinned. "We'll see."

He spun around and ran back into the building.  
I stood staring after him.

"Cute kid," Chris said. "Shitty deal." She glanced over at me, noticing my frown. "What are you thinking?"

"I have to figure out some way to help him."

"You gave him an option. And hope. That's more than he had yesterday. Hopefully, he'll call you."

"And then what? He's just a kid. He has a family somewhere who doesn't even know where he is."

"You just promised him you wouldn't turn him in. Are you going to break your word?"

"No, not unless I have to. I just wish there was something more I could do. I don't even know his last name. Or, for that matter, if Tad is even his real first name."

"Okay, let's start moving. We can talk while we walk, unless you're too blond to handle that."

I laughed, breaking my melancholy mood. "I think I can handle it."

We headed once more toward the Metro station.

The trip to the Dupont Circle stop took about twenty minutes. From the station, we walked another twenty minutes to find Paul's address. Just as Chris had said, it was in a very nice neighborhood. The streets were lined with stone- and brick-faced townhouses, each with its own tiny patch of lawn, most filled with flowers and ornamental trees. Paul's building was actually an ornate brick apartment block tucked between two sections of rowhomes.

You had to be buzzed in, so we just stood nearby and waited for someone to come or go. It wasn't long

before a woman with two small dogs came out. We slipped in behind her before the door could close. She never even noticed.

Paul's apartment was on the third floor. We took the stairs, but Chris stopped me at the second-floor landing. "Okay, let's talk about our plan. Do you still want me to stand watch? And if so, how do I alert you if somebody is coming? I almost panicked when Razi showed up. I was ready to break the door down if you yelled or anything. It was hard not knowing what was going on."

"I guess you can text me if you see someone coming. Or call. I can call you if there's any trouble."

"Okay, I guess that's the best we can do under the circumstances. Let's just hope nothing goes wrong."

I gave her a reassuring smile and climbed the rest of the stairs to the third floor. There were four apartments, but it was easy to identify Paul's door — the only one with police tape across it. I guess that meant Chris was right, the police investigation was still open.

Suddenly, I had second thoughts.

How many laws would I be breaking if I went in? Still, I was there and I really wanted to see the apartment.

I took a deep breath and fished out the key Micah gave me. If it didn't work, I wouldn't have to worry about any of this. I slid the key carefully into the lock, which clicked and released when I turned the key.

I couldn't tell if I was relieved or disappointed.

Pushing the door open slowly until it was just wide enough for me to squeeze through, I ducked under the tape and quickly shut the door.

The room smelled of damp carpet and mildew and was so dark I couldn't see a thing after the bright light of the hallway. I fumbled along the wall for a light switch, but before I could find one, I heard the door handle rattle behind me.

Did I lock it? I couldn't remember.

The door started to swing open, and I froze in place, praying it was just Chris.

The room flooded with enough light to temporarily blind me, but I could just make out a dark figure standing in the doorway.

"Don't move. I have a gun," a harsh voice ordered.

## Chapter 13

This was definitely not good.

I froze where I was and slowly raised my hands. Getting caught was not part of my plan. Assuming I survived long enough, Chris and I were clearly going to have to work out a better way for her to warn me.

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I began to get a better look at my assailant. To my surprise, they turned out to be a small, slender Asian woman with long, glossy, black hair. And in her hands was a deadly-looking pistol, aimed directly at my chest.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?" she said in a surprisingly deep and husky voice. "And don't think for a minute I don't know how to use this thing."

"My name is Killian Kendall," I said as calmly as I could manage. "Are you a police officer?"

"I'll ask the questions. Who are you and what are you doing in Paul's apartment?"

She'd said Paul's apartment, I noted, so she was most likely not a cop. Hadn't Micah mentioned something about a neighbor of Paul's that he was very close to? What was her name?

I wondered if I should lie and say I was a friend of Paul's or tell the truth. I decided that, in this case at least, the truth was the best policy.

"I'm a private investigator looking into the murder of Paul Flynn."

"You seem a little young to be a private eye."

"I can't help that."

"Who hired you?"

"Micah Gerber."

"Micah?" she asked warily, the gun wavering ever so slightly.

"Yes."

"How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Good question.

Just then, the name I was searching for surfaced. "Are you Sabrina?" When her eyes widened, I took that as a yes and went on. "Micah said you were a good friend of Paul's. Maybe you can help me find out who killed him."

The gun dropped a little farther, but I kept my hands in the air. I wasn't about to risk my life with any sudden moves.

"How'd you get in here?"

"Micah gave me a key."

That seemed to be what she wanted to hear. The gun dropped to her side, and she stepped back from the door.

"Will you help me?" I lowered my hands very slowly, keeping them in her view.

"I'll talk to you, but I think we should go to my apartment. If someone comes along, I don't want to be standing here with Paul's door wide open."

There was no arguing with her logic.

In the hallway, I risked a quick glance toward the stairwell and saw a wide-eyed Chris peeking around the corner at us. I motioned for her to remain hidden.

The door next to Paul's was standing open. Sabrina stepped to one side and motioned with the gun as if to say, "After you." She wasn't going to give me the

chance to get behind her — a smart move on her part had I been someone dangerous.

Entering her apartment, I found myself in a large open space that served as both living and dining room. Straight ahead was the kitchen, and off to the right was a closed door that I assumed led to a bedroom. The place wasn't large, but Sabrina had decorated it tastefully with a blend of antique furnishings and Asian art.

"Have a seat," she said casually, as if she entertained guests at gunpoint all the time. Then again, for all I knew, perhaps she did.

I perched gingerly on the edge of her scroll-back Victorian sofa and watched her expectantly. She sat across from me on an uncomfortable-looking carved wooden chair and looked back at me.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked after a few awkward moments.

"Er, uh, no, thanks." It wasn't a question I had expected.

"So Micah asked you to find Paul's killer?" She fiddled with the gun in her lap.

"Yes. Um, do you think you could set the gun down? It's making me a little nervous. I promise I'm not going to hurt you, but if it makes you feel better, you can set it on the table right next to you where you can grab it if you need to."

"Oh." She looked down at the gun in surprise, as if she'd forgotten she was holding it. "This?"

She aimed the gun at my chest and pulled the trigger before I could react. I flinched, but nothing happened.

"It's not real," she said. "I bought it at a women's safety conference I attended a few years ago. It's just meant to scare people. I don't like real guns."

I stared at her in disbelief. "What would you have done if I'd attacked you?"

She blinked as if the thought had never occurred to her. "Hit you with it?"

"Do you even know any self-defense?"

"Yes. What does any of this have to do with Paul?"

"It doesn't have anything to do with Paul, but if you're going to run around pointing a toy gun at people, you'd better be able to take care of yourself."

"I don't make a habit of it," she said defensively. "I heard someone going into Paul's apartment — these walls are thin — and went to check. Now can we get back to Paul, please?"

"You're right, I'm sorry. It's really none of my business."

"It's okay..." She gave me a hesitant smile. "I guess I sort of made it your business when I pointed it at you. For the record, I'm a second-degree black belt in Taekwondo. So Micah hired you? Do you know him or did he just hire you?"

"I know him. We've been dating for a few months."

Her mouth formed a little "o" of surprise. "So...wait...you're dating Micah and you're investigating the murder of his ex-boyfriend?"

I gave her a wry grin. "That about sums it up."

"Wow. Either you're a better person than I am, or you guys have a weird relationship."

"The latter, most likely."

"How is Micah?"

"He's...good. I guess. Paul's murder shook him. I don't think he was completely over him."

She frowned. "Did you know Paul?"

"No, I'm not from around here. Can you tell me about him?"

"Where do I start?" She sighed. "He was a sweetheart. I miss him so much. I keep thinking I'm going to run into him in the hall. It hasn't really sunk in yet that he's gone."

"Were you good friends?"

"Yes, very good friends. We talked pretty much every day, and I don't just mean in the hallway. He'd come over for a drink in the evening if he wasn't working, or I'd go over there. Sometimes he'd call me at work just to chat."

"Where do you work?"

"I work for the Pentagon."

"What kind of person was Paul?"

"He was a good person. One of the nicest, most thoughtful guys I've ever met. He was always looking out for me, always there for me. When I got dumped by a boyfriend completely unexpectedly, he was the one who held me while I cried myself to sleep. When the train I was on crashed, he was the one who came to the hospital and stayed with me. He was probably my best friend. He didn't deserve to die — especially like that."

She broke off and visibly tried to regain her composure.

"I talked to Razi Akiba earlier today. Do you know him?"

Her expression changed as if she'd bitten into something rotten. "Oh, I know him, alright."

"I take it you don't like him?"

"No, I don't."

"Any particular reason?"

She thought a moment before answering. "I'm not really certain. There's just something about him I don't trust. I always got the impression that he was using Paul, although I couldn't quite explain why or for what. I know he tried to break Paul and Micah up when they were still dating."

"He did? Did Micah know?"

"Well, I never told him. I talked to Paul about it, but he wasn't concerned. He said they had a solid relationship and it didn't matter what Razi said or did. It was well before Micah started talking about wanting to move away."

"Why did he try to break them up? Did he want to date Paul?"

"That's what I thought at the time. As far as I know, though, when Micah left the city and Paul was available, Razi never made a move. It always struck me as strange. If he was so hot for Paul, why didn't he go after him when he was single?"

"Maybe he's the type who's only interested in what he can't have."

"He does strike me as that type, but still..."

"Or maybe Razi was dating someone else by then."

"That's possible. I certainly don't keep up with his love life. I don't really spend much time in his company. Only if it was one of Paul's rare get-togethers."

"After Micah left, did Paul date anyone else?"

"Not seriously. He always said he was so busy with work that he didn't have the time or energy to date socially. I always suspected that it was hard, dating. You know, with his...line of work. Plus, I think he was still hung up on Micah. The breakup was hard on him."

"So there's no angry, jilted ex-boyfriend out there?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Did he have any enemies?"

"No. That's what's so scary about all this. It seems so random, and yet...the way he died... It feels so personal. Do you know what I mean? It seems like a murder with a lot of...passion. Does that make sense?"

"Passion?"

"Yes, strong emotion. Maybe I listen to too many murder podcasts, but somehow, it doesn't feel...premeditated? Like, there are so many ways to kill someone if you just want to get rid of them — poison, shooting, push them off a balcony and say they fell. Strangling somebody just seems like such a heat-of-the-moment thing to do. It's a very personal way to kill. The victim is actually in your hands as their life leaves them."

I shuddered at her words. "You sound like you've given this a lot of thought."

"Oh, I have. Trust me. I've lain awake almost every night since it happened, wondering what it was like for poor Paul in those last seconds, trying to figure out why on earth someone would want him dead. I just... I don't understand."

"And you probably never will. Most murder is senseless. There's no way you can understand it."

"I just wish I could do something to help."

"You can answer my questions and tell me everything you remember."

"I'll do my best."

"Great. Were you in a position to know who came to his apartment?"

"I didn't spy on him or anything, but yeah. Living next door to him and being friends, I saw people come and go. Like I said, the walls are paper thin in this building, so even if I didn't see them show up, I could hear when he had someone over."

"Who came?"

"He didn't have many friends. Besides Razi, mostly just...well..." She broke off and seemed unsure of how to continue.

I remembered earlier when she'd avoided mentioning Paul's "line of work."

"I know Paul was an escort," I said, just in case that was the hang-up.

That must have been it, because she relaxed slightly. "Oh, good. Well, besides Razi, it was mostly just his clients. He did in-calls and out-calls."

"Meaning?"

"In-calls are when the clients come to you, out-calls are when you go to them."

"So a lot of clients came here?"

"I wouldn't say a lot..."

"But some came here?"

"Yes."

"Did any come more than once?"

"You mean like regulars?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"I'm sure there were regulars," she said, "but I didn't pay much attention. It wasn't really any of my business, you know?" She paused, eyes flicking upward as she thought. "Still, there was this one guy I seemed to see fairly often. I assumed he was a client, though I can't say that for certain."

"Can you describe him?"

She screwed up her face in concentration. "That's the thing — he's hard to remember. He wasn't, like, strikingly handsome or ugly. Just...average. Completely ordinary."

I groaned inwardly. Ordinary people were the hardest to describe. No one remembered the middle of the bell curve. People like that disappeared into the background, like the insurance rep at Novak's office — pleasant, bland, forgettable.

I pressed on. "Hair color?"

"Brown? Or maybe gray. Somewhere in between, I think."

"Eye color?"

She shook her head. "No idea. I'm not being very helpful, am I?"

I gave her a tight smile but didn't answer. "What about height or build?"

"Average. Average height, average build."

Of course.

"Any distinguishing features? A scar? Tattoo? Jewelry?"

Another head shake. "Sorry. I just never looked that closely."

"Are you even sure it was the same guy each time?"

"Yes," she said with certainty. "That much I noticed. He came around enough that I recognized him, even if I can't describe him. He had this...vibe. Quiet. Shy. Kind of politely awkward when I'd run into him in the hallway or in the elevator."

I noted that down. It wasn't much, but it was something. "Okay. Anyone else stand out? Maybe someone who didn't seem to belong? Any other regulars?"

She hesitated. "Well... Razi's been showing up the past few weeks with this kid — really young-looking. Pretty boy. Curly red hair, big blue eyes. I don't know where he found him. Probably bought him off some crack whore."

I winced. "We've met. His name's Tad. He's a homeless kid Razi took in."

Her eyebrow arched, skeptical. "At what cost? Razi doesn't do charity. He doesn't do anything out of the kindness of his heart — if he even has one."

I didn't comment. I wasn't about to unpack Tad's situation with her.

"Did Paul ever confide in you?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I don't think Paul confided in anyone, not really. He was...private. But I guess he probably told me more than most."

"Had you seen him recently? In the weeks before his death?"

"Same as usual, I think. Maybe a little less. I was super busy — my sister's wedding, I was maid of honor." She paused. "Honestly, now that you mention it,

I don't think we talked much toward the end. He hadn't invited me over in a while."

"Do you have any idea why? Was something bothering him? Did he seem withdrawn?"

She frowned, then shook her head slowly. "I honestly don't know. I was so wrapped up in my own stuff...I didn't notice anything different." A flicker of realization crossed her face, followed by a wave of guilt. Her voice trembled. "God, what kind of friend am I? What if something was wrong and I just didn't see it? What if he was in danger and I was too distracted to help?"

Her voice edged toward panic, her eyes starting to gloss over.

"Hey," I said gently but firmly. "You can't blame yourself. We don't know what happened. Maybe it had nothing to do with you — or anyone. People drift sometimes. Maybe Paul was busy, too. Or preoccupied. Don't jump to conclusions until we have more information."

She nodded, sniffing. "I just— If he needed me, I would've been there. I would have done anything."

I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince more, me or herself.

"I believe you," I said, soothingly. "The only person responsible for Paul's death is whoever killed him. And you can help me catch them."

"You really think I can?"

"Absolutely. So...can you think of anyone, no matter how unlikely, who might've wanted him dead?"

She bit her lip. "I wish I could. Paul was...he was one of the good ones. I just can't imagine anyone hating him enough to kill him."

"What about Razi?"

She gave a dismissive wave. "No. I mean, he's a sleazeball, sure, but he's not a strangler. If he wanted you dead, I think he'd prefer something more...subtle. Poison, maybe. Or he'd just ruin your life from the shadows. Strangling feels too personal. Too messy."

"So nothing stands out?"

She shook her head, defeated. "No. Nothing. I'm sorry, I really wish I could help more."

"You already have," I said, even if I wasn't entirely convinced it was true.

I wasn't coming up with an abundance of suspects so far. Or motives, either, for that matter. I needed to get back to the physical evidence.

An inkling of an idea began to form. "But there's more you can do..."

"Like what?"

"You've been in Paul's apartment, right?"

"Many times."

"Would you walk through it with me? You can tell me if anything is missing. Razi said he didn't think so, but you'd know better than I would."

"But we shouldn't be in there. It's a police crime scene."

"The police don't seem very eager to solve this crime. We might discover something that would help me find Paul's killer. Besides, they're done with it by now."

"What if we get caught?"

"I have a contact on the police force," I said, hoping it was true.

She was quiet for what seemed like an eternity. I could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

Finally, she took a deep breath and looked into my eyes. "Fine. If you really think it'll help, let's do it."

We crept out of her apartment like a couple of cat burglars after she checked to make sure there was no one in sight. I caught a glimpse of movement in the stairwell, so I knew Chris was still on duty — whatever that was worth.

I unlocked the door again and Sabrina quickly slipped in, with me close behind.

As before, the first thing I noticed was the unpleasant odor. In addition to mildew, I also detected a faintly rotten smell.

"Ugh," Sabrina said under her breath, as she reached for the lightswitch. She knew where it was, so, this time, there was no fumbling around in the dark.

She gasped as the room lit up.

I didn't blame her.

The apartment looked like a war zone. I'd never seen anything like it — not in real life. The layout was a mirror image of Sabrina's, but the resemblance ended there. Where her place was polished and curated, like a photo spread in *Dwell*, Paul's had been meticulously, almost vindictively, destroyed. This wasn't the aftermath of a robbery. It was personal. Violent. Rage-filled.

Razi's description hadn't even scratched the surface.

The couch — a sleek, mid-century piece with a wooden frame — had been gutted. Its cushions were torn

to ribbons, their insides torn out and tossed across the room like snowdrifts of stuffing. Shattered ceramic and glass littered the floor, gleaming dangerously among the fabric guts.

The artwork was in even worse shape. Dozens of paintings and drawings had been ripped from the walls, their canvases slashed or crumpled, frames cracked and twisted. Jagged shards of glass stuck out at odd angles, catching the light like broken teeth. Several of the paintings had clearly been originals — oils and watercolors, probably expensive. Whoever did this hadn't just wanted to take things. They'd wanted to erase him.

Even the television — a flatscreen that looked practically new — was almost split in half.

Against one wall, a large aquarium sat on a wrought-iron stand, its thick glass face now spiderwebbed with cracks and gaping holes. The water had long since emptied onto the floor, soaking into the wool Persian rug beneath it. A few limp, lifeless fish still lay in the puddles, their scales dulled, their bodies stiff. The air was rank — a wet, rotting stench of mildew and decay, overlaid with something coppery and faintly organic.

I wrinkled my nose. Between the soggy carpet, the dead fish, and whatever the humidity had cooked up in here since the crime, the place reeked.

Sabrina didn't speak. She just stared, taking it all in — the violence of it, the ruin. I could see the questions forming behind her eyes, the same ones that had been haunting me since I started this case.

This wasn't a robbery.

This was a message.

Or a breakdown.

Or both.

"Oh my God." Sabrina whispered. "Why didn't they clean this up?"

"I don't even know where to begin..." I spoke in a low tone.

It seemed somehow inappropriate to raise my voice, as if we were in a mausoleum. I hoped I didn't sound as overwhelmed as I felt.

"How did the police find anything? Wouldn't they have to collect all this as evidence or something? They always do on TV."

"I don't know. Maybe they aren't done here after all. Don't touch anything."

"I already touched the light switch," she said, a hint of panic entering her voice. "I should have never agreed to this."

"Calm down. I'll fix it." I pulled my sleeve down over my hand and carefully wiped the plastic light switch clean. "There. If you have to touch something, make sure you put your shirt over your hand. And for God's sake, don't take anything."

"I'm not touching anything else. I think we should leave."

"We're here now. We might as well look around."

"I'm not moving."

"Can you tell if anything's missing?"

"How should I know? How can you tell anything in this mess?"

"What did he have of value?"

She took a deep breath. "His electronic equipment." That was all plainly visible amidst the rubble on the floor. "His art collection." Also readily identifiable. "And his coin collection."

"Do you know where he kept that?"

"In the bedroom."

I started making my way carefully across the room, glass crackling under my feet. As I passed the kitchen, I noted the destruction continued in there. All the dishes had been pulled from the cabinets and shattered on the floor.

"This couldn't have been quiet. The whole place is wrecked. You said the walls are paper thin. Why didn't anyone hear something?"

Sabrina's shoulders drew up. "I wasn't home." She sounded defensive.

"I didn't just mean you. What about the other neighbors?"

"Mrs. Gupta across the hall is legally deaf. She wouldn't have heard if the killer was smashing up her own apartment. When she watches TV, I can hear it as clearly as if I were sitting next to her on her couch."

"And the other neighbor? There are four apartments on this floor."

"That's Kent. I don't know what he does, but he's away on business more than he's home. You could ask him, but chances are good he wasn't here when Paul was..."

Her eyes skated across the wreckage and she shuddered.

"How about the apartment beneath us?" I said. "If anyone had been in, they would have had to hear a lot of bumps and crashes when all these things hit the floor."

"You're probably right, but I have no idea who lives there."

I made a mental note to check in with Mrs. Gupta, Kent, and the person downstairs before I left.

Moving cautiously toward the bedroom, I grasped the doorknob with the hem of my shirt, trying to avoid leaving fingerprints. The door creaked open slowly. I reached into the dark room to find the light switch—

And then everything went sideways.

My breath hitched in my throat. And stayed there.

A sudden, overwhelming wave of terror crashed over me. Cold and suffocating.

I couldn't breathe.

My hands flew to my neck instinctively, clawing at invisible fingers that seemed to tighten with every passing second. Panic surged through me as my vision tunneled. My chest burned. My knees buckled. I stumbled back, scraping my shoulder against the doorframe as the world began to dim around the edges.

Somewhere, distantly, I heard Sabrina shouting my name, but the sound was muffled, as if I were underwater — or slipping out of the world entirely.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it was over.

Air rushed into my lungs in huge, ragged gasps. I collapsed against the doorframe, drenched in sweat, shaking uncontrollably.

Sabrina was in front of me in an instant, her eyes wild. “What the fuck was that?” Her voice cracked, shrill and close to hysteria.

“I...I don’t know,” I panted. “I couldn’t breathe. It felt like—”

“Felt like what?” she demanded, her voice rising.

“Like I was being strangled.”

She froze. Her eyes widened, and she took an unconscious step back. “That’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking,” I said, still gulping air. “It felt like...like someone wrapped their hands around my throat and just squeezed. Hard.”

Her face drained of color. She glanced into the dark bedroom, the unlit space now ominous, predatory.

“That’s where they found him,” she whispered. “That’s where Paul’s body was. In the doorway.”

My skin prickled, and every hair stood on end. I remembered Razi telling me where he’d found Paul’s body.

She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and took another step back from the door. “What the hell is going on?” she asked, but it wasn’t really a question. Not to me. Not to herself. She was trying to hold something at bay — logic, fear, reality.

I didn’t have an answer. But whatever had just happened, it was unlike anything I’d ever experienced. Far more terrifying than my encounters with Amalie.

Something in that room remembered.

And it wanted me to know.

## Chapter 14

What had just happened?

Had I somehow experienced Paul's attack? Were my gifts manifesting again?

The thought that I might have actually felt Paul dying — not just imagined it, but physically and viscerally felt it — made my stomach churn. But to what end? The police had already determined he'd been strangled. I didn't need a front-row seat in some psychic horror show to confirm that.

So what was the point? What was I supposed to learn from this...replay?

Maybe nothing. Maybe there was no point. Maybe the so-called "gift" didn't come with neat little takeaways or clues wrapped in a bow. Maybe sometimes it just was — chaotic, uncontrolled, and terrifying.

Still, the experience had made one thing crystal clear: I needed to talk to Judy. Soon. Whether I liked it or not, this ability — this curse, this whatever — it wasn't going away. I needed training and I needed it now.

A soft, frightened sound pulled me out of my spiraling thoughts.

Sabrina whimpered. "We should leave," she said, edging back toward the living room, her eyes fixed on me like I might suddenly sprout fangs and start speaking in tongues.

I nodded numbly, ready to follow — until I wasn't.

Before I'd taken two full steps, a strange sensation swept over me. It was like an invisible rope had looped around my chest and was gently, insistently tugging me back toward the bedroom. Not physical exactly — more like a psychic current pulling me backward.

I stopped, turned slowly, and faced the dark doorway again. The pull intensified.

“What are you doing?” Sabrina's voice wavered. “Killian...don't.”

“I...” My voice was barely above a whisper. “I have to go in there.”

“No! You can't!”

“I need to.”

She backed up farther. “I'm not going with you.”

“That's fine. Stay here.”

I stepped through the threshold.

The light from the living room spilled behind me, but as I entered, it felt like I'd passed through a veil. My body cast a long shadow, plunging the rest of the room into gloom. The air changed — thicker, colder, charged.

It wasn't just darkness. The shadows felt alive, as if something unseen stirred just beyond my vision. And in the depths of those shadows was pain. Sorrow. Panic. A psychic scream still echoing against the walls.

I stopped, rooted to the spot. It was like hitting an emotional wall. My body refused to move forward. My legs trembled.

And then, without thinking, I reached toward the wall behind the tall armoire. My fingers slipped behind it with unerring precision and flipped the switch.

The overhead light flared on.

I didn't even wonder how I knew where it was. Somehow, I just did.

As the room filled with light, the heavy, suffocating weight lifted — like a tide receding. The feeling of death receded too, but not completely. It still hovered at the edges, like something half-seen in a mirror.

The bedroom, in sharp contrast to the rest of the apartment, was pristine. Tidy. It looked almost untouched. For a moment, I thought maybe the intruder had spared this room. Then I realized that no, it had to have been cleaned. Cleared for evidence.

Even as the idea formed, my knees buckled slightly, and the room shimmered, like a heat mirage. The clean surfaces blurred, then doubled. Overlaid across the neat bed and dusted dressers was a second image — fainter, flickering. A psychic double exposure.

I stood in two versions of the room at once: the orderly version the police had left behind, and the real one — the one Razi had found.

Drawers had been ripped out, their contents dumped in chaotic piles. Clothes were strewn everywhere, tangled and tossed. The mattress had been yanked half off the box spring. A shattered lamp lay beside the overturned nightstand, ceramic shards glittering. I noticed a scattering of coin holders — white cardboard squares with shiny bits inside, flung across the floor like forgotten toys.

And in the middle of it all — on the exact spot where I was standing — was a body.

Paul.

Or at least, what was left of him.

He lay half-in, half-out of the bedroom, his legs sprawled toward the living room, his upper body twisted unnaturally. His face was contorted in a rictus of pain and terror.

I couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

Even in death, he radiated agony.

This wasn't just a memory. It was an imprint. A moment so charged, so violent, it had burned itself into the walls, into the very air of this place.

And now, it had found me.

I closed my eyes, tried to slow my breathing. It wasn't real. Not anymore.

But the pain in my chest told me otherwise.

And this time, it wasn't mine.

When I reopened my eye, the ghost image was gone, the room back to normal. I sighed. Just what I needed: yet another demonstration of my gifts.

I'd deal with that later.

*Focus.*

I crept into the bedroom, each step slow and deliberate, skirting the area where Paul's body had once lain. I was certain the police had already combed through every inch. So why did I feel this invisible tug, drawing me back here? What was I expecting to find?

Or worse — who was I expecting?

A chill ran through me.

“What?” I rasped aloud, my voice foreign to my own ears. “What am I supposed to see? Why bring me here?”

Silence.

I took another cautious step, glancing around the quiet room. “Look, Paul...or whoever you are. If you

want me to understand why I'm here, what this is, you're going to have to give me something.”

Still nothing. I was just beginning to feel absurd, muttering to shadows in an empty room, when I heard it: the faintest sound, barely more than a whisper. A delicate rustling, like paper sliding across paper.

I froze.

I turned slowly toward the armoire beside the door.

It stood like a sentry — tall and old. The inlaid wood was polished to a soft sheen, its crown molding nearly brushing the ceiling. It looked impossibly heavy, the kind of furniture that outlives its owners. I couldn't imagine what a bear it must have been to move.

I approached warily, hand outstretched, and opened the double doors.

Empty.

A frown tugged at my brow. Nothing inside. No clothes. Just empty space.

Then the sound came again — clearer now, just above me.

I tilted my head. It was coming from the top of the armoire.

Of course.

I stepped back, scanning the room. Nothing here tall enough to stand on. I sighed and retreated to the living room.

Sabrina looked up, arms crossed, eyes sharp with impatience.

“What are you doing now?”

“Is there anything I can stand on?” I asked.

She raised a skeptical brow. “I’ve got a step stool in my apartment.”

“Could I borrow it?”

She hesitated, then exhaled a long-suffering sigh. “Sure. Why not? Anything to get this over with.”

She disappeared out the door and returned a moment later, carrying a small folding step ladder.

“Perfect. Thanks.” I offered a tight smile and headed back to the bedroom.

Climbing the steps, I finally got a view of the top of the armoire — and immediately noticed how spotless it was. No dust, no cobwebs. Paul must have been a meticulous housekeeper.

The top had a slight lip around the edge, maybe two inches tall, forming a shallow tray. On each side, a small block of wood — about one-by-three inches — was affixed. It didn’t make sense. They weren’t decorative. They weren’t structural.

*Almost like handles.*

It was like a light flicked on in my brain. I suddenly remembered something Steve had said back when he and Adam were hunting for antiques for the bed and breakfast. Some old furniture, he’d explained, was designed with hidden compartments: desks with secret drawers, chests with false bottoms, and — most relevant to me now — armoires with concealed tops.

I grabbed the wooden blocks and lifted.

It took a bit of effort, but slowly — inch by inch — the top panel of the armoire began to slide upward. Once it started, it moved with surprising smoothness, opening to reveal a hidden compartment.

Underneath the false top was a shallow, four-inch-deep cavity — cleverly camouflaged to blend seamlessly into the cabinet's construction. You'd never notice the subtle difference between the inside and the outside unless you were specifically looking for it.

Inside was a single, letter-sized envelope.

That was it.

No bundles of cash. No flash drive. Just a lone envelope, resting precisely in the center of the hidden compartment, as if it had been waiting.

If Paul had hidden it here, it must have mattered.

I picked it up. The flap was tucked in but not sealed. When I lifted it open, a small key slid out and bounced softly on the carpet at my feet.

I hopped down to retrieve it and held it up. It was small — maybe for a drawer or a lockbox — silver, with an unusual, almost old-fashioned shape. No logo. No numbers. No clue what it opened.

Brow furrowed, I turned back to the envelope. Inside was a single handwritten sheet, dated a little over a month ago.

*I never thought when I bought this armoire that I'd have any use for the secret compartment on top—and up to a few weeks ago, I didn't. If you've found this, then one of two things has happened. Either you were looking for it — congratulations — or I'm not around anymore and you're probably the new owner of this beautiful piece of furniture. If it's the latter, feel free to throw this away. It's no longer of any use to me.*

*If it's the former...then you've got what  
you wanted. I hope you're happy.*

*Sincerely,  
Paul Flynn*

A chill moved up my spine.

It wasn't a suicide note, not exactly, but it read like someone who thought they might not be around much longer. And if that was the case...who had Paul been afraid of? What had he gotten himself into?

And, more importantly, what did this key unlock?

I stared at it again. Smooth. Cool. Nondescript. And utterly unhelpful.

There had been no locked drawers, no safes, no hidden compartments beyond the one I'd just opened. Had someone already taken whatever it went to? Had the killer found the match and just missed the key?

Or had Paul hidden that too?

"Killian?" Sabrina's voice drifted in from the other room. "I think we've been here too long. We should go."

She wasn't wrong. I'd lost track of time, and we were pushing our luck.

"Coming," I called.

I hesitated one last moment, then folded the letter neatly and slid it back into the envelope. I slipped both the envelope and the key into my pocket, then replaced the hidden panel with care. Using my shirt, I gave the surface a quick but thorough wipe, focusing on any spots I might have touched. It was probably too little, too late, but a guy can hope.

Stepladder in hand, I returned to the living room. Sabrina eyed me. "Did you find what you were searching for?"

I paused, then shook my head. "No luck."

Her brow arched, unconvinced. "You were in there a long time. What exactly were you doing?"

"Just looking around," I said with a shrug. "I thought you were ready to go."

"I am. But you're avoiding the question. Why did you need the ladder?"

I rolled my eyes. "I wanted to check the top of the armoire. It's too tall for me to see up there without help. Okay? You want to make short jokes, go for it later. Right now, let's get the hell out of here."

Whether she bought it or not, she didn't press. She crossed to the door, cracked it open, and peeked into the hallway. After a moment, she turned back and gave a nod. Coast clear.

We slipped out quietly, careful to leave everything just as we'd found it.

Back in the safety of her apartment, I finally let out the breath I'd been holding. I turned to face her.

"I appreciate your help, Sabrina. I know it wasn't easy for you."

Her face softened just a bit, though her arms remained crossed. "Yeah, well...I guess I owed it to Paul. Just don't get caught. If you do, I was never there."

"Understood," I said.

"But...what happened to you?" She almost seemed as if she wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

"What do you mean?"

Her eyes narrowed. "You know what I mean. When you said you felt like you were being strangled. What was that?"

I shrugged, hoping I appeared nonchalant. I had avoided the subject while I searched the room and wasn't quite ready to tackle it there with Sabrina either.

"Are you some sort of psychic?"

"What? Why would you think that?" I asked, unnerved by her guess.

"It seems like the only explanation."

"Maybe I just have an overactive imagination."

"I saw you. You weren't imagining anything. You looked...you looked like you were being choked, except there was no one else there. Your face was so red and your eyes were bulging. It was terrifying."

A shiver raced up my spine. "I don't know what was going on, and I'm telling you the truth. Nothing like that has ever happened to me before. I don't understand it any more than you do. I really appreciate your help, but I have to go."

She put a hand out and caught my arm as I turned to leave. "Can I at least have your number? In case something else turns up?"

I fished out a card and handed it to her. I knew it was unprofessional of me, but I wanted to put as much distance between myself and the whole unsettling experience as possible. I let myself out of Sabrina's apartment without another word.

I found Chris sitting in the stairwell, head propped on her hands, looking eminently bored. As I appeared at the top of the stairs, she glanced up, relief written plainly on her face. I expected to hear

recriminations about taking so long, but before I could say a word, she bounced to her feet. "I'm so sorry."

I was confused. "Sorry for what?"

"I was so busy watching the stairs it never occurred to me that someone would come out of their apartment and ambush you. When I saw the gun I almost shit my pants."

I gave a halfhearted chuckle. "You and me both. It turned out to be a fake, though."

"Fake gun? That seems dangerous."

"That's what I said. Anyway, her name is Sabrina, and she was Paul's neighbor and friend."

"Great. So she was helpful?"

"Yes and no."

"Explain, please."

"She didn't have much to offer, but I found something in Paul's apartment. He wrote a letter and hid it with a key. The way the killer tore the place to pieces, it seems obvious he was looking for something. I have a feeling it was that key."

"But the killer didn't find it. You did."

"It was very well hidden."

"If it was so well hidden, how did you find it when you were only in there for, what? Like fifteen minutes? Where was it?"

"Um...in a secret compartment on top of an armoire."

"An arm what?"

"It's a big piece of furniture, like a wardrobe. People kept their clothes in them before they started building closets."

"How in the world did you think to even look in there?"

"Just a hunch." I said, using her own words from earlier against her. "But the point is, I don't know what the key goes to."

"What about the chick with the gun?"

"Sabrina? What about her?"

"Would she know what the key is for?"

"I didn't tell her I found it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I guess I felt that the fewer people who know the better. Besides, I'm not sure I trust her completely."

"Oh. Good point. So what did the key look like?"

I fished it out of my pocket and held it out in the palm of my hand.

The color drained from Chris's face. "Killian! You removed evidence from the scene of a crime."

"What was I supposed to do? How can I find out what the key goes to if I leave it in there?"

"We could have told the police and let them handle it. It is an ongoing murder investigation. Being in there in the first place is bad enough. Taking stuff is more than even I can get away with."

"Well, it's too late now. I already took it."

"You have to put it back."

"It's too risky. I'd have to explain to Sabrina why I was sneaking back in there without her and she's already suspicious of me as it is."

"Hello?" She leaned over and knocked lightly on my forehead. "Is anyone home in there? You've now tampered with evidence. That's a criminal offense. You

have more to worry about than what Sabrina thinks of you. We have to let the police know about the letter and the key. What did the letter say, by the way?"

I reached into my pocket again, and Chris smacked her forehead. "Please tell me you didn't take that too."

I grinned sheepishly and produced the offending object.

Chris sighed heavily. "Holy fuck! What were you thinking?"

"I, uh...guess I wasn't."

"Clearly. We've got to get back in there now."

"And then what?"

"We call the police."

"And say what? 'Oh, by the way, I just happened to be snooping around Paul Flynn's pad today, and you won't believe what I found in the bedroom.'"

"It doesn't have to be like that. We can make an anonymous tip."

"Again...and say what?"

"We can say we're concerned friends who know Paul had a hidden compartment in his armoire-thingy. We can tell them we think there might be evidence in it. Or we can just let my dad know, and he can handle it."

"Then I'll never learn what the key is for."

"We can find out. My dad knows people."

I hated to admit it, but I was beginning to think she might be right. "Only one problem. Even if we tell the police, there's no guarantee they'll do anything. It's not like they've been exactly on the ball with this case. That's the whole reason I was hired in the first place."

"So what do you propose then?"

"I stick the letter and the key back in my pocket, find out what the key goes to, and take it from there."

"What about the police?"

"They don't know the key exists so it's not like they're looking for it. They missed it when they did their search."

"What if you turn up something that you can take to the police? How will you explain the key then?"

I thought for a minute. "I'll just tell them I was given the key with an anonymous tip."

She raised an eyebrow. "You mean you'll lie?"

"It's not a complete lie..."

She narrowed her eyes and gave me a stern look. "We're not done talking about your 'anonymous tipster,' but we can't stand here in the hallway all day. If we're done here, why don't you come back to my house with me? We can discuss this further there. My dad should be home from work soon."

"Actually, I should check in with some of the neighbors first, if that's okay."

She sighed. "Sure. I'll just wait here." She patted the wall. "I'm starting to really like hanging out in stairwells."

I laughed and returned to Paul's floor. Ignoring Sabrina's door, I went to the one directly across the hall. According to Sabrina, this was Mrs. Gupta's apartment. I knocked and waited a minute. When no one answered, I knocked again, a little louder this time, remembering that Mrs. Gupta was hearing impaired. I heard some shuffling through the door and, a few seconds later, the sounds of locks being undone.

The door swung open to reveal a bent, frail woman wearing a brightly colored sari. Her face was deeply creased, and her steel-gray hair was pulled back into a bun. Despite her age, her eyes were sharp and sparkling, and they quickly gave me a once-over. From her expression, it appeared she found me lacking.

"What do you want?" She had a heavy, melodic accent.

"I'm looking into Paul Flynn's murder." I spoke slowly and much louder than usual to be certain she would be able to hear me. I wasn't sure how deaf she was. "I'm hoping you can answer some questions for me."

Her frown deepened. "You do not have to yell. I have already talked to the police."

I lowered my voice sheepishly. "Yes, I know, but I've been hired by a concerned friend. Were you home the day Mr. Flynn was killed?"

She glared at me, and for a moment, I thought she was going to refuse to answer. "I do not get out much, so I'm sure I was."

"Did you hear anything unusual — loud crashes or shouting, perhaps?"

She shook her head. "I didn't hear anything. I probably had my TV on."

"And you didn't see anyone suspicious?"

"No. Nothing. I cannot help you." She shut the door.

I sighed and turned to the last door: Kent, the traveling businessman. If he was away as much as Sabrina said, I doubted he'd be home, but it was worth a knock.

As I suspected, no one answered. I pulled out a business card and jotted a quick note asking him to contact me at his earliest convenience, then stuck it in the door jamb.

I rejoined Chris in the stairwell. "Going down. This is the last one. I want to check the apartment under Paul's."

She grinned. "You know where to find me."

I knocked on the appropriate door — two firm raps, polite but audible. No answer.

I tried again, this time with a little more force. Still nothing.

After waiting about a little longer, I gave it one final knock, slower and louder.

A few seconds later, the door of the neighboring unit flew open. A woman in a frumpy, ill-fitting gray pantsuit stepped into the hallway. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, with roots that hadn't seen a touch-up in months and tired eyes that said she was already over this conversation.

"That one's vacant," she said, her tone tinged with annoyance, as if I'd interrupted something far more important than whatever I was doing.

"Oh," I said, flashing a sheepish smile. "Sorry. I didn't know. Do you happen to know how long it's been empty?"

She narrowed her eyes at me, clearly sizing me up. "Several weeks at least," she said finally. "They were doing renovations after the last guy moved out. Had just about finished when the ceiling got water damage. Had to rip the whole thing out."

Her gaze sharpened. “Why? You looking to rent?”

“No, no. I’m actually looking into the murder of Paul Flynn. He lived in the unit right above this one.”

Her expression shifted immediately — suspicion replaced by something colder. “Yeah, I know who he was,” she said. “You don’t have a murder in your building and not know about it. That water damage I mentioned? That came from the mess upstairs.”

“Right,” I said. “Makes sense. Well maybe you can help me.”

She folded her arms. “What do you want from me?”

“I was just wondering if you were home the day when it happened.”

“I’m in and out. I’m a realtor. Why?”

“Did you hear anything from the apartment above you? Any loud crashes? Shouting? Breaking glass or dishes?”

She thought about it, lips pursing as her eyes flicked upward in memory. Then she shook her head. “Nope. Nothing like that.”

“Anything unusual at all?”

“Nothing I can think of.” A pause. “Look, are we done here? I’ve got a client to call back.”

“Yeah. That’s all. Thanks for your time.”

Without so much as a goodbye, she stepped back inside and shut the door behind her.

Another dead end.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the blank, silent hallway hoping the next person I talked to might actually be helpful.

I left to get Chris, but she met me halfway. "That didn't go so well."

I rolled my eyes. "Not at all. Complete waste of time. I guess we're done here. Until I can find out how to get in touch with Paul's family or the guy that owns the escort agency Paul worked for, I don't really have anywhere else to go."

"So we're off to see my dad?"

"Um, sure."

I was somewhat nervous. Chris's father sounded a little authoritarian, and authority figures tended to make me uncomfortable. My therapist would probably say it was leftover baggage from my father.

"Don't worry," she said, reading me like a book.

"Dad's just a big teddy bear."

"Teddy bear. Right."

"Really. You'll see."

She looped her arm through mine and started dragging me down the stairs.

From the Metro station, it was a short trip to the neighborhood where she and her dad lived with her twelve-year-old brother. Her mom had passed away a few years previously from cancer, she'd told me on the ride. Their home was a two-story brownstone townhouse like the ones I'd seen in Paul's old neighborhood — perhaps not quite as nice, but still well-kept and very welcoming.

Chris let us in. "Dad?" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

While we waited for an answer, I took in the entryway. It was wainscoted in dark wood, whose rich patina could only have come from years of polishing.

Above the paneling, the walls were painted white. A mirror hung over a small table by the door, and in the corner stood an old-fashioned, brass coat tree bearing an assortment of outerwear, including a police uniform jacket. A hallway laid with a carpet runner gave access to the rear of the house. A staircase led up to the second floor. Doors opened to the right and left at the front of the hall and again farther down.

"In here," a man replied from the room to our left.

Chris stuck her head in. "I have Killian with me."

"Well, don't make him stand in the hall. Come on in and have a seat."

"I didn't want to interrupt you if you were busy," she said as she entered the room, motioning me to follow.

Louis Silver's den was cozy if a bit shabby. A ratty old sofa faced a big-screen TV, while an equally beat-up recliner stood off to one side.

Chris's father sat at a large wooden desk against the front wall, under the window overlooking the street. He was a big man, tall and broad-shouldered with the beginnings of a beer belly. His short dark hair was peppered with gray, and his pale blue eyes seemed tired but kind. He pushed away a stack of papers and smiled a warm greeting in my direction.

"I welcome the interruption. The problem with being a policeman is there's too much damn paperwork. You must be Killian."

I shook his outstretched hand and smiled in return. "Yes, sir. And trust me, Mr. Silver, there's plenty of paperwork in the private-investigator business too."

He laughed. "I don't doubt it. And none of this 'Mr. Silver' business. Call me Lou. Have a seat."

I sat next to Chris on the sofa.

"So how'd the first day on the case go, Christina?"

"It went okay, I guess. I mostly just stood around waiting."

He smiled indulgently. "I told you most investigative work is hurry up and wait."

I almost laughed at how much he sounded like Novak when he said that.

Chris continued, "Still, Killian learned quite a bit, so it was worth it."

"I couldn't have done without you," I hastened to assure her. "You were a huge help."

She laughed. "I don't know about that, but thanks."

Lou turned his attention to me. "Now, this isn't my case, so I don't know much more than you do, but I did talk to a couple people closer to the investigation after I talked to Shane. They don't have any solid leads and no real viable suspects. Sounds like the place was pretty thoroughly trashed so there's not much in the way of evidence, but they're still waiting on a few tests, fingernail swabs, etc. They didn't seem too confident. Why don't you fill me in on what you found out today?"

I quickly sketched out the details for him, including my interviews that day — leaving out, of course, my search of the apartment and finding the key and letter.

When I finished, he nodded thoughtfully.

"Sounds like you're doing a good job. You got more out

of that Razi character than our boys, although that's not surprising that he wouldn't be chatty with the cops. That's not at all said to diminish your accomplishments. Shane was right about you." His face suddenly creased into a big smile. "So how *is* old Shane Novak these days?"

"He's good."

"Is he keeping busy?"

"Busier than he'd like, according to him, but in all honesty, I don't think he'd have it any other way."

He laughed. "You're right about that. He was one hell of a cop. You've got a good teacher when it comes to learning the investigative process."

"You don't have to tell me."

"How about the home front? Has he moved on after his wife's death?"

"You're one to talk, Dad," Chris said.

"Hush," he said, but his eyes were warm. "That's my business. I'm prying into Shane's right now."

I laughed. "I don't think he'd mind. He's been dating someone for a little while now. Her name is Judy."

"Have you met her?"

"Oh, yes. I introduced them."

"She's a good woman?"

"The best."

"Good for him. He deserves it."

"If the inquisition is over," Chris said, "I'd better show Killian how to find his car so he can head home. He has a long drive."

"You're welcome to stay here tonight," Lou offered.

"I appreciate that, but I'd really like to get back."

"The offer stands anytime you need it. Shane says you're a fine young man, and that's all the recommendation I need."

I blushed at the compliment and nodded awkwardly. Chris saved me from further embarrassment by grabbing my arm and dragging me toward the door.

"It was nice to meet you," I called out at the last minute as I remembered my manners.

"You too, Killian," he called back.

Just as we were walking out the door, a skinny kid with dark hair and eyes exactly like Chris's came down the hall.

"Hey, Chris," he said, eyeing me over.

Chris stopped with a small sigh. "Hello, Kevin. I don't have time to talk right now. We have to go."

"You aren't even going to introduce me?"

"Kevin, Killian. Killian, Kevin."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Kevin asked in that annoying singsong voice kids use. "What happened? Decide to switch teams?"

Chris merely dragged me out and shut the door firmly behind us.

"That was my twerpy little brother," she said in an aggrieved tone.

"Hey, I have one too. I can't tell you how many times he's embarrassed me in front of people. And it's usually at the door too."

She laughed. "He's not so bad, really. It was hard on him when Mom died."

"I'm sure it was hard on all of you."

She shrugged. "I was prepared — or as prepared as you can be for something like that. She'd suffered a long time. At least she's not suffering now."

I nodded, and we walked the rest of the way to the station in silence. When I turned and prepared to say goodbye, Chris surprised me by inserting money into the fare-card machine.

"What are you doing? I can find my own way now. You don't have to come with me."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. I have a few questions for you."

"What kind of questions?" I had a sinking feeling I already knew the answer.

She finished getting her fare card before facing me with a look of resolve. "Earlier today we both agreed we couldn't be partners unless we were honest with each other. You avoided the issue when I asked earlier, but now I want to know about this help you got finding the key — and you're going to tell me the whole story if you want me to keep working with you."



## Chapter 15

I stared at Chris while trying to decide what to say. She'd caught me off guard by demanding the whole story.

After a few minutes of silence and internal debate, I made up my mind. If she was going to be my partner in this investigation — and I really hoped she would be since it seemed we worked well together — then she had a right to know the truth. All of it.

Especially if I had another one of my "psychic friends" moments in front of her. She needed to be prepared. If she couldn't handle it or chose not to believe it, that was up to her, but at least she'd understand what was going on.

So once we were settled on a train, I told her everything.

I started with Seth — his murder and how he had started coming to see me. Then I filled her in on Amalie. After that, I tried to explain what Judy and Seth had told me about my gifts — and how I'd been reluctant to use or even acknowledge them. I finished up by explaining everything that had happened in Paul's apartment.

To my surprise — and relief — she just nodded and said, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. It's no biggie."

"No biggie? Dead people *talk* to me, or at least *communicate* with me, and all you have to say is *no biggie*?"

She gave me a withering look. “Why should I care? A good investigator uses whatever tools he’s got. I don’t pretend to understand your... gifts, and honestly, I’m glad I don’t have them. But you do — and if they help crack the case, then use them.”

She leaned back, arms crossed. “I mean, come on. That key in the armoire? You never would’ve found it without whatever *that* was. So yeah. The results speak for themselves.”

I nodded, thoughtfully. She had a point.

"What's the big deal? You have a unique ability. I don't envy you for it, but it could definitely have its uses. My advice, unsolicited as it is, would be to get all the training you can for those gifts. Maybe you'll be able to control the, er, attacks like the one you had in the apartment when you felt like you were being strangled. At any rate, the better you understand them, the more helpful and the less scary they'll be."

"You know, that's pretty much what Judy and Seth have been saying all along, but hearing it from you seems to make more sense."

She laughed. "Well, at least something makes sense."

The Metro pulled into New Carrollton station just about then, and we said our goodbyes.

Our conversation gave me a lot to think about on the long drive home. It was the first time I’d ever laid everything out like that for someone else—laid myself out like that. And Chris was only the second person I’d ever told about Seth. I’d never even mentioned him to Micah, and I wasn’t sure I ever would. Some things just

felt too raw, too personal. But with Chris, it had been different.

There was something about her I trusted instinctively. Maybe it was her no-nonsense attitude or the way she stayed grounded no matter what I threw at her. She had a certain quiet steadiness — practical, clear-eyed, unflinching. I found it oddly comforting, especially when I was feeling anything but steady myself.

But more than that, something shifted in me during that conversation. As I tried to explain things to her — the ghosts, the visions, the cold touch of the unknown — I realized I was finally coming to fully accept my gifts. Not just an unwilling acknowledgement or a simmering resentment. I was starting to really appreciate how they could become useful in my chosen career. But that realization also hammered home the fact that I needed training. Real training. Not just asking for occasional advice and hoping for the best. Not just waiting and reacting.

Of course, that meant I'd have to face them — these things inside me that I didn't fully understand, didn't entirely want. I'd have to open the door instead of just peeking through the keyhole. And part of me was terrified of what I might find on the other side.

Still, I knew I had no choice. Things were escalating. Whatever had happened in Paul's apartment wasn't just another psychic blip.

While somewhat similar to what I'd experienced in the cellar with Amalie, it was also entirely different — strange and terrifying in ways I couldn't quite explain. With Amalie, I'd felt as though I were slipping into her memories, seeing her life from behind her eyes. But with

Paul...it wasn't like stepping into the past. It was as if his death had reached forward in time and wrapped its hands around my throat, dragging me into his final moments as they happened — right there, in the present.

Was it a new gift? A deeper manifestation of the ones I already knew about? Or was something else beginning to surface? Something darker?

I didn't know. But I couldn't afford to keep running from it. Not anymore.

I arrived home around eight to an empty house, which suited me just fine. As much as I loved Adam and Steve, I wasn't ready to go into an explanation of my strange business trip.

I went up to my room and debated about whether or not to call Judy. I could wait until the next day to talk to her, but I was still shaken by my experiences earlier and my conversation with Chris was still fresh in my mind. I decided to call her and see if she was free.

I breathed a sigh of relief when she answered on the third ring.

"Hi. It's Killian. Are you busy right now?" I asked.

There was a slight hesitation. "Not really."

"I need to talk to you."

"Is it about...?" Her voice was filled with tension.

"Jake? No, this is personal."

"You want to talk now?"

"Yes, please. If it isn't too much trouble."

"No, I don't suppose it is. Do you want to come here, or would you rather I came to you?"

"Well, I just drove home from D.C., so I'd rather you came here, but it doesn't really matter."

"No, that's fine. I'll be over shortly."

She hung up without saying goodbye. I had the feeling I was interrupting something, but she was too polite to say so.

True to her word, Judy was knocking on the front door in half an hour.

"Thank you for coming over," I said as I let her in.

"You're welcome. Now, do you mind telling me what this is all about?"

"Something happened today that I need to discuss with you."

"In D.C.?"

"Yeah," I said slowly. "How did you know I was in D.C.? Oh...your gifts?"

She laughed. "You told me on the phone, you goof. Look, before we get started, can I make some tea?"

"I can do that," I said while blushing furiously.

We went into the kitchen, where I rummaged through the cabinet. "I don't think we have any tea leaves. Just regular tea bags."

Judy leaned against the counter with an amused expression. "That's fine. I wasn't planning on doing any readings. I just thought tea would be nice while we talked. Now tell me what happened today."

I got out a tea kettle and started filling it with water. "I'm investigating a murder. I don't know how much Novak told you..."

"He didn't tell me anything. He rarely discusses work with me."

I put the kettle on the burner and sat down at the kitchen table, taking a deep breath before I began.

“There was this guy — he was strangled in his apartment. I was in there, looking around, and when I opened the door to the bedroom where he was murdered...something happened.”

Judy raised an eyebrow. “Wait. Do I need any backstory for this?”

“Um, maybe a little. The police don’t seem too interested in solving the case. The victim, Paul, was an escort. You know what that is, right?”

She gave me a look that said really?

“Sweetie, I wasn’t born yesterday. I know what an escort is. My question is: how did you stumble onto this case? It’s in D.C., and as far as I know, you don’t frequent escorts. And how exactly did you get into his apartment?”

I sighed. “Okay, fine, you do need the background. Paul was...a friend of Micah’s.”

My pause said more than I intended, and I saw the flicker of recognition in her eyes. I pushed forward before she could comment.

“That’s how I got involved. And why I had a key to his place.”

“Got it,” she said. “So you were in his apartment, opened the door to the murder scene, and then what?”

“I...I think I experienced his murder.”

Her eyes widened. “What do you mean experienced?”

“I mean it felt like I was being strangled. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t even scream. I could feel fingers around my throat, digging in.”

Judy stared at me, speechless, until the kettle whistled, jolting us both. She got up and turned off the

burner. I jumped to grab two mugs — one for her, one for me. A hot cup of tea suddenly seemed like the best idea in the world.

Once we were settled at the table again, I leaned back in my seat and continued.

“And that’s not even the end of it.”

“There’s more?” she asked, stirring in a spoonful of sugar with unnerving calm.

I nodded. “Paul’s neighbor Sabrina was with me. She got freaked out and wanted to leave, but I felt this...pull toward the bedroom. I couldn’t ignore it. She stayed behind, so I went in alone. The police had already cleaned the place, but I saw this...double image overlaying the room. Like how it looked right after the murder. His body. The mess. Everything.”

Judy sipped her tea like I’d just told her about a vivid dream, not a psychic death experience.

“And then I don’t know why I did it, but I asked Paul to show me what he wanted me to find.”

“Did he?” she asked, completely unshaken.

“Sort of. I heard a sound coming from the armoire. And before you say it — no, I don’t think it was a coincidence.”

“Didn’t cross my mind,” she said dryly. “Go on.”

“The sound led me to the top of the armoire, where I found a hidden compartment. Inside was a letter and a key.”

“What did the letter say?”

“That he thought he was in danger and was hiding the key.”

“And what does the key go to?”

I threw up my hands. "I don't know! That's not the point."

She laughed, and I scowled. "Sorry," she said, still chuckling. "I got caught up in the story. The point is, your gifts are evolving, and that's upsetting you."

"Upsetting?" I stared at her. "I felt like I was being murdered. Damn right I'm upset."

"But no physical harm came to you, right?"

"Unless you count being scared out of my mind."

"I don't. This is fascinating."

"It's terrifying."

"Things always are when we don't understand them. So...what are you going to do about it?"

I took a deep breath and tried to match her calm, though it felt like a losing battle. "That's why I called you. I think we need to amp up our search for someone to teach me."

"Oh, it's been amped. After our last chat, I reached out to a few more people and really stressed the urgency of the situation."

"And...?"

"And..." She sighed. "And nothing. Not yet anyway. If I'd found someone, I would have let you know. But I am looking."

I slumped down in my seat. "What if we can't find someone?"

"We will. It's just... It might take some time. I put out feelers to my contacts. They'll pass it on to theirs. We'll find someone eventually."

"How are you so calm about this? Weren't you the one who said I was in danger?"

She turned her mug thoughtfully in her hands. "I *do* sense danger all around you. I don't believe it's associated with your gifts. At least not in the immediate future. I think we have a little time to find the right person."

"Why do I not find that very comforting? Is the danger associated with one of my cases?"

She gave a little shrug. "Yes? Possibly? I mean, most likely. It's all a little...confusing."

"I wish our gifts were a little more...clear."

She smiled. "What would be the fun in that? Just hang in there. In the meantime, I'm here and I'll help as much as I can."

I stared into my mug, letting the scent of mint and chamomile ground me.

"Thanks," I said at last.

"You're welcome," Judy said as she took another sip. "Now, drink your tea before it goes cold."

I obediently took a sip of tea and realized I hadn't added any sugar. I made a face, then quickly spooned in a few scoops and stirred it in. I liked my tea very sweet.

Judy stared at me, eyes thoughtful, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips.

"What?" I asked warily.

She tilted her head. "While you were having your little chat with Paul...why didn't you just ask him who killed him?"

My mouth fell open. For a second, I couldn't form a single word. Thoughts raced through my head in a frantic tangle. Then everything tried to come out at once.

“We didn’t— I didn’t— He— Wait...could I have done that?”

Judy burst out laughing, full-throated and delighted. When she finally composed herself, she shook her head and patted my hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said, wiping a tear from her eye. “I was just kidding. Even if you had thought to ask, he probably wouldn’t have told you. It’s never that easy.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? Ghost logic. Things just don’t seem to work that way.”

She stood and reached for her coat. “Now, I’d better get going. Will you be okay?”

I nodded, still a little dazed.

She leaned in and kissed my cheek. I started to rise to walk her out, but she waved me off.

“Stay put. Drink your tea. Don’t let it go to waste.”

I nodded, only half-listening. My mind was already picking at her comment about how it didn’t work like that. I remembered Seth’s saying he had rules about what he could say and do. Was it the same with all ghosts? I’d gotten the impression that Seth occupied some sort of special category in the echelon of the dearly departed, but what did I know?

“She’s right you know,” someone said, and I nearly spit hot tea across the table.

I coughed and set the mug down with a clatter. “I hate it when you do that.”

“I know,” Seth said, entirely too pleased with himself.

He slid into the chair across from me and casually propped his feet on the table. I opened my mouth to scold him — then stopped. Scolding a ghost for putting his spectral feet on the table felt like a waste of breath. Still, I gave him a look.

"Just for the record," he said, settling in, "in my professional opinion, you were never in any real danger today. At least not from anything ghostly. Breaking into an active crime scene, though — that's another story."

I leaned forward, suddenly alert. "Was that Paul? Did I interact with his ghost?"

Seth shrugged. "I don't know. I wasn't there."

"Then how do you know I wasn't in danger?"

"I was listening to your little tea-time therapy session with Judy."

"You were eavesdropping."

"I hadn't made myself known yet."

"That's literally the definition of eavesdropping."

He rolled his eyes. "Are you done? Because I was trying to make a point."

I gestured for him to proceed.

"Based on what you told Judy, whatever — or whoever — was guiding you in that apartment clearly didn't mean you harm. You were vulnerable, and if something wanted to hurt you, you wouldn't be sitting here nursing your trauma with Earl Grey."

I frowned. "Whoever or whatever?"

"There are other things out there, Killian. Not everything in the spirit world is a ghost."

"You mean, like...angels?"

"Not exactly."

"Demons?"

He raised a brow. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

"Are any of them, you know, unfriendly?"

"You bet your sweet booty they are."

I groaned and sank lower in my seat. "Fantastic."

"But like I said, I don't think that's what this was. If I had to guess, I'd say it was Paul. Or at least some aspect of him."

"Some...aspect?"

"Yeah. It doesn't have to be Paul's conscious spirit. Sometimes a person leaves behind an imprint — an emotional echo, like a psychic fingerprint. Places they lived, places they died...those impressions stick. They're not sentient, but if someone like you comes along with the right kind of sensitivity, they can...respond. Sort of."

I let that sit for a moment, rolling the idea around in my head. "So what I felt...the hands on my throat...that wasn't really Paul attacking me to relive his death?"

"Probably not. More likely, it was you reacting to the energy he left behind. Strong emotion — especially terror, pain, trauma — burns itself into a place. It's not unusual for someone with your particular talents to tap into that."

"And the feeling of being pulled to the bedroom?"

He nodded. "Same deal. The strongest impression would be where the strongest emotion occurred. Death — especially violent death — leaves behind a mark. You picked up on it."

I rubbed my arms, suddenly chilled. "So you don't think Paul's ghost is actually there?"

He shrugged again. "He might be. He might not. I'm just saying what you experienced doesn't require an actual ghost to be present. Don't get too hung up on definitions."

"You're a real comfort, you know that?"

"Hey, I'm just here to keep you humble."

"You know, you're not actually that helpful."

He smirked. "Want me to stop showing up?"

"No! Don't—" I cut myself off, scowling. "You know I don't."

"Then quit your whining."

I stuck my tongue out at him.

He grinned and returned the gesture before vanishing into thin air, as usual.

"You always have to have the last word, don't you?" I muttered into the silence.

Somewhere, I was sure he was still laughing.

I took Sunday off and had class Monday morning, so it was mid-afternoon by the time I finally made it into the office. I wasn't expecting much of a welcome — Mondays weren't exactly warm-and-fuzzy to begin with — but I also wasn't expecting to find Novak sitting at my desk.

"I've got good news," he said before I was even all the way through the door.

"Whatever happened to manners?" I asked theatrically, dropping my bag. "Doesn't anyone say hello anymore?"

He gave me a look. "I thought you'd be more interested in the news."

"I am. But a greeting wouldn't kill you." I plopped onto the worn orange chair across from him. "For the record, I've got news too. I want to fill you in on Saturday."

"Fair enough. Who goes first?"

"You."

He grinned. "I got you tickets to the Equality Ball."

I sat up straighter. "Yes! You're a miracle worker, Novak."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. Don't start singing my praises just yet — I only scored them because I know someone who had a couple extra."

"Still, you came through. Are you going with me?"

"Nope. You're going with Micah."

That made me pause. "Wait. What? I am? Why?"

"I want someone with you," he said, calm and matter-of-fact. "But it can't be me. Odds are good you'll run into Jake, and you can't very well explain my presence to him. You and Micah, on the other hand? Totally plausible. Micah's a reporter and you're his date."

I started to object, but he cut me off with a raised eyebrow. "No buts. You either go with Micah or you don't go at all."

I was beginning to suspect Novak was playing matchmaker in his spare time.

"When is it again?" I asked.

"A week from Sunday. Halloween night. It's a masquerade ball."

"Great. So now I need a costume too?"

"Not exactly. It's formal — tuxedos and masks, not mummies and fake blood. Think elegance, not cosplay."

"You're kidding."

"I promise you I'm not. You might want to give Micah a heads-up too, so he doesn't show up in a Dracula cape."

"And how are we supposed to know who anyone is if everyone's masked?"

He chuckled. "Most people take them off at some point. These things are more about being seen than staying anonymous."

I sighed. "Why can't anything ever be simple?"

"Because then it wouldn't be nearly as fun." He leaned back. "Now, your turn. Tell me what you uncovered this weekend."

I gave him the rundown — an edited version, of course. I left out the supernatural elements and anything too legally dubious. He listened without interrupting, nodding occasionally. When I finished, he leaned against the edge of my desk, arms crossed.

"That was a solid report," he said. "Now give me your impressions. Not the facts. I want to hear what your gut tells you."

"Well..." I hesitated, organizing my thoughts. "I don't like Razi. I don't trust him — instinctively — but that doesn't make him a killer."

"You know better than to go on instinct alone. It's failed you before."

"True." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Honestly, I think my discomfort with Razi is tangled up with the situation with Tad. That whole thing feels...off."

"It is off. To put it mildly. But it's not our focus — at least not right now. Finish the case. Then take it to the police."

I nodded. "As for suspects, Tad actually has a decent motive. I like him, but I can't ignore that. And that's really all the suspects I have at this point, unless you count unknown clients and the other escorts at the agency."

"I don't. Not that you should rule them out, but vague categories aren't the same as actual suspects. You need names. So, next steps?"

"I want to interview Paul's family. And I need to track down Neal, the guy who owns the escort agency."

"Good." He smiled faintly. "That's exactly what I would have recommended. But prioritize the agency. Neal's the center of that particular web. And for that, I think you need Micah's help."

There it was again — a not-so-subtle nudge toward Micah.

Or maybe I was just being paranoid.

"I'll call him," I said with a sigh. "Just as soon as you get out of my chair."

Novak pushed himself off the desk and stood, then started toward his office. He paused in the doorway and turned back to look at me.

"I know this is none of my business," he said, voice softer, "but whatever's going on between you and Micah? You should figure it out. Before it's too late."

I looked up sharply. "What do you mean, too late?"

"Life's unpredictable, kiddo. You never know what tomorrow holds. Let go of what doesn't matter. Hang on to what does."

He disappeared into his office, closing the door with a soft click behind him.

I sat in silence for a long moment, replaying his words.

It's hard to tell the difference between what matters and what doesn't when you're knee-deep in the middle of it. But one thing I did know — Micah mattered.

I took a deep breath, pulled out my phone, and dialed his number.



## Chapter 16

I sat alone at Micah's favorite diner, anxiously waiting for him to arrive. I'd managed to snag a corner booth, so at least we'd have some measure of privacy when we had the conversation I'd been rehearsing over and over in my head. Despite having agreed to meet at five, I was such a nervous wreck that I'd left work well before the appointed time.

I slouched there, playing out what I planned to say while mutilating sugar packet after sugar packet. Although Novak's advice had set me off on a path of self-examination that ended with some very clear decisions, I was still worried about how Micah would react.

I wasn't even sure why I'd chosen this place. We didn't have the best history here. The last time we'd been in this booth, Micah had come dangerously close to breaking up with me. Maybe I'd chosen it on purpose — a kind of emotional reset, a chance to rewrite the memory.

I destroyed the last sugar packet and was about to move on to the Sweet-n-Low when Micah slid into the seat across from me.

"Hey," he said easily.

He wore a dark-blue pullover that looked like it had been crumpled at the bottom of a laundry basket, and his hair was endearingly mussed — but somehow, he looked better than ever.

"Hi," I said softly, trying to smile.

"How did things go yesterday?"

“Okay,” I said. “But there’s something I need to talk to you about first, if you don’t mind.”

An unreadable expression flickered across his face — gone before I could make sense of it. I fought a sigh as I wondered what the point was in having all my gifts if they didn't help me out when I really needed to know what was going on right across the table from me.

Before I could say a word, however, a waitress appeared to take our order. I bit down the urge to snap at her. She was just doing her job. But I could feel the words I’d carefully built up teetering at the edge of my nerves like a stack of fragile dishes.

Once she was gone, Micah turned the full weight of his attention on me, causing my stomach to suddenly curl itself into the fetal position.

“Yeah. So,” I began, my voice shakier than I’d hoped. “Novak said something this morning that really got me thinking...about us.”

Micah tilted his head, listening.

“He told me to let go of the unimportant things and hold on to what matters. And as I thought about that, I realized something. You matter to me. A lot. And I don’t want to lose you.”

He opened his mouth, but I held up a hand.

“Please...just let me get this out. I’ve been rehearsing it all day, and if I don’t say it now, I might never get it right.”

He nodded once, and I continued.

“I know I handled things badly when I found out about your past. I could make excuses — I was caught off guard, it was a shitty way to find out — all of which are true, but it's also true that I overreacted. Who am I to

judge your past? I've never been in your shoes, and I have no idea what I would've done if I had been."

I paused, collecting myself. "But what I do know is that I love you. I love who you are, and who you are is a product of everything that came before. These past few months with you have meant more to me than I ever expected. That morning in D.C., when we...you know, I've never felt more right about anything in my life. I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose *you*. So...I guess I'm hoping you'll forgive me. And maybe we could try again. Start fresh."

I started to add something else, but Micah cut in gently.

"May I speak now?"

I nodded, heart pounding.

"There's nothing to forgive," he said. "Honestly. Yeah, the way you found out sucked — but I should have told you sooner. You needed time to process, and you took it. That doesn't mean we need to start over. It just means we keep moving forward...together."

I let out a long breath I hadn't realized I was holding and felt an enormous wave of relief roll through me.

He smiled. "Kill, I thought for sure you were about to dump me."

"Not a chance, Mr. Gerber. You're stuck with me."

"Suits me just fine, Mr. Kendall." He reached across the table and gave my hand a squeeze. "So, now that we've survived that conversation...what happened yesterday?"

I quickly walked Micah through my conversations with Tad, Razi, and Sabrina, ending with the search of Paul's apartment and the discovery of the key.

"At this point," I said, leaning forward, "I need to get in touch with Paul's family and with this Neal guy. I was hoping you could help me."

Micah rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I might be able to help with Neal. But Paul's family? That's going to be tougher. I never met them, and he hardly ever talked about them. I'm not even sure where they live." He paused. "Do you have the key with you?"

I nodded and pulled it from my pocket. I'd slipped it in earlier on a hunch. I slid it across the table.

Micah picked it up, turning it over in his fingers with practiced curiosity. "Looks like a safe-deposit box key."

I frowned. "Do you know if he had one?"

"Not while we were together. But that doesn't mean anything. He could have gotten one after we broke up, and even if he had one then, he wouldn't have told me. He was careful, especially with anything that might tie back to the agency."

I nodded, thinking. "There's no bank name on it, no logo or number — nothing."

"Yeah, they're not usually marked. That's part of the security. Even if you figure out which bank it's from, you still can't just walk in and open it."

"Why not? I have the key."

Micah gave me a look. "There are two keys. Yours, and one that stays with the bank. Both are required to open the box. Plus, you'd need proof of

identity, either as Paul or as someone legally authorized to access his belongings. Without that, they won't even talk to you."

I groaned and slumped back in the booth. "So I risked tampering with evidence for nothing."

"I didn't say that," he replied with a small smile. "I'm sure something will occur to you. It always does."

I looked up at him, his expression warm and confident, and couldn't help smiling back. "You really think so?"

"Absolutely. You're stubborn. That's one of your better qualities. Most of the time." He winked. "Okay, so let's talk about Neal. What do you want to know?"

Before I could answer, the waitress arrived with our sandwiches. We took a break to eat a few bites.

After a minute, I asked, "So what about Neal? Do you have a number for him or something?"

Micah shook his head and swallowed.

"I don't think I have Neal's number anymore. I didn't keep much from that time. When I moved here, I wanted to leave all that behind. Start over."

I must've looked disappointed, because he quickly added, "Hey, it would've been too easy if I did, right? You're the detective. You'll figure it out."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I hate it when people say that."

"I know. That's why I said it."

"Jerk."

He grinned. "You love it."

"Maybe. So, tell me more about the agency. How did it work, exactly? I mean, how do they find people? Isn't this kind of thing illegal?"

“Technically, yeah. But they operate pretty far underground. Neal’s agency was known for being discreet and professional. It had a good reputation—especially for keeping the escorts safe. I don’t know how he handled the business end of things, but I’d bet he used a front of some kind to launder the money.”

“I know you said Paul got you into it, but how do they find their...employees? Do they advertise on Indeed?”

He laughed. “It’s mostly word of mouth, networking, spotting someone who fits the profile. They do a lot of recruiting from sites like OnlyFans these days.”

“Did you ever meet Neal? Like, did you have an interview?”

“No, I think my videos were my interview. I never met Neal face to face. I talked to him on the phone a few times, but most of our communication was through text.”

“What happened after you were hired?”

“If he had a job for me, he’d send the time, location, and client info. If the client paid in cash, I deposited it into a shared account. He’d pull his share and leave the rest for me. If the client paid electronically, Neal would transfer my cut directly.”

I blinked. “You took credit cards?”

Micah smirked. “Yeah. Like I said — professional operation. Again, all very discreet. It’s not your credit card bill had the charges listed as sex work.”

I snorted. “How did clients find you? Word of mouth again?”

“That, but there’s also a website.”

I stared at him. “A website?”

“Sure. That’s how people booked us. It had profiles, photos, preferences, the whole thing. Password-protected, naturally.”

I sat back, trying to process it all. “It’s like this whole parallel world I didn’t know existed.”

“In a way, it is another world,” he said, his voice softening.

I took another bite of my sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. “How many guys work for Neal?”

“I have no idea. I didn’t interact with the others much. Neal kept us pretty isolated, probably to avoid any complications or drama.”

“Razi mentioned that he met Paul through work,” I said slowly. “And that sometimes clients had special requests.”

Micah froze slightly, his sandwich halfway to his mouth.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “Do I even want to know?”

Micah looked suddenly sheepish. “Um...every once in a while, a client would request a specific scenario or, like...two guys.”

“Oh,” I said, blinking. Then, “Ohhh.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, clearly uncomfortable.

I waved a hand. “No judgment. Really. I’m just trying to get a complete picture.”

“I appreciate that,” he said quietly.

“Do you think Paul and Razi ever worked a job like that together?”

“It’s possible,” he said, brow furrowed. “But honestly, Razi and I never got along so I never asked for

details. But if Razi was telling the truth, then yeah...maybe.”

“Got it.” Time to change the subject. “What was Neal like?” I asked.

Micah leaned back in the booth, thinking. “He seemed...fine. At least over the phone. Polite, professional. Never raised his voice unless you broke the rules, and even then he wasn’t cruel. Just firm.”

“What kind of rules?”

“You had to be reachable, always. Your phone was never supposed to be off. If he called and you didn’t answer, you had thirty minutes to call him back.”

“Or what?”

“The first time, he’d let you know he wasn’t happy. The second time, he’d dock your pay. More than that, and he’d stop using you.”

I frowned. “Sounds a little controlling.”

Micah shrugged. “Maybe. But in his world, reliability was everything. If a client had a last-minute change or an emergency, he needed people he could count on.”

“And if someone got fired or quit, could they just go solo? Keep escorting on their own?”

“Sure. Like Razi said, a lot of guys eventually do. If they’re in it long-term, it usually makes more sense to branch out on their own. But working with Neal meant stability, safety, and a steady stream of clients.”

“How did Neal even get into this business? I can’t imagine it’s the kind of thing you grow up dreaming about. ‘What do you want to be when you grow up, little boy?’ ‘I want to be a pimp!’”

Micah chuckled. “He’s not exactly a pimp. I mean, yeah, kind of, but not all clients are looking for sex. Sometimes it’s companionship, an event date, someone to talk to. Still, the label kind of fits, I guess.”

“So?”

“I heard he made a ton of money on some Internet startup in the early 2000s. Sold it off, retired young, and got bored out of his mind. Rumor is, he’d used an escort service before, thought he could run one better, and just...did.”

I raised an eyebrow. “That’s a hell of a post-retirement project. Most people just take up golf.”

Micah grinned. “Neal wasn’t most people. Some people say he even used to work for an agency himself, back in the day. But I don’t know how much of that is true. It was all rumor. Nobody I knew had ever met him in person.”

“How old is he?”

“No idea. I always pictured him in his late forties, maybe early fifties? But it was just a voice on the phone.”

“One last question, and I promise I’ll stop prying.” I leaned in slightly. “What’s the agency called? Does it even have a name?”

Micah nodded. “Yeah, it’s called The Drake Group.”

I blinked. “The Drake Group? That sounds like a law firm.”

“I think that’s the point. Neal wanted something discreet, professional. So if someone saw the name pop up in your contacts or on a deposit, they wouldn’t think twice.”

“Smart. Boring as hell, but smart.”

He smirked. “Would you prefer something like Top to Bottom?”

That made me laugh — hard. “God, no. But you definitely never told me the name before. The Drake Group. Yeah, that I wouldn’t have remembered.”

We ate in silence while I digested all I’d learned. After a few minutes, he asked, “So, do you have any Halloween plans?”

“Oh! I almost forgot,” I said, dropping what was left of my sandwich. “I have tickets to the Equality Ball on Halloween night.”

Micah blinked. “You what?”

“I have tickets. To the Ball.”

He leaned forward, eyes wide. “How in God’s name did you get them? Those are like golden tickets. Practically impossible.”

“Novak pulled a few strings. Called in a favor, I think. I wanted them for another case I’m working on.”

“Another case? What case?”

I hesitated, realizing I hadn’t mentioned anything about investigating Jake. So I explained Judy’s request and how I’d found the ticket among Jake’s things. “So, you wanna go with me?” I added lightly. “You can be my Prince Charming.”

Micah grinned. “Does that make you Cinderella?”

I stuck my tongue out at him, which made him laugh. “Of course I’ll go. You think I’d miss a chance to see you in a ball gown?”

“You’re hilarious. But for real, Novak said we need to dress up — tuxedos and masks. It’s a formal masquerade.”

Micah raised an eyebrow. “Leave that to me. I might be able to convince the paper to cover tux rentals. They’ll be thrilled one of their reporters is actually going.”

“They weren’t already sending someone?”

"Not that I've heard, but we do have a society writer, so maybe. I've been so caught up in this story that I wouldn't even know if they were sending Walters."

Walters, one of the senior reporters at the paper, had been in the business since Ben Franklin started printing and resented the younger reporters like Micah. After Walters sabotaged some of Micah's early assignments, their relationship became especially acrimonious, leading Micah to relish every chance he got to upstage the older man.

"I can't believe you have to go to the Equality Ball for work."

I laughed. "It's a dirty job but somebody has to do it. What are you up to later tonight?"

He glanced down at his phone. “Unfortunately, I have to head back to the newsroom soon. I’m lucky I could sneak away for dinner at all.”

“I was hoping we could hang out tonight.”

He gave me an apologetic look. “Wish I could. But the story’s heating up. Why not make plans with someone else?”

I sighed. “Like who? I don’t exactly have a bustling social calendar. It’s basically you or my family,

and I haven't been making much time for them lately. Kane reminded me of that not so gently."

Micah leaned on the table. "You really should try to expand your social circle, Kill. You throw yourself into work like a man possessed. It wouldn't kill you to spend time just having fun."

"You think I'm too caught up in my job?"

"Uh, yeah. You're only eighteen. You should be going out, doing stupid things, partying—"

"I do have fun! We go dancing sometimes and..." I trailed off, struggling to think of anything else.

Micah raised an eyebrow. "Case in point."

"I'm just not a party person, okay?"

He tried not to smile, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "All I'm saying is, you could use more friends."

I shrugged. "The guys at Haven seemed nice."

"Exactly. So stop arguing with me."

"I'm not arguing," I said, then paused. "Okay, maybe a little. I think I'm just getting tired of everyone telling me what I should be doing with my life...even when they're right."

"Who else is telling you what to do?"

"Just about every living person I know. Plus a few who aren't."

He tilted his head. "Huh?"

"Long story."

Micah glanced at his watch. "I've got about half an hour before I absolutely have to get back. Want to tell me?"

I hesitated, then nodded. Micah knew about Amalie. He'd been present for most of what happened

with her, so he was aware of my gifts. We'd even talked about my being sensitive to supernatural things, but I'd never really laid it all out. If this relationship was going to move forward, I couldn't keep hiding pieces of myself.

So I told him everything — my visits from Seth, what happened at Paul's apartment, the sensation of being strangled, the strange visions, and my decision to finally seek training for my abilities, whatever that might look like.

When I finished, he sat quietly for a moment, processing.

"Yeah, I can understand how that might be overwhelming," he said finally. "I'm glad you're going to get training. You need to understand what's happening to you so you're not constantly freaked out."

I blinked. "You're not...freaked out?"

He smiled gently. "Not really. I was there for Amalie, remember?"

"Yeah, but—"

"If I could handle that, this doesn't faze me. Give me some credit."

I let out a breath. "You're right. Sorry. I guess because I've had a hard time with all this, I assumed everyone else would too."

Micah shrugged. "Not everyone resists change as hard as you do."

"Hey! I don't resist—" I paused. "Do I?"

He didn't say anything. Just gave me a look.

I sighed. "Okay, fine. Maybe a little."

He reached across the table and gave my hand a gentle squeeze just as the waitress returned with the

check. Before I could reach for it, Micah grabbed it and pulled out his wallet.

“My treat,” he said. “Now I really do have to get back, but I’ll call you tonight, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

As he stood, he leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “You’re doing better than you think, Killian. Keep going.”

I sat there for a long moment, staring at the empty space across from me, his words echoing in my head. You’re doing better than you think. It was such a simple thing to say, but it landed with unexpected weight.

The last few weeks had been a mess — a confusing blend of grief, guilt, supernatural chaos, and emotional whiplash. I’d second-guessed every choice, questioned every instinct. I hadn’t felt like I was doing well at all. If anything, I’d been constantly afraid I was screwing everything up — Paul’s case, my so-called gifts, and most of all, my relationship with Micah.

But he believed in me.

And so did Novak, as he took every chance to remind me.

A small smile tugged at the corners of my mouth despite everything. I could still feel the ghost of Micah’s kiss on the top of my head — so light it could almost have been imagined, but real enough to make my heart ache in the best way.

You’re doing better than you think. Maybe he was right. Maybe I didn’t have to have it all figured out right now. Maybe just trying was enough.

I watched Micah walk to the counter, that easy, self-assured stride of his making something flutter quietly in my chest. He handed the cashier a couple of bills and cracked a smile at something she said — probably some corny joke — and I found myself smiling too, almost involuntarily. There was something comforting about seeing him like that. Steady. Familiar. Mine.

I leaned back in the booth, feeling the last of my nerves unwind. Things between us really did seem to be returning to normal, like we'd finally started to shake off the tension that had crept in over the past few weeks. We weren't magically back to where we'd been, but maybe we were getting there.

It wasn't lost on me how ridiculous my version of "normal" had become. Murder investigations, psychic visions, dead people showing up at my kitchen table like it was just another Tuesday... But sitting there, watching Micah pay for dinner and shoot me that casual wave over his shoulder, I felt something dangerously close to contentment. Didn't every young gay couple juggle ghosts, guilt, and romantic dinners in the middle of ongoing homicide cases?

I finished the last bite of my sandwich and slid out of the booth, grabbing my jacket. As I passed the counter, our waitress reappeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She caught my eye and grinned.

"You've got a cute one there, hon," she said with a wink. "Better hang on to him."

I felt my face warm, but I couldn't stop the grin that spread across it. "Yeah," I said, almost to myself. "I plan to."

Outside, the air was cooler than before, and the early evening sky had started to slip toward dusk. I shoved my hands in my pockets and headed for my car.

I didn't know what was waiting for me tomorrow — visions, spirits, angry clients, or something worse. But for now, in this brief, quiet moment, I let myself feel the tiniest flicker of peace.

And I held on to it.

I once again returned home to an empty house.

It was starting to feel like a theme — me coming home to silence, lights off, shadows stretching across the walls like they'd taken up residence in our absence. I was beginning to wonder if everyone else had quietly moved out and forgotten to tell me. I hadn't seen Adam or Steve in a couple of days, and even Kane had been scarce lately. The house didn't feel haunted, exactly, just hollow.

Micah FaceTimed me later that night. I was already in bed, and he was still at the office, hunched over his desk and looking unfairly good in bad lighting. We didn't talk about anything important. Just chatted. Laughed a little. It was a nice change of pace.

We were running out of things to say when I heard a noise from downstairs.

"Hey," I said, sitting up a little straighter, "I think Adam's home. I haven't seen him in a few days. I'm gonna go check in."

“Okay,” Micah said with a small smile. “Tell him I said hey.”

I padded downstairs barefoot and found Adam in the kitchen, bent over and rummaging through the fridge like it owed him money.

“I thought that might be you,” I said.

He jumped and nearly whacked his head on a shelf. “Damn it, Killian, you scared the crap out of me.”

I tried to smother a laugh and failed miserably.

“Sorry, I figured you knew I was here.”

“I saw your car but thought you’d be asleep by now.”

“I was talking to Micah.”

“Ah. How’s that going?”

“Better,” I said, and realized I meant it.

“Definitely better.”

Adam sighed as he closed the fridge door and flopped into a chair. He looked bone-tired. The kind of tired that seeps into your shoulders and never quite lets go.

“I feel so out of touch,” he said. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around lately.”

“It’s okay,” I said, joining him at the table. “I know you and Steve have been slammed trying to get the B&B up and running.”

“True, but that doesn’t make it right that I haven’t been home in days. I’ve barely seen Kane, and you boys never complain, so I just assume everything’s fine.”

“Everything is fine,” I assured him. “We’re figuring it out. It’s not forever.”

He studied my face for a second, like he wasn't sure whether to believe me. "You're really okay?"

I hesitated. Part of me wanted to tell him everything — Paul's apartment, the visions, the feeling of being strangled — but I held back. Adam worried enough. No need to add supernatural murder trauma to his mental checklist.

"Yeah," I said. "Everything's under control."

He didn't look convinced, but he let it go. "What about Kane? How's he holding up?"

I smiled. "He'll be okay. He was a little upset the other night, said it felt like the family was falling apart. We promised each other we'd make time to hang out more. It helped, I think. He's a good kid."

Adam nodded slowly. "He is. You both are. But I'm a dad. Worrying is part of the job description. And I worry about you too. You have so much going on..."

"I'm going to get training for my gifts," I said quickly. "Try to understand this stuff better. I've already talked to Judy."

"That's great, and I'm glad," he said. "But it's not just the visions, Kill. It's your job — it's dangerous. You're balancing school, work, a relationship... You're eighteen. That's a lot."

"I'm fine."

"You're overworked, sleep-deprived, and emotionally stretched thin."

"Okay, okay. I get it. Jeez, you have a lot of fears."

"Welcome to the joys of parenthood."

"I'm a big boy now, Adam. I can take care of myself."

He gave me a long look. “I know you think that. And that worries me too. You’re still a kid in a lot of ways. A kid with a much older, much more experienced boyfriend.”

“Micah is good to me,” I said softly. “He would never hurt me.”

“Not intentionally, no.”

“This is about his past, isn’t it?”

Adam hesitated. “Maybe a little.”

“Micah told me he appreciated the way you and Steve handled it. He said the talk meant a lot to him. He thought you were supportive.”

“I was. I am. I meant everything I said. That the past is the past. That you were mature enough to handle the truth. But after that...my dad instincts kicked in and I started overthinking everything. And worrying.”

“Well, stop. I was freaked out at first too, but I love Micah. And he loves me. We’ve both got baggage. Who doesn’t?”

Adam chuckled. “Boy, isn’t that the truth. And listen — I like Micah. I really do. I think he’s a good guy. I’d be worried no matter who you were dating. That’s just what I do.”

“You’re exhausting, you know that?” I teased.

“And yet, here we are.”

“School’s going fine. My job is mostly boring, with occasional spikes of mortal danger. Could be worse. I could’ve become a—” I dropped my voice to a whisper, “—lawyer.”

That earned a laugh. “You said Kane’s a good kid, but I’ve got two good kids. No — two great kids.”

I leaned over and hugged him. “And we have two great dads.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in, warm and steady. It had been a long time since he’d held me like that. His hand rested gently on the back of my head.

Then he sighed. “I’m beginning to think this whole thing was a mistake.”

I pulled away slightly. “What whole thing?”

“The bed and breakfast.”

“But it was Steve’s dream.”

“I know. And I wanted to help him make it happen. But maybe some dreams aren’t meant to come true.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

He rubbed his temples. “No. Not really. I’m just exhausted. And I miss Steve. Even when we’re both there, we’re so busy we don’t get any alone time.”

I nodded. “It won’t always be like this. Starting a new business is hard. Once things settle, you’ll find your rhythm again. You’ll find each other again.”

He gave me a faint smile. “A new normal, maybe. I’ll take it. But you’re right. We’re not going to solve all the world’s problems tonight. We should get to bed.”

“I thought you’d never say it. I’m running on fumes.”

He stood and gave my shoulder a squeeze.

“Thanks, kiddo. For talking. For being here.”

“Anytime,” I said, meaning it.

We turned off the lights and climbed the stairs in comfortable silence, each of us carrying our own worries — but, for the moment at least, not carrying them alone.



## Chapter 17

Adam and I had breakfast together the next morning before I headed into work.

Once at the office, I checked my email, replied to anything urgent, then pulled up Google. I typed in “The Drake Group” and hit enter. To my surprise, the very first result was an official website: *drakegroup.com*.

I clicked the link, and a sleek, professional site loaded immediately.

A deep charcoal background set the stage, overlaid with subtle, tasteful accents of gold and midnight blue. A slow-moving video banner played in soft focus — glimpses of an impeccably tailored man adjusting his cufflinks in a hotel suite, a black car pulling up to a private entrance, candlelight glinting off crystal glassware. The logo — The Drake Group — sat elegantly in the top left corner in gold serif lettering, as a discreet tagline faded into view beneath it: "Exclusivity. Discretion. Excellence."

There were several menu options: Home, About, Services, Meet the Escorts, Client Access, Contact, and Apply. A small, unobtrusive icon in the top right corner linked to a private client login portal.

In the center of the page in bold text a banner read, "*Where Sophistication Meets Seduction*," and below that, "*The Drake Group offers a discreet, highly selective escort experience for discerning gentlemen and professionals. Washington's most powerful men trust us — and no one else.*"

Below the banner, there were three columns highlighting key values:

***Discretion:***

*Your privacy is our highest priority. Every client interaction is protected by strict confidentiality protocols.*

***Exclusivity:***

*We are not for everyone. Our clientele and companions are carefully curated to ensure compatibility, elegance, and discretion.*

***Excellence:***

*Our escorts are more than stunning — they are cultured, intuitive, and highly skilled in the art of refined companionship.*

Under that, in an elegant serif font, “Power is knowing who to trust with your secrets. We exist for men who don’t take chances.”

There was a scrolling escort preview gallery that was blurred until you logged in, just a stream of fuzzy profile cards with hints of luxury: black-and-white portraits, luxury watches, finely tailored clothing.

At the bottom of the page was a subtle gold button that read, “Request a Private Consultation.”

I clicked on *About* and a new page loaded.

***About The Drake Group***

***Sophistication. Discretion. Excellence.***

*At The Drake Group, we are proud to be the premier provider of elite male companionship in the Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Northern Virginia region.*

*With a curated roster of exceptional gentlemen, we specialize in offering discreet, refined, and bespoke experiences tailored to the needs of our distinguished clientele.*

*Whether you're a visiting diplomat, a prominent public figure, a high-powered executive, or a discerning individual seeking discreet companionship, The Drake Group offers the highest standard of professionalism, confidentiality, and luxury.*

*Our gentlemen are selectively chosen not only for their exceptional appearance and fitness, but also for their intelligence, charm, and emotional intuition. They are cultured, confident, and capable of blending effortlessly into any environment—whether it be a black-tie gala, a private dinner, or a quiet night in. At The Drake Group, we believe that true luxury lies in the experience. That's why our companions are committed to creating moments that feel effortless, genuine, and unforgettable. Every interaction is approached with care, ensuring that your privacy is protected and your desires are fully understood.*

***With The Drake Group, you don't just book an escort. You secure a discreet, world-class experience.***

*Let us exceed your expectations.*

Well, that was informative.  
I clicked on the *Services* tab next.

***Our Services***

*Discreet. Refined. Unforgettable.*

*At The Drake Group, we understand that true companionship is an art — not a transaction. Our services are tailored to fit the sophisticated lifestyle of our clientele, whether you're seeking an elegant companion for an evening gala or a discreet presence during your next overseas engagement.*

*We do not provide a menu.*

*We provide an experience.*

***Private Companionship***

*Whether it's a candlelit dinner at Le Diplomate or a quiet evening in your penthouse suite, our gentlemen offer intelligent conversation, attentive presence, and effortless charm. Each encounter is customized to your preferences and comfort level.*

***Event + Social Engagements***

*Appearances matter. When discretion is required but solitude is not, our escorts provide seamless social integration. From diplomatic functions to charity galas and corporate mixers, your companion will be impeccably dressed, well-spoken, and socially intuitive.*

***Overnight + Travel Companions***

*For business trips or weekend escapes, our clients often request a companion who can offer connection beyond the boardroom. All travel engagements are carefully arranged with discretion, professionalism, and absolute confidentiality.*

*International travel subject to advance notice and approval.*

***Long-Term Arrangements***

*We offer highly selective, ongoing arrangements for clients who desire continuity, discretion, and connection with a regular companion. These partnerships are structured with mutual respect and clear expectations — ideal for public-facing individuals.*

***Concierge Coordination***

*Need a private table? Car service? Weekend itinerary? Our dedicated client concierge can assist with planning every detail of your experience — from wardrobe recommendations to international bookings — ensuring that every encounter is seamless and stress-free.*

***Your Privacy is Paramount***

*We never discuss our clients.  
We never share information.  
Every detail of your experience with The Drake Group is protected by our*

*unwavering commitment to confidentiality.*

***We serve only those who value privacy as much as pleasure.***

*To request an engagement or consultation, please visit our Contact Page or log in to your secure client portal.*

I navigated to the *Meet Our Escorts* page, curious to see if they actually showed photos considering how discrete the rest of the site was.

***Our Gentlemen***

***Elegance. Discretion. Presence.***

*At The Drake Group, we believe true luxury is found in nuance — a knowing glance, a clever turn of phrase, the quiet confidence of a man who can hold his own at a Senate fundraiser or a black-tie gala. Each of our escorts is carefully selected for far more than physical appearance.*

*These are not simply attractive men — they are cultivated companions, each bringing a unique blend of intelligence, charisma, and sophistication.*

***What Sets Our Gentlemen Apart  
Worldly & Well-Spoken***

*Our escorts are fluent in more than just conversation — they bring cultural fluency, education, and emotional intelligence to every encounter.*

***Discreet & Professional***

*Every member of The Drake Group understands the importance of privacy and discretion. Our clientele includes politicians, public figures, and executives — individuals who demand confidentiality above all else.*

***Tailored to You***

*Whether you're seeking a quiet intellectual, a sharp-dressed confidant, or a charming extrovert to light up the room, our Client Concierge will help match you with a gentleman who complements your needs and lifestyle.*

***Meet a Few of Our Featured Escorts***

*(Note: Photos and full profiles available upon request for verified clients.)*

***Julian*** – Ivy League-educated, fluent in French and Italian, former investment strategist. Enjoys fine wine, museum dates, and private dinners.

***Elias*** – Ex-military, fitness-focused, with a calm, commanding presence. A perfect companion for those who value quiet strength.

***Noah*** – Professional dancer and conversationalist, excels at high-energy social events and red-carpet appearances. Warm, witty, and magnetic.

***Sebastian*** – Graduate student in political science, well-versed in international affairs. Sophisticated, thoughtful, and deeply intuitive.

Each profile was accompanied by a professional photograph of a stunningly beautiful man. Julian had a well-groomed beard and smoldering dark eyes. Elias was buff with close-cropped hair, the slightest hint of tattoos showing under the rolled up sleeves of his crisp white button-down shirt. Noah was lithe and almost feminine with a flirtatious smile. Sebastian looked like a nerdy boy next door, blond with glasses and a smile that suggested he wasn't as innocent as he looked.

At the bottom of the page was a privacy notice: Full portfolios and availability are shared only through secure channels with verified clients. All photos used on this site are approved by our escorts. We respect the privacy of both our clientele and our companions above all else.

I clicked the gold “Request a Private Consultation” button, and a sleek window appeared, offering two options: Returning Client Login or First-Time Guest. I selected First-Time Guest, and was directed to a refined digital screening form.

***Welcome to The Drake Group.***

*For the comfort and safety of our clients and companions, we require all first-time guests to complete a confidential screening process. This ensures that we maintain the highest standards of discretion, professionalism, and security. Our companions do not meet with new clients without prior screening. This process is designed to verify legitimacy and to uphold the integrity of our service. We ask for your understanding and*

*cooperation — it allows us to serve only those who value trust, respect, and refinement as much as we do. Once your information is submitted, a member of our Concierge Team will be in touch to schedule a discreet phone consultation. Please note: Only respectful, serious inquiries will receive a response.*

Below, the form requested details like name, profession, preferred method of contact, references (if any), and availability — simple, elegant, and unmistakably upscale.

Fair enough. It was reassuring to see they prioritized that level of security. I wondered if they did any sort of background checks as well. I closed the screening form and clicked on *Contact*, which led to a streamlined contact page featuring a direct email form and a phone number listed for urgent or high-priority inquiries. I made a note of the number as a backup but decided to start with a more subtle approach.

I composed a concise, professional message introducing myself, briefly explaining my connection to Paul, and requesting a private conversation with Neal. I hoped the name drop would be enough to open a door — or at least earn me a reply.

That night, Micah invited me out to dinner. We made a silent, mutual decision to avoid discussing the case while we ate, and it was a welcome break. For a little while, we just got to be two guys enjoying good food, a quiet corner booth, and each other's company.

Afterward, we walked along the river that wound past the restaurant, the path lit by soft amber lights. We

were alone aside from the occasional passing jogger. The evening air was unseasonably warm, but the air held a crisp tang that reminded you that it was indeed fall.

As we reached a quieter stretch of the path, Micah glanced over at me. "So," he said casually, "how's it going? With the case, I mean."

I told him about finding The Drake Group's website and shooting off an email to Neal. He nodded, listening carefully.

"Did you have one of those profiles?" I asked, half teasing, half curious.

He smiled faintly. "Yeah. When we were brought on, we had to fill out this whole survey to build a profile. Then they scheduled a professional photo shoot for each of us."

I raised an eyebrow. "Clothed?"

Micah gave a sheepish little shrug. "Mostly."

That image hit me harder than I expected. I'd been staring at profiles on the site earlier — slick, curated shots of beautiful men, polished and impersonal. They'd all seemed like props in a fantasy catalog. But hearing Micah talk about his time there, about being one of those men...it made it real. Every profile I'd scrolled past represented a person with a story, a past. A life.

"Do you think he'll contact me?" I asked quietly.

"Probably. You dropped enough names to pique his interest, if nothing else. Neal's cautious, but he's not immune to curiosity."

"And if he doesn't bite?" I asked. "Do you think I need a backup plan?"

Micah tilted his head thoughtfully. "It wouldn't hurt. Neal plays it close to the chest. If he thinks you're a

threat or a liability, he won't respond at all. But if you can find a way to prove you're not a risk — or that you might even be useful — that could open a door."

I sighed. "Right. All I have to do is make myself useful to a man running a secretive, illegal escort agency."

Micah bumped his shoulder against mine gently, but didn't say anything.

"There was a phone number on the site too," I said. "It was listed for emergencies, so I was saving it. But you know what?"

"What?"

"I don't want to talk about work anymore tonight. Can we just make this about us?"

He stopped walking and gently caught my arm, turning me toward him. His expression softened as he pulled me into an embrace. "Yeah, of course. I'm sorry."

I leaned into him, letting his warmth seep into me. "No need to be sorry. I just... want to stop thinking for a little while. Shut it all off. Besides, I've got other things on my mind." I slid my hands slowly up his back.

"Oh yeah? Like what?"

"Like this." I rose onto my toes and kissed him — no hesitation, no holding back. It was deep and hungry and exactly what I needed. He responded just as intensely, his arms tightening around me, one hand tangling in my hair while the other slid down to cup my ass, pulling me flush against him.

By the time we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard, hearts thudding in sync.

"Yeah," Micah said, a dazed grin spreading across his face. "You're right. That was way better than talking about work."

He leaned his forehead against mine. "Do you want to come back to my place tonight?"

The question hit me in the chest — simple, intimate, and full of possibility. I was surprised at just how much I wanted that. "Yeah. That sounds perfect. I just need to swing by the B&B and grab some clothes."

He looked confused for a moment. "You keep clothes at the B&B?"

"Yeah. I crash there sometimes. And it's a lot closer than driving all the way to Ocean City."

"True," he said, brushing a thumb across my cheek. "Then I'll meet you at the apartment."

Then he kissed me again — slower this time, savoring — before pulling back with a mischievous smile. "Just don't take too long."

"I won't," I promised, breathless and already counting the minutes.

I sped all the way to Amalie's House and burst through the door.

Steve looked up in surprise from the front desk. "Whoa! Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I said as I breezed by him on my way to the stairs. "I'm just grabbing some clothes to spend the night at Micah's."

I ran up to my room and threw some clothes and toiletries in a backpack. I was back downstairs in less than five minutes.

"Killian," Steve called just as I reached the front door. "Can I speak to you for a second?"

"Sure." I paused with my hand on the doorknob.

He approached, looking slightly uncomfortable. I suddenly grew a little uneasy.

He took a deep breath when he reached my side.

"Look, I don't know if this is my place or not. I mean, I'm not your father..."

"What is it, Steve?" I tried to keep my voice neutral. "You may not be my father, but for all intents and purposes you've been like a second father to me. Or I guess that would be a third father. I don't really count my dad, though."

I was babbling. I had a feeling I knew what Steve wanted to talk to me about, and I'd rather have avoided it if at all possible.

"It's just that...well...I guess I didn't realize your relationship with Micah had progressed to the point of sleeping together." He rubbed his face and sighed.

"Which I admit was probably pretty naïve of me. I know I haven't been around much the last couple of months. I've been so busy with this place I don't suppose I'd have noticed if you'd suddenly gone straight and started dating girls."

I grinned. "I think we're all safe on that score."

Steve chuckled, but sobered quickly. "I just want you to be safe on every score."

"What do you mean?"

"You're eighteen so you can make your own choices. Adam and I both respect that. But I know if he were here he'd want to tell you to be careful."

"I've done a lot of thinking about Micah and me. I'm sure this is right for us."

"That's not quite what I meant," Steve said with a slight blush.

My blush was more than slight as I realized what he was talking about. "Oh. Oh! You mean..."

"Are you having safe sex?" he asked bluntly.

At that moment, I would have actually welcomed a visit from Amalie, but of course, there's never a ghost around when you need one. I felt as if my face would burst into flame at any moment.

"I... We... I mean... We've only... I..." I stammered to a stop, took a deep breath, and managed to get a coherent answer out. "Yes."

Steve looked eminently relieved. "That's all I needed to know." He pulled me into a sudden hug that caught me by surprise. "I'm sorry that was so...ghastly," he said, releasing me. "I've never had kids, and I don't exactly know what I'm doing. It really shows at times like this."

I kissed his cheek. "If you ask me, you've done a great job."

His face creased into a grin. "Liar. But look, now that you're...sexually active...maybe we should get you an appointment with a doctor. Even if you're being safe, you should still get tested regularly for sexually transmitted diseases. And there's a prophylaxis you can take to help prevent the spread of HIV."

I felt my eyes getting bigger with each sentence. Steve noticed my expression and laughed.

"Relax, Killian. This is all just part of being a gay man. But we can have this conversation another time. I didn't mean to scare you." He ruffled my hair and gave

me a gentle shove towards the stairs. "Now get back to your man before he falls asleep without you."

I decided a little payback was in order.

"Not much chance of that," I said with a wicked smirk as I swung the door open. "Micah's been promised something, and he isn't likely to forget it.

I shut the door, leaving a blushing Steve on the other side.

Revenge is sweet.

Of course, Micah was still awake when I got to his place. In fact, not only was he awake, but he answered the door in the nude. After I got over my initial shock, I quickly slid inside, where he shut the door and pinned me against it for one of his deep kisses.

"God, you're beautiful," I said when he broke away, my voice a little husky.

"You look pretty good, yourself. But either I'm underdressed or you're over overdressed."

With a grin, I started shedding clothing as I made our way to the bedroom. By the time we reached the bed, I was as naked as he was. Micah threw an arm around my waist and pulled me down onto the bed.

"Are you good?" he asked just as I was going in for another kiss.

I pulled back in surprise. "Yeah. Now that we've had sex, I'm not scared of it anymore. In fact, I haven't stopped thinking about it since D.C. I want you to fuck my brains out."

Micah laughed. "That's not what I meant, but that's good to know too. You just took a little longer than I expected. I was starting to get a little chilly"

I buried my face in his neck, a little embarrassed.  
"Oh. Steve held me up. He, uh, wanted to give me the birds and the bees talk."

"Aren't you a little old for that? Or is he worried you're going to get pregnant?"

I pushed up so I could give him a dirty look.  
"Very funny. I guess this was the gay birds and gay bees talk. He wanted to make sure we were safe."

"Good thing we were or that talk would have been even more awkward."

"Tell me about it. And he wants me to get tested."

"Probably a good idea. I get tested every three months."

"Really? You never mentioned that."

"It was never an issue until recently, but you're right. We should have talked about it before we had sex."

"It never crossed my mind."

"I guess it wouldn't. I always use condoms and, like I said, get tested regularly, plus it was your first time, so I wasn't really worried."

"Well, right now I'm ready for my third time."

"Are you sure it's not your fourth?"

"Hm. Maybe you're right. Think we can make it six before morning?"

"Think big, Mr. Kendall."

I slid my hand down his stomach and wrapped my fingers around his cock. "Oh, I am thinking big, Mr. Gerber."

"I think we can make it seven by morning."

"I like the way you think."

By the time we hit number six, I was so exhausted someone could have done a full tap routine in the middle of our bed and I would have slept through it.

Waking up in Micah's arms, his body warm and pressed close to mine, was nothing short of wonderful. The kind of peaceful, perfect moment I could get used to far too easily. I stayed still for a while, not wanting to break the spell — just soaking in the quiet intimacy of being held, the rise and fall of his breath syncing with mine.

Then I felt him shift slightly, his lips brushing against the side of my neck in a slow, lazy nuzzle. So he was awake too.

I smiled and rolled over to face him, tossing a leg casually over his body as I settled in closer.

He gave me a warm smile. "Good morning, beautiful."

"A very good morning," I said. "I wish I could wake up like this every morning."

Micah studied me for a minute, his eyes searching mine, before he broke into a wide smile, his eyes twinkling. "If you think this is good, then you're just going to love what comes next."

With that, he ducked under the sheet.

After number seven and a shared shower, which took a lot longer than usual even if we didn't quite make it to number eight, we finally made it to breakfast.

"Should I call Steve and tell him he might have a grandchild on the way?" Micah asked me, just as I took a big sip of coffee.

I almost spit out my mouthful. "Oh my god, stop!"

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks.

Micah smirked. "And if not, I'm dedicated to keep trying until we're successful."

I punched him in the arm.

"Okay, okay, so, I need to get going so I can finish up this story. I'm hoping to turn it over to my editor today. I'll talk to you later?"

"Yeah, just let me know when you're free."

"Okay. Sounds good."

He gave me a quick kiss before jumping up and heading out. I finished my bagel, then followed him out to make my morning classes.

After school, I swung by the office where I was typing up reports when Micah called.

"I thought you were going to be busy all day," I said after answering.

"Just turned in the story."

"That's awesome! Congratulations. Are you happy with it?"

"I'm happy it's done. At least for the moment. We'll see what happens once it breaks. But that will wait for tomorrow. Right now, I'm missing you already."

"Oh please. It's been three hours at most. You can't be ready for number eight already."

He laughed. "No, I need to recover and rehydrate first. Actually, I have a surprise for you. Is now a good time?"

"What's the surprise?"

"I'm not saying. You'll see. So, is it okay if I come by now?"

"No, I want you to tell me first."

I don't really like surprises. I prefer to know what I'm doing and what's expected of me. If someone says there is a surprise, predictably, I obsess over it until I find out what is going on. Blame it on my insatiable curiosity. That's why I'm an investigator.

"If you cooperate you'll find out a lot quicker," he reasoned.

"Fine. Just hurry up and get here."

"I'll be there before you know it."

Despite his promise, it felt like forever until he came through the office door. I jumped to my feet and noted his empty hands.

"So where's this surprise?"

"You have to come with me to find out."

"Where?"

"The sooner you stop asking questions and just do what I say, the sooner you'll find out."

I crossed my arms obstinately.

"I'm not moving until you tell me what's going on."

"Then I guess we're doing this the hard way." He walked calmly around my desk and, before I knew what he was doing, he'd grabbed me around the waist and tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I struggled, but it was cursory at best, my laughter betraying how much fun I was having.

He carried me through the door just as Novak was coming in.

"I won't even ask," my boss commented coolly as he squeezed by and went into the office without so much as a look back.

"It's nice to know I can count on you if I'm ever in trouble," I yelled after him, mustering as much dignity as one can while hanging over a man's shoulder with one's rump in the air.

"I didn't ask to be included in your sexual peccadilloes," I heard him call back.

"What?" I gasped. "What did he say?"

Micah just laughed and carried me outside.

"Now," he said, setting me down in the parking lot next to his car, "we can either do this the easy way — namely, you get in the car and quit being a pain — or I can stuff you in the trunk."

I had a feeling he would do it too. I made a show of smoothing my clothes, then turned calmly and climbed in.

"There, now that wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked.

"Just go," I replied.

Chuckling, Micah drove us a short distance to one of those ubiquitous suburban strip malls — the kind that seem to spring up around any reasonably sized town like mushrooms after a storm. This one featured a Chinese restaurant, a tattoo parlor, a Kenpo studio, a custom framing gallery, and a bridal boutique. An eclectic mix, to say the least — and one that offered absolutely no clue as to why we were here.

I gave him a sideways look. "So, are we taking self-defense classes, getting matching tattoos, or splitting an order of moo goo gai pan?"

"None of the above," he said, grinning. "Just trust me. Come on."

With the air of a man on a mission, he strode straight to the bridal shop. I blinked. Well, that certainly wasn't on my bingo card. Credit where it was due — Micah knew how to keep me guessing.

I followed him warily, trying to piece together what on earth this could possibly be about. He held the door open with the solemn grace of a royal footman, and I stepped inside.

The shop was all soft lighting and tulle, with an unmistakable undercurrent of floral perfume. A small man with a receding hairline and a mischievous twinkle in his eye greeted us at once. Judging by the way he lit up the moment we walked in, he was definitely in on whatever Micah had planned.

And judging by that smile, I was definitely in trouble.

"Okay, I'm here. Now what's going on?" Then a terrifying thought occurred to me. "This better not be another surprise wedding," I yelled.

The bewildered expression on both of their faces was almost enough to make me laugh. Almost.

"Surprise wedding?" Micah asked in confusion.

"Whoever heard of such a thing," the clerk added with a dismissive wave.

"Will someone please just tell me what the hell is going on?" I interrupted, a bit louder than I had intended.

"The Equality Ball," Micah said quickly, apparently deciding he'd dragged out his little game long enough.

"Huh?" I replied, brilliantly.

"I told you I'd take care of the tuxedos for the ball," he explained. "We're here to get fitted."

I blinked at him. “Wait...all of this was just for a tux fitting?”

“Yes.”

“That was the big surprise?”

“Well, it is a ball,” he said, completely unapologetic. “I wanted it to feel special. Exciting.”

“You kidnapped me for a tux fitting?” I tried to keep my tone stern, but the corners of my mouth were already fighting the uphill battle. I wasn’t mad — not even a little — but payback was a delicious concept.

“I didn’t kidnap you,” he protested. “Not exactly.”

That was it. His expression — equal parts smug and sheepish — broke me. I burst out laughing. He joined in a moment later, clearly relieved I wasn’t actually pissed.

The clerk, who had been watching the exchange with growing confusion, finally cleared his throat and stepped forward with practiced precision. “If we could...?” he prompted, producing a measuring tape with a magician’s flourish that suggested years of theatrical fittings.

“Sorry,” I said, still grinning as I stepped forward to be measured from every possible angle — and possibly a few new ones. Then it was Micah’s turn. Afterward, we browsed their selection of tuxes, tried on a few to get a feel for the cut and style, and settled on a matched-but-not-matching look that suited us both. They’d need a few alterations, but the clerk promised they’d be ready before the big night.

Back in Micah’s car, he glanced over at me. “Do you need to go back to the office?”

“Not really. Nothing that can’t wait until tomorrow.”

He grinned. “Good. I feel like celebrating turning in my big story.”

“Then let’s celebrate. What’d you have in mind?”

“Dinner somewhere nice. My treat. And I know it’s a Wednesday, but...you wanna go dancing?”

“Where? Inferno?”

“Yeah. I need to burn off some energy.”

“More than last night?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He laughed. “Okay, fine — I need to burn off some energy on the dance floor, not just in bed.”

“But maybe in bed too?”

“You really *are* insatiable.”

“Is that a complaint?”

“Definitely not.” He reached for my hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “So we’re on?”

“We’re on.”

“Great. I’ll drop you at your car so you can run home and grab a change of clothes. Then meet me back at my place and we’ll head to dinner from there.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Once we got back in the car, Micah glanced over at me with a crooked smile. “So... what was all that about a surprise wedding?”

“Oh, nothing.” I waved a hand, suddenly feeling sheepish now that the moment had passed.

He didn’t buy it. “C’mon, that didn’t just come out of nowhere.”

I sighed. It was easier to just tell him than endure the full Micah Gerber Interrogation Experience. When it

came to rampant curiosity, Micah was definitely my match.

“You remember my friend Will?”

“I don’t think I’ve met him, but you’ve mentioned him before.”

“Yeah, we met when he was dating my cousin Aidan.”

“The one who was murdered last year.”

I nodded. “Right. Well, Aidan and Will had a surprise wedding. Adam helped them plan it, but they kept the whole thing under wraps. No one knew why we were all invited to their house — it was around Christmas, so I figured it was just a holiday party. But when we got there, the place was decorated, the officiant — who was Bryant, by the way — was waiting, and they got married. And then...” I trailed off for a second. “Aidan was killed that same night.”

Micah let out a breath. “God. That’s...unbelievably tragic.”

“Yeah. The wedding was beautiful, though. Classic Adam — elegant and perfect.”

He smiled. “I don’t doubt it. So...you thought I was throwing you a surprise wedding?”

“No! I mean...not seriously.” I winced. “It just popped into my head and kind of came out of my mouth.”

Micah laughed. “You realize there’s one major difference you should’ve picked up on right away, right?”

“What’s that?”

“Aidan and Will *both* wanted to get married. They were surprising the guests. Surprising one of the grooms? That would be a bold strategy.”

I laughed too. “Okay, fair point. I didn’t really think it through.”

“Well, you can relax,” he said, squeezing my hand. “I’m not planning a wedding.” He paused for a beat before adding, “Not anytime soon, anyway.”

His words hung there for a moment, light but meaningful. We fell into a thoughtful silence, and I found myself turning over the idea of marriage — not in a fantasy way, but in that quiet, contemplative way you do when something suddenly feels possible, even if it’s a long way off. Still, I wasn’t ready to dive into that pool just yet. I pushed the thought aside and let the silence settle into something warm and comfortable as we drove.

I ran home to swap out my backpack full of dirty clothes for some fresh ones and changed into an outfit that could pull double duty — polished enough for dinner, but still club-ready. Adam was home, so I let him know I’d probably be staying with Micah again that night. Then I hit the road back to Salisbury to meet my boyfriend.

Dinner was excellent. Micah was in full celebration mode, his good mood infectious. After we ate, we made our way to Inferno.

The parking lot was nearly empty, and my favorite bouncer was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Carmen?” I asked.

“She mostly works weekends,” Micah explained. “They don’t usually bother with a bouncer during the week.”

I looked around. "It looks kind of dead."

"Yeah, it does. But that's okay — we'll bring our own party."

Inside, the music was blasting, but the place was practically deserted. After the sprawling chaos of Michelangelo, Inferno felt almost cozy — and the lack of a crowd made it seem even smaller. It was like stepping into a private club with a killer sound system. Not what I expected, but, somehow, it felt right.

"Let's dance!" Micah yelled over the music and grabbed me by the wrist to drag me onto the dance floor.

At first, I felt a little self-conscious — we were the only ones on the dance floor — but eventually, I let the music take over. It didn't take long before a few more people trickled in, and some even joined us. Most still lingered at the bar or sat at tables, watching, sipping drinks, or chatting with friends. I didn't care. I had Micah, the music, and the moment.

We danced for hours, stopping only for water breaks. By the time we finally called it quits, we were both sweaty, grinning, and breathless.

"You ready to go?" Micah asked.

I nodded. "I've got class tomorrow, so we probably shouldn't be out past midnight."

He smirked. "It's already past midnight, Cinderella. But yeah, let's go before you turn into a pumpkin."

I frowned. "Cinderella didn't turn into a pumpkin. Her carriage did."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do I have to throw you over my shoulder again?"

I laughed and ran for the door.

Back at his apartment, we peeled off our damp clothes and collapsed onto his bed. I stretched out, eyes closed, enjoying the cool air against my flushed skin — until I felt Micah’s hand glide down my chest and over my stomach. My body responded instantly.

Micah chuckled low in his throat. “Before I get you too worked up, maybe we should hit the shower. I don’t know about you, but I feel gross.”

“A shower sounds amazing,” I said, cracking one eye open. “Let’s take one together.”

When I looked up, Micah was propped on one elbow, watching me with a wicked twinkle in his eye.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” he said, voice low and seductive.

He leaned in and kissed me, hard and hungry, before jumping up and pulling me with him. Once I was on my feet, I grabbed his face and kissed him again, our tongues teasing, playful and hot.

Still laughing, we stumbled into the bathroom. Micah kept one arm wrapped tight around my waist, cupping my ass, while his other hand fumbled with the shower knobs. Once the water was just right, he pulled me under the spray, breaking our kiss only long enough to grab the body wash.

He lathered up his hands and began working them over my body — slow, deliberate, teasing. Every glide of his palms over my skin sent shivers through me. I wasn’t about to let him have all the fun. I grabbed the body wash and returned the favor, my hands roaming his firm, slick torso.

Suddenly, he spun me around so my back was pressed to his chest. I instinctively pushed back, grinding

against him as he lightly bit my neck and thrust his hips forward. We groaned together.

“I want you so bad,” he growled in my ear.

“I want you too,” I said breathlessly. “Right now. Right here.”

He stilled. “I don’t have a condom in here.”

I hesitated. “I...you’re the only guy I’ve ever been with.”

Micah gently turned me to face him, wiping water from my face with his thumbs. “I haven’t been with anyone since I met you. I still get tested regularly, but even so, I think we should use protection. At least until we both get tested. Together.”

I smiled, despite my frustration. “Get tested together? How romantic.”

He laughed and pulled me into his arms. “Those are the terms. Take ’em or leave ’em.”

I sighed, grinning. “Fine. I’ll take them. But in that case, we need to get out of this shower so you can take me.”

He laughed again. “You’re too much, Killian Kendall.”

I reached behind me and turned off the water. “Nah. I’m just enough. I hope you’ve got condoms and plenty of lube, because now I’m all riled up, and you know I’m insatiable.”

Fortunately, he did — and we definitely made good use of them.

Later, wrapped in Micah’s strong arms, I drifted off to sleep, warm and sated, the world fading into quiet peace.

## Chapter 18

Waking up in Micah's arms for the second time that week was just as blissful as the first. Maybe even more so. There was something about the warmth of his body pressed against mine, the steady rhythm of his breath, the way his arm was slung protectively across my waist — it made everything else feel distant and unimportant.

I shifted carefully until I was facing him, doing my best not to wake him. He looked peaceful, almost boyish in sleep, and I couldn't help but marvel at the fact that he was mine — that this strong, confident, maddeningly sexy man wanted me.

I watched him for a few quiet minutes, memorizing the curve of his lips, the fall of his hair across his forehead. Finally, unable to resist any longer, I leaned in and flicked my tongue along the edge of his ear.

He twitched and rubbed at the spot but didn't wake. I grinned and tried again, this time letting my tongue linger just a little longer.

Micah jerked slightly, blinking himself awake with a confused squint. As his gaze focused on me, his expression softened into a sleepy, radiant smile.

“Good morning,” I purred, pressing my body close against his, already very aware of the electric contact between us.

His hand slid lazily down my side, the tips of his fingers barely grazing my skin, and I shivered under his touch.

“Waking up to you makes it a very good morning,” he murmured, brushing his lips against mine in a soft, slow kiss. I returned it hungrily.

He pulled back just far enough to raise an eyebrow at me. “Unless I’m mistaken...someone’s a little horny this morning?”

“You must be mistaken,” I said, trying to look innocent — which was difficult given the very obvious way my arousal was pressing into his hip.

“Oh?” He smirked. “So you wouldn’t mind if I just got up and took a cold shower then?”

He started to shift away, but I grabbed his arm and tugged him back down onto the bed.

“You’re not going anywhere, mister.”

I swung my leg over him and settled into his lap, straddling him with a wicked grin.

Micah laughed, his hands finding my hips. “Well, this is new. We haven’t done it like this before.”

I rolled my hips slowly against him, feeling him harden beneath me. “You know what they say — there’s no time like the present.”

His breath hitched and his fingers tightened slightly around my waist. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Not in the slightest. Just trying to prepare my body for the trauma.”

“Trauma?” I teased, grinding against him again. “Sounds like someone’s scared.”

“Not scared,” he said with a devilish grin, “just aware of the challenge.”

“Well then, quit talking and start proving something. Because if you don’t do something soon, I might have to find someone who can keep up.”

His eyes flared with heat. In one swift motion, he bucked his hips up hard, sending a jolt through me and forcing a gasp from my lips. I caught myself against his chest, wide-eyed.

Micah’s voice was low and full of promise. “Oh, sweetheart. I think you’re the one who’s going to have to keep up. Hold on tight, cowboy.”

And I did.

I managed to leave Micah's apartment in time to swing by the office before my classes. Novak emerged from his office while I was checking the office email and slapped a newspaper on my desk.

"I see your boyfriend has made the big leagues," he said.

"You're probably the only person I know who still reads an actual newspaper. You know they have this online now, right?"

"I stare at a computer screen enough, and besides, I like the smell of newsprint. Now get off my lawn."

I glanced down at the front page of the paper, and the headline practically shouted up at me:

**COUNTY COUNCIL CORRUPTION**

**Payoffs, Bribes, and Cover-ups Abound in Local Government**

**Bold. Aggressive. Impossible to ignore.**

Beneath the subhead, I spotted the byline: Micah Gerber.

“Holy shit,” I breathed. “I knew he was working on something big, but I didn’t know it was front-page material.”

Novak, standing across from me, arched an eyebrow. “I’ll be sure to congratulate him — right after I remind him to keep his head down. I hope he’s ready for the fallout.”

I looked up sharply. “Is it that bad?”

Novak snorted. “You’d better believe it’s that bad. He’s just kicked a hornet’s nest the size of a city block, and some of those hornets carry badges, bank accounts, and backroom connections. He may not have named every name, but he named enough to start fires in a lot of very expensive offices.”

He tapped the headline. “Illegal contracts. Land deals. Missing funds. Millions of dollars. That kind of exposure doesn’t just make people uncomfortable — it makes them dangerous. There’ll be investigations, grand juries, maybe even arrests. But before all that, there’s going to be a lot of behind-the-scenes panic. People will want to know who talked. And who else knows what.”

I swallowed. “Do you think he’s in danger?”

“I hope not. But you know how these things work. People don’t like having their secrets aired in public. Especially powerful people.” Novak’s tone shifted slightly. “You of all people should know what happens when someone tries to shine a light on the good ol’ boys club.”

I did. He was talking about my biological father — a once-prominent State’s Attorney who’d been taken down for covering up evidence in Seth’s murder case...and a string of various other charges ranging from

collusion to discrimination. His corruption hadn't been as widespread as what Micah had apparently uncovered, but it was enough to destroy his reputation and send him to prison for five years. Most of the damage in that case had been self-inflicted, but it didn't stop him from trying to take others down with him.

"I'd better check on Micah."

I pulled out my phone and called his cell. It rang until voicemail picked up. I tried his office line — busy. Not a great sign. I sent him a quick text: *Just saw the paper. Call me when you can.*

While I waited, I opened my email to distract myself. The first message was from Noah, inviting me to Haven's annual Halloween dance. It was set for the Saturday before Halloween, with awards for best costume and an open invitation for friends. I'd heard some chatter about it at the last meeting but hadn't really planned on going.

Now, though, it didn't sound like such a bad idea. Micah could probably use a night where no one was dissecting his article or looking over their shoulder. At Haven, no one would care about corruption or politics. Just music, costumes, and the chance to be yourself. It might even help him decompress — assuming I could convince him to go.

Then I saw the next message. It was from Neal. My stomach dropped.

I clicked it open and read:

*I would be willing to speak with you regarding the unfortunate death of Paul Flynn. However, the nature of my business being what it is, I'm afraid I will*

*need some sort of verification that you are who you say you are. If I'm satisfied, we can meet, and I will answer your questions. Please call me at my office, and we'll see if we can work things out.*

I exhaled slowly, heart thudding in my chest. Cautious, but not dismissive. He wasn't shutting me down — which probably meant he did want to know what I knew. Or at the very least, he was worried I might already know too much.

It made sense. He couldn't be sure I wasn't vice, working undercover. But the fact that he was willing to meet — even with conditions — said a lot. And none of it made me feel particularly safe.

I sat back and stared at the screen, weighing my next move carefully.

Micah's investigation might have stirred up trouble in the halls of government...but mine was starting to dig into the shadows beneath. And I wasn't sure which one was going to get us hurt first.

I shook off the darker thoughts clawing at the edges of my mind and reached for my phone — just as it started to ring in my hand. It was Micah.

"Hey, I saw the paper," I said after our usual quick hellos. "Novak thinks you'll be catching hell."

"Novak would be correct," he replied, his tone flat and unreadable.

"Is it bad?"

"Not yet. But it could be," he said. "We've already gotten several calls — all from furious local bigwigs demanding to know how we could 'print something like that.' Most of them sound personally

offended. A few have hinted at legal action. One or two were more...creative with their displeasure. I wouldn't exactly call them threats, but I wouldn't call them friendly either."

My stomach tightened. "So this is going to blow up bigger than you thought."

"Way bigger. These people aren't just connected — they are the connections. They've got fingers in every pie from zoning to campaign donations. This thing has tentacles, Killian. I'm starting to think it might reach all the way to Annapolis. Maybe even higher."

"Let me guess," I said dryly. "Everyone thinks you should've let sleeping dogs lie."

"Exactly. The real scandal isn't what they did — it's that I dared to say it out loud."

I gave a humorless laugh. "This is the Eastern Shore, Micah. That's how it works. The good old boys protect their own. First rule of the backroom."

"I get that," he said, his voice tightening, "but it's not good enough. Maybe that was the way things worked fifty years ago — hell, maybe even ten — but we can't just let it slide anymore. If no one calls it out, nothing changes."

"I admire that," I said honestly, "but just be aware, these guys don't lose quietly. They're used to winning, and they don't play fair. You said some of them sounded threatening. Do you think you're actually in danger?"

"No direct threats," he said carefully. "Nothing they could get arrested for. But the tone...yeah, it's getting heated. I hadn't really thought they'd go further, but now I'm not so sure."

“Then maybe you should be careful, Micah. I mean it. Maybe back off a little — at least for now. Let someone else pick it up.”

There was a beat of silence before he answered. “I can’t. You know I can’t. I broke this story. If I walk away now, it sends a message — to them, to the paper, to every source who trusted me. This is my job. It’s what I do. You, of all people, should understand that.”

He wasn’t wrong. I did understand. Too well.

“I do. I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “I just...I worry about you.”

“I get it. And for what it’s worth, I worry about you too. Trust me, I’m not trying to be reckless. How about this? I’ll stay as low profile as I can and still do my job.”

"Promise?"

"I promise."

“Okay,” I said, even though it didn’t make me feel any better.

“You know what this means, though — you probably won’t be seeing much of me for a bit.”

“I figured. It sucks, but I’ve got a lot going on too.” I hesitated. “But what about Saturday night? Think you’ll be free to go to a Halloween dance with me at school?”

Micah hesitated. “A college Halloween dance?”

“It’s not just students. And it’s hosted by Haven. It’s safe. Fun. Low pressure. And I thought you could use a break.”

“We are going to the Equality Ball the next night.”

“I know, but this is different. It’s not tuxedos and photographers. Just dancing and bad costumes and maybe a few awkward teenagers.”

He chuckled. “Okay, okay. You win. Let’s do it. Do I have to wear a costume?”

“Yes,” I said, firm and unyielding.

I could hear voices in the background through the phone. Then Micah’s voice, lower, distracted: “Hang on a sec, Kill.”

He was gone for a few seconds, and when he came back, his voice was brisk. “Something’s come up. I’ve gotta go. I’ll talk to you later, okay? Love you. Bye.”

Before I could answer, the line went dead.

I stared at the screen, heart thudding. I hadn’t even said it back.

Be careful, I thought. Please.

It was stupid how quickly I’d gotten used to waking up beside him, how much it already felt like home. I just had to get through the next few days without him.

And hope the world didn’t fall apart in the meantime.

I needed a distraction. Good thing I was in the middle of two tough cases. If that couldn’t keep my mind off how much I’d miss waking up in my boyfriend’s arms, nothing would.

I dialed the number Neal had included in his email, and a smooth, cultivated voice answered on the second ring.

“The Drake Group. How may I be of service?”

“I’m calling for Neal.”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Killian Kendall. We exchanged emails. He asked me to call.”

“One moment, please.”

A soft, inoffensive smooth jazz instrumental filled my ear — just generic enough not to be memorable, but polished enough to suggest luxury. It wasn’t long before a deeper, confident voice came on the line.

“Mr. Kendall, thank you for calling. This is Neal.”

“Neal, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me.”

“Of course. Your email was...let’s say, intriguing. I’m sure you understand, before we meet in person, I need to be confident you are who you say you are.”

“And that I’m not a cop,” I said, dryly.

He laughed — warm, rich, and just a little too knowing. “You cut right to the point, don’t you, Mr. Kendall?”

“Please, call me Killian. And yes, I do. I imagine you’re a busy man. I’d rather not waste your time.”

“That’s refreshing. You said in your email you’re a private investigator looking into Paul Flynn’s murder?”

“Yes, sir.”

“May I ask who hired you, or is that confidential?”

I hesitated. Normally, I wouldn’t disclose a client’s name so easily, but I had a feeling it might help move things along in this case. “Actually, I believe you know him — Micah Gerber. He used to work for your agency.”

There was a pause, then, “Micah? Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. I thought he and Paul parted ways years ago.”

“They did,” I confirmed. “But Mr. Gerber still wants to know what happened to his friend.”

I kept my voice neutral, careful not to hint at anything more than professional ties between us. The last thing I needed was for Neal to figure out Micah and I were dating.

“Understandable,” he said. “Though I’m not sure how much help I can be. Paul and I never actually met. Our communication was all digital or over the phone.”

“Micah already gave me the rundown on how your business operates.”

“Then I don’t need to explain the finer points of discretion. Let me ask you this — is there any way I can verify your credentials? Can I check your license with the state?”

I definitely didn’t want to get into the fact that I wasn’t licensed yet.

“You’re welcome to contact my agency. The owner is Shane Novak. He can confirm everything.”

“Could I speak to him today? I’m leaving town this weekend for an extended vacation, and I’d prefer to meet before then.”

“Where are you headed?” I asked casually.

“Costa Rica. I’ll be gone most of November.”

“Must be nice,” I said. “But Novak’s not in the office right now. I can try to reach him and ask him to give you a call.”

“How do I know you’re not just having someone pretend to be him?” Neal’s tone remained pleasant, but there was a sharpness under the polish.

Fair question. I paused. “Would hearing from Micah be enough? If he called and vouched for me?”

“That would work,” Neal said after a beat. “It’s been a long time since we talked. Last I heard, he said he was taking a job at some newspaper out on the Shore. I always suspected that was code for going independent.”

“He’s still in journalism,” I said, maybe a touch too proudly. “He’s actually the star reporter for the biggest paper covering the entire Eastern Shore.”

Okay, so technically that might have been a stretch — but I had no doubt it would be true soon enough.

“Is that so?” Neal sounded genuinely pleased. “Well, good for him. Yes, have him give me a call. If everything checks out, we can meet tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“Union Station. Center Café. Noon. Just give them my name, and they’ll bring you to my table.”

“That works. Thanks again for your time.”

“Don’t mistake this as entirely altruistic, Killian,” Neal said with a smooth, dry chuckle. “It’s in my best interest to meet with you. I’d rather give you facts than have you wandering around with half-baked theories. Or worse — taking those theories to the police.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll be expecting Micah’s call. I look forward to meeting you...assuming all goes well.”

“Likewise.”

He hung up, leaving me staring at my phone. It had gone better than I expected. Now I just had to convince Micah to make the call — and hope Neal really did want to help.

I called Micah immediately, holding my breath with each ring. Come on, pick up. Please pick up.

“Hello?” His voice came through sounding a little curt — distracted and just short of annoyed.

“Micah, I’m sorry to bug you again, but I need a quick favor.”

“Is it important?” Papers rustled in the background, and his voice suggested he was only half-listening.

“It’s about Paul.”

That snapped him to full attention. “Paul?”

I couldn’t help the flicker of annoyance that flared in my chest. Nice to know Paul got an instant reaction while I had to compete with background noise.

“Yeah,” I said, keeping my voice even. “I just spoke to Neal. He agreed to meet with me, but he wants confirmation that I’m who I say I am and that I really was hired by you.”

Micah gave a short laugh, the sound tight. “Paranoia is the price of doing business when your business is a legal gray area. I don’t miss that part.” He paused. “Yeah, I’ll call him. Just give me the number. When does he want to talk?”

“As soon as you can. Now, if possible.”

“Alright, I’ll do it now before I dive back into work.” He sounded more grounded now — focused.

I rattled off Neal’s number, and he repeated it back flawlessly.

“That’s it,” I said. “Thanks, Micah. I love you.” I was determined to get that in before he hung up this time.

"I love you too."

I didn’t waste any time before placing my next call — this one to Chris. When she picked up, I filled her in on the meeting with Neal. She agreed to come with me without hesitation, offering to be my backup just in case things got weird — or dangerous.

I’d have to miss my morning classes, but this was too important to postpone. Neal’s tight schedule meant this might be my only shot to get real answers. And something told me he had more to say than he was letting on.

I hit more traffic than expected after I crossed the bridge, and by the time I finally reached the Metro station, I was running late and a little frazzled. Chris was already waiting.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon,” Chris said as I jogged up.

“That makes two of us,” I replied, catching my breath. “Sorry I’m late.”

“No worries. We should get there on time — assuming the trains cooperate.” She turned and started walking briskly. “Come on, we need to catch the Red Line to Union Station.”

I hurried to match her pace, taking a moment to look her over as we moved. She was wearing black jeans and a dark gray hoodie with a large white skull across the front. Not exactly subtle, but knowing Chris, she’d

probably chosen it on purpose. Still, I hoped she wouldn't draw too much attention.

We boarded the train a few minutes later and snagged a pair of seats. As the car rattled along, we spent the ride trading theories about the case. Most of it was speculation, but one thing we agreed on: I needed to talk to Paul's family. And I needed to figure out what that damn key opened. I had a hunch it would turn out to be — quite literally — the key to everything.

Once we pulled into Union Station, we started reviewing the plan.

"Do you know where this restaurant is?" I asked as we exited the train and headed up.

"Yeah, the Center Café. It's right in the middle of the main concourse. Can't miss it."

"Perfect. I'll go in first. You follow me, but hang back — discreetly. Neal said to ask for him at the front, and they'll take me to his table. Just keep me in sight. I doubt anything will happen in a public place, but...better to be safe."

"Agreed," she said. "I've got your back."

We stepped into the grand concourse—its sweeping ceilings and soft light making the place feel more like a cathedral than a train station. In the center of it all was the café. True to its name, it sat open-air in the middle of the floor, two levels high, the second ringed with a black metal railing.

I approached the host stand, where a sharply dressed young man stood like he was guarding the gates of heaven.

"I'm here to meet with Neal," I said.

The host gave me a slow once-over, his eyes cool and assessing, like he was trying to guess my net worth.

“Are you Killian Kendall?”

“Yes.”

“Follow me.”

He led me up the stairs to the second level, toward a quiet corner where a single table sat apart from the others. The angle of the host’s body blocked my view of the person waiting, but as we approached, he finally stepped to the side — and I stopped cold.

Seated at the table, looking perfectly relaxed and unbothered, was a man with sharp, clean features and a perfectly curated air of polite detachment.

I’d never met him in person, but I recognized him instantly.

He was the man from the photo I’d found hidden in Jake’s room.

## Chapter 19

I stood frozen, my brain scrambling to process what I was seeing.

Why did Jake have a photo of Neal hidden in his bedroom? What was their relationship — if any? Could my two cases somehow be connected? A hundred questions flew through my mind like a flock of startled birds, but I shoved them aside. Now wasn't the time. Neal was watching me, his expression curious.

I forced myself to move again, pasting on a pleasant smile and walking toward him with what I hoped looked like professional confidence.

As I approached the table, Neal rose to greet me. "Hello, you must be Killian," he said, his voice smooth and lightly accented. It caught me off guard — over the phone, I hadn't noticed it. The accent was faint, hard to place. Continental European, maybe. Polished. Educated.

"Yes, and you must be Neal. Thank you for meeting with me."

"Believe me, it's always a pleasure to share a meal with such an attractive young man."

I gave a polite smile in response, my brain still reeling from the revelation that he was the man in Jake's photo. Normally, I'd blush at such a comment, but I was too rattled to do much more than nod.

A waiter arrived just then, refilling Neal's water and taking my drink order. I used the interruption to study Neal more closely. The newspaper photo hadn't done him justice. In person, he was striking — tan skin with a golden undertone, dark eyes that sparkled with

intelligence and humor, and sharp, patrician features that belonged in a fashion magazine...or perhaps a spy thriller. His dark hair, peppered with silver, was styled with just enough care to look effortless. Age-wise, he could've been anywhere from a forty to a well-preserved sixty. I suspected he'd had work done, but, if so, it was subtle — and probably very expensive.

He wore a charcoal-gray sport coat over a crisp, open-collared shirt, and everything about his outfit spoke of expensive taste and quiet confidence. A slim gold chain at his throat, a heavy watch, and a pair of elegant rings of each hand completed the look. If the goal was to radiate wealth, charm, and control—he succeeded.

“You look surprised,” he said, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Even a little...unnerved?”

I forced another smile. “I’m not sure what I was expecting, sir, but you’re right, it wasn’t you.”

His eyes twinkled. “The way you hesitated, I could practically hear the gears turning. Don’t worry, I’m not always so intimidating—only when I need to be.”

I took a sip of my ice water, more for something to do than out of thirst.

“You’re not what I expected either,” he said after a pause, voice light but intent. “Partly your age. And partly...your beauty.”

This time, I couldn’t stop the blush.

“When I think of a private investigator, I imagine the Philip Marlowe type, someone a little more jaded. A trench coat. Cigarette smoke. A five o’clock shadow.

But you? You're all light and angles. More charming than cynical."

"I guess I'm the new model," I replied with a tight smile.

"Then I like the new model. Much more aesthetically pleasing, I assure you." He gave me a warm, practiced smile. "But business first. We're both busy men."

"Yes, thank you again for taking the time," I said, welcoming the shift back to something solid and professional.

He waved a hand with a graceful shrug. "Let's just say, your email didn't exactly leave me many options. I find myself in a rather delicate position, and meeting with you seemed...prudent."

"You're careful," I said.

"Careful," he echoed. "Yes. Discreet. Selective. It's how I've stayed in business this long. In fact, you're the only person to ever associate me with the Drake Group who's met me in person."

"You must trust me."

"I trust that your interest is sincere. And speaking with Micah helped confirm that." He gave a soft sigh. "He was always one of my favorites, you know. Smart. Sexy. Reliable. I'm glad to hear he's doing well. Though I have to wonder...is your relationship with him purely professional?"

I smiled, but it didn't reach my eyes. "That's a bit personal, don't you think?"

He chuckled, unbothered. "Touché."

I leaned forward slightly. "What can you tell me about Paul Flynn?"

Neal tilted his head, amused again. “That depends. What would you like me to tell you about Paul Flynn?”

The vaguely patronizing tone irked me. Since I’d arrived, he’d been controlling the tempo of the conversation. Time to take it back.

“Let’s start with how long he worked for you.”

He considered. “Just under three years.”

“That’s a long time for an escort, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps. But the arrangement suited him, and I don’t interfere where I’m not needed.”

“What kind of employee was he?”

Neal folded his hands on the table, his rings catching the light. “You must understand, Mr. Kendall — it’s not quite the same as managing a retail business. Escorts aren’t clocking in and stocking shelves. Paul had a certain appeal: blond hair, blue eyes, youthful charm. Not unlike yourself, actually. That look never goes out of style. Clients loved him. He was honest, dependable, respectful. Never caused trouble, never shorted me on my share. His reviews were glowing. By every metric that mattered, he was a model employee.”

“Micah told me you paid your employees by direct deposit when clients paid online. Was that true for Paul?”

“It’s standard practice.”

“Do you know what bank he used?”

“I don’t recall, but I’ll find out.”

“Did you ever meet him in person?”

“No. I make it a point never to meet my escorts. Separation ensures discretion — for both sides. Business is conducted digitally or over the phone.”

“Then how do you manage quality control?”

“I have people,” he said smoothly. “Handlers, photographers, client feedback, regular check-ins. Before I even consider hiring someone, they’re required to submit photos and measurements, undergo a physical exam with a clean bill of health, and commit to regular HIV and STD testing. I also run a full background check. It’s a well-oiled machine.”

I nodded slowly, filing away every detail. So far, he was composed, consistent...but that photo in Jake’s room still nagged at me. I couldn’t very well ask him about it, though. I forced my mind back to the business at hand.

"Did Paul seem any different the last few months?"

"Different? No, but then, I'm not sure I would have noticed. We weren't close. Our contact was minimal and always by telephone or email. The only way I'd have known if he had changed would be if his clients noticed a remarkable-enough difference that they felt compelled to report it to me, which as you can imagine is not very likely."

"You said his reviews were good. Did he have any repeat customers?"

Neal’s expression shifted slightly. “Paul discouraged long-term arrangements. Repeat clients can form attachments, and those attachments can become messy.”

“But he *did* have repeat clients?”

“A few. Yes.”

“Do you keep records of your clients?”

He narrowed his eyes. He still wasn't squirming, but I had a feeling this was a man who never squirmed. Slightly peeved might be as close as he got.

"Even if I did, they would be kept in the strictest confidence. That's how I maintain my reputation."

"So you do keep records."

"I didn't say—"

"You're too defensive. That's a giveaway." I leaned forward, voice calm but firm. "We'll call them *alleged* files, for the sake of conversation. I don't plan on making them public. I just want to see Paul's file. And his client history."

Neal's charm dropped like a mask. "I agreed to meet as a courtesy, Mr. Kendall. That does *not* include handing over private files."

His voice had taken on an ice-cold-steel quality that sent a shiver down my spine, but I didn't flinch.

"This isn't a social visit. Someone strangled Paul in his own apartment. That makes it murder. And if I don't get those files, I'll go to the police. You said yourself you're in a vulnerable position. Do you really want law enforcement digging into your business model?"

His jaw tightened. A long moment passed. Then, to my surprise, he broke into a wide, genuine smile.

"Well," he said, sitting back in his chair. "I underestimated you. That doesn't happen often."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"You should. You're quite the surprise. If this PI gig doesn't work out, I imagine you'd make a very successful escort."

“Thanks,” I said, deadpan. “I’ll keep that in mind. Now, the files?”

“I can’t risk transmitting digital files over unsecured channels. I’ll send you a hardware-encrypted USB drive, overnight, delivered by private courier. Signature required, of course. Once it’s delivered, call me for the code.”

“And you’ll include everything? Paul’s file, his banking info, and whatever records you have on his clients.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dare forget.” His eyes twinkled again, but the steel behind them remained. “Is our business concluded?”

“Just one more thing. Do you have any idea who might have killed Paul?”

“None,” he said flatly. “I’ve thought about it quite a bit. Paul was a good person. I can’t imagine anyone wanting to hurt him.”

“Alright then. We’re done. I’ll be looking for those files.”

“You’ll have them tomorrow.” He stood and offered a faint bow. “It’s been a pleasure.”

He turned and walked away, never once looking back.

I sat there a moment longer, my mind churning. I had just pushed a very powerful man and lived to tell the tale. That alone was cause for caution. But there was more.

Why did Jake have a photo of Neal?

I left a few bills on the table to cover my drink and went to find Chris.

"So...how'd it go?" she asked.

"It went."

"Is this fill-in-the-blanks? I couldn't really see you guys up there, so I had to content myself with loitering around at the bottom of the stairs. They almost escorted me out a few times, until I told them I was waiting for my aunt, Senator Sampson. They left me alone after that."

"Is Senator Sampson really your aunt?" I asked, momentarily distracted.

"No, but they don't know that. Why are you so frowny? Did the interview go badly?"

"Not really."

"Did you get any information out of him?"

"Not really."

"So it was a total waste of time?"

"Not—"

"—really," she finished for me. "Would you care to elaborate on any of this?"

"He didn't exactly tell me anything useful. He's sending me the files I was hoping to get, however, so it wasn't a total bust."

"He's sending them? Like...in the mail?"

"Overnight. Private courier. Signature required. Password protected. He's very...cautious. He admires caution."

"Does he? Hmm. Well, caution is very admirable, especially when crossing the street. So is that it? Are we done? I have a class at two, and if we get moving now I won't have to miss it."

Shaking my head in an attempt to clear it, I started toward the trains.

"Yeah, we're done. Let's go."

As we walked back down to the Metro, Chris was rattling on about something, but I couldn't have repeated a word of it if my life depended on it. My mind was still stuck on one thought: Why did Jake have a photo of Neal stashed away in his room?

There was one obvious explanation that would explain the photo *and* the wad of cash I found in Jake's room. But I didn't like where that answer led me.

And Judy would like it even less.

I brooded the whole train ride back, and then the entire drive home. But by the time I pulled into the driveway, I still didn't have any answers. Just more questions.

And a bad feeling that things were about to get worse.

The only vehicle in the driveway was the pickup, which likely meant Kane was home. That suited me just fine — I needed to talk to him about Jake. I couldn't do much more on Paul's case until the files from Neal arrived, but I'd put off dealing with Jake for too long already. And now that there was a chance the two cases overlapped, I had even more reason to get back on track. Kane was my first stop.

I found him in our shared room, hunched over the computer, typing away with the fierce intensity of someone procrastinating productively.

"Homework?" I asked.

He jumped and spun in his chair. "Jesus, Killian, you scared the shit out of me. When did you get home?"

"Just now. Sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you. Got a minute?"

He pushed back from the desk with a dramatic sigh of relief.

"Please interrupt me. Take your time. I'm knee-deep in Shakespeare, and I'd rather talk to a serial killer than write another word about Hamlet."

"How can you hate Shakespeare?"

"Not hate — strongly resent. And it's not even Hamlet himself, it's having to analyze him in five pages or more. Why couldn't the guy have written fewer soliloquies?"

I laughed, momentarily distracted from why I'd come. "Fair enough. But I need to ask you something. Kind of official."

His expression shifted. "Official how?"

"Jake."

Kane's brow furrowed, and he nodded slowly. "Go ahead."

"Who were his friends at school?"

"You mean who used to be his friends," he corrected. "He doesn't really have any now. I think that's the way he wants it."

"What happened? Why'd they pull away?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. We weren't exactly tight. Different grades, different social circles. I tried to be friendly when he first moved back, but he was...off."

"Off how?"

"Different from before. He was always so outgoing and confident, not cocky, just really...assured."

"What's he like now?"

"Quiet. Not mean or anything, just...distant."

"But he used to have people he hung out with?"

"Yeah, mostly Danielle and Craig. They were kind of his inner circle, I guess."

"Last names?"

"Lewis and Martin. Danielle Lewis, Craig Martin."

I jotted them down in my notebook. "Were they close?"

"Danielle was like his best friend. Craig—" Kane hesitated, then smirked. "Craig had a major crush on him. Followed Jake around like a lost puppy. Not that he ever said anything. He's not even out, but everyone knows he's gay."

I raised an eyebrow. "If he's not out, how do they know?"

Kane gave me a look. "C'mon, Kill. You know the signs. Craig's...pretty obvious. Flamboyant as hell."

I frowned. "That's a stereotype."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't start preaching. I'm president of the queer club you started, remember? I live with three gay men, and my brother was gay. I think I've earned a little gaydar credibility. Trust me — Craig's gay. Whether he knows it or not."

"Alright, alright. Sorry." I rubbed my face. "You wouldn't happen to have their numbers, would you?"

"Nope. You'll have to sleuth that out yourself, Nancy Drew."

"Ha ha. You're hilarious." I closed the notebook. "Just for that, I'm not helping with your paper."

"Rude," Kane said, but he grinned. "So, when are we hanging out? You said we should spend more time together, but I haven't seen you in, like, forever."

"I know. I've been buried in these cases. Soon...I promise."

He rolled his eyes. "That's what you always say. What about tonight?"

"Don't you have homework?"

He looked at his computer with contempt. "It can wait."

"Well, I really can't tonight. I want to swing by the office to type up my notes while it's fresh on my mind. I'll probably stay at the B&B tonight since I have class in the morning. Is Adam coming back tonight?"

Kane's face dropped. "Yeah, but he said he'd be late."

An idea occurred to me.

"Oh hey — random question — do you like dancing?"

Kane gave me a suspicious look. "I mean...I guess? Why?"

"Wanna go to a dance with me?"

He made a yuck face. "Um, thanks for the invite but isn't that a little weird? You're my brother and all..."

"You're hilarious. But seriously, I'm going with Micah. You'd just be tagging along. It's a Halloween dance at Pemberton, sponsored by Haven."

"What's Haven?"

"The queer club on campus."

He raised a brow. "So not only would I be third wheel, but it'll just be, like, all gay guys and lesbians?"

I laughed. "It's college, so it's more mixed than Rainbow Alliance. There'll be bi girls, at the very least. Think about it: maybe you'll be the only straight guy there. Prime opportunity."

Kane's grin widened. "Suddenly, this is sounding like the best idea you've had in years."

"Are you seeing anyone right now?"

He sighed. "Nope. I'm in a bit of a drought. Maybe I've outgrown high school girls. A college dance might be exactly what I need. When is it?"

"Tomorrow night. Costume required."

"A costume? What is this, middle school?"

"Oh, come on. It'll be fun."

"What are you going as?"

"I have no idea. Got any suggestions?"

Kane looked horrified. "It's tomorrow night and you don't have a costume? Killian!"

"I know, I know."

He paused. "You remember the last costume party we went to together?"

Unfortunately, I did. Jake's house. The night everything went sideways — a busted windshield, a death threat, and a murder.

"Yeah," I said quietly. "Let's hope this one goes better."

"For real," Kane agreed. "Hey, why don't you come back here tomorrow and we can make our own costumes? We can brainstorm and grab supplies, then throw something together."

Normally, that sounded like my personal hell — I was the least crafty gay man on the planet — but Kane looked so hopeful I couldn't bring myself to say no.

"Sure," I said. "Come up with an idea and call me with the supply list."

His whole face lit up. "Awesome! Okay, back to Billy Shakes for me. Unless...how about this? I'll be

Hamlet and you be Yorick. I'll drag you around in a headlock all night and whisper, 'Alas, poor Yorick,' over and over."

"Keep thinking," I said flatly.

"Ha. Later, Kill."

"Later, Kane."

I grabbed my keys and headed for the office, glad to have made progress — with the case, sure, but more so with Kane.

I drove to my office, where I found no messages waiting for me. In fact, it didn't even look as if Novak had been in that day. The mail was still in the box, and a yellow post-it note from a delivery service was stuck to the door, saying they would be back the next day to try again, but after that, we were out of luck.

"We need a secretary," I said as I sorted the mail, making one pile to give to Novak and tossing the rest in the trash.

After finishing that task, I looked up Martin and Lewis online. There were far too many to call one-by-one, and I didn't know their parents' names to narrow my search. So much for the easy way.

Then again, perhaps there was an even easier way. I picked up the phone and dialed Judy's number.

"Hey Judy, this is Killian."

"Hi, Killian. Have you found something?"

"I don't know yet." I chose my words carefully.

"Maybe. I need to check some details first before I say anything."

"It sounds serious."

"I don't want to go into it at this point. I don't know enough. I'm hoping you can help me, though. I'm trying to get phone numbers for Danielle Lewis and Craig Martin. They were friends of Jake's."

"I know Danielle and Craig, Danielle especially, but I don't think I have their phone numbers." She paused. "Actually, maybe I saved them in my phone just in case I needed to track down Jake some time. Hang on."

While I waited, I picked up a pencil and doodled absently on the back of an envelope.

A few moments later Judy came back on the line. "Found them," she said triumphantly.

She read off the numbers, which I jotted down on the envelope.

"You know," she said, "I don't think he's really friends with them anymore. I talked to them when I first became suspicious, and they said they didn't know any more than I did."

"What they might not be willing to tell a mom, they might not mind telling me. You know parents are like the enemy at that age. You keep your mouth shut—"

I glanced down at the envelope and stopped in midsentence.

"Killian?" Judy asked. "Are you still there?"

While I'd been waiting for Judy, I had drawn words in bubble letters. I was suddenly struck by the ones my subconscious had chosen,

Escort. Jake. Money.

It was the most obvious conclusion...and the one I'd been trying to avoid. It explained everything: where he kept disappearing to after school until late and even

occasionally overnight, the expensive clothes, the electronics, even the ticket to the Ball. One of his clients could be taking him. It all fit too perfectly. I didn't like it, but it made too much sense to simply dismiss.

More importantly, I didn't have to like it. I just had to prove or disprove it. All I had so far was circumstantial evidence.

The one thing that theory didn't explain was the photo. Neal claimed he never met his escorts in person, so how could Jake know who Neal was? Then again, maybe Neal was lying. Or maybe Jake was just too much to resist, and he'd made an exception. Or maybe Jake figured it out somehow. What if he was blackmailing Neal?

"Killian? What's wrong?" Judy asked again. I had forgotten I was still holding the phone.

"Oh, um, nothing's wrong." There was no point getting Judy all upset until I knew for certain what was going on with Jake. "I just realized I'm late meeting Micah," I fibbed.

"Oh, then I'll let you go. Tell him I said he did a great job on the big article. It's about time we shook up those fat cats."

"Yeah, thanks. Bye, Judy."

I hung up and sat staring at the envelope and those three words.

Jake an escort?

Was he somehow connected to Paul's death?  
Could he be in danger?

I didn't even want to consider it, but it was too late. I was in too far. I had to know the truth.

## Chapter 20

I was still brooding over Jake the next morning.

Something about that photo of Neal in Jake's room wouldn't let me go. The implications twisted my gut in ways I wasn't ready to examine too closely. Still, I'd promised Kane we'd work on costumes today, and I didn't want to let him down again. That said, I figured I might be able to squeeze in a couple quick interviews with Jake's old friends first. I wasn't expecting much—high school gossip tends to be shallow and fleeting—but it was a loose end that needed to be tied off.

I checked the time. It was late enough to call without being rude. Craig answered on the second ring. His voice was cautious, maybe a little guarded, but not unfriendly.

"Yeah, I remember Jake," he said after I introduced myself and explained why I was calling. "I guess I can meet you. Give me, like, two hours?"

"That works. Text me the address and I'll be there."

Danielle was equally reachable. Her tone was brighter, more open, and she sounded genuinely curious about why someone wanted to talk about Jake now. I told her I'd drop by about an hour after my meeting with Craig, give or take. She said she'd be home.

With both appointments set, I suddenly had some time to kill—no pun intended. Neal had promised to send the files overnight, and with any luck, the package might have arrived already. On impulse, I decided to swing by the office and check.

As I climbed the front steps to the agency, I was surprised to catch a glimpse of someone slipping out the door to the back stairs — just a flutter of a tan trench coat and a quick flash of silver-blond hair. Novak's client. The mysterious, birdlike woman who'd been the subject of so much intrigue.

I paused at the top of the stairs, watching the door click shut behind her. She moved like someone who didn't want to be noticed—but I noticed. That only made me more curious.

Inside, I found Novak leaning over my desk, scrutinizing a handful of photographs. He straightened the instant he saw me and swept them up in one practiced motion, like a magician making evidence disappear.

"Was that your client I just saw sneaking out the back?" I asked casually.

"Yes, it was," he said, matching my tone.

"She's here awfully early for a weekend meeting."

"I could say the same about you."

I crossed to my desk and leaned against it.

"So...why was she sneaking out? Avoiding paparazzi? Angry ex? Federal agents?"

"She wasn't sneaking," he replied.

I simply raised an eyebrow.

Novak sighed. "She's in a sensitive situation. She needs discretion."

"In other words, she was sneaking."

"She wasn't sneaking," he repeated with a straight face, then rolled his eyes. "Okay. Fine. She was sneaking."

I gestured to the stack of photos in his hand.  
"And those are...?"

"None of your business. If they were, I'd have shown them to you."

"Fair enough. You're getting good at secrets, Novak."

He gave me a tight, unreadable smile. "Don't you have cases of your own to be working on?"

Then, without waiting for a response, he retreated into his office and shut the door behind him with just enough force to make a point, but not enough to qualify as a slam. A classic Novak move — firm boundaries, theatrical flair.

I chuckled to myself. Teasing him was almost too easy. Still, my curiosity about the elusive client — and the photos — was definitely piqued. But I'd already pushed that envelope far enough for one morning.

There was still no sign of the package from Neal when I got to the office, and I was just about to leave when a delivery guy showed up with perfect timing. He was wearing a uniform from a company I'd never heard of and carrying a small, nondescript box under his arm.

"Killian Kendall?" he asked.

"That's me."

"Please confirm your identity."

I hesitated for just a second, then took out my wallet and flashed my license. He scanned it quickly, tapped something on the screen, then held out a sleek tablet and a pen stylus.

"Sign your name."

Ignoring the stylus, I scrawled a crude approximation of my name using my finger, and he

finally handed me the package. It was heavier than I expected — about the size of a glasses case with no markings.

“Thanks,” I said.

He gave me a tight smile. “Have a good day.” Then he was gone.

I examined the box. The label had a PO Box as the return address and no sender listed. Neal, cautious as ever. I carried it to my desk and grabbed a letter opener and gently pried it open. Nestled in the black foam was a flash drive — but not just any flash drive. This one had a keypad built into it. A small LED screen lit up, flashing: ENTER PIN.

I stared at it for a moment, then picked up my phone and dialed Neal.

He answered on the second ring. “Mr. Kendall. I trust the courier found you.”

“He did. Very cloak and dagger.”

“I take precautions,” Neal said smoothly. “I assume you’ve found the drive.”

“I have.”

“You’ll need to enter the code. It’s 2401.”

I punched it in. The LED flashed green, then the drive unlocked with a faint mechanical click.

“What’s 2401?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Neal said. “Just a number I remember.”

“Well, thanks. I appreciate the quick turnaround.”

“I’m a man of my word,” he said smoothly. “Be careful with what you find. Some of it may be more dangerous than you expect.”

“Noted.”

I stared at the now-accessible drive in my hand. This little device held a list of secrets someone had possibly killed to protect. I had a feeling they might be willing to do it again.

Neal was a lot of things — paranoid, manipulative, morally flexible — but he wasn't stupid. Trusting a device from someone like him without checking it first would be a peak rookie mistake. I set the flash drive down on the desk like it might explode and pushed my chair back.

I started to slide it into my laptop but paused as a thought suddenly occurred to me.

First rule of digital paranoia: never plug unknown hardware directly into the machine you actually care about. I dug through my office closet until I found the ancient, wheezing laptop Novak had given me when I first started. It hadn't taken long to replace it since it could barely load a web page without having a small existential crisis, but that wasn't the point. The thing was practically air-gapped by virtue of being too old to function with most modern networks. Perfect for containment.

I booted it up, a slow, painful process, and, while it churned, I grabbed my phone and pulled up a quick about recognizing hardware trojans.

Before I even thought about plugging the drive in, I ran a hardware scan using a USB analyzer I'd downloaded ages ago and promptly forgotten about. It wasn't perfect, but it could at least tell me if the device was trying to broadcast anything, draw unusual power,

or initiate a hidden auto-run script. I connected the flash drive through a cheap USB data blocker — basically a plastic chastity belt for ports — and watched the diagnostic window populate.

Nothing. No unexpected signals, no rogue pings, no attempt to overwrite the boot sector. That was...comforting. But “comforting” didn’t mean “safe.”

Just to be sure, I grabbed a small Faraday pouch from my drawer. I’d teased Novak when he gave it to me, saying he was turning into a conspiracy theorist, but right then, I was grateful. I slipped my actual laptop inside and sealed it shut. If something on the drive managed to jump networks or phone home, at least it wouldn’t be reaching anything important.

Finally, after triple-checking every precaution I could think of, I plugged the drive into the sacrificial laptop. The machine whirred like it was considering dying on the spot. Then a directory window opened.

No fireworks. No smoke. No “you’ve been hacked” pop-ups.

Just a single folder labeled "Paul Flynn."

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. Maybe Neal was telling the truth. Maybe.

Either way, whatever was on this drive wasn’t meant for just anyone. And now it was mine to uncover — carefully, and with both eyes open.

Time to find out just how deep this rabbit hole really went.

I clicked on the folder. Inside were several files — PDFs and spreadsheets neatly named and organized.

I opened the file marked `CLIENTS_RECURRING` and skimmed the spreadsheet. As Neal had told me, Paul had avoided repeat customers when possible, but there were seven names that showed up more than twice. Each entry included basic contact information—email, phone, address—as well as notes on where the meetings occurred: Paul’s apartment, various hotels, or the clients’ homes. Payment method was noted for each transaction: some paid cash, others used wire transfers or online platforms.

All seven records were detailed and complete. I made a mental note to prioritize interviews with them.

Switching back to Paul’s main file, I found his banking information, including the name of his bank and partial account details. A quick search gave me the bank’s public customer service number. I jotted it down on a sticky note and slipped it into my notebook. I’d need to call during business hours — and figure out exactly what I was going to say before I did.

That was a problem for Monday.

In the meantime, I decided to tackle Paul’s client list. The first four didn’t answer — not too surprising given the hour. It was still early enough that some might be sleeping off the night before. I made a note to try again later.

Client number five answered, but hung up the moment I identified myself as a private investigator calling about Paul Flynn. Charming.

It wasn't until the sixth call that I actually got someone to stay on the line.

"Are you Manuel Rodriguez?" I asked, trying to mask my surprise that he hadn't immediately bailed when I said I was a PI.

"Yes, I am. May I ask what this is concerning?"

"I'm calling about Paul Flynn."

There was a pause on the other end. "Paul who?"

"Paul Flynn. He was an escort. I believe you might have known him."

"Oh — Paul." His voice warmed with recognition. "I thought I knew him pretty well, but he never mentioned a last name. That's not really something that comes up, you know? Other things come up, sure, but not that." He laughed again at his own joke.

I forced a polite smile even though he couldn't see me. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Hmm...maybe a month ago? I met someone recently, so I haven't really needed—"

According to Neal's records, Manuel had last seen Paul about five weeks ago. Close enough. I didn't care to hear the rest of his romantic adventures, though, so I cut through the small talk.

"Did you know Paul passed away a few weeks ago?"

"What?" The amusement drained from his voice instantly. "Paul is dead? I didn't know. Was it...was it an accident?"

"No," I said gently. "He was murdered. In his apartment."

There was a long, stunned silence. “Murdered?” His voice jumped an octave. “Oh my God! No, I — God, I didn’t know.”

“You hadn’t heard?”

“No. If I had, I wouldn’t have been making stupid jokes and talking about my damn love life. Jesus. How...how was he killed?”

“The police are calling it a robbery gone wrong.”

“But you wouldn’t be investigating if you believed that.”

“My client doesn’t believe it. That’s why they hired me, to look into what really happened. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions.”

“Yes, yes — of course. Anything I can do to help. Paul...he was a good guy. I may not have known his last name, but he always made me feel...seen. Safe.” His voice caught with emotion.

As Manuel spoke, I glanced at his client record. Six visits over six months. Not exactly an epic romance. The man didn’t even know Paul’s last name, but now he was waxing poetic about their connection. But grief was grief — or something close to it.

“How long had you been seeing Paul?” I asked, testing him.

“Off and on for about six months.”

That matched the file. Good so far.

“And how many times during that period?”

“I think...five?”

Once again, close enough.

“What was he like?”

“Professional,” he said after a moment’s thought. “In a good way. He always put me at ease. Made sure I

was comfortable. And satisfied.” A small, awkward laugh. “He never rushed. Always remembered little things I liked. I guess that’s part of the job, but he did it so naturally.”

“And how did he act with you? Especially toward the end — anything unusual?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Did his behavior change? Did he seem...different? Distracted?”

“Change? No, not really.” He hesitated, then added, “He always seemed calm. I never got the sense he was in trouble. If something was wrong, he hid it well.”

“And he never seemed scared? Nervous?”

“No, not that I noticed. Nothing that set off any red flags.”

“Any idea who might’ve wanted to hurt him?”

“None,” Manuel said, his voice lower now. “He was...kind. Quiet. Not the type to make enemies.”

“Can you think of anything at all that might be relevant? Any names he mentioned, or odd things he said?”

There was a pause. “No, I wish I could help more, but he never shared much about his personal life. He didn’t talk about himself. I guess I didn’t really know him at all. Still, he helped me more than he probably realized. He was better than therapy — and more fun. Gave me the confidence to start dating again. Made me feel good about myself. That meant a lot.”

“Alright. Well, if you do remember anything, here’s my number.” I rattled off my cell and was about to end the call when he stopped me.

“Wait. How did you get my number? How did you know I saw Paul?”

I was ready for that. “Paul kept a journal,” I lied smoothly.

“He did?” He sounded more surprised than suspicious. “And he...mentioned me?”

“Yes.” I replied, then, on impulse, added, “He seemed fond of you.”

The line was quiet for a few seconds, then Manuel said softly, “Thank you.” He hung up before I could say anything else.

There was one number left on Neal’s list that I hadn’t called yet, but I decided to hold off for now. That last conversation with Manuel had taken more out of me than I’d expected. I hadn’t really considered the idea that an escort might offer something deeper than just a transactional service — but for Manuel, Paul had clearly provided something more: affirmation, confidence, even a kind of healing. That hit me harder than I cared to admit.

I glanced at my watch and realized I’d spent longer at the office than I’d meant to. Swearing under my breath, I grabbed my things and headed for my hometown, keeping my speed just below the limit the whole way. I’d learned my lesson after my fender-bender with Novak, and I wasn’t about to wreck my new car.

I was only a few minutes late arriving at Craig Martin’s house. He lived in a middle-class neighborhood so uniform it was like a suburban Xerox machine had spat it out. One gray-blue-beige box after another lined the street, differentiated only by minor cosmetic flourishes — a small porch here, a gable or shutter color

there. Everything was tidy, manicured, and muted, like someone had washed the entire neighborhood in bleach and called it a day.

Still, the Halloween decorations tried their best to liven things up. Jack-o'-lanterns glowed on almost every stoop, flickering orange in the growing dusk. A few houses went all in — paper ghosts swung from trees, witches crashed into shrubs, cobwebs blanketed bushes and banisters. One yard even boasted a full DIY cemetery, complete with foam headstones and a fog machine coughing out a sickly haze in the background.

I pulled into the driveway of Craig's house, which was sporting a jointed cardboard skeleton taped to the front door. Before I could even kill the engine, the door creaked open and a thin teenage boy stepped hesitantly onto the porch.

He peered out at me, his posture wary but curious, a nervous tilt to his narrow shoulders, his hands fidgeting at his sides.

I stepped out of the car slowly and gave him what I hoped was a friendly, non-threatening smile, lifting one hand in a small wave.

"Are you Craig?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Thanks for agreeing to talk to me," I said, pausing at the bottom step. I wasn't sure if Craig planned to have our conversation through the screen door or if he'd eventually invite me in. He stood there, hovering just inside, the door slightly ajar, like he hadn't quite decided yet whether I was trustworthy — or whether he regretted agreeing at all.

While I waited for his verdict, I took a moment to study Jake's former friend and, according to Kane, maybe more than that. A secret admirer — or not so secret, depending on how you looked at it.

Craig was about five-ten or eleven, slim but not scrawny, with the kind of narrow build that teenage boys sometimes try to hide under hoodies. His waist was trim, his jeans snug, and his blue T-shirt hugged his chest in a way that told me he either didn't realize how good he looked or was trying hard not to care. His skin was clear and golden, the kind of complexion that looked almost too smooth to be real, like something out of a teen drama on Netflix. He wore rectangular glasses that framed a pair of large, dark eyes — eyes that looked at you like they were already trying to figure out if this conversation was going to end in embarrassment, heartbreak, or both. His light brown hair had a soft wave to it, falling just far enough into his face to give him that carefully disheveled look, although I had a feeling it wasn't entirely intentional.

He could've been striking, maybe even hot, if he had just a little more confidence — or maybe just believed he had any at all. But the way he held himself, shoulders slightly hunched inward, arms tight to his body, gave him away. He looked like he wanted to shrink into the doorframe, disappear into it entirely.

After a beat of silent assessment, he seemed to decide I wasn't here to sell him something or mock him for being "flamey," as Kane had put it. He opened the screen door and stepped aside to let me in.

"We can talk in here," he said, his voice quiet, careful. There was a slight lisp on his sibilants, barely

noticeable, but it added something soft to his speech, something delicate. “My parents aren’t home, they went to the farmers market.”

I stepped into the front room, which was neat and faintly scented with whatever fabric spray suburban moms seem to buy in bulk. Everything in the house had that lived-in, lower-middle-class comfort to it — clean, beige carpet, framed photos on the walls, a well-loved couch, a stack of magazines on the coffee table. A big bowl of Halloween candy sat on an end table, a few wrappers already tossed beside it. I wondered if Craig had eaten his way through half of it himself.

A family portrait hung over the couch — his father was white, his mother Black. A much younger Craig dressed in his Sunday best sat on his mother's lap in the picture, smiling shyly for the photographer.

I turned back to him and watched him fold himself into the couch, tucking his long legs under him and watching me with uncertainty. I understood what Kane meant about him. There was something decidedly feminine about this boy.

“Thanks,” I said again. “I won’t take up too much of your time.”

He gave a slight shrug and gestured toward the chair. “You can sit, if you want.”

I took the seat opposite, careful to keep my posture relaxed, my expression open. I was here to ask questions — but the last thing I wanted was to make Craig feel like he was on trial.

“So,” I said gently, “I’m hoping you might be able to help me.”

Craig looked down at his hands, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt.

He nodded an acknowledgment, and I hoped I wasn't going to have to drag every word out of him. "I know you don't know me or anything—"

"Actually, I know who you are," he said, cutting me off and catching me completely by surprise.

"Everyone at school does. You're kind of a legend."

"Me?" I squeaked in a decidedly unlegend-like manner.

"Yeah. I mean, everyone's heard about how you caught that murderer a few years ago. And that you killed him. I wasn't even in high school yet, and I still knew. And then you came out, and—" He cut himself off, blushing.

I made a face. "Trust me, going after that psycho wasn't heroic. It was reckless. I almost got myself — and people I cared about — killed."

"But you saved Jake's life."

"Maybe his life wouldn't have been in danger if I'd left it alone."

"But then the guy would've gotten away with it."

I let that hang, unwilling to argue anymore. "As for coming out," I added, "that wasn't brave. It was just something I had to do."

"It's more than a lot of people do," he said softly, eyes shifting away.

"Maybe that's because they don't have anyone to support them the way I did."

He looked up at me then — something flickering behind his eyes — curious, maybe even cautious hope.

"So...you came here to ask me about Jake?"

"Yes."

His face darkened. "Then you're probably wasting your time. I doubt I can help. I don't really see him anymore. He acts like he's too good for me now."

"What do you mean?"

"When school started this year, Jake went out of his way to be my friend. Like, just out of nowhere. He was really nice to me. Same with Danielle. For like a month it was great. Then, just like that, he ghosted. Wouldn't return my calls. Started avoiding me at school. Stopped sitting with us at lunch."

"Do you know why?"

He shook his head. "I've thought about it a lot. I keep wondering if I did something wrong."

"Do you think Danielle might know?"

He shrugged. "You'd have to ask her. We were only really friends because of Jake. We don't talk much now. She probably thinks I'm the reason he ditched us."

I was getting more sadness than substance from Craig, but that sadness seemed real — heavy and familiar. He looked like someone who'd had a piece of himself quietly pulled away, and no one noticed or cared. Jake's treatment of him just served to reaffirm his lack of worth in his own eyes.

"You know I'm a private investigator now, right?" I asked. He nodded. "What I'm about to tell you needs to stay just between us, okay?"

His eyes widened. Another nod.

"I think Jake may be involved in something illegal. Someone close to him hired me to look into it. I was hoping you could help me understand what's going

on. Do you have any ideas, even if they sound ridiculous?"

He hesitated. "Drugs? Maybe. I mean, he liked weed. Not that's weed's a big deal, but I don't know what else it could be. Sorry."

"Don't be sorry." My heart was breaking for this kid. Maybe I saw myself in him, but I couldn't just walk away leaving him with that sad, puppy-dog expression in his eyes. "Look, for the record, I don't think you did anything wrong. I suspect Jake is the one doing something wrong."

His eyes lit up for a second — like he needed to believe that as much as I needed to say it.

"I need to talk to Danielle now," I said, "but before I go, I want to leave you something." I pulled a business card from my wallet, scribbled my cell number on the back, and handed it to him. "This is none of my business, really, but if you ever need someone to talk to...I'm a pretty good listener. Maybe you have plenty of support already, but just in case..."

He stared down at the card like it was a foreign object. When he looked up, his eyes were shiny.

"I don't have any friends anymore," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "And my parents...they're busy. They wouldn't care about my stupid problems."

"They're not stupid," I said gently. "If they matter to you, they're important. And I bet your parents would care."

"They wouldn't understand," he interrupted.

"Maybe not. But maybe I would."

He carefully tucked the card into his pocket, folding his hands in his lap. "Thank you." It had the ring of polite dismissal, but I wasn't quite done.

"I meant what I said. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate."

He nodded, and I started to stand.

"They call me faggot," he said suddenly.

I sat back down. "Who does?"

"Everybody. At school."

"Why?"

He gave a bitter little laugh. "Isn't it obvious? I'm not a jock. I'm not tough. I suck at sports. I look at guys just a little too long. I walk like a girl..."

He trailed off, breathing hard, trying not to fall apart.

"There's nothing wrong with any of that."

"Try telling that to the guys at school."

"I remember what it was like," I said, and his head snapped up. "I wasn't always a legend," I said dryly. "My early years in high school? Total awkward disaster. Shy. Uncoordinated. I was lucky because I hung out with jocks, so people mostly left me alone, but the minute I started hanging out with Seth and figuring out who I was? They turned on me. Fast."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. That part doesn't make it into the school legend, huh? But it's true. It sucks now, but all that stuff isn't important in the long run. After high school, you'll never even see most of those idiots again."

"So what did you do? How'd you get through it?"

"Well, I had...Asher." It still hurt to even say his name. "We started Rainbow Alliance. And the school

started cracking down on harassment, taking things more seriously. It might not be perfect, but, trust me, it's a lot better than it used to be. You should talk to someone — a guidance counselor, the principal..."

He shook his head. "I can't."

"You don't have to do it alone. There are protections. Legal ones. Even if you're not out — or not sure — they can't harass you for how they perceive you. Can I ask you something personal?"

He looked anywhere but at me. I waited. Eventually, he gave a small nod.

"Do you think you're gay?"

Another long pause. Then a nod. A tear slipped down his cheek.

"Have you told anyone?"

He shook his head.

"Well, now you have. And I won't tell anyone else. You can trust me."

His eyes finally met mine. They were full of quiet panic — but also, maybe, the tiniest bit of relief.

"You're not alone. You don't have to be afraid. You can talk to me — about anything."

That cracked the dam. He broke into tears, covering his face with his hands. I sat frozen for a second, unsure what to do, then slid over and placed a tentative hand on his shoulder.

He turned toward me, burying his face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling how hard he was shaking.

After a while, the sobs quieted. He pulled back, red-faced and sniffing.

"I'm sorry. I can't believe I just did that."

“Don’t be sorry. Pressure builds. Sometimes it just needs to blow.”

He gave a small, embarrassed laugh and nodded. After a beat, he glanced at his watch and frowned.

“You should probably go. My parents will be home soon, and I don’t want to have to explain...this.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

He stood. “Yeah. Better than I’ve been in months. Telling someone...it helped.”

“Good. And yes — you can still talk to me. Any time.” I rose too. “All my info’s on that card. You can reach me day or night. And you should check out Rainbow Alliance. My brother Kane runs it now. It’s a great place to meet people who get it.”

He looked doubtful. “What if I get teased for going?”

“Sounds like you get teased already. What have you got to lose? You should go.”

He looked thoughtful. “Yeah, maybe I will.” Then, suddenly, he hugged me. “Thank you, Killian.”

“You’re very welcome, Craig.”

He let go, then gave me another quick hug at the door. I laughed and hugged him back before stepping out onto the porch.

As I drove away, I glanced in the rearview mirror. Craig stood in the doorway, watching until I was gone, his arms wrapped tightly around his thin body.

I might not have uncovered much for the case, but, somehow, it didn’t feel like a wasted trip.

## Chapter 21

I pulled into Danielle's driveway only a little later than expected. Her neighborhood was a step up from Craig's, in that the houses were discernibly different from their neighbors in architectural style. She lived in a light-blue, two-story Cape Cod with an attached two-car garage, whose open door revealed a matching set of late-model Audis, one dark green and one champagne. In the drive outside sat a slightly older red Hyundai, which I assumed to be Danielle's.

Unlike Craig, Danielle was not waiting to greet me. I approached the front door and knocked. After a brief delay, it was opened by a dumpy, middle-aged man in the uniform of a stereotypical college professor: sweater-vest over a button-up Oxford shirt, brown slacks, and brown loafers. His hairline had long ago sounded the retreat, and what remained was turning from a mousy brown to an equally mousy gray. He peered at me over half-glasses, wearing a slightly befuddled expression as if he expected to recognize me but didn't.

"I'm here to see Danielle," I said, hoping I had the right house.

"Oh. Yes. One minute, please." His voice was a surprisingly rich baritone.

I stood waiting on the doorstep for about a minute before she appeared. She looked remarkably like her father, except she was a little heavier and lacked the receding hairline. Her hair was the same mousy brown and hung limply to her shoulders; she had the same pear-shaped body; she even peered at me over her glasses in

much the same way. She wore what looked like a man's shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of Capri pants, and no shoes.

She eyed me critically. "Are you the guy who called and wanted to talk to me?"

"Yes, I'm Killian Kendall."

She nodded. "I've heard of you. Jake used to talk about you, and of course, almost everybody at school knows what you did."

"Of course," I said under my breath.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," I replied quickly. She seemed a little sullen, and I figured it would be in my best interest to keep her talking while she was still willing. "Can I ask you some questions about Jake?"

She shrugged, which I took as an affirmative. When she made no move to either come out or let me in, I asked, "Do you think I could go inside or you could come outside so we don't have to talk through the door?"

She made a face and threw open the door with a dramatic sigh. "I'll come out there," she said as if she were making a huge sacrifice for my benefit. "If we go inside, my parents will listen."

I doubted her father would be able to work up enough interest to be bothered. I didn't know him, however, and I'd never even seen her mother, so I took her word for it. She led the way across the yard to a freestanding lawn swing with just enough room for two people to sit next to each other if they didn't mind being a little intimate. I minded, but sat down gingerly anyway, as far to one side as possible.

Danielle gave me an expectant look.

"So you're friends with Jake?" I asked.

"Not anymore."

"What happened?"

She picked imaginary lint off her shirt. "Who knows? He never told me."

"What do you think happened?"

"He got bored with us and moved on to greener pastures."

"Us meaning you and Craig?"

"Yeah."

"Was it always just the three of you?"

"Pretty much. Every once in a while, some guy would try to get close to Jake, if you know what I mean. He'd be around for a few days, and then we wouldn't see him much anymore. I think Jake's motto was, 'Use 'em and lose 'em.'"

"Do you know for a fact that Jake was sleeping with them?"

"Not for a fact, no, but it doesn't take a genius."

"Who were they?"

"I don't remember their names. They weren't really important, you know?"

I tried not to sigh in frustration, wondering if she was making this stuff up as she went along. She struck me as the type who embellished stories to be more dramatic — or invented them from whole cloth, if necessary.

"So you know Jake is gay?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Duh. Everyone knows that. He's not exactly in the closet."

"Did that ever bother you?"

"Of course not," she said quickly, which probably meant that it had. I was beginning to suspect she had a crush on Jake and had resented the competition. It made me wonder how she felt about Craig, who also had a crush on Jake, one so obvious even Kane had noticed it.

"What about Craig?"

"What about him?" she asked obtusely.

"What did you think of him?"

She quirked her mouth to one side. "Craig is a little wimp. He followed Jake around like a puppy dog. It was sickening. That's probably why Jake quit hanging out with him in the first place."

I had to bite back asking her if that was why he'd quit hanging out with her too. I doubted Jake's sudden change had anything to do with Craig or Danielle, and, in fact, suspected Jake had actually enjoyed having his own private fan club. Something else must have come along to make lovesick teenagers seem paltry in comparison. Could that something have been the escort business?

It was obvious that Danielle lived in her own bitter little world. She saw only what she wanted to see, which led me to think she was unlikely to give me anything useful. To be honest, I didn't like her, and wanted to get away as quickly as I could. Still, I had one more question I needed to ask before I made my escape.

"So you don't really have any idea what's going on with Jake?"

"I already said no. We don't talk anymore."

I took a deep breath and decided I was done there. "Thanks for your time, Danielle—"

She cut me off. "Wait a minute. What was that all about? Why were you asking all those questions about Jake?"

*She asks that now?* I marveled to myself. The logical time would have been when I started interrogating her, not when I was done and ready to leave. Although I didn't owe her anything at that point, I suspected if I didn't give her something, she'd be on the phone to Jake before I was out of the driveway. On the other hand, she seemed like the gossipy type, so I couldn't tell her too much.

"You know I'm a private investigator, right?"

"So you said on the phone. How do I know you're not lying? How do I know you're not just hot for Jake's ass like those other guys?"

I gritted my teeth and counted to ten.

"The case is classified," I said.

Her eyes narrowed, and I knew I'd said the wrong thing. For all her bluff and bluster, however, I had a feeling she was really a coward at heart, so I decided to try a little scare tactic.

"Jake may be involved in something very dangerous." I clipped off each word in my annoyance. "Lives may be at stake, including everyone he is or was close to." Her eyes widened at that. My ploy might work after all, and, as far as I knew, I wasn't even lying. "I need you to stay very quiet about our talk or you could put the whole case in jeopardy. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"Good. Thanks again for your time." I turned away quickly before she could ask anything else and

strode across the yard to my car. I hoped I'd been convincing enough to keep her quiet.

I also hoped like hell I had overstated the case.

Once I was in the car, I checked my phone and saw that I'd missed a call from Craig while I was talking to Danielle. I wondered if he was already taking me up on my offer to talk, or if he had something to add to what he'd told me earlier.

He answered on the second ring, as if he'd been waiting near the phone. "Um, thanks for returning my call." He sounded slightly surprised, as though he hadn't expected me to.

"No problem," I said. "What's up?"

"After you left, I thought I remembered something, but I wasn't sure about it, so I looked it up in my journal. Right before Jake started acting weird, he was really excited one day at school. I asked him why he was so happy, and he said he couldn't tell me, but he might have met someone totally different from the normal boys around here. He was always going on about how much better the guys were in California."

"He didn't tell you anything about this guy he'd met?"

"No, sorry."

"Craig, you don't have to apologize all the time. It's not your fault. There's nothing to be sorry for. You've just given me some information I didn't know before.

That's extremely helpful."

"Seriously?"

"Absolutely. Thank you."

"Um, you're welcome."

"I have another question for you. Danielle said Jake dated a lot of guys, but none of them stuck around for very long. Is that how you saw it?"

"I guess. Jake always said the guys here were too boring. I got the impression he missed the West Coast."

"But he told you the new guy he'd met was different?"

"Yeah."

"Any idea what he meant by that? Even a guess?"

"I don't know."

"Did he have any specific complaints about the guys here other than they were boring?"

"He said they didn't know how to party. And, um...he sometimes tried to get me to do drugs with him, but I never would. I don't know where he got them from. He complained no one here knew how to have fun. He always said that when I told him I didn't want to get high with him."

"What kind of drugs did he use?"

"I have no idea. I don't know much about drugs. I've never done anything. I don't even drink."

"Was it pills? Powder? Needles? Joints?"

"Joints and pills mostly."

"Mostly?"

"I mean that's all I ever saw."

"Do you know what kind of pills they were?"

"No, sorry. Er...I mean...sorry. I'm sorry I said sorry again."

I stifled a giggle. "It's okay. Thanks, Craig, you've been a big help."

"I have?"

"Definitely."

"Cool. Um, well, I'll let you get back to work or whatever."

"Okay. Thanks again, Craig."

"Yeah, you're welcome. Oh, and um, thank you. For, uh, talking to me and stuff."

"You're welcome. And don't forget to call me anytime you want or need to talk."

"Okay," he said softly. "Bye."

"Bye, Craig."

I hung up and thought about the difference between him and Danielle. One was sweet and gentle, while the other had the grace of a bulldozer. Jake couldn't have chosen two hangers-on who were more at odds. The only thing they had in common was their fascination with Jake Sheridan.

I took out my notebook and jotted down the little bit of information I'd managed to glean from Craig and Danielle, most of which came from Craig. After that, I decided it was time to check in on Kane.

His face lit up when I walked into our bedroom. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Did you forget about the costume party tonight?"

"No, but I figured you would."

"Well, I didn't. Do you have any ideas for costumes? We'd better get working on them if we want them to be any good."

"Micah's going, right?"

"As far as I know, although considering all this stuff happening at the paper, I should probably check with him just to be sure."

"Well, if he is, I was thinking maybe we could go as some famous trio, like the Three Musketeers or...well, I can't think of any others."

"What about the Three Stooges, or the Three Little Pigs, or Huey, Dewey, and Louie?"

He poked his lip out in a pout. "If you don't like my idea, just say so."

"No, I think it's great. I was only teasing. Let me call Micah and find out if he's still going."

I called his cell but it went to voice mail after ringing for a while. On a whim, I tried his desk phone.

He answered on the third ring. "Yeah? What do you want?" he snapped.

"Micah?" I asked uncertainly.

"Killian?" His voice softened. "Sorry about that. It's been a bad day."

"What's going on?"

"It's just this story. Things are getting messy. I'm getting crank calls. The paper's running scared. They want me to back off. I'll tell you about it later. This isn't a good time. Were you calling for anything in particular, or just checking to make sure I was still alive?"

"Well, actually, I was calling about the dance tonight at Haven..."

"Fuck! I forgot about that. Kill, I don't think I'm going to be able to make it. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, trying to hide my disappointment. "What about the Equality Ball?"

"I think I can still make that. I'm so sorry, Killian."

"It's okay."

"Are you sure? I feel terrible."

"It's all good. Kane is going with me, so we'll be fine. Work comes first."

He sighed. "No, work shouldn't come first. You should come first, but right now—"

"Work has to come first," I finished. "Micah, I understand. Things won't be so hectic forever, and this story is a big deal."

"I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"That goes both ways, mister."

"I love you."

"I love you too." I hung up and turned to find Kane leaning against the wall.

"So, it's just the two of us, then?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Looks that way."

"I guess instead of famous trios, we should be thinking of famous duos?"

"Sure," I said cheerily, trying to shake off the disappointment that Micah couldn't go. "What are we going for here? Funny? Sexy? Clever?"

"Well, I want it to be creative. No pirates or vampires. I think we should go with sexy, don't you? Let's make Micah wish he'd been with us when he sees the pictures. Besides, I might actually meet somebody there. How about Batman and Robin?"

I shuddered as I sat on my bed and Kane flopped down across his. "No thanks. I haven't felt the same about Batman since Jake's Halloween dance that first year you moved here. And besides, how the hell are we supposed to make Batman and Robin costumes by ourselves in one afternoon?"

"Oh yeah. Sorry, I forgot. Well, um...what other superhero duos are there?"

"Do we absolutely have to be superheroes? Aren't those costumes a little...tight? And besides, who would be the hero and who would be the sidekick?"

"I don't mind being the sidekick. I'm younger, so it's only fair. And I know I have the body to pull off spandex. Are you a little worried there, big bro?"

"Not exactly worried. It's just that I don't especially like showing off all my goods for free. Ya know?"

"Wimp."

"Exhibitionist."

We laughed.

"Okay, so no superheroes?" Kane asked.

"If you're really set on it, I guess I can live with it."

"Well, there are other choices."

"Like what?"

"Um...you could always be a Hobbit."

"Are you trying to say I'm short?"

"I plead the fifth."

I threw a pillow at him, which he easily dodged.

"We could be hippies."

"Come on, Kane, that's not very creative."

"Hey, you be creative. I'm the one coming up with all the ideas while you just shoot them down. Are you sure you even want to go?"

"Yes," I said quickly, "I do want to go. Let's see...well, I could go as a mental patient. I wouldn't even have to wear a costume." Kane shot me a dirty look.

"No? Okay, how about gangsters? No, not creative.

Um...maybe we should just be pirates."

"This is a lot harder than I thought it would be."

"Tell me about it."

"Oh, wait! I have it!"

"What?"

"This is so perfect. Why didn't I think of it sooner?"

"What is it?"

"Sherlock Holmes and Watson. How perfect is that? You're a detective and everything."

I blinked. "That's actually a good idea. At least for me. It wouldn't be that great for you, though. I mean, what did Watson wear? A gray suit? Not exactly sexy."

"Then I'll go as a superhero."

"I thought you wanted to go as a duo."

"I did, but this is getting to be more work than it's worth. Oh hey, maybe Dad will have some ideas," Kane said and darted out of the room before I could even respond. He returned a few minutes later with Adam in tow.

Kane explained to him our predicament, and Adam thought for a few minutes.

"What about salt and pepper or ketchup and mustard?" he said.

Kane rolled his eyes. "That's not very sexy, Dad."

Adam raised an eyebrow. "You didn't specify sexy."

"It goes without saying. How am I supposed to meet girls if I'm dressed as a bottle of ketchup?"

"Who said you'd get to be ketchup?" I said.

"Nobody's going to be ketchup."

"What about the Ambiguously Gay Duo?" Adam said before an argument could ensue.

"Who?" Kane asked.

"They're characters from a Saturday Night Live sketch." We stared blankly at Adam. He sighed. "You guys are too young." We all thought for a few more minutes, then he perked up. "How about Greek gods?"

"That's not too bad," Kane said. "I think I'd look pretty good in a toga."

"Only the Romans wore togas," Adam said.

Kane rolled his eyes. "Fine. What did Greeks wear?"

"They wore tunics under cloaks. That would be a little much, though, so I suggest we simplify it quite a bit and just make skimpy, sexy tunics."

"Togas, tunics, whatever...isn't the whole thing a little cliché?" I asked.

"It doesn't have to be," Adam said. "You can decide on specific gods, and we can tailor the costumes. For instance, if you were Zeus you could carry a thunderbolt. Or Hermes could have winged sandals and helmet. Ares would have a shield, spear, and helmet. Apollo, a harp or bow and arrow. You get the point. Best of all, we could sew the tunics from old bed sheets, which won't take more than an hour or two. You'd only have to buy a few accessories."

We jumped on the computer and looked up images of various Greek gods. I chose Hermes, and Kane picked Ares.

Kane and I ran to the costume store to get the props we needed while Adam started sewing our tunics. By the time we got back, Adam had them both ready to try on. They were cut rather high, since Adam had cut them both out of the same sheet.

I started having second thoughts as I stood in front of the full-length mirror in our bedroom. "I don't know," I said doubtfully.

"Oh come on, Killian." Exasperation was clear in Kane's voice. "We have to leave in less than half an hour. What do you mean you don't know?"

"It's awfully...short."

"It's supposed to be short," Adam said, trying to suppress a snicker and not quite succeeding. "Kane insisted they had to be sexy."

"I mean, I know. There's just...less of it than I expected."

"You look great," Kane said. "Besides, it's too late now. Can we just go?"

I continued staring at my reflection. At eighteen, I still looked pretty much the same as I had two years earlier: short and thin. My chest was maybe not quite as scrawny as it used to be, but I was still feeling awfully exposed. My entire costume amounted to a white minidress, a winged helmet, and winged sandals, with a leather messenger bag slung over my shoulder.

I turned to check out Kane. His Ares costume was even skimpier than mine, but he was more built than I was, the result of a different body type, skateboarding, and some weightlifting. He wore only a skirt that barely covered his bits, and carried a fake spear, a round shield, and wore a war helmet.

"Easy for you to say," I grumbled. "You look fantastic."

"You both look great, and after all the work I put into those costumes, you're damn well going to wear them." Adam softened his proclamation with a warm

smile, his face glowing with fatherly pride. "You'll be the two most handsome boys there."

"I feel like I'm on display," I said weakly.

"Oh come on," Adam said. "You're young. Flaunt it while you can. My days of running around half naked are long over."

"Ugh." Kane pretended to gag. "Thanks for that mental image."

Adam ignored him. "Besides, you'll be having so much fun you won't even think about it."

I sighed. "I hope so. I just wish Micah was going."

Kane squeezed by me to take one last look at himself in the mirror. "Are you done complaining yet?" he asked, his eyes never straying from his image.

I took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Good. Then let's go."

"We'll be early if we leave now," I said.

"Why don't you stop by the B&B?" Adam said. "I know it's out of the way, but Steve would love to see you in your costumes."

"It's not too much out of the way," I said. "And it'll allow us to be fashionably late."

"Perfect," Kane said. "That way we can make an entrance."

"Just what I want to do," I said sarcastically. "Are we going to have to pry you away from the mirror?"

"What? I'm not that bad."

"You haven't stopped taking selfies since you put your costume on."

"So? I look good. And so do you, so don't start. Let's go." He jogged off down the stairs.

I gave Adam a long-suffering look as I stuffed my wallet in my messenger bag.

He patted me on the shoulder. "I know you wanted Micah to go, but try to have fun without him. Just not too much fun. Don't forget you're taken."

"Oh my god, Adam!"

"What?"

"I would never cheat on Micah."

"I didn't say you would, but I was eighteen once. I remember what it was like."

"Come on!" Kane called from downstairs.

Adam grinned. "You'd better go before he pees himself."

I laughed and headed out the door.

"Oh, and Killian?"

I paused.

"Keep an eye on Kane, please."

Steve got a kick out of our costumes, as did the middle-aged gay couple who had checked in that day. They practically drooled over the two of us before we escaped out the door. The stop took longer than planned since both Steve and the couple insisted on taking pictures. I'm sure I was bright red in all of them.

The party was in full swing when we arrived. It was being held in the same building in which Haven met, although the room was larger. We found it by following the thumping sound of the dance music. Everett and the plump blonde from the first meeting were sitting at the door selling tickets. Everett was wearing a pink bunny costume. The girl, whose name escaped me, was dressed all in black with huge black

wings. She looked like an overgrown crow, although I doubt that was the effect she was going for.

"Hey, Killian. Wow, you guys look great," Everett said. "You remember Tanya, right?"

"Of course." I handed him the money for our tickets, and Tanya stamped our hands.

Everett eyed Kane. "Sooooo...aren't you going to introduce us? Is this your boyfriend?" he asked finally, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Kane choked, and I bit back a giggle. "No, this is my little brother, Kane."

"Oh. Hi, Kane. I'm Everett. Are you gay?" Everett batted his lashes.

Kane grinned. "Nope, one hundred percent straight, but I'm gay-friendly. Just not *that* friendly."

"Damn. I knew it would be too much to hope there'd be two guys that hot in the same family who were both gay."

"Actually, I'm the only person in my family who isn't gay, but that's another story. Right now, I just need to know if there are any girls here who aren't just into other girls."

Everett hooted a huge booming laugh. "I like this kid. To be honest with you, I don't know who's here. I just arrived and took over for Tony. He wanted to dance so bad I thought he was going to have a heart attack before I got here."

"He was dancing out here," Tanya said. "But I've been on door duty the whole time and let's just say you should be fine."

"Thanks," Kane said, flashing her his most dazzling smile.

Everett chuckled. "It's wasted on her, buddy. She's only into girls."

Tanya elbowed him in the side, and he laughed again.

"Well, I guess we'd better go on in," I said.

"Wait, let me get a picture to post in the group." Tanya grabbed her phone and hopped up in a flurry of feathers. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"They're Ares and Hermes," someone said from behind me.

I spun around to find Noah giving me an admiring look. My mouth dropped open when I saw what he was wearing — or maybe I should say not wearing. All he had on was a leopard-print loincloth and a white shell necklace with a matching anklet on one foot.

He gave me a sexy smile. "Or is it Mars and Mercury?"

I licked my lips. "Um, you had it right the first time."

"I know my gods." He cocked his head to one side. "So, you like my costume?"

"Tarzan?"

"Yup."

"Picture," Tanya reminded me. I posed with Kane while she took a couple of photos. By the time she was done, Noah had paid and been stamped. He followed us into the room, which was surprisingly full.

Haven had hired a DJ, who had the music pumped up. The lights were low, and a disco ball threw tiny spotlights all over the room.

"Hey, guys," Val said, bouncing up in a cheerleader uniform. I had to laugh when I saw the letters FU across her chest. "Nice costumes," she said. Then she noticed Kane. "And who is this?"

"This is—" I started but Kane quickly interrupted.

"I'm Kane, Killian's brother. And you are?"

"I'm Valora, you can call me Val."

"Hello, Val."

"Kane is straight," I said rather unnecessarily.

"Well, I hate to disappoint anyone, but I'm not," Val said with a laugh. "However, I can introduce you to some girls who are into guys."

"That would be great." Kane jumped on her offer like a starving dog on a bone. He turned to me with a pleading look. "Is that okay?"

"Sure, go have fun. Just be careful. And you'd better not drink anything or Adam will kill me."

"There's no alcohol here," Val said. "At least officially. Come on, Kane. I'll introduce you to everyone."

The two of them went off into the crowd, leaving me alone with Noah.

"You really look great," he said after a moment.

"You look pretty good yourself." I was trying hard not to stare at his body, which was a lot more defined than I'd expected. He even had a lightly sculpted six-pack.

"Where's your boyfriend?"

"He couldn't come. Work stuff."

"That sucks. I have to meet this guy. I'm beginning to wonder if he really exists."

I glanced over to see if he was serious or joking, but it was impossible to read his expression.

"Oh, he's real," I said. An awkward silence fell between us. I spotted the drink table. "I'm going to go get a drink. You want anything?"

"Um, yeah, thanks."

I realized he'd been staring at my ass.

He grinned at me, knowing he'd been caught. "A Dr. Pepper, if they have it."

I grabbed two cans out of the ice, poured them into clear plastic glasses, and carried them back to Noah.

"Thanks," he said, taking one of them from my hand. A chill went up my spine as his finger brushed mine. "It was nice of you to bring your little brother. I hope he doesn't get hit on too much."

"You think he will?"

"Probably. He's a cutie, and the guys will be all over a fresh piece of meat like that."

"Kane can take care of himself."

"How about you?"

"What about me?"

"Can you take care of yourself?"

"I like to think so." I was getting nervous. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, you have to know you look really hot in that costume. Every guy here is staring at you."

"They might be staring at you, you know," I said in an attempt to shift the attention off of me. "After all, you're practically naked."

"You're not wearing much more. Trust me. They were watching as you walked across the room."

I glanced around and noticed several guys looking over in our direction. It was impossible to tell which of us they were checking out, although a few nodded when I made eye contact. I hoped the dim lighting would hide the blush I felt creeping up my cheeks.

"It was nice of you to notice that I'm practically naked though," he said with a grin. "I was beginning to think I was invisible."

"Oh, I noticed. I'm just trying to behave."

"Behaving is never any fun." He shifted a little closer. I could feel the heat from his bare skin.

"I need another drink," I said.

"You haven't drunk that one yet."

I looked down at the almost-full cup in my hand.

"Oh."

"Come on, let's dance." He took my drink and placed it with his on the floor against the wall, then pulled me onto the floor. Once he'd pointed it out, I noticed more than a few sets of eyes following us. I had to admit we made a pretty hot couple.

The song playing was a sexy Beyoncé remix with a driving beat. At first, I was uncomfortable dancing with Noah — there wasn't much fabric between us, and my attraction for him was stronger than ever — but it wasn't too long before the music took over and I loosened up. Before I knew it, I had almost forgotten I was even dancing with Noah. I just moved into my own little zone.

"You're a great dancer," Noah whispered into my ear, startling me out of the slightly hypnotized state into which I'd slipped.

"Uh, thanks," I said, surprised how intertwined I'd become with Noah's body. I tried to pull away without being too obvious, but he drew me close again. I gave up. *It's just one dance*, I told myself.

That one dance turned into two, which turned into another, then one more, and before I knew it, an hour had passed and I was still dancing with Noah.

"I need a drink," I said, escaping from his arms at last. "Water, preferably."

"I'll get it," he said. "Wait over there." He pointed to a metal door on the far wall.

As I made my way in that direction, a few guys asked me to dance, and one of them, smelling strongly of alcohol, tried to grope me a little. I pushed him roughly away and finally reached my destination. I was only there a second before Kane was at my side.

"Hey, are you having fun?" I asked him.

"Yeah, actually I am. And from the look of things, so are you."

"What? I'm only dancing." I sounded defensive even to myself.

Kane cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Oh, put your eyebrow back where it belongs," I said. "It's just dancing. What was I supposed to do, stand against the wall all night?"

"No, but you could dance with a few other guys. You've been with the same one for the last hour. He's hot for you."

"He's just a friend."

"Killian, I saw the way he was looking at you. He wants you. Bad."

I chose to ignore his observations and change the subject. "Have you met anyone?"

He tried to look stern, but couldn't resist grinning. "Actually, yeah. She's really cool. She's my age and everything. Her name is Lila, she's Val's cousin, and she's bi."

I laughed. "Well, where is she?"

He turned around and scanned the dancers. Across the room, a tall, slender girl with long, dark hair fluttered her fingers at him. He waved her over. She was wearing a black cat costume with little ears perched on top of her head and a long tail trailing behind her.

"Lila, this is my brother, Killian."

"Good looks run in your family," she said flirtatiously.

"The same could be said for your family," I returned the compliment, even though Kane and I weren't technically related.

She looked a bit confused for a second, then her face cleared. "You mean, Val? Yeah, she's gorgeous. If she wasn't my cousin..." She waggled her eyebrows suggestively, and I laughed again.

*Kane has his hands full with this one*, I thought. Speaking of Kane, he was grinning like the proverbial cat that ate the canary, but I had a feeling he was the one about to get eaten.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Noah approaching with the water I'd asked for. Kane followed my gaze and frowned.

"Be careful," he said under his breath. "Don't forget how much you love Micah." With that he turned back to Lila and offered his arm. "Shall we dance?"

"Why, thank you, sir, yes," she said with a little curtsy, and they melted back onto the dance floor.

"Your little brother met someone?" Noah asked as he handed me my bottle of water.

"Yeah, she's Val's cousin. He seems to like her, but she looks like a handful."

"If she's Val's cousin then she really is a handful, from what I hear."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind. It might not even be the same cousin. Is it hot in here or is it just you?"

I groaned. "That was awful. Can't you come up with something better?"

He grinned. "Actually, I'm serious. I'm really hot. I could use some fresh air. Come outside with me?"

A little fresh air sounded nice. "Sure."

He pushed open the door, and we slipped out into the cool night. A few other couples had the same idea, several of them busy making out in the shadows.

"The moon is almost full," Noah said.

I glanced up at the bright yellow orb hanging low in the sky. "A full moon for Halloween? The goblins and ghouls will love that."

"It's beautiful, though, don't you think?"

"Yeah, it is."

He moved a little closer to me. I shifted away as nonchalantly as I could.

"You really look great tonight, Killian."

"So you've mentioned a few times," I said teasingly. "You look great too. I suspect we're going to get cold quickly, though."

"It is a little chilly, now that you mention it."

He scooted closer again, and once more I moved away. At that point, he nearly had me pinned against the wall. Another foot and I wouldn't have anywhere to retreat.

"You could keep me warm," he said when I failed to pick up on his hints.

"Or we could go back inside."

I liked Noah, but things were quickly getting out of hand.

"I'm not ready to go back inside just yet," he said, his voice husky.

He turned to look at me, the moonlight reflecting off his face making him almost seem to glow. His eyes locked onto mine as his full, red lips parted.

He really has amazing lips, I found myself thinking. I wonder what it would be like to kiss them...

He moved a little closer, and my back hit the wall. He lifted his hand to softly stroke my cheek.

"I've wanted to do this since the first time I saw you," he whispered, leaning in quickly to press his lips against mine.

For one shocked, confused moment, I froze. Then my brain caught up, and I reacted. I twisted my face away, planted my hands firmly against his chest, and shoved with all my strength.



## Chapter 22

Noah stumbled back, tripped, and sprawled on his ass. He stared up at me with an expression of disbelief.

"Noah, I have a boyfriend," I said softly.

I reached out a hand to help him up.

He stared at my hand for a few seconds before purposefully ignoring it and standing without my assistance.

"You know," he said in a low, tense voice as he brushed off his bottom, "I'll admit I'm not blameless here, but let's get one thing very clear: neither are you. You've been sending out mixed signals to me since the day we met. You were staring at me that day in the bookstore, you flirt with me, you've been dancing with me all night, and you came out here alone with me."

"You're right, and I'm sorry. I have been sending out mixed signals. The truth is I am attracted to you. I can't deny that. I like you. If I wasn't already dating someone, I'd probably want to go out with you. But I *am* dating someone, and I care about him very much. I'm sorry if I confused you or hurt you, but I can't do anything to risk losing Micah. He means too much to me."

Noah slumped against the wall and slowly slid down to a crouching position on the ground. I winced as I thought about his bare back against the rough brick, but he didn't even seem to notice.

Without looking up, he asked, "How much does he mean to you?"

"Everything."

"What does that mean?"

"It means...I want to be with him. I can't stand the thought of losing him, and I really want to try and make our relationship work. It means...I love him."

I squatted a few feet away facing him, carefully tucking the skirt of my tunic between my legs as I did.

"And I guess it's too much to hope that you guys are open," he said, sounding defeated.

"Open?"

"You know, like an open relationship, meaning you screw around with other guys."

"Oh. No. Is that a thing?"

He laughed. "It is for some couples. Sounds like you guys are pretty serious."

"It's taken a lot to get us to the point we're at now. I don't know if it's a forever thing, but it feels like it could be. You know?"

"Not really. The longest relationship I've ever had lasted like one month. Most guys don't seem to be looking for a relationship. All they want is a hookup or maybe a fuck buddy."

"I guess I've been pretty lucky. I've only had two boyfriends so I've never really done the whole dating thing."

"It sucks. It's so hard to meet guys."

"What about the apps?"

Noah snorted. "Have you used them?"

I shook my head no.

"They're the worst," he said. "Great if I'm horny and just need a quick fuck, terrible for finding a

boyfriend."

"What about Haven?"

"Almost every guy in Haven is single, and we've all hooked up with each other at least once. I think you're the only person I know with a serious boyfriend. I think the Haven record for the longest relationship is like three months."

"You're in college. How many straight couples do you know who've been together longer than that? And they have more of a selection to choose from. We're what? Ten percent, at best? How many of those are even out of the closet?"

He shrugged. "I guess you're right. Intellectually, I know you are. Emotionally, I'm just tired of being alone."

"Well, I can't be your boyfriend, but I'd like us to be friends, if we can."

He smiled a sad smile. "If I can keep from jumping you, you mean?"

"No. That's not—"

"I was trying to make a joke, Killian. I'd like us to be friends too. I realize I've said that before, but I mean it. Now I know where the boundaries are. I accept that I don't have a chance with you as anything more than friends — at least, as long as Micah is in the picture. Not that I'm wishing you'd break up or anything."

I laughed. "At least not too much?"

He smiled, a real smile this time. "I really have to meet this guy. I just hope I can keep from being too jealous."

At that moment the door opened and Kane came out, obviously looking for me or, perhaps I should say, checking up on me.

"Over here, Kane," I called softly so as not to disturb the amorous couples.

He turned in our direction, eyeing the distance between us with undisguised approval. "I hadn't seen you in a while, so I thought I'd look for you, make sure you were staying out of trouble."

I laughed at his bluntness. "You know, I was supposed to be the one keeping an eye on you."

"Just goes to show that father doesn't always know best," Kane said dryly.

I grinned up at him, then turned my attention back to Noah. "You ready to go back in?"

"Might as well, I'm pretty chilly."

"Maybe if you weren't naked..." Kane said under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear.

I snorted, but turned it into a cough. "You'll warm up quickly enough once you start dancing again."

The three of us walked back into the building, where it seemed even more people had arrived while we were outside.

"It's a really good turnout," I said. "I have to admit I'm a little surprised that so many people would come out for a dance put on by a queer club."

"It's not just our school," Noah said while Kane scanned the crowd — for Lila, I assumed. "We went in with the other two colleges in this area and invited all the other LGBTQ groups at the other schools on the Shore. Even a few high school groups showed up. Plus,

everyone knows that gays throw the best parties, so people come to these things."

I noticed several guys eying Noah hungrily. "Well, with this many people here, you shouldn't stay with me the whole night. Mr. Right might be out there while we speak."

"And if not Mr. Right, then at least maybe Mr. Right Now," he said and waggled his eyebrows.

"Go have fun." I gave him a little push, and he flashed me a crooked smile in return.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't apologize. It's over, forgotten."

"I hope it's not forgotten. I'd like to think I'm not that forgettable."

I winked and shooed him away, then moved off to one side and sat on the edge of a bench. Several guys and a couple of girls approached to ask me to dance, but I wasn't in the mood anymore. What I really wanted to do was find Micah. Kane was still dancing with Lila, though, so it was obvious he wasn't ready to go.

"Why the long face?" Val said, appearing beside me.

"Just missing my man." I shifted over to let her sit down.

"Where is he?"

"He had to work. He's a reporter, and he's working on a big story."

"Oh, you got yourself a grown ass working man, huh? What's his name?"

"Micah."

"Micah. That sounds familiar. Oh wait! Is he the one who broke that big scandal?" I nodded. "I saw him on TV. He's pretty hunky."

I grinned proudly. "I agree."

We sat in silence for a minute, then she cleared her throat. "I know this is probably none of my business," she said, "but I couldn't help noticing you seemed pretty, um, close to Noah tonight."

"It's not—"

"Hey, like I said, it's none of my business. It's just that Noah's a good friend, and I'd hate to see him get hurt, so if you're just playing around..."

"Val, really, it's not like that. We talked earlier tonight, and we're fine now. We're just friends. Things got a little confusing for a minute there, but we got it all worked out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm glad to hear that. So, you want to go see your boyfriend?"

"Yeah, but Kane's having such a good time with your cousin I don't want to ask him to leave."

"They do seem to be hitting it off, don't they? Your brother seems like a nice kid."

"He is. He's a great kid." I paused then added to be polite, "I only met her for a second, but Lila seems nice too."

"Lila...well, Lila's been through a lot," Val said slowly.

When she didn't elaborate, I asked, "Like what?"

"Oh, I'd rather not go into it right now. Family stuff, you know? It's just not been easy for her. She came

to live with us this summer. She doesn't really know many people yet, and she's bi, so I invited her to the dance. I'm glad she met Kane. Look, if you want to leave, why don't you go ahead? I'll keep an eye on the kids, and I can even drive Kane home after things wind down."

"I don't want you to go to all that trouble," I said. "You don't even know where we live."

"It's not really all that much trouble. I'm going to be here anyway. I have to keep an eye on Lila, and it's not like they've been more than a few feet apart all evening. It's no extra work. Where do you live?"

"Well, we live all the way in Ocean City, but I guess you could take Kane to the B&B. That's a lot closer."

"What B&B?"

"It's in Chicone."

"Oh yeah, that's no big deal at all."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I really don't mind. Go. See your boyfriend."

She smiled and gave me a little push. "Somebody should get laid tonight."

I laughed "As long as it's not Kane!"

"Killian! ¡Vete a la mierda!" She gave me a playful swat.

"Thanks, Val. I really appreciate it."

She shrugged. "*De nada.*"

I interrupted Kane and Lila's slow dance long enough to let him know what the new arrangements were. Predictably, Kane was quite agreeable to the change.

I started to say goodnight to Noah, but he seemed pretty busy with a tall redhead who was dressed as what I could only guess was a slutty Woody from *Toy Story* — denim booty shorts, red scarf around his neck, a cowboy hat, and boots — so I left him alone and slipped out of the party.

A short time later, I pulled into the parking lot of the *Times*. Micah's car was still there, along with several others. Since I'd never been to the offices at night before, I had no idea how to get in. I was pretty sure the doors would be locked, and I doubted there was a receptionist at the desk at that hour. I could have just called Micah on my cell, but that would ruin the surprise.

I was standing next to my car trying to decide what to do when a side door opened and a black woman in her late thirties stepped out to light up a cigarette. She didn't notice me, and jumped as I approached. Her eyes grew wide as she took in my costume.

"Hi, is Micah working?" I asked in as normal a voice as I could manage, as if I always walked around in a winged helmet and a mini skirt.

"Uh, yeah," she said without taking her eyes off of me. I was beginning to feel like a piece of meat the way she was blatantly ogling my body.

"Could you please tell him Killian is here to see him?"

She blinked and looked at my face for the first time, her eyes widening even more, if that was possible. "You're Killian? As in Micah's boyfriend?"

It was my turn to be surprised. "He talks about me?"

I hadn't even known Micah was out at work.

"He never shuts up about you," she said, taking me in again from head to toe as she sucked on the cigarette and slowly blew out a stream of smoke. "Damn. Micah said you were cute, but he never mentioned you were a god."

"Hermes, actually." I fought a blush and lost, suddenly glad for the dim lighting. She stared at me blankly. "The costume. I'm supposed to be Hermes, the messenger of the gods. I, uh, just came from a costume party."

I have a bad tendency to ramble when I'm nervous.

"You mean you don't dress like this all the time?" She smirked. "Too bad." She took a final drag from her cigarette and flicked it away with a practiced gesture. "Come on in. I'll show you to his desk."

"Sorry for interrupting your smoke break," I said, following her inside and down a hallway.

She stopped and turned back, hand on her hip, to give me one more lascivious inspection. "Honey, looking like that, you can interrupt me any day."

She winked and started walking once more.

We came into a large, open office space divided into cubicles. I spotted Micah right away at his desk on the far side of the room. He was bent intently over his laptop, his fingers flying over the keys.

"Micah, there's a messenger here to see you," my guide announced.

Micah's head popped up as he glanced absently in our direction, his mind clearly still on his project. When he saw me, however, his eyes grew wide, and a delighted

grin spread across his face. He jumped up and quickly crossed the room.

For a moment, I thought he was going to sweep me off my feet and kiss me right there, but at the last second he seemed to remember we weren't alone and stopped just inches from me.

"Mmm. Don't let me stop you," the woman said.

Micah laughed. "You'd like that too much, Tina."

Tina grinned. "Didn't say I wouldn't. I'll give you two some privacy. I need to go check in with pagination."

She winked at me as she left us alone in the office.

Micah quickly swooped in for the delayed kiss.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he pulled away.

"Just thought I'd say hi and show you my costume."

"Hold still, I've got to take this in." He walked around me in a slow circle, looking at me from every angle. "Wow! You look... Wow!"

I laughed. "Micah Gerber at a loss for words? You do know Hermes was the patron god of orators and writers, don't you?"

"Wasn't he also the protector of thieves? I think you're stealing all my rational thoughts." He grabbed me and pulled me against him for a tight hug, knocking off my helmet. "Do you have any idea how hot you look?"

"Um, no, but if you keep telling me, maybe I'll buy it."

"I'm serious," he said, pushing me away and holding me at arms' length. "I really wish I could have been there tonight."

"Me too."

He glanced down at his watch and frowned. "It can't be over already."

"No, things were really just getting going when I left. I just wasn't having fun alone."

"Didn't Kane go with you?"

"Yeah, but he met a girl, and I hated to drag him away. A friend is going to drive him home when the dance is over. I'm sorry about interrupting your work. I just wanted to see you."

He pulled me against him again for another, much gentler hug. "Oh please. I welcome any break, especially if it involves you. So, how about if you tell me why you're really here?"

I pulled back, surprised. "What do you mean?" I sounded defensive, even to myself.

"Easy. I'm not accusing you of anything. It's just that I know you. I can tell there's more to the story. If you don't want to talk about it, that's cool."

"It's not that I don't... It's just..." I sighed and nervously ran my hand through my hair. "You know that guy Noah from Haven?"

"Yeah, the one who invited you to go?"

"Yeah, him." I took a deep breath. "He, um...he kissed me tonight."

Micah's expression didn't change. "Did you kiss him back?" He sounded completely calm, as if he were asking about the weather.

"I don't know," I said miserably. "Maybe for a second. But then I realized what was happening and told him to stop and that I was dating you. Well, actually, I pushed him so hard he fell on his ass."

"And then what happened?"

"We talked about it for a while. I told him you meant too much to me to risk losing you, and he apologized."

"And that's it?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged and smiled. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. Thanks for telling me."

"You're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad? It's inevitable that we're going to be attracted to other people. What's important is how you react to that attraction. You decided we were more important than your interest in Noah. How could I be upset about that? I'm just really glad you trusted our relationship enough to tell me."

I rushed into his arms again. "Damn it! You just keep getting more and more amazing. I don't know how much of that I can take. How did I get so lucky?"

"Hey, I'm the one holding a hot Greek god. Speaking of which, now that we've got your little confession out of the way, how about if you put the hat back on? Just for me?"

I rolled my eyes but obliged.

He let out a wolf-whistle that I was sure they could hear all over the building.

"Why do I have to go back to work?" he lamented.

I frowned. "How late do you have to stay?"

"I don't know. I guess I could leave it for the night. Why?" A little smile played around his lips as if he already knew the answer. "Do you have something else in mind?"

I struck a pose — fists on hips, feet splayed — and gave him my most suggestive smile. "How about you and I slip back to Mount Olympus for a little frolicking of mythical proportions?"

He broke into a grin as he adjusted himself. "I, uh, think I'll just run and let them know I'm leaving for the night. My place or yours?"

"Yours."

"Great. I'll be right back."

While I waited, I thought about how lucky I was to have a guy like Micah.

I got lucky several more times that night.



## Chapter 23

I woke up the next morning when I felt Micah getting out of bed. The sky was just starting to brighten with the first light of day. I sat up and rubbed my bleary eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up. I was going to let you sleep in. I need to get back to work."

"What time is it?"

"It's like six."

"A.M.?"

"Go back to sleep." He leaned over to give me a kiss.

I tugged on his arm. "Come back to bed with me."

"I can't, babe. I really need to keep writing. I probably shouldn't have left last night." He grinned.

"Although I'm really glad I did."

"I'll make you glad again if you stay."

"Kill, I can't."

"Just once..." I pushed the sheet down to show him how much I wanted him to stay.

His eyes traveled down my body and I knew I had him. I pulled his arm again and this time he let me drag him back into bed.

The second time he crawled out of bed to shower, I just rolled over and went back to sleep.

I woke up a few hours later and just luxuriated in Micah's bed, surrounded by his scent even when he

wasn't there. Eventually, my growling stomach forced me to get up and take my own shower.

By the time I finished drying off, I remembered that I'd come to Micah's wearing only a Greek god costume, and I'd be damned if I was going to drive around in broad daylight wearing only a white mini skirt.

I figured Micah wouldn't mind if I borrowed some clothes, so I rifled through his dresser until I found an outfit that wouldn't be too oversized. I ended up in a pair of his jeans that were probably on the small side for him, but were still a little on the large side for me. The long-sleeved rugby shirt I dug out looked like it probably dated back to high school. I probably looked ridiculous but I had the same warm feeling wearing Micah's clothes that I got laying in his bed.

It was almost noon by the time I got dressed, so I grabbed some food from a drive-thru and swung by the office. I expected the office to be empty as I let myself in, so I was a little surprised when Novak's head popped out of his office.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. I thought he sounded a little perturbed. "It's Sunday."

"I could ask you the same question."

He stepped out of his office and shut the door behind him, something he never did. He was definitely acting suspiciously.

"This is my office. I can come in whenever I want. You technically work Monday to Friday."

"No, my job as your assistant might be weekdays only, but my job as an investigator is seven days a week."

Novak had to concede my point. "But the ball isn't until tonight, so why are you here on a Sunday afternoon? You must have a pressing reason."

Of course, I didn't. I'd mostly driven to the office out of habit, but now I needed a damn good reason to rest my case. My eyes fell on Paul's file and a light bulb went off. "I want to know about safe-deposit boxes."

Novak raised one eyebrow. "Safe-deposit boxes?"

"Yes."

"What about them?"

"I found out Paul had one and went to a lot of trouble to hide his key, which makes me wonder if it contains something important. Is there any way I can find out what's in it?"

"You personally?"

"Um, yes."

"Not that I'm aware of. The police, or next-of-kin, would most likely have to open it."

"What if I had Paul's key?"

Novak frowned at me. "Is this hypothetical?"

I nodded quickly. "Yes, purely."

He looked as if he didn't quite believe me. "Even if you had his key, you'd have to provide some proof of identification to get the bank's key in order to open the box. It requires two keys, one of which the bank—"

"Right. I know about the two keys and how that works. So, basically, what you're saying is, I'd have to talk to his family or turn the information over to the police and wait until they got around to looking into it."

"No, what I'm telling you is that you need to turn the information over to the police, period. This is an active murder investigation."

"Active is a relative term in this case."

Novak gave me an exasperated look. "Killian..."

"Can I talk to Paul's mom first, at least?"

He sighed. "I suppose, but if you turn up anything remotely relevant to the case, you'd better contact the authorities immediately."

"Yes, sir."

We sat staring at each other for a few moments.

"Is there anything else?" Novak finally asked.

"I mean...I'm sure I can find something..."

"Killian, you're becoming a workaholic. Go get some fresh air. Walk through the zoo, bike through the park — do something outside that isn't related to your cases in any way. For goodness sake, take a break."

"I'm not becoming a workaholic," I said weakly.

"Did it even occur to you to relax today?"

"I slept in!"

"And then what did you do? You drove right to the office."

I blinked. "That's beside the point."

"No, that's exactly the point. You're working too hard. Go enjoy yourself for the rest of the afternoon. That's an order."

I snapped up straight and sketched a mock salute. "Yes, sir, Novak, sir. The zoo it is!"

He gave me a dirty look. "Get the hell out of here. Go have some fun...if you haven't forgotten how."

I rolled my eyes and slipped out of the office.

"I know how to have fun," I mumbled under my breath.

I decided to go to the zoo, tucked into a stretch of parkland that followed the Wicomico River like a green ribbon through the middle of town. It wasn't a big zoo — nothing compared to the sprawling urban ones — but it had a certain charm. Winding paths, old brick buildings, shaded benches where you could sit and listen to the chatter of monkeys or the splash of water in the otter pond. I used to come here more often, back before my life got so...full. Or maybe "cluttered" was the better word. It had been at least a year, maybe two, since I'd set foot inside.

I wandered aimlessly, letting the afternoon sun warm my face as I lingered by the jaguars, watched the bears amble lazily in their enclosure, and paused to admire the monkeys' acrobatics. I stopped by the alligators for longer than I meant to, studying their still, prehistoric forms. It was nice, pretending for a little while that there was nothing pressing waiting for me outside the zoo gates.

The problem was, the moment I told myself not to think about work, I realized there wasn't much else to think about. Things with Micah were good — better than they'd ever been, really. My so-called gifts were on hold until I could find someone to teach me, and frankly, I was happy to keep them in the farthest mental closet possible. They were more stressful than work any way you measured it. School was fine.

And that was...it.

Had my life been boiled down to three categories — dead people, work, and school — with Micah as the bright spot in between?

I need a hobby, I thought, and then actually laughed out loud at the absurdity. A little girl nearby stopped mid-step on the path, gave me a wide-eyed look, and inched closer to her mother like I was some kind of zoo exhibit myself. When would I find the time for a hobby anyway?

I drifted over to the playground next to the zoo. For such a perfect fall day, it was surprisingly quiet — just the warm scent of wood chips, a few scattered shouts, and the creak of the swings in the breeze. A young woman sat on a bench, keeping half an eye on two kids who took turns racing up the slide the wrong way, the other half absorbed in whatever she was reading on her tablet.

I took a seat on one of the empty swings. The chains were cool against my palms as I leaned forward, letting the swing sway lazily. I watched the kids — totally lost in their game, breathless with joy, without the faintest thought of bills, grades, or mortality — and felt ancient. Would I ever feel that carefree again?

That's when I felt it — that subtle shift in the air, the prickle of someone close behind me. Before I could turn, hands pressed firmly into the small of my back and shoved. I let out a startled yelp as the swing lurched forward. Instinctively, I twisted to look, but the sudden movement made me lose my grip on the chains. My feet scrambled for purchase as I fell backwards.

Strong arms caught me before I could hit the ground.

I looked up into Micah's face, his expression caught somewhere between concern and a mischievous smirk.

"Are you trying to kill me?" I asked accusingly.

Amusement won out, and he laughed. "Sorry. I wanted to surprise you, not send you to the hospital."

I laughed too as I managed to get my feet under me and stand up. "You almost succeeded in doing both. How did you find me?"

"I'm a reporter."

"No, really."

"Novak called me and said he'd sent you out to relax and that you might need a little more convincing to take the afternoon off. He suggested I might find you at the zoo. I decided to surprise you since I had to run out so early this morning. Sit down, and I'll push you."

I sat back down obediently, and he gave me a gentle push.

"I don't know why Novak is playing matchmaker so much lately," I grumbled.

"Probably for the same reason he's concerned about you working too much. He cares about you."

I smiled. "I guess. Although I also think he's trying to get rid of me for some reason."

"No conspiracy theories."

"What about your story? What's going on? You never did fill me in last night."

"To be fair, we got distracted." He sighed. "It's like a bad soap opera. There's hate, greed, cruelty, deception — you name it. And it seems I've only scratched the surface."

"So how far do you think it reaches?"

"Don't know yet, but I've definitely uncovered something big."

"I guess I don't understand what's going on with all this, really. I've been so busy I haven't taken the time to read everything. I thought it was just some development shenanigans."

"It's a lot to explain, and even I don't know how it all connects just yet, to be honest." He stopped pushing me and sat on the swing next to me, kicking lazily.

"Basically, though, it has to do with the environmental-protection laws. It appears the commissioners and other authorities were being paid off to allow development where there shouldn't have been any, such as in protected wetlands. Turns out that's just the tip of the iceberg. But that's enough work talk. You're supposed to be relaxing, and I'm supposed to be enforcing your break, not whining about my job."

"You weren't whining, but fair enough," I said, thinking about Novak's accusing me of being a workaholic. "Let's take a walk."

"That sounds nice."

We ambled through the park along the river. There weren't too many people around, so we essentially had the place to ourselves.

We paused on the little arch bridge to kiss. When he pressed his lips against mine again, I melted into his arms. It didn't take long before I began to get aroused.

Micah noticed immediately. "Have you ever had sex in a public place?"

"No! And I don't intend to start now."

"You have no sense of adventure," he said.

"I just have no desire to get arrested. You're supposed to write the news, not make it."

He laughed. "I love having sex with you."

"It's only been a couple of hours."

"That's too long."

"Now who's insatiable?"

"I love you, Killian."

"I love you too."

We stood for a while just holding each other until a dog walker came down the path at a brisk stroll. We pulled apart, but she just smiled at us as she passed by with her spaniel.

"I'd better get back to work," Micah said with a sigh.

"Don't go!"

"I have to if I'm going to be free to go to the ball tonight. This was just a quick break. But you're under strict orders to take the rest of the afternoon off. Relax. Read a book. Binge watch a TV show. Just no work. Got it?"

"You sound like Novak."

"I guess we both care about you. Why don't we meet at my apartment around six and get dressed for the ball together? I picked up the tuxes yesterday."

"That sounds fun." I waggled my eyebrows.

"Then it's a plan," he said with a chuckle. "We just can't get too distracted or we'll never make it to the Ball."

"But we'd sure have a ball."

He laughed and gave me a quick kiss before we walked hand in hand back through the park and zoo to

where we'd both left our cars. After one final kiss, we drove off in our separate directions.

I headed home so I could get my dress shoes and relax before meeting Micah in a couple of hours.

"Well, it's not that Hermes costume, but you still look pretty damn hot," Micah said from behind me.

I contemplated my reflection in the full-length mirror in his bedroom. The tuxedo was sleek, perfectly tailored, and undeniably expensive. I'd never worn one before, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Mostly, I felt like an imposter.

"I think I look like a penguin," I muttered.

"Babe, penguins don't turn me on. You do. Nuff said."

I snorted and turned, giving him an appreciative once-over. "How come you're so much better looking in these things than I am?"

We were wearing nearly identical tuxedos — black suits, crisp white shirts, satin lapels. Nothing fancy, just classic. And yet, somehow, Micah looked like he'd stepped out of the pages of GQ, while I looked like a kid playing dress-up. Truthfully, I hadn't even felt this ridiculous in the Hermes costume.

"Oh stop," he said, rolling his eyes as he crossed the room to adjust my bow tie. "You look fantastic. Put your shoes on."

I did as instructed, but as I stood after lacing them up, I caught my reflection again. "I'm not wearing one of these at our wedding," I said absently, following him toward the door.

He stopped so suddenly I walked right into his back. Turning slowly, he arched an eyebrow at me, lips quirking into a mischievous smile.

"What did you just say?"

Heat flooded my face. "What?"

"You said our wedding." His smirk widened.

"We're getting married?"

My mouth opened and closed a few times like a fish gasping for air. "I... I... I—"

"Are you proposing to me, Killian Kendall?"

I thought I might pass out right there in his bedroom. My knees went weak, my pulse hammered in my ears.

He broke into a grin and let me off the hook.

"Breathe, babe. Inhale, exhale. I'm just teasing."

Air whooshed back into my lungs, and I sagged with relief. As much as I loved Micah, I wasn't ready for vows, rings, and forever. Not yet.

Micah softened, brushing a thumb over my cheek before straightening my tie again. "One day, maybe we'll be there. It's not such a bad thought, is it?"

I shook my head, tugged him close, and kissed him before I could second-guess myself. For a moment, I wanted to forget tuxedos, cases, and everything else.

But Micah eventually pulled away, eyes sparkling. "Before we get too carried away and decide to skip the ball, I have a few more surprises for you."

"More surprises?" I asked warily.

He strode to the breakfast bar and returned with a flat white box. It was heavier than I expected when he handed it over.

"Open it."

I sat on the couch and lifted the lid. My breath caught. Nestled inside was an exquisite Venetian-style mask, covered in thousands of tiny glass beads arranged in a swirling pattern of brilliant colors. It shimmered like living flame.

"Micah, it's beautiful! Where did you get it?"

"I have my sources," he said with a grin, clearly pleased with my reaction. "I was hoping you'd like it. Every bead was hand-sewn."

"It must have cost a fortune."

He waved that off. "Let's not talk about that. But I can tell you I couldn't afford two of them, so mine's a little less...elaborate." He produced a feathered white half-mask and held it up with mock pride. Pretty, yes. But compared to mine, it looked like something from a discount costume shop.

I lifted my mask carefully out of the box, afraid even to touch it. "It's a work of art. I'm afraid to wear it."

"Of course it is. And of course you're going to wear it. After the ball, we'll have it framed. It deserves to be displayed, not hidden away."

Emotion welled up, unexpected and overwhelming. I hugged him tightly. "Thank you," I whispered.

"You're welcome. Now we need to go or we'll be late."

I nodded, distracted by my thoughts. I'd wanted to be there early, before Jake arrived, to observe without being seen. And Micah, always the planner, was making sure I'd get that chance.

We were halfway out the door when I remembered he'd promised a few surprises. So far, I'd only seen the mask.

"Hey, what are the oth—" I broke off mid-sentence, eyes widening as we stepped into the parking lot.

Waiting at the curb was a limousine. Not just any limo — an obscenely long, glossy black stretch with a uniformed chauffeur holding the door open.

"You didn't."

Micah's grin was positively wicked. "Oh, I did."

The ride was surreal. Soft leather seats, chilled champagne, the city lights flashing past the tinted windows. Micah poured us each a glass, handing mine over with a wink.

"I know you're technically working tonight," he said, clinking his flute against mine, "but I wanted it to be special. The Equality Ball is one of the biggest social events of the year. Even if you're on a case, it should still feel like a night to remember."

I took a sip of champagne and leaned in close, my lips brushing his ear. "Mission accomplished."

I leaned in for a kiss.

The gala was being held in the grand ballroom of the Wiltshire, the most luxurious hotel in the city. I'd never set foot inside before, but its reputation preceded it. People spoke about the Wiltshire with a kind of reverence, as if it weren't just a hotel but a monument to wealth and taste.

It lived up to every word of the hype.

The ballroom opened before us like something out of a dream: sweeping red carpets underfoot, crystal

chandeliers dripping from gilded ceilings, and polished dark wood so glossy it almost doubled as a mirror. The whole place shimmered in warm, golden light, making it feel as though we'd stepped onto the set of some long-lost Hollywood epic. For a second, I forgot why we were there.

When we arrived, the room was still sparsely populated, which was exactly how I'd planned it. It gave us the chance to stake out a spot near the edge of the action — a vantage point where we could see the grand entrance and still keep a discreet eye on the rest of the room.

The crowd began trickling in not long after we settled, their laughter and chatter filling the cavernous space until it swelled into a living, breathing thing. Soon, it felt as though half the Eastern Shore had descended on the Wiltshire.

Micah, who knew almost everyone worth knowing in town, leaned close to supply a running commentary as people filtered through the doors. His voice was low and amused, sometimes affectionate, sometimes dry, as he identified one power player after another: the mayor and his wife in matching smiles, the police chief with a chest puffed up like a rooster, the county sheriff looking like he'd rather be anywhere else, and a smattering of politicians, including one congressman who seemed to shake every hand twice. Mixed in were the old-money families — names I'd only ever seen in headlines or on buildings — gliding in with the kind of practiced ease that came from never having to worry about whether they belonged.

It was dazzling, overwhelming, and impossible to keep straight. After a while, the names and titles blurred together in my head, a jumble of faces, power, and money.

And somewhere in this glittering parade, Jake was going to walk through the door.

I noticed that many of the local officials who wandered by us seemed to recognize Micah. As they did, their faces would take on rather disgusted expressions, and they would make a show of turning their backs to him. Some of the looks were downright hostile.

"Does your status as official pariah have anything to do with your article?" I asked him finally.

"Yeah. Try not to let it bother you. Just ignore them."

"You'd think they'd be grateful to have the corruption exposed," I said.

Micah snorted. "You'd think so, but that's not how it works. First off, the ones who got exposed were popular. Some of them had been in politics around here for decades. That makes me the bad guy. Secondly, corruption spreads like mold — it clings to everyone it touches, whether they're actually involved or not. It leaves a film of suspicion on everything. And since this is an election year? Guess who's the villain again. Finally, I'd bet good money some of the people here tonight are just as corrupt as the ones I exposed—only better at covering their tracks. This thing's bigger than we realized, and I'm just starting to see how deep it goes."

“Maybe you should put your mask on so they won’t recognize you.” Not many people were wearing theirs—most just carried them as an awkward accessory.

He laughed, about to answer, when the mayor approached. My pulse spiked. For a second, I braced for fireworks, expecting him to tear into Micah over the article. Instead, the man beamed, his politician’s smile wide and unthreatening.

He shook Micah’s hand, then mine when Micah introduced me. After a few polite words in my direction, his focus slid back to Micah.

“Mr. Gerber—”

“Please, Mr. Mayor, call me Micah.”

“Only if you’ll call me Phil.” His grin widened, all teeth. It reminded me uncomfortably of a shark about to bite. “Micah, I just wanted to congratulate you on your excellent reporting. You’re doing important work, and I want you to know you have my full support. I realize certain people are giving you grief, but you’re on the right side of this.”

“Thank you, Mayor... er, Phil. That means a lot,” Micah said, genuine gratitude in his voice.

They shook hands again before the mayor drifted off to charm his next voter.

I turned back toward the doors, but Micah caught my elbow and steered me in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“I want you to meet someone.”

He guided me toward a tall man surrounded by a small circle of elegant admirers. I thought I recognized him, though I couldn’t immediately place him. He was striking: tall enough to tower over nearly everyone else

in the room, broad in a way that made me think of a redwood rather than a stick figure. His short iron-gray hair was perfectly in place, his square face softened by kind eyes. For all his size, he carried himself with easy, quiet grace.

“Dr. Mason,” Micah said.

The man turned, a smile lighting his features. “Micah.” His voice was soft, cultured, with a warmth that immediately set him apart from the peacocking crowd. He excused himself from his circle and stepped toward us. “So good to see you.” His gaze shifted to me, eyes twinkling as though he were in on some private joke. “And who is this?”

Micah smirked, which put me instantly on guard. “This is my boyfriend, Killian Kendall. Killian, this is Dr. Hiram Mason.”

Recognition hit. I shook his hand. “You’re the president of Pemberton University.”

“That would be correct,” he said smoothly. “A pleasure to meet you, Killian. Are you a student?”

“Yes, sir. First year.”

“None of this ‘sir’ business.” His eyes sparkled again, as though daring me to laugh. “Quite a party, isn’t it? Though I’ve seen better. The music’s a bit lifeless.” He tipped his head toward the jazz band.

“You’d rather they played dance music?” Micah asked, sounding more familiar with him than I expected.

“Disco was my era,” Dr. Mason chuckled. “But my dancing days are behind me.”

Micah grinned. “Oh, I don’t know. I bet you could still outdance anyone here.”

Something in that exchange unlocked a memory. It hit me like an electric jolt, my jaw dropping as I stared. Micah leaned in and gently tilted my chin shut with one finger, smirking.

Dr. Mason, visibly amused, laid a hand on my shoulder. "Our little secret, Killian."

I nodded mutely, still rattled, as a woman detached herself from the circle he'd been with when we approached and slipped a hand around his arm. She was younger, with dyed-blond hair and too much makeup caked over fine lines. Her dress strained against her figure, and her jewelry glittered in a way that screamed money without taste. Together, she and Dr. Mason looked mismatched — her flashy ostentation clashing against his dignified composure.

"Dear, this is an old friend, Micah Gerber, and his companion, Killian Kendall," Dr. Mason introduced us. "This is my wife, Lenore."

Before Micah or I could say a word — assuming I was yet capable of speech — her face took on a pouty expression.

"I'm thirsty, Hi," she whined as if we weren't even there.

"Then we'll get a drink. Boys, if you'll excuse me..."

"Of course," Micah said.

"It was nice meeting you, Killian," Dr. Mason said.

I nodded again, and he gave me a surreptitious wink as they moved off.

"Charming lady, isn't she?" Micah said when they were out of earshot.

"That..."

"Hmm?"

"He..."

"Spit it out, Killian."

"He's married?"

"Yep. Thirty-five blissful years, I think it is."

"But..."

"But what?"

I shook my head silently. I'd have to think on that one for a while.

It was turning into a night full of surprises, and I still hadn't even found Jake. As Micah and I started back toward our spot, I let my eyes sweep across the ballroom one more time — then froze mid-step. My breath caught.

On the far side of the room, I'd finally spotted Jake. That part wasn't surprising — I'd come here to find him, after all — and it wasn't even shocking that he'd slipped in unnoticed. With the mayor and Dr. Mason pulling our focus, it would've been easy for him to arrive without us seeing.

No, what stopped me cold was whose arm Jake was clinging to.

Micah followed my line of sight and gave a low whistle. "Well, I'll be damned. Didn't expect to see him here."

"You know him?" My voice came out sharper than I intended.

"Not personally. But I know of him. Every reporter in the tri-state area does. That's Fenton Black."

The name hit me like a slap, but my brain refused to process it. "No it isn't," I blurted out before I could stop myself. "That's Neal!"



## Chapter 24

Micah blinked at me, astonishment flickering across his face. He glanced at the man I knew as Neal, then back at me, clearly deciding he must have misheard.

“What did you say?”

“That’s Neal,” I hissed, tugging at his arm. The last thing I wanted was to be spotted by either Neal or Jake.

But Micah went stubborn on me, planting his feet like a mule. “Neal as in...?”

“As in your old boss. As in the guy in the photo in Jake’s room. As in the man I had lunch with in D.C. on Monday. Now move before they see us.”

Only when I yanked hard did he let me pull him behind a wide marble column. He shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t understand. That’s Fenton Black. I know it is. I’ve never been introduced, but I’ve seen him up close more than once. I recognize him when I see him.”

“Who the hell is Fenton Black?”

“You’ve never heard of him?”

“If I had, would I be asking?”

Micah exhaled through his nose. “He’s probably the richest man on the Eastern Shore. Maybe one of the richest in Maryland — hell, maybe the whole country. Nobody knows exactly how much money he’s sitting on, or where it came from. Just that it’s...obscene. Originally from Argentina. Eccentric as hell. And if I said there were a lot of rumors about him, that’d be underselling it.”

My pulse thudded in my ears. “What kind of rumors?”

“Well...” Micah hesitated, lowering his voice. “Let’s just say it’s whispered that half the state’s politicians are in his pocket. The other half owe him favors. Officially he’s in ‘import/export,’ which is vague enough to mean anything. Unofficially? People say drugs, weapons, maybe worse. Some call him a kingpin.”

“Like a mafia boss?”

“Something along those lines.”

“But no one can prove it?”

“Not so far. And anyone who’s ever hinted they had hard evidence tends to wind up dead in an ‘accident.’ Truth is, I’m not sure law enforcement’s all that eager to catch him. The guy’s sharp. Charitable, too — donates millions, keeps half the local nonprofits afloat. People convince themselves his money pays for his sins. It’s amazing what you can buy when you’re rich.”

I risked a peek around the column. “Well, add ‘running an escort agency’ to that list of sins, because that’s definitely the man who called himself Neal when I met him Monday.”

Micah leaned over my shoulder for a better look, shaking his head. “Unbelievable. At least I finally know what Neal looks like.”

My eyes locked on my friend. “What’s Jake doing with him?”

“Looks like they’re on a date.”

The words gave me a tiny flicker of hope. If Jake was with Neal socially, maybe he wasn’t one of the

escorts after all. Unless Neal had broken his rule about never seeing his own employees. Either way, the puzzle pieces weren't fitting together. Too many jagged edges, too many gaps.

"You have to give him one thing, he's got balls," Micah said almost admiringly.

I ducked back behind the column and glared at Micah. "Jake?"

"No, Fenton Black. I mean, meeting you and then showing up here."

"He had no reason to think I'd be here." I weighed the situation aloud. "Still, his picture could have ended up in the paper again."

"Actually, he's notoriously freakish about having his picture taken," Micah said. "Usually, he won't allow it for any reason. And if someone tries without permission, he makes them delete it while he watches."

"Well, someone slipped past him at least once. Jake has a photo."

"Maybe Jake took it with his phone."

"It looked like a download — printed out on plain paper, not a snapshot."

Micah leaned closer, lowering his voice even though no one was near. "Earlier this year at a children's hospital fundraiser, some tiny local paper snapped his picture without him realizing. They ran it online and in print. Within weeks the paper folded. I remember one of the guys at The Times joking it was because they dared to print Fenton Black's photo. Everyone laughed nervously. Like maybe it wasn't really a joke."

"But there's still a chance I could spot him anywhere, just like tonight. That makes it a risk. And he

doesn't strike me as the kind of guy who takes risks. Why would he meet with me?"

"Probably because he didn't take you seriously," Micah said. "Thought he could brush you off and be done with it. He never expected to run into you again."

"You're right. He definitely underestimated me at first. But I doubt he's making that mistake anymore. By now, I could be on his hit list."

Micah paled. "So what do we do? Because I have a bad feeling it'd be...unhealthy for him to see you here."

"I can't leave, if that's what you're suggesting."

"Why not?"

"I don't know why Jake is here with him. That's why I came tonight. Novak pulled strings to get me in. He'd kick my ass if I wasted the chance."

"Not if you didn't have an ass to kick," Micah muttered. "Killian, this guy is dangerous. Deadly dangerous. You're playing with fire."

"Micah." I kept my tone steady. "Didn't we just have this exact conversation a few days ago — except I was the one worried about you? Do you remember what you told me?"

He grimaced. "Yeah."

"And?"

"I said it was my job and I had to do it."

"Right. And then you said you'd never ask me to give up on an investigation."

"I'm not asking you to give it up."

"You might as well be. You're asking me to compromise it. What's the difference? If he already sees me as a threat, then it can't get much worse. If he still

underestimates me, I might even use that to my advantage. Either way, I don't plan on him seeing me."

"And how exactly are you going to avoid that?"

I slipped my mask into place. Plenty of people still weren't wearing theirs, but enough were that I wouldn't stick out. "I've only met him once, he doesn't expect me here, and I'm masked."

Micah sighed. "Just be careful. Guys like him can't afford to be unobservant."

"I'm always careful. But we shouldn't stay together. Even if you never met him, he knows what you look like. Besides, he also knows you're a reporter, so it makes sense for you to be here. If he sees me with you, he might connect dots we don't want him connecting."

He looked ready to argue, then thought better of it. "Fine. We split up. But stay where I can see you."

"Ignore me. Otherwise, you'll just draw attention. I'll text when I'm ready to leave."

He gave a reluctant nod, turned as if to walk away, then stopped and doubled back. "I just remembered another rumor about Black that might be important."

"What rumor?"

"They say he likes young boys."

I felt my stomach drop. "He's a pedophile?"

"Maybe not that young. But Jake... Jake would be about the right age."

I risked a glance around the column. If this was a date, Jake wasn't enjoying it. His tux was sharp, expensive, perfectly tailored, but his expression was unmistakable — utter boredom. And no mask, so his feelings were plain. Beside him, Black — Neal — was

immaculate in white, speaking earnestly with a man I half-recognized but couldn't place.

"Who's he talking to?"

"Black? Humphrey," Micah said. "Ronald Humphrey. County commissioner. One of the few not tied up in the scandal."

"Where would I have seen him?"

"On the news, probably. He's been railing against my article nonstop. Calls it reckless journalism. The louder he shouts, the guiltier he looks."

"Do you think it means anything he's cozying up to Black?"

"Could. Doesn't have to. Everyone wants a word with Black. Local celebrity, bottomless bank account."

"I want to get closer."

"How do you plan to manage that without drawing his attention?"

"Um...maybe you could create some kind of distraction — fall down, fake a choking fit—"

"Killian, my reputation. I might have to interview these people later. I don't need them remembering me as the klutz at the gala."

"Yeah, okay. Good point. What if you just stroll over and talk to Humphrey? Pretend you're chasing a quote."

Micah arched an eyebrow. "One, I wouldn't have to pretend. I am a reporter. Two, there are rules at these shindigs. You don't just ambush someone unless you want to be shown the door — and Humphrey would happily throw me out. He hates me that much."

"Fair. We don't want that." I exhaled. "Forget the distraction. I'll circle the edge of the room, work my way behind them."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll mingle. Good luck."

I began threading my way through the crowd as inconspicuously as possible, keeping my shoulders relaxed and my pace unhurried. Once I reached the wall, I edged sideways, careful to appear as if I were simply drifting, a guest in search of a drink or a familiar face. My actual destination, of course, was the spot where Black and Jake had planted themselves.

Black wasn't mingling in the traditional sense. He didn't need to. Instead, people orbited toward him like satellites pulled by gravity, eager to pay their respects, murmur pleasantries, or curry favor. He received them all with a faint smile, then dismissed them with a flicker of impatience, like a king indulging petitioners at court. By the time I drew near, Humphrey had already vanished, replaced by two different supplicants who came and went quickly, practically bowing on their way out. A third was speaking now, while another hovered in line for the privilege.

At last, I positioned myself directly behind them. My eyes stayed on Jake. He looked restless, paying little to no attention to Black's steady stream of admirers, not even bothering to hide his boredom.

I inched closer, angling my head to catch their voices. I should have been able to hear them clearly — except for the raucous knot of revelers who'd taken up residence nearby. They had clearly found the open bar early and often. Their laughter rang out sharp and brittle, a little too loud, a little too forced, the kind of mirth that

teetered on hysteria: I'm having fun, damn it, even if it kills me.

Just as I was about to give up and move farther down, their volume dropped, and one of them — a squat, red-faced man with a gut straining against his cumberbund — launched into a joke. Something about a pilot leaving the intercom on by mistake. The group leaned in with drunken anticipation.

The sudden hush opened a pocket of quiet, and at last I caught Black's voice.

"Again, thank you so much for your generous donation," a woman was saying, her words wrapping up some bit of formal gratitude. She was hard to miss — towering, upholstered in satin, and so amply endowed she looked as if she might actually serve tea from her bosom.

"You're very welcome," Black replied smoothly. Then, with that same regal economy of motion, he inclined his head. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

The buxom lady accepted her dismissal with a gracious nod and lumbered off.

"Tiresome woman," Black muttered the instant she was gone, his tone sharp enough to slice silk.

"They're all tiresome," Jake said flatly. He didn't bother lowering his voice. "I hate these things."

"Jakie," Black chided, calm but firm. "We've been through this before."

"Yeah, I know." Jake's shoulders slumped, resignation sharpening his boyish profile. "It's part of the bargain."

I couldn't hear what was said next because the rowdy group burst into raucous laughter as Dumpy delivered the punch line.

When I could make out what Black was saying again, he was placing a drink order. It only took me a second to remember that the closest bar was directly behind me.

Before I could react, Jake turned around and started in my direction.

For just a moment, I panicked. Then, remembering I was wearing a mask, I turned casually — I hoped — to the side, as if I was with the band of merry jokesters.

*Stupid! That was way too close.*

I had to be more careful.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Jake approach the bar and place Black's drink order. He returned to Black's side without so much as glancing in my direction, and a moment later a waiter brought the drink over.

I was just about to break cover when he leaned in and whispered something in Black's ear. Black nodded, and then, to my stunned horror, Jake walked right up to me.

"Can I have a word with you in the hall, please?" He spoke in a civil-enough tone, but his eyes were flashing with anger.

"Of course," I said quickly. What else could I do without causing a scene?

Jake spun on his heel and marched stiffly toward an inconspicuous door behind the bar that I had completely failed to notice earlier. I followed him out

into a deserted but brightly lit, if sterile, hallway. Jake kindly waited for the door to close before ripping into me.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he said as soon as the door snicked shut.

I pulled the mask off. "What do you mean?"

No one can ever say I don't think quickly on my feet.

"Damn it, Killian. Don't play dumb. I know you've been snooping around, talking to my old friends. Danielle called me in a panic and wanted to know what was going on, that you'd told her she was in danger because she knew me, or some shit like that."

I'd expected that would come back to bite me in the ass.

"What kind of fucked-up shit is this?" he continued. "I thought you were my friend."

"Calm down, Jake," I said, which is, of course, always the worst thing to say to someone who's upset.

"Calm down? You want me to *calm down*? After I find out you're sneaking around talking to people about me behind my back? And then I catch you following me around here, eavesdropping on my conversation? And you want me to *calm down*?"

His voice had been steadily climbing throughout that whole tirade, but it reached a crescendo on the last question that I feared would bring security running. I decided a judicious fib was in order.

"I'm not following you," I said in what I hoped was a completely believable voice. I tried to arrange an expression of righteous indignation on my face, but I

was feeling so guilty that I'm not sure I pulled it off. "I'm here with Micah."

"Bullshit." I opened my mouth to argue but he cut me off. "Oh, I know you're here with Micah. I saw you both hiding behind that damn column, peeking out at us every few minutes. And then you come creeping up behind us. And I know you've been following me for a while now. I've seen you behind me in traffic and at the mall once. At the time, I just thought it was a coincidence, and I wondered why you didn't say anything. Now I know it's because you're...you're...*investigating* me!"

He spat out the last two words as if they tasted bitter in his mouth, which they probably did. He stomped back and forth a few paces while I tried to decide what to say.

"Jake, listen—" I tried, but he wheeled around and silenced me with an angry slash of his hand.

"So far, Fenton doesn't know you're here. He's too busy playing benevolent king to the greedy peasants."

So I wasn't the only one who'd made that comparison.

"But all I have to do is make a scene and he'll have your ass in jail so fast you won't know what hit you. I'll say you're harassing me or that you tried to force yourself on me here in the hall."

My mouth fell open in shock. "You wouldn't do that to me."

"Really? Well, I didn't think you'd stoop to sneaking around behind my back, either."

There was genuine hurt in his eyes, and it killed me to see it.

"It's only because we care about you," I said softly.

"Oh please. Spare me."

"Really. Everyone is worried about you. You stop talking to your friends, you don't come home at night, and then you suddenly start throwing around a huge amount of cash that you won't explain where it came from."

"Judy's behind this, isn't she? God. I should have known. I knew someone had been through my stuff. That settles it. I'm moving out."

"You're still in high school."

"I'm already eighteen."

"What are you doing with this Fenton Black guy? He's bad news, Jake."

"What do you mean? You don't even know him."

"We've met."

That stopped him. "You've met?" There was a hint of jealousy in his voice. "Where? How?"

"Through another case."

He waved it away. "Well, you don't know him. I'm old enough to make my own decisions."

"And what decisions are you making? To throw away your family and friends? For what?"

"For what? I'll tell you for what. For a life I could never have with my so-called family and friends. Fenton gives me anything I need or want. He takes care of me."

"Does he love you? And what's your end of the bargain?"

"What good is love? What has love ever gotten me? My whole family is dead, and my own brother killed them. And tried to kill me. Then, before I even had time for that to sink in, I was yanked away from the only people alive that I still knew and cared about. I go off to live with complete strangers on the other side of the country, and everyone expects me to be just fine.

"And *then*, once I *finally* start to make friends and enjoy life again, Auntie Judy decides it will be good for me to move back here. Good for her is more like it. My old friends? Where to start? No one gave a damn about me. No one ever once asked me how I was doing or if I was okay. No one ever cared about me until I started throwing a little money around, and then suddenly everyone is so concerned for me. Give me a fucking break.

"And you" He paused to wipe angry tears from his eyes. "The person I thought was my closest friend. You were too busy following me around and asking people about me to actually talk *to* me. If you were so damn concerned for my wellbeing, why didn't you just fucking walk up to me and ask what was going on?"

I was reeling from his revelations and his accusations. I had no idea he felt like that. After everything he'd been through, why hadn't it ever occurred to me that he'd be having a hard time dealing with it all? Because I'd been too caught up in my own life to think about anyone else's. I'd talked — really talked — to Jake only once since he'd been back. He was right. I'd done a piss-poor job of being a friend.

"Jake, I'm—"

"Sorry? Well guess what, Killian? It's too late for that now. Do you know how many nights I've lain awake in bed for hours wishing you'd just let Todd fucking kill me? At least that way I wouldn't have been feeling all this shit. But you know what? I finally found a way to make the pain go away. So I don't need you, and I don't need Judy, and I don't need my supposed friends who never really cared about me, either. The only reason they ever hung out with me was because they wanted something from me. They wanted me but not for me. They didn't even know me. They just thought I was hot."

I didn't even try to argue with him. I couldn't. He was right.

"So save your apologies for someone else. I don't need them. I'm fine. I have everything I need. You can quit following me around, and you can stop asking questions, and you can tell Judy to fuck off, because I don't need her anymore, either."

"Jake, please, just listen to me. Judy loves you. She really does. She's tried to do what she thought was best for you."

"Then why didn't she ever ask me what I wanted? She got stuck with me, and that's all it is. Let's not pretend there's anything more to it than that. I barely knew her before. She's not my mom. She can't expect me to do whatever she wants just because she thinks it's right for me. It's my goddamned life, and I'll do whatever I want."

"It's not like that."

"How would you know? If she really cared so much about me, wouldn't you think she'd at least have

asked me if I wanted to move back to Maryland, instead of just springing it on me one day when I come home?"

"Did you ever try to talk to her about it?"

"Why bother? She does what she wants when she wants. She can't even handle this like a normal person. She has to hire a private detective. I don't know why she didn't just get her boyfriend to do her dirty work for her. Why'd she have to drag you into it? Or maybe you volunteered for the job of snooping on me. You always did seem to like watching me when you thought I wasn't looking." I flinched. "I was good enough to stare at but not good enough to love. Even then, you chose Asher over me. I guess you got tired of him too, huh? Maybe Micah had better watch out."

He was baiting me, trying to get me to lash out in some way, and I could feel my temper rising. I wanted to defend myself. I wanted to tell him that wasn't how it happened, and he knew it. I would have been playing into his hands, though. He wanted a real screaming match. It's hard to fight when only one person is angry.

*Stay calm, I told myself. If you lose it, you'll just give him more ammunition.*

I took a deep breath. "Jake, I'm sorry I hurt you. I don't know what else to say. I'm sorry I've been such a shitty friend since you've been back. You're right. I haven't been there for you. But this isn't the answer. Can't we try to start over?"

All the fight suddenly seemed to drain out of him. He almost seemed to collapse in on himself.

"No." His voice was suddenly soft. "No, we can't. It's far too late now. Too much has happened. I'm in too deep. I can't start over."

"Too deep into what? It's never too late. I can help."

He laughed, but it was a hollow, joyless sound. This new, withered Jake was much scarier than the angry, overblown one from just a few seconds ago.

"No one can help. I'm beyond help. Can't you see? Just give up. Go back to your happy little life. It's too late."

"Jake—"

"It's too late," he screamed. "It's too fucking late!"

He slumped back against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. I rushed over and knelt at his side, but he shoved me away with surprising strength. I landed hard on my tailbone with an "oof" of surprise and pain. That was going to hurt in the morning.

"Just go," he said, beginning to sob. "Get out before I call security."

"Jake, please let me help."

"I told you, you can't help. Get out. Now."

"But—"

"Get out! Get out! Get out!"

The door we'd come through earlier swung open and Fenton Black stepped into the hall. It only took a moment for his gaze to fall on the two of us. His eyes swept over Jake with a look of annoyance.

His expression when he took me in was harder to read. There was clearly surprise there — and recognition. The other emotion was less definitive, but I didn't need to know what it was to recognize that it was dangerous.

"Go!" Jake said in a voice so low only I could hear him.

I didn't need to be told again. I was on my feet and racing down the hall before the word was off his lips. I heard Black yelling angrily behind me, but he wasn't pursuing. It only took a few more seconds for his words to sink in. He wouldn't need to chase me. He had the entire security staff at his beck and call.

I risked a glance back to see him screaming into a small walkie-talkie.

I started looking frantically for an exit. I spotted one up ahead just as a door to my left burst open and a burly security guard blinked at me in surprise. For a guy his size, his reflexes were quick. He made a lunge for me, but I was quicker. For once, size was on my side. I slipped under his arm and bolted down the hall.

Another guard, shorter and thinner than the first one, came around a corner in front of me. Fortunately, the exit was between him and me. I slammed into the door with my full weight and was gratified to feel it fly open. Some small part of my brain had been worried it might be locked. I didn't take the time to breathe a sigh of relief, however. The chase was still on.

I sprinted across the parking lot and ducked behind a car. I tried to control my breathing as the door exploded open again and the guards raced through it. They had been joined by one more. All three stopped just outside and looked around. I stayed very still, trying not to make any sounds.

"Should we look for him?" the shorter one asked.

"He's gone by now," the tall one said. "Why'd we want him anyway? Was he a gate-crasher?"

"You got me. All I know is that Mr. Black told us to catch him," the burly guy said.

Shorty snorted. "Well, we can guess why Black wanted him, a pretty kid like that."

"Yeah, we shoulda just let him go even if we had caught him," Stretch said with a snicker. "Poor kid. He probably just didn't want to play with Mr. Black."

Burly elbowed him in the side. "Why don't you both shut up?"

He lifted his radio to his mouth and reported that they'd lost me. A burst of static mixed with curses was their response. Mr. Black was not happy.

Neither was I. I might have just escaped from an immediate danger, but I knew Black had recognized me. I was still very much at risk. Probably even more so now. And what if I'd put Jake in danger? My heart was racing.

I waited until the guards retreated into the building, tails between their legs, before quickly digging out my cell phone and dialing Micah's number.

"Where are you?" he asked. "I looked all around, and you and Jake were both gone. Now I can't find Black either."

"I'm in the parking lot behind the hotel."

"What are you doing there?"

"It's a long story. Go get the car as quickly as you can and come pick me up."

"Killian, what happened?"

"I'll tell you when you get here. For now, let's just say I'm in big trouble."

## Chapter 25

I stayed hidden, crouched behind a bright red sports car, waiting for the limousine to come around the corner. It was a tense wait. I fully expected the security guards to return with reinforcements at any moment. I tried to remember if they carried guns.

As soon as the limo appeared, I ran to the passenger side, yanked open the door, and leaped in.

"Go!" I shouted.

"Go where? What's happening?" Micah asked.

"Just drive," I instructed the driver. Then to Micah, "I'll explain when we get away from here."

I slumped down in the seat as the driver pulled off. Micah was silent until we were a distance from the hotel, then, "Killian, what the hell is this all about?"

I sighed and chose my words carefully. "I may have messed things up a bit."

"Messed them up how? You said you were in trouble. What did you mean?"

"Okay, well, Jake saw us at the Ball, and he's noticed me following him a few times. Apparently, I'm not as good at this whole detective thing as I thought."

"So he saw you. How'd you get into trouble? Did he confront you?"

"Yeah, you could say that. We had a huge argument in the hall behind the ballroom. He ripped me a new one, told me I'd been a shitty friend, and had no right to care about him now when I didn't before."

"Ouch."

"Yeah...and the worst part is..." I stopped and swallowed a few times. "He's right."

"Killian..."

"No, he is. I wasn't there for him as much as I should have been. I knew he'd had a hard time in California — we talked a couple of times right after he got back — and I still wasn't there for him. I was too caught up in my own life. I *was* a shitty friend."

"Okay, so maybe you could have been a better friend. What's done is done. How did that get you in trouble?"

"Well, it seems Jake is dating Fenton Black...or at least Black is his sugar daddy."

"Oh. Oh! So that's where all his money is coming from. And the gifts and clothes. How did he get tangled up with Fenton Black?"

"I don't know. But while we were arguing, Black came looking for Jake."

"Shit."

"My thoughts exactly. He definitely recognized me. Jake told me to go so I did. Black called security, and three guards showed up and chased me. Not that they tried very hard to catch me once they were out of Black's sight. I managed to get away from them and hid in the parking lot."

"So Black now knows that you've identified him and you were talking to Jake, but maybe not that you two are acquainted. Let's hope, for both your sakes, that Jake is quick on his feet. You're still a target either way, though. Black will probably assume you're investigating him instead of Jake, which makes you a very real threat."

"As I said, I'm in trouble."

"Trouble? Killian, that doesn't begin to cover it. You're in danger, serious danger."

"Yes, I know. I just need to figure out what to do next. Should I go to the police?"

"Are you listening to me? You're in big-time, serious danger!"

"Yeah, I got that, Micah. I don't really need you to keep telling me."

"Then act like you understand what that means."

"And how am I supposed to act? Scared? Well, I am, but what do you expect me to do? Cry on your shoulder? I don't have time for that right now. I can't let my fear get in the way of the investigation. I'm sure I'm right on the edge of figuring this whole thing out."

"I don't want you to cry on my shoulder, but Fenton Black is a very deadly man. He's killed before, and I seriously doubt he'll hesitate to have you taken out."

"Then we have to stop him before he gets a chance."

"How are we supposed to do that? You're not a superhero, Killian."

"I never said I was. Do you think I should go to the police?"

"And tell them what? That Fenton Black is a bad, bad man? I'm sure they'll jump right on it."

"I can tell them he runs a prostitution ring."

"Why should they believe you? Just because you say so?"

"I have contacts in the police department."

At least I hoped I did. Sergeant Hank Kaplan had helped out a lot in the Caleb Cohen case.

"Even if you could pull strings and get them to not only believe you but actually do something about it, they'd still have to investigate on their own. You'd be dead long before they found anything concrete. This guy is smart. He knows how to hide his tracks. He's gotten away with worse than prostitution in the past."

"So I'll have to think of something else. Just stop yelling at me. You're not helping."

We fell into a heavy, tension-filled silence. I understood Micah was overreacting because he was terrified for me — I could feel the fear rolling off of him in almost physical waves — but it definitely wasn't helping my own rising panic. I tried to force my mind to go over everything I'd learned that night from Micah and Jake. I knew I was missing something...and it was important.

"Sir, sorry to interrupt, but where should I take you?" the driver asked after a few minutes had passed.

"Oh! I'm so sorry. Um..." I thought about it for a second. "The bed and breakfast." I gave him directions, then turned to Micah. "I'll be safest there, I think. I don't want to go home. It would take him less than five minutes to find out where I live. I can't go back with you. Jake knows we're dating, and he might tell Black. It would take him longer to find out that Steve is Adam's boyfriend and that he owns a B&B. Even if he found out, he wouldn't know which room I was in, and he couldn't very well just start breaking into one after another."

"I don't know if I'd put anything past him, but you're probably right: the bed and breakfast seems like the safest place for tonight."

"You should stay there too. You might not be safe at your apartment."

"I think I'll sleep at the office — if I sleep at all. I want to get back to work on this story. It occurred to me earlier that Black, quite possibly, could be involved with the whole county-council scandal. It would be right up his alley and, as I said, he already has most of the officials in his pocket. At the very least, he would've known about it, even if he wasn't directly involved."

"Well, one thing is clear. It's more important than ever that I talk to Paul's family. And I think it's past time for me to meet with the detective in charge of his murder investigation."

I dug my cell phone out of my pocket.

"Who are you calling?" Micah asked.

"Chris." Her brother answered. "Kevin, this is Killian Kendall. Is Chris there?"

"Yeah, hang on."

He set the phone down with a clunk, and I heard him yell, "Chris, it's your boyfriend."

A few seconds later Chris was on the line.

"Hello?"

"Chris, it's Killian."

"Hey, what's up?"

"A lot, but I'll have to fill you in later. Do you think you can get me an appointment with the detective in charge of Paul's murder investigation?"

"I can try."

"Tell him it's urgent that I speak to him immediately. It could be a matter of life and death."

"Well, I doubt he'll be able to resist that. What's going on? What did you find out?"

"I can't go into it now. I'd rather tell you in person."

"Okay, but you're killing me here."

"Poor choice of words. Look, try your best to get me in with him tomorrow afternoon or evening. I'll call you in the morning."

"Okay, then maybe I'll see you tomorrow. I'll be expecting a full briefing."

"I promise."

We hung up, and Micah looked over at me. "I wish I could go with you to D.C., but I know you'll be safer there than here."

"It's okay. You have your job to do, and I have mine."

"I just..." He drew a shaky breath. "I don't want to lose you."

I reached over and grasped his hand. "I'll be okay, Micah. I'm not going anywhere."

"I wish I knew that for sure." He frowned and stared straight ahead.

A few minutes later we pulled into the circular drive in front of Amalie's House. Micah walked me in and waited while I called Adam and Kane at home to tell them I thought it would be better if they came and stayed at the B&B.

Of course, Adam demanded to know why. I told him I couldn't go into details, but it was possible they could be in danger at the house because of one of my cases. That sent Steve and Adam into almost identical panic attacks.

By the time Adam and Kane arrived and I got everyone calmed down enough to go to bed — Steve,

armed with a small pistol I didn't even know he owned — it was almost one in the morning.

I tossed and turned fitfully under the covers, my mind refusing to shut off. I was still full of energy even though I was dead tired. I ran the case over and over in my mind, looking at it from every angle I could imagine.

Once that bone had been thoroughly gnawed, I moved on to what Jake had said. I was riddled with guilt for the way I'd neglected him. The worst part was that he wasn't the only friend I'd been neglecting. I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked to Will, my cousin Aidan's widower.

After what seemed like an eternity — but what the clock said was only about an hour — I finally fell into an uneasy sleep filled with strange, foreboding dreams I couldn't recall when I woke up a short while later. They just left me feeling very unsettled.

I was lying in the dark with my eyes open when I suddenly felt another presence in the room.

I sat up with a jolt to find Seth standing at the foot of my bed.

"My God, you scared the hell out of me," I said.

"You're in danger." His words were filled with an intensity I'd never heard before in his voice.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"Why do you always put yourself at risk?"

"It's the middle of the night. I don't really need a lecture right now."

"Stop being a smartass and listen to me. You have to be careful."

"I'm always careful."

"No, you're not. In fact, you're almost never careful. You run head first into every situation without ever thinking about your own safety. You need to be smarter and you need to take this seriously. Fenton Black is deadly."

"So everybody keeps telling me."

"Just promise me you'll be very careful."

"I will. I promise."

"Good. I...I don't want to lose you."

A shiver went down my spine at his words that so eerily echoed Micah's from earlier. "How can you lose me? Won't I be with you no matter what?"

"Oh, Killian. You can't understand, and I can't explain. I gave up so much to be able to come back...and all for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't explain it..."

"Fuck the rules. What do you mean?"

"I can't, Killian. I can't."

"I don't understand."

"I love you." With that, he vanished, leaving his final words hanging in the air like the scent of someone's perfume after they pass by.

"Great. Just what I needed," I said to the empty room. "One more thing to worry over."

I flopped down onto the bed and tried to will myself back to sleep. That never works.

Finally, I gave my mind full rein and allowed it to wander where it wished. I thought about Seth and our brief friendship while he was still alive. I'd known him longer as a ghost than I had as a living, breathing person. I'd never really thought about what it meant that he could

come speak to me whenever he wanted. He'd mentioned rules before, but always in vague terms, never anything concrete. I knew so little about what made it possible to see and talk to him. I'm sure it must have been made easier by my gifts.

Thinking about my gifts made me remember Judy's promise to find me a teacher. While I wasn't necessarily eager to deal with all that, in some ways I was looking forward to finally understanding things a little better. I wondered who my teacher would be.

Eventually, I managed to drift into a restless slumber. It seemed I'd barely closed my eyes before I found myself wide awake again and inexplicably alert. It was still dark, so I knew I hadn't been asleep for long. A quick glance at my phone told me I'd received a grand total of two hours of rest.

I tried to fall back asleep, but it was useless. I finally gave up and climbed wearily out of bed. Although my mind might have been bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, my body was anything but.

I took a shower, hoping it would revive me. It didn't.

I dragged myself downstairs, ate a light breakfast, then took a walk by the creek in the brisk fall air. It was a morning designed to make you feel energized and alive, yet I was still drained and weary.

If Chris was able to get me a meeting with the detective, then I'd be heading to D.C. If not, I'd have to see what I could dig up without him. Either way, I'd be skipping classes again today.

I decided to go into the office and try to be productive, at least. I had barely started my computer

when someone knocked on the door. I could make out a woman's silhouette through the frosted glass. Who on earth could be there that early? We weren't even open yet. I considered ignoring the knock and pretending I wasn't there.

"Killian?" she called.

I recognized Judy's voice. Was something wrong? I jumped up and opened the door.

"We need to talk," Judy said, as she breezed by me.

I closed the door with a small sigh. "Let me guess. I'm in danger?"

She raised one eyebrow. "Yes."

"You're only the third person to tell me that in the last eight hours, and I knew it already on my own."

Her lips pulled down sharply into a frown. "Don't be flippant about this, Killian."

"I'm not, really. Trust me, I have a healthy amount of fear about the situation. I'm just trying not to let it paralyze me."

"Jake is in danger too. I can feel it. It terrifies me because there's nothing I can do about it. He...he didn't come home last night. I was up all night worrying."

At least that explained why she was here so early, but not how she knew to find me here. Then again, considering her gifts, maybe that didn't need an explanation.

I held a silent debate in my head about whether to tell her what I'd discovered, finally deciding to just give her a capsulated version.

"I saw Jake at the Ball. He was with Fenton Black. Do you know who that is?"

"I've heard of him."

From her monotone voice and the look on her face, I thought it safe to assume that what she'd heard wasn't good.

"Apparently, Jake's been...dating Black." Judy cringed. I took a deep breath. "It gets worse. Jake saw me at the Ball and dragged me into a hallway, where he proceeded to tear me limb from limb for investigating him behind his back. It seems I left a trail wide enough to drive an eighteen-wheeler through. He guessed it was you who hired me. He's furious."

She sighed heavily. "I was afraid it was something like that."

"I'm sorry I messed things up so badly."

She patted my cheek. "You didn't mess anything up. I'm the one who talked you into doing this. And who knows, maybe something good will come out of this yet." She didn't sound very convinced.

"I'm not giving up. I think Fenton Black is connected to the other case I'm working on as well. I just have to figure out how all the pieces fit."

"I have every faith in you. I guess I should let you get to work." She gave me a hug and started to leave, then stopped with her back to me. "You know," she said slowly, in a tired, worn voice, "there are times when I wish I wasn't gifted, when I think it would be better not to know certain things. It would be nice to just live my life as ignorantly as everyone else for a change."

She turned and looked me in the eye. "Death is coming. I can feel it. I don't know who it's coming for, but it's too late to stop it...and it's coming soon."

A shiver ran down my spine as she let herself out. I locked the door and tried to push her dire prediction from my mind.

I checked the time, but it was still too early to call Chris. As I sat down at my desk, I spotted Paul's client files and it occurred to me that it might be a good time to try and catch Paul's clients at home before they left for work. I set aside the guy who had hung up on me and Manuel, which left five to go.

I called the first one. After a brief conversation, it became obvious he wouldn't have much to add. His visits with Paul had been out-calls, meaning Paul went to him, and he was amazingly unobservant.

The second person still wasn't home, or at least wasn't answering. The guy after that said Paul never mentioned personal matters and always kept everything focused on giving as much pleasure as possible. "We never really talked all that much, if you know what I mean."

I was beginning to think the clients were going to be a complete waste of time. It seemed Paul didn't talk very much about himself. He obviously didn't let anyone inside the emotional walls he'd built around himself. Maybe it was self-preservation. In a business like escorting, you'd have to keep some sort of distance between yourself and the clients; you couldn't very well get emotionally involved with all of them. And that's what it was — a business.

I decided to keep calling, though. Another one of Novak's little mottos: "Perseverance pays off." He always insisted you never knew when you might strike gold.

I thought I'd hit a nugget with my fourth call, but it turned out to be pyrite, better known as fool's gold. The guy started out as if he knew Paul well, but I quickly realized he was only interested in keeping me on the line so he could talk dirty to me. I finally hung up on the pervert.

I almost didn't call the last number back, but figured I might as well be thorough. The phone rang for so long I was about to hang up when a young-sounding male voice answered.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hi..." I was caught off guard. "Is this, um..." I scanned the page in front of me for his name.

"...Howard Rich?"

"Are you trying to sell me something?" he asked politely.

"No, I just have a few questions to ask you. I won't take much of your time."

"So this is like a survey?"

"No, I—"

"Do you want money from me?"

"No."

"Well, in that case, it's Howie, please. I hate the name Howard."

"Um, okay, Howie. My name is Killian Kendall. I'm a private investigator."

"Really? How interesting. And you want to talk to me?"

"Yes." I wondered if he would ever allow me to get more than one sentence out at a time.

"About what?"

An opening. I didn't waste any time taking it.  
"Paul Flynn. He was an escort. I think you were acquainted? He was—"

"Murdered," he said sadly.

"You knew?"

"I saw it on the news. Actually, I'm at my office right now. Could you hang on a second while I step outside? I'll be able to talk to you more freely there."

"Yes, of course. I'll wait."

I heard him tell someone that he'd be right back.

While I waited, I glanced down at the page of notes on Howie and raised an eyebrow in surprise. It appeared he'd been a client of Paul's for much longer than any of the others.

"Okay, I'm back. Sorry about that. As I was saying, I knew Paul. I was shocked to hear about his death. To be honest, I've been having a hard time dealing with it. He was a good person."

"You'd been seeing Paul for quite a while. In fact, considerably longer than any of his other clients." Howie refused to rise to the bait. When the silence had stretched out a little longer than was comfortable, I asked, "How well did you know Paul?"

"How well do you ever know anyone?"

I wasn't about to get drawn into an existential conversation. "It would be very helpful if you could answer my questions."

"Why? What are you looking for? Who are you working for? Why are you concerned with Paul's death?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you who I'm working for — that's confidential — but I can say I've been retained to look into Paul's death by someone who cared about

him. They hired me because the police don't seem to be putting much effort into finding his killer."

"So you're trying to find Paul's killer?"

"Yes."

"Sounds dangerous."

"Possibly."

"What's in it for you?"

"What?"

"What do you get out of it?"

"It's my job."

"Okay, if that's what blows your skirt up, but what does any of that have to do with how well I knew Paul?"

I felt like pounding my head against the desk. I was too tired to deal with this. I took a deep breath and tried again. "I'm trying to get a grasp on what was going on in Paul's life the last few months. If you knew him well, I was hoping you could help. If you didn't know him well, just let me know now and save us both some time."

He was quiet for so long that I began to wonder if he'd hung up.

"Howie?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I guess you could say I knew Paul pretty well. You're right, he did see me longer than his other clients because he was doing me a favor. You see, I'm married to a wonderful woman. I was in denial for much of my life, and I had a family before I finally realized I was gay. I've never told my wife. She's an incredible person and the best friend I could ever ask for. I would never leave her or my children. She deserves better than that, but I still had a need to be with men...so

I hired Paul. Paul's the only man I've ever had sex with. He took care of my needs very well. He knew all of this when he agreed to allow me to keep seeing him."

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

After a brief pause, Howie went on. "Paul was perhaps the sweetest, most gentle man I've ever met. He gave of himself completely, and I don't just mean that sexually. I like to think we became friends. I know I cared for him very deeply. Maybe I even fell in love with him."

"Did you...did you ever talk about Paul's personal life?"

"To some degree, yes."

"Did you notice any change in him over the last few months before his death?"

"Yes."

My heart caught in my throat.

"What changed?"

"He was a lot quieter, more distant, as if something was weighing heavily on him."

"Did you ever ask him about it?"

"I did."

"And did he tell you what was bothering him?"

"Yes."

Could this be the answer to all my questions?

"Let me clarify that," Howie said quickly. "He told me some of what was going on but by no means everything. Paul was too much the professional to name names or give too many details, but I know vaguely what was troubling him."

"Can you tell me what you know?"

"Paul and I did a lot more than just have sex. I'd take him to dinner at nice restaurants we knew to be discreet. We'd take walks along the river; we'd talk for hours after sex. It was while we were talking that I learned he suspected someone he knew of being involved in something illegal, something serious. He didn't specify what, and I didn't press him. Those were the unspoken rules of our conversations. He asked me what I thought he should do. I told him it would depend on what this person meant to him. If it was just a casual acquaintance, then maybe he should go straight to the authorities. If it was someone he respected or cared about, I suggested he go to the person and speak to him or her directly."

"Did he indicate what he was planning to do?"

"No. As I said, that wasn't how it worked. But you know, ever since I heard he was murdered, I've worried it might have been my advice that got him killed."

It was a very real possibility, but I wasn't about to tell him that. He already sounded upset as it was.

"You have no way of knowing," I said truthfully enough. "You don't know if Paul took your advice or not. Even if he did, it might not have had anything to do with his murder. That's what I'm trying to figure out. He didn't give you any indication as to who this person was?"

"No. None."

"And you never saw him again after that conversation?"

"No."

"This was about a month ago?"

"About a week before he was killed."

"Can you think of anything else that might be helpful or important to the case?"

He was quiet for a second. "I believe Paul might have met someone."

"What do you mean by 'met someone'?"

"I suspect he'd met someone he really liked. The last couple of times I saw him, he was different somehow — happier and more relaxed. That was before he wanted my advice. I asked him what was going on to put a smile on his face, but he just smiled all the more and shook his head. When I asked him if he'd met someone special, his smile grew even wider, if possible. I said the new person must be someone very special indeed to bring about such a big smile. Then I said, whoever he was, he was a very lucky guy. Paul changed the subject after that. He never really liked talking about personal things, at least not when it was his own life being discussed. He was perfectly content to limit his role to being my confessor, counselor, and lover."

I fought a sigh. Paul's reticence certainly didn't make investigating him any easier. It would have been so much simpler if he'd just been a little gabbier.

"Well, thank you, Howie. You've really helped a lot."

"I'm glad. I hope you catch the bastard who did this. Paul was a... He was a good person."

I hung up and sat back in my chair, propping my feet up on the desk. I had so many questions about the cases swimming around in my head that I was having trouble making sense of it all. I was rubbing my chin when I realized I was unconsciously imitating Novak.

With a snap of chair springs, I yanked my feet off the desk and sat up straight, chuckling at myself. I guess there are worse things than discovering you're becoming like your teacher.

I grabbed my phone and called Chris. She picked up on the first ring.

"I was just about to call you," she said before I could even say hello.

"Were you able to set up a meeting with the detective?"

"I talked to him. His name is Owen Evans. My dad says he's a good cop. But, well, he's...a tough nut to crack."

"What does that mean? Is he going to talk to me or not?"

"Ye-e-e-s." Chris managed to drag the word out to impossible lengths.

"That doesn't sound good."

"He's willing to meet with you later this afternoon."

"I sense a 'but' coming..."

"Well, I may have had to stretch the facts a little to get him to agree."

"Stretch the facts how?"

"I...uh...I may have told him you know who the murderer is and have proof."

I gasped. "You what?"

"It was the only way I could get him to agree to meet you."

"But, Chris, I don't have any proof. I don't even have a real suspect. What am I supposed to do when I get in there and he expects me to have solid proof?"

When he finds out I probably know less than he does, he'll be so pissed he won't help me at all."

"Then hold off on telling him that for as long as possible."

"Oh great. Then he'll lock me up for...for...something."

"For what?"

"Obstructing justice. I don't know. He'll make something up."

"Calm down. You're awful high-strung today."

I sighed. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Long night?"

"You could say that."

"Are you sure you should be driving then?"

"I'll be fine. I'll just get a coffee before I head out.

But I should probably head out soon. What's your address? I'll just come directly to your house this time. I suspect I'm going to need my car."

I got her address, then locked up the office and headed for the nearest coffee shop. I got the largest size they sold and set out for Washington. My car could just about make the trip on autopilot at that point, which was a good thing with the way I was feeling. I would be glad when the case was over so I wouldn't have to make the drive so often.

## Chapter 26

I arrived at Chris's just before noon. She answered the door at my knock.

"Wow, you made great time," she said, stepping aside to allow me in.

A small black-and-white dog came barreling down the hallway and skidded to a halt at my feet, looking up at me with enormous, expressive brown eyes.

"Have you met Janie?" Chris asked.

"I don't believe so," I said, momentarily distracted.

"She's a Boston Terrier," Chris said with all the pride of a devoted dog lover. She sounded like she was introducing her child.

"She's beautiful." I knelt down to rub her ears. Janie wriggled with pleasure. "Janie is a cute name."

Chris blushed slightly. "It's short for Janeway, as in Captain Janeway."

"I didn't know you were a Trekkie."

"I'm really not, but my dad is. I grew up watching all the old series. I had a huge crush on Captain Janeway when I was a kid. The signs were always there..."

Just then, Janie leaped into my arms, knocking me off balance. I tumbled backwards onto the floor with the dog happily bouncing on my chest and giving me kisses. I laughed and played with her for a few more seconds before returning to business.

"When do I have to go see Evans?"

"Not till five."

I frowned. "That's a while off. I'll have to kill some time until then."

"Well, then, tell me what happened last night. You promised when you got here you'd give me all the details."

"Okay."

"Can we do it in the living room? I'm getting tired of standing in the foyer."

I made a face at her, and she pulled me to my feet. Janie trotted along beside us as we went into the living room, where I gave Chris the rundown on everything that had happened since we'd last seen each other while the dog sat contentedly in my lap.

She thought for a minute when I finished. "So you think these cases are connected somehow?"

I nodded as I stroked Janie's head. Her fur was so soft. I felt calmer than I'd felt since my confrontation with Jake.

"It sounds like Fenton Black is the common denominator. What are you hoping to get from Detective Owens?"

"I have a lot of blanks to fill in. Do you think he'll tell me if they've gotten anywhere on the case? What's he like?"

"Kind of gruff, a little impatient, maybe. He sounded busy, mostly. This isn't his only case, you know. The cops here in the city are overworked and underpaid, and things are tense with the current administration, to say the least."

"I know. It would be nice, however, if he didn't have to be bribed into working on this one."

"I didn't bribe... Well, okay, maybe I did. Look, it's only natural for me to side with the cops on this — my dad is one, after all — but that doesn't mean I don't see your point of view too."

"I know. I'm just grouchy. You've been a huge help. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Sure you could have. I've just made it easier."

I glanced at my phone. "I still have hours before I meet Evans."

"Is there anybody else you could interview while you wait?"

"Just Paul's family, and I don't know how to get in touch with them. That's part of the reason I wanted to talk to the detective."

"Oh. Isn't there any other way you could get up with them?"

"If there is, I haven't thought of it yet."

"What about Sabrina? Did you ask her about his family?"

I stared at Chris dumbly. Had I? I wasn't sure. I whipped out my notebook and flipped through to my notes from my conversation with Sabrina. There was no mention of Paul's family.

"It, uh, seems like I may have overlooked that."

Chris shrugged. "It's worth a shot."

I found Sabrina's number and called her, but she didn't answer. I figured she was at work or screening her calls — maybe both — so I left a message asking her to call me back.

Chris and I talked for a few more minutes about the case before we were interrupted by the buzzing of my phone.

"Killian? It's Sabrina. I got your message. Has there been a break in the case?"

"Possibly, but that's not why I called. I just thought of something I forgot to ask you when we talked. Do you know how to get in touch with Paul's family?"

"His family? No. Like I said— Wait! Actually, I think he did give me his mom's number once in case of an emergency. Let me check to see if I copied it over when I got a new phone last year." The line was silent for a couple of minutes, then she returned. "It's your lucky day. I found the number."

Silently thanking the patron saint of private investigators — assuming there is such a thing — I jotted it down, then thanked her and hung up.

"Did she give you anything useful?" Chris asked.

"Yeah, I got lucky. Sabrina had his mom's phone number."

"Where does she live?"

"I'm not sure. Do you recognize the exchange?" I showed her the number.

"It's a 301 area code, so it's Maryland, but that's all I can tell you. We can look it up on the computer, though. We may even be able to find the address using a reverse directory."

I stared at her in admiration. "Good thinking!"

She grinned. "Maybe you'll make a detective out of me yet."

A few minutes later, we had the information we needed. Paul's mother lived in Silver Spring, Maryland.

"That's just outside the city," Chris said. "As long as there's no traffic, it shouldn't be more than fifteen or twenty minutes away."

"Let's just hope she'll agree to see me."

I dialed the number, and the phone rang three times before someone picked up. The woman on the other end had a pleasant, sunny voice.

"Mrs. Flynn?" I said.

"Yes. May I ask who's calling?"

"My name is Killian Kendall, Mrs. Flynn. I'd like to ask you some questions about your son, Paul."

"Paul?" she asked, the brightness suddenly fading from her voice. "Why do you want to talk to me about Paul? You do know he's dead, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's what I wanted to speak to you about, actually. I'm so sorry to intrude, but I'm a private investigator, and I've been hired to find out who killed him."

There was no response. "Mrs. Flynn?"

"It's very hard to lose a child," she said at last.

"I can't even imagine your pain."

"I lost him twice. I got him back after the first time, but nothing can return him to me now."

"You don't think his killer should be brought to justice?"

"It's not that. It's just...my older son, James, he doesn't want me to even talk about Paul. He wouldn't like it if he knew we were having this conversation. We're a very religious family. My husband and James could never accept...they couldn't understand..."

"That Paul was gay?"

"You know?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"My husband is dead now, but James still won't even speak of Paul."

"Is James there now?"

"No, he's at work. He won't be home until after five."

"Could I come to your house and talk to you before that? He wouldn't have to know."

"I don't like to lie..."

"You wouldn't have to lie."

"I suppose if it will help you catch Paul's killer, it would be okay."

"Thank you. I'll be there in about half an hour," I said, allowing myself some wiggle room.

"I'll be looking for you," Mrs. Flynn said.

I hung up and turned to Chris. "Are you coming with me?"

"Yeah, but I think maybe I should drive. I know how to get there, and you look really tired."

When she said that, I realized just how tired I was. I was running on caffeine and adrenaline, and when that was used up, I had a feeling I would crash. Still, there was a growing feeling of urgency pushing me forward.

"I am tired, but I'm okay. Besides, what about your brother? Can you leave him here alone?"

"Crap! I forgot about Kevin. He has a two-o'clock appointment with the orthodontist. I guess I can't take you."

"I'll be fine. I have GPS. Besides, Mrs. Flynn might be uncomfortable if two of us appeared on her doorstep."

I set off to make my way through the confusing maze of D.C. area streets, beltways, and highways. Even with the assistance of my GPS, however, it took me fifteen minutes longer than it should have, thanks to traffic and several wrong turns on my part.

Mrs. Flynn lived on an attractive, if crowded, street with well-cared-for homes that looked as if they'd been built during the post World War II housing boom. Large, old trees lined the road, keeping everything shaded. The lawns were immaculately groomed with neat, color-filled flowerbeds.

Mrs. Flynn's house was a small cottage, part brick and part white clapboard, with a chimney on each end. Enormous mums exploded with autumn color along the brick path leading to the door and against the foundations. Dark-green ivy climbed up one chimney. It made for an idyllic scene.

I walked up the path, breathing deeply the smell of fall — a pleasingly earthy, spicy scent. When I knocked, the door was quickly answered by a small, plump woman wearing white cotton pants and a blowsy, emerald-green top: Mrs. Flynn, I presumed. I was surprised to see she was older than I'd expected. She had short, permed, brown hair, shot liberally with gray. Her round face was relatively smooth, but deep creases cut into the skin at the corners of her mouth and eyes. She looked like a woman who smiled often, though she wasn't doing so at that moment.

"Yes?" she asked cautiously, as if she suspected I was selling something.

"Mrs. Flynn? I'm Killian Kendall. We spoke on the phone?"

Her eyes widened. "Oh! I didn't expect—" "Someone so young?" I gave her my most winning smile. "I get that a lot."

She smiled tentatively and opened the screen door. "Please, come in."

"Thank you for seeing me, Mrs. Flynn."

She led me into a cozy living room decorated with an eclectic mix of antiques and modern furniture. Knickknacks, photographs, and souvenirs covered every available surface: the evidence of a lifetime only family members could decipher. The pictures seemed to be of several different children. Over the fireplace, in a place of honor, was a huge portrait of Jesus. Although he wore a benign smile, I had the creepiest feeling his eyes were following me as I moved.

I was relieved when she offered me a seat on an oversize armchair that was turned slightly away from the fireplace, which kept me from having to look Jesus in the eye. Mrs. Flynn took the sofa.

I decided to start off with some easy questions to put her at ease. "How many children do you have, Mrs. Flynn?"

"We had six: three boys and three girls. My husband and I were married for forty years before he passed away."

"I'm sorry for your loss."

"We had a good life together. He's in a better place now."

I paused for a moment at the nonchalance in her voice as she talked about the death of her husband. I couldn't imagine being that blasé about Micah's dying, and we hadn't been together anywhere near forty years.

"Where did Paul fit in?"

"He was the youngest. I always called him my surprise package. I was forty when I found out I was expecting for the sixth time. My next-youngest was almost ten by then. After five children, I knew what was happening as soon as the morning sickness started. I didn't even need to go to the doctor, but of course I did. They assumed I'd want an abortion. It wasn't safe to have a baby at that age then, not like it is now. Women can have babies at almost any age these days. Then it was dangerous. I wouldn't even hear about an abortion, of course. It was never an option."

"One of your sons lives with you now?"

"Yes, James. He's the youngest one after Paul. He moved in after his father passed away."

"I understand Paul was estranged from the family for a while, but reconciled with you after his father...passed away."

"Yes, when he told us he was...well, you know, his father said we couldn't accept that. Unless he was willing to get help, we couldn't have anything to do with him. Oh, how it broke my heart, but there was nothing I could do. My husband was the man of the house, he was an elder of the church, and it was what he felt was right."

"Did anyone from your family stay in touch with Paul?" I tried to mask my horror at the matter-of-fact tone in which she spoke of how they had turned their backs on their own child.

"Not that I know of. As far as I can remember, my husband's funeral was the first time any of us had seen Paul in years."

"And after the funeral, he began to visit you?"

"Yes. Always while James was at work. It was wonderful to see him again. He'd grown into such a handsome young man." She cocked her head slightly to one side. "He looked a bit like you, actually."

She stood up, went to the mantel over the fireplace, and picked up a small, silver-framed photograph, which she handed to me. "That's Paul."

It was strange to realize it was the first time I'd seen a photograph of him. I'd been poking into his life and investigating his death for weeks and had never known what he looked like. The picture had been taken at his high-school graduation. He was wearing a blue robe and holding his mortarboard hat in his hands, posing in front of the ivy-covered chimney.

There was indeed a certain air of resemblance between us. He was, as he'd been described, small and blond. Beyond the superficial similarity, however, we really didn't look all that much alike. His face was shaped differently, his eyes smaller, his nose thinner and longer, and his ears larger. His hair was lighter than mine and straight. He wore glasses, while I had contacts. He was cute in a quiet, unassuming way.

"Do you know who might have wanted to harm Paul?"

"No, I have no idea. I really didn't know much about his life. He almost never spoke of personal things. I didn't even know what he did for a living until the newspaper articles came out with it. I don't know why they feel they have to smear that sort of thing all over the pages like a trashy novel."

I felt my hopes take a nosedive.

"Then you wouldn't know much about his personal life?" I asked without much optimism.

"No, not really. I did meet his...friend once, though."

My heart skipped a beat. "His boyfriend?"

"Yes. He brought him to meet me a few months ago. I asked Paul if he had anyone special in his life, and he told me yes. At first, it was enough to know he was happy, but a mother wants to meet the person in their child's life, so I finally told him that on his next visit he should bring his...friend."

"Can you tell me about him?"

"He was a very nice young man. He was tall with dark hair. It was obvious, even to me, that he cared very much about Paul. I've thought of him often since Paul was killed, but I didn't know how to get in touch with him."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Of course. His name was Tom, Tom Jackson."

It was all I could do not to crow in exaltation at those words. That was information I hadn't even expected. I tried to keep my excitement under control, however. I had more questions to ask.

"Did Paul ever seem worried or scared during his visits?"

"No, not that I noticed."

"Did he ever mention anyone who might want to harm him?"

Mrs. Flynn shook her head firmly. "Definitely not. I would remember that for sure."

"Do you know anything about a safe-deposit box he kept?"

"No. I'm sorry. I don't seem to be very helpful."

"You've already helped me a lot, Mrs. Flynn."

A kernel of an idea began to form in the back of my mind at the mention of the safe-deposit box.

"I have?"

"Yes, and there's a way you could help me even more."

"How is that?"

"The safe-deposit box I just mentioned. I have a feeling it could be very important to know what's in it."

"The police can't find out?"

"Well, they could, but they're taking their time with Paul's case. They're overworked, and it...hasn't been a high priority for them, to be honest." Mrs. Flynn looked distressed by my blunt honesty, so I hurried on. "I intend to turn everything over to them, but I'd like to know what's in it first. I have Paul's key, but I can't get into it. You could, however."

"Me?"

"Yes. They would open it for you as Paul's next of kin."

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

"Please, Mrs. Flynn. The two of us could go there right now. It wouldn't take long at all. I'd have you back long before James got home."

I hoped I was telling the truth there.

The older woman thought for a few minutes.

"You really think the contents could be important to finding Paul's killer?"

"I suspect the key to the whole case may be in there."

She nodded hesitantly. "Then okay, I'll do it."

I quickly called the bank and asked to speak to the branch manager. I didn't want to make a trip all the way there, only to find out they wouldn't open it for us. After I explained the situation, the manager checked Paul's record and discovered he had listed his mother as his emergency contact. The manager said as long as she had a photo ID on her, she would be able to open the box. I got directions and hung up, my excitement building with every development. My earlier weariness was all but forgotten.

I loaded Mrs. Flynn into my car, suddenly very grateful I'd driven, and we set off for the bank. We didn't speak much on the way, each of us lost in our own thoughts.

The manager met us personally and, after expressing his condolences to Mrs. Flynn, led us to the vault. Mrs. Flynn inserted Paul's key into the lock and turned it, then the manager did the same with his key. He slid the long, narrow box from the wall and carried it to a nearby table before leaving us to open it in private.

Mrs. Flynn lifted the top with shaking hands while I peered over her shoulder. At first glance, all I saw were individual coins encased in plastic sleeves, which I figured must have been the more valuable pieces in his collection.

When Mrs. Flynn pushed them to one side, a thick envelope appeared. She pulled it out, and we read the scrawled handwriting together: "Open in the event of my death."

Mrs. Flynn gave a shuddering sigh and handed the envelope to me. "I don't think I want to read it."

I debated whether to read it there or wait until later, but my curiosity got the better of me. I lifted the flap, which wasn't sealed, and removed the contents: several sheets of paper folded together. I flattened them out and picked up the top letter, dated a week before his death.

*To whom it may concern:*

*I don't know who will find this, but I will more than likely be dead if you're reading it, so I suppose it doesn't really matter. I recently found out some information that I've come to believe may have put my life in danger. To explain, I'll have to go back a while, though.*

*I was hired by The Drake Group several years ago. Not long after I started working there, I was assigned a repeat client I later learned was the man I knew as Neal, the owner of the agency. I only found out because he wanted me to be his boyfriend. I told him that, while flattered, I wasn't interested since I was already dating someone. He seemed to take the news in stride and stopped seeing me. Our business relationship remained cordial, although he did offer me a larger cut of my earnings in exchange for my silence. He didn't want the other escorts to know we'd met in person. I agreed.*

*A few months ago, I was attending a symphony concert with a client when we ran into Neal. My client also knew him and proceeded to introduce the two of us. We pretended not to know each other, but my client introduced Neal as Fenton Black. As soon as I got home, I looked up that name on the Internet. Most of what I*

*could find online made him sound like a wealthy philanthropist.*

*But I found a Reddit thread that claimed Black was a murderer and involved in drug smuggling and all sorts of other illegal activities, yet had somehow remained above the law. The person claimed to have personal knowledge of him, but said pictures of him were very rare. They'd managed to get a photo of him from a newspaper. Sure enough, it was Neal. I saved the picture to my computer and printed it out. I'm glad I did, because the next time I tried to find the thread, it no longer existed. When I searched the user's name, his entire profile had been deleted.*

*I didn't know what to do with my knowledge that the infamous Fenton Black owned an escort agency. Should I tell him I'd stumbled across his true identity? Go to the police? The thread had said no one had ever managed to bring him down. What if I could help?*

*After talking to some friends, I finally decided I couldn't ignore what I knew, although I felt I owed it to him to at least talk to him about it first. Maybe it was all just some sort of misunderstanding.*

*I wrote him an email, making it seem like a funny joke that the client had introduced him as Fenton Black. I played ignorant, like I didn't know it was really him. He responded almost immediately, saying he didn't know what I was talking about, that he hadn't been at the symphony at all that night. I knew he was lying. I'd looked him right in the eye and shaken his hand.*

*I still don't know what I'll do with this information, but if Fenton Black is as dangerous as everyone seems to think he is, then I could be at risk. I'm*

*placing this letter in a safe place along with the other information I collected and printed out.*

*If anything suspicious happens to me, please take this information to the police.*

*Signed,  
Paul Flynn*

My heart was pounding as I flipped through the other pages. The first sheet was a blown-up, grainy copy of the same Fenton Black photo I'd seen in Jake's room. It had obviously been printed out, and at the bottom, in Paul's handwriting, were the words, "Fenton Black."

The next few sheets were, as Paul had said, printouts of web pages. I didn't take the time to read them.

I looked up at Mrs. Flynn, who was staring down at her hands clasped in her lap.

"I think I need to take these to the police," I said softly.

She looked up at me. "Does it...does it explain Paul's murder?"

I hesitated, not wanting to make promises when I wasn't sure. The letter certainly seemed to imply Fenton Black was behind Paul's death, but I couldn't be positive.

I shrugged. "It seems to, but I don't know. I have an appointment with the detective in charge of Paul's case later this afternoon. Is it okay if I take this to him?"

She nodded. "Yes, of course."

We quickly finished up at the bank, and I drove Mrs. Flynn back home. After seeing her inside and thanking her profusely for her help, I headed back to

Chris's. She and Kevin weren't back yet, so I sat on the doorstep to wait.

When they eventually showed up, Kevin looked cranky and Chris frazzled.

"Hey," she said, catching sight of me. "How'd it go?"

"Very well. How was the orthodontist appointment?"

Kevin glowered at me.

"Don't ask," Chris said. She unlocked the door, and we all filed inside. Kevin immediately disappeared to his room. "He hates having his braces tightened, and I hate being his mother."

"You could always move out," I said.

She sighed. "Nah. Dad needs me. Maybe someday when Kevin's a little older. So anyway, what happened with Mrs. Flynn?"

"Well, I think I may have gotten enough information that your promise to Detective Evans won't be a complete fabrication."

"What? That's great! What did you find out?"

I quickly outlined everything I'd learned at Mrs. Flynn's and what I'd discovered in the safe-deposit box.

"So you think Fenton Black killed Paul because Paul discovered who he was?"

"I think it's possible, at least. It's the first solid clue I've come up with. I'm going to turn the letter over to the detective when I see him."

"I think that's a good idea. It sounds like you could be in danger, and your friend Jake too."

"I knew that already. What I still can't quite figure out is the connection to Jake. How did Jake meet

this guy? It sounds like Jake is totally Black's type, though. He went after Paul, flirted with me... He clearly likes them young and blond."

We tossed around more ideas for a while until Chris glanced at her watch. "You'd better leave if you're going to meet Detective Evans on time."

"You're not coming?"

"No, I'd better stay here with Kevin. It'll be dark soon, and I don't like to leave him alone at night."

"Oh. Okay." I was disappointed and a bit nervous at the prospect of seeing Evans alone. "You'll at least give me directions, right?"

She laughed. "No, I thought I'd let you find it for yourself. By the way, you're not meeting him at the station. He said, and I quote, 'If I have to waste time with some amateur sleuth, he can talk while I'm eating dinner.'"

She gave me the directions to the place where I would find him.

The restaurant turned out to be a little hole-in-the-wall Irish pub. A neon sign in the window proudly proclaimed that they served — what else? — Killian's Irish Red.

I pushed open the door and stepped into a dimly lit room. Round tables sat in the middle of the floor, while old-fashioned, red vinyl-upholstered booths lined the walls. The place was doing a brisk business, with almost every table full. It only took one look around to see I was the youngest person there by at least a couple of decades.

A geriatric waitress carrying an empty tray stopped near me. "Can I help ya, sugar?"

"I'm here to meet with Detective Owen Evans," I said.

She pointed out a man sitting alone in a corner booth at the far back of the restaurant. He was intent on his hamburger and wasn't looking up.

As I approached, I took him in. He was on the far side of middle-aged and had to be nearing retirement, but he appeared to be in pretty good shape physically. He was just starting to expand a little in the middle, and meals like that greasy burger and mountain of crinkle-cut fries weren't going to help any. He had salt-and-pepper hair that was a little on the shaggy side, as if he'd missed a haircut or two. Although his face was lined, it didn't make him look old, just interesting. He was wearing a slightly rumpled suit with a fresh ketchup stain on the lapel.

"Detective Evans?" I asked when I reached his table.

He looked up at me. "That's me. You Kendall?"

He looked tired. The bags under his eyes had their own luggage.

I nodded, and he inclined his head towards the seat across from him. "Have a seat."

I sat down and tried to organize my thoughts, but before I could speak he asked, "So you're a friend of Chrissie Silver's, huh?"

"Chrissie..." I had to struggle not to laugh. I wondered how long it had been since he'd seen Chris. She definitely wasn't the Chrissie type.

"Yes," I finally managed. "Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. As Chris...sie may have

explained to you: I'm a private investigator and I've been hired to look into Paul Flynn's murder."

He gave me a very unimpressed stare before taking a bite of his hamburger. I waited while he chewed and swallowed.

"I hear you think you know who the killer is," he finally said, before taking another bite.

"Well, I have a strong suspicion. I think a man named Fenton Black may be involved. I believe he uses the name Neal to run the escort agency Paul worked for."

Evans swallowed and chased it down with a gulp of his soda. He eyed me for a moment then said, "You think. You believe. You suspect. You got any proof, or you just wasting my time?"

I pulled out Paul's letter.

"Paul left this in a safe-deposit box. His mother opened it today and gave it to me to pass on to you."

I was stretching the truth a little, but I hoped he wouldn't find that out.

He reluctantly set his burger on the plate and wiped his hands before picking up the letter. He read it over slowly while I fidgeted impatiently in my seat.

When he finished, he drummed his fingers a few times on the table, then went back to his sandwich again.

"So, um, what do you think?" I finally asked.

He stared across the table at me while he chewed slowly and deliberately. "I think it's interesting but circumstantial at best. For all I know, you typed that letter up. Flynn didn't even sign it. It's just his name printed at the bottom."

I blinked. It hadn't even occurred to me that the detective wouldn't believe me.

"You can ask Mrs. Flynn. We went to the bank a few hours ago. The letter was in a safe-deposit box."

"How'd you know about the box?"

"I found a note Paul had written that mentioned it. I just had a hunch there might be something important in it."

"A hunch, huh? And you found the letter this afternoon?" I nodded. "So what proof did you have this morning when your friend called me and badgered me into agreeing to this little tête-à-tête?"

"Well, she may have overstated my case when she said that..."

"So, essentially, you're wasting my time."

"No! I mean, the letter—"

"The letter proves nothing."

"Why don't you just let me tell you everything I've found out? Then you can decide if there's anything to it or not. You're not losing anything, since you have to finish eating anyway. If you still think I'm wasting your time when you're done, I'll pay for your burger and leave you alone."

He took a huge bite of his sandwich, making about half of what was left disappear in one gulp.

"Deal," he said. Or at least that's what I thought he said, his mouth being a little full.

Since he wasn't leaving me much time to talk, I didn't want to waste any of it. I outlined my investigation to date as succinctly as possible, leaving out such trivial details as tampering with evidence and breaking and entering. Even without those particulars, it added up nicely — or so I thought. What really mattered, however, was what the detective thought.

When I finished my recital, he swallowed the last of his burger and signaled the waitress over. I held my breath as she approached. I was certain he was going to tell her to give me the check and walk out, leaving me with nothing more than I'd arrived with.

He surprised me by ordering a chocolate milkshake and a cup of regular coffee.

"You look like a chocolate kind of guy," he said after she'd left. I nodded my agreement, still too surprised to know what to say. "I have to give it to you; you've done a good job on the investigation. Knowing PIs like I do, I suspect you left out a few things, but that's neither here nor there. Unfortunately, you've also left out the most important part. You don't have any evidence. So you suspect this Fenton Black character? So what? What do you want me to do about it? I can't go after this guy just because you say so."

"The letter—" I tried again, but he broke in.

"So Flynn thought his pimp was also a drug lord? Not a big shock there, if you ask me. It doesn't necessarily mean the guy had anything to do with Flynn's murder."

"I...I know Black is involved..."

"How? Another hunch?"

I frowned. "I know I can get the proof. I just need more information."

"What kind of information?"

"Do you know who Paul was dating?"

"I didn't know he was dating anyone. Everyone we spoke to said he was single."

"You didn't speak to his clients."

"His clients? You make it sound like he was a dry-cleaner. He was a prostitute."

The waitress came to pour his coffee, and I waited until she left to continue.

"I know what he was, and I really don't see how that makes any difference. Why does it matter what he did for a living? He was a nice guy, a good person. Everyone that knew him loved and respected him."

"Obviously not everyone."

I was annoyed that I'd walked into that one. I'd made the same point several times myself.

"One of his clients told me Paul was dating someone, but he didn't know who. Then, when I spoke to Paul's mother today, she told me she'd met his boyfriend and said his name was Tom Jackson."

"That's great. I'll look into it."

"I'd like to talk to him myself."

"I'm sure you would. I'd like a pristine 1967 Ford Mustang. Too bad we'll both be disappointed."

I decided to change tactics slightly. "What about Paul's cell phone?"

"What about it?"

"Maybe the boyfriend's number was in it."

He shrugged. "It's possible."

"Any chance you could give me the number?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why not? What if it helped solve the case?"

"It could also help me lose my job. I can't just run around handing over key evidence to everybody who asks."

"How is Paul's boyfriend's phone number key evidence?"

"The cell phone was taken from the murder scene, that makes it — and its contents — evidence in a homicide investigation."

"Have you at least contacted everyone in it?"

He gasped melodramatically. "Gee golly! You know what? We didn't even think of that. It's a good thing you came along to remind us how to do our job."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I jumped as the waitress dropped a large glass of chocolate milkshake in front of me with a loud thunk. I hadn't even seen her coming that time.

"You don't have to get all snotty about it," I said when she'd gone. "I was just asking. It didn't lead anywhere?"

"Nobody knew nothin'."

"Can you at least tell me if Tom Jackson's number was in it?"

He sighed. "You don't give up, do you, kid?"

"Nope."

"Even if his number is in there, we've already talked to him."

"You've already talked to a lot of the people I have, and I found out much more than you did."

He didn't look too pleased at that reminder, but he couldn't argue with its validity.

"I won't tell him where I got the information, I promise."

He pressed his lips together and silently whipped out a small notebook from his inside jacket pocket. The notebook was almost identical to the one I carried.

I felt a little thrill to see that a professional police detective used the same notebook I did. Then I

remembered that I used one because a retired police detective taught me.

I pulled out my pad while he flipped through his pages. Wanting to be ready, I waited with pen poised over paper.

"There was no Tom Jackson in the cell phone," he said. I felt my heart drop. "But there was a TJ. Damn, you are one lucky son of a bitch. We did talk to him, and his full name was Thomas Jackson. He claimed he was just an acquaintance of Flynn's and didn't really know him."

He rattled off a phone number, and the notebook vanished back into his pocket.

"Just one more thing," he said. "We're going to have to question him again. I could order you to leave him alone until after we've had our crack at him, but to be honest, I have a feeling you'll get more out of him than we would. Chances are he'll be a lot cagier getting questioned for a second time by the police, especially if he was less than truthful the first time around. You haven't spoken to him before, you're in an unofficial capacity, and you're closer to his age — all of which makes you very nonthreatening."

"What are you saying? You'd like me to talk to him first?"

"I didn't say that...officially. However, if you do talk to him before I can get in touch with him — which probably won't be until tomorrow at this point — I would expect you to fill me in on your conversation afterward."

"Of course. I'll tell you everything I find out."

"You'd better," He threw back the last of his coffee and signaled the waitress. "He's picking up the check," he told her as he stood up.

I gaped at him. "The deal was I would pick it up if you thought I didn't have anything to offer."

"And you didn't. All you gave me was some speculation and allegations without anything to back them up..." He belched. "...and a bad case of heartburn. Thanks for dinner."

He nodded at the waitress, who was busy keeping a professionally bland smile on her face, and walked out.

## Chapter 27

As soon as the detective was gone, the waitress's fake smile fell.

"Don't let him get to you, hon," she said softly.

"He's a real hard ass. From what I overheard, he's just mad because you've done a better job on this case. For a guy who's been at this game for as long as he has, that's a real kick in the gut. The other guys on the force are always ragging on him about losing his edge. He's trying to hold out a few more years till he can retire."

"You know him?"

"I ought to. He's my ex."

"You were married?"

"Yep. It wasn't one of those messy divorces, you know? It's pretty hard being a cop's wife. I just wasn't cut out for it. We're still friends, though, which is why he eats here all the time."

"Oh. Well, I guess I'll take that check now."

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Owen eats on the house. He was only giving you a hard time."

"Can I at least pay for the shake?"

"That one's on me. Think of it as an apology."

I smiled. "Thanks, but you don't have to do that."

"I know, but I want to."

"Well, thank you."

"Any time, cutie." She moved off to check on her other customers.

I finished my milkshake, left a twenty on the table, and slipped out before she could notice the money.

Once in my car, I quickly dialed Tom Jackson's phone number and held my breath while it rang. Detective Evans was giving me an awfully narrow window of opportunity. If I couldn't get a hold of Tom that night, I'd lose my chance.

He answered on the fifth ring. "Hello?"

"Hello, I'm looking for Tom Jackson."

"Speaking."

"This is Killian Kendall. I'm a private investigator looking into the death of Paul Flynn."

There was a long silence. I allowed it to stretch out, determined not to be the one to break it.

"I already told the police I didn't know Paul Flynn that well," he said at last.

"I'm not the police. Mr. Jackson. I'm aware you and Paul were dating. I spoke to his mother, who confirmed she'd met you." Silence. "I'm trying to find Paul's killer. I think I know who it is, but I need your help to catch him." More silence. "Mr. Jackson?"

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you face-to-face. I promise you, I don't mean you any harm."

"Who hired you? Why are you investigating Paul's death?"

"I was hired by a friend of Paul's."

"May I ask who?"

"I'm afraid that's confidential."

"Then how can I know I can trust you?"

"It was...an ex."

"An ex? What does he have to do with this?"

"He still cares for Paul. He was very upset when he heard about the murder and even more so when he

found out the police weren't pursuing the case with all their resources."

Jackson snorted. "They're hardly pursuing it at all."

"That's why he hired me."

"You know who did it?"

"I have a suspicion."

"And you think I can help?"

"I'm hoping so."

"Okay. I'll meet you, but it has to be somewhere public. For all I know, you could be the killer and you're afraid I know something, so you're coming after me too."

"Is that why you didn't talk to the police? You were afraid?"

"Wouldn't you be in my position?"

"I probably would be. Where can we meet?"

"I live in Alexandria. How about you meet me in about an hour? I can give you directions to a restaurant I know where we can talk privately."

"I don't really know the area well. I'm in D.C. now. How long will it take me to get there?"

"I'm in Northern Virginia, but it's basically a suburb of the city. An hour should be plenty of time."

He gave me directions to the restaurant, and we disconnected.

As I pulled out into traffic, I mused that I was doing a lot of driving around for this case.

The trip was a simple one, for which I was grateful. While I drove, I let my mind wander. I went through several topics quickly — Jake, Fenton Black, Tom Jackson — before finally settling on Paul.

After seeing the picture of him, he'd become more real to me somehow. It was almost as if, before I'd seen it, he was just an abstract concept, a puzzle to unravel. He'd been Micah's ex. The escort. The murder victim. Now he was an actual person, someone who had loved and been loved, someone gone forever.

I had a sudden urge to cry but fought off the tears. It wouldn't do to show up for my meeting with Tom Jackson with red-rimmed eyes and a case of the sniffles — not a very professional image. I knew I was getting overly emotional due to my exhaustion.

I located the restaurant easily enough, but parking proved to be more difficult. I finally found a spot on a side street and had to backtrack to our meeting place. It was on the first floor of a two-story brick building, just one in a block-long stretch that could have easily dated back to the nineteenth century. On either side was a small, upscale boutique. Further down the road I saw antique stores, art galleries, coffee shops, bars, and restaurants. It appeared as if the second floors had been converted into offices, or perhaps apartments, one of which might be Tom's. I thought it wouldn't be a bad place to live at all. The neighborhood had a bustling, cozy feel.

I walked into the restaurant and looked for someone sitting by himself. The place wasn't crowded, and most of the people were there in pairs or groups. Alone at a table off to the side was an attractive black man in his early 30s, well dressed with close-cropped hair and a clean-shaven face. I approached his table cautiously.

"Tom Jackson?" I asked in a low voice.

He looked up, and surprise registered on his face.  
"Are you the detective?"

"Private investigator. My name is Killian Kendall." I held out a hand for him to shake, which he did somewhat hesitantly.

"I expected—" He cut himself off.

"Someone older?" I finished. "I get that a lot."

"Call me TJ." He had a soft, lyrical voice. "I didn't mean to insult you. I realized as I was speaking that it was a stupid thing to say. I don't even know how old you are."

I smiled. "I'm almost as young as I look. I appreciate your talking to me."

"It's the least I could do."

"I don't want to take up a lot of your time, so I'm going to jump right in. You and Paul were dating?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"We'd just celebrated our six-month anniversary the week before he...before he was..."

He stopped and swallowed several times, his eyes blinking rapidly.

His grief was painfully obvious. It washed over me, almost bringing those earlier tears back to the surface. I wondered why I could feel his pain so clearly and decided it must have just been because I was so tired.

Before meeting him, I'd half wondered if my suspicions about Black could be wrong and the boyfriend might be the killer. Having met him, I no longer thought that. Every ounce of my intuition said he was innocent and had cared deeply for Paul. I hated to

continue to dredge up these painful memories, but knew I had to.

"When and how did you meet?"

"It was last year. I teach music at a school in Baltimore. The school was holding a benefit concert, and Paul was there with a client. He approached me afterwards to tell me how much he'd enjoyed the performance and to congratulate me on my work with the students. He was so sweet. We hit it off right away. We talked for a while, but when he left, that was it. I didn't know his name or anything.

"A few months later, we ran into each other at a jazz concert on the Mall in D.C. He wasn't working that time, and I was there with a couple of friends who wouldn't miss me at all, so we hung out for the rest of the night. That led to a few more dates, and things just grew from there."

"You knew he was an escort?"

"Yes, Paul was totally upfront about that right from the start."

"And it didn't bother you?"

I admit that question was more for my benefit than relevant to the case.

"Not really. It was his job. He had it before I met him. Who am I to judge anyone else? He was a good person. I knew that instinctively from the very first." He shrugged. "That was all I needed to know."

His words sank into me like rain into parched earth. I sat quiet for so long that TJ finally waved a hand in front of my face.

"You still there?"

"Sorry," I said, blushing. "My mind wandered for a second. I didn't get much sleep last night." I shook my head to clear it. "Why all the secrecy? Why lie about knowing him when the police called?"

"Two reasons. First, as I told you earlier, I was scared. Second, the school I work for isn't the most liberal institution. It's private, with a religious affiliation, and the administration doesn't know I'm gay. I'm out to a few people on the faculty, but they're all very protective of me. State law would prevent me from being fired if the powers-that-be found out, but the working conditions would no longer be pleasant. I love my job, Mr. Kendall."

"Call me Killian."

"Okay, Killian. I admit it was cowardly of me, but I was scared and trying to cover my ass."

"What about bringing Paul's killer to justice?"

"That's why I'm talking to you now. I've had some time to calm down and look at things rationally. I realized I was wrong. I'd made up my mind to go back to the police with what I know, but just hadn't worked up the courage yet."

"What were you going to tell them?"

He drew in a shaky breath. "I think I know who may have murdered Paul, or at least who might have been behind it."

I leaned in intently. "Who?"

"His boss."

"Neal? At the escort agency?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have any proof?"

"No, but I know Paul found something out about him a month or two before he was killed."

I slumped back, disappointed. I knew that much already. "Yeah, we found a letter he'd written explaining all that in his safe-deposit box. He knew that Neal was really Fenton Black."

TJ rubbed his face. "God, he became consumed with the whole thing. He didn't know what to do about it, or if he should do anything. We were both stressed out from the idea that he could be in danger. I wanted him to just drop it, pretend it never happened. That wasn't his nature, though. He was the type of person who couldn't stand to see injustice go unchallenged."

"Do you know if Paul ever confronted Neal directly about his real identity?"

TJ shook his head. "I'm not sure. Not that I know of, but it had become such a sore spot for us that, over the last few weeks, we just avoided talking about it altogether."

"What was Paul hoping to accomplish? Was he trying to get Black to do the right thing? Turn himself in? Was he really that naïve?"

"In many ways, yes. It wasn't really so much that he was naïve, he was just very idealistic. He had this view of the way he thought the world should be, and he expected everything to fit that outlook — even after all he'd been through, with his family abandoning him and his last boyfriend dumping him. He wasn't stupid, though. He'd started gathering proof that Black was involved in the agency — emails, phone records, bank records — all stuff that could be traced back to Black."

"There was nothing like that in the safe-deposit box. Just some stuff he'd printed off the Internet."

"That's because it was never in the safe. He kept it somewhere else, as a precaution."

"Where?"

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

"TJ, Black is a ruthless criminal," I said, urgency filling my voice. "You have to tell me what you know. Paul isn't the first person he's killed, but we can make sure he's the last."

He stared at me for a moment, then stood up abruptly and walked out.

At first, I thought he'd simply abandoned the interview. I was a little miffed about being stiffed with the check for the second time that day — even though he'd only ordered a soda and I hadn't ordered anything — but a few minutes later he returned carrying a file folder.

He sat back down and slid the file across the table. "I haven't even looked inside it, but I had a feeling you'd want to see this, so I brought it. I just didn't know if I'd have the courage to give it to you."

"Why wouldn't you have the courage?"

"It makes me more involved than I already was. If Black decides to take revenge, now he has a reason to come after me."

"How would he even know who you are?"

"You found me. If he's half the master criminal Paul and you have made him out to be, he'll be able to find me too."

"If this information accomplishes what I hope it will, he'll be behind bars."

"People like him have ways of reaching beyond those bars."

"I think you've been watching too many mob movies."

I wanted to insert a little levity into the conversation, because I could tell TJ really was terrified. He was still eying the folder as if he was thinking about snatching it away and running.

I quickly flipped it open and began to read.

I immediately felt my eyes bulge as I thumbed through the contents, amazed and excited by what I saw. If Paul hadn't been murdered, he would have made one hell of an investigator. He had somehow amassed a dossier documenting Black's illegal activities, complete with the much-needed proof. As TJ had said, he had managed to conclusively connect Fenton Black to the alias of Neal Parsons, owner and operator of The Drake Group.

There were several photographs of Black talking with various men, all taken outdoors. On the back of each one, Paul had carefully printed the date, time, and location, along with the identity of the men with Fenton Black. I didn't recognize any of the names, but I had a strong suspicion the police would.

How on earth had he gotten them?

It was the last few pages that really blew my mind, however. They were deeds for large plots of land, all on the Eastern Shore. Each piece of property was originally zoned as protected wetlands, but I was pretty sure a little research would show they had recently been rezoned for development, thanks to certain corrupt

politicians — the very same ones Micah had recently exposed.

Pieces began to fall into place. I was suddenly very afraid for Micah.

"You haven't read this?" I asked TJ, my heart pounding in my chest.

"No. I told you, I wanted as little to do with all this as possible."

"I need you to go with me to the police, immediately."

He began shaking his head.

"No way," he said. "You don't need me, you've got the file. I've done my part."

"I may need you to verify that Paul gathered this data, that this is what he was killed for."

"I can't do it. I'm sorry, but I'm just not a brave person."

"Yes, you can. You have to. Look, I'm not operating on my own in this investigation. The police know you were Paul's boyfriend. I'm cooperating with them. I'm going to tell them exactly where I got this from and everything you told me. If you don't come forward now, they may assume you have something to hide. And you can be guaranteed they'll come looking for you."

He was the picture of absolutely misery. I only hoped my little speech wouldn't spook him. If TJ bolted, Evans would have my neck for sure.

"Fine, I'll go with you," he said at last, after several long seconds of tense silence.

"Good. I have to make a couple of quick phone calls. Wait here."

I jumped up and practically ran out of the restaurant. I had to call Micah and warn him.

I stayed near the front door so I'd see TJ if lost his nerve and tried to give me the slip. Micah answered quickly.

"It's Killian," I said somewhat breathlessly.

"Are you okay?"

"It's been a long day, but I just found out some things you need to know. Listen carefully. I don't have a lot of time. I've got a skittish witness waiting inside that I need to get to the police, pronto."

"Killian, what's going on?"

"I found Paul's boyfriend. Paul knew that Neal was Fenton Black, and Black was aware that Paul knew. Before he was killed, Paul gave his boyfriend a file containing evidence that Black was the same person as Neal Parsons and that he was associated with drug lords."

"That's great! Solid evidence? It's the proof you needed to show he had a motive for killing Paul."

"Micah, there's more. Black was also involved in the wetlands scandal there on the Shore. He was the real owner of the properties that were rezoned."

"What? But his name isn't on any of the deeds."

"Dig back and you'll find it. I have copies of the deeds in my hand right now. He probably sold them to some dummy corporation or to fake names, but I'm betting he's at the core of the corruption."

"Whoa. This is an even bigger story than I ever imagined."

"Weren't you listening? That means you're in as much danger as I am."

"I've been in danger of one sort or another since I broke this story. I'm not worried."

I sighed. "You'll at least be careful?"

"Of course I'll be careful, as long as you promise to be careful too."

"I promise. Now I've got to run. I have to take photos of all these papers, then see the detective and hand them over."

"Okay. Killian, I love you."

"I love you too."

Next, I called Detective Evans to tell him I was coming in with an important witness and the evidence he'd been waiting for.

"This had better be good, Kendall. I was supposed to get off in 15 minutes," he said.

"It'll be worth the overtime, sir. I think you'll be very interested in what I have to show you."

I hung up and rushed back into the restaurant. TJ was still waiting at the table, although he'd shredded his napkin into confetti.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"No, but I'm as ready as I'm going to get."

I smiled encouragingly. "Can I trust you to drive yourself or should we go in my car?"

He stood up and drew his shoulders back, as if bracing for a storm. "I'll follow you, I promise. I need to do this...for Paul."

"Great. Let's go stop a killer."

After all his growling about having to work overtime, Evans kept us cooling in the waiting room

forever. Or maybe it only felt that way because I was still wondering if TJ might have second thoughts and bolt.

Finally, Evans seemed to feel he'd made his point. He stuck his head into the cramped sitting area and motioned us back with a jerk of his head. I practically had to drag TJ behind me.

Since it was my first time in a big city police detective's office, I took a quick glance around. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting, but it wasn't this impeccably neat shrine to the Baltimore Ravens football team. Not so much as a pencil was out of place on the faux-wood-grained top of his standard metal desk. The guest chairs were also standard office issue — hard, upholstered, maroon seats with wooden arms and legs.

Nothing else was standard issue. It seemed as if every other item in the room was either purple or black. Glass-fronted display cases housed autographed footballs, helmets, photographs, stuffed animals wearing the Ravens uniform, caps with the team logo, even a mini-reproduction of the stadium. A framed shirt with scrawled autographs of the entire winning Super Bowl team hung on the wall over his desk. It was a little overwhelming, rather like walking into a museum.

"I would have pegged you for a Commanders fan," I said as I sat down.

A look of disgust passed over Evans's stoic face. "Please, just because I live in D.C.? I'm originally from Baltimore. But we're not here to talk football. You said on the phone you had some important news for me. I'm assuming that news has something to do with your friend here?"

"Yes, excuse me for not introducing you. Detective Owen Evans, this is Thomas Jackson, who goes by TJ." TJ flinched at his introduction. I plowed on doggedly. "He was dating Paul. He knew a lot about what was going on, and the best part is, he has proof."

Evans held up his hand as if to stop traffic. "Let's get right to the good part. What's this proof?"

I handed the file to Evans, who carefully flipped through it, his expression never changing.

When he'd finished, he laid the file carefully on the desk and looked up at TJ.

"You had this all along?" he asked in a deadly calm voice.

A slight shudder rippled through my body. I'd heard someone else use a voice like that whenever he was furious — my father. I moved quickly to head him off.

"He was scared and grieving. His boyfriend had just been murdered and he was afraid the killer would try to get him too if he came forward with the information."

"So he was going to let his lover's killer just walk away?"

"He wasn't exactly in a condition to be making solid judgment calls."

"If he'd come to us in the first place, the killer would be behind bars and he'd be safe."

"We both know it doesn't always work that way. Good lawyers can get even the guiltiest clients off scot-free, and Black can afford the best in the country. Besides, if Black has mob ties, and there is evidence here that he does, then he could take revenge even from behind bars."

"Hello?" TJ said. "I'm sitting right here, and this isn't exactly making me feel any better."

"Feel any better?" Evans snapped. "Why should you feel any better about anything? This isn't about making you feel good. It's about catching a murderer and bringing him to justice."

I jumped on his last sentence. "So you do believe Black is the killer now?"

"I think it's probable he was behind it at the very least, although it would be more likely that his type would hire it done."

"The crime didn't show any signs of a professional hit. Everyone said it seemed more like a crime of passion."

"Black is smart," Evans said. "After our conversation earlier I made a few calls about this guy. He's a very wanted man. They've been trying to get him for years, but he's like Teflon: they can never make anything stick. He's suspected of being behind no fewer than six deaths — five unsolved murders and one suspicious accident — and that's just in the U.S. alone. It's long been common knowledge that he's involved in the drug trade and, as you pointed out, he's rumored to have mob ties. The man is scum, but they've never been able to prove anything. He's very careful. I doubt he'd be so foolish as to hire a killer who would make this look like a professional hit. They'd want to confuse things as much as possible."

"Or maybe Black went to talk to Paul, perhaps to try and scare him off, and it got out of hand."

"Why the hell does it matter whether it was a professional or an amateur?" TJ suddenly blurted out.

"You're right, Mr. Jackson." I was shocked to see a compassionate expression on Evans's face. "It doesn't matter. We have more than enough reason to bring Fenton Black in for questioning. In fact, thanks to the contents of this folder, it's likely we'll be able to do a lot more than just question him. I have to be honest with you: there's a good chance you'll have to testify at the trial, but there's no reason your name should ever come up before then. If it would make you feel better, we can place you in protective custody in the meantime. I'm sure the FBI will be involved in this before it's over, so I can even say it's a safe bet you could be offered the witness-protection program."

TJ shook his head. "None of that. Whatever happens will happen. I'd like to stay out of the media as much as possible, to protect my job. If that can't be done, then I guess I'll just have to face the consequences."

"You've certainly changed your tune since you walked in here," Evans said thoughtfully.

"Listening to you made me realize that this is a lot bigger than me. This man has to be stopped."

Evans nodded and turned his attention to me.

"Mr. Kendall, on behalf of the Metropolitan Police Department, I want to thank you for your help in bringing this evidence to our attention. Now, your part is finished. You've done a fine job. We'll take it from here."

"Hey, you'll get no argument from me," I said. "I'm not some maverick who wants to bring this guy down on his own. I only have one request to make."

Evans rolled his eyes and heaved a monumental sigh.

"Here we go," he muttered.

"It's not that big a deal. I just want a little time before you move on this, maybe one day at the most."

He narrowed his eyes. "A little time for what?"

"I'm afraid that's private," I said quietly.

I suspected Jake was at Fenton Black's house, and I wanted time to get him out of there before the SWAT team burst through the door. I couldn't very well tell Evans that, however.

I didn't know how I was going to contact Jake if he was holed up with Black, but I had to try. I owed him that much at least.

Evans stared at me a while longer, then shrugged.

"It's going to take between twelve and twenty-four hours to get the warrants in order. You have however long that takes. I can't give you any more time and I can't nail it down any closer. When the team and the warrants are ready, we'll move in. Simple as that."

"It's something," I said.

"It's a damn sight more than you had any reason to expect," Evans said.

I nodded. When you're right, you're right.

The detective stood up, and TJ and I quickly followed his lead. We both shook his hand, and then we were led out.

Standing in front of the police station, I turned and gave TJ a careful once-over.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

He cast me a bleak look. "Only time will tell. I don't really expect them to be able to keep this from the news forever. Eventually, it will come out, and so will I — out of the closet that is. And then I'll have problems with my job...and quite possibly lose my life."

"You could always take them up on their offer of the witness-protection program."

"And spend the rest of my life pretending to be someone I'm not? I've done that for the first half of my life. I'd rather not have to do it for the remainder. No, I'll just take things as they happen."

"Maybe it won't be all bad. Things seldom are, you know. You could find another great job at a more accepting school."

He shrugged. "There's always hope." He stuck out his hand and we shook. "Thank you, Killian."

"For what?" I asked, confused.

"For forcing me to take action. That file had been eating away at me ever since Paul died, but I seemed paralyzed to make the first move. You took the decision away from me...and it was actually a relief. Come to think of it, I'm half hoping the papers will get wind of this and out me. It would save me the trouble." He flashed me a feeble grin. "I guess that makes me a coward, huh?"

I impulsively reached out and hugged him. He returned it, clinging to me for several seconds as if I were a lifeline. Then he released me all at once and stepped back as if embarrassed.

"Take care of yourself, TJ."

"I will. And you take care of yourself. You're the one with the dangerous job."

"Really, it's not usually this dangerous."

"If you say so." He waved and walked away to his car.

With all the excitement over, I suddenly felt my remaining energy drain out of me as if someone had pulled the plug. My vision blurred, and I swayed a bit.

Shaking my head and forcing my feet to walk to my car, I climbed inside and rested my head against the steering wheel.

*I'll just close my eyes for a few seconds...*

## Chapter 28

A sharp knock jerked me awake.

I jumped upright, briefly disoriented, not knowing where I was. Then I focused on Evans's sour mug glaring at me through the car window and realized what had happened.

Glancing at my watch as I opened the door, I saw I'd been asleep for almost half an hour.

"I hope you weren't waiting to bug me some more," he said.

"No, actually I was just resting my eyes. I haven't been sleeping very much lately."

"If you're that tired, are you sure you're okay to drive?" He sounded almost concerned.

"Yeah, I'll be fine after my power nap," I said with a cheeky grin.

"Then get going," he said, slapping the roof.

"Yes, sir." I sketched a salute and pulled the door shut.

He tapped on the window again, but this time I just rolled it down.

"One more thing." He leaned down to look in at me. "You be careful. You're one of the good guys. It'd be a shame to lose an investigator of your caliber. That was some fine detective work you did. I'd be proud to have you on the force."

"Thank you, Detective Evans," I said, sincerely moved.

He walked quickly away across the parking lot.

I watched him go, then pulled out my phone. I mentally crossed my fingers and dialed Jake's number. The phone rang and rang before going to voicemail. I hung up, waiting a few seconds, then tried again. That time, it went directly to voicemail.

I sighed and typed out a text message: *Hey, I know you're mad at me, and you have every right to be, but please call me. It's urgent.*

I didn't have much faith that I'd get an answer, which meant it was on to my backup plan — the one that I had a feeling no one would approve of.

I started the car and headed for Chris's house. I owed her an explanation.

Chris's father, Lou, insisted I stay for dinner so I could tell the three of them what had happened.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Lou said when I'd brought them up to speed.

I laughed. "I couldn't have done it without Chris." Chris actually blushed a little.

"So that's it, then?" she said, in an effort to shift the attention away from herself. "The case is closed? Fenton Black killed Paul Flynn?"

"Well, the case won't be officially closed until they arrest him, but yeah, all the evidence points to Black as the killer."

"But our part is finished?"

"Your part is finished. I still have one more thing I have to do."

"What would that be?"

I shook my head. "It'd be better if you didn't know."

"It's not something illegal, is it?" Lou asked.

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what do you mean it would be better if I didn't know?" Chris asked.

"If you knew you'd probably try to talk me out of it, which would be pointless because it's something I have to do."

"So it's something stupid or dangerous," she muttered darkly.

"Or both," Lou said jokingly.

"Killian..." Chris started.

"Chris, really. You don't even know what I'm going to do, so why try to talk me out of it?"

"Listen to him, Christina," Lou said before our difference of opinion could degenerate into an argument. "Sometimes there are things on a case that aren't part of the official investigation but still need to be taken care of — for closure, if nothing else. God knows we don't often get it, so if we have the chance, we go for it."

I practically glowed under the inclusion implied in his statement. This veteran cop considered me to be an investigator. I was still basking in the warmth his words gave me when Chris sighed. "Well, you're going to spend the night here, at least."

"Actually no, I can't do that. I have to get back tonight."

Chris frowned. "Why? What's the rush? You're exhausted. You shouldn't be driving."

"I...I just have to get back as quickly as possible."

"Does this have to do with your closure?"

"Yes."

"Killian, I'm going to have to side with Chris on this one," Lou said. "It's obvious you're tired. If you

hadn't been telling us about the investigation, I think you'd have been asleep in your plate by now. Whatever it is you have to do, it will wait until morning."

I shook my head vehemently. "That's just it. What I have to do can't wait. I have a very narrow window of opportunity, so I have to take advantage of it tonight. It could be too late by tomorrow."

Everyone sat in tense silence for a few seconds while Kevin looked back and forth between the three of us, all equally stubborn and determined.

Lou finally broke the deadlock. "Okay."

"Okay?" Chris demanded.

"Yes, okay. Killian isn't my child. In fact, he isn't a child at all. He can make his own decisions. He knows the risks. If he says he has to drive back tonight, then that's the way it has to be. I can't stop him."

"Thank you," I said quietly. "I'd better head back soon, though, so I'll be that much less tired." He nodded while Chris scowled. "I have a few phone calls to make first. I'll use my cell phone outside."

"You don't have to do that...unless you need the privacy."

"Well, that and I get better reception. Your house is like a dead zone. I'll say goodbye before I leave."

I excused myself from the table and slipped out the door. I tried Jake again, but wasn't surprised when it once again went directly to voicemail. I left another message, asking him to call me right away.

Next, I called Judy. She answered on the first ring as if she'd been waiting for the phone to ring.

"Judy, it's Killian."

"Oh, hi, Killian." Her voice was filled with disappointment, which pretty much confirmed my reason for calling.

"You haven't heard from Jake?"

"Nothing. Not a word since he left the other night."

"That's what I figured. Well, try not to worry. I think I know where he is, and I'm going to go get him."

"Killian...be careful." Her voice carried much more weight than I thought those simple words could convey.

"Is this a specific warning or just a general word of caution?" I asked carefully.

"Specific."

"Does this have anything to do with your...gift? What you told me about the other night?"

"Yes. The feeling of death has gotten stronger. It's...imminent. It's like a black cloud surrounding you and Jake."

I took a deep breath as the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"I'll be as careful as possible."

"I just hope it isn't too late."

With those dire words echoing in my mind, I hung up and called Micah.

"Hello?" he answered.

"Hey, it's me."

"What's happening? How are things going?"

"Things are going very well, actually. I'll tell you everything, but you have to be quiet until I'm finished. I need to hurry."

"What's the rush?"

"I'll get to that." I quickly filled him in on everything that had happened since I'd talked to him last. I finished up with, "So Evans told me I only have twelve to twenty-four hours before they move to arrest Black. I have to get Jake out of there before then."

"Considering how badly the Feds want Black, I'd say you're probably closer to the twelve-hour estimate, maybe even less."

"That's what I figured. So what I need from you now is Fenton Black's address."

"Why do you need to know that?"

"I just told you, I have to try and get Jake out before the police show up."

"Killian, you're not going to be able to just waltz in. Black lives on a gated estate, and I'd be willing to bet he has security guards. You could be walking right into their hands."

"It's a risk I have to take. I can't just leave Jake in there."

"Killian, this is nuts. Do you have a death wish?"

"No," I said between clenched teeth, trying not to think about Judy's premonition. "I do not have a death wish. If you're not going to help me, I'll figure it out another way, but I'm doing this with or without your help."

Micah sighed. "Okay, fine. I'll help, but only on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you wait for me."

"Huh?"

"Black's house is only about twenty minutes on this side of the bridge. He's closer to you than to me, so I want you to wait for me."

"You're not coming," I said firmly.

"It's the only way you'll get the address from me."

I stewed and argued for a few minutes but eventually gave in.

Micah looked up the address and gave it to me.

"Hang on. I'm pulling it up on Google Maps so we know what we're up against." I listened to his keystrokes for a few seconds before he continued. "His place is on a secondary road and sits well away from the street. There aren't any other houses nearby. A fence runs around the perimeter of the property, which backs up to a river. The only way in seems to be the front gate. If you pass the house, the road ends in another half mile in a little cul-de-sac where you can turn around. On its left side is a small dirt lane that was probably a logging access road at one time. It looks to be mostly overgrown now, but there should be enough room for you to hide your car. Pull in as far as you can to let me get in behind you. Wait for me there."

"When can you leave?" I asked.

"I'm at work, so I'll need a few minutes to get everything squared away. I can't just walk out. It'll take me an hour and a half at least to drive up, so expect me in about two hours. From D.C., it shouldn't take you more than an hour to an hour and a half, depending on traffic and how fast you drive."

"I'll meet you there."

I let myself back in to find Kevin smirking at me by the door.

"Chris went upstairs," he reported. "She said she wasn't going to speak to you. Want me to show you to her room anyway?"

I stifled a smile. "Yes, please."

Occasionally, a bratty younger brother can prove useful.

He led me up the stairs to Chris's door, which was closed. I tapped on it hesitantly.

"Chris? It's me. Can we talk?"

She opened it and stood glaring at me. I managed to get a peek around her at the room beyond, which was pretty much what I'd expected: organized and neat as a pin. A few black-and-white photographs in simple black frames hung on plain white walls. A very expensive computer shared the wall I could see with a floor-to-ceiling bookcase that was filled to overflowing. The only traditionally feminine touch in the entire room was an ornate brass bed covered with a pure white coverlet.

"I thought you were in a hurry," she said peevishly.

"I sorta am, but I didn't want to leave until we'd talked."

"What's there to talk about? I thought we were partners, and here you go running off to do something stupid and/or dangerous, and you won't even tell me what it is."

"Is that what this is really about? That you're not included?"

She frowned. "Maybe."

"If I tell you what I'm doing, will you ease up on me?"

"Maybe."

"Look, Chris. I meant what I said at dinner. It's true I could have never done this without you. I've really enjoyed working with you, and I'd like to think we became friends as well as partners in this investigation. It would be great if we could work together again someday if I have a case that leads me up this way."

"Yeah, I'd like that too," she said. "I've learned a lot from helping you. You're a good investigator, Killian."

"So are you. Friends?"

"Yeah. Now, what is it you have to do?"

I quickly gave her a rudimentary outline of what I was going to try.

She stared at me dubiously when I finished.

"That sounds extremely stupid and dangerous."

I shrugged. "Maybe so, but I have to do it."

"Because this guy Jake used to be a friend of yours?"

"Yeah, and because I let him down. That's part of the reason he's in this position to begin with. I feel I owe it to him to at least try to get him out of there before the cops show up. Maybe it will start to make up for my being such an awful friend."

"I can't imagine you ever being an awful friend, Killian. It takes two people to make a friendship."

"I have to do it for my own peace of mind."

"Okay. Just...be careful."

"I will."

'Be careful' was soon going to become my motto.

She stepped forward and surprised me by giving me an awkward hug.

"Let me know how it turns out."

She stepped back and wiped her palms nervously on her pants.

"Okay."

"Wish I was going," she added with very real wistfulness in her voice.

I raised an eyebrow. "I think that would make you the stupid one here."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want to go. It's not that I can't wait to throw myself into harm's way. It's just something I feel I have to do."

She grinned and shrugged. "I'd like a little more excitement in my life. So sue me."

I laughed and turned to let myself out.

"Hey, Killian?" I stopped in the doorway. "You've definitely made things exciting lately. Now I know for sure that I want to become a detective. Thanks."

"Anytime," I said with a wink. "You'll make a good detective."

"You think so?"

"I know so."

I shut her door behind me, said my goodbyes to Lou and Kevin, and started the drive to Black's house. I had to arrive there well before Micah if my plan was going to work.

My exhaustion caught up with me as soon as I was out of the city. It was a constant struggle just to keep my eyes open. My eyelids felt as though they were made of lead.

After a few swerves onto the shoulder, I rolled my window down and let the crisp fall air hit me directly in the face. Although it worked for a little while, even that began to wear off before long.

I turned on the radio, found an obnoxiously upbeat pop station, and cranked the volume up as loud as I could stand. It was an exercise in futility.

I began to worry that I'd never make it over the Bay Bridge. I had visions of getting halfway across before falling asleep at the wheel and plunging to my death in the waters below. Maybe that was what Judy's whole feeling of death was foretelling. I'd always been somewhat uncomfortable around water — I had an irrational fear of dying by drowning — so the anxiety actually kept me awake all the way over.

Once on the Eastern Shore, however, the weariness returned with a vengeance. I had to struggle to stay alert enough to follow the GPS directions. I almost missed my turn and had to backtrack when I passed the road Black lived on.

When I reached his house, I slowed down slightly to get a quick glimpse of the place I would have to infiltrate. It was a hulking fortress built of brick and stone, surrounded by a high metal fence that stood at least twice as high as I was tall. Security lights were placed at regular intervals around the perimeter. There was an actual guard booth at the gate, although I didn't see anyone in it as I drove by. The whole place looked as if it had been built to withstand an invasion, which, come to think of it, may have been the case.

I drove a little further until I came to the cul-de-sac Micah mentioned. My headlights swept the wall of

trees, illuminating the narrow path — calling it a road would be misleading — right where Micah had described. It was just wide enough for me to ease my car into, but tight enough that I had nightmares of scratching my paint job. I pulled in as far as possible, although I wasn't sure if there would be enough room for Micah's car behind me.

Since a tree was too close to the driver's side to permit the door to open all the way, I had to slither sideways out the small opening.

I popped the trunk to rummage through the assorted junk that had built up in there — a sandy blanket from an impromptu beach picnic with Micah, jumper cables that Adam insisted I have with me at all times, and a lightweight doohickey that could inflate your tires and flash a warning light at the same time.

Somewhere in the mess, I knew I had an old backpack containing a black shirt, black pants, gloves, and a black skull cap. Novak called it the cat-burglar ensemble. He said every good investigator needed to keep one handy in case of emergencies. He'd never expounded on what constituted an emergency, but I figured what I was about to do qualified as one.

I quickly changed into the commando outfit and started back toward the house on foot. I had no intention of waiting for Micah. I wasn't about to put him in danger. Besides, I had to do this on my own.

Slipping through the shadows, staying just inside the tree line, it didn't take me long to reach the corner of the fence protecting the Black estate. I contemplated climbing it, but it was too high, and the spikes at the top

looked sharp, so I decided to save that route as a last resort. I'd check out my other options first.

I crossed to the opposite side of the road to stay under the cover of the trees, and made my way to the gate. I watched it for a few minutes, but there was no sign of anyone around.

I saw at least one security camera mounted to the side of the guard booth, pointed at the drive. I thought I could get closer to the booth and avoid the camera pretty easily — assuming it was the only one, of course.

I darted across the road again, staying as low to the ground as possible, my heart pounding in my chest. With the rush of adrenaline coursing through my system, my earlier fatigue was all but forgotten.

I crouched under the window of the guard booth for a few seconds. Surely, if there was anyone inside, he would hear the thumping of my heart. I slowly eased up until I could see into the booth — empty, although the lights were on, clearly showing the controls to open the gate.

I wondered if activating the gate caused any alarm in the house. Even if it didn't, how was I going to get into the booth to push the button in the first place? The only entrance was on the wrong side of the fence, and the glass I was looking through was undoubtedly bulletproof. It was certainly thick enough to withstand anything except maybe an atomic blast.

I edged my way to the corner of the booth and peered around at the gate. To my surprise, I realized that it wasn't closed all the way. It was open by a little less than twelve inches. That wasn't much, but, for once, being small might be to my advantage.

Then again, how was I to know it wasn't a trap of some sort? Maybe Black or his security team had spotted me skulking around and decided to lure the mouse into the trap before killing it. Cats like to play with their prey after all.

I was standing there fretting about what to do when I heard the distant sound of an approaching vehicle. I glanced down at my watch. It was just about time for Micah to be arriving. I had to move quickly, or in just a few seconds I would be fully caught in the headlights of the oncoming car.

Should I run back to the security of the trees or risk going through the gate?

I stood indecisively until the headlights began to light up the trees at the final turn. I made my decision and dove toward the gate. It was a tight fit, and there was a moment of panic when the button of my jeans snagged, but I managed to wiggle through and throw myself behind a nearby shrub just as the car zoomed past.

I thought it looked like Micah's, but I wasn't positive. If it was, I knew I had to move fast.

I began to weave my way across the seemingly endless expanse of lawn, moving in a crouched run from tree to bush. It was scant cover at best, but it made me feel better, if nothing else.

I finally reached the house and sat panting for a moment with my back to the cool brick wall. The breathlessness was due as much to fear as to being winded from the run.

I tried to calm myself. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes at that point. My life — and possibly Jake's — depended on my having all my wits about me.

Unfortunately, they seemed to have scattered.

When my breathing was finally under control, I started moving again. I had no idea how to get into the house. I was sure there must be some sort of security system, an alarm at least, wired to all the windows and entrances. I'd never broken into a house before, so I wasn't even sure I would know how to get a locked window open without simply breaking it. I'd been lucky with the gate — assuming it was luck and not stupidity — but I couldn't count on that again.

The front of the house was definitely out of the question. The main entrance was lit up as if it was broad daylight. I couldn't just march up to the door and knock.

Needing a better idea of what I was up against, I half-crawled, half-ran toward the back of the house. To my relief, it was not as well lit. Pools of inky darkness collected between security lights spaced too far apart.

After a few seconds of study, I decided the attached garage offered me my best opportunity to gain entrance. People often forgot to lock the garage door, or so I reasoned. Although getting there would involve a race through one of the well-lit areas, I didn't have a choice. With my heart in my throat, I made a mad dash, feeling as if I was in a spotlight.

I flattened myself against the wall next to the garage door and wondered if I was under surveillance the whole time. I could picture the security guards inside watching me on closed-circuit televisions, laughing as I zigged and zagged my way across the property, knowing they could snuff me out whenever they tired of the game.

I took a deep breath, grabbed the doorknob, and twisted. It yielded. I stared dumbly at the open door for a moment, too surprised to walk through.

This was way too simple. I was becoming uneasy.

I inched through the door into the dark interior, illuminated only by what little light spilled in from outside. The garage held two cars with space for a third. Both vehicles looked to be brand-new, expensive models.

I cautiously made my way to the inside entrance to the house, being extra careful not to bump into anything in the gloom, and paused at the door.

The way things were going, I couldn't decide whether I should wish for it to be locked or unlocked. If it was locked, I'd have to find another means of entry — unless, of course, someone had conveniently left a key under the mat. If it was unlocked, I wasn't sure if I could pass that off to incredibly good fortune.

Was I stupidly following crumbs of cheese right into a trap?

I turned the doorknob and heard the telltale click. It was unlocked.

I took a shaky breath. I'd come too far to chicken out. If it was an ambush, I was already well within their reach. If it wasn't, I was quite simply the luckiest guy on the face of the earth. I would have to follow this investigation with a trip to the casino.

I held the door closed for a few seconds while I collected myself.

Assuming this had all been some sort of amazing coincidence, which I was desperately trying to believe, I

was now faced with what could be the trickiest part of the operation. I had to find my way through a strange house that was easily the size of a small hotel, locate Jake, persuade him to listen to me when he'd made it quite clear at our last meeting that he didn't want to talk to me anymore, and get him out of there...all without running into another soul.

*Easy as pie.*

I slipped quickly inside, closing the door behind me. I was immediately struck by the utter stillness of the house. It felt eerily like a tomb.

I stood statue-still, listening for a noise — any noise — but there was only total silence. Of course, as big as that place was, they could have been having a party on the third floor complete with live music and I wouldn't have heard.

I took stock of my surroundings. The door from the garage had opened into a rather large laundry room that I was pretty certain Fenton Black never used, at least not personally. Another door stood open, leading to what looked like a hallway. There were no lights on as far as I could see.

I walked slowly down the hall, stopping every few feet to listen. I passed a couple of closed doors, but there was no light showing beneath them and no sound from within. The hallway ended at a large dining room with a door on either side. I figured the one to the right opened into the kitchen, where I finally noticed a dim light burning. The one to the left, I assumed, led to the rest of the house.

Deciding it would be wise to check the kitchen before moving on, I crept up to the door and peeked in.

I froze as my heart leapt into my throat again.

A large man sat at the table facing away from me, backlit by a low-wattage hood light over the stove. I was afraid to move for fear he'd hear me and turn around.

Then I realized he was unnaturally still. Was he listening for me to move before spinning around and shooting?

We both remained motionless. It began to remind me of the game we used to play as children where you try to go the longest without moving or speaking. I hoped the name of the game wouldn't turn out to be a portent — we called it graveyard.

I stayed locked in position until I couldn't stand it any longer. The man at the table still hadn't moved. No one was that good at the game.

I took a hesitant step into the room.

When he still didn't move, I took another. And then another, until I was within a few feet of him. My feet stuck unpleasantly to the floor, as if something had been spilled.

I moved around beside him and felt the air rush out of me as I began to tremble.

A perfectly round hole the size of a dime punctuated his forehead, dribbling a tiny trickle of blood down his face.

If it was a mob-style hit we were looking for, I had just found it.

## Chapter 29

I staggered back in horror, barely making it to the trashcan before I lost the contents of my stomach.

His wasn't the first dead body I'd seen, but apparently repetition didn't make it any easier. People with their brains blown out were officially not in my league.

I pulled out my cell phone to call the police before I realized it might not be wise to have the call traced back to me. Still holding onto the idea that I might somehow find Jake and get him out of there before the police arrived, I located a land-line phone on the counter and dialed 911 with shaking hands, carefully keeping my back to the dead guy the entire time.

I explained to the dispatcher that there'd been a murder and gave her the address. When she asked for my name, however, I hung up.

It suddenly occurred to me that I had no way of knowing whether the killer was still in the house. A chill ran up my spine as I spun around. The hallway beyond the door was pitch black. Anyone could be hiding in the shadows, aiming a gun, preparing to shoot me right where I stood.

With a stifled gasp, I dropped to the floor, getting an up-close look at the gore splattered across its surface. The room began to spin as my stomach heaved again. I fought down the nausea and waited for the dizziness to pass, then pushed myself into a crouching position.

Although no one had come into the room, it was only a matter of time before the police arrived. I had to

move quickly. I wasn't about to leave the kitchen without a weapon of some sort, however.

Desperately wishing I had a gun, I briefly wondered if the guy at the table had been a security guard and therefore armed, but I couldn't bring myself to get close enough to find out. Then I remembered a knife block I'd seen on the counter when I was looking for the phone. I pulled several out, choosing the largest and leaving the rest.

Still feeling terribly vulnerable even with my new weapon, I eased back into the hallway and waited anxiously for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. The house was deadly quiet, and, for the first time, I truly began to fear for Jake.

I made a hurried search of the first floor as quietly as possible. My ragged breathing sounded unnaturally loud in the silence as I grew more tense with every second. I ended up at the bottom of a pitch-black stairway leading to the second floor.

For what seemed like an eternity, I was unable to force myself to take the first step. Even though there was a light switch on the wall next to me, I was afraid to turn it on. There was no point alerting anyone that I was in the house if they didn't already know.

Finally, I worked up enough nerve and slowly began to climb one step at a time, testing it for squeaks before placing my entire weight on it. My ascent remained pretty much silent until about halfway up — when, of course, a step creaked. The sound was like a car alarm in the eerie silence. I stood frozen until it became obvious no one was going to come running at me with

guns blazing, then took the remaining steps quickly, feeling at a disadvantage as long as I was on them.

At the top, I found myself once again in a hallway, which stretched a short distance both ways. Four doors opened off it, two on one side, and two on the other. One of the doors on my left stood open. I moved cautiously toward it, wanting to get that one out of the way first.

As I edged closer, however, I noticed a light at the bottom of the door on the other side of the hall. I stopped and listened, but didn't hear a sound from either side.

The room with the open door was brightly lit by a security light outside. A quick glance showed it to be empty, with no place to hide. It was clearly a home office, sparsely furnished with a simple but elegant antique desk and chair. Built-in shelves lined the walls, holding not just books but also various exotic and ancient-looking artifacts that would have been more at home in a museum. I had a hunch they had not been obtained by entirely legal means.

I turned back to the door with the light showing under it, approaching it slowly until I could press my ear against it — not a sound. I touched the knob hesitantly, gripping the knife handle so tightly my fingers ached. I took a deep breath, twisted the knob and threw the door open in one sudden movement, jumping back into the room across the hall as I did so.

Nothing happened. No one yelled out. All was just as quiet as before.

I peeked around the corner. The door now stood open, spilling warm, yellow light into the hall. A pair of

feet were plainly visible splayed on the floor. Trembling, I stepped closer. The feet belonged to another dead body, this one shot as well, at least twice in the chest from what I could see. He'd knocked over a table as he'd fallen.

I appeared to be in a sitting room of some sort. There was a fireplace at one end with two chairs arranged in a conversational grouping. Another door stood partly open on my right. I edged around the body, trying hard not to look too closely.

Approaching the door, I kicked it fully open, brandishing my knife — as if it would stop a bullet.

Although no lights were on, the glow from the sitting room allowed me to see it was a lavishly furnished bedroom. Someone appeared to be asleep in the bed, but something was definitely wrong — no one could have slept through all that.

I fumbled clumsily for the light switch. As bright light filled the room, I found myself staring at a very naked, very dead Fenton Black sprawled across the bed. Blood splattered the white silk sheets. He, too, had been shot.

I looked quickly away.

It suddenly dawned on me that everyone I'd found looked as if they'd been caught by surprise. It was a big house, but they still should have heard the gunshots — unless the killer was using a silencer, and even then, I'd read that silencers weren't even that quiet.

I took a quick look around the spacious room. The king-size bed occupied a large part of the floor space. An enormous armoire sat opposite, its front doors open to reveal a large television set.

A leather sofa and armchair sat in front of another fireplace, the back side of the one in the sitting room. The walls were hung with original oil paintings that looked to my untrained eye to be old and valuable. Mirrored sliding-glass doors led to what I assumed was the closet.

I was about to go back to the hall to continue my search for Jake when I noticed a bare foot sticking out from behind the sofa. I crept toward it, hoping against hope that I wouldn't find Jake dead as well.

A muffled sob escaped me when I got close enough to see it was indeed Jake lying naked, facedown on the floor. It took me a few seconds of panic before I realized there was no blood and he was still breathing.

He was alive, but unconscious.

I dropped to his side with another sob, this one of relief. Then I discovered he had a gun gripped loosely in his hand, and felt the knife slip from my numb fingers as the implications hit me.

*No, no, no, it can't be true,* my brain jabbered as I pushed away. *Why not?* another part of me argued. *After all he's been through, you had to expect him to crack eventually. His brother was a killer. Maybe it runs in the family.*

He looked so peaceful lying there, as if he were simply taking a nap. Yet only a few feet away lay a murdered man, and Jake was holding a gun. Passed out? Except for his shallow breathing, he hadn't moved a muscle since I'd found him. I took a closer look and noticed some bruising on his face and around his mouth.

"Jake?" My voice came out in a hoarse croak.

"Jake?" I shook his foot hesitantly.

"Freeze! Don't move!" a loud voice suddenly shouted from behind me.

I screamed and lurched forward, throwing myself behind the couch with Jake.

"This is the police," the voice identified itself. "Come out with your hands where I can clearly see them. If you make any sudden moves, I will shoot."

"Don't shoot," I pleaded shakily. "I'm the one who called 911. My name is Killian Kendall. I work for Shane Novak. We're private investigators."

"Come out from behind the couch," the police officer repeated. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

I edged carefully out to the center of the floor, moving slowly and deliberately, holding my hands in plain sight at all times. The officer was pointing a gun right at me.

If you've never had the pleasure of such an experience, let me tell you, it's very unsettling. I wasn't about to make any sudden moves.

He looked surprised when he saw me, then hid it well.

"Let's see your license." He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, with dark hair, a carefully trimmed mustache, and heavy eyebrows over dark eyes.

"I don't have one. I'm still in training."

"Is there anyone else in the room with you?"

"Yes, there's another person behind the couch, but he's unconscious." I decided not to mention the gun just yet. The cop looked a little nervous as it was. "He might need medical attention."

"Guys," he called, stepping farther into the room, his gun never once wavering.

In response, two more uniformed officers entered and approached me cautiously, guns drawn.

"Turn around," one of them ordered.

He grabbed me roughly, pushing me to the floor with a knee in the small of my back, twisting my arms painfully behind me to snap handcuffs around my wrists. It all happened so fast I didn't have time to do more than gasp in pain.

After patting me down and removing my wallet, he carefully slid my gloves off my hands and deposited them in a plastic bag, then left me on the floor with an order not to move.

The first cop, the one who seemed to be in charge, was still training his gun on me, while the other two checked Jake.

"It's another kid, sarge, and this one has a gun," one of them said tightly. "He's out cold. Pulse is weak. He's not responding."

"Boyd, before you move him, go find Deacon and have him get some shots. We don't want to fuck this one up. It's high profile."

One of the officers stood and started to leave the room.

"Take the other kid with you," the sergeant told him.

Boyd hauled me roughly to my feet and led me downstairs into the front room, which evidently had been taken over as a command post. The place was crawling with cops, including several CSI types.

Apparently, the crime lab was already getting started. I wondered what they'd make of my bloody footprints all over the kitchen and the vomit in the trashcan. This was not turning out to be my finest hour.

My escort left me sitting awkwardly on a chair — hands still cuffed behind my back — and detailed another young cop to watch over me. The new guy wasn't very talkative, and since I wasn't exactly feeling chatty myself, we sat in uncomfortable silence while his brethren bustled around us.

I had plenty of time to study the officer they'd chosen to keep an eye on me. He couldn't have been more than a few years older than I was, probably fresh out of the police academy. He had close-cut, light brown hair and hazel eyes, with a smattering of freckles across his pug nose that made him look even younger. His thin lips were pressed together nervously, making me guess this was probably his first big case. He looked almost as scared as I felt.

After about half an hour, the sergeant from upstairs came into the room and spotted me. He walked over and frowned down at the clipboard in his hand.

"Killian Kendall," he said in a dark voice. "What do you know about these murders?"

"Less than you do, probably."

His frown deepened. "What were you doing here?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"Considering I found you at the site of a multiple homicide, that's a distinct possibility."

"Then maybe I should wait to talk until I have a lawyer."

"Damn kids. You've watched too many movies. You got something to hide?"

"No, sir. I just think it would be best if I wait to be questioned until I have a lawyer."

He sucked in a deep breath between clenched teeth. "Marshall," he said to my young guard. "Have him tested for residue then take him to the station and lock him up. And be sure to let him call his damned lawyer."

Marshall nodded sharply. "Yes, sir!"

So he could speak.

He helped me up and, after a tech swabbed my hands and clothing, led me out the front door toward the cluster of police cruisers parked on the lawn. I noticed he was being a lot gentler than the guy who'd cuffed me.

The whole thing was kind of surreal. I'd never been arrested before. I was pretty shaken, but I would have been a lot more scared if I thought there was any chance of being charged with something. I knew I hadn't done anything they could charge me with...except maybe breaking and entering...and possibly interfering with a crime scene.

I was suddenly worried.

"I'm going to switch your cuffs to the front," Marshall said, stopping next to one of the cars.

"Thanks." I was unsure of how else to respond.

It was a relief, though. I was very uncomfortable with my arms locked behind my back.

"You're Killian Kendall?" he asked softly, unlocking one side of the handcuffs. I gratefully dropped my arms to my side, but he quickly pulled my wrists forward and cuffed them again in front. "I've read about you."

"About me?"

"Yeah, I—"

"Killian!" a familiar voice called from the direction of the street.

I turned and spotted Micah by the front gate behind the police tape. Another officer stood nearby, arms crossed over his chest, making sure no one dared attempt to get through the line.

"The reporters are here already?" Marshall said. "They're like vultures."

"Actually, he's with me." I shouted to Micah, "Find Novak and Judy."

"You shouldn't be talking to him," Marshall said uncertainly.

"Sorry."

I allowed him to push me gently into the back seat.

He buckled me in, then slid behind the wheel. A metal grill separated the front seat from the back. We didn't speak again until we were on the road.

"What did you mean you've read about me?"

"Online. In the news. After you solved that ax-murder case. I wasn't on the force yet, but there was a big story about you. It said you'd solved another murder too, when you were younger."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess."

I wasn't used to being recognized and, under the circumstances, wasn't sure what the proper response should be.

"So...is that what you were doing here?"

"I probably shouldn't say anything."

"I'm not going to tell anyone. I think it's awesome that you're so young and you're out there solving crimes the police can't figure out."

"It's not always that they can't," I said, thinking about Seth and Paul. "Sometimes it's because they don't really care."

"What do you mean?"

"Not all cases seem to get the same priority. Fenton Black was a killer and a criminal, and there must be twenty, twenty-five cops crawling around his house, just because he was rich and powerful. I had a friend who was murdered for being gay, and no one cared about finding his killer. He was just a kid. The case I'm working on now involves a young guy who was murdered in his own apartment, but since he was a gay escort, nothing was done about it for over a month."

"So you *were* on a case. I was right. And Black was involved?"

I sighed. "I'm not saying anything more about it."

Marshall looked disappointed. He glanced at me in the rear view mirror, his eyes catching mine.

"I'm gay too," he suddenly blurted out.

I blinked in surprise. I couldn't believe this was actually happening. There I was, sitting handcuffed in the back of a police car, while the cop driving came out to me. This day kept getting more and more bizarre.

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say.

"Was that reporter your boyfriend?"

I nodded. "How did you know he was a reporter?"

"You start to recognize the reporters pretty quickly around here. There aren't too many of them, and

he's been working on that corruption case." He was quiet for a minute. "I've never had a boyfriend."

He obviously wanted to talk about it, even if I didn't. I decided it was in my best interest to humor him. I might need an ally.

"How long have you known?" I asked.

"That I'm gay? A long time. Since junior high at least."

"Are you out?"

"Pretty much. I mean, I never really hid it. I grew up in a small farming town, very rural. All my friends were rednecks, but I guess I fit in well enough. No one ever made a big deal of it, but we mostly just don't bring it up. Man, it feels good to be talking about this to someone who understands."

"Um, glad I can help."

"My dad used to be a state trooper, but he was injured in an accident when I was a kid. He always wanted me to become a cop too, so when I graduated from high school, I went to community college and then into the police academy as soon as I was old enough. I've never even kissed a guy, but I've thought about it a lot."

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror again, and I got the feeling he was thinking about it at that very moment.

"You should, uh, meet more people. Gay people, I mean," I said awkwardly.

"I don't know where." He blushed. "And I'd be really nervous. Plus, I'm not really out officially at work." His eyes widened as he thought of something.

"You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"No, I won't tell anyone," I said. "I promise. It's not my place to out someone else."

He gave me a tentative smile. "Thanks. Maybe I'll tell them some day, but not yet."

We arrived at the police station, and all gay-related conversation was abruptly dropped.

He led me inside, where the officers had apparently been warned of my impending arrival. I was photographed and fingerprinted — just like a real suspect — then allowed to make my phone call.

I called the only lawyer I knew, Ilana Constantino. Technically, she was a family lawyer, but I figured she was better than nothing. I certainly didn't want to call Adam. He'd go into cardiac arrest on the spot.

Luckily, Ilana answered and agreed to get there as quickly as possible. She also insisted she would call Adam to let him know what was going on. The idea of being behind bars when Adam found out seemed almost appealing.

After my call, I was led to the holding area. My cuffs were removed, and I was locked inside a small, featureless cell. My stomach sank as the door swung shut with a loud clang.

I sat down on the metal bed built into one wall, and suddenly everything caught up to me at once. The lack of sleep, the shock of finding the dead bodies, my fears for Jake, my arrest — whatever had been holding me together completely collapsed, and tears began to fall, slowly at first, then faster as my sobs built.

Eventually, I cried myself into an uneasy sleep.

I was startled awake by a loud clang. I sat up with a jerk to find the sergeant who'd been giving orders back at Black's house standing in the open door of my cell. He didn't look any happier than the last time I'd seen him.

"Your lawyer is here now, Kendall," he said. "If you'd be so kind as to follow me, we'll have that chat now."

I didn't actually follow him; he walked a few careful steps behind me, directing me where to go with terse commands. At least he didn't put the cuffs back on.

The interrogation room was a small space with a table and a few chairs. Ilana was waiting there, looking as calm and self-assured as always. She'd handled the legal proceedings when my mother gave Adam custody of me, as well as when Adam fought his ex-wife for custody of Kane. She was a close friend of the family's, and it was a comfort just to see her.

I sat down at the table and the officer sat across from me. "I'm Detective Sergeant Rosen," he said. "This will all be recorded. Please state your full name."

"Killian Travers Kendall."

"Please tell me what you were doing at the estate of Fenton Black this evening when police responded to an anonymous call that a murder had taken place at that address."

I looked over at Ilana, and she nodded.

I took a deep breath. "Actually, the anonymous call was from me. I was there because I work for Shane Novak. He's a private investigator, retired from the Metropolitan PD." Rosen didn't look impressed. "I'm working on a case involving a murder in Washington,

D.C. In the course of my investigation, I learned that Fenton Black was implicated in the killing. I turned the evidence over to Detective Owen Evans of the MPDC this afternoon. At that time, he indicated they were planning on moving to arrest Black within the next twelve to twenty-four hours."

Rosen was scribbling furiously. He paused when I stopped.

"I'm assuming this is the Reader's Digest version?" he asked dryly.

"Yes, sir."

"You still haven't explained what you were doing at Black's house."

"I was getting to that. The unconscious guy behind the couch is a friend of mine. His name is Jake Sheridan. Maybe you remember the Sheridan murders a few years ago." I could see in his eyes that he did, although he refused to comment. I continued, "I knew he was involved with Black and...well...it's a long story."

"We've got all the time in the world."

I took another deep breath. "I guess I felt I owed him a favor, so I wanted to warn him to get out before the police arrived."

"Exactly what do you mean by involved."

"I don't know all the details. I've heard that Black was something of a pedophile, or at least he liked his boys young. I think Jake was his...boyfriend. I'm pretty sure he was supplying Jake with drugs."

"So you went to warn him that the police were coming?"

I nodded miserably, sure I was going to be charged with something now. I realized just how stupid I had been.

"What happened when you arrived? I want a detailed, step-by-step account of your movements so we know where you went and what you did."

"I parked up the road at a dead-end turnabout."

"How'd you know it was there?"

"A reporter friend told me." He nodded, and I went on. "I walked back and found the gate open. I was trying to decide whether to risk going in when a car came along, so I ducked inside to avoid the headlights." He quirked an eyebrow, but I ignored it. "Staying hidden as best I could, I made my way to the back of the house and entered through the garage."

"It was all unlocked?"

"Yes."

"And that didn't strike you as odd?"

"Maybe a little. To be honest, I wasn't thinking very clearly. I'm going on a serious lack of sleep. I've been functioning on adrenaline all day. All my attention was focused on finding Jake. Anyway, I went inside, and it was dark and very quiet. I, uh, found the dead guy in the kitchen."

I stopped and gulped.

"What did you do when you found the body?"

"After I puked, I called the police right away."

For a moment, I saw something that almost looked like amusement flash through Rosen's eyes, but it was gone quickly.

"You didn't leave your name, and then you stayed."

"I don't know why I didn't tell them my name. I guess I didn't want anyone to know I was there, especially if there was a chance I might still be able to find Jake and leave. I was kind of panicking at that point and really wasn't thinking clearly."

"What happened next?"

"I searched the rest of the first floor and then went upstairs. The door to the sitting room was closed, but I saw a light on, so I opened it. There was one guy in the middle of the floor. He was dead too. The door to the bedroom was open, so I went in and turned the lights on. That's when I found Fenton Black. I was about to leave when I saw Jake behind the couch. And that's pretty much when you arrived."

"Do you know of any reason why someone might want to kill Fenton Black?"

I almost sighed with relief. Maybe they didn't suspect Jake after all.

"I imagine people were lining up for the privilege. He was a drug dealer, he ran an escort agency, he was involved with the mob, and he was behind the corruption with the land deals here on the Shore."

"Let me be more specific. Do you know of any reason why Jacob Sheridan would want to kill Fenton Black?"

My heart sank again.

"Jake isn't a killer," I said, sounding weak even to myself.

Rosen didn't comment, just sat there staring levelly at me.

"I really don't think he did it," I said softly.

"We'll be sure to take that into consideration," the detective said, sarcasm dripping from his voice. He stood to leave, signaling the end of my interview. "Ballistics will be able to tell if the gun in his hand was the same weapon that killed the two bodyguards and Black, and we're running tests to see if he was the one who fired it. If he did, I'm afraid your opinion won't carry as much weight as the evidence."

The mention of the gun brought something to the surface of my memory.

"Wait. Did the gun have a silencer on it?"

"What?" I'd clearly caught him off guard.

"The gun you found near Jake, did it have a silencer?"

"No, it didn't. Why would you ask that?"

"Think about it," I said. "Three people were shot in the same house. Two of them I assume were trained bodyguards. They all looked like they'd been caught off guard. Now, the house is huge, but you would still hear gunshots, unless maybe the sitting room and bedroom were soundproofed, which I highly doubt. The only other option is that the shooter used a silencer."

Rosen looked down on me with a grudging respect in his eyes.

"I'm going to go verify your story. If any of it doesn't check out, you're going to be in very deep shit. I'll be back. You can wait in here."

As soon as the door closed, Ilana breathed a deep sigh.

"That went a lot better than I had feared," she said.

"Really?" Not knowing what to expect, I had no way of judging if it had gone well or not.

"Definitely. He didn't take you back to the cell, which means he probably believes you're being level with him. You are, aren't you?"

"Yes, I told him the truth."

"Good. That was definitely the best move in this situation. You could still be facing some serious charges, though, Killian. What were you thinking?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I just wanted to help Jake. I've failed him in so many ways as a friend. I felt I owed him something. If I'd been a better friend to start with, maybe he wouldn't have even been in this mess."

"Killian, you can't blame yourself for the choices other people make. Perhaps you did play a part in all of it, but he made the decision to get involved with Fenton Black. You didn't force him to do that."

I sighed, knowing she was right but feeling no less guilty.

"So you think I could still get in a lot of trouble?"

"It all depends on how generous Detective Rosen is feeling. That last bit about the silencer might be helpful. If you have any other flashes of brilliance, it wouldn't hurt to share them."

"What do we do while I wait for my next genius moment?"

"We sit here patiently."

We sat patiently for about an hour, while neither brilliance nor Rosen appeared.

Finally, the detective returned. He didn't look quite as sour as he had before.

Taking that as a good sign, I sat up straighter in my seat and gripped the edge of the table nervously.

"Alright, Mr. Kendall. Your story checked out, and several good men have vouched for you. I should be charging you on various counts, but since you have a clean record — and some of your friends called in some favors — we're going to let you go with a very stern warning. If I ever catch you interfering with police business again, or even hear that you've gotten in the way of an official investigation, you'll face serious charges."

"I'm free to go?" I said, barely able to believe my luck.

"You're free to go."

"Thank you, Detective Rosen," I said sincerely, holding out my hand to shake.

"You're welcome, Mr. Kendall. By all accounts, you're a good investigator, which doesn't begin to explain the monumental mess you nearly made of this case. Do you have any idea what kind of chaos you would have caused if you'd removed the Sheridan kid from the scene of the crime? Not to mention you tracked blood all over and you vomited in the trashcan. All that confusing evidence would have slowed down our investigation considerably. Besides all that, you would have made yourself a major suspect. Is any of what I'm saying getting through to you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm truly sorry. I won't be that stupid in the future, I promise."

"You'd better not, or, I repeat, I'll throw your ass in jail. Now, we're going to tell the press that we found the bodies while performing an unrelated drug raid. Do

us a favor and tell your boyfriend to stick to the official story."

He turned to leave, but I had one more question.

"Sir?"

He turned back.

"Was I right about the silencer?"

He paused for a second, and I thought he wasn't going to answer. Then he shrugged. "Let's just say the rooms aren't soundproofed. I'll send an officer to see you out."

I hugged Ilana, then she held me by the shoulders at arms' length. "Now, if you thought that was rough, you ain't seen anything yet."

"What do you mean?"

"Adam, Shane Novak, and Micah are all out in the lobby."

I gulped. I knew she was right. Detective Rosen had let me off easy. I wouldn't be so fortunate with the trio waiting for me.

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin.

"Well, it's been a good life. Let's go face the firing squad."

She chuckled and slipped her arm through mine. "Any last requests?"



## Chapter 30

Officer Marshall was sent to escort Ilana and me out. He offered me a small smile as he held the lobby door open for us.

Adam and Micah leaped to their feet the moment we appeared. It was a race to see who could get to me first.

Adam won by a hair, enveloping me in a huge hug. He gripped me tightly for a long time, then stepped back abruptly and shook me by the arms.

"Don't you ever do something that stupid again!"

After he let go of me, Micah quickly moved in for his hug. Holding me close, even longer than Adam had, he whispered fiercely in my ear, "I love you, Killian Kendall. I swear to God, though, if you ever do something like that to me again, I'll leave you and never look back."

I jerked away to stare into his eyes.

He was deadly serious.

"I've never been so scared in my entire life," he said hoarsely. "I couldn't stand to lose you."

"I'm so sorry." I felt as if my heart was being ripped out. "It's okay now, though. It's all over."

"I'm still furious with you. Why didn't you wait for me?"

"If I had, you would have been arrested with me."

"At least I would have known what was happening. You lied to me, Killian. You said you'd wait."

"I'm sorry."

"Can we continue this later?" Novak asked, giving me an unreadable look. I was sure I'd be hearing from him later. "I'd like to get over to the hospital to sit with Judy."

"The hospital?" I asked.

"Jake was admitted for a drug overdose," Adam said.

"Oh my God! Is he okay?"

In all the confusion of being arrested and worrying about what would happen, I hadn't even thought about Jake's condition.

"He'd still not regained consciousness last I heard. I don't know much more than that," Novak said.

I turned to look at Adam and Micah. "Can we go over there too?"

They both nodded. "Of course," Micah said.

"Are you going?" I asked Ilana.

"Well, I was really only here as a family friend. I'm not a criminal lawyer, which means I won't be much help to Jake. Still, I can give some advice, and if things look bad, I can recommend a colleague who is an excellent criminal lawyer. So, yes, I'll join you."

We all left together, then drove to the hospital separately. Adam, Novak, Ilana, and Micah had all come to the police station in their own cars.

The ride over with Micah was mostly silent.

"Micah, I'm really sorry," I said. "I just felt this was something I had to do by myself. Saying I'd wait for you was the only way I could convince you to give me the address. I wish I hadn't lied to you. I promise I won't ever do it again."

"Not now, Killian," he said, turning on the radio.

At the hospital, we found a Judy I hardly recognized. She seemed completely lost sitting in the waiting room alone. I'd never seen her look so defeated and tired.

She brightened a bit when she saw us, however. Her eyes caught and held mine, sharing the knowledge that her vision had been fulfilled. I could see her fear that Jake would be the final loss.

There wasn't much to say. Although nothing had changed yet in Jake's condition, the doctors were still being positive. All we could do was sit and wait in an uneasy silence while sick and injured people came and went around us.

I dozed fitfully, snapping awake as images of the dead bodies I'd seen floated up before my eyes over and over.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a tall, thin doctor who looked as tired as we did approached Judy.

"Ms. Cassara?"

"Yes." She snapped to attention, her back straightening.

"Jake is awake. The police have been in and talked to him, and now he's asking for you. They've given their okay for you to see him."

Judy was on her feet immediately. "If you'll show me the way?"

"Of course. Just follow me."

He led her off beyond the doors. The rest of us sat tight.

"Do you think they'll charge him?" I asked.

"They'll probably hold him in custody, at least," Ilana said, "but unless they have more than they've told us, they won't be able to actually charge him yet. The ballistics tests won't be done today, even with the rush they'll put on it because of who the victim is. That means we can probably get him home by tonight, assuming they set his bail."

"I can't believe this is happening."

"Believe it," Novak said shortly, and we fell back into silence.

It wasn't too long before Judy was back out.

"Killian, he wants to see you."

"Me?"

"I told him what happened. He has no memory whatsoever of the killings. He can't tell the police anything, not even to say for sure he didn't do it."

"Drugs?" Novak asked.

"Possibly." Judy gave a weary shrug. "Probably. He could also be blocking the memory. Or maybe he's lying. Who knows anymore?"

"Did the police say it's okay for me to go in?" I asked after an awkward pause.

"Yes. They're hoping something will trigger his memory. They're recording everything, of course, so be careful what you say."

I nodded and stood up nervously.

"Just go through those doors and a nurse will be waiting to show you the room."

I almost turned around when I saw Jake. He looked so pitiful lying in that big hospital bed, his face pale and sunken. There was something black all around his mouth.

"Charcoal," he said in a frail voice.

I stepped closer. "Huh?"

"The black stuff. They pumped my stomach, then gave me charcoal just to be safe. It's supposed to soak up any poisons left in me, or something like that. I think it was just to torture me."

I reached out a tentative hand. He took it in his, his grip weak.

"You came for me," he whispered after a moment.

I bit my lip, not sure what to say.

"You risked your life for me...again. After everything I said to you the other night."

"Actually, it was because of everything you said to me the other night. It made me realize what a terrible friend I've been. I wanted...to make it up to you somehow. I wanted to help you." I looked down at him. "What happened, Jake?"

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

"I don't even mean just tonight. I mean...what happened to you? How did you end up with Fenton Black?"

He looked away as a tear rolled down his cheek. "I told you how messed up I was in California." His voice was so soft I had to lean in to hear him. "That's part of the reason Judy wanted to move back here. I was having sex with anyone who would supply me."

"Supply you?"

"Drugs. I got into drugs. I guess Judy thought moving me back here would stop it. And it did...for a while. Even I thought things might be different...but then they weren't. It all just hurts so much. I started using

again. Small stuff at first — weed, pills now and then. It makes it all go away. I can forget what happened. And it's so easy to get. You can score it at school.

"But then, after a while, it doesn't really work as well. So you need more pills. And then stronger pills. And it kept escalating. There was this one guy who supplied me for sex. His name was Julio or something like that. I don't even remember. He told me he knew someone who would like to meet me. It was Fenton."

"And Fenton offered you drugs for sex?"

"More than just drugs. He showered me with clothes, presents, cash. I felt like a prince, like someone actually cared about me for a change. Which was stupid, but you can believe anything if you try hard enough. He was only interested in the sex, but I could fool myself, lie to myself enough that I didn't think about how he was using me. For a while anyway."

I squeezed his hand.

"Did you kill him?" I asked softly.

His eyes welled up. "I don't know."

"What happened after I left the Ball?"

"He was furious. He screamed at me for talking to you. He accused me of ruining everything, of being a stupid, drug-addicted slut and having single-handedly brought down his empire. I told him I didn't know what he was talking about, that I hadn't said anything to you. He didn't believe me. He took me home and knocked me around a bit."

"He hit you?"

Jake nodded. "Then he gave me some drugs, I don't even know what. I didn't really care. I think he was hoping I'd OD and take care of his dirty work for him."

"You almost did."

He looked up at me. "I wish I had."

I bent over and gathered him up in a hug. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It's true."

"Because...do you know what that would have done to me? To Judy? We love you, Jake. I know I haven't done a very good job of showing it, but I do. I want to be a better friend for you."

We cried for a few minutes, with him clinging to me as if I were a life preserver and he was drowning.

"Jake," I said at last, "I don't think you killed Fenton."

"You don't?"

"No, but I don't know who did. You have to try and help me here."

"I'm trying."

"Okay, what about the case I was working? Did you ever hear Fenton mention someone named Paul Flynn?"

He thought for a minute. "No. Maybe. I can't remember."

"He was an escort in D.C. who was murdered a little while ago. Paul knew that Fenton was involved in some illegal activities, and had been collecting evidence against him. I'm not sure what Paul intended to do with it...turn Fenton in, I guess. Unfortunately, he was a nice guy — if more than a little naïve — so he gave Fenton the chance to turn himself in first. I believe Fenton killed him instead."

"I...maybe there was something..."

"What?"

"It must have been a month ago or more. Something was really bothering Fenton. He'd been pretty edgy for a couple of weeks. We were in his bedroom one night when someone came to see him. From what I could tell, Fenton had asked him to come. Fenton always sent me out of the room when he talked business, so I went to the sitting room and lay down by the fireplace. Sound came clearly through it from the bedroom, and I could hear most of what they said. I got the impression that Fenton wanted this guy to kill somebody. Although he didn't spell it out, he kept hinting, saying stuff like, 'This problem has to be eliminated,' and 'I want you to take care of this for me.'"

"You think he was hiring this guy to kill Paul?"

"They never mentioned any names, so I don't know. And he wasn't exactly hiring the guy, either. They never discussed money or payment. It was more like Fenton had something he was holding over the guy's head, like blackmail."

"Did you see the guy?"

"Yeah."

"Can you remember what he looked like?"

"He was kinda small and dark skinned, might have been Middle Eastern. He had dark eyes, long black hair, and fairly sharp features."

I knew someone who fit that description perfectly.

"Razi!"

"You know him?" Jake asked in surprise.

"We've met."

My heart was hammering in my chest, my mind racing. I sat down heavily in the single chair next to the bed.

"You think this guy may have had something to do with what happened?"

"If Fenton coerced Razi into killing Paul, or even hired him, and Razi discovered I was getting close to finding that out, he might have had reason to want Fenton dead."

"I don't understand."

"As far as Razi is concerned, with Fenton dead there's nothing left to tie him to the crime. He doesn't know you overheard his conversation with Fenton, which is probably the only thing that saved your life."

"What do you mean?"

"I think when Razi found you unconscious, he decided to try and pin the murders on you. That's why he put the gun in your hand and left you alive. If you'd died later of an overdose, it would have been all the better, as if you'd offed yourself after killing everyone else. There'd have been no one left to defend you."

"You don't have proof of any of that."

I stood up. "No, I don't, but I intend to get it."

Jake eyes widened. "How?"

"I'm going to see Razi."

"Killian, no! If he's the killer, you could be in danger."

"It's the only way to clear you of the murders."

"Let the police handle it. I'll tell them everything I've told you."

I'd forgotten about the police for a moment.

"You won't have to tell them anything. I'm sure they're listening. You're right, though. They should handle it, but if that doesn't work..."

I left the rest unsaid. No need to tip my hand to the police just yet.

I left to go find Ilana and a police officer. Ilana went in first for a brief conference with Jake, then she was joined by the officer, who took Jake's official statement.

I sat tensely in the waiting room with Novak, Micah, and Judy. I seemed to have gotten my second wind — or was it my third or fourth by then? — and my body was aching for action. I was itching to be in on whatever the police decided to do about Razi.

Finally, Ilana came back out.

I was on my feet in a flash. "What's going on?"

She shrugged. "You know about as much as I do. Jake gave them a statement regarding this Razi character, but I don't think they gave too much credence to it. They seem to be under the impression that he's making it up to draw suspicion away from himself. They want to see you now to find out what you know about Razi."

As she finished speaking, Detective Rosen came into the waiting room with his signature sour expression on his face. Spotting me, he signaled me over.

"I didn't think I'd be having another conversation with you this soon," he said. "We've got Jake Sheridan's statement, and now we need some information from you. He doesn't know what this Razi's last name is, but he thought you might."

I flipped through my notebook until I found Razi's information.

"It's Akiba, Razi Akiba."

I spelled it for him.

"What do you know about him?"

"Not much. I interviewed him during my investigation, but he wasn't exactly cooperative. I know he used to work for Fenton Black's escort agency and was supposedly a friend of Paul Flynn's, the guy who was murdered."

"That it?"

"I have an address for him."

He copied it down from my notebook.

"Are you going to look into this?" I asked.

Rosen gave me a probing stare.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I'll be getting in touch with the D.C. detective handling the case. We'll compare notes and see where it goes from there."

"Ask for Detective Owen Evans, and you already know everything he knows because I told it to him."

My big mouth earned me a very dirty look.

"Back off, Kendall. I'll take it from here."

"Don't you think you should at least have Razi taken into custody? What if he finds out you're on to him and runs?"

"We can't just lock people up for no reason. Right now, we have no evidence that he's involved with these murders in any way. All we have is the word of some drug-addled kid who'd probably say anything at this point to save his own hide. Maybe he's telling the truth, but until we have something more to go on, we're assuming Jake is the killer here."

"What about the gunpowder residue tests? Did you do them on Jake?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Are you telling me how to do my job?"

"No, but—"

"We're running the test, but even if it comes up negative, that's hardly conclusive. It's not that reliable. Your friend won't be off the hook that easily. Now, go home and stay out of this. Your involvement is finished. That's an order."

I opened my mouth to object, but he ignored me and walked away.

"Killian, relax," Micah said, coming up next to me.

Realizing I had clenched my fists at my sides, I forced myself to let go.

"I have to go back to D.C.," I said in a low voice.

"What? Now?"

"Yes, now."

"Killian, you haven't had any real sleep in almost forty-eight hours. You can't turn around and drive back up there. Let the police handle this."

"Like they handled Paul's case? I've got to do something, Micah. I can't just sit here."

He sighed. "You're going to do this no matter what I say, aren't you?"

I nodded.

His shoulders slumped in resignation. "Then I'll drive you."

"You'll do that for me?"

"I'll go get the car."

As Micah walked out, Novak appeared at my side.

"We need to talk. Let's step outside." His tone of voice implied that this would not be a fun conversation.

I followed him without a word. An older man was smoking a cigarette just beyond the door, so we moved a few feet away.

"I need to apologize to you, Killian."

I felt my mouth drop open. "Apologize to me? For what?"

"I've been very negligent in my training. You came along so quickly and you're such a good investigator, I keep forgetting you're still a rookie. I should have paid more attention instead of getting so wrapped up in my own case."

"Novak, you don't have to apologize." I was confused and a little shaken by this sudden turn of events. "It's your job..."

"It's also my job to make sure you're properly trained as an investigator...and keep you out of trouble. This business at Fenton Black's house was reckless, and well — let's face it — stupid. First of all, if you had a license, it would probably be revoked. What you did is called illegal entry or trespassing. It was also incredibly dangerous. If the security force had been in place, or if the killer had still been on the premises, you would quite possibly be dead right now."

"I know it was stupid. I'm sorry."

He held up a hand.

"But...if you hadn't done what you did, Jake would probably be dead right now from a drug overdose."

Plus, it gave us a jump on the killer that we might not have had if you hadn't gotten there when you did."

"So, wait... Was it a good thing I snuck into Fenton's estate or a bad thing?"

"Both."

"I don't get it."

He sighed. "You caught every break possible, so hopefully everything will work out for the best. You might not be so lucky next time. I overheard you saying you're heading to D.C. If you're planning on confronting Razi in some way, I would advise you not to. Somehow, though, I have a feeling I'd be wasting my time."

He gave me a look that clearly invited a response of some sort.

"The police could drag this out for who knows how long, if they do anything at all. The more we delay, the more chance Razi will bolt. Or he could hurt Tad."

"Tad?"

"The boy who lives with him."

"Do you have any reason to think Razi will hurt this boy?"

"He's killed at least four people so far. Isn't that reason enough?"

"You've obviously made up your mind about this. As your employer, I could officially forbid you, but you'd probably just do it anyway." He shook his head. "And I can't say I wouldn't do the same thing if I were in your shoes. I want you to be better prepared than you are, however."

Just then, Micah drove up, reminding me I'd left my car parked in the woods.

"Where's my car?"

"Probably in impound," Novak said. "You'll have to go after it."

"It'll have to wait. I don't have time right now."

"Then I'll take care of it. Come on. I have something to give you," Novak said, setting out across the parking lot.

I jumped into Micah's car. "Follow Novak, please. He has something for me."

"What?"

"I don't know."

When we stopped behind Novak's beat-up old jalopy, he was leaning into the passenger's side to rummage through the glove box.

"Too much crap in here," he grumbled.

He pulled out a shiny black gun and laid it on the seat next to him.

"You're giving me a gun?"

He carefully turned to give me a withering glare.

"Have you lost your mind? Do you honestly think I'd give you a gun? Do you have any idea how quickly they'd yank my license if you ran off and shot somebody with my gun?"

He ducked back in and emerged a few seconds later brandishing a black, tube-shaped object.

"What's that?"

"Pepper spray."

"Pepper spray?" I asked disbelievingly. That was what he wanted to give me?

"Have you ever been on the receiving end of it?"

"No."

"I have. We had to when it was issued to the police department. Let me tell you something: it hurts."

All you can think about is how much it hurts. It's some of the worst pain I've ever felt in my life. It's a very effective, relatively nonviolent weapon. Don't knock it. Put out your hand." I did, and he slapped the canister into my open palm. "Stick it in your pocket and don't forget it's there. If you need it, don't hesitate to use it. But for God's sake, make sure it's pointed in the right direction before you spray it. We'll talk more when you get back."

I put it in my pocket, thinking it wasn't very likely I'd be using it. I left Novak returning things to the glove box and rejoined Micah in his car.

"What did he give you?"

"Pepper spray."

Micah frowned.

"Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too," I said. "Let's go."

"Where exactly are we going?"

"Razi's apartment." I pulled out my notebook, found the address and entered it into Micah's GPS.

"Do you think it's safe to confront Razi? Even with your trusty pepper spray?"

"No, I don't think it's safe, but what choice do I have?"

"Maybe you should call your detective friend that you worked with yesterday."

"Evans? I wouldn't exactly call him a friend."

"Still, he knows the history of the case. He might be willing to go out on a limb to help."

"I doubt that."

I pulled out my cell phone anyway and dialed Evans's number.

A voice message answered: "Hi, this is Detective Owen Evans. I'm not at my desk right now, but if you leave a message at the tone, I'll get back to you as soon as possible. If this is an emergency or if you would like to speak to someone else, please press zero now."

I did so.

The phone rang a few times before being answered by a gruff male voice.

"I'm trying to reach Detective Evans," I said.

"Detective Evans isn't on duty right now. Would you like to leave a voicemail message or speak to the detective currently on duty?"

"No, that's okay." I disconnected. "He's not on duty," I said to Micah.

"What about Chris's dad?"

"He's not even working on this case."

"Still, he might be able to help."

"I should at least tell Chris what's going on," I said.

Glancing at my watch, I realized that between jail and the hospital I'd spent another wakeful night. "It's 7:30. I hope she's an early riser."

Her little brother answered after several rings.

"Hey, Kevin, this is Killian. Is Chris there?"

"Yeah, hang on." I heard him bellow for Chris, followed by their father yelling at Kevin to finish getting ready for school. The phone was set down with a thud.

A few seconds later, Chris came on the line.

"Killian! What the hell is going on? We heard on the news this morning that Fenton Black is dead, along with his two bodyguards."

"I know. I'm the one who found them. I was there when the police arrived, and I spent most of the night in jail."

"What?"

I quickly gave her the whole story, including how Jake was currently under suspicion for the murders, and what he'd told me about Razi.

"So we're on our way there now," I said. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do when we arrive. I guess I'll figure it out as I go along."

"Killian, this is crazy. You can't go in there alone."

"Oh, it's okay. I'm armed with pepper spray."

"Huh?"

"Chris, I have to do something. Tad could be in danger. You've met him. He's just a kid, and he's already been through so much."

"You know what? You have a savior complex."

"A what?"

"A savior complex. It's common among cops. It means you think you have a mission to save everyone. Well, guess what? You don't. You're only human. You can't be there for everyone in trouble."

"Of course I can't save everybody, but what kind of person would I be if I knew someone was in danger and didn't do anything to help them?"

"That's what the police are for. Let them deal with it."

"They don't always want to deal with it, and when they do, they're often too late. They don't prevent crime, they just show up after it's already happened."

"That doesn't mean you can just take the law into your own hands."

"All I'm going to do is try to get Tad out of there. And maybe see if I can get Razi to admit anything."

"I just don't think it's a very good idea."

"Is there anything your dad can do?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Backup of some kind?"

"Backup? You're not a cop. You can't get backup."

"I just meant maybe some officers could be sent over to Razi's apartment or something."

"That would be backup. Without evidence, their hands are tied. Right now, there's absolutely nothing linking Razi to either crime, except for the testimony of your friend, who isn't the most reliable source. If someone else could corroborate his story..."

"Everyone who could have done so is dead."

"Which would be convenient if he was lying, since it also means that everyone who could disprove his story is dead."

"Except Razi."

"And, of course, all you have to do is ask him if he killed Paul and the others. I can just see him falling all over himself to admit it."

"I didn't say that."

"Then what exactly are you expecting to happen?"

"I don't know."

What was I expecting? Why was I doing this?

Pausing for a second while I thought about it, I recognized the underlying feeling of pressure, which I'd

pretty much grown accustomed to over the last few days, as having been my driving force through all of this. Although I couldn't identify it, I felt something bad was approaching, as if a storm was building, and I had to do what I could to get people out of harm's way.

"It's hard to explain, Chris. I just feel...compelled to do something. Look, I'm sorry I called and upset you. I'll handle this myself."

"Killian, does your compulsion have anything to do with those — what did you call them — gifts you were telling me about?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure it does."

"Please don't do anything stupid."

"I won't."

I hung up and slumped down in my seat sulkily. Micah took his eyes off the road long enough to glance over at me.

"Why don't you try to get a little sleep? I'll wake you up when we reach the city."

I shrugged. It was as good a suggestion as any, although I doubted I'd be able to fall asleep, considering how keyed up I was. Somewhat surprisingly, however, I realized I was drifting off after just a few minutes. I struggled against it for a bit longer, then finally gave in and slept.

I came awake with a start when Micah gently shook my arm.

"We're almost to D.C. What's the plan once we get there?"

My little nap seemed to have done more harm than good, leaving me feeling very discombobulated.

"I don't really have one."

"Well, it might be a good idea to come up with one, don't you think?"

"I work better without a plan."

"Okay. Well, what about me?"

"What about you?"

"Hey, Killian, can you stop being so hostile with me? I'm on your side, remember? I didn't have to drive you up here."

"You're right. I'm sorry," I said contritely. "I'm just so tired. Not that I'm trying to make excuses. It's just..."

"Never mind. I understand. This is something you feel you have to do. I can sympathize with that. I'm not going to try and stop you. I want to help you, but I don't know what to do. Should I go in with you, or stay outside and act as your backup?"

I rubbed my face, wishing I was more alert for this. "I don't know. Which do you think would be better?"

"Neither one is going to be a picnic," he said darkly. "If I go in and something goes wrong, I may not be able to call for help, but at least I'll know what the hell is happening. If I stay outside and something goes wrong, I may be able to call for help, but I won't know what's happening. And what if Razi isn't home?"

"Huh?" That possibility had completely escaped me.

"What if Razi isn't even there?"

"Well, that would make it easier to get Tad away from him, at least."

"Have you thought ahead as to what you're going to do with Tad if he decides to leave with you?"

My silence was answer enough.

"You're really doing this on a wing and a prayer, aren't you?"

"He can stay with me until we figure out what to do with him," I said.

"I hope Adam will be okay with that."

"He will be. Besides, he's barely even at the beach house these days. He spends most of the time at the B&B."

"Okay. So you have a plan if Razi isn't there: Whisk Tad away to safety. What if Razi is there?"

"Then I'll think of something."

"Kill, I know you think fast on your feet — usually, anyway — but you're awfully tired right now. You're not exactly at your peak performance."

"Do you have any ideas?"

"Not really."

"Alright then. We wing it."

Micah sighed, obviously not happy with that prospect but unable to come up with a better alternative.

We drove the last few minutes to Razi's neighborhood in tense silence. Micah parked the car on the street, and we approached the apartment building on foot.

At Razi's door, I hesitated, wondering if maybe we shouldn't form some sort of plan after all.

The question was answered for me when the door suddenly swung open and Tad stepped into the hall carrying a large trash bag. He blinked in surprise when he saw us.

I quickly put my finger to my lips before he could say anything. He pulled the door shut and looked at me questioningly.

"Is Razi home?" I whispered.

He nodded uncertainly. "I have to throw this in the dumpster. If I take too long, he'll be mad. He's been in a really foul mood lately. What are you doing here?"

"Keep walking. I'll come with you and tell you on the way. Micah, you stay here and watch the door in case Razi comes out."

"And what should I do if he does?"

I shrugged. "You'll think of something."

Tad trotted off down the hall, with me matching him step for step.

"Do you know why Razi has been in such a bad mood lately?" I asked him.

When he shot me a sideways glance, I noticed the fading evidence of a black eye.

"No," he answered shortly.

"Was Razi home last night?"

"Yeah, why?"

That stopped me in my tracks for a second. I rushed to catch back up.

"He was home? Are you sure?"

"Why? What's going on?"

"There was a murder last night, several murders in fact, and a friend of mine is being accused of them. I'm pretty sure it's all connected to Paul's murder, and Razi is involved up to his eyeballs. But if he was here last night..."

"You think Razi is the killer?"

"Yes, there's a witness who heard Razi being asked to kill Paul."

"But...but Paul was Razi's friend. Razi wouldn't kill him."

We approached the dumpsters in an alley next to the apartment building. Tad tossed the bag into one of them and started back.

"The witness said the guy who wanted the job done seemed to have something on Razi, something he was holding over Razi's head. Besides, it could have been killing two birds with one stone. Didn't you say Paul had been talking about getting in touch with your father?"

"Razi wouldn't have killed him," Tad said again, although he didn't sound so convinced this time.

"Look, I know you feel you owe Razi some sort of loyalty because he took you in, but as I said before, it could be a lot different, better. You can stay with me until we figure something out."

Tad's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, very serious. I don't think it's safe for you to be here anymore." I stopped and grabbed his wrist. "Listen for a minute, Tad. If I'm right, then Razi has killed at least four people, one of whom was supposed to be his best friend. Even if I'm wrong about that..." I reached out and gently touched the fading bruise. "He did this, didn't he?"

Tad nodded slightly.

"If he's hitting you, what makes this any better than living with your dad?"

"It's not always like this, only when I do something wrong."

"Nobody deserves to be treated this way, Tad. Get out while you can."

"What about Razi?"

"What about him?"

"What if he comes after me?"

"Do you think he would?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He doesn't like to lose things he thinks of as his."

"And you're his property?"

He shrugged.

"We'll have to deal with that if and when it happens. Do you have anything inside that you need?"

"I never said I was going with you."

"Tad, come on. Think. You've essentially become Razi's sex slave." He winced but didn't argue. "And now you're turning into his punching bag too. Is that what you want?" He shook his head. "I can give you a safe place to stay until we figure something out. Will you go with me?"

He nodded, although he looked more terrified than ever.

"Good. Is there anything in the apartment you need, or can we just leave?"

"The clothes Razi bought me..."

"We can get you new clothes."

"That's all I have."

"Okay. I'll call Micah."

I pulled out my phone and dialed Micah's phone. It rang and rang with no answer. I hung up and turned back to Tad.

"He's not answering. You wait by the car while I go get him." I pointed out the car and started back inside.

"Killian, hold on," Tad called before I reached the door. I turned back.

"I wasn't completely honest with you."

"About what?"

"When you asked me if Razi was home last night."

"He wasn't home?"

"He was, but not all night. He got a phone call yesterday afternoon that seemed to upset him. I don't know who it was or what it was about, because Razi hardly said a word. As soon as he hung up, he slammed around the apartment for a few minutes, then left. He returned after dark in a terrible mood. I did my best to avoid him for the rest of the night."

"So he could be the killer?"

Tad shrugged helplessly. "You'd better hurry. He's going to notice I've been gone too long and come looking for me."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

When I reached Razi's floor, however, Micah was nowhere to be seen.

## Chapter 31

I stood uncertainly in the hall, trying to force my tired mind to think logically. My brain was, however, putting up a valiant fight.

When I'd left Micah there to watch out for Razi, I hadn't specifically told him what to do if Razi appeared. I'd simply hoped he'd know enough to invent a distraction. Micah wouldn't have deserted his post, so if he wasn't where I left him, it followed that he was most likely in the apartment.

"Fuck!" I cursed under my breath. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

That was the worst case scenario, but I had to do something. I took a deep breath, boldly walked up to the door, and knocked.

A few seconds later, it swung open to reveal Razi's thin frame and frowning face. His eyes narrowed when he saw me.

"I should have known."

"Is Micah in here with you?" I asked, as if it seemed perfectly natural that he might be.

"Yes, I opened my door and found him standing in the hall. He didn't mention you were with him."

"Oh, I was parking the car," I lied fluidly.

When his frown deepened, I realized he didn't believe me. I wondered frantically what pretext Micah had given him for being there. Until I knew, it would be better to avoid the issue.

"You didn't happen to see Tad while you were out there, did you?" he asked suspiciously.

"He's the boy who lives with you?"

Razi's dark eyes flicked over me. "Yes."

"I didn't see him."

I could tell Razi didn't buy anything I was saying, but he seemed to remember that we were still standing at the door. He stepped back and motioned me in, somewhat ungraciously, I thought.

He scanned the hall one last time, then shut the door firmly.

In the living room, I found Micah sitting on the couch looking somewhat lost and very nervous. I was struck again by the impersonality of the room, which contained nothing at all of the man living there. It could have been an anonymous showroom apartment anywhere in the country: well furnished and tastefully decorated, but empty of soul.

"I was just telling Razi how relieved we are that this whole mess is over," Micah said a little too loudly. I blinked uncomprehendingly, my brain too exhausted to catch his hint. "You know," he went on, "with Fenton being dead, now we can finally put Paul's death behind us."

"Oh, yeah," I said, catching on at last. "It's such a relief."

Razi walked slowly past and stood facing me across the glass-topped coffee table, where several glossy, oversize photo books of nude young men were scattered. He glanced pointedly between Micah and me, then cocked his head to one side.

"Try again."

"What?" The tension in my voice was clear, even to me.

"Why are you really here?"

"I told you, now that this is all over we just wanted to see how you were," Micah said. "I mean, you were Paul's closest friend and all..."

Razi cut him off with a razor-sharp glare before turning his attention back to me. "I know you were the one who found Fenton's body."

I shook my head in confusion. How could he know that? It hadn't been released in the news.

Razi misinterpreted my headshake. "Don't bother denying it. I have excellent sources."

"Sources?" I asked stupidly.

I was dying here. I had to clear my head. It was vitally important to my health — and Micah's — that I start thinking faster.

"It doesn't matter who they are. Let's just say I trust them completely. They've never let me down yet."

I took a seat next to Micah, who put his hand on my back, offering comfort. The slight tremble in his touch was not reassuring, however. He was as scared as I was — more so, really, since I was still too flustered to be properly panicked.

I shrugged. "Yeah, I found him, but what difference does that make? It's still over. Everything led to him. Paul found out about his criminal activities and had evidence on him. Fenton knew that, so he had Paul killed."

Razi's eyes snapped to mine. "Had him killed?"

"Or killed him himself." I tried to shrug my gaffe off. "Does it matter now? Paul is dead either way...and so is Fenton. It's finally over."

"Is it?" Razi asked with a dangerous edge to his voice.

I was beginning to worry about our chances of walking out of there easily.

"Yes, it is. With Fenton dead, the case is closed as far as the police are concerned."

"What about Fenton's killer?"

"The police believe they have him in custody."

"And what about you?"

"What do you mean?"

Razi's eyes locked with mine. "Is it over as far as you're concerned? Do you believe the police have Fenton's killer in custody?"

"What difference does it make what I think?"

"It makes a big difference...to the killer."

I laughed uneasily. "Aren't you giving me too much credit?"

"Am I? You pretty much single-handedly solved Paul's murder when the police couldn't."

"When the police wouldn't," I corrected. "They could have if they'd wanted to."

"I'm not so sure. You had contacts they didn't. People would talk to you that wouldn't talk to the police. People like TJ Jackson."

My eyes widened. He did have good sources if he knew TJ's name.

"Where is all this going?" I asked, tiring of our tense game of cat-and-mouse.

"Going? It's not going anywhere." Razi suddenly seemed more at ease. His shoulders slumped, and a small smile turned up the corner of his mouth. "I'm just killing time until Tad gets back."

"Where'd he go?" I asked, relieved at the break in the tension. I felt Micah relax next to me as well.

"To take out the trash," Razi said.

He walked over to a long, narrow table against the wall and leaned casually against it. The top was completely barren except for a carved wooden staff lying stretched across a matching set of intricately fashioned brass stands.

"He's never taken this long before. I hope he didn't run into trouble." He threw me an unreadable glance.

"You want us to go look for him?" Micah asked hopefully, no doubt seeing a chance to escape.

"No, that's quite alright. I wouldn't want to impose."

"It wouldn't be an imposition," Micah said quickly — too quickly.

Razi gave us a little smile I didn't like at all. I suddenly felt more uneasy with this relaxed Razi than I had when he was so clearly on edge.

He trailed his fingers lazily across the staff.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is," I said.

And it truly was: magnificently carved with mythical creatures writhing around its entire length.

"It's one of the few things I own from my homeland." He looked up at me, his eyes heavy-lidded, almost seductive. "I didn't bring it with me, of course. I didn't have time. I bought it here."

He paused and smiled creepily again.

"I never told you my story, did I?" He was speaking only to me, as if Micah wasn't even in the room.

I shook my head, my throat suddenly too tight to speak.

"The last time you were here, I said we all have stories. You asked me what mine was, but I was rude and didn't tell you. I'll rectify that now, if you'll allow me."

I nodded.

"I was born on the West Bank in a village not far from the Israeli border. My parents were considered freedom fighters by my people, terrorists by Israel and the U.S. Death was a daily occurrence. Killing and fighting were a part of my earliest education. I could shoot a gun by the time most American children are learning to tie their shoelaces. I can handle almost any weapon with ease, from a rifle to a knife. I can even kill with my bare hands if I have to. That didn't mean I liked killing, just that I was good at it. When I was ten years old, my mother died in a car bombing. Two years later, Israeli soldiers arrested my father, and he was never seen again. I was sent to live with my uncle and his wife."

He paused for a moment. I sat in horrified silence, watching as he gripped one end of the staff and gave it a slight twist. To my surprise, a slender steel dagger slipped from it like a sword from its sheath. The blade was no longer or wider than that of a large letter opener, but I had no doubt the glittering edge was lethal.

Glancing our way, Razi seemed pleased to see our eyes glued to the dagger.

"Beautiful and useful," he said, sliding the blade back into the staff and locking it in place. "What good is beauty if it's useless?"

He stroked the staff again, then turned to face us.

"To continue my story, although my uncle was married, he and his wife never had children. I don't know why. Maybe because my aunt couldn't conceive, or possibly because my uncle was gay...at least, I understand that now. I didn't even know what the word meant then. All I knew was that my uncle liked to do things to me at night when everyone else was asleep. He used to tell me that if anybody ever found out, I would be killed. I accepted what he did to me as payment for living with them instead of on the street as a beggar. It got to the point where I became quite good and even rather enjoyed it. It went on for a few years, until one night his wife caught us. She was utterly horrified, as you can imagine. My uncle panicked and killed her — strangled her to death."

Razi began to pace, never moving too far from the staff and its concealed blade.

"That left us with the question of what to do with her body. I suggested leaving it near the border, to appear as if an Israeli had killed her, but the border area was dangerous, and my uncle was never a fighter. Besides, soldiers didn't kill by strangulation. My uncle decided I would have to take the blame. Who was I to argue? I was barely fifteen. My uncle couldn't stand the idea of my being executed, however, so he chose to help me leave the country. He would tell the authorities I had run away. I'd be long gone by the time they came looking for me. He still knew my parents' friends, people

who could arrange for me to slip over the border unnoticed. I was passed from one place to another, from person to person, until I reached Jordan.

"There, I was helped by a kind woman who reminded me much of my mother. She took pity on me, a young boy alone and afraid in a strange country. She had contacts, knew the right people, and arranged for them to supply me with false documents, including a passport, so I could travel to the United States. It would never work today, but back then, my fake passport was sufficient."

He paused his pacing and leaned against the table once more. "There I was, fifteen and alone in a foreign country. I barely spoke English, didn't know a soul. I managed to find my way to the city, where I quickly learned to survive using what my uncle had taught me — first as a street hustler, later as an escort. I've done pretty well for myself, wouldn't you say?" He gestured around the room with an all-encompassing sweep of his arm. "So there, Killian Kendall, that's my story. Are you satisfied now?"

"Yes," I managed to say.

"Good." Then, moving so quickly I barely had time to register what was happening, he suddenly leaped forward, swinging the staff like a club.

I slammed myself against the back of the couch while Micah, who I'd almost forgotten was there, threw himself in front of me.

The carved cane hit Micah's head with a sickening thud, the force of the blow actually knocking him off the couch and onto the floor.

I sat stunned by the sudden violence. It took me a few seconds to realize that Razi was making no move to hit me.

He stared down contemptuously at Micah.

"How heroic, sacrificing himself to save his beloved. Hero — it's really just another way of saying someone did something stupid." He looked up at me with terrifyingly cold eyes. "If only the poor idiot knew he was the target all along. Now that we're alone we can talk...man to man. I told you my story, so it's time for you to tell me yours."

"What do you mean?"

"I know why you're really here. We can skip that part. Somehow, you figured out who killed Paul and Fenton and, of course, you came running right to me. Unfortunate for you, convenient for me. It saves me the trouble of hunting you down. You were my last obstacle. What I really want to know is how you figured it out, and, more importantly at the moment, what have you done with Tad."

"I haven't done anything with Tad," I said, praying the boy would be smart enough to stay by the car and not come looking for us. I'd completely lost track of how long we'd been in the apartment. "I didn't see him when I came up."

If we were going to stay alive, we had to escape — and fast — but I had no idea how to accomplish that, especially with Micah unconscious. My only chance was to get the pepper spray out without Razi noticing it and hope it really was as effective as Novak said.

In order to do that, though, I had to stall and distract him, so I kept talking.

"I thought Fenton killed Paul, except everyone kept saying it wasn't his style, that he'd probably hired a hit man. Either way, I knew who was behind it, so I went to the police with the evidence I had."

"Considerable evidence," Razi commented offhandedly.

I filed that away, beginning to suspect his source was a mole inside the police department.

"The police said they were going to raid Fenton's place. I had a friend who I knew was with Fenton, so I went to the estate to try and get him out before they did it. That's when I found the bodies and called the police. I guess you were tipped off and got there ahead of me?"

"You had a friend there?" Razi asked sharply, not answering my question.

"Yes. He's the one you left alive. I spoke to him last night after he woke up. He told me how he'd overheard Fenton ordering you to kill Paul. It was fairly simple to put the rest together."

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," Razi said. He looked at me with narrowed eyes. "But you're here, not the police, which means they don't believe your little friend, at least not yet. I'll be long gone before they arrive. All they'll find here will be two more dead bodies."

He swung the staff back.

"Wait!" I screamed as I scrambled up onto the sofa, balancing precariously on the cushions. "I have one more question."

His arm stopped in midair. I took the scant opportunity before he could begin the downswing.

"Why?" I asked. "Why did you agree to kill Paul?"

The staff swung down. I didn't have time to do more than flinch before it smashed across my face, sending me reeling over the back of the sofa. I hit the floor with a heavy crash, but thankfully, I was still conscious — a little stunned, but aware. I could taste blood in my mouth, metallic and warm, but I figured the damage was unimportant, all things considered.

I scrambled to my knees as Razi came purposefully around the sofa.

"You want to know why I killed Paul?"

He stalked slowly toward me, speaking in a chillingly calm voice, while I crab-shuffled away as quickly as I could manage.

"I'll tell you why I killed Paul: for the same reason I killed Fenton and his clowns, and for the same reason I'm killing you and your boyfriend. Because I didn't have a choice."

I spit out a mouthful of blood. "You always have a choice."

"No!" he shouted, then regained control and continued. "No, I didn't. Not if I wanted to keep my freedom. That's something most of you Americans take for granted. I know the difference."

"What do you mean?" I had to keep him talking and hope he wouldn't notice me trying to get my hand in my pocket as surreptitiously as possible. "How could you lose your freedom by refusing to kill someone?"

"When I was working for Fenton as an escort, some rich, fat-cat politician tried to rape me. Apparently, he got off on taking by force what was already included

in the price. I knew how to kill, remember. I'd done it before. So I killed him. A good lawyer might have argued self-defense, but it was just as likely I'd be locked up for murder. After all, he was a respectable public servant, while I was just an illegal immigrant prostitute, brown skin and all. Imagine the headlines, the field day that the Republicans would have had with that. Fenton helped cover it up, but what I didn't know at the time was that he carefully saved the evidence — just in case. If necessary, he wanted to be able to pin it all on me."

Razi became so caught up in his story he failed to notice my hand slip into my pocket, my fingers curling around the cool metal cylinder there. It helped that my crouching position partially hid my movements.

"Fenton used that evidence to blackmail me into killing Paul and stealing the evidence Paul had against him," he said. "I didn't want to. I tried to talk Paul into running, or at least leaving Fenton alone, but he wouldn't hear of it. He died because he was too damn stubborn." He paused, a tiny, cruel smile playing at his lips. "Kind of like you."

He made a sudden lunge toward me, whipping the staff through the air as I threw myself backwards, scrambling away from him until my back hit the wall.

Yanking my hand out of my pocket, I ripped the lid off the canister. I didn't have time to aim it, only to hope I had it pointed in the right direction.

I held it out in front of me, but before I could press the button, Razi caught my hand on the back swing, knocking the can out of my grip. I watched helplessly as it skittered across the floor.

I turned my horrified gaze back to Razi, who had crouched down in front of me, his face now so close I could feel his breath. If anything, he was even more terrifying than before. His eyes had taken on a crazed look that sent chills running down my spine. Any perceptible sanity that had been there in the beginning was gone, replaced now by pure hate.

"You and Micah have caused me so much trouble," he said in a low voice made rough by emotion. "No one actually cared who killed Paul until you came along. I'm really going to enjoy killing both of you." He cocked his head to one side. "I think I'll do it slowly, so you feel every second of pain."

He twisted the handle of the staff and the soft click sounded unnaturally loud in my heightened state of alert. He slowly withdrew the dagger, its razor-sharp edge eerily mirroring the glint in his eyes.

"What do you think? Should I start with your pretty face?" he asked in a breathy voice, seeming almost turned on by the prospect. "Or maybe I should start somewhere a little more personal."

He flicked the blade toward my crotch, chuckling menacingly when I flinched.

I fought the rising panic in my chest, willing myself to remain still. I was deadly certain that, if I tried to move, he would forego the torture and kill me quickly and efficiently. He was clearly enjoying the smell of my fear.

He reached out a steady hand and drew the blade softly across my right cheek.

There was no pain, but I immediately felt a trickle of blood spill out. I sucked in an involuntary gasp.

"Sharp, isn't it?" he asked seductively.

The cut began to sting, and I felt a tear roll down my cheek, more from fear than pain.

"Are you scared now?"

I nodded.

"Good. I want you to be scared. That makes it more fun."

He was reaching out to slice my left cheek when a flash of motion caught both our attention.

Before I could even turn to see what was happening, Razi spun around to face his new adversary.

With a roar of fury, Micah launched himself at him, the two of them colliding with bone-rattling force and crashing to the floor.

The knife vanished from sight in the chaos, but I didn't waste precious time worrying about it. My focus narrowed to one thing: the pepper spray. Heart hammering, I dropped to my knees and scrambled frantically across the floor. I shoved aside an end table, flipped a recliner, and there it was—the canister, glinting faintly in the sunlight.

I snatched it up, surged to my feet, and vaulted over the couch.

Razi and Micah were still locked together, grappling like wild animals, their limbs tangled, their faces pressed dangerously close. If I used the spray now, I'd hit both of them.

I froze, the canister aimed and ready, my finger twitching on the trigger—until I saw the dagger emerge from between their bodies, still clutched in Razi's fist.

"I'm sorry, Micah," I whispered, and pulled the trigger.

The effect was instant and brutal. Both men shrieked in unison, a raw, animal howl that tore through the room before dissolving into choking coughs. They writhed on the carpet, clawing at their streaming eyes as the knife clattered harmlessly to the floor.

For a split second, I just stood there, shaking, paralyzed by indecision. What now? What if Razi recovered first? What if—

The front door exploded inward with a deafening crack, splinters flying. I hit the floor instinctively as the shout rang out:

“Police! Don’t move!”

Relief crashed through me so hard I almost sobbed. I had never in my life been so grateful to hear those words.

It took a while to sort things out.

Eventually I learned that, after I'd talked to Chris, she'd become worried and explained things to her father. He'd agreed that it sounded dangerous and called Detective Evans. Together, they decided "unofficially" to drive over to Razi's apartment.

When they showed up in uniform, Tad had quickly approached them, concerned because I'd been gone so long. He had no idea they were there looking for us, assuming they were two cops who just happened to be in the neighborhood. So they were forewarned before they went in.

When they got to Razi's floor, they heard Micah's scream, so, of course, they broke the door down.

Once they saw what was going on, I tried to explain who was who and what had happened. I'm not sure how coherent I was, but they got the gist of it.

They quickly placed Razi under arrest and handcuffed him. Then they left him to cough and thrash on the floor while they attended to Micah.

By then, I was at his side. He was calmer but still in excruciating pain.

Evans rushed into the kitchen and came back a minute later with a bowlful of suds.

"It's just dish soap and water," he said, more to me than Micah, whose eyes were still squeezed shut in agony, streaming tears.

He began carefully dabbing at Micah's red face.

"Can you bring me fresh water?" he asked me. "I need it to rinse his eyes and get this soap off his skin."

Running to the kitchen, I found a glass and filled it with tap water.

"Will this stop the pain?" I asked, handing it to the detective.

"Not completely, but it'll help ease it some," he said without looking up.

Meanwhile, Louis had called an ambulance, which arrived in what I thought was a surprisingly short time. Micah was handed over to the paramedics to be taken to the emergency room, where he would be treated for the pepper spray and the blow to the head, which I now saw was bleeding slightly at his temple.

When they noticed that the cut on my cheek looked pretty nasty, they insisted I go too, so a doctor could decide if I needed stitches.

Miraculously, Tad had not disappeared. He arrived on the scene with the paramedics when they came up. I'd been half afraid he'd run, but he was determined to make sure we were okay.

I told the officers he was with me and insisted he accompany us to the hospital. It was allowed with a minimum of questions.

"So what now?" Tad asked a few hours later as we sat in the waiting room.

Micah was still in an examination room. I hadn't required stitches, for which I was very grateful, but they had bandaged the cut on my cheek with some gauze and white surgical tape.

"I guess next I'll have to talk to the police," I said wearily. "I'm sure they didn't get all their questions answered at the apartment. I doubt I was very articulate. I'm surprised they haven't shown up before now."

"That's not what I meant. I want to know what happens to me. But since you brought it up, will I have to talk to the police again?"

I glanced over at him. He looked more like a lost little kid than I'd ever seen him.

"What did you tell them before?"

"Well, they were pretty busy with everything else so they really weren't paying much attention to me. When they arrived, I just told them I knew you'd gone up to talk to Razi and you hadn't come back. They took off like a light. Later, this guy asked my name and address and wrote them down, then said they'd be in touch."

"Did you tell them the truth?"

"My name and address you mean? Not exactly. I said I was Tad Young and gave them the address of another apartment in the building."

I raised an eyebrow. "Probably not the smartest thing in the world."

He shrugged. "I was scared."

"I'll talk to Detective Evans and straighten it out."

"Will he make me go back to my dad?"

"I don't know. I'll try to get him to let you come home with me."

I watched his eyes skitter toward the door and knew he was thinking about bolting.

"Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't run. I'm not going to abandon you, I promise. No matter what happens, I'll be there with you."

He bit down on his lip and nodded.

"So what's your real name?"

For several long seconds I thought he would refuse to answer. Then, seeming to come to some sort of decision, he drew a quavering breath.

"Tad Yoder. Thaddeus."

I smiled at him and held out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Thaddeus Yoder."

He gave me a small smile back and shook my hand. "Call me Tad."

"Thank you," I added, knowing how much trust it took for him to tell me.

He left his hand in mine and we waited a bit longer in companionable silence.

At last, the double doors swung open and Micah stepped out, trailed by an attractive woman in a white

coat with a stethoscope draped casually around her neck. His face was still flushed and blotchy, his eyes bloodshot, and a neat little bandage — nearly identical to mine — was taped at his temple. Aside from that, he looked remarkably intact, far better than I'd feared.

"They say I'll live," he said cheerfully. A bit too cheerfully for someone who had been thwacked in the head and hit with pepper spray just a short time before.

"Luckily, he has a hard head," the doctor tacked on. She gave us all a warm smile.

"I could have told you that," I said dryly.

Just then, Detective Evans walked into the waiting room, trailed by another young officer.

"Good, I see you're all here." He turned to the doctor. "If you're finished with them, I think it's my turn."

"They're all yours." She excused herself with a little half-bow.

"Lucky me," he muttered under his breath, and then louder, "Alright, kids, we're moving this party to my place. Officer Barnes here will escort you since your car remains parked at Mr. Akiba's apartment building. I'll meet you at the station."

"Wait," I said and looked over at Tad. He nodded slightly. "Before we do, you need to know that Tad gave you a false name when he was questioned back at the building."

Evans gave me a surprised look.

"Is that true?" he asked Tad.

"Yes, sir," Tad answered in a low voice. "My real name is Thaddeus Yoder, not Young."

"Why would you lie about that?"

Tad threw me a desperate look, and I hastened to explain.

"His father abused him so he ran away. Razi took him in off the streets, but then started abusing him too. He's scared you'll send him back to his father."

Evans frowned. "Well, by law we have to report this to social services. They'll step in and do an investigation to see if there was abuse. Then he'll be placed in foster care."

Tad took on a stricken expression.

"Isn't there any way around that?" I asked. "He can stay with me."

"It's not that easy," Evans said.

"What if we talk to his dad and he gives permission?"

The detective looked at me curiously. "And bypass social services?"

"Can we do that?" He looked unsure, so I threw in a final plea. "Please? He's already been through so much."

He sighed. "Let me check into it. For now, this will stay between us." He gave Officer Barnes a meaningful look. "Let's go."

Barnes took us to a holding room at the police station. One by one, we were ushered into an interrogation room where Detective Evans sat waiting. I was last.

After I gave my statement, which took the better part of an hour with all his questions, the detective shut off the recorder.

"Well, Kendall, as much as it pains me to say it, congratulations on a job well done — despite screwing

up a few times along the way. That said, your visit to Fenton Black's estate and this mess with Razi Akiba were both dangerous and risky — not to mention incredibly stupid."

"Yeah, I know. I just didn't know what else to do. The official channels move so slowly, and I was worried about my friend. And Tad."

He shook his head. "The justice system is far from perfect, but it's not your job to take matters into your own hands. Still, it's hard to argue with the results. You potentially saved two lives, even if you put your own — and your boyfriend's — at risk. I can't figure out if you're the luckiest asshole on the planet or if you're really just that good."

"A little of both?" I suggested. I attempted a smile, but I'm not sure I pulled it off. "So what's going to happen to Razi now?"

He chuckled. "The bastard's going away for a long, long time. He's admitted to everything. Your statements are just icing on the cake."

"He admitted to it?" I asked in disbelief.

"Singing like a canary. He's hoping it'll make things go easier for him."

"Will it?"

"Not a chance, but nobody's telling him that."

I snorted.

"You've tied up quite a few loose ends. Not only do we now have all the answers about the deaths of Paul Flynn, Fenton Black, and his bodyguards, but we can also close the books on that nasty business from a few years ago."

"Nasty business?"

"The John Akiba killed and Black covered up. The guy was a low-level politician, one of those right-wing, pro-family types. His body showed up in a fountain in Duport Circle. We never got anywhere on it. It was still an open case. Now it's closed, thanks to you."

"What about his sources? It sounded to me like there was a leak in the police department."

His face darkened. "We're working on it," was all he would say.

I took the hint.

"And Tad? Have you had a chance to look into that?"

His expression lightened some. It was still burdened, but for a different reason.

"Not yet. I haven't had time." My face fell, and he took pity on me. "Look, so far, he's flying under the radar. No one has paid any attention to him. That makes things a little easier. After all you've done, I'm going to return the favor. I'll look the other way on one condition."

"What?"

"I'm taking a risk here, but I don't want to see the kid stuck in foster care. There are some good people who are willing to open their homes, but it's a rough life for a boy his age. I've seen way too much. He'll be better off with you. Just...make sure you handle things correctly, okay? Go through the right legal channels. Don't let this come back to bite me in the ass."

"I won't," I said. "I know a lawyer who specializes in situations like this. She does family law."

He nodded. "The father will need to be contacted."

"I know."

Evans shook his head. "You're a remarkable young man, Mr. Kendall. I said once before that I'd be proud to have you on my force, and I meant it. A little discipline would do you some good, honestly. If you ever decide to get out of the PI business and go into law enforcement, you be sure to let me know."

He stood up and held out his hand.

I jumped to my feet and clasped his rough hand in mine.

"Thank you, Detective Evans. That's very kind of you, but I think I'll stick to being a private eye."

"Your mistake. Take care, Kendall."

"I will. Thank you again. For everything."

He nodded and led me out to the waiting room.

Micah and Tad stood up, Tad looking very nervous.

"Let's go," I said brightly.

Tad's eyes darted between Evans and me.

"I can go?" he asked hopefully.

"You can go," Evans said.

The smile that slowly spread across Tad's face was like the sun rising over the horizon after a long, harrowing night.

I slipped my arm through his and tugged gently.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go home."



## Chapter 32

We said very little on the drive home from DC. Since Micah had suffered a slight concussion, I was driving. Tad sat in the back seat, silently staring out the window. I kept an eye on him in the rearview mirror just to make sure he was okay. He dozed off after we'd crossed the bridge back to the Shore.

"He's awfully quiet," I said softly.

Micah twisted stiffly around to check on the dozing boy, who looked even younger asleep than he did awake.

"He's been through such a lot."

"I hate that it has to be like this," I said, emotion thickening my voice.

Micah glanced over at me. "It's hitting close to home, huh?"

I nodded. I tried to speak, but my throat was suddenly too tight to force the words through. I swallowed a few times and tried again.

"It could have been me. If Adam hadn't been there for me, I could have been on the streets like that."

Micah reached over and squeezed my leg. "But it wasn't you."

We rode on a bit longer in silence, Micah's hand resting on my leg. Then he spoke up again. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Kill?"

"What do you mean? Is what a good idea?"

"Taking Tad home like this."

I frowned. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"You haven't mentioned it to Adam and Steve yet."

"There wasn't time. Besides, I'm sure they'll be fine with it."

"I think that's assuming a lot, don't you? I mean, you show up with a kid and just expect them to take him in. They don't even know him."

"Adam took me in."

"That was different. He knew you. You were friends with his son. And they have a lot going on right now with the B&B and trying to work out their living situation. Besides, Kane graduates next year. Maybe they won't want to be tied down after that with another kid."

"So what was I supposed to do? Just leave him there to get taken back to his father so he could be abused some more? Or maybe let them throw him into the foster-care system? How long do you think he'd last in either one of those situations? You know he'd run away again and end up right back on the street."

"I'm only saying that maybe you shouldn't expect Adam and Steve to be overly thrilled about this."

The silence between us was suddenly filled with tension.

After a minute, Micah sighed. "Killian, you can't save everyone."

"Does that mean I should stop trying? Should I just give up and not try to make a difference?"

He looked over at me, studying me. "No, I don't think you should ever do that. It's one of the things I love most about you. You care about people. You want to make the world a better place. That's great, but you need

to understand that you can't personally save everyone you come across."

"Maybe not," I said quietly, "but maybe I can save a few."

The rest of the trip was tense, and not much effort was made at conversation.

I found myself becoming more and more nervous about my decision to bring Tad home. Micah was right. I hadn't given any thought to Adam's and Steve's reaction. Knowing Adam as well as I did, I couldn't see him turning Tad back out on the street, but that didn't mean he'd be happy about it.

Tad woke up as we turned off the main highway and onto the twisty back roads.

"Where are we?" he asked groggily.

"Almost to Chicone," I said.

"Is that where you live?"

"Part of the time. Remember I told you my friend's dad took me in after my father threw me out?"

"Yeah."

"His name is Adam. His partner, Steve, bought an old house just outside Chicone and turned it into a bed and breakfast. Adam still has a house in Ocean City, and we kind of go back and forth between them. He has an emotional attachment to the beach house."

"Wow, you guys sound rich."

"Not really. I guess Steve used to be fairly well off, but he's spent a small fortune on the B&B."

"Where do you live?" he asked Micah.

"I have an apartment in Salisbury, not far from here."

"You guys are dating, right?"

"Yeah," Micah answered for both of us.

"For how long?"

"A few months now."

Tad watched the scenery for a few minutes before commenting, "It's really flat here. I've never been on the Shore before. Is it all this flat?"

"You've never been on the Shore?" Micah asked in surprise.

"Nope."

"Not even to Ocean City?"

"I'm not even from Maryland. If we went to the beach at all, which was rare to begin with, we went to Virginia Beach."

I cut in, "Most of the Shore is pretty flat."

"Have you both always lived here?"

Now that he was awake, Tad seemed to be full of questions, but I guess that was pretty natural, really. If he was going to stay with people who were perfect strangers, it was to be expected that he'd be curious about us.

I answered first. "I've lived here all my life. I grew up in a small town near Ocean City."

"I'm from Montgomery County, right outside D.C.," Micah said. "After I graduated from college, I moved here and got a job with the newspaper."

"What was it like growing up here?" Tad asked me.

"You're from a rural area, right?"

"Yeah."

"Probably not so different than it was for you, then. I never knew anyone who was gay. If I had bothered to think about it, I guess everyone I knew

seemed to be pretty homophobic. But it was never an issue for me until Adam's son Seth moved here and started going to my school. He helped me figure out I was gay."

"He's the one who was killed?"

"Yes."

"Was he your boyfriend?"

"No, I wasn't at that point yet. We were just friends."

"How was he killed?"

I didn't answer for a moment. "I'll tell you some other time, okay?"

"I'm sorry," Tad said immediately. "I shouldn't be so nosy. It's none of my damn business."

"No, it's okay. Don't apologize. You're getting to know us better. You can ask questions if you want...I just might not answer all of them right now."

When I turned into the driveway of the bed and breakfast, all Tad's questions fell by the wayside as he caught his first glimpse of Amalie's House.

"Holy shit. That's it?" he asked in awe.

"That's it."

I gazed up at the house, remembering how I'd felt when I saw it for the first time. It was quite grand, a real mansion. It looked very different from when Steve had first considered purchasing it — it had resembled the Addams family's mansion more than a country bed and breakfast — but Steve had watched over every second of the meticulous restoration, and it turned out beautifully.

"Are you sure you're not rich?" Tad said.

I laughed. "Positive."

I parked the car, and Micah and I climbed out. Tad stayed put in the back seat.

"Aren't you getting out?" I asked, leaning back into the driver's-side door.

He tore his eyes away from the house, an anxious expression on his face.

"Can I talk to you alone first?" he asked in a small voice.

"I'll go on in," Micah said, overhearing Tad's request. "I want to get something for my head anyway. I've still got a splitting headache." As if kissing my ear, he whispered, "It'll also give me a chance to warn Adam and Steve."

I waited until he was inside, then turned back to Tad.

"Come on. Let's go for a walk."

He climbed out hesitantly, and we started around the house. I tried waiting for him to make the first move, but eventually my inquisitiveness got the better of me.

"So what did you want to talk about?"

"It's just that..." he started, then stopped abruptly, took a deep breath, and tried again. "I don't want you to think I was eavesdropping or anything, but I wasn't completely asleep when you and Micah were talking in the car."

"Tad, look—"

"No, let me finish. Let's just forget this whole thing, okay? I don't want to cause trouble for you. You've got a good thing going. I don't want to mess it up."

"You're not—"

"I ruin everything!" he said loudly. "That's all I am, a screw up. I screwed things up with my boyfriend, so he left me. I screwed things up with my dad, and he hated me. I screwed things up when I ran away, so I had to become a hustler. I couldn't even do that right. I got sick. Then I screwed things up with Razi, so he hit me."

"Tad, you couldn't help most of those things. It's not your fault your boyfriend wasn't man enough to stick by you when things got rough, or that your dad is homophobic. It's not your fault Razi abused you. Maybe becoming a hustler wasn't the best decision, but you didn't have a lot of options at that point, at least from your point of view. You were just trying to survive."

"What about you?" he insisted. "Think about it. How did we meet? I told you Micah used to be an escort. You didn't know it before that. I remember the look on your face."

"It turned out for the best in the end. It forced us to get a lot of things out in the open where they belong. Hey, we're still together, aren't we?"

"I guess. I still don't think I should do this. I'll screw up with you too, and in the end you'll just hate me, just like my dad. Everybody hates me."

"Tad, I don't hate you."

"You don't even know me."

"Why don't you give me a chance to get to know you?"

Tad looked everywhere but at me. His eyes fell upon the old angel statue among the trees in the back corner of the lawn. He stood staring at it for a minute while I watched him. A tear slipped from his eye and rolled slowly down his cheek.

Finally, he spoke, his voice so soft I had to step closer to hear him. "Because I'm scared."

I moved without thinking, slipping my arms around him and pulling him against me in a hug. He stood stiffly in my embrace, not hugging me back but not pushing me away either. Of course he'd be afraid — terrified to open his heart for fear we'd just turn on him and abandon him, or let him down the way everyone else in his life had.

"I know you're scared, but give us a chance. Okay?"

"What if they don't want me?"

"Then we'll figure something else out. I promised you I wouldn't leave you, and I meant what I said. Look, why worry about that yet? You're getting too far ahead of yourself. Let's go talk to Adam and see what he has to say. Maybe none of this will even be an issue."

Tad sniffed a little and nodded, pulling away to rub at his face. He followed me back to the house, where we entered through the back door.

In the hallway we ran into Steve, who quickly pulled me into a hug. "You've got to stop almost getting killed."

"Next time I'll try to get the job done right."

Steve answered that with a soft smack upside my head. "How about if there is no next time?" He turned his attention to Tad, who was hanging back uncertainly. "And you must be Tad. I'm Steve." He held out a hand, which Tad tentatively shook. "It's nice to meet you."

"Hi," Tad murmured.

Steve flashed him a warm smile. "Come on, let me show you around this huge hulk of a house."

I opened my mouth to argue, but Steve gave me a glance that quickly shut me up.

"Killian, why don't you go find Adam?" he said, and, although his voice was light, I could tell there was more to it than just a simple suggestion.

*Uh oh*, I thought darkly.

Leaving Steve to give Tad the history of the house, step one on the official tour, I found Adam talking to Micah in the front parlor. Adam definitely didn't look happy. I felt my stomach clench. Adam stopped speaking abruptly as I appeared in the doorway.

One look at his face and I knew this would be better off as a private conversation.

"Micah, Tad is being given the grand tour of the house, and he might be more comfortable if you're along," I suggested.

"No problem." He gave me an encouraging smile as he walked away, leaving Adam and me alone.

"Look, Adam—" I figured a good offense would be my best defense, but he cut me off quickly.

"I don't know what to be angriest about," he said in a voice like a whip, "the fact that you just ran off without even telling me where you were going or what you were doing, the fact that you needlessly risked your life yet again with no thought of anyone else, or the fact that you come waltzing back in here with a kid in tow — a kid, I'm told, you've already invited to live here."

I took an involuntary step back as Adam's anger washed over me. Then my own anger rose up at his accusations.

"First off, I didn't know I had to ask you for permission to do my job. I was working. I didn't have

time to run around asking if it was okay for me to go play with my friends. I felt it was urgent that I get to Razi quickly. I was acting on instinct, which turned out to be right. By the time the police got around to acting, assuming they ever even got that far, Razi's informant would have tipped him off, and he would have run. And maybe even killed Tad. Considering I solved a crime, caught a killer, and quite possibly saved a kid's life, I wouldn't exactly call that needlessly risking my own life."

"I—" Adam started to interrupt, but I cut him off.

"No, let me finish. As for Tad, I have not invited him to live here. I told him he could stay with me until he figured out what to do. I thought you were the kind of person who would be willing to help a kid in need. His dad abused him, and he was living on the streets before Razi — a homicidal maniac — took him in and made him his sex slave. With Razi arrested, he had nowhere to go but back to the streets. I thought we could be some sort of support for him since he's never had any his entire life."

"We don't even know him."

"You didn't know me either when you took me in."

"That was different."

"How? Because I knew Seth? Why should Tad suffer just because he didn't have the privilege of knowing Seth? He needs help, Adam."

"You can't just drag home every stray you come across, Killian."

My breath caught in my throat, and my eyes stung with the tears I was determined to hold back.

"Is that what I was?" I asked, my voice shaky with anger and hurt. "A stray?"

"Killian, no!" Adam said, all anger melting from his expression to be replaced with concern and remorse.

"Why did you take me in, Adam? Was it out of pity? Or was it just because you were so grief-stricken from Seth's death? Is that it? Was I just a replacement for Seth?"

It was Adam's turn to gasp. "Killian!"

"I'm sorry I dragged home another stray. And I'm sorry *this* stray has stuck around for so long, burdening you and ruining your life. You won't have to worry about either of us from now on."

I turned sharply on my heel, but before I'd taken two steps, Adam caught me, both of his arms wrapping tightly around my body.

"Killian, stop. Listen to me. That was a horrible thing I said, and I didn't mean it. I was just so worried about you when you left the hospital without a word. I've been frantic ever since. I reacted badly when I saw you, all my fear and worry turned to anger, and I took it out on you. I'm sorry — so, so sorry."

I refused to look at him, keeping my back purposefully to him.

"You're not a stray. You were never a stray. You want to know why I took you in? Because I looked at you and saw a hurt, scared young man and my heart broke. You're right. I barely knew you. In that sense, maybe I did take you in out of pity, but I very quickly grew to love you. You were never a replacement for Seth. Never. Not then, not now. You've always been Killian. I love you as if you were my own son, and I've

never once regretted asking you to live with me. You've never been a burden. You've only enriched my life."

I couldn't hold back the tears any longer. I burst into harsh, ragged sobs as I turned to him, his arms once more circling me in the comforting hug I'd come to take for granted.

"Doesn't Tad deserve to have that too?" I sobbed into his chest.

"Of course he does. Absolutely. I just don't know if I'm the person to give it to him."

"It could have been me."

"What?"

"It could have been me on the street if you hadn't been there to take me in. I owe it to him to be there for him the way you were for me. I can't just turn my back on him. I can't."

Adam squeezed me fiercely and was quiet for a moment. "I won't ask you to."

I pulled away, swallowing mid-sob. "What?" I asked, wiping my eyes and sniffing. "What do you mean?"

"Someone very special to me once told me to pay his kindness forward when I asked how I could repay him." He sighed. "He also told me to open my heart and build a family."

I wiped my face. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I won't ask you to act against your conscience."

"You'll let him stay here?"

"Temporarily."

"Oh, Adam!"

He held up a hand. "I'm not promising anything, Killian. I haven't even met him yet. All I'm saying is that he can stay here while we look at his options."

"You'll help him do that too? Figure out what his options are?"

"Yes, I'll do what I can to help him, within reason."

I ignored the proviso and threw myself into Adam's arms for a hug. He held me tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Killian," he whispered into my hair. "I can't believe I said that."

"I'm sorry I left without telling you where I was going. You're right. I didn't stop to think how worried you might be. All I could think about was getting to Razi."

"That's what makes you a good investigator." He held me out at arm's length and looked me over carefully, his face suddenly breaking into a grin. "You're a mess. Go wash up, then we'll tell Tad the good news."

After a good night's rest, my first thought the next morning was Jake. He was still technically in police custody, even with Razi's confession, but I managed to pull a few strings and get in to see him.

He was propped up in his hospital bed, TV flickering in front of him, one side of his untied gown slipping off his shoulder.

"How do you even manage to make a hospital gown look good?" I asked from the doorway.

His head snapped toward me, eyes widening. He looked miles better than the last time I'd seen him — his

lips no longer smudged with charcoal, his eyes clearer, color returning to his cheeks.

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, right. I look like death warmed over."

I strolled to his bedside. "I don't know about that. I'm happy to say you look plenty alive to me."

"Thanks to you."

I shrugged. "All in a day's work."

"I hear I have to thank you for clearing my name too."

"No thanks needed. Just doing my job."

He shook his head. "We both know it was more than that. Thank you. Really."

I just nodded. Gratitude was never easy for Jake.

"So what happens next?" I asked, changing the subject. "Are they releasing you?"

He frowned. "I don't know. They said something about possible drug charges."

"What?" I nearly fell backward. "You were a victim!"

"Your lawyer friend — what's her name?"

"Ilana?"

"Yeah. She recommended somebody, a criminal attorney. Judy hired him, and I guess he's working on it. He said I might have to agree to rehab."

I perched carefully on the edge of his bed. "Would that be such a bad thing?"

"I don't need rehab," Jake snapped.

"You almost died from an overdose..."

"I don't know what Fenton gave me. He may have tried to kill me."

"Jake, let's be real. You told me yourself you were out of control, trading sex for drugs long before you met Fenton Black. I think you need help."

His shoulders went rigid, his gaze skittering away.

"Look, I know it's hard—"

"No, you don't know," he shot back. "How could you know? Everything always works out perfectly for you."

I blinked at him. "Oh yeah? Like my best friend getting his throat slashed? Or me getting stabbed when I found his body? Or my dad punching me in the face and calling me a faggot? Or almost dying in a house fire trying to save your life?"

He opened his mouth to argue, but I pressed on. "Yeah, I was lucky Adam took me in. If I didn't know that before, my last two cases have made it painfully clear. But you're lucky too. You've got Judy. She loves you more than you realize."

His shoulders sagged. "Yeah, I know," he admitted softly.

"And I love you. I've done a lousy job of showing it, but I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

His eyes flicked toward me. "You've said that before."

A guilty pang hit my chest. "Yeah. And I fucked up. I'm sorry, Jake. I won't let it happen again. You won't have to go through this alone."

His hand inched across the sheet, tentative, like he wasn't sure I'd take it. I reached out and clasped it in mine.

For a long moment, we sat there, neither of us speaking.

Jake's grip tightened, almost desperate. "I don't know if I can do this," he whispered.

"You can," I said. "And you won't have to do it by yourself. We'll figure it out together."

His eyes finally met mine — haunted, but with the smallest glimmer of hope breaking through. For the first time, I believed he might actually let me help him.

I shifted a little closer, still holding his hand, and reached up with my free one to brush a stray lock of hair off his forehead.

He stiffened at the touch, then let out a shaky breath and relaxed, leaning back against the pillows. His eyes fluttered closed for a moment, as if even that small gesture was more comfort than he'd expected.

"You're gonna get through this," I murmured.

"You're tougher than you think."

He gave a tiny, disbelieving huff. "Yeah, right."

"I mean it," I said. "You've survived this long with everything stacked against you. Imagine what you could do with people in your corner."

His hand squeezed mine again, not letting go. I could feel the tremor in his fingers, the vulnerability he usually fought so hard to hide.

We sat like that for a while — no more words, just the low drone of the TV and the quiet weight of everything left unsaid.

Eventually, his breathing evened out, eyelids growing heavier with each blink until they finally stayed closed. He didn't let go of my hand even as he drifted into sleep.

I stayed there, still holding on, watching his face ease into sleep. For the first time in years, he looked younger — almost peaceful. It was a fleeting glimpse of the boy I remembered, the one he used to be before everything went to hell. He was still in there, buried beneath the damage and the scars. He'd never be the same, but maybe, just maybe, he could heal.

"Sleep, Jake," I whispered. "I've got you."

Several weeks had passed since Razi's arrest, and Thanksgiving was only a few days away. In that short span, so much had changed.

Jake had accepted the rehab deal and checked into a 60-day inpatient program. The first week was rough — he'd been on total communication blackout during detox and orientation — but once that ended, we managed to talk several times a week. The calls were brief, sometimes no more than a few minutes, but hearing his voice steadier, clearer, was enough to unknot the tension in my chest.

He admitted it was hard, harder than he'd expected, but he was sticking with it. For the first time in a long while, there was something like hope in his tone. I told him I was proud of him, and I meant it. A part of me even dared to believe that maybe, just maybe, he'd make it through this.

Meanwhile, Razi was staring down a mountain of charges: the murders of Paul Flynn, Fenton Black, and both of Black's bodyguards, plus the attempted murders of Micah and me. The DA had chosen not to drag Tad's part in all this into the spotlight. If they had, Razi would also be facing a long list of sexual-abuse counts. Even

without them, he had more than enough stacked against him to guarantee he'd never breathe free air again. And hanging over it all was the still-unresolved question of that politician's death.

Micah, on the other hand, had become the Shore's newest media darling. His corruption exposé had blown the story wide open, reaching farther than even he'd imagined. Every week seemed to bring new charges, fresh resignations, another twist in the scandal. Some of the wetlands had already been lost to development, scars we couldn't erase, but the courts had issued an injunction that froze the bulldozers in their tracks. For now, at least, what remained was safe. It was a hollow victory, but still a victory.

And then there was Tad. Things with him were moving more slowly, haltingly. Adam had taken to him quickly, offering the same patient, steady kindness he'd once shown me, but Tad kept himself guarded, skittish, like a stray that wasn't sure if it wanted to stay or bolt. He seemed most at ease around me — not that I was exactly a calming presence — but it was something. I tried to make time for him despite my already packed schedule, offering what little stability I could.

Adam had gone the practical route, consulting Ilana about Tad's situation. She'd reached out to his father, but so far there had been no response — radio silence. That left everything in limbo, too unsettled for anyone to feel comfortable making long-term commitments. For now, all we could do was give Tad a roof, a place to breathe, and the faint beginnings of something like family.

Most nights, when the house finally went quiet, I found myself lying awake, wondering how I'd gotten here: juggling the wreckage of Jake's life, the uncertainty of Tad's, the fallout from Micah's story, the shadow of Razi still lingering over everything. It felt like I was trying to keep too many plates spinning at once, waiting for the crash.

But then I'd remember Jake's voice on the phone, tired but determined. Or Tad's fleeting smile when he let his guard down for half a second. Or Adam's hand on my shoulder. Those little things reminded me why I kept fighting, why I couldn't afford to let any of those plates drop.

Maybe we were all broken in different ways. But maybe, if we held on long enough, we could start to piece something whole together.

Perhaps the biggest surprise came one evening when Micah was hanging out with me at the beach house.

Micah, Adam, and I were sprawled in the den, half-watching some cheesy sci-fi flick with rubber monsters and bad special effects. When it ended, the news came on. None of us were paying much attention, chatting over the anchor's voice, until something on the screen snagged my eye.

"Wait! Who's that?" I cut Adam off mid-sentence, leaning forward.

"Who's who?" Micah asked, following my gaze.

"Shh!" I grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

The newscaster's voice carried over the room:  
*"After the events of the last few weeks, many of us*

*thought we'd seen it all. But the latest arrest in the Wetlands Conspiracy has shocked even the most hardened among us."*

"A new arrest?" Micah sat up straighter.

"Shh!" I hissed again, my eyes glued to the screen.

*"The corruption surrounding the illegal sale and development of protected wetlands has reached all the way to the top,"* the anchor continued as footage of a gray-haired man being led toward a police car in handcuffs played on the screen. *"Senator Tom Day was indicted today for conspiracy to commit murder, along with several other charges. Police allege that Day conspired with murdered businessman Fenton Black to kill Henry Gartland, a local environmentalist who'd been protesting the wetlands development."*

Adam frowned. "Who did you—"

"Shh!" Micah and I said in unison.

*"Day was suspected early on in the official investigation, but police lacked sufficient evidence to bring formal charges."*

"I didn't know that." Micah muttered under his breath, quietly enough to not get shushed.

*"That evidence,"* the anchor went on, *"came from an unlikely source."*

The image changed — and my stomach jolted. It was her. The bird-lady from Novak's mystery case.

*"Day's own wife hired a private investigator to look into her husband's business dealings. Justine Sterner spoke with the PI earlier this evening."*

"She hired Novak," I breathed, glancing at Adam and Micah.

Onscreen, the feed cut to an earnest young reporter with close-cropped dark hair and wide, dewy eyes. “I’m Justine Sterner, and I’m here with local private investigator Shane Novak.”

The camera panned back to show my boss standing stiffly beside her, looking as thrilled to be on camera as a cat in a bathtub.

“Mr. Novak helped police obtain the evidence they needed to charge Senator Day. Mr. Novak, you were hired by Mrs. Day, were you not?”

“Yes, I was,” Novak said flatly.

The reporter waited for him to elaborate, but of course he didn’t. Adam chuckled at his classic stonewalling.

“Do you know why Mrs. Day hired you to investigate her own husband?”

“Yes. But wouldn’t that be better coming from her?”

The reporter flushed but pressed on. “What can you tell us about your investigation?”

“Very little. That’s police business now.”

“Is there anything you can tell us about the charges against Senator Day?”

“They’re serious. If they stick, I’d imagine he’ll be locked up for a long, long time. Tom Day’s political career is finished.”

“How is Mrs. Day holding up through all this?”

“She’s been a trooper.”

And that was it. Novak clammed up, leaving the poor reporter staring at him like she’d just watched her exclusive turn to dust in her hands. The feed cut back to the newsroom.

Adam burst out laughing, and I couldn't help grinning despite my shock. "God, he's impossible."

Later, Novak filled me in. Mrs. Day had overheard her husband on the phone plotting Gartland's murder. She had no proof — just her memory of what she'd heard — and had been terrified to go to the police directly. She'd feared for her life if her husband discovered she'd betrayed him. That, plus the political sensitivity, explained all the cloak-and-dagger secrecy.

With that case finally wrapped, Novak suggested I take some time off. I had to admit, for the first time in a long time, the idea of a break sounded...not just nice, but necessary. Novak wasn't the type to hand out vacations, so I took him up on it.

Steve couldn't get away on such short notice, but Adam, Kane, me, and Tad piled into the car and headed west. No destination, no plan, just driving until the last few weeks were a memory in the rearview.

We ended up at a run-down inn tucked against the mountains in Western Maryland. The kind of place with peeling paint, creaky floors, and a view worth every flaw. It was a quirky place built in the 1800s, with a local-history museum and a speakeasy with an old cock-fighting pit in the basement, and an off-beat cafe in the lobby. It wasn't luxury, but it was exactly what we needed.

Adam parked himself on the back porch with a small stack of books, Kane went off in search of hiking trails and single girls, Tad drifted around exploring the rambling building and his freedom one cautious step at a time, and I...I tried to remember how to breathe without waiting for the next punch.

Nights were quiet. Too quiet. It left space for the ghosts to crowd in. Not real ghosts this time, but memories of Jake in his hospital bed, Micah bleeding on the floor, and bodies staring at me with dead eyes. But every time I thought I'd crack, Adam would glance over, steady as always, or Kane would make a wisecrack, or Tad would wander back with some half-smile he didn't know he had, and I'd remember why it was all worth it.

The truth is, cases end, but the lies don't. The truth of yesterday becomes a lie tomorrow. The villains rot or reinvent themselves, and the truth gets buried right alongside them. That's how the world works — always has, always will.

All I could do was keep trying — try to make the world a little better where I could, try to help the people I loved, and try to hold on tight to what was real in front of me. Adam. Steve. Kane. Tad. Micah. Judy. Jake. And that thin line of light breaking over the ridge at dawn, reminding me every day that nothing stays dark forever.

The rest? It was just smoke.

Judy would find me a teacher to help me understand and control my gifts — or she wouldn't, and I'd have to hunt one down myself. The B&B would thrive and become self-sustaining — or it would stumble, and we'd rebuild from the ashes. Tad would settle in, slowly weaving himself into our strange little family — or, if he couldn't, we'd do everything in our power to make sure he found a safe place to land. Micah and I would grow into something stronger, something lasting — or we wouldn't, and I'd learn to live with that, too.

None of it was guaranteed. Life never was.

But I knew this much: I'd survive. More than that — I'd keep moving forward, even when the road bent in directions I didn't expect. Because that was the only choice, really. Keep walking, keep learning, keep opening myself up to the people who mattered. The future would bring what it brought, and I'd meet it head-on.

And maybe — just maybe — that was enough.

## About the Author

Josh Aterovis is the award-winning author of multiple LGBTQ+ novels blending mystery, romance, suspense, and the supernatural, including seven novels and multiple short stories in the acclaimed Killian Kendall Mysteries series. His work explores themes of identity, chosen family, grief, healing, and queer resilience, often centering flawed but deeply human characters navigating extraordinary circumstances. Known for emotionally grounded storytelling and vivid atmosphere, Josh's books have earned a devoted readership among fans of queer fiction and genre-bending narratives.

In addition to his work as a novelist, Josh is an immersive theater creator and producer with Submersive Productions in Baltimore, Maryland, where he develops original, site-specific experiences that blur the line between audience and performer. His storytelling across both page and stage is driven by a passion for creating meaningful, transformative experiences that invite audiences to connect, reflect, and imagine new possibilities.

Learn more at [joshaterovis.com](http://joshaterovis.com) or [submersive.org](http://submersive.org).